

# Heart of the Mountain

By Keith Ryan Kappel

*Long ago, a powerful mountain spirit looked to the sky and longed to visit the Heavens. Rooted to the ground as she was, she raised her mountain home high into the sky so she could see the kingdom of the gods for herself. Her mountain grew mighty, visible to even those dwelling above the clouds.*

*Lady Sun, angry with the spirit's defiant act, sent down her son, the Lord of Flame, to protect the secrets of the Heavens. He fought the mountain spirit, but as the Lord of Flame raised his fiery sword to strike the killing blow, the impulsive god stayed his hand. He was unable to kill the mountain spirit for her curiosity. Instead, the two went inside the mountain, and the Lord of Flame shared his stories of Heaven. The two soon fell in love and were married.*

*Now living in more of a volcanic crater than a mountain peak, the pair forges wondrous armaments of peerless craftsmanship for the gods from the molten slag. The fire in the mountain's heart has since never guttered or dimmed.*

*It was the fruits of this passion that had drawn Yoritomo, Captain of Captains, to the mountain's dark and secretive interior. This is where our story begins.*

---

"Any time now, dearest wife!" Yoritomo's attention was focused on the fray around him. He evaded the black-sashed monks' flurries of kicks and drove his fist into the nearest one. Linmei, Lady of the Isles of Spice and Silk, studied a great black stone in the center of the chamber and smoldered instead of answering.

"The kami are restless," Kudaka the Stormweaver warned from beside him. Her lithe arms were as effective at brawling as they were at honoring the spirits. "Linmei's map has 'em scrambling like crabs on a carcass. Can't say I like it."

"Quit your worrying, Priest," Yoritomo couldn't keep the smile out of his voice as he felled the last monk with a face-crunching knee strike. They would tackle any problem that came their way. The tide comes and goes as it pleases, and just then what pleased Yoritomo most was the thought of taking a spark from the mountain's inner flame.

"Guiding star of my sky? Any luck?" Yoritomo turned to see his wife poring over the scroll.

"Oh, I'll guide you somewhere, all right." Linmei grumbled. "Quiet, I'm thinking!" For hours, they'd followed her map, written in the language of the Isles spoken before the Fall of the Kami—the ancestral language of the kōmori. For hours, the island's secrets had stymied her: a breakwater gate sealed to entry, ancient roads grown over, and many dead-end tunnels into the mountain. Then, they had been set on by the island's guardians, and Linmei's ire had truly





begun to boil. By the time they reached this chamber, the sweltering weather seemed pleasant by comparison.

At the center of the room lay a black boulder, wide as a riverboat and shiny as polished silver. Carved into its flat face were images of two large kami and a third smaller one. Surrounding them were two-dozen dials with unfamiliar symbols arranged without a modicum of sense. Above, the ceiling was a clear quartz dome holding back a lake of boiling magma. The sickly orange glow of magma lit stone tables, counters, and chests, sparsely

arranged over smooth marble floors. But the furnishings were unimportant: this stone was the only thing left that stood between Yoritomo and his prize.

“Does your map contain some sort of key to open it?” Yoritomo was glad for his wife’s presence, for her gift for riddles and ciphers had gotten them this far already. At the heart of the mountain, fire and earth’s private secrets lay hidden for only the most daring to discover.

“A key of sorts. It’s a star map from our ancestors’ farthest travels. We can’t see these parts of the Heavens from the Islands of Spice and Silk, so I’m not familiar with the stars,” Linmei explained, brushing aside Yoritomo’s hand from the dials. “But I’ve traced the points on the map to represent the constellations on the stone, and it isn’t working.”

“Is that not the Celestial Pillar of Mweneta?” Kudaka offered as she looked at the constellations.

“Of course!” Linmei’s eyes widened, then narrowed. Yoritomo had seen this look many times over the past few years. She would have the seal open soon. “Of course, south is at the top!”

Linmei flipped the map upside down and started busily tracing new constellations.

“Fu-Mo-To! Fu-Mo-To! Fu-Mo-To!” a new group of monks emerged from the cavern behind them. One stepped forward, a mountain of a man who dwarfed even Yoritomo’s prodigious size.

“You do not belong here,” he bellowed.

This was their champion!

Yoritomo grinned his most fearsome smile. Kudaka rolled up her green linen sleeves. Linmei did not flinch from her tracings on the black stone. The monk lowered himself deep into a horse stance. Silence fell over the chamber.

Kudaka mouthed a prayer, then thrust her arms forward. A gale-force wind rushed past Yoritomo toward the monks, who shouted and scattered like gulls chased from a ship’s deck.



Fumoto, however, was unmoved.

Yoritomo took two steps and slid toward the monk, letting the current of Kudaka's winds carry him. As he passed between the monk's legs, he struck a blow most would consider dishonorable—or at least impolite—and nimbly rolled back to his feet before delivering a kick to the back of the leg that drove the monk to his knees. Kudaka's winds abruptly ceased, and Yoritomo's arms encircled the monk's head and throat, squeezing with the power of a raging river.

Seconds later, the oversized monk was unconscious on the stone floor.

"I can't believe that worked," Yoritomo grinned. He turned to face the other monks, who quailed at the sight of his flawless martial prowess. Kudaka gestured up a gale, and the monks immediately took flight. The chamber was now empty, but like the pestering sea-birds they were, the monks would soon grow bold and return to try again.

"It wouldn'ta worked quite so well on some of us," Kudaka chuffed.

"I am well aware of when there is a woman in my presence, Kudaka," Yoritomo answered. "It's why I'm never caught flat-footed!"

"We know you can't resist a pretty face, husband," Linmei rolled her eyes.

All brashness, Yoritomo responded. "No one will best me, wife, no matter how beautiful."

"Not the so-called Princess of Pirates?" Linmei's jibe had more bite than expected.

"That was business!" Yoritomo stammered, shock written across his face.

He stepped close to her until only the chart separated them. He gently brushed away some of the soot from her face, letting her unmatched beauty shine through. They locked eyes, and for a moment, shared a secret smile. Then she pulled away, resuming her work on the dials.

"It was just some liquor to celebrate an arrangement," Yoritomo continued. "A little boasting about the time we took that Saamrajya ship, then a quick jaunt to Kirtinaramto to prove that boast, then some more liquor that we stole, a shark hunt, and then a little celebratory liquor. The rest after that is...hazy, but I know nothing happened between us."

The so-called Princess of Pirates was Damayanti of the Ivory Kingdoms, also known as Damayanti the Red. Some claim that she leads a fleet larger than Yoritomo's. But that depends on which ships you count, and they can hardly claim to rival the Mantis's courage!

"Yoritomo, the heart—"

"Yes, the heart can lead one astray, but if anything had happened, you would know of it." Yoritomo fixed her with his most sincere gaze. She rolled her eyes, as she was so accustomed to doing.

"You're a fool. Look!" Linmei grabbed his wide chin and turned his head toward the mandala. Where the representation of the earth kami stood, a cavity had opened in its rocky torso, revealing a lever. Yoritomo's eyes lit up.

Linmei reached her hand into the figure's chest and pulled the lever. The giant seal in the boulder's face spun and belched an angry blast of heat around its edges. It opened to reveal the jade of heavenly memory: the Heart of the Mountain.



It was beautiful—a flat disc of red jade nearly as large as an open scroll polished to translucency. With this treasure, the prowess, bravery, and honor of the Mantis Clan could no longer be ignored. The Mantis would be respected, not thought of as criminals and pirates, but as equals in the eyes of the Emperor. It would set right all the insults Yoritomo's ancestors had suffered, and they would no longer be forgotten as honorless exiles.

Yoritomo reached in and took the Heart into his hands.

"Yoritomo, wait! Don't grab—"

But Kudaka's warning was too late! A sickening crunch drew all eyes to the quartz dome overhead, where a large crack was slowly beginning to spread. Linmei and Kudaka's eyes turned in unison to Yoritomo in aggravation, and even the Captain of Captains shuddered—but only a bit. Yoritomo stuffed the Heart into a satchel.

"We need to run, now," Linmei pointed down the tunnel. Yoritomo nodded and sprinted after her with Kudaka ever at his side. After a minute of racing through the cavern, they reached a fork in the tunnel.

Linmei stopped and scanned her map, which she thought she had remembered exactly. Unfortunately, she had. "This tunnel isn't even on the map!"

"Fresh air, this way." Kudaka gestured to the right. A loud crash echoed through the tunnel, and a violent shudder passed under their feet, as if something large was passing beneath them. "Let's go!"

Behind them, an eerie orange glow brightened. After a few moments, thick black smoke filled the tunnel, and soon all three were coughing and wheezing. After several complicated twists and turns, they found an air shaft within reach.

The opening was small, but Linmei and Kudaka fit through easily enough. After no small amount of pulling, Yoritomo's broad-shouldered frame passed through as well. They sought refuge on a rocky outcropping above, which extended over the water of the bay where the *Bitter Wind* awaited them. Suddenly, an explosion of lava erupted out of the air shaft, carving a fiery path to the water.

Fresh, cool air had never tasted so sweet. Yoritomo wanted nothing more than to lie peacefully on the outcropping with these two women, their prize now in hand. They could overlook the narrow inlet that circled the western side of the mountain and drink clear water until their stomachs burst. Unfortunately, they had only minutes before the monks who had fled made their way around and caught up to them. Seaward along the inlet, other monks already busied themselves on both sides of the breakwater gate. Below, on Yoritomo's left, the *Bitter Wind* was at half-sail. It would pass the outcropping they stood on in moments.

"Linmei, how are you feeling?" The mountain belched black smoke. Soon, the gates out of the bay would be closed to them.

She sighed between deep gulps of cool air and glared at him.

"Like you didn't think this through."



"But we need to get through that gate."

Kudaka gestured to the column of smoke. "I think that gate's the least of our problems." She spat a glob of black ash onto the rocks. "The children of Tenyama, Kagu-tsuchi, and Ryuji're making war o'er that way. None'a that will involve listening to me."

Yoritomo tightened the latch on his satchel. His quest to elevate his clan to greater status drove him on, and he would gladly shoulder any risk to lead his people to that future. But, should they not live to see it, would the victory be worth the price? Was this mystery he now held in his satchel worth Linmei's life, or Kudaka's?

Linmei leaned on a rock, still coughing the ash from her lungs and brushing the dust from her kimono. Kudaka had her eyes closed and was trying to calm her breathing. Yoritomo held himself up as if running from an exploding mountain were nothing more than a brisk jog, but his muscles ached something fierce. His determination and bravery had helped get the Heart into their hands, but his wife was right: he had never thought this through. Now, they needed a plan. "My fearless and cunning wife, what do you think is our best bet off this rock?"

"Why don't you ask Damayanti the Red to solve this problem for you?" Linmei hissed.

"What? Nothing happened! It was a business arrangement!" Yoritomo said.

"I know, dammit!" Linmei caught her breath and pushed herself to her feet to stand before him. "That's what I'm angry about! How did you let her swindle you into such poor terms again? You should have consulted me!"

"What's wrong with the terms we got? They agreed to joint raids in Swaramar Bay. Leaving the Kailash Strait to them was more than fair!" Yoritomo responded with equal intensity.

"Joint raids means we'll be fighting them as often as not! And the Kailash Strait gives them direct access to the Venkar Islands, which are their ancestral grounds—we could have gotten a much better deal for access to those!" Linmei glared up at her husband. "This is exactly how we end up in situations like this one."

They continued arguing like this for several minutes. When those two quarreled, as Kudaka said, it was best to just sit back and let them burn their conflict out. Fortunately, such spats usually don't take place on an angry mountain.

"Linmei, please." Yoritomo finally pleaded. "Can we deal with one thing at a time?"

Linmei's sigh was loud and full of frustration.

"Fine. I can get us through the gate; just keep the ship heading out of the bay." She jabbed a finger at his chest. "Next time you conduct business, run it by me first. I don't want you losing the whole fleet to your bravado." She turned back toward the mountains and darted inside one of the caves.

"You can't tell me what to do!" Yoritomo shouted after her, hands on his hips. "I'm a daimyō!" But Linmei was already gone. Yoritomo and Kudaka stood together, waiting for the Bitter Wind to pass below the rocky outcropping.



"Don't you say it," Yoritomo warned. Long moments passed in silence as their glorious vessel drew into sight. The *Bitter Wind* was marvelous, a hybrid of gaijin and Rokugani construction of Yoritomo's own design. Her keel ran deeper in the water than most Rokugani craft, but Yoritomo had achieved a stability and maneuverability any captain would envy. Five broad green square sails can turn the slightest breeze into incredible speed, particularly with Kudaka's help.

"Smooth as a cloudless sail 'cross Dark Water Bay." She was smirking to herself, but he noticed.

"I'm so lucky to have an advocate like you in my marriage."

Kudaka made an exaggerated bow.

The ship pulled up below them. Yoritomo waved at his favorite cousin, the dashing Byoki, who was helping the tiller crew at the aft end of the ship to guide it along the rocks.

"Can your old bones handle this jump, or do I need to carry you?"

Kudaka spat at Yoritomo's feet and leapt off the rocks. Yoritomo followed, landing hard and rolling across the deck. Kudaka landed moments after him, as lightly as if stepping off a wagon. The two approached Byoki, loyal crewmate and steady hand, who had expertly guided the ship in their absence.

"Where's Linmei?" Byoki asked. "And what are we going to do about the breakwater gate? They're already shutting it; we'll never get there in time."

"Just keep us off the rocks, cousin, and make all possible speed." Yoritomo clapped loyal Byoki on the shoulder. "Linmei has the gate covered."

Kudaka stood behind them, looking out over the fantail of the *Bitter Wind*, communing with the kami warring across the inlet. She looked stronger now that she was back on the water. Yoritomo placed a hand gently on her back, not wanting to interrupt her arranged fingers and mumbled prayers. The inlet waters were choppy than they should be, like a long strip of

spiked armor.

Kudaka looked up to Yoritomo, her eyes wide in fear.

A moment later the mountain roared like a tiger! Arcs of orange and black erupted from its peak. Boulders and sprays of lava rained down like a volley of fiery arrows. The water crashed and sprayed in front of the ship as boulders the size of castles slammed into the inlet and filled it with smoke, fire, and stone. Through the haze, the sky glowed like a grim sunset.





"Kudaka!" Yoritomo shouted for her as the ship lurched beneath him. Without visibility, the ship caromed off the new rocky navigation hazards, knocking crew off their feet and chipping the hardened wood of the hull. Kudaka turned and gestured wildly in the hopes of catching the attention of some kami, any kami, but none answered. The crew was struggling to regain their feet. They looked scared. Whatever Kudaka was trying to do, it wasn't working fast enough.

"Hull teams below!" Yoritomo shouted his orders with the unquestionable authority of command. "Main sail at full, douse the rest!" The crew snapped out of their fear at the sound of his voice and attended Yoritomo's orders. He leapt up the aft mast where he hoped to get above the haze and call down bearings.

From his elevated position, Yoritomo could see the gate, already a third of the way shut. It was still perhaps three times as far as Yoritomo could shoot an arrow. Linmei needed to hurry. The ship shuddered as it bounced off another rock, and Yoritomo nearly lost his grip. He scanned what he could see of the water. If they kept to the left, they would soon be out of the rocks and haze.

"Byoki! Thirty degrees to port!" Yoritomo shouted below.

The Bitter Wind veered at his command under Byoki's dutiful hand. Then the mountain erupted again. A stream of lava clawed through the air toward the ship, and briefly all Yoritomo could see were red streaks above him.

"Get below!" Yoritomo shouted. "Everyone get below, now!" He repositioned himself, taking cover behind the mast as molten slop peppered the deck and blistering vapor filled the air. A swirl of wind around Kudaka blasted away the acrid smoke; she was safe, and now Yoritomo could see clearly. The ship was running free, with no hand on the tiller. The molten fire had speckled the deck, and the mainsail was aflame. Screams of the men and women that hadn't made it to cover filled Yoritomo's ears. He knew what he had to do, so he grabbed a line and rappelled back to the deck.

But a spray of orange filled his field of vision and his face exploded in pain. The line snapped and Yoritomo slammed into the deck, clutching his face as agony overwhelmed him.

Byoki shouted for his captain, emerging from the relative safety below. Kudaka splashed a bucket of water in Yoritomo's face and the thin line of lava on his right side steamed and fell away. He wiped away the flaky crust and tried to blink away the pain within his head. The skin felt tight and numb, and his vision was blurred.

"How bad is it?" Yoritomo asked Kudaka.

"You just got a little prettier," Kudaka helped him to his feet. "Will you live?"

Yoritomo grimaced, but nodded. Kudaka took the burned rope from his hand. "Good. I'll tend to that later. Your wife'll kill you if we don't make it out of here. Back to it, captain."

The fresh scar only made Yoritomo's grin the fiercer. Still burning, the ship finally emerged from the haze, but they had been thrown off course and were careening toward the side of the inlet. If someone didn't get on that tiller immediately, they'd be wrecked. It swung freely like an angry serpent, covered in flames.



"All hands, return to your stations!" Yoritomo ordered. "Fire teams, get water on the tiller! Douse the mainsail before we lose it and give me full on the rest!" Byoki snatched up Kudaka's empty bucket and dashed away to refill it. But Yoritomo knew there wasn't time to wait.

He leapt across the cooling lava, narrowly avoiding a searing fate as he grabbed the long end of the tiller and heaved with all his might. Willing himself to ignore the searing pain on his palms, he leaned inward, leveraging his entire body to straighten the ship. But the rudder would not budge. Yoritomo yelled with pain and effort, setting his entire self—ambition and pride and cunning and all the rest—against the rebellious current.

The tiller moved.

The ship began to straighten, but then the ship hit a rock and Yoritomo's feet slipped along the deck. For a moment, the tiller began to shift back to follow the current. The rocky wall loomed large before them. But as his hands bled on the tiller, another pair joined them—Byoki set his grip alongside his captain's and their flesh burned together. Then another pair of hands, and another.

"It's not over yet!" Yoritomo's shout was as much for himself as for his crew. He took a deep breath and pushed his focus past the noise of the desperate crew behind him. He took one step, defying the smug Lion, Crane, Phoenix, and even Scorpion samurai that had stood over him, mocking the Mantis, telling him he was not worthy. He defied the assassins that took his family, the imposter he had called father for years. He defied those who impugned his people's honor. Driven on by his crew's devotion, he forced the tiller to bend to his will. He defied all those who had stood in his way and had told him what couldn't be done. Then he had a vision of Linmei, a brief image of his wife nursing a child while studying an old book. Yoritomo grunted with exertion as he took the final step toward her and the tiller steadied.

The ship pointed toward the breakwater gate once again. Kudaka returned with wetted blankets to smother the remaining flames on the tiller while fresh sailors relieved those who had been straining with Yoritomo. The captain's legs collapsed and he sat on the deck in a momentary heap of exhaustion. He stared at his hands, blackened and burnt, and felt the scar newly seared across his face. He made tight fists, letting the pain feed his will to live. To see the Mantis elevated.

"Cousin, we near the breakwater!" Byoki shouted.

Yoritomo took a breath and stood. The gate was nearly closed, and would lock long before they reached it. Monks lit their arrows and nocked them, rows of tiny flames like candles at a shrine. They'd be in range within moments.

"Lengthen those sails," Yoritomo called out. "I want us making all possible speed!"

"Cousin, what about that gate?" Byoki was genuinely concerned. "Perhaps we could turn back to a cave, wait out the eruption."

"Linmei is coming." Yoritomo stood and watched the breakwater grow larger. He could make out the details of individual monks' faces now with his eye that wasn't swollen shut.



The gate was seconds from closing when the inlet was suddenly filled with a thousand ear-piercing shrieks. A black cloud erupted from the side of the mountain and stretched toward the breakwater, moving too fast to be smoke. The crew collectively gasped.

"Kudaka, what is that?" Byoki pointed to the unnatural black cloud.

"Not my place t'say," Kudaka shrugged, turning her attentions back to the water.

"That is my wife." Yoritomo smiled so hard he felt the skin crack over his right cheek. She was magnificent. Their children would surely rule all of Rokugan.

Byoki stared at him in surprise.

The cloud-that-was-not-smoke lashed out like a whip, expanding, contracting, twisting, turning. It streamed over the breakwater gate and monks cried out and leapt into the inlet waters to avoid it. It screeched through the sky like a million doomed, angry souls—bats.

Then Byoki gasped in recognition. "A *kōmori*!"

"Yes!" Yoritomo laughed, all his pain forgotten. "Like in the stories, the *yōkai* who helped our ancestor Kaimetsu-Uo first survive on the islands."

The gate was now cleared of monks, so the bats that had driven them off dissipated back into the surrounding rocks. All except for amidships, low on the deck, where a thick swarm of the creatures swirled like a waterspout. Yoritomo grabbed a scorched blanket off the tiller and entered the cloud. When the bats dispersed, Yoritomo stood there, his arms around his wife. The crew were terrified, but still had the sense to be grateful for the woman that had made possible their escape.

"Brace for impact!" Byoki shouted. Yoritomo grabbed a line and held onto his wife. The Bitter Wind smashed into the unlocked gate. The ship shuddered, but the gate opened. They were free. A great cheer rang out among the crew.

"Linmei," Yoritomo started, brushing a stray hair from her face. "I was wrong to conduct our business with Damayanti without your counsel."

Linmei looked away, toward the south.

Yoritomo put his forehead to hers. "It won't happen again. I swear it."

Linmei looked back to him and raised an eyebrow.

Yoritomo's eyes were full of mischief. "After all, how are you going to prove you're half the negotiator I am if all the business is left to me?"

Linmei pulled Yoritomo's mouth to hers and kissed him.

"Y'know, the mantis female eats the head of the male after mating," Kudaka offered.

Yoritomo was grinning. They were going to make it out alive. Most of them, anyway.

"Let's get some wind in our sails, Kudaka."

"It ain't over, yet." Kudaka warned.

A mournful wail filled the inlet behind them, though Yoritomo couldn't tell if it was a horn from the monk's village or the mountain itself as it raged to the heavens. Then a deep, resounding, earth-splitting crack echoed from below. Yoritomo watched as the rate of passing shore slowed, stopped, and then, impossibly, began moving backward.



"Kudaka?" Yoritomo hoped he was wrong.

Her eyes went wide. "Maelstrom!"

"We need wind!" Yoritomo shouted, heaving on a line to open his sails more fully. "Lengthen those sails, keep us ahead of the tide!"

The Bitter Wind's sails billowed outward as Kudaka's powers filled them, countering the backward pull of the whirlpool. The ship crept forward slowly. Yoritomo and Linmei worked as one mind, trimming sails and turning them to catch the most wind, trying desperately to hang on against the current dragging them toward certain doom. Byoki manned the tiller, keeping them as stable as any man could as the sea rose against them. Even the mainsail, pocked with holes from lava spray, did its part. For long minutes they labored, the landmarks to either side of the ship unmoving.

The wail sounded again, the trees shook, and the rocks tumbled. Then the current shifted, and the Bitter Wind shot forward like an arrow from a bow. A cheer ended early when the ship grazed a rock formation. Then another rock. They were moving far too fast to avoid all the hazards!

But suddenly the rocks disappeared beneath the water. Yoritomo's orders were swallowed up by the sounds of trees snapping and water rushing. Yoritomo looked behind him. He couldn't see the island. The water behind him was higher than his ship.

"Tsunami!" Yoritomo yelled over the roar of water. "Trim those sails, set storm conditions! Extend the leeboards!" As Yoritomo repeated his instructions, Linmei secured a line to him, herself, and Kudaka. The tenkinja whispered a prayer to the gods of the sea that they would make it safely home.

When the wave passed under them, it tossed and pitched the Bitter Wind as if it were made of paper. The ship bobbed in the pit behind the wave, sinking until Yoritomo's ears popped. His stomach flipped until he felt sick. Then they were rising, so fast even his experienced sea legs ached just standing upright. Then the sea finally flattened out, and they were in the Bay of Black Water, the island already small behind them. Even the mountain seemed half the size it had been mere moments ago. A thin whisker of smoke at its nose and glowing stripes of lava along its sides made it seem like a tiger. One they had barely escaped with their lives.

Yoritomo stood next to Kudaka on the fantail, and the pair watched the horizon. "That wave couldn't make landfall, could it Kudaka?"





"Hard to say." She slumped slightly. "Ain't ever easy to see what your actions will do. It's like tryin' to see the ripples from a stone thrown in choppy water. And you like to toss boulders."

Linmei went to Yoritomo and he held her tight. After a long moment, she broke the embrace to trace the edges of the burn down his right eye and cheek. He gave her a crooked smile. He hoped the scar was as dashing as he imagined. It certainly felt horrific.

Linmei then opened his satchel and removed the jade disc. She flattened the map out, laid the disc over it, and angled it to catch the light. Filtered through the specific red of the unique jade, entirely new symbols and images appeared. As Kudaka joined them over the map, a new puzzle was unfolding. Together, they would solve these puzzles and unlock the secrets of all eleven realms. And next, who knows? Perhaps they will even complete their quest to raise the Mantis and join the Great Clans of Rokugan!

---

The children sitting near the bench sat in silence for a moment. But the moment passed, and one burst forth with a question, breaking the dam for the rest:

"Didn't Yoritomo get his scar dueling Umineko?"

"How much did it hurt to get burned?"

"Where is the red-jade disc now?"

The children's eyes shone with excitement.

Byoki spun the platter he had been holding up as the red-jade disc and pantomimed casting it into the sea, rocking it back and forth gently as it sank beneath invisible waves. "We lost it when we fought the sea spider. Kudaka threw it into its eye to blind it, remember? It fell into the whirlpool, sinking with the monster. I expect it's still down there, a treasure waiting for some new hero to find it. Maybe that'll be you! Now get about your chores."

The children dispersed in a babbling crowd, and Linmei approached Byoki. "That was quite a tale you spun for the children. They'll be asking to see me turn into a cloud or a bat for days, you know, and I won't thank you for that."

Byoki smiled, rubbing the flame-scar on his palm. "Well, they need these kinds of stories. Sets the fire in their bellies, makes them want to find their own treasure. A decksweeper doesn't become a captain in a year. A bunch of pirates don't become a samurai clan in a decade. And it's easy to get too comfortable along the way. Even our champion loves a good tale to remind him what he's chasing. After all, we can't disgrace the memory of everyone who didn't make it by getting lazy now, can we?"