

Reclamation

By Gus Prouty | 4478 words

A small sigh escapes me as I make my way through the lunch tables that litter the HUB. Another pointless meeting; I will never understand why they make all the Guardians waste an hour every day. An hour we could be spending doing our jobs, protecting the campus and actually tracking down leads. Instead, I just spent the last sixty minutes sitting in the Guardian conference room in the HUB, receiving sideways glances from my fellow officers, while the chief regaled us with all the details we still don't know about our ongoing investigations. Chief among those details being the main location of Neo-Delta. My teeth grit at the thought; lucky for them their hideout's a secret because, if it wasn't, Mana and I would have already razed it to the ground. Wishful thinking, I suppose; no, today looks to be shaping up to be another perfectly boring day of sitting on the bell tower.

I dig through the pocket of my black leather duster, standard Guardian issue, and pull out a small human shaped piece of paper. A familiar phrase is scrawled across it, written in Japanese and surrounded by a fiery outline.

"Mana Ukabu Kudasai," I mutter dropping the paper and continuing to walk. It is only after moments have passed and I haven't heard the standard cheery greeting that I cast a glance over my shoulder. The paper human is still lying on the ground exactly where it had fallen, no Mana. I stop dead. Quickly retracing my steps I pick up the piece of paper. Maybe she didn't hear me; yeah that's it. Or Amaterasu could just be feeling especially lazy today. But that doesn't sound plausible even in my head. I speak the phrase over and over again, each time with slightly

more desperation, but I'm still left standing alone. As a final check, I pull a pen out of my back pocket and scrawl another word on the back side of the paper human, not even bothering to outline it in fire.

“Kasai.” The syllable has barely left my lips before the paper has already started smoldering. Despite the flames now lapping at my hand, a chill runs through me. My magic is working fine, which means the worst-case scenario has happened. Mana is missing.

I turn on my heels and march out of the HUB. I need some space to think without being questioned about why I just set something on fire. This is bad, really, really bad. Nobody should be able to summon Mana, at least not without the blood of Amaterasu running through his veins, and as far as I know I'm the only one like that on campus. I need to report this to the Guardians, start gathering a search party. But something stops me; it's a bitter thought. Would they even care?

Most of the Guardians are distrustful of Mana, at best; that was the entire point of dispelling her for this morning's stupid meeting in the first place. For some unfathomable reason, they feel she is less safe than the mechanized monstrosities they have following them around. I try not to think about it, most times, and just use it as motivation to work harder, to prove them wrong. But now their distrust seems so much more hateful, as it occurs to me that they likely won't rush off to ensure she is brought back safely. As I consider whom I can rely on, it suddenly occurs to me that I don't have very many friends. It shouldn't really surprise me; a position in the Guardians isn't known for making one popular, and I wasn't the most social person in the first place. Mana's company is usually more than enough for me.

A sort of panicky loneliness creeps up my spine. It reminds me of a time as a child when I had been separated from my mother at the park. It had just gotten dark and to my young mind every bush and shadow concealed a monster just waiting to strike. She finally found me after what seemed like hours of walking alone, calling her name, crying. I didn't want to be alone.

Swallowing hard, I push those feelings aside; they won't help me now. Closing my eyes, I think back over the last few weeks, trying to come up with something, anything that can show me where to start looking. A particular conversation keeps coming to mind, something about a new machine that can simulate having Amaterasu's blood, along with the person who told me about it. He's always called himself a friend, to both Mana and me; maybe I should take him up on it. Pulling out my phone, I hesitate for only a moment before dialing the number of the only other Guardian assigned to the bell tower.

“Hello, Nathan its Kyou; I need your help.”

“This is not what I need you to help with!” I have to shout to be heard over the roaring winds, as I cling to the massive arm of Nathan's golem, Sentinel, as it rockets through the sky.

After I had explained my situation, Nathan volunteered his help almost immediately, and we are currently on our way to the MSE lab that houses the Shaman Simulation Machine. Figures, they didn't even have the decency to name the thing that stole my skikigami after the kind of summoner I am. Sentinel wobbles slightly as it flies, jostling me from my thoughts. I glare at Nathan who sits clutching Sentinel's other arm.

“Don’t look at me like that. You’ll be fine. I designed this baby myself. Smoothest ride on campus; we’ll be there in no time;” he grins back at me.

“You really think this could just be an accident?”

“I’ve seen it happen before, is all I’m saying. Half of the things these guys build backfire and cause weird problems; it’s part of the draw of the program. They may have accidentally snagged her, and don’t know how to let her go.” I shoot Nathan a skeptical look.

He shrugs, “And if not, at least we can cross off that possibility.”

Now that, I can’t argue with; the sooner we know one way or the other, the quicker we can get to finding Mana. Besides, we’re almost there. Sentinel descends in front of the engineering building. Some students shoot us curious looks but, for the most part, they pay us no mind. After letting the two of us off, Sentinel straightens up and, once more, rockets into the heavens.

“Where’s he going?” I ask, as I gaze at the jet trail the golem leaves behind.

“His planet needs him,” Nathan says with a smirk. *Wiseass*. I snort in disapproval at his joke and start walking into the building. The front doors are already open. A campus handyman is atop a ladder working on the door’s hydraulics from the inside. The professor we want is standing just slightly further inside. His arms are crossed as his eyes scan the entire entrance hall. He visibly relaxes when he sees us.

“Hello, I’m Kyou Kobayashi and this is my associate, Nathan. We are with the Guardians and we would like to speak with you about the prototype you have been developing.”

“Thank heavens; you boys must be psychic. I was just about to put in a call about that,” the professor exclaims, clasping his hands together. I have a bad feeling about this.

“Call in about what?”

“Why, the prototype of course! It was stolen from my lab this morning.”

“Of course it was,” I groan, face in my palm.

“Do you have any idea who might have taken it?” Nathan picks up the conversation while I reel.

“No! And it’s the strangest thing. No one should have keys to that lab but me, and I had them on me when I left the building last night.”

“Did you run into anyone on your way home?” Nathan presses.

“I don’t think so...wait! I did bump into Daniel over there as I was leaving the building. Said he was doing some late night maintenance or something like that. Perhaps he can tell you more.” He gestures toward the handyman in the doorway, who is now watching our conversation with more than slight attention. Something about that name sounds familiar, but I can’t quite put my finger on it so I make my way over to him. Nathan thanks the professor for his help and follows me. As I look at the handyman’s face, despite his attempts to look elsewhere, it suddenly seems a lot more familiar than at first glance. And then it clicks.

“So...,” I begin, “we’re from the Guardians, and we would like to ask you a few questions about the break-in this morning.” Daniel only grunts an affirmation. “We have reason to believe that Neo-Delta may be involved.” He visibly stiffens at that. Bingo!

In the next second, he kicks off the ladder, leaps through the door and breaks into a full sprint.

“Basta...,” I exclaim, the ladder crashing beside me. Before I can give chase, Nathan’s outstretched arm stops me.

“I got this,” he replies simply, then walks casually through the door and raises one hand to the sky. Speaking into the data pad held in his other hand he exclaims, “Sentinel, its show time!” while snapping the fingers of his raised hand. Almost immediately, the golem descends from on high and lands in front of our fleeing suspect. The impact knocks Daniel off his feet and Sentinel proceeds to gingerly scoop him up in its massive hands and hold tight. I simply stand there for a second, perplexed at what just took place. Nathan grins at me. When I finally find words, all I can think to say is,

“Did you just summon your golem with a catch phrase?” The smile fades from Nathan, replaced by a look of slight embarrassment.

“What? Did that not sound as cool as it did in my head?” He is genuinely concerned. I just shake my head and walk past him towards the apprehended Daniel.

“It sounded fine,” I mutter over my shoulder, not waiting for him to respond.

When we arrive at Sentinel, Daniel already has his piece prepared.

“I’m not telling you shit, so don’t waste your time,” he barks at me as Nathan finally catches up.

“Hey Kyou, I meant to ask, how’d you know he’s with Neo-Delta, anyhow?”

“I’ve apprehended him before... vandalism, loitering, and petty theft; all in the name of Neo-Delta.” I emphasize the last words to give Daniel an idea where this is going. He seems to get it.

“Like I said, I’m not talking, so piss off.” Nathan moves forward to reply, but this time it’s my arm that extends to hold him back.

“I got this.” I dig through my pockets and emerge with a post-it note and my pen. I scribble a phrase, doodle the fire outline, and then speak the new spell out loud.

“Shinjitsu Hanashite Kudasai,” and I stick the post-it to his cheek. The letters glow and soon steam begins to pour from Daniel’s mouth. Before long he’s panting like a dog.

“So Daniel, did you steal the prototype?” I ask.

“Like I’m going to tell you that I swiped that dumbass teacher’s keys and broke in.” His eyes widen at his own admission. I smile.

“Where did you take the machine?”

“No way you’ll ever find out about our secret base hidden up in the mountains; it’s off the path you hike to get to the big C.” He shouts in frustration and tries to hold his mouth shut, but soon his cheeks are bulging from the steam and he forcefully exhales, panting once again.

“Lastly, did Neo-Delta kidnap Mana?”

“What’s it even matter that we took your spirit bitch?” My vision turns red. What in Amaterasu’s name did he just call Mana? I am about to draw my sword, Nobuko, when Nathan speaks up, stepping in between Daniel and me.

“Before my friend cuts you into bite sized pieces, do you have any last words you don’t want to tell us?” Daniel’s eyes widen in fear as he shakes his head.

A couple of hours later, the two of us are overlooking the Neo-Delta hideout. Daniel’s information had been correct. We had flown over on Sentinel, after delivering Daniel to the proper authorities of course, and found the base right where he had said it would be. Landing a good distance away, we approached on foot and are currently crouched on top of a hill overlooking the clearing where they had set up camp.

There are at least four golems milling about down there, along with more than a dozen Neo-Delta members eating, talking, or playing cards, blissfully unaware they are being watched. Still, I don’t see anything that looks like the missing prototype.

“You think it’s in that shack there?” Nathan asks gesturing towards the dilapidated structure.

“I don’t see anywhere else it could be,” I reply, my hand drifting to the hilt of my blade.

“You’re really not going to call for back-up?”

“I’m not waiting any longer. I know she’s here, so I’m going to go get her; no telling what they could be doing to her, what they may have already done...” my voice hitches in my throat at the thought, but I push it down. Mana is still alive; she has to be. There is a brief moment of silence.

“Alright, Sentinel and I will create a distraction, take out the guys down there while their guard is down, and you slip into the shack in the confusion.” What the hell was he talking about?

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Which is why I’m offering.”

“Why? Why go through all that, all this,” I say, gesturing around me, “for our sake?”

“You think you’re the only one who has trouble making friends? Don’t get me wrong, the big guy is great at parties, but he isn’t much for conversation.” I’m looking at him now, straight in the eyes.

“Thank you.”

Nathan rolls his eyes. “You and Mana are my friends; it’s the least I can do; besides, I haven’t done anything yet. Thank me when all three of us walk out of here.”

I nod. “Deal.”

He grins and moves over to Sentinel.

“Glad I added those cannons, now,” he mutters, before taking a deep breath and commanding Sentinel to fire into the unsuspecting camp. The explosions shatter the calm of the scene. After a few more volleys, Sentinel charges down the embankment and into the pandemonium Nathan had created. On his way down, I see two blades extend from the cobalt golem’s forearms.

Nathan stands at the top of the hill, rifle in hand and shouts, “You call those hunks of junk golems? Don’t insult me!” before bounding down after Sentinel who is already tearing into another golem. I take this as my cue to move. Doing my best to ignore the chaos around me, I

head straight for the shack and, with a quick slash of my blade, the lock falls. Here I come, Mana!

The shack is empty. There's nothing but junk and old gardening equipment. Panic begins to build in my chest as I wonder if I was wrong, but then my eyes fall on the trap door that lies at the base of the far wall. Dashing over, I slice the lock and yank it open, coming face to face with the Neo-Delta member who's in the process of unlocking it from the other side. Soon we're face to boot, and as he tumbles back down the stairs into the basement, I'm not far behind him.

When I finally reach the bottom, I take stock as quickly as I can. It's a big room with a surprisingly high ceiling and there are crates and equipment everywhere. There are also a fair number of Neo-Delta members here and, through some unknowable means; they have managed to get two golems down here as well. But all that is suddenly much less important when my eyes fall on the far wall. A large opaque glass tube ascends to the ceiling. Standing next to it is a strange looking machine, which I can only guess to be the prototype. Mana sits within the tube, knees pressed to her chest, head down.

"Mana!" There's no response. Whatever is holding her must be completely shutting out the outside world. The same can't be said for the Neo-Delta members, as every head in the room is now on me, except for the one I want. Reaching into my coat I pull out a spell and press it to my thigh.

"Kakeru Hayai Kudasai." Steam emanates from my legs as I flash between my opponents, striking out with Nobuko. Some have guns, but they don't get the chance to use them before my blade finds them. One of the golems opens up with its machine guns, but I manage to outrun the attack. Still, I need a bit more power to take one of those out.

“Kire Yuni Kudasai.” The inscription carved into Nobuko’s hilt glows warmly in my hands. I leap and in two swift motions the mounted guns fall to the floor. Still, I can already feel the effects beginning to pass. If I ask too much of Amaterasu’s favors, she may abandon me for a time. The golem strikes out with its hands and I duck, just barely avoiding it. But I can’t afford to care about the goddess’s favor right now; I need to free Mana.

“Kire Hayai Kudasai.” The other side of the hilt glows and my blade begins to vibrate. With speed unmatched, I slash the automaton to ribbons until I finally see its core. In one swift motion, I stab Nobuko forward and pierce the small container of blood that is every golem’s core. Without that piece of life, given to it by its master, the machine slumps to the ground, inert.

A heavy blow sends me flying across the room and into the opposite wall. I failed to account for the second golem and I’m paying the price for it. I think my arm’s broken. Wincing, I roll toward cover as one of the Neo-Delta members shouts commands at the remaining golem. I pull a spell from my cloak and press it to my wounded arm.

“Naosu Hayai Kudasai,” I grunt through gritted teeth as the paper sends searing heat through my shoulder. Healing isn’t supposed to hurt this much. Amaterasu is definitely getting tired of all my favors. I need to stall.

“Why did you guys take Mana, anyway?” There’s a sudden silence, the member obviously not expecting the question.

“What, so you burst in here and I’m just supposed to explain our big plan to you?” That was the basic idea. There is another short silence before the member lets out a bark of laughter, sounding a bit closer than before.

“Fine, why not, it’s not like it’s a secret. We’re just doing your job for you, removing dangers from the campus. That thing’s a hazard; if it wanted to it could kill anyone, with anything on campus. Before that machine was invented, what was stopping it? A sense of common decency, loyalty, love? Ha, sorry if those reasons just don’t help me sleep at night.” The voice sounds like it is coming from right behind my cover.

“Now though, we can stop it, we can catch it, and pretty soon we’ll figure out how to get rid of it for good.”

“Like hell you will, you bastard!” I scream, launching myself from my hiding spot. Apparently that is exactly what he wants, as he slams the butt of his rifle into my chest sending me crumpling to the ground. Nobuko falls from my grip and he kicks it away from my hand. He has me face down in the dirt with a gun to the back of my head.

“Yeah, I will. Anything to add?” he asks, pressing the barrel harder against my neck.

“Kasai!” I spit into the dirt. In my pocket a small flame flickers to life, which quickly grows to encompass my whole duster. It doesn’t stop there, the fire leaping towards my assailant as if alive, igniting him as he stumbles backwards off of me. I quickly slip off my cloak and pat out my smoking shirt and pants. I’m both thankful for and terrified of Amaterasu’s affinity for fire as I watch the blaze slowly grow outward from my cloak. I’ve done quite a number on the room. The Neo-Delta members still conscious either run or try desperately to put out the fire.

But I don’t care about that as my eyes fix on Mana and that accursed machine. I haven’t the slightest idea how to properly shut it down. My body aches and burns, all my spells have gone up with my cloak, and my sword is nowhere to be seen. But I still have one last thing to do.

Walking up to the machine, I pull the pen from my back pocket and scribble a phrase onto the palm of my hand. Crouching down I press it to my foot and whisper,

“Keru Kudasai!” My boot begins to steam and I roundhouse kick the machine for all I’m worth. The metal crumbles like concrete under the heel of my boot. The giant tube sparks and then slowly fades until it is clear like glass. For the first time since I walked in, I see Mana move, looking up and around her and finally at me. The surprise and relief in her eyes is almost enough to block out the pain in my now surely broken foot. Amaterasu had only gone in half way on that last spell, and the hand I wrote it on is now in searing agony. But that’s fine, because I’ve accomplished my mission. Crumpling to the ground, I don’t even try to move when the Neo-Delta member from before makes his way over to me.

“You think you’ve won, you bastard?” he cries, the right side of his face badly burned. Too tired to move, I simply glance at him.

“You should run now.” He doesn’t get to respond as a giant fist slams into him. It’s Mana; she has possessed the remaining golem and is wreaking havoc on the rest of the Neo-Delta members. In that moment a small part of me, one I will never be able to forgive, actually sees what people fear about her. As she dances from one victim to the next, her weapon flickering in the firelight, be it dagger, golem, or just her bare hands, it is haunting and terrifying and beautiful all at once. But once the carnage has been wrought and she returns to me, kneeling by my side, her big eyes fill with tears and I know they are all wrong about her. She isn’t some mindless killing machine; she cares as much as anyone and is just as easily hurt. As I fall into unconsciousness, heat from the fires and ache from my wounds enveloping me, I vow to never let her leave my side like that, ever again. To never let either of us be alone again.

I wake to the smell of smoke and the sound of the wind rustling leaves. My whole body hurts, but that really isn't a surprise. What does intrigue me is the fact that I am under the clear open sky. Looking around, I find the cause is kneeling right next to me.

Sitting up despite the discomfort I ask, "Did you pull me out of that burning basement?"

Mana's eyes widen at her realization that I am awake. We just sit there in silence for a few moments. Then she launches herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck as if afraid I will disappear.

"I was so scared that when they caught me and then it was so cold and lonely and then you were there but you were so hurt and I was so scared for you." Her mouth is running a mile a minute, but I don't mind as I wrap my arms around her to let her know I'm not going anywhere. There was a time when this much physical contact with her would have made me uncomfortable, but that time isn't now, not after everything we have just been through. I don't even let go when Nathan walks up to us.

"Glad to see you're up. You had us worried for a bit."

"Thank you, for everything Nathan. I can say that now, right?"

"Sure you can, man. I mean, we took down an entire Neo-Delta base. Think we'll get any medals for this?" He has that goofy grin on his face again.

"Before or after the chief kills us for going off on our own?"

"If we survived this, then I think we can survive anything," he laughs.

Mana finally disengages from around my neck and looks at Nathan.

“I thank you too, Nathan, especially after what happened to Sentinel.” This catches my attention and I look around trying to tell what she means. When I notice it, I almost don’t recognize it. Sentinel is missing an arm, part of its face, and most of the armor on its chest and forelegs. It’s so bad I think I can see part of its core through its exposed chest. It almost hurts to see it in such rough shape.

“I’m sorry about Sentinel. I know it means a lot to you,” is all I can manage.

“Don’t worry about it. Half the fun is building him up bigger and badder than before. Besides, we both lost companions today.” It suddenly hits me that Nobuko is buried beneath the ashes of the compound. Perhaps noticing the faraway look in my eyes, Nathan continues, “But we saved the one that matters the most.”

I smile at this and hold Mana a little closer, “He’s got that right.”

She flushes and looks down after my praise.

“Oh, get a room, you two.” This instigates my own fascination with the ground. A few moments pass before Nathan speaks again,

“Hey, you know, I could make you a new sword. I know a fair bit about weapon crafting.” He gestures toward the husk of Sentinel.

“I appreciate the offer but, I, ah, think I’ll pass.” I respond a bit too quickly.

Mana giggles at my rushed refusal. “Oh, he just doesn’t want you to because, according to tradition, he would have to name it after you.” Nathan laughs at this, a really truly hearty

laugh. Soon Mana joins in and before long so have I. It isn't really that funny, but it is so good to hear that sound again, to be able to relax after what has felt like forever. I just can't help myself; I lean back on the ground, look up at the sky, and laugh.