



**SHINJI COBKUBO**

Illustration by  
**K AKAGISHI**

World Concept Art by  
**mocha**

**BIRTH OF A GOD:  
THE GREAT  
MUSHROOM GIRL,  
HEAVEN'S EQUAL**



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



# S A B I K U I B I S C O

Analysis complete. Missing species identified: Hokkaido, female specimen. Estimated life force: 1.238 billion lifra.

An unprecedented number. Awaiting presidential decision.

...  
Congress has voted unanimously.  
Readyng capture beam.  
Beginning rescue immediately.

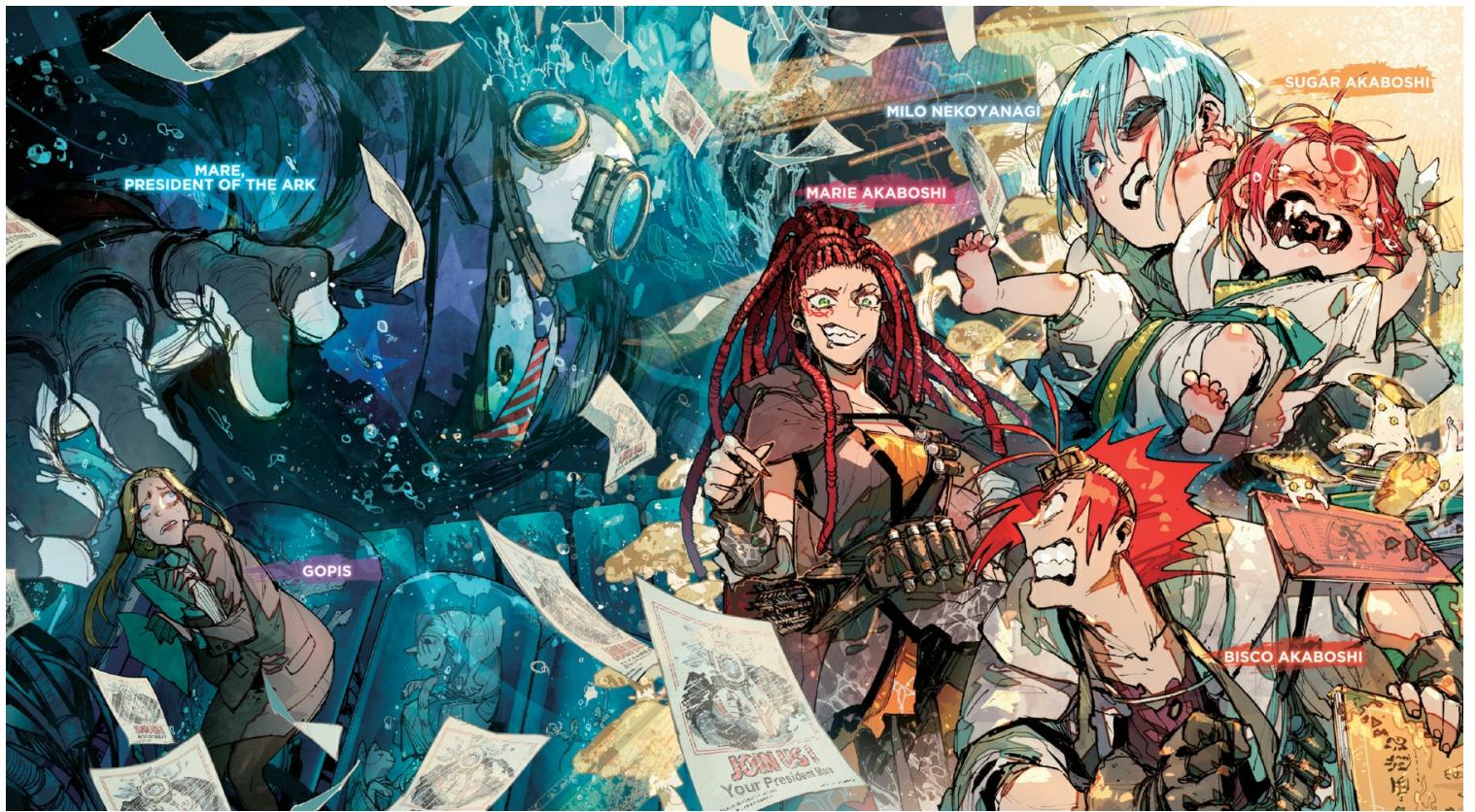
The object hung motionless in the air, save for the rippling and roiling of its ocean-like surface.

Lights flickered across it, like a spaceship from some advanced alien civilization.



THE RUST WIND EATS AWAY AT THE WORLD

A BOY WITH A BOW MATCHES ITS FEMINITY



# SABIKU BISCO



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# SABIKU SISCO

8

Birth of a God:  
The Great Mushroom Girl, Heaven's Equal

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YEN  
ON  
NEW YORK

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Sabikui Bisco, Vol. 8

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SABIKUI BISCO Vol. 8

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: August 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Cobkubo, Shinji, author. | Akagishi K, illustrator. | mocha, illustrator. | Humphrey, Jake, translator.

Title: Sabikui bisco / Shinji Cobkubo ; illustration by K Akagishi ; world concept art by mocha ; translation by Jake Humphrey.

Other titles: Sabikui bisco. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021- |

Identifiers: LCCN 2021046139 | ISBN 9781975336813 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975336837 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975336851 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975336875 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975336899 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975336912 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Science fiction.

Classification: LCC PL868.5.O65 S3413 2021 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23/eng/20211001

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021046139>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-6794-7 (paperback) 978-1-9753-6795-4 (ebook) E3-20240802-JV-NF-ORI

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**The ship of the life-forms, by the life-forms,  
for the life-forms.**

**The almighty ark shall cleanse this country, and  
ferry you all to a pure and prosperous land.**

**Repeat after me: Make the earth great again.**

**— Mare, President of the Ark**

Clouds drifted through the summer sky, like mounds of soft ice cream. Beneath the sun's rays, the ocean's calm and reflective waters twinkled in the light.

All of a sudden, the waters broke, shattering the silence, and a mysterious ship rose out of the ocean, levitating eastward through some unknown force toward the Japanese mainland.

"Nothing but sun and sea as far as the eye can see!"

Amlí gazed out over the ocean, letting the wind run through her fluffy silver hair.

"The salt on the breeze, the smell of the ocean, the moisture in the air... It's amazing! Back at Six Towers, we never saw anything like this!"

"I figured you'd like it; that's why I invited ya."

The owner of that voice was lounging in a deck chair, sipping red-melon juice through a straw. The pink-haired girl raised her sunglasses and flashed a crafty grin.

"You priestesses don't get out much, do ya? You're always preachin' against earthly pleasures, but you don't know the first thing about 'em!"

Tirol's knowledge of such pleasures was clearly extensive: She was down to her swimwear, working on her tan. According to her, it was important to keep the tools of her trade well maintained.

*But considering she doesn't look much older than me, I can't say I see the value in it...*

"Hmm? I got the feelin' you just thought somethin' awful rude about me just now..."

"I was just thinking what a wonderful getaway this has been, Ms. Tirol,

ma'am!" Amlí beamed, seating herself down in the neighboring chair. "I just wish Mother could have been here. It's such a shame the thought of wearing a bathing suit embarrassed her so."

"Nah, I wouldn't let her come anyway."

"What? Whyever not?"

"Ain't that obvious?" cried Tirol, snapping up in her seat. "How am I s'posed to compete with her beach bod? This is *my* holiday, and I didn't bust the bank buyin' this king turtle just so Miss *Baywatch* could strut around one-uppin' me! That's why you get the captain's approval, but that landlubber's stayin' at home!"

"O-oh, I'm...honored?"

The two were enjoying a very pleasant cruise on a yacht constructed atop a giant turtle's back. Dangerous fauna infested Japan's oceans, and no boat constructed from wood or metal could venture more than a few meters from shore without being torn to shreds. The king turtle's retaliatory capacities, however, were known and feared by local wildlife and ensured that any would-be predators kept well away.

The creature's price tag was beyond Amlí's wildest imaginings, but right now she was more bothered by what Tirol had said.

"Hold on," she said after thinking for a moment. "If that's the case, then why did you invite me?"

"...Nyeh?"

"Am I no threat to your self-esteem? Am I just a child to you? Is that how you see me?"

Tirol turned to see Amlí's face slowly become demonic, and she shrank back in her seat.

"H-h-h-hold on, hold on! I can explain! W-wow! Just look at that view! It's gorgeous!"

"If I may be so bold, Ms. Tirol, ma'am, I would submit that your womanly charm is no more bountiful than mine."

“Say what?! You’re pullin’ my leg! Look at you! Flat as a pancake!”

“That is not true! And even if it were, Ms. Tirol, ma’am, may I remind you that I am still only fourteen years of age? How old are *you* again?”

“T-twenty-two...”

“There you have it. I do hope you’re not expecting any sudden miracles of nature. I, on the other hand, am still bursting with unripened potential. Give it two or three years, and perhaps I shall become another one of those *Baywatch* babes you find so detestable.”

“That’s it! I’m keelhaulin’ ya! Walk the plank!!”

But just as Tirol lunged for Amli to throttle her tiny neck and hurl her overboard, something bizarre happened. The clear skies grew dark and overcast in a moment, and peals of thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Hmm?! Whatever has happened to the sky?!”

“Shit, looks like rain! We’ll finish this inside, Amli!”

“Wait, Ms. Tirol, ma’am! This is no ordinary rain...!”

Amli’s spiritual sense was as precise as ever, for as she stood on the deck, staring into the sky, the clouds suddenly parted, and a large floating object descended through them.

“Wh-what is that?!”

“Whoa! That thing’s huge!”

It looked like a spaceship from some advanced alien civilization. Even Tirol had not seen anything like it in all her years at Matoba Ironworks.

“It’s a UFO!” she cried.

“Don’t be silly. UFOs aren’t real.”

“Well, what else do you want me to call it? It’s unidentified, it’s flyin’, and it’s an object!”

The object hung motionless in the air, save for the rippling and roiling of its ocean-like surface. Lights flickered silently across it, and then...

BEEEEEEEEE

A mysterious ray erupted from the craft, bathing the turtle yacht in red light.

“Eep!”

“It’s attackin’ us! Amli, do somethin’!”

...

ANALYSIS COMPLETE. MISSING SPECIES IDENTIFIED: KING TURTLE, MALE SPECIMEN.

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 23,800 LIFRA.

AWAITING PRESIDENTIAL DECISION.

...

CONGRESS HAS VOTED UNANIMOUSLY. READYING CAPTURE BEAM.

BEGINNING RESCUE IMMEDIATELY.

“The heck’s it sayin’?!”

“This is bad! Get behind me, Ms. Tirol, ma’am!”

In response to the UFO’s unsettling behavior, Amli made a few swift signs with her hands. A purple aura sprang up around her, which then became a spherical barrier protecting the pair.

Then, just as Amli braced for the worst, the craft emitted...a gentle beam of light, which shone down on Tirol’s yacht, inflicting no harm at all.

“Whoa! Your magic’s amazin’, Amli! I knew I brought you along for a reason!”

“Hold on, this is strange,” the young girl replied. “Is this not an attack after all?”

But before she could puzzle over it any longer, Amli’s stomach sank, and the ship suddenly lurched into the air, turtle and all. A king turtle’s weight easily surpassed thirty tons, and as such, the creature was not accustomed to being moved against its will. Its usual gentle nature gave way to wails of panic.

“Waaaaagh!!” screamed Tirol, in concert with the beast. “We’re flyin’! The ship’s *flyin’!*”

“That’s not me!” yelled Amli, her eyes glued to the craft overhead. Its

wavelike surface began spiraling, like a whirlpool, drawing the king turtle into its center.

“It’s sucking us in!” she cried. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t care, just *do* somethin’!”

“I—I can’t...! It’s too strong...!”

The force of the beam tore Amlí from the deck and lifted her into the air. Tirol quickly snatched on to her leg, only to be hoisted up as well, and the two of them went swirling into the heart of the vortex.

“Waaaaaaaaahhh!!” screamed Tirol.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeep!!” screamed Amlí.

“Gruuuuuuuuuuh!!” screamed the king turtle.

*Shlorp!!* went the trio as they disappeared into the craft’s underbelly.

...

MALE KING TURTLE SPECIMEN CAPTURED SUCCESSFULLY.

...?

POSSIBLE CONTAMINATION DETECTED...

CONTAMINATION ANALYZED. NO THREAT DETECTED.

RESUMING FLIGHT.

After effortlessly engulfing its target (plus a couple unintended bystanders), the craft embarked once more to the skies on wings unseen, leaving only a calm, empty ocean bathed in the warm rays of the summer sun.



Birth of a God:  
The Great Mushroom Girl,  
Heaven's Equal

8

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**SABIKUI  
BISCO**



The Rust Wind sets away at  
the world. A boy with a bow  
matches its force.

*Ouya! Ouya! Ay-ho!*

*Ouya! Ouya! Oo-ra! Hee-ho!*

*Mushrooms, mushrooms in the ground,  
can you tell when feasts abound?*

*How can the lunarshroom be found?*

*Ouya! Ouya! Ay-ho!*

*Not yet! Not yet! Our mother frowns.*

*The moon is hidden by the clouds.*

*And so once more our song resounds.*

*Ouya! Ouya! Ay-ho!*

In a large cylindrical tent, the *sporko* sang and danced around a crackling fire. They had been at it so long that all were drenched in sweat from head to toe.

“How long is this gonna take?!” shouted one figure from atop the seat of honor. “I’m dyin’ of boredom over here!”

“Shh! Be quiet!” snapped Chaika. “The ritual will continue until we receive an answer from our mother, Hokkaido. If you want the *you-know-what*, you’re going to have to be patient!”

“The Ghost Hail?”

“Do not say its name!” yelled Chaika once more, slapping Bisco on the nose, as if he were a disobedient hound. “Hokkaido is a fickle mistress: If she knows what it is we seek, she shan’t give it to us. You must call it something else.”

“If I’d known it woulda been this much trouble, I’d have gone inside Hokkaido and picked the damn things myself...”

"Whit's wrong wit ye sorry lot!!" Bisco shrank back in his seat as Chief Cavillacan let out a furious roar right by his ear. "Ye call thit dancing?! Tis nae wonder Hokkaido nae want te speak te such a grottin' poor excuse fer sporko as ye!"

""Ouya!""

"Reight then, ye bleighters! From te top, nae!"

""Ouya...?""

"Pit yer belly intae it!!"

""OUYA!!""

At their elder's urging, the *sporko* took up formation once more and danced with renewed vigor. Bisco, excluded from the ritual and dressed in the clan's ornate and heavy guest robes, started to let his mind wander.

*Dammit, how'd Milo manage to talk his way outta this one?*

He sighed and muttered curses under his breath, while Chaika clung lovingly to his arm.

"Lurkersrooms, swayshrooms, and lifeshrooms? Great wartshrooms growing right next to earthstars? Hokkaido really is like another world. This should be enough to stave off any disease!"

Milo was in his element. Having left his partner to suffer in the *sporko* village, the famed Dr. Panda had gone topside in order to gather as many medicinal mushrooms as he could from the peculiar environment of the Island Whale's back. Hokkaido was able to swim relatively fast, and so the fields were constantly exposed to hot summer winds and the sun's blinding rays. This meant that all the snow had pretty much melted, and Hokkaido's boundless vitality had given birth to all sorts of mushroom varieties the boy doctor could never hope to find back on the mainland.

"All right!" he said, satisfied. "This should be more than enough to raise a baby!"

He stowed his findings in his backpack.

"Now we just need the Ghost Hail..."

The baby he spoke of, by the way, belonged to none other than his sister, Pawoo. After becoming pregnant, Pawoo had stepped down from her duties (though only at Milo's insistence) and had gone to stay with Shishi in her newly established prefecture of New Kaso. The prospect of raising a half-demigod created a lot of unanswered questions, so for the time being, Milo contented himself with ensuring a healthy birth, with the knowledge he would tackle the remaining difficulties when the time came.

After all, the baby was sure to inherit Bisco's omnipotent Ultrafaith energy, and as far as Milo knew, there was only one way to keep it in check: the Ghost Hail mushroom, with its unique ability to counteract rampant evolution.

The baby was not due for many months, yet Milo could hardly be expected to twiddle his thumbs while his sister's well-being was on the line. And so it was at his urging that he and Bisco ventured to Hokkaido.

"Sorry for the wait, Actagawa! Let's go rejoin Bisco at the camp!"

The giant steelcrab was idly picking at the soil with his claw and turned at the sound of Milo's voice, allowing a stray mole he had cheekily unearthed to hurriedly scamper away.

"Hey, what do you think, Actagawa?" said Milo, hopping atop the crab's back. "If you had a baby, what name would you give it?"

*Pop.*

"Actually, Bisco and I already thought of a name for your baby. What do you think of 'Ryunosuke'?"

*Pop.*

"Don't you care about that sort of thing?! I swear, you and Bisco are like two peas in a pod..."

But as soon as Milo had finished speaking, a peculiar feeling came over him.

*...Urgh??*

He clutched his chest in response to severe nausea that struck the depths of his stomach. Milo quickly hopped off Actagawa and ran over to the bushes, where he emptied his guts.

*“Bleeeeh... Guh... Gueeeeh...”*

When it was finally over, Milo wiped his mouth dry.

*Haah... haah... Not this again. Why do I keep vomiting?*

This wasn't the first time it had happened. Milo's mysterious sickness had begun at around the same time as his sister's pregnancy. In addition to nausea, he was also experiencing stomach pains and loss of appetite.

As a doctor, Milo knew his own body better than anyone, and he quickly ruled out infection or poisonous mushrooms as the cause. There was also no way to treat the symptoms. It seemed to be the result of an excess of life-energy in the body. Too much of a good thing, so to speak. Perhaps after repeatedly using the *Ultrafaith Bow* and harmonizing with Bisco, Milo had allowed too much of his partner's boundless vitality to flow into himself. It was the only explanation he was able to come up with.

In any case, it didn't seem serious, and so Milo hadn't told Bisco about it, but...

*...Maybe I should? I don't know... I don't want to feel like I'm bringing him down...*

Still pondering the issue, Milo turned and flashed Actagawa a reassuring smile. But just as he approached so they could ride off together, he heard a voice and turned to see Chaika in the distance, waving at him.

“Milo! The ritual was a success!” she called out. “We were just about to share a celebratory drink together! Would you like to join us?”

Behind her, the stout and burly Cavillacan laid a grizzled hand on his daughter's shoulder. “Drenk it while it's hott, ye ken? Thet Akaboshi lad be nae fun at all.”

*Well, Bisco doesn't drink, that's why.*

Milo waved and signaled his eagerness to participate, before hopping atop Actagawa and taking up the reins.

But just at that moment, Milo saw a dark shadow fall over the *sporko* pair. He looked up at the sky in confusion.

“Wh-what?!” he cried. “What on earth is that?!”

An enormous floating object tore through the cumulonimbus clouds, dominating the sky. It appeared so suddenly, and its very nature so completely overturned Milo’s beliefs on aviation, that he wasn’t sure how to react.

“Grott! Whit manner o’ beast or god be this?!”

“Father, I’m scared!”

Cavillacan placed himself between Chaika and the threat and glared up at its inscrutable form. Just then, a loud voice issued forth from the craft.

...

ANALYSIS COMPLETE. MISSING SPECIES IDENTIFIED: HOKKAIDO, FEMALE SPECIMEN.

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 1.238 BILLION LIFRA. AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER.

AWAITING PRESIDENTIAL DECISION.

...

CONGRESS HAS VOTED UNANIMOUSLY. READYING CAPTURE BEAM.

BEGINNING RESCUE IMMEDIATELY.

The ship shot a harmless-looking beam at Chaika and Cavillacan, which then expanded radially outward until it covered the entire region.

“Wh-what’s happening?” screamed Chaika.

“Steigh beheind me, Chaika! I’ll nae let this—! Wh-whit in Grott’s name?!”

All of a sudden, the muscular chief let out an unbecoming squeal of confusion as both he and his daughter were whisked into the air, the 120-kilogram giant lifted effortlessly, like a feather.

“Wh-whit sorcery be this? I cannae do a thing!!”

“Elder! Chaika!” yelled Milo.

“Milo! Run! Forget us and save—eep!!”

It was all over in an instant. The ship’s powerful beam sucked Chaika and Cavillacan into its whirling core like a vacuum cleaner. But it didn’t stop there.

“Ouya?! What’s happening!?”

“Seems the tent’s learned how to fly.”

“Get a grip, lad! It’s the rapture! We’re all dyin’!”

The beam had also engulfed the *sporko* settlement and was sucking up everybody, tents and all. Milo could scarcely grasp the scale of the threat.

“...This is bad! Actagawa, we gotta go find Bisco!”

Thinking fast, Milo dived into the beam’s radius in search of his partner. With Actagawa’s powerful legs keeping him securely fixed to the ground, he headed over in the direction of the elder’s tent.

“Biscooo!! Where are you?! Answer me!”

“Over here!” came Bisco’s reply.

“Bisco!” cried Milo, gripping the reins and steering Actagawa toward the voice. “This is bad! Chaika and the *sporko* have all been... What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“This isn’t the time for games, Bisco!”

“I ain’t playin’! You think I did this for fun?!”

Bisco’s swift decision-making had led him to firing an anchorshroom arrow into his own cloak, from which he now clung upside down for dear life. It was a commendable choice, but one that nonetheless made for an amusing sight.

“The beam’s gettin’ stronger!” Bisco yelled. “We gotta get outta here before it sucks us up, too!”

“Right! Take us away, Actagawa!”

Using his right, smaller claw, Actagawa pruned the anchorshroom and popped Bisco on his back before exiting the range of the fearsome light.

NEW LIFE-FORM DETECTED.

MISSING SPECIES IDENTIFIED: STEELCRAB, MALE SPECIMEN.

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 5.088 BILLION LIFRA. A TRULY INCREDIBLE NUMBER.

PRIORITIZING RESCUE.

"Uh-oh. That thing's comin' after us!"

The ship expelled a second beam, which enshrouded Actagawa. At this, he could finally cling to the surface no longer and was lifted helplessly into the air.

"Shit! It got us!" said Bisco, growling.

"There's only one way out of this one. Bisco, hold on tight!"

"This again? Grr, just 'cause we ain't got a choice don't mean I gotta like it!"

"Prepare the jets, Actagawa! Three, two, one... Ignite!"

Actagawa's eyes twinkled with determination! The rockets mounted on his back flared to life. It was these rockets that had ferried the trio over to Hokkaido from the mainland, and now they would save them from certain doom.

Actagawa jetted off, leaving a thick trail of smoke as he spiraled out of the capture beam's grasp and into the skies over the ocean. The two atop his back breathed a sigh of relief, and then they turned and saw it.

"Bisco...!"

"You gotta be shittin' me..."

""It's pulling Hokkaido out of the sea!""

The two couldn't believe their eyes. The Island Whale, which once terrorized Japan, was being lifted clean out of the ocean. Bits of earth and rock crumbled and fell from its underbelly as it rose, levitating toward the strange flying saucer.

Of course, the saucer was vast, but hardly as vast as an entire island. There seemed to be no way that Hokkaido could possibly fit inside. And yet fit it did. The beam seemed to have some kind of morphing effect on the island, allowing the ship to suck it up through the hole in its base in a manner somewhat reminiscent of sipping a thick milkshake through a straw. It seemed the ship's mysterious weapon cared not for the size of its target, but even stranger was the fact that Hokkaido did not once struggle as the process went on.

"What's goin' on?" asked Bisco. "Hokkaido should be able to swat that thing outta the sky, no problem!"

“I don’t know what kind of technology this is,” said Milo, fighting to stay calm and rational, “but surely it can’t lift Hokkaido *and* fight us off at the same time. Now’s our chance! Let’s get above it before it finishes doing whatever it’s doing!”

“Got it!”

Actagawa’s thrusters flared to life once more, and he barreled up through the towering clouds, past the ship’s colossal hull, and over its sunlit surface.

“What the hell?!” Bisco cried when he saw the full scale of the craft. Milo, meanwhile, could pull only one word from the sea of his education that even began to describe what he was seeing.

“It’s an ark, Bisco! It’s Noah’s Ark!”

“Noah’s Ark?”

“From the Bible! Aren’t you good with religion and stuff, Bisco?”

“I only know *Ame-no-torifune*! Is that the same thing? —H-hey, watch out!”

Bisco’s warning caused Milo to take the reins, just as a dangerous-looking array of cannons popped out of the ship’s deck and swiveled to point their way. However, when they fired, it was with a strange *pwomf* noise, and what their barrels expelled were not cannonballs but instead a strange, bubble-like object that drifted slowly toward the two Mushroom Keepers.

“That’s the dumbest weapon I’ve ever seen!” shouted Bisco, drawing his mushroom bow. “Milo! I’ll pop these bubbles; you get us close!”

“All right!”

Quick as a flash, Bisco loosed an arrow at the nearest bubble, but instead of bursting, it simply swallowed the arrow whole. Within the membranous orb, Bisco’s projectile squelched into an underwhelming cluster of clamshell mushrooms, while the bubble, its purpose apparently fulfilled, drifted off toward the ship, its mushroom sample in tow.

“My arrow didn’t do nothin’... That’s weird. What happened?!”

Bisco pulled an oyster mushroom arrow from his quiver and tried again, but the same thing happened. His repeated attempts meant that, before long, the

airspace looked less like a battlefield and more like some kind of mushroom conservatory.

“The hell’s up with these bubbles?! They makin’ fun of me?!”

“Uh-oh! Bisco, we’re surrounded!”

The bubbles were slow, but while Bisco had been trying in vain to damage them, a bunch had managed to encompass the pair.

“They’re made to capture living things! We can’t risk touching them!”

“Well, we gotta get past ’em somehow! We’re almost there!”

“I’ll try!”

Actagawa’s jets flared once more, and the bubbles descended on him all at once. He spun and wove, working his way to the deck of the ship, but just as all seemed well, one of the bubbles grazed Actagawa’s leg, throwing him off-balance.

*Schlup!*

“Aagh! Our leg’s caught!”

“Dammit!”

“Actagawa! Are you okay?”

Luckily, the giant crab managed to shake the bubble free, and the two boys breathed a sigh of relief as they landed safely aboard the ark. But when they reassessed their surroundings, they gulped.

At first glance, the ship seemed to be made of wood, in keeping with the legend. However, strange geometrical lights coursed through the wood grain, and each turn of the head revealed more inexplicable technological mysteries, the most extreme of which was...

“Bisco...wh-what is that?”

“It’s a whole bunch of animals... They sleeping?”

Filling the ship’s deck were rows upon rows of cylindrical vats, all of differing sizes, and all filled with life. Mammals, fish, insects...even plants, and always in pairs: a male and a female specimen. They all slept peacefully, as if waiting to

be awoken.

“This shit gives me the creeps... What’s up with this ship?!”

“It’s Noah’s Ark...,” muttered Milo, breaking out into an anxious sweat. “According to legend, it gathered two of every animal, in order to wait out the destruction of the world. This ship...it’s doing the same thing!”

“Precisely.”

The sudden, booming voice shocked the pair. They leaped back-to-back and cautiously eyed their surroundings for the source.

*“The ship of the life-forms, by the life-forms, for the life-forms. Gentlemen, welcome...to my ark!”*

“You bastard! Show yourself! Who are you?!”

*“I commend you on your brazenness, gentlemen, as it is I who should be asking that question. Yet I’m afraid you’ve caught me with my pants down, so to speak... Computer, fetch me a fresh suit and tie, would you?”*

The man’s voice sounded calm and composed, and the two Mushroom Keepers found it hard to decide whether he meant them harm or not. The uncertainty only made them even more nervous.

*“I shall meet you on the deck shortly. Until then, please amuse yourselves by perusing my collection... Computer! I don’t like this tie; bring me a new one.”*

“Y-your collection?!”

*“Interested, Mr. Nekoyanagi? That right there is a Darwin’s fox that I captured on Chiloé Island, in Chile. It possesses a life force of 408 lifra, quite high for a fox species.”*

*W-wait, they’re all from overseas?!*

Milo’s curiosity got the better of him, and he suddenly wandered over to the nearest vat.

“Milo?! The hell are you doin’?! Stay focused!”

“But...just look! They’ve got species I’ve never seen before!”

*“To your left there is a giant otter; beside it, a Bornean orangutan. The species*

*on your right is an Atlantic giant squid, followed by a white-rumped vulture. My collection comprises only the most immaculate specimens, all but completely uncontaminated by the Rust. As you can probably surmise, it is exceedingly valuable, and... Oh no! Computer, stow the vats!"*

All of a sudden, the cylindrical tanks retracted into the deck, not a moment too soon as Actagawa angrily swung his greatclaw into the ship's deck with a *Ker-room!*

The boys' hair fluttered. "Waagh! Actagawa!" cried Milo.

"Calm down!" yelled Bisco, running over to the enraged crab and stroking his legs reassuringly. "It's just 'cause he's faced with all these strange creatures; he don't know what to do. Don't worry, dude, you could beat all of 'em with your big claw tied behind your back!"

*"My dear crustacean,"* came the voice. *"You must understand there is more to life than strength. Maybe one day, you will learn."*

*Pop. Pop. Pop!*

"Don't look down on us, you...!"

Bisco began to swear, when all of a sudden he noticed the ground at his feet had grown slick and reflective, as if coated in a thin layer of water. He hadn't noticed when it happened.

*It smells...salty? But we're all the way up in the air! And I swear this deck was bone-dry a moment ago!*

"This isn't fair!" cried Milo. "You can see us, but we can't see you!"

*"You can't? You wound me, gentlemen. I've been right by your side this entire time."*

"Milo! Somethin's not right! Get back over—!"

*Splashhh!*

Suddenly and without warning, a fountain of seawater erupted from the deck, engulfing Milo whole!

"Waaagh?!"

*“It is I, gentlemen!”*

The column of water began swirling, taking Milo with it.

*“Brilliant! What amazing life force! It’s just as Mama said. Are you even human?!”*

*“Bliscgoo...!”*

*“Milo! Grab on!”*

Bisco swung his bow like a sword into the whirling tides, granting Milo a handhold. He gripped on to it, and Bisco pulled him out like a pole fisher, resulting in a dazzling spray of seawater.

*“Wah-ha-ha-ha...”*

The water let out a high-spirited chortle and receded. Just then, there was a *Clunk!* in the center of the deck, and something rose out of the floorboards: a large diving suit, nearly three meters tall.

The seawater drained into it, filling the helmet with liquid. Then the diving suit slowly moved its arms and legs. It took one forceful step forward, and then another.

*“Make the earth...,”* it said, one finger pointed proudly to the heavens, *“...great again!!”*

Its words were punctuated with a dazzling spray of water from the joints of the suit, like something of a fireworks display. The boys could do nothing but stare in utter shock.

The suit’s helmet was constantly leaking water from the back, giving it the appearance of a head of flowing hair. It turned to the rack behind it and picked out a smart suit and tie, which it clumsily donned over the diving suit itself.

*“Apologies,”* it said, turning to face the pair once more. *“I find it difficult to keep my form without this suit, you see... Hmm, have I put on weight?”*

*“Bi-Bi-Biscooo?! What on earth is that?!”*

*“If you don’t know, then how the hell am I supposed to?!”*

*“I am Mare,”* the diving suit explained. *“President of the ark. You may call me*

‘Mr. President.’”

President Mare then crossed the thick metal arms of his suit, and the liquid sloshing about in his head began bubbling proudly.

*“All living things upon this rock have placed their trust in me to ferry them to prosperity. Perhaps you already know me by another name: the ocean.”*

““Th-the ocean?!””

*“I watched how you took down that old dog, Tokyo! Marvelous! I’d love to crack open a Heineken and swap stories with you boys, but unfortunately...”*

Mare paused and cast his gaze over the boys’ shoulders. (Or so they presumed, as he did not possess eyes.)

*“It seems your friend there is not so eager to partake.”*

At this, the two boys turned around.

“A-Actagawa?!”

The giant crab was waving his greatclaw at Mare in a very threatening manner. Milo was surprised; compared to Bisco, Actagawa was never one to start fights.

“Calm down!” Bisco cried. “This guy just wants to talk; we don’t need to resort to—”

“Bisco, watch out!”

Milo grabbed his partner’s coat and tugged him back, narrowly out of the range of Actagawa’s raging claw. The angered crustacean didn’t even spare a glance for his masters as they went tumbling along the floor, instead making a beeline for Mare directly.

“What’s gotten into him?!” Bisco shouted.

“I don’t know!” replied Milo. “But Actagawa always gets angry when people don’t treat life with respect!”

Thinking fast, the boy doctor pulled a sedative syringe from his vial pouch.

“We have to stop him! Mare’s so confident, he must have access to some secret weapon we don’t know—”

But just as Milo rose to his feet, a strange feeling assailed him.

“Urgh...? Guh...”

“Milo?!”

“Guuh... Bleeeagh...”

Milo promptly emptied the contents of his stomach all over the ship’s deck. By the time Bisco reached him, his face had turned ghostly pale.

“Now you’re losin’ it, too! What did that guy do to us?!”

“My stomach... It hurts...”

*“Now this is a startling development...,”* said Mare, eyeing Milo curiously. *“I sense not one but two life signatures coming from Mr. Nekoyanagi. ...Oh, but before I worry about that...”*

President Mare calmly turned to face the giant crab bearing angrily down on him. Actagawa somersaulted, transforming his inertia into a devastating claw swing that struck Mare head-on, splintering the deck beneath his feet! However...

“Ho-ho, you’re a feisty one, aren’t you?”

Mare blocked it with his arm, and though his ankles sank into the wood from the force of Actagawa’s blow, there was not so much as a single crack all across his metal suit.

*“Impressive! My, how you’ve grown these scant few generations!”*

His body creaked, emitting bursts of water.

*“You beautiful beast! The persistence of your ancestors is truly inspiring, to have adapted and flourished so in the face of Earth’s calamity!”*

Straining, Mare slowly pushed the steelcrab back. It was an astonishing sight; not one organism in all of Earth’s history had had the power to overcome Actagawa’s monstrous strength in a head-on battle.

“Th-the hell? He’s stronger than our crab?!”

*“This is my answer to you, majestic creature!”*

*Thwack!!* Mare brushed Actagawa's claw aside, then wound up for an attack of his own!

*"A sign of my respect!!"*

*Ka-bamm!!*

Mare's straight punch shot directly into Actagawa's exposed underbelly. The blow sent his necktie aflutter, and the whole ship shook.

*"“Actagawa!!”"*

The giant crab was struck with the force of a tsunami, and his six legs clung to the ground for dear life. Yet even this was in vain, for the energy of Mare's blow stripped the very planks from the deck and scattered them into the air!

*"Mare Engine, engage!"*

The president's roar activated his special technique. From his extended fist came a torrent of water that snatched up Actagawa and carried him high up into the air.

*"Go forth with that power and settle a new frontier!"*

"Let him gooo!!" yelled Bisco.

*"Great Wave: Life Ocean Stream!!"*

The pillar of water conjured by Mare's technique twisted and coiled like a serpent, and the front of the president's helmet swung open. Then he began to suck with great force, drawing the water, and Actagawa with it, into the mysterious space within. The giant crab did his best to resist, but as soon as his legs touched the opening, there was a *Shlurrrp!* noise, and he completely vanished inside.

*"Conservation complete!"* the president exclaimed.

"Wh-what have you done?!" wailed Milo.

Mare belched up the creature's saddlebags, as if such foreign matter was not welcome, and effortlessly tossed the heavy packs over his shoulder. Then he took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the circumference of his "face." The water leaked from his every crevice, as if attempting to contain

Actagawa's boundless might.

*"Your support is much appreciated, beautiful creature! I feel stronger already!"*

"You bastard!" yelled Bisco, stepping forward to protect the compromised Milo. "What have you done to Actagawa?!"

*"No need to worry, boys! He is with me now, safe and secure!"* replied Mare, as though he expected this to come as good news. *"The Genocide Wave cannot touch him in here. After the organism known as Hokkaido, this is another great step toward conserving all of Japan's megaflora and fauna!"*

"You mean to say Actagawa, Hokkaido...they're inside your body?!" cried Milo, who was throwing up with each new revelation.

Bisco rubbed Milo's back, a pained expression on his face. "Then Chaika and the rest of the sporko...they're in there, too?"

*"Perhaps. I'm afraid I didn't notice, but if they are, that is great news! Oh, but don't be upset; you two are more than welcome to join them!"*

If the diving suit had possessed a mouth, it surely would have been smiling broadly. Instead, the liquid inside Mare's helmet bubbled excitedly, and he poked a patriotic digit at the pair.

*"Join us!!" he said. "Join the conservation efforts! Leap freely into my welcoming breast!"*

"Milo, you think we can beat him?!"

"Don't underestimate us, Bisco!"

Before Bisco could react, Milo leaped into action. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and conjured the spinning emerald cube in his palm.

*"Won/shad/viviki/snew!"*

"Aw yeah! Here we go!"

Bisco took up his bow-firing pose, and Milo's cube traced a rainbow arc in his hands.

*"Hmm? What is...?"*

“Behold!”

““The *Ultrafaith Bow!!*””

A wave of power swept out from the pair as their ultimate technique was made manifest. A powerful wind shook the ark, and rainbow spores leaked out of the weapon, bathing Bisco and Milo both in a radiant glow.

Mare was utterly entranced by the sight. “*B-beautiful!*”

“Hey, Mr. President! You still got a chance to get outta this alive! Just let all the plants and animals you captured go!”

“*What are you, some kind of doomsday cult? I’m sorry, but the minority has no power here! That’s democracy at work, I’m afraid!*”

“Screw that! We didn’t vote for you!”

“*What?!*”

Mare’s Achilles’ heel! He had yet to earn the confidence of the Japanese people! Milo’s comment bothered Mare even more than expected, because his head started frothing wildly, and hot steam shot from his joints!

“*This is innovation! We don’t have time to convince each and every person on the planet!*” he said. “*All right, if that’s your game, then fire away! I’ll show you I’m worthy to lead! My politics are ironclad! I’m sure they can weather one little arr—!*”

But just as Mare was speaking, a telephone receiver made of water appeared by his head and started ringing.

“*...Apologies, boys. Mama’s ringing me again. What is it now, Mama? Didn’t I tell you not to call me when I’m at work?*”

“If that’s the way you want to play it...!!”

“*What’s that, Mama? If the Ultrafaith Arrow hits me, it’s over? It doesn’t matter how strong I am? Well, doggone it, woman! You should have said so earlier! What am I supposed to do, then?!*”

President Mare suddenly began to panic as the two boys glowed with spores.

“Milo, now’s our chance!”

“...Wait. S-something’s wrong...”

As they teetered on the brink of releasing their unfathomable power, Milo suddenly let out a groan.

“Oh my god! I can’t be impeached! There’s still so much more to do!”

“M...my stomach...”

“Hmm?”

“Milo!! Stay focused, or else the bow’ll... Aagh!”

The *Ultrafaith Bow* leaped suddenly from Bisco’s grasp! Without the two Mushroom Keepers’ combined focus, the weapon broke down into its constituent spores, which then flew toward Milo and engulfed him!

“Waaah!!” screamed Milo as the spores worked their way into his body through his mouth. “*Gblblblh...!*”

“Milo!!”

The rainbowshroom spores unleashed their reality-defying powers inside Milo. The boy’s eyes flew open as his body was suddenly filled to the brim with life force, far more than was safe for any human.

“Aaagh! There’s something...inside me...!”

“What’s that?! Did you swallow some of this guy’s seawater or somethin’?! Milo, keep it together!”

“Help me, Bisco...! I’m scared!”

“Goddammit, what did you do?!”

Bisco turned his eyes, sharper than the point of any arrow, on his mysterious adversary. Mare looked left and right, then pointed a confused finger at himself.

“I know you did somethin’ to him! Spit it out!”

“*I did not have relations with that man, I swear!*” Mare protested. “*Wait, why do I need to make excuses? Now that you can’t fire that technique of yours, I’m on top again!*”

He reassumed his confident posture. “I’m not sure what just happened, but someone up there must be looking out for me. Why don’t you gentlemen just come along quietly, now?”

“Grr! Don’t you dare!”

“Bisco!”

Milo suddenly squeezed his partner’s hand with all the force he possessed. Bisco scarcely had time to know what was happening before Milo pulled him into his arms with astonishing force.

“I’m scared, Bisco! Stay by my side!”

“The hell’s wrong with you?! There’s a guy tryin’ to vacuum-pack us over here!”

“There’s something...there’s something coming out of me! Urghh... Grh...!”

The pain intensified until Milo could only manage a strangled cry. His face went completely pale, and he squeezed Bisco’s hand tightly enough to break his bones.

“Milo!”

“*Mare Engine, engage!*”

“Bisco...it’s too late...”

“Don’t worry! When death comes, we’ll face it together!”

“The baby...it’s here...!”

“...The *what*!?”

“*Prepare to know peace, barbarians! Great Wave: Life Ocean Stream!!*”

The great waterspout shot forth once more from the president’s extended fist. There was nothing the two boys could do but watch and wait as it swallowed them mercilessly up...

...but just then!

“Gughh...”

*Plop!*

“Mah!!”

With a fledgling cry that split the air, a glittering object, about half a meter across, emerged from Milo’s mouth. It flew through the sky like a sunbeam, right toward Mare.

“Mah!!”

*Klangg!!*

A stubby little leg struck the president’s face with all the force of a thermonuclear bomb.

“Guuuooogghhh?!”

The attack left a huge dent in his diving suit and catapulted Mare halfway across the ship’s deck. *Ker-rang! Ker-rang!* He collided with the surface again and again, finally coming to rest about fifty meters away. Meanwhile...

“Bab-ba-ba-baaam!”

The mysterious new arrival raised a single pudgy arm in a valiant display of triumph. The two boys were even more gobsmacked than President Mare had been.

“Wh...?”

“What the hell is that?!”

“Mama!!” the figure cried, leaping onto Milo’s breast.

“Wah?!”

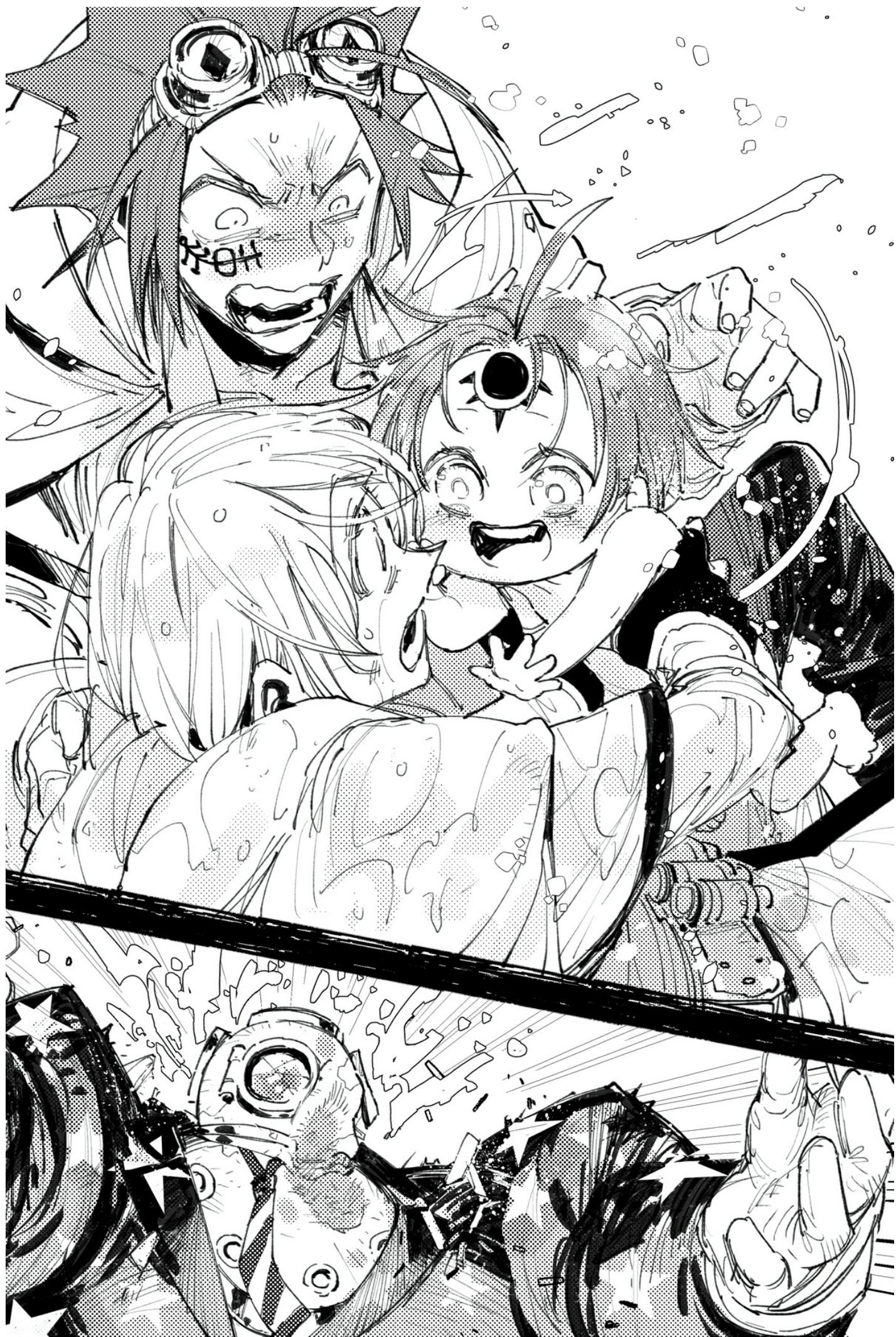
The force toppled Milo, and the creature sat atop him, scrutinizing his face closely. Their big round eyes blinked a couple times, and then...

“Mam-ma!”

“Mama...? You mean...me?!”

“Dad-da!”

“Whaat?! I think I woulda remembered...”



“Hee-hee-hee!”

“*This is... This is...*”

President Mare struggled to his feet, readjusting his damaged helmet.

“*This is...a miracle!!*” he cried out with joy. “*So this is what Mama was talking about. The new life created from the ultimate mushroom art! The final stage of human evolution!*”

“Bisco! He’s not down yet!” cautioned Milo.

“Mam-ma!”

“No! You have to stay safe— Ah-ha-ha-ha! That tickles!”

“*The miracle mushroom kid! It will be my privilege—nay, my honor—to safeguard this child inside myself for future generations! I shall unleash the full power of the Mare Engine to save you from this dying world!!*”

Mare focused the boundless power of the ocean for a second attempt. Milo tried to cast a mantra in response, but with the bouncing bundle of joy clinging to him, he couldn’t concentrate on the spell.

“Wah! Bisco! Don’t just stand there, do something!”

“...What name should we give it?”

“Huh?!”

“We gotta give it a name, Milo!”

Bisco’s eyes were dead serious, as though he were standing before God himself. He held out his finger, and the small figure chomped on it happily.

“We’ve given birth to a divine being,” he said. “You have your role to play, and I have mine.”

“...You really see us that way...? I—wait, no! Now’s not the time! Mare’s attacking!!”

“Who cares about him?! This is the most important moment of our lives, and the baby’s! We need to give it a name that carries our hopes and dreams!”

“...”

"I want you to do it, Milo. You're the only one in this world who can."

When Milo looked into Bisco's eyes, as calm and clear as a lake surface, all the chaos and turmoil of the outside world melted away. It was just him, Bisco, and the baby. Milo looked down into its eyes. They were the same shade as its father's.

Just then, Milo was overcome with love. He wanted to protect this child at all costs. He squeezed it tightly so that it would never leave him and pressed his cheek into the baby's.

*I want you to know neither sadness nor pain for as long as you live.*

*Only happiness and love, as sweet as can be.*

*So, your name...*

*Your name is...*

*"Mare Engine: Full Power! Life Ocean Streeeam!!"*

The oceans coiled, and an attack of unprecedented magnitude bore down on the boys. Bisco stepped forward without hesitation to protect his baby and the mother of his child.

And just as the waves were about to engulf the new family and seal their fate...

"Sugar. I'm so glad to finally meet you. I love you."

Sugar. As soon as Milo spoke her name, the rainbowshroom spores wrapped Sugar in a prismatic light.

"Sugar...," she said. "I'm Sugar! My name...is SUGAAAR!!"

Her howl! Her roar! Her divine word! It rippled like a shield of force, pulverizing Mare's titanic mass of ocean water and turning it into harmless droplets!

*"Wh-what?! Impossible! How did she part my oceans with just her voice?!"*

"Attagirl!" came Bisco's rallying cry, the wind fluttering his hair. "She'd give Moses a run for his money! You see that, Milo? That's our kid!"

"B-Bisco! I can't take it...!"

The deck let out a splintering sound as huge cracks formed in a circle around the trio.

"I can't stand being this close to her! Sugar still doesn't know her own strength!"

"Huh?"

"Waaagh! I can't hold on!!"

"Grab on, Milo!!"

"Maaah!!"

Sugar's cry successfully overpowered the Mare Engine, but she also catapulted herself and her two parents high into the air. Having expended all their power, and without their trusty steed to save them, there was nothing they could do but tumble helplessly through the endless blue.

"Waaaaahhh!!!"

"Ee-hee!"

They passed by the ship, through the clouds, and plummeted back down toward the earth. By the time President Mare finally stood and peeked overboard, the three of them were long gone.

"Astounding..."

Mare looked down at himself, tore off his soaked jacket, crossed his arms, and pondered the situation.

*"I knew the miracle mushroom kid was coming, but I never thought it would come from Mr. Nekoyanagi's mouth, of all places. How am I supposed to capture the three of them now?"*

Milo's words played back in the president's head. He had yet to earn the trust of the Japanese people.

*"The people's votes are my strength. I need more grassroots support. It's time to return to the original plan and do a little canvassing."*

Then he looked once more at his battered diving suit and his even more battered ship, and he emitted a sigh-like bubble.

*"However," he said. "It seems that first some repairs are in order. We're setting out to impress the Japanese people here, so we must look our best... Still, a candidate doing maintenance on his own campaign vehicle? Pah! This country's gone to the dogs."*

Beneath the clear summer sky stood a patch of gardenias, cloaking the Benibishi garden in a fragrant scent. The Benibishi themselves were hard at work, their silky skin awash with sweat as they set about developing the land of New Kaso in service to their king.

Shishi was leading the efforts, hoe in hand. At first, her subjects had been reluctant to let the young leader participate in such grueling work, but in time, they had come to accept their new king's way of doing things and welcomed her with eager respect.

At her side, as ever, stood the Iron Judge himself, Someyoshi Satahabaki, casting a vigilant eye over the fields and, in his own words, handling the work that was far below a ruler's station.

"Someyoshi, my friend," asked Shishi, "is there nothing I can do? I wish not to impose upon you to this extent."

But the giant stubbornly shook his head. "There is no need. Simply sit upon your throne and inspire the people. That is all a king can and should do."

"But founding a nation is a monumental undertaking," Shishi argued. "Even this palace is grand in its construction. Tell me, how much did it cost?"

"SILENCE!" Satahabaki barked. "Petty is the king who frets over every coin. Have a little faith in your almighty servant, Someyoshi Satahabaki!"

Shishi looked at him, his scepter raised proudly, and she let out a defeated sigh and smiled.

"Thank you, Someyoshi. I shall take you at your word, then. Pray use your powers in service to our great nation."

"Think nothing of it, young blossom. Your father used to work me twice as hard!"

“Ha-ha-ha!”

Although Six Realms had been shut down, Satahabaki’s services as a judge were still very much in demand all over the country. He was able to earn a modest income simply by traveling here and there, rounding up criminals and settling disputes.

Let us take a peek behind the curtain, so to speak, and see just what that work entailed...

“Merchants of Shimobuki Prefecture,” the judge’s booming voice resounded. “You have each been charged with sabotaging the business of the other, putting pointless feuding above the needs of your customers. What say you in your defense?”

“*Nadoo! Hin armundoo. Kher, yoobishee, obol!*”

“*Nadoonadoo! Heeba-liango. Kher, barbel, heebo, obol!*”

“It seems they only speak Shimobukian, Your Honor. I shall go fetch the interpreter...”

“UNNECESSARY!” yelled the Iron Judge, rising from his seat. “The merchants’ pettiness is one crime. My ignorance of languages, another.”

““Y-yooho?””

“All three of us share in our fragrance of the law, and all three of us shall share in my punishment!”

*Flick! Flick!* The judge’s merciless fingers tossed the Shimobukians clean across the courthouse. Then the ever impartial arbiter of justice swung a weighty iron fist into his own face!

“L-Lord Satahabaki?!”

Flung clean across the courthouse by his own attack, Satahabaki climbed out of a heap of rubble and brandished his folding fan!

“All involved have suffered equally! Balance has been restored to the scales of justice!! Ōoka Tadasuke himself would smile upon this wise decision!”

*Clack! Clack!*

Speeding through the trials like this, Satahabaki could easily oversee a dozen cases in a single day, and the stubborn magistrate never once paused for rest.

“Your Honor, if it pleases you, I have prepared lunch...”

“Very well. But first, what of our guest?”

“Well, she—”

“Say no more. I shall go call upon her myself.”

The well-being of this “guest,” it seemed, was of great concern to Satahabaki. He quickly made his way over to the corner of the palace in which she was staying, shaking the earth with every step.

As he approached, a voice cried out, “Hello?! Is anyone there?! Can someone let me out of here, please?!” It appeared the occupant of the room was not all too happy to be present.

“Shishi?! Is that you?!” she screamed. “Let me out already!!”

Satahabaki sighed and shook his head in despair before sliding open the door.

“Your Honor!” cried the person inside, upon noticing his arrival. “I demand you explain! What is the meaning of this?!”

It was Pawoo Nekoyanagi, now *former* governor of Imihama, following her resignation. She was tied to the bed by thick roots, the result of Satahabaki’s cherry blossom art.

Even in her maternity dress, she looked as elegant as ever, and Satahabaki’s restraints notwithstanding, it was clear every measure had been taken to ensure a relaxed and peaceful atmosphere.

“I cannot move a muscle, Your Honor! I demand you let me out of here at once!”

“Denied!” roared Satahabaki, baring his gleaming white teeth. “We all know what manner of misadventures you would get up to were you to be freed. I have been tasked by my liege, at the request of your brother, Nekoyanagi, to ensure a healthy environment for the child.”

“But I’m still only a month pregnant! Isn’t this too hasty?!”

“Am I to understand you have no appetite, then? I sincerely apologize if the offerings of the Benibishi are insufficient to satisfy your kind’s meat-loving tastes.”

*It’s impossible! He’s not listening to me at all!*

It was true that Milo had warned the Benibishi to be prepared for Pawoo’s rambunctious behavior, but Pawoo couldn’t help feeling that Satahabaki had taken that advice a little too seriously.

Originally, it was Shishi who had volunteered to act as Pawoo’s midwife, but Satahabaki insisted such menial duties should fall to him instead. It couldn’t be said that he didn’t have the baby’s best interests at heart, and Satahabaki never did things by half measures. The problem was in his methods. You see, the Iron Judge had been a prison warden most of his life, and old habits died hard.

“Today, I have come to produce my finest offerings for the pregnant mother: cherry-flavored ice cream.”

At Satahabaki’s bidding, several Benibishi brought in a cooking table, while Satahabaki himself affixed a pink frilly apron around his vast waist. He took a pailful of ice and began mixing it with salt.

“First, we mix some salt into the ice,” he explained, “lowering its temperature to minus twenty degrees. Then we add some cottoncow milk, fresh cream, and some of my own Florescence into a metal tin, mix it well, and submerge it in the ice.”

“L-Lord High Overseer...aren’t you supposed to take off your gauntlets before you start?”

“After that, simply open up the tin and serve!”

“Ooh!”

The apron-sporting Satahabaki had made for quite a bizarre sight, but when Pawoo saw the finished product, garnished to perfection with red bean paste and a sprig of mint, she couldn’t help being impressed. Satahabaki’s natural flair for the dramatic led to a truly gourmet dish, practically unheard-of in post-apocalyptic Japan.

“Now I shall untie your arms, so have a taste.”

“It...it’s so beautiful. May I really?”

Pawoo hesitantly took a spoon and scooped up a bite, releasing a fragrant cherry blossom scent. At that, she could wait no longer and eagerly stuffed the ice cream into her mouth.

“It’s so...SALTYYYYYYYYYYY!!” she screamed, sticking out her tongue.

“I adopted a more modern approach to ice cream. I would love to hear your thoughts.”

“I know sugar’s rare these days, but that doesn’t mean you can replace it with salt!!”

“The salt counterbalances the sugar and also serves to ward off evil,” Satahabaki explained. “Perfect for the baby, would you not agree? A kilogram or so ought to do the trick, I thought, taking into account your magnificent appetite! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

As Satahabaki laughed, the midday gong struck.

“Ah,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment to attend.”

“Wait!” Pawoo protested. “Let me out of these roots first!”

“I look forward to seeing what kind of prodigy you bring into this world, good woman. Farewell!”

Satahabaki left, his teeth rattling with what surely had to be laughter.

“Haah...”

Pawoo let out a sigh as the weariness hit her all at once. She sat alone in a room far too spacious for the single bed to which she was confined.

The Benibishi’s concept of hospitality left much to be desired. It seemed they had yet to adapt to their lives outside the slammer, because their idea of taking care of people involved locking them up and never letting them see the light of day. All Pawoo had to look forward to were Shishi’s visits, and even those were few and far between.

“At this rate,” she said, “I’m going to lose my mind before the baby arrives...”

“Yeah, I bet. Can’t be fun locked up all by yourself, can it?”

“Tell me about it. I’ve half a mind to— Wait, who’s there?!”

Pawoo’s eyes flew open. She searched around for the source of the unfamiliar voice and spotted a figure—a woman—standing with her in the room. Despite obviously not belonging to the Benibishi, Pawoo had been completely oblivious to the woman’s presence until she spoke.

“Oh, what’s this?” the stranger asked. “Ice cream? So the big guy fancies himself a five-star chef, does he? Give us a taste... *Om...* Fuck, it’s salty as hell!”

“Identify yourself!!”

Pawoo tried to leap out of bed...but forgot she was fastened to it. The whole thing flipped up on its end and was about to flatten her when the figure extended an arm to prop it up.

“Hey, keep it together, silly. You got a kid to look after, don’t forget.”

“Wh-who are you?!”

When Pawoo saw her gleaming jade-green eyes and crimson hair, which shimmered in the sunlight, any suspicion she harbored about the figure’s aims melted away, for the woman reminded her of Bisco. And what’s more...she was a Mushroom Keeper. The bow on her back and cloak around her shoulders were unmistakable, even if the piercing in her lip and tattoo around her right eye were her own additions. From looking at her, Pawoo couldn’t shake the feeling she was a woman who was hard to faze.

“What a powerhouse that silly kid’s gone and hooked up with. Takes after his mother, he does: always worryin’ about other people.”

“That kid? Y-you mean Bisco? Then you’re...”

“Pretty much,” the woman replied, scratching the back of her head. She let out a big yawn. “Came to give my congrats, but it looks like my kid’s gone and buzzed off.”

It was almost impossible to tell her age. She could have been in her teens or her thirties, and Pawoo would have believed it. But her vigorous demeanor left a deep impression.

*She's...beautiful.*

She was everything Pawoo wanted to be and more.

"Bisco's never told me anything about his family before..." she muttered.

"Such a shame about that ice cream," said Bisco's mother. "Perhaps a vanillashroom could extract the salt..."

She idly turned and began doing something to Satahabaki's offering. Pawoo started to lose her patience.

"What do you want with Bisco?!" she cried. "I'm warning you, if you..."

"Add a capershroom to taste, and... Mm! Try it now."

The mysterious woman smiled like a young girl and brought a spoonful of the ice cream over to Pawoo.

"What's wrong? Oh, I'm not tryin' to poison you, if that's what you're thinkin'."

"Er...er... Ahh...?"

"Good girl. That's better."

Disarmed by the woman's mysterious bearing, Pawoo obediently opened her mouth for yet another serving of the terrible ice cream she had only just earlier been forced to endure.

"Hmm?! It's delicious!"

"And nutritious. Good for you and the baby."

"How on earth did you do that?! It was so salty before!"

"Why are you so surprised? Don't tell me Bisco can't even do this. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though. Jabi never did pay much attention in mushroom class... Here, have another bite."

Pawoo was suddenly acting as if the woman were her own mother, content to be coddled. She wasn't sure what had come over her, but she found it impossible to avoid being swept up in the woman's pace.

"*Om-nom...*" she said, munching. "At least tell me...*om...*your name!"

“Marie. You know, like the biscuits.”

“M-Marie?”

“But who cares about my name?” said Marie, pointing an accusatory finger at Pawoo before tracing it down her neck toward her belly. “What about the baby’s? Have you thought of one yet?”

“N-no, not yet. It’s still too early...,” said Pawoo, cowed into submission by Marie’s overpowering aura. “But...I wanted to pick something like Bisco’s, to help them grow up sweet and strong. Something that will lead them to where they want to be in life.”

“If you ask me, I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean. I came up with Bisco’s name on the day he was born. I’d been eatin’ some of the snacks earlier, you see, then when I saw his face, it just kinda came to me in a flash... But I oughtta stay out of it; this is *your* decision.”

“Just what kind of woman *are* you...?”

“This kind.”

*Gaboom!*

Marie did nothing more than flick the rooty restraints binding Pawoo, yet the cherry blossoms were torn to shreds by mushrooms in an instant. The newly freed Pawoo leaped to her feet, her eyes flared wide in astonishment.

“H-how did you do that?! Flowers are supposed to eat the mushrooms!”

“Then you just gotta use a mushroom that *wants* to be eaten. Then the flower absorbs the mushroom’s death wish and just wilts. Seriously, how come nobody else ever thought of that?”

Marie dusted the wood chips off Pawoo’s kimono, leaving the raven-haired woman to ponder what she had just seen.

*Marie...? Can it be? Marie the Godshroom?!*

Milo had once shared with her tales told among the mushroom peoples. Marie the Godshroom stood alongside Jabi the Godbow as one of the

Mushroom Keepers' living legends. She was a genius at the mushroom arts, constantly pushing the frontiers of knowledge with her innovative uses for fungi. However...

*This isn't possible. Milo told me that the Godshroom died a long time ago!*

"I'm thinkin' you might need to fight to protect the baby," said Marie. "So I'll lend you a little somethin'."

While Pawoo looked on, unsure of what to make of her, Marie fumbled around in her pack.

"This here's an adamantshroom. It'll protect the baby so you can go all out. But careful, it's got rainbowshroom spores in it, so only use it when you need to."

"Adamantshroom?"

Pawoo curiously eyed the golden mushroom that Marie offered to her.

"I'm really glad I met you, Pawoo. See ya!"

Pawoo had to say something. She lifted her head. "Marie. Marie Akaboshi! You're—"

...But she was gone. In just the few short seconds that Pawoo's gaze was averted, she had vanished, leaving only a trail of spores and a lingering mushroom scent.

"..."

Pawoo was not afraid. She felt strange powers at work, and so she quietly placed the adamantshroom in her pocket and stood up out of bed slowly, so as not to raise alarm.

*Fate works in mysterious ways, she thought. My path is clear. I need to go to Bisco!*

She strode over to the corner of the room and picked up her staff.

"Ms. Pawoo! Are you otherwise engaged? I wished to let you sample my latest pumpkin CHOWDER!"

*I'm sorry, Your Honor!*

Sensing the earthquake at Satahabaki's approach, Pawoo leaped out of the nearby open window and fled the Benibishi Realm, eyes glimmering with determination.

*...Then at last, the Buddha lost his patience and trapped Monkey beneath a big rock.*

“Let me out! Let me out!” Monkey cried.

*But the Buddha said...*

*...Guh...*

*Ow!!*

*Okay, okay! I'll keep reading! Don't twist my nose!*

*Where was I...?*

*Oh yeah. The Buddha said....*

“If you want me to rescue you, Monkey, then listen carefully.”

“Five hundred years from now, a lone monk will...”

...

*Sorry, I just think the Buddha's lettin' him off lightly, you know?*

*I mean, if I was him, and Monkey came in on his flying cloud and ate all my peaches, I wouldn't let him off with only five hundred years. I'd be ready to end his life right then and— Ngaaagh!!*

*Don't hit your father like that! All right, I get it, no comment. I'll just read, all right?*

*Ahem.*

*And so, Monkey stayed trapped beneath the boulder. For five hundred years, he stayed there, through wind and rain, until at last...he...*

*...He...*

...

Zzz...

The poor weary father could stay awake no longer and fell asleep heavily, like a log.

“Dadda? Read Monkey! Dadda!!”

Sugar pouted and began shaking him by the neck.

It had been two days since the trio had fallen from Mare’s ark and landed in Miyazaki, Kyushu, in a region called Terasuiwa. The fall would surely have killed them, had Sugar not grown a cluster of balloonshrooms that ferried the three to safety.

However, the land in which they found themselves was a dangerous one. Terasuiwa was sacred soil where one of Japan’s old gods was enshrined, and since the country’s downfall, mutated megafauna had moved into the region, just like those found in the Weeping Valley. Without Actagawa, the boys were hard-pressed to escape on their own, a task made all the more difficult with a baby in tow.

“We should focus on raising Sugar for now,” Bisco had said.

“Whaaat?! In a place like this? Are you insane?!”

“How do you think Pawoo’s gonna react if we bring this monster baby back with us? She’ll throw a fit! She’s more delicate than she looks, you know!”

“I know, but...”

“Maybe the gods are tryin’ to tell us somethin’ by sendin’ us here. Like, let a divine kid grow up in a divine place.”

In the end, Bisco had gotten his way, while the bags beneath Milo’s eyes only grew darker every day.

Sugar had not calmed down for one second since they arrived. She was unquenchably curious, taking an interest in anything and everything that caught her eye. Add to this her literally boundless energy, and it was more than a mother could handle. In addition to looking after her health, Milo sewed her clothes, played with her, and put her to sleep, and it was approaching the point where it would be easier to fight Kelshinha or Apollo again than tend to another

of her constant demands.

As a result, “Mommy” had collapsed into his sleeping bag, while “Papa” was left to deal with the onerous task of putting the baby to bed.

“Goo-goo ga-ga!!”

Sugar was desperate to know what happened to Monkey after that. She tried rocking Bisco awake or slapping his cheeks, but he was sleeping like the dead. All out of ideas, Sugar swiped the cat-eye goggles off her papa’s head, leaped down out of his arms, and put them on, like she’d seen him do. Wandering over to a puddle, she peered into it, examining her reflection.

“Oooh! Papa glasses! Sugar stwong!”

Seeing the rugged binoculars sitting atop her own adorable features pleased Sugar so greatly, she completely forgot about the story, and leaned in for a closer look, when...

*Snapp!!*

“Waaah?!”

...some kind of lizard leaped from the puddle and latched on to Sugar’s nose with its powerful jaws, causing her to fall flat on her back.

“Owiiiieee!!”

Sugar cried out and leaped into the air, more out of shock than pain. A mushroom cluster grew out of the ground to catch her, and she rolled around on top of it.

“Rrraaah!!”

She grabbed the lizard by the tail and pulled with all her might. It didn’t take much for the creature to pop free, and Sugar slammed it into the puddle, causing a great splash and scaring the water striders into the bushes.

All that was left was the frightened lizard, which was, to be precise, the juvenile form of a creature called a mossboss.

This creature lacked eyes, and instead its entire face was taken up by its mouth, which possessed an impressive array of gleaming white teeth. In many

respects, it looked similar to the Pipe Snake and must have evolved similarly, but while the Pipe Snake was a serpent, the mossboss was more closely related to the lizard or the newt.

However, the mossboss was far longer than its ancestors and possessed five legs on each side, each with five toes to better grip surfaces. True to its name, the mossboss also sported green growths along its back, complete with colorful little mushrooms.

It was a majestic creature. A symbol of Miyazaki Prefecture, and yet...

*Splat! Splat!*

“Bab-ba-ba-baaam!!”

Sugar swung it this way and that, having far too much fun tormenting the poor beast. This continued until finally...

*Rriipp!*

“Wah?!”

...the lizard’s tail came off completely, causing Sugar to lose her balance and fall, while the lucky mossboss crawled over a moss-covered stone and disappeared into the undergrowth.

Sugar stared at the spot it had just been and then at the creature’s detached tail.

“...Come back!” she cried out after it. “You fowgot something!!”

Sugar flung off her lovingly crafted boots and ran barefoot after the lizard, tail in hand. She pranced through the forest like a skipping stone, mushrooms blossoming in her wake wherever she stepped.

“Whee! Mr. Wizard! Wait for meee!!”

To the lizard, however, Sugar’s innocent voice must have sounded like the taunts of a vicious predator. Their game of cat-and-mouse took them all over the clearing before disappearing into the depths of the mountain trail.

...

Meanwhile, back at the camp, Milo’s alarmshroom erupted from his pillow

and began ringing. Milo let out a groan as he prepared to face another day on only three hours of sleep.

“Bisco...,” he muttered, still drowsy. “It’s my turn to watch Sugar...”

“Zzz...”

“Bisco...?” he asked, before spotting his partner’s sleeping form, a line of drool dangling from his mouth. “Bisco! What are you doing?! Wake up!” he yelled, shaking Bisco awake.

“Hwugh? Ugh, sorry, musta drifted off. Anyway, just then, a monk called Tripitaka came along, and...”

“I’m not here to listen to your story?! Where’s Sugar?”

“Sugar? She’s right...”

Bisco looked down.

“Um... She *was* right here, I swear.”

“You idiot!!”

Milo struck Bisco so hard across the cheek, he was seeing stars. Bisco looked at him like a young girl whose father had just beat her for the first time in his life.

“Th-the hell? You didn’t have to hit me that hard.”

“This is why raising babies is so difficult!” Milo screamed. “Because all men act like complete numbskulls!”

*Aren’t you a man, too?* Bisco thought.

“I’m going to look for her!” cried Milo in a panic. “Got my bow! My dagger!”

“She’s a divine kid,” reasoned Bisco. “Ain’t no way she’s gonna get—”

“Bisco!”

“R-right!!”

His drowsiness be damned, Milo took off like a lightning bolt in search of his errant daughter.

The mossboss had no natural predators. There was no animal, alive or dead,

that was able to keep up with its speed and agility. It could run on land, swim underwater, and dash inside tree hollows or between the cracks in the rocks to escape. The moss upon its back also made the perfect camouflage; if it stayed perfectly still, none of God's creatures could spot it.

One of God's *children*, on the other hand, was a different matter entirely.

"Mmmaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

An unholy cry flattened the grass, caressed the earth, and caused rivers to flow upstream. Mushrooms burst into being all over the place, flinging rocks into the sky. On one of those rocks clung our poor lizard friend, trembling with fright.

"Aha! There you are!!" came the voice from his nightmares. The lizard's ten legs scrambled, desperate to ferry him away from this place as quickly as possible.

"Bab-baaam! You fowgot this, Mr. Wizard!!"

Sugar clutched in her hand the lizard's discarded tail. It seemed she was still determined to return it at any cost.

The river waters had soaked her head to toe, and her hands, feet, and face were all caked in mud, yet her heart brimmed with a life force that eclipsed even her father's! Even now, she didn't seem the least bit tired, as though the holy peak were her very own backyard.

An innocent hand reached for the terrified lizard, but just before Sugar could close her stubby fingers around him...

"W-w-whoa?!"

...the lizard leaped away at the very last instant, into the hollow of a nearby tree. Sugar lost her balance and toppled in after him.

"Waaah!!"

She went tumbling head over heels for what seemed far too long, following the passage deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, before finally...

"Gwagh!!"

...she landed in a subterranean grove, atop a well-placed cushion of moss. She lay there dazed, her eyes spinning like tops, for a good ten seconds or so.

When she finally sat up, she found the cave was surprisingly vast, with a dome-shaped ceiling made of intertwined roots. Between them, Sugar could just make out the sunlight streaming in from the canopies far overhead.

Sugar leaped to her feet, full of energy. The curiosity of this new place erased the urgency of her quest, and she looked around at the moss, which covered every bit of ground like fallen snow.

“Yippee!!”

She jumped into it, rolling this way and that, when all of a sudden...

*Slide... Slide...*

...she sensed something enormous coming her way. Sugar peered into the darkness, and soon something emerged from the cave, blocking out the light.

“Wha?! Owawa?!”

Her face turned to one of shock. For what had appeared before her...

“Gwaaaagh!”

...was the face of an *adult* mossboss!

It occupied the entire cave entrance and was even larger than Actagawa in size. Out of all the long-lived mossbosses, this specimen was by far the most venerable and reigned as the undisputed lord of the Terasuiwa Mountains.

Its roar tore the moss from the floor and fluttered Sugar’s hair. She stared at it, blinking, and then reached into her pocket, pulling out the lizard’s tail she had been trying so hard to return.

“Hello, Mrs. Wizard Mommy. Mr. Wizard dwopped this!” she said this, beaming as brightly as a thousand suns.

However, the mossboss didn’t answer. Instead, it whipped its huge tongue, catching Sugar and flinging her into the root-twined ceiling, where she remained, dazed, for a few seconds, before falling to earth amid a hail of wood chips.

“?!?!?”

Sugar was stunned. She hadn’t suffered a single scratch, due to her supernatural resilience, but she stood there in shock nonetheless.

...?????

There wasn’t a single unkind thought in her little head, and so she couldn’t possibly have understood why her good deed was repaid with violence. The shock to her mind was far greater than the shock to her body.

Of course, from the mossboss’s point of view, this human had almost killed its child and was waving the trophy right in its face, to say nothing of the fact that animal ethics were not particularly aligned with human values in the first place.

*Thud! Thud!* The creature marched closer with slow yet intimidating steps. Sugar stood there, trembling, and extended her hand a second time.

“M-Mrs. Wizard...? Mr. Wizard dwopped this!!”

*Thwack!*

This time, her heartfelt appeal was met with an overhead swing from the mossboss’s tail! It was as thick and heavy as the oldest tree in the forest. No creature had ever been caught beneath it and survived to tell the tale.

The mossboss let out a low, rumbling groan and slowly lifted its tail to confirm the human’s minced remains...

...or *tried* to, in any case. For at that moment, some enormous power lifted the mossboss into the air by the tail, spinning it round and round. The mossboss wailed in panic, flapping its ten legs in terror.

At last, the incredible power released it, sending the enormous beast flying headlong into the wall of the cave. The agile creature righted itself in an instant, but when it did, its eyes fell upon a glowing bundle of light shimmering in all colors of the rainbow.

The miracle spores suffused her very being, and Sugar’s hair fluttered and waved, even in the absence of any wind. She huffed and puffed with indignation, forced to experience the pain of being misunderstood for the first time in her short life. Tears rolled down her face, like stars in the Milky Way.

“Stop...buwwying...MEEEEEEE!!” she screamed. A wave of force radiated out from her, causing the whole cave to tremble and quake and mushrooms to burst into being across every surface.

The mossboss let out a deep groan. It seemed keenly aware that Sugar could very easily destroy its home if left unchecked, and so, in a last-ditch effort to protect its children and the holy land in which it dwelled, the creature leaped into the air, pouncing upon its uninvited guest.

Then, with its soft underbelly completely exposed...

“Magic pole!”

*Ga-gaboom!!*

Sugar slapped the ground with her palms, and just like the monkey king’s treasured weapon, an enormous King Trumpet burst from the ground, striking the mossboss in its core.

“*Gwooaahh?!*”

“Two!! Thwee!!”

*Gaboom! Gaboom!* Another two mushrooms pummeled the poor beast as it hung in the air, launching it straight into the roof overhead. After that, a final King Trumpet sprouted from the ceiling, smacking the mossboss back down with all the force of a guillotine blade. Moss flew into the air as the enormous creature collided with the earth.

The battle was won, but Sugar didn’t stop there.

“Die...”

Her anger was far from abated. Her pure heart had been forced to experience the bitter taste of betrayal, and now her innocent eyes burned with hatred. She balled her fists and squeezed, commanding the final King Trumpet to grow larger and larger until it was closing in on the mossboss from above.

“Die, die, die! DIIIIIEEE!!”

Sugar’s divine power caused the mushroom to swell, but just as it was about to smother the creature...

*Pchew!*

...a sunlight arrow shot down from the heavens, severing the King Trumpet and coating the vicinity in a smattering of Rust-Eaters. Sugar watched as her prey seized the moment to make a run for it.

“Come back!” she cried after it, but just then...

“Sugar!!”

...Milo’s arms wrapped around her.

“Sugar! It’s okay! Mommy and Daddy are here!”

“Wet go of me! I’ll kill it! I’ll kill it!”

“S-Sugar...”

Normally, Sugar calmed down immediately in Milo’s arms, but today she was on the warpath. Her teeth had become fangs, her nails claws, and she was positively fuming.

*She’s too much for me! I’m still exhausted from giving birth!*

“Sugar! Calm down!”

*Gulp!*

It was her father’s furious voice that intimidated Sugar into silence, and she stopped swinging her fists. Bisco dropped down before her, his cloak aflutter.

“How dare you come onto this girl’s turf and start throwin’ hands!” he yelled.  
“Look at what you’ve done!”

Bisco pointed at the dazed mossboss parent, whose children now crowded around it with worry.

“B-but!” Sugar protested.

“Each of your words contains Ultrafaith,” Bisco reprimanded her. “You can’t just go around telling people to die, or it’ll come true! How many times do I got to tell you?!”

“B-but! B-b-b-but...!”

“Bisco! You’re being too hard on her!!”

Seeing the tears in her eyes, Milo picked up Sugar and held her close, while shooting Bisco a nasty look.

“Sugar has thoughts and feelings, too, you know!” he cried. “She just doesn’t know how to express them yet!”

“She hurt a divine beast!” Bisco yelled back. “I’m just tryin’ to teach her proper manners. What’s wrong with that?!”

“Manners, manners, that’s all you go on about! Stop trying to push your stupid beliefs onto our child!”

“Wh-what?!”

“M-mama... Dadda...”

Sugar looked up at her parents. Suddenly caught in the middle of their shouting match, she didn’t know what to do.

“I’ll be good, Papa, I pwomise... Mama, pwease stop...”

“What did you just say about my beliefs?! Say that again to my face, asshole!”

“Sob. Papa... Mama...”

“You want to fight, do you? All right, then! Maybe you’ll calm down a bit after I beat you to a pulp!”

“Oh, you’re on!”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

*Whoosh!*

A wave of spores radiated out from Sugar, causing the boys’ cloaks to flutter. They turned to look, but their precious daughter was already flashing rainbow-colored before their very eyes.

“S-Sugar?! What’s wrong?!” asked Bisco.

“N-no!” cried Milo, trembling from the fear of his daughter’s rejection. “She wishes she didn’t have to be here anymore! If we don’t stop her, she’ll disappear forever!!”

“...I’ll stop her with the Catwisp Bow!” came Bisco’s split-second judgment.

“It’ll touch her heart and make her change her mind! Milo!”

“Right!”

Milo spun his mantra cube, summoning the pair’s newest art, the Catwisp Bow.

But just then!

“...Heh. Looks like I made it just in time. You gonna bring out your finishing move every time your daughter cries? Who do you think you are? Me? Here, let me give you a hand...”

*Pchew!*

A silver streak arced through the sky and passed between the two boys, landing with a *Thud!* in the rainbow Sugar’s heart.

““Whaaat?!””

“Waaah!! ...Huh?”

The snowlike spores issuing forth from that silver mushroom erased Sugar’s rainbow flicker and quelled her imminent explosion. All of her anger was completely forgotten, and she let out a huge yawn before collapsing to the ground and snoring soundly.

““Sugar!!””

The two boys ran over to her, but she was completely unharmed. They each knew that controlling the mushrooms to that extent was all but unheard of.

“Wh-who shot that?! Where did it come from?!”

“B-Bisco... Look at this!”

Milo quickly extracted the arrowhead and showed it to Bisco. When the two of them saw its silvery glow up close, they gulped.

“It’s the Ghost Hail!” said Milo. “The Ghost Hail stopped Sugar from going berserk!”

“That’s ridiculous! Hokkaido taught me that technique personally! Who else knows how to—?”

“Comin’ through!!”

*Slamm!!*

The mysterious figure came in like a meteor, landing on Bisco and sending him face-first into the moss.

“Guhhgh?!”

“Bisco?!”

“What’s the matter? Been skippin’ leg trainin’? I ain’t that heavy, y’know!”

The woman leaped to her feet. Milo stared at her in disbelief. She was a Mushroom Keeper with flowing crimson hair, just like Bisco’s.

“So this is Sugar, huh?” she said. “Damn, the little one’s grown up fast! What is she in human years? Like, three?”

“Wh-who are you?” asked Milo with wonder. Bisco’s inquiry was decidedly less reverent.

“Tell me who the hell you think you are before I tear your goddamn tongue out!!”

Extracting himself from the moss, he sprang to his feet, face bright red with anger.

“Who do you think you are, comin’ out of nowhere and savin’ my daughter without a good reason?!”

“I didn’t want to meddle, but you were just going about it all wrong. I couldn’t just sit back and watch,” said the woman in her defense.

“Tell me your name! Right now!” Bisco roared. “Which tribe are you from?! I’m gonna go there and—!”

But upon saying that, he stopped. For when he saw those jade-green eyes staring back at him, a glimmer of recognition crossed his mind.

“...Hmm? Where have I seen those eyes before...?”

“Bisco. She’s...”

Milo pieced it together at once. Her wild look, like a beast’s. Her fierce gaze,

like a hawk's. She was the spitting image of someone Milo knew very well.

"B-Bisco! She's your—!"

"Biiiscooo!! I've waited so long to meet you!"

"Ngwah?!"

Bisco, who had only just risen to his feet, was knocked flat once more as the woman threw her body weight on top of him.

"Get off me!! Who the hell are you?!"

"It's been fifteen years, you little troublemaker!" said the woman, nuzzling Bisco's cheek. "How have you been?"

"Get off me! I said! Get! Off!" yelled Bisco as he tried to pull himself out from underneath her. The woman sat up, and in the light filtering in from above, she ran her hand through her crimson hair and smiled. The piercing in her lip glittered.

"You're taller than me now," she said.

Bisco's eyes went wide as plates. His very genes trembled with recognition.

*...That ain't right. She's... She's supposed to be dead!*

"I can't believe you asked me to introduce myself," said the woman. "You tellin' me you forgot your own mother's name?"

"I-it's you!"

""Marie Akaboshi, the Godshroom!""

The two boys were united in their shock. Neither of them wanted to believe it for one second, but the genetic resemblance was strong enough to erase all doubt.

Bisco leaped into the air with fright, while Milo scooped up Sugar and backed away.

"Hey, what's the matter!" pleaded Marie. "Let me see my grandkid!"

"Bisco, I thought your mother passed away?!"

"It's a ghost! It's gotta be!?"

Bisco squinted and scrutinized the “ghost” carefully. Her eyes flared with vitality, and she seemed to be very much alive. However...

“Jabi said my mom died in a mushroom-mixin’ mishap! Come on, tell me that ain’t the face of a ghoul or a zombie if ever you saw one!”

*She looks exactly like you, Bisco...*

“Wait, I died mixin’ mushrooms?” Marie listened to Bisco’s explanation with a blank expression, then doubled over laughing. “Ah-ha-ha-ha! That’s the craziest thing I ever heard! Me, the Godshroom, blowin’ myself up by mistake? Well, it’d be a hell of a twist of fate, that’s for sure!”

Her grin showed off her canines, just like her son’s. From what she was saying, it seemed like Jabi had been lying to Bisco ever since he was very young. Bisco simply couldn’t accept that right away, but Milo, on the other hand, was starting to show acceptance.

“...I knew you were alive,” he said, stepping toward her. “But I just couldn’t make it make sense. Why would Jabi lie to Bisco like that?”

“Hey! She’s a ghost. Don’t talk to her! She’ll take you to the land of the dead!”

“Where have you been all this time? And why did you come back?”

Milo’s eyes, like comets, delivered an icy glare into Marie’s soul.

“H-hey...”

Sensing his partner’s combative attitude, Bisco took a step back, but Marie didn’t so much as flinch. She gave a smug smile as the wind fluttered her hair.

“On second thought,” said Milo. “I don’t care why. But you don’t get to see Sugar after what you did.”

“That’s no way to treat your mother-in-law,” Marie teased. “I’ve just come to give my regards. Is that so wrong?”

“You’ve had fifteen years to do that!!”

Milo’s trembling voice had little effect on the unrepentant Marie. She simply stood there, watching him, while Milo glared at her like David facing down Goliath barehanded.

“We’ve stared death in the face so many times already! And never once did we need your help saving ourselves!”

“I know. I’ve been watching.”

“Then where were you when Bisco needed you? Why did we travel all over the country looking for the Rust-Eater when you could have saved Jabi yourself?!”

“Because if I interfered, humanity would’ve been wiped out.”

Marie picked at her piercing with her long nails. It appeared to be a habit of hers. She listened to Milo’s ferocious attack on her character as if she was enjoying it.

“Think about it. What would’ve happened if I saved Jabi’s life? Then Bisco never would’ve gone on his journey. He never would’ve met you, never would’ve awakened the Rust-Eater blood, and then Tokyo would’ve come along and killed you all.”

“But you never helped us after that, either! We had to face it all alone!”

“Yep, y’sure did. And just look atcha now.”

“We almost died!”

“But you didn’t, did you? ’Cause that’s *my* son right there.”

“How can you be so emotionless about it?!”

Sensing his partner’s turmoil, Bisco stepped up and placed a hand on Milo’s shoulder. But even that wasn’t enough to calm him down.

“You could have at least come to say good-bye to Jabi! Weren’t you partners? The Godbow and the Godshroom; you two were unbeatable! So why...?”

“Because I’m a realist. Lovelessness is my strength. It’s what I’m good at.”

She smiled, an indefatigable smile that showed off her canines, such that Milo’s damning gaze fell to pieces upon touching her.

“Jabi was old, and he died. What’s so strange about that?”

“I hate people like you!!”

“Milo!!”

Bisco stepped in before his partner could launch himself at her.

“You’re both right,” he said. “Both Marie as the Godshroom and you as a doctor.”

“But aren’t you mad at her, too? She left you alone your entire life!”

“Maybe so, but I don’t need her anymore.”

In stark contrast to Milo’s anger, Bisco cast her a calm and enlightened gaze.

“She knew she couldn’t love me, so she left me alone. I got nothing but respect for that. If anythin’, we both oughtta be grateful, ’cause thanks to her, I met you.”

Bisco Akaboshi displayed his trademark broad-mindedness. It was this aspect of his character that seemed to surprise Marie most.

*Huh...?*

Bisco had grown up so fast and let go of his mother of his own accord...

It almost felt...disappointing.

*I guess you’re not a kid anymore. Hell, you’ve already got one of your own.*

“So I ain’t buyin’ this ‘come to see your granddaughter’ excuse,” said Bisco, pointing an accusatory finger at his mother. “The only reason you’re here is because Sugar’s a danger to the world that even you can’t ignore!!”

“Ah-ha-ha! Pretty much.”

Marie gave a jovial chuckle and leveled her gaze at the baby in Milo’s arms.

“Just now you two had a taste of what she can do,” she said, toying with her hair. “Her childish fantasies can become real just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “And that’s without adding a pair of bickering parents into the mix.”

Milo clammed up. There wasn’t much he could say to that.

“You two are too young to be takin’ on such a big responsibility,” Marie went on. “So I was thinkin, why not lend a hand? And so that’s what brings me back from the dead, see?”

“You want to...help with the baby?!”

“We don’t need your help!!” Milo yelled.

“Don’t be like that. We’re all family here; you can lean on me!”

“We’re good!”

“Nuh-uh!”

Bisco watched, chin in hand, as Marie and Milo butted heads. “I see...,” he muttered to himself. “Milo, I think we should let her help.”

“Have you lost your mind?!” Milo screamed.

“I know, I know! But think about it: Sugar’s too much for us to handle. We’ll be walking corpses in three days if she doesn’t wish us out of existence first. The smart thing to do here is to take advice from an experienced Mushroom Keeper.”

“*Experienced?* What experience does she have?!”

“Well, I mean, for one,” said Marie, leveling a finger at Bisco. “*That* thing came out of *my* belly. That’s impressive enough, right?”

Milo opened his mouth to yell at her, then paused. “...That’s a good point,” he said.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!” Marie gave a hearty chuckle and clapped Milo on the shoulders. “It’s okay, Milo, I’m not gonna bite! In fact, I wanna thank you for lookin’ after Bisco this whole time! Now, show me to your camp, and we can have a nice, intimate family chat!”

*"Snail Six to Snail Leader. We're picking up a large target on the forward scanners."*

*"Copy that, Snail Six. Do you have visual confirmation?"*

*"That's a negative, Snail Leader. Too much cover. Permission to engage cloudburst rockets!"*

*"Permission granted. All units, cloudburst rockets on my mark! Three, two, one..."*

*"""Fire!!"""*

The eighth Escargot fighter regiment unleashed their barrage, sending rocket after rocket streaking into the clouds ahead. Upon making contact, the cloudburst rockets exploded, causing an artificial downpour that drained the clouds away, revealing...

*"Captain, what...?"*

*"I didn't believe it when I read the reports..."*

Snail Leader gave a frustrated *tut*, then turned on his confidential radio channel.

*"Kyoto high command, this is Snail Leader. We have visual confirmation of the ark!"*

The vast ship loomed in the air ahead of them, uncaring and silent.

*"Commander Gopis, what should we do?"*

*"We're analyzing the images now! Hold your fire!"*

*"Sometime today, Commander. I think it knows we're here."*

*"Shut up! We're working as hard as we can!"*

Kyoto high command was in a shambles as meanwhile, in a large dome-shaped room, a Matoba research team attempted to dissect the images coming in from the Escargot scout planes. In the chaos following Kurokawa's death, Gopis had somehow managed to wrangle herself a seat among the top brass.

*Dammit, she thought. This was supposed to be a cushy job. Why'd war have to break out just as I took over??*

Underneath her breath, she cursed her rotten luck.

"Th-this is amazing," stammered her technical adviser, Chief Namari. "The energy readings are off the charts! This surpasses anything we've seen from the Rust or Florescence! N-no, it *comprises* those powers! It's the ocean itself! The mother of all life on Earth!"

"Namari, can you *stop* getting excited?!" screamed Gopis, throttling the overeager scientist with his own necktie. In defiance of her strict military garb, her face was caked in makeup, and a single large ring hung in her nose.

"We're here to shoot that flying zoo out of the sky, so act like it!" she reprimanded him. "Tell me what's going on, in plain Japanese, if you can manage that!"

"W-well, we don't yet know how it works, but judging by its prior behavior..."

Namari prodded a virtual screen with his finger, and a 3D map of Japan appeared, with a bright-red line marking the craft's previous path. This line was marked with the various megafauna that the ship had picked up along the way, specimens that the Japanese people revered as living gods.

"I-it seems the ship is moving east, along Japan's coast," Namari explained. "A-after picking up Hokkaido during her migration to the Fukuoka Sea, the craft has been maintaining an irregular velocity at approximately a nine-hundred-meter cruising altitude."

"Hmm. Very strange," said Gopis. "I wonder what it's up to."

"T-take a look at this, ma'am. It's a sample of seawater that fell from the ark."

Namari snapped his fingers, and a cylindrical container extended from his device. Within it was a frozen sample that glowed ominously. Namari traced the

data with his fingertip as he explained what it meant.

“A-astonishingly, the water appears to be alive. We believe there is some sentient microorganism within it, perhaps as the result of mushroom spores...”

“You’re telling me,” growled Gopis, “that mushrooms brought the ocean to life?! That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!”

“I-I’m sorry, but science doesn’t bow to common sense! Mushrooms have the power to make the impossible possible! We’ve seen it countless times already! ...Ahh! No! Belay the attack order, I beg of you!”

“I don’t know why I bothered asking you,” said Gopis with a defeated sigh. “This is Commander Gopis to Snail Leader! Give it everything you got! Blow that ship out of the sky!”

*“Roger that, ma’am. All units, you heard the commander!”*

*“About time! Let’s blast that bucket of bolts!”*

*“Last one home pays for our victory meal! How’s that, Commander?”*

*“That’s the spirit, team. Mantra missiles, on my mark!”*

The half-dozen Escargot fighters took up formation, ready to unleash their newest technology developed in combination with the temples of Shimane.

“All right!” cheered Gopis from back in the command room. “Even Godzilla can’t stand up to our mantra warheads!”

*“C-Commander, please! Think of the science— Gaaagh!”*

Gopis’s swift heel came down hard on Namari’s toes, and he screamed in agony.

*“Target locked,” came the voice of Snail Leader through the radio. “Skerva, shad, snew!”*

*“““Fire!“““*

*Fwoosh!*

Six mantra rockets hurtled toward the floating ship, leaving smoky trails in their wake.

“Take that! Ah-ha-ha-ha!” Gopis laughed. But just then...

*Bwooble.*

...all six rockets were engulfed by mysterious bubbles.

“Wha...?”

Gopis was gobsmacked. The soon-to-be war zone was now completely silent as the missiles floated, immobilized, in their watery shells.

V<sub>E</sub>RIFYING CAPTURED RESOURCE...

R<sub>E</sub>SOURCE IDENTIFIED: MANTRA MISSILE.

E<sub>S</sub>TIMATED LIFE FORCE...ZERO.

R<sub>E</sub>LEASING SPECIMEN.

The missiles were released from their bubbles and fell vertically to the ground before setting off an incredible explosion! The command room shook like an earthquake had hit.

“Waaagh!” screamed Gopis. “Snail Leader, come in! What’s happening out there?!”

*“Unknown! Some kind of...bubbles...came out of the ship!”*

*“This is Snail Four! I’m detecting a massive heat spike from the enemy craft! Get ready!!”*

H<sub>O</sub>MING CAPTURE WAVE: READY.

P<sub>H</sub>YSICAL CONNECTION TO P<sub>R</sub>ESIDENT CONFIRMED.

M<sub>A</sub>R<sub>E</sub> E<sub>N</sub>GINE: ENGAGE.

L<sub>I</sub>F<sub>E</sub> O<sub>C</sub>EE<sub>N</sub> S<sub>T</sub>R<sub>E</sub>AM C<sub>A</sub>NNON: R<sub>E</sub>ADY, AIM...

FIRE.

*Kaboom!!*

From the broadside of the ark came a thunderous roar as the ship ejected several high-pressure jets of water. These jets twisted and converged like lasers on the hapless eighth Escargo fighter regiment, doggedly pursuing in spite of their target’s evasive maneuvers.

*“Captain! I can’t shake them off!”*

*“Snail Two! Hang in there!”*

*“T-tell Cordelia...I died a hero’s death... Gaaagh!!”*

*Schlurp.*

*“Looks like the end for me, too... It’s been a pleasure serving with you, Captain!”*

*“Captain! After I’m gone...wipe my computer’s hard drives for me!!”*

*Schlurp. Schlurp.*

The columns of water engulfed all five of Snail Leader’s squad, and the radio reverted to static.

*“Aaaargh!! Taste my vengeance, demon!!”*

*“You fool! Fly back to base! Snail Leader, respond!!”*

*“Glory to the Kyoto Prefectural Bureau! Waaaaargh!!”*

*Schlurp.*

The captain’s attempted kamikaze run was cut pitifully short as he, too, was swallowed up by the beam.

*“What is that thing?! Our Escargot fighters couldn’t put a scratch on it!”*

*“Th-that’s because they’re up against sentient water, ma’am! D-did you see that precision?! They made our elite Escargot fighters look like a bunch of babies!”*

*“You don’t have to sound so pleased about it! Are you on our side or—?”*

*“People of this great nation!!”*

Just as Gopis was about to throttle the professor once more, a booming announcement shook the war room. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen.

*“I have come to deliver a speech that will win the hearts and trust of the proud Japanese people.”*

*“Wh-what...?”*

*"I can only guess at what you have had to endure until today; a tiny island nation split into warring states, forced to fight over limited resources. But I begrudge not your barbarism, for the Rust Wind was to blame!"*

"Who's that?! Who's speaking?!"

"I-it's the master of the ark! Get the cameras close! I want to see!"

*"Worry not! For your sad days are at an end!"*

Gopis and Namari crowded around a screen as the long-range scanners homed in on their target. There, standing atop the ark, wearing a red, white, and blue striped necktie, was President Mare! Apparently familiar with Japanese electoral procedure, he wore a golden sash across his chest that said:

MAKE JAPAN GREAT AGAIN!

PRESIDENT MARE FOR PRESIDENT!

AMBITION TRADITION PROHIBITION

*"The almighty ark shall cleanse this country and ferry you all to a pure and prosperous land! I, President Mare, speak on its behalf when I ask for your support!"*

Here, Mare spotted the ladybug camera hovering in the air before him.

"Join us!'" he said, poking a thick finger in its direction.

These images were being broadcast nationwide. All across Japan, people stared at their TVs, their mouths agape.

The Japanese people were no strangers to calamity, having been forced to witness Tokyo's attempted takeover, the Benibishi uprising, and an epidemic of feline flu, but this was different...

"Hey, that man on the telly said he's going to take us somewhere clean."

"Is that true, Paw-Paw?"

"Honey! This isn't the time to be listening to priests! We need to get on the ark, pronto!"

"Shush! It ain't every day Ochagama comes down from his mountain! Get your eyes off that idiot box and—hey!"

In contrast, nothing surprised them anymore, and they all eagerly dropped what they were doing to go after the ark.

"Wuzzat?! Everyone's gone! I'm always telling these whippersnappers to look out for anyone peddling easy salvation! Don't they ever listen to me?!"

"Quite right, Your Eminence," said a handsome priest, trying to calm the furious Ochagama. "Still, I can't help but wonder what this President Mare is thinking. With all that power at his disposal, why does he still seek the approval of the Japanese people, instead of simply capturing us by force?"

"It's because the people's approval is the source of his power. Grr...open this for me, Tese."

Tese opened the bag of *karinto* and passed it back to Ochagama, who began stuffing the snacks into his whisker-lined face while continuing his explanation.

"He is the ocean itself," he said. "He doesn't share our values. The ocean doesn't care if Japan lives or dies. We're just a rock, floating in the sea. This desire to save humanity must be something he got from somewhere else."

"So he has no desires of his own? In some ways, he really is the savior he purports to be. However, the will of the people is nothing but an illusion. Somewhere inside that helmet of his, there must be a wish born of his own will."

"Hmm..."

Hidden deep within his fuzzball face, Ochagama's eyes twinkled.

"What does an immortal sea god wish for? Now, that's a question. Perhaps we're thinking too big; perhaps there's no great ambition at all and instead something small and fleeting..."

"Your Eminence, there's food in your beard."

"Pick it out, please..."

*"What a speech that was! What a show of charisma! Not bad for a gaijin, huh?"*

President Mare surveyed Kyoto from atop the ark's prow. The ship cruised close to the ground, casting a literal shadow across the whole city. Mare looked

down at the people below, who stared back in terrified silence.

*“...What’s the matter?” he said. “Do people not clap in this country? Yoo-hoo! Old lady! Thanks for your support!”*

“Eeeek!!”

“He’s a cyclops!!”

Mare’s jovial wave elicited shrieks of panic, and the terrified townsfolk retreated into their homes.

*“Well, I’ll be damned. These Nipponese folk aren’t half shy. Where’s the welcome wagon?”*

“I got your welcome right here, fool!”

“Hmm?!”

*Crash!!*

A huge jolt rocked the ark, and the ship was slowly lifted into the air. The only thing that could move a mass of that magnitude...was an equally enormous metal man!

“Boot-up sequence looks good! Optimizing Action Trace System!”

Back at Kyoto headquarters, Professor Kobe Namari fiddled with a 3D display.

“We’re all ready on our end. C-Commander Gopis, give the order!”

“Order? What order?”

“Th-the order to start the robot! Shout ‘Go! Go! Tetsujin,’ if you please!”

“You fool! You think this is a Saturday morning cartoon?!”

“Y-you have to! It’s the only way the robot will respond! If you don’t want to say it, th-then get out of the Action Trace System and let me drive!!”

“Goddamn! At least say it with me! On three, ready? One, two, three!!”

““Go! Go! Tetsujin!!””

*Bwongg!*

The giant robot swung both arms, tossing the ark with all its might into the

nearby Mount Hiei!

*“Snakes on a plane! What is that thing?!”* cried Mare as the ship collided with the mountain. The scale of the destruction was so vast, it was like something out of a movie.

*Ka-schwing!*

The robot struck a triumphant pose. It was an earlier prototype of the Absolute Tetsujin used to revive Kurokawa, which Matoba created and shelved before attempts at miniaturization were successful. However, its performance was every bit as outstanding as its successor.

“Great work, Commander!”

“Haah... haah... If Mepaosha can control one of these things, then so can I!”

“The ark is recovering!” warned Namari, as the ship rose out of the crumbling mountain. Recognizing the Tetsujin as a threat, it engaged its engines, launching itself full throttle at the giant metal man. “We have to use our finishing move! Get ready!”

“Hold on... Let me...catch my breath...,” said Gopis, panting. “Why do we have to control it this way?! Why isn’t there a joystick or something?!”

“B-because it’s cool, right?”

“I’m gonna dock your pay...”

“Activate chest-mounted cooling fans!”

“All right! Take this!!”

““Flash-Freeze Typhoon!””

From out of the Tetsujin’s chest burst a stream of absolute-zero wind, freezing the ark’s seawater lasers in midair.

“Yes! Take that, sucker!”

“Commander! Lower the power level! You’re not dressed for such cold temperatures!”

“I’m not gonna give up when I’m finally on top! I’m a sadist, you know!!”

The freezing wave continued along the hull of the ark until the entire ship was encased in ice!

“Full power!!”

“Commander! Now’s our chance!”

“Rooaaaghhh!! Taste the wrath of a wild bull!!”

*She seems a lot more into it now...*

“Gopis Punch!!”

*Slamm!!*

An earthshaking blow! The Absolute Tetsujin channeled all its mass into a supreme straight right, striking the ark with enough force to shatter it into a million pieces!

...

But it didn’t.

Because of a single diving suit standing at the prow of the ship. It quelled the titan’s terrible blow with only one finger.

“...You’ve frozen my sash.”

“Huh...? H-huh...?”

“I-impossible!! With just one finger?!”

*“That was your finishing move? It was hollow, foolish, and impractical, just like the opposition’s promises.”*

“Oh no! We’ve offended the president! Commander, get out of there!”

“I—I can’t move! He’s pinning me in place with just his finger!”

*“In the name of all life on this Earth, I shall expose your party’s lies!!”*

Mare’s suit creaked as he strained his digit and unleashed the world’s most devastating flick! The shock resonated through the body of the Absolute Tetsujin, and bit by bit, its invincible Rust Flower armor began to crack. Then, all at once, it shattered, leaving only the giant’s bones. With just one finger, Mare had reduced humanity’s ultimate weapon to scrap.

“Waaaagh!” Gopis screamed as she fell from the cockpit, hurtling toward the ground below. Her death was all but certain, but then...

*Shwumf!* Mare caught her in his arms and then—*Klangg!!*—landed on the soil of Kyoto far below.

“How rude of me,” he said. “If I had known it was a lady piloting the thing, I would have gone a little easier on you.”

“Let me go, fool! Please don’t kill me!”

“Why would I kill the very people I am trying to save? I would like for nothing more than to ferry you all into the future, as Mama desires.”

“M-Mama?”

“In any case,” said Mare, looking Gopis up and down. “Now that your position has been made redundant, what say you come work for me? I could use a girl with a bit of Angus meat on her bones to draw in the voters!”

“Wh-what do you want from me?! I want to go home!”

“Become my secretary! It’s an easy job; just gotta stand there and look pretty!”

Ignoring Gopis’s weeping, Mare went over and pulled one of Tetsujin’s bones out of the ground. He then tied the ark’s flag to it and began waving it overhead.

“The will of the people,” he shouted triumphantly, “is on my side!!”

Mare stood proudly, silhouetted against the majestic figure of the ark. The ladybug cameras swarmed like flies, delivering this scene into the eyes of people nationwide. Their hearts swelled with trust, which became power delivered directly into Mare’s seawater body. Gopis flinched as she heard his suit creak with burgeoning power—power that had surpassed Japan’s mightiest weapon and was still growing.

“Mrgrgrgh...”

“That’s right. Now...hold that image in your head...”

Sugar focused, her eyes squeezed tightly, as in a sandbox made of mushrooms, a tiny dioarama of spores began to take shape, depicting the monkey king pinned beneath a rock.

“Grgrgh...!”

“Well done, Sugar! But what’s this supposed to be!”

“It’s Monkey, Gwanny!”

“Oh? You mean ‘Journey to the West’? Okay, then. Do you know what happens next in the story? Try to imagine it for me, sweetie.”

“...I dunno...”

“Didn’t Disco read you that part yet? What a useless boy. Well then, I’ll show you.”

Marie gently took Sugar’s little hand, channeling her will into the diorama. Slowly, the spores recombined into a representation of Tripitaka on his way to India.

“Wooow!”

“The wise monk Tripitaka came along and rescued Monkey, but just as Monkey was about to run away without thanking him, his headband tightened...”

As Marie recounted the tale, the spores moved, depicting an animated version of events. Tripitaka’s chanting, Sun Wukong hopping in agony, all were reproduced in breathtaking detail.

“Tee-hee-hee!! Ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

"Then they...hmm, hold on. How did the story go again?"

As Marie paused to remember, the fungal cartoon ground to a halt.

"Huh? Gwanny, keep going! Gwanny!"

"Hey, you think you could call me somethin' else? I'm a bit too young to be a 'Gwanny,' don't you think?"

"Shut the hell up, Granny, and read the damn story!" Bisco's voice echoed from elsewhere in the camp, causing Marie to adopt a sullen frown. "I'm givin' you a chance to make up for your absent parenting here, so you better damn well take it!"

"I *did* read to you, thank you very much! You were just too young to remember!"

"Shush, Papa! I'm pwaying!"

"Oh, that's right, sweetie! Papa's so scary, isn't he?"

"Bisco! Leave those two alone and stay focused!"

Milo was crouched over his mixing machine, a troubled expression on his face.

"Let's see," he said. "Two parts King Trumpet, four parts flameshroom, and four parts Bishamon mushroom make Atomic Mushroom. Then add the Nitroclamshell you prepared earlier..."

"None of this shit's babypf, that's for sure. Can you believe that woman?"

"Be quiet, Bisco! Even just the slightest perturbation in the air could cause this to explode!"

Milo was following Marie's instructions in an attempt to reproduce the Ghost Bubble, the imitation Ghost Hail mushroom that Marie had commanded. It lacked the full power of the original, but the advantage was that it could be made from readily available ingredients.

In addition, it could be called upon and used just like any other mushroom, without the need to summon the Mantra Bow. This made it convenient for dealing with Sugar, who could explode into a tantrum at a moment's notice, but

it would also be useful for the boys' original goal of ensuring the safe delivery of Pawoo's child.

Milo wiped the sweat from his brow and said, "These recipes make my doctor's exam look like a middle school pop quiz! The legends of the Godshroom were no myth!"

"Yeah, no sane mind could come up with this stuff..." agreed Bisco. "She's even accounted for the individual natures of the spores. Beside the explosives, there's also doping agents, sedatives, even stuff to give it awareness and agency. This is crazy..."

"You sound more impressed by that than by your own daughter, Bisco."

"That's 'cause I am."

*Show a little love!*

Milo was shocked by the ease with which Bisco responded to his unfair comment. The Akaboshis' approach to parenting was an affront to his city kid sensibilities.

"Listen, I think you're givin' me a hard time. I'm helpin' out, ain't I?"

"I'm not the one who needs to lighten up here; it's you!"

"What?!"

"Your mother shows up, and you act like she doesn't mean anything to you!" said Milo, coming close to Bisco's face and staring him down.

"Well, she doesn't!" Bisco retorted. "She's been gone my entire life!"

"But she gave you your name, didn't she, Bisco? To help you grow up sweet and strong. Does that name mean nothing to you, either?!"

"That's...!" Bisco tried to snap back but stopped himself.

"You can't just disown her; she's your mother, whether you like it or not. You have to learn to compromise. I don't like what she did, either, but we have to learn to forgive! It's not too late to take back the mother you never had!"

"How the hell am I supposed to do that after all this time...?"

"Biscooo!!"

““Waaagh!!””

Marie wrapped her legs around Bisco’s neck, driving him into the ground once more. This childish display stunned Milo so much, he dropped the beaker he was holding.

“Aw, now look what you did,” said Marie. “That’s because you didn’t catch me.”

“Waaah!” cried Milo. “The Nitroclamshell!!”

“You idiot!” Bisco shouted at his mother. “Can’t you sit still for one freakin’ second?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!! Guess it runs in the family!” said Marie, giving a vibrant cackle. “Somethin’s come up. I’m goin’ out to pick prayershrooms. I need to borrow Papa for a sec.”

“Prayershrooms?!”

“Sugar’s grown up even faster than I was expectin’. See for yourselves.”

Marie motioned with her chin over to where the child was playing, and there the pair saw...

““W-waaaagh!!””

The spores of Sugar’s sandbox were in motion, vividly re-creating the entirety of her favorite tale from start to finish. This was no longer a mere diorama but a lovingly crafted feature-length animation, re-creating in perfect detail every beat of the story’s plotline. The Buddha’s shining halo, Sun Wukong and his flying cloud, all set to the intricate backdrop of rural India.

At the center of it all, Sugar murmured in concentration.

“Mmmrghhh!”

“That’s enough now, Sugar, sweetie!”

Marie clapped her hands, and Sugar released her focus. Immediately, the spores dissipated, becoming lifeless sand once more. Sugar rolled about happily, getting it all over herself.

“I—I can’t believe it,” stammered Milo. “Sugar did all that by herself?!”

"She's a much quicker learner than I thought," said Marie. "She learned how to command the spores in a matter of minutes. Even all the monks in Banryouji working together couldn't make something that intricate."

"That's my kid for you!" said Bisco.

"You mean my grandkid."

"Shut it, Granny!"

"The problem is," Marie went on, "Sugar doesn't understand how to use her power responsibly yet. If she gets upset, her negative thoughts could warp reality."

"So that's why you want to give her prayersrooms?! That's crazy talk!!"

"Er, Bisco?" interrupted Milo. "What are these prayersrooms you're talking about?"

Bisco looked a little annoyed that Marie had taken the initiative in the upbringing of his child, but he answered Milo nonetheless. "You know those prayer wheels?" he said. "The ones that generate merit when you spin them? It's a mushroom based on that. I don't really know much about 'em, myself, but we used to feed 'em to bad members of the tribe to teach 'em proper morals."

"I ain't sayin' it's a substitute for her upbringing," said Marie in her defense. "We just gotta fake it till we make it. Otherwise, she's gonna bend reality every time she throws a fit. I mean, what if she gets into a fight with a friend or somethin'? Think of it like a vaccine, that's all."

"Even if it's for her own good," Bisco protested, "I don't like it! It's fiddlin' with her brain! This is Sugar's life, and she's gotta live it for herself!"

"It's not for *her* own good," replied Marie, delivering a sharp gaze into Bisco's eyes. "It's for yours."

It was a strange look. She wasn't speaking out of love, nor was her response entirely mechanical.

"Sometimes, as a parent, you gotta do what you gotta do," she continued. "Else you're gonna regret it down the line. You really want to live with that your entire life?"

Her subdued tone of voice tugged at Milo's heartstrings, and for the first time, he trusted the strange woman completely.

"Anyway, now that's settled," Marie went on, "let's get going! No time like the present!"

"Hey! Wait right there! We can't just leave Milo and Sugar by themsel—"

"I'll be fine, Bisco!"

"What?!"

"I'll be fine! Go with Marie!"

Milo turned and flashed his partner a sunny smile.

"Stay safe out there, okay? We'll be waiting for you!"

"...Thanks," said Marie. "She's done with Japanese, science, and now arts and crafts, so next is..."

"Yep, math! Leave it to me!"

"You make a great mom, kid. You're gonna put me to shame one day!"

The Godshroom smiled, the spitting image of her son.

"Right, then, hedgehog-hair. You feelin' the need for speed? Last one to Amano-Iwato's a rotten mushroom!"

"I ain't gonna lose to some old lady!"

Marie took off into the mountains without even looking back, while Bisco snatched up his bow and followed after her. Milo was left to watch as those two crimson streaks disappeared into the distance, leaving him with a sense of relief.

"I think I'm starting to understand her a little more," he said to himself. "And thanks to her help, we'll soon have the Ghost Bubble on our side."

"Mama!"

"Sugar! Well done in your classes today! Are you hungry?"

"Mama! I want to do more cwasses!"

"M-more classes?!"

Milo looked into his daughter's sparkling eyes.

*She's just like me, he thought.*

"Good girl, Sugar! All right then, let's teach you some math!"

"I'm a good girl! Smart girl! Bab-bam!"

"Yes you are! You've got my genes and the best teachers you could ask for!"  
Milo said, smiling and pulling a math textbook from his bag. "Listen to me, and you'll go far! I'd better start saving up for college already!"

\* \* \*

*Shwf! Shwf! Shwfoom!*

Bursting through the mossy forest came two crimson figures. One moved in leisurely leaps and bounds, while the other kept a straight path, like an arrow.

But although Bisco's speed was far superior...

*...Huh? That's strange. I can't catch up!*

Marie's actions seemed slow at first glance, but she always managed to outpace Bisco. It was like she always knew what he was about to do and could turn on a dime to cut him off.

*She's just an ordinary human...right? Why can't I beat her?!*

"What's up, slowpoke? Did you think your Rust-Eater blood would do everythin' for you?"

"Wh-what?!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Silly boy. What's Jabi been teaching you? How to tie a tie? How to write your CV?"

"Say that to my face, Granny!"

Bisco flared golden as the Rust-Eater spores spilled from every pore. No doubt even the mushroom itself was surprised by his sudden force of will, ready to summon up all but his strongest reality-bending powers in an attempt to beat his mom in a race. He shot off like a bullet, and soon the legendary cave came into view.

*I see it! I'm almost there!*

But as soon as Bisco took another step...

*Gaboom!!*

“Huh?! Whaaa?!”

“Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

...the trap beneath his feet went off, and Bisco was hoisted by his leg into the trees, leaving only a cloud of sunlight spores in his rough shape. He dangled there, helpless, while Marie doubled over with laughter.

“Hee-hee-hee! We really are related! I know what you’re going to do before you do!”

Bisco fell from the trap, stumbled to his feet, and snarled with all his might. “G-grr...! I’ll get you for that...!”

“You win, Bisco.”

“...Huh?”

“You were faster than me. You’ve really changed.”

Marie so readily admitted her defeat that Bisco’s anger had no place to go. Instead, he just stared at her for a few moments in disbelief.

“You really are my kid,” Marie said. “It was obvious even when you were two.”

“Krh! Now you wanna try bein’ a mom?”

“Nope, never did. We could never live together, Bisco. We were too big for each other.”

She smiled. A relaxed, beautiful smile.

Bisco was left with no response. Ever since Milo pointed it out, he couldn’t help seeing Marie as his mother, and somewhere deep down, he yearned for her approval. He wanted her validation, despite knowing he didn’t need it.

He shook his head to dispel those gentle thoughts and put on the meanest-looking face he could manage. Whether it had any effect at all on the Godshroom was unclear.

"Now we're at Ama-no-Iwato," said Marie, turning and walking briskly in the direction of the blocked-up cave. "You know what that means, don't you? Did Jabi tell you about Amaterasu?"

A cold mist issued from the cracks in the rock, transmitting the solemn air of the sanctuary within to those standing outside.

"Pretty much," Bisco answered her. "He said someone from the tribe pissed her off, and we had to seal the entrance. Never told me who that idiot was, though."

"Yeah, that was me."

"...What?!"

"Well, I needed the prayersrooms, and they only grow inside this place! You gotta believe that I pissed off the gods by ransackin' the place. Not as much as I pissed off Jabi, though. You shoulda seen the look on his face!"

"Shut it, Granny! I can't believe you'd do such a stupid, blasphemous..."

"Hey, you're here, aren't you? Do it for Sugar."

At the mention of his daughter, Bisco was left with no choice but to put his unshakable faith aside. Besides, he might have sworn an oath to the Eighteen Gods, but Japan's old gods were a different matter, and Bisco didn't know them too well in the first place.

"Grrrgh!"

With great effort, Bisco slowly shifted the boulder to one side, and Marie shamelessly waltzed inside. Bisco followed her in. It was completely silent, save for the distant trickle of water.

"Man, it's dark. Bisco?"

"I gotta do everything around here? Sheesh..."

Bisco popped some glowshroom spores into his mouth and spread them about the cave, bathing the surroundings in a soft, twinkling light.

"Guh. I hate doin' that," complained Bisco. "Always tastes so bitter..."

"...Heh."

“What?!”

“You sound just like me at your age, that’s all. I always hated sittin’ next to Jabi on Ogai, too.”

She continued walking deeper into the cave.

“...He’s dead now, I guess...,” she muttered.

It was a strange thing to say at this point. Bisco blinked at her a few times in surprise before running to catch up with her. The two of them walked in silence through the stillness of the cave.

“...”

“...”

“...It was Jabi who first told me,” said Marie, all of a sudden.

“...Huh?”

“That lovelessness was my strength. But for you, Bisco, it created a mountain you could never climb. So I was to abandon love, forsake his grave, and focus on being the Brahman this world needs.”

“...Jabi said all that?”

“Do you think *you* could handle watching the world go by? Watch as your son drowns in a sea of rust? Watch as the cities swallow him and the flowers devour him? You can’t do that with love; you need to be like me. I only learned that because of him.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Bisco.”

“...”

“Do you hate me?”

“...”

“...Heh. Forget I said anything. We’re here. This is it.”

Set into the walls of the stone cave were tiny glowing crystals. Marie plucked one out and showed it to Bisco.

"Wait," he said, scrutinizing it. "This ain't a rock, it's a flower!"

"It's a kind of Florescence called a mirrorbud," explained Marie.

Upon closer inspection, Bisco could see that the bud truly lived up to its name, for his face was reflected in each of its leaves. Bisco was familiar with all sorts of post-apocalyptic flora, yet he'd never seen anything like it in his life.

"As far as I know, it only grows here in this cave. Prick it with a clamshell needle, and it should turn into a prayershroom."

"Great, so we're done here, right? Let's take this back to Sugar, and we can —"

"Not so fast, silly. We're gonna need a lot more than just one. Each one lasts up to a year, so we'll need at least six or seven. If you wanna go back so bad, then hurry up and look for more."

*Goddamn, picking flowers that belong to a god? How the hell am I gonna explain this one to Shishi?*

Racked with guilt, Bisco turned his racing heart to the arduous task of completing his quest before the absent god returned. He zipped from here to there, searching every nook and cranny of the cave system, before his eyes fell at last upon a cluster of the mirrorbuds growing on the far side of a pale lake. The miraculous patch contained far more specimens than the six that Marie had stipulated, perhaps two or three dozen in all.

Bisco plunged into the pool and began swimming toward the crystalline formation when he heard Marie's drawling voice from elsewhere in the cave.

"There should be a mother lode somewhere," she was saying. "There's always one wherever the plant grows."

Bisco was only half listening to her when, all of a sudden, his foot brushed something hard in the water.

*Huh? It's shallow...*

Bisco was about halfway across the lake when the bottom came up to meet

him, allowing him to stand such that the water came to chest height. Something didn't seem right, but the mirrorbuds were tantalizingly close, and so Bisco stood on the tips of his toes, reaching overhead to grab them, when all of a sudden a powerful light from below illuminated the entire cave!

"Huh...? Waaagh!!"

"Hmm?!"

A giant figure emerged from the pool. "Aaagh! My eyes!" screamed Bisco, momentarily blinded.

"That's why you wear your damn goggles!" shouted Marie. "Keep your eyes on it!"

"Damn... It's got my leg!"

Bisco's limb was caught up in some kind of chain that held him upside down in midair. He flipped his goggles over his eyes and analyzed the foe. It appeared to be some sort of crystalline plant creature with fernlike whips, while its bulbous core emitted a high-powered beam of light.

"*BREEEEEEE.*"

Its howl sounded like a tuning fork fed back through a speaker a hundred times over.

"It's the Yata Mirrorbud!" yelled Marie, shielding her eyes from the light. "Looks like we angered the gods after all! Cut that thing down to size and then get back here!"

"Are you kiddin'?! I can't hurt this; it's a holy creature!!"

"You wanna die, idiot?! It's kill or be killed!"

"But we're in the wrong here! It ain't right to beat this thing up in its own home!"

Bisco could have trounced the plant-beast handily and escaped the cave with their plunder, but he was vehemently opposed to the idea, and it was his determination that fueled the Rust-Eater's strength. Without it, it was just like Milo had once said—he couldn't even beat a pack of sewer rats.

“That damn son of mine...!”

Marie steeled her resolve and drew back her bow, loosing two shots into the roof above the Yata Mirrorbud.

*Gaboom! Gaboom!*

“Guillotine Mushroom!” she yelled. “Slice that thing in two!”

The colossal mushroom dropped under its own weight, severing the crystalline fern that ensnared Bisco. He dropped into the pool while the mirrorbud rampaged in agony, directing its beam all around the cave.

“That pond’s gotta be its nest!” Marie called down to him. “What are you standin’ around there for? Hurry up and get out!”

*D-damn! The Florescence got my leg!*

The floral energy was quick to get to work on Bisco’s mushroom body. He struggled to swim back to shore, while the Yata Mirrorbud used its crystalline vines to make some approximation of hand signs.

“Bisco, what are you doing?! Get out of there!”

The sentient divine plant charged up energy, and then...

**“BREEEEEEEE.”**

...all across its ferns appeared countless mirrorbuds, which each unleashed a powerful beam of light!

“Bisco!!”

“Dammit!”

The sound rent the air as the mirrorbud swung its razor-edged fern toward Bisco, whose eyes flickered with resolution.

*Fine, I’m immortal anyway. Knock yourself out!*

He turned to face the oncoming onslaught. The fern came down, and...

*Splat!!.*

...a splatter of blood hit the water. But it was not Bisco’s blood.

“Wh...whaaat?!”

“Are you okay?”

The Godshroom, Marie, had leaped in front of Bisco, taking the blow that was meant for him! The crystals tore through her cloak, slicing the flesh of her back and cleaving it apart.

“Heh. You really are a handful. No wonder I left you alone.”

“Wh-what do you think you’re doin’, Granny?!”

“I just couldn’t think of a good mushroom, had to use myself instead.”

“Like hell you did!!”

Bisco couldn’t believe it. His mother’s eyes were calm, collected...and filled with love.

“I coulda taken that blow myself, easy!!”

“I know.”

“Then what’re you doin’?! What happened to lovelessness?! I thought that was your strength?!”

“You’re right... Lovelessness is a skill I abandoned my own child in order to hone.”

Marie raised a bloodstained hand and placed it atop Bisco’s head.

“Guess I’m not that good at it anymore...”

“...!!”

**“BREEEEEEE!!”**

The Eight-Span Mirrorshroom flared its spotlight-like beam, and once again the Florescence caused crystalline growths to appear along its ferns. As it geared up for another attack, Bisco felt unimaginable determination welling up inside him.

*Fwoosh!* His blood brimmed with the strength of his faith, his prior wound now nothing but a forgotten memory. His hair flickered with life, and the entire cavern was lit up like the surface of the sun.

**“BREEEEE—”**

“Get your hands off her.”

Bisco pulled an arrow from his quiver, which left a coronal path as it moved. A mushroom exploded from the lake bed beneath him, catapulting Bisco’s divine form into the air.

“—EEEE.”

“Get your hands off my mom!!”

*Pchew!!*

A streak of light! A sunbeam in motion! The *Soulprint Arrow*, Jabi’s final gift, flew on an impossible trajectory, weaving and spiraling through the air. It sliced through all the mirrorbuds implanted along the creature’s ferny vines before finally entering the central bulb.

*Gaboom!*

There, it grew into a magnificent Rust-Eater, shattering the beast’s crystalline hide from within.

“!!!”

The Rust-Eater trumped all matchups, and its violent growth far outstripped the flower’s capacity to devour it. The Yata Mirrorbud flailed wildly, directing its beam all over the place.

“BREEEEE...”

Then, at last, the light grew faint, and the colossal plant fell still.

“Haah... haah...”

Bisco gasped for breath, a torrent of sweat pouring down his brow. Then he opened his mouth to say one word...

“...Fuck.”

Back to his senses, Bisco realized the sin he had committed.

“What have I done? I’m in deep shit now...”

“Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’ll say! Bustin’ up Amaterasu’s pet guard dog? You’re goin’ straight to hell for this one!”

“Don’t just laugh! This is all your fault! ...Wait, what about you?! Are you okay?!”

“Hmm? Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you stood up for me! You took that blow, and—”

“Stood up for you?? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Marie seemed completely unbothered by the question of both Bisco’s welfare and her own. She had already stemmed the bleeding, no doubt with one of her extensive mushroom arts, and now only the sound of her laughter filled the cave.

“I just thought it’d be a shame if you dodged and all those juicy mirrorbuds got smashed against the floor, that’s all!”

“What?! Th-that’s crazy!”

“See? Ta-daa!”

Marie rolled up her cloak to reveal all the mirrorbuds lodged in her flesh as a result of the guardian beast’s attack. All of them were perfectly intact, albeit stained with her blood, and would prove perfect for creating the prayershrooms.

“These things are useful, you know,” Marie explained. “Even if there’s too many for Sugar, I can use the rest for my own needs.”

*“Grrr... The godlessness of this woman... I’m wastin’ my time gettin’ mad at her...”*

“Don’t look so sad, Bisco. The Yata Mirrorbud’ll be back on its roots in no time. In fact, that Rust-Eater’ll make a great meal for it to grow even stronger off of, so just pretend that was your idea all along.”

“Keep your ideas to yourself, Granny! Just make sure you got all we need. I ain’t comin’ back here again, got it?”

“Hey, aren’t you gonna be a gentleman and help me? I lost a lot of blood back there, and I’m startin’ to feel real giddy...”

“Serves you right!!”

Bisco was so enraged, it seemed his ears would start spurting steam at any moment. Marie watched him storm off toward the cave entrance, then turned to look at the enormous Rust-Eater growing out of the Yata Mirrorbud's body.

“...”

None could guess what she was thinking behind her emotionless facade. Once Bisco was well out of earshot, she pulled out a deep-blue mushroom from her pocket and tossed it into the lake. The lake water swirled and rose up, forming a large, liquid sphere around the mushroom.

PORTABLE LIFE CAPTURE SYSTEM, STANDING BY.

After speaking those words, the sphere emitted a red laser that scanned the fallen beast.

...

ANALYSIS COMPLETE. MISSING SPECIES IDENTIFIED: YATA MIRRORBUD.

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 391 MILLION LIFRA.

AWAITING PRESIDENTIAL DECISION.

“You have my permission. Go ahead.”

EXECUTIVE DECISION RECEIVED FROM PRESIDENTIAL REPRESENTATIVE: MAMA. READYING CAPTURE BEAM.

“Careful with that, now. You can’t find this beast anywhere else.”

BEGINNING RESCUE. GENTLY.

The tractor beam began slowly drawing the fallen guardian inside the watery sphere until at last—with a *Shwpf!*—the beast disappeared inside entirely. It could be seen in miniature form, floating within the sphere, as the mechanical voice issued forth once more.

CAPTURE COMPLETE. DO YOU HAVE ANY FURTHER BUSINESS?

“I wanna talk to the kid. Is he doin’ what I asked?”

APOLOGIES, BUT INFORMATION ON THE PRESIDENT’S PRIVATE LIFE IS CONFIDENTIAL.

“The hell you mean, ‘private life’? It’s not like I’m askin’ where he’s stashed

his porn mags."

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I CAN HELP YOU WITH?

"Forget it. Just turn back."

SHUTTING DOWN. SEE YOU AGAIN SOON.

The watery sphere descended into the lake and disappeared, leaving no trace at all. In the light of the glowshrooms, Marie thought for a moment.

"Hey, Granny! What's takin' you so long?! I'll shut you in if you don't hurry the hell up!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! I don't mind! You must really be fond of me if you're givin' me a warnin'!"

"Milo's waitin' for us! Hurry up and let's go!"

Putting her thoughts aside, Marie decided to rejoin Bisco before his patience wore out. Moving like a hawk, she swiftly exited the cave.

"Well, we may have run into a nasty surprise, but it was fun seein' my son in action," she said.

"Hmph. If it wasn't a holy creature, this woulda been over in seconds."

"Aww, is baby not happy with the way things went? Why don't you show me next time, okay?"

"Would it kill ya to say somethin' positive for once?!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! That's rich comin' from you!"

With no witty response forthcoming, Bisco turned away from her and sulked. But behind his anger lay a vague sense of relief, as well as some other feeling that Bisco hadn't felt before.

## **INTERMISSION 1**

Mama, are you crying again?

Please don't cry.

The more you cry, the bigger I grow.

No matter what I try, Mama...

I can't make you understand.

Is it because I'm not human?

Human joy and human sorrow

are far too short for me to know.

But what if?

What if I absorb all humans' wishes?

Then I might be able to understand their hearts.

If I learn to please people, beasts, all of nature, then surely I'll find a way to make Mama happy, too.

So I shall represent all life on this earth.

I shall pick up all the love there is in this world and wash away all the sadness.

Then surely Mama will smile again and see the world in a new light.

Do not misjudge me!

For I do not need your love in return.

For I am the sea,

I am President Mare!

Staking my eternal life on a single moment, all to bring back Mama's smile!!

*“Governor Kurokawa: wise but wicked! Governor Pawoo: righteous but foolish!”*

Out in front of the Imihama Prefectural Bureau, the streets were awash with people ahead of the upcoming governor elections. One man stood atop a loudly decorated vehicle, bellowing his campaign speech through a megaphone.

*“Is there not a single man or woman of merit in all of Imihama? Can we not have our cake and eat it, too? For too long have we been forced to live under incompetent leadership, but come election day, you have the power to change all that!”*

His natural charisma seemed to be working wonders on the crowd. On his sash were the phrases RUST, RESTRUCTURING, RESPONSIBILITY; RICH NATION, STRONG ARMY; and STEP BOLDLY FORWARD.

*“My name is Hoteru Imihada! I ask all who love this city to proudly lend me their support! Now, let’s end this like always, shall we? One, two, three—”*

“Outta the way, fool!!”

*Ker-rash!!*

“Dwaaaaghh?!”

All the charisma of the upstart Imihada was no proof at all against the army of Mokujin that suddenly stormed into the plaza, knocking him and his parade vehicle clear out of sight. The robots were all decorated in red, white, and blue stripes, and upon one of their shoulders stood none other than Gopis, the raging bullwhip and ex-commander of Kyoto’s armies!

“Stop the count!” she growled. “We don’t need no stinkin’ prefectoral elections! Now sit up straight, all you ignorant fools, and feast your eyes on these!”

The eyes of the crowd were drawn immediately to Gopis's exposed cleavage... and then to the JOIN US! posters in her hand. The Mokujin robots began tossing them about the place, and people hesitantly picked them up off the ground.

"Oh? Isn't that...?"

"President Mare?"

"So Kyoto really did surrender?"

"I heard he's going to clean up Japan!"

"Place your trust in us! Your trust will become the president's strength! Forget about devolved powers or prefectural borders and let Japan be reborn as a single nation!"

*"C-Comander, are you sure about this?"* whispered Namari from behind her.

*"Shut it!"* she snapped back. *"We just gotta suck up to Mare for now! Now keep quiet and just control the robot like you're supposed to!"*

Then, turning back to address the crowd, she stated the following: "Listen up, people! The presidential election will soon take place at the White House in Kyoto, to decide whether to proceed with the revitalization of Japan! As citizens of Imihama, you are all required to vote in this..."

As Gopis's speech went on, some of the crowd muttered to one another in dissatisfaction.

"How are we supposed to place our trust in someone like that?"

"We don't even know what he really looks like."

"Is he going to increase the minimum wage?"

"Nadoo."

Thanks to their newfound prosperity, it seemed that many of the citizens of Imihama were uninterested in making far-reaching changes.

"Grr, these fools," Gopis said, swearing.

"W-we need the president's charisma," added Namari. "Sh-should we get him on the line?"

"If Mepaosha could lead these rotten fools, then why the hell can't I?!" grumbled Gopis, prodding the belly of her frog phone. "Hello? Mr. President? Where are you now?"

"Ah, Secretary. I see Imihama on the horizon. Yoo-hoo!"

"Imihama's too damn rich to listen to us. We need your— Wait, you can see us?!"

*"I'm just flying over the Kanagawa Desert right now. I must say, I never thought I'd see the day that cats were given the right to vote! Once I finish up here, I'll head right over, so do your best until I arrive!"*

"G-Gopis! Look at the sky! What is that?!"

Gopis turned and looked where Namari was pointing, and her eyes widened in shock. Seeing her response, the townspeople followed her gaze and reacted the exact same way.

"Oh gods, it's..."

"It's the ark!"

"H-how is anybody supposed to compete with that?!"

The people were thrown into panic by the incredible sight! And little wonder, for beneath the ark was the enormous form of...

\* \* \*

"MROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW."

...a colossal, corpulent, lazy-looking feline! The front half of its body had already disappeared into the ark, leaving only its tail, rump, and hind legs. However, even these were being sucked into the ship with the consistency of softened clay.

MISSING SPECIES IDENTIFIED: CAT GATE.

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 100 BILLION LIFRA.

AWAITING PRESIDENTIAL DECISION.

...

AWAITING PRESIDENTIAL DECISION.

MR. PRESIDENT?

*“Can’t you see I’m a little busy right now?!”*

*“Catwisp Art: Carp Streamer!!”*

*“Jesus Christ!!”*

A flash of steel shattered Mare’s guard and sent him reeling backward. He stared back at his attacker with a look of utter shock (probably).

*“What a cut, man! That’s a real samurai slash right there!”*

As he staggered, Yukan Yatsuhashi glimpsed the path to victory.

*“Geppei! Our chance presents itself! Now!”*

*“My pleasure! Nyan/nyad/viviki/smeow!”*

With his wife at his back, Yukan scampered across the deck.

*“Ultrafaith Arrow, hear my prayers!”*

*“Hidden Catwisp Art!”*

Yukan held his newly forged sword, Daikintsuba, aloft, and the *Ultrafaith Arrow* spiraled around its length, transforming it in the blink of an eye into an enormous golden blade seven meters long!

*“Christ on a bike! Stand down, my good people! I come in peace!!”*

*“Black Fleet Annihilation...”*

*“Expel the foreign barbarians!”*

*““Seven-Tailed Adamant Sword!!””*

*Slashhh!!*

Yukan’s incredible skill guided the golden blade into Mare’s diving suit, ripping open the metal abdomen. A torrent of seawater spilled out, and out rolled a dripping wet cat.

*“Cough! Hack!” he spluttered.*

“Oh, please,” said Amakusa dryly. “If you’re going to cough up a hairball, then please do it elsewhere.”

“Shibafune! Are you okay?!”

Yokan ran up to the sodden cat and helped him to his feet. His soaked fur made him appear about half his usual size.

“M-my liege!! I felt the Catwisp Blade touch my heart...”

Shibafune looked up into his lord’s face, his round, bead-like eyes awash with tears.

“Oh, how glad I am to see you well, my liege! Curse be upon me! How could I have so easily cast my loyalty aside...?”

“I may no longer be Byoma’s protector,” said Yokan, “but I cannot stand idly by while its cats are senselessly abducted!”

“N-no, my liege! You must not! Flee! Flee this place at once! You cannot hope to win!”

The old Chinchilla forgot his self-loathing and clung to his lord in a plea.

“He is a god! A god of the sea! He came to us requesting our support, and when we refused...”

Shabafune trembled with fear as he recalled the horrifying tale.

“He responded with violence! All our land’s cats, even the Cat Gate itself, plucked from the land and into his iron grip! In truth, he cares not for our favor and will gladly use force to fulfill his dastardly aims! My liege, you may be our keenest warrior, but you have lost your arm! You cannot hope to defeat a god in that state!”

“Hmm. ’Tis rare of you, Shibafune, to caution me so.”

“It does seem like this is all a game to him,” added Geppei. “He brushed off that last attack like it was nothing.”

Geppei chanted a mantra, and the *Ultrafaith Arrow* danced around her head. Her luxurious fur billowed in the high-altitude winds.

“It seems our foe is the very sea, strengthened by the life force of countless organisms it has taken within itself. Thus, it has not one heart but many, rendering the Catwisp Blade useless.”

*“Precisely!”*

All of a sudden, the seawater rose up, engulfing the damaged suit in a geyser. In a matter of moments, the torn metal was repaired, and the suit took two powerful steps, standing proud once more before the feline trio.

*“Since you’re already familiar with the facts, why not agree to my trade deal? The samurai cats are an irreplaceable cultural phenomenon! What could be more civilized than ensuring such a fascinating institution remains preserved within myself?”*

“Apologies, but foreign proselytizers are not welcome!” Yōkan retorted.

“We are free cats!” added Geppei. “So I’m afraid we must decline your kind offer. Besides, your suit seems far too small to contain my *magnificence*.”

*“Quite right!”* responded Mare, his helmet afroth with bubbles. *“Why, you’re simply dynamite! Hotter than a Florida summer! Feel like being my secretary?”*

“Hmm, tempting. What do you think, *mon amour*?”

“I’ve never heard of anything so absurd in all my nine lives!” growled Yōkan.

“Apologies,” said Geppei, turning back to Mare. “Sounds like my husband is a little possessive! Oh-ho-ho-ho...”

*“A mating pair?”* answered Mare, placing a hand to the chin of his helmet. *“That certainly speeds things up.”*

Suddenly, from all over the ark, seawater began converging on Mare, filling his suit with the pressure of the ocean depths. Each drop of water adopted the hardness of compacted steel.

*“I’m afraid your diplomatic immunity has run its course, friends! It’s time to resort to big-stick policy!”*

“Gladly!” answered Yōkan. “I shall take back my country by force!”

*“Mare Engine! Life Ocean Streeeam!!”*

Twin typhoons of water emerged from Mare’s fists and bore down on Yōkan as if they had a life of their own. Yet the former feline shogun shot into the air and landed on Geppei’s *Ultrafaith Arrow*, using it like a surfboard to ride the

waves!

*“Sweet Jiminy! A surfing cat?!”*

“Catwisp Art...”

His crimson eyes glimmered, and the bell on Daikintsuba’s hilt rang out!

“Bonito Return!!”

*Clanggg!!*

Yokan’s falling sword found its mark on Mare’s head! The helmet cracked under the impact, and Mare went staggering back.

*“Amazing, simply amazing! ...But!”*

*Ker-rashh!* Mare’s back foot supported his massive frame.

“Mrh?!”

*“I’m afraid one arm simply isn’t enough...”*

*Curses! He’s even more formidable than I feared!*

*“...to get one over on the PRESIDENT!!”*

*Slamm!!*

Mare’s open palm collided with Yokan’s torso, nearly snapping the black cat in two! Yokan spluttered blood, and with his face close to Mare’s, the oceanic executive whispered into his ear...

*“Perhaps...if you had the right to bear both arms, you could have beaten me. However, I hope this proves I am more than qualified to lead.”*

*I...I lost...*

*“Mare Engine: Life Averaging!”*

“Noooo!!”

“Yokan!!”

Geppei screamed out in terror as the seawater from Mare’s suit found its way into Yokan’s body through his open mouth! Mare’s power began manipulating Yokan’s life force for some sinister purpose, causing his body to shrink and

shrink.

“Save him! *Ultrafaith Arrow!!*”

*Clang!!*

“*Shit!*”

Mare flinched and retracted his hand, dropping Yokan moments before his power was drained completely. The feline fell to the floor and began spluttering, while Geppei defended him from the president’s next move.

“Oh, sweetie!” she cried, upon laying eyes on Yokan’s new form. “What’s he done to you?!”

“Hmm? What’s the matter? What has he...?”

Yokan swiftly rose to his feet, and all of a sudden, his kimono slipped from his shoulders. He was standing upon four legs, and he was no longer recognizable as the eighth shogun, for his body had regressed to that of a mere kitten!

“What has become of me?!”

“*I used the Life Averaging technique,*” Mare explained. “*It balances all forces in the body, allowing me to regenerate your missing paw at the cost of your age.*”

Mare shook his damaged head, and the liquid inside frothed and bubbled. Yokan, meanwhile, looked down at himself to find that his missing limb had well and truly returned.

“By the gods! It’s true...”

“Hey! What do you think you’re trying to pull, turning my husband into a kid?”

“*You look like a lovely couple to me. How much older than him did you say you were again?*”

“I’m not old!!”

Amakusa brandished the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, but Mare miraculously deflected it using only his fists. He launched himself at her, caring not for the collateral damage he caused the ship, and very soon Geppei was forced to focus entirely

on keeping herself alive.

“Geppei! I must protect you!”

“No, Yukan! Stay behind me!”

*“Your attacks are full and soft! You’re not nearly starved enough to drain the seas of their water!”*

*Ker-rang!*

Deflecting one last blow aimed at his throat, Mare snapped the arrow in two at last. Its fletching went twirling through the air.

“Geppei! The arrow!!”

*This is as far as I go...!*

It was then that Geppei knew her fate. She caught the tail end of the arrow in her paw and handed it to the kittenified Yukan.

“This is a shard of the *Ultrafaith Arrow*. Keep it safe.”

“Geppei?! What are you...?”

“The president is a hollow shell. That’s why we can’t beat him. There’s someone controlling him.”

Amakusa turned to Yukan, letting her fur fall from her shoulder.

“I shall send you to Akaboshi,” she said. “You must work with him to find out who it is.”

“Wait! I cannot even swing a sword like this! I must stay with you!”

“I believe in you. Mwah.”

Geppei placed Yukan atop the arrow’s feathers, seeing him off with a kiss before the arrow sped away into the distance.

“Geppeeei!!”

Yukan disappeared into the clouds, bound for the world below. The last thing he saw was Mare’s arm reaching for her tearstained face.

\* \* \*

I don't believe it!

Geppei and I swore to pursue freedom together. How could she sacrifice herself for the good of Byoma? And to make matters worse, I have been transformed into a helpless kitten! How the mighty have fallen...

...But I must not forget my quest! Mare's aim is clear. He seeks to imprison all life on Earth within that metal body of his. Only the most stalwart of warriors can stop him! I speak, of course, of Bisco Akaboshi and Milo Nekoyanagi!

My task is clear. I must seek out Akaboshi at all costs. And to do that, I must command this arrow to seek him out.

...

Hmm. I don't seem to be able to stop it from falling.

And that ground is looking awfully close now...

I'm going to die! Oh, gods! Oh, Buddha!

...Oh well, it was a good life. Farewell!

“Flying Fungus, go!”

*Fwmp!*

“Gwuff!”

Just before getting intimately familiar with the geography of Miyazaki, Yokan received an unbelievably soft landing at the behest of an innocent and empty-headed voice. Stuck headfirst in a newly formed cloud of mushroom spores, Yokan was brought down to where the bearer of the voice stood.

There, an irreverent hand latched on to Yokan's madly swinging tail and tugged.

*Pwoof!*

Yokan found himself dangling upside down, dazed, while a pair of big, round eyes examined him closely. The child looked him up and down, then declared...

“Kitty!!”

The loud voice startled Yokan to his senses.

"It's a kitty! I've never seen a kitty before! It's all furry! Is it true they have ten nipples?"

"Wh-wh-wh-what is the meaning of this?!"

"What's up, pussycat?"

"I am not a pussycat. Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Sugar!"

By now, she was far too big to be a toddler. To Yokan, she appeared around seven years of age. This "Sugar," as she introduced herself, spun Yokan by his tail and dusted the mushroom spores out of his fur.

"You're such a cute kitty, kitty cat! But why did you fall out of the sky? Don't you wanna be alive anymore?"

"I...fell? Ah! Of course!"

Suddenly remembering his quest, Yokan looked down at the fragment of the *Ultrafaith Arrow* in his paws. Seeing it safe and sound, he let out a sigh of relief.

"But why did it bring me here?" he asked aloud. "I asked it to follow the traces of Akaboshi's power."

"Hmm? Are you a friend of Papa's, Mr. Kitty?"

"P-Papa?! Who is that?!" asked Yokan in disbelief. "Are you telling me Akaboshi is your father?! I never envisioned the man with a daughter... Perhaps I'm not as good a judge of character as I thought..."

"If you know Papa, then listen to me! I've got a bone to pick with 'im!"

Sugar pulled Yokan tight and squeezed him with unimaginable strength for her age. Ignoring his yelps of pain, she launched into her tirade.

"I spent ages making him some sand pies, and he refused to eat them! He just pretended, then ran away! Even though he's *always* telling me not to lie!"

"Wh-what barbarian would eat pies made out of mud?!"

"So I'm running away from home, Mr. Kitty Cat. I'm not listening to Mommy's math lessons anymore! I don't understand them! How come Bobby has to start walking fifteen minutes after Alice? Doesn't he have free will?"

*Wh-what in the Six Realms is she talking about?*

The child's boisterous voice was like a tommy gun in his ears, and Yokan couldn't make head nor fluffy tail of what she was trying to say. Sugar, meanwhile, was absolutely over the moon to have someone to speak to besides her stuffy old parents and didn't seem inclined to let Yokan out of her grip anytime soon.

"J-just let me go, child! I don't have time to play!"

"You smell nice, Mr. Kitty Cat! *Sniff! Ahh!* By the way, I think I'm allergic to cats, Mr. Kitty! Watch this! *Aachoo!*"

"Are you incapable of comprehending me, you idiotic child?" Yokan turned and pointed to the horizon from where he had just come. "There's a god of the sea on my tail, and he could be here any— What?!"

Yokan was shocked into silence, for when he turned, he saw that the sky was already dominated by the form of the ark. Somehow, it had traveled halfway across Japan, from Kanazawa to Miyazaki in a matter of minutes.

"It's here!! Mare must have summoned the powers of miraculous translocation!"

*Kaboom! Kaboom!* Great globs of seawater fell from the sky like meteorites. They leaped toward Yokan, clearly possessing a will of their own.

"They've found us!" Yokan said, cursing. "Run, child! You cannot hope to best them!"

"I'm not a kid, you know!"

"Are you insane?! Run, lest I be forced to watch an innocent young life meet a most cruel and unusual end!!"

"Flying Fungus!"

Sugar leaped into the air, and a cloud of spores whisked her along. At lightning speed, she flew here and there, crashing through water and rocks alike with a *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

"What sorcery is this...?!"

“Hold on tight, Mr. Kitty! The bad guys are after us!”

LANDING SUCCESSFUL.

DEPLOYING SECRET SERVICE.

SUITS: ON.

The watery spheres trembled like dumplings, and then all of a sudden, they disgorged a squadron of sharply dressed men in black, their skin and bones formed of liquid. It was an aquatic re-creation of the president’s very own security force. The Secret Service goons all straightened their neckties and closed in around Yokan and Sugar, numbering a few dozen in all.

“Come in, Ark. This is Eagle One. We’ve surrounded the target,” said one, pressing a watery digit to where his ear would be if he had one.

However, the other goons were already looking at one another in confusion.

“Who’s the kid?”

“Nobody told us there’d be a civilian.”

“It looks like she’s floating off the ground...”

“It’s just an optical illusion. Eagle Eight, grab the cat.”

“Hi there, little lady!”

One of the aquatic bodyguards transformed his watery face so that he looked just like Matt Damon and gave Sugar a handsome smile.

“Looks like our little friend there got lost. Do you think you could hand him back to us?”

“No! He’s my cat!”

“Are you sure? Here, how about a trade? I’ll give you some candy!”

Sugar looked conflicted for a moment before responding, “I’ll take the candy...but I’m not giving you the cat!”

The goons all slapped their watery foreheads in unison. “““Oh, please!“““

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! — You little punk-ass kid. That’s enough Full House.”

The handsome agent dropped his nice-guy act and swelled in size, engulfing

both Sugar and Yokan inside his aquatic form, like a sea butterfly.

“Stop it! Let go of me!” screamed Sugar, flailing helplessly.

The leader, seeing the situation under control, placed his finger to his ear. “*Ark, come in. This is Eagle One. We’ve captured the target, plus an anomaly. We’re bringing them both back to—*”

“W-wait! *Eagle One!*”

“*What is it, Eagle Three? I’m in the middle of a report!*”

“*Something’s wrong with Eagle Eight! Look!*”

Eagle One looked over in the direction of his associate and was shocked by what he saw. With an incredible *Schluurppp!* sound, Sugar was imbibing his fellow colleague whole!

“*What the hell?!*”

“*H-help me, sir! The kid’s got me!*”

It was safe to say that Eagle Eight had never experienced being drunk like water before, at least not in quite so literal a sense. His panicked screams grew quieter and quieter until he disappeared down Sugar’s gullet entirely.

“*Burp.*”

“Wh-what manner of god or beast...?”

Yokan was just as astonished by Sugar’s feat as the rest of them. He flared his cat eyes wide as he hung there in the girl’s arms.

“H-how? No human can contain that much water!”

“I’m not a human! I’m a mushroom!”

“*Did you hear that, Eagle One?*”

“*Yes. That must be the miracle mushroom kid that the president mentioned. There’s no doubt about it!*”

The Secret Service goons all heightened their caution, adopting wary postures.

“*The situation on the ground has changed. Forget the cat. Focus on bringing*

*back that girl, alive!"*

*"Let's huddle, team!"*

*"Hut!"*

*"Hut!"*

*"They're forming together," warned Yokan. "Get ready!"*

*"Ugh. I don't wanna drink another one; they're all salty..."*

*"Hike!!"*

The men in black merged into an enormous localized tidal wave that swept toward the pair. Sugar wrapped Yokan around her neck like a fluffy scarf and said...

*"Look! I'm a fashion model!"*

*"Hmm. I'd wager no shogun has been made into a stole before..."*

Then Sugar grinned the wicked grin she'd inherited from her father.

*"Mushy Magic Pole!!" she yelled, raising her arm up high. With a *Kroom!* the earth split open, and a shining golden mushroom staff emerged, tearing the tidal wave apart into its constituents, who each screamed as they were flung in all directions.*

The magical staff then shrank and returned to Sugar's grip, where it became a handheld weapon about one-and-a-half meters in length.

Yokan stared in wonder at the countless miracles Sugar performed as a matter of course. *Well, she's Akaboshi's daughter; there's no doubt about that!* he thought as the samurai glint returned to his eye!

*"Look out, she's got a weapon!"*

*"Abandon the huddle!"*

*"It appears they seek to outnumber us," advised Yokan, Sugar's scarf. "The orthodox strategy in this case would be to use our troops to cut a path to the enemy commander."*

*"Are we calling our friends, Mr. Kitty?"*

“Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Leave it to me, Mr. Pussycat!”

With a triumphant look on her face, Sugar twirled her mushroom staff, and her hair billowed. Sugar plucked a few crimson strands, then blew on them. From her breath came a cloud of rainbow spores that transformed the strands of hair into...

*Bwoom! Bwoom! Bwoom! Gaboom!*

“Bab-baaam!”

“We’re here!”

“Goo-goo ga-ga!”

“N-no, it’s *them*!”

It was little wonder all the color drained from Yokan’s face, for what Sugar had conjured out of nothing but her own hair and breath were none other than the fearsome monstrooms that had laid waste to Byoma so many times in the past!

“All right, buddies! Line up!” Sugar declared.

“All right!”

“In order of height?”

“Huh?”

“How about in order of how loud we can be?”

“““AAAAAAAGHHH!!!”””

“Be quiet!” yelled Sugar. “It’s up to you now, people! Beat up the baddies for us!”

Sugar pointed to the numerous suits crawling along the ground. The monstrooms looked at them and then at one another.

“They look kinda strong.”

“They’re all muscly.”

“So are we, though.”

“No, we’re just fat.”

“The Yatsuhashi shogunate will see that all those who bring us glory in the upcoming battle will be rewarded handsomely,” said Yokan, stirring up the monstrooms with his clever words. “You could all be million—no, multi-gazillionaires!”

Simpleminded as ever, the monstroom folk flashed their mismatched eyes, lighting up with greed, and all of them turned to face the Secret Service goons with a fiery patriotism.

“““Bab-baaam!!”””

“Who’re these freaks?”

“They look like sumo wrestlers!”

“Eagle One, are we bringing them in? —Whoa! They’re stronger than they look!”

“Stay calm, everyone. They’re slow and brutish creatures. Keep your wits about you, and—”

“Mushy Magic Pole!”

Whack!!

Sugar’s magic staff came down hard on Eagle One’s head, squashing him flat, but the aquatic bodyguard turned into a puddle and leaped back onto a rock, where he re-formed.

“So you want to do this mano a mano, kid? I warn you, the other agents ain’t chicken scratch compared to me!”

“Sugar!” yelled Yokan. “He may just be a foot soldier, but he is made of seawater! You cannot hope to beat him with brute force alone!”

“Grrr! Then what am I supposed to do?”

“End of the line, kid. Your magic tricks are useless against a liquid body like mine.”

Eagle One then transformed himself into an enormous watery mace that smashed the ground where Sugar stood! Sugar managed to escape, using her

Flying Fungus to dodge between stray fragments of rock, but she was finding it difficult to control the cloud and focus on the fight at the same time.

“Mushy Magic Pole! Hi-yah!”

*Fwoom! Crash!*

“Ah-ha-ha! Looks like the little lady needs to learn some discipline!”

“You were right, Mr. Kitty! It’s not working at all!”

Yokan, meanwhile, was muttering to himself, eyes trained on his foe.

“There’s an old Byoman legend,” he said. “It says that the goddess Nekoterasu once used the sun’s rays to dry up the ocean as revenge against a mischievous sea god...but what am I saying? It’s not like me to entreat the gods at a time like this...”

“The sun? That’s it!” cried Sugar, suddenly adopting her father’s wicked grin.

“Wh-what do you mean?” asked Yokan.

“Mushy Magic Pole!”

Sugar spun her staff at lightning speed, and it quickly became enshrouded in rainbow-colored spores. The tip of the staff started to glow, and then...

“Let there be light!!”

“What the...? It’s so bright...!” yelled Yokan, shielding his eyes with his paws. At one end of Sugar’s staff had appeared a tiny ball of radiant fire. “It’s the rising sun! She created it out of nothing!”

“*You think I’d fall for such a ridiculous act?*” said Eagle One, winding up another swing of his mace-shaped body. “*You must be out of your goddamn minds!!*”

“Here we go, Mr. Kitty!”

“Indeed!”

Sugar didn’t even try to dodge the next incoming attack. She leaped off her cloud, directly into the path of the mace, and thrust the miniature sun toward it!

“Mushy Magic Pole! Finishing Move!”

““Cloak of Steam!””

*Pshhhhh!!*

“*Whooooaaa?!?!*”

Eagle One’s panicked shriek was well warranted, for his invincible body...was shrinking before his very eyes! The water was evaporating into a steamy cloud, while his suit and tie were charred even blacker by the heat.

“I’m...I’m boiling! I’m boiling!”

“Tremble in fright before my almighty wisdom!” Sugar proudly declared. “Mommy taught me in science class that water evaporates when it heats up!”

“You consider this an intellectual victory, do you?”

“Well, I did go to school, you know!” said Sugar, winking.

*I see. So, this “mommy” of hers is...*

Seeing she had inherited Milo’s infuriating habit, Yukan gave a gentle smile.

“*Oh, what a world, what a world...*”

By now, Eagle One had shrunk down to about the size of a toy action figure.

“*We’ve got to tell the president about this! Boys, we’re pulling out!*”

“*This whole country’s lost the plot!*”

“*Let me go, fatsos!*”

At their leader’s command, the other Secret Service goons all turned to water and left like the ebbing tide, leading the monstrooms to survey the empty battlefield.

“We won.”

“Huh?”

“That’s ‘cuz I’m here.”

“*Dosukoi!*”

“Bab-bam!”

After talking over one another, all the monstrooms turned back into spores with a *Bam! Bam! Bam!* and were sucked back inside Sugar.

*"All right, if that's the way she wants to play it... She can forget about being saved. We'll inform the president, and then..."*

All of a sudden, a shadow fell over the retreating Eagle One.

*"Oh, you're here! Watch out for the kid, she's—"*

*Splat!*

The figure stepped on Eagle One, cutting short his words. A pair of jade-green eyes watched him like a hawk as he seeped into the ground.

*"Gramma! Gramma! I'm over here!"*

*"Sugar! How many times have I told you not to call me that?"*

Her laugh. Her crimson hair that billowed in the wind. Marie Akaboshi, bow in hand, walked silently across the moss over to Sugar.

*"Don't just fly off in your magic cloud,"* she said. *"I'm the one who's gotta go look for you."*

*"Gramma'? Then this is...?"*

*"She's Papa's mommy! She's amazing! She can control the spores like it's nothing!"*

*...So can you? Can't you?*

*"Papa said he'll change his ways, Sugar. How about we go back to camp?"*

Marie briskly closed the distance and crouched over Sugar.

*"Oh? Who's your new friend?"* she asked, noticing the black kitten in her arms.

*"Mr. Kitty!"*

*"..."*

Yokan stared up at the woman's features and felt a strange tingle in the tip of his nose. The fragment of the *Ultrafaith Arrow* that he gripped tightly in his paw shivered, as if cold...or afraid.

"I see," said Marie. "It's someone's lucky day today. Let's bring him back with us, shall we?"

"Yeah! Eh-heh-heh..."

"All right, let's go. And no flying this time. It's too dangerous. Hold my hand and we'll—"

*Slashhh!*

A flash of claw brushed Marie's offered hand aside. With incredible speed and agility despite his short size, Yokan picked up Sugar in his mouth and leaped backward, out of the woman's reach.

"M-Mr. Kitty?"

"You may have her fooled," Yokan told Marie, "but you cannot hope to deceive a cat's nose." He stood before Sugar protectively and growled. There was no sword at his belt, but the soul of a samurai burned brightly behind his eyes.

"I reached out to your mind with the Catwisps," he went on. "Behind your innocent appearance lies a heart of such coldness, I felt it only once before...in my own loveless father!"

"What's wrong, Mr. Kitty?" asked Sugar, failing to keep up.

"What a funny little cat you found," said Marie. "Did you two decide to pull a prank on me, or what?"

"I care not in interfering with your goals, wicked or otherwise. But to use and cast aside your own descendants is something I can never allow! Begone, foul witch, and never let my eyes fall upon your face again!!"

A chill wind blew through the trees. It ruffled Yokan's fur and caused Marie's crimson hair to flutter.

"M-Mr. Kitty...?"

Sugar's miraculous birth had imbued her with an innate sense of truth...

...and so she stayed right where she was.

She wasn't sure what to believe. Yokan's words had thrown her into a state of

turmoil, spinning her internal compass, and it was not yet clear where its point would land. She stared at Marie, as if hoping the woman would say or do something to put her mind at ease.

But Marie just stared. She stared at the kitten, expressionless, for what seemed like far too long, saying nothing.

Then, at last, she noticed her granddaughter's gaze...

...turned to her...

...and smiled.

\* \* \*

“Arrow of Infinity!”

““Mantra Soulprint Bow!””

*Pchew!!*

Bisco's and Milo's combined efforts unleashed an arrow of such power that the two boys' boots left deep grooves across the deck. The projectile curved in the air and struck the side of the ark, where it punctured clean through and out the other side. Defying physics, the arrow then curved once more and came back through the ship the other way.

“*Oh, sweet Jesus!*” cried Mare as the holes in his vessel multiplied by the second. “*Stop this, please! You're destroying the ark!*”

A stout feline blocked Mare's path as he attempted to entreat the two boys. “I, Shibafune, will not allow you to interfere!”

“*On, nyad, viviki, smeow!*”

Amakusa's spell conjured chains of gold that bound the president with no hope for escape. Her magic prevented him from even taking liquid form and slipping out through the cracks. Also at her disposal here were the hale and hearty legs and loins of the ex-lord Yokan's aged retainer, Shibafune!

“Catwisp Art: *Binding of the White Whale!*” he yelled, skillfully employing the sickle and chain in his paws. “I may be old, but I taught my liege everything he knows of the blade! Do not underestimate me!”

"I'm glad you're here, old man," said Geppei. "I hate to admit it, but he is too strong for me alone."

"Try not to fall in love," Shibafune retorted. "It would be difficult to explain that to my liege."

"How did you ever get on the shogun's council with an attitude like that...?"

*"Goddamn samurai! Where's your Bushido code? This is four against one! Secret Service? Do something about these meddling cats!"*

"You sent them all off to recapture Yokan," said Geppei. "Or have you already forgotten?"

"*Grrr...*"

It was Milo who approached the fallen and bound Mare, as the Rust of his mantra danced in the air behind him.

"Mr. President," he said. "We both know you can't be beaten, but we do know what you want, and that means we can negotiate."

*"What is this? Am I on trial? Speak to my lawyers! I am not a crook!"*

"Bisco."

"On it."

"Wait. W-w-w-wait!"

*Ker-rash! Kaboom!*

*"What in God's name?! You guys are messed up!"*

"These are our demands, Mr. President," said Milo coldly. "Release Actagawa, the cats, and everyone else you've captured here in Japan, or else Bisco's arrow will keep going until there's nothing left of this ship but sawdust!"

*"Be reasonable! I've come to save this land! There's no future here for civilization! Our only hope is to wash it all away and start anew! Why are you so opposed to that?!"*

"Because we like it here, dumbass," said Bisco, half focused on his technique. "Our masters and everyone we ever faced are buried in this land. Just because it's scary to you don't mean it's not meaningful to us. This land connects us to

our roots, our history. You can't just come in and take that all away!"

"..."

"Let's start with Actagawa, Mr. President. Let him go."

*"...He said he likes it in there, actually. I'm not sure I can convince him to leave. He can be quite hardheaded at—"*

"Bisco?"

*"Okay, okay, okay! I get it! Holy shit, I never thought I'd see the day..."*

The president finally acquiesced to Milo's demands, and the liquid within his helmet started to bubble. As everyone watched closely, keeping a careful eye on Mare's restraints, the helmet cover swung open, and out popped a single orange claw!

"Actagawa!" cried Milo.

"Hey, President Asshole! Hurry it up, will ya?"

"Cut him some slack," came a frigid voice from behind them. "Mare's used to sucking creatures up. This is the first time he's letting one go."

Bisco felt a cold tingle crawl up his spine. The two boys wheeled around.

"...Granny!"

"Marie?!"

Standing on the deck, her crimson hair billowing in the wind, was Milo's de facto mother-in-law.

"Look at this," Bisco proudly declared. "We managed to outwit Mare and make him give back Acta—"

*Fwsh.*

Something whistled past Bisco's cheek.

*Splat!*

"Guhh!!"

"""What?!""""

The arrow landed in Shibafune's shoulder with such force that it knocked him back into the ship's balustrades, causing him to drop the chain.

“““Shibafune!!””” the other three all cried in shock.

Without the old Persian's paw on his restraints, Mare rose to his feet.

*“Make the earth...great again!!”*

He slammed his fist into the deck, tossing Geppei into the air before grabbing her defenseless form.

“Geppei, no!”

“Let her go!”

Bisco loosed an arrow, but it simply lodged into Mare's suit with no effect.

“Eeek!” Geppei screeched. “Unhand me, brute! Swallow me and you'll regret it!”

*“Do your worst, madame. Critters far more ornery than you have passed these lips.”*

With that, he took Geppei into his face, pushing Actagawa back inside just as the giant crab was about to regain his freedom.

“Ugh... M-my liege...”

*“I commend you on your loyalty, old cat. Let's meet again in the New World.”*

The injured Shibafune was powerless to resist as Mare's hurricane of seawater picked him up and delivered him inside the president's faceplate. In just five seconds, Milo and Bisco were left all alone.

“The Soulprint Arrow... Jabi's final technique...”

A calm, quiet voice broke the heavy silence. Marie spoke to nobody in particular.

“So he taught the spores to think for themselves, did he? To lie to themselves and misrepresent the nature of reality. How very like him, the old romantic. A realist like me could never come up with something like that.”

“What the hell do you think you're doin', Granny?!”

“Don’t move!!”

Marie’s sharp yell rooted the two boys to the spot in fear. Two bubbles appeared behind her, containing...

“Mommy!!”

“Sugar!!”

Seeing his own daughter floating there, Milo cried out her name in despair. The surface of the bubble was like rubber, and despite Sugar’s frantic scratching, she couldn’t leave a single mark.

“Akaboshi!” shouted Yōkan from the second bubble. *“She’s too strong! Her abilities trump feline understanding, even more so than your own! Plus, she counts a god of the sea among her allies! Pray, forget us for now; flee from this place and garner support from your friends!”*

“The cat’s right, you know,” said Marie. “Except the part about you getting away, that is. All I have to do is snap my fingers, and these bubbles will compress their contents into mincemeat. If you care about your daughter’s life, then—”

*“—Then cease your misguided assaults and join the conservation efforts, my friends!”*

“Mare. Stay quiet if you want to keep your job.”

“...Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

“You mean to say,” muttered Bisco, “you were on his side all along?! This was your plan the entire time? All those smiles you showed us—showed Sugar, for crying out loud! They were all lies, made to trick us?!”

His cries of grief and betrayal grew into a furious roar that shook the entire ship. “Lovelessness is my strength,” repeated Marie. “I was always proud of that...”

A slight tremor worked its way into her voice.

“...until I gave birth to you.”

“...Hrh!!”

“In the end, I chose my strength over you. But somewhere along the way, I looked down at my bloodstained hands and asked myself...what if I’d chosen motherhood instead?”

“It’s not all about you!!”

“Milo, get back! It’s not safe!”

“Whenever I cried, Mare took all my tears and grew bigger. I raised him, transformed him into a representation of my own subconscious. Now, finally, he’s giving me the chance to do something motherly for once.”

“To safeguard all life on Earth?! That’s why you’re doing this?!”

Milo’s rage caused Marie’s hair to flutter. Mare crouched, ready for combat, but one sharp glare from his creator caused him to stand at ease.

“You’re erasing our past!” Milo went on. “What’s so motherly about that?! And where are you planning on taking us anyway?!”

“...”

*“Why, to her ultimate creation, the Continent of Life!”* said Mare, evidently growing impatient at Marie’s silence. *“Using a power on par with Hokkaido itself, she will make herself into a new land—”*

“Who asked you?!” yelled Bisco.

*“Don’t you understand? Your mother is prepared to give of herself to become Japan! To allow the mushrooms to create a new archipelago out of her own body!”*

Bisco was stunned speechless by this revelation. Milo turned his attention from Marie to Mare, and even Marie herself let out a small “Tsk” at the president’s indiscretion.

“That granny’s gonna...turn herself into a new Japan?”

*“A brave new world, formed of mushroom power! Without Rust, disease, or anything else that plagues our lands! This fine lady is ready to become a new Mother Nature, a mother that will never desert you!”*

“Quiet, Mare...”

*“A mother that will watch over you for all eternity!”*

“I said shut it, Mare!”

“You expect us to be grateful?!” shouted Milo. “We don’t need a new country! If you really cared about Bisco’s happiness, you’d have stayed with him!”

“You shut up, too, Milo. This is between us Akaboshis and no one else.”

“Don’t think you can make up for fifteen years of absent parenting this way! There’s nothing magnanimous about any of this! It’s all just to make you feel better about your own mistakes!!”

“Learn some manners when talking to your mother-in-law, you damn kid!! You know, I’ve always hated you from the moment I laid eyes on you! Always actin’ like Bisco belongs to you!!”

Marie leveled a murderous gaze at Milo. It was a momentary lapse in her rational thinking that Milo didn’t fail to capitalize on. Using minuscule changes in his expression, he conferred with Bisco.

“Milo, now!”

“Got it!”

With perfect timing, Bisco’s *Soulprint Arrow* shot out of a nearby cloud, and Milo caught it in his bare hand, brandishing it aloft as it glittered with the mantra hue.

“*Won/shandreber/varuler/snew!!*”

He then thrust the arrow into the deck of the ship, causing dozens of spears of Rust to spring up out of the bare wood.

“*Tch,*” Marie tutted. Mare clutched his helmet as an alarm blared in the background.

“*Good God! What have you done?!*”

**A**LER**T!** **A**LER**T!** **C**RITICAL DAMAGE SUSTAINED!

**A**RK DESTRUCTION RATE AT **23%**.

**C**ONTINUED PRESERVATION CAPACITY **UNCERTAIN**.

BEGINNING LANDING. SEEK URGENT REPAIRS.

"Why is nothing ever easy?" Marie asked, sighing. "Mare, head to the engine room and activate the reserve power!"

"Aye-aye, ma'am!"

"Bisco! Help Sugar!" yelled Milo.

"On it!!"

Bisco leaped over to where she was and took the bubble in his hands. Milo, meanwhile, unsheathed his dagger and swung it at Marie in an attempt to keep her occupied.

"Hi-yah!!"

"You think a kid like you can beat me?"

There was a *Clanggg!* as Marie deflected Milo's swing with a short, crimson-edged blade of her own. She lashed back in response, and Milo only just managed to step back in time before a few locks of his sky-blue hair were cut loose.

"You're right, kid," she said. "I am only doing this for me! That's what's got me all this way already!!"

*Sh-she's too fast! Too powerful! I need a mantra weapon, or I don't stand a chance!*

"Still thinkin' about how you can win? How about you listen to someone better than you for a change?! You can have things your way when you're strong enough to earn it! But for now...Mother knows best!!"

"*Won/ul/viviki—*"

"Too slow!"

*Clang! Slamm!!*

Marie sliced at the mantra cube with her dagger, obstructing Milo's art. Milo let out a shocked yelp as Marie lunged forward, delivering a powerful elbow into the pit of his stomach.

"Guhh!"

“Your stance is off, kid.”

*She's...too strong...*

No one was more adept than Marie when it came to taking down Mushroom Keepers. Milo's faith was an unstoppable force, but it was all for naught if he wasn't given the chance to employ it.

As he felt his consciousness slip away, Milo uttered one final plea.

“Stop this...Marie... We have...to understand each other...”

“...”

“It's not too late... It's never...too late...”

Then he fell backward...into Marie's waiting arms. With one slender hand, she tenderly caressed his sky-blue hair.

“...”

“Sorry, Milo. I didn't want to do this. I oughtta be thanking you...”

“...”

“...Take care of Bisco for me, kid. Make him happy. 'Cause I sure can't.”



\*

Marie stared at his sleeping face for a few seconds longer, then turned around. The ship's alert sound filled the air with its blaring. Bisco was still struggling with his knife, trying in vain to obtain purchase on the rubbery surface of Sugar's prison.

"Papa!!"

"Grr, can't get a grip! ...I know!"

Bisco rummaged in his vial pouch and pulled out the syringe containing the Ghost Bubble serum, then jammed its sharp point into the sphere.

*Pop!*

"Whah?!"

"Sugar!"

"Papa!!"

Bisco took his daughter into his arms as tears streamed down her little face. Yokan shook himself off, restoring the fluffiness to his flattened-down fur at once.

"You fool, Akaboshi! I said to leave us! You cannot stay here a moment longer!"

"Sugar, listen to me."

At the serious sound of Bisco's voice, Yokan withheld any further warnings. He simply gazed at those two pairs of eyes, of father and daughter, which seemed locked on each other in a glittering resonance.

"In our time," Bisco said, "you had to take your happiness by force. Tryin' to understand each other would only get you killed. But you've got a choice, Sugar. You can fight...or you can choose peace. You can understand people. Make them happy."

"Papa...? What are you talking about?"

"You can be a god, Sugar. Or you can be a demon. Whatever happens, your mommy and daddy will always believe in you. Follow your heart, wherever it

leads. And remember that all the words in the world can't change how you feel."

"...Papa..."

...

*Sugar... Your eyes...*

*Look how they shine...*

Bisco met his daughter's gaze without saying a word, then held her close and squeezed her tight. Closing his eyes, he listened to the beating of her tiny heart.

"...Yokan, take this!"

"The *Ultrafaith Arrow*?! When did you...?"

Bisco held the drained and broken arrow shaft, and his own power flowed into it, causing it to glow once more.

Then he handed it back to Yokan. "Look after my daughter for me," he said.

"You can't be serious! Let me help! I can fight, too!"

"Sugar's only just been born, and she doesn't know her own strength. If she gets upset, it could destroy the world... But that's no problem for the Catwisp Blade, right? I know she'll be safe with you."

"Akaboshi!!"

"Sugar! What do you do with cats?"

"Oh! I know! Eh-heh-heh!"

Sugar wrapped Yokan around her neck once more and struck a glamorous pose.

"Look at me! I'm a fashion model!"

"Stop turning me into a scarf, child!!"

"She knows 'Journey to the West.' Right now, Sugar needs to learn discipline, just like Monkey had to. And I know just the monk for the job!"

With a big grin on his face, Bisco lifted his daughter up in his arms.

"Sugar! I'm sending you to see Tripitaka! Listen to everything she tells you, okay?"

Then he hurled the two of them high up into the air. The arrow shone brightly, illuminating their way.

"No! Papa! I don't want to go!!"

"Akaboshi! You have my word. On my honor as the Catwisp Blade, I shall protect your child with my life!"

As Sugar reached out her hand, the arrow carried them away through the clouds until they were gone completely. Bisco smiled as he watched them go.

"...Now, then."

Cracking his neck, he turned to face Marie.

"Thanks for givin' us a moment," he said. "Maybe you ain't so bad as you look."

"We have time," Marie replied. "They'll all be coming with us in the end anyway."

Marie had already nocked her arrow. The wind passed through their hair, tracing two scarlet comet tails in the sky.

"I failed you," she said. "But it's okay. I'm going to make things right. I'll wash away all that's been said and done and grant you a world where you can be happy. This is my final gift to you, Bisco. The one I could never give you."

"You failed me?"

"..."

"Sorry, but I ain't got a clue what you're talkin' about. All you're tryin' to wash away...is your own mistakes!"

"...!"

Slowly, Bisco drew his own bow.

"Life. Love. Fate," he said. "All of it's connected by time. An unbreakable, unchangeable chain of events...and I wouldn't change a single one of 'em."

“You’re lying!”

“No, I ain’t! Look at me, Granny!”

Bisco hit her with a gaze so clear, Marie could see her own reflection in it. So bright and bursting with life, it erased any illusion of the poor and lonely son that Marie wanted to see.

“Grr...”

“You still don’t realize it, but I’ve been walking in the sun this whole time. I’ve been living! There ain’t a part of me that’s not already filled with light!”

Bisco’s wild proclamation caused Marie’s hair to flutter. She was flabbergasted by this philosophy coming from the lips of her own son, a son who had already built himself into a man in her absence.

But she was an Akaboshi, and an Akaboshi never knew how to admit defeat. She snarled, displaying her family’s trademark fangs, and shot back a defiant glare!

“...Heh-heh-heh-heh. I see, so that’s the way it’s going to be, huh?”

“What now, Granny? Ready to back down?”

“I’ll make room,” she said, a rebellious flame in her eyes. “If there ain’t room for me in your life, then I’ll tear you open and climb into it!”

“Bring it on!”

The two Akaboshis shot each other a ferocious grin, their canines gleaming!

“Ready to make some memories, kid?”

““Let’s play catch!!””

Their fight was far too fast for any mortal eye to follow. Arrows collided head-on, filling the space between the two combatants with sprouting mushrooms. With Jabi dead, there was only one woman on this earth capable of matching Bisco’s aim and precision.

However...

*Goddammit, how is he so powerful?!*

“Taste the strength of my devotion!”

*Gaboom!*

In terms of speed and skill, the two were evenly matched, but Bisco held the upper hand when it came to physical strength. When the mushrooms collided, it was Bisco's that sprouted ever so slightly faster, and as the fight wore on, Marie found herself shifting more and more to the back foot.

*I can't lose...*

Her jade-green eyes glimmered as she prepared to stake it all on a single play!

*Not here! Not to him!*

She took a deep breath, and...

“Come to me!”

“What?!”

“Ghost Hail Bow!”

The lunar spores spilled out of her, wreathing her bow in the silvery glow of the moon.

*She can fire the Ghost Hail Bow by herself?!*

“With age comes wisdom, kid! Watch and learn!!”

“Don't get cocky!”

In response to the threat, Bisco's own Rust-Eater spores awakened, shrouding him in a fiery mist.

“I'll turn you into mushroom fertilizer!!”

““Take thiiis!!””

*Pchew! Gaboom!!*

Above the deck of the ark, the mushrooms of the sun and moon connected, emitting a powerful blast wave. Amid the cloud of spores that ensued, the two mushroom masters nocked their bows for a follow-up shot...

...Only Marie was a split second behind.

*Grh!*

The strain of firing the Ghost Hail Bow alone had been more than she could handle. Bisco spotted her moment of weakness and glimpsed the path to his victory.

“There it is!!”

His bowstring pulled tight, Bisco leveled an arrow at his own mother.

And then...

He glimpsed, just for a moment, the pleading look in her eyes.

...*Grh!*

In a world a microsecond long, Bisco felt a touch of hesitation. And then...

“If lovelessness is my strength, Bisco, then yours is the exact opposite.

“Love’s the reason you trample everything in your path...

“And now...it’s the reason you’ll lose...”

*Ka-chew!*

A flash of light skewered each of their breasts.

CRITICAL DAMAGE SUSTAINED.

ENACTING EMERGENCY LANDING.

ALL HANDS, BRACE FOR IMPACT.

A belch of smoke erupted from the side of the ark, which lurched horrifyingly to one side, then slowly fell out of the sky. It landed amid the mountains with an impact that shook the whole nation.

## **INTERMISSION 2**

Heeey! Marie!

*Wheeze, wheeze.*

What're you playing at, leaving yer fella without even sayin' good-bye?

Tryin' to skip out on your final farewell?

You really are a loveless woman.

Hyo-ho-ho...

Hey, don't get mad at me, woman! I just came to give you somethin' before you go off on your way. This here's your finest work, so be sure to look after it.

Hold out your hands now... Here. *Splot.*

It may just look like ordinary water right now, but I planted one o' your wisdomshrooms inside its noggin. Once it grows up, it'll be a god of the sea, smarter than any human.

You can't expect me to take care o' somethin' like that.

Besides, you're gonna need somebody to talk to out there, to help keep you sane.

Think of him as your second son, y'hear?

Hyo-ho-ho!

Just leave Bisco to me! Don't worry, I'll tell him you're dead, just like you asked.

The kid's got a lot to live up to, bein' the son of two great heroes. Nobody blames you for not wantin' to stifle him.

...But Marie.

If you ever get tired o' your path, so tired that you can't go on...

Come see the li'l tyke, will ye?

He's got a light inside him that can banish any darkness, even yours. Come to him at your lowest, and he'll pull you right out!

Hyo-ho-ho! What's that face for? You upset 'cause I said he'll be stronger than you?

I'm just statin' facts, Marie. He's your kid, after all.

All right, well, you better get on, now. And don't look back! Believe in your skills and don't give up until your heart stops beatin'.

And if you ever stray in your path, don't forget...

Me and Bisco'll be watchin' over you!

Western Hiroshima had been badly damaged by Hokkaido's attack and had only just recently finished reclaiming the land that had been eaten. Little by little, the region was starting to claw back its former prosperity.

"That's all mighty well and good, stranger, but, ya see, the thing is..."

A merchant walked down the half-built country road, while a hippo-drawn cart trundled beside him. The gas mask over his face mixed his voice with radio static.

"...Where there's money, there's always gonna be outlaws lookin' to make a quick and dirty profit. Take that bandit group that've started hanging out in Akakimo Pass, for example. 'Cause of the critters infestin' the other routes, we got no choice but to take our chances."

"What bandit group?"

"Don't tell me you ain't never heard of them?! I'm talkin' about the monstrooms!"

The merchant turned and looked back at the stranger, but the figure wore a deep hood and didn't react in the slightest.

"And the leader of those bandits is the craziest one of all. She calls herself the Great Mushroom Girl, Heaven's Equal, and they say she built a massive temple on top of Tsurikiba Hill in one night! Just so she could admire the view!"

"Don't the monks of Izumo have anything to say about that?"

"Course they do! Kandori led a bunch of the Wizened up there, dead set on teachin' her a lesson, but she blew them all away with a single breath!"

"With a single...breath?"

"Damn right! So she ain't human, that's for sure!"

“She blew Kandori away with a single breath...”

The stranger seemed to ponder this for a while, and then...

“Ha-ha-ha...”

“It’s no laughing matter, I tell ya. Come to think of it, I know you said you were a master and all, but can you really hold those bandits off if they—”

“Hold it right there!!”

“Hmm...?”

The stranger slowly lifted their head, in time to see a small squadron of mushroom men descend from the cliffs to either side and gather in the middle of the road, brandishing their spears at the caravan.

“Hold it right there, hippo!”

“Bab-bam!”

“Hand it over!”

“Leave your goodies and scram!”

“Snakes alive! They’re here! You’re up, stranger!”

The hooded figure rose to their feet and took a few steps toward the mushroom folk.

“I will not stand by while you harass good, hardworking citizens,” they said.

“Who’s this loser?”

“What are your demands? I would like to avoid bloodshed if possible.”

The mushroom men slammed their spears against the ground and barked an answer in unison.

“““Leave your goodies and scram!”””

“Give us sweets!”

“Or else you’ll regret it!”

“Bab-bam!”

“What...?”

The stranger turned and placed a hand on the shoulder of the trembling merchant.

“It seems they only want sweets, my good man. That seems very reasonable to me. Why not give them all you have, and we can be on our way?”

“Give them all I have?!” the merchant screamed, waving a finger at the logo on the side of his cart that read:

GLICO™: BRINGING HEALTH AND HAPPINESS.

It was the very company that produced Bisco’s namesake. It seemed it had managed to survive the apocalypse and continued delivering smiles to this day.

“I’m a chocolate merchant! You’re asking me to give away my entire stock for free!”

“That right?” asked a monstroom.

“You’re saying there’s a mountain of chocolate in there?”

“Golden angel!”

“Godiva!”

“““Chaaarge!!”””

“Hmph, very well,” said the stranger. “I didn’t want to get rough, but...”

The figure’s deep, indigo-blue eyes glimmered underneath their hood as they slipped their weapon from their back.

“If that’s how you want to do things, then fine. I could use a little warm-up!”

\* \* \*

“Please behold my humble offering, O Great Mushroom Child. It is a toy called the ‘dancing flower.’”

Within a luxurious palace, a single merchant presented his tribute. The sweat pouring down his chin looked like the melting wax that glued his plastic smile to his face.

Opposite him, sitting immodestly atop a throne, flanked by two scantily clad mushroom minions with fans, was a young girl who looked around ten years old, though her preferred mode of address was “The Great Mushroom Girl,

Heaven's Equal."

One of the sexy mushroom girls handed her a peach, and she bit into it, allowing the fruit's juices to dribble messily down her chin while she awaited the merchant's next words.

*What an arrogant kid! And yet...I can't help but worship the ground she walks on!*

"What's wrong? Continue."

"I-if you sing or clap your hands, it can dance in time to the beat. It is truly—"

"Skip the elevator pitch. Let me see."

She gave a commanding jerk of her chin.

"Y-yes, Your Eminence! As you command! Ahem! *Riiiding on the baaack of a siiilver dragon...*"

The pre-apocalyptic toy shook left and right in response to the merchant's voice. Its jerky and unsettling movements earned awkward looks from the other merchants gathered in the hall.

"That's creepy."

"He's a dead man, for sure."

They muttered to each other in hushed voices, their eyes pinned to the ground. However, after a short while...

"...Ha-ha!"

"*Riiiding on the—* Huh?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha!"

...she was laughing.

It seemed that the toy flower and its bizarre dance moves amused her greatly. She snapped her fingers, and a mountain of sols began raining down on the merchant.

"This is good," she said. "Now leave the flower and go."

"Yes, at once! Your generosity knows no bounds, O Great Mushroom Child!"

But the girl was no longer listening to him. She commanded one of the sexy monstroom girls to bring the toy closer, her heart aflutter with excitement, and then...

“Mmmraaaaaagh!!”

...she let out an air-rending scream! Spores spurted from the ears of her monstroom retainers, and all the merchants fell to the floor in agony.

The target of her unmelodious cry was none other than the dancing toy itself. It shook this way and that, attempting to keep up with the beat as best as it could, when...

*Boom!*

...with an eruption of black smoke, the toy danced its last and turned into ashes, which slipped through the girl’s fingers.

“...”

“Uh...Great...Mushroom Child...?”

“It broke.”

“I-it must have been defective! I-I’ll get you a new one, so just sit right—!”

“Is this some kind of FRICKIN’ JOKE?!!”

The furious child’s eyes sparkled in all the colors of the rainbow! Before the merchant could even shiver in fright, a cloud of spores engulfed him, and...

*Slamm!*

The spores became an iron cage that bound the man, helpless. “Mercy!!” he screamed as a quartet of stout mushroom folk lifted the cage and carried it away somewhere.

“Mweh. It looked so fun at first...,” grumbled the girl.

*“Great Mushroom Girl, there are many more toy merchants waiting to present their wares.”*

“Chocolate merchants, too.”

“Hmm. All right, bring in the next one.”

“Stop this madness!!”

This sudden voice accompanied the rattling of a birdcage hanging behind the throne. Inside, forced to wear a set of ridiculous court robes, was none other than the ex-shogun of Byoma, Yokan Yatsuhashi.

“Stop this at once, Sugar! You are exploiting this land’s people for your own amusement! This cannot stand!”

“But I’m a god. Can’t I do whatever I want?”

“I know you must be saddened by the loss of your parents. It is for that reason I allowed you to indulge your whims awhile. But this has gone too far!”

Yokan flared his cat eyes and hissed his warning at the unrepentant girl.

“You truly take after your father in his arrogance and disrespect, but at least he had faith! All you’re doing is feeding your own desires! How do you not see that?!”

“...Don’t say Papa’s name to me, cat. I’m not LIKE HIIIM!!”

Sugar’s eyes twinkled, and the birdcage shrank slowly, crushing the poor cat trapped within.

“...Grr... Kill me, then, Sugar, if it will bring you peace.”

Yokan’s eyes were unwavering in the face of his certain demise.

“I promised your father I would see you safe. If my death can ensure that, then so be it.”

“...Grh!”

The birdcage rattled as Sugar released it from her power. She looked down at her own trembling hands, the hands that had almost ordered Yokan’s death.

And just then...

““Waaaaaaaaah!!””

...the doors to the temple burst open, and in came running a pair of spear-wielding monstrooms. Sugar sat down calmly on her throne once more, so as not to betray her emotion.

“What’s all this noise?” she demanded.

“Mushroom Child! It’s awful!”

“Awful, awful, just awful!”

“Help us!”

“What’s awful? How come you guys never get to the point?”

“The stick is awful.”

“It hurts like heck.”

“The black one beat us all with their stick!” said one monstroom, pointing with fear toward the entrance. “They’re coming up the mountain as we speak! We’re holding them off, but—”

At that moment, there was a chorus of “waaaaaaaaahs,” and a few dozen mushroom folk flew through the doors, breaking them off their hinges. The only other sound loud enough to be heard over the commotion was the *Clack! Clack!* of heels on the marble floor.

“This is quite the impressive palace,” said the intruder, the cloaked stranger from before. “Your powers of creativity are truly a wonder.”

“Who are you?!”

“Heh. Who am I indeed?”

The figure set a slender finger to their equally slender jaw and pondered the question for a moment.

“I don’t suppose you could call me a peacekeeper. Consider me a passing monk with some sage advice for the little lady.”

“A passing...monk...?!”

“You’ve done well to channel the Ultrafaith to this extent,” the mysterious intruder went on. “But there’s no one left to acknowledge it. No one to validate your hard work and effort with some kind words of praise.”

“Grr!”

The figure’s words angered Sugar greatly.

“Insolence! I am the Great Mushroom Child, Heaven’s Equal!!”

With no prior warning, she plucked a few hairs from her head and launched them at the stranger like pellets from a shotgun blast. They flew so incredibly fast that no human could possibly move out of the way in time.

However...

*Clanggg!*

The figure drew their weapon and swung it in one clean blow, scattering the hairs in all directions. The hairs stuck into the walls of the temple, where they exploded into mushrooms with a *Gaboom! Gaboom!*

“What?! Who are you?”

“I’ve been waiting to see you, Sugar.”

The figure pulled back their hood, revealing a head of long raven hair and a metallic skullcap!

“Wh-who are...?”

The two had never met.

*M-Mommy?*

But a glimmer of recognition resounded behind each of their eyes, as if they had known each other once, at the beginning of time.

“You’re not Mommy! Who are you? Tell me who you are!”

“...I’m the worst mother in the world, for leaving a child to cry alone when they needed me the most.”

Standing there, in all her glory, was the victor of a thousand battles, the Whirling Steel, the Whitesnake Staff, Pawoo Nekoyanagi!

She whirled her metal rod, then ran a gentle finger along its length. “I’m here to make up for your parents’ absence,” she said. “Come into my arms or spout abuse at me, whichever you prefer.”

“U...urgh...”

Sugar took a few steps back in fear, then filled her tiny lungs with air and

bellowed!

“Mushy Magic Poooole!!”

In a wave of energy, Sugar drew her secret weapon and caused it to sparkle with the prismatic light of the rainbowshroom spores.

“Great SCORPIOOOOO...!”

She lifted the staff above her head and brought it down like a comet, like the tail of Scorpio cruising through the atmosphere! There was enough force behind the blow to vaporize every bone in Pawoo’s body, but...

“...OON??”

Sugar was bewildered to find *herself* flung back instead! The immense power of her own move was turned back on her, launching her hard into the roof of the temple!

*Boom!*

“Gahhh?!”

“Repay love with love and violence with violence.”

Pawoo stood amid falling debris, brushing the rubble away with her staff. She gave a sharp breath and continued.

“A technique of reception and reflection. Whitesnake Staff: *Snake-Projecting Mirror.*”

Pawoo’s move that turned her attacker’s aggression back on them. Yet still a burning mark from Sugar’s staff marred her chest. Pawoo stroked it lovingly, then said, “Thank goodness, Sugar. Your heart is not dead yet.”

“I never LOOOOOOSE!!!”

“Come here.”

Rather than being abated, Sugar’s fury was greater than ever! As she fell from the ceiling, she raised her staff once more, using the momentum to deliver a devastating swing to the back of Pawoo’s hung head.

*Slamm!!*

“Hwugh!”

Once again, it was Sugar who went flying off. Only this time, she landed feetfirst on the wall, blood streaming from her nose, and unleashed the same move for a third time!

*Ka-slamm!!*

“Gruhuh!!”

“Keep it coming, Sugar. You’re not sweet enough yet.”

“Shut UUUUP!!”

*Fwoom!!*

“You’re amazing, Sugar. You’ve only just been born. You’ve been left alone all this time, and yet you’ve tried so hard and grown so much...”

“Shut up!”

*Bang!*

“I’m invincible!”

*Slam!*

“I’m unstoppable! And I’M! NOT! LONELY!!!”

*Ka-boom! Clanggg!!*

At last, with one final swing, the cracks along the length of Sugar’s staff took their toll, and the weapon snapped magnificently in two. Sugar herself was flung back like a meteor and landed with a *Thud!!* on her own throne, knocking it over in a cloud of smoke.

*U-urgh...*

Sugar leveled her shaky gaze at Pawoo. The black-haired woman was wounded all over from the countless clashes, and the heat of battle caused steam to rise off her body.

She had been damaged even more than Sugar, and yet...

...she stood tall and proud, the flame of determination in her eyes.

“I don’t blame you,” she said, walking closer. “Anyone would be angry after

what you went through.”

*U-urgh...*

*Clack. Clack.*

“I...I’m sorry...”

*Clack.*

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry I’m sorry! I was so lonely, I didn’t know what to do...”

...

“I’m sorry. I’m sorr—”

Pawoo kneeled down and hugged her. The girl felt her tender touch and the heat of her blood through the warmth of her skin. Pawoo hugged her with all the love in the world and brushed aside her forelocks with a gentle finger.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You aren’t alone anymore, Sugar.”

“...”

“What a name you’ve made for yourself out here. And what a lovely palace you’ve built. You should be proud of it, because I’m sure your mommy and daddy would be.”

“*Sob. Sob...*”

“Obviously, I’m impressed, too. You’ve done so much all by yourself, Sugar...”

“Waaaaahhh!!”

“It’s okay now, Sugar. Let it all out...”

“Waaaaaaaaahhh!!”



“Ah-ha-ha. Look at you, getting your tears all over me. It’s okay, your mommy and daddy will be just fine; they always are. Um...?”

“Waaaaaaahhh!!!!!”

“Okay, I know I said to let it all out, but...maybe you’re crying just a little too much...?”

Just then, Pawoo noticed a cluster of adorable little mushrooms, growing with a *Pop! Pop!* in among Sugar’s hair. The next moment...

*Gaboom! Gaboom!*

“Wah! What did I tell you?!”

As Sugar’s pent-up emotion spilled out of her, mushrooms burst to life all across the temple, destroying the pillars and walls and unleashing a torrent of stone and brick. The monstroom minions scattered in all directions, disappearing with a *Poof! Poof!* into clouds of mushroom spores that retreated inside Sugar’s body. The merchants, meanwhile, had no such method of escape available to them and scrambled for the exit instead.

“Waaaaaaahhh!!”

As Pawoo held the wailing Sugar, she heard voices.

“What about us?!”

“Get us out of here!”

“Hi-yah!”

Pawoo approached the cages piled up behind the throne, and with one sweep of her staff, she sliced them all open. The trapped merchants clambered to freedom and shot for the exit, pale-faced with terror.

“The temple is sustained by her belief,” mused Pawoo. “Disrupt that foundation and the whole building crumbles. We must leave as well!”

“Wait! Don’t forget meeee!” came one last voice.

“Whoops! Almost forgot!”

Pawoo retraced her steps and severed the chain holding the dangling

birdcage to the rafters. She bent over and peered at the black kitten within.

“Thank you for keeping my niece in check,” she said. “I’ll repay the favor somehow.”

“Your niece?!” Yukan exclaimed. “Then you are Nekoyanagi’s...?”

“We’ll save the introductions, if you don’t mind! Apologies for keeping you in the cage, but just bear with it awhile!”

Pawoo picked up the cage, then dashed and leaped off the throne as the floor of the temple crumbled, landing and rolling on the outside.

The palace was carved into a mountain, surrounded on all sides by deep chasms, like a demon’s castle, and accessible only by a single long bridge that spanned the ravine.

“It’s like a painting,” said Pawoo, dumbfounded. “Did the land really look like this before?”

“It’s another product of Sugar’s mind!” Yukan called out. “She must have seen it in a picture book somewhere...”

“Waaaaahhh!!”

“I fear this isn’t the end of her imagination. We must hurry!”

Spotting the last of the merchants making it safely across the bridge, Pawoo made to follow them, carrying both Yukan and Sugar in her arms. It was then that a bellowing cry shook the air.

*Rumble!!*

“BWUUUUUHHH...”

““Whoa?!””

The fist of a colossal monstroom rose out of the valley and landed on the bridge, blocking Pawoo’s path.

“BAB-BA-BA-BAAAAAAAM.”

It was a giant monstroom, its titanic scale the equal of the monstroom castles that once strode over Byoma!

“Waaaahh!!”

“Its blows are easy enough to dodge, but if it destroys the bridge, we’re doomed!”

“Sugar! Cease that overactive imagination of yours! Maybe if I tickle her with my tail...”

“WAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

The giant monstroom raised its fist, ready to smash the bridge into smithereens, when...

“Divine Punishmeeent!!”

*Kaga-boom!!*

...a shadow fell over the trio, and from out of the sky, like a meteor, came the demonic arbiter’s scepter, landing hard on the monstroom’s head.

“WUUUUUHHH...!”

A giant of a man, clad in navy-blue armor, stood atop the towering fungus and held his scepter up high.

“Terrorizing the people of this good land and obstructing their flight?! Heaven and earth may show mercy upon you, foul being, but do not imagine for a second that I shall do the same!!”

He struck a proud pose to the graceful strum of a *shamisen*.

“Wh-what?! Never in my nine lives have I seen a magistrate like that!!”

But while Yukan reeled in shock, Pawoo simply buried her face in her palm.

“Oh dear,” she said. “And here I thought I’d managed to shake him off...”

“You know this man?!”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“In accordance with the Six Realms penal code, Article twenty-three, I charge you with the crime of negligently endangering foot traffic and sentence you to ONE HUNDRED YEARS’ HARD LABOR!!”

“OHHH NOOO...”

The force of will that drove Someyoshi Satahabaki was no less than that of the demon arbiter of hell itself. His terrifying pronouncement caused the monstroom to slink back into the ravine, mortified.

“Hmm. The bridge is collapsing. I shall postpone my arrests for the time being!”

Satahabaki leaped off the monstroom’s head and summoned the Florescence within himself!

“Flourish, cherry blossoms! *Gojo Bridge: Full Bloom!*”

Vines of cherry wood extended from his arms, connecting the two halves of the broken bridge by using his body as an intermediary.

“Now, cross!”

“Your Honor! I keep telling you, you don’t need to—”

“I follow the orders of my king!!”

*Ka-kang!*

“Nay, even if it were not ordered, I would see that body of yours, vessel of Akaboshi’s heir, safe and sound! Now hurry up and cross! Ow...mind the face...”

“Waaaaaaaah!! Waa—!”

When Sugar saw Pawoo trample across the judge’s face...

“Ha-ha-ha!”

...she finally laughed.

Then the four of them put Sugar’s castle behind them and descended the mountain toward civilization.

\* \* \*

“*Is the connection stable?*”

“*My name is Furubachi, and I’m reporting from the headquarters of the Kyoto Prefectural Government. The ex-Kyoto Prefectural Government, that is.*”

“*Just look at the magnificent white building that stands behind me...*”

“*...and the massive queue out front!*”

*"It seems everyone wants to be first in line to help out at the White House, come election day, and who can blame them? President Mare has announced that volunteers will be prioritized in advance of the Genocide Wave."*

*"And it seems a lot of people are on board with the idea. What has Japan come to, that people are so willing to forsake their nationality?"*

*"Where is the pride of the Japanese people, who eked out a life for themselves despite the Rust Wind? Where is that Japanese spirit, that once so boldly stood up and said 'No!' to outside influence? News Nine is firmly on the side of all you patriots out there, who..."*

*"What's that?"*

*"One of the volunteers has bailed, you say? If I join now, I can be allowed onto the ark?"*

*"Oh... Hmm..."*

*"Sorry, everyone, I have some urgent business to attend to, so I need to go. Good-bye!"*

*"Heeeeey! Let me on! Let me ooooon!!"*

*"Let go of me, cameraman! Remember when I bought you lunch? I deserve this! Now, get your damn hands off—"*

*Zzzzzzzzt...*

*"It is pathetic! Shameful! To forsake my fellow cats and go into hiding!"*

Pawoo turned off the TV and lent an ear to Yokan's complaints. The pair were sitting in the living room of a deserted house, the owner of whom had already skipped town in the hopes of getting a ticket on the ark.

"President Mare isn't evil at heart," Pawoo said. "Perhaps that's why everyone likes him. Marie created him as a means to show love to her child." She scratched her lip with a fingernail. "Maybe that's why Bisco and Milo couldn't win; because Mare's true power is love."

"I do not comprehend," came the booming voice of Satahabaki from the kitchen. Yokan caught the sweet scent of whatever he was cooking in there and had to shake his head to get back on track.

“This ‘Mare’ fellow sounds like a lumbering oaf—”

“You’re one to talk!”

“—but even supposing that he managed to swallow Akaboshi within himself, why has that irrepressible rascal not torn his way out by now?!”

Satahabaki spoke while still occupied, wearing a frilly pink apron.

“Magistrate! You speak as if it is a simple matter!” yelled Yōkan. “I have been subjected to his temptations once already. The inside of that diving suit is a peaceful place, truly, and being there is like returning to the mother’s womb. That is the reason none of the ferocious creatures of this land have thus far managed to break free. There is no danger in there, just an enveloping warmth and love...”

“But you managed to free Shiba-fune from that place, did you not?”

“That is only because I possess the arts of the Catwisp Blade. I was able to touch the old mog’s heart, but I sensed countless other lives beyond my reach. My art is a delicate one and cannot handle such multitudes!”

“That seems to me like a failing on your part,” said Satahabaki. “You are a withered branch lacking even a single bloom.”

“You dare mock my skill?!”

“Your Honor! Lord Yōkan! Stop this childish bickering!”

At Pawoo’s remonstration, Yōkan and Satahabaki turned away from each other with a ““Hmph!”” Pawoo sighed, but realizing Yōkan had just touched on an interesting point, she questioned him further.

“Lord Yōkan. You mentioned the Catwisp Blade cannot touch multiple hearts at once. Is that really true?”

“Of course. To touch a heart means to truly understand a target, and for them to understand you in return.”

“But then something doesn’t add up. How was Bisco’s and Milo’s Catwisp Bow able to alter the intentions of the Ultrafaith Sphere? Was that not also an amalgamation of monstrooms?”

“True. The powers of that art go far beyond anything I have ever learned.”

Yokan recomposed himself and lent a paw to Pawoo’s scientific inquiry.

“In all likelihood,” he said, “their technique uses the *Ultrafaith Bow* as a means to amplify the base power of the catwisps. Through the medium of Akaboshi’s charisma, they can be made to reach multiple minds at once.”

“In that case,” said Pawoo, leveling a glare at Satahabaki as he poked his head around the kitchen door, “we have a chance. If we use the Catwisp Bow to touch the hearts of all those organisms living inside Mare...”

“But who will fire it?!” shrieked Yokan. “Akaboshi and Nekoyanagi were the only ones who could command that technique, and now they’re gone!”

Pawoo pursed her lips and responded.

“There’s only one being in the world now with that kind of power...”

Yokan didn’t understand what she meant at first, but the realization soon dawned on him.

“You can’t mean...!”

He slammed his kitten paw on the desk.

“What are you thinking?! You mustn’t!”

“She’s their daughter! And her power to make miracles may be even greater! I felt that when I fought her!”

“It’s not about whether she *can* do it or not! We don’t understand the strain that touching all those hearts could cause! Akaboshi and Nekoyanagi have a strong bond to soak up that stress, but Sugar has nothing!!”

“I’ll do it!!”

At that moment, the front door burst open, and in walked Sugar. Pawoo and Yokan nearly fell out of their seats. For whatever reason, the girl was caked head to toe in mud.

“I’ll do it, Pawoo!” she repeated, hopping onto a nearby table. “Let me save Mommy and Daddy!”

“S-Sugar! I didn’t know you were listening...and how did you get so dirty?!”

“I was practicing! Hurry up, guys!”

At Sugar’s encouragement, a squadron of exhausted-looking mushroom folk walked in through the front door.

“I’m beat...”

“That girl’s a drill sergeant...”

“My muscles hurt...”

“I was practicing what you taught me! I’m a black belt master now! Watch this! *Snakebite!!*”

*Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Fwoosh!*

“Wah! Okay, okay! I get it, settle down!”

“I will not allow it!” interrupted Yukan. “Akaboshi trusted me to ensure your safety and happiness. Think! This isn’t what they would want!”

“I don’t care!”

Sugar stopped twirling her Mushy Magic Pole with the point directed squarely at Yukan’s nose. The force caused all of his fur to fly back.

“I don’t care what Papa thinks! I’m my own being, and I’ll do what I want!”

Everyone in the room was stunned by her brazen outburst. The girl broke down all logic and reason in her path with pure emotion. Pawoo looked at her with a mixture of astonishment and love and thought:

*I don’t know which of them she’s more like.*

In Sugar’s eyes, she saw those of her husband, as well as those of her own brother.

Meanwhile, cherry blossom petals began appearing in Sugar’s hair.

“Admirable words for one so young. Bravo! One Thousand Coin Bloom!”

“Huh?”

“I knew I was right to stay with you, young lady. You’ve come back just in time. Here.”

With stout fingers, Satahabaki gently placed a delicate plate on the dining

table, upon which was...

“Whoa! Pancakes!”

This dish comprised a five-story pancake delight, drizzled with pure scorpion honey and adorned with a chocolate slab that read H<sub>A</sub>P<sub>P</sub>Y BIRTHDAY, S<sub>U</sub>G<sub>A</sub>R in fancy handwriting. An enticingly sweet scent filled the room.

“Impressive!” said Yukan. “You are more dexterous than you look!”

“That looks amazing!” said Sugar with wonder.

“I presume you are hungry following your training,” said Satahabaki. “So eat up! Even you, cat! And Pawoo, and the mushroom folk, too!”

“Even us?”

“It does look tasty...”

“Bone apple tea!”

“I—I think I’ll pass...,” said Pawoo, suddenly turning pale for some reason. But everyone else enthusiastically dug in, and then a moment later...

“““Bleeeeegh!!!”””

*Gaboom!!*

Sugar’s powerful reaction caused a cluster of mushrooms to literally blow the roof off the whole house and throw everyone outside, into the gazes of their curious neighbors.

“S-Sugar! It’s okay! Here, suck on this lollipop!”

“Wahhh! It’s too saltyyy!!”

“What tears! I never imagined you missed your parents so much! Did the taste of my homemade cooking bring all those memories flooding back? Poor thing...”

“Is there no end to your buffoonery?! I cannot believe humans let such hardheaded imbeciles judge their crimes!”

“We can’t stay here; our cover’s blown! Your Honor, get us out of here!”

“Understood!”

Satahabaki curled up like an armadillo, forming a giant cannonball that sped down the road, crushing all rubble and boulders in its path. Pawoo and Sugar hopped swiftly atop it.

“Come on, Sugar! Start running!”

“Whee! Ball!”

Satahabaki carried all three of them away from the human settlement, and in no time at all they had vanished over the horizon.

The Golden Diet. This national building stood proudly over the streets of Kyoto, enshrining the nation's finest political minds. Although some people were opposed to their laws, many saw them as a beacon of civilization in an otherwise barbaric land.

And right next to it...was an even bigger building! The grand construction of the White House made Japan's seat of power look like a toy, overshadowing its predecessor both literally and metaphorically.

On this momentous day, the Japanese people gathered to elect a president. However, there were those vocally outspoken against the ark's aims, and they gathered in the streets along the route of the glorious parade Mare ordered, barking their pessimism at the crowd through loudspeakers.

*"I, Hoteru Imihada, Independent, have a message for all citizens of Japan! I implore you, do not be deceived by the beguiling words of President Mare! He is an invader! An outside element! Will we stand by while our country's proud roots are washed away by the waves? Nay, I say! Nay!"*

The presidential Cadillac stopped before the row of protestors that blocked the road. Each of them were holding placards saying things like CONSERVATION? NOT ON MY WATCH! PEOPLE OF JAPAN RISE UP! and INVADERS OUT!

*"Now is the time to stand, people of Japan! Now you know the drill! One, two, three...!"*

"Out of our way, fools!!"

*Crash!!*

"Waaagh?!"

"She ran him over!"

"Run away!"

“Outta the way, people! President comin’ through! ”

Gopis showed the peaceful protestors no mercy, pressing pedal to the metal and barreling straight through in her four-wheel drive! The presidential Cadillac, its path no longer barred, gently rolled forward and resumed the parade.

“Mr. President!”

“We know you’ll save Japan!”

“You’re so big and brave and handsome!”

*“Oh, it feels good to be loved!”* said Mare, waving to the crowd even as his diving suit threatened to burst out of his clothes. *“Sometimes I scare myself with my political genius. Who needs to go out campaigning when the people come straight to us?! At this rate, it won’t even matter that the ark isn’t repaired!”*

“Listen, you big bucket of water. I know I said you could do what ya wanted now Bisco’s safe...”

Marie was crammed into the seat next to him, struggling for space.

“...but what kinda clothes do you call these?!” she yelled, pointing at her own outfit. “My shoulders are out for everyone and their dog to see!”

*“It’s brilliant, just brilliant, isn’t it? A beautiful emerald blue, like the sea itself, sparkling like starlight on the waves at night! It’s a stunning dress, made all the more stunning by your blazing crimson locks...”*

“You’re makin’ fun of me, ain’t you?”

Marie’s ears were bright red, and she was a far cry from her usual calm self.

“I’m too old to be wearin’ shit like this. Stop the car! I’m gettin’ out.”

*“You can’t, I’m afraid. The First Lady must be here for the parade.”*

“That’s your wife, not your mom!! Just stop the car, now!!”

Just as Marie exited the vehicle, she was blinded by a storm of camera flashes. A number of Secret Service bodyguards stepped in to keep the cameramen at bay, and then Mare slowly lumbered out of the car and waved to the crowd.

*“Make the earth great again!”*

From the spectators came cheers and confetti, and the drum and fife band played a jaunty tune. Mare strolled up the red carpet toward the White House, and Marie, utterly defeated, followed him with a twitch in her eye.

When they arrived at the building, Marie spotted a special stage that had been set up with two ballot boxes, between which was a large panel reading **EMERGENCY CONFIDENCE VOTE**. Over each box was an electronic scoreboard, which seemed to update in real time to display the number of votes cast.

“Mare, what’s goin’ on over there?”

“*Why, the election, of course! Voting will soon begin.*”

“Why the hell do we need to hold an election? You’ve already conquered the whole country! Why do you need the people’s trust?”

“*I am the president!*” Mare declared, with such vigor that it caused Marie to shrink back. “*There can be no victory without democracy. No charisma without the right of the people to choose!*”

...*Why are both my children such complete idiots...?*

“*Now, eager spectators,*” said Mare, stepping up to the podium. “*I believe these have already been handed out.*”

He held up a bright-red ballot paper. In response, the crowd cheered and began waving their own.

“*I am also aware that there are...dissenting opinions in the crowd. I could flatten them all in no time, of course, but that wouldn’t be very sporting of me, would it? What sort of politician would I be if I ignored the voice of the minority?*”

*Hurraaaaahhh!!*

“*Now, if you look to the ballot, you’ll see there is a vote of confidence for my leadership, and a vote against. You are completely free to vote whichever way your heart desires! And in the unlikely event of a defeat, I shall withdraw the ark from these lands, immediately!*”

“What? You idiot!”

*“Oh, and as an FYI, anyone who votes for me is guaranteed a place on the ark!”*

*Hurraaaaaahhh!!*

*What part of this is democracy?* Marie thought, shaking her head in despair.

The reason she went along with Mare’s farce was solely to keep him happy. Born from the mushrooms, Mare was much the same as Bisco in that his power stemmed from his own belief.

*Still, with an election as rigged as this, he’s guaranteed to win in a landslide. That satisfaction should give him the energy he needs to carry out the Genocide Wave.*

*“Now, it’s time for the all-important voting to begin! Everybody line up now! Hut! Hut! Hike!”*

*Hurraaaaaahhh!!*

The people surged forward like the tide, eagerly casting their votes like their lives depended on it. In no time at all, the scoreboard above the “Yes” votes read 30,000, then 40,000, then 50,000...

The “No” votes, on the other hand, were populated almost entirely by radical protestors, and the count was pitiful by comparison. At times, it didn’t seem to be going up at all.

*“That’s what I like to see! The people of Japan are wise as well as brave!”*

*“Hey, just checking, but can you even fit all those people on the ark?”*

*“Oh, that? That was just a little campaign promise. Nobody actually makes good on those.”*

*“What a fraud!!”*

Just then, Gopis came running up.

*“P-President Mare! Something’s come up!”*

She leaned across and whispered in his ear. “There’s a huge crowd coming this way, sir. It’s a protest group we’ve never seen before. We’re fighting them off, but those fools just keep coming!”

*“I’m afraid I don’t see the problem. Let them cast their votes, I say! The more, the merrier!”*

“B-but you’ve already won the people’s trust. I figured we should drive them away before—”

*“Oh, what’s there to be afraid of, you cowardly woman?! You doubt my charisma?! Shut up and—”*

**RRRUMBLE!!**

All of a sudden, the gates flew open, scattering the Secret Service men on guard duty, and a crowd of oddly small, oddly stout citizens came streaming into the polling station. There were hundreds, no, thousands of them, and they were all dressed exactly the same, in suits and top hats, like a band of Victorian gentlemen.

“Bab-bam!”

“Voting time!”

“Does second place get anything?”

The newcomers flocked to the “No” booth, casting their votes in an unstoppable wave! In no time at all, the previously unassailable “Yes” vote was down to 80 percent...

*“Ha-ha! We’ve got ourselves a real vocal minority here!”*

Then 70 percent...

*“Can’t win ’em all, I suppose! Well, there’s no shame in that! Where would we be without dissent?”*

Then 60 percent...

*“Holy shit! You fucking idiots! Fucking idiots! This is bullshit! Bullshit!”*

Mare finally blew his top! His metal diving suit glowed red with rage, and steam spurted from the cracks in his helmet.

“Shit, the president’s losing it!” cried Gopis. “Somebody stop those fools from voting!”

At her command, the Mokujin robots leaped into action. They snatched at the

intruders, tearing away their baggy suits and revealing...

“Whee!”

“Hugo Boss!”

The monstrooms, sparkling golden, flew out of their disguises, dropped their ballots in the box, and then disappeared in a puff of spores. Already the vote had reached a dead tie!

“They’re all monstrooms! Sugar, you really pulled one over on us...”

Marie realized Sugar’s ruse and scanned the area, but it was already too late.

*“Th-this isn’t fair. This is voter fraud!”*

“Uh-oh, the polls are about to close!”

Yes: 178,345 votes.

No: 298,568 votes!

Only five minutes remained until the voting deadline, and already the votes in Mare’s favor were totally eclipsed by those against.

*“Th-this... This can’t be happening!”*

It was shaping up to be a landslide defeat. Mare, who had spent all this time totally assured of his victory, now trembled with fear.

*“Th-they’re going to vote me out... I’ll have to resign...”*

With a great *Clang!* he fell to his knees. Mare’s invincible form, which none of Japan’s great heroes had been able to scratch, was finally forced to kneel by the power of the democratic process.

*“I can’t take this...!”*

Seawater spurted from his helmet as the people’s confidence slipped from Mare’s grasp. Energy meant for the Genocide Wave was slowly dripping away.

*Uh-oh!*

That wasn’t the only thing at stake, Marie realized. Without his confidence, Mare would be unable to even sustain his own form. With lightning wits, Marie leveled her bow at the ballot box. Only three seconds remained until the

deadline! Two, one...!

“If that’s how you want to play this...!!”

*Pchew! Gaboom!*

“Whaaat?!”

“Hah! How’s that for stopping the count?”

Marie’s mushroom arrow destroyed the ballot box, scattering votes everywhere. The electronic scoreboard crackled and broke down in a puff of smoke.

“*Mama?! What have you done! That’s the will of the people!*”

“Who cares what the masses think?! Wash them off the face of this earth! There’s only one person who believes in you, and that’s this genius right here!”

“Mama...”

“Now, cheer up,” she went on. “Regain your confidence and unleash the Genocide Wave upon this—”

But just as Marie approached to help Mare to his feet...

“Attention, criminal. Meddling with votes is against the law!”

“Wh-who’s there?!”

Marie spun around, but there was nobody in sight. However, just then the earth at her feet began to shake, and...

*Crkcrkcrkcrkcrk!!*

The ground itself split upon, and a figure rose up, like a guardian of the underworld!

“This is a contravention of the Public Offices Election Act!!”

“Erk! What’s that fool doin’ here?!”

All at once, the color drained from Gopis’s face, and she shook so hard, her nose ring sounded like a wind chime!

And little wonder, for the man who appeared was one who Gopis knew well, who stirred to mind only the most unpleasant of memories. Standing there in

all his glory, scepter at the ready, was none other than the former warden of Six Realms Penitentiary, Someyoshi Satahabaki himself!

“Intruder alert! Mokujin, smoke this fool!!”

“You sully the name of democracy itself!!”

Satahabaki’s scepter sent the presidential bodyguards scattering in all directions.

“I, Someyoshi Satahabaki, know not the meaning of the word ‘jurisdiction’! All life on this earth shall find themselves weighed equally upon my scales, be they angels, demons, or extraterritorial political leaders!”

“Cheese it, it’s the feds! Somebody call my lawyer!”

*I see, so that’s your game. Undermining Mare’s legitimacy, the source of his power.*

Marie quickly pieced together the enemy’s strategy. Unlike her watery son, she wasn’t so easily disturbed, and even Satahabaki couldn’t put the fear of God into her.

“Impartial, my ass!” she yelled. “Those guys just invalidated the election with their mushroom-wave tactics!”

“Yeah!” agreed Gopis, emerging ever so slightly from Marie’s shadow. “I demand a do-over! Mare’ll win this thing ten times outta ten! I mean, there ain’t even another candidate—”

“Yes there is!”

A booming voice rang out in the heavens. The crowd looked up to see a single cloud, zipping across the sky at the speed of sound. Then a small figure leaped off the cloud and landed before Satahabaki.

“You can all trust your lives to Sugar!”

“Whaaat?!”

“My name is Sugar Akaboshi, representing all life on Earth!”

She swung her staff a few times and struck a pose. At the last possible moment, Sugar put her name forward for the candidacy!

*“It’s you! The miracle mushroom kid!”*

*“Listen up, Mare!”*

Sugar transformed her staff into a bundle of microphones.

“Do you really want to let a few hundred thousand scraps of paper decide who wins?!”

*“That’s what an election is!!”*

“Human elections, perhaps,” said Satahabaki, crossing his massive arms. “But this is a showdown between gods! A mushroom god and a sea god, both of whom feed off the prayers of life. In other words, the people’s faith is their strength! Let them both fight and see whom the Earth favors!”

*Cha-chang!*

*““That is the way of the president!!””*

“I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous!” shouted Marie. “Mr. President, don’t listen to them!”

*“...”*



“...Wait... Don’t tell me...”

*“The people’s faith...is our strength. A battle, an election by proxy. And if I win, I become president!”*

*Dammit, he took it hook, line, and sinker!*

Marie mopped the sweat from her brow. It didn’t matter whether Satahabaki and Sugar’s suggestions held any merit, only whether Mare believed them or not. And believe them he did. Yet disciplined as ever, Marie only stretched her bow to the limit, pointing it at Satahabaki’s large, pillar-like teeth.

*We’ll see how persuasive you are after I rip out your tongue!*

However, in that moment, a flash of metal appeared from the corner of her eye!

“Swift is heaven’s vengeance!”

“...What?!”

“Demons begone! Hi-yah!!”

*Bwongg!!*

*Clangg!!*

Quick as a flash, Marie whipped out her dagger and blocked the blow, but the impact blew her far away from where Mare was. She ground to a halt, kicking up dust, and leveled a gaze at her assailant.

“Wah, what’s that?!”

“It’s a terrorist attack!”

“This is the craziest election I’ve ever seen!”

The people began running about, trying to escape.

“I won’t let you interfere with Sugar’s fight,” said the newcomer. “This is between you and me.”

She swiveled her staff and pointed it directly at Marie. It was none other than the steel-capped blacksnake herself!

“I, Pawoo Nekoyanagi, shall take you on with the Serpentform Arts!”

“What kind of wife takes a swing at her mother-in-law from out of nowhere?”

Marie wiped the blood from her mouth and adopted a defiant grin. She seemed to be enjoying it.

“At least wait for me to say, ‘*Oh, Pawoo, this place is filthy,*’ first!”

“You’re just like Bisco. The way he talks and the way he looks.”

Pawoo directed a venomous glare her way, betraying not one iota of fear.

“And since he wasn’t strong enough to defeat you, the task falls to me. I’m sorry it had to be this way, Marie.”

“You really think you stand a chance with a baby in your belly?”

“Well, I was thinking of taking up yoga, but taking you down should be just as easy!”

“Keep yappin’, bitch!”

*Pchew! Bwonggg! Clang!!*

The next instant, both combatants disappeared into a scintillating storm of metal sparks and clashes. Both of them were so fast, it was impossible for any normal human to follow their fight.

“Excellent! Pawoo has managed to draw Marie away from Mare!”

Watching the fight disappear into the distance was a single black kitten. He emerged from Sugar’s clothing and wrapped himself around her neck. Despite his adorable appearance, this was none other than the Catwisp Blade, Yukan himself.

“Your plan worked perfectly, Mr. Kitty!”

“Indeed. But, Sugar, do not think for a moment that the battle is already won. Even with his voter base halved, Mare is a formidable foe, and from here on out, you must face him alone.”

“Huh? Isn’t Someyoshi gonna help?”

“Judges must remain neutral, I’m afraid.”

“Aww...”

*“...My voter base, halved, you say?”*

Mare’s despondency...

“*Bullshit!*”

...lasted but a moment! Seeing his political opponent in the flesh lit a fire beneath the diving suit’s backside. Sealing off any leaks, Mare rose to his feet and shook off any stray seawater.

*“El-oh-el, my friends. El-oh-el. You humans may be divided on my suitability to lead, but don’t think for a moment you’re the only creatures on this rock! There are millions of species inside this suit, and they all vote for me!!”*

“I don’t care if it’s millions or billions or whatever!” retorted Sugar. “No number’s big enough to stop me!”

*“Your hubris will be your undoing, little girl! Life! Ocean! Streeeee—!”*

Sugar lifted one arm and yelled,

“Come here, Mushy Magic Pole!!”

*Ker-rashhh!!*

Her weapon appeared by magic in her hand, and Sugar swung it diagonally at her foe! It was strong enough to split a boulder in two, but it stopped clean on Mare’s shoulder, without inflicting a single scratch.

“Nice arm, kid,” said Mare, “*Figure you could try out for the Little Leagues!*”

“Blacksnake Form...”

*“But it won’t do you any good against a seasoned pro like—”*

“Snakebite!”

*Ker-rashhh!!*

Sugar spun, her hair tracing a half-moon arc, and her staff struck Mare in the opposite flank!

*“?!?!?!?!?!?!?”*

Seawater spurted from his diving suit!

It took Mare a few moments to realize he had been damaged. The *Snakebite*

utilized the body's full strength, delivering a reverse swing at a time when any follow-up ought to be impossible. Pawoo had studied for ten years to perfect this technique, but Sugar...

“Impossible! She learned it in a single day?!”

Even a master swordsman like Yokan was astonished by the girl's staggering growth. Mare, meanwhile, was caught off guard and vulnerable to another attack.

“I'm not done yet!” Sugar yelled, flashing her gleaming canines.

*Bwonggg!*

“Eight Dragon Kings! Nanda!”

A devastating blow!

“Upananda! Manasvin! Sagara!”

Sugar unleashed a flurry of strikes, each as destructive as the jaws of the divine serpent whose name it bore.

“Takshaka! Anavatapta! Utpalaka! Vasuki!”

*“I...I can't stand much more of this! Where is all this power coming from...?”*

“Eight Dragons: *Samsara Strike!*”

*Ka-slammm!!*

*“Grughhh!!”*

Sugar's final staff swing caught Mare's jaw from beneath, exposing his throat, into which she delivered a powerful kick that launched him into the White House wall.

“How's that?” Sugar proudly declared. “Nine attacks in one second!”

Yokan, meanwhile, stared in wonder at the cloud of dust where Mare landed. “What was that technique?!” he muttered. “No ordinary man could face that and live! I had understood Pawoo Nekoyanagi's staff style to be nonlethal...”

“Nuh-uh! That wasn't Pawoo's!”

“What?!”

“I came up with it all by myself! It’s way cooler!”

Sugar gave a charming wink. Not even one year old, and she was already breaking hearts. *What a precocious young lady*, thought Yukan, shaking his head. Then he steeled himself to press the assault.

“Now’s your chance, Sugar! Finish him off!”

“Okay! Come to me, Catwisp Bow!!”

...

“Huh?”

“Nothing’s happening because you aren’t calm! How many times did I tell you in training? You must suppress the anger within if you hope to control— Sugar, above you!”

“Wha?!”

*Ker-rash!!*

Sugar backflipped out of the way moments before a massive attack came down from above! She landed and stared at the smoking crater where she had just been standing.

“That’s not fair! I just beat him silly. Did it not work?”

“It had to work!” Yukan replied. “Even if he is a god, that last attack had to have damaged him!”

*“I already told you. I do not fight alone. I am empowered by the lives and trust of the thirty million creatures that live within me.”*

Mare’s voice carried loud and clear, though his form was hidden by the smoke. Sugar swiveled her staff and took up a fighting stance.

“*Let me prove it to you,*” Mare went on. “*Trust-Me Engine: Engage!*”

At Mare’s words, the diving suit began drawing in energy at an astounding rate, instantly healing the damage inflicted by Sugar’s staff.

“What?! He can heal?!?” cried Yukan, squinting into the smoke. “He’s absorbing the life force of the creatures within him!!”

“You call that trust?” yelled Sugar. “You’re just taking what you want without asking!”

Her eyes narrowed with rage. Her voice was barely audible over the swirling maelstrom of life energy manifesting around Mare.

“He’s preparing something!” came Yokan’s warning. “Stay on your guard, Sugar!”

*“Delegate your techniques to me, life-forms! Trust-Me Engine: Proxy!”*

*Fwoosh!*

A gust of wind radiated outward, blasting away the smoke. Sugar closed her eyes and felt something warm and familiar brush her cheek.

“This smell...”

“Don’t stop, Sugar! Keep your distance!”

“It smells like Papa... It’s the Rust-Eater!”

*“Coronal Life Arrow!!”*

*Pchew! Gaboom!!*

A flash of sunlight! Sugar narrowly dodged the seawater arrow itself, but when it exploded into a Rust-Eater mushroom behind her, Sugar was blasted forward. She twisted in the air to shield Yokan, then slammed full force into the side of the White House.

“Guh...!”

“Sugar! That technique! It was...!”

“He’s using mushroom power against us...”

Sugar peeled off the wall and fell to the ground, then leaped to her feet, staff in hand. President “Sunburn” Mare stood before her, the flame-like spores of the Rust-Eater dancing about him like a coronal glow.

*“Invincible!”* cried Mare. *“So this is the power of the mushrooms, representative of all life on Earth!”*

His diving suit shone like the sun itself, the water inside a jade green, while

orange spores spewed from his head like fire.

*“Life Proxy is a technique that borrows the power of my constituents,”* Mare explained, gazing at his glowing palm. *“I never thought to borrow a human’s power, but this is more than I expected! Why, with just a wave of my finger...”*

“That’s Papa’s power! Stop using it!”

“...I can do this.”

*Flick!*

“Gyaaaagh!!”

*Crash! Boom!*

Just a flick of Mare’s finger sent Sugar flying! She hopped to her feet, defiant, and jumped in for another try, but Mare knocked her back just as easily as before.

“Sugar!!”

“Gahh...”

Then, just as Sugar was about to pass out, Mare delivered a series of kicks to her gut!

*“President Double Kick!”*

“Grrgh!!”

“And now! *Coronal Arrow!!*”

*Boom!*

“Grrghh...”

“Stop this! Sugar, you can’t take any more!”

“Gh...ghh...”

Sugar spluttered blood, dug her fingernails into the dirt, and glared up at Mare.

“Stop making fun of Papa...and everyone else!!”

*She’s furious! Sugar can’t stand that Mare is using the life force of other*

*creatures for his own benefit! It's certainly very godly of her, but at this rate, she'll never be able to use the Catwisp Bow!*

Yokan clenched his jaw and hissed at Mare, hoping to draw attention away from the wounded Sugar and toward himself.

Mare, however, only crossed his fiery arms and looked down at Sugar with something resembling curiosity.

*“...Do you despise me, mushroom god? All life requires a president to lead. No life is strong enough to chart its own path. You must stop vainly searching for happiness. Delegate it all, your lives and your deaths. Be free of responsibility! Only then can you truly be happy! Why can’t you see that? Go about your lives in eternal peace, free of troubles! What more could you possibly need?!”*

“Shut UUUUPPP! Mushy Magic Pole!!”

“Sugar?! Oh no! Not the staff again!”

“Mushy Magic Pole: Sunbeam!”

On the brink of death, Sugar summoned up her Ultrafaith power. The rainbowshroom spores burst into being and blew away the Rust-Eater spores that Mare had manifested. At the very tip of Sugar’s staff was a miniature sun.

“Stay away, Mr. Kitty,” said Sugar, removing Yokan from her shoulders and casting him aside. “I’m going to bring back Mommy and Daddy!”

But Yokan clung to her in desperation. “No, Sugar!” he cried. “You must use the Catwisp Bow! It’s the only way to change the minds of all the creatures he’s absorbed and take away his power!”

*“You want to see your parents again, do you? Well, that can be arranged!”*

“Rraaaaahhh!!”

“Coronal Arrow!”

Mare’s arrow skimmed Sugar’s cheek, drawing blood. Then, when it exploded behind her, Sugar borrowed the power of the Rust-Eater, hurtling toward Mare with her staff drawn!

“Go evaporate, stupid!”

“Hmm?”

“Mushy Magic Pole: *Smokescreen!!*”

*Ker-rang!!*

The tip of Sugar’s staff skewered Mare’s armor, treating President Sunburn to a taste of his own medicine! The miniature sun began to roar, emitting an infernal heat that caused steam to fizzle and...wait.

“Wh-what?!”

“*My ocean is already as hot as the sun!*”

Even amid the clouds of steam, Mare’s coronal glow was as bright as ever!

“*Your attempts to boil me are useless!*”

*Squeeze!*

“Gyaaah!!”

President Mare tightened his red-hot fist around Sugar’s body, scorching her and releasing the gut-wrenching smell of scorched flesh!!

It was the heat of her own weapon, channeled through the metal of Mare’s suit. However, Sugar’s pain only caused her will and her staff to glow even hotter, even as it damaged her! Mare’s suit cracked and warped under the heat, but of the two, it was clear whose body would give out first.

“Rrrrrgghhh!!!”

“*Give up, Sugar! Do you really mean to throw away such a promising young life?!*”

“Never!! This is my last chance! If I give up, then Mommy and Daddy are gone forever!”

“*Don’t you see? Bisco Akaboshi and Milo Nekoyanagi offered themselves so you could escape! They want you to be free and happy!*”

“Rrrrrggghhh!!!”

“*Listen to them. Leave it all to me! Choose life! Choose happiness! Let go of me and live!*”

“I’m not Daddy! I’m not Mommy! I’m SUGAR!!”

As the steam rose, as her flesh burned, Sugar raised her jade-green eyes and glowered.

“I don’t care what they say! I don’t want to just live! I’m fighting to be myself! I’m Sugar because I’ll never let go! I’ll never let go...because I’m SUGAAAAAR!!”

“Wh-what?!”

Sugar’s scream was filled with such emotion, such conviction, such truth, that it shook even Mare. All he could think was one thing...

*It’s beautiful...*

For the first time, Mare was seeing the raw power of life in all its splendor. But he soon shook his head and attempted to get back on track. The moment he admitted the existence of the god living inside Sugar at this moment, his own identity would crumble.

“...*There can be no place for you on the ark,*” he said. “*Life cannot exist alongside two gods.*”

“Sugaaaaar!!”

“*Good-bye, mushroom kid. I’ll never forget this election as long as I live...*”

*I have no choice, thought Yokan. Though it may lead me to ruin, I must keep my promise. I’m sorry, Geppei...*

The black kitten drew his *wakizashi* and held it in his jaws, leaping at Mare for one final suicidal attack before he crushed Sugar in his grasp...

...when all of a sudden, his keen nose picked up a peculiar scent on the wind.

*Something’s coming!*

“...?”

*Blblblb...*

“...Wh-what?!”

*Blblblb...*

Mare’s seawater was beginning to bubble. Then there was a *Clang! Clang!*

and his suit bent out of shape, like something was beating him up from the inside!

*“Wh-what’s happening?! Something’s gone wild inside of me...”*

“Heh-heh-heh...”

Sugar looked up at him, her nose bleeding, and shot him a defiant glare!

“I win, Mare. Sounds like someone was listening to my speech!”

*“What?! U-urgh...”*

*Ker-rannng!*

A jet of seawater tore through the suit, and from the hole...

“*Gwaaagh?!*”

An oilsquid, a scorched shrike, the Yata Mirrorbud, and countless megafauna squeezed through the hole, letting out a roar!

“*Gwaaagh?!?!?!*”

The oilsquid squirted oil on Mare’s faceplate, causing him to drop Sugar and grope around blindly. Yukan ran over to her side.

“Sugar!” he cried.

“Mr. Kitty! I’m sorry, I didn’t manage to use the Catwisp Bow...”

“It’s okay, Sugar. You don’t need to apologize. It turns out you were right!”

Yukan’s eyes were brimming with tears, and he gently licked the blood off Sugar’s face.

“We didn’t need the Catwisp Bow after all. The voice of your heart awakened the life within Mare! They recognized you as their god and placed their trust in you!”

“*Whaaaaat?!*”

Mare roared, indignant, as creature after creature emerged from the opening in his suit. His glow flickered and faded, a reflection of his waning confidence.

“*Life...chose you?!*” he said, flabbergasted. “*It turned its back on my promises?!*”

Emerald ocean water spilled forth from his suit! In seconds, the whole area was knee-deep in water.

*“That can’t be possible! I am this world’s president! Mama entrusted this mission to me and no one else!!”*

Mare did not give up. If he could crush Sugar here and now, his plans would still be on track. And so, with that single thought guiding him, he poured all of his might into a single hammer punch!

However...

“Stop talking about Mama all the time!!”

Sugar thrust her spear, skewering Mare’s fist and stopping the attack in its tracks!

“Grgaaaaagh!!!!”

The attack, combined with the rising internal pressure, tore Mare’s arm off at the shoulder. A great torrent of seawater spilled out, and the majestic form of a Pipe Snake emerged. The divine serpent whinnied at its newfound freedom before slipping out completely, knocking Mare into the air as it left.

*Now’s my chance! Ah, but...*

Yokan looked at Mare falling through the sky, then to Sugar, collapsed on the ground, and clenched his fangs. Already she lacked the strength to finish the sea god off, and her rainbow glow was fading fast.

However, all around him were the creatures Sugar had saved. Each of them felt in their heart a newfound devotion toward their liberator.

*This is it, thought Yokan, casting a glance around. Now is the time to show my skill as a general!*

He hugged his half of the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, then raised it to the sky. As it shone like never before, Yokan focused all the catwisps under his command into a single prayer!

“Hear me!” he cried. “Lend your trust once more! Not under duress this time, but of your own free will! Lend it to Sugar, the mushroom god, and place your lives in her care!!”

President Mare, meanwhile, spiraled through the air, knocked high by the Pipe Snake.

*“Gaaaagh! Why?! Why?!?” he cried. “Why do you turn your backs on me, villains? Why do you choose destruction?! Surely you know there is nowhere more pleasant than my embrace! Nowhere in the universe you can truly be safe!!”*

Despite his dwindling strength, his will was as powerful as ever! He summoned up the Mare Engine once more, in an effort to recapture the wayward fauna.

*“This isn’t over! These escaped animals make up only a few percent of those I’ve rescued! Let’s see you act so determined after I take them back! Life Ocean Stre—!”*

“Come here, Flying Fungus!”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

An auroral glow, reborn! A streak of rainbow hair! Riding on her magic cloud, Sugar quickly approached the airborne Mare and spun her magic pole.

*“How are you still upright?! Don’t tell me you have a Trust-Me Engine as well?!”*

“Mare! You’re pretty good, but you forgot one thing!”

*Clanggg!!*

“You forgot to trust in yourself!”

“...”

Butting heads as a hot wind blew, Sugar and Mare gazed into each other’s faces. At first, Mare could see a hint of respect in Sugar’s jade-green eyes, but it was immediately swept away by the emerald fires of defiance!

“It doesn’t matter if a million other people believe in you, or a billion, or a trillion! You’ll never beat Sugar like that!!” she declared. “Because I have myself on my side!!”

“St-stay back!!”

Mare's opponent was only a child, yet he let out a terrified shriek! In an attempt to defend himself, he pointed the Mare Engine at Sugar and unleashed a cyclone of seawater.

*“Sunbuuurn! Ocean! Streeeeeam!”*

“You think I’ll go easy on you just ‘cause you’re technically my uncle?!”

*“Drag her into the depths!!”*

“I’m sweet...but I ain’t that sweet!”

*Cranggg!*

Sugar’s counterattack was as swift as a riptide! Hastened by her magic cloud, she thrust her staff straight through the metal of Mare’s engine!

“Mushy Magic Pole: Hidden Art: *Howl of Life!*”

Sugar’s inner voice screamed out her manifesto, amplified to untold levels by the Ultrafaith inside her. Every living thing inside Mare’s body heard it and awoke. Hearing her prayers, they trembled with life, eager to snatch back their own destinies!

*“Stop! Gblgblgbl... St-stop!!”*

“Be freeeeeeeee!!”

*“Gwaaaaaaagh!!!”*

What followed was an explosion of life, as every last creature Mare had captured sprang from the ruptured Mare Engine. Great clouds of steam and the scintillations of the rainbowshrooms obscured everything, and the battle between gods disappeared into the mist.

\* \* \*

“You just don’t know when to give up, do you?”

Marie unleashed a roundhouse kick, catching Pawoo in the head after the latter evaded her blade. The kick was as sharp as a knife’s edge, and the force sent Pawoo flying into the side of a nearby building.

*Crash!*

“Haah... haah,” Marie panted, still wearing her ill-suited dress. “You’re a real

beast for someone who's supposed to be pregnant!"

She paused to wipe her sweat, but Pawoo was determined not to give her a second to breathe.

"This isn't over yet!!" she yelled.

"Erk!"

"Whitesnake Staff: *Constrictor*!!"

Pawoo leaped right back into action as if she were completely undamaged, and though Marie hopped out of the way, Pawoo's downward slam broke the earth apart and sent rubble flying everywhere.

"Crap!"

One of the rocks caught on Marie's dress, hampering her movements ever so slightly...but that was enough for one of Pawoo's persistent blows to finally hit home!

"Whitesnake Staff: *Pit Viper*!!"

"Graaagh!!"

Marie's quick wits and superior life experience had made her dominate in the battle so far, but at long last, Pawoo had managed to land a rib-shattering strike, sending Marie flying back and rolling along the floor.

"Grrr... Dammit. You hit like a damn steelcrab..."

"Apologies. But rest assured, my Whitesnake Arts do not claim lives."

*H-how the hell do they manage that?!*

Marie struggled to her feet, leaning on her bow for support, and looked up at the striking figure of Pawoo, standing over her.

*I musta beat her ass a dozen times by now. But she's lookin' better than me! How come?!*

Indeed, if you took into account only the countless wounds inflicted by Marie's kicks, blades, and mushroom arts, then Pawoo was not looking too hot. However...

“I told you there was no need to go easy on me.”

“You think I’ve been goin’ easy on you?!”

“Stand. Show me the arts of the Godshroom and watch as I weather them all.”

The look in her eyes was as cold as the tone of her voice. Marie looked surprised at first, and then...

“Kheh-heh-heh...”

...she broke into chuckles.

“I see now why you married Bisco. You’re both as dumb as each other. You’re really gonna show honor and mercy to me this late in the game?”

“I have a duty now,” Pawoo replied sternly. “To act like an uncultured beast would set a bad example to the baby.”

“Hah! Good one!” Marie grinned, baring her fangs. Then she leaped back, opening up some distance between her and Pawoo.

“That supposed to be a dig at me? You don’t like that I lied to your husband?”

“Not at all. Besides, it was you who extended her goodwill first.”

“...Huh?”

Pawoo gazed into the bewildered eyes of her foe and pulled out the golden mushroom Marie had gifted her previously—the adamantshroom.

“You said it would protect the unborn child. Well, it worked just as well as you said. Even better, I dare say. Even after all the blows we’ve exchanged, my child is safe and well. If you hadn’t given me this, I wouldn’t be standing here before you now.”

“...”

“You’re a strange woman, Marie. Are you on our side or not?”

Pawoo’s analytic gaze caused the bow in Marie’s hands to instinctively fly up.

“You claim to want to keep Bisco all to yourself, but you don’t only accept my existence, you actively cultivate it. You brought me here, to this place, to fight

you.”

“...”

“You want me to win. You want me to stop you.”

“Shut up...!”

“I’ve heard your cries for help, Marie! And as you’re my mother-in-law, I’ll do whatever I can to help you!”

“Don’t call me that!!”

“Just try and stop me!”

*Pchew! Bwonggg!*

Marie’s peerless arrows were no match for Pawoo’s whirling staff! One after the other, she swatted them out of the sky, decorating the parade route with mushrooms. Pawoo lunged in close, like a black panther, causing Marie to hop back into a safe distance.

*I underestimated her!! She’s strong!*

“Hi-yah!”

*I thought she was an ordinary human, but somehow she possesses the power of evolution! In that case...*

Marie steeled her nerve, and with a *Fwoom!* the silver spores enwreathed her body. They traced a crescent-moon shape in her hand, and...

“Come to me!”

*That’s...the Ghost Hail Bow!*

A weapon capable of bringing ruin to any errant evolution. Mare pulled the bowstring tight.

“You didn’t do too bad, wifey! I enjoyed our little chat, but I’m afraid I gotta call it here!”

*Just try and stop this one!*

“Take this! Ghost Hail Bow!!”

*Ka-chew!!*

The streak from Marie's bow was faster than sound, but not as fast as Pawoo's staff. Watching the silver arrow bear down on her, Pawoo channeled all of her might into the Whitesnake Arts, and...

*Thunk.*

“...Gh?!”

“You idiot.”

Silver sweat glistening on her brow, Marie cracked a grin.

“I knew you would do that. Turned our own strength against you.”

*She realized I would be able to hit it back...!*

Marie had put a calculated spin on her arrow. When Pawoo brushed it aside with her staff, it spun through the air, back on itself, landing in Pawoo's shoulder.

*Gaboom!*

“Gahh!”

*Not as strong as I would have liked, but this is it! Now she won't be able to use the power of evolution any—*

But just as Marie grew confident of her victory, she noticed it. Pawoo had not crumpled on the spot under the force of her mushroom arrow, as she had predicted, but instead...

“Irreconcilable Foe, Heroic Strength!”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

Pawoo utilized the momentum of the explosion to launch herself at Marie!

*Sh-she knew that I knew she was going to do that!!*

“Swift is Heaven's Vengeance!!”

*Ker-rashhh!!*

Pawoo swept her staff with monstrous strength. Having exhausted herself firing the Ghost Hail Bow, Marie had nothing left with which to dodge and was slammed into a building, coughing up blood.

"H-how are you so strong..." she asked, dropping to the floor. "The Ghost Hail Bow ought to have weakened you..."

"Unlike my husband and brother," Pawoo replied, "I don't possess any powers of evolution."

Pawoo ripped the Ghost Hail mushroom from her shoulder, standing strong despite her injuries. She walked over to the fallen Marie, leaving footprints of her own blood as she went.

"I'm just an ordinary human," she stated. "There's no power to take away. That's why you lost."

"...Hah. Ridiculous..."

Marie chuckled once more.

"Nah, I gotta give you credit, I guess. Now end it."

"Kill you? Why would I do something like that?"

"You want Bisco back, don't ya?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to steal him from you. I just want to ask you one thing."

"What?"

"Marie..."

Pawoo spoke in soft yet fervent tones, and she leveled her gaze against the wounded Marie. Each of them stared into the eyes of the other, so close, their bloodied noses touched.

"Let me take your son's hand," Pawoo said.

"What?!"

"I promise to make him happy."

Marie was absolutely floored by Pawoo's remark. Even she could not possibly have predicted the words coming out of her mouth. She just stared blithely in response at the woman she had just beaten black-and-blue, and from whom she had received a similar pummeling in return.

“...Gh...”

She stared into the girl’s eyes, innocent and pure, like a maiden requesting her mother-in-law’s blessing!

*The hell is wrong with this chick?!?!?!*

Marie’s mouth flapped wordlessly as her mind raced to come up with something to say, but before she could speak...

*Boom!*

“?!”

“Wh-what’s that?!”

ARK REPAIR RATE AT 97%. EMERGENCY STARTUP SEQUENCE INITIATED.

MARE DEFEAT DETECTED.

EXECUTING FINAL DIRECTIVE.

GENOCIDE WAVE ACTIVATED.

PREPARE FOR TAKEOFF.

“Look out, Marie! The White House is collapsing!”

“Mare lost?!”

Pawoo helped Marie to her feet and watched as the enormous craft rose out of the spot where Mare’s fortress had stood.

“He’s stubborn as a mule, that kid. He precharged the ark so that it could carry out the Genocide Wave even after he’s gone!”

“So she won, then? Sugar won?”

“Well, there ain’t no time to give her a medal. We gotta stop the ark!”

Marie wiped the blood from her mouth. The usual fire returned to her eyes, and she snatched her crimson bow and started running.

Pawoo swiftly followed. “Marie!” she called out after her. “You’re in no shape to fight!”

“Neither are you! But that ain’t gonna stop me savin’ Sugar and Mare!”

“What?!”

“Geez. I wanted to say you should just sit down and shut up when your elders are speakin’...”

Marie turned back over her shoulder and shot Pawoo a smile, resolute and free of doubt.

“But since you got me beat, I guess that plan’s in the can! I gotta go clean up my mess, but after that... Heh-heh. Don’t worry, Bisco’s all yours!”

\* \* \*

A noise.

The sound of something very important. Bisco turned and peered into the distance.

“Here you go, laddie. Eat up... Hmm? What’s wrong, my boy? Take yer bowl.”

Whatever it was, it lasted only a moment. Bisco shook his head free of distractions and turned back to Jabi.

“Lost yer appetite, have you? I don’t mind; more for me!”

“Give it here, old man! I was just wonderin’ if you gutted it properly this time, that’s all...”

“Still fussin’ over the taste like a kid? Listen here, Bisco my boy. When eatin’ ironrat, you gotta—”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Swallow it whole, no chewin’. Just ‘cause you got no teeth!”

“Hyo-ho-ho...”

Night had fallen over the Northern Saitama Iron Desert, and Bisco’s bonfire crackled beneath a roof of stray girders. Bisco’s quest for the Rust-Eater had been successful—a breeze, even—and the pair were returning home.

Jabi was now fully cured of the debilitating disease and back in his prime again. He’d even stopped giving crestfallen looks when he thought Bisco wasn’t looking.

All of Bisco’s wishes had come true. He had found the peace and comfort he

had been fighting for.

*...And yet somethin' don't feel right.*

**“Papa!!”**

Out of nowhere, a voice resounded in his chest.

*There it is again!*

*Feels like someone's callin' me.*

*Someone I know...only I can't remember. Why can't I remember?*

“You hear somethin’, Bisco?”

“N-no, I just...”

“Bastards. They still after us?”

Ignorant of the conflict brewing in his student’s heart, Jabi cast his eyes over the desert sands, but he could neither see nor sense anything hiding out there amid the dunes. Scratching his beard, he turned back to Bisco.

“There’s nothin’ there,” he said. “What’s gotten into you, my boy?”

“...Somethin’s callin’ me,” answered Bisco. He narrowed his eyes, clutched his chest, and wriggled in discomfort. “Least, that’s what it feels like. Musta breathed in some weird spores. I’m gonna go to bed...”

“Hold on a sec, Bisco. Let me see your face.”

Confused by his master’s unnaturally serious response, Bisco turned to face Jabi. The old man pried Bisco’s eyes apart with his fingers and peered into them curiously. Then, after a short examination, he gave a sharp sigh.

“I get it now,” he said. “You’re in a dream, boy.”

“A...a dream...?”

“Watch closely, boy.”

No sooner had Jabi finished his utterance than he drew his dagger and, in the light of the bonfire, plunged it into his own chest.

“J-Jabi?! What the hell are you—? Huh?!”

"Heh. I knew it..."

Jabi took one look down at himself and clicked his tongue. What spilled from the open wound was not blood but a cloud of shimmering rainbow spores.

"Jabi...what the hell's goin' on?!"

"Bisco! There ain't no time! We gotta get you outta this place! Grab your bow!"

"Get me...out?"

That shred of truth was all it took to awaken the Rust-Eater inside Bisco. The spores pulled him from his reassuring slumber, and a rebellious glimmer returned to his eyes!

"Wait...where am I?!" he cried, startled. "Where's Milo? Where's Sugar?!"

"Bisco...what's happened to you...?"

Jabi looked at his son, filled with radiant light. He was no longer the hollow child Jabi knew, who knew only death and destruction. Bisco was a god, a being suffused with the divine.

He looked down at his own crumbling body, and a satisfied smile appeared on his lips.

"...I see," he said at last. "I guess out there, I'm not weighin' you down no more..."

"Jabi. No, don't go!!"

Bisco clung to his father, the one he already knew wasn't real.

"Don't leave me. There's still so much I gotta say!"

"Don't worry, boy. You got the whole rest of your life to say it."

Jabi pulled his bow from his back and aimed it off into space, casting Bisco a crafty grin.

"Our lives are one now. You got Sugar now, just like I once had you. You're about to find out just how angry you made me, how sad you made me...and how happy you made me. Serves ya right, don't you think?"

“Jabi...”

“Good luck, sonny! You’re gonna need it!!”

Jabi, the Godbow, gave a carefree cackle.

Then he focused once more on his aim, pouring all of his mind, body, and soul into the ultimate manifestation of his unearthly skill!

*Thunk!!*

His arrow landed solidly in thin air, tearing open a hole in the fabric of space!

“See you on the other side, Bisco, my boy! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!  
Hyo-ho-ho!”



“Jabi!!”

“I’ll be watchin’ ya from on high, boy. Watchin’ ya walk the same path I did!”

Bisco reached a desperate hand, but it was too late. His fingers brushed the old man’s clothes as he was sucked through the hole.

He looked back at Jabi, a smile on the old man’s face, and...

*Blb...*

*Blblb...*

*Blb! Blblb!!*

Bisco opened his tearstained eyes to reality!!

*I’m underwater!!*

He was in a calming place, as warm and gentle as a mother’s womb.

*This must be inside Mare’s suit!*

It was a place that felt so safe and secure, even the hardiest of creatures could not resist. Bisco saw them all around him now—creatures that could defy the most painful of tortures, all lulled into sweet silence by the serenity of their prison.

However, Bisco possessed the prior experience of Hokkaido’s womb to help him resist! With his master’s words still ringing in his ears, Bisco took a deep breath and called out the name of his secret weapon.

“Abwabwabwaaa!!” (Actagawa!) *Fwoosh!*

It was a creature of similar mettle to Bisco’s own that answered the call! Like an orange thunderbolt, the giant steelcrab sped through the water with great familiarity, appearing beneath Bisco and seating him in his saddle.

“Actagawa! You’re awake, too! I knew you had it in you!”

*Popopop.* (Translation: Of course I am.) “Sugar’s callin’ us! If we follow her voice, we should be able to find a way outta here!”

*Popopop.* (Translation: I know.) *Popop.* (Translation: Try to keep up.) *Pop.* (Translation: Idiot.) “Hey!! Why you gotta be like that?! I’m trying to help

*here!!*

*“Abwabwabwa!! Bibwo!!”*

*“Hwb?!”*

A voice! Looking up, Bisco spotted his partner, Milo, holding on to some sort of giant pole that ran through the ocean.

*“Hey, glad to see another early riser around these parts!”* said Bisco, swimming over.

*“Now’s not the time! Look what I found!”*

Milo stroked the surface of the pole, and when he saw the rainbow-colored spores rising off it, he gurgled incomprehensibly in an attempt to communicate his excitement.

*“It’s Sugar’s Mushy Magic Pole! She must have been the one who woke us all up!”*

*“Huh...?”*

Thanks to Sugar’s ultimate technique, the Howl of Life, this whole area of the ocean was devoid of life-forms. They appeared to have all heard Sugar’s manifesto and left of their own volition.

But the ocean was vast and contained many more creatures.

*“She’s got the power, but her voice doesn’t reach...”*

*“That’s where we come in, Bisco!”*

Milo turned to him with sparkling eyes, excited to uphold a mother’s duty!

*“Let’s fire an arrow loaded with Sugar’s dreams,”* he said, *“and deliver her message to everyone!”*

*“Sounds good! You sure you can handle it?”*

*“I’m the only one who can!!”*

Milo placed his hand on the staff and focused. The staff seemed to treat Milo as its master, undoing its transformation instantly and becoming a cloud of spores that gathered in his palm. There, the spores recombined into a glittering

rainbow cube that spun, tracing an auroral arc in Bisco's hand!

*"All right, listen up, you lot!"* yelled Bisco, pulling the bowstring tight. *"This ain't no time to be lazin' around!"*

The rainbow bow unleashed a sparkling arrow, filled with the hopes and prayers of life's newest messenger, the mushroom god Sugar!

*"Hear her voice!!!"*

*Pchoom!*

*Ka-boom!*

Up above her in the sky, Sugar watched as countless life-forms broke free of Mare's suit. She watched as each of them departed, following their own path and proclaiming their own freedom.

Each of their voices was filled with love for their new god. *Thank you, Sugar. Well done, Sugar,* they were saying. Sugar felt their unalienable wills resonating inside her own heart, and their victorious cries carried to her through the medium of the rainbow spores.

*Eh-heh-heh... Thank you...*

Sugar fell into a sea of white as everything around her faded away.

*I hope Mommy...will be pleased with me...*

As she plummeted through the sky, she felt her consciousness dim. And just as her weighty eyelids were about to close forever...

*"Sugar!!"*

*"...Hwah?!"*

*"There she is! Actagawa!!"*

*Fwoosh!*

Rockets flared, and a gleaming orange carapace shot out of the clouds, speeding like a firework toward the falling Sugar.

*"Mommy. Mommy! Mommy!!"*

*"Sugar!!"*

*Thud!*

The child fell directly into Milo's open arms. He nuzzled her cheek, his own slick with tears, while Sugar cried like a baby into his chest.

"Waaah! Mommy! Mommy! Sob. Mommy..."

"I felt you, Sugar. We all did. Your voice brought us back here. Well done... you're our number one, Sugar."

"Waaaah! Waaaaahhh!"

Milo held Sugar, the strongest thing in the world, in the tenderest way in the world. And then, just as her seemingly endless tears finally drew to a close...

"C'mon, Milo. Don't hog her all to yourself. She's my daughter, too!"

"All right, greedypants. See that, Sugar? Papa's okay, too!"

"Papa!"

*Slap!!*

"You big idiot, Papa! Waaaahh!"

"The fuck was that for?!"

"Well, I think you deserve it! You threw her off the ark, remember?!"

"Waaaah! Papa! Papaaa!"

"All right, sorry about that, I guess... I mean, I knew you would come back for us, but I was thinking it would take more like years? You're pretty strong, Sugar. You showed that president a thing or— Whoa?!"

Suddenly, Actagawa ignited his jets, narrowly avoiding a mass of seawater that came tearing through the clouds.

***"Ruuugh..."***

"Look, Mommy!"

"He's lost his diving suit... That's the real Mare!"

"He's lost his damn mind," growled Bisco. "All the life has been taken from him. He's on a rampage!"

The blob of seawater hurtled through the air and was sucked up by the ark as it rose steadily out of the clouds. After he disappeared into it entirely, the ark throbbed like a heartbeat and began giving off a solemn light.

ENGINE CORE RESTORED.

EXECUTING FINAL STAGE OF THE GENOCIDE WAVE PROGRAM.

“Bisco! Something’s up with the ark!”

“Uh-oh! Reverse thrusters, Actagawa!”

Actagawa flared to a halt in midair, when all of a sudden all the clouds around them disappeared, sucked into the ark by the reactivated Mare Engine.

““Waaaahhh!””

Actagawa spun and wove, managing to break free of the ark’s pull. However, the ark did not react. It seemed its true goal was the clouds all along.

***“Make the earth...great again.”***

The clouds re-formed into an enormous representation of Mare’s upper torso, like Atlas himself, holding the heavens aloft!

***“Of the mama, by the mama, for the mama!”***

***“It’s not over yet. Even if all life on Earth has left me...I still have myself! Sugar! Let us fight once more! I shall show you the promise I made in Mama’s name!!”***

His voice was a bare representation of himself now, a naked blade with which to fight his cause. “So that’s the real Mare,” said Milo, twin glimmers of respect and defiance in his eyes. “Not the one built upon the trust of others, but his true self. He’s not just a hollow proxy anymore, but an individual soul with a dream! You know what happens now, Bisco!”

“We see which one of us is stronger,” Bisco replied. “He’s on! We’ll tear him in two! Milo, the *Ultrafaith Bow!*”

“You got—”

“Noooo!!”

Milo suddenly lurched forward, crushing the cube in his hand. The cause was

Sugar, holding on to him with all the force she could muster. She turned to the astonished Bisco and shouted: "You can't hurt him! He's my friend!"

""Y-your friend?!""

"I felt his heart! He's really, really nice on the inside! His values are just way, way too big, that's all!"

Sugar's parents looked to each other.

"Well, that's because he's the sea, I guess," said Milo. "Maybe you two gods can get along with each other?"

"Seems like you're on Mare's side, Sugar. Don't tell me you caught feelings for the guy?"

"Bisco! Don't tease her like that!"

"W-well, maybe I kinda..."

"You're kidding."

"Well, I ain't gonna take it!" roared Bisco. "There's no way I'm gonna let my kid give in to the passions of youth!"

Milo pushed the indignant Bisco to one side and looked down into his blushing daughter's eyes. As the wind caressed his sky-blue hair, he opened his mouth to speak.

"You care about him a lot, don't you, Sugar? Why don't you use your bow to bring him down?"

"But, Mommy...I can't use a bow."

"Yes, you can!" replied Milo with a charming wink. "You can do anything you set your mind to, Sugar!"

"!!!"

Milo's wink unlocked a violent stream of emotions from Sugar's heart. The spores danced around her, her hair flickered with every color of the rainbow, and a new world of possibility awakened within her.

"Mommy!" she cried. "I'm gonna give it a try!"

“You do that, Sugar. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Come to me! Mushy RainBow!!”

Sugar’s Flying Fungus carried her away from Actagawa, and in her free hand, a rainbow-colored greatbow appeared. As her magic cloud wove through the sky, Sugar’s faithful heart shone, gifting her a seven-colored arrow.

“Look at that!” cried Bisco. “That’s our Sugar’s bow! Attagirl!”

***“I no longer require trust.”***

“...Bisco, look!!”

***“All I need is a single vote, pure and true. Mama’s vote! My mission is to make her happy! To bring about the shining future she desires!”***

“Uh-oh. The president’s on the move!”

“Watch out, Sugar!!”

***“And you’re all coming with me!!”***

*Splash!!*

“Whah!!”

***“Jupiter Lightning Streeeam!!”***

The great cloud giant Mare released a bolt of lightning, which struck Sugar just as she was about to fire her bow, delivering a massive electric shock!

“Agyagyagyayga?! Bibibibibii...”

““Sugar!!””

“Gwehh...”

The Flying Fungus let out a puff of soot and began falling out of the sky, when...

“Don’t lose focus!!” came a voice. “Remember, Mare’s my son, too! He won’t go down so easily!”

Sugar found herself in someone’s arms, rising rapidly back through the sky. She looked up and down and saw...

She was riding atop an enormous Pipe Snake! Out of its brain grew the wisdomshrooms, the bestowers of sentience previously used on Mare. And standing atop its back was a single woman, her crimson hair fluttering in the wind.

“Granny?! What’re you doin’ here?!”

“Granny!!”

It was Marie Akaboshi, Sugar held safely in her arms. She took up her crimson bow and spoke: “Give it up, Mare! We lost this one! Let’s start all over again, just you and me!”

***“Do not get in my way. Jupiter Spark!!”***

The bolt descended toward Sugar once more. “Hey, watch it!!” cried Marie, deflecting Mare’s attack with a swing of her bow. “Listen to me, Mare! It’s me, your mama! Don’t you recognize me anymore?!”

***“For Mama...”***

“In the end,” said Marie, “you were too kind for me. I used you as a pawn to advance my own agenda. I was so obsessed with talent and skill that I forgot how to be a parent...”

“Granny!”

Sugar jumped up and squished Marie’s cheeks. Marie was just about to object to her name-calling once more when she met Sugar’s eyes and was transfixed by them.

“Why do you look so sad?” Sugar asked.

“...”

“Mare’s been working hard, so you don’t have to frown. If you really like him, then smile!”

“...I can’t. Not now. It’s too late.”

“You still don’t get it!!”

“H-hey? Sugar! Stop it! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

Quick as a flash, Sugar began tickling Marie.

And Marie...

She felt herself change. Sugar's unconditional love and affection touched her heart, washing away its stony shell. Her slender eyelashes quivered, and the next moment, she felt Sugar's soft arms squeezing her head.

"...Sugar...I don't..."

"It's okay. There, there. You did so well."

"..."

"You don't have to be a parent! You just have to be able to laugh with your children. I mean, just look at Papa; he's completely hopeless! But don't worry; I'll take good care of him!"

"...Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

"I can hear you, dumbasses!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Her laugh echoed through the sky. It was the most herself she'd been in years. Stripped of the cynicism that had consumed her heart, that laugh was the purest expression of Marie Akaboshi yet.

And in the back of her mind...

...Marie felt she could see her old partner's smile.

"Granny! Watch out!!"

As she gently nuzzled Sugar's cheek, Marie was oblivious to the Jupiter Light Stream bearing down on her. Bisco deflected it with the Mantra Bow in the nick of time.

"Hey!!" he called out to her. "Is that bow on your back just for show or what?! Get ready! You're gonna save that son of yours!"

"I...I am?!"

"We're still too far from his heart," Milo explained. "But maybe he'll listen to you...his mother! Your prayers might just reach him!"

"You can't be serious!" Marie protested. "He's too far gone. Even my bow

can't—"

"It's not just you! Papa and Sugar are here, too!!"

Marie looked down at her granddaughter's rainbow-colored smile.

"All three of us, combine our bows?!"

"Yeah! Even the Mōri clan said if you tie three arrows together, they form an unbreakable bond!"

"This isn't the time for history trivia! My son's a monster, and my granddaughter's a god! If I add my bow to the mix, I'll be torn to shreds!"

"It'll be okay, Granny! I've never done it before!"

*Is that supposed to be reassuring?!*

"Can't you do it?" asked Sugar, tipping her head. Marie looked at her and began to chuckle.

*It'll be okay 'cause we've never done it before... Heh, I get it now...*

With a genius twinkle in her eye, Marie gave a ferocious smile!

"All right, Sugar, let's do it! Follow my lead, okay?!"

"Yeah!!"

"Heh, finally got your ass into gear, huh?!" Bisco grinned a grin just like his mother's as the golden glow of the Rust-Eater spores slowly engulfed his body. "You sure you can keep up with me and Milo's ultimate technique?"

"Hah! Don't talk to me about technique! You're all brawn, no finesse! Watch me, and you might just learn a thing or two!"

"You're on, Granny!"

BEGINNING LIFE FORCE ANALYSIS.

DETECTING TWO CONSECUTIVE MUSHROOM-BASED LIFE FORCE SPIKES.

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 12.08 BILLION LIFRA.

"I'm sorry it took me so long, Mare. For the first time...I fire my bow for love. Watch closely, okay? Ghost Hail Bow!"

Marie was suddenly enveloped in a silver glow, the mark of the Ghost Hail appearing on her skin. She leveled her crescent-moon bow, which burned with the twin lights of peace and love!

ALERT!! NEW MUSHROOM BOW DETECTED!

ESTIMATED LIFE FORCE: 680.2 TRILLION LIFRA!!

RECOMMEND IMMEDIATE DEFENSIVE PROCEDURES!!

“Come to me! Mushy RainBow!”

Standing upon the Flying Fungus, Sugar conjured her signature bow, only to stagger backward due to its massive weight. Just before falling off her cloud, however, there was a *Pop! Pop! Pop!* as a host of mushroom minions leaped out of her hair and caught her just in time!

“That was close.”

“You’re heavy.”

“You’re all here! Let’s pray together, everyone! Pray that he and I can be best friends forever!”

“By shooting him?”

“Why not just talk it out?”

“If we win, I’ll buy you all a hundred-year supply of Apollo chocolate!”

“““Bab-ba-baaam!!”””

NEW ALERT!!!!

MUSHROOM ENERGY SPIKE DETECTED.

COMPOUND VALUE: 8,070 QUINTILLION LIFRA!!

FAILURE DETECTED IN LIFE CAPTURE SYSTEM.

RESCUE IMPOSSIBLE! BEGINNING IMMEDIATE—

“Look at those two! They’re goin’ all out! We can’t let ‘em beat us, Milo!”

“Heh-heh-heh...”

“Wh-why are you laughing?”

“Your whole family’s a pretty selfish bunch, Bisco!”

Bisco was stunned speechless by his partner’s gleaming smile and heartfelt words. Milo brandished his emerald cube, dyeing his hair the same color.

“They fight not for the world but for themselves. They put their lives on the line, even when nobody asks them to. They completely ignore their past and their future and stake it all on one single moment!”

“You’re one to talk!!”

“Oh yeah, we’re the same, all right! Because we know that when you stake it all on a single moment...”

Milo closed his eyes and opened his mind.

“...that moment lasts forever!”

He released his glittering cube, which shot over to where Bisco stood, Mantra Bow drawn, and transformed it, giving it a coronal glow!

“This ain’t the Mantra Bow! The power of the Rust-Eater...it’s overheatin’!!”

“This is!!”

““The Sunbeam Bow!!””

CRITICAL EMERGENCY!!

COMPOUND LIFE FORCE: 999 NOVEMDECILLION LIFRA!!

CRITICAL FAILURE IN LIFE CAPTURE SYSTEM! OVERHEATING DETECTED!

***“Stay calm, ark!!”*** came the bellowing voice of cloudform Mare. ***“There is no number high enough to defeat me. I am infinite! Free from suit or tie. Free from honor or shame. Free from status or prestige! Free from solitude or recognition! Free from time and space! Free! There is no life on this Earth I cannot save! I shall take all of it, all life, this rock, all of existence! Take it into myself and make Mama smile again! Sugar! I ain’t playing around this time!!”***

Mare had outgrown the oceans. As vast as they were, they were no longer sufficient to contain his power, and so Mare had set his sights on space itself! The entire planet’s oceans responded to his will, rising up into the air and taking

the form of an indomitable dragon that coiled amid the clouds!

LIFE FORCE CHARGE AT 100%.

EXECUTING GENOCIDE WAVE.

...NEGATIVE.

EXECUTING GALACTIC WAVE!

***"All creatures, great and small! Hear my cry!!"***

***"Samsara Draconic Life Streeeam!!"***

All of Earth's ocean waters took draconic form in the skies above. They coiled, let out an earth-shattering roar, then descended with lightning speed upon Bisco and the others, preparing to swallow them whole!

But at the very last moment!

*"Sun!"*

*"Moon!"*

*"Rainbow!"*

Three bows, pulled to the physical limit, shone with the blood of the Akaboshis and unleashed a streak that spanned the stars!

“““Wroooooaaaaggghhh?!?!?”””

The power.

The universe-bridging power, the product of three miracles! It rushed from the bodies of Bisco, Sugar, and Marie, threatening to tear them apart!

But right there, at the center of the vortex, came Milo's heaven-shattering whisper.

“You can do it, Bisco.”



\*

“Granny! Sugar! You ready?”

““Yeah!!””

Three pairs of jade-green eyes tore the sky apart!

“““Crimson Bloodline!”””

“““Legacy Bow!!!!!!”””

*Ka-*

*Chewww!!*

Those three divine arrows, born of the Akaboshis' blood, combined their prayers mid-flight, producing a hymn for all life on Earth!

*Ka-bamm!*

It struck the dragon head-on, drilling a hole through its oceanic length! And then came the mushrooms. Like a chain detonation, they sprouted all along Mare's cloud body; colossal mushrooms that dwarfed all else.

***“Roooaaaaaghhhh!! This...isn’t over! I have to answer...Mama’s prayers...!!”***

Beads of sweat descended from Mare's face, only each droplet held an entire lake's worth of seawater. He struggled to maintain his draconic technique, and then finally...

*Ka-gaboom!!*

***“Groooooouuughhh!!”***

The light of the Legacy Arrow pierced his abdomen! Mare summoned up all of his remaining strength, holding back the arrow with his bare hands, but at last...

***“Th-this isn’t...”***

All of his strength wasn't enough to stop an arrow of destiny that pierced all it touched!!

***“Is this...where the ark finally sinks?! Was all my power...insufficient? Did I not deserve Earth’s trust?!”***

“Mr. President!!”

“?!”

“That arrow’s my vote, Mr. President!”

It was Sugar, calling out to him on the verge of his defeat.

“It shows I trust you...and want to be your friend!!”

The glow of the rainbowshroom spores engulfed her, and she brimmed with the light of life.

“A sea god...and a mushroom god. We’re both fated to watch over humanity, so let’s share the burden together! We don’t need a boat; we can *be* the boat! We can embark together, right now, on a *new* journey, ferrying all life into the future!”

“Sugar...!!”

“Eh-heh-heh...and besides...,” she said, suddenly growing sheepish. “I don’t want to be the only god around!”

Then she leaped across the skies to him and asked: “Mare...will you be my friend?”

She fluttered her charming eyelashes, her cheeks a little flushed.

“*I...is that...*”

...

“*...a proposal?*”

“Nooo, I didn’t mean that! Just friends, for now...”

“Mare! Listen to me! That’s what I want as well!”

“*Mama?!*”

The Legacy Bow had succeeded in rescuing Mare from his rampage and bringing him back to reality. Marie stood and addressed the cloud giant, her crimson-red hair blowing in the wind.

“I’m sorry, Mare. I didn’t realize it before, but all my wishes have already come true. My only wish left...is for you.”

“...”

“Me and Bisco will both die someday, but not you. I want you to look after Sugar once we’re gone. Fill the loneliness in her heart. Nothing could make me happier than knowing you’ll be there for her.”

***“But I can’t love! I was born from your strength, Mama. I don’t want anything in return. I only want to make you happy...”***

“Seeing you succeed is what makes me happy.”

Mare and Marie shared a single glance, engulfed by the light of peace.

“...Thank you, Mare. My cursed skill gave birth to you and Bisco. Because of that...it wasn’t meaningless at all.”

“...”

***“...You’re telling me...to be independent?”***

***“Very well...if that is your wish!!”***

A short pause...and then!

*Bwummm!!*

The Legacy Arrow began charging up, shedding an auroral glow and causing Mare’s body to glow in seven colors. The shimmering rainbow president rose up to his full height and poked a thick finger at Sugar, riding on her magic cloud.

***“Sugar, Mushroom President! You have shown more trust in me than anyone else on this planet! Very well. Let’s do it together. Let us be the ship that ferries life to the future! Never forget! I am the sea! I! AM! VICE PRESIDENT MAAAARE!!!!!!”***

Mare raised his arm and shattered into a million droplets that fell like rain.

“Mushy Magic Gourd!” Sugar cried, conjuring up a magic gourd that sucked all the rain inside, condensing the vice president into a space the size of a water bottle.

“Sugar!!”

“Mommy! Daddy!”

With a *Poof!* Sugar's flying cloud vanished, and she hopped back onto Actagawa's back.

"That's crazy..." said Bisco. "I didn't think Mare would fit inside something so small..."

"Heh-heh! He's my boyfriend in a bottle!" replied Sugar, rubbing the gourd to her cheek and beaming.

Her two parents were shocked and shared a horrified glance.

"Hey, wait a minute," said Bisco. "Weren't you into Yukan before?"

"That's right! You mustn't cheat on people, Sugar!"

"Why not?! I have more than enough love for everyone!"

Wearing the proudest look ever on her little face, Sugar unleashed a wink that would bring all life to its knees!

"And don't bother telling me off," she said. "A thousand years from now, I'll have forgotten all about it!"

INTER MISSION

Birth of a God:  
The Great Mushroom Girl,  
Heaven's Equal

8

SABIKU  
BISCO



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

It was an odd-looking god, its captivating body illuminated by the light of the braziers. It had elegantly honed muscles, like a true goddess of power and justice.

And in those arms, the statue carried a featureless stone, as yet untouched by any chisel: a child of unbound potential!

“*Won-culvero-pawhasha.*”

“*Won-halcuro-pawhasha.*”

Worshipers from the Kusabira and Wizened sects gathered in the large hall surrounding the statue to offer their prayers. Before them, the high priest, Kandori, wailed in despair.

“Oh! I cannot do it!”

He stood atop the statue, tools in hand, chisel poised over the unmodeled stone. Bound by indecision, every time he raised his hammer to begin, he withdrew it again immediately. This had been going on all night now.

“I cannot see!” he cried. “Even with my powers of foresight, I cannot determine the face of Akaboshi’s child!”

“Are you still going at that? Useless priest.”

Raskeni appeared with a sigh, carrying a tray of liver soup, steamed chicken, and an assortment of wild rice dishes.

“I told you,” she said. “There’s no point in trying. That’s the face of a god you’re trying to see. There’s no way us mortals would be allowed a peek.”

“But then...,” retorted Kandori, obviously distressed. “How are we meant to celebrate this auspicious occasion?! How are we meant to prove our devotion to our god, Bisco, and his empress, Pawoo?!”

"Just make it after the kid's born!" said Raskeni. "Seriously... Look, I brought you a pick-me-up and some food. Eat, before you pass out."

Drenched in sweat, Kandori wiped the tears from his eyes and descended the scaffold, sitting down beside Raskeni and sampling the food.

"Hmm?!" he exclaimed after taking a single bite.

"O-oh, sorry. Do you not like it? I'll take it away..."

"This is divine! What did you do to it?!"

After tasting the carbs, Kandori's appetite awakened like a sleeping lion, and he began shoveling food into his mouth at a monstrous rate.

Raskeni looked at him in shock. It had been a long time since she felt the joy of tending to another, and her heart skipped a beat.

"This is too delicious to be orthodox," Kandori went on. "Did you lace it with narcotics, perhaps?"

"The hell would I do that for?!"

"I never knew you were such a good cook," said Kandori, as Raskeni sighed and wiped the grease from his chin. "Then again, you did attend to the Rust Lord, Kelshinha, for a time. I suppose it is only natural."

"...Kelshinha never ate anything I made him," Raskeni admitted. "He said he could never allow the offerings of a lowborn wench to pass his lips."

"That is why Lord Akaboshi defeated him, I suppose. A god must accept his followers' tributes to grow strong. I must say, I envy your future husband very much! Wah-hah-hah!!"

"..."

Raskeni was silent for a moment, then looked at Kandori's face once more. She had never thought much of him when she served as Kelshinha's bride. A boring man, not worth remembering. But now...

*He wears his heart on his sleeve. There's not a single falsehood about him.*

*...He's the complete opposite of what I used to be.*

*A boring man, without ambition, and yet...why do I...?*

"You should eat, too, Raskeni. Here, allow me to pour you a cup."

"Huh?! O-oh, no! I'll do it—ah!"

As she reached out to stop him, their hands touched. Raskeni's face, usually so rugged and masculine, suddenly turned a bright shade of pink. She looked up, locking eyes with Kandori, who was scrutinizing her closely, and...

"Mother!! Mother!! Come quick!!"

"W-waah!"

Hearing Amli's voice, Raskeni sat bolt upright and acted like nothing had happened.

"What's wrong?" her daughter asked. "Oh, I see. Did I come in at a bad time? Your face is all red, Mother."

"I-it's just the heat. Y-you're not interrupting anything..."

"Oh, really?" said Amli, touching her forehead to Raskeni's, a sly grin on her face. "So you weren't just thinking about our sect's six-year cool-off period before remarriage? You know, we can always change those laws if you want..."

"Shut up!! You're the high priestess; you ought to stand by our precepts!!"

"Will you not take a break, too?" Kandori asked the young girl. "Your mother is a fantastic cook, it turns out."

"I already know that, Kandori, but now's not the time!! Mrs. Pawoo's gone into labor! She's about to deliver Mr. Bisco's firstborn son!"

"Ohh!"

The two adults reacted with wonder to Amli's news.

"That is good news indeed," said Kandori, "but is it not earlier than the baby was due? Quite a bit earlier, in fact..."

"That's exactly what's so important! Ms. Tirol has sent her...‘drones’...all across Japan seeking assistance!"

Amli looked up at her mother imploringly. While Kandori was still basking in the happiness of the event, the ever-sensitive Raskeni picked up on what her daughter really wanted to say.

“Let’s go,” she told her. “It seems like we are needed once more.”

“Yes, Mother! This is an important moment for the Kusabira sect! We must ensure our founder’s heir is brought safely into the world!”

\* \* \*

“Commander Gopis!! Our troops are all wiped out! We must surrender!”

“Fool!! I will never yield to a Benibishi!!”

The Benibishi armies stood on all sides. As far as the eye could see, the plant-powered warriors marched under the banner of the camellia flower. Kyoto high command stood on the brink of defeat, with no way out! The only two still holding out hope were Commander Gopis in the Absolute Tetsujin No. 3 suit and honorary guest Professor Kobe Namari.

Still, they kind of got what was coming to them. After all, it was Kyoto that had started this war in the first place. In the wake of Mare’s disappearance, the city sought manual laborers to repair their capital and had invaded the Benibishi lands in the hopes of turning the former slave race to their own ends.

“I will never surrender,” Gopis growled. “Not to her. Not to Shishi!”

“Wh-why throw your life away? Just swallow your pride and make the right choice!”

“Shut up, fool! You could never understand my pain! How I was forced to lick her boots and beg for my life!”

“Does that mean,” said a voice, “you are content to let your life end without purpose?”

““?!””

A figure appeared on the Absolute Tetsujin’s monitor, sitting cross-legged atop an opulent throne of vines and camellia flowers. It was the undisputed ruler of the Benibishi, King Shishi!

Behind her left ear were now two camellias: the larger red of love and passion, accompanied by the smaller white of wisdom and mercy.

“The man by your side speaks truth,” Shishi said. “Death cannot exact your revenge nor restore your honor. Are you content to die without seeing your

whip slice the flesh of my neck?"

"Shishi! You little...!!"

Gopis ground her teeth so hard, it seemed they would crack. With all the anger of a raging bull, she planted her feet firmly within the Action Trace System, causing the Absolute Tetsujin to stand up.

"I can't lose to you again!" she screamed. "I would sooner die than be reduced to such a pitiful state!"

"Does winning and losing mean so much to you?" answered Shishi, in a voice as calm and serene as a spring day. "In that case...how about I concede defeat?"

"...Whaaat?!"

"Oh man, you got me. Well fought... Does that make things better?"

Shishi sat back on her throne, twiddling her hair as she spoke. Gopis was pale with shock...then an indignant vermilion shade slowly worked its way into her cheeks.

"We never intended to invade in the first place," Shishi went on. "We only want to see an end to this war. You see..." Here, Shishi petted a robotic jellyfish drone that hovered by her side. "...We recently received a missive from Ms. Tirol Ochagama. It seems that Brother's wife has gone into labor. I would therefore like to see as swift an end to this war as possible. What better means of achieving that than by handing you the victory?"

"How...?" Gopis's gums started to bleed from the immense strain they were under. "How can you be so calm about it?! What happened to the Shishi who wanted to boil me alive?! Don't you remember how I beat your kinsmen and tortured them to death?! Don't you want to do the same to me?!"

Gopis's mad roar fluttered Shishi's hair, but the Benibishi king was not perturbed in the slightest.

"Hatred of others is born from hatred of oneself," she said. "I have forgiven myself, and now I forgive you, Gopis."

"Who said you get to forgive meee?!"

*Whoosh!*

All of a sudden, the Absolute Tetsujin twisted, raising a massive fist high into the sky!

“Don’t treat me like a jilted ex you can just move on from!!”

Tetsujin’s arm bore down on Shishi with crushing speed! However, none of the Benibishi army raised a finger in their king’s defense. Why? Because Shishi had already taken up her shining camellia sword!

“...Flourish,” she said. “Lion’s Crimson Sword...”

“DIIIIIEEEEE!!”

“*Balsam Blaze!!*”

*Slashhh!!*

A crimson gleam!! The path of Shishi’s sword became a wave of Florescence, slicing off not just the hand and arm of Tetsujin No. 3 but most of its shoulder and torso, too.

““Waaaahhh!!””

*Bwoom! Bwoom! Bwoom!!* The chain detonation of flowerbursts turned the giant robot into a flower arrangement, and Gopis and Namari were swiftly ejected from the cockpit. Then the top half of the Tetsujin slowly slid sideways before crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust.

“Urgh... Cough! Cough! I can’t see...! Dammit! Dammit!!”

Gopis crawled on the ground, groping around to find her way.

“I can’t live like this... I need to win... I need to beat them all, step on them...”

A crunch of feet on rubble.

“Eep!!”

Gopis already knew it was Shishi, come to humiliate her. She cowered like a frightened rat, shivering.

“Gopis.”

“Noooo! Don’t step on me! Please don’t step on me! Please, please...”

“Your hand...”

“Nooo... I don’t want to lose, please don’t make me...”

“Give me your hand.”

Her voice was benevolent. Gopis opened her eyes to see a radiant figure, backlit by the sun, wearing a loving smile. What she offered was not her cold, hard boot...but her warm, soft hand.

“You want...to help me?!”

“That’s right.”

“You’ve gone soft, Shishi! I’m pure evil! Your archnemesis!!”

“You sure are. But even a toxic mushroom deserves to live.”

“...”

“Perhaps I ought to kill you. Perhaps I am too soft to be a king. But just once, I wanted to show you who Shishi really is.”

“...”

“Besides, I cannot fight you while you cry, Gopis. Dry your tears, and then and only then can we settle this. Let us decide who should live and who should die the honorable way, in a clash of souls, leaving no room for regret.”

“...”

For a while, nobody spoke a word. Shishi simply stood there, her arm outstretched, waiting for Gopis to respond, but she didn’t. Eventually, Shishi gave up hope and withdrew her hand, and it was then that Gopis clung on to it. Shishi’s ivy crept across her wrist, forming a small flower where the two hands touched.

The wind ruffled Shishi’s hair and the petals of her flowers. She pulled Gopis to her feet, then turned to survey the wreckage of the fallen Tetsujin as it burst into petals and cloaked the battlefield in a beautiful blizzard of foliage.

\* \* \*

*Where there are humans, there are cats.*

*Their very pawprints flicker in the shadows of great men.*

*Once, there was a feline general who carried a golden-guarded blade.*

*But men, do not ask his name.*

*The flickering flames extinguish his presence.*

*That is the nature of cat.*

*The singular rule of a beast of freedom.*

“Yee-haw! Drop the goods, kid!!”

The cry of banditry in the night! Half a dozen men leaped out of the shadows on motorbikes, encircling the young boy who walked alone. The boy looked about twelve and was hopelessly outnumbered, but his speed was like none other. As sweat dribbled down his brow, he took flight, racing across the wilderness on foot as though the enormous backpack he carried weighed nothing at all.

“Phew-ee! Looks like we got a runner, boys! Must be somethin’ mighty fine in that knapsack o’ his!”

“It’s worth nothing to you!!” the boy shouted over his shoulder, a fire of determination in his eyes as the pond snail shell hat bounced atop his head. “You’d better turn back now if you know what’s good for you!!”

“What did you say?!”

“Brave don’t suit ya, kid. Why don’t you act more your age and start pissin’ your pants?!”

The boy’s taunts drove the bandits into a rage, and they drew their shotguns and began firing! The boy leaped to and fro, dodging the blasts; then he drew a bow and started firing back.

*Gaboom!*

““Huh?! Hwaaagh!!””

The sprouting mushroom took out two of the motorbikes. After making sure the riders were still alive, the boy breathed a sigh of relief.

“Why don’t you *lot* act more your age and leave me alone?! I’ll have you know I was once the second-best spear in the Calvero Fishermen, and right now I’m the second-best pupil of Jabi, the Godbow! My name’s ‘Pond Snail’ Kousuke,

and I don't start fights, but I can sure as heck finish 'em!"

The young boy turned to the gang of bandits and offered the fiercest glare he could muster in conjunction with a flashy pose.

"Th-the kid's..."

"...a Mushroom Keeper!!"

"So what?!" barked the leader. "He's still just a kid! Get him!"

The bandits noticed that the boy was not prepared to kill them and took this for weakness. Seeming to outnumber him, they all charged at once on their bikes.

*Oh no! I'm surrounded!*

"Don't let him fire!"

"Splatter him all over the sands!"

*I have to shoot, but...!*

Kousuke drew his bowstring back but hesitated before taking the shot. Against this overwhelming a foe, Kousuke knew that he couldn't hold back and that his enemies would die.

Just then...

"Ha-haah!!"

*Crash!*

"Gahh!!"

One of the motorcycles hit Kousuke from behind, causing him to fall over and drop his luggage. The backpack tore upon, spilling its contents.

"Heh-heh-heh, serves ya right, kid! ...Hey, what gives?"

"Where's all the food? The money?!"

"It's just statues! Dozens of 'em! They all look so creepy..."

Struck to the ground, Kousuke reached out a quivering hand in their direction.

"They're birthing charms..." he croaked. "Statues of the god Hatahoten... The

Calvero Fishermen all made them out of pearl we gathered! They're to ensure Bisco Akaboshi's son is born safely... They don't mean anything to you guys!"

"What did you say? Birthing charms? What a load of bullshit!"

Upon realizing the boy's luggage was essentially worthless, the bandits looked disappointed. One of them started laughing and pulled out a portable lighter from his pocket. After lighting it, he showed the flame to Kousuke.

"Who'd wanna be born into a world like this?" he said. "If that's all you got, then let us save you the trouble of destroyin' 'em!"

*Meow.*

"N-no! Stop!!"

*Meow!*

"Hah-hah-hah-hah! Now, watch 'em burn, kid!"

*MEOOOW!*

"The hell that's noise? Sounds like no creature I ever—"

*Slash!!*

"H-hwuh?"

All the bandit saw was a flash of steel. The next moment, the lighter in his hand was sliced in two, and the flaming fuel splashed over him.

*Fwoomp!*

"Aaaaaaaaaghghh!" the bandit screamed as his hair burst into flames.

"Wh-who's there?! We're bein' attacked!"

"Come on out where we can see ya, coward!!"

"I'll not have it be said that I attacked without warning. I made my presence known three times in advance, did I not?"

With that, a figure landed with a soft step in Kousuke's defense. It was the master swordscat, Yokan Yatsuhashi, now possessed of his full adult form once more!

"The seeds of villainy shall never die..." he muttered. "Those words ring just

as true for humans as they do for feline-kind, it seems. But know that while the catwisps shine, those despicable acts shall not go unpunished!"

"Wh-who are you?" asked Kousuke.

"You have proved the depth of your loyalty, Kousuke of the Pond Snail. I shall handle things from here."

"Who the hell do you think you are?!"

The bandits went for their guns, but the black-furred intruder closed his eyes and growled. A moment later, the blade of his legendary sword flew from its sheath!

"Catwisp Art: *Exploding Uni!*"

Before the bandits even had time to fire, Yōkan's art sliced the barrels off all of their shotguns in a flash of steel. The next moment, each of them was engulfed in a soot-filled explosion as the gun in their hands backfired.

"Waaagh!! What's with this guy?!"

"He's a monster!"

"Run away!!"

The bandits fled for the hills, but Yōkan chose not to pursue them. He simply flicked his sword clean and resheathed it. The bell hanging from the scabbard emitted a single chime.

Then came a second voice, appearing fluidly at his side.

"Are you not going to kill them, *mon amour*? I could do it for you, if you like."

The white-furred cat raised the *Ultrafaith Arrow* hovering in her paws, but Yōkan extended an arm to stop her.

"Even they are someone's children. One day, I pray they will realize the virtue of Kousuke's act."

"You're as soft as your namesake, *mon amour*."

"Er... Thank you, Mr. Samurai!"

After retrieving all the spilled sculptures, Kousuke ran up to Yōkan and

thanked him profusely. Geppei clicked her tongue and wiped the blood from around his nose.

“You saved me,” the boy said. “I was trying to stay hidden, but I guess I’m not good enough...”

“Ridiculous,” answered Yokan. “From what I saw, you are incredibly skilled for your age.”

“That is the garb of a Mushroom Keeper, if I am not utterly mistaken,” noted Geppei. “Come to think of it, you did mention that Akaboshi fellow, didn’t you?”

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot! I gotta go deliver these before the baby’s born!!”

“The baby?” Yokan approached Kousuke curiously. “Ah, of course! Akaboshi’s child! Yes, I’d heard Pawoo was having a boy. So Sugar will have a little brother, will she...?”

“Still, isn’t the birth a little early? In human terms, at least,” said Amakusa.

“You’re right,” Kousuke told her. “Something’s up with the baby for sure. That’s why it’s so important to deliver these charms.”

“Hmm...!”

Yokan cradled his chin in his paw, then turned to his wife.

“What do you make of all this, Geppei?”

“There are a lot of circumstances introducing uncertainty into the calculations,” Amakusa reasoned. “But the solution seems obvious to me. I’m sure everyone would feel more at ease with your Catwisp Arts close at hand.”

“Then why did you not say as much sooner?!”

“Because I couldn’t care less for the fate of a single human child.”

“Kousuke!” barked Yokan. “You know where Akaboshi is, correct? Pray, lead us to him!”

“O-okay!”

“Oh dear. Me and my big mouth. Take us there, *Ultrafaith Arrow!*”

After shaking her head at her husband's generosity, Geppei channeled her prayers into the *Ultrafaith Arrow*, and in the blink of an eye, it transformed into a luxurious golden carriage.

"Get in, child," she said. "You can be our driver."

"W-whoaa! It's so fancy!"

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! I suppose a diversion from time to time isn't so bad! And I can't say I wouldn't be interested in seeing the dirty, tearstained face of Akaboshi's brat!"

Kousuke lashed the rains, and the carriage raced like the wind, ferrying the two cats to Bisco's location.

\* \* \*

Hello.

My name is Actagawa.

I really must apologize on behalf of my younger sibling, Bisco. He's been out of control recently with his wild schemes and impossible feats, and that idiot Milo has been too busy fawning over his every act to rein him in like he usually does. In fact, I dare say that panda-faced moron is the true problem child these days.

As you all are no doubt painfully aware, I am the only one with a lick of sense around these parts, and so it falls to me to deliver my heartfelt apologies.

However, I don't see why I should. After all, it's not *me* that's done anything wrong, is it? Why should *I* be expected to clean up *your* mistakes?! Are you hearing me up there?!

"Gyaaaaagh!! This crab's outta control!!"

Oh. Sorry. Force of habit.

I forgot for a second there, but the one upon my saddle is not Bisco at all.

"Stop messin' around before you drop me in the drink, ya loony! Crap, why do *I* gotta do this? Once this whole childbirth thing is over, I'm askin' Pawoo for my severance pay!!"

It is the jellyfish woman. Or “Tirol Ochagama,” as she prefers to be called. She is currently lounging upon my back in a swimsuit, with some kind of communication device strapped to her head. I feel our bond growing stronger as of late, and her Crabriding has markedly improved...

...Or perhaps it’s fairer to say I’ve simply grown tolerant of her.

*“Ouya! Is everything okay, Tirol? I heard a scream!”*

“Barely!! This frickin’ crab just tried to give me a swimming lesson!!”

*“I’m sorry! But Father and I have our hands full with Hokkaido, and there just aren’t any other sporko with the training to control Actagawa!”*

“Yeah, yeah, I already told ya, it don’t bother me. Acty and I, we go way back. People always say wherever Akaboshi and Nekoyanagi go, you’ll find me. ’Sides, y’all *are* payin’ me, right? In that case, I’m happy to show you what a generous gal I can be!”

What on earth is she talking about?

She talks a big game, but I suppose she does walk the walk from time to time. Then again, I walk the walk without saying anything at all, so that’s even more commendable, don’t you think?

Kicking her legs idly in the water, Tirol turns to me.

“Still, I can’t believe you put the charms on Hokkaido back there”—she looks over her shoulder at the Island Whale kicking up waves in our wake—“but that’s our Acty! Breakin’ hearts and takin’ names! You old Romeo, you!”

What on earth is she talking about?

As usual, I find it difficult to decipher a single utterance spouted forth from Tirol’s brain, yet it’s true that her plan hinges on the affection she so precisely identified. You see, it seems that Hokkaido noticed my acts of bravery from within Mare and has become quite smitten. As a result, we are using me as the bait, so to speak, in order to lure her over to Pawoo, so that the Ghost Hail might be of use in the imminent delivery.

How cruel a mistress that jellyfish girl is, to tug so carelessly at a maiden’s heartstrings. Does the warm heart of a crab not beat within you?! ...I suppose it

doesn't, does it?

"Wish I had yer luck, Acty. Guys into me only care about money and sex. When am I gonna meet my soulmate?"

What on earth is she talking about? I think somebody needs to teach this girl the phrase "Like attracts like."

"Ya know, Acty. Sometimes I get jealous of what Bisco and Milo have. I like bein' alone, and I don't wanna change that...but when I look at them...I feel like...ya know...maybe it ain't so bad, sharin' your life with someone else..."

...

"...S-so...don't tell anyone about this, Acty, but...I been thinkin' lately...and I was thinkin'...maybe it's time I got up off my ass. Stop waitin' around for guys to come to me, and...you know...start lookin'..."

What on earth is she talking about?

"C'mon! Don't give me that look!! I'm allowed to take my life seriously for a change, ain't I?"

I never said you weren't. It's just that, well, a connection isn't something you find just by searching. It's something that's written in the stars from day one. That's how it was for Bisco and me, and for him and Milo, too.

So I'm sure you don't want to hear this, but I suggest, well, giving up?

"You wouldn't happen to know a guy, would you? Someone who lives up to their words, with a pretty face...rich, of course, tall...heck, it can be a woman, for all I care! I just want someone who won't lie to me, and someone I don't have to lie to back..."

So someone who's the complete opposite of you, is what I'm understanding.

Well, I don't know why you're asking me. Why not speak to Bisco or Milo about this? I'm sure they have some advice.

"Are you even listenin' to me?! ...Whoa, Actagawa! Look out!"

Oh boy.

Casting my focus ahead, where Tirol is pointing, I spy a school of razor-billed

drillfish coming our way.

Now, a few dozen razor-billed drillfish are no match for my stout carapace, as I'm sure everyone knows. The problem is...

"Gyaaaah!! They're comin' for me! Heeelp!!"

The fish leap out of the ocean in concert, ready to slice the jellyfish to ribbons, when...

*Ka-whamm!*

One sweep of my greatclaw is all it takes to send those fish packing.

"Whoa..."

Then I dip my face into the water and unleash a storm of bubbles. The bubbles trap the drillfish like birds in cages, sending them floating off harmlessly toward the ocean floor. Any remaining specimens are so utterly intimidated by this display that they flee for safer waters immediately.

"W-wow..."

The jellyfish upon my back seems awfully surprised. I took out a few small fry; that's all. You've watched me fight cities and the like, have you not? I'm a crab of mettle, grit, and vigor, and I dare say I could give Bisco a run for his money in the brains department, too.

"...Wait a minute... It's you..."

What's me?

"Strong and silent. Never tells a lie. It's you, isn't it? The man I've been searching for..."

Wh...?

Wh-wh...?

What on *earth* is she talking about?!

"I'm right, ain't I? You're the only one I can trust! The only one who doesn't lie like all the others!"

Well, that's because I can't talk, for one.

“I...I guess it’s only fair that I do the same to you. Okay, Acty, I’m gonna make you a promise! No matter who I cheat and swindle, I’m only ever gonna tell you the truth!”

...That’s a joke, right? I never did understand human humor... Oh no. She’s serious, isn’t she? I can see it in her eyes... Is it really that painful a promise to make?!

“I’ve made up my mind, Acty! I’m gonna buy you off Akaboshi! I dunno how much it’ll take, but I’ll save up a billion, trillion sols! All so I can make you mine!!”

Where did all this purpose suddenly come from?! Just a few seconds ago, you were all but ready to give up the ghost!

Tirol grips the reins with practiced ease, like she’s known me for ten years already. Her jellyfish hair and golden eyes shimmer amid the sea spray.

Oh boy. It’s tough being this popular, I tell you.

Looking over my shoulder at Hokkaido only reminds me of that fact.

Still, I can’t say I dislike the absurdity of some of these humans. It keeps things from getting too boring, you know? And I’m sure Tirol will soon tire of this charade and move on. I don’t mind keeping her occupied until then.

I slacken the reins a little in response.

“You’re the best, babe!”

It seems that Tirol interpreted that as acceptance and sprawls herself front-down on my forehead.

“I got a lotta lies to make up for,” she says. “I’m gonna start by coming clean. One a day, and I’ll be pure of heart in no time! Let’s start with my height. Truth is, I been paddin’ it. I’m actually only four foot nine...”

Who cares?!

\* \* \*

“Everyone be quiet! If you’ve come to pay a visit, please line up in an orderly fashion!”

New Kaso Prefecture, on the southern island of Kyushu, was the location of the recently built Benibishi royal palace. There, in a hospital room decorated in celebratory colors, stood all the heroes of modern Japan, packed in like sardines!

“Did you not hear Nekoyanagi’s words? Put away that flower, young miss, before you poke somebody’s eye out.”

“I will not be told what to do by a loathsome stray. Shut your mouth, cat, before I turn my Lion’s Crimson Sword upon you.”

“You dare speak to me that way, child?”

“I do, in fact!”

“Please stop this! Miss Shishi, ma’am, you are a king now! You must not resort to petty bickering!”

“If you say so, Amlí, then I shall let it rest. You know I value your input, my dear...”

“Oh, Miss Shishi, ma’am... Not while everyone’s watching...”

*What is wrong with them?!*

“It’s packed in here.”

“That’s all your fault.”

*Pop-pop-pop.*

“Huh?”

“It’s a crab.”

““Let us ooout!!””

“Be quiet, you fungal fools! Just sit still and don’t make a noise!!”

“My, it’s so awfully dreary in this place. Shall I use my magic to replace the walls with solid gold?”

“Preposterous! Where is your sense of class?! I shall use my Florescence to add a few tasteful cherry blossoms here and there, and...”

“Ouya! Are you insane?! This is a hospital room! It’s not supposed to look

tasteful!"

"Let me show these whippersnappers how a *real* ritual dance is done! *Three hundred fifty years of a human life...*"

"Stop misquoting *Atsumori*, Grandpappy! And stop dancin'. Your hair's gettin' everywhere!!"

"Gg..."

"Grr..."

"Everyone SHUT UUUUP!!"

Suddenly able to take no more of this nonsense, Pawoo overpowered her concerned relatives and stood atop her bed, her raven hair floating and coiling like angered vipers. She cast everyone in the room a deadly glare, made all the more deadly by the rainbow-colored beams that shot from her pupils!!

*Bzzz! Kaboom!!*

"""Aaaaagh!!"""

"Grrrrrr!!"

"Time out! Time out! Pawoo, calm down!"

It was Marie Akaboshi who intervened before Pawoo's superpowered rampage reduced the entire hospital to a smoldering wreck.

"And you lot, settle down!" she yelled at the gathered spectators. "Pawoo's filled with more Ultrafaith energy than you could ever believe! Stand there quietly and don't do anything to set her off!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

All of them stood to attention at Marie's rebuke. Pawoo, meanwhile, fell back into bed, panting and sweating profusely.

"Urgh..." she groaned. "Milo... Bisco...!"

"We're both here!" cried Milo, gripping her hand. "I don't like this... The Ultrafaith bursts are growing quicker, and Pawoo's getting weaker. Marie, what do we do?!"

“I’m already doing everything I can,” replied Marie, placing her palm on Pawoo’s belly, infusing the powerful Ghost Hail spores into the womb. Chaika clung to Marie’s other hand, supplying her with Hokkaido’s energy.

“The Ultrafaith in Pawoo’s womb is out of control,” said Marie. “I don’t understand. It’s supposed to be protectin’ the kid, but at this rate, it’s a danger. Not just to him and the mother, but to the whole world!”

“What do we do, Bisco...? Come to think of it, how are you so calm?!”

“Don’t disturb me!”

Bisco, the man of the hour, was the only one not on his feet in a panic like the other grown-ups. Instead, he sat on the floor, legs crossed and eyes closed, hands fixed in a symbolic gesture. He looked for all the world like a statue of the Buddha himself!

“Of course the kid is gonna be anxious if his parents are panicking, ain’t that right, Sugar?”

“Bab-bam! Right you are, Papa!”

Sugar sat atop Bisco’s shoulders, mimicking the exact same pose.

“The baby’s scared of his own power,” she explained. “The Ultrafaith won’t be appeased until we’re all calm. I’m impressed by how much you know, Papa!”

“Well, he’s my second kid. I’ve learned a lot.”

“But that doesn’t help!” lamented Milo. “There’s still nothing we can—!”

“Yes, there is!”

Bisco’s eyes flared open, and he shot his partner a meaningful glare. Milo stared in shock for a few seconds, then at last he realized what it was that Bisco was trying to say.

“Of course! We need to...”

“...give it a name!””

Everyone turned in shock at the pair’s sudden outburst. However, what they were saying made perfect sense. After all, it was only after Milo named his daughter that Sugar was able to manifest in reality. Just then, a third voice

came forward in their support: that of the cotton-brained head priest, Ochagama.

"Indeed. The holy child has not yet decided upon a form, and so his power runs rampant. Perhaps if you two can think of a name, something to ground the boy in reality and connect him to this world, then..."

"O-of course!" said Marie. "All right, Bisco, you're the kid's dad; come up with somethin'!"

"...I can't!"

"“Whaar?!”"

Bisco climbed to his feet and folded his arms. "For hours now, I've been meditatin', rackin' my brain for the perfect name... But I can't think of one!"

His eyes flared open, and the unwarranted pride in Bisco's statement caused Milo to stride over and knock him upside the head.

"Guh! What was that for?!"

"How long have you had to think of something?! You can't flake out on us now!!"

"You think I been slacking off, asshole? Look at me! I ain't had a decent night's sleep in days! This name's gonna stay with the kid for life! I gotta take it seriously!!"

"M-Milo...!" came Pawoo's weakened voice from her hospital bed. "Please don't be so hard on Bisco... I asked him to let me come up with the name...but I can't do it. I don't have enough faith. I can't think of a name that will decide his form for the rest of his life!"

"Pawoo! It's okay, don't worry about it; it's bad for your body!"

Meanwhile, Sugar looked from her mother's face to Pawoo's and made up her mind.

"...All right," she said. "First, we gotta make sure the baby feels at ease. We can use mine and Papa's powers for that!"

"...We can?" asked Bisco, uncertain. "How?"

"It's simple!" replied Sugar with childlike innocence. "We just need to send you inside Pawoo's belly! You ready?"

"I'm always ready! ...Wait, what? Send me where?"

"Mare!! Come on out!!"

Sugar raised her hand, and a stream of seawater came up through the floorboards, engulfing her. While the whole room panicked, Sugar mimicked Mare's signature pose and poked a finger at Bisco.

"Take him to meet the baby, Mare!" she said. "And Mommy! You take care of Pawoo, okay?"

"Whaat?! Sugar, where are you going?!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" cried Bisco, suddenly flustered. "Can I take it back? Maybe I'm not ready after all!"

"Direct Delivery! *Life Ocean Streeeeeam!!*"

At Sugar's yell, the seawater scooped up Bisco and lifted him into the air!

"Waaagh?!"

Everyone watched in shock as the miraculous Life Ocean Stream shrank Bisco down to the size of a drop of water, and before he had time to react, he disappeared into Pawoo's belly button.

"Rrrrgh?! I can feel something...inside me!?"

"Try to stay calm, Pawoo! It's okay; it's only your husband!"

"How does that make it okay?!?!"

Their voices grew fainter and fainter as Bisco disappeared deeper into the confines of his wife's body, ferried upon Mare toward the nascent consciousness of the unborn child!

"Whoaaaaaa!?"

"Oof!?"

Bisco landed with enough force to break his neck...but to his surprise, the surface upon which he fell was as soft as a cloud, causing Bisco to bounce back

in the air a few times before finally coming to rest.

“Urgh...”

Unable to stand, Bisco surveyed his new environment.

*Where the hell am I...?*

He was lying in a featureless plain that seemed to stretch on forever. No trees, no sky, just endless white. While the isolation terrified Bisco, it also seemed to offer comfort, causing Bisco to think that perhaps this was how the unborn child saw the world.

Still splayed out front-first on the ground, Bisco took it all in, as a mysterious wind ruffled his hair.

*Pitter-patter pitter-patter.*

...?

Bisco heard a strange noise, then felt a soft sensation on the back of his head. A mysterious pair of hands examined Bisco’s neck and face, and then... *Pop!*

The *thing* leaned down off Bisco’s head and peered into his face.

“Who are you?” it asked.

“Waaagh?!”

Bisco was so shocked, he flipped over onto his back. The *thing*, whatever it was, dexterously hopped onto his chest and began pinching Bisco’s cheeks with its soft, flabby hands.

“Whoa, what the hell’s goin’ on?!”

“Hee-hee-hee!”

“Are you like...a spirit baby or somethin’? No, wait, it’s you...!”

“Gaga?”

The being was roughly the shape and size of a baby, but from time to time, it would flicker like a flame or pop like a firework. Its form and color changed phantasmagorically from one second to the next. Only its jade-green eyes, the same as Bisco’s, were constant.

Bisco hesitated for a moment, but then he wrapped his arms around it.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked softly. “I’m your dad. I’ve been waitin’ so long to meet you.”

The thing stared into his eyes, unsure whether to trust Bisco’s words or not, and then...

“Hee-hee!”

...it fell gleefully into Bisco’s arms, nuzzling his chest. Bisco was taken aback by its sudden warmth, and then embraced his son, surprising even himself at his own tenderness.

“Good baby...!!”

Bisco could feel his child’s beating heart, proudly affirming his son’s existence. Love swelled in Bisco’s own chest, and he trembled, when all of a sudden, his son reached up and pulled his scarlet hair!

“Oww! What’s that for?! Cut it out!”

This highly amused the baby, who began giggling as sparks flew off him. Then, with a smile on his face, he pinched his father’s cheeks for a while, when suddenly, something seemed to frighten the poor fetus. He nestled into Bisco’s arms, causing Bisco to look around and see just what had spooked his son so.

Then, off in the distance, where pure-white earth met pure-white sky, there was a radiant glow of divine light!

*Bisco, my vessel. You have done well.*

The glow was blinding, overwhelming, and all-consuming. Bisco gritted his teeth and clutched his child to his chest. When at last his eyes could endure the brightness, he opened them, and standing there, he saw...

...a colossal divine figure, standing over him, arms crossed.

“Wh-who are...?!”

Bisco opened his lips to speak, but paused. For he already knew the being’s identity. He knew every one of the scars etched across its boulder-like surface. He knew them like he knew himself, for the being’s true nature was that of

Bisco's own reflection.

It was the shard of his own Ultrafaith that Bisco had passed on to his son!

*Indeed. You have come to call me by that name. I am power unending, will unending, life unending. You hold in your arms my future host. Now, offer him to me!*

Bisco nearly found himself floored by the god's awesome majesty. Its hair billowed like flame, and its eyes—fully jade, with no pupils—bored holes into Bisco's soul.

Bisco had come face-to-face with his own faith. It was the god inside him that he had spent his entire life cultivating. Its very aura was so powerful, so noble, that Bisco couldn't help but sink to his knees in reverence.

*P-power unending. Will unending. I see. I made this. And I trusted it to keep my children safe from harm, just like it does for Sugar.*

*S-so then...why do I hesitate? I should do it! I should give my child to this god...!*

“No... Noo!”

“?!”

“I don’t wanna!!”

Bisco’s son fidgeted in his arms, breaking Bisco out of his trance.

He looked down at the child. “...Of course!” he said. “I understand now! That’s why you’re upset!”

“I don’t wanna! I don’t wanna!”

“You don’t want the Ultrafaith power at all. You want to lead your own life, start from scratch and do everythin’ your own way! That’s what you been tryin’ to tell Pawoo this whole time!”

*“Bisco! Tell your child the truth! That it spurns me in its ignorance! Spurns infinite power!”*

Bisco looked down once more at the child in his arms, body tensed, eyes squeezed shut. Then he let him cling to his shoulder, while Bisco looked up with

a fire of determination in his eyes.

“Quit yellin’...”

*“Rejoice, Bisco! All your life you have sought the power to stand apart, the power to follow your own aims! Now you have the chance to give that opportunity to your child as well! Offer him my protection!”*

“Quit yellin’ at my son!!”

Bisco unhooked his emerald bow!

*“Do you not hear me, Bisco? I have come to grant your wish, to pass your way of life on to your descendants. Now, accept!!”*

“You’re the one who ain’t listenin’! He says! He doesn’t WANT YOU!!”

*Ka-chew!!*

A streak of light from Bisco’s bow impaled the giant’s face and bent him backward. A wave of power rushed outward, rippling Bisco’s cloak.

*“You would turn your bow upon yourself? Incorrigible fool. You can never defeat me...because I! AM! YOU!!”*

The divine giant, the amalgam of a lifetime of prayers, emitted an angered breath of spores. Upon contact with the ground, the spores exploded into rainbowshrooms that sent Bisco and his child careening off like a rubber ball.

“Waaaagh!!”

“Gagaaaa!!”

Bisco somersaulted in the air and landed on his feet, teeth bared. Summoning the Rust-Eater that dwelled in his blood, he prepared to unleash a miracle as he had so many times before...however!

“I-it ain’t workin’!!”

Bisco was unable to focus the kingmaker particles that lent him his holy strength! The Ultrafaith giant sucked them up out of the air before they could be of any use.

“That guy...he really *is* a reflection of myself.” Bisco looked down at his palms and at his foe. “If I power up, it only makes him stronger, too!”

*“Offer your child!!”*

The divine giant raised its arms, preparing to squash both Bisco and his unborn baby flat, when...

*Fwoop!*

...dozens of camellia vines suddenly sprouted from the ground, catching the giant's fists and holding them aloft!

*“Huh?!”*

*“Brother!!”*

Bisco heard Shishi's voice echo throughout the vast, empty space.

*“I'll hold off the Ultrafaith! Run!”*

*“Run?! Where to?! There ain't nothin—”*

*“Flourish! Lion's Crimson Sword!!”*

*“Out of my way!!”*

Shishi's blade protruded upward out of the earth, a hundred times larger than life, skewering the titan in the chest. But the Ultrafaith Giant snapped it and pressed on, lumbering after Bisco.

*“Allow me to assist, Miss Shishi, ma'am! Lend me your aid, Mr. Yukan, sir!”*

*“Very well!!”*

*““Won-nyandareber-gobika-snew!!””*

The earth shook, and a mountain of Rust rose up, taking the form of an enormous beckoning cat statue, which then grappled with the Ultrafaith god!

*“Meoooow!!”*

*“Out of my way, insects!”*

Meanwhile, Bisco ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction, carrying the baby and crying up into the featureless heavens.

*“C'mon, Pawoo! Give me a name!! The kid's rejectin' the Ultrafaith power! That's a crazy decision! We gotta give him a crazy strong name to match! A name to ward off danger, without relyin' on miracles!”*

“I see...”

Pawoo was drenched in sweat, panting heavily, but she managed to choke out the words.

“I hear you, husband. I understand now! He needs a name...oh, if only it didn’t hurt so much...I feel like it’s on the tip of my tongue!”

“Pawoo!!”

Milo clung to Pawoo’s bedside in concern. It was at that moment that Satahabaki burst through the door, wearing his frilly pink apron.

“This is no cause for ALAAARM!!” he yelled. “I have prepared something to give your body the nutrients it needs at this crucial time. Pray, Nekoyanagi, feed it to Pawoo post-haste!”

“Y-Your Honor?! What have you made?!”

“Why, it is cherry blossom ice cream.”

“You incompetent fool!” yelled Yokan, still funneling the catwisps into Pawoo. “I wondered where you’d gone. Don’t tell me you’ve been baking another of your sodium-filled monstrosities at a time like this?! An offering such as that is liable to make the poor woman lose her memory instead!!”

“I-it’s fine... I’ll eat anything... Give it here...”

Pawoo reached out and took the ice cream, popping it into her mouth.

“““Aaahh!!”””

...

*A strong name...*

*One that can ward off danger, without relying on miracles.*

*...Ward off danger... ...Wait.*

The next moment, Pawoo’s eyes flared open. The name hit her tongue like a message from God and worked its way to her lips.

“Of course! It’s strong and pure and wards off danger and carries the ocean’s protection! Bisco! I know what to name our child!!”

*“Nothing...can stand against me!!”*

*“Miaooooo?!”*

*Ker-rashhh!!*

The Ultrafaith giant swung a fist at the Rust cat, flattening it. Shishi's Florescence, Amlí's mantra, all had failed to stop it, and now nothing stood between the god and Bisco. It raised its arm in the direction of his fleeing form and flicked a single finger.

*Bwoom!*

*“Waah!!”*

A clump of mushrooms burst out of the ground, blocking Bisco's path.

*“There is nothing more powerful than the will of the Ultrafaith.”*

*“Dammit, we're screwed!”*

*“Your child will become a god and follow in your footsteps!!”*

*“Pawoo!! Please!! You gotta give this kid a name!!”*

*“Bisco!!”*

*“Huh? Pawoo!!”*

At last, Bisco heard his wife's voice. But already the giant's fist was bearing down on him, and there was no time left!

*“His name...is \*\*It...”*

The words of truth from Pawoo's lips were eclipsed by the strong winds descending on Bisco from all around.

*“What?! I can't hear ya!” he yelled. “What's his name?!”*

*“It wards off calamity! It carries the sea's protection!”*

*“What...?”*

Bisco lifted his chin and opened his eyes. In a flash, he knew what Pawoo meant. It seemed so simple now, as though somewhere deep down, he had known the answer to the riddle all along. Like it was destined.

“...Yeah.”

“Hwu?”

The baby in his arms flickered, as though he sensed what was coming. Intense sparks flew off him, and he looked up at his father. Bisco felt at peace.

*“This is the EEEEEND!!”*

He looked down at the baby in his arms and locked eyes with his own child.

“You’re salt,” he said. “Salt Nekoyanagi. Mine and Pawoo’s kid.”

*Fwoomp!*

“W-whoa?!”

A path was set. Skin and blood came together, granting the ephemeral baby a human form. The form of an individual...of Salt Nekoyanagi.

With one thumb stuck innocently in his mouth, the unborn infant extended its other hand toward the Ultrafaith god. From out of his soft, warm palm came a burst of mysterious energy, powerful enough to hold even the Ultrafaith at bay. The god’s fist hung in midair, powerless to come any closer.

*“Krh! Wh...what?! Impossible! I am the faith! All things are possible through me! Reality bends to my very whim! Why can I not move?!”*

“Daa-oo!”

*Crkcrkcrk!!*

“Gaaaaagh?!!”

The child slowly clenched his palm, crushing the Ultrafaith giant into a wastepaper ball. The god’s pupilless eyes went wide with pain and shock.

*“Your power...exceeds my own?! Impossible! There is no power greater than I! You are nothing but a powerless child! What did you do? What did you do to him, Bisco?!?!”*

“Wh-whoa...”

Bisco was at a loss for words. He peered down at his child, his adorable, pudgy-cheeked child, who felt no fear at all as he regarded the Ultrafaith god.

Right here and now, from before the moment of his birth, even, Salt Nekoyanagi was a child who chose his own path.

*“Make him stop! Stop him, Bisco!!”* cried the god as he was crumpled up into nothing. *“Do you not understand what’s at stake?! You created me! I am the essence of your life’s teachings! If I die here, your life’s work will end with you!!”*

“I guess so...”

*“Then make him stop!! He seeks to invalidate your life! To make all you’ve worked for in vain! To be born not as your son but a powerless human!!”*

“Yeah. He doesn’t share in my beliefs. He doesn’t need me. That’s what he’s tryin’ to say. But it’s strange; I don’t feel upset about that at all. In fact, I feel kinda happy... ’Cause ain’t that what every parent wants, deep down? Ain’t that right...Bisco?!”

“Y-you...”

*Crkcrkcrk!!*

Salt’s eyes flickered with light, and he tightened his fist.

*“...I give up. You’re a fool... But it’s that foolishness...that birthed me.”*

“Do it, Salt. Surpass me...and claim yourself!”

“Gaa...GAAA!!”

*“You have chosen hardship. You have chosen mortality. So be it. Start with nothing, live with nothing, and die with nothing...like the fools you are!!”*

In the moment before his demise, the Ultrafaith gave a ferocious, canine-baring grin. Then Salt closed his soft, weak palm, and the god shrank into microscopic particles before exploding outward with enough force to tear this mysterious space apart!

“Look out, Salt!!”

Bisco placed himself in front of his child and was engulfed by the explosion. As limitless white gave way to an all-encompassing rainbow glimmer, Bisco swore he could hear...

*Waah! Waah!! Waah!!!*

...his son's first newborn cry.

...

Bisco opened his eyes. He appeared to be sitting in a chair and felt a weight in his lap. When he looked up to see what it was, he found his daughter's big, bright eyes staring back at him.

"Yo," he said.

Sugar smiled the biggest smile in her life and yelled...

"Papa's awake!!"

Her million-decibel voice shattered his eardrums, causing Bisco to groan in pain.

"Daddy's awake!! Mommy, Pawoo! Daddy's awake!!"

"Bisco!"

Milo came running over, his brow slick with sweat. When he saw Bisco safe and sound, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Welcome back. And wakey-wakey."

"Yeah...wait! Milo, what about Pawoo?! And Salt, is he okay?!"

Marie, her hair a mess, came over and slapped her son on the forehead.

"Calm down. They're both fine," she said with a heavy sigh. "Thanks to Salt rejecting the Ultrafaith power, the birth was a breeze. Well, except for that up there."

She pointed to the ceiling, which now contained a perfectly round hole, smoking at the edges.

"What the hell?!"

"That's where the Ultrafaith escaped, into the sky," said Milo. "Anyway! Forget about that and smarten yourself up! There's somebody you have to meet!"

It almost seemed like Milo wasn't treating the former matter with the gravity it deserved. He quickly brushed Bisco's hair and gave a satisfied nod.

Bisco stood up out of his seat and nearly fell over. Milo helped him walk over to the bed where Pawoo lay. Everyone in the room turned to him. Some of them were crying, some smiling proudly...and at least one gave a dismissive click of the tongue. They were all people whose paths had once crossed with Bisco's, either on his side or against him.

And her.

"Bisco..."

"Pawoo!"

Bisco tried to run but instead stumbled over to her bedside.

"You're okay," he said, flashing a smile. "I don't believe you. You're insane!"

"And I don't believe you, dearest. How could you meet the baby before *me*?"

She placed a hand to his cheek, gazed into his jade-green eyes, and smiled coyly.

"It's not fair," she said. "I'll never forget this, you know."

"It was Sugar's idea!! And anyway, if I hadn't been there..."

"Ha-ha! We'll have time to argue about it later. For now, go and meet your son..."

At that moment, Sugar walked over, holding the swaddled babe tenderly.

"Here you go, Papa..." she said, offering him up. Bisco reached out and hesitantly, timidly, took the child in his arms, peering down into his soft face.

"Goo-ga!"

He could feel the baby's tiny heartbeat. His tiny life. The child looked up at his father, and though there was nothing funny about the situation at all...

"Yah-ha-ha-ha!"

...he giggled.



## **AFTERWORD**

Once, when I was in preschool, I tried to make a flip-book animation. I started with a clean sheet of paper, then drew picture after picture, one on top of the other, in an attempt to convey movement and action. By the end, all I had was one big, black, impenetrable mess!

I was scolded and told to take class seriously.

The young Cobkubo learned a valuable lesson that day. A single piece of paper can only capture a single image.

Children have to learn what can and can't be done through trial and error. What an exhilarating time it can be for them. As an embodiment of that natural wonder and thrill of exploration, I created Sugar.

I knew when I was writing her that it was important to ensure she didn't talk with the self-awareness of an adult. To that end, I attempted to mentally regress myself to childhood (which, let's be honest, didn't take much effort).

I feel like this book gets even more philosophical than the previous ones at times, but at the end of the day, it seems to be about whether or not to follow the path laid out for us.

All life is a relay race, of which we as individuals only play a very small part. The history our ancestors have built is far longer than any one of our lives, and the duty that each of us bears is heavy indeed. To trace that unbroken line of souls, to nurture what we are given, and to carry it into the future—does anyone truly realize what a pure and selfless task that is? Society (you lot) takes it for granted, but I want you to understand! All parents of the world, understand what a great service your children are doing for you!!

Anyway, it seems that was something I wanted to get off my chest with this volume. On the flip side, of course, is the choice to not carry on, to sever that connection. This, too, is a commendable choice. A brave one. To go, "*Who the*

*heck cares about the past? I wanna live my own life!"*

To forsake the blessings of your ancestors, to turn against them and live on in spite of their vengeful curses...in some ways, that is even harder and more painful than accepting them. These people fight alone in a world of shadow. They deserve nothing less than my undying love and respect. And so I wanted to dedicate a part of this book to them.

That would be all, but as it turns out, there's another chapter after this afterward. You see, I was having so much fun, I just couldn't stop writing. So I hope you'll stick with me for just a little while longer.

See you in the next one.

***—Shinji Cobkubo***

## **EPILOGUE**

*And so Sugar assumed her divine duties, providing validation, encouragement, and love to all the world's creatures. To this day, she is there, watching the circle of life play out again and again and again.*

*"Gaze upon a single moment*

*and see the face of eternity."*

*When you feel lonely, know that she is there.*

*She will not help you. She will not hold you. But she will smile upon you, as she smiles upon all things locked in the eternal cycle of life and death.*

...I did it.

Is that really it?

I guess...it is, isn't it?

A cool wind blew through the open window, ruffling the curtains.

*The end— Salt Nekoyanagi.*

With a final stroke, I laid down my pen, stretched my back, and reached for my tenth can of Red Bull. But just as my fingers closed around the ring pull, I realized I didn't need it anymore. I clumsily gathered up the papers of my manuscript and bundled them together before calling out to my trusty crab, Ryunosuke, playing on a miniature jungle gym.

"Ryu! Can you punch a hole for me?"

Ryu stopped what he was doing and scuttled over, hopping onto my desk and using his pincers to cut a hole in the top right corner of the paper.

I tossed him a small pineapple candy as a treat. Seeing him munch on it happily brought a smile to my face, while I bound the pages of my manuscript using a piece of string.

Four hundred characters per page. Three hundred and seventy pages. Bang-on the quota for the 24th Annual Kurokawa Nonfiction Award. This was my first time entering since becoming a professional writer.

Still, I wasn't really sure what I wrote qualified as nonfiction. I had no doubt some people out there would dispute it, but I conducted proper interviews and everything! Interviews! There aren't many people who are able to do that level of research, but networking is part of the job, I always say. Even if it is my own family...

Then again, Dad's memory was a little fuzzy on the details, and Mom only ever talked about the romance side of things. It was only Uncle Milo whose stories I could trust.

Well, let's just call it "artistic liberties," shall we?

I flipped through the pages of my work, feeling quite pleased with myself, when all of a sudden, an announcement came through on the AI speaker sitting in the corner of my room.

*"The time is now midnight."*

Ryunosuke hopped atop the small spherical device.

*"The weather forecast for April eleventh is as follows: Temperatures expected to drop as a cold wind makes its way down from Shimobuki Prefecture. There is a forty percent chance of rain, so don't forget your umbrellas..."*

I winced at the thought of the temperature getting any lower. My blood circulation was bad enough as it was.

Then I paused.

...The eleventh?

...The eleventh?!?!

"Oh no! I missed it!!"

The entire reason I had confined myself to solitude, possessed only by the desire to complete my manuscript...

...It was to make the April 10 deadline!!

I must have passed out at some point and somehow lost a whole day. I had planned to travel to the publishing house to submit my work in person, but at this time the place would be shut tight! Still, I grabbed my manuscript, pulled on my coat, and reached for the door handle, when...

“Saaalt!”

“Waaagh!!”

Somebody kicked open my door, in clear flagrance of the Do NOT DISTURB sign on the outside, sending me flat on my back! It was my live-in...oh, what's the word? Oh, yes! Housekeeper! It was my live-in housekeeper, Ms. Tsumugi.

“What's the matter, Ms. Tsumugi?” I protested. “Can't you see the sign?”

“There's a guest on the intercom!” she replied. “She wants to know if you're in!”

“Must be an editor from the publishing house. Send them away! They always keep me waiting for replies yet want to meet on a moment's notice!”

“It's not, I tell you! It's a cute little girl with red hair!”

For whatever reason, Ms. Tsumugi's eyes were red with tears, and she glared at me most harshly!

“I knew it!” she said. “You've been hiding a daughter, haven't you?!”

“Wh-what?!”

“She said you were her family! I didn't believe it at first, but then I saw her eyes: jade-green, just like yours!”

“C-calm down, Ms. Tsumugi! I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about!”

“I trusted you...”

As the tears streamed down her face, I could only wonder what I had done to deserve this.

“I'm going back to live with my parents,” she said. “Thank you for being such a wonderful employer...”

“Waaait! You can't leave, Ms. Tsumugi! What will I do without you?! I can't

even speak to a store clerk by myself without having a panic attack! Waaait! At least drop me off by the offices of Imihama Publications!!”

*Slam!!*

She departed, leaving me alone in the silence of my two-bedroom flat to ponder what had just happened.

“I can’t believe it...,” I muttered. “I can’t believe it... What...what was she so angry about anyway?”

Then, just as I’d scrambled to my feet, a weight on my shoulders caused me to collapse to the floor once again. Ryunosuke scuttled over to see what on earth all the commotion was about, and the five-year-old child on my front step grinned at him.

“Heya, Ryunosuke! How ya been?!” she said, flashing a peace sign.

“S-Sugar?! What are you doing here?!”

I peered up into the eyes of the mushroom god sitting atop me and squirmed like a frog.

“Did Sugar do something wrong?” she asked. “That lady was super angry!”

“It’s because of the way you look!” I retorted. “You’re my big sister! Showing up as a five-year-old girl is sure to cause confusion!”

“But you’re the one who called me. I had to hurry!”

“I...did...?”

It was then I realized. I realized how much my overloaded heart had been crying out for solace. More than enough to summon a god, at the very least.

“It’s been a long time since you wished for anything! Ten years already? I’ll grant you anything! What do you want?”

“A-any wish, you say...?”

The sight of my proud elder sister gave me hope. Perhaps, if I used the Ultrafaith power...

“N-no! I’m sorry you came all this way, but no!”

I was forced to put my foot down! There was no way that I, Salt Nekoyanagi, could resort to divine cajolery to make my book a bestseller! I had my pride as a writer to consider!

“I don’t need your miracles, Sugar! I will write on my own terms, with my own —”

“Maaaaare!!”

The girl didn’t even finish listening to my heartfelt statement! In response to her voice, seawater began welling up beneath us, lifting us into the air on a miraculous watery boat!

“Take us to the offices of Imihama Publications, Mare! Full steam ahead!”

“Hey! You read my mind! That’s not fair!”

*“God bless you, Salt Nekoyanagi! Rest assured, we will get your manuscript submitted on time. The pen truly is mightier than the bow, and I look forward to seeing how many votes your pen will gain, how many hearts your words will stir!”*

“I-I’m not writing anything like that! It’s just a little story...”

“Watch the house for us, Ryu!”

Sugar jabbed her finger at Ryunosuke, who raised a claw in salute. Sugar smiled, and as if in concert with her joy, the ship we were on began to sparkle rainbow-colored.

“Your claw’s starting to look like your dad’s!” she said.

*Pop-pop...*

“Time to set sail!!”

*Crashhh!*

The ship shattered the wall of my apartment, tracing a rainbow through the midnight sky.

\* \* \*

“Phew! One story, safely delivered!”

“Really...?”

Aboard Mare's ark once more, I peeked back over my shoulder at the hole we had just left in the side of the publishing house.

"All we did was break in and leave the manuscript on the front desk," I said with a sigh.

"Well, what else did you want me to do? Besides, none of this would have happened if you'd kept to your deadline in the first place!"

"Gulp..."

Fair point.

It had always been difficult for me to win an argument with my elder sister, who was in some ways an embodiment of truth. I could beat her at games, like Othello or mahjong, but she usually ended up turning all the pieces white, in a huff, so that it didn't matter. She always apologized after that, though, so I couldn't stay mad at her.

"So, Salt, what's your next book gonna be about?"

"Oh... I haven't thought about it."

"Why not?! And how come it takes you six months to write one when it only takes me a day to read?!"

"That's just the way it is!"

*"Sugar, you mustn't rush the poor man. He's only just finished his last work!"*

"But I like reading them!"

Sugar pulled out one of my past works, *Aurora Diver* (published by Hirukado Ltd.), and pointed at where I had clumsily scrawled my signature on the front cover.

"Mommy and Pawoo love your books! They always read them! Daddy does, too! Even though he tries to hide it, he buys every book the day it comes out!"

"Dad? You're lying. He can't even read properly!"

"He asks Mommy to explain it to him! He even talks about the story! Stuff like '*What do you think this means?*' or '*I think this guy's the villain!*' Mommy always gets mad at him for spoiling the plot twists!"

“Ha-ha-ha...”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I imagined the scene Sugar described.

“...Hey,” Sugar said. “When are you gonna start talking to Papa again?”

“I’m not angry with him or anything,” I replied. “The ball’s in his court.”

“That’s what Papa says, too.”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Fathers, eh? Can’t live with ’em... You know the rest.

But I’m glad to hear he’s happy.

“...I don’t have powers like you or Dad,” I said. “I left them in Mom’s stomach. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice...”

“...”

“But I’m happy now. You don’t need miracles to enjoy life, do you?”

“What are you saying, Salt? You make miracles all the time!”

“Huh?”

“Just having fun is a miracle!!”

*Fwoomp!*

The rainbow spores enveloped her, like her very joy taking form.

“My Mushy Magic Pole and Papa’s *Ultrafaith Bow* were both born from the fires in our hearts,” she explained. “Things that we enjoyed, things that made us happy... When all that comes together, a miracle is born!”

“...”

“And short and tiny prayers like yours...”

Sugar reached out with one pudgy finger and touched my chest. When she did, I felt an explosion of rainbow power in the depths of my heart.

“They’re the ones that burn the brightest. They’re the ones that bring us back to life, cause us to soar again, like an immortal phoenix...”

“...”

“...”

“...So? You in the mood to start writing yet?”

“...Why are you acting like you just convinced me? I was in the mood to write all along!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Good, then!”

The three of us sat on Mare’s boat as it crossed the sky, silhouetted against the moon like that one scene in *E.T.*

...

My sister has always been five years old. She can choose to be any age she likes, and time holds no meaning for her. Perhaps she’ll never die, either. I don’t know.

Is that a good thing or a bad one? I don’t know that, either. That’s for her to decide. All I know is...

...I ought to leave something of my moment to accompany her into eternity.

That’s part of the reason I became an author. To keep her amused, always thinking, “*When will the next one come out?*”

“*Salt!*”

Mare called out to me, as though he could read my thoughts.

*“I am very pleased you decide to write such entertaining tales. However, please try to keep them grounded in reality. If Sugar likes them too much, she could end up altering the world to match.”*

“Who cares?” Sugar protested. “If it’s fun, it’s fun! Don’t say things like that!”

“Do you prefer more fanciful stories, Sugar?” I asked.

“Of course I do!” she said, throwing her arms around my neck and peering directly into my eyes. “As fancy as possible! I mean, I like quieter stories as well, but what I really love is stories full of life! Running around the universe! All that!”

Life, running around the universe...

“...I see. In that case, I’ll write something more like that next time.”

“Really?!”

“Set five hundred years from now, in the Space Age.”

“The Space Age?!”

Sugar’s eyes sparkled like rainbows, brighter than the light of the moon itself!

“Yeah. When Mare has created billions of arks, allowing life to leave Earth and spread across the galaxy!”

*“Good man! That’s what I call ‘Manifest Destiny’!”*

“That sets the scene for a tale of galactic proportions! Intelligent life, laser guns, and light saber battles! Our heroes, the chosen warriors, will have to face their fears! What has become of the cradle of humanity, the planet Earth?! And what—?”

Her eyes.

“\_\_”

Her jade-green eyes, shimmering with dreams, never once looked away. Every time one of my words touched her heart, the wind ruffled her hair, scattering rainbow-colored particles into the night.

The sight of it was so beautiful to me that I couldn’t stop speaking. I continued with my story, as if in a trance.

The ark flew on. Whenever my story reached a major beat, the color of its trail would change.

An aurora stretched across the night, unseen, bequeathing light to the dreams of the people below.



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

THE BOY'S ADVENTURE CONTINUES  
TO THE GALAXY.

A long

time

from

now,

in a

galaxy

far, far

away...

# SABIKUI BISCO 9

My Star, the Star of Brahma

(subject to change)

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