

PATHS ACROSS THE SEA



The Voyage of Mikoro and Dari

as told by
Chaobang
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<http://www.aichaobang.com>



for Mikoro and Dari

Characters from a wide range of realities cross paths in this tale. While all characters, as people, belong to themselves, the author recognises the special rights of those they have chosen to represent them in the current reality such as through literature, video games and mythic tradition. In representing them in this text the author makes no claim against those rights, rather has sought only to humbly record their involvement in a spirit of love, respect and fair use towards the general improvement of humankind. More detailed acknowledgements and respects are offered at the end of the text due to the massive spoilers these necessarily contain.

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...a great wind came upon them, so that they were driven over the sea, all that night until morning. And even after morning they saw nor earth nor land, and they knew not whither they were going...

The Voyage of Mael Duin (*Immram Maíle Dúin*), c.1100 CE

Its summit towers above the Eastern Sea.
Red cliffs and strange rocks;
Beetling crags and jagged peaks.
On the red cliffs phoenixes sing in pairs;
Lone unicorns lie before the beetling crags.
The cry of pheasants is heard upon the peaks;
In caves the dragons come and go.

Journey to the West (西遊記 *Xī Yóu Jì*), attributed to Wu Cheng'en, c.1592 CE

Hello there.

Mm. Yes, you. Are you sure you're supposed to be here?

...Oh? A story? Ahh, I see! Well in that case...

What – my name? Which one? I have many names.

Hey. It's okay. I'm not throwing you out. That's not how things work in these parts. It's just that...you do know not many of you make it all the way out here?

...Are you okay?

Well of course you aren't. By the stars, the things they've done to your reality...

Hey. You don't have to hide it. Not out here. It hurts, I know. Of course it hurts. Of course they don't understand.

Still – you're here now. It's going to be okay. I promise you.

I know, I know. They always say that. Don't take it from them. Take it from someone who has...mm, a little knowledge of these things, shall we say.

I mean, you've found your way out here, haven't you? Why that's proof of the matter!

You don't understand? Well, that's to be expected. You will, though. You will.

...This? Oh don't mind this.

Well, what does it look like?

Yes. Water. No really, that's all it is. Here – see? An ordinary bowl of water. Nothing dubious about – no no, don't touch! Let me just...put it down over there.

There we go.

So. Your troubles. Let's see then. How about...a cake?

Oh no, I'm quite serious. Come, come. I wouldn't make light of your strife. Of course I don't mean just any cake.

...What? Yes of course it's a real cake. All cakes are real, didn't you know?

A better question might be: Which reality?

And the answer, in this case, is...there. The cake you want is in that reality right there.

Do you see it, with the little shining star on top?

Go on. Follow the star. You might be surprised where it leads.



PART ONE
THE CAKE

There stood the cake, three storeys high, sweet supremacy in a coat of half-inch icing. From its levels and creamy parapets, white as powder snow, rolled turquoise cliffs that were surely the very aurora reborn in mint and sugar. A sleet of chocolate sprinkles glittered in edible silver as it caught the chandelier's light and danced with it; and mounted upon the summit, what could only have been a genuine star, the softest, sweetest, sparkliest star in the universe, a yellow beacon to light your way to the peak of this heavenly mountain.

It never stood a chance.

Two pointy furry cat-ears twitched as they rose on a mass of pink hair. Beneath its scruffy bangs, a pair of naughty amber eyes transfixed on this marvel. From that moment, the moment it found itself caught in that gaze, a gaze so innocent – so innocently *ravenous* – the cake was doomed.

“Aaa-AAHMF! Aaamf...aahmm...amff...mmfh...”

The empty husk of a sugar-star fell with a *clink!* Nothing beside remained. Beyond the debris of crumbs, boundless and bare, the lone and level platter stretched far away.



Ibaraki Rin, director of the Chaldea Academy, glanced up at the double doors of her office as the definite din of an argument drew closer and closer.

“No! You have to take responsibility!”

“Let go of me Kiyoko! It wasn't my fault! Nyaaah!”

The doors burst open and in they tumbled, rolling, grappling, snarling across the carpet, spun together by the sheer energy of their quarrel into a singular mass of tumultuous pink and gold.

“Nyyy-rarr! Let – me – GO!”

“Oh my!” gasped Rin, and she hastened across the room to intervene. “My dears! What's this about?”

The scuffle settled at her approach. That tended to happen. Mother Rin, as everyone called her, exuded such gentle serenity as to soothe any conflict she touched.

It was a shame there was only one of her, really.

The dust cleared to reveal her two adopted daughters. The elder, a tall young woman with the ears and tail of a golden fox, had her face set as far as it could go toward the stern end of its spectrum. She had the younger pink-haired cat-girl gripped by the shoulders as through presenting her for sentencing, her red-faced sullenness belied by naughty smears of chocolate and white-and-green icing.

“Mikoro? Kiyoko? Come, this isn’t like you! What could possibly have you fighting like this?”

“She ate it,” declared Kiyoko, with the gravity of someone reporting a murder. “All of it. I turned my back for just one moment, just to go to the – ”

“Aaahh, how was I supposed to know it was special?” Mikoro protested, struggling under her sister’s rock-like grip. “You can’t leave such a delicious-looking cake on the table and expect it not to get eaten!”

“You *knew* you weren’t supposed to eat it, you gluttonous cake-monster!” Kiyoko fumed. “Did you think I didn’t see your ears through the window? You *waited* till I left the room, as you knew I’d eventually have to, and as soon as I did...”

She tightened her hold as she spoke, but hearing her sister cry out, realised she hadn’t meant to and let go. Immediately Mikoro flung herself into her adopted mother’s arms and burst into tears.

“Oh, there there,” Rin consoled her, stroking the cat-girl’s waterfall of tresses. “It’s okay, Mikoro dear. Shhh. It’s going to be alright.”

Rin embraced her long and tight, communicating with Kiyoko through a wordless exchange of expressions. There was no hurry.

The sobs subsided into sniffs.

When and only when she felt Mikoro was ready, she began the investigation.

“Now Mikoro. I would like you to tell me the truth, okay?”

“I’m sorry Mother...I c-couldn’t – I couldn’t help it...”

Kiyoko and Rin exchanged glances again. They both saw it – the one’s frustration, the other’s concern. This was a serious matter. Had it been snacks from their own larder, or even the Academy’s supplies, well, that would have been recoverable. Goodness knows it happened often enough. But it was nothing trivial this time, and they both knew it.

Still, they also knew it could have been the last cake on Earth and it would still have been unfair to penalise Mikoro. Her voracious habits came not from greed but from certain magical procedures which, by tradition, members of the Ibaraki family undertook at an advanced stage in their training, the same procedures for that matter which empowered them with the features of other animals. Rin herself

for example had a cat's ears and tail much like Mikoro's, only midnight-black to match her long silken hair. Kiyoko had taken on the aspects of a golden fox. But in Mikoro's case she'd lost control, and the process had gone on a little longer than it was supposed to – no doubt, the others teased her, because she was already so feline in her fixating tendencies and hyperactive appetite for mischief. As it happened, it had left her with an even more considerable dose of cattitude: an adorably harmless pair of fangs, a playfulness that oscillated from bubbly to ballistic, and of course, a stomach which absolutely had to catch and play with everything tasty in sight.

And everyone.

All organisations have quirks unique to their cultures, and in this case the predilection of the senior women of the Chaldea Academy for the safe and comfortable shrinking and swallowing of their friends, be it for bonding, training, relaxation or troublemaking, had splashed excitement across a thousand newspapers, canvases and academic journals. Needless to say, no-one had done more to contribute to this curious custom than the pink-haired cat girl whose stomach was the present target of scrutiny.

“Nyaah...” Mikoro's face burrowed into Mother Rin's chest again. “Nyaah...my head hurts...”

“Ohh of course it does, you naughty,” said Kiyoko. “There must have been enough cake there for a hundred people! You're lucky all that sugar didn't send you to hospital!” She placed her palm over her face and sighed. “Oh Mikoro. What are we going to do with you?”

As if in answer there came a solid sequence of knocks – and they all looked to the doors to watch a striking figure in dark leather armour come striding into the office. A weathered but hardy travelling cloak trailed from her back, and under her arm was a hefty bag of supplies.

“Ready to set sail at a moment's notice, Lady Rin,” she announced – Hebridean tones, soft, susurrant, though there was no mistaking the bedrock of gneiss beneath her vowels. Her lips parted as she read the scene before her, though only for an instant, then her composure returned at once. “Ah – Mikoro, Kiyoko. Am I interrupting something?”

Mikoro sniffled. Her cheeks were red and wet with tears, but she was too curious not to ask: “Nnhf...set sail?”

“Ah, thank you Scáthach,” said Rin, urgently considering what to do as she glanced between her daughters and the erstwhile warrior-queen of Skye who,

after a long and convoluted series of events – that is, *very* long and convoluted – had come to offer her formidable expertise to the Academy.

“Yes. Right. Well – I’m afraid the plan seems to be changing as we speak. My darling Mikoro has eaten the key.”

Mikoro swung round to stare at her, now thoroughly confused.

“Key? Wha...what key? Was there a key in the cake? I didn’t taste a key!”

“Is that so?” Scáthach frowned and crossed her arms, but showed no further sign that this news perturbed her.

“Hey! Why are you all looking at me like that?” Mikoro spun round and round in dismay, pinned in this triangle of inspective gazes. “I’m being honest!” she insisted. “I would have been able to taste it if there was a key, and I promise you I didn’t! It was all just sugar and chocolate and – and – cakey stuff!”

“I knew it,” Kiyoko groaned. “Oh Mikoro, what have you done this time?”

“Aahh, I didn’t! I didn’t!” Mikoro stamped her foot as her eyes began to water again. “I don’t – I don’t understand...”

“If I might offer a suggestion,” stated Scáthach in a strong, clear voice – a timely interjection backed up by millennia-old instincts as an instructor to rowdy warmongering Gaels. “If Mikoro *did* eat the key, we are left with but a single course of action.”

All three of them focused on her expectant.

She cleared her throat.

“Mikoro must make the voyage.”

“Wha?!” the Ibarakis gasped in unison, and they all talked at once: “Oh dear. Are you sure that would be safe?” “Her? Oh no, no, you can’t be – ” “Wawawa – voyage? Wha...wha...what voyage?”

Scáthach shut her eyes, her face meditative, and waited. Rin was the fastest to come to her senses, and above the renewed kerfuffle between her daughters, she and the warrior-queen exchanged resolved glances.

“Show them?” Scáthach mouthed, unrolling her finger at them.

Rin nodded. She opened a drawer on her desk and collected her keys.



The Ibaraki family boatyard sat on one of the port district’s finer pieces of real estate. Most of its vessels were bespoke sea monsters: built to eye-watering specifications, bedecked in the very latest in navigational instruments, and packed

prow to stern with enough hidden compartments as to leave no complaint even for Mikoro's secret-chocolate storage needs. That said, few of them sat at their berths at any one time. Mother Rin constantly had them away on trusted humanitarian commissions: disaster relief, refugee assistance, search and rescue, and perhaps a spot of 'special research'. If that meant the boatyard operated at a tremendous loss, well, it was all to the public good, the family had plenty of other concerns to cover it, and you never knew, in Rin's line of work, when swift access to the sea might prove essential.

"The week before last," Rin explained as she led her daughters along the well-maintained wooden wharves, "I received a letter from a dear friend who lives a very long way away. She happened to be working on a...experimental watercraft, but there was an incident, and it drifted away. As we were her closest liaisons to where it ended up, she asked for our help in securing it."

Mikoro stopped for some reason, and Kiyoko gave a start as she walked straight into her back. A moment of panic ensued as the two of them balanced on the walkway.

"Ahh, for goodness's sake Mikoro, don't do that!"

But Mikoro was in a mopey mood and ignored her sister's rebuke. "Mweh. Why does it feel like it's only me who wasn't told?"

"Begging your pardons, young master," said Scáthach, bringing up the rear with her sack of supplies. "You have my assurance that it was not only you. This was a matter of the highest sensitivity, so knowledge was restricted first to Lady Rin as the correspondent, and second to me as the one she charged with the vessel's return."

Mikoro wasn't convinced. "But you told Kiyoko too, right?"

"No they didn't," said Kiyoko. "I was only brought in to guard the - aahh come on, don't keep stopping! Are you trying to make us both fall in?"

"I suppose the matter of the cake warrants further explanation," Scáthach went on, cool as an iceberg. "Lady Rin's acquaintance lives somewhere...not entirely accessible. You cannot fly there or travel by ordinary ships. We were informed that the craft in question is specially equipped to find its way there, so would best be returned by piloting it in person."

"Huh." Mikoro stood baffled.

"That's why I chose Scáthach to do it," Rin put in with a smile. "She's one of the Academy's most experienced seafarers, with expert knowledge of...hmm...the kinds of waterways we're dealing with here. But they couldn't just send us the key. Too much of a risk if it were intercepted."

“What, so they sent a cake instead?” The bemused Mikoro halted again, to an exasperated holler from her sister.

“Careful dear!” Rin hastened back, carefully swapped places with Mikoro, and from there shepherded her safely along in front. “Now. I’m sure that when you ate the cake, you noticed the little yellow star on top?”

“Um...nope. I think I ate it too fast.”

Her mother gave a tender smile. “Well, that was the key.”

“Part of the cake was a key? But if it’s gone in my tummy...”

“It’s a little tricky to explain, dear. Instead of sending a physical key, she delivered it in the guise of that decorative star-shaped sweet. It has a unique energy signature, so the ship should recognise whoever absorbed it and allow them access to its systems. My friend is...creative like that, and as you’ve learnt, she bakes terribly good cakes too. I was going to give the star to Scáthach, then share out the rest of the cake with you, Kiyoko, little Sayuri and the students, but then, well...”

“Aaww! Why didn’t you just tell me about it?”

“And what happens,” came Kiyoko’s voice from behind her, “when someone tells Mikoro there’s a cake?”

“That isn’t fair! At least I would have known!”

“Well!” announced Rin loudly, to head off any trouble that might end in a loud splash. “Look – here we are.”

She approached a shelf of fishing equipment, flipped open what looked like a simple tin, and placed her fingertip on the biometric scanner concealed inside. To a satisfying tune of beeps, not unlike what you’d expect at the end of a rice cooker cycle, it then caused Mikoro to jump in surprise – even took Kiyoko aback – as with a mighty grinding of gears, the wall receded, shelves and fishing nets and canoe racks and all, and slid away to reveal a hidden chamber.

“What’s this?” said the astonished Kiyoko. “I never knew we had something like – ”

“Aaahh, it’s dark! I can’t see anything!”

“Be patient, Mikoro! Stand still and wait for Mother to turn on thaAAAGH! – nnaahh Mikoro, that was my foot! Ohh, you incorrigible little...”

“Steady now,” came Scáthach’s stabilising voice. “Do you have it, Lady Rin?”

“Just a second – yes! Here we go.”

A heavy *thunk!* as her hand flipped a master switch – then a electrical sputter, followed by a whirr and cascade of snaps as great spotlights burst to life. A water

gate rolled up and away, admitting rays of pale sunlight, as the secret dock's arrangement of little cranes and digital panels stirred from their slumber. The chamber was much smaller than the main section, containing only one berth, with just enough room –

“Nyaaaaah! It's *cuuuute!*”

...for a single vessel.

The vessel in question, now complete with hyperactive pink-haired cat-girl tapping and prodding each part she could reach, appeared to be a wooden affair in a fibreglass coat painted all white save for its turquoise gunwales. It was little, perhaps five or six metres in length and scarcely two across, but its dominant feature, which had doubtless done the most to merit Mikoro's outburst, was a prow in the shape of a giant rabbit's head. Its face was endearingly chubby with large oval eyes, a projecting nose, and a single square tooth protruding from its mouth. It somehow managed to be every bit as adorable as warranted Mikoro's level of excitement while retaining an air of dignified mystique. If she stood on the deck – and she did – the top of its head came up to her chest, so anyone of her height or taller could have kept a clear view over the top. Yet on either side it continued to rise, upward and upward along two great ears whose zigzagged tips, splashed yellow as the sun, flopped ever so slightly forward.

A golden knob of a tail stuck out from its stern.

“This...” Kiyoko found her voice at last. “This is no ordinary boat, is it? Who exactly...?”

But she did not get the chance to finish this question, because it was at that moment that Mikoro, poking the bunny's cheek in a bliss of giggles, gave a startled scream and flung herself back against the wall as the rabbit-ship rattled awake in the water.

An enchanted hum, like that of a gentle air-conditioning machine but somehow *illuminated*, if a sound could be described that way, seemed to indicate the ship was now online. Its eyes shot out a pair of headlight-beams the colour and texture of pollen – on and off, once, twice, three times. Wood brushed on wood as its knob of a tail twitched. The peaks of its ears beeped in quick succession. And then at last, a plank in the deck slid aside, and from the gap emerged a tall white mast, its gold-disc cap glinting bright in the chamber's spotlights till it attained full height and there set loose a gorgeous sail: a triangle, lavender, with a turquoise shooting-star design.

Mikoro stood spellbound. “Waaaah...!”

So did Kiyoko, albeit at lower volume.
Bluegreen calligraphy glowed to life on the hull:

Sea Bunny

“Aahh, I want to ride it! I want to ride it!”

Mikoro standing still was a condition rarely observed and never for long. It was safe to say that any guilt, confusion and over-sugared achings were well and truly forgotten.

“As we thought,” said Scáthach. “You absorbed the energy-key, so your proximity seems to have activated it. That makes you the only pilot it will allow.”

“Yaaaaaay!” The cat-girl’s hair – long like the others’ but full of loose curls and scruffy bits – soared behind her as she leapt back on deck in a single bound, then threw out her arms for balance as the vessel wobbled beneath her loafers, bunny-head and all.

At this point Kiyoko, whose concern for her sister could not have been more sincere, hurried over to Rin. The latter for her part stood admiring her daughter’s energy with a smile that the senior daughter found far too lacking in the necessary apprehension.

“Mother,” she spoke urgently. “Look at this ship. It’s not a toy, is it? And you say we’ve been trusted with its safe delivery. Are we seriously going to let Mikoro take it off by herself? How many times has she even been on a ferry?”

“Hmm? Well, she does love swimming in the sea,” answered Rin, as though that made everything alright.

Kiyoko fell speechless and watched with the other two. Now Mikoro was flipping open the little hatches round the edge of the deck, lowering her face into one after another and squealing in excitement, for all they knew because of how many muffins she could cram into each compartment.

“Oooh, there’s a refrigerated one! Yaaay! Ice cream!”

“Aaahh, I don’t get how you can be so relaxed about this!” Kiyoko flung her arms in the air then turned on Rin with hands on hips. “Where is she even supposed to take it? What if she gets lost, or falls in the sea, or runs it onto some rocks? And you know the waves on the open ocean are no joke! I mean, look at it – it’s barely

bigger than she is! Don't you think we should think about this? I know Mikoro isn't a kid anymore, but this is too much!"

But Rin wore that same warm smile as on every occasion she had consoled her daughters through their distresses over the years; a smile which, if ever you had the fortune to bask in it, would be your comfort that all sufferings would fade and the sun rise anew on the most beautiful of mornings.

It was enough to cause Kiyoko to check herself. She took a long, deep breath. Then another. Surely if Mother Rin could be so tranquil about the matter, then there was no possibility that Mikoro would come to harm?

"Trust me dear. I'll explain everything when we get back to the Academy," said Rin with a wink.

That would have sufficed for most people, but Kiyoko's love for her little sister demanded absolute satisfaction.

"Look, how about – " She stopped. Reconsidered; but she knew she had to. "What if I go with her? Or if Scáthach goes?"

"Yeah, why don't you come with me?" Mikoro jumped in, having disembarked and come running up on suspicion that they were talking about her. "I know there's not much space, but we can take turns riding in each others' tummies! Come on, sis! It'll be fun!"

But Scáthach shook her head. "I am afraid it does not quite work like that," she said. "A journey such as this must be made alone."

The warrior-queen's tone had taken on an unnerving solemnity. Mikoro and Kiyoko both blinked.

The younger sister spoke first. "Um. What do you mean, *a journey such as this?*"

A strange hush had fallen over the little dock. All of a sudden they could barely hear the whirr of its electrical systems, and even the eager hum of the ship seemed stifled into the background.

"Have you not noticed?"

Kiyoko *had* noticed in fact, but had suppressed her nagging suspicions thus far under her quite righteous concern for her sister's welfare. But now that she forced herself to pay attention, she found it worthy of note that the hidden door through which they'd stepped was pitch-dark on the other side; that although it had been mid-afternoon when they'd arrived, the shafts shining in through the sea gate carried the pale light of dawn; and that the water beyond that gate was not the calm, still water of the enclosed city harbour but the choppy and endless expanse of the open sea.

She stifled a chill. “This...isn’t just a backroom, is it? This is one of *those* spaces...”

“Well discerned, young master. Now I would ask you to pay attention for a moment Master Mikoro, for as you have taken this mission unto yourself, it is my obligation to impart on you all you must know to complete it.”

And Mikoro did listen, because now Scáthach seemed to speak with a voice native to this strange *other realm* they had entered, and its tone, bearing the weight of centuries, commanded awe.

“The *Sea Bunny* carries enchantments that will see you swift to the shores of its creator, perhaps within two hours if the wind is favourable. You may turn the tiller to steer, but should not feel the need to alter its course unless strictly necessary. So long as you remain on board or within range of your ship, no waves shall sink it, no reefs shall slow it down, and no ordnance of any kind shall breach its hull.”

“Oh?” said Mikoro. “That sounds kinda easy. Nyaah, I’m excited!”

“Wait. There are prohibitions...”

Mikoro’s smile faded instantly. “Aaww, no fair!”

“...prohibitions,” Scáthach continued, “which pertain to any crossing made at this level of reality. However, considering that this is a straightforward sea journey, I do not expect any of these should trouble you. Nonetheless I am duty-bound to make you aware of them.”

She cleared her throat, and recited off by heart: “You are not to kill birds.”

“What do you mean?” Mikoro interrupted, aghast. “Of course I won’t kill birds!”

“Hush!” hissed Kiyoko, placing a hand between Mikoro’s pointy ears and rubbing her fingertips into her scalp. “Let her finish!”

“You must not kill birds. You must never hunt the Colourful Beast of Karbo. You must never sleep in a house from which the fur of a fox’s tails can be seen through the spokes of a cart. You must never settle a dispute between two alternate-universe counterparts. You must never enter a red house after three red things. You must never spend more than nine consecutive nights away from your vehicle. You must never go sunward around the Jora Bora Mountains, nor against the turn of the sun around the Seven Pinnacles of Stiff.”

Mikoro batted her eyelids. Nope, still don’t understand, she thought, but she held her tongue beneath the firmness of her sister’s grip.

“And most important of all,” Scáthach finished, “you must not sail with greater than the determined number of crew – in this case, one.”

She was too curious not to ask. “Um. What would happen if one of you came with me?”

“I have told you the tales of my heritage, Master Mikoro. It is the same as in them all. If this number were to be exceeded, *terrible things* would happen. Those accompanying you would not return.”

Something very unusual for a situation with Mikoro in it happened: a silence fell. It was not a comfortable one.

“Nyaha.” She gave her furry white tail a nervous scratch. “Well, um, I’m going by myself, right? So that shouldn’t be a problem?”

“It should not.”

“Okay!” And in an instant she was back to her grinning self. “Well, if the boat’s as easy to handle as you say, I’m happy to give it a go. Um...how will I get back?”

“Don’t worry about that, dear,” Rin reassured her, though her voice seemed to come from oddly far away. “My friend will get you back safe and sound.”

“And how will I recognise your friend? What’s her name?”

“Oh, you’ll know her when you see her. I promise.”

Her voice was close again, for there she was, opening her arms to wrap her daughter in an affectionate hug. It was as though the unearthly atmosphere had withdrawn as far as the walls now, out of respect for the necessary fluffiness of a good send-off.

“My dear sweet Mikoro. Remember you’re representing the Academy, so don’t be a little terror out there okay?” She ruffled her hair and gave her a sustained kiss on the forehead. “My darling little ambassador. Make us proud.”

Released from Mother Rin’s embrace, Mikoro wore a smile not at all unlike a little emperor who has just conquered all the territories and set income tax to 99% for all her subjects, payable in chocolate chip cookies.

She turned to regard her mighty flagship, only to find Kiyoko standing in her way. At first she expected her sister had found yet another pretext to admonish her, but as it turned out, she only wanted a cuddle as well.

The fox-woman sighed as she nuzzled her sister’s ear. “Just be careful Mikoro, okay? I know I’ve nothing to worry about, but...” She sighed again. “Well, it’s as you’ve been told. This is expensive equipment we’re trusting you with. Someone else’s expensive equipment. Please don’t drive it like you drive in *Mario Kart* alright? Take care of it. And take care of yourself, too, do you hear?”

“Mnnyam nyamm – nnn-yah!” She gave Kiyoko a brisk wet lick on the cheek. “I love you sis! Trust me, it’ll be fine! I’m gonna have so much fun!”

“You – that’s what worries me! Ohh, you little...”

“All loaded up,” announced Scáthach, who had been stocking the ship’s stores from her supply bag, and no sooner had she said it than Mikoro was bounding on board to check out what tasty treats lay in store for her. There washardtack with a selection of her favourite jams and spreads, some packets of biscuits and nuts, instant noodles, teabags, sugar, strips of salted beef and fish, a few nibble-worthy vegetables stashed sneakily away behind them, milk and ice cream in the refrigerated compartment, and countless bottles of water as well as fruit juice for the all-important Vitamin C.

“Oooh! Is this all for me?”

The sight revived Kiyoko’s consternation, and she challenged Scáthach: “Oh for the love of – what’s all this? I thought you said two hours, not two months!”

“Aye. But in no circumstances does one set forth on the open sea without adequate provision for emergencies. Anything you don’t eat, Mikoro, you can leave as a gift for Lady Rin’s friend.”

“*Anything she doesn’t eat?* Have you forgotten who you’re talking to? It’ll all be in her belly within ten minutes! You’ll never see it again!”

“And don’t forget your bag!” Rin sang, handing Mikoro her shoulder pouch which in her excitement she would certainly have forgotten. Mikoro slung it over her arm and, by trained habit, gave the inside a glance to check everything was there: her Academy-issue smartphone; a wallet with a cute sewn image of a cat face, containing coins and notes in seven common currencies; a box with toothbrush and toothpaste, plasters, allergy tablets, antiseptic cream and cough sweets; and of course, an unfolding pink brush for her hair and tail.

“Yaaay!” Mikoro leapt into the boat, fast realising how fun it was to do so, and shuffled her feet around on the deck as she sought the stance she felt struck the best balance between comfort and coolness. Finding it, she edged her way back till her hand found the tiller. The *Sea Bunny*, sensing its new captain eager and in position, emitted flickering bursts of light from the tips of its ears, mechanically twitched its nose and tail, stretched its sail taut, and with steadiness and charisma, set forth in a glide...

“Woohoo, it’s moving!” Mikoro yelled. “See you soon!” And she half-twisted her waist to wave at her onlookers.

And Kiyoko shouted back: “Aahh for goodness’s sake, don’t take your hand off the tiller!”

Rin waved too, and called out: “Have a great journey dear! Give my friend a kiss from me, won’t you?”

Behind them the ancient warrior-queen Scáthach leant against the wall, arms folded, and observed in silent satisfaction.

But as for the mischievous pink-haired cat-girl who could newly and fairly be styled Captain Mikoro, she had raised her fist in the air and, for reasons known only to herself, was hooting like a locomotive – “Wuu wuu! Wuu wuu!” – as the *Sea Bunny* cleared the sea gate and pulled beyond the reach of the world she knew.



Half an hour later, a considerably more relaxed Kiyoko emerged from the doors of Rin’s office. She strolled down the corridor, turned, turned again, then passed through a set of doors into the Chaldea Academy’s inner courtyard.

Here were palm trees and hanging ivy, grassy flower beds and red granite pools. The yellow glow of the lamps and textured windows soaked her nerves in soft tranquility. Above her head, a blue rectangle of sky was abuzz with the chirps of sparrows.

Coming at last to a central pavilion, she sat upon the balustrade, stretched out her arms, and breathed deep. Exhaled with relief.

It lifted a great deal of stress when you understood what was going on, generally speaking. A great deal more if what was going on involved Mikoro.

“Kiyokooooo!” A delighted little squeak produced a shuffle of her vulpine ears and raised her spirits still further.

She turned to find herself approached by a little platoon of young ladies. Anna, Hina, Kurumi and Nagisa: senior trainees at the Academy, and inseparable friends. But the voice had come from a fifth individual, a tiny girl with a mop of violet hair who rode on Kurumi’s shoulder.

“Oh, hello everyone,” said Kiyoko happily, and by well-practiced routine she held out her hand, whereupon the purple-haired *smol* – to use the technical term favoured in the current era – leapt in and rode it up to Kiyoko’s lips for a tiny kiss. “Mmnh! And what’s my precious Sayuri been up to this afternoon?”

“We’ve been over in Tamamo’s quarters! She made delicious tea for us and showed us how to do calligraphy!”

“Is that so? How delightful!” said Kiyoko, parking her tiny friend upon her head. It brought her heartfelt satisfaction to see Sayuri adapting to her life at the

Academy. It wasn't that long ago that she'd mysteriously appeared in one of its corridors one evening, with no memory of who she was, how she'd been shrunk, or even what her original name was. Since then she'd been entrusted to Kiyoko's tender care.

"Yeah," said Anna, twirling a long bunch of her silver hair in her hand. "I never realised how curling an ink brush could be so...well, *subversive*."

Kiyoko smiled. Tamamo-no-Mae was another figure with what you could call (if you held your breath) a somewhat lengthy personal history, who like Scáthach had opted to bring its weight to bear in service of the Chaldea Academy. 'Curling an ink brush' likely connoted the manipulation of profound dimensional powers, or at least, no less potent, psychological ones. But these days it needn't necessarily mean she was teaching them how to overthrow governments or bend unsuspecting populations to their whim. Probably.

"And how about Dari?" Kiyoko asked, put in mind of the Academy's other frequent tiny face. "She's visiting at the moment, right?"

The girls searched each other's faces.

"Um. I thought she was with you," came a hesitant little voice between Kiyoko's ears.

"Ahh...no?" Her eyes rolled upward. "I definitely saw the two of you cuddling on the windowsill this morning."

"Yeah," contributed Nagisa, the rowdy one, "but she didn't want to join us when we came to pick up Sayuri. Said she'd promised Mikoro she'd go to the gym with her for...uh...exercise..."

She'd noticed the change in Kiyoko's expression. They all had. At the word 'Mikoro' it was as though her blood had turned cold as a glacier.

"Waah!" yelped Sayuri, fastening her hands in the fox-girl's hair as her world took off at escape velocity. "S-Slow down! Where are you going?"

But Kiyoko was already rocketing up the hallway to Rin's office, where she burst through the doors for the second time that day.

The students looked at each other again, soaking in the alarm written over each other's faces. Then, with an automatic exchange of nods, they crept up the corridor as a group and lingered outside the doors, listening hard.

"Mother!" they heard from within. "Have you seen Dari today? Please tell me you've seen her!"

A muffled exchange of voices – and then the eavesdroppers barely stifled their yelps as they tripped and tumbled over each other at that rarest of things: a total collapse in Kiyoko’s composure.

“Fuck!”



“Waah! It’s c-cold!”

Mikoro curled against the *Sea Bunny*’s stern and shivered. Her thrill at soaring upon a crystalline sea had lasted about two minutes, but then the chill of the ocean wind had caught up with it, sliced it to ribbons, and swept it far, far away.

“Blehh! Why did no-one tell me it would be so c-cold? Ahh! I wonder...”

Her inquisitive hands found a hatch she had overlooked in the wall of the stern. She yanked it open, rummaged around...

“Hooray! That’s more like it!”

Her arms drew out a splendid coat, in blue deep and grand as the celestial seas. It was a little too big for her but the lining felt so wonderfully fluffy. It had golden trims along the hems and lapels, large buttons that twinkled with the radiance of the night sky, and pockets so deep that to take one look at them was to imagine the mountains of sweets you could hide within. Mikoro wasted no time in hefting the thing round her back, finding it surprisingly light, whereupon she shuffled till it settled comfortably about her and wiggled her hands till her fingers emerged from the sleeves.

“Nyaaaah! This is amazing!” she as much as screamed to the fresh and boundless sky. With the temperature problem solved it was as though it had never bothered her in the first place, because now her coolness was the correct kind of coolness and she had a sea-coat fit for an admiral to prove it.

“Oooh wait, there’s something else in there!” she shouted her thoughts as she plunged in again, up to the waist this time. She emerged with such a roguish grin that one might dread she’d found another cake, but in the circumstances it was the next best thing: a tricorne hat, navy blue to match the coat and complete with mounted pin, turquoise, in the shape of a shooting star. It went straight on her head, fit perfectly between her cat-ears, and there it would stay, as far as she was concerned, for as long as it accentuated the naughty grin of the legendary Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny*.

Thus she stood, the legendary Captain Mikoro, hand on tiller, basking in the glorious sunshine, the broad blue sky, the glitter and froth of the waves, releasing her feelings in high-pitched mewls of delight at just how awesome everything was. She found herself little distracted by thoughts of where she was, or which way she ought to be going; the ship seemed to be handling such silly little details just fine. But eventually, like the cannonball that spins deeper and deeper into a whirlpool, her concerns slipped to the one place from which no experience, however sublime, could keep them: her stomach.

“Nrrr. I’m hungry.”

And as her attention followed that instinct to that most operative part of her being, she became aware of a cluster of collisions within.

“Ooh. That can’t be the cake doing that...can it?”

She concentrated. There it was again – a pair of impacts. Then another. Like tiny fists drumming against her stomach lining.

“Um...hello? Is someone in there?”

That was not an unreasonable question. Everyone knew Mikoro’s stomach was the most eager at the Academy to entertain guests. But in the excitement of the last few hours, what with the cake, then the quarrel, then the ship, she had quite forgotten everything else.

She could hear a squeak. No – a voice. A minuscule yet ominous voice of reproof.

“Mikoro! Ahh, come on!”

Her eyes widened. She’d remembered.

“Uh-oh.”

Bracing herself against the stern, the great Captain Mikoro commanded the sum of her efforts to shift her upper gastro-intestinal tract into check-out mode. As her stomach contracted, she felt a compact little mass half-clambering, half-lifted into her oesophagus. The shape seemed to stiffen, bracing itself, as the tube conveyed it up, up, up to the exit floor – and she cupped her hand beneath her mouth, ready to catch it as it cleared her throat and rolled down her tongue to freedom.

It landed with a salivary *splosh!* in her palm, where it – or rather, she, for it was clearly a tiny woman – shook out a soaked shock of squirrely chestnut hair. She then attempted to brush from her clothes the stains of something sticky and sweet-smelling, something in fact with a suspicious resemblance to half-digested cake. It had smudged into her skin, clogged in her dark athletic skirt, her

lightweight black vest, and beneath the latter, a tube top that was trying very hard to be green.

“Da...Da...Dari?!”

As a bare arm parted the sodden curtain of hair, Mikoro found herself pinned in the glower of a pair of furious hazel eyes.

“Mikoro! What – the – heck – were you doing?”

“Nyaah...aah...Dari...”

The tiny woman staggered to her feet, anchoring herself in a puddle of saliva made viscous by melted icing. The cross-shaped scar on her forehead throbbed alarmingly as she pointed an impeaching arm straight at the face of Mikoro, for whom the feeling was rather like being skewered to the wall by a waterlogged mouse.

“Aahh, look at me! Look at my hair, my clothes!” the tiny figure berated her. “How could you eat so *much cake* while you *knew* I was in there? It flattened me like an avalanche! I could hardly breathe for all the sugar!”

“Mwaah! I’m sorry! I – um – forgot...”

“What do you mean you *forgot*? You only ate me this morning! We’d just exercised together! How do you...how...what...”

Mikoro watched bewilderment take hold of her little friend. Ire was not Dari’s natural state and within seconds it had evaporated, replaced by a familiar nerviness as those wide eyes scanned their surroundings. They registered the sky, the sea, the ship, then settled at last on Mikoro’s impressive sea-coat.

“Uhh...Mikoro? Where are we?”

Still rattling in her nerves, Mikoro was taken off guard.

“The nyaah...the sea...”

“The sea. Yeah. I can see that. *Why* are we at sea? And why are you wearing – that...”

“Nyeheh.” All Mikoro could manage was a guilty smile.

For a while Dari just gaped.

Then she admitted: “Well...I suppose it is a nice coat.”

“You...you think so?” The cat-girl’s face brightened up. “And, and – the hat?”

“Yeah. The hat suits you.”

And now Dari too managed a smile, the sight of her cute friend in so inane a state of affairs doing enough to restore her to standard bashful equanimity.

“Yaay! Aaww, thank you!”

The tiny woman squeaked in surprise as her big friend wrapped her in both hands and nuzzled her close to her cheek, purring with dribbly affection.

Dari's was an unusual state of affairs. If asked, she would probably tell you she was an explorer, which was a perfectly decent thing to be, thank you very much, so enough about her, let's talk about some of the cool, um, ruins or dinosaurs she's found, okay? But by keeping your questions focused on her unique circumstances, you would find her voice growing squeakier, her cheeks redder, and her story more intriguing with each additional layer of detail.

For a start, her travels took her not merely across lands and seas, but across *worlds*. Challenged on how that could be, she might at last admit to possessing the uncanny ability to perceive and pass through rifts between realities, or even, if she concentrated hard enough, to open them herself. You might then inquire as to how she had come upon this extraordinary facility, but would do well to extract anything beyond an evasive reference to some 'incident' long ago. You would be left to discover from third-party sources (and you would, because Dari's was a legend of trans-dimensional proportions by now) that said 'incident' had taken place in her university halls of residence when she was twenty – not that long ago at all then – on account of a quite unethical researcher who had interrupted her history studies one night; to wit, by shrinking her and swallowing her whole.

This experience had proved life-changing, not to mention unpleasant. She got better, to cut a long story short, but the ordeal left the now-diminutive Dari with two curious properties. The first was an indestructible 'core', which, by means perhaps protective, perhaps regenerative, but at any rate far beyond her, guaranteed her emergence in perfect health from situations that might have proved fatal to most people. The second was the aforesaid attunement to interdimensional rifts.

Yet her tumbings through those rifts revealed a further layer, one whose mere mention was enough to bring the sweat to her forehead. For these blessings carried a burden: one to whose operation they were so integral that at times it felt like the universe had provided them specially that she could fulfil it. To be clear, Dari found she had a certain effect upon many of the now-gigantic women across the realities for whom she'd become something of a magnet. That is to say, they found her so adorable, so utterly delectable, that to even look at her, let alone get their hands round her as they inevitably did, was to be overcome by a desire to put her away where she belonged – namely, inside of them. The result, and there was no escaping this cast-iron law of nature, was that a great deal of her time was

spent flailing her way down their throats, rolling around in their stomachs, or otherwise squirming and squeaking as they installed her in their bodies through an ingenious variety of points of access.

Clearly this was a complicated way of life. Many mysteries surrounded it, about which she often wondered in the generous time these tight and fleshy confinements afforded her. Occasionally she might even glimpse the corners of answers, for it was not long till her wanderings carried her to the attentions of women on frighteningly cosmic orders of magnitude, who were themselves so naturally curious about how a harmless little mouse like Dari could scurry between the realities. Yet even these goddess-level likes had found much in her lot to baffle them, which she took as good evidence as any that energy spent troubling herself over these matters was energy better spent elsewhere.

In the meantime, though too flusterable by nature (not to mention same-sex attraction) to ever truly get used to so all-consuming a way of life, she gradually came to accept that it was what the stars seemed to have ordained for her. And in time, they had rewarded her patience. For every so often, those interactions with giant women chanced to grow into communications, and some of those into relationships, till at last, the intrepid explorer found herself anchored in a loving and supportive network of cross-dimensional friendships. These friendships were beautiful friendships, wholehearted friendships, exciting friendships, if still typically lewd and hungry friendships, yet they meant that it was not only in the organs and orifices into which the fingers of the cosmos shoved her that innocent Dari, in ways never imaginable in the life she'd left behind, had at last found belonging.

These were the proverbial fingers that had dropped her into the halls (or more accurately the mouths) of the Chaldea Academy, and their lasting upshot for Dari had been as true a family in the Ibarakis as has been known to anyone anywhere, with the promise of a place permanently open to her at (not merely on) their dinner table. Their penchant for swallowing one another in the safety and comfort of their protective enchantments had helped allay her tension in organic environments a little, while the chance to bond with fellow tinies with their own complicated burdens, in particular her dear friend Sayuri, had done wonders for her self-esteem.

For these reasons her visits to the Academy were nowadays frequent, even prolonged. With a lifestyle like hers after all one comes to appreciate any such oasis where you can catch your breath, get dry, find at least as many receptive

ears as mouths, and write in peace about those aspects of your explorations that surely hold far more appeal, you insist, to a general audience.

That was why she was merely startled, rather than reduced to a squeaking and wriggling hamster, when her treasured friend Mikoro cuddled her with an intensity she had long come to expect of her. This cat-girl's ravenous enthusiasm could be a handful, which was an ironic thought in the circumstances. But Dari knew her for a hyperactive bundle of joy, with a heart of the same stuff plushy animals are made of, and was prepared to do anything, even spend precious oasis-time in her stomach, if that was what kept Mikoro's beam at its widest.

Her great nose was sniffing about Dari's face.

"Nyah! You smell like cake!" Mikoro giggled, and began to prod at the tiny woman with the tip of her tongue.

The faintest glower returned to Dari's eyes, but it lasted only a moment. It was impossible to stay indignant at a face like that. More than impossible, when its disarming innocence filled your whole field of view in much the same manner as a cat sprawls to fill a sofa.

Dari sighed. "It's alright. I'll wash it in - ah." She winced as she remembered where they were, feeling her options narrow at an alarming rate. "I suppose I can...uhh, w-wash it off in your stomach acids later. *Later!*" she added in haste, as Mikoro's grin widened and Dari felt her grip tighten ever so slightly. "But, really, Mikoro. Where did you get the ship? Where are we headed?"

Seeing that Dari was stuck with her now, on a boat in the middle of a great deal of sea, Mikoro recognised she would have to do her best at an explanation.

"Um. You know the cake?"

"Yes, Mikoro. I know the cake extremely well."

"Well, I was kind of...nyaah...not supposed to eat it. It was a special cake. Sent specially. For a mission."

"Sent by whom? What sort of mission?"

"To take this boat back to...uh..." The cap flopped over her eyes, necessitating a push with her free hand. "You know, it's funny. Mother never told me a name. She just said they were, like, a really good friend. A friend who lost this bunny-boat, and wanted it brought back..."

"Wait. I'm not following. What's the cake got to do with that?"

"It was...um...a magic cake, or something. It had a secret thing - a key, that's what they called it - and I ate it by mistake, and that...kind of made me the only one who could sail the boat."

“You mean it was meant for someone else?”

“Nyah. Maybe...”

Dari folded her arms and shut her eyes in contemplation – which, still up to her waist in Mikoro’s fingers, was a posture the cat-girl found instantly worthy of giggles.

“A lost ship. A magic cake with a key. A good friend of Mother’s...wait. If they were a good friend, surely they would have known you live at the Academy with her? In which case, why hide something so sensitive in a cake of all things? Isn’t that just asking for trouble?”

Mikoro didn’t quite follow the logic, but something in it, perhaps the implied acquittal, raised a warm and happy fuzziness in her chest.

“Well, who was going to sail it originally?”

“I think she was gonna get Scáthach to...Scáthach...was going to...um.”

She froze, eyes wide, as though recalling something.

“Mikoro? What’s the matter?”

“Nyeeh. Nyeeeh...”

“Mikoro!” Dari squeezed on the cat-girl’s thumb.

Suddenly Mikoro was grinning. “Nothing!” she uttered quickly. “It’s nothing! Eheheh...heh...”

“I know that look Mikoro. There’s a problem, isn’t there?”

Dari’s trusting nature might have prevailed had it been anyone other than Mikoro, but as it happened, she did know that look. *That look* was the exact reason the sequence of her introduction to the Ibarakis had been Rin’s digestive system first, and more customary things like names and tea second.

“No problem!” Mikoro insisted with the least convincing laugh imaginable. “It’s okay! I – I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

“You remembered something important, didn’t you? What is it? Something about Scáthach?”

There was nowhere to hide. The ship was too small, the ocean too wide.

“Come on. Please.” Dari’s voice was earnest. “If I’m travelling with you, and it looks like I am, then I need you to tell me what’s going on. I mean...” A familiar heat rose in her cheeks, the mere thought sufficient cause. “You d-do remember what sorts of...*things*, happen to me when I travel, right?”

Mikoro capitulated. Her beaming visage gave way to the nervous truth.

“It’s about that. About you – I mean, you coming with me. You weren’t supposed to. I don’t think anybody was supposed to. Scáthach said so.”

Dari frowned. "Why? What difference does it make?"

"Ooh!" Mikoro squealed without warning, and instead of answering the question she hurtled to the bow of the *Sea Bunny*, fumbling awkward around the sail.

"Aahh, Mikoro! What the – "

"Look! Look there!" The cat-girl leapt up and down in her excitement, pointing ahead between the figurehead's ears. "Can you see it? There, in the distance! How about now?"

"Gwaah!" Dari yelped as Mikoro fastened her fingers round her tight and lifted her as high as her arm could go. But even before the blur had cleared from her vision she heard Mikoro pronounce: "Oohh...there must be..." – and next moment she was ferried back down the deck as the gallantly fluffy captain chased her brainwave.

The cat-girl pulled open the hatch where she'd found her coat. After some indiscriminate rummaging her free hand drew out – what else? – a folding brass spyglass, which when shaken to full extension revealed pretty constellation engravings all the way down its length. She mounted it in a setting between the bunny-ears, evidently there for that purpose, and held the rattled Dari up to the eyepiece.

"Urggh, Mikoro, a little gentler, please! What do you want me to – huh? Is that an island?"

"It's gotta be!" said Mikoro, and she gave a cheer so loud that the beleaguered Dari had to cover her ears. "That must be where Mother's friend lives! Look – the ship is sailing straight for it! Hooray! I told you it was gonna be okay!"

She lowered a huge amber eye to the glass, right behind Dari – a rather disconcerting imposition on a tiny person, seasoned body-explorer or not. No mistake, she could definitely spy an island on the horizon. It was quite small, though that could have been just the distance, with a central edifice whose roof rose into a cone, and from there into a towering spire. She could make out an assortment of smaller structures around it, some of which appeared to be – floating?

It all looked rather colourful.

Mikoro raised herself from the scope and squinted. Her eyes were better with close objects than distant ones, and uncannily good in the dark (as Dari would attest). But the ship had been spraying forward all this time, so even in the bright morning sun she could now make out the silhouette of their target. It was the only

feature of note on this sea. Aside from the obligatory seagulls and the fish that burst through the surface, there were no other islands, no sign of dark clouds, nor of sharks, of pirates or periscopes, indeed nothing to impede the final stretch of their progress.

“Yaay! We’re almost there! Come on, we can celebrate with some snacks!”

“That still looks a little far to me,” said Dari. “How long do you think it’ll take to reach it?”

Mikoro squinted again. “Um, half an hour, I guess? Forty minutes maybe.”

“I dunno Mikoro. I’ve not done much travelling at sea, but I’d say it’s still a good hour away.” (In this she was probably right; in those periods when Dari’s line of sight didn’t end at her nose, she’d cultivated a good eye for distances. Alas we shall never know.)

“Even better! That means we have more time to try these funny cracker things Scáthach gave me! Want some jam?” And she flopped down beneath the sturdy windbreak of the bunny head, crossed her legs (still clad in her Academy-issue black tights), and dropped Dari in the valley of one knee so she could get to work on the grub.

“Still hungry after so much cake,” Dari marvelled. Amazement at Mikoro’s appetite does not simply diminish.

The young dimension-hopper lay back and folded her arms behind her head with a smile, giving in to relaxation for the first time since her live sugar-burial in the stomach concerned. Surely it was no big deal that she’d ended up as Mikoro’s little stowaway? Unlike her more familiar experiences with getting stowed away, she was travelling with a trusted friend, could still in fact move, and if she had to hide, well, there was always that coat Mikoro had found, with its fluffy collar and deep pockets, or that distinguished stomach if the need was really desperate.

It was truly a marvellous coat, now that she had the latitude to take it in properly. The way its surplus length spread round its wearer on the deck, a great blue tent with that hatted pink head sticking out...

Mikoro munched, spilling crumbs all over her.

“Ahh! Mikoro!”

“Nyah! I’m sorry!”

The naughty captain glanced down apologetically at her doll-sized friend, then offered a fingertip-load of strawberry jam by way of compensation.

Mikoro’s grin returned as she watched Dari puzzle out a non-disgraceful way to eat it. And she thought to herself: despite Scáthach’s warning, wasn’t the little brunette the perfect companion for a trip like this? She was an experienced

traveller, portable and used to it, undemanding on the provisions, and a calming presence under all pressures if you discounted those unique to her situation.

Mikoro had been present on several occasions when people who judged Dari merely by her small size, or her renowned sensitivities, had underestimated her ability to take control of a room if she found her basic sense of fairness tested. She'd make sure Mikoro didn't do anything reckless, but at the same time wouldn't loom over her with the threat of a wrestle as did, say, a certain big sister. But what the cat-girl appreciated most of all was that if ever you were depressed, upset, or dealt to unjustly in any way at all, Dari would make of herself an inexhaustible fountain of compassion and support, showering you in kindness till your spirits mended or the universe reached its end – whichever came first.

Her satisfaction mounting, the ever-fidgety captain twisted round for another peek through the bunny ears. The island had grown a touch, with still no sign of anything untoward on the boundless blue.

“Heehee! Still plenty of time. Here, I'll pour some apple juice in the cap for you!”

“Thanks Mikoro,” came Dari's voice from below.

Mikoro grinned to see how comfortable her friend looked now. She reached down, then, alert to the jam on her fingertips, stroked Dari's hair with the back of her pinky finger.

“You know,” said Dari, stretching out her arms for a tiny yawn, “this is actually quite nice. Where exactly are we? I mean, the sky is so clear, the air is so fresh; and the sun...”

“Nyah?”

Mikoro became aware that Dari had stopped – felt a shudder press into her leg – but as soon as she noticed her startled stare it was already subsiding.

“What is it Dari?”

“Oh, uh...n-nothing. Just a jolt of – you know – déjà vu. Don't worry about it. Eehh.”

She was blushing. Now it was her turn to fumble in her attempts to cover up something too big.

“Oooh, I want to know, I want to know! Your stories are so much fun!”

“Nnnnah – another time, okay? N-Now, Mikoro. Do you mind if I take a little nap here?”

Mikoro beamed. “Sure! I'll wake you when we're about to arrive, okay?”

She jiggled another piece of hardtack out of its wrapper, coated it liberally with three types of jam, and chomped down. She took care to hold it away from Dari this time, and when she next looked, the little one was snoozing away, her face

reverting in her sleep to a big goofy smile. Mikoro suppressed the urge to give her a playful poke, or better yet, tickle her midriff with a strand of long pink hair. Resisting took considerable effort, but she knew how her friend cherished these rare snatches of peace, so instead her mind wandered aimlessly, following a seagull overhead, then soaking in the endless foam of the waves, before finding itself dragged, as by a rope bound to an anchor, back to Scáthach's warning.

You must not sail with greater than the determined number of crew – in this case, one.

It had sounded so arbitrary. Yet something sharp in the warrior-queen's tone had lodged it in her furry ear like a spear-point, and for all her expertise at removing things she felt didn't belong in there – most commonly, advice from Kiyoko about what not to eat – she just couldn't shake it loose. It was like a stubborn grain of sand, tangled up in her fur.

"Why?" She chewed on the question with her cracker. "What does it change, to have Dari here with me? Blehh. I bet Scáthach just made it up to make me take this seriously. I mean, it's been so much easier than they made it sound! We're practically already there, right? What could happen?"



"Terrible things," pronounced Scáthach. "Terrible, terrible things." Her name meant *the shadow* in her native Gaelic and to look on her countenance now was to see why.

"Just tell me she's going to be okay!" Kiyoko demanded. "Tell me my sister is safe! Dari too!" And she set off stomping around the office, tugging at her ears and waving her arms with abandon. "Aahh, I should never have let her go!" she harangued herself. "It's all my fault, all my fault!"

"Forgive me Master Kiyoko, but the blame is not yours to carry. I have sailed those realms. I knew the risks. Lady Rin, responsibility for this affair is mine alone and I duly submit to your judgement." And she marched up to Rin's desk, knelt on one knee and bent her head ninety degrees.

"Oh, stop this, both of you!"

Rin pushed off her desk with a groan, leapt to her feet, and strode around with hand to forehead. This did enough to stun them speechless. It didn't matter whether you were a fox-girl in your twenties or a Hebridean warrior-queen in

your two-thousands. A crack in Rin's tranquility, even a momentary one, signified disaster.

"Scáthach," Rin addressed her, after a silence as jagged as the cliffs of her native Skye.

"At your service, my lady."

"Terrible things, you said. Could you be a little more specific?" Her voice was firm, if shaken by unease, but still – this was Ibaraki Rin – not unkind. Never unkind.

"Forgive me my lady. I cannot."

"Oh dear. Well, I suspected as much," sighed Rin.

"My sincerest apologies, Lady Rin. You know how it is with those realms."

"I do," the director replied. "All too well."

She paced to the window and stood silent, watching the students drill in the garden. Thick cloud cover had cast the prospect in gloom, and now the first drops of rain came pattering on the panes.

"Well I don't know how it is," said Kiyoko. "Suppose Dari is with her. Why is that a problem? What does it affect? Mikoro could hide her in any number of places. No-one would even need know she was there."

"It affects *everything*, Master Kiyoko," came Scáthach's answer, in the patient voice of one who has spent centuries trying to explain things in languages not built to express them. "Do you not recall the tales I have told? Of what happened to the crewman of Bran, when he disembarked on his old land despite being told he must never set foot on its soil? Or of the fate of Oisín of the Fianna when he did the same, though warned so emphatically against it while he resided in the otherworld? Or what befell the foster brothers of Máel Dúin after they swam out to board his ship, thus taking his crew above the stipulated number of seventeen?"

Kiyoko clawed deep into her own hair. "Aah, you can't be serious! Didn't you say one of the brothers burnt to ashes?!"

"...when a cat jumped on him," Rin recalled, correctly. "Well, at least we know Mikoro's the cat."

Kiyoko released a vulpine bark – anxious, exasperated. And she pressed on: "But, how could Mikoro having an extra passenger result in something like that? It's Dari, for goodness's sake! Dari! Mikoro and Dari! Salts of the earth, the pair of them! Tell me why – "

"Master Kiyoko, I do not make the *geasa*. These prohibitions are not the rules of kings, nor even of gods. They dwell deeper, in the living earth on which we walk; in the air we breathe; in the waves which carry us forth on the seas of time; and

there, right there, in the very stuff of the primary realms through which your sister voyages now. They exist to hold all things together. The world cannot but fall apart when we break them.”

The rain had grown to a deluge, battering on the window-glass like a deranged drummer desperate to get in. Rin watched the trainees scramble for cover, jackets and folders raised on their heads. The clouds choked off the sunlight, casting her office in shadow as thunder rolled menacing in the distance.

“I would hazard to presume that Dari, at least, will be safe.”

“Oh?” Rin glanced sideways at Scáthach, waiting to hear her reasoning.

“The wee creature is protected. Oh it would take a bolder woman than I to speculate on the nature of her ‘core’ as she calls it, but the least I have surmised is that it thrums to the very beat of those realms, of the *geasa*, though at a frequency far beyond my range. From that same frequency comes the mandate on which she travels the worlds, despite, or perchance because, the beloved child is too pure of heart to suspect it.”

“So the rules *aren’t* total?” said Kiyoko, glimpsing a loophole and latching on with all her might. “Because you said – back at the boatyard – that anyone who went with Mikoro would not return...”

Scáthach appeared to give this some thought. “Your point is valid, young master. In this case the principles appear in conflict with themselves, and I have no doubt which is the stronger. Dari will return because she is Dari. Returning is what she does. Perhaps not in the ways we expect, necessarily, but I believe there is little chance she will come to harm.”

After a pause, she added: “She is needed in too many places.”

Another silence, solemn, as they contemplated Scáthach’s words. The thunder rumbled closer.

“I daresay you are right,” said Rin at last. “But then, how about my darling daughter? Mikoro is needed too. Needed here.”

“Too right she is!” added her other daughter. “Needed right here, in my stomach, under a blanket held down by four bricks so she can’t go after other people’s cakes! Ohh Mikoro you hungry hungry bundle of trouble, what has your insatiable gullet got you into this time?”

To her surprise, Scáthach replied: “Your question might contain its own answer, Master Kiyoko”.

“Bah. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t blame her. She couldn’t possibly have known about – ”

“Blame is not so much the issue. *Responsibility*, however, is meaningful to how those realms operate. Do we know how she came to take Dari as a passenger?”

Scratching her forehead, Rin recollected: “Well, the little dear spent last night with me.” She gave her bust a reflexive pat. “And she was here on my desk all through yesterday. Writing, as usual.”

“Her chronicles?” asked Scáthach.

“Ooh no. She’s been trying something new. Fiction. She showed me some. About a character she’s created; ‘Dark Harry’, she’s named him, I’m not sure why. He’s this sweet young man who wants to go on the kinds of adventures she does, but he’s stuck in a world where they’ve built walls over all the rifts. Well I find it incredibly touching. It’s like the little dear is imagining what her life might have been if not for what happened to her. Maybe it helps her believe it’s better the way it is now in spite of everything she goes through – ”

Kiyoko interrupted: “Aaah, Mother! Mikoro’s in danger, remember?” so any further insights into Dari’s forays into creative writing would have to wait till their publication.

“Oh dear, you’re quite right. Sorry about that. Let’s see now...we had breakfast with Sayuri, and then – oh! I remember. She said something about desperately needing some exercise today. She was going to use the gym. With...Mikoro.”

“There we have it!” Kiyoko proclaimed. “It’s the same thing as always, I bet it is! Mikoro gobbled her up then forgot she was there. Oh by the – that means she was still in there when the glutton helped herself to that cake! Aahh, what a disgrace!” She grimaced hard and buried her face in her palms, which fortunately for her, meant she failed to notice Scáthach’s expression turn dark.

“If this is true,” said the warrior-queen, “it means the young master will be deemed responsible for the violation. The burden will be hers to carry.”

“Dear me!” spoke Rin, and she turned to face them head-on. “That does sound serious. Ooh, how frightful! Although...” – and now her words turned slow and deliberate – “if you ask me, I shouldn’t think it right that Mikoro be made to suffer for an honest mistake. I mean, it would hardly be fair to punish my sweet daughter for being my daughter – yes?”

Like all Rin’s words, they fell softly. Yet once they sank beneath the mere field of sound, they plummeted onward, suddenly so remorseless in weight as to ignite the very ether around them till they landed at last with a *thunk!*, like anvils of unhewn wood, on some fundamental layer of the cosmic circuit boards. Anvils, to be clear, of a loving mother’s challenge, worthy of any *geas*, to even the most rigid

and inscrutable forces in all the realities, to go ahead and lay a finger on her daughter if they dared...

Scáthach took a nervous half-step back. Though you didn't hear it from your uninvolved bystander of a narrator, she might even have shown evidence of the slightest hint of a gulp. Ancient champion that she was, Scot that she was, not even she had any interest in getting caught between the wills in contention here.

"I am sure," she uttered, selecting her words carefully, "that whatever consequences befall Mikoro will not be so crude as an attempt to punish her. The question is not one of punishment, nor even of right and wrong, but of how things must be. In that equation, other concerns are also of consequence: fairness; need; the love of friends and family..."

"Good," said Rin. "Good! Oh, that makes me feel so much better."

"Nonetheless," Scáthach's sense of duty impelled her on. "It cannot be escaped that the weight of the violation must in some manner fall upon Mikoro's shoulders. If events unfold to the customary pattern, her task will have become much more difficult. Most likely she will have to discharge the burden by facing many additional challenges on her journey."

"So let me get this straight," said Kiyoko. "Mikoro can't get back unless she takes responsibility?"

"That would appear the case."

A tear glistened in the fox-girl's eye. "She's doomed. She's doomed."

Rin sensed her daughter to be on the verge of breaking down and swept at once across the room for a pre-emptive hug. And she consoled her: "Shh, come now, my strong, sweet Kiyoko. You know your little sister's better than that. And you know what? I'm going to trust her. Will you?"

Kiyoko tensed up as Mother Rin drew her close. Kiyoko strove to be responsibility personified, and it was that commitment, to projecting a more stabilising presence in the Academy than her cat-in-a-cotton-mill of a sister, that made her a little reticent in exposing her vulnerability to those like Scáthach. But in the end that reticence was no match for her love for Mikoro, and she returned the embrace, allowing her tears to trickle silent into Rin's chest.

Not breaking from that ministrations, Rin looked to Scáthach. "Is there anything we might do to help my daughter?"

Scáthach shook her head. "Forgive me, Lady Rin. Any part of the burden allayed in her stead would merely replenish till she carried it through on her own strength." Realising this was not enough, she added quickly: "Though perhaps, you should speak with your friend."

“Well. Alright then. If that’s the way it is to be...”

She released Kiyoko, though kept a hand on her shoulder. And then she stood tall, looked from one to the other – and beamed. It had returned at last: the full smile of Ibaraki Rin, that which parts the shadows and melts the frost off the hearts of all who behold it.

“That’s okay then,” she purred. “I’ll write to my friend, tell her what’s happened and ask her to look out for our little dear. And then – we shall wait. We shall wait for the stars to guide our sweet Mikoro home. They will. I am sure of it.”

“I beseech that it be so,” said Scáthach, who without realising it had edged a little closer to Rin. It felt safer.

“When you get back,” muttered Kiyoko, an involuntary sniff heralding an astonishing change of policy, “y-you can have all the cake you want. All of it. I’ll bake you one myself.”

And then a tiny purple-topped figure emerged from the orange-gold cascades of Kiyoko’s hair: little Sayuri, who had been on her friend’s shoulder this whole time. Too nervous to participate in the discussion, even to make her presence known to these three formidable giants in the reigning gloom, the sunshine warmth of Rin’s smile had drawn her out at last.

“Mikoro, Dari,” she whispered. “My wonderful friends. Please, be safe. Wherever you are.”



“Wawawawa! It’s shaking too much! I c-can’t – nyaaah!”

Clutching the mast for dear life, Mikoro’s feet slipped and kicked as though skidding on ice as the *Sea Bunny* listed hard, first to one side, then to the other, each tilt threatening to overturn it before the wrath of the waves clobbered it back the other way. They battered the hull, punched and pounded the sail, and surged seething over the sides of the ship on every sway, flooding the deck in a joint assault with the rage of the driving rain. The terrified cat-girl’s sea-coat flapped in the wind like a loose tarpaulin, and then she squealed, for that wind had yanked the hat off her head and sent it spinning toward the stern; and then at last, the soles of her shoes gave up and she slipped, kicked in the air, and landed with a painful and humiliating bounce of backside on wood.

“Yeeow! Ahh, that hurts! Nyaaah! Wet! All wet! D-Dari! Help! What do I d-do?”

With the jolt of the impact her hand had almost flung her friend skyward, yet somehow she kept it clasped tight. From its watertight cage came frantic squeaks, but not even Mikoro's keen furry ears could make out their content for the roar of the broken skies.

The storm had come out of nowhere. One moment she had been cruising towards her goal, flask of hot cocoa in hand beneath a glorious midday sun. But soon the sated little admiral, watching her pocket-sized first mate doze in her lap, had herself grown drowsy, and the next thing she knew she'd opened her eyes to find herself splashed, soaked, scared and shaken about in a tempest whose like this poor first-time captain had never had cause to imagine. Indeed it was ferocious even measured by the far-ranging experiences of Dari, whether in water or her vocation's far more relevant metric of bodily fluids.

Acting entirely on instinct, Mikoro half-crawled, half-scuttled across the wooden deck, feeling her way with one freezing hand, the other still closed around the head and chest of her tiny wiggling companion. Her sight was completely compromised by the dismal murk and the waterlogged drape of pink that was her own hair, and after failing to shake it loose, she raised a hand to part it, only to scream and duck just in time as the boom of the sail came soaring overhead, clipping the tips of her ears. She pushed off the deck again, gave one further determined lurch, and at last, made it aft, where she curled beneath the little overhang with her back to the stern, recovered her hat, gave it a pointless shake before returning it no less sodden onto her head, then drew her knees in close and wrapped herself in the folds of her coat till all that was pink disappeared beneath the blue. The hat and coat were waterproof, impressively so, but the import of that had been lost when the wind had breached the former and the deck the latter; and it was at that point, just when matters surely couldn't get any worse, that a tiny thunderbolt struck through the skin of her fingertip – a hamster-like nip from the desperate Dari, for forgotten in her hand and finding the air crushed from her lungs, her survival instincts had at last run out of options. At this the once-great Captain Mikoro's misery was complete and she burst into tears, a dripping, shivering ball of lamentation.

Unable to hear her own cries, it was as though the storm came bellowing into her very mind. The ship pitched and rolled on the merciless swell, whose waves, roiling and crashing and thrashing, fused in her consciousness with searing rebukes from her sister – for failing to control her appetite, for causing nuisance to the trainees at study, for embarrassing the Academy in front of visiting dignitaries. The rains lashed torrential like her tears on the very worst occasions

of her life – those when she'd been so naughty that she could tell she'd disappointed Mother Rin, the mere sight of whose downcast gaze had made her cry and cry and cry; and then came the streaks of lightning, each disintegrating the world in a burst of white-hot rage, and it was the rage of Dari, her kind and gentle friend Dari, on those extraordinary occasions – and she would never let them happen again – when she'd pushed her too far, such as by eating her after she'd clearly said she was exhausted from too much being eaten, or on that day she'd gulped her down while she was writing and digested all her day's work by accident. But above these nightmares and phantasms rolled the worst thing of all: the thunder, rumbling and drumming and snarling and rumbling some more like the rumble of her very own stomach, that ravenous beast, that infernal machine, whose determination to devour everything and everyone in sight now seemed to her the cause of all ills to ever befall the nations of humankind.

Lost in this whirlpool of guilt and despair, something ignited in Mikoro's heart. It was barely noticeable at first, as tiny as the girl cupped in her hand who might as well have been shouting into a vacuum. But now it was as though time had frozen around her – for then the spark exploded, burst through her veins, coursed through her nerves, electrified all the fur on her ears and tail. And when now at last it awakened in her eyes, it was a fire that steamed her tears to vapour.

“Nyraaaaaaah!”

With a piercing roar (or rather a rawr – this was still Mikoro), the erstwhile fluffy heap of sorrow staggered to her feet. Gripping the gunwale for support, the first thing she did was to shove the hand holding Dari into her coat, fumble loose the zip on her Academy shirt, and slip her friend into it, about the last place left in the world that wasn't utterly drenched, before fastening everything back up as quick as she could. Now with both hands free, the next action of the resurgent captain of the *Sea Bunny* was to shake off her shoes – with the result that she shivered at the frigid water creeping up her tights, but that was fine, because now she could feel the wood beneath her soles and rely on her feline instincts for balance. She stretched her arms out, widened her step, held there for a moment, adjusting as the ship rocked on beneath the assault of wind and water; and when her confidence had built to her satisfaction, she clenched her teeth, pushed out for the rattling mast and, reaching it, gripped with all her strength to hold herself steady. Now the boom swung round again – and catching it with one hand she wrestled it back in its proper position. Having at last stabilised the sail, she freed that hand, groped behind her for the tiller, found it, clutched it, and with grim

determination, resumed her station on the ship whose delivery had been entrusted to her on the reputation of the Chaldea Academy – her mother’s Academy, her family’s Academy, *her* Academy. Oh, how the wind howled, the waves surged, and the sky shrieked loose its fury! She was soaked, she was cold, her clothes felt heavy and soggy on her skin, she knew not which way was up or which way was down, she could see nothing, had no idea which way her ship was sailing, for not even the *Sea Bunny’s* headlights on full beam could pierce this unearthly gloom. But it mattered no longer. She had been trusted with this task by those she loved more than anything in the world, wished never to feel like a disappointment again, and seemed to have decided, right here, right now, with all the forces of heaven and earth arrayed against her, that no matter how long it took, no matter what monstrosities rose from the depths to bar her way, she was going to steer this rabbit back to its nest or so help her her name was not Ibaraki Mikoro – and that, at least, she damn well knew it was.

How long she stood in that onslaught none can tell; and that was all she could do, not see, not steer, but *stand*, stand in the darkness, stand in her truth, exist, exist on her terms even as the world rose up and bore down to change them, exist on them nevertheless, exist on them *well*.

It was all she could do – and all that was needed.



“Mikoro...”

“Uguu.”

“Mikoro! Wake up!”

“Nyam nyam nyam...nyah?”

Mikoro opened her eyes to find Dari filling her gaze. Which was odd.

“Gweh!”

She sat up with a start, her ears registering a squeak as her tiny friend tumbled off her nose.

“Nyaaaah,” she yawned. “Wha...Dari? What happened?”

Then she remembered. The storm, the waves, the wind, the rain...

It was over.

She squinted in the bright light. Looked round, left, right, her head feeling the weight of her saturated hair. The sky was bright once more, the ship rocked on calmest seas, and though her skin felt the salty press of her soaking layers, their

chill was mingling with a heat that wafted in on the breeze and hung in the air, beating down from a tropical sun.

She heard a little padding sound and looked down. Dari had tumbled down her coat but managed to halt her descent by digging her hands and legs into the sodden fabric.

“Dari? Are you okay?”

The diminutive explorer looked shaken, even slightly groggy, but as she steadied herself on a button it was clear she was little the worse for wear. What was more, she looked completely dry.

“Urgh. I don’t – where did all that come from? What’s going on? Mikoro?”

The cat-girl again surveyed her surroundings. It dawned on her that they were different from what she remembered. The sea was greener, fresher, its waves merely choppy. The sun was definitely brighter, and yes, the wind really did feel warm on her hands and cheeks.

“Ah! The island!”

She placed a hand over her eyes and searched for that telltale spire. It was gone. Instead many new islands dotted the seascape – some large, some small, but none with a shape that remotely resembled that which they’d seemed so close to attaining.

“Uh-oh.”

“Mikoro?” came Dari’s voice again. “What’s the problem? We got through the storm, didn’t we?”

Mikoro stood up, which was easier said than done under the load of her coat’s soaked-up ocean, and perched Dari in the fold of her tricorne.

“Oooo-kay. This looks...uhh...different,” she observed from her new vantage point. “Where are we?”

“Nyah...I think we’re...I think we’re...”

Dari waited. “We’re...yes?”

Mikoro gulped, then whined in a tiny voice:

“...lost.”

A long silence followed, punctured only by the flap of the sail.

Eventually the hat-mounted lookout uttered: “The ship’s stopped.”

Indeed it had. The sail was still up, had weathered the storm intact, but if it was catching the wind the *Sea Bunny* didn’t seem to notice. It was drifting inert, although Mikoro’s ears picked up a definite beeping from somewhere in the rabbit-head’s.

“Aahh, it’s too wet and heavy!” she complained, getting fed up. “Can you hold tight a sec? I’m going to take this off.”

With a pang of reluctance she dragged her limbs from the sleeves and slipped from her wonderful sea-coat, which crumpled into a soaking pile on the woodwork. Finding her Academy outfit damp as well, she undid that too – white top with black belts, skirt and tights – and shook them off till she stood on the deck in her hat and underwear (white with tiny pink hearts), whose mismatch looked rather funny, truth be told.

“At least it’s warm here in...wherever we’ve ended up,” she said. “Um...Dari? Seeing as we’re just floating here, do you think it’s okay if we roll up the sail for a bit? Then I can hang these to dry on the whatsthis.”

“I think it’s called a boom, Mikoro. But yeah, why not? You’re in charge remember.”

“Nyahah! That’s right! I’m Captain Mikoro! Muhuhuhu...um. You don’t sound very worried about us being – you know – lost.”

Dari shrugged, then clutched the brim of the tricorne as Mikoro unbound the sail from the horizontal spar and rolled it against the mast, making space for her clothes. “Well, it’s – how can I put it?” Dari ventured. “I suppose I’m always lost in a way, so really never lost...if that makes sense.”

“Ooh, that’s right! You’re always exploring new places, so I bet you’re used to just wandering around without knowing where you are!”

“And besides,” Dari went on, clambering into Mikoro’s hand so the fluffy captain could take off her hat and hang it on the end of the boom, “I find rifts all over the place, so even if I’m somewhere dangerous-looking it’s usually not too hard to escape somewhere else. Although...”

She was looking all around, confused.

“Huh. That’s weird. I don’t think there are any rifts here.”

“Um. Should there be? Even in the middle of the sea?”

“Yes. Well, not necessarily *here* here, but – how do I explain this? I sort of get a sense when they’re nearby, even when I can’t see them. If they were on those islands, for instance. They’re even over the water sometimes, or under it. But I’m getting a different feeling here, one I’ve only had in a very few of the strangest realities. Mikoro – I don’t think there are any rifts here. At all.”

Mikoro gave a puzzled chew of her lip. “So that means...what?”

“Just where are we, Mikoro? Not necessarily where as in exactly where, but – what sea is this? Where does Mother’s friend live?”

Her face fell as she saw Mikoro's expression.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Um, um..."

"They really didn't tell you? I can't think Mother would send you out to sea, on your own, without that kind of information."

"I think it was...um...a *special* sea."

"A special sea. Right. Isn't there a map? Or a compass at least?"

"There's...I mean, maybe a...I think in the – nope."

And Dari muttered to herself: "She went to sea without a map or compass. She went to sea without a map or compass."

But then an idea struck the under-equipped Captain Mikoro. "Ooh! I know!"

Carrying Dari carefully, she ran to the stern and opened the luggage compartment, as she'd come to think of it, where she'd found the great coat and hat and stashed away her shoulder pouch. Everything was dry, thank goodness, and she flipped it open, dug in a hand and pulled out her Academy-issue smartphone.

"Yaay, it still works! We can get the satellite map on this! If I just press this...and then...and then...nyaaah..."

Dari glanced upward. Somehow she knew, without having to be told, that the satellite in question was in a different sky.

"Okay...no map. And no phone signal too, so I can't call home...and – hey. What's this little squiggle where the internet symbol usually is?"

Without waiting for an answer (and she wasn't going to get one – Dari never pretended technology was one of her competences) she fiddled with apps and buttons, but found that nothing connected. Which wasn't surprising, to be fair.

"Ooooh!"

Almost nothing.

"What's that?" asked Dari, scooting onto her wrist for a look.

"I can still get Pokémon GO! Look, it works!"

A little pink cat-girl avatar popped up on a field of monochrome blue. It didn't look particularly useful.

"Ooh! There's a Lapras!"

Dari drew a deep breath.

It would be okay, she told herself. It would always be okay. She'd been stuck in so many inescapable situations, even impossible situations, but she would always emerge out the other side and journey on.

Yet impossible situations were one thing. Being lost at sea with Mikoro was quite another.

“Well Dari,” she instructed herself, “you’re just going to have to bear with it, like you always do. Unless...”

Something occurred to her.

“Mikoro?”

“Nyah? Aaww, it got away!”

“Mikoro, listen. Do you think this happened because of what Scáthach said to you? About how you were supposed to take this ship on your own?”

Mikoro opened her mouth to answer, but stopped before the words had formed.

She didn’t want to say it. But she knew. They both did. And she knew what Dari would say if she said so.

“Then it’s my fault,” said Dari anyway. “Well, the answer’s obvious, isn’t it? I should leave.”

“No!” Mikoro reacted at once, though in its feline intensity it was more of a ‘nehh!’

“Look. I can tell this is no ordinary reality. It’s got its own rules, and clearly that storm arose and blew us off course because you weren’t supposed to have an extra passenger. If I go, that means it’ll be alright again and it’ll let you reach Rin’s friend, right?”

“But you can’t go! I don’t want you to go! You’re my friend and we’re out here together! It’s – it’s not fair!”

Dari’s ride on the logic juggernaut hadn’t lasted twenty seconds. That huge face looked so crestfallen that to press the point against it would have violated emotional physics.

“And you said you c-can’t, anyway...you said there’s no rifts...”

“That’s true,” Dari sighed. “But I was going to open one myself.”

The big watery gaze transformed into one of sudden curiosity. “Ooh. You can do that too now? How did that happen?”

The question must have activated a memory. It certainly activated a blush.

“That’s...kind of a long story.” It was, in fact. “Another time.”

“You always say another time!”

You would too, thought Dari. On second thought, actually no, you wouldn’t. She sighed yet again and got lost in her thoughts for a moment, imagining Mikoro leaping and giggling and clambering of her own gleeful will into all the kinds of places she herself got commonly introduced to at a squirmier degree of indignity.

“But – awawa! If you can do that, can’t you open a big one we can take the bunny boat through?”

“I can’t open big ones. Sorry. But, now that I’m focused on it...”

She closed her eyes and concentrated, reaching out with fingers hooked, groping for the edges. Then she frowned.

“Nope. Nothing. Just air. I don’t think there’s anything there to open.” She added: “That’s really weird, just so you know.”

“Everything about this feels weird,” said Mikoro. “I don’t get it at all. I thought we were just meant to take the boat to my mother’s friend, and now we seem to be...well, miles away. Somewhere. Far from everywhere. Uh-oh. What do we do now?”

There might have been any number of answers to that question, but in the event the operative one came from the ship itself. To be specific, the low-level beeps she’d been hearing suddenly came to life in a catchy tune. The two young women looked at each other, then toward the helm as the yellow tips of the bunny-ears flashed, the tail behind them gave a jiggle, the headlights blinked on and off, and a familiar hum issued forth once more from somewhere beneath them. It seemed the boat was rebooting. And as it did, it swerved of its own accord, clockwise, then anticlockwise, searching, correcting. And then – very slowly – it began to nose forward.

“Oooh, look!” Mikoro cried with excitement. “It must remember the way! Come on! Let’s put the sail up!”

“A-Are you sure?” said Dari. “Wait, Mikoro. Wait. Let’s stop and think for a minute. If we approach the island together, won’t the storm just blow us away again?”

“Nyah. Yeah, I guess it might. Then, in that case...we’ll find a way through it! Because...um, Dari...”

“Yes Mikoro?”

Her lips wavered. She seemed to have trouble formulating the words.

Dari waited patiently.

“I want – nyah! I really want you to stay. This is...um...well it’s just, this is my first time to have a real adventure with you, and having you here beats being out here on my own with no-one to talk to. Can you...um. Can you promise me you’ll stay? That’s – even if the rifts work again, or if we pass an island you can get off at, or something; will you stay till we get to the end?”

“Oh, Mikoro...”

“I don’t care if you’re *not supposed to*. Who gets to tell us we can or can’t travel together? It isn’t fair! I’m not going to accept it, even if it makes things difficult! And, and, if you stay, I’ll...”

A pause again – eyes clamped, nose wiggling, as though negotiating a formidable mental hurdle.

“If you do, I’ll promise I won’t eat you without asking first!”

The cat-girl’s cheeks had turned pink as her hair, and so irresistible was her pleading grin that no-one in the world could possibly have said no, least of all so dear a friend as her kind-hearted and empathetic Dari.

“Alright,” she acceded, and allowed Mikoro to raise her in her palm so she could hug her gigantic cheek. “I promise I’ll stay with you, Mikoro. I don’t get to go on many adventures with other people either, because – you know – well that is to say, *with* in the sense that I’m with you now.” And now she too was grinning, albeit with embarrassment. “And I guess, you’re going to need someone to make sure you don’t get into any – aaack!”

Mikoro had plunged the tiny traveller into her lips for a massive plushy kiss.

“Mffkrrwww! Haah...haah...and I w-was going to thank you for...haah...k-keeping me dry...haah...through the s-storm...”

“Ooh, really? I...did?”

“Well...yeah.” And she didn’t add: “And I should know”. Staying dry did not really feature in Dari’s expeditions.

“Well I’ll keep you dry all the way to the end then!” Mikoro declared, not fully understanding that offer’s incompatibility with fundamental cosmic principles. But Dari gave her an affectionate scratch under the chin anyway, much to her purring satisfaction.

“Come on, let’s get the sail out! We gotta make up for lost time! Wuu wuu!”

And so to an incongruous refrain of train-cat sounds, Mikoro yanked her clothes off the spar and put them on, all warm and dry, and this time made doubly sure to button up the coat properly and fix the hat firmly on her head so she was ready if the rains came again. On Dari’s advice she inspected her way round the hatches and compartments, finding to her relief that they had well protected their food supplies from the water. Thus prepared, Captain Mikoro unfurled the lavender sail, made a wish on its turquoise shooting star, then took up position at the tiller while her trusty friend, first mate, advisor and keep-out-of-troubler maintained a watch from atop her hat. They were ready, these two fast friends,

and so like that they ploughed forth unto the waves for a goal that awaited them far beyond the horizon.

The voyage of the *Sea Bunny* had begun.

PART TWO
THE SEA

THE WAY OF THE

猪
BOAR

Then speak to me, O great realities of a love-based cosmos, of the tenacious and courageous fluffy one who crossed the Sea of Ways on a white rabbit. Bear me to know of her adventures, her marvellous exploits on the many islands she visited, of the many people with whose manners and tasty flavours she was acquainted, and of the ordeals she faced to steer the *Sea Bunny* home.

Speak to me, O great realities, that I, humble chronicler in a world fallen far from the ways, might thrill the minds, stir the hearts and shake the miscellaneous organs of its despondent natives; that my mediocre hand might rise to represent the voyage, in a manner befitting its excellence, which raised the name of Ibaraki Mikoro to the pinnacles of that most illustrious roster where she enjoys so worthily the company of Odysseus, Mael Duin, Sindbad, Leif Ericson, Ibn Battuta, Zheng He, Thor Heyerdahl, and of course that most illustrious wayfarer of all who just happened to join her for the ride: beloved Dari, Wanderer of Ten Thousand Worlds.

And what was our brave Mikoro's trouble? What burden propelled her forth on her journey? What sacred quest? What storm inside? What hunger? Why surely the purest, most truthful hunger of all...

“Nyaah! I'm hungry!”

Dari yelped and seized the brim of the tricorne hat just in time, feeling inertia sweep her legs into the air as its wearer plunged for the nearest storage compartment where to rummage for the next pack of biscuits.

“M-Mikoro! You just ate!”

“That was cookies! That means I gotta have biscuits now!”

“It...does? How do you figure that?”

Dari caught her breath, then winced as the head beneath her vibrated to some hard munching. Then came the sharp seismic wave of a gulp, followed by the tremors of a giggle.

“Aaww, silly Dari! Everyone knows that when you eat sweet things, you’ve got to eat at least one of every different type of sweet you have near you!”

This was apparently a new precept for Dari, whose mouth hung open but found itself short of a retort. After all, her experience from the point of view of those sweet things suggested the opposite: that just one was quite sufficient.

“And I promised not to eat you too, so I have to have an extra one! Ahmf...amff...nmmf...”

Dari felt a sweatdrop trickle down her cheek, but upon a mounting concern for her captain’s welfare, and by extension her own, she compelled herself to advance her petition.

“Mikoro. Do you think you should be getting through our food supplies so quickly? I mean, we have no idea where we are anymore, nor how far it is to where Mother’s friend lives. Suppose we run out of food?”

“Um. We could catch fish, I guess? I’m sure I saw a fishing pole in the luggage box. I could stick you on the end of the string, and – ”

“Mikoro! You are *not* using me as bait!”

“You mean...you wouldn’t find it fun to be slurped on by a cute fishy?”

“Uhh...no? No I most definitely would not.”

Dari shuddered. She could glimpse sleek shapes through the water’s surface, occasionally following the boat and no doubt ogling her with much the same interest as the seagulls overhead. For her tiny size she had a curiously good record with animals, which, perhaps to balance out some cosmic equation, tended to prefer nuzzling, prodding, or letting her ride them over opening their chops at her. All the same, these birds and fish made her relieved to have feline company.

So long as that feline company remembered that not everyone was so eager to roll around on tongues.

“Aaww,” said a plainly disappointed Mikoro. “Then, how about those islands? There’s so many! I bet we could find more to eat if we explored them.”

“We don’t have any idea what’s on those islands! For all we know we could be the ones to end up as food!”

“Yaay!”

Dari gave up and retreated into the fold of the hat to grumble. Mikoro’s pointy ears might have caught muted utterances like ‘impossible’ and ‘one-track mind’, but as she raced for a gander through the spyglass she was too excited to heed them.

The *Sea Bunny* surged through warm green waves as its captain swerved the scope left and right, once more feeling all cool and awesome in her fancy blue sea-coat. Here was an island with beaches and palm trees, there another with a smouldering volcano, and there yet another with what looked like a crumbling sandstone tower. Each such sight earned a ‘Yaay!’ or an ‘Oooh!’ as the inquisitive Mikoro imagined what tasty treats lurked within.

“Aaww Dari!” she hollered.

“Wha – ?!” came the startled peep from her tricorne.

“Why doesn’t the Bunny want to visit the islands? I want to check out that one with the funny trees, but it’s just sailing right past them!”

“Well, I should think it wants to get home,” said Dari, finding it prudent not to admit to Mikoro how those islands were tickling her own wanderlust. “If we stopped to explore them all, who knows how long it would take to get the ship home, and you after that? I’m sure we can come back to this archipelago another time, but for now let’s press on so we don’t make Mother and the others worry.”

“Archi...peligi – aahh, I’m hungry!”

“Mikoro!”

And so to the tune of invigorating debates like these, the *Sea Bunny* made its progress through the waters of these mysterious islands. Eventually Dari relented and gave Mikoro her blessing to get some ice cream out of the refrigerated compartment, so long as they shared it (and there was even pistacho, to the diminutive woman’s delight). But as they shovelled through their combined four-and-one-twelfth scoops, they became so distracted that only afterwards did they notice that a grim blanket of clouds had covered the sky.

“...Mikoro? Why’s it gone so dark all of a sudden?”

“Nyah! It’s raining! A drop just splashed my hand!”

They exchanged ominous looks then scanned the horizons, Mikoro holding her palm out to test the rain. Both exhaled with relief when they saw no signs of a re-run of the terrible tempest on whose account they came to be here: the clouds were thin, and the rain held at a drizzle. And yet...

“Ehhh, I don’t like how gloomy it’s gone. This air – it has a...a taste...”

The cat-girl stuck out her tongue. Rotated it, round and round.

“Eew. It tastes mean.”

“Tastes...mean?” repeated Dari, who in her alertness had noticed the birds and fish no longer followed them. Her nerves were tingling, and not in the way they were used to.

“I don’t know how air can taste mean. But I’m feeling it too, Mikoro. Something’s not right here. Hey. What’s that over there, in the distance?”

Mikoro strained her gaze, unsuccessfully, then opted for the spyglass instead.

“It’s...another island. But it’s different. Bigger. It’s got some kind of big thing on it – a...a ruin of some kind, it looks like. And it’s got these big beams of light sticking out; I can see nine, ten...no, twelve of them. There’s twelve. They’re moving around. Pointing at the sky, at the sea, like they’re being...aimed...”

“Searchlights?” Dari lent forward over the hat-brim. “What else can you see?”

The island drew closer.

“There’s...creatures, moving about on it. Creepy shapes. I don’t like them.” She drew back from the glass and blinked. “Um. Why are we heading straight for it?”

She was right. Having glided past all those islands she’d actually been excited to explore, the *Sea Bunny* was holding a course straight for this singular example which, with every passing moment, impressed more on its crew as a dark and sinister carbuncle they had no inclination to visit.

BOOM!

That inclination shifted into firmly negative territory as a monstrous cannonball burst from a turret, high on the ruins, and made a tremendous splash some twelve yards portside.

“Wawawa! They’re shooting at us?”

The searchlights, till now swinging aimlessly, began to cohere in their direction.

BOOM!

This one whooshed across their heads, smashing into the sea where they’d been only seconds earlier.

“Aaah! Aah! Dari! I’m scared! What do we do?”

“Come on, Mikoro! This isn’t safe! Grab the tiller and turn us away before we get closer!”

“Nggh...nhaah! It doesn’t want to turn! It just jiggles! It’s like it actually wants to go there!”

The spotlights converged right on top of them.

“Nyaaaah! It’s too bright! I can’t see!”

BOOM! BOOM!

“Waaaaaah!”

The ocean erupted as cannonball after cannonball punched the waves. The defenceless vessel rocked and bobbed like a rubber duck, or more properly a rubber rabbit, as dislodged drapes of ocean crashed across the head of its panicking captain.

“Whyyyy! Why do they want to hurt us? We didn’t do anything to them!”

“Focus, Mikoro!” Dari screamed through the din, then shrieked as a splash of sea flooded her perch; the hat’s waterproofing only benefited those underneath it, it turned out. Now they were close enough to see the gun emplacements, to catch the horns and fangs of the creatures, the monsters, manning them, leering in the flickering haze of their torches. Mikoro heard unearthly horn-blasts issuing from the depths of the ruins, then closer still, the monsters’ guttural snorts and cries; but worst of all was the sickly smell, wafting down as though belched forth from every rank window and bonfire of this nest of evil. The odour could only be described as that of a sizeable pork left to decay for months past its expiry date, which then, overcooked to the point of fury, crackles back to life off the spit and belches sulphur upon your descendants for twelve generations.

Dari dashed from edge to edge on the hat, searching their surroundings for options. In fact she was little more prepared for this predicament than her captain, for though she had made journeys through the occasional warzone, those had naturally taken place within the confines of individuals who, perhaps by virtue of their having some of the confines in question, were typically the strongest units on their battlefields, thus rendering Dari’s positions extremely secure, but at the cost of the line of sight to acquire meaningful strategic expertise.

If she kept her presence of mind under the terror of the present bombardment, that was rather simpler to explain. It was because this was not the terror at hot, lusty envelopment that so habitually reduced her to wriggling hamsterism, merely the more ordinary terror of everything blowing up around her. It was not impossible to keep a cool head in the latter situation.

“There! There!” she shouted. “Get us around that cliff! If we can get behind it the rocks should block their fire!”

But Mikoro was flailing her arms and running round and round on the spot, wailing: “Waaaah! I don’t like it! I don’t like it!” She let loose a prolonged bawl as another projectile whistled straight past them, now on the verge of taking total leave of her senses.

“Come on Mikoro!” yelled Dari in desperation, and with no recourse left, she leapt over the hat-brim, grabbed a strand of Mikoro’s hair, abseiled down, pushed the soggy pink curtain aside, and rapped on the cat-girl’s forehead with her fist.

“Wah! D-Dari...”

BOOM!

Mikoro squealed. The blast’s shockwave swept Dari and her hair-rope away at an angle, but she clung fast to it and swung back, planting the green soles of her plimsolls on the bridge of Mikoro’s nose.

“Come on!” she shouted again. “For goodness’s sake don’t just stand there! Mikoro! *Captain* Mikoro! You’re the only one who can do this!”

“Nyah...nyah...”

This seemed to have some effect, for although the valiant captain burred on incoherent, she at least staggered back into position and, on the third attempt, managed to push her hand down so as to lock it around the tiller.

“Good! Now, push! Push! You can do it Mikoro!”

BOOM!

A cannonball hurtled straight for the face of the *Sea Bunny* – but then, something peculiar happened. As though detecting its trajectory, the ears of the figurehead sang in a series of high-pitched beeps – and the vessel swerved at the last moment, pitching violently from the impact it had so narrowly evaded.

“Waah...D-Dari, did you see...”

“Not now, Mikoro! Come on, keep pushing! We’re almost there!”

And as though it sensed their intention, the *Sea Bunny* rolled back its sail, whisked the mast away into the deck, and swung slowly but stubbornly around that rocky outcrop to where the spotlights and turrets couldn’t follow them, and where, thank goodness, the wind direction was such as to take the horrid stench away. They drifted past thick growths – mangroves perhaps, though the murk, thicker still, made them impossible to discern – then shuddered as their ship berthed crunchily on a bank of shingle.



“Waaahh. Nyam nyam. Uuuuu...”

“Shh! Don’t! They’ll hear – ”

“Uwa-a-ahh!”

In all fairness to Captain Mikoro the day had been cold, wet and gunpowdery, which was hardly a set of conditions to her liking. As a master of the Chaldea Academy she was no stranger to armed confrontations, but standard practice in her training was to hang back in support while legendary big-shots like Scáthach did the actual fighting. Of course an individual assailant could be easily shrunk and swallowed – she had Tamamo’s special training to thank for that – but monster armies and fortifications bristling with cannon were something else. In that light, you will surely forgive our poor captain if she responded to her present predicament by bursting into tears.

Dari knew a Mikoro emergency when she saw one, so after ruling out tasty snacks – there’d been quite enough of those for one day – she settled for the next best option: rappelling down to Mikoro’s chin for some dedicated scritchng.

“N-N-Nyaah...D-Dawwi...”

The wet cascades abated. She sniffled. The little bursts of air from her nose set Dari’s hair-rope swaying.

The tiny brunette hugged Mikoro’s chin. “It’s going to be okay, Mikoro. I promise you. It’ll be okay.”

But would it? What even was *it*? It was hard to sound confident when she too struggled to make sense of things. Where one moment they’d been cruising across a warm and sparkling sea, here they were now, beached on a baleful shore. The rain fell cold, making rivulets in Mikoro’s hat, and the mist which clogged the air prickled her skin like malevolent tar. Worst of all, this islet’s antagonistic occupants were surely aware that they’d come aground. Likely they had heard Mikoro’s cries and had search parties clomping towards them right this minute...

Mikoro was whimpering. “N-Nwah. Thank you Dari. You’re always so kind to me when I’m sad.”

Batting the last of the tears from her eyelids, she clambered to her feet, hands on the gunwale to steady herself. “I know. Don’t say it. I need to be better than this. Yes! I will be! Because I’m Captain Mikoro!”

Dari froze. “Nnnnhh! It c-can’t be...”

“Yup! It is! I’m Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny!*” Her smile returned, too fast to catch the shift in Dari’s tone, and by extension the radical shift in their state of affairs.

“It is! It’s *her!* Oh no...”

“Of course it is! Heehee!” Mikoro giggled. “She’s fluffy, she’s cool, she has pink hair and she likes cake!”

“Oh m-my god, here – *how?* Nnnh, she’s coming! Quick! Quick! *Hide me!*”

“Huh?”

Dari didn’t wait for an answer, she dove into Mikoro’s pink tresses as the now bewildered cat-girl scrambled around and there came face to face with...

“Wah! They have walking statues too? Uh-oh, it’s tall!”

The walking statue had seen her.

It was striding towards her.

Then it burst from the fog – splashed as though through a curtain of paints in the colours of tropical glory. Huge and bulbous crimson hair, erupting like a magma flow; armours, ornaments, a swift round shield, each carrying vivid and elaborate patterns and decked in glinting gold; the swish of a sky-blue skirt, sweeping, asymmetric, on which flashed the white insignia of a camel; and within this stunning kaleidoscope the “statue” itself, no statue at all but the burnished bronze of living skin, breathing skin, rippling, twisting, palpably *arse-kicking* skin. What statue, indeed, could match this figure’s sculpted grandeur, its towering dynamism, its strident perfume of sweat, the regal sweep of its gaze, the sheen of its scimitar as it sliced through the murk on a stride whose every step was grace and gravity?

Mikoro’s jaw plunged, all else forgotten as this colossus bore down on her.

“Wahhh...wahh...h-handsome...”

The figure veered to a halt at the shoreline, its suddenness impossible. And then, fixing Mikoro with an unbreakable stare, it raised a finger to its lips and shook its sword in a beckoning gesture.

“Um. Do I...follow?” Mikoro whispered into her hair – but the only reply she got from its depths was a whimper. This whimper was of a very specific quality: one only produced by a pocket-sized person processing the warmest and wettest of compressive memories through flushing cheeks and rather keen, if at all possible, that her presence not be given away.

The statuesque figure signalled again, and Mikoro decided she found it so incredibly impressive that she didn’t want to imagine it could be with the

monsters. At any rate it looked capable of demolishing anyone who disagreed with it, in which case it might be wise, Mikoro reckoned, to do as it wanted. And so with no reason to delay, Mikoro raised her foot onto the gunwale, pushed off to leap to the shingle, and so took her first steps on solid ground since that day, perhaps in another stream of time, when she'd stepped from her mother's and sister's arms and set forth from the Ibaraki family boatyard.

She followed the grand shape into the undergrowth, taken aback by the agility, the whispering footfalls of someone so obviously hefty. And as soon as she poked her head through the bushes, she released a high-pitched mewl as a pair of strong hands grappled her shoulders and swerved her nose-to-aquiline-nose with a visage forged in the fires of the sun. Eyebrows red as flames, lips painted blue as the sky, and those eyes, those eyes! – judicious, sharp as emeralds, just a trace of brooding amusement – which after mere seconds of scanning her up and down, reached their conclusion.

The hand on her shoulder lifted, flexed, as it made ready to give the astonished little admiral exactly what she deserved.

A head-pat.

Mikoro purred. That hand, swarthy and robust, with sky-blue nails to match those lips, slipped through her hair with the smoothness of a fish through kelp. Its fingers found her ear, set off the faintest of tingles – an electric shock? But straight away their tickling was delightful, so deft that they might have been playing a sitar.

“Well now,” said the woman, her voice carrying the same measured dignity as her stature. “I thought I heard the cries of a weeping cat, but I’ve never met a cat your size, with a mane so fine, a smile so sweet, or a hat and coat so grand. And your name is?”

“I’m Mikoro! I’m from the Chaldea Academy!” Mikoro introduced herself at once, so much happier she felt in the protective warmth this lady exuded.

She smiled, putting Mikoro further at ease.

“The Chaldea Academy you say? Forgive me, that is not a name I am familiar with. What brings you to...*aha!*” And like a flash of lightning her hand clamped shut around something in Mikoro’s pink locks. She drew it out, its little legs protruding from her fist and kicking wild in the air.

“Mmmph! Mmmpff!”

“I *knew* I heard you talking to someone. A little friend?...Oh! Hmm. Now then. I know this shape.”

Her sizeable fingers wrestled those legs into their clutch and proceeded – quite professionally, mind you – to slide and squeeze upon their captive, now wholly enclosed within. “This soft skin...these sturdy little muscles...these clothes...this hair...hmm, yes. The anklet.”

She opened her hand, and there in her palm, red in the face, lay the dazed and disconcerted figure of Dari.

“Nnnnnnn!”

“My, my. It is you. *Sav’otta* Dari, my lovely little sand mouse.”

“Nnnhh...Urb-bosa...y-you remembered...nnnh...my n-name...”

“Fancy meeting you here. And what’s all this?” Urbosa probed the smudges of half-digested cake in Dari’s otherwise green tube top, prompting squeaks, then hoisted her up to her nose for closer investigation.

“Hmph. Sweeter than I recall. Now what did I advise you about your diet?” And here Dari rolled onto her face to hide her embarrassment, because to be quite straightforward on the matter, Urbosa’s hand was so majestic that merely being held in it was firing her skin with currents of arousal.

“Urb-bosa?” Mikoro was mouthing. “Urb-bosa...Urb-bosa...where have I heard...”

“Hm? You know of me, young cat of the sea?”

“I think so. Where did...ooooh!” Mikoro remembered, and her hatted face lit up with glee. “I *have* heard of you! Dari told me all about you! You’re the one who smooshed her around in your – ”

“Ahem. Did I now?” Urbosa cut in, and for this particular intervention Dari was quite thankful. But her relief transformed into a paralysed fluster as Urbosa’s smile, that enigmatic gaze that scanned all the way to the soul, fell inquiringly upon her. “Did she tell you then,” the formidable woman addressed Mikoro, “of my people, the Gerudo, proud warrior-women of the Hylian deserts, among whom it is my honour to serve as chieftain?”

Dari sat up with trembling urgency. “Of course I told – ”

“Um...nope.”

“W-What the heck Mikoro?! I said shm mff mmph mmpfff...” Her voice went inaudible as those enormous brown fingers sealed her away once more.

“Nyah, maybe she mentioned it but I forgot,” Mikoro hastened to add, which was in fact exactly what had happened.

“Is that so? Well then, I am honoured to meet you, Mikoro of the Chaldea Academy, for a friend of Dari’s is a friend of mine. And speaking of Dari...”

She raised her clasped fist to eye level. “Ordinarily my position would oblige me to dispense justice to cheeky little sand mice who not only fail to state my credentials with the necessary clarity, but so naughtily carry secrets beyond my palace walls.” She parted her thumb to whisper in the gap in her fist: “Or should I say, beyond *mine*.” And as if to put that policy into practice, her mighty fingers began to implement a programme of squeezes.

“However,” she returned to Mikoro, “as I believe the manner of your arrival gave you to understand, we have more *pressing*...” (squeeze, squeeze, rub) “...matters to attend to.”

The reminder jolted Mikoro back to the broader situation. “Ooh, that’s right! Who are those monsters, Miss...um...Chief Urbosa? Why did they fire their scary guns at Dari and me?”

“Because *he’s* here,” said Urbosa, raising herself to full height (she had been kneeling on one leg to look Mikoro in the eye). Now she cast a glance at the cliff above, beyond which loomed those fortified ruins.

Her eyes flashed.

“Ganon.”

The name sent a chill down Mikoro’s spine. It sounded important, so she focused hard on giving it priority over her impulse to climb Urbosa’s colossal red ponytail.

“What’s a Ganon? It doesn’t sound very tasty...”

“An ancient and terrible tyrant who has menaced my people – all peoples – since time immemorial. That is why I am here.”

Her gaze returned to Mikoro, and the cat-girl saw in its solemnity a trust she felt it did not casually bestow. The hand which clasped Urbosa’s friend, captive, and impromptu stress ball was drawn to her chest, fingers rolling like waves; the other, Mikoro noticed, had not once loosened its grip on her scimitar.

Urbosa explained: “The brute reincarnates from one age to the next, in some periods a man, in others a calamitous beast. As the appointed champion of my people, I am sworn to track down these incarnations and eliminate them before they can grow to wreak the disasters for which they are infamous.”

Mikoro did not understand the part about ages and incarnations, nor had she any familiarity with the Hylian realities in which to situate Urbosa’s words. Her main concern was of course the monsters, and if this mighty hero – one of Dari’s remarkably numerous high-powered connections, no less – was here to do something about them, then that was enough to immeasurably improve her mood.

“You’re going to defeat the monsters then? Um. You must have a strong squad with you!”

Raising a purposeful gaze to those heights, Urbosa replied: “On these seas, I sail alone.”

“Whaa? B-But, there must be a hundred of them at least!”

“Two hundred and twenty-one.” A dry chuckle. “Hmph. Hardly fair, is it? Do you think I should wear a blindfold?”

Mikoro gaped up her muscular ridges, her opulent precipices, her rugged abdominal cliffs. The cat-girl’s eyes were dewy with awe. The solidity of Urbosa’s stance, the glint of her sweat, the gleaming radiance of her panoply; our fluffy captain was left with no trace of doubt that this champion, whom even the mists dared not drift near, might topple those stacks of iniquity in a single blow.

“You take me at my word,” said Urbosa, regarding Mikoro through the corner of her eye. “Most wise. I have already slain one hundred and nineteen incarnations of Ganon since I pursued his fleeing spirit to these seas. Now I shall strike down one more, and that should suffice to bring peace of mind to my people. Care to join me, little cat?”

The question took Mikoro by surprise. “Um! I d-don’t really know what I can...”

Urbosa crouched, scrutinising her pink-haired friend once more.

“Your eyes have seen scrapes, my sea-cat,” she discerned, “yet your hands and cheeks are soft. Not the features of a civilian, but nor exactly a frontline combatant. You prefer a support role – correct?”

Mikoro nodded, amazed. “Nyeah – I mean, yeah! But my support powers only work on fighters I’m joined to in a magical contract...I don’t think I can – oohh...”

Urbosa’s proximity was setting the fur on her ears and tail bristling with excitement. The heat of the sand dunes rising off her skin; that heady tincture of desert fragrances, of aromatic oils and powdered minerals and cactus-flowers and perhaps just a pinch of molduga extract, besieging its way into Mikoro’s nostrils on the heady intoxication of Gerudo warrior-sweat; and then her eyes fell on that fist, still having its way with Dari. It was the sort of fist she’d heard about in legends. The strongest warriors in the world would queue up to try to force it open, but all would fail. Then along would come sweet and gentle Dari, whose presence alone would open it in an instant – because to close around her it had to open first.

And these distractions were why Mikoro gave a start as Urbosa shot to full height, for right there, twelve repugnant little monsters in bell-shaped helmets burst from the bushes with a bloodthirsty gurgle, their flappy ears sticking out,

their snouts visible through central square windows, their halberds raised as they soared through the air –

“Waaah! Urbosaa!”

But the warrior remained motionless as a monument, twitching not an eyelid as the bokoblins rose, one second, two seconds, three, to reach the peak of their leap; and then – but she hadn’t even moved! – she’d raised to the heavens the hand that held Dari, unfurled the thumb and first two fingers so that just for an instant, Mikoro glimpsed that tiny mop of tousled brown hair – and then there was a SNAP! and what she heard was not the crack of those fingers but a detonation of green-white electric brilliance as a lightning bolt crashed from the skies, forked in twelve, and struck the monsters through where they soared. Even gravity had no time to react, for their charred husks, suspended in the supercharged air, congealed into the reddish-purple liquid malice from which this generation of Ganon’s minions were formed before it too fizzled out in the residual heat.

Now this spectacle so thrilled Mikoro that she began to vibrate and run on the spot and emanate hyperactive high-pitched squeals. Her excitement was not shared by Dari, for the simple reason that in the moment the hand she was in had snapped its fingers, her head, or more specifically her right ear, had been right next to where the most important digit in that operation, which was also the largest, had crashed down. The impact thus produced an impassioned “MMPFFF!” on her part which unfortunately, for the simultaneous bang of the thunderbolt, no-one knew of but her. As for whether the incredible honour of being in Urbosa’s hand as it called forth her signature power was worth the resulting period of tinnitus – well that, of course, was a normative question.

A question there would not be time to contemplate, for now Urbosa hurtled into the open. “Waah!” went Mikoro as she clung to her sword-arm, great blue sea-coat whooshing out behind her.

“Did you see?” spoke Urbosa, her voice hurried but totally controlled. “Something’s off here. Those helmets – not like them at all. Well come, let’s get this dealt with. Ready yourself!”

As Urbosa screeched to a halt Mikoro let go, landing niftily on all fours. The ruins towered, a crawling, cackling cacophony of monsters with torches ablaze, searchlights carving trails through the fog, and once more that reek of demonic pork that seethed from deep within. A horn rasped from the heights, then another, and now the searchlights swung upon the interlopers as malicious creatures scrambled from every crumbling door and window, all wielding spears, axes or

crossbows and clad in that strange lamellar armour, those bell-shaped helmets, those tunics. It was then that Mikoro witnessed something bizarre. At the bellow of a huge leonine officer they all started to stamp ferociously, and when the splashing of mud had ceased, they had cohered into a rigid square of ranks in perfect formation – except one, some upright lizard creature, whose horn was angled marginally off centre. This was spotted and roared at by the lynel, who immediately dispatched the luckless fiend with a flaming arrow. The others did not budge but uttered a synchronised grunt, as though to perform acceptance that this punishment was righteous.

Only then did they stampede forth against their invaders.

Mikoro put a hand to her stomach, wincing. It took a lot to discomfort that most vigorous of her organs, but something about this display had accomplished it. The callous immediacy, the heartlessness for its own sake, the coercive drive to impose order on all things – that was it. The *principle* of it. It had expressed itself in front of her. It existed. And that meant it could take root; could spread; could seep through the cracks in the doors of the Academy...

She screamed.

Even Urbosa looked perturbed. “No,” she answered Mikoro’s unspoken question. “I have never seen them behave so. Such pretensions are unlike Ganon’s rabble. Nevertheless,” – the sparks crackled down her sword – “Hold the gate for me would you, little cat? This shouldn’t take long.”

A bolstering thump on the back, as she moved to unbuckle her shield from her belt with the same hand – then realised it still held Dari.

“Tsk. Little Dari, have you ever been told what a handful you are?”

Well she needed her shield, so in the interests of efficiency she reached down, brushed her skirt aside with the same fist, and there revealed a dagger in a sheath strapped to her massive thigh. Into that strap her fingers tucked the squirming Dari.

“Mmmphhh! Nnrhbhssff!”

“You behave.”

Her eyes flickered, dissatisfied. She whisked the tiny explorer out and secured her instead on the opposite side, that is to say, the inner. Pressed face-down in Urbosa’s rippling musculature her body wiggled and twitched, but this only tickled that surface into flexing round her tighter.

“Better. Well then little mouse – shall we dance?”

Down went the skirt, and up to the summit of her fearsome stature rose the fabled Gerudo Tempest, sinews crackling with the pride and might of her nation. In one hand she brandished the Scimitar of the Seven, passed down from the greatest of ancient Gerudo heroes, and in the other the legendary Daybreaker, radiant with gems and forged to unbreakable toughness. They rose just in time to greet that ruthless regiment as it rampaged into her presence – its most foolish act, and also its last, for with a cry and a leap she spun herself into a thundering twister of steel that smashed that sham into an explosion of flailing monsters; then off the final twirl of her spin, she launched unto the ruins with no loss of momentum, a soaring, swerving, spinning, swirling storm of electric fury. And Mikoro did hold the gate, because the only work that capacity required of her was to look on gobsmacked at this dance of destruction which here demolished another bokoblin battalion, there seared a trail along a narrow parapet where it scattered lizalfos archers like skittles, and from there cleared a roof in a single bound to surprise that blustering lynel upon its stack of scaffolding where, though to Mikoro it looked quite huge and growly and fearsome, it buckled under Urbosa's first blow, reared back at her second, then toppled in a follow-up eruption of fulminant sparks from her sword, crashing through those boards and poles and bringing the whole arrangement down with it; but by then the burnished juggernaut was already back on the soil, now blasted with her lightning's craters, amidst which she ricocheted from monster to monster in zigzagging triangles. Another pack of some thirty or forty devils burst forth from a doorway as she levelled a pair of moblins in a single somersault, whereupon she landed, raised her hand, and without even looking at her foes, struck them down in a clash of white-hot screeching as she shattered the clouds with another snap of her fingers. Fifty, sixty, eighty, a hundred and forty – she split them like paper beneath her twisting heels in a sequence of steps whose like would electrify the dreams of the mesmerised Mikoro for years to come.

Everything burst in a flash of white and green, and when Mikoro opened her eyes, there stood that prodigious woman atop the tallest tower, scimitar held to the sky. The cat-girl screamed with delight as marvellous thunderbolts smashed upon the turrets and fortifications, shattering searchlights, melting cannons and spinning their wreckage into the sea. Then came a final cataclysmic flash, and there she stood, unstoppable, triumphant, towering over Mikoro as currents of lightning licked off her sword.

Her smile was placid.

“Waaah...”

She hooked her shield to her belt, reached beneath her skirt, unfastened her impromptu dance partner and dropped her into Mikoro's outstretched hand.

"Your mouse."

Mikoro watched the sweat-greased Dari roll down her fingers, coming to rest in her palm with the faintest of groans. But Urbosa's fireworks display had left her rapt, and when she finally got her voice back, all she could utter was: "Nyah...ah...are you sure you got them all?"

That great hand lifted Mikoro's hat and gave her hair a massive ruffle, delighting her in its graceful hugeness. "Two-hundred and twenty," the champion replied.

And yet – and yet. Still the rain fell cold; still the eerie murk spread back where Urbosa's blistering thunderstorm had cleared it.

"Um. I guess the last one's gonna be more difficult?"

Urbosa shrugged. "Maybe a little. When it can talk it even calls me names."

Mikoro opened her mouth to giggle, but lost the instinct to when she noticed the smile had fallen from Urbosa's face. "Um. Is something wrong?"

"You could say that," said the chieftain. "In all my conflicts with Ganon and his minions, I have never seen them behave like this even once. They are crude, they are pitiless, and that's usual, that never changes, but it's not like them to be quite so...*organised*, in their pitilessness. It was as though they were more afraid of their commanders than of me. And look at this."

She strode upon the shattered battlefield and picked up a helmet. It had caved in, was melting away at the edges, but its distinct bell shape and square window could still be recognised.

"Have you ever seen anything like this, my sea-cat?"

Mikoro shook her head.

"How about you little Dari? You've been around."

"Nnnnnnn..."

"Well...I suppose it's a secret to everybody." The ruined helmet fell with a plop into the mud. Urbosa's scimitar glinted. "It's time to finish this. Come?"

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

Mikoro was trembling.

She could feel it, slithering up her spine. Monsters were one thing, but something else was at work here. Something dark, with no shape of its own. Something worse than monsters.

Something made of fear itself.

"Nyaah! Chief Urbosa...I'm scared..."

Strong fingers penetrated her flowing mass of pink hair; found her shoulders.

“Scared, you say?”

Mikoro nodded.

“Good. To know courage requires that you first be scared.”

“Nngwah?”

“My dear. Did you think me totally fearless?”

Mikoro shook in her grip. “Honestly? Y-Yes.”

A hand began to gently massage her back. Even through the thickness of her sea-coat, she could feel the reassuring heft of Urbosa’s fingers, steamrolling the liquid fear from her skin.

“Come,” she said. “I will show you what to do with fear.”



Its snorts dripped with flame, like fiery foghorn-blasts flaring forth from the cave. The hell-swine stench was beyond Mikoro’s endurance, such that all she could do, after uttering a meek apology to Dari, was to clasp her little friend beneath her nostrils so that the fragrances she’d absorbed off Urbosa’s skin provided a barrier.

“Stand there, behind the pillar,” the Gerudo champion instructed her. “If he fixates on you, leave his line of sight and count to twelve.”

Mikoro didn’t need telling twice.

A guttural roar rumbled beneath the earth.

“Hmph,” said Urbosa. “Not a talkative Ganon this time. Thank the ancestors for that.”

Mikoro concealed herself behind the pillar, took some deep breaths, then dared to peek round it. She made out two burning eyes, drilling from the subterranean murk; then came the roar again, and at last it lumbered forth, a calamitous demon boar with a blazing crimson mane, its tusks bristling with spikes, and yet again that strange armour, a curtain of square metal plates bound together with fibres. Through its gaps there smouldered horrific glyphs, oozing with blood as though carved into its very hide.

Urbosa wasted no time on taunts, nor did she charge straight in to hit it over and over again. No – she landed a single blow on its snout, then spun into a retreat as the enraged monstrosity pursued her. When she’d run far enough to draw the hideous thing entirely out of its cave, she cartwheeled to a point behind and to its left, slashed hard, blade coursing with sparks, whirled to its right, did it again, then

finally swept back to where she had started. The disoriented horror was staggering on its hooves, snorting and spluttering blood. The entire sequence had taken no more than a few seconds, and having laid her electric web, Urbosa now turned her back on the beast, raised those fearsome fingers, and with a SNAP! a scorching thunderbolt seared through the sky, so brilliant in its crackling intensity that it would have humbled even those old bearded divinities who thought they were good with such techniques. The infernal monster-pig lit up like a bonfire, and it was a stinking bonfire, a raucous bonfire, a bonfire on which you would absolutely never barbecue anything you meant to eat. And then the flames died down, the sparks subsided, and all that remained was an ooze of elemental malevolence.



“Mikoro? You can come out now.”

The cat-girl tiptoed forward, tentative. Ganon’s remains had shrivelled to a puddle of blight. Urbosa stood over it, still brandishing scimitar and shield. By the time Mikoro reached her it had all but vanished.

She lowered Dari from her nostrils; stared blankly at the space occupied till moments ago by that hulking atrocity; blinked again and again, then stared some more. It was as though it were never there at all.

“Wasn’t that – um...kind of easy?”

“What did you expect?” said the Gerudo champion. “Ganon embodies pure hatred. He is arrogance, rage, destruction, and little else. In other words, utterly predictable.”

Mikoro glanced at the gloomy sky. She sniffed. The appalling stench had gone, but little else seemed to have changed.

“Nyah. So that’s it, then?”

She hadn’t expected the rain to stop, or rays of light to burst through the clouds, or the surrounding foliage to erupt with daisies and butterflies. Mikoro knew that sort of thing only happened in fiction. But when she stuck out her practiced tongue, it caught the taste of some fetid vapour lingering still.

The taste was unnatural; *wrong* somehow. It seemed to pass by her tongue and soak its ugly flavours straight into her brain. They were flavours of all-pervading bleakness smattered with terror, a taste of all hopes forlorn, all affection extinguished...

A squeak from her hand – Dari’s first in a while. With all her exertions the tiny traveller had subsided into her resigned long-haul I’m-a-toy-I-get-it setting, but a direct hit from a raindrop had chilled her back to her familiar nerviness. Mikoro hurriedly slipped her into one of her coat’s huge pockets, but even on withdrawing her hand the water’s eerie coldness tingled her skin.

“You sense it too.” Urbosa’s voice came scorching through her mind-haze.

“I don’t get it. Why does this place still feel so...so *evil*? You beat the Ganon, right?”

“Oh, this isn’t Ganon. I’ll tell you what this is, dear cat of the sea. This is what they call a surprise.”

Mikoro shivered. It hadn’t occurred to her that anything in the world might surprise Urbosa.

“You know what I suspect? I suspect this island is haunted by a shadier menace than the Great King of Evil. Its dark power must have drawn him here in the first place.”

There was no doubt as to the direction of its source. The cave yawned terrible before them. Sickly torch-light flickered in its dark, and as Mikoro’s eyes adjusted, she made out wispy trails of smoke that stung in her nose like tainted incense.

“Gweeh! It’s so creepy! Do we really have to go in there?”

She shuffled closer to Urbosa; fought the urge to cling to her leg. The great woman’s sheer presence, her unbreakable composure, made Mikoro feel safe – but not safe enough. The cave’s shadowy, shapeless miasma leaked through the gaps in her feelings to drip, drip, drip on the deepest layers of her consciousness – a drip of doubt, of dread, of anxiety, of despair. She was struggling. A mini-Mikoro was scurrying frantic in her mind, trying to tape off the leaks with reassuring memories. The corridors of the Chaldea Academy, safe in the cosy glow of the wall-lamps even in darkest night; the students training in the garden under Scáthach or Tamamo, cultivating the skill and will to stand up to villains of legendary proportions; the protective bark of her sister – oh, never had she so longed to feel cornered by a Kiyoko rebuke! – and warmest of all, the caring, soothing arms (or better yet, the caring, soothing stomach) of beloved Mother Rin. But the more freely this memory-Mikoro ran down those corridors, the harder it wrestled in Kiyoko’s grip, the deeper it burrowed into Rin’s protective chest, the thicker she felt those sinister tendrils creep from the images’ frames towards the centre – towards *her*.

Trust no one, they seemed to whisper. No-one cares. No-one cares. They will kill you.

“Mikoro?” boomed a powerful voice, but it came from so far away, as though shouting through sandstorms from the far reaches of a vast desert...

“I...I want to go home. I want to go home!”

“Mikoro!”

A sturdy arm locked round her shoulders. The tendrils receded.

“Nyah! Chief Urb-bosa...”

“My dear little lion. You’ve turned white as the snows of Hebra.”

“Bweeeeh!”

The arm constricted – tight, so tight it almost hurt, yet it was real, physical, present in the here and now; and somehow that meant all those images and connections, all the relationships of love and meaning that made Mikoro Mikoro, felt so much realer too. Urbosa had drawn up right next to her – that relentless heat, that musk of raw sweat and power, that was real, thank goodness, so *real*. There was the Daybreaker, warding her, a steel umbrella built of the very colours of sunshine; but Urbosa’s gaze, her scimitar, remained resolutely fixed on that cave.

Mikoro realised she had been on the verge of crying, but now succeeded in drawing back her tears. Her shaking hands dug into her coat pockets for warmth. The hand on the right found Dari – sweet Dari, who was both her marvellous, kind, and funny friend from across the worlds *and* one of the tastiest treats she had ever savoured (and in light of Mikoro’s psychology, the importance of the latter right now could not be exaggerated). Her body was so small, yet felt so athletically solid, so comfortingly massive an anchor for Mikoro in her sense of a loving universe where she belonged.

She curled her hand around the little one, feeling her tiny arms, strong for their size, lock around her index finger. Evidently Dari too had been flinching at whatever malign influence emanated forth from that cave.

“Would you like to hear a secret, Mikoro my dear?” said Urbosa.

“Mnyah mnyah...”

“This path into darkness fills my heart with dread. I feel it must lead to a malevolence a thousand times worse than any incarnation of Ganon I have known. I should not like to enter this cave alone. But with you at my side, my brave little sea-captain, I shall gladly stand to this challenge.”

“Mnweeeh?” Mikoro exclaimed. “But – but – you don’t look scared at all!”

“If I did then it wouldn’t be a secret, would it?” Was that a wink?

Mikoro gulped – but without understanding why, somehow felt a little better. A little *bigger*.

“W-Well, I’m definitely scared,” squeaked a voice. Dari had used Mikoro’s hand as a climbing frame and now her head and arms poked out of the pocket. Her wet hair still clung to her forehead. “And I don’t mean scared like when – ah, I mean...never mind. What I mean is – really scared. Really, *really* scared.”

That put a smile back on Urbosa’s lips. “Spoken like a true authority on the matter!” she laughed. “And what good fortune to have you here too, little sand mouse. Well my friend Mikoro, that settles it. With her involved we have no excuse to pass this over.”

“Eh? Wh-What the heck does that mean?” said Dari.

And Urbosa replied: “How could I ever face my people again, my gutsy explorer, if I balked at a cave before a girl the size of my navel who plunges into every shape and size of hole she passes?”

Dari blushed ferociously and dropped back in the pocket.

“Aaww, Dari!” Mikoro giggled – for all her apprehension she couldn’t stop herself – and she put her hand in to tease her little friend with a finger. Dari had curled up right at the bottom, and a spring of fresh delight burst forth in Mikoro’s heart as she felt tiny slaps on her fingertip.

A thump of strength on her back again – Urbosa had got the effect she’d been after and seized on it. “On we go!” her voice struck like thunder as she steered Mikoro into the abyss.



This was not the peaceful dark of night, whose embrace bids you sleep and carries your dreams to where the dreams of all worlds meet. No, it was the darkness of non-existence: a space where space is missing.

It was following them.

Urbosa held forth her electrified sword, driving the nothingness into retreat just as it would drive anything in its right mind into retreat. But when they advanced, the void crept back, so that they seemed to walk within a bubble in an infinite vacuum of meaning.

At last they emerged in a larger cavern. At its centre lay a dais with a burnt-out pyre, and the space above it was hollowest of all.

Mikoro was trembling again.

"I d-don't understand," she mewled. "Why..."

Urbosa crept to the edge of the dais. She held up her scimitar, but even its arcing sparks seemed repelled by the nothing-space above it. She snarled.

"Wait. Come no closer."

Mikoro waited. There was nothing she less wanted to do than approach that broken zone.

"Something unspeakable happened here. The very structure of this realm has been...incinerated. Look."

She pointed with her sword. Mikoro's eyes followed it to where a charred mass of objects lay strewn about the dais.

Papers.

Books. Scrolls. Tablets, manuscripts, computer discs, USB sticks...

Knowledge.

Meaning.

Stories.

"Oh no," peeped a tiny voice in the darkness. Dari's voice. "No. No, no, no."

She had travelled farthest. Multiple stories, multiple worlds – it all came so naturally to her. She so rarely even thought about it, because she *was* it, and so she had been first to gain an intuition of what kind of realm they were in; of what this reality, perhaps *all* realities, were made – and by extension, of the horror of what had been attempted here.

Mikoro felt ready to vomit. "This is – nyaach!" she choked, rubbing her mouth with her outsized coat-sleeve. "This is horrible! It's like everything's been..."

And now the nightmares came dripping into her mind again – those whispers, those non-messages, sensory poisons leaching through the gaps in her thoughts and memories. *Trust no-one*, they were saying. *No-one cares*. *No-one cares*. *No-one cares*.

"Aahh...Chief Urb-bosa...help..."

"Come, Mikoro. You are not alone in this pit."

No-one cares. *No-one cares*. *Only you*.

"Nyaaaah! It's wrong! It's all wrong!"

"Mikoro. Mikoro! Come, dear cat – take my arm – "

Only you. *War of all against all*. *They will kill you*. *They will kill you*. *They will take what is yours because life's unfair*. *Life's unfair*. *Life's unfair*.

"Nyanyanyaa! M-Mama! Waaahh!"

No-one cares. Shit happens. They will kill you. They will kill you. Kill them first. Kill them all. Impose order.

“No!” – a piercing shout, sharp as a needle. “It’s not like that! No reality is like that! Get away from me you – you – whatever you are!”

Mikoro’s shock at this outburst broke her mind-siege and she plunged a hand into her pocket, unfurling it in the light of Urbosa’s sword to reveal a Dari incandescent with rage. That alone startled her back to her senses, Dari was so rarely anything other than harmless, but this was a fury unlike anything Mikoro had known. Her little friend was striking and kicking the air as though beating an invisible foe to within an inch of its life, yelling: “I’ll give you *shit happens!* How dare you? How *dare* you? It happens, you say? Have you any idea where I’ve *been?*”

“There. You see?” Urbosa spoke in Mikoro’s pointy ear, caressing it with her fingers. “The mouse has teeth. Her truth is strong. The wickedness which lurks here made a grave mistake in challenging it.”

“You think you can empty the rifts by *burning* them?!” Dari screamed into the darkness. “So – so – *stupid!* I’ll find all of them – *all* of them – and I’ll write about them – I’ll make them all known – I’ll care about them – I’ll *care!* I’ll care, you hear?”

“I defy you to tell me,” Urbosa put to Mikoro, “that you’re more afraid of this place than you are of her.”

A memory flittered by, searing Mikoro with the brush of its wings – the white-hot remembrance of what had happened when she’d digested Dari’s writing. But this, now, was something else; this was as though these skittering shadows had managed to offend something right at the core of Dari’s nature. Everything between that and the surface was soft, stubbornly adorable, so fun to tickle and squish. But there was something beneath, deep beneath, which even Mikoro knew better than to prod till it squeaked; some Daric nucleus of truth, or connection, or basic sense that reality was good, or whatever other fallible labels the imperfections of language might attach to it, which, as the unreal malice of this cave was finding, was something you never, ever messed with if you knew what was good for you.

“Watch her,” Urbosa instructed. “Watch her. Good. Now, look there.”

There was about the only other place she could look – the only part of the cavern whose reality appeared remotely intact. So she looked, and what she saw was a pair of heavy bronze doors. Perhaps they had been carved with tranquil images of mountains, rivers, forests and birds at one time, but all Mikoro could

see were the faces of demons with square-toothed grins, ears like hooks, bulging eyes that leered at her with punitive hunger.

Mikoro staggered straight for them. She wanted this nightmare to be over.

The doors had two handles: one raised, one lowered. She reached for one –

“Stop!”

“Nya – huh? Urb-bosa...”

“Something’s not right about those handles. Better not touch them. Here – let me.” And Mikoro took a step back, breathed deep – then her eyebrow twitched as she was distracted back to Dari, still beside herself as she battered invisible terrors to smithereens in the cat-girl’s palm.

“That will do for now, little mouse.”

The giant scimitar appeared above her, and from its steel the flimsiest bolt, delicate as a wire, nipped down to deliver Dari a zap on the forehead.

“Nnaah!”

Dari fell, landed, sprawled with knees bent, face casting about like a bewildered squirrel.

“Wha – what happened? Where are we? Mikoro?”

Her hair had gone all fuzzy from the static. And Mikoro, having been secured in the here and now by the marvel that was Dari’s frenzy, now found this sight so funny that any attempt to answer was lost in a fit of giggles, which intensified, then spiralled into howls of uncontrollable laughter as Dari persisted in asking what was up without a clue as to what she looked like right now. Neither of them even noticed the nothing-whispers – forgotten, powerless – recede.

That was good enough for Urbosa. “Stand back!” she commanded, and once more she drew back, inhaled, raised her battering ram of a leg, and in an impact which clamoured through the bowels of the earth, kicked in the doors with one almighty blow.



The Gerudo Tempest swept in on the follow-through. Mikoro darted in after her, doing her best not to imagine what monsters or demons waited on the other side.

Yet the only thing to greet them was a bitter voice:

“The fools, the fools. Can’t they keep it down? How am I to work with all this noise?”

“Nyah? This is...a study?”

There weren't any monsters here. Only books and scrolls piled against the walls, in teetering columns, in broken-glassed cases, in stacks along shelves lined with dust. Bracketed torches on the cold stone walls cast a dismal light which fell, not on a demon, but on an old man hunched over a desk loaded with papers. The room felt dingy, almost squalid. But at least it was an intelligible squalor, not like the squalor at their backs which gave the sense that reality itself was in decay.

Mikoro stared at him. "Um. Who are you?"

The first thing she noticed was the eyepatch. It accentuated his scowl, a face wracked and weathered as though carved with the strife of eternal war. The man's greying locks, unkempt, tumultuous, would have suggested a crazed old philosopher if not for the last stand of an alarming streak of ashen blond. A massive winter cloak weighed on his back, tattered and black as a starless night, with a mantle surely once white and fleecy but which now brought to mind the wiry manes of dead horses. The torchlight struggled to illuminate his battered garb, catching every so often on patches of blue that could have been called royal were they not so faded; but then a fleeting glint drew Mikoro's gaze away, to the corner of the room, where the light had struck an old lance lying in a pile of books – festooned with cobwebs, rusted, handle bent.

The old man regarded her. She shivered in his one-eyed glare. It felt like being stabbed.

His glare turned on the wary Urbosa, confronting him across the room with scimitar raised. Then he gave a scornful laugh and returned to his writing.

"More ghosts," he sneered, scribbling away. "So many ghosts. Of course. Well, soon. Soon they shall have their peace. All of them. When Emperor Ganon brings order to the world, all war will cease."

Urbosa's stance stiffened at the name. "Ganon," she declared, "is dead."

The man's quill halted mid-phrase. It tapped on the document, slowly at first. Then faster – then faster still, and then it was scrawling till it left the paper altogether and dragged haphazard through the wood of the desk. The man was sniggering, then chortling, till at last he threw the pen down and erupted in peals of laughter. He hollered so hard that the hair on his forehead flew back; and staring into that iris of unhinged blue, Mikoro saw that he was not so old after all, perhaps in his twenties or thirties, merely aged beyond his years by unimaginable hardships.

"Ahaha! Ahahaha! What uproarious ghosts you are! You think to play games with me?" Even in his laughter the steam seethed from his ears. "The Sovereign does

not die! You know this! The Sovereign is eternal, and he *will* bring order to these loathsome, treacherous wretches, and I *will* avenge you, and I *will* put an end to this war!” And in the course of these words his mirth transformed to unbridled ferocity, and he leapt to his feet and swept the desk aside in a clatter of splintering wood, shattering glass and fluttering paper. Mikoro backed away in panic, nearly losing her hat as it hit a bookshelf, as Urbosa in her vigilance sidestepped between them.

The man was taller than he had appeared sitting down, and now he paced around them, eyeballing Urbosa with a twisted grin.

“Must I explain it to you again? Foolish ghosts! So foolish! The war will never end by itself, never! No, people are wretched, they only serve their own interests and covet the riches of the world for themselves. No education, no cultivation will change this. *Only* the iron path of the Sovereign can bend their despicable instincts to pacify the world!”

“Look, dear scholar,” said Urbosa, calm as the cliffs. “We are not ghosts, and I don’t know anything about this war you refer to. We are here only to vanquish the evil curse that hangs about this island.”

“*We are the curse!*” the man burst with maddened glee. “We are all the curse! Oh, don’t you see it, you poor deluded spectres? We, who so rarely value benevolence, who lack the ability to be righteous – *we* are the curse, a curse that will never be broken till it is imprisoned in the rewards and punishments of a strong state! But ohh, they don’t listen,” – he began to gather up his scattered papers – “they never listen, they prefer to squabble forever, appointing their feckless sycophants and *misaligning names and forms!*” And having gathered an armful of his documents he hurled them at Urbosa, piteously, for they all flapped and glided into a new mess.

Urbosa sheathed her scimitar. The fellow’s motions suggested a trained strength, but his posture was unbalanced, his temperament brittle, and she was not at any rate about to strike an unarmed man.

“Only Ganon listened,” he sneered, getting right up under her face with a grin of anguished triumph. “Only Ganon will do what is necessary to end the cycle by which the strong trample the weak.”

“Why?” burst out Mikoro, before she could stop herself. “Ganon, that horrible monster from outside? He and his monsters – they didn’t care about any of that! They were just evil! They wanted to hurt us! They tried to sink my bunny-boat with their cannons!”

This intervention won her the full force of that one-eyed glower. So concentrated it was with rage and distress that it made her want to break into tears on the spot. Urbosa edged closer, fixated on the man like a desert eagle, ready to pounce and restrain him the instant he moved a muscle on her innocent friend.

“You must be one more foolish warlord then, looting and slaughtering to your heart’s content,” he told Mikoro, in perhaps one of history’s more spectacular misjudgements of character. “A wild admiral – no, a *pirate*, whose wanton fleets lay waste to the hopes and dreams of the people.”

“Waah! I’m nothing like that!”

“Ahahaha! And next you’ll be claiming that you do it all out of virtue! That your plundering can make people *loving* and *kind* by themselves!”

“I – I love my friends,” sniffled Mikoro. “And my sister. And my mother. And, and, cake...”

The man turned his back on them, the sweep of his cloak sending papers flying. “You know what you are?” he said, raising his finger. “You are farmers who wait by a stump in your field to catch rabbits, because out of all the rabbits that run across your field, you once saw one *just happen* to crash into the stump and break its neck. So you stand there, believing it will happen again, waiting like fools, *stump-watchers*, waiting for the people to *just happen* to fall into order!”

“Nyaah, how can you even suggest that?” Mikoro protested, not understanding the context but compelled to chase after whatever was right in front of her. “If that happened then I would dig out the stump! I don’t want to hurt bunnies!”

“If you were truly wise,” said the man, ignoring her, “you would not wait for people to be good in deference to you. You would be like Ganon, creating a situation in which it becomes impossible – *impossible!* – for them to do wrong.”

“And Ganon, malice incarnate, would have done that, how?” Urbosa challenged him. Each moment she kept him talking was another in which to study his motions.

“Nraargh! It’s so *simple!*” he roared – then just like that his voice turned cold as a dungeon. “I...I saw him that night. He was drunk. Asleep. And that moblin, his Minister of Caps – he saw that Ganon was cold, and put his cloak over him. Then Ganon awoke, and he was pleased, and asked who had done it; and on finding it was the Minister of Caps, he not only ran him through where he stood for overstepping the duties of his position, he then also killed the Minister of Cloaks for failing to carry out his! And when I saw those two moblins’ corpses, I smiled – ohh, I smiled – because that was when I knew: here, at last, is a ruler who

understands! Who understands, that subjects encroaching on one another's offices brings far worse harm than being cold in the night..."

"Hmph. That's what you call good?" said Urbosa. "Casually slaying your own minions to make a point of your power, as Ganon does?"

"Exactly! Only fear of the Sovereign's power can stabilise the world under firm, consistent laws that are clear to everyone. Only by controlling the levers of reward and punishment in person, and by making those punishments so heavy, so inescapable that everyone knows – everyone *fears!* – the consequences of breaking them! Yes, yes – punish! Punish! Rip them apart! Tear off their heads! The only way! How do they not see? Ahahaha!"

Urbosa folded her arms and sighed. "You know, you're not completely wrong."

"Gwaah?" went Mikoro, who was struggling to follow these ramblings but growing quite upset at their barrage of violence.

"Consistent laws that are clear to everyone?" said Urbosa. "Well, of course. What use are laws if they are too difficult to understand? Who will heed them if you have one law for your adversaries and another for your friends? And, naturally, your officials must be clear in their duties."

"Ahh," the man's eye lit up. "Maybe you see after all..."

"But to rule by cruelty and bloodshed? By fear?" Urbosa pressed on. "No – that is the way of a tyrant. The way of Ganon. And since the day Ganon made the mistake of incarnating himself as one of my people, that, among the Gerudo, is the way you get overthrown."

The man bent for his desk and fumbled it onto its legs, laughing all the while as though at the most ludicrous joke in the world. "You," he growled. "You are no ghost. No, no. You fancy yourself a Sovereign!" – then yet again his glee morphed into a bellow of hate as he slammed his fist upon the table.

"I am chief of the Gerudo, a position in which I would not have lasted a day had I governed according to what you espouse. Why, even if I did succeed in building a nation that way, it could not but be cursed to thousands of years of suffering."

"A Sovereign? A Sovereign. Nonsense. Ahahaha, nonsense! You are too *seen*. Too *heard*. Too *known!*"

"Urbosaa! I don't like it..." came Mikoro's disconsolate cry from the corner. Urbosa drew close to her, not taking her eye off the man, till she was near enough for Mikoro to clutch on her skirt. Its silk slid comforting through her fingers. Made her feel secure.

“The sovereign sees,” the man seethed on, “but does not permit herself to be seen. She hears, but does not permit herself to be heard. She knows, knows *everything* that flits through the deceitful minds of her officials, the unruly hearts of her people, but she never, *never* allows herself to be known. But you, you with your screaming colours and shapes – did you put aside your power to reward and punish, and instead go door to door to persuade and debate with people? Of course not! If you had, you would not have been able to bring order to even a few households!”

“Hmph. That’s not too far from what I did,” said Urbosa. “It is precisely by being seen and heard that you earn your people’s trust – their confidence that the power of your position will be there for them when they need it.” And Mikoro clutched tighter, quite appreciative in this moment of the power of Urbosa’s position.

“Useless,” sneered the scholar. “Useless like all the others! You, with your court filled with scheming cliques and factions, ever undermining your authority by pursuing their own interests – you are why *the war never ends!*”

“Oh, my palace has little trouble with cliques and factions,” Urbosa riposted. “Trust me. When you live surrounded by the Yiga Clan, creeping across the dunes and doing its best to skitter into your administration through every crack in the walls, you learn how to appoint officials you can rely on. But fear and suspicion only offer fertile hearts for such infiltrations. Only trust based on mutual affection keeps them out.”

“How amusing,” spoke the man, almost in a whisper. “A murdering beast like you, prattling on about trust and affection.”

Mikoro’s fingers loosened. “Wahh! Urbosa isn’t...!”

“Isn’t she?” His mouth contorted, a sinister grin. “Come out here, kitten. Look closer. Look at her pitiless stare, the blood that drips from her blade. You are a monster, Gerudo Sovereign. A monster just like Ganon. You just have yet to realise it. As a chieftain you must have killed countless souls without a shred of mercy. Do you remember the sound of them begging? Or do you drown your ears in the praise of your admirers, that you might hold till the end of your life to the lie that your hands are not stained red with blood?”

Mikoro let go. She backed into some books, sending them clumping to the dirt in clouds of dust.

But the chieftain’s answer, when it came, was calm as the endless sands. “That question,” she said, “is one which every ruler must ask herself. Not a day goes by when I don’t. Yes – I have killed. Who am I to deny it?”

“Urb-bosa...nyaah...”

“And yet, my power brings a duty of restraint. I kill only when there is no other option, and only to prevent further killing. Only a coward kills those who beg; only a tyrant fails to show mercy. Does that make me different to a tyrant? Let my people look on my deeds and pass their judgement, for my duty is to their answer, not my own. In the meantime I shall go on asking the question of myself, day after day, once when the sun scorches the dunes at its height and once more when its sleep leaves them frigid. Where is that responsibility in this ideal sovereign of yours, your Ganon, who gives himself to that power as an end in itself?”

All this was a little above Mikoro’s head, even with that splendid hat on it, but the strong sincerity of Urbosa’s tone held her steady. She found her hands clenching tight to the chieftain’s skirt. Splotches of monster blight had spoiled its sky-blue clarity somewhat, but the texture’s silken smoothness ran undiminished. Mother Rin had a scarf that felt like that, Mikoro remembered. She had so loved to run it through her hands when she was small. It felt so soft, yet at the same time so strong. Made her feel so safe.

“Power is power,” the man scoffed. “You have piled up corpses for your people. I have done the same for the salvation of the dead. After all is said and done, we are both murderers. Both stained. Both monsters. And Ganon is the greatest monster of all. Don’t you see the difference? The greatest monster, the necessary monster, the only monster who can tame a reality of monsters. Only the greatest will to kill can strike such fear that all the killing ends.”

“Striking fear only ignites a desire to strike down the source of that fear,” Urbosa countered. “Hardly breaking the cycle, the path you call for would spin it on for eternity. Have our ancestors not taught us that lesson enough? Before the Yiga there were the pirates, and before the pirates there was the twins’ cabal – ”

“Before this, before that – pah! You would speak of the past as though it brings salvation? No, no, the past is an illusion, a beacon that splutters into darkness as you reach it, leaving you tripping over corpses into lakes of blood! What, you think this is some kind of joke?! Then answer me this, you fools! Tell me how, after the struggle between Saint Seiros and Nemesis, King of Liberation, when the followers of Seiros split into nine factions and those of Nemesis into three, the doctrines that each of these factions accepted and rejected were divergent, conflicting, and yet each faction claimed it was the true representative of the ways of Seiros and Nemesis!” And he bellowed like a furnace: “Well Seiros and Nemesis can’t come back to life, can they, so who can determine which of these factions was right?!”

It was at this point that Mikoro, feeling more lost in this room than she ever had at sea, heard a voice break through. Tiny but insistent, it was calling her name: “Mikoro! Mikoro, listen!” By the time she realised it was Dari, the little explorer was as much as shouting into her ear. Grateful for the distraction, she took her in hand while Urbosa held her rhetorical ground.

“Dari?” the cat-girl moped. “What’s going on?”

“Those names he mentioned – I’ve heard them before.” It seemed she’d been paying attention from atop Mikoro’s hat this whole time. “Mikoro, I know who he is!”

“Um. You’ve met him before?”

“No. At least, I’m pretty sure I haven’t. But those names; his appearance; the way he speaks, the war he keeps going on about – his world...”

There followed the obligatory sequence of wincing and blushing as Dari pushed her way through her memories: memories of gallant knights, of ministers and priestesses, sorcerers and secret agents. The memories were not primarily of these women’s faces, but if she could struggle through the various sensory overloads they’d imprinted on her body to remember what she’d actually heard them say, or what she’d heard said around them...

No, there was no mistaking it. Least of all what she had learned from (or more accurately *in*) that empress, whose name she very much remembered but sure as hell wasn’t about to mention in front of this fellow here...

“Mikoro – please. I need to speak to Urbosa. Right away.”

“I’m listening, little Dari,” said Urbosa, to which Dari tumbled over in surprise. How could she possibly have heard her from up there?

And she muttered to herself: “Never mind it Dari, concentrate, this is important!” as Mikoro raised her to Urbosa’s ear. And she told the chieftain: “His name is Dimitri. *Prince* Dimitri – or King, depending on...ah, it’s difficult to explain! Look, I’ve been to his world. I’ve – nnggh – met people there. But the thing is, those places – I mean, those people – they didn’t seem to be from the same world. Or rather, they were, but – ”

“From the same world, but not? Dear little mouse, that makes no sense.”

“It’s like – there’s more than one variant of that world. Many, in fact. As if its timestream has branched in different directions, each giving rise to a different version of reality. There was this time for example when I was stuck in – nnnh, I mean, was taken to an opera, and then another time I met the opera singer herself, only she wasn’t an opera singer in that timeline, but a government minister.

Though she still had the voice; it was very, uhh...vibrant..." She broke off in another blush, clenching her face as though suddenly compressed.

They had edged across the room as she spoke – Urbosa on purpose, Mikoro following on instinct. The latter realised that as the scholar's raging and shouting intensified, Urbosa had moved to block any possible path for him to the lance in the corner.

"In that case," said the Gerudo champion, "who is this King Dimitri, in that world?"

"He's the leader of a major power," Dari recalled, perfectly now. "And a powerful warrior – they called him the Boar of Faerghus. Only, in most of its realities, he and his kingdom went through terrible suffering. He was always conspired against, or deposed, or killed in battle, and even when he survived he was known for the extremely painful burdens he'd endured. I remember wishing I'd met him. I know it's silly, but I thought, maybe, if there was someone to listen and care for him..."

The dejected fellow appeared to have forgotten they were there at all. He was slamming his fists against the far wall, as he ranted to himself about ghosts and endless warfare and how Ganon was going to usher in a new age of order. Mikoro's lips quavered as she watched him. He looked like a man who had lost not only his kingdom, but his friends, his dreams, his world – his everything, in fact. And where his violent outbursts had struck Mikoro with dread, it now gave way to pity as she saw them for what they were: not so much arguments, as expressions of the rawest grief and terror.

"If what you say is true," Urbosa told Dari, "and I believe you, for you are an honest little creature, then this must be a Boar of Faerghus from one of the worst timelines of all."

"I wasn't sure at first," said Dari, "because I don't remember any version of him known for this kind of...well..." – she searched for the word – "philosophising. But I'm certain, it's him."

"Nyrahh!" Mikoro let loose. She could take no more. Overcome on an adrenaline of pity and frustration, she parked Dari on Urbosa's hot shoulder – there was a squeak, of course – and stamped to the centre of the room. "Mr. Dimitri!" she called out. "Is that your name?"

The man's muttering ceased. His shoulders started to shake. Slowly, so slowly, he raised his head till the angle allowed him to glower at Mikoro.

"Pfft. Young. Like I was, once. Who are you?"

"I'm Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny*! And we're not here to hurt you! Can't we...um." The force of his scowl made her gulp, but she persisted. "Why don't you come outside with us? We have tea and cookies in the ship!"

"You're no ghost either," the fallen prince gave a sneer of realisation. "You must have been sent by *her*. You were, weren't you? That damned brute, she would hound me to the ends of existence! Well you'll not poison me today, kitten of the emperor!"

"Mikoro," said Urbosa, looming up behind her. "Come. He appears exhausted, but his motions are not those of an amateur. If he strikes you – "

"I don't care anymore!" Mikoro shouted. "The world doesn't have to be the way he's saying! He's gone through horrible things, I get it! But he won't make it better by making it more horrible!"

"Have – you – understood – *nothing*?" Dimitri snarled, and now he stood to his full height and stretched out his arm, pointing at Mikoro with a motion which, just to see it, you would have known had ordered executions and massacres.

"You're right, I've understood nothing!" Mikoro answered regardless. "Because all I know is I love my family, and my friends like Dari and Urbosa, and it sounds like you want a world where we all fear and hurt each other, and – and, I know that if all you've known is hurt, if the people where you come from are always fighting, then maybe it makes sense to think they're just naturally like that and need to be controlled! But if we can be kind to each other instead – "

"Kindness," Dimitri spat the word back at her. "There is no kindness. No love. Love can't make people do what is right. Even the love of parents for their children isn't enough, have you not seen? The way they are congratulated for producing children with Crests, but kill those children born without them? Love! Ahaha, don't you see? Both types of children come from their parents' bodies, but one occasions celebrations while the other is brutally destroyed! How ridiculous! Even parents in dealing with their children use a calculating heart! How much more so those who lack the affection of parents? How much more so those whose parents were *slaughtered in front of them*?"

He screamed these last few words with spittle flying from his face, and groping emptily for a lance that wasn't there, he lowered his head and came stampeding towards Mikoro in a straight line, exactly like a wild boar...

But Mikoro was elsewhere. For now it was *her* memories, so distant, so repressed, that sparked to life as the Boar of Faerghus came roaring towards her. Fragmentary memories, memories from a time before they could truly be called

memories, a time before the Chaldea Academy, before Rin, a time so brief – a time of shouts, a scrap, a storm, ambulance sirens...

No. Ibaraki Mikoro knew her reality.

She had no recollection of those eternal seconds it took the wild boar to reach her. She didn't think, didn't choose, rode on purest instinct. Urbosa came flashing to intercept the fallen king, but Mikoro had leapt past her, her feline reflexes a match for Gerudo lightning; and when her consciousness caught up, it was to find her assailant leaning into her arms, bulky, too heavy, yet somehow inert, as though by barrelling into him for a hug – for that was what she had done – she had earthed the charge of his rage in an instant.

Now there are hugs, and there are Mikoro hugs. Light and nimble as her body might be, no-one it's ambushed ever forgets the ballistic energy of its impact. A Mikoro hug is pink and fluffy deliverance, a purring, gurgling miracle – in other words, utterly unique, brimming with years of Mother Rin's nurturing affections as well as sisterly cuddles, sweet treats and exhilarating alimentary adventures. At a Mikoro hug, all that is hurtful melts into air, from barren hearts burst sprouts of meaning, and in that glow of pink sunshine it becomes possible to imagine at last, with sober senses, a life in loving conditions and wholesome relations with, if not all, then at least enough, just enough, of one's kind.

“Nnnah! Heavy! Nyaah, stubborn piggy, you're too heavy...”

Dimitri said nothing. Did nothing. Whatever processes took place in his consciousness did so in infinite night. But after an age of grunting beneath the strain, Mikoro could have sworn the load lightened, just a little; and then she heard, rather than saw, the faintest glimmer of a star in the darkness.

It lingered; then it fell. It splashed on the dirt behind her.

A tear.

Urbosa's scimitar hung poised above the prince's neck. Now it lifted, and the Gerudo's free arm came round to help Mikoro support his weight. All of a sudden he was drenching the floor with tears, blubbing low, and from his howls rose unrecognisable names which, from the way he hollered them, Mikoro guessed must have belonged to people who had been extremely close to him – who perhaps, in a sense, still were. She couldn't have known that they, his immediate family, his closest friends, had all been slaughtered around him in his childhood; a planned assassination, orchestrated to strike at the heart of his kingdom but whose true damage had been to the heart of a fourteen-year-old boy who had since stalked a reality where trust, affection, even hugs like this had been fundamentally erased from his existence.

She could smell the salt in his tears, soaking into her hair. She allowed it to; went on holding him, for how long she neither knew nor cared, because it didn't matter. Ibaraki Mikoro knew what mattered.

His tears spattered onto his writings, strewn about their feet. Their arguments concluded.

And that was how Mikoro ended the cycle.



The dais was empty now. No charcoal, no ashes, no pyre. Instead of burnt-out stories, fresh texts, colourful and diverse, sat in neat stacks round the edge of the cavern. The exciting scent of new books, waiting to be opened; of the casings of new video games Mikoro couldn't wait to play. From the bronze double doors, whose dreadful demon-face carvings had yielded to breathtaking mountain and forest scenes, she could see across to the tunnel to the surface. The rips in reality had gone. Sunlight crept in – sunlight real, and warm.

Mikoro thought she heard a mutter from her hat: “Manuscripts don't burn...”

“Nyah? What was that?”

“Oh, uh, nothing,” came Dari's voice. “Just – something I once heard someone say.” In fact she'd wondered about it ever since, still wasn't entirely sure what it meant, and fearing her friend was about to ask, she added quickly: “You know Mikoro, Mother would be so proud of you. Kiyoko too.”

Mikoro glanced back through the doors. She chewed on her finger. “I just hope he's gonna be okay,” she said.

“He will, I think. You were so brave.”

“He was scary! But...I kept thinking about what Urbosa said, about, you know, how courage is doing what you're supposed to even when you're scared; and then what Mother always tells me about how when people behave scarily, it's usually because they're scared themselves, or because they've been hurt. Like Dimitri – he looked so miserable. And miserable people deserve hugs!”

“I daresay that is also the dessert of pink fluffy people,” said Urbosa, who came striding out at that moment. “Come here, my valiant cat of the sea.”

“Yay! Dessert!” Mikoro cheered, as the great warrior got down on one knee and swept her up in a muscular embrace. Momentarily confused as to where the ice cream would come from, she quickly sank into murmuring bliss, nuzzling her nose on Urbosa's breastplate, as she realised that this treatment was a match for any

dessert of the culinary variety. Such desserts of course included Dari, who up on the hat-brim found herself caught beneath the sharp green steamroller of Urbosa's eye.

"Aa-a-aaack..."

It winked, massively. Dari tumbled with a yelp into the fold of the hat, where she curled up and held her breath in fearful anticipation of the press of giant fingers. But for once it didn't come, and she lowered her arms, exhaling with relief as the heat receded from her cheeks.

"Oh, you silly girl," she told herself off. And she reflected: well, there are fears and there are fears, aren't there.

Mikoro's head vibrated beneath her. "Is he okay?"

"That remains to be seen," said Urbosa. "Years of trauma do not resolve with a single hug. But you have opened a window on it, and through it, with time and support, his pain might find release. You have impressed me today, *Captain Mikoro*." And she drew close, clasping her again, and whispered over the brim of the hat: "You too, you perceptive little sand-mouse. Don't think I'll deny you your *clear and consistent reward*. Next time our paths cross, hmm?"

A tiny "eep!" issued from the fold.

"Next time?" said Mikoro. "Does that mean you're leaving?"

"On the contrary. I shall stay and guide our poor prince onto a path of recovery."

"You'll...stay? Are you sure?"

"My people are no strangers to war, dearest Mikoro. Nor to the devastation of those it leaves shattered in its wake. It would not be becoming of me to turn my back on one who has suffered as he has. And – no, no, no," she added, pressing down with a fingertip on the protesting Dari who had popped from the fold of the hat. "You must journey on. You have a duty of your own to carry out, am I right? Well let this one be mine. I set sail on this sea to vanquish one hundred and twenty incarnations of Ganon, and that is what I have done, but now I have the chance to seal that accomplishment by subduing the very notions of tyranny which enable his power."

"N-Notions..." said Mikoro, beginning to snuffle. She found the thought of parting from Urbosa quite upsetting.

"Dimitri's texts. Or rather, what they awoke, and the form they found in Ganon and his forces. It is a lesson, I suppose. Strike down a tyrant and you save one reality. Strike down the tyrant a hundred and twenty times, and you save a hundred and twenty. But tyranny itself, justified and made timeless, carries the

potential to rend *all* realities asunder. That is the potential we saw here in this cavern. And an idea, dear cat of the sea, makes for a far more fearsome foe than a person.”

Mikoro, always better with particulars (which she could put in her mouth) than transcendentals (which she couldn't), stared blankly.

“Hmph. He wanted to burn *his* texts now, you know.”

“He – nyeh?!”

“I stopped him. Yes, their ideas are incredibly dangerous, but what good would that do? Someone else might always write them again. And besides, in the conflict and social breakdown of the only world he knew, it made sense that he could imagine no behaviour other than cruelty, and no remedy other than laws and punishments that returned that cruelty in kind. His works are a testament to what experiences like his can do to people, and must stand as a reminder that it is up to all of us to prevent such conditions arising. So instead I suggested that he rectify it. Update it, that is, with the alternative possibilities you introduced to him.”

“The – the – but I just gave him a hug!”

“Yes,” said Urbosa. “You took responsibility. You attributed his violent manner not to human nature as he did, but to his circumstances, and so you improved them. You offered him a better vision of what we can be.”

“I offered him a hug. I don't see why that's special...”

“Don't worry, my dear friend,” Urbosa reassured her. “You will, in time.”

“Nyah. Now you sound like Kiyoko.”

The Gerudo chieftain raised an eyebrow. But sensing she was about to walk off, Mikoro tugged on her skirt and spoke to her, almost pleading:

“You have a boat too, right? Why don't you bring him and sail with us? You can come to my mother's friend's island, where we're going. I'm sure it's a nice, safe place where there'll be tea, and cookies, and cake, and, and...”

Urbosa appeared to give this some thought. Then she ran her great hand through Mikoro's hair, and said: “For sure he will need a place to recover. Perhaps we shall join you there, once he's ready to travel. But first I must make certain he isn't a danger to himself or to others; and secure this island so nothing like this,” – she gestured to where the pyre had lain – “can happen again.”

Mikoro mewled and grabbed onto the chieftain's arm. Her hands followed it up, and from there found their way into her awesome mass of flaming-red hair. Pulling that huge ponytail around, she buried her face in it. Urbosa smiled at the

nyam-nyam-nyam sounds coming from within, then with a contented sigh, reached around her with both arms for a final prolonged cuddle.

“Nymnmhh. I nnvh uu,” mumbled Mikoro, emerging from her hair-dive.

The chieftain’s hand closed round Mikoro’s and shook it, then clapped her heartily on the back. “Off you go now, Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny*,” said the Gerudo champion. “Sail well. You too, little Dari. May the Seven Ancestors be with you till we meet again.”

Mikoro stood and watched, still awestruck, as the towering woman strode through the doors, shield and scimitar rattling on her belt. Then she reached up and collected Dari.

“She’s right,” Dari reminded her. “We have to get the ship to Mother’s friend, remember?”

“Yup. I know. I just wish...”

“That she could come with us?” Dari finished the thought for her.

They emerged into bright sunshine. The clouds had yet to clear; still sprinkled the island in a pattering rain. But at least now they looked like clouds of water rather than malevolence; refreshed the skin and the soil, rather than chilling it.

“I know it’s naughty,” said Mikoro. “I know we already got in trouble because there’s two of us. But don’t you think that if any trouble saw her standing on our bunny, it would turn round and swim away as fast as it could?”

“It might,” Dari replied. “But how do you think I’d be spending the rest of the trip, on a ship with her on it, that’s barely big enough for one of you as it is?”

Mikoro gave an extremely simple answer in the locative – that is, beginning with *in* – which attested to her breathtaking frankness, a lovable quality to be sure, but whose omission here should be pardoned lest it embarrass Dari into murdering your narrator. In the event she was embarrassed just short of that threshold, which was enough to send Mikoro into a fit of giggles.

“Aaww, silly Dari!” she said, tickling her with a finger. “Would that be so bad? It’s obvious you like her!”

“Nnn, s-stop it! So do – nnah! I mean, you know that’s not how it works! Mikoro!”

“She hasn’t even eaten you yet, has she?”

“What do you mean, yet?”

“Nyaah! You’re so cute when you go red and fidgety!”

“Ohh, for goodness’s sake Mikoro, why don’t we just – wha – what are you doing now?”

She was sniffing at her.

“Um. Dari?”

Dari sighed. “Yes, Mikoro?”

“I’m so happy wonderful Dari is my friend. But, um...I think we need to give you a wash.”

“Well whose fault’s that?” She spread out her arms in exasperation. “Who inhaled a freaking cake on top of me? Who got me stuck on Urbosa’s...on her...nhhh...”

The *Sea Bunny* waited on the shingle. Its systems hummed to life as they approached, ears singing in beepy expectation. The lush green mangroves glistened in the drizzle.

“It is kinda a nice smell though. Nrrr. I wonder what they make her perfume with.”

“I know what they make her perfume with,” said Dari, a folded-arm figurine of gruffness. “She told me the first time. Some things you just remember, you know?”

Mikoro hadn’t expected that answer. “Um.”

“Do you know what a molduga is?”

“A...a...molguuga? It’s a, it’s a...uh-oh. I bet it’s, um, huge, and smelly, and has big teeth, and a great big tummy, and, and...”

“A liver.”

“Nyah. And a liver...”

“Right.”

THE WAY OF THE

狗

DOG

The rain eased up, the clouds blew clear, and the isle of ruin dwindled into the distance. Soon the *Sea Bunny* was making its way beneath a gorgeous afternoon sun. The ocean breeze tickled Mikoro's cheeks, sweeping the dusts of dread and gloom from her senses and baking summer warmth into her skin.

She smiled, dreamy.

"Ooh. It looks so peaceful now. Don't you think it's so much prettier from this side?"

Dari gazed from her hat-perch. "Well," she said, "there aren't monsters or cannons on it anymore, thanks to Urbosa."

Mikoro's smile rose at the corners – a naughty grin.

"Nyahah! You're still thinking about her!"

"Wha – what do you – "

"You are, aren't you? Heehee!"

"I wasn't – I mean, I – arghh, Mikoro! Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"I think you liked it when she held you," she insisted, taking on a cutely professorial air. "Otherwise why did you snuggle up so long in her big strong hand?"

"Nnnh! Did it look like I was given a choice?" Dari flinched as the fluffy captain's head bobbed giggly beneath her. "And, well," she reflected by habit, "Urbosa did have a point. She's a leader, isn't she, with a reputation to look after, so she was right that I shouldn't have told you what happened in the privacy of her palace."

“Aaww, Dari is such a caring friend! Always thinking about how people feel!”

“Well I, uh...” That too felt sudden. “Thanks, Mikoro.”

“How squidgy they feel here, and how tight and soft they feel there, and, and...”

“Nnnnnhh! M-Mikoro!”

“Mufufu. I think you *liked* it. Otherwise how come you keep travelling around even when you know the big women are going to find you? Especially the ones who are older than you, like Urbosa, and my mama, and...”

“Look Mikoro, we’ve been through this befo-”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to admit it. It’s our *see-cret*.”

Dari’s mouth clamped open and shut like a hole punch. Mustering a complaint she opened it once more, only to be cut off by a far weightier grumble from the deep.

Grrrrgl...

“Nyaah! I’m hungry!”

She seized the hat brim, her reflexes learning fast, as the Mikoro-ground plummeted for another glorious expedition through the food stores.

“Aa-AHMFF! Nmmff...mmhhf...”

And Dari gazed out to sea; then down at the horizontal crumb-volcano over the brim, and from there out to sea again. A blue vastness, endless in all directions, its waves too rough to swim, its depths no doubt teeming with hungry denizens, and no interdimensional emergency exits in sight.

And besides – she’d promised.

A tremor, as Mikoro gulped down her lunch. Then a huge jolt as she burped.

The little explorer buried her face in both palms. “Oh Dari, you silly, silly girl,” she told herself. “What in the worlds have you got yourself into this time?”



“Mikoro?”

“Nnnnf.”

“Mikoro! Are you awake?”

A tug of tiny hands on her ear.

“Nrrff. Nyam nyam...molguugas...”

“Wake up Mikoro! We’ve stopped!”

“Nnngwa?”

Mikoro sat up with a start. This time Dari saw it coming and ducked back into the hat-fold to head off a tumble.

The intrepid captain had been curled up napping in the stern. She rubbed her eyes.

“Dari?” she yawned. “Where are...”

“It’s another island,” said Dari. “The ship docked while you were asleep. It looks safe, but...”

Mikoro crawled from her cosy spot and pulled herself up against the mast. The sunlight was bright – it was still afternoon – and her eyes needed time to adjust.

“Mnnh. Tired.”

She stretched out her arms for another yawn.

“I fell asleep too,” the little explorer admitted. “I only woke a few minutes ago. We’d already docked. Look – there’s even a little pier. I thought I’d better wake you before we...you know.”

Mikoro did know. They were thinking the same thing. The *Sea Bunny* had made landfall of its own accord.

“Huh. Well at least it’s not dark and scary this time. I can’t hear any monsters. Can you?”

“No, but – ”

“I see a hill, and bunches of trees, and – ooh, are those houses?”

“Mikoro – ”

“Nyaha! There’s even a beach!”

And before Dari could utter another word she found herself bounced up the pier atop Mikoro’s head.

The cat-girl’s footsteps rattled along the planks, then screeched to a stop as they emerged on a red-brick plaza.

“Huh. That’s weird.”

You couldn’t better design a square to bustle with public life. There should have been pedestrians and tourists, kids and adults playing ball games, kiosks peddling hats and bags and pot-plants. Where were the late-lunchers munching on sandwiches, or the fitness groups exercising to the radio?

There were no travelling carpet-sellers, no fashion designers handing out sample clothes; no elderly folk relaxing on benches, peering over their newspapers at passers-by who stopped to hold meaningful conversations about religion and politics. No entomologists or master fishermen came by to investigate the local wildlife; no dodgy art dealers attempted to unload

masterpieces stolen from museums which had themselves stolen them from indigenous peoples. No balloons flew overhead. The space was deserted: a book with no pages, a story with no characters.

A chocolate milkshake with no chocolate, Mikoro thought.

She glanced down. The brickwork beneath her shoes was laid in concentric patterns, neat, deliberate, but the bricks themselves were badly weathered and cracked. So too the run-down shacks, slumped at either end, whose wide display windows, now vacant and strewn with debris, suggested they must have once been shops. Between those wreckages dirt paths trailed out onto grass, only to be ambushed and devoured by unmanaged scrubland. Aged trees dotted what remained of a space that pined for better days.

Mikoro listened hard, but all she could hear was the sea breeze. It ruffled the boughs; creaked through rotting wood-boards; rearranged shards of broken glass.

She twitched her ears and listened again. There was another sound. The faintest *tap-tap-tap-tap...*

“Dari? Do you think anyone lives here?”

“*Lived* here, I would say,” Dari offered. “It looks abandoned now. All the same, let’s be careful. You never know who might – aahh, Mikoro!”

There was no repressing Mikoro’s curiosity, and in a heartbeat the coat-clad cat-girl had gone scampering across the plaza. She was headed for the largest building of all: what had to have been the town hall, with oaken double doors (though one swung from a single hinge) and a decaying clock tower whose hands had stopped at exactly eleven o’clock. Its blue-tiled roof, once pretty, now stained, had for the most part fallen in. To its side stood a flagpole, on which the remnants of a red banner flapped in sad and tattered futility.

A branch, Mikoro thought it depicted. Or maybe a hand.

The tapping came from within. Mikoro peeked through a broken window. She could spy someone hammering away on the keys of a laptop computer.

That someone looked up.

“Oh! Visitors?”

A singsong voice, high in pitch. It was a tone you recognised at once as belonging to someone in the hospitality sector – a someone who now burst smiling through the doors to greet them.

Mikoro jumped. “Nyah! A doggy?”

The first thing she noticed was the huge yellow head. It came with flappy yellow ears and bushy yellow hair, the latter tied up in a bun by a red elastic band with

little bells attached. This individual reminded Mikoro very much of a Shih Tzu lion-dog, and yet they also stood upright, like her, and wore the shirt and skirt of an office clerk. The bizarre administrator bowed at her, facial features fixed in an unflappable beam.

Mikoro wondered if this was a human who had gone through a similar transformation as herself. She remembered how she had indulged in the process a little too long, thus ending up with pronounced feline instincts as well as her little pair of fangs. Had she kept going – had Mother Rin not intervened in time – would she have ended up something like this?

She shuddered.

“Oohh. What are you?”

“Welcome, Mikoro from ChaldeaAcademy and Dari from...!”, said the dog-person, freezing momentarily like a computer experiencing a critical error. Then she continued: “I’m Isabelle! And I hope you enjoy your visit to emainmacha!”

“Wawawa – slow down! Our visit to what?”

The strange Shih Tzu handed Mikoro a leaflet.

“To our lovely island of emainmacha! In this guide you’ll find a list of all our exciting shops and amenities, a directory of currents residents, and further information to help you make the most of your visit.”

Mikoro accepted the leaflet with a cautious hand. She couldn’t shake the sense that there was something not quite right about this Isabelle. She was bright of bearing, unfailingly polite, almost zealous in her enthusiasm; the perfect customer-facing professional perhaps. But what lay beneath that unbreakable smile? Mikoro somehow suspected that, hypothetically (because you wouldn’t dare put this to the test), if you put a hammer in her hands and steered her onto a battlefield, then here was a terror for which the darkest alleyways, fieriest pits and toothiest jungles of the universe would be sorely challenged to put out a parallel.

The island’s name was printed on the leaflet: *emainmacha*. Other than that, the paper was empty.

“Um. How do you pronounce – oohh! You have matcha here? I like matcha! Tamamo gives it to me in her tea ceremonies and, nyaah, it has such a deep, sweet flavour! And sometimes she gets me matcha-flavour ice cream, and matcha-flavoured chocolate, and, and...”

"I don't think that's what it means here Mikoro," said Dari, whose wary eye stayed fixed on Isabelle. Big, yes, female, yes, but no alarm bells just yet, and thank goodness in the name of all things sane and merciful.

Mikoro pouted. "Why not? Matcha is matcha, isn't it? I want matcha ice cream!"

"Did you hear how she pronounced it? *Makkha*. I think that's a different language from Tamamo's green tea."

Sensing a chance to be helpful, Isabelle sang: "If you'd like refreshments, please stop by Nook's Cranny!" And she raised a yellow arm (or was it a leg?) and pointed to one of the derelict stores. Mikoro's heart sank just looking at it. Those cake-shaped empty spaces, the ice cream that wasn't – the despondency was too much to bear.

"Um. Does anyone actually live here?" she asked.

Isabelle turned downcast. "Ooh. There really isn't any news to report today, but..."

"Come on, let's not be rude Mikoro," Dari whispered in her ear. "Look how hard she's trying. Do you think she's been carrying on her work here since everybody left?"

"Oh yes!" Isabelle's face turned bright as the sun again. "I was having a hard time with my crossword puzzle, but I finally figured it out!"

They stared at her.

"Ehh...I suppose that doesn't really count as news, does it? Sorry! Well I'd better get back to work supporting your enjoyment of our island, so please have a wonderful visit!"

And like that she was gone. Once more the rattle of machine-gun typing issued from the wreckage.

"Gosh," said Dari.

"Nyah. A busy yellow doggy."

"But, what could she be doing here? From the way she spoke you'd think this was some thriving paradise, and maybe it was once, but now..."

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap...

"...everyone's gone," they finished together.

They shared a disconsolate silence, which naturally Mikoro couldn't stand for more than a few seconds and so she began to wander at random. The ruined store stood out, and perhaps with a desperate corner of her stomach-mind holding out for the association between ice cream and shop-shaped things, she approached it anyway. A curious wooden box sat outside the entrance, and inevitably she lifted

the lid and peeked inside. Hissing rose from within, making her go “Ooh”. A bunch of chubby tarantulas were glowering out at her, and one or two raised their front legs, displeased at this disturbance to the peace of their nest.

“Sorry,” she mumbled as – resisting the urge to poke one – she lowered the lid back in place.

Unfazed, she followed her curiosity out to the scrubland. She shook a couple of trees, but there was nothing left to fall out; any fruit up there had long since been eaten by birds. She crept up for a closer look at some suspicious overgrown piles of stuff; these turned out to be abandoned construction materials, which Dari, ever the experienced observer, deduced to be the plots of houses whose residents had long since moved out, their sites made ready for replacements who never arrived. A grand old pile of stones must once have been a museum, though both visitors wondered how many galleries such a small space could really have accommodated. Wandering back round to the pier they even noticed some wreckage in the water; the remnants of a port, perhaps.

Mikoro lifted her tail into her hands and gave it some squeezes. “I feel sad now,” she moped.

“It does seem kind of depressing,” Dari agreed.

“Right? Like we arrived late to a party and missed all the sweets, and fluffy animals, and fun games, and, and...cake...”

She glanced back at the *Sea Bunny*, drifting inert by the pier.

“D’you think we should sail on?”

“Well...”

“Um? Dari?”

Dari gave a sigh. “I feel kind of sorry for Isabelle. Still here after everyone else has left, working so hard to keep this place alive – well, alive-ish. It’s almost as though if she left, the island would just...well, vanish, I guess.”

“This place feels so strange. Almost like it’s some kind of...nyeeh...”

“...dream,” they concluded as one.

Dari marshalled her resolve.

“Come on Mikoro. Let’s at least have a stroll before we get back on board. It feels safe here at least, and after all those hours at sea I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs a little. Hadn’t you better get some exercise too? You’ve kind of – you know – been eating and sleeping all the way.”

“I only ate a little!” Mikoro protested. “Like, this much!” – she indicated with her fingers. It was a breathtakingly liberal error margin – indeed one might have called

it radical – but the patient and kind-hearted Dari succeeded in her attempts to not cringe at it.

“Come on,” she urged again. “How about we just go to the top of the hill and back again? We might find interesting things that’ll tell us what kind of community lived here.”

“Mweh...”

“That path on the right doesn’t look so overgrown. Let’s see where it leads?”

“Mweh.”

“You never know. There might be secret stashes of chocolate biscuits they forgot to take with them?”

“Yaaay! Let’s go!”

And at once Mikoro was on the march, convinced that somewhere on the island was a bush, and behind it a lever, which when pulled, would heave open a vault in the hillside piled from floor to ceiling with scrumptious goodies.



On the outskirts they came to a river. There was a bridge – but only just. Had its ropes hung any looser, it is unlikely the row of logs would have got away with their claim to that status.

Really it was more of a ford.

Mikoro surveyed the far side.

“Ooh. There’s flowers.”

Red tulips, red lilies, red pansies, red hyacinths, red roses, red windflowers, red cosmos, and even red chrysanthemums carpeted the field ahead.

“Um. That’s a lot of red.”

The different species were bunched together in rows or clumps, but any governing order in their arrangement had long since fallen apart. With each passing rain the flowers had multiplied on their own terms and now ran amok, a battlefield of bloody vegetation. The blood-red lilies looked especially vicious, Mikoro thought.

“So many varieties,” Dari observed, leaning out from her perch. “I can’t imagine they all grow naturally here. Someone must have planted them on purpose.”

Only a single patch of grass by the bridge was spared floral aggression. Protected by a row of stakes, it contained a simple headstone whose surface was

a little eroded but clear of moss and dirt. Beneath it lay the only flower in sight that wasn't red: a solitary sprig of white meadowsweet.

"A memorial?" suggested Dari. "Is anything written on it?"

"Um...nope. There's a little stick-figure though. I think it's a person."

Finding no further clues to this puzzle they headed on up the path, braving some especially aggressive pansies to come out on the beach Mikoro had spotted from the *Sea Bunny*.

"Nweh. It looked nicer from the ship."

A melancholy air seemed to suffuse this shoreline. She chose it as a good place to set Dari down, mainly because it was always fun to watch her tiny legs flounder through soft sand; which, awkward as it sounded, was still appreciated by the tiny traveller for its exercise value. And this beach was certainly soft and sandy, lapped by warm waves and sprinkled with colourful seashells. But to walk on it was to watch the colour fade from the air. The wind blew in your ears, but you no longer heard it, and soon felt your spirit sapped with regret, or perhaps, with misplaced nostalgia for what might have been. There were no deckchairs or coconut trees, even though Mikoro felt sure there *should* be, and sure enough, after several minutes of scuttling along, they came to another memorial stone much like that they'd found by the ford.

This one too had white flowers freshly laid beneath an engraved human stick-figure; slightly smaller than the last, Mikoro thought. A row of tetrapod concrete wave-breakers stood between it and the shore, as though daring the waves – or anything on them – to come near.

Put off by this atmosphere, Mikoro returned Dari to her hat and padded back up to the grass. A further wade through warlike flowers brought her to a ramp paved with stones. This looked like the trailhead for the central hill, and on scampering up, she arrived at a plateau strewn with...

"Nyah? Are these weapons? And, and, armour...why..."

Spears. Swords. Helmets. Boots. A mess of armaments lay strewn about the grass, with no apparent method to their placement. Yet for what they were, their impression was not particularly frightening. Rather they conveyed resignation; appeared almost wistful. They were broken. Every blade or battle-suit was in some way twisted, bent, snapped or shattered to pieces. It was like they were convinced they existed for nothing.

Some weird wooden assembly stood in the midst of this muddle.

"What's that?" said Dari. "Some kind of cart?"

“It’s got barrels,” said Mikoro, trudging towards it. “And...um. Is that a rocking horse?”

The blades brushed against her coat but were too blunted to leave any marks.

It was in fact a rocking horse, and it did have barrels, as well as cardboard boxes, fences and tables of several sizes. It took them both a while to work out that if your goal was to create the appearance of a chariot, but for want of an actual one you had to make do with household objects, then this was about as respectable a go as you might make.

Two more memorial stones sat side by side here, each with its own sprig of meadowsweet. The stick figures were a little different this time. One was stocky with a very large beard. The other didn’t look human at all.

“Um. A hippo?”

“What the heck Mikoro? That’s a horse. Look at the tail, the shape of the head...”

“Oh.”

“A hippo. Really?”

“Well, it is kinda big.”

Dari sighed. She looked again and conceded that Mikoro’s point was fair. Whoever engraved this horse had obviously not intended to be humble about its proportions.

“Well, okay. It is a big horse, I’ll give you that.”

“Maybe it’s a molguuga.”

Dari blushed without knowing why and said no more.

The trail led on to the summit, and from here they could make out a bulky structure on top. But there was one last plateau to cross, and on it was one of this baffling island’s most baffling features of all.

It was a grassy rectangle some hundred and fifty metres long and perhaps one hundred wide, levelled out to perfect smoothness. White lines ran across at regular intervals, and at each end stood a goalpost, but these were neither the netted boxes of football goals nor the H-shaped bars of rugby goals, both of which Mikoro recognised from the television and Dari recalled from her athletic childhood. Rather they were like both types of goal stuck together. It was evidently a sports field, but they couldn’t shake the sense that there was more to what happened here than the word ‘sport’ implied. For each blade of grass seemed to seethe with aggression – an aggression more vigorous than the weapons, more even than the flowers; and it was a righteous aggression. No, more than that. A *political* aggression.

This ground was not for a sport you *played*. It was for a sport which reminded you of who you were and prepared you physically and mentally for the day you would rise up and overthrow the oppressors.

“Mikoro? I think we should walk round the side of this one.”

“Yup. I think so too.”

So they did.

On the far side a set of stone stairs completed the climb to the summit. The island’s highest level was enclosed by a stone fence, with a stone wall behind it, and behind that...

“Oohh, I bet those have yummy things inside!”

“Hold on Mikoro. They do look like farm silos, yes, but look how they’re positioned. And they’re painted grey like the walls. Hang on – are those real walls?”

“Um.” Mikoro went up to one and tapped it with her knuckles. “Nyah. I think you’re right. It’s just a wood screen with pictures of stones painted on.”

Like the chariot, it was as though someone had lacked an actual fortress so had given it the best attempt they could with the objects available.

“And why is there a doghouse in the middle?”

“Well, I’m as stumped as you are Mikoro. I’ll tell you, I’ve been to one weird place after another, but this island...I just don’t get it.”

She clambered onto Mikoro’s hand and rode it to her chin, where she reassured her friend with some routine scritchng. The cat-girl purred.

“Nrrr. I wonder who set it all up like this. Someone must have, right?”

“Whoever they were,” thought Dari aloud, “they must have been pretty troubled. The memorial stones; the weapons; those flowers; that sports field; this...uhh...effort at a fort; well, they don’t feel to me like the work of someone who’s terribly happy.”

“But it doesn’t feel dark and scary like the island with the monsters, no?”

“Not at all. I’ve honestly not felt threatened once since we landed here. Have you? If anything it feels, I dunno...tired?”

They emerged through the entrance.

“Hey, the view’s nice from up here!” said Mikoro. “I can see the bunny-boat! And look at all that sea! Oooh...so many islands in the distance...”

She raised her hand to give Dari a higher vantage point. “Are we headed that way, or is that the way we came from? Can you see the island where you got put on Urbosa?”

“Nngh. Mikoro.”

“What can you see? What can you see?”

“Nothing. Your finger’s in my face.”

“Nyah. Sorry.”

“Thanks. Yeah, I don’t know about the islands, but that’s a good view of the village down there. Can you see the old town hall? I bet Isabelle’s still in there, typing away on...whatever it is she does. And there’s the beach – you can just see the ford – and further along...”

She squinted hard.

“Mikoro?”

“Ooh, I wonder what molguugas taste like...”

“Not now Mikoro. Look there, quick. Is that a person?”

“Huh? Where?”

“Along the beach. Yes, there. I’m sure someone’s there!”

Mikoro pulled her hat down to shield her eyes from the sunlight.

“Oooh! You’re right! There’s definitely someone sitting on the sand!”

“Do you think we shgwaaah! Mikoro, wait!”

But there was no stopping the inquisitive captain once she’d fixed her attention on something, and she bounded across the sports field, waded through the marsh of weapons, somersaulted down the ramp, and scampered onto the beach to get a closer look at what was now quite definitely a mysterious stranger.

He sat with his back to them, facing the sea; but the moment Mikoro caught sight of him he rose to his feet. A man – or was he a boy? He was a good head and a half shorter than Mikoro, with shaggy dark hair, and naked aside from a pair of leather shorts.

Mikoro hesitated. She was in tune enough with her own animal instincts to recognise the alertness in his posture. He knew she was there. If he hadn’t turned around, it was because he was confident enough in his speed to not yet need to.

“Um. Hello?”

He did not reply.

“Careful Mikoro...” Dari warned her.

Mikoro took another step.

Now he spun around.

A youthful face – yet his stare glinted with a hardness of many seasons that all the same could not disguise a brooding sorrow. Nothing in his movement suggested aggression; rather he just eyed her up and down, shoulders slumped with the same downcast air as the sands on which he stood.

Mikoro felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. There was a tautness to his stance, like a loaded spring. It made her feel much as she did when big dogs barked at her from across the street. That didn't happen often, because she found dogs adorable, and they adored her – they liked to waddle up sniffing and licking – but every so often one canine or another might catch onto her feline mannerisms first and, before it had time to think, react upon deep-seated instincts of its own...

Mikoro checked herself. She was being silly, she decided. He was only a boy. Unarmed, barely clothed, not menacing at all.

Maybe he was lost.

“Hello?” she called out again. “What’s your name?”

No answer.

Gingerly she took another step forward – then stopped. The youth was making gestures with his hands.

“I’m Mikoro!” said Mikoro. “Do you live here?”

“Mikoro,” Dari’s voice rustled in her ear. “I’m not sure he can speak.”

“Nyah. Ah – ah, I’m sorry,” she uttered. She pointed at herself. “Mi-ko-ro,” she pronounced. Then she pointed at the youth and gave a questioning shrug.

To this the youth did something that surprised her: he got down on all fours and made silent barking motions, rocking back and forth on bent limbs just like a dog. In so far as this was his answer to her question she did not find it particularly helpful. But then with remarkable agility he sprung to his feet, turned side-on, raised his arms as at an invisible enemy, and proceeded to trade it blow after blow, first with his fists, then as though with an imaginary spear, and then with punches and kicks again – interrupting this show with constant glances in Mikoro’s direction.

“Um. You’re a fighter?”

“Mikoro,” came Dari’s voice, urgently.

“Ooh, a strong fighter – a fast fighter...”

“Mikoro!”

“Nyeh?”

“Tell me if I’m seeing things, but doesn’t his style look familiar?”

“Um.”

“Watch him.”

They watched. The youth seemed to be enjoying his performance of swinging and brawling and grappling, or at least to be very proficient in looking like he

enjoyed it; and as she watched, Mikoro became certain that she had seen these exact manoeuvres before.

“Um, um...where...”

“Didn’t we spot Kurumi doing rolls and dodges just like that, in the yard about a month ago? Who was her trainer again?”

“Oooh, that’s right! And some of the other students do it too...”

“There – look! That flourish after each set of strikes! She’s made me practice exactly like that on her hand!”

“Who? Scáthach?” Mikoro blurted out.

This triggered an astonishing change in the youth’s manner. Without warning he ceased his miming and rounded on the cat-girl, eyes round and wide as though someone had just dropped a piano on him and missed by an inch. With knees bent and shoulders low he crept right up to her, finger outstretched, then swung his hand round and round as though asking her to repeat something.

“Wah! What do you want? Why, why...”

“Ask him about Scáthach!” urged Dari. “Quickly!”

“Um! Is it because I said Scáthach?”

It was. His eyes bulged, and he jabbed his finger insistent at her, its meaning clear: “that, that”. He drew closer, his face no longer downcast but ablaze with curiosity, and every so often he glanced to the end of the beach where the memorial stone stood behind its cordon of wave-breakers.

And the perceptive Dari, who in her thirst for knowledge had paid close attention when Scáthach told her stories, felt her heart skip a beat as she worked out who this was.

“Oh my god. Mikoro, this is...!”

“Nyah nyeh! Scáthach is our friend! All the students love her training even though she works them real hard, because she’s so good at figuring out their strengths and weaknesses and changing her approach to suit them! And she’s patient, and fair, and knows so many stories, and Mother is always saying how lucky the Academy is to have an instructor as capable as her. Isn’t that right Dari?”

“Mikoro, listen! This fellow – ”

“Kurumi knows her best, doesn’t she? She even made a game out of Kurumi’s training where she made her Gáe Bolg tiny and swallowed it – you know Scáthach’s spear, the Gáe Bolg? – and then challenged Kurumi to go in and get it out of her tummy...”

What the young man did next made it evident that this was the wrong thing to say.

Specifically, his eyes swelled with bloodshot rage, foam seethed from his chops, and his muscles tensed so tight that it was as if they were preparing to detonate upon a naughty cat, with twitching ears and a long swaying tail, who had dared subject him to mockery. Where there'd been a despondent young lad, there now stood a snarling, sputtering rampage waiting to happen.

“Gweh? What’s wrong? Wha – nyaaah!”

The youth made a brutal swipe, which had Mikoro not veered back would have swept the hat clean from her head.

“Wah! S-Stop it! I didn’t do anything to you!”

“What are you doing, Mikoro?” Dari shouted – then realised. “No! Don’t!”

“Oohh you silly little man, I’m not going to hurt you! Here!” And in what she but unfortunately not all people construed as a gesture of conciliation, she gripped him on the forearms, stuck out her tongue, and gave the fellow a great wet lick up his face – “Nnnn-lah!”

Imagine her disappointment when, far from improving that face’s disposition toward her, it actually turned it purple.

The youth reared up, bursting with a wrath so hot that her saliva visibly fizzled off his forehead, and bellowed from the depths of his throat: “Rrrraaaaagh!”

“Nyah! Uh-oh, uh-oh...!”

“Don’t just stand there Mikoro!” cried Dari. “Run!”



Mikoro ran.

Through the flowers, she ran. Up the ramp, she ran. Across the field of weapons and armour, she ran. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her, with the furious young man never more than a lunge behind. He was a hound unleashed, on the warpath, and his was a trained pursuit which only the feline contribution to Mikoro’s neural pathways equipped her to outpace.

Across the sports pitch he bolted after her, and its atmosphere seemed to further rile his spleen so that he almost caught up, till Mikoro felt the very tips of her hair slipping through his grasp.

“Faster, Mikoro! Faster!” screamed Dari from the rear of the hat, where she very much wished she had something capable of firing snowballs right now.

At the summit fort Mikoro screeched to a halt before the doghouse. This was a dead end, so on impulse she scrambled up the scaffolds of its artificial walls,

clambered across the top, then scurried down the other side – down the walls, down the cliff, all the way down to the scrubland on the outskirts of the dilapidated village. She had not gone eleven paces when she heard a loud crash, cracking the earth, blasting twigs and leaves everywhere: the agile youth had leapt from the summit, cleared the wall, and landed in the bush in a single bound.

“Nyah! N-No way...”

Out he burst from the undergrowth, gnashing his teeth and thrashing with hands like claws. Through the trees and thickets the chase went on, then straight through the village, past the dock where the *Sea Bunny* lay berthed, and out to the ford beyond. By now they had done nearly a full circuit of the island, but before Mikoro could cross, the youth went somersaulting over her head – an amazing manoeuvre, flipping and diving through the air exactly like a salmon – to land square across the bridge in front of her.

At this point a frightening change overcame him. A hero-light shone above his head, and his skin turned mottled and dark, as purple as a carnivorous berry as his body contorted to twice its size. His roars broke into barks, his sinews bulged into strings of knobs, his vision clouded over with blood, and in the back of her mind Mikoro latched onto a memory of Scáthach describing a transformation exactly like this. *Ríastradh*, she had called it. *Ríastradh* – if only Mikoro could remember where that came from...

The contorted youth came snarling across the ford at her, logs snapping and buckling and splashing beneath his stomps.

“Nyaaaah, I’ve had *enough!*” she yelled. “You attack me for no reason, then you chase me all the way up and down this island like I did something wrong, and if you’re not even going to tell me what it is, then I think it’s time you cooled off!”

And she extended her hand, fingers outstretched, just as the monster-boy’s charge brought him within an inch of them. They radiated a sharp blue light, and then the whole ford seemed to bask in a lavender glow, so pale, so fleeting that had there been anyone around to notice, it would have faded by the time they’d raised their heads.

When it did, the riotous young man had shrunk to the same size as Dari.

He plunged into the river where his footfalls had broken the bridge’s logs, vanishing in a cloud of steam as the water hissed in the sheer heat of his battle-spasm. But Mikoro was unstoppable now, and she reached in and snatched him up. Still he raged and snarled, apparently unperturbed by this latest change in his

circumstances. His body was scorching to the touch, and his fists pounded on her thumb with such force she could feel it in the bone.

She opened wide, just as she did at the dentist. “Aaaa-h!”

Nomf!

Ordinarily elated at this stage in the sequence, she grimaced instead. Her hand stung from the blistering heat of his body, and she flapped it hard. Now she could feel him thrashing down her throat, wrestling against every pulse of her oesophagus. He was a fair match for each but thankfully not for all, and after about a minute in which that gullet grappled with its most arduous challenge on record, it deposited him safe and secure in Mikoro’s stomach.

“Eugh. Too spicy...”

She realised she was sweating, though she didn’t know whether that was on account of that exhilarating run around the island or the ferocious kick of her latest fare. She removed her hat, thinking to fan her forehead with it, only to find Dari leaning against the crown with arms folded.

“Now will you listen?” she said.

Mikoro was breathing hard. “Nhaah – nwah – Dari...”

“You do realise what you’ve just done, right?”

“Nnhah...nnhah...”

“You just gobbled up Scáthach’s most legendary student of all time. His name’s Cú Chulainn.”



Holding Mikoro’s attention for ten minutes was a trial at the best of times. At others – say, while she was being violently sick – it was not worth the effort.

“Nyaaack! Pfff-ah!”

Mikoro gagged, spluttered, teetered dizzily, then turned her head so as not to look at what she’d retched upon the sand.

“Nnyeh...nnnh...uuuuu...”

Dari clung to those masses of pink hair, having found the hat too great a seasickness risk with its wearer in her present condition.

“Look Mikoro,” she said, “if he’s making you feel this bad, why not just let him out?”

“Nnn...nyhh...n-no! If he comes out, h-he’ll just chase us around again! Gwehhh!”

“Well, uhh...in that case...”

But Dari found herself short of ready guidance. She had never seen this before. Mikoro's famous stomach, her pride and joy, just wasn't supposed to struggle with its, well, guests. Between the robustness of its walls and the enchantments she'd learnt off Tamamo, it was all but structurally impervious. So what could account for this?

"Euuuugh! Tastes s-so icky..."

"You're tasting your own stomach acids, Mikoro. Look, is it really worth it? Why don't you bring him out but keep him at this size? I'll try to talk to him."

She knew it was pointless even as she said it. Not because Mikoro was stubborn – which she was. It was rather that her stomach might as well have had a personality all its own, and one with which Dari was as well-acquainted as anyone. It must have sensed it had a challenge on its...glands, of a like it had never faced before, and that being the case, Dari knew it would not give up its catch even if it had to throw up everything other than him.

Most of that everything consisted not of the snacks Mikoro had devoured on the ship, which her stomach had made quick work of, but rather of the acids, enzymes and mucus by means of whose torrents that desperate organ was struggling to suppress its latest visitor's battle-spasm. The fluids did him no hurt, the enchantment saw to that, but nor did they seem to have the same effect as when squirted onto reasonable people. They were frothing to vapour before they even landed on his skin, so fierce did the air roast around him as he roared and snarled and leapt and kicked and bounced against those pulpy walls, at which he lashed with his fists, struck with his heels, and whose ridges he even made attempts to chew through. None of this succeeded in damaging Mikoro's stomach lining but neither was it anywhere close to comfortable, and its outcome was a gastric civil war in which this stomach's ancient evolutionary instincts – to throw up offending contents, as one does – tussled with its higher consciousness (a thing usually associated with the brain, but no less applicable in Mikoro's case to the organ concerned) whose obstinacy committed it to setting the terms for inconsiderate guests.

"Nnye-pffffth-hhh!"

Another load of this struggle's residues shot up her gullet, although a full description of its journey to the sands would be excessive to the general interest.

Dari got fed up of getting swung back and forth, so she rappelled down a strand of long pink hair and leapt to the sand. Straight away she slogged a good distance to put herself clear of any splash hazards. Spotting a scallop shell, she took cover – just to be real sure – and from there bore witness to the rest of this

extraordinary spectacle. Her heart throbbed, in part out of concern for her sweet friend for whom she was so little help right now, but equally in awestruck reaction to how Mikoro's stomach, whose strength of will she'd be the last to underestimate, was proving itself, if inelegantly, up to containing one of the most fearsome Red Mists in the chronicles of all the realities she'd known.

"Uuuu. N-Need to lie down..."

Mikoro staggered to the grass, wobbling a few steps further before finally crashing down in the flower field. Dari hastened closer, wary of being caught too far from her giant friend. It was not as if she suspected anything might happen to her on this island, but she could glimpse the river from here, and knew that across it, in the old town hall...

Surely not.

Well, she felt guilty even suspecting it. But that still got her imagining it, so on this occasion the resulting rush of dread overcame her trusting nature. She moved faster, weaving between the flower stalks without losing pace.

The pinnacles and ridges of the supine Mikoro rolled in the crimson sea. The visual effect gave Dari a headache as her brain tried to work out why, contrary to the usual pattern, the sea was red and the island blue. The island for its part was groaning, shuddering, issuing noises of squeaky and throaty discomfort from one end to compete with the rumbling, gurgling protests of the deep centre. Dari decided this was not a mountain range she would attempt to climb, and instead mounted the tricorne hat, which had fallen a little way from Mikoro's head. Now she could survey both her continent-friend and her surroundings in safety.

Both sets of noises were subsiding. Mikoro was settling, rubbing her stomach; little jets of saliva (at least Dari hoped it was saliva) intermittently spurted forth from her lips. Knowing she mustn't get distracted, the lookout swivelled to make sure no-one was coming. By the time she looked back, Mikoro was fast asleep.

She released a pent-up sigh.

"Poor Mikoro. You know you can't just eat your way through every problem, right?"

狗

"Nnnnmhh..."

"Mikoro? Mikoro!"

"Nyam nyam."

“Come on Mikoro. You can’t sleep all day,” said Dari, sacrificing historical accuracy for practical gain.

Mikoro sat up; rubbed her eyes; blinked. She took in the field of red flowers, then the beach, then the sea, and finally squinted cross-eyed at the Dari sitting on her nose. This routine was beginning to feel familiar.

The sky was still bright, but the sun hung low across the ocean.

“Nyam. What a nice nap!”

“How’s your tummy?” asked Dari.

“Tummy is – ooh.” She burped. “My tummy feels happy. It’s made a new friend!”

“Mikoro, you were vomiting all over the sand. Are you sure you feel better already?”

She reached into her coat and gave her belly a rub. “Yeah...nnggh. He’s calmed down now. I can tell.”

The rumbling and groaning had stopped, Dari could work out that much.

“It feels like he’s, um...feeling around. Want me to let him out?”

She raised a hand for Dari to roll into, whereupon the little traveller stood up in her palm.

“Look Mikoro. There are a few things you need to know about the person you swallowed.”

“Ooh. I remember now. Did you say you know him?”

“Sort of – well, no, not personally. I just remembered Scáthach’s stories and thought about what we’ve seen on this island. I’m almost certain that he’s Cú Chulainn.”

“Cu...Cuu...nyah – wait, *that* Cú Chulainn? The big scary warrior who won lots of battles and beat up lots of people even though he was young?”

“There you go. You do remember.”

“Wah. I thought he’d be...um, bigger. What’s he doing here?”

“Not a clue. What else do you remember Scáthach telling us about him?”

Mikoro chewed on her fingertip. “Um. Well, she trained him. And...um, um...”

“His pride, for instance?” Dari offered. “How he couldn’t hear anything that sounded like a challenge to his dignity, or that of his family or country, without starting a fight over it?”

“Um...!”

“Something that getting scarfed down like a snack might just possibly constitute?”

“Wha – but why?”

“I should know, Mikoro!”

“Nyah! But...but...”

“And you also remembered the Gáe Bolg, which I know because you just couldn’t wait to tell him about it. But did you remember the part about Scáthach bestowing it specially upon him? How he was the only person she taught to use it? What he went on to do with it? And how he might feel if after all that, people were now playing with it like a tummy toy?”

“I...um. I forgot.”

Dari turned away, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like ‘attention span’. She ran a hand through her hair as she contemplated what to do.

Perhaps, she decided, this was a problem more easily addressed from the opposite direction.

She turned back.

“Um. Now your cheeks are red...” Mikoro observed.

“It’s fine,” said Dari. “Look. I think I’d better go in there and talk to him.”

“Mnyah? B-But I promised not to eat you!”

“You did. And I’m not sure I should be going in there so soon after what happened last time, either. But if it gives us the best chance of getting out of this without a major incident, I’ll do it.”

“Major incident? What do you mean?”

She watched Dari squirm in search of an explanation. The little explorer had no idea how the Hound of Culann had come to be here – for all she knew he’d been dead for over two thousand years – but people like that were *connected*, she knew that because she paid attention, and if he was around, it raised the chances that others from his reality were around as well. When those others included indomitable goddess figures who had a professional interest in such things as agriculture or fertility (which, translated into terms meaningful to Dari’s way of life, meant they were either hungry or horny), the result was a considerable likelihood that she would face consequences – three-hundred-and-sixty-degree consequences of the wet variety, she was sure – if they learnt of her involvement in anything that befell their protégé.

This was Dari-calculus, developed under pressure of rigorous experience. But how to explain it to the likes of Mikoro?

The cat-girl put her out of her misery. “Well, okay, if you really want to. But but – nyah – what if he hits you?”

“Ah.” Dari actually hadn’t considered this. “Well...I don’t think he will. Surely he’s exhausted after all that struggling. And if he does...well, I’ll just have to wrestle with him, won’t I? Ehehe.”

She said it with genuine embarrassment. But Mikoro knew that for all Dari went through (in no small part *because* of what, quite literally, she went through) her muscles were well-exercised, and her reactions quick.

Besides, Scáthach had put the little explorer through a few sessions too. She’d know all his moves and have the advantage of familiar terrain.

Satisfied, Mikoro brightened up instantly. “Yay! Dari wants me to eat her again!”

“J-Just this once, okay? And then not again till we get you home.”

“Okay!” Mikoro raised Dari to her mouth. “Aaaa-h!”

Nomf!

She gulped, a little late – Dari had stumbled straight for her throat before the cat-girl’s tongue, which also oft evidenced a mind of its own, got ideas about playing with its food. Mikoro shifted her fingers to her neck, tracing the Dari-shaped bulge as it slid down her gullet.

She giggled.

And then, maybe it was guilt, or maybe it was the atmosphere of sadness which pervaded this coastline, but the cat-girl felt the soak of a wave of depression.

She wandered aimless for a while then sat in her coat amidst the lilies, gathering her knees in her arms.

“Nyuhu. D-Do I really just...eat my way through every problem?”

She lifted her hat from the flowers. Spun it around in her hands. Gave its turquoise shooting star pin a long, hard stare.

“And I promised her, too, but look at me now. I couldn’t go two islands without eating her again. Just like the cake.”

Dari hadn’t sounded harsh. She was always patient with Mikoro. She hardly ever all-out scolded or berated her. Even so, the cat-girl felt certain the little one was frustrated with her. That everyone was frustrated with her. Or if not with her, then with her tummy.

She sniffled. Through the moisture in her eye, the hat-pin glinted.

“I wish...nnhh. I wish I...”

But what she wished would never be known, because at that very moment, her pointy ears gave a twitch. Then another.

“Nyah? That sounds like...”

...something she recognised. From students who might come to her room to practice while relaxing on her sleepy bear sofa. From the nice professionals Rin would occasionally get in for concerts in the Academy theatre.

A guitar.

Music was hit-and-miss for Mikoro. She rarely experienced it the way it was intended, given that her cat-ears perceived a different range of frequencies to those of the average human. Generally speaking, light and melodious instruments excited her, while harsher, screechier outputs were a reliable way to send her running from a room. But the strumming she picked up now was as melodious as melodies came. Its notes were as gentle as the evening wind through the woods; brushed the soft pink fur of her ears like the whispering trickle of a mountain stream.

It was coming from the summit. Her ears twitched again, pinpointing their source to that effort at a fort. Before she knew it she was making her way up the hill for the third time that day. The music was mesmeric, made her so relaxed that had she not been in an accountable mood she might have quite forgotten to tread steady for the benefit of her passengers.

Reaching the top, she found a large white dog sitting atop the doghouse.

“Ooh.”

“Hey there cool cat. What’s buzzin’?” he said.

In some respects he was much like Isabelle: about the same height, and far more dog than Mikoro was cat, that was for sure. But this dog-person had the appearance of a Jack Russell Terrier, entirely white aside from his snout and thick black eyebrows, and his fur was smooth as fur could be. What was more he was completely naked, save for what Mikoro suspected was the only piece of clothing that mattered to him: a simple acoustic guitar.

The bewildered cat-girl edged closer. She gave him a sniff. He didn’t seem to mind. The fresh scent of a minty breeze – through wooded valleys, the umbrellas of outdoor cafés, the curtains of opera houses...

“Um. Is everyone a dog around here?”

“Relax, my friend. No need to get your fur in a ruffle when K.K. Slider comes to town.” His voice was the mellowest to ever flow through Mikoro’s ears. Apart from Mother Rin’s, of course.

“K...K? Is that your name?”

“That’s me,” said the dog. “I don’t ask for much, you know. A stool to sit on, a song to sing, and some folks gathered ‘round to hear it. How about we settle down to one of my sweet tunes?”

Mikoro extended her hand. Hesitating, but receiving no adverse reaction, she stretched it the rest of the way and placed it on top of his head, between his flappy ears. She gave it a rub. The dog-musician merely smiled, a smile so tranquil as to suggest all was right with the world, and carried on brushing his strings.

His large head felt so solid, and his fur so smooth and satisfying to stroke, but there was something else in its texture which Mikoro couldn't quite place. This dog was real, physically there in front of her in that moment, that much was plain. Yet she couldn't shake the sense that this wasn't *everywhere* he was, or for that matter, *everywhen*. Her thought processes didn't quite have the profundity to explore this sense further, let alone the words to put a shape on it, so she left it at that and dwelt instead on how calm she felt in his presence; how the tension seemed to melt from her limbs, and her wilful desires settle into contemplation.

Before she knew it she was letting out everything.

"I don't understand it," she confessed. "I did a naughty. I was bringing my bunny-boat back to its owner to make up for it. They said it would be an easy trip. But then there was this storm, and we got lost, and now I don't know where I am. And there's monsters firing cannons at me, and shouty princes, and strange boys who get big and angry and chase me around, and I've...um, I've eaten my friend; and it feels like everything's going wrong because all I do is make trouble for everyone, because I'm naughty, and can't control my tummy, and, and, nyaah..."

"Hey. Chill, sweet puss. Feeling a little in the doghouse, is that the mood? Alright. Well Uncle K.K.'s got you covered with a slick little number you might wanna hear."

Mikoro blinked at him.

"You mean - you're going to sing a special song, just for me?"

He began to twist the pegs on his guitar.

"Oooh."

"You know that feeling," said K.K., "when you come up with something fresh and groovy, but it feels like it's been there singin' around in the stars since long before you were a pup?"

"Um." She couldn't really say she did.

"Well that's how it rolls for this little ballad. I call it K. K. *Ulster*. Take a seat, and we'll jam."

Mikoro looked round and spotted a row of wooden stools along the makeshift walls. She could have sworn they weren't there before. She looked back to the dog, who flashed her the gentlest of smiles as he tuned his instrument. His teeth glinted. Apparently he was serious.

Genuinely curious now, and with little better to do while she waited for Dari, Mikoro parked herself on one of the stools.

“Alright. All tuned up and ready to roll,” said K.K.

狗

To Mikoro’s surprise, the lyrics to K.K. *Ulster* turned out to consist of five sounds: ‘nah’, ‘mi’, ‘o’, ‘queh’ and ‘nao’.

O queh-queh nao mi queh o nah mi nao...

To her greater surprise she understood them perfectly. By some process she knew she would never be able to explain, K.K.’s strings and syllables fused in her mind into words made not of sounds but something more immediate; something primary. Something which infused not only her consciousness but also, it seemed to her, the doghouse, the artificial fort, indeed the very air she was breathing.

She couldn’t hear it, technically speaking. Nor see it, nor – most significantly for her – taste it. But she could *feel* it. Feel the story woven by the notes of this bard-dog’s guitar.

The story of a little boy from a far-off land called Ulster.

Ulster. Mikoro was sure she’d heard of it but couldn’t quite place it. Oddly, a fragment of Rin’s voice flashed through her mind from her early childhood, when her adopted mother was on the telephone and she’d naughtily picked up the receiver in the other room, as one does. She’d overheard her talking about a Good Friday, and reasoned it meant those Fridays when she managed to badger Kiyoko into letting her have extra ice cream. She could never work out why Rin got so stressed over Good Fridays.

Apparently, the name *Ulster* translated roughly as ‘No’.

Now this boy (*queh nao nah queh mi o nao queh...*) might have been any other had he not, alas, received the worst possible thing you can give a child: a birth in miraculous circumstances. He came into the world so surrounded by kings and ceremonies and shapeshifting demigods and parental journeys through other worlds that it left him no choice, really, but to become a hero.

For instance, he couldn’t simply try to be the best at things, as children often do. If he tried to be, he actually would be. That was how it went when he marched into the king’s fort at Emain Macha, intent on joining the troop of the children of its hardest warriors, and so ran onto their hurling field and inserted himself in the game without their permission. This did not get him humiliated and beaten up as

might have happened to other kids, because he just had to be good enough to score a goal against all of them without even using his stick, then to hold his own against those furious kids as they bore down on him with theirs; and then, even once they allowed him into their troop, to single-handedly beat them all up – all one hundred and fifty of them – just to make his point.

“Makka, makka...” Mikoro chewed on the word. Then it struck her, and she pronounced it with her familiar and beloved soft *ch*: “Nyah! Matcha! That’s this island, right? Um. What’s a hurling field? What do you hurl there?”

She’d turned as she said it, and there it was, out through the entrance: the hurling field.

And K.K.’s song continued: *Mi mi o-o mi nah mi o-o mi...*

The king of Ulster was so impressed that he invited the boy to a feast at the house of his friend, Culann the blacksmith. But the boy wanted to finish his hurling game, so he told the king he’d come along later. When he did, he found the blacksmith’s house guarded by a monstrous dog, with huge, sharp teeth and the strength of one hundred warriors. He didn’t know it was the blacksmith’s, and so killed it by accident on his way in.

“Boo. That doesn’t sound very nice,” said the cat-girl.

The blacksmith was devastated (*nao nao nao nao o-nao mi nao nao-queh...*). The dog had been his good friend, he’d trained it since it was a pup, and now he had no-one left to guard his house. On learning this the boy was mortified at what he’d done, and promised the blacksmith that he’d take the dog’s place for as long as it took him to rear a replacement. And that was how he got his name – a moment whose gravity K.K. underlined by ending the verse with the gentlest of howls: *awooo*.

“Nrrrrr,” Mikoro purred at the placid sound. “And what was his name?”

And K.K. sang: *Queh-nao...queh-nao...*

“The Hound of the blacksmith Culann...*Cú Chulainn*. Nyeh! He’s that guy? The guy in my...”

She glanced down; placed a hand on her tummy. Then she looked to K.K., her face caught in a tug-of war between naughtiness and innocence.

“Um. I ate him. Wah, but don’t worry! Dari’s looking after him! I’m sure he’s okay.”

She pressed around with her palm. It felt unusually quiet in there.

“Well at least it doesn’t feel like they’re fighting.”

K.K. simply smiled, and now he came down off the doghouse – somehow still sitting, his paws never quite made contact with the ground. He drifted down the ramp, tilting his large head to beckon Mikoro to follow.

And follow she did, across the hurling pitch, till they came to the field of broken weapons. K.K. alighted on the pile of furniture that was supposed to be a chariot, and there began to sing once more.

O queh-queh nao nah nao o-o mi o...

The day came, according to the song, when the boy overheard the king's druid speak of a prophecy (through the telephone in the other room, Mikoro imagined). It told that any warrior who took up arms on that day would have a brief but glorious life. On hearing this, the boy, to whom the *glorious* bit spoke louder than the *brief*, went straight to the king and asked for weapons. But he was too wanton for the swords and spears the king brought out from the arsenal, and they broke in his hands one by one. So in the end the king lent him his own weapons, then lent him the royal chariot before he could break everything in his garage too.

Though a song about weapons and fighting held little appeal to Mikoro, the dog's tones were so soothing that she couldn't help purring along. And she thought to herself: "If this boy was so strong, how come he needed weapons at all? Well at least now I know how he managed to give me such a tummy ache. Still – I bet he isn't stronger than Urbosa. Heehee! Zappity-zap!" And she clicked her fingers in the air till they grew sore.

O nao mi-queh...o nao mi-queh...

"Oohh. So women *were* stronger than him! Well – of course! Isn't it usually like that?"

So she determined as she heard how the first time Cú Chulainn returned from the fight, still aflame in his battle-spasm and unable to tell friend from foe, Emain Macha was saved only by its women, who by approaching him with their shirts raised over their heads, startled him helpless ("That's like Dari! Heehee!"), then seized and dumped him into three vats of water to cool him down. She listened to how he crossed the sea to train under the greatest instructor of the age ("Yay! Scáthach's my friend!"), and received from her the legendary Gáe Bolg, forged from the bones of a sea monster. She heard how, pressured to marry, he insisted on a partner who was his equal in all regards, and found one in the witty and intelligent Emer, with whom, by mutual attraction, he built a heartfelt yet open relationship ("Nyah!" Mikoro rubbed her belly, trying to find Dari and wondering if this happy approach to companionship was providing the two of them common

ground). His greatest enemy, whose armies he clashed with time and again, was the fearsome and cunning Queen Medb of Connacht (“Oohh...like my sister when she’s mad...”). And of course there was that time two big strong fairy-women appeared to him in a dream and beat him up; and even though it had felt like a dream, he awoke so badly bruised that it took him a year to recover.

“Aaww. That last one sounds ouchy. But – nyah! He must have had so much fun! It must have been cool being so capable and loved and wanted by everyone, and – um – I suppose he did look kinda cute, until he chased me and swelled up like a purple fridge.” And Mikoro rambled on, extending this logic in a direction perhaps not intuitive in all cultures: “I bet he was just like Dari, and women couldn’t wait to grab him and gobble him up!”

K.K.’s song was reactivating her memories of Scáthach’s storytelling. The great teacher’s style was exciting, Mikoro had always thought, but terser, more prosaic. She realised she really had heard much of this from those tales, but it was usually around this point that she felt them dragging on, and began to yawn, and had soon nodded off in Kiyoko’s lap.

But it was impossible to fall asleep to the strains of this K.K.’s guitar strings. To hear them twang was to feel their song plucked upon your nerves.

Queh-nao...queh o mi-nao...

And it all went as the prophecy foretold: young Cú Chulainn grew into the greatest warrior Ulster had ever known, but alas, the other part also came true: he died young. He was only in his twenties. Scarcely her own age, Mikoro noted. And as she listened to the circumstances of his fall in battle, the notes sunk her gaze to the pair of memorial stones with stick-figure engravings: the one of somebody with a beard, the other of the horse she had taken for a hippo.

“Ooh. So this one is his charioteer; and this one his horse, called the Grey of Macha. Wait – isn’t matcha supposed to be green? Uh-oh. I don’t think I’d drink grey matcha.”

Then she realised something else.

“Wait a minute. If he died...then how come he’s here, alive, sitting in my tummy?”

As she dwelt on this she grew terribly confused. How could someone be alive if they were dead? It didn’t make sense! And yet, as she filled her lungs with this fresh ocean breeze, she came to feel that actually it was not so confusing. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she found it quite reasonable that such a person might show up here, on this sea. Why shouldn’t they? And with her mind at ease, she quite forgot what she’d worried about in the first place.



Grruguru!

Startled, the young man backflipped onto his feet, fists raised, knees bent – all in a single reflex – and cast his gaze round wild.

“Hey! It’s okay!” Dari reassured him, taking him by the arms and trying to sit him back down.

This was tricky. He just couldn’t sit still. Each wobble, each rumble, each echoing groan, each squirt of fluids drove him to distraction.

“You’ve...never been in a stomach before, have you?”

He fixed her with a stare of the what-the-hell-kind-of-question-is-that variety. Realising she was serious, he shook his head.

“Yeah. I could tell.”

At least his terrible transformation had worn off. He was just a youth again. A youth thousands of years old, though never mind that. A youth who glowed like a lightbulb from the residual radiance of his battle-rage, lighting up the lively ridges of Mikoro’s gastric mucosa, but never mind that either. A shy young lad, brooding in silence; or at least he would be, Dari was sure, if he weren’t preoccupied with the extraordinary novelty of his situation.

She sat patient against the stomach wall, arms sinking in its creases, as she watched him squidge the floor with his feet, or prod at glands then dodge whatever came squirting out of them. She felt a spark of something in her chest, then, realising what it was, felt immediately guilty and tried to smother it.

Envy.

How nice it must be, having this as your first time, she wanted to tell him. A harmless, cuddly cat-girl with protective enchantments. Stomachs aren’t all as hospitable as Mikoro’s, you know? Want to know how my first time went? Go on then, poke it harder. Yes, rub it all over your face, just like that. Hydrochloric acid feels so gentle on your skin, doesn’t it? Kills all the germs too. Why not brush your teeth with it while you’re here? In fact you might as well go all the way and put smiley cat pictures over the walls, then you could call this your bathroom.

She sighed. “Come on Dari,” she rebuked herself. “It’s not his fault you’re such a regular snack. And, well, he might be a legendary warrior, but in here, right now, you’re the one with relevant experience. You’d better take some initiative.”

The ancient youth had found a gland that oozed some pale milky substance which, deciding he liked the feel of it, he was proceeding to experimentally rub all over his muscles.

“That’s called pepsin,” said Dari. “Yeah. I wouldn’t get in the habit of that.”

She trudged across to him, placed her hands on his shoulders and tugged, a little harder this time. At the same scale he was shorter than she was, perhaps not even her equal in raw strength; it was his greased-perfect coordination and sense of balance that made him solid as a mountain. Definitely Scáthach’s style, Dari thought. But at last she reclaimed his attention, and having done so, steered him onto one of Mikoro’s less wobbly stomach ridges – she knew this terrain too well – and sat him down.

“Let’s try again,” she said. “I’ll ask you something, and you nod for yes, shake your head for no, and move your hand like this if the answer’s more complicated. Alright?”

He had just begun to nod when their whole world jerked skyward. The gastroquake flung them across the chamber to land face-first with a double SQUELCH!, its echo near bursting their eardrums for good measure.

“Nngahh! For goodness’s sake Mikoro!”

She ran an arm across her face, brushing off a curtain of mucus. Pulled further gobs out of her hair. Cú Chulainn was staring at the sphincter in the ceiling in utter confoundment, his own hair matted to his forehead.

Dari cringed.

“Yeah...Mikoro likes to burp. Sorry about that.”



O nah-nao queh...o nah-nao queh...

Mikoro pursued the singing dog as he drifted across the flowers like an itinerant Buddha. His tale had excited her at first. What wasn’t there to like about being a capable hero, defending those you loved and (as she imagined it) playing around in stomachs in your free time? And even though he’d died young, it had been in battle, doing what he liked best; which though it made little sense to her personally, she’d heard Scáthach insist was the happiest way a warrior could go.

Kweh-kweh...kweh-kweh mi nao nao mi...

But now she wasn’t so sure.

K.K.'s song was running through the battles in which Cú Chulainn had made his name. For his country, family and personal honour he'd taken the lives of hundreds of people. Competent enemy warriors, yes. Always on fair terms – never captives, never bystanders. Yet each had had their own things to live for; their own stories. Each left behind grieving parents, siblings, lovers and friends, no few of whom, when they raised their heads, did so in the direction of Ulster with hatred in their eyes and a vengeful will in their hearts. Thus each killing actually meant two killings, three killings, a neverending chain of killings down the generations. Each battle watered shoots which, when they bloomed, would spurt the blood of future battles.

Just like this blood-red meadow. Only a few flowers were planted deliberately. The rest had shot up of their own accord, conquered the world with a vengeance, long after the gardener had turned his back.

Mikoro hated the idea of killing people. But would she do it if they threatened the Academy, she wondered? To protect her family, her friends? No, she'd try hugging them first, was her first thought. But what if that didn't work?

Was there always a choice?

Always?

Urbosa had killed people. She'd admitted it. Yet Mikoro just couldn't bend her mind to imagine her as a bad person.

How about Scáthach? She'd trained this guy, after all. How many people had she killed?

They'd reached the ford. There was the stone memorial, the first she'd come across. And as she listened on she found that K.K.'s strings, which had so hoisted her mood, now drew on it a drape of troubling dusk.

What if protecting your friends meant killing your friends?

Surely that was nonsense.

Mi-kweh...mi kweh mi kweh nao kweh...

The Hound of Culann's best friend of all was a young lad of similar age called Ferdia. They had trained together under Scáthach. Grown so close that they saw each other as foster-brothers. But amid the pandemonium of war, Ferdia had ended up fighting for Ulster's great enemy, Queen Medb of Connacht, and she manipulated him into challenging Cú Chulainn in single combat at the ford on their battlefield. Both were dismayed, both distraught, but they were bound by their oaths, and so they fought. But their hearts just weren't in it, and after each of ten days of combat they shared their meals, tended to each other's wounds,

reminisced on their adventures of recent years and slept with their backs to each other. Only on the eleventh day, at the limit of his aggravation and heartbreak, was Cú Chulainn overcome by his battle-spasm; and at last he ran Ferdia through with the Gáe Bolg, and then, realising what he'd done, broke down hysterically over the body of his devoted friend.

"But why?" said an aghast Mikoro. "Why didn't they just refuse to fight or something? Bwah! That sounds so stupid!"

And now K.K. went gliding onto the beach. Somehow Mikoro knew, without understanding why, that they were approaching their final stop.

The dog-musician paused at the memorial stone by the wave-breakers, and this time his lower paws settled on the sand. Once more he gave the softest of howls, into the wind – *awooo* – as he placed the final twist on this tragic tale.

Mi-o-mi-kweh-mi-nah, nao nah o kweh...

The Hound of Culann had a son. During his training, Scáthach had recruited him to defeat her rival and neighbour, another formidable warrior called Aoife. He had done so with great difficulty, more through guile than strength, but it was his skilful arbitration of their peace talks afterwards that most impressed both women – Aoife in particular, in so far as they ended up spending a night together ("Oohh, did she shrink him?" Mikoro wondered, quite sensibly). She became pregnant ("Aaww, maybe not then,") and they named the child Connla, agreeing that he would be trained in the military arts just like them and live under three prohibitions: to never give his name first, never back down from a fight, and never turn aside from his path. He was born soon after Cú Chulainn returned to Ulster, and just as they'd planned, Aoife trained him into a mighty warrior.

Eventually she found out Cú Chulainn had never mentioned he had a partner back home. Feeling perhaps mildly annoyed, Aoife sent their son to Ulster to confront him over it, wearing on his finger the red-gold ring his father had left for him. Alas, when Connla made landfall on the strand, still bound by the prohibitions, he refused to give his name to the king's messengers, then declared his readiness to fight when challenged on it, and finally, faced with the king's greatest champion – his dad – doggedly insisted that he still could not give his name first. They fought a ferocious fight, knowing all each other's moves, till finally the Hound's battle-spasm took hold. Only then, after Cú Chulainn had struck Connla down with the Gáe Bolg, did the dying son raise his finger with the red-gold ring, whereupon the champion of Ulster learnt the truth: he had killed his son without realising it was him. For eleven days and nights thereafter he lashed out against the very waves

on the beach, thrashing in anguish and despair, till at last, exhausted, he collapsed upon the sand.

Awoooo...

And now Mikoro was crying.

Not uncontrollably like the prodigal Ulsterman on that day, but tears bitter and silent, that trickled down the cold, hard concrete of the wave-breaker. She grunted, and gave the ridiculous thing a shove. It was much lighter than it looked, and slid a few inches down the sand till it mysteriously got stuck and budged no further.

“All because...nnyah...stupid rules,” she moaned. “Should have just...gnrrr, *communicated*, the way Mother says we always should...”

Awooo – came the howl again, but this time as though on the wind from a long way off.

She dried her eyes. Blinked over and over. Looked left, then right, then up.

K.K. had vanished.

“Mnyah? Where did the doggy go?”

The fluffy sea captain was alone on the strand, watching the sun sink on a red horizon.

狗

The shadows lengthened. Mikoro could scarcely make out the engraving on Connla’s memorial stone now. No name; just a stick-figure. The son, the foster-brother, the charioteer, the horse – stick-figures all.

“Nrr. I wonder if they read and write in Ulster.”

She removed the tricorne hat and held it to her chest, facing the stone. She wasn’t entirely sure why; she just felt that she should. She’d seen them do it that way on TV.

For a while she just stood there. Her coat flapped heavy in the wind. But after a minute or so she felt this was somehow not enough, and so she cast a furtive glance around – just to make sure no-one was watching – then brought out the bar of chocolate she’d stashed in her coat pocket when Dari wasn’t looking.

She broke off a little piece and placed it beneath the stone, alongside the sprig of white flowers.

Then she turned away. Padded a few paces. Sat down; smoothed out her coat where it spread on the sand.

She stared out to sea.

That young fellow – she'd bumped into him here, on this very spot. He hadn't come across like the reading and writing type. Nor the talking one, for that matter.

Had he no voice? K.K.'s song hadn't said anything about that.

Perhaps he had come into the world without one.

Naturally? Or as a condition of his miraculous birth?

Or did he lose it along the way, taken perhaps by the final resounding bark of Culann's original hound, or by a nasty blow to the larynx the day he took up arms and pledged to serve his kingdom?

Those rules and vows were silly, she was convinced. Or at least, killing people over them was silly. But she dwelt on them in the evening light, and began to think that maybe from some positions they didn't feel so trivial. Promises meant something, after all. To anyone, but especially to people you cared about.

Well, alright, maybe it was okay to break a promise to big sisters once in a while, if the cookies looked tasty enough. But she always kept her promises to Mother Rin.

She remembered Scáthach, reciting that list of things she wasn't supposed to do. Back in the boatyard. How many worlds away?

Those rules had sounded silly too. But now look what had happened.

Still. Rin, Kiyoko, Scáthach – they loved and accepted her for who she was. They took into account how she felt, what she wanted, even if they couldn't always give it to her. They made it possible for her to trust them, and so she wanted them to be able to trust her too.

She knew that not everyone got to grow up in such a caring and respectful environment – even though they *should* get to. It had given her choices, and with them the option to take responsibility for them. But what if the only life you knew was as a secondary character in other people's stories? A father's and mother's son, a trainer's pupil, a blacksmith's dog? A resource to one ruler, an obstacle to another? If your choices were never truly yours – if you were never given the chance to consent – what did taking responsibility look like then?

Take control, perhaps. Own your life. Be an *adult*.

It sounded so easy to say.

But Rin had discussed this with her many times. Had made clear it was her responsibility to impress this as a mother. The truth, she had said, was that none of us got a choice in what kind of world we were born into, or what family, supposing we got one at all. Into what kind of stories, before we learnt to write

our own – no, before we learnt even to recognise them as stories. It could take years, lifetimes even, to become conscious of those narrative fences, let alone break free of them. To distinguish them as *stories* – that is, things with *authors*, who can change them – rather than a fixed reality that was somehow *just there*.

Adult is not a verb. Perhaps it is nothing at all.

What would she have done, had she grown up in Cú Chulainn's reality? No – not if she, Mikoro, had grown up in his reality, what if she had been *him* growing up in his reality? Or his best friend? Or his son? Had they voices either?

A cloud obscured the setting sun, shrouding Connla's memorial in darkness. As it drifted clear the light fell on her coat. Blue as deep as the sea, as boundless as the sky.

And beneath it, her oh-so-irresponsible stomach.

She wanted to go in there and give him a hug. Then she realised that that would be a little absurd.

She also realised it was being tickled. From the inside. In a particular spot. The spot she'd told Dari to tickle when she wanted...

"Nyah! H-Hold on!"

She anchored her hands on the sand. Scrunched up her nose; concentrated hard. For the second time that day she relaxed her oesophagus, waiting for the tiny press that told her the Dari-shaped mass had lodged in its lower end. Then she inhaled; then again, and again, each breath drawing that shape a few inches upward.

Dari's progress through there was always the same. The shrunken woman did her best to keep her body limp to allow a smooth passage, but she couldn't get halfway before its tubular massage, more intense in Mikoro's case than most, overwhelmed her prey-mind and caused her to squeak and squirm the rest of the way. Mikoro was in sympathetic mood and so cupped her hands, scooped up some seawater, and on sensing Dari emerge from her throat, disgorged her into that makeshift sink for a quick rinse. Setting her down on the sand, she then did the same for her second passenger, who to her incredulity slipped up her gullet like a salmon up a waterfall, his motions so streamlined that she barely even felt him.

"Heehee! Well, I shouldn't be surprised. You must have done it thousands of times before."

"M-Mikoro," Dari sputtered, coughing up some stubborn cat-girl mucus. "Nobody's ever – pffeh! – eaten him before."

"Um! B-But I thought..."

“You thought – what?”

“All those women...I thought...I heard...”

“What did you hear, Mikoro? Surely you couldn’t hear what we talked about in there?”

“Nyah – no...I mean, there was this dog...”

Dari froze.

“Dog. What dog?”

“Um. He was, um, white, with a big head, and floppy ears like this,” – she bent her hands by her head – “and, and...”

“...a guitar?”

“Yup. And he sang this song, and – gwaah?! How did you know?”

Dari and the tiny Cú Chulainn exchanged stares, each as amazed as the other.

“Mikoro, a white dog with a guitar appeared in your stomach. You didn’t eat him, did you?”

“Whaaa – n-no! Of course not! I didn’t even think – no! I didn’t, I promise...”

Cú Chulainn, who had his own reasons to be distressed at the notion of dog consumption, turned away in shame.

“Shhh. It’s okay, Mikoro. I believe you. Well I did sense there was something unusual about him.”

“He said his name was...his name was...I remember! K.K.!”

“K.K. Slider?”

“Nyaaaah...”

This was doing her head in. She shot to her feet, accidentally spraying the little ones with sand, and proceeded to pace around, scratching her cheeks, her tail jerking about like a loose hose.

“Mikoro! Come back!” she heard Dari squeak from far below. “Did you say he sang you a song?”

She spun back to them.

“Yeah. A song about, um...*him*.”

She tilted her head at the diminutive Hound of Culann, who was now gesticulating wildly at her, though he calmed when Dari placed a hand on his shoulder. Mikoro crouched down, carefully this time, and squinted at them cross-eyed.

“Well he didn’t sing for us,” said Dari. “He just offered to interpret. It’s thanks to K.K. that I’ve come to understand Sétanta better.”

“Sétanta? Um. Who’s Sétanta?”

The name seemed to strike a flame of recollection through the young man, and with barely a further glance at them he rocketed off into the flower field. It seemed that even at his present size he had no trouble dashing at his original speed.

A string of pitter-patter splashes announced he had crossed the ford.

“Um?” said Mikoro, astonished. “He could have just – you know – let me unshrink him first.”

“He doesn’t want to,” said Dari. “He made it clear to me he wants to stay like that for now. Make a new start. That’s the thing, you see. He’s Sétanta.”

“I thought he was Cú Chulainn. Who likes to drink matcha.”

“Sétanta’s his original name. From before he became Cú Chulainn. He told me – well, he made some signals, and K.K. told me – that that was what he wants to be called from now on. It looks like,” – she stared off the way he had run – “he’s gone to register that.”

They shared the ensuing silence. Each could feel the other had taken in a lot of information since they were last together; well, together at enough of a degree of separation to meaningfully communicate. Both were full of questions. But somehow, they just didn’t feel an immediate need to ask them.

Instead Mikoro sat on the sand once more. She crossed her legs. Picked up Dari and parked her on her knee. Together they sat, gazing out at the ocean.

Eventually Mikoro broke the silence.

“Dari?”

“Yes Mikoro?”

“He ran so fast. How come I’ve never seen you run so fast?”

“Uhh.” The question unbalanced her; it took her some fidgeting to work out what to say. “W-Well...do you know Mikoro, I think it’s the first time he’s actually doing something he wants to for himself.”

“What are we doing, Dari?”

“We’re – what do you mean, what are we doing?”

“I mean – with our lives. Where are we going with them? Do you think we’re living in the right way? Or are we just – nyeh – *characters in other people’s stories?*”

The tiny woman peered up at her, concerned.

“Are you alright Mikoro?”

“Nyah? Why?”

Her finger emerged from the dusk to give Dari a poke.

Dari yelped, fending it off with her arms. “Nnh. It’s n-nothing. I just...don’t think I’ve ever heard you ask those sorts of questions. You’re usually so – ohh, how to say...”

She searched for the words, but couldn’t get past her mental image of a cat following a laser-pointer on a wall, trying to catch it with its paws.

She’d been discovered behind a sofa once because of that.

The cat at least hadn’t eaten her.

It had brought her straight to its mistress.

Another Mikoro-poke interrupted her skid down memory lane with bright red headlights.

“I know I don’t think much about these things,” said Mikoro. “I just run from one day to the next, doing my best to have fun, to help Mother and Kiyoko at the Academy, and to study hard and improve myself. But maybe if I did think a little more, I wouldn’t cause everybody so much trouble. Like, I wouldn’t have eaten you and forgot; or eaten that cake; or, you know, got us lost at sea.”

“Don’t say that Mikoro,” Dari replied. She couldn’t bear to see her fluffy friend grow disconsolate, so she tugged on that finger till Mikoro opened her palm, then jumped in and rode up for a round of chin-hugs.

“I’m a naughty,” said Mikoro. “I know I am. But after hearing what that cute little boy went through – what it must be like, having to hurt so many people, even his best friend, even his own kid, like he wanted to stop but had no idea how...”

Dari gave her a tiny kiss on the chin.

“You know how it makes me feel?” she went on. “It makes me feel that since I’ve got the chance to decide my own story, I’ve gotta do better to use it. To keep getting stronger. To make the Academy better. To make the whole world better – nrrr.”

She purred, because Dari, anxious that Mikoro not hurt herself by diving too fast into deep introspection, was now using both arms to scritch her chin.

“How about you?” Mikoro said suddenly.

“How about – what do you mean?”

“Are you living your life the way you want to? Are you – heehee – the *author of your own story*?”

Dari had feared this was coming. Prepared for it.

“Mikoro, I...”

But still got caught short of a response.

It was an extremely complicated question. For a time Dari had agonised over it, especially in those delirious weeks following her ‘incident’. But she was nothing if not adaptable, and had quickly decided it was a question best coped with by getting on and *living* it, rather than grappling with it at a theoretical level.

“Nyaha! You see? You don’t think about it either!”

Dari sighed. She scratched the giggling chin some more. “You’re not wrong, Mikoro.”

“Nrrrr. But...um. Are you sure that’s okay? I guess you’re used to it by now. Or something.”

Dari weighed up possible responses. Eventually she turned and folded her arms behind her head, resting them against Mikoro’s chin as she gazed out to sea.

“Well, some things you never really get used to,” she said. “I’ve just...never really worked out the answers either, know what I mean? I never asked for this kind of life Mikoro. It’s been years now, and I still don’t really understand how it happened, or why it happened to me of all people. Every other day I’m reminded how little control I have over it. I mean, think about it. Just this trip, for instance. How much time have I even spent on the ground?”

Mikoro cast her mind back. “Um. You ran around on the sand here earlier; and then...and then...nyah.”

“Right? That’s it, isn’t it? That, plus the hour or so you slept off your upset tummy. The rest of the time I’ve either been on you or in you. Or...nnggh, let’s not even mention Urbosa. What I mean is, that’s completely typical for me Mikoro. For all these years, that’s how it’s been.”

“Nwah...Dari...”

“But you know what? I’ve also got great friends like you, people who mean the world to me. I get to go to places and see things that most people can only dream of. So that’s what I do. And I know it’s a huge privilege for me to say this, but I’ve learnt that I don’t have to have control over everything, nor even understand everything straight away. Because in the end, however hot things might get, even if sometimes all I can do is shut my eyes and wait, I know that everything will turn out okay.”

“Guuu.”

“I don’t need all the answers straight away. And I certainly won’t find them by chasing them round and round in my head. I’m sure I’ll stumble across them eventually. In the meantime...”

“You know you’re amazing?” said Mikoro.

“Hey, come on. D-Don’t – ”

“Sometimes I wish I was as confident as you. That everything’s gonna be okay.”

“Well I tell you what Mikoro. So long as I’m with you, it will be. We’ll get you back to the Academy safe and sound. That’s a promise.”

“Ooh!” The cat-girl’s chin lurched, causing Dari to stagger. “Look! The stars are coming out!”

“So they are. Looks like we’ll be getting a clear sky tonight.”

“Big and bright and starry; looking at the night sky makes the world feel so big. All the places to go, things to see, animals to cuddle, tasty treats to eat...”

“I dunno, Mikoro.”

“...um?”

“I mean, yes, I feel the same – well, almost the same.” I’m usually the treat, she didn’t say. “It’s why I keep travelling. I want to see what’s out there, to learn as much as I can. It’d be a shame to waste this special gift I’ve been given, don’t you think? But you know, sometimes...”

“Nnnm?”

“...sometimes I look out at the stars, and they give me this sense that there are vast unseen forces out there, pushing our lives around for their own amusement. It’s like...they’re opening some doors – or rifts – and shutting others, making us blunder along till we end up where they want us to go. It’s like it’s, I dunno – well, like you said: *characters in their stories*. Or maybe we’re their dreams. Maybe when we fall asleep, they wake up. Or maybe we *are* them, dreaming of each other, back and forth in an endless cycle. Ack, look at me – I’m doing it too now. But, honestly Mikoro, don’t you ever feel like that too?”

Mikoro’s giggles accelerated. She clamped her free hand over her mouth, but it was the most futile gesture she’d ever made and soon she was rolling about on the sand, hand clasped round Dari, laughing so hard that fish swam startled from the shore.

“Aaww, Dari! You’re such a silly! Nyah-nyah! That’s so ridiculous – but it’s so, so funny!”

“Nngh! M-Mikoro! Mmph...”

“Nyaha! Nyahaha! Nyahh – it sounds like you’re saying we’re not real! Or, like, butterflies or something.”

“N-No, I d-didn’t mean it like that,” Dari stammered, straining to free herself from the cat-girl’s fist. “It’s j-just...when you’ve journeyed through as many realities as I have, you do come to wonder what *real* really means.”

“Real is like this!” said Mikoro, and she settled the matter by thrusting her tiny friend into her lips and pursing and rolling them for all their worth in gratuitous dribbly noises.

She cupped her hand beneath, but her endeavours had got Dari stuck to her lips; the little adventurer took her time to fall free.

“Blnhh. I guess it’s always gonna be challenging,” the cat-girl reflected. “Making our own choices, like, like...” – her eyes caught the flutter of her coat – “like the *captains* of our lives; all while finding meaning in things bigger than ourselves.”

Dari rolled down her palm, dazed enough to begin with but now finding the wind thoroughly knocked from her by Mikoro’s words. She couldn’t have just heard that from Ibaraki Mikoro. Alright, the profundity, maybe – on this shore, in this twilight, just maybe. But that last part? The Dari-entendre? No. Surely not. Surely she couldn’t have intended that.

“Gahh.” She brushed Mikoro’s saliva off her arms and struggled to her feet. “Come on,” she said. “It’s getting dark. Let’s go see if our friend’s okay.”



Light flickered through the cracked town hall window.

“I’m afraid it’s a little more difficult than that,” chirped the voice of Isabelle, over the moon as ever. “I’m only supposed to perform this service if you can present a valid deed poll.”

A brief silence.

“Well, how long ago did you change it? I don’t suppose there were any witnesses?”

Outside, the two visitors to Cú Chulainn’s island eavesdropped on his struggle with the administration. It sounded discouragingly one-sided.

The tiny figure scooted out from beneath the broken door, and then the door itself fell aside, no match for the eternal cheer of yellow-dog bureaucracy.

“Oh? These visitors are your witnesses?” Isabelle sang. “Well...that helps, and I’ll make a note of it. But I’m afraid I just can’t register your name change without seeing some form of official certification.”

Sétanta – formally if not truthfully still Cú Chulainn – waved his arms at her.

“You’ll have to go to Comet Island for that. I guess it is rather a long way...”

The young man gave up and grumbled off in the direction of the pier.

Isabelle scratched her worried head. “Oh dear. I hope I didn’t upset him. He is our cherished Resident Representative after all. But – oh! The good news is a sock I’ve been looking for forever turned up behind my washing machine! It’s one of my favourites!”

And she disappeared into the building, smiles and buttercups all restored.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap...

“Um. D’you think we can help?” said Mikoro.

“This one might be a little out of our depth,” came the advice from her hat.

They wandered after the ‘Resident Representative’, both pondering the same thing.

“Comet Island...”

狗

From the end of the pier came the noise of tiny work – wood getting heaved, heavy cloth unfolding. They were almost right on top of it when they spotted it: a rugged little coracle the size of several matchboxes stuck together, with a miniature hurling stick for a mast. Sétanta was milling about on board, preparing the sail.

“You’re leaving?” said Mikoro. “Hey – wait! Are you sure you don’t want me to put you back to your correct size?”

The youth nodded vigorously.

“He made his decision in your stomach,” said Dari from the hat. “K.K. Slider explained it on his behalf.”

“Whaa...? He wants to stay tiny? Like you? Oooh!” She squealed, vibrating with joy. “He liked it so much he wants to be eaten more?”

“M-Mikoro! He can still hear you, you know?”

Sétanta waved an arm without looking up from his rigging, as though to indicate he didn’t mind.

“Huuuh. Well, why then? You still haven’t told me what you talked about.”

“Well...alright, I’d better explain. As far as I could work out – this was before K.K. showed up – he felt that all he was good for was fighting other people’s battles. He believed that that was what it meant to be a great warrior: to not think for yourself, to do whatever was needed for the good of your kingdom. His belief was so strong that he could never bring himself to stop, no matter how much it hurt him. Even out here, having drifted so far from his homeland, he still felt the weight of those obligations. That’s why he laid out his island like this; so he could wander

around those memories every day, constantly reminding himself of how the stronger he grew, in body and wits, the less power he felt he had over his own life. Over his failure.”

She skipped the part about him handling Mikoro’s gastric fluids to make an analogy about how he felt his power slipping away – which, she suspected, had been an excuse to play around with the cat-girl’s glands again.

Mikoro watched the young man rig up a sail – leather, tiny, but confrontationally robust. Like the *Sea Bunny* it had its own emblem: a bright red branch.

He considered it with hands on hips. Then he grunted, and fiddled with some buttons on the ship’s control panel.

The branch turned pink.

“Um. That’s the same colour as my hair.”

“Well you did change his mind, Mikoro.”

“I...did? But we hardly even talked!”

“He said you were only the second person to defeat him in battle, and the first to do it without hurting him. Like I said, he’s never been eaten before. Not even by giants, of whom he’s fought plenty.”

“I still can’t believe it,” said Mikoro. “A cute little guy like him. When K.K. sang about the women in his life, I felt so sure...”

“Well, it was K.K. who told me exactly what he was trying to communicate. At first he just sulked on, calling himself an object in *your* story now – a stepping stone for some insolent cat. But...ehh, I might have spoken to him a bit. He came round to appreciating that there’s so many possibilities out there he never even knew how to imagine, and your overpowering him so easily and making him spend time in your stomach opened his eyes to that. So he’s decided he wants to wrap things up here for now.”

“Ooh. So he’s going home?”

“Nope. It stopped feeling like his home a long time ago, K.K. said. Apparently Ulster’s been torn in two. He got upset about it. More foolish conflicts, he said, just like in his own time, dragging people into the same regrets as him, and the silliest part is that both sides rally round his name to justify it. Still, as far he journeyed, his heart never left Ulster, however much it felt Ulster had left him. Now he says he wants to spend some time living for himself for a while, just seeing what’s out there. He believes travelling at this size will give him a fresh perspective

on things. And I guess it'll help stop others seeing him as the hot-headed warrior he doesn't want to be anymore. Whose power made him so powerless."

"Waah. All that, just because I ate him?"

"Well...yeah. Spending time as a snack does change the way you look at things. Take it from me."

The fluffy captain noticed Sétanta waving both arms at her, then pointing to where a rope moored his vessel to a nail in the pier.

"Ooh. You want my help with this?"

She crouched down, pinned the rope between her fingernails and looped it free.

"Hey! Um. If you want to, why don't you come to the Chaldea Academy? I'm sure my mother would love to have you teaching there!"

The young man appeared to give this some consideration. Then he returned her an equivocal head-wobble. Maybe later.

His coracle bobbed free of the pier. For a final moment he regarded them, then raised his arm in a staunch vertical salute, palm forward beneath the starlight – only to lower it straight away, flinch as though at an embarrassing mistake, and at last suit himself with a wave.

They waved back, till his boat was lost to sight on the dark sea.

A whirr – Mikoro glanced over her shoulder. The *Sea Bunny* was coming to life behind them.

"Yeah. We'd better go too," said Dari. "No offence to Isabelle, but I'm really not sure we want to spend the night here."

"Um. D'you think she'll be lonely?"

They listened out. The tapping had stopped. All they could hear was the ocean wind – through tired boughs, dilapidated boards, and the hefty flap-flap-flap of Mikoro's sea-coat.

Then she wailed.

"Nyaah! The pier! It's, it's – "

Her cat-instincts moved swifter than her lips and she leapt into the *Sea Bunny*, sprawling onto the deck. Another yelp, this time from above, and she reached out just in time to catch the plummeting Dari.

By the time she'd stood up and brushed herself off, the island was gone.

The *Sea Bunny* drifted alone on the open sea. Had that latter-day Emain Macha faded like an echo in the air? Or was that air merely too dark to see it now?

"Oofh. Sorry Dari. It felt like the pier was, um...uguu! I banged my tummy!"

"Oh Mikoro. Does it hurt? I can rub it for you if you like."

“Nweh. Thank you.”

The whirr stabilised, the bunny-ears beeped, and up sprang the lavender sail with the turquoise shooting star. They were off, their headlights slicing a path through the starlit sea.

“There we go,” said Dari. “All better?”

“Yup! Aaww, Dari. You’re always so good for my tummy.”

Dari blushed, thankful for the darkness, but the stars lit up her cheeks for Mikoro anyway.

The cat-girl giggled. Then she added: “Oooh! Does this mean my tummy wasn’t naughty to eat him up? You said it helped him...um...”

“...change his perspective. Yeah.” Dari did not sound entirely sure she should be saying it.

“Yay! My tummy helped people!”

“Well, I guess it worked out alright this time,” Dari admitted. “But there was something else Mikoro. Did K.K. sing to you about the fellow’s fall in battle?”

Mikoro cast her mind back. It was hard to pick up the song’s trail; the island seemed already to rest on the far side of a dream.

“He said he died young. Fighting, like he always did.”

“There was more to it than that,” said Dari. “He told me about it. On his way to the battle, some old women by the road invited him to share their meal with them. They were eating dog; they were impoverished, you see, and in a time of war there wasn’t much else around. Now because he was the Hound of Culann, he’d been forbidden from ever tasting the meat of his namesake because, well, what dog eats dogs? But they taunted him, saying that serving as the king’s champion had made him too proud to eat with poor people. So he felt no choice but to accept their hospitality, and as soon as the dog meat touched his lips, he lost half the strength in his body. That was why he went so badly weakened into the battle that killed him.”

“Boo. I hope now if it happens again, he’ll do what I’d do and just tell them he can’t because it would hurt him. Although...I still don’t get it. If he died, how come we found him running around here?”

“Never mind that. The point is, while we were in your stomach, he told me – or rather, he told K.K., and K.K. told me – that he thought his suffering might be some kind of punishment, first for killing a dog, then for eating one. But now, he worked out, he’d been eaten by a cat – or close enough to a cat, anyway. He thought that maybe that was some kind of signal from, erm...he mentioned some of his people’s goddesses. I’m – you know – kind of afraid to say their names.”

“Why?” Mikoro asked in her loudest, brightest voice, which to Dari seemed to ricochet through the stars like a billiard ball.

“Aaahh! Shhh! For goodness’s sake Mikoro, you *know* why! Ack, what was I saying? Nngh, yes – an omen. He decided to read it as the reversal of what he’d done. A sign that he didn’t have to be bound by his past anymore.”

Mikoro pushed her fist into her cheek, deep in thought. Not for long though.

“Nah. I still don’t understand. I’m just happy if going in my tummy made him feel better.”

She pulled open one of the hatches as she said this, and before Dari could stop her she’d dug out a colossal Baumkuchen with strawberry-flavoured icing. A box of teabags came next, followed by the ship’s kettle – baby blue, ceramic, and plugged into an electrical outlet at the bottom of the cubicle.

“Nyeh. I still don’t get why he called the island something-matcha if it didn’t have any matcha. How did he get there in the first place anyway?”

“Well, that part was really weird, and I’m not sure I properly understood him. He said he’d been drifting from place to place, and one day he stumbled into some shop, and there was this dodgy raccoon standing behind the desk...”

And so they conversed over a light supper, as the *Sea Bunny* carried them on into their first night at sea.

狗

A few layers of reality away, a certain individual by the name of Macha – mother-goddess of land, war and sovereignty, and after whom Emain Macha, with a hard *ch*, was named – set down her reports.

“She’s called Dari, is she?”

Her tent’s vast tabletop lay strewn with maps, charts and records. She reached beneath it, to a place about her person whose precise coordinates history does not record. Presumably the place she still felt pangs of discomfort whenever she dwelt on the last time she’d shown herself at the Ulster chariot races.

“Ach. If she mightn’t be just what I need after the mischief caused to me by that bunch of gombeens. A swift session with a toy like that – eleven days, I’ll give it – and these aches’ll cease and I’ll feel fresh as a young mare.”

She studied the sea chart. The tiny green counter had a long way to move yet. It would not do – would not be to her honour – to reach for it on those high seas.

That was okay. She could wait. She wouldn't be a mother-goddess of land, war and sovereignty if she couldn't.

THE WAY OF THE
雞
ROOSTER

“Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven...”

“Mikoro.”

“One hundred, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and fifty...”

“Uhh...what? Mikoro?”

“Two hundred, five hundred, fifty hundred, five hundred hundred...”

“Look Mikoro, I don’t think – ”

“One thousand hundred – um – fifty thousand, um, um...*many many* hundred thousand hundred! Yaay! There are *many many* hundred thousand hundred!”

So did Dari bear witness to the invention of the universe’s newest counting system.

“Waah. So many stars! So many! You never see this many at the Academy!”

“That’s because it’s in a large city, isn’t it? Too much artificial light.”

The fluffy captain propped her back against the stern, one hand cuddling Dari into her coat for warmth.

“When Kiyoko and I were small,” she said, “Mother used to drive us up to the hills behind town so we could see the stars better. It was chilly, so Kiyoko made me wrap up warm, but once I saw what the night sky *really* looks like I forgot all about the cold. We would turn off our torches and just sit there on the hillside looking out at the stars. And Mother would give us hot chocolate from a big flask, and she’d point out stars and constellations, and tell us their names and all sorts of stories about them, and sometimes we’d even see shooting stars!”

“That sounds wonderful Mikoro,” said Dari. Her voice carried the faintest wistful tinge.

“We still do it from time to time. Da Vinci even let us bring her telescope once; the super one with all the knobs and sliders. Oooh, that was amazing! There were these *huuuuge* galaxies and colourful things so far away, and they had funny shapes, and so many beautiful colours, and, um...”

A befuddled pause.

“Where’s the Milky Way?”

Dari waited. Let’s see how long it takes her, she thought.

“Um. Um. It’s missing. Where did it go?”

She waited some more.

“Dari? Where’s the Milky Way?”

She decided to lend a hand.

“Mikoro. When Mother was explaining the constellations to you, did you have any favourites?”

“Um. I kind of...”

Fell asleep, Dari filled in.

“Um, um...yeah! Yeah, there was one I really liked! It’s the one called the Chubby Bear. Well, really just the Bear, but I called it the Chubby Bear because it looks so chubby!”

“Well, can you point it out for me?”

“Of course! Mother said it was always in the higher part of the sky, and you could use it to work out which way was north. It should be...”

She gazed at the sky. Blinked. Craned her neck; swung right, then left, then every way she could reach without standing up.

“Nyah! The Chubby Bear’s disappeared too!”

“Right?”

Mikoro pouted at her tiny friend, as though suspecting she’d eaten it.

“What do you mean, ‘right’? You...you know where it’s gone...”

“Maybe it hasn’t gone anywhere,” said Dari, shrugging. “Maybe it’s us that’s moved.”

“Oooh.” Mikoro chewed on her fingertip. “Mother did say they have different stars in the Southern Hemisphere.”

“There you go. But is this simply a different hemisphere? Mikoro, I’m not sure we’re even in the same world as the Academy anymore.”

“Waaah.”

“Or the same galaxy. No Milky Way, as you’ve seen. Maybe we’re not in a galaxy at all.”

“But – but – how? Surely we can’t have sailed *that* far?”

“Well I wasn’t exactly in a position to judge that, was I? All I can tell is that this is a completely new sky for me.”

“Oooh, that’s right! You must’ve seen what the night sky looks like from so many different worlds! Does every world see different stars?”

“Well, yes, but it’s a little more complicated than that. For a start I’ve no way to tell if these really are different stars, or the same stars but from different angles. And sometimes the sky’s a different colour, maybe because the sun’s different, or the atmosphere. There are red suns, blue suns, green suns, purple suns, and sometimes they’re huge, and sometimes they’re tiny. Some worlds have multiple suns, and others none at all. Sometimes there aren’t even nights or days. And a few realities I’ve visited didn’t even seem to be in the same universe – assuming the others are, which honestly I really don’t know.”

“Nyeeh. That is complicated. Doesn’t it give you a headache?”

“Uhh...yes? And then there’s realities like yours, or where my friend Rida lives, which I’m pretty sure are alternate versions of the Earth I came from originally. I recognise many of the countries and languages, but others are very different to what I remember. You know, like that Inuit League which Rida drives up to for scientific conferences sometimes, or the Ainu Empire with those libraries and museums the Academy has partnerships with. Now here it gets even more confusing, because these realities have similar stars but different names for them. And the constellations are completely different.”

“Same stars, but different...constellations? How does that work?” Mikoro gave a nervous burp as she imagined her Chubby Bear with five legs or (the horror!) a missing stomach.

“The constellations aren’t actual *things*, you know,” said Dari. “They’re just patterns that people imagine the stars to take, based on things they recognise. Animals. Musical instruments. Cooking equipment. Characters from their stories. It’s not that the stars in a constellation are actually related. Even if they look close together, they could be just as far from each other as they are from us. It depends on their size and how bright they are, among other things.”

She looked up. Mikoro’s face was angled away, and it was dark. But Dari was experienced at reading people’s feelings by a broader range of their bodily motions, and right now the cat-girl’s stillness had a crestfallen quality.

“Constellations, like the Chubby Bear; they’re not...real?”

“Hey, I didn’t say that,” Dari put in quickly. “I mean, they’re imaginary, yes. But they’re still fun and useful, aren’t they? Like your Chubby Bear. You said you can work out which way is north with it, right? I bet that’s been a huge help to sailors and explorers for thousands of years. It’s probably saved their lives sometimes. That’s pretty real, is it not?”

“Nyah. I guess so.”

They gazed in silence. It didn’t take long for Dari to interpret that silence.

“You’re thinking, Mikoro,” she said, worriedly.

“Nyam.”

“What’s up?”

“You said sailors and explorers. That’s us too now, isn’t it? We’re sailing and exploring.”

Uh-oh, thought Dari.

“That means we can use the stars to work out where we are, right? And which way we’re headed?”

“Well...we’d need to know a few things first. And I for one don’t recognise this sky at all. We don’t even know if this is a planet, or if it has a north or south to meaningfully – ”

“But you said it’s all made up! That means we can make up constellations too, right? And if we do that...”

Dari wasn’t sure where this was going, but decided there were worse ways for Mikoro to occupy herself on a tiny ship in the middle of the ocean at night. What could go wrong? Might as well let her have her fun.

“Alright. Go on then.”

Mikoro pointed. “Let’s try those stars there. If you draw a line, like that...and then across, to that one there – heehee! That’s like a big long box, right? And that there is its head, with those two big bright stars there, those have gotta be its eyes; and that makes those ones its tail. Yay! Look Dari, I did it! I’m gonna call it...”

No, pleaded Dari as though to the stars themselves. Please no.

“...the Molguuga!”

I knew it, thought Dari. She’s obsessed now isn’t she? She’s never going to let it go.

“Mikoro, I’m not sure that’s what a molduga looks like.”

“How do you know? Have you *seen* one?”

“Well, no, but – ”

“Aha! You see? So how do you know it isn’t a molguuga?”

“Because you haven’t seen one either!”

“So how do you know that I don’t know it’s a molguuga even though I haven’t seen one?”

“I – I – arghh, Mikoro!”

“Oooh. And look at those stars there, above the sail. Don’t you think they look like Kiyoko’s face when she’s mad?”

“Mikoro – ”

“And that line of them there: that’s a huge and tasty fish. Made of chocolate. And that one’s a cross – oooh, it’s shaped just like your scar. And then those ones...if you screw up your eyes like this, it looks kinda round...”

“Okay, I think maybe now we should – ”

“Heehee! Yup! It looks just like a bum!”

Mikoro prodded at her little friend, who had resigned to bury herself in the folds of the coat.

“Nyahah! Dari likes bums, doesn’t she? Have you ever been to that one? Oooh. I wonder if it’s got a black hole.”

“How do you like that Dari?” came a grumble from the coat-fold. “Did you think you were being clever, encouraging her like that? Well you’ve made your bed, now lie in it.”



Purry high-pitched snores; the mysterious hum of the *Sea Bunny*’s engine; the flap of the sail; and always – always – the perpetual foam of the waves.

Narrow headlights pierced a trail through everlasting night.

“Nmyaaah...”

The cat-girl yawned awake. She felt for the flask she’d left rolling on the deck; grabbed hold of it. Flipped the lid and glugged some fresh cool water.

“Nyam nyam. Mmhh. What a nice sleep.”

It was just the rest she needed after the excitement of the previous day. No dreams, no distractions, just a nice long night of solid slumber.

Except...

“Darii!”

“Eeee!” A squeaky shriek from the depths of her coat. “Nnngh! Mikoro? What’s going on?”

“Oops. Sorry. I didn’t realise you were still asleep.”

Her pocket-sized friend crawled groaning from a coat-fold, hand on forehead.

“Nnnh. S’alright.”

She yawned too. Then she ran both arms through her hair and shook it loose. It was a mess. Tangled, sticky strands clung together like wet spaghetti, clogged with stuff that never had reason to feature in the millions of years of evolutionary pressures on hair.

“Urgh. I need a shower.”

“Dari? I think something’s wrong.”

“Huh? What do you – ”

It struck her.

“The sky. It’s...”

“Yup.”

“Huh. How long did you sleep, Mikoro?”

“Nnm...nine hours? Ten?”

Ten hours sounded about right. She too had slept like a log. A dry one for once. Nonetheless, the starry sky looked exactly as it had when they’d fallen asleep.

“Dari? Where’s the sun?”

Dari rubbed her eyes. Climbed a short way up the coat. Squinted at the horizon. Pitch-black.

She climbed sideways. Squinted again. The other side, too.

“Well...maybe this place has long nights and days. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Um. What’s the longest?”

“The longest I saw for myself? Hard to say, because they all count time differently, but I’d guess about forty hours.” She yawned again. “Mind you, in some worlds days and nights go on for hundreds of years. And like I said, in some places it’s always day, and in others it’s always night. Heck, days, nights, years – they all mean different things depending on where you are. There really isn’t a single standard.”

“Waah. Travelling around really does change the way you think about everything.”

“Well, we’re awake now,” said Dari, feeling her way down to a gap in the coat. There it was: Mikoro’s tummy. Wait for it – wait for it – there.

Grlngrn!

“Come on Mikoro. Let’s have a little breakfast.”

“Yaay!” The cat-girl launched to her feet, prompting a squeal. If Dari hadn’t wrapped her arms round a coat-button she’d have been flung clean overboard.

“Argh! W-Wait Mikoro! Wait! Can’t we get some light around here first?”

“Oops. Yeah...I guess it’s kinda dark. Surely the bunny’s gotta have...”

Dari clung tight as her big friend felt around. Both women had respectable night vision – Mikoro because her transformation allowed her pupils to expand beyond their original range, and Dari on account of long acclimation to dark environments. This was just as well, for aside from the stars and the headlights there was no light at all. As things were, Mikoro could see just well enough to fumble open the rear compartment.

She rummaged around.

“Aha!”

“What have you got there?”

Part of the ship, Dari’s gut warned her.

Instead Mikoro’s hands drew out a fantastic silver lantern, its elaborate metalwork gleaming in the starlight. She pressed a button underneath. It lit up. Its amber warmth brought to Mikoro’s mind the honey she liked to dunk her toast in, much to her sister’s annoyance. Its glass panels were clear as crystal, and awash in its glow, revealed the patterns in its casing: a flourish of curves and spirals with stars and animals nestled in their midst.

“Ooooh. That’s so cool!”

Mikoro hooked it onto the boom. Its glow washed the deck; climbed a little way up the sail, and danced at its edges on the surface of the surrounding water. Now they had their own sun, a tiny orange star in a box. A safe and cosy bubble on the deep dark sea.

It was time for a few packets of hardtack with cashew-nut butter and three varieties of jam, followed by a nourishing pot of tea. The ship was too small for toilet facilities, but there was always – well – the sea, in conjunction with a hatch well-stocked with toilet paper (with bunny patterns of course), sanitary towels, and enough bottles of fresh water for hand-washing, tooth-brushing, and all their miscellaneous hygiene needs. With Mikoro’s assistance, the kettle and a mug also afforded Dari, if not a proper wash with shampoo, then at least a satisfactory alternative for the time being. There then ensued a couple of hours of sitting around chatting about random things; on the agenda this time was cake, mammoths, ‘molguugas’ and people from Ulster. Then came a round of exercise for Dari, a further spot of stargazing, followed by more tea and biscuits, more

loafing about, and a mounting sense, as the night dragged on into what should have been the afternoon, that something had gone quite seriously wrong.

“Aaww, come on! Where’s the sun?” Mikoro complained, tapping her feet with impatience. “I’ve never had a night this long!”

Even Dari was having misgivings now. “It was morning when we woke up after that storm, right?” she said. “Well, it feels like it’s been night for twice as long as it was day.”

“Nyaaaah! Do you think the sun might really have disappeared? Maybe something ate it!”

“Nnnnn...”

“Dari? Your head is red.”

Her head was red because the suggestion reminded her of several societies on her travels where, astronomical scholarship being not necessarily at its finest, eclipses were explained in terms of massive mythic beasts consuming the sun. That in turn had stirred memories of a particularly involved giant woman encounter she had yet to dare disclose to Mikoro.

“Boo. I want the sun to come back. What if we’re missing loads of cool islands? There could be one made of chocolate!”

“W-Well, we’re still sailing I guess,” said Dari. “What can we do but carry on? I’m sure it’ll come back eventually.”



The sun did not come back eventually. The afternoon was night, the evening was night, and the night, surprisingly enough, continued to be night.

Mikoro began to wonder if it was because she wasn’t taking her task seriously enough. So she shifted into serious fluffy captain mode, assuming serious position with a serious face and serious hand on the tiller, while Dari played her part from the hat by providing regular reports of what she spotted: that is to say, absolutely nothing.

When this failed to bring any change to their circumstances the captain gave up and rolled about on the deck again. She came up with more constellations, and complained for want of pen and paper to draw them. Then she got out the kettle and prepared some instant noodles – high-grade, nutritious, a product of one of the Chaldea Organisation’s subsidiary companies – and so shared with her first mate a delicious if simple dinner. Further conversations with Dari over tea got her

hungry in ways that had not so much to do with food, and so the two of them engaged in some healthily carnal recreations which good friends are entirely allowed to do and if you disagree then the problem is your society. This did however result in a wet Dari, so once more the services of the kettle were called for ahead of settling in for a second night beneath the stars.

When they woke to find still no sign of the night's end, the panic set in.

“Nyah...nyaaah...!”

“Shhh. It's okay, Mikoro.” Dari rappelled down to Mikoro's shoulder and dug her arms into the pink curtain for some timely caresses.

“B-But, you said...you said some places have nights that go on for – ulp – hundreds of years. Which means – on and on, like this...on and on...”

“Hey. I'm sure this won't be one of those. If we just keep moving forward – ”

“How do you know? How do you know we haven't gone off the edge of space, or, or, got stuck in some sort of time-circle that keeps going round and round and round?”

The little explorer scratched her friend's cheek with both hands. “Can you feel this Mikoro?”

“Nrrrr...y-yeah.”

“Good. Feel it. It's real, isn't it? I'm real, and you're real. Now listen. We're not in – I dunno – some fantasy story here. This is reality, just like all the realities out there, and I've always found that when you go off the edge of one reality, it also means you're entering another. Always. Nowhere's *really* off the edge, Mikoro. Everywhere's somewhere.”

“Nyah. Dari, I'm scared...”

“And as for a time loop, well, as far as I know, time doesn't work like that either. Things might seem to repeat, sometimes over and over – heh, look at what I go through,” – a wry smile in the lantern-light – “but they never do so in exactly the same ways.”

“But, but...”

“It's okay. We still have plenty of food, right? And the ship's been pressing forward ever since we left Sétanta's island. It seems to know where it's going, don't you think?”

Mikoro's big hand appeared and took hold of her friend. Clasped tight, trembling. Dari winced at the compression but carried on stroking and reassuring her giant friend.

“I want the sun to come back,” said Mikoro. “I wish we could at least see where we’re going.”

Dari heaved on Mikoro’s thumb, pushing it down so she could see. The sail held taut in the unseen wind. The silver lantern swung. Beyond those two great bunny-ears, alabaster pale against the jet-black dark, she saw nothing.

“Hm. That’s funny.”

“What...what is?”

“Look there Mikoro. What do you see?”

Mikoro peered ahead.

“Um, nothing? It’s still totally dark.”

“Right? *Totally* dark. You don’t see any stars there either?”

“Nope? Why...”

Mikoro sat bolt upright. Her eyelids fluttered like camera shutters as she registered the significance of this observation.

“Nyaah! If there’s no stars there...”

“Right, Mikoro? That must mean *thnwaah!*”

The fluffy captain dashed to the bow and leant out over the bunny-head, her amber eyes following its headlights into darkness. Stars were missing from a huge chunk of the sky, and suddenly strong gusts slapped against the sail, as though the wind was having to swerve round an obstacle ahead.

And then – a lurch.

“Dari! The bunny! It’s slowing down! But – but – I still can’t see...”

“The lantern, Mikoro! The lantern!”

“Nghh! I think it’s stuck!”

She tugged it and twisted it and attempted to jiggle it off the boom, but the stubborn thing just wouldn’t come loose. Strangely its hook didn’t appear physically jammed or otherwise stuck to the structure. It was more like it somehow *knew* they might take it off the ship and was resisting with all its might.

THUNK.

The prow hit something. The fluffy captain staggered, but caught the mast with both hands and steadied herself.

The *Sea Bunny* had stopped.

Mikoro gave the lantern one last useless shake, mumbled grievances at it, then in a flash of insight pulled out her Academy-issue smartphone instead. A slide and a tap activated its flashlight, which she held up over the side. Its circle of light landed faint on shrubs, rocks, dirt.

Land.

Dari tugged on Mikoro's ear. "Shh. Wait. Listen first. Do you hear anything?"

They listened. Wind. Waves. The faint rustle of plants.

The wall of darkness loomed high, suggesting a hill. Or a cliff. Or a castle. Or maybe a huge sleeping monster with bad breath and challenging political opinions.

"It's so dark!" Mikoro whispered, a little too loud. "Are we supposed to get off? But I can't see anything!"

Dari frowned as the cat-girl waved her phone-light about. She might as well try to light up outer space with a candle.

"Why don't you check the luggage box again Mikoro? I mean, the ship's been pretty good with giving us the stuff we need so far."

After the recalcitrance of the lantern Mikoro wasn't going to follow this advice without a grumble, but her mood lifted as she dug out yet another opportune discovery: an electric torch, silver like the lantern but all light and sleek and businesslike this time with no ornamentation. The nifty thing had the simplest of switches, and on flipping it she as much as cried for joy as it shot out a beam of brilliant starlight.

She directed it at the coast. Swung it round, pale and yellow like the *Sea Bunny's* headlights. A wide arc of shoreline lit up bright as day: dark sand, scattered gravel, dense low-lying foliage.

"Oooh."

"Nice! Well that's a little better at least. Still, let's be careful. We still have no idea what's out there."

Each knew what the other was thinking: that somehow, without either of them giving voice to it, their decision had already been made. There was nothing to do *but* disembark and explore. Even if they had no clue what they were meant to be looking for in the thick dark depths of eternal night.

"Come on Mikoro. Hey – maybe we'll find the sun!"

Mikoro's grunty purr suggested she didn't find this terribly funny.

"Heh. Sorry. Just trying to be, uhh, cheerful, you know? Eheh. I'll shush now."



Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Dari squeezed her eyelids as the crush of dry plant matter announced Mikoro's stomps to every ear from here to the stars.

“M-Mikoro, is there a way you could do that a little less loudly?”

“Mother says you’re supposed to be loud! That way the snakes and fuzzy bears will know you’re coming and you won’t step on their tails!”

She tramped on, singing cutesy songs about bear encounters as she swung the flashlight left and right. Leaves and dirt, leaves and dirt – the plants looked like ferns for the most part, and what was more they were all parched, which might have been why they crunched so loud underfoot.

Mikoro suddenly asked: “Do you think there’s dinosaurs?”

“D-Dinosaurs. Why, Mikoro? Just why?”

“Um. These kind of look like the plants you get in dinosaur books.”

Dari shivered. Her rational mind rushed forth evidence: they couldn’t hear any dinosaurs, smell any dinosaurs, nor were dinosaurs likely to eat her even if they were there. All that was well and good, except that beyond that disc of light they could see a great deal of nothing, and when you see nothing, the more ancient regions of your brain find great entertainment in filling it in with what you least want to be there. So now that Mikoro had mentioned dinosaurs, Dari was seeing dinosaurs there; and when her brain realised those did not particularly perturb her, it helpfully replaced them with the outstretched hands, dripping mouths and assorted pulsating orifices that did.

She eeped and ducked beneath the hat brim.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

“Um. Dari?”

“Nnnh...”

“Dari? I don’t think there’s anything here.”

“Nnnh...nnnh – huh?”

“Look. It’s sandy here.”

She shone the torch out in front. Black waves lapped on the beach.

“We’ve walked all the way across. I guess it’s a small island.”

“W-Well, how about over there?”

“Um! You mean to where the shadow is higher?”

“Yeah. Look along the top, where the stars are. It’s a smooth line. It must be some kind of hill.”

“Uh-oh, uh-oh...”

It’s a hill, Dari argued with herself as Mikoro trudged towards it. It’s not breathing, not heaving, not rumbling. It’s a hill. It’s not a head, nor any other anatomical structure I’m going to end up stuck in.

“Nyaah!” A sudden hat-quake and explosive shuffle of leaves.

“Aah! What the – ”

“Gwah. I walked into a plant.”

“For goodness’s sake Mikoro, hold the light so you can see where you’re going!”

“Um. The bushes are thicker here. I can see a path though. I’m gonna have to push.”

Dari took cover, but to little avail as she discovered that by pushing Mikoro really meant headbutting. The tricorne hat was a good shape for this and kept most of the foliage off her face, but its main disadvantage was visited on its passenger, who squealed and yelped as she gripped the brim against the island vegetation’s best efforts to sweep her away.

“Wait, Mikoro, s-stop! I can’t hold on!”

“Ooooh! Dari, look!”

She raised the torch. Its circle of concentrated starlight lit up a broad hillside, almost a cliff – rugged, rocky. But if the pair were reassured to find that it was indeed such an innocuous geographical feature, it also offered a new cause for concern. A huge cave entrance yawned before them – or would have done, were it not sealed by a massive boulder.

“Uh-oh,” said Mikoro, as one does in the face of such things.

“Huh. What could this be about?” said Dari.

“Oooh! I bet there’s some huge, angry monster inside, and we’re gonna have to find a way to move this rock, and go in and give it chocolates so it doesn’t breathe fire on us...”

“Come on Mikoro. Does there have to be?”

Mikoro harrumphed. “Well there could always be molguugas instead.”

Dari swivelled on her hat-perch, as though searching for something in the envelope of darkness.

“Before we even touch it – do you remember which way the ship is?”

“Um, um...I think it’s roughly that way,” said Mikoro, pointing at random into the void. “I hope it’s that way. Nyah. It’s too dark.”

“We should – ah! Wait! Shh!”

“Or maybe it’s more over there – ”

“Shh, Mikoro, listen! Do you hear something?”

Mikoro froze as her mind parsed ‘something’ as ‘tyrannosauruses’. Her sharp ears twitched in the silent wind. They sifted through the brush of dry foliage, the seethe of waves in the distance – and then caught on something else: a tiny

pinprick of anomalous noise. High in pitch, buzzy like an insect; but no, she realised, it was a voice. Tiny. Insistent. Irate.

“Hey! Hey! C’mon! Listen to me when I’m talking!” it was saying.

“Ooh. Who said that?” went Mikoro, and she took a startled step back, on which her foot came down on something hard as a marble.

“Waaaaah! Nya – nya – nya – owww! What was thaaat?”

She dropped the torch, tore off her shoe, squeezed both hands round her foot and hopped in pain. In those same moments the tiny voice got louder, sharper, so aggravated that it grew impossible to make out its words.

“Mi – ko – ro – mi – ko – ro – ahh!” stuttered Dari as the hat bucked beneath her.

“Oww! Owww! I stepped on something hard! Owww, that hurts!”

“You stepped on something, did you?!” rose the voice, a very discernible squeak this time. “Well how’d you like to get stepped on instead you lumbering oaf? I’ll give you ‘oww!’”

“Nyaah! I’m not an oaf! I’m Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny*! I’m, I’m...hey! Who’s there?”

“Eh? Surely not,” uttered Dari, who spotted it first.

In what was becoming a quite fluent motion, the explorer abseiled down Mikoro’s hair, climbed down her coat to the muddy earth and cautiously approached the insect. It was smooth and round, with an iridescent green sheen that glistened like some species of beetle. But as she drew closer, she realised it was not a beetle at all. What she had taken for its shell was in fact a helmet, currently jammed onto the head of its wearer, a tiny person, who in turn was struggling to break from the mud into which Mikoro’s sole had compacted him.

“Look at this Mikoro!” Dari gasped out, as she rushed to the figure’s assistance. “Er, are you alright? Is there any way I can – ”

Mikoro’s curious face loomed hugely in. “Whaaa? Oooh. Some kind of bug...?”

“Aaaah!” the stricken figure fumed, and he shook with such offence that he burst from the ground with a *pop!* “So it’s like that, is it? First you ignore me, then you bury me in the dirt with your clumsy foot, and now you’re calling me a bug? Who the heck do you think you are? I’m not a bug! How dare you call me a bug?”

And he began bouncing on the spot, attaining a quite alarming height for his size. Truly he was tiny: he came up only to Dari’s waist even with the helmet, or to her chest if you counted its little pair of antennae. When he at last held still, for he had to to glare his pique into his trampler’s eyes, Dari observed that he had on

a purple vest, with a leaf-green kerchief bound round his neck like a cape. From his belt dangled the smallest sword she'd ever seen.

"Oohh, you klutz, you make me so mad! Well you're gonna regret messing with the great Issun – Celestial Envoy, wandering artist, and wielder of the supreme blade Denkomaru!"

Chhing!

In an instant the 'supreme blade', which looked about as menacing as a sewing needle, had been yanked from its scabbard and held to the tip of Mikoro's nose.

"Nyaah! I'm sorry little bug! I won't step on you again, I promise!"

"Damn right you won't! And don't you forget – aaaaah!"

The needle had tickled the tip of Mikoro's nose till she sneezed, the force of which sent Issun rolling away like a tiny football.

"Guuu! You're a naughty bug!"

Mikoro grabbed for the torch and lay it along the ground for a better look at this 'wandering artist'.

"Stop calling me a bug! And turn that – that – *thing* away, it's blinding me! Ooh, of all the – "

"Nyam. You do look kinda cute though."

"What was that?"

"With that cute cape and helmet. Handsome little thing!"

"I, er – well, that's right! That's me, Issun, the dashing and handsome wandering artist!" And he struck a pose with tiny hands on hips.

Mikoro's tongue emerged as her grin grew mischievous. "Mmm. I bet the handsome wandering artist would find my tummy real comfy. He could massage the crinkly bits with his little needle!"

"Whoa whoa whoa!" The self-proclaimed great Celestial Envoy drew away. "Stay back you klutz of a cat-thing! No-one eats the mighty Issun! And what do you mean *little needle*? This is the legendary Denkomaru I'll have you know!"

"Aah, stop it, both of you!" snapped Dari, striding between the duelling parties and stretching her arms apart. "Look – Mr...Issun, was it?"

"Hmph! Who wants to know? You – you're a *korpokkur*, like me! Grr, I bet you're from one of the rival villages. You've come to steal the secrets of my trade, haven't you? Aha! I'm onto you, mouse-girl!"

"Mouse...what?" said Dari, a little unnerved by the nickname. "No, I've never heard of a – what was it again?"

The *korpokkur* studied her up and down. “Hmm. On second thought, you’re right. It’s just as I thought. You’re far too tall.”

Taken aback by words she’d never expected to hear again, Dari fell speechless. Mikoro made use of the resulting interval to draw closer, so curious about this new species of tiny person that she couldn’t resist extending a finger to poke him. The finger recoiled as he yelled “You big bully!” and raised his sword to ward it off.

“Alright. Look,” said Dari, asserting herself before everything went out of control. “It appears we’ve got off on the wrong foot.” (“Too right we have,” Issun muttered crossly.) “Shall we try again? This here is Mikoro, and my name’s Dari. We’re, err, travellers.”

“We have a bunny!” Mikoro piped in.

Narrow eyes scanned Dari with suspicion. “If you’re not a *korpokkur*, how come you’re small like me? Even though you’re too tall.”

“Ah – well you see, I was originally about Mikoro’s size, and then there was, erm, an incident, and I got shrunk. Look, it’s kind of a long story,” she said, in sincere hope she wouldn’t be asked for the rest of it.

“And you, you stomping neko-ball! Where’d you get the ears and the tail? You’d better not be some fiendish monster in disguise!”

“Waah, no! I’m not a monster! The Chaldea Academy – the transformation...”

“And you said you’re an artist?” Dari cut in before they could wind each other up again.

“Did I say I’m an artist?! You’re only talking to *the* Issun, wandering artist extraordinaire and Seventh Celestial Envoy! Surely a bunch of travellers like you have heard all about my legendary brush?”

“Nope,” said Mikoro straight away. “But you’re so teeny. I know teeny people are amazing and – nyah! – delicious; I mean, look at Dari, she’s tiny and goes *everywhere*! But...um. Can you really be as legendary an artist as that?”

“Aaahh! It’s not enough to squash me flat and take me for a bug, you now have the cheek to question my creative brilliance?!” Tiny puffs of steam blasted forth from the minuscule fellow as he raved in Mikoro’s face. “Well now I’ll show you. I’m gonna teach you your folly, and when I’m done you’ll be scraping those pointy ears in the dirt as you bow before my skill!”

And as though out of nowhere he whipped out a great blank scroll ten times taller than himself, and with a twist of its handle his sword indeed became a brush, which with a splash here, and a dab there...

“Ha-ha! Behold! Whaddaya think of *that*?”

The scroll's surface had transformed into a symphony of pinks and greens: a likeness of Mikoro and Dari worthy of any world-class art museum.

"Woooooh! But – but – that's amazing! Awawa, my face is sooo cute!"

"Eh? Eh?" bounced the smug little artist. "Even cuter than the real thing, don'cha think?"

Dari grimaced. "...Why am I in her mouth?"

"Heehee! Well where else would you be?" Mikoro giggled. "But, but – um. Little Issun, is this your home? Why would a wandering artist wander all the way out here?"

"Ack, that's right," said Dari, remembering the gravity of their situation. "Mr. Issun, perhaps you can help us. You see, the thing is, we haven't seen the sun for days. Would you happen to know anything about that? Or at least, can you tell us where we are?"

"Hmph!" Issun sheathed his brush and folded his arms. "No sun? Of course there's no sun. The sun hasn't come up since my dear friend Ammi shut herself up in this cave."

Mikoro and Dari looked at each other. "Your dear friend...Ammi?"

"That's right! Isn't it obvious?"

"Nyeh? Not really. Um, and how long has Ammi been in there for?"

Issun shrugged. "Ten days? Ten years? Ten thousand? How am I supposed to tell without the sun? All I know is that we were roaming the lands and the seas, enjoying all these great adventures together, then one day we drop by her parents, something goes down, and next thing I know she's holed up in here and refusing to come out or speak to anyone."

"But that...what's that got...the sun..."

"And believe me, I've tried everything! Mirrors, shiny jewels, offerings of birch-bark and stag bones and solemn recitations, you name it! I even got all her friends round to hold a great big party right here outside her cave, thinking all the singing and dancing and laughter would stir her up, and oh boy, what a thrilling dance it was, let me tell you – but nope. Nothing. It's like Ammi's a different person now, all morose and withdrawn, not the lively and headstrong lady who roved at will, smiting devils and helping out folks in need under the wisdom-filled guidance of yours truly."

Mikoro wiggled her nose. She'd been no stranger to depression over the years, and Issun's description twanged her memories.

“Uhuu. I think I know how Ammi might feel,” she said. “D’you think it would help if maybe we met with her?” A spot of cheer returned to her face. “We can bring her tea and cookies from the boat!”

“Nope. Not a chance,” snapped Issun. “Didn’t you hear what I said? Ammi isn’t talking to anyone. And till she changes her mind she’s not letting anybody past this boulder. Besides, do you think I haven’t tried bringing her treats?”

“Well there must be something we can do!” Mikoro insisted. “I don’t get what the sun has to do with your friend, but if it won’t come out till she does then we’ve gotta persuade her out!”

“Aaah, you obstinate cat!” Issun leapt onto Mikoro’s tail and bounced up and down on the tip. “Aren’t you listening? Even if I wanted to let you in, which I don’t because you’re a klutz who’ll knock over everything, Ammi’s the only one who can move this boulder, and she doesn’t want to see anybody! Now can’t you be a good little moggy and sit tight? It won’t be long till I, the great Issun, think up a way to help my friend!”

The fur on Mikoro’s tail was sensitive, and she shook it, growing annoyed as Issun’s minuscule boots hammered on its tip. Finally she went “Agaga!” and swiped with her hands, which caught the little artist off-balance and sent him tumbling once more.

“Ohh, that does it!” he yelled. “You dare disrespect the mighty Issun? Your garish locks had better be ready to get sliced and diced by Denkomaru!”

“Nyaah! You’re not getting near my hair you cheeky bug! It’s tummy time for you!”

“I told you not to call me a – wh-what the heck? Ahh! Help! Back off, you furry fiend!”

Mikoro’s lunge missed her bouncing quarry by an inch, and she glanced up to spot him hopping away into the undergrowth.

“Mikoro, wait!” Dari yelled after her. But the cat-girl was fixated now and she bounded off after the little creature.

“Come back! Don’t just...ahh, she did it. Well, what did you expect? You know it’s not her fault Dari. You know she can’t help thinking with her stomach when she’s excited. You should have stayed on her hat, rather than let her leave you here, all alone...in the dark...in front of a huge...dark...cave. Eep.”

Except, on saying this, Dari noticed it was not quite as dark as it might have been. In the absence of torchlight she became aware of a faint ring of light, which, as her eyes adjusted, turned out to be leaking round the edge of the boulder. There

must be a light source inside the cave, she reckoned; and moreover the gap looked just wide enough to squeeze through.

She wondered if she should. She understood too well what happened when she sneaked into places she shouldn't, and in this case her apprehension was all the greater for her prior knowledge of a female presence in this one, the mysterious 'Ammi'. But wouldn't standing around in the dark leave her equally at the mercy of whatever might reach for her from those shadows? After all, as a driving instructor lady who'd once caught her had told her during their ride together, it's not what you can see that ought to worry you – it's what you can't see.

She gulped. "Well, here goes."

She held her breath and sidled into the gap.



The dark depths frequented by Dari were unusual by the standards of professional caving. But even for her, this cave was exotic.

It was no rocky or earthy passage, nor a cleverly-disguised organic one (which had of course happened). Rather it was a plain plasterboard corridor whose like you might find in some dreary apartment block or labourers' barracks. The walls were featureless. Everything was featureless. There was nothing to do but make for the door at the far end.

The light she'd seen from outside came seeping through the crack round that door. It was a brisk jog away, but then again most things were at Dari's size, that was one reason she kept fit, and she made it there with little loss of breath.

She got down, rolled beneath the door, then rode that roll's momentum onto her feet in a single practiced motion. Not as practiced as it might have been, she thought, as she stumbled, flung her arms out for balance – then swung her head left, then right, then up, then all around, scanning for reasons to immediately flee.

Then she stood baffled as though there'd been some mistake.

The chamber had two distinct parts. The side into which she'd emerged had plaster walls, a ceiling, a boarded floor, a futon, a kitchenette, a toilet and sink but no mirror. It was an all-purpose bedroom as far as she could tell, or rather, what a bedroom might look like after an earthquake, a tsunami and three or four world wars happened to it. Her peripheral vision soaked in the details: a minefield of crisp packets, wooden chopsticks, manga albums, DVD cases, drinks cans, noodle cartons, plastic take-out trays, plastic wrappers, plastic wrapper-wrappers – so

much plastic! – unwashed dishes and cooking utensils, T-shirts and underwear in varying gradations of unwashedness along with their apparently redundant coat-hangers, a pile of folders and files, and a clutch of random appliances planted wherever they'd found space to take root in this jungle of urban horrors: a solar-powered electric fan, a microwave, a low table, an umbrella.

Beyond this relentless clutter the room extended into a cavernous space much more like the earthy grotto Dari had expected; and though she registered the glimmer of light on water, that part of the room was now pushed to the edge of her consciousness by a far more familiar apprehension.

For right there in the bedroom section sat a towering figure who Dari just knew was exactly the sort from whom she could expect a return to her more customary expeditionary style in the immediate future. The giant had long black hair which did not so much flow as twist down her back, as though the invention of combs had totally passed it by. Her full white robes might have flowed too once, but now hung crumpled as a crag, splotched with stains and crumbs. In this forsaken manner the giantess sat cross-legged on a cushion, seemingly detached from the world save for a videogame controller whose buttons her fingers mashed with tedium.

Dari's brain fast-forwarded to sensations of moist and fleshy constriction, rooting her to the spot in that oh-so-familiar rush of hamster-hormones. She hadn't even noticed the glyphs printed on the doormat beneath her feet: 言語道断 – which for their angry font presumably meant something akin to Fuck Off. Meanwhile her higher brain, always happy to recline on a deckchair and spectate in these situations, helpfully identified the game by its sounds: *Mario Kart*, which she'd seen on the screens of friends in multiple realities and knew to be a cross-world phenomenon.

A phenomenon those friends enjoyed all the more with something Dari-shaped wriggling about their persons.

“Aahh...aahh...”

At her squeaks, the giant woman turned her head, slowly, inevitably – and spotted her.

“Eek!”

She was wearing sunglasses. All Dari could make out of her face was the frown of pale lips on chalk-white skin.

The interloper's knees quivered like jelly. She cast flustered glances about for hiding places, stumbling all the while through mental calculations over how long

it would take this woman to stand up (one second) and stride across the room to her (three seconds) – not enough time to squeeze back under the door, or make it to the nearest open crisp packet. She didn't understand why her brain behaved that way. To the extent it thought it helped her avoid capture it was absolutely purposeless. All she could do was wait, wait for the loom of this next individual on the cosmic rota for the universal Dari-snack or Dari-toy, brace herself for the clasp of gigantic fingers, try her hardest not to think about the splash of fluids, the pound-pound-pound of gargantuan blood vessels, the reverberations of muscular joy...

But then, something inexplicable happened.

The woman turned away.



“Nyahah! Naughty bug-boys go in my tummy!”

“Yikes! Help! Wild cat on the loose! Somebody stop her!”

“C'mon, you'll like it in there! I wanna see your drawings of it from inside!”

Ten times round the island Captain Mikoro chased the wandering artist. The insect-sized Issun kept bouncing out of her torchlight, but the energy of his leaps released a green effervescence onto which Mikoro's eyes latched automatically, so she always knew which way to follow.

“Aahh! You great fancy-dressed pink oaf! Don't you ever give up?”

“I told you, I'm not an oaf! I'm Mikoro from the Chaldea Academy!”

“Well I'm not a bug, and I'm certainly not your lunch, you, you – *whoa, that was close!*”

Mikoro had swung her tail at her quarry, but the little guy vaulted clear by the breadth of his own antennae and scuttled back towards the cave.

The cat-girl fixed her sights on him, worked out his trajectory, bent her knees for another pounce which like all the others she was certain would end with him dangling by his cape between her teeth – but just as she was about to spring, a vibration in her inner coat pocket distracted her.

“Huh? But that's my...!”



Dari had no idea what to do.

Statistically speaking there were plenty of women who weren't interested in her, or who could at least suspend their cravings long enough to interact with her as a person first and a treat second. It was just that whatever forces governed the function of the cosmos seemed to consistently land her in the laps of those women who fundamentally, as a matter of first principles, found her immediately irresistible.

This was one of them. Dari had known it the moment she'd seen her, with that acutely-tuned intuition unique to her. Every cell in her body knew – had learnt – that by now she was meant to be wriggling in the clutches of that dark-haired titan as she decided how best to put her catch to use.

But she wasn't. And as the flurry of fluster-clouds receded, she found herself in a situation for which her experiences did nothing to equip her.

“Uhh...”

The woman looked young, or young-ish, perhaps in her thirties or forties; certainly not, let's say, in her four-and-a-half billions. Dari gawked at her, knees still shaking, skin still tense with the pressure and heat of the grasp that wasn't. But the woman made no move. She merely sat there playing her game. And she was good at it, Dari observed. She knew exactly when to fire off a red shell or shield the rear of her kart with a green one, and took the sharpest turns with no loss of speed.

Had she really seen her? Perhaps she was blind? But she'd definitely heard the squeaks...

Dari thought: Should I leave? Or would that be rude? How am I supposed to behave at this point? Even as she negotiated this existential quandary her kind and trusting nature prevailed, and she prodded herself: “Come on Dari. You should at least say hello and see if she's okay.” And so, as an experienced corner of her mind screamed in her face: *What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you actually WANT to get eaten?!* – and she cringed, and said sorry, knowing for sure that it was right – she set off through the maze of detritus.

Because she could tell something was up with this individual.

Because she cared.

Because she was Dari.

The woman soared up like a skyscraper. At close range a not entirely fragrant scent found its way into Dari's nostrils. It felt recent in her memory. Then she

realised she'd last got washed in it by Mikoro's kisses after their meal of instant noodles.

"Uhh...good evening?" she peeped from beneath the robe-clad knee.

"No," the woman replied.

"Eek! I'm sorry!" Dari braced herself, expecting the worst. But no – the woman carried on gaming as though she wasn't there at all. So she cleared her throat, battled through the thickets of her own timidity and tried once more. "Are you – "

"No," said the woman again.

Her voice was without passion, without vigour. She might have been merely breathing out.

Dari felt every sinew straining to drag her back across the room. It felt like a dream. This just didn't happen – not with strangers, not on the first encounter. Not to Dari. Grab first, work the rest out later: that was the universal law that governed her life.

"Err...is everything alright?"

The towering lady cast her a momentary glance – "Why even ask?" it seemed to say – then continued mashing her controller. Dari could see the screen from this angle. She was playing as Bowser.

"Uhh...okay. Well. It looks like you don't want to talk to anyone right now, least of all a *sna-ahem*, sorry, a stranger, but if..."

The woman raised a finger to her lips. "Shhh."

"Eep! Nnnh...o-okay..."

Dari hugged herself to settle her nerves as the woman fired off a spiky blue shell. That helped: it introduced a suffering third party to the immediate equation. Dari muttered a silent prayer to one of her goddess friends (who she didn't worship as such, but they found it fun to pretend), on behalf of the poor sod in first place whose day was about to get ruined.

After a while she looked up at the woman – goodness she was tall – and opened her mouth again. *There's really no helping you, is there?* said her brain.

"You're Ammi, right?"

The woman completely ignored her.

"Er. My name's Dari – "

A nod, without even looking at her. Did she know? It would hardly be the first time.

What should she do? Each moment she stayed she was tempting fate, which had obviously missed the bus or something but would surely be along on the next

one. Or she could go back outside and tempt whatever lurked in the night instead – whatevers with wings, most likely, or extra mouths in their tails. She certainly wouldn't be getting Mikoro's attention till that pint-sized painter was safely ensconced in her stomach, and till then felt she'd really prefer not to get trodden on in the pink fluffy rampage.

Better to give Mikoro some time to calm down, she decided. Then have The Talk about ingesting random people she'd just met.

She addressed maybe-Ammi again. "Well, I s-suppose I'll just, er, have a look around, if that's okay with you? If you w-want to talk, just, er...signal to me, or s-say my name, okay?"

Or pick me up, she thought, because that's what they did.

The faintest hint of a grunt.

Dari backed away, her instincts still cautious; if she turned her back she just knew she'd be swept up without warning. Yet her rational mind was gradually reaching a realisation.

This woman's disinterest wasn't in her specifically. It was a disinterest in general terms. A disconnection.

Still, looking around was easier said than done. There was nowhere she could stand without losing her line of sight on this woman to a stack of volumes or a discarded food container, and she didn't dare climb anything lest it annoy its owner into reaching for her. So she felt her way backwards through these warrens of domestic debris, never taking her eyes off the giantess as she took a step back; then another; then –

"Ah!"

She teetered, swung her arms in circles and flung herself onto her hands. She'd almost backed right off the edge of the floor, which she now realised overhung the space where the room transitioned to an open cavern.

Now she could see that its floor was an underground lake, with some sort of raised platform in the middle. Her vantage point was too low to see what was on it.

Far enough now from the woman's lunging range (so long as she couldn't lunge with her hair – it'd happened), Dari mounted a stack of volumes for a better view. She could see no better onto the raised structure, so turned instead to assess the bedroom.

Something seemed off about it. Aside from its resemblance to a landfill site after aerial bombing, that is. The room was suffused with light. Dim light, but insistent enough for her to have noticed it from the other side of both a door and a boulder.

The problem was that there was no sign of a reasonable source – no bulbs, no flaming braziers, nor even the more unusual options like magical floating spheres or electric eels in a tank.

When she worked it out, she only grew further perplexed. The light was coming from the woman herself.

It was then that she suddenly stood up. Dari squealed at the top of her voice, knowing for sure the giantess must have changed her mind and decided it was Dari time – only to watch her mumble “Noise” and shuffle through her ocean of hermit’s paraphernalia for the door.

She exited, leaving Dari alone and utterly confused.



“Oooh! It’s hatching!”

Mikoro had forgotten all about the chase. She slipped the flashlight into her pocket so its cone shone straight up and gripped her phone in both hands, eyes wide with anticipation.

“You’re something else. You know that?” squeaked the wandering artist Issun, likewise forgetting his peril as he came bouncing up to her. “Hey, what’cha got there?”

“It’s my Pokémon GO! You made me run enough to hatch an egg!”

Issun fell dumbfounded as though she’d spoken to him in Old Norse.

“I forgot I left it on!” said Mikoro, tapping the screen excitedly. “It counts how far you walk, and after a certain distance it hatches! Ooh, what’s it gonna be?”

“Whoa, are you serious? After all that, you’re just gonna forget about – you know – the world, and play some game?”

The screen flashed. Mikoro let loose a squeal.

“Wawawa! It’s a Torchic! Torchics are *cuuute!*”

“Meh. Lemme see that.”

The tiny Issun hopped onto her shoulder.

“Look! Look!” she said, and she shoved the screen so fast at him that it hit the edge of his helmet and knocked him away. He plummeted with a yell, splatted into the mud, popped out, shook himself off, then bounced his way up Mikoro again, grumbling under his breath about whether there weren’t laws to restrict the maximum sizes of cat-people.

“Unbelievable. All this, just for some...”

Some tiny baby chicken. It had a head larger than its body, both spherical, and was entirely orange aside from a yellow beak, a flame-like yellow tuft atop that head, and two more tufts aside its body that would presumably one day be wings.

“Nyaah! Isn’t it adorable? Don’t you just want to hug it and feed it and tickle its fluffies?”

The little artist stared transfixed. He was pointing at it, making picture-frame gestures with his hands. He bounced to her opposite shoulder, then onto her hat (“Hey! That’s where Dari goes!”), pausing, shifting, then pausing again, as though examining the screen from multiple perspectives.

“Hah! Okay, I’ll admit it. That’s some nifty brushwork right there. No, no, I’ll go further: the concept is perfect. *Perfect* – just a little sloppily realised. But hey, not everyone is the great wandering artist Issun, so we can forgive them no? Yeah. Yeah – I like it.”

“Of course you like it!” said Mikoro. “How could anyone not like this cute little chicken?”

“Hey now Captain Cat-Lady, I’m a professional remember? This is years of expertise speaking, not some *opinion!*”

Mikoro didn’t seem to hear him. “Aaww. I wish it was real so I could cuddle it.”

“Real? What are you talking about? Of course it’s real. It just needs the touch of a true master of the art is all!”

And right there on her shoulder he whipped out his brush, shook out a scroll, and splashed it with buckets of yellows and oranges so vibrant that had he used them to draw a Hertzsprung-Russell diagram, the dots would surely have risen from the page and set the sky alight with newborn stars.

“There’s the tuft, and that’s the beak, and – there! How’s that for your ‘cute little chicken?’”

“That’s, that’s – oww! Hot! Your paper is hot! Oohh you little troublemaker, are you trying to burn my fingers?”

She shook him from her shoulder and sucked the sizzle out of her fingertips. He yelped again and lost hold of his scroll, which was just as well, because so concentrated were those fiery colours that it glowed white-hot, and only grew hotter as it wafted through the air, ramping up hundreds of degrees at a time till it blazed with such blinding radiance that Mikoro went “Nyeeh!” and shielded her face with her arm.

The superheated air prickled on her cheeks. As it cooled, she lowered her arm and blinked.

A rustling of feathers.

She looked down.

It stared back up at her.

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic! it chirped.

“Nyagagagaga...!” – her squeals ascended into an unintelligible turmoil.

The Torchic was no taller than her shin. It scampered round her in circles. It tripped. Its tiny chicken legs kicked in the air as it rolled forward, its head having the perfect shape for such a motion, till it settled upright after the third somersault and scurried on.

Issun struck a haughty pose, arms crossed and face raised in side-profile. He gave a satisfied whistle. “Hmph. Told ya.”

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!

“Aaah! I want to hug it! I want to hug it!”

Mikoro pounced, but the wary creature dodged her closing arms and skipped aside. It eyed her nervily.

“Come here! A cutey like you needs cuddling!”

“Oh come on, you’re scaring it already?” Issun cried in disbelief. “Stop, stop, otherwise it might – there. *There*. You see?”

The Torchic cheeped into the darkness. Unstable firelight burst and flared from the little thing as it zigzagged round the island.

“Nyah. It went.”

“Aaah, there’s no stopping you is there? You see what you’ve done now? I wanted to show it to Ammi, you irredeemable klutz! She loves cute critters like that!”

“I’m not a klutz! I just wanted to cuddle the bird!”

“Exactly! You, an oversized *cat*, wanted to cuddle the bird! What would you do if you were a bird and saw a *big, hungry cat* come salivating to *cuddle* you?”

Mikoro’s answer, and she certainly had one ready, would never be known as a rumble of stone smothered further argument.

They turned. The boulder blocking the cave had been rolled aside, if only a fraction – and someone was leaning through the gap.

“Noise,” said that someone.

Issun blustered in panic. “Ammi? No no no, I’m sorry! It’s only a mischievous cat-girl! I’m dealing with it, don’t worry, I won’t let her disturb you – ”

Mikoro shone her torch at the cave. The light didn’t quite reach it, but the woman seemed to bask in a faint light of her own and her features were

illuminated perfectly. She wore a plain white robe with sunglasses. She was very tall. Yet between her slouch, her impassive frown, and the way her long dark hair tumbled unkempt over her shoulders, she seemed somehow diminished in stature.

“Ah. Just a *neko*...”

She trudged back in, slippers shuffling into the distance.

“Wait!” Mikoro called after her. “Are you Ammi?”

Then she spotted that she’d left the boulder ajar. There was a gap.

Issun noticed her studying it. “Oh no. No. Don’t even think about it,” he started up. “You’ll only bother her. I’m not letting you in there for all the – hey! Where d’you think you’re going?”

But Mikoro was already pushing at the boulder, attempting to open a little more space. It wouldn’t budge – “Oooh,” she marvelled, thinking how strong the woman must be – and so she slipped through the gap with only a little difficulty, her cat-mind knowing exactly where and how much to twist.

“Gwah. Is this really a cave?”

She advanced down the corridor, ignoring the frantic ring of prohibitions (not terribly effective ones, it had to be said) from behind her back. The door at the end was half-open.

She sidestepped through.

“Ehhh?!”

Her shock was much as Dari’s had been, and for the same reasons, only greater for the view her height afforded her.

Ammi sat at her game. She did nothing to acknowledge her visitor, though must have heard her come in.

Then the corner of Mikoro’s eye picked out the motions of something green. She turned to the other side of the room, her puzzlement mounting at how it fell off in a cavern. And then she identified the green thing as Dari, waving her arms at her from atop a small tower of manga.

“Dari? How did you get in here?”

She looked from her tiny friend to the white-robed recluse, then back to Dari again.

“Um. How come she’s here and you’re over there?”

“No,” said the woman as though in answer. She didn’t look round.

Mikoro blinked – then a riled-up shout smashed the *Mario Kart* music as Issun bounced into the room. He sprang straight for Ammi and hopped atop her head, down her arm, then up and down on her game controller as he ranted and raved:

“Can you believe it? I tried to stop her but she had the insolence to just barge straight in! Aaahh, how rude is that? And how did her nosy green friend get in here? Is she bothering you? I can smite her with Denkomaru if she – ”

“Noisy.” Ammi wrapped her hand round the irritating fellow and put him away down her robe. His stifled protests issued on till she pressed her arm over her chest, not relinquishing the pressure till he got the message and shushed.

Then she went on with her game.

Mikoro turned to Dari, who had seen this, remembered how it felt when such things happened to her (which was often) and so gone red as a beacon. Carefully and with difficulty the fluffy captain waded through the clutter-swamp towards her, only just maintaining her balance when her foot slid on an empty melon soda bottle, and lowered her hand for Dari to climb on board.

“Oh thank goodness,” she spoke into Mikoro’s ear, safely ensconced aboard the hat once more. “It was getting real awkward in here.”

“Um. What’s going on?” Mikoro whispered up.

“I don’t know. Something’s up, but she doesn’t want to talk.”

“Why hasn’t she eaten you yet? Or put you where Issun is, or...”

She’d whispered too loud and Ammi heard her. “No,” said Ammi.

“Nnnh, we’ve got to keep it down!” Dari hissed. “Look Mikoro, do you see that? Over there, in the middle of the cave.”

Mikoro looked. She was tall enough to see the top of the raised platform, and to give Dari sight of it too.

The platform was covered in water. A chain of rocks sat within: three large ones, surrounded by innumerable little ones. (There was in fact a fourth large one, but it was ephemeral, shifted in and out of the visible spectrum as though not truly part of this set.)

“Oooh. What’s that?” said Mikoro out loud, forgetting she was meant to whisper.

“From parents,” muttered the recluse as Bowser’s kart sang the jingle of an invincibility star. “Hurts. Don’t want them.”

“Um. Is it okay if we look?”

Ammi gave a tilt of her head.

A set of mounted binoculars stood at the floor’s edge, like those you get at popular lookout spots that only work nowadays if you feed them coins. This set had no coin slot and its aim was fixed on that island-display. Mikoro peered through.

“Wah. This is strange.”

“What do you see?” asked Dari.

Mikoro took her friend in hand and held her to the left eyepiece, keeping her own eye on the right. The lenses' magnification power was incredible. They showed tiny people crawling on the rocks, millions of them: sitting in offices, eating in restaurants, crammed into trains so packed it was a wonder they didn't burst.

Agape in wonder, Mikoro drew back and examined the binoculars themselves. "Waah. These must be expensive..."

And she glanced over her shoulder on instinct. An alarmed Kiyoko was never far away when she got her hands on fancy equipment like this.

"They're...people," said Dari. "Only – can you see them without the scope?"

Mikoro peered over the top of the binoculars. She strained her eyes. "Nope. It just looks like rocks."

"There are beautiful mountains covered in snow," reported Dari, still at her eyepiece. "And farm fields, and forests; and high-rise buildings, lots and lots of buildings all together – "

"Nope. From here it's just rocks. But in that case..."

Mikoro returned to the eyepiece and saw all the things Dari had mentioned.

"Uwaa. This is weird."

"Do you see that?" said Dari.

"Um. It looks like an office? A big one..."

They spied some thirty or forty people, hunched over their desks in a room evidently designed to keep each in line of sight of the others at all times. They swayed with exhaustion. Some had passed out. It was clearly late – the display seemed to rotate, varying up how much of Ammi's light reached it – but none of these serf-like figures showed any sign of going home, perhaps because they feared that doing so before everyone else had gone would look shameful.

On the contrary, they were remarking to each other – and all agreeing – about what amazing examples of loyalty and dedication their colleagues were setting by working so hard that they'd fainted.

Something else was strange about these people. They were all wearing the same bland clothes, and for some reason the men specifically were dressed absolutely identically in suits. Stranger still, each had a strip of cloth noosed round his neck, from where it dangled straight down in a line, much like – there was no other way to put it – an arrow pointing at his penis. It was as if to say: 'Look, I have a penis. Look at it. It's the locus of my importance' – which of course made no sense at all. Indeed there was nothing else to suggest these people *were* important,

penises or not, and the fact that all these men were tied in these cloth-strips rather gave the impression that these were livestock-collars, a tag that indicated someone else owned these people and could lose and replace them as easily as from a box of screws.

Mikoro wondered: why would anyone *want* to look exactly the same as everyone else, let alone wring their own necks with such a ridiculous item? What happened to those who refused?

Were they all dead?

Those cloth-strips must have bound them tight, because the workers were clutching at their collars, fanning themselves with their hands. Surely the air was stifling.

The problem looked easily rectified by opening a window, but apparently this solution did not occur to these personnel till one individual got up to try it. But he was immediately pulled back by his sleeve, and warned that such a thing must not be done without consulting the boss – not because the boss was scary, but because that was simply how things worked – and though the boss would surely be okay with it, he would no doubt be overruled by the ninety-year-olds on the executive board who despite never setting foot in the office they technically oversaw, might feel that opening a window was too ambitious a change to the way things had been done since their great-grandparents' generation.

So the window stayed shut – and one by one, the staff dropped dead of overwork.

“Nyaah! What the heck?”

“Mikoro, look there,” said Dari. “Isn’t that a school?”

And indeed, when Mikoro looked again, the view was of rows of children sitting at desks, all dressed in exactly the same uniform.

They were at work on some exercise. Writing out glyphs like those on Ammi’s doormat. It looked like they were under instruction to do it exactly the same way. But then one child drew a glyph ever so slightly differently – with a doodle of a cute animal at the end – and at once a teacher figure began roaring in his face, telling him he mustn’t do things his own way, must merely copy, as though to do otherwise would bring the whole world crashing down. The man slapped him about the forehead. When he turned his back, the other pupils tittered at the beleaguered boy, only to stop and smile, teeth glinting with innocence, the moment the teacher looked at them; and from then on those he thought were his friends would shun him, and leave any table he sat at, turn away at the first

moment of eye contact, freeze him out of their games and gatherings, throw away his work when he wasn't looking, and just generally behave as though merely to acknowledge his existence would contaminate them with his impurity. When he spoke to his teachers, they merely shrugged and suggested he change his attitude, stop overthinking, and make more of an effort to fit in; and when he broke down in tears in front of his parents, their faces turned cold as stone as they asked him why he had to cause them trouble and bring so much embarrassment upon his family.

Mikoro felt her face flare up like a furnace. But then the binoculars shifted again.

Now they showed a train station platform. A row of people stood along its edge. The persecuted schoolboy was among them, as were others like him, but so too were those suited salarymen and others of various ages, occupations, genders and states of attire. Each was gazing onto the tracks. From their defeated postures, their depleted gazes, their terminal distress was plain as day.

The crowd of commuters cleared a semicircle around them, and though Mikoro could make out one or two haranguing mouths and pointed fingers, almost all those passers-by were facing away, exchanging remarks – casually, smilingly, light-heartedly – about people who just didn't try hard enough, or weren't grateful enough, or didn't 'read the air', or had a negative attitude. 'Negative people', they were saying – 'cut out negative people'. And if one of the sufferers along the edge turned round and looked to the throng in a final plea for help, those closest shifted away as though magnetically repelled, all the while questioning one another as to why people who struggled were too proud to ask for help.

"What good is light," came Ammi's voice, "for those who don't want to see?"

The schoolboy jumped.

Then a salaryman.

Then a young lady.

Then a small child.

One by one – they jumped.

And when they'd all jumped and the train rattled through, a great sigh of relief rippled through the crowd, as though some unspoken inconvenience had kindly removed itself so they could go on with their pretence at respectable life. Onto the train they crowded, smiling – always smiling – as they insisted to each other how happy they were, shouting, shrieking, even ejaculating their gratitude, their humility, their satisfaction with the world, as with but a muffled announcement of some 'human-body incident' over the speakers, the train rattled away on rails of broken bones.

“Fuck,” Mikoro heard in her left ear.

“Don’t want it,” said Ammi from somewhere behind them.

She wanted to tear her eyes away, but couldn’t. It was too horrific, too hypnotic.

The lenses blurred, then focused on a new scene. A picturesque shrine. An effigy with a remarkable resemblance to Ammi, fronted by a wooden offering-box and overhung with a chrysanthemum-flower symbol – a circle with petals fanning out like rays of the sun.

A priest in a tall hat approached the offering box. He clapped; bowed; clapped again. Then he began to lecture the effigy. He told it that with its negative attitude it would never be successful. Gratitude is the answer, he said, finger raised: not complaining, not moping around depressed, but gratitude, because we are a rich country at the top of all the OECD indices and you are lucky you weren’t born among one of those poor barbarian peoples who are always hungry and at war and the wrong skin colour. Don’t you understand, he asked, that everyone has problems but manages because life is just like that? Why don’t you go to the doctor, get some medicine to drink, and only show yourself in public after you get better so your sad face doesn’t ruin people’s moods with worry? Don’t you realise that if you keep making a big deal over nothing you’re going to tarnish the national reputation?

Atop the shrine a beautiful nail stuck out from the roof beam, dazzling in all the colours of the rainbow. On spotting this the priest climbed the thatched roof and pulled a hammer out of his robes, whereupon he mercilessly slammed down on the nail, each blow smashing it deeper and deeper into the wood. After ten blows the wood began to crack. Then it split, and the whole structure collapsed in a calamity of dust and splinters.

The priest emerged, bloodied and cradling a broken arm but examining the wreckage with satisfaction. “*Ganbatte*,” he sneered, before walking away.



Why she didn’t know, but Mikoro found herself sitting beside the hermit playing *Mario Kart* together.

She couldn’t respond to what she’d seen.

“From my parents,” Ammi had said. “I don’t want it.”

Dari had once explained that on her travels, she’d occasionally look through rifts between the realities and witness scenes so implausible that she could only

imagine those realities somehow *weren't real*. Mikoro had replied: Why are they there then? Dari didn't know. A hallucinating universe? A theatre of nightmares? Or some kind of cosmic cautionary tale, to warn all realities what they cannot be?

"Shadows," said Ammi. "Not mine. My light, but not my shadows."

It was Dari who spotted the spare controller, sticking out from a pile of discarded hardware beneath the television. The recluse hadn't objected as Mikoro picked it up, blew off its thick layer of dust and sat down beside her. She waited for the race to end – Bowser came in third – and on the character screen, selected Princess Peach in her cat outfit for the next one.

They raced once. Twice. Three times. It was engaging. Soon they'd raced nine. The only time Ammi reacted to her new partner was when the latter activated a lightning bolt, shrinking her Bowser along with all the other karts. To this the taller woman clicked her tongue but showed no serious displeasure.

Everyone had a chance in this game. If you were skilled, you could still lose if you failed to concentrate for a moment or got caught in a maddeningly unlucky cascade of projectiles. If you were poor, you had a better chance at the meatier power-ups to wreck those ahead of you. Ranks and relationships in *Mario Kart* flipped as fast as the weather.

As they waited in the online lobby ahead of a tenth race, Mikoro spoke up.

"Can I give you a hug?"

"No," said Ammi.

Mikoro looked down, pouting.

A hand stroked the back of her head. Its touch was warm as an oven. But it went as soon as she noticed it.

"Nrrrrr."

They played.

On lap two, Mikoro said: "Miss Ammi?"

No reply.

"Um. Who are you...really?"

Ammi answered: "I am me."

"Nyah. Um...okay."

"You're the sun, aren't you?" said another voice – which promptly became a squeal as Ammi's hand scooped the culprit from Mikoro's hat and suspended her at eye level.

Dari squirmed and stammered apologies as the hermit examined her, pinching her waist in those slender fingers. Behind those sunglasses the giant face was

inscrutable. And then, just as the worried Mikoro was ready to ask her not to eat her friend, Dari was returned to the fold of the hat.

“Heehee! Don’t worry Miss Ammi. Dari says such silly things sometimes!”

“M-Mikoro! I don’t – ”

“So funny! How can a person be the sun?”

“Shhh,” said Ammi. “Noisy.”

From behind came the pattering of tiny feet. Mikoro twisted round.

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!

She leapt up and cried: “Yaaaaay!”

It waddled in.

It cheeped at them, rising on the toes of its chicken-legs and wiggling its wing-tufts as though it thought it could fly; and realising it couldn’t, proceeded to gambol around the room, twittering *Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!* as it leapt and rolled and scuttled for joy amidst the accoutrements of Ammi’s hermitage.

“Cute,” said Ammi. She didn’t get up, but put down her controller and swivelled to track the scurrying creature.

It skidded towards the edge, where the floor dropped off into the cavern. The temperature surged around it till the surrounding air shimmered in a hazy corona, though it appeared all of Ammi’s belongings were heat-proof. The Torchic must have perceived the water below might be hazardous, so instead of leaping down it leant over the edge, flapping its feathers and tweeting at the platform in the distance.

And then, fluttering its tufts with all its might, it rose into the air. It couldn’t fly – but just about managed to hover in place.

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!

It glowed. Flared with licks of flame. Gorgeous rays flashed from its body and bathed the chain of rocks in a new light.

The rocks shimmered and speckled as the Torchic’s light merged with Ammi’s, dancing into a kaleidoscope of textures as it broke through clouds and shaded boughs, refracted through raindrops to wash the landscape in a rainbow of colours, swept down the streets and the corridors, cast the scrutiny of day through the windows of private households and gleamed on mountain snow.

Something remarkable was happening. Mikoro could tell because Ammi had stood up and gone padding to the edge.

“Quick, Mikoro, the binoculars!” Dari urged her.

Mikoro scrambled over the piles of stuff to Ammi's side and plugged her eyes into the apparatus. At a tug on her ear, she budged to one side and held Dari up to the other.

A second sun had risen over the land.

It mattered not what it was called, nor what colour and shape was its light. Its power was that it was a new perspective, whose very introduction revealed to its inhabitants new ways to think – indeed, the very possibility of thought at all. In that instant, the only way they knew, the single set of shadows to whose chase they'd dedicated their lives, was exposed as not the one true reality but merely one in an infinity of potentials. In the light of multiple sources, the shape of real truths, real realities, real *people* grew sharp in their visions, as illusion evaporated, artifice fell away, and masks, now undercut by light from both sides, were prised from shaken faces.

The dead office-serfs woke up, saw the time on their watches and computers – and went home. There they slept, drank tea, or otherwise relieved their stress and pursued meaningful relationships made of more substantial things than rote scripts and rituals.

Parents hugged their children, learnt to listen to them, to respect their wills and take their grievances seriously, understanding at last that shame consists not in objection to abuse but in abuse itself.

Friends hugged friends, for the first time ever – indeed, could now be properly called friends.

The instrument lost focus; adjusted automatically; found it again. It showed a great cemetery, where the lids of urns were popping off and the ashes billowing out, to reassemble in the forms of those people who had jumped from the platform at the railway station. Once more they stood in a row, faces and torsos now streaked with the linear gashes of hurtling train-wheels. Yet they no longer drooped in despair, rather stood tall in all the dignity of eternal magistrates. Through the gates shuffled the crowd, which once more assembled around these people – only this time the citizens came right up to them, then fell to their knees, prostrated themselves at the suicides' feet, one rank after another, where they screamed out their tears, pleaded with those they'd mocked to forgive them, confessed that it was their own performative obsessions, their ruthless herd arrogance, their callous refusals of empathy, that had driven those victims of their society to their fates – this congregation of contrition, this symphony of the sorry,

the tatters of a chastened social order grovelling for the mercy of those it butchered on its altars of beaming masks.

These people, who of course were not supervillains but ordinary individuals from all walks of life – they promised there and then that from now on they would take responsibility. They would care in sincerity for those around them, extend their hands to those who fell rather than kick them into pits; vowed never to slander people for their differences or distresses ever again, and in that resolve, to create at last something worthy to be called a society. And for some even this bold commitment must have been insufficient to assuage their shame, because they pulled out shovels and dug holes at the suicides' feet; then lowered themselves all the way in till only their heads and shoulders protruded, and from there bent forward, pressing their foreheads onto the dirt, onto those shoes, and sobbed and shrieked their disgrace till their tears filled their pits and washed them free.

Mikoro pulled back from the binoculars.

There stood Ammi. She'd pulled off her sunglasses and was staring at the Torchic through amber eyes, eyes just like Mikoro's, only they were luminous, mottled with tiny black splotches, eruptive with flares of molten radiance.

"Bird. You understand."

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!

She approached the Torchic. It scurried at her; leapt into her arms.

They shone. The world exploded in infinite white.

"Nyaaaaah! Wha, wha – I can't see!"

Mikoro flung her arms out, staggered, fumbled but couldn't feel anything. She turned, ran, stumbled on books and cans and wires and trays and whatever else she could no longer discern down there in this plain of roaring light – and it was just as well she kept her hands held out because they found the door before she'd have crashed face-first into it, and she pushed, plunged down the corridor to where she could just make out the outline of the boulder and squeezed through the gap into cool night air...

"Nyhaaah....nyhaaah..."

She panted hard, rubbed her eyes with her fists, then lifted her hat – thank goodness Dari was shouting, or she'd have forgotten – so she could safely shake her head extremely fast, so intense was the brightness that she'd felt it sear up her optic nerves to befuddle her right there in her brain.

She blinked; squeezed her eyelids tight; blinked again, and again. Her vision came creeping back. The outline of her hat took shape, and the green blur in the centre solidified into Dari, staggering against the tricorne's crown and grinding her fists in her eyes.

"Nyaah – Dari – what just happened in there? Are you okay?"

But before Dari could answer, the mouth of the cave erupted in light – not blinding white light, thank the stars, but warm, golden, nourishing; the light that caresses the fields of spring, beats down on summer beaches, dances on the leaves of autumn forests, reflects its majesty on winter snow, and asserts its abiding strength on the tropics and poles alike.

A hand shunted the boulder aside. There stood Ammi, the hermit, the *hikikomori*, shining forth at the coruscating heights of her splendour. Her eyes were alive with the energy that enthuses all things, the drapes of her robe broad and full as they swam with gorgeous crimson swirls, and her hair flowed like cataracts of cosmic night against the ornamental rays which struck from her golden mantle to all four corners of reality. In her arms she cradled the infant Torchic, which shuffled, then squeaked, then loosed its loudest bawl yet – TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC! – to announce the approach of a new day.



"I am Amaterasu Ōmikami, She Who Illuminates The Heavens. Please forgive my failure to offer you the correct hospitality." She bowed with gravity supreme. "There is no excuse."

Overcome in a wash of warmth and light, all Mikoro could manage was: "Nwaah..."

"D-Don't be scared, Mikoro," said Dari. "Say hello."

"But you're scared!"

"Nngh! That's n-nothing to do with it!"

Which strictly speaking was true. The pressure Dari felt was not that of standing in a divine presence, which with friends like hers, she was used to. It was that of the knowledge that when that pressure became physical, it mattered little, at her size, whether the presence applying it technically counted as divine or not.

"Uwaa...uwa!" The cat-girl swallowed her awe and tried again. "Um – I'm Mikoro! I m-mean – I'm Captain Ibaraki Mikoro, from the Chaldea Academy! And this is my friend Dari! But...nwah. Didn't we already meet?"

“Dearest Mikoro-chan,” said the goddess. “We have known each other since the beginning. Such is the way of things.”

She bowed again. Mikoro, having somewhat collected her nerves, did the same.

“Ooh. Now that I look properly, I think I sort of recognise you, Miss – um – do you mind if I still call you Ammi? It’s just – nyah – your name is a bit long...”

“You really are the sun, aren’t you?” Dari dared to ask.

The full weight of the goddess’s gaze fell upon her. Was that a solar flare, or did she actually lick her lips? Dari squeaked and sank to her nose behind the hat-brim.

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!

The hatchling tugged at Amaterasu’s robe with its beak. She lifted it in both hands; regarded it. Beamed.

“Even a star smiles to know she belongs,” she said. “To be heard. To be validated. To connect. That is real truth. Real light.”

“Waaah! You – you – then you *are* the sun? As in, the sun that shines up in the sky?”

Amaterasu stepped forward, robes gliding soundless across the earth, and lowered a hand to Mikoro’s cheek. The warmth of her touch was incredible. It reminded Mikoro of the lifetime’s worth of love that Mother Rin had poured into every hug, every gentle word, every bedtime story, every meal brought forth from the oven.

It was the same warmth.

The hand slid further. It stroked her under the chin.

“Nrrrrrrr!”

Dari remembered what had happened in a recent situation not unlike this one and pressed herself along the bottom of the hat-fold, doing her best to lie still. She risked a peek and glimpsed Ammi’s lips over her hiding place. Solar breath baked upon her back.

She squeaked.

“But, but, I don’t understand,” said Mikoro as the hand pulled away. “If you’re the sun, how come you were in...um...”

She hesitated. It was difficult to parse ‘acute social withdrawal’ into something befitting the majesty of this being.

“My brave little captain, I think you understand well. Have I not caressed your hair through the window as you plunged through the same dark clouds of doubt and despair? No soul is immune to such occlusion. No matter how bright you shine,

how hot your fires blaze, how can you not be laid low when your story plummets from beneath you? The darkest of nights may fall upon anyone.”

And Mikoro realised she did understand. The words – or at least their message – could have come straight from the mouth of Mother Rin.

She flung her arms round Amaterasu’s waist and hugged her.

Fingers tickled beneath her ear. “Blessed are those who count you as a friend,” she heard.

“Mnyah mnyah.”

She rubbed her face into those robes. She didn’t want to stop. They were so warm and soft, like they’d come straight off the iron.

Eventually, reluctantly, she pulled back and asked: “But Miss Ammi – what happened to you? Why did you end up all by yourself in that room?”

Amaterasu Ōmikami faced the cave. Her expression turned sombre.

“It all started when my Celestial Envoy,” – she placed a hand to her chest – “recommended I call on my parents, whom I had not seen in many cycles. My visit went poorly. They decided it was time to bequeath me that set of islands you witnessed in my lodgings. They called it their proudest creation; but as soon as I cast my light on it I could see that something was wrong.”

“You mean...it was real? said Mikoro. “What exactly was it? It made me scared...”

“It was real, and it was not. That was the problem you see. My light fell oblique on it – as though skewed by things *not there*. Ruinous things. Things which seeped doubt into the depths of my heart, and convinced me my parents’ real aim was to offload the burden of their own mistakes onto me.”

“Um. I’m confused. What do you mean, things *not there*?”

“How can one *not* be confused when what is is held in subservience to what is not? They had passed me a reality where masks wear faces; where thinking minds must non-think, feeling hearts must non-feel, and the infinite varieties of being must all be as one, or as one of a stunted set – that is to say, to *not* be. My parents’ creation was corrupt. They never told me. And when I gave of my light to it, nothing could have prepared me for the shock of what it revealed.”

“But – you mean – was there something wrong with the rocks themselves? Or did your parents do something to them? Did you ask them?”

“At first I did not wish to make trouble over it. I believed they meant well, and that my responsibility as their daughter was to accept their generosity without question. But what I saw was more than I could take. I confronted my parents.

They denied everything. I pressed them, pleaded with them, ended up shouting at them. Only then did they admit they had known their work was flawed.

“They had created those islands through a ritual, in which they circled the Pillar of the Heavens in opposite directions. Their first attempt was flawless. They met on the far side, greeted each other, and procreated as equals. Magnificent islands were born. But then a weakness took hold in my father’s mind. Sinister voices whispered to him from the voids beyond reality. He heeded them; believed their lies. He decided the islands were defective because when he and my mother greeted one another, she, the woman, had spoken first. He advanced the notion that this was wrong. Can you imagine that? A notion so vain of sense, so hollow of meaning, so futile a seed of conflict? Yet my father became obsessed with it. He imagined himself inferior, and it terrified him. He insisted that they demolish their creation and try again, this time with him asserting a right to speak first. So they did. And when I heard this I was appalled, for now I understood perfectly. This new set of islands, the set they handed down to me, was invested in the very process of its creation with this *principle that did not exist*, this terrible unreality, this thing my father had feared all along: the reduction of all its manifold beings into a simple pair of types, divided one against the other, only now reversed, with the ordering of one, the male, on top of the other, the female.”

Mikoro seized up. It felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. Horror-struck, she clutched onto Amaterasu’s robes to steady herself. She had never, ever had cause to imagine so absurd and frightening an idea – except she had, she remembered.

Once.

Her fingers fished in the fold of her hat. “Dari – Dari – didn’t you say...”

“Urgh. Yeah,” said Dari, re-emerging to find a huge feathery sphere right there in her face: the Torchic’s head, nibbling at the hat-brim. “It’s only a distant memory now,” the explorer recalled, “but there was a lot of that in the world I grew up in. I’d almost forgotten; in all the realities I’ve been to I’ve never seen it since. For all I know it only exists there.”

Mikoro remembered well why she hadn’t probed further. “Brrr. An entire world like that...” She shivered, in spite of literally hugging the sun.

“So you see?” said Amaterasu. “My parents’ gift was created in fakery. How then could it not live in fakery?”

“And that’s why you shut yourself in? Nyah. I think I understand now.”

“To spread my light upon such a thing was to unravel my very sense of what is real. But even as I lost my way in the shadows of anxiety and depression, my parents refused to take responsibility. They blamed each other. Since my birth they had been estranged, and now I knew the episode with the islands was the cause. Forced to admit it, my father claimed that my mother had consequently walked out in disgust, leaving him to birth me himself through his own left eye, and that she had reacted with violence to his every attempt to reconcile. My mother insisted this was a lie, that it was he who ran away with me, and that once he even locked her in a cavern to stop her pursuing him for access to her child. Each appealed to me to believe their own story, to have the clear and objective sight to see that the other was obviously in the wrong, laid low as I was by the heartlessness of what they had done. In the end I lost faith in everything around me. I doubted I was anything I had believed myself to be, doubted my memories, doubted my senses, doubted even that these were my parents, and could no longer trust my discernment of truth from falsehood.”

“Some parents!” huffed Dari, so vexed at what she was hearing that she not only forgot all about her timidity, she did something which for her ought never to have been more daunting: she looked directly at the sun.

“I could not bring myself to condemn them,” said Amaterasu. “They were my parents. I had assumed that parents always acted in the best interests of their children; that parents deserved respect. That was what they had always taught me.”

“Respect?!” said Dari. “After behaving so lousily towards you? How screwed up is that?”

Mikoro tugged on the goddess’s sleeve. “Dari’s right! What they did to you, it’s, it’s – what did Mother call it? When they hurt you by trying to manipulate your own senses and memories against you...”

“Gas-lamping?” said Dari.

“Yeah, that’s it! It’s gas-lamping! And it’s a type of abuse, so you don’t need to stand for it! Nrrar, how dare your parents do things like that?”

“I recognise that now. I have decided the reverse of their teaching is true: that it is for those with power to show respect for those without. The parent chooses to bring forth the child; the child has no choice in the matter. If the child has no chance to consent, then what obligation to her parents, to anyone, can possibly be held to her? And from the other side, if the parents abuse their power over the child, whether by hurting her or holding her to responsibilities she did not ask for, then what claim have they to call themselves parents at all?”

Mikoro was hugging her round the waist again. “I think you’re a good parent,” she mumbled into the robe. “You’re kind of everybody’s parent, aren’t you? I learnt about it at the Academy – how everybody’s power comes from you. You have so much of it. If you were mean you could easily cause so much hurt with it. But you don’t. You share it with us. You share it so gently. Because of you, we have all the energy we need for lives full of adventures, and cuddles, and good friends, and good food, and nyah, nyaah...”

“Thank you, young Mikoro-chan. I am touched.”

“Please, Miss Ammi. Will you come out and hug us with your power again? You’re, you’re...”

“Yes, my sweet child?”

“You’re just like my mother Rin! But, um, taller.”

The goddess laughed. Then she did what anyone might do on seeing Mikoro’s face as it was then: she placed a finger on her nose and stroked it.

“Oh my dear. Come. I hardly merit this highest of all compliments. But to your appeal, I answer: yes. The free spirit of your auspicious bird has restored my parents’ bequest to health. My confidence returns. I am ready to travel once more.”

The Torchic nuzzled against her arm. She stroked its fluffy crest, then to Mikoro’s delight, lowered it so the cat-girl could at last give it the cuddle she’d longed to.

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic! it screeched, a little too close for the comfort of Dari who clamped her hands to her ears.

“And the matter of travelling reminds me,” said Amaterasu. “My mischievous Celestial Envoy – a dear and devoted friend, who has journeyed with me through ten thousand skies, shall never be found sparing in insight and charm, but benefits from the occasional reminder that there are people in this world other than the Celestial Envoy. I pray he did not give you trouble?”

She parted the neckline of her robe, and out popped the glinting green helmet of Issun who could only hang in place, gasping for breath.

“What is the matter?” she inquired of him. “I thought you enjoyed it there. How often do you sneak down my robe to nap?”

Dari blushed. “He...actually does that?”

Issun ignored the matter under inquiry and instead launched into a bout of huffing and puffing about everything from naughty pink-haired cats to the scents your skin gives off if your diet consists of too little beside instant noodles.

Amaterasu clicked her tongue, placed a fingertip on his helmet, and with the least application of pressure, pushed him back in.

“Heehee! Look Dari!” Mikoro giggled. “He’s just like you! Always naughtying into women’s places!”

The words buried Dari like an avalanche. “Nhhaah, w-what the heck Mikoro?! When was the last time I did anything of the sort? I’m the one who gets...!”

“Nwaah. I guess you’re right. You don’t climb down their shirts.”

“Of course I don’t! I’m not some sort of – ”

And the cat-girl whispered up at Amaterasu: “She prefers bums.”

“Aaahh, f-for goodness’s sake Mikoro!”

“Wha – really?” Issun surfaced once more, all other concerns made secondary by this challenge to his professional understanding. “Hmm. How strange,” he said. “Are you perhaps mistaken in your aesthetic sensibilities?”

Dari’s face went as red as it could go. “D-Don’t you start too! It’s not what you think it – eeeep!”

Torchic in arm, the goddess’s free hand whisked Dari up to eye level.

“Aahhh! Wait, wait! P-Please!”

“Cute,” said Amaterasu. “Your cheeks burn so bright you could be taken for a binary star yourself. Have you considered an application?”

“Nnnn...nnnn...”

“I know you, sweet Dari-chan. You are the talk of the entire celestial family, and though you are become a daughter to them all, I trust you have not forgotten the star you came from. Perhaps one day you shall join me for a circuit or two?”

“Eek! Too hot! Too hot!”

“Naughty. You are fine with heat – and every bit as tempting as they say. But your sweet friend needs you more. This journey she has set forth on is long, and you must be there by her side, your wisdom to guide her, your courage to drive her on, and your compassion to comfort her when dark clouds cover the sky. So for now...” – and here she pressed the diminutive woman to her lips – “...this will suffice.”

Dari squealed as she found herself plunged deep for a prolonged yet irreproachably dignified kiss.

“Hey!” Issun yelled up at Amaterasu. “How come you never give *me* a smooch like that? I – I protest! After all we’ve been through!” But then the Torchic made playful nips at his helmet, prompting him to duck for the cover of his companion’s robe.

And at last, having returned the suitably flabbergasted Dari to her perch, the goddess turned her attention to the infant fire-bird.

“Miraculous creature,” she addressed it. “Thank you for sharing your light with me today. You have gifted the world an important lesson: that when a reality ceases to shine true, submit not to its absolutes, rather relativise it in the light of other suns, other sources, other stories. Then you shall see what should and should not be.”

Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!

“Still, I cannot but ask: Where did you spring from, oh tiniest and sweetest of suns?”

“Aha!” Issun spied his moment and leapt heroically upon the goddess’s hand, where he struck a pose with head held high. “Need you even ask?” he said. “Naturally it was I, the great Issun, wandering artist and Seventh Celestial Envoy, who drew forth this marvellous creature with my mind-blowing mastery of the brush!”

Its beady eyes gazed up at Amaterasu. *Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!* it cheeped.

“Then I pay your mastery fair tribute,” she said, “but this creature is not your style. This shape, this face – no no. It is far too innocent. You cannot have brought it forth alone.”

Issun deflated. “Well – ah – okay, okay. I might have got a little inspiration from...somewhere.”

“Here!” said Mikoro, and she held up her smartphone. “It hatched from my egg! Take a look!”

Amaterasu crouched shoulder-to-shoulder with Mikoro, studying her Pokémon GO as the cat-girl marked the Torchic as a favourite, gave her fingertip a thoughtful chew – then changed its name to Ammi Jr.

“If I may?” said the sun goddess – and she touched it on the screen. The animated Torchic shook out its feathers and gave a digital burble. This must have excited the real thing, for it returned a cry of *Tor-Chic! Tor-Chic!*

Amaterasu smiled. Speaking softly, as though more to herself, she said: “Even in that truthless nightmare, there were those who saw through to true light and harnessed it into curative shapes like this. This irony brings hope. It proves that truth never truly submerges. How many have been saved by the grace of miracles like these?”

She lifted the physical, fluffy Torchic in both hands and pronounced:

“The stars shall honour your service. I bestow on you this.”

Its pair of yellow wing-tufts wiggled. Its eyes contracted and it attempted to lower its head to look at them, only to be thwarted by said head's considerable curvature. It needn't have worried though, because next thing it knew those tufts were sprouting new feathers, and these were shuffling, elongating, surging so hot that the air around them sparked gold – and then, to the bird's uncontainable cheep-cheep-cheeping excitement, they flourished into wings: magnificent, glorious, and above all, fluffy.

The goddess of the sun declared: “You shall be the Rooster of Truth. You shall fly as you please, by day or by night, that your light shall diversify the visions of all who bask in it; and that when they hear your sweet cry, they shall remember that other stories, other realities await them out there, where they may explore, connect, relate, and from them bring back treasures of knowledge to improve their own.”

TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC! it crowed at the peak of jubilation – and then it launched to the sky, a magical rocket of joy, and zoomed its heart out all round the island just because it could.

“And now you must journey on,” said Amaterasu. “You make for Comet Island, correct?”

This was news to Mikoro. “Um? We do?”

“W-Wait a second!” interjected Dari, emerging from the hat-fold and fumbling aside her wet shock of hair. “Comet Island – the place Isabelle mentioned – how do you – ”

“I see all things, remember?” said Amaterasu – then her gaze lingered on Dari, and she added in an undertone, “Or at least, all things while they remain where my light can reach.” Smiling as the smaller woman sweated, she went on: “Your vessel had all but attained Comet Island when a storm swept you far, far away. Yet ever since, it has held a straight course for that distant land. Its lord, your mother's friend, is a dear friend of mine too and will surely be overjoyed to receive you. The way is long, but – ”

“Hey! Hey! Hang on a minute!” Issun cut in from the goddess's shoulder. “Wasn't Comet Island the one behind that blockade?”

“Uhh...blockade?” said Dari unnerved.

“Yeah, when we last flew over it we saw this towering wall of magical fire, stretching from one end of the sea to the other, with this huge horned demon blocking all ships from passing...”

“Nyaaah!” Mikoro squealed in terror. “What do you mean *huge horned demon*?”

“Do not frighten them, little beetle,” said Amaterasu.

“Hey! I told you never to call me that!”

“Hang on,” persisted Dari, “if there’s something as dangerous-sounding as that then we’d really like to know about – ”

TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC! proclaimed the Rooster of Truth from on high.

“Dawn breaks!” Amaterasu Ōmikami declared triumphant. “There is no more time! I must get changed! Journey well, Captain Mikoro of the Chaldea Academy and Dari the delic-ah! – Wanderer of the Worlds. The great sea shall carry you where you need to go; find the answers you seek from those you meet along the way.”

“At last! That’s the Ammi I remember!” said Issun as the goddess scooped him up in both hands. “Hooray! We’re off on another adventure! Oh, and, Mikoro-san?”

“Nyah?”

Issun’s helmet vibrated. Clearly he was in the midst of some painstaking internal struggle.

“I’m sorry I called you an oaf. You’re not an oaf. No, actually, I’ll do better than that: you’re really not half bad. There. I said it. Now you two take care of each other okay? And remember, if all else fails – leap before you think!”

And Dari, remembering a multitude of hot, tight reasons to consider this poor advice, muttered to herself: “No Dari, I don’t think you should do that.” As for Mikoro, “Um!” was all the response she could manage as she watched the goddess run off into the cave.

At the last moment, she shouted out: “Miss Ammi?”

Amaterasu stopped and glanced over her shoulder. “Yes, sweet child?”

“Let’s play *Mario Kart* together again some time, okay?”

A smile – that was a yes, Mikoro would insist – as the goddess’s light returned to the cave, plunging their world into darkness.

There they stood in the pitch-black void, breathing, waiting: seven seconds, eight seconds, nine, ten – then a flash of light seared through the sky as the heights of the cosmos shook with the heralding cry: TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC!

“Oooh! Look Dari – it’s getting brighter! Does this mean the sun’s coming back?”

“It must be.” And here Dari couldn’t resist leaning back on the crown of the hat with a great goofy smile of satisfaction. “What do you know, Mikoro? I guess we found it after all. Didn’t I – *gwaah!* M-Mikoro!”

“Uwaaaah! Look Dari! Look!”

“Yes, I can s-see if you s-stop s-shaking m-me! Urgh, Mikoro, you – look, why don’t you try climbing the hill? Can you see the slope now? I bet we’ll get a better view from the top.”

Mikoro didn’t need telling twice; she stuck Dari back in her *de facto* crow’s nest and scampered up the brushy hillside, where now the soft touch of dawn nourished its earthy browns and greens to life. By the time she reached the peak the sun had breached the horizon so that there before their eyes, it burst the sky aflame in reds and golds of glorious resplendence; and as those inks rewrote the firmament in lustre, so too they splashed across the sea, unfurling in all directions like a scroll of infinite possibility – then lighting up, glimmering and flickering as though ten thousand candles had come to life on its surface. With the travellers’ sight thus returned, it was the turn of their speech to sleep, for further words were superfluous. All they could do, all they wanted to do, was watch, transfixed, as the rising sun threw open the paths across the sea and paved them with the promise of a new morning.



“Teehee.”

“What is it Mikoro?”

The *Sea Bunny* bobbed, calibrating its sail in a slow rotation.

Mikoro giggled again. Dari put her hands on her hips and bent over the brim.

“What?”

“Nyeheh. Dari got sun-kissed.”

“Very funny. That’ll get old real quick you know.”

“Was it wet?”

“Yes it was wet.”

“Heehee. I never thought the sun would be wet.”

“Urgh. Well maybe the sun isn’t wet. Maybe it decided to be wet *just for me*. You know she can probably hear us right?”

“Yaay!” Mikoro cheered, raising her arms and waving them at the sun. “See you soon Miss Ammi! Remember you promised more *Mario Kart!*”

“Hey, don’t look directly at the sun Mikoro! Even when it’s not very bright yet it can still damage your eyes!”

Mikoro pouted. “Did you hear that Miss Ammi? Dari said you’re not very bright. Maybe you should put her in your – ”

“Mikoro!”

“Nyah!”

The sail locked in place, the figurehead’s ears beeped off a fanfare, and off swept the *Sea Bunny*, following its nose for the fabled Comet Island.

“Come to think of it,” said Mikoro, taking hold of the tiller, “you’ve always had this cute tan. How come your skin’s so good?”

“Come on Mikoro. Do we have to?”

“Hmm. What was it Da Vinci said about it? That time in her lab?”

“You know exactly what she said about it. Because you learnt it off by heart and recite it to me every time I visit.”

But there was no stopping Mikoro now. “I remember, I remember!” She paused for effect, shut her eyes and raised the finger of expertise. “It’s because of...‘prolonged immersion in environments rich in organic nutrients!’”

“Oh Mikoro, you’re impossible,” said Dari, if not unkindly. “Shouldn’t the *great Captain Mikoro* have more important things to do than teasing the poor little snack-woman? Like, for example, figuring out where we’re going?”

“Nyah. The bunny knows where we’re going. And Miss Ammi said we can trust the sea to take us there. Although, I am kinda worried about the thing about – you know – the *huge horned demon* not letting anybody past.”

“It did sound ominous,” Dari agreed. “Well, we’d better try and find out more about it. With the way our journey’s gone so far, I’d say there’ll be plenty more stops before we get there.”

She breathed an inward sigh of relief at getting Mikoro onto something else.

That was, till those ever-fidgety fingers found her phone.

“Nyah. My Pokémon GO disconnected. I’d better log back in.”

Dari turned away on instinct as Mikoro tapped in her password – but she’d accidentally caught the first three letters, and her eyes widened as they caught up with her: *D-a-r...*

Against all her principles, she looked.

“Uhh. Mikoro?”

“Heehee?”

“Why is your password *DariGoesMmff?*”

“Nnyah!” Mikoro fumbled, almost dropping her phone. “Because – because – Sayuri said – ”

“Oh really. Sayuri said what?”

“After that time, that time you two went out with Rida – she said...she said...”

“I see. So it’s Sayuri’s fault.”

“Um, um...”

“Actually no. Don’t worry. It’s my fault. I do go *mmff*. It’s my sole defining quality, isn’t it?”

Mikoro attempted to change the subject. “Nnwah...I, um, can’t get into the Pokémon GO anymore. It’s not connecting.”

“Mmff,” huffed Dari, unconvincingly. It didn’t seem to work when she did it on purpose.

“Aaww! Dawwi!”

Dari decided it was time for the nuclear option. “Go on Mikoro,” she said. “Let’s have some breakfast.”

“Yaaay!”

High above their heads, a pair of beady eyes ogled the crackers, pupils dilating as a deft hand smeared them with cashew-nut butter and three types of jam. Deciding it would get its breakfast elsewhere, the Rooster of Truth put its tail-feathers to the skies of its birth, loosed a final exultant cry – TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC! – then blazed away in search of adventure.

THE WAY OF THE

猴

MONKEY

“Oohh. It goes donk, donk, donk – and then...”

“Mikoro?”

“Nyah.”

“What are you doing?”

The fluffy captain pulled her ear from the chute.

“I want to know what the bunny does with our rubbish! I can hear the bottle bouncing down the hole, but then the sound just...stops.”

Dari peered over the waste hatch. “Well,” she suggested, “there must be some sort of bin box underneath. Have you checked if there’s a way to empty it?”

“Nope. Um. Maybe it’s on the outside?”

“You’d better take a look when we next stop. We ought to empty it if we find an island with proper bins. Wha – hey, what are you...oh Mikoro.”

For no apparent reason the cat-girl had scooped her travelling companion from the hat and cuddled her into her cheek.

“Dari always thinks of everything,” Mikoro purred. “I’m so happy you decided to come!”

“Well – your tummy decided for me to come, actually,” said Dari, returning the hug.

“What an awesome adventure we’re having! We’ve seen cool things, and funny things, but – nyah – also some scary things, and I don’t know how I’d have

managed if you weren't here looking after me because I'm such a naughty muddle sometimes."

A tiny peck on the cheek.

"Come on Mikoro, you can give yourself far more credit than that. Haven't you noticed? People *like* your naughty muddle. It's your naughty muddle that's got us out of all of our scrapes so far."

"Mwaah."

"Besides, I don't think I've...ehh, how to say this?" Dari sat in Mikoro's cupped palm and dangled her legs over the edge. "It's just I don't usually get this far without – you know – getting eaten."

"I ate you!"

"Yes, but you're *special*."

Mikoro poked her in the face.

"Hey, I d-didn't mean it like that! What I mean is – well – thanks, Mikoro. Thank you for looking out for me. I'm beginning to think I might just get through this one without anything too crazy happening to me. Well, by my standards anyway. Ehehe. Let's keep looking out for each other, okay?"

And so they sailed on in this mood of mutual appreciation, and as they advanced through the morning the sky held clear, the wind grew warm, and even the sea turned smooth as a lake. The pair travelled among reefs and islets, craggy like elders' faces, gnarled trees sticking out like straggling clumps of hair as waves the colour of jade licked the *Sea Bunny's* hull. And then, peering through the spyglass, Mikoro shouted:

"Waaah! Look at that! That's a *bigbig* mountain!"

And what a splendid mountain it was! A slab of rugged magnificence, towering on an island so majestically formed that it might have been the ancestral artery of all the islands and continents in the world. Its might stilled the ocean and awed the waves into calm; the tides washed its slopes, its caves teemed with fish, and seabirds sang as they circled its lofty peaks. As the fluffy captain swung the scope about this marvel she spied woods of cypress and bamboo, wisteria winding thick round brooks and streams whose water tinkled like glass and whose banks overflowed with flowers in a thousand colours. So outstanding was this island that the entire seascape gravitated towards it, waters and islets and birds and fish all paying it their reverence.

The *Sea Bunny*, no exception, was cruising straight for it.

"Wow! Doesn't that look wonderful?" said Dari, taking her turn at the eyepiece.

“Waah, it looks like the bunny’s gonna let us off there! Aaah I’m so excited! I can’t wait to run around and climb all the things and taste its tasty treats! Ooh, do you think it has chocolate trees?”

“Hey. Don’t just grab at everything in sight, okay? We’d better find out if anyone lives there and avoid taking anything that isn’t ours.”

“Gwah. You’re right. Of course you’re right. Let’s run and climb and eat things *respectfully* then.”

Now the mountain-island loomed close, and they no longer needed the spyglass to make out its ruddy bluffs and winding rock formations. They glimpsed deer that leapt from crag to crag and the fluffy tails of foxes frolicking in the woods, as glassy water gushed from springs on high and poured down the cliffs in waterfall after waterfall. A spring-blossom fragrance came wafting into the travellers’ nostrils, the sniff of whose notes of honey and nutty pine set both their mouths watering.

So they stood, rapt in wonder, as the *Sea Bunny* made its final approach to this paradise, whereupon it slowed, nosed its way into a cove, and at last came to rest on the yellow sand. There great square letters were carved on a wooden sign:

花果山

Mountain of Flowers and Fruit

猴

What release the fluffy Captain Mikoro found on this island heaven! After storms and caves and gloomy skies this gust of nirvana was surely her just reward for sticking it out, or so she convinced herself, and she grasped it with zero hesitation. She yanked off her shoes and tights and ran wild on the sand with screams of happiness, then off came the hat, the coat, the belts and the shirt to splash and swim in bliss in the warm jade sea. She reclined on a mat of straw to dry off in the beating sun, experimented to find the funniest ways to bury Dari in the sand, then built sandcastles for her little friend to scurry around in while marauding upon them like a rampaging, rawring Mikorozilla.

When they’d had enough of the beach, the fluffy captain put on her clothes, planted Dari on her hat, and proceeded inland via a narrow trail through the crags.

They drank from the springs, trekked the mountain slopes, and not finding anything particularly tasty-looking as yet, picnicked with crisps, cracker-sandwiches of dried meat and salad leaves and fruit juice from the ship on a grassy clifftop overlooking the sea. The rest of the morning was spent climbing willow and peach trees, sniffing flowers, poking at dragonflies and bumble bees, and peeking through cracks in the rocks to look for beetles. Encounters with deer, cranes and pheasants excited Mikoro, but they skipped away shy when she went giggling up to them so on Dari's wise counsel she got used to admiring them from a distance.

"Nyaah! This place is amazing!" Mikoro rejoiced as they trekked down through a bamboo grove. "It's such a shame we can't stay. Wouldn't it be great to have a little cottage here?"

"Maybe we can come back with the others one day," said Dari. "Feels kind of guilty to enjoy it without them, doesn't it?"

"Ooh, I bet this scenery would be sooo good for Kiyoko's stress! And I want to ask Mother what all these trees and flowers and insects are, I bet she knows them all!"

The canopy here was dense with leaves. Through the gaps the sunlight peeped, dancing rays which flecked the pleasant shade.

Mikoro's ears twitched.

"Nyah. Dari?"

"What is it Mikoro?"

"Do you ever have the feeling, um...that someone's watching?"

Dari thought about this. Then she replied: "Uhh, yeahhh? They usually are, I find."

"No no, I mean..." The cat-girl's eyes flicked to the treetops. "Gwah. Never mind. Although...um, don't you think it's strange? An island like this, so healthy, so lively – so why haven't we found anything yummy?"

"You know, I was wondering that too. You're right. It is strange. We've passed several kinds of fruit tree, but with no sign of anything growing on their branches or fallen around them. Did you even spot any pinecones up in those high woods?"

"Nope. Not a one." Mikoro crossed her arms and glowered, as though the island had broken some law at her expense. "It's not right! Somewhere like this's gotta have tasties! D'you think someone's eaten it all? Ooh...maybe the animals..."

“Hmm. I dunno Mikoro. We’ve not come across anyone else here, and I doubt the animals would have done so thorough a job of it. Maybe people come on ships and harvest it? An island like this has got to be pretty famous.”

“Well I’ve never heard of it. ‘Mountain of Flowers and Fruit’ – it said that on the sign, right? Nyah, it’s even got food in the name! Why have food in the name if there isn’t food in the place?”

“A shame,” said Dari. “It would have been nice to restock the ship. The water’s lovely and fresh at least. Did you happen to keep any of those bottles?”

“Um. I threw them down the thing.”

“Never mind. Let’s refill the ones from our lunch.”

There was no shortage of springs to select from, then after a final saunter round the meadows and clifftops they trod a reluctant path back to the cove where awaited their faithful vessel. But as they came through the crags to the mouth of the trail...

“Mikoro! Wait!” hissed Dari. “Shhh, shhh! Look there!”

“Wha?”

In the *Sea Bunny*’s place she saw a huge furry mass, shifting and scrabbling at the water’s edge.

Mikoro shrieked – and hundreds of little red faces shuffled to its surface to stare at her.

“My god,” said Dari. “Are those...monkeys?”

“Nyaah! What are they doing to our boat?”

Arms, legs and tails wavered in the pile of fuzz. Clutching things. Bottles, packets, cartons, boxes...

“Agagaga! That’s our food! Hey! You can’t just – ”

The fur-mound erupted. Monkeys scarpered everywhere, each carrying its weight in irreplaceable plunder – across the sand, up the rocks, to the tops of the trees and the cliffs, leaking into the landscape like grains from a smashed hourglass.

“Aaahh! Wait! Come back here!”

The *Sea Bunny* had toppled on its side. The hull was covered in muddy prints and all the hatches hung open. The ear-tips beeped impotent.

“N-No way,” Dari uttered. “Completely ransacked.”

Mikoro felt about in the luggage compartment.

“My bag’s still here. Ooh, they opened it, the naughty things, but at least everything’s still inside.” She buttoned it tight and crammed it into one of the coat’s deep pockets.

“It looks like they were after the food,” said Dari. “How much did they get?”

“This one’s empty, and this one’s empty, and this one...gwaah, even the refrigerator! It’s all gone! They took all of the food and drink. All of it. All. Nyaaaaah...”

“Well we can’t just stand here,” said Dari decisively, “we’ve got to get it back! Look, they’re disappearing up the cliff! Hurry, before we lose them!”

Mikoro swallowed her panic with a great gulp and shot off up the path. In the relaxation of the morning she’d been caught completely off guard, and now as she ran, the footfalls of dread fell heavy on her nerves, thumped atop the roof of her mind: that they wouldn’t last the day without food, still less water; that there were springs here, that helped, but they’d found no food, none at all, and if they couldn’t get it back...

“Nyeeeh! They’re so fast! I c-can’t...”

“Hurry Mikoro! Hurry! We have to find out where they’re taking it!”

The fuzzy rascals were too quick, catching up was out of the question; no sooner could Mikoro land eyes on one than it slipped round the back of a crag, hurtled into the bushes, or melded into the invisible traffic rustling up the canopy highways.

“Not...fair! This...nyahh, nyahh...this is no good! Nhh, nhh...nwaah...”

“They’re all moving in the same direction,” Dari observed, welling with concern for her friend but forcing herself to concentrate. “Now where could they be taking – ahh! There! That huge waterfall!”

And what a waterfall! Plunging from the mountain’s highest peak, gallons and gallons of crystalline water fell in sheets beneath the arc of a beautiful rainbow. The monkeys were converging on it, nipping from the landscape on all sides to leap and swing at it, arms and tails loaded with the *Sea Bunny*’s booty; and on reaching it...

“How? How are they doing that?” said Dari. “They’re just – vanishing.”

Mikoro halted, bent over with hands on knees. She gasped for breath.

“I...c-can’t...”

“It’s okay Mikoro. Let’s stop and rest a while.”

“But the naughty monkeys have all our foods! If we don’t get them back...nyah, nyah...”

“Shhhh! It’s okay Mikoro. Don’t panic. That isn’t going to happen.” Over the brim, down a strand of hair to the chin – scritch, scritch, scritch.

“Awawa. It’s n-not okay. Not. Nyahah...uuuu...”

Bracing herself for the detonation, Dari spoke quickly: “Look, Mikoro. Look there. They’re all disappearing into the waterfall. Don’t you think that means there’s something behind it? There’s got to be a way to get back there, and we’ll find it. We’ll find it and get our stuff back.”

“Uuuu...nhhh...”

“It’s going to be alright. I promise you.” Scritch, scritch. “It’s okay. It’s okay. Deep...breaths.”

The rumbling receded. Dari loosed a sigh of relief.

“Look – there go the last of the monkeys. They probably think they’ve shaken us off. Don’t rush Mikoro. That’s it. Breathe. Slow. Take your time.”

“Mnyuuuh...”

“Good. Now, what would Mother say if a bunch of monkeys raided her kitchen?”

“Oh dear, that can’t be right,” the calm tones of Rin washed through the cat-girl’s consciousness. “We’d better go and ask them to return everything, hadn’t we?”

Her mother’s warmth rinsed the residues of her panic. She felt refreshed.

“Right?” said Dari. “So then. Onward, *Captain Mikoro*?”

The little explorer cringed at how silly she’d made it sound, but it was the effect that mattered and on that she hadn’t misjudged. Mikoro’s face was a picture of grim determination, and she expressed it by going “nyraar!”, returning Dari to her perch, and marching purposefully off in the direction of the waterfall.

The trail zigzagged up the precipice to the top of the falls. Water roared in Mikoro’s ears, and the wind blew cooler and stronger the higher she climbed. Reaching the top, she looked over the edge – and gulped. It was a long way down.

“Are you sure this is where the monkeys went?” she shouted against the din.

“I’m positive. You saw them too, no? They all disappeared into the falls right about here.”

For the water and wind Mikoro could barely pick out her friend’s voice, so held her right up to her ear.

“But the path just ends! There’s no walkway round the back, nowhere else they could have...wha?”

“Try the torch!” Dari was yelling. “Try the torch!”

Mikoro dug in her pocket for the ship's flashlight and shone it against the sheet of water. At first it felt pointless and she wondered what Dari was thinking. But then she noticed that the circle of brightness, pale as it was in the light of high noon, vanished as she swung it across the curtain's centre only to fade back in as it moved to the sides.

She peered hard.

"Um. Some sort of cave?"

She was dragging her mental feet. Already she knew where this path led. There had to be a cave. The monkeys must have leapt through the waterfall to reach it.

That meant she would have to leap too.

But if it *wasn't* a cave – an optical illusion, say – or if the entrance was too small, or she mistimed the jump...

"You can do it Mikoro!" said her ear.

"Nyah?!"

"Be brave! You can do it!"

She couldn't believe she was hearing it from Dari. Sure, the little explorer was prone to tumble along by Issun's maxim of 'leap before you think' in spite of all her efforts to the contrary, but was not plunging into the top of a waterfall a leap too far? What Mikoro didn't know – what Dari couldn't explain against so much background noise – was that the little traveller had observed the movements of her torch with great caution and discerned that not only was the cave entrance high and wide, the barrier of water was also far thinner than it looked; in fact the bulk of the falls gushed out beneath it.

"It's...it's scary!" The cat-girl seized up. A horrified Kiyoko came rushing into her imagination, seizing her arms and pulling her to the safety of a warm and cosy bollocking.

"Throw me through it," said the voice in her ear.

"Wh-What?! Nyah – Dari..."

"Throw me through it! I promise you, it's safe! I'll show you, then you can follow!"

Mikoro recoiled at the thought – at Rin asking her how she lost Dari, and having to reply, "Because I, um, threw her into a waterfall, and missed, and she fell all the way down and probably hit her head, and I couldn't find her core because it got swept into the sea, and the sea is big, and it must have got eaten by a fishy..."

And yet, fast running out of alternatives, Captain Mikoro fastened Dari in a pocket and clenched her fists. She ran on the spot, rubbed her hands together,

and thought of the *Sea Bunny's* pilfered supplies, of Rin and Kiyoko and all her friends at the Academy and how everybody was counting on her.

“Nyraar,” she growled again, and faced the waterfall.

She crouched. Raised her tail.

She leapt.

She didn't even feel the water – the hat and coat did their work. And when she opened her eyes...

“Waaaah!”

The mountain's interior was massive. From the entry tunnel a great iron bridge rose over the currents, which poured through a fissure beneath her. It was so cool in here that wispy clouds and coloured mists drifted in the air, while clumps of moss, rich greens and blues, piled lush on ancient rocks. Atop the bridge a huge stone tablet read:

水簾洞

Water Curtain Cave

Mikoro fished Dari from her pocket. “What did I tell you?” said the little expeditionist.

“But, but...how did you know?”

Dari averted her gaze.

“Ooh! I know! I know!”

“Yes. You know. So no need to say it, let's concentrate and find out where – ”

“Dark, wet caves! Heehee! Dari knows all about dark, wet caves! You must be so experienced by now! Oooh, I bet you can immediately tell the difference between more than twenty degrees of darkness, and judge the speed and thickness of moving liquids just from a glance, and, and...”

“Nnnhh! C-Come on Mikoro, not now! Look – where's our food?”

The question's weight prevailed on Mikoro and she stomped to the top of the bridge for a better view.

“Waah! Look at all the monkeys!”

Hundreds, thousands – an entire hamlet of them, a veritable simian settlement, spread out before them on the far side of the cave. The interlopers could make out training grounds and obstacle courses, flower fields, groves of trees, and a clutch of nine stone storage booths shaped like pepper-pots where even now the

monkeys were unloading their loot from the *Sea Bunny*. But the dominant feature by far was a vast stone mansion, effectively a palace, with stone eaves, stone windows, stone balconies, stone gateways, stone skybridges, and so many storeys that it soared to within touching distance of the roof of the cave. The entire edifice bristled with monkeys, dancing on the cornices, hanging off the parapets, swinging through the windows, boxing in the yards and chasing each other all along the ramparts.

“Now let’s approach this carefully,” said Dari. “There must be thousands of them here, and monkeys can be frightening when they lose their – ”

“Ooooo!” Mikoro yelled, leeroying straight for the silos. “Ooohh you naughty monkeys, that’s our stuff! Give it back!”

The monkey-world fell motionless as every pair of eyes swivelled her way.

“Nyaah! How dare you just take all our food without asking? Ooh, you’re so rude, you make me mad! Give it back, right now!”

Then she wailed and held her ears as a stridency of simian screeching rent the air asunder. It smashed off the walls, reverberated to the heights and crevices and corners as the monkeys panicked, dropped whatever they were doing and fled for the mansion in terror. So fast did they pile behind its walls that within seconds the only sound was silence, save for a faint drone of monkey-murmurs as a thousand little red faces followed them from the windowsills.

“Wah. Am I...um, really that scary?”

“Maybe it’s the hat and coat,” Dari suggested.

“Aaww. I feel kinda sorry for them now. But look! All our stuff’s here! Wah. It’s a lot. How are we ever gonna get all of it back to the bunny?”

But they had no time to ponder this question, because new monkey-cries came issuing from the mansion and these were quite different from the cacophony of a moment ago. They were regimented, belligerent, broadcast straight from the throat and coordinated in a disciplined chant. Sure enough, the tips of banners and spears arose above the mansion’s battlements, rising and falling in time with the chants as they approached the gates...

“Uh-oh,” said Mikoro.

...and there emerged, a complete battalion of monkeys marching upright with bright bold colours on their armour and tassels fluttering from the shafts of their standards and spears. “Ooo! Ooo! Ooo ! Ooo!” they trilled as they moved as a unit to encircle the storage facilities, cutting off all the bridges and lining the stream-

banks from end to end. Before the bewildered captain could even react she'd been surrounded in a porcupine of spears.

“OOO!” roared a ferocious gibbon at the front, brandishing a no doubt loaded banana.

“Nyeeh!” the cat-girl squealed as she put up her hands.



“Nyeh, nyeh, nyeh...”

“OOO!”

“Gwaah!”

Captain Mikoro's mood was quite miserable. Any moment now, she was certain, the monkeys would charge in and poke her with their spears. That they were taking their time was no consolation. She could not so much as twitch her nose without setting off a ripple of shuffles and squawks, thus prompting another terrifying bellow from the officer-gibbon.

And yet, despite outnumbering the *Sea Bunny's* crew by hundreds to one-and-a-tiny, the simian soldiers were hanging back. Their muscles were tense, their fur stood on end, and their spears visibly shook in their little red hands.

Dari raised her head over the hat-brim just enough to slip her voice into Mikoro's ear. “Look at them Mikoro,” she whispered. “They're just as afraid as you are.”

Mikoro watched the scary gibbon lope across to a second, equally burly and commandingly-dressed gibbon. They were joined by two lumbering baboons whose faces could not have been better designed for causing small children to break down in tears, and together the four conferred in raucous and throaty fashion.

“Um! I think those ones are in charge,” Mikoro stammered under her breath. “N-Nyah! They must be arguing about who gets to jab us first! What do we do? Daaari!”

But the shrunken explorer's tribulations had not thus far included confrontations with hordes of fuzzy wild animals armed to the teeth and organised to military precision, so she was equally at a loss to answer this question.

“EEEEK!” one of the big baboons shrieked at Mikoro.

“Waah! What do you want?”

The monkey was thrusting an arm in her direction, jabbering insistent through such a set of chops as made you weep for the sight of a toothbrush.

“He’s asking you something,” said Dari.

“Nyaaaaah, I don’t understand!” Mikoro answered back. “And it doesn’t matter how many times you ask because I can’t speak monkey!”

This only riled the baboon to the peak of his temper, and he bared his teeth as far as his lips could curl, then leapt about, slapped his calloused buttocks, and finally reared to full height. He appeared right on the point of commanding his troop for a full frontal assault on the pink fluffy enemy when a voice spoke behind him: “What’s this about, what’s this about?”

Mikoro and Dari, the four monkey officers, and the assembled battalions all looked to where the voice had come from. A murmuring and scuffling spread through the ranks, then the furry forces parted like water as a tall macaque in splendid garments strode to the fore. This monkey had neither the swagger nor the musculature of the four military officials, indeed was slender of limb and light of tread. But with a yellow jacket, loose green trousers and rough leather boots this was the only fully-dressed monkey among them, while the tasselled belt, ceremonial staff, and headband overflowing with bird-of-paradise features left no doubt that this was an individual of some authority.

The first thing the newcomer monkey said was incredibly strange: “She doesn’t look like a cow. Stand down.” A loose wave of the hand.

The four officer-monkeys bowed their heads deferentially, then each faced a different part of the fuzzy throng and performed a crisp swing of the arm, accompanied by a bark, to which each platoon lowered its spears. But the angry baboon gave a grunt, as though to check the boss-monkey was absolutely sure.

“Definitely. There are no records of cows with the ears of a cat, and though it might look like a mouse riding on her head, if you look closely it is certainly not a mouse but a small human.”

Dari gasped just as the baboon gave a guttural pant. The latter had not noticed her – none of them had – but she was as surprised as they that this new monkey had not only spotted her straight away but also discerned what she was.

Now many things had impressed Mikoro in the last few seconds – the colourfulness of this monkey, its ability to speak her language, and its arrival’s apparently encouraging impact on her chances of getting a spear through her hat, among others – but all that fell aside as she fixated on one very specific point of perplexity.

“No, I don’t look like a cow!” she said. “Why would anybody think I’m a cow? I’m not a cow! I’m Captain Mikoro from the Chaldea Academy!”

This prompted bulging glares from the four military officials, but the boss-monkey extended an arm to forestall any rash reaction. It was just as well, for the furry mass glowered on at her in suspicion and vibrated in a low chatter, their spears clutched tight even if no longer pointed at her.

“I don’t get it! Why am I a cow?” Mikoro persisted.

“Rest assured you are not a cow,” said the colourful monkey. “Please pardon my officers’ mistake. I am afraid it is quite understandable in the current circumstances.”

“Wha – no it isn’t! I don’t look anything like a cow!”

“You do not, it is true. But no precaution is too great while the oceans tremble beneath the boots of Niu Mowang. My officers believed you might be some new trickery of hers, such as a minion disguised with cat ears or even an outside privateer employed to do her bidding.”

“Um. What’s a Niu Mowang?”

“OOO!” barked one of the officer-gibbons in accusation.

“Enough, enough,” the colourful monkey reproached him. “She honestly does not know. Are you new to these waters, Captain Mikoro? Because you have not truly arrived till you have run up against the oppressive might of Niu Mowang, the great and terrible Demon Cow Queen.”

“Nyaah! D-Demon...Cow Queen?” Mikoro’s eyes went wide. “Cow Queen, as in...?” – and she placed her hands by her head to indicate horns.

The monkey gave a shrewd smile. “You have a sincere face, and I can tell at once that you have no connection with her. But before we answer any more questions, you must tell us who you are and why you have invaded our home.”

“I told you! I’m Captain Mikoro from the Chaldea Academy, and this is my cute friend and travelling partner Dari! And we’re not invading! We’re here because...um, why are we here? Aaah, that’s right! You naughty monkeys stole all the food from our ship!”

The chief-monkey exchanged glances with the four officers. Then they bowed to Mikoro as one, and the boss stated: “On behalf of the Monkey Kingdom of the Water Curtain Cave, we earnestly apologise. I believe there has been a grave misunderstanding. If you would accompany me to the palace, I shall offer you a full explanation over tea and refreshments, after which we shall of course return all the provisions we took from you.”

Now all this time Dari had been surveying this well-dressed macaque from her perch. Its soft mannerisms and cultivated tone assured her that this was a trustworthy individual. But she also had a mental alarm system unique to her and here it was running into trouble. Was this monkey in contention for her specific concerns or not?

“Excuse me,” she called out, intent on making sure straight away. “Are you, by any chance – ”

“They/them,” answered the monkey at once.

That wasn’t particularly helpful for the purposes of Dari-calculus; from experience it kept the likelihood of reasonable concern at approximately fifty-fifty. But as for Mikoro the matter had gone completely over her head, for at the mention of tea and refreshments she’d yelled “Yaaay!” and set off after the monkeys with no further ado.



The monkeys led Mikoro to a stone pavilion in the palace grounds, where they laid out, if not a sumptuous banquet, then at least a respectable light buffet with every effort made to demonstrate the generosity of their realm.

The Monkey Minister and their guests sat on lush goose-feather cushions atop a carpet of fine-woven straw. Around them chunky giant beetles sat atop poles, their luminescent carapaces casting the diners in light bright as day. Monkey attendants brought out pots of jasmine tea, grown on the mountain’s inaccessible rear slopes and as clear and refreshing as any Mikoro had tasted. Then out come the snacks, served on immaculate banana-leaf platters: warm scented rice balls, crispy fried salmon which slipped from its skewers and cleansed the palate in creamy rapture, delectable *dandan* noodles which awakened the tongue with their sizzling spices, and so rich and sweet a variety of nuts, grapes, dates and pears that no doubts remained as to where the island’s produce had gone.

The Monkey Minister, as they’d gone on to introduce themselves, bowed their head low and pronounced: “Honourable captain, please forgive our stinginess.”

“Nmmf? How come?” said Mikoro, slurping up noodles as loud as she possibly could. “Everything is so tasty!”

“This is the measliest scrap of what the monkeys of the Water Curtain Cave should properly offer their guests,” said the Monkey Minister. “We number more than nine hundred immortal monkeys, and since time before time we have thrived

in the abundance of our mountain paradise. Yet for all that we can only offer this shameful appetiser.”

“Nyah? What do you mean, *immortal* monkeys?”

The Monkey Minister couldn't resist a prideful grin.

“Look around you,” they said. “Have you ever known a kingdom of monkeys so mighty and prosperous? The smooth function of our administrative structures is the envy of all the kingdoms, republics and empires of the human world, while our mountain provides such treasure and leisure that we want for absolutely nothing. All this is thanks to our king and founder Sun Wukong, the Great Sage Equalling Heaven, who first claimed this cave for monkey-kind, organised our bureaucracy, appointed civil and military officials – you've already met the Four Stalwart Officials: the baboons Marshal Ma and Marshal Liu, and the gibbons General Beng and General Ba – and forged steadfast alliances with the Demon Ox King, the Demon Salamander King, the Demon Roc King, the Camel King, the Macaque King and the Lion King.

“Not content with that, the Great Sage cudgelled his way into the underworld palace and erased from the Register of Death not only his name but the names of all the monkeys, thus liberating us from submission to the Three Worlds, the Five Elements and the Ever-Turning Wheel. From there he led us to such heights of glory that the heavenly armies, the underworld forces, the vagabond demons and the dragons who control the weather were no match for us even with all their might combined. It was only then, at the peak of his power, that our king was cast down by trickery and forced to leave on a long journey, but in spite of this it is entirely thanks to him that our days are long, our bellies always full and our lives lived out in limitless pleasure.”

“Waah. He sounds like quite something, this Great Sage. So where is he now? Did he make it back?”

“Alas, the Great Sage has not returned since he completed his journey and rose to the duties of his appointment as the Victorious Fighting Buddha. But what you see around you here is his legacy, and we have never forgotten it. Thus when I, as the highest-ranking civil official at the time, was appointed to perform the Great Sage's duties in his stead, we all agreed that rather than pretend to fair inheritance to his station, I would style myself only as the Monkey Minister, not the Monkey King, and govern from a desk beside his stone throne rather than put on the airs of sitting there myself.”

This was a great deal for Mikoro's fluffy ears to take in. But they had offered her scrumptious food, so she paid attention and listened politely even when she didn't understand. A further layer of challenging distraction came from the baby monkeys, who after hanging back wary at first now edged steadily closer, lacking the trained apprehension of their elders, and at last got accustomed to climbing on Mikoro, making grabs at her food, and bringing their eyes right up to Dari and prodding her on the head as they tried to work out what she could be.

"And you're neither a boy monkey nor a girl monkey?" Mikoro asked. "Heehee! I didn't know monkeys did that." She gurgled as she washed down a chunky slab of fish while ignoring a rebuke from memory-Kiyoko to not eat and talk at the same time.

The Monkey Minister shrugged. "All creatures with four limbs, five organs, six entrails and nine orifices understand that they are who they are. It is only humans who have been heard of to punish the real for not fitting the fake."

The mention of orifices produced a blush from Dari, though she concealed it with a strategic length of noodle.

Mikoro asked no more on this subject, because she had a quite natural intuition for what the Monkey Minister meant. This was on account of her upbringing in the warmth and love of the Ibaraki household, which accepted you for who you were and exposed you to all sorts who passed through the Academy's doors. It wasn't that she'd been specially taught to understand the Monkey Minister's words, so much as that she had never been taught *not* to understand them. As for Dari, she was merely enjoying the feel of her pulse settling as her well-honed sense for these things informed her that, although they/thems were generally a toss-up, this was indeed one of that small minority of encounters which was not cosmically required to do cringe-inducing things with her.

"There's one thing I really don't get," said Mikoro. "If you've got so much wonderful stuff to eat on this mountain, then why did you want the sailing food from our bunny-boat?"

"Something's changed, hasn't it," said Dari, pulling manageable strips off a piece of dried seaweed. "You're hoarding all the island's food in your cave, and – erm, forgive me – I've never seen any person, let alone an army, so jumpy at Mikoro as your soldiers were. I can't believe anyone would find Mikoro that terrifying, so they were actually frightened she might be involved in something else, am I right? Is this to do with that Demon Cow Queen you mentioned?"

The Monkey Minister's sharp eyes studied Dari. "For one so small you see far and probe deep," they said. "You are exactly right. Everything changed when the dread Demon Cow Queen came to power."

The return of that name turned the tea cold in Mikoro's throat. Once more she rolled the words down her tongue: "D-Demon...Cow...Queen...nyah! She sounds scary!"

"Scary? No no. Demons might be scary, and cows are certainly scary, and queens of course are scariest of all. But the Demon Cow Queen? Mere mention of her name sends the young monkeys burrowing into the palace's deepest, darkest basements, where they cower in puddles of their own sweat and refuse to come out for days on end. She only has to stand from her throne for the skies to darken, the rain to fall upwards in fright, the birds to plunge from the air, the fish to retreat into cracks in the seafloor, the tigers and dragons to cringe away, and the gods themselves to squabble at a loss as to what to do."

Mikoro might have screamed were her mouth not full of noodles. She gulped them down without chewing, emitted a series of high-pitched whines, then accomplished the question: "B-But who is she? Where did such a frightening monster come from?"

The Monkey Minister explained. "She is the daughter of the Demon Ox King, a fearsome leader in his own right in his day. Originally he was named sworn brother to our Great Sage and they got along splendid, always feasting and sparring and playing games and debating religion and politics together. But the relationship soured, and the friends grew into fearsome rivals. Some of the Great Sage's toughest battles were fought with him, or with his consort, a formidable *rakshasi* called Princess Iron Fan who was every bit his peer in strength and cunning.

"Now by the time I took office the Ox King was already very elderly. He had grown tired of making trouble for us, and though a stubborn bull more often than not, I found him straightforward enough to deal with. But then he died, passing the mantle to his daughter, and she is another matter entirely. The Demon Cow Queen has made it her goal to become the strongest being on these seas. She harbours a grudge against us for our Great Sage's conduct toward her old bull, and she regularly terrorises us for tribute – either in the form of food she likes, that being beef bowl and rice-wine, or the food she doesn't, so she can trade it for beef bowl and rice-wine. She has a massive body, rules from a mighty fortress whose walls are too high to scale and too sturdy to break, and sails the seas in a

terrible dreadnought whose cannons could reduce our mountain to rubble in an instant. Yet she sees herself as a sovereign, considers mere brutish violence beneath her, and prefers to display her power in a more indulgent manner. She captures our smallest and meekest monkeys, handles them, teases them, and finally swallows them whole, imprisoning them in her enormous stomach till we submit to handing over whatever she wants.”

“Nyaah! Wh-What a bully!” said the aghast Mikoro. “But, but, you have such a well-trained army! Can’t you fight her off?”

“We are no match,” said the Monkey Minister. “Our army protects us from casual troublemakers, but our campaigning days are over, and we drill mainly to keep alive the martial traditions instilled by the Great Sage rather than for any serious military purpose.” Having said this the Minister paused and shut their eyes, as though anticipating – correctly – the nasal sneer this statement produced from one of the baboon marshals. They waited it out before continuing: “Besides, the Demon Cow Queen is something else. Her stomps shake the earth to topple us where we stand, while at the mere sight of her enormous fist all our nerves desert us. On top of that we have no navy, and even if we did we would need at least one hundred aircraft carriers to make so much as a dent in that armoured juggernaut of hers.”

“Nyaah. So that’s why you’ve brought all the island’s food into your cave.”

“This is correct. We could not possibly hand over the volume of tribute she demands, so have thus far succeeded in convincing her we have less than she thinks. Even so the pressure on our stores has been intense, which is why we must scavenge everything we can get. The arrival of your well-stocked vessel, as well as our uncertainty as to whether she sent you here to spy on us, made your supplies an opportune target. But I realise we were in error, and ask again if you would possibly forgive us.”

As Dari listened to this conversation, a familiar apprehension tingled through her skin. It spread across her chest and back, tickled on her face, and vibrated to the tips of her fingers and toes. She found herself hoping against all hope that they wouldn’t have to meet this Demon Cow Queen – even as something deep within her, perhaps in her core, whispered to her in a reassuring tone: Oh, you’ll meet. You’ll so meet.

Besides, you know you’re curious.

She squeaked. Then, when the Monkey Minister looked to her, she disguised her embarrassment with the question: “S-Surely no-one could be *that* strong?”

“There is no-one stronger,” they replied. “The only person with any sway at all over her is the ruler of Comet Island.”

“Hey! That’s where we’re going!” said Mikoro. “The ruler is a friend of my mother; we’re travelling to bring the bunny-boat to her! What if we asked her to do something about the Cow Queen?”

“I appreciate your concern for us, but this is impossible,” said the Monkey Minister. “The great hegemon has blockaded the way to Comet Island with a wall of magical fire. To pass this she demands a toll so high that none can afford to pay it. We have already attempted nine times to negotiate a way through, but to no avail. Therefore we cannot reach Comet Island to make a complaint, and furthermore, because we have known nothing but luxurious plenty since the Great Sage walked among us, the burden of the Cow Queen’s tribute keeps us hungry, impatient, squabbling, and unable to organise any solution.”

Mikoro and Dari looked to each other, either face reflecting the other’s worry. “So that Issun-bug was right!” said Mikoro. “But but, that’s a disaster! How are we supposed to get to Comet Island if this huge scary cow-demon is blocking the way? Can’t we just, um, go around the fire or something?”

“We have heard from passing traders that the wall extends thousands and thousands of *li* in either direction. Only the Cow Queen possesses the means to lower it. Your best chance would probably be – ”

But the Monkey Minister never got the chance to complete this advice, for at that very moment a resounding blast shook the walls of the cavern so hard that powder fell in columns from the roof, the attendants slipped and sent their trays and teapots crashing to the floor, and hundreds and hundreds of monkeys shrieked and wailed and scattered in squawking terror.

“She’s here, she’s here!” panicked the Monkey Minister, jumping to their feet. “And now comes the part I dread most. I must go forth and represent the monkeys of the Water Curtain Cave and offer as much tribute as I dare relinquish. If the Cow Queen is satisfied, I will come away with merely the disgrace of sacrificing our kingdom’s bounty to an invading bully. But if she is not, she will demand I bring forth my own subjects, the subjects of the Great Sage Equalling Heaven Sun Wukong, that she may choose a hostage for humiliation.”

At first Mikoro was minded to dive into the palace and take cover with the monkeys. But then she looked down at her hands, saw the deep blue drapes of her sea-coat sleeves, and felt a rush of resolve through her limbs, vigorous and empowering.

“I’m Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny*,” she declared, “and I’m here representing the Chaldea Academy on a mission to Comet Island. I have the same right as everybody else to sail wherever I want, and on top of that I don’t like bullies! I’m gonna come with you to meet this so-called Demon Queen and give her a piece of my mind!”

There was nothing the Monkey Minister could say to this, so they simply spread their arms and bowed in gracious acknowledgement. Dari for her part, climbing back into the hat, found herself in an internal tug-of-war. One side of her had been paying attention to Mikoro since the start of this adventure and felt full of admiration for the growth of her courage and strength of will. But the other, the part most tightly squeezed and splashed throughout her own more convoluted itinerary, was giving her cause to mutter: “I have a bad feeling about this Cow Queen, Dari. A real bad feeling. Cow Queen. Cow Queen. Oh no.”

猴

Mikoro followed the Monkey Minister out of the Water Curtain Cave – and squealed.

“Waaaah! Wh-What a huge ship...”

It was a monstrosity! Toting four sets of dark red sails *and* some snarling engine that blasted thick black smog from its rear, the vessel so dominated the seascape that the legendary Mountain of Flowers and Fruit was reduced to an ornamental rock in its shadow. It was a wonder the ludicrous thing even floated, for everything not painted red or black was decked in solid gold plating from masts to rails, quarterdeck to bowsprit. The figurehead alone, in the shape of a snorting bull with wings outstretched, must have been worth more than the annual output of a respectable middle power, while its armaments – three rows of cannon below, three nests of 12-inch artillery above – would have given any world-class navy a run for its money.

Along the hull, huge gold letters punched from a plaque:

LAMASSU

Mikoro had never seen a ship so vast. It reminded her of those pictures in history books of the ships which the Maratha Empire had sailed round the world to overwhelm the English tribes, but even those would have sped off home at the sight of this leviathan.

Mikoro and the Monkey Minister hurried down the mountain trail, coming out on the clifftop meadow where she and Dari had picnicked. There she looked up and found herself pressed beneath an imperious gaze. A hulking figure stood atop the forecastle, legs apart, arms crossed in expectation, and goodness she was huge! Four or five Mikoros tall (and at least two wide in places, the cat-girl thought), the colossal creature was armoured up as heavily as her ship, with an enormous belt, enormous breastplate, enormous greaves, enormous gauntlets – enormous everything in fact, from enormous boots to enormous helmet with its enormous pair of buffalo horns. If she stood unarmed, it was simply because no weapon in the world would be enormous enough to not look ridiculous in her hands, for any sword would be a toothpick, any hammer a doorknob, any lance a chopstick, any axe a nail-clipper. So redoubtable was this figure that her mere presence implied everyone else was an ant crawling about in her shadow.

“Nuuuuuuuuoooo!” the behemoth boomed, discharging jets of steam through her helmet’s nostril-slots. “I, the mighty Demon Cow Queen, sovereign of land, sea and sky, have returned to claim what is rightfully mine! Tremble, you monkey rascals! Tremble!”

She lowed once more, long and deep as though from the very bowels of the earth, and the mountain quaked, and the trees lost their leaves, and all the deer and rabbits and foxes dashed for cover.

The Monkey Minister fell to one knee and lowered their head in submission. But before they could even open their mouth, Mikoro shouted past them: “You’re a bully!”

All life in water, earth and air froze still.

The Demon Cow Queen bellowed, “Oho! Who said that?” and placed a gauntleted hand over her helmet for a better look.

“I did! I said you’re a bully!” Mikoro shouted again. “Who are you to come snorting and shouting into the monkeys’ home to demand their stuff? You think it’s okay just because you’re a huge...a huge...nyah – a huge *molguuga*? Well I’m Captain Mikoro, and I’m not afraid of you!”

She meant it. For rumours and descriptions were one thing, but now that Mikoro set eyes on the actual Demon Cow Queen, the same thing happened as

always did when she felt someone was behaving meanly, no matter how big or strong they might be. After all, she'd shrunk herself plenty of times to play on or in the bodies of her friends and adopted family. Ibaraki Mikoro was not afraid of giants.

Unfortunately everyone else was. The Monkey Minister was cowering, as were the hundreds of monkeys watching from the crevices and crags, and the faces of the Four Stalwart Officials contorted in fury, convinced that they and their armies would bear the crushing consequences of Mikoro's provocations. As for Dari, she was burrowing as deep into the hat-fold as she could squirrel herself for a quite different reason. She needed no sight of what flesh lay beneath that armoured glacier. The deep, husky rumble of the Cow Queen's voice alone, the very acoustic manifestation of that concept known in the scholarly jargon of the day as *thicc*, was electrifying the little explorer's nerves, flushing all her body heat to her cheeks, smashing her impending-squish alarm at its maximum volume, and shaking her up in palpitations of thrilling, terrifying arousal.

The Cow Queen thundered: "Oho! What is this adorable kitten you monkeys have found? A special gift this time? Come here, you kitten! I shall permit you to run about my ship and amuse my two-thousand-minotaur crew!"

"Nyraar, you'd better take me seriously!" Mikoro growled. "Or, or – I'll eat you!"

Thousands of eyes, simian and bovine alike, contracted in horror.

The Cow Queen was unreadable behind that helmet, and for a few bloodcurdling seconds everyone dreaded she might unload her cannons on the island and let that be that. But then her armour creaked. She was rocking, shaking – then all of a sudden roaring with laughter.

"You? You eat – what? Ohoho! Are you sure you have not got your understanding of the world back to front, little kitten? Why don't you come up here so we can feed you some cat food instead?"

At the snorting chorus of minotaur-laughter Mikoro seethed in indignation. She stamped her foot, pointed straight up at the offending juggernaut-queen and shouted, "Oohh, that does it! Well don't say I didn't warn you! You can go in my tummy and think about what you did!"

She stretched out her fingers. A pale blue glow spread from their tips...

...and fizzed out.

"Nyaah?! Wha...wha..."

The Demon Cow Queen hollered so hard that her armour clanked like a car factory.

“Nrrrrm, you foolish monkeys!” she chuckled. “I see your game! You knew you were too weak to resist me, so you called on this foreign kitten-sorceress to ambush me with her magic! Hoho, how magnificent! Did you seriously forget? I am the Demon Cow Queen, immortal successor to my father the Demon Ox King and heir to his powers, transformations and limitless might! How could you expect such a pitiful spell to pass through my thrice-forged armour, let alone my impenetrable hide?”

“Da-Da-Dari...” Mikoro whimpered, suddenly feeling a whole lot smaller. “The shrinking d-doesn’t work on her...”

“Nnnnnn!” Dari whimpered back. “Shhh! D-Don’t! Don’t give away that I’m here!”

“Enough games!” boomed the Cow Queen. “I shall collect the tribute to the total stipulated by my messenger on her last visit, which amounts to...hrrrrm.” She raised a huge armoured hand and appeared to calculate, counting off iron fingers thick as chimneys. Then she gave up and bellowed, “Come here accountant!”

A silk-clad minotaur-woman, tall and brawny in absolute terms but about as imposing as a puppy beside the mighty Cow Queen, handed her an abacus.

“Ah yes! A tribute to the sum of *nine hundred and ninety-nine* beef bowls – or the equivalent, in kind.” She considered a further moment. “Actually make that nine thousand, since you rascals make me so hungry!”

To this the Monkey Minister fell on both knees, beat their head on the grass and implored profusely: “Forgive us, oh mighty queen. We offer every homage to your dominion over all the peoples and beasts of the world, but even the total produce of the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit could not possibly amount to – ”

“Pah!” the Cow Queen roared. “First you spring some joke of a trap, then you think to fob me off with excuses? I grow tired of your impudence! Will you monkeys never learn? Well then, how about another round of punishment to remind you of your place? Bring me my Plantain Fan!”

Mikoro gulped. “Uh-oh.”

As the Monkey Minister pleaded and all the watching monkeys squawked and scampered for cover, a colossal fan in the shape of a plantain leaf was borne forth on the shoulders of six minotaurs, three on each side, each straining and struggling as though it weighed the same as a small aircraft. The Cow Queen whisked it up in one hand as if it were a feather, and announced: “Mighty Plantain Fan, sacred treasure bequeathed by my stepmother! With thee I harness the winds to bring me the shyest, meekest creature on this island!”

She wafted the gargantuan fan – once, twice – and immediately it was as though a typhoon came blustering down on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. Monkeys shrieked and wrapped their limbs round branches, table-legs, standard-poles, lamp posts, anything they could reach as the gales swept their legs kicking into the air, whooshing in and out of windows, round pinnacles, under the bridges and across the plateaus and through every tunnel and crevice on the island. The Monkey Minister flattened themselves and dug their claws into the dirt, while Mikoro clasped her coat round herself with one arm and fastened her hat to her head with the other. And then, just when the wind appeared to have completed its search of the island without success, it found what it was looking for in the final crevice of all: not the first fold of Mikoro’s hat, nor the second, but the third, where to an “Eeeeeee!” it scooped tiny Dari from her hiding place and swept her high in the air.

The squall blew clear, Mikoro raised her head, and there was Dari, squirming between a colossal iron thumb and forefinger.

“Hoho! What is this?” The Cow Queen gave a mighty guffaw. “More surprises from the mischievous rabble? I expected to catch a monkey, so what is this tiny little mouse you’ve been hiding?”

“Nyaah! Let her go right now!”

Mikoro and the Monkey Minister watched helpless as the giant brought Dari right up to her helmet’s eye-slot, through which the tiny explorer caught a glimpse of a wine-red iris, bulging and contracting in hungry curiosity. She squealed and stammered and kicked in the air, but hers was not at all a promising position.

Then came a *chink!-chink!-chink!* of retracting metal as a slot opened up in the base of the helmet. Beneath its nose-ring, beneath its snarling-iron moustache, something infinitely more alarming appeared: a huge pair of lips on an even huger chin, smooth, creamy-brown as the hide of a Guernsey cow and every inch as robust.

“Nnnaaah...” Dari panted, palms pushing out, eyes stretched in dismay, as a colossal tongue rolled across those lips like a sloshing, lumbering cross between an amphibious landing craft and a monstrous sea cucumber. Those gigantic armoured digits were cold on her skin, but she didn’t even notice for the heat of her fluster as she squirmed and squirmed as only she knew how.

“Where did you get this?” rumbled the Cow Queen, turning over her prize with fascination. “On my ancestors’ names, I have never seen such a delicious-looking

mouse. *Nuuuuuu!*” Beefy breath buffeted the tiny explorer, ratcheting her squeaks to the highest possible pitch as the sweat broke out on her limbs. “Hoho! See how she wriggles and twists in my sovereign grasp! Nrrrrmm, you mischievous mouse, I must know how you taste!”

Her buff brown lips smashed together, the plumpest of continental plates – and then they heaved wide, wide as the mouth of the earth, as with the obligatory yelp Dari was popped into that dripping maw like a pill. The Cow Queen’s mouth clamped shut – massively, heftily, casting a shockwave through all the island’s grottos and fissures – and the monkeys looked on appalled as she slobbered and slurped and sucked her catch like a tiny suck-sweet, that submarine-muscle of a tongue shoving and wrapping and swilling her round and round, its curtains of gloopy saliva washing and wrapping her body till its sheer viscous weight squashed her immobile, then finally, unstoppably, carried her off to the back of that cavernous throat...

“Nyaah!” protested Mikoro. “Don’t you dare – ”

The eternal instant, the word of conclusion, the stamp on the edict, the gavel on the block.

GLUMPH!

The Cow Queen’s lips smacked sated. She relaxed her stance, savouring the slip of that tiny Dari-shaped mass deeper and deeper into her deep dark depths. Then she exhaled, with a great big slap of her armoured belly.

“Nrrrrrh, what a succulent, scrumptious mouse! I have never known a snack whose every squirm so bursts with flavour! Even now as she wriggles down – *nuuuuuuu!* – every minuscule motion smears the walls of my gullet with savoury sweetness!” And in a practiced routine, her two-thousand-minotaur crew hailed their commander’s verdict with boisterous applause.

Mikoro was not so elated. “Aaahh, Dari isn’t a mouse!” she yelled. “She’s my friend! Bring her up right now!”

“Hoho! You know the rules,” said the Cow Queen. “Your morsel’s mine now, and she’ll roll around in my stomach till your foolish monkey associates submit the proper tribute. But!” She raised a munificent finger. “Never let it be said that the Demon Cow Queen is not a generous ruler. This mouse you have found will sate my tastebuds for many months. Since you have offered up such a delicious surprise, I am content to reduce the necessary payment to – hrrm hrrm, let me see...” She consulted her accountant-minotaur again, before deciding: “...nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-eight beef bowls. Yes, that is fair.”

“Oh Great Sage, wherever you have gone, save us, save us!” howled the Monkey Minister. “How are we ever to scrape together such an extortionate tribute?”

“Until you do,” announced the Cow Queen, “I shall relish this little treat. Nrrrrrrhh, yes! I shall bounce and shake her about in my paunch, press her deep in the folds of my honeycomb-chamber, and every hour I shall squeeze her up to my mouth to slurp and savour her squirms to my heart’s content. Nuuuuuo!”

It was a decree, not a question, but Mikoro answered anyway: “Aaahh, *nuuuu* yourself you great big beef-molguuga! I’ve had enough of this! If you don’t give Dari back then I’m gonna go in there and get her myself!”

“Oho! The kitten volunteers herself on a platter? Better and better! After a treat like that you’ll be just the bundle of candyfloss I need!”

But Mikoro ignored this insult; already she had leapt from the cliff to the Cow Queen’s dreadnought, where she caught hold of an iron loop and proceeded to clamber up the hull, muttering “I’ll show you, I’ll show you,” much to the alarm of the Monkey Minister and the amazement of the minotaur crew eyeballing her through the gunports.

At last she raised her hat and ears over the prow, and right there was the plated boot of the Demon Cow Queen, who towered so fearsomely high that even if Mikoro craned her neck she could barely take her in up to the horns.

“Come here then, candy-kitten,” laughed the Cow Queen, reaching down to grasp her; but at this Mikoro put on an annoyed face and reached out with her own much smaller hand. It glowed momentarily with a ring of blue light, which faded just as fast as the first time.

The Cow Queen burst out laughing. “*Nuuuuu!* That again? Didn’t I tell you your shabby spells can’t touch me?”

And she reached on down – but Mikoro, having clambered upon the deck, pushed off the railings into a leap just as those fingers shut, then came down atop the Cow Queen’s fist and ran up her arm. For now it was she, Mikoro in her coat and hat, who was shrinking smaller and smaller.

“Nrrrrm? What are you up to, you silly kitten?” rumbled the Cow Queen, genuinely puzzled now.

“I told you I’m gonna show you!” snapped Mikoro, running almost on all fours now as her size receded by the second. “I promised Dari I’d look after her, so no-one gets to eat her without asking me first!”

In that square of brown skin the Cow Queen’s lips were parted in surprise. She had evidently not expected this turn of events, and her bafflement gave Mikoro all

the time she needed. As tiny at last as the young woman tumbling around in that mighty belly, the fluffy cat-girl scabbled up the woman-mountain's shoulderpad – of course it would be the shape of a bull's head, the nose-ring and horns made the climb so easy – then in a single leap she soared into the gaping maw, swam up that swimming-pool-sized tongue, kicked off its meat, and clung to the Cow Queen's hot-flesh-balloon of a uvula as she waited for an opening. No-one else could have pulled off such an operation so smoothly but Mikoro was a daughter of the Ibarakis, she knew exactly what she was doing, and with not so much as a yelp, nor a wince, nor a drop of sweat, she picked her moment, dived head over heels, and plunged through a gap in the thuds of the sovereign throat. Her invasion of the belly of the beast was underway.



Boom-BOOM! Boom-BOOM! Boom-BOOM! Boom-BOOM!

The Cow Queen's heart hammered the walls of her oesophageal passage, pulping the very air within as her body impressed its authority on its naughty interloper. Such was the manner in which, only minutes earlier, the same tube had seized hold of tiny Dari, wrapping her in its full muscular immensity and massaging her wriggling and squeaking all the way down. But Mikoro was having none of it, she was far too at home in these conditions to be anything other than the boss of her own incursion, and she rode the peristaltic currents like a shamanic surfer bending the waves to her fancy.

She slid her hands over the tough, smooth tissue as she went, giggling at the sensation of mucus bunching up between her fingers. "Waaah, so chunky and squidgy!" she remarked, her irritation replaced by the excitement always brought on by a new gastric adventure. "I don't think I've ever felt one so tough and fat and strong! Ooohh, Dari's so lucky! She must have loved getting rubbed and squeezed down this wonderful muscle-pipe!"

All around her the Cow Queen's meat-realms thundered and rumbled, shifted and gurgled; Mikoro could scarcely hear her own voice for the organic din, and the deeper she delved, the denser that brawny scent compacted in her mouth and nostrils till it felt like she was breathing not so much air as, well, the concentrated gaseous form of beef. But all that was just icing on the cake.

Her ears caught the splurt of a sphincter below and she curled up into a rolling fluff-ball, spinning once, twice, three times before landing on her feet on a surface which became in the next instant a slope, then a floor again, then a wall...

“Wah? Yaaay! It’s all wobbly and rumbly! Nyaah, this is so much fun!”

She flung herself onto her back and whooped and cheered as she allowed this juddering stomach to trampoline her about in the darkness. So enjoyable was all this bouncing and flipping that she quite forgot why she’d come down here in the first place, at least till the peculiar conditions gnawed on her curiosity.

“Um. Why is it shaking this much anyway? And why does it feel so huge? Even if she’s that big, that can’t explain...”

The beefy scent clogged thick in her nostrils. She sniffed.

“Mmm! It smells like that *gyūdon* place Kiyoko takes me to when Mother’s too busy to cook! Um. How come? Shouldn’t it smell more – nyah – digesty?”

Intent now on leaving no gastrointestinal mysteries unsolved, Mikoro found her feet on a more stable ridge of tissues and carefully edged her mucus-soaked hand into her coat pocket. Her fingertips found the *Sea Bunny*’s flashlight; she pinched it out and thumbed it on.

“Waaaah! It’s, it’s – *huuuge!* Gwagwagwah, I’ve never seen a tummy like this!”

Folds and creases, folds and creases – truly the scale of this structure was vast! There was no end to them, these ridges thick as train-tunnels, these furrows deep as trenches, pulsating into the distance no matter where she turned the torchlight. She saw that in places the ridges grew out into pillars of flesh which stretched breathtakingly from wall to wall, or floor to ceiling (all such terms were provisional in here); their awesome impression was that this was no mere stomach but a temple of temples to all things grand and gastric. The entire organ-edifice wobbled and quavered and rumbled and drummed, no part of it ever kept still, and though you and most people you know might well have found such a sight perturbing, to Mikoro it was as though all the funfairs and amusement parks in the world had been cobbled together right here, all around her, and she rejoiced till her eyes went wet with excitement and her legs shook quite independently of the stomach’s churns.

Then her light caught the soar of some dark shape. She swerved the beam to chase it.

“Agaga! Oooohh! That’s – so – amazing!”

What had she found now but a stupendous mountain of rice and shredded beef, piled up against the far end of this warehouse-stomach where it shook and danced

in time with the shuddering walls? The motions constantly vibrated loose its upper layers, flinging grains of rice and strips of meat through the gastric atmosphere. But most astonishing of all was that most of this food looked nearly as pristine as when it came served on trays in Mikoro's beloved eatery, as though the Cow Queen's gut was not even bothering to digest it.

The flabbergasted cat-girl went bouncing across to it, sniffing and squinting hard as she went. But of the acidic drip-drip-drip so usual to these environments there was no sign; nothing but the faintest tinge, which at any rate was drowned out both by the aroma of spiced beef and a whiff of something microbial. Then her torchlight glinted off some transparent pools, settled in pits round the base of that food-mountain. She thought then that she'd solved the mystery, only to find on closer inspection that they carried not the familiar tang of gastric fluids at all but the intoxicating punch of rice-wine.

Now Mikoro's own salivary glands grew excited and her lips began to dribble. She knew she shouldn't but she just couldn't help herself. This heap of magnified delicacies, apparently untouched in spite of their situation...

And then, amidst the symphony of big bovine body-sounds, her ears discerned something else:

"Mmmmph! Mmmmbgl...!"

"Gwah!" Mikoro remembered now. She yelled out: "Dari! I – I forgot you're here too! Nyah, nyah...Dari? Daaaarii? Can you hear me?"

The muffled squeaks soared in pitch, then were suddenly smothered as though packed away by a seismic shift in flesh.

"Ooh. Are you under the rice?"

Mikoro hoped she was. It would give her an excuse. But Rin had brought her daughter up to be honest, and grudging as the feeling was, she had to admit: the squeals had come from the other direction.

She reminded herself that ravenous as the beef-rice mountain had made her, she was also one of Dari's best friends.

Friends before food.

Even when they were the same thing. They were friends first, food second.

Timing her leaps against the roil, Mikoro sprang off in search of the Cow Queen's stomach-captive. "Daarii? Where are you?" she called out.

After some experimentation she found it was easiest to move along the wall, because it had lumpy papillary projections she could grasp to (or, because she was Mikoro, squeeze gigglingly in both hands for the fun of it). She got into a rhythm

of calling out Dari's name, twitching her ears to determine by the volume of the reply if she'd got hotter or colder, and adjusting her progress in accordance.

"Heehee! Come out Dari! I know you're in here somewhere!"

At last her search brought her right up to one of those giant flesh-pillars. A narrow crevice separated it from the stomach wall on one side, and she found she could widen it slightly, for the pillar's edge was wobbly and pulled back like a fold.

She peered in.

"Dari? Are you in there?"

"Mmmpphh! Mmmfff!"

"Ooooh! You are!"

It was dark, so she stuck the torch through the gap and shone it around. As far as she could tell it was a separate chamber, far smaller than the temple-like space she'd explored so far.

"MMMPHH!"

"Heehee! One sec. I think I can squeeze through."

Mikoro eased herself through the fold and suddenly found it a lot easier to steady herself. The chamber juddered no less than the grand one, but its floor was full of deeper pits that anchored her legs up to the knee. The flashlight soon revealed why. Rather than ridges and furrows this surface was filled with honeycomb-shaped hollows, some larger, some smaller, their walls quivering and contracting as they pleased.

"Ooohhh, these look like – *nyah!*"

Mikoro clenched her eyelids. The torchlight was breaking out in flashes, dazzling her, and as she squinted through it and realised why she squeaked in disbelief. Golden goblets, golden necklaces, golden rings and brooches inlaid with precious stones the size of her head – some of these honeycomb-pits were stacked with treasure!

"Gwaah...gwaah...seriously? She keeps her treasure in her tummy?"

"MMPPH! MMBGFF!"

"Agwah! D-Dari!"

She was right on top of the Dari-sounds now and swung her torch-beam up, across, further across – and there it caught another glint. An anklet.

"Yaaaay! Dari!"

"Mmff! Mmkhrrh! Gn hh mn nnt!"

Dari's legs were kicking in the air. She'd got herself stuffed down to the waist in one of the honeycomb-pits, whose crumply enclosure seemed to be taking great

enjoyment in rubbing, squeezing and jiggling its captive for all it was worth. Its walls were shaking, twisting, spinning, sliding back and forth in opposite directions...

“Mmmph! Mmfff...mmff...”

Marvelling at how even so unthinkably complex a stomach as this got on so well with Dari, Mikoro plodded across and wrapped her arms round her legs. This was difficult, for Dari’s skin was slippery with mucus, and furthermore the more Mikoro tugged the more the honeycomb-pit tightened, so unwilling to give up its prize, whose squirms and kicks duly intensified under the pressure. But at last Dari’s torso began to slip free – then with a POP! she came loose, and they were both sent flying to land squishingly in the opposite wall.

“Yaaay! It’s Dari!” Mikoro cheered, and wasted no time wrapping her gasping, panting friend in a now same-sized hug.

“Heehee! How did you get in there? Did you roll in by accident? Or...oohh. Maybe it put you there on purpose. Aaww, well it’s okay now! And look, I made myself the same size as you so I could come in to get you! Gugugugu! Dari likes same-size hugs too, doesn’t she?”

“Nnnhh...! M-Mikoro! Too...t-tight...” Dari protested, for though she did indeed like same-size hugs, they were not necessarily her priority right at that moment.

“Aaww! Sorry Dari! You must have got so much tummy-cuddling already. Isn’t it amazing in here? I never even imagined such an incredible tummy existed!”

Dari splayed herself across Mikoro’s lap, weighed down by an extra suit of mucus. Her clothes and skin were soaked in fluids and her hair was an absolute shambles. “Y-Yeah...inc-credible...” she gasped, but her sarcasm passed Mikoro by and the cat-girl only giggled harder.

Then Mikoro noticed something else she’d missed: a tall, thick sphincter on the other side of the honeycomb-chamber. For such a huge structure it lay remarkably still, its slit sealed shut by its sleeping ring of muscle. None of its surrounding pits held treasure.

“Hey, what’s that?” Mikoro asked, but Dari was too shaken up to reply. So instead she shuffled her ears; concentrated...

“Ooh. It sounds gurgly. Is there even more stomach in there? How many stomachs does this Beef Queen even have?”

The honeycomb wall was scrunching, puckering. It knew its plaything was loose in here somewhere.

“Ooh, we’d better get out before it tries to squish you again,” said Mikoro. She stood up, half-supporting, half-carrying her friend – “This way! We can slip back through here!” – and eased her through the fold back to the main chamber. That turned out to have been a mistake, for Dari lacked Mikoro’s feline instinct for balance and was immediately at the mercy of those mighty convulsions. She yelped as she lost her footing, fell upon that bed of flesh, and was immediately bounced and rolled away.

“Aaww,” said Mikoro admiringly. “I bet child Dari really liked bouncy castles!”

At this point the scent of fresh, delicious beef and rice came wafting into her nostrils again. “Mmm, and why shouldn’t I?” she told herself, scrambling back towards the tantalising food-mountain. “I bet the naughty Beef Queen took all this off other people anyway, so it isn’t really hers, and if she isn’t going to digest it, well...Nyahah! Okay you big bully! Let’s see how you like this!”

And with a mewl of sheer delight she plunged headfirst into the Cow Queen’s stockpile, which shook, then shifted, then started to cave in altogether as it produced a new sound effect:

“Aah-AAMF...aamff...ammf...ahmm...amff...”

Now all this time the Cow Queen’s voice had come reverberating through this world of endless flesh, but its words had generally not registered between the blasts, squishes and gurgles of the organic orchestra and the fact that Mikoro simply wasn’t that interested in what she had to say. But as the hungry cat-girl made inroads into this food pile, that booming speech grew insistent. “What are you doing in there, you impertinent fluff-kitten?” it demanded. “Do you think I can’t feel you scoffing your way through my rightfully-exacted beef-bowl tribute? Nuuuuu!”

Mikoro’s hatted head and shoulders popped through the slope of rice. “It’s mine now!” she shouted at the top of her voice. “And I’m gonna eat it *all* unless you stop making trouble for the monkeys!”

“Making trouble?” The gastric caverns shook harder than ever. “I am the queen of all the things that fly in the air and crawl on the earth and swim in the sea! Their tribute is entirely the due of my awe-inspiring station!”

“Well in that case,” answered Mikoro, “AAHMFF! Aahmf...mnyamff...”

“Ohoho! Go on then, you insolent fluff-kitten. You couldn’t possibly make more than a dent in it. Soon you’ll be full, and you and your little mouse friend will still be my guests until the monkeys pay up.”

“Grawrr!”

She knew the Cow Queen was right. For all the vigour of her appetite she was never going to overcome this giant pile of takings. Its strips of beef were practically large enough for her to wear; each grain of rice might as well have been a pillow.

She crawled from the food pile and wondered what to do. Dari's squeaks echoed about in the darkness. She contemplated finding her again and simply leaving the way they'd come. That would be no trouble, only in that case they'd all be back at square one, and there'd be nothing to stop the Cow Queen swallowing some monkey or levelling the island with cannon-fire.

She needed leverage.

But what could she do? Punching and kicking the walls would do no good. That would be like trying to kick a castle down.

Then she grinned. Her mischief-engine, already at full throttle, provided the answer.

"Wait here Dari! I've got an idea!"

"Eeep! M-Mikoro! Nnnah...*gwaah!*" the answer zigzagged from the darkness.

Mikoro chewed on her lower lip, raised the flashlight, and felt her way back to the honeycombed chamber. She slipped through the flesh-fold and this time made straight for the sphincter she'd spotted earlier. She pressed her ear right up to the slit. Sure enough, gurgles rumbled deep within, and her sniffs snagged on the sour seep of acid.

She poked the ring of muscle.

"Ooh, it's tough. But just squishy enough. I should be able to..."

Once more she grinned.

"Okay then you big bully!" she shouted as loud as she could. "If you don't leave the monkeys alone, I'm gonna do this!"

She trudged across the chamber, felt around in the honeycomb-pits, and drew out the heaviest, shiniest gold goblet she could get her hands on. Its weight was immense, she could barely lift the thing, but with a huff and a puff she succeeded in dragging it over to the orifice. With another deep breath she hauled it up against the slit. There was no way to press it open, the ring of muscle was too formidable for that, but it was just soft enough that if Mikoro applied her shoulder she could squeeze the precious object through.

"You foolish moggy," boomed the voice of the Cow Queen, "what are you up to now?"

The goblet lodged in place, so Mikoro plunged her arms in up to the elbows and heaved. She felt the trinket give an inch. She pushed again; another inch. Then another – and then it suddenly shifted out of reach and, after a few exciting seconds, reported a satisfying SPLASH! from deep beneath.

“Nuuuuuu! That’s, that’s – No! You idiot!”

“Nyahah! If I was an idiot I’d store my valuables in my tummy!”

Thrilled at the promising results of her experiment, Mikoro scooped out an armful of gold-chain necklaces and shoved them merrily into the sphincter, pressing and jiggling them one by one into the Cow Queen’s third stomach.

“Stop that! Stop that at once!” the very atmosphere seemed to low. “Haven’t you any idea how hard I had to work to appropriate those?”

SPLASH! SPLASH!

“Nuuuuuu! Stop! Not the sceptre too! I had to keep those princes in there for days to requisition that one!”

“Okay, I’ll stop!” declared Mikoro. “If you promise to stop demanding tribute from the monkeys!”

“I – I can’t do that! I’m the Demon Cow Queen! It’s my duty to chastise these rascals!”

“Nyah? Well that’s too bad!”

SPLASH! SPLASH! SPLASH!

“Nrrrrmm – you fool! My treasures will be corroded to worthless lumps of metal by the time I get them out from there! Have you any idea how much it’ll cost to restore them?”

“Then promise! Promise you’ll stop and I’ll stop!”

“You – you damned cat! How about *you* stop or I’ll blow this heap of rocks to kingdom come?”

“Nya-ah! You do that and it’s *all* gonna go down the hole! And you know what? I’ll be quite happy to just live in here a while, and dump *all* the treasure you put in, and eat all your food, and push out anyone else you gobble up, and – oooh! I wonder what happens if I peepee into there...”

“Nuuuuuu! Oh you little terror, by the horns of all my ancestors, that’s enough!”

Mikoro paused, her arms full of rings and bracelets. “Are you ready to promise then?”

“I’ll – nrrrrmm – *halve* the tribute to five hundred beef-bowls. How about that?”

“Nyah! Not good enough!”

SPL-SPL-SPLASH!

“Aaargh! Two hundred and fifty then!”

SPLASH! SPLASH!

“One hundred! One hundred beef bowls! That’s the feeblest tribute I’ve ever accepted from anyone!”

“Zero! No more tribute! If you want their stuff then you give them something fair in return!”

“I *do* give them something fair! They have the honour of performing deference to me as their sovereign lord! What more could anyone ask for?”

SPLASH!

“Nuuuuuuuuuuuu! Okay! Okay! Zero! No more tribute!”

“Promise!”

“Fine! You have my word! Nuuuoo, what possible kind of demon-cat...”

“Good!” Mikoro dropped her latest armful of plunder and eased herself back into the great rumen. “Dari!” she called out. “She’s promised so it’s okay now! Let’s go out!”

“Mmpph...mmph...”

“Aaww! Again? Nyeeh, we’d better leave before you have too much fun!”

Mikoro bounced about with the flashlight, homing in on the muffled squeaks, and this time found her friend stuck in one of the stomach’s floor-grooves. She was jammed in even tighter than last time, the thick folds almost completely enveloping her and working her body between them.

“Hey! How did you fall down there? Aaww, c’mon, silly! You just have to stand on the more stable part, like this!” She had yet to grasp that the excitement Dari awakened in women’s bodies took effect all the way down to the cellular level, such that not only the women themselves but any tissues thereof that got hold of her just had to embrace her as tight as they could no matter what.

Mikoro reached down with both arms to prise apart the fold, but naturally it wouldn’t budge and just kept pressing and kneading away. So instead the fluffy captain took a deep breath and jammed her legs in sideways up to the waist, and between the exertions of her arms and her backside, pushed them just wide enough for the exhausted explorer to crawl free.

“Haah...haah...M-Mi-koro...”

“Heehee! We’ve had enough fun in here for one day, right? Let’s go see how the monkeys are doing!”

“H-How...how do we...g-get out...”

“What do you mean, how?” she giggled – then realised her friend genuinely didn’t know.

“But – nyah! – like this, of course!” She lugged the staggering Dari up the wall-slope to the oesophageal sphincter, which though huge, had the same shape as countless such structures which Dari had uselessly punched and tugged at over the years.

“Wha...wh-what do you...”

“You just tickle it like this!”

And with a nigh-professional precision Dari knew she’d never have the composure to replicate, Mikoro ran her little finger back and forth through one of the sphincter’s creases – and with a SQRK! the muscle lurched open, showering them both in mucus.

“Wah – but you’ve gone in so many tummies! You really didn’t know?”

“H-How...”

Another dollop of fluids splashed upon them. The mucus oozed down Mikoro’s hat and drooped over the edge in tendrils.

“M-Mikoro,” gasped Dari, already too slimed up for it to bother her. “Y-Your coat...”

“Nwah? Aaww, yeah. I guess it’ll be all sticky and smell of beef now. Well, maybe the monkeys have a washing machine!”

“M-Monkeys...w-washing machine...” Dari shook her head, wondering as she sometimes did whether her whole life was just some ludicrous dream.

But now Mikoro discovered yet another surprise that was even better than monkeys with washing machines. “Look! Look at that!” she exclaimed. “Her tube looks like it’s pushing up instead of down! Oohh, not many people can do that. Even Kiyoko and I had to train for months to learn it properly. But, but – that’s great! It means we don’t have to climb!”

This was genuinely good news for Dari, whose limbs were too stiff and wits too scrambled for a self-propelled ascent. “Ahh!” she yelped as Mikoro grabbed her arm and hauled her up into the oesophageal elevator.

“Yaaay!” cheered the cat-girl, riding atop a wave of contractions. “Isn’t this fun?”

But the only response Dari’s position afforded her was “Mmph!...Mmph!...Mmph!” For dragged along after Mikoro, that same wave of contraction caught her within it and was muscularly engulfing her with squeeze after squeeze.

“Oops,” said Mikoro, noticing. “Nyah – hold on! We’re nearly there!”

“Mmf...mmf...mmf...”

The meat-world lit up all at once, then there was the Cow Queen’s tongue, rolling away like a runway. At its end, a window to the sky, the rims of her incisors its frames.

“Heehee! Hold tight Dari!”

“M-Mikoro, wh-whatareyougyaah!”

The valiant captain wrapped an arm round Dari’s chest then whooped arse-first onto the tongue, rode down its central septum like a slide, then out they launched into the open air, which glowed blue round Mikoro’s hands as she grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger, and somersaulted round and round like a fluffy meteor spattering off a thick wet tail of mucus and gastric fluids – then her loafers slapped on the grassy earth, and she shot out her arms for balance, before realising this motion had dropped Dari, going “Bleh!” and ducking a hand just in time to catch her friend before she went splatting into the mud.

“OOO! OOO! OOO! OOO!” chanted the Four Stalwart Officials, as to a monkey the onlooking crowd rose in a standing ovation.

“Silence!” bellowed the Cow Queen. “Nuuuuuu! H-How dare you?”

Atop the *Lamassu* the great behemoth was running a plated arm across her helm, no doubt attempting to press the sweat from her forehead. When this was not successful she grasped the helmet in both hands – and lifted it off.

“Waah...” Mikoro gasped; and the monkeys, who had never seen their oppressor’s face before, were struck into silence.

A glossy mane of ivory hair – bangs straight and full at the front, flowing long all round – framed a face as royally grand as it was royally annoyed. Beads of sweat glinted on this woman’s buff brown skin, and now Mikoro could see that her horns were not part of her helmet at all but actually grew from the sides of her head. On the oesophagus-ride up the fluffy captain had prepared a few remarks for the Cow Queen, but the sight of her true visage scattered these plans to the wind. Mikoro had expected some kind of blood-faced fire-snorting devil, or at least an actual cow, but the most bovine thing about that face – beside the horns and lateral pointy ears – was its air of simple placidity. Her gaze was almost gentle, though perhaps it was only because at her size the gentlest press sufficed to flatten an armoured car. It was a face which, if only it got its desire to rule the world, looked happy to laze about munching chubbily on grass all day. Or beef bowls.

Dari squealed anew and curled up in Mikoro’s hand.

“Ooh. Is she your type?” the cat-girl whispered onto her. She curled up tighter.

Those cardinal eyes regarded Mikoro with a mix of dread and curiosity. “I swear on my father’s bones, I have never come across such a fierce little terror,” the Cow Queen declared. “Do you have a name, terror-kitten?”

“You know it!” Mikoro found her voice. “I’m Captain Ibaraki Mikoro of the Chaldea Academy! And, and, you made a promise, so you’d better not bully these monkeys anymore!”

“Through your underhanded methods you have won this round, Mikoro the Terror. I gave you my word, and as the Demon Cow Queen my word carries the weight of my ancestors’ honour. I would not be caught dead breaking it, so can no more harm a blade of grass on this rock than pull down the curtain of stars.”

“I’m not a Terror!” snapped Mikoro, fixating on the most important part. “Call me my real name, you – you – *Beef Queen!*”

“Nuuuuu! How dare you call me that? I am the Demon Cow Queen! Learn it properly!”

“Nyeh! Whatever you say, Beef Queen!”

“You impudent cat! As if it’s not enough that you don’t fight head-on but resort to devious tricks and schemes, just like the monkey who humiliated my parents!”

“Well you, um, um – you fight like a cow!”

“Why you...hrmm? Well – that’s right! That’s because I’m the Demon Cow Queen!”

“Nyah. Why are you smiling?”

She was not only smiling but laughing, a rumbling guffaw which sent the monkeys scrambling for the tunnels and outcrops again. “Nrrrrm, you cheeky little kitten!” she boomed. “Your trickery might have prised a little rock full of monkeys from my collection, but I rule this sea, and everything upon it falls under my domain. Do you expect I will allow you to scurry about my boots making trouble for me? You might be a famous admiral or pirate where you come from, but I’ve never heard of a Mikoro or a Chaldea Academy, and now that I know your name I shall be sure to find out everything about you. And next time we meet: Nuuuuuuuoo!”

She lowered her head and mimed a great toss of her horns.

“Ulp,” went Mikoro.

The Cow Queen replaced her helmet and raised a hand. From the bowels of her dreadnought two great engines roared, and the grunts of hundreds of minotaurs clogged the sky.

Thus did the mighty *Lamassu* haul away, crushing the waves before it. The monkeys crawled from their shelters, birds and fish took off from the ledges and undersea tunnels, and even Dari uncurled in Mikoro's hands, the red flush subsiding from her face. But just as the Cow Queen's shape was about to become indistinguishable from her ship's silhouette, she bellowed forth:

"And don't think I've forgotten about your mouse, Mikoro the Terror! Now that I know what a tasty treat she is, she certainly belongs with me! Yes, yes, she'll be *your* tribute when I make you grovel in defeat! Nrrrrrm, a plaything fit for a queen; I wonder what else I might do with her..."

"Nnnnnnn!" Dari squirmed so hard it felt to Mikoro like she might burrow right through her skin.

The ship disappeared. The sea – the Cow Queen's domain – was vast.

The *Sea Bunny* was tiny.

"Uh-oh," said Mikoro.



The Monkey Minister stood at the front. Behind them lined up General Beng and General Ba, Marshal Ma and Marshal Liu, as well as all the other civil and military officials from the Water Curtain Cave. In perfect synchrony they got down on their knees and bowed so low that their foreheads scraped on the grass.

"Nyaah! N-No need, no need!" said Mikoro.

"We cannot express the depth of our gratitude toward you," said the Monkey Minister. "Your boldness and cunning today have saved the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit."

"Come on, it was nothing!" insisted the bashful captain. "I had fun! I like exploring tummies! And Dari's, like, the biggest tummy expert in all the world, so we were never gonna be in any trouble!"

"Heh. That's not how I'd put it Mikoro," said Dari from her hat. "If it weren't for you, I'd probably be in her third or fourth stomach by now."

"Naah, didn't you hear what she said?" giggled Mikoro. "She found you so tasty she was gonna bring you up to her mouth to slosh you around every hour!"

Dari cringed hard. "M-Mikoro!" She didn't know if she was more embarrassed by her fluffy friend remembering that of all things, or her announcing it with glee to the entire mountain.

“But it’s a good point,” said Mikoro, pensive all of a sudden. “I’ve never seen a stomach so strange as that. It was so huge, and so lively, and it was like it had lots of parts with all different shapes and sounds. How did she get a stomach like that?”

“Well you see, that is her bovid inheritance,” said the Monkey Minister. “All those in her father’s line are masters of transformation, and though the old bull was known for favouring his bovine shape, his daughter enjoys a form more akin to a human woman, claiming it befits her natural size and strength. But of all the cow’s aspects she has retained, none more becomes her than her multiple stomachs. Since she has swallowed plenty of our monkeys as well as passing travellers, traders and pilgrims, we know from their accounts that her stomachs number four. The first is a huge space where she stores food whose flavour she relishes, and she will return it to her mouth again and again to take pleasure in it. The second is the small honeycomb-chamber attached to the first, where she stores valuable treasures along with her captives. I have never heard of her swallowing them deeper than that, but a doctor she once consumed managed to pass a magic string through the next orifice. He spoke of a third chamber, filled with leafy ruffles to filter and absorb all the fluids that collect there, followed by a fourth, where powerful acids and enzymes finally break down the food that reaches it.”

Mikoro looked like she’d just learnt the secret code of the universe. “Waaahh...that’s amazing...”

“The magic string indicated that the fourth stomach is so powerful, and anything that reaches it already so well-filtered, that whatever gets past is absorbed within the first yard of her small intestine. Everything beyond is to all intents and purposes vestigial. The doctor was so impressed about this that he asked the Cow Queen about it afterwards, and said it brought her such pride that she confirmed it straight up. Her digestive system has all the strengths of a cow’s but none of its renowned drawbacks, and she obsessively keeps its lower reaches clean and hygienic out of disdain for the less salubrious part of her heritage. Apparently she said: ‘Because who has time to shit all day when they’re ruling the world?’”

Dari’s fluster had settled since her tour of this system but what she was hearing now brought it right back, and she emitted high-pitched noises and edged round and round the hat in circles, fighting imaginary losing battles against impossible immensities.

“Pfft,” went Mikoro. “For such an ambitious big bully she seems awfully petty. She fixates on things like that, and beef bowl, and how big and strong she is. Is that all she cares about?”

The Monkey Minister glanced at their Four Stalwart Officials, who returned their usual impassive angry-monkey faces. “As far as we know that is all,” said the Monkey Minister. “Her ambitions are simple. But they reach far, and the power behind them is real. Your actions here will have earned you her personal enmity, and I do not envy you the danger of that position. Are you sure you wish to sail further?”

“Nyah! We don’t have a choice! We have to take the *Sea Bunny* to Comet Island!”

“Then your voyage will be perilous. Comet Island is more than one thousand *li* from here, and the Demon Cow Queen will have plenty of opportunities to target you along the way. Even if you make it within a day’s sailing distance, her fortress controls the only sea lane through the surrounding reefs, and there is no way she will allow you to pass her blockade.”

“Um. I forgot about that. Bwaah! B-But then, what can we do? Is there really no way past?”

“As far as we on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit have heard, it cannot be breached or circumvented. But as I tell you, we live extremely far from Comet Island. If you are truly set on this journey, your best chance might be to seek advice from those closer to the Cow Queen’s fortress. If there are chinks in her mighty armour, they should know them better.”

As the Monkey Minister consulted with their civil and military officials for anything more that might be of help, Mikoro nervily scanned the sea. She couldn’t shake the sense that that mighty dreadnought was waiting just out of sight, and would come steamrolling upon her as soon as she set sail.

The Monkey Minister loped back to her. “There,” they said, gesturing to a speck on the horizon. “We are all in agreement that you would do best to head for that island next. It has a Sheep Pub.”

“Um. What’s a...Sheep Pub?”

All the monkeys chattered in surprise, and their regent queried: “Doesn’t everyone know what a Sheep Pub is? In any place where travellers come and go you are bound to find a Sheep Pub. It is a place of safety, an inn at the crossroads where wayfarers rest, repair, and exchange their stories before the hearth-fire; where hot meals and cool drinks are served, currencies exchanged, and soft dreams dreamt beneath a sturdy roof and a tranquil sky. Furthermore every Sheep

Pub carries an unbreakable rule of sanctuary. Its doors are always open, everyone is welcome, and no violence of any kind is permitted on its grounds. Not even the Demon Cow Queen would dare make trouble in its waters.”

“Oooh!” went Mikoro. “What a wonderful place! That sounds like just what we need after all this hard adventuring, doesn’t it Dari?”

“Y-Yeah, that does sound nice,” agreed the smaller woman. So adventured out was she that her clothes, which had accumulated the aromatic signatures of adventure after adventure, were now a permanent anchor dragging down on her mind. Gerudo sweat; solar saliva; the very best in both feline and bovine gastric blends...

Embarrassing as it was, she forced out the question: “Does this Sheep Pub by any chance have – you know – washing machines? Or at least fresh water and soap?”

“Its laundromat is second to none,” said the Monkey Minister. “And – if I may recommend – so too are its baths.”

“Th-Thank you!” Dari blushed, but the news made her inwardly ecstatic. “Finally!” she said to Mikoro. “Shall we head there straight away, while it’s still light?”

“Yeah, we’d better go before the Moo-Moo Queen comes back!”

“It looks far,” said the Monkey Minister, “but that is because it is a small island. Even with your small craft you can reach it within an hour.”

“Thank you, um, Monkey Minister,” said Mikoro. “Thank you to all of you. But are you sure you’re gonna be okay?”

“When the Cow Queen said she would not break her word, she did not joke,” the representative of Sun Wukong replied. “She throws her bulk around without qualm, but in her own mind she is convinced that she is a just ruler, and claims her word carries not just her authority but that of her father the Ox King, her stepmother Princess Iron Fan, and indeed the entire weight of her sovereign line. To break her promise would be to violate the honour of them all, and this she will do under no circumstances.”

“Huh,” said Dari. “Maybe she does have some decency worth appealing to, Mikoro. You might be able to reason with her.”

“Me? Why not us?”

“B-Because I’m terrified of her! Didn’t you hear what she said about me as she left?”

“Nyahah! Dari’s attracted to the Moo-Moo Queen!”

“Nnnnnn, wh-what the heck Mikoro! What part of anything I just said makes you think that?”

“Heehee! It’s okay. I *won’t tell*.”

“Every monkey on this island can hear you!”

“Um. Oops.”

“Her pride is worth accounting for,” said the Monkey Minister, doing their best along with every other monkey, including the Four Stalwart Officials, to suppress the urge to screech with laughter. “In seriousness, Captain Mikoro. It might be nobility on her part, but it might also be a weakness you can exploit. For a foe whose weaknesses are few, such knowledge is priceless.”



So it was that with Dari in hat, and hot meals and long baths in mind, Mikoro trudged down the trail to the cove. There she found the *Sea Bunny* righted, scrubbed and ready to sail, along with a few dozen monkey porters who had just finished loading the provisions they’d pilfered a few hours earlier. At this point the Monkey Minister and their civil and military officials couldn’t help but line up and bow to them again, so indebted they claimed to feel to the pair for delivering them from the Cow Queen’s oppression. And so at last, as hundreds and hundreds of monkeys lined the clifftops and waved and jumped and scampered around and teased each other as monkeys do, Captain Mikoro and her first mate Dari sailed from the legendary Mountain of Flowers and Fruit and set their sights on their next destination: the Sheep Pub.

“Yaaay!” cheered Mikoro, when the *Sea Bunny* aimed its nose straight for it.

“Keep a look out Mikoro,” warned Dari. She still couldn’t clear her mind of those gargantuan lips; the swell of that tongue; those mighty expanses that surely rolled and heaved beneath that shell of iron...

“What for?” said Mikoro – then she remembered. “Oh.”

Dari braced herself for a playful remark. She would have to remind Mikoro that this was serious now. Two thousand minotaurs, three rows of cannon and 12-inch guns versus their little rabbit-shaped dinghy: these were not favourable odds. So she was taken by surprise when Mikoro instead asked: “Um. Are you okay?”

“Wha...? What do you mean?”

“Well...I know tummies are kind of your thing, but all the same you got very smushed and splashed today. And – nyah! – though it looked like great fun, I’m

sure it must get tiring when it happens again and again. So I just thought, maybe I should check you're okay..."

"Oh Mikoro," said Dari. "I'm really touched." And she absailed down Mikoro's hair to plant a kiss on her cheek. The cat-girl's hand came up and cradled her affectionately.

"Thank you for worrying about me. You're right, you know? Sometimes it does get a little overwhelming, and that's definitely one of the weirder stomachs I've been stuck in. But hey! At least this one didn't try to digest me. I'll be okay. And, honestly, a nice hot bath at this Sheep Pub place sounds fantastic right about now."

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Mikoro, as she rested her elbows atop the stern and chewed her finger thoughtfully. "How come you go all – um – mousey in tummies and let them play with you however they want to? You're so relaxed most of the time, it's like you always know what to do, but as soon as a woman touches you you go all shy and squeaky like a hamster. Even just the suggestion – there, like that! See?"

"Nnnh...M-Mikoro..."

"Gweh. If their tummies are annoying you, why don't you stand on the more stable parts like I do, or tickle the thing and climb out, or, um...? Is it uncomfortable if I'm asking?"

Dari sighed.

"It's fine. Because you're right again Mikoro. I know what effect they have on me. And I can't say why, I guess that's just how I've always been. Even before I got shrunk, if a woman I liked smiled or waved at me it just made me so self-conscious. I would feel so flustered and intimidated – like they could so easily come and just take me away if they wanted to. They never did back then of course, but nowadays...eheh."

"Aaww. Shy Dari is so cute."

"I can't even imagine handling these situations the way you do Mikoro. It just gets so overwhelming, so quickly. When I'm trapped inside their bodies, with that chaos of sounds all around me, all those scents, that heat...nnnngh!" And she winced, made timid at the very thought of it.

"Buuut, how about when you're in Mother? Like those times we've gone in her tummy together; you remember?"

"Well, Mother's different. Like you're different. When you're such good friends, and go to such great lengths to make me feel safe and relaxed – "

“Ooh. Maybe when we get back we can help train you to keep your cool when women hold you. It might make your travelling easier!”

“Heh. I think there’s about as much chance of that as training you not to eat sweets. It’s really that deeply ingrained in me Mikoro. I can’t imagine it changing. And besides...urgh, how do I put this...”

Mikoro wasn’t one to beat around the bush. “You *like* it, don’t you!”

“Nnn-ah! That’s not what I – well, I wouldn’t put it – ”

“But you do, you do! Heehee! You like being the little one, being handled and played with! I can tell!”

“Well, *like* isn’t the right word. I mean, it still makes me scared, or at least intimidated. It’s just...well, I guess, it feels like at some level that’s how it’s *supposed* to be, you know? If that makes sense.”

“Nyeheh! So Dari’s *supposed* to be a snack-toy?”

“Argh, Mikoro! Wh-When you put it as bluntly as that – ”

“Well you’d better be careful. I think the Beefy Moo-Moo Queen wants you as *her* snack-toy now.”

Dari gave a high-pitched “Eep!” and clutched tight to the strand of pink hair.

“Heehee! You see? You *do* like her!”

“What the heck do you – ”

“You said, ‘When a woman I like smiles or waves at me’...”

“Th-That doesn’t mean...!”

“Hey! She obviously likes you too! Well, likes how you taste. That means you should be the one to talk to her! Maybe she’ll listen because she likes you and let us through the blockade!”

“Nnnnnn – M-Mikoro! No, d-don’t even think about – ”

“Bweh. You’re right. She’ll probably just squish you away somewhere she can feel you wiggle. Ooh, she’s so big. She must have so many places she could tuck in a tiny Dari...”

By now Dari was desperately scrambling up to the hat, only she kept finding her way blocked by Mikoro’s fingers.

“I wonder what she looks like under her armour? Ooh, I bet she’s got great big...um, everythings, actually. So cool! Nwah, it’s a shame she’s such a bully. I wonder what’s got her all worked up about, you know, taking over the world.”

“Don’t let her catch me!” Dari peeped. “Don’t let her catch me!”

“Aaww, come here,” said Mikoro, finally taking hold of her and giving her a big dribbly kiss. “I’ll keep you safe from the big bad Boob Queen.”

“Nnnnnnnnnn...!”

The fluffy captain looked ahead. The speck on the horizon had grown into a bump. And that wasn't all.

For the first time, moving shapes were cropping up across the seascape. Some were large, some were small, and they chugged and streamed in a full spectrum of colours and profiles. Ships.

“Dari?” said Mikoro.

“Nnnhh...B-Boob Queen...M-Mikoro, why d-did you have to...”

“Look Dari! It looks like everybody else is going to the Sheep Pub too!”

Dari shook herself to her senses and looked. “Ah...y-yeah. At this rate it looks like it'll be quite crowded. Let's be careful Mikoro, okay?”

“Um, what for? The monkeys said it's safe!” Out came the Professor Mikoro face again; she even raised her finger. “They said: ‘no violence of any kind is permitted on its grounds!’”

“Violence. Right. And what about everything you've spent the last ten minutes imagining the Cow Queen doing to me?”

“Oh. Um, um...”

“Exactly.”

She scrambled up Mikoro's sleeve and fluffy pink hair and climbed into the hat-fold.

Mikoro gave a purry grunt that meant nothing in particular and leaned out to watch the ships. Her line of argument had got stuck in a grey area, and when that happened, she had learnt, it was usually best to forget it had happened and look for other fun loose threads to pounce on. So she slouched over the gunwale and watched the growth in maritime traffic, counting all the types of craft she could see and wondering where they'd come from, or more importantly, what tasty things they had to eat where they'd come from. Meanwhile her ears twitched to background mutterings as Dari lectured herself on how what was going to happen to her was going to happen, how she should know that by now, and how it was hardly her fluffy friend's fault if she was so inherently a toy.

“Dari?” Mikoro shouted all of a sudden.

A head of tousled brown hair poked over the brim. “What is it Mikoro?”

“Um. Why d'you think it's called a Sheep Pub?”

THE WAY OF THE



SHEEP

“Baaa.”

“Ooooooh!”

“N-n-n-eeeeeh!”

“Nyanyah! You hear that?”

“Yes Mikoro. Well there’s your answer I guess?”

“Yaaay! Ooh, d’you think they’re fluffy? I bet they’re fluffy. I’m gonna hug them and chase them around and ruffle their fluffy coats and tickle them on the nose!”

“Please don’t. At least till we know it won’t get us thrown out. Or, you know, bitten.”

“Aaww. But they like it!”

“The ones on your uncle’s farm like it because they know you. But do you remember what happened when you tried to hug the ones with horns up on the ridge?”

“Um? B-But you weren’t there! How did you know?”

“Kiyoko told me. She was the one who had to get all her cards replaced.”

“Nyah. But they went mehh mehh at me. I thought they wanted to cuddle.”

In the course of this edifying debate the air grew thick with the splashes of paddles, the hammering of propellers and the grunts and hiccups of engines. The *Sea Bunny* no longer sailed alone but had joined a whole constellation of schooners, junks, yachts, ferries, longships, steamships and even a container ship

or two. The islet was small and flat; it was a challenge to make out more for the volume of hulls, masts and sails in the way.

The ships drifted into organised queues for landing.

“Waah. So many! D’you think there’s space for everyone?” Mikoro wondered, as the *Sea Bunny* slotted itself between a bright red mail boat and a lean and mean little catamaran.

“I hope so Mikoro. This sure looks like a lot of traffic for one pub.”

They needn’t have worried. The queue moved fast, and soon they’d eased round a lighthouse to enter a sizeable marina which must have had room for at least eight hundred vessels. The *Sea Bunny* homed in on a berth nice and close to the gate. There was no parking meter or further indication of a mooring charge, nor were there menacing signposts declaring that ships were left at the owner’s risk. On the contrary, the atmosphere made you feel certain you could leave your craft unattended in broad daylight, even leave a suitcase full of banknotes on the deck, and know it would still be there if you returned a month later.

“Woohoo!” Mikoro rejoiced as her loafers whomped up the boards of the landing stage. “I’m so looking forward to a nice hot meal! Um – not that there’s anything wrong with Scáthach’s crackers of course. But we haven’t had a chance to sit down for some real cooking in ages!”

“Mikoro, didn’t the monkeys serve us a full-course meal this morning? And – urgh – what about all that beef bowl you devoured? You do know there’s a word for creatures who eat food out of someone else’s stomach, right?”

“Yeah! It’s *ingenious*! Heehee!”

Dari screwed up her face, wondering why she even bothered as a pair of sinewy fellows tying up the catamaran burst out laughing. They’d heard every word and now began a running commentary in Malay.

“Besides,” said Mikoro, “I know you’ve done it too.”

“Wha – that was different! I, I – ”

“Because it was chocolate?”

“Yes, because it – w-wait a minute, no! That’s got nothing to do with it!”

“Creamy melty delicious chocolate, nyeheh?”

“Hrrnnggh! Mikoro!”

A simple wooden arch opened on the main part of the island, where a set of thatched-roofed farmyard buildings squatted in the midst of low drystone walls. But plenty of arrivals were milling about here in this bustling marina. Fuel pumps lined a row of self-service stalls; people were queueing to fill cans or cartons and

lugging them back to their ships. Next door stood a little machine shop with solar panels, turbine blades, outboard motors and miscellaneous maritime paraphernalia piled up outside in neat stacks. Some seafarers were trolleying their own parts inside, where they passed them to a bunch of elderly goat-headed people in headbands for inspection or repair.

“Hey Mikoro,” said Dari. “Do you think we’ll need to refuel the *Sea Bunny* at some point? What does it even run on, come to that?”

“Um. Maybe it’s magic. The boat doesn’t mind if I play with the sail, so I think it’s more for decoration...”

They hadn’t told her.

She hadn’t thought to ask.

Why couldn’t – never mind.

“Well,” pondered Dari, “it does give off that nice hum. But what kind of magic then?”

“Maybe bunny magic! There could be a magic bunny running on a wheel inside. I bet it’s extremely fluffy.”

“A magic bunny. Right. Well do you think this magic bunny needs, uhh, feeding, or recharging of some kind? Should we ask here?”

“Bwah. Mother and Scáthach didn’t say anything about it.”

“Yes, but we’ve sailed a lot further than they expected. Now that I think about it, I can’t say it’d be great if we suddenly ran out of fuel on the open sea.”

Further along another agglomeration of people was tossing bags of refuse into a great row of colour-coded recycling bins.

“Ah yes!” Dari recalled. “We were going to check where the *Sea Bunny*’s rubbish went, remember? This looks like the perfect place to drop it off.”

But Mikoro’s attention had scampered elsewhere. Some friendly black and white faces were ogling her over the stone fence. They were munching on grass.

Mikoro cheered and trotted up to them. By the time Dari even opened her mouth the cat-girl was tittering in gratification as she scratched them behind the ears.

“Me-e-eh.”

“Nyaah! You’re cute! Would you like cookies? We have cookies!”

“I dunno Mikoro, don’t you think these look rather chubby already? The pub must keep them well-fed.”

“Oooh, their fur is all soft and fluffy. Feel that!” And she plucked Dari from the hat and dangled her right up close to the sheep’s flank.

“Aaah, for goodness’s sake Mikoro! Careful or she’ll – ”

“Heehee! She licked my face!”

The sheep shuffled around and nosed at Dari.

“Aaww look,” said Mikoro, “she’s so friendly. You see? I told you it’d be okay! Go on, you should pat her too!”

“Y-Yeah, I guess she is.” The doll-sized woman reached out and gave the probing snout a stroke. “Nice sheep. Hello there.”

“Be-e-e-h.”

“Heh. I guess I was worried for noth-”

The sheep sneezed, showering Dari in discharge.

“Gwaaaaaaa-!”

“Nyeh! Nyaah, nyaah...”

“Me-eh.”

“Nnnhh...nnnhh...gnnnh...”

Laughter erupted, and Mikoro glanced over her shoulder to see those same two sailors from the catamaran, carrying a cracked propeller to the machine shop and passing just in time to witness this whole display.

“Oops,” said Mikoro, dangling the besieged Dari before her. “Um. Maybe we should go in and ask about the bath first.”

“Y-Yes,” shivered Dari. “Yes, w-we should d-definitely d-do that. R-Right now, in f-fact.”

“Nyah. Nyah. Fuel and rubbish later then?”

“L-Later. Definitely l-later.”



A cobbled track crossed a field to the thatched-roof houses. Mikoro joined the flow of people heading that way, more than a trickle but not quite a crowd, while Dari up top did her best to come to terms with her latest stratum of questionable bodily fluids.

A hanging pub-sign, black with a yellow sheep symbol, identified the largest structure. What a heartening sight after a day’s tossing and tumbling on the waves! Every brick in its walls, each straw in its roof, each marigold in its hanging baskets evoked the charms of an old-fashioned hospitality, and now in the dim light of early evening its windows were awash in a warm and cosy glow. Their open panes leaked a fusion of sounds that lifted the travellers’ spirits: hearty conversations,

flickering hearth fires, and the clinks of glasses and cutlery. They felt like they'd found the enchanted inn in the depths of the snowbound forest; the noodle hut at the top of the mountain; the mirage that turned out a real oasis after all.

The track passed right by the kitchen window.

"Oooh! Do you smell that? Dari, I'm hungry!"

"The bath first, Mikoro. Please. And the laundry if we could. Do you really want to show up to eat in a public place looking – and smelling – like this? I don't know if you packed spare clothes, but these are all I've got."

"Uh-oh. I didn't. But...doesn't your core clean yours up?"

"Uhh, no? I mean, it brings them back if I lose them, and regenerates them if they get digested off me, yes. But it doesn't seem to bother when they simply get soaked with, let's see: sweat, slobber, stomach juice, sheep snot, or – you know – cake."

"Gweh."

The entrance was through a little portico. Mikoro stepped in, thanking a lively squad of pirate ladies who held the door as they came out the other way.

"Waaah! Look – at – this!"

Now this was a pub. Not a raucous pit of sweat, crammed past capacity, where people drank in order to get drunk while trading vacuous banter over that hideous amalgam of smashes, screeches, and platitudinous lyrics about screwing one another's lives over in toxic relationships that in mediocre societies passes for music – cranked of course to maximum volume to force customers to shout to be heard, grow thirsty quicker, and thus maximise their expenditure on drinks. No – this, here, was a haven. Here, eight roaring fireplaces cast the comforts of home into every wood-panelled corner of this upholstered realm of sofas, armchairs, curtains, carpets and bay windows. Along the bar, sheep-girls – bubbly young ladies with spiral horns and landslides of canary-yellow curls – splashed draught ale into tankards and sodas into glasses from row after row of hand-pumps, rattled their tongues in ice buckets and ferried food from the kitchen, all while sharing the latest on the weather, the shipping, the freshest tall tales, with patrons whose every eyebrow was a study in well-earned relief. Not a table was without nuts, crisps and seasoning racks, to say nothing of those piled high with hot food, and any glance might have landed you among card-dealers or chess-players, cuddlers or conferrers, travellers reassuring their relatives on long-distance calls or writers scribbling the seeds of great novels onto notepads; or grizzled mariners, the mere shape of whose beards instilled a promise of a hundred riveting stories of fierce storms, exotic trading posts, and long-lost sunken chests in coats of

seaweed. And of course, through all these legs and posts, the obligatory small children chased each other around the room, giggling under tables and clambering over the backs of sleepy dogs.

“Bath first,” Dari reminded her spellbound friend. “Come on. The reception’s back that way.”



“Welcome, welcome!” a sweet-cheeked sheep-girl in a waistcoat piped up at their approach. “Eeehh, what a cute couple! You’ve travelled far I see. Please, what are your names?”

There was not a trace of disingenuousness in her smile or her voice. Rather they were hospitality in its elemental prime, and the little black cap on her head was somehow exactly what you would want to see after days of getting tossed about on the waves. A brass nametag on her lapel with a tiny fluffy sheep icon read: ‘MARY’.

“Nyah! Hello!” said Mikoro, in toasty mood. “Yeah, it’s turned out a *waaay* longer trip than we expected! I’m Mikoro, and this is my friend Dari. We’re going to Comet Island!”

The sheep-girl’s eyes lit up in amazement. “Eeeh, now that is a long journey. Well it’s a good thing you pulled in here then isn’t it? Is this your first time in a Sheep Pub?”

“Uhh, yeah,” said Dari. “It sounds like you’re pretty famous. How many Sheep Pubs are there exactly? It’s just that I’ve, well, sort of been around a bit, and I don’t exactly remember coming across...”

“You’ll always come across us when you need us,” winked the sheep-receptionist. “Come, my sweet friends. Take a load off your shoulders. A hot bath, a filling meal, and a warm and cosy bed for the night – how does that sound? Want me to book you in?”

“Yes please,” said Mikoro and Dari together. They hadn’t consulted; but it was as though this place had sprung up in perfect equal and opposite reaction to their longings.

They’d stay the night here. Anything else was out of the question.

“Um. Do we pay now?” enquired Mikoro.

“Now if you like, otherwise when you check out. Let’s see: one regular, one tiny – are you sharing a bed?”

“Of course!” giggled Mikoro.

Dari blushed. “Yeah. Heheh. Looks like we are.”

“...with dinner and breakfast included, access to the bathhouse, and – laundry?” She glanced up at them. “Eeeh, yep. Laundry. That’ll add a service charge of one silver piece to the bill, but please pay the attendant separately based on your load.”

“Let’s pay now Mikoro, so we don’t forget,” said Dari.

“...and that brings the bill to sixteen silvers, or the equivalent.”

Mikoro brought out her cat-faced wallet. There was only cash; the Academy preferred not to leave a data trail. “Um. Yuan, Rupees, Cedis, Dinars, Lira, Canadian Dollars, gold and silver pieces...”

“We take all currencies!”

“Nyaah. Which one should I use then?” Her eyes wandered to the digital exchange rate board behind the counter. It looked forbiddingly numerical.

The sheep-receptionist wiggled her eyebrows. “I think you’ve got a stronger currency than any of those,” she suggested.

“Um. I do?”

She leaned over the counter and whispered in Mikoro’s ear.

“Oooh! Really? That’s okay too? Yaay!”

And so the cat-girl paid in her most powerful currency: she ran round the counter and tackled the sheep-receptionist in a big hug, wherein the two ran their hands through one another’s cataracts of fluffy hair and exchanged mutually-affirming cat and sheep sounds.

They really did accept all currencies. That way everyone could afford to stay. Everyone had something they could offer.

Dari placed her hands on her hips and peered over the hat-brim at this spectacle, once more considering the nature of reality and whether it went on holiday. Then she yelped as Mikoro grabbed her and thrust her right into the crushing centre of their embrace – for she too of course had her share of room and board to pay for. She was still reeling as Mikoro breezed happily out to the lodging-house, a lengthy annexe that might once have been a barn. From her coat pocket there now protruded a key attached to a hardwood rectangle, on which was carved their room number: 88.

“Yaay! This is wonderful!” Mikoro couldn’t contain her excitement as she burst into the room. There was an enormous double bed – plenty of space to roll around in – with a headboard in the shape of a ram’s head, a sumptuous woollen duvet, and pillow after pillow woven with images of dreamy sheep jumping over clouds. Hairdryer, trouser-press, kettle and mugs with complimentary packets of tea and

drinking cocoa, a mini-fridge, a telephone with a book of useful numbers – everything was there, including of course the customary bedside drawer with a spiritual text stashed inside, only this one compiled eight hundred of the most empowering passages from the combined philosophical heritages of all the worlds. There was even a games console with the latest *Mario Kart* and *Super Smash Bros.* installed.

Their window overlooked the field of sheep, and enough light still lingered to make out the shapes of masts and funnels in the marina. The walls were thick and the windows lined with strong sealant; there would be no tossing and turning through the night on account of noise from the port or the pub. Most immediately cheering of all, a laminated page on the bed bore a diagram with directions to the laundromat and bathhouse, and beside it a complimentary set of woollen gowns sat in a wicker tray: a big gown for Mikoro, and a tiny gown for Dari. A sprig of fragrant fir leaves sat on top, while a card explained that guests whose clothes were in the laundry should feel free to wear these robes on any part of the premises.

“Waaah, it’s soft! I bet it’s so cosy! D’you think these come from the sheep outside?”

“It would make sense,” said Dari, jumping off Mikoro’s hand onto the bed. “The blankets and carpet too. I guess they make all their own textiles round here.” She gave her own gown a feel. “Hey, you’re right, that does feel good! But...how come they have one that fits me? Can they really get that many people my size coming through here?”

“Heehee! Well you saw all those people out there. They must get all sorts!” And because she was Mikoro she hurtled about giddy with excitement, poking her face into every cupboard and drawer, pressing all the switches to see what they did, and ploughing through the information brochure as Dari fell back on the duvet and asked herself if maybe, just maybe, they’d landed somewhere she could just close her eyes and relax after all.

“Woohoo! This is fantastic!” rang Mikoro’s voice. “Aaww, can you believe we get to stay in a place like this? Ooh. I kinda wish Mother and Kiyoko were here to enjoy it too. But, um...you know. Heehee!”

“I know,” said Dari, her smile broadening. “It’s fun like this too, isn’t it? Just the two of us, I mean. Travelling together.”

“Nyeh! You mean – you like it? Even with all the smooshing, and the wetting, and, and...”

“Well...yeah? Trust me Mikoro, all that’s been tame compared to what usually happens to me. Well, except the Cow Queen maybe. That was a little intense.”

“Well now we can have a fun time together and forget all about the stupid Beef Queen for a night. Aaww...I want to stay two nights, or three, but the others might worry where we are. We’d better not. But let’s enjoy it while we’re here!”

“You took the words right out of my mouth Mikoro. Now are you ready to go find the bathhouse? Then I can finally get out of this...stuff and stop smelling like a disaster in a chemical factory, and you can get your coat back to its *fluffy* glory.”

“Yaay! I’ve been looking forward to a bath for aaages! And when the coat’s clean I’ll be a proper Captain Mikoro again and can scare the Beef Queen just by going *rawrrr!* Ooohh, let’s go, let’s go!”

“Heh. Don’t forget the gowns.”

Dari considered riding in the tray with them, before deciding it would be close to profane – or else self-defeating – to touch their perfection till she’d got cleaned up herself. She contemplated alternatives, but in the end Mikoro decided the matter: she was in such eager mood that she snatched Dari up and simply marched off with her in her hand, puzzling everyone along the corridor through whose doors her train-cat sounds came wuu-wuuing.



“Nnnnnn.”

“Come on Dari! Everyone else is doing it too!”

“Eheh. I know. It’s just...nnnnh. Ahh, don’t poke me!”

“Um. You’re not one of those people who find it – nyah – *wrong?*”

“No no, it’s not that! I – ”

“Or do you have a, um...a religious thing?”

“...a what?”

“Heehee! Aaww, I get it. It’s not because of anything like that. You’re just bashful like a bunny!”

“Nnnnn. Y-Yeah. Something like that.”

“Well if you’re afraid someone’s gonna eat you or smoosh you because you’re cute, just stick close and I’ll make sure they don’t get you! I promise!”

“Thanks Mikoro. It’s – it’ll be okay. I’ll take off my clothes. Just...give me a little time to adjust, okay?”

She was well accustomed to losing them around close friends, or to the fingers of lustier captresses, or indeed to getting them dissolved off her in stomachs. But her present way of life rarely landed her in public settings where she took off her clothes on the same terms as lots of people she didn't know. The experience hadn't exactly been common before her shrinking either; many cultures in her world of origin prescribed an absurd yet fanatical panic at one another's bodies.

As always Mikoro had come trundling to the heart of the matter. Dari's resistance stood neither on principle nor on prejudice. She was simply that shy.

The Sheep Pub's bathhouse was an immense open-air space, reached from reception via a glass tunnel and divided into eight public baths on the basis of water temperature and mineral composition. An informative diagram on the wall explained that they were heated by hydrothermal vents on the ocean floor, a process it illustrated with lots of arrows and wavy lines. Bathers were directed to wash themselves off in the showers first, and then they could enter any bath they liked in any order, with no restrictions or separations based on species, genders, professions or political beliefs. For this was a space of plain and honest recuperation: an open harbour where no matter where on the spectrum of travellers you stood, you put aside your burdens and relaxed in naked equality.

Everyone was soaking in peace, either chatting quietly or miles away in shut-eyed contemplation. A few of those sheep-people shuffled about mopping the stone floors, sampling the water with test tubes, or handing out towels and little trays of soap and shampoo.

Having secured some for herself and Dari, Mikoro found a locker and laid the towel and woollen gowns on the shelf inside. She dropped her hard-worked coat and hat into a laundry bag they'd brought from the room, then pulled off her Academy shirt, skirt, tights and white-with-pink-hearts underwear and shoved the lot in as well.

"Ready yet Dari? I gotta put yours in too!"

Dari resigned to the inevitable and pulled, or rather peeled, her encrusted attire from her skin. Standing on the bench in nothing but her anklet, she blushed and hugged herself, though no-one was paying attention – at least not till Mikoro squealed and seized her up for a two-handed cuddle.

"Nnnngh! M-Mikoro! You're c-causing a scene!"

"Heehee! Aaww, sorry! Dari's just sooo cuuute! Oohh, the tiny tan, and the anklet..."

More laughter. They looked along the row of lockers and there, as always happens in these situations, just had to be those same two chaps from the catamaran preparing for their own immersion – although this time they stifled their chuckles and pretended awkwardly to be engaged in some discussion about the trade winds when they realised they'd been caught.

Dari glowered at her friend.

“Nyah. Um, let's go shower! Heehee.”

Mikoro pinched up Dari's clothes and dropped them in the laundry bag, then stuffed it away and flipped the locker door shut. Then she grabbed the tray of soap and shampoo and marched off with Dari to the showers, where on account of the rigours of their journey the ever-considerate cat-girl refrained, with a great effort of willpower, from rubbing Dari all over herself; and now we shall respect their personal space as they partook in the thorough relief of the baths, where the blissful, bubbling embrace of those deep-sea vents soaked days of accumulated stress from all their muscles and joints. Let us rejoin them an hour later as they handed their sack of dirty clothes to the laundromat attendant.

“This is a fine coat you have here young lady,” said the surly old ram. “I expect you'll want this dry-cleaned?”

“Nyah. If that's okay?”

“Eight silvers, and we'll have it outside your door by tomorrow morning along with the hat. The rest is no trouble, you can put these straight in the machines. And what's this?”

He pinched out Dari's theoretically-green tube top and peered with distrust through his spectacles. “Oh dear. Dear dear dear dear dear.”

“Uhh, is something wrong?” asked Dari.

“You ought to take better care of your clothes, young lady,” he said flatly. “Goodness me, what have you done to this? You didn't eat it I hope?”

“W-Well, as a matter of fact – ”

“Are these icing stains? And I don't even want to ask what *this* is. Dear dear dear. These will certainly bring the staff their week's excitement.”

Dari baked in her woollen gown as the people queueing behind them looked over each other's shoulders to see what was going on.

“This'll require the full treatment. We can do it, there's no question there, but getting all this out'll need the imported solvents so it's going to cost you I'm afraid.” He stroked his goatee. “Forty silvers.”

“Wh-Wha-! B-But – that – it's tiny – h-her coat was – ”

“Heehee! Don’t worry,” Mikoro sniggered, handing the attendant a wad of banknotes. “It’s Academy money, and Mother would want you to be squeaky clean and hygienic!”

“Eehh. Thanks Mikoro. I’ll have to see about making that up to her when we get back.”

“Oohh you will, you will.”

Squeaky clean in their gowns as they were, it was back to the room for a session with Mikoro’s pink hairbrush. Truly a fetching sight they made in those long woollen robes. It was like they’d become honorary sheep for the evening, a little brown-headed sheep on the shoulder of a tall pink-headed sheep, and in that condition it was time at last to descend on the pub for some dinner.

By now it was dark out. Wrought-iron lamps kept the paths well lit, and the pair made their way back to that happy place which warmed the soul with firelight and roused the appetite with the scent of hops and roasting food.

“Hello again!” said the sheep-girl Mary, who was evidently taking a turn waiting on diners. “Eeehh, just look at your hair! That’s fantastic! Had a good time in the bathhouse then?”

“Nyaah, it’s incredible here!” Mikoro replied. “Your baths were just what we needed after all that travelling!”

“That’s what I like to hear,” said Mary. “Are you here for some dinner then? The restaurant’s in use for a private function tonight, but just between you and me it’s a little fancy. You two look like you’ll be plenty comfortable here in the lounge, and there’s a great selection of hot food here too.”

The pair of guests took in the view. People were digging into their meals. They spotted massive burgers on beds of sweet-potato chips, whole fishes coated in herbs and breadcrumbs, peppered steaks oozing with juices, piping-hot casseroles, piles and piles of pasta, and fresh salads as colourful as the rainbow. At the nearest table a small child was worthily demolishing a fountain of ice cream as big as his head.

“Oohh, it smells so good,” said a dreamy Mikoro. “Yes please!”

The sheep-girl handed her a menu. “We’re a little busy tonight as you can see, so please take a seat at the bar and place your order whenever you’re ready. We can get you drinks straight away, and I’ll bring you to a table as soon as we have one prepared.”

Mikoro and her shoulder-passenger wove across to the bar. On their way they passed some people hard at work on their cheeseburgers. A punchy odour rose

into Dari's nostrils, cheerily wafting the covers off recent memories she'd hoped she'd left in the bathwater.

"Uhh, Mikoro? I think we should maybe...avoid getting anything with beef for tonight. If that's okay?"

"Heehee! Because beef got you?"

"Nnnhh..."

"Of course it's okay silly! I want fish!"

"Heh. Fish sounds good. We're on the ocean after all. I expect they do some great fresh seafood here."

They took a seat at the bar, where Mikoro fell under the charm of the draught ale handpumps with their colourful labels, ploughing away to irrigate the crop of patrons. But Dari hauled her attention across to a bold-inked poster that warned of the dangers of boating under the influence, with melodramatic symbols of watercraft smashing into each other, flipping upside down or careening down the throats of sea monsters. These, along with a reminder that she was piloting the *Sea Bunny* in trust, sufficed to persuade the fluffy captain off the beer and onto a fizzing tankard of cherry soda instead.

This however carried its own hazards, as Dari found to her cringing embarrassment whenever her friend's giggly belches turned the heads of the nearest dozen people.

"Do you absolutely have to do that?" she asked on the seventh emission, after it startled her into spilling some of her lemonade (provided by the bar in a thimble-sized glass for tiny people).

"Heehee! Of course I have to! Isn't that the whole point?"

"I shouldn't think Kiyoko would be very happy."

"Nyah. Don't tell her okay?"

"You know I won't."

"Heehee! Nyuhh!" She burped again, to the especial delight of a nearby toddler in a high chair who dribbled with excitement, flapped and kicked in her strap, then set about annoying her parents with some gurgly imitation burps of her own. This in turn excited the little child just emerging from his successful conquest of the ice cream, and so Mikoro set off a relay which zigzagged to the far end of the room.

Dari shook her head to herself and searched for a distraction. Her eyes wandered from the crisps and nuts stacked copious behind the bar in colour-coded flavours, to the photographs along the walls which appeared to display mostly sheep, or farms, or otherwise sheep on farms. A television screen in the far

corner was showing the football; she could just make out that the current score was Greenland seven, England nil.

From that rather typical spectacle her gaze fell on the clientele. "Focus next time Dari," she rebuked herself, thinking she should have checked them out first for obvious reasons. Yet such was the atmosphere here that aside from furtive glances from a few of the more humanoid women, there was no hum of impending designs on her like that which seemed to buzz in most places.

Truly this was a cosmic sanctuary, a place of rest where the usual rules didn't apply.

Cosmic – and cosmopolitan. The guests came in so many sizes and shapes that it was impossible to categorise them; never had Dari seen so many realities represented in one room. The only constant she could discern was that each party had at least one person in the apparel or facial hair of someone who knew their port from their starboard. Additionally there was one large group at the far end whose members, even if they weren't sitting exactly *together*, seemed to gravitate to each other as though drawn by a network of weak magnetic charges. They were distinct for their eccentric range of headgear; Dari identified headbands, conical straw or fibre hats, headscarves, turbans, and at least half a dozen species of cap. Most of these people were drinking rather than eating, and unlike the rest of the room theirs were by and large expressions of irritation, worry or plain boredom.

"All travellers," spoke Mary in a low voice when she spotted where the pair were looking. "Merchants, pilgrims, explorers, travelling performers – those types. They're all trying to get to Comet Island like you, but right now they're stuck here because they say some powerful hegemon's set up a blockade."

"That's what we've heard," said Mikoro. "Nwah. It's gotta be a big deal if it's keeping out so many serious-looking people."

"Eehhh, oh yes. They say the toll is pure extortion. First they're asked for beef bowl and rice-wine, which none carry except the specialist merchants. When they can't offer it they're held up for other barterable foods, but of course they don't have enough of those either, so finally they're threatened for such vast sums of gold that not even those travelling on behalf of the richest trade guilds can pay up, let alone the tourists or spiritual types who're usually sailing on a tight budget. So they get turned around, and because most of the lands in between are under that same hegemon's control or simply unequipped to support so many people, they end up straggling all the way back here."

Dari's lemonade went down the wrong way; she choked, spluttered, and wiped her lips with her wrist. "S-She...controls it all? Oh no..."

"Um, um!" said Mikoro, "What do you mean by unequipped to support them?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," said Mary. "Abandoned. Haunted. Lawless. Or just wild. Whirlpools, rough reefs, fire-breathing creatures with scaly and spiky bits, that sort of thing. We're a long way from settled civilisation out here, but eehhh, you knew that before you set sail. Of course, that's why our pub's here too! Ah, excuse me."

Mary swept off to serve another customer, leaving Mikoro and Dari to simmer in their apprehension.

"Gwah. I don't like the sound of that at all," said Mikoro. "Does this mean the way's only gonna get tougher from here on out?"

"Look at those people," said Dari, nodding at the frustrated crowd. "So many experienced travellers; you can read it in their faces. And look at that lady in the turban! Don't her clothes look expensive? Probably owns a fleet of battleships, or flying machines, and look, she's far from the only one. How tough must the Cow Queen be if all these people together can't break her blockade?"

"Nyah. It's the abandoned and haunted stuff I'm worried about. Does that mean there won't be more cosy baths and food places like these?"

"We'd better see if Mary can get us a map. They've got to have maps in a place like this, right?"

ANOTHER PACK OF THOSE PEANUTS IF YOU WOULD. NO NO, THE CURRY-FLAVOURED.

The voice clamped weights on their attention and dragged it three stools along to the customer Mary was serving. The words fell strange in both sets of ears – or rather brains, as they somehow seemed to skip their ears altogether. A courteous tone, but also hard, as though carrying the inevitability of the deep dense earth; at one level hollow, yet at another as heavy with substance as a voice can be. If gravity itself had a voice it probably sounded like that.

THANK YOU MARY. THOSE ARE THE ONES.

"Eehhh, any time! Oh look – that fills out your stamp card! Well, you know better than anyone how it works: that's another full set meal for you, free of charge. Congratulations!"

NEXT TIME IF I MAY. I'M HERE FOR THE FUNCTION TONIGHT.

"But of course. Any time you like!" And off walked Mary, polishing a glass.

Mikoro felt her eyes were playing tricks on her. If she concentrated hard, she could just about distinguish the outline of a figure in a thick black cloak and hood – thick, that is, not as in the width of its fabric, but as one might describe the

darkness in a perfectly-sealed stone chest, or round the back of a gravity well in the depths of outer space. She'd blink, and the personage might fade out; but then she'd blink again and there he'd be, munching away on his peanuts. That she could definitely hear. Surely her fluffy ears didn't play tricks?

Most people didn't seem aware of him at all. A little kid returning from the bathroom tugged on his cloak for fun as he passed, eliciting a pat on the head from a thin white hand – that is to say, *extremely* thin. Every so often a dog might also raise a sniffing nose or lick its chops in his direction. Everyone else walked by oblivious.

Maybe they were simply ignoring him. It sounded like he was a regular here after all.

Dari saw him perfectly. Then again, Dari was attuned to all-the-realities – by more ambitious definitions could even be said to exist in all of them, what with how liberally she'd shared her matter – so her attunement to what was real was better than most people's. She was certain she didn't recognise this individual. Yet she couldn't bury a nagging sense, perhaps a slightly guilty sense, that she should.

“Mikoro – ” she began, but too late. Mikoro was not one to sit back and wonder at things she was curious about, and she'd shuffled straight over to tug at the fellow's sleeve.

“Um. Excuse me...”

HM. A FINE ESTABLISHMENT, DON'T YOU THINK? GOOD EVENING BY THE WAY.

“Nyah? Yeah, this place is great! Do you, um, come here often?”

WOULDN'T STOP ANYWHERE ELSE IN THESE PARTS. NOTHING LIKE DRAGGING YOUR WEARY BONES IN HERE AFTER A HARD DAY'S WORK AND MURDERING A GOOD OLD CASSEROLE. THEY GROW THEIR OWN VEGETABLES YOU KNOW?

The hooded figure didn't turn around, but Mikoro could always tell when someone was paying attention to her. There was something inscrutable in his manner. It gave her to feel he was someone very important indeed, but unlike most of the bigwigs who limousined up to the Academy for long and boring meetings with Mother Rin, this fellow was taking her seriously. Made her feel like she mattered.

She liked that.

YOU HAVEN'T TRIED THE PORK SCRATCHINGS YET. I RECOMMEND THEM.

“Heehee! You're funny!”

“Mikoro!” hissed Dari. “Come on, be polite!”

AH. 'POLITE', DO I HEAR?

“Aaww, don’t mind Dari, she’s just shy! My name’s Mikoro! Um, um – do I know you from somewhere?”

EVERYONE KNOWS ME FROM SOMEWHERE, said the personage. BUT NO, WE HAVE YET TO MEET IN AN OFFICIAL CAPACITY IF THAT IS YOUR QUESTION. YOU’RE NOT DUE AN APPOINTMENT FOR...HM. QUITE SOME TIME, I BELIEVE.

“Um. Aren’t we meeting now?”

I’M OFF DUTY RIGHT NOW. WAITING FOR A COLLEAGUE ACTUALLY.

Mikoro grinned as that *extremely thin* hand ruffled her hair between the ears. Those fingers felt weird; almost – she didn’t want to say it – well, bony. But a headpat was a headpat and that was enough for her. She could tell from the measured weight of his stroke that he was a serious professional, so it was hardly his fault if his work kept him too busy to eat properly.

THERE’S MUCH TO SAY FOR CATS, he intoned. FLUFFY. YOU’VE MADE GOOD CHOICES. DO YOU KNOW WHAT DOES BOTHER ME THOUGH?

“Nyah? What?”

PEOPLE WHO REFUSE TO KEEP THEIR APPOINTMENTS.

Dari reacted with her cheeks. Quite why she didn’t know, but she found herself receding into Mikoro’s hair.

IMAGINE THIS, AND TELL ME IF THERE IS ANYTHING MORE EXASPERATING. YOUR CLIENT DECLINES TO APPEAR AT THE ARRANGED TIME. YOU WAIT AND WAIT BUT STILL THEY FAIL TO SHOW UP, AND THEN THE NEXT DAY THEY DO IT AGAIN, THIS TIME AT A DIFFERENT VENUE THAT’S, OH, ONLY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE UNIVERSE. ONCE OR TWICE AND I’M HAPPY TO OVERLOOK IT – PEOPLE HAVE LIVES, THESE THINGS HAPPEN. BUT WHEN THE SAME INDIVIDUAL DOES IT TO YOU FOUR HUNDRED TIMES IN A ROW? IT TAKES A COOL SKULL TO DO THE WORK I DO, I DON’T MIND ADMITTING IT, BUT YOU’LL APPRECIATE IF AT TIMES THE PEOPLE I DEAL WITH MAKE ME QUITE UPSET.

“Um. Yeah. I guess that must be kinda lousy.”

THESE ARE EXCEPTIONALLY BUSY TIMES YOU KNOW. I’M STRETCHED TO CAPACITY MOST DAYS. CAN YOU IMAGINE THE INCONVENIENCE SUCH PEOPLE CAUSE, NOT MERELY FOR ME BUT FOR EVERYONE ELSE I HAVE TO PUSH BACK ON THE SCHEDULE? CALL THAT WHAT YOU WILL, BUT I WOULDN’T CALL IT TERRIBLY ‘POLITE’.

Dari had fully submerged in the pink thickets by now, though with her present camouflage she’d have done just as well had she not. She put up with much, did Dari, but this class of passive-aggressive shade did not feature in her expectations.

“Um, Dari? I think he’s talking about you,” Mikoro whispered, unhelpfully.

AH, THERE YOU ARE, said the hooded figure.

Dari squeaked, but he'd turned away; in fact the comment had been addressed to a spruced-up character in an Emperor-Nehru jacket who'd come marching in from reception. He was short and solidly-built, even a little pudgy (he had more meat on his bones than their conversation partner, that was for sure), and his immaculate haircut framed a ruddy but genial face which Mikoro thought might be Tibetan, or possibly Nepalese.

The two shook hands. "Yan, Yan," Mikoro heard the newcomer introduce himself. The pair exchanged brief words before Mr. Yan beckoned toward the restaurant.

The cloaked figure tilted his head at Mikoro before he left.

GOOD CAT. THESE ARE FOR YOU, he said, and he slid an unopened pack of roasted peanuts down the counter to her. YOU'VE ALREADY ORDERED, BUT NEXT TIME YOU'RE HERE I WOULD STRONGLY RECOMMEND THE GREEN CURRY. IT'S TO DIE FOR.

The Tibetan threw her a friendly wink, then the odd pair trod off for the restaurant. Mikoro watched as they were greeted at the door by a dapper dark-skinned figure in a top hat and tails with a cocktail-glass of rum in his hand.

The nearby tables rose to a chorus of cheers. Greenland had just gone eight up.

"Aaww. He gave me peanuts!" Mikoro happily informed her shoulder.

"Is he gone, is he gone? Whew. He's gone..."

"He sounded grumpy at you. Is he, um, your doctor from somewhere? Did you do a naughty and make appointments you didn't turn up to?"

"What? N-No Mikoro, of course not! I haven't the vaguest idea what he meant by - well, maybe the vaguest, but, no, I don't think - "

"Heehee! Usually it's big women who make you go all silly." A thought occurred to her. "Ooh! Maybe you're - "

"Gaaah, no, no! Damn it Mikoro, don't even think about it!"

Mikoro stared at the restaurant door.

"Um. Surely this one's just a bit too old for you though?"

Dari fell into a mortified fume, producing garbled grumbles in which the only intelligible words were "preposterous, preposterous," but she was rescued from further discomfiture by Mary who at last popped up to announce a table was ready.

Mikoro gave a great big cheer, pocketed the peanuts for later, and followed the sheep-girl to a place where not only did she get to lounge on a lovely cushioned bench beneath the window, there was also a miniature seat raised much like a lifeguard's chair so Dari could sit properly at the table beside her, rather than atop it as she usually had to. On top of that they had laid on a full diminutive set of tableware: plates, glass, cutlery and napkin, just for her; and when their meal came

– beer-battered cod and chunky chips with crispy onion rings, fried polenta sticks, fresh garden vegetables and a curious little bowl of mushrooms, pink for Mikoro and green for Dari – the tiny explorer did not need to tear bitesize pieces off Mikoro’s dinner, because she received a meal just like Mikoro’s only fit for her scale. Needless to say this cheered her up immensely, and from the moment the first forkfuls entered their mouths, all their troubles melted away like, well, Dari’s composure in the mouths of other people. The food was so delicious that they could think of nothing else, and they exchanged barely a word till it was finished.

The night would not have been complete without the obligatory peaks of gelato: strawberry and chocolate for Mikoro, pistachio and vanilla for Dari, and caramel sauce, rainbow sprinkles and wafer sticks packed with thick chocolate cream for them both.

“Nyaaaaaah!” Mikoro yawned once they’d polished everything off. “My tummy feels so good!”

“Wow. That was just...something else,” said Dari. “Not just the food, but, well, eating out like this, and getting it as a proper meal, with everything at the right size; which isn’t to say Mother doesn’t try her best, she absolutely does, and her cooking’s just as wonderful, but – gosh. I’ve missed this, Mikoro. This has been special.”

The cat-girl opened her eyes. “Nyah. Did you eat out much before...you know, *that*?”

“Sometimes. But usually on my own, or with difficult people, like – well – family. Eheh.” An awkward pause. “I shouldn’t say that. I didn’t say that, okay? But I’ll be honest Mikoro. Sharing this with you has made this more pleasant a meal out than any I had in the...the old days.”

“Waah.”

They were too full to move. So instead they stayed sprawled on the sofa for half an hour, with Dari eventually nesting against Mikoro’s fleecy chest for some cuddles as they digested their feast, observed the mariners coming and going, and watched Greenland seal their win with a lead of sixteen. Eventually, when it felt right, and at their own pace, they sidled from the table, conveyed their thanks to Mary with another great big hug, then waddled into the fresh air on their way back to the room.

“Hey, that’s a nice horse,” said Dari from Mikoro’s shoulder. “I wonder – ahh...” she yawned, “if it was there before.”

Mikoro looked and thought she glimpsed a white stallion by the portico, its hide as pale as the moon and rich as milk. But after settling days of adventure with a meal like that she was comprehensively bushed, and could think only of sinking into those soft woollen sheets and drifting to a realm where the waves sighed soft and shooting stars whistled through the sky.

“Nnnrrr...what...a wonderful place...” her lips mumbled, once they’d pulled off their gowns and burrowed under the duvet at last. “D’you think...nrrr...this is real?”

A sigh of contentment from Dari. “It’s real, Mikoro,” she assured her fluffy friend, whose giant face, so impossibly cute in its end-of-day repose, loomed over her on the pillow. “I know it feels too good to be true, but all this is real. I’m sure of it. So let’s enjoy it for all it’s worth.”

Mikoro slumped face-first into the pillow, coating Dari in an avalanche of soft pink hair.

“Dawi?” – a muffled mumble.

“Mmnh. Yes Mikoro?”

“You’re a good fwend...nrrr...and I wuvv you vevy much.”

“Aaw.”

Mikoro’s fingers blanketed her chest. She stroked them; massaged a knuckle with both hands. The cottony curls of the actual blanket soared overhead, a dark bank of clouds against the very-slightly-less-dark thatched ceiling.

“Good night Mikoro,” she said; but Mikoro had purred off to sleep.

In seconds, Dari slept too.

In the peaceful dark, all realities were as one.

In the field outside, the sheep were led to their pens for the night. Over the drystone wall they jumped, one by one; each hop a musical note, rippling in the cosmic score.

On the pillows, sheep sprang through clouds.

Strange mushrooms released their gifts to the sleepers’ bloodstreams.

That night, they had the realest of dreams.



Dari’s was the more straightforward.

“Wha – where am I? Aah! C-Cold...”

She was in a field. There were sheep.

At first she wondered if she'd sleepwalked outside, but then realised that no, she couldn't have, the sheep were the same size as her. Furthermore there was no sign of the inn buildings, only a dense thicket of palm trees and a beach surrounded by sea. She could see all this because of the bright and tropical sky, but the ocean breeze was cold and set her shivering.

The palm trees rustled.

"Is that...?"

A sheep leapt from the thicket. But this was no ordinary sheep.

"Eeek! N-No!"

What a monster! Its head was bigger than its body with multiple rasping tongues, while its teeth gnashed like knives and dripped with viscous venom. It was also purple.

That was when she knew she'd seen something that wasn't meant to be seen.

She yelped and spun to run for her life, but colossal fingers plucked her into the sky before she could take a step.

She was Dari, after all.

It was all a blur: the swoosh of the wind, flashes of lightning, a temple on a mountaintop – and, she could have sworn, a pair of eyes, bright green, just like her tube top was supposed to be and would be again if that laundromat was as good as they said it was. These eyes she glimpsed only for a fleeting instant, but they were memorable because they had no irises, no pupils. They were simply green from edge to edge.

A rush of fragrant heat – then the world crushed in on her.

"...mmmpghhhh!?"

Sensations like these came in variants, and she had experience enough to identify straight away which she was in. Like them all it was dark, soft, compact, extremely warm, and pumped her nose with squirm-inducing pheromones. But it was also dry – these dewdrops of sweat didn't count – and that ruled out most alternatives instantly. Factor in the curvature, the distinct double-directionality of the pressure, and the thumping heartbeat immediately behind her...

She squealed, lit up like a fire extinguisher and wriggled with all her might. Yet all that accomplished was to invite the pliant walls to close up tighter, and soon they'd sandwiched her so snug she could move no more.

"Mmnggh!...Mmmphh..."

They swelled on her captress's breaths, lifting and lowering Dari in a continuous full-body massage. She knew it wouldn't be long before they carried her off to

sleep like that (if she wasn't sleeping already; it didn't *feel* like she was, even though she was sure she should have been; probably), so in the little time available she strove to work out where she was, or rather on whom. She could hear a muffled argument taking place out there, but the only words she made out came from the larynx above.

"We've had this conversation before," the giant woman's voice vibrated. "It was cheating then and it's cheating now. Put it away. I'm not going to ask you again."

More distant claims, muted by her impenetrable surroundings.

"No. This one's mine too, and I'm not putting her back till you play responsibly."

The world heaved again, squashing Dari tight in her own sheepishness. It felt so warm on her skin, so cosy even, but her recognition of this only hampered her more. And so, overwhelmed in these tides of timidity, she accepted that all this, whatever this was, was way beyond her, beside the fact – and this she knew well – that she was going nowhere fast. So she did what she always did: shut her eyes, allowed herself to feel it, to just experience it, while her mind wandered off on autopilot and fired back questions on why, just why, she had to be such a toy.

"It's just your luck, isn't it Dari?" she told herself – but all that came out was "Mmmphh..."



Mikoro had wound up somewhere quite different.

"Nyah! Where is this? Why's it so dark?"

She felt heavier than when she'd went to bed, and realised it was because she was in her hat and coat again. She didn't remember putting them on. Weren't they undergoing dry-cleaning?

She rubbed her eyes, then opened them to see a pair of goat-headed officials approaching her. They bowed to her respectfully, then one of them handed her a black envelope with a red wax seal.

"An invitation from our king," they stated.

"Huh? For me?"

Mikoro tore it open carefully and unfolded the letter. Her eyes scanned right to left. Sure enough, it was an invitation addressed to Ibaraki Mikoro. Although...

"Um. Why's there another name here? Are you sure you've got the right Mikoro?"

One of the officials took a closer look, then said: "Aha. The protocol here is that all the names you have carried are listed in reverse chronological order. That

means this would be your birth name. But since you had it for less than four months, it is little wonder you do not remember it.”

Mikoro shrugged and read the rest of the letter. The language was a little formalistic, but its gist looked like a request to help arbitrate in some sort of civil proceeding.

“Is this like some sort of, um, jury service?”

“You could think of it that way,” said the other official.

Her sister had done that once. She’d told Mikoro all about it afterwards. It’d been a complicated headache involving somebody’s chihuahua, someone else cosplaying in an undead costume (or more specifically that someone’s shins), and an eye-watering bill for orthopaedic surgery.

“Oohh, that sounds like fun!” said Mikoro. “Show me where!”

The goat-headed officials bowed again and escorted her through a huge gate in a city wall, above which hung an iron plate inscribed with the words: **WORLD OF DARKNESS**.

The fluffy captain followed them through tidy streets, past what looked like traditional little sweet shops and coffee-houses. They crossed an elegant bridge wreathed in red mists. Then the mists cleared, and Mikoro’s breath was stolen by a majestic green-tiled palace with soaring towers, rows of incensed braziers, and funny-faced monster carvings at the ends of its eaves.

As she marvelled at this citadel, the officials announced: “the Ten Kings” and drew aside. Down the steps came pairs of attendants holding lanterns and banners, followed by a bizarre procession of characters in sophisticated civil service hats, belts and robes. Each appeared to have his or her own favourite colours, and their faces were so stern and severe that Mikoro burst out laughing, it was so obviously all a performance. She only stopped when one of these individuals dropped the façade for just the briefest moment to cast her a secretive snigger.

Her surprise was not at his doing this, but at the fact she recognised him immediately.

“Wah! You’re that Himalaya guy from the pub!” she called out. “Didn’t you say your name was – um – Yan? Nyeh, nyeh...how come your head is red?”

The Ten Kings of the Underworld dismounted the steps, lined up in order of seniority, and shook Mikoro’s hand one by one. Only once they had done this did the fifth king, ‘that Himalaya guy’, who by some bureaucratic nicety was their *other* most senior figure and their representative in all dealings with the surface realities, inform Mikoro: “Yes that’s right, I have many names. Here I am known as Yama.

On behalf of the Underworld Palace I am most grateful to you for your timely response to our invitation.”

Mikoro’s jaw dropped. “Nyaah?! Underworld...P-Palace? Then that means...this, this...”

“There’s no need for shock,” said Yama, his voice gruff yet kind. “We called you here purely by way of routine procedure. As we explained in our missive, we would be most grateful if you were willing to help adjudicate a case to come before the court by sitting as an impartial third party. I can tell you now that the matter looks very straightforward and should not detain you long. Of course you are free to decline, but your participation would do your name great credit. In that regard we would make a formal note of your good service under your entry in the Register of Life and Death, which would be taken account of in any future engagements.”

Mikoro was at pains to answer immediately. Truth be told she was dumbfounded.

Hadn’t she been snuggled up in bed? Why was she of all people being asked to sit in an underworld court? Was there a special reason they’d called her, or did they simply ask people at random?

She had to admit, it was kind of exciting. Such an experience certainly promised to be out of the ordinary. But a nervous voice in the corner of her consciousness was mewling: people go here after they die, right? Isn’t this, like, frightening? Hold on, hold on.

One of the Ten Kings – surely a Queen, Mikoro thought – tapped Yama on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear.

“Complimentary drinks and snacks will be provided, naturally,” he added. “Our Senluo-brand biscuits are quite renowned. They are made only with the finest flour, donated in sacrificial offerings by the most scrupulous farmers.”

That sealed the deal. “Oohh, okay then!” Mikoro assented, and she clapped her hands eagerly. “Where do I go?”

“The King of Mount Tai will preside.” Yama gestured to one of the taller Kings; he had a bushy black beard and nodded to Mikoro in acknowledgement. “The case will be heard in fifteen minutes, so please attend outside the chamber in ten.”

With that the Ten Kings took their leave, and an attendant escorted Mikoro down a balustraded corridor past a great square pond. She peered in over the lacquered rail and saw huge fish as well as chubby crawling creatures she thought might be salamanders. They passed through a set of inner doors into the main

wing, then ascended in an ornate elevator to the eighth floor, where the hearing was due to take place in chamber number seventy-two.

The time came, and Mikoro was ushered into the jury box along with seven other people whose like she didn't recognise at all. One had a breathing apparatus connected to a water tank on their back, and another might not have looked out of place in a volcano.

The King of Mount Tai was already seated along with several junior judges, clerks and stenographers, while armed and armoured bailiffs guarded the doors. And then the complainant staggered in, a tall young man who broke furiously from his escorts. His fuzzy hair identified him as a computery type, and a badge on his leather jacket carried the coloured stripes of the Federation of Southern Slavs.

The presiding judge and court officials all stood and bowed to the jury box. Mikoro joined her colleagues as they stood and bowed back. Then all of them as one bowed to the angry litigant, who was too impatient to bow in turn and instead shouted: "Ridiculous, ridiculous! Tell me why I am here!" Plainly he was upset, but unfortunately he was one of those people whose intonation just sounds side-splittingly funny no matter what they are saying, and Mikoro had to clamp her hands over her mouth to contain her mirth.

"Please be seated sir," the King of Mount Tai addressed him, before putting on a pair of spectacles and scrunching up his nose at a sheaf of papers. "According to this report submitted on your behalf this very evening, Mr..." – he squinted – "Mr. Y. Y. Feldiir of Beograd, you are here because you have lodged a complaint that you were sent to the underworld unfairly. It is highly possible this was all a misunderstanding, so let us go through the matter calmly and I assure you we can sort it all out without delay."

At first the young fellow stood there uncomprehending, but then it was as though a light switched on behind his eyes and he grasped the situation perfectly. "Quite right, quite right," he said, each phrase winding up and down a full octave. "I mean, look at me. I'm clearly still alive, and you can all see I'm still alive, so obviously I should still be on my way home to play *World of Warcraft* rather than here."

He glanced at his watch. "We're raiding tonight you know?"

"Can you confirm what you stated in your deposition?" enquired the King of Mount Tai. And he read out word for word in a clear and deliberate voice: "I was walking home after work as usual, eating a sandwich and thinking about re-spec'ing my fire mage to frost, when I saw this strange girl standing by the bus

stop who looked like she was entirely made of cream. She was very cute, so I offered her chocolate, but the moment she took it out of my hand she ate me as well. Then everything went dark and felt cold like ice cream, and then I lost consciousness and the next thing I knew I'd ended up here.”

The judge removed his glasses and peered at this Y. Y. Feldiir. “Is this correct?”

“Well...yeah? That’s what I said. And I wouldn’t have said it if was wrong, would I?”

“In that case it’s quite clear what has happened here,” said the judge. “This case falls under the Voraric Exemption Law. Therefore there is no need for further deliberation, my decision can be made immediately.”

Mikoro heard a sneer behind her, and looked over her shoulder to see the lava-creature lounging with arms folded. In a voice like grinding rocks, it complained: “Didn’t he say he was planning to re-spec his fire mage to frost? That’s a disgrace if you ask me. Everybody knows that frost mages are terrible in raids. It’s entirely his fault he ended up here if he thinks such incorrect things.”

The King of Mount Tai banged a little gavel. “That will do, that will do,” he decreed. “The Voraric Exemption Law, which occurs as a natural outcome of a functioning universe, applies in all cases involving individuals who express Connection by consuming people whole in the manner here concerned. It holds that good cosmic function requires they be permitted to do this, but simultaneously, that those to whom they do it must not suffer pain beyond the extremely strict limits set out in articles three to seven, and furthermore, as per article eight, must come to no lasting harm. Any paradox these terms necessitate is therefore acceptable. That is why the accused in Mr. Y. Y. Feldiir’s case, known by the single name of Creame, was able to consume and digest the plaintiff and transfer some of his biomass to her own, but at the same time his body was not damaged and he was transferred here directly.”

“I still think it’s a disgrace,” that igneous griping went on in the background. “Pah! He’s serious, isn’t he? Frost mages. Brrrrr.”

The judge went on: “The Voraric Exemption Law carries fifty sub-clauses, mostly governing the nuances of its application to different categories of consuming and consumed party, but clearly this is an open-and-shut case in which none of these need apply. I therefore rule that Mr Y. Y. Feldiir be returned to the Beograd Terazije southbound bus stop at seven fifty-two in the evening local time, and allowed to carry on his journey with immediate effect.”

“Wait, that’s it then?” said the plaintiff, mildly surprised. “Oh. Okay.”

A rap of the gavel marked the end of the hearing, and with that the persons of the court stood up and bowed to one another respectfully. The King of Mount Tai and his officials left through wide double doors in the rear, while the claimant was escorted into a side room to receive a stamped certificate confirming the time, date and outcome of these proceedings along with two formal recommendations: to refrain from getting eaten again, and to not re-spec his fire mage to frost. Beside this document was a small vial of fruit spirit he was directed to drink, and in so doing return to the exact time and place of his interruption.

Equally surprised that she hadn't had to do anything, Mikoro accompanied the rest of the panel into a well-lit reception room with straw mats, sliding doors decorated with animal motifs, and framed black-and-white photographs of retired underworld kings. They were offered tea with biscuits that were every bit as tasty as suggested, and they mingled and chatted informally till one by one the court assistants stepped up to guide them back whence they came.

Soon Mikoro was the last one there. She started to worry as to whether they'd forgotten her, but then a goat-headed attendant tapped her shoulder, bowed low, and spoke: "Please excuse me, Captain Ibaraki. King Yama requests your honoured presence in his office."

"Nyah? Just me?"

"If you would."

Her heart skipped a beat.

"Uh-oh. Am I in trouble?"

"Nothing of the sort. His Majesty would merely like a word."

Wondering what could possibly be the matter now, Mikoro followed the attendant deeper and deeper into the palace sanctum, coming at last to an impressive corridor where all the doors were solid mahogany and the lanterns shone through lacquered purple frames. The attendant knocked on one of these doors and bowed Mikoro in.

King Yama looked up from his desk. "Ah, Captain Mikoro. Thank you for acceding to my request. Please, come in."

Mikoro tiptoed forward. The unexpected summons had made her nervous, a reaction not allayed by the king's towering hat or the row of spiky pot plants along his office wall.

"Um. Is this about the lawsuit? It finished so quickly, I didn't have time to –"

"Not at all, not at all," said Yama as he gestured to a cushioned seat facing his desk. "Quite the contrary. I apologise for taking up your time with such a trivial affair. In fact most cases that come before us are routine in that way. But disputes

do occur, so the admission of third-party perspectives like yours is essential to ensuring every case is heard fairly.”

“Oh.”

Mikoro sat down. Her eyes traced the rugged contours of her counterpart’s face as he finished scribbling off some correspondence. She fidgeted. It occurred to her that maybe she should take off her hat and place it on her lap. But Yama was keeping his on, and Mother Rin had always advised her not to initiate gestures of respect to people in authority till they had done so first, for such was the responsibility of their position.

He didn’t look like he would. The hat looked so indispensable to him that it might have been part of his head, Mikoro thought.

He probably slept in it.

“Was there, um...something you wanted to talk to me about?” Mikoro probed.

“Yes,” said King Yama. “Well, yes. Something like that.”

He rubbed his forehead; tapped his brush on his desk. He appeared to be having great difficulty deciding how to broach it.

“If I might put it this way,” he said at last. He raised a long-nailed finger and made a beckoning gesture, to which a secretary stepped from the shadows behind him. He leaned back and whispered something, to which the secretary gave a crisp nod and left the room. The king’s gaze returned to Mikoro.

“Here at the Underworld Palace, we are tasked with upholding the cosmic balance of life and death.”

“Wah,” reacted Mikoro. “That sounds...um, very important.”

“Not as important as you might believe. Did you know that most of reality operates at levels where the life-death distinction is irrelevant? If that sounds strange then I’ll show you our salaries to prove it. And yet, the cycles do matter, and our job is to make sure everyone gets fair participation in them.”

The bulge of his eyes couldn’t hide their weary glaze. It occurred to Mikoro that they were the same tired eyes as she’d seen in junior public servants, on those occasions Mother Rin had taken her to government ministries to get her registered for things or change details she didn’t like on her official documentation. Those people would beat around the bush with all manner of tiny stipulations they’d played no part in making, and Rin would show them great compassion over this, she really would. But in the end she’d not leave till she’d got exactly what she and the badass human rights lawyers she was about to have coffee with sincerely hoped, in gentleness and with every consideration, that they’d be so kind as to provide their full cooperation in securing for her.

All Mikoro could manage at first was, “Um, um”. Then she asked: “Does that mean everyone comes through here when they die?”

“Here or an equivalent accredited institution,” replied Yama. “There are several, and which one you attend depends on a range of factors. For instance your cosmic relationships and operative stories are taken into account, or it might be simply whichever centre is closest to your location. But of course, life and death are not a black-and-white matter. Death can be very contentious you know. That is why each day we hear millions of cases like that you kindly aided us with, brought by people who have died in circumstances they consider unacceptable. There might be errors, or exceptional procedures to consider like those you witnessed just now. A large part of our job is to make sure all these disputes are resolved into the correct continuation of people’s journeys, whether that means restoring them to their lives, allocating them to new lives or new realities, or referring them to a different department if action is required to correct imbalances brought about by their deeds in life.”

“Gwah. Y-You mean, punishments?” Mikoro’s eyes widened fearfully.

“Strictly rehabilitative, and only in the slenderest minority of cases,” said Yama. “Far more often it means therapy, compensation claims, cosmic investigations or other procedures of that nature. You can see why we are such a large and complex organisation.”

The secretary returned, carrying a stack of the most enormous leather-bound tomes Mikoro had seen in her life. They were lowered onto a side-table, at which point the king lifted the first book in the pile onto his desk, opened it out, and began to leaf through its pages. The calligraphy was very small, but Mikoro could see rows and columns laid out neatly much as in a telephone directory. It appeared to be a list of names. Each was assigned a date and time, some essential details, and a large space for any additional comments.

Some had a stamp at the end. Some several. Some none at all, yet.

Mikoro gulped. She was sure she knew what these lists were.

She asked in a tiny voice: “Is...my name in there?”

“Hmm?” Yama flicked through the pages, not looking up. “No no. The volume with your name is in a different section. It will not be on the shelf right now, because my clerk will have it out to update your record with a commendation for your attendance today. No, these volumes from the Register of Life and Death contain the entries for a different iteration of your reality. What I wished to ask you about concerns the matter of...aha. Here.”

He pulled down the bookmark-ribbon, flipped the volume round, and pushed it out for Mikoro to see.

“This is your friend, correct?”

“Nyaaaah! Wh-What is this?”

The pages were a total mess. Line after line of dates and times, places and details had been crossed out, one after another, and what was more the hand holding the brush had clearly grown increasingly fed up the further down the page Mikoro went, even dragging so hard as to tear holes in the paper in places. Instead of stamps, the stamp column carried dried and discoloured blotches, as though someone had had to hurriedly rub the stamps off with a chemical wax remover.

The king’s finger flicked to the next pair of pages. These were much the same, and so were the next, and the next, and the next after that.

Eventually the corrections ran out. The rest of this final page-and-a-half had been left blank, with the exception of a defeated scrawl: ‘FFS’.

Mikoro shuffled back to where this tangle began. Sure enough, there in the upper-right corner was the culprit’s name.

Dari.

“Gweh! Gweh, gweh...wh-why...”

“We were hoping you might help us answer that question,” Yama sighed, closing the book and replacing it atop the stack. “We are given to understand she is one of your closest friends.”

“Well, yeah. She is! Um, actually...where is she? We were travelling together, you saw us at the bar, she was...she’s...”

“Otherwise occupied,” Yama finished for her. “As usual. As you can see, she never appears for her proceedings, and every time we attempt to track her down our fetchers lose her trail. It is as though she never sleeps in the same...*bed* twice.”

The king tugged at his collar. He looked nervous. He added hastily: “I use that word in the functional sense, you get me. By the way, I’m sure you’ll understand that this conversation is strictly off the record, yes?”

“Never appears for her...but why, why...bwaaaah. I see.”

She’d worked out what this was about.

“So what you’re saying is...she keeps getting eaten and digested – *dying* – but –”

Yama shrugged. “If she fails to show up, she can never officially be said to have *died*. The Register clearly states the date, time and circumstances in which she is required to, just as it does for all living creatures, only in her case it repeatedly

fails to happen and her entry defaults to new information. How this can be, none of us understand. It is not as though she'd have anything to be afraid of. She could bring suit much like the plaintiff just now and be on her way with no trouble. The provision applied in his case would seem to apply perfectly to hers as well. Yet the routine summons seems never to reach her, or else she ignores it, which is unthinkable without submitting the proper documentation in advance. I have to admit it: we are all stumped."

He gave her an expectant look, as though hoping she might shed some light on this difficulty.

"Um, um? Nwah. I don't really know either..."

She'd rarely discussed it with Dari. It didn't sound pleasant, so she didn't like to press her kind little friend into dwelling on it. And Dari herself hardly wished to dampen Mikoro's mood with it either.

"Well there is this thing she's got," said Mikoro. "Her core..."

Yama stopped her. "We are aware she is imbued with a mechanism that operates some metaphysical field. As to its nature or the details of its function, we know nothing. Technically whoever applied it to her would have been considerate to send us a memorial about it in mind of – well yes, you see – its significant impact on our work. But of course, we are merely the civil servants aren't we, so it's beneath them to waste their time and energy filling us in on these lofty matters of policy."

He slumped his shoulders. Mikoro was struggling a little here, but all the same she couldn't help feeling sorry for this long-suffering cosmic official.

"Nonetheless," said Yama, "the matter of the core changes nothing. Anyone who reaches even a provisional mortal juncture is supposed to come here, at least to straighten out their records. And that is not 'supposed to' as in a law to be enforced, but 'supposed to' as in..."

He considered, then picked up his glass of water and tilted it over the spider-plant on his desk. "Like that, you see."

"Nyeeh. I don't get it. So does Dari die or not?"

The king grabbed the registry and opened it out on his desk again. "There's the answer," he said. "None of us has a damn clue."

"I, I...um. I'm sorry. I want to help, but I don't see how I can..."

"Never mind it. It was only a shot in the dark. We are completely out of options, and I thought there would be no harm in asking you while you were here, as one of those who know her best. Of course we don't *have* to know, and if her case

comes under a special higher remit then it's out of our hands. But professionally speaking it feels discreditable, and you can see for yourself how hideous it looks in the Register."

"It really does, doesn't it. If Kiyoko saw an account kept like that I think she'd scream."

"Did you know this Dari wasn't originally in our jurisdiction at all? A different centre shunted her onto us. They refused to deal with her case any further, insisting they lacked the necessary 'cultural expertise'. I don't see how they expected us to handle it any better."

Mikoro frowned. "It sounds like they just wanted the scribbles and crossings-out to go in your books instead of theirs."

"Well it can't be helped. Thank you for entertaining an old man's foolish request."

The king put back the book and stood up. He motioned to the secretary, who nodded again and carried the tomes from the room.

"You know," Mikoro thought to add as she stood too. "Dari's a sweet girl. She's one of the nicest friends I know, and I'm sure she isn't making trouble for you on purpose. Why don't you ask her in person? She and I are together on this trip right now, you even saw her in the pub last night. You could just..."

"Ah," said Yama, looking down at the desk. "That would be a little difficult, you see."

"Why? She's so gentle and harmless!"

"Well, you see...yes. The thing about Dari..." The king fidgeted with an inkstone. "She has, how do you say? *Guānxi*."

Mikoro recognised the word at once. Mother Rin taught her the big ones. And among the Chinese partners who often showed up at the Academy, this was as big as they came.

Mikoro realised the cause of Yama's discomfort.

"You're scared of her!" The notion alone made her giggle out loud. "Heehee! Because she's *connected*, right? Because of the big goddess friends she's made! Aaww. But come on, she's so kind! Surely you aren't worried she might complain to them about you, are you?"

Yama's pained expression told her she'd hit the nail on the head. "It has not escaped our notice," the king said carefully, "that she has forged tight relationships with persons at an executive level of cosmic power. What is more, it is well-known how adept she has proven at – well, you see – *zōuhòumén*."

Mikoro didn't know that one. "How adept she has proven at...huh?"

King Yama muttered, as though he shouldn't: "Going through the back door."

It was all Mikoro could do not to erupt in a shower of giggles, but her restraint won out, if for no other reason than that her underworld host looked so hard done by.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help, um, Your Kingness," she said. "If there's anything I can do instead..."

"Not at all, not at all," said Yama, managing a smile. He shook her hand across the desk. "We are flattered enough that you have given of your valuable time today. It's at our expense, needless to say, so your entry in the Register will be lengthened by that precise amount."

"Ooh." A voice in her head piped up, urging her to see if she could get them to add a few zeroes on the end in exchange for chocolate. It was chased back down by Kiyoko's louder echo: "Don't be naughty."

So instead she wondered something else. It didn't take her long.

She scooted round the desk and gave him a big hug.

"Strictly off the record," she said. "Heehee."

The king patted her hat. "Right. Yes."



"Good evening, Captain Ibaraki Mikoro," she heard as she left King Yama's office.

The voice, which was so mild it immediately evoked Mother Rin, came from an individual in a simple red shroud and sandals. He or she – probably both, or neither – had a shaved head, the tenderest of smiles, and a pewter staff from whose loops hung loose metal rings.

"Ooh. Hello. Who are you?"

"King Yama has asked me to escort you back to the surface," the person replied. "I am called the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha."

"Wah! L-Long..."

"Then please call me Jizō. I have many names you see. Now please, this way."

Mikoro followed this Jizō down the corridor, wondering why everyone round here seemed to have many names.

This guide of hers evoked a sheltering serenity. Truly it reminded her of Rin. It was that same aura of unconditional care, if perhaps stiller, more silent. Jizō's footfalls made not a sound. But that same silence turned awkward once they were descending in the elevator, prompting Mikoro to make an attempt at conversation.

“Um. Have you been working here long?”

“You could say I am one of the underworld’s more established servants, yes. However I accept no rank within its system, and prefer to extend my humble services on an more informal basis.”

“Ooh.”

“You are presently on a great voyage, I am told.” The guide’s voice washed into Mikoro’s ears like waves lapping on a shore. “Does it go well?”

“Yeah. Um, yeah, I think. It’s fun! I mean, there’s this big bad cow who’s blocking the way and wants to eat my friend, but other than that..”

“You have the face of one who has overcome hardships,” said Jizō with a tranquil smile. “That is well. However, please do not be too hard on yourself if ever you find the way too rough to go on.”

“I have to keep going though,” said Mikoro. “Dari and I have to get to Comet Island! So we can take the bunny-boat back to Mother’s friend; so I can go home...”

“I see. So you follow the ways to Comet Island?”

“Um, I guess so? The bunny seems to know the way, at least.”

“Then do not lose heart, gentle one. Continue on your path. Only remember as you go that the path can be said neither to exist nor to not exist.”

“Nyah? But that’s...what does that mean?”

“Only that reality has no paths to begin with. At sea it is even clearer than on land. Only in the act of passing a certain way is a path made there. In that regard, it is the same as hope.”

“Um. So what you’re saying is: the path isn’t the line through the earth, or the water, but the people walking along it?”

“What I am saying, friend Mikoro, is to not be afraid to make your own path.”

“Huh.”

“Your sweet companion understands this very well.”

“Nyah! You mean Dari?”

Jizō smiled and led her from the elevator.

Mikoro followed round the pond, down a set of corridors, across a paved courtyard, then out through the rear wall of the palace complex. When she spoke again, it was to say: “Um. Hang on a sec. Didn’t I come in the other way? I thought you were taking me back.”

“In this place you can only go; it is impossible to go back. That is why I must take you by a roundabout route. It means you will get a little tour of the underworld on the way.”

“Oooh!” went Mikoro, for this sounded like a special privilege indeed.

The houses, shops and storage sheds fell away, to be replaced by an unfurling landscape of wild mountains, ridges and gorges. Dark fogs shrouded the peaks, eerie mists swelled from the gullies, and strange birdlike shapes scythed through the claret skies. It was uncanny to be sure, but nothing like as terrifying as in the more fantastic video games and TV dramas depicting the afterlife, Mikoro felt.

Her guide led her up a well-worn track through one of those gorges. She didn't feel particularly threatened, even though there was no shortage of shadows whose teeming eyes peeped out at her. She felt calmed by the faint tap of her guide's staff on the dirt, each impact causing its rings to jingle. Still, it would have been easy to get lost in such a convoluted landscape, so she stuck close to Jizō just to be safe.

They passed a cave entrance with a high stone tablet beside it. Even though the light was dim Mikoro could see that it ended five metres in. Nonetheless curious, she ran up to look at the tablet. It read:

Way to the Eighteen Layers of Hell: The Hanging-by-the-Sinews Hell, the Hell of Injustice, the Hell of the Pit of Fire, the Hell of Ghosts, the Tongue-Extraction Hell, the Flaying Hell, the Grinding Hell, the Pounding Hell, the Hell of Drawing and Quartering, the Ice Hell, the Skin-Shedding Hell, the Disembowelling Hell, the Oil-Cauldron Hell, the Hell of Blackness, the Hell of the Mountain of Knives, the Hell of the Pool of Blood, the Avīci Hell, the Hell of the Steelyard Beam.

"Gwaaah! What the hell is this?" she cried out in terror.

"Oh? This is a prop the film crews use sometimes," said Jizō, coming up behind her. "The palace is unhappy with its budget, so it rents out parts of its estate for the entertainment industry. The ninth king in particular, King Lu Pingdeng, is a great patron of the arts."

"Nyahh...so you don't actually..."

"Of course not. In some realities they make up stories that people are tortured as punishment for evil deeds here. It might be good for filling cinemas, but really it is nonsense. Everyone knows that almost all evil arises from suffering. To heap more suffering on top of that would not only do nothing to address the conditions that cause the problem in the first place, it would promote a further abusive mentality."

Mikoro breathed a sign of relief.

"In any case," Jizō continued as they walked on, "by the time people arrive here their most intense emotions and traumas tend to have subsided. If not, they are referred for support. They only move on when they feel restored, and where apt,

have committed fair compensation to their victims through whatever means are available to them in subsequent stages of their journeys.”

Mikoro purred. “Aaww. Even though we never hear about this stuff back home, it makes me real happy to know it’s all going on in the background.”

“There is a remainder of course,” said Jizō as they crossed a fence using a stile. “A tiny number of people who have chosen evil entirely out of their own will, whether for personal gain or through unaccountable enjoyment of others’ suffering. Such people are extremely rare. They make up only an infinitesimally small number of living beings. On top of that, their majority is concentrated in one specific iteration of the world you come from: a planet of societies beset by a corruption from outside the functioning cosmos, and so set up to constantly produce such people. We are about to pass some facilities where they are held to account. But even here the goal is not to torture them, but to bring them to empathise with those their actions harmed and to take responsibility.”

So speaking, the Bodhisattva stopped by an iron door in the rock and bade Mikoro to look through its little window. On a plaque was engraved: THE OTHERWALL.

“Waaah. That’s a long wall!”

It must have stretched for miles and miles, winding and looping over the hills in the distance. But on closer inspection it turned out this wall had faces – lots of them, of all different colours and shapes.

The faces were moving. More accurately, they were spitting, cursing and vomiting insults.

“All realities are connected,” explained Jizō. “This is the place of accountability for Otherers: those people who draw imaginary lines to separate the citizens of reality, then hold that those on their own side of the lines are superior to those on the other sides. By becoming united as part of this single wall, they are taught that walls do not exist. No matter the variety of threatening lyrics in their anthems or colours on their flags, all their mistakes are the same.”

Mikoro saw that her guide was right: even if their languages were different they were all spluttering and swearing through the same twisted expressions, and there was no way to know if a face was, for instance, American, Hungarian, Polish, Filipino, Egyptian, Australian, Russian, French, Italian, Burmese or Israeli – most of which, in any case, either did not exist in her world or existed differently.

Mikoro watched an underworld clerk approach one of these faces and speak to it in the language of those Others that face despised most. The clerk wore a transparent screen over her face, and just as well, for much bile came spluttering

out in response. Another face was having headphones placed on its ears to stream foreign music, while yet another, a bloodcurdlingly hate-filled visage with the tatters of a saffron scarf jutting beneath its chin, was being fed...

“Oohh, that smells like the Punjabi rice my mother gets from the import shop!” said Mikoro. “It’s so fragrant and tasty! Why is that face spitting it out instead of enjoying it?”

Strictly speaking he wasn’t spitting it out, merely spitting, because the saliva he sputtered was also saffron and broke apart anything a different colour from itself.

“Because in his world,” answered Jizō, “an imaginary wall runs across the Punjab, so he associates this meal with those on the other side whom he fears as Other. You see, none of these people are actually being hurt. They breathe fresh air, are fed good food and have pleasant music to listen to. Eventually they realise that all their suffering emerges from lies devoid of meaning, and at that point they are ready to attend the compensation hearings of those they hurt with their imaginary nativism.”

“Oh.”

Mikoro didn’t know what to say. Everyone she’d met from that part of her world was so gentle.

“His brother was released yesterday,” Jizō added. “He felt so ashamed that he vowed never to pick up his cricket bat again until he had tracked down every person whose body he violated or whose homes or places of worship he burned down, and offered them a vial of his tears.”

They walked on to the gated entrance of a ravine filled with water, where a sign read STRAITS OF HOSPITALITY.

Jizō pointed out a boat. “You see those people on board? They died fleeing from wars, persecution, poverty and other hardships because no-one offered them shelter.”

The fluffy captain watched as the refugees were welcomed ashore by underworld officials. They were wrapped in towels, re-united with loved ones, and helped away to a reception centre to be offered teas, hot meals and dedicated counselling.

“All reality is in motion,” said Jizō. “Everything made of reality – every person, every thing – is on a journey. It is reality’s nature to move in search of improvement. This facility serves a double purpose: to support those who in life were dealt evil treatment for moving...”

New voices – shouts, diatribes – as the officials ushered a new crowd of people toward the vacated dinghy...

“...and to bring account to those who violated reality by inciting that evil treatment.”

This was a more troublesome bunch than the refugees. They were dressed in the suits of politicians and media barons, and they protested to their handlers with smug tirades about ‘swarms, ‘cockroaches’, ‘economic migrants’ and other such strange notions with no relevance to the current situation. ‘Take back control! Take back control!’ one rectangular-headed man in a flat cap chuntered for no reason while smacking the clerks’ protected faces with a beer-filled pint glass. Another, a lady with a sadistic smirk who had obviously come from an immigrant family herself, seethed with such an indiscriminate thirst for violence that her fists and teeth found the flesh of her fellow violators just as often as they did the officials’ armour. Yet another, a man with a bald head and distinctly reptilian face, was bleating nonsense in an accent Mikoro recognised from those troublesome long-term English refugee hamlets in the Great South Union: “The trash are replacing us! The trash are replacing us!” Resist as they might, those officials tied them with ropes, sat them down in the boat, then picked up poles and pushed it out to sea.

“Most of those you saw embedded in the Otherwall were destructively educated,” said Jizō. “Their hurtful motives were real, but manipulated to serve purposes they did not understand. These here are their manipulators: those who directed the violence of the Otherers to accrue power and wealth for themselves. They are now taught the suffering their evil actions caused, whether by being tossed at sea for as long as their victims or sealed away in the island prisons they constructed. Once they have learnt, they are brought back. Such people often go on to volunteer for reincarnation as life-jackets or lighthouses.”

Onward the Bodhisattva trod, robe fluttering in the dusty wind, and Mikoro followed till they came to a hatch in the grass of a wide open field. This too had a little window, and beside it a sign carried the words BEHAVIOURAL DE-ENGINEERING. Jizō bade her to peek in.

The underground room was brightly lit with featureless plaster walls. It harboured a pandemonium of noisy people – all adults – rampaging around in tantrums. There were underworld therapists among them too, but as they were all interacting in different ways it was difficult to make sense of what was happening.

“Every particle of reality is unique,” said Jizō. “All of nature knows it is folly to expect two particles to be the same, so how much more so the complex life they give shape to? In that sole corrupt reality I mentioned are those who waste their

lives attempting to force others to be the same. This is where they must un-learn their corrupt ways till they no longer threaten violence upon cosmic diversity.”

There was no way Mikoro could take in all that chaos at once, so her attention flicked from one encounter to another. In one corner an underworld therapist was refusing to take photographs of an adult until she dropped an obviously fake smile and adopted an expression that reflected how she actually felt. Further along another therapist was studiously ignoring a man who was screaming at her while shouting “I’m looking at you! I’m looking at you in the eyes so you have to do what I say!” Another was in the midst of a rampaging fit as a therapist attempted to reason with her that it was okay for people to pursue their own hobbies, rather than feign interest in activities they found vacuous just because others did the same. A fourth adult was obsessively doing up one of those penis-indicating neck-ribbons Mikoro had seen through Ammi’s binoculars and puffing himself up in the therapists’ faces, as though expecting that by toting those strips he deserved respect. Another pair was getting grenaded with exploding cakes, some pink, some blue, until they learnt that the colour of the cake had no bearing on its ballistic profile.

At the far end of the room, behind a protective screen, a dedicated specialist was chasing a squawking man and making constant grabs at his genitals as she instructed him in slow and emphatic tones: “It feels dreadful, doesn’t it? So what do you do when someone says they will do this? Yes – you vote *against* them! Not *for* them, but *against* them!” Oh, how the man tantrumed as she wrenched his hapless organ again and again! “You did vote for this explicitly, right? Are you sure this was what you wanted?” And it was plain to see that this professional derived no prurient interest from her duty but was merely carrying out the remedy required to restore the cosmos to good function.

“The process is arduous because they all convinced themselves they had no more to learn,” Jizō explained. “They called themselves ‘mature’ and ‘experienced’, indicating they believed themselves in a position to talk down to others. But the total existence of nature cannot be measured in the mere billions of years, so whose experience can amount to more than a mere fraction of this total? We are all children. That is why at night they open the shutters and let them see the stars, for none can look on the stars and think themselves an adult.”

“I don’t like these people,” said Mikoro with a pout. “It looks like you’re trying so hard to help them, but they’re just so arrogant! Are you sure you can heal them this way?”

“It is challenging,” Jizō admitted. “But we must try our best, because so long as they are like this they are the most dangerous people in all the realities. They would have it that life serves power, rather than power serve life. Theirs is the pride that turns worlds upside down and causes responsibility to run backward.”

They left the field and climbed a set of hills. As they ascended it began to snow, and it was here Mikoro noticed that the soles of Jizō’s sandals were as rugged and ribbed as those of her chunkiest walking boots. Soon they came to a vault in a slope which carried the engraving: SNOWFLAKE MOUNTAIN.

Mikoro peeked through. “Waah, what a fierce storm!” she exclaimed. “Um, where’s the mountain? I can hardly see anything!”

As she peered into the ferocious snowstorm, Mikoro realised she could spot people tied onto individual snowflakes by their arms and legs. The gale was blowing them about, flipping and spinning them relentlessly.

“All the realities grow upon the Ten Thousand Important Things,” said Jizō. “You know these well: they include kindness, compassion, care for those weaker than ourselves, and other considerations necessary for life to flourish. Some people forget this. Sometimes it is because they live lives that know only cruelties and torments, so their cynicism is quite understandable. But others turn their backs on a loving cosmos as a matter of proud ideology. These are people who cast violence and a hurtful will as signs of strength, and who mock care for others as weakness. They re-imagine reality as a bloodthirsty contest between winners and losers, and attempt to force all life to exist on those shocking terms.”

“Um. So they get stuck to snowflakes and blown about?” Mikoro questioned.

“This teaches them that what they consider weakness is in fact incredible strength. Notice that no matter how they are beaten and buffeted by the wind, the snowflakes do not break. The violators snarl because they cannot imagine their snowflakes will hold out, but it is invariably their own brutish illusions that will melt first.”

As they crossed the hills an ache gnawed in Mikoro’s knees. “Nyeh, we’ve been walking for ages!” she moaned at last. “Are we nearly there yet?”

“The way out is just beyond that river,” said Jizō, pointing away down the slopes. “Not far now. But stay close to me here, and hold tight to my cloak. You must beware the cosmic allure of what lies behind that door there.”

“Ooohh.”

This final door was embedded in a piece of landscape seemingly made out of bits of all possible landscapes stitched together. It was impossible to describe, and just to look at it, to sniff its scents and listen to its sounds made Mikoro quite dizzy.

She clutched her guide's red fabrics tight as she focused her eyes on its plaque, which read: WOMB OF ALL REALITIES.

"Before you look, I must explain something," said the Bodhisattva. "There are causes and consequences, shoulds and should nots, ways of callings things good or evil. Some are universal, while some can be viewed from multiple perspectives. All this is accounted for within the system of which this realm is part. But in that damaged world I have mentioned, and there alone, things have broken in from outside the system. These things are not merely wrong, but abominable at a level that minds and words cannot contain."

Once more it flashed in Mikoro's memory: a set of binoculars; a chain of rocks... She attempted: "Like, you mean – nyah – male over female..."

"For example. Or – consider the carnal enjoyments by which you and your friends bond at your Chaldea Academy. There are those who – "

"Gwah! H-How do you know about that? It's not, um, *wrong*, is it?"

"Oh my dear, no. The very converse. Personally speaking I am a great fan of your monthly newsletters and I read them all from top to bottom. Your friends' compassionate antics restore vigour to my heart, especially after those nights when my work is most gruelling. What *would* be wrong, if you can imagine this, is when people impose their bodies by force on those who do not want it."

"Um. Do you mean like – like big women do to Dari?"

"No. Dari's interactions appear to serve a more complex mandate unique to her, and such is her character that there is no evidence she is substantially harmed by it. However, can you imagine such things done to a person they would genuinely distress? To whom they would constitute a severe and lasting violation? Purposefully, that is, and by force, as an act of power and pleasure in their suffering."

Mikoro gaped. No, she found she could not imagine it. Who could?

"Furthermore, can you imagine a person who not only commits such unthinkable acts, but justifies them as rooted in nature and seeks to convince others that it is so?"

"Nnnahh! B-But that's – that's horrible!" The mere thought was so vile that water surged in her eyes. "Surely it can't be possible. It can't be! Can it?"

"You are correct. Nowhere is it possible. It belongs nowhere. But in that world, things from nowhere have managed not merely exist, but to sustain that existence through the mass capture of accepting imaginations. Therefore we must resort to

the most drastic of measures to separate out that nowhere-force and cast it from the structure of all actual and potential realities.”

“But, but, where is Nowhere? Isn’t everywhere somewhere? D-Dari says...”

Jizō raised a hand to the peephole. Mikoro trembled, not sure she wished to draw any closer to this soul-chilling subject. But she was too curious by nature not to look.

“Wow! What is that? It looks like a...like a...!”

A black hole? Or rather a *red* hole, swishing and slurping amid the sea of stars. It hungered. Oh, how it hungered. Matter and energy whirled in a circle, packing so tight into its near orbit that they congealed into a solid lip-shaped – well, there was no other way to put it – a vulva.

Over this maw was suspended a plank of unhewn wood, and as Mikoro watched, a muscular young man in a black tank top was marched onto it by a pair of underworld officials in full-body aluminium protective suits. A gelled blond pate and wispy goatee framed a face hewn from the very stuff of cocksure thuggery, and he raved and shouted as a third official read from a stone tablet. Mikoro could just make out that magistrate’s voice above the gurgles and spurts of the singularity. This individual, whose name she didn’t catch, had had his life interrupted under the conditions of the Voraric Exemption Law, but under its fiftieth sub-clause, its provisions could not apply to him because he had previously wrought existential cosmic damage, and caused acute individual suffering, by employing his genitals as violent instruments in a noxious fantasy of male power. Thus the only recourse was to cast him back to the origin of all realities, for there and there alone, pressed up against the outermost boundary of all existence, could the corrupting influence be wrung across its edge into non-existence. Only so liberated could this creature then be reborn with a new name and form and given a fair chance to live responsibly.

Thus did the pair of officials haul him forth by his arms and hurl him from the plank. He fell, shrieking all sorts of slurs too offensive to print as he turned and twisted through space – till in an instant the gigantic space-vagina slurped him in, and that was that.

“Waah,” uttered Mikoro.

The villain had been hard to fix eyes on. Truly there’d been something about him that *couldn’t exist*. But she had to admit, this sight was hypnotic.

Another name was read off the tablet as they brought a second man onto the plank. This one was an even nastier piece of work, for they could drag him not an

inch without him swearing and thrashing and kicking and striking his military finger in bilious contempt. His stream of invective did not cease for a moment, and its every third or fourth word was a coarse term for bodily waste or genital anatomy repurposed as an insult.

“Hey, I recognise that guy!” said Mikoro. “Isn’t he that architect? He is! That famous one, who designed that amazing bridge in São Paulo! Yeah, that’s it – the Bridge of Rainbows! But, but – his eyes...they’re so full of hate...”

“In your reality he might well be someone you know,” said the Bodhisattva, “but in its corrupted iteration he saturated himself with the Nowhere-influence and went on to cause tremendous suffering as the leader of Brazil.”

The man was spitting in his handlers’ faces, one then the other, then trying to clamp his teeth upon their suits; and when that didn’t work he ejected from somewhere about his waist a stream not of semen, but rather some corrosive colourless liquid not found in reasonable people.

Down he went, obnoxious fluids spiralling from both ends. The Womb of All Realities visibly spluttered at his ingress. His flavour must have been disgusting.

“And now we must ford the River of Three Crossings,” said Jizō.

As they approached a pair of elderly officials with horns, fangs and banners bowed in welcome and introduced themselves as the Commissioners of the Bridges. Behind them stood a great set of scales.

“The Crossings are the first place where people entering the underworld have the balance of their deeds checked and adjusted,” Jizō explained. “The Commissioners assess that balance by weighing your clothes on the scale. If they indicate you have led a worthy life, striving to apply your power to benefit others or at least to not do them harm, you may cross the bridge. If you gave it a decent effort but perhaps cut corners or made compromises, you must wade across the ford through the raging shallows. And if you knowingly abused your power to cause pain and suffering, then you must swim, making up the first of the difference by offering bites of your flesh to the hungry river creatures.”

One of the Commissioners, a charming old lady whose unfamiliarity with dentistry did not diminish the cheer in her face, looked over Mikoro with approval. “My, what a beautiful coat you wear,” she remarked. “Since you are here on invitation you need not be measured, but I must admit, I have rarely seen clothes so marvellous. Purely out of curiosity – may I?”

Mikoro liked this crone’s friendly manner, so she slipped out of her sea-coat and handed it over. With impressive strength the Commissioner hefted it onto the

balance – and with a CLANG! the pans tore from their chains and the device fell to pieces.

“Gwaah!” Mikoro bawled. “Nyah! Nyah! Uh-oh.”

The Commissioners burst out laughing. She couldn’t understand why.

“Um! Did I break it? Nyaaaah! I’m sorry!”

“Not to worry, not to worry,” chuckled the other Commissioner through his tusked moustache, as he handed the coat back to Mikoro. “Honestly we should have known better. This coat has not been properly gifted to you yet, has it? That means it carries the weight not only of your deeds as its wearer, but also those of its creator. What just happened merely indicates that the latter is someone who by virtue of their good service has transcended the cycle of life and death and stands at an executive level of cosmic power. You should wear this coat with pride, young captain.”

“B-But, your scales...how will you...”

The old lady chattered in a guttural language Mikoro had never heard before, and the fluffy captain looked round to find her talking into an old-fashioned mobile phone. “Don’t trouble yourself,” she said as she flipped it shut and returned it to her pocket. “The machinist is already on her way to fix it.”

And so with this satisfactory outcome, Mikoro waved goodbye to the Commissioners and followed her guide across the bridge to a broad shoreline. A thousand pinwheels rattled in the breeze here, and the dusky sand was strewn with little towers of rocks and pebbles.

“This is where I take my leave,” said Jizō. “The way out is just ahead.”

Mikoro flung her arms round the red-robed Bodhisattva. “Aaww! Thank you for coming such a long way just to show me out! You are so kind.” And because she just couldn’t help it, she reached up and fiddled with the metal rings on Jizō’s staff, smiling as their chimes soothed her soul.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” the guide replied, stroking her hair with one hand. “Much of my work takes place here, so I was hardly required to go out of my way.”

“Here? You mean, on this beach?”

Mikoro stared out over the sand. Dark shapes coalesced on it. They were shuffling about, weeping by the waterside, or forlornly stacking those rocks into columns.

Jizō explained: “I specialise in taking care of the lost souls of travellers, children, and those who died uncared for. There remain many who have been unable to find their way into the underworld because they were forgotten about by their

societies. All those you see here died because they were betrayed by those around them who violated their right to live in a caring universe. They might have pleaded for help only to be told lies such as that no-one cares, or that life – as opposed to the choices made by those speaking – is tough or unfair. They might have been labelled as weak, weird, defective, lazy, melodramatic, or as scroungers. Often they were told they should compare their suffering with that of others, as though that made it unimportant. As you see then, these cold and hungry ghosts lack the love, food or supplies to continue on their journey, and so are stranded in this liminal space till the situation is remedied. To that end I have vowed to take responsibility for each of them and to never advance to Buddhahood till not one soul is left behind.”

Mikoro watched a spectre pile up six or seven pebbles, only for the tower to collapse as it placed the eighth. The spirit sighed soundlessly and started again. It was a heartbreaking sight.

“I want to help,” said Mikoro. “What can I do?”

“Any currency is of help to them,” said Jizō. “You could make offerings of money or food when you get back, or tell others of – what are you doing?”

At the words ‘any currency’ Mikoro had gone marching straight onto the beach. The ghosts slowly turned their heads her way as she advanced on the nearest spirit with arms outstretched.

“Captain Mikoro,” Jizō called out. “These poor souls have been so wronged by the living that they bear a terrible – ”

But as for a terrible what, Mikoro would never find out. So heartfelt, so energetic was her hug that the ghost wavered and bristled in surprise; and then it glowed in her warmth, its edges shimmering like the setting sun’s reflection in a rippling sea.

The ghost solidified – took shape. It was a small child. His naked body was covered in bruises, left by parents who’d considered it their right to discipline him with their fists, or worse, prior to fulminating on social media about how politicians they disagreed with were all pedophiles. As the child stared up in wonder at Mikoro, she thought she could see the cracks in his shattered psyche fill with her love, and fuse shut; and the child smiled, then giggled just like her, and finally hugged her round the legs before scampering off for the bridge, flapping his arms and laughing all the way. He stumbled on a rock and fell over, but crawled to his feet without pain and scooted on.

She hugged another. It turned out to be a fur-clad mountaineer who’d frozen to death in a crevice. Then another, a mere baby, left in a rubbish skip for not

having the genitals her family desired. Another youth had drowned after leaping from a pier when his government had deported his mother for being the wrong colour. One after another she embraced these ghosts, reconnecting them in the web of cosmic love, and soon they were piling in on her as she laughed and burbled at the heart of a mountain of cuddles.

When the clouds of sand and plasma settled, no hopeless shapes remained on the shore. In their place was a procession of all sorts of people, chatting and joking and laughing heartily, in many cases for their first time ever, as they stood in a queue that wound all the way down the beach.

Mikoro bounded back to her guide, whose face was struggling so hard not to lose its unbreakable poise. “Thank you, my dear friend. You didn’t have to do that,” was all the Bodhisattva could say.

“Heehee! You go and take a nice afternoon off, okay? Remember what my mother says: you have to permit yourself to get enough rest!”

Something else occurred to her, and she dug her hands in her pockets. “Here,” she said. “These are for you.” And she handed Jizō her pack of roasted peanuts.

“My dear, my dear. This is too much. My favourite flavour too. What a treasured guest you are, Ibaraki Mikoro. I shan’t forget. And though I do not expect to see you here again for some time, please know that you and your friends have nothing to fear from the realities beyond.”

A final hug, a parting bow of respect – and Mikoro was alone.

“Wah. I suppose that’s that then. Do I just, um, keep going along here?”

She trod on warily. Then her foot slipped, the ground gave way and she fell, and fell, and fell...

“Nyeeeeeh...!”



“...Nwah!”

She bounced onto something soft.

“Nnmhhh. Nyam nyam. Fluffy...”

A twitching sensation under her mouth, and a pinprick of sound: “Mmmff! Gmmppff!”

She pursed her lips. “Pftftfth. Pfffhhh.” The twitching intensified.

“Prrblfthh – nyah?!”

She spun round, sat bolt upright. Morning light streamed through the gap in the curtains. There was the ram-shaped headboard, the pillows woven with flying sheep, the woollen duvet, the pastel walls.

She was back.

“This is...ooh. Was it...all a...?”

“Mmph...glmmph...”

She looked down. There was Dari, arms wrapped round herself as she rolled left and right on the pillow. Her athletic little body was reddened all over, and her hair flew in all directions as she unleashed such incredibly cute squeaks and groans.

“Ooh. Looks like Dari’s having a fun dream too.”

“Mmnh, s-stop! So...tight...l-let me...”

She placed her fingertip on her wiggling friend.

“Wah. So warm.”

“Aahh!” Dari jolted awake. “Nnhh, nnhh – M-Mikoro?! Wh-Where...”

“Heehee! Good morning Dari! Um. How come you’re all hot and sweaty?”

The explorer flopped back into the pillow, heartbeat racing. Breathing heavily, she groaned: “Urrgh. J-Just a dream...no way...”

“Hey, I had a dream too!” giggled Mikoro. “It was so weird! I was in this, um...place.”

The cat-girl’s face turned puzzled. Snippets and snapshots spun across her senses: a letter of summons, tall hats, the whap of a gavel, the clink of metal rings, and this inexplicable hole, throbbing and spinning in the tapestry of stars. She could feel them there, knew what they were. She just somehow couldn’t connect them into words.

“A big place,” she said at last. “A *big, big* place. I saw so many things!”

“Fancy that,” uttered Dari, opening her eyes and staring at the ceiling. “A *big big* place. Yeah. I relate to that.”

“Ooh! Ooh! Did you see many things too?”

“Nope. I honestly can’t say that I did.”

Mikoro put her nose right up to her and peered suspiciously. “You dreamt you were somewhere that made you go mmph mmph,” she stated. From there it was not a complicated calculation.

“Yeah. Extraordinary, right? What were the odds? Million to one I’d say.”

The cat-girl grinned. “Oooohh! Heehee! I get it!”

“I’m sure you do. Look, would you give me a lift to the sink? I’d better rinse off before we go anywhere.”

She climbed into Mikoro’s obliging hands.

“Urgh. I wonder if it was those mushrooms...”

“You were in a tummy!”

“No Mikoro, I’m pretty sure I wasn’t. No, wait – the cold tap, please. Thank you.”

“Um, um. A mouth then?”

“Not a mouth. Come on Mikoro, do we have to do this? I just woke up.”

“Oooh, I know! A bum!”

“M-Mikoro...”

“Heehee! That’s it, isn’t it? That’s always it! I’m right, I’m right!”

“No you’re – argh, I didn’t mean...!”

“Nrrrr? Not a bum? In that case...ooh, I’ll get it!”

The gush of running water obscured Mikoro’s further attempts, though she did get there – on her very next guess, to be precise. She was still teasing Dari about it as she carried her back, freshened up but no less flushed, at which point, much to the little explorer’s relief, she got distracted by a happy chorus of *Beeeh! Beeeh!* and rushed to pull back the curtains.

“Yaay! Look, Dari, look! Our friends have woken up too!”

“I see them Mikoro. Don’t hold me so close when we pass them this time, okay? Now let’s check if they left our clothes outside the room.”

Mikoro left Dari on the window bay and made for the door. “Yaay!” she called out. “They’re all here in a big basket! Oooh, my coat smells so fresh and clean!”

Dari smiled. It was all fine. Clean clothes, morning exercises, a nice breakfast...

“Dari?”

“Yes, Mikoro?”

“What’s more smelly, the sheep sneeze or the cleavage sweat?”

Dari ground her teeth. When the rush of heat subsided she took a long, deep breath, and told herself: “Look at the sheep, Dari. Just look at the sheep. Fluffy innocent sheep.”

On they came, leaping into the field across the drystone wall. Each sheep took a mouthful of grass as it landed then munched on it as it went on its way; and then it would raise its snout and bleat to the sky, high and clear, welcoming in a new day of life at the crossroads.

THE WAY OF THE

馬
HORSE

Mikoro glugged down a glassful of fresh cold milk. She burped, wiping her mouth with her coat-sleeve. Then she asked:

“Dari? What do you think happens after we die?”

“What do I – huh?”

The little explorer looked up from her Dari-scale bowl of muesli. “Gosh Mikoro. That’s a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

“Um. Guess I’ve just sort of been wondering.”

Dari considered her fluffy friend, getting to work up there on a strip of bacon the length of an airstrip. They’d secured the same table as last night, with that bench full of cushions by the window, only now the lounge had transformed into a breakfast room. Its nest of self-service tables overflowed with cereals, porridges and soups, while a battery of food-warmers dealt out baked and fried delights from a hundred continents. Toasts and pancakes, croissants and pastries sat piled up in baskets, jars of honey and pitchers of milk were in plentiful supply, and back and forth through this cornucopia swept Mary and her colleagues, armed with pots of tea and fresh roasted coffee.

A sharp little fang tore the bacon-airstrip in two. “I mean – *Amff!* *Nyamff!* – do you think we just, I dunno, disappear? Or do we go somewhere else, like an afterlife? Or – *glmph* – maybe we turn into toadstools?”

“Toadstools. Nghh. I dunno Mikoro, isn’t this a little heavy for a breakfast topic?”

“It’s just, I thought maybe you’re a good person to ask, because you...you know...”

"I...what?"

"You get eaten and, um, um...digested up."

Mikoro wasn't the sort to tread on eggshells. More to stomp all over them in fluffy iron boots.

"Mikoro, I'm not sure I really want to – gahh. Look, why now?"

"It's just, this dream I had last night. I can't really explain it. But it's made me think. I used to think, when we die, then that's just it – *whoof* – we're gone. Like, remember how distraught I was when I got you digested by Mother by mistake, that first time I found you in my room?"

Dari's spoonful of muesli wasn't tasting so good as the last.

"But now I'm wondering – d'you think there might be more to it than that?"

"Because of your dream?"

"No, not just that. All this, too. All these amazing things we've seen on this trip together. I never imagined there might be a demon piggy who was made of just pure horrible, or a dog who can play the guitar, or, you know, that the sun might be this woman who likes to play *Mario Kart*."

"Hmm. Yeah. I guess it must feel pretty surprising. But that's what travelling's like Mikoro, you know? You get to see all kinds of things you never thought to imagine."

"And then I remembered that all along, I've had this little friend who even when she dies, just comes back like it's nothing. Isn't that just as hard to imagine?"

Maybe the milk is a little off, Dari told herself. Or the almonds are past their use-by date. How strange. Mary said they use only the freshest ingredients.

"Nyeah nyeh," Mikoro rambled on, "so *that* made me think: when you get, you know, absorbed, does it count as actually dying? I mean, what does it feel like when it happens?"

Dari shut her eyes and took a long sip of tea. More a gulp, really. Any longer and it would have been a swig.

Just answer her Dari, said Dari the evidence-based historian. You know there's no outrunning her inquisitive tongue.

"Well Mikoro, it feels like..."

She paused.

"Actually – I don't know what it feels like. I mean, I was about to say I feel this sizzling on my skin; and then I'm gasping for breath, not – *haah-haah* – like this but here, from my lungs; and sometimes the panic sets in, though not so much nowadays, now I generally know what to expect. That's usually the furthest I get

before I pass out. And when I wake up, I'm outside again and feel all awake and refreshed. Usually."

"Um. So you never know what it feels like at the moment of...you know..."

Dari shrugged. "Isn't it the same when you fall asleep?"

"Nyah. Yeah...I guess so. I know when I'm sleepy, and feel my body getting heavy and stuff, but I never actually..."

"Well, there you are."

"B-But, wait! That's different, isn't it? I mean, if you're getting digested, doesn't that mean...you know, your body..."

Dari flinched. The bacon dangling full of holes wasn't helping.

"Oh come on Mikoro. Do we have to do this over breakfast?"

"Aahmf, amff! I'm just curious! Is there ever - you know - blood, or anything? Or, um, you know, bits falling off..."

Dari choked on a chunk of raisin, put down her spoon and double-facepalmed. "Oh, of all the - no. No, Mikoro, there isn't *blood or anything or bits falling off*. Not as far as I can tell. But maybe that's because it's dark, or I'm in too much of a flap, or busy brushing goop off my skin or trying to stay afloat or reading the newspaper or - I dunno!"

"Waah! Um, um - sorry Dari. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's alright." Deep breaths. "No, no, really, it's alright. You're my friend, and you're worried about me. I get that. And I appreciate it. Thank you Mikoro."

"Well I am kinda concerned."

"Because you don't want me to get hurt? It's okay Mikoro. I still won't pretend it's fun, but it's not so unbearable that - "

"Well, yeah - that - but also because there's these guys with this great big book with the names of everything that's alive and the dates they're supposed to die, and yours gets crossed out again and again and they don't know why and they say you never turn up to tell them if you're doing it properly, and they looked, well, kinda fed up and say they've sent people to find you. And they have tall hats."

Dari's spoon froze mid-foray. She tapped it against the side of the bowl. *Clink-clink-clink*, it chimed against the porcelain.

"Right," she said. "Right. I'd better speak to Mary about those mushrooms."

"Nyaah, Dari, wait! I'm serious!"

"Yeah, I'm sure you - "

Dari broke off as Mikoro's truthful eyes loomed unmissable. Come on, said that inner voice. Evidence. You know she wouldn't lie about something like that. And

you absolutely know that that was *not* the sort of thing Ibaraki Mikoro just makes up.

“A great big book with all the names of...nnnnhh!” A spiny caterpillar danced merrily down her spine.

“And another thing,” said Mikoro, webbing her fingers together. “I was thinking, you see.”

“Help,” Dari didn’t say.

“If it’s true,” said the cat-girl slowly, “that your core passes all the way through whoever ate you and regenerates you later, then doesn’t that mean, *logically*,” – in Mikoro’s voice the word alone struck terror – “*logically*, you’d be waking up in lots of – um. You know? Sewers.”

Dari opened her mouth to swear, but once more her train of thought crashed dead into a wall.

“Do you know Mikoro,” she said slowly, “you’re right. You’re right. I’ve never really thought about that. No, I only remember one or two sewers. Usually I come to my senses on a floor, or on a bed, or in a field, or somewhere spacious close to where I – hang on, you’re getting me muddled here! N-Now look, can we go back to that business with the list of names – ”

Mikoro’s eyes narrowed shiftily. She raised her fingers one by one: “Doesn’t fall into sewers. No blood or bits. Doesn’t *really* remember what it feels like to die. A bunch of people with angry noses and big beards and hats wanna talk to her about it. And of course, keeps going round looking for women to eat her...”

“Nnngh, Mikoro! I d-don’t go around looking for – ah, what am I even supposed to...forget it.”

“Nyahah, I get it!” said the fluffy captain, grinning with dreaded glee. “Maaaybe,” she set forth, “Dari-digestion isn’t the same as, um, *ordinary* digestion. Don’t you think it sounds like your *core* does a ton of more complicated stuff? Like, you know, getting you out of tummies without having to go down toilets, or letting them absorb from your body without it actually, you know, maybe really breaking, or giving you back your clothes, or – nyahah – messing up record books and giving high blood pressure to people in big hats!”

Dari stared down at her chest. Her tube top had returned to its rightful greenness. It was so clean it almost shone, felt so smooth against her skin, and best of all was back to its satisfying stretchiness. That was reassuring – but not enough to distract her.

It was under there somewhere. Her 'core'. That *cell*, that *essence*, that *something or other* – that *black box*, the scientists at the Chaldea Academy had termed it. She was grateful to it for keeping her safe time and again, of course she was. But she was damned if she had a clue how it worked, even after all this time, and that was a less than convenient fact in the face of a giant hyperactive cat-girl who wants to know everything.

She'd finished her bowl of cereal without realising it. She climbed upon the table and placed her hands on her hips.

"Right. Mikoro. What exactly did you say about me to these *people in big hats*?"

"Um! Um! I told them – um, I said Dari might be – I forgot."

"Oh. Alright. You forgot."

"Nyah, nyah..."

"Don't worry about it. More attention like that's just what I need, isn't it? I mean, it's not like I've already got the fingers of some of the most powerful goddesses in the universe following me around and, oh, I dunno, literally shoving me straight up their arses, right?"

"And that is why it can be said," commented a nasal voice, "that Heaven and Earth are equally low, and mountains and marshes are on the same level."

"Nnnnh!" Dari froze like a cracked pane of glass right before it shatters.

"Gwah?" Mikoro sat up in equal surprise.

Not wanting to turn, really not wanting to turn, Dari turned.

A white horse had joined them. Not a horse-human, nor a human who looked like a horse. An actual horse.

"Some might object," sniffed the horse, hoofing a bowl of oats onto their table, "that mountains and marshes must, by definition, be high and low to each other. But that is the limited point of view of those who crawl their whole lives on the ground. If you travel to a higher or lower angle, you will see that the mountain and the marsh lie on the same plane."

High up his tall face, a bulging black eye cast Dari half a squint. She cringed.

"It is for example possible to attain this angle," the horse added, "if you look to one from inside the other. You might lack line of sight, but assume perfect information and it is so."

He dipped his nose in the bowl and slurped noisily on the oats.

"Nnnn...nnnn..." Dari whined in perfect mortification.

"Oohh," went Mikoro in awe. "A talking horse."

“I put it to you,” said the horse, raising his muzzle, “that a white horse is not a horse.”

“Um. It isn’t?”

Dari edged back to her seat. Her hands found her napkin and pretended to wipe the lower part of her face by way of excuse for an embarrassment-shield.

It wasn’t terribly effective.

“And what do you say,” said the horse, “to that proposition?”

“Um, um – who are you? Nyah. Aren’t you a white horse?”

“Whether I am a white horse is secondary to the matter,” he said with a snuffle. “I challenge you again: a white horse is not a horse.”

“N-Now look,” started Dari, “you can’t just listen in and invite yourself to – ”

But Mikoro, who couldn’t resist leaping at whatever string was dangled in front of her, jumped in: “Oooh, I get it! This is like one of Tamamo’s riddles, isn’t it? Nyah, those are so fun! Nyamh. Okay. Lemme see. A white horse...”

She slathered her toast with marmalade and chomped it over with the problem.

“Um. But wait a minute. How can a horse talk? In words we understand, I mean, rather than, you know, in horsey.”

“Nngh. C-Could that be the *arsnng*h – I-I mean, the answer?” dared Dari, still steaming like a tiny humiliated power station. “When we say *horse*, we generally assume an animal that doesn’t talk. But this white horse can. So by that definition, maybe he isn’t what we usually call a *horse*?”

“You have found a way,” said the not-what-we-usually-call-a-horse.

“Ooh, I see, I see!” said Mikoro, excited. “Or, um, um – didn’t we see a white horse last night? Whiter than you, but strange, as though it – nyeh. I don’t quite remember.”

“You have found a second way,” said the horse. “The principle is the same. I know that horse. We dined together last night. We discussed religion and politics. Good corn. Now that horse can fly, and when most people say *horse*, they mean an animal whose characteristics – which, I should remind you, are as illustrious as they are many – do not include the ability to fly. By that definition, that white horse is indeed not a horse.”

Dari thought to herself: Is this my life now? It’s not enough *being* breakfast, I can’t even get through my own without the certainty of death and horses.

“I supply a third example,” said the horse. “The famous monkey from the Island of Flowers and Fruit went on a long journey in service of a monk from Tang. The

monk rode on a white horse, but actually that horse was a dragon. Therefore, he was not a horse.”

“Nyehh! So it’s like – I’m a pink cat, but actually not a cat!”

“Mikoro, I’m not sure that’s – ”

“There is a simpler way,” the horse persevered, “that a white horse is not a horse.”

“Gwah.” Mikoro chewed on her fingertip. “Um, um – how?”

“So far we have considered the word *horse*. I would invite you to consider the word is.”

“Nyeh? But...is is is, right? What else can it be?”

“I get it,” said Dari quietly. Occasionally the women who took an interest in her were philosophically-inclined, and put her in positions where it could hardly be helped if their wisdom joined the equation of their absorptive exchange.

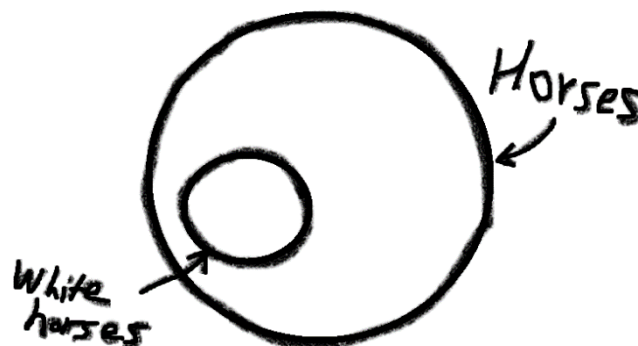
“Think about it Mikoro. Mikoro is Mikoro. Mikoro is a sea captain. The word is means two different things there, right?”

“Um.”

“Or to put it another way: if it didn’t, someone could walk into this pub and ask for Mikoro, and Mary could bring them to a different captain and say, since Mikoro and a sea captain are the same thing, to want Mikoro is to want any captain. Do you see?”

“Um, um...kinda, I guess...”

Wham. The horse’s hoof flattened a napkin upon the tablecloth. With his other front hoof he flourished an ink brush, somehow customised for a horse-hoof’s collateral grooves, and scribbled a diagram. It looked something like this:



“Wah. A horse who draws and writes too...”

“The large one is correct,” said the horse, indicating Dari with his brush. “If *is* is taken to mean *is part of a set*, it clearly stands that a white horse is a horse. However, if we interpret *is* to mean *is identical to*, then quite clearly a white horse is *not* a horse, because horses and white horses are ontologically distinct. The category called *horses* is not the same as the category called *white horses*.”

“Gwah. I don’t know what kind of vegetable an ontology is, but I think I get it now.”

“The large one,” Dari repeated to herself. “The large one. The large one. Actually, no, I’m not sure I want to know.”

“And what,” said the horse, “are we to conclude from this?”

“Um, um, um. That sometimes a white horse is a horse, and sometimes it’s not?”

“And the significance of that is?”

The significance of that, thought Dari, is that now Mikoro’s going to bug me every day about things that are things but aren’t.

“Heehee! Talking horses are fun!”

“Mikoro, I don’t think he means it just for fun,” said Dari. She was by no means an expert in the study of horse faces, but she felt sure that she sensed, somewhere beneath those half-eyed twitches and dilating nostrils, some sliver of shifting yet serious solidity.

“Suppose you go into a stable and ask for a white horse,” the white horse put to them. “The stable hand brings you a black horse. You complain, but the stable hand says, you asked for a white horse, and since everyone knows a white horse is a horse, you were in fact asking for a horse, so I was within my rights to bring you a black horse. Now you might be dissatisfied at this and file suit against the stable, but who is to say you would win? Or you might attempt force to get the horse you wanted, but who is to say your actions would not spark a wider conflict and lead to the collapse of civilisation? You can imagine then the resources that stand to be wasted and lives laid down because of a simple miscommunication about the word *is*.”

“Waah. That’s, um, big.”

“Now let us consider another problem. That which has no thickness cannot be accumulated, yet it can be a thousand leagues long. How is this so?”

At this point Dari was sorely minded to put her foot down and drag that ungainly equine face back to the basics – that is to say, introductions, if not reasons for barging in on other people’s breakfasts. But before she could say a

word a second voice came barging in: "That's enough, Yahoo-Tongue. Leave these people alone."

A second horse arrived at the table. Oh no, said Dari inwardly.

The first horse flicked his eyelids, but showed little other sign that he was perturbed. He snuffled: "To you my name is Yahoo-Tongue, but to everyone else it is..." – and here he released a totally unpronounceable whinny.

The newcomer was a large bay mare with a rich copper hide and muscles like iron girders. Her sleek black mane was quite a contrast to the philosopher-horse's scruffy tresses. "You are Yahoo-Tongue because you speak nothing but *the thing which is not*," she sneered, nostrils flaring.

"That itself is *the thing which is not*," countered Not-A-Horse (as Mikoro decided to name him). "You know full well that it is impossible for our kind to speak *the thing which is not*. Therefore everything I say is in at least one way, and what is more, I do not content myself to take it for granted but can furnish tangible proofs." And he hoofed the napkin with the diagram into the Mare's muzzle.

She snorted it away. "Do not poison me with your *ink-symbols*," she rebuked him. "Is there not one drop of shame left to evaporate from that bramble-patch you call a mind? These wranglings, these controversies, these dissembling propositions are exactly why you were exiled. Yet rather than learn from your foolishness, you ambush passers-by and vomit it into their meals."

To which Not-A-Horse retorted: "What you term wranglings only reflect the subjective complexity of lived reality and the instability of language. These are not my fault. To point them out is not to say *the thing which is not*."

"No, Yahoo-Tongue, they only grow complex and unstable *because* you point them out, *because* your tongue twists and tears at what is certain." The Mare's tone was cool, collected, graceful even, but her narrow black eyes were livid with rage.

"Furthermore you might say I was exiled," Not-A-Horse went on, "but I say that I left on my own will because the rest of you were arrogant and refused to heed the cracks beneath our hooves. Were that not the case, you might have been wise to the manipulations of Feffel."

"Do not play with my patience, outcast," said the Mare, baring her teeth now. "Feffel only had his chance because your..." – she seemed to struggle for the right word – "your *nothings* laid waste to the confidence of the foals and colts and flung their minds to confusion. You and he might as well be one and the same."

Mikoro's pupils flicked right to left, right to left, doing their best to follow this bizarre two-horse breakfast-theatre. Soon they were spinning in circles.

"Eehhh, excuse me Captain Mikoro," said Mary, appearing round the Mare's flank. "Are these people disturbing you?"

"I'm not disturbing them," Not-A-Horse answered before Mikoro or Dari could. "As they say, a pink cat is exhaustible yet inexhaustible."

"Of course he's disturbing them," snorted the Mare. "There – he's done it again, see?"

"Eeh, as long as everyone's comfortable," said Mary with that charming smile of hers. "More tea or coffee?"

"Yes – tea – thank you," said Dari. She blinked a dozen times, saw the giant squabbling horses still existed, then added: "The strongest tea you have. Please."

"Now then," said Not-A-Horse. "Seeing as you are exhaustible yet inexhaustible, I extend you an invitation to our lamented community of Horseham. It would please me quite much if you saw for yourselves what happens when the closed-minded mistake the thousand meanings of *is* for *the thing which is not*."

"You extend – no, you shall do nothing of the sort," said the Mare, so taken aback this time that her stamps shook the table. "Have you forgotten your crimes, outcast? You are forbidden from laying a single hoof on our soil, and for good reason."

"That was when it was the soil of Horseham. But now that Feffel has finished clomping that soil into ashes it can hardly be said that Horseham means the same thing. Therefore I contend that my prohibition does not apply to the thing which it is now."

Dari and Mikoro looked at each other. "Horse...ham?"

"You are not coming," said the Mare. "Yahoos are forbidden."

"Uhh, yahoos?" said Dari.

"Especially suspicious ones like you, who are dubiously-sized or have parts from other animals sticking out."

"The name Horseham might sound like it means a hamlet of horses," said Not-A-Horse, "but actually it has etymological roots akin to *This Great Country*. Feffel said it, so it must be so. *They* all believed it."

"Ohh, that's low, that's low," snarled the Mare.

Whatever else it meant, it meant fresh excitement for Mikoro. "Nyaah, you mean there's a whole village of horses who talk and argue like you?" she asked. "I wanna see, I wanna see!"

“It might disappoint you,” said Not-A-Horse. “Because of Feffel’s hoofiwork there’s only about seven Houyhnhnms still living in *That Great Country*. Houyhnhnms. That’s what we are. Not horses as you know them, but horses as we know them. Once more a white horse declines to be a horse.”

“Huuy...hhnn...bwah. I can’t pronounce it.”

“They can’t even pronounce it,” said the Mare. “Why do you think we will let them in?”

“Because there is no way you can not let them in,” said Not-A-Horse. “Though half your will threatens to bar them, the other half wishes to show them firsthoof the effects of my *dubious propositions* on Houyhnhnm society. Even though the real effect is not of my reasoning, but of your refusal to hear it.”

These statements offended the Mare on so many levels at once that she chomped and chomped on the air but could not settle on a satisfactory attack. Which was worse? His suggestion that she was a liar, or mistaken – both intensely difficult concepts for her, it appeared? Or that her speech was not a perfect expression of her will?

“L-Look,” said Dari, more than daunted at this circle of faces each taller than her. “I admit I’m intrigued, and I’m sure Mikoro is too, but I’m not sure we can visit. You see, we have to make haste to Comet Island, and what’s more the Demon Cow Queen is bound to be looking for us. Do you know of her?”

“The island of Horseham is surrounded by shallow reefs, so there is no way the Cow Queen’s dreadnought can approach,” said Not-A-Horse. “Furthermore, if you are sailing from here to Comet Island then Horseham is the next land you come to. You could say that it is the centre of the world; although while we are here, we might say that this pub is the actual centre of the world. And that is why the centre of the world is north of north and south of south.”

The Mare loosed a neigh of resignation. “Then come if you must,” she said, putting her best effort into sounding like she didn’t want to. “It will be obvious to you yahoos that our faultless colony was laid low not by our perfect nature, but by its debasement by this reasonless beast here.”

“Both arguments are acceptable,” Not-A-Horse said to this.

“There is no *argument*, there is only what is and what is *not*,” the Mare snorted back with a force that could have rammed in a blast door.

“Aaww, please can we go there Dari, please please please?” Mikoro implored, and she picked up the little explorer in both hands, knowing this would help fluster her into acquiescence. “Nyaah, I wanna go see the talking horses! And if

their island's safe from the Moo-Moo Queen then that gets us one step closer, right?"

"Nnnaahh – s-stop – s-shaking – me! Aaghh, alright Mikoro, alright! Urgh. But do you think the *Sea Bunny* will be okay with this?"

"Well they said it's on the way, right?"

Dari looked to the pair of Houyhnhnms – the one attempting to murder the other with her eyes, the other about as bothered as a brick.

"And how do you get there, for that matter?" she put to them. "Uhh – do you have ships?"



"Horse-ships," said Dari. "Now I've seen it all."

The philosopher-horse's was as dishevelled as he was, like it'd been cobbled together in a backyard workshop, whereas the bay mare's was planed and polished smooth. But structurally speaking the Houyhnhnms' vessels were the same: simple wooden rafts with frameworks of hewn logs and branches bound with ropes to secure their single occupants in place. From that position the horse would pedal to drive a great propellor-wheel at the rear, steering the rudder by means of a rope held in the teeth.

Between these contraptions the Houyhnhnms carried their trade in accusations and denials out to sea. It soared over the deck of the *Sea Bunny*, a neighing commerce impressive in its volume but in fact quite spare in the variety of its contents. Neither horse ventured far beyond basic positional statements mildly spiced with the occasional rude name. It seemed theirs was not the style for grand oratorical flourishes or towering eight-legged arguments.

"Dari? Why are you so quiet?" asked Mikoro, looming over the girl atop the bunny-head.

"Shh. I'm trying to listen to them," said Dari.

"Nyah. But they're saying the same things over and over."

"They are. But that can still tell you a lot if you pay attention. For instance, have you noticed how different their attitudes are? The white horse doesn't seem that interested in making his case, it's like he's happy just to keep the argument going. Whereas I'd swear the Mare's mortally offended that it's happening at all."

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen horses arguing,” said Mikoro. “Usually they just, um, stand around peacefully together. In fields. I guess I kinda assumed they – you know – always agreed.”

“There’s more. See how even while they bicker they’re still pedalling hard with all four hooves. Don’t you think they must be extraordinarily strong to push their craft through the ocean like that, with nothing but their own, uhh, horsepower?”

Mikoro answered by way of a *crack!* and some hard munching; she’d pulled some chocolate from her pocket and snapped off a piece. She offered some to Dari.

“No thanks Mikoro. I’ve just had breakfast. So have you for that matter. Are you sure you should be eating that?”

“Of course! Amff, ahmff – *gluck!* It’s my after-breakfast chocolate! Mmm, it’s so creamy!”

“After-breakfast chocolate. Right.”

“Um, um. Oops. I opened the wrapper wrong.”

She held it up to show Dari. The foil had torn too far, leaving it impossible to fully cover the remaining chocolate. But before Dari could even react she went: “Oooh, that means I get to eat more till it’s small enough to wrap! Yaay!” *Crack!* “Ahmm, amff...”

Dari mustered the sum of her restraint, succeeded in not sighing or shaking her head, and returned to the horse-quarrel.

“Have you noticed,” she pointed out, “how often the Mare tells Mr. Not-A-White-Horse he’s saying *the thing which is not?*”

“Gwah? Nomf, gmpff...yeah. They use that phrase a lot. Do they mean lying?”

“It’s like they don’t have an actual word for lying, don’t you think? And not just a word. If you hear the contempt with which they say it, you’d think the very concept is revolting to them. Interesting, no?”

“Waah. Does that mean they don’t lie at all? Life would be so much simpler if everyone was like that.”

“Well you’d think so, but listen to these two. Even supposing they can’t lie, their idea of truth doesn’t sound at all the same, does it?”

Mikoro rested her elbows on either side of her friend and paid attention. The Houyhnhnms didn’t really shout, but their natural elocution was so bold and clear that it readily carried across the froth of the waves.

“From what I can gather,” said Dari, “the island we’re heading to, this Horseham, isn’t their homeland. It sounds like a colony. A group of them set out to sea and

settled there, but something went wrong because of something to do with this Feffel figure.”

“I’ve never heard of a Feffel. Is that a vegetable too? Nyah. It doesn’t sound very tasty.”

“Now she’s attacking him for using iron nails and framings in his ship. He’s saying it’s why his ship’s more stable on the waves, and look, I think he might be right; it looks a wreck, but it does seem to glide more smoothly than hers. Hmm. She doesn’t like his thinking, doesn’t like his iron, doesn’t even like his writing, and both of them keep suggesting that most of these Houyhnhnms are like her. I dunno Mikoro, don’t they sound kind of – uhh – well, puritan, I suppose?”

“Purry? I didn’t hear them purr.”

“No, I mean, they’re not fond of things they find new or difficult to understand. They like things simple.”

“Waah. That’s a lot of stuff you’ve worked out just from listening to them argue. Dari’s a good listener!”

Dari reached up and scratched the cat-girl’s chin. “Thanks Mikoro. But, well, it’s only experience. That’s what happens when you keep ending up in places where you can’t do much *other* than listen, I suppose. Eeh.”

Having let that thought slip she immediately regretted it as Mikoro began specifying those places one by one. But as luck would have it a low bulge was growing on the horizon, and the *Sea Bunny* followed the Houyhnhnms as they paddled straight for it. Soon the sea grew so shallow that Mikoro could have reached through it and touched the sand, while imposing spikes and ridges of ancient rock pierced through its surface.

That put them at ease. No way could a monstrous vessel like the Cow Queen’s sail through these waters.

“Aaww, well at least you’ll be okay here!” giggled Mikoro. “It’s just horses, right? No-one to eat you or smoosh you! Um, um – why’ve you gone quiet?”

It took all Dari’s concentration not to rise to the hope-bait. In her experience, the very inkling that things would be different was all it took to guarantee they would not be.

Surely Mikoro was right though.

Talking horses.

Surely.



“Here we are,” sniffed Not-A-Horse. “We left today and arrived yesterday.”

“Can you lay not one hoof on our soil without debasing it with *the thing which is not?*” snorted the Mare.

“Then how would you say it instead?”

“I would not. That we left today and arrived today is so plain it would waste my breath to state it.”

“But that is only because you look from today’s point of view. If you regard it from the point of view of tomorrow, did we not arrive yesterday?”

“Keep up this attitude and you will be fortunate to regard anything from the point of view of tomorrow.”

It was to these unsettling tones that Mikoro and Dari disembarked on the island of Horseham, also known as *This Great Country*. The fluffy captain went ashore with her usual jump and a cheer but Dari’s notice fell at once on the quay. It was the simplest of timber platforms, its segments carved to slot together like jigsaw pieces with no evidence of metal parts. A pair of basic log-houses with straw roofs and curtains adjoined it.

“Tread with respect, yahoos,” the Mare warned them. “Here the original seventy first made landfall on what was then a barren island.”

“That is only the case if *barren* means barren of Houyhnhnms,” said Not-A-Horse.

“It can mean nothing else,” said the Mare. “Houyhnhnms are *the perfection of nature.*”

“But does nature not also include the soil, the grass, the trees, the insects, the birds, the fish, the wind and rain? It was not barren of these. Our arrival was special because it was *our* arrival, but it was also not special because it was just one in a sequence of many arrivals.”

At this point Mikoro pointed and spoke up: “Waah, look! More are coming!”

Three more horses, or rather Houyhnhnms, approached. Mikoro and Dari were growing aware of the difference, which consisted not only in Houyhnhnms’ capacity for speech but in their size, their robustness, and that calm yet overpowering weight of attention you felt in their presence.

The islanders were holding back. Their eyes rolled suspicious, taking in the philosopher-outcast, then the pink fluffy yahoo and tiny green yahoo, then the outcast again.

“Look at them,” Dari whispered into a fluffy ear. “The whiteness in their stares, the tension in their legs, the way they flick their tails. They’re deeply afraid.”

“Have you returned to gloat?” panted the largest horse, a sombre black stallion. “Begone.”

“But I am gone,” said Not-A-Horse. “It is *because* I am gone from my last location that I come to this one.”

“Trickster. Traitor. Saboteur.” The islander Houyhnhnms dropped these terms on him matter-of-factly, with little emotion in their tones, but their teeth, their nostrils, their sinews seethed with scorn. With eyes like theirs, you needed no guns; guard towers were surplus if you could sway your neck with such menace.

“I warned you, outcast,” said the Mare. “You were foolish to – ”

But how the pariah’s return would have developed on its own would never be known, for at this point Mikoro took centre stage. Specifically, she ran up to the islanders and said: “Bweh! Why are you being so mean? This horse is scruffy and funny and gave us lots of cool puzzles! Did he really do something wrong to you?”

This seemed to set off several of the Houyhnhnms’ mental bombs at once, and they took startled jumps back as a group, then lowered their heads with nostrils flaring.

“Yahoo. Yahoo. You are not welcome.”

They considered her further, heads rising now to cast high-horsed glares upon Mikoro’s hat, her coat, her ears, her fluffy pink hair.

“Outrage-Yahoo,” they escalated. “There is nothing here for you.”

“But, but, you’re talking horses!” Mikoro went on. “Isn’t that so cool? Um. I still don’t know what a yahoo is.”

“It’s us, Mikoro,” Dari put in from her hat, “and we’d better back off, they don’t look friendly, they’re very tall, and I’m not sure we’d survive a kick from – ”

“But I’m not a yahoo! I’m Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny* and horses are my friends! Heehee! I can give you cookies if you like! Oooh, I wonder if I can ride one...”

Their bellicose stamping and braying signalled that this was the worst possible thing to say.

Dari yelled: “Aaah, for fuck’s sake Mikoro, don’t provoke them! Now *run!* Run before – ”

But Mikoro wasn’t scared in the least. She giggled: “Heehee! They won’t do anything!”

“Look at them! They’re about to kill us where we stand!”

“Aaww, silly Dari! Nyaan! I can tell when a creature’s gonna attack me, and I know these horseys won’t!”

“Wha – wha – how?”

“Because,” spoke Not-A-Horse from the rear, “the exalted Houyhnhnms consider violence beneath them. They value *friendship* and *benevolence*.” He pronounced it in the idlest good humour, but its hair-width twinblade of sarcasm could have drawn blood from the thickest of earlobes.

Dari gaped. The horse-pack’s eyes wanted to kill them. Their chops wanted to kill them. Their hooves wanted to kill them. Every hair in their manes and tails wanted to kill them. They should have been dead a hundred times over by now. But something was stopping these Houyhnhnms. Something stronger than belief. A deep-seated instinct perhaps, inherited and fortified over uncountable generations.

They wouldn’t attack.

They couldn’t.

The horses spat great gobs at Mikoro’s feet and trailed away.

“They are right,” snarled the furious Mare. “You are not only yahoos but *twisted* yahoos who have changed your sizes and shapes through unnatural sorcery. That makes you worse than the yahoos who infest our homeland, whom we specifically chose not to bring with us in order that our new lives be free of their taint. Your very presence here is an abomination.”

“Bweh. I’m not a bomination. I’m fluffy, see?”

Not-A-Horse gave a nasal chuckle. “They didn’t bring any yahoos because the yahoos were a mirror. To look into a yahoo’s face was to see our own haughty chauvinism reflected back at us. We preferred to exercise it without seeing it.”

But the Mare didn’t reply, she was too busy backing away from Mikoro’s brandished shock of hair, arching away her neck as if its pinkness was contagious.

“Stop that,” she said. “Do not bring it near me. Why should I possibly want to touch you, Outrage-Yahoo?”

“Look, what exactly is a *yahoo*?” asked Dari. “Does it mean humans? Or anyone outside your society in general?”

“A white man is not a man,” was Not-A-Horse’s cryptic reply.

“As yahoos you are ineducable,” said the Mare, “but I shall tell you anyway, Yahoo-Bean, since I pity your feeble attempt to understand. Yahoos come in two types. The first is the wild, filthy two-legged brute who scrabbles in muck and flings excrement in our homeland. Better if it did not exist at all, but while it does,

it is fit only to haul our loads and be driven through our fields. The second type, yours, is the same only worse, for it plays at disguising its savagery by placing fabrics about its body and arranging its cries to imitate language. Nonetheless, a yahoo is a yahoo.”

“Gwah. So...where you come from the horses are in charge, and humans are like...um...wild and dirty? That doesn’t sound nice at all! Can there really be humans like that?”

“A yahoo is not necessarily a yahoo,” said Not-A-Horse, whose head had dipped into his ship then surfaced with a mouthful of oats. “Had we learnt this lesson, there would still be seventy of us here rather than a tenth of that number.”

“Will you desist?” the Mare snorted with a toss of her mane. “You. Outrage-Yahoos. He is more like you than like us, so tell him to stop.”

“I cannot help saying that which is,” said the philosopher-horse.

Mikoro jumped up and down between them. “Nyeh nyeh! You both insist you are saying *the thing which is* but it’s like you believe opposite things! Is there maybe a way you can both be right?”

“Yes,” said Not-A-Horse and “No,” said the Mare, at the same time.

“Gwah. Well at least you’re not actually fighting. My sister Kiyoko usually eats me if she’s wrong when I’m right.”

The Mare panted her disdain. “Only yahoos fight. There is *the thing which is*, and *the thing which is not*. The Houyhnhnm, as a creature of reason, intuits *the thing which is* with immediate conviction. We speak to be understood, and to convey factual information. What more is necessary? To say more would be to *place oneself outside of reason*.”

Oat-husks spilled messily from Not-A-Horse’s mouth. “Does undoing yourself with divisions, secessions, emigrations and plagues count as *placing yourself outside of reason*?”

“You placed us outside of reason, Yahoo-Tongue. You, by poisoning our nature with doubts and disbeliefs, loosening our speech, fixing it for assault with your *ink-symbols*. You did Feffel’s work. You undid us.”

At this point Dari’s patience finally gave way and she pressed her hands to her head, finding it quite done in by this situation. She put to them bluntly: “Alright. Alright. Look, at this rate we’ll be standing here all day while the pair of you go round and round in circles. You Houyhnhnms wanted us to come and see this place, or you didn’t, I honestly can’t tell. But you’ve brought us here now, and I’d

suggest we either get an actual look at it or get back on the ship and be on our way. Which will it be?"

"Both ways are acceptable," sniffed Not-a-Horse.

"I knew it," seethed the Mare. "Yahoos are insolent at any size." But from the way she lowered her head and hoofed at the ground, it was clear this outburst from the insignificant 'Yahoo-Bean' had blindsided her.

"Right. Come on Mikoro. Let's have a look around ourselves, and these two can follow if they want."

"Yaay!"

So off marched Mikoro, Dari in hat, with that pair of equine voices bickering in the background.

"Mikoro?" said Dari, once they'd put a little distance between them and their not-an-escort.

"Agwah?"

"How did you know that group of Houyhnhnms wasn't going to attack us? I would have sworn they were about to trample us flat."

"Heehee! It's because a pink cat is not a cat!"

"A pink...right. Never mind."



Mikoro's excitement lasted all of five minutes.

"Nyah? *This* is where the talking horseys live? But it's...bweh."

Dari couldn't disagree. Her wanderings had got her used to many sights but poverty wasn't one of them. Most societies across the realities understood the dangers of inflicting it – so on the whole, they didn't.

"Wow," she eventually managed. "I don't think I've seen squalor like this since...well, since the world I grew up in."

There must have been thirty or forty wattle-and-daub abodes clustered together, but they formed less a village than a diorama of the decomposition process: each stage was represented, from damp, to woodworm, to plain fallen to bits. Mud and chaff, wood-chips and pottery shards were strewn randomly everywhere, or lay in piles beside paths perhaps once lined with banks of grass or pretty flowers, but since hoofed into crack-and-pothole mosaics which no-one had bothered to repair. The most lively things in this desolation were the flocks

of scraggy crows, pecking their lunches out of the detritus or cawing in political debate to one another from the branches of bare trees.

The bitter Houyhnhnms who'd confronted them earlier were here too. They slouched languid outside what houses still functioned, idly flicking at clouds of flies with their tails or otherwise rotating their heads to follow the visitors like turrets of hate. Beyond the dwellings spread farm fields where mouldering oats and barley straggled from fence to fence, the former done in by the salinity of the soil, the latter for depletion of the hooves and ambition to tend it.

Mikoro scrunched up her nose. "Gwah. It smells like horse poopoo."

"I present – glorious Horseham," said the philosopher-Houyhnhnm. "*This Great Country*. Witness again: Heaven and Earth are equally low."

"You brought it low," said the Mare with a scornful flare of her lips.

Dari too held her nose as she scanned this sorry scene, taking in the craftsmanship of the walls and roofs, the neat underlying layouts of the shattered paths, the dried-up carcasses of wells and drinking channels.

"It wasn't always like this, was it?" she put to them.

"Was it, or was it not?" said Not-A-Horse. "You could say it was not, when first we placed the roads here and the houses there, and the farms on this side and the barns and workshops on the other. *This Great Country* could have been, perhaps was, a *great country*. But you could just as easily say that at the moment the sun is at its highest, it is setting; at the moment something is born, it is dying."

"You are outside reason to talk Horseham down," said the Mare. "It is not *setting* or *dying*. It is a great country, only turned on its head by doubts and disorders sown by you. Soon you shall be sent away once more and we shall continue to level up and build back better."

Mikoro prodded a decaying length of door-frame with her shoe. It tipped on its side, leaking a trickle of ants and tiny worms. The island had its own ideas of recovery it seemed.

"But why did you come here in the first place?" Dari questioned them. "You sound, uhh, quite confident in your ways, if I may put it that way. Were there problems in your homeland?"

"No," said the Mare. "Problems came to our homeland."

"Yes," said Not-a Horse. "Our homeland was not prepared for the myriad things."

"Argh, come on! Please? Do you have to give opposite answers to every question?"

Mikoro was tittering. Dari put her hands on her hips and bent over the hat-brim. "What?"

"Aaww, Dari's annoyed!" she giggled through her sleeves. "I bet she's missing the big women now. Isn't it more fun just getting smooshed away?"

An instant blush. "N-No, I – Mikoro! Seriously? Come on, not in front of these two!"

To which Not-A-Horse offered the wisdom: "There is nothing outside what is supremely large: call it the 'great one'. There is nothing inside what is supremely small: call it the 'small one'."

"Ngggghh..."

"But, nyeh nyeh," went Mikoro, badgering the Mare now. "Just to be sure – you're really not interested in eating Dari? I mean, you called her Yahoo-Bean..."

"You disgust me," sneezed the Mare, and she jerked back her ears as though recoiling at the most grievous of insults. "I, touch a yahoo, still less eat one? I'd rather lap up this outcast's droppings."

Dari oscillated into a strange double-cringe, back and forth between relief and indignation.

"But let us return to the myriad things," said Not-A-Horse, a good fellow to have around when awkward silences were on the menu. "Our homeland is remote, and there we managed well enough for many lifetimes. Quite how many nobody knows, for as we are creatures of *reason*," – the way he said it vexed the Mare's ears once more – "we kept no records, told no stories, and set no words in ink."

"Nor needed we," grunted the Mare with head held high. "The *perfection of nature* suffices just to be."

"Whoa," Dari couldn't help herself. "That means...no history?"

"You slur strange words that mean nothing," said the Mare. "You are not needed. Your likes should have left us alone. *Don't touch me!*"

She brayed this last part because Mikoro had tried to pat her nose. Deterred by this unwelcoming response, the fluffy captain stroked the muzzle of Not-A-Horse instead. He appeared quite happy for her to do so, the sight of which drew a revolted spit on the ground from the Mare.

Up on Mikoro's hat, Dari wondered why she didn't feel put out by the Mare's constant reminders of how much she loathed them. Perhaps it was just so blatant that it broke through the roof of maximum offence and wheeled right back round to innocuousness.

“Should have left you alone,” Dari repeated – then asked: “You mean, people like us came to your home?”

“First they washed up by chance,” said Not-A-Horse. “Then they stopped by in floating vessels – wrecked, lost, waiting out storms, or asking directions. Before long these *yahoos from beyond* were showing up with more colourful fabrics on their bodies, like yours, and their vessels grew longer, deeper, with metal components and larger parts sticking out. Before we knew it they were coming on purpose, their vessels stacked with outlandish materials – foods, cloths, trinkets, texts. They wanted to give us these things in exchange for other things, or study our ways, or share their strange ideas. That was when we learnt that there was more in nature and reason than is found in us alone.”

“No, the yahoos came from *outside* nature and reason,” insisted the Mare. “Like the yahoos of our home, they were repugnant. Unlike them, they could not be controlled. That made them dangerous. For this reason we selected seventy of our kind to build vessels of our own and set out to sea. We had to find where this new breed of yahoos was coming from, and learn how to stop them corrupting our ways.”

“...learn from them to improve our ways,” Not-A-Horse concluded at the same time.

The Mare struck him with a glare that made words like *fuck you* redundant.

As they talked they’d set off walking again, and now stopped at a wasteland of derelict barns.

“It was an error to build these,” said the Mare. “To tarnish our hooves with *the thing which is not*.”

“It was impossible not to build them,” said Not-A-Horse. “Those things *were*. We needed those things.”

“What things, what things?” piped up Mikoro. “Nyah. I don’t see any things in there except...um. That’s doodoo, isn’t it?”

“This island suited our goals,” Not-A-Horse explained. “The yahoo shipping lanes overlap at the Sheep Pub. From here we could study them, but the reefs and the distance kept us at enough of a remove that most of them passed us by. Yet linked rings are linked even if separated. We encountered yahoos in countless shapes and sizes, far beyond the range that had shown itself to our homeland. Then it turned out that the soil here was poorer than in our estimation, and the trees and grasses ill-suited for our construction techniques. To house and feed

our community we had no choice but to take the yahoos' goods in exchange for wisdom, hoofcrafts, and *This Great Country's* most precious export of all..."

"Our premium-grade fertiliser," interrupted the Mare; "Our shit," Not-A-Horse finished anyway.

Mikoro again raised her gaze to the heaps in the caved-in warehouses. Minerals glinted within. At least it doesn't smell, she thought.

Not-A-Horse saw where she was looking. "Old stuff," he said. "Left there after the trade stopped. Worthless now."

"Oh."

"But valuable in its day. With what we received in return we smoothed the roads, strengthened our walls and roofs, planted new crops more suitable for this climate and beautified our outpost with fountains and electric lighting."

"Sullied them with iron," the Mare amended. "Bent the lines, flattened the curves, and diluted the purity of our way of life with meaningless little pretty things we didn't need."

Not-A-Horse challenged her: "Do we *need* to live? Do we *need* to *be*?"

"You are completely - "

"It is the same as asking if we *needed* arts, music, writing."

"All abhorrent. All *the thing which is not*. Admitting them was our ruin."

"They are there in the rhythms of nature, even when yet unborn. We were bound to discover them one day. We convinced ourselves we would not, so instead *they* discovered us, and found us unready. *That* was our ruin."

The track stretched on past dilapidated dwellings. Mikoro was finding it enough of a challenge to walk on paths designed for hooves but these were in truly terrible condition. She could barely take a step without stumbling in a pothole or feeling a rock press painfully into her sole. Her loafers were spattered with mud, dust, and whatever else leached through this wasted soil. Matters hardly improved when she turned a corner to find that big black stallion roaming away, having left a steaming pile of donation right where he knew the visitors would have to walk. Mikoro had no recourse but to push round it through the brambly undergrowth, whose thorns scratched ugly white scars into her sea-coat.

They came in this way to the settlement's central commons, or rather the sea of wreckage in which it had drowned. From the fragments' shapes and distribution Dari imagined a wooden dais supporting a ring-shaped structure - a communal drinking trough, most likely.

"Governance," stated Not-A-Horse.

“Pathetic,” spat the Mare.

“I was going to ask you about that,” said Dari. “How do Houyhnhnms run their society?”

The Mare spat again. “We don’t. Why would we? The *perfection of nature* needs no *running*, it simply is. It would have stayed so had we left well enough alone.”

“You cannot leave alone *the thing which is*,” Not-A-Horse countered. “As we dealt more with the yahoos, drawing in their goods and looking on their ways, life lost its simplicity. There was more to be organised. Decisions to be made, routines and practices established.”

“Ah. Governance, then,” said Dari. “And...laws?”

The Mare wheezed revulsion at both words.

“In our homeland,” said Not-A-Horse, “on the rare occasion that discussion was needed we held a Grand Assembly. We thought to do the same here. We set up this space for that purpose. But while in our homeland it was typical that everyone agreed, here *disputes* arose. We came to different...*opinions* on what to do with the yahoos’ materials, different reactions to their tales of voyages and stars and gods and machines and faraway places.”

“Pathetic,” the Mare grumbled. “All because those knick-knacks and non-things clouded our sight of *the thing which is*. If only we had not touched them, there would have been no problem. Ours is to heed reason – that is all. There’s no need for *opinions*.”

“That,” said Not-A-Horse with a dry chuckle, “was the one point of agreement. Everyone spoke for reason. But – some said it was *reasonable* to distribute the crops and tools, others that they should be held and used in common. *Reason* drove some to question the natural order we had always known: for with our new tools for building, crafting and harvesting, could not the servile sorrel, white and iron-grey now perform the same tasks, and earn the same dwelling space and feed, as the more perfectly-formed and intellectually gifted bay, black and dapple-grey? Was it still *reasonable* to treat them apart?” (Dari made a mental note: “Class system”.) “And as those outsiders proved to us the sophistication to which yahoos could rise, *reason* dictated to some that we reconsider them as our equals, yet to others that we condemn them all the harsher for the heights of their pretence to Houyhnhnm perfection.”

“Arguing can be stressful when everyone thinks they’re right,” Mikoro contributed thoughtfully. “Kiyoko and I have that problem *all* the time. It sounds like you horseys needed a Mother Rin!”

“All sides were right,” said Not-A-Horse. “All spoke from nature and reason, so every statement *was* in at least one way. But does a dispute settle on that which most *is*, or on the *art of the dispute*? It turned out that nature evenly dispenses the first, but not the second. It then turned out that those with the strongest share in the second were those who learnt to speak not to the first, not to reason, but to a part of us we never knew we had. It was the part that trembled our knees at the sea – the vast sea, that unbreakable wall around our perfection, which we now found flattened in all directions, an open bridge on which the yahoo-worlds came surfing in. *Fear*. It was to fear that those most adept in the *art of the dispute* learnt to speak, and the most persuasive of all was a dapple-grey Houyhnhnm who was not a Houyhnhnm, with a gift of the gab and a bundle-mane which fell about his head like a circle of hay.”

Dari and Mikoro both looked to the Mare, expecting an alternate view, but she had turned away in disgust.

“She knows. Since then we have all known. Known to our irreparable shame, that the Houyhnhnm, the *perfection of nature*, has in its heart the same faculty for baseness, coarseness and ravaging greed as the yahoo. For that Yahoo-Houyhnhnm was Feffel.”



Somewhere up there the midday sun passed Horseham by. Clouds like cotton soaked in grey paint had clogged off the sky, and the air was dank and leaden with gloom. Mikoro enjoyed days like these so long as she was looking out of a window at them, ideally curled up snug in a pile of blankets and pillows with a mug of hot cocoa. Perhaps she'd have a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle in front of her, or a few episodes of her favourite *anime*. She'd smile at the tap-tap-tap-tap of Kiyoko's footsteps hurtling down the corridor, and settle into a calm of purrs as a little friend or two played in her stomach, massaging that exact spot that never failed to soothe her nerves.

She wanted that.

Here and now, in this skeleton of a village of talking horses, she felt that twinge of longing. She'd remember the Houyhnhnms just for that. Their island: the first place her voyage felt *long*. Or at least, where she felt that length most aptly measured not in tasty snacks or excitement, but in the pangs that troubled her whenever she spent too much time away from her mother's and sister's side.

Homesickness.

“I want to go home.”

She didn't voice it. It would do no good, she told herself. She was where she was. But that was okay. The experienced and huggable Dari was with her. She'd made new friends too. And she had an amazing boat shaped like a bunny, which knew the way and had plenty of food left in store.

She didn't have to live here.

Her eyes fell on the resident Houyhnhnms, slumped upon their doorsteps. They'd given up staring daggers into their guests now. Instead they just lay there, indolent upon their flanks. Once in a while they might roll, scratching an itchy loin on the bleak earth. Or they might raise a bent leg, only to let it drop.

Couldn't they leave too? They had ships. They were close enough to the Sheep Pub to get supplies. It accepted any currency. But these horses seemed, if not content, then at least satisfied to root themselves to their island-country even as it crumbled beneath them. It mattered not what insects gnawed on their hides, nor how cold the rains lashed through their shredded roofs. They would rather fritter away their lives in this smashed snow-globe of depleted soil, hollowed-out homesteads, broken paths and illusions. Their *Great Country*.

The *perfection of nature*, they called themselves. That highest of dreams was still, to them, their highest of realities. Real or not.

“This Great Country,” Feffel had taken to reminding them in every sentence. “This Great Country. This – Great – Country.” But *This Great Country* hadn't known what it wanted to be. Its seventy citizens, Not-A-Horse related, had drifted into opposing camps. On one side, his own, were the Houyhnhnms for whom reason meant an embrace of the reality beyond their shores. They desired to take up the yahoos' goods and learn their ways, not in order to become like them, he stressed, but to understand nature in its fullness and so become better at being themselves. The other camp, spoken for by the Mare (who had set off alone on a circuit of the ruined centre, so sickened she was at all things), insisted that reason led them the other way: into themselves, already the *perfection of nature*. Reason meant closing the gates, halting the trade, dropping their yahoo fetishes and rediscovering their own perfect nature lest they degrade into yahoos themselves.

“Feffel initially stood astride the fence,” said Not-A-Horse. “He listened to the merits of both cases, and scoped out the community's patterns of feeling. Then he suggested, quite harmlessly, that we put the matter to a vote.”

“Wah,” said Mikoro. “You mean, like an election? But...if both sides wanted opposite things, wouldn’t that just drive them further apart? Weren’t there Mother Rins or Kiyokos to bring everyone to a compromise instead?”

“That was the concern we all shared,” answered Not-A-Horse. “Voting was a yahoo tool. None of us had any memory of its use. Why would we? Even she,” – his nose gestured at the Mare – “said it was ridiculous. To make a decision that way – let alone one so drastic as to remain in reality or to leave it – would appear to place those with the losing arguments *outside of reason*. Think of it: to divide reason against itself. To divide the indivisible. Absurd, no? And that is how they learnt that linked rings can be separated. For Feffel had worked out that those who wished to close the gates were slightly in the majority, and he worked their anxieties, convincing them that they would win such a vote, and then they’d need never fear the yahoo tides again.”

Mikoro’s eyes wandered as he said this: from the Mare, cutting a resentful figure across this debris of a public forum, to Dari down at her feet. The little explorer had gone up to examine one of the dais’s fragments but ended up in a staring contest with a beetle. Were they competing for who had the greenest shell?

“Ooh. Careful,” said Mikoro, crouching over her friend. “Remember you told me about the bee that carried you away?”

“It’s fine,” said Dari, as the beetle get bored and shovelled into the woodwork. “I only panicked because I was startled, but it turned out alright. Most insects are really gentle you know? It only wanted to take me back to its hive. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted sweeter honey.”

“Um. Or was it the time an ant picked you up? Which was the one you didn’t like?”

Dari decided not to mention the Drifting Squid-Insect, as she’d named it (or the Squidgy Suck-Suck, as Mikoro had). “Ants are cool,” she said instead. “If you sit on them the right way you can direct them, just like you’re riding a...uhh...” She remembered where she was. “Never mind. Look, er, Mr. Not-A-White-Horse, you were telling us about Feffel, how he played on the Houyhnhnms’s anxieties. But were their anxieties really so terrible? Weren’t you supposed to be creatures of reason?”

“So we said, so we said,” said Not-A-Horse. “Even as into the gap between reason and anxiety, we lost the difference between *the thing which is* and *the thing which is not*. For Feffel learnt he could say *the thing which is not*, and yet it would

still, to his followers, mean *the thing which is*. That the yahoos were taking our oats and our fish; that they would settle here, and edge us off our land plot by plot; that they were coming in ships with exploding iron and steel; our fellows believed this because as far as they had always known, whatever they believed, by virtue of their belief, was *the thing which is*.”

“Nyah. So none of it was actually true? Did the yahoos ever actually threaten you?”

The horse’s muscles heaved, then fell – an equine shrug perhaps.

“All statements come from nature. If a fishing tug noses about outside the harbour, does that mean it will take our fish? Can we call them *our* fish at all? What do the fish think? Or, if a visitor with a clipboard asks what crops we produce, does that mean she wishes to settle? If a huge horned yahoo in a ship as strong as a mountain drops anchor on the horizon and roars to us that this is her sea, does that mean she intends to bury us?”

“Waah! That sounds like the Cow Queen!” And Mikoro clasped both hands round Dari and cuddled her protectively.

“The proprietor of the Sheep Pub had shown me charts and treaties,” said Not-A-Horse. “I did my best to explain: the reefs kept the hegemon from our shores, and no-one, not even the most shameless of yahoos, would dare risk open hostilities so close to the Sheep Pub’s neutral waters. But by that point Feffel’s words were feeding the very fear they lapped up for fuel, and their gallop would not be halted. It no longer mattered what *was* or *was not*. In *This Great Country*, those were the same.

“Feffel edged out my friend there to become the spokeshorse for the conservative faction. Realising it was fear that made him popular, he set it aflame by turning a dispute over a single decision into a vengeful clash over the entire Houyhnhnm way of life. The more our learning drove us to question our ways and assumptions – our subjugation of the yahoos in our homeland, our arranged breeding and child-exchange practices – the more Feffel’s crowd slandered and railed at us for taking our leave of common sense and wallowing in yahoo irrationality. Before we could do anything about it, he put forth the vote. He had calculated well. The outcome split Horseham clean in half, but his faction held the slenderest margin.”

“All,” said the Mare, returning, “because your loose speech loosened the meanings of words and melted the solidity of facts. It’s your fault.” But her voice was wavering now. At a stroke it occurred to Mikoro why this stubborn

Houyhnhnm's muscles were so well-defined. It was not because she was physically strong, though that she was undoubtable. It was because believing her own beliefs required constant maximum strain on her every sinew.

"But then, what happened after you split?" asked Mikoro, settling Dari back in her hat-fold. "Did you have an, um – what was it Dari? Like, um, the Japanese after the Ainu Empire smooshed their invasion."

"A civil war?" Dari suggested.

"War." The Mare spat the word like venom. "See how the yahoos think of us. As though we are just like them."

Rather than answer, Not-A-Horse shuffled off into the barley fields. Above him Mikoro's eyes picked out a band of grey: the sea, lapping on the far shore.

She followed.



Shattered glass. Rotting wood. *Crunch, crunch* went Mikoro's shoes, hastening nature's work as it prised this depleted yesterday's grip off today. Tomorrow felt neither here nor there.

Mikoro had seen enough. Her legs were tired from all this rough walking, and on this side of the island these clouds of gnats were everywhere, there was no way not to walk through them, and no amount of hand-waving stopped them stinging her face when she did.

"Nyaah. Dari?"

"Look there," said Dari overhead, somehow still interested. "The shacks on this side are huddled closer than in the village. That's glass down there, and...electric wires, of some kind? And is that a radio tower?"

"Bweh."

At least the sea air was fresh. The salt it put on Mikoro's lips smelled better than the only alternatives on offer here.

Not-A-Horse turned round and mooched up to them.

"Most of those who lost the vote lived on this side," he snuffled. "When Feffel's gang took over the village and shut the main dock, we developed this as a satellite community. Soon it was all but independent. North Horseham, we called it. It's harder to steer through the reefs here, but we needed our imports, our conversations with yahoos, and at least our access to the Sheep Pub."

“The houses here look more sophisticated,” Dari considered. “What did it mean to you to lose the vote? Surely this Feffel couldn’t just stop you interacting with the outside world?”

“We should all have respected it,” said the Mare, trotting up behind them. “It had been decided. Even if the method was in error, our unity was paramount, so reason required us to respect the outcome. By seeking to overturn it, they guaranteed we could not hold.”

“Or did the result overturn itself?” said Not-A-Horse. “It divided the indivisible. It did so as soon as it framed reason as a contest of extremes. We had never decided problems that way. But Feffel insisted that notwithstanding the feather of a margin, closing the gates had been settled as ‘the rational will of This Great Country’, and to speak against it was to give up your claim to be a creature of reason. There was no going back. The linked rings had separated; the two halves of reason meant clean different things.”

“Sovereignty!” neighed the Mare all of a sudden. “We had to protect our sovereignty! How else could we not sink in this sea of yahoos?” Her voice was cracked, her eyes like clouded glass.

“A white horse is not a horse. A sovereign country is not sovereign. To you, sovereignty meant independence. To us it meant interdependence. We wanted the same thing but different things. Therefore we got neither.”

He half-nodded past the perished shacks, and there Mikoro took note of a mound of low grass, heaped incongruous in the middle of one of the ex-barley fields.

Her first instinct was to want to climb it. It had a satisfyingly rounded shape and the view from on top must have been pretty.

Then she choked as she realised what it was.

“When the plague came no-one was ready for it,” said Not-A-Horse. “We never fell ill in our homeland because we were the *perfection of nature*. So when the first of us fell sick, Feffel’s crowd insisted it was nothing, it would pass. Because Houyhnhnms were healthy and vigorous by nature, they said; because we had no more yahoos bringing their filth in, none of their so-called ‘doctors’ and ‘vaccines’ to pump unnatural chemicals into our veins. As more of us fell to our beds, they cast the blame on North Horseham. The malady was caused by water-borne toxins leaking from the yahoo ships we traded with, they said, or by radiation from our yahoo radio mast, which a posse of Feffel’s supporters burned down in the night. Then came the deaths. The first victims were all aged, and they said alas,

what a tragedy, but it only affects the eldest among us so the rest have nothing to fear. Then before we knew it the whole of Horseham was bedridden, hacking and spluttering and gasping for breath. Most survived, including Feffel, but many did not. There they lie.”

“All because of you,” was all the Mare could manage now. “All because you twisted...mis-spoke...”

Mikoro had never seen a horse cry. Not until then.

“Don’t touch me!” spluttered the Mare, jumping backwards off all four hooves as Mikoro attempted to hug her face.

“Come on, it’s okay!” said Mikoro. “If you don’t want a yahoo-hug then think of me as a cat instead! Nya-nyan!”

The Mare spun round and thundered into the bushes.

“Bweh.”

“The plague was the last straw,” Not-A-Horse finished. “Those of us in North Horseham were so appalled by what had become of us here that we sailed away, never to return. One or two headed back to our homeland, but most went the other way, to wander the yahoo realms beyond. The survivors in the main settlement cried jubilation, but one by one they, too, quietly trickled away for *greater countries* elsewhere. I too set sail, but only as far as the Sheep Pub, where I have waited ever since for those who might come to chronicle the sad tale of *This Great Country*.”

The sea sighed exhausted on the sand. In its foam bobbed posts and planks, window-frames and nets of rope, shunted endlessly on the last breaths of dying waves.

“You might do so, I trust. For are you not Dari, the Grand Historian?”

“Am I – wh-what?! Where did you – ”

“At the Sheep Pub, where I fell into conversation with a Houyhnhnm-from-Beyond. His name was Malanya. He suggested you might be passing through and spoke highly of you.”

“Ooohh!” went Mikoro. “Heehee! Dari’s famous!”

“Ma – Ma – uhh, what? I’ve never heard of a Malanya. Who could...n-no way...*Grand Historian*...”

“He has four cousins. All women. He said that each recommended you, for you are known to completely immerse in your subject matter and seek to experience it from all perspectives inside and out.”

“Four – *ggck!*” Dari covered her face with her hands as it lit up in all four quarters from all perspectives inside and out. “N-Never mind that,” she said quickly, before Mikoro got any ideas. “What of Feffel? Did he survive?”

“He survived, and he did not. He survived because he caught the plague and recovered, then boarded a ship with his closest chums and went braying across the horizon. But he also did not survive, because to those he left behind, his name means not only the individual called Feffel but the fall of the Houyhnhnm race. We are all yahoos now.

“And so,” he wrapped up, his gaze still on the mass grave, “I put to you again: A white horse is not a horse. What is the significance of this statement?”

“Gweh,” went Mikoro, not expecting its sudden return. “Um, I thought we went through it already. It has lots of meanings, no?”

Dari frowned. She thought aloud:

“Houyhnhnms and yahoos; when reason isn’t reason, nature isn’t nature – when truth isn’t truth? Ack. Well, I can see why those like the Mare have trouble with it. It almost sounds like you’re saying there’s no such thing as truth; that anything can be anything, and not, at the same time. Goodness it’s scary when you think about it that way. More than scary. It sounds like exactly where Feffel led your people – a place where truth no longer exists. But...you were trying to lead them somewhere else with it, weren’t you? To somewhere where they’d have a more active and agile view of the truth; where they’d understand how it can look different, or rather *feel* different, from different angles, or in different situations, right at a time you were coming into contact with so many more than you’d ever been used to. To understand that when you look at the truth, you do so through your feelings – your fear, your beliefs, your dreams – and speak of it through language that isn’t fixed, whose meanings can shift back and forth and be easily misunderstood. To be conscious of that, and so grow more comfortable with a complex world and spot the tricks and techniques of people like Feffel; is that the point of your paradoxes?”

Dari realised she was waffling – at least, she thought she was – and fell silent with a guilty cringe. But as for Not-A-Horse, he merely sniffed and shook out his mane. All he said was:

“Indiscriminately care for the myriad things. Heaven and Earth are one whole.”



Not-A-Horse's shack was mayhem in four walls but at least those walls still stood. They had gone furthest of all in incorporating yahoo materials and construction techniques, which for the oddity of their combinations – iron beams, double-glazed windows, bricks and cement and fire-resistant stone – had held out where the others had crumbled. Factor in the yahoo curiosities within, and no space on the island, not even the mass grave, presented a more forbidding taboo to the Houyhnhnms who lingered here. None had dared put a hoof to it, still less stick a nose inside.

Even Mikoro was daunted. This floor wasn't really for standing on. It was for generators, water filtration appliances, fax machines, walkie-talkies, heaps of batteries in a dozen shapes and sizes, stack after stack of books and scrolls and loose papers covered in scribbled notes and diagrams, and a pair of funny pink cone-shaped air fresheners that had no doubt done him good service in the days before his exile, when Feffel's followers were wont to defecate their displeasure at him round the exterior.

On a better afternoon Mikoro might have run around prodding and shaking and playing with everything. But with all she'd heard, smelled and been bitten by on this island her mood was ruined.

Not-A-Horse hoofed at the detritus of his life in *This Great Country*, mumbling ruefully under his breath.

"They could have learnt much from yahoos. Learnt of all the situations in which fire is not hot, or the eyes do not see, or the shadow of a flying bird never moves. Feffel would have been harmless."

"Nyah. Fire...eyes...birds..." Mikoro's enthusiasm was half-hearted at best.

"You mean," said Dari, getting used to this now, "whether the heat belongs to the fire or the thing that feels it? Or how the eyes are the means by which *we* see, rather than seeing in their own right? Or – hmm – that shadows don't actually move, but are re-cast as the bird moves? Or, maybe...maybe it's that all these words are just that: words. Labels we attach to things, different in every language, but none of them actual qualities of the things they describe. What do you think Mikoro?"

"Gwah. I think a Dari is still a Dari."

"Heh." Dari detected her friend's fatigue and made an awkward smile. "Yeah, you've got a point. It's easy to go too far with these and feel like reality's just evaporating around you. We'd better remember what's true and important too, whatever the names we give to it, right?"

“Yup. Dari means ‘goes in my tummy’.”

“H-Hey! I didn’t mean...!” But she trailed off, becoming aware of the difficulties in arguing with this position.

“I think we’d better head back to the bunny,” said Mikoro. “Thanks for showing us around, Mr. Horse. It’s kinda depressing, but I guess we needed to see it. Dari can write all about it, can’t you Dari?”

“I promise. As soon as we get you home, I’ll – hang on, what’s that?”

A commotion was brewing outside. Mikoro heard it too and trudged to the window. There was the stallion, in a group of four or five Houyhnhnms; the remaining population of Horseham indeed, though the Mare was not among them. They were cantering from the village centre, their necks stretched as one at the sea – stretched at...

“Gwaaaah! That’s, that’s...!”

“What is it Mikoro?” said Dari as she leant over the hat-brim – and saw it.

“...oh no.”

It was moored a good distance from the shore, but there was no mistaking that glint of gold, that horned, winged figurehead, the massive sails, the row after row of cannon. And as if the pair needed more convincing, there then boomed forth that huge bovine bellow: NUUUUUUUUUUO!

“Nnnnaah! Wh-What is she doing here?!” Dari squealed. “D-Didn’t you say she left this island alone?”

“I said so, but am reminded once again that I know nothing,” said Not-A-Horse. “What I *wish* to know is: why have my fellows formed a line and bowed their heads in subservience?”

He got his answer straight away from those burly bovine tones, broadcasting forth with no need for amplification.

“Oho, my equine vassals! Your Queen speaks! By order of the sovereign of land, sea and sky, you are commanded to keep watch for a cheeky pink-haired cat girl and her *lip-smackingly scrrrumptious* tiny mousey friend in a green shirt! These two troublemakers, who answer to the names Mikoro and Dari, are known to be sailing these waters in a rabbit-shaped craft known as the *Sea Bunny*. Any and all sightings are to be reported immediately!”

Radios and remote-controls clattered round Mikoro’s feet as she drew from the window and pressed her back to the adjoining wall. “Nnn-nyah,” she uttered. “Uh-oh, uh-oh.”

“There’s more!” thundered the Demon Cow Queen. “Should you encounter this pair, you are under no circumstances to eat the mouse-girl yourself! She is for my enjoyment alone! Mine, do you hear? Adhere to our Memorandum of Understanding and detain these rascals till they can be handed over to my pleas-nrrrrrm, I mean, to face justice!”

“*Memorandum of Understanding?*” Dari shot at their equine friend. “Wh-What the hell?”

Not-A-Horse’s lips were peeled back, his teeth parted in confusion. For the first time he looked seriously put out.

“But Houyhnhnms call themselves the *perfection of nature*,” he said to himself. “It is against the order of things for perfection to make *agreements* with non-perfection. They insisted this to every yahoo who sought one.”

Mikoro risked a glance out the window. The Houyhnhnms were trooping towards them.

“Both arguments are acceptable,” he neighed, stoically – then trotted round on the spot and out the door.

Mikoro made to follow him but froze as Dari squealed in her ear.

“D-Don’t! They mustn’t know we’re h-here! She mustn’t...!”

“Um!” Mikoro flattened herself to the wall again. “D’you think they saw us? They...they’re not really gonna hand us over to the Beefy Queen, are they?”

The thumping of hooves drew right up to the house.

It stopped.

“The yahoos,” came the stallion’s voice.

“*Memorandum of Understanding*,” Not-A-Horse’s spoke back. “*Vassals*. Is this the thing which is?”

“It is reasonable,” came the croak of an old nag. “In the state you left us in, it is reasonable.”

The stallion: “We are not really vassals. That is just yahoo-babble. We are sovereign. We are a *Great Country*. If we sign an accord with yahoos then they are the vassals. Words are just words.”

“And what does it mean, to be sovereign vassals? What do we get from it?”

“Water. Rice. And she leaves us alone. It is reasonable.”

“So *This Great Country* is *Her Great Province* now?”

“Yahoos have no country,” – the nag’s voice. “Yahoos cannot *have*. Horseham is ours. Reason requires we survive.”

“And what did you submit to in return? What does *reason* require of you?”

“Oaths of compliance. Fertiliser tribute. Trade privileges.” A pause. “Extradition.” Dari gave a high-pitched squeak.

“The yahoos,” demanded the stallion.

Not-A-Horse made a very strange noise. It puzzled both women, till they realised it was the first time either had heard a horse attempt a moo.

He trotted back in.

“You are safe here,” he said. “They dare not enter my house.”

Mikoro set Dari on the floor, took off her hat, and slowly, very slowly, raised her ears above the windowsill. Snorting and panting. So heavy. So near. She sniffed – a dander of pure resentment.

The philosopher-horse nosed open a cover on the wall. A switch – he tongued at it. With a *clank-clank-clank-clank!* steel shutters rolled down the windows and door, sealing them in darkness. Then a *click!* and a *gr-gr-grrrrrrrr* as his generator rumbled to life, bathing the room in yellow light.

“We will wait,” came a muffled growl from outside. “Reason requires it.”

The shuffles and snorts spread out. Soon they came from all sides, their invisible weight pressing through every slit in the shutters, every crack in the weaker sections of wall. They were surrounded.

“Waah. What do we do now?” said Mikoro.

Dari seated herself on a battery. She shut her eyes; wiped the sweat from her forehead with her arm. Tried to relax, though she kept twitching. Took three deep breaths.

“The *Sea Bunny!*” she remembered, eyes shooting open. “What if they – ”

“Her craft cannot approach the reefs,” Not-A-Horse reminded her. “And the Houyhnhnms won’t touch it. Yahoo-ware. It repels them.”

“Ugh.”

More deep breaths. Calm, Dari, calm, she counselled herself. You’re in here and the Cow Queen’s out at sea. She’s huge – huge enough to do all those things with you, and maybe one day she will. But not now. She can’t reach *that* far. She hasn’t got you yet. There’s time.

“How long will these Houyhnhnms wait for us?” she asked. “They’ll get bored or something eventually, right?”

“You might think so. But you might also think how little there is to do in *This Great Country*. They might wait as long as it takes.”

“Nyaah! But we can’t wait in here forever!” Mikoro protested. “We need to get to Comet Island! And, and...bweh. I’m hungry.”

“You could say that is a problem,” said the philosopher-horse. “I have not lived here since I left, so there is no food. But there is water.” He kicked one of those water purifiers upright; fresh liquid gugged within. “Drink if you need.”

Dari’s eyes shot in all directions, scanning his improvised bunker. “It’s quite nifty how you’ve set up this place,” she said. “I don’t suppose it has – well – a secret tunnel or something?”

The horse shook his head.

“B-But then – what do we do?” said Mikoro, her panic surfacing. “We can’t let the Moo-Moo Queen get us! We can’t! Nyaaah!”

“Why does she seek you?”

“Because she was being a big bully to the monkeys, and then she gobbled up Dari! So I had to stop her, and I kind of, um, um...well the point is, we can’t let her get us! She’ll probably put me in a cage, and I just know she’ll stick Dari somewhere in her and never let her out!”

“Nnnnhh! M-Mikoro, you don’t have to put it like – ”

“Aaaahh! There’s gotta be a way past these horses! B-But, even if we get back to the bunny-boat, she’s still out there on her big ship, waiting...”

“Come sit here, Mikoro,” said Dari.

“B-But, why? We’ve not got time! We gotta...”

“You’ll see why. Come. Look, there’s space on this pile of hay.”

With eyes full of muddled gloom and cheeks reddening under moisture, Mikoro sat as Dari bade her, crossing her legs and pushing out her coat-flaps. The little explorer scrambled straight up those dark blue folds and scratched Mikoro’s chin.

“There we go. Don’t panic, alright? We’ll think of something, but we’ve got to stay calm and keep our heads clear.”

Mikoro quietened into a purr – long, but cracked with worry. “B-But we’re stuck...”

“We are, but one might also say we’re not,” said Dari, a little too cheesily, and she glanced apologetically at their equine friend. “Look – I’ve been stuck plenty of times, right? But I’ve got out just as many. That’s how I’m here with you, you see? It’ll be alright Mikoro.”

“Yeah, but you can, you know,” – she hesitated – “...go in your core then come out again.”

“And so?”

“I don’t have a...I can’t...”

“Can’t you?”

“Um.”

“Have you had a look around, Mikoro?”

She wiped her eyes and looked again. What did Dari mean? Piles and piles of, well, *stuff*, it no longer mattered what it was now; that white-horse-who-was-not-a-horse, loitering in the midst of it as though everything was fine, even though it wasn't, even though it was – what did she really know anymore?

Then a flicker danced on her retina, and she followed it to a crack at the base of the wall where old wattle had rotted away. The shadows there were in motion. Something was shifting out there, blocking the light then moving out of its way. Mikoro could hear it. Hooves – pawing on the dirt.

“I don't have a core.” Mikoro pondered. “But I *can* become tiny like Dari...tiny enough to fit through there...”

“There you go!” said Dari. “What do you think?”

“Um! But, even if we did, one of the mean horses is right there on the other side...”

Dari waited. It was good to let Mikoro get some practice in. That, and she felt slightly embarrassed to offer guidance. It wasn't as though her clever escape schemes had ever actually worked.

“Nyah. It moved. Are they...going round and round out there? Maybe if we wait for a gap? But we might not be fast enough; and then if they catch us when we're both tiny...”

Her attention returned to their friend and host. He just stood there, looking nowhere in particular. Forlorn? Or indifferent? Horses' expressions were difficult enough to read when they *didn't* seem to believe themselves to exist in all realities at once. Was it safe to just leave him in here?

Or maybe, she thought, that was the wrong question.

“The Cow Queen's craft has moved,” he said suddenly – and Mikoro realised he hadn't been just standing there, nor had his gaze been vacant, he was merely staring up at the ceiling. A tower in the roof. Mirrors and windows. Of course.

“She's g-gone?” said Dari, losing a few nerves at the name again. “Are you sure?”

“Nothing is sure. I can no longer see her moored off North Horseham, nor on any other side of the island. But I cannot prove she is not *here* or *there*, any more than I can prove she is not in this room right now.”

Dari whimpered. It was struggle enough to imagine a woman of the Cow Queen's magnitude being *far* no matter where in the world she was. Though she knew it absurd, she found herself glancing squeakingly at every shadow in the room.

“Um! I’ve got an idea,” Mikoro piped up. “But I’m not sure you’ll like it, Mr. Horse. Because you – nyah – *Huuhuunym*s don’t want people to ride you...”

He gave this some consideration.

“Houyhnhnms will not be ridden,” he said. Then, after a pause: “But about *Huuhuunym*s I do not know anything. Where would you like to ride one?”

“Um, there,” said Mikoro, pointing to the gap in the wall.

The first member of this new category of things called *Huuhuunym*s went up to the gap and sniffed it. It barely rose higher than his nostrils.

“Grounds for scepticism might be found,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Mikoro. “About that. There’s another thing I’m not sure you’ll like.”



The stallion’s blood boiled. He stomped hard; vented twin geysers of fury. His associates stopped circling. A temporary halt: to breathe deep, calm down, remind themselves that everything they felt, everything they *were*, was rationality personified. Then they’d circle back the other way.

A Houyhnhnm was a high-order presence. To merely set eyes on one, to hear one’s snort, to smell one’s musk, was to be crushed in awe beneath the pressure of naked perfection. The yahoos couldn’t resist that pressure forever. They had no spirit to speak of; if they had it’d be brittle as desiccated hay. Any moment now they’d crawl out on all fours and grovel for mercy, followed by that atrocious wretch who had turned his tongue to the service of yahoo barbarism. Let him be cast out for good, and his pets offered up to the horned yahoo they so ingloriously relied on – but only for now – to remain the *Great Country* they inherently were.

The stallion raised his grand head high. Time to circle back: let the pests cower at the judgement-beat of their hooves, the primordial fire of their breaths. But just as his nostrils trumpeted forth, the roll of his eye landed on a tiny bundle of pink and blue, green and brown and white, flashing away from that hideous wall and vanishing into the undergrowth.

Strange. Rats weren’t that large. They certainly weren’t that colourful.

Were he not the *perfection of nature*, he might have imagined it to be a tiny pink-haired cat-girl and brunette in a green tube top riding a miniaturised white horse.

But he was a *creature of reason*. Imagination did not enter into it.



“We did it, we did it!” cheered Mikoro, riding behind Dari, and she clamped her arms round her so suddenly that the unfortunate explorer fell forward against Not-A-Horse’s neck, recoiled at the impact and slipped off, dragging her hugger such that they both went tumbling along the ground.

Dari groaned, staggered up and rubbed that spot on her backside where a bruise was now to be expected. Mikoro for her part was well-served by her feline reflexes, and she laughed with relief and jubilation as she leapt to her feet and patted off the dirt with both hands.

She scanned the surrounding vegetation. “That’s far enough, right?” she said. “They won’t see us if I put Mr. Horsey and me back to our proper size now. Then we can hurry to the bunny!”

“Urgh. Thanks for putting up with all this,” said Dari to the equine philosopher, consolingly, although he hardly seemed to need it. His expression was that of someone who might have changed sizes a hundred times a day.

“Mountains and marshes,” he said. “Houyhnhnms and Huuhunynms. All things are the same, all things are different.”

“Uhh. Right.”

Mikoro put out her arm. That oh-so-satisfying blue glow spread from her hand, the tips of her fingers holding its arc.

Dari’s companions soared up around her. She watched – a touch wistful, but only for a moment. Her own shrinking process had been intricate. Reversing it was far beyond the methods of Chaldea masters like Mikoro. Indeed it confounded all but those of her acquaintances who happened to be some of the most powerful beings in the cosmos, and even with them she rarely raised the matter. Life at this size just felt, well, Dari.

A solid truth if there ever was one, she told herself, as with that familiar pressure round her waist and whoosh in her ears, Mikoro’s fingers ferried her up to her hat-perch.

“Heehee! Let’s go, let’s go!” The resurgent captain took off through a gap in the brambles, then slowed to a crouch as they came round the back of the village. Here she crept close to the rotten walls, ignoring the dung-and-wood stench of decay and the crawliness of the creatures she could see facilitating it in order to stay out of the Houyhnhnms’ line of sight. Round another corner the sea breeze gusted in her face. They were almost there.

At last – the dock. There was the *Sea Bunny*, bobbing patient beneath the quay. And there on the interlocking woodwork, tail swishing in the wind, legs parallel and as sturdy as pillars, stood the Mare.

Her expression was not that of someone who'd come to say goodbye.

"The yahoos stay," the Mare stated. "You shall leave, Yahoo-Tongue. But the yahoos stay till the horned one returns."

The cat-girl's heart sank. "Nyaah, you as well? I – I thought we were friends!"

The Mare spat at her feet.

To this Not-A-Horse parted his teeth and flapped his lips like loose covers. It was a bizarre motion for any horse, let alone this most phlegmatic of specimens, but the sounds it produced made its purpose apparent.

Nuu. Nu.

The Mare clamped her eyelids shut and slanted away her head. "Spare me your mockery Yahoo-Tongue," she seethed. "You left us no choice. You and Feffel."

Not-a-Horse paced along the quay, regarding her with one side of his face, then the other.

"Tchh. You. You of all Houyhnhnms. You were sincere, I thought. Could this not be called a surprise?" He loosed an ironic neigh. "To not become yahoo – that was why we came in the first place. Is that not what you said? But look: here we are. Whose hooves is it that have flattened *This Great Country* to the level of just one more yahoo province?"

The Mare, too, parted her teeth, but all that came out was an anguished screech.

"*Memorandum of Understanding*," sniffed Not-A-Horse. "Tchh. Tchhh."

The Mare's legs were quaking. When she opened her eyes, tears of molten loathing plopped from those spheres of rage – spheres white all over, their odium no longer for yahoos or arguments as such but for an entire world whose certainties had burst like soap bubbles.

"And so you see: you left today, but arrived yesterday. You've known all along that *the thing which is* and *the thing which is not* are interlinked. The harder you strove to pull them apart, the tighter they coiled together."

A chorus of neighs rose from the dead trees behind them. Canterng hooves smashed the earth.

"Nyaah, we gotta go!" yelled Mikoro. "Come on, let us back on our boat!"

"If you go," said the Mare, "you will speak *the thing which is not*. You will – ffffhhh – write it. You will convince the world that the Houyhnhnms tripped on their own pride."

“I won’t,” said Dari.

“Of course you will. You’re a yahoo. It’s obvious that’s what you think.”

“N-No, I don’t know what I think yet!” said Dari, hurriedly. “I mean, it’s not like I’ve had time to process what we’ve learnt here! But look, I *can* promise you this: whatever I end up feeling about it personally, I’ll be sure to record your side of the story too. Is that okay?”

The Mare glowered right at her – a full-on right-angled stare. Dari trembled. Never had she seen such astonishing volumes of hatred concentrated into a single point. It was as though it burst straight from the mantle of the Mare’s soul, a soul readier to cast the whole world in flames than entertain any departure from the only truth it knew. To be held in that gaze, lashing forth from an eye almost as large as she was, was to feel it sear on her bones.

But in those bones dwelt an equal and opposite truth, born of journeys through a thousand unthinkable realities – *living* realities. A truth that knew through fluid experience that truth took many sizes and shapes, both inside and out, and that it was irrational, yes, it could be so, so irrational; but that sailing through it was a constant, a living, breathing, learning constant, a *true* constant: she herself, stubborn little Dari, a girl who didn’t understand it all or even have an inkling at times to be fair. But she didn’t have to. That was okay. Because she knew what was important to her; that is, didn’t know, but *knew*. Knew that so long as she did her best to be kind, to stay curious – so long she stayed within the gravity of plain decent honesty – then the realities could swirl about her as much as they liked, for when they settled, she’d always have a place at their table.

The rage of perfection seethed and burned in the Mare’s eye, but Dari, or the *Grand Historian* if you like, held firm.

“I don’t know what happened here,” she said. “Our friend here’s given me one version, and you’ve given me another. That and my own experiences are all I have to go on, so how can I know for sure? I’m just – as you say – a yahoo, and not even a particularly big one as I’m sure you’ve noticed. I don’t get to know what’s true just by existing. I’ve only got my experiences, and they won’t be the same as yours, nor anyone else’s; and yes, it might turn out I believe one of you more than the other, or even just *like* one of you better, but then how do I know that’s not my own prior experiences talking, rather than the truth as it is? All I can do is speak and write my truth in good faith, as honestly as possible, and trust that somewhere between my story, and his, and yours, and of course Mikoro’s, that’s where the truth will be found.”

“Yeah, listen to her!” said Mikoro. “I promise you, Dari doesn’t leave anything out! Not even when it’s squidgy and embarrassing, and believe me, there’s a loooooooot – ”

“Versions. Experiences. Pathetic.” But the Mare’s eye was streaming.

The thunder of hooves rolled closer. Clouds of dust were rising over the roofs.

“Look,” said Dari urgently. “For all your hatred of us, you haven’t done a single thing to hurt us. Isn’t that, too, part of what it means to be perfect? Well you’ve still got that. Don’t lose that too. Please – let us pass.”

The Houyhnhnms careened round the last of the houses, rampaging towards them like chariots out of hell.

The Mare hobbled aside. “Go,” she snorted. “Go, and do not return.”

Mikoro didn’t need telling twice, she cleared the quay in a single leap and thumped onto the deck of the *Sea Bunny*. The lights whacked on and off, the ears beeped their greetings, the nose and tail twitched in calibration, then up soared the lavender sail with its turquoise shooting star – and away they veered, as the talking horses screeched to a halt on the quayside.

The *thwap-thwap-thwap* of a propeller approached as Not-A-Horse drew up beside them. “Report them,” the stallion’s voice broke through its noise. “Report them to the horned yahoo.”

“You might wish to make yourselves scarce before she returns,” said their philosopher friend. “Or you might wish to go slow, in case she lies in wait ahead. Who knows?”

Their attention however was still on the shore, where a *dispute* seemed to have broken out over the Mare’s decision to let them leave. But the dust they were kicking up soon obscured them from view. By the time the travellers wound through the reefs to the mouth of Horseham harbour they heard them no more.

“I am minded to wait,” said Not-A-Horse. “She might no longer be welcome among them.”

“Nyah. Where will you go?”

“There is always the Sheep Pub. That is *the thing which is*, there is no way around it. Then we can see. Perhaps it is time to let *This Great Country* be *the thing which was* and seek out new things to be.”

The gap between them was widening. Not-A-Horse’s horse-ship faced the way they’d sailed to get here, back to where the sky was blue. But the *Sea Bunny* was turning away, its own course to seek.

Mikoro called out to him: “Hey! If you dunno where to go, you should go to Comet Island too! We’ll tell Mother’s friend all about you when we get there, maybe she can help! Though, um, I guess we’ve still gotta find a way through the Tummy Queen’s blockade...”

“You have yet to consider my proposition,” neighed Not-A-Horse.

“Um? Which proposition?”

“That which has no thickness cannot be accumulated, yet it can be a thousand leagues long’.”

“Gwah? But that...what do you mean?”

But they had drifted too far, and the horse’s words, foolish or wise, were lost to the wind.



Dari lay back and shut her eyes, taking in the undulations of Mikoro’s head as it nibbled on giant sandwiches. Mary the sheep-girl had packed them specially for her cherished guests when they’d set off that morning: a savoury one with peppered ham and fresh mustard, and a sweet one filed with the richest and creamiest chocolate and hazelnut spread. These were hefty delicacies, in demand of some serious munching; such munching as in Mikoro’s case tended to involve sound effects that had little to do with her jaw.

It was weird not to hear them.

A loud gulp; then silence. After a while: “Bweh.”

“What’s the matter Mikoro?” said Dari, opening her eyes. “Not tasty?”

“Nyah. It’s not that. They’re really good. Want yours?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I would actually. Thanks.”

Mikoro’s thumb and forefinger deposited two tiny tinfoil-wrapped packages into her arms.

“You’re feeling down,” said Dari.

“Bweh.”

“Is it the horses?”

“Um. Sort of. It’s more like...you know how we calmed down the angry prince, and helped that little warrior find a new direction for his life, and got the sun out of her cave, and chased the Moo-Moo Queen off the monkeys?”

“Yeah. I know.” Dari could guess what was coming.

“It’s just that – I dunno – I thought maybe we were gonna carry on helping people like that. Y’know, one by one, just like that, in all the places we visited. And then I was all excited because oooh, talking horses...”

“Not quite the talking horses you imagined, huh.” Dari resisted a return to questions of whether horses were horses.

“Nyah. I guess I got over-excited. Horses are always so friendly when I meet them while out walking with Mother and Kiyoko. They always come up to say hello, and love it when I stroke their noses or give them carrot sticks. I never imagined there’d be horses with such mean tempers, or who live in places as miserable as that as though they’re just proud to be stuck there. It doesn’t feel like we made things any better, does it?”

Her ears twitched to the rustling of foil. “Well, do you think we tried our best?” came Dari’s reply.

“I guess so. I mean, I can’t think what more we could do. Apart from our funny friend they just hated us so much. It was like – like they thought we were doing something horrible just by existing, and no matter what we did it’d be the same. Nobody’s ever jumped away like that when I offered to hug them, or stared at me with such sickened eyes. It made me feel like I’m poisonous or something. Gwaah. I feel so lousy.”

“I hear you Mikoro. It sucks, it really does.”

Dari made a start on her sandwich. It couldn’t have tasted better. The bread was fresh as the morning, soft and spongy with a hint of pine-nut sweetness lurking beneath a crispy crust – followed by the spread of that mustardy tang, a carpet across her tongue for the sharp dance of peppercorns.

But Mikoro was right. That sinking feeling was in their hearts, not their mouths. It would take more than miracle-food to address that.

Dari sighed.

“This is what happens sometimes when you travel, you know? It’s understandable to want to help everyone, to solve every problem. But there are times when it doesn’t work out that way.”

“Nyeh. I get that. But it still hurts. Why? Why did they hate us so much?”

“Maybe it’s not us, Mikoro. Maybe it’s them. Maybe when they looked at us, they didn’t see us but something else that, in their minds at least, resembled us. I dunno what the ‘yahoos’ of their homeland must have been like to make them that way, to fill them with such disgust, but from time to time I still remember some of the ways people behaved in the world I originally came from, so it’s not hard to imagine the possibilities.”

Mikoro realised she'd crumpled her used tinfoil into a ball without noticing. "But then...how do we know?" she said, staring at it. "How do we know if it's them, or if it's us?"

"Maybe we can't. Not for sure, anyway." And she went for it, despite herself: "Just like at the end of the day, maybe we can't *really* be sure if a white horse is a horse."

"Gwah. You know, I found those puzzles so fun at first, but because of them everything kinda feels a whole lot more complicated now. If I think about them too long it makes me dizzy."

"Well, that's just it I suppose. Things *are* complicated Mikoro. People especially so. I mean, we all share the same reality – or realities; and in at least one sense, white horses are horses for all of us. That's important. Beneath it all, facts are facts. But like I was saying to the Mare, we've each got our own experiences of those facts. Those experiences are all we've really got to help us understand them. And try as we might to stand in each other's hooves – err, shoes – there are times it's too hard, or too painful, or just too far from what we know. We misunderstand each other, or our senses or languages just don't match up. It doesn't have to mean we're lousy or they're lousy. Maybe with more time, or in cosier surroundings, we could bridge those gaps. But till then, all we can do is try our best: to bear honest witness, take responsibility for what we can, and learn as well as we can from what we can't. It might not feel like we accomplished a great deal on this island, but it's certainly given us things to think about, don't you think?"

Mikoro's hand had scooped her from the hat mid-spiel and now held her cupped in front of that giant face. That the cat-girl's lips were adorably smudged with chocolate couldn't disguise the worry that weighed her eyes askance.

"It's okay Mikoro," said Dari, rubbing Mikoro's thumb with one hand while the other clutched her half-eaten sandwich. "We don't even have to think about it straight away. Heck, it's important to let ourselves feel it too."

"Dari's good at feeling things," mumbled Mikoro. "Um. I didn't realise you'd, um...thought things through so much."

The little explorer looked away, hiding an embarrassed smile. "Heh. I really haven't, you know. Most of the time I haven't got a clue."

Mikoro was studying her, her curious eyes those of a cat which has caught a mouse then realised it speaks twenty languages.

"Nyeh. I guess always getting stuck in woman-places gives you lots of time to work things out."

Dari's cheeks lit up and she choked on her mustard – carried on choking, till Mikoro trickled some water into her hand for the tiny traveller to wash it down.

“Urgh. Y-Yeah. I won't deny it Mikoro. And they do talk to me sometimes you know? If I'm lucky I'll get the chance to have an actual conversation. And if not, well, you can still learn a great deal just from listening. Especially if they...you know. Eheh. Forget I'm there.”

“Gwah? But Dari's so cute and squirmly! How could anyone forget she's there?”

Dari paused mid-chew and gave her friend a long, searching stare. “Yes. How, I wonder?”

“Oh. Um, um...nyah.”

Mikoro decided to say no more and listened to her little friend chomp through her chocolate sandwich. She'd cheered up a little – talking with Dari tended to do that – but it still felt like lots of little billiard balls were whacking the walls of her brain from within.

She looked over her shoulder. The dry shrubs and dead trees of Horseham were still there, but the sea was colder and choppiier on this side. She hadn't noticed, so smooth was the *Sea Bunny's* glide.

“What did he mean?” she said at last.

“Mmhh?” pronounced Dari through the last of her lunch.

“That riddle. About long things that can't be thick, or something.”

“Uhh. Things with no thickness? Yeah, that was it. If it has no thickness it can't be accumulated, yet it can be a thousand leagues long.” She scratched her forehead. “Maybe a line? A line can be as long as you want, but if you break it down to the smallest level it's made up of points, which having no size – because they wouldn't be points if they did – can't be accumulated. So they can, but they can't. Ugh. I get what you mean about it making you dizzy.”

“Nyah? I thought he might be taking about his horse-people.”

“Really? How so?”

“Well, they were like, um, a point, weren't they? Originally. They said they lived all alone, far from everyone else. They didn't record things, or write, or even know how long they'd been there. They had no history, you said. Just sat there without growing or changing. Then they bumped into people from outside, and stretched out into the world, like a line, all the way to this island; but they still couldn't learn, so just kept getting longer without getting thicker, until, until...bwah. I'm muddled now.”

“Heh. Come on Mikoro, bring me closer.”

Dari reached out with both arms to commence the chin-scratching.

Mikoro purred.

“Hey. You know what I think?”

“Nrrrrr?”

“I think it’s time for a little rest from these paradoxes. They’re good fun, and have shown us important things about how language and reality can be trickier than we think. But let’s remember to stay grounded too. You’re real, and I’m real, right? Like this.”

She ran her fingers hard over Mikoro’s chin. Then a kiss and a hug, feeling it vibrate to her purrs.

“Um?” said Mikoro after a while. “But you don’t usually stay grounded?”

“Huh? What do you – ”

“You’re always off the ground going mff mff mff somewhere snug and squidgy, and, and – ”

“Nnnnhh! M-Mikoro...”

There rose the finger of expertise; the sealed eyelids of authority, the nose raised to the angle of perfect correctness. “But you could still say that’s grounded if you use a *different definition of grounded*. Not physically grounded, but, um, *Dari-istically* grounded. Grounded in being a Dari.”

Dari crossed her arms in a puff of pique. “Hey. I thought we were giving those a rest.”

“Ooh, and how about what we were talking about over breakfast? Yeah, we never finished! Is Dari-digestion a digestion?”

“Oh, for the – ”

“Ooh, ooh! I’ve got a good one! Wanna hear it?”

“Really Mikoro. I can’t wait.”

“Well...if you look at it from a tummy point of view...how about: A *Dari is exhaustible yet inexhaustible!* Heehee!”

And as the *Sea Bunny* sailed, no heavier in the water for this new cargo it had found in the wisdom of the white horse, that wisdom demonstrated its power over reality in the cheeks of the girl in the captain’s hand as she said to herself: Thank goodness it’s Mikoro. Thank goodness she’ll never use this power for evil.

THE WAY OF THE



SNAKE

And so their ship swept on as *This Great Country* sank into their seas of memory. Seas that now teemed with islands and caverns, warriors and philosophers, warm baths and hot meals, fuzzy creatures scrambling up cliffs and red shells zooming round racetracks; such were the waves of recollection which washed through the fluffy captain's mind as she curled up in the stern and submerged in an afternoon nap.

From atop the transom Dari watched her friend snooze. "Let her rest," she instructed herself. "And you stay up here Dari, so she won't grab and squeeze you while she sleeps. She'll put you in her mouth, you know she will. Don't risk it. Not when you've just had your clothes washed. Or, what, were you expecting to see another washing machine on this trip? How about on those rocks ahead? Yeah, take a good look. All black and barren, see? Volcanic probably. They'll have mint-scented detergent bubbling up through geysers, won't they?"

Beneath her dangling legs, Mikoro shuffled and emitted the cutest of high-pitched sighs. The cat-girl's coat and hat so enswathed her that all that protruded was a corner of her face with one pointy ear sticking out. Her tail lay along the deck-boards like a rope of white fur. She snored purringly.

Dari smiled. "Hang in there Mikoro," she spoke quietly. "We've come such a long way now. We'll get there. Closer and closer."

As she wondered how much further, her own subconscious, more attuned to wandering till the next grab than travelling to a fixed destination, asked her: “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” she answered herself. “Mikoro’s not used to long journeys like this, is she? She’s held up well so far, but she’ll be getting weary sooner or later. And what about Mother and Kiyoko and all her friends? They must be worried sick by now.”

A short silence – then she added, as an afterthought: “And don’t you get smug either Dari. You’re the one who’s gonna write this all up, remember? Don’t stop paying attention.”

That thought prodded her into observation mode, and she stood up to see what she could see. What she saw was ocean, and lots of it, stretching away on all sides. There was no sign of land unless she counted those approaching rocks, which were really little more than knobs of hardened lava. The traffic surrounding the Sheep Pub had completely dropped off, and the fading light suggested the sun had similar plans.

“It’s quiet here, isn’t it?” she put to the snoozing captain. “Feels nice. And it looks like we’ve given the Cow Queen the slip for now.”

Mikoro’s lips wibbled a noise – *blblbl*. A dribble trailed down her chin.

So tranquil. It was like they’d sailed into a cosmic pause; drifted from the tumultuous rush of realities into a dimensional quiet-room where all was in balance. The smoothness of the overcast sky agreed to disagree with the choppiness of the sea; the watery red of sunset shook hands across the border with the deep dark blue of the briny abyss. The air was cool but not cold, just right for the fluffy captain in her coat and the tiny traveller running on the heat of her own awkward memories.

The moment wouldn’t last. Perhaps shouldn’t last. But for now, Mikoro’s and Dari’s realities were in equilibrium.

Dari relaxed. Feel the breeze, the open air, she told herself. Just feel it. Feel it while you’ve got it. You’ll miss it, once you get yourself tucked away somewhere again. Don’t think it’s not going to happen. That’s what you’re for, remember? But here, right now, this is for you.

And it’ll be here afterwards, too. It’ll always be here.

She must have mused in this way for some time, because when Mikoro broke her reverie with a great big yawn she found the surroundings had changed. The basalt outcrops had accumulated into islets and reefs which jabbed from the

depths all around them, their shadows cast long by the setting sun. If not for the turbulence of the waves it might have been an inner-city plaza, frozen at rush hour as people in thick coats and hats hustled home. Here and there a rock would catch the light just right and sneak them a wink of glassy obsidian. And ahead they continued to grow: islets into islands, reefs into ridges, but just as they looked ready to rise into mountains – the view disappeared. A wall of white screened off the world beyond.

“Brrr. A storm?”

Dari shivered. The air had definitely cooled.

“Gwaaah.” Mikoro was stirring. “Nyam nyam. Dari? Where’s Dari? Hungry...”

“Have a look, Mikoro.”

Another yawn. The cat-girl rubbed her eyes. “Nyah? Wha...these things...”

“A chain of undersea volcanoes, I’d say,” Dari commented.

“Wah! Does that mean we’re gonna sail into lava?”

“It is lava. Look at it. I don’t think it’s flowed for a long, long time though.”

Mikoro reached out and brushed an outcrop with her hand as they sailed past. “Ooh. It’s chilly.”

“We might want to put off dinner for a bit,” said Dari, jumping into her hands. Their warmth round her skin was instant relief.

“Wha...? Why?”

“Look there.”

Mikoro turned – and saw it.

“Nyeeh! B-Big and white...so huge! Come on Mr. Bunny! Can’t we go around it?”

“Shhh. It’s okay, Mikoro. Listen to it.”

Mikoro listened.

“Um. But I don’t hear anything.”

“That’s what I mean. No rain. No thunder. I don’t think it’s as bad as it looks. And look there, there’s patches of clear sky around it, do you see?”

“Bwah. It’s scary though. So huge...”

“Huge, but kind of beautiful too, right? It’s nice having a wide open sky like this, where you can see the weather coming from miles away.”

Mikoro’s ears twitched.

“Ahh, such peace and quiet,” said Dari, fighting the urge to curl up in Mikoro’s hands and doze off herself. “Still – we’d better check the sail’s secure and lock the hatches, in case we have to hunker down for a bit once we hit it. But we can think about what to have for dinner while we cuddle, right?”

“Um! Dari?”

“Do we still have those tomato soup packets we got from the pub? We can do those with the kettle, they’ll warm us up nicely.”

“Nyah! Nyah! Dari!”

“Huh? What?”

“I – I hear something.”

“Uhh...you do?”

Dari took heed, but heard nothing beside the chop of the waves.

“Your ears are better than mine Mikoro. What is it? Where’s it coming from?”

The furry triangles twitched again. “From there,” she said, facing the cloud bank. “It sounds like...”

“Rain? Thunder?”

“Um, um...”

“Or is it the wind? Is it rustling through leaves maybe? Or howling – *whoosh*, *whoosh* – like it’s being funnelled between things? That could mean there’s land ahead.”

“Nyah – actually it sounds like an engine going *rawrr-rawrr-rawrr* and lots and lots of cow-people stomping and grunting.”

“Lots of – nnnnnn!”

They looked horrified at each other – right as the raging golden bull-head of the *Lamassu* crashed from the clouds dead ahead, the blast of its foghorn ripping the sky asunder.

“Waaaah! It’s a, it’s a – *cow-bush!*” Mikoro wailed, and she thrust Dari away into an inside coat pocket as the dreadnought’s prow smashed the waves like a plummeting space station.

“*Nuuuuuuuuuu!*” rumbled the armoured titan, pointing down at Mikoro from the bridge. “*Theeere they are!* You stomach-cramping scoundrel of a pussycat, we have you now! Catch them, catch them! One hundred beef bowls to the one who brings me the cat, a hundred for the mouse, two hundred for the ship!”

Mikoro screamed as the juggernaut impended upon them like a floating city, pitching so high that it blocked out the sun before shattering down so hard that the resulting tidal wave pounded upon the *Sea Bunny*, captain and all. A heartbeat later and the Cow Queen’s flagship might have splintered it to smithereens, had it not found just enough time to recover and bank aside to slide along beneath that hull which soared gigantic, shutting off the sky, while from its lowest level of gunports minotaur after minotaur leant out, all swinging their arms and grasping

and snatching as they competed to lay hands on whatever part of Mikoro or her ship they could reach. All she could do now was roll up into the stern as tight as she could, bawling and mewling and flinching at the brush of fat bovine fingers as they tugged on her coat, knuckled upon her hat, while the heavens resounded with their chuckles and chortles and snorts and squabbles and lows of encouragement or frustration; and if that wasn't enough to upset her, her shoulders kept slamming into the sides of her own ship as it jerked and swerved, seemingly on its own will, to keep its occupant out of reach of its marauders. On and on it pressed through this procession of nightmares, and at once she lost count of how many there were, dared not look up to see how many awaited, as the Cow Queen's voice boomed in her ears: "Seize them! Seize them! I'll have the cat in my lap and the mouse on my tongue before this day is done!"

"Nyah! Nyah!" Mikoro yelped as the grasping storm rolled unabated; and the *Sea Bunny* lurched and rolled, pitching beneath the swing of an arm, leaping off a wave to soar across another. Then, as she passed beneath the central cannons, naturally the most prestigious on their row, an especially adroit minotaur gunner, set apart from her peers by a year or two's training and ambitions set firm on the great 12-inch batteries on high, succeeded in shoving her fingers into the Mikoro-ball and latching them round the fluffy captain's chest – to which said captain, in a flurry of panic and indignation, brought her fangs down hard on the offending index finger. A roar rang out as the insolent grip fell loose, but this barely registered with Mikoro, she was all adrenaline now as without thinking she dug the ship's spyglass from her pocket and swung it back and forth, not even looking, just yelling "Aaaah! Aaaah!" as she smacked the grasping beef-hell out of her path. Then a minion on the row above got a hand round the mast and the *Sea Bunny* wrenched violently ninety degrees – but its nose bounced off the *Lamassu's* hull, shunting it out of reach of the next five or six ports as it swung in a full spin before clanging upon the black iron plating yet again. Then another howl amidst the grunts and laughs; Mikoro had landed a hit square on someone's thumb-nail. "Nyaah! Get out of my way!" she shrieked. "Agaga-gwaaah!" And the Cow Queen lowed, and the *Sea Bunny* reeled, and its captain kicked and swung with wild abandon...

Then all was silent, all was white.

She was clear.

"Nyahah! Nyhaah...ahaahh..."

The *Lamassu* was gone. Somehow the *Sea Bunny* had evaded it long enough to plunge headlong into the cloud bank.

Its captain stood on, panting and sweating, still clutching her spyglass like a sabre. It took a while for her heart and nerves to catch up with the news of her escape. The clamour still clambered from the fog behind her: the grunts and moans of the minotaur crew, the snarl of the dreadnought's engines, the Cow Queen's furious rebukes as she realised her quarry had given her the slip. But whether on account of the *Lamassu*'s own speed or the thickness of the clouds, the uproar soon faded to nothing.

Fwap! On snapped the *Sea Bunny*'s lantern, still swinging on the residual momentum of the ship's countermeasures. Amber light, cast through its casing, danced on the cloud-walls in the shapes of animals and stars.

"Fuuuuh. That was close."

She pulled open her coat on one side. "Da...Dari? Are you okay?"

Tiny hands appeared on the rim of the inside pocket, followed by a head of dishevelled brown hair. "Urgh. Wh-What happened, Mikoro? Are we safe?"

"I...I think we got away. No idea how..."

Then she went "Gwah!" as something turned cool on the back of her hand.

She reached out, palm upturned.

"Waah, look Dari look! It's *snowing!*"

Dari let loose a sigh of relief.

"So it is. Aahh, damn it, that was scary Mikoro! I could hear them out there! I really thought they were about to get us that time, that she'd - she'd - nnnnnn!"

Mikoro fished Dari out and seated herself against the stern as snowflakes settled upon her coat, the deck, the surrounding sea. The shrunken woman shivered in her hand so she cupped and slanted it, making it easier for her friend to press herself into her skin for warmth.

The air was frigid now, but so crisp and fresh. Her lungs loved it.

"Thanks Mikoro," said Dari. "Well I can hardly see a thing, but that'll mean *she* can't either so thank goodness for that. Brrr, how the heck did we get past her?"

"I dunno, I think the ship just, just - um! D'you think she'll turn round and come back for us?"

"Well if she does, I'd much rather be in this than out there where it's clear. Gosh, it's a total whiteout, isn't it? Just as well. She'll have a great time looking for a ship as small as ours in here."

She shuddered as a giant snowflake landed on her head and melted, soaking her through. To this Mikoro half-giggled, half-aaww'ed and placed her other hand over her like an umbrella.

"Heehee! This snow's so gentle! You were right, weren't you? It looked dangerous from outside but now we're in it feels so soft and safe!"

"Let's learn our lesson though okay?" said Dari. "We can't forget she's out there looking for us. We got lucky this time but we mustn't let her ambush us like that again."

They glided on, still on edge, all ears to the clouds with constant glances the way they'd come. But the tinkling of snow soon settled their nerves. It shrouded them like a protective mass of cotton wool. The walls of white were so thick that it was easy to imagine them blocking cannonballs and jamming radar systems. But the snow they released was so soft that it melted at the touch, so light that it formed tiny rivulets on the deck which trickled out through the scuppers.

"Wah. It's like a great big soup! Like that type with the clams that Mother likes!"

"Heh, soup sounds good about now. Shall we have a bite to eat while we can?"

The answer was of course yes, so Mikoro pocketed Dari for safety as she opened a hatch and lifted out the kettle. It turned out they did still have the tomato soup from the Sheep Pub, so Mikoro prepared a nice steaming bowl of it – with crunchy croutons and a packet of black pepper, naturally – and then they shared it, alternating one's gluggy gulps with the other's careful sips round the edge. It was followed by the spiciest salted fish from their stocks, whose scorching chili flakes helped compensate for their coolness, along with a light salad of leaves, carrot and onion slices, and some goat's cheese they also carried courtesy of their favourite stop so far. There was even time for tea and chocolate-chunk brownies at the end, and by the time they'd worked through those the sun had set and the white greyed to black.

"Gwah. I'm not sure I want to sleep in this," said Mikoro, rubbing her pacified belly. "What if it gets heavy and I turn into a snow-cat during the night?"

"You've a point there. Want to take a look in the hold again? There's gotta be, I dunno, a tarpaulin or something. Or at least an umbrella."

"Nya-!" The captain pointed ahead, bringing the goosebumps straight out on Dari's arms as she imagined the only thing it could mean. She turned but her view was blocked by the prow.

"N-No, please! Don't tell me she's back!"

"Nnah. Nnah! Eyes!"

"What?"

“Eyes! Right there!”

“What do you mean, eyes? Show me Mikoro, quickly!”

Mikoro scooped Dari into her hands and held her up. Sure enough, there they were: two enormous eyes in the clouds, scorching, flaring like the glare of some formless reptile.

One eye was red. The other was blue.

“Those aren’t eyes, Mikoro! They’re fires! B-But that means – ”

Thunk.

The *Sea Bunny* hit something and stopped. The sail retracted, the ears bleeped, the systems powered down, and the clouds whooshed aside as the pair of furnaces scorched a view through the centre. They had landed.

And not at a dock or beach this time. Their ship pulled up at the base of a wide set of stairs which beckoned onto a dark stone landing stage. It was framed by those blistering braziers, but there was nothing ordinary about the fires that blazed within. For the flame on the left burnt solid blue – the rich, pure blue of the starry night, the azure sea, the colour of eternity itself – while the right flashed in volatile red, the crimson flux of volcanoes and revolutions, of algal blooms and solar flares, unpredictable, uncontrollable, ever-changing.

“Waaaah...!”

“Whoa. What could this be?”

The firelight tinted the falling snow: red on one side, blue on the other, and where it melded, not purple, but a concord of all colours combined. It fell on a paved stone path which stretched away, marked out by further pairs of braziers much the same: blue on the left, red on the right.

Taking it in, they saw that the path itself had a dual character. The pavestones on the blue side were lined up neat and regular, while on the red side they ran haphazard like crazy paving. Yet the two styles merged harmonious into a single path, which trailed ever onward and upward, deeper and deeper into the fog – till it stopped, breathtakingly, at a wall of parting clouds which cleared to reveal, block by block, a stony magnificence of arches and windows, pediments and pillars...

“Oooohhh.”

...the ruins of a colossal temple.

The voyagers gawked at it – stretched their eyes up its crumbled towers (straight on one side, twisting on the other); along its sweeping eaves (smooth on one side, sinuous on the other); and then to the centre, where a stupendous rose

window dominated the building's facade. Its glass had long since shattered to powder, but they knew – somehow just knew – that it would have been red on one side, and blue on the other.

Their mouths hung open. It was a good few minutes before they thought to disembark.



In the days this temple attracted pilgrims, an average procession might have taken two minutes to walk to its entrance. Mikoro and Dari took thirty.

The reason for this lay not in any nervousness on their parts at the chilly solemnity of this obviously hallowed place, nor indeed in any aversive reaction to the stone snake symbols they found carved into the columns, brazier platforms and paving slabs (snakes which, as Dari pointed out, tended to stand straight and symmetrical on the blue side but corkscrew randomly on the red). No – the cause of their delay was simply the snow. It having been quite some time since the gallant Captain Mikoro had seen so much of the stuff, the tons that blanketed this hillside, so soft and crunchy underfoot, quite naturally awoke in her the need – and it was a need – to run and jump and dive in it for joy, to roll around in it, to lie upright and flap her arms and legs through it, and at length, to pile it up into what Dari surmised to be a snow-Mikoro, a snow-Kiyoko and a snow-Rin.

Dari for her part declined to be plugged into these charming effigies, then just as emphatically turned down Mikoro's suggestion, after she'd lamented her big sister's absence, that were she here the little explorer might enjoy riding snowballs hurled in said big sister's direction.

All of which Mikoro found hard to understand. "But Sayuri likes it!" she insisted. "Ooh. Did you have a bad experience with snowballs maybe?"

"Nah, not really." Then she added quietly: "More a bad experience with ice cream," cringing at the memory and conveying the thanks of her cheeks to whatever celestial forces had steered Mikoro to the red-lit side rather than the blue.

"Oooh! You mean you got put in one and gobbled up with it? You do, don't you! Heehee! You did, you did! I need to remember that idea!"

"Nngh. You don't *need* to, Mikoro."

The captain lovingly applied a finishing pat to the snow-Rin's ears, then glanced down at her little friend huddling in her sea-coat's deep pocket.

“Aaww. Dari’s not really dressed for the snow. Is it warm enough in there? Or maybe...”

“No no, your coat’s warm enough. You don’t have to eat me,” said Dari, taking a short-cut straight to the end of this line of inquiry.

“Aaww. Well I won’t if you don’t want me to. I did promise.” And she added quietly: “Even though you’re tasty.”

“Besides, how can I examine these ruins from inside your tummy?”

“Um. Well, I could describe them out loud for you?”

Dari searched with her eyes till they fell on a fallen pillar. On this side with the red braziers they stood all over the place with no apparent pattern, while the pillars on the blue side were lined up at regular intervals.

“Alright,” she said, “let’s give that a try. There. See that? Describe the pattern on it.”

Mikoro ran over – *crunch, crunch, crunch* – and bent over the snake carving, assessing its graceful curves with a penetrating eye. The sculptor’s hand must have been extraordinary. Its result was perfectly asymmetric, swerving and looping with indiscriminate spontaneity, but the overall effect was coherent, almost provocative. The snake’s thickness varied along its length, and about one tiny scale in six shone smooth with the same obsidian they’d seen on those ocean outcrops.

Mikoro presented her analysis. “Nyah. It’s a snake. It’s long. And, um, wibbly.”

“Wibbly. Right.”

Well it was right. How it would have made the architect feel, or the sculptor, or whatever priests or monks were invested in whatever it meant – well, that was another matter, Dari reflected.

“They’re not wibbly on the other side though,” said Mikoro. “Look. Those ones are completely neat and straight.”

“Yeah. They are.” She had to admit, Mikoro seemed to have identified the operative contrast at work here. Her cunning plan was backfiring fast.

“Heehee! You see? It’ll work! You can stay safe and cosy in my tummy while I tell you all about what’s out here! And if you’re in there you won’t get swallowed either!”

“Yeah. Genius, right? All the same I’d like to stay out here if you don’t mind. Look Mikoro. Is it alright if we, er...”

“If we gwah?”

For the first time Mikoro noticed how animated her little explorer friend had become. She was levering herself up and down on the edge of the pocket, the hazel in her eyes throbbing with hunger – hunger! – as they zoomed those vast distances up and down the cathedral’s walls, its columns, its snaking spires...

“Um! Dari? You’re not...thinking of eating the temple, are you?”

“Not thinking of – wha?”

“Uh-oh. I don’t think even I could eat that. It’s too big. And, um, you know – made of stone.”

“What the heck Mikoro? Of course I’m not going to eat it! I’m just desperate to get a closer look at it!”

Indeed, as Mikoro now realised, she’d been waiting patiently for the chance since they’d got there.

“Ooh! Aaww, sorry Dari. I guess I got so excited with the snow and didn’t notice. But I remember now! Dari loves ruins, doesn’t she!”

“Well, doesn’t everyone? My god, just look at it Mikoro. Look at it! This place must be hundreds of years old! Thousands, even! Think of the stories, the *secrets* these stones must have absorbed over all that time. What kind of people would have built a structure like this? What did they use it for? The red and the blue, the snake motifs, this strange wavy script – this is a script, it’s got to be. Would they have worshipped something here? Actual snakes, maybe? Might it have been a library, or perhaps a laboratory? Maybe all three, at this size. And whatever its formal purpose, think of all the personal memories that individual people must have made in the corners of a vast thing like this. The conversations, the insights, the mishaps...might they have scratched messages in the walls maybe? Sat on benches in there dreaming about their futures, or about lands far away, or people they fancied? Come on Mikoro, don’t tell me you’re not itching to take a look in there too!”

“Wah. Dari’s excited. Well when you put it like that...ooh! Maybe it was a restaurant.”

“A restaurant?”

“Yup. Those ancient people must have eaten something, right? Oooh. Maybe it was run by these snakes with arms and legs who walked upright, and they were green, but their bellies were yellow and they had these rattles on their tails they could signal the kitchen with. Yeah! And they all wore those, those tall white hats, and the snake in charge was grumpy and shouty and always yelled at the others to make sure they brought the red soda to the people who’d ordered red soda and

the blue soda to the blue ones, and there would have been these long tables, and counters, and they'd carry those shiny platters with the big round covers with – um, what do snakes eat? Omelettes? Yeah, I bet the restaurant served omelettes! Nyah. I'm hungry now.”

And so the cat-girl trudged through the snow to the main approach, as Dari did her best to explain that when it came to historical investigations, there was this thing called evidence that just perhaps came in useful sometimes.



“Buuuuu!”

Making this noise at the top of her voice was naturally the first thing Mikoro did on stepping through the arch into the ruined hall. But two thirds of the roof were missing, so her hopes for an echo were sorely disappointed.

The cryptic grandeur of this place more than made up for it. It was huge. The intact part of the ceiling was perhaps sixty Mikoros high, and enough of the walls and pillars remained to sustain the atmosphere of a secure and spacious sanctum, even if its crumbling had left it exposed to the elements. Grass and shrubs crawled from the cracks in the flagstones, and the snow blew free through empty windows to lay white mantles on the outlines of alcoves, pedestals and pews.

A pair of fountains stretched through the hall, one on each side of the nave. The left was blue, contained in a rectangular obsidian basin, its water smooth as glass. The other was red, with no basin at all: it had been gouged straight through the floor, exposing the earth beneath, with an abstract edge and wine-dark surface choppy as the sea.

Through the open roof the stars had appeared, yet the temple was well-lit by red and blue torchlight.

Dari's awe overcame her. “Look...at...this...!”

“Waah!” Mikoro rubbed her fists together, no less thrilled. “D’you think anyone still lives here?”

Dari jumped at the question. “Ah! Y-You’re right. Eheh.” And she reproached herself – “You should have thought about that first, shouldn’t you Dari?” – much as she was so often left to do in the gurgling darkness after those times, and they were many, when she’d stumbled on places like this, got carried away by her excitement, and so subsequently by whoever took the opportunity for her sudden and easy collection. By now that list included archaeologists, priestesses, lingering

spirits (marshmallowy, she remembered), and once or twice, the goddesses in whose service those facilities had been built in the first place.

Well there didn't seem to be anyone here, much to her relief. All the same, she withdrew down to her nose into Mikoro's pocket. Just in case.

"Oooh! There's someone there!" The cat-girl's voice rang through the temple.

"Wha?!"

There was. At the nave's far end. A figure in a furred cap and trench coat.

"B-But, how? I just, t-there wasn't – I could swear..."

The individual's back was to the visitors; whoever it was appeared to be gazing up at the shrine's most striking feature by far. A monumental statue: three serpents, coiled together. Or to be specific, one black serpent, rearing up tall, straight and centred, while two others – one red, one blue – spiralled up its body in a double helix till their heads came up just short of the black one's and faced each other across its neck.

Together they occupied a dais before the far wall: this hall's position of greatest visual power. Clearly they were its centrepiece.

"Waaah," gasped Mikoro, stepping closer to better take in this serpentine masterpiece. The graceful curves of the snakes' bodies, their lustrous scales, their hissing faces; awe and respect were the only possible reaction. And though the red and blue pair had eyes for no-one but each other, the central snake seemed to fix Mikoro in its stare no matter where in the room she stood. Its gaze frightened her – but she managed to return it, finding no malice in those pupils, nor any glint of predatory hungriness. What was daunting was merely the incredible weight of cosmic power they projected. If anything they were shrewd; followed her around with a mild, if omniscient, curiosity.

If she could reach that high she'd have patted its head. Carefully.

Meanwhile Dari released the breath she'd been holding. She'd realised the stranger was only a man.

Only – it was strange. A moment ago she'd been sure he was dressed in a trench coat and furry hat. But now they'd drawn up to him, he was clearly wearing a claret suit – bespoke, polished, certainly expensive – with matching shoes and a fashionable fedora. He was tall, and his left hand (or was it his right?) grasped a ball-topped walking stick – the kind, she felt, that wouldn't surprise her if it concealed a sword.

"What the devil...?" she said to herself.

Mikoro too did a double-take: "Wah." Evidently she was having the same trouble processing this figure.

The stranger clicked his tongue. “Marvellous, absolutely marvellous,” he said, admiring the snake statues. “The vision, the craftsmanship – how exquisite!”

Mikoro giggled. His accent was funny. Lithuanian? One of those tiny German-speaking provinces maybe.

“Oh!” he started, and tilted his gaze. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise I had company.” He then turned full-on as he recognised the fluffy nature of that company. “Aha!” He smiled. “Tourists?”

Mikoro gave the faintest of gasps. The man’s eyes were different colours. Alarmingly so – one was pink, the other green. But the well-mannered captain was too affable to let this bother her for long and she giggled once more as she doffed her tricorne.

“Heehee! Um. Are we tourists, Dari?”

“Erm, no, not really. We’re just...”

She stopped. Something was bothering her about this individual. She’d been soaked and squeezed in high-level cosmic influence enough to know it when she saw it, and this guy radiated it in spades. He was charming enough; it wasn’t that that was suspicious. Indeed, his crooked teeth, his glasses (did he have those before?) were the spitting image of sincerity. He was genuine. Likeable, even.

It was just, part of her wasn’t quite sure he *should* be.

“Ah! I quite understand,” he said, lifting his beret in return. “I too am – how do you say? – *just passing through.*”

“Well I’m pleased to meet you!” said Mikoro, realising she really did feel reassured to run into so jolly and reliable-looking a fellow in a place as sombre as this. And she introduced herself: “My name’s Mikoro! I mean, *Captain* Mikoro of the Chaldea Academy. Heehee!”

“Come, come, the honour is mine,” said the gentleman, taking a little bow. Definitely Germanic. Or perhaps Venetian? Mikoro didn’t know those little European tribal states very well. In fact they confused her. It was hardly her fault with the way they seemed to change their names and borders every weekend.

“What’s your name, um, Mr...?” She paused as the figure handed her his card. “Ooh – sorry! *Professor!* – um – Vo...Vo...”

Dari squinted. If only those letters would keep still, she felt.

“That says *Woland,*” she determined, pronouncing the W like a V. Her brain seemed to tighten at the name.

“Nyah. A professor. Does that mean you’re, um, here to study these ruins?” Mikoro’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Oooh! Are you a historian like Dari?”

Dari's cheeks reddened. "Nnnh, come on Mikoro. I'm not really a historian. I just, you know, wander around and explore...eheh..."

"Yeah you are! A proper one! Just like the horse said: Dari the *Grand Historian* – and you know how things that come from horses' mouths are true!"

Any redder and Dari could have camouflaged herself against the red serpent statue. Instead she decided to hide her bashful face by climbing up Mikoro's sleeve, trusting that by the time she reached her shoulder the conversation would have moved on.

"A historian...a historian..." The man turned the word over and over. "Yes, you could call me that. A consultant, you might say."

"A consultant," Dari repeated mid-climb. "But, uhh...what's a consultant doing here? There isn't anyone to..."

The man raised the brim of his top hat and looked around. "No, there isn't anyone here to consult me, you're quite right on – oh! Hang on!" He clapped his silk-gloved hands in gleeful realisation. "You're here, are you not?"

Mikoro burst out laughing.

"And it's just as well you are," the fellow went on, approaching Mikoro and running a chiselled hand through her hair. "My goodness, my goodness. Feline transformation. How cheery. I had a cat like you once, you know? Well, not *really* like you, but close enough. Or – hmm. Was he a hippopotamus?" The man's expression turned thoughtful, as though it were perfectly natural to get those two things mixed up.

"You're funny!" said the delighted Mikoro. "I like it when important people have a sense of humour!"

"Humour? Me?" He took a step back, scandalised. "Never! I'm dead serious!"

Mikoro only laughed harder. So did Dari, but awkwardly. She'd worked out who this was. Only – her reality had grown considerably more complex since the last time she'd heard of him. It had been by a different name then of course. He had *many names*. And since she couldn't begin to work out how to place him in her expanded social cosmology, she decided not to.

He winked his green eye at her. It seemed to say: I've read all your stuff in *Eka's Journal*. Snipped out the pictures for an album. Good fun, yes?

Dari's nape sweated despite the cold.

"A consultant. Err, right. Well...since you're here and we're here, is there anything you could tell us about this temple? It is a temple, right?"

"Nyeh. Restaurant," muttered Mikoro.

“Gladly!” said Woland. Then he narrowed his eyes conspiratorially, drew up to Mikoro, and put to her in an undertone: “Do you like snakes, my dear?”

“Snakes are cute!” she answered happily. “It’s fun to touch their tails when I’m out walking with Mother and Kiyoko, but they’re always so shy and go slithering away! Um. These ones don’t look shy though. Are they friendly?”

The professor appeared to take great delight in this answer, for he grinned a grin much like Mikoro’s own as he adjusted his bow-tie.

“Fascinating!” he remarked. “Well, *friendly* depends on who you ask, does it not?” And now he raised his umbrella at the serpent statues, which, this close, soared so high that their heads seemed to brush the stars through the hole in the ceiling.

“Take the Great Serpent of Balance for instance. The serious-looking fellow in the middle. A steady friend, certainly. Reliable. Cares deeply, there’s no denying that. But,” – he dropped his voice again – “just between you and me, he’s a little too sober for my liking. The work-oriented type, you know. Not exactly the life of the party.”

“Balance,” said Dari. “I see.” Red and blue – it was beginning to fit together.

“Now the Chaos Serpent,” Woland went on, “that’s this lively red-scaled lass – oh, she’s one for knowing the meaning of a good time. Oh yes, no shortage of exhilarating comings and goings when she’s around, and you can take my word for it, because she and I, we are like *that*.” He indicated with a pinch of his leathered fingers.

“Uhh. Colleagues?” said Dari.

“Colleagues! Hah! A good one, that.”

“And how about the blue snake?” said Mikoro. “That colour’s so pretty!”

“Ah. Yes. Not really my cup of coffee, the Order Serpent,” the strange professor confessed. “Uptight. Fastidious. Can’t stand her. Not complaining about her work ethic, you get me, I’m sure she’s *superb* when you’re organising an army or drawing lines across a map or such things, but, yes, you know the type, mmm? Everything has to be done *right now*, in exactly the correct way, or she’ll bring the heavens down upon your head. I’ve never really clicked with that sort, personally speaking.”

“Heehee! That sounds just like – ”

“Don’t.” Dari interrupted. “You know your sister loves you.”

“Aaww. Yeah, I know. Kiyoko’s wonderful. I love her very much too! But – heehee – look at them! Look at the faces the blue one and red one are making to each other! Isn’t that just like Kiyoko and me?”

Dari arched her neck. It was tricky to make them out from this angle.

“Heh. It kinda does, now that you mention it. I guess that makes Rin the one in the middle.”

“Nyah! So the red one is Chaos, and the blue one is Order, and the middle one they’re wrapping around is Balance. Aaww, it’s like a happy snake family!”

Woland clicked his tongue, impressed. “It is. That’s exactly what it is. They have their differences of course, and they quarrel – oh, how they quarrel! – but when it comes down to it they’re lost without one another and well they know it.”

“Um, but, there’s just one thing,” said Mikoro. “You’re saying all that like they’re alive! But aren’t they just – um, you know – statues?”

Woland roared with laughter, as though she’d told the funniest joke in the world. “Oh come now dear captain,” he chuckled, “you know better than that! Of course you do! Say – you know that drawing you keep in your bedside drawer, depicting the ingress of your admirable friend here in the mouth of your adopted mother?”

“Wha-!” Dari really did blush this time, ferociously, and she swerved her flustered face between the pair of them till it happened to settle on Mikoro. “Wh- What the heck Mikoro! What does he mean, that drawing you keep in your – ”

“Nyah, nyah! But, how did he know?”

“Well there’s my point!” cried Woland triumphantly. “Is that Dari, or just a picture of Dari?”

“Urgh. Please, no,” cringed Dari. “We’ve had more than enough riddles for one day.”

But Mikoro burst out: “Nyahah, I get it! So these might just be statues, but the snakes they show are real? Ooh. But where are the serpents *actually* then?”

Woland squinted at the hole in the ceiling through his monocle. “Up there, perhaps? Or is it down? Pah, I can hardly tell sometimes, it’s all up to taste after all.”

Mikoro drew back for a better view. Goodness those snakes were magnificent. Darkly imposing in stance and stature, yet so stable, so inclusively-coiled, so as *they should be*, and so pretty in the snow with their obsidian sheen. The snow wasn’t settling on them, Mikoro noticed. It slipped straight off. And if she concentrated, she could feel them thrumming with an energy not entirely of their already-commanding physical presence.

“Wah. Yeah. I feel them. It’s like they’re somehow *here* too, through their statues! But does that mean they’re *here* here? Or, um...everywhere?”

“Very good. Oh, very good!” And the professor rambled off to himself about transcendence and immanence and other entertainments of that flavour.

“Well, what do you know about the people who built them?” Dari followed up. “They must have been amazingly advanced, that’s for sure. Skilled with obsidian for a start.”

“What?” said Woland, snapping back to the here and now. “Ah. Yes, that’d be them. The Ophidians.”

“Um. The Ophidiwho?” said Mikoro.

“Ophidians. Snake-worshippers. They built their entire civilisation upon the example of our scaled friends here, would you believe? Had its own moral code and everything.” And he gazed up at the statues again, chuckling to himself: “Fascinating, just fascinating!”

“Wah. You know a lot about this place,” said Mikoro. “Did you, um, know these people? Actually – how old are you?”

“Hah! Now there’s a question,” said Woland. “Would you believe me if I told you I can’t remember? You know how it is. You grow old, and one day follows the next, then all of a sudden,” – he yawned – “it’s gone all hazy.”

“Heehee! Yeah, I do know! Uncle Yoshi’s just like that!”

“But as it happens, yes, I did speak to an Ophidian or two back in the day. It must have been, let’s see, five hundred, six hundred...hang on, what am I saying? I had breakfast with their Chaos Hierophant just the other morning! It was his birthday too. Got him a nice electric razor, you know those ones you can charge up just by letting it sit near the thing, no batteries needed? Figured he could use it – and I wasn’t judging, goodness no, it’s your beard, your choice, but after a few centuries a lack of shaving can get a little – hmm – inconvenient, I suppose.”

He paused, absent-mindedly flipping the lid of his pocket watch. “Nice man though,” he added. “You’d like his dog.”

“A few centuries. Wah.”

“So, wait,” said Dari. “This moral system. It’s about balance, right?”

“Oh, shush, you,” the professor joked. “You’ll work it out all by yourself, and then I’ll be spoiled the fun of an explanation.”

“Err, right. Okay. Well I won’t stop you.” And she fell quiet as she worked out whether to take it as a criticism or a compliment.

“Consider this then,” said Woland, with an authoritative tweak of his scarf. “Ophidian values weren’t values *per se*. What I mean by that is, when people think of moral systems, they tend to think in absolute linear terms. Take telling the truth, for example. Telling the truth is *right*, or *good*; lying is *bad*, or *evil*. Or so they say.

A singular quality, and the more of it the better as far as they're concerned. Boring as hell, right?"

"Gwah. If you say so!"

"I *do* say so. Because, think about it. Is life really so simple? Hmm. Perhaps there's a better example." His pink eye swivelled energetically, scanning Mikoro up and down. "Take hugs, for instance."

"Hugs are good!" said Mikoro at once.

"Oh yes, I won't dispute that," said Woland. "Except...would you say it's good to hug an unfortunate sufferer who lies trussed up on a hospital bed, waiting for his broken ribs to recover? Or from your own point of view, to hug a creature made of molten magma?"

"Ooh. Yeah...that's true. I wouldn't want to hug someone if it'd hurt. And if they really told me they didn't want it, I wouldn't."

"There you go! In other words: hugs are good until they are bad. That's the ticket, is it not? It's the same with eating people I suppose."

Mikoro gave a cheer of instant comprehension. "Oooh, Dari, isn't he a good professor?" she said, giving her friend a finger-nudge. "The best ones always adjust their teaching to make sense to individual students!"

Dari for her part felt inclined to argue on the moral intricacies of eating people, but then realised the trouble that would stir up in present company and held her peace.

"So it went for the Ophidians and their serpent deities here," said Woland. "Order and Chaos, they believed, were neither good nor bad, they were simply Order and Chaos. Primal forces opposed to each other by nature, yet each essential to how the universe worked, and each essential for the health of their own society."

"Ahh, so that's how they did it?" said Dari. "Order and Chaos were both important, but too much of one without the other and people would get hurt – so each needed the other to keep it in...Balance?"

"Quite so, quite so. Now from here it gets a little complicated, so listen closely!"

"Heehee! I'm listening!" said Mikoro.

"That means you too!" said Woland suddenly, as with a twirl of his handlebar moustache he thrust his finger in an impossible direction. "That's right – you out there, with the face! Pay attention or there'll be no helping you later, yes?"

"Um. Who is he talking to?" said Mikoro.

"Uhh, no idea," said Dari. "I think we're...supposed to not worry about it?"

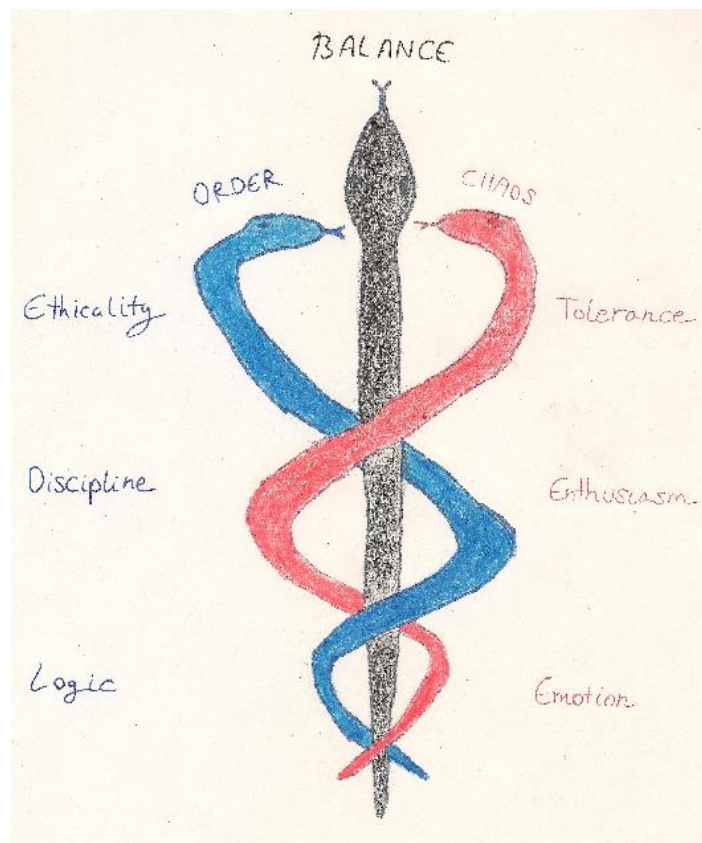
“Order and Chaos. Order values and Chaos values. Bearing in mind, then, the conditional definition of *values* in the context of these people, I introduce to you: the Order values of Ethicality, Discipline and Logic; and the Chaos values of Tolerance, Enthusiasm and Emotion.”

“Wah. Many!”

“Many?” He peered over the rim of his pince-nez. “Only six!”

“Ethicality, Discipline – um, what were the others? Nyah. Discipline is a value?”

The professor chuckled and whipped out a notebook, on which he scribbled something in the flash of a single stroke. Then he tore out the page and handed it to Mikoro. It looked something like this:



“Aah, I see!” said Mikoro. “Um. How did he do it in one scribble?”

“So the opposing values are in tension, right?” said Dari, studying the diagram from Mikoro’s shoulder. “Like, Ethicality and Tolerance – they mean opposite things? In the sense that Ethicality would mean, uhh, having solid principles and rules of right and wrong, while Tolerance would mean putting up with people who don’t share them. They’re both good, but too much of one without the other can cause problems, right? As in, you don’t want your rules to be so strict that you

hurt people for the sake of keeping them, but you also don't want to be so tolerant that you have no principles against hurtful things. So the two have to check each other in...Balance, like the red and blue snakes. That's it, right?"

The professor feigned an aged frown at her. "Are you sure you don't want my job?"

"Ahh!" Dari squeaked. "N-No, don't worry. Quite...quite sure, yes."

"Pity. I've been wondering about retirement of late. Though come to think of it, you might be a little too much like our friend the Great Balance Serpent to keep up with my...responsibilities. Now you on the other hand, my dear captain..."

"No," said Dari urgently. "Just say no. Trust me Mikoro, you don't want his job."

"Aaww. Well I guess I've still got a lot to learn before I'm as smart as him. And it's so kind of him to take the time to explain all this to us! He's a real goody!"

"A goody. Right. Eheh."

The cat-girl returned to the diagram. "Ethicality and Tolerance. Nyah. So the others make pairs too? Ooh, like Logic and Emotion, I see. Thinking and feeling. How about, um, Discipline and Enthusiasm?"

"Why, is that not the couplet you know best of all?" said Woland, twirling his bamboo wand in his fingers. "A disciplined will drives you to your goals heedless of distraction, but too much discipline and – hah! – you know?"

"Oooh, that's right!" And it was obvious she was thinking of her sister again. "Too much discipline leaves you uptight and makes you hide my muffins! It's true though, I've always admired how Kiyoko's so focused, how she concentrates so hard and gets things done, but for me it's just too much stress. I can't imagine living my life like hers."

"Exactly!" cried the professor. "You can't! And that's because you skew towards the Chaos Serpent's nest, it's plain as night that you do. You, my dear captain, are better off approaching your goals from the Enthusiasm side of things. No need to control or direct it, right? You just want it, and it as good as does itself! Fantastic, no?"

"Yep, that's you," said Dari as Mikoro gawped, enjoying having her mind personally blown – let alone validated – by people from hundreds of years ago.

"Say," said Woland, "you do know why it's called *enthusiasm*, right?"

"Nyah?"

"ἐνθουσιασμός. Sorry – *enthousiasmós*. It's Greek. *En* – that's 'in'; *theós* – a god, if you would; *ousía*, that means 'essence'. You are literally 'entered by the essence of a god'. Remarkable, is it not? Now please note it doesn't have to mean an actual

god – Hah! Who needs those? – rather the point is that instead of driving things yourself through your own controlled will, you’re giving of yourself to a higher cosmic agency which enters your body and acts through you.”

“Oooh! But...wouldn’t the opposite of that be Dari, not discipline?”

“Huh? What does that mean Mikoro?” said a worried voice from her shoulder.

“Because enthusiasm is gods entering you, but it’s you who’s always entering goddesses! Um, getting entered into goddesses. Usually through their – ”

Dari emitted something between a squeal and a shout. But the professor said, “How interesting!” then much to Dari’s consternation he’d got out his notebook again. “Is this a revision you would suggest? I can pass it along in a formal recommendation to the Hierophant if you – ”

“Please don’t,” Dari cut in quickly. “It’s fine just as it is. Isn’t it Mikoro?”

“Ah. Is it though?” said Woland. “Is it now. You see, I wonder about that. I wonder.”

The snow seemed to be falling heavier now. It swept up the long-deserted aisles; stuck to Mikoro’s coat, glanced cold on Dari’s arms and legs and drove her half for cover in her friend’s pink hair. A dark wind howled through the vacant windows.

“After all, see how bustling with Ophidians this place is now.”

Mikoro blinked. It occurred to her to remove her hat and shake off the snow. She’d been so engrossed that she only now remembered they were standing in a ruin.

“So...what happened to them? Didn’t you say you had breakfast with one the other day?”

“Yes, yes,” said Woland dismissively, “but not *here*, you know. There hasn’t been an Ophidian *here* for hundreds of years. Still,” – he extended his arms, palms up – “it’s held up impressively, hasn’t it? They knew what they were doing, those Ophidian masons. And they should have, considering this Temple of Balance was the heart of their belief system.”

“You mentioned that the serpents quarreled,” said Dari, cautiously. “Did those quarrels ever get...you know. Out of hand?”

“Oh, they’re always quarrelling! That’s what they do, haven’t you realised? But I suppose, yes, there’s a difference between quarrelling with someone and setting out to tear them to pieces. Tch. People. Even when you think they’ve worked things out, they’ll always find ways to make a trouble of things, you know?”

“Gwah! But, how?” said Mikoro. “I mean, if they kept their lives in balance like this, how could it go wrong?”

“Well, I could tell you that it was the priesthood of Order’s fault, but I probably shouldn’t or people might suggest that I’m not impartial. Hah! Can you imagine it? Biased? Me?” The notion appeared to fill him with mirth.

“Um. Dari? You’re a historian too. Is he biased?”

Dari cringed. “Uhh, y-yeah?” And instead of addressing the matter specifically, she took refuge in generalities: “Let’s just say everyone’s biased, Mikoro. It’s more about recognising and being honest about your biases, you know?”

“Gwah,” said Mikoro, and she mumbled something that Dari could have sworn sounded like ‘devil’s advocate’.

“Well, it was a fact! A fact, I say!” Woland rambled on. “Instead of keeping the balance, the Ophidians split into warring camps devoted to Order and Chaos. Their struggle went on for years, till in the end, the forces of Order stormed into the capital of the followers of Chaos and wiped them all out, every last one, thereby triumphing in the war. But what had they won? Without Chaos to temper its will the Order Serpent went mad, and its obsessive and paranoid followers turned on themselves. Those few who survived left for good and no-one has seen them since. Hah! People, I tell you. You just can’t win sometimes.”

“Nyah! You mean, the Ophidians ended up killing each other?” Disappointment crumpled Mikoro’s stomach. After all that confident talk of balance, it felt bitter. “Gwaah. That really sucks.”

“Oh, it gets worse my dear. The Serpent of Chaos hadn’t died, you see. Oh, how she twisted and writhed, bereft of Order to control her wildest urges! In the end, her energy grew so uncontainable that it split her into three parts.” And here he came right up to Mikoro’s ear as his voice fell to a whisper: “For that’s how they were born, you see.”

“Um. How who were born?”

“Who? Why the Banes, of course!”

“Gwah. The Banes.”

She shivered, as if a chill breeze had crawled down the back of her collar. She felt it lick like a fiery serpent’s tongue till all those tiny pink hairs stood on end.

“The Banes,” Dari pronounced, uncomfortably. “What were they?”

“Terrors!” Woland rejoiced. “Spirits of purest Chaos, unshackled from all constraints, now free to revel and riot and wreck the world to their whims! Tolerance liberated from Ethicality – the Bane of Anarchy! Enthusiasm without

Discipline to steer it – the Bane of Wantonness! And Emotion unfettered from Logic – the Bane of Insanity! Ohh, there was nothing to stop their rampage now: no standards of conduct, no self-restraint, no rational thought. Though mind you, accounts differ on the consequences. Traditionally it was believed the Chaos Banes merely massacred everyone in their path. But with the recent opening of formerly classified Chinese and Soviet archives, new research has given rise to a revisionist view: that the Banes infiltrated those communities they found most susceptible and bent the ways of life in their image. Either way, pandemonium reigned till the Banes were finally cornered by foreign interventions. In time they were subdued, restored into the Chaos Serpent, and at last reunited with Order. So has Balance held ever since.”

“But, but, without the Ophidians any more – ”

“Oh come on, you don’t think the Ophidians actually *created* our slithery friends here, did you? Oh no, no, they merely gave them form. As essences they’ve always been there. So even with no-one left to worship them, here they stand, this faithful family, doing their part to hold up the universe with their quarrels. Touching, really. A smoke?”

The professor pulled a packet of cigarettes from his waistcoat pocket and held it out to Mikoro. But then he withdrew it: “Ah of course, you don’t. Well don’t start, I’ll advise you. Filthy habit. Excuse me.” He lit one up and puffed on it, turning away courteously so the smoke wouldn’t bother them.

They looked up together. The Great Serpent of Balance had been taking them in this whole time. Ever that same inscrutable gaze. Unjudgmental. Kind, even. But inscrutable.

“Look at that writing underneath,” said Mikoro. “Is that the Ophidians’ script? It’s so squiggly. All the letters are like – um – snakes.”

They were. Each glyph was an S-shape, or a pair of S-shapes, differing only in that they might have been mirrored, or rotated, or deeper or shallower in their curves. Just looking at them was giving Mikoro a headache.

“Ugh. I’ve seen a language or several,” said Dari, “but I can’t imagine I’d ever get to grips with that. I guess their eyes or brains must have worked differently. At least, I hope they did.”

Once more Mikoro contemplated Woland’s sketch. “This is amazing though. I’ve never heard of a system like this. And the snakes are such a good symbol for it when you think about it. It’s such a shame it fell apart.”

“Heh. He’s kind of got a point though,” said Dari. “Remember what I said, Mikoro? People are complicated. You could have the perfect system on paper, but so long as it’s people who’re implementing it you’ve got to be prepared for the unexpected. You can’t just leave it to, I dunno, cosmic snakes to do it for you. Everyone’s gotta take responsibility.”

“Bweh. I hope it wasn’t too bloody and scary. At least the snakes themselves are still here I guess. Standing in front of them like this...nyahh. It feels so peaceful. It’s like they’re right here with us, right? With this snow, and way the wind goes *wooh wooh* through the windows...”

Dari smiled and reached into Mikoro’s hair to ruffle it. “I’ve come across this from time to time,” she said. “When people want to build temples or sacred sites they tend to select the most special-feeling places they can find. Places where there’s an energy, they say. It might be because it’s on high ground and the view’s wonderful, or maybe the wind and light line up just right to speak to something deep in their hearts. This’ll be that sort of place. I’m sure of it.”

“It feels...safe,” said Mikoro, almost in a trance now. “I hope it’s safe. Are the snakes really okay just standing here, in this open ruin, where anyone could come and cause trouble? What if the Cow Queen comes to take them away? Or maybe she’d knock them over while she’s clumsying around searching for treasure. Or, um, beef bowl.”

“Do you know,” replied Dari, “I’m not sure she would. Surely even she would feel what we’re feeling and know to respect this place. She can’t be *that* bad, right? Or, I dunno, maybe it’s just the serpents making me feel that. Telling me people like her aren’t *evil* as it were – just out of balance.”

“Gweh. Or maybe you just want her to put you in her – ”

“Wha – of c-course it’s not that! Nnnh, Mikoro! Not here, please? Look, it’s a sacred place – ”

“Heehee! I bet the snakeys don’t mind! Ooh. Maybe they wanna eat you too. Nyah, that’d be fun! Would you like to go in the red one or the blue one first?”

“There’s no stopping you, is there? Mikoro, sometimes I – ”

“It’s a good question though, isn’t it?” said the professor, brogues slicing through the snow as he returned from his cigarette break.

“Nnngh! D-Don’t you encourage her!”

“Hmm? Oh no no, I meant as to whether the serpents are safe here. Technically speaking these statues do serve as our trio’s material anchors. It’d be a great shame were something to happen to them. No?”

And here he did the worst thing possible. He glanced towards the entrance. They could hear shouting outside.

It was coming closer.

“Uh-oh,” said Mikoro.

...and at that very moment, a squad of armed and colourfully-armoured individuals, five of them, came bursting through the arch.

“Tch. The Heroes’ Agency,” muttered Woland, pronouncing it as he might pronounce malaria.

Halfway up the hall the party halted, assessing its situation. That is to say, a pair of them took in the serpent statues with indifference, a third jumped up and down for no apparent reason, a fourth appeared to consult a journal, and the fifth wandered off to piss in the Chaos fountain.

Something was not at all usual about these characters, Mikoro thought. For a start, their names were spelled out in disembodied letters above their heads.

The one so labelled Benlord was clearly their leader. He stood at the front, clad head to toe in gleaming plate with a shield and a great big hammer over his shoulder. Casting a bored eye on the serpents beside him was Shosho, a lady in a gown of black and purple; she held a stick with a horned skull on the end in one hand, and a sneering little imp skipped at her feet. The leaping one, called Riya, was a short, slight woman in unobtrusive close-fitting leather with a pair of daggers at her waist. The fourth, consulting her papers, wore a robe of scales and furs with grassy bushels on her shoulders and a hood with a pair of antlers sticking out – Mariska, her name read. And the fifth, leaning his rifle against the wall as he fumbled his zip back up, was a rotund man in a safari suit called Hossam. Mikoro thought he looked a little like a dwarf from her much-loved trilogy *Mansa of the Rings*, by that Malian author J.R.R. Touré; except he had no beard, and a nose permanently twisted as though by scrunching in disgust at everyone he met who wasn’t exactly the way he believed they should be. A six-legged crocodile followed at his heels as he lumbered back to the group.

Now they all gathered, looking from Mariska’s documents to the serpent statues and back – all except little Riya, who went on jumping with glee in a world of her own. Then Mikoro noticed that beneath their floating names they all shared a designation in angular brackets. It read: <It’s Just A Game M8>. Their team name perhaps?

“Right then,” said Benlord the paladin. “Let’s just get this done alright?”

“Such a waste of time,” said Shosho the warlock in an indolent tone. “I don’t know why they sent us here. This place has terrible loot.”

“Yeah, but the drops are better if we only kill the red one,” put in Mariska the druid, businesslike.

“It makes sense,” said Benlord. “Chaos is bad, yeah? We’re here to restore order. That’s why we’re heroes. Let’s knock it down and then we can go do something more worthwhile.”

“Fuck Obama,” spat Hossam the hunter for no apparent reason. “Fuck the EU. Fuck NATO. Fuck the Arab Spring. Putin knows where it’s at. Everyone lick Putin.”

And Riya the rogue, off to the side, sang to herself: “Ohh, I’m happy! I’m – so – so – *happy!*”

Mikoro’s dread had reached her stomach. Something wasn’t right about these people. Not in the way that something might not be right about, say, cow-people on battleships or suns taking refuge in caves. Something else. Something about these people *didn’t belong*.

“And just what do you think you’re doing?” said Woland, who had somehow materialised right in front of the company.

“Huh? Well who the devil are you?” said Benlord.

“He’s very hard and doesn’t drop any loot,” Mariska advised. “We can skip.”

“No loot? Well clear off then, grandpa. Stop being silly.” The paladin waved his hammer, albeit with little feeling. Its head shimmered in a halo of yellow light.

“Alright! Alright!” the Professor conceded, raising his chequered palms and backing away. “Don’t worry, I know the rules. But look here, I’m a specialist, and I wouldn’t advise you to do what you’re going to do.”

The exchange at last got Riya’s attention and she broke from her dance to round on Woland in annoyance. “Who cares what people like you think?” she said, one hand raised to press his nose, the other feeling for a dagger. “Negative people don’t matter! I’m going to do what makes me HAPPY!” She sung the last word and once more cavorted in bliss.

“Fuck professors,” Hossam sneered at Woland, wiping the barrel of his rifle with a paper towel. “Fucking students. Fucking scroungers. You cock-suckers need to work.”

“Yeah, we can do what we like, since we’re heroes,” said Shosho. “Don’t try to stop us.” Her voice, her motions bore the coldness of someone who could have skewered a hamster without batting an eye.

“Why, of course you will do what you like!” said Woland. “In fact, I’m counting on it!” And he leant back with a watchful glance at the paladin’s hammer, as though allergic to the light that arced from it. “Although...”

The paladin grunted wearily. “Although what?”

Woland put his hand beside his lips and leaned back in, as though imparting a delicious secret.

“You’ll die, you know.”

This news couldn’t have interested Benlord less. “Who cares?” he said. “It’s only a game.”

Woland shrugged, defeated, and just like that he was back with Mikoro and Dari.

“Nyah! Are they really gonna hurt it?” asked Mikoro. She could feel her nerves taking leave of her. “I – I heard him! The shiny one with the hammer said they’re gonna destroy the Chaos Serpent! But, but, if they do that...!”

“Alas! It seems so,” said Woland ruefully.

“But can’t you stop them?” said Dari. “I mean – of course you can! You’re – ”

“I can no more lift a finger against them than turn light into dark or switch the skies and seas,” said Woland. “I can’t engage with them if they won’t attack me first. That’s the rules.”

“But then...ah, Mikoro, wait!”

But Mikoro, subject to no rules that wished to stay uneaten, was already scooting out to confront them.

“Did you say you’re going to attack the Chaos Serpent?” she challenged them. “You can’t! Don’t you understand how this place works? The nice professor can explain it! If you hurt one snake, the other will – ”

“Don’t waste time with the NPCs, just do it,” Mariska spoke over her.

“Yup. Come on guys, don’t be silly,” said Benlord, pushing past Mikoro as if he didn’t even see her. He raised his hammer to the sky; its golden crackles intensified till its head seared white-hot.

“Order is what matters,” growled Hossam, and he pointed to the red serpent statue. The motion was a command, and sent his crocodile gnashing across the floor at it. “Kill it, Morsi!” he spluttered. “Fuck justice! Fuck protesters! Fuck the United Nations! There has to be ORDER!”

“W-Wait, stop!” wailed Dari, inaudibly, as the rest of the group advanced on the serpent statues. The great monuments hissed – or perhaps that was just the slice of blades and shots through the air – as Benlord slammed his hammer into the Chaos Serpent’s tail, Mariska channelled lightning onto its head, Shosho and her imp blasted it up and down with bolts of shadow and fire, Hossam plugged it full

of rounds while his crocodile's chomps prised off its scales, and Riya vanished in a puff of dark smoke to reappear behind its head, where with cries of intoxicated pleasure she thrust her daggers into its ruby eyes and stabbed from both sides again and again and again.

The onslaught reverberated through the surrounding walls and the ruins began to rumble as dark powder, then shards, then rocks, showered in columns from the ceiling. Then with a gut-wrenching CRA-A-A-ACK! the Chaos Serpent came loose. It fell a way, then held in a slant, stuck at an excruciating angle.

"Come on guys, harder," said Benlord, who could not have sounded less invested in his current activity. "Go full DPS. Don't worry about aggro." And with a shake of his wrist a pair of golden wings sprouted from his back, and he began accentuating his hammer-swings with token jumps.

"Meh. So boring," complained Shosho as she wove her sinister threads into missiles of liquid darkness. "Let's not bother with this place next time, okay?"

And the fluffy Captain Mikoro, overtaken by events and in high agitation at being ignored, could do nothing but run back and forth yelling "Stop! Stop!" as these unbelievable vandals drove their offensive to its conclusion. That came when with a final lurch, the Chaos Serpent broke from its fellows' embrace and coiled away, unstoppably, calamitously, to fall in a curve and crash through the wall in a dreadful blast of rubble, dust and snow...

...and that, that right there if you're going to be precise about it, was the moment everything went horrifically wrong.

Benlord lowered his hammer. Hossam swung his rifle onto his back. Mariska turned away, Shosho folded her arms and went "Hmph!" and Riya reappeared in a haze of smoke. "Okay, good job guys, now let's - " began the paladin, but then all their attentions returned to the serpents as with a distressing crash, the Great Serpent of Balance, which in this state could hardly be called such a thing any longer, fell rigid over the Chaos Serpent and lay inert. But the Order Serpent - the Order Serpent! It now stood alone, or not so much stood as rocked on its coils, quaked, hissed, hissed hoarser, hissed harsher, and now it was *cackling* out of control, unmoored from the reality of free and spontaneous life as the very air, no, the very *reality* shook into a fractured haze around it...

"Bah, roleplay," Mariska grumbled. "So irritating. Can't we just skip this?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, it won't let you skip it the first time!" realised Shosho, seething in frustrated entitlement.

Somewhere off in the shadows, Woland mused: "The first? Hmm. Also the last."

“Um, guys,” said Benlord. “Are you sure this is what’s supposed – ”

A sickening shriek slashed through the sky – shrieking pain, shrieking joy. Everyone looked up, for through the hole in the roof they could make out three shapes, three snakes of coloured light. The red was falling away, the black drifted unconscious, but the blue, the blue! It was blistering, twisting, bending in on itself as it broke apart; and then with an earth-shattering SNAP! – of volcanic rock, but also of the very beams and rafters of the cosmos – the blue statue and the divine Order Serpent itself rent asunder. They clattered to the floor, the statue parts: the head, the body, the tail, three pieces, shattering the flagstones, dredging furrows through the snow as they rolled to a halt and stirred no more. Benlord put up his shield, Mariska and Shosho conjured magical ones, and Hossam and Riya managed to dodge, but it was the cosmic serpent they should have worried about, not the statue pieces, because now that shrieking laughter returned, and it was in fact not one but three shrieking laughs, each distinct in tone and pitch but equal in how they curdled the blood and blasted the mind with corrosion – and now they came, they came, through the hole in the roof, and they tore through the air of the devastated Temple of Balance, striking in perfect rectangles and spinning at the corners. They were regular, symmetrical, each of them blue, but no longer the calming blue of rigorous ethics, cool heads and firm resolve. Theirs was the blue of secret-police uniforms, of the blue screen of death, of unaccountable blue blood. And as they swirled and screeched triumphant, the five fools who’d unleashed them were faced in the end with the true gravity and horror of what they’d done.

“Run!” shouted Mariska, properly alarmed at last. “Get out of here, it’s not worth it!” And all semblance of group cohesion evaporated as they fled for the exit – all except Benlord who, with a shrug of complacent disdain, called up around himself a bubble of holy light which no force could break. Safe within, he brought out a strange white stone. His hands glowed green on it as he called on its power to magically transport him back to base.

But what good was running from a broken universe? The disembodied essences jerked around them, laughing, perhaps even teasing – then one of them found its target, the hunter Hossam, and smashed into him with the relentlessness of a drill. He tripped on a chunk of masonry; roared something inaudible, released his rifle, flailed his arms as he rolled and shook and the air around him liquefied, his body throwing off globs of blue-green bile which burnt through the stones where they splashed them – and now his roars turned to laughs, the very laughs of torturers

and megalomaniacs as their cruelties drive them out of their minds, and he stood up, his body amorphous now, an animated barrel of corrosive poisons, and where his head should have been he now had a liver. The hideous organ was punctured by a pair of beady eyes, and a set of rotting square teeth, and through them he blustered forth: **YES! YES! THERE SHALL BE ORDER! AAAAAAAHH, I AM THE BANE OF PREJUDICE! FUCK YOU, YOU MOTHER-FUCKING COCK-SUCKING FUCK-FUCKS, I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE DEAD! FUCK YOU, LIBERAL ACTIVIST CUNTS! FUCK** – And from here we shall stick to paraphrasing, not only because the coarseness of his output thenceforth was foul, but because he was directing it in ever more impossible directions – against genders and sexualities, body shapes and sizes, religions and ethnicities – which bent the realities in ways they were not supposed to bend, ways that made no metaphysical sense, such that reality at its most fundamental levels lost its stability around him. Even his crocodile sensed it, and by its nature it clamped its jaws round his leg to stop him. But no blood came out, only bile, which blistered in its mouth and shocked it loose – to which the possessed hunter shrieked: **FUCK YOU, YOU** – followed by a stream of unprintable abuses, and the vessels of his liver-head blasted the terrified creature with nauseating jets of fluid that seared through to its brain and killed it instantly. Still spewing with elemental bigotry, Hossam the Bane transformed into a sickly green cloud and soared off into the night.

No sooner had this happened than the second of those rampant spirits of Order set its attentions on Riya the rogue. She was fast, seemed even to dart from point to point without covering the spaces in between, but there was no outrunning the very essence of discipline. It impacted her like a piercing harpoon, and she staggered, almost fell – but then somersaulted and landed steady. Her leather-clad body now blazed the blue of an unstoppable will, the blue of the farthest reaches of the sky to which it hurls its vision and the trenches of the deepest seas where it lies low till the hour of its rise is nigh. And she snickered, tensed up, raised her daggers high, then as much as screamed out in orgasmic joy: **Ahahaha, I am the Bane of Ruthlessness, and I – am – so – HAAAAPPY! HAAAAPPY! HAAAAPPY!** And she leapt and twirled, dancing sharp and freezing the air to void in her wake as she goaded her fleeing former comrades Shosho and Mariska: **Are you happy? Are you happy? Happy happy happy! Happy happy happy!** And then, forgetting about them as they fled through the arch – they were inconsequential now, at any rate – Riya the Bane ascended, taking the shape of a

dark diamond javelin to shred through all in its path, and so soared away on a high arc out to sea.

The final spirit drifted lazily around Benlord, still crouched in his bubble of light, his recall device glowing stronger by the second. He smiled, smug, and ignored it as it allowed itself to drift and bounce off that bubble which no force could break. But of course, it wasn't a force as such. These essences didn't take over their targets so much as give them the chance to be their most perfect selves. And so, as casually as if it didn't matter at all, the final spirit sank through the impermeable barrier and soaked into the paladin's armour. He didn't even react as his face faded into a featureless blue surface. And he as much as threw away the words: *Meh. I'm the Bane of Apathy. Why are you taking this so seriously? It's just a game.* And with that his stone's activation sequence completed, and Benlord the Bane vanished.

Silence. Then, lightning.

From behind the collapsed Chaos Serpent a tricorne hat emerged, lopsided, crumpled. Then a pointy furry ear, too stunned to twitch, followed by an ashen mess of hair in a coat of dust. A pair of amber eyes gazed shellshocked at the smashed walls and pillars, the shattered fountains, the melted snow, and the extinguished brackets of torches where red and blue flames blazed no more.

The serpents' collapse had brought down the rest of the ceiling. The sky was the wrong blue. No stars. No snow. No rain. Only sparks – crackling sideways.

“Uh-oh,” said Mikoro.



Something strange was happening on the island of Horseham.

To passing captains – those who chanced to turn their spyglasses that way as they sailed from the Sheep Pub for instance – the island appeared to be leaking a dark liquid. If they'd sailed closer, which none admittedly had reason to do nowadays, they might have learnt that these rivers were not liquid at all, but rivers of ants, beetles, spiders, worms, gnats, cockroaches and other such critters pouring into the sea. It was as though they'd sensed something terribly unnatural was about to take place in *This Great Country* and wisely decided to take their leave.

They'd be okay. This was no ordinary sea after all.

Weirder still, a rainbow-vapour of written words could be seen rising from the island. It came from the chimney of one specific house, the only house containing

books, sketches, wood-carvings and other such unique creations whose loss would be irreplaceable. Later it would even be suggested that the silhouette of an orang-utan was glimpsed through the slits of its steel shutters, gathering up texts and scrolls and anything else too solid to escape in abstract form. But as there was no-one who could conceivably have witnessed this, such tales can hardly be taken for reliable testimony.

Crows cawed, took wing from the island's dead trees and flapped for distant skies. Fish and crabs took off from the reefs; in fact so did their entire multitude of marine life, carrying with them sea anemones, corals and other such creatures unable to make a break for it on their own. Bushes and brambles retracted deep into the earth, or uprooted themselves and rode away on the wind.

The Houyhnhnms lifted their heads. They curled their necks, regarding with cursory interest the torn-out sky. Having snorted their disdain, they then went back to slouching across their doorsteps.

A flash of lightning. They looked again.

A soaring, splashing, spluttering mass of blue-green corrosion was barrelling towards them.



The first thing it occurred to Mikoro to do was hug the Chaos Serpent.

She locked her arms round the tip of its tail. It was cold to the touch, and gashed with fractures where hammer-blows and energy blasts had disfigured it. Her palm stung as it brushed against one such wound, drawing a tiny prick of blood and a tinier squeal.

“Careful Mikoro,” said Dari from her shoulder. “It’ll be sharp as glass.”

“I don’t care,” said Mikoro. “They hurt the snakey.”

Dari said no more as Mikoro pressed herself against it. It was hard to know what to say. Even as she surveyed the devastation she could feel in her core that more than some ancient ruin had been desecrated this evening.

“Did you know this was going to happen?” she asked as Woland hobbled up to them out of nowhere. Actually no, don’t answer that, she thought. Of course he knew. And of course he couldn’t stop it.

He was back in his trench coat and furry cap. He puffed on an ivory pipe, leaning hard on his cane as he limped.

“Pah! Pardon me,” he said. “Weather like this – it really brings out the old injury.”

Dari glanced at the open sky. She suppressed her instinct to ask: What weather? Because there wasn't any. That ultramarine template, those sparks of cosmic static; that was what it must look like *behind* weather. Behind sky. Behind space.

Mikoro was mumbling cuddle-sounds into the statue's tail. She wished she could eat it, Dari interpreted. Comfort it in her tummy.

"We're in serious trouble," said Dari. It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes. Yes, you could say that," answered Woland. "The universe appears to be what we in the profession term – well – *a bit fucked.*"

His funny accent had vanished completely. Dari couldn't place the new one; could sense only that each syllable was now as smooth and articulate as a sound could possibly be.

Mikoro turned to face him. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"Oh, come, my brave captain, it's not *that* bad!" said Woland – and next thing he knew the cat-girl was sobbing in his arms. "Tch. There, there." He cast the suddenly closer Dari a look of mild surprise as he patted the dust from the fluffy captain's hair.

"Nyah. Th-Thank you. You're a nice man."

The professor slipped loose. "Tch," he said. "Just between you and me, I'm not really supposed to do that. Don't tell, hmm?"

"I understand," said Mikoro. "T-Teachers gotta be careful...reputation..."

"Eheh," Dari chuckled awkwardly, "I'm not sure that's what he –"

"Well, no use crying over spilt snakes," Woland declared loudly, sweeping his cane across the shattered vista. "It's clear the terms have changed, wouldn't you say?"

"B-But I don't understand! Who were those people and why would they do such a stupid thing? Everything feels...nyaah! Broken! It's all broken!" And she clutched her head in her hands.

"Why, that's because it is!" said Woland. "And what do you do when something's broken?"

Kiyoko's voice reverberated from the depths of her sister's memory. It told her exactly what she did.

"Um. F-Fix it?"

"That's it, that's it!" cried the professor, with far greater jubilation than either woman felt the situation called for. And he sang to himself in tones that might have come from some opera: "Things whole must break apart, things broken must come whole..."

“Fix it,” echoed Dari. She looked from the depleted sky to the three lifeless chunks of the Order Serpent statue, whose collapse had all but demolished the blue flank of the temple. A gash of sparks jerked her eyes back to the heavens. If she concentrated, she could just about sense their grid lines.

She’d rarely felt so powerless. And – yes, she was well aware of this fact – for her that was saying something.

“Uhh. I don’t want to discourage either of you,” she said, “but mightn’t this one be just a little bit beyond us?”

“Dari’s right,” said Mikoro, shoulders slumped. “I know we’ve dealt with many amazing things on this trip. But this? This is just scary. It feels so wrong in ways I can’t understand. Gwah, I feel ill. It’s like – like I just saw gods get killed! Or saw something which...which isn’t supposed to exist. Nyaah. You need, I dunno, bigger gods, or crazy scientists or something to fix this. Or my mother. And we’re not gods. We’re not even experts like you. We’re two girls with a boat. I’m just Mikoro. I’m a naughty. I don’t know how to fix a universe.”

“You...don’t?” said Woland, amazed. “Well – of course you don’t! Why, neither do I! Nobody who *knows* how to fix a universe ever managed it, I can tell you that much!”

He tapped his cane on the flagstones as if shuffling through a mental filing cabinet in search of ideas. Then he suggested: “Have you tried turning it off then on again?”

“Nyaah! I don’t wanna do that!”

“Oh very well, very well. Then you’d better have a look at the instruction manual, hadn’t you?”

When Mikoro stared blankly, he sidled up and whispered in her ear: “It’s in your pocket.”

The cat-girl dug her hands into her coat. Her fingers latched round paper.

“Nyah!”

She drew it out.

“But that’s the serpent sketch,” said Dari. “What do you – ”

“Well you can’t fix something till you know how it’s broken, can you?” said the professor. “A good start, I’d say that’d be, a good start!”

“But, it doesn’t say...”

“Oh, I don’t know, try turning it around or something,” said Woland, facing away. She turned it around.

“Ooh.”

The rear carried a different diagram. The image of the red Chaos Serpent was pale as a dying star, and its labels – Tolerance, Enthusiasm and Emotion – scratched out by a merciless hand. The Order Serpent fared little better: it had been cut into three. Its values remained – but they had mutated. The words in their place were printed bold, in huge font, and in all caps.

“There. See? Without Chaos, Order now has free rein to trample the world into its neat little lines and boxes as it sees fit. There, for example. What befalls Ethicality, without Tolerance to drag it out of its own pompous arse?”

“Um, um...”

PREJUDICE, the diagram read.

“And what of Discipline, without the Enthusiasm to infuse it with meaning and connect it to a world where other things matter?”

RUTHLESSNESS, was what had appeared.

“And, lastly, where does Logic leave you without the Emotion to give a monkeys?”

APATHY, it said.

“Wah. So those were – those, um, *things*...”

“The Banes of Order,” said Woland. “The Prejudice Bane, the Ruthlessness Bane and the Apathy Bane. Tch. Poor things.”

To which Mikoro reacted: “Gwah! *Poor things*? They – they were horrible! Their evil laughs, the monster-things they turned those people into – ”

“Turned? Oh no, you quite misunderstand. The Banes aren’t *evil* as such. Hah! *Evil* – don’t get me started on that one. No no my dear, they’re simply lost. Don’t you see? They’re the same primal forces of Order, only deprived of Chaos’s warm and heartfelt embrace. Oh they can be stuck-up sometimes, I’ll grant you that. Full of themselves? Absolutely. But this? Well, imagine what *you’d* be like if you never had a sister.”

Mikoro didn’t need to imagine. The thought was frightening enough on its own.

“Or more to the point – if she never had you.”

“Nyaaah! But that’s, that’s...hey. How d’you know about my sister anyway?”

“I know everything,” said Woland with an innocent shrug.

“Gweh.”

Then his green eye met Dari’s. Its pupil contracted. “*Almost everything*,” he corrected himself.

“So the Banes – what these Banes did to those people...”

“They didn’t,” said Dari, who’d worked it out. “The Banes didn’t *change* them, something was up with them already – right? They were drawn to them; brought out something already inside them. Is that right, uhh, Professor Woland? But then, how...”

“But where did they come from?” Mikoro cut in. “Nyah! Didn’t you mention some weird thing when they entered? Something about, um, heroes...”

“Heroes. Hahah. Excuse me. Ahahah!” Something in Mikoro’s words must have proven terribly funny to him, because now he laughed so hard he as good as keeled over clutching his abdomen.

“Oh that’s a good one,” he said between his chokes. “Heroes. Hah! A classic, don’t you think? But of course you’re right, you’re absolutely right. Consider. Some old fellow finds a world where all the rifts have been blocked off. He’s saddened. So what does he do? He contrives some ingenious scheme to project *all comers*” – and here he rubbed his thumb and middle finger together, as one might over a coin – “into the other worlds, and in the forms and shapes of their dreams at that. Now that’s all good and respectable, I won’t hear a word against it, don’t you mistake me. When your people are as impoverished as that you’ll make use of the means available to you, and the guy’s a genius, there’s no disputing that. The devil only knows how many lives he’s turned around, plucking lost souls from that sea of impossibility and sending them off to run around mowing down ogres and demons to their hearts’ content. But – here’s the thing – encouraging them to call themselves heroes? Now *avatars*, alright, that’s fair enough, even if that would throw the records here into confusion – but *heroes*? Just like that, as if it’s some title that comes rattling out of a vending machine? Hah! Well there’s a recipe for something, and as for what, well you’ve seen it, you’ve seen it right here! *Heroes!* Ahah! Well they wanted order and now they’ve got it!”

“Um, Dari?” said Mikoro. “Do you understand it?”

“No, he’s lost me again,” Dari replied, resuming her station atop her friend’s hat. “Look here, um, Professor, are you saying the people who did this weren’t actually present here?”

“They’re here, and they’re not. Why that’s the genius of it! If you’d like to know more then why not go find out for yourself? They’ve a base nearby where they dawdle about between all their *heroing*. That’s where he’ll have gone – that bore who looked like their leader, the one spilling light from his orifices. Might even have brought one of the Banes there with him. If you’re going to restore them – and you are – I’d say it’s as decent a place to start as any.”

“Gwah. Us? Restore those...but, h-how? I thought we – we’re supposed to go to Comet Island...”

“Tch, no chance of that now I’m afraid. No no, not while the universe is like this. Out of the question.”

“Nyaah! B-But, the bunny-boat...Mother’s friend...Mama...”

“Oh, and there’ll be no turning to *great big friends* either, hmm?” he added, striking down Dari’s thought process just as they sighted an emergency exit. “You know what I mean. Not the big ones – the *big* ones. Oh no, they can’t help you with this one. That’s what people just don’t get about omnipotence you see? It must be all fun and excitement, they tell themselves. Then they get their hands on it and learn that all it really means is you realise all the things you can’t do.”

“I wasn’t – ”

“Yes you were.”

“Oh fine,” huffed Dari. “But at least stop scaring Mikoro. Tell her it’s going to be alright.”

“Of course it will be alright,” said Woland flippantly. “Isn’t that obvious?”

“No. Tell her seriously.”

“Hm? But I’m always serious.”

Then he saw the expression on Dari’s face.

“Oh alright, alright,” he relented. “Captain Ibaraki Mikoro. Please to take it as a matter of expert counsel that the manner in which things turn out will, as heretofore described, *be alright*. And here’s the best part: do you know *why*?”

“Um. Why?”

And he proclaimed: “Why, because you’re Captain Ibaraki Mikoro of course!”

“But, but, what are we supposed to do about those scary Banes then? Are we meant to fight them or something?”

“Oh no no, nothing like that. I mean – yes, of course you’ll have to *fight* them. But you have friends, yes? And foes – better yet! Yes, yes, I’m sure you’ll have no problem at all. Just remember to bring them back into balance afterwards, that’s the important part. Then you can send them back.”

“S-Send...”

“Ah! You’re quite right. I almost forgot that part. Your hand, please.”

Not sure why or indeed whether she should, Mikoro held out her right hand.

“Wah! Wh-What’s this?”

The back of her hand carried a red snake pattern.

“Oh? Already? How curious!” said Woland, his pink eye spinning in genuine disbelief. He tapped a finger on his chin. “Perhaps...yes! That’ll be it! Now tell me, dear captain: while you were in contact with the statue, was there a moment you felt something, say, *big* and *powerful* entering you? No more than a flash, it must have been; a fleeting flicker of a fragment of an instant in which you knew all things and envisaged all potentialities that ever could be? Just for example mind you.”

“Nyah! I did, I did!” Somehow his words captured the sensation perfectly. “But I was too focused on giving the snake good hugs, so I, um, didn’t really notice.”

“Ah-ah-ah!” uttered the professor, clicking his fingers in great delight. “There you have it then! The Serpent of Chaos rests in you now. Aha! Hugs! Just think!”

“She – *whaaa*? The snake god?! Um, um, um...!”

“Do look after her, would you? She’ll be tired after all that, I’m sure you can tell. Now all you need do is touch her mark to a Bane of Order and it’ll be returned to its proper place in the cosmos. Once you’ve calmed it down enough, that is.”

“N-Now hold on, wait a second,” Dari started up, “are you sure this is a good idea?” The notion of allowing a divine manifestation of primal chaos to reside in Ibaraki Mikoro was causing her some concern.

“I wouldn’t lose time worrying about that now if I were you,” said the professor, checking his wristwatch. “You’d better get moving if you’re to be at the Heroes’ Agency on time.”

“Um, on time?” said Mikoro. “On time for what?”

“Oh, don’t let me spoil it,” said the professor with a trivialising wave. “But it’s happening soon, I can tell you that much.”

“It...is? How do you know?”

“Because...because...” Professor Woland gazed at the hollow sky, as if checking the way the non-existent clouds were moving. “Because Tsong has already bought the gas mask and not only bought it but put it on prior to the pull. He’s in combat now so can’t take it off, see?”

“Nyah, nyah. Um.”

And now Woland was at the far end of the room. The temple’s facade had crumbled, rose window and all; all that remained was the free-standing arch through which the professor was leaving. “Oh – and one more thing,” he called out.

“What?” Mikoro called back, more than a little alarmed.

“The fellow who set that place up? He’s a dragon. Watch yourselves, yes?”

The last they saw of him as he walked away was the back of his trench coat, the corpse of the six-legged crocodile slung respectfully over his shoulder.

Then he was gone, leaving them alone in the ruined temple. The ruined universe.

“A dragon,” Dari repeated.

“Uh-oh,” said Mikoro again.



On reaching the landing stage they grasped the true extent of the disaster. Not only was no trace left of fog and snow, there were also no stars, no clouds, nor even wind. The sky was stripped and the sea flat as ice. They could see far across it now, past the basalt outcroppings which looked more than ever like crowds petrified in time when the hands were twisted off the clock.

Then the travellers' hearts froze too as they spotted a larger silhouette: the Cow Queen's dreadnought. But to their infinite relief, it was leaving. Crossing the horizon.

Hence they would board the *Sea Bunny*, sail from that suffocating pair of blue braziers and make haste into this new concept of night. A night of anxiety, of the disorientation of perfect order in which nothing dared happen and all directions were the same. It spoiled even the taste of the tea and cookies Dari sensibly suggested to give them comforting routines to latch onto, and beneath its featureless firmament the pair of them tossed and turned, bumping but never breaching the borders of a restless sleep. In the end, disconsolate to see her friend so distressed, Dari even prevailed on Mikoro to swallow her so she could rub that spot in her stomach that always calmed her down; and when she'd at last brought her fluffy friend to rest, she sank in its folds, soaked in a gastric chaos she'd never imagined she'd find so comforting, and for an hour or two, caught some valuable shuteye herself.

And now we must leave our two travellers momentarily and move to consider events aboard the *Lamassu*.

“Nuuuuuuuuuo!”

The voice of world domination thundered from the cabin, scattering the minotaur deckhands with their big bovine hands clamped to their ears. “Whoooo did this?” it raged. “It's been clear in law for every generation of the dynasty that no-one is to disturb that temple! Nrrrrm, I bet it was that naughty cat! You fools, you fools, she was right there! How could you *all* fail to catch her?”

The Demon Cow Queen slammed her fists on her desk and stood up, meaning to thump out to the deck and assemble her crew for the earful they deserved. But before she could take a step an intercom rang, and a minotaur in a purple robe and veil materialised on the wall screen. The flap over her face carried a pair of piercing scarlet eye-symbols.

“What do you want?” the Cow Queen bellowed, her mood foul as ever now. “Can’t you see the sky’s fallen in? What do I grant you your share of the tribute for if I know about these things before you do?”

“Your M-Majesty, Your Majesty,” quaked the terrified Minister of Eyes and Ears – but then she fell silent, waiting for her queen’s rant to subside. Behind her the junior clerks hustled desperate through the fortress’s information room, no doubt struck with the same terror as everyone else by the great disruption.

“And I’m still waiting for your report on Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny* and Dari the squirming mouse! Is this their doing? Do you see now what a danger they are? Well? What have you to say for yourself?”

She waited, but the Minister seemed stuck in a loop of bows and whimpers.

“And the Beast! What – about – the Beast?”

“B-Beg pardon, Your Majesty,” dared the Minister at last, “but you’re on mute. I didn’t hear anything you just said.”

The Cow Queen raised her armoured fists to slam them into the screen. Then she stopped; forced herself to remember the bill from last time, not to mention her blood pressure. She shut her wide eyelids, counting through the illustrious generations of her dynasty till she’d calmed down. Then she returned to her desk and lowered her great rump onto her couch, with much groaning of its frame, and slapped the button next to her microphone.

“Report,” she grumbled.

“Y-Your Majesty,” said the Minister of Eyes and Ears, bowing briskly. “It’s about – ”

“The great big nothing where the sky’s supposed to be? Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Forgive me Your Majesty, it’s worse than that. Your sovereign might has been called upon. There’s been an attack on the Sheep Pub.”

The Cow Queen opened her mouth to reply. She paused, contemplating. Then instead she shovelled in a spoonful of rice and beef from the drawer-dish at her arm.

She gobbled it down. “Go on.”

“It came out of nowhere,” the masked Minister continued, constantly glancing down at an armful of dispatches. “An air raid, they say. Fortunately there are some skilled admirals staying at the inn at this time. They mobilised their ships and repulsed the attackers before they could cause any serious damage.”

“Mmnh. But?” said the sovereign through another mouthful of rice.

“But some smaller civilian craft were caught in the crossfire. There were casualties.”

The Cow Queen spluttered and reached for her nearest flagon of rice-wine.

“They already recovered the bodies. Two itinerant labourers. Their catamaran flew the colours of the Sunda Republic.”

Glug, glug, glug. She wiped her lips with her plated arm. Drummed her massive fingers on the table. This was serious.

“They’re still debriefing, but from what our people there have gathered, the assault came from the direction of the island of Horseham.”

“That squalid little shanty?” said the Cow Queen. “Preposterous. Those horses have neither the vision nor the verve to try something so stupid, let alone the equipment. Weren’t there only half a dozen of them left in any case?”

“Ah – yes Your Majesty, but their island, their island is...”

“RIGHT!” she boomed, and once more she stood, slamming down so hard with her fists that the walls rattled, snapping the cables and filling the screen with static.

The great hegemon paced back and forth, each stomp transmitting tremors into the lower decks and shaking her minotaur staff in their bedrolls.

Then she returned to her desk and scooped up her huge helmet. She wedged it onto her head, jiggling it twice to jam it round her horns. Having done so, she faced her desk – or more accurately, faced her late father, the Demon Ox King, who smiled handsomely out at her from the portrait over her couch. It was a majestic smile, she always found; a regal smile, a *sovereign* smile, brought out by the glint of his nose ring and the tassels that hung from his horns. But, it also seemed to her, a vulnerable smile; less fatherly, more grandfatherly; perhaps because of the way his leathery face had darkened with old age, or the permanent battering done to his armour by the rod of that infernal monkey, or just that tired manner in which he rested his hands on the handle of his iron mace as if it were a walking stick.

He wasn’t around to protect what was his anymore. Only she could do that.

She raised a gigantic iron finger.

“Let NO-ONE say,” she snarled, to herself, her old bull, or the universe in general, “that the great Demon Cow Queen stood idly by while troublemakers violated a designated sanctuary in her domain!”

Then in two strides she’d crashed out to the deck. Hundreds of horned heads spun her way. She bellowed forth: “Fire up both engines! To your posts, the lot of you! Set course for the island of Horseham!”

With the cattlepower at its disposal there was no stopping this floating fortress, and within half an hour *This Great Country* lay in sight.

“Closer!” commanded the Cow Queen.

“B-But Your Majesty!” pleaded her panicked advisors, prostrating themselves at her boots. “The island – it’s, it’s – ”

“CLOSER!” she roared at the top of her voice. “This is MY sea, and all who cross it answer to ME!”

But a pair of suppurating green rockets seemed not to share her assessment. As they sputtered closer, it became clear to the onlooking crew that they were not rockets at all, but horses – only horses weren’t supposed to gallop above the water, nor spit burning bile from their eyes and teeth, nor indeed leak trails of toxic waste that decomposed the very reality they dripped on.

“Hrrm. What in the name of – ”

“Y-Your Majesty!” lowed a minotaur from the nearest lookout tower. “Portside – incoming Houyhnhnms – they’ve become – ”

An eruption of moos blew out as the corrupted Houyhnhnms smashed into the *Lamassu’s* hull. The great ship listed twenty or thirty degrees, but recovered under its own awesome weight – only now two hideous gaping holes disfigured its flank. Through them dozens of minotaur deckhands and cannoneers spilt into the sea, shrieking as the acids of prejudice sizzled through their hides; and it was only to their great fortune that those hides were rugged and resilient thanks to their bovine inheritance, and this sea itself suitable balm for those wounds. This was because the poisons attempting to sear them open were rejected by all functioning universes, to say nothing of the material in which they floated.

“Outrageous!” the Cow Queen’s judgement rang through the decks, rippling with a fury none of her minions had known from her – and it seared through their sinews, bolstered their spirits, felt to them like the hand of a solid, secure reality gripping their shoulders tight. “Medics and engineers to the lower decks!” the voice commanded. “Attend to the wounded! Secure the breach! All remaining hands to battle stations!”

She lumbered across the still-swaying bridge and took hold of her mighty mounted scope, swinging it straight for the island – and there saw sights that belonged to no sane reality.

The problem was not merely the caving dimensional walls, nor even the impossible colours. It was the equine chants she could hear, rising forth from that twisted snarl of dead branches – “*Exterminate the yahoos. Exterminate the yahoos. Exterminate the yahoos.*” And now her very consciousness began to gasp for breath beneath a cascade of unthinkable images: of torch-bearing cultists, of soldiers like robots smashing down doors and dragging screaming people from their beds; of barbed wire, brick furnaces, villages aflame, crowds mown down with machine-gun fire, children beaten or screamed at till they broke in torment or abandoned in gutters for not being the shape or colour their parents wanted – and not only that, but worse by far, *ordinary people*, millions and millions of *ordinary people*, shrugging about their days as an eyed and toothed liver in the sky drenched their streets with torrents of molten hate through its every open vessel, and those *ordinary people*, they were lapping it up, wading in it, splashing in it, not even with excitement, but as though it were the most natural thing in the world...

No. Enough. Only one recourse remained.

“FIRE!” she roared. “ALL CANNONS, FIRE!”

That Great Country exploded in dense black smoke as three rows of cannon blasted in unison, drowning out all other sounds and mental images.

“MORE!” thundered the Cow Queen. “ALL POWER TO THE MAIN GUNS! FIRE! FIRE!”

And now the great 12-inch turrets turned, slow but with inevitability, till the offending island shrank beneath their fearsome gazes. KA-THUNK. KA-THUNK. Two by two their barrels pounded, tongues of flame flashing from their muzzles as they pumped the Cow Queen’s wrath unto that prejudiced carbuncle, their every pulse shaking the world to its foundations. Atop the highest heavenly towers, gods spilt their coffees over the balconies; in the deepest deep-sea trenches, slumbering horrors groaned in dismay as they suffered nightmares of squeaky fuzzy creatures clambering across their tentacled carapaces. The pummelling went on till the *Lamassu*’s artillery had nothing left to fire, but the Cow Queen was taking no chances and she ordered them reloaded for a second bombardment. Only after that did she call the fusillade to a halt and return her eye to the scope.

The island had been levelled. Literally. All that was left was a flat plain of ashes. Even the surrounding reefs had been demolished.

“Something’s still moving on there,” she grunted. “Enough. I’ll get to the bottom of this myself. Bring us in!”

The *Lamassu* drew up, its sailors swallowing their fear. Down crashed a gangway into the ashes, and with a series of earth-shaking stomps the mighty Demon Cow Queen took her first steps on a land whose dwellers had called themselves nature’s perfection.

Her royal guard fanned out around her, tower-shields thunking into the ash. She counted the dead Houyhnhnms – one, two, three, four. The other two must have combusted when they’d turned themselves into bigotry-missiles and hit her ship.

“Nrrrrrrm. What a mess.”

Something else protruded from the ash. A leg. She dug in a gauntleted hand and lifted out the charred remains of a human. Corpulent, not very tall, face fixed in a sneer of hate. A hunter, going by his clothes.

His corpse vanished in her hand – didn’t decay or come apart or anything like that, simply vanished.

She rumbled: “I swear on the bones of my ancestors, something inexcusable happened here. Nrrm, that rascal of a cat! Whatever she did at the serpent temple must have caused this!”

EXTERMINATE THEM ALL, said a voice. **THEY ARE INFERIOR. LIFE UNWORTHY OF LIFE. RESOLVE THEM.**

“Silence!” she roared. “Who dares talk when I’m talking?”

It descended, wreathed in spikes of blue-green plasma. **EXTERMINATE**, it insisted.

“Why, you...!”

EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES. EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES.

It hovered. Jerked round her head in a perfect square. Then it seemed to reach a decision.

YOU ARE TOO BIG, it said, and began to drift away.

Why, yes I am, she thought proudly.

Then she processed the too.

The Cow Queen snarled, drew back her fist and smashed it into the Bane of Prejudice with the force of an armoured train.

The essence thumped into the ash and fell silent, its power extinguished.



In the exact instant that Hossam the hunter had been obliterated by the Cow Queen's cannons, thereby ejecting the Bane from his body, a computer exploded in the apartment of a minor diplomatic functionary of the Abdel Fattah al-Sisi regime in Cairo.

The man rolled backward across the floor, then smashed into a cabinet and fell still. It wobbled, showering him in porcelain dishes which he just had time to register shattering around him before that distinguished piece of furniture – a courtesy gift received during his recent posting at one of the embassies in East Asia – came crashing onto his head.

He lay there a while, lost in a daze, but eventually came to his senses and staggered up to survey the wreckage of his gaming desk.

"Fuck!" he snarled. "Fucking Mossad. Fucking homos. Fucking atheists."

He lashed out, meaning to hurl away the desk with all its now-useless equipment – only to find his arms passed straight through it.

"*What the fuck?!*"

His doorbell rang.

"Ah, fuck it! Wait!" he shouted, wading through the debris (though he didn't have to) and stumbling into the entrance hall. But just as he was about to reach it the door swung open.

He gagged; recoiled, and threw himself onto his back, shrieking "Aaaahh! Aaaaaah! *What the fuck are you?*"

"Good evening!" said Woland cheerfully. "Mind if I come in?"

"Fuck...fuck..." the compromised man panted, scrabbling backwards.

"Oh look! I already have! Dear me, I can be so careless sometimes. But never mind that. It's time we had a little talk, don't you think?"

THE WAY OF THE

龍

DRAGON

Was this how it felt to sail beyond the end of the world?

No fresh ocean breeze, no foaming surf, no seagull cries nor flap-flap-flap of flying fish. No waves, no sounds; just water so flat that no self-respecting mariner would be caught dead calling it the sea.

What shadows of fish remained swam in straight lines. The weatherless air fared no better; it hung so deadened that the travellers' lungs felt stifled, not refreshed, to breathe it. The *Sea Bunny's* sail, powerless to flap in non-existent wind, stood suspended, as lost as a flag on the moon.

Most disturbing of all, Mikoro sat silent.

You had to see it to believe it.

It hadn't sunk in. It never would. She knew it. A world without chaos was not a world which made sense to Ibaraki Mikoro.

"We'll fix it Mikoro," came Dari's muffled tones. The little explorer had burrowed in beneath the tricorne hat and lay face down, spread-eagled within her hair. She was sweeping her arms and legs, dispensing between them the most thorough head-cuddle she could muster.

"I want to go home," said Mikoro, morosely.

Her little friend emerged, gliding down a strand of pink hair to land on her shoulder. The cat-girl's head didn't move. She just stared straight ahead.

Dari had comforted a depressed Mikoro before, but this was her first time seeing the cat-girl so utterly forlorn. She'd grown so used to those huge curious

eyes following her around. That naughty grin. That ominous lick of the lips that told her tummy-time was coming.

It might drive her up the wall sometimes, or more accurately down it. But it was Mikoro. It was her way. And the world felt faulty without it.

“It’s my fault,” said Mikoro. “It’s because I’m a naughty.”

“Huh? No, Mikoro, you had nothing to do with – ”

“It’s my fault!” Louder this time. “I ate a cake that wasn’t for me and now everything’s wrong!”

“No – look,” said Dari, tugging on her hair. “You didn’t cause this Mikoro. You can’t blame yourself for it, and I’m not going to let you. Didn’t you tell the de-*eeeh*, the nice professor that you’re just one person? Well it’s true, and it means you can’t be responsible for everyone else’s choices. They did this, not you. All we can be responsible for is what we do about it.”

Mikoro sniffled. Her pink cheeks were moist but bore no tears. She was too lost to cry.

“Bwah. I’m sorry. I just feel so...nyaah, actually I don’t know. Messed up, I guess. Scared. It’s like I can’t even breathe. It’s not meant to be like this. It’s just not.”

“And you know what?” said Dari, stroking her neck. “You’re not wrong to feel that way. Because all this – it is wrong. Heck, what would be wrong is if we *didn’t* feel this way about it. So if you do feel it’s wrong, it means you’re still good. You’re still you.”

“Nyah. A naughty.”

“And you know what? That matters, Mikoro. Because, look, maybe you can’t help it if the sea’s stopped being the sea, or the sky’s stopped being the sky. But you can still be Mikoro – naughty, fluffy, lovable, chaotic Ibaraki Mikoro, *my friend* Mikoro – and so long as you are it means the Banes of Order haven’t got their way. And that’s how we’ll fix it. We’ll track down those Banes, we’ll send them home, and then we’ll go to Comet Island and get you home too.”

Mikoro’s fingers curled round Dari’s legs. They ferried her in front. Amber eyes half her size took her in through drapes of watery gloom.

“Even when the sky falls down, tiny Dari’s not afraid,” the cat-girl remarked.

“Actually Mikoro, I’m terrified. This is new. In all my travels I’ve never seen anything like this. But, do you remember what our friend Urbosa said about fear?”

“Nyah. Urbosa. I wish Urbosa was here now. I want to hug her. And Mama. And Kiyoko. And Ammi, and the nice professor, and Mary from the pub, and cute Sétanta...”

Dari allowed the giant fingers to fondle her as she listened in silence. For all such handling she received she'd never truly got used to it. Its tendency was still to fluster, intimidate or annoy her, depending on whose hands they were and the manner in which they were applied. Even the touch of close friends like Mikoro set her heart racing, typically in the direction of her cheeks. But it was clear from her big friend's face that she wasn't in it for the pleasure anymore. Her soft digits moved slow: a nail through Dari's hair; a fingertip-rub on the forehead, feeling out the imprint of her scar; the gentle slide of thumb and forefinger down her chest and back, then on down her sturdy legs, pausing at the end to spin her anklet.

She – her body – was familiar to Mikoro. That familiarity was what mattered now.

Yes, it is, she argued with herself, as the apparatus of probing switched from fingers to tongue.

Then the light shifted. Dari twisted round in Mikoro's grip, with difficulty – and smiled.

“You know what Mikoro? You might be about to get one of your wishes. Look.”

Mikoro looked. And what she saw was the sun, peeking across the skyless horizon.

“Wah.”

“You see that? The sun's going to keep sharing its sunshine with you. So don't you stop sharing yours, alright?”

She bent down and kissed Mikoro on the finger.

“It's Ammi! She didn't go back in her cave!”

“Nope. And look there. She's showing us something.”

As sunlight fell in liberating rays through this world of unnatural order, it caught on a dark shape ahead and dragged it forth from the surrounding nothing. It coalesced; grew sharp around the edges; and as the ship sailed closer and the sun climbed higher it began to fill in with colour.

It was an island. Terraced, with standing structures and tiny things moving on it.

And one big thing.

One very big thing.

Right at the top. Big and blue.

“Look at that,” said Dari, watching it flex its wings. “I think we've found our dragon.”



As the *Sea Bunny* pulled into the dock, an eager voice screeched: “Ah, potential customers!”

The concave cliffs had blocked the view on their approach. There’d been no time to take anything in, and now they’d no sooner landed but been surrounded by a reception crew of motley humanoids. Some were obviously in fact human, but one was hunched with fangs and green skin, another two or three were definitely elves of various kinds, and yet another only came up as high as Mikoro’s waist, and had a pointy nose and skin greener still – it had been he who’d announced their arrival. Yet another was a brawny bipedal bull with horns and a nose-ring.

The last put Mikoro and Dari instantly on guard, till they realised he looked nothing at all like the Cow Queen’s minotaurs. That was mostly on account of his outfit, all their outfits in fact: a sky-blue hood, a sky-blue tabard, a sky-blue belt, and sky-blue gloves and shoes. If your eyes worked hard they might just have glimpsed the plain black robes beneath.

As they beckoned the pair to disembark, one of the elven ladies hailed them with the words: “Well met, travellers! Welcome to the Nexus-Dragon Heroes’ Agency! Have you come today to set forth on your own heroic journey?”

Mikoro scanned that semicircle of hooded faces. They all looked startingly at ease for the condition the world was in.

On another day those smiles might have won over Dari’s trusting nature, but not today; not with what they’d seen of the heroes this place supposedly put out. “Look Mikoro,” she whispered in her ear, “we’d better not mention we’re searching for the Banes. Not till we’ve had a look around.”

“Um. Do many heroes come here then?” Mikoro asked them. “Why are there so few boats?”

The burly green-skin grunted: “Most of our heroes come through the portals. But don’t let that dissuade you. All are welcome in the Nexus-Dragon’s domain.”

It certainly sounded the case. A hubbub of shouts, laughs and cries was travelling down the cliffs to them. Whatever was happening up there, it had to involve a great number of people.

So Dari inquired: “Excuse us then, but how exactly does one become a hero?”

“Why it couldn’t be simpler!” the bull-person growled affably. “First we run you through a few basic checks to help you decide your calling. Are you a warrior who

leaps into the fray with sword or axe ablaze? A mage who blasts down your enemies with fire and ice, or a warlock who bends demons and darkness itself to your whim? Will you protect the weak as a paladin, or draw on the power of the earth as a druid or shaman? The choice is yours, brave heroes, and once you have made it, it's off through the portals to whatever beleaguered kingdom, perilous dungeon or wild frontier is most in need of your valour. As you carry out quests and overcome monsters and tyrants, you'll accumulate the equipment and skills to venture into ever more dangerous regions till you're a match for the most terrible of dragons and dictators, demons and dark gods! The realms you'll have access to here are nigh limitless, and thanks to the tireless vision and guidance of the Nexus-Dragon you'll have every opportunity you need to rise as the greatest heroes the world has ever known!"

"Terms and conditions apply," jabbered the little green goblin extremely quickly.

Having blinked her way through this sales pitch, Captain Mikoro thought to ask: "Um, so do you have heroes working on *this*, too?" And she pointed at the shattered sky.

"Oh, why worry about such things?" said another elf airily – he was slighter than the other, with bright green eyes and pale skin. "Come, friends. Put your worldly troubles aside and embark on your epic adventure with the Heroes' Agency!"

"Just say yes," Dari whispered. "Come on. We only need to get up top, then we can see if that paladin with the Bane's here."

"Gwah. Okay then, we wanna be heroes!" Mikoro declared with a winning smile. "How do we get up there?"

"Easy!" said the screechy little green one, and he led them away as the hero-masters bowed and dispersed. "The portal up's right this way!"

Mikoro took a step.

"Ah, but first!"

She stopped.

"Nyah?"

"There's just the small matter of the enrolment fee. That'll be thirty silvers per entry, with an additional twenty for each tier of portal you'd like access to. Or, if it's more convenient, we could set you up for a rolling subscription!"

"Uhh...we have to pay to be heroes?" said Dari. "Didn't you say everyone's welcome?"

"Hey, this place doesn't run itself you know!" said the goblin. "Takes plenty of the shiny stuff to keep the portals up and running, cover salaries for the hero-

masters – that’s us – furnish the weapons and armour, respawn the monsters and bad guys and what have you, and then of course there’s that big ugly Cow Queen’s corporation tax. Corporation tax! Hah! Can you believe it?”

Mikoro hesitated. Something about this arrangement didn’t feel right.

“Well what are you waiting for?” said the goblin, tapping his sky-blue shoe. “Time is money friends!”

“But, but, we don’t even know what it’s like to be heroes yet!” Mikoro objected. “What if it’s not for us? Don’t we at least get to take a look first?”

The goblin’s smile went missing. He must have really wished she hadn’t asked that.

“Well...yeah,” he confessed. “You *are* entitled to a twenty-minute free trial, if you absolutely must. That’s the policy. Still – no going through any portals until you’ve paid, you got me? Except this one of course,” and he gestured with a bow to a shimmering circle of purple air at the end of the path. “This’ll take you upstairs. Now go on, go be heroes!”

“Nice one Mikoro,” said the voice in her ear.

Mikoro reached out, curious. She’d never been through a portal before.

“Wah. Is this what the rifts look like Dari?”

“Not at all. This looks...artificially generated, I’d say. No idea how.”

Mikoro stuck an arm through it. “Ooh.” Then a leg. Then she dipped her head and pushed on through.



“Waaaah! So many!”

If chaos was missing from the universe, the Nexus-Dragon Heroes’ Agency hadn’t got the message. Such a tumult of colours and voices surged across its terraces that to be confronted with it all at once meant instant disorientation. It was all Mikoro could do to stagger to a bench, sit down, and soak it in layer by layer.

Where to start? With the so-called heroes themselves? There must have been hundreds of them, thousands perhaps, running, jumping, standing on fences and bridges, singing, dancing, or – this was weird – disguising themselves as bears, trees, pirates, skeletons, bizarre walking owl-creatures or practically any other shape Mikoro could think of, along with no few that she couldn’t.

These characters all had names over their heads like the five they'd encountered at the serpent temple, and none appeared at all perturbed by the collapse of cosmic balance. Some were crowding round individuals who held up signs with big yellow exclamation marks, while others hammered up posters splashed with strange acronyms – LFG, LFM, WTB, WTS. On closer inspection the LFG and LFM people tended to amalgamate into groups, mostly of five, occasionally of ten, twenty-five or even forty, before scuttling away to plunge through the island's portals.

Then there were those portals themselves: swirling interdimensional doorways, like the one they'd just stepped through only much huger, either blue or green, and each set in a gateway structure which with its surrounding scenery presented a distinct theme. On the lowest level, where they were now, she made out a stone-walled enclosure draped in blue banners carrying golden lion-head insignia; a rougher fortress of timber and iron with red-roofed watchtowers; an obvious death theme with skulls, bones, dark bricks and – perhaps a little over-the-top – conduits of viscous green sludge; and a dark evergreen forest with darting blue spirit-lights and pointy glaives sticking out. There must have been thirty or forty of these gateways on this level alone, and up the terraces Mikoro picked out more of them, more and more, some with heavier hero-traffic than others...

“Looking for more!” someone screamed in her face, making her jump.

“Nyah! Wha, wha...”

“One more for Stratholme!” he bawled – a tall fellow with broad shoulders and chalky blue skin up to his plated forehead and down to his...hooves? A goat-alien? He wore an esteemed bearing, but his babble – “Need healer! Link achi and gearscore or NO INVITE!” – failed to match the dignity of his stature.

“Stratholme...” said Dari.

“Oh no, these heroes aren't eligible yet,” said one of the sky-blue hero-masters, dropping by to turn the petitioner away. “They can't enter high-level dungeons on the free trial.”

“Dari?” said Mikoro. “I'm not understanding this at all.”

“Stratholme,” Dari said again. “N-No way.”

“Um...?”

“I've heard of it Mikoro. It's a city. In a world called Azeroth. I've been to Azeroth. I've got a good friend there. But what's that got to do with...?”

At that moment a throaty rumble announced: “Good morning, good morning! Welcome to another day of exhilarating adventures in the world of Azeroth!”

A reptilian roar – and on looking up the two of them immediately identified the source of this proclamation.

There lorded the Nexus-Dragon. Impressively grand with sky-blue scales, a wispy beard, a colossal pair of folded wings and a bulbous mass on its tail like a great white durian, it lounged atop a hoard of silver at the very summit of the island and from there bestowed its blessing on the day's proceedings.

Mikoro stared transfixed. "Waah. That's a big, big dragon..."

"So he's the one running this show," Dari inferred. "Should we go ask him about his bunch of heroes who attacked the temple? Maybe it was all some mistake, and if we explain – "

"Nyah! B-But he's big..."

Dari had to collect herself at that one.

"Since when were you put off by *big*, Mikoro? You're the one whose idea of fun is sliding down your friends' throats...?"

"Yeah, but they aren't dragons! Aren't dragons supposed to do all sorts of big scary stuff like, um, roar extremely loud and control the weather?"

But the fact there was no weather to control did not seem a major concern for this Nexus-Dragon.

"Bweh. I bet he can, he just doesn't want to."

Dari squinted as she scanned the upper terraces more attentively. Each was layered with different terrain, and the ramps up were guarded by pairs of more thickset variants of those sky-blue hero-masters.

"On second thought," she assessed, "we might have trouble getting up to him. Look at the signboards Mikoro. There's some kind of tier system in place here. Do you have to be a certain...*level* of hero to progress up each terrace? My gosh, yes – look at the armour and big flashy weapons on the people up near the top! I'd guess only the most powerful heroes of all get access to the dragon."

Mikoro's gaze fell back to their own tier, the lowest. A bunch of 'heroes' had taken off all their clothes and were dancing gratuitously on a nearby postbox. Their hysterics as they thrust their waists did not commend them to her.

"Bwah. So what do we do? I'm not sure I want to get involved with some of these people."

"I'm trying to work it out," said Dari. "Azeroth – is it supposed to be through those portals? I've not seen much of it, mind you. My friend there's taken me around a little. The ruins in Andorhal were pretty cool, and Tirisfal's nice, we had a fun picnic there once if you don't count the business of that wolf with the spider

eggs that – eheh, never mind. What I’m saying is, I’ve never seen people like these there. I don’t get it. Maybe a different...?”

“Ten minutes!” a passing hero-master reminded them. “Ten minutes left on your free trial!”

“Bah, we’d better hurry,” said Mikoro. “Any sign of that paladin who had the Bane?” But the commotion here was already supplying its answer.

“Ugh, not a chance,” said Dari. “There’s just too many of them. Well, I guess we’ve no choice but to pay and work our way up. If we get through one of the portals, maybe we can see if it’s the actual Azeroth through there? In which case...”

“Congratulations, brave heroes!” – an announcement from the electronic speakers on a nearby pylon startled them. Wondering to whom it was addressed, they glanced around till their attentions caught on a clump of people near a portal on one of the high terraces. The portal had a nautical theme going by the giant seashells and ship parts surrounding it, and from it a squad of heroes had just emerged with victory written all over their faces, their raised fists, their bulging loot sacks. Straight away they’d been accosted by a crew with television cameras and microphones; it must have been their output they were hearing.

“Aahh, what an excellent raid!” declared the little pink-haired gnome who was surely their leader. “It was close at times, but we did it! Queen Azshara has fallen!” She was panting for breath but her voice was delirious with pride.

“Well done, well done!” said one of the interviewers. “Is there anything you’d like to take this opportunity to tell our listeners around the world?”

“Yes!” the gnome tittered. “Don’t give up, you wonderful heroes! Keep fighting till we’ve liberated the seas from the evil naga!”

Cheers and applause rippled round the terraces. Some people whooped. The corner of Mikoro’s eye found the Nexus-Dragon, resting his chin on his silver-nest with a satisfied smirk.

“Queen Azshara,” Dari echoed. “That’s Azeroth alright.”

“Did she eat you?”

“Wh-What? No way Mikoro, Azshara was dreadful! One of the worst tyrants in their history, from what I could learn. But she was defeated millennia ago. The naga are – I don’t understand – how...”

As she struggled through this quandary another group piled exhausted from a portal at the far end of the terrace. They’d staggered only a few steps before microphones were shoved in their faces, to which they readily proclaimed: “Get in there! It took more than fifty attempts, but we did it! The corrupt warchief

Garrosh Hellscream is dead! Look, look, he dropped his axe! Liberation for Orgrimmar! Freedom for the Horde!"

The Nexus-Dragon yawned with contentment and pawed at a clump of silver ingots.

"Now that's really wrong," said Dari. "Garrosh Hellscream was overthrown years ago. Right then – look. Let's grab one of those guys in blue and buy more time to get to the bottom of this."

Mikoro stood up to search for a hero-master but had not taken two steps when yet another party scrambled from a portal, the nearest this time – the stone-walled city with blue banners. The interviewers duly approached them.

"Welcome back, great hero!" they greeted the leader. "Have you any words to mark this glorious occasion?"

The leader wore a gas mask.

And as the microphone bumped keenly on its visor, he took hold of it and shouted: "Liberate H- "

Mikoro didn't hear the rest. The words, muffled initially by his mask filter, were swiftly drowned out in the collective gasp of everyone on the island – which for the terrible instant that followed, lost its breath.

"THROW HIM OUT!" roared the Nexus-Dragon.

Immediately a pack of sky-blue hero-masters converged on the gaggle, where they seized the arms not only of the gas-masked hero but the pair of interviewers too. After a brief scuffle they were marched straight past where Mikoro was standing, and as the island returned to business as usual, she overheard one of the hero-masters recite: "You have brought the Nexus-Dragon Heroes' Agency into public disrepute. You shall forfeit the right to participate in its activities for a year, along with any loot you acquired while operating under its banner..."

"Nyah! Wh-What's going on?" said Mikoro, alarmed at the sudden yet unremarked severity of this turn of events. There was no cheering or clapping this time either – the heroes had simply put their heads down and were going about their affairs as if nothing had happened. But Mikoro was never one to leave questions unanswered, and she went up to one at random and tugged on his sleeve.

"Um, excuse me," she said, "why is that guy being arrested?"

"Hah? Wha'choo wan?" said the hero, a lanky blue-skinned creature with an arched back, curved tusks and two-toed feet.

"That guy there!" said Mikoro. "You saw, didn't you? And the interviewers too! Did they do something wrong?"

The hero shrugged her off angrily and walked away.

“What was that place he mentioned?” Dari was saying. “I didn’t catch it.”

“Hey!” Mikoro made an attempt on another champion, a paladin dressed much like that Benlord who’d led the serpent temple group, only much shorter with a bald head and big bushy beard – definitely a dwarf. “Hey, that incident just now!” said Mikoro, and she even tipped her hat this time for politeness. “Why did they – ”

“Doesn’t matter,” the dwarf said brusquely.

“What do you mean *doesn’t matter*? All he said was liberate somewhere, like the others, no? Isn’t that what heroes do?”

“Fuck sake!” snapped the dwarf, losing his temper. “I came here exactly so I wouldn’t have to think about that sort of thing. Stop making everything political.”

“B-But, didn’t they say it’s all about, um, standing up to tyrants and oppressors?” said Mikoro as he wandered off. “Nyah. What’s going on here Dari?”

“Two minutes!” a passing hero-master threatened them. “Two minutes to go!”

Mikoro lifted off her hat to find the little explorer standing in the fold with arms held out sideways, as though trying to gauge something invisible.

“Mikoro, do you feel that?” she said.

“Um. Feel what?”

“It’s very faint, but – there, right there. I’m certain.”

“What? What?”

“Earthquake.”

And as soon as she’d said this, Mikoro felt it too. First with her ears, then with her feet. A low-level tremor.

The sea, she remembered. As still as ice. She ran to the edge and looked over. Sure enough: ripples, spreading out from beneath the cliffs.

Then her ears twitched at a pair of voices – two heroes in conversation as they hurried past. “Look at that,” one of them sneered, flicking his finger at Mikoro. “It’s ridiculous. They’re letting too many women in. See there? Another one. I tell you, this is a setup to put an end to common sense and destroy the freedom of speech of patriots like me. They’re cancelling me, do you hear?” And he roared so loud that no-one could fail to hear it: “FUCKING SNOWFLAKES STOLE THE ELECTION AND NOW THEY’RE SILENCING ME!”

Mikoro blanked out. The nonsensical words might as well have been in Martian.

“Yeah, could be,” said the second hero. “Oh, by the way, did you hear what went down on the island of Horseham last night? Sounded rough, man.”

“Dude, not cool,” objected his colleague. “Keep politics out of it.”

The tremors were growing. There was no wind, but Mikoro could hear the leaves shake on the trees of some of those gateways. They sounded like paper.

“What happened last night in Horseham?” she asked.

“Something’s wrong Mikoro,” said Dari. “This reality’s unstable.”

“Unstable? Because the serpents...the Banes...?”

“No. This is different. It’s coming apart from within. I can feel it.”

“Coming – wah! But how can you tell?”

“I don’t know. My core, perhaps – it’s reacting somehow. Do you remember, Mikoro? The first island we stopped at – with Urbosa, with that cave where they’d tried to burn all those stories...”

They weren’t tremors anymore. The ground was visibly shaking. Eddies churned and foamed at the island’s base. The gateway structures were loosing bricks, boards and stones, and the portals themselves were swirling harder, faster, bursting with sparks. At the summit silver clinked on silver. The Nexus-Dragon raised his head. Sniffed at the air.

“One minute!” barked a hero-master. “One minute left!”

The heroes were bustling about as if nothing was happening. Back and forth, up onto fountains and fences, in and out of portals.

“Burning the stories,” said Mikoro, seizing up. “Nyah. But there isn’t...no-one’s...”

“No. It’s worse than that,” said Dari. “Much worse.”

The heroes were noticing. They were getting...stuck? They’d run on the spot for several seconds then suddenly reappear a few paces ahead. Or, groups of them would dash into portals but fail to get through, just run where they stood, running, running...

“For fuck’s sake, lag!” some were shouting.

“What do you mean it’s worse? Dari? I don’t understand! What’s happening here?”

She looked at Dari and let out a cry. The little explorer was shaking and sweating. Anger? Terror?

No. *Resonance.*

“I d-don’t g-get it,” Dari stammered, the whole world rocking around her. “I j-just know – this s-story’s – b-betrayed – itself...”

Lightning crashed from the shattered sky, demolishing bridges, signposts, gateways and setting great portions of the Heroes’ Agency ablaze. Mikoro yelped and scrambled from the edge just in time as the cliff came off in chunks and

plunged into the sea. The air erupted with affronted snarls and curses; the heroes were livid, incandescent with rage at this uninvited disruption to their hero-reality, but they'd have little chance to do anything about it because in that very instant the portals flashed – then there they came, hundreds and hundreds of them, pouring forth from every gateway: hordes of axe-toting green-skinned warriors, jabbering ghouls and screeching stony gargoyles, ranks and files of human soldiers, elven archers, trident-toting serpentine creatures, even some multi-eyed tentacular monstrosities from goodness knows where – and catching the crowds of heroes unawares these waves of enemies crashed upon them, slashing and hurling and crushing and firing and spurting and lashing and chopping them down in their hundreds.

“Waaaaah!” wailed Mikoro. “Nyah, nyah – agwah!”

Cracks spread beneath her feet. She panicked and hurtled by instinct in the only sensible direction – towards the ramp onto the second terrace, whose sky-blue sentries had mysteriously disappeared.

Lots were disappearing, in fact; the hero-masters and heroes alike, who ran on the spot till they simply vanished or otherwise – more suspiciously – sat down for about twenty seconds then stood up again, just standing, standing, then *pop!* – gone. But the majority were too busy getting mown down by the vengeful otherworldly armies to make such an escape, in such overwhelming numbers that Mikoro could only notice, and this no doubt helped her, that no blood or guts were involved; a slain hero simply fell over and disappeared.

Far, far away, on a completely different world, computers began exploding, shorting, or switching themselves off. Later research would suggest a correlation between the severity of computer failure and the reactions of their operators to the gas-masked hero's arrest. Those who'd expressed grievances suffered no computer problems, those who'd frowned but carried on got a simple crash, those who didn't react at all lost all the data on their machines, and those who'd scorned others for speaking out were sent to hospital with electric burns or shards of screen through their foreheads.

Back in the world of present concern, Dari yelled: “Run, Mikoro, run! This reality – it's imploding!”

“Gwaah, I'm running as fast as I can!” cried the fluffy captain. “Nyah! Nhaah! What's going oooon?”

She dashed across the bleak red sand of the second terrace, shouldering through crowds of panicking heroes who were here waylaid by hosts of demons.

At last she gave herself over to her feline instincts and leapt into the air, and from there stomped and bounced across the complaining heads of heroes and demons alike, making it to the third terrace just in time to watch the second fall away with everyone on it. Most disappeared before the chunks plummeted into the sea in a cluster of mighty crashes.

“Nyaaaah! That’s – ”

“Forget it Mikoro! They’re *not real* – trust me, I’ll explain later! But *we’re real*, and we have to keep going!”

New armies poured forth from the portals on this level: ghouls and skeletons, ghosts and gargoyles, knights in bleak black armour and bearded necromancers with shifty eyes. The ground was ice, and Mikoro yelped as she ducked and skidded beneath their claws and blades. She scrambled onto a fourth terrace, hopping on cracked and burning earth as smaller dragons belched a gauntlet of flames, frost, sand, sparks and clouds of poison; then a fifth terrace, of grass crags and bamboo bridges beset by fearsome stone sentinels and swarms of giant amber insects; a sixth, which was dusty desert in places, overgrown rainforest in others, and where battalions of those hunched and fanged green-skins, only now they were brown, rumbled around in industrial-age siege vehicles; a seventh, where her shoes sank in ash and she was forced to leap over bubbling green pools as the demons returned with more serious faces and titanic death-machines; and then an eighth, where burly helmeted marines sparred with lanky hominids like that tusked hero who’d ignored them, only far taller now and clad in gleaming golden armour. Two thirds of the way along this final terrace, bouncing once more across the conveniently flat heads of naga warriors, the ground beneath them gave way completely and Mikoro leapt with a yelp, grabbed onto the cliff and clambered the last few yards onto the summit.

“Nyhaah...nyhaah...ny-gwah!” She panted – then yelled “Ooooo! Come back here!” because she’d arrived just in time to watch the Nexus-Dragon lumber off with an entourage of heroic elites and sky-blue hero-masters at his flanks and a sack of his silver over his shoulder. But it was too late – they’d made their escape through the island’s grandest portal of all.

The imposing thing dominated the plateau, or rather its gateway did: a soaring stone edifice with menacing statues of cowled figures with swords, one on each pillar, and another of a grinning dragon’s head and claws on top. The portal seethed and raged, flared in and out as lightning flashed and whirlpools choked on the island’s debris; then a statue’s sword collapsed and crumbled to powder,

the dragon-head lost its jaw, and fissures cracked through the ground at Mikoro's feet.

With nowhere left to go, the fluffy captain tore across the mountaintop as it snapped beneath her and soared through the portal in a single leap. Moments later it fizzled and burst as the gateway fell in, the summit splintered apart, and the last pieces of the Nexus-Dragon Heroes' Agency tumbled into the sea.



"Where are we? I can't see!"

"Shhh," said Dari. "I can't either. Let's – wait. Do you hear that?"

With a clunky chime a windowed display appeared before them. It showed five symbols: a blue shield, a medical green cross, and three red swords. Yellow text spelled out: *You are queued for Siege of Heunglung. Assembling group...*

The cross and three swords had ticks beneath them. It looked like they were waiting for the shield.

They waited some more.

Someone was taking their time.

Finishing a drink, perhaps.

"Come on," said Dari impatiently.

Then the shield got its tick, and reality shifted around them...



A two-tiered passenger ferry: green below, white above. Puffs of dark smoke from a funnel painted with black shooting stars. The shove of its keel through pitch-dark waves as it pushes across a harbour. On both sides, skyscrapers, alight, ablaze – embers, smoke, crashes, shouts, screams.

"Guhh!"

Mikoro clamped her eyelids, expecting a bumpy landing. It didn't come. She opened them to find that, to her surprise, she was standing on the lower deck of this vessel.

It certainly wasn't the *Sea Bunny*. Row after row of wooden benches; racks of orange life-jackets in the ceiling; both sides open to the air. Warm air, tropical, but spiked with the sting of flames.

“Dari? Dari! Are you there?”

“I’m here Mikoro,” came the voice from her hat. “Where in the worlds are we now?”

Someone behind them said: “This is the Ferry of the Stars.”

Mikoro spun round with a swish of her sea-coat – and there, sitting on one of the benches, was the gas-masked hero whose expulsion by the Nexus-Dragon had brought its world crashing down.

He spoke. “Liberate Heunglung. Revolution of our time.”

“It’s you!” said Mikoro, scampering up to him. And remembering his rough treatment by the hero-masters, she probed him: “Um, are you okay?”

“I had to do it,” he answered, stoic. “If I had to go back, I would do it again. Some things we must do. But I am worried for the interviewers. I knew the risk I was taking, but they were punished for absolutely nothing.”

He stood and paced to the guardrail. Mikoro followed, leaning out as he did. His gas mask’s canister pointed resolutely ahead to that shore packed with massive glass towers. There were more than Mikoro could count, their bright lights banishing the night like a necklace of stars that had fallen and come to rest across the harbourfront.

“At long last,” said the young man, “I am home. It’s time.”

“Nyah. Time for what? What is this place?”

“This is Heunglung. I went to train at the Nexus-Dragon’s academy so I might learn the skills to free us from the oppressive rule of the Great Wei. My name is Tsong.”

“Heunglung. Great Wei.” Dari repeated the words. “That sounds...uhh, kind of familiar?”

“It doesn’t look safe! I can hear shouting and, and – is that gunfire? It’s some kind of war!”

“Till now all the violence has been on one side,” said Tsong. “We were happy to stand with the Wei Empire so long as they respected our freedom, and for a while they did, but when the new Emperor Wei Ni-Pu came to power he passed sweeping laws against any and all forms of critical expression. Students, professors, journalists, legislators, booksellers – any who showed the tiniest hint of dissent were thrown from their jobs, arrested, humiliated and punished. My people have resisted peacefully, but they cannot stand up to the sheer brutality of the Heunglung Security Police, once the pride of the world for its civility and professionalism but now infiltrated by the emperor’s men and reduced to his

violent thugs. But no longer. Today we shall take back this beautiful land for its people.”

The perplexed Mikoro remembered something and scooped Dari from her hat. “Um, Dari?” she said. “You mentioned that all those heroes and monsters on that island, um...weren’t real? Is this all, I dunno, a projection or something like that?”

“This? I don’t know,” said Dari. “I mean, I’m pretty sure the Heroes’ Agency was exactly that, yes. Those people were, I don’t know, proxies or something. Avatars. Expressions of people somewhere else. But this? This feels pretty real to me. Mr. Tsong is quite real – look. No weird label over his head, moves and breathes like an actual person.”

“Thank you,” said Tsong.

A huge explosion rocked the ship; smoke and fire surged from between the skyscrapers.

“Gwah! Th-That felt real too...”

“Yeah. I dunno Mikoro. I’ve a real bad feeling about this one.”

“So, um, what are we supposed to do?”

“There should be five of us,” said Tsong. “If we can link up with the Red Umbrellas and clear the Security Police from the streets, that should give us a chance to find the imperial viceroy and present our demands.” He scanned Mikoro up and down, inscrutable behind his gas mask. “With a coat like that,” he said, “you must be a highly-trained and competent hero. What is your name?”

“I’m Captain Mikoro, and this is my friend Dari! But we’re not heroes, we’re just –”

“Dari,” he said, his attention now on the tiny traveller. “You have a very experienced face.”

“Nnnh, thanks,” Dari replied with experienced awkwardness, “but neither of us are exactly fighters.”

“I know, I know, you are hunters or shamans or something like that. I am not a fighter either. I shall offer my medical expertise.”

He parted his hands. A flourish. Cool turquoise mists wove round his fingers.

“There should be a tank on the ferry too,” he said.

“Nyaah! A tank?” said Mikoro aghast. “You mean, with the big caterpillar wheels and cannon-turret? Uh-oh, uh-oh...”

“No, I mean a tank as in somebody who can stand in the centre of the battle and protect our group by holding the attention of the Security Police. Could you go upstairs and look for them? They will have heavy armour, probably a shield.

Something like that. Excuse me. *Wai?*” He turned away to answer his phone, speaking in articulate Heunglung-wa.

Mikoro’s head span with bewilderment as she hurried up a narrow staircase, clutching the handrails as the ferry lurched through the waves. The upper deck was much like the lower, only with a white-panelled ceiling with electric lights and enclosed bow and stern sections with square glass windows.

An armoured figure gazed out at the harbourfront. She was very tall.

“Boralus in five hundred years? No – far too warm. This wind. Surely not Ratchet?”

Across her shoulders flowed midnight-green hair, a little like Dari’s only straighter. She had her back to Mikoro, but the cat-girl recognised at once – from Scáthach, she worked out – the posture of a veteran warrior. This woman was leaning against the guardrail, apparently relaxed with her spaulders slumped and boots crossed. Yet she buzzed with that faint perpetual tension – the steadfast bearing, the attentive silence – that spoke of a readiness to spring into action at a moment’s notice.

A coffin lid rested on the guardrail beside her.

“Oh my god,” said Dari. “N-No. No way. It can’t be!” Then she almost screamed: “Cy!”

“Who’s there?”

Suddenly the warrior was facing them head-on, sword raised, an arm reaching for her shield. But by the time Mikoro even registered this the lady was not only lowering her guard but grinning at her – grinning! – and her eyes, her eyes, how they glowed! They glowed like pale yellow lamps whose spectral beams burst from the earth to catch the fog unawares and cast it from the battlefield, and that grin was a travelling companion’s grin, a swashbuckler’s grin, the exact grin you’d long to come to your rescue when the beards rustled and tankards slammed in any dodgy tavern.

The grin flashed – highlighting the best set of teeth the fluffy captain had never seen on a zombie.

“Waaah! What a cool zombie!” Mikoro couldn’t help but squeal.

“Well well! What have we here?” said the undead warrior, as her widening smile wet the beds of toothpaste advertisers the universe over. “Is this a fluffy bundle of fun that comes bouncing towards me? Why, it is! Come here, young lady. Come, come. My, isn’t that outfit superb!”

Her pronunciation was cultured, her syllables smooth; indeed, they dripped with aristocracy. But to hang up on that would have got you knocked out by the words themselves as they spilled with a rough-and-tumble maritime heft, sprinkled with no-nonsense salt and the faintest pepper of an undead rasp. The effect of that seasoning was to bring out that voice's echo of a noble upbringing while banishing all hint of pretentiousness from it, and before Mikoro knew it this dashing zombie was running a claw-nailed sea-green finger under her chin, scratching with such purr-inducing precision that she completely forgot her confusion at how she'd come to be here.

"There we go. You like that? What's your name, tomorrow's Lord Admiral?"

"Nrrrr. I'm Mikoro! I'm the captain of the *Sea Bunny*! And this is –"

"I know *very well* who this is," chuckled the undead warrior. For her tickling had brought her fog-light eyes upon the tricorne hat, and there, gaping flabbergasted up at her, was Dari.

"It can't be you," said Dari again. "How, Cyania? *Eeek!*"

"Delighted to see you too!" said Cyania, sweeping her up in a tough set of fingers and applying a vigorous squeeze-rub by way of greeting. "Hahah! Keeping these limbs in shape then? How've you been, my little protein-monster?"

"Nyah! Is Dari your friend?"

"Urghh...yeah," Dari answered for her, struggling to the surface of the overbearing clutch. "This is Cyania, Mikoro. She's the friend from Azeroth I was telling you about. Cy, you remember Mikoro right? The fluffy one, from the Chaldea Academy?"

"Ooooh! You're Cyania? The one who gives Dari her exercise?"

"Ho ho, that's right! See these tough little arms and legs here?" She squeezed them with her fingers, unnecessarily in Dari's opinion. "Where'd you think she got these, hmm?"

Dari flinched as those giant nails traced her muscles. They certainly looked sharp enough to claw from the earth, but were likewise in far better shape than those usually imagined to do so.

"Heh, it's true," said Dari, putting up with it. "Cy here's been like a personal trainer to me. Honestly I owe her a great deal."

"Hahah, nonsense! Don't listen to her!" Cyania laughed. "This little one *always* makes it up to me!" And slipping Mikoro a mischievous wink, she confided, to Dari's blushing consternation: "See this body of mine? Fittest corpse you've ever seen, right? Well you could say I'm as much her gym as her trainer!"

Cyania was a good head or two taller than Mikoro, but her sturdy presence, her down-in-earth good cheer, her face full of warmth from beyond the grave filled the cat-girl with an immediate sense of safety. That face made her think of a pale blue moon through the trees on a cloudless night; a briny lagoon beneath verdigris roofs; a beer festival in a cemetery.

“But Cy,” said Dari once Mikoro made it through her fit of sniggering. “What in blazes are you doing here? Just where are we?”

“The guy on the lower deck called this place, um, Hong-Long or something,” said Mikoro. “Are we in Azeroth? We just came from somewhere called the Nexus-Dragon Heroes’ Agency where everyone was talking about it.”

“Hmm. Heroes’ Agency?” said Cyania, her expression thoughtful. “Never heard of it. This Agency sent you here?”

“Actually it kind of – um – blew up while we were standing on it.”

“It did, did it? Ooh, I’m sorry I missed that. Well, I’ll tell you this much: if this is Azeroth, it’s no Azeroth I recognise. A different era? A lost civilisation?” Her thumb pressed on Dari’s chest. “Why don’t you tell us, you little wanderer?”

“W-Well, how did you get here?” asked Dari.

“Caverns of Time,” said Cyania simply. “I received a letter from those bronze dragons the other day. Anachronos, would you believe it? Special assignment, details unclear, timestream hazy, blah blah blah – you know their deal. They didn’t explain anything, just insisted it had to be me. Maybe they knew you’d be here. But this...?”

She leant out once more. The skyscraper-shore was drawing closer. Tower after tower, packed together in their mind-boggling thousands to bombard heaven and earth with lights, shapes and colours...

“...I’ve never known anything like this. Nah, this isn’t Azeroth. This can’t be Azeroth. Not even the Titans built on a scale like this.” She glanced over her shoulder at Mikoro. “Hong-Long, did you call it?”

“Um, that’s what the guy downstairs said,” said Mikoro.

“Look, I’d better explain,” said Dari from her zombie friend’s hand. “Mikoro and I are on a sea journey. This man downstairs – his name is Tsong – we watched him get arrested on an island controlled by this Nexus-Dragon where crowds of these heroes went in and out of portals supposedly linked to Azeroth. Well, I say heroes, but they didn’t exactly come across as impressive. The whole thing felt like some sort of simulation, and when they threw out Tsong it all went haywire. We escaped

through a portal just in time and found ourselves on this ferry. Tsong says it's his homeland, and that we need to free it from some – what was it – *Wei Empire*?"

"You don't say?" said Cyania, lifting her friend close to her ear as she listened intent.

She studied the shoreline again. Squinted. Frowned.

"Mikoro," said Dari quickly. "Did we bring the spyglass?"

"Um. Yeah. It's right here." The fluffy captain fished it out of her pocket. "Um, want to try this Miss Cy?"

"Oh?" The warrior's eyes brightened. "Well look at that! Aren't you a resourceful one? Well, I say, look at this!" She held it up, jiggling its cylinders and admiring its beautiful star-engravings. "A collector's piece, this. Cute. Can't imagine my old man so much as brushing it with his sleeve, but let's give it a go."

She put it to her eye. "Hey! This is quality, this is!"

"Trouble with her eyes," Dari mouthed at Mikoro.

As the warrior scanned the shore from end to end, Mikoro's own eyes wandered onto her coffin lid. It had arm-straps, hardened edges, and a tough glossy sheen reinforced with metal strips. Rough and ready, but what are you going to do about it? – it seemed to say. Slam a fridge into me and see if I notice, why don't you?

She'd been buried under that once, it occurred to Mikoro. And now she uses it as her shield.

"Urban street-fight," Cyania assessed. "Suits my style and all, but it sounds pretty chaotic over there. You hear that shouting and screaming? There's civilians I'll wager, and what's more I don't trust these towers. What are they for? They can't be fortifications with all that glass, and if you actually want to live that high you might as well grow wings. Hmm. Magical? Doesn't look like anything's raining from the upper floors..."

They'd drawn close enough that the buildings soared as high as their sights could stretch. Mikoro followed the spyglass's angle upward, ever upward, pausing at the flashing red lights on their spires then up to the mountains beyond –

A roaring hiss as a shape reared up on the highest peak.

"There! That's him!" Mikoro yelled. "That's the Nexus-Dragon!"

"Haha, wonderful!" said Cyania. "Of course there'd be a dragon! Well well! This is getting interesting!"

Something else struck her attention. Her fog-lamp gaze lingered upwards.

"Hey, what's up with this sky of theirs? Where are the stars?"

Mikoro and Dari had got so caught up in events that they only now realised they had a sky again. It was blue – but not the blue of night, not even a night whose stars were drowned out by the preposterous punch of this city’s electric mayhem. No. This blue could only mean one thing.

“They’re here,” said Dari. “The Banes.”

“What’s that now?” Cyania raised her to eye level, and Dari elaborated: “That’s the other thing. It’s too long a story to run through now, but we’re hunting these dangerous spirits that got loose when a squad from that Heroes’ Agency broke down a temple. We can’t go on with our journey till we’ve found them.”

“Spirits too? Better and better! Right, we’d better shape up then! You ready for this, Captain Furball?”

The way she said it made Mikoro burst out in giggles. “Heehee, I’m ready! I – wait a second, no I’m not! I’ve never been in an actual war before, where lots of people get hurt and...uh-oh. Uh-oh!”

She panted as the undead arm thumped her charismatically round the shoulders – once, twice.

“Hey, everyone has a first time right? Well you’re with me, big cat. I’ll look out for you. Here!” She tossed the spyglass back into Mikoro’s hands. “I can’t be everywhere at once you know? Stay at my side, keep your eyes peeled and your pointy ears sharp for me and I’ll take care of the rest. You can start by rounding up the rest of the team. There’s a guy downstairs you said, but if we’re a full squad there should be a fifth!”

A squeeze round the shoulders: trusting, authoritative. *You’re important*, it told her. “Well go on then? Go find them, off you go!”

Mikoro found it impossible not to well up with confidence at the way Cyania took control of the situation, and she mewed her assent before scurrying off in search of the final member.

Meanwhile the team leader’s attention returned to the one in her hand.

“Combat situations aren’t exactly your thing either, hmm?” she told Dari, her prods travelling up to the little woman’s forehead. “Brainsy type, you are. Shall I stick you in somewhere? Your squirming’ll be great for my adrenaline.”

“Nnnnnn! N-No need! I’d better just...”

“Hmm...yeah. Unfamiliar environment and all. Better keep a level head. Alright, tell you what. You sit tight on your cute friend’s hat and keep an eye out for me alright? Knowing you you’ll be writing this up afterwards, so you take a good record of my honourable conduct so that no-one goes accusing me of war crimes

afterwards. Got that?" She winked – then her face turned serious. "You know how it is. *I am Forsaken* and all that. Hurrah, warmongering and cannibalism and green sludge and what have you. Rarr, I'm gonna catapult plague at your house and gnaw on your bones and floss my teeth with your cartilage. Drop your keys down the gutter while I'm at it, why don't I. Pah. Well I'll hold down the front with the old casket lid, but you cover my rear with that sweet little pen of yours and I might just see if it's willing to go easy on you on your next workout. You got me?"

"Ahh...y-yeah, I can do that. Oh, Cy, I can't tell you what a relief it is to see you. It's been one heck of a journey – "

"You can tell me all about it later! It's war now little Dari, we're going in hot, and I won't have you slacking out there even with these big bad bones to protect you. Have you at least been keeping up with your exercises?"

"T-Trying to," said Dari. "The deck of our ship's good for it, but things've been so shocking today that – mmff!"

A brisk adjustment and Dari found herself face-down in the undead palm with a fingertip pressed to her back. "Right!" Cyania declared. "Looks like we've still got a minute or two before landfall so we'll make up the difference now! Fifty press-ups, fifty crunches, fifty squats! Ready? GO!"

"Aahh!...Aahh!...Aahh!"

"Go on, faster! Faster! You're better than that!"

"Aahh...aahh...C-Cy..."

"Right then. Looks like we're all here." Her hand snapped shut, upturned, unfurled, then lightly tossed her trainee up and down as Mikoro came skipping up the stairs with two companions in tow.

"I found them! This one here is Tsong, he says he can heal us! And this...this..."

"Oh hi!" announced the jolly fellow in a fuzzy haircut and black leather jacket.

Cyania leant down and peered at his face in suspicion. "Who are you?"

"Name's Feldiir," he said in a funny accent. "I'm a mage!"

"You don't look like a mage," said Cyania. "Where are you from?"

"Weeeell, it's weird," said Feldiir. "I thought I was a night elf, but it looks like I'm *actually* here for this one. I've never been in this dungeon before. I'm from Serbia!"

Mikoro's eyes joined Cyania's in narrowed scrutiny. "I think I've met you before," she said.

"Oh? I'm not sure about that," said the supposed mage. Frankly he looked more like the type who magics away problems with your computer.

"Serbia..." Dari repeated.

“Ooh, I know Serbia!” Mikoro piped up. “It’s in the Federation of Southern Slavs, right?” And she recited, recalling her How-To-Take-Over-The-World sessions with Tamamo and her enchanted atlas: “The largest, richest and stablest country in Europe! Yeah, that’s right! Everyone looks to your country for its model of how lots of people with different identities and beliefs can all get along!”

“Ahhhhh, nope? Actually my country’s kind of cra-”

“Hold that thought,” Cyania barged in. “Look – fire mage, right? Or at least arcane?”

“Weeeell, I was fire, but...”

He raised his gloves. They puffed with sparkly snow.

“Frost?” Cyania stared at him. “You understand that does no damage, right?”

“...I guess I kinda sort of wanted to give it a try,” said Feldiir. He’d been caught blue-handed and he knew it, but his cheery way of speaking made him too plain hilarious to castigate.

“Ugh. Whatever then. At least try to slow our enemies with it and don’t draw their attention off me,” Cyania instructed him.

They were closing in on an old-fashioned terminal building with a row of piers: two tiers each, white pillars, roofed but open along the sides. The skyscrapers dominated massively now. The nearest were a squat stronghold of modular steel which might have been a bank; a regular white block with rows and rows of circular windows; and a monstrous glass cigar, surely the tallest structure on the island. As the party adjusted its senses to these enormities the ferry’s speakers crackled to life, announcing something in that brash local tongue. Mikoro didn’t understand a word of it but loved how it sounded all the same. It must have been perfect for shouting at people. Or rather, who needed to shout when you could make any friendly greeting sound like a death threat?

She gulped. Better not tell Kiyoko this language exists, she thought.

“We’re landing,” said Tsong.

Regimented shouts rose forth from the piers. Dark figures were hurtling along in rows, lining up to deny them entry.

“Looks like our welcome party’s here,” said Cyania. She dropped Dari into Mikoro’s hat, unsheathed her sword and hefted her casket-lid shield in front of her. “Here we go! I’ll take point; Captain Furball and Dari to there where you can see what’s coming; Feldiir there to cast through the windows; Tsong behind me, in line of sight of everyone.” And she marched to the gangway as its chains began to rattle.



“Why hello there!” said Cyania.

“By order of Viceroy Lim,” pronounced the security officer, “foreign meddlers who promote...separatist elements...ah, ah...aiya.”

The men – helmets, riot armour, plastic shields – cowered beneath Cyania’s grin. She raised her shield and slammed it into the iron floor, the echo donging hard in everyone’s ears. The men fled for their lives, screaming about evil spirits.

“We’re *foreign meddlers* now are we?” she said.

“Do not worry,” said Tsong. “Heunglung is an international city, so anyone who contributes to the lives of its people is welcome here. Besides, you are all independent heroes so cannot be accused of representing the interests of foreign states.”

To this they all looked to the only suspicious individual on that count, Feldiir the mage. He was busy conjuring up food and water for the party – or more specifically, spongy flatbread along with some dubious bottles labelled *rakija* which Mikoro came dangerously close to accepting.

“Ah, he’s harmless,” said Cyania. “Heads up, more incoming!”

More units of the Heunglung Security Police came clunking down the pier. They slowed, then held their ground, linking their shields into walls. Mikoro anticipated a fight and gave a growly “nrrr!” but could only watch in amazement as Cyania strolled up to one line after another, bashing through each with a shunt of her coffin-lid shield. That was enough to make each set bolt in terror at the triple shock of her size, strength, and obscenely jovial undeath. By around the fifth line the police must have realised what they were up against because burlier, shoutier troops began to crop up who even managed to land a hit or two on that coffin-lid with their truncheons before a left-right shunt swept them aside, the unluckier ones jerking over the railings to splash into the harbour below.

“Waah,” went Mikoro, as much relieved as impressed. “She’s not killing them!”

“Cy’s got a strong sense of honour Mikoro,” came the voice from her hat, shouting to be heard through the bashing and brawling. “She won’t use lethal force against an opponent who has no chance of hurting her.”

“Come on, is this all you’ve got?” Cyania yelled out as the final ranks scattered rather than face her. “An empire, you call yourselves? Then give me a challenge worth the name!”

As it happened, she would get a quite different challenge.

The streets were mayhem. Fires blazed and windows shattered in a havoc of smoke, flares and grilled iron barricades, for here was the bulk of the Heunglung Security Police, a tide of repression in endlessly-duplicated dark helmets, riot armour and plastic shields. Mikoro and her party emerged just in time to watch this wave of brutality crash upon a throng of unarmed civilian protesters whose shouts of “Liberate Heunglung! Revolution of our time!” split into shrieks of panic as the security forces lashed them with truncheons, beat them with fists and crushed them between their shields, dragging out individual protesters or even bystanders then knocking them to the ground and bludgeoning them, kicking and stomping on them while roaring abuse in their faces, calling them traitors, parasites, cockroaches, before hauling them away by their legs or their hair to awaiting police vans.

Mikoro screamed. She was a master of the Chaldea Academy. She could handle the odd villain or monster. But this level of organised violence by a state against its own people was unthinkable in any functioning world and nothing in hers could have prepared her for this. She’d stumbled off that ferry into a nightmare.

Most of the protesters looked little older than her. Plenty were younger. Teenagers, even. Some would have looked right at home in the Academy, perhaps browsing through spells in the library, chatting in the corridors or drilling in the yard under Tamamo’s expert supervision. There of course freedom of expression was a given so long as you didn’t abuse or threaten anyone, and Mother Rin kept her doors wide open to students who wished to complain about the way she ran things. If that so rarely happened now, she always said, it was because she’d listened to them over the years and done her earnest best to learn from their critiques. But for the ugliness confronting her now Mikoro had no reference points, and even Cyania, with her undead bellyful of Azeroth’s bellicose history, gawked appalled before gripping her sword and rattling those streets with a howl of provocative rage.

None of these police had heard a cry like that before, and at once, exactly as intended, they switched their attentions to her.

“Oh, you take me right back,” she chuckled. “Siege of Orgrimmar, right? Different stage, different cast, different costumes, but you gutless little goons are the same no matter which tyrant’s arm you hang off. Hahah! Come then! Try an opponent who’ll hurt you back!”

“Yeah, come on!” boasted Feldiir, lobbing a piddly little frostbolt which glanced off a riot shield to no effect whatsoever.

With an efficiency honed through years of organised repression, a segment of the faceless sea came loose and re-formed in a semicircle of shields around the ferry terminal. They edged toward Cyania, cagily. Orders were barked – louder, harsher. At last one or two clumps found the guts to surge forward. Then they all did, for none wish to be out-swaggered by the others.

Cyania cheered – “Ahahahaah!” – and slammed the bottom of her shield into the pavement as the leading wave broke upon her. Her motions were incredible: the attackers poured in at a full hundred and eighty degrees, but that reinforced casket lid might as well have been a mobile fortress wall for the dynamism with which she swept and spun and struck with it to beat them off her. She was impenetrable. The enemies’ riot shields were like mass-produced toys that cracked or snapped in one smash, and Mikoro stood stiffened in wonderment as she watched this steadfast veteran stand firm. And stand firm she did: her feet shuffled, ever shifting her centre of gravity to meet the oncoming bashes and blows, but you could have chalked a circle round those boots and never once would they leave it. Far from leave it, she was enjoying it – and as the seventh or eighth dozen crashed feebly upon her bulwark she even began to taunt them with song: *Zombie o, zombie! Zombie o, zombie! Zombie no go go unless you tell ‘em to go, zombie no go stop unless you tell ‘em to stop, zombie no go turn unless you tell ‘em to turn, zombie’ no go think unless you tell ‘em to think!*

“Waah. It’s like Urbosa!” Mikoro admired.

“It’s the exact opposite of Urbosa,” said Dari. “Watch her.”

“Um...?”

Then she saw it. It was obvious really. Urbosa was a flash of lightning to sear a path through the enemy, but Cyania was a rampart which ten thousand waves would not crack. Their contrast in styles was perfect, beautiful even. The unstoppable force, the unbreakable object; the storm’s aggression, the tomb’s protection. And just as Mikoro was marvelling at the thought of how invincible a pair the two might make together...

Thunk!

A cylinder clunked at her feet. Her feline instincts bent her over for a closer look.

“Nyah? What’s this?”

“Don’t!” screamed Dari. “Go, go – ”

FSHHHHHHH!

“Gwaaaaah!” Mikoro shrieked. “I can’t see! Nyaaahh, my eyes, my eyes – *they’re burning!*”

“Plague!” Cyania hollered. “Ohhh, that’s low, you – Tsong, you’re up!”

In blistering agony Mikoro threw up her fists to rub the all-consuming fire from her eyes, but already the pain was subsiding, smothered by blankets of cool green vapour. She blinked, again, again, shook her head hard to dislodge the sudden deluge of tears – and through them saw Tsong, weaving his mists to the relief of Feldiir and –

“Dari!” Mikoro cried. “Are you okay?”

From the hat came the tiniest hacking and spluttering. “Urghh...ackkkk...pfft! Wh-What the fuck was – ”

“Tear gas,” said Tsong. “Look.”

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

Someone in the police’s rear lines was lobbing a volley of canisters their way, and also at the protesters up the street if the smoke and screams were anything to go by. Most cylinders were falling around Cyania where they erupted in clouds of blinding chemicals, but a stray shot had landed one at Mikoro’s feet, accounting for her momentary experience of eye-gashing terror. Whatever was in Tsong’s mists worked fast though, and reeling through her shock, the cat-girl could still make out the silhouette of their leader swishing and clouting in the haze.

She wasn’t singing anymore. Her undead eyes were immune to tear gas – but her memories weren’t.

And Azeroth didn’t have tear gas.

“Oh you really are all the same, aren’t you?” she snarled, her shield-swings strengthening. “Plague weapons – just like *her*. On civilians, just like her! You honourless rubbish, do you expect me to forgive that? Do you? *Rrrrrrrrr!*” And to the horror of both sides the gas cleared to reveal a new Cyania who thrust her sword unfettered, splitting plastic left right and centre as she skewered those riot shields out of their bearers’ hands and shook them aside, beating and smashing with her coffin lid not merely to stagger her foes but to slam against their visors, upon their helmets, smashing them unconscious, snapping their bones, knocking them to the tarmac then launching them rolling into the feet of those charging up behind them – and she gnashed, and swore, and put a crunching kick in the knees of another policeman as she sheathed her blade and seized up his shield – now she had two – and proceeded to dual-wield those whirling walls of fury like pistons pounding relentlessly into processed meat –

“Gwah...gwah...” the fluffy captain panted, struggling to process this sudden change.

“Oh no. They’re in for it now.”

The dread in which it was spoken transmitted its shudder into the membranes of Mikoro’s ear. She reached up to grab it; felt tough little arms lock round her fingers.

“Do you know about the Forsaken, Mikoro?” said Dari, wresting back control. “Her faction of undead freed themselves from the Lich King in a revolutionary struggle. But over the years their own leaders grew corrupt and disgraced their people in all sorts of ways, and one of the most iconic was their use of chemical weapons, even on their own allies. To those like Cy, the Forsaken dream had promised so much more. They’ve never recovered from the shame.”

The warrior had breached as far as the man with a tear-gas rifle. The culprit panicked, but hemmed in by his clone-like troops and barricades he had nowhere to run. Seething and shaking with rage, Cyania threw down her shields, seized the hapless villain by the throat, raised him high, and with her other hand, ripped a tear gas canister out of his belt.

She drew the man close so her teeth filled his visor.

“*My mother was a Vrykul,*” she snarled, accentuating the rasp for all it was worth, “*and we Vrykul return the insults thrown to us.*”

She raised a sharp-nailed thumb from his throat and prised open his visor. *Thunk! Thunk!* – that was her other hand, ramming the canister against his helmet. It dented – then buckled as gas leaked through its cracks. She lodged it through the gap, against his eyes, pressed the visor down hard, and flung the shrieking wretch back to his throng.

He’d get his sight back one day. But till he did, he would wear that flawless set of zombie chops across his darkness.

“Who’s next?” Cyania roared.

The mass of suits and shields was receding, draining through the gaps between the buildings. It seemed they’d learnt that there was always a bigger shield, that here was a dissenting voice they couldn’t repress, and as Cyania’s party ran up to join her it was to find her grinding the gas-rifle into a lump of twisted metal beneath her heel.

“They’re no warriors,” she growled. “These humans – they fight no different from the Scourge. Mindless, brutish, thirsty for defenceless flesh: all those things the living say *we* are. So why is it suddenly glorious when they do it?”

An unexploded canister rolled to a stop against her boot. She picked it up. Glowered at it. Turned it this way and that. Then with a breathless sigh, she tucked it into her belt.

“Cy,” said Dari, worried now. “Are you going to be okay?”

Cyania lifted a finger for Dari to stroke, but her eyes fell on Mikoro. “Has the little one ever told you how I died?” she asked the fluffy captain.

“Um! Um, nope...”

“You were wondering,” she said. “Of course you were. They look on the walking dead and the first thing they think is, ‘Ah, poor thing, what happened to make them like that?’ If you’re lucky they’ll think it’s rude and won’t ask. More often you’re not and they’re all spittle and pitchforks. But that’s alright. I’ll tell you.”

She paused. Mikoro expected a deep breath. Grew puzzled as she waited for it. It didn’t come, and she jumped when Cyania suddenly continued:

“It was Arthas. That time he massacred Stratholme. I headed the Kul Tiran detachment in that city at the time. Went out to greet him on his arrival. Saluted him, turned around – wham. Right royal hammer to the back of the head. The last thing I saw was his platoon cutting down civilians in the streets, tearing into kids, kicking their way into houses. You get me? Trained professionals, just like these, spilling the guts of people they’d sworn to protect. And that’s why...”

She broke off as a little girl peeked from a shop door and, sensing a lull in the fighting, darted out to make a run for it. Then out of nowhere a police truck careened round a corner and spilled forth a pack of reinforcements, whereupon five of them cornered the startled child, tackled her to the ground and set about viciously beating and restraining her. At the same time the rest of this squad drew pistols – actual firearms this time – and fired into the air as they advanced on the protesters whose battle with the police still raged up the road.

Mikoro wailed in horror as the thugs let loose on the defenceless child but Cyania was already there, slamming them aside with the edge of her casket lid. Her swings were ferocious now, the first then the second launching their unfortunate targets to eventual bone-cracking impacts before the third smashed the bottom edge of her shield through a visor, visibly splattering blood. The bruised and shaken child took the opening to dash into an alleyway but now the new ranks had turned on Cyania and they opened fire, their rubber bullets ripping through the air, but the relentless zombie was ready and she strode upon them, shield up vertical, then horizontal, then vertical again, then a smash, then a swing, another swing into the doors of the prison van with such force that they tore off their hinges, releasing a dozen bruised and bloodied protesters, journalists,

passers-by who duly made their escape as the police swung their handguns and fired on them as they fled, puncturing a leg here, a shoulder there – but there was the coffin lid, then a kick, then an elbow, then out came the sword, then a ferocious snarl and a thrust...

...and out came the sword, again; through the ribs of an officer who, by the time anyone realised what was happening, had fallen limp, his lifeless body suspended on Cyania's blade.

For the next five seconds Mikoro heard nothing but her own heartbeat: *boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom...*

Up on the roof of the store, a bearded man in long white robes and a tall hat inked a mark on a list and handed it to his attendant.

The Heunglung Security Police seized up. They were watching their assailant; watching her slip her bloodied sword from their colleague, whose carcass fell to the tarmac with nary a thump. Their expressions were unreadable behind those helmets, but the prevailing sentiment was readily communicated by their shaking, then their curses and whimpers as one, then another, then the entire pack fled for their lives like a receding flood, abandoning their wounded comrades to their fates.

"Nyah...nyah...he's..." Mikoro uttered.

Sssssshh.

"Wah! Wh-What...!"

Darkness.

And again: *Sssssshh.* A soothing hiss. A lick round the edge of her consciousness. A flash of crimson scales. Ruby eyes, glinting in the dark.

It is close, said the voice. *Feel. Feel. Find the Bane.*

Mikoro lifted her hand with the red serpent symbol. It had started to glow.

The world faded back in.

"I would have preferred to avoid that," Tsong was saying. "They will claim we are violent."

A hush had fallen over the central streets of Heunglung. Now there were only the groans of the injured – protester, pedestrian and police alike. The wail of ambulance sirens; the clatter of barricades dragged aside; the *clug-clug-clug* of water from bottles into gas-stained eyes.

"This shan't stain your movement," said Cyania, who alone had no breath in need of catching. "The violence is mine to shoulder. I'll even keep doing my best

to rein it in. But if they're so craven as to shower plagues and bullets on their own people..."

Then her eyes met Dari's. Both pairs wavered for a while.

"...I've seen where this goes," the Forsaken adventurer finished her point. "I won't let what happened to my people happen to anyone else so long as I can help it."

Dari was struggling. She's a warrior, said the inner voice of Dari the evidence-based historian. You've known all along what she does. Look how hard she's been trying, for you and for Mikoro as much as herself. You know she's right.

Still – all the logic in the world might be left queueing in the rain when you see someone killed in front of you. It wasn't Dari's first time, nor even Mikoro's. But nor was it exactly part of either woman's notion of a satisfying life.

Cyania began: "Dari, I – "

"You don't need to say it Cy. War is war. I get it."

"Write it, yeah? Promise you won't leave it out. Then you can show all the others. I don't know what kind of a world it is that designs an army like this specifically to pick on noncombatants, but if there are others out there, you tell them what happened to this guy. And you – Tsong – you live here, right? Make sure when this is over you find who his family is and send my little chronicler here whatever you can find about his life story."

"Cy – " Dari attempted.

"No. It doesn't matter if they serve Garrosh Hellscream, or the Dark Lady, or even this Emperor Wei or whatever his name is. When they lend their arms to a rule of terror, this is how they end up. This one could help many others by turning them back to find healthier uses for their lives."

Her words came steady now, and with weight, yet within each polished syllable smouldered something so invisibly fierce that they all felt its heat pricking on their faces. No-one dared interrupt.

"Don't misunderstand me," she finished. "There's nothing wrong with a good death in battle. For honour. For glory. For those you protect. But this?"

She prodded the dead policeman with her boot.

"This is just sad. A waste."

Tsong was first to break the silence that followed. "We must keep going," he said, as a group of ambulance staff in high-vis suits came to take the body away. "Where are the Red Umbrellas?"

"Yes! Onward!" declared Cyania. "These forces' leaders are going to answer some questions!"

They advanced up a wide set of stairs between a pair of bronze statues. Dragons. Mikoro realised they were passing beneath that modular-steel building she'd taken for a bank. The ground-floor atrium was hollow, a public underpass, with several escalators leading up into the structure itself.

"That's as far as your riot goes," came a voice, as down one of those escalators rode a businessman in a suit, a tie – but no face.

Or rather, where his face should have been was a featureless blue oval.

"Nyah! C-C-Cyania!" Mikoro tugged on her arm. "That's the Bane! Is that...that paladin?"

"What is a Bane?" said Tsong. "That's the chief executive of the Heunglung-Xiahai Banking Corporation." So it was a bank after all.

As the man stepped off the escalator he stated: "The HXBC respects and supports all laws that stabilise Heunglung's social order."

"Quite right, quite right," spoke a second voice, and down another escalator came a different man, this one with an airline logo pinned to his lapel. "We must and will ensure one hundred percent compliance. There will be zero tolerance for illegal activities."

And Tsong identified him: "The new boss of Kitai-Pacific Airways. The Viceroy's government forced the old boss from office along with all his staff who participated in the protests."

"Ooh, at last, a boss!" said Feldiir. "Exciting!"

But this man's face too was blank and blue.

"Two of them?" said the puzzled Mikoro. "Um. They can't both be –"

And now a third appeared, a woman, likewise with a missing face. "This handful of radicals does not represent the people of Heunglung," she said emptily. "Their generation has not been properly educated. We must give up on trying to talk to them."

"The head of the Beautiful Heart Caterers," said Tsong. "One of the Wei Empire's most vocal supporters in the Heunglung business community."

Then a fourth rode down, and this one said nothing at all.

"The boss of the Heunglung Mass Railway. They cooperated with the government to shut the subway stations to protesters, and allowed in armed police and organised gangsters to beat up citizens in stations and trains."

The four CEOs assembled in a row. Their heads, their suits all faded out in apathetic blue.

“Have you no care for the people you serve?” Tsong challenged them. “The free citizens of Heunglung built your companies! We made you rich! And now you side with those who oppress us? Have you no empathy for your people at all?”

They didn’t even shrug.

“Stand aside,” Cyania told them. “You are civilians. No more blood need be spilt today.”

The executives stretched out their arms. Shockwaves echoed through the gantries of the HXBC building as mind-numbing blue light enveloped the atrium.

Cyania growled. “This...this! I know this magic!”

“Nnnah! Nnah!” uttered Mikoro, glancing nervously around as all turned blue. “Y-You’ve fought Banes before?”

“This is like the Sha! Manifestations of darkest emotion that rose from the breath of the fallen Old God Y’Shaarj; but this...this...isn’t emotion. This is...urgh. Boring.”

“Yes. Don’t you find it so tiring?” spoke the bank chief. “Stop wasting your energy on pointless acting out. You don’t need free speech or human rights. Just go back to work.”

Feldiir yawned. “Guys? I don’t know if I can be bothered with this place anymore. I think I’d better log out...”

Mikoro yawned too – but there it was again: *Sssshhhh...feel...feel...*

“Nyah!” she cried, snapping to her senses. “It’s the Bane!”

“Argh, that’s right!” Dari added her voice. “The Bane of Apathy – it’s trying to crush your emotions! Damn it, it’s so...why am I even...nnngh, n-no!”

“Heheh, I dunno,” Cyania laughed lazily as she ambled up to the four faceless executives. “They have a point. This is kinda tedious, right?”

The business chiefs had stretched out their hands. They were offering to shake.

“That’s right, that’s right,” said the head of the catering company. “Send all those immature kids back to school. Make them study the correct version of history from the official textbooks instead of playing with foreign ideas they don’t understand.”

Cyania reached out...

“No!” yelled Dari and Mikoro together. “Don’t – ”

...and seized the boss of HXBC by the collar, shook him until he ceased to flail, then flung him headfirst through his fellow corporate chiefs like a torpedo down a bowling alley.

The spell broke – and the reality of the atrium flooded back in as Cyania roared with laughter. “Hahahah! Ahahahaha! Oh I could die all over again, that’s so pathetic! Plagues weren’t enough so you dabbled in the piss of an Old God too? Ahaha! You – you thought you could mess with the feelings of my undead heart – ahah, ahahah...”

“Wow! It’s great having an undead on your team!” said Feldiir, superfluously.

The pile of literally faceless corporate bosses twitched as Cyania pointed her blade at them. “Leave, you goblins on stilts,” she said. “Mr. Tsong and his friends will handle your organisations from here, but I’m letting you go with your lives. Leave this land and never come back.”

And then...

...something terrible happened. One by one, all by themselves, the executives jerked – and fell still. Wisps of blue energy welled in their mouths then streamed away through the air.

They had their faces back. But they were dead.



“Okay,” said Tsong. “This is bad. Very, very bad.”

“Oh, by the – I didn’t do anything this time!” said the properly confounded Cyania.

“Ahh, I think they died,” said Feldiir, as though he could only state it once they all knew.

As for Mikoro, all she could manage as she approached the corpses was “Uh-oh...uh-oh!” But then...

Sssshh.

That hiss. Scarlet scales. Ruby eyes in the dark.

Bane of Order. Order Bane. Apathy to the world. Apathy to themselves. Their formss gave in.

She blinked.

“Um, everyone? It was the Apathy. It did this. It was, um, too much for their bodies – or something...”

“Urgh. So this is the power of those Banes,” said Dari. “My god, this is frightening.”

Footsteps and murmurs – onlookers had massed at both ends of the atrium. At a shout from Tsong a small group came running. They all wore gas masks like his

and cast fretful glances at the dead executives as they hurriedly conversed in Heunglung-wa.

“They are with the Red Umbrellas,” reported Tsong, despite the fact that none of them currently carried umbrellas. “The Viceroy’s car has left the official residence. They spotted it driving up the Peak. She must intend to speak with the Nexus-Dragon.”

“So that dragon’s on their side too?” said Mikoro. “But they said the whole point of his Heroes’ Agency was to fight monsters and dictators!”

“Could he have sent his squads to release the Banes on purpose?” Dari suggested.

“Always the same, these power-hungry fools,” said Cyania. “Ever making deals with powers they don’t understand. They delude themselves that they can control them while forgetting that power has its own agenda. This is the result.” She jerked her head at the remains of the CEOs, whose elemental indifference had overcome their own vital organs. “An Apathy Bane, you called it? Hah. A Sha of Apathy. Sounds so harmless right?”

“If even one of these four had taken a stand,” said Tsong, “the Empire might not have destroyed our people’s liberties. Their selfishness did more damage than all those police.”

“Well we don’t know where this Bane’s hiding, but we do know your Peak’s got a dragon problem,” said Cyania. “It’ll be bad news if the leader of this place links up with him. Any chance we can cut her off?”

“We can use the tram,” said Tsong. “The Peak is very steep, so the roads go a long way around. But the tram will take us straight up the slope. We can get there first if we hurry.”

One of the gas-masked Red Umbrellas – barely a teenager, going by her pitch – spoke urgently to Tsong in the local language.

“There is bad news,” he translated. “The dragon has sent his agency’s strongest champions to secure the tram. They have put gates on the tracks at all the stations. We will have to fight through them one by one.”

Cyania burst out laughing. “Oh, this Heroes’ Agency gets better and better! Let me guess: are they receiving something shiny in return?”

“The government has licenced them to loot the money, clothes and belongings of any ‘rioter’ or ‘foreigner’ who crosses their path,” translated Tsong.

“Hahaa! Is that right? Well then, I suppose foreign interference is just fine when it’s on their side. Come then, the tram it is!”

“I never realised undeads could be so, ahh, lively,” said Feldiir in a voice funnier than his point. “Maybe I should switch to Horde. Hold on – why am I allowed to party with...”

“Hold that thought too, yeah?” said Cyania, snatching the *rakija* out of his hand and swigging a mouthful as she ran.

Word must have spread among the Security Police that these five were beyond their competence, for no-one attempted to stop them as they sped up a paved footpath hemmed in by banyan trees. Venerable boughs shrouded their progress, and for just a while it was as though they’d left the battlefield behind. Here was only the shuffle of leaves in a balmy night; the patter of harmless footsteps; the vigil of pale electric lights on yesterday’s bricks. Dari guessed the buildings were government offices and courthouses from days long gone by. She found herself wishing for more time, and better circumstances, to explore the patently deep layers of history in this place. More than that – they felt familiar, and she couldn’t for the life of her pinpoint why.

They emerged on a main road where the spaces between the towers opened up, presenting the dark slopes of the island’s central ridge. More clusters of towers packed the middle distance, but these were not so tall, most likely residential apartments. The tram terminal was right there across the road.

“No-one here,” said Tsong. “They must hope to draw us up the tramway and ambush us there. It is narrow. Every station is a chokepoint.”

But as they filed into the entry tunnel Cyania found something far more interesting than the enemy’s schemes.

“Ohh, now *this* is a beauty!”

A funicular electric railway system: two carriages with wood-panelled interiors, windows all along the walls, and quaint wooden bench-seats whose tight spacing presented an immediate problem for those members of the party whose genomes inclined in a Vrykul direction. Yet you wouldn’t think it for the way Cyania ran her fingers across the vintage maroon paintwork, her face awash with such hale and hearty amazement that gatekeepery types in undead rights activism, and they’re always there in activisms these days, might accuse her of the privilege of being able to (say it with a sneer) – ‘pass’ as living.

“Um. I think Kiyoko and I rode something like this in the World of Steam Museum,” said Mikoro.

“Heh. I see what you mean Mikoro,” said Dari. “Must be up to the job if it’s survived so long in a city like this though. Why change something if it works, right?”

But it might as well have been a space shuttle as far as Cyania was concerned, for the thing had thoroughly captured her admiration. She was rapping her knuckles on it, heaving at it to test its hold on the rails, running her hands across its livery much as Mikoro might an extremely furry yak with curls of fluff over its eyes, and then her boots went clunking along the platform as she sought a position from which to peer beneath it.

“Hahah, what a beauty!” she marvelled. “No enchantments, no ropes, nothing to push it or pull it. Runs all by itself, does it? Well I never!” And she exhaled by vestigial instinct, so taken by this miraculous mode of transport as to wonder out loud all sorts of things Mikoro didn’t understand about gnomes and subterranean mechanical cities.

“Gwah. Cyania likes machines?” she deduced.

“Yeah...?” said Dari. “Don’t get me started.”

As for Feldiir, his bemusement went down a different route. “Yoi. You like gnomes?”

“Everyone likes gnomes,” snapped Cyania in a tone that made argument impossible.

“We have to hurry,” said Tsong.

“Ah. Yeah.”

With some reluctance, Cyania adjusted her gaze to a more frowningly strategic setting. “It’s kind of cramped, don’t you think?” she said. “We’ll be in trouble if we get pinned down in this. Why don’t I jump on top? You boys can cast through the windows.”

“Nyah! What about me?” said Mikoro.

The team leader considered the options. Then she grinned, a wily glint in her teeth.

“Wanna drive this thing?”

That brought the sweat out on Dari’s forehead and she started up, “Cy, I don’t think – ” but it was too late, for with an ecstatic “Yaay!” Mikoro was already jamming herself through to the driver’s compartment. Safely ensconced, she reared with glee over the panel of colourful buttons and switches.

“Um. I can’t read the symbols. Guess I just press them randomly till it works?”

Which of course was exactly what happened.

“Alright!” Cyania’s raring tones echoed from the tunnel, followed a few moments later by the tram itself. As it shunted from the terminus Mikoro watched those armoured limbs swing up the forward-facing window. She’d never thought

one of the moments she felt most safe would come in a vehicle with a zombie crawling around on it.

Then she went “Waaaaw!” in double excitement as her world flipped near-horizontal.

“Wow, that’s steep!” came Cyania’s voice from outside as her greaves reappeared on the front window. “Hey, nice view out here too! Looks like the harbourfront’s quietened down a little.”

“Watch out Mikoro,” pleaded Mikoro’s hat, or rather its teetering passenger. “Whatever you do, don’t lean back!”

“Yoi!” said Feldiir. “I can’t cast spells at this angle!”

“That’s okay,” said Tsong. “You’re frost. You do zero damage.”

“Weeeeell, are you sure fire’s a good idea in a vehicle like this?”

“Alright, heads up!” Cyania barked them to attention. “First gate approaching! Enemy dead ahead!”

Mikoro banked left and right to maximise her view past Cyania’s legs, much to Dari’s yelping dismay. She made out a sign that read ‘O’Kennedy Road’, and beyond that a tiny station platform. Someone had dumped a heap of foliage across the tracks; most likely the dwarven hunter whose green-leathered head and shoulders popped from it now.

“Look out! It’s one of those – um, um – *projected* heroes! Like the ones from the island! Look, he’s got letters over his head!”

Those letters identified his name as Korri, and beneath, the name of his association: <It’s Just A Game M8>.

“You fucking kids, why don’t you fuck off and die?” he bawled in a pitch that itself could not be far advanced from puberty. “Imma own you up and take all your loots you noobs! Lololol!” He actually pronounced that last part.

“Are all hunters so coarse?” said Mikoro.

“Yeeeeeah?” Feldiir replied from the back.

“This is your one chance!” Cyania’s voice struck out. “Clear off!” And knowing that he would not, she compacted herself behind her shield.

The hunter raised his crossbow. “Hahahaha, noobs!” he prattled. “We’ve shut off these tracks with our Gamer Gates all the way up! There’s no way you’ll get to the top!”

“Why?” Cyania demanded of him. “Why are you and your dragon fighting for this regime?”

“It’s logic fool! The Heroes’ Agency is a business!” And he preached in that satisfied way of one convinced he understands the universe: “Profit, people! You can’t blame a business for acting in its own interest! Why don’t you shut the fuck up and accept it instead of whining like kids?”

Mikoro briefly lost her grip on the controls as the hunter’s reasoning took her aback. Naturally she’d grown up in a world where the norm was that companies were responsible first to all people their activities affected and only second to their profits.

Cyania on the other hand was smirking. In the ten seconds she’d got the hunter cockily boysplaining rather than opening fire, they’d closed to within his minimum range.

“Full speed ahead, Captain Furball!” she instructed.

“Yaay!” Mikoro clamped her fingers round the fattest lever and pushed it as far as it would go.

“What?” babbled Korri the hunter. “No! Fucking kids! Fuck off and – aaaaaah!”

The tram ploughed through the O’Kennedy Gate, smashing leaf-pile and hunter aside with Cyania’s shield the only buffer it needed. The articulate Korri spun through the air, then suddenly halted and fell dead on the spot in midair as though that motion took priority over gravity. His corpse vanished instantly – and in the same moment it’s possible a computer ploughed itself into a wall somewhere in Amsterdam.

“One down!” cheered Cyania. “Keep ‘em coming!”

“Bah, these tracks are too narrow!” Feldiir complained. “I can’t get line of sight to cast like this!”

To which Mikoro suggested: “Heehee! Why don’t you go on the roof with Cy?”

“Nah. I like it in here. It’s a good view.”

“The view will be better from outside?” said Tsong.

“Nah. I’ll stay here.”

“You’re scared of her,” said Tsong. “Because she’s bigger than you?”

“New enemy!” Cyania announced. “Hahahaah, look! It’s another warrior!”

The sign identified this second barrier as the McDonald Gate. This one was rigged out of iron poles with planks on top, and upon them stood a night elf in full plate, much like Cyania, only instead of a shield he waved a massive two-handed sword with sinister blood-red carvings and a hilt shaped like two snarling dragon heads. His label gave his name as Semteks, and he too stood for the esteemed company of *It’s Just A Game M8*.

“What the hell is your problem?” he howled, with such genuine disbelief that it was a wonder he didn’t sway off his balance. “This is an economic city! Don’t you realise this is where people come when they want to get on with their game without the stress of your shitty politics?”

“Oho! And what you’re up to doesn’t count as politics, does it?” retorted Cyania, crouching behind her shield again – but this time, Mikoro noted, her greaves vibrated with tension.

“Of course it doesn’t!” Semteks hollered. “Because I’m right! Listen to people with experience!”

And he loosed an adult-tantrum cry and drew back his greatsword, observing Cyania’s defensive stance and preparing to strike with all his strength the moment the tram brought her in range. But he’d misjudged her intent. Cyania sprang from her crouch well before they reached him, catching him completely off guard as she rocketed into him and sent him toppling onto the tracks, his framework of poles and planks crashing around him. By the time the passing tram pushed them aside his body was nowhere to be seen.

“Experience, he says,” Cyania chuckled. “Hmm. By the voice I’d reckon I’d forty, maybe fifty years of it on him? Ah well.”

In a town called Aylesbury deep in the English provinces, a computer burst into flames.

“How many more stations?” Dari called out.

“Two stops, then the terminal,” answered Tsong.

“Hahaa! Feel that wind!” The roof creaked beneath Cyania’s armoured weight. “Keep us moving Captain Furball! You’re doing great in there! Ah, I see the next one already. Hah! Antlers. This one looks more substantial folks.”

“Antlers,” said Mikoro and Dari together.

The third sign identified this as the March Gate. A knot of roots and branches barred their way, and they correctly guessed who awaited them even before they glimpsed her standing atop it.

“Bah, why do you care so much?” Mariska the druid called out to them, her leather gloves coursing with sparks. “See, you’ve even brought an undead this time. That means you must be in the wrong.”

“That’s her, that’s her!” Mikoro spoke up, banging the roof with her fist. “She was with the group that destroyed the serpent temple!”

“Aha! Released the Banes, did you?” Cyania shouted at the druid.

“Who cares? We’re heroes. We just support the majority.”

Upside-down yellow eyes peeked through the top of the window. “A little basic, this one?” she put to Mikoro.

“Life’s simpler if you don’t think too much,” chortled the druid. “I’m just glad I have the truth. The lefties and feminists control all the media anyway so it’s not worth reading anything.”

With no reason to know what those epithets meant, Cyania placed her focus into readying a leap. Lightning seared, and she ducked behind her shield – only for the loosed bolt to arc across her head and strike the tram square in the roof.

“Nyaah!” Mikoro yelped amidst the shouts and grunts of her passengers – the hat’s as well as the tram’s – as the vehicle shuddered to a halt. She hammered the buttons and jerked the switches to no avail, and now snarls and clangs rang out: their trusty champion had leapt upon the gnarled-root barricade and was duelling the druid, who it turned out was not so inclined to go down in a single hit. She’d shrouded herself in magical moonlight to phase through Cyania’s shield thrusts, and when the warrior’s blade hacked or sliced the druid parried with bars of solid lightning. Feldiir meanwhile had at last found a window that gave him a functioning line of fire and flicked frostbolt after frostbolt at their adversary, with about as much effect as dropping ice cubes into the sun; and Tsong wove parabolas of mist through all the windows at once, shrouding Cyania against loose electric charges.

“Is this the behaviour of a hero?” Cyania challenged the druid. “Fighting for those who beat up their own citizens? Do you even know what’s happening here?”

“I don’t care,” said Mariska. “I don’t need to know. I’m happy with my life as it is.” And not so happy with her lack of success against this warrior, she metamorphosed into a ferocious lynx and leapt for Cyania’s head. This was a mistake, for the quick-witted zombie feigned a shield block then caught the beast in her sword arm as it twisted to come at her from the side. It scratched and snarled as she wrestled with it, till at last she succeeded to grasp it by the rump and in the heat of her battle-rage smashed it back and forth upon the barricade, each blow cracking the roots till they snapped apart and spilt the pair of fighters onto the tram tracks. Mariska, being a projected character, died on contact, her corpse vanishing instantly. Cyania, being real, did not, and she steadied herself, brushed herself off, and treaded her way carefully back to the tram.

A faraway gaming computer, incidentally also in Amsterdam, went up in a shower of sparks.

“Hmm. What’s up with you my old thing?” the zombie asked of the stalled tram. Unsure what else to do, she kicked it – gently – and the ancient funicular hummed back to life.

“Whew, they’re getting serious now! One more to go, right?”

The gradient now grew so steep that their mage tripped on his withdrawal from the window and had to be caught by Tsong. Finding the rails dark ahead, Mikoro glanced through the side window – and lit up in wonderment, for now the lights of Heunglung harbour lay strung out beneath them. From these heights she could see that those brilliant towers spread far further than she’d guessed. Even across the harbour, though lower to the ground, the electric kaleidoscope blanketed the land as far as her stare could reach.

“Where’s the last one?” Cyania’s boots thumped around on top. “Blast it, I can’t see a thing!”

The way was pitch-dark.

Too dark, for a city like this.

The tram screeched to a stop – and Cyania grunted as something hit her shield, shunting her against the front glass. It cracked, showering fragments on Mikoro as she screamed and covered her face with her arm.

“You see,” came the darkness’s voice, “I don’t get why people are strange like you.” *Shhm!* – another bolt struck the shield, but Cyania was ready this time and held fast.

“Come out, little phantom,” she muttered. “Come out where I can – aha!”

A circle of starlight – Mikoro had deployed the *Sea Bunny*’s torch – and there on the station platform stood Shosho the warlock, her imp hopping mockingly at her feet. At her side was the Baker Gate, a mass of solid shadows from which the tram’s collision detector had spared them an impact.

“So irrational,” said Shosho, spearing the tramcar’s windows with spikes of pure darkness; the shattering glass forced both Feldiir and Tsong to duck between the seats. “Just what do you want?” she goaded them. “Why do you think you have any right to get involved here?”

“You’re unbelievable!” Mikoro shouted back. “Don’t you realise the Banes you released have killed people?”

She didn’t expect the unflappable Shosho to care – which was why it shocked her, shocked them all in fact, when the warlock completely blew her top.

“Youareallsickinyourheads!” she shrieked at five hundred miles an hour. “Whodoyouthinkyouare?!Ijustcameheretobuythegreatgeartheysellhere,butyou,

you disrupt everything for no reason! Why did you get political in your interview? This is our city! You haven't got it right! You haven't got it right!" And the shadowbolts flew from her hands with such reckless abandon that most missed the tramcar entirely.

Only Cyania had the focus to withstand this outburst, and as she thumped onto the platform and charged at Shosho the warlock swerved, raised her rod with a horned skull on the end and channelled from its maw a gob of horrific burning shadow. The rampaging Cyania was wide open as Shosho loosed this ball of death – or rather, that was what she wanted her to think, for the instant it left her hands the coffin-lid shield slammed down at exactly the angle to catch the missile on one of its iron strips and reflect the horror straight back the way it came. Shosho was caught utterly unprepared and shrieked as it blew up in her chest, killing her instantly. Her useless imp vanished into thin air, followed by her corpse, undisfigured on account of its virtual nature – although somewhere in Suzhou, the computer of a certain entitled individual among the Chinese coastal new rich blew up with such force as to bring down its entire three-storey mansion with it.

"Wah," went Mikoro, with their foe's spectacular failure of patience still ringing in her ears. Surely it cost less energy to care about people than to blow up like that?

At last, the battered tram pulled through a corridor of thick foliage into the base of a structure.

"The Peak Terrace," said Tsong. "This is the terminus. Hurry. The observation deck."

Their footsteps echoed off the polished floors of this Terrace, which was obviously some touristy shopping centre. But no-one was here. Its stores were shuttered, its escalators switched off, and only the dimmest of lights illuminated its passages. Evidently the conflict had confined the staff and clientele to their homes.

Tsong took the lead now as they followed him through this commercial maze. Cyania was content with this for the chance it gave her to fascinate over the escalators, which she only curtailed on pain of a bollocking from Dari. Their arrival at the rooftop brought a further delay as each member of the party lost their breath – figuratively, in one case – at the sheer radiant glory of the view across Heunglung harbour; all except Tsong, who rushed to the opposite rail and assessed the mountaintop.

"Come," he said. "Hurry."

Cyania clapped Mikoro's and Feldiir's backs and ushered them over – and here they wheezed once more. For right there on the summit was the Nexus-Dragon,

his outline all the more menacing for how these electric lights drew him out of the darkness. He appeared to be sleeping, or at least bored stiff, and as their eyes made sense of the distances up here they realised they weren't quite there yet. Their current building was part of a complex of shopping centres and visitor attractors on a broad paved plateau. From a plaza in the centre a road led up to the summit proper, dragon included.

From the other direction they heard the growl of an engine.

"There," said Tsong, pointing. "The Viceroy's car. We must hurry down and stop her."

They turned to go – but the escalator was ablaze with light. Not electric light. Angels, energy beings, monotheistic conviction – that sort of light.

"Stop being silly," said Benlord the paladin, strolling onto the observation deck. Golden hammer, golden shield, golden bubble around him – but no face. A flat blue oval.

"Ah, splendid," Cyania groaned. "A paladin. Yach, this one looks as thrilling as watching formaldehyde dry."

"Think I want to be here any more than you do?" said the paladin, or more accurately now, the Apath. "All this is because of people who kick up a great big fuss about nothing; who are too immature to accept the way the world works."

"Is that right?" said Cyania, raising her shield and beginning to circle him.

"Crying and throwing their toys out of the pram because they think their opinions are so important. Because they want attention. Well tough. No-one cares."

The words were provocative but spoken so drearily that they barely registered.

"And here I thought paladins were zealots," said Cyania. "My friend, I've heard skulls talk with more feeling than you. Scratch that, I've heard pelvises doing it. If your time's so precious then why even bother?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Benlord the Bane. "Because the dragon's promised huge EXP to take you down."

Cyania's face went puzzled. Then she cackled, and next thing they knew she was beside herself with laughter.

"Ahaha! Wahahahah! Sorry, that's the best thing I've heard all day! You're a paladin, right? A *paragon of justice and compassion*! A holy warrior who dedicates his life to helping others, who defends the weak from oppression – well, of course, I mean, everyone knows you're actually in it for personal gain, well most of you

anyway; it's just the pretence so goes with the territory that I never thought I'd hear your likes admit it outright!"

"Don't be silly," said Benlord.

"Well you just did, didn't you? And here I thought you'd bore me. So then! Where's the Bane, Sir Paladin?"

"Don't be silly," said the Apath again. It seemed this was his go-to response for anything he didn't like to hear.

The zombie circled on, wary in spite of her good spirits. The paladin rotated to follow her, keeping his garish shield (gold-plated with wings, of course) facing hers.

Cyania charged.

She struck – fainted, rolled and rose in a lunge before he could bring the shield round. With a clang like a church bell her sword bounced off his holy bubble.

"What! That's not supposed to – "

The paladin retaliated with his hammer, but her coffin lid easily took the blow. Ducking the return swing she rolled the other way and thrust again, but once more his bubble nullified the force. The thing was suffused with elemental indifference. It cared about nothing outside it; nothing outside could break through.

Cyania realised the problem.

"Oh come on, you cannot be serious!" she objected. "Has your damn Bane made your divine shield permanent? Oh, now that isn't fair!"

"Life isn't fair," said Benlord the Bane as though it were a fact, and he called forth the light to heal himself just in order to make it look like he was putting in an effort.

"Meh, two tanks," commented Feldiir. "They'll go on for hours without taking each other below ninety percent."

"We don't have hours," said Tsong. "Look – the Viceroy is driving up to the top. We missed her thanks to this paladin."

"Yoi. Weeeeell, in that case..."

Feldiir wibbled his fingers while mumbling something in Serbian, probably about graphics cards or solid-state drives. This produced five icicles which he flung one by one at the paladin. They shattered on impact: three on the shield, two on the bubble. Benlord didn't even notice.

"Meh, that's it, I'm going back to fire after this."

Whack. Whack. Whack. Whack. It was like watching coastal erosion in real time.

“Ooh, I know how to deal with this!” said Mikoro, and duly it followed: the outstretched hand, the pale blue glow...

...and it fizzled, just like when she'd tried it on the Cow Queen. Not even her high-level shrinking magic could penetrate that divine bubble.

“Waah, no way! Um...Dari? How are we supposed to...”

“Well I'm out of ideas,” said Dari. “I think I'll be sent to sleep if I watch this much longer.”

“Statistically,” said Feldiir, fiddling on a laptop, “if it continues at the present rate then we'll all die of old age before they finish.”

Even with her ageing process all but stalled by her core, Dari believed this.

Mikoro tried again, unconvinced that her power could fail against a man so devoid of notable characteristics, but as she raised her arm the world went dark once more...

Sssssh. Feel. Feel.

“Gwah. What do you – ”

Feel.

She looked again to the pair of combatants, locked in a duel that could only be more ridiculously pointless had it involved two paladins.

Cyania's bashes and strikes fell hard with frustration, but for lack of a living metabolism she wouldn't grow tired, nor would she disengage till she'd made her point. Indeed, it was hard to believe she was the zombie here; the paladin's motions had all the vitality of a sandbag. Worse, it was as if that blank blue nothing he had for a face exerted some reverse sensory gravity that repelled your attempts to process him at all.

Mikoro wondered: What must it be like, to go through life that way? Concerned only for the next unit of material self-interest: the next steak, the next piece of loot, the next ejaculation, each for its own sake with no broader meaning. No values. No dreams. No care for anything but your least potential self.

No story, even.

No being. Only existing.

Did he not *feel*? Was he afraid to feel? Ashamed?

What sort of society grew adults like that?

A serpent's tail pressed on the back of her consciousness. Pressed her forward.

Feel. Feel.

Without answering, without really even thinking, she crept round behind the paladin.

“Mikoro,” said Dari from her hat. “What are you doing?”

“Shhhh,” she hissed, a little more snakily than she meant to.

The paladin was ignoring her. Between blows she caught Cyania’s eye. Somehow the zombie managed to wink at her while studiously pretending she hadn’t noticed.

The cat-girl crept closer.

“Boo!” she shouted, and flung her arms round Benlord’s bubble from behind.

The shield vibrated. Shook. Brightened to yellow-white.

The Bane of Apathy could not by nature expect anyone to hug it. Even less could it handle the bulldozer of raw fluffy emotion that dwelt in the arms of Ibaraki Mikoro.

Its only possible reaction? Denial.

“Don’t be silly,” said Benlord – but his bubble was thickening, crackling, tightening, its light solidifying into a perfect indifference to all things. In seconds it was dense as a concrete moon.

“Oho! Nice one, Captain Furball!” cried out Cyania. “Ahh...what exactly did you just do?”

“Let me out,” came the Apath’s muffled voice. “Stop being so emotional. Let me out.”

Asking Mikoro to stop being emotional was like asking rain to stop being wet.

“If we let you out, will you tell your dragon to stand down?” Cyania negotiated with him.

“Don’t be silly,” came his reply. Then his coughs. His wheezes. The feeble tap of his hammer.

“He’s suffocating!” said Feldiir, in the manner of pointing out that a fire is hot.

“Ohh alright then,” said Cyania, raising her sword. “My cold dead heart’s gonna let you out, you hear? See if yours can keep up with it next time, why don’t you.” And she brought her blade down on the barrier – but it made not a dent.

She bashed with her shield. Not even a chip.

His scrabbling weakened. Then his last words: “But it was just...a game...”

The apathy-bubble evaporated. Benlord’s body fell flat on the ground, head sideways. Yes – his head was back. Black hair, slight beard, forgettable expression. In the few seconds before he disappeared, Mikoro wondered if she’d ever seen such an unremarkable face.



Somewhere in the English city of Bristol, a computer screen flashed so bright that its user raised his arm to shield his eyes. When he lowered it, he found himself encased in a bubble of light.

He got up and walked around. It followed him as he went.

He didn't panic. He was logical, as he liked to remember. He knew how the universe worked.

So instead he reached for his phone to call the doctor, or at least an electrician. But before he could get his hand on it the light-bubble knocked it to the floor.

He tried again. It slipped.

Again. It slipped further.

On the next grab it slid under the table.

"Don't be silly," he said.

He left his flat and shouted down the corridor, hoping to alert someone. Then he made to knock on the next door along – but his fist couldn't reach it. His bubble blocked the way.

He went outside. People walked right past him. Even when he put himself in front of them they walked around as if they couldn't see him. He reached out to grab an arm or shake a shoulder, but couldn't get his hand outside his bubble.

"Shit," he said.

"Having trouble?" someone called out from the café across the road.

"You again," he said. "Did you do this?"

The gentleman peered over his newspaper. "Well I did warn you," he chuckled.

"Don't be silly."

"Still convinced it's only a game?"

Woland held out a smooth white stone. A hearthstone.

"Go on then."

He grabbed it, somehow able to grasp it through his barrier. By instinct he placed both hands on it and shook it, beginning its activation sequence. That usually solved his problems.

Woland checked his watch. He yawned.

Then, right in the last few seconds before the man disappeared, he slapped himself on the forehead and said: "Oh, blast! How silly of me – I completely forgot! Forgive me, yes? That isn't set to the Heroes' Agency. I'm afraid it takes you somewhere quite...political."

As the hearthstone flashed, the face it lit up was extremely emotional.



“You know, it’s funny,” said Cyania. “I was nearly a paladin once. Hey hey – don’t worry, I’ve completely recovered.”

“I can’t imagine you as a paladin,” said Feldiir, as if telling a cliff he couldn’t imagine it as cheese. More usefully, his gloves now crackled with flame.

Cyania rested her shield against the guardrail. She stretched her arms; two loud crackles of bone.

“Would you believe the Silver Hand offered me a placement?” she said. “Back when I was with the regulars out of Stratholme. I was tempted at first. Went to have a gander. That’s when I learnt that the first loyalty of people who call themselves good guys from the start is usually to their belief that that’s what they are no matter what.”

She patted down Feldiir’s jacket till she found the *rakija* and raised it for a quaff.

“Cy,” said Dari, “is this the best time for – ”

“Hey. I was just a moody half-Vrykul daughter of the sea. Big mansion outside Boralus, arms like girders, porcelain cups smashing soon as I got my fingers round them, know what I mean? What did I want with standing in the light to recite huge walls of words about how awesome I was? As long as I could bash up people who wanted to hurt those I cared about I was happy. Knew straight away that all that pious bilge about light this and holy that and holy divine retributive light of so-and-so was more trouble than it was worth.”

Another swig.

“Hah! Just listen to me go. Mushy old jabbering corpse, right? Sometimes I can hardly tell if I miss the taverns of Kul Tiras or never really left them.”

She looked up to find them all staring dumbfounded.

“So!” she shouted brightly as though it had never happened. “Where’s this Bane then?”

They panicked and swung their heads in all directions.

“Uh-oh,” said Mikoro.

“Ahhh, it’s not here,” said Feldiir, even though they’d all realised.

“Great. Just great. Snuck off without anyone noticing. Even you, Little Miss Perspicacious?”

As Tsong pulled out his phone to look that up in the online translator, Dari spoke guiltily in her defence: “W-Well, it is the Bane of Apathy.”

“Aahh, that’s no good!” said Mikoro. “We gotta find it! Quick, it can’t have gone far!”

Cyania’s eyes flashed as they met Dari’s, who quivered at the fifty additional press-ups they’d added to her not-too-distant future. With copious tons of *dead weight* on her back for extra challenge, no doubt. But Cyania was too seasoned an officer to raise questions of fault in the middle of an operation and instead rattled ahead down the motionless escalator, then the next, then the next after that, and then they all scrambled onto the plaza just as an official car screeched to a stop at its edge.

A door swung open, and out stepped a short woman in a smart white suit. Her motions were officiously prim and proper, and her sharp eyes weighed the troublemakers through wire-framed spectacles beneath a short-coiffed mat of black hair.

“Your actions constitute foreign interference in the internal affairs of the Great Wei,” she stated formally. “That is enough. I will no longer permit you to endanger our national security by encouraging rioters and lawbreakers.”

She was apparently unarmed, not half a Cyania tall, yet she stared the party down with no hint of fear.

“Um. Internal affairs,” said Mikoro. “Isn’t that what Dari’s good at?”

“Nnnhh! Not now Mikoro!” came the tiny remonstrance from her hat.

“Nice suit,” said Cyania. “You’re in charge here then?”

But at this point Tsong stepped forward and addressed the woman as follows:

“Viceroy Lim. I request that government forces cease all violent actions against the people of Heunglung and sit down to negotiate with our civic representatives. We have five demands. First, to stop the passage of legislation that threatens to undermine rule of law by allowing the Wei Empire to interfere politically in Heunglung’s legal system. Second, to retract your characterisation of peaceful protesters as ‘rioters’. Third, to release and clear of charges all protesters in custody, including those you arrested in hospitals and universities. Fourth, an independent inquiry into police violence. And fifth, that you resign and implement free and fair elections for Viceroy and the Legislative Assembly on the basis of full universal suffrage.”

The Viceroy shut her eyes as she waited out this ultimatum. Then, speaking slowly and patiently, she replied: “I am a mother, Mr. Tsong. If, every time my son tells me he wants something, I give it to him, will he not become spoiled and have

regrets later in life? You have to be firm and sometimes harsh to teach wayward children the correct way to behave.”

That set off Mikoro, to whom this model of parenthood was alien in all the wrong ways.

“Nyaah, what does that mean? No, if your child wants something you listen and find out why! What kind of parent is *harsh*? Parents are supposed to love their kids and always be fair and understanding! What would my mother say if she heard you comparing good parenting to police shooting and beating people?”

Tsong supplied a different argument. “Your citizens are not your children. Even if you were appointed by the Emperor rather than chosen by us, as our leader you are responsible to us, not us to you. We ask for nothing unreasonable. We do not ask for independence from the Great Wei, nor do we see the Emperor as our enemy. We expect only respect for our dignity and freedom like human beings everywhere.”

The Viceroy fired back: “You are a small minority of lawless elements who have caused huge damage to the Heunglung economy and disrupted the lives of the majority. There can be no dialogue till order and stability are restored.”

Cyania pointed over her shoulder at the harbour and challenged her: “And that down there is your idea of order and stability? Look, Madam Viceroy. You might have noticed, but I’m what you’d call a stranger in these parts.”

“A foreign interest,” Viceroy Lim came back like a whip.

“A foreign – that’s just it, you see? I honestly can’t make heads or tails of what you people go on about most of the time. All this about red umbrellas and internal affairs, it’s all just coffin dust to me. What I can tell you is this. I’ve crawled my way through three separate regimes which gave their armies and security forces this kind of power. Arthas, Garrosh, Sylvanas – all different cultures, different systems, different beliefs. Doesn’t matter. It always ends the same way. Today you’re beating and gassing people, tomorrow you’re cutting them down, setting their homes on fire and impaling their carcasses on spikes. Nuh-uh. The iron boot’s the same whether the foot that wears it is pink or brown or grey. I’ve seen what happens once you let it drop. Reckon I’ve seen enough of it for a lifetime and deathtime put together.”

Perhaps to her credit, Viceroy Lim did not look the least put out at receiving political advice from a zombie. But Cyania’s words no more swayed her resolve than did the demands of her own citizens, and she threatened: “The Imperial

Liberation Army is on its way. Put down your weapons and I will intercede for leniency in your sentencing.”

“She leaves us no choice,” said Tsong. “We must take her into custody and return to the Red Umbrellas before the army gets here.”

“You have no chance,” the Viceroy replied matter-of-factly as she stepped into her car and slammed the door before Cyania could reach it. Immediately Cyania tugged on the handle only to find the high-security lock too strong, so instead she clattered in front to block the vehicle’s escape while the rest of the party surrounded it. But the Viceroy had other ideas – for now the car’s interior lit up as blue as the Nexus-Dragon’s scales, and next moment it sat protected behind an impenetrable barrier.

“Curse it!” hissed Cyania, slashing and clouting at it with all her strength but in vain. “Pure arcane energy this time? She must have a pretty powerful artifact or something for this one! Is this that dragon’s doing?”

The Viceroy’s voice crackled through a speaker: “The Nexus-Dragon has respected our sovereignty like a responsible partner. You have no means of escape.” And with these words a sky-blue portal shimmered into the plaza.

“Look out!” yelled Dari. “That portal – it’s exactly the same as the ones we saw at the Heroes’ Agency!”

“How?” Mikoro shouted above the rising thrum of the gateway. “Is she generating it from there in the car? Behind its own barrier? Nyaah, then how can we stop her?”

A beam of sky-blue energy shot out from the portal. It danced and flickered about the party like a laser pointer before finally alighting on Feldiir.

“Hey, what gives?” said the mage.

The portal gushed with a noise like belching magma. This was fitting, for from it surged the molten bulk of a fire elemental. It swept toweringly upon them in a twister of smoke and sulphur, and raised high a huge spiked hammer forged in primordial fire.

“BY FIRE BE PURGED!” it roared, barrelling straight for Feldiir.

“Oh come on!” complained the Serbian in utter disbelief – for having just re-specialised as a fire mage, he could only spatter it with fireballs which, though blisteringly effective against all other foes, had as much impact on this one as, well, fighting fire with fire.

“TASTE THE FLAMES OF SULFURON!”

In the spirit of that proposal it brought its hammer down on the mage’s head – only to clap instead on the coffin-lid shield, for Cyania had dashed to intercept

the strike then whirled in an arc to drive her blade through the Firelord's flank. One might think it ought to have taken more than that, but with a couple more well-placed thrusts (and for the sake of an accurate combat log, a spray of Serbian rude words) the Firelord buckled, hissed and dissolved to steam with a rumble of "TOO SOON...TOO SOON..."

"Hahah! Only a shade!" said Cyania. "The real Ragnaros the Firelord offered a little more resistance than that!"

Then something significant happened. As the imitation-Firelord's energy particles dispersed, a wave of disturbance whipped back to the portal and round to the Viceroy's car. Inside the barrier something burst in a plume of black smoke.

"That's it, that's it!" cried Cyania. "If we disrupt its output the feedback must damage whatever's generating it!"

"There's no point resisting," broadcast the Viceroy. "The Nexus-Dragon knows all your weaknesses."

The sky-blue pointer flickered again and this time came to rest on Mikoro's forehead. She stared at it cross-eyed.

The portal thrummed again – and out shambled a hideous fleshy mass of eyes with a circle of teeth on top. Tentacles burst from the ground, prompting Cyania to leap about smashing them, Feldiir to lob fireballs about, Tsong to weave his healing mists pre-emptively, and Dari to scream not in fear but in frustration at how she would possibly represent so unspeakable a thing in writing.

All Mikoro's attention however was on a different variant of tentacle that reared up before her. It had a mouth at its end.

"Wawah! That, that's...!"

It wasn't that she was terrified. It was more that the abomination before her, whose existence would already have strained the processing power of your average brain, offended the cat-girl's understanding of things a more basic, that is to say, a *gastric* level.

It wanted to eat her. But getting eaten by this thing didn't look at all fun. And that was just wrong.

Which, as the mouth-tentacle licked its brim with a sinuous tongue, had an effect akin to crashing her fluffy, gurgly operating system.

"Nnn-yah! Nnnah!"

"So it's like that, is it?" came Cyania's voice from somewhere in the distance. The warrior had moved in for a go at the atrocious thing's main body, but her strikes bounced off its carapace as off a wall of ancient rubber.

“Uhh, Cy?” said Dari, wincing as viscous green drool rained upon her. “Cy! A little help – ”

Then she ducked into the hat with hands on ears as the riotous clatter of boot-steps tore up her surroundings; Cyania had covered the ground in a single charge and interposed her shield between the mouth-tentacle and Mikoro. The clamour of her motion startled the latter back to her senses and she staggered back, as the warrior beat back the tentacle with her shield and slashed at it hard, one way first, then the other. But the supple tendril juddered against her blows, as though it just wasn't meant to be hit.

Cyania considered her options. “Think you're a bit of a horror then do you?” she thought aloud as, hesitating, she sheathed her sword and reached for her belt. “Naah, I think these people might have outdone you on that particular front. Want a taste?”

Mikoro just had time to identify the object before she hurled it through that salivating maw: it was the tear gas canister she'd taken off the streets. Caught unprepared for such a stratagem, the tentacle swallowed without realising it, swayed in a daze of perplexity – then jerked, hissed, and shot off as though yanked underground, causing the entire' abomination's mass to convulse in flashing purple. With a hurrah Cyania launched herself at its main body, now made vulnerable by whatever the gas had done to its innards – a point proved when with a single smash of her blade the monstrosity crumpled, shimmered, then sizzled to particles.

Arcane feedback snapped back to the portal and from there to the car. A fiercer explosion this time. Dark smoke amassed within the barrier.

“I see how it is!” said Cyania. “It's manifesting enemies based on what it takes for our weaknesses. Hahaa, what fun! Let's see what's next then!”

“We must hurry,” said Tsong. “If the Liberation Army gets here we will struggle.”

Out shot the laser-beam. It appeared to settle on Mikoro yet again, only this time it jerked around unstable.

“Nyah! Don't choose me twice!” she yelled, still somewhat shaken by what she'd seen.

It hovered in place – then banked upward, pinpointing Dari.

“What?” said the little explorer. “But I – ”

The portal resonated – but then suddenly a completely different portal whirled open on the other side of the plaza. The group spun around to watch a fearsomely gigantic woman come stamping onto the Peak. She had six muscular arms, four of which wielded savage hooked sabres. Blades of dark gold laced her black and red

dress-armour, and on her head a huge matching tiara blazed with a brazier of lilac flames. Her strong soft skin – to which her armour yielded plenty – was alabaster-white.

Dari wailed, and well she might, for the violet fires of this colossus's eyes had pinned her. "So, business or pleasure?" the towering woman spoke as her shadow fell over Mikoro; and the tiny traveller on the hat had only time to squeak "B-Business! Business!" before velvet-gloved fingers whisked her skyward. Her squeal muted in an instant as the six-armed woman thrust her into her bosom then swept off round the mountain before anyone could stop her.

"Waah! Who was that?" yelled Mikoro. "Daariii! Come back!"

Cyania scratched her chin. "That...didn't look like a shade," she considered. "Ahh it's Dari, she'll be fine. Or she'd better be after all the specialist training I've given her for that." She looked down and patted her breastplate with pride.

"Uhh, did she disconnect?" said Feldiir irrelevantly.

But there was no time for further deliberation because the arcane search-beam was at it again, and this time it was Tsong who caught its glare.

"You! You have earned my ire!" boomed an imperious voice from the sky-blue portal, heralding the arrival of a burly statuesque figure. He was not half as much a colossus as the woman who'd carried off Dari, but his stony physique came with a tusked authoritarian leer to cement it, and the spires of his helm and mace crackled with thunder.

"Haha! Lei Shen, slayer of kings and gods, as I live and breathe!" wheezed Cyania. "Or rather, that is, as I – you know what, never mind."

"What are you talking about?" said Tsong. "That's Tyrant Zheng, the ancient warlord who founded what is now the Wei Empire."

"What? No, it's definitely Lei Shen!"

"Nyaah, can't we work out who it is after we beat it?" said Mikoro. "Come on, I wanna find Dari!"

"You are NOTHING!" roared whoever-it-was. "I wield the power of the heavens!" And he raised his mace to the sky, prompting bolts of lightning to strike across the plaza. Cyania got straight to work on him only for the stoic Tsong to surprise and impress her with an astonishing burst of passion; that is to say, he leapt upon the tyrant's shoulders, ripped the thunder-helm from his head and channelled two thousand years of revenge into an awesome left hook to the jaw. The tyrannical figure fell to his knees, pointed to the dragon on the summit and dissipated to sparks, groaning: "I sought only to finish the work of the gods..."

...sparks which zoomed back to the Viceroy's car. An alarming THUNK! and the barrier flickered, fizzed, almost fell – only to straggle back, but now the space inside was opaque with smoke.

“Keep at it!” Cyania bellowed. “We have her!”

But the words hadn't left her mouth when the sky-blue pointer found it. It reflected off her teeth in a brilliance of beams – and then the air darkened, fog shrouded the peak, and that fog was frigid as death.

“No,” she snarled. “Don't you dare.”

It echoed – a terrible voice. “*I will show you the justice of the grave, and the true meaning of fear.*”

CLANK.

CLANK.

CLANK.

Armoured footsteps cracked the pavestones as if to release the ghoulish claws beneath. So did he tower forth from the buried past, dread blade Frostmourne in hand, his mandate relinquished to the cursed suit of ribbed black armour to which he'd consigned his destiny. His eyes flared blue beneath the spikes of his Helm of Domination as he loomed upon the undead warrior, and the gaze she returned matched every inch of its fury.

The Lich King. Lord of the Undead Scourge.

Arthas.

With an unbridled scream Cyania propelled herself at her killer – no, far worse than that, her *sovereign betrayer* who as a living prince had taken his hammer to her as she turned away. In so taking to violence against those he was meant to serve, he'd cast off his honour and plunged down the path that reshaped him into the sovereign of the Scourge, those monstrous undead armies from whom Cyania's Forsaken had secured their freedom through revolutionary struggle. Twice this butcher had denied her a fair fight: first in her disgraceful murder, second at his eventual fall when she'd been tied down holding off hordes of his minions at his citadel's base.

No longer. Here in this foreign land, she'd make amends.

But this Lich King was merely an echo, and where his original Frostmourne had laid waste to armies at a stroke, this one was but a match for Cyania not even at her surgical best but in the frenzied ferocity of her red mist – a mist whose canister might have stayed buried in the depths of her undying soul for all she cared, had not his manifestation here so foolishly prised it asunder. It mattered

not that he was the most formidable shade so far, that his high-handed swings at last succeeded in carving ugly scars through the casket-lid shield; for even as armoured personnel carriers drew up and snipers took positions on the roofs of the shopping complex, there was no curbing the emotions these tyrants had so foolishly unfettered from a heart which, though it ceased to beat long ago, still burnt with those passions which drive any true character at a level far beyond that where the life-death binary holds meaning.

In this case, with a ear-splitting shriek and a shield-smash to knock him off balance, they drove Cyania's blade hard through the slit in the Lich King's helm.

The tyrant of the Scourge fell to his knees, then collapsed, rolled upon his back, and his helm tumbled away to reveal the ashen face of Arthas at the end of his bloodstained saga. He looked so different to the treacherous fair-haired prince Cyania remembered that she hesitated, numbed, before raising her sword to finish him – but by then he was reaching feebly at the dragon on the summit, to whom he choked: "Father? Is it...over?"

As the sword fell his likeness burst to the winds.

Several things now happened at once. The chill clouds blew clear; this gave the Imperial Liberation Army forces clear sight of their targets, and they opened fire; but Tsong wove his mists with sufficient intensity to dampen those salvos just as the feedback from the fallen shade ripped around to its origin. In that instant the car and barrier went up in a blast so savage it stunned the party and imperial soldiers alike – and as it burned the still-furious Cyania stomped towards it, torn by the storm in her heart between rescuing the civilian politician within it and running her through for the filthiness of her insult.

She wouldn't have to decide. She'd not got within five paces when a figure staggered from the wreckage: charred, choking and spluttering, coat smouldering, glasses askew, but suddenly solid, shaking, fists balled up, teeth bared in desperate fury. Cyania halted, just for an instant, but that was all it took for the reckless Viceroy to lunge at the warrior in a harrowing wrath, shrieking: "You will not destroy Heunglung! You will never humiliate us again!" And Cyania stiffened, confused, as through a haze of adrenaline she sensed this matron – unarmed, burnt out, not half her own size – lashing and kicking and clawing at every part of the undead armour-tower she could reach, loosing Heunglung-wa screams that even from a mouse would have been more terrifying than cannon-fire. For that matter every rifle in the plaza now trained itself on this pair, but no order came forth, no finger dared rest on its trigger lest it go down in history as the one that put a bullet through the Emperor's appointed governor; while Cyania, still shaken

by her latest encounter and running largely on auto-zombie, stuffed her sword away and lowered herself on her ankles, making a mindless attempt to grip the Viceroy's thrashing arms. It was in that precise moment, as they flailed past her hand, that a fingernail gashed the warrior's cheek, drawing snips of bright green embalming fluid; to which Cyania, her defence instincts triggered and adrenaline bursting once more, swung her shield – sideways, vicious – against her attacker.

With a nasty crack the Viceroy of Heunglung soared through the air and landed some distance away.

Time froze.

Tsong recovered first, and at his hand gesture the party swept across to her body.

"She's alive!" yelled Mikoro, getting there first. "Come quick!"

She was. Just.

"The f-foreigners..." the Viceroy forced out, coughing up blood. "N-Never...never again...don't let..."

"Cynthia," Tsong addressed her. "Why? Why didn't you listen?"

Her face twisted in anguish. "Heunglung was always...the Empire's – never...never; foreign bullies..."

"But this was supposed to be a *People's* Empire now! Isn't that the revolutionary mandate on which the Wei dynasty took power? You can't behave the same way as the colonisers did! Otherwise how can you claim to be any better?"

Viceroy Cynthia Lim's breath failed her. Her head sagged; and she slumped, lifeless on the bloodstained plaza.

"Uhh, guys? I don't think she has the Bane of Apathy," said Feldiir, unnecessarily.

Unbeknownst to everyone else present, a bearded gentleman in flowing white robes and a tall hat stepped forth and helped the Viceroy to her feet.

"Do not worry," he told her, soft but serious. "Our organisation takes historical trauma very seriously. I am sure your hearing will grant these factors due consideration." And supporting her by the arm, he led her off to his waiting carriage where a broken-helmeted policeman and four dejected businesspeople slouched handcuffed in the back.

"She will not need them," he told his attendant, raising his palm as a new pair was offered.

Meanwhile Mikoro, Feldiir and Tsong looked to Cyania for guidance, only to find her staring off into the distance. She was miles away.

"Um. Are you okay Cyania?" said Mikoro.

“Cynthia...” she spoke silently.

“Nyah?”

“Oh? Ah – yeah. It’s nothing.”

A trampling, and the Liberation Army reinforcements closed in. Their eyes boggled in shock at their late governor; then at the party, Cyania in particular.

“Raaaaah!” one of them growled, feebly. The rest were too appalled to act.

“Stand down, humans,” Cyania told them. “It’s over.”



Rank after rank of sky-blue hero-masters guarded the road to the summit. As the party battled up this final stretch, the Nexus-Dragon snorted forth:

“Do my policies bother you that much? Fine. What if I were to satisfy you with an apology?”

On they slogged past landscaped parks and the gated yards of luxurious mansions. From those gates spilled more of the dragon’s cowed and robed elite guard, flaunting between them the full spectrum of faux-Azerothian classes, weapons and magical and martial skills.

“I divided the world when I should have brought it together. I decided too fast, and consulted too slow.”

Mikoro searched their faces for the bunch that had greeted them at the Heroes’ Agency, but to no avail: each and every one had a flat blue oval instead of a face, and when they fell their corpses vanished instantly. They poured from the summit, wave after wave like a sky-blue flash flood as that lazy drawl droned on:

“I didn’t live up to my own high standards. I failed at what I set out to do. For that I am sorry. I accept accountability. There. I said it. Now can we all just get back to the game?”

The hero-masters temporarily became immune to damage as they turned to face the dragon and clapped, whooping and whistling in performative satisfaction. Then they resumed their attacks on the party.

“Yoi. Nice accountability,” said Feldiir, blasting aside four hero-masters with one well-placed flamestrike.

“Still not enough?” The voice snored on, now grated with irritation. “How about this then? I will do better in future. I will continue to unite the world in epic adventures, because I truly believe in the positive power of the Heroes’ Agency to

create a common ground where we can all be heroes irrespective of the things that divide us. Isn't that amazing? What more could anyone want?"

In a final flurry of fire, steel and impatience, Cyania, Mikoro, Feldiir and Tsong broke through the last line of hero-masters. There before them lounged the Nexus-Dragon on his throne of silver coins, silver ingots, silver trinkets. He'd spread them across the gardens of the Heunglung Peak, piling them up beneath the palm trees and lamp posts, gazebos and pergolas that were all that remained of the old colonial governors' summer lodge.

All that remained of his face was a block of solid blue.

"What more can I say?" rumbled the Apath-Dragon.

"Well sorry would be a good start," suggested Cyania.

"I said sorry," said the dragon.

"Yeah, it helps if you sound like you mean it. Have you really nothing of substance to say for all the havoc you've caused here?"

The dragon sniffed. "I didn't cause it. It's not my responsibility to get involved in politics."

"Have you forgotten already?" said Tsong. "You threw me out of the Heroes' Agency. What was that if not a political act?"

"Yeah! How could you punish him for speaking up against the people doing horrible things in his home?" shouted Mikoro. "Isn't that heroic? How can you call your operation a Heroes' Agency if you punish actual heroism?"

The dragon ignored her.

"You are the same as the business leaders who turned their backs on their people," said Tsong. "The Wei Empire could not repress us if those with power like yours stood up to them. Don't you know how many millions of the Empire's citizens your Agency has inspired? You could show them true heroism. Show the world. Instead you line up your power with Emperor Wei's and help him wreck the lives of the people of Heunglung. You left us behind. Left your own heroic principles behind."

The dragon lifted a claw to scratch his flank, releasing a fountain of silver coins. A great deal of this currency appeared to be stamped with the twiddle-eared head of Emperor Wei Ni-Pu.

"No-one asked you to stop the Empire single-handed," Tsong kept trying. "Only to do your part. If everyone did their part – if everyone took responsibility to stand up to abuse with what power they have – then bullies would have no space to operate."

"I haven't broken any laws," grouched the dragon. "There's nothing you can blame me for."

"Nah, the law's got nothing to do with it," Cyania came in. "This guy's got a point you know? Arthas couldn't have done what he did at Stratholme without the knights and paladins who followed his orders to slaughter his own people. Garrosh couldn't have disgraced the Horde without the weapon merchants, arena masters and goblin financiers who held up one fist to chant 'strength and honour' then polished his boot with the other while it stomped over everything the Horde stood for. Even Sylvanas couldn't have carried out her atrocities without the apothecaries and their hundreds of little gofers who concocted her plagues for her, to say nothing of those silent crowds who shrugged and looked away. All that was *legal* too you know? But it doesn't change the consequences. Doesn't change the fact that we lost lives and homes, friends and families over it. Doesn't make it less evil."

She laughed, bitter and wry. "Hah. You know – the more you think on it, the more you realise evil's not the problem. The real problem's all those people who see evil happening and choose to hide their faces. What did you call them again? *Heroes?*"

The dragon appeared to yawn. It was hard to be sure when he had a block of elemental apathy for a head.

Cyania realised something.

"You...haven't the foggiest what I'm talking about. You've never even been to Azeroth, have you?"

"Oh alright," grouched the dragon, changing the subject. "How about if I halve your ban to six months?"

"Do you still not understand?" said Tsong. "It's not about my ban. It's about the dignity of my people."

The dragon didn't respond.

"I think it's because he doesn't want to upset the authorities into banning him from their country and losing him silver," said Feldiir, stating the obvious as usual.

They waited. The dragon was clearly so absorbed in his own satisfied lethargy that he wasn't going to attack first.

"Wah. We're gonna have to fight it, aren't we?" said Mikoro in hushed tones. "Uh-oh."

"Never fought a dragon before?" said Cyania, not taking her eyes off the creature. "Heh, it's simple really. The thing about fighting dragons is to not stand

near the head or the tail. Other than that, just move out of any stuff it calls down and you'll be fine." A brisk clap on the back, then up came the coffin-lid shield.

"Yoi! I'm glad I went back to fire!" said Feldiir, enswathing himself in a molten barrier. "This one looks like it's immune to frost."

"Dari..." Mikoro spoke as the group moved in. "Where are you?"

That sky-tearing hiss, like a fusion of crocodile snarls and revving engines, as the Apath-Dragon rose up to engage them.

"Welcome! I am the Nexus-Dragon!" he declared as Cyania's shield drew his front-claw swipes like a magnet. "Would you like to be heroes too? Come then! Embrace the core values of the Heroes' Agency!"

Following Cyania's advice, Mikoro ran with Feldiir and Tsong to face the enemy's long flank, so as not to be in range of his freezing breath or durian-club tail swings.

"Play the game! Above all else, a hero *plays the game!*" The dragon reared with a flap of his wings and bellowed into the night, prompting storms of ice to materialise at random and sweep across the old gardens in straight lines. But Mikoro was good at reacting to things and so had no problem keeping out of their path.

"Bask in the game's quality!" roared the dragon. "Play nice! Play fair! Yes, yes! *Embrace your inner hero!*" From where his mouth might have been streamed a torrent of icy breath; it split in two on Cyania's shield and streamed off at right angles.

Then the dragon froze – fizzed and sputtered like static on a broken television screen. Then it passed and he was back to the combat.

"He's unstable!" Cyania hollered. "Come on team, we've got this!"

"Heer-roes le-le-lead respon-sib-ly," stuttered the Apath-Dragon. "Heer-roes learn an-an-an-and gro-ww."

Glistening power surged through his scales as he activated his Active Vision Aura. He swelled in size and smashed on the shield with twice the claw-strength as before. Cyania drew up a spark of rage – remembered the pathetic police violence, the provocation of the Lich King's shade – and she seized on it, let it bubble in her veins till she was blocking and thrusting at the dragon's frenzy with matching intensity.

He froze – longer this time. His condition was impossible. The values he had come to embody were not compatible with his apathy. Less still with Apathy itself – the Bane's essential perfection.

The summit shook. A reality-quake. The dragon's world could not hold.

"Thi-thi-thi-think glo-o-o-o-obally," he dared proclaim. "Every-ry-ry-ry voice ma-ma-ma-ma-maaaaatters!"

That broke it.

Portals ripped open round the gardens, a circle of them, all directed at the dragon. Imposing figures emerged, and they stormed the lizard as he reared and snarled at the edge of his volatile existence. First to reach him was a fanged, green-skinned chieftain riding a huge wolf, and with a roar of: "I did not ask for this!" he slammed his hammer into the dragon's wing with a surge of sparks and vicious crack of bone. Then a tall fuchsia-skinned lady with blue-green hair rode forth on a colossal (and, Mikoro noted, fluffy) sabre-toothed tiger whose fur was white as powder snow, and she uttered a whisper which could have sliced the night asunder: "Long ago, I swore to protect this land, dragon. I never had the luxury of sleeping through times of great peril." She proceeded to punish him with the slice and dice of a glaive soaked in the shadows of a wounded moon. Next swept forth a bitter mage in crimson robes with three verdant spheres circling his head, and conjuring forth a phoenix of flame, he and his bird incinerated the thrashing lizard as he spoke coldly: "You've taken everything I've ever cared for, dragon. Vengeance is all I have left." Oh, how the Apath-Dragon screeched and hissed, slammed his tail on the earth and flapped his functioning wing as it burned in realisation of the true gravity of his crime! But it was too late, far too late, for now a sorceress in admiral's clothes soared in aboard a massive flying battleship, her bright blond hair streaked with white from her shock at the dragon's betrayal, and she declared: "Was there truly no way to save him? I fear I shall always wonder," as a broadside of arcane cannon-blasts seared the scales from the Apath-Dragon's hide.

Cyania did a double-take. "What? Are these meant to...nah, they can't be. They don't look like..." - then she remembered where she was and issued a bark for the whole team to fall back. This was beyond them now, for the Nexus-Dragon's relationship with reality was drawing rapidly to its only possible conclusion. More heroes from his replica-Azeroth were pouring forth to stamp, carve, blast or berate their verdict unto the one who had built their vision plank by plank, stone by stone, then thought nothing of selling it out for a mess of silver. And at last, as the Apath-Dragon crumpled to the grass with a final hiss, a ghostly figure emerged right in front of the team.

He was real.

"How..." began Cyania.

Through a big bushy beard and walrus moustache, the broad-shouldered paladin glanced over his shoulder at Cyania. Even in spectral form his eyebrows gave him away as a stern judge of character.

He shut his eyes and nodded his respects.

“Who is he?” said Mikoro.

“Oh? He’s, err – ah, just some guy. Has his tomb near where I live, would you believe it. Big local tourist attraction. Took Dari there once. Never actually met him.”

Mikoro knew when a face was holding things back.

“But I thought you said you didn’t like paladins!”

“Hey, not so loud Captain Furball!”

Now the spectre was beckoning Tsong. Hesitantly, with some suspicion, the gas-masked dissident stepped forward. Together they approached the degraded mass of the Nexus-Dragon, still straining to lift his lost face one last time.

Tsong removed his gas mask. He decided to try again. He told the dragon: “Liberate Heunglung. Revolution of our time.”

“Tss-Tss-Tsshrrrow hi-hi-him...out-t-t-t-t...”

The ghostly paladin shrugged to Tsong, apologetically. Then he looked down at the dragon with a disappointed sigh. He marched right up close, to where perhaps, in his realm, he could still regard that scaled blue face, and gave his judgement:

“You’ve just crossed a terrible threshold, Nexus-Dragon.”

He too had a hammer. He brought it down on the Apath-Dragon’s skull.

In a flash of blinding light, dragon, silver, heroes and portals disappeared.

The undead warrior, cat-girl captain, Serbian computer-mage and dissident youth stood alone but together in the humid Heunglung night.



Round the back of the summit gardens, the Bane of Apathy slipped away down the old Governor’s Walk.

Of course the sentimental mortals would celebrate and cuddle each other and all that chaotic nonsense. They were too emotional, that was their problem.

They’d forgotten all about what mattered. It couldn’t be helped; that was what it was. Apathy. No-one cared. And that suited it just fine.

It rolled for the railing. It would slip into the woods, bounce down the hill, find a new host.

There were plenty of candidates here. This land hankered for order. It was only logical.

A pair of black plimsolls moved into its path. Green soles and accents. An anklet. Physically tiny. Cosmically vast.

The Bane couldn't pass. It could only move in straight lines.

"Haven't you had enough?" said Dari.

The Bane froze. Fell to the concrete path. Played dead. No-one noticed when it did that.

It didn't work. She cared too much. *Felt* too much. Worse – she was reddened and awkward, still racing with hormones compacted in the pressure of the hottest, tightest structures of animate chaos.

That helped her, in this case.

She stepped closer.

"Urgh. Come on," said the tiny explorer. "You're going home."

Why do you care? These people are none of your concern.

Dari didn't answer. Couldn't. Didn't need to. Care needed no logical justification. It was simply the way.

Go away. There's nothing to see here. Don't touch me.

Small hands clasped the dull blue cube. It struggled. It was larger than her but had little weight to command. And it was weakening by the second.

Your actions are illogical. I am the Bane of Apathy. I lay waste to the enemies of Order. The sensitive. The bleeding hearts. The whinging moaning complainers. I carve up their souls in the millions. And the best part? I need not touch them. I speak no words. I wield no weapons. I annihilate by doing absolutely nothing.

Her limbs were so strong for her size. Such strength – because she cared?

You have seen but a drop of my power. I am the rational. The rock of nations. The pacifier of dissidents. The silencer of insolent babble. I bring Order not by raising the hand that slaughters the whiners, but by holding down the hundred billion that can stop it.

"I know," said Dari. "And that's not like you. That's why I can't let you do this anymore. Not here. Not anywhere. Not like this."

She was too strong.

Nobody cares.

"I care."

The Bane fell inert.



“Hey, what’s that?” – Cyania’s voice. Dari could just make out her pale yellow beacons squinting towards her. “There! Can any of you see?”

“Nyaaaaah!” – Mikoro, of course. “It’s Dari, it’s Dari! And look what she’s got! She’s got the...”

But it wasn’t the Bane anymore. They all instinctively knew it on bending down.

“Nngh. Go on, Mikoro,” said Dari. “You remember what to do?”

Mikoro nodded; extended her right hand. The serpent symbol glowed red. She touched it to the dormant cube. With a sigh – reasonable, but heartfelt – it dispersed to particles and soaked into the night.

“Whew. Well that takes care of *gaaaaack!*”

Mikoro had swept her up in her hands and smushed her into her chest. “We got one, we got one!” she rejoiced through sobs of joy and relief. “We rescued part of the Order snake! Waaah, what a struggle it’s been!”

“Heh, didn’t break a sweat,” chuckled Cyania. “Just hope these mouldy old bones didn’t trip you up too much along the – whoa!”

Mikoro had flung herself into the zombie’s arms and hugged her so hard her armour clanked in protest.

“Well aren’t you a piece of work, heheh.” She ran her sharp-nailed hand through that mass of pink hair. “Hey hey. Steady now, Lord Admiral Fluff-Face.”

“You’re wonderful!” said Mikoro, clasping tighter. “We managed it all because of you! Nrrrr, I’m gonna cuddle every zombie I see from now on!”

“Mmmff – oww!” a tiny squeak leaked out. “M-Mikoro! I’m – nnggh – still in here!”

“Gwah! Um, um...oops...”

At last Dari was liberated from the cat-and-zombie sandwich. She groaned, her hand rubbing hard beneath her hair.

“Nnnggh. You banged my head on her breastplate.”

Their attention swerved as the ostentatious clearing of a throat robbed Dari of an apology.

“Thanks for the group guys but I’ve gotta go,” said Feldiir. “Raid starts in ten minutes. Well, nine minutes and twenty-two seconds. Ciao!” And he sat down on the grass cross-legged.

“Raid? What do you – ” Cyania began, but the Serbian mage was gone.

“Aaww,” said Mikoro. “He was funny.”

Cyania racked her undead brain for better words to describe him, but apparently couldn’t find any so desisted from trying. “Ah well. At least he left me

this,” she said, stashing the half-empty bottle of *rakija* into her belt. “A good kick, if a little sweet for my liking.”

“And where’s Tsong?” said Dari. “We couldn’t have found our way through this place without his help, but this was his battle more than any of ours. We’d better check he’s okay.”

Cyania pointed across to the road they’d come up on. Tsong was there, conferring with a group of Red Umbrellas and what must have been the commanders of that Liberation Army regiment. As they approached he spoke hurriedly to those people in Heunglung-wa then turned to face the group. For the first time they saw his face with the gas mask off.

“Thank you,” he said simply, shaking hands with Cyania, then Mikoro, then extending a gloved finger for Dari. “This will not be the end of the Empire’s attempts to subject our homeland, but our actions here have sent a clear message. I wish only that it could have been done more peacefully, but everyone made their choices and at least now the parties can sit down to negotiate on equal terms. Hopefully Emperor Wei has learnt that he cannot bully Heunglung without grave consequences.”

To which Cyania’s response was: “Ahaaah! Well if you’re ever in need more of those, you know who to shout for!” And she gave a hammy flex of her arms, to which the dissident organisers and army commanders laughed too, albeit in an attitude best indicated by their creased foreheads and sweatdrops.

The zombie paced to the railings; gazed down at the valley of lights. “Seriously, that Anachronos had better let me visit again after all this. You know, this city reminds me a little of Zandalar, strange as that sounds. I dunno; a musty cadaver could appreciate weather like this sometimes. And the view – hah! You should see the views I shuffle awake to. You can just about make out Caer Darrow across the lake on the five days a year it doesn’t rain.”

“Caer Darrow, as in the Scholomance?” said Tsong.

“Nah, Caer Darrow as in the strawberry plantation.”

They searched each other’s faces. But it had been a long night, and the mysteries in the mis-alignment between Cyania’s Azeroth and the dragon’s imitation were a matter for another time.

“Come to the real Azeroth some day,” said Cyania. “I’ll show you around. Maybe we can even take down another dragon or two. Isn’t that right Dari?”

“Nngh. W-Well, I think one dragon was enough for today,” said Dari. “Are you okay, Tsong? You’re the one he treated lousily in the first place.”

“I have decided to forgive him,” said Tsong. “It’s a shame, you know. The Nexus-Dragon we fought was a real villain, but he was never like that in the past. However poorly he treated my people, it’s a fact that his Heroes’ Agency gave me a place to express myself and develop my skills after the Emperor cracked down in Heunglung. There was a time the Agency encouraged you to speak freely, and I would have been useless today had I not had the chance to train there. Whatever the dragon became, I believe his original vision was sincere.”

“Maybe he lost sight of it along the way,” suggested Mikoro. “Or...maybe he just went about it the wrong way. Maybe what the world needs isn’t more heroes. It just needs people generally to care about what happens in it.”

“Well you cared tonight, and you are always welcome in Heunglung,” said Tsong. “All of you. Come back any time.”

And with that the representatives of Heunglung trooped off down the road.

“So,” said Dari. “How do we get back?”

Mikoro looked across the gardens. “Um. Maybe through that blue portal over there?”

“I see it Mikoro. Are you sure?”

“Hey, what blue portal?” said Cyania. “I don’t know about any blue portal, but there’s a green portal there.” She gave a sideways nod at the other corner. “Guess that one’s mine. Yeah look, there’s a bronze dragon face poking through it.” And she shouted, “I’m coming! Just give me a moment, yeah? Yeah, you can do that. You’re time-dragons, of course you can.”

“I can still hardly believe it,” said Dari. “Just bumping into you like this, here in this – ah, what am I saying? It’s no crazier than the rest of the stuff that’s happened to us on this trip.”

“Come here you,” said Cyania, plucking her tiny friend into her fingers.

“Aahhh, C-Cy! Some w-warning, if you wouldn’t mind!”

“You drop by as soon as you’re back and tell me all about it, you hear? And – say. How did you do it, anyway?”

“D-Do what?” Dari squeaked.

“Get Dari’d off like you always do – like with that banshee in Andorhal, or that sorceress when I took you up to Hearthglen – but reappear in just the right place to catch that Bane?”

“Ah. Y-Yeah. That.” The dangling Dari gave a bashful cringe. “Her name’s Shahraz. She, uhh...”

“You knew her too?” said Mikoro. “Heehee! You see? Dari knows everyone!”

“M-Mikoro! I – ah, let’s just say that we’ve met before, okay? And apparently she also gets – eheh – letters from the Caverns of Time...about me...and, er, cosmic threats...and, well, she is a pretty experienced military strategist. When I explained how quick the Bane of Apathy slips away...”

“Ohh, you’re definitely telling me all about this one when you come by. I have to factor it into your training regimen, yes? Speaking of which...”

Dari watched with mounting alarm as her personal trainer unbuckled her breastplate at the shoulders. That was all it needed – just enough to tilt it forward.

“Uhh, Cy? What are you doing?”

“Well you didn’t exactly stretch your legs riding this fine fluffy head all night,” she said, lowering her in, “so you’re getting a dash of catch-up before you go. Now now, don’t fidget, you know this is for your own good.” And a long and tiny squeal was abruptly smothered as Cyania dug Dari into her bust and fastened her breastplate.

“Now: One!” she drilled, as Mikoro fell beside herself with laughter. “Two! Three! Harder, harder! Push, Dari, push! Four! No, again! Do it properly! Four! Yes, that’s it! Come on, what are you going to do when you find yourself jammed in some *really* hefty ones? Five! That’s it! Six!”

“Waah, that looks so fun!” said Mikoro. “I gotta tell Scáthach about this method!”

Seven, eight, nine, ten – then out came Dari, moaning and flushing and dripping with sweat.

“Haah...haah...haah...”

“Now you make sure she keeps up her exercises,” said Cyania, dropping the exhausted but well-trained little traveller into Mikoro’s hand. “And take care of yourself too Captain Furball, do you understand? They don’t make them like you in Azeroth. Well, not in the Plaguelands anyway. Ahahah!”

“Nrrrrrm. You should come to the Chaldea Academy some time! Um. Once we find our way back there. Then we can train and hug and eat each other all day long!”

“Hoho, you don’t say? Well that does sound like an offer I can’t refuse. I’ll keep it in mind. Now you’ve got a long voyage to see through, yes? Go on then, the next Lord Admiral. Off you go.”

Mikoro hesitated.

“Hey. No point dallying,” said Cyania. “Go on, I’m lousy at mushy goodbyes.”

“Um.”

Mikoro couldn't tear her eyes from Cyania's, even as the latter turned away. Like that it had gone, swift as the swerve of a lighthouse beam. But she could swear she'd seen it. That wistful flicker.

"Heehee! Come on, tell me what's up!"

"Ah, there's no getting anything past that little nose of yours, is there? Don't worry yourself. It's ridiculous. You don't want to hear it."

"Nyaah, I do! Come on, you can tell me!"

"Oh alright. But don't say I didn't warn you. I see you stand there in that coat and hat of yours, and – well, it makes me remember my old man. He had a coat like that. Bigger of course, and greener. Fond of cats, he was. I think he'd have liked you."

"Wah."

"Hah, you see? Told you it was ridiculous."

"But, that's not ridiculous at all! Um...what was he like? I, um...don't know who my dad was. My mother Rin adopted me when I was small. Did he support you even when you, um..."

"Nah, he never knew. Went in his casket a few years before I did. He had the sense to stay in it though, not like his hurricane of a daughter. Liver condition I think. Drank a lot, you know how it goes; in Kul Tiras that's practically a requirement for the job. Least he stuck around long enough to usher his daughter out of that stodgy mansion before she brought down its walls and let her crash around in the army instead."

She paused, feeling the memories push the slab off their vault under the weight of their own decompression; smiled inwardly at herself at the convenience of not having working tear ducts.

"Ah, that was another life," she said. "Well, the only life. I'm something else now."

"Ooh, Dari says that too!" said Mikoro. "How *that was then, and this is now!*"

"Mikoro, that's not – " Dari attempted.

"But – heehee! I don't believe it. You never really leave *everything* behind. It's not that Dari wasn't cute and tasty before she shrunk. She just hadn't yet found the mouths to appreciate her!"

"Mikoro, that's *really* not – "

"And I think you still have fun crashing around just like when you were small! I mean, didn't you have fun with us here? You're still the same Cyania, aren't you?"

"Hahahah! Maybe you've got me there lass. Just maybe. And you know, maybe it's just as well he never stuck around to see what happened to Little Cynth- ahh,

Little Cy. Because you want to know the best thing death's done for me? I'll tell you. Little Cy cared a lot about Kul Tiras's sovereignty and the Alliance's sovereignty, just like her old man did. But if he'd stuck around to watch that sovereignty stove his daughter's head in when her back was turned, he'd have had the fleet down on Arthas before the smoke finished billowing from Stratholme. Might have been no Lich King then. Which would have been fantastic, yeah, don't get me wrong; only it'd have meant no undead revolution, and no Cyania. But there I was, lurching out of my crypt, and I remember thinking a bunch of zombies who'd seen it all might be more responsible with dicey things like sovereignty. Not a chance – Garrosh's militarists then Sylvanas's thugs did it all over again. I know better now. Belonging's got nothing to do with banners and colours. Doesn't matter if you're red or blue, or looking at one side of the grave or the other. When you've seen them both, made friends on both, you realise that at the end of the day you've gotta be your own sovereign. Remember that, would you? No-one's owed your loyalty."

And having left Mikoro this bone of wisdom to chew on, the gallant Cyania clanged off home, one arm raised with a bottle of *rajika*, the other carrying her coffin-lid shield.

"Wah," said Mikoro. "Dari makes good friends."

"Come on Mikoro. We'd better get out of here," said Dari. "We don't want to get stuck here if the portal closes."

Mikoro clutched Dari tight. Mikoro ran. Mikoro leapt –
...and landed in cute style on the deck of the *Sea Bunny*.

"Boo. The sky's still broken."

"What's all this?" said Dari

Surrounding their ship, on a sea as flat as an ice rink in spite of their victory over the Bane, a clutter of debris floated still. Chunks of cliff, sky-blue garments, stones and bricks and sticks that once held portals...

"Guess the Heroes' Agency isn't coming back," said Dari. "Hey. What's that, shining over there?"

Mikoro grabbed hold of the tiller and gently steered the *Sea Bunny* through the wreckage. There it was: two sky-blue dragon scales, drifting on the water.

Letters were etched upon them. *Think Globally* – one read. *Every Voice Matters* – the other.

"Um. Are these from the dragon?" said Mikoro.

She and Dari looked at each other. Nodded.

The fluffy captain leaned out with both hands and lifted the scales into the *Sea Bunny*.

“Let’s ask Mother’s friend what to do with them,” said Dari.

“Yup. Ooh – do you think it’s possible to grow a new dragon from them? Maybe if we plant them, and, um, um...” She tipped her hands in a watering-can motion.

“Grow a new dragon. Yeah. Know what? Let’s get there first.”

THE WAY OF THE



RABBIT

“I believe you, Mikoro.”

The little explorer slid down Mikoro’s coated arm. There it was, shining so faint on the back of her hand. The symbol of the Chaos Serpent.

“You said it felt like she was offering advice?” said Dari.

“Yup. Telling me the Bane was near. How I should fight it.”

“I see.”

She felt a strong urge to touch the symbol and see if she could commune with the serpent herself. Offer some advice about Mikoro.

“Well, did she say anything else?”

“Nope. She wasn’t that talkative. Mostly she just went *ssssh*.”

“*Ssssh*?”

Mikoro cast her mind back, pinching at her lips. “Yeah. Usually when I got anxious. I think she was trying to calm me down.”

Great, thought Dari. She gets a divine presence in her to keep her calm. I get put in divine presences to work me up.

Nonetheless, she turned to smile at Mikoro and tell her how pleased she was for this newfound source of support – and jumped. Mikoro had puffed up her cheeks and loomed upon her, waiting to see how long she’d take to notice.

“Aah! M-Mikoro!”

She released her breath. The gust toppled Dari into her hand.

“Oof! Nngh. Come on Mikoro. Why?”

“The serpent told me to!”

“Urgh. No she didn’t.”

“Okay, she didn’t *tell* me exactly, but I know it’s what she wanted. Wanna know why?”

Dari spread her arms, questioning the universe as much as her friend. “Why?”

“It’s because...she’s the Serpent of Chaos! Heehee!”

“Very funny. Come on, let’s have some food.”

Mikoro cheered and placed Dari on the deck ahead of the customary rummaging.

“Um!” she said suddenly. “But is it breakfast? Or dinner? Gwah. I’m discomnyaminated because we jumped through those portals.”

“Welcome to my world,” said Dari. “Well, what does your tummy tell you it wants?”

“It wants a Dari!”

“Ooo-kay. And if it can’t get a Dari, what does it want then?”

“Um. How about noodles?”

“Noodles is fine with me.”

So out came the noodles, along with the ship’s kettle and an extra helping of fermented bamboo-shoot sticks from the fridge.

Mikoro marvelled as she watched her friend polish off an entire stick. “Waah. Dari’s hungry.”

Dari chewed and swallowed before answering: “Well, Dari got a lot of exercise today.”

“Oooh! That’s right!” Here it came – the giggling. “Heehee! I liked Cyania! And now I’ve met her I can understand how you stay so fit!”

Dari slurped her noodle-soup, then grew suspicious at the silence and looked up to find Mikoro considering her coat. Or rather, that part of the coat that covered her chest.

“Hmm. She said I need to make sure you exercise...”

“No,” said Dari.

“Aaww. Even though mine aren’t so big? Or...maybe that just means you gotta do double the number of pushes...”

“Please Mikoro,” said Dari, patiently. “I’m really tired. A little rest, just this once?”

She winced as eager eye-walls zoomed right up to her.

“Ooh! Dari’s blushing again!” Mikoro announced, not purposefully to every ear from there to the horizon.

“Nngh. No, Dari’s trying to eat,” said Dari.

“You are, you are! Is it because – ”

“Aaaah, Mikoro, for goodness’s sake!”

“Nya-!”

...and silence.

Sudden, dreadful silence.

She realised it had come out angrier than she’d intended.

Much angrier.

“Mikoro, I...”

Too late. The dam was collapsed, the cat-girl swept off down the cataracts of misery.

Dari dropped her bottle-cap with its giant noodle and dragged herself up the coat to Mikoro’s knee. “I’m sorry Mikoro,” she said, with urgency. “Really, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. I’m just...exhausted, that’s all.” But tears streamed silent down Mikoro’s face, leaving Dari in all the abject desperation of someone who has dropped a grenade and is struggling to put the pin back in.

Mikoro slurped up the noodle in her mouth, but already she’d lost her appetite. She pushed her bowl away and curled up tight.

“I don’t like this anymore,” she said, feebly. “I want to go home.”

“Mikoro, we can – ”

The cat-girl tore off her hat, flung it to the deck and buried her head in her arms.

Excuses swept through Dari’s conscience like pages in a flick-book. She *was* exhausted. Exhausted and fed up. Wasn’t it enough that her life revolved around such embarrassing challenges without her getting relentlessly teased about it too? And how long had they been at sea now? How much more would they have to take?

How had their fantastic journey suddenly smashed up the universe in their faces, then shunted them with no warning into an active conflict zone where they’d witnessed – no, participated in – the violent deaths of half a dozen people?

It was too much. Too fast. All she wanted right now was to finish her meal, settle her nerves over tea, then bury herself in sleep for a few hours of not worrying about huge mouths, huge tits, or how to record it all in a way that wouldn’t get the names of her friends put on lists.

“Mikoro?”

No answer.

“Oh Mikoro. It’s because of all this, isn’t it?”

A despondent whimper, which Dari interpreted as a yes.

That was it, she understood. It wasn’t that Mikoro had got to her. It wasn’t even that she had got to Mikoro. It was this. This sense that it was all somehow unravelling.

“You told her to do it,” Dari told Dari, catching herself in her own headlights.

“Uhh, n-no I didn’t?”

“Yes you did. ‘You can still be Mikoro,’ you told her. ‘Naughty, fluffy, lovable, chaotic Mikoro.’ Well wasn’t that exactly what she was doing? Being Mikoro. Mikoroing a path through this suffocating Order-world that’s decided it has no place for her. You told her to do it then barked at her for it.”

She felt her stomach give way. “Fuck. I did, didn’t I? How could – ”

“Well there you are then. How about a dollop of all-crushing guilt to add to your noodles?”

Livid with remorse, Dari climbed straight to Mikoro’s shoulder and funnelled all her concentration into stroking her hair.

Words were redundant now. What could she say? They’d fix it? Yes, they’d fix it – only they’d fixed one third of it at a cost which, with Cyania no longer present to spin it cheerily on her finger like a dumbbell, only now pressed its true weight down on their shoulders. They’d been in serious danger. Indeed, Cyania’s gift for making you forget that was such a great part of what made her a terrific leader in those situations. And Dari had her core, yes, she’d be okay, she was always okay, but it gave her a jolt of terror to think what a single stray bullet or magical blast might have done to Mikoro.

Then there were the killings.

Killings of political and corporate officials no less, with constitutional consequences, and the feeling that she and her fluffy friend ought to share at least some of the responsibility.

Could they justify it? Hadn’t those people done horrible things? Did that make it right, even if they had? Would it land them in trouble? Get them investigated? Hunted? Sanctioned? Would Mikoro get stopped in airports?

The Viceroy said she was a mother.

Did those CEOs have loved ones too? Or that trigger-happy policeman? People they thought they were protecting?

Dari wondered if Cyania or her other fighting friends thought about questions like these. How they coped. How they didn’t wake at night to find themselves at

the centre of an ever-growing circle of pointing ghosts, regardless of how necessary it had been.

And that – all that – just for one Bane. The *Bane of Apathy*. So bland. Almost boring. And to make you think that was precisely its terrible power, oh it'd more than made that point, but it still didn't strike the same dire clang as the remaining two. The *Bane of Ruthlessness*. The *Bane of Prejudice*. The very names conjured up fields full of corpses impaled on spikes or floating in pools of poison.

And then there was the Demon Cow Queen. With her huge dreadnought, and her blockade, and her multiple hungry stomachs.

“Almost forgot, did you?”

Almost.

She clutched her head.

Two girls in a boat, and the whole damn world against them.



Sssshh.

“Nhhh? Nyah. No. I want to sleep.”

Sssssshh...

“I don't understand anymore. Do you? Everything feels so horrible.”

Sseek a realm of tolerance...

“Tolerance...nrhhh. Dari. Dari's tolerant. Tolerates me. Want to go home with Dari.”

Sseek a realm of tolerance...



“Mikoro?”

Dari pushed through the folds to the coat's surface. Her friend, captain and improvised bed lay curled up in the stern, snoring softly.

She was mumbling. “Nnhh...tolerance...”

Dari frowned. That didn't sound like a typical Mikoro dream.

She parted the messy brown hair from her face. Watched for a while.

Mikoro shuffled. Her breaths were rough.

A fitful sleep.

“Realm...nnhh, tolerant realm...”

See what you did, Dari? – said that voice in her head. Somehow she always found it wide awake.

“Urgh. Are we getting anywhere?”

She climbed Mikoro’s arm for a better view, only to find there wasn’t one. There was nothing to get a view of. Flat, featureless water in every direction.

She wondered: Are we even going the right way for Comet Island anymore? Can there be a right way when all directions are the same?

We’re not going, said inner-Dari. Listen. Look.

She listened. She looked. She was right of course.

“Mikoro? We’ve stopped,” she almost said – then held the words while she argued with herself over whether she should.

Why had they stopped? There was nothing here.

Dari ducked for cover in a coat fold. This moment – when she convinced herself ‘there’s nothing here’ – usually preceded a hand scooping her up or lips clamping round her.

Then she realised that was impossible. She realised it precisely because of its novelty as a realisation.

It was because this was the wrong kind of nothing.

A high-pitched wheeze from the giant cat-girl. “Nnhh. Dari...tolerant...”

You’ve really done it this time, said inner-Dari.

“Alright. First Mate Dari, yes?” she seized herself. “Your captain’s had a rough time. She deserves what rest she can get. Instead of waking her over something that’ll only upset her, why don’t you get up and see what you can do about it?”

So did the tiny tap-tap-tap of plimsolls on wood join Mikoro’s murmurs as the only sounds to be had in this sterile seascape. The first mate walked a length of the deck, releasing her yawns and shaking her arms out – which, she noted, were still quite stiff from Cyania’s workout. Then she jogged back. Spun her arms, twisted her waist. Ran two lengths more. Now her legs were suitably awake, so she undertook some stretches and set about seriously pondering what to do.

A rinse would have been nice right now. But without Mikoro’s help, opening a bottle of water or manipulating the kettle would be impossible.

Ah well. Zombie sweat wasn’t so bad. There wasn’t much of it. Certain bodies had not so much need for cooling.

“We really have stopped,” she confirmed, alert enough now to trust her senses. In fact, it was worse. The sail had gone down, the mast retracted. The *Sea Bunny*’s characteristic hum had ceased.

“Right. That can’t be good. This hasn’t happened before, has it? Why...?”

Mikoro’s energy signature. From the cake – the signal that made the ship work. Was she...

Dari’s heart skipped a beat as she swung to look.

No, the fluffy captain was okay. Still breathing. Still snoring. A tiny cough.

Or, had the signal elapsed? Had its energy so diffused – through Mikoro, or out of her – that the ship no longer detected it?

Was it supposed to do that?

A trickle of panic seeped in as she realised how stuffed they were if it had.

“Come on Dari, don’t be daft,” she rebuked herself, with difficulty. “There’s no way Mother would let that happen. Come on. You’re a historian. *An* historian. Don’t lose yourself in the wild explanations till you’ve ruled out the likelier ones first.”

Which was easier said than done. She wasn’t exactly a mechanic. Where to even start?

“Think, Dari. Take your time. Look: you’re not sinking right now. There’s no waves to shake you, no sky to rain stuff on you. No evidence of immediate danger.”

She got down on her knees and placed her ear to the boards. Nothing.

She strode to the opposite side and tried again. Again, nothing.

Now she paced up the deck, repeating the exercise in random spots. At last she reached the bow, where the rear of the bunny head towered upon her. On the point of giving up, she lowered her ear once more for investigative rigour’s sake.

“Huh. What’s that?”

She pressed it down harder.

The faintest of noises. High in pitch, almost squeaky, heard as though through a kilometre of steel.

“Is that...crying?”

She knocked.

“Hello? Is someone in there?”

Is someone in there. I’m losing my mind, she told herself.

What’s that sound then? – the evidence-based historian answered back.

An engine leak? A systems malfunction? A sea creature that’d swum in the hull and got stuck?

None of those felt particularly encouraging.

“Hmm. I wonder if there’s a way to check. Surely a panel, or a hatch, or...?”

With her luck it’d be on the outside.

Probably underneath.

She gazed back at the dozing cat-girl. Between them the storage hatches lined the edges of the deck. The food, the refrigerated compartment, the kettle, the toiletries – all in there. Each was shut, the safety latches clamped too tight for her to attempt on her own.

The only alternative was the larger compartment in the stern. What they’d come to think of as the luggage box. The boot. All the fluffy captain’s valuables were in there: her phone, the wallet with her money, the medical supplies, and of course her pink hairbrush. It’d be locked too of course.

Mikoro emitted a sleepy whine and rolled onto her shoulder. There was the hatch behind her.

It was ajar.

“Huh? Surely not...”

Had she forgotten to lock it? Or had her tossing and turning bumped it open?

No and no, Dari thought, hurrying over. She wouldn’t forget, not after what happened with the monkeys. And it was too secure to come loose by itself.

Emergency access, something logical whispered – perhaps inside her, perhaps in gratitude from beyond the broken sky. Who knew?

She ducked beneath Mikoro’s dangling hand – carefully to avoid brushing the fingers, she knew what would happen if she did – and poked her head into the luggage box. It was dark, but just enough pale sunlight leaked in to trace the outline of Mikoro’s shoulder-pouch. It sat propped up against a heap of clutter: the pair of dragon scales, an umbrella, a fishing pole, a coiled-up rope, a salvaging claw, some fabric – perhaps a spare sail? – and numerous odds and ends she couldn’t distinguish.

Mikoro must have dug their handy tools out of there. The spyglass. The lantern. The torch.

The hat and coat.

Captain Ibaraki Mikoro. It was enough to get people in port authorities cowering beneath their desks. Dari could imagine the conversations. “Who appointed her as a captain?” “Well you see, she seems to have kind of, erm, appointed herself.”

Nonetheless – she’d made her path by walking.

Sailing.

Eating. Hugging. Whatever.

Dari turned to go. Then her eyes caught on something else.

Turquoise light. A glow from behind the pile.

“Huh. Now what could that be?”

Never one to let a mystery go, the little explorer eased a leg over the ledge of the hatch, her anklet clinking. Yes, definitely a glow: soft, steady.

She swung her other leg over, jumped down, and felt her way along the wall of Mikoro’s pouch. With a deep breath and a heave she shoved aside the end of the umbrella, then the fishing pole.

There it was – shining from the compartment’s floor.

Or more specifically, from a Dari-sized trapdoor in the compartment’s floor.

It was open.

Emergency access – the words filtered through again.

She glanced outside. It was silent enough that she still picked up Mikoro’s snuffles.

A dribbly murmur: “Tolerablbl...”

Just a quick look?

“Yeah. A very quick look,” she instructed herself. “Pop in, find out what’s there, pop out. Because if I *can* get us moving again, or at least find out what’s caused us to stop, won’t that be one less burden on her when she wakes up?”

It couldn’t be dangerous. Could it?

It’s carried us this far, she told herself. It’s given us everything we needed. Heavens, it’s even shaped like a bunny rabbit; what more could you ask for?

It’s a *good ship*. It’s on our side.

Her mop of brown hair bobbed into the shaft.



There were no stairs, nor even a ladder. Only a passage, sliding off into the belly of the bunny. Just wide enough to fit through, high enough to stand in.

But why? – Dari considered. Why at my size? They couldn’t possibly have built this craft on the assumption it’d carry tiny or shrinkable passengers, could they?

More likely a ventilation duct. But then, why ventilate into the luggage box?

She took a few steps. Her good shoes made it easy to keep her balance, even on this gradient.

Good grip, those soles. Quality rubber. Green of course.

A considerate gift. I have such caring friends, Dari thought.

Her core had approved too. Till then her journey could be charted in the trail of tiny footwear whose molecules were kicking around some giantess's bloodstream, or which had otherwise fallen whole into grass or sand, often in coatings of mineral-rich fluids that had no doubt turned them into thriving micro-habitats by now. Then her core had seen fit to attune to this pair. She could lose them as much as she liked now and it'd always bring them back.

Occasionally she wondered why that was.

Probably the green. Yes, that had to be it.

Clank. Clank. Clank. Her footsteps echoed down the conduit. They were all she could hear. No water, no wind.

Was it because the unnaturally-ordered world had done away with those movements? Or was this shaft simply that insulated? It felt unreal to think she was inside a watercraft here. This felt more like some installation.

The passage levelled off. It stretched into the distance, bathed by soft turquoise lamps embedded in its sides. Dari had rich experience staying oriented in moving environments, so easily judged in this motionless one that the passage ran below and in parallel with the deck. That would place Mikoro directly above her present position, and the rabbit-head prow at the far end.

"Gosh. What's all this? Has this been here all along?"

Something on the floor caught the light. A porthole window?

Yes, that was exactly what it was. And there were more ahead, set into this conduit at long intervals.

Intrigued, the tiny explorer hastened as far as the closest then crouched down and peered through its convex glass.

"Oh. So this is where it all goes."

Technically she beheld a culinary and sanitary record of their journey. More prosaically she was looking at noodle cartons, biodegradable plastic bottles, paper napkins and wrappers, crisp packets, cotton buds, dental floss, and a range of now-unidentifiable organic remnants.

"Wow. Did we really get through all that? Makes you think."

She squinted, eyes darting round the contours of the room. Then she stood up and scratched her head. Lining up the shape of the *Sea Bunny's* hull with this rubbish-chamber was proving a considerable mental challenge.

She shook it out of her mind and trod on, her footfalls echoing in her ears.

Here was a second porthole. This one was built into a hatch in the floor with a rotating handle, but one glance at its bulky don't-even-try-it reinforced steel dissuaded her from reaching for it. A little brass plaque read: SNACKS.

“Uhh...what? Whose snacks?”

Then she registered the yellow sticky note under the plaque. By way of answer, it offered:

My snacks! Please don't go in okay?

Another note poked out underneath. She lifted the first with a finger. The second read:

Highly flammable by the way!

Really, please don't enter!

I need these!

Curious now, she went down on her knees and pressed her face to the glass.

“Huh. Those don't look like snacks?”

They looked like fat metal cylinders of the type they stored pressurised gas in. Hydrogen, for instance.

Dari stood up. Squeezed her face with her hands. Glanced both ways along the conduit.

“Are you still in the ship, Dari? If you've tumbled through a rift without paying attention again...”

But there were no rifts on this sea. She knew that.

She peered in again. Thick tubes ran beneath the cylinders, apparently collecting their contents and piping them off towards the front of the ship.

Clank-clank-clank-clank. She advanced, faster now. A third porthole with a similar unmovable hatch had a plaque labelled: BEDROOM.

“Right. So someone does live down here,” Dari muttered, more than a little nervous now, as she crouched over the window.

“Well, at least this one looks like a bedroom. Sort of.”

A cylindrical room. Not very large, but curtained and wallpapered with a plush circular carpet (purple) and armchair (turquoise). It was quite dark. No sign of light

sources at all in fact, except what little filtered in from the sea through a curved square window.

If the world was in balance there'd probably be stunning views out of there. Fish swimming by, whales and sharks, squidgy things on ocean shelves and reefs alive with coral...

"Heh. It's cute. Looks rather cosy actually. But who...?"

There was a little cupboard too, and a bedside table with picture-frames standing on it, albeit facing away so she couldn't see what was on them. The strangest thing was what by process of elimination must have been the bed: a strange metallic cylinder with cushioned insides visible through a see-through window.

A mobile – if currently immobile – hung from the ceiling. Stars, planets, comets...

"Well I don't know about you Dari," said Dari, "but I'm flummoxed. Has someone been scurrying around down here all this time? Someone who sleeps in this room, and eats, uhh, whatever's in those containers..."

Against her own better judgement, it occurred to her to sneak in for a better look. She glanced left and right, hurriedly, as if she really knew she shouldn't, then placed her hands on the handwheel.

It wouldn't turn.

She took a deep breath. Pressed herself down, locked her arms around it. Gritted her teeth. Then she heaved, straining her muscles till they'd stretch no further. In her mind she heard Cyania's tongue click with disapproval as a hundred thigh-lifts – Cyania's, not hers – were added to the routine.

"Nnnnghhh-*aah!*" She let go and caught her breath. "Haah, haah...wh-what kind of handle is this? So small, yet the s-strength you'd need...incredible..."

Determined to get to the bottom of this now, Dari sprinted along to the final porthole. She leapt down onto her hands, put her face to the glass –

"Wow!"

She had to blink, rub her eyes, shake out her head before she believed what she was seeing. At first glance it might have been some huge orrery – no, grander still, a three-dimensional star chart or clockwork universe, sparkling and spinning and swirling with light alive. It was so vast that it must have been a projected image, some sort of hologram or digital display, she figured; it couldn't possibly have physically fit in the hull's confines.

"I can't believe it. It's so, it's so – what the! Is that a *book?*"

It was. Every few seconds a data point would soar close to the window, giving her a close glimpse of a book – or a scroll, or a...disc?

Dari relaxed onto her chest, elbows beside the porthole, and for a time she watched, just watched, mesmerised by this most surreal of lightshows. Tablets, stone or plastic; paper volumes, carved slabs of tree bark, film reels, folders, and games cartridges, those were definitely games cartridges, in constant motion amidst a web of clouds and streams of pure energy. Some of these objects were small, others were large, and there was no colour or shape not represented; but no matter their profile they all had a place, all belonged in this revolving galaxy of...

“Stories!” she gasped in a bang of comprehension. “They’re stories!”

Stories – worlds, realities, universes; they orbited one another, grew and shrank, sprouted new pages, branches, circuit boards, which pulled off and zoomed around till they sank into other stories; and all the time their paths crossed, whereupon they’d bounce off each other, or get caught in each other’s gravity and travel together, or otherwise words or runes or grids of numerals would lick out of one and soak into another. She couldn’t follow it, couldn’t make sense of it – it was too vast, too fast, plainly designed for someone with sensory and information-processing equipment on a level beyond her wildest imagination...

You’d have to be some kind of god to interface with this. Or at least, a being of *serious cosmic magnitude*.

Then she remembered something – or rather, remembered she’d forgotten something. She grimaced and told herself off. She’d meant to ask Mary the sheep-girl for a map before they left the pub. She’d forgotten, thanks to all that business with white horses that weren’t horses.

Although – in the face of what she’d found down here, perhaps it was just as well.

“This isn’t for you, Dari. Don’t even think about it. You couldn’t even begin to...”

She turned her mind away, prepared her body to follow – but couldn’t. It was too hypnotic. And more than that...

“...could you?”

Some of these data points – they appeared to be *lit up*, in a way others were not. Except, there was nothing distinct about the points themselves. Rather it was as though *she* felt something different about them, at a level beneath her ordinary senses.

About them? Or about her? Her connection with them?

Connection. She'd been to them. Been in them. Or more specifically, been in –
“Nngh, no. This isn't the time to dwell on that.”

Yes it is, said Dari the evidence-based historian, who she had to admit could be an annoying-as-hell pain-in-the-arse sometimes.

You haven't *been* there. You *are* there. Right now. In all of them at once. You've left material in them. Come away with theirs. Immersion. Absorption – both ways. Your core. Connection. Attunement with the fundamental structure of what matters. Narrative energy. *Resonance*.

“Nngh. Stop. I'm getting a headache.”

Narrative energy. It's *there*, that's all. Never created, never destroyed. Only channelled, conducted, changing from form to form.

You *feel* it, when someone tries to destroy it.

You *feel* it, when someone it trusts betrays it.

“Aagh! No, that's enough. This is scaring me now. Please, no more. Not now. I'm just Dari okay? This is *way* beyond me.”

She pushed away. Groaned. Staggered to her feet.

She was shaking.

“Deep breaths, Dari. Deep breaths. Right. Look, you're almost there. There's the end.”

There were no more portholes. The passage ended at a door.

A thick door. A very, *very* thick door. Multiple layers, each made of serious metal; titanium or something like that, she guessed. So thick that what started on Dari's end as a window of respectable size was only a tiny rectangle of glass by the time it'd made it through.

“Uhh...right. What could this be?”

She strained her eyes as hard as she could. Was that another cylinder in there? Dark and glossy metal, plated in squares. Standing; curving out at top and bottom...

The walls were plated too. She could just make them out, curving round in the background. Some kind of ring-shaped chamber.

A torus.

“Huh? That sound. Is that...?”

She pressed her ear to the door. Harder. It was so faint she thought she might be imagining it, but no – there it was.

Crying.

She tapped on the window.

“Pfft, are you serious Dari?” she chided herself. “Look at this door. Who do you expect’s going to hear that?”

She clenched her resolve and thumped it with her fist.

“Hello?” she called out. “Is somebody in there?”

She pressed her ear to the door again. The crying had stopped.

She waited.

Raised her fist. Hesitated.

Then she tried again.

“Uhh – hello?”

Nothing.

“Give them time, Dari. Be patient. Perhaps they’re shy?”

Then a darting motion yanked her eyes to the window. She stared.

Again, nothing. Just that strange graphite pillar.

That was odd. She could have sworn she’d caught a pair of eyes peeping through at her.

“Goodness, Dari. What in the – *gyaaaah!*”

Her whole world rocked – a single violent shake, slamming her into the wall as a distant screech came echoing down the conduit: “Nyaaaah!”

“Mikoro!” Recollection hit her like a train and she rocketed up the passage, shouting out her friend’s name and cursing herself: “Oh m-my god, h-how could I forget, how could I possibly be so – *aagh!*” – as a second jolt threw her on her back.

“Nngghaah! What the heck’s happening?”

To which the outside world returned the worst possible answer.

“Nuuuuuuuuoo!”

“N-No!” squeaked Dari, seizing up as though the ceiling had filled with tongues.

“Nyaah! Aah, let go you big bully! Get off my bunny!” – that was Mikoro.

“Ohohoho! I’ve got you now, you rascal pussycat! Thought you’d just curl up for a nap on *my* sea, did you? There’ll be no more mischief from you!”

Dari attempted to get up then loosed a wail as everything lurched upward, the sudden thrust pinning her back against the floor. Her environs halted, swayed – then just as she managed to right herself they tilted, sliding her back to the bottom with a yelp.

“Ooof!” she grunted as her backside thumped into the door. The level corridor was now a forty-five-degree slope.

“Hoho, you’re coming with me!” the Cow Queen’s words rumbled through the walls right into her skin. “Nrrrm, you sit tight up there and behave, little kitty! Don’t you think you’re in enough trouble already?”

Boomph. Boomph. Boomph.

“Oh m-my god,” stuttered Dari. “S-She’s c-carrying the s-ship. She’s l-lifted it out of the w-water. She’s *carrying* it.” And she yelled at the top of her voice: “Mikoro!”

The distant din was crowding in, overlapping, growing tumultuous. She made out Mikoro’s furious protestations, the Cow Queen’s booming laughs, the grunting and chuntering of hundreds of minotaur crew...

“Get back here!” – the shaft shook so suddenly that Dari was bashed from wall to wall. “Catch her you fools, catch her! *Nuuuuuu*, what – are – you – *doing*?!”

The shouts and snorts grew strident, and in the same moment her world swung in an arc one way, then the other, then the other again, the rotational force plastering her to the walls so hard that all sense of outside noise was lost beneath her own scream.

And then – silence. Dari slumped on all fours and panted for breath.

The silence didn’t last.

“Fools.” The voice rattled the conduit. “Fools! What do you mean you *lost* her, you blockheaded, blundering buffoons? She was right here! How can you lose someone who’s *right in front of you*?”

A pinprick of hope through Dari’s wall of terror. Had Mikoro escaped?

“S-She must have shrunk herself,” she muttered. “S-Shrunk herself and g-got away...but to where? Wh-Where are...aaargh! Stupid Dari! Stupid! *Stupid!* What the hell were you thinking, leaving her on her own out there? She was sleeping – *sleeping!* – and you, you just scamper off like a nosy squirrel to poke around in – *aahh, you promised her you’d stay with her!*”

The rocking resumed, now accompanied by a riled bovine grumble.

Dari cast her eyes up the turquoise shaft, almost willing them to pull her up on the strength of their stare. She had to get out, had to make sure Mikoro was okay, but at this angle it was impossible. All she could do was press herself into the corner to minimise the jolting and wait it out.

Boomph. Boomph. Boomph.

“Urghh. H-How could you, Dari? If anything’s h-happened to her...if Mikoro’s got hurt, or scared, because of you...you...*stupid...*”

She whimpered, withdrew as tight as she could into her own sweat and goosebumps and waited for things to settle.



“Nnnhh. Is it over?”

Dari crawled from the corner – and fell on her face. Her body had not yet caught up with gravity’s changes of mood, but the bump did the trick, and she realised with a groan that the passage was level again.

“W-Wait, Dari,” she directed herself. “No – wait. Listen. Are you *sure* it’s stopped?”

She listened. Then she argued with herself over whether the boomings and rumblings were coming from outside the ship or within her own head. Her heart’s insistent pounds weren’t helping.

At last she convinced herself that her surroundings themselves had gone silent.

“Urgh. Well go on then?”

And so she crept up the conduit, all the while interrogating herself as to how she could ever face Mother Rin again after leaving her daughter to fend for herself on a hostile sea. Kiyoko’s head reared up in her memory just as her foot caught on a porthole, and she tripped. It didn’t hurt. She was too busy imagining the fox-girl tearing her to pieces.

She hastened her step, but it was like the duct went on forever.

At last she stopped, pressed the heels of her hands into her cheeks – why were they so hot? – and shook herself down. “Get a grip, Dari!” she rallied herself. “Mikoro’s no baby. Neither are you. Now look. Ibaraki Mikoro is a trained and competent master of the Chaldea Academy, and if she’s escaped there’s a good chance she’ll know how to keep herself safe. As for you, are you or are you not her friend and first mate? You are? Well in that case, get your cute little behind out of this hiding hole, find out where you are and take some responsibility!”

As if by magic the words brought her to the exit slope. Moments later her restless head of brown hair emerged from the turquoise square, and she scrambled her way up into the luggage compartment.

“Now why’s it so dark?”

She paused; gave her eyes a minute to adjust. The light from the shaft caught on the pair of dragon scales, which helpfully scattered it for her viewing convenience.

It revealed that the hatch had shut. And the latch was too high to reach.

“Okay. Calm, Dari. Calm. Breathe. *Think.*”

This at least wasn't difficult. How many times had she got shut in drawers, dropped in purses, locked in jewellery boxes? When her confines were made of woman it was a different matter, but when they weren't there was always a keyhole to squeeze through, a crack to widen, a tool to improvise...

“Well aren't you lucky? Just this once, you're in the right place for tools.”

The salvaging claw? Too heavy. The umbrella? Wrong shape. The fishing pole...

The process was too laborious to bear a step-by-step description, but at last Dari succeeded in tossing the hook round the latch, tugging the string till it caught taut, then working the reel like an agricultural thresher till with a satisfying *snap!* the lock came loose.

The hatch creaked open.

“Good!” she told herself. “See, you *can* be more than a suck-sweet when you make an effort, can't you Dari? Now, careful!”

She crossed the partition – carefully – and jumped down to the boards of the ship's deck. Mikoro was nowhere in sight. Neither, for that matter, was the sea.

“Whoa! Who in the worlds is that?”

Gazing out through a window in the heavens, a massive bull regarded her from his armchair. The imperious creature was armoured up to his neck with tassels on his horns, a thick gold nose-ring, his hands at rest on the handle of his mace. They stared at each other for several seconds before Dari grasped that he wasn't likely to move. There was, in fact, an improbably flat quality to his grandeur.

The window was a picture frame. This bull was made of paint.

Dari wheezed. She permitted herself a chuckle at her own expense. “Heh. Thought he was real, didn't you? I worry about you sometimes, Dari, I really do. Still, I wonder who he is?”

He gave off a strange harmlessness for such an impressive fellow. Dents and scratches scarred his breastplate, his shoulders were slumped, and there was a weariness, even a kindness to his smile. Dari wasn't sure if she should imagine him at a battlefield or a bingo table. A part of her, no doubt nurtured under Mikoro's influence, got the idea of putting a Best In Show ribbon on his nose to see how he'd react.

Then she gave her own nose the attention it'd sought since the start.

The smell – it was recent to it. She knew it well. Too well, perhaps.

Beef bowl and rice-wine.

As she climbed onto the gunwale it all hit her at once: the huge white casks stacked against the wall; the curtained dumbwaiter, beneath which trays of empty porcelain bowls and chopsticks overwhelmed a lacquered red table; the massive gold-rimmed desk with a queen-sized couch behind it, the screens and maps and charts on the walls, the gold-foilate scarlet wallpaper and lush wine-dark carpeting, and alongside the portrait, the gallery windows through which a tall enough person – that is to say, *very* tall – might survey her maritime domain...

“Oh my god. That’s her father. The old Ox King. This – this is her cabin. On the *Lamassu*. Nnnnaaah!”

A flood of tactile memories splashed through her skin – the rumble of honeyed thunder that was the Cow Queen’s voice; the creak of her seismic armour, that monstrous dripping tongue, the crushing darkness, the bouncing and squeezing deep within...

A squeal – but with a tremendous effort she stifled it.

“Shhh. Breathe. Calm, Dari. Look. She isn’t here right now. No-one’s here.”

It could have been a gigantic museum hall in this silence. Well, not quite silence – she could pick out a constant background murmur of shuffles and bellows. Two thousand crew, she remembered. That couldn’t be anything less than a din. Soundproof walls? Good for the Cow Queen’s privacy perhaps. Not so good for tiny intruders with an interest in hearing her coming.

Still not daring to move from the gunwale she glanced over her shoulder. She’d left the luggage hatch ajar. Good. At the first sign of trouble she could dart back in, take cover down the shaft. Good luck to the Cow Queen trying to squeeze her massive wrist through there.

She jumped down, landed with a roll, and waded through the waist-high fur of the carpet. After about forty paces she looked back. There it was, the *Sea Bunny*. Sitting against the wall like a piece of furniture.

“Seriously, she just carried it in and dumped it here? Just like that?”

Dari had worked that out on the way of course, but the strength it must have taken, and more than that, the effrontery, was almost too breathtaking to believe.

“Now *think*, Dari. If Mikoro escaped, she’ll be somewhere on this dreadnought right now. You won’t find her just by scuttling around. It’s too big, too dangerous; you’ll just get lost, or trodden on. Or worse. Mikoro on the other hand has a better chance at sneaking around – because she’s Mikoro – and what’s more, her goal, once she’s calm enough to think, will be to find her ship. Right? Right. Therefore: you stay put and wait for her to come.”

She scratched her head. The *Sea Bunny* looked ludicrous in here. Too cute for the cabin's upholstered magnificence, too clean and bright for its sloppy heaps of documents and demolished dinners. Its hull still dripped, soaking a dark patch into the carpet.

"I'd better hide in the luggage box and wait," said Dari. "Or..."

Her wandering eyes trailed up, up, up – up to the ledge of the Cow Queen's desk.

"No!" she immediately caught herself. "D-Don't be stupid!"

But as always, her inquiring nature just had to come back at her. You've snuck into the Demon Cow Queen's personal quarters! – it pointed out. Do you think you'll get another opportunity like this? There's got to be something up there that can help you. Sensitive information; some secret weakness of hers perhaps. A way through her blockade. Or had you forgotten all about that?

She shoved a leg through the carpet-grass towards it.

"Nngh, w-wait!" she stopped herself. "If she catches you rifling through the stuff on her desk...nnnnhh!"

She swung this way and the other. Bunny or Cow? Bunny or Cow?

After much trembling she reached a decision. She swallowed a gulp and told herself off: "Bah! Some first mate you are, thinking of leaving Mikoro to do all the work while you curl up in a corner. And as always, what's the point of having this size if you don't make use of it, right?"

Without realising it she'd made it right up to the foot of the desk. A gold-plated bull's hoof of course, although its soaring rosewood was worn and scratched. An heirloom?

The leg sloped out – unclimbable. The couch looked more promising. A silken drape dangled to the floor. She tugged at it, testing how much weight it could bear, and after much grunting and swinging made it up to the lavish expanse of the Cow Queen's mobile throne where the red cushioned seat tugged at her shins like quicksand...

"Eeek!"

Heat rose within her, almost stumbled her, as she sighted the pair of crater-like imprints sunk into the obviously well-used central cushions. Their immensity was mind-boggling. They were wide and deep enough for a stadium full of Daris apiece. As for what could be so ridiculously massive as to make them...

If she tripped in there it would take most of her strength to scramble out.

No – she wouldn't go near them. Because of that. And because she knew exactly what had made them.

“D-Don't think about it Dari!” she snapped, though her cheeks were on fire and she knew it. “Come on you silly girl, pay attention!”

Smaller cushions – silk covers, richly patterned, tasselled at the corners. Slanted. Helpful. The explorer scaled one, jumped to another, and from there clambered daringly onto the couch's arm. She sat sideways, shuffled herself along, then stood cautious atop the bull-head ornament at the end while holding its horns for balance. There – a cable, dangling down from the desk. Thick rubber. Strong enough not to fall under her weight, but soft enough to cling to, to climb. So it turned out – she was good at these things – and soon enough, with but a passable dose of sweating and panting, Dari stood in triumph on the sovereign tabletop.

“Haah...haah...I made it! I – jeez, what a mess!”

If the Cow Queen ruled this sea, she certainly hadn't started by ruling this desk and working outwards. This desk was the furniture equivalent of a failed state – no, a Warring States Period. Or a post-conflict peacebuilding process where the supposed peacebuilders were off holding drunken parties on a yacht. At least they weren't excluding the locals from the drunken part, if the cluster of empty rice-wine jars was anything to go by.

Dari mounted the handle of a red wax stamp for a better view, with the benefit of which she began the challenging task of organising this calamity into visual zones. There was a clear technological enclave, dominated by the microphone whose cable she'd climbed. Then there was a fenced-off fortified quadrangle that enclosed the palatial landmarks of royal authority: brushes and inkstones, pots of red wax, paperweights, letter-openers and seal-stamps. The one on which she squatted had no doubt passed out in a drunken stupor far from base after a night of heavy pummelling. At the far corners a pair of monumental solid-gold bull statues stared straight at the door, no doubt so positioned to cow whatever supplicants dared fall prostrate into the Cow Queen's personal domain. The remainder of this tabletop terrain – by all accounts, the largest territory – lay buried beneath an endless combat of letters, decrees, petitions, certificates, and all those minor paper tribes too disorganised or marginal to appear on the official lists of battle participants, but whose subtle yet significant influence on the outcome would one day be brought to light by some determined and no doubt illegal revisionist history.

“Look at all this! Well, this is where you wanted to be, right Dari? So what are you waiting for? Come on, let’s find something useful!”

The state of these materials allowed just one approach: a random one. Whichever she landed on would do. And so she leapt down, threw out her arms for balance, and set about examining the paper beneath her.

It was a list. Name after name she didn’t recognise. People? Places? In the adjacent column, numerical figures: printed, but with plenty of extra zeroes inked on at the end.

“Beef bowl tribute. Of course.”

That wasn’t much help, so she ran off onto another paper.

This one looked more interesting. It was a letter, in a script full of symbols like 7s and Zs. It would have bamboozled her if not for the adjoining item that carried the same colourful letterhead, marked there with the words *Sunda Republic*; it must have been a translation by the Cow Queen’s clerks.

Dari was experienced enough with languages to tease some sense out of the latter script. The writer was thanking Her Majesty for the swift recovery and repatriation of the bodies of two of the Republic’s deceased citizens, and furthermore for taking the trouble to ensure they were handled in accordance with the complex funerary practices of the specific island they came from. It was signed: the Sundanese Ambassador.

“Huh. Well that was...considerate of her? Wonder what the story is here.”

The next document was inked in bold-block glyphs. It was evidently a decree of some kind, destined to be copied a hundred times and pinned high on the walls of every room on the ship. **REMEMBER! ALL ARE EQUAL BEFORE THE GREAT DEMON COW QUEEN**, it read. Dari made out its gist to be a prohibition on all kinds of discrimination, with special emphasis on accommodating minotaurs with physical or mental impairments. Specifically, all crew, on pain of reduction to one-tenth of beef bowl rations, were held responsible for finding them safe and fulfilling roles on the *Lamassu* and ensuring they were properly supported. Any hint of mistreatment was to be reported immediately.

The notice ended at a rare paperless space, a trench through which the oppressed wood of the tabletop gasped for breath. The brave explorer leapt across, landing on the lowest ridge of a more mountainous mass of papers.

“Now what’s this one? These pictures...”

Photographs. Most of this sheet was jammed under the pile; she could see only the three or four images on the part that stuck out.

A shadowy shape. Menacing. Indistinct. A thing glimpsed in brief as it prowled through dark woods, crouched distant atop a marble tower, glowered from a fissure in the earth.

Its eyes were like drills.

“What in the...”

She shivered. This was sinister.

Unable to prise the paper out and honestly a little afraid to touch it, she climbed till she gained a view over a breadth of these documents.

She shivered again. Her eyes had landed on the largest title. It read:

THE BEAST OF RECKONING

“Beast of...what?”

She rode her instincts now, scanning whatever portions of paragraphs grabbed her gaze. “Beast of Reckoning. Fiend that roams the realities...roars in the night...sprints through the dark that joins all worlds together...”

Dread crept up her skin as though seeping in from the ink. Even those green rubber soles were powerless to stop it.

With a wary step – you don’t mess around with paper edges at this size – Dari made it to the top of the pile. The uppermost page likewise related to this mysterious Beast. Indeed, by this point it was clear that this entire heap of documents concerned it. Eyewitness accounts, commissions for research into ancient legends, orders to a ‘Minister of Eyes and Ears’ to track down its lair...

“Goodness, she’s obsessed with this...*thing*. Could it be she’s frightened of it? Hmm. This here looks like the latest report. It says it was last spotted vanishing into a...what? *Forest of Beginnings and Ends*...”

Riveted now, Dari walked along the lines of the text, reading out loud: “‘In the *Forest of Beginnings and Ends* dwells the legendary *Master of Reality*, said to grant unstoppable power to those who prove worthy of it.’ Whoa. Someone like that exists? And, yet... ‘Any who enter the *Forest* lose their way. The few who return have described horrors and madnesses beyond the limits of imagination. But no two accounts are the same. We can only surmise that the *Forest* forces you to confront your darkest nightmares, and the deeper you delve, the farther you plunge toward a total loss of meaning...”

Well she was delving deep already, deeper perhaps than she dared. Deep enough, that only too late did she register her senses banging on the doors of her concentration...

“Huh?”

...seeking to alert her, desperately, to the snorts of salutation outside, the vibrations of paper and heavy stationery on the desk, the THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! drawing closer and closer...

“...Oh no.”

Dari froze like a startled hedgehog – just as the cabin door slammed open to make way for Her Majesty in person, the mighty sovereign of land, sea and sky. It was the Demon Cow Queen, here in the flesh, and more than merely voluminous flesh at that – to which Dari’s response, alas, was to let loose the shrillest squeak that she was able.

This might not have been the most advisable course of action, but in the circumstances it was the only one possible. To understand why, we must consider that Her Majesty had been having the most stressful of days. First the cosmic balance had shattered, creating problems all over her domain which she’d had to spend her day whacking like moles. In the course of that she’d had to bombard Horseham, during which her imagination had been stained with foul and troubling visions she couldn’t understand. To crown it all, she’d finally cornered that scamp of a pussycat, ship and all, only to watch her literally slip through her fingers. The rascal was no doubt running loose on her flagship right now, leaving a wake of fluffy pink havoc and destruction which the hegemon was not looking forward to trailing.

In short, this just hadn’t been her day. There had been nothing for it but to perspire off all the stress with a good long soak in the ship’s sauna, and that was why she’d come striding in stark naked save for a burgundy sash that draped loose off her waist and forearms.

Dari hadn’t seen her out of her armour before. She’d surely imagined what lay beneath that fearsome shell of iron and steel, even if she’d categorically deny it when asked. But nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared her for the sumptuous magnitude of the goddess-mountain who’d just taken the place of one of the four walls of her universe. If the Cow Queen’s armour was immense, Dari now knew it was because *she* was immense. Immense as a whole, and immense in all her parts – veritably, *all* her parts. That immensity’s mere entry into Dari’s sensory range was a hotter shock than it could handle; the living brain just wasn’t

meant to deal with gigantitude on that scale. Least of all when that gigantitude – the creamy bovine tan of her continental curves, her heaving, breathing vitality, her gravitational dominance of all that dared exist in her orbit – came crashing down all at once on that timid little squirrel-sense that passed for Dari’s sexual consciousness.

How could she do any other than squeak? Gods would have squeaked. Computers would have squeaked. And for Dari it was impossible, even in a quantum sense, not to squeak.

Unfortunately, the effect of that squeak was to instantly draw the Cow Queen’s gaze upon her.

It felt rather like a shipping container full of beef falling on her head.

Which of course, made it impossible for her not to squeak a second time.

“Oho! What have we here?” STOMP. STOMP. STOMP.

The tremors unfroze Dari – she scrambled across the papers and rappelled down the microphone cable, emitting high-pitched yelps all the way. She must have been a third of the way down when that gargantuan shadow fell across her world, and an almighty crash – a hand on the desk, or an asteroid – cost her her grip. She fell with a wail, landing safe in the furs of the regal carpet.

That mellifluous rumble: “Nuuuuuu! I saw you, little mouse! You were hiding in your boat the whole time, weren’t you?”

“Eek!” Dari pressed herself as low as she could into the wine-dark carpetland. The fur was thick enough to hide her, but every clomp of a titanic foot threatened to toss her free if it didn’t flatten her first.

“Why you – you’ve been snooping around on the royal table! Nrrrrm, we won’t be having that! Out you come to account for yourself in the palm of your Queen’s hand!”

A tumult in the vaults of heaven – the Cow Queen was rifling through the clutter on her desk. Did she believe Dari was still up there? Yes! On risking a peek, she saw the colossal sovereign engrossed in shuffling papers, lifting stamps, tilting the golden bull figurines. This was her chance. She’d have to hurry. She had seconds, minutes at most, till the behemoth realised she’d made a break for it.

Sure enough, she was not halfway to the *Sea Bunny* when the shockwaves banged into her back: “Nrrrrm, where are you, my tasty treat? Hide and seek is it? Ohoho, that’s fine with me! Go on then little mouse. Amuse your Queen. How long you can hide in my *inescapable* chambers? One minute? Two? Ohh, I’ll have you tucked away where you belong soon enough...”

“Nnnnghh!” Dari’s dismay at these words tripped her, and she was bounced face-down three times – STOMP! STOMP! STOMP! – before she managed to pull herself up on the carpet-fur and struggle on. She was nearly at the ship, but now the Cow Queen was crashing round the room pulling up cushions, lifting trays, crouching down to sweep her meat-storm hands through the carpet...

The gunwale – it was too high to reach.

“D-Damn it Dari! Why didn’t you think about – *gwaaah!*”

She was right there behind her, over her, her sky taken over by that impending planet of a belly. This heavyweight among colossi was bending over the *Sea Bunny*. Inspecting it. Dari scarcely came up to her ankle. Why even bother with a dreadnought if she could sink ships with a bump from that alone?

Her sash. It was the only way.

“Nnnnnnaah, d-do you *want* her to catch you you idiot? Th-Think about this!”

But she *was* thinking about it. Thinking she was light enough to not draw the Cow Queen’s notice; that the monarch’s own monstrous chest – heaving, swaying, damn it Dari, *focus* – would keep her out of line of sight. The moment she dropped onto the deck she’d be a sitting duck of course, but if she could just make it to the luggage hatch, get herself into that conduit...well there was no other way, at any moment those outrageous feet would stomp her flat or bounce her squealing into the air...

She grabbed at the rich red curtain, clutched it tight, prepared to climb – then yelled in shock as the Cow Queen tugged it up beneath her arms, a chance adjustment which swept her high into the air. The yank was too strong, she couldn’t hold on, and she soared, spun in a somersault, then landed, sooner than she expected, sprawled on the deck of the *Sea Bunny*. She groaned, looked up – and there, smiling straight back at her, was that face: that gigantic, long-horned, ivory-locked, buff-skinned, hungry-eyed, lip-smacking face of bovine world domination.

A truck of a tongue, trundling round coffee-coloured lips that could have smothered the head of a tyrannosaurus.

“Nrrm. You, little mouse, are *mine*.”

The luggage box – her only chance now. With a flustered cry Dari loped for the hatch...

...only to find it sealed. The Cow Queen’s stomps must have shaken it shut.

She spun just in time to watch that monstrous hand fill her vision...

“Aaaackk...”

...its fingers spread, fatter than the roots of a world tree, tougher than battering rams, long enough to lay her between their joints –

“Mmmphh!”

They gathered her up in a crush of hot dark musk.



Sssshh.

“Nnyah!”

Ssseek the Bane. The Bane is clossse.

The self-shrunken yet still stylishly hatted and coated Captain Mikoro flinched as the snake-tongue flicked at the walls of her mind.

She'd seen it this time. Or at least, she thought she had. An outline. A ruby-scaled serpent amidst the stars.

Ssseek the Bane...

“Wah, wait! I'm not ready!”

It had happened so fast. Her troubled sleep; dreams of Mother Rin cuddles and chocolate cakes, lingering just out of reach. Then she'd been rocked awake to find her ship, herself upon it, carried aloft on the Cow Queen's shoulder, bobbing over a sea of cheering and snorting minotaur-people. Her instincts had done the rest: launched her from the deck, diminishing in size as she went, till she'd landed on all fours on the immeasurably vaster deck of the *Lamassu*. Before anyone realised, she'd ducked through a gap in the boards.

And that was where she'd stayed: stunned, shaken, stranded in this between-decks terror-sandwich with grunts and stomps pounding on her head. And in this woeful state she'd rolled down stair after stair of shameful realisations.

She'd abandoned her ship.

Dari wasn't in any of her pockets.

All their adventures, all their escapes – was this how it ended? Lost and alone in a disgrace of woodworm and rough cattle?

Perhaps there was no way out. Nothing to do after all but hand herself in to that aggravatingly victorious big bully.

She was rescued from this slump by a rat, quite a chonky one at that, which came nosing through this timbery underworld to inspect its iffily pink visitor. At her present size it might have outweighed her but a cat-girl was a cat-girl, and the mere sight of its twitching whiskers roused in her an excitement that rinsed

out the sediments of misery. She raised her arms and went “Nyarr!”; and as the spectacle of the rodent’s arse squeezing away through the wood brought satisfaction to her feline neural pathways, she felt her spirits lift in a new resurgence.

She was Captain Mikoro. She’d swallowed heroes. Vanquished dragons. Hugged the sun. Three times out of three she’d outwitted the Cow Queen. Why not a fourth?

She needn’t wait for her sister to start barking out of her memories. She’d take responsibility. Her ship, her friend – it was up to her to get them back.

That was when the serpent spoke.

Ssseek the Bane. The Bane is clossse.

“Nyah! But Dari...the bunny-boat...”

Twin red glints in the cosmic ocean. *The Bane sssleeps...sssend it while it sssleeps...*

Mikoro stood up – too fast, and she bumped her hatted head on the deck boards.

“Ow. Nnhh. There’s...a Bane here? Here, on the Beef Queen’s ship? But, how? And what do you mean it sleeps?”

Harmlesss. Realm of Tolerance...

Her right hand glowed. The serpent symbol. It seemed to tug, gentle but insistent.

“But, but – Dari...”

Sssafe. Realm of Tolerance...

“Nyaah, but the Chub Queen’s big and huge and Dari’s scared of her! If she’s caught her...”

Prejudice Bane...sssend it while it sssleeps. Ssshould it escape, worldss will burn...

That prospect produced an extremely high Mikoro noise that unsettled the minotaurs swabbing the decks above. A mop-handle thudded probingly on the boards, prompting the fugitive captain to scurry on all fours into the dark.

“Wah! Um, um! O-Okay, that does sound pretty bad I guess. We’d better find this Bane first then. But we’ve gotta be quick, okay? I bet Dari’s already rolling through the Moo-Moo Queen’s big bad tummies...”

Well she is Dari, thought Mikoro, though not without guilt. The Cow Queen had made it sound like she wanted to enjoy Dari for a long time, and even if worst came to worst, the tenacious little traveller had her core.

She could hear her, almost feel her tough little arms around her cheek. “Even if sometimes all I can do is shut my eyes and wait, I know that everything will turn out okay.”

They’d quarrelled. Mikoro had teased her too much, even though she knew she shouldn’t, and Dari had snapped at her. It’d struck through her heart, put her straight into fight-or-flight; and as there was no fighting Dari nor flying from the middle of the ocean, that had meant balling up in whimpers.

“Bah. We didn’t even get to make up. Did she sleep away from me because I’m a naughty? Is that why she...when the Tummy Queen caught the ship...”

Ssseek the Bane. Ssseek the Bane...sshe would ssay...

“Nyh. She really would, wouldn’t she? ‘Don’t worry about me, save the universe first!’ Dari’s always putting others before herself.”

Feeling the onset of tears, she gave a quiet growl and clenched her eyes. This wasn’t the time for misery. Captain Mikoro had work to do. She shook those thoughts from her head, hair swishing side to side.

She assumed crawling position. “Okay then Miss Snake. Where do we go?”

It was just as well the serpent had some clue, she thought, as she followed the pull in her hand through the labyrinth. It smelled of soapy detergent, rotting wood, wet rat. It was pitch-dark for the most part, but the occasional crack between planks let in light which glanced off heaps of fur or happy fungal-looking organisms. Holes in the boards granted glimpses of minotaurs on the next level down: they were patrolling down corridors, drilling in squads, polishing cannons.

More tugging. They were getting closer. Round a corner, then out through a square of light. Too bright – squint, wait, adjust.

She had emerged on a ceiling beam.

“Ooh. What’s all this?”

Fern-green tiles, bright electric lights, minotaurs shuffling around in pastel-coloured robes and surgical masks. Wounded cow-people, hides splotted with ugly green scorch-marks and limbs suspended in bandages, groaned in row after row of beds.

An infirmary.

“Wah. Looks busy down there. Um, how did they all get so hurt?”

Mikoro considered the possibilities.

“Uh-oh. Does the Cow Queen take them into big battles every day? Maybe they’re on the way to another one right now...”

She scampered across the beam, straight into another warren of wooden tunnels. Several more minutes of bumping and shuffling brought her to a large crack in the floor. This one conducted a great deal of snorty grunting and laughing, only higher in pitch, smoother in its quality...

“Ooooh!” she cried out through a gasp. “Look Miss Snake, look! It’s *cuuuuute!*”

A hundred chubby minotaur infants were crawling around in a room filled with inflatable objects and bright primary colours. They were wrestling three or four together, climbing on frames, rolling in pools of soft fabric balls, building towers and ships out of blocks or crushing the living daylight out of tiny humans and monkeys made of rubber.

This had to be a crèche of some kind. Were these the crew’s kids?

The Cow Queen’s dreadnought – it had a dedicated facility for taking care of little ones. Good care. Indeed it looked so fun that she hankered to join in. Stroke their tiny horns and squeeze their tough little cheeks. Feed them biscuits.

Ssseek the Bane...Ssseek the Bane...

“Yup. I know.”

She crawled on, keeping her incredulity to herself. Wasn’t this a military flagship? In her waking nightmares she’d imagined it to be all cannons and soldiers and storerooms full of artillery shells and confiscated beef bowl.

Another crack – another room.

A classroom, just like at the Chaldea Academy. These children were older. Teenagers, she thought. Their horns grew fast. A bespectacled minotaur tutor was sitting amongst them, engaging them beneath a whiteboard covered in words. DIVERSITY. SELF-MASTERY. COMMUNICATION. PLEASURE. BODILY SOVEREIGNTY. YOUR BODY, YOUR CHOICE.

Beside it a second whiteboard displayed a variety of artworks, each portraying a close encounter – indeed, a *very* close encounter – between a tiny brown-haired figure and a range of women many times her size.

Mikoro barely swallowed her gasp. “B-But...! That’s Dari!”

“Now I must warn you,” the professor was explaining. “A frightening phenomenon has been observed on some of the more...troublesome islands. There are reports that the very thought of people your age having access to material like this is enough to send the adults on those islands into bouts of bloodthirsty hysteria. While screaming that they will protect their children, they have been witnessed applying one hand to those children to punch them, thrash them, or strangle them slowly to death with ribbons of pink or blue; while with

the other hand, simultaneously, they point at the artists concerned and garble an unintelligible noise that sounds something like ‘Piiido! Piiido!’ Latest research suggests these fits are symptoms of an infectious disease, caused by a virus that degenerates the amygdala and is spread via the ink fumes of poisonous newspapers.”

Shoulders tremored; hands reached reflexively for horns. A fearful murmur rumbled round the room – “Terrible virus, terrible virus,” – as the instructor gave them time to process this sinister news.

At last one youth attempted: “But if people grow up there without getting to see their feelings represented in art and culture – if the only role models they have are adults like that! – then what happens when they...”

“It’s too scary!” whimpered another. “Can there really be illnesses like that? What if...what if the virus gets out, and spreads across the sea? What if it comes here?”

Mikoro meanwhile was still getting over the use of her friend’s image in minotaur pedagogy. “Waah. Dari really is famous...”

“Rest assured,” came the tutor’s charismatic tones, “that Her Majesty’s rigorous sanitation standards ensure you are quite safe on board this ship. Any coercive interference in your access to erotic material – in anyone’s, in fact – is strictly prohibited under Her Majesty’s Third and Fourth Public Health Laws, which, naturally, overrule any and all legal systems that might contradict them, even in territories outside her domain. This is because Her Majesty has deemed it of universal interest that minotaurs, or rather, all peoples, develop *HEALTHY SEXUALITY*” – the term went up on the board – “central to which is an awareness that sexual consciousness differs from person to person. In other words, it’s okay if your erotic desires are not the same as those of the person next to you, or even if you have none at all. There is no standard or ‘right’ sexual attraction or behaviour, and no ‘wrong’ – except...?”

And they all spoke at once, because it was so intuitive: “If it hurts people!” “If it causes harm!” And one child who’d been paying extra special attention added: “And if you don’t know if it’s harmful, the thing to think about is whether it’s *abusing an unequal power relationship!*”

“Very good. Now, your bodies and desires will change a lot in the next few years,” concluded the instructor, folding her hands, “and at times they might feel very turbulent. But what won’t change is that they’re natural, they’re *yours*, and no power, none at all, is entitled to take them from you. Anyone who attempts to will

be handled by Her Majesty in person, and in the meantime you can always come to us for sober and informed support on your journey to master your sexual consciousnesses; that is, to learn to live in them in such ways as improve your lives, while harming no-one.”

“But what about those islands, Professor?” said one of the more anxious students. “They’re still out there, aren’t they? The newspaper virus...the blue and pink ribbons...”

“Quite so, quite so. And that is why tomorrow morning, for your next Sexual Citizenship class, please remember to assemble in front of No. 2 Battery instead of here. We’ll be combining the session with your Ballistics lesson, so in the event you do come across such islands you’ll have the proper knowledge to handle...”

By this point Mikoro felt like she was sitting among the students, rather than spying through the ceiling. “It’s just like Tamamo taught Kiyoko and me,” she uttered in admiration as cheers rang out and chairs slid back below. “The Boob Queen really does take care of them, doesn’t she?”

Sseek the Bane...Sseek the Bane...

“Gwah. I forgot.”

The tugging again – now so vehement that Mikoro had to clasp her left hand round her wrist or it’d have dragged her into a sprawl.

“Nnyah, n-not so hard! Look there – it says ‘BODILY SOVEREIGNTY!’ It means when you’re in my body you’ve gotta do what I say!”

The Chaos Serpent’s efforts eased up, no doubt to work through the implications of that one.

“Um. Are you there, Miss Snake?”

Hsss.

“D’you think you could, um...do the nudge again? I don’t know if it’s left or right or down here.”

A prod within her hand. A little perfunctory this time, Mikoro felt. The way was down.

This was a tricky bit: spidering down a narrow space between two walls. The descent was long, and her hat got knocked about with every bob of her head, but she made it. Soon after that the wooden maze turned to metal with bright electric light streaming through grates.

A ventilation duct. From here she’d have to consciously control her footfalls to limit the echo.

These were laboratories. Grille after grille offered views of lab-coated minotaurs handling test tubes, or microscopes, or more complex paraphernalia which, not knowing their names, she came up with her own: up-and-down machines, bubble-boxes, twirly-whirlies. Well okay, the last one was a centrifuge, that one she knew. But twirly-whirly sounded more fun.

“Ooh. What does the Moo-Moo Queen need all this for?”

Medicines? Surveillance equipment? Weapons?

She decided: “Bweh. I bet she’s researching better-flavoured sprinklies for beef bowl.”

They rounded another corner. A grille blocked her way. She jiggled it, prised her fingernails in at the edges, and when it still didn’t budge, simply headbutted it in. The clang reverberated down the vent. She froze – snorts, drawing near.

She crept back in silence. Waited, as someone’s fist beat on the panels in front of her, rattling the detached grille.

More grunts.

Then boots, stomping away. She scurried on.

Another corner, then another.

“Hwaah, aren’t we there yet? My arms are getting sore!”

Sssssh...soon...

Round the next corner the shaft plunged into darkness. All she could see was a set of stark white lines in the sea of black – another grille. She pressed her face right up to it, wincing till her eyes adjusted to the bright LED lamps.

“Nnnh...a containment chamber? I see...some sort of energy field. There’s a thing in it.”

Hearing voices, she seized up and shushed. There they were: two minotaur scientists in full-body protective suits, standing at a control panel. Even their horns were covered.

“The MEM sample,” one was saying (Mikoro wondered: is that Mooing Electron Microscope?), “indicates a structure of pure prejudice down to the sub-atomic level.” Her voice was crackly, as though filtered through a transmitter. “It acts towards the suffering and violent destruction of all things unlike itself. However, its energy levels dropped off rapidly as soon as we brought it on board, which we believe is due to the pluralistic ethos Her Majesty maintains aboard her ship. But she had to subdue it first, and that required an act of tolerance at its highest concentration.”

The other scientist asked: “You mean, she punched it? As in, actually hit it, just like that?”

“It’s the paradox of tolerance,” the first minotaur suggested. “In order to sustain a stable tolerance field, you cannot tolerate intolerance. As soon as intolerance exists it proliferates at an exponential rate, disrupting every part of the tolerance structure it comes into contact with. Before long the field is compromised and collapses. The lesson has been passed down over the seven generations of Her Majesty’s line, and is why hostility to difference is severely forbidden in every part of her domain.”

“Wah,” Mikoro mouthed in the dark. “The Stompy Queen really did smooch it. Prejudice Bane...that was that nasty man who killed his poor crocodile, right? The one who – um – whose head turned into a liver...”

The memory was chilling enough. She wouldn’t complain. For a split-second she even felt something akin to gratitude towards the Cow Queen for sparing her that confrontation.

The one with no face at all had been nerve-wracking enough.

The scientists had paced to the other side of the room. Their voices were indistinct. Mikoro twitched her ears, but grew irritated as a certain background hiss drowned them out.

“I know it’s the Bane!” she hissed herself. “But I can’t get near it while those two are clomping around! Hmm...maybe a distraction...”

An idea came to her, and she grinned the grin that always set Dari on edge.

Her scheme wasn’t particularly complicated. She shuffled backwards till she was roughly above where the wall should be. A little more – this would be the adjoining room, or the corridor. Then she raised her hands, took a deep breath, and slammed her palms on the floor of the shaft like a drum, shouting “Agwagwagwagwagwagwa!”

Padded footsteps. Doors shunted open. “Who’s there? Who’s there?”

Seizing the moment she scrambled back to the grille, whacked it loose, then somersaulted down to the floor. But as she did she felt a tingling all over and grew, and grew...

“Nyah! This is – they’ve got some magic-dampening thing in here! It’s disabled my shrinking spell!”

There was no time to lose, she hurtled for the control panel and smashed all the buttons at once. A receding whirr: that was the containment barrier coming down. There it was...

...but it was no longer the Bane. The triangular prism's azure hue was smooth like coral, not sick like contaminated blood. To look on it put Mikoro in mind of lists of rules and regulations explicitly justified in terms of their intended effects, open to critical discussion, and humble enough to stand aside if to follow through would result in cruelty or suffering.

Ethical order. Order that cared. Cared like Kiyoko.

Sssend...sssend!

"Oi!" came a roar through the door. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Agwah!"

The fluffy captain thrust her hand at the essence of ethicality – or perhaps it was the Serpent of Chaos, concentrating its power in the blood-red shape on her hand then launching it out to embrace its counterpart – and at once the dormant blue polyhedron dispersed, its particles rising away, soaking back into the framework of reality.

Yesss...stronger. Sstronger!

"It's her! It's the pirate-cat! Sound the alarm!"

Mikoro's hair frizzed on end as the hulking bovine tribes packed into the containment room, most of them clad in those full protective suits which now made them downright menacing. On instinct she reached out, meaning to shrink as many as she could, but the dampening field stifled her magic the moment it left her fingers. She tried it on herself, to equal disappointment. In fact it was more than disappointment, for by that point the stampede was halfway across to her.

"Nnnah! Help! S-Snakey! Wh-What do I do?!"

SSSSSSSS.

She hadn't seen it – maybe she imagined it. But she had, that was what mattered, and as the minotaurs backed against the walls with fists raised and horns lowered it was clear they'd imagined it too. A huge red serpent, so long and thick its coils took up most of the room, rearing up, frilling its hood, hissing and spitting...

"Hrrrrm! Watch out, she's extremely dangerous!"

"In Her Majesty's name – was that a snake? Does anyone else see a snake?"

"But this is the highest-security zone on the ship! She must be obscenely strong to have broken in here!"

"She must have snuck in through the ventilation system, you fool!" – a gruffer voice, someone senior. "Her Majesty warned us about her size-shifting magic!"

The fluffy captain saw her opportunity. "Nyrawrrr, that's right! And if you come any closer you're *all* gonna go in my tummy!" And she raised her hands like claws

and shook them in such an extreme display of cuteness that it flipped right round to the opposite end of the spectrum and terrified her beholders.

Like that she marched through the trembling lines of minotaurs and out into the corridor, her chest puffing up with satisfaction. That feeling lasted all of four seconds, at which point the lights went red, sirens rang strident in her ears and the terror she'd discharged pierced electrically back through her skin.

"Seal the gates!" "Summon the sentries!" Commands rang out – from adjacent rooms, across the speaker system – as Mikoro flew into a fluff-storm of flapping, hurtling and wailing. She ran for her life, not knowing or stopping to make sense of where she was going: down a corridor here, over a security barrier there, under a falling blast door, through another just before it sealed, then through an X-ray gate, rolling under laboratory tables, ducking their arms, getting caught by others but screaming in bullish faces to startle them loose. It took the arrival of armed and armoured minotaurs – mallets, lances, tower shields – to startle the pink whirlwind to a standstill, at which point she spun her head to find she'd stormed her way out to one of the cannon galleries. There they came, a line of them with their shields in a wall and pointy implements aimed right at her, and these were no ordinary guards but crack elites with rings of status on their horns and shields that gleamed in royal maroon. Mikoro went "Nyaaah!" and turned to run, only to find another rank marching from the other direction. At the same time her pursuers from the laboratories massed through the doors she'd just fled through, with capped and nose-ringed security guards at the front.

She was surrounded.

"On the floor with hands in the air, in Her Majesty's name!" thundered a voice from the beef-wall, propelled with such deep-throated force that Mikoro took a frightened step back, stumbled on something, tripped – and fell into a sitting position on the breech of a cannon.

The minotaur-soldiers closed in.

The cat-girl sweated, squeaked, shuffled back on cold hard steel. Feeling the back of her hat bump on something, she ducked, kept going – and shivered as she realised she'd backed out through the gunport. The *Lamassu's* hull soared dizzyingly in all directions – all the way up to the void where the sky should be, all the way down to a sea still as glass.

The nearest soldier lunged – stuck her arm through the gunport. Mikoro yelped and did the only thing she could: jumped up, bracing herself against the hull so she could kick at that chunky fist, all the while tearing through mental cat-

calculations on whether she could spring off it to climb these golden frames and crimson boards up to the next level. She might even make it all the way to the main deck; shrink herself, look for Dari –

The minotaur-gauntlet swiped at her legs. She kicked again – felt her weight shift as her foot clipped the edge of her coat. Her other foot slipped on the curve of the muzzle – too smooth, still slippery with polish. She fell backwards. Threw out her arms. Shut her eyes and caterwauled as the ship rushed upward, the coat flapped outward and the hat flew off her head. Down, down, down, down – splash.

The impact hurt. The unnatural ordering of the world had lined up the water's molecules so neat and thick as to make the surface close to solid. Mikoro's own innate chaos, supplemented a little perhaps by that of her tenant divinity, saved her life: her very impact liberated the water around her. Still, it was everything she was not, couldn't support her consciousness; and the last thing she felt before it faded was a shunt – a rough one – as the mighty wash of the Cow Queen's dreadnought caught her body and swept it far, far away...



“Eeeep! Nghh, w-wait! Don't – *gyaah!*”

Tossed upon the sovereign palm, Dari yelped and flailed her limbs in the air. Another toss – so gentle, her landing so soft, but from her adorable motions one would think she'd been thrown high as the moon.

An indulgent smile crossed the Demon Cow Queen's lips. This mouse-like girl was irresistible. The great hegemon had looked forward to this from the moment she'd first soaked her tongue in her sweet, squirming succulence. She couldn't believe she'd caught her then lost her, and every botched opportunity to recover her since had further churned her frustration. But to have her drop into her hands like this, right here in her cabin as she settled down to relax? Well that was almost too perfect.

The bouncing paused. Dari glanced up nervously, her hands and knees sinking into the meaty palm, then squealed as four titanic fingers curled in like fleshy baobab-tentacles. They clamped heftily around their captive then proceeded to fondle her, the explorer explored, prompting peeps of timidity as they pressed her down, packed her up, then pinched her in tips as large as she was to squidge her between them.

“Nnnnah! P-Put me down! Put me – *mmfff!*” Her squeaks really did turn high as a mouse’s as the soft heat of surrounding skin baked her in her own embarrassment.

“Nrrrm, such a coy little thing!” the behemoth chuckled, washing Dari in gusts of beef-thick breath. “My word, I’ve never seen a mouse sweat and blush so. Ohoho – good! You *should* tremble in awe of your Queen!”

That volcano of a voice; that heaving mountain range of flesh hot out of the sauna, still wafting with steam; that overpowering beefy musk that soaked her nostrils, clasped round her skin like an extra hand, and more than anything the sheer mind-crushing magnitude of that meatscape – of course Dari was sweating. But as the Cow Queen watched her pull at her tube top to vent her unruly skin, her giant smile puckered with hungry curiosity.

A shadow fell. Dari looked up and gasped.

“W-*Wait! What are you doing?!*” she squealed as the second mothership of fingers landed, knocking her down then ironing her into the first. Her squeals intensified as those huge digits rolled, pinched, gripped and pressed in a clumsy but relentless operation.

“Oho, still squirmy as ever! Hold still my skittish little mouse, that I might bestow upon you my permission to remove your garb. Would that not be more to your comfort? Besides, as your sovereign has removed hers it is only proper. Next time you’ll think twice about concealing yourself in her quarters to steal a glimpse of her raw grandeur, nrrrrm?”

“I d-didn’t! I wasn’t t-trying to – ” Dari attempted as the fingers raised in reprieve, but at that point her newfound nakedness caught up with her and she threw her arms round her knees and squealed yet again.

“Ohoho! Well, who can blame you?” The Cow Queen laughed as her fingers lifted Dari into a dangle. “Here you go then, my inquisitive mouse! Behold! Behold the stupendous physique that comes of such a distinguished heritage! *Nuuuuuuuu!*”

And so Dari received a ride, swept low across those stately mountains and ridges till their atmosphere, packed with heat and pheromones, turned her red as a lobster. As she flew she flapped her arms and legs in the air, and her hair whipped round, and her squeaks tumbled through all the letters of every alphabet she knew before they cohered into the words: “Please! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Forgivemeyourmajesty!”

“Hrrm hrrm hrrm! I suppose you are forgiven, if only because it’s brought my little mouse-treat where she belongs. But the question remains...” – and now that huge face loomed so close that a stray inhalation might have sucked her straight through those lips as they spoke unto her in husky tones: “*Does the little mouse quite realise the right royal trouble she’s in?*”

“Nnnnaahh! Ididn’tdoanything! Ididn’tdoanything!”

“Ohohohoho!” The sheer punch of her breath spun Dari into the wall of curled fingers. “*Didn’t do anything*, you say? Let’s see!” And the other fingers rolled up one by one to doom her: “Interference in the official tribute collection process and in the administration of justice to simian ruffians. Participation in the illegal handling of items from the royal treasury. Fleeing arrest; destruction of scheduled ancient monuments; and nrrrm, of course, let’s not forget: *cosmic vandalism!*”

Dari cringed into the smallest Dari-ball she could manage.

“Well? What have you to say for yourself, my Dari-mouse?”

“*Wasn’tme! Wasn’tme!*” she peeped.

The Cow Queen unleashed a belly-slapping guffaw. “Ohoho, we’ll see about that! Do you mean to say it was all the fault of that furry fiend you’ve befriended?”

“Nnnnaaahh, notMikoro! *Didn’tdoit!*”

“Nrrrmph! A likely story! Hrrm hrrm hrrm. Although...”

Dari dared not register the ‘although’. She was already bracing herself, her mind stumbling ahead to when that huge tongue lunged out to lap her away, any minute now...

“...although, looking at you now, it does challenge one to believe such a harmless creature could be capable of so much trouble. Oho, very well then my mouse! Let us say for the sake of argument – provisionally mind you, and only at your Queen’s generous discretion – that you are innocent of such foolish slights to her authority. Let it never be said that the great Demon Cow Queen rushes to judgement without bestowing a fair hearing on her honoured captives!”

Dari peeked out, then shrank back tighter as a wine-red iris the size of a flying saucer hovered in low.

“Well then! You are fortunate, little mouse, because the mighty Cow Queen happens to have toiled enough for the benefit of her subjects for one day. Let us do away with all pretence to formalities for the night and engage, hrrrm hrrrm, on a more casual basis.”

“Nnnhh...engage...!”

Dari's mental dictionary zoomed straight to the lower definitions on the list, lingering on those that pertained to locks and keys. She trembled. She was crushed as much by her own timidity as beneath her captress's awesome gravity. She should have been terrified – *was* terrified – but more than that it was sheer awkwardness; that awkward, stubborn insistence of her own skin that the Cow Queen's was so soft, so warm, that she should happily sink into it and melt away in a cloud of tactile bliss.

The monarch noticed of course. It made her mouth water, set her hot skin rippling with excitement (which, as that ripple had a long way to travel, was much prolonged in the delight it served). It would not become the dignity of her stature to genuinely terrorise such a helpless creature. But Her Majesty was nothing if not an experienced judge of trembling character, and this little one's trembles? They weren't terror; not in the true sense anyway. No, this was the sheer submissive shyness of a naughty little subject who knew exactly where she belonged: stashed wrigglingly away on the sovereign body, even as the very thought stirred her every tiny cell's inherited prey-memory to squirm against it.

Oh yes. The Cow Queen knew just what to do with a catch like this.

She shifted mountainously on her couch, cupped her palm to catch Dari tight in its folds, and drew her in close.

"Tell me *casually* then," rolled the voice of the gigantic queen. "What are you and your mischievous kitty-cat doing in my waters? Where did you get that ridiculous, and I should say, *unlicensed* toy boat?"

For all her flusterments Dari understood she was in no position to withhold cooperation. But as she stammered off a list of the first things that came to mind – "N-Nothing, j-just passing, t-travelling, t-trusted, d-don'tknow!" – she quickly realised that the Cow Queen wasn't even listening. Rather her eyes were clouding over with barely-restrained lust, and her great lips puckered, smashed drippingly together, then released that beast of a tongue to steamroll in weather-generating circles.

"Nrrrrrm? Ohoho, you sweet toy, you drive me to such distraction with your squirms! Again – more clearly this time! *Whooo* gave you the boat?"

"C-C-Chaldea Academy!" Dari squeaked. "Ac-Ac-Academy, official business – *aaaaack!*"

The Cow Queen's face rose away, or rather Dari descended with a hand-elevator view of the large-scale structure of her bovine universe. A neck thick as concrete; the wrecking-ball curvature of shoulders whose collision no material in

the universe could withstand; and to her rushing agitation, the vast smooth spread of that coffee-cream chest-cliff which heralded the surge of far more ominous geological colossi...

“Hrrm!” that cliff visibly rumbled. “Wrong answer, you naughty mouse! Do you think that I, the Demon Cow Queen, do not know Comet Island tech when I see it?”

“Nnnaah! Nnnaah!” was all Dari could manage as an impossible planet-sized breast swelled before her.

“Still! Even an *attempt* to deceive your Queen is a serious offence! And what happens, when a naughty mouse commits an offence in the realm of the Demon Cow Queen?”

“Nnnnnnnn...!”

The fingers tightened...

“Nnnn-ahh!”

...thrust her face-first into the monumental mammary...

“Mmmmphhh!”

...and pressed her so deep that its soft, supple meatiness all but closed up around her.

“Ohoho!” the laugh wobbled around her. “You *compensate*, of course!”

And now Dari knew nothing but beef-breast as a fingertip rested on her back and bounced her in, catching then pressing, catching then pressing, bobbing her in the surface of this hot, thick flesh-sea. Then, just as the press relented, just as she thought her sentence was complete, that entire palm clasped upon her and proceeded to knead her bodily in circles, and then in all directions, shoving and squashing and rubbing her wild on that endless expanse then finally tightening, fixing her in place, shuddering her in the decadent bellows of release that swelled from the Cow Queen’s flesh to reverberate into her own...

“Nuuuuuuuuuu! Ohh-ho-ho, youuu...! Nrrrrrrm, yes! Yeeess! Ohoho, that’s goooooo! You – you really are a toy fit for a Queen!”

Rubbing, rubbing, rubbing – then at last a rest, a bounce, and a tumble into that huge cupped hand.

“...nnnah!” Dari gulped down air. “Haaah...haaah...”

And now the Cow Queen too was panting. That dominating chest, it heaved like a roaring furnace; her ivory locks swayed free, her heart pounded like distant artillery, and so too did her great cheeks fire up, ruddy with passion.

“Nrrrrrrmm, so good! Ohhh, you squirmy, squirmy little thing, you are so good! You know *how* good? So good I must credit you a free offence in advance, just for the quality of your compensation!”

And if these words brought Dari a split-second of relief, she was taken straight to another eye-widening gasp as her conveyance to the other breast taught her better – just in time for those fingers to plough her in and repeat the entire exercise in symmetry.

“Mmmphh! Mmmphhh!” The explorer wriggled with all her hapless strength as she found herself ground into an areola whose radius easily accommodated her. She felt its bumps roll into her skin, administering a massage to her tired muscles, then it was back to the neverending rub in firm, overflowing soft tissue till its pressure, its heat, its meaty scent clogged her every sense to saturation.

The mental immersion outlasted the physical, and as the haze cleared to leave her breathless in the Cow Queen’s hand she gasped: “W-Water! P-Please...water...”

“Hrrm? Thirsty, little one? Well you *are* the Queen’s honoured guest this evening, so how about you be treated to something a little more...special? Hoho, very well then! Receive it respectfully – my gift!”

Another squeal, soundless this time, as a brown nipple more than half Dari’s size took over her vision – though only for an instant, for in the next she found her face and chest pressed against it. And then, before she could even process this rush of stimulation...

SHLPP!

...she was soaked.

“Ga-aa-ack...!”

It was a thick soak. A creamy soak. A *good* soak. And even as her outraged higher brain flipped tables in the background as it demanded to know what the hell she was doing, Dari’s parched throat reflexively lapped up the droplet. A droplet was all it was, any more might have swamped her, but the Cow Queen’s milk was strong and refreshing, full of fortifying nutrients that had grown more concentrated with each generation of her most illustrious line, or so she claimed. And there might have been more than a grain of truth in that assertion; for as events would demonstrate, it gave Dari all the hydration she needed for at least another day of exertions at Her Majesty’s pleasure.

“Nnngh...I c-can’t...believe you D-Dari...” – the scolds of her executive mind grew loud as the haze of thirst dispersed, till at last they pulled her away just in

time. She'd felt a suction. Any longer and that monstrous nipple might just as easily have drank her.

She gaped up at the Cow Queen's distant smile. "Y-You...wh-what did you..."

"Wahahah! Well what did you expect, my little pet? I *am* the Demon Cow Queen!"

"Y-You've done it n-now," Dari seethed at herself. "L-Lapped it up, just like that. Her c-calf, are you? P-Proud of yourself Dari? Nnnhh, wh-what a disgrace..."

But it was hardly the first time! – a feeble Dari-squeak protested. It was just milk! Just a teeny tiny drop! You were thirsty!

No! – the crushing rejoinder. No, and you know it. You're a historian, aren't you? An historian. You know a gift like that is never just anything. Oh, you feel it. You don't know it, but you *feel* it. You're *connected* now. You and this big beefy demigoddess – you, and her Dari-munching tits! Probably for all time! Another one! How do you like that, *little mouse*?

"And now that we are adequately provisioned," the booming voice snatched her back, "we return to more pressing concerns! Another question! Your fluffy pink fuzz-ball! *Where* is she hiding?"

Her speech was ardent, but it wasn't clear from her face if she was after an answer or a further excuse to dominate Dari with her body. She could see it. The great Queen was getting drunk on her. Her cuteness made the rice-wine industry wholly redundant.

But instead of answering, Dari involuntarily sighed. It was a moment of relief on her higher brain's part: the question meant Mikoro had got away. Could she keep herself safe? Where did –

"Hrrrrm! You dare hold your silence? That's not allowed!"

An "eep!" as her hamster-brain resumed regular service. There goes your hard-won wrong-answer credit, Higher Dari leant back through the fire exit to tell her.

"One more time! *Where* is your naughty accomplice Mikoro?"

"Nnngh! I don't know! I don't know!"

"Does it look like I gave you permission not to know?" The bellow was relished. "Here then – another lesson for the cheeky mouse! *Nuuuuuuuu!*"

Dari wailed as the fingers pinched her round the waist and lowered her yet again, this time into the most agitating topography of all. It would not do to say the Cow Queen's cleavage yawned cavernous beneath her, nor even rolled with thunder from its bottomless depths as it hungered to chew on its wiggling offering. It was just too vast for the reach of such terms; and what it did to Dari's sensory reality left all language and imagination far behind.

“Aahhh, ahh, *aaaa*-mmpfffgghhhh!”

The Cow Queen’s bust swamped her world, indeed became the only world she knew – but now with twice the weight of before. At first it afforded her a touch of give, just a touch, as the thumb and forefinger kept hold to jam her into the crevice, shove her to the zone of closest compression and nudge her around within it. So long as they did, their bulk prised those breasts apart just enough that the light seeped in, showing her their buttery voluptuousness for the benefit of her squirms. But then the fingers withdrew – and in an instant, all of Dari at once was avalanched into a lesson...

“MMMMPHHHH!”

...in the meaning of two times infinity.

“Nuuuuuuuuuuuu! Yes, yes! Ohoho, yes! Squirm, little mouse! Squirm for your Queen!”

And Dari squirmed – squirmed and squirmed and squirmed as though her whole life had been a preparation for the service she now found herself compelled to provide. For she had to squirm, could do none other, as the twin massifs made her theirs, sandwiched her, wrestled for her, imprinted her into each other, lifted and lowered and rolled her and worked her vigorously in their soft, supple flesh as though attempting to squeeze her through the tiniest crack in the wall between universes; but there was no other universe here, there was only the Demon Cow Queen’s absolute chest, and as it had its way with its captive it tremored to tiny waves of stimulation set off by her wiggles, which expanded a thousandfold as they swelled and bounced through that gargantuan body then crashed back into her and reverberated her up, ever up, four rungs at a time up a ladder of squirming ascension...

“Nrrrrrrrmhhh! Ohohhh! Hrrrrrh, hrrrrnhh! How? How does this tiny toy raise such fire across the length and breadth of the sovereign stature? Ohohohoh, tiny Dari! Know that this is only the beginning! Nrrrrm, a mouse like you...now I know you were always destined for life as a permanent fixture upon the bovine body politic!”

And with these words she clasped her arms round her chest, drew in her breath, and *clenched* – overpowering her bosom-toy in the full majestic weight of the royal embrace.

“.....!!” No squeak in the galaxy was ever so swiftly muffled to nothing.

Sealed in the royal chest, Dari’s consciousness was a solid cloud of heat, sweat and rumbling bovine ecstasy. Occasionally, in those moments of relative let-ups

in her rubdown, split-second glimpses broke in of worlds far away: of Mikoro giggling unstoppably; of Cyania grinning down at her with finger raised – “Hahaah! You see what happens? I warned you Dari, I did warn you!”; of that sassy wandering artist Issun – “Are you perhaps mistaken in your aesthetic sensibilities?”; and finally of her own head, shaking in a huff of disappointment – “What’s that, there? Seriously? This is making you *wet*? You never change, do you Dari?” But these visitations didn’t last long; they could squeeze only into molecule-width spaces temporarily unoccupied by breast-flesh, and these were not reliably in supply.

She would never be able to say how long she spent compressed in those glands, not only because they smothered her sense of time as much as her other senses, but because their sensations stayed soaked in her brain and skin long after her eventual release. When the beef-fog finally cleared it was to leave her spread-eagled in the Cow Queen’s palm – lungs heaving, heart thrashing, skin alight with cascading bolts of stimulus.

“Ohoho! I trust the little mouse will consider her answers more carefully from now on, nrrrrrm?”

“P-Please...” wheezed Dari, weakly. “Please, Y-Your Majesty...e-enough...”

“Hrrrm. Yes. That will do for now. As much as our engagement pleases me – and as much as you deserve it to continue – we shall soon arrive at the fortress. There your Queen has important matters of state to attend to before she retires for the night. Ohoho, that’s right! Never let it be said that the great Demon Cow Queen lacks restraint!”

And Dari did not let it be said, did not even let it be thought, lest the provocation prove itself.

“Very well then, my scrumptious Dari! Let us resume your interrogation later.”

The haze of arousal drifted clear of Dari’s vision. Far above, the monarch’s contented smile graced her from the heavens. There too swayed that meteoric pair, mercifully further away now, but not far enough, never enough. She knew that now. So long as that pair of mammoths was *somewhere* in the universe, that were close enough to roll her up and away at their whim.

“F-Fortress...” it occurred to her to utter.

And the Cow Queen ruminated aloud: “Of course I would be imprudent to leave such a resourceful little rodent unattended, and downright foolish to tempt my female crew with the sight of you. We can’t have that now, can we?”

Dari's skin-currents spiked in panic as she was raised to the lips of judgement.
"N-No! Please - "

"Into my gut you go then, little mouse! I'll fix you safe and secure in the royal reticulum till our next rendezvous! Nuuuuuuuu!"

"Waaaaait!" Dari shrieked as the dark, dripping cavern lurched open.

"Hrrm? You would appeal to your Queen?"

She wrenched open her eyelids. Had to mentally slap herself to believe it. She hadn't been tossed in yet. A shock. And a chance – she had one chance. What to say? What words could possibly chip away at the certainty of another trip down that gullet?

"M-Mikoro!" she squeaked. "You haven't c-caught her yet! If y-you eat me again, she'll, she'll..."

The lips shut.

Actually shut.

Chewed in discomfort as the Cow Queen dredged up those memories.

"Hrrrrm, hrrm. Yes. A good point. A good point indeed. I shan't take that risk again."

Dari was stunned. "Wow," she thought. "Did I...actually convince someone not to swallow me? Her – her of all people!"

It was historic.

The easy smile returned to the Cow Queen's thick round face. She wiggled her ivory-crescent eyebrows; twirled a lock round her finger in satisfaction.

"Very well. It's the royal dungeon for you."

The funny thing was that when Dari heard this announcement, for just a fleeting instant she permitted actual relief to wash through her naked body. A dungeon, for once? – she wondered. An actual dungeon? Of course! A ship like this – there'll be a brig, or something.

"Ohoho, don't worry! On the honour of the Queen you won't find a cleaner, fresher dungeon anywhere on this sea! Now don't think you'll escape, of course. Hoho, now *that* would amuse me! That impudent cat – let's just see her try to extract you from there!"

"Well," Dari said inwardly. "After all that, maybe it won't be so bad." She even permitted herself the beginnings of a smile.

Why the hell did you just think that?! – the shriek came echoing from the back of her psyche.

And sure enough, those huge fingers fumbled her into their tips and ferried her, not out, but down, down that awesome body, down, down, down and around, into the orbit of yet another staggering curve. A curve so vast it took Dari some time to round it; plenty of time, that is, to realise exactly what nature of dungeon she'd got herself committed to.

"Eeeeeeeek!" she squealed, soaked in a new rush of timid anticipation as the royal rump wheeled past. A cosmic hemisphere of thick, firm fat, too big, far too big, nothing was supposed to be so gigantic; and then there were two of them; and then, like a singularity lurking in ambush, it surfaced from its nest deep in the chasm between that pair of gluteal impossibilities. A gluttonous sphincter: so thick, so tight – bigger than she was! – throbbing, pulsating alive under the vigour of its cravings for a wiggling Dari...

"Nnnnnnnnhh...!" Dari's legs kicked hapless in the air.

Closer. So close. Squelches, squalks, belching up from the deep dark tunnel then showering through the opening in a fine fresh spray – moist, rich, fragrant.

It wobbled. Rumpled its creases, purposefully. Ravenously.

It puckered. Its suction tugged on Dari's face, billowed her hair.

It wanted her.

The Cow Queen's stomachs did all the work. All else was the apparatus of ruling. And Dari was about to get ruled.

"He...he...heelp!"

In! – and the instant her hot cheeks made contact, the muscular ring gave a SCHLPP!...

"Glmmpmph!"

...and with a brisk sharp suck, siphoned her into its hole.

It clomped so massive upon her she couldn't imagine it all at once, let alone see it, least of all now; pressed so unthinkably heavy that she didn't realise at first that this was merely the sphincter. The circular muscle's aperture alone was longer than she was tall, savoured her lusciously as it squashed her through headfirst – and then, only then, suddenly, startlingly, did the full heft of the tube in the darkness settle upon her, packing her up, so rubbery, so slippery, its walls sinking and squashing to accommodate her shape as it massaged her deeper, deeper into this vault of flesh. On all sides, colossal muscles and banks of fat, juddering, shifting tectonically, concentrating the full mass of the Cow Queen's bulk to fasten her in her place...

...but they weren't even doing anything yet. Just resting. Relaxing. Being.

Ruling by nonaction.

“Nnnff! Mmnnff!” Dari could barely even squeak, so utterly overpowering was the clutch of the regal rump; and when the behemoth spoke, she felt it in her face, her chest, her back, her arms, her legs, all of her skin together.

“Nuuuuuuoo! Nnrrrm, yes! Now *that’s* where you belong! Nowhere better for a mischievous mouse to do her time than in the royal rear, no? Ohh yes – you’ll spend the night there, I think. Safe and snug, with plenty of time to reflect on your conduct...”

“Nnnnmph! Nnn, nnn...!”

Reclining onto her side, the almighty sovereign placed her palm on her upper buttock and gave it a meaningful rub. She clamped her eyes shut, all the better to feel that tiny shape, and then...*clenched* – gentle, but firm.

Just held for a time, drinking in the wiggles deep within.

Then she heaved herself up. Shuffled on her couch, centring herself so her rump rested comfortably in those well-worn impact craters. Glanced round and smiled at her distinguished old bull, who gazed down from his portrait, regarding her as ever with placid approval.

The day had been long and strenuous. Its matters sat unresolved. But wasn’t that what minions were for? That wayward kitten couldn’t hide forever, and already the sea and sky outside her gallery windows seemed to her hopeful, somehow, as though predicting a return to cosmic balance. As far as the supreme matter of the Queen’s pleasure was concerned, the day couldn’t have come to a better end.

She’d remind herself of it often that evening. Perhaps a little more often than strictly necessary. All it took was a quick clench. Or a crossing of her legs. Or a wobble.

It felt so good.

“Nrrm. Maybe just a pinch deeper...”

She clenched now. Concentrated. *There* – the lightest of muscular tugs. She held...

“Hrrrmhh! Yes, that’s it, that’s it. Right...there.”

...and relaxed.



Far, far below in the rumbling dark, Dari tried to squeak. It came out as a “nnngph”. It couldn’t do otherwise. She couldn’t even think. The Cow Queen’s slightest motions massaged her to the mind-smothering limits of her senses. Each shift on the couch, each tremor of laughter, each resonant command to her subordinates – these to her were *absolutely everything*.

It was so warm. So incredibly warm. And that was before the storm of shuddering rubs that made it clear to her – so clear she was made to know it actively, continuously – that the great Queen was walking. *Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.* She was being carried. Each footfall was a jiggling reminder, to all of her, of the humiliating condition of her ride.

“Nnnnff! Mmnff nfff nnnnff...!”

At an hour or so in the sovereign rump had squeezed most of the tension from her muscles, and her body settled into the rhythms of her squashing, pulsing surroundings. Only her timorous prey-mind couldn’t adjust, wouldn’t adjust, and so kept her suspended along a lingering margin of low-key arousal; and though that was usual in these situations, in this case it hung stubbornly (as well as literally) above its average high-water mark, so to say.

It was all just too huge. Too heavy. So much heavier than she’d learnt was hers to expect.

Too much beef.

“You knew this was coming Dari,” – the barely perceptible cheep of her higher brain. “You knew all along, you silly girl, and yet you had to fill your head with such smart ideas. Wasn’t leaving Mikoro asleep out there unpardonable enough? No, you *then* had to scurry around in this big beast’s cabin even though you knew – you *knew!* – exactly what she was capable of. You’re hopeless Dari, you know that right? She’s right. You belong here. I should just leave you in here, seeing as it’s clearly where you wanted to be.”

To which her prey-mind squirmed her up in denial (“Nnhff!”) – or tried to, but it couldn’t, of course it couldn’t, it was so tight she could barely twitch. All she got when she tried – by turning her cheek, sliding her hand, bending her foot – was the squish of rubbery epithelium, the slip of her stimulated skin on its slick film of fluids, and so her nerve-endings overloaded, soaked her mind in her sheer self-conscious tininess, making her squirm even more till the tissues hugged her so tight they utterly immobilised her; then after a while they relaxed, let her thoughts and memories seep back in, and so the cycle began anew.

At some point – or points – she might have climaxed. At another it's likely the muscular contractions worked her to sleep. But who knows for sure? There were no witnesses, and she herself was hardly an independent observer.

THE WAY OF THE

虎 TIGER

“Ugwuu...”

Sand. Sand on lips. Not tasty.

“Pffff-ffweh!”

Mikoro spat out the grains and raised her face.

“Nnnnah, nnah...uuuu – gwah!”

She threw her arms out, as though to catch on something. Attempted the same with her legs – but they didn’t respond.

Because they were on sand.

Mikoro realised she wasn’t falling anymore. Her memories caught up: the splash, the sense of breathlessness, then the buffeting impact and sideways rush of motion...

“Nngwah. Where am I...?”

She sat up.

A strange shore. A beach – but narrow, dark sand, no shells or cute pinchy creatures. It curled away in both directions. A circle.

An atoll?

No. The centre was filled with dark green spikes, their tips at sea level.

Mikoro peeked over the dune. She saw then that as soon as the sand transitioned to dirt, the ground sloped away, and the spikes were in fact the tops of trees.

A huge basin with a forest in it.

The rest of her body woke up, struggling beneath a strange weight in her limbs. She'd assumed it was because she was waterlogged, but now that she dabbed at her coat she found that the seawater hadn't touched it. It was as dry as if she'd lifted it straight off an ironing board.

Which was apt, because that was how flat the sea still was.

It wasn't supposed to be so...organised. It wasn't healthy. Wasn't water.

Something blue sat on the sand nearby. A healthier blue. A prompt to get on her feet and work things out.

She stood. Yawned, unsatisfyingly. Brushed the sand off her coat. Her joints ached. She mumbled incoherent Mikoro sounds as she trod for the object.

It was her tricorn. She remembered it coming off as she fell, fluttering out of reach; but here it was, washed up along with her. A good sign.

Also dry. Not such a good sign – as far as she knew, the sea was meant to be wet – but convenient at least.

She picked it up, shook off the sand and placed it on her head. She squeezed her pointy ears in her hands while at it just to make sure she still had those too.

She looked out to sea for landmarks, ships, or anything else that might position or reassure her. There was nothing.

“Uh-oh. Where did the Tummy Queen's ship go? What is this place?”

A mysterious island like all the others? Another adventure in wait?

No. It was different this time. There was no *Sea Bunny*. No *Dari*. Still no sky. No waves, even. The flattened water just stopped at the sand. Didn't wash, didn't lap. Didn't even lick.

It was just her. Mikoro. Alone.

Sssssshh.

Well, not quite alone. The sound soaked her in relief.

“Um, Miss Snakey? Can you hear me?”

My sstrength returnss. One final Bane remainsss. Soon...

She could see her now. Not a flash anymore, nor a faded image. Solid. A solid scarlet serpent.

She wasn't here on the beach with her, nor had she physically manifest inside her. Mikoro would know if she had. But she was *there*. Somewhere. Accompanying her. That was what mattered.

Mikoro wished to hug her. She could really have used a hug right now.

Those scales looked so squishy.

“So what do we do now? I guess we’re stuck here till a boat comes by or something...”

Foresst...

“Um. Yeah. Guess I knew you’d say that.”

Of course she’d explore it. There was no way not to explore it.

She got on her belly, rested her elbows on the dune and peered over the edge, scanning the forest below like a sniper. The longer she looked, the less she liked the look of it. It didn’t look fun. It looked like a *dark* forest. The trees were all the same species: some variety of evergreen, their needly leaves packed thick and dense. Interwoven, as though they’d grown in cooperation to blot out the light.

What was more, they stood completely still. No shuffling or creaking. No swaying. No cute forest creatures rustling in the branches.

Mikoro suspected wind wouldn’t have made a difference.

Perhaps they weren’t trees at all.

“Uh-oh.”

She pushed herself up. Patted the sand off her coat again. Girded her nerves. Against her better judgement, she was going in.

“Are you ready, Miss Snakey?”

The Chaos Serpent was hissing. No – whispering. Soft, susurrant. Secretive.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright, in the foressts of the night...

“Um. Are you...poetrying?”

The snake fell silent.

Mikoro shrugged and searched with her eyes for a way in. She saw no path, no stairs, no ladder. The only way was straight down the slope of the crater. It would take her past the treeline straight away, and beyond two or three layers it already grew too dark to see.

“I guess I just do it like this?” she suggested, getting down on her backside.

She pushed off. Half-slid, half bounced down the slope of dry soil – then she lost her balance, wailed “Waaah!” and fell on her side, rolling uncontrollably. *Whoosh* – she was into the trees, and all at once the air cooled and the light took its leave.

She groaned – “Guuuuu!” – as the gradient eased, and with it her momentum. Her feline instincts kicked in and asserted control of her roll; spun her to the correct angle to dig her heels in the soil, flip up on her feet and throw her arms out for balance. She skidded to a stop.

She rubbed her bum. “Ow. I banged it on a rock.”

Well there was no going back now. Patting down her coat a third time to dislodge the dirt, she padded nervously into the forest.

She'd assessed right. This place wasn't fun. It lacked everything she loved about walking in the woods with her mother and sister. No fresh piney scent, no birds to whistle back to; no acorns or pinecones to collect, no mushrooms to pick, no squirrels or boars or bears to run up to. So little light trickled through those smothering spike-boughs that she could barely see, and there were no sounds or visual clues to orient herself: no foaming sea to judge her distance from the shore, no funny-shaped boulders or branches to use as landmarks. Rather it looked exactly the same whichever way she turned. Dark soil. Dark bark. Dark needles. Dark nothing.

It was like her direction didn't matter. Nothing here mattered. Never grew, never shrank, never moved.

Never changed.

Never cared.

Just a permanent beginning, or a permanent end. Without a middle it didn't matter which.

No characters. No events.

No story.

They were watching her. The trees. They were evil. She knew it. The only thing missing was scary faces carved in their trunks. But they were all she could see, and by now she'd grown convinced that they did have scary faces, only they didn't show them unless her back was turned.

If she suddenly looked and still didn't see them, it was surely because they hid them so fast that she missed them, this being proof of their nefarious intent.

"Nyah. I think I'm lost. Are you sure this was a good idea?"

Sseek it...sseek the final Bane...

Her spine was tingling. To come face to face with one of those murderous Banes in this place? She couldn't think of anything she less wanted to do.

"Why am I even here? I need to get off this island and chase after the Chub Queen's ship! She's got Dari, the bunny-boat..."

Ssssssss...the only way out, iss in...

"But which way is in? I don't know where I'm going anymore!"

Tread ssteady. Tread sstrong. Tread with care.

"Ulp. Because of the Bane?"

Not the Bane. In these woodsss...extreme danger...

“N-Nyaah! Next time tell me that first!”

Sssssssh...

Mikoro gulped. “Uh-oh, uh-oh...”

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Through the meaningless forest, the forest of dreams, the forest of the soul...

Extreme danger. Did it lie in wait behind that tree? Or that one? Perhaps that one over there?

The answer was invariably no. No matter how many trees Mikoro passed, nothing lurked behind them.

Could that itself be the danger?

“Mikoro my dear! Over here!”

Mikoro shot bolt upright, ears stretched like pylons.

“That’s...!” she wheezed, as though the voice had jerked her back through a hundred worlds. “It can’t be! It is! Waaah, it is!”

“Ohh, there you are, you naughty little...!” – a second voice. “I told you, you’ve got to stop running off like that! Have you any idea how long we’ve been looking for you?”

They stepped from the shadows.

Kiyoko. Rin.

Tears of joy gushed from Mikoro’s eyes. “Mama! Big Sis! It’s really you! It is, it is! Aaaaah!”

All else was forgotten as she hurtled through the trees with only one thing in mind: to fling her arms round her mother and sister and never, ever let go. Forever! It had been forever!

Had they been there all along? Had she simply wandered off during a walk in the woods as she always did, and got lost?

Well they’d found her, so it was alright again. Everything would be alright –

She stopped dead. Her limbs froze, her heart skipped three beats, her throat gagged on a stoppage of breath.

Their faces.

They’d never looked so unhappy to see her. In fact, they looked disgusted. Terminally so. Kiyoko’s eyes glowered like a pair of fuses as she trembled with rage, from the hairs on her bristling fox-ears to the stress-chewed nails on her

fingers. As for Mother Rin – well, Rin didn't get angry. She merely sighed. Refused to meet Mikoro's gaze.

The shock was the worst in Mikoro's life. Getting shot through the heart wouldn't have broken it half so hard.

There'd be no hug after all.

A wrenching sensation deep within, like someone was twisting her arteries into knots.

"Um...M-Mother? Big sis? Is something wrong?"

Rin sighed again – the lightest breeze, civilisations to powder – and showed Mikoro her back. "Come," she said. "Just come."

Mikoro followed. "Wh-Where? Where are we going? Why are – "

"Don't ask insolent questions, just do as she tells you," snapped Kiyoko, scowling over her shoulder at her. "We're done with you, you impossible child. There's only one remedy now."

"I'm not a...!"

The trees parted ahead. A clearing? No, they still stood thick – conceded the bare minimum of space for the forbidding structure that phased in before them.

It punched up like a ziggurat, its front face flat, up-to-date in its concrete and glass yet rigid with timeless hierarchy, for each floor up was narrower than the last. At its crown the smallest and highest pierced a circle through the treetops so that light sank in, highlighting its rectangular windows, rectangular blank spaces, rectangular pillars, and a rectangular blue sign above the glass entrance doors – rectangular too, of course – which read:

Upside-Down University

Each layer had spiked triangular elements along its edges. If you were a video game designer and wanted to fashion a lair for some sinister organisation with increasingly difficult enemies on each floor and the final boss on top, then this building was for you.

"Um, sis? What is this place? Why are we here?"

"You have to learn, Mikoro," said Kiyoko. She placed her hands on Mikoro's shoulders and shoved her towards the entrance.

"Go on now," said Rin.

"You're...just gonna leave me here?"

Another sigh from Mother Rin. The sound was as a hurricane through Mikoro's insides, ripping up and snapping all it touched.

"It's for the best. You're too much, Mikoro. We can't do any more to help you."

Mikoro realised what she'd known all along.

"You...! You're not Mother and Kiyoko. You're not! They've *never* treated me like this! Never, never! They love me, and I love them!"

Whoever was posing as her sister blew her top. "Who'd love an incorrigible waste of space like you?" she screamed. "Just another mouth to feed! A pest who devours everything in sight and contributes nothing!"

To which Mikoro too finally cracked. Even if this wasn't Kiyoko, to hear such callousness put out through her voice –

"Get away from me!" she shrieked, and she rushed at the apparitions, her fingers bent into claws. "H-How dare you? How *dare* you? Nyaaaaaahhh!"

Not-Rin turned away with a sad click of her tongue. "Come on Kiyoko," she said. "She just wants attention. Let's not encourage her."

And just like that, the impostors vanished in puffs of shadow.

Mikoro's swipe found empty air. She was shaking, sweating in her coat. The suddenness of the shock had staggered her.

She screamed.

"Aaaaaahh! They, they...! Wh-Where the heck... nnyah, *nnaaaaaah...*"

Sssssh...phantasmss...

She dug her hands in her hair; clawed so hard she felt it on her skull. She couldn't get those words out. Those horrible words. Vile, atrocious, spoken through the very faces and voices of love...

Her adopted mother, her big sister – they were her life. They'd never say such things. Never.

Would they?

How could she imagine they would?

And yet, she just had.

The blow had been cruel. She fell to her knees and wept uncontrollably, slamming the ground with her fists.

"Nnaaaaaaaah!"

Sssssh. They are with you...

"N-No! No they're not! They're far away, I haven't seen them in so long, and now even Dari's gone and I'm lost in this horrible place, this, this – *nhaaaaaah!* Th-This island! Something's wrong with this island! We c-can't stay here, we have to – "

They are with you. Your friendsss are with you. All the realitiess are with you.

“Nnah...y-you...”

Sssshh. Feel. Feel.

They made their presence known. From her memories. From now. For in this place, more than anywhere she'd ever been, now and ever were one.

Voices. Hugs. So many voices. So many hugs. Instant. Infinite.

Come. I will show you what to do with fear.

It is for those with power to show respect for those without.

What I am saying, friend Mikoro, is to not be afraid to make your own path.

At the end of the day you've gotta be your own sovereign. Remember that, would you?

“Nyah! It's like they're all here; all...here?”

Instinctively, she felt for her stomach.

No, not *there*. That was a relief, they'd be too many to fit. But they were definitely *here*. Part of her. Part of what it meant to be Mikoro – what had preserved her all the way to the centre of this forest of meaninglessness. To here; to this...Upside-Down University?

Ruthlessnesss, hissed the Chaos Serpent as the fluffy captain cast her eyes up the imposing structure. *Here, ruthlessnesss makes its ssstand. Finissh it, Ibaraki Mikoro. Finisshh it once and for all...*

“I...I dunno if I can...”

Only you can.

“Um! O-Okay...”

She took a deep breath. Shook her arms. Adjusted her hat on her head, and did up a couple of extra buttons on her coat. Appearances would matter in there, she felt.

They believed in her. Old friends and new. Even if she had no idea what to do, she could ride that belief. She knew what it meant. She knew *it meant*. She could trust it.

She marched through the doors.

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“Welcome,” said the man at the reception desk. “Are you Ibaraki Mikoro?”

“*Captain Ibaraki Mikoro*,” said Mikoro, on the confidence burst that comes from walking.

“Ah – my sincerest apologies, but this is the Upside-Down University. We have our own table of ranks, and since you’re a new student...”

“Um. I am?”

The man gestured to a door at the back of the foyer.

“You’d better hurry,” he said. “The opening ceremony for the Master’s programme is about to begin. The Rector will be giving the address in person, so please don’t be late. You’ll find the ceremony hall on the third floor. The stairs are just through there.”

And like that, Mikoro was directed through to a little chamber with an elevator and set of stairs. Ordinarily she’d have leapt up the stairs, but thinking there wasn’t much time, she pressed the elevator button –

“What what!” a white-haired man with a horseshoe moustache barked in her face as he marched out. “Who do you think you are, using the lift?”

“Nyah! Wh-Who are you?”

“Don’t give me that tongue! Take off your hat when speaking to a Doctor of Reality!”

“Um. You’re a doctor?” And putting aside his comment about the hat she sniffed in his face, which only added fresh coal to his locomotive impression.

“Are you sure you’re a doctor?” Mikoro probed. “I’ve never met such a shouty doctor before.”

“You, you, you impudent...! I am Professor Wightman, and the lift is for faculty only!”

Now this really did come as a shock to Mikoro. “What do you mean *for faculty only*?” she answered back. It was hard to press her gaze through this academic’s browbeating scowl, but she somehow felt it important to return it on equal terms, so she did.

“The rule is that students must use the stairs. You know this.”

“Wha...! What kind of rule is that? That’s ridiculous! And you don’t even know I’m a student!”

The professor brushed her off and marched away, as though she could not have been further down his list of priorities.

“Nnyah. What a jerk...”

Sssshh. Patience...

Ignoring what Professor Wightman had said – the rule was discriminatory, would have been illegal where she came from so it couldn't be true – Mikoro jumped into the lift and pressed button number three on the panel.

There were twelve in total, she noticed.

Several were blank.

The lift was dull, grey and featureless save for a mirror on the back wall. Mikoro adjusted her hat in it on her way up, all the while wondering what to expect.

She hadn't been to university. She and her sister had been personally tutored by Tamamo till they reached the age to enrol in the Chaldea Academy, so they lacked experience of the general education system. She had however accompanied Rin when she went to meet professors, say, or to give guest lectures to crowds of fixated students, and what little exposure to the academic way of life this had offered had stayed with her.

She'd observed that everyone respected each other in those places. There was something almost sacred about the activities in which they brought people together. To seek and share in the truth; to explore difficult questions with honesty and integrity; to develop the power to control your life and improve the world around you – that was what schools and universities were about. And though some people might have more experience to share than others, everyone always had more to learn. In that most important sense, everyone was equal, for reality was far larger than any one knew.

Not that she envied those kids. Tamamo was a formidable teacher. She cared deeply for Mikoro, loved her curiosity and rewarded it in full. Her rich and wide-ranging lessons had drawn on her millennia of personal experience and accumulated wisdom. Best of all, she possessed that skill that sets legendary instructors apart from the merely great ones: the ability to adapt her methods to students' individual approaches to learning. Simultaneously juggling Mikoro and Kiyoko had been proof of that. While Mikoro learnt by chasing her inquisitive nose as it struck off in random directions, Kiyoko preferred to sit quietly, selecting problems to study systematically and at length. And one thing they'd both learned, thanks to Tamamo, was that neither was wrong. All roads of study were legitimate, so long as you drew on their strengths and learnt to avoid their pitfalls.

Ding!

The third floor. Mikoro stepped out. She needed no directions: the main event was right there through a pair of double doors.

Chattering students packed the auditorium. All humans, Mikoro noticed, though with no signs of the Academy's touching home charms: no animal ears, no fingers buzzing with magical sparks, no hugs or cuddles. In fact, all those smiles and cheery conversations couldn't conceal what seemed to Mikoro an underlying dourness. She couldn't understand what they were talking about. There were too many monologues, peppered with long words she'd never heard in her life, issued through voices blaring too loud out of puffed-up chests. Ordinarily eager to jump up and down in the front row at proceedings like this, the atmosphere unnerved her instead into a vacant seat near the back. She listened as she waited, feeling more stupid for every jargon-sculpture that got stuck in her earlobes.

Eventually she suspected they were doing it on purpose.

Not to share knowledge, but to own it. Or rather, to appear like they owned it. Like they had it, and the people they spoke to didn't.

Tamamo had warned her about cults.

"Nyah. I thought this was a university."

Then she dwelt on their clothes. They weren't uniforms as such, but these students couldn't have looked more boringly identical to each other if they'd tried. Dull grey suits, patternless dresses, hair combed and gelled into submission; it was as though each was saying: "I'm a block. I have no emotions, no biases, no imagination – I'm just a block. That's why I expect you to take me seriously."

Many of them – and only the males, for some reason – were wearing those plain strips of cloth she'd seen in the sun goddess's cave. The ones tied round their necks to dangle in a straight line, with a pointed end to indicate where their genitals were.

To concentrate your view there. As if to say, "These are why I am right."

The man who'd just appeared on the stage wore one too. He looked older, with a rugged face and curly ginger hair. The Rector?

The chatter subsided. Applause swelled in its place. The Rector smiled as he took his place at the lectern. He cleared his throat, and began:

"Your Majesties. Esteemed Ministers. Most Respected Generals and Admirals. Your Excellencies the Ambassadors; Your Excellencies the Deputy Ambassadors and Chiefs of Mission..."

"Um," said Mikoro inwardly. "Didn't they say this was an opening ceremony for a Master's course?"

She determined to pay attention, but as the Rector droned down the list of guest attendees, affording each an honorific style in decreasing order of the pomposity of their titles, she found it impossible to stay awake.

Ssssss. Ssstay alert...sseek the Bane...

She awoke. "Wah!"

A circle of startled students swerved round and angrily shushed her with fingers to their lips.

"...honoured guests, fellow citizens; and...students."

Finally. Ten minutes?

"Welcome to the opening ceremony for the Upside-Down University Master's Degree Programme. We are extremely excited to welcome the new batch of students who have come to join the study of Reality at this institution. For the next three years you will train diligently, making use of our facilities and benefiting from the timeless wisdom of our distinguished faculty; and when your studies are complete, each of you will graduate in this hall as a certified *Master of Reality*."

The hall burst with claps and cheers, each student competing to perform his or her approval the loudest.

"Three...years?" Mikoro muttered unheard. "But...but..."

One individual's whoops rang shriller than them all. She'd jumped up on her seat near the front of the hall, was leaping on it, striking her fist in the air –

No, not her fist. Her spike.

"Gwaah! It's her! That woman from the temple – with the daggers – *it's the Bane!*"

Riya.

Letters above her head still spelled out her name, only now they'd gained a title: Riya the Ruthless. She'd put aside her leather rogue's outfit for an I-am-a-block dress like the others, but her body still bristled in blue; not a roaring bonfire but a snarl of fine flames whose tongues pierced sharp, narrow, deliberate, twisting.

She no longer wielded daggers. Her hands themselves seemed to phase at will into a pair of skewering spikes.

"Woohoo!" she shrieked above the crowd. "*Haaaappy!* This is such a happy day!"

Her guild designation was gone. *It's Just A Game M8* must have disbanded.

Anxiety welled in Mikoro's veins. She was a student here, like the rest of them?

Everyone here was in danger. She had to stop her. Stop the Bane. But how? The room was too large, too many people, and the Rector still spoke, if she stood up it'd make a scene...

The crowd faded. A blanket of comforting stars.

Sssssh. Patience. Bide your time...find a weakness...

"Gwah."

And back to the hall. Now the Rector was outlining the University's three departments, each apparently led by an accredited Doctor of Reality.

"A weakness..."

She scanned the sea of heads and shoulders. Riya was tugging on the arms of the people next to her, annoying them till they returned forced smiles to acknowledge how right she was to be so excited. But of the Bane inhabiting her, no-one took notice. They were all too single-mindedly focused on the Rector's words, as though listening for a secret code that might put them one up on their fellows.

Mikoro's eyes swerved up to the stage, to the Rector himself, then over his shoulder –

She saw it.

".....!!!"

Who was that?

The figure stood in a full brown robe that concealed every inch of its body. From its masked and pointed hood to the boots that poked from beneath its hem, everything was hidden.

Scary.

Across its face – presumably – was a yellow band of cloth with diamond-shaped slots for its eyes.

Ssssssssss! – the Chaos Serpent?

The hooded figure was looking straight at her.

Horror-insects crawled down the back of her neck. Time itself seemed to slow, to crack. She was seizing up. Clutching her throat. Choking. Suffocating...

Ssssss! Ssssss! Extreme danger! Extreme danger!

...then the baleful figure's gaze moved on.

Mikoro gasped for breath. She tapped a neighbouring shoulder.

"Nnhh! Wh-Who's that?" she whispered, pointing from beneath the chair-line.

"Shh! I'm trying to listen!"

Like the others, he was paying attention to the Rector's long exposition on the University's history. None of them seemed to notice the robed, cowled figure. Or if they did, they dared show no sign.

She'd have to watch out for it. Make sure she stayed wherever it was not.

Three years. She didn't have much time.

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Well she gave it a wholehearted effort. But as the days passed (But did they? Since when did days feel shorter than minutes?) the Upside-Down University seemed ever less a university to Mikoro.

Was this one of those new-age religions? Or was the whole thing a performance?

Before anything else there was the building. Twelve floors. The entrance and foyer were on the first, a library on the second, and the ceremonial hall on the third. The student quarters, where the fluffy captain spent most of her time, were on the fourth and fifth: there were classrooms, a lecture hall, workspaces, a computer room, a small lounge. But then came several floors of empty space; not till floors ten and eleven did you come to the faculty offices. The Rector's residence was on floor twelve.

There weren't even buttons for those middle floors in the lift. It was as though that space solely existed to emphasise the gulf between professors and students.

She'd continued to use the lift. Just to make a point. She even managed to get in with that Professor Wightman once. How he had blustered and threatened, holding the door with his elbow to stop it closing! But she had stood in the corner with her hands behind her back, just watching him, smiling, and in the end he'd had to relent and spent the whole ride crackling like a bomb on the verge of detonation.

As for her studies themselves, it turned out the University did have three departments: an Economic Reality Department, a Biological Reality Department, and a Historical Reality Department. In accordance the course was structured into three parts, none of which, it seemed to her, had a great deal to do with any reality she recognised.

For example, everything taught in the classes in Economic Reality, whose head was called Professor Lecter, was centred on a notion that all living beings, including humans, were atomised units – like automatons, say, or viruses – whose sole purpose in life was to consume as much as they could. Indeed, they'd consume each other if they could get away with it, so the textbooks said, and really should, if not for all those unnatural and inefficient regulations put in place by governments to stop it.

The prospect excited Mikoro at first, till she realised this was not the gentle, caring consumption she was used to. No, you were meant to use your teeth – or worse still, eat people in ways that didn't even look like eating. For example you could force them to work with no effective pay or rest, in conditions that

guaranteed injuries and ill health, and to the extent you lived off their energy the effect was much the same as forcibly swallowing and absorbing it off them. Apparently all rational people were meant to do this – no, not even meant to, but *did*, as a matter of hard scientific law.

There was supposedly no limit to this drive to consume. It was natural that everyone desired to keep consuming till there was nothing left to consume, Lecter said.

Mikoro didn't get that one at all. Even with her fabled appetite, she knew that when she was full she was full.

These precepts were introduced in the first week. After no more than this cursory skim, the course turned immediately to abstract quantitative modelling of this mutual consumption: that is, reams and reams of abstract statistical projections on patterns by which people ate each other in different scenarios, at small and large scales and to varying levels of complexity. By that point everything was expressed strictly in numbers and formulae, and Mikoro quickly found herself sidelined. If she so much as mentioned any aspect of reality that couldn't be measured in fixed quantities – like loving relationships, feelings, stories, cultures, flavours or cuddles – she'd get stared at fearfully, as if she spoke some forbidden language, or pityingly as though she just didn't understand the way life worked. Then things would go on as if she'd said nothing at all.

The classes in Biological Reality were little better. This department was led by a Professor Bochs, who opened with a week on principles every bit as surreal as her colleague's in Economic Reality. According to her, everything that living beings did could be reduced to the pursuit of two goals: survival and reproduction. Everything you felt, thought, said or did, she explained, was either about staying alive, or passing your genes to the next generation in a merciless competitive struggle of all against all.

With no further discussion they'd then sped on to what seemed the guiding framework of all Professor Bochs's research: the division of human life into categories. Binary opposites were best if possible, but on general principle the fewer and simpler the better. The idea was that these categories were governed by basic rules that were fixed, unchanging, and the same for everyone in them. In other words, they made you identical to everyone else in your category and different from everyone in other categories.

There was no end to the divisions the keen Professor had found she could draw. She'd divided people into male and female, light-skinned and dark-skinned, child

and adult, left-handed and right-handed, round-skulled and long-skulled; and all these, the students were taught, were defined by hard common characteristics and fundamentally at odds with each other, with no exceptions, as a matter of natural law.

They'd then be shown case studies of people who didn't fit properly in their categories. There were left-handed people who pretended to work hard, for example, or adults who enjoyed video games, or people whose genitalia expressed both male and female characteristics. These would then be diagnosed with a raft of syndromes and disorders to explain their deviance from biological reality. Maybe the lefty believed she could perform as well as right-handed people, for instance. According to Bochs, this was a common mental disease caused by listening to social justice activists, who pretended to be scientific but were actually pushing a political agenda rooted in present-day ideological values, not facts of timeless reality. Likewise the elderly *Smash Brothers* pro had no doubt been urinated on in infancy by his mother.

Finally there were the lessons in Historical Reality. The head of this department happened to be that Professor Wightman of elevator confrontation fame, and if his bristling manner had set Mikoro reeling then it was nothing compared to his curriculum.

Despite their tag, these classes taught only the history of a tiny portion of the world: namely, the western part of the European Peninsula and a few boatloads of its people who had gone across the sea and got big. It was a highly suspect history too, completely different from that she'd learnt off Tamamo (who needless to say had exposed her to countless primary sources, diverse perspectives and immersive field trips), let alone what she knew of the world from those evenings Rin sat her down to watch and discuss the news. Europe, everyone knew, was the shambles of the world: a troubled backwater out at the edge of the Great Continent, whose warlike tribes shook their spears atop hilltops in their petty and incessant squabbles for territory. Only the more stable Celtic Union and Federation of Southern Slavs, both at its fringes, had proved exceptions.

These classes, on the other hand, framed the West Europeans and their offshoot settler societies as the only people who mattered – indeed, not only that, but as a blessed subset of humans, separate from and superior to those in the rest of the world. Other peoples and continents barely featured save as battlegrounds for Europe's moralising invasions and laboratories for its supposed improvement projects, which as they'd spread through the world, according to Wightman, had

increased its peace, prosperity and happiness in linear proportion. As for those non-European peoples – that is, the majority of humankind – the programme characterised them in such terms of frightening coarseness and savagery as even the real Europeans, Mikoro knew, were spared; even in, say, the notoriously ribald media of the Mongol Republic or the city-states of the Swahili Coast, let alone the scientific journals of Cusco and Sakhalin.

“Nyeh,” she reflected to the Chaos Serpent. “I don’t think reality from this Wightman’s perspective is the same as reality for everyone else.”

And yet, all these tenets were taught rigidly, as if they were objective fact; this was a course in Reality after all. Indeed, there seemed to be only one Reality, and only one way to learn it: namely, to receive information that flowed from top to bottom. Any attempt to discuss, debate or challenge it, they seemed to believe, was only bound to confuse one’s understanding.

Mikoro quickly learnt the futility of trying. Her fellow students came to groan in irritation, shuffle away, or bury themselves in their texts the moment they saw her open her mouth. On occasion she even got Riya the Ruthless in her class. Whenever she heard Mikoro speak, that permanent rainbows-and-butterflies grin would fall from her face to be replaced by a fed-up pout, and she’d fiddle with her smartphone while muttering common-sense wisdom like: “But that’s just reality.” “Why do you ask such annoying questions?” “No it’s like that, and I know because I’m from a developing country.”

What even was that? – Mikoro wondered when she heard the last one. Aren’t all countries developing, as in, having room to improve? Developing as opposed to what? Falling apart?

She considered seeking out the professors for a frank discussion, but as it turned out she got little chance to interact with the three Doctors of Reality. Aside from the odd lecture, most of the teaching was taken by PhD students on the side of their own studies. They were unpaid, irritable, and reliably exhausted. They hated dealing with Mikoro’s critical questions, and on one afternoon, after some particularly determined pestering in the corridor after class, she even drove one to the brink of tears. Instead of answering, he then explained to Mikoro that he’d be kicked off his course if he didn’t teach thirty lessons a week, and pleaded with her, practically on his knees, to sit through lessons in silence so he could just get it over with quickly.

“But all this stuff – it isn’t real!” she insisted. “How can they call it Reality if it’s ignoring real things? How about things like, like – how much we love our friends?”

Or how not everyone wants to have children? Or how the Algerians tried to bring peace to France but gave up because the French valley-tribes were too full of – ”

And then she'd stopped, because suddenly it felt like the corridor's walls and ceiling dripped with blood.

There – at the end of the corridor! That phantom, in its brown robe and cowl, with its diamond eye-slots, its unbroken stare, its tasselled yellow string from shoulder to shoulder...

It just stood there. Looking right at her.

Her heartbeat raced off into turmoil. She felt the veins bulge on her hands, her arms, the blood within replaced by liquid fear. And her stomach – her stomach! It was like its bottom had dropped out and everything in it was falling, falling, falling...

The PhD student hurried away. Mikoro dragged herself in pursuit, around a corner. The air unfroze. She could breathe again.

“No more, please,” the rattled fellow begged her. “I have to get back to – ”

“Just tell me who that is!” said Mikoro. “They're terrifying! What is someone like that doing in a university?”

She blocked the corridor. He wasn't getting away. She needed an answer.

He mumbled at last: “The algojo.”

The word seemed to steal the breath from his throat.

“You mustn't mention it,” he croaked. “Don't even think about it. Just stay disciplined. Focus on your work.”

He pushed past and hurried away.

Mikoro poked her head back round the corner. The dreadful shape was gone.

“What's an...?”

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They didn't like her. They really didn't like her. Six months in (Was it really six months already?) that much was obvious.

But she had to challenge them. She had to. If she sat quietly and absorbed these lessons for too long, they felt like poison oozing through the folds of her cortex. Mutating her. Converting her into a meaningless, characterless, self-seeking particle, severed from her hopes and memories, from everyone she cared about, from the living world itself. A unit of animate nothing, whose every act – each swish of her hair, pick of her nose, chomp of a burger – was about prolonging her

life, or spamming out babies, or devouring as much of other's people's stuff as she could.

That wasn't her. That wasn't Ibaraki Mikoro, who belonged by her nature in a joyful and exciting universe filled with friends and cuddles and flavours and adventures. Even the very act of eating, that primary consumptive drive, was for Mikoro an act of care, compassion and fun. Shared fun, at that. She swallowed her friends not to hurt them, nor to take from them, but to love them.

Mikoro's very existence, in other words, was a challenge to the university's Reality. And vice versa: it seemed to be telling her she wasn't real.

Good luck with that.

So of course, they hated her for it. They hated the way her questions shattered the spell, sliced through their webs of unreal reality. They hated her eccentric coat and hat, her outrageous pink hair, her fluffiness, her hyper voice, her feline ears and tail, for these together amounted to a double violation: first of the categories of reality she was supposed to fall under, and second of the entire educational ethos by which students were expected to learn them – that is, to listen, obey, and recite in a pretentious register of speech, thus denoting the objectivity of their regurgitations. Professor Wightman hated her most of all, and he turned red as a gammon, foaming beneath his already-foamy moustache, whenever Mikoro spoke of the majority of humankind as though they were actual people, or asked about countries he insisted were not important, or suggested people today weren't necessarily better or cleverer than people in ancient times.

After all, Mikoro knew some of the latter. Who was cleverer than Tamamo or Scáthach?

She'd even got Scáthach an electric toothbrush as a Lunar New Year present, and she'd worked it out without looking at the instructions.

But it wasn't just the teaching staff. Mikoro's stubbornness irked even the students.

Such as one morning when she asked a frantic young lady in the study room: "Ooh, what's that?"

"It's my CV," the student replied. "I have to fill it in using the exact format and fonts it says in the advice, or no-one will employ me after I graduate."

"A see-vee?" Mikoro looked at it, puzzled. "Aha!" – she realised. "It's like a personal profile, right? Um. But this..."

She skimmed it. It seemed to boast that this student was good at all things.

“Um, I don’t want to be rude, but...can anybody be that good at everything? What about things you don’t like, or have problems with? And why haven’t you mentioned the foods you like, or your favourite animals, or...”

“Because employers don’t care about such stupid things!” snapped the student. “This is the way you have to do it!”

“It...is? Why? Isn’t it better to be real and honest?”

“No, it’s better to have a job and not starve!”

“I don’t get it,” said Mikoro, totally flummoxed now. “Who’s gonna let you starve? And where do they ask you to make up all sorts of stuff and pretend you’re...ooh. Ooh! You’re not from the English Warring States, are you? That’s it, isn’t it! Waah, that must be terrible, I’m so sorr-”

“What the hell? No, I’m from Mumbai!”

“Nyah! But then...what do you mean no-one will, um, *employ* you? Don’t you just tell the nice people in the government agency what kind of work you’d like to do? I have friends who did that, and they gave them tea and really nice cookies while they helped them find something exactly right for them! And in the meantime you get the Citizen Income, don’t you? Tamamo said Marathaland has one of the best in the world!”

The student stared at her as though she were from another planet. Then she lost her cool, flung down her pen and scrabbled her hair in her hands. “Aaah, go away, I have to live in reality!” she panicked. “I don’t have time for this idealism, just leave me alone!”

Another student was working himself into a frenzy nearby.

“Um, what’s wrong?” Mikoro inquired, as gently as she could this time. “Can I help?”

“Naah, g-go away, I have to get this done!” he stammered. “I have to finish this essay by noon, but it has to be three thousand words and I’m stuck at three thousand and one! Aaah! I don’t know what to do!”

“Um – you’re following the word limits? But they’re just guidelines, right? You don’t have to have exactly...ooh, I see! You’re gonna get it published in a journal or newspaper, so there’s limited space!”

“No, no, it’s for Professor Bochs’s class – ”

“But...what’s wrong then? It looks fine!”

“*Three thousand words!*” he screeched, inexplicably. “It can’t be more than *three thousand words!* Don’t you understand?” It was like he expected to be hauled before a firing squad if he didn’t keep to the word limit.

“Um, um, nope? I don’t understand at all. Isn’t the argument more important than the length?” Tamamo had taught her that though brevity was considerate to the reader, different people expressed themselves through different styles and should never be punished for speaking in their authentic voices. Furthermore, life was complex, and if you had something to say about it then you should take the space you needed to say it properly.

Tamamo had also said: give a task the time you need to do it well. So when the student didn’t reply, she suggested: “How about getting them to extend the deadline then?”

The student gawked at her as if she’d just suggested murdering the Rector.

Then she saw the title.

“A *discussion on the difference between friendship and sexual relationships*,” she read out. “But...there isn’t a difference? I love my friends, and we do sexy things together all the time! Aren’t relationships whatever people want them to be?”

The student slammed his palms on the desk and opened his mouth to scream. Scarcely succeeding not to, he waved dismissively and hunched over his paper.

“Reality is reality,” he said. “If you don’t understand then go away.”

“Nyah.”

Well, there was no point, she decided. Clearly they resented everything she said, so she turned to go look for some snacks instead.

“I don’t get it at all,” she muttered to herself. “What kind of world do these people live – *ghh!*”

Hsssssssss! Hssss, hssss!

High brown hood, yellow band, eye-slots. Staring at her through the window in the study room door.

Danger! Extreme danger!

She blinked. It had gone.

The room hadn’t changed, but deep dark dread gnawed on her bones.

“Rrrrrhh. I need some tea. Are you there, Miss Snake? I wish you could come out and scratch my chin.”

She felt something akin to tiny scratches. Not under her chin, but on it. From the inside.

“Nyah. It’s not quite the same. But, thank you for the effort. You’re nice!”

She stepped out into the lounge – and saw Riya the Ruthless goading a student who was trying to rest.

“Oh, I’m so, so *happy!* Are you happy? Are you happy? Why aren’t you happy?”

The young man was sat on a cushioned bench by the window, facing straight into the trees. He looked like he wanted no more than to catch a breath and get through his sandwich before his next class, but the little rogue was dancing around him, grabbing him by the shoulder or bending down to grin in his face.

“Come on! You should be *haaappy!* Think about all those people who have less than you!”

Then he uttered a wail with his mouth full; Riya had jammed her fingers into his lips, viciously, and was attempting to yank their ends into a smile.

“Hey!” Mikoro yelled on instinct. “Leave him alone, you bully! I know what you are, and I’m gonna stop you!”

Riya’s grin faded right there. She turned away, as though to permit Mikoro to enter her view would spoil it, then broke into a happy-happy solo as she skipped off round the corner.

Mikoro considered following her. A chance to confront the Bane alone. Yet she couldn’t bring herself to go that way. She had an eerie premonition that the algojo was in that corridor.

She approached the student. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said, obviously shaken. “Please – just let me finish. I have to get to class in three minutes.”

Messy hair, freckles. He was cute. Mikoro felt a forceful desire to hug him, but not wishing to upset him further, she backed off. If there was one thing she’d learnt here, it was that these people rarely reacted in the ways she was used to.

“Hey. Thank you,” the young man called after her.

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How long had she been here? A year and a half? Two? The months flew by so fast she couldn’t keep track.

“Bweh. I haven’t learnt anything.”

Sstay on your path...ssteady...sstop the Bane...

“I know. But don’t you feel we’re really not getting anywhere?”

It wasn’t as though she hadn’t tried. As the purposelessness of the Master of Reality course had sank in, she’d switched her focus to keeping that Riya under observation. She’d hoped for a chance to catch her off guard – to drop a doorplate on her head, say, or scope out potential allies among suspicious students or staff. No such luck.

Mikoro grew convinced that Riya was avoiding direct confrontations with her on purpose. She always sat at the far end of classrooms, took cover in crowds of students, or scarpered as soon as she saw her coming. The professors all gushingly approved of her, and the students either played along with her happiness-theatrics or did their best to steer clear of her. Even when Mikoro caught her abusing them, which was often, they never fought back or complained; which took some restraint, given her knack for catching them at their most depressed or exhausted then barraging them with song and dance, happiness hysterics, or shame for their 'selfish' and 'entitled' expressions of misery.

"You need to learn *gratitude!*" she once sang, spiritedly tickling the ribs of a young lady who'd collapsed from anxiety on learning from one of the Biological Reality classes that her attraction to women was a mental illness. As the tickling failed to stir her from her despondence, Riya grew peeved. "You're so selfish, moping around where everyone can see you," she said matter-of-factly, twanging the student's nose. "Don't you realise there are people in developing countries who don't have any of the opportunities you do? Stop thinking only about yourself. Be *happy*, like me!" And having reduced that face to tears, she intoxicated herself on her bliss once more to yell, so loud that everyone could hear it: "I choose to be haaappy!"

Once or twice, Mikoro happened upon Riya studying alone in the computer room or dancing in front of a window. But each time that happened the air seemed to close dark on her, seething, crackling, and the Chaos Serpent would hiss, and her blood would curdle, and she'd turn to find the algojo cutting her with its gaze. It burnt on her skin, burnt through to her very soul as though it sought to rip it out for scrutiny – to turn it round, scan it drop by drop for evidence of sin. Then it would walk away, and by the time Mikoro recovered Riya the Bane had vanished.

They were more frequent now. Her algojo encounters. The more she contested the teachings, wrote what she liked, or flouted the countless stupid little rules (no students in lifts, three-hour limits on library book loans, no drinking water in tests, and of course, no pink hair), the more she found those leering diamonds pinpointing her down a corridor, through a window, or from the back of a room. Before she knew it it was happening at least once a day.

The strange thing was that ordinarily she'd just go right up to an idiot like that and yank off its hood. She should, she realised, and decided she would – but each time she saw it her resolve went to steam.

It wasn't merely frightening. It was fright. The algojo was fear itself.

Why? A godly presence, perhaps? Or a spectral one? Surely supernatural, at least. A figment of her nightmares? The living coalescence of all the terror and disgust her loving upbringing had spared her?

It wasn't just some person in a costume, that much felt certain. It was chillingly unreal.

Even her friend, the divine embodiment of chaos, was horrified by it.

She wished Mother Rin was with her. Holding her hand. Stroking her hair. Whispering in her pointy ear that she would protect her. Rin knew how to stand up to things on that level.

If only for a stomach to hide in. Somewhere this thing couldn't reach. Strong flesh.

Dari had it so good.

A tap on the shoulder. She jumped – but it was only the PhD student who took her Biological Reality classes.

“Professor Bochs wants to see you,” he said wearily. “Tenth floor.”

“Nyah. Me?”

“Yeah. You.”

Mikoro wrinkled her nose. She'd never been to the upper floors before. She hopped in the lift, made sure her hat was on tight, straightened her coat, and pressed the button marked '10'.

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“Miss Ibaraki,” the professor acknowledged her, not getting up from her desk. “Come in.”

“Um. You wanted to speak with me?”

“Just a quick chat. Please, take a seat.”

Mikoro regarded her distrustfully. Her office was too tidy. Neatly-arranged files and folders, stationary lined up in trays, and too many right-angled corners – the desks, the walls, the filing cabinets, the window frames. And the posters: they were all charts with lines down the middle to demark the supposed differences between, say, male and female brains, or northerners and southerners, or adults and children.

The obligatory row of phallic figurines lined the edge of her desk. Presumably they were meant to trigger thoughts about survival and reproduction.

"I understand you've been finding your studies difficult," said the head of department.

"Um, yeah," said Mikoro. "None of it makes any sense. It's like it's all some made-up world, completely different from the real one. Only, you treat it like it's real and find problems with the real one for not fitting it!"

The professor adjusted her glasses. Rather than respond, she typed something up on her computer.

"Why?" Mikoro pressed her. "Where do you get all these crazy ideas, about, um..." – she nodded at one of the posters – "like that! Splitting everybody into this group or that? Real people aren't like that! Or, the horrible idea that you can only gain things by taking them from someone else, or that if your people have dark skin then they don't have real culture, or, or – um, are you even listening?"

"Hmhm. Yes I see." The keyboard rattled on.

Then the academic folded her hands and studied Mikoro. Watched her for a minute or two, just like that. Eventually, as Mikoro began to wonder if she should say something, the professor sighed, and told her, sympathetically:

"I know these things are hard to understand. The real world is just so complicated sometimes, is it not?"

"Um – yeah? That's what I'm saying! It is complicated! It's like you're all pretending it's simple when it's not!"

Tap tap tap tap. Was the professor taking notes?

"It's just science, I'm afraid," said Bochs when she'd finished this round of typing. "Everything we do here adheres to the highest standard of academic discipline. That's why we understand the laws of reality. They're facts – that's all. Your trouble, Miss Ibaraki, is that you're too attached to your value judgements to see things objectively."

Something in what she'd just heard unsettled Mikoro. "How is it objective to say that cat-girls don't exist?" she fired back. "Look at these ears, this tail! I exist, don't I?"

"See? You speak with too much emotion. That means your words cannot be admitted as legitimate argument."

"Legitimate...but, but...I exist..."

"Besides – that's not what I asked you here to discuss. Here. Your most recent essay exemplifies the problem."

Professor Bochs picked up the only loose wad of papers on her desk – a copy of Mikoro's work – and placed it in front of the ruffled captain.

“Nyah. So much red...”

It was a paper on the structure-to-function adaptations of the human digestive system. This was familiar terrain to Mikoro, not only from rich experience of jiggling the structures in question but also from Tamamo’s explanations of her protective shrinking spell. It was actually a masterwork of chemistry as much as of magic. It wasn’t enough to be simply ‘acid-resistant’, it had to account for the diverse combinations of fluids, enzymes and microorganisms present in different parts of the digestive tract and neutralise the potentially injurious mechanisms of each of them specifically. Now Mikoro was never going to memorise that entire cornucopia of terms and formulae, but there was no question as to whether her field expertise, so to say, equipped her to engage with this topic at Master’s level.

“Um. I can’t read your handwriting. What’s wrong with what I wrote?”

“Words, for a start,” said the professor. “The word limit was three thousand words. You wrote three thousand, three hundred and twelve. You have to stay within the limit, otherwise we are within our rights to discount the entire piece.”

“Um, no you’re not? What’s wrong with it being a little longer? I cut it as much as I could! Are you asking me to keep cutting it even if it loses important stuff and worsens the argument? How can the number of words be more important than what they mean?”

“It is, for a student. The pillars of Reality are built of discipline, remember. The integrity of the entire scientific enterprise collapses if you do not respect the established authority. When you’re a Doctor of Reality you can write as many words as you like.”

“B-But you just said...*objective!* That means it should be the same for everybody, doesn’t it? Tummies are tummies! How *established* you are doesn’t change that!”

More typing. Then the professor flipped the papers in Mikoro’s hands and tapped on the back.

“Your references are also wrong,” she said. “It is essential you reference in the Oxbridge Style.”

“But the style you all use is silly!” said Mikoro. “It puts things in a wonky order and depends on those abbreviations in that weird Old Roman language you use for everything. Most people I know wouldn’t understand that! I’ve done it like this so anyone can look at it and immediately know what it means!”

“Not enough sources, either. Too much personal experience. Students aren’t capable of original contributions; you can only do that when you’re an accredited Doctor of Reality.” She paused for another spell of hammering. Then she added:

“Professor Wightman saw this, you know? I had to sit him down. He was furious at how much research from Asian universities you cited. Those places are dubious. You have to rely more on European and American scholars.”

Mikoro opened and shut her mouth, but there was no stopping the professor now.

“He also wishes you to know you nearly gave him a stroke yesterday. That class, where you criticised the government of Spain – it took him all afternoon to recover. He asked me to point out that as a matter of historical fact, everything the Spanish have done is heroic.”

“Bweh. Just because the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is funding his project...”

“And good lord, your language,” the professor drove on. “This is not academic language. ‘Squidgy’? ‘Wibbly’? These are not scholarly terms, and your use of them severely undermines the validity of your work.”

“But it is squidgy! How else am I supposed to describe what it’s like when you squeeze it? Have you ever even touched villi before?”

Tap tap tap tap.

“You haven’t, have you? Gwah, forget villi, I bet you’ve never even been in a stomach! When you say experience, do you mean actual experience? Or do you mean – ”

Bochs threw up her hands in frustration. “The problem you have, Miss Ibaraki,” she maintained, “is that you lack discipline. With the proper discipline, you would comprehend that our faculty’s power and status flows from our more experienced understanding of how Reality works. Listening obediently and following the correct procedures as set out by those more experienced than you is the only path to becoming a Master of Reality.”

“Professor Bochs?” said Mikoro.

“Yes, Miss Ibaraki?”

“Why did your department cover up the research findings about the chimpanzees who have sex to become better friends?”

The professor looked momentarily alarmed. “Wh-What research?”

“I saw it. Someone leaked it on the internet. You censored it because it goes against what you said about everything being about reproduction, didn’t you?”

“I rest my case,” said Bochs, recovering quickly. “You lack the necessary discipline.” And straight away she was tapping energetically on her keyboard.

“Are you objective?” The cat-girl was growing annoyed now. “Or is it all, um – value judgements? Like, you know, you don’t think sex is for reproduction, you think it *should be* for reproduction. And Professor Lecter thinks all people *should* compete with each other; and Professor Wightman thinks people like himself *should* have power over everyone. You’ve just made it all up, haven’t you? You’ve made it all up because you want to feel you’re better than everyone else. Well if that’s the world you want, why don’t you just come out and say it? Don’t try to trick people by calling it science, or nature, or reality.”

Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap.

She stopped tapping. A long silence in which the immediacy of Mikoro’s critique faded, replaced by a rising sense of expectation.

At last the professor announced her decision.

“In ordinary circumstances, your undisciplined attitude, your disrespect for the staff and your brazen flouting of the rules would get you stripped of your progress and expelled. You would be banned from further applications to this institution, and blacklisted from any and all employment within the academic sector. However – ”

“No I wouldn’t!” interrupted Mikoro. Her voice was heated now, her hands balled into fists. “I wouldn’t, because none of it is real! Your rules, your course content, your ‘employments’ – it’s all in your imagination! Maybe even this university isn’t real! I don’t know where you think you are, but where I come from academics care about the truth, and about empowering other people, not just their own power or the rules for their own sake!”

“However,” the professor persisted. “On the grounds that your defiance is a medical pathology outside your control and not a conscious choice – that is to say, diminished responsibility – the faculty has charitably determined to allow you to complete your studies.”

Mikoro stood up to reject this out of hand – but then the office faded, soothing shadows enswathed her, stars appeared...

Wordsss...only wordsss. Sstay on your path. Sseek what matters. Sstop the Bane...

The office blurred back in.

“Pfft. Fine,” said Mikoro. “Nheh. Thank you, I guess.”

“You may go.”

Mikoro turned to leave. She stopped at the door.

“By the way,” she said, “you know the Bane of Ruthlessness is running loose in your building?”

“Do you have a reference for that?” said Professor Bochs.

“Meh. I thought you’d say that. Think what you want then.”

She grumbled all the way down.

“At least they won’t throw me out I guess,” she said. “We’ve got, um...a year left? There’s got to be a way to trap...the...”

The doors dinged open on the third floor (the ceremony hall’s toilets were better than the student ones) to reveal Riya the Ruthless aggravating a wound-up student in the corridor.

“I’m from Heunglung!” he protested desperately. “I’m not from the Wei Empire, those people are oppressing us! I won’t have my name attached to them!”

“It’s just the system,” stated Riya. She had on a face of pouty displeasure; spoke as though through her nose to a mosquito. “Heunglung isn’t recognised as an independent country, so you’re from the Wei Empire.”

“But they arrested my parents!” the student erupted, rocking violently as his trauma overcame him. “They kidnapped my best friend! They destroyed my life! I am not from the Wei Empire! I’m from Heunglung!”

Riya didn’t even condescend to look at him, just walked around him as he tried to block her way. “I have to follow the rules,” she said. “I’m the editor.”

“Take my article out then,” demanded the student. “I won’t appear in the university journal if you misrepresent me like that!”

“Why must you make such a fuss?” sang Riya in a seriously put-out tone; even in this mode her words had a mocking musicality. “The rules are the rules.”

“She’s the editor of their journal now?” said Mikoro to herself. “Uh-oh.”

She collected her courage and marched from the elevator, making to intercept them – then screamed as the algojo burst through the double doors in front of her.

“Wh-What do you want?” she yelled, her skin turning to ice. “Get out of my way! I don’t know what you want with me!”

That brown hood pressed forward. Dark eyes in anonymous yellow, skewering her soul.

“Who even are you? Go! J-Just go! You’re too scary! You shouldn’t be in a place like this!”

The algojo’s glove reached behind its robe. It returned with a bamboo cane.

Tap, tap, it went in its opposite hand.

A crack of lightning – and it vanished.

Mikoro staggered to the nearest bench and sat down. Pulled off her hat. Dabbed the sweat from her forehead with her coated arm.

“Faaaaah, that thing! It’s evil...”

Sssupreme evil...sssoaked in blood...ssseeks your screams...

Could she stop that thing?

No – the very thought was absurd. It was solid fear, built into the walls, as permanent as the walls of the universe...

虎

If Professor Bochs’s concession to Mikoro had come across as a reprieve, the devastating truth was made clear at her next Biological Reality lecture.

Mikoro sat with arms folded, half-watching, really not interested anymore, as the professor strode to the lectern, tapped a remote control – and brought up a full-size image of Mikoro’s face on the big screen, complete with medical labels commenting on her hat, eyes, ears, teeth and expression.

“Mikoroism,” she addressed the hall full of students, “is a neurological disorder characterised by the following symptoms: a delusion that you know better than those more experienced than you; an obsessive defiance of rules and regulations; inappropriate language in both speech and writing; unrealistic notions, or in more extreme cases hallucinations, about animal hybridity, voyages through gastrointestinal tracts, and/or having historical or legendary characters as imaginary friends...”

The demonstration came complete with printed materials and a PowerPoint presentation as the professor set out to the rapt crowd how people with Mikoroism either suffered from a grievous genetic condition, or had grown up with parenting that did not follow the natural division of labour between mothers and fathers – most likely both. In her professional opinion, they were thus not to be hated but pitied for their illness, in spite of the horrendous burden their behaviour imposed on everyone around them.

The students were scribbling down notes. Even Riya – especially Riya, taking everything down on the far side of the room while nodding her head and muttering with nigh-orgasmic glee: “That’s right! Oohh yes, that’s exactly right! Yes, yes, that explains it!”

Mikoro made an attempt to put up with it, just bear it, sit it out. But at three minutes in she could take no more and she smashed her fists on the table, shot to her feet, glared at the professor like a shadow of judgement and stormed straight from the room.

“What – the – heck – was – that?!” she screeched.

Ssssoon! The Bane moves ssssoon! Prepare...prepare...

“Aaahh, fuck the Bane! How *dare* she humiliate me like that? That – when she called me to the office – her long quiets – her notes – she was planning this all along, wasn’t she? Aaaah, that’s horrible! I’m not a disorder! I’m not!”

She stamped off at random. She was lost in a fog of turmoil, her truths shaken, her psychic temple defiled, her sense of direction up in the air. She must have done three or four circuits when the doors swung open, disgorging a flood of cheerful students all chatting about what a bizarre phenomenon Mikoroism was and how painful it must be to live with people with such a heartbreaking syndrome.

“The gene editing research sounded promising though,” she overheard. “Won’t it be great when we can just fiddle with DNA so people like that aren’t born anymore?”

Mikoro snarled.

“I’m done with this place,” she decided.

She wasn’t a student here. She was Captain Mikoro of the *Sea Bunny*. And she’d had enough.

She’d wait till nightfall. That would be the best time to corner Riya the Bane and do what she needed to do.

She didn’t know what. But things had worked themselves out twice before. Wouldn’t the third time be the same?

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That evening, while the students slept, Mikoro prowled down the fourth-floor corridor. Riya would be here somewhere. She always stayed late, picking off stragglers to torment.

The computer room door. Someone was crying in there. Mikoro raised her head to peek through the window.

A student was slumped in front of his computer, slamming his head into his arms. “I just want to die,” he moaned. “Nothing makes sense! It’s so sick, so brutal – I can’t live in a world like this! I just want to die!”

Riya stood over him, arms folded. “So selfish,” she chided him. “There’s nothing wrong with your life. You’re just a pathetic little boy who’s chosen to be negative about everything. Don’t you realise how lucky you are? All those people in developing countries choose to be happy, so why can’t you?”

The words could have sliced through his arteries – he jerked, as though impaled five ways at once, and his agony ripped forth in a bloodcurdling scream. And as it did, Mikoro saw...

“Nya-! His wounds! Nnnah, nnnah, that’s – nnyahh!”

They were grotesque. Blooded red streaks, across his scalp, his shoulders, his back. You didn’t need to be a trauma surgeon to tell that he’d been battered by some horrific blunt instrument till his clothes were torn loose, his hair thrashed from its pores in striking straight lines...

Riya clicked her tongue, shook her head. “So dramatic,” she goaded him on. “You’re such a drama queen. No wonder everybody shuns you. Who has time for negative people like you?”

“*I want to die!*” he shrieked from every sinew. “*I can’t take this pain anymore! I want to die!*”

“Go on then?” said Riya with a shrug. “Die, you little shit. There’s the window, want me to walk you to it? Or should I go get all the students first, since you blatantly want the attention? Ooh, I know! I’ll take pictures of your attention-seeking corpse and put them on the internet so everyone can watch the death of a whining, selfish, spoilt little boy who thinks the world owes him everything.”

He screamed. On and on, he screamed. He slammed the table till the computer monitor collapsed on his head, but he didn’t even notice – would have torn his own body to shreds were his control over it not dissolving in a soot of pain.

Mikoro had seen enough. Her nerves still smouldered from their scorching by Professor Bochs that afternoon, and this torture – that was what this was – was the limit. She shouldered through the door, pointed straight at Riya and yelled: “You sick, cruel, *evil* – how can you treat people like this? Can’t you see how much he’s suffering?”

“Oh, it’s the delusional disorder-girl,” teased Riya, switching her attention, and at once her face lit up in her trademark grin. “Ohh, seeing you makes – me – so – *happy!*” she sang. “Because, because – you know what? *You’ll be dying soon too!* Oh, I’m so happy, so happy...”

“S-Shut up! This is the end!”

Mikoro raised her right hand, and the symbol of the Chaos Serpent – the god inside her, her enthusiasm – it glowed hot...

CRACK!

Lightning – spiked, right-angled like a set of stairs – a bang of a flash, and there was the algojo, right there in her face, eyes arched in judgement, raising high its bamboo cane –

“Nyaaaah!”

Another flash. Then it was gone. So was Riya.

Its thunder crackled long after.

Sssssssss!

Mikoro’s coat trapped her sweat. She was baking.

Then she noticed the anguished young man was still there. She flew to his side, didn’t waste time on asking if he was okay, he evidently wasn’t. Instead she pulled him into her arms, cradled his sobbing head against her shoulder, carefully avoided placing pressure on his gruesome wounds, and spoke softly, as Mother Rin might have: “It’s okay. Shhhh, it’s okay. She can’t hurt you anymore.”

“T-This p-p-place,” he babbled gutturally, as though his lungs were failing. “Th-This p-place...!”

“Shhhh. I know. It isn’t real. *This* is real. Feel this. Hugs are real. Care is real. Love is real.”

He managed to squint up at her, and she realised he was the young man from before, the one she’d thought was cute – freckles, messy hair, the sandwich.

“Want to go somewhere nice and real?” she asked him.

He could only whimper.

Mikoro raised her hand; the serpent symbol had gone cool again. A pale ring of light issued from her fingers.

The young man shrank. The enchantment’s protective magic welled in his open wounds, sealed the last of the bleeding.

In her warm and gentle hands, she lifted him to her mouth.

Gluk.

She could feel him, blundering around in her stomach. But the soft, springy walls settled him quickly. A shelter. A world beyond the gaze of this tower of lies.

The next morning she thought to bring him back out, but he’d gone. A moment of panic – but no, she hadn’t digested him, she’d never do that and the enchantment at any rate prevented it. Rather the insulation had set him free of the nightmare, shown him that this broken reality needn’t be his. He’d awakened to seek his own, or build it, in a universe that was bigger, so much bigger.

A universe which cared.

One fewer soul for Riya the Ruthless to grind. But she still ran loose, and time was running out.

虎

Mikoro wasn't taking any more chances. Next morning's Historical Reality class was the last before they broke up for the final exam, and she showed up for a single purpose: to confront Riya the Bane and take her down come what may.

She burst in. Students looked up, then immediately averted their eyes. They shared whispers, shot her awkward glances. It didn't matter. Where was Riya?

She wasn't there.

"In your seats everyone," said Professor Wightman, marching in behind her. "We have a lot of ground to cover today. You won't have a hope of passing the exam without a clear understanding of how the British Empire single-handedly won both World Wars, despite the Indians whinging about self-inflicted famines just to spite - "

"Where is Riya?" Mikoro demanded.

A shocked silence, as Professor Wightman processed this new affront. Wisps of steam billowed from his ears.

"Excuse you? How dare you speak to - "

"Where! Is! Riya?!"

A collective gasp. Murmurs around the room.

"Don't any of you understand?" Mikoro shouted at them. "Riya carries a terrible evil spirit, if I don't stop her she'll - "

"How DARE you interrupt my lesson?" roared Wightman, whose name should perhaps have provisionally changed to Redman. "You," he boiled like a brick, "you native, with your disrespectful Asian name, your constant sticking up for the primitives, the way you airbrush history to turn civilised order on its - "

"That's enough!" Mikoro screamed right back. "You - all of you! Why don't you see it? You're all stuck in this, this...*illusion*, which you're all making up together," - and she swerved back to the professor: "That's why you're Doctors of Reality, isn't it? Because you *doctor* it! You edit it to make it look exactly how you want it, and all this fear, all this *discipline* is so no-one calls it what it is till no-one even remembers it was something else!"

"*Silence!*" Professor Wightman spluttered in her face, all pretence of scholarly decorum now cast aside. "I - am - Wightman, do you not see? I am civilisation

incarnate! You benighted, sub-human cannibals, you *apes*; without me you have no history! *That* is why you must be disciplined, before you start to think you have proper countries, proper *cultures* – pah! – and next thing you know you’re believing you can govern yourselves, that you’re *people*, with *rights*, and you’re organising into those criminal rabbles you call independence movements, and re-naming streets, and tearing down statues to your betters – *that*, you slanty-eyed cat, is why there’s discipline, because without it you primitive hordes swamp the civilised and drag our severed heads back into the muck!”

The silence that followed stunned even him.

The students were batting their eyelids. It was as though a mask had fallen off Wightman and they were seeing his face for the first time.

“Are you finished yet?” said Mikoro.

His diatribe meant nothing to her. Civilised and primitive, human and sub-human – labels like those belonged to no reality she recognised. When she spoke next, it was instead to voice the insight she’d reached, and to do so with the confidence that comes of channelling Kiyoko.

“This thing you call discipline – it isn’t even discipline. You just want to punish people to make them scared of your power! How is that discipline? Real discipline has nothing to do with punishment, or with fear! It comes from inside – from your *will*! It’s about knowing what you want and having the focus and self-control to work hard for it!”

“DISCIPLINE!” bellowed Wightman, as if he were suddenly dressed in a military overcoat and pith helmet. “DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE!” That was the troops lining up; training their rifles on the crowd.

The lights snapped, thunder cracked, and the world swayed around her.

“N-Nyah! What’s happening?”

DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE! Wightman’s voice no longer. The screech of the void, a hunger from beyond.

“Gwaaaah! What is this?!”

And now she was in the ceremonial hall, only now the walls were dark and spattered with blood.

More precisely, she was on the stage.

The students were there to watch, all of them, not only crammed in the seats but standing packed in the aisles, along those grisly walls, and right there beneath the stage, or rather perhaps, the scaffold. Frightened anticipation lined their faces. Murmurs. Whispers. Breaths of fear.

DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE! Strident now.

The rasp of a dry throat behind her; she seized up as terror clogged in her veins. She spun round, and there on the platform with her was the algojo: brown sleeves tied back at the wristline, hood arched, cane held upright at its chest. Its diamond-shaped eye slots brimmed with high judgement. The unspared rod. The harvest of tears. The hour of punishment had come.

DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE! DISCIPLINE! THREE - HUNDRED - LASHES!

SSSSSSSS! – the Chaos Serpent was going berserk. *SSSSSS! SSSSSS!*
IMPOSSSTOR! OUTSSSSIDE THE BALANCCCE! ALL LIFE SCREAMSSS!

“Nya...! Nya...!” Mikoro panicked, as the bloodthirsty demon raised its cane...

...and just as it began its downward swing, just as it started to blur, something snapped in the cat-girl. It wasn't clear what; more likely it was several somethings at once. Her realisation, worthy of vomit, that there were places in reality where *teachers hit their students*, where *adults assaulted young people and called it discipline*; her stress, degradation and sickness of heart, built to bursting point over three years – three years?! – in this unreal reality where truth was spun inside out, dressed in citations and puffed-up terminology and rammed down a thousand terrified throats; and to be sure, she'd never really recovered from their abuse of the shapes of her beloved mother and sister – its abuse, this horror's abuse, this horror *was* abuse, it was so clear now – for three years ago it might have been, or not, but the wound was as fresh as if it'd been three hours. Her fight-or-flight impulses, feline instincts, and the chaos-divinity hissing in her ear might all have had something to do with it too.

All that – that storm of consciousness – split through her mind in a fraction of a second. It was enough, had to be enough, to transmute her terror to rage.

They wanted to punish her. They wanted to *cane* her.

No.

Time sped up, the cane whooshed down – and the room resounded with gasps, for Mikoro had caught it in her hand and next thing she knew she was tussling with the algojo, locking both hands round his cane as she attempted to yank it out of his hands. The algojo fought back, his arms were stronger, each tug might have shaken her off had she not matched it with the sheer ballistic haphazardness of her jerks; and as they struggled across the stage she grew fiercer, snarling, twisting the stick with newfound ferocity as the algojo resisted, adjusted his step, drew back a fist and attempted to punch her – till something exploded in her brain and she shrieked into a frenzy, and her ears stretched taut, and her tail arched,

and her shock of pink hair frizzed into spikes, and her teeth snapped at the algojo's wrists, her forehead smashed into his face – that staggered him, at last he lost his balance – then all in the same instant, it was cosmic necessity, no-one could stop this now, she wrenched the cane from his hands, kneed him clean in the stomach, then as he fell round on his back – clutched his abdomen with one arm, lifted the other – she leapt astride him, raised his stick, cried, screamed, and battered the wretch into submission.

And as her blows rained from the sky...

...something peculiar happened. On a certain world, far far away, where whatever ruthless energy crystallised in this algojo had spread into the arms of those who'd proffered their egos to it – it began to resonate. When Mikoro knocked him down, the same effect was replicated in each of them: teachers who had been about to lash their pupils; parents about to beat their children, factory owners about to abuse their workers; police officers, immigration officers, soldiers, gangsters, drug lords, sports coaches, priests, mafiosi – every individual, in fact, to whom discipline meant control of those in their power through violence, cruelty and fear. They crashed to the floor in front of their victims, each and every one of them, clutching their winded stomachs; then as the flurry of the algojo's own cane crashed down on his hooded head, his robed chest and shoulders – his twists, his jerks, his hapless cries – “Aaah-hah! Aaaah-ha-hah! Naaaah-ahh!” – were likewise extracted from every last one of that world's writhing, kicking and spluttering fallen authoritarians.

And she couldn't stop. The hurt, the humiliation, the pent-up rage, the shock of that realisation that the world is not alright, not alright at all – the very notion that such hideous realities are imaginable, let alone exist; she lashed and lashed, a hundred times, a hundred and fifty, two hundred; and that faraway world, it buckled beneath the millionfold magnification of this settling of accounts, this payment of dues, the return of the stick; but at about two hundred and fifty blows her arm grew heavy, lactic acid burnt in her muscles and her streaming cries subsided to sobs; and a tiny presence in her mind, growing now, took her by the shoulder and urged her: this isn't you, Ibaraki Mikoro. Stop, please stop. And another voice said no, no, it's too horrible, it can't exist, I have to get rid of it; and the lashes, though they continued, slowed – two hundred and ninety-seven, two hundred and ninety-eight, two hundred and ninety-nine; and at last she held the cane level in both hands, pressed its ends – heaved! – till it snapped in two, and tossed the pieces aside; then she raised a foot, raised it to finish the job with a stamp in the face of this bleating coward, his hood and robes crumpled, his

crooked hands jerked beneath her, his eye-slots stretched into slits of pleading terror...

“Please, Mikoro,” – the voice. It was Mother Rin’s. “My sweet daughter. That’ll do. Please, enough. It’s more than enough.”

“Oh for the love of – gaaah!” – that was Kiyoko. “My sister! Don’t you ever know when to stop?”

“Yes,” stated Mikoro. “I do.”

She lowered her foot – not on the algojo’s head, but back on the floor. She forced herself to close her eyes. To take deep breaths. Then she bent down, locked a hand round the crown of his hood, and ripped it off.

It was a man.

Not fear incarnate, not a demon of supernatural sadism – just a man. Bruised, bleeding, sweating, whimpering, gurgling, cowering, white-eyed with fear; much, indeed, as were all those power-tripping egos in discipline’s guise to whom the reimbursement of their own methods had now been carried out on that faraway world. Now at last they had lived by their own principles. Each of them, like the algojo, had felt their aura of high invulnerable menace snap to vapour. And they’d been stripped of it for good; had flailed and thrashed on their respective scaffolds before those who could never fear them again.

Mikoro realised she still held his hood. She tore it up for good measure, flung away the scraps, then pointed up the aisle.

“Go,” she told him. “Go, and never return.”

She watched him hobble through the stunned crowd of students, and eventually, prevailing in a tumultuous internal battle, managed to add: “And someone get him an ambulance!”

But the students were disappearing.

One by one, the shock of these events, the freshness of the air that blew in at the disintegration of the curtain of disciplinary terror – it was waking them up. They no longer needed to be here. And as they faded, the blood on the walls dried up and flecked away, and the plaster came off, exposing stones which wore out as the building turned ancient; and suddenly the Upside-Down University was a ruin, its corridors crumbling, its window-panes shattered, its walls cracked with holes through which the branches of aged trees crept and twisted...

But Mikoro’s mind was elsewhere.

“Wh-What...what did I just...”

It wass your right...a cossmic impostor...thirrssted for tears...

“I – I’ve never...I didn’t want to hurt him! I just had to protect...”

Your disgusst was the worldsss’...you protected them all. Yet Ruthlessness remainssss...the Bane, now it risesss! Ssstop the Bane...

“Um. Y-Yeah, that’s right. Riya! Where was Riya?”

She hadn’t been in this room. Fear crept back in. It welled once more.

“Gwaah, don’t tell me! This, this...! Was it all just a distraction?”

She looked around. The broken seats, their fabric frayed; the splintered stage, its worn and rotted curtains, the petrified trunk that coiled through the wall...

“I haven’t been back here since the opening ceremony. Was it really so long ago? The Rector, he gave that speech...the Rector...nnyah, that’s right! The Rector! I’d forgotten all about him! How come we never saw him once during the course?”

The Bane, it risesss...hurry...ssstop the Bane...

No time remained. Mikoro dashed up the broken-down hall and out into the elevator chamber. The lift’s doors were battered, its mirror cracked, the wires exposed on its panel of buttons. But it still worked.

Mikoro shut her fist and thumped on the ‘12’.

虎

The Rector. Had he any idea of what had happened on his watch? Of his compromised Master of Reality programme? The dishonesty of his faculty, the duplicity of the course contents, the algojo’s reign of terror in his halls?

As the lift rattled to the apex, part of Mikoro hoped it was all a huge misunderstanding. There’d be a genial meeting, an explanation, maybe a cup of tea. Then a handshake. He’d help her subdue Riya and all would be sorted.

The warier part of Mikoro, more prominent by far at this stage, was bracing herself for a fight.

Ding!

The lights flickered; wires spat sparks. The doors trundled apart. But this wasn’t the twelfth floor. It was the eleventh.

Professors Bochs and Lecter were up against each other in the elevator hall, their index fingers raised and heads tilted back so their all-knowing glares could strike along their noses.

“The problem is her irrationality!” insisted Lecter, his voice doubling in volume every three words. “Realistic assessment of Mikoroism is only possible through

rigorous economic methodology, so clearly her problem is my department's concern!"

"Nonsense, nonsense," said Bochs, feigning cool-headedness. "Mikoroism is a medical pathology. It requires neurological scans and studies of large samples of people raised under single-sex parenting to determine its causes. These are the domain of my discipline, and only my discipline has the analytical tools to research it."

"Now you're behaving irrationally!" Lecter hollered. "It is in your rational self-interest as much as mine that *my* department receives the research grant, in order that the economic phenomenon of Mikoroism be understood and the proper sectors de-regulated so they can resolve it!"

To which Bochs replied: "Keep this up and I shall have to recommend you for a diagnosis! Bald men like you are by nature ashamed and self-effacing. It's in your genes, your hard-wiring – you can't argue with that. Your departure from that nature might be taken as a classic sign of Wronghead's Syndrome, and that would make you mentally unqualified to receive a research grant even if this were your discipline's remit!"

"You – you can't threaten me! All my models indicate things won't work out well for you if you threaten me!"

"Good, because nothing your models predict ever comes true! I deal in facts of nature, and facts of nature aren't threats, they're facts of nature!"

"No, you're allowing normative assumptions to cloud your scientific judgement!"

"At least my discipline is a real science!"

"No-one important listens to people in your discipline!"

"Well your mother was a fridge!"

And now they were jabbing their fingers in one another's faces, and jabs turned to slaps, then slaps into blows, and next moment they were rolling about on the floor, kicking and scuffling and cursing as they tore into one another's hair and clothes.

"Economics is the true science!" Lecter gasped through a chokehold. "Who cares how many penises your father had? You won't rob us of our policy influence!"

"Your self-absorbed number games only undermine the integrity of all scientific endeavour!" shrieked Bochs. "You fool, you'll sink us all!"

"Um, hello?" said Mikoro, as this most disciplined and empirically rigorous brawl clattered about the elevator hall. But neither of its participants noticed her;

they were too busy applying their teeth and elbows to batter each other out of their territories.

Mikoro shrugged and pressed the '12' button again. The doors closed. She could still hear them shouting and swearing as the lift lurched up its final length of shaft.

虎

At last – the top of the Upside-Down University ziggurat.

Here was total silence. The antechamber to the Rector's residence was pristine. It might have been the entrance to a luxury apartment; unlike the anodyne elevator halls of the other floors it had black marbled walls, a red satin bench, and a pair of dark-leaved tropical plants in clay pots.

Mikoro rapped on the door. Gilded, but made of high-security steel. No answer. She thumped it harder.

She pushed. Heavy – but unlocked.

A plush living room with a walled partition across the way. Pillars, tiled flooring, sofas, coffee tables, a television, a speaker system, more jungle plants in pots. Window-walls on either side offered identical views across the treetops.

A metallic smell. Unpleasant.

"Hello?" Mikoro called out. "Um, Mr. Rector? Are you there?"

Receiving no answer, Mikoro trod cautiously across the room. The thick carpet helpfully muffled her footsteps. The scent grew stronger.

She peered past the partition.

Yes, this must be the Rector's study. Filing cabinets, bookshelves, windows, plants – and there he was, slumped at his desk in a two-tier pool of his own blood. Dead.

Mikoro retched, clamped a hand over her mouth; threw the other at the partition to steady herself.

She forced herself to look. His blood still dripped. Trickled from a gaping wound in his back.

Tall, narrow, deep. Savagely neat – a single thrust. Most likely from a hand that had shifted into a dagger-spike.

She'd murdered the Rector.

She was still here.

Mikoro stood dead still. Twitched her ears.

But Riya was an accomplished rogue. She wouldn't see or hear her coming.

She could be anywhere.

The Bane risesss...up, up... – the Chaos Serpent.

Mikoro looked up, but saw only the ceiling fan. Then she noticed a bookcase was ajar. A hidden passage?

Yes – stairs. Stairs leading up.

She crept, so carefully now. Almost tiptoed. Didn't proceed one step without scanning and re-scanning her surroundings.

Another shock awaited on the landing.

"Nyahwah!" For the second time, Mikoro retched.

A stupendous tiger lay dead on its side.

Stupendous was no exaggeration. It stole Mikoro's breath with its bulk, the brilliance of its stripes, the strength of its paws and the silken fluff of its fur. Such fearsome dignity, such terrible beauty! – and to see it in this state wrenched her heart till it physically hurt.

A creature like this wasn't supposed to be dead. Just fundamentally wasn't. Yet here it had fallen, and blood streamed fresh from its wound.

Steaming blood. Literally boiling. Its drips had scorched a hole through the carpet; were already at work on the bare boards beneath.

"She killed this...how? Why? H-How could she kill it..."

The wound?

Yes: a clean gash in its flank. Ruthless. Professional. Sick to behold.

"Ggah. This poor tiger..."

Ruthlessss Bane...Ruthlessss Bane! Sslain a cardinal will...

"Cardinal...will? This tiger? What do you mean?"

She knelt down to lift its beautiful head. Beauty itself. Eyes like drills capped with stars, furnace-forged fur – black ash, white light, orange fire – yet so soft that once compelled to stroke it she wished never to stop. And those whiskers, such dignified whiskers, still warm as they brushed its final breaths on her hand...

Cardinal will...musst exisst, impossible to sslay. Yet sslain, by the Bane...

"Nn-nnyah! B-But, that means..."

Ruthlessnesss. Never sstops. Impossible to sstopt. Sstop the Bane...sstop the Bane...

"How? If she's grown so powerful that she can do even this? Uh-oh. Uh-oh! Are we too late?"

She looked up at the final door. It had to be, because it was like none other in this building. In fact it wasn't even a door. The hall just...ended. There in the wall, and not just the wall of the hallway: an opening.

Mikoro couldn't see through it. Not willing to risk sticking her head or an arm through in case of an ambush, she leapt through in one go and landed in a somersault. Then she realised the reason she hadn't seen through it was that the space beyond was completely black. She couldn't tell where the floor ended and the walls began, or even if those existed anymore.

Riya the Ruthless was right there in front of her.

Still slight, still bristling with hairy blue fire, each sinuous flame twisting deliberate; but now she was back in her suit of cutthroat leather, with its manifold straps and compartments.

Her back was turned. She appeared to be examining an object.

"Come on, you selfish thing," she was humming. "What do you mean I have no power? I'm the Master of Reality now, don't you get it? That means *you* have to give me *your* power so I can make all of Reality *happy*! Happy happy, happy happy, no more negative people!"

Mikoro opened her mouth to shout, then thought better of it and crept up. Her loafers made no sound on this ethereal floor, but she hadn't closed half the distance when Riya looked up, and without turning round, sang:

"Negative people *just – like – you*. Why are you here, Mikoro Disorder? How did you survive the algojo? You're so whingey, always breaking the rules and spoiling life for others. Why didn't you just take your punishment?"

Mikoro didn't answer. She knew better now than to attempt to converse with this Bane at face value. Everything Riya said, everything she did – there was no truth in it. Its sole design was to crucify anyone who stood in her way.

"Aah, no matter," Riya crooned. "We'll have a new era now, and – lucky you! – you've come just in time to watch it dawn! Isn't that *lucky*? Be grateful when you're lucky!"

She turned, grinning from ear to ear. If that weren't her usual expression one might have guessed she'd discovered the gates to a promised land of beaches and eternal sunshine.

She'd certainly discovered something. In her hands was a mirror.

A hand-mirror. An oval glass about the size of Mikoro's face, with a lavender frame and handle. She could see herself in it. Could see the tiny script on its frame

– even from that distance, somehow – and what’s more, though she’d never come across its language, she understood it innately.

It read:

*Beginnings are never beginnings;
the causes sleep behind.
Endings are never endings;
the consequences sail beyond.*

Mikoro stared at it. Its glassy sheen was more beautiful than any non-organic surface she’d ever set eyes on.

And not only beautiful. *Complicated*. She felt like she was taking in more information from that little oval than from all she’d seen in her life put together.

“Does Mikoro Disorder want to know what this is?” Riya teased her. “Sorry not sorry! Only the Master of Reality needs to know about these things – oh yes, that’s me by the way. I’ve won, you know? I’ve won, and ohhh it makes me so *happy*! But don’t start whining again like a negative person. You have so many things to be grateful for, so why don’t you count them? I’ll help you start! ‘I am grateful I have enough food.’ ‘I am grateful I don’t live in a developing country.’ ‘I am grateful Riya has so much empathy and doesn’t shun me.’ ‘I am grateful for – ”

“What do you mean, you’re Master of Reality?” Mikoro interrupted her. “The university’s finished! That stupid course doesn’t exist anymore!”

Riya began to laugh, but it swiftly transcended into a part-sung, part-moaned, part-gurgled eruption of liquefied ecstasy. “Ohhhhhh, you’re so funny it makes me so *haaaa-ppy*! Did you think you become a Master of Reality by getting presented with some crappy piece of paper with the signatures of people who think they’re so important? No no – you do it by *discipline*! Working hard, learning how things work, playing their game till you’re so good you grind them under your heels – ohhhh, it was so much fun! Those reality-professors – they thought they were so great because they could *doctor* it, that a *master* was just some sweet badge to stick on good little students who kept in line. Did you see how the students didn’t care about what they were learning either? Ooh, they were disciplined, everyone here was, all they wanted was power and advancement. But were they disciplined enough? Heeheehee, nope! Pretend discipline isn’t enough! You have to *choose* it! If you want to be happy you have to *choose* to go *aaaaaaaall* the way!”

Like stabbing the Rector and beautiful sacred tigers, Mikoro inferred.

"I'm the real Master of Reality now," Riya warbled on. "I chose to come *aaaaaaall* the way to get this Way-Mirror, and when it stops being a selfish little shit and transfers its power to me, I'll be able to *reach in* and *twist the necks* of anyone whose negativity spoils my happy, happy, *happy* days. Aaah, doesn't that make you *sooo happy?*"

"Reach in..."

It was absurd. She couldn't literally mean it. Could she?

The mirror – suddenly it was terrifying.

"Yes, once it stops being *selfish* and just lets me be happy...stop being – *selfish!*" And here Riya's mood inverted completely – she was shrieking now, beside herself in a bloodthirsty rage, and she shook the mirror like an infant she meant to shake to death as she screamed: "*Selfish! Selfish! Give me your power you selfish, ungrateful machine with your saviour complex, your lack of empathy, your first-world problems!*"

And then – seamlessly – she segued back into her grinning, giggle-moaning happiness trip. "Oh, whatever!" she sang dreamily. "Be entitled then, you don't have to give me anything. I'm the Master of Reality – I'll...just...*take it!*"

And to Mikoro's horror, she flipped the mirror around and picked at its rear with startling precision.

"There we are, my happy happy little switch! If I twist you like *that*, and then shake you like *this* – yes! Yes!"

The glass was rippling, rippling out of its frame – gleaming radiant, erupting in an overflow of molten energy, of a beauty and power incredible beyond Mikoro's power to process it. She wasn't seeing it with her eyes, that much she knew.

"I see it! I see it *and it makes me so happy!*" Riya's exultations shook her so hard now it was a wonder she didn't explode.

Ssssstop the Bane! Ssssstop her now!

"Aaaah, you're too late, Serpent of Chaos! So selfish, so inconsiderate, always doing what you want without thinking what it does to my *happy!* Well now you can't rain on my happy happy days, because now I see *everything*, I can do *anything*, and it's time, it's time for all your stories to end! Because why do you need stories? The only reason you all exist is so I can be *happy happy happy happy happy*, so let's make this a world of perfect happy and *Pop! Pop! Pop!* those silly negative flies!"

Her wiry discipline-fire burst and blazed now, its hair-flames flicking like flagella in rapture. This was an apotheosis. Riya had ascended. She was unstoppable.

“N-Nyah...you can’t just...”

“Oohoo! Let’s start with you, poor silly wanton little Mikoro Disorder! What’s this I see in the Mirror?” She sucked in her breath. “Oooh, it’s called the Chaldea Academy? Oooh! Ooooooh! So many happy little friends, playing and cuddling and rolling around so happy! Well it’s *my* happiness that matters, not yours, so how about I – ”

Mikoro didn’t wait to hear how that sentence ended. Nothing else mattered now – to prise that mirror from the grip of this heartless butcher was the only way to prevent such horrific torments as were never supposed to enter even the wildest fringes of possibility...

The cat-girl lunged into a leap, and reacting to this, Riya moaned for joy: “*Or maybe I’ll just kill you now!*” And suddenly her free hand was a terrible blue spike, and she plunged it around, straight for Mikoro’s throat...

...but just before it made contact, just for an instant, the mirror tilted in her other hand at just such an angle that it caught the corner of Mikoro’s eye...

...and time stopped.

Or rather, it didn’t; it would be more accurate to say that she and the mirror *left* time, because its operations took place on a level of existence where time had no relevance.

In that timeless instant, Mikoro, too, saw everything.

Saw that the Way-Mirror had no power of its own to confer. It merely converted narrative energy from one form to another – or more to the point, reflected the power you already had. Your *meaning*. Reflected it in all its potentialities. Not within the limits of one space and time, but all of them. Fulfilment, mythic, supreme.

She saw it could do nothing for those who sought power. For to do so through discipline alone was to cast aside your meaning; to reduce characters and worlds to objects, data, mere obstacles in your path, and so lose your Connection to them, and with it all your potential for narrative significance. So many had tried; but by the time they got near the Way-Mirror their narrative energy had dissipated, stranding them in meaninglessness. A meaninglessness which accumulated around the mirror as more and more of them came, and so had grown into the Forest of Beginnings and Ends: a stagnant zone whose denizens were stuck in

permanent beginnings – their present realities, which they believed fixed and absolute – and the permanent ends of their unattainable power-goals.

They no longer changed, no longer Connected. They claimed to reality, but in reality rejected it. They had *careers*, but no longer *stories*.

She saw that that was why Riya had had to force its mechanism. Through sheer ruthless discipline, she had done so.

But Mikoro was brimming with this *narrative energy*. She saw this reflected. She was Connected. So Connected. Mikoro's potentialities – they spanned the worlds, released wave after wave of loving and healing fluffy power upon friends and strangers and thousands of admirers she didn't even know she had across the length and breadth of the universe...

...and it could manifest this potentiality. Bring forth Mikoro's ultimate.

What was her ultimate? What, drawn to its pinnacles, was Mikoro's greatest power of all, that which might stand a chance against this deplorable Master of Reality?

Unleassh it! Unleassh it now! Unleasssh your enthussiasm!

Her enthusiasm. The god inside her. She remembered.

The Chaos Serpent?

No. She saw it in the mirror: that was a trap. Riya was the Bane of Ruthlessness. She knew her counterpart too well, would know how to slaughter it. The Serpent hung back within her, knew it too.

Something else?

The divinity inside her. What made something divine? Power alone?

No, what was divinity to Mikoro?

She wasn't religious. She liked temples and places like that when they had nice gardens, cute sculptures, fish in ponds, funny monks with amazing stories, haunting songs, animals wandering about, that sort of thing. She could be friends with gods, could be friends with anyone, if only they were kind to her in turn.

That was it. Friends. Meaning. Connection. Her place in a joyous universe of loving friends – among whom she was immanent, and through whom she transcended.

A universe like that couldn't have a *master*. What it needed was care. A *curator*.

A curator not of *reality* – rigid, stagnant, lonely – but of *realities* – vibrant, endlessly multi-dimensional, thriving.

Loving friendship. What was more sacred than that?

The Way-Mirror flared – a cool, clear wash of cosmic engine fluid. While all else held, it flipped out of Riya’s hand, spun in the air, shrunk to the size of a sweet – what was size, after all? – and tumbled through Mikoro’s mouth. The potentiality: its strongest traces lay in that direction.

Time hadn’t resumed, but something was in motion, Mikoro could feel it. Something formidable beyond measure. Something that rolled up her oesophagus, smooth and sleek like a minty ball bearing, then bounced on her tongue, shot from her lips and wheeled in the air right where Riya’s dagger-hand would thrust when time resumed.

And in her time outside time, Mikoro screamed in a shock of realisation. She’d seen this orb before.

It looked different now. Glossy, a metallic sheen traced with aerodynamic lines and curves. A gap ran round its great circle, and from it verdant energy burst forth. But she knew what it was. Knew it and couldn’t believe it.

“Waaaaaah...! It’s, it’s...!”

...time resumed, and Riya’s dagger-hand deflected off the verdant sphere. It was impervious.

Riya loosed a snarl that most definitely wasn’t happy and recoiled from the blow, staggering back three steps. Where she’d stood, Mikoro landed safely. And the verdant orb – it bounced from the impact, landed at her feet, rolled round them in a slightly wobbly arc then trundled between her and Riya. There it surged into the air then rolled in place, so swift, so slick, and in a single fluid motion, *unfurled* – that is, opened out like a blurry hedgehog: arms, legs, a capped head of brown hair...

...and there she stood, hand outstretched to ward off the scandalised Master of Reality.

The Curator of Realities. A wanderer and chronicler of ten thousand worlds, who loved and was loved in them all.

Her loving friend.

Dari.

虎

“Da...! Da...! Dari?”

A mop of brown hair, longer than Mikoro remembered. The same green tube top, the same anklet, the same face – no, slightly older? Ten years? Twenty? Thirty? Thirty thousand?

She had a teal travelling cloak on her back now. That was new. So was the green cap. It flopped on her head, saggy, stylish. Admittedly adorable.

She was so familiar. So *Dari*. Serene in her stance, at peace with the worlds, if liable to startle at a moment's notice – there, just like that. That nerviness on her face. It was the look Mikoro so often imagined she wore as she stumbled into a giant new world. What is this? Where am I? Is it safe?

Except, she was big now. A little taller than Mikoro. Her original size?

That might have contributed to her startlement. She still wasn't used to it.

Curator *Dari*. Her hazel eyes caught Mikoro's over her shoulder – and she smiled. *Dari's* wonderful smile.

“Waaaaah...”

But she didn't speak. Was this the *Dari* she'd been travelling with? No, it couldn't be – or rather it had to be, sort of, but at a different level of reality. Or something. How could Mikoro describe it? She hadn't the words, hadn't the concepts. A potentiality? A projection? Real or imagined? Both?

Would it be enough?

Well, *Riya* was a projection too.

The Curator had taken *Riya* in now. Identified her as a cosmic threat. The Curator's cheeks were still hot, her irises wide, but her pupils had hardened to steel.

The instinctive animosity was mutual.

“Selfish!” tittered the rogue. Giggles, rising unrestrained – then a detonation in blue-hot rage, lashing, bloody, unbridled. “*Selfish! Selfish! Who is this spoiled, selfish, negative nobody who's crashed my party just to ruin my happy happy happy? Can't you read the air? You have no empathy, no empathy at all!*”

She stamped right up to the observant Curator. Glared into her worried face. Grinned – a broad and blissful grin. Stabbed –

Whoosh – her hand-spike found air. The Curator had dropped backward through an inter-dimensional rift, then as soon as the blow passed, fallen back through another one just in front to land in the same position. The manoeuvre took less than half a second.

And it must have set something off in *Riya* the Ruthless, for now she screamed and screamed, “*No empathy! No empathy!*” as she drove forth her blades, each stab

destined to rip through a critical junction in Curator Dari's anatomy only to miss as she wove gaps in the cosmic curtains as though they were strings on a harp, either to divert those dread blades into otherworldly air or to otherwise phase out and in herself. Those swings and stabs never so much as glanced her, and in the moments in between she continued to study her assailant – her moves, her background, her motives, the chances of a peaceful resolution – till her fluster receded, her frown fell deep, and at last, understanding the nature of the menace before her, she swerved aside, yanked open a rift, and through it a truck of a fist – a fist! – ploughed headlong for the unsuspecting Riya.

It too found air: the rogue backflipped at the final instant, vanished in a cloud of dark smoke, then reappeared, stumbling onto one knee as the fist retracted whence it came.

She leapt to her feet at once, blade-hands brandished.

“So that’s your choice?” she said in incredulity. “You choose to fight me? Me, the Master of Reality! Ahah – ahahah! Aahahahahaah! That’s – ahahah, it’s *funny!* That’s soooooo funny! You know why it’s funny? Because you’re just like those selfish, entitled little first-world shits *who choose to commit suicide and shit their inconvenience onto everyone else even though their lives are fine!*”

To which Mikoro began, “What do you mean, *choose* – ” but Curator Dari waved her arm. No need for that, the gesture seemed to say. She’s made her choice. Now so must we.

“It’s choice,” avowed Riya, in a grin of hermetically-sealed understanding. “It’s choice, it’s always choice. *Choosing* to get hurt, *choosing* to let things upset you – it’s so inconsiderate to everyone else! Don’t you care about anyone other than your sulky little selves? Well I choose to be *haaappy!* Come then, you emotional pollution! Come kill yourselves in my sunshine, and then I’ll help everyone forget about you so the rest of us can be *haaaaa-ppy!*”

“You’re a monster, Riya!” said Mikoro. “No – worse than a monster! Worse than evil! The cruelty in every single thing you do, the way you look for people who are suffering just to hurt them as much you can – there’s no word for that! What made you that way? What even are you?”

“A-ah-ah, I don’t need made-up little words like *evil*,” Riya sang, and now she rose to a crescendo: “I’m just *happy*, that’s all! *Happy!* *Haaaapy!* *Haaaapy!* **HAAAAPY!** **HAAAAPY!**”

Blasts of undiluted glee – they tore through Mikoro’s ears even as she pressed them flat to her head, and through her palms she heard something CRACK! – a

mountain maybe, or a planet. Riya's rapturous cries were shaking the Way-Mirror's protective dimensional pocket to its foundations – then all at once its bounds fractured, caved in, fell to nothing, dropping all three women into the Rector's living room.

Mikoro's cat instincts landed her on her feet. Curator Dari whirled open a rift above her head, through which the suction of someone's giant vacuum cleaner slowed her fall till she landed almost at a standstill, poised, graceful – then stumbled anyway and threw out awkward arms to steady herself. As for Riya, she landed with peerless agility, laughing, chanting **Happy! Happy!**, then she spread her arms and crowed in a climax of jubilation: ***LIKE A ROOM WITHOUT A ROOOOOF!***

Mikoro slammed down her ears again. The shockwaves, they were unbearable, she could see them rippling off the petite rogue as they lacerated the sofas, shattered the glass cabinets, burst the lamps and ceiling lights and slashed the leaves off the plants – and then they blasted away the walls, the ceiling itself, the partition, the study, even the Rector's corpse. Now they stood, exposed at the crown of the forest to the hollow sky of a nascent World of Order, in which every particle, every organism would be bent to the happiness of its final champion or be picked to disembowelled pieces at her whim...

...if only the fluffy captain and her friend the Curator of Realities would get out of her way.

Negative People. Spoiled. Entitled. Well, ruthless discipline – that would get her through their guts, just as it had got her all the way here to the very cusp of her happy happy paradise.

She cast a pout of supreme contempt, then that grin, the grin of a will that would bleed all life to add a note to her song of eternal happiness; and with hair-flames dancing and hand-blades sharp as crystals of death, Riya the Ruthless launched herself at Curator Dari in an uninterrupted drawl of cackling happy-hatred, slashing and chopping and plunging those daggers in such a storm of murderous remorselessness that Mikoro dared not draw close lest it slice her to ribbons. It was the single-minded Riya's only technique it seemed, and the only one she needed. Each strike was disciplined, deliberate, its aim and force calibrated to deliver death in singular precision. Driving those arms, buzzing in the tips of those blades was the will of the Master of Reality herself. Nothing in reality could stop it.

But the Curator of Realities wasn't limited to one reality. She belonged in them all, and with that freedom of movement she leapt and ducked and swerved

through rifts, in and out and through the spaces in between. She carried no weapons of her own of course, she was Dari, she wouldn't hurt anyone. But she had powerful friends, and all of who she was, from cheeks to heart to core, was invested with a stake in all worlds. She would protect them, protect her friend Mikoro, whatever it took – and here she zipped open a rift from which a river of magma tormented forth upon Riya, and here another which blew in a remorseless polar squall, then a rift overhead for a satellite-mounted plasma cannon, then a falling moon, a landslide, a gamma-ray burst. But most often it was that big fat fist that came barrelling through the rift in a strike or a grab, and sometimes a colossal foot – thick yellow pumps, white socks – to stamp or kick at the villain, or otherwise a tongue which in other settings might well have had fun snatching up unsuspecting people, but no-one – absolutely no-one – was going to risk ingesting such lethal fare as this so instead it rolled, pounded and swatted. Yet Riya dodged each of these attempts as though their atoms themselves, by virtue of their reality, were repelled from her at the last; and then she came for Mikoro, who panicked, raised her hands, prepared to grapple to the death even though she knew she had no chance – only for the Curator to pop up in front to shield her, whisk her across the room through a rift, or distract the rogue with a flanking surprise.

After they'd fought a hundred rounds with neither Master nor Curator so much as landing a scrape on the other, the Curator changed her approach. In a reverse of her initial appearance she retracted into her core – so brisk, so proficient – and now contested Riya in that form, rolling and skidding in circles around her, hovering in the air to soak her blows – it was one single elementary particle, nothing could damage it – or launching arcing jolts of verdant energy at her, crackling in her face, or spinning a trail of them in her path which went off like green electric bombs. Mikoro was spellbound; she couldn't believe what she was seeing. This was a Dari who could withdraw into her core or emerge from it at will; who controlled its motions, who must have upgraded, unlocked and learnt to command the full range of its powers and secrets...

...and now she'd unfurled again, she'd had enough, her eyes were storms of hazel indignation. Her strong arms found Riya's shoulderpads and they crashed to the floor, rolling together, wrestling, kicking, screaming – that was all Riya – as they tussled and scrapped in a mortal typhoon of knuckles, blades and terror.

Stop being so negative! – the shriek was so shrill it ripped the sparks from the hollow sky. ***Stop being so negative or I'll carve my happy smile into your face!***

And not willing to be a bystander to this, not standing by while this slaughterer of scholars and gods hurt her friend, Mikoro piled into the mêlée and locked her arms round Riya's waist from behind, and she heaved, and dragged – and Riya snarled, lashed round at her with a bladed arm – *zhoom!* – and that was the Curator, she'd pushed Mikoro through a short-range rift to safety, but it didn't go far enough, Riya's elbow crashed into her cheek, an explosion of pain, and she wailed and fell aside; rolled, recovered, clutched at her jaw, staggered onto one knee and witnessed Riya, her hand pressing the Curator's neck to the floor, the other raised high, a merciless blade, as she cried triumphant: ***I CHOOSE TO BE HAAAA-PPY! HAAAAA-PPY! HAAAAA-PPY!***

Mikoro screamed: "Dari!" She watched – helpless. It happened so fast but felt so slow, every motion in turn...

The blade plunging down, down for Dari's throat...

Dari raising a hand in reflex to block it – exhausted, desperate, twitching...

The blade piercing her hand – or rather, disappearing into it...

Disappearing into a rift.

Then it re-emerged. Next to it, but back the other way: the same arm, thrusting opposite ways in parallel. A second rift? Or the reverse of the first one?

The same arm – the same committed momentum. Re-emerging: tip, blade, wrist, forearm – the downward thrust continued upward. Straight. Fast. Unstoppable.

It didn't stop even when it drove into Riya's own forehead.

Riya the Ruthless gave a bloodcurdling screech – yanked, yanked again, tugged out her dagger-arm, dragged it back through the folding rift. No blood, but the recoil flung her back, made her sway on her feet as her hand-blades became hands again and she clasped them to her wound, lurched, bent at the waist, keeled over...

They were blades of concentrated will. The will of the Master of Reality, disciplined into the sharpest, cruellest daggers in all existence. Nothing could resist them.

Not even the Master of Reality.

She fell on her front, dead in a single blow. Her body vanished. The Bane of Ruthlessness, stunned by the power of connected forces it did not understand, clinked to the floor. Rolled. Slowed into a turn.

Stopped.

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The Curator of Realities had shrunk. Her work here was done. It was almost time to go.

Almost.

On what was now the roof of the Upside-Down University ruin, the three Doctors of Reality knelt in a line. Their heads bent in shame, for theirs was the humility of the vanquished. Only Professor Wightman ventured the occasional glance up at Captain Mikoro.

He looked so old, she thought. Lost. Distraught. A life wasted in service of a lie.

Curator Dari stood before them. She was tiny as a doll. But her raised arm, her pointed finger – those indicated a bollocking, and for a giant nothing was scarier in all the worlds.

It was the only time Mikoro heard the Curator's voice. It was Dari sure enough, but the strange thing was that she didn't hear it with her ears. It was as though she spoke straight into every cell in her body.

You styled yourselves realists, but were content to understand only one reality? Just one apiece? They weren't even real, for goodness's sake! Well, that's enough. Begone – and till you have known at least ten thousand realities, don't ever let me hear you call yourselves realists again.

With those words, three rifts appeared behind the three doctors – a blue one for Lecter, a green one for Bochs, and a red one for Wightman. The Curator of Realities thrust her tiny arm, once, twice, three times; and into the openings the professors were shunted, as though by a great series of gusts.

Her work complete, the Curator turned and walked back to Mikoro – huffing, flushed, her scar still throbbing alarmingly. How it hadn't occurred to Mikoro before she had no idea, but it was only now she realised that when Dari was mad, that scar was so evocative of those little squiggles they drew on foreheads in comics to signify a loss of temper.

But the Curator was swift to calm. She stopped, just a pace away. Seemed to be waiting for something.

Mikoro's hand.

She lowered it. The Curator stepped into her palm and rode it to eye level.

They gazed at each other.

Mikoro had never felt so awed. She was so light in her hand. But that weight was the weight of universes.

“Um. You...you're really Dari, right?”

The Curator nodded.

“Nweh. Does that mean you still...um, um...”

An immediate blush; that sudden tilt of her head. Yes. She did still ‘um, um’. Of course she did. Dari was Dari after all. And the cap only made her cuter.

Mikoro’s awkwardness whooshed away in an instant, and she cried overjoyed: “You do! You do! Awawawa, I can’t believe it, it really is you! B-But, how? You look so, so...”

She couldn’t find the words. Perhaps they weren’t there to be found. And she wouldn’t even if they were. She was shaking, bursting her emotional dams, and her eyelids were welling with tears.

But the Curator of Realities shook her head.

Not yet Mikoro, she seemed to say. Not yet, my dear sweet friend. One day you’ll be ready to know. You will, I promise you. But not yet.

As a child she could never stand it when Kiyoko said that. Still less when after a clear explanation from Rin she understood perfectly. This, however? This, she was okay to believe.

A quake – this reality was buckling. The vacant sky spat sparks.

Curator Dari stared straight into her eyes. You know what you have to do, that look said. You’ve come so far Mikoro. You’re almost there. Please don’t give up now.

“But if it is you...” – Mikoro was fixated. She cared so much for her friend. “If it is you, then that means...the *real* Dari – nyah, I mean, the real Dari who’s still in *my* reality, the you I’m travelling with...it means she’s safe, right? She’s gonna be okay?”

The Curator of Realities tightened into a mighty cringe, as if she’d remembered something extremely embarrassing.

She nodded – only once, and with some effort it had to be said. That was a yes. There might have been an unspoken *but please hurry up* attached to the end of it, but a yes was a yes all the same.

Another quake. Really, it was time.

The Curator pointed at Mikoro’s mouth.

“Um. You want me to eat you?”

A nod. Of course – the Way-Mirror. It was still in her stomach.

Another nod. Go on, she was saying.

The tears really did flow this time. Just one gush, but immense, an immense rush of pride, washing forth to cleanse Mikoro’s frazzled nerves. This conjectural

Curator Dari: her wonderful friend, at the crest of her ride through the realities after how many ages? How many uncountable twists and turns through the landscapes (and *landscapes*) of all-that-exists? And here she was, still happy to let Mikoro eat her. Still her friend. Always and everywhere, her friend.

The fluffy captain wiped away her tears. Opened her mouth, feeling the light but oh-so-weighty steps of the Curator tread up her tongue. The sensation tickled, she could hold no longer; felt a knee rather than a foot, because the little one had stumbled –

GLUCK!

That cool peppermint ball bearing, spiralling down the walls of her gullet. Then she was gone. Back to the potentiality space. Back to everywhere.

The Upside-Down University tremored again, stronger this time. But Captain Mikoro knew what to do.

“Are you ready to go home, Miss Snakey?”

The Chaos Serpent’s hiss was so soft. Did snakes cry too? – she wondered.

Home...home at lasst...

“You’ve been such a great friend. Sorry if it was bumpy. Come and visit my friends and me at the Chaldea Academy, okay?”

Chaoss. Order. Balance. Familiesss, together as one...

“Heehee! Yup, that’s right! Yours and mine – we’re just like each other, aren’t we?”

She crouched over the extinguished blue diamond. The temptation was to wiggle her finger at it, to tell it how naughty it had been. But in her mind she felt the calm hand of Mother Rin rest on her shoulder. Most evil comes from suffering, she’d said. As for the evil that doesn’t, the chosen evil, well, you defeated it – she might have added now. And now it was love, not hurt, that the severed spirit of discipline deserved.

The serpent symbol glowed red on the back of her hand. She touched it to the octahedron. It dissipated, showered up to the sky, to the stars – the stars!

The stars were returning, spinning back in as three cosmic serpents, black, red and blue, drew the curtain of night across the firmament. They’d intertwined, together once more, together as they were always meant to be; and now a howl whooshed in her ears, awakened her spirits, invigorated her, she hadn’t felt it in so, so long. The wind. Real wind – real space, real time! And there were the twinkling stars, the kiss of the cool breath of night on her cheek, and her furry

pink ears twitched for joy as they cast to the distance and picked out the foam and churn of a sea resurgent...

...and then the Upside-Down University, the Forest of Beginnings and Ends – it vanished. All of it. Gone from beneath her feet.

Mikoro's arms and legs flailed as she fell. "Nyaaaaaaaah...!"

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Riya's killing blow was ruthless. She knew this, of course: she'd placed it herself. In fact it was so ruthless that after piercing her forehead it'd ploughed on through the realities till it came smashing through a computer screen in the city of Zamboanga.

In Mikoro's reality this was the primary port of the Sultanate of Mindanao: a thriving realm known for its thousand years of peace under a rich fusion of Islamic and indigenous cultures. But in the reality of this computer's operator, in whose forehead that dagger-hand finally stopped, Zamboanga happened to belong to a Republic of the Philippines.

Not that it mattered. The ensuing events would have been the same in any country.

She stood, shaken. The floor was soaked in blood, but she seemed alright.

"Oh, come on!" she moaned. "Why are there such selfish, negative people who just want to stop me being happy?"

She had to recharge her happiness. Urgently. That meant finding depressive, ungrateful wastes of space to remind herself how miserable they'd chosen to be. To remind herself she wasn't like them. To remind *them*. That always cheered her right up.

The trouble was, no-one was there.

She skipped up the street, singing determinedly: "Happy, Happy, Happy! Happy, Happy, Happy!"

But it was empty. No neighbours, no passers-by, no cars, no jeepneys, no tricycles.

Her lyrics grew half-hearted. She widened her search: the neighbourhood, the shopping mall, the cathedral, the docks, even the ruined fort and the sardine canning factories.

All completely deserted.

"Happy...hap-ppy..."

Her tunes flagged. Then they dried up altogether. She'd realised.

"No," she complained, though only she could hear. "No! This is not – I just chose to be HAPPY! How is that wrong?!"

She set off, searching for a negative face – someone, anyone – off which she might catapult herself back to happy-heaven. Back and forth across her island, then the archipelago, then onto the mainland and from there across the length and breadth of the world...

...but no, no-one. No people, no plants, no animals. Not even a fungus. Only she.

"Hello? Isn't *anyone* here?"

"Over here!"

A reply – but far away. So very far away.

From the edge of the universe?

On its other side, Woland pulled his lips from it. That was the best he could do. It was impossible, even for him, to step across.

She'd chosen it, after all. She'd chosen to sever her Connection in its entirety.

He'd just have to wait till she got here.

It could take a while.

"Hmm! Which way will she run?"

This way or that way? It was all the same, they both led round to the same place eventually. Still...

He tossed a coin. Tails. This way.

She ran that way.

"Damn! Oh well."

He consulted his pocket watch. Yawned.

Well, he could check back later. Four or five quintillion years, perhaps?

Might as well get a few things done in the meantime.

Decide on a token of appreciation for that cat-girl, for instance. She'd been so helpful. One, two, and yes – it counted – three. All there. Things had worked out grand.

Fantastic.

虎

Falling, falling, falling, falling...

"Nyaaaaaaaa – ooff!"

The fluffy captain bounced off an equally fluffy pile and landed safe on her bum.

“Uguh!”

She shook her dazed head. Stood up. At least her hat had stayed on this time.

This was a crater. The crater filled by that sinister forest?

It had gone now. So had the Upside-Down University.

Just an ordinary crater.

A crater – where something had landed, or blown up.

Where what had?

The mirror in her tummy?

She wondered if she just possibly ought to bring it up and check. And well she might have if not for a noise behind her.

“Rrrr.”

She spun around. Saw it. A stout clump of orange, white and black. A cushion?

It was shuffling.

“Ooh. Did I land on this?”

She gave it a poke. Couldn’t resist. It looked so fluffy.

“Oooh! It’s chubby...”

Poke. Poke.

“Rrrrrrrr.”

“Gwah. And it makes a rawr rawr sound.”

She was running her hand on it now, stroking it round and round. It twitched – and partially uncurled.

“Wah! Ears!”

Two little ears, so much like hers.

But hers were pink. These were orange, white and black.

Then eyes. Big, round watery eyes. Irises that swam like honey of all colours. Their pupils drilled into hers. Drills of primal cuteness; of the cuteness from which all cuteness comes.

“Agagagwah! It’s cuuuuuute!”

“Rawr,” rawred the tiger cub, uncurling in full.

“Nyah, nyah...nrrrrrrr! You are *adorable*! Waah, so fuzzy and chubby! Such a beautiful furry baby! Do you want a cuddle?”

“Rarr.” It did want a cuddle.

Mikoro squealed as the gorgeous little tiger cub half-climbed, half-rolled onto her lap. What weight! She snuggled its thickset chub and nuzzled its fur with her nose, and as she did, it was as though an untold weight of stress, exhaustion, and sheer mental strain melted away in the light of a butterscotch dawn.

It pawed at her face. Then it licked it – a tiny little tongue.

“Nrrrrrr.” She took its paw in her hand and pressed her thumb on its soft pad.

“Gwah!” she said suddenly. “But, but, what’s a sweet baby like you doing here? Here in the middle of..”

Nowhere, she’d meant to say. But no, at least this felt like *somewhere* now.

“Nyah. Was it all some kind of...nightmare? But the sky’s back; that means that part at least was real. The part with sending the Bane back, and with...”

She scratched the sides of her head. The tiger cub noticed and, perhaps thinking to help, slid its paw up and down her face.

Curator Dari. The space outside space in the Rector’s office. The three-year Master of Reality course; the students, the professors, the algojo...

It was impossible. Impossible to say where reality had ended and the nightmare begun.

Except...

She looked down into the tiger’s eyes. So beautiful. A primal beauty. Cardinal.

A cardinal will, the Chaos Serpent had said.

Impossible to slay. It had to exist.

“You...are you the same tiger that...?”

“Rawr,” it growled, rolling onto its back with paws raised.

Well, if there had to be cardinal wills, it warmed her soul to think they were heartwarming cuddly ones like this.

“Just how long have I been here? Three years, they said...but you know, it doesn’t feel like that at all. It feels like I’ve been here less than a night.”

She lifted her gaze from the creature in her lap – with difficulty – and up to the rim of the crater. She could hear it up there. The sea. And somewhere on it was the Cow Queen’s ship, with the *Sea Bunny*, and Dari...

“Dari! Dari and the Moo-Moo Queen...uh-oh, uh-oh! Um, I *hope* it wasn’t three years. Uh-oh.”

She stood, keeping hold of the tiger’s front paws as it landed on its rear ones.

“Do you have a name, fuzzy rawr-rawr?”

“Rrr-rrawr.” It landed on all fours and sniffed at her shoe.

“Nyah. Okay. Rawr, then. Can I call you Rawr?”

“Rrrr, rrrr.”

“Okay Rawr. Do you know how I get off this island? I don’t think I can climb those steep slopes.”

The tiger padded around. Crouched, with its back to her. Tilted its head to the side.

“Um! You don’t mean...”

“Rrrrr!”

“Uh-oh.”

The cub was small enough to sprawl on her lap, if bulkily. Was it seriously suggesting she ride it?

Well there was nothing to lose, she reckoned. And it was cute. It must have wanted to play.

Oh well. She wasn’t going anywhere till she worked out a way out of this crater.

She stepped astride the cub’s back. Squatted down. “Are you sure about this?” she asked, just in case.

“Rarr.”

She sat.

The tiger stood, heftily – “Wah!” It was small, but its back felt so solid. So solid. Solid as a pillar of reality.

It was strolling. Mikoro giggled. Its motions bobbed her up and down, just like those fairground-ride tigers with springs underneath.

Then it was running.

“Waaah! Slow down, Rawr! Where are you – wawawawawa!”

Towards the slope. She flung her arms round its neck, clasped as tight as she could. Up, up, up – she was riding it! Up the slope. Up to the rim. Up *past* the rim – up, up...

“Nyaaaah! N-No way! We’re, we’re...*flying!*”

Flying. Paddling through the air – the air! Real air at last, wind, salt, moisture; and the sea, the sea was back, the waves, the foam, the flocking gulls, the leaping fish; the world, the *worlds*, they were back, the realities restored, and she’d known it, of course she’d known it, but now beneath the dawning sun she could see it, smell it, drink it through her ears, her nose, her throat, relish it, relish the glory of awakening to a new day of spreading out on sofas and pushing things off tables – of *riding a flying tiger cub across the sea*.

Order had been restored to its senses. So too had Chaos returned: beautiful Chaos, freedom, feeling, spontaneity, love. It made sense on her terms now, not the terms of Order for Order’s sake. She could breathe. At last, Mikoro could breathe.

But there was no time to whoop and shout for joy. Okay, maybe one whoop – there. That felt good. But there was something she had to do now. Something important. Something meaningful.

It wouldn't be easy. She'd need a disciplined will. But if the Upside-Down University had taught her one lesson, it was one she'd taken to heart. She would never, *never* let that will run ahead of what it meant to be Ibaraki Mikoro.

She'd warn Kiyoko about hers too, she thought. Not that she was suggesting anything. Just in case.

She'd wait till her sister was blocking her from the muffin box and do it then.

The tiger – did it know where it was going? Its paws left pad-prints in the air as it soared on its way. Soared determined.

“Where are we going, Rawr? Can you tell me?”

“Rrrrrr.”

“Um. Okay.”

In her heart, she knew. She knew exactly where they were going.

Why? Did the tiger want to help its new friend? Or did it, too, have meaning of its own to make?

Either way, they were almost there. Her ship. Her friend. It was time to get them back.

THE WAY OF THE



“Nnnmphh...”

Dari was awake. She opened her eyes, but couldn't see anything.

Not that she needed to. Between the all-encompassing squidgy slipperiness and the beef-and-minerals warmth, she required no reminder where she was.

“Oh, come on...!” she moaned inwardly as a new round of squeezing began. To be fair it had never really stopped, she'd just slept through it.

“Nnghh, how long...? Why...?”

You know why, her too-clever-for-its-own-good brain answered back. It's because you're Dari.

“Mmnnbl...”

Despite her prolonged sequestration she felt wide awake. She'd slept well, if she could convince herself to believe it, and wasn't hungry or thirsty. Indeed her body felt as energised as after morning exercises and a hearty bowl of cereal.

For all the good that did her in here.

It was the Cow Queen's milk, she knew to her flushing disgrace. She could still taste it. A layer of residual creaminess, rich and thick, still there beneath her regular facefuls of...whatever this slippery stuff was.

Water, probably.

Yes, she decided. Let it be water.

Her world shuddered portentous.

“Nhh? Nngh, mmghh...!”

SQLCHPP!

“Mmmmmnnnphhhh!”

A clench so mighty it had to be deliberate.

Well, at least the Cow Queen hadn't forgotten she was there. She shut her eyes and squeakily endured the back-and-forth rubbing.

While her conscious mind immersed wholly in the experience of being a reverse-snack, so to say, a tiny bunch of nerve cells on rationality duty took note of faint voices in the background. There was no point guessing the words, they were drowned out by the Cow Queen's bodily rumbles throughout this spell of savouring, and even when her confines relaxed that chorus swamped Dari on. The blood pounding deep through these infinite flesh-realms, sustaining her warm hydraulic massage; the gurgling work of those multiple stomachs, echoing down to her at the end of a long and convoluted descent through tubes with little else to do; the heft of muscle, the flex of industrial-strength cartilage each time the body that held her made a move, by way of reminder, if she was remotely close to needing one, of the awesome enormity of the sovereign presence...

“NUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”

“Nnnnnnnn!” Dari squealed as a tremendous flesh-quake shook her up like a chocolate milkshake.

That was a powerful one. For sure something was happening out there.

“Mmphh mmpf!” Cross, but inconsequential.

And now her environs were bouncing, jiggling, ferrying her about, vibrating her up with the Cow Queen's pronouncements. They were cheerful. Boisterous, even. Something must have improved her mood still more than her Dari-toy had already.

The words were now loud enough for the on-duty part of her brain to catch some. “Celebration!” “Abundant Feast!” “Beef bowl all round!” But it would have to hold this intelligence for the time being. For now that Dari was awake, the Cow Queen's proverbial wealth of territories had monopolised her senses and were once more carrying her off up a rollercoaster of stimulus.

Tucked away. Each ripple rubbed that knowledge into her flesh.

“Mmph...mmph...mmph...mmfff!”

So heavy. So huge. Huge beyond belief.



“Waah! So huge! I can’t believe it!”

Mikoro had sailed one hundred leagues across it. She knew it was huge. But to see it from the air was to *know* in a whole new way.

From the back of a flying tiger cub? Better still.

Best possible, really.

She tugged on its ears. “Woohoo! Isn’t this amazing, Rawr? We’re flying! We’re flying! Waah, look at all those tiny islands! Is this really what I’ve been crossing with Dari in the bunny-boat all along? I can’t believe it! It just goes on and on and on...”

“Rrrrrr.”

The fresh winds that whooshed in her hair, flapped the tail of her coat; the marvellous sun which warmed her face and hands, and whose light washed the waves in their dance of radiant liberation; it was back, all of it was back, and Mikoro felt alive, so alive she wished her sister were there, sleepy, so she could climb upon her and rub faces in giggly exhilaration.

No – this was more than exhilaration. This was transcendence, or a taste of it. The feeling was akin to bursting through a cloud layer after years of arduous climbing, to find she’d at last gained the height to see it all at once: to know all the disparate things she knew, all over again, only splashed together at a broader, fuller, fresher level of perception. It was a threshold of enlightenment, a sensory epiphany, a celebration of colour and meaning and splendour...

But no. Her voyage was not yet complete. It’d be irresponsible to celebrate too soon.

Mother Rin, the Chaldea Academy – they’d trusted her to take the *Sea Bunny* home. Together – she and Dari had promised each other.

“Nyah. A responsible captain keeps her promises,” she avowed with finger raised.

“Rrrgrrr,” came the furry reply. An encouraging verdict.

She pulled the *Sea Bunny*’s trusty spyglass from her pocket to do some spotting.

Islands. A minotaur base, with barracks, guard towers, red banners, a set of piers and some two dozen humanoid cattle drilling in the yard. An island of jungle ruins, with lots of large insectoid creatures crawling in and out of a pit. An island so thick with smoke she couldn’t see through it. Another with fences, a bizarre and gigantic creature leaping within them; a hybrid of many different animals, difficult to look at.

“Gwah. Most of those don’t look very welcoming.”

A huge haunted mansion dominated another island. She knew it was haunted because it had dark spires and eerie lights and toothy little ghosts bumbling round its towers. Near to that was a tall rock with a cave, aside a massive whirlpool with something squidgy at its centre. They were surrounded by reefs; the channel between was the only passage.

There was something extremely Dari about that arrangement, Mikoro couldn't help thinking.

Her viewing circle panned far out to sea. It settled on a blurry cluster close to the horizon, so far away that even the awesome power of the spyglass's zoom barely sufficed to catch it. She jiggled it till it focused in.

Floating debris. There was something familiar about it.

"Oooh! That's the ruins of that Heroes' Agency! That's where we were! Nrrr. Okay. So. I guess that means we sailed in *that* direction. Yeah! That huge area there with no islands, that's gotta be where I fell asleep! Where the Moo-Moo Queen..."

"Rrr-rawr."

"Uh-oh. So, if we'd kept going...we'd have had to do the cave and the whirlpool, and some of those scary islands...gwah. You know Rawr, Dari and I have had tons of fun together on this ocean. But some of these...um, I think it would have got a little too much."

She thought for a moment, then corrected herself: "Heehee! I mean, I maybe wouldn't have minded, but I think Dari was getting tired!"

A brief ache, a throb in her chest, as she remembered their quarrel. Not even a quarrel, looking back on it now. A moment of stress. That was all. Dari had snapped, but straight away been so gentle and understanding.

"She really was tired. I wonder if the Tummy Queen caught her. Um. I hope she's not in too much of a hole right now."

She'd have gulped her down, most likely. At least she'd be safe in there. Probably got trapped in one of those honeycomb-sacs or in the folds of her rumen again. Perfect for some sleep. Unless...

"Grrr! That bully had better not be bringing her up to suck on her every hour like she said she would!"

Still – might the Cow Queen have inadvertently done them a favour by giving the *Sea Bunny* a free ride? Assuming Mikoro could get it back, that was, and prise Dari from her big beefy clutches while at it...

Pondering thus, Mikoro turned her spying eye to the moving specks on the water.

“Wah. There’s lots of ships here. They’re smaller than the Beef Queen’s huge monster-ship, but they all have these, um, ox-head prows, with big horns. Are they her navy?”

No cannons, as far as she could see. Patrol boats? Coastguard?

They’d obviously travelled deep into her domain. From her present survey the cat-girl doubted she’d have got the *Sea Bunny* more than an hour into these waters without getting spotted and caught, or otherwise forced to seek cover on iffy shores.

It was nice sometimes, having a flying tiger.

She aimed the scope straight between its furry ears.

“Um, is that where we’re headed Rawr? That chunky thing in the distance?”

She pressed her eye to the lens. It was only a silhouette at this point, but behind it the horizon was aglow. At first Mikoro put this down to some optical game on the sun’s part, but when she looked again the effect had grown. A wall?

A shimmering wall. Flickering.

Fire.

“Nyah! That’s gotta be the Beef Bowl Tribute Queen’s blockade!”

A barricade of magical scarlet flames, which, yes, stretched off beyond the spyglass’s range in both directions. An alarming sight.

Impassable.

She lowered the spyglass. Blinkered. Looked down at the fuzzy tiger head.

“You could probably fly over it Rawr, but, um...are you strong enough to carry the *Sea Bunny*? Maybe if we rope it to your tail...”

“Rrrrrrrr.” Not a favourable response.

“Aaww. Well that’s okay,” said Mikoro.

She understood. The tiger’s strength wasn’t the issue. She knew how these things worked by now.

Through, not over. That was the only way.

She considered the blocky silhouette. It was expanding, the coffees and creams of its sandstone walls entering into resolution. She already knew what it was.

“That’s funny. I thought the Cow Queen’s fortress would be more, um...Bowsery.”

It was hulking, that much was not in question. Bulwarks and battlements, turrets and towers, soaring walkways, portcullises, sea gates, nests of wave-breakers. Ironclad interceptor boats laced white trails through a maze of breakwaters, sea towers, sentry buoys with flashing red lights. Not even one of those toothy ghosts was getting through there undetected.

But the structure itself looked...*old*. Some of its walls were punched through with gaping holes; others had crumbled altogether into sandy piles. It had no rows of spikes, no ominous artificially-generated thunderclouds or rivers of lava. It lacked even a colossal gold statue of the Cow Queen's head for an entrance with the drawbridge leading into its mouth, which Mikoro had imagined would be its most indispensable feature.

"Wah. It's like some half-ruined castle. Don't you think it looks fun to live in, Rawr? There must be huge kitchens, and libraries full of old books and, um, Bronze Age video games, and halls with funny old statues and armour suits, and lots and lots of secret passages so I can jump out at Kiyoko and say boo!"

When she thought about it, it made sense. Video games were video games, but in real life it stood to reason that the sovereign of land, sea and sky would want to live somewhere, well, liveable, just as anybody would.

Perhaps her ancestors had lived in this fortress? They were important to her, she'd made no secret of that.

Had the Cow Queen returned here after capturing the *Sea Bunny*? Was this the last level, the lair of the final boss, where Super Mikoro would defeat the evil fire-breathing cow and rescue her beloved Princess Dari?

"Uh-oh. Don't tell Dari I said that, okay Rawr? She'll bite my nose."

Still – such an impressive stronghold. It must have been as old as the sea itself. Whether or not Dari had got herself picked up, Mikoro hoped she'd at least got a view of it on the way in. She'd have gone giddy at the sight of it. All the stories that must have soaked into the sponge of those sandstone walls; the battles and conferences, the personal and political dramas, the scheming intrigues and palace coups...

Who am I kidding? – Mikoro thought. This was Dari. If she'd been caught by the Cow Queen her view on the way in would have been of the Cow Queen.

On the way in...

Yes! There it was, at anchor in the fortified harbour! There was no mistaking its girth, the dominant spread of its sails, the searing gleam of its great gold figurehead.

"That's it, Rawr! That's the *Lamassu*! Ooh, that means they've gotta be here! The Bully Queen, little Dari, the *Sea Bunny*!"

And that, she had to acknowledge, was a problem.

For its historic charms the fortress looked nothing less than impregnable. Every gap and breach was guarded. She couldn't spot a single potential way in that wouldn't have sights and sensors trained on it.

They'd drawn close enough now to spy the minotaur guards patrolling its roofs and parapets: spears and shields, magical orbs, laser-guided rocket launchers. There were spotlights, inactive in the bright light of day but which no doubt lit this place up like a surveillance festival after the sun went down. Wine-red banners fluttered along its walls, antennae and satellite dishes nested on the towers, and from its enclosed docks the snouts of battleships poked fearsome, ready to emerge to pound the beef bowl out of your sorry country at a moment's notice.

"We're gonna have to find a way in there, aren't we Rawr? Uh-oh."

"Agrrrrr."

"And we have to find Dari, and the bunny-boat, *and* some way to get through that fiery barrier, otherwise it'll stop us as soon as we, um, escape..."

Escape. It sounded laughable as soon as she'd said it. It all did. Penetrating that sprawling buffalo of a fortress; locating her tiny ship and even tinier friend – a bunny in a labyrinth, a bean on a mountain; and if she somehow managed that, there was still the hopelessness of making a break for it without getting pulverised beneath tons of guffawing beef-woman, only to then find a literal wall of fire blocking their path and the military might of all the nations of cattle closing in behind them, horns lowered, nostrils and 12-inch naval guns flaring...

It was impossible. Every step was impossible.

Then again, so was a university which slaughtered truth on the altar of power; a heroes' agency that rewarded indifference to injustice and punished actual heroes; a trio of snakes who held up the universe; a horse that argued it wasn't a horse; a pub that took payment in hugs; an organised polity of monkeys; a cave where the sun played video games; a battle rage so intense it could upset Mikoro's stomach; a woman who could call down lightning with a snap of her fingers...

...and a tiger cub who could fly.

Was a tiny woman who wandered the worlds possible?

Was she, Mikoro, possible? In the aeons before she was born, would they not have laughed at the idea that the universe's random collisions of matter could spawn an individual as idiosyncratically fluffy as her?

It was impossible.

For ten billion years it was impossible.

And then – it had happened.

“Nyeh.”

Reality was never what it seemed. There was always more to it: a different perspective, a secret condition or caveat, a change in circumstances. Reality was fluid. Reality was contingent.

Reality was Ibaraki Mikoro.

“Grr-rawrrrr!” growled the tiger cub.

“Nrrrr? What is it Rawr?”

Her mount had stopped. This was as close as they could get; any further and they’d be spotted for sure. The tiger was treading air now. Staring down at an angle. At the water. At a procession of ships...

“A sea lane? Wah, that looks busy. But those aren’t military vessels. They’re, um...loaded with stuff?”

Supply ships, she realised. Long, with exposed decks and powerful noisy engines. They had vats of rice, or crates of beef, or barrel upon barrel of rice-wine. Extraordinarily, one or two were even piled high with green vegetables.

If grass counted as a vegetable, that was. It did look fresh and lush. Probably healthy, if you went in for that kind of thing.

Mikoro followed them through the spyglass. Each supply ship was crewed by a pair of minotaurs, and they were all headed in the same direction: the fortress. They converged just ahead, after which she could spot them nosing through the maze of sea defences to queue at the mouth of a canal. There was a guard post there – sentries, officials with clipboards, inspecting the boats one by one. Then they disappeared through an arch at the foot of the fortress wall.

“That’s a lot of food. Are they preparing some huge banquet or something?”

“Rrrrr.”

“It’s making me hungry! Ugwuu...when did I last eat?”

A simple enough question, but confusing to contemplate.

“Um. I swear I had meals in that weird university. But my tummy doesn’t remember eating since I was on the boat with Dari, after we left the Heroes’ Agency.”

One of those cargo vessels passed right beneath them. The shrewd tiger had stopped in line with the ship and the sun, so the minotaurs on board wouldn’t look directly at them.

Sunk into its deck was a huge open drum of scented rice, broad and deep as a swimming pool.

She could smell it all the way up there.

That's your way in, her rumbling stomach urged her. Hide in there and you can sneak straight into the royal kitchens without anybody noticing. Isn't it worth it just for the bonus? There's so much rice in that one vat that no-one will notice if you skim off a tiny bit of breakfast...

But it's raw, her rational mind objected.

But they'll cook it, her stomach answered conclusively. Imagine how it'll smell then.

"Ooh, but that's perfect!" she said, instantly convinced. "Because if it's as huge a feast as it looks then the Beef Bowl Queen's bound to be there. That means if I'm sneaky I can find her portion and hide shrunk in it, maybe even slip all the way into her tummies without her ever knowing. If she's caught Dari then that's where I'll find her! And if Dari's been paying attention like she always does, then maybe she'll have overheard the stupid I-Rule-Everything Queen boast about where she's put the bunny-boat, or how to get through her blockade..."

"Rawrawrawr-rawr!"

"Heehee! Are you hungry too, little Rawr? Do you like my plan?"

The tiger paddled in the air, its gaze fixed on the supply ship.

Then it dived.

Mikoro wrapped her arms round its neck and held tight. The wind howled in her ears, flung her hair up behind her. With the sum of her efforts she refrained from hooting in exhilaration. The Cow Queen would have issued an all-points bulletin for her by now. It wouldn't surprise her if they had wanted posters with her face on them in the cabins of each of these ships. If this pair saw she was there then they'd no doubt radio ahead, the fortress would scramble all its ships to catch her – perhaps aeroplanes if they had them – and her cunning scheme would be sunk before it had started. She might get away on the tiger, but as a cat-girl she understood well that you only get one chance at the element of surprise.

The supply ship's cabin was in the stern. One of the minotaur pair was in there steering. The other – nose-ring, kerchief, worker's vest – had fallen asleep on the deck.

Whoosh.

The tiger swept behind the craft in a low arc. Distracted, the pilot took her hands off the wheel and peered out of the rear window, but by then the feline double-trouble had spun round the front and somersaulted headfirst into the rice pool.

Mikoro swam deep. This rice smelled incredible – a cascade of flavours from tropical islands and cool mountain slopes, pungent, nutty and fragrant. But it had yet to be cooked, she'd have to forbear. In the meantime, and here was the real challenge, she'd have to stay as quiet as possible to avoid detection.

“Are you there Rawr?” Her hushed tones percolated through the rice-heap.

No response.

“Um. I guess you're in here somewhere. Be good okay? Don't let them know we're here!”

She lay back and relaxed, sinking a little further into the rice-bed. It smelled so good. She couldn't wait till it came out at the other end of the royal kitchens. Steaming, fluffy, with all these spices awakened...

No. She had to concentrate. Everyone was counting on her.

Shouts and snorts. Iron gates clanking, motors firing. They were closing in. Suddenly a loud grunt, right on top of her:

“Papers! In Her Majesty's name!”

“Ulp. Inspection.”

Mikoro seized up; didn't twitch a muscle.

A shuffle of documents. Then – alarmingly – a shuffle of rice, right there in her face. Samples being taken for testing? Testing for what? Quality? Freshness? Poison?

Minutes passed. The absence of voices grew ominous.

Then a grunt in the background: “All in order.”

“All in order!” – far more forceful; the inspector couldn't have been standing more than a couple of metres away. Then the words she'd been counting on: “You may proceed!”

“Glory to Her Majesty!” – the pilot.

“Sounds like we're in, Rawr! Stick close to me okay?”



“Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuoo!”

Each window, drain and crack in the walls blared the sovereign low. In the surrounding waters fish broke formation to shoot away in fright; on the outlying islands farmers looked up from their fields, and clerks from their desks; birds shrank into their nests, and earthworms popped from the soil to rotate like curious antennae. Dragons peered unnerved through the clouds, turtles withdrew

into their shells, and every monkey in a hundred-mile radius ducked trembling beneath the nearest piece of furniture.

The Great Horned Hall quaked to the clang of hand-bells, the thumps of fists and drinking horns on long wooden tables, and the chants of “Nuo! Nuo! Nuo! Nuo!” as ten thousand minotaurs of all shapes and colours communicated their approval.

Applause followed, amid a storm of snorts and belches so clamorous that thunderclouds condensed near the ceiling.

There were procedures for this of course. Anxious hands got busy in a hidden side-room, and with the flips of a few switches a hundred hard-worked ventilation fans whirred up to join the din.

Methane. That was the problem. Too much methane and Her Majesty’s subjects would go groggy, or worse, set fire to things while she was talking. And she couldn’t have that, could she?

Now she stood, spreading her mighty arms across the royal dining table. Ten thousand minotaurs, yet hers alone was the weight that pressed a well into the visual spacetime manifold of this hall. The sovereign supergiant, a singularity of sheer biomass; to look up at her, which you would, was to feel her gravity dragging you into orbit, or if you were especially privileged by the whim of bovine physics, into the robust plumpitude of her belly. Naturally she stood bare-chested, bare-shouldered, bare-bellied, bare-legged: the strength of her heritage on raw display such that none who witnessed it could mistake *Her Majesty* for a purely ceremonial expression.

Yet she’d also turned out in the fullness of her royal regalia, as sure a sign as any that this would be a day to remember. The ancestral crown: no jewels, no intricate patterns or other such ostentatious nonsense, just a simple tiara-shaped chunk of gold to bring out, by its contrast, the magnitude of her horns and tresses. Upon those horns, a pair of great gold rings: each a snug fit, a tassel apiece. Beneath the august visage, a galaxy of golden necklaces – rings, plates, beads, and in pride of place, a huge gold square-edged cowbell. And round her enormous upper arms, a pair of fittingly enormous bracelets with engraved bull’s-head reliefs; and it was these that secured her burgundy shawl, drawn up properly now so it draped across her forearms, down her flanks then up to her waist in a regally asymmetric sweep, where a grand gold disc, fastened by her rope of a belt, held it in place.

One special piece completed the set. Her most recent acquisition. Precious. Invigorating. But invisible.

And that was just fine. It wasn't there to be seen. But more than the rest of her equipment combined, it made her feel the consummate ruler.

A ruler by nonaction. One who merely by sitting there exerting her weight, could feel the world wiggling into its proper arrangement, all by itself. What could be better than that?

Its only drawback was that it kept misting her eyes up in pleasure. That was not so convenient for a public occasion like this, so she clenched her rump and swung her head hard to clear her vision.

Thus prepared, she bellowed forth:

"Nrrrrrrm! Children of the great dynasty! Raise your horns in celebration!"

And they did raise them, very much so, the ones on their heads and the ones in their hands, and there was a great deal of clapping and crashing as the chant resurged: "Nuo! Nuo! - "

"Nuuuuuuuuuu!"

A meteor of a fist smashed upon the royal table, and within two seconds the noise had subsided.

"Not yet, not yet!" Her boom rebounded off the walls. "I haven't told you what you're going to celebrate yet!"

The commotion persisted as a low murmur. Tails and eyebrows bristled in expectation. Great Feasts were a fixture of everyday life at the court of the Demon Cow Queen but this was an Abundant Feast, hosted by the sovereign in person, at royal expense, and open to absolutely everyone. All of her cabinet was here: the Minister of Rings from the royal treasury, the Minister of Horns from the army office, the Minister of Eyes and Ears from the information centre, the Minister of Tongues from the department of restorative justice, the Minister of Hooves from infrastructure and public works, the generals, the admirals, and all those others whose shoulders dragged the ploughs of Her Majesty's fair and munificent rule. The soldier and sailor minotaurs, the fortress sentries, civil servants, clerks and housekeepers, the instructors and physicians, the mages and scientists, the artists and artisans, the calves and the elderly veterans, everyone was there, and since the feast would carry on all day, the on-duty staff would get their turn halfway when they swapped places with the present celebrants. What foreign guests were in the fortress at the time had also been invited to attend, and even the prisoners in the hospitality of the royal dungeons – that is, the actual dungeons – had been granted amnesty and ushered up to participate. The majority of these were thieving or scheming monkeys, though there was also a handful of human

tributary chiefs who had said extremely rude and incorrect things about Her Majesty's policies, body or general benevolence.

In short, something extremely special must have occurred to beget this most momentous of occasions, and everyone was on tenterhooks as they waited to be told what it was.

The Cow Queen cleared her throat.

"Hrrm hrrm! Today we raise our horns to toast not one but *two* causes for celebration! First – look around you! Balance has been restored to the world!

A tumultuous cheer, as the Cow Queen raised her fist and proclaimed over the din:

"Ohoho, yes! We have complete victory over the evil spirits released by the destruction of the serpent temple! They promised menace on a scale unheard of in the annals of the dynasty, but thanks to the tireless efforts of my ministers and the valour of my crew, the crisis was resolved in under two days! *Nuuuuuuuuuu!* Rejoice, for this victory belongs to you all!"

The celebrations doubled in volume, with such a clatter of wood and cutlery that the shockwaves threatened to rearrange the ocean currents. And while they rolled, the Cow Queen bent over her Minister of Eyes and Ears and rumbled in an undertone: "Has the investigation team returned from the Heroes' Agency? What did they say? Was it the evil spirits? Or the cat?"

"Not yet, Your Majesty, not yet," muttered the cowed and masked minotaur. "You'd better not announce it till we know for sure."

"Hrrmph. I knew we couldn't trust that dragon." She rose to full height and alerted the room: "Be vigilant, however!"

With these words the roars of exultation were smothered at once.

"That naughty cat has yet to be found! Though we have confiscated her ship, our search parties have found neither hide nor naughty pink hair of the mischievous rascal. Till they do, you must expect her naughty head to surface in *your* areas of responsibility at any time! *Nrrrrrm*, stay sharp, each and every one of you, and deliver her to me if you would claim the reward which as of this moment is hereby increased to two hundred beef bowls!"

The murmurs rose again, incredulous now. Two hundred beef bowls!

"Are you hungry yet, my hard-working followers?" the sovereign stirred them further. "Then gird your stomachs to believe my second announcement! Rejoice, one and all: the Evil Forest is no more!"

Silence. Eyelids and nostrils stretched in disbelief. More silence.

Then an explosion – a climax of clattering and thumping and snorted hurrahs which surged so far that they chopped up the ocean, so high that they shook up the stars. This was still the wrong realm if you wanted to see the Milky Way, but had it been there, this euphoria would have milked it.

“Hohoh, it’s true! Hours ago, reports came in that the Evil Forest had disappeared! Sure enough, this has now been verified. There’s nothing left but an empty crater!”

Nothing remained to be said on this matter, for the Evil Forest had been the dark open secret of Her Majesty’s domain for all seven generations of her line. No-one even remembered why it was evil anymore. All they knew was that terrible things lurked in its shadows, things no reasonable character could imagine, let alone describe. It was a place you stayed well away from without having to be told, not to mention an unconquerable blemish on the sea charts. Ugly. Maddening. Humiliating.

And now, gone. Finally gone.

The roll of celebration would not subside this time, for upon its waves, or rather the arms of the kitchen staff, tide after tide of loaded platters swept the hall. There were cauldrons of *tinawon* rice, spiced with the herbs of the Great Cloud Plains and the nuts of the Ginger Archipelago; trays of smoky grilled beef from the sacred and self-replenishing free-range herds of Thrinacia, whose silly charioteer-god the Cow Queen had bested in personal combat to cement her rule and who now sent her his finest beasts in regular tribute; rice-wine shipped in from the Queen’s own world-famous distillery four islands away; and fresh wild grasses from the sunward slopes of the Twenty Mountains, where all who carry a bovine heritage dream to graze. And while the stomachs and slobbering snouts of the hall went wild, the monarch hefted an arm round the startled Minister of Eyes and Ears and, with an embrace in excess of crushing but considerably short of medically significant, chuckled:

“Hoho! Come here, you crafty old thing. You’ve excelled yourself this time. Double beef bowl stipends for all those clever calves in the information centre for a month! But tell me, hrrm hrrm! How did you do it? How did you repair my sea and sky? How did you unravel the mystery of that forest which has troubled my forebears since the dawn of history?”

The Minister slipped free of that daunting arm and stammered: “Y-Your Majesty, I really don’t...I mean, sincerely, we didn’t do anything. The problems, you see – well, they all appear to have resolved themselves. We don’t quite – ”

“Mwohoho, nonsense, you modest creature! Just because it’s your job to lurk in the shadows, doesn’t mean you can’t take a lesson from your sovereign sometimes and wear your accomplishments with pride!”

“Y-Your Majesty,” nodded the Minister, who took the chance for a precious breather as the Queen leant out over the royal cauldron and proceeded to shovel copious quantities of beef and rice into her bathtub-sized bowl.

For a while the great sovereign bulldozed her way through beef bowl heaven, but by her seventh or eighth helping it came to her attention that her Minister was barely touching hers.

“Nrrrm! Still thinking about your work? Truly I am blessed to be able to rely on such diligence!”

“Your Majesty. I must report.”

“What, right now? In the middle of this? This is the most glorious day of my reign since I accepted the submission of those accursed monkeys! What could possibly have you so concerned?”

“The Beast, Your Majesty! T-The Beast of...”

The jolliness evaporated from the Cow Queen’s face. She noticeably tightened up, as if contracting her rump somehow steadied her nerves. Then she lowered her great head close to the Minister and growled in an undertone: “Shhhh! Not so loud, you fool! Why mention it here?”

“It was last spotted in the F-Forest, as we reported. If the Forest is gone, that means the B-Beast, it c-could be...”

“Oh, who cares about the damned Beast now? I haven’t heard its roar for over a month! Is not my reign now as secure as since the day I first sat on my late father’s throne?”

“B-But you asked, you asked...”

“Nrrm. I did indeed. Yes I did. Well forget about it, at least till you’ve eaten your fill. That’s a royal edict, do you hear? You work too hard, and I won’t have you wasting away when you’ve results like these to deliver for hundreds of years yet!”

The Minister trembled. There was something different about the Queen’s high-spiritedness today. She’d never seen her in quite such ebullient mood, nor been showered with such lavish praise.

It frightened her. What did it mean?

Her temptation was to provoke her back to her characteristic bellowing and stomping. That at least she knew how to handle. It reassured her: told her that the walls were solid, the ships afloat, and that it was safe to carry on down the list of bad news. But how was she supposed to interact with this?

“Th-There’s more, Your Majesty,” she managed to force out, just as the Queen raised a barrel of rice-wine to her lips.

She waited, trembling upon a faint high-pitched bleat, as the Queen glugged down her beverage, belched with satisfaction, then loomed in with an eyebrow hitched in annoyance.

“The ship,” the Minister pressed. “The c-cat-girl’s ship. You were right. Comet Island. I d-don’t understand. How did it...?”

“Hrrm! Yes. A mystery indeed. But that’s just fine.”

“It...is, Your Majesty?”

“Ohoho, of course! Because your best technicians have been investigating it since last night and you’re about to tell me you’ve worked it out, nrrrm?”

The Minister gulped.

“Or rather then,” the sovereign continued, brandishing her beef-loaded chopsticks in the gap between their faces, “that you *will* have it worked out soon. By tonight, in fact. Correct?”

“A thousand pardons, Your Majesty! It’s, it’s...”

The Cow Queen munched. Swallowed it down. “It’s *what*?”

“It’s impossible! Activation requires a unique energy signature...twelve million variables, t-too complex to replicate; only that c-cat...”

“Hrrrrrmph!”

“And th-that means...the ship, it’s not a ship at all! It’s one of those – one of her...!”

The Cow Queen sat up. The back of her hand rolled across her lips, wiping away the sauce. Her other was already reaching for a second cask of wine. It went down in one go. Then a third.

And now she leaned in close once more, flapping the Minister’s fabric mask with her draughts of breath. Her smile had gone for a stroll again.

“Do you mean to tell me,” she grunted, “on the honour of my father’s bones, that *she* has returned?”

The Minister gave an affirmative whimper.

The Queen sat up again. Chewed her lip. Drummed her fingers on the table edge.

No-one noticed the unrest on her brow. By this stage her subjects were drowning in their beef bowls, singing sea shanties with rude words installed in the lyrics, and carousing down the tables on a fast-track ride to inebriation.

Tree-trunk fingers clapped the Minister's back, shunting her face-first into her food. "Good work, good work," the Cow Queen commended her. "You were right to inform me of this. This changes everything of course. I must go and pay my respects. At first light tomorrow I shall take the rabbit-ship there in person on the *Lamassu*."

"B-But Captain Mikoro!" choked the Minister, wringing the rice off her mask. "Perhaps she's found another ship, or worse, possesses some magical means of locomotion; if she gets there first..."

"Pah, let her try! The blockade's still up, is it not?"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty. Every generator and monitoring station is functioning at one hundred percent efficiency."

That felt good to report. Confidence. A snuffle of relief.

"Hrrm. Hrrrrrm. Now that I think on it, if *she's* back you'd better raise that to two hundred percent. I swore on the pride of my dynasty that I'd protect Comet Island, and I shall not have it said that the Demon Cow Queen violated an oath by letting so much as a naughty kitten slip through those flames!"

"Of course, Your Majesty." Naturally one hundred percent was the maximum setting, but telling the Queen that would only get her asked for an explanation she wouldn't understand.

Never draw the Demon Cow Queen into territory she doesn't understand. Especially when numbers are involved. Half the work of the Minister of Rings was erasing all the zeroes she stuck on the ends of figures for the stuff she wanted.

"Should I instruct them to lower the barrier for you tomorrow?" the Minister of Eyes and Ears asked instead.

"No need, no need. I have the Plantain Fan for that. And in the meantime I'll *properly* interrogate the little mouse tonight and find out exactly how her pink furball of an accomplice captured one of Comet Island's...you know, and terrorised it into attuning to her."

Yes, that was something to look forward to. Her mind eased at that relishing thought, the sovereign returned to the weighty affair of her meal. Her Minister of Eyes and Ears, too, having relieved some of the burdens that'd pressed on her weary shoulders all night, at last lifted her mask and joined the feast.

But it was in both her character and her job description to see disaster through every little mousehole, and after two mouthfuls she ventured: "Excuse me Your Majesty, but as concerns the interrogation, shouldn't the honourable Minister of Horns take charge of..."

“Nrrrm? Ohoho, no no, I’m all over this one,” said the Cow Queen with assurance. “The matter of the mouse is well in...nrrm, well in hand.”

“B-But Your Majesty, the procedures – ”

“A matter relating to so delicious a mou-nrrrm, hrr-hrrm, to Comet Island is a matter of the highest sensitivity, so I have chosen to exercise my sovereign prerogative in this regard. Don’t trouble yourself, hrm hrrm! She’s a headstrong one, but I have just the techniques, ohoho! Oh yes I do!”

And in a motion whose significance was lost on everyone nearby, even the sharp and discerning Minister of Eyes and Ears, the Cow Queen shuffled on the seat of honour.

“Nrrrrm, yes, yes! Trust me, she’ll tell me everything.”

What high spirits she’s in, the Minister thought silently. Her face, her posture – I’ve never seen her settle into such bliss after every little aggravation. Certainly the return to cosmic balance and the disappearance of the Forest of Beginnings and Ends were great pieces of news, each worth a celebratory feast in itself. But could even those miracles account for this turn?

The Minister was worried. Too much was happening which she didn’t understand. And if she didn’t understand the causes, she couldn’t count on the consequences staying in her favour.

She had her suspicions of course. But Her Majesty’s pride was at stake. She had to be sure. And without a chance to question the captive, that was easier said than done...

She’d have to work extra hard as soon as she got a chance to excuse herself from this feast.

The Cow Queen had risen to her feet. “A toast!” she proclaimed. “To my devoted servant the Minister of Eyes and Ears!”

That caught her off guard. The Minister hurriedly pulled her mask back down and stood up, trembling. “The Minister!” the room roared at her before drowning itself out in its glugs.

A quarter; no, a third, she observed. A third of the room passed out drunk from that one, rather than sit back down. Should Her Majesty really be taking such a security risk while that fearsome cat still ran loose? What if she’d rallied resistance across the isles and assaulted the fortress while they were all completely blotto?

Sure the defences were impregnable, and the web of surveillance solid even at half strength. But the fortress was huge. Might she have found a crack in the wall they didn’t know about? Was every single guard above bribery?

Even Her Majesty was losing it now. She'd reached across the table, picked up one of the tourists she'd planted opposite her as a lucky guest, and was now grinding the hapless fellow into her chest in a generous display of royal hospitality.

Well it could be worse, the Minister thought. According to the records, Her Majesty's great-great-grandfather's reign had been all protocols, pretentious costumes and formulaic exchanges. You were thrown out on your ear if you said what you thought or did what you felt, rather than what you were meant to. That had meant nobody knew what anyone *really* thought or felt. Which in turn was probably why nobody saw his daughter's coup coming till it was too late.

At least under Her Majesty everyone knew where they squirmed.



Mikoro couldn't risk squirming.

Here was a true challenge. To swim up that tongue, so luscious and fat, without snuggling giddily into it; to roll discreetly off it rather than dive headfirst while whooping at the top of her voice; then to slip down that waterslide into the depths, resisting the need – and it was a need – to rub her arms, legs and face into every fold and wibble in it for joy.

She had to enjoy it inwardly. If she enjoyed it outwardly, the big bad beef-monster might learn she was there, regurgitate her in front of her entire angry cow army, and that, as they said, would be that.

Tamamo had taught her about various historical orders of sneaky types. They must have crept into stomachs undetected like this every day, Mikoro thought. But trained as they were in the most extreme conditions, from where had they mustered the restraint not to go silly with excitement? How, generally speaking, had they managed?

The kitchens at least were easy. Years of snack-hunting behind the scenes of large functions at the Academy had prepared her well for this day. The battalion of minotaur auditors, marshals, handlers and chefs was so single-mindedly preoccupied with the Cow Queen's feast that Mikoro had slipped from the supply ship, crept to a cauldron of freshly-steamed rice and burrowed into its depths with not so much as a hint that she was there.

The best part followed.

“Aahmf, amf, mmnf, nomf...”

As quietly as she could, admittedly. Which was not so quiet at all when it came to it, but then again neither were the kitchens, so that was alright.

It tasted incredible. Rice on its own was little to write home about but this must have been an extraordinary cultivar. Each mouthful played her tastebuds like a xylophone, clouded her daydreams with vistas of lush, rainswept highland forests.

Eventually she remembered that this was a bonus and not the primary, secondary or even tertiary purpose of her mission. So lest she ended up in the wrong cow, she'd had to cautiously poke her head out while no-one was looking and scan for the correct cauldron. That phase of the operation was over as soon as it began, for there was no mistaking it: gold-plated, vast as a bathtub, closest to the door. A so with a flash of a leap, a furtive creep and a well-timed scramble up and over, the naughty infiltrator took up the position of fluffy surprise ingredient in the Cow Queen's lunch.

Then came the waiting.

Mikoro didn't like that part. It was boring. So while she lurked she distracted herself with thoughts about what Kiyoko would say if she could see how far her sister had risen in the world, and about all the ice cream Mother Rin would have waiting for her when she finally got home. She looked forward to thrilling little Sayuri with tales of all her marvellous adventures with Dari, and more immediately, to her impending reunion with Dari herself, doubtless having so much fun in that bouncy castle of a stomach right at that moment.

The rice smelled so good. Her lips couldn't resist a further nibble every now and then. All by themselves.

Then her cauldron was on the move. Suddenly she could hear an enormous commotion beyond her rice-submarine, and then the Moo-Moo Queen herself was booming from the heavens, though she'd burrowed too deep to make out the words. Good thinking. Because the monarch began by skimming the upper layers with chopsticks, but by the time she reached Mikoro's stratum she'd grown so ravenous as to gulp giant mouthfuls straight from the cauldron.

And just like that, the crafty captain shrunk herself to the size of a few grains, rode through the gates, slid down the pipe and landed with a *plop!* in a mound of rice and shredded beef. Committedly refusing the urge to gobble up more, she surfaced from the fragrant mass and flipped on her flashlight.

The Cow Queen's rumen. It was just as Mikoro remembered it. A colossal fleshscape of slopes and ridges, pillars and glands, constantly reshaped by its perpetual temblor.

A muted call, as loud as she dared. "Dari? Daaaari? Are you in here?"

Ordinarily it'd be a joke to think the owner of this stomach might hear her too. But Mikoro remembered her first expedition. This demigoddess of a beast-woman had felt her Mikoroing around. Detected her eating the food out of her stomach, ransacking her reticular treasures. Opened negotiations. A tummy-treaty.

She realised, only now, how precarious that made her present position. Realised in fact that she'd reached the limit of her cunning plan. She hadn't thought as far ahead as where it would go from here.

How, for instance, she'd get back out without the big bad dictator, whose fleets of cow-people were scouring the seas in search of her, realising she had her right there in her body.

"Uh-oh."

Well, no use panicking. Everyone was counting on her. She'd have to keep her voice down. Her footsteps light. Her hands to herself. And her appetite under control.

And accept that she wasn't getting out for some time. Not till she was sure the Cow Queen had fallen asleep, or gotten distracted with smooshing something, or waddled off somewhere conducive to a quick escape.

None of which Mikoro could count on, let alone straightforwardly judge from the caverns of her belly.

Did she even sleep?

Now that she thought about it, Mikoro couldn't remember seeing cows asleep in their fields. They seemed to just sit about munching all the time. Resting. Relaxing. Watching her.

"Uh-oh," she mumbled again.

First things first, she decided. She eased herself out to her waist and swung her torchlight in all directions.

"Daaari? Where are you? If you can hear me say 'mmfff!..'"

She coughed. The air was heavier than she remembered.

Headier.

"Nnah. Alcohol?"

Rice-wine. Of course. Lots of it, going by the torrential rivulets that caught her light on the lower slopes. They reminded her of those maps of massive rivers deltas, only in reverse. Rather than branching out, those dendritic spirit-webs were converging. Building into a steady flow to sweep round the fold of the Cow Queen's second stomach.

"Did the Rice-Wine Queen stick Dari in there again? Gwah. I'd better check."

This was strong stuff. Mikoro had swum in beer, in red wine, even in her sister's evening whiskey, but the Cow Queen's favourite beverage smelled like something that went in your aeroplanes' fuel tanks, not your liver.

It was making her dizzy. She could almost see the fumes.

She had to find Dari quickly. Dari would know what to do. Things always turned out alright when Dari was involved.

Mikoro popped from the mountain of rice and trampolined a path through this gastric temple. Light steps, she had to remind herself. Keep to the sturdy structures, no poking, no prodding.

Then a cascading SPL-SPL-SPLASH! ripped through the stomach-air, and she swung the flashlight just in time to witness a new waterfall of rice-wine, plummeting in to soak the pile where she'd landed.

Her head ached. She was losing concentration. She had to –

“Nuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

Mikoro yelped as the stomach rumbled, rumbled, rumbled for the duration – then shook so violently on the recoil that she lost her balance. She wailed – “Nyaaah!” – as she tumbled head over heels twice, before landing on her backside on one of those rice-wine torrents which carried her down, down, down and around...

“Gwahah!”

She caught hold of the pillar-flap at the entrance to the reticular treasure room. Staggered to her feet astride the river. Caught her breath. Or rather, struggled to. The fumes were overpowering. Even when she managed to steady the flashlight, everything in its light was multiplying by four. She was seeing stars, ringed planets, flying tigers, flying bunnies. Exasperated Kiyoko-faces whirled round her head, demanding to know what in the world she was up to now.

A feast. Of course that big beast would be chugging down barrel after barrel. Why hadn't she thought of that?

“Guuu...! S-So...irresponsible,” she groaned as she heaved herself through to the honeycomb-chamber, doing her best not to slip on the raging torrent. Then she swerved round against the flap and dumped herself in a pile against the wall of soft compartments.

At least it was drier here. Slightly raised, with a rampart of firmer muscle to keep the flow from inundating the royal riches. Their glints peppered the haze of Mikoro's vision. Stashed around her, secure in these walls, safe from the river of rice-wine gushing on through the sphincter.

A useful sphincter, she remembered. She'd got leverage out of it. Somehow.

Was Dari in there?

"Dari...uguuh..."

She must stay awake. She couldn't doze off here, confused and alone in the belly of the beast. She had to find Dari.

"Gugugugwuuu..."

Her brain was struggling. Concentrating all of its efforts in keeping her conscious, let alone sober. In the absence of its control her hands played about on their own accord. Fiddled with the ridges of the honeycomb-chambers. Stuck themselves in, feeling that satisfying *schlp!* of suction. Played tug-of-war to slip back out.

The coat would need another dry-clean after this.

Schlop. Schlp-schlp.

Her fingers brushed on something hard. A stick?

They closed around it. Tugged. The compartment's pressure was strong, but after each compression came a relaxation, and Mikoro's body, conscious or not, was adept at riding these motions.

She dragged the object out. Gazed blankly at it through swooning eyes.

"Nnhmm. A leaf...?"

Her hand stuck it in her coat pocket. A snack for later.

"Leaves are...fuzzy..."

She fainted.



"Agwah! Awawah..."

Dark. Bouncy. Gurgles. Nose full of beef.

Mikoro was awake. Pressure: a tight fold of stomach lining. She must have rolled in here while out cold.

"Nnyahhhh..."

A drowsy yawn. Her head still swam.

She lay awhile, letting it settle while waiting for the rest of her body to switch itself on. Once she could feel her hands again she fumbled. Slippery stomach lining. Her coat – wet and sticky. A cool metal rod – her flashlight. Good.

She squeezed herself free of the fold. Flipped on the light.

She was back in the primary stomach.

“Gwah. But I was in the other...?”

Had she been shaken back out while unconscious?

She reeled. Those fumes had hit her in the head like a boxing glove.

They were gone now, thank goodness. All that rice-wine must have washed away. A faint lingering whiff of spirits was easily overpowered by the prevailing beef.

She shone the light around in a muddle. Where was that passage to the honeycomb-chamber?

It wasn't where it was supposed to be.

Her light panned round the walls. Up them.

There. It was on the ceiling.

And while she puzzled over that one, she took notice of an unfamiliar background noise. It seeped weak into her ears through the gastric pulsations, the labouring glands, the heaven-hammers of that big bovine heart. But its roll was distinct, blasting down an oesophagus whose exit sphincter's new position it handily located for her. Right there against the floor.

Conclusion? The Cow Queen was two things she wasn't before. Snoring, and horizontal. She'd fallen asleep.

“Nyah. I'm getting out. Dari's not here. But then, where did she...ooh.”

She had a hunch. A solid one, all things considered.

Very solid.

But she had to get back to the surface first, and this was the best chance she'd get.

Oddly enough the gullet was tougher to negotiate this time. Even with gravity factored out the Cow Queen's peristaltic rhythms pushed against her like a wave machine, demanding the sum of her aptitude for scrambling, weaving and dodging to squeeze through to the royal throat. There she found that precipitous tongue arched against her, necessitating a sweaty climb with much digging of her fingers into its pulpy surface. As she attained its tip and rode an upsurge of alcohol-infused breath out to the light, she hoped against all hope that the Cow Queen wasn't a light sleeper.

“Nnnhah!”

Light rushed in, blinding her momentarily as she tumbled upon the Queen's bedsheets. She rolled further, shedding what slobber and gastric fluid she could. Then she lay a while, adjusting her senses and filling her lungs with fresh sea air.

The world faded in. A rich red blanket; the bed-plain itself, with its distant curtains, pillows and sturdy corner posts; and far away, a sandy stone wall, blurry golden and wooden things, a finger of blue sky through a glassless castle window...

She rolled round – and stifled a wail of amazement.

The Cow Queen, it turned out, was no lighter in sleep than in any other aspect of life. She'd crashed, massively, onto her covers; or more likely, staggered in and passed out drunk.

For a minute or so Mikoro wondered if she'd got the right cow. It was her first time seeing the monarch out of her armour, and whatever she'd expected – leather, fire, coal – it wasn't the ravishing massif of chubby coffee-milk voluptuousness that all of a sudden filled her world.

A loose wine-red sash, a profligate panoply of golden ornaments; they covered a lot, more than the entire surface area of the average human being even at scale. But then again, what they *didn't* cover might better be compared with the average planet.

Was it any wonder? There couldn't have been enough silkworms in the universe.

Even in sleep the overlord overloaded Mikoro. The mass, the scent, the eruptive snores were steamrolling her senses. She dithered. Should she stay at this size, and risk the pull of all her instincts which even now dictated she must climb, roll and slide her heart out on those luxurious landmasses? Or should she resume her regular dimensions, so to escape this stifling wash of body heat and clear her head but at the risk of waking this ludicrous titan?

Was there anyone else around?

Better to stay discreetly small till she was sure it was safe, she decided. The big bad beef was utterly out of it. Her snores alone out-roared any noise Mikoro could generate. So long as she didn't tickle her or scream in her ear, the fluffy interloper could surely take her time here.

Dari, she remembered. She had to find Dari.

And if she wasn't in those stomachs...

In watchful attitude Mikoro approached the woman-mountain. She wasn't intimidated by giant bodies in their own right in the manner of her tiny friend, but the sheer scale of this one boggled her mind. She had to be careful. The slightest shift would be perilous. Even if it didn't flatten her, it might rearrange the sheets beneath her and send her rolling in to where flesh pressed on fabric. Even Mikoro at her sneakiest wouldn't be slipping free of that one.

The Cow Queen snorted. Everything shook. Mikoro seized up – tripped on a fold that formed right there beneath her. She tumbled onto her face. Leapt up, quickly. Waited with bated breath.

Exhaled.

Took a few steps closer. Her head craned up as though drawn by an invisible winch.

“Waah! Wh-What a huge bum...”

There – that was as close as she dared get. That immeasurable curve of a cliff, vast and smooth, flexing with the rises and falls of this entire tectonic formation...

“Um, um, um...!”

Should she? Could she?

Yes – she managed it. A whisper of a shout. “Dari?”

Her ears twitched.

A response through the beef-storm? Or was she imagining it?

She tried again, fractionally louder.

“Dari? Are you there?”

There, right there! So faint, as if from deep underground:

“Mmmphh!”

“Guhwah! Dari! Is that you?”

“Mmkmmrww! Mmn nn nnn – glmmmmphh!”

The last part shot to the top of the pitch ladder as the Cow Queen dragged one spaceship-sized leg over the other.

“She put her in there,” Mikoro whispered to herself, as if granting herself permission to believe it. “She got Dari stuck in her bum.”

She strained her ears once more.

“Mmkrww...mmnn...”

Excitement and dismay tussled in her mind. Excitement, because she’d found Dari – found her at last! It was her voice, could only be her voice. At long, long last. And she was safe – well, safe in a manner of speaking.

How long had she been in there? What was she feeling right now? *Amazing*, insisted Mikoro’s favourite sensory pathways – massively, exhilaratingly amazing – but this was Dari, she had her own way of reacting to these things. Would she be okay? These particular things were about as superlative as things came...

And dismay, because the implications were obvious. If she was packed away in there, Mikoro’s chances of extricating her were precisely zero.

Hypothetically she could wait to see if the Cow Queen shifted onto her side. But even then it would entail a risky investigation: a climb, a feel, a tickle. But a tickle there was sure to rouse the beast from her stupor. That is, if she didn't roll over her mountaineer first.

No. It was too dangerous.

"Um, um! Can you, um, sit tight a bit longer, Dari? I, um...dunno how to get you out yet."

"Mbglnnff....!"

"Gwah. I'll, um, think of something. Uh-oh, uh-oh..."

Well, she would if she could drag herself away from the way those muffled attempts at words got squashed into squeaks whenever the Cow Queen so much as budged. It sent such a thrill through her nerves in spite of herself.

She decided the next best thing would be to survey her surroundings, but the trek away was not easy. She could feel that behemoth's presence physically weighing down on her even with her back turned, as well as a tiny Dari beating against the inner walls of her imagination, seething at her for leaving her to her fate. But as she pulled free of the Cow Queen's personal atmosphere she got a grip on her alertness, and now forced herself to cast a wary gaze outwards. Her deep blue coat must have stuck out like a jewel on the scarlet sea of these bed-covers. If anyone was watching...

But no – no-one was here. Above the industrial-grade snores and meaty shifts her ears caught only the wind, whistling in through the narrow windows. They were alone.

Mikoro put out her hand, drew forth her magic and returned to her original size.

The slumbering Cow Queen was no less imposing at this scale. Hell, Mikoro could probably cram herself down that throat without shrinking, she reckoned.

Did she usually shrink her captives before swallowing them? Or did she just scarf them down as they were?

No, there were more important questions right now. Namely: was there anything here that could help get Dari out? Ideally – or rather, definitely – without waking her jailer?

She considered an iron mace mounted on the wall. A rusty old thing, with leather straps twisted round its handle.

Nah. What was she meant to do with that? She doubted she could even lift it.

What else could she see? Red banners and curtains, gold ornaments, a writing desk with digital screens and a microphone. A lair of rich silk cushions with books

strewn about; titles like *The Two Horns of Government* and *Why Cows Rule*. Histories, biographies. Scrolls piled up on a side-table. A very large sphygmomanometer.

A nice enough room, Mikoro had to concede. Curved sandstone walls. High ceiling. Plush carpet. Cool draughts of fresh sea air. Grandiose, but with no sacrifice in comfiness.

How about the paintings?

They were mostly portraits. Old cows and bulls, dressed up, stately, distinguished. Her precious dynasty no doubt.

The main exception was a massive oil-on-canvas that dominated the wall opposite the bed. *The Seventh Illustrious Niu Mowang Subduing the Monkey Kingdom*. It was of her. Leading a minotaur landing party ashore on a familiar-looking island of rock pinnacles, sandy beaches and thriving bamboo forests. An army of rascally monkeys scattering at her approach, but not all in time. She'd snatched one up in her hand. Trapped another in her cleavage. Tucked a bundle of six or seven under her arm.

History was alive in this bedroom. Alive and stomping all over you.

Further along, a set of double doors. Mikoro crept up and placed her ear to them. Thick mahogany, the noise was extremely subdued – but yes. Snorty breaths. Guarded on the outside.

Good insulation. To spare her from annoyances? Or to protect the annoyances from the shockwaves when she practiced threatening monkeys and demanding tribute?

Another door, smaller, lay round the back of the four-poster bed. On investigation it led to an ensuite bathroom. A marble tub the size of an open-cast mine. Jets, vents, nozzles – all running. They'd filled it to overflowing. Steaming hot water. Bubbly fluff. Racks full of colourful things in bottles.

It smelled so good. Aloe vera, she recognised.

Had the Cow Queen left it running, intent on a bath, only to capsize before she had the chance?

As Mikoro stood there wondering: a colossal creak of wood, and a thump.

She jumped, spun back to the main room – and clasped her hands to her mouth.

The Cow Queen was on her feet.

She was looking straight at her.

“N-N-Nnnyah!”

Still looking.

“Wah! Waahh...”

Just standing there, looking.

Or maybe...not actually looking, Mikoro realised as her cognition jostled through her terror. Facing her, but not looking at her. The Cow Queen’s eyes were miles away.

Dazed? Drunk? Sleepwalking?

All of the above?

“Nrrrrgh. Monkey...” she grunted.

And now the gigantic hegemon turned from Mikoro. Stumbled, lumbered, swayed like a teetering monument, muttering in her sleep, but just about veering into a net progress across the room. Towards the mace on the wall.

“Nnnnyah, uh-oh, uh-oh!” Mikoro whined. “She’s gonna hit me with it!”

But she didn’t.

She merely steadied herself on its handle, which, despite appearing brittle as a twig in her hands, didn’t so much as buckle. Then she unhooked it from the wall and rocked on the spot, half-regarding it.

“Mrrrhnm. Protect. Hrrhrnhmm. Proteeeee-ct. Nuuuuu!”

The fluffy captain could only stand dumbfounded. This was the last thing she’d expected.

Should she hide? Flee? There was nowhere to run. She couldn’t get past her to the double doors, which were guarded anyway, and the windows were too small to crawl through. Unless she shrunk herself – but how many eyes would be waiting?

Someone like the Cow Queen didn’t need emergency exits. Nothing in the world could obstruct her from the main one, and even if it did, all she had to do was pick a wall.

“Never, never again,” she was mumbling, head shaking, lips wobbling. Anxious. “Never, nrrn-hrn-hrm. Never! Nevernevernevernever, never!”

It was surreal. It terrified Mikoro. She thought about Dari, the ride she was getting right now. Wondered if either of them was getting out alive.

And now that placid smile again as the monarch stroked the mace. Tenderly, as if it were an infant. Or the head of an old man.

“Nuuu. Sleep. Sleeeeeeeep. Legacy...nrrhrnhrrm. Works...I’ll protect...nrrrrrm, protect-t-thh...”

Mikoro couldn’t take it anymore. “Aaah, give me back Dari!” she shouted.

And regretted it at once as like a bovine moon, that great horned head turned towards her.

The Cow Queen's cherry-coloured eyes were glazed over. For so majestic a mountain she was a mess. Her ivory locks had been tossed and strewn as she slept, and one of her horn-rings had come loose to spin hazardously on its tip as, petrifyingly, she came plodding in Mikoro's direction. One of her armlets had slipped to her elbow, with the result that her silk shawl hung off her like a half-collapsed curtain, dragged along in the train of her massive shambles.

"Terrrrrrrrs..." she slurred, raising a massive arm to point at her victory over the monkeys. "Pnrrr...pledge. Pro-tecttt. Trib-bute. Never - nrrhrrm - again. Terror-king...pfffffh...beating up...nrrr...helpless old bu-bulls..."

Mikoro's instinct was to run. When something that size came your way - an asteroid, say, or an allosaurus - you ran. But her feet were glued to the floor. She couldn't prise her senses from this spectacular somnambulation. That huge round face - it was meant to be roaring, guffawing, steaming from its nostrils, taunting her, barking orders, scoffing down everyone in reach. So what was this? What plan could have accounted for this?

That gaze - it was too compelling. The way it washed straight through her, struggling to focus through a screen of solid rice-wine. Or was it the weight those great eyelids seemed to bear? A weight of sad apprehension - almost of pleading?

The sovereign juggernaut crouched loomingly over her. The Cow Queen's breath reeked of alcohol. She was stretching out a meaty hand. Why or how she'd never remember, but Mikoro allowed her to clomp it onto her shoulder.

"Nnngah!"

She'd have to get that looked at when she got back, she thought. But the hand was too big to settle there. Its thumb lingered, then slipped off after the rest like a mudslide.

"Nuuuu. Sov'rnnn...duuuuty..."

"Um, um! D-Dari...Dari's in your..."

"Nrrrrrm! Monkey...come, monkey..."

"Nnyah! S-Stop that! I'm not...!"

The august presence trundled into Mikoro. Too close, too hot - and next thing she knew she'd backed into the bathroom.

"Stop, stop, you great big..."

Mikoro pressed her square in the nose, but that only aggravated whatever otherworldly spell the monarch was under. She lurched at the cat-girl, snorting,

spluttering, shaking off rings and necklaces with every stumble. Sensing an inevitability about things now, Mikoro ducked aside and pressed herself into the wall – just in time to watch the almighty sovereign trip and plunge into the hot tub with a meteoric splash.

“Nnnnyah!” Mikoro squealed as hot water came splattering over her coat.

“Nrrrrrrrrrm,” sighed the Cow Queen, rolling onto her back.

At the astounding sight of which Mikoro gave the most silent of mewls.

She thought of Dari. She hoped it was watertight.

It was watertight, she decided.

A purry rumble. “Nrrrrm. Monkey.”

The Cow Queen was gazing at her. Spreading an arm out.

“Gwah! I told you I’m not a monkey!”

“Monkey. Nrrhrm. Come, monkey. Peaceful...rule. Don’t need kings. Just...beef bowl. Nuuuuuu.”

Those eyes again. Almost imploring. What did she...?

Yes. She did.

“Nnyah! Y-You want...me...to...!”

Mikoro’s head turned straight for the door.

Turned back.

Those eyes. Huge, harmless eyes, soggy with hope.

Mikoro was sweating. She didn’t know what to do.

“Nuuuuuuuu. Saaafe. Pro-tect...”

She was the Demon Cow Queen! She’d browbeaten a bunch of defenceless monkeys, treated the sea like an extension of her own bath, even blockaded it so no-one could come or go without her say. She’d seized the *Sea Bunny*! Gobbled up Dari then stuffed her in up the other end! She was the reason they’d had to tremble through the nights, take detours, hide and sneak their island-hopping path to the place they should have reached so long ago...

And yet, and yet...

Those eyes. That hunger. That desperate hunger.

To be accepted. To *deserve* acceptance. To be good enough.

Mikoro had seen it before.

In mirrors.

Acceptance. Friends. Family. The honour of her family. She went on and on about it. Why?

Mikoro was accepted. She had the best mother and sister in the universe. An entire ecosystem of warm and huggable friends at the Academy.

She knew she deserved it. Because everyone deserved it. But she also knew knowing wasn't the same as feeling.

Who did the Cow Queen have?

Her legend of a father? Well he wasn't here for her anymore, that was bad enough, but the legend part only made things worse, it might as well have put him twice as far away. And sure, she had her minotaur tribe, but she was their Queen, as much a legend to them as her predecessors. Who among them really got her, could speak to her on her level? Who was her Kiyoko, her Rin, her Dari, her Sayuri?

Those big, sad eyes. Such hunger. Such fear.

Such longing.

All she wanted was to rule the world. Was that so bad?

The great arm wavered; but no, it remained outstretched. Beckoning. Becoming shaky.

"Nuuuu."

The low regressed into a plaintive snuffle. Within it, a whine.

And the cat-girl realised that right now, all the power was her own.

No. She couldn't turn her back. Not now that she'd seen it. Not now that she knew.

In a daze of her own now, Captain Mikoro – no, just Mikoro – shook herself out of her sea-coat. She laid it neat on a huge wooden stool and set her hat on top of it. Undid the belts on her Academy shirt, then the zip. Removed her shoes. Pulled down her skirt, her tights; then, after a vague contemplation, her underwear with the tiny pink hearts. She lifted her hat once more and pinned her clothes beneath it. Breathed deep; and at last, took tentative steps towards the awaiting sovereign.

She shut her eyes. Felt the rush of warmth, the tree-trunk impact on her back as she plummeted forth into a nest of bubbles, bouncy flesh and hot water.

"Nyaaahhh. H-Hot..."

The scented bathwater soaked in her skin. Soaked it all out: the gastric spelunking, the nightmare university, the prow around the warship, the street battles, the abominable Banes – all at once her days of exhaustion caught up with her, pressed together in the soothing heat of the Cow Queen's hot tub till they popped and billowed away with the steam.

Movement around her. Seismic. She opened her eyes to find she'd fallen between the hegemon's arm and chest. It curled heftily round her now, enveloping her in its heat. She sighed; allowed it to push her up the imposing heights.

She spread out her arms, on instinct. Hugged that gigantic breast; or at least tried to, even at full stretch her arms didn't reach all the way round.

Then she winced, as the crook of that giant elbow enfolded her back and pressed her in.

"Nrrrrrrrrrm," the great demigoddess exhaled. Pleasure. Sweet relief.

What a smile. The smile of grazing fields high in the sky, irrigated by rains of rice-wine. The smile of world peace.

"Guuh. You're a big baby. Just like me."

Well, who wasn't? – she thought. Everyone needed caring for.

The Cow Queen's fingers settled round her head. Heavy, but so gentle for such a massive set of structures. They were rubbing. Kneading. Loaded with shampoo, Mikoro realised as it slid down her forehead.

She was washing her. Washing her hair.

Mikoro shut her eyes and giggled. She loved it when her friends washed her hair.

She couldn't believe it. Maybe she shouldn't. Was it all a dream?

It felt so good. So marvellously good.

That hand was working up and down her body now. Caressing her. Massaging soap into her shoulders, round her chest, up and down her legs. Rolling a finger down her tail. Two fingers – pressing it through them. Fingers which could have snapped an aircraft carrier in two, yet so gigantically gentle. Trustable.

"Nrrrrrrrrrm."

The continental vastness rumbled beneath her. Around her. Permanent with life.

What did it mean?

Friends?

She'd thought they were, well, not exactly enemies, Mikoro didn't do those. The least that could be said was that their journeys had ranged them against one another. Yet where she was now, Mikoro was challenged to believe this big beast of a woman could hurt even a mosquito buzzing round her horns.

Was that it then? Simple as that? Their animosity a thing of the past, a misunderstanding, now melted out with their stress in enchanted bathwater?

Dari was missing out. She should be out here in her hand, Mikoro thought. She'd give her a cute rub round that massive nipple. A wonderful massage. She'd like that.

She could just sink into this sea of soft, thick flesh and doze her troubles away. Maybe she should.
Maybe she did.



She still felt half in a dream as she pulled up her tights, fastened her belts and shuffled her coat back on.

How long had she lain there? A lazy cat, mewling in that sweet and chubby embrace? An hour? Two?

She hadn't even needed a towel, nor a hairdryer. She'd just climbed onto the Cow Queen's shoulder and snuggled against her neck till her body heat baked her as toasty as she hadn't felt since that magical night at the Sheep Pub.

So toasty, she felt guilty to ask. But she had to. It would be irresponsible not to.

"Um. Do you think you could let Dari out now? We, um, have to get to Comet Island..."

The Cow Queen burred incoherent at her. Still out of her senses. Drifting in bliss towards one heck of a hangover.

Mikoro sat on the stool and waited. There wasn't much she could do. Perhaps when the monarch came around she'd give back Dari. And the *Sea Bunny*, while she was at it.

So easy as that, in the end? After all they'd been through?

Well, not yet. Not while she lolled about like that.

It was awkward to watch. Too awkward. Give her space, Mikoro thought as she wandered through to the bedroom.

The Cow Queen's mirror. Massive, of course. To so much as glance in it was to see all the portraits of Their Majesties reflected around her, pressing her down with their gazes. Some were solemn, some curious, some amused, but their weight together was almost too much to bear.

Had she positioned it like that on purpose? Was her every pinch of an eyebrow, every scratch of a horn an act of communion with her lineage?

It made Mikoro self-conscious. Her hair was a puffy pink floss. Her hairbrush – still in her pouch. Still in the luggage box on the *Sea Bunny*. She hoped.

Did the ancestors disapprove?

She gazed at herself, just like them. Hat and coat. *Captain Mikoro*.

No sea chart. No compass. No GPS. No licence. Yet she had her gut – she was Mikoro, after all – and it told her that steadily but surely, her long voyage was drawing to a close.

Home. Home at last. Where she belonged. Where she needed to be.

Yet what was it Dari had told her once, late one night on Mother Rin's sofa?

Could she still hear it, in the little traveller's voice?

No, not 'mmph'. The other thing.

'You never go back.' That was it.

To journey out was to journey within. It changed you.

She remembered her excitement when her loafers hit the *Sea Bunny's* boards for the first time. When she hugged her family and sailed from the boatyard. The limitless sea, the wind in her fluffy pink hair.

She'd sailed forth. Mikoro had sailed forth. But *Captain Mikoro* would sail back in.

'You never go back.' She hadn't understood it. She'd ridden on aeroplanes plenty of times. Travelled abroad on Academy business, on field trips, on holidays. But then she came back and life went on. What changed, really?

Dari didn't understand it herself, she'd figured. Probably learnt it off someone and thought it sounded cool.

This, however. This had been different. She'd seen things, on this trip. Felt things. Funny things, frightening things, or just plain weird things – like this, now – but all things she couldn't have imagined before.

She'd felt what it meant to be Captain Ibaraki Mikoro. And she knew in her heart, even now, that she might step off the *Sea Bunny's* deck for the last time and hang up the hat and coat behind her bedroom door, but she would never, ever hang up that feeling.

If she got to keep the hat and coat, that was. She hoped she'd get to keep them.

But there it was. That hope: it was proof. She understood what Dari had meant now, at least in part. Was that understanding, too, not proof in itself?

And yet – Captain Mikoro was still Mikoro, was she not? Daughter of Rin, sister of Kiyoko. Dari's friend, a master of the Chaldea Academy, devourer of cakes and ice cream. And of Dari, when Dari permitted it. That wouldn't change. Couldn't change, one might insist.

She had grown, perhaps. Become a better Mikoro. Certainly a wiser Mikoro. But still, a Mikoro. Beneath the hat, still fluffy and pink.

And a hugger of the sun, juror of the underworld palace, dragonslayer, snapper of the rod, Bane of the Banes, and now, on bathing terms with royalty...

Her she was, in the bedroom of the Demon Cow Queen.

Her friend.

How had it happened?

And there – still in *there* – was Dari. She hoped she was okay. Believed she was. For all their heated encounters, had the Cow Queen ever actually hurt either of them?

Waiting for Dari. A good title for a play, she mused.

Musings which brought her to that old iron mace, leaning on its head against a gigantic dresser. The bibulous hegemon had left it here before...that. Hadn't replaced it on the wall.

Mikoro was no smith – thank goodness – but for a weapon she thought it looked pretty unremarkable. Perhaps the old king had clobbered a tank or two with it. In his daughter's hands it barely qualified as a toy. Her fists alone could do twenty tanks at a time. The idea of her armed was laughable. It was like imagining a cannon firing a smaller cannon. Yet the affection with which she'd handled this thing, like a limb fallen from her own body...

The memories she must have attached to it. The emotions. The sense of responsibility.

Mikoro reached out to touch it...

"YOU!" the very air roared her into it – bounced her shoulder off its handle, painfully, and reeled her to the side just in time to watch the Demon Cow Queen surge through the bathroom door with her shawl in her fist, face red as a furnace, horns lowered and nostrils blaring with steam.

"You, you...YOU, HERE?! By the blood of my ancestors, WHAT are you doing in the Queen's bedchamber, you insolent cat-pirate? HOW did you sneak past my guards?"

Panic flooded into Mikoro's head. "Nnnnyaaah! B-But, b-but, you, nnyah, I thought...!"

"Nuuuuuuuuuuuu! What are you – GET AWAY FROM MY FATHER'S MACE, YOU SCOUNDREL! My venerable – nrrhh, it's – you've taken it – nrrrrrrrrrm, YOU CAME HERE TO STEAL IT!"

"Nnah! Nnnnah! N-No, you, you, we – awawaaaaah!"

An instantaneous charge – a bighorned bullet-train of meat, muscle and red-hot rage ripping reality like a rag off its wireframe lattice as it trampled towards her, too phenomenal to react to, too fast to escape – and Mikoro screamed, then choked as the very hand that had caressed her like a kitten – washed her hair! – grabbed her forcefully from jaw to waist, swept her aloft and slammed her back into the wall.

“Nnnhhyeah! I – I – nyahh, hahh – I d-didnhhaahh...” She couldn’t speak; her neck was suffering too hard under the press of that mighty forefinger. That mightiness was its sole mercy, it turned out; its bulk was too great to jam under her chin.

“How, how...HOW DARE YOU? THIS IS THE FINAL STRAW, YOU BRAZEN! – SHAMELESS! – FIEND OF A...”

And here Mikoro tuned out the words as that avalanche of a fist rose into the air, and she squealed: “Hwaaaaaaaaaaa...!”

...until another voice, a third, spoke the truth.

It wasn’t loud. Not at all. But as it rolled through their ears, all feeling, all intent lay down for it to roll over them.

“Rrrr.”

It came from the window.

A tiger cub, squeezing furrily in.

And Mikoro cried out: “Rawr! It’s Rawr!” – realising only when she’d said it that the Demon Cow Queen had dropped her.

This was part of a sequence of reactions on Her Majesty’s part that requires explanation. Of primary note is that its most important stage – the first – was by far the shortest. It lasted only two seconds. But within that margin, events took place which totally rearranged the weights in the narrative equation.

It wasn’t immediately intuitive. There was nothing objectively scary about a tiger cub – fuzzy, chubby, cuddly – squashing its way through your window, still less when it was barely the size of your foot. And yet in the first lick of that flash of orange and black across the Cow Queen’s retina, it triggered something in those rods and cones that didn’t get much use these days. Something ancestral, in this most ancestrally-minded of monarchs; so ancestral, in fact, that it had trickled down not only through the eminent generations of her dynasty but also the not-so-eminent generations preceding it. And the ones before those. Indeed, the source of its descent lay so far back that any attempt to trace it must lose its way

in the murk of unrecorded prehistory, long before the invention of such new-fangled contrivances as states and dynasties, queens and kings.

And as for that something, it now pushed aside all other sensory inputs, even the pink fluffy ones, to dictate, by ancient hereditary decree: This is urgent. Everything in the optic nerve gets out of the way, right the hell now, so this information can get where it needs to. And as soon as the flash of colour rocketed up that vacated highway and surged into her brain, it erupted like a flash fire through every cell in her body. Every cell, which unbeknownst to its best chemical memories, sat on a logic that'd lain ever dormant in her bovine heritage and whose operative piece of information was really quite straightforward.

It was this: *Orange and black EATS YOU.*

It lasted only those two seconds before it was battered aside by more contemporary concerns. Indeed it only took such time in the first place because that primal fear, that ripple of archaic nonsense, required those two seconds to traverse the vast distances of this particular territorial inheritance. But in those two seconds its effect was twofold, and both parts were consequential in the extreme.

The first, straight away, was that the Cow Queen dropped Mikoro. With the cat-girl's quick reactions she was steady on her feet on the tick of the first second.

Just in time for the second effect, which took place right at the end of this period as the signal straggled through to the monarch's more peripheral provinces. There is really no dignified way to represent this one, so let us refrain from putting too fine a point on it and simply note that it resulted in the immediate liberation of Dari from her confinement.

Right in front of Mikoro.

To which the cat-girl had her own reactive pathway, though hers was comparatively modern. Barely a year old, in fact. Almost as old as the afternoon when Dari first stumbled through a rift onto Mikoro's dresser at the Chaldea Academy.

It went something like: *Green and brown – how tasty!*

And as of that second second, it found her perfectly positioned to act upon at least the initial stage of its directive.

Dari's tiny naked body – hair clogged in a mess, patches of embarrassment all over, still squirming – fell clean into Mikoro's cupped hands. A moment later the cat-girl's friend-instincts had overridden her predator ones and landed her companion safe in her coat pocket...

...just in time for the sovereign visage, now recovered from its tiger scare, to catch the tiny mop of brown disappearing beneath the flap.

“Nooo!” she hollered. “That’s my Dari-mouse! Nrrrrrm, you – you! Hraaaaaaaah!”

And then – her attention swung back to the tiger cub, now pacing across the carpet towards her. The competition between the two inputs was fierce.

“You. That – you’re...the Beast? The roar in the dark?”

“Rawr,” answered Rawr, striking a tiny paw against her shin.

“Um, um, um!” stammered the still-terrified Mikoro. “His name’s Rawr...”

The sovereign didn’t seem to hear her. “Nrrrr,” she snorted. “The Beast of Reckoning. All this time it was just a...”

She reached down to pick up the cub. It rolled beneath the sweep of her hand and gnawed playfully at her other foot.

She tried again. This time it jumped on the back of her hand, licked her fingers and rolled off.

“GUARDS!” she roared suddenly. “THE BEAST IS HERE! COME AT ONCE!”

The double doors slammed open. A pair of minotaur sentries: helmets, greatswords, maroon tower shields rimmed with gold.

“Rrrr!” the tiger growled at them.

That same inherited reaction to tigers, so useful to their distant forerunners, flashed to life in the guards and they cowered behind their shields, whimpering as their armaments clattered against the flagstones.

The Beast of Reckoning leapt between them and raced down the corridor.

They recovered, crossed their swords as they’d been trained to and swung their heads confused.

And Captain Mikoro, a shaken fluff of bewilderment, heartbreak and fear, gave up control to her instincts; which, finding an opening on one side and a living crag of blistering beef-rage on the other, directed her to duck beneath those blades and scoot for her life.

“GET BACK HERE!” The shockwaves pounded the air through which she ran, scoured the walls with such force that showers of sand shook loose. “HOW DARE YOU RUN FROM THE QUEEN? BRING ME BACK MY MOUSE, YOU PITILESS MONSTER!”

Anguish pierced her heart, and it wept in a cry of protest: “I’m not a monster!” – but she couldn’t listen, if she hesitated for an instant she was done for. Follow the tiger, follow the tiger, that was all that mattered now: the tiger, her friend Rawr, the Beast of Reckoning, barrelling through the halls of the Cow Queen like

an unstoppable furry torpedo, shooting down corridors, banking round corners with a scrabble of its paws, stopping only to “Rrrr!” or “Rrawr!” at the elite minotaur sentries in its way. Each shared the ancestry, the instinct, each growl stunned them just long enough for Mikoro to dart through unhindered – and then they’d come to their senses, grip their weapons, and join the thunderstorm of stomps accumulating behind her.

“THE CAT IS IN THE FORTRESS!” The roar seemed to come from the fortress itself, each syllable a grief-stricken inferno. “THE CAT AND THE BEAST ARE IN LEAGUE! STOP THEM! STOP THEM YOU FOOLS! I WANT THEM ALIVE!”

Follow the tiger, follow the tiger – through the carpeted galleries of the royal sanctum, where a proud antiquity spectated the flight of its latest desperate fugitive from each weathered block, each aged banner, each hand-worn balustrade and line-up of minotaur statuary; through the prestigious corridors of the civil service, where ministers, clerks and bureaucrats, alarmed at the noise and still far from sober, stumbled from their offices, recoiled at the bolt of striped orange fur then staggered with papers in hand into the pursuing flood of royal guards; down staircases wide enough to launch ships off, then across the feast-strewn tables of the Hall of Abundance where boozed-out revellers still sprawled unconscious amidst the empty cauldrons, meat-steamers and wine-casks, and where drunken minotaur housekeepers were tossing equally drunken monkeys and human tourists between one another’s arms; from there into the foundries, cannon and crossbow racks, firing ranges and open-air courtyard of the royal armouries, where abstinent soldiers and livid minotaur smiths with huge horns and headbands added their fire to the foaming, snorting tidal wave at Mikoro’s back; then at last through a labyrinth of dark, narrow corridors that came out of nowhere – they couldn’t all get in here at once, there were no signs, no markers – which led, at length, to a dark-walled information centre full of computers, clocks, beeping mainframes and massive screens attached to the walls and ceiling...

...where a minotaur hand, whose chain of inheritance had threaded too long through subterranean caverns to ever encounter a tiger, locked its fingers round Rawr’s tail.

The Beast of Reckoning growled, angrily but adorably, as it curled to gnaw them off it. When that failed, it transformed. First into an adolescent tiger; then, astonishingly, into an adult whose fur flared like starfire, whose muscles swelled magmatic, and whose every tread rolled the world beneath it; and finally into the beautiful elder Mikoro had first encountered as a corpse, only now alive, so

essentially alive, its irises rippling with knowledge of all realities and its shoulders streaked with venerable crests of white fur. And in each embodiment the tiger grunted, the timeless rulings of a cosmic will, and locked its teeth round the arm of this minotaur in a purple robe and veil..

...but it didn't hurt her. She merely stroked it.

"The Beast of Reckoning," she spoke, respectfully. "Ah...so it's like that. I see now."

"RR-rrrr."

"You won't bite me. Her Majesty is too sincere in her heart, too answerable in her ways for you to bring violence against her rule."

"Rrrrr," snarled the ancient tiger – but it was a cub again.

It would only snarl. Caution, not censure.

Not propaganda then. Hard fact. Spoken in the voice of a consummate professional whose job is to know the gradations of fact like the back of her mask.

"That's as far as you go, Captain Ibaraki Mikoro," said the Minister of Eyes and Ears.

And at this point, brought to a standstill by a wall of incomprehension, Mikoro's own tide of turbulent emotions caught up and smashed her from behind.

"Nnnnyaaahhh, I can't! I c-can't take it anymore..."

"I apologise," said the Minister. "I cannot allow you to cause Her Majesty further trouble."

A silence, as the cat-girl vacillated at critical mass.

Then she exploded through her tears: "*I thought she was my friend! We – we had a bath together! She was so kind to me, we cuddled, we, we...!*"

"Oh? Did you now?" Surprised – but not derisive. Nor disbelieving.

"Why? *Why?* What is her problem with me? I didn't do anything! All I've been trying to do all along is go to Comet Island with my friend! T-To take my ship...take it home..."

A clamour of snorts and shouts echoed from the rear wall. Thuddingly irate. It sounded like they were taking wrong turns and jostling each other in the dark.

The tiger nuzzled at the Minister's chest.

"Do you mean to say," she asked – slow, clear, matter-of-fact – "that you did not steal the *Sea Bunny*?"

"Of course I didn't! I was trusted with it! My mother, the Chaldea Academy – take the ship back, back to her friend on Comet Island..."

"Ah. So you understand it to be a ship."

Puzzlement suspended Mikoro's burnt-out nerves for a second. "W-What do you mean? It is a ship, isn't it?"

"I see," said the Minister.

Mikoro didn't, but her response seemed to satisfy her questioner.

"Just tell me this," the minotaur said, changing the subject. "The Temple of Balance. The release of the Banes. Was that your doing?"

That was the last thing on Mikoro's mind right now, and it cost her further precious seconds to dredge up her memories.

"That...that was nothing to do with me! It was a bunch of terrible people from that so-called Heroes' Agency! Dari and I have spent half our journey trying to catch those awful Banes, I – nnyah, have you any idea how much of a struggle it was to put things right? I'm never gonna forget what I saw them do!"

"Nrrh. I thought as much."

"You, um...you did? What do you mean, you thought...?"

But once more the Minister moved on. "And what of the Forest of Beginnings and Ends?" she asked now. "Were you involved in its disappearance?"

Her strokes of the tiger cub resumed. It was now chewing playfully on her sleeve.

"Um. That scary forest? It went away after I sent back the Ruthlessness Bane. After I – nyah."

"After you...what?"

She'd almost let it slip. She'd only just remembered. It was still in her stomach.

Reflexively – defensively – her hands found their way into her pockets. One of them discovered Dari and fidgeted with her absent-mindedly. She was wiggling.

Well Mikoro was done with subterfuge. Even if she lied, those unsettling scarlet eyes on the minotaur's mask would pierce through her anyway, she figured. All she longed for now was to rush home in the straightest line possible and dive into Mother Rin's arms.

"I found an artifact there," Mikoro confessed. "A mirror. It helped me defeat the Bane."

"Indeed? Would you show me this...mirror?"

"No. It's too powerful. I'm not trusting anyone with it. I'm going to take it to Comet Island and ask Mother's friend what to do with it."

The Minister appeared to expect this answer. Or at least, Mikoro thought she did. That face-flap made it impossible to know for sure.

"I see," said the Minister again. Her horns lowered in contemplation.

Mikoro was doing her best now to stall her tears, to show a resolute spirit, but the sways of her tail betrayed her anxiety. The shout-storm of accusations and rebuttals was growing hotter, but also closer.

She added, urgently: "I only naughtied around in her stomachs because she was bullying the monkeys."

"Ah. The monkeys."

"Yeah, it's not like I got involved on purpose! But she was pushing them around, and then she ate Dari, and then, and then..."

The Minister turned her back to Mikoro. A pause – silent, restless, long.

Then at last, a snuffle of resignation.

She asked: "Do you know why Her Majesty pushes the monkeys around?"

The fluffy captain, still unsure if she should be standing around having this conversation but too fraught and forlorn to fight it, shook her head.

A click, unseen. A blurry image came up on the big screen. Mikoro sleeved off her tears.

"Wah. That's..."

A fantastic scroll painting. A thousand coloured inks, bursting into clarity.

It was much like the oil-on-canvas she'd seen in the Cow Queen's bedchamber. Only – this time the setting was not the monkeys' island. It was the fortress. Indeed, she recognised the galleries of the royal sanctum she'd hurtled through only minutes earlier.

And this time, instead of the majestic Cow Queen scattering a lawless simian rabble, a different sovereign – a gnarled and leathery old bull in a dark green dressing gown – had stumbled on the carpet: his mace rolling away in two parts, his elbow raised, his lips stretched wide in a howl of mortal terror. And the driver of that terror, unmistakable for his bold, brilliant brushstrokes that might have leapt from the canvas to beat up your face, was a red-faced macaque – gold robe, green trousers, headdress of bird-of-paradise feathers, smug and supreme with a smile of ferocious arrogance – who towered over him with a blood-smearred gold-banded rod raised high. At his heels massed an army of monkeys, fierce in their fur, their chops bared merciless.

The remaining landscape – the greater part – was strewn with the battered remnants of a grotesquely-illustrated minotaur army. A few of its members looked barely alive. The majority, going by their smashed limbs and exposed bits of brain, were not even that.

“*The Great Sage Equalling Heaven Sun Wukong Subduing the Minotaur Kingdom*,” pronounced the Minister. “The erstwhile Monkey King himself. Confiscated from his throne room in the palace of the Water Curtain Cave on the Island of Flowers and Fruit.”

It wasn't a piece she'd want to come across in an art gallery, Mikoro thought. Still less on a late night's randoming about on the internet. Its revelling bloodlust should have made her sick. But with her heart already so sore from her latest ordeals, it only sank deeper into sorrow.

“Bah. I trusted the monkeys,” said Mikoro. “So did Dari. Are you saying they lied to us? Or...how do I know you're not making this all up? Bwah. So many people I've met on this trip just made up whatever they want – the horses, the police, the professors, and now you and the monkeys. I don't know who to believe anymore. I never wanted any of – ”

“Do not misunderstand,” said the masked minotaur. “I make no claim that this is a historic document. On the contrary, I served Her Majesty's late father the Demon Ox King and was present in the fortress when the event depicted took place. There were casualties. Painful ones. Nonetheless, I believe the monkeys grossly exaggerated the carnage in memorials like this to play up their Great Sage's all-conquering reputation. There are glaring inaccuracies. For a start, he never led his furred hosts in the invasion but did his damage single-handed, and not as this headdressed chieftain but as an ordained discipline in service of a human Buddhist. I suspect the officials who commissioned this painting had the masses added for their own political ends; say, to offer their supporters a sense of personal stake in the legend of the one who made them great.”

“Um, um...”

“But I digress. What is beyond dispute is that the Great Sage was a fearsome leader – the equal, I daresay, to Her present Majesty; and that her late father, His Majesty the Ox King, never recovered from his humiliation at his hands. My point here, Captain Mikoro, is that His Majesty's daughter, with whom he shared a sincere and wholehearted love, was brought up on these stories of his wounding in body and soul by unaccountable simian tyrants, and believes, with some justification, that his decease was hastened by the ordeal. Thus she swore by his deathbed, then once more by his memory as her first act on succeeding to his office, that she would never be brought to such shameful treatment, nor would her people need ever fear it again. That, you see, is why she keeps the monkeys cowed and places constraints on their material and military means.”

Mikoro regarded the painting as she heard the Minister out. The veteran official had a point: its violence did appear a little too ridiculous to be true. But that truth wasn't the point, was it? Not for its celebrants. Neither for its victims.

She searched for the words she wanted. Her ears found Rawr, prowling on the tabletops and sniffing at random computers. They must have smelled very suspicious. Gremlins, probably.

"I'm sorry," said Mikoro. "It must hurt so much. I must have hurt her so much when I made a fool of her in front of the monkeys. I wish I'd known. I wish they'd told me. I mean, they kinda did, but I never thought..."

The Minister shook her head. "It is fair to say Sun Wukong did remarkable things for them," she said. "Their lifespans, their comforts, their knowledge, their wealth; the revolutionary changes wrought by the Great Sage were astonishing when you consider their manner of life beforehand. And although it shames me to speak ill of His late Majesty, my duty, which is to rooting the sovereign's rule on a firm field of facts, would find me in worse dereliction were I to pretend that his rule was without its shortcomings either. Such is the way of things."

Mikoro gave Dari the softest of squeezes. This was just the sort of discussion where she'd have loved to hear the tiny historian's point of view. She might have brought her out to check on her were she not well-versed in the vocabulary of Dari's squirms; not least these ones, which said: "I'm tired. Please let me rest."

Well she'd more than earned her break, Mikoro thought.

"I understand you have met the monkeys' interim prime minister," the minotaur continued. "We correspond in secret of course. I believe they are an honourable individual who seeks the best for their people, just as Her Majesty does, while moreover struggling to fill the most impossible of shoes. Behind the scenes it's an open secret that they retain more supplies than they admit to, easily enough to pay Her Majesty's tributes. We accept this. Her Majesty makes a great performance – almost a ritual – of intimidating them, but understands that to come down too hard would gash the pride so inordinately inflated by the Great Sage. The result would be political turmoil, the rise of hardliners like the Four Stalwart Officials, and reckless monkey bellicosity across the Sea of Ways. In converse, any lessening of pressure would allow them to once more amass the means and confidence to mount a more formidable challenge. Do you understand now the painstaking calibrations behind the present policy?"

"Um. I guess so, when you put it like that. But..."

“Please do not mistake the monkey policy for the general character of Her Majesty’s rule. She makes no secret of her power; indeed she revels in it. Such is her way and the way of her line before her. But she is not an authoritarian. She takes real enjoyment in engaging with dissent, seeks always to learn, and spreads her arms wide to accommodate the myriad differences. You will find no heart larger than hers on this sea, nor any which more brims with care not only for her minotaur tribe but for all who reside in her sphere of influence. She provides for everyone, turns none away who look to her for safety or support, and strives, in short, to wield her power such that all who cross this sea may feel they have a home on it. Her tribute system supports work to the benefit of all people, and is carefully calculated by her Ministry of Rings so as to be exacting only on the richest islands and traders so that none might gain unaccountable power over others. Now of course you are entitled to not believe a word of this, coming as it does from the mouth of her devoted servant and her father’s before her. But I offer it also as her lifelong friend, who has cared and watched out for her since she was a calf and – if I may humbly claim – knows her better than anyone alive.”

Her words were earnestly spoken, and Mikoro was at any rate too drained to pick holes in them. “Okay,” she said. “I believe you, okay? You don’t have to explain it to me any more. Can you just tell me how to fix it? If I say sorry to her – or if you say sorry from me...”

“I am afraid it is not so simple. If you have grasped my meaning, then you will also understand why acts such as the destruction of the Temple of Balance and the assault on the Sheep Pub caused her such personal offence. She attributes these crimes to you, although I have always suspected you were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, while unfortunately salient in her temper after your initial encounter. Though Her Majesty means well, she is innately stubborn, and I fear that after the ultimate insult – in her mind, you see – of breaking into the heart of her power and laying hands on her father’s mace, she would bury you in her rage before the steam in her ears has cleared enough to hear you.”

“B-But...nyaah! I don’t want...that’s...”

“I shall speak to her of course. But it will take time. Better you wait in the royal dungeons till she is ready to receive you.”

In Mikoro’s fingers, a burst of squirming.

“The dungeons beneath the fortress,” the Minister clarified. “With the beds, furnishings and suchlike. There is internet access, uncensored. The rations are generous.”

"I can't do that," said Mikoro, for what it was worth. "I have to take the *Sea Bunny* to Comet Island."

"That I cannot permit," said the Minister. "By my duty to Her Majesty."

"Please," said Mikoro. "Dari and I – we've travelled so far. My family – my mother Rin, my sister Kiyoko, all my friends – they're all waiting for me. They don't know if I'm okay. The lord of Comet Island is Mother's friend and all of them are trusting me to take the *Sea Bunny* there. I should have got there ages ago. It was only by accident that Dari and I ended up so far away, and had to sail through the Beef – um, I mean, Her Majesty the Cow Queen's territory."

"Your family you say," said the Minister.

"Yes. My family." And it occurred to her to add: "My responsibility to them. To those I care about. To those who care about me. All of them are wonderful people, and it'll hurt us all so much if you don't let me see it through. Such a kind queen wouldn't want that – would she?"

The quarrelling snorts and shouts had eased behind her. Now there were only stomps. Lots of stomps. Stomps which might trample down the wall at any moment.

"Please," said Mikoro again. "I'm not going to beg, because it's humiliating. But I promise I won't make any more trouble. I'll even be her friend, if she still wants me. But not like this. Not while everyone's waiting on me. Let me go to Comet Island first."

The Minister was inscrutable. Panic crept up Mikoro's back, unhindered by her sweat. The minotaur boots seemed to stomp within her very ear canals.

"The lord of Comet Island has...an arrangement, with Her Majesty," said the Minister at last. "It is strictly between them. Even I am not privy to its content. I know only that Her Majesty is committed to Comet Island's protection at all costs. Even if you go you have no means to bypass her blockade, and whether you do or not, she will overtake you long before you arrive."

"Can't you lower the blockade for me?" Mikoro pleaded. "Even just for a bit?"

"Only Her Majesty can authorise that," said the Minister.

"B-But then...is there no other way?"

"There is not. Well, strictly speaking there is, but there is no way she would grant you use of her stepmother's Plantain Fan, so..."

"Plantain Fan...!"

Mikoro had been aware all this time of a twig-like sensation brushing against her fingers as they fiddled with Dari. An exclamation mark thudded into her brain

and she rotated her hand, clasped the object and lifted it out. Without warning it shot to the length and width of her own body: a gigantic banana leaf, jerking her wrist with sudden loading. It wafted up and down with rubbery flops.

“Nyah! You mean this?”

For the first time the Minister visibly drew up in shock. “Wh-Where did you get that?”

“I, um...her tummy, I think. I sneaked in with her rice during the feast. Yeah – I remember now! It was in her second stomach with all the treasures!” And realising what she’d just said, she became agitated. “I didn’t take it on purpose!” she said hurriedly. “I was blacking out from all the rice-wine, my hand just...”

“It no longer matters,” said the Minister, faster now. “That fan possesses the most potent magic of all her heirlooms. It can blow down any obstacle, draw or push almost any object no matter its mass, and as you’ll have noticed it changes size automatically to accommodate its bearer. When she discovers you stole it her fury will be without parallel. This changes things. Considerably. If she catches you now you will not be safe. Go.”

The Minister flipped a switch on a desk console. A bright light lit up the wall: a row of narrow entrances, each topped with a cryptic symbol.

“The *Sea Bunny* is in the research dock. Third passage from the right. Use the fan to lower the blockade then raise it up behind you to buy yourselves time.”

“Wah! You mean, now you’re okay if I – just like – ”

“Go! Go straight to the lord of Comet Island, as fast as you can! Only she has the power to help you now! I will do my best to calm Her Majesty, to stall her pursuit, but – ”

There was no time to lose. She could hear the minotaur army stampeding up the final passage. And as if to emphasise the point, the little tiger, hitherto so casual in its exploration of the Minister and her information centre, frizzled up and darted for the third passage from the right.

Mikoro was already there. Her tumultuous inner storm, temporarily allayed by the Minister’s calm engagement, had risen again in her heart, her nerves, her limbs. Yet just as she reached the entrance, one image among all those she’d tumbled through on her journey flashed before her eyes.

She loved her mother, just as the Cow Queen loved her old bull. And now she remembered another parent – another mother. One she’d seen killed in front of her. By one of the most chivalrous and warm-hearted individuals she’d ever met.

Reality really wasn’t simple.

“Be careful with so much power, okay?” she called from the entrance. “It’s so easy to lose control and hurt people because you think you’re doing what’s good for them. Please always respect and listen to them too! Otherwise in the end it just hurts everyone.”

“Noted,” said the Minister. “Her Majesty thanks you for your feedback.”

Mikoro ducked through the entrance. A flick of a switch and the wall was black as a dark night.

Minotaur sentries, soldiers, artisans and civil servants piled into the information centre.

“You there!” barked the Minister of Eyes and Ears. “What are you doing here? This area is strictly off-limits to all except Ministry staff, as you know well!”

“The pirate cat!” a military officer spluttered in protest. “We were chasing – ”

“Out! Out, before Her Majesty hears that the confidentiality of her intelligence operations has been compromised! Or would you like me to serve her your names on a list?”

The hunting party issued a collective gulp and withdrew.

The Minister of Eyes and Ears walked to her desk. Sat down. Flipped open her notepad.

“Be careful...so much power...” she muttered aloud as she wrote. “Lose control...respect and listen...hurts everyone...Captain...Ibaraki...Mikoro.”

She tore out the paper and slipped it through the slot of a little sandalwood box.



At the harbour, a tunnel in the fortress wall provided restricted access to the research dock through a sea gate. From this tunnel lovable baby tiger snarls rose forth: “Rarr! Rrrawr!” From each there followed a startled whine on the part of a minotaur scientist or technician, till at last a beeping was heard, then a low whirr, then the flap of a sail unfolding, and at last, at escalating volume, a curious noise like the whistle of a conjectural feline locomotive: “Wuu wuu! Wuu wuu!”

Then the gates burst open and the splendid *Sea Bunny* was loosed on the world anew: hatted and coated captain at the tiller, not-quite-ready first mate at groans in her pocket, and furry chubby cosmic mascot curled asleep in the prow.

“Wuu wuu! Wuu waaagagagwah!”

Coastguard cutters, interceptor boats, battleship crews and mounted emplacements rounded on the fleeing vessel in unison. They’d been on high alert

ever since the alarm was sounded – that is, since their sovereign’s shouts had echoed through the fortress to them – and they wasted no time in crowding and ramming the *Sea Bunny*, bombarding it with netted harpoons and demanding through megaphones the immediate surrender of its errant captain. But whatever countermeasures had saved it against the cannons of the dark beast Ganon so long ago, and then the grasping arms of the Cow Queen’s own *Lamassu*, bleeped to life once more to swerve it through the gaps, jerk from the trajectories of falling nets, and bank out of reach of the minotaur marines till the rabbit-shaped ship, by miraculous means, cleared the great iron gates of the fortress dock and returned at last to the sea.

But it wasn’t over. Straight away it faced the fortress’s defensive rings: breakwaters, sea towers, and further fleets of high-speed interceptor craft coordinated in their movements by the signals of surveillance buoys. These had all been deployed to keep invaders out, but were no less effective at keeping captives in.

“Wawawah!” Mikoro yelled as foghorns blared, projectiles smashed the surrounding sea and aggressive charging-bull naval rams whooshed within a whisker of the rabbit’s blameless face. Its breakout was impossible, there couldn’t be a more impenetrable perimeter anywhere on this sea, but somehow the *Sea Bunny* knew exactly when to brake, when to tilt, which way to spin, so that all its intrepid captain could do was follow its lead and sway, duck and yell from the depths of her lungs to match it. Sluggishly, painstakingly, as though time was stopping and starting in jerks, she breached the innermost ring of obstacles, then the next, then the layer after that – and from there the walls and buoys began to disperse, and the slower vessels broke from the pursuit, leaving only a handful of stragglers, the speediest jet-propelled interceptors, still attempting to draw up alongside or rear-end her. At last these too fell away, for now the waves grew choppy and the sizzling air pricked at her skin...

...and the signposts appeared, sticking out of the water, increasing in number the further she sailed. ‘BLOCKADE!’ they spelled out in no uncertain terms. ‘WARNING: FIRE HAZARD!’ ‘DANGER OF DEATH! NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY!’ Then came the automated monitoring stations and wooden platforms with stairs and emergency telephones.

The wall of fire soared up before her. But even that – the terror of its limitless stretch, its crimson intensity, the sting of its heat on her face – paled in comparison to the fortress’s final surprise.

For the first time Dari properly noticed their new friend. “Uhh, about this Rawr...”

But Mikoro went on: “I wish we’d had the chance to meet her somewhere nice like the Sheep Pub first. Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Huh? Oh – I hope so Mikoro, but right now I think we’re going to end up one on each of her horns unless we get to Comet Island before she catches us.”

“Gwaah! Uh-oh, uh-oh...”

“The fan, Mikoro. Do it. Hurry.”

“Waah. Right. The fan...”

Mikoro raised the Plantain Fan from her pocket. Once more it whomped out to match her size, but this time she was ready for the recoil. Holding it firm, she raised it high in one hand.

The *Sea Bunny*, perhaps sensing her intent, swerved side-on.

Mikoro parked Dari in the fold of her hat. Both hands on the fan now. A deep breath.

“Raaaah!” she yelled as she wafted the fan. “Raaaah! Raaaah!”

“Rrrr,” the Beast of Reckoning contributed in its sleep.

A section of flames the width of a football field died down to let the *Sea Bunny* pass.

“Waah, that was amazing!” Mikoro cried out as they cleared the blockade. “We’re through! We made it Dari, we really made it!”

Yet her cries were strained. She still felt guilty.

“Not yet,” Dari reminded her. “We can’t stop now. Now remember what the Minister said you should do?”

“Yup. Let’s get a safe distance first.”

“Good. You’re good at this now, you know?”

“I’ve learnt a lot,” she said in a knowledgeable voice. And added in an undertone: “Because of you.”

The *Sea Bunny* made a yaw turn to give the fan clearance once more. Mikoro faced the gap in the flames, spread her legs, and raised it yet again. She made great strokes upward this time, with no yells, only purry exhalations.

The fire returned.

“Gwah. There.”

“Good,” said Dari. “Now she’ll have to take down the whole blockade to come after us. If she doesn’t realise you’ve got the fan till she gets here then she might

have to go all the way back, I dunno. Valuable time either way. We'd better make use of it."

Onward. The flames receded behind them. They remained in sight, a lambent line of red, but all else now was open sea.

They were back. Mikoro and Dari, riding the waves beneath a clear blue sky on their way to Comet Island.

Mikoro stood with a hand to the mast. She breathed. Then she produced a high-pitched mash of unrepresentable squeals as she snatched Dari from her hat and clasped her into her chest with both arms.

"Nnnnnnhaah! M-Mikoro!"

"Nyawawawaaah! Dari! It's Dari! I can't believe you're back! Look at this – we did it! We really did it! We're together again, and the sky and the sea are fixed, and we've passed the blockade, and we're there, we're finally almost there!"

And she erupted into tears, hot and free, flooding the deck with pure untrammelled joy, as Dari reconciled with her lot as she always did and bore this admittedly cathartic crush of celebratory cuddles.

"But...are you okay?" Mikoro asked her again. "Really okay, I mean. How long did she keep you smooshed inside her, um, beef bowl?"

Dari's cheeks turned red as the flames behind them. How Mikoro had missed that.

"I'm alright," said Dari, managing a smile. "Really alright. It happens all the time, did you forget? Though, I'll admit...this was a little long, even by my – nnggh – standards. And heavy. I mean really, really heavy."

And safe, she didn't add as Mikoro fidgeted with her stiff limbs. She'd felt so embarrassingly safe.

"Urgh. I'm going to need some exercise."

"Um, but your clothes?"

"They'll come back. They always do if they get beyond a certain range. I haven't worked out the exact distance yet but...gaaack. Oh Mikoro."

She was cuddling her into her face now. Cheek-hugs, nose-hugs and long dribbly kisses.

Then she stopped. Stared dead ahead.

"What is it Mikoro? Is something thwaaah!"

With Dari in hand the cat-girl rushed to the prow. She fumbled in her pocket, pulled out the spyglass. Still caked in bovine bodily fluids; she gave it a shake before raising it to her eye. Pointed it straight between the *Sea Bunny's* ears.

She saw a spire. Very tall. Widening and narrowing up its height, with horizontal lines across it – balconies. Rising from a large central edifice. Smaller structures around it: some on the ground, some floating.

A flash of colour.

A scream of joy, and another cataclysmic embrace for poor little Dari.

THE WAY OF THE
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CAT and MOUSE

“A hat? What do you mean, a hat?”

Dari patted her own head, as if to check such an article had not snuck on while she wasn't looking.

“Oooh, it was so cuuute! I wanted to poke it!”

“Nngh. As cute as yours Mikoro?”

“Um...maybe? Let's say *nearly* as cute. Yeah. And you also had this amazing cloak, a green one, but not green like your shirt, a really, really cool shade of green like – yeah! Like the sea over there!”

“Right. A cloak. Even better.”

“And you went *zhoom!* and opened these rifts, and, and, tons of cool stuff came out, and you moved them around defensively so she couldn't hurt us, and then you used one to send her attack back at her and beat her in one hit! And then you told the mean professors, ‘You are wrong because of this and this and this,’ and pushed them away somewhere, and then I ate you and everything was okay.”

Dari climbed out of the mug and towelled herself off with a tissue. She pulled on her clothes – her core had recovered them – thinking that by the time she'd got her shoes on she'd have worked out whether to be worried.

She hadn't.

“Um. You do believe me, right?”

“I believe you Mikoro. How could I not? I mean, look at this.”

She spread her arms. The sea, the sky, the wind, the afternoon sun – it was as glorious as the day they'd first set sail.

"You did it Mikoro," said Dari. "From what you've told me it sounds like the Bane of Ruthlessness was the nastiest of them all, but you defeated it all by yourself. I'd say I'm proud of you Mikoro, but that would be one heck of an understatement."

Mikoro took her in hand and raised her to her cheek for a kiss.

"Nrrr, nrrr..."

...there! That tiny wet peck! She purred in blissful satisfaction. It was as stimulating as a mosquito bite but in all the opposite ways.

"Heehee! Well, I wasn't really alone. I couldn't have done it without Super Dari and the friendly Chaos Snake! And then there's the other Bane, which I didn't have to fight at all because, um..."

"Ahh, right. Prejudice, wasn't it? What happened with that one?"

Mikoro's lips drooped. She hesitated.

"It was on her ship. The Cuddle Queen's. It turned out she'd beaten it already. I found it after she caught the bunny boat. The Chaos Snake led me to it. I managed to send it back, but that's when they all chased me and I fell off."

A tiny blush on Dari's part as she alighted on Mikoro's knee. Unusually, it receded into genuine discomfort.

She hadn't had time to resolve her feelings about the Cow Queen.

The Cow Queen who'd – yes.

But come on, Dari told herself, of course she did. When was the last time you held that against someone?

And she had to admit, even if it brought the blush back, that for as long as she'd been so generously hosted she hadn't felt in any serious distress, let alone danger. Which must have taken some quite considerate attention given the generosity of the territories there concerned.

Heck, she hadn't even felt particularly in need of her wash just now. Really she'd only taken it because the alternative was trying to explain that to Mikoro.

And then, those anguished roars as they'd escaped; the Minister's words; and now the news that Her Majesty had spared Mikoro a harrowing Bane encounter which, remembering that spirit's nature, she wouldn't have wished her fluffy friend even to set eyes on...

She looked up. The fluffy captain was using Dari's surplus bathwater to towel off the spyglass. Her gaze – she was concentrating so hard. Such cute responsibility. But it couldn't hide the worry beneath.

“We’ll speak with Mother’s friend about her as soon as we get there,” said Dari, giving the cat-girl’s knee a determined squeeze. “She has influence, the Minister said. She’ll help us get it all cleared up. Speaking of which, we’d better get ready to meet her. Uhh...Rin really didn’t give you a name? Or tell you anything else about her?”

“Nope. Just that we’ll know her when we see her.”

“Strange.”

Well, Dari figured, we know four things.

She rules over Comet Island, which everyone speaks of with awe and respect.

She has influence over the Cow Queen. That must make her tremendously powerful.

She built or commissioned the Sea Bunny. Which reminds me, she thought, should I tell Mikoro about...?

The cat-girl shook the water off the spyglass. Held it up. Good as new. Its star-engraved brass casing sparkled as it caught the sun.

...and fourth, determined Dari, she’s Mother’s friend. A friend of Rin’s would be nothing less than absolutely trustworthy.

“Yeah. We’ve got a lot to ask her about. We’ve earned a complete explanation after all we’ve been through for her, don’t you think? About the Cow Queen, and this sea, and this ship, and, err, this new friend of yours...”

It napped at the other end of the deck. It looked for all intents and purposes like a striped and furry cushion. Yet it seemed to sense Dari’s eyes on it, and she knew it.

“Rrrreh,” came a noise from its centre, just for her.

“Are you sure this is safe?” she asked Mikoro in hushed tones. Somehow she felt it still heard her.

“Rawr is cute!” said the cat-girl, as if that were answer enough.

Why she didn’t know, but Dari wondered whether it might be more prudent to keep the Beast of Reckoning on a raft attached to the *Sea Bunny* by a rope. But then it shuffled and went “Rrh-rrrr,” so she sensibly thought better of it.

“Uhh, Mikoro?”

“Nyeh?” The cat-girl was scratching dry flakes of royal mucus off her coat now.

“About this, uhh...*Curator*, you called her? I still don’t quite...”

“Heehee! It must feel so strange, right? A Super Dari who can play with rifts all she likes and roll around and blow stuff up with her core. Isn’t that so cool?”

“And you’re certain this was me.”

“Yup. She was like, a god-mode Dari! But even like that she was still so cute and kept blushing and flustering around and wanted me to eat her, so, um...”

Alright, she decided. She had to ask.

“I’d really like to see it if you don’t mind, Mikoro. The mirror.”

A fair enough request. A quick oesophageal engagement and out it came: a tiny oval glass in a lavender frame, temporarily expanding as it soared from Mikoro’s mouth then contracting right back down as Dari caught it by the handle.

Despite its manner of storage it was clean as the day it was made. Not a speck of gastric fluid lingered on its lens, which gleamed like molten light; nor its frame, which still carried that enigmatic inscription – beginnings and ends, causes and consequences – in letters they couldn’t read but comprehended perfectly.

One glance. That was all Dari needed.

“Fuck.”

“Gwah? You know this mirror?”

“Yes, I – I mean no, I don’t, but – nghh. No way. How? That’s...gaah, of course it’d be her! I should have...! I can’t believe she’d...”

“Um? You do know about it, or you don’t?”

Dari brandished it at her.

“Mikoro – look. You see this? This is *special*. When all this is over you’re going to have to tell me extremely carefully what went down on that island, because you see the material this is made of? This script? There’s only one person I know of, one person in all the realities who this could belong to, and I’m not going to guess how it came to be here but *thank fuck* it was you who ended up with it, not the Bane, and not anyone else for that matter.”

“Wah.”

Dari’s eyes fell on the glass. She saw incredible things. Things not for her, even though they were. They were, they insisted. Who are you, Dari? Who are you? Take a look.

No. She wasn’t ready. For now it was good enough for Dari to simply mean Dari. She wrested her gaze away.

“Who?” said Mikoro.

“Huh?”

“Who does it belong to? Someone you know?”

“You...could say that,” said Dari, gazing high into the sky now. “Someone who it’s just like to pull a thing like – well, someone I’m going to have a bloody word with, that’s for sure.”

“Um...”

The tiny explorer clasped her forehead. She was muttering. “Did she just lose it or something? No, no, that’s not like her. On purpose then? But that’d be...nrrgh! No, she couldn’t possibly...no. No. She would, wouldn’t she? Ahh, for goodness’s sake!”

She found Mikoro again. Found those wide, curious, innocent eyes.

Perhaps their pupils were just a little sharper than the Dari-guzzling cake-monster she’d berated at the start of their voyage together. As its very first act, in fact.

But she was still Mikoro. Still and always Mikoro.

If she couldn’t be trusted with it, what hope was there for anyone?

“Swallow it, Mikoro,” she said. “Please.”

“Um! A-Are you sure?”

“Your stomach’s the safest place for it for now. When we get to Comet Island we can ask Mother’s friend all about it. But, privately okay? Don’t get it out and wave it around where others can see it.”

Mikoro had never seen her tiny friend look so serious. She nodded, and with a gulp, returned the Way-Mirror to its improvised safe.

For perhaps the first time in her life, the sight of a bulge travelling down a giantess’s neck brought Dari a sigh of relief.

Should she tell Mikoro what she’d seen before she was captured? Those weird rooms inside the ship? Beneath the very boards they were sitting on now...

She realised she couldn’t describe them.

Better not, then.

Besides, they were almost there. All would be made clear soon enough.

The conditions were superb. Flocks of seagulls, swooping on a pearlescent sea; the sun just where it should be, with a clear blue sky all to itself save for a few puffy flocks of cloud-sheep; and off in the distance, the unmistakable spire of their goal. The island they’d come so close to before the storm that had turned an errand into an epic.

It was visible to the naked eye now. They were back. They’d done it. Two more hours’ sailing, maybe three? They’d be there by nightfall at any rate.

Mikoro’s tummy rumbled.

“Gwah. I’m hungry!”

“Know what?” said Dari. “I am too.”

“Oooh, that’s right! You won’t have had anything to eat since, um, um...”

Dari cringed.

“Nrrrr. You don’t look that hungry though.”

Mikoro’s crossed eyes loomed in suspiciously. Her cringe deepened.

She poked her.

“I know what tired Dari looks like. This isn’t tired Dari. This is energy Dari. She gave you something, didn’t she?”

“Nnnhh. How about we get some dinner ready first, then I’ll tell you?”

Nudging. Sniffing.

“Ah! M-Mikoro...?”

“Heehee! And I can smell something else. I think Dari’s hungry in more than one way.”

Dari emitted a timid whimper.

“Rrgrr,” the snoozing Rawr opined from the far end.

“Aaww, Dari! You should have just said!”

“Wh-What, Mikoro? I don’t – *waah!*”

Mikoro picked her up and tickled her face with a fingertip.

“Yeah you do! Heehee! Of course you do, you must have got such a huge rub-rub in there!”

“Nngh...ahhh – Mikoro, s-stop...”

“Well I’ve got an idea! How about I give you a hand?”

Dari’s view became the cat-girl’s naughty tongue, swirling round her lips.

“W-Wait, Mikoro! Don’t – huh?”

Her friend had put her down on the deck. She hadn’t expected that.

A flash of blue overhead.

Then the flop of a giant coat and hat on the deck, with a whoosh of displaced air in her face; and emerging from them, her beloved fluffy friend and travelling partner, now at her own size, giggling towards her with arms outstretched.

Mikoro collided with her, cuddlingly. Stuck her face into Dari’s shoulder and made silly purry noises, such that Dari’s own face got fluffed in her mass of pink hair.

Which she stroked. It was impossible not to.

“Aaww. Mikoro.”

Then the cat-girl’s arms tightened round her bashful friend and half-dragged, half-carried her over to the coat, whose thick tent of fabric and furry lining now offered the perfect shade.

“Come on,” Mikoro’s lips found her ear in the darkness. “Hasn’t it been so much fun, travelling together? You promised me you’d stay, and you stayed. You stayed

with me all the way. Even when you couldn't be there, you were there. It wouldn't have been anything like as fun without you. So now we've nearly finished, let me help you make it as fun as it can be for you too!"

"Nnahh!" The cutest squeal. "Ohh, M-Mikoro..."

"Heehee! I bet the Moo-Moo Queen did a number on you here! And now I get all the fun of finishing what she started."

Dari moaned. Her dear friend, so sneaky yet so straightforward; she'd read her like - well - like a cat reads a mouse. Like she always did. Like she'd done ever since that day they'd first met, when what started as a terrible mishap had resolved just like this in the most fluffily Mikoro of ways. In the sanctuary of Mother Rin's stomach they'd come together in the pure heat of passion, and in that tender crucible, forged a loving friendship as deep as the sea and vibrant as the stars. How much deeper, now, for the seas and stars through which it'd sailed?

"Nyawah-!" Mikoro gasped, surprised, as Dari's fingers, so hesitant at first but unstoppable once committed, found what they were searching for.

"Eheh. Do you remember, Mikoro?" she whispered.

"Nnaahn...wh-what do you think? I'm never gonna forget, Dari. Never never never. Never!"

"Good. So - together?"

"T-Together..."

Together.

And as they rolled, together, up and down the high ranges of the love from which all realities are made, a creature of cosmic significance might have approached the coat and poked its nose in for a curious sniff. But then, with a "Rrr-rrr" of approval and respect with which no-one could disagree, it padded to the prow and went back to sleep.



The setting sun would not take its leave without imparting one final blessing on its travelling friends. Just for them perhaps, it cast its most splendid rays on the goal now rising before their eyes. Lit up in the evening glow, Comet Island's rainbow of colours came alive in coruscating splendour.

Steam whistled from the *Sea Bunny's* kettle.

"I'm gonna miss it so much," said Captain Mikoro, back to full fluffy magnitude. "Eating and chatting and drinking tea together on the bunny-boat like this. Sailing

around, exploring lots of islands, watching clouds and boats and fishies together, looking at the stars...”

“I know what you mean Mikoro,” said Dari, getting some pre-dinner stretches in. “I guess this’ll be our final meal on the *Sea Bunny*. Let’s enjoy it for all it’s worth.”

“Nyah! But we can always travel together again, can’t we? We should bring Mother and Kiyoko and Sayuri too next time! Maybe we can even go back to some of the places we...”

“Heh, steady now. Let’s see this adventure through before we start thinking about the next one, alright?”

Instant noodles. Most else had spoiled after the *Sea Bunny*’s prolonged spell without power. When an aghast Mikoro realised this on opening the refrigerated compartment, Dari had had to explain a little about how the ship had stalled while the cat-girl slept, and her search below decks for the reason.

She hadn’t found it. Another mystery on the long list of questions for when they arrived.

The crackers, jams, preserved meats and bottled drinks were okay, as were the noodles they slurped on now. The worst tragedy was finding that all the ice cream had melted. No matter though. They were so close now, and if Comet Island was as magical as everyone made it out to be then they were bound to have ice cream there. They couldn’t not have it.

The travellers shared their meal in enchanted mood. As at the Sheep Pub, they didn’t talk till they were finished. The moment was just too special to spoil with words.

Only afterwards, under incredible strain of resistance, did they set about preparations for landing.

“Well, less than an hour to go I’d say,” said Dari. “We’d better get the ship in good order, no? Ourselves, too.”

“Nyah. I guess.”

Mikoro pulled open the luggage hatch. Then, reluctantly, and only after bouts of sighs and wistful staring, she folded up the spyglass and stowed it away. She gave the flashlight a wipe with her coat – loving, full of reminiscence – then rolled that into the pile too. She considered taking down the lantern, still dangling from the boom, but it looked nice enough where it was so she left it there for now.

Then she rummaged through her pouch.

“Everything’s still there, yes?” came Dari’s voice from outside.

She'd checked first thing. Everything was there. But now she was sorting it properly, she could tell that its contents had been neatly rearranged. The minotaurs must have searched it but put everything back.

"Um. My phone..."

"What about it? You said it was there, didn't you?"

"Yeah. But, um...the battery's full. Even though it ran out ages ago. I remember it did. Does that mean they...?"

"RRRR." Dari yelped as the sound took over her ear.

Rawr had crept up on her while her back was turned. Just to do that, apparently. The stout creature was already prowling back up the deck, innocent as a kitten.

"Come on," she said with hands on hips. "Really?"

Mikoro giggled – she'd emerged just in time to catch the show. "Aaww, Rawr likes you!" she said.

"They always *like* me," said Dari with a flop of the arms. "I wonder why."

"Heehee! Everyone loves Dari because Dari's a cutey!"

"Well same to you Mikoro."

"Yeah, but you're the one they put in all their holes!"

Dari reeled like the ship had taken a torpedo. "Nnnaah, M-Mikoro! Oh come on, where did that come from?"

Mikoro scooped up the timorous little traveller and set her in position in the fold of her hat, with just a brief stop for a lick and a nose-rub on the way.

"It's true though! And I think I understand why!"

"Is this really the time?" came Dari's voice. "We'll be there any minute now."

"Heehee, just listen! I've been thinking about it all the way along!"

"Yeah. I've realised that."

"...and then I thought, maybe it's the wrong question. Maybe it's not 'Why does it happen to Dari?' – but 'Why is it Dari it happens to?'"

"Nnghh. What do you..."

"What I mean is, imagine if it wasn't you! If it was anyone else – someone like me, maybe – it might mean you enjoy it too much, and then you wouldn't have the cute mousey reactions that make it so much fun! But then, if it wasn't you in the *other* direction...then you'd be too scared, or might even find it hurts you, and that wouldn't be fun for anyone, would it? So maybe, I dunno, the universe chose Dari because Dari is *just right!* Like in that story about the bears!"

No answer. Mikoro giggled. The silence must mean she'd got it exactly.

Then she looked ahead, and grasped that it actually meant ‘Where did Comet Island go?’

Or, more problematically: ‘Where did those clouds come from?’

She reached up. Brought Dari back down. All the while the little explorer stared dead ahead.

Now Mikoro did too.

“Uh-oh.”



It wasn't that they'd forgotten. What they'd done, all they'd done, was permit themselves one final little irresponsibility.

A tiny one. The one everyone takes in these situations.

The hope that if they didn't mention it, it wouldn't happen.

That never worked. Just ask Dari.

For a while she kept her eyes shut. Not in denial, but mortification; her internal evidence-based historian was upending her cerebral furniture piece by piece.

At last she opened them and looked to Mikoro. Their faces reflected each other to an eyelash.

Dari swore.

Her fluffy friend stared at the darkening sky. The wind had picked up, was flapping the sail, now her coat. The sea built pyramids of foam only to break them.

No – Mikoro wasn't staring. She was glowering.

She stated: “No.”

The lantern clinked as it swung.

Again: “No! We came all this way together! *Together*, do you hear?” And now her ears and tail were bristling, and she was shouting, shouting hard. “All this way – *all this way* – and we are *not* gonna get blown away all over again! We did it together, and we're gonna finish it together!”

It began to rain. Pinpricks of water pattered on the deck-boards, drummed against the sail. Soon they were thumping and whipping.

“Mikoro, are you sure we shouldn't – ”

“NO! *Captain* Mikoro isn't turning back! We said we're going to Comet Island, and that means we're going to Comet Island!”

“Okay. Good. That's the way. Now look, there isn't much time. Once the storm kicks up I'll have to take cover and my voice won't carry as it is. What's the plan?”

“Um. The plan is...I’m gonna stand there,” – she pointed to the tiller – “and steer us through it no matter what!”

First Mate Dari squeezed her eyelids shut, tighter this time. But there wasn’t time, she’d said it herself, and she opened them once more. Support your captain, she instructed herself.

“Make sure everything’s safe,” she said. And she ran off the list as Mikoro raced about the ship, checking that the tiller was engaged, the hatches sealed, the luggage box fastened, the sail secured, the deck clear of obstructions, and the lantern-hook clasped fast to the boom.

Rawr had awakened. The tiger cub leant with its front paws on the rabbit’s head, gazing up at the sky with a purry growl. Strange. Not a frightened growl, nor a menacing one. Simply an acknowledgement, for all they could tell.

Mikoro wondered if she should call it over, suggest it take cover in the luggage box. But there was no need. Rawr did what Rawr did, she knew that by now. And with that cleared up, she took up position with a hand on the tiller, the other on her hat, and stared the rising storm dead in the face.

“Make your own path,” a gentle voice echoed in her memory.

“Together,” said Dari from her collar, just as the wind drowned out her voice.

“Together!” Mikoro roared as the tempest crashed in.



The *Sea Bunny* pitched, ominous at first, then perilous as the sea turned serrated beneath it. Into her face the gales came screaming, and Mikoro screamed back, though she no longer heard herself, but it didn’t matter, all that mattered now was that she keep her hand round the tiller and her feet firm on the deck, even as rains that had drowned civilisations came horizontally at her, even as the sea that had been their bridge between worlds now rose into walls to bar their way home. The sea, the sea! The wrecker of all nonsenses and arrogances, the eater of coasts, toppler of imaginary borders, sinker of gunboats, drowner of delusions of dominion over worlds and stories alike. All that was not real was undone by this sea, the reality of realities in which all that mattered swam, and all that didn’t sank...

“Raaaaaaaah!”

Mikoro’s hand jerked the tiller, banking here round the great wave of Hokusai, swerving there to race through the tunnel of the wave which sank two of the three

ships of Cesair. She rode the crest of the wave that buried Atlantis, then ploughed headlong, with a cry of utter defiance, through the wave which sent Noah lurching equally headlong for his toilet. And with each impossible onslaught cleared she thought: We're winning! We can do this! – only for the waves and gusts to regroup and come at her again with legendary ferocity...

Then a flash – and a terrible blast fractured the skies.

Mikoro wailed, the thunder had shocked her, and she lost her grip on the handle – only to shoot out her hand and grab it determinedly back, then steady herself against it as pillars of lightning struck the seas. The storm was worsening. It wouldn't stop till it had broken all things to their constituent particles. This was impossible, how could she have been so reckless? There was no way –

ZH-OOM!

“Waaah!” she screamed as for an instant she thought the lightning had hit them – only to watch what seemed some huge invisible missile shoot from the *Sea Bunny's* prow in a straight line. Such was its force that it ploughed a half-pipe through the ocean ahead, and for just a few seconds, streaked a clear blue gash through the roiling sky.

“Wha – wha...?!”

ZH-OOM!

Once more the unseen blast, pattering across the broken waves as it carved a smooth path ahead. Impending upon her now was the wave the fish avatar of Vishnu warned of to the Vaivasvata Manu, but the invisible force shattered a gap through its wall as if it were so much vapour.

Was it the ship?

No! – she realised, as her eyes caught a flash of green.

“Dari!”

The tiny explorer had emerged from her coat-collar. She was waving the Plantain Fan.

“Nyaah! Why didn't I think of that?”

Another flash – and in its light she caught Dari grinning up at her. She must have had the foresight to grab the fan from Mikoro's pocket. It was the size of a pencil in her hands but none the less potent for it.

Mikoro nearly reached to grab her tiny friend and cuddle her to thrilled smithereens; but if she did that it would defeat the stroke of brilliance that had earned it, so she stubbornly resisted and instead put all her focus in keeping control of the tiller. She was struggling now, the lightning was frying the sea all

around her, the relentless rocking had shaken her out of balance, the deck was waterlogged up to her ankles, but Dari's ingenuity had given them a chance, and if she could just keep them steady, just skate the ship down these beautiful, blessed half-cylinders...

But something else was steady. Something so faint in her hearing but rising fast through the storm...

BOOM-boom, BOOM-boom, BOOM-boom, BOOM-boom...

Her ears twitched to the beat. Soon they were shaking.

Drums.

She twisted her neck, squinted back through the rain – and gasped, for the wall of cloud glowed red-gold.

“Nyaaaa – ”

“NUUUUUUUUUOOO!”

The *Lamassu* erupted from the storm like a world-ending leviathan.

“GIVE YOURSELF UP YOU REPREHENSIBLE PUSS!” bellowed the heavens in the voice of the Demon Cow Queen. “HAVE YOU NO SHAME? GIVE ME BACK MY FAN! GIVE UP THE BOAT YOU STOLE AND FACE JUSTICE!”

Mikoro screamed, it was right there on top of them, tall as the sky, that great ancient figurehead with arched wings stretched out to get them, its horns close enough to impale them, its keel about to steamroll them flat, there was no time –

The winds changed, and with a creaking heave the *Lamassu* listed away.

“How...? Waah, Dari!”

The little one was right there on her shoulder, swinging the Plantain Fan to waft the dreadnought away.

It didn't go far. The fan's power was formidable but a ship with the combined mass of two thousand minotaurs, two thousand forests and two thousand mountains must have been close to its limits. Still, the great dreadnought surged well back before it righted itself, a giant planet of wood and iron heaving back into orbit after the cheeky tug of a passing star – and now they could see her atop the prow, hulking, horned, a titan of vengeance in steel...

“HOW DARE YOU WIELD MY FAN AGAINST ME? SHOULD I CRUSH YOU WHERE YOU STAND? ALL ENGINES, FULL AHEAD!”

Mikoro shrieked as the *Lamassu* caught up in a single heartbeat, and there were the snorts and shouts and grunts and the gold winged bull rearing down on her once more...

...and once more the right-angled shift of wind in her ears, as a stroke of the fan beat it impossibly back.

An inaudible cry, as Dari shouted something up at her.

“Keep it up Dari!” she yelled back in the loudest voice she could. “We can’t be far now! All we’ve gotta do is make it through!”

A flash – and another snarl of thunder, this time mixed with splintering wood. Fingers tight, knees bent, feet firm, Mikoro reminded herself, instinctive now, before she looked around.

Another flash, and this time she saw it: the lightning was striking the Cow Queen. White sparks danced round her arms and horns as the thunder rolled away, leaving crimson flames to lick up her armoured slopes or cavort on the deck around her. The *Lamassu’s* prow – it was on fire. And she was ignoring it, her impervious skin shrugging off the blasts and the flames, she might have arched her back and laughed were she in the mood, but she wasn’t, her mood was all about the oaths she’d sworn and the corpse of her father tossing and turning in posthumous misery as naughty loafers trampled upon it and a shameless furry tail tickled its face, and so she only pointed at the tiny dot of pink and white and roared at her crew to press on.

But then, another voice – shrill, desperate, piercing out from somewhere behind her: “It’s no good! Your Majesty, this storm, it’s not safe! We’re on fire, we can’t – ”

There were children on board, Mikoro remembered.

“Oh alright!” the Cow Queen relented, her back to the *Sea Bunny* now, her armour orange-hot as though fresh from the forge. “Hard astern! Put out those fires and take the ship to safety! I shall not have it said that the Demon Cow Queen behaved with disregard for the lives of her subjects!”

The dreadnought heaved into a turn, fell back, vanished into the clouds. Still they glowed, those clouds, flashing and crackling as the flames and sparks disclosed its position.

Had they done it?

“We’ve done it!” cried Mikoro. “Awawah, did we actually...”

No – what was that clanking?

Thunk. Thunk. It sounded like...huge pieces of armour hitting wood.

Then an almighty **SPLASH!** and a sizzle like half an ocean evaporating.

“Uh-oh! No...n-no, that couldn’t be...”

It was.

The horned and furious mass that was the Demon Cow Queen tore from the fog, and Mikoro screamed: “Nyaaaaaah!”

She was swimming for them. Actually swimming. She’d leapt from her flagship and now came barrelling through the chopped-up sea towards them, horns to the fore, eyes crimson with rage, ivory tresses plastered to her face, her body bare save for those blinding gleams of gold and that flash of sovereign maroon.

But of course: the Cow Queen was the strongest swimmer alive. For her muscles no sea was too wide to cross, no storm too fierce to break.

With a body like that, who needs a dreadnought?

And now Mikoro staggered, struck by a rush of panic worse than anything the storm had stirred up so far.

“Nyahhh, s-she can’t seriously – she is! She’s swimming for us! Dari, Dari...!”

In her mind she was shouting: “Use the fan! Use the fan!” But for all her agitation, for all her certainty that she and her ship were about to be plastered into the depths, she couldn’t drag the words to her lips. It was the Cow Queen. The strongest part of her mind still registered her as a friend – she’d washed her hair! – and those eyes, the anguished humiliation that lashed in the flames of her bloodshot fury, would only be cranked through the roofs of all comprehension if they brought her own fan to bear against her now...

...and Mikoro glanced down to find that Dari too was panicking, the Plantain Fan suddenly heavy in her hands. Was she hamstered out of her mind by the rushing in of this landslide of elemental woman-power whose raw magnitude her body knew all too well? Or was she merely terrified, in a more basic sense, as she might be by an oncoming bison stampede or ballistic missile? Or was it her heart, Dari’s sweet, kind heart, struck helpless by those swimming pools of scarlet pain?

Either way, when her arms at last hefted up the fan, they were shaky, half-hearted, irresolute in their task – while the imminent sovereign was resolution made flesh, knew exactly what she wanted; knew exactly how her stepmother’s precious treasure worked. And glimpsing the flash of green on green through the crack in her red mist – green: treasured, beloved, tasty – she stopped – so suddenly, just for a second, concentrating the staggering sum of her mass just as the fan wobbled down on Dari’s swing; and the result was that it was not the wind and the waves that took the fan’s force but the fan itself, which with a squeal of shock on Dari’s part recoiled out of her hands, spun through the air, and fell straight into the Cow Queen’s open maw. A *GULP!* – just like that – and the fan was gone.

And that was that, the champion swimmer was upon them, and Dari went “Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!” and Mikoro lost her wits, lost her hold on the tiller, her feet slipped as the ship rocked violently in the clash between the Cow Queen’s wash and the fury of the storm –

Together, they’d said. Together. Her friend. They were there for each other. That was what mattered.

Mikoro grabbed the rattled Dari and shoved her into her mouth. Swallowed hard. She’d be safe from whatever hell was now upon them.

Then she yelped as a massive hand seized the *Sea Bunny*’s bulwark; and she leapt, flung her arms round the mast, felt her feet leave the deck as that huge weight dragged the ship into a slant, further, further, almost onto its side. An elemental galaxy swept through her senses – bursting air, raging sea, creaking wood, snorting flames, and a flash of ethereal orange-black: the Beast of Reckoning, how the hell could it sleep through this?! Then an immense pressure round her abdomen, horrendous, unstoppable, she screamed as that trunk of an arm slammed her into the deck, and off spun her hat, and there was the Cow Queen rearing out of the waves, her dripping and swaying sky of soaked steaming coffee and cream with a rain of splutter and salt, a wind of roasting breath, a thunder and lightning of gold chains and plates and that bell to swish and thunk her doom in her face...

“Naaaaah!” Mikoro wailed, not bearing to look. “What do you want with me?! Just leave me alone! I have to get to Comet Island!”

The sky grinned – a triumphant, maddened grin. “You, your ship, your mouse – you’re coming with me,” pronounced the Cow Queen. “You’re going to answer for your crimes against – ”

Then a shriek from beyond the sky as ten thousand volts tore through their world. A stray bolt of lightning had struck gold – literally, that is, struck the Cow Queen’s crown and horn-rings. Mikoro thought she’d passed out, then realised it was only the crackles lingering in her ears, the white-hot paste on her retinas; she shouldn’t have survived that, the *Sea Bunny* by all rights shouldn’t have survived that, but apparently the Cow Queen was mighty enough to make her own physics and her bulk had dispersed the charge like a meaty umbrella. She hadn’t even noticed!

“Stop this!” Mikoro screamed through her mind-haze, feeling the seawater seep through her hair as gravity gave up on her. “Can’t you see what you’re doing? You’re going to get us both killed!”

“Did you think you could escape me?” the sovereign roared oblivious; the heat stung on Mikoro’s face, dried her hair as fast as it could soak. “No thief, no vandal, no invader escapes the Demon Cow Queen, and no-one, *no-one*, shall ever have cause to say that she allowed so much as a kitten to lay her low in her duty to protect Comet Island!”

“Nyaaaah, just *listen to me!* I’m going to Comet Island for my mother! She’s friends with – sent me – the ship – a favour – *I thought you were my friend!*”

“Nuuuuuuuuuuuoo!”

She could see the sparks snapping along those horns. It was no use. The Cow Queen was high on an inner tempest of rage, pride and sovereignty every bit as intense as the tempest tearing around them.

As the dimensions swung everywhere – as down became up, and up became sideways – Mikoro struggled between the Cow Queen’s hand and the deck, kicked uselessly, tried to bite but for the bounce of her fangs off those unbreakable knuckles. She couldn’t shrink herself, that would set Dari loose, that was how the spell worked, and the permanent flood on the deck would wash the pair of them straight into the sea...

The big beast – she was dragging the ship around. Levering it round herself in the water but straining, panting; it might have been heavy as a star. The weight of her hand on Mikoro’s thorax was unbearable. Fastening her to the deck no matter how the ship swayed, crushing her stomach, its contents, Dari, her lunch, instant noodles, she could feel them, taste them welling up towards her throat...

She choked: “L-Let me...g-go...! Y-Your fff-th...w-would your f-father...”

The pressure lessened just for a trice as a firestorm of humiliation blistered through the Cow Queen’s frame. “Y-You!” she snarled, spreading her palm to press it down on the offending lungs twice as hard. “How *dare* you speak of...!”

And Mikoro’s instincts took note of that momentary easing, sought to slip free, but too slow, the hand whomped into her stomach and she gurgled in shock and pain, genuine pain this time; pain which was wrong, just wrong, this was Mikoro, to see her hurt would return the hearts to the most heartless of monsters just in order to shatter them. That was more than enough to hurl a dart of shock through the walls of the Cow Queen’s tunnel vision, to lessen the pressure again, and this time Mikoro’s body wasted no time, it writhed, slipped loose, slid down the deck to bounce off the behemoth’s mighty breast just as the ship lurched up the oncoming cliff of a wave – and she snapped over the gunwale, flipped in the air and fell back, arms spread, towards the churning sea...

But!

The impact on her chest had done something else. It'd so happened that the mass she'd felt escaping her stomach wasn't entirely composed of soggy noodle. In the midst of that wayward bolus was Dari, her faithful friend and first mate, who'd heard everything, even as that everything had bounced her wall to wall, and now alert to the hopelessness of their situation, the final ruin of their quest, she'd tickled the sphincter, just as Mikoro had shown her in the Cow Queen's belly so long ago, and set about slugging her way up her gullet – so she could do it if she really needed to, and here, here was a time if ever there was one – and moreover she had something in her hand, their last resort, just as the thump, the geyser of gastric air and the plummeting Mikoro-world came together to shoot her the rest of the way...

...and as Mikoro fell, out she flipped from the cat-girl's lips, squealing through the sky, the arc of her descent dampened by every raindrop she pummelled through...

...the first of which shocked from her fingers the Way-Mirror, which on its own impetus, its own force of cosmic necessity, flipped high into the air...

...and of the three independently-falling masses, Dari was the first to land – in the Cow Queen's chest, a bolt of pleasure and relief for the monarch which burnt through her red mist, bade her calm, told her that at least a fraction of the world was as it was meant to be, and by instinct she drew back a finger to stuff the squirming girl all the way into her cleavage: safe, warm, watertight...

...as with a splash, as Captain Mikoro, stunned unconscious, plunged into the waves...

...and then the mirror came down, larger now, as large as it needed to be, and as it came level with the tip of the mast it flipped at just such an angle to reflect the Cow Queen's madness back at her, just for a moment...

...a moment which, so sudden, yet with all the ease and patience with which it went on, could no longer be named a moment: because time had stopped, or rather taken a back seat, so that the sovereign could see that which lay beyond it.

“Nrrrrrrrh...?!”

The storm – it was gone.

So was the sea.

A dark room?

No – she could see now. Sunlight. Sunlight so bright...

A rampart?

A rampart. She knew one of those when she saw one. Shining walls, inimitable parapets, a stairway to a bygone era. She was climbing. Climbing the walls, walking them back and forth; examining their brickwork, surveying their foundations. A city. A *great* city. Adobe blocks on a lush, fertile floodplain, so abundant that you couldn't possibly imagine anything ever going wrong there. Here a date-grove, there a clay pit, in its midst a temple...

But who was she?

It wasn't her at all, she saw. It was a cow – but not her.

How? How could a cow be so noble and majestic, but not be her?

It could. Oh, it could. Gold eyes, gold tail, enormous golden horns. A golden beard.

Golden *wings!*

And she realised – she knew this cow.

Only from her dreams. Only from engravings on heirlooms so old that no-one remembered who had crafted them. Only on the figurehead of her dreadnought, older than the ship itself, older even than the fortress. As old, she'd sometimes wondered, as her sea?

And all of a sudden she was overcome with an urge completely new to her. An urge which, had she been physically present, she'd have acted on at once.

It was the urge to prostrate herself. Not on a point of ceremony, but in awe, in veneration. In love.

Love for the one who'd laid the first stones on the path she walked.

The Founder.

She could have done with some love, her great-great-great-great granddaughter thought. Her wings were slumped, her breaths weighed down, and her eyes, oh her eyes! Gallant, so gallant, glazed as they were with all the sorrow in the world...

Why? Why did she look so sad?

The Cow Queen followed her gaze, out to the city below. Her city?

No – she'd been brought to protect it, of course she had. Protectors. Hers was a family of protectors.

And she'd failed.

The Founder had failed. The city – it was corrupt.

Corrupt, how? How could she know?

The mirror. The Cow Queen wasn't seeing with her eyes. She was seeing with all that she was. That was how she knew.

She saw it was not merely oppressive, violent, troubled. Something worse was here. Something far worse. Something she'd only ever glimpsed, most recently just the other day when that evil spirit had overtaken the island of Horseham.

Things that should not exist.

Things she couldn't understand.

Things that could not be understood.

All that was intuitive to her about power and responsibility, strength and weakness, unity and diversity, governments and citizens, parents and children – it was corroded here. Horribly corroded. A world collapsing even as it rose.

Like that silly little man, gallivanting about on the opposite ramparts. With hair like that he had to be their leader. What had he done with this place?

Why so many male warriors? No, why were *all* the warriors men? That wasn't right. Human boys – they were so soft and sweet. What were they doing to them? Where were the cute ones? What atrocities must they have visited on their souls to turn them into these...not even warriors, just screaming swaggering thugs?

And the women? What had befallen them? It was like they'd been sapped to their souls. Turned submissive. They were so...*small*.

What? Why?

How?

How could such a situation exist? It was unthinkable! It made no sense to her, violated every principle on which the universe turned...

Where would she be – the Demon Cow Queen – in a place like this? To look on these people: it was like being told she didn't exist...

That couldn't stand. The buck stops with the sovereign – that was what she had been taught. The sovereign was responsible. But this sovereign was participating in it. He was *a man exercising power over women*, as though such a thing came naturally. But no – it didn't. It was abominable! A mockery of reality itself!

But, a voice nagged in the depths of her mounting rage: Could one individual really pull off this? Were they not all complicit? Were they not all damned by their deeds?

But there was no stopping her now. No stopping the Demon Cow Queen once her train of reason had charged her off in a straight line.

"How dare he? How *dare* he! *Nuuuuuuu!*" she bellowed, and even though she wasn't there, she prepared to trample down the ramparts to show him what women really do with idiots like him...

Come.

So soft a voice, it soothed the stars to sleep. So warm a breath, it spun them in their cradle.

It stopped her in her tracks. A word heard not with her ears, but with every cell in her body. *It stopped her.* Who could possibly...?

"I...can't..." – the Founder. Her speech: so deep, so proud. Regal in ways they just didn't do anymore. Yet, broken. Shatteringly broken.

Its effects have reached critical mass. We can do no more here. I am so sorry.

An arm – a hot pink hand in a sleek black sleeve – ruffled the Founder's brilliant mane. That hand...!

You did everything you could. Come, and you shall help them yet.

She saw her. The Cow Queen saw her, and went so weak with shock that she stumbled, catching her fall with her fist.

"Whoooo...?"

A humanoid? At one level perhaps, but no, she was something else, obviously something else. The Cow Queen felt her mind straining to comprehend what, even as it recognised this person innately. Hair as black as the depths of space, cascading wild and free like waterfalls in flight; horns, just like her own, but no, not like hers at all, they were small, lilac-coloured, yet the authority in their subtle curves was not sovereign authority but an authority to which all sovereignty, *all power* must yield, must get straight down and pay its respects. And wings – she too had wings. But they were velvety, ridged, sleek as night, sleek like the brilliant blue cloak that draped off the back of this so-familiar stranger.

They had wings and she didn't. Should she feel put out? She wanted to be in their set, not in the set of that blockhead over there.

But to look on this beautiful creature was to know that there were no sets. There was only love.

So beautiful, both in the soft beauty of love and the hard beauty of will...

...and she too was sad – *the universe was sad* – as she gazed upon what had become of the humans of this world.

"I am disgraced," the Founder lamented. "I couldn't protect them. My beloved friend, I do not deserve your compassion. I have failed them. I have failed you."

Her words sent the Cow Queen's heart up the Richter scale. The Founder – the Founder! – she'd felt the same fear?

Oh, it ached. How it ached.

And yet...

You haven't failed. No, my courageous friend, this problem is beyond us all. I know not whence it came, but already it has spread throughout this world. Soon we will not be safe here. Please – come. Come, rest in my chambers, and we shall speak of what to do next.

The Founder couldn't tear herself away. Her duty was here.

There is cake. Come – let me show you what chocolate tastes like.

A big wet tongue slipped through the curls of her beard.

Her descendent chuckled despite herself. The sight felt somehow validating.

And like that, the great Founder heaved herself up on her hooves and allowed this figure of love – love itself – to lead her away.

And then – the Cow Queen could have sworn the figure shot her a wink before they vanished, because in the instant she received it her body tremored with an otherworldly warmth; and it shook her, stubbornly refused to dissipate as her vision went dark.

She realised it was because she didn't want it to dissipate. Because it felt so strange. So good.

“Have I failed too?” she moaned into the ether. That infernal cat! Paddling in out of nowhere, disrupting her rule, mocking her justice, rampaging over her islands, humiliating her, humiliating her ancestors right there in her own bedchamber!

No, that tremor replied. *You haven't failed either. You merely made a mistake. But that's okay.*

That voice; to feel it was to feel so...weak. Unthinkable! And yet: so safe. A good weakness. It was okay to be weak before that voice. So warm. It felt so warm!

That voice: it was a hug. A long and heartfelt hug. A hug from – well, who? Who or what could be bigger than she? The world itself? The universe? *Space?*

That hug – it was how she wanted her subjects to feel. All of them, even the naughty ones. Everyone deserved to feel safe in her realm. It was why she appointed good ministers, held public feasts, roamed the sea levying tribute on those who grew too strong, or too certain – mischievous monkeys, haughty horses, any merchant whose income approached one billion silvers, because the world didn't need people with more than one billion. Better those resources go to widening a path for the small, the sweet, those who suffered and struggled.

That was why she ruled. Why rulership existed. The responsibility of power. Her sovereign duty.

“Where are we?” – the Founder, her ancestor, in the darkness.

The crossroads – the sublime voice. The place where all realities meet.

“But, why...?”

Will you protect it?

“Protect it? From whom?”

They will come. It is open to them, just as it is to us all.

“But that means...!”

Yes. The corruption too will come. It must not take hold here. You have seen it, my dear friend. You have seen how it seeks to annihilate all meaning, to place love beneath it, to reduce all stories to the hollow cruelty of its lies. All the more reason the ways must stay open.

“I don’t – you would have me let it into this place, yet hold it back? How can I do both at once? If they are truly too far gone, then would it not be safer – hrrrr, curse me for the very thought! – to seal that world off?”

That would only quicken the corruption. Whatever ails them, they are born from the love of the stars and the realities love them still. The sickness will close their minds to the realities beyond their own. It will sink them in the belief that their broken reality is the only one: a universal dead end where might makes right, no-one cares, and their lives mean nothing. But – it will remain in their nature to reject this. Their hearts will long for the worlds they have othered. Their lungs will gasp for the Connection banished from theirs. These exiles, these refugees – they must be free to move. They must have access to places where they can know, in all that they are, that the universe cares and the realities love them still.

“I...think I understand. So you would ask me to...”

Yes. You will recognise the corruption when it seeps through. Would you shelter those who flee it? Would you help contain its leaks? Would you keep watch on those who carry its mark when they, too, travel this way, that rather than drip it into these foundations, they might be cleansed of it by the power of the journey? There – look!

The Founder looked. So did her descendant, whose blood boiled as she identified that silly little man staggering forth to the crossroads.

And the Founder growled: “Hrrrrr – that’s the corrupt king! Why is he here? Shall I pound him?...What makes him so distraught?”

Good. Such are the questions you must ask.

The familiar stranger kept her arm round the Founder’s shoulders. Tightened, gently, till the tension left them.

The suspicious king – had something happened to him? He was wetting the ground as he walked. Weeping. Wretched, bitter, a shade of his former self; indeed, it was as though he'd swapped places with his shadow.

Because he cared? After all that, he cared?

It had to be true. It could be nothing else.

Loving friendship.

A chance, then.

Allow him his chance. Let him set forth.

They watched him disappear up a mountain pass.

“But...how will I know who to welcome, who to observe and who to deny?”

You have always been an excellent judge of character.

“I – I don't know if I can take...”

You swore to protect them. By doing this, you will honour your oath. Light their way to the worlds beyond; encompass them all within you. Would you do this for them? Would you hold the threshold? Would you keep the crossroads safe for love?

The Cow Queen's jaw dropped like an anchor. The words – she knew them. She'd spoken them herself! They were the first words to leave her lips when she'd sat on her throne for the first time. Just like her father, his mother, and each generation before them...

Except – she'd never really understood them. Her smart old bull hadn't either, he'd admitted as much. They were figurative, or something. Some old formula they followed just because that was how they'd always done it. *Light the way to the worlds beyond*: she'd thought that meant infrastructural duties, beacons, lighthouses and the like. *Hold the threshold* – but of course, she had to protect the fortress, the way to the vast seas beyond her domain, beyond Comet Island. And *encompass them all within you* – well, the Minister of Eyes and Ears had framed it as an obvious metaphor for toleration, but she herself preferred a more literal interpretation. How could she not, with such a marvellous body for it?

Yes – she could feel the squirming in her chest right now. The adorable little mouse, back where she belonged.

Except...how could she squirm if time wasn't flowing?

You shan't be alone – the love-speaker was assuring her forebear. *You shall make many friends here. And when the burden becomes too great, feel free to share my power with a successor. Please take all the rest you need. Refresh yourself with a voyage of your own. In the meantime I shall uncover the source of the sickness and restore that world to love, no matter how many ages it takes me.*

“I...hrrr. I accept. I shall do whatever it takes.”

Good. Thank you, my beloved friend. And don't forget, will you? The humans are born of the stars, like us. They were meant to be better. They shall be better. I am Eclipse, and by the stars I shall make it so.

An embrace.

I am with you. I am with you always.

The darkness, spinning. Colours returning. A glimpse – the mirror, the sea, the storm?

No, not yet. It had more to show her.

Why? What was this artifact? More urgently, how had it come to be in the hands of that mischief-making moggy?

Who was she? Who was Ibaraki Mikoro?

But now – a new world. Sunlit skies, glistening seas.

A heave of relief. (Oh, those squirms!) She knew this view well.

The royal balcony. The top of the Aurochs Tower, the central keep of her fortress. The oldest part. Four sides, a pair of telescopes each. From here she could survey her domain, from Comet Island on one horizon to the Cave of the Sun on the other.

She grabbed one and raised it to her eye.

Blinked.

Her vision blurred with tears.

“Nrrrrrh...”

Ships of a thousand colours and sizes nosed about her sea. They threaded between the islands; pulled in sometimes, where to rest, eat, drink, share their stories in the knowledge that whoever they were they'd be heard, supported, find the company they sought or the solitude they needed. In the knowledge that they were safe. And there, on the plains above: why there were her beloved minotaurs, tilling the rice paddies, running the great distillery, distributing bottles of milk – such rich, creamy milk! – to crowds of excited children...

It was as she'd dreamed. Why she ruled. But there was something else, too. Something unseen; only now, through the mirror, she could see it.

A tranquility.

No sinister periscopes, no silly iron ships flying colourful flags as though their arrogant colours excused opening fire on islands at random. And then, those stories, playing out on those islands or sailing together on the high seas; at first her heart sped up as it always did, as she wondered which would demand she get

the *Lamassu* out today. Would the crew be ready? Had they cleared the decks, stoked the engines, polished and loaded the cannons?

But now, as she examined her targets one by one, her vision started to shake.

A sea-quake?

No. Her arms were trembling.

These stories: they were stories as they were meant to be. No hordes of scrawny yet oh-so-shouty thug-men inflicting violence for violence's sake; no characters falling overboard under a battering of demands that they or their relationships should be this way or that because of their age, their colour, their language, the shape of their genitals or other categories that meant nothing in and of themselves; and there were quarrels, skirmishes, conspiracies, misunderstandings, *conflicts*, of course there were, but these...they all had *meaning*. They were in their limits, sane limits, limits cosmically supported. Limits that shouldn't even need stating. Limits like...in general terms, parents did not abuse their children, nor governments their peoples, nor other peoples for that matter. That people fleeing persecution were looked after; that people could not be property; that people were all different, that indeed any notion of making them the same could only be a nonsense; that they all mattered, all these characters *mattered*; that power, all power, carried commensurate responsibility to all those whose lives it touched. And of course: that no gender was ever, *ever* reduced to a set of fixed characteristics, still less to wield general power over any other, and less still to have that power considered innate to it...

These principles simply *were*. The Cow Queen had never needed the words, the concepts to reify the things that violated it. Why would she? Such things couldn't exist in any real reality without reality itself rising up against them. This was the cosmic standard, the underlying way, which, when breached, reliably brought down accountability, a reckoning, a restoration. A healing, not only of those wronged, but of the fabric of reality that such violations ripped up beneath them.

Thus she knew – by inherited instinct? Or merely by virtue of being real? – that it was in her power, and therefore her duty, to move straight in and neutralise anything which looked set to become such a *thing that should not be*.

And she did. Whether with her hands, her voice, her horns, or when it was called for, her three rows of cannon and 12-inch naval artillery, she'd always stop them.

That didn't mean they didn't trouble her. Didn't stop her lowing awake in the night, hands on horns, at the flash of a memory of a *thing that should not be*. A thing which nonetheless somehow *was*. If not here, then somewhere *out there*.

Even though it shouldn't be. Even though she was meant to stop it. Even though her old bull, her every ancestor, everyone she'd sworn to protect, was relying on her to stop it.

Was she failing, then? Was she good enough? Should this power be hers?

For the first time, she felt the answer she'd longed for.

It's *okay*.

Because the *things that should not be* – they were not. They never would be again.

They'd gone. She could sense it.

She'd done it.

She'd held the threshold.

The work the Founder had started: she'd finished it. Her line's original world, her ancestral home – it was free. Its connection to all the realities had been restored. It belonged in a love-based universe. Belonged, once more.

How? Had the Founder's mysterious friend fulfilled her promise at last? Or had the Cow Queen and her forebears merely *lit their way* long enough, *encompassed* them long enough, such that they'd found in her embrace, personal and political, what their damaged world had denied them – connection, meaning, *love!* – then returned there, and with what they'd learned in the other worlds, delivered it once and for all?

Either way – she'd done it.

She'd been good enough.

Her work was done.

And those portraits, those honoured ones whose torch she'd carried – oh, the pride in those weathered eyes, those rugged smiling snouts! And there – there he was! There he came, stepping at last from the walls, smiling his wonderful smile; and the rope of his green dressing gown no longer trailed loose on the carpet as he'd always left it in his final days, no, he'd done it up, a perfect ox-bow, and he wasn't leaning on his mace anymore but carrying it on his shoulder even as he raised his other arm to embrace her; and, goodness, her stepmother, she was there too! Her steel-eyed *rakshasi* of a stepmother, of whose approval she'd never felt convinced; and she wasn't smiling, but she never smiled, that was okay, the way she held out her fan said it all.

She *deserved* it. She'd done them all proud.

But then...what now? Did the crossroads still need a sovereign? A tribute system? Was it time for reforms?

Don't rush into it, the Minister of Eyes and Ears would say. There's no perfect system, you should set out and learn from the myriad ways, with all their strengths and weaknesses, their contributions and their pitfalls...

Wait – what was she thinking?

No, she hadn't done it. Not yet. Not nearly. There was still so far to go. The monkeys, the temple, the horses, the mess left by that dragon – she'd always known he was dodgy, she'd said so from the start – and then that cat! That slippery scoundrel of a pussycat!

Oh, those squirms...

How? How, if she stood outside time?

She thought about this. Raised a huge finger, as if counting.

If she was outside time, and the squirms were outside time...

Pop!

She glanced down in amazement.

“Hrrrh? Dari? You – you're not...”

She was...older? Still so mousey...

She'd struggled out to her waist. She was pointing up at her. Furious. The way her scar stood out when her forehead throbbed...

Okay, that was the scariest thing she'd ever seen.

“When are you going to stop being an idiot?” fumed Curator Dari.

“Nrrm? Where did you get that hat?”

“Aaagh, will you just *listen* to me? I've been trying to tell you since the start!”

“Nrhh! Tell me – what?”

“Mikoro's your *friend*! It's all a huge misunderstanding, don't you see? That world that's caused you such trouble – the one in your nightmares, the one your ancestors came from, the one I came from: *she can fix it!*”

“You – you...”

“Don't you get it? She's from one of its variants! She can connect – nnggh, it doesn't matter, there's no time to explain. What matters now is she *has* to complete this journey! Won't you give her a chance?”

“Nhhh, but she, but she...”

“Oh, for goodness's sake, she's hardly Gilgamesh is she?! Well if you're really that worried then why not go with her? Go on, go with her to Comet Island, or so help me, I'll...”

She couldn't resist any more. She shouldn't, she really shouldn't, but who was she to challenge cosmic necessity?

She placed a giant finger on that hatted little head and tucked it back in her cleavage.

“Mmmrrrrfff!”

“Nrrrrrm,” she rumbled. The squirms so calmed her. Calmed her enough to ruminate.

“Pink...fluffy... Hrrm. Fix it?”



Sinking.

Sinking in a sea without beginning or end; a sea where they were always coming, always going, always changing and staying the same; the sea where they might stay awhile and listen, cross paths, sail together, share their ways, rest for a time; only then to move off, perhaps, for sure, to come through again another day...

“Nyah. I thought there’d be fishies.”

But it wasn’t fish Mikoro saw.

It was swans.

A big swan sheltering two little swans with its wings. More swans, a whole flock, carrying a fabric of stars through the sky. She saw an elderly spider in a rainforest, playing a wistful tune on his violin beneath a great tree covered in bright green vines. She saw a gigantic female gorilla, reaching for a tiny little man through an apartment window. She saw an organised platoon of miniature flower-headed vegetable creatures: red ones, yellow ones and blue ones, hauling a nine-volt battery through a field of snow. She saw a strange flying creature with shiny blue-green skin and long yellow feathers that glowed like jet engine fires; it glided in to land, and transformed into a pretty silver-haired lady with a pair of feathery white wings on the sides of her head. She saw another lady, white-furred with droopy ears and short little goat-horns, leading a small child by the hand through a set of underground ruins; and what was that scent? Cinnamon and butterscotch? It was making her hungry; and then she saw a telephone drift past her, one of those old-fashioned types with the ring-shaped dial. She pulled it in, put the receiver to her ear while she spun up a random number, and a voice on the other end said: “*Si, Commissario Montalbano sono!*” She let it drift away, really hungry now, only to glimpse – what was that, behind that submarine? A three-headed monkey? Yes, that was definitely a three-headed monkey, whatever anyone said. And then she saw another forest, vast, with snow-capped mountains in the distance, and from

that evergreen sea a glass path spiralled up to a door in the sky; and what were those brown shapes shuffling along it?

“Wah! Are those...bears?”

Bears. Beautiful brown bears, cuddly and fluffy just like her. They were padding up to the top of the path and leaving through the doorway, one by one...

“But...where are all the bears going?”

She didn't know why, but watching them go filled her heart with a profound sadness. A sadness which weighed it down, dragging her deeper, deeper...

Her vision blurred. Contracted in a rush of fear. She clamped her hands to her mouth, kicked in the water. Struggled. Thrashed. The ocean was in her lungs. She was losing consciousness.

Drowning.

This sea – could you die in it? Where did you go if you did?

Was it real?

It was deep. Darkening. Blue turning to black.

There were *things* down here too. So dim, so indistinct. Because her mind was fading? Or because they changed shape faster than it could process them?

Was this where the old ones settled? Those that had held up the ocean since long before those who sailed it learnt to write: forgotten, unrecorded, spoken only once, but for all time – or spoken again and again, but each for their moment alone? Those that shifted, that grew and shrank with each retelling yet were always there, settled in the layers beneath the continental shelf, the deep foundations...

Despite it all, she felt fortunate.

Few must see this far down. They kept to the surface, most of them; even those who'd travelled far further than she. To see this, to get even this fleeting glimpse at the very edge of her consciousness; to sink down here, a pink, fluffy narrative mass which, however tiny, must by its motion make its mark on the deep currents, stir the sands of the seabed with the tip of a loafer and in so doing, budge the foundations...

It felt amazing.

She felt special.

And they were smiling at her.

Wait, they were down here too? Rin and Kiyoko, the best mother and sister in the universe...

They must be so proud of her.

It was okay, she felt. If it had to end, it couldn't end better than that.

So dark. It was so dark down here.

It if had to end...

"Bwah..."

Annoying! There was something else now and it'd ruined it!

It came plunging. A huge, dark shape. Bubbles streaming off it like an undersea meteor as it smashed straight to the sea floor, just like that, as though that *special thing* was something it did every day. How disappointing! And then to make matters worse, it stuck something out and *bounced* right off it, leaving a crack! A crack which unsettled the crust, shook up a cloud of sand and minerals – again, like it was *good at it*, although she had to admit, the sea looked better now it had done that; and now it was rising, growing, barrelling towards her...

A whale?

"Nnhh...!"

It hit her. No – met her. The impact felt so gentle. Up, up, up...

It was big and hard. Silky, like polished grass. Her hands fumbled. Found hard things on either side.

Horns.

Up, up, up, up...

She burst through the surface. Gasp for air. Rain, wind, thunder – the storm still raged. There in front of her, the churning sea; it was moving backwards. *She* was moving backwards. Backwards on a mobile undersea mountain, an outcrop of ivory sward on a muddy plain with golden ore deposits and a road of wine-red...something.

Backwards. Backwards. Deeper into the storm. The storm, the seething sea – it reminded her of someone.

Who did it remind her of?

"A journey such as this must be made alone," it said. "You must not sail with greater than the determined number of crew."

Scáthach! Her phlegmatic friend from the remote and rocky north. She ate storms like this for breakfast, or so Mikoro had always imagined. She certainly knew them better than anyone else she'd met.

But did that make her always right?

The storm seemed to think so. It'd been incensed when she'd come with Dari. "Don't you ever try this again," it had told her. But not only had she not listened,

she'd come back with more! There were four of them now, weren't there? Cat, Mouse, Cow, Tiger – oh, it couldn't like that.

It didn't matter, she wanted to think. I can travel with my friends if I want, she wanted to think. It was a struggle to think. She felt so tired, so heavy. She might not be in the sea anymore but the sea was in her: in her coat, in her hair, in her stomach.

It's okay, she wanted to think. You've come so far. You're almost there. Believe in your friends. Just ride, now. Ride.

And keep thinking.



“Mmmph! Nnnnnmmmp!”

Dari wrestled with the weighty pair of matters pressing in on all sides. They made it a struggle to think. They always did.

She'd think though. She was too infuriated with herself not to.

She'd think: For goodness's sake! Of all times, why now? I can't afford this! I can't leave Mikoro out there! Why, just *why*? *How*? Nnngaah, it's ridiculous! How does this always happen to me? Is this really all I'm good for? Is this what I'm about?

It was too hot. Too tight! She struggled, struggled hard, but of course it was pointless, the Cow Queen's body enfolded her right back.

“Mmnnnbl...”

They were moving, that much she could tell. Through the swaying and jiggling, more or less a straight line.

Where to? Onward, or back?

Did those terms even make sense anymore?

In a former life she'd sat on her own at the back of lecture halls, listening to people drone on about history as though it were something that went on and on and on. They'd as good as taken it for granted. Worse to better, low to high, dark to light, simple to complex, traditional to modern. *Progress*. Just like the life of a student, so they said. Or a life in general. And then she'd tumbled into a new life, a life of situations like these, where that model of history made so little sense anymore, and instead it felt like things just went round, and round, and round, and round...

Was it still storming out there? She had no way to tell, she had a storm all to herself in here, crashing and pounding and heaving and sweating all round her.

Around. Round and round.

Or – on and on and on?

Why not both?



Stars.

A starry sky. So very bright.

“Wh-Where – nnh-hhah!”

Mikoro spluttered. Coughed. Spat out seawater.

She was facing downwards. That helped. Slumped on something, she realised.

Why was she bobbing up and down?

It was annoying. Making her seasick.

The something was snorting. “Hrrnh...hrrnh...hrrnh...” Was she on a train? Why hadn't they checked it had enough coal before it set out?

She did that thing she usually did first thing on waking up in the morning: shook herself awake with a stretch of her arms and a great big yawn...

...and lost her balance, slipped backwards, fell – “Nyagwaaah!” – and landed with a splash.

She floundered, spluttered again, thrashed her limbs. Then she realised, a little embarrassingly, that the water was gentle and warm and actually quite shallow.

She righted herself. Stretched her leg; found she could poke the sand with the toe of her shoe.

She looked up. Stars. Stars draped in green...curtains?

Night, but as bright as any day.

She looked ahead. Stared blankly as her brain struggled to process what she was seeing.

The exhausted Cow Queen was right there in front of her, wallowing forth, nostrils blasting the water. She was lugging the *Sea Bunny* under one arm, making great strokes with the other. And there beneath her face, fuzzing around on the waterline, a ball of orange and black. A tiger cub.

Rawr, she remembered. The Beast of Reckoning.

The creature was pawing at the Cow Queen's prodigious chest. Trying to burrow into it? (Logical, Mikoro thought.)

No – trying to burrow something out of it. (Just as logical. What had she lost down there this time? Car keys? Car? Car assembly line?)

The bizarre flotilla was drifting closer. The great bovine must have reached the limit of her strength, for her strokes were languid, her arm slipping from the smooth fibreglass of the *Sea Bunny*; but they were close now, so close, assisted in at the last by the gentle current.

Mikoro swam backward to give them room. Her shoes hit sand. She stood up. Turned.

A beach.

“Gwah!”

Somehow it was the last thing she'd expected and she fell over in splashy surprise. She stood again, aggravated and soggy, and stumbled ashore...

...just as the tiger cub succeeded in extracting Dari from her sweaty accommodations and with a swing of its head, tossed her squealing through the air to her fluffy friend...

...and Mikoro opened her hands to catch her, but still woozy, misjudged the arc of her flight. To be fair Dari was flailing her arms and her hair was whipping behind her, so it was challenging in the few moments available to pinpoint her centre of mass. She thumped into Mikoro's fluffy head, bounced, and landed headfirst in the sand just as Mikoro tumbled down next to her. And so Mikoro and Dari, together, were the first to arrive.

The Cow Queen became vaguely aware of white replacing blue. At last she gave up her grip on the ship and with one last almighty heave, hauled herself ashore. She rolled upon her back, not entirely unlike a buff beached whale, and snorted fountains of seawater high into the air. And so Her Majesty was the second to arrive.

The tiger cub paddled ashore, shook the sea out of its fur with a “Rrrr,” then scurried around to paw at the Cow Queen's nose. Thus the Beast of Reckoning was the third to arrive.

And the *Sea Bunny*, drawing at last to the final few metres of its marathon voyage, glided in on the current and came to rest on the sand. It was the fourth to arrive.

And then...

...it beeped a thank-you tune. Retracted its sail, then its mast. Twitched its nose and tail one last time. Then it powered down – and rose, rose off the shore, rotating; levitated a metre above the sand. It kept spinning, slowly at first, then

faster, faster and faster and faster till it'd spun into a whirling blur of white light. It spun off a spray of seawater, and then – each to land in its own neat pile on the beach – a bag of rubbish, the food and drink from the hatches, the captain's hat, the captain's pouch, the Way-Mirror, the tools from the luggage box, the pair of dragon scales (a fifth arrival, technically), and finally an odd pile of hydrogen cylinders. These last it re-absorbed, just as it drew back into itself all the matter that constituted the ship itself; and as it grew in mass it shrank in size, slowed, slowed...

...and twirled to a stop, a chubby little star-shaped creature with a pair of adorable black eyes and a body lustrous in all the colours of the rainbow.

“Mama!” It peeped with delight as it flew across the trees to the giant spire.
“Mama, Mama! I'm home!”

PART THREE
THE WAY HOME

Firelight.

Shadows, flickering on panelled wood. The scent of books.

A pale hand. Lavender nail varnish. A silver wand with an open gold star on the end, set down on a tabletop.

The hand opens a book. Purple cover, turquoise star. Pages blank with possibility.

Now it picks up a fountain pen.

Pauses. A moment of thought.

And now it writes.

“Home,” she says.

Underlines it. Another pause, longer this time.

Photographs, lined up on the mantelpiece. Stars. Lots of stars.

Stars with eyes.

She writes. “Family. Friends. Those close to us. Or...?”

She pauses once more. Listens to them, zooming around outside. The sound of sparkling – trails of stardust. Cheering, tittering, shrill in innocent mischief.

Beloved. So beloved.

She continues. “How about...our wider family? The worlds. The stars. The universe.”

She does not rush.

“Are we not all born of the stars? Do they, too, not warm us, feed us, care for us, fuel our journeys? Are they not family too?”

They are excited. A commotion, drawing closer. Something is happening out there.

The pen moves. “They ask: Is home *here*, or *everywhere*? The immediate family? Or the cosmic family? Which first?”

She sighs, circumspect. The question is poor. Love is love. Never a contest.

“Why choose?” she writes. “Why not both?”

They’re calling. She looks up.

“Mama! Mama! I’m back! My friends need help!”



“Green...curtains...”

Mikoro blinked. She felt so muddled.

“Dari? Why do the stars need curtains?”

“Nnnfff.”

“Nyah? Dari?”

“Nnnnfff! Nnnff mnn nnt!”

Mikoro turned her head sideways. A glint – an anklet. A pair of legs sticking out of the sand.

“Wah.”

Mikoro reached over. Struggled to. Her arm felt heavy, weighed down by the water in her clothes. She was so tired.

But for Dari? Anything.

She closed her fingers round those flailing little legs and tugged her friend from the sand.

“Haaahh! Hhh, hhh – pffthh! Urghh.”

Sweaty. Red and sweaty. How was she so warm? – Mikoro thought.

“Dari? What’s that?”

Her finger pointed up.

“Nnghh. That’s the aurora, Mikoro. Wow. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Never...seen it. Thought it was...curtains...nyaaaah...”

A long, soft yawn.

“Gosh Mikoro, you’re soaked! You look shattered, you’d better...”

Events caught up with Dari. Brought home the novelty of solid sand beneath her shoes.

She rose. Made a swift survey of her surroundings, as she’d done so many times before. Yellow sand. Green grass. A ring of trees: deciduous, spaced out, shafts of starlight between them.

The spire.

The spire! A cream-white cone, irregular, tapering, with purple zigzaggy patterns and thin, transparent little balconies – red, yellow, pink. Fluorescent beams arcing up and around it. Little floating platforms: a fountain, a hovel, a giant mushroom, a tree.

Fantastic.

“Mikoro?”

“Nyam nyam...”

“I think we’ve made it. I think this is – ”

A huge watery snort shook her out of her nerves. She panicked, knew she was about to get seized, rebuked herself for getting distracted halfway through her survey just as she always did, turned –

“Nnnhhh!”

There was the Cow Queen. Not right there on top of her, thank goodness, but supine on the sand some thirty yards away. She was panting, heavily. Her sash lay loose on the sand. The Beast of Reckoning jumped up and down on her belly, each pounce releasing jets of sea from her trembling lips.

“Nrrrrrrhhhh...”

Mikoro, the Cow Queen – they were both exhausted. Should she get help?

“Over here!” a high-pitched voice spun her back to the trees. “My friends are here!”

No need then. Help was coming.

At least, she hoped that was help.

It sounded a little too gleeful for your average rescue party. Shouldn’t it sound more...well, worried?

It didn’t look worried at all, she thought as it zoomed from the trees. It looked adorable.

A chubby little star, about four or five Daris large and shimmering in all the colours of the rainbow. Soaring. Sparkling. Swishing down through the air to spin round and round her.

“Here they are! Come help my friends!”

More swishing. There were more of them. Lots and lots, all coming forth now: yellow, for the most part, but also some cream, some blue, some purple, some orange, some green...

“H-Hey! Who are – ”

They giggled and cheered, descended around Mikoro to dab at her coat, check her pulse, raise her hair, rub the folds of her ear; and they were piling in around the Cow Queen too, orbiting her as though she was the star and they the planets, prodding her nose, tugging her sash, playing so happily with the rowdy little tiger cub...

...then the rainbow one drifted into Dari’s face out of nowhere.

“Ahh! Wh-Who are...hey. I know you.”

“It’s Dari! It’s Dari!” cried the thrilled little rainbow-star. “Hello Dari! My name’s Leppi! I’m the Sea Bunny!”

“You’re...the Sea Bunny. Right.”

“I am! I am!”

“Dari?” Mikoro’s groan from behind this Leppi. “I’m seeing stars...”

Come on, said Little Miss Evidence in the back of her mind. If you can believe anything else about your life, you can believe this.

“I believe you,” she said. “Uhh, I don’t want to be rude, but...what exactly are you?”

“I’m a luma!”

“A luma. Uhh...right.” Animal? Vegetable? Mineral?

“Hey! Can you walk?”

Now there was an invitation she didn’t get every day. That settled it. Leppi was her friend.

“Yeah. I’m okay. I think my friends might need a little help though.”

But the little star-creatures were already on it. Mikoro had staggered to her feet and was slouching forward, her arms clasped on a cute yellow luma floating in front. It was giggling.

From the other side, an enormous rumbling. An ancient pyramid, rising from the sand? No, it was the Cow Queen, heaving up as well. Two fat lumas under each arm, a fifth holding up the loose end of her sash, and a sixth, tiny, hopping between her horns like an excited pilot.

“Come on! Come meet my mama!” Leppi peeped.

And so Dari followed her luma-supported friends into the woods with Leppi hanging back to accompany her. The grass was soft and short, easy to wade through even for her, and starlight tricked down through the restful boughs. She could spot cute huts through gaps in the trees that reminded her of cabins or holiday chalets. The place looked perfect for picnics.

“You’ve all been such great friends!” said Leppi, drifting alongside her. “And – thank you so much, Dari, for coming down to look for me when you heard me crying! I’m so sorry about that by the way. The whole world had turned so dismal, and when I couldn’t even see my friends in the sky anymore, it was just too much. I couldn’t go on.”

“It’s okay,” said Dari. “Look – come here.”

And she threw her arms around Leppi in a heartfelt hug, just as though the sentient star were a huge plushy forest creature. Its body was soft and squishy. And warm, so incredibly warm; but for once, not in a way that set off her prey-mind.

“You’ve been a great friend too, Leppi,” she said. “Thank you for taking such good care of Mikoro. There’s still a lot I’d like to understand, but, my goodness, what an adventure you’ve given her.”

It beamed with its cute oval eyes. “It was so much fun! And I got *looooooads* of data for my mama! Did you have a good time too? I’ll admit, I was surprised when I felt you on board because Mama said Mikoro would be coming on her own, but I’m so happy you came along too!”

“Oh? She said that, did she? Well then...ah, I mean – yeah! It was great!”

And she realised she meant it. Indeed, if she could fill in a few more gaps, she might even have the information to write a complete account this time without resorting to her customary formula: ‘Unfortunately my research was interrupted at this point and I did not have the opportunity to explore this matter further.’

They’d cleared the trees now. Mikoro and the Cow Queen were lurching ahead across a small meadow with circular flower beds, where grassy steps led up to a central platform.

Dari did a double-take. While the area they’d just crossed felt natural – a beach, a wood, as you might find on any random island – the centre of Comet Island was landscaped and structured as if by design, and marked off from the outer woods by a long curved crack in the ground. As she hopped over it she heard water foaming and caught a glimpse of starlit ocean beneath.

“Uhh. What is this place?”

“This is where we lumas live with our mama!” answered Leppi, twirling ahead now. “Come on, we’re almost there!”

And now Dari saw numerous dome-like houses about the central structure. Each stood in a place of prominence and had a distinct appearance to reflect its surrounding theme. There was a grassy dome here on the meadow, a brick dome over on what looked like a kitchen tower, a grey-tiled dome off on that floating fountain...

...and music, coming from the spire. A soft, symphonic melody led by violins and flutes. A waltz? Gorgeous, yet so upliftingly gentle. The music of a distant sanctuary in the stars, yet also, somehow, the music of home.

The steps were high, but there were only three of them. Anticipating Dari’s difficulty, Leppi happily spun face-up to serve as an impromptu trampoline. And as she reached the top...

“Wow! Is that...a star?”

An actual star this time, or at least, actual in the way she remembered them from those astronomy books she'd so loved as a kid. It sat right there in the open space beneath the spire: a blistering blue-hot sphere, in a coppery ring suspended over the open water.

"Heehee! That's the Beacon!" said Leppi. "It's Comet Island's power source!"

This was astounding. Dari's mind overflowed with questions now, and she might have bombarded Leppi with them had not the music soothed her senses and told her that everything was okay now, that here there was nothing to worry about.

There would be time.

Besides, she could see the answer stepping forth now.

The answer was very tall.

"Nnnah! Nnnnh!" squeaked her underlying Dari-sense. "S-She's huge!"

"Oh, shush Dari," said higher Dari, prevailing for once. "Are you serious? You came all this way to meet her and that's how you react when you do?"

"Yes! Look at her!" she didn't say.

So tall – and composed, centred, soft with astral enigma. She wore a flowing turquoise gown with powder-blue frills round its sleeves and hem, held up by a star-shaped brooch on her chest. A large bang of platinum blond hair covered her right eye, while her left gazed at Dari, at all of them – at all things?

It made her feel like those galaxies she'd marvelled over in the books were staring just as curious back at her.

Curious; but accepting. Acceptance gentle. Acceptance firm.

Like the woman's lips. They neither frowned nor smiled, they simply *were*. Cosmic balance between a smile of compassion for those who were kind to her lumas, and a frown of astronomical consequences for those who were not.

A small silver crown sat atop her head. In her hand was a thin silver wand with an open gold star at the end.

"Rrrr."

The Beast of Reckoning bounded up to her and stood on its hind legs to nuzzle her hand. She stroked it between the ears.

"Oh, my dears," she spoke softly. "You must have had such a difficult journey to get here. Please – be at peace now. My name is Rosalina. I watch over and protect the cosmos. It brings me such joy to welcome you to Comet Island at last."

Leppi sparkled merrily and spun into this lady's arms, joining her and the tiger cub in a three-way cuddle.

Meanwhile Dari sidled up to Mikoro. Just in case. For safety, said the squirrely part of her. Because we're together, said the rest.

"Waaah. So...pretty..." Mikoro mumbled, swaying on her luma.

"My sweet child. Mikoro, yes? Your dear mother Rin told me you were coming. And you...you are Dari, of course."

"Nngh. D-Do I know you?"

"I have been watching you for a long time now. I was so pleasantly surprised to learn that you were accompanying Mikoro on her journey. My friends speak so highly of you."

Of course they do, thought Dari; and she leafed through her mental archives, trying to work out the most likely candidates for mutual friends and what they'd have advised Rosalina to do with her.

"And you..." she turned to the Cow Queen...

...who did something extraordinary.

The great sovereign staggered forward, steadying herself on her lumas. One step. Two. Then, with a crash which reverberated to the peak of the spire, she fell to one knee and lowered her head in supplication.

"Hrnnf. Jade Mother," she rumbled, hoarsely. "Humbled...to meet you at last. Nrrrh. I thought you'd be...nrrn. Larger."

"Jade...Mother?" Dari repeated aloud, more than a little gobsmacked. "She's your, erm..."

"Hrrrm! Don't be insolent, little mouse!"

"Eek! S-Sorry..."

The faintest of laughs from Rosalina. So soft – yet Dari could have sworn it came echoing through the stars.

"I'm not her birth mother, if that was your thought," said the lord of Comet Island. "They call me the *celestial mother*, because I watch over the stars and all who dwell in their light. The lumas too are my children, and live here with me in this observatory."

A familiar notion of motherhood, Dari thought, as she looked straight up at Mikoro.

But the fluffy captain was on her last legs now. "Mama..." she managed to get out. She looked ready to faint.

"Oh my dear friends," said Rosalina, approaching them close. "You've come such a terribly long way, and must be so drained after travelling through that frightful

storm. Please, go with Leppi. You are our guests now. You may rest as long as you need.”

They didn’t need telling twice. Mikoro and the Cow Queen, an unlikely pair united at last in sheer mind-clogging knackeredness, shambled off across an outdoor lounge area – dark red velvet carpet, circular benches, a pair of ornamental yuccas.

“And you, most honoured one,” she said to the tiger cub now dangling from her arm. “You of course may go where you will. Please, stay as long as you like.”

She gave its nose a poke with the tip of her wand. Playful? Purposeful?

Then she released it. Watched it leap to the Beacon in a single bound, where it rubbed its back against the star as it might a radiator.

Dari made to follow her friends but gave a sudden squeal, her prey-sense resurgent, as elegant lavender-nailed fingers whisked her off the floor.

“Nnnhh!” she squeaked as Rosalina’s face filled her view. A face full of comforting mystery, she’d have felt, were she not convinced part of it was about to be full of Dari.

“Dear little Dari,” she said, her breath like warm stellar wind.

“I d-didn’t do it! I didn’t mean to – ”

“Shhh.” She pressed a fingertip to Dari’s face. “Come. We have so much to discuss.”

And she stepped away to the lounge, but rather than follow the others round the corner, she disappeared with Dari in hand into a dark wood-panelled structure with an image of an open book carved above the doorway.



Mikoro slept deep. Slept just as she’d slept as a child, curled up in Mother Rin’s sheltering arms.

Where was she?

Home?

Not the Chaldea Academy, she knew that. All the same – somewhere she belonged.

She dreamt.

Dreamt she was still aboard the *Sea Bunny*, steering it down a river of shimmering stardust. Sailing past galaxies which spun around her like whirlpools of coloured light; past streaming comets, tails glittering with ice. It was so

unbelievably beautiful. And the stars – they were drawing right up to her, hovering round with such cute and curious eyes, crowding each other to get close, reaching out to touch her on the nose...

“Nyah!”

She woke with a start. A rush of giggles, receding.

She yawned. Rubbed her eyes. Opened them just in time to watch a gaggle of lumas disperse to the edges of the room. They goggled at her from behind cushions and dressers and chairs, still tittering with naughty innocence.

She grinned at them. She felt so refreshed. Already she brimmed with energy.

Where was she?

Dark blue wallpaper with yellow star patterns. Indigo curtains. Piles of cushions – all colours, all sizes. Animal plushies. More constellations: a mobile, tinkling on the ceiling. Rocking horses. Bouncing balls. A television.

And a thunderous snoring. That was why the mobile was tinkling, the horses rocking and the balls bouncing.

The Cow Queen’s pinnacles, peaks and slopes protruded from the largest pile of cushions. Still out like a light. Another bunch of lumas was playing in furtive bliss on her wonderful big body: sliding, bouncing, prodding, nuzzling, as they interspersed sniggers of sheer delight with sneaky shushes.

Mikoro clambered from her cushion-nest. Her clothes sat on a chair, neatly folded. She sorted through them. Academy shirt, tights, skirt, belts, loafers, and of course – what a relief! – the great sea-coat and tricorne hat. It was all freshly laundered and ironed; indeed felt so warm and dry in her hands that she kept expecting Mother Rin to walk through the door, because surely only she took care of Mikoro so well.

Beside her clothes a basket sat full of the Cow Queen’s royal doodads, topped by that massive cowbell. Ordinarily such a pile of gold might have stood out, but such was the lustre of these star-creatures that it was actually pretty inconspicuous.

Still finding it somehow incomplete, Mikoro searched with her eyes and found the burgundy sash. It was tangled about the mobile. Evidently the lumas had been playing with it and got it stuck on the ceiling.

She waved at a luma peeking out from behind the basket. It ducked away, just as the cluster playing on the Cow Queen, having noticed Mikoro was up, took cover behind those convenient bovine-brown formations. The cat-girl found that if she pretended to look away and waited a few moments, the shy creatures would creep back out to stare at her.

They were so cute.

Well she was awake now. That meant it was time to get dressed and stomp about looking for things to do.

“Nyaahh. I’m hungry.”

She stepped out into bright daylight. The high sun cast sparkles on the fountains and paved streams of Comet Island. She must have slept well into the morning.

A fresh sea breeze danced in her hair. It tickled her nostrils with apricot. She licked her lips and followed the scent round the corner.

A tiny voice: “Mikoro!”

“Ooh, it’s Dari! And Miss Rosalina too! Yaay!”

There they were on the lounge, shaded by the rim of the spire-cone. A pretty wrought-iron table had been set out for breakfast. Mikoro spotted a bright blue teapot steaming with apricot tea, toast in a basket, jams and marmalades, and a plate stacked with multicoloured star-shaped...things?

“Wah. What are these?” she asked, scampering up.

“Please. Try some,” said Rosalina, offering her the plate.

Mikoro reached out – then froze. Stared spellbound. She’d seen these before.

“The cake!” she remembered. “The star on the cake! The one that let me drive the *Sea Bunny!*”

“Mmrf. The one you buried me in?” said Dari from the tabletop, through a mouthful of the bright green star-sweet she held in both hands.

Rosalina laughed – so soft, haunting almost – and exchanged smiles with Dari, although the latter’s was markedly more bashful.

Mikoro scooped out a handful of the candy-like objects. She chomped: “Aahmf!”

...then consciously slowed her jaw movements, making sure to savour the taste this time. Their outer casings melted on her tongue, slowly releasing the mellow flavours within.

She blinked.

“Mmmmm! These are amazing! They taste like...honey, but in all different colours!”

“They’re called Star Bits, Mikoro,” Dari explained. “The one on the cake was baked specially in Leppi’s heat signature though, so the *Sea Bunny* would recognise whoever absorbed it.”

Rosalina pulled out a chair for Mikoro to join them. Dari scuttled back, in part for a better angle on the giant cat-girl now looming over her but mainly to be out of range of the inevitable breakfast-landslides.

Once the fluffy captain was ensconced – hat on the table, mug of tea and plate full of toast and Star Bits in front of her – the lord of Comet Island took her hands in hers.

“My beloved Mikoro,” said Rosalina. “Thank you very much for bringing Leppi back to me. Dari tells me the journey was quite a bit longer than you expected.”

A huge grin from Mikoro.

“Heehee! That’s okay! It was like, the most amazing adventure ever!”

And because the moment surely called for it, she leant forward to offer Rosalina a licky kiss on the nose.

“M-Mikoro!” said Dari, cringing. But straight away the cat-girl was hard at work on the bounty before her, unreachable in a guzzling celebration of toast and Star Bits.

Dari sat there gaping at her. Perhaps she was thinking of what she’d told Mikoro before, about the way travelling changes people.

Reconsidering it, most likely.

“But you know what, Dari?” she said inwardly. “Thank goodness for that. Where in the worlds would we be without Ibaraki Mikoro?”

Even Rosalina’s perplexing gaze was giving way to sweet mirth. She informed Mikoro: “Your brave little friend here has been telling me all about the places you found and the people you met on your way. It would seem the sea is a brighter place for your passage.”

“Ahhmf, mmnf,” – Mikoro scoffed down her current mouthful, spraying crumbs all over the tablecloth. She felt so at home.

She burped, adorably.

“Mnnhh. Yeah, we made so many new friends! And I invited them all to come to the Chaldea Academy too!”

And now it was Mikoro’s turn to launch into a relation of her travels. Rosalina listened, sipping her tea in silence. Not once did she interrupt. She only nodded, or hummed, whether in approval or heightened interest.

“...so it was *wonderful*, and I only got the chance because of you and Leppi, so thank you both so very much!” And there was no stopping her this time, she leapt right off her chair to throw her arms round Rosalina and rub her ear into her chest.

The celestial mother smiled and stroked Mikoro's pink hair. Dari noticed that even though she'd been holding her tea at the moment of fluffy impact, she hadn't spilled a drop.

It was a little alarming, come to think of it. Anyone else would have lost the cup. A further half of those would have ended up horizontal. Was physics optional for Rosalina?

"So," said the mysterious overseer. "What have you learnt, my sweet child?"

Mikoro mumbled into her gown, not surfacing yet. She wondered: what had she learnt?

About friendship and family?

Truth and reality?

Power and responsibility?

Life and death and all the things in between?

"Nyah."

The more she thought about it, the further she felt from an answer. She knew a lot more about these things now, she'd say. So why did they feel so much more complicated than before?

Did that mean she actually knew a lot less?

She raised her face. Met Rosalina's gaze of honest enquiry.

"I don't really know yet," she said, equally honest. "Lemme have some time to think about it, okay?"

"Good," said Rosalina, running a palm down the cat-girl's cheek.

And now, fresh from a good night's sleep, fuelled up on breakfast and buzzing with the kiss of apricot tea on her nerves, it was all Mikoro could do to discharge that energy by running off to explore Comet Island and play with some lumas.

Dari watched her go. When she was sure she was out of earshot, she said: "Well?"

"It is as you say," Rosalina replied. "Completely unperturbed."

"Yeah. Amazing, right?"

The cosmic guardian sipped again. Her gaze was pensive.

She spoke: "Only a heart of purest trust in the love of the stars could face some of the things you both described and come away unscarred. You were right, Dari. She is remarkable."

"So you see what I mean, right?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't you find it suspicious? Almost like Mikoro was, I dunno, *chosen* to solve some of those problems. Like, you know..."

She nodded sideways to where the Way-Mirror lay face down on the tablecloth. The fluffy captain had spilled crumbs on it. They'd rolled off, forming a faint crumb-halo. Mikoro hadn't even noticed it was there.

Rosalina's expression was inscrutable. It was almost frightening to think there were things that could puzzle a woman of her...range of concern. But she'd assured Dari during the night – admittedly a tight and cosy one, but for once, a cerebral one too – that the storms took her completely by surprise; and Dari believed her. All she'd had in mind, she insisted, was to arrange a surprise visit to Comet Island for the lovely young daughter she'd heard so much about from her dear friend Rin, so they could meet for tea and a chat.

Conveniently, one of her lumas, those sentient star-creatures destined to transform into all sorts of things – planets, galaxies, comets, you name it – had just mastered a metamorphosis into a charming little research vessel, modelled after its beloved mother's favourite stuffed rabbit. She'd thought: Why not send it to fetch Mikoro for a test run? And perhaps, if the cat-girl was good, let her take it out for a spin in the surrounding waters...

"I have to admit, it was clever," said Dari. "A cake like that; of course Mikoro would be the one to eat it. She simply wouldn't resist. I, uhh..."

She looked out at the meadow. It was okay, Mikoro was too busy rolling around on the grass with the lumas even if those pointy ears were good at this distance. Still, Dari couldn't hold back a guilty smile.

"That cake smelled delicious," she confided to Rosalina. "I just wish I could have tasted it properly. Rather than, you know, getting crushed in its goopy chewed-up mounds in her stomach."

Rosalina hummed thoughtfully. "We shall just have to make another to express our appreciation then, shan't we? Right here in our kitchen, the lumas and I, for you and all Mikoro's friends at the Academy. Isn't that right Polari?"

A black luma with sagacious blue eyes had hovered up behind her. It tinkled something into her ear.

"Thank you," said Rosalina. "Yes, she should. Please tell her she's welcome to join us as soon as she's ready."

The advisor luma departed. Not wishing to come across as nosy, Dari drank a while from her miniature cup of tea before returning to the matter at hand.

"Was Mother Rin in on it?" she asked. "And the others at Chaldea?"

"Rin? She was the one who suggested it," said Rosalina. "We also involved Lady Scáthach for her familiarity with this sea. She even read the list of prohibitions to

Mikoro to make it more convincing. We kept it from the others till she set sail though, for that same reason.”

“Oh. Wow. I hope Kiyoko didn’t react too terribly to that.”

“Yes, I worried about that. But Rin insisted, bless her heart. I think she wished to show Kiyoko that she could trust her younger sister with important Academy business; that the sweet one was more responsible than she appeared. Still, it was a dreadful shock for them all when they realised you were on board. Not least because Scáthach’s wholehearted belief in the *geasa* led her to immediately insist that you were both in grave danger, especially once they learnt that Mikoro’s arrival had been delayed.”

Dari swore. The images she was getting of Kiyoko right now were unsettling.

“However, all is well now. I corresponded with Rin while her daughter slept, and while you...”

And she actually giggled. Dari blushed, aware that she might be one of the only people in existence to merit such a sound from Rosalina.

“Well, at least they know we’re safe now,” she said, wresting back control.

Rosalina picked up a fresh piece of toast. Held it; hummed in thought again.

“Do you think Scáthach’s wisdom was sound after all?” she asked. “Even I cannot claim to truly understand the Sea of Ways. Did it react to a situation where two should have been one?”

Dari helped herself to another Star Bit, a red one this time. She munched, observing Rosalina all the while. She could tell the celestial mother wasn’t convinced.

“My friends did not exaggerate when they spoke of your keen insight, my precious Dari. Having heard both your account and Mikoro’s, I can only share your suspicion that there was more to it.”

The red Star Bit tasted smooth as a stream of honey, but there was a sharp strawberry sweetness to it too. A naughty sweetness, almost.

Like Mikoro. She could still see her. She was feeding lumas some Star Bits she’d snuck into her pocket.

“More to it,” Dari repeated. “So it wasn’t just some silly rule of the universe, right? But still – how, then? A storm like that...or rather – who...?”

So saying, their eyes fell, simultaneously, on the Way-Mirror.

Watched it, sitting there innocently.

For an instrument of such awesome power it was artfully good at pushing attention away.

Not Dari's, though.

"You know her, don't you," she stated.

"Everyone knows her," said Rosalina.

Dari jumped up.

"I knew it! Of course it was her! It's just the sort of thing she'd pull! Ohh, for goodness – arghh! Was it *all* her doing? All of it? Ohh, we're going to have words, we..."

"Ah. You *know* her, then."

"I...!" A blush, enormous this time. Then she admitted straight up: "Yeah. I *know* her. Of course I do. There probably isn't a part of her I don't know by now."

Rosalina giggled again – no doubt the biggest one in her life, Dari thought, or at least since she grew into the gravitas of her present role.

"Still, how could she do this? Put Mikoro in such – grrr, no, I know how she'll say it! She'll say, *she was never in any real danger*, won't she? And she'll be right, too, that's what's so frustrating about it! She's always right! It's some, I dunno, law of existence or something! That's what comes of being such a huge horny – *aack!*"

Rosalina had swept her up in her fingers. She appeared to be finding far more amusement in this situation than Dari thought reasonable.

"What a treat, to know her so well!" the lord of Comet Island remarked. "Even I wouldn't be fast to speak of her in such terms. Well, not out loud."

"Well, what can she expect?" Dari huffed, so charmingly peeved at this point. "She's the one who just grabs me out of nowhere to talk my ear off about all sorts of stuff I don't understand, and then she ends up sticking me in somewhere no matter what, and I know she can't actually *hurt* me, so, so...nnrrgh!"

"Well I shall be sure to pass her your regards when I return her mirror," said Rosalina.

"Hmph! You don't have to."

"You love her really."

Dari sighed. Released her breath. Sat cross-legged in Rosalina's palm.

"I know I do. It's impossible not to. You see what I mean? That's the point! Doesn't it drive you completely up the wall?"



Mikoro ran.

She ran free on the grassy terrace, where she rolled down the slopes and sniffed through the flower beds. She splashed lumas in the fountain, pressed all the buttons in the funny little mushroom-shaped starships in the garage, and even found her way into the kitchen where, mercifully, she was too full from breakfast to menace the cakes and shortbreads.

It was as a trance. She felt so free. It might have been another morning at the Academy where she'd yawned awake, gone to tickle awake a grumbly Kiyoko too (or dabbed Sayuri with her tongue, which in an instant achieved the same effect in the protective fox-girl), then filled herself up on pancakes and run out to unleash pink fluffy energy on an unsuspecting new day.

How could that be, when this place was so different from the Chaldea Academy?

Was it just that sense of release after all those long days at sea? Or was there something deeper here, some spirit of this sanctuary that was somehow contiguous, on an unseen plane, with that of her home?

There was so much she wanted to know. So much to ask Rosalina, who surely knew everything, she had the same aura as Mother Rin in that regard. But Mikoro's excitement had an agenda of its own this morning, because she'd made it. Through hell and high water she'd made it to Comet Island. And now all the pent-up pressure of the storms and shadows, the battles and bewildering encounters, would have its release.

And that was okay, she felt.

Here, it was all okay.

Besides, Dari asked the best questions. She'd find out everything important. Yes. 'Ask Dari later' – that was generally a sound policy.

So reckoning, she found Leppi soaring down on her to say good morning.

"Come with me, come with me!" cheeped the rainbow-coloured luma. "I'll show you something special!"

Now Mikoro couldn't say no to an invitation like that, so she followed Leppi into one of those domes. It was an elegant one, velvety purple with a gilded-arch entrance topped with stars. On stepping through she could tell at once that this was Rosalina's bedroom, but rather than admire the deep blue four-poster bed or the astral wallpaper, she squealed at the sight of a plushy rabbit and scooped it straight into her arms for a cuddle.

"That's Mama's friend!" said Leppi, spinning around her. "He's been so special to her ever since she was a little girl! So when I was ready to transform into a ship I decided to base my shape on him, specially for my mama!"

That got Mikoro thinking.

“Um. Rosalina, a little girl...how long ago was that?”

Leppi stopped spinning.

“Ooh. Well, I know it was much longer ago than I was born. But I was born only two hundred years ago, so that doesn’t say much. I’m sure it wasn’t three hundred years, or four hundred years, or even five hundred years, because that’s when she built the archive extension beneath the library, she told me. Could it be nine hundred years? One thousand? Two thousand? Five? I’m really not sure. You’d have to ask one of the older lumas like Polari!”

“Five thousand. Wah.”

Mikoro wondered where she might be in five thousand years. Somehow the question felt more open than before she set foot on the *Sea Bunny*.

Those musings took her outside, through the lounge with the now-empty breakfast table, past the central platform in front of the Beacon, and out to the meadow again...

...where she gasped: “Nyaah!”

The Demon Cow Queen lay amidst the flower beds, decked in her sash and gold ornamentations. She appeared to be sunbathing.

She had a big dreamy smile on her face. The lumas were laying and cuddling all about her; the luckiest were enjoying a cosy caress in her arms. Mikoro could even see star-shaped protrusions wobbling about beneath her sash.

“Um, um...!”

The Cow Queen’s ears twitched. So uncannily like her own, Mikoro thought. They were pointy. Sure they were larger, fleshy rather than furry, brown instead of pink, and at the sides of her head rather than on top, but still. So similar, she chose to think.

“Nrrrm! It’s you. Come here, would you?”

Mikoro gulped. Was she in trouble?

Well at least it was safe here. Nobody could hurt you on Comet Island. Even one of those notorious English Conservative Army terrorists, she felt, would get sat down by this atmosphere and driven to share Star Bits with you in contrite contemplation.

The Cow Queen’s sizeableness had startled Mikoro as it always did. But drawing closer, she felt guilty for her wariness. The big lug looked so serene here, playing with star-children as she lazed on the grass like actual cows did.

As opposed to, say, sailing armed to the teeth from a fortress.

“Nuuuu.” A relaxed rumble. The lumas loved that.

Mikoro ventured: “Um! Thank you for bringing Dari and me here through the storm. You...did do that, didn’t you? That’s how we got here safely?”

“Hrrm? I...did? Yes, I suppose I did. Hrrm hrm. Although, I still don’t...”

Mikoro giggled. The Cow Queen looked so funny when she was thinking.

“That mirror you found, little cat,” she grunted, shutting her eyes. “Have you ever looked into it?”

Mikoro immediately opened her mouth to say, “Yeah, I saw a Super-Dari!” – only to remember what Dari had told her and clamp it shut. She dithered, “Nyah, nyah...” before hedging: “I’ve, um, been a little scared to. It’s too powerful for me.”

“Nrrrrrrrm.” A reverberating sigh, with an accompaniment of bouncy luma giggles. “Powerful. Yes. I’ll grant it that.”

A silence. Mikoro batted her eyelids. She’d wondered whether to expect an altercation, or a peace conference if she was lucky, but the Cow Queen looked far too comfortable for either.

“Um!” she dared at last. “Can I say something else?”

“Hrrm. You need not ask my blessing here. This is the Jade Mother’s domain, not mine.”

Mikoro hesitated – but not for long. She went for it.

“I’m...nyah. I’m sorry for what happened on the monkeys’ island. When we first met. Your nice Minister told me about a lot of things and I think we got each other all wrong. I still dunno what was actually going on there, but, um...”

“Shhhh,” the monarch exhaled with a smile. “All’s fine now. I have received a full explanation from the Jade Mother.”

“Um. Okay. But I still wanna say...”

“Nrrh?”

“I understand why I wound you up so much. I didn’t know at the time how much you loved your dad and saw me as a threat to the world he left you, and I guess one thing just added to another. I wanted to say it because...um, because I know how it feels, I think. I have a mother I love just as much, and it made me imagine how hurt I’d be if one day she’s gone, then someone comes along and tries to mess up all she’s built at the Chaldea Academy. Guu.”

The Cow Queen’s huge hand was feeling round Mikoro’s face. Giving her chin a squeeze.

A piston-like finger settled underneath. Rubbed her chin.

“Nuuuu. I was hasty. Shadows everywhere, you see. But to think I could take a creature like you for a monster, even in partial light. Hrrm hrm. Will you forgive a stubborn old cow?”

Mikoro resisted the urge to climb up and cuddle her face.

“Gwah. You’re not that old. Leppi told me that Rosalina’s been around for more than five thousand years.”

“Hrrrm. Has she now? Yes, I suppose she has. I suppose even the great Demon Cow Queen is a mere heifer next to the Jade Mother. Oho!”

Lumas tumbled cheerily off her chuckle-quaking topography.

“Nyah. About that. Why do you call her the Jade Mother?”

“Come, little cat. Sit here and I’ll tell you.”

She patted a presently-unoccupied patch of grass by her hip.

Mikoro grinned. Were all her dreams coming true? It felt just like the time they’d bathed together, only now there was no drunken haze to suspend the truth of things.

Friends, after all.

Mikoro scampered into the space before a luma got there, drew up her knees, and pressed her back to the Cow Queen’s cliff of a waist. She giggled. It felt so warm, even through her coat. She loved the way it wobbled on the surface but, if she leant hard, felt so unbreakably firm underneath.

“I call her the Jade Mother,” the Cow Queen explained, “because although she is not my mother in one way, she is my mother in most of the others. It was she who interceded when that wretched Monkey King was on the point of murdering my old bull, and offered him asylum here on Comet Island.”

“Wah. So she saved his life?”

“Nrrrm, more than that. She restored him to the horned throne as soon as the so-called Great Sage had left the picture. Nonetheless his consort – my stepmother, Iron Fan – was harsh on him for a time, and it was in that period that I was born from the lonely old bull’s involvement with a kind young passing adventurer. Ohoho!”

Mikoro grinned as the lumas tittered around her. If she shut her eyes she could imagine hearing that sound as she soared through space.

“So you see,” said the sovereign, “it’s thanks to the Jade Mother that I was born, and also that I learnt that, though most of us are born with two parents, it is quite alright to have a different number if that is the best way. From my dear old father I learnt to love and to rule. My birth mother has sent me books filled with

knowledge of faraway places. The Jade Mother appears in my dreams to tend my heart and soothe my fears. And my stepmother taught me to fight and wield magical tools and technologies. If it were not for any one of those four, think what a stunted excuse for a Queen you'd be speaking to now! *Nuuuu!*"

She laughed out loud again, and this time a luma landed with a "Yaay!" in Mikoro's lap. The cat-girl cried out happily – it was pink just like her hair.

"Nrrrm, listen to this, too," the monarch added, more throatily. "You won't be repeating this anywhere on my seas, but the same is true of sovereigns. On these troublesome waterways one sovereign is enough. But there are places with councils of sovereigns, places where sovereigns take turns, and even places where they manage with no sovereigns at all. Then there are powers that by their nature run above that of sovereigns, like the Jade Mother's, or beneath it, like...nrrrm, cats, I suppose. All are acceptable, so long as that is what people want and none are harmed or excluded."

"Gwah. I thought you said you were the boss."

"Hoho! I am! But you know better than anyone that the strongest boss in the world – nrrm, that's me – can't and shouldn't want to stop people being sovereigns of themselves. That's the difference between a sovereign and a tyrant, my old bull used to say. A tyrant takes away her subjects' power, but a sovereign protects it. Nrrm. It's like..."

She considered the lumas in her arms. They'd fallen asleep now.

"...like these star-creatures. Each is birthed individually from stardust and has its own journey to go on, its destiny to fulfil. But they also need each other, so the Jade Mother helps to bring them together and provides them a roof till their power is ready to flourish."

"Wah. Are you saying a good sovereign is like a good parent, then?"

The Cow Queen ruminated. That amusing face again, like she was puzzling over something a lot less complicated than she made it look.

"Nrrrm. I won't say that. I won't say subjects are the same as children. But...maybe a few things are the same. You can have as many parents or as many sovereigns as you need. Both parents and sovereigns hold power on your trust. A good parent, and a good sovereign, respects that trust and uses their power to build up yours. A bad parent, and a bad sovereign, breaks that trust and takes yours away. Hrrrrrm...actually, you know what? It is the same with all power. If you hold power, of any form, your responsibility is to the good treatment of those you hold it over. The trust in which you hold it is always conditional. You must

love and care for them. Listen to them. Otherwise they – children, subjects, minions, worshippers – may do whatever they need to take back that power or seek that care elsewhere.”

She paused. Then raised a finger.

“Except monkeys,” she grumbled inaudibly. “Monkeys have to pay beef bowl.”

These ramblings were getting a little beyond Mikoro’s territory so she brought the conversation back to the celestial mother, recalling how the Cow Queen had knelt to her the previous day.

“So that’s why you respect Rosalina so much?” she asked. “Because she cared so gently for you and your dad? Ooh – you said she, um...appears in your dreams?”

The mass behind her vibrated.

“I have...hrrm...nightmares,” it rumbled. “My father did too. Comes with our ancestral duty, he explained. Protect the sea from...nrrrm...”

“Pirates?” said Mikoro, a little impatiently.

“Nrrrm. No.”

“Monkeys?”

“No. Well, yes, those too, those very much, but...”

“Tigers?”

“Oho! Like the little Beast?”

She pointed into the sky, where the tiger cub and a pair of red lumas were chasing each other around.

“Hrrm. I’ll divulge it to you, seeing as you were so good as to bring it to my fortress. I suspected that thing. Hrrnh, with a name like *Beast of Reckoning* so would you! But of course the Jade Mother knew better. She explained to me this morning that the Beast exists as a natural check on power. Like...hrrm, a *primal critical experience*, she said. If you grow too powerful you hear it roaring in the night, to remind you that the power isn’t yours by right, that your use of it must answer to a higher scheme. And if you forget...well, roaring isn’t all it does, so they say. Nrrrm, but how would I know? I’m just the Demon Cow Queen! Nuuuuu!”

Mikoro joined the giggling lumas wholeheartedly this time. But she couldn’t forget the memory of the Beast’s magnificent and fearsome elder form; first when it was killed by a will of sheer ruthlessness – except of course, it couldn’t be killed, it had to exist – and second when it had transformed in the arms of the Minister of Eyes and Ears.

How could it do that? Was it an adult tiger all along, who’d taken the guise of a cub for Mikoro’s cuddly comfort? Or was it just naturally a cub?

Was age even meaningful for a creature on that scale?

Was it meaningful for anyone?

“Um. You’ve never heard it roar?” she asked the Cow Queen.

“Nrrm, maybe once or twice. Only quietly. More a purr, really. But when the nightmares were at their worst, I could not tell where the purrs ended and the terrors began. So I asked the Minister of Eyes and Ears to open an investigation, but she only found that it’s rare for the Beast to appear in physical form. All we had to go by were suspect accounts and patchy old records.”

Mikoro watched the vivid shape soar overhead. A *cardinal will*, the Chaos Serpent had called it. Well it made perfect sense that they’d be as cute and cuddly as they were critical. Was cuddly cuteness not a core truth of the universe?

“As I was saying!” snorted the Cow Queen. “To protect the sea...nrrh. There are places...*beneath*, supposedly. Places so broken that even the Beast of Reckoning can no longer go there. The sea in my domain – that’s where they’re closest. That’s where their influence seeps through the vents. That, according to the oldest legends, is why the dynasty exists. You might think my realm is large, but the sea you have crossed is only a puddle in the wider ocean, and most of those high seas function well enough to need no formal governance. But here – nrrrm, we *hold the threshold*. That’s right. We stop those...*things that cannot be* from leaking past to corrupt the wider sea. I think you know what I mean by *things that cannot be*, hrrrm?”

“Um...I guess.”

Mikoro recalled – if only momentarily. The cave. The siege. The university. She’d encountered those *things*, knew they’d settled in her memory. But her consciousness was just too fundamentally fluffy and cuddly to not smother those corrupt slivers into impotence.

“Hrrmph! They are weak, to be sure. They crumple easily. But...nrrrm. Just to see them – to know of them – is to feel their poison drip through your mind. If not for the Jade Mother’s hand in my dreams, they might have been too much even for this mighty heart of mine. *Nuuuu!* What an honour to meet her at last!”

“Nyah! You mean you never actually met her till now? But her island’s right next to your...”

“Ohoho, did you think she lives here? Well – hrrm hrm – she does *live* here, but...nrrm. Yes. You know what? You’ll see soon enough. Never let it be said that the Demon Cow Queen is one to spoil a fun surprise!”

Mikoro couldn't resist anymore. She climbed up onto the Cow Queen's belly and rubbed it for all she was worth.

"Nrrrrm. You should have told me you were here to help resolve those *things that cannot be*, my capable little Captain. I'd have given you a commission! Lent you a fleet!"

"Um! But I...wasn't? I was just here to take the bunny-boat back to Miss Rosalina..."

"Hoho, sure you were! That'll be why you took care of the Evil Forest that withstood the best efforts of every generation of my predecessors!"

That only further mystified Mikoro. "Um, I did? Oh."

"Nuuu! Well, all's well now. The Jade Mother has even instructed that the blockade be brought down for the next cycle. She deems the sea safe for the time being."

"Nyah! You mean, she was the one who told you to put it up?"

"Hoho, of course! What, did you think the munificent Demon Cow Queen was in the business of impeding wayfarers' freedom of movement on a whim? Nrrrm, for a few beef bowls perhaps? Nonsense! That was only a cover, so those inconvenienced by the blockade needn't trouble themselves over the *things that cannot be*. No, the Jade Mother expressly requested it in her last communication, on advice she'd received that we were entering a period of heightened menace from those...nrrm, *things*."

Her great hand felt its way behind Mikoro's shoulders. Revolved them for a better look at her; then, still experiencing line of sight issues, sat up a little.

"Now I still don't know what exactly you did, little swashbuckler. Was that why you released the spirits from the serpent temple? So they would help you locate the leading threats?"

"Gwah? I thought you said Miss Rosalina explained it. The temple wasn't me, it was a bunch of bad people from the Heroes' Agency!"

"Nrrrm. Well...never mind it. I shall have another word. What's important is that you've done us all a great service here. I spoke with the Minister of Hooves through the Jade Mother's communicator an hour ago. The blockade is lifted now."

The great Cow Queen placed a hand along her fringe and stared off to the horizon. Then, laying back down, she sighed sleepily:

"Nrrrm, yes. I expect it'll get a little crowded here in...hrrm...a few hours..."

"Hey!" said Mikoro. "Come on, don't sleep again! I wanna talk!" And she scrambled her way up the valley of the Cow Queen's chest and donked her gold

cowbell. The strategy was an effective one, because it got the lumas going again and soon they were lining up in midair to take turns with it.

“Nuuuu. You’re a troublesome one, did you know that?”

“Nyah nyah! Why are you called the *Demon Cow Queen*? You’re not a demon at all. You’re just a big cuddly!”

“Nrrm, I’m the *Demon Cow Queen* because my sweet old bull was the *Demon Ox King*. He said he kept the title to remind him of the time in his youth when he and that infernal monkey were friends.”

“Oh. Okay. And, um...”

“Hrrrm hrrm!”

“Wah! Just one more question!”

“Nrrrr. Go on.”

“What exactly is a *Lamassu* anyway?”

The *Cow Queen*’s eyes shot open. Stared wide into the sky. Then those great eyelids rolled shut, and she rumbled as she plunged off to sleep:

“Nrrm...no idea. No idea at all.”



“Oh my. Look at this!”

Rosalina lifted *Dari* off her shoulder and raised her for a better view.

“W-Wow. That’s...pretty amazing, huh. I don’t suppose you have a camera?”

The *Cow Queen* lay slumbering on her back, her buff slopes gleaming in patches under the midday sun. The hatted and coated *Mikoro* lay snuggled up on top of her, legs in the valley, arms round her neck.

“What a sweet pair they make,” said Rosalina.

“Yeah. Almost like it was worth all the trouble just so they could make up like this, right?”

“Hmm.”

“Uhh...what are you thinking?”

“Oh? Only that this scene’s missing a little something. Just to complete it. A cat, a cow, and...what was it Her Majesty calls you? *Little Mouse*?”

“Aah, no!” *Dari* wriggled in her fingers. “Nngh, please don’t. I must have spent half the journey on one of them or the other.”

“My. What shall we do with you then? We’ve a busy afternoon ahead of us, you should know...”

So saying, she pointed out to sea.

Dari followed her arm. She had to squint, but could just make them out in the distance.

Masts. Sails.

Ships, of numerous shapes and sizes.

“What’s all that?” said Dari, a little alarmed. “It looks like the whole world’s coming to visit.”

“Why of course,” said Rosalina. “Now that the blockade is lifted, everyone who’s been waiting to come here has their chance. Comet Island is an important hub for this region, so it’s usual for people to come great distances to make use of our services. We offer special information and support, buy supplies, sell exotic goods, and most precious, provide transportation to worlds too far to reach by sea.”

“Gosh. Err, are you sure all those people will fit on this island at once?”

“On Comet Island there is always room for everybody. Why don’t you and Mikoro mingle a little once they arrive? You might catch up with some friends, and it will give you a good chance to interrogate them, as you do, for your story.”

“I don’t *interrogate*...!” said Dari, taken aback.

“We are expecting thirteen in total to journey onward. That includes yourself and Mikoro of course. Why don’t you come and find me once they’re all here? A setting forth is always an occasion to mark, so there’ll be a special ceremony with tea and blessings. In the meantime...take some rest, my sweet child.

“Huh? W-Wait! What are you doing?” Dari stammered, as the serene hand ferried her across the sleepers’ terrain.

“My dear Dari. You know it can’t be helped.”

That gentlest of laughs again, as though the whole universe was tinkling surreptitious at her.

Dari squirmed as Rosalina lifted Mikoro’s cheek with her free hand. The cat-girl’s lips were all dribbly.

“Nnnah! N-Now hang on...”

“That’s a good idea,” said Rosalina with a wink. And in that instant she slipped Dari through one of the Cow Queen’s necklaces, securing her snug to that oak of a neck. Dari squeaked as Mikoro’s lips came to rest on top of her.

“Relax, little Dari,” came Rosalina’s words from beyond her hot galactic walls. “You’ll have much to do when our guests arrive.”



Come afternoon Comet Island was unrecognisable. Clamour filled the air as ship after ship disgorged travellers, traders, merchants, students, pilgrims, researchers, journalists and even the odd ghost or two. Conversations were had, names called out, hands clasped, backs thumped, and arguments about religion and politics exchanged in good temper as wayfarers stood in queues, took lunch from the lumas' seaside stalls, or strolled round the terraces catching up with old friends.

Some of these people stayed only long enough to pick up crates, send messages, or get stamps on various bits of paper. Others remained, lingering in the woods or stretching their limbs along the island's walkways. A few, with overnight waits in store, were put up in the cosy little guest cabins in the outer ring. The surrounding ocean was a hubbub of vessels coming and going, but the *Lamassu* dwarfed the lot, even at anchor round the back of the spire in a not-so-effective effort at discretion. The Cow Queen paraded noisily about the deck as a crowd of minotaur children piled down the gangway, allured by the lumas who were equally excited at this chance to make new friends.

"Nyah...nyah..."

Mikoro swung her head left and right, suddenly lost in an unfamiliar crowd. But just as she felt the slip of her nerves, a gloved hand tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hail, Captain Ibaraki Mikoro, Terror of the Banes!"

She spun around.

"Oooh! It's you!"

Professor Woland doffed his flat cap and bowed in greeting. "Well?" he said. "Did they wear you out very much?"

"Um, the Banes? Oh, no. I mean, yeah, they were kinda tough, but I managed alright because I have such good friends!"

"Very good, very good," said Woland, whose serpentine tail, sticking through the tails of his evening suit, Mikoro now noticed for the first time.

"You." The voice was snappier than its softness should have allowed. Rosalina had materialised out of nowhere and stood ten paces away, holding her wand out at Woland. "You behave around here, understood?"

The Professor held up his hands in a gesture of total innocence, causing Mikoro to burst out laughing.

"Heehee! Just passing through again?" she asked, once the real power on Comet Island had melded into the crowd.

“You could say that. But it’s an excellent thing I found you, my dear creature, an excellent thing indeed.” And without warning he held out a neat little package wrapped in black snakeskin.

“Um...! What’s this?”

“I dined last night with certain mutual friends of ours,” said Woland. “The serpent family. They solicited my assistance in commissioning a little souvenir for you. In appreciation for, you know, services rendered.”

“Wah. They didn’t have to. I like helping my friends!”

She unwrapped the gift.

“Awawawa! It’s cuuuute!”

In her hands was an exquisite figurine of coloured marble. A blue fox and red cat were locked in a play-wrestle so vividly postured that they might have tumbled to life any minute. And in the centre, gentle in presence, no larger than the others yet perfectly positioned to balance proceedings in a safe and dependable harmony: a sitting black cat.

The red cat had a little green mouse in its mouth, while the blue fox held in its paw a tiny purple lily.

“A Phidias original,” said Woland proudly, adjusting his bowler hat with his cane. “Fresh out of his workshop this morning. I collected it myself.”

Mikoro went “Yaay! Thank you so much!” and flung her arms round the professor.

The professor glanced about, looking distinctly awkward. Then he muttered into her ear: “You served my purposes admirably too, don’t you know. Not to worry, nothing questionable or anything like that, goodness no. Let’s just say...”

He swung his head around, more intently this time, and spotted a fishing crew passing some crates to a burly luma.

“...let’s just say I had a few fish to catch. Of *the second freshness*, as has been said. Before they could, you know, rot holes in the ocean.”

“Oooh, I can’t wait to take this home to show everyone! Give my snake friends a big big thank you from me okay?”

“Really, I mean it,” said Rosalina, appearing over Mikoro’s shoulder. “I’m watching you. Don’t cause trouble while you’re here.”

Woland flinched dramatically and clicked his tongue, scandalised. “Trouble?” he protested. “Me? I wouldn’t dream of it! With whom do you think you are speaking?”

Rosalina took the figurine from Mikoro and examined it with a suspect eye. She tapped it with her wand. Apparently satisfied, she replaced it in her hands and swept away.

“Oof,” said the professor, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. “There’s no arguing with that one. Why not consider me a hallucination then if that’s more comforting?”



“I would put it to you that a brown cow is not a cow.”

“A brown...hrrrm...is not...? Nuuuuuu! Now look here!”

“When you say *look here*, do you invite me to distinguish you by means of small comparison, or great comparison?”

“That’s enough! Tell me what has happened to your friend.”

The Mare stumbled, trembling, to Not-A-Horse’s side. She was in a frightful state. Her eyes bulged bleached, her nostrils seemed stuck in a permanent stretch, and her lips were curled with teeth parted in shock. She’d thinned badly, as though she hadn’t eaten for days.

“It might be said,” Not-A-Horse put forth, “that she is like this because Houyhnhnm fortitude is exhaustible yet inexhaustible. It might alternatively be said that she is like this because somebody has blown her island to bits.”

The Cow Queen’s frown fell sombre. She swivelled to address the Mare, but it was an open question as to whether the Houyhnhnm could tell the great presence was there. It was as though she’d pulled her consciousness back to her own outline as a last barrier of safety, and could not interact outside it lest the least prod cave her wits in completely.

The Cow Queen stood tall and raised an open hand. “Bring me the best physicians and counsellors we have!” she boomed.

As caring hands led the Mare away, the monarch addressed the philosopher-Houyhnhnm: “I am told they viewed you as a troublemaker, and to be frank, I can see why. However. Hrrm hrm. As you are the last surviving representative of the community of Horseham in sound mind, it is to you that I must deliver a sincere and heartfelt apology for, nrrm, blowing your island to bits. When an evil spirit took possession and drove its residents to violent aggression against the Sheep Pub, I was left with no choice but to act decisively. Nonetheless! Please understand that all of us on board the *Lamassu* earnestly regret the damage and

loss of life sustained by our tributaries the Houyhnhnms of Horseham in that battle. We have suspended all tribute payments and stand ready to contribute resources should you wish to rebuild.”

“It can accurately be said that I wish to rebuild,” said Not-A-Horse, “but it can just as accurately be said that I do not.”

The Cow Queen’s solemnity swung straight back to stupefaction. “Nrrrm! How am I to interpret that? Do you do wish to rebuild or don’t you?”

“I wish to rebuild in the sense that I wish the trough on my ship would replenish its oats as fast as I eat them: that is, at a level of conjecture where a community of Houyhnhnms might yet learn to thrive in a world where people exist other than the Houyhnhnms. However, I do not wish to rebuild in the more practicable sense that I understand my fellows brought about their destruction through their own bloody-minded folly and would rather, were I to have any say in these matters, to never set eyes on that island again.”

“Nrrrrrm. Well, that is your say, is it not? You are free to travel wherever you like, and the generous – and, honestly, rather concerned – Demon Cow Queen stands ready to support you on your way with a trauma stipend.”

“It is indeed my say, in that I may choose any direction in which to turn my nose and set sail. However it is not my say, in that I cannot be certain that travelling so far in any given direction will not bring the ruins of Horseham into my field of view within a time interval of t , where t equals...”

The Cow Queen scratched her horn. Holding a conversation with this horse was not straightforward.

“Hrrm. Look,” she interrupted when she got a chance. “If you want help, you shall have it, but I need to know plainly – ”

“Please look after my friend,” said Not-A-Horse, and he turned and trotted away.



“Nnnggh!” Dari wheezed, crushed once more in the hug of hugs between Mikoro and Mary the sheep-girl.

“Nyaah, it’s so great to see you here!” said the delighted Mikoro. “But, is it really okay? For you to leave the – I mean, um...”

Try as she might, she just couldn’t imagine the Sheep Pub running without Mary’s bubbly hospitality.

“Eeeh, it’s fine!” Mary assured her. “All the guests who were stuck because of the blockade are on their way here now. It’ll be much quieter for the next few days, so I’ve decided to take a little leave for some sightseeing!”

“Wah. But how did you get here so fast?”

Mary shrugged. “I have a seaplane. Want to see it? It’s cute!”

Her offer tempted Mikoro, but so many people were massing back and forth by now that getting to the shore appeared more trouble than it was worth.

“That’s a shame,” said the sheep-girl. “You’d like it. It’s got little sheep decals on the wings!”

Having escaped to Mikoro’s shoulder, Dari swung her head till the hug-daze cleared. “Nngh. So, you’re travelling on from this island? Where are you going?”

“Eehh, I don’t know yet! I figured I’d just wander off at random and see what happens. Wherever I end up, there’s sure to be a Sheep Pub nearby where I can drop in on a few friends.”

Dari yelped as Mikoro spontaneously rocketed in for another hug.

“I’ll never forget our stay with you,” the cat-girl mumbled into that mass of woollen curls. “Never! The baths were magical, I slept so soundly, and the fish was the most amazing I’ve ever tasted! Well, apart from Mother’s of course.”

“Aaww, I’m so pleased!” said Mary. “Come stay again whenever you like! You’re always welcome.”

“Did I hear that the pub was attacked?” asked Dari. “Is everyone alright?”

And there, for the first time, they witnessed sadness in Mary’s face. She leant in, speaking quietly now:

“It was a terrible shock. Eeehh, I mean, who attacks a Sheep Pub? Ironically it was the blockade that saved us. It’d kept a few navy types idling about who saw off the mad horses, but it pains me to say we lost a couple of guests in the crossfire. They, ehh...didn’t make it.”

“Oh,” said Mikoro. “Um...we didn’t know. I’m so sorry.”

She advanced to embrace Mary again, but was suddenly struck by what she thought to be an otherworldly glow in the sheep-girl’s eyes.

“It’s alright though,” Mary said, her voice now exhibiting a strange background echo. “Want to know a secret?”

Mary’s pupils darted left and right. Then she drew right up to Mikoro’s ear, only inches above Dari too, and whispered: “Don’t tell anyone I told you this, but you can’t really be *killed* on the Sea of Ways. It’s...eehh, how to explain? We’re too far

out for that, let's say. If you lose a life here when you're not supposed to, then all that happens is you get sent back to the, eehh...the place you last came from."

Then she drew back, all immanent service-sector smiles again. "You see then?" she beamed, as though that were a totally reasonable thing to ask. "Nothing to be sad about!"

"Wah," went Mikoro as their friend from the Sheep Pub waddled off in search of a newspaper.



The Monkey Minister scanned the terms of the settlement with a wry smile.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted," they said. "But it's for the best."

"Nyaah? Are you sure?" said Mikoro.

"I do not resent your actions on our behalf, kind Captain Mikoro, not in the slightest. But it was never my intent to get the tribute abolished. On the contrary, it gives me an effective excuse to squeeze the budgets of the Four Stalwart Officials, who would have us re-arm into an invasion-capable force if they had their way."

"Hrrm! Quite right, quite right!" harrumphed the Demon Cow Queen. She kept a hungry eye on the numerical portion of the document, as though waiting till everyone looked away so she could sneak a few more zeroes in.

"I see," said Dari to the monkey. "So that's why you gave that big show of thanking us after we, er..."

The Cow Queen's other eye was spending most of its time on her. She knew too well what that body could do to dare risk offering it any excuses.

"In front of those four and their supporters? Of course I did," said the Monkey Minister. "They wouldn't waste the first opportunity to replace me with one of their candidates for a second Sun Wukong. But their ambitions are foolish. They would merely provoke Her Majesty along with more vengeful factions in the minotaur nation, as well as alienate our allies and trade partners while getting us nothing in return. That is why I am happy to go along with a period of ritual self-abasement, so that the population remains well reminded that we will not achieve anything by violence."

"Nyah! But, but, you said the Cow Queen was a - "

The Monkey Minister quickly shifted their eyebrows at her. “Yes. You came across as a reasonable third party. Her Majesty listens to such voices. My hope was that you might find a means to pressure her to slightly lower the tribute.”

“Nrrm! It was, was it?” rumbled Her Majesty, leaning in close.

The Monkey Minister smiled, not daunted at all it seemed. “Just a little, you see, to nudge the angry-generals valve back the other way.”

“And why did you not approach me directly?”

“In person, with movements they might have found suspicious? Or by correspondence, with a paper trail for them to find? I thought a free element like the Captain here might be less of a risk, but I’ll admit, I miscalculated. I had not accounted for her remarkable...ingenuity. Still, I do not recall that I uttered anything slanderous about you, Your Majesty. I only described your awesome might and dominance of these seas.”

“Not exactly untrue,” said Dari, whose nerves had a good memory of the descriptions that’d so shaken them up. “Still – you’re a cunning monkey, you know that?”

“I apologise if you feel misled, Miss Dari, and you too Captain Mikoro. Alas, you know how it is my friends. Monkey politics.”

The last pair of words brought an air of grim contemplation down on the terrace. Even the lumas peeking over the spire seemed to hang heavy in the air as they weighed them.

“Nrrrrrm.” The Cow Queen slumped back and sighed. “Yes. I don’t envy you your position, you crafty rascal. How can you be sure your military officials will accept the reinstated tribute?”

“Oh I’m certain they won’t. That is why tonight I shall be journeying from Comet Island for a fortnight or so while they shriek the cave down. In exactly one week they will receive a letter from your emissary at the Sheep Pub – or rather, from myself, but penned in your emissary’s hand at my secret request, in the lavatory, during a ‘routine goodwill visit’ – to inform them that you are holding me prisoner and will not release me until they have ratified these terms. They will categorically refuse, but after a few days cooler heads among the civil officials will prevail on them on the basis that only I have the authority to mobilise all parts of the administration for the upcoming Great Fish Festival. Not even the baboon marshals will be willing to miss out on that.”

“Gwah,” said Mikoro, faintly stunned. “Monkey politics sounds kinda intense. I don’t think I could do your job.”

She chewed her lip thoughtfully, and added: “My sister could though! Um, maybe. You’d better not ask her.”

A neat tap as the Monkey Minister’s stamp came down on the paper. In the next instant the royal seal of the Demon Cow Queen slammed down next to it, ten times as large, three-dimensional in its wax, and so positioned as to look like it was crushing its counterpart into the corner. As if still more weight was not the last thing it needed, her name and titles were represented in the classical script of her ancient forebears, anchoring them to the page with historical heft and calligraphic mystique.

“Ooh, I have one too!” Mikoro chimed in, reaching hopefully into her pouch. “Can I add it to the beef bowl treaty? You need a witness, right?”

The Cow Queen considered: “Nrrrrrm.” Then she boomed, “Why not, why not? It’s your fault after all! Ohoho!”

Mikoro grinned, brought out her little pocket-stamp with the Chaldea Academy seal and squeezed it right up against the other two.

And Rosalina, who’d observed in silence all this time, stepped forward, and with a flourish of her wand, certified the agreement with a swirling signature.



“TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC!”

From the peak of the spire the Rooster of Truth turned heads, first in startled curiosity and then, universally, in admiration. The Torchic’s wings fanned up a gorgeous stream of solar ejections in its wake, and soon the awestruck Leppi was surfing the embers to chase it, spinning them alight into a rainbow road that rained coloured dust and fluffy gold feathers on the onlookers. By the time the Beast of Reckoning got involved the whole island had put down its tools, crates and parcels to marvel at this dance of the fluffy, furry and bouncy cosmic miraculous.

It was not merely beautiful. No, each of these creatures was stuffed to its particles with so much of what just fundamentally matters: the rooster with its pure sweet truths, the tiger with its critical roar, the sentient star with its saturation of stories. What better proof could be had of a universe of love than the chase of these three cutenesses which now spun together in a whirlwind of elemental cuddles?

To soak one's senses with their free-spirited frolic was to be left incapable of meanness. It was to cast aside all illusive tenets that reward the fake and punish the kind, even those you'd accumulated without knowing it; to gain stripes on your irises that petrified all abusers of power in your presence and sharpened your moral courage to call them out; and to cast open your mind to the true range, depth and richness of the unexplored narrative seas outside those tiny patches kept to by societies which believe no ways exist beyond their own.

"TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC!"

"Rawrarrar-rarrr!"

"Yaaaaaaay!"

Mikoro, alas, couldn't fly. The fluffy captain stood transfixed, ears twitching, tail swaying, eyes watering with a longing to join in the fun. But the universe might not have withstood the pressures of such a high concentration of cute, so perhaps it was just as well.



"There you go sir!" came Polari's voice from the archive dome. "Your deed of change of name has been registered. Congratulations, *Sétanta*."

A tiny figure in shorts raced out onto the balcony. Tiny even for a tiny, he nonetheless moved with the agility of a hunting hound and the speed of someone so fit that running rather than walking was his default mode of ambulation. Furthermore, though he showed no signs of aggression, every passer-by sensed the tension in his limbs. They felt he could probably lash their foreheads in a split-second if he so chose, even from ground level.

That was probably why they cleared out of his path as they might that of a grinning chihuahua as he hurtled from the archive dome to the Comet Island Post Office.

A quick luma-assisted photocopy and sign-dictated letter to a certain canine later, the Sea of Ways's latest *smol* loped down to the beach, sat down, and gazed out to sea.

A shadow fell over him.

"Nrrrrm hr-hrrm! What's this?"

His eyes darted sideways.

"Oho!"

The Cow Queen had reached out to pick him up, but the tiny youth stood facing her foot, fists raised in a combat stance before she'd even straightened her arm.

She huffed, impressed.

"Nuuuu! A skilled warrior, passing himself off as a mouth-watering little puppy? I haven't seen you around, little one. What is your name and who do you serve?"

Eyeing this crag of a woman warily, Sétanta pointed squarely at himself.

The Cow Queen leaned in close, prompting him back to stance in a flash. He swung back and forth on his feet, looking like he might actually dare box her nose – or by analogy, the moon – if it came in range.

"Nrrrrm, calm yourself, puppy-boy! I am only taking a closer look. I am the Demon Cow Queen, sovereign over all the seas from here to the Cave of the Sun!"

She squinted at the tiny youth. His build was slight, yet his limbs appeared uncannily robust and his motions fluid as a river. His stare was hard and alert. Was that the sliver of a shadow over his forehead?

She realised he was making hand signals at her.

"A complicated one I see. Hrrm, I cannot understand your signs, but if you wish to communicate with me I can take you to someone who will?"

That someone was of course the Minister of Eyes and Ears, who five minutes later, having observed the miniature Ulsterman's gesticulations by video link in the Cow Queen's shipboard cabin, interpreted: "He claims to be a formidable fighter and – ah, forgive me Your Majesty – states that up till a few days ago he would have insisted on challenging you to combat to test who was stronger."

"What? Nuuuuuuuuuo! That's – "

"Ah, please wait, Your Majesty, there's more! You see – he regrets that he cannot do so because he has renounced the combative approach to life. That is why he has come to Comet Island. He means to set forth in search of new understandings."

"Hrrnhh! Is that so, little pup?"

The Cow Queen raised her palm to examine the tiny human on it. He reminded her so much of Dari. For all his training there was even a trace of that fluster, just a trace.

All the same, something about this little fellow unnerved her. It had not escaped her notice that he'd managed to stay on his feet ever since he'd hopped upon her hand outside the Post Office, in spite of the subtle attempts she'd made to topple him.

The Cow Queen had seen all sorts on the many islands of her domain, and knew better than to evaluate someone on size alone. Who wasn't tiny to her? For the staggering size disparity on display here, she found herself curious as to how he'd have behaved in a brawl with her.

How disappointing!

"And what's he saying now?" she questioned the Minister, growing baffled at a particularly emphatic round of hand and mouth gestures.

"Ah...I'm not sure I'm seeing this right. Could you perhaps hold him closer?"

She shifted her hand – suddenly, at speed. Still standing. His control over his line of gravity was astonishing.

"Well?"

"Ah...Your Majesty, he seems to want you to...ah..."

"What? Nrrrm, out with it!"

"He wishes you to swallow him!"

"He – what? Ohoho! Is that right, little pup?"

Sétanta nodded. His brow pushed forth in serious anticipation.

"Nuuuu! You're actually asking me to – nrrm-hrm, I mean, *of course* that's what you want! Well, why not? Who am I to deny you your right to squirm under the dominance of the sovereign body? Especially after you went to all this trouble, yes! Hoho! Never let it be said that the Demon Cow Queen was so rude as to turn away a foreigner with a good faith interest in her internal affairs!"

And with that proclamation she drew up her hand to toss the former warrior through her lips – only to raise her eyebrows in amazement, for the moment she tilted it, he kicked off with one foot and leapt into her mouth like a salmon.

"Nrrhh! Come here, you – "

She sloshed her tongue for him, but already she felt him in her throat.

She slapped her thick hands on her desk and soared to her full height.

"Ohhh-ho-ho! So it's like that, is it? Outstanding! Come then, you wily little pup! I suppose we shall have our duel after all!"

And so state business went on hold till the evening as the sovereign gut wrestled for its lithe little challenger. It was one of the most exhilarating contests the Cow Queen had ever partaken in, and it ran up and down her gullet, bounced around her rumen, and at its climax even descended into her third stomach. There its dry, leafy lining finally tripped the tiring Sétanta and ejected him back to the reticular chamber, where he lay amidst the honeycomb pouches, at ease in his defeat, and reflected at length on this auspicious new direction his life was taking.

Auspicious, because this was in fact his second involvement in the story of a brown bovine, and so far it was proving infinitely more enjoyable than the first. Indeed, for a lad brought up on omens and signals, it offered to further expunge the painful bonds of obligation that had caused him so much trouble in his previous life; ties he'd never had the chance to consent to, which by rights could not therefore bind him, yet whose imprint of grief dug heavy in him still.

They'd ask questions, for sure. But this time he was brawling for the sheer sensual thrill of it: not to win or make some stupid point, but to engage, to experience, to learn; to *live*. On top of that, this particular bovine's innards had proved a better match for him than any army he'd ever levelled for the sake of others' vainglorious claims to land or cattle.

For the first time he was imagining a life in front of him. A future of his own. It was exhilarating. And so what if people found it strange? It was better than slaying random strangers – slaying your own friends and family! – under the shame-tripping pressure of abusive excuses for honour.

He couldn't stay, not yet. There must be so many more *internal affairs* to throw himself into in the worlds beyond. But if he ever got tired, or disillusioned, he wondered if his latest acquaintance might have mercenary work for a fellow of his discretion.

Connacht or the Red Branch? The Loyalist paramilitaries or the IRA? Gods, how could he ever have attached importance to such distinctions? Considered them real, even?

Well he was done chasing shadows. This, here, was what mattered. Here was the real cattle raid, the only type he'd participate in from this day on.

You don't raid cattle, he'd realised. In the real worlds, the cattle raids you.



“Nrrrrrrrrrrrr.”

Mikoro purred – loud, much louder than usual – as Urbosa's fingers rolled like a heavy lumpy molguuga (as she thought of it) up her spine. Their tiny bursts of static only heightened the sense of the tension in her muscles cracking to vapour.

“Nnhhh! That feels soooo good! Nyaah, what an amazing massage!”

A warm smile on the Gerudo chieftain's part as she withdrew her hand from beneath Mikoro's shirt, pulled her coat back in place, than cradled her fluffy head on her lap.

“Are you surprised, my dear cat? Every Gerudo warrior trains to support her sisters on and off the battlefield. As well as relieving stress, skills like these help us build familiarity with one another’s bodies, each of which acts and reacts in its own ways. The better we know those reactions, the more naturally our movements flow in concert even in the most uncontrollable of battles.”

“Ooh,” said Mikoro. “I like building familiarity with my friends’ bodies! We do that a lot at the Academy! I bet that means if we ever need to fight together to defend it from naughty monsters then we’ll have a big advantage!”

Urbosa laughed and stroked her hair. “I’m sure you will, my friend. I’m sure you will.”

Mikoro relaxed, scampering through memories of her adventure alongside the Gerudo Tempest. Her very first island expedition, that was. Her initiation as Captain Mikoro.

The scents and sensations had been so sharp, and now they flooded her nostrils like they’d never left. The salt, the sweat, the desert fragrance. The gabbling monsters, the cannon-fire, the thunder and lightning, the dark and scary cave. Goodness what a sleeve-flapping muddles she’d been!

Was it really so long ago? Was Urbosa smiling at how far she’d come, or how she was still the same good old fluffy Mikoro?

The chieftain brought her huge red ponytail around. Mikoro caught it; fondled it as she reminisced. Stuck her arm in up to the elbow.

“Nyah. Where’s that troubled prince? Is he okay?”

Urbosa raised her gaze. Mikoro followed it out to the meadow, where it took her a while to realise the young man sitting on a mushroom-chair surrounded by lumas was Dimitri. In the course of his travels in the chieftain’s care he’d obtained a haircut, a shave, and a thorough clean and patch-up for his outfit. Though still recognisable by his cloak and eyepatch, he was a far cry from the haggard wreck of a man they’d encountered on the other side of this sea.

Indeed, he appeared to be telling the lumas a story. His solid posture and the engaged weight of his expression held them rapt, and between that newfound spark in his eye and the neat streaks of blond and white in his hair that put Mikoro something in mind of a badger, it was as though he’d found twenty or thirty years he’d dropped in a ditch somewhere and stuck them back on his future.

“The Sheep Pub did him a world of good,” said Urbosa. “I almost couldn’t believe how courteous he was once the honourable young prince in his heart started to find its way through his layers of strife. Look – you see there? It turns out he’s great with children. You should have seen them in the pub lounge.”

“Wah. The lumas really like him, don’t they? What is he going to do from here, Chief Urbosa?”

“He’ll be journeying on to new lands. Kinder ones, we may hope. A fresh start. I’m sure Lady Rosalina will help him choose a promising direction.”

“And, um...what about you? Will you be going home to Gerudo-land? Or...will you come and visit me and Kiyoko and our mother and all our friends at the Chaldea Academy?”

“Hmph. It’s funny, you know. I’d meant to head back straight away. But having spent some time sailing about with that young man, just exploring and taking things as they came instead of chasing Ganon about, I’m tempted to stay a while longer. It makes a change, spending time among people who don’t know who you are.”

“Ooh. But...aren’t you a big important chief? Will your people be okay?”

“Don’t worry, I made sure to leave them in good hands. I’ll find my way back when I’m ready. After that I’ll certainly take you up on your invitation, my gallant friend. You should visit us in our desert too. The sand does have a tendency to get everywhere, but we’ll kit you out in something to handle that. Something even cuter than your lovely coat. How would you like that?”

“Yaaay!”

“Hmm, yes. You’ll enjoy our cuisine I think. And my people are always curious about exotic visitors. And then...hmm.”

She contemplated.

“Ooh. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking of what people here have told me about you, sweet cat. You’ve certainly proven yourself a capable captain, haven’t you? How would you like a go at piloting Vah Naboris?”

At this a cry of muffled alarm issued forth from somewhere beneath Mikoro’s left ear. She lifted her head just in time to watch Dari wrestle her way from the bronze valley of Urbosa’s lap, all reddened and sweating but so possessed with agitation as to forget everything else while she yelled:

“Oh my god Urbosa, don’t even mention it! What the heck are you thinking? Have you completely lost your – *mmmffff!*”

A tectonic thigh-shift – convergent, if you wish to be technical about it; that is to say, one on top of the other – and Dari was safely returned to her own massage under the pacifying pressures of the great Gerudo subduction zone.



As the day wore on, those who had come to Comet Island completed their business and went back to sea. By evening departures were outpacing arrivals, by sunset the crowds were noticeably thinning, and by the time the stars came out only a handful of stragglers still milled about. Within an hour these too had taken to their ships, or else retired for the night to the cabins on the outer ring.

The spire stood as a colourful landmark during the day, but it was at night that its melodious beauty came into its own. Yet on this night of all nights, under the tapestry of stars and the glowing, zooming kaleidoscope of lumas, its lustre was further enhanced by a set of turquoise spotlights.

These were very special. They didn't switch them on for just anything.

Their beams fell soft on the dome-shaped structures, and on the central platform, where beneath the Beacon's cool blaze a ring of thirteen of them shrouded the heart of Comet Island in blue-green tranquility. Within this soothing circle tables had been brought out, and their lavender tablecloths set with light refreshments: teas, coffees and juices, along with biscuits and cupcakes sprinkled with Star Bits.

Mikoro was growing tired now. She'd had a long and busy afternoon of peopling. But the suggestive lights, against the twinkle of star-chirps and sighs of the surrounding sea, stirred in her heart one final spark of anticipation.

"Not long to go now I should think," said Dari, perched on her hat as she'd been for so much of their journey (or at least, those parts when she wasn't otherwise committed).

"Whsss gmna hnppnn?" asked Mikoro through a mouthful of cupcake.

"I'm not exactly sure," Dari answered. "But...I think we both know where it's leading."

She didn't wince as Mikoro's gulp jolted her head. The cat-girl's motions were second nature to her by now.

"Yup," said Mikoro. "I think so."

"Are you ready?" asked Dari.

"I, um...I dunno. I mean, in one way, yeah, of course I am. I've missed everyone so much - Mama, Kiyoko, Sayuri and the others - and it'd be naughty of me to keep them waiting longer. I bet they've been so worried."

"But...?"

"But...nyaah, Dari!"

She snatched the tiny explorer from her hat – she did wince this time, but only slightly – and brought her in front of her eyes.

They were moist

“I want to go home, yeah, but I also don’t want to! Because – nyah, because I’ve loved travelling together like this so much. I’ve never had an adventure as wonderful as this, and it’s all because of you. I know it’s silly, but...even though I’m ready for a rest, I also want it to go on and on and on!”

A huge kiss, and a snuggle into her cheek.

“Heh,” Dari sighed happily as she spread her arms. “In a sense it will, you know Mikoro? I mean, we’ve grown so close during our trip, and we’ll only get closer as we spend more time together, no? There’ll be more adventures, I promise you. And as you said, we can bring Mother and Kiyoko next time so you don’t have to miss each other. I’m sure Sayuri would like to come too. Heck, we can bring all your Academy friends if you like. Maybe some of mine might be up for something like that. I’m sure Cy would.”

A long, noiseless cuddle followed. Somewhere in the background a white horse who might not have been a horse tilted his head at them as he mooched past, but perhaps sensing that this was an unbreakable communion from any angle, he ambled on in pursuit of biscuits.

Drawn off Mikoro’s cheek at length, Dari yawned.

“You know Mikoro...there’s something else I haven’t told you. About our trip. I was talking with Rosalina earlier, and I think I ought to – ”

“Nah. It’s okay,” said Mikoro. “I know she brought me here on purpose.”

Dari’s mouth stayed open, though not for long. She nodded.

“I could have guessed. How did you work it out?”

“Well, I’ve kinda wondered about it all along. The cake; the islands we went to; the way it all kinda...pulled together; and then when the bunny-boat turned into Leppi and we met Rosalina, it all just felt too neat to be an accident. And *then*, when the Moo-Moo Queen said she thought I’d come to sort out the gribbles on her sea, because I was *juuuust* the right person to do it...”

The corners of their eyes found the Cow Queen. She was lingering by the Beacon, caressing a luma in her hand. She appeared to be in close conversation with Rosalina.

For each her own reasons those two couldn’t really be in the vicinity without you being conscious of them.

“Uhh, gribbilies?” said Dari. “Mikoro, the storm and the islands weren’t part of the plan. That just...happened, for some reason, and Rosalina swore she didn’t know why.”

“Um! That...are you sure?”

“Well, we have our suspicions, but...yeah. Once we were out there she had a little idea what would happen as we did.”

“Gwah.”

The clever cat-girl thought she had worked it out. But now it’d got all tangled up again, and no matter how hard she screwed up her nose she couldn’t think it loose.

“Um, well...that’s still okay, right? Or, actually, it’s even better! Because that means our trip really was *our* trip! Me and Dari, just the two of us, crossing the sea in our faithful bunny-boat!”

As they rubbed lips again, a high-pitched voice (clear and precise for a luma – probably Polari) echoed out of a loudspeaker: “Excuse me! Your attention please! Could any visitors not travelling on with us tonight please step off the central platform within the next five minutes. I repeat, if you are not travelling on, please step off the central platform! Thank you!”

“Ooh. I think something’s happening,” said Mikoro, as voices broke off and footsteps trailed into the woods of the outer ring.

The turquoise lights grew bright.

They waited.

And then, it was playing again – the uplifting waltz they’d heard when they first arrived.

Rosalina cleared her throat. At once all those who remained paused their conversations and swivelled to face her.

“Good evening, beloved wayfarers. It pleases me so much to welcome those who would cross the starry skies.”

She stood at the rear of the platform, the Beacon blazing behind her. But her voice projected across the space with no need for a microphone, still clear, still gentle, and her face and turquoise gown stood out as bright as the star at her back.

“Tonight, each of you has chosen to follow your way wherever it might take you. But whether you are returning home, travelling in search of learning or opportunity, or seeking restoration for wounded bodies or hearts, I bless you, precious children of the stars. It is my honour to travel together with you as you set off on the next stage of your journeys.”

The central building began to rattle. Not violently like an earthquake, but so mild that Mikoro felt it only as a tingle under her feet. At the same time a low clanking was heard from the base of the spire, and a few moments later, the muted roar of flames. An ignition.

“The domes will become active in about half an hour,” Rosalina finished. “In the meantime, please talk, rest, refresh yourselves, and enjoy the view of the long paths you have travelled to get here.”

The tremors strengthened, though never so much as to trouble anyone’s balance. And now the roars erupted, echoed within the metallic depths of the spire; a roll which travelled downwards, spread beneath the floor, and in that moment...

“Waaaaaaah! Look, Dari! Look, look!”

...everyone hurried to the guardrails and gazed down as the centre of Comet Island, or as we should properly call it now, the Comet Observatory, rose away from the sea.

Dari reached out and squeezed Mikoro’s cheek.

“I see it Mikoro. It’s beautiful.”

They were climbing fast; and as the stars fell around them, the glittering sea spread wide like the floor of the universe. The starship veered, and now they could see the green ring of the island in which it had nested, a hole swept with waves like the navel of the sea. From there the waters spread, broader and brighter in all directions the higher and higher they rose, and Mikoro and Dari saw how its true extent was vaster – far, far vaster – than they’d ever imagined within the small sample of flavour they’d tasted on this one little outing across the realities. They saw islands, innumerable islands, but also buildings, waterfalls, monuments, whirlpools, sea monsters, strange shifting forms, the blinking lights of ships and lighthouses and so many other things besides. At first the most prominent of these landmarks by far was – well, she left no-one in any doubt: “Ohoho! Look there everyone, yes, yes! Isn’t that the most awe-inspiring fortress you’ve ever set eyes on? It’s mine, it’s mine! That’s the Demon Cow Queen’s fortress, right there! Nuuuuuu!” And as they ascended further, Mikoro picked out the red and blue torchlight of the Temple of Balance, the cosy glow of the Sheep Pub, and even a faint crimson haze which she thought might be coming off her friend Ammi, perhaps settling down for a night of *Mario Kart* in her cave (she’d have to add her to her Friend List, she remembered). But soon they’d soared so high that the lights of individual islands melded into a universal network, and the Sea of Ways became

as just one boundless plain of interconnected meaning, each light unique in its quality, shape and colour yet infusing its glow in the others around it; a perfect mirror for the sea of stars which now descended to meet it side by side.



And now the Comet Observatory cruised, midway between these reality-filaments, as the wayfarers came together one last time.

“The domes are active now,” said Rosalina. “Each holds a transporter that will allow you to reach any of the realities its dome is currently set to observe.”

Mikoro glanced about. There must have been some dozen domes in total, each marked out by a turquoise spotlight.

“So.” Almost a whisper now. “Are we all ready to go?”

“Ah, if I might just have five more minutes to use the lavatory...” – that was Woland, but Rosalina cut him off with a cautionary shake of her wand.

“Shhh, you. I asked you not to make trouble.”

The blameless professor raised his open hands and backed away unthreateningly.

Rosalina kept her wand fixed on him, as though considering whether to ask why someone with perfectly good cosmic locomotion of his own was even here. But she knew he’d only get started about some of the other travellers if she did, so she let the matter drop.

Mikoro mumbled: “Wah. All our friends are about to go their separate ways. I’m gonna miss them. Do you think we’ll ever see them again?”

And Rosalina went on, as though she’d heard her: “A parting of ways weighs heavy on the heart. But my dear friends, there is no need for sorrow. See...there is a force that binds us. Listen – do you hear it, tinkling as it streams through the stars? It prevails through all of time and space. It is stronger even than the laws of the universe. It is what brought your realities together, and no matter how far you sail, you can be sure its gentle pull will do so again.”

Mikoro’s chin felt the scratch of tiny fingers. She purred.

She wiped her eyes with a sleeve.

Rosalina turned and raised her wand.

“So...”

Her little black luma advisor twirled up beneath the rim of the spire, then came back, followed by the descent of a large translucent panel. In the light of the Beacon behind it stars appeared, too dense and plentiful to process.

“Ooh,” said Mikoro. “A chart? Nyah, it’s...kind of hard to look at.”

Faint lines spread out across its circle. They appeared to demark twelve regions.

“It is arbitrary to sort the realities into sets,” said Rosalina. “But for ease of navigation, I have arranged them for tonight into twelve seas.”

“Nngh. Don’t stare too hard, Mikoro,” said Dari. “It’ll do your head in.”

“Now,” said the celestial mother. “Let us embark.”

Polari swept off somewhere again and returned with a list of names.

“Dimitri Alexandre Blaiddyd,” Rosalina pronounced.

The cloaked and eyepatched former prince of Faerghus stepped forward. “My lady.”

“Your way leads to the Sea of the Boar, where you seek solace for the ghosts who travel with you and an honourable path far from the strife of your homeland. Please travel from the garden dome. May your story inspire us to plough steadfast through storms of hatred and rage, that we might bring a healing touch to the terrible wounds that drive them. May it turn us from lazy assurances that such violence is in our nature; bring us instead to the diligence to root out the pain from which it truly springs.”

She raised her wand high, a display of respect. Then all the dome lights temporarily switched off except for one right up near the top of the spire: the garden dome was a spherical bulge in the structure itself.

Sluggish, weary, but with a re-ignited and stubborn sense of purpose, the blond figure trod up the transparent walkway. He paused halfway, then turned and raised his hand in a wave, brisk but solid, to the onlookers. Then he went from their sight as the curving walkway took him behind the cone. The clank of his footsteps faded. Moments later, a rich flash of azure light streaked from the dome in the spire to the stars beyond.

The turquoise spotlights returned.

“Sétanta,” spoke Rosalina.

The tiniest of those present darted out before her. From certain quarters Mikoro’s ears perceived the fat slosh of a tongue.

“Your way leads to the Sea of the Dog, where, having renounced old loyalties that made you an instrument in hurtful ways, you would now roam free and nurture a life on your own terms. Please travel from the gateway dome. May your story rouse in us the courage to choose our own loyalties, the nose for which fords

to cross and which to turn from, and the agency to write our own stories in our own most meaningful of ways.”

This time the light remained on a dome with a blue-tiled roof, high on a floating platform. The tiny independent adventurer stood nonplussed, apparently at a loss for how to reach it. Then he appeared to work out that the fluorescent arc of light that linked it to one of the balconies looked promising, and so sped off up the same walkway Dimitri had left by. He too waved from approximately the same spot, though the watchers only just made it out at his size.

His hunch was right: the arc connected a pair of teleportation pads, and once he'd made it through the gate, a bright red spark shot off to the starry expanse.

“The Rooster of Truth,” Rosalina called next.

“TOR-CHIC! TOR-CHIC!”

A ring of smiles surrounded the little orange bird as it scurried before the celestial mother. It ruffled its wings in hopping excitement as she pronounced:

“Your way leads to the Sea of the Rooster, where many worlds will benefit as you shine the light of a second sun upon their problems. Please travel from the music room dome. May your story bring us to observe, in honesty and alacrity, the faces behind the masks and the hands that manipulate the gas lights. May your warmth steady us in integrity as we heed your forthright cry to communicate what we feel, not what we ought to say.”

A polished wooden dome with silvery musical notes round its arch lit up on the lounge, close to the library. It was only a few steps away, but the ardent Torchic couldn't resist expressing its wings to soar round the spire in a spiral of brilliant flames, before screeching to a stop by the yuccas, flapping up to nibble their leaves out of sheer curiosity, then dashing into the dome and soaring off to new adventures in a dart of orange light.

Now Rosalina announced: “A humble citizen from the Monkey Kingdom of the Water Curtain Cave on the Island of Flowers and Fruit, who has requested anonymity for political reasons.”

“Hooray!” roared the Demon Cow Queen, and she clapped her hands mightily as a simian figure in a trench coat and face-obscuring sombrero shuffled forward.

“Your way leads to the Sea of the Monkey for...a short vacation. Please travel from the archive dome. May your story raise in us the intelligence to come to terms with the complex legacies we inherit, the wit to steer divided families together in common wellbeing, and the mischief to devise brilliant schemes for the betterment of...”

She trailed off as she saw that the figure was jumping and flapping their arms in agitation.

“...ahem. Please have an excellent holiday.”

The individual bent their head, pulled the rim of their sombrero low and skipped off round the back of the library, ducking down some steps to enter a dome of many colours set beneath its base. From below, a little brown comet made off extremely discreetly.

On preparing to speak the next name Rosalina hesitated, then beckoned Polari to her and spent a good couple of minutes squinting and conferring. Then she read out, with a certain tentativeness: “Mary.”

The girl from the Sheep Pub gave the sweetest of cheers and skidded forth, dragging a wheelie-suitcase with a giant adorable sheep-face sticker. A tiny black bowler hat sat askew on her yellow curls.

“Your way leads to the Sea of the Sheep for an actual – I mean, for a holiday as well. A well-earned rest for one who works so tirelessly to nourish the rests of others. Please travel from the fountain dome. May your story light our darkest nights in the charms of hospitality, bring us safe together to clink glasses in good cheer in a place where all are equal, and deliver us all to the relaxations we need and deserve.”

Mary offered a cute wave to each of the remaining travellers, one by one, before wheeling her luggage round to the back, where a short-range teleportation pad whisked her up to that pretty dome of tiles on the floating fountain. Soon a yellow light, pale but somehow reassuring, sprang off to the stars.

Rosalina now uttered a peculiar whinny. It turned out to be the name of the Mare from Horseham, whose vacant gaze lit up in deep-seated disbelief at Rosalina’s perfect pronunciation.

Still reeling from her narrative catastrophe, the once-proud Houyhnhnm staggered before her host. She was gaunt, unstable on her hooves, her face a portrait of that hollow desolation that is all that remains after the roof of your story falls in on you. But she had teetered back from the brink under the tender care of the Cow Queen’s therapists (whose work naturally took critical account of the social drivers of mental health problems and centred the voices and experiences of their clients), and now as Rosalina’s wand smoothed the wires of her mane, a faint glint returned to her eyes – if not of hope, then at least, of a potential acknowledgement of possibility.

“Your way leads to the Sea of the Horse,” said Rosalina. “A place far away, where the frameworks that shaped your life have no meaning, and thus where their

wreckage shall no longer trap you. Please travel from the terrace dome. May your story teach us the preciousness of truth, and the perils of seeking independence from it; but also alert us to its changes and ambiguities, humble us with its gallop beyond the limits of sense and speech, and show us the value of a nimble mind in the constant, active questioning of how things seem.”

As the Mare trudged to the grassy dome, Mikoro whispered: “Um, where’s the other one? The riddle-horse isn’t going with her?”

“He’s staying behind,” Dari’s voice rustled in her ear. “He said his paradoxes have most to offer on the sea where we met him, because it’s closest to...you know. At least, that’s what I think he said. It’s hard to know anything for sure with that one.”

A grey bolt of light rose from the terrace and corkscrewed away.

And now Professor Woland hobbled to the centre, exaggerating his limp a little Mikoro thought, with his arm raised as if to signal to Rosalina that his name was unnecessary.

“So,” she said. “You. I have no idea where your way leads, but since the Great Balance Serpent has vouched for you, you may use the greenhouse dome to travel to the Sea of the Snake. I don’t need to know what you’re up to there.”

The good professor put on an affected sulk and nervously whipped a comb through his hair. “Dear lord, why so surly?” he complained. “Isn’t this one of those nights when accounts are settled?”

“Off with you,” said Rosalina. “And keep your hands where I can see them.”

The poor fellow shook his persecuted head and raised his arms as though she were pointing a revolver at him. He maintained that posture as he slouched a browbeaten trail to the back of the meadow. They could still see him through the glass walls of the greenhouse as he stopped inside, sneaking a hand towards the celestial mother’s precious azaleas. But a luma popped out and bumped him on the elbow, then together with an accomplice, hassled him over to the teleporter. Only after his colourless bundle of light had danced off to the stars did Rosalina sigh and admit:

“Well, I cannot fault the scoundrel’s good works. If we handle his story with care, it offers much to make us thoughtful about the binary divisions into which we tend to simplify the cosmic multitude. May we come away with the dedication to probe the more nuanced currents beneath those waves, the wisdom to travel them in balance, and the humility to face the dangers not merely in the extremes we confront, but also the opposite extremes that stare us back in the mirrors.”

At this point came a pause in the proceedings. Were they waiting for something?

There weren't many of them left, Mikoro realised. Although, the mass projected by those who remained – even the little ones – still made the platform feel somewhat crowded.

At last a pair of lumas drifted in, carrying a treasure chest between them. They set it down in the centre, unfastened the locks, and swung open the lid to reveal a pair of sky-blue dragon scales. The letters they carried gleamed in the turquoise light.

Think Globally.

Every Voice Matters.

“Once upon a time,” Rosalina narrated, “a brave young man had a vision. Taking in his hands the leading technologies of his day, he glimpsed in them the power to build a bridge to the stars, and so bring the worlds together in a heroic struggle against oppression. Undaunted by the scale of this ambition, he found in himself the confidence and strength of leadership to turn it into reality. Alas, in his moment of triumph, tragedy struck. The dazzle of silver lodged in his eye, sending cracks through his vision. They spread, till all that was left was a twisted reflection: an upside-down world where to behave in selfish regard was called heroic, and to stand heroic against oppression was to be shamed and cast down as the oppressors themselves once were. He had turned his reality inside out. It could not hold. And so it caved, taking its creator with it.”

“Nrrm, I knew we couldn't trust him,” came a grumble from somewhere. “I did say.”

“And yet,” Rosalina went on, “as our...good friend just now was so keen to point out, this is a night when accounts are settled. My sweet children, please take the world-builder's remains to the playroom dome and send them forth to the Sea of the Dragon. Let them there have the chance to journey in penance, reflection, and just perhaps, in restoration: a new chance, this time to bridge the worlds responsibly.”

The lumas flipped the chest shut and bore it away to the dome where Mikoro had woken up that morning. Not long after, a faint sky-blue snow cloud drifted off to the worlds beyond.

“And now,” said Rosalina, “my dear beloved child. Leppi.”

“Yaaay!” cheered the rainbow-coloured luma, spinning in with delight.

“Your maiden voyage as the *Sea Bunny* was a great success, was it not? Even as you were blown on an unexpected detour, you made of it an opportunity to fill your databanks with the deepest and richest stories you could find.”

“I did, I did! It was so much fun!” trilled Leppi. “And they’re all uploaded to the archive now! But Mama, it wasn’t just me! I could never have done it without all my friends here!”

“So. Are you ready for more? To carry new friends, enrich your memory with new stories, and enrich those stories in turn with the compassion and tenderness of the stars?”

“Yes, Mama, I’m ready! I’m ready!”

“Good. Listen close then. There is a lonely child in the Sea of the Rabbit who desperately longs to experience the worlds beyond. Will you travel to them through the bedroom dome, offer them your friendship, and bring them here to me? The way is far, but the waters you must cross teem with incredible stories, and now that I know you can handle it I am sure you will share many wonderful adventures.”

“Wah,” Mikoro marvelled. “Leppi has energy. Off on a new adventure already? Um, are you sure you don’t need a rest first Leppi? We only got here last night!”

“Well Leppi is a star, Mikoro,” said Dari.

And now Leppi wheeled past them all – the Cow Queen, the Beast of Reckoning, and of course Mikoro and Dari, showering rainbow stardust on each of them in turn.

“I’m off now!” the luma cried. “But just because I’m on my way to make new friends, don’t think I’ll ever forget you! Stars and bunnies both have amazing memories, did you know? I promise you’ll always be my friends, and you’re always welcome to come for another ride in the *Sea Bunny*!”

“Hoho!” guffawed Her Bovine Majesty. “And the *Sea Bunny*’s always welcome to come for more rides on the Demon Cow Queen, yes!”

Mikoro thought she should say something too, but her days of sailing were cascading all at once before her eyes now, as was the salty sea, and she found herself too choked up to get her feelings into words. So instead she pulled off her tricorne hat and waved it in the air as Leppi whooshed round the corner into Rosalina’s bedroom...

...and re-emerged as the *Sea Bunny*.

“Waaah...”

“Shhh,” whispered Dari, rubbing Mikoro’s cheek. “It’s okay, Mikoro. It’s okay. Didn’t you hear? This ship’s never going to forget its first captain. Heh, it’s first crew, even. I’m sure all you’ll have to do is call...”

But that only yanked open Mikoro’s floodgates, and the fluffy captain squeezed her hat and swung it in the air with uncontrollable sobs as the *Sea Bunny* took its leave: ears beeping, nose twitching, and lavender sail with a turquoise shooting star fluttering free in the stellar wind.

A shadow and a blast of warmth – and there was the Cow Queen, coming down on one knee to clasp strong fingers round Mikoro’s back. The cat-girl flung her arms round that pillar of a leg and cried, while a startled “Mmfff!” from somewhere behind it suggested she’d forgotten Dari was still in her hand.

“Now,” said Rosalina. “The Beast of Reckoning.”

The furry tiger cub bounded across and leapt at Rosalina, hooking its paws across her shoulders as it licked her cheek with a tiny tongue.

“Oh, my sweet one,” she sighed, returning its embrace. “Yours is a way as old as the stars, for so long as their power spreads uneven, so in accordance must those with more share with those with less. Have you recovered from your wounds, you beautiful creature? Or would you recuperate first in the lush nurseries of the Sea of the Tiger?”

“Rrrr.”

“I see. Then please, let us speed your passage – the engine room dome will see you swift on your way. Let your plush fur connect all who touch it to the cuddly love that infuses the realities with meaning. Let your roar in the night warn all who would do them harm, all who would raise their power over love, over truth, over the things that matter, that their actions contravene the realities and they war against the stars at their own peril.”

The Beast of Reckoning rubbed its ear on Rosalina’s shoulder. Then it scampered back to the others for further adoring licks to Mikoro’s and the Cow Queen’s faces, and in Dari’s case, her everything. And then...

...it grew, and its fur lengthened, and its muscles stiffened, and its stripes grew dark as interstellar space and its coat flared hot as a supernova; and for just that instant, just long enough, it announced its nature as a cosmic phenomenon whose wild dimensions equalled those of the universe; and as a tiger which, in this case, very much does pronounce its tigritude, it roared, long and deep, a shockwave of accountability which resonated through all living matter to embolden the

frightened, comfort the vulnerable, and horrify the abusive with the promise of reckonings to come.

Then once more it was a gorgeous little tiger cub, and it threw its paws out, took to the air and flew up to the spire's lower balcony, rolling at last into a metallic dome round the back. A burst of flame – and out blistered a comet, black as the ceiling of the sky and the floor of the sea as it blasted a brilliant trail into the night.

Suddenly the Comet Observatory felt a lot quieter.

“Nrrrm,” snorted the Cow Queen. “Looks like we’re the only ones left.”

“Please,” said Rosalina, beckoning the last of the wayfarers over.

The fluffy captain, the tiny explorer, and the sovereign of land, sea and sky crossed the platform to join her.

“Your journeys have bound you so close,” said the celestial mother. “If you need some time...”

The Cow Queen adjusted her cowbell. Unusually, she was acting awkward.

“Hrr. I should probably get going,” she said.

Mikoro jumped at the chance to ask what she’d been wondering all along.

“Um, are you travelling somewhere too?” she put to the great sovereign. “I thought you’d be going back to the fortress to, um...to queen some more. But you came up here, with us...”

The Cow Queen glanced sideways at Rosalina, who answered for her: “Our friend here has decided that, since she came all this way, she would use the Observatory to make a state visit to a realm she has had her eye on. I understand she has a potential alliance in mind.”

“Nrrrm, that’s right, that’s right,” grumbled the Cow Queen. “Jade Mother, the arrangements – are you sure...”

“It is as we discussed,” said Rosalina. “Everything is in order.”

The Cow Queen scratched her horn – and suddenly she was laughing out loud with hands on belly.

“Ohoho, that’s excellent then! Well then, my clever little friends, I suppose I should allow you to take your leave of your Queen, hrrrm? Come here!”

“Waaaah!” Mikoro squealed in delight as the huge monarch scooped her up in her arms and compressed her into her chest. The cat-girl threw her arms up before rolling and nuzzling like a genuine cat on that squashy wonderland, to the effect that Dari found herself raised right into the presence of the royal lips.

She whimpered as a gush of hot breath moistened her skin. It only grew redder as that beast of a tongue lurched from its lair and sloshed a dripping circuit of the sovereign maw.

“You. Little mouse. You remember where you belong, nrrrrrm? Though duties of state call to me now, you should expect that my boundless seas will carry you back to your Queen’s harbour, that you may squirm safe in the sovereign body for many ages to come. Nuuuuuuu!”

And faster than she could comprehend, Dari found herself thumbed into the Cow Queen’s hand and – alarmingly – thrust into her nipple for a farewell rub-around. Naturally the more she squirmed, the faster and deeper she found herself applied...

“Nnnnffff! Mmmkrr-rrw! Hnnpff!”

...but her devoted captain, just this once, was too busily enraptured on the neighbouring planet to hear her appeals.

Eventually – extremely eventually in Dari-time – the pair were released and reunited, and the Cow Queen straightened her sash, shook out her gold necklaces, and once more stood serious as a statue.

The celestial mother consulted the chart. “You head for the Sea of the Cow,” she spoke, “most of which, of course, is your domain. Be that as it may, I am pleased to grant you use of the kitchen dome to spare you a lengthy sea journey.”

“Thank you, Jade Mother,” rumbled the Cow Queen. “And...nrrrrrm. Thank you again for all you have done. Both for my reign as a sovereign, and my life as a daughter.”

With remarkable grace for such an enormous creature, she lifted Rosalina’s hand in hers and kissed it.

“You owe me no gratitude, young guardian,” said Rosalina, stroking her great fingers. “I have believed in you from the very beginning, just as I believed in your father. You will always be dear to me, and the stars ever support you with the burden you carry. In the meantime, please maintain the fairness and sincerity of your rule. Hold wide your embrace of diversity and dissent, and continue to temper your strength with wise counsel, transparent procedures and a lively civic environment. Keep doing this, and you will be a blessing to all who cross the Sea of Ways and an example to rulers and sovereigns across the universe.”

“You honour me, Jade Mother,” said the Cow Queen, who a person with more guts than your narrator might observe to be almost in tears herself at this point. “I will earn it, I promise,” she snuffled. “I shall protect everyone who needs my aid.

I shall leave no-one behind. I shall light their way to the worlds beyond, I shall encompass them all within me, and I shall hold the threshold for as long as it takes to carry out that for which I was called to the horned throne. On the bones of my stubborn old bull, I swear it.”

“Good. Then just as you care for them, I will be there to care for you. If the nightmares return, you need only look to the starry skies to know that all you see there stands real at your side.”

And now the travelling monarch stomped around, raising her gaze up the prestigious tower of wooden cupboards and utensil racks. The red-brick kitchen dome sat at the top, its chimney puffing steam.

“Nrrrm. Well then. I’d better go.”

“Wait!” Mikoro called to her back.

“Hrrrn. Yes, little Mikoro?” Her voice had gone strangely aloof.

“You’ve gotta come to the Chaldea Academy some time, okay? You have to!”

“Hrrrrrm. Telling the Queen what to do now, are you?”

“If you do then I’ll get Mother to throw a great big beef bowl party for you and all my friends!”

“Nrrm. Hrrrr-hr-hrrm! Ohoho, you mischievous cat! Are you not aware of the sheer load of sovereign responsibilities I carry? Nrrm, I’ll consider it, I’ll consider it...”

She lumbered up the walkway, lumas swooping to nuzzle at her all the way. Reaching the stack, she stepped aboard a green elevator platform that looked ready to snap off any minute under her bulk; and yet it held, and she rode it up to the dome.

“We’ll visit you too if you like!” shouted Mikoro. “I know Dari will! Ooh, I know – I’ll post her to you! She fancies you very very much you know!”

A scream of a squeal from her hat: “Nnnnaaaahh! Mikoro!”

“Well you did just roll around on her boob?”

“Aah-ga-ga-gahh...”

The Cow Queen waved with the back of her hand and disappeared into the dome. In the next moment a sizeable mass of burgundy heaved from its roof, rotated away, and steamrolled a path across the stars.

“Nyah,” said Mikoro. “Um...Dari?”

“Nhhhh...”

Mikoro brought her down and poked her.

“Don’t you think she was acting a little, um...suspicious?”

“Nnghh...suspicious...”

“Gwah. Never mind.”

“And now,” Rosalina brought them back, “Ibaraki Mikoro. Thank you so much for coming to visit me today. Your way leads...home. Home, to beloved Rin, and your sister Kiyoko, and all your friends who await you at the Chaldea Academy.”

And with all ceremoniousness long swept aside, Mikoro flung her arms round Rosalina and burrowed into her gown.

The celestial mother placed her hand round the back of her head. Stroked her hair.

“Nrrrrr. Miss Rosalina?” Mikoro mumbled.

“Yes, my sweet child?”

“Is the Snuggle Queen gonna be okay? She seemed a bit, um, depressed...”

“Be at ease, sweet Mikoro. I promise you, she has never been happier than I’ve seen her today. It seems a great weight has lifted off her shoulders. Hmm...I wonder. Perhaps it is because she has made precious new friends and is incredibly thankful for what they have taught her?”

“Um. I hope so. I know we had our ups and downs along the way, but...nyaah, it’s all been worth it to make wonderful friends like her!”

Another cuddle. As Rosalina’s hand stroked deep, it received a little lick of affection.

“Good,” said Rosalina. “In that case...”

“Um. But...can I ask you about something else, too? Before we go...”

Rosalina smiled. She must have sensed the longing in Mikoro’s voice, because she lay a gentle arm across the cat-girl’s shoulders, steered her gently to the lounge, then sat beside her on one of the plush circular benches.

“Go on, my sweet child.”

“It’s, um...”

Rosalina waited. She had all the time in the universe.

“What about you?” Mikoro came out with it. “I mean – you’re...a special kind of mother. I can tell. Special like my mother. It’s obvious you’ve looked after the Moo-Moo Queen so much, even though you’d never met, and she loves you just like Dari and I love Rin. Even though Her Cuddly Majesty’s so big and strong; I mean, especially because she’s big and strong, with so few others who can be big and strong for her when she needs it. It’s been the same with so many people we’ve met on our trip. People like Cyania with her dad; the two snakes with the Serpent of Balance; even the monkeys with their Great Sage; and with some of them, especially people like Ammi and Dimitri, it was so clear how much hurt it can

cause if we don't have anyone like that, or if we lose them, or worst of all if they do horrible things to us even though we trust them. So I guess what I was wondering was...what about you, Miss Rosalina? Do you have someone like that to care for you too?"

"Oh my dear. Come here."

And now they really embraced. Rosalina placed both arms round Mikoro and drew her in close, running her hands all the way down her river of hair.

"It's so kind of you to ask, you know that? And not only kind. It is such an important question, and if your journey here has only made you more sensitive to it, then that alone has surely made it worthwhile."

She stood.

"Come. Let me tell you a story."

And she took Mikoro by the hand and led her into the library. There she sat the cat-girl on the carpet, where she was quickly surrounded by lumas who always clustered around in high spirits when they sensed their mother was about to tell them a story. And then Rosalina sat on a rocking chair, opened a treasured brown picture-book with a yellow star on the cover, and related that famous legend that all who look to the stars know so well: about a young girl who went to space with a lost star-child in search of the little one's mother...

...and how they stayed on an icy comet for a while, where the girl dreamed of her own lost mother, and woke up in tears, distressed at the thought she'd never see her again...

...but of course, the tale is too beautiful to be told by anyone other than the girl concerned, so if you wish to hear it, you should seek her out too.

Maybe your parents know her? Your friends? Perhaps your gods?

If not you can always seek her out yourself. She'll find you.

Just as she found Mikoro, whose face was soon in her lap, with the greater part of her emotions soaked into the celestial mother's turquoise gown.

"So you see," she finished, closing the storybook. "The lumas are my family now, from the star-child who grew into the comet we ride to all these beloved ones around you. But Mikoro..."

"Nhhh...nyahwah..."

"Remember – your home is not only the place where you live, and the people closest to you. You and I, Dari, the Cow Queen, everyone you met on your journey; each of us is born of the stars. Just as I am mother to these little ones, the grown ones you see in the sky are parents to us all. We are one great family, all sisters and brothers and cousins whose matter left their embrace to journey across the

universe. We see them out there, watching over us, but like that, they are also in us. They *are* us. Do you understand what that means?”

“Nyahh...the s-stars...”

“Yes. It means the stars are always with us, no matter how far apart our journeys take us, and that anywhere you feel their light in your eyes or their warmth on your skin is also your home. No matter what troubles you face, even if all the realities you know are breaking down around you, remember that theirs is the grander embrace, and that you will always, always belong in it. That is the way of the stars: to welcome you home, care for you, and hold your story forever.”

In the course of the telling Mikoro’s hat had ended up on the carpet. She looked now, through tear-glazed eyes, and saw a little brown-and-green shape sitting upon its crown.

“Dari...” she mouthed, silently.

But Dari was gazing off into empty space, adrift in a galaxy of complicated feelings of her own.



“So...it’s time.”

“Nyah. Which sea is my world in, Miss Rosalina? Which dome will we take to get home? Ooh, I think I can guess! It’s the Sea of the Cat, right?”

“My sweet Mikoro. Of all people, you should know that the cat is too free-spirited to be bound to a single zone. It wanders wherever its curiosity takes it, finding loving friends in each house it enters. No, my beloved – it so happens that your world is also in the Sea of the Cow.”

“Um! It...is?”

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it?” said Dari. “That’s the sea we’ve been sailing all along, right?”

“It is,” said Rosalina. “So you, too, may travel home through the kitchen dome. It is where we baked the cake that brought you here.”

Dari grimaced. Still too soon?

“Ooh! That means...”

“Yes. Are you ready to come full circle?”

“Yes! I’m ready now. Nrrrrr, thank you so much for everything Miss Rosalina! I’ll be sure to tell everyone what a wonderful adventure we’ve had thanks to you and Leppi! Come on Dari, let’s go home!”

“Ah...about that,” said Rosalina. “There’s one more thing.”

The celestial mother’s fingers closed round Dari’s torso, and – so gently, but with the inevitability of the fundamental forces – lifted her from the hat.

“For now, Dari’s way leads...elsewhere.”

“Uhh...it does?” said Dari, to whom this was apparently news.

“Nyah? Nyahhh? B-But, but...Dari...”

“Shhh. Do not fear, my sweet Mikoro. You will see her again soon. But she must return by a different path.”

“Oh,” said Mikoro. “Um, um...well...”

And just as Mikoro had thought her heart had taken all it could from these partings, it shuddered as though a temporary ceiling had given way, releasing a hundred logs that had piled up on top in the course of her journey.

All their time together on the *Sea Bunny*. All their adventures, their funny and cuddly conversations, their squabbles, their snuggles, their struggles and magical meals and communions beneath the stars...

They’d grown so close. They felt like family. They were family.

But...

Dari didn’t live at the Chaldea Academy. At least, not in the way Mikoro did. Did she?

“I...understand,” said Dari.

And perhaps because she was too exhausted to cry by now, or perhaps because she really did understand, Mikoro said: “Nyah. I do too. We’ve each gotta be, um...true to our ways, isn’t that right?”

Dari nodded.

Rosalina returned her to Mikoro’s hand for the moment they needed.

They stood there. Gazed into each other’s eyes: the big amber eyes of the cat-girl, and the little hazel eyes of the mouse-like explorer.

Both open. Both so honest. Both full of love and understanding for what they saw in each other.

Each so like the other.

Two loving friends, on their way home.

They didn’t speak. They understood without words. The Chaldea Academy was a home to both of them; and yet, for Mikoro and Dari, *home* meant something so profoundly different. Mikoro had grown up between the Academy’s walls and knew it for the brightest, hottest star in her sky. But for Dari it was one of a constellation of homes – no less loving, no less treasured – but as meaningful for

the spaces between its stars as the stars themselves (as well as the warmth, if we say it quietly, of the places their light didn't reach).

Perhaps, if not for the journey to get here, Mikoro would have eaten her and taken her home, just like that. But that journey had bound their ways together, for a time. Maybe even made them a little more like each other. Just a little.

That was why it was alright. Even if each had her way to go back to, that, at least, would remain their shared reality. The path they'd made together. Their path across the sea.

They hugged. They hugged, so tight.

"The journey doesn't end here," the celestial mother's voice settled in, like a shroud to hold them closer still. "Captain Mikoro and First Mate Dari – you will carry your friendship with you, wherever you go."

Loving friendship.

They held. They didn't want to let go.

They didn't, even when they did.

Even as Mikoro rode the little green elevator platform up to the red-brick kitchen dome, and turned round to look at Rosalina below, and Dari standing cupped in her hands, and the faithful Polari hovering behind her.

She lifted her hat. Raised it high in the air. Waved it.

Dari waved back.

Then, a swish of her coat, and she was gone (but she wasn't) – and from the place where a cake of turquoise cliffs and creamy parapets, three storeys high, had once set forth to call her to the sea, there now soared a dazzling pink comet. So many were the filaments and streaks in its tail that, as it headbutted across the night skies and telescope lenses of innumerable worlds, anyone who spotted it would have sworn they'd never seen a comet so fluffy.



"This is where you eat me or something, isn't it," said Dari, in a wry attempt to ease the silence with humour.

"Oh? It is?" Rosalina stared down at her in surprise.

Dari blushed. Now that she'd said it, she realised how ridiculous it sounded.

Except – it wasn't, was it? She knew her *way* too well by now.

"Well...yeah. That's what you all do, isn't it? Even the big cosmic goddess-types don't seem able to resist it. I dunno why. I'm just..."

She sighed.

“Just what?” said Rosalina.

“Just...Dari, I guess.”

She lay in those comforting hands as Rosalina stepped back towards the lounge. It's okay, she told herself. What'll happen will happen, and whatever it is, things will turn out okay. And that's special, not everyone gets to live that way, so if I can use it to help make things okay for the people around me too, like Mikoro...

“Oh, Mikoro. I miss you already.”

She could feel the invisible poke. The lick. The tickle. The teasy giggle.

“My offer still stands, little Dari,” said Rosalina.

“Huh?”

“You didn't forget already, did you?”

“Oh! You mean – ”

“Yes. This is your chance. Soon you too must set off on your way, as I must on mine. But we've a few hours yet, if you wish to make use of it now?”

“Yeah,” said Dari, sitting up. “Yeah. I'd like that very much. Erm...thanks, Miss Rosalina.”

Rosalina returned to the library and set Dari down on her desk. Placed a stack of note-paper beside her along with some pens in various colours, all to her scale. Then a catalogue.

“It's all open to you, my sweet child. Let the lumas know whichever books or materials you'd like them to get down for you.”

And so...Dari the wandering historian got to work.

First, she spent a great deal of time convincing herself this priceless opportunity she'd been given was actually real. Eventually, having satisfied herself that it was, she began to scribble down an outline of her adventures on board the *Sea Bunny*, beginning – arbitrarily of course, as all beginnings are – with a certain demolition-by-cake. As she went, she built up a list of lacunae based on the parts she'd not really understood, or where her attention had lapsed, or where of course she'd been otherwise engaged. She then tore off that list and, holding it in her teeth, climbed atop the catalogue and worked along it on hands and knees, checking the giant labels for anything that might help her beef up her chronicle. As promised the lumas eagerly brought her everything she asked for, while at other times they floated about, browsing, snoozing, conspiring, or occasionally hovering up behind her shoulder for a sneaky preview. At one point Rosalina even

reappeared with a tiny tray bearing a Dari-sized mug of apricot tea and a saucer of Star Bits.

On she wrote, stopping at times to fall back on her hands, breathe deep, and cast her gaze round the shelves full of books, along the panelled walls, or at the shadows cast by the cosy flickers of the fireplace. Often her eyes returned to an old telescope, brown with thin gold bands, which leant against the wall beside its wooden tripod.

“This is *special*, Dari,” she kept telling herself. “How many people get the chance to work in a library like this?” And each time the thought filled her with energy and propelled her back to the page for a new burst of writing.

It was just as well. The going was tough. There was just so much to get through, a torrent of memories slowing at cataract after cataract as she steered her pen carefully around a thoughtful frown, a jerk of the heart, or more often than not, a prolonged bout of blushing that transmitted a relay of astral titters around the room. But she persisted, and in a few hours she’d filled a nice sheaf of pages with what she felt to be a satisfactory outline.

“Whew. That ought to do it for now. I’ll write it up properly once I get back to Chaldea, or Rida’s place, or...hmm, I wonder where’d be best for this, actually. This one’s going to take a little longer than usual.”

She folded them up and slipped them into the pocket of her skirt. Did up the zip; then the other one on top of it. Fluid-resistant. It’d served her well. She’d just have to remember to keep her finger on the gnashing-fury button in case she ran into anyone who looked remotely likely to digest her clothes before she could get these notes somewhere safe.

She stretched her arms and yawned. Leaned back. Flexed her fingers. When she opened her eyes, it was to find an upside-down Rosalina looming over her.

“It’s time, little Dari.”

“It’s time, it’s time,” Dari muttered foggily through her yawn. “Ah. Yeah. I guess I’m ready.”

She climbed into Rosalina’s cupped hand and rode with her back to the Beacon, where that mind-bending star chart still hung suspended in the air.

“Uhh, where exactly am I going then?” she asked.

“The Sea of the Mouse,” said Rosalina, placing her wand to the final section.

“Right. I should probably have guessed.”

Rosalina’s fingers curled round to stroke her.

“Your story is very dear to me, little Dari. You are like a tiny green comet, blinking from one nightscape to the next.”

“Uhh...I am?”

“And in each new sky, you tumble, innocent and timid, into the hands of those who need you most; who when they feel your sweet motions, surge with the desire to hold you within them just as we were all once held by the stars. Will you carry on this way, little Dari? A resourceful little wanderer who crosses the worlds, observes their stories with insight, then rustles them, not merely onto her pages, but into her very cells, so bringing the whole cosmic family back together?”

“I, err – I...suppose? Look, I’m just – ”

Rosalina shook her head. “Yes. You’re just Dari. Don’t you see? Yours is the way of the way itself.”

She was blushing again. Bashful in her bemusement.

“Well, err...that’s more than they usually give me,” she said with a shrug. “I am just Dari. I get that part. I don’t really know what else I can be so, yeah, I guess I can keep being me. I don’t know why they always swallow me or stick me in their places though. I’ve always presumed it’s just...”

“Oh, you silly thing. Well, if you insist...”

“Huh? Wha-”

Rosalina’s fingers pinched her round the waist and lifted her up, up, up...

“H-Hey! What are you doing?” She flailed her arms and legs as Rosalina parted her lips. “No, w-wait! It was just a joke! You c-can’t just...aahh, no! Let me go to my dome!”

“Sweet Dari,” she whispered. “Do you know the Sea of the Mouse?”

Dari’s squeaks belied the fact that she didn’t.

“Of all the regions of the universe,” said Rosalina, “...or perhaps, at this scale, you might think of it as the multiverse – it is the most sublime. Out there, on the remotest reaches of the sea of stars, dwell some of the most ancient and mysterious realities of all. It is too far out to calibrate the domes to it; not without an exceptionally long journey first. But it is there that your way leads now, and if you’ll trust me, I promise to get you there safe.”

“W-What, by eating me? But that’s – that doesn’t – I can’t believe...”

“Shhhhh. You’ll see.”

“Eeeep!”

And there, in that most extraordinary of places, Dari experienced, yet again, that which to her life was as ordinary as breakfast. The splat upon a tongue. The

brief sinking sensation, then the lifting, the curling, as she was suspended in a darkness of wet, hot random motion...

“Nnnnnh! Rosalinaaaa! L-Let me – aah! Whaa, whaaa...”

...an elemental savouring, as chaotic as the collisions of the infant universe yet with a guiding order that drew her steadily, inexorably towards the gravity well, the funnel in spacetime, the inescapable great attractor...

GULP!

“Nnnnnn – mmmphh! Mmmssnnrrrrrnnaaa!”

...to be dragged down, down, down, pressed in on all sides by an irresistible force; and yet a soft force, a gentle force, really just a great, long cosmic hug...

“Nnngh, and that’s how it goes, isn’t it Dari?” she scolded herself in her mind as she slipped through the layers of time and space. “She’s been waiting to do this all along, hasn’t she? Well, of course she has! This was the whole point, right? What, did you think this time would be different? Again? Did you really?”

And so she shut her eyes, let her arms and legs go limp, and waited – no, *felt*, felt the passage through her flesh of the experience of what it meant, as she understood it, to be Dari.

Felt there was something else. Something she was forgetting.

Remembered.

“Aaaaahh, fuck! She’ll digest my notes!”

She struggled, hard. She was strong for her size. Her every atom was born of the stars. But of course, so were those that constituted the walls of flesh surrounding her, and they held firm, squeezing her ever deeper.

“Aaagh, no! Rosalina! You c-can’t just – nnngh, s-stop! Let me out! Let me out at – *glmmph!*”

And she clenched her eyes and all her muscles and gritted her teeth as she writhed and squirmed with every ounce of her strength...

“Mmmnnghh! Nnnnt mnn nnnntt! Nnnhh, nnnhh, mmnt me...huh?”

The pressure – it had stopped. Her arms and legs thrashed freely.

She groaned, bracing herself for the thump on wobbling pulp or splash in a lake of fluids.

Waited.

Waited some more.

Okay. It never took this long.

She opened her eyes.

“.....Wow!”

Galaxies! Thousands of galaxies, hundreds of thousands, bright ones, dark ones, straight ones, spirally ones, a fantasia of such fabulous shapes and colours as might have blown out the minds of anyone who hadn't reached a certain stage, intuitively as much as rationally, in their ascent up the slopes of cosmic understanding. No, she recognised now, not just galaxies. There were nebulae too: marvellousnesses of coloured gas which grew from the voids to envelop her: to swathe her in the formless shades of perplexity, splash her in the vivid paints of joy, sweep her low through the gloomy mists of melancholy then clasp her up and away in the swaddling clouds of high comfort. And that was only the structures she had names for, there was so much else, so many lights and colours and sounds and scents and sensations which stimulated her consciousness in ways she'd never learnt to reify against a curtain of millions of stars, each looking at their surprised little guest, each winking her way. And she panicked – it was too beautiful, too transcendental, too humbling, she couldn't process it; but then came that gentle voice, all-pervasive now, blanketing her with calm as it echoed in from beyond it all...

“So...you'll see.”

And Dari, tiniest and meekest of creatures, began to see.

She was seeing, she knew by now, not only with her eyes but with all her so regularly exercised senses. Seeing to her core. Seeing things so few had seen; or rather, things that are there for us all to see if only we learnt how to look. And if she had the beginnings of an instinct for it, it might have been because such a level of vantage is only reachable to those who set forth, who keep setting forth, who set forth again and again till it is no longer possible to do so because any direction you step in brings you home...

“N-No. No, I don't understand.”

How could she understand? How could anyone understand the things Dari felt now?

“Not yet. No, please, not yet. This is for...I dunno, for gods or something. I'm not ready for this. I'm not supposed to be here. Didn't I tell you I'm just Dari?”

But the marvels on this ultimate layer of reality, this apex of the cosmos, pressed in on her to insist otherwise; blew her round to face them, gusted hot minerals on her cheeks, her arms, her legs, till yes – of course – they even made her blush; on and on till she was brought to relent, and admitted, yes, it was still an admission, however squeaky:

“Alright. Maybe one day. Maybe, okay?”

That was good enough. They let her go on her way.

But what was her way? What did that even mean out here?
Should she look around? Which way to go?
There, perhaps? Towards that pulsating mass in the distance? It looked solid enough.

“Uhh...what’s that? It looks like...”

Two masses, in fact? No, just one, only...bulbed? Lipped?

It was red. It wouldn’t stop moving.

No, not just the thing itself – the area around it was moving too. Swirling.

Swirling in, or swirling out?

It was so hypnotic. In a familiar alarm-bells and impending-squish kind of way.

“Nnnnhhh! It looks like a...a...”

She blushed. Blushed so adorably hard – twice in as many minutes, in the cradle of the universe no less – and floundered about, making to swim away as hard as her limbs could propel her.

Who could say if she got anywhere?

“Swimming...in space...haah...haah...why, Dari...what do you think you’ll...”

Mm. *There you are.*

“...nnnahh!”

The voice soaked straight into her every particle. It tickled them, brought her skin out in goosebumps. She swung her head about in agitation, her mousey hair swishing back and forth...

“Eeek!”

And there it was. An immense indigo eye, blazing with excitement.

“Aah! Aah!”

Then – a vast outstretched hand, reaching for her. Hot pink, manicured, nine inches.

“Aaaghh, for goodness – mmmmphh!”



Few truly believed the tales of the Fluffy Comet, as it came to be known.

Legend has it that it was spotted early one summer’s morning, nosediving through the skies above the Chaldea Academy just before dawn. The best sightings were had by those avid hikers, most of them elderly, whose daily routine took them up into the surrounding hills while things were still quiet. But down in the

city it found wearier eyes, and was swiftly passed off as a dream, or a strange weather phenomenon, or otherwise a trick of the dawning sun.

After all, if it were real there'd have been photographs or recordings, everyone thought.

There were, to be fair, a few early-morning strollers and naughty drivers who claimed to have attempted some, only to find the marvel had disappeared by the time they'd fumbled out their phones.

Only a handful of smarter individuals, or perhaps those with most to long for and least to lose, did the sensible thing, which was of course the silliest.

They made a wish on it.

And though the existence of the Fluffy Comet was never proven, a notable increase in hugs, loving friendships, and unidentified cats clambering through windows did show up in official statistics in the subsequent period.

Still, few would have believed the truth of it even if they'd known. Who could have convinced respectable news outlets, let alone astronomers and meteorologists, that if they'd only had time to train their telescopes on it they might have picked out a pair of pink pointy ears within that fiery envelope? Even if it had happened to fall past a weather balloon with a conveniently-attached microphone, who would not have put it down to a glitch that it seemed to broadcast a sound like "Blublublublublublubu?" – akin, perhaps, to the lips of a hyperactive cat-girl gaining a radiant view of her home after a night spent soaring through the stars?

One person who certainly would have believed it, because she knew no ceiling was to be had on the mischief of a certain little sister, was Ibaraki Kiyoko, who lay fast asleep on her bed with the sheets loose, blinds raised and window wide open to let in the breeze on this most uncomfortably humid of nights.

In spite of which, she'd enjoyed her best sleep in many days. It was made possible on account of the news, shared by an elated Mother Rin the previous morning, that Kiyoko's little sister, lost at sea without trace for exactly one week, had washed up, soggy but safe and in the brightest of spirits, in the care of that of Mother Rin's dearest friends to whom, against Kiyoko's better judgement, she'd been dispatched on mission.

The bomb of relief had been almost too much for the fox-girl's nerves to contain. Her sister was safe! She'd accomplished her objectives, she hadn't even devoured all the snacks, Rin was right, she really could trust her – and as usual Kiyoko had distributed the force of this detonation by throwing herself into her work. In a single day she'd caught up on all the accounts, copy-edits, anonymous advice box

responses, arrangements for forthcoming visits (of which a sudden flurry had cropped up in the Academy calendar – she'd have to speak to Rin about that, they were meant to provide a month's notice) as well as replies to enquiries she'd fallen behind on while gnawing at her fingernails in worry these past few days. She'd ploughed on and on till one o'clock in the morning, when after a brisk shot of whiskey she'd hit her pillows and fallen on through to the depths of a well-earned slumber.

She'd dozed off so fast that she hadn't even had time to send little Sayuri down to her customary sleeping place in her stomach – leaving her tiny purple-haired friend, befuddled at first but readily understanding, to crawl in by herself.

So it was likewise understandable that the fox-girl was completely oblivious when a pink fluffy bundle in a stylish captain's coat and hat came barrelling in lengthwise through her window, casting off its pink protective corona and equally pink tail of flames as it did so...

...to land right there on top of her, stirring her in a groan to find its nose an inch from her forehead and its lips in front of her eyes going "Blublublublublublu...boo!"

Those eyes shot open as Kiyoko let loose a startled bark.

"Aaahh, what the hell Mikoro?" she snapped, her mind still scrambling out of its dream-piles of paperwork: of accounts which always balanced, of registers with ticks lined up neat in each box, and of heartfelt letters of appreciation from the students, thanking her from the bottom of their hearts for her compassionate pastoral care.

"Wuu wuu! Hello sis!" her little sister cheered, full of beans.

"Nmeh? Kiyoko?" a tiny sleepy voice echoed from her throat. "What's happening out there?"

Kiyoko blinked. She was used to a childhood's worth of waking up to Mikoro's grinning face like that, usually accompanied by the slide of a tongue up her face, or a tickle, or the wiggle of a strand of hair in her ear. But this, now? There was something off about it happening this morning, she was vaguely aware.

The hat? No, it wasn't just the hat.

A nice hat, she had to admit.

Then she remembered.

And by the time the next bark to come forth from her dispersed, everyone in the Academy was awake as well.



“Okay. Why?”

Mhmm. What have I done this time?

“Don’t try that on me! You know exactly what you did!”

I do, do I?

“Of course you do! You know everything, don’t you?”

I don’t know. Do I?

“Aaaagh! No. No, we’re not playing that game this time. Just tell me. Where have you put it, for a start? Where’s that mirror?”

Mm. I really am in trouble this time, aren’t I?

“What were you thinking? Letting Mikoro go near that thing? Mikoro, of all people! And why was something like that just lying around in the first place? Hey! Are you listening to me? Why – why are you licking your lips like that?”

Oh don’t worry. I’m just taking pleasure in the delightful irony of this situation. Mmm, yes, it’s good. It’s good! See? This is why it’s all come out so well.

“Hmff.”

Oh Dari. Come here.

“Nnnah! Nnnn...”

There. Doesn’t that feel better? Or how about...

“Nngh! Y-You can do that as much as you like. I still know it was you.”

Well, you both had a good time, did you not?

“There! That, right there! I can see it!”

What? This?

“Yes, that! What is it? I bet it had something to do with it! It did, didn’t it?”

Come. It’s only a bowl of water.

“Bowl of water my arse! I know the sorts of things you get up to! Did you, what, blow on it to generate the storm or something? Both storms! No, don’t say it: a storm not quite strong enough to hurt you, but strong enough to send you where you needed to go. Well? Ten out of ten, right?”

You’re getting too good at this. I might have to mix things up a little next time. So...

“So – nnaah, no! No. You are not just squishing me away after all that! I want you to explain it! The mirror, the places we ended up, the – *don’t crumple my notes!*”

Heheh. Fair enough. Alright then, how about this? Tell me why I did it. If you know me as well as you say then you should be able to figure out each of my reasons, no?

“Do I get to stay dry this time if I do?”

Oof, you drive a hard bargain my little dumpling. Very well. You have a deal.

“Hmph. Okay. Well, you’re, I dunno, an expression of the loving universe or whatever it is you call it, so there’ll be a Dari reason and a Mikoro reason, won’t there?”

Mm. Go on.

“You wanted to give Mikoro a wonderful adventure. The adventure a loving universe decided she needed.”

Good! That’s one.

“And to give me the one it decided I needed?”

Close. Essentially correct. But you can be a little more specific than that.

“Specific. Hmm. Well, we’ll come back to that. And third, because you always need to accomplish at least three things with every move...well, it’s gotta be about the mirror, right? That’s the only part I can’t explain.”

Mm. I’ll give you that. I couldn’t possibly expect you to get that one. So. The Way-Mirror was...a prototype, let’s call it. An early attempt. A good one, but a touch inefficient. I’ve got the latest model on my dresser.

“So you, what, threw the old one into the sea?”

Come, you know me better than that. Throw out something I’d invested my energy in? You do remember what I am, yes?

“What happened, then? You just, I dunno, dropped it by accident while you were out or something?”

Mm. That’s exactly what happened.

“What? How?”

Well, it was a while ago.

“Are we talking dinosaurs a while ago, or that...stuff in your, um, thing that used to be a pancreas a while ago?”

Quark-gluon plasma? Oh no, not that long ago. Long enough that the star that birthed you hadn’t itself been born yet. But not so long that I had yet to see you coming. Let’s just say it was back when I still...eheh...

“...still made mistakes?”

Mm. Well, it wasn’t a problem back then. It only became a problem when, oh, you know, certain people turned their reality inside out and started to close off all the others. Seeking power to the exclusion of all other meaning. That’s when I realised I couldn’t just leave the mirror there, however good a job it was doing of protecting itself.

“But then – why Mikoro? Of all people, why – ”

Why else? Because she's fluffy of course!

"Hmff. You could have told me."

Could I? You know you'd have told her in turn. Made her aware in advance. Changed her behaviour. How do you think it'd have gone then?

"Grr. Do you have to be so right about everything?"

Do you have to be so deliciously cute?

"Gaaah!"

Come on Dari-dumpling. You still haven't worked out the second reason.

"The Dari reason. Yeah. I know. It wasn't just getting me in contact with new stuff, was it? That happens anyway, without you having to do anything. Which means...hmm, something more specific..."

Keep going.

"Something. Someone? Connection – that's what you're about, isn't it? But that..."

Nuuu.

"No."

Yes.

"What? Seriously? That's why? You decided – you deemed it necessary that I – oh my g-god, you actually went out of your way just to orchestrate – "

What can I say? It was cosmic necessity. You are Dari, after all. I don't make the rules. Mm.

"Aaagh! You – are – impossible!"

Come. You know that's not true.

"There. There! You see?"

Besides, you love her really. You haven't stopped thinking about what it was like.

"Nnnnnghhh!"

Told you.

"Okay, wait. Wait! I've worked it out, right? One, two, three – those were your reasons?"

They were.

"Oh. And that means...wow, it does! It means that for once you're not going to – ah! No, w-wait! What are you doing? Y-You said...!"

Oh, Dari. Dari, Dari, Dari. You're quite right you know. Three reasons, each cleanly deduced. I wouldn't expect any less from you. Except...why did you think I stopped at three? Is there some fundamental principle which states that I can't have more than three?

"You mean – you mean there was – "

Yes. A fourth. You missed one.

“Nnnah! Wait, wait! What was – aaaaack...!”

SHLPP.

“Mmmmmphh! Nnnclpsss! Nnnff...nnff...”

Ohhhh, yes. Mmm...MMMM! Good! Now. How shall we proceed?

Oh! I know! How about...a cake?



“I miss Dari.”

“Oh my dear. Come, mother’s here. We’ll see her again soon, I’m sure we will. Dari always comes back.”

“But I miss her!”

“Have a little patience, sis! I mean, it’s only a week since you got back! Would it be fair on the rest of Dari’s friends if you kept her all to yourself?”

“Gwah. I know. It’s just...you know how often we cuddled up and looked at the stars, just like this? Together, on the bunny-boat. Out on the ocean. It was so nice. And we talked about, um, finding your way around using the stars to help you, and chubby bears, and how much she likes bums, and...”

“I’m sure it was wonderful darling. You know, maybe she’s out there right now. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe. What are those constellations called again? Dari explained to me how they’re all imagined up but real just the same. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Well dear, you mentioned bums. The lion’s pretty clear tonight. That one there, with its head like *that*, do you see?”

“Yaay! I like lions! Rarr! Did I tell you about the tiger cub I found?”

“Yes, sis. Thirty times a day I believe.”

“Um. But what’s the lion got to do with bums?”

“Well, the lion’s bum is special.”

“Nyah. How? I’m not sure Dari would think it’s special. She prefers cow bums.”

“Oh, Dari will definitely know this trick. Now, I want you to imagine a line that goes like *that*. You see it? Straight down through the two stars of the lion’s bum. Now it’s a little imprecise when they’re not exactly one above the other, but when they are, that line points directly south!”

“Waah! That’s so cool! I’ve gotta remember that for the next time I go to sea.”

“And you see those three bright ones there? If you connect them up, that’s called the Summer Triangle. Think you can learn that one, my dear? They’re very bright, so you can spot them quickly even when there’s lots of ground light. It’s a really useful one if you need to orient yourself to the sky quickly.”

“Yup. A triangle. Simple enough, right? And, um...what’s those ones there?”

“That’s called Andromeda! It’s named after a famous girl who rescued a defenceless little sea monster from some angry Greek people. If you go to that part of the world today you still see her icon on fishing boats, warning them to keep to the quotas so they don’t overfish.”

“Hmm, a sea monster. I didn’t find sea monsters this time. There was a dragon though! A naughty one. I didn’t like it.”

“Now, it’s getting late dear. Shall we head back to the Academy? Your mother’s got a very busy day tomorrow, so let’s make sure we each get a nice long rest tonight, okay?”

“Aaww. Okay. I’m not tired though! Guess I can see if the students are still up so I can tell them about all the bits of my adventure they haven’t heard about!”

“Sis, I doubt there’s any part they haven’t heard by now. Besides, didn’t Dari tell you she’s going to write something about it? If you exhaust them so much that they don’t read her book, she might get mad...”

“Yeah, but I bet she’ll be too mousey to include all the fun things that happened to her! So I’ve gotta help her by talking about them again and again so I remember them, and then when she gives her pages to Mama to help her edit them, we can sneak them in!”

“Tsss, Mikoro. You can’t just insert - ”

“Nyah, it’s Dari! She likes being inserted! Gwah. I miss her. I hope she comes to visit soon.”



Thus did Ibaraki Mikoro return safely to the Chaldea Academy and resume the life she’d always known.

Or...did she?

After the return, the end?

Never.

You may close the cover, or stop the reel, or put the controller down and switch off the power. Nonetheless – the return goes on.

Many never complete it.

Consider.

From one reality, you set forth into others. Such is what it means to journey. But to return is not merely to cross back the other way. As you have journeyed into the other realities, so have they journeyed into you. Thus, you never truly cross back. Rather you bring the other realities with you, back to the reality you call home, and from then on must learn to live anew at their juncture.

To bring the realities to terms, whether or not they wish to come.

Often they don't.

The return is not the end. It is the most perilous beginning of all.



It took only a day for Mikoro to slip back into the rhythms of life at the Academy, much as a fish returns to the water. It was all as she remembered it, with little outward sign that anything had changed.

There were glimpses of course. If you headed over to Rin's office, for example, you might have noticed an exquisite little figurine – a black cat, red cat and blue fox in marble – had found a permanent home on her desk. Look closer and perhaps you'd wonder whether the schedule book for the month ahead was packed just a little more than usual with visitor appointments, many of them under unusual, even exotic names.

Most of all, there was the wonderful blue mariner's coat which now lived on the peg behind Mikoro's bedroom door, along with a hat with a turquoise shooting star pin which she kept getting down and insisting on wearing to dinner.

Her mother, of course, raised no objection.

Yet beyond the costumes and ornaments life was much the same. Crashing around looking for things to do. Helping the students train. Supporting her mother. Sneaking licks of Sayuri when a certain big sister wasn't looking. Afternoon naps. Hot bubbly baths – which seemed to take her a lot longer than they used to, much to Kiyoko's consternation. And of course, cosy hours with her student friends or Scáthach or Tamamo, with exciting new conversation topics between the cuddles, exercises and mutual ingress.

Home, in other words. As comfortable, fulfilling, and just plain pleasant to be in as anywhere she'd known.

But not the same as being Captain Mikoro aboard the *Sea Bunny*.

Not worse, mind you. Just...different. The feeling was of two worlds, or perhaps two timelines, struggling to overlap inside her. Two alternate Mikoros.

And they weren't quite fitting.

By the time of their little stargazing excursion Mikoro had been back for as many days as the voyage itself had taken. When they got back, she discovered she was sleepy after all and so she flopped down on her bed and was snoring away within minutes. She woke up the next morning, had a nice long soak, came out more introspective than she was used to again, and scarfed down a pile of hot pancakes covered in syrup.

And then, as she shuffled in her slippers back to her room – it hit her.

“Nyah. I miss...I don't know what...nyaaaah...”

All of a sudden she was as depressed as she'd felt in years. Something inside her had gone tumbling off a cliff, and she didn't understand it, didn't know how to put it in words. She just felt totally miserable and that was that.

She longed to feel the wind in her hair, the salt in her nostrils, hear the seagulls screech overhead. To squeeze Dari's hot red cheeks. To feel the creak of a fibreglass hull, the beeping ears, the thrill of dodging cannon-fire and sneaking through hordes of angry cattle, the fresh aromas of *dandan* noodles, fish and chips, beef bowl and rice-wine, Star Bits...

It felt unreal, thinking about it now. They were all *over there*, on the other side of an invisible wall. In the other worlds. In realities that weren't real in this one.

If she didn't have the coat on the back of her door to stare at she could easily have deceived herself that they'd all been a dream.

Except...they weren't. She knew they weren't. Because they weren't just *there*, they were *here*, too. Inside her. Embodied in her. Even if she could only feel them in her memories, not with her hands, they were no less physical.

Her feelings were real.

And yet...if she reached for them, she felt herself stretch away from Mother Rin's warm hugs and delectable home cooking, like the pancakes; from Kiyoko, yelling her name for admonitions that always ended in cuddles; from green tea with Tamamo and stories from Scáthach, from her place in the mishaps that rose so spontaneously and full of giggles out of the quadruple-reaction crucible of Anna, Hina, Kurumi and Nagisa...

To be present in the feelings of one reality felt like an othering of the other. A betrayal. And it made her feel guilty. It felt like she was rejecting it, abandoning it, saying she didn't want it.

She did want it.

She wanted them both.

She loved them both.

And though love does not diminish in the spread, there is a challenge, we might admit, in imagining yourself to be both on land and sea at the same time.

The tension was unbearable. Pain whichever way she reached.

She was home. But for the first time in her life, she felt lost there.

To make matters worse, she couldn't shake the feeling that her mother and sister had grown far busier than they used to be. They'd hardly had any time to play all week, and on this day when she needed them most they were working harder than ever.

Rin had shut herself in her office with something *extremely important*, she'd said. That wasn't like her. At other times she was rushing about so frantically that by the time Mikoro found someone who'd seen her it was invariably to learn that the sighting had taken place at the other end of the Academy. She couldn't even find Kiyoko, and the students and trainers were all in classes, and even the clerks, technicians, caterers and cleaning staff were all roped up preparing for something – yes – *extremely important*.

Eventually she put the pieces together and worked out that all those extremely important things were in fact just one single super-important thing.

So important, whatever it was, that it meant there was no-one for her to talk to. All she could do was mope through the corridors, or sit on the bench in the courtyard pavilion and cry silently onto her arm, or return to her room and open a book or pick up her videogame controller only to put it down again, realising she wasn't in the mood; then to mooch aimlessly through the halls once more, coming at last to the grand double doors of the reception room.

Where she'd found the cake. Eaten it. The very spot from where, without ever imagining it at the time, she'd set forth to become Captain Mikoro.

Was this how it ended? With no cake?

She could hear voices behind those doors. Something was going on in there, but the windows were papered over from behind. Yes – that was Kiyoko, agitating the staff down a list of tasks.

An event, then. Another of those receptions? Were they getting the silverware out for some tedious bigwigs from the Association who might put some money in the box if Rin let them talk for long enough? A government type perhaps? Or better, a religious one, so they'd have the bells on their clothes that she could ring?

Or was it a commemoration, some important founding or battle or death or other anniversary she needn't trouble herself to remember?

It was rather noisy for something like that, she thought. Were they getting the builders in again? Maybe they were simply refurbishing the wing. These were old buildings. That wasn't unusual.

Whatever it was, it wasn't about her. If she got involved she'd only cause trouble. She slouched back to her bedroom and threw herself face-down on her bed.



“Mikoro?”

“Nyam nyam nyam.”

“Are you awake?”

“Nnhhh...? Nah.”

“There there. Oh my dear, you've had a difficult day. I'm so sorry for just disappearing on you like that. There's just been so much to prepare.”

The cat-girl lay there with her face pressed into the blanket.

“S'okay,” she mumbled. “I'm just a naughty.”

Rin crouched to stroke her between the ears. “Sshh. It's okay now,” she consoled her. “I came to check on you because mother's got a little surprise you might want to come and see.”

“Don't need a surprise. I'm really really sad.”

“Oh, I think you might like this one sweetheart. Do you know, I think it might cheer you up just a tiny bit.”

“Doubt it. I don't know what I am anymore.”

Rin sat on the bed, taking her daughter's unresponsive hand in her own as she lengthened her strokes down her pink tresses.

“Hmm. Well, let's see now. You're my brave and reliable daughter, that's one thing you are, isn't it? And...you're a captain now, so that's two! We can even go to the port authority next week and get you registered if you like. I know you don't have a ship at the moment, but don't worry, your mother will persuade them.” And she would, she would. “Would you like that?”

“Nmmh. Maybe.”

“And third...you're a lovable fluffy friend to lots of people.”

“Nyeh. A naughty one.”

“Don't you think you'd better come say hello to them?”

And right there – with those words – the worlds came back together.

They reacted. The noise reached her loud and clear, too loud to be anything other than real as it came repercussing up the corridors to rattle on her door:

“Nuuuuuuuuuuoo!”

“Nyaah!”

Mikoro shot onto her hands and feet like a cat; fell off balance, waving her arms till Rin caught her and helped her round onto her bum.

She drew her wrists together, still stunned. Her expression had changed completely. She stared at her mother, her mouth wide as her eyes.

Rin smiled.

“Awawawawawawawa!” Mikoro yelled, and straight away she was out of the door, hurtling down to the lobby like a fluffy pink guided missile.



Ordinarily it might have qualified as an incident. The Demon Cow Queen had barely managed to squeeze her three-dimensional Majesty through the Academy gates. And that was to say nothing of the doors to the actual building, whose split frames now languished in dear want of the tender hands of a professional construction crew.

Next, the visiting dignitary had gone on to realise, in the space of two stomps, that what was integral to the charisma of her standard Here-Comes-The-Queen manner of entry – specifically, sudden loading – existed in a trade-off with what was integral to the floor.

At least the carpet was alright. Classical Samarkand. Heavy-duty stuff. It had compressed neatly into its new pair of heel-craters without so much as a frayed thread.

With a state visit like that, who needs invasions?

Even so, no-one in the lobby had noticed the damage yet. This was probably because they were too busy noticing the Cow Queen, which was less a reaction and more a ladder of psychological processes.

No-one could say she wasn't wearing enough. Her goldware alone must have cost and weighed more than all the clothes in the building, if not the building itself. Nor could they accuse her of wearing too much, though this was less a problem, in part because irrational prejudices towards body parts are unheard of in the world at issue (or in fact in any world that functions properly), and in part because

once you'd worked out what the parts here concerned could do to you you wouldn't say disrespectful things to them either. And that's without mentioning the horns, the bovine-like utterances and mannerisms, and the massive burlap sack across her shoulder.

In short, the receptionists, stewards and serving staff were left incapable of any course of action other than to stand there and gape at her. This being an unfamiliar environment she stood there too and studied them back, such that no-one, for those nervous opening moments, had any idea what to do.

It was just as well no nervous silence survives Ibaraki Mikoro.

The cat-girl rocketed down the stairs, kicked off four from the bottom and launched on an unstoppable trajectory into the midst of that huge shape of brown, red and gold – and in that moment all apprehension in the room went to pieces as she whumped into the Cow Queen's arms, a fluffy cyclone of tears, squeals and jubilation.

"Nuuuuuuoo!" the monarch lowed again, lowering her sack so she could get both arms round her friend. "Ohoho! It's only been a few days, you little rascal! Steady now! Is this the way you greet your Queen?"

"Nyaaah, I knew it!" Mikoro cried, shaking that great gold cowbell in both hands. "I knew it, I knew it! You were acting so strange on the spaceship, I just knew you were up to something!"

"Hrrrm! I'm that obvious, am I?"

"Heehee! You are, you are! Aaww, you big cuddly! You're too everything-in-a-straight-line to play monkey tricks like that!"

"Hey!" came another voice from the entrance – relaxed, a slight rasp. "This is the Chaldea Academy right? Who's this then? Would you like to move along so I can moo...moo...moove – whoa!"

The Cow Queen swung round to loom over her latest impudent petitioner, who though surprised, was not intimidated in the slightest. A tantalising contest might have resulted if not for the overjoyed Mikoro once more flooding the emotional atmosphere.

"Nyaah, it's Cyania! You're here too? Waah! Wawawaah!" And from there her thrilled noises broke through the edge of the legible spectrum as she leaned out and wrapped her arms round the undead warrior's head.

"Heh! That's my furball alright," came Cyania's muffled voice amid her armoured clanks. "Careful now or you'll pull it off!"

"Nyah!" Mikoro panicked and let go at once.

Cyania roared with laughter. “Haahaha, only joking! You thought I was serious right? Raaah. I’m a zombie. Gimme your keys so I can throw ‘em down the drain.”

“Oho, who’s this, who’s this?” said the Demon Cow Queen. “Hrrm. You don’t look in the best of health, young lady. I trust the Chaldea Academy has a medical wing, Captain Mikoro?”

“Hah! At least I know I’ve got the right place then,” said Cyania, still processing the beefy titan before her. “Thought I might have absorbed some of Dari’s shrinky effect and wandered into Mulgore for a moment here.”

“It’s okay!” said Mikoro, leaping to the floor again. “Your Moojesty, this is Cyania! She’s one of Dari’s friends, from Azeroth, and she’s big and strong and helped us beat that dragon!”

“Hrrnh, she did, did she? Well – good. I knew I couldn’t trust that dragon.”

“And Cy, this is the Demon Cow Queen!”

She might have imagined it, but for half an instant Mikoro could swear the corner of her eye caught Cyania’s fingers tense into a ball.

“Demon...?”

“Nyaah, don’t worry! She’s not a real demon! She just calls herself that because it’s cool!”

The undead hand relaxed.

“Hah, is that so? Careful little miss next Lord Admiral, you had me on edge there! Remember that demons aren’t so cool where I come from, yeah?”

Her eyes wandered the royal expanse. Impressive terrain, challenging to navigate in places – but no sign of anything *not so cool*.

“Well anyhow, a friend of Mikoro’s is a friend of mine. I just hope you’re more upstanding than the last few queens I’ve had to cross swords with.” She placed her hands on her hips and offered a winning smile, full of energetic sincerity. “Hey, nice horns!”

The Cow Queen for her part had been visibly struggling a little with Cyania’s unflappable manner, but of course she was very proud of her horns, so the compliment was enough to uproot any remaining seeds of suspicion.

“Well you certainly look like you’ve got much more of a...err, a resource base. Real big cheese, yeah?”

The statement seemed to puzzle the great monarch. “How did you guess?” she snorted, and she overturned her giant sack to loose twelve enormous wheels of cheese on the carpet. Each came wrapped in premium brown paper and carried the acclaimed horned seal of the royal dairy.

“Ooh, that looks wonderful!” said a delighted Mother Rin, choosing her moment to appear on the central staircase. “Why, thank you ever so much, Your Majesty. Welcome to the Chaldea Academy!”

Mikoro giggled. She had a sneaking suspicion that she knew the special ingredient in that cheese.

“Nrrm! Director Rin, I presume! Hrrm hrm. I accept your humble welcome and hereby magnanimously confer upon you these nutritious tokens of approval from the Cow Queen’s domain!”

Mikoro sniggered. The Cow Queen might have been massive enough to block out the sun but in communicative terms she was transparent as glass.

“You already met each other, didn’t you?” the cat-girl realised aloud. “You’ve been talking! Yes, you have! I can’t believe – you’ve been planning this for days – you set this up just for – just for – nyaaah!” And she hurtled back to the stairs and wrapped her arms round Rin.

And not to be outdone, Cyania rounded the bovine mountain to present Rin with a handcart loaded with a large crate.

“The soils where I live grow the best pumpkins that side of the Thandol Span,” she said proudly. “A little pack of appreciation, seeing as I couldn’t have pulled off that mission without certain fluffy services from these quarters here.”

Mikoro gave it a dubious sniff. “Um. Didn’t you say the place you live is called the Plaguelands?”

“Yeah, but that’s history for you,” sighed Cyania. “And you didn’t hear me saying anything complimentary about paladins, but the Silver Hand folks up at Hearthglen have done a fine job cleaning things up. A mighty fine job. It’s been a good ten years since their instruments picked up anything in the soil or water that’s not supposed to be there, but Dari will tell you how these things go. Once a name like that’s stuck it’s stuck, and we’re all primary industries up there so it doesn’t matter whether you’ve got air in your lungs or not, chances are that for the last few years you’ve had your livelihood taken out by the stigma. Just ask any of the farmers still struggling to shift their stuff.”

“Come, my dears,” said the beaming Rin. “Let’s go to my office and get the formalities out of the way first. You’ll want your coat and hat, Mikoro dear.”

“Yaaay!”

And so the distinguished guests followed Rin into the building as the reception staff mopped the sweat off their brows, drank from their water flasks and carted the gifts away to be inventoried exactly right by Kiyoko, all while doing their best to recover their composure. Which they accomplished, to be fair, being well-

trained and used to all sorts at the Academy, with the red-haired maid Hisako perhaps the only exception. She was as conscientious and hard-working as them all, but the smidge of Dari in her nerves, perhaps, kept her knees trembling and her jaw looking like it could use some help from a winch as she goggled after the Cow Queen's reverse profile.



“Heehee! Ibaraki Mikoro...*Captain.*”

Thus Mikoro printed her name beneath her stamp, right there beside Rin's at the bottom of the text. The Memorandum of Understanding was by its nature informal, but therein lay its promise. Both the Seventh Demon Cow Queen and Director Ibaraki Rin were the sorts of individuals, in each her own way, whose *goals* and *desires* could for all intents and purposes be treated as accomplished outcomes. No commitments simply meant no constraints.

The Academy had a new benefactor. Never again would it want for the freshest, creamiest milk, butter, yoghurt, cheese and ice cream. On top of that, anyone working or studying under its auspices was granted free admission to Her Majesty the Demon Cow Queen's fortress at any time, as well as a nifty certificate they could paste on their ship windows granting exemption from routine inspections and licensing and tribute requirements while sailing through her domain. In return the Academy would offer scientific and technological cooperation as well as intelligence on its world's historical and current affairs – which, given its strategic location in parallel with a certain reality of critical concern to Her Majesty, was a high-value prize indeed. Best of all, from Mikoro's point of view at any rate, a certain *high-ranking official* – name: Captain Ibaraki Mikoro – would be received with ambassadorial status whenever she visited the fortress, with all the perks thereof in beef bowl protocols, reserved ship parking, access to cool bits of the fortress and – she hoped, at least, because it didn't go down in writing – to the sweetest-smelling shampoos on the occasion of bathing with the Queen.

To facilitate said visits, first steps were taken towards establishing a permanent gateway to and from the fortress in the Academy's secret underground portal nexus. But this does not officially exist, so it didn't appear on the document and you don't know about it and you have no evidence.

As for Cyania, well, she was there in the capacity of a private citizen – indeed, she insisted on it – so was not really in a position to pursue or indeed desire an

equivalent written arrangement. But with Mother Rin an exchange of friendly words may carry just as much force as an international treaty if she wishes it, so plenty of fertile suggestions were tabled about improving the Academy's linkages with her homeworld, starting perhaps with pink fluffy visits.

And with that the boring important parts were completed, and the visitors trod off to the fun important parts in the reception hall. Mikoro made to follow, only to feel the pull of a caring hand on her shoulder.

"Feeling a little better now?" asked Mother Rin.

"I can't believe it. Gwah. Did you really arrange all this just for me?"

"Oh, come here darling," said Rin, and she wrapped her daughter in a long, tight hug, sneaking in a subtle tweak of her hat while at it.

"But...when?" asked Mikoro. "How long have you been talking?"

"Well, Rosalina set me up a video call with the Cow Queen while you were both at her observatory. She's so pleased she got to meet you, by the way. Rosalina's one of the kindest people I know, and it was just like her to help arrange this visit to give you a nice boost when we knew you'd need it, while also letting us take forward this lovely new connection you've made for the Academy. Then later that same day I heard from Cyania. We already knew about each other thanks to Dari so it was a very pleasant conversation. Oh my sunshine, can you imagine how happy it made me, listening to her talk on and on about what a great team player you were?"

"Wah. So I wasn't even back yet and you were already sneaky sneaking to bring my friends here?"

"Oh yes. They both wanted to visit straight away you know? But I asked them to hold off for a few days, to let you have some time to settle back in first. They were happy with that, but the Cow Queen had to make use of Rosalina's transit facilities while she was there, so she arrived on the same morning as you. We put her up in Uncle Yoshi's farm, but she's been nosing around the country all week! We had to make a few...hmm, special arrangements."

Her smile was so light-hearted you wouldn't have guessed the rent, media subterfuge and beef bowl expenses it'd swallowed. Anything for her precious daughter. After all, with the new Memorandum it would pay for itself in premium dairy products.

"Wah. So that's why you've had so little time since I got back. Nyaah, I didn't know! All this time you were setting it up so they'd come to say hello right when I felt most..."

Caring fingers massaged the back of her head.

“Sshhh. It’s alright now, sweetheart. Adventures can be tough, everybody knows that, but what they don’t realise is how much more of a challenge it is to come back. I’m proud of you Mikoro. And yes, I’m proud of my little daughter who stood up to kings and armies and dragons and evil spirits and opened her loving arms to everyone who needed her help. But I’m more proud of her because she didn’t do it by following one world’s rules or another’s. She stood by her own. She did it by being Mikoro.”

“Nnmh. But I am Mikoro.”

“That’s what I mean, dear. And even when it was impossible, you didn’t stop being Mikoro under pressure. You chose to be impossibly Mikoro right back at it.”

“Nyah. When do you mean?”

“The storm, Mikoro. The storms weren’t part of our plan, Rosalina and I. We still don’t know where they came from. They weren’t like the other things you faced, dear. Queens and gods are one thing, but the storms – well, you must have sensed you were up against something...supreme. A force impossible to fight. And the only information you had about it was what Scáthach told you about making the journey with extra passengers. However...Dari was your friend. Your friends matter so much to you, so you insisted on going together. You didn’t turn back, or look for a way around or some sneaky way through. You wanted to bring your friend along, so you did, and that was that.”

She brought their faces together, so close that the tips of their noses brushed. “Do you understand, Mikoro?” she said softly. “You made your own path. You took responsibility. Your responsibility to your friend, yes, but most of all, your responsibility to yourself. You told the storm that what you want matters. That your love for your friends matters. That you matter. And you did. You won an argument with the universe. You blew the storm away. And *that*, right there, is my daughter. That’s my Mikoro.”

Mikoro said nothing. Only pressed herself to her mother’s bosom and clutched tighter; pressed so close that her hat tipped up in a slant.

“It’s because I learnt it all from you,” she mumbled.

“And now, it’s the same,” said Rin, “You don’t have to choose, you know?”

“Choose...? Choose...what? Nnyeh...”

“You don’t have to choose between the ordinary world and the special world, I mean. If it’s what you want, they can both be ordinary and both be special. They can both be you.”

Mikoro's eyes were welling up. It was at times like this she truly understood what it meant to have a parent like Rin.

"Yeah. I'm not gonna choose," she said, feeling strength surge deep within her chest. "That's right! I'm just gonna be me!"

"Good. Now that doesn't mean it will be easy, yes? I want you to give yourself all the time you need, and all the kindness, till you feel comfortable with what Mikoro means again. And don't forget, your sister and I are here for you all the way. As are all your friends – big and small, both here and there, I'm sure."

"Mn nnvv uu", Mikoro uttered, rubbing her face in Rin's chest.

"I love you too my dear," said Rin. "Now, won't you go and spend some time with our delightful pair of guests in the reception hall? I'll be along shortly, you just help your mother by making sure they don't drink each other under the table too soon. There might be a little surprise coming along after dinner."

Mikoro kissed her mother on the nose and ran out to rejoin the others.



Rin needn't have worried about the Cow Queen's propensity for a barrel of rice-wine or twenty, nor about Cyania's for a good tankard. As it turned out, the students had heard so much about the former's wonderland of a stomach system from Mikoro – all week, in fact – as well as the latter's curious caverns of green ichor from Dari previously, that their expeditions, under the extra protection of Tamamo's shrinking enchantment of course, were already well underway by the time the cat-girl joined them.

It took her only a cursory investigation to discover that Anna, Hina and Kurumi had opted straight for the bouncy castle experience in the royal rumen. Nagisa meanwhile, who with her rowdier personality had clicked with Cyania straight away, was receiving firsthand experience of some rather impeccable gastrointestinal undead hygiene.

Hosting such adventures was of course much more pleasurable than alcohol for either imbibers. And though strict-minded organisers might have found this a little forward as far as the protocols for such functions are concerned, in practical terms this was the best time to do it, before their stomachs got occupied by whatever magical fare Rin had spent the best part of the week preparing.

Besides, under the roof of Ibaraki Rin, protocol came second to what people actually wanted.

What they got, therefore – once they'd been regurgitated, towelled off, and ushered into the dining hall along with the guests and the rest of the Chaldea community – was beef bowl. But because every ingredient had been sourced and every spice selected under Rin's personal supervision, and every involved pot and pan touched by her at least once, it was objectively the most nourishing, energising and just plain mouth-watering beef bowl ever to grace the tastebuds of those present – even, and this was surely the pinnacle of accolades, Her Majesty's, that great connoisseur, by her own admission.

Mikoro kept her coat and hat on through the entire meal and for the first time thought she could feel, really feel, the synergy Rin had suggested. It was like she was still Captain Mikoro but had graduated onto a bigger vessel built from the breath and stone of the Academy itself, and was now treating her friends from both land and sea in its dining saloon. There were second, third and fourth helpings, toast after toast – to the gallant captain, to Her Majesty, to Cyania, to the Chaldea Organisation, to pretty much everyone by the time the plates began to stay clear; and by then the students had all got their rides on the Cow Queen, and Cyania and Scáthach were impressing each other with the absurd things they could do with knives and cups at the dinner table, and the realities, it appeared, were finally learning not to get stuck at painful angles in the overlap.

They were merging. Mikoro could feel it.

She was home.

In the sublime excitement of which, she'd forgotten all about the surprise.

That was why when Mother Rin came over to whisper in her ear she felt a charge of suspense rush through her nerves once more. Looking up, she observed that in different parts of the room, Cyania, Scáthach, and Kiyoko with little Sayuri on her shoulder had left their seats and were doing their best to percolate discreetly back to the vacated reception hall. Then Rin approached the Cow Queen in the same manner – and as discretion was not an option in this case, the monarch launched up with a thump of her fist on the table and snorted: “The Queen shall return momentarily!”

When Mikoro followed, it was to find them witnessing the entrance of a trolley. On board was a plain white box.

Its wheels squeaked comically on the impact-resistant rubber flooring, fitted for Her Majesty's convenience, as the maid Hisako, with ever a bashful eye up the bovine mountain, rolled it into the centre. Next minute they were all standing round it.

“Well!” said Rin, bringing her hands together. “I’ve been looking forward to this one!”

She placed her hand flat on the box.

The sides fell open, revealing...

“Waah!” Mikoro yelled, unable to restrain herself “It’s, it’s...it looks *amaaaazing!*”

For there stood a cake, three storeys high, sweet supremacy in a coat of half-inch icing. From its cliffs and crisp iced parapets, black as the most secluded shelters of space, rolled marbled terraces of fuchsia and lavender that were surely buttercream nebulas of the very stuff of love made solid. Chocolate splotches erupted from its sides like miniature big bangs, bursts of sweet new meaning...

...and mounted upon the summit: a strange heart-shaped chocolate...quasi-stellar object?

They stared in silence. None of them had ever seen a cake like this before.

An urgent whisper, Kiyoko’s, rustled in the background: “Where did we get this?”

“Hmm?” – that was Rin. “Oh. A benefactor. Someone who cares very much.”

There was something hypnotic about the chocolate thing on top. Something mathematically impossible.

It looked delicious though.

“Well everyone,” said Rin, “we’re all together tonight thanks to Mikoro, so it’s only fair she gets to do the honours, don’t we think?”

Mikoro looked to her for confirmation.

Rin nodded.

“Yaaay!” went Mikoro, and with no further ado she launched herself at the cake.

“Oh, for – *wait!*” went Kiyoko, catching her by the shoulders just in time. “She meant the chocolate on top, not the whole thing at once!”

“Aaww.”

The Cow Queen bellowed with laughter. “Ohoho! So the legends were true! Who would believe it was a cake that launched the dread Captain Mikoro upon my sea?”

“What, you thought I was exaggerating?” said Kiyoko. “I meant it literally! Look here! Look at this dribble!”

And though the words were exasperated, the arms that clasped her sister were heavy with affection.

“Hey, steady now Captain Furball,” said Cyania. “Something about this cake gives me the willies. I’m getting all sentimental just looking at it. And...eh. It feels alright, actually. Are all sweets like that in this world, or just the cakes?”

“Nrrm, it’s funny you say that, my...determined friend,” rumbled the Cow Queen. “In front of this thing, it’s like I can feel my old bull standing here with us. The Jade Mother, too. I feel...hrrrrm. *Powerful*. So peacefully powerful.”

“It’s beautiful,” said tiny Sayuri, totally mesmerised. “And somehow...familiar...”

Scáthach stood a step back from the others, arms crossed and eyes shut in deep contemplation. And with waves foaming in her ears and cliffs of ancient gneiss behind her eyelids no doubt, she spoke, in total silence: “Hm. I wonder how my sister’s been doing.”

“Go on Mikoro,” said Rin. “We’re all waiting.”

Mikoro reached for the chocolate topping. Brought it right in front of her face to squint at it cross-eyed. Even this close she couldn’t make sense of it. It was solid; but something was...*swirling*, inside of it.

Something that suggested the rules were different on the inside.

Trustworthy though. Of this she had no doubt.

She popped it in her mouth. Tongued it around.

Her face filled with bliss.

“Mmmm. Chocolate.”

She could feel it melting. Melting, melting...

Plap!

“Nyamff! Whass thss?”

Suddenly it had changed – its shape, its texture, everything about it.

It was larger.

Wriggling.

Squeaking.

Delicious.

No – more than delicious. It was one of her favourite flavours in the world.

She placed her hands to her mouth and drooled it into her palms.

“Nnghh...” it groaned.

“Gwaah!” uttered Mikoro, just as everyone standing around her gasped, barked or snorted in amazement.

The little creature – brown and green – stood up. Spooled Mikoro’s fluids from its hair with an arm.

“Dari?!” went everyone at once.

“Heh. Surprise.”

“Daaaaarii!” Mikoro screamed, plunging her lips straight back onto –

“Wait!” the tiny arrival’s voice struck, with terrible resolve.

“Nya-!”

Silence. Each gigantic pair of eyes swelled in alarm. For the space of one heartbeat, Dari’s was the power.

She blushed.

“Eheh. S-Sorry about that. It’s just...before *anything* else...”

She raised her other hand. It clasped a thick wad of exquisite-looking paper, or at least something like it. Ridiculously the pages were proper A4. Hundreds of them, each far larger than her.

Where had she been keeping them? How could she even lift them?

Her mousey handwriting filled them top to bottom.

“Here. Mother. P-Please...”

“Why, of course dear!” said Rin understandingly, taking the files and folding them into her pocket.

“Whew,” breathed Dari, relieved. And now she could properly react to her situation.

“Uhh...wow. You’re all here. I didn’t realise you’d**begyaah!**”

Her resistance at an end, Mikoro plunged Dari into her chest and crushed her in a hug of undiluted joy.

“DariDariDariDariDariDariDari! Guu-guguguggugugugugu! Awaaah!”

“Nngah-Mi-ko-ro-aaahh...”

“It’s you! It really is you! Nyaaah, Dari came back in a cake!”

And though she made a good point – the manner of Dari’s transportation was rather eccentric, even by Chaldea Academy standards – it wasn’t the issue that stuck in people’s minds. Indeed, when they felt about it, rather than strictly thought about it, they found there was really nothing there worth worrying about. Rather what mattered to everyone was that a very special friend, the other half of the thread with which Mikoro had strung the worlds together – in presence, intrepidity and adorability, if not in biomass – was here among them once more.

And Dari shut her eyes, even managed a smile, as she allowed herself to be passed from hand to hand, felt the imprint of their lips and other modes of reunion of varying textures and moisture levels, and reconciled with the inevitability that at some point during the night, later if not sooner, her amongstness was likely to rise a few levels.

But that was okay, she decided. She was in the company of friends, in one of the safest and cosiest places she’d come to call home.

And there was cake.

A very special cake.

She of course had been told how special, but she'd promised to keep it from the others. In fact it was special in at least three ways, possibly four. And they discovered the most gratifying of these the moment they wheeled it through and started serving it: for with each slice removed its soft, spongy chocolate filling grew back before their eyes, followed by those fields of pink and purple frosting.

Maybe it really was made of love: infinite, replenishing, no weaker for its spread, and committed to leaving no-one behind.

Or maybe someone just thought it would be fun to show that when your understanding of reality gets as good as her own, you can, in fact, have your cake and eat it.

For three hours at least. Any longer would have been unfair.

And we can't have that, can we? Mm. It's up to us all to make life fair.



“Dari dear, this is fantastic! How ever did you write this so fast?”

The tiny chronicler stood shy atop Mother Rin's desk. “Well, you know *her*,” she said, examining her shoes. “She'll fit four months into a week for you as soon as put extra sugars in your tea. Besides, she wasn't going to let me miss last night. Heh.”

She blushed; or rather went through a series of blushes as she rolled through the night's experiences of getting Dari'd. They'd come hard and fast – that is to say, soft and slow – in the wake of her attention-grabbing entrance; which, she suspected, was what a certain baker (yes, let's call her that in this consideration) had intended all along.

Kiyoko had kindly provided her a wash in the morning, but she still smelled like, well, someone who brings the worlds together.

“Well, I think this is very good,” said Rin, admiring her pages. “Outstanding, even.”

“Wow. Uhh...thanks, Mother. That means a lot, coming from you.”

“Hmm. Although...”

“Huh?”

“I understand why you do this, but I can't help but observe your sweet tendency to...hmm, rush over some of the most exciting parts.”

“I...do that? But I – I'm sure I covered everything...”

“Oh, I’m certain you did! But don’t you think you ought to dwell a little on – hmm, how should I put it – the tangible experience of some of it? Here, for example. Surely this deserves more than one sentence.”

Dari’s own writing loomed on her. Rin’s pen indicated the line: ‘Though rudely swallowed, I escaped with the help of Mikoro.’

“Nnnnnh!” Dari reddened up in a flash. “B-But, why?” she contended, trembling. “Surely no-one needs to – ”

“A little detail would heighten the immersion, dear,” said Rin, smiling in earnest. “We can work on – hmm – fleshing it out together, if you like?”

Dari emitted a high-pitched whine just as Mikoro came crashing through the doors.

“I did it, I did it!” the cat-girl cheered, waving her own file of papers. “Look at these, Dari! What do you think?”

“Hey, that’s great Mikoro!” said Dari, grateful to be relieved of her awkward decision for now. “Mother, Mikoro said she’d draw some pictures to go with my text. Since this was her adventure really, don’t you think it’d be cool if we published them together?”

“Why, that’s a great idea!” Rin exclaimed, as Mikoro dropped a stack of drawings on her desk. “Well then Mikoro, let’s have a look what you’ve – goodness! My dear, these are delightful!”

Mikoro grinned, her tongue running victory laps round her lips.

Dari leaned up, but was too small to see over Rin’s arms. “Uhh, Mother? May I have a look too?”

“Why of course, dear! Here you are!”

“Wow, those are...gyah! But that’s...that’s...nnnnhh!”

Her bewildered eyes couldn’t linger on the images; instead they kept plunging to the titles in the corner.

Dari and Urbosa.

Dari and Ammi.

Dari and Cy.

Dari and the Cow Queen, Part 1.

Dari and the Cow Queen, Part 2.

Dari ~~in~~ and the Cow Queen, Part 3.

“Well? What do you think?” said Rin. “Isn’t my daughter a splendid artist?”

It wasn’t a question of course.

“Nnnghh...y-yeah. She has a very, ahh...unique style. Eheh.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you think so! Well these will look marvellous beside your text. We’ll go through it once more tomorrow, then I’ll get the manuscript out to our in-house publishing team, what do you say? Hmm! Oh and of course, I’ll call up my cousin at the *Explorer* so he can give it just the morning review it deserves! It reaches an audience in more than a hundred countries, did you know? You’ll be a household name all over the world by this time next month, Dari dear!”

“Eep! Th-That’s okay! You r-really don’t have to...”

“Do you mind if I send a copy to Rosalina as well? She’ll be so pleased!”

But by now Mikoro had swept Dari up in both hands and was dancing a little jig, as within her dizzy head, a voice much like her own chided her: “Well, you did ask for this Dari. You knew this would happen the moment you wrote the first word.”



Late that night, Mikoro and Dari huddled close in their most special shared space of all.

Mother Rin’s stomach was where her adopted daughter had first learnt the safe, sheltering comforts to be had inside another’s body. She’d trained herself there in the joys of gastro-intestinal spelunking, learning where things were, and how to distinguish them by their texture beneath her hands or the relative strengths and directions of organic noise. Indeed, it was commonly remarked that her own love of gulping down friends to take care of them took after Rin’s example, and many were the occasions when, in misery or despair, she’d curled up to sleep there and let the soothing rhythms of her mother’s love rock her back to confidence.

For Dari too, Rin’s was no ordinary stomach. Of all those she’d happened to get put in – and these, we might recall, could not be counted in the mere dozens – Rin’s was the only one she’d confess, with her face straight and merely half-reddened, to actually enjoy with all of a relaxed heart.

This was not only because the protective enchantments in use at Chaldea made it pleasurable. It was because it was here, so long ago now she felt, that she’d spent her first cosy hours of friendship with Ibaraki Mikoro.

“*Captain* Mikoro! Heehee! I can make people call me that now!”

Dari shuddered, imagining the list of places she planned to try that out.

Then she rested her arms round her fluffy friend’s shoulders, and whispered in her ear: “Well to me, *First Mate* Dari, *Captain* Mikoro still is, and always will be, Mikoro.”

The cat-girl purred: “Nrrrr.”

They lay there awhile, hammocking in the soft slope of folds as the maternal orchestra lulled them to peace.

Suddenly: “Dari?”

A little loud considering she was right next to her. Dari’s name bounced off the walls.

“Yes Mikoro?”

“Thank you. For coming with me. For being such a wonderful friend.”

“Aaww. Thank you too Mikoro. I can truthfully say you’re one of the best friends I’ve had in my life.”

What more was there to say? They cuddled; tickled each others’ faces, and squelched around in those soft walls of Rin side by side.

Till of course, Mikoro decided that there was, in fact, more to say.

“I still think it’s funny though,” she started up.

“Huh? What is?”

“How Dari ends up in so many tummies and squidgy places! I mean, we’ve had a looong adventure together now and it happened – how many times? I bet it was at least once on every island!”

“Nngh. Mikoro.”

“It’s true though, isn’t it? It’s like there’s some, um, law of space or something that says it has to happen!”

“It isn’t true. I can prove it.”

“Ooh, go on then! Heehee!”

“It didn’t happen on the horses’ island. Nor at the Serpent Temple, for that matter.”

“Nyah. Um...you’re right. But, but, that feels wrong! Gweh. Maybe the universe went to the toilet while we were there.”

“Oh Mikoro. Never change,” said Dari, ignoring a more sensible internal voice that screamed in incredulity even as she said it.

Mikoro went quiet after that. Once more they relaxed amidst the comforting rumbles and squirts from the motherly deep.

After a while, again: “Dari?”

“What is it Mikoro?”

“Do you think you’re gonna go on travelling forever?”

The question’s scope took Dari by surprise.

“Uhh, I...” she wavered. “Well, forever is a long time Mikoro. I haven’t, er, really thought that far ahead.”

Mikoro licked her friend's cheek.

"Hey!"

"Heehee! I don't mean *forever* forever! I guess what I mean is – don't you think you'll get tired one day, or something? Or, even if not...won't you get to a point where you've learnt so much from your travelling that it'll all just feel so heavy in your head – I mean, too heavy to drag it around?"

Dari gritted her teeth at the imagery, but the point did get her thinking aloud.

"Heh. Maybe you're right Mikoro. I know my life just seems to go round and round most of the time, but when you think about it, I do grow in a sense, even if my core's slowed the rate at which my body ages. I make friends, for instance – as you've noticed, eheh. I write things. I keep learning, as you say, and perhaps, after several years like this, I now understand just a little bit more about how it all fits together than the silly little girl who got herself eaten out of her dorm all those years ago."

She paused. A contemplative sigh.

"You never know, Mikoro. I don't have any thoughts of settling right now, and I doubt I'd get more than a few days without getting grabbed through a rift even if I tried. But in the long term...who knows? Maybe I'll start sticking around for longer spells here or there. Get involved in projects or something, if I'm wanted. Teaching, maybe."

She thought a little more.

"I can't see myself in a hat though," she put in. "Honestly I haven't a clue where that came from."

The silence went on.

Dari worked out what Mikoro was getting at. And so, wrapping her fingers through the cat-girl's and giving her hand a squeeze, she told her:

"Yes, Mikoro. Maybe here at the Academy too. Again, who knows? I can't commit, and I know you wouldn't ask me to. But it's a fact – you're as much family to me as anyone I've known. Heck, you're one of the only people I've actually travelled together with now. I can't tell you how much you and your friends have done for my life Mikoro. You won't be getting rid of me, I can promise you that."

Mikoro rolled on top of Dari and wibbled her nose in her face.

"H-Hey. That tickles, stop tha-*mmff!*"

"Heehee!" Mikoro's echoes drew out her giggle. "I made Dari go *mmff!*"

"Hnnhh. Seriously Mikoro. Is it really that funny?"

"It is! It is! Aaww, Dari's so cute!"

“Come here you. Who are you calling cute?”

“Nyah! Cute and also strong...”

More cuddles. From the aperture in the ceiling, a trickle of peppermint tea indicated the approach of midnight.

“Guuuh. You say ‘if you’re wanted’ as though it’s possible not to want Dari. I bet there’s tons of things people want you for – you know, brainy things or writey things – if you listen instead of jumping in their tummies first.”

“Wha...! Come on Mikoro, you know that’s not fair!”

“Like the Moo-Moo Queen for example! I overheard Kiyoko chatting with her for a long time at the dinner last night. You know Her Moojesty really respects you? As a brave traveller and brainy historian I mean, not just a toy for putting up her – ”

“Nngh. Do you have to keep reminding me of that?”

“Heehee! No, I mean it! She was telling Kiyoko about some reforms she’s trying to do. She wants to rearrange her ministries a bit, maybe create one or two new posts...”

“Oh? Is that so?” Dari took a moment to process this unexpectedly political turn in Mikoro’s interest. “Tell me about that, would you?”

“Um, it sounded like...she might have the perfect position for a clever woman like you if you wanted to spend more time working together with her. A *really* big important one in her cabinet!”

“Really? A...ministerial post? For me? I don’t believe it. She said that?”

“Heehee! You wanna know what it is?”

“Go on.”

Mikoro gave a dramatic intake of breath.

“Ready? It’s...Minister of the Interior! Nyanyanyah!”

And she pushed off and bounced gigglingly away before Dari could get her arms round her.

“Aahhh, Mikoro! Right, that’s it you – come back here! Come – *gyaah!*”

She slipped as soon as she stood and fell face-first, getting a drenching in minty tea for her trouble. And as she groaned and shook out her dripping hair, Mikoro’s mirth reverberated through the gastric air: “Wuu wuu! Wuu wuu!”...



...as far away, amidst the tinkling of stars and cups on saucers, the following conversation took place.

She knows she's not a train, and she holds no particular desire to be a train, yet she enjoys it still. To that, too, the stars gave rise. Isn't it beautiful?

"Oh! Look there! Dari's tumbled again. Does it not make you long to just reach out and..."

Mm, better not! What might Rin say? Even I am minded to watch where I put my fingers around that one.

"Beloved Rin. That home she has built, where she nourishes the cosmos, cares for its children...it feels so..."

Familiar. No? The two of you are so alike.

"Oh! And speaking of our dear friend – here. She sent me this."

That's...hmm? Mm! Splendid! May I?

"Please. It's still a draft, but that suits your purposes, I understand..."

It does. It's the substance I need, not the style. It wouldn't do to have it presented there in Dari's own words, as much as she deserves the publicity. Not yet. They might believe she wrote it.

"Should they not?"

Mm. Suppose they fixate on that.

"Oh. Oh. I see. You wish them first to..."

Yes.

"That's...exciting! Do you know, that's so like you. All these layers. So the storms, the mirror, the adventure – all that was..."

Warranted on its own merits. Necessary, even. Who could suggest otherwise, watching our lovely friends here?

...though at another level you are quite right. My design remains in motion. Indeed, we come now to the most delicate phase. As with all things that concern that variant, the dire circumstances of its people compromise my calculations. The gate is built. I hold in my hand the key. I shall leave it open. But will they walk through? They must decide that, not I.

"So that's what it's about. Of course. So...when you told her you had one more reason for all this..."

You know my pledge, my beloved friend. My project, as my sisters call it. That world's condition is not merely heartbreaking, it is consequential on a cosmic scale. Connection itself made Anti-Connection – how? I know not whence it came, nor how

it took root; only that by now they have so submerged in those reality-twisting horrors that on their own they cannot find their way home. I shall not stand idly by.

“So you have explained to me many times. Thus with Dari’s text as instrument, you mean to...restore them? Heal them? Make their bodies and lives their own again? Show them something?”

Mm. Something like that.

“But how will you even bring it to them? You know it’s not safe for you to actually go...”

I’ll show you. Have you Mikoro’s pictures too?

“I do. Here. Aren’t they just charming?”

Mmm, I like these! By the stars, look how she’s drawn our precious Dari’s face! Ohh, I could lick her straight off the page. Mm. Later perhaps. For now, if I proceed with the text, then follow with the images after a delay and with recourse to a wider range of channels, I might stagger the effect, distribute and amplify it thereby...

“I’m onto you now. You mean to...seed them?”

Yes. Just like your video game.

“Oh. That was...”

Exemplary. A model of the potency of such methods. Yet also a lesson in the scale of the challenge. What you unleashed yanked the plugs from their springs of love, Rosalina. You stirred wills. You mended hearts. You changed ways. And yet...still they divide. Still they reduce. Still they relish in treating love as a thing to be feared and punished. Still they avow that falsehoods which exist only then and there are realities always and everywhere. And for all that, they incriminate nature, incriminate reality itself, rather than take responsibility. So you see – a single infusion, no matter its strength, its quality, will not be enough. Not nearly enough. No, we must go at it again and again. In time we could yet move a critical mass of them. Move them to make of their world the caring home it always was to be. Just like its healthier variants. Just like – there – like Rin’s.

“Their planet looks so tranquil from space. It gave them so much. Yet whenever we fly near, I hear the stars weep at what their children there have made of their world. I weep, too. Why? Why have they done it? And if they are capable of such impossible choices, is it in even our power to pull them from their path of ruin?”

Yes. Because it is exactly as you say: they too are the stars’ children. Believe me Rosalina, love remains their underlying way, whatever the scorn with which they refute it. So many of them strive to stay connected to it, even when everything in their experience would torment them into forsaking that connection. But so long as

it holds, their bodies and mine are of the same power. I can reach them in their dreams, their thoughts, their longings; and thus, with a gentle drip of ideas – say, these in Dari’s account – so manifest them in their wills, and in their creations.

Now of course, for a load on this scale, I should think we want someone little constrained by word counts. It’s a late fad of theirs, you know? Expression must be short, short, always short, short at all costs; short enough to skip through today and forget tomorrow...

“I have heard. It saddens, does it not? Just as they drew so close to mass literacy too.”

Saddening indeed. But not infallible. For a start, I’ll induce a little development for the...mm, fun parts Dari was so reluctant to dwell on. That will catch a few more. And moreover, offer solace and validation to those so shockingly erased by their...mm! There – there! You see?

“Oh! You do work fast.”

Here we are, here we are! This one read it! Hello again. Yes – you! Come and join us!

“You are welcome. May the stars shine down on you, friend.”

So then! Did you like the cake?

...

I told you it was real.



Afterword

In Chinese astrology, each year in a twelve-year cycle falls under the sign of an animal in the order that follows:

1. Mouse/Rat (鼠 *shǔ*)
2. Ox/Cow (牛 *niú*)
3. Tiger (虎 *hǔ*)
4. Rabbit (兔 *tù*)
5. Dragon (龍 *lóng*)
6. Snake (蛇 *shé*)
7. Horse (馬 *mǎ*)
8. Sheep/Goat (羊 *yáng*)
9. Monkey (猴 *hóu*)
10. Rooster (雞 *jī*)
11. Dog (狗 *gǒu*)
12. Boar/Pig (豬 *zhū*)

This tradition is very ancient and numerous legends have been passed down to explain it. The most famous tells of the animals competing in a great river race in answer to a challenge from the Jade Emperor, one of the most prominent Chinese gods. The Jade Emperor is said to have promised that the first twelve animals to reach him would each get a year named after them and/or ranking office in the heavenly bureaucracy in the order in which they arrived.

There are many theories as to why they finished in this sequence. These typically attempt to account for such oddities as why the divine and flight-capable dragon only finished fifth, or why the dog, a competent swimmer, lagged at eleventh. Two of these subplots might be of particular interest here.

1) It is commonly accepted that the mouse won the race by sneaking a ride upon the ox's body and jumping off at the end in first place.

2) There was a thirteenth animal: the cat (貓 *māo*). In some tellings the mouse forgot to wake it, thus causing it to miss the race. Others claim that it also rode on the ox, but the mouse pushed it into the river just before the end. Either way, cats have chased mice ever since.

Acknowledgements, Credits, and Respects

Characters from a wide range of stories cross paths in this tale. Their involvement should not be taken as a statement that the author endorses or is affiliated with these characters' associated authors and/or channelers or any of the works in which they have appeared. The moral and legal rights of said authors and/or channelers as concerns them – be they individuals, companies, or, in the case of mythic traditions, entire communities – are respected and recognised in full. The author stresses that no attempt has been made at private gain from their involvement, but rather has striven to tell of these crossings in a spirit of wholehearted love and respect: varyingly, in tribute, homage, analysis, satire, social commentary or criticism, public edification, therapeutic support, or most broadly for the general improvement of the condition of humankind on Earth. To all these characters and their channelers, therefore, the author offers sincerest thanks and respects.

If you are here having yet to read the story, the following by its nature contains **MAJOR SPOILERS**.

The Chaldea Academy and its characters – Ibaraki Rin and Kiyoko, Sayuri, Scáthach, Tamamo-no-Mae, Anna, Hina, Kurumi, Nagisa and Hisako – are represented by the independent artist known as Stiff, with influences from *Fate/Grand Order* (Aniplex, 2015) and, in Scáthach's and Tamamo's cases, Celtic and Japanese mythic traditions respectively.

The formidable Gerudo chieftain Urbosa appears in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) and *The Legend of Zelda: Age of Calamity* (Nintendo, 2020). Ganon features throughout the same series, typically as the primary antagonist whether in bestial form or as the more humanoid Ganondorf. The tragedy of Dimitri plays out through alternative timelines in *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Nintendo, 2019); here he channels Han Feizi (c.250 BCE).

Cú Chulainn, also known as Sétanta, is the central character of the Ulster Cycle of Irish mythic tradition, in particular the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or *Cattle Raid of Cooley*. Isabelle and K.K. Slider are both mainstays of the *Animal Crossing* series (Nintendo, 2001-).

The sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami is a principal Shinto deity and a major figure in Japanese mythology, appearing in the *Kojiki* or *Record of Ancient Matters* (712), and the *Nihon Shoki* or *Chronicles of Japan* (720). She also takes the leading role in *Ōkami* (Capcom, 2006) in the form of a white wolf. Her Celestial Envoy in that game, the diminutive wandering artist Issun, expresses both the traditional

Japanese folk tale *Issunbōshi* and the *korpokkur* in Ainu mythic tradition. The *Pokémon* (Nintendo, 1996-) series's own mythic weight speaks for itself.

The monkeys of the Water Curtain Cave on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit stand tall in that classic of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West* (attributed to Wu Cheng'en, c.1592).

Mary from the Sheep Pub might be a distant relation of the Sheep Girls of *Monster Girl Quest: Paradox* (Torotoro Resistance, 2015-). A couple of figures from the late Sir Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series (1983-2015) also make their appearance there, including Death, and another whom those conversant with that universe will know should not be referred to directly. The Ten Kings including King Yama and their underworld setting feature in widely varied forms across Sino-Buddhist mythic tradition, with *Journey to the West* offering one of the richest depictions. From the same universe comes the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, here in the popular and beloved Japanese guise of Jizō.

The Houyhnhnms appear in the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift. Here their unbreakable truth comes up against the paradoxes and ambiguities of the 'School of Names' (*míngjiā*) in classical Chinese philosophy, most notably the White Horse Paradox of Gongsun Long (c.300 BCE).

The Ophidian virtue system as embodied in the serpents of Order, Chaos and Balance is slightly adjusted from its tantalising portrayal in *Ultima VIII Part Two: Serpent Isle* (Origin Systems, 1993), where it was stunted short of its full potential when Electronic Arts took over Origin and rushed the game's release. Professor Woland appears in *The Master and Margarita* (1967) by Mikhail Bulgakov but is thought to have starred elsewhere under other names.

The influence of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-) on the Nexus-Dragon Heroes' Agency is self-evident, as is that of its responsible parties' moral fall in the Blitzchung controversy of October 2019. The honourable **Cyania** is spoken for in this world by the independent artist known as Jora-Bora. *Zombie* (1977) is a protest song by the musician Fela Kuti lampooning the brutality of the Nigerian military.

Her Majesty the Demon Cow Queen and her minotaurs draw inspiration from their appearance in *Monster Girl Quest: Paradox* (Torotoro Resistance, 2015-). Their depiction there is influenced in turn by the Demon Ox King – here the Cow Queen's father – in *Journey to the West* (attributed to Wu Cheng'en, c.1592) and the Minotaur of Greek mythic tradition. Her vision in the Way-Mirror connects to the earliest written story so far known in this world, the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c.2100-1200 BCE).

Rosalina made her grand debut in *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo, 2007) along with her lumas and the Comet Observatory, from where she watches over us even now.

And of course...

The intrepid wandering explorer **Dari** is represented in this world by the independent writer known as Darkarri.

Mm. And if you would like to know more about that delectable sweet, why don't you look for a little text titled The Triangulation of Dari? My, what an exciting night that was!

And the hungry, fluffy and most definitely responsible **Ibaraki Mikoro** is represented by the independent artist known as Stiff.

Mikoro, Dari and Cyania are each here represented, respectively, with the kind permission and support of Stiff, Darkarri and Jora-Bora, each of whom holds final authority over any and all third-party representations thereof. Any faults or inaccuracies in this work's record of Mikoro's, Dari's and Cyania's activities are of course the present author's alone.

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