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The Living Buddha

Ishii was making good time despite the heavy snow that covered the trail. Having grown up in the rural north of Japan, the monk was no stranger to long walks in the snow, but covering 30 kilometers a day for the last 100 days had taken its toll on his body and spirit. Tattered bits of straw tethered together were all that remained of the straw sandals that Ishii wore over his tabi socks. His robe bore the marks of his journey as well. A mix of brown, black, and green tie dye now covered the once angelic white robe. Both the filthy robe and the tattered sandals did nothing to quell the bitter cold winds and ever-present chill that had invaded his bones.

The stone marker came into view on Ishii's left side. He came to a stop when he reached it. The snow had almost smothered the two-foot-tall marker, but Ishii was still able to decipher the engraving: "Mt. Hiei. 5 KM." Ishii pulled an apple from his sleeve pocket and sat down on a nearby stone for a brief rest. Although he usually stuck to his diet of miso soup and rice, apples were one of the few worldly possessions Ishii could not abandon. Even as a yakuza enforcer in the Yamaguchi-gumi, Japan's toughest and largest criminal syndicate, on the streets of Osaka, he was known to have an apple somewhere on his person at all times. A native of Aomori Prefecture, where the best of Japan's apples are grown, apples were in his DNA.

Ishii had come the Tendai Sect's Headquarters of Enryakuji on Kyoto's Mt. Hiei, seeking redemption and strength after being expelled from his clan ten years ago. He had heard of the Kaihogyo, the 1,000-day marathon around Mt. Hiei that is performed over the course of 7 years in which monks became "living Buddhas" at the end and was determined to complete it. Very few monks have ever completed it. This morning, the last day of his final 100-day block of hiking around the mountain, Ishii passed by a food stall at the beginning of his hike and saw that the seller had, despite being out of season, apples from his home Prefecture. Ishii saw it as a sign from the heavens and quietly thanked the Buddha for the much-needed inspiration.

"*Yosh*, almost there. Let's get moving", said Ishii to himself as he peeled himself of the rock and stretched his tight and exhausted muscles.

The blurry black figure appeared on the last turn before the temple. The monk stopped 15 feet away. The boar with his razor-sharp tusks squealed angrily and mocked him.

"You won't become a living Buddha today, Monk-san."

"Leave and your life will be spared", Ishii said to the animal.

"Those robes and prayer beads don't trick me, Monk. I know you are still a thieving tattooed murderer. Do the Head Monks know you killed your boss? Your *oyabun*! The man who was supposed to act as your father in the clan. I'd love to tell them."

"The girl was 14 years old! I could not stand by and let him hurt her any longer. Persuading a Filipino or a Russian girl into doing a little ex-

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tra business outside of their hostess jobs is one thing but expecting me to stand guard while he did horrendous things with a child is unthinkable!", Ishii screamed.

"Tell the heavens the story again. I'm sure the Buddhas and the *Kamisama* would love to hear about how their little monk is a traitor.", jeered the Boar.

"When he was in the bath, I snuck into his room at the love hotel and told the girl to beat it. When he came out I hit him over the head with the lamp and plunged my dagger into him over and over while he was splayed on the bed. Gave myself a shiner to make it look like I got knocked out while the Yoshikawa Kai took out the *Oyabun*."

"You lost a pinky and your position in the clan for it. The notorious Ishii, 'The Rock', of the Yamaguchi-gumi, who worked his way up from being a nobody from some hick town in some hick prefecture to being the personal bodyguard of the *Oyabun*. How the mighty have fallen.", said the boar. A smirk snuck out from behind his tusks.

"It was my mistake for even entering that world in the first place. The '*Gokudo*' is a lie. There is no honor or code in the Yakuza. Only violence and suffering."

"Very noble, Monk-san. I see your religious training has taught you well. How's the hand now? Can you still fight? Let's see how you like getting stabbed.", asked the boar.

The animal suddenly charged down the path and the yakuza enforcer-turned-Tendai monk pulled his tanto dagger with a familiar grace. The force of the charge took Ishii and the boar over the edge of the trail and the two cascaded down the hill. Ishii could feel the boar's tusks dig into him each time they fell head over heels with each other. A clearing made their deadly tumble come to an end.

"You are a tough one, Monk-san, I'll give you that", said the boar as if nothing had happened.

Ishii who had borne the brunt of the fall and was already drained from his 100-day trek was still dazed as the boar made his final charge. He felt the shark-skin handled dagger still in his hand and summoned all of his strength for this last battle. He tried to guard his face and throat from the tusks as best as he could with one hand and brought the other under the boar. Blood soaked the grounds of Mt. Hiei that afternoon as one creature became the 47th living Buddha and one joined the Buddha in the Pure Land.