



Return of the Arquebusier

By

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Winter, 2002

Chapter 1: In Search of the Past

Following a disastrous defeat at the walls of Edo, the Emperor was forced to flee before the advancing armies of Lord Eivel to his summer palace at Tosa. Soon afterwards, the remaining loyal bastions in western Japan all fell before the relentless tide of Eivel's dark forces. And despite the fall of Nagato, Shimazu remained defiant against the Emperor...

Four months after the retreat from Kawachi, in a remote stretch on forest, just north of the now abandoned fortified monastery at Nagashima, a small party of armed men advance slowly through the foliage...

[Agador]: Are you sure we are in the right spot?

[Kong]: I'm sure I'm sure...

[Agador]: Time is of the essence... we must try to get back to the ships by nightfall...

[Kong]: I know! I know!

After a few minutes, Kong comes across an area of loose dirt...

[Kong]: Here is one of them!

[Agador]: Great! Start digging!

Kong and some of the men start digging at the site with their shovels.

[Agador]: Move those rocks... they will chip your shovels...

[Kong]: [Turns back to look at Agador] Well...

[Agador]: [Looks away for a second, then looks back] Well... keep it up! Chop, chop!

After a few minutes, the crew lifts a small bag from the hole and hand it to Kong. Kong looks inside and smiles.

[Kong]: We got one!

[Agador]: One down, two to go! Now, where are the others...?

[Kong]: Right around here somewhere...

After several hours, Agador and his men retrieve the other two objects they are looking for.

[Agador]: Now that we have all three... and we have a couple of hours to spend before the ships return...

[Kong]: What?

[Agador]: Kong, I want you to lead the men back to the pickup zone and wait for the ships. I will be right behind you...

[Kong]: Surely, you must be kidding...

[Agador]: No way! I must go check out the old temple... there is something inside that I am need to find... at least I think its there...

[Kong]: We have to go! You said so yourself!

[Agador]: Just go. And take the 3 urns with you. Guard them with your life. If by dusk I have not arrived, depart without me.

[Kong]: But... but...

[Agador]: But nothing. It's an order. Go! Now!

Reluctantly, Kong leads the rest of the men back to shore, where they will await for the ships to pick them up and take them back to Tosa. Meanwhile, Agador heads towards the legendary temple, where he arrives an hour after he split from the rest of the men.

[Agador]: [To himself] Now, if I can only find the old library...

Agador creeps into the dark corridors of the abandoned temple. He goes from room to room searching for signs of the old library. Eventually, he finds a staircase that leads down. He follows the staircase into the darkness.

But, soon he reemerges and ignites a torch. With a light source, he returns to the dark floors beneath. After descending 3 more floors, he finally finds the old library... The dim light of the torch shows hundreds of manuscripts archived in shelves around the cavernous room.

Agador starts to finger through the various manuscripts, anxiously looking for that elusive document...

Three hours later...

[Kong]: Damn! The sun is almost beneath the horizon! Where is Agador...?

[Sailor #1]: Look! I see somebody on the beach...

[Kong]: Huh – Is it Agador?!?

[Sailor #2]: Looks like a woman... in a robe...

The woman on the beach collapses. Minutes later, Agador emerges from the trees and picks her up.

[Kong]: Quick! Send a boat to pick them up!

A rowboat is dispatched from the ship. Soon, Agador and the woman are brought onboard and the ship sets sail for Tosa.

[Kong]: GAH!

[Agador]: [Smiles] He he.

[Kong]: Care to tell me why this little escapade of yours was so important? And who is this woman?

[Sailor #3]: He. He had to make a stop to service the people...

[Sailor #1]: Being of the people...

[Kong]: Gah! Shut up!

The sailors fall silent.

[Agador]: I was searching for this manuscript... The monks at Tosa told me kind of what to look for...

[Kong]: What is in it...?

[Agador]: Remember our encounter with the horseman in Kawachi?

[Kong]: Yeah... who could forget that...

[Agador]: Well, I described the horseman's sword to the monks at Tosa. They said there was a manuscript in Nagashima that contained information about it. I guess the old man recognized something in the description...

[Kong]: OK... so what's the story about the sword...?

[Agador]: Don't know. The manuscript has a picture of the sword, but I can't read the writing... it's in some ancient language or something...

[Kong]: So what good is this piece of papyrus? I can go wipe my arse with it now...!

[Agador]: Not quite yet. I'm afraid that would make it illegible to the monks in Tosa, who promised to decipher it for us...

[Kong]: Illegible? Gah! I can't read it now! And, so what if we know whose sword it was or what the inscription says anyway? How will that help us in the least?

[Agador]: It will give us an insight into the nature of the beast. Now your enemy, Kong, and victory will come easy.

[Kong]: Since when do you quote academic military dogma?

[Agador]: Since I became sei-taisho...

[Kong]: OK Aga-Tzu...

[Agador]: Soon, my son, you will take over...

[Kong]: The horseman is about to destroy the world! And before that we will be skinned alive by Eivel's fanatical peasants! What is there for anybody to take over...?

[Agador]: You always get so hyper whenever we are in danger...

[Kong]: Gah! And the woman...? Who is she, and why is she covered in blood...?

[Agador]: Oh... I came across her on the way back... she was hunched under a bush... hiding from something. She hasn't said a word since I found her save some mad rambling...

[Kong]: What was she muttering...?

[Agador]: Some nonsense about a demon that makes trophies of man...

[Kong]: [Gives Agador a stern look]

[Agador]: Wow! That's the same look my mother gave me when I told her I was joining the Imperial Arquebusiers! She thought I was crazy too... Honestly, though, I did get the feeling I was being followed...

[Kong]: Uh huh.

[Agador]: What?

[Kong]: Did you know we came under attack on the way back to the ships?

[Agador]: What?!?

[Kong]: Three peasants spotted us making our way through the trees and attacked us with their hoes.

[Agador]: [Laughs out loud] You said "hoes"...

[Kong]: They killed two of our workers...

[Agador]: Gah!

[Kong]: We killed them. But the two men were nonetheless killed...

[Agador]: Well, at least they are not military. Peasants...

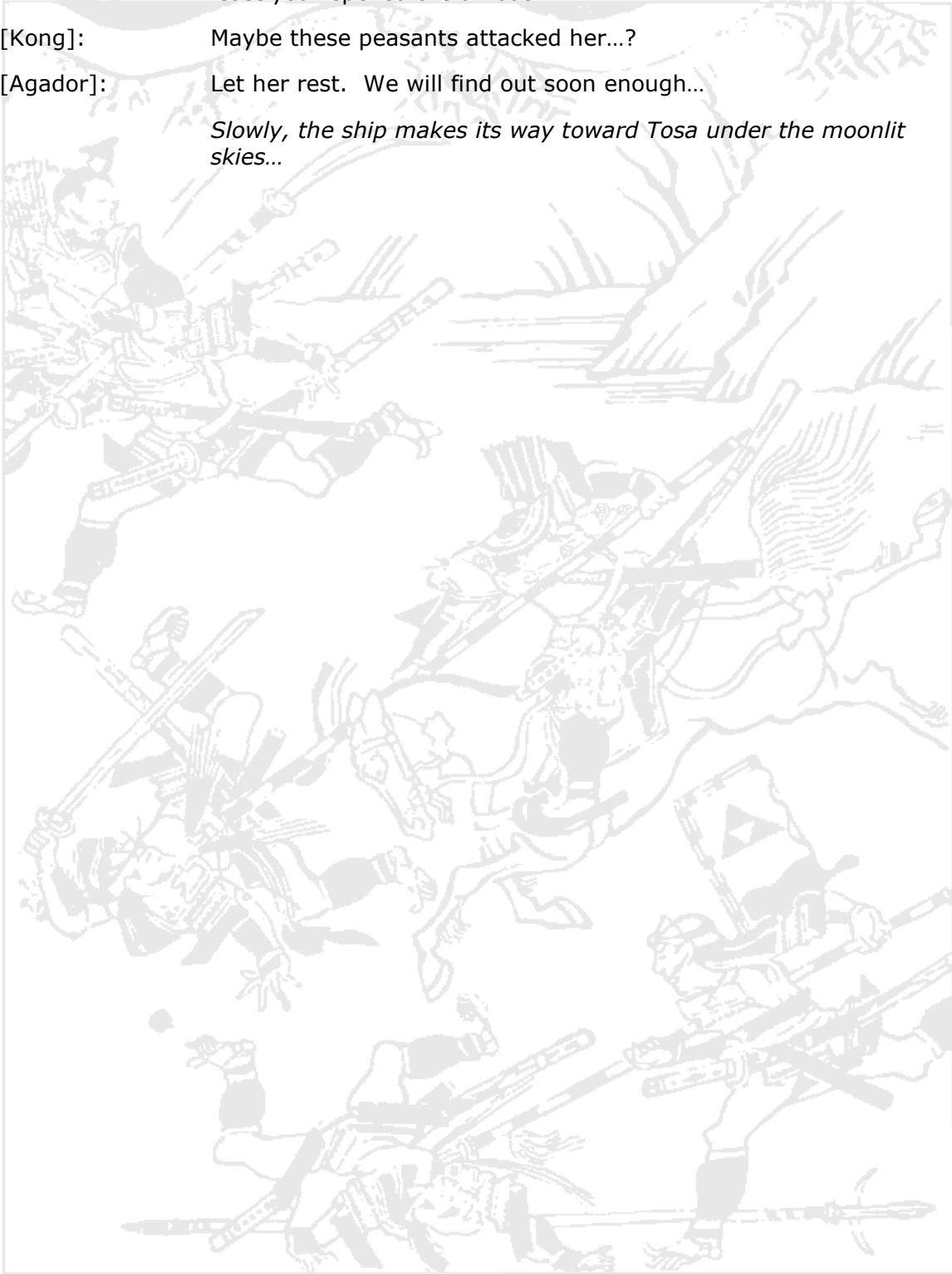
[Kong]: Weren't you once an Ashigaru...?

[Agador]: And I can always count on you to remind me of that... He he. At least you repelled the ambush...

[Kong]: Maybe these peasants attacked her...?

[Agador]: Let her rest. We will find out soon enough...

Slowly, the ship makes its way toward Tosa under the moonlit skies...



Chapter 2: The Pillars of Tosa

Several days later, the ships arrive in Tosa. Soon afterwards, Agador is before the Emperor...

[Emperor]: So... how did it go in Ise?

[Agador]: Well. We extracted the three urns that contain the pieces of the horseman's head.

[Emperor]: I heard you made an extra trip to the old temple there...? Why?

[Agador]: Well... I had talked with some of the monks here in Tosa about the sword we saw the horseman wielding. It was so unusual looking... very bright and shiny, and with strange etchings on its blade. And who could forget the eyes...

[Emperor]: Eyes...?

[Agador]: Yes! It had a silver counterweight – a two-headed shih tzu with fiery blue eyes... piercing eyes...

[Emperor]: OK... go on...

[Agador]: Well... the monks here said that the monastery in Nagashima contained documents describing a similar weapon. The head monk claimed to even have seen this document once. So, I had to try to retrieve it...

[Emperor]: And what did it say?

[Agador]: Gah! How would I know? It's written in some kind of ancient language...

[Emperor]: You stole a document you can't read? What good is that?

[Agador]: The monks here will decipher it. I have already dispatched Kong to the monastery here to deliver it.

[Emperor]: Ah so!

[Agador]: So... what next?

[Emperor]: I have given some thought to what you said before... about Shimazu...

[Agador]: Great! Did he join us?

[Emperor]: [Sighs] No. He had decided to take things into his own hands. My shinobi have reported that he has landed an invasion force in Nagato.

[Agador]: He wants to conquer Honshu for himself?

[Emperor]: Seems so. But I still have hope that we can reach through to him...

[Agador]: What? How?

[Emperor]: You will go to Nagato and meet with the Shimazu taisho there. With luck, you can convince him to speak on our behalf to his Daimyo.

[Agador]: Why would some stuck-up samurai listen to me?

[Emperor]: Nagato was only recently overrun by Eivel's armies. The population there is in revolt. When you land, they will flock to you, for you will bear my standards. Once you assemble an army, you will march towards the Shimazu beach head and assist them establish a foothold.

[Agador]: What if they attack me?

[Emperor]: Unlikely. Their force is only around 1,000 men...

[Agador]: Gah! Shimazu expects that tiny display of force to scare off Eivel's cronies?

[Emperor]: Their purpose is to establish a safe beachhead. Once they do so, the main army will arrive. This will pose a significant diversion to Eivel's forces – we must guarantee Shimazu's landing!

[Agador]: Makes sense...

[Emperor]: Then, you will return and personally lead an invasion of Musashi.

[Agador]: Why Musashi?

[Emperor]: There are still pockets of resistance... troops loyal to Hojo... freeing them will open a land corridor to the besieged fortress in Mutsu...

[Agador]: Ah so! And with luck, Eivel will be focusing on Shimazu, and not on the Kwanto! Brilliant!

[Emperor]: [Smiles] I thought of that all by myself too...

[Agador]: When do I depart?

[Emperor]: In 3 hours.

Agador leaves and heads towards the monastery, where Kong and the monks await him.

[Kong]: So... where are we off to?

[Agador]: Gah! Nagato!

[Kong]: Nagato? This time of year? You must be kidding? It's frigid!

[Agador]: Tell me about it! Any luck with the translation?

[Kong]: Not yet... Hey! They wanted to talk to you about something...
Kong leads Agador to the studious monks.

[Egg Ona]: Welcome, Agador... to our humble abode.

[Agador]: [Bows] Greetings. What can you tell me about the sword we saw?

[Egg Ona]: We are still working on it. But we did decipher one passage... very interesting indeed...

[Agador]: What did it say?

[Egg Ona]: This sword... cannot be wielded by evil. It goes on to say that if a man possessed by evil were to wield it, he would be destroyed...

[Agador]: Are you sure you are reading the right thing? If what you say is true, this evil being would actually be 'good'! Gah!

[Egg Ona]: We will know more once we finish deciphering the passage.

[Kong]: What a kick! Next thing you know, the horseman will actually be Buddha!

[Agador]: Gah!

[Egg Ona]: Buddha never lost his head, child...

[Agador]: We will be back in a couple of days... can you have the translation finished by then?

[Egg Ona]: Of course!

[Kong]: When are we leaving?

[Agador]: Now.
Agador and Kong turn from the monk and head for the exit. Just before the gates, Agador turns around and looks at the monk...

[Agador]: Say... what language is the manuscript in anyway?

[Egg Ona]: A very old one... from a distant land... the land where the Buddha himself lived...

[Agador]: Gah! Why am I not surprised...?
Agador and Kong head towards their ship. Once they arrive, they load their men and equipment and depart for Nagato.

[Kong]: Do you think Shimazu's general will welcome us?

[Miso]: He better.

[Kong]: Or what?

[Miso]: I'll chop his head off!

[Agador]: No you won't. That would only make things more difficult between the emperor and Shimazu.

[Miso]: Who am I kidding? Eivel's army will take care of them...

[Agador]: Not if we can help it...

[Kong]: But... we barely have 50 men going on this voyage...

[Agador]: The Emperor says there are thousands up in arms awaiting our arrival... that they will join our ranks under the Imperial banners and become the crest of the wave that shall cleanse Honshu of the fanatics under Eivel's spell...

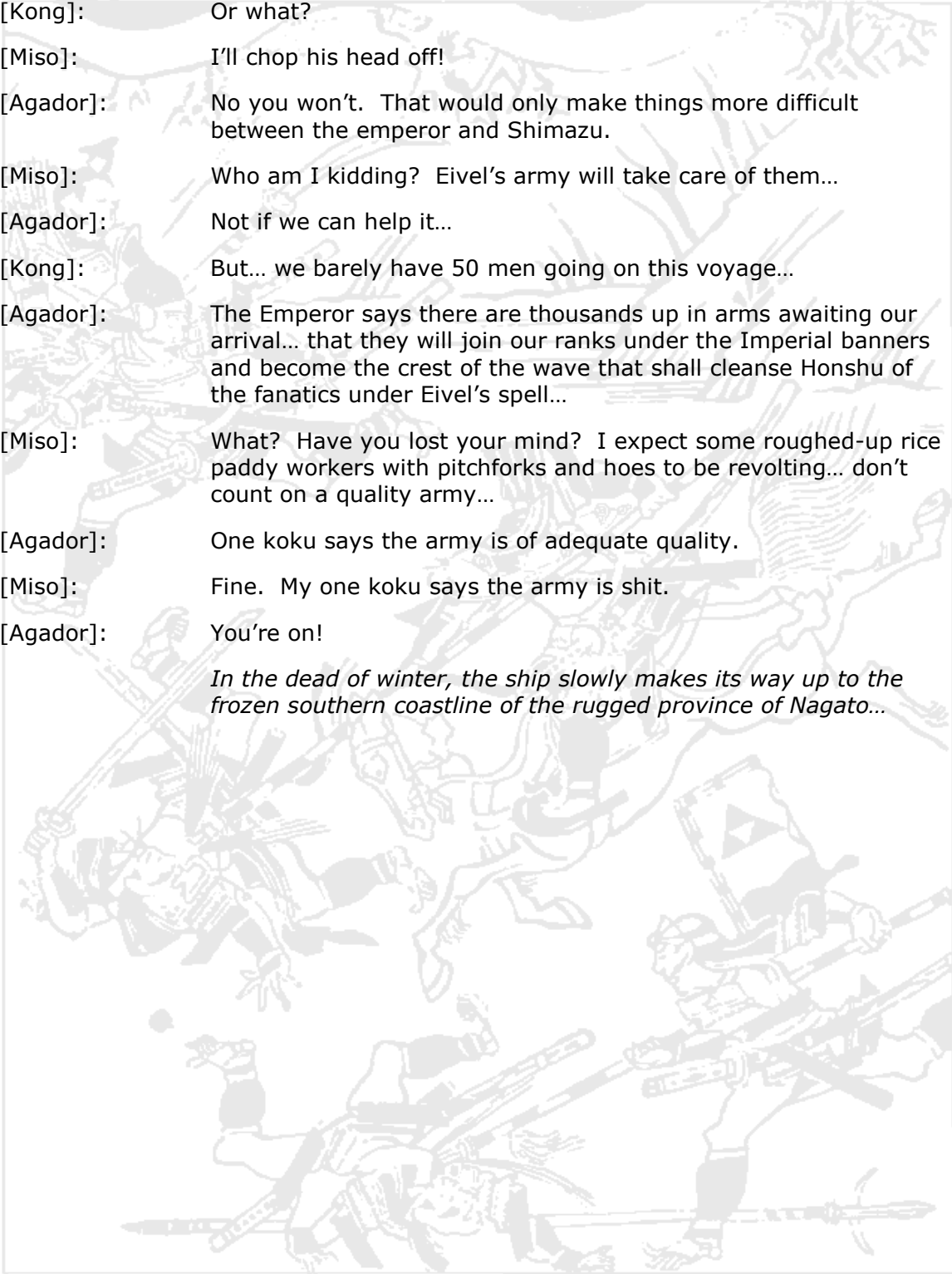
[Miso]: What? Have you lost your mind? I expect some roughed-up rice paddy workers with pitchforks and hoes to be revolting... don't count on a quality army...

[Agador]: One koku says the army is of adequate quality.

[Miso]: Fine. My one koku says the army is shit.

[Agador]: You're on!

In the dead of winter, the ship slowly makes its way up to the frozen southern coastline of the rugged province of Nagato...



Chapter 3: The Ice Storm

The small imperial force lands on the southern coast of Nagato. The ground is blanketed by a thick layer of snow. As the men march inland, a distant rumble is heard in the darkening skies.

[Miso]: Damn it's cold out here!

[Agador]: The village is just ahead...

[Kong]: My feet are frozen already!

[Miso]: And it looks like more is on the way. [Points to dark clouds ahead.]

[Agador]: First, let's just get to that village...

Sometime later, the freezing men enter the village that awaited their arrival.

[Chieftain]: Welcome, brothers! We have been expecting you!

[Agador]: Greetings!

[Chieftain]: Come this way. Let's warm you guys up...

The men are lead to a large building and are served hot tea. As they thaw out and enjoy the tea...

[Chieftain]: We have assembled a small army and can depart in about a week's time.

[Agador]: A week? We need to march tonight... tomorrow at dawn at the latest!

[Chieftain]: That would not be wise...

[Miso]: Why not?

[Chieftain]: An ice storm is moving in as we speak. Blizzards have been bashing this province for several days now. Mobilizing in this weather is suicide...

[Agador]: Suicide or not... we must get this army to the Shimazu landing zone as soon as we can. We must reach them before Eivel does.

[Kong]: Have you spotted Eivel's army yet?

[Chieftain]: They have patrols all over the province.

[Miso]: How have you kept this army a secret?

[Chieftain]: The army is made up of volunteers from the rice paddies. A few samurai are in the ranks as well. But, mostly, it's Ashigaru.

[Miso]: [Looks at Agador and raises his brow] What did I tell ya, hah? You owe me 1 koku!

[Agador]: Gah! Fine! Ashigaru rule, though.

[Kong]: Say... what weapons do you have?

[Chieftain]: Mostly some old spears and swords...

[Agador]: Arquebuses?

[Chieftain]: Heck no! When Eivel's men swept through, they collected and destroyed all guns. The use of guns is strictly forbidden now! If you are caught even bearing a gun, you will be hanged for violating the Bushido!

[Agador]: What?!?

[Kong]: Samurai never use guns... just teppo... and they are Ashigaru...

[Chieftain]: The new lords have dictated that even women and children must follow the Bushido.

[Miso]: Gah!

[Agador]: OK. So, no guns.

[Kong]: Spears.

[Miso]: Spears to fight monks.

[Agador]: When do you expect the storm to move in?

[Chieftain]: Any hour now.

[Agador]: Hmm... we should mobilize now. Let me tell you why! Eivel will not move an inch in this weather. We can use it to march right past his positions and reach Shimazu in time to help him land his army. The blizzard will provide us cover.

[Miso]: And what about the friggin' frigid weather?

[Agador]: Bundle up! Each man must carry an extra coat.

[Chieftain]: These are peasants! They don't have adequate coats!

[Agador]: Then we must march like the wind!

[Kong]: Have you lost your mind? March like the wind?

[Miso]: Shut up, Kong! Before he thinks you are suggesting we run the whole way...

[Agador]: Great idea, Miso! We must RUN the whole way!

[Miso]: Gah!

[Agador]: Seriously, though. We will split up. One group will move inland to spot the landing zone. The ship will sail along the coastline with the Ashigaru. We'll land somewhere where the march isn't too long...

[Kong]: What about the weather? Wouldn't it be safer on land than at sea?

[Agador]: Gah! You're right!

[Miso]: How long is the march expected to be?

[Chieftain]: We expect Shimazu to be at a location about 3 days march from here.

[Agador]: We must depart at once!

[Chieftain]: The -

[Agador]: That's it! They will serve their emperor! Assemble the men in 30 minutes!

[Chieftain]: Yes, my Lord.

An hour later, Agador leads his new Ashigaru army into the wilderness towards the expected Shimazu landing zone. Within a couple of hours, they find themselves in the midst of a heavy blizzard. Vicious winds whipped the quivering bodies of the peasants without mercy. Dozens collapsed in the cold and died where they fell. Frostbite afflicted many more as very few had adequate footwear or gloves.

Five days later, as the battered army made its way into the beaches in the vicinity of the expected Shimazu beachhead, about one third of the peasants in the army had died in the blizzard. The men setup a camp at the banks of a small river to spend the night...

[Agador]: Tomorrow morning, we will meet up with the Shimazu taisho.

[Miso]: If he is even here...

[Agador]: If not, we just hop on our ship and head back to Tosa.

[Kong]: Our ship! We should have used the ship!

[Agador]: The ship has not even showed up here yet. Who knows where it is. It could be stuck in ice for all we know...

After a couple of hours, a sentinel runs into Agador's tent...

[Sentinel]: My Lord! Smoke is rising from behind the mountains ahead!

[Agador]: What?!?

Agador rushes outside. Surely enough, a towering smoke cloud is rising over the mountains... right about where they expected Shimazu to land his invasion force.

[Agador]: Gah! We must move at once!

[Kong]: What is going on?

[Agador]: We are missing the battle! We must hurry!

[Miso]: Gah!

Agador hurriedly assembles his army and rushes them towards the smoke. When they arrive, they see a scene of utter devastation. Corpses abound over the charred battlefield. The lamentations of a few mortally wounded survivors echo throughout the smoldering grassland from beneath the piles of mutilated bodies.

Agador and his men run about seeking out survivors. After questioning a few who were strong enough to mutter intelligible words, they determined that Shimazu's landing force had been ambushed by a massive Eivel army. Agador's heart sank, for he knew he was too late to assist them in their landing.

The men search tirelessly for signs of the Shimazu general. But they were unable to locate him – or his body.

Then, just as about Agador was going to lead his men back to where they came from...

[Ashigaru #1]: Look! Eivel cavalry!

[Agador]: Quick! Into the trees!

The peasants follow Agador into a nearby grove of trees. Most of them were charred. Nonetheless, the burnt, broken tree trunks still made for an impressive obstacle to in-rushing cavalry.

The cavalry charged straight into the trees, obviously oblivious to the disadvantage they suffered therein. The Ashigaru spearmen quickly dispatched the overzealous foe.

They wasted no time, and quickly crossed the forest. As they emerged from the other side, Agador spotted about 500 heavy cavalry bearing Eivel standard moving through the meadow before them. They quickly ducked and hid in the brushes, as the cavalry did not notice their presence.

There they waited until night fell. Then, under a cover of darkness, Agador lead his men down to the coastline. They then marched along the beach towards the initial landing zone.

They only marched at night, for the roving patrols of Eivel's cavalry frequently passed near their position during the daylight hours. The men, weary of this tiresome game of hide-and-seek while they tried to escape, prayed incessantly to Buddha for the ship to appear. Five days after they clashed with the Eivel cavalry in the charred bushes on the battlefield, they spotted their ship nearby, glowing gloriously under the full moon.

Hysterical, some Ashigaru cried out loud. Others yelled for the ship to come rescue them. Agador desperately ran about trying to silence them so that the Eivel patrols would not be alerted to their presence their.

The ship did notice them, though. Soon, dinghies were ferrying the panic-stricken Ashigaru onto the ship. But, the enemy cavalry spotted them as they last dinghy was departing. Agador and the other men on this last dinghy came under heavy fire; arrows were raining down on their position. Yet, they had nowhere to hide. Agador ordered his men into the water after the first volley. They did not hesitate a second. Nine were killed in the first volley alone. But, now in the water swimming towards the sea, the next few volleys proved ineffective.

Some flaming arrows then hit the boat. Now, Agador and his men knew that they could no longer use the boat to reach the ship, as it burst into flames.

Minutes later, several dinghies from the ship reached the desperate swimmers. They used the bright flames to shield their approach from the enemy. They scooped up half of the men originally on the ill-fated boat. Agador was among them. The rest... perished beneath the waves...

Agador, blue from the frigid waters, was barely conscious. The men rushed him into his cabin... they desperately tried to thaw him out. Kong and Miso privately thanked Buddha they had taken the previous boat...

As the ship set out for the open sea, a single volley of gunfire was fired at the bellicose cavalry on the beach. They were caught by surprise by this; a full third of them were wounded or killed in the volley. After than, they immediately fled inland while the Arquebusiers on the ship reloaded...

With the army returning to Tosa, and the Shimazu landing force decimated, the half-frozen Agador would have no good news for the Emperor when they disembark...

Chapter 4: Buddha's Compassion

While Agador recovered his strength, the Emperor's planners were amassing their army in preparation for their last-ditch effort to thwart Eivel's black tide. During these preparations, Agador visited with the monks...

- [Egg Ona]: Well... we have managed to decipher a good portion of the manuscript!
- [Agador]: Great! What can you tell me?
- [Egg Ona]: First, the inscription across the blade reads "Compassion". It is written in an ancient Himalayan dialect... it has not been spoken for thousands of years...
- [Agador]: OK... What an odd inscription for a weapon of war...
- [Kong]: I'd say.
- [Egg Ona]: Its original owner... was...
- [Miso]: Who?
- [Agador]: Who?
- [Egg Ona]: ... It was Buddha himself.
- [Agador]: No way!
- [Miso]: You saying this is the sword Buddha wielded in battle while he walked the Earth?!?
- [Egg Ona]: That is right.
- [Kong]: What about the dog...?
- [Egg Ona]: Ah so! The two-headed Shih Tzu is the symbol of Buddha's secret paramilitary corps. This elite unit would hunt down threats to the kingdom under a veil of secrecy. The manuscript contains some rather lengthy passages describing Buddha's quest to rid the world of the original headless horseman that stalked the Himalayas in that time. It is with this sword that he vanquished that evil.
- [Miso]: What about the eyes?
- [Egg Ona]: The eyes reflect the soul of the bearer. They glow red when the bearer is enraged or full of hate. Black when they are utterly evil.
- [Kong]: And blue?

[Egg Ona]: Blue is said to be the color of death. Cold... merciless... and utterly indifferent...

[Agador]: What about what you said before... that only those whose heart was pure could wield the sword...?

[Egg Ona]: Technically... that is true. But only for mortal men.

[Agador]: And since the horseman is immortal...

[Egg Ona]: [Nods] So it seems.

[Kong]: What would happen if one of us would grab the sword?

[Egg Ona]: Nothing... if your heart was pure. Otherwise, you'd probably have a seizure and die. Or at least die somehow on the spot...

[Kong]: Hmmm.

[Agador]: Anything else?

[Egg Ona]: There was some mumbo jumbo about some weird Buddhist mythologies... stuff that makes no sense to us.

[Miso]: Mythologies? Like what?

[Egg Ona]: Weird stuff... like power struggles over the control of Nirvana... theories of demons that stalk the earth in an attempt to subvert the universe to darkness... talk of soldiers of light sent forth by Buddha to protect Man... nonsense really...

[Kong]: Gah! Anything else...? [Rolls eyes]

[Egg Ona]: Ah so! An amulet! There was talk of an amulet... also a two-headed Shih Tzu... silver... like the counterweight on the sword.

[Agador]: What does it do?

[Egg Ona]: Oh, nothing. But, according to the myths, they are worn by Buddha's soldiers of light...

[Kong]: Great! Where is one of these guys when you need him...?

[Egg Ona]: But... some of the demons may also bear them to confuse the believers...

Agador and his men continue to discuss the never-before-heard strange mythologies described in the ancient manuscript.

Several days later, Agador is about to take command of his new army...

[Emperor]: Agador. You are my last taisho. You are the first, last, and ONLY line of defense between us and the scum of Japan.

Take forth this army... liberate Musashi... and lift the siege in southern Mutsu. With luck, old Hojo units will join our force as we liberate their hiding places.

[Agador]: Ah so!

[Emperor]: I really do mean you are our last hope. Once you depart, we will have a skeletal garrison protecting Shikoku and Awaji from invasion. Only 500 men will protect Awaji... and about 960 are available to protect the whole of Shikoku. But your invasion force is quite impressive.

[Agador]: Are you sure you want to leave these last bastions of Imperial power open to attack...? After all, Shimazu's landing failed...

[Emperor]: That is the risk of victory. Take care of this army... it's the only one we will be able to field...

[Agador]: Will this still work given Shimazu's failed invasion?

[Emperor]: Even in failure, the foray there surely will keep Eivel's focus on that part of Japan. A thrust into the pacified southern regions of the kwanto should still be unexpected... The element of surprise will still be on our side...

[Agador]: OK. What do I have...?

[Emperor]: You are fielding the largest Arquebusier army in Japan. 8,000 strong. They are backed mostly by yari units... a few samurai, but mostly Ashigaru... 10,000. And lastly, you have 1,000 cavalry to support your maneuvers.

[Agador]: No shock troops?

[Emperor]: You do have about 200 No Dachis. But they constitute such a minor percentage of your overall army...

[Agador]: This may be quite an advantage... Eivel has banned the use of guns...

[Emperor]: Most of the Arquebusiers were rushed through training. They are green and inexperienced.

[Agador]: I'd have it no other way...

[Miso]: Huh?

[Agador]: Uncorrupted by bad habits instilled by weak commanders...

[Emperor]: Ah so! Well then... the fleet awaits you!

Agador departs and heads towards his command ship. As he makes his way through the streets, the citizens gather around him and cheer... and they throw rice and confetti on them.

As Agador boards his ship, he turns and waves at the cheering crowd. Then, a humble man steps forward...

[Citizen]: May Buddha's Compassion go with you!

A booming uproar erupts after the humble citizen speaks. The men aboard the last Imperial fleet are all emotional over this send-off.

[Agador]: Who would have guessed that that expression was really about the man's sword and not his virtue...? [Turns and looks at the 3 silver urns he brought along for the journey...]

[Kong]: Now... I hope his "compassion" does not cross our path...

[Miso]: I totally expect him to crash the party...

[Agador]: Sharpen your blades... there will be no surrender... there will be no retreat...

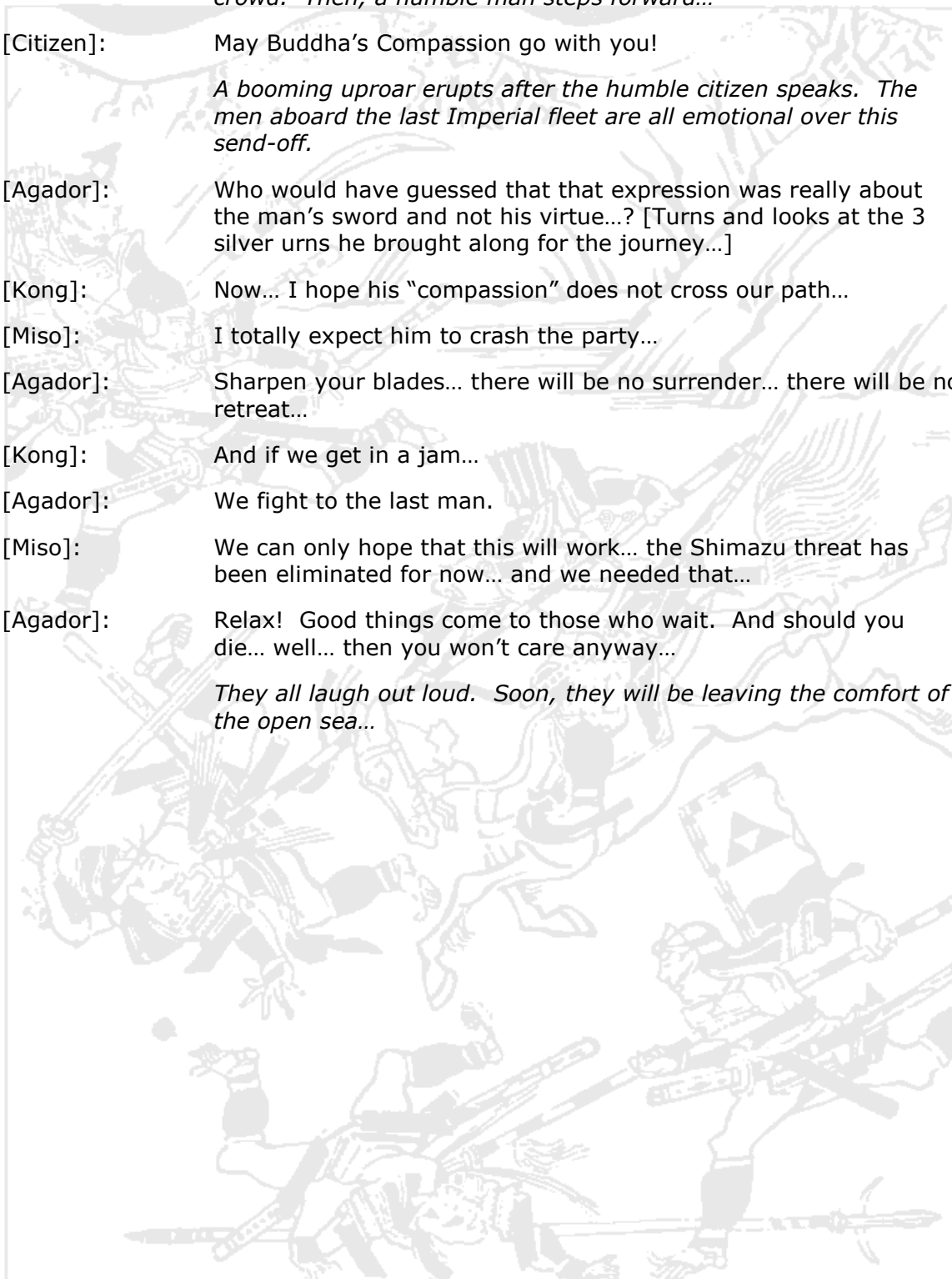
[Kong]: And if we get in a jam...

[Agador]: We fight to the last man.

[Miso]: We can only hope that this will work... the Shimazu threat has been eliminated for now... and we needed that...

[Agador]: Relax! Good things come to those who wait. And should you die... well... then you won't care anyway...

They all laugh out loud. Soon, they will be leaving the comfort of the open sea...



Chapter 5: Invasion

The first rays from the sun piece the dark landscape. The Imperial ships can be seen just offshore as the landing boats row towards the cold beach.

Agador disembarks at the head of his 19,000-strong invasion force. They face no opposition to the landing.

The first groups to land spread out and form a perimeter as more boats pull onto the beach. By noon, the entire force has disembarked and they start the long march inland...

But, shinobi loyal to Lord Eivel soon alert the local garrisons of the presence of the Imperial army. Soon, an enemy army was dispatched to intercept them...

[Miso]: The first Hojo fortress is just beyond those hills...

[Agador]: Great! I hope it's not occupied.

[Miso]: And so far, no hint of opposition... perhaps we will have a smooth march to Mutsu after all...

Then, a scout rushes in and informs Agador of the enemy army approaching from the north...

[Agador]: OK... let's show them a good time!

Agador orders his army to get into formation. They establish themselves on a grassy plain with the Arquebusiers in front along a wide skirmish line. The spearmen are held in reserve.

Then, to entice the enemy into the open field, Agador dispatches his cavalry to harass the enemy army and draw them to the field before his army.

[Kong]: The wait... is always the worst part...

[Miso]: Patience... the enemy will chase our cavalry foolishly...

[Agador]: 8,000 Arquebuses! It will be a historic sight to see so many guns go off in battle at once...

[Kong]: He he. I'm sure this battle will be over very quickly...

An hour later, the Imperial cavalry is spotted approaching the army. Behind it, a cloud of dust follows... dust from the enemy army's marching...

Eivel's army, confident in their superiority, just rush straight onto the battlefield and do a frontal assault on Agador's lines.

The Imperial Arquebusiers unleash their first volley. The results were dramatic... almost 1/3 of the enemy army dropped as a result of the fusillade.

Undeterred, Eivel's army pushed their advance. The next volley decimated the remaining force even more. Yet, the last third of their shocked army still pressed forward.

Agador ordered his cavalry to quickly take up position at the enemy's rear. The charging monks closed the gap between them and the Arquebusiers too fast for the Arquebusiers to get off a third volley. The gunmen swiftly abandoned their position as their yari guards stepped up to meet the charge.

The monks fought furiously. They easily dispatched several green yari units. But, the Imperial cavalry charged into their rear in wedge formation. The monks, now surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered, were slowly killed off.

Some of the enemy Ashigaru, who were just now entering the battlefield, saw the scene and turned and ran for their lives. Agador's cavalry chased them down, but some managed to get away.

[Agador]: Ah so! A great battle!

[Miso]: Gah! I didn't even get any blood on my sword.

[Agador]: Don't worry... your chance will soon be at hand...

Agador marched on towards the Hojo castle. Finding it abandoned, he decided to make it his first base of operations in the newly liberated land.

Within weeks, a dozen other former Hojo fortresses were liberated in the name of the Emperor. Slowly, former Hojo units started emerging from their hiding places and joining the liberation army.

As Agador shifted his center of gravity northward towards Mutsu, he made sure to always use a liberated castle as his headquarters. From there, he would order raids and ambushes on enemy movements in addition to plan major assaults.

Annoyed by this thorn in his long-pacified lands, Lord Eivel himself returned to the Kwanto at the head of his main army and left the western front in the hands of his youngest son.

To precede his arrival in Musashi, Eivel ordered a series of hit-and-run raids up and down the river basin that crosses the liberated lands. Many of these raids failed to accomplish their objectives. But the ever present threat sure managed to keep the Imperial garrisons on their toes.

But Eivel's forces controlled the narrow mountain passes into Mutsu to the north. Knowing that Agador would eventually have no choice but to face him there, he decided to station his main battle force there.

But, Lord Eivel was not going to let the Imperial threat go unchallenged. He now brought in specialists to deal with the threat posed by Agador...

[Miso]: Things have calmed down recently... perhaps it is a sign that we have worn down the enemy...?

[Agador]: Fat chance. I bet he is waiting for us somewhere... lurking...

[Miso]: We should press ahead as fast as we can. We need to break that siege in Mutsu...

[Agador]: I just don't get why the calm... before there would be many raids each day. Now, barely one or two a week...

[Kong]: Well... at least it's a good time to be hunting...

[Miso]: [Laughs] Any other time and we'd be hanged for this...

Spotting a pheasant, Agador fires an arrow, but misses the bird by many feet.

[Miso]: That was horrible!

[Agador]: Give me a break! I just started learning how to use a bow...

[Miso]: Your archery skills are about as good as your swordsmanship. You must be the lousiest warrior of all the Emperor's taishos!

[Agador]: But I can sure fire a gun!

[Kong]: Hey! I spotted something over there!

[Miso]: What was it...?

[Agador]: A pheasant...?

[Kong]: I couldn't see it...

The men quietly follow the source of the noise...

[Kong]: Whoa! I think there are several birds!

[Miso]: Don't yell... your going to scare them away, you nitwit!

As the trio pushes their way past some thick bushes, a dozen ninja suddenly emerge from the trees and attack them!

Miso draws his sword and quickly dispatches 3 of the ninjas. Kong is running waving his hands in the air and screaming at the top of his lungs as he's being chased by two other ninjas.

Seeing Kong in trouble, Miso races over to help him out. Just then, he notices Agador in trouble as well. Miso then heads towards Agador instead. Some of the ninjas turn to face Miso while the rest slash away at Agador. Before he knows it, Miso sees one of the ninjas jump, spin and smack Agador on the back of his head with the grip of his katana. Agador falls unconscious to the ground. Desperately trying to save Agador, Miso fights the ninjas, but can only watch as the other ninjas hoist him up on their backs and carry him into the foliage. Then, the ninjas fighting him break off their attack and disappear into the trees as well.

From the distance, Miso can hear Agador's fading voice...

[Agador]: You are now in command... lead the army north...!

Seconds later, Agador's voice falls silent...

Miso, disheartened, goes in search of Kong. He finds him a mile away... panting like crazy...

[Miso]: There you are!

[Kong]: [Panting] What... was... that...?

[Miso]: Gah!

[Kong]: Wheres... Agador...?

[Miso]: I couldn't stop it... they captured him and carried him off into the forest...

[Kong]: Is he dead?

[Miso]: Somehow I don't think so... I mean, why would they kill him if they took the trouble to just disarm him and kidnap him? Doesn't make sense...

[Kong]: What now...?

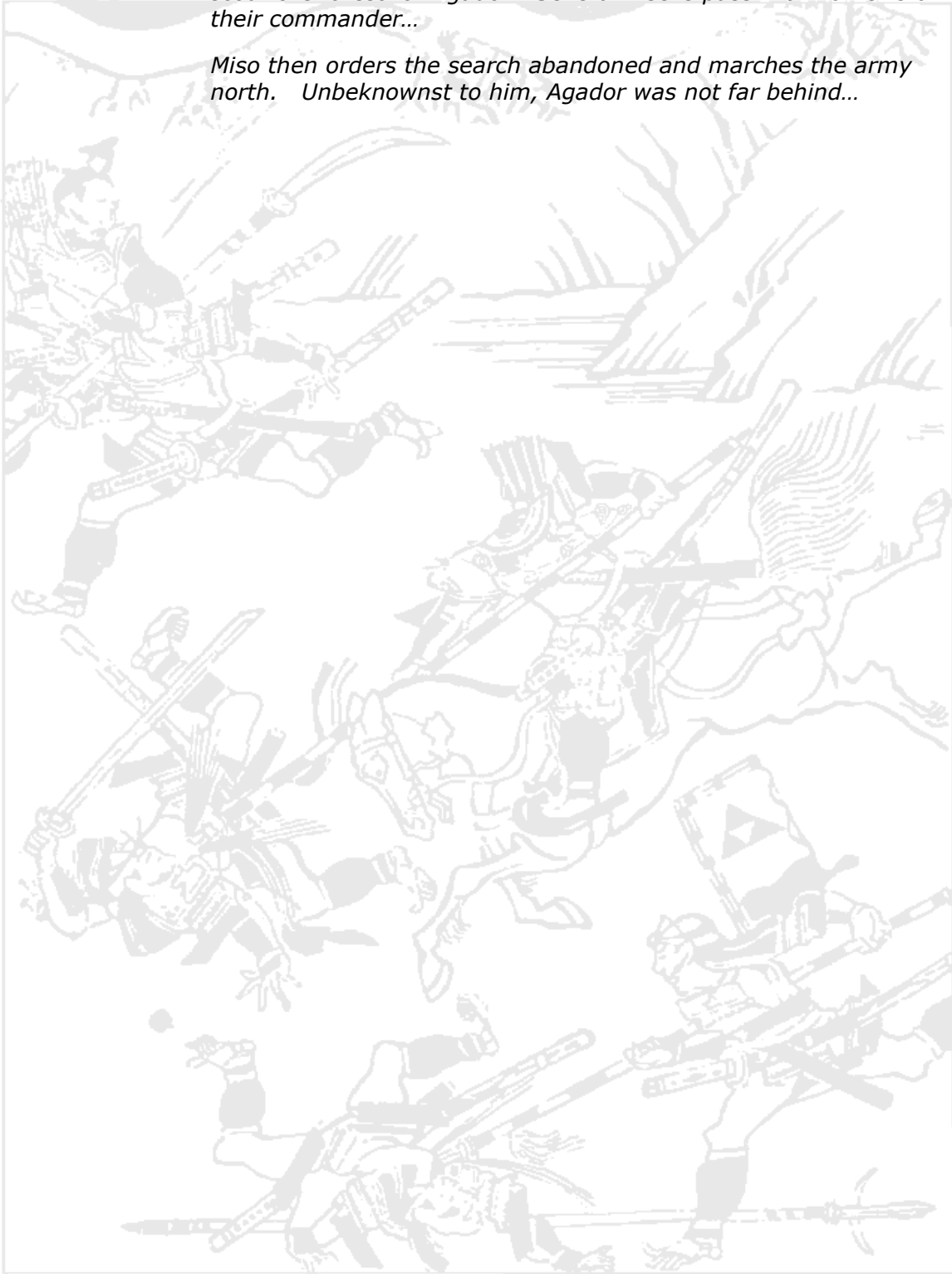
[Miso]: We get out of this forest and dispatch a search party as soon as we get back to camp...

[Kong]: And if we don't find him?

[Miso]: Then we press on without him. His last command was that I take over the command of the army and press onwards with the mission...

Miso and Kong race back to camp and send out a search party to scour the forest for Agador. Several weeks pass with no news of their commander...

Miso then orders the search abandoned and marches the army north. Unbeknownst to him, Agador was not far behind...



Chapter 6: Tide of Darkness



After being cleaned and clothed, Agador, now more perplexed than ever, is lead to the mess hall... unaware of what he will face there...

[Eivel]: Sit. Have some wine. [He motions his hands and servants rush up and pour Agador some wine.]

[Agador]: What is this about? What is going on...?

[Eivel]: Where did you get that mark on your back...?

[Agador]: What mark?

[Eivel]: That mark... [points to a circular birthmark on Agador's left shoulder.]

[Agador]: Oh, that one. I've always had it... why?

[Eivel]: You are my son!

[Agador]: What?!? Get out of here! No way!

[Eivel]: All my sons bear that mark. They were branded at birth with a hot iron. This was done because my wife was crazy and was intent on killing off my children to prevent my line from continuing... But I showed her... her head now sits in my throne room... nicely stuffed... over the dining table.

[Agador]: How nice...

[Eivel]: But, you are still my son! An heir to my Shogunate! And a legendary general too! [Waves fists in air] Together, we shall rule all of Japan and China!

[Agador]: It cannot be! I cannot be your son! You are an abomination!

[Eivel]: Ah! I expect you to resist at first... But you will join my army or you will die in these walls...

[Agador]: Is that what you want? You want me to bear your standards?

[Eivel]: Yes!

[Agador]: You want me to help you spread your militant Buddhism throughout the land?

[Eivel]: Yes!

[Agador]: And you want me to lead your armies to victory over my former masters? And kill my friends?!?

[Eivel]: Indeed! [Jumping up and down with joy]

[Agador]: No way! I would rather die!

[Eivel]: [Frowns] You will join me... or you will die. Either way, you cannot change who you are... you are an Eivel... just as I.

[Agador]: I still cannot believe it!

[Eivel]: Your friends... they will soon die trying to cross over into Mutsu... I have 50,000 men waiting for them at the border. Your bullheaded commander-in-charge will lead the last Imperial army to certain annihilation! [Laughs]

Agador's heart sinks as he realizes that Eivel knows exactly where they are headed and that he will undoubtedly slaughter the army at Mutsu if his force is as big as he suggests...

[Agador]: Wait...

[Eivel]: What...?

[Agador]: Spare my friends and I shall lead your army.

[Eivel]: Ah! Making demands now? You are hardly in a position to negotiate...

[Agador]: [Takes a deep breath] I shall join you... Father... if you will spare my friends...

[Eivel]: Sure... why not...

[Agador]: OK then.

[Eivel]: Your training will commence at once...

In the meantime, Miso's army slowly lumbers northward... unaware of the ninjas tracking their every move. As they advance, Hojo loyalist commanders that have surfaced and are now visibly guarding the newly liberated lands are quietly assassinated by Eivel's ninja corps...

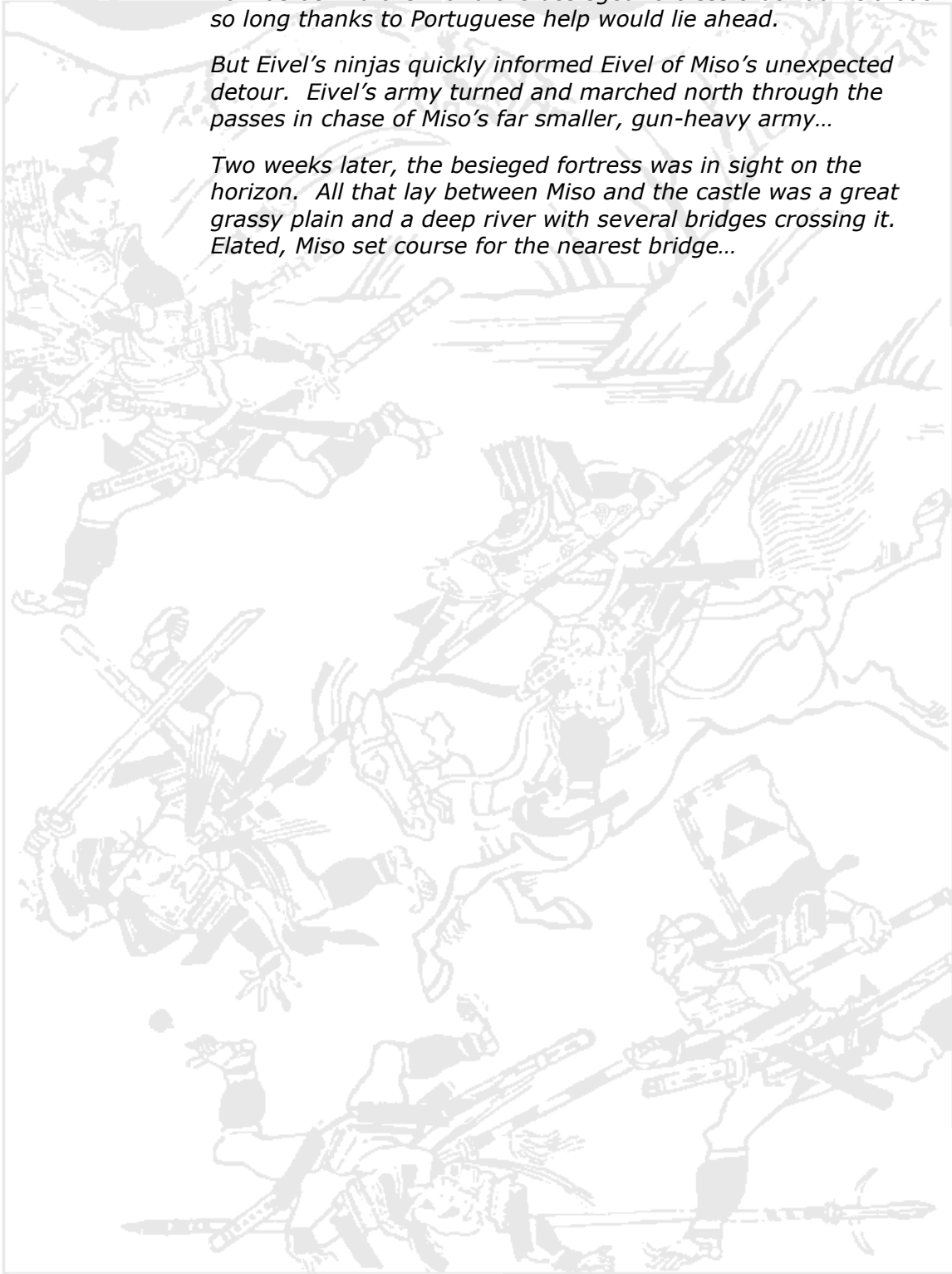
Within view of the mountains that form the border with Mutsu, Miso opts to stop the march northward and sets up his headquarters in a small Hojo castle. From there, he attempts to gather intelligence about what may lay ahead. But, to his dismay, none of his scouts return.

Sensing that he was slowly being surrounded by Eivel's dark forces, Miso suddenly abandoned his castle and marched out to sea. He opted to bypass all Hojo installations along the way. Then, before reaching the sea, he ordered his army to climb to rugged slopes. In so doing he bypassed the passes that were guarded by Eivel's main army. But he also forced unbelievable hardships on his men as they climbed the rocky mountains in the dead of winter. Many men died along the march.

But after they descended on the other side, Eivel's army would now be behind them and the besieged fortress that had held out so long thanks to Portuguese help would lie ahead.

But Eivel's ninjas quickly informed Eivel of Miso's unexpected detour. Eivel's army turned and marched north through the passes in chase of Miso's far smaller, gun-heavy army...

Two weeks later, the besieged fortress was in sight on the horizon. All that lay between Miso and the castle was a great grassy plain and a deep river with several bridges crossing it. Elated, Miso set course for the nearest bridge...



Chapter 7: The Bridge of the Damned

The besieged fortress lied just ahead. The Portuguese warships could be seen loitering just off the coast. The constant crackle of gunfire could be heard as the beleaguered garrison fought off Eivel's siege.

An impressive array of battlefield fortifications and earthworks surrounded the castle. Within, a huge besieging force took refuge from the hail of lead they were subjected to.

Impetuous and eager to relieve the garrison, Miso ordered his army to cross the river and move on the rear of the besieging army. But, as soon as he crossed, Eivel's main army appeared at his rear to the south. And soon afterwards, a detachment from the siege force approached his front from the north.

But Eivel's force was on the other side of the river. Miso knew he could hold the strategic bridges... but was concerned about the force to his north. His scouts surveyed the makeup of the enemy armies. To Miso's dismay, the reports came back indicating that large numbers of ferocious Ikko-Ikkei monks made up the core of both forces. Miso quickly ordered his men into formation; one group was to face Eivel to the south and the second to face the presence to the north. Then, Miso just sat and waited for them to charge...

- [Eivel]: Come, my son. How do you propose we should attack these pesky opponents?
- [Agador]: They are terrified. Look at their position. They are frozen in fear of our might!
- [Eivel]: He he.
- [Agador]: Father, let me lead the charge across the bridge... so that I may prove myself to you in our first battle as Father and Son...
- [Eivel]: Ah! I am delighted to hear that!
- [Agador]: Give me the Elite Guard of the Sword and I shall give you victory!
- [Eivel]: The Elite Guard... those are the best of the best of the Ikko-Ikkei...
- [Agador]: It will take the best of the best to make it across that bridge and deliver a death knell to the enemy. I need their valor... their courage under fire...
- [Eivel]: [A tear breaks out and rolls down his cheek] If only my other sons were like you... Japan would already be my garden!

[Agador]: When my men cross, order your detachment to the north to attack simultaneously. Frontal charge. No retreat!

[Eivel]: So it shall be! Ride with pride, son!
Agador, dressed in the black armor of the Eivel clan and sporting a tall black plume over his helmet, takes command of the Elite Guards of the Sword... 5,000 strong... and marches them in formation towards the bridge.
Then, in a show of defiance, he approaches the bridge alone...

[Kong]: Who is this fool...?

[Miso]: He's wearing the Eivel plumes... he must be a senior general... maybe one of Eivel's sons...

[Kong]: Shall I take him out...? [Lifts his arquebus]

[Miso]: Not yet...
Agador removes his helmet to reveal himself to the Imperial army...

[Kong]: It's Agador!

[Miso]: In Eivel colors! No way!

[Kong]: A traitor? I can't believe what I am seeing...!

[Agador]: Surrender! And you shall be spared!

[Miso]: Never! We are here on orders from the one true Emperor! And we shall never surrender!

[Agador]: Your men are inexperienced peasants! They stand no chance! Look up! Clouds are rolling in... it will soon rain, rendering your guns useless! Lay down your weapons, and you will be allowed to go home alive!

[Kong]: I can't believe I am hearing this!

[Miso]: What did they do to you?!? You were once one of us!

[Agador]: [Draws sword and raises it over his head] If you will not submit... you shall die today on this field!

[Miso]: Gah! A sword?!?

[Kong]: Agador doesn't know how to use a sword... What does he think he's doing...?

[Miso]: Hmm... Quick, order the Arquebusiers to fall back by 100 paces...

[Kong]: Why? That would take us just out of range of the bridge...

[Miso]: Trust me... we want these fools to cross over en masse...

[Kong]: Am I missing something here...?

[Miso]: Trust me...

As soon as the Arquebusiers reposition themselves, Agador orders his monks to cross the bridge. Thunder can be heard overhead as the dark clouds threaten to unleash their deadly rain on the surrounded Imperial army.

The monks cross the bridge easily, for the enemy is too far to fire on them. But as soon as the spearhead gathered on the other side, 4,000 Arquebusiers suddenly opened fire on the impetuous monks. The unarmored warriors dropped like flies. Several more volleys erupted from the Imperial forces. But they could not stem the tide of Sohei that was pouring over the bridge. The bodies were piling up high, and soon posed a barrier behind which the monks could seek refuge.

Then came the attack from the north. The northern charge was made up of spread out monks and Ashigaru over a wide front. The fusillades were not as effective against this force. Soon, the northern marauders clashed with the Miso's yari force. Shortly thereafter, the monks from the south broke through the gun line facing the bridge.

Mayhem broke out. Lord Eivel was delighted. It appeared his monks had broken the formidable Arquebusier force.

But his delight was short-lived. Miso's cavalry swept in behind the northern attack force and hit them from behind. Soon, the northern force was fleeing back to their fortifications.

Sensing the tide turning, Agador ordered the monks to retreat back across the bridge. By the time they completed their retreat, the once formidable Elite Guard had lost over 90% of its force.

[Eivel]: Gah! What was that?!?

[Agador]: The northern force broke. I had no choice but to pull back. But we have the numbers. And we shall wear them down.

[Eivel]: Spoken like a true warrior!

Agador did not let his new army rest. He quickly ordered a fresh attack. This time, using a mix of crack Ashigaru fanatics and warrior monks. Again, he expected a push from the north to serve as a diversion.

The assault was furious. But in the end, the casualties were just too high and again, Agador's forces were forced to retreat. The Imperial Arquebusiers had proven to be very tough opponents in these tight quarters.

Yet, despite the awesome firepower of the opposing force, Agador continued to order his men to cross the bridge and launch bold assaults. By nightfall, Eivel's army had lost over 20,000 men charging over the bridge. The river was littered with corpses and the waters flowed red.

[Kong]: I still cannot believe Agador has crossed over...

[Miso]: I think he knows what he's doing. Think about it... only a fool would charge a bridge defended by 4,000 Arquebusiers like that.

[Kong]: What are you saying...?

[Miso]: I think he is sending those men across so that we kill them.

[Kong]: Hmm...

[Miso]: It makes sense...

[Kong]: Our position is bad anyways... They can afford the losses... we can't.

[Miso]: We lost less than 2,000 men today. I'd say we are doing fine...

[Kong]: But we are now under siege too. How long will we realistically last here? Eventually, we will run out of ammunition...

[Miso]: Hmm... that would not be good...

[Kong]: We are cut off from reinforcements... not that we ever had any to start with...

[Miso]: So... what are you saying...?

[Kong]: I know this will sound crazy... let's open the urns...

[Miso]: What?!? Are you crazy???

[Kong]: Its genius! We open the urns... the headless horseman will smell his head and come rushing to claim it!

[Miso]: ... And in so doing... will smash his way through the enemy!

[Kong]: Exactly!

[Miso]: And then what? What do we do when he comes?!? He'd kill us all too!

[Kong]: Then, we each take a piece and run in separate directions. We just run and run and run...

[Miso]: And what about our whole mission here?

[Kong]: It only takes one man to carry each urn. The rest of the army can focus on the panic-stricken enemy!

[Miso]: That is if they don't shit in their own pants!

[Kong]: What else can we do? At least we can count on a reinforcement army on one this way...

[Miso]: Gah! Fine! Do it!

Kong and Agador open the silver urns and pull out the butchered pieces of Sibalinga they had cut up ages ago in Nagashima. As soon as the pieces are out of the urns, though, they jumped towards each other and fused themselves back into a single mass. Sibalinga was now a single head again!

[Kong]: GAH!

[Miso]: What the... did you see that?!?

[Kong]: Shit! Shit! Shit!

[Miso]: One of us will have to hold this head, you know...

[Kong]: You hold it! It's freaking me out!

[Miso]: So much for your plan to run in three different directions... eh? Fine... I'll hold it.

Miso puts the head in a satchel and slings it over his back. Then, they climb into their tents and try to get some sleep before dawn.

As morning breaks, Miso's men hurriedly reform their units and take up their defensive position.

Agador likewise had his men prepare for the day's first assault. More of the same carnage continued throughout the morning. Half a dozen charges were brutally pushed back by the fierce Arquebusier fire.

But then, just before noon, the rains broke out. Heavy rains blanketed the Arquebusiers.

[Miso]: Shit! What now? Why did it have to rain now?!?

[Kong]: We're doomed! We're doomed! We're going to die!!!

Agador raises his sword and orders a new charge. Only this time, he intends to lead it himself. He throws his sword to the ground. His page hands him an old arquebus, which he then raises over his head... holding it by the barrel with the stock facing up.

[Miso]: That's it!

[Kong]: What?!?

[Miso]: Order the Arquebusiers to hold their guns just like that. We are going to club these pigs back across the river!

[Kong]: Are you crazy?!?

[Miso]: Its genius! The assaulting force is mostly Ashigaru! Heck, by now we've killed most of the monks! I'm telling you... the spectacle alone will scare the crap out of those peasants...

[Kong]: The men are scared... they surely will not have the stomach to face their commander... even if he was just their former commander... they have all been weaned on his legend...

[Miso]: Tell the men that Agador is still with us...

[Kong]: How can you be so sure...?

[Miso]: Tell them... make them believe it... if it is not the case, I will kill him myself!

Agador crosses over amidst a sea of peasantry under the rain. As soon as he reaches the shores, he stands aside and lets his Ashigaru race forward to clash with the Imperial army.

Miso orders the countercharge. Several thousand Arquebusiers and yari hurl themselves onto the unsuspecting enemy waving their spears and guns. As they hold their massive guns over their heads and charge towards the enemy, the rain mixes with the soot from the barrel and drips over the faces of the Arquebusiers, creating a ghoulish appearance in the eyes of their prey. When the two mobs clash, the Arquebusiers smash their heavy guns over the heads of the terrified peasants. A brutal melee ensues, but only lasts a few minutes as the Eivel Ashigaru panic and turn to the bridge to cross back over to safety as the Imperial teppo transforms into a lynch mob.

But Agador steps out onto the bridge and starts swinging his massive arquebus at the routing Ashigaru. Alone on the bridge, he single-handedly, from his horse, beats back the Ashigaru, preventing their crossing. The Imperial army pursues them and hammers away at them with no mercy.

[Ashigaru #87]: [Raises his hands to fend off the brutal battering from the Imperial Arquebusiers. The stocks of the heavy weapons crack his skull and smash his bones. With blood oozing out of his mouth and his eyes glazed he shrieks...] Can't we all just get along...?!?

Seeing his son's betrayal, Eivel orders his elite cavalry to ride in and kill Agador. But, as the cavalry rushes onto the bridge, the Imperial yari reach Agador, who then casts off his helmet and jumps into their midst. The yari make short order of the cavalry, who are forced to retreat back across the bridge.

[Miso]: Agador! Agador!

[Agador]: Miso! Kong!

[Miso]: I knew you had not betrayed us!

[Kong]: How...?

[Agador]: Apparently, I am one of Eivel's long lost sons... I took the post in his army to ensure their defeat. I am delighted you picked up on it and slaughtered those monks. Now we can clean up here and move on to the fortress...

[Kong]: What about Eivel? He still has a large army... and it's still raining...

[Agador]: I didn't say it would be easy... I made sure their best men died crossing the bridge...

[Miso]: I'm glad you are back!

[Agador]: Now... we must wait for the rains to stop. Then we move fast towards the castle and try to break the siege.

An hour later, Agador got his wish, and the rains stopped. He quickly ordered his army to march north. Eivel wasted no time and had his battered army cross the bridges and stay close behind.

Agador's army reached the earthworks and settled into formation. Within minutes, the Arquebusiers opened fire on the besieging forces with deadly results. But Eivel's army was close behind. As they approached, Agador had a quarter of his guns turn to face the threat from the south.

Then, when Eivel got within range, he ordered a full attack on Agador's position. The besiegers sallied forth from their positions at the same time as Eivel's Ashigaru raced up from the south. Soon, Agador's army found itself surrounded on all sides.

The Arquebusiers sniped away at the enemy from inside their formation while the yari tried desperately to keep the enemy at bay. The porcupine they formed proved difficult to break as the day wore on.

Then, as dusk approached, Eivel's armies pulled back. They would certainly resume their attack the next day.

But Agador was not planning on waiting. He ordered his men to pursue the retreating besiegers back into their fortifications.

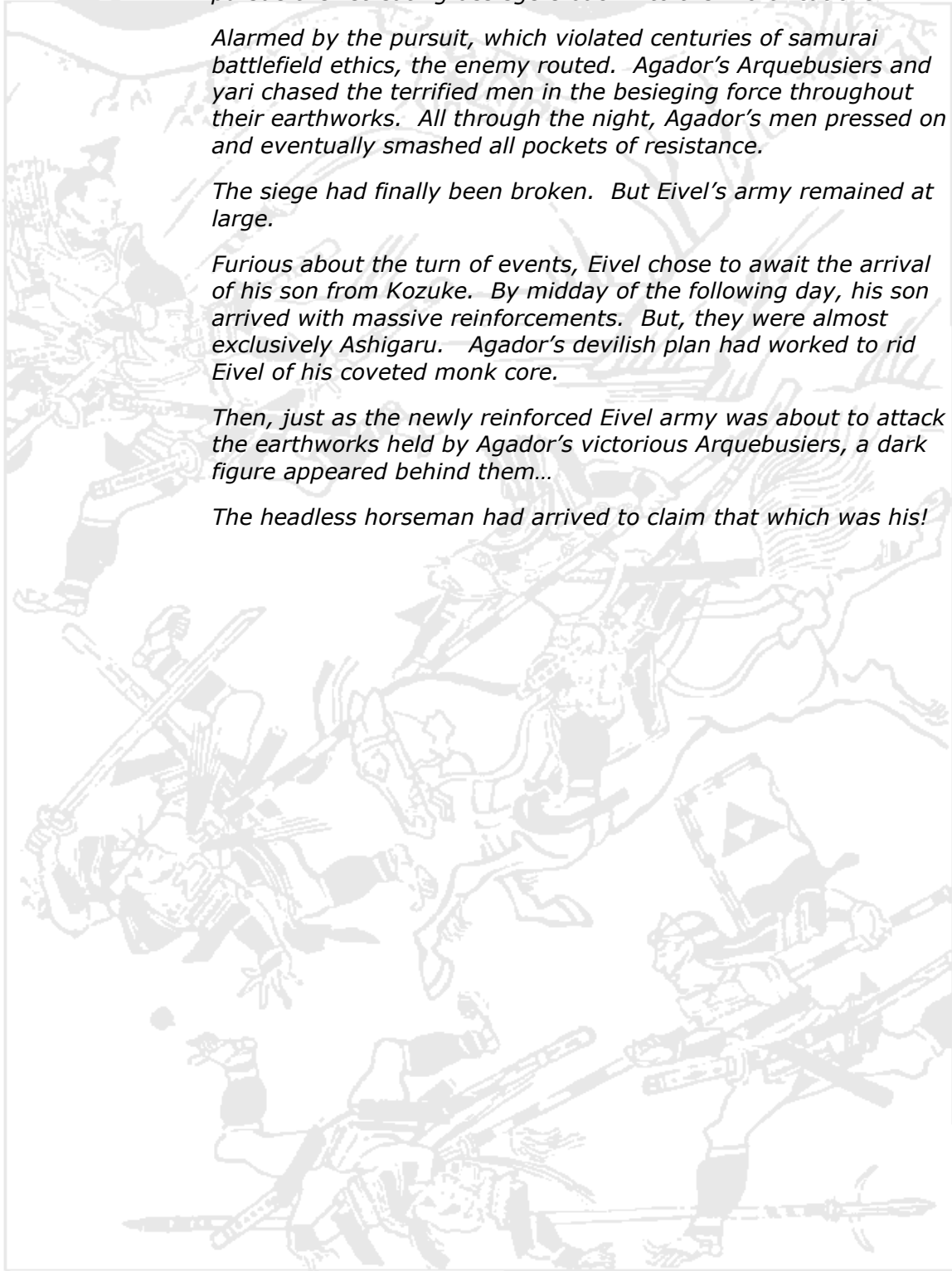
Alarmed by the pursuit, which violated centuries of samurai battlefield ethics, the enemy routed. Agador's Arquebusiers and yari chased the terrified men in the besieging force throughout their earthworks. All through the night, Agador's men pressed on and eventually smashed all pockets of resistance.

The siege had finally been broken. But Eivel's army remained at large.

Furious about the turn of events, Eivel chose to await the arrival of his son from Kozuke. By midday of the following day, his son arrived with massive reinforcements. But, they were almost exclusively Ashigaru. Agador's devilish plan had worked to rid Eivel of his coveted monk core.

Then, just as the newly reinforced Eivel army was about to attack the earthworks held by Agador's victorious Arquebusiers, a dark figure appeared behind them...

The headless horseman had arrived to claim that which was his!



Chapter 8: The Ascent

The horseman charged into Eivel's army, chopping heads off left and right, on his advance towards the castle. Seeing this, Agador ordered his men to open fire on Eivel's army, hoping to start a mass rout.

But Eivel's men pressed on despite the horseman's presence. Eivel himself lead his cavalry up into the earthworks on Agador's flank. With no yari units there to shield the Arquebusiers from the cavalry, Eivel soon made short order of the teppo guarding the earthworks he had breached. Agador ordered some yari to head over and hold off the threat, but most of them were already actively protecting Arquebusiers elsewhere. Sensing things getting out of control, Agador ordered his men to retreat into the castle, where they would enjoy the protection offered by its massive walls - and he could concentrate his yari and firepower over a narrow front..

Eivel's men harassed Agador's retreating army right into the gates. But Agador was unable to keep them from breaking into the castle along with his forces. Now, Eivel himself was inside the castle slashing away at Agador's terrified Arquebusiers.

With Eivel in control of the gates, more and more of his troops poured into the courtyard. But, they too were being chased... by the horseman.

Agador picked up his arquebus and took aim at his father. His first shot missed as Eivel effortlessly turned to avoid the shot. Stunned but not deterred, Agador fired a second shot, only to see Eivel again dodge it by arching backwards over his horse. Several shots later, Agador was furious... and loading his gun again.

[Kong]: I have never seen somebody move so FAST...

[Agador]: GAH! I'll show him! I'm gonna get me some... I'm gonna have me some fun...!

Agador took aim again. But this time, he did not aim at Eivel directly, but the stony parapets overlooking the courtyard. Eivel laughed as Agador discharged his weapon. The bullet bounced off the parapet, headed down towards the courtyard, ricocheted off a teppo's conical helmet, struck Eivel's steel scabbard, bounced up and ricocheted off Eivel's helmet and slammed into his shoulder. Lord Eivel fell off his horse as a result. Wounded, but not dead, he picked up his sword and lunged at Agador.

[Eivel]: You ungrateful little pig! The world could have been your playground! You shall play with Buddha tonight!

[Agador]: Ha! It is not I that has a lead ball in my shoulder!

Eivel swings his sword at Agador, who blocks it with his gun. Incensed the rage, Eivel's attack does not reflect his injury, as he hammers away at Agador. . At one point, Agador trips over a dead body and lands on his back. Eivel raises his sword with both hands and prepares to deal Agador the fatal blow... when Agador coils his foot and thrusts the ball of his heel deep into Eivel's groin. Eivel pauses and looks at Agador... his eyes popping out of his face, which turns tomato red...

[Eivel]: [Lets out a slow sigh] Oh!!! That was good!!!

Apparently unfazed, Eivel resumes his all-out attack on Agador, who gets up and evades his wide swings. Falling back, Agador makes Eivel expend a lot of energy chasing him over the courtyard and up and down stairs. After exhausting himself chasing his son, Eivel swings his sword haphazardly at Agador, who easily steps out of the way, and with a swift motion, cracks the butt of his gun over the back of Eivel's head. Eivel falls to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Eager to finish off one of his foes, Agador steps over Eivel and smashed his head with his gun.

But the melee in the courtyard is feverish. And then, the headless horseman enters the gates! His horse bucks up on its hind legs as the imposing black-clad beast brandishes the pale sword Buddha once yielded in life. The whole courtyard comes to a sudden halt... all the warriors... enemies viciously battering each other just seconds before, stand silently, side by side, staring at the ominous man with no head... its as if time stopped momentarily...

[Yari man #69]: Alright then! Back to the fight now! Chop, chop!

The horse drops back down to all fours as the Imperial and Eivel warriors resume their battle. Then the horseman kicks his stallion and races forward into the crowd, whirling his sword with the greatest of ease... killing indiscriminately. The heads of terrified victims bounce off his blade like golf balls off a driver and drop amidst their petrified comrades...

Miso runs up and pushes Agador into a door as the horseman races by. The two men run down the corridor hoping to get away from the courtyard.

[Miso]: Shit! That was close!

[Agador]: Where to now???

[Miso]: Here... you take the head [hands Agador the satchel with Sibalinga] I'll try to keep him busy while you escape.

[Agador]: Come on... we can both make it...

[Miso]: No. You go! One of us must make it out of here with that head!

[Agador]: I will never forget this...

[Miso]: Go now! GAH!

Agador disappears into the depths of the castle as he follows the dark corridors. Unknowingly, the corridors lead straight to the dungeons, from which there is no escape...

Miso frantically makes noise as he heads in the opposite direction. Soon enough the horseman himself appears in the corridor... calmly looking over Miso's antics.

In the background the battle cries from the raging melee can be heard...

The horseman approaches Miso. Miso races forward and attacks the horseman. They fight amidst the close quarters of the narrow corridors. The sound of metal clashing with metal echoes throughout the passageways. Miso's heart is racing as he fends off the horseman's furious counterattack.

But Miso is no match for the horseman. Realizing this, he tries to draw the horseman away from where Agador fled. But the horseman breaks off the attack each time to resume his pursuit of his head. Miso is forced to engage the horseman each time.

Weary from the ongoing swordplay, the horseman finally forces Miso into a corner and beats him down furiously. Miso can only hold up his sword to block the blows. Then, in one swift stroke, the horseman's blade slices off Miso's hand.

Screaming, Miso clutches his arm and falls to the ground. Now unarmed, he closes his eyes in anticipation of the final death blow.

The horseman, however, gives Miso a long look and moves on... calmly walking down towards the dungeons where Agador inadvertently trapped himself.

Agador, pacing around the dungeon frantically, decides to go back out into the corridor to find another way out. But, just as he reaches the door, he sees the horseman approaching. Agador retreats back into the dungeon.

As the horseman enters the cavernous room, Agador backs up. He reaches into the satchel and pulls out Sibalinga.

[Agador]: This is what you want...?

Agador holds up the head. The horseman stops. Then, the eyes on the severed head open!

[Sibalinga]: Give me my head, and you shall be spared.

Agador, now in shock, pulls down the head and sees it staring back at him! Bewildered, he watches in shock as the head speaks to him!

[Sibalinga]: Hand over my head!

[Agador]: Wha--

[Sibalinga]: There is no way out. Your friends are incapacitated or busy. Nobody can help you. Let me be your friend...

[Agador]: No! You will destroy the world! You must NEVER get your head back!

[Sibalinga]: Gah! Fool!

[Agador]: No...

[Sibalinga]: And who told you I would destroy the world...?

[Agador]: The monks and scholars...

[Sibalinga]: Ah... yes... the bastions of ignorance... and the rest of you accept their lunacy as fact and follow them down their road to madness...

The horseman slowly approaches, raising his shiny sword... The pale blade glistening in the dim light... the piercing eyes of the twin Shih Tzus starring intensely back at a petrified Agador...

[Agador]: Stop! Don't come any closer!

Agador reaches for a torch and holds it up to Sibalinga.

[Agador]: Come any closer and your head shall burn!

[Sibalinga]: Burn the head! The ashes will suffice! [Laughs]

[Agador]: I mean it!

Then, the horseman swiftly jumps at Agador and strikes the torch with his blade, sending it across the room, where it lands amidst some stones and hay. The fire from the torch ignites the hay, and soon a fire is raging within the dungeon. Agador clutches the head and heads for the fire.

The horseman motions his hand and the blaze erupts and swirls around Agador. Then, he waves his hand again and the fire dies... not even a trace of smoke scents the air...

[Sibalinga]: This is not how it has to end. I have been in search of my head for over a thousand years now. My ascent awaits my wholeness. Then, I shall take my rightful position as commander of Buddha's legion!

[Agador]: And destroy the earth! No!

[Sibalinga]: [Laughs] You petty myths and fantasies are amusing. But if destroying the world had been my intent, do you really think I would be walking the earth as a lonesome horseman...?

[Agador]: You just want to kills us all one by one! Yeah!

[Sibalinga]: [Laughs] Battles will come and go... but even when you think you have won, rest assured that I can never be defeated... for I am Legion... and I am many... Long after I am gone, another will arise...

[Agador]: Gah! This battle will be remembered...

[Sibalinga]: Gah! Your destiny... is not that of a hero...

[Agador]: What?!? My destiny?!? I put an end to Eivel's evil reign! I lead the Imperial army to victory! Even should I die here today, history will remember my accomplishments here today!

[Sibalinga]: Your destiny is to be forgotten. Death shall engulf your friends, and your allies will cast you out. You WILL be forgotten... during your own lifetime...

[Agador]: Not true! How could you pretend to know these things...?

[Sibalinga]: I am the darkness that gives comfort to the ailing hearts of Men at the end of the day. Soon, you too will realize this... Nobody will ever escape my embrace...

[Agador]: [Looks at the head] I can't... I can't be the one that brings about the death of us all...

[Sibalinga]: Death... everybody dies... it's just a matter of when, where and how...

Agador takes a moment to think things over. Thoughts race through his head, but he can't seem to make sense of any of them... He looks up at the horseman...

[Agador]: Why have you not slain me? Everybody else that has crossed your path has died by your sword... why haven't you killed me... I am unarmed...?

[Sibalinga]: How can I kill the man that has freed Japan of its greatest scourge? You killed Lord Eivel. For that – and for handing over my head – you shall live long...

[Agador]: I cannot stop you either way... I am no match for you...

[Sibalinga]: True.

Agador hands the horseman his head. A devilish smile overcomes the rotten Sibalinga as it is placed on its neck for the first time in a thousand years.

Right before his eyes, Agador sees the decomposed head reconstitute itself. The skin and flesh regenerate rapidly... the color flushes back into the head and the hair grows out. Within minutes, the fully restored horseman stands complete before Agador... as lifelike as any other living being.

[Vanya]: Ah! Now I am complete again!

[Agador]: And you are not going to destroy the world...?

[Vanya]: [Laughs] Destroy the world...? Why... Man controls their own destiny. Who better suited to destroy the world than yourselves...?

The horseman turns to leave the dungeon. Then, at the door, he turns back to face Agador...

[Vanya]: Here... a token of my appreciation...

The horseman reaches into his pocket and pulls out a silver chain. From the chain hangs a two-headed silver Shih Tzu. He tosses the chain to Agador.

[Agador]: What is this?!?

The horseman reaches in and clears aside the shrunken heads that adorn his necklace to reveal the same amulet on his neck.

[Vanya]: Always wear it. It is... for... luck... Remove it only... when you are ready...

With that, the horseman exits the dungeon into the corridor. Agador runs out after him. But, as he gazes into the straight, narrow corridor leading out of the dungeon, he can see no trace of the mighty horseman.

[Agador]: Where the heck did he go...? Ready for what?!?

A gentle breeze blew down the corridor. Agador raced out to the courtyard. Along the way, he sees Miso on the floor crawling towards the courtyard clutching his bloody stump.

[Miso]: Agador! What happened?!? Where is the horseman?!?

[Agador]: Relax... he is gone now. He is gone...

[Miso]: What happened down there...?

[Agador]: [Frowns] That is something I can never hope to explain... something I just don't know how to explain...

Agador helps Miso out to the courtyard. There, they are greeted by a victorious Imperial army! The remnants of Eivel's army had been defeated while they were within the dungeons and corridors.

[Agador]: Look! [Points to a ray of sunshine breaking ominously through the clouds] A doorway to Nirvana...

[Miso]: What...?

[Agador]: One day... you will understand...

Then, from amidst the jubilant crowd, a man covered in blood and wearing haggard clothes steps forward...

[Jotito]: Agador! You did it! You lifted the siege! Eivel is dead!

[Agador]: Jotito! Oh... you are alive!

The two long-separated friends hug.

[Agador]: Miso... you ought to go see one of the Imperial surgeons... your hand...

[Miso]: Gah! I shall bear this wound with pride! For I took part in the greatest battle in the history of Japan! Right now, I feel no pain!

Kong joins them, and the four go about rejoicing and reveling in their accolades that day...

Chapter 9: Epilogue

500 years later...

[Susuki]: So... grandpapa... what happened then to Agador and his friends...?

[Mako]: Did they live happily ever after...?

[Tano]: [Coughs] Ah, children. In the weeks after that great victory, Eivel's remaining sons were hunted down and killed. But the Emperor had grown sick, and soon after died. Although his son succeeded him, he was weak and became dependant on Lord Oda for security. And Lord Oda despised Agador...

[Susuki]: So what happened then...?

[Tano]: Well... the Samurai could not stand that an Ashigaru commander had achieved such a monumental victory. He was represented the commoner... a threat to the samurai dominance... and was a constant embarrassment to the samurai. Thus, Oda stripped Agador of his command and rank and exiled him from Japan. Agador left Japan to live amongst the Ainu in Hokkaido. Oda ordered all accounts of the great battle be stricken from history... in essence... he ordered the country to forget about Eivel, the horseman and Agador...

And the samurai were all too happy to oblige. They quickly reverted to their warlike ways and exerted their dominance over the people.

History remembers Oda as the first of the Great Unifiers... but he merely inherited a decimated land, where his opponents had all been killed or chased out of contention by Lord Eivel. Oda reaped the rewards of Agador's labor and merely put the finishing touches on his campaign of unification...

Oda took control over the Imperial Arquebusiers... they were the secret to his success. And... ironically, Oda's successor, Hideyoshi, dissolved the Imperial Arquebusiers and outlawed the use of guns...

[Mako]: And Miso, Kong and Jotito...?

[Tano]: Kong and Jotito, as did Miso, remained in Oda's new army. But Oda, realizing they were friends of Agador's, suspected they would not follow his command to forget those memorable events they took part in. So he sent their unit to attack a Mori stronghold in Wakasa. He made sure they lead the attack. They all died at that battle...

[Kalisa]: Oh! That is so terrible!

[Mako]: It was just as the horseman said! All his friends died...

[Tano]: Not only those... But all that knew Agador died mysterious deaths. The monks in Tosa were found beheaded in their latrine. The Portuguese allies that had helped the Emperor so much in Mutsu disappeared at sea... never to be heard from again. Rumor was it that kamikaze ninjas boarded the ships and made sure they sank far from land... and in so doing, silenced themselves as well. Even the monks in Manchu Kwo were not spared...

[Mako]: Oda attacked Manchu Kwo too?!?

[Tano]: No... Oda had his Shinobi leak lies to the Great Khan... claiming the monks of Manchu Kwo were planning to assassinate him. Well, the Khan bought it and attacked the massive fortress. He laid siege to it for 13 months... but in the end, the fortress fell. The monks were all killed. And afterwards, Oda's shinobi crept into the smoldering ruins of the castle and burned all the manuscripts within... and in so doing, erased all knowledge about the horseman there too...

[Susuki]: And the horseman... what ever happened to him...? Who was he?

[Tano]: Ah! The mystery... Agador did not just meet a mythical immortal being... Who or what he is is anybody's guess... Within the manuscripts read to Agador in Tosa was a story about how each age of Man is marked by the ascent of a new horseman... a commander of Buddha's legion... a new emissary to rule over Death itself... But Agador realized this much later in life, for the manuscript itself was very cryptic and metaphorical... Was the horseman Death proper...? I don't know... as for what I believe... In Nirvana, Buddha is the King... the Emperor... but, the horseman is the Shogun...

[Susuki]: If he is Death... how can he visit everybody...?

[Tano]: He commands a legion more populous than the all the men that have ever lived... if he is Death, he would not have to personally visit anybody... he could delegate...

[Mako]: But wasn't the horseman once a man like the rest of us...?

[Tano]: Yes... but Buddha appoints the greatest warriors to lead his legion... So even you or I could, in theory, take that post if our death occurs at the right time...

[Kalisa]: Oh! This story has such a sad ending! The kids are going to be spooked at night!

[Tano]: Spooked? Didn't you hear that Hiroshima yesterday was just wiped off the face of the earth? That spooks me!

[Kalisa]: Gah! Don't get me started about this stupid war with the Americans... They are going to bomb us back to the stone age...

[Tano]: [Turns back to the children] So, you see, kids, it happened just as the horseman had said... all memory of Agador's feats had been erased from the collective conscious... he was, as was predicted, destined to be forgotten...

[Susuki]: And the necklace? Did he keep the necklace?

[Tano]: Ah, yes! The necklace. He never told a soul about it. He always wore it beneath his clothes. Often, he would just gaze into its fiery yellow eyes... He lived his days peacefully in Hokkaido... but what happened to him? Nobody knows... He was never heard from again...

[Kalisa]: OK. Your stories are usually great, father. But you are scaring the kids. [To the kids] Please wait for me outside.
The kids leave the room.

[Kalisa]: Why did you tell them that was a true story in the beginning? I have never heard such accounts... I studied history at the university!

[Tano]: Yes. I know. Forgive me. I am but an old man, and death is knocking on my door... has been for ages now...

[Kalisa]: Get some rest. We'll be back next week. And tell a story with a happy ending next time...?

[Tano]: OK.

[Kalisa]: And try not to fill their heads with lies about our history...

[Tano]: Lies...? Oda's campaigns against the Ikko-Ikkei were but a cover for the whole campaign against Eivel. The truth... has been kept secret for hundreds of years... It is the biggest cover-up in history... Perhaps one day, you will discover something that proves this story... Maybe something survived at Nagashima... the temple was already in ruins by the time of the great battle in Mutsu took place...
Kalisa heads for the door.

[Tano]: Wait. I want you to have something...
Kalisa turns around and glares at the old man.

[Tano]: [Reaches into his shirt and removes a silver chain from his chest] Here... I want you to have this...

[Kalisa]: I can't...

[Tano]: Please... take it... it has brought me much luck. I have lived long enough to see you flourish. Take this necklace... please... then, after the war, build yourselves a good life...

[Kalisa]: You sound as if you were dying...

[Tano]: No stopping that now...

Reluctantly, Kalisa takes the necklace. She says goodbye and leaves. As she closes the door, she can hear the old man sigh...

Kalisa leads her two kids down the hall, heading towards the hospital exit. Then, she stops, pulls out the necklace Tano just gave her and stares at it... perplexed...

[Mako]: Hey! That's a two-headed Shih Tzu! Just like the one in grandpapa's story!

[Susuki]: And it's silver too! With fiery green eyes!

[Kalisa]: Yes... I notice that... I thought they were yellow...

Then, as the three were staring at the amulet, a dark-clad man walks past them.

[Dark Man]: Kalisa! Good day!

The man continues down the hall.

Then, Kalisa's eyes open wide as she drops her jaw. She turns and runs back to Tano's room. When she busts in there, she sees Tano's lifeless body lying peacefully on the bed... a great smile spread across his wrinkled face.

As she stooped over Tano's lifeless body, a sweet breeze blew threw the closed room. But, Kalisa noticed that all the windows were closed tight.

[Kalisa]: Why didn't you tell me earlier... I would have listened...

Kalisa then looks at the amulet in her hand again.

[Kalisa]: I swear the eyes were yellow when you gave this to me...

Two weeks later, Kalisa took the children to Tano's grave. There, they placed a rose over his tomb. And, Kalisa saw the same dark-clad man loitering in the vicinity of the grave.

[Kalisa]: Who are you...?

[Dark Man]: Nobody. He was just a friend... from long ago...

Kalisa looked back at the grave. Then look back towards the man. But he was gone. There was no trace of him anywhere in sight...

THE END

