

RIZAWA: THE ARTERY OF PERDITION



BY PAT JENKINSON

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LANGUAGES, MAGIC, AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS.

"Rizawa: The Artery of Perdition" is dedicated to my grandfather,
Erwin Schramma (1922-2022).
May the light of my labors guide him to the farther shore.

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THE SHORT STORIES OF "UNDER THE BURNING TOWER"

So what's going on with these short stories? Simply put, Aios is a massive place. One with dozens of unique cultures and hundreds of characters, many of whom did not get as much of a chance to shine in the main volumes as I would have liked. Now, I'm not the first fantasy author to have the bright idea of using short fiction to explore the storylines of characters who weren't quite relevant enough for the main arc. In fact, I am quite indebted to Steven Erikson's "Tales of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach", which takes two relatively minor characters from his Malazan series and puts them in a Victorian Horror setting that is at once completely distinct from the genre and tone of the Malazan books and yet perfectly at place in his literary universe. R. Scott Bakkar's "The False Sun" is another excellent example of a piece of short fiction that expands the lore of the main series, in this case by focusing on some key events from Earwa's past that play a decisive role in the future events of his main story.

However, while the short stories featured here are indebted to my influences, there are also some key differences between what Erikson or Bakkar did and what I am doing, so I figured it would be worth taking a moment to touch on what I'm trying to achieve here. In both of the above cases, the stories were written by established authors looking to give devoted fans a bit of extra content between their main releases. I, by contrast, am an up and coming writer seeking to use these free stories as a means of attracting viewers to his work.

Now, this may or may not seem important to you., but it has a number of ramifications that affect my approach. The most important is that I am writing for an audience that is largely unfamiliar with my work. Thus, in addition to acting as a lure to get people interested in the "Under the Burning Tower" series, these short stories also introduce readers to the cultures, magic systems, and political events of the main book.

For the moment, I am releasing two sets of novella-length story arcs: one introducing readers to the land of Naviras through the character of Sarkiades, a Lystian officer and diplomat who makes a brief appearance in the book but whose actions play a decisive role on the events; and another giving readers a peek at Nezhuan society from the perspective of Rizawa, a spy who appears at the end of Volume 1. There are a few other sets of stories that I'm thinking about doing as well, but they will likely be more akin to traditional short stories rather than full novellas.

I have put a great deal of thought into these stories, and I have taken care to ensure that they have a harmonious relationship with the main volume. While there are some key elements of Volume 1's narrative that are touched on here, 95% of this information presented in the first few chapters of Volume 1, while the rest has been carefully curated to whet the readers appetite for, rather than spoil, the surprises of the main narrative. I hope that readers will enjoy Sarkiades' and Rizawa's exploits as they struggle against the Dark God's grand invasion from opposite corners of Aios.

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ACT I

THE WESTERN PAN RIN GARRISON



"Is this the place?" Rizawa asked the visibly exhausted infantryman.

She got all the answer she needed from the off-green hue of his cheeks and the way he held his back against the lamp-post: his gaze fixed just close enough to the walled courtyard to ensure that nobody disturbed the scene, yet unable to rest upon the poorly maintained estate itself, as if seeing that building with anything but the furthest corner of his eyes would be enough to bring back a flood of memories, alongside his dinner.

"Be careful in there." he shouted as she walked past. "The smell is horrific."

Rizawa gave the man a wave, suppressing the urge to laugh. She'd been a criminal investigator attached to the Divine Army for over half a decade before being transferred to this boiling cesspit, the furthest of Nezhu's frontier outposts. Her entire life since then had been little more than an exhaustive demonstration of all the things that the moist jungle air could do to a stiff. That poor soldier, who'd probably been off duty at one of the brothels when word came down about another dead whore, would never be able to outrun the memory of what he saw in there, but the way that women were going missing in the Western Pan Rin Garrison, Rizawa doubted whether she'd even have a week of peace before another corpse showed up somewhere in this forsaken march.

The courtyard was surprisingly spacious. Looking around, she allowed herself the small hope that this was the break they'd been looking for. All of the other bodies had been hastily discarded in alleys or dumped out in the jungle, but this crumbling manor had all the tells of a base of operations: obviously abandoned, but not quite long enough for any serious structural damage to set in; thick walls of lacquered wood and a glazed ceramic roof; a courtyard large enough for whatever screams bled through to dissipate out into Pan Rin;

close enough to the brothels that he wouldn't have to drag his prey very far.

As Rizawa slid the paneled door open, she was greeted by a stench so severe that she nearly emptied her stomach. The only thing that kept her gag reflex intact were the stares of the four men standing around the the body and some lingering ghost of the confidence from a moment before.

The victim was splayed and pinioned to a table at the center of the room. Like all the others, this one showed the marks of a methodical hand: an unwavering intent that Rizawa somehow found more sickening then the dozens of lacerations running the length of her body.

"Her name was Chilai. Apparently she was rather well known among the soldiers. Worked outta that brothel just down the street with the red flowers on the door. She was familiar enough for the gentleman outside to have no problem identifying her. Even in her... let's just say present condition." Wujao, a senior investigator, said.

"Well, it seems we've finally found his hideout." Rizawa replied. "Do we know who owns this place?"

"Shinjuro stopped by the quartermaster on the way over. Seems he was one of the bigger fish in this runoff ditch of raw sewage that we call the garrison's outskirts. Apparently he was operating nearly a third of the warehouses out here, including some of the ones that have already been targeted." Wujao said.

"Well there's not much good you can say about the kind of copper piece pimps and petty kingpins who've fucked things up so badly that they've ended up out here, but if morals or basic human decency are a foreign language to them, then they are remarkably fluent in profit and loss. They don't tend to be of a mind to shit where they eat. Did you send anyone to check up on this guy?" Rizawa asked.

"Shinjuro's already on it. He went down to where she'd been working to see what he could find."

"Then send for a Xunjin. Something's not right here." Rizawa said.

"Are you serious?" Poshu, one of the junior investigators, asked. "It's well past midnight, and you know how aloof and haughty those mages are in the daylight. Do you really think any of them are gonna get out of bed for the sake of one more dead whore?"

"Well then, I guess you have two choices. You can sit here steaming in the stench of rotting flesh until your own wife won't let you into your bedroom, or you can take this missive from General Chunlao's desk to their dormitory and pound and scream until someone gets their ass out of bed." Rizawa answered.

"How the hell did you get your hands on that?" Poshu asked. "The garrison commander's been so busy lately that even his own aides rarely see him."

"Don't worry about that." Rizawa answered, shooting Wujao a stare as if daring him to reply.

Poshu was in such a rush to get out of the house that he nearly knocked Shinjuro to the ground as the two of them crossed at the threshold.

"What did you find?" Rizawa asked before he'd even caught his balance.

"Nothing that makes a damn bit of sense." Shinjuro answered. "According to the, erm, staff, both buildings were bought out a couple of months ago by some big merchant family from the capital. Apparently, the fact that the Thozogh Canal is gonna be finished in a couple years has inspired some interest from the investors in Tyung. Heir Empress Zhe is already making plans to fortify the Western Garrison and extend her influence into Shungnath before the Ukni can start bringing their ships through, and with all those extra soldiers comes a whole bunch of extra paychecks. Enough to make even a sweltering shit heap like this seem appealing, apparently."

"I have a couple of friends who are connected in the capital. Any idea which family it was?" Rizawa asked.

"The woman who ran the place didn't remember, or didn't want to tell me. Apparently someone showed up a few months ago claiming to be acting on behalf of the new owners. He said that Pe, the old boss, had already sold off his stake, and that the messenger would be coming back next month to collect his share of the profits. When that never happened, the ladies figured that the smartest move would be to keep their mouth shut and pocket the extra cash, which seemed to be working out pretty well until some of their own went missing."

"Any idea where this Pe fellow's gotten off to?" Wujao asked. "He might be able to give us some answers."

"I doubt he's anywhere good, the way those women were going on. This whole thing just seems incredibly suspicious if you ask me." Shinjuro replied.

"What about you, Rizawa? You're not gonna tell me that you just went and started the biggest shitshow high command's seen in months on the strength of some vague hunch?"

"I don't think he's gone anywhere at all." she answered. "I know you've heard the same stories I have about cunning serial killers, but everything that I've seen of the type suggests that they are far too impulsive and detached from reality for the kind of methodical techniques we've seen this gentleman use. Take this house, for example. Besides the fact that there's no way for a single, hours-old body to smell this bad, even in the Pan Rin, everything about this place seems to have been carefully designed to give the impression of a crumbling, abandoned manor. But the moment you step inside it's obvious that someone has not only been carefully maintaining this property, but has also clearly taken a number of steps to fortify it against prying eyes. The roof stones may be cracked and the wall panels chipped and broken, but those outer gates were recently renovated, and the lock looks to be a few months old, tops."

"But who in the hell would go through all the trouble of setting up a fucking murder house just outside the garrison when there's hundreds of miles of untamed wilderness surrounding us?" Wujao asked.

"Someone who keenly understands Liutse's old maxim that the best way for a king to protect his treasury is to convince the world that it's empty. Someone who needed the site of his operation to be as close as possible to the Western Garrison without drawing attention. Someone with all the tools and resources he needs to make sure that his secrets stay hidden." Rizawa replied.

The Xunjin that Poshu dragged out of bed was a squirrely looking southerner with neatly pleated robes and the kind of oversized spectacles favored by those who were confident that they could remain indoors indefinitely. He looked as if he was about to leap right into a long, carefully worded diatribe about the consequences of Poshu's actions, but as soon as he stepped through the doors his jaws clamped shut, and Rizawa took advantage of his violent gagging to reclaim the verbal initiative:

"A prostitute was recently murdered in this house. I have reason to believe that she was killed with Zuthruhk magic, and I need a mage know for sure." she said.

The Xunjin quickly sobered up as a few of the junior investigators gasped. It was true that the presence of the Thozogh Canal all but assured their proximity to the Dark God's mages, but a Ka'in operating just outside a Nezhuan garrison would compel the Heir Empress into open war. Everybody knew that the Ukni incursions into the Pan Rin would eventually lead to a conflict between the two powers, but the prevailing view was that this battle was years away. If Zuthruhk priests were already being used so openly, though... well it didn't bode well for the prospects of even a short term truce.

"I'll see what I can do." the Xunjin muttered.

The Zuthruhk, at it's core, was a magic of force. The Ka'in used their powers to mold the surrounding environment to their will. By contrast, the Xunju, the school of magic native to Nezhu, sought to subsume the mind of the individual within their surroundings, guiding, rather than compelling or defying, the forces of nature. Because of this, Xunjin had a unique ability to detect the scars left by Zuthruhk magic. Back home, poets and scholars were found of using this fact as evidence of some fundamental opposition between the two schools, but Rizawa had her doubts. She'd traveled the world enough to know that every school of magic still being practiced in Aios had some claim to being diametrically opposed to the Dark God's own, but none of that mattered. What was important was that this Xunjin would be able to feel the presence of Zuthruhk magic the way a man dying of a heart attack feels the clot in his artery.

The play of breezes moving through the open windows went still as the mage began to chant. For an instant, it felt as if the entire estate was immersed within the warm embrace of a mother soothing her screaming infant. Then the walls began to tremble. Rizawa could hear the sound of roof tiles shattering as dozens of surgical implements crashed down to the floor. The Xunjin seemed physically shaken by the resistance, but a moment later he was on his feet, intoning a new chant while the house's convulsions grew more and more frantic.

The room fell dark as the all the light from the windows converged into a single point. As the mage cast the beam around the room, strange words and symbols flashed across the wall. Most flitted in and out of existence far too quickly for her to decipher, but the few that lingered were savage and cruel, their harsh assessments of those poor souls who met their end in this place taking root in the depths of her memory. A glyph taller than anyone in the room burst to life so fast that Rizawa barely had enough time to dive back before the wall burst open to reveal a hidden stairwell and a stench of rot that was somehow worse than the room she now occupied.

She picked up one of the junior investigator's torches and dashed down, leaving the others

in stunned silence or struggling to support the ailing Xunjin. If her nose hadn't already warned her that what was coming was far worse than what they found in the vestibule, then she would have puked her guts out the moment she saw it.

She'd heard whispers of what went on inside Locharans: those sprawling temple complexes that held the material fires of the Dark God's Arkuloch. They were lightless pits where slaves, captives, and criminals were hauled in by the thousands to stoke the powers of the three firstborn with their lives. There were some scholars who even claimed that, being the very heart of the Arkuloch's power, no love could ever penetrate into the depths of the Vitarshir. Here, Rizawa was a bit more inclined to agree with their assessment, for as she looked over the Ka'in's grizzly work, she couldn't shake the thought that she'd stumbled into a place that knew nothing of warmth or humanity.

Dozens of bodies sat heaped in various states of decay: desiccated husks so stripped of moisture that they looked as if they might burst into a cloud of dust sat piled atop bloated carcasses whose lacerations bled a strange green ichor. A row of chains lines the furthest wall, where the thousands of scratch marks told a tale of depravity that no human words could possibly translate.

"What the hell were they doing here?" Wujao asked.

"One thing's for sure, this wasn't some rogue mage satiating his twisted impulses beyond the eyes of high command, but a large scale operation designed specifically to attack the garrison."

"I assure you that neither myself nor any of my colleagues have sensed the slightest hint of Zuthruhk magic within the walls of our base." the Xunjin said.

"Which, presumably, is why he set up his little outpost just beyond your jurisdiction, using the taverns and brothels that surround our walls rather than the fortress itself as his hunting grounds. Well, that and the fact that he had easy access to a pool of victims who weren't going to be missed."

"But what could they have been doing if none of the mages in the base could sniff it out?" Wujao asked.

"I don't know, but I aim to find out. The enemy will be quick to adjust their tactics once they realize that their little operation has been discovered, and that means that I won't have time to get bogged down in paperwork or ambiguities in the chain of command. Our foes have proven themselves to have a keen understanding of the Divine Army's operating procedure, otherwise they would have never been able to do something like this under our noses. If you don't plan on getting dragged any deeper then I'd suggest you go back to base, file your reports, and leave me the fuck alone while I find the son of a bitch who did this."

Rizawa had expected the usual shouts of resistance as she strode out into the warm night air, but for the first time that she could remember, none of the other investigators gave so much as a grunt of dissent to her plan.

The Thozogh Canal. The largest construction project Aios had seen in centuries, linking the central Khavasak's Runkalash River to the Pan Rin's Gaujong. Rizawa didn't have a whole lot

to go on, but the one thing she felt certain of was that the Zuthruhk blood magic she'd witnessed had to be connected with the canal. There just wasn't anything else in this infernal jungle that would be worth the risk of open war.

But that one island of firm conviction in her mind did little more than provide contrast against the abyssal depths of uncertainty that stretched to the limits of her mental horizon. The whole reason that Saklugz had sunk more money into that canal than most kingdoms could collect in a hundred years was because the Pan Rin had always been Nezhuan's greatest natural defense. Every time he tried to bring his armies into the rich farmland of the Fezhong Valley, the diseases, indigenous peoples, and the many Nezhuan Garrisons spread throughout the rainforest would strip his forces to the bone before they'd even made it to the wealthy cities of the interior. While the Dark God's reputation for intrigue and deceit was more than justified, the idea of him nearly bankrupting his empire on a canal just for the sake of catching the Nezhuan by surprise as he launched yet another costly infantry invasion seemed ludicrous.

Then there was General Chunlao. Everyone at the base knew that the garrison commander had been busy lately, but nobody could quite say with what. While it was certainly possible that the Ka'in had been acting without any outside assistance, Rizawa couldn't shake the feeling that they must have had a collaborator on the inside. While the taverns and brothels built up around the garrison were not strictly considered Nezhuan territory, and thus not subject to the same exhaustive security you would find within the walls, if a single team of Xunjin had been sent out to patrol the perimeter they would have almost certainly detected the presence of the Zuthruhk. But if someone connected to high command had alerted the killer to where their mages would and wouldn't be...

Of course, none of that directly implicated General Chunlao. It was just as likely that the reason nobody had seen him was because he was so preoccupied with the same treachery that she had independently discovered. Yet, while there were many officers who could manipulate the Xunjin's patrol routes for their own benefit, they all had to submit their reports directly to the garrison commander. It wasn't much to go on, but it was the only lead she had.

The trickle of drunken revelers stumbling towards the barracks gave way to a wall of stiff-backed soldiers and three story gatehouses that rose up from the curtain wall like the fangs of some tremendous beast. Rizawa climbed the network of embankments until she found herself standing before a sprawling courtyard with a large pagoda nestled up against the far wall. The team of six guards held their spears to block the doorway as she strode forward to meet them:

"General Chunlao is away on business. Until his return, all access to the garrison commander's residence is limited to- Oh it's you Rizawa. Right this way."

"Stealing my husband's personal seal so you can drag one of his Xunjin out of bed in the dead of night. You've been a bad, bad little girl." Meixi said as she pushed Rizawa onto the mattress, the pins and needles that held her hair in its elaborate, courtly style falling onto the goose feather bedding as Rizawa took her into her embrace.

"There was no other choice. Who knows what kind of damage that Ka'in would have caused if someone hadn't heard that poor girl's screams. I doubt that Chunlao will raise any objections once he returns."

"You are always so serious." Meixi giggled. "You know I could never stay mad at you."

"Meixi, the Ukni have been using Zuthruhk magic against the very base you call home. Despite the fact that your status as the garrison commander's wife is nothing short of a gigantic target on your head, you're just sitting there as if this were nothing more than one of my usual midnight visits. If I could be half as relaxed as you are then I wouldn't even need to risk tempting your husband's wrath."

"And leave me all alone in this miserable jungle?" Meixi cooed.

The large, white sleeves of her court gown rolled like a gentle wave as Rizawa pivoted on top of her. God she loved it when Meixi wore white. It made the green of her eyes shine like the lanterns during the harvest festivals in Tyung.

"Anyways, half the guards in this building are on my payroll for their, shall we say, discretion..." Meixi continued as Rizawa pulled back of the layers of finery, timing out the strokes of her tongue to make her lover's voice quiver as she struggled to maintain her noble comportment. "It may well be true that men can be brave and devoted out there on the battlefield, but back home their loyalties rest with whoever's paying them. Did you know that I give those gatekeepers nearly as much as they make from their salary? All so I can spend some time with a stuffy old criminal investigator who can't even take her mind off work long enough for me to finish. The general has his fun too, you know."

"I didn't mean it like that, but you have to understand that this is serious. A Ka'in moving so brazenly outside our own base could easily lead to open war."

"Which is exactly why you should leave this to the soldiers. I mean really. I know that you used to be a big, scary Nobiwaru assassin, but that was years ago. You're just an ordinary criminal investigator now, albeit one who happens to be stationed near the axis of the biggest war the Nezhuang Empire has seen in centuries. I'm sure that once my husband returns he'll be more than happy to spend half the night listening to whatever intelligence you've managed to gather, but the last thing I need in my life right now is one more stone-faced soldier too preoccupied with all the world's problems to even enjoy a good fuck."

"This is serious, Meixi. You know as well as I do that those women were murdered under the eyes of someone in high command. The whole point of keeping all those Xunjin around was to detect the presence of Zuthruhk magic, yet nobody thought send a single one of them to patrol the perimeter of our garrison? By the time General Chunlao returns, whoever was responsible will have had all the time they needed to hide the evidence and come up with a cover story."

"And do you really think that one more person sticking their nose into that burning shit heap is going to make anything better? I mean, haven't you learned by now?"

"I'm sorry, but I have to do this. It's like you said, I'm a criminal investigator, and a woman was just murdered right outside our garrison. Like it or not, this is my fight."

"Well if that's how you're gonna be, then I guess I'll have to take your mind off that investigation the hard way. How about I give you something else to stick that beautiful nose into?"

Rizawa was wracked with guilt as she made her way back to her small cottage nestled up against the garrison's curtain wall. There were times when Meixi could be as cunning as any of the courtesans back at the capital, but she was also a deeply loving person who could be startlingly naive when the stories she told herself about the people closest to her clashed against the unyielding force of reality. While her marriage to General Chunlao clearly had its issues, Meixi loved her husband. She loved him enough that, even after Rizawa had done everything short of openly accuse him of treason, she'd still let the accusations roll right over her as if she didn't even acknowledge their existence. And this was a woman who could see through her own lies like a hawk spots a field mouse.

And she knew that Meixi loved her, too. She understood the real pain of having to sit helpless in some walled estate while those you love go rushing off into danger again and again. But there was one thing that Meixi didn't know. In fact, there were only two people in the entire Pan Rin who knew that Rizawa was a spy for Princess Zhe, heir to the imperial throne of Nezhu, and both of them resided deep in the wilderness, among the tribesmen of the Pan Chui confederation.

Meixi had her connections to the capital, and they were good enough for her to suss out Rizawa's time among the Nobiwaru assassins within weeks of their first meeting. But the story she dug up of a talented young fighter whose stubborn pride could not sit flush with slitting people's throats as they lay naked in bed was only half the picture. It was true that Rizawa's temperament was not much of a fit for the Nobiwaru, but the very willfulness that made her a terrible choice for ambushing people on the toilet would have also compelled her through her training, had something not arisen to take its place. That something turned out to be an envoy for the Heir Empress. A man who just so happened to be in desperate need of an outsider without any ties to their existing spy network to investigate the strange reports they'd been getting from the Thozogh Canal.

The process had been a methodical one, done so carefully that even someone as connected as Meixi couldn't put the pieces together. Six years had passed from the day the imperial envoy told her to wait for communication about her objectives to the day she found that envelope with the Heir Empress' personal seal tucked underneath her pillow. Long enough for even Rizawa to begin to settle into life as a criminal investigator in Wajukara and doubt whether any of their plans would come to pass. Every message between her and Zhe had been routed through a staggeringly complex network of intermediaries so byzantine that even the pedantic scholars of Naviras wouldn't be able to make sense of it.

As a case in point, Rizawa need look no further than her two contacts in the Pan Rin. She was never quite sure whether the Heir Empress was a genius or a madwoman for using the members of the Diengu tribe as her formal liaison. On the one hand, all of the Pan Chui tribes maintained formal neutrality in the conflict between Nezhu and Ukni. On the other, while the Diengu would obviously prefer complete independence to being under the yoke of either of the two great powers, that didn't mean that they viewed both masters as one in the same. They may have preferred the Heir Empress' velvet gloves to Saklugz' iron gauntlets, but the moment the Nezhuans successfully expelled the Ukni from the jungle would be the same moment that the Pan Chui tribes rose in revolt. Until that day, though, the Ukni's policies of forced integration and large scale deforesting gave the tribes of the rainforest more incentive than anyone else to make sure that her secret stayed hidden. Beyond that, the Ukni's dismissal of the Pan Chui as ignorant savages was the best security measure that Zhe could have asked for, while their aversion to the Dark God's usual goads of wealth and status robbed Saklugz of his only two carrots in dealing with outsiders.

While it ripped Rizawa's heart out to deceive Meixi, the only chance she had to convince her that Chunlao was a traitor, if that even was the case, would be with a mountain of evidence so high that she'd need a team of guides just to reach the top. Yet, while she still lacked anything as concrete as that, it was obvious that whatever was happening here would be of great interest to the Heir Empress.

The one thing she felt certain about was that the Thozogh Canal was at the heart of everything, so that was where she'd go. Since she wouldn't make it a quarter of a mile through the jungle before the malaria or a Moss Tiger got to her, that meant getting in touch with her contacts. Walking around the back of her home, Rizawa carefully pivoted the small, ceremonially inscribed bird feeder at the rear of her property, placing a handful of red and green Seeslia seeds in the font instead of the usual millet. Then she went inside and listened to the clamor of the jungle, her ears pricked for the distinctive, throaty squawk that would let her know that her missive had been answered.

ACT II

THE PAN RIN RAINFOREST



The night echoed with the mating songs of Dirge Crickets and Wanderer Flies, and Rizawa couldn't shake the notion that the jungle cacophony, rather than being the aggregate of thousands of individual beings competing for dominance of the sonic environment, was born from some singular beast whose amorphous body wound around her like a serpent poised to smother her in it's clicking, chittering embrace.

Rizawa caught the motion at her periphery just in time to see a Scorpion Gecko whip it's stinger-barbed tail into the air. She instinctively swung out her hand to knock back the branch, but the force of the impact loosed a Flying Centipede from it's burrow. The antipode let out a shrill cry as it glided onto her arm, darting straight for the gap between her gloves and the leather armor she'd acquired from her friends in the 22nd Scouting Company. As she felt dozens of tiny legs probing for weaknesses in the string band that bound the two together, she could no longer resist the impulse to bang her arm against the trunk of a nearby Hammerfruit Tree, undoing half a night's work concealing the sound of her footsteps.

As she regained her composure, Rizawa found herself wishing that she'd been a bit more constrained in her harsh assessments of the Pan Rin. It wasn't that her unabating contempt for this jungle had ever tarnished her words so much that they didn't glisten in the light of untainted truth, but once you'd exhausted the limits of your vocabulary on the oppressive heat and pestilent air around the garrison, you weren't left with much room to maneuver in that hellish stew of seeping muck and venomous fangs that was the rainforest itself.

A rustling noise caught her attention. Something much larger than the bugs and lizards carpeting the forest floor. Something that moved on two legs. As Rizawa cursed herself for making enough noise to draw half the jungle around her and then getting so lost in thought that she barely had the time to duck down in the undergrowth, a lone Phujeng Bird walked into the clearing. It's half-man long legs kicked out in an oddly disjointed manner, which, along with it's large eyes and bright multicolored plume, always made them seem like they

were in a perpetual state of confusion. While their large talons could certainly do a lot of damage if provoked, the Phujeng were at heart peaceful creatures, which made them one of the few animals in the entire Pan Rin docile enough to be roped into humanity's schemes.

"Very funny." Rizawa said.

From the other end of the clearing, in nearly the opposite direction she had been looking, two figures rose up from the brush. The moment they revealed themselves, the Phujeng Bird came rushing over like a dog whose owner had been away, nuzzling its technicolor headdress against an outfit that, to an unacquainted outsider, would have seemed nothing but leaves and vines. In fact, Guanh was wearing the same lamellar armor worn by many soldiers in the Divine Army, save for the ecosystem's worth of wildlife carefully threaded through and the ritualized blessings of Namapha magic which imbued it. Likewise, the pike in his hand was a modified version of those used in Nezhu, it's shortened staff perfectly adapted to the kind of close quarters combat necessitated by the jungle. The mere fact that he chose it over the bow and arrow that he used on their hunting trips spoke much of what occupied his thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Rizawa..." the woman in a calf-length dress whose jungle fauna had been woven into intricate, nearly geometric patterns, said. "But in times such as these, the only time I get to see a smile on my brother's face is when he's watching you stumble through the jungle."

"Well I'm glad that somebody's enjoying this." Rizawa answered, carefully noting the strain beneath Vieng's jovial affect. "But I don't need to be shepherded through the jungle in secret like some small child."

At this, Guanh began to laugh.

"You have eaten at my table, Rizawa. You alone among the Nezhuanes in the western garrison can make that claim. However, if any child of the Diengu were as inept as you are in navigating the Pan Rin, our elders would have both them and their parents flogged." he said, his face suddenly going serious. "If the Ukni so much as suspected that we've discovered what we are about to show you, then they would burn down every Pan Chui village for a hundred miles."

In all Rizawa's years knowing Guanh, she had never picked up so much as a hint of over-exaggeration from him. The Ukni were frightened enough of the Pan Chui's ability to disrupt their supply lines to not risk open conflict with them. If that had changed, then it wasn't just the jungle tribes who had cause to be frightened.

"This trip is going to be different from the others." Vieng said. "If you wish to know why your enemy have suddenly grown so bold, then the answer will not be found in watching the patrols around the Thozogh's perimeter."

"Are you saying that we're going into the construction area? How the hell can we pull that off?" Rizawa asked. "Entire companies of Divine Army infantrymen have been lost trying to breach the canal."

"That's because the entire Ukni defense doctrine has been built around repelling large bands of loud, well-armored soldiers such as those used by your Divine Army." Guanh said. "You don't need many pickets to detect the advance of an infantry regiment. In fact, the Ukni use

the exact same patrol routes night after night: an inflexibility that has allowed us to devise our own paths to the canal. More to the point, however, as you yourself have admitted, somebody within your garrison has been working with the Ukni. Perhaps that same someone simply wishes for you to believe that the enemy's lines are impenetrable."

"General Chunlao?" Rizawa asked.

"I would have no way of knowing. However, I can say this much: if a single one of your scouts had discovered what we are about to show you, then your entire base would be readying itself for war. So ask yourself, if all it took was one lone spy breaking through their cordons to send years of planning into ruin, then don't you think it's strange that there are no fixed defenses until you get to the canal itself? It's almost as if someone knew the exact route that their spies would have to use, and made sure that the Ukni knew it as well."

Rizawa now understood the reason for their caution, and the risk that the two of them were taking by bringing her along. The relationship between Nezhu and the Pan Chui was complex in the best of times, but while the common cause of a shared enemy could unite them in times of peril, the idea of them staking the fate of their tribe on a foreigner was nearly unheard of. The ugly reality was that life was rarely pleasant for those born into the borderland between warring powers. Rizawa could thread the needle between Heir Empress Zhe's struggle to defend a kingdom of millions, in which tribes like the Diengu were just grains of sand on scales built to measure out cities and empires, and the realities that Guanh and Vieng were contending with. However, she also understood that the Pan Chui had plenty of reason to distrust Zhe's support.

If one of the cities in the Fezhong Valley found itself facing down an Ukni army, they could safely be evacuated and relocated. If their original homes could not be retaken, then within a few generations they would have seamlessly integrated themselves within their new community. The same could not be said of the Pan Chui. Their customs, values, and lifeways could exist only within the bounds of this jungle. The Heir Empress might have been able to write off the territory around the western garrison if it meant securing the lives of her subjects in the interior, but for Guanh and Vieng, their entire world lay within the bounds of the Pan Rin. If the Ukni succeeded in destroying their homes, there would be no evacuations or resettlement. Their entire way of life would be swept away like fallen petals in the spring floods.

At the heart of that unique, vibrant culture sat the Namapha, the ancient magic of the Pan Chui. In its current state, the Namapha was as indebted to the highly respected Vijnav magic of the Shugatyad order as the untamed, deeply secretive arts that were practiced in the Pan Rin before their arrival. Humans, however, are inclined to see differences over similarities. While the scholars and generals back in Tyung might recognize a certain distant kinship to the magic of the Pan Rin, they were also keenly aware that each time the Pan Chui rose against them, it was under the command of a preternaturally gifted Namapha mage. Needless to say, the question of whether they were even interested in protecting the school was an open one, a fact that practitioners like Guanh and Vieng were all too aware of.

"There's just one thing I don't understand. All of the reports from the 22nd indicate that the Ukni are using Kolghur tracking dogs with their pickets. Even if what you said about their patrol routes is true, the idea that those dogs would miss your trail seems a bit ridiculous."

"There are ways of covering one's scent..." Vieng said, pulling out a cloth sack whose

stitched symbols seemed to glow with a light of their own making. "Especially when you are dealing with beasts of the Zuthruhk."

"You don't mean that--"

Vieng reached into the sack, carefully, reverently removing three items and presenting them to her with upraised arms in a gesture that Rizawa recognized as being reserved for the Diengu's most sacred rites and relics.

Rizawa attempted to mimic the sincerity, if not the precise motions, of Vieng's offering as she took up the leather cloak, braided shoes, and long silver hairpin.

"Do they bear the touch of the Quansai?" Rizawa asked, sheepishly despite her best efforts to match Vieng's stern composure.

"It is as my brother said, if the Ukni knew that the Diengu had discovered their secrets, our tribe would be exterminated without mercy." Vieng replied.

Even as the weight of their danger pressed on Rizawa's heart, she struggled to shore up the gravity and gratitude befitting such an unprecedented gift. The Quansai Stone was the most sacred relic of the Pan Chui. It was said that, prior to the Shugatyad's arrival, the Pan Rin used to be infested with Saklugz's creations. The Diengu claimed that the Dark God himself had split the earth in twain, and from that fissure every variety of nightmare came screaming out into the jungle, driving the Pan Chui to the edge of extinction. Rizawa doubted whether even Saklugz ever had the power to raise up life from the earth, believing the story to be a conflated retelling of the kind of breeding grounds that were still used to make the swamps of the Galghad an impenetrable morass. However, whatever disparities might exist between the Pan Chui's oral history and the accounts at Tyung's imperial archive, there was no dispute about how the matter came to be resolved. A young mage of the Shugatyad order named Huidai presented himself before the dying confederation. After hearing the stories of the Ukni onslaught against their people, Huidai calmly walked down to chasm, hoisting up a boulder many times his size and sealing off the entrance. He then intoned a powerful chant, changing the shape of the rock so that it resembled arms reaching out from the sealed opening crowned by stone hands held out in a gesture of offering. The Quansai Stone was still held to be the most sacred relic of the Pan Chui: an ancient treasure that outsiders rarely got to see, whose power to ritually bless objects against Zuthruhk magic, as far as she knew, had never before been bestowed upon a foreigner.

Rizawa put on the garments with as much care as she could manage given her surroundings, and fell in behind the two mages as they crept through the overgrowth. As she did so, she noted, as she always did, how their mere presence seemed to have a calming effect on the wildlife. No animals came bursting out of the clearing, nor did she again have to deal with that vile, skittering sensation along her arms and legs. In fact, there was barely any movement in the forest at all until their paths crossed the first of the Ukni pickets.

She heard the sound of footsteps half a second before Vieng grabbed her sleeve. As her confidence in Guanh's assessment of the Ukni defenses evaporated before her eyes, the Namapha mage reached out and held his hand to the ground in the same gesture he often used to pacify the wildlife. The footsteps grew closer, until there was less than two men's length separating them from the search team, and Rizawa began to pick up fragments of their conversation:

"What the hell's his problem, anyway?"

"Beats the shit outta me. A minute ago he was freaking out like he expected to find a bitch in heat on the other side of the clearing, but now that he's out here all he wants to do is turn back."

"I swear these Kolghur are more trouble than their worth. Give me a Wenghur any day of the week. Their noses might not be as good but at least they have the decency not to drag you halfway across this shit-carpeted wasteland on some phantom pussy hunt."

They were nearly on top of them now. Rizawa was sure she could reach out her arm and touch the man's ankles if she wanted to, but she kept her gaze pinned to the floor, listening as their tracking dog strained against its leash to get away from whatever magic Guanh was using.

"You know what, fuck it. Let's just get outta here before Zehuk shows up. You know how he gets around rules and regulations. It's like the stick they shoved up his ass was so long you could raise a flag from his mouth."

"No such luck, I'm afraid." the second man said as a new set of footsteps became audible.

"What's going on here?" a third voice asked.

"Fuck if I know. The dog started freaking out like he smelled something but as soon as we got here he started pulling to go home. We were just about to head back to base, actually."

"You heard what the Dissatir said about the Pan Chui. Seems they've started getting a bit more brazen lately, pushing too close to the canal for high command's liking. You know, they say that the barbaric forest magic they use actually lets them control their scent."

"Even if that were true, and I highly doubt that it is, what the fuck are we supposed to do about it. We've already done a full sweep of the area and we didn't find a single angry native."

"I believe the two of you conducted a thorough search about as much as I believe that my dick's two hands long. C'mon, the sooner we finish the sooner we can get home."

Rizawa moved her hand to the hilt of her blade, but felt Vieng grip her wrist before she could reach it. From the corner of her eye, she watched the Diengu mage place her hands on the ground and intone a whispered chant. A moment later shrill shrieks began to echo around them. The guards leapt up with their torches just in time to see the Phujeng bird from earlier leap out from the overgrowth, squawking like someone had stepped on her eggs and then sprinting off into the night.

"See? I mean what did I fucking tell you. That terrifying jungle warrior looked a hell of a lot like the stupid shitbirds that always eat our rations if we don't dangle them out on branches. You know as well as I do that high command just make shit like that up anytime they think we've gotten soft."

"Fine, fine. Let's just go back to base, okay. No need to make a huge fucking deal about everything."

They rose, following in the guard's wake, pushing far deeper into the Ukni territory than she had ever gone before. Further, in fact, than any Nezhuan had in years, if you believed what high command were saying. Rizawa didn't, of course, otherwise she'd have been happy to follow Meixi's advice and leave this all to the generals. But someone in a Nezhuan uniform had made this trip many times, and she aimed to find out who.

There were a few more close encounters as they moved past the perimeter defenses, but by the time they'd gotten a half a mile from where they'd met the first picket it was obvious that none of the guards seriously believed that anyone was out there. They made no effort to whisper or conceal their movements, and, as a whole, seemed completely disinterested in anything whose scent bore the slightest hint of "more work", giving them ample opportunity to skirt around them. After a slow but mercifully uneventful slog, Guanh raised up his hand and the three of them gathered together.

"We've reached the site of the canal. Pay close attention to the materials and building equipment lying around."

Rizawa did as she was told as they crept down the steep embankment, but she sensed nothing of the trepidation in her companion's voice as she took in the scene. If anything, the sight of all the carts and stones strewn carelessly about the work site brought relief to her heart. Whole sections of the masonry were in complete disrepair. It reminded her of the middling nobles back in Wajukara who thought to equal the splendor of Tyung's palatial estates by hiring the cheapest work crews they could find. She had become skeptical of the claims that the canal was still years from completion after discovering the enemy's Zuthruhk magic, but the chaos around her seemed to suggest that this was an optimistic assessment.

The first sign that something was off came from a pile of building stones strewn across a flattened stretch of dirt. They were midway down the defile when she noticed that the stones, which had been scattered as if thrown at random a moment before, were now heaped into a disordered pile. By the time they reached level ground, those same rocks had taken the shape of a partial curtain wall.

As Rizawa took in her surroundings, she could see more and more evidence of this strange translocation. Wheelbarrows rising up with each step forward and sliding into neat rows, girders floating up into the air and securing themselves around a massive canal lock. It was as if, in the span of 100 yards, a years worth of progress had been made.

"What the hell is happening?" she asked.

"You wanted to know what that mage was doing in your garrison? Here's your answer." Vieng replied.

"That's impossible. Everything about that operation pointed to a single culprit, but no lone mage could achieve results like this, not even a member of the Grevaburz. Our killer was as savage as any I've seen. They ended the lives of quite a few working girls, but the only time I've ever heard of illusion magic this powerful it came from the sacrifice of thousands. I mean even if that mage had slaughtered our entire garrison, it still might not be enough."

"Which would be a problem if the Western Pan Rin Garrison was their only source of human chattel. But the Dark God's wrath has never been reserved for Nezhuan alone. It was the disappearance of some of our own tribesmen who sparked this discovery, but even that

barely scratches the service. It seems that enough progress has been made on the canal for them to start carting in sacrifices from all across Aios. The Diengu alone have already discovered dozens of sites similar to the manor you mentioned hidden underground around your garrison. The forest echoes with the muffled screams from those lightless pits, where human souls are extinguished on a scale and precision that rivals the ingenuity of the Thozogh Canal. Rather than being the first forays of an Ukni incursion into your base, the sacrifices that were being performed outside your garrison were the terminus of a great web of Zuthruhk nodes, each designed to conceal the progress of the Thozogh Canal from the eyes of outsiders."

"But surely someone would have noticed when the Ukni started digging up the forest and building sacrificial altars in the middle of the jungle? I have close friends in the 22nd scouting company. There have been some problems that have stopped them from getting too close to the canal, but I can't imagine them failing to notice something of that magnitude. I know Captain Wan. He can be a bit of an asshole, but he's as unyielding as cold iron. He'd set fire to his own barracks before willingly covering up a thing like that."

"You know as well as I do that the Pan Chui do not share your convictions about the reliability of the Divine Army. I cannot speak for Captain Wang, but you came to us looking for proof that someone in the garrison is in league with the enemy, and this is all the evidence you could possibly ask for."

"I'm afraid that isn't so." Rizawa replied. "I appreciate the risks you've taken to bring me here. Really, I do. But you didn't drag me this far into enemy territory to help me solve a prostitute's murder. Once the Heir Empress discovers what's been happening, she will almost certainly seek to mount some kind of intervention. But going to her now without a clear report on the canal's progress could add months of delay while she does whatever she needs to do to rebuild her spy network."

"We expected that Zhe would want hard evidence if she was going to commit more of her forces to the Pan Rin, and we are prepared to bring you to the canal itself if that is our best chance at securing her aid. Things have begun to move far quicker than we anticipated, and we do not have the luxury of getting mired down with your bureaucrats."

Rizawa nodded her head, and the company fell back into silence as they crept through the shifting landscape. She never felt more exposed in her life than when they stepped out from that overgrown embankment into the still night air. She could never remember a time when the Pan Rin felt as cold as it did then, but rather than bringing any relief, the bitter winds seemed to suck the vitality from her, stripping away the strength from her limbs and dissipating the mental acuity that such a dangerous mission required. She could see no lookouts along the now-fully-completed curtain wall, but it would take but a single pair of well-trained eyes to spot the three figures creeping through the open clearing. Without the heaps of detritus, even the midnight darkness could not veil them as they moved across that vacant, flat expanse. Guanh and Vieng, however, showed no sign of hesitation, and, as headstrong as she was, even she could accept that the situation was entirely in their hands, so she soldiered on behind them in silence.

It was as if there was some invisible threshold midway through the clearing that set a network of invisible gears in motion, hoisting up her surroundings with machine precision. Earlier, the changes had been so subtle that she found herself constantly second-guessing her own assessments. Now, however, it was as if each step forward turned the wheels of some tremendous crank. Girders the size of palaces leapt up at odd angles until they

sketched out the shape of a monolithic water lock. The only advantage that came from the shifting terrain was the fact that she now understood why there were no guards to spot her. Rather than being in a vacant field, Rizawa found herself standing at the base of a defensive wall that stretched to the limits of her night-blind eyes.

“We've been able to reach the edge of their defenses from stealth alone, but we'll need a disguise if we're going to make it past those walls. Getting armor off three of the infantry guards would be all but impossible, but the Ukni have been working their slaves through the night, and given the climate, it's not uncommon for the overseers to shed everything but the outer cloak used to signify their station. We've seen workers coming in and out of an exit on other side of the water lock, but the Ukni custom of using only men for positions of command means that the two of you will have to play the part of prisoners.”

Rizawa was as enthusiastic about pretending to be an Ukni slave as she was about taking a spa trip to a Wyr grounds, but it had been her idea to enter the canal, and doing so remained the only viable path towards giving the Heir Empress the information she'd need. Reluctantly, she gave Guanh a nod as he disappeared into the darkness.

Before Rizawa even had the time to properly catalog the whirlwind of anxieties tearing through her mind, Guanh had returned in the blood flecked coat of an overseer. Using a line of rope that he'd acquired along with the outfit, he tied her and Vieng's arms in a fierce looking knot that, in fact, could be undone with a single tug, and led the two of them along the walls. A few moments later they reached a large double door where four men dressed in loose clothing with cloaks similar to the one Guanh stole stood around a dozen or so rag-clad figures carting wheelbarrows full of dirt out from the dig.

They walked in silence, with Rizawa doing everything in her power to imitate the broken shuffle and floorbound yet horizon-spanning gaze of the other slaves. Her heart leapt up when a man in the full uniform of a Nashragha infantryman stepped out from the passage and began interrogating each of the teams as they returned to the complex. While the laborers appeared to be drawn from every corner of Aios, the same was not true of their masters, and Guanh's thick Pan Rin accent would be immediately recognized the moment he opened his mouth to speak.

As they got close enough to make out the hundreds of dings and scratches in the infantryman's armor, Rizawa felt the rope jerk behind her. She turned around in time to see Vieng trip and stumble forward, falling to her knees in front of the soldier and quivering as if her body had been pushed to its furthest limits.

“Water... please...” she begged.

The infantryman struck her in the face with his shield, sending her toppling backward. Rizawa let the force of the line carry her to the ground as well, and as the two of them scrambled out of the soldiers way, he barked a handful of curse-laden orders to Guanh about keeping his workers in line, and then hustled the three of them through the gate.

Rizawa's jaw dropped as she entered the building grounds. Being a child of Nezhu, she was no stranger to the sight of canals. During her youth, the northernmost stretches of the Zu River had been the site of a vast irrigation project designed to make the countryside more arable, and her travels had given her many chances to cross the titanic canals that bridged her homeland's two great rivers. The construct before her looked far closer to the latter than the former. There were dozens of water locks that dwarfed the largest of the garrison's

pinnacles, most of which already appeared to be completely operational. Those sections that were still devoid of water seemed visually indistinguishable from their completed brethren, suggesting that the entire canal was nearly complete.

As if to confirm her fears, her eyes caught upon dozens of stakes rising out from the furthest lock like the spikes of some disjointed crown. At first, she couldn't figure out what she was looking at, until at last she realized that they were the masts of a gigantic fleet that had been dry docked on risers just above the water line.

"What the hell is happening there?" she whispered, pointing up towards the ships.

"Probably to transport the slaves." Vieng replied.

But while Guanh and Vieng's knowledge of the Pan Rin dwarfed her own many times over, their knowledge of the outside world was decidedly less impressive. Of course, before today, there would have been little reason for a people who spent their entire lives in the jungle to learn the flags of the Ukni navy, or to distinguish between the lightweight Chakaltun skirmishing galleys and the wide-bellied transport ships used to haul slaves around the empire. But even Vieng, on her second look, was able to pick out the looming form of the Thasak tower ship, where, just beyond the hazy torchlight, a three man long Golugz ballista was doubtless being readied to rain its ship-piercing bolts upon the Water Stallions of the Divine Navy. Not only was the Thozogh Canal nearly complete, but the Ukni had already prepared the fleet for its upcoming invasion.

"Look, up there." Vieng said, gesturing towards a group of figures lining the parapets.

Rizawa looked up to see a cloaked figure surrounded by Nashragha infantrymen making their way down a broad stairwell linking the upper levels of the water lock. Even with his face partially obscured, she instantly recognized the short, bulbous figure who was being escorted. Frankly, she doubted if there was a single soul in all of Aios whose walk combined the clumsy waddle of the morbidly obese with the crisp, certain strides of a man bred for command into such a comically overdrawn composite.

"That's Yuanqi. He's General Chunlao's personal adjutant." Rizawa gasped.

"Then that should be all the proof you need that the commanders of the western garrison are in the enemy's pocket." Vieng replied.

"You there! What are you staring at?" came a shout from behind.

Rizawa had been so transfixed by both the Ukni armada and the sight of Chunlao's highest ranking subordinate that she'd forgot to keep up the appearance of a broken slave, lifting her head to openly gawk at her surroundings and speaking without a care for the attention she was drawing on herself.

Guanh tried to answer for her, throwing out a bunch of vague explanations about where they had been assigned, but the moment that the words left his mouth, his atrocious accent became startlingly apparent, and the Ashravid began shouting out for his superiors.

Rizawa looked around, her eyes catching on a large pulley with arm-thick ropes up against the wall. Before she even realized what she was doing, she'd untied her hands and drew out her knife. She sliced loose the rope just as Vieng threw off her own bonds, cutting the throat

of the Ashravid and throwing him beneath the cartload of mortar and building stones just as the entire thing came crashing down.

Within moments, dozens of guards had swarmed around the site of the accident, while hundreds of slaves, their overseers too preoccupied to worry about beating them, put down their work and rushed over to gawk. She felt Guanh's hand tugging on her robes, pointing to a narrow alley between a large outbuilding and the curtain wall. They could hear the screams of dozens of guards as they dashed into the darkness, but they didn't stop to listen, pressing on through a mob of confused work teams until they came to an exit gate guarded by four Nashragha infantrymen.

Rizawa dashed forward. The shouts and panicked flight from her advance may have given the Ukni soldiers some warning that the unbound woman rushing towards them was armed, but while Rizawa's elongated hunting knife had been forged by the best blacksmith in Shungnath specifically for its combat efficacy in the cramped jungle environs, its visual similarity to the machetes the Ukni used to clear out overgrowth, combined with the starvation rations that slaves were fed, meant that the Nashragha had little reason to suspect she actually knew how to use the thing until the tip plunged straight through the slats of the first man's helm. She pulled it loose just in time to parry the stroke of the man behind him, but he fell dead before Rizawa even had the chance to counter, Vieng's poison dart still sticking from his neck as he collapsed to the floor.

"They're heading east!" came a shout from behind.

Guanh threw off his overseers cloak as the three of them rushed out into the night, grabbing the hem of the camouflaged inner robe that he'd concealed underneath it and flipping it around to reveal a coat of feathers on the reverse side. As he began to chant, Vieng came rushing up from behind her, throwing her own robe overtop of her as arrows rained down from the parapet.

A cacophony of shrieks echoed through the clearing as hundreds of birds rushed forth from the tree line. The flat brown sea of packed and flatted soil was suddenly awash in thousands of bright colors. Arrows still came down, but their cloaks were indistinguishable from that roiling sea of feathers, and in the chaos they were able to dash out into the cover of the forest. All the while, Rizawa's thoughts were fixed not on the bolt that had torn through her shoulder nor even the firsthand knowledge that Nezhuan officers were in league with the Ukni, but on the beautiful young courtesan whose decision to sleep with a poor criminal investigator may have left her stranded and alone in a den of wolves.

ACT III

THE WESTERN PAN RIN GARRISON



"You stupid, stupid girl." Meixi said, her voice rising up in the mock-playful pitch that she used when she was still angry about something but wanted to hide it.

Rizawa had made every effort to clean the wounds she'd picked up on her expedition, but while most of the cuts could be dressed and cleaned with minimal effort, the black eye she got from that overseer and the arrow that grazed her shoulder during her escape couldn't exactly be covered up with an extra layer of makeup (as if the sight of Rizawa in cosmetics wouldn't have been just as suspicious). Truth be told, Meixi probably knew about her injuries within hours of her return to the garrison. The doctor she saw was a local from Shungnath with, as far as she knew, no connections to anyone important at the base. However, the way Meixi launched straight into that tearful, rage-soaked philippic before Rizawa had even shut the door behind her made it obvious that her spies had been hard at work. She always forgot how resourceful she could be when she wanted to learn something.

"I can't believe that you would just go off into the jungle like that without so much as a word to me. I mean, what if something happened?"

"Something is happening, Meixi. I hate having to be the one to say this, but you know Yuanqi as well as I do. If he was over there having a meeting with the Ukni commanders, then he was doing so at the behest of your husband."

"And what? I'm just some dolled up courtesan who isn't good for anything but beauty and conversation?"

"You know that I wouldn't be standing here if I felt that way." Rizawa answered.

"Well if you trusted me half as much as you like to pretend that you do, it might have

occurred to you that you weren't the only one whose had some cause to be suspicious of Chunlao lately." Meixi said, tossing her a small brown jewel.

"Where on earth did you find this?" Rizawa asked.

"In my husband's office. After you came to me yesterday and told me that you thought he might have been involved in that poor girl's murder, I decided to have one of my guards toss his room."

"Do you know what this is?" Rizawa asked.

"I might not be able to make out the words, but I know that script as well as anyone."

"What you discovered here is a Lagovrun jewel. It translates from the Nezlugz as roughly 'word transporter' or 'word channeler'. Lagovrun are used by Ukni spies and saboteurs to communicate with their handlers in the Korvadun. The Dark God has always operated his espionage network using a cell-based system with multiple segregated chains of command, so that no one spy or agent ever knows enough about the network's structure to be of much use in the event of their capture. Thus, owing to the fact that Saklugz' field assets report to a rotating team of Korvadun agents, he needed a means to facilitate safe communication between his spies and their handlers. The Lagovrun crystals were created to address this need. In normal circumstances, they seem like nothing more than precious gems, but when they are placed in proximity to another Lagovrun they grow warm to the touch and emit a dark yellow light. The fact that Chunlao had one of these stones in his possession removes all doubt that he's in the Dark God's service."

"Then what are we going to do?" Meixi asked.

"You're not going to do anything but play the part of the dutiful wife until I can dig up more evidence. If we came forward with just a Lagovrun crystal, Chunlao would simply deny that it was his and we'd lose the initiative. The entire point of using them is that they only identify whoever has the stone in their possession. However, if the other officers discover that the Ukni have constructed a network of underground chambers where large scale sacrifices are being conducted for the specific purpose of casting illusion magic around the Thozogh Canal, then even Chunlao would be hard pressed to come up with an explanation. I still have a few friends whose loyalty I trust. As soon as I'm done here I'm going to--"

"You always do this!" Meixi screamed. "Running off on your own whenever things get dangerous, charging headlong into certain death without the slightest regard for anyone else. Do you have any idea what it's like to sit here helplessly every time you decide to take matters into your own hands. This is dangerous, Rizawa. Not 'I'll make it work somehow' dangerous, but the other kind. The kind that you don't come back from. You're not a general or a Xunjin or even a company commander, you're a criminal investigator with a backwater garrison in the middle of a jungle. You can't fix this all by yourself."

"I'm sorry, Meixi. I really am. I never meant to make you feel like you don't matter. But this thing is so much bigger than you or I. Another war with Saklugz means thousands upon thousands of deaths, wide scale famine, and whole cities put to the torch. I'll be the first person to admit that I have no business trying to stop a war, but if I don't, then who will?"

"Let me help you." Meixi said. "I have plenty of contacts back at the capital. I have a much better chance of getting word to the Heir Empress than you do. How about we sit down and

figure out what we can do about this together instead of just blindly hoisting the weight of the world onto your shoulders.”

“I'll tell you what. I set up a couple of meetings with some friendly faces before I stopped by. Why don't you get in contact with whoever you need to talk to and we'll meet back up in the morning and come up with a plan.”

Meixi nodded her head.

“I love you, Rizawa. Please don't get hurt.”

“I love you too.” Rizawa replied, kissing her on the forehead and walking out the door.

The image of the world that reached eyes of humanity was little more than illusion. If one were to use the signs and tokens of their eyes to categorize the Western Pan Rin Garrison, then the most significant divide would be found between the derelict warehouses and seedy taverns along its periphery and the untamed wilderness stretching far beyond the limits of human sight. Few would be dense enough not to pick up on the differences between the imposing watchtowers and siege-ready construction of the base itself and the dilapidated buildings beyond her walls, yet the differences in wood quality and masonry would only affirm the fundamental similarities of walls, roofs, paved roads, and 90 degree corners that nearly all settled human societies eventually come to adopt.

But the eyes had a way of deceiving, and anyone who tried to navigate that marketplace of syphilitic flesh and bathtub rice wine with the notion that they were within the bounds of civilization would quickly find themselves feeding the maggots in one of the outskirt's many conveniently located back alleys and runoff ditches.

Rizawa, for her part, had always felt that there was little difference between the taught muscles and jumpy eyes of the men selling counterfeit medicine outside a run down tavern and the spiders that she needed to pound out of her shoes each morning; how much there was in common between the cold stares of the pimps dragging their wares through the streets and the appraising eyes of the Ghost Jaguar just before it leaps from the fold. In fact, she sometimes felt more alienated from the warmth of human society wandering through the garrison's outskirts than when she was alone in the jungle. For there was nowhere in Aios that made it quite so clear that the thing we name civilization had nothing to do with infrastructure or material comfort, and that all the splendor in the world could not bring love or compassion to the hearts of serpents and venomous insects.

“This is the last time I ever do something like this for you.” Wujao said as Rizawa approached the deserted streetcorner that he'd chosen as their meeting place.

She wanted to reply that, at this point, the question of whether there would even be a next time was very much an open one, but Wujao had stuck his neck on the line by looking into how the 22nd Scouting Company could have possibly missed the construction of dozens of sacrificial chambers across the breadth of the Pan Rin. They were the kind of questions that would make him a prime candidate for the very disappearances that they were charged with investigating. The least she could do was let him vent.

“What did you find?” she asked.

"Well it seems as though the 22nd Scouting Company hasn't set foot around the Thozogh Canal in over two years."

"How the hell could that have happened? The entire point of keeping such a prestigious company this deep in shit nowhere was so that we could have a good team of eyes on the only canary we have for our next war with the Ukni."

"That's where things get interesting. You remember those skirmishes along our southern marches between Ukni soldiers and the 22nd a few years ago?"

"I do, but to be honest the whole thing seemed like a flimsy excuse for high command to impose some order on the soldiers."

"Well I imagine the boys in the 22nd felt pretty much the same, right up until the day Yuanqi came waddling into their command headquarters with a story about how the Ukni were using the forces they'd stationed around the Thozogh Canal as a feint while the cut south around the garrison."

"What? Every time the Ukni have tried to cross the Pan Rin on foot it's been at the helm of a large invasion force. I mean if everything I've read in the history books is true, they'd just hack and burn their way through the forest rather than trying to deal with all the wildlife. Hardly the kind of thing that you'd need highly trained scouts to spot."

"Which helps explain why they were so fucking pissed when Yuanqi said that he was splitting the 22nd in two, and that the breakoff group, the 45th, would be the ones tasked with monitoring the Thozogh." Wujao said.

"And I take it that all of the people selected to be part of this new company were recent recruits or transfers from other divisions of the Divine Army?" Rizawa asked.

"You got it. According to all of the records back at HQ, the 45th have been conducting daily patrols of the borderland between the two powers, while the 22nd has been bled dry in a series of ambushes that they insist are the result of intelligence leaks from the highest levels. In the first year after the company broke up, the casualty rates went up five fold."

"So I take it that the surviving members of the 22nd aren't particularly pleased with General Chunlao right now."

"Well despite having less than half the manpower that they had a couple years ago, they've managed to rack up more disciplinary complaints in the year after they made the switch than in the previous twenty combined."

"So why hadn't I heard about all this?"

"Probably because you're a teetotaler. Apparently someone high up finally realized that having such a well-established company suddenly disappear might draw more attention than it kept away, and so they elected to place the 22nd on an indefinite suspension while the 45th took over both duties. For the past year, the scouts have just been sitting around in taverns complaining about the situation to anyone willing to pay for their next round. It shouldn't be too hard to find them."

"Thank you so much, Wujao. You really saved my ass here."

"I just hope that you know what you're doing with all this." he replied.

Rizawa didn't have the heart to tell him the truth

The energy pulsing through the Lonely Tortoise that evening seemed completely at odds with Wujiao's tale of a company bereft of purpose. She heard the shouts of excited revelers before she'd even turned onto the street, and by the time she got inside it was obvious from the dozens active dice games and the many prostitutes weaving their way from table to table that the 22nd Scouting Company thought they had something to celebrate. Or perhaps something to mourn, for a grieving soldier and an exultant one were remarkably alike how that built up energy found expression.

It was the ferocious shouts at the dice table that gave things away. Rizawa had been called to enough disturbances to know that the loudest games were the ones least likely to spiral into open violence. Nothing sent shivers down her spine quite like walking into a tavern and being greeted by the sight of silent, dour looking soldiers. On nights like that you'll get better odds on someone getting their throat slit than anything you'll find on the tables.

Rizawa scanned the crowd, selecting a burly looking gentleman with a large scar on his face and an even larger pile of coins in front of him.

"I need to find Sergeant Luo." she said.

"Well if you're looking for a ride on that famous cock of his then you're gonna have to get in line. Fat pockets and a huge dick seem to go a long way with your type." he replied, swinging out his arm to brush her away.

Rizawa caught it, twisting it to drive the man face-first into his coin pile.

"A big dick's worthless if you don't know what you're doing with it. If Luo wants his cock sucked so bad then the best thing he could do is get his own mouth game up to speed. As things stand, I think I'd have better luck cutting out his tongue and stapling it to cat than getting him to do anything useful with it."

The soldier leapt up to his feet with a smile on his face.

"So you're the type who likes it rough, eh? I can work with that."

"Let's just hope you can keep it working when all that's left of it is a severed stump. I know the 22nd talks a big game about being the Nobiwaru's equal in stealth and efficiency, but I suspect that deep down you already know what's gonna happen here. I'll tell you what, if you hold real still I'll try to at least leave you with a nub to piss out of."

The man's eyes lit up at the mention of the order of assassins. He looked her up and down again, no longer focused the curve of her hips but on the countless scars running the length her body and the half dozen weapons concealed on her person.

"I thought you Nobiwaru were supposed to be graceful courtesans right up until the moment you cut your target's throat. You hardly seem the type to be at home in the halls of power."

"Why the hell else would they send me to this shithole." she replied.

"It's okay, Tsunan..." came a voice from behind her. "Rizawa's a friend. I've known her since we were stationed at the Husheng Gates together. Despite her manners, she's proven herself to be a reliable comrade when things fall to hell, provided you don't make the mistake of trying to get into bed with her."

"I take it she's the one who stabbed that dockmaster to death?" Tsunan asked.

"Yep, alongside the entire compliment of Korvadun agents who'd been sent to protect him."

Rizawa knew that it was just a coping mechanism, but she always hated how men could turn the most unspeakable horrors into comic tavern tales. The official in question had been using his office to smuggle arms for an Ukni-financed uprising along Nezhu's northern frontier. She had done everything in her power to resolve the situation through traditional channels, and the whole thing had blown up in her face. Still, she couldn't deny that Luo's banter had a pacifying effect on Tsunan, who peacefully returned to his game as the two of them walked off to a table in the far corner.

"Holy shit." Luo said as Rizawa finished her story. "This is bad."

"What, the fact that the Western Pan Rin Garrison has been infiltrated by the Ukni at the highest levels? The fact that Heir Empress Zhe and her admirals are laboring under the mistaken belief that the Thozogh Canal is years from completion? Or were you referring to the enemy fleet that's poised for an imminent invasion of the Nezhuan heartland?"

"None of those bode very well, I'll admit, but I was talking about the orders we got from high command this afternoon. I guess you must have stirred up quite the hornet's nest, because Yuanqi himself came down and gave a whole speech about how the enemy, no doubt knowing that they could not hope to match our vigilance in open battle, had resorted to digging a massive tunnel system designed to carry their mages right up to our doorstep. Even listening to him talk, I found myself half-suspicious that he was some kind of enemy saboteur. I mean spies and poets are the only ones who'd give such an ostentatious speech about the depths of the enemy's depravity and how we were the last bastion against being completely overrun, and Yuanqi never seemed to have much of a taste for the written word. About the only things he didn't mention in that rambling paean were the fact that there's an Ukni fleet drydocked at the canal and that the 45th are on the Dark God's payroll. The boys have been celebrating the fact that he gave us orders to go out into the Pan Rin and wipe out each of the nodes by force in a combined operation with members of the 45th. We're supposed to be out of here by first light."

"Holy shit." Rizawa said. "Do you think he's setting you up for an ambush?"

"It'd make sense given everything you just told me. General Chunlao would be able to knock out the only company in the Pan Rin with a real chance of discovering his treachery, and at the same time he'd be giving himself the perfect cover to 'announce' a new Ukni troop buildup in the region before their fleet took to the Gaujong River. If he gave a report about the fleet after half the base already knew about invasion he'd be finished, but if he timed things out so that his report got to the Heir Empress just ahead of the fleet's departure then he could make it seem like he was caught as off guard as everyone else while still leaving her with next to no time to respond to the attack. Plus, with us out of the

way, Chunlao would have all the pretext he needed to establish ever stricter security protocols. After all, if the best scouting company in the Divine Army could be taken out by the enemy, it would make sense to keep his regular soldiers confined within the base in the event that we were besieged. He could make the 45th his official vanguard and keep the rest of the army locked up in the garrison as the Ukni fleet sailed right past."

"What in the hell are we going to do?" Rizawa asked.

"Well I know what we're not gonna do, and that's sit on our asses and wait for the enemy to put their plans into motion. Given that the 22nd is set to leave the garrison at dawn, that gives us a pretty short window." Luo replied.

"Well Chunlao might be able to make the 22nd and 45th seem like equal forces on paper, but he knows as well as anyone which of the two companies is strongest. Because of that, I'm guessing that he'll be making full use of the element of surprise, luring you out to some kind of choke point before the 45th turned on you en masse. But given the stakes, if I were in his shoes I'd be sure to give myself a second line of defense in case the fighting turned in your favor. Since he happens to be in possession of a network of Zuthruhk sites complete with a team of Ka'in working around the clock to keep that illusion magic going, I can't imagine any reason why he wouldn't bring them into the fight as well." Rizawa said.

"Yeah, you're right. There's no way Chunlao would trust those dipshits in the 45th to wipe us out on their own, even with the element of surprise. And if he's going to be using Zuthruhk magic to finish us off-

"Then he'll almost certainly have ordered his Ka'in to begin whatever rituals and preparations they'll need for the morning." Rizawa cut in.

"So that just leaves the question of how we're gonna find those underground chambers in the dead of night without so much as a hint to their location." Luo said.

"Well I may just have something that can help us out with that." Rizawa said, pulling out the Lagovrun crystal.

Luo burst out laughing.

"Of course you'd have one of those things tucked away in your robes. You know, I've heard stories of Ukni spies presenting themselves before the great noble houses in Tyung because their Lagovrun were triggered by some old war relic that was kept on display as a trophy, but this is the first time I've heard of anyone using one to bring the fight to the enemy. If we can snuff out those Ka'in ahead of the ambush it will throw their whole plan to the shitter, especially if the 22nd know that the 45th are out to get them."

"If the 22nd can hold their own against the Ukni, then Chunlao's whole plan falls apart. Do you think that your comrades will believe your story?"

"They might or they might not, but they'll certainly take my words seriously enough to be on guard when they're out there. But if I can get back to the base ahead of the deployment with some kind of proof that we're being ambushed then the 45th won't have a fucking chance."

"Then that just leaves one last question." Rizawa said.

“What's that?”

“Given that Chunlao must know that I'm the one who visited the Thozogh Canal last night, and given the amount of effort he put into wiping out your unit, doesn't it seem strange that he hasn't bothered to do the same for me?”

“Well put it this way: when a man wants to hunt down a trophy buck, he's gotta jump over a hundred hurdles just to get the thing where it needs to be for his arrows to do their magic, but when that same man wants to find the fox whose been rummaging through his pens at night, all he has to do is wait.”

Rizawa fidgeted with the sealed scroll as she made her way back to the garrison walls. She'd spent so much of her life carefully protecting the one thing that could give her direct access to the Heir Empress that the idea of ripping it in half felt as wrong as ripping off her own arms. But there was no other choice. She'd never had any problems keeping secrets from her lovers before, but this time was different. Her decision to pursue a relationship with General Chunlao's wife meant that Meixi was now in danger. She hated herself for breaking her promise to her, but if she didn't go out there with Luo then there would be nothing to stop the Ukni fleet from sailing up the Yaln River and besieging Tyung. But if Meixi understood the true reasons for her involvement then she'd at least have chance of slipping away before heads started flying in earnest. She was also one of the few people in the garrison who actually had a chance of getting word to the Heir Empress in the event that Rizawa didn't make it back. Cursing herself for her shortsightedness, her cowardice, and her pathological inability to be anything but a burden to her lovers, Rizawa tore the seal, handing one half to the guard outside the commander's palace with a note that explained everything and then crawling back into the darkness to rendezvous with Luo.

ACT IV

THE PAN RIN RAINFOREST



Even after Guanh and Vieng had told her that the enemy had constructed a network of underground chambers for use in their Zuthruhk illusion rituals, Rizawa still found it difficult to believe that such a thing could exist in such an inhospitable environment. Yet here she was, descending down a narrow stone chasm far below the dense snarls of jungle fauna. Even with the Lagovrun to guide them, the sheer depth of these subterranean hideouts meant that locating the surface entrance had been a tremendous ordeal. If it wasn't for Luo's keen eyes, which were able to spot the days-old signs of human feet being dragged through the sodden earth with nothing but the dull moonlight to guide them, she would have wasted the entire night wandering aimlessly through the overgrowth. Even if she had known that one of the ordinary looking boulders scattered around the clearing was in fact a hidden passage, the idea that she would have figured out how to sound out the stones until she heard the distinctive echo of hollow rock was about as fanciful as the thought of her finding her way into a stable, trusting relationship.

As she made her way down the tight defile, she tried not to think about the vulgar Ghakat writing revealed by their torchlight or the obvious signs of resistance scratched into the walls, directing her attention instead to maintaining some foggy reckoning of how far they'd delved into the earth. It wasn't easy. She felt as though they'd gone half a mile underground before they found themselves in a broad, level passageway whose warped stone suggested a much earlier construction than the comparatively recent access tunnel. Not for the first time, she found herself wondering just how long the Ukni had been working on this in secret. If the broad ruts running along the corridor were any indication, this passageway had already seen decades of heavy use.

The Lagovrun cast the hundreds of Zuthruhk inscriptions in the hazy yellow hue of a fog-veiled dawn, and it occurred to Rizawa that all General Chunlao would have needed to do was leave that stone somewhere Meixi would find it while placing its mate in a trap and she would be done for. It was more faith than anything else that guided her footsteps. As if, by

being unwaveringly fervent in her trust in Meixi's discretion, she might negate the tremendous suffering she caused by running out on her. It was only the muddy rumble of distant voices echoing across the stone that unlocked the chains of the mental prison she'd constructed for herself.

"So they aren't even gonna give us a half a watch to pound one out and catch a nap between killing off the scouts and leaving with the rest of the Chadurb?"

"You can beat that thing 'til its red and swollen once the transport ship hits the Gaujong but until then you're on the Dark God's time."

"Any idea why the fuck they're in such a hurry all of a sudden? Cuz from where I'm sitting it doesn't make one bit of sense for the priests who are responsible for keeping the Onguloch in line to be half-dead from exhaustion at the exact moment when we need to be functioning at our best."

"You didn't hear it from me, but it seems that Zojhin got a little sloppy with that operation outside the Nezhuan garrison, and the stench of dead whores has got all kinds of vermin poking their noses into things. Krosatir Sethim's apparently starting to get a little bit nervous about our plans getting discovered. So much so that he's willing to risk Banorg's handlers to make sure this ambush goes off without a hitch."

Rizawa turned towards Luo, his shocked expression a perfect mirror of her own as all the pieces fell into place. An Onguloch, the Dark God's most fearsome weapon save his firstborn, was here in the Pan Rin. The implications pounded down like a landslide: a cascade of gut-wrenching epiphanies that was nearly enough to knock her off her feet. While Saklugz' disregard for the lives of his human subjects was amply attested, he was never so frivolous with his fire born. He couldn't be. He might have been able to secure the backwaters of his empire with nothing more than human lives, but his victories against the great empires of Nezhzu, Kusadha, Naviras, and the like had been carried to him on the backs of his Onguloch. If one of them was accompanying the fleet she saw anchored at the water lock, that meant just one thing: the war between Nezhzu and the Dark God was not some distant eventuality, nor even an impending calamity. It was right here.

"On the subject of vermin poking their noses where they don't belong..." the first priest continued. "I don't recall anyone mentioning that we'd have company this evening."

Before Rizawa had even processed what was happening, Luo was on his feet, sprinting into the chamber with a fearsome cry. For an instant, she thought that he'd gone mad at the discovery of Nezhzu's mortal peril, but as she watched him dive down on the ground between the two Ka'in, pivoting back to his feet with his sword drawn, she realized what he was up to.

As a wall of Zuthruhk wards materialized between each of Luo's sword-strokes and their targets, Rizawa crept up behind the Ka'ina, who'd been forced to put their backs to the door after Luo got around them. She brought her dagger clean across the first priest's neck, but in so doing she alerted the second to her presence. Dozens of chains shot loose from the wall, whipping into her flesh as she struggled against their inexorable pull. Yet as she gripped the thick metal bonds within her fist, she found that she could snap them in two with just the force of her hands. She began feverishly ripping at her restraints, but each time she tore loose one set of manacles another latched itself around her, burning her flesh and constricting her motion until she felt her consciousness slip away.

The sound of knives hissing against a sharpening stone beckoned Rizawa back to the world of the living. She instinctively stretched out her arms and felt the resistance of chains pinning her against the wall. She cracked her eyes just open enough for the wall of emaciated corpses at the other end of the chamber to impress itself onto her memory, studying the Nezlugz writing that covered the chamber.

"Don't even bother trying." came a voice to her right, which she recognized as belonging to the Ka'in whose throat she didn't slit. "Hell of a show you put on back there. I wasn't expecting you to be wearing clothes that were blessed by that wretched Quansai Stone, but I made sure to take care of them."

Rizawa opened her eyes in earnest, confirming that the Ka'in had removed both the cloak and the shoes that Vieng had given her, along with all of the weapons she'd concealed on her person.

"He was a friend of mine, you know..." the Ka'in continued. "Kashtu and I studied together in Dissak. We were both sent into this godforsaken jungle on the same Chakaltun. I don't know what it is you did to get high command so pissed off. I suspect it has something to do with that torn seal I took from your pocket, but to be honest I don't really care. Krosatir Sethim made it clear that you were to be turned over to the Korvadun alive and intact, but that was all he said. Now I won't even pretend to be as good at that kind of work as those boys, but you seem to be a hardy little thing if that fight back there was any indication. I doubt the Krosatir will mind too much if I get things started while we wait for his agents to come collect you."

Rizawa felt a rush of fear, and she did nothing to fight against it. She let it pulse wild and untamed through her body, guiding her muscles into the exact kind of desperate convulsions that a man like him would expect from his prey, carefully measuring out the distance between her hands and the top of her head. At last, on the tenth or the fifteenth lunge, she felt her finger run across solid metal.

Guanh's words came flooding back: how the Quansai Stone's powers made it's magic invisible to Zuthruhk users. Obviously, there were certain limits to the effect. It was not powerful enough to make a man who clearly witnessed her using an enchanted cloak to break his bonds suddenly forget that she was wearing clothing. But something small and tiny, like, say, a hair pin carefully tucked against her scalp...

"You can strain all you like, but it won't help. Just look at all your friends on the other wall."

"You seem to have a taste for the Pan Chui." Rizawa said as she felt her thumb and index finger clasp around the pinhead. "Does torturing the people of the forest do something for you that whores and passing sailors just can't?"

"I'm glad to see that my assessment of your hardiness was accurate. To tell you the truth, right up until the moment that you tore out Kashtu's throat, I hadn't really considered this to be anything but brutal, necessary work. It's true that some of my colleagues, like your friend Zojhin over at the Nezhuan garrison, took great delight in what we'd been sent here to do, but to me it was always just a job. Who knows though, maybe our time together will awaken something new inside me. With the influx of new captives from our attack on the Pan Chui, I'll have plenty of time to--"

Rizawa contracted her legs and stomach, allowing the force of the chain's retraction to tug the hairpin free. As it jerked loose, the thin piece of metal sliced through the chains in an explosion of steam and shrapnel. She caught herself just as she plunged to the floor, driving the pin deep into the shoulder of her captor.

"You're not the only one who can be moved to great evil by grief and necessity." she said, staring deep into his fear-swollen eyes. "If you tell me everything you know about the attack on the Pan Chui, then I'll leave you just wounded enough for the Korvadun to believe you when you say that you were ambushed by a large detachment from the 22nd."

"It's a joint operation." the Ka'in gasped. "At the same time that the 45th were luring the 22nd into an ambush, a division drawn from the 6000 archers and marines onboard the Chadurb fleet were to launch a combined strike against all of the Pan Chui tribes around the canal. They intend to annihilate them outright, alongside any Nezhuan resistance, and then immediately depart for the Gaujong River."

"So the Thozogh is fully operational, then?" Rizawa asked.

"It has been for months. They were just waiting for the fleet to arrive before they opened the last of the water locks."

Rizawa brought her heel down on the mans neck, pressing until she felt his trachea collapse beneath her bare ankle. It wasn't that she didn't believe that he would have done his best to convince the Korvadun that there had been a coordinated attack against them, but as the man himself had admitted, those boys were good at their jobs, and they had plenty of ways of learning the truth.

Realizing that she had forgotten about Luo, she frantically searched the chamber until she found him strapped to one of the altars not far from where she'd been tied. She grabbed the torn seal from the Ka'in's body and rushed over, shattering the bonds and breathing a sigh of relief the moment she felt the blood pulsing through his wrists.

"Rizawa... what happened."

"The Korvadun are on their way. We have to get out of here, fast. Take this: it's Heir Empress Zhe's personal seal. Show it to Major Wan alongside Lagovrun crystal and that Ka'in's signet ring and you should have no trouble persuading them about the coming ambush."

"What about you?" Luo asked.

"It's not just the 22nd that they're going after. Seems they're of a mind to wipe out all of their enemies in a single stroke, including the Pan Chui.

"Rizawa." Luo said as he looked over Zhe's seal with disbelief. "You're a spy for the Heir Empress, and the Nezhuan Empire is at war."

"Guanh and Vieng are her allies, too. It only takes one person to deliver a message. Go now before the enemy arrives!"

Luo did as he was told, stopping at the doorway for one more pleading look. But whatever he saw in her eyes compelled his feet on into the darkness.

She'd been rushing blind through the jungle for nearly a third of a watch before the Phujeng caught up with her. The note attached to its neck was terse, in Vieng's handwriting:

"They came in the dead of night, in numbers far beyond our bleakest estimates. They came for all of the Pan Chui tribes. Guan and most of the Diengu have been captured. The survivors now gather for war."

Given how easy it would be for the Phujeng bird to get caught, what with the Pan Rin being lousy with Ukni soldiers, Vieng had chosen her words carefully. Yet it did not take a strategic mastermind to suss out her meaning. If Guan and the other tribesmen were captured rather than killed, it meant that the Ukni aimed to sell them into slavery. However, while the Dark God loved to use the economic mobility that came with slave ownership as a free incentive to get soldiers to sign on, the very fact that this practice had been Ukni operating procedure for centuries meant that he'd had all the time in the world to iron out the kinks in his system. And of all the many ways that slave-taking could go wrong for the captor, there was perhaps no better example than detaining thousands of hostile indigenous warriors in a single, central location when there were still hundreds more who were ready to fight. Thus the most likely outcome was that, while Saklugz had ordered the Pan Chui's annihilation, Krosatir Sethim had not been able to pass up the opportunity to enhance his personal coffers and chose to sell them into slavery instead. Given the penalties for disobedience in the Ukni, this also implied that Sethim would be rather eager to get rid of his chattel as quickly as possible, hence the need for an immediate counter-strike.

As for the location where the survivors would be gathering, there was no need for details. It was the one place that all the Ukni strike teams in existence would never be able to find. The heart of the Pan Chui's Namapha magic.

Rizawa could feel the tension as she approached the Quansai Stone. While it seemed ludicrous to imagine that any rock, even an enchanted one, could possess the power of cognition, she could not help but feel the presence of volition in the ancient stone. The supplicating posture of the five man long hands seemed to match with the artist's depictions that she'd seen back in Nezhu, but the muscles seemed tighter somehow, as if the bounty and nourishment promised by that gesture were some distant hope that the stone itself now clung to as a bastion against the hard realities to come.

From the dozens of Pan Chui tribes residing close to the canal, but thirty souls remained. They looked little better than the stone that they encircled. It wouldn't be quite right to say that their eyes were cold or dead, but whatever fires had formerly animated them had been snuffed down to a smoldering defiance of their fate: an insatiable rage that even the subjugation of their people could not extinguish.

It was hard to believe that the woman who came to meet her was the same one that she'd known all these years. The weight of whatever authority had been bestowed upon her had warped her features to the point that Rizawa saw no sign of the loss of her brother in Vieng's face. The red coloration around the knuckles fiercely gripped around the hilt of her pike was the only testament to the fact that she was about to embark upon a suicide charge.

Vieng moved to place her hands upon Rizawa's shoulder in the traditional Diengu gesture used by soldiers departing for war, but Rizawa blocked her arm, gripping her hand within her

own and drawing their hearts together in the traditional greeting between comrades in arms.

"This is not your fight, Rizawa. Your loyalty is to Heir Empress Zhe, and it does her no good to have her best asset throw her life away." Vieng said.

"People love saying that to me." she answered. "But the Heir Empress that I serve would not abandon her allies in the hour of their greatest need. I have done everything in my power to help the 22nd Scouting Company, who appear to be the only unit in the entire Western Pan Rin Garrison to have avoided the corruption that will soon bring the entire fortress toppling to the ground. Besides, the Ukni have placed a rather sizable bounty on my head. Even if I were to flee, both the garrison and the harbors of Shungnath will be crawling with Korvadun agents. More to the point, though, I come here today with new information. I don't know if it'll be enough for us to win this thing, but it might be enough to show our enemy the true cost of going to war with the Pan Chui."

Rizawa told Vieng of what she saw in that underground passage. How the Zuthruhk nodes that she and Guanh had discovered were in fact linked together by way of an underground tunnel system that was used to cart slaves and sacrifices from the site of the Thozogh Canal. Given that, on their earlier trips, the three of them had accessed the canal by way of the main entrance, the Ukni would almost certainly expect whatever last vestiges of resistance the Pan Chui could muster to attack along the same route. However, her decision to kill that Ka'in meant that, even if the Korvadun had stumbled upon the body within moments of her departure, all of the evidence still pointed to the 22nd as the culprits. If luck was on their side, they might be able to use those tunnels to travel directly to their captive tribesmen and then retreat right back out the way they came before the Ukni could mobilize whatever defenders they stationed around the main gates.

When she was finished, Vieng turned to her with a look that was normally reserved for hopeless yet beloved relatives when they announce yet another sure-fire scheme to strike it rich: the warmth in her eyes reflected the love and the guilt that drove Rizawa to this place, while her pursed lips betrayed what she truly thought about even the possibility that these crushing odds could be overcome.

"The Pan Rin is dying, Rizawa." she said. "In the fields and valleys of your homeland, you may have convinced yourself that your people stand apart from their surroundings. That the thing you name Nezhu somehow exists independent of the endless fields that carry fresh grain to your sprawling capitals, but the Pan Chui suffer from no such delusions. We are as much a part of this forest as the birds and the foliage. The culture and values of our people came up from the same soil that nourishes the vast canopies overhead. I know that you speak with sincerity when you tell us of the Heir Empress' offer to resettle our people within the Fezhong Valley, but the Diengu have always been children of the Pan Rin, and like an infant whose mother dies to sickness, it is our fate to wither alongside the forest that birthed us. Even if we somehow secure a miracle, with each passing year more and more of our homeland will fall to the axes of Ukni and Nezhu alike until there is nothing left for them to hew. We march to our death, Rizawa, but if it is your wish to journey with us into the maw of the beast, then we would be honored to have you at our side."

"I do." Rizawa answered.

"Then it is time for the ceremony."

As if on cue, the sound of drums began to echo out from the forest. Even as she spun around in search of those responsible for that driving rhythm, Rizawa knew that she would not find them. That the sounds she was hearing came from the jungle itself: the heartbeat of the Pan Rin Rainforest.

The surviving Pan Chui began dancing wildly, spinning about in broad circles that somehow never crossed each other, as if their individual wills had been subsumed within some singular mind. She found herself being drawn into the frenzy, her crazed gyrations feeling as right and as natural as drinking water after a hard day in the fields. She barely even noticed Vieng leaping up into the petrous grip of the Quansai Stone until a large stalagmite shot up from the statue's palm, impaling her through the chest as she writhed in agony or ecstasy; retracting a moment later and leaving only a blackened mark in the place where it had smote her flesh.

One by one, the other survivors ascended the Quansai Stone, each receiving an identical mark where the rock cut through their flesh. When the last had finished, Rizawa felt a compulsion to follow, an urging which she blindly obeyed. The stake burned terrible and exultant as it pierced her chest, and the last vestiges of her consciousness were swept into the tide.

The next thing Rizawa knew she was standing in the clearing, her clothes bearing the same decayed camouflage that adorned the surviving Pan Chui, her mind honed upon the task at hand. They departed in silence, sprinting towards the Zuthruhk node, leaving not so much as the sound of a single, trampled leaf in their wake.

The Korvadun were waiting as they made their descent into the antechamber. Their voices rose up as one, first from shock and then mortal terror, before all sound was extinguished on the tips of their arrowheads. Their grim company swept over the dead like a tidal wave, drawing up two survivors and dragging them into the room where the Ka'in had been conducting his grisly work on their fellow Pan Chui. A few minutes later, a warrior from the Thiphien tribe strode back into the antechamber, confident that he could lead them straight to the captives.

They ran through a lightless maze of narrow corridors. They were as intangible as shadows on a moonless night, as real as a knife peeling back strips of flesh and sinew. At first, their advance was met by little more than armed overseers and their shackled charges carting rock through the phantasmal torchlight. Those in chains were freed to fight or flee as they saw fit. The others were left strewn in heaps as flickering beacons of victory and retribution drew the Pan Chui deeper and deeper into the heart of perdition.

The cramped passages grew into monumental caves as they carved their course through the sunless labyrinth, passing from tight corridors designed to carry the Ka'ina to the site of their foul rituals into the arterial halls used to haul large quantities of stone up to the dig site in secret. Whatever their intended purpose, the Ukni were quick to adapt to the open battlefield, stuffing doorways full of armored infantrymen and lining the walkways with hundreds of archers.

As they moved closer and closer to their target, the Ukni began growing desperate. The fights at the gates deteriorated into mutually destructive slugging matches where unrestrained force, rather than tactics or coordination, determined the victor. But despite their inferior numbers, the Pan Chui continued their advance. Rizawa put her Nobiwaru

training to good use dancing in and out of the range of their Tuthranus shortwords, slashing and thrusting to the irresistible rhythm of the forest. Meanwhile, Vieng and the other Namapha stood behind the warriors, drawing upon the thousands and thousands of bats who'd taken up residence in the tunnel complex to loose a deafening storm upon their adversaries. The archers and mages along the scaffolding were stripped of their flesh, leaving only a gallery of bone and sodden cloth to witness the Pan Chui's advance.

They were getting closer. The dust clouds kicked loose by their footfalls and the thick layers of guano along the ground turned into a maelstrom of toppled carts and abandoned tools that suggested that whoever had been occupying these chambers had been forced to hastily abandon them. Suddenly Vieng was shouting, pointing towards a towering double door whose arch was shaped in the likeness of a lion-headed serpent.

"I can sense them, above us." Vieng said as the twenty odd survivors gathered around her. "Our enemies, however, are cunning. While the abandoned refuse around us proves that our attack through the tunnels caught them by surprise, it is also ample evidence that they've made use of the time it took for us to get here. The mere fact that they were able to evacuate their laborers also indicates that they've had plenty of time to redeploy their forces against us. When we ascend that stairway, we will be stepping directly into the enemy's trap. We have but one advantage in our favor, and that is our Namapha magic. I can feel it pulsing through the hearts of our captive brethren as they draw out the might of the forest in preparation for our attack."

They ascended the stairs as a funeral procession. As if, knowing that the Ukni would leave their carcasses where they fell, the Pan Chui had elected to use these final moments of calm to mourn not just their own impending demise, but the annihilation of an entire way of life. Rizawa somehow felt this truth pulsing through the hearts of each of the Pan Chui: that, whatever happened once the fighting began, for the Diengu and the Thiphien and all of the other tribes unlucky enough to be situated between the hammer and the anvil of these two great powers, this would be their final battle.

You could not have asked for a better killing zone than what had been prepared from them as they crossed that final threshold. Colossal slabs of granite reached dozens of men's length into the air, ensconcing them from all sides. At the other end of the canal bed, hundreds of Nashragha stood in formation, fully arrayed for war. The harsh light of the thousand Zuthruhk wards lining the curtain wall glinted off their shields as they began their slow, unrelenting march forward. Behind them, bound and gagged, were countless captives from the Ukni raid. Their chains had already been fastened to a single length of rope, as if the Krosatir sought to haul them onto his cargo ships the moment that the fighting reached its end.

Then, the Nashragha began to part, and a black-robed figure strode out from their ranks. Their face was concealed beneath a thick cloak, but rather than draping lifelessly over their flesh, it seemed to hover around them like some kind of specter. Even at that distance, Rizawa could tell that their gaze was not fixed upon the leaders of the Pan Chui as they strode out to meet her.

The cloaked figure came to a stop in front of Vieng, pulling back their hood to reveal a woman with a tangled nest of auburn hair and eyes like a caged predator. She bore the barely suppressed grin of an impish schoolboy, while her gaze snapped between Rizawa and the Pan Chui's surviving commanders.

"The Dark God is not of a mind to send out envoys after a battle's outcome has already been decided in his favor." Vieng said. "Given your superior numbers, why bother to treat with us at all?"

At this the woman, who bore the marks of a Nektan priestess, burst into laughter.

"What you mistake for a war is in fact nothing more than a drawn out manhunt. If the Dark God had wished to annihilate the Pan Chui, he could have done so decades ago. No. The reason that our soldiers have put your villages to the torch is because you have been harboring a dangerous fugitive: a spy to the Heir Empress herself." the Nektan said, removing a torn seal from her robes.

The light in Rizawa's heart went out. She didn't know which of the two seals the priestess had acquired, the one she gave to Luo or Meixi, but it hardly mattered. Either the woman she loved was dead or their best chance of preventing this invasion lay in ruins. After everything she'd endured, she lacked the willpower to confront either possibility.

The Nektana reached into the other sleeve, pulling out a second document and handing it to Vieng.

"This is from Krosatir Sethim's own hand. It is a renegotiation of the terms of our peace treaty. It promises the safe return of any Pan Chui tribesman captured in the process of bringing this fugitive to justice, as well as affirming the freedom and security that we have always held to in dealing with your confederation. All you need do in exchange is turn over Rizawa to us and provide a full account of what she witnessed on her trips to the canal with you. I suggest you take the Krosatir up on his offer. The presence of such a dangerous spy has had quite the effect on our high command, but I don't expect his compassion to last forever."

Now it was Vieng's turn to laugh.

"So that's what this is about. You needed to find out just how much Rizawa was able to discover before she had a chance to die in the fighting and deny your Korvadun their sport. Yes, I suspect that the Krosatir's compassion will not last much longer. Just long enough for you to wring whatever last drops of intelligence you haven't yet been able to extract from our tribesmen. You can stand here all night trying to convince me that Saklugz could have destroyed the Pan Chui whenever he saw fit, but the heaps of Ukni corpses that we've left in our wake tell a very different story. Do you really believe that I'm stupid enough to think that, the moment we've given up our only bargaining chip in this game, your Krosatir will suddenly forget about all the money he could make by selling us into slavery, or that your Nashragha will be too overwhelmed with love and tenderness to take up arms against an adversary that has voluntarily relinquished their own?"

"Yes, yes. They do love their little games, don't they. It's something that we have in common, you know..." the Nektan answered, staring into Rizawa's eyes. "Like that little whore I had back at your garrison. To think that all this trouble came about because one worthless bitch managed to scream loud enough for the guards to finally notice."

"That hardly seems worthless to me." Rizawa said, eyeing the woman up and down. "That must make you Zojhin."

The Nektan gave her a smile.

"Well I suppose that if you're in the business of stuffing the biggest and wealthiest cock you can find into your pock-riddled cunt, then getting fucked by both the Ukni and Nezhuan empires at once is about the best you can ask for."

Rizawa had always prided herself on her ability to maintain composure in the face of the most repugnant hardships, and, by extension, on the fact that she could treat with the horrors of reality in the aloof vocabulary of wit and banter. Yet no barbed quips came to her tongue as she listened to Zojhin speak. There were no clever rejoinders or righteous polemics ready to be thrown out at her adversary, just four simple words:

"Her name was Chilai."

"Is that all you have to say?" Zojhin asked. "I was expecting a bit more from the woman who came so close to sabotaging our invasion."

"The time for talk is over." Rizawa answered.

Rizawa wasn't even sure what she was doing as she strode forward and raised her arm in signal to the Pan Chui. If she had been in possession of her senses, she would have been keenly aware of the arrogance of an outsider, especially an outsider with such a high bounty on her own head, ordering the warriors of the forest into battle. But whatever it was that had guided her since she left the Quansai stone blinded her to this fact, and at her signal the Pan Chui charged. They formed up around their Namapha mages and rushed against the Ukni infantry. The Nashragha pounded loose a screen of dust as they marched forward to meet them, and from behind, a cacophony rose up from the canal locks.

A great host of birds poured out over the parapets. Hundreds of Royal Kingfishers and Crimson-Tufted Cockatiel danced around the pounding wings of War-Banded Eagles. Birds of Renewal fell from the heavens in their thousands, the wall of multicolored plumes shimmering as if someone had gripped a rainbow by both ends and shaken it violently. The Pan Rin's wrath fell upon the Ukni with sharp talons and terrifying shrieks. Dozens of Phujeng Birds, their expressions no longer fixed in docile confusion, rushed the Ukni shield wall, while a flock of Swordbreaker Toucan descended upon the captives, their titular jaws making quick work of the Pan Chui's chains.

Rizawa did not join them. She may have been on the Heir Empress' payroll, and the ceremony at the Quansai Stone had bound her to the Pan Chui, but she was also a criminal investigator for the Western Pan Rin Garrison: charged with tracking down the killer of a desperate and confused young woman. A terrified little girl with family somewhere who was doing the best she could to survive in this vicious jungle. Chilai's death may have been the opening volleys of a war between the two greatest powers in Aios, but that didn't change the fact that she had been murdered on Rizawa's watch, and that her killer now stood before her, assured in her conviction that there would be no consequences for the horrors that she'd loosed upon the world.

Zojhin had fled into the chaos the moment that the birds began their attack, but a drunkard in a snowstorm wouldn't have had any trouble missing the whirling dome of Zuthruhk wards cutting a straight course towards the curtain wall, where dozens of Nektana stood around the cloaked figure of their high priestess, throwing the combined force of their power into fending off the attack. These mages were alone among the Ukni in having any success at beating back the Pan Rin's vengeance, and Rizawa could not allow her to rejoin the ranks of her coven.

She scanned her surroundings, her eyes locking onto a small awl laying beside a toppled wheelbarrow. Zojhin's attention was split between fending off the birds and arrows raining down from above and cutting a course through the sea of hand to hand combat roiling around her. Rizawa crouched low and tossed the awl like a discus, watching it spin through the air and embed itself into the back of Zojhin's leg. The Nektan toppled forward, and before she'd even had the chance to spin onto her back Rizawa was already in motion: drawing out her blade and diving forward with the tip aimed down.

Zojhin rolled around just in time to throw up a crimson sigil against the impact of Rizawa's hunting knife, the string of archaic Ghakat writing rippling and warping before her blade snapped at the hilt. She had fended off Rizawa's attack well enough, but while that instant of warning may have been enough to throw up some defenses out of instinct, she didn't have the chance to react as Rizawa rolled to her side and wedged her body between the Nektan and her scutcheon.

"Chilai!" Rizawa shouted as she brought her fist crashing into her jaw. "Her name was Chilai!"

Zojhin, her face bloodied and swollen, began to laugh hysterically. The Zuthruhk wards began to uncoil themselves from the curved half-domed of her shield, the words wrapping around Rizawa's arms and legs and constricting her.

"She was a maidservant's daughter, born of an illicit affair. She found work as a prostitute after her mother came down with the weeping sickness, and when it finally took her she signed aboard a ship bound for Shungnath with the hope of starting anew."

Zojhin smiled at her words, spitting a wad of blood into her face as she burst into laughter:

"You certainly are a feisty one. I can see why she took such an interest in you."

Rizawa didn't take the bait. Words could not describe how much she hated herself for dragging Meixi into this mess, but there was no longer anything she could do to fix that. The woman who had dragged her into this nightmare, however, was laying right in front of her, and all the confidence in the world would not be enough to save her.

Rizawa's arms and legs were bound to her side, but her body was in an open field, laying on top of the woman she aimed to kill. Unlike her fight with the Ka'in underground, there were no walls that she could be pinned to. Nothing to stop her from hoisting back her chest and hammering her forehead into the Nektan's nose."

"Her name was Chilai, and she was a human being!"

She brought her head down again and again, each new impact blotting her awareness until she nearly missed the sensation of her bonds loosening. She strained to break free of the writing, but as she did so Zojhin saw her chance, and the ancient Nezlugz script dissolved into a glowing mass before taking on the form of a serpent nearly as thick as her arm.

The snake's venomous fangs glowed from the bursts of mage light while its black eyes reflected back nothing but untamed malevolence. As Rizawa pulled her hands loose and wrapped them around Zojhin's neck, the serpent snapped upright, burying its fangs deep into her forearm.

"The woman who you killed was named Chilai, and I'm going to send you to the house of death with that word echoing through your ears."

The Zuthruhk snake seemed to grow with Zojhin's blind desperation, but Rizawa kept her thumb clamped against her trachea. Her arms hurt beyond anything she had ever known. She could see spiderwebs of necrotic skin spreading from her arteries, but she would not relent.

Then, the thrashing stopped, and the serpent dissolved into the ether. As the light faded from the Nektan's eyes, Rizawa looked down at her arm. Exempting a handful of cuts and bruises, it looked exactly as it had this morning.

Zojhin had made a foolish choice. There were indeed many Nektana whose command of illusion magic was such that they could blur the line between symbol and reality, but she was not one of them. She was a serial killer whose weapon of choice happened to be Zuthruhk magic, and she was no more capable of penetrating the depths of the Dark God's secret arts than she was of understanding mercy or compassion. Rizawa couldn't help but find it fitting, for an illusion mage to die pretending to be something that she wasn't. In the end, she was just as scared and confused as the countless victims she'd left in her wake. Rizawa left the body where it lay and rose to her feet.

All around her, the battle had descended into chaos. The ordered ranks of Nashragha infantry had broken apart into a free-form orgy of clashing blades, completely encircled by a wall of poorly armed yet ferociously determined Pan Chui warriors.

None of it made any sense. The Ukni soldiers had been drawn from the men serving as marines on the Nezhuan invasion fleet. While the Dark God's Chakaltun galleys had earned their reputation as powerhouses on the battlefield, maintaining the speed and maneuverability required to engage with Nezhu's lighter Water Stallions meant carefully managing the number of marines on any given ship. An Ukni field army might have been able to shrug off the loss of a few hundred heavy infantry, but the same could not be said for the marines manning the decks of their ships. Given that the primary function of those infantry units was to keep the surviving Pan Chui from getting to the prisoners, Krosatir Sethim should have sounded the retreat the moment that he realized Vieng and the other Namapha were relying on the birds of the Pan Rin to free their comrades. Then he would have had all the time in the world to seal off the exits and let his Nektana and the hundreds of archers along the curtain wall finish them off. But the impassive silhouette at the top of the highest water lock, whose posture of cold command marked his station far better than any herald or insignia ever could, seemed content enough to let his marines get encircled by a disorganized mob. It was only as her eyes began to take in the form of the large stone slab behind the Krosatir, and the first glimmers recognition cast their light upon the dim memories of her childhood education, that the horror revealed itself in earnest.

Rizawa turned around, sprinting towards where Vieng and the other Namapha had gathered.

"Run!" she screamed. "We have to get out of here, now! The Onguloch has awoken!"

Vieng's neck snapped up at her words, and an instant later they were being echoed out to the other Pan Chui. But it was too late. Dozens of Nektana stepped out from the darkness, forming a ring around the sarcophagus as they began chanting in unison. All along the curtain wall, black flowers with the crimson filigree of venomous insects began blossoming

to life, while a new figure strode out into the light, brandishing one of the Havrech staves used to control the Onguloch over his head as he strode towards the graven vault.

The Pan Chui began rushing towards the exit, only to find them all barricaded by more teams of Ukni marines. A deep, grinding sound reverberated across the canal bed. Rizawa looked up in time to see the doors of the sarcophagus burst open, revealing the form of a towering, repugnant figure as it strode out onto the parapets.

It had the pink skin of a newborn infant, but blotched and hardened into a sickly carapace that heaved in and out as its massive, tooth-ringed maw drew in tremendous breaths of air. The Onguloch's form swelled and dipped to the rhythm of these colossal inhalations, so that its entire body grew from roughly twice the height of a man to nearly four. A fierce wind came crashing down from the battlements with each exhalation, the acrid air whipping her cloak up as it kicked the screen of dust into a raging whirlwind.

The storm of birds and insects called forth from the forest were swept back like dandelion seeds. Some plunged to the earth frozen and immobile while others were hurled clear over the water locks. Then, just as the Onguloch's power reached its crescendo, the black roses burst open, releasing clouds of spores that fell upon the canal bed like some febrile snowstorm.

Warriors, Pan Chui and Ukni alike, began to stumble and fall. Rizawa suddenly understood the Krosatir's plan in all its brilliantly repugnant detail: using the surprise raid on the Pan Chui to draw her out of hiding, evacuating the tunnel system rather than trying to defend the tight passages so that all of his enemies would be conveniently funneled into a single killing zone, at which point he could use the Onguloch's wind control powers to spread a potent sedative created by his Nektana across the field. Both his marines and his new slaves would be rendered helpless yet, crucially, alive, allowing him to collect his soldiers and sell off his chattel without the risk of losing either. There was nothing to be done. Nothing, that is, but to wait until the Nektana's magic sapped the strength from her body.

Still, she desperately resisted, fighting against the unearthly weight which sought to drag her consciousness towards the false promise of an unending void. She fought, knowing that there was no escape: that the Ukni had her exactly where they wanted her to be. She fought with every broken fragment of strength that remained to her, until her eyes rose up to the smog-veiled battlements, and the last of her will dried up and dissolved upon the Onguloch's caustic winds.

Standing there, at the very crown of the parapet, with the robes of a Nektanulz high priestess billowing around her body as she led that fell coven in their ritual, was Meixi.

ACT V

THE THOZOGH CANAL



Into that oblivion of dreamless sleep came three messengers. The first was sensation: a web of interlocking agonies that extended to the furthest limits of skin and sinew. She could feel thousands of gashes rending their way through her skin, penetrating into muscles that felt more like a hastily assembled rig of stretched and bent springs than any kind of functional support system. Her first forays into physical motion were met by the disgusting sensation of flesh bonded to itself with dried blood and restraints binding every joint in her body.

As she opened her eyes, she was met by the second messenger: sight. She was in an opulent bedchamber. Luxurious Vyadalese pillows sat atop finely crafted Xumari divans. In the center of the room sat a dining table that must have originated somewhere in the inner Khavasak, if the Darkwood body and lion-headed sigils on each of the legs were any indication. On the table itself was an assortment of grapes and oranges brought directly from the Nethgorad, if their freshness was any indication. Glancing around the chamber, the only thing that marked it as anything but the office of a high ranking Ukni official was the large collection of Nezhuan porcelain, the screen prints depicting Birds of Renewal along the walls, and the recent, hastily cleaned bloodstains around the desk in the far corner.

"The blood belongs to General Chunlao." came a familiar voice from somewhere behind her. "He slit his throat when he learned where Yuanqi's true allegiance lay."

It was one of the guards on Meixi's payroll, standing behind an iron-barred door whose build and design were so at odds with the rest of the chamber that it was obvious it had been hauled in from a prison on short notice.

"Afterwards, we went through and pulled out everything sharp or pointy, just in case you came around to the same idea."

But Rizawa hadn't, in the most literal sense. In fact, it took her a few moments to even parse out what the guard was implying. For if pain and visual splendor were the first two messengers of the strange world she'd come to inhabit, then the third was the inescapable, world-consuming stupor that laid siege to her mind with an army of bewildering, disturbed, warped, and misshapen memories:

Their defeat at the Thozogh Canal. The Onguloch and its powerful magic. The fate of the 22nd. Zojhin and the coven of Nektana. And, of course, above them all, was the fact that the woman she loved just so happened to be said coven's high priestess.

As heart-stopping terror gave way to an illimitable desert of numb despair, Rizawa found her thoughts returning to her surroundings. If this was the room where Chunlao took his life, then, besides proving that the Garrison Commander had been nothing more than a blind puppet this entire time, it also meant that Meixi must have used her connections to bring her here. That meant that the chamber must have been part of a second residence that Meixi kept, presumably near the site of the canal.

How could she have been so stupid? It was one thing to end up accidentally sleeping with an enemy agent. Humans were humans, after all, and this was a line of work that was rife with that sort of thing. But to be so blind as to miss the fact that the woman she'd been sharing her bed with for years was also in command of the very coven of Nektana that were responsible for concealing the progress of the Thozogh Canal? Well, it was the kind of fuck-up that gets a no-name criminal investigator a permanent slot in the history books.

But Rizawa *had* done her research. She'd looked into her past with great care, and every detail had confirmed her assessment that Meixi was an intelligent if somewhat unambitious Nezhuan courtesan forced into the boring world of frontier province life. She'd been born to a wealthy family in the city of Chang Yin, she was married to then-Major Chunlao at the age of fourteen, at which point she transitioned from the life of an eligible maiden to that of an officer's wife: bouncing from base to base, mastering the art of building small islands of comfort in seas of untamed wilderness and political turmoil. Rizawa had even reached out to some of her old associates in the Nobiwaru after their first night together, but they hadn't turned up so much as a trace of the unusual.

And if Meixi truly had been a Nektanulz this whole time, then why had she let her live as long as she had? Rizawa had been so careless in revealing the details of her investigation that Meixi had every chance in the world to kill her long before she became the uniting force of the pan-Nezhuan resistance. Yet what had she done after it became obvious that her lover was undoing decades of careful intelligence work? She'd pleaded for Rizawa to be careful and then handed her a Zuthruhk artifact that could detect the presence of enemy mages. Nothing would have been easier than for her to use a team of Korvadun agents to drag her from her chamber in the dead of night, and yet she'd sat there silently as Rizawa revealed everything she'd discovered in her investigation.

The more she thought about it, the stranger the whole situation became. From what she could remember of the attack, Meixi had been in command of the entire coven of Nektana, but even the highest ranking members of Saklugz' priesthood lacked the power to openly defy the Dark God's will. The fact that she had united the Ukni's enemies and forced them to expedite an invasion that had been in the works for decades would have been enough to place her among the most wanted fugitives in all of Aios. A spy with a direct connection to the Heir Empress who both unified the Pan Chui against them and gave vital intelligence to

the 22nd about their planned ambush. None of it made a damned bit of sense no matter how long she spent trying to put the pieces together.

Rizawa sat there in silence until the sound of footsteps, agonizingly familiar even with the forceful, hurried character that they'd taken on, let her know that the one person who could give her answers was rapidly approaching.

"Did anyone see you bring her here?" Meixi barked to the guards.

"We followed your instructions perfectly. The Korvadun agents accepted the package at face value, and we were able to take advantage of the disorder at the canal bed to bring her here in secret."

"Good. Just remember that I won't be the only one up there on the Tekik if any of this gets discovered."

Rizawa heard the latch snap open as Meixi strode into the chamber. The night-black robes with their red filigree of Ghakat writing around the hem could not have been more of a contrast from her courtly regalia, but there was no denying that she was looking at the same face that had scrunched up in half-feigned terror the first time Rizawa had brought her into Shungnath. It really was her.

"You know, I always said that you looked terrible in black. It bleeds into the color of your hair while concealing the delicate beauty of the browns of your iris."

Meixi looked down at her, her eyes sodden with tears even as her posture spoke of a confidence that Rizawa had never seen before.

"You were the only one who ever complimented my eyes, Rizawa. My mother always said that they were dull and uninteresting, and before I met you I would have been inclined to agree. But you of all people should know the value of keeping things concealed..." Meixi said, drawing out the torn seal.

"I just can't seem to get rid of those things." Rizawa replied. "I'd sort of hoped it would be buried under a few thousand tons of water by now."

Meixi looked at her for a moment and then burst into tears, falling to the ground at Rizawa's side.

"You always have to do this, don't you. Witty fucking quips at the ready whenever one of your plans backfire, walking around the goddamned jungle like you're some kind of grizzled veteran. For fucks sake, you just found out that the woman you love is a Nektanulz working in the service of your most hated enemy. I mean what would it fucking take for you to drop this ridiculous act and just talk to me like a normal fucking person for five minutes?"

"Well what the hell do you think I'd say if I did? That I felt my heart tear loose from my chest the moment I saw you up on the parapets? That I don't have a fucking clue about what I'm doing, or whether any of the decisions I've made have had the slightest bit of difference in this little struggle we find ourselves in. Or maybe you'd like me to talk about the one thing I do feel certain about: the fact that leaving my to die on the canal bed would have been a far more merciful end than dragging me back up here."

"Dont say that!" Meixi screamed.

"Or what? Do you really think you've done me any favors by doing this? Was it really that fucking important that you had the chance to gloat about your secret double life?"

"Well if you'd just been honest with me for one fucking minute, none of this would have happened. I had a boat packed and ready for Tandariz that was due to depart from Shungnath at first light. But you had to go running off with your old friends from the 22nd, throwing all of my plans into ruin."

"So I take it Luo was able to warn the rest of the scouts in time? I'd say that's all the more reason to doubt whether the Korvadun would let the most wanted spy in Aios be ferried out of harm's way, don't you think?"

"The Korvadun believe that Rizawa died fighting with the Pan Chui during the Battle of the Thozogh Canal." Meixi answered.

"How the hell did you pull that off?" Rizawa asked.

"Well, you may be surprised to hear it, but with the sole exception of my dealings with a certain criminal investigator, I'm actually quite good at cleaning up my own messes. While I certainly didn't predict the lengths to which you'd go to disrupt our little operation, I've known that my plans would have to take you into account since that night on the Gaujong River all those years ago. The night I fell in love with you."

"I remember that evening well. I couldn't believe that someone could live in this jungle for as long as you had without ever stepping foot outside the base." Rizawa said.

"You took me in your arms and pointed out all the animals, telling me how the Pan Chui would use each of them for different purposes, and I knew that I needed to figure out a way to keep you out of this. Even then I knew that you weren't exactly of a mind to leave well enough alone, so the next morning, I set some of my most loyal agents out to find somebody who was a close enough match to your physical appearance that I could pass them off as the real thing. Yesterday, after you promised to meet up with me in the morning, I put out orders to have that tavern maid killed and dressed in your investigator's uniform. The plan was to leave your body with the remains of the 22nd, but with your little insurrection I obviously had to make some changes."

"I take it that your operation to deal with the 22nd didn't go as planned?"

Meixi burst into tears.

"Do you really think that after all this time I don't know when you're baiting me for information?"

"You're surprised that I'd like to know about the fate of the operation I risked my life for? That my duties as a Nezhuan spy give me a bit of a vested interest in the outcome of their fight?" Rizawa asked.

"Do you know what, fine? Do you want to hear about how you fucked up years of careful planning in a single afternoon? How, owing to your little intervention with Sergeant Luo, the 22nd were tipped off to our ambush, and a sizable majority of their ranks, including your

little war buddy, were able to flee into the jungle to set up a base of resistance? Do you want me to confess that you're better at this kind of espionage than I was or ever will be?"

"I want to know whether my sacrifice meant something." Rizawa answered.

Meixi paused, her glistening eyes focusing in on her as the muscles in her face relaxed for the first time since she'd entered the chamber.

"Of course it did, sweetie. Luo escaped in the fighting, and he's probably halfway to Tyung by now, while the rest of the 22nd are no doubt busy attacking our logistical train. Not that there are enough of them to stop us, but the sooner the Heir Empress gets word of the approaching fleet, the better her chances of halting it before it reaches any of the major canal systems of the Fezhong Valley. More than anyone else in this forsaken jungle, that victory is yours, Rizawa."

She wasn't sure whether it was the relief in learning of Luo's escape or the way the morning sunlight flickered across the thick, hastily made-over riverbeds running down her face, but Rizawa suddenly found herself pitying Meixi. Maybe it was just because this was the first time in all their years together that she finally saw the woman for what she was: neither the refined yet naive courtesan who'd won her heart nor the cold-blooded Nektanulz that she hoped her Ukni associates would see her as, but a flawed and desperate human being struggling to appease a vast and terrifying horde of conflicting responsibilities and duties.

"So, how'd you end up in this mess, anyway?" Rizawa asked, gesturing towards the table, where a bag of Shanxin Red Leaf marked General Chunlao's last moments of earthly pleasure.

Meixi grabbed the pipe and packed it, sitting down in Rizawa's lap and loosening the straps that held her in place as she lit the tobacco. Then she wrapped her arms around her shoulders and looked into her eyes as if the past three days had been nothing more than a nasty dream.

"My earliest inkling that things were different for me came from the cloaked figures who used to visit my father's estate in the evenings, after I was in bed. Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night and listen to my father speaking with them until the early hours of the morning. On one of those nights, I finally worked up the courage to sneak out of my room. I found my father talking to a group of frightening looking men with pale faces and keen, remorseless eyes. They talked about enemies and necessary action, and none of it made any sense to me.

Even now, I'm still not totally sure just what it was that they were discussing, but I was terrified of the whole experience, and the next day I told my friends about what I saw. Later that same afternoon, my father walked into my bedroom with a switch and beat me until my skin turned purple and burst. Afterwards, I learned that he'd almost been discovered when my friends told their parents about his strange midnight visitors. Apparently, the only way he could salvage things was pretend that the Korvadun agents were gentleman callers, and that reputation haunted him until the day he died."

"You never did have a very good relationship with your father, did you?"

"The first time he showed me the slightest concern was on the eve of my marriage to Chunlao. I'd already been studying Zuthruhk magic for years, but the most I'd ever gotten

from him was a terse nod or a vaguely high pitched grunt if I'd done something really impressive. That night, though, he brought me into his office, sat me down in the same chair he'd use during his meetings, and asked me if I'd like to learn the true history of the Shaichuo House."

"I know we never talked much about your family's history, but I'm assuming that he was referring to the incident with Huenzu?"

"How did you know?" Meixi asked.

"Well besides the fact that Emperor Sho's disastrous campaign into the Khavasak was the source of your family's fall from grace, most Nezhuan historians have come to question the official record of events. There might be a few diehard loyalists to the imperial house who still believe that Emperor Sho was led into that disaster by the horrific advice of his counselors, but the vast majority have long since concluded that the largest share of the blame rests on the emperor himself, with everything that followed being little more than flimsy pretext to save face."

"Well if that same majority had ever had the courage to express those views outside the safety of their precious academies, then maybe this whole mess could have been avoided. According to my father, not only was Huenzu not responsible for the Divine Army's defeat in the Dachai, but he was one of the few voices on the emperor's command staff with the courage to openly express dissent about their chances of successfully invading the Khavasak. As a reward for his loyalty and candor, Huenzu was ostracized from his fellow officers, and when everything fell apart and the emperor needed a scapegoat, it was him who found himself with the unenviable choice of taking responsibility for the entire disaster and retiring to his family estate or else facing trial for treason. That evening, my father produced a trove of documents validating every aspect of Huenzu's story. There were letters he wrote to other generals clearly outlining his issues with the invasion, logs of journeys made on the emperor's behalf that proved he couldn't have been at the capital during the war's planning stages, and even a missive from a friendly general telling him that his best option was just to accept his exile, regardless of the facts of the case. My father told me that those documents had been handed down from generation to generation, and that Huenzu had kept them specifically so that his descendants would know that he had never betrayed or misled the emperor."

"Thereby priming them as perfect candidates for enrollment as Korvadun assets." Rizawa said.

"Well I doubt that Huenza was thinking along those lines, but that's certainly the path things took. With the help of Ukni financial backing, my great grandfather was able to begin the arduous process of rebuilding our family's reputation. My grandfather was the first man in my family to enroll in the Divine Army after everything that happened, while my father was the first to gain any traction climbing the ranks of the officer corps, rising to become a general with the help of his connections in the Korvadun."

"And I take it your marriage to Chunlao was instrumental to this return to power?" Rizawa asked.

"It was the linchpin of a generation-spanning struggle to restore the honor of the Shaichuo house. That night, my father told me everything. How, unbeknownst to my betrothed, his appointment to the Western Pan Rin Garrison had already been decided. That, were I to

succeed in making myself into a fifth columnist: hiding behind the guise of a simple noblewoman while I used my command of the Zuthruhk to conceal the progress of the Thozogh Canal from both my husband and the rest of the garrison, then my brother Jaiwe, who was set to be deployed to the Dua Neng Canal on the pretext of a feud between him and Prince Suel, would be able to take command of the forces there and bring the Ukni fleet into Nezhu's heartland without a drop of blood being spilled. Suel, who of course was in league with Jaiwe from the beginning, would then be able to take his place on the throne, supplanting the Heir Empress and making my brother his chief advisor, thereby restoring the honor of my family name."

"What made you agree to his plan?" Rizawa asked.

"I wish I could even say. I guess it was the way he looked at me when we were in his office. It was the same way he always looked at my brother. As if I was capable of doing something more than being a pretty little piece of decoration. He said that I'd have to power to right all of the wrongs that had been done to us. Funny how that stuff works. I thought I'd be able to restore the entire Shaichuo House to power, but I couldn't even stop a single garrison investigator."

"You could have. Easily." Rizawa replied. "You had all the chances you could have asked for to get rid of me, but you didn't..."

"Because I love you! I always have. Before I met you, my world was a smoke-veiled pantomime. Immersed as I was in that miasma of hatred and despair, all I could see of the people around me were the skeletal frames of will, desire, and mechanistic struggle that defined my old man's world. It was that gala, when you caught me staring at you from the officer's table, that I first realized things could be different. We went out into the courtyard and listened to the birds, and I told you that I'd only ever seen the ones that came into my courtyard to eat from the feeders. I still remember that look of sadness in your eyes, and the way you smiled at me and then snuck off into the forest."

"I certainly remember how long it took me to actually catch that Bird of Renewal. I'd already met with Guanh and Vieng by that point, but I'd apparently convinced myself that spending a few weeks hanging out with the Pan Chui would be enough to turn me into an expert hunter. God I must have spent half the night up in the canopy looking for nests."

"It was almost morning by the time you finally snuck past the guards and made your way to my bedchamber. I remember how quickly my fear melted away when you pulled out that beautiful blue and silver bird, the way I felt when you told me that each Bird of Renewal had its own unique coloration, and that some were wild shades of green and purple while others were painted in stately whites and browns. I just couldn't believe that such a hostile, miserable place could produce something so beautiful. I didn't realize it then, but that was the first time that anyone had ever really listened to what I wanted instead of just thinking about how my needs could be exploited for their own ends. After that night, I knew that I had to protect you."

"So you gave me your own Lagovrun stone to help me hide from both the Ka'in and the Korvadun agents who were on my trail, then made arrangements with some of your personal guard to ambush me when I went to meet with you in the morning?"

"I could have fixed this!" Meixi shouted. "I could have made this right if you hadn't gone and gotten so damned entangled in everything."

"No, you couldn't." Rizawa answered. "But that's okay. There are some things in this world that just can't be made to fit together. Even if you didn't know that I was working for the Heir Empress, you must have realized that I'd prefer death to a life of idle, amoral luxury in the heartland of my hated enemy. I have no idea what schemes you cooked up in your head to keep me pliant or confused or frightened enough to stay put, but you must know that they wouldn't have worked forever. Sooner or later I would have figured things out, and once I did there'd be nothing you could do to stop me."

"Maybe you're right." Meixi said, the boiling sea of rage and despair that had moved through her veins a moment before cooling into a coagulated sludge of despair and exhaustion.

"Maybe there was nothing I could have done all along."

They sat there for a while, in each others arms, in silence. For there was nothing more that could be said between them. It was as if the they had retreated to a place where facts and realities could not penetrate: a world of simple sensation, of hands moving down shoulders and mournful glances. After a time, Rizawa turned to her and asked:

"So what happens now?"

"The escape of the 22nd has forced Krosatir Sethim's hand. As we speak, agents from the Korvadun are conducting a purge of anyone in the Western Garrison who still poses a threat. They intend to use friendly assets reveal the canal's progress to the rest of the soldiers, and then execute the loyalists within the Divine Army under the pretense that they were the true saboteurs. However, as you yourself already figured out, Krosatir Sethim is not one to let sound strategic practices get in the way of a quick payday. Thus, he has already begun the process of collecting the wives and children of his enemies and getting them onto the same slaving vessels that will take the Pan Chui to Tandariz. The Ukni have always had a taste for Nezhuan women, so if we dress you up as a minor noble, and you have the good sense to keep your Nobiwaru training a secret, you'll almost certainly find yourself in the harem of some wealthy merchant. If you play the part of the timid, demure concubine well enough, they won't have any reason to suspect anything until they day you make your escape. I wish that I could do more for you, but even my power has it's limits." Meixi replied.

"And what about after? I mean, if I do manage to escape. You must know that, no matter how much I love you, I can't just turn my head and pretend that none of this ever happened."

"Of course I do, darling. I never would have loved someone who could. You've been sticking your nose where it doesn't belong for as long as I've known you, and I see no reason why that would change. I have but one request should our paths ever cross again. Think of it as nothing more than a favor for an old lover."

"What?" Rizawa asked.

"That, when the day you drive your dagger through my heart finally comes, you'll do it face to face. Even if they're filled with nothing but hate, I just can't bear the thought of never seeing those eyes again."

Meixi ran her hands down her shoulder, thrusting her against the wall as she took Rizawa into her embrace, kissing her as if it were the first and final time. For an instant, Rizawa was immersed in the sensation of Meixi's tongue against her own, the gentle tingling running up

and down her back. Then Meixi was standing on her feet, straightening her robes and walking out the door. By the time she was halfway down the hall she was already back in character: a fierce Nektanulz barking orders about timetables and security protocols.

Rizawa strained against her bonds, and, finding that they'd loosened just enough for her to get up onto her feet, she propped herself up and looked out the chamber's only window. She must have been at the crown of one of the bastion towers that lined the canal locks, for she could see miles around in every direction. To say that the Thozogh Canal dominated the view was a bit like saying that getting food was the main preoccupation of an emaciated beggar. The poets were fond of comparing rivers to gigantic serpents winding their way across the earth, but to look upon the Ukni canal was to see something more akin to an artery: a blood vessel running half the length of the continent, pumping out blackened waters and unspeakable suffering from the very heart of perdition. She would soon find herself traversing that artery, bound and chained for one of the wealthy cities at the center of the Dark God's empire.

Without Meixi to distract her, the entire weight of her predicament came crashing down. The uncertainty. The heartbreak. The stinging guilt over whether there was something more she could have done. For the first time since she could remember, Rizawa began to cry. She cried for the friends and comrades she'd lost, and the obliteration of an entire people. She cried for a frightened little girl who'd been shoved into the death-mask of a tyrant by the uncaring hand of fate and for the countless legions of innocent Nezhuanes who would bear the true brunt of what had transpired here. She sat there, sobbing in silence, until there were no more tears left to shed. Then she collected herself, wiped down her cheeks, and set to work figuring out how she was going to dig herself out of this one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Jenkinson is a writer, musician, and audio engineer from central CT. He is the author of the "Under the Burning Tower" fantasy series, a vast literary universe spanning short and novel-length fiction, constructed languages, a detailed bestiary, and a sprawling collection of maps and lore. He received his degree in English Literature from La Salle University in 2019 with a focus on creative writing, producing a novella about his time as a heroin addict on the streets of Hartford as his senior capstone. Besides the "Under the Burning Tower" series, he has also had his poetry, music criticism, and horror stories featured in a number of publications. In addition to writing, he performs guitar, bass, keyboards, and vocals in his metal band Harmozel, and has done both studio and concert recordings for a number of national acts.

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