

*Kalamazoo*  
By Danny Cove

Contents

*Kalamazoo*

*A Day in the Life at Kalamazoo*

*The Search for a Son of Kalamazoo*

*The Darkness Descendeth on Kalamazoo*

*The Loss of Kalamazoo*

*The Reign over the Ruins of Kalamazoo*

*The Corruption that Dreamt of Kalamazoo*

*The Return of the Son of Kalamazoo*

*The Exile Encumbered by the Fall of Kalamazoo*

*The Light of the Sky Shall Save Kalamazoo*

*The Return of Kalamazoo*

## *Kalamazoo*

In the region above the South China Sea, in an area commonly referred to in many of the ancient manuscripts as the Devil's Sea, there exists a world quite unlike any other. It is the ancient city of Kalamazoo, itself not known to any culture and for many vexing, perplexing and unknown reasons.

While the other nations of the earth fueled wars and plagues, Kalamazoo lived by the code of peace and harmony with their neighbor; whether that neighbor be man or animal, the people of this city took no notice. When England suffered under the might of the monarchs like John, and France, encouraged by Dagobert and Clovis II, sent forth their Merovingian boy-kings eventually stopped by the Carolingians, Kalamazoo had peaceful government warranted by the dead. This tiny city took no notice of the persecution under the false authority of the *Witch's Hammer*, and felt none of the icy chill in the northern regions of Russia. This isolation lived in a powerful utopia with no damning wishes nor desire for expansion; the avarice of the city's inhabitants, cut off from all other civilizations of the world, had not been needed nor developed.

The citizens of this paradise were known as the Daimyo, the *Great Named*, and virtually none came into conflict with his friend or neighbor. Each Daimyo had an equal say with his superior-in-rank-yet-equal-in-life confidants, the Shoguns. The Shoguns, trained for years as incredible fighters, guarded a wall that flowed across the tips of the Himalayas, protecting the city from all they knew to be the Outside. And across these frost-covered peaks existed the only true threat to the city, the Mi-Go, although even a single Mi-Go was rarely, if ever, seen by the Daimyo. But the Mi-Go did appear in the other stories and accounts of people who claim to have witnessed these abominable beings.

Between the times when the age of adulthood is reached and a Daimyo is married, they

are placed in a brotherhood or a sisterhood with four other individuals who lived together in elaborate, bamboo houses decorated with art painted and sculpted by the city's most talented artists. Within this pentet, each person is responsible for maintaining his own roles and duties in the household and any punishment or reward based upon the acts of one individual was allotted to the whole group.

The government of the Daimyo was supernatural though simple. The Shoguns, the ruling class of militants, made the most major of decisions and protected the city from non-existent threats but the minor issues of maintenance and court rulings was based upon the general consensus of the people. And in any court case, a person found guilty would have to either pay for punishment or, depending on the seriousness of the crime, be ejected from the city, never to return.

The Shoguns traveled the city escorted by great parades and processions, riding on palanquins carried by the Daimyo. A single Shogun would not touch the ground until he reached his point of guardianship. Although the Shoguns did live in a class above the Daimyo, they did not act as so. The Shoguns tended, more in actions and behavior than by law, to treat the Daimyo as equals and even many of the dead consultants were Daimyo, and that fact brings about the most spiritual part of the city of Kalamazoo.

In the northern regions of this city, there was an abandoned, at least by the living, set of houses. It is in these houses that Shogun and Daimyo alike would consult with their dead relatives, for by means of some unknown blessing, each Daimyo was allowed, after their death, an additional ten years to reside spiritually within the city. This election by the Almighty also aided to quell any religious disputes since each was capable of seeing what truly lay beyond the throes of death. And the Shoguns would seek advice on hard issues from the wisdom of the

deceased.

Kalamazoo suffered no threat of invasion from Outside opposition. The wall and Shoguns stopped anyone strong enough to brave those Netherworldian mountains and the Devil's Sea held its own surprises. It was rumored that great beasts of the deep, monsters and leviathans never seen by man roamed those waters, sinking ships and hiding in underwater mountain ranges deeper than anywhere else on Earth. None but the Black Ships could survive these waters.

The Black Ships first appeared in the legends of Kalamazoo around the year 1281, when some unknown, pitch-colored seafaring rovers appeared at the port of the city demanding that the Shoguns open outside trade. The Shoguns staunchly refused and the Black Ships have waited outside the city ever since, occasionally leaving and returning, preparing for the city to bend to their alien will. The existence of the Black Ships, as well as the history of the Great Gnome War, are only speculations as that the Daimyo had no form of literature or writing. Their entire history resides currently on blocks of wood called "ukiyo." The careful, artistic calligraphy on these blocks holds most in common with the Hieroglyphics of Egypt, but there also exists some semblance of Japanese iconography, although the letters are completely different and only matching in style and methodology.

It is commonly believed that, until the time of the Great Gnome War, the people of Kalamazoo had no connections with any civilization anywhere. The only true accounts of anything with regard to the city lay in the references in the deep, dark caverns on Miyake Island and aside from those inlaid allusions, the only connection to another world is in the origin of the Daimyo themselves. The Daimyo, it is said, came from everywhere before the mountains sprang and before the gargantuan marine life sought the light. A thousand races of people all came to the

same place and eventually, over the course of the thousands of years of Kalamazoo paradise, they all merged into one race: the Daimyo.

*A Day in the Life at Kalamazoo*

Edo concentrated on the ukiyo he was working on. He had been working on this one for days and, if he might say so himself, it was his best ever. There was no way old Denunci was going to beat him with this one. It was a complicated ukiyo that was very personal to him, detailing a conversation he had with his great-great-grandfather right before his ten-year term was up in the Hallows. The Hallows, of course, was where the dead stayed for their terms. Denunci's was just about a made-up story about a garden gnome or something silly like that.

Edo finished what he was planning to do with his ukiyo today and carefully placed it back on his mantelpiece with the ukiyos of his "brothers", as the other members of his pentet were referred. One of them was working on his own over in a corner. "Hey," Edo asked him. "Where are the others?"

"Down at the pier," was the reply. Edo shrugged and decided to go find them. He left his home and walked down the street. There was a blare of a horn and Edo stood aside as a Shogun was marched and carried down the street. The Shogun turned and gave Edo a big smile as his palanquin passed, acknowledging their equality despite the procession. After it all had passed, Edo continued his way down south toward the pier.

After ten minutes, Edo finally reached the waterfront and, after five more minutes of searching, managed to locate his other three brothers. They were standing at the very end of the pier and dropping food into the water. As Edo approached, he saw that they were actually feeding a baby sea serpent. It hissed and swam around, gobbling up the spare food they were tossing to it. "Hey, Edo," they said when he walked up. "Where have you been?"

"Working on your wood block?" asked one of them.

"Yeah," Edo answered. "It's coming along great. I've never seen one better."

“Ooh, arrogant.” Laughed one. “The Shoguns don’t like that too much.”

“Well,” Edo said. “I was actually going to go talk with one of them today. You know, my dad.”

“That reminds me, why aren’t you a Shogun?”

“I just never felt like being one. I mean, Shogunateship is not hereditary. I’m perfectly fine being an artist. Well,” Edo looked at the sundial mounted on the edge of the pier. “I have to be going. I’ll see you guys at home.” Edo waved them off and walked north, traveling through the busy streets and into the marketplace. He was smart enough not to bring his money; he knew if he did he would end up buying something he didn’t need.

Edo continued walking north until the ground began to slope upward toward the mountains. It got less and less populous the farther he walked until, at last, Edo entered the Hallows where the trees grew black and high, choking the sun from the sky. Edo reached a particularly gnarled tree and turned left, following a path until he got to a small shack back in these woods. “Hello!” he yelled. There was no reply, so he called again. “Hello!”

There was a grunt as an old man hobbled out, supported by a cane. This old man wore a medallion shaped like the sun with an etching of a quarter moon inlaid inside it, the sign of a Shogun. “Hello, father.” Edo said.

“My boy!” the man replied. “I haven’t seen you since the passing. What have you been up to? What brings you around?”

“I have a decision to make.” Edo stated. “I’m thinking of leaving the city. Kalamazoo holds no more inspiration for my art. I need to see what’s on the Outside.”

“Good,” came his father’s reply. “You need to leave. Darkness approaches, my son. I want you to be safe. The future of Kalamazoo lies in your hands.”

“What do you mean?” Edo asked. “There’s never been any darkness here before.”

“The Garden will rise. The sky will turn dark and the beasts will fall to the depths. The wall will fall and the Shogun will ally with the darkness to bring back the light.”

“What are you talking about?” Edo repeated. “Are you prophesying?”

“I have spoken with my kind, Edo.” His father replied. “The dead can see into the future, but not very much. We only get glimpses, flickers of what might possibly come to pass. You must leave, Edo. Go beyond the wall into the great Outside and don’t come back until three scores have passed.”

“Three!?” Edo screamed. “Three scores! How can I stay from Kalamazoo for that time and still live?”

“You must and you will! Go!”

Edo left that day. He scaled the wall and disappeared into the Outside, not to be seen for over half a century. The year was 1542 and that very day, when Edo vanished into the unknown world of the Mi-Go, gloom ascended from beneath the city and changed the history of the eternal paradise of Kalamazoo.



### *The Search For a Son of Kalamazoo*

The skies filled with clouds and darkened the streets of Kalamazoo. It rained down like a great outpouring of Heaven's river and thunder boomed to the great clash of the fire of the sky. But Nidhog ignored this. He simply remained inside his home, working on his ukiyo. He and his entire pentet were ukiyo-makers; that was the job that had been assigned to their household by the shoguns after these his group had explained their interests and they did not refuse it. It just so happened that each of the five brothers possessed an incredibly artistic quality, although none matched Nidhog's younger brother, Edo. He was regarded by many in the town as the city's greatest up-and-coming ukiyo-carver. But Nidhog agreed to give it his best shot and he had to say, he wasn't half-bad.

Nidhog finished with his block and placed it up on the mantel, right next to Edo's and then paused, trying to remember where his brothers had gone. Nidhog did not own the best memory in the home. After a moment, he remembered that Edo had left to find the other three members a few hours ago. *But where can they be now?* He asked himself. Edo was probably still talking with his father at the Hallows, but there was no way the eldest three could entertain themselves in this weather.

The young man quickly put on his sandals and raingear and left the structure, intent on finding the rest of his "family." He decided to check down by the waterfront first. That was where they had been a few hours ago. Nidhog reached those watery shores within a relatively short time, despite the harsh rain and wind pounding in his opposition. He could barely see, the sky had grown so dark and the rain was quickly changing into sleet and stabbing at him like the dull side of a ukiyo carver's blade. The boy placed one hand on his side just to make sure his knife was still there; they were expensive. It cost nearly two whole ukiyos to afford a single

blade. A Daimyo had to be careful with these expenditures.

The sea roared and pounded into the shore. The tide was high, way higher than it should be at this time of year. Nidhog worried for the first time in his life about what part the weather would have on the crops. Would they drown? Would they die? What would Kalamazoo do if that happened? Nidhog dismissed these questions. Kalamazoo had never once had any time of famine or problem with their crops, so why should any conflict arise now?

The Daimyo noticed something strange about the sea: normally, at turbulent forces of climate such as this storm, many of the sea creatures would be frolicking and flourishing on the surface of the water. He remembered as a boy when he had seen a pod of whales rolling, yes *rolling*, in the crests of the waves and filling the city with their mournful, melancholy wails. And it wasn't an uncommon occurrence to witness a globster or two leaping into the air and soaring for hundreds of feet before splashing back into the water. Globsters seemed to be one of the most interesting creatures in the waters of Kalamazoo, not being a specific race of animal or being. One might have tentacles while another might have great underwater wings and yet more might have flippers with which they would zip through the waters over half a millennia before the Chilean Blob would wash ashore on the other side of the world. But on this day, the waters of Kalamazoo laid vacant.

Disturbed and not finding his brothers, Nidhog decided to head back home. He gave one final look back at the ocean, noticing the dark black shapes of ships on the horizon before abandoning his last ever sight of the great ocean port. Nidhog made it home in about half the time it took him to walk toward the waterfront. The wind and rain had been pushing with him this time, pressing him forward rather than slowing him down.

Nidhog arrived at his house and closed the door behind him, removing his drenched

raingear and sandals and drying off with a spare cloth he had left by the door shortly before he left. He stared out the window at the incredible darkness that had descended upon his beloved city, the great black clouds that shut out the light save that which they released and the report that followed.

Nidhog turned at the sound of something scurrying in the next room. There was a small, shrill squeak and then the whisper of a cackle and Nidhog rushed into the room, expecting to find one of his brothers. Instead, he found the room completely empty except for a small statue of a dwarf by the fireplace. He wondered at the statue, assuming it to have been done by one of his brethren or a member of their extended friends. Nidhog moved closer, inspecting the statue with great detail. It was carved of stone and painted, only about a foot-and-a-half to two feet tall. It was in the shape of a short, squat man with very dark green, almost black skin. He had two beady eyes, a nose with a hint of red that spread out to the cheeks and a long gray and white beard. He wore a dark blue shirt with brown pants and perched atop his head was a pointed, bloodred cap that fell down to one side like a nightcap. Nidhog reached forward to touch the smooth, marble-like texture and felt the clothing to be real, cloth coverings. A confused expression crossed his face when suddenly, the statue came to life and bit hard on Nidhog's finger. The Daimyo fought back and hurled the little creature across the room where it hit the wall and crashed to the floor, temporarily phased.

But that shock did not last long. Within seconds, it was on its feet again, chattering in an unknown language that seemed to consist of squeaks and grunts. Eventually, though, its nonsense gibbers seemed to culminate and recreate themselves into something Nidhog could understand: "what is your name?"

Nidhog waited for a second before responding with a shaky voice. "Who are you?" he

asked the miniature, marble creature.

“I am Surtr, second only to the great Gnome Lord.” The creature responded. “Tell me your name.”

“What are you doing here?” Nidhog answered. “Why do you need to know my name?”

“I will inform you after you tell me your name! What is it?!”

“My name is Nidhog. What do you want with me?” Surtr cackled an insane little laugh and moved forward, a knife now wielded in his hand. “I am a Gnome, Nidhog. Before each conquest, our people record the name of the first foreigner from the realm. Congratulations, boy. You will forever live in the memory of our archives.” Surtr was now only a few feet away from Nidhog and brandishing his dagger dangerously, a demonic grin across his face. The Daimyo, peering into those dark, abysmal storm clouds, knew then that the invasion of Kalamazoo had begun and that he would never again see the light of day.

*The Darkness Descendeth on Kalamazoo*

It was late in the burning year of 1542 when the world of the utopic Kalamazoo was disrupted and its history fell into darkness. That was the beginning of a dangerous but short-lived aeon that tormented the minds of its surviving Daimyo, the age bracket that came to be recognized as the “Lost Generation.” No Daimyo was the same after that harsh and legalistic foreign rule when they were stranded and isolated in the bondage of Lord Jormungandr’s followers. No one would have expected that tiny, newfound race to have grown so brave and powerful. But that bravery, that cunning, that power led to a hunger and a desire to rule over others, a ruthless aggression that could only be overcome by the harsh touch of that cold end. That cold end...

A body was found in the streets. The wind and rain had just died off, but the sun still remained invisible behind the consistent dark clouds. The waters receded from the flooded streets and left, laying in them, a corpse partially eroded and eaten away by the saltwater and monstrous sea algae of the Devil’s Sea. He could easily have drowned, but the Daimyo called in the Shoguns because of the vertical slashes down the arms, the apparent sign of a suicide. But those gashes extended down his back, far beyond the reach of any *normal* Daimyo. Murder was suspected, but in Kalamazoo? None could believe such an atrocity.

His body was moved over to the Hallows so that his soul could be guided by others now like him. But his soul did not arise. The spirits refused to speak or even show themselves. The Shoguns grew nervous. Shogun Azuchi, one of the most respected of the community, was called in to investigate this mysterious rejection of the Hallows. He suspected that the boy’s soul had left immediately, possibly out of fear. But fear of what? Shogun Azuchi knew not what to do. He left the body to be guarded by the spirits until he could later return.

Shogun Muromachi stayed in the temple at the top of the hill and surveyed his city. He could see only half of it lit beneath the candled street-lanterns and the rest receded into darkness. Invisible it was. Gone. His city was disappearing. The world he had grown up with was dying and he had neither the cure nor the cause. And he had a feeling that he would not be around to save it.

Shogun Muromachi turned around as a servant walked in, carrying with him a series of papers all listing complaints from the Daimyo. *What is this?* He wondered. *What could the Daimyo possibly have to complain about besides the weather? There was nothing he could do about that.*

“Shogun,” began the thin messenger. He was tall with dark hair and spindly, skeletal bones. Muromachi had suggested before that he get some more exercise. Or eat more. Perhaps both.

“Yes, my fellow?” opened Muromachi. He was not nearly as tall as the Daimyo, nor as thin. Muromachi was actually a rather heavy-set man always encased in a thick set of armor only open at the sides. But he would soon lose grace by that weakness. Muromachi looked at the man though hazy eyes, hazy from damage he had received as a child when he tried to go swimming in the Devil’s Sea. His mother had rescued him, but not before a wave crashed him into a boat. He had grown used to the Black Ships, but this boat he saw was not one of them. This one had been smaller, flatter, with a figure on the front and a group of tiny men running around inside. He had only been four years old and unable to comprehend what he was seeing, but they looked stunted, short, with long beards and dark, mossy, glossy skin. One look was all he got before his eyes had stung with the fire of a torch and he fell back into the sea. He heard the beat of drums and the

boat disappeared behind a cliff. He washed ashore moments later to the relief of his tear-ridden mother.

That had been years ago, but Muromachi still bore the scars and he still had the eyes of a rhino, and the unstoppable force of strength to boot. “The Daimyo grow upset, Shogun. They are claiming domestic break-ins. Windows smashed. Doors hacked up. That boy in the streets-”

“I have heard. We are at war, my boy.” The Daimyo gave a confuddled look. “War with this darkness,” finished Muromachi. “It’s enshrouding the city like an enemy. It’s alive. I can feel it breathing, growing, twisting. And there is something worse hidden inside it. A dark race I haven’t seen in...so long.”

“Master Shogun?” The Shogun snapped out of his thoughts and back into reality. “What are we to do?” asked the Daimyo. The rhino-eyes thought for a moment, then turned to the skeleton boy and answered with an order he never thought he would utter. “Kalamazoo is in danger. Have every north Shogun stationed on the wall. The Sea-Guard will protect the waterfront. Keep an eye on the Black Ships.”

“Anything else, Muromachi?”

“Organize a mob-army. Any man willing to defend his home is to be issued a weapon and ordered to move the populace into the lit area of the city. Search any house willing to be searched. I want this darkness stopped.”

Shogun Azuchi could not understand what was happening. He was standing in the Hallows with ten Daimyo, calling for any deceased to come out and speak. But none would come forth. Not a single one could be found that day. Azuchi thought deeply and began to tie the boy’s body to a tree. He hoped that, in angering the spirits, he would at least draw them out. But it was

all to no avail. After a moment, Azuchi grew disgusted with his plan and cut the rope. The body fell and squished into thick mud around the tombstones. *If only this boy had remained here, Azuchi fumed to himself. Rather than departing for the hereafter. Then he might be able to shed some light on the situation. What could scare someone so much that even a ghost would not want to stay?*

“Shogun,” a man said, approaching the warrior. “I have news. Three more bodies were found by the beach. They say it’s the beasts, but they have the same wounds as this one.” The shogun gave him an insistent stare, so he continued. “They are all related. Those three lived in group with this one.”

“Where is the fifth?” Azuchi asked.

“Gone. No one can find him. His name is Edo. They suspect him responsible!” There was suddenly a great flash of light. A gargantuan cone of sun poured in through the clouds, only it had started from deeper in the Hallows. The light rose like a funnel up into the heavens and Azuchi could clearly see the glowing, ethereal forms of spirits abandoning Kalamazoo. Within moments, it was gone and no spirit remained in the city of Kalamazoo, nor would any for a long, long time. For here is where the darkness descended upon the paradise and poisoned it. Any death from here on would send one directly into the afterworld out of fear of the oppressors that would rise to control.



## *The Loss of Kalamazoo*

Shogun Muromachi looked out at his beloved city that was now enshrouded in the great darkness. The gray and black storm clouds hovered over the outskirts of Kalamazoo, thinning out until they cleared at the temple where the Shogun now stood. This was *definitely* nothing natural.

There was a screech from down below. Muromachi looked down into one of the streets at the edge of the darkness and saw a Daimyo being dragged by what appeared to be very short men into the darkness. He let out a screech as the darkness engulfed him and Muromachi called for his fellow guards; none came. He called for them again, louder this time. This time, he got a reply, a high-pitched gibberish, almost a clogged garble. The Shogun turned toward the entrance and saw the torches on the walls begin going out as small, dwarfed forms approached, remaining in the darkness. He couldn't see any clearly, but he did see the flash of a glinting knife. He backed to the window, his sword now raised, preparing to fight for his life if he had to. The hall torches had all completely gone out, leaving only the light from the room in which he now stood. Those torches remained on as he saw, through his blurred, uncooperative eyes, the tiny forms come sprinting toward him. They were dark blackish with gray beards that almost reached to the floor. Muromachi swung his sword, hitting one in the side, but it was deflected by what he assumed to be tough-as-stone armor. The creatures all tackled him and he stumbled back, away from the entrance, out the window and down to the ground...

Azuchi left the dead boy in the Hallows and went back toward the heart of the city. He decided that the best thing to do would be to warn the other Shoguns. Azuchi sprinted toward the temple with the Daimyo in quick pursuit, completely forgetting the ritual of the palanquin. He reached the temple minutes later and stopped to catch his breath. But rather than go in, he peered

up into the large, open window a few stories up, seeing the form of Muromachi, one of the toughest and highest-ranking Shoguns in Kalamazoo, stumble around and trip on the sill, falling out of the four-story window. Azuchi rushed forward to try and slow his fall, but it was too far. Muromachi hit the street with a great *thud*. Azuchi rushed forward but stopped and turned when he saw the three statuesque beings standing above his body. One flashed a knife at Azuchi and disappeared into the darkness that was now rushing toward the temple...

The darkness had now completely engulfed the city. The torches had gone out and Shogun and Daimyo alike had to rely solely on their night vision to navigate through the complex crossings of the city.

Before anyone had even realized it, the ships had rolled into the harbor. They were flat and easily maneuverable in the treacherous Devil's Waters. They landed on the beach of Kalamazoo's waterfront and emptied their cargo, freeing the demons that would seek to leave the city in conflagratory ashes. These beings were the bringers of darkness, the barriers of the light, the bringers of the Plant Corruptus; they were the Garden Gnomes.

They were led by the powerful and merciless second-in-command, Surtr, a sadistic fool who sought only to destroy and was recognized as a valuable beast to be released only when destruction was the whole design. They washed into the island and butchered Daimyo by the dozens. The Sea Guard roared to fight but were quickly outnumbered and ousted in regard to defense. The Shogunate swords were incapable of penetrating or even denting the Gnomes' tough, rock skin, but the lesser creatures had no ease guiding their small daggers into the flesh of their opponents. The Sea Guard managed to send three messengers to the mountain wall, but those three Daimyo, upon reaching the wall, were engulfed by the vile plants that had already

played predator to the Shoguns of that wall.

Azuchi rushed to Muromachi and, to his astonishment, found him alive. Muromachi was a tough one to survive a four-story drop like that. Azuchi helped him to his feet and the two stumbled and worked their way back to the Hallows, where they knew they were safe to plan a strategy of attack. No creature would desire the mucky swamps of that undead property.

The Shoguns reached the Hallows in almost twenty minutes, their speed hardily decreased by Muromachi's condition. They sloshed their way through the mud and blackness before they finally barred themselves inside a hut where, not long ago, a prophecy had been uttered. But once inside, they heard a scratching and knew they were not alone. "My name is Cassandra," came a sweet, angelic voice. "I escaped when I saw those...things."

There was a shatter as a window was shattered and Azuchi hugged the girl tight, protecting her from the danger that was to come. As he watched in horror, a long vine twisted its way into the shack and pierced through Muromachi's sides. He screamed in agony before drawing silent, and Azuchi ran for the door. Within seconds, Cassandra was the only surviving person inside the shack.

Within that day in the year of 1542, every Shogun lost his life. Any man who possessed a weapon or dared to fight for his home or his rights was also cut down to pieces, slashed from his wrists down toward his back in bloody, twisted myriads of designs exclusively known to the Garden Gnomes. Houses were burned down as the stone-creatures marched through the city. In less than an hour, a great path was created from the Himalayan Mountains directly to the temple.

The sky had turned dark. The beasts had receded to the depths. The wall had fallen, and it

now lay in ruins and vague piles of rubble, almost indistinguishable as a former wall. And under cover of darkness, a creature, the leader of the Garden Gnomes, the being that spoke exclusively to the Gnome Lord Jormungandr, crawled up from behind the wall, having sated its hunger for years on the flesh of the now dwindling Mi-Go population. This being crawled forth on great, viney tentacles, trudging and almost growing its way through the city before it reached the temple. This monstrous leviathan not meant to be seen by the light of day set up its home in Kalamazoo, where herds of food, the Daimyo, would continue to breed and serve it as sustenance whilst also working as slaves. It could not rely completely on the Gnomes; they were a simple race of warriors, not workers. They could not be eaten or expected to think for themselves. And this is why this creature that grew along the walls of the Daimyo temple and was worshipped by the stone-skinned dwarves with the long gray beards had chosen this paradise in which to introduce its chaotic madness. This was its home now, and Kalamazoo would belong to the Garden Gnomes for the next sixty years...

### *The Reign over the Ruins of Kalamazoo*

Kalamazoo was dead. Its buildings were gone, demolished and crushed by the Gnomes, and the land it used to cover now existed under the guise of an eternal, never-ending darkness wrought on by the clouds above. A great mass of mossy, fungus-ridden growth had established its hold on the area, tearing through the ground and feeding on the Mi-Gos that now freely roamed the city. The wall was gone, pulled over and decayed, while the Gnomes worked their slaves to the brink of oblivion.

The Daimyo now served a life of bondage and servitude, spending every moment of their wakefulness building statues and monuments to the Garden. Each Daimyo was allowed six hours a night for sleep, thus creating the greatest compromise between patience and efficiency of work that the Gnomes could muster. They were not the most lenient of races known to the world.

No one could tell where the Gnomes had truly come from, nor did anyone know what existed of their god, the Garden, which made its home inside the old Kalamazoo temple. That structure was the only allusion left of the paradise. But the temple now took on a darker complexion; the stones that created it were darker-colored and cracking, yet the temple would not fall. Blood spatters were found around the outer edge, yet no one was ever seen near it. No one, that is, except the elder Daimyo. Whenever someone reached a point where the Gnomes could view the pulling of age on them, that person was taken roughly into the temple where they were never seen again. A scream would be heard, but no one could ever be sure if it was real or imagined. Many lost their minds.

The great monuments were carved of stone and standing erect. They displayed the images of the greatest leaders of the Gnomes. There were *Aesir* and *Vanir*, ancient ones that supposedly led the short, little creatures to defeat their ancient oppressors. There was a great statue honoring

*Tyr*, an olden Gnome that lost his hand leading one of the greatest wars in their history shortly after assimilating the Gnomes into a ravenous empire. *Varuna* had a statue honoring his expansion of the Gnomes across the great seas of their previous world and *Pak Tai*, who, with the help of the *Three Pure Ones*, created the portal to this world, was granted a statue out in the harbor where he could forever look upon the kingdom he had led his armies to. *Pak Tai*, as one of the Daimyo heard it said, had died shortly after the Gnomes entered this world, “taken” by the Garden that had been waiting inside that doorway. The Garden had provided sustenance and happiness for the Gnomes who, in turn, provided it protection from the glare of the sun. Over the generations, they had come to worship the Garden and it had recently, for some unknown reason, appointed Lord Jormungandr to conquer the paradise it desired. This sketchy diagram was all that was known of the stunted, rocky creatures from another realm.

The Gnomes put a quick end to any uprising or even any threat of an uprising. Any man suspected of plotting against the empire would be taken into the temple where all were forbidden to go. It was said that vines grew all over the temple and that they came to action, catching and pulling inside anything near. Anyone with an ounce of a mind avoided that abhorred palace of the dank and moldy earth.

Many Daimyo chose those times to try and fight the Gnomes but they would be given no weapon. And someone cannot hope to stop a dwarf made of stone with his bare hands. The Gnomes had become notorious for knocking a quarreler unconscious by bashing the Daimyo’s head on their chests and then slicing with their knives, cutting all the way from the wrist, down the arms and curling into intricate patterns along the Daimyo’s back. Those were fearsome, bloody, ruthless times. And it was in that fashion that almost three generations passed out of this world, replenished only through the breeding houses where the strongest Daimyo would be kept

for ten months or longer at a time. So many deaths occurred around those times and none could even break a finger of the might of the Garden Gnomes. For such tiny beings, they seemed unbeatable.

Some of the Daimyo would find comfort in song, crying to the heavens for deliverance. But no sound would come for sixty years and only a few would survive the entirety of those days. The singing eventually died when every person to speak without permission was severely beaten into submission. The Daimyo dared not use their tongues.

No Shogun had survived the slaughter that happened the day those bodies were found. Their bodies had been piled high before being tossed into the raging, monumental Devil's Sea. The Garden, it appeared, was serpentine in its engorgement. It preferred live prey. The armor that the Shoguns had worn their entire lives had been melted down in the great furnaces the Gnomes had demanded be built. Many Daimyo lost their footing and were found as charred, black husks of human when a furnace would be chilled for a time. And no one knew what to do with those bodies. They were left out in the streets to decompose so that they could return to the soil and be soaked up by the ruler of Kalamazoo. None could contend with that.

The Daimyo were required to sleep on the cold, hard earth. Only the Gnomes were allowed to use the tendrils of their deity as beds on which to sleep. It rained often, having no affect on the Gnomes due to their mineral exterior but driving cold and sickness into the Daimyo. Those who could not carry on were immediately taken to the temple. No disease caused by exposure could leave any damage or even a semblance of affect on the plant. It was thought to be immortal.

Through all the carnage and depression and misery of the enslavement, there was one human who felt nothing, who had died inside long ago. He was a man who only survived as an

oracle betwixt the ruler, the ruled and the enslaved. He existed in none of the categories and did not even possess a mind capable of extraneous or autonomous thought. He was the only surviving Shogun and he wandered the streets, impressing his demands upon the Gnomes. They immediately obeyed his commands upon seeing the vines and leafy tentacles exuding from his sides. His eyes glowed bright green, swirling with that which plants possessed. He was possibly the cruelest of all in this ancient city, but he was also the key to its weakness, the seed of its destruction. He was a large, scarred man named Muromachi.



### *The Corruption that Dreamt of Kalamazoo*

The year was 1598. The Garden Gnomes had ruled in their ruthless ways for fifty-seven years and they sought to continue their reign. But there were troubles in their world. The limestone they had the Daimyo mining for them was beginning to deplete, and without it their race would grow weaker, more human. Limestone was the key to their exterior, but it seemed as if with each passing month, there were fewer living to quarry for this sustenance and less of the stone to pass. The ground was emptying and the sun was strengthening its rays. The Daimyo were dying.

Lord Jormungandr had never revealed himself to his conquered. He remained forever inside the temple with the Garden or out to sea, exploring new worlds to destroy and leave in rubble. Many believed his work to be those of the Vikings, but only because he had made contact with them. They feared him, as did the Huns, but the Huns decided, rather than serve him, to flee into the Germanic worlds and force those inhabitants into the might of ancient Rome. Rome knew not the world nor the plight of Kalamazoo and lived peacefully almost two millennia behind the calendar of the former paradise.

Surtr, however, Lord Jormungandr's right-hand-man, had no hesitations when it came to revealing himself to the others. Muromachi, or what was left of him within the hollowed corpse now inhabited as the Oracle of the Garden, wandered the streets and burned fear into the Daimyo. Even some of the Gnomes feared his dark connections. But Surtr merely skipped up and down in glee, beating helpless Daimyo and threatening any of them he happened upon. The Daimyo rarely spoke, their language having been all but silenced through the course of the generations. They spoke telegraphically when commanded and held their tongues when not. No happy thoughts abounded in those cold, heartless days.

Kanagawa was young, with only about two dozen years under his belt. He was strong and silent, clever, but wise enough never to use the cunning. It was whispered that he was very brave, yet he never once stood up to any of his captors. He was, as Surtr himself had occasionally noticed, a rather decent slave. But inwardly, he hated and despised the Gnomes and especially the unknown being that writhed inside his own peoples' ancient temple. He loathed the being that inhabited the sanctity of what had been described to him as a paradise and longed for talks with the dead. Oh, yes, he had heard the stories. They had been passed down and whispered to him by an ancient old crone named Cassandra, a woman who claimed to have witnessed the Oracle's birth. But she spoke so very little these days, and Kanagawa spoke not at all.

Kanagawa awoke this morning to find a small shaft of light piercing through the darkness. He looked up to see a hole in the dark storm clouds. He was entranced by the majesty and grace of such a light existence. He had lived his life in the dark and never in his life had he seen anything lighter than a bright shade of gray. But this light brightened up the vines on the ground, showing their dark brown color. The boy backed up as he saw the shrubbery begin to writhe and move. He could have sworn he heard a light screech and the leaves burst aflame, withering beneath this bright sun. Within moments, a fraction of the Garden had moved from out of the sun. Kanagawa stepped into the glare and immersed himself in the warmth, the heat engulfing his body, filling him with a strength he never knew he had. He had lived his entire life in the cold and, having never experienced the energy of warmth and light, he had never felt real thought and power. He flexed his muscles and breathed deeply, inhaling the fresh air and letting it fill his lungs. He opened his eyes and let out his breath, watching it crystallize in the air.

After a moment, the light disappeared. Kanagawa looked up to see the clouds shifting and filling the hole, quickly attacking the small beams that had penetrated them until all light had,

once again, died off. The light was gone and Kanagawa was back, trapped in his freezing hell. There was a snap and searing pain wracked his back. The back of the rags covering him tore and blood seeped through, the calling card of the whip spun by the Garden Gnome slave-guards. A squeaky grunt was issued and Kanagawa turned to find one of the little beasts staring at him, an angry expression across its stony, sutured face. It had seen battles before. A fight with this young Daimyo would be nothing new.

Kanagawa would normally have returned to work, moving rocks and tossing them into the furnace. But the light had changed him; it had infected his mind and jump-started the strength within his heart. He was not the same angry boy that had awoken moments before. This slaving must stop. And it *would* stop if Kanagawa had anything to do with it. Without a momentary thought, the boy charged at the Gnome and picked it up by its waist. The Gnome, not expecting this, dropped its dagger and struggled to free itself from its captor. It had grown undisciplined over the course of these sixty years; it was nothing compared to the fighter it used to be. And in moments, the furnace erupted and it was only a smoldering, melted pile of magma. Kanagawa had committed a capital punishment; he had killed a Garden Gnome.

Knowing that a fate with the Garden was all that awaited him, Kanagawa sprinted for the waterfront. Gnomes saw him running along the way but none would follow. If they abandoned their posts to catch him, their own charges would escape and they would suffer for that. But there was one being that stood to stop Kanagawa: Muromachi. Muromachi stood in the path of the fugitive, his eyes glowing green and his sides pulsing messages back to the temple. But Kanagawa was not afraid. He was brave. He also knew that he was the only one who stood a chance against the Oracle.

Kanagawa sprinted around the Oracle of the Garden and stole for the waterfront.

Muromachi tried to stop him. He even sent a wave of tentacles to rip the boy to shreds, but something was holding them back, keeping the tentacles just out of reach; it was a memory. A tiny bit of Muromachi had survived and that little semblance did not want Kanagawa to die. That bit wanted to escape and it knew that that boy now descending into the dangerous waters was to play a part in the downfall of the Gnomes.

Kanagawa swam through the cold waters, ignoring the icy touch of the liquid as it swirled around and threatened to cast him onto the rocks. Using his newfound strength and the muscles he had built through a lifetime of servitude, he swam like hell toward those ancient, pitch-colored ships floating just beyond the reach of Kalamazoo. The Black Ships just might help. If Kanagawa could reach those ships, maybe he could strike a deal, create an ally to save the dying city and return it to its former glory...

Muromachi watched from shore, peering past the statue of Pak Tai and out at those ancient, enigmatic ships that had floated effortlessly since the year of 1281. The old Shogun and now Oracle of the Garden turned his back to the waters and died again, abandoning all recollections of his brave and resiliently fleeing grandson.

### *The Return of the Son of Kalamazoo*

Kanagawa had been gone for five years before the true threat came to the city. The Garden Gnomes were no longer completely stone, having lost much of their strength as the limestone mines dried up; but they were still bloodthirsty beasts to be reckoned with. Kanagawa was the only Daimyo ever to defeat one and he would die if he ever returned to the Gnome Empire. Such, it seemed, would also be the fate of the city natives.

It was nighttime when the old man left the light of the mountains and stepped over the demolished former wall, making his way into the city. He was over eighty years old and his quests on those treacherous mountain peaks had further aged him into an ancient physique; but his destiny kept him alive. It was what drew him back to his homeworld. That and the cries of his descendants.

The old man stepped over the rocks and carefully avoided the moving, twisting tentacles of the Garden, a difficult task considering the extent to which they encompassed the city. But he was careful, wise, protected by fate from setting alarm in that ruined city. The Gnomes barely took notice, seeing him only as an old servant running errands throughout Kalamazoo. The old man tried not to stare, having never before laid eyes on a Gnome, let alone a Garden Gnome. But these little creatures held little of their former glory; flesh was shining through the rock and their white beards had begun to turn gray. Jormungandr was growing anxious about finding another source of limestone despite the Garden's demand to remain in the city. Jormungandr, now an old Gnome, older even than the old man, was weary of seeing his people suffer because it was what the Garden willed. It was rumored that he had sent secret missions to other parts of the earth, searching for the stone that would end their reliance on the Garden. It was rumored, but never said aloud, that he even sought to abandon the Garden.

The old man walked north, toward the Hallows. He remembered running there as a child and talking with the spirits that resided there. But this swamp was empty now. No ghost walked in those dark woods. He did not dare call for his father, for that man's time would have run its course. Instead, he looked for even the tiniest of spirits, even a voice of the dead that could tell him what had happened but none could be found. The old man found an old shed, the resting place of his father's old spirit. He stepped back, seeing a great mass of tentacles and animate plants shifting inside that shed. With a deep breath and a glare, the old man stepped through that ancient door and into the dark, overgrowth-ridden shack where, so long ago, two Shoguns and a woman had hidden from a multi-dimensional nightmare. Now, one of them was dead, one was a slave and the other...well, no one truly understood that parasitism.

The old man covered his mouth with a cloth, partially to block the pained, hacking cough indicative of his state and partially because of the noxious, filthy smell that issued from the corpse he saw. The old man looked upon the body of Shogun Azuchi, pierced from all sides in a macabre silhouette of living death. The plants grew through his dead shell of remains, feeding on his body, slowly decaying it. By now, sixty years after death, there was scarcely anything left. But it was still recognizable and still dementedly attached to the environment. The Garden's artwork was truly hideous.

The old man placed a hand over the heart of Shogun Azuchi and began to cry, silent sobs coming for fear of attracting attention to this place. Tears rolled down his face and were soaked up into the tattered cloths that still clung to the ancient warrior's frame. The old man fell to his knees and wept over the death of his beloved brother. Azuchi had deserved better than this horrible, merciless death, and the old man was determined to make those responsible pay.

The old man turned to the back wall of the shack and opened the door a bit wider,

allowing the ample light emitted by the city's constant lightning bolts to illuminate it. The old man squinted, reading the words that the woman had carved into the paneling before she was taken and forced into slavery. The words were choppy, but the old man was barely able to make them out: *the Garden is rising. The sky is dark and the beasts have fallen to the depths. The wall has fallen but the Shogun will ally with the darkness to bring back the light.* The old man was confused. He turned his back to the words and began to walk out of the shack, but not before he pricked a finger on a thorn and rubbed the seeping blood across the forehead of his brother. And as the old man left the Hallows, the plants within that shack had begun to shrivel and die, withering away from the body of the great, fallen hero.

The old man walked out into the city, looking for anyone he might recognize. He had been gone for sixty-plus years. He did not expect to find anyone he knew. But he did. The old crone, Cassandra, the woman who would, in later years, be assimilated into the myths of the ancient Greeks, was spotted by the old man carrying rocks over to one of the great, fiery furnaces that pockmarked the man's old, beloved city. "Cassandra," he whispered when she came near. She jumped, startled, and he hoped that her heart would last. She was over ninety-five years old, but she kept on trudging through that servitude.

"Cassandra," the old man whispered again. This time, she recognized him. He was her old love, come back to her after sixty years of absence. She was about to speak before he interrupted her. "I saw what you wrote in the Hallows."

"The...Hallows," she replied. "They have been gone for so long." She thought for a moment, pretending to work in case a Gnome was watching the two. After a moment, she remembered and looked up at him. "The prophecy. Yes, I remember. The Shogun will ally with

the darkness to bring back the light. I carved that into the Hallows on the day they hanged that boy they found.” Tears were welling in her eyes but she hid them away, not prepared to show them to the world. The Gnomes loved to see the Daimyo cry and they were always merciless with their taunts. “A son of Kalamazoo was supposed to return as well. It...it was said he would end the Garden. But he never came. He never came to save us...”

“But he has,” The old man rushed forth and hugged his aunt tight, embracing the woman who had helped raise him to adulthood.

“Are you...?” she began, fearing to say it out loud, scared that the sight before her might disappear and destroy her fragile heart. After a moment, however, she abandoned that and held him tightly. “Oh, Edo! You have returned! But where have you been?”



*The Exile Encumbered by the Fall of Kalamazoo*

“Surely you remember, my dear aunt, those days of paradise that reigned before the city left the light, back when the seas were rich and the wall was high and protective. It was in those days when I sought to leave. I wanted to enhance my art, introduce something new that no Daimyo had ever seen before. Many ukiyos sat in my home telling of my dreams. My last ukiyo was actually a note written for my brethren telling them where I would be. I thank the heavens that it was destroyed by the Gnomes rather than read. It was on the day that I left when I retrieved the advice of my father, your brother, and he urged me to leave. He told me of the deaths and the conqueirage, and so I left without even a goodbye to my family. I took with me nothing but myself and the clothes I wore.

On that ancient day, I scaled the wall and avoided the strange shrubbery that I had seen. It almost seemed to grab for me, but I evaded it. I trudged my way through a primitive world I had never before seen. You cannot imagine what the Outside holds. I struggled for years in isolation, living off the barren land and fighting vicious monsters and heartless Mi-Gos with only pointed sticks. Not the most advanced of weaponry, but I was no Shogun. I knew nothing of metalwork.

After a few years – I assume years, for the cave-people who lived on the other side of those mountains knew nothing of chronology and the ways of calendars – I found myself wandering through a valley entrenched on both sides with nothing but sheer, limestone clifftops. I dared not call aloud for fear of causing an avalanche. Are you surprised I know what an avalanche is? Have you not heard of the Daimyo who scaled the mountains? I read the ukiyos he carved telling of his discoveries.

Well, I was walking between the rocks and I heard behind me a deep, primal growl. I turned and found myself with some type of strange, overgrown cat! It had teeth like sabers,

growing well beyond its mouth and it had claws the size of my fingers. Surely that creature meant to tear me to shreds. But prophecy held me close. I knew that I would someday return to Kalamazoo and bring back the light. I knew I would survive for three scores of years and that I would be strong enough to destroy the Garden Gnomes. But this creature still inflicted horrible fears within me and I found myself running as fast as I could. I remember trying to stab at it with my sharpened stick, but it gripped it between its massive jaws and snapped my weapon in two. I expected then, despite the prophecy, that I would die. But it saved me.

I had closed my eyes and been unaware of what had happened, but when my eyes opened I found the carcass of the cat lying on the ground beside a group of battle-worn men. They wore only animal skins and leather hides for clothing and all looked unkempt, with long, outgrown hair and smelling of dead animal decay. One extended his hand to me and I was taken back to their dwelling. They lived in caves, staying inside during storms and hunting for food by attacking their prey in groups. I was eventually accepted into the group but found that they seemed much more adapted to the icy caverns of the world than I and so I took the job of gutting and skinning the animals when they returned. These men, with their large noses and overdeveloped eye arches, would bring back fantastic corpses of animals I never knew to exist! They brought giant behemoths that were covered in hair and had strange pieces of ivory growths and abstract tentacles growing from their faces. When one of these creatures would be felled, the clan would move their homes to the death site, nomadically making it their new stay.

I had stayed with these beings for years when I first saw another Daimyo. It was my old nemesis, Denunci, a man I had never grown a liking to. He snuck up on me whilst I slept in one of the caves and held a dagger to my throat. He told me why he was there and why I needed to die. He said he'd been ordered by a creature named Surtr to track down and destroy the Shogun

of the prophecy. I fought back and broke his shin. I felt pity and decided to let him go. It was only later, when I was brought to the Alpha of the tribe, that I saw his remains and learned of what had happened. Denunci, after crawling away, had stolen a child from these people and, in retaliation for my survival, had murdered the babe. My fellows had found the corpse and followed a trail of blood, where they removed Denunci's head. I suspect they did worse things, for food was very scarce in this world, but I may never know for sure. There was a sort of mock trial where it was decided that I would leave and I was ejected from their pack. I never saw them again.

I wandered for decades before I found myself at an ocean, the likes of which I'd never seen before. No creatures swam through these waters...at least none that I could see. I built a small boat and carved a paddle and left, disheartened, this continent of my birth.

I drifted for a long time and nearly lost my mind before I was, at last, rescued by the rocky framework of a large island. I landed on this island and walked around it, seeing few animals and little vegetation. In one area of the island there was even a volcano; the Daimyo who had scaled the mountains had spoken of those as well. I thought the island was empty before I found a small pack of decently advanced little people. They were scarcely taller than three feet and very skinny. They seemed almost immediately to know who I was, as though they had looked into my heart and read it there. These beings took me in as the wintry people had and even spoke my language – although I have a theory that they were really speaking differently and helping my mind to somehow translate it for me. Many strange things happened on this island. The creatures, whatever they were, were capable of great mental abilities. They could see things I could not see and move things without touching them. Their powers were limited, but I even had an inkling that, on occasion, *they had delved inside my own mind.*

However, the time came that, not so long ago, the volcano erupted and I had to leave again. I had kept my boat and I used it, along with a few of the beings of that half-paradise, to row back to the mainland. A few of the little people, about a dozen or so, stayed on the island, hiding in caves. The rest went with me and abandoned their home. I have no knowledge of what state the island is in, but when we reached the shores of this continent, the little people decided to set up somewhere else and departed. I was invited to come along, but I saw the volcano as a sign that my time of exile was over. It certainly felt much longer than a mere half-century, but I spent ten more years scaling the rocks and braving the cold to make it back here.

I am not the same Edo that left Kalamazoo all those years ago. I have changed, Cassandra. I have taken weaknesses from the outside world and brought them back. The rocks that crashed after a great sky-fire erupted are a sign of our deliverance. That was not long ago, Cassandra. I have begun to feel ill from the green light that I touched on those rocks. I have brought that strange, unearthly luminescence back here, where, I am sure, the Garden will now have to endure it.”

*The Light of the Sky Shall Save Kalamazoo*

Edo finished his story and looked at his aunt, not really expecting anything but knowing in his heart that the time to battle for freedom was now and that he may not survive the battle. The green light, he could feel, was tearing him apart inside. Edo hugged Cassandra and turned to face his destiny. He knew not the details, but something primal told him he must see the last Shogun. Edo walked away from his bewildered kin and stepped right up to the nightmarish, green-eyed Oracle of the Garden. The man merely stared at Edo and a smile crept across his face, not a smile from himself, but a smile from the Garden. Something fun had just come its way...

It was early in the day when the light first broke through the clouds. The Gnomes – their limestone quarries now completely depleted – were growing weaker by the day, and now their magic was fading as well. The Gnomes grew more and more vicious, trying desperately to compensate for their newly grown skin; skin that had grown to replace their rocky outerworkings. Dozens of Daimyo were slaughtered but their powers still grew weaker and weaker. Kalamazoo, for the first time in over sixty years, received light that sprayed down on the Daimyo and caused the Garden to shrivel into its home, the temple it had conquered. But that home would not hold for long, for another enemy would quickly invade it.

The Black Ships took the new light as their cue. In throngs, they swarmed to the shores, masterfully navigating those treacherous, tidal waters. Their ships landed onshore and men, looking just like the Daimyo only more well-groomed, leapt from those ships, led by two, solitary individuals: their ingenious master, Captain Perry, and the newly promoted Shogun, Kanagawa. He had struck a deal with the Black Ships which would in the future be referred to as

the Treaty of Kanagawa. Captain Perry, having waited all this time to invade the rich port-city, would receive his wish – Kalamazoo would open Outside trade – if he would lead his people to help reclaim the city for the Daimyo. However, he had waited five years, contemplating with Shogun Kanagawa, for the perfect opportunity to strike. The light invading the city was their signal to come ashore. Of course, Perry knew that he could easily have conquered the city but he was honest and what would he do with it? His people were a seafaring people, a people that would someday settle in the Scandinavian wilderness but not really settle, only claim it. He also followed the laws of morality, and that ensured that a deal was a deal. He would aid the Daimyo.

The Black Ships were fully stocked with swords and, more importantly against the Gnomes, hammers. Many men carried enormous hammers that stretched the length of a man's arm, which they used to grind the still rocky Gnomes to rubble. The little ones who had taken on a more human appearance were cut to shreds with the pirates' cutlads, what they called their almost indestructible swords. It seemed that the reign of the Garden Gnomes was at an end...at least until the Garden began pulling the foreigners into its grasp and making an end of them. Men were being caught by it left and right, but the Captain and the Shogun still pressed on, relentless.

Muromachi left the site of the fight, struggling to stand. His legs were not working and his skin was burning away. Something had happened to him. The Garden was having trouble controlling him and, as such, it eventually withdrew from him and left only a decayed leftover of the Shogun. But it brought something with it, into its temple home, and that something, the green chemical light that Edo had taken, now coursed through its tendrils. The Garden let out a scream louder than any sound on Earth. The scream caused furnaces to collapse, the skies cleared a bit and, within minutes, the strange, alien abnormality had spread all through its being and driven it

mad. The Garden, now raving in a language so extra-dimensional that none could even comprehend its sounds, crawled out of the temple, out into the light that was now shining brightly through the punctured holes in the rain clouds, and it withered and burned beneath the sun. In only half an hour, the entire Garden, the extra-dimensional god of the Gnome Empire, was gone.

Surtr, the ardent follower of the Garden and servant of the vacant Lord Jormungandr, was furious. He raged at the skies and he screeched at the Daimyo, slitting open all that came near him. He ran to a furnace, the only one that had withstood the scream of his leader, and turned it up to full power. The flames erupted from it and reached to the sky. They scared away the clouds but he didn't care. Now that the Garden was dead, the clouds held no purpose. Surtr gripped his knife and punched a hole in that furnace. He lit a torch and made a trail of oil follow him across the town.

Surtr stood before Kanagawa, the man who had overthrown his empire. "Daimyo!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "I will make you pay! Watch as I burn this wretched city to ash!" Surtr tossed the torch into the fluid and watched the trail erupt and work its way to the fuel hold of the furnace, where it would explode with enough fire and brimstone to level Kalamazoo and remove from existence all that stood within its boundaries. Kanagawa watched in horror...but relaxed when a torrential downpour of rain filled the furnace with water, drowning its flames and destroying Surtr's chance to burn down this former paradise. He turned to look back, knowing that nothing could have stopped that plan except for someone who could manipulate the skies. But the rain clouds were clear; that had been the reason for the death of their ruler. However, the storm had grown excessive directly above the furnace.

Surtr looked around the city, seeing everywhere the signal of his species' death. Gnomes lay dead in piles along the broken, antiquated streets and bodies were being thrown into the ocean. The statues he had ordered built were being toppled, pulled down and crushed. The few Mi-Gos in the city were being driven beyond the walls. The Daimyo and the pirates were working together. The humans were defeating everything else. Surtr fell to his knees in horror when he saw what he saw next. It explained the storm clouds over the furnace, it explained why some of the Gnomes were boarding ships to leave...it explained why the Gnomes were not fighting back as hardy as they could.

Standing at the base of the temple, not ten feet from Surtr, stood the person in charge, his beloved Lord Jormungandr. Jormungandr, the great general who had led his people to victory here in the first place, was ordering a retreat. "Surtr," he said. "We have found a new home. Come with us. You are my second-in-command." But Surtr was in a fit of rage and, following his temperament, he swung his dagger at his lord and never lived past that moment.



### *The Return of Kalamazoo*

Jormungandr ordered his race to abandon their post. He had, over the course of the sixty years, found numerous other places on the planet at which they could mine for limestone. He claimed to have discovered new continents to the far east, where no humans were said to live. He even claimed to have found a land passage leading directly to that world. He was quick to discuss with Kanagawa and Captain Perry and came to the agreement that Kalamazoo would never again fall under Gnome rule. Lord Jormungandr was by no means a weak ruler; on the contrary, he cared much more about the lives of his people than for the glory and might of his empire. He had grown weary of wars and destruction and, in his old age, he longed only for a peaceful home for the Gnomes to declare their kingdom. He allowed the boarding of a few Mi-Gos to his ships, hoping to train the Mi-Gos into intriguing allies. Those Mi-Gos that left Kalamazoo would someday birth ancient legends, the legends that some people commonly refer to when speaking of the missing link of the ape family. Jormungandr cremated the body of his servant, Surtr, the gnome whose zeal was good yet misdirected. Surtr's ashes were cast into the sea so that he could sail throughout eternity. The Garden now lay simply as roasted bits of plants and shrubbery. When asked if he would like to take with him the body of their god, Lord Jormungandr replied with "destroy it." He then went on to explain that he had secretly been plotting against it for years. He suspected its selfish natures would lead his people to destruction and it surely had. That was why he had saved this city by creating the storm clouds over the furnace and clearing the sky everywhere else. The Gnome general never explained how he was capable of manipulating the weather, but he assured the Daimyo that they "needn't worry about the weather. This paradise will live for many more millennia." And after that, the Gnomes were gone, sailing off to create their own utopia.

Kanagawa, the last living Shogun, was rewarded greatly for striking an alliance with the Black Ships. Edo, as well, was acknowledged for his part in the destruction of the Garden itself. He had retrieved the disease that led to its demise and for that, he could never be repaid. Unfortunately, his honor was posthumous as his body was found after the battle, slaughtered by Muromachi. The body of the Garden's Oracle was smeared with the blood of the old artist, possibly accounting for how the disease had been introduced into the advanced metabolism of the creature. Azuchi's and Muromachi's bodies were both recovered from the conflict and offered great dignity in their funeral rites. Their bodies were, in a manner later followed by Edo, laid in small boats and pushed out into the sea. The ceremony was said to have had a great effect on the pirates, who would later assimilate the funeral service into their own culture.

Kalamazoo was to be rebuilt. Kanagawa, now re-instituting learning centers so as to elevate the education of the current Daimyo to their former brilliance, appointed many of the brightest and the bravest to be Shoguns as well. No one looked at the family history and no one cared who was in what shape in order to become elevated in rank. Kanagawa would later go down in the historical ukiyos as one of the greatest leaders Kalamazoo had ever had. And he did not deny the city help.

The temple was torn down and rebuilt, grander and much more beautiful than it had ever been. Artists were hired and paid to implant great murals along its walls so that it stood for the citizens of the city, rather than the city's ancient, forgotten traditions. The uprising occurred in the Kalamazoo calendar year of 1603. The temple was restored and opened to the public in the year 1606. Such was the enthusiasm of the city. Daimyo and new Shogun alike pitched in to restore the city to the old, paradisaical ways of its past.

No palanquins were created. Shoguns were no longer required nor allowed to be carried

in the great parades to their destinations. They walked everywhere, just as the Daimyo did, for they were truly equals now. The wall was reconstructed, taller and sturdier than it had ever been before. The Gnomes themselves would not be able to take down this structure. It stretched all along the exposed-to-land area of the city, protecting it from any and all intruders. But the creatures never returned to the surface of the Devil's Sea. It was never known for sure what became of those aquatic beasts – some say they discovered underwater caverns from which they could now surface anywhere in the oceans of the earth – but few creatures were ever seen again. Sure, the dolphins stayed close and the whales drifted in and out of the port, but the sea serpents, the giant squids and the even more bizarre-yet-beautiful creatures were gone from the sight of Kalamazoo.

The port was opened to trade with the Black Ships. Captain Perry became a powerful ally of the city, his descendants protecting it from outsiders on occasion. In time, he grew to love the city and is said to have married a Daimyo and had several children. Nothing more is known of his family line except that some of his descendants were believed to have left the city and traveled to the new world, where, as some ukiyos go to say, they once again met with the Gnomes, but that story ends there.

Kanagawa lived for many more years, married and had a slew of children who bettered the city. But the ways of the city had changed. Daimyo and Shogun, neither willing to again lose the invaluable city, succumbed eventually to a plan in case of invasion. People continued to live with a pentet, a brotherhood or a sisterhood, and of their own choosing, but instead of remaining in one house, the groups were urged to keep few belongings and, a few times a year, everyone rotated houses. In that case, if the city was taken by an enemy of unknown proportions of powers, everyone could gather their things instantly and leave, unsaddened by the loss of their

homes. It was an initial hassle, but the people of the city grew used to it after a while and, on numerous accounts, the concept saved the city from its one-time fate.

Before the celebration of the temple's reconstruction, the Hallows had been cleared of the death it held. That was where Azuchi's corpse had been recovered, as well as Cassandra's prophecy. But after that day, Cassandra never again bore the gift of prophecy. She was old, of course, but the prophetic message she had delivered on that day of darkness appeared to be her only one. She died a few years after the city's recovery, of age and a strange, glowing foreign sickness.

The Garden, or at least what was left of that multi-dimensional monstrosity, was fed to the last surviving furnace the Gnomes had created – the furnace Surtr had attempted to use to burn the city down. Its limbs and tentacles and what might have passed as its completely alien head were all thrown into those fires where it then ceased to be. The furnace was then disassembled and used as building material in other parts of the city.

On the day the temple was completed, it is said, the Hallows were reawakened by the laughter of a great celebration, and the spirits of Edo and Azuchi watched the city enjoy the first breath of its new age.