

# SARKIADES: THE ECHOES OF RESOLUTION



BY PAT JENKINSON

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"Sarkiades: The Echoes of Resolution" is dedicated to my father,  
Joseph Jenkinson (1954-2020).  
May whatever joy or merit it creates be as a beacon to his liberation.

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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, owing to space limitations. 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.

At the moment, I am planning on doing two sets of short 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 I'm still on the fence about whether they are worth the time investment.

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 the information presented in the first 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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# PART 1: THE FALL OF PIRISTRUS



The walls of the inner keep trembled to the rhythm of the Onguloch's advance, and it almost seemed like the streams of falling debris were the palace's own tears. As if the senseless destruction they'd witnessed could move even the stones to weep.

Sarkiades looked over the last of the desperate defenders gathered here in the heart of the imperial palace. The few remaining members of the royal guard now lined the marble staircase that had once carried awed petitioners up to the throne platform, where King Vatrebian and the last of his Minairoi mages stood with gaunt yet determined faces that provoked images of specters forever bound to this world as they relived their final act of defiance until the end of time.

Below, closer to the trembling double doors that would soon burst open to reveal the hateful monstrosity who'd torn through the city walls like a horse through a spiderweb, a motley collection of officers, advisors, functionaries, and Piristran soldiers gathered for a final stand at the very heart of their empire. They may have come from different walks of life, but in that nightmare haze their faces seemed almost interchangeable, each gaze fixed upon the smoke veiled archway that would soon reveal the hateful eyes of their city's final bane. They were the last survivors of this hellish siege, the marks of their stations fading to insignificance against the uniformity of their cold affects and unfocused stares. Each of them understood that there was no coming back from this one. That the story of the mightiest city of the Velian Plains would end in this very chamber.

"Sarkiades, King Vatrebian wishes to speak with you."

He had but an instant to reflect on the absurdity of the request: that the King of Piristrus wished to spend his final moments chatting with an envoy from an inconsequential neighboring city-state, and then the dozens of metal beams bolstering the gates began to

twist and bend, snapping loose as Arikhe heaved its tremendous body into the chamber.

When he saw the Onguloch smashing through Piristrus' fabled city walls, Arikhe's physical shape and locomotion had reminded Sarkiades of a toad. Though he hated himself for thinking it, from the heights of the Adricanum Temelrum the battle for the lower city had reminded him of his childhood, when he used to watch the struggle for dominance in the tide pools along the Aedonae Channel. It had almost felt as though those squirming, screaming dots were not human beings with lives and families being devoured gigantic stone-plated monstrosity, but flies senselessly buzzing in every direction as a nearby frog went about the business of satiating its hunger.

He didn't like admitting it, but there may have been a certain truth to his observation. It was often said that the Dark God lacked the spark of true creativity, and was thus forced to shape his Fire Born from models found in the natural world. However, if Saklugz had used the common toad as inspiration for that hoary abomination, then it was obvious that he had taken a great deal of liberty with the execution. While Arikhe's eyes bulged out from its spheroid carapace in a manner not dissimilar to the frogs he used to catch as a boy, there had been something oddly endearing about the eyes of its smaller kin. The Onguloch's eyes, by contrast, were black as jet, with smoky yellow slats in the place of pupils that conjured images of plague and starvation. He could remember the viscous fluid that coated the bodies of ordinary toads, but he could not recall a single occasion where that strange substance had dissolved the hands of one of his companions. Yet the tarry ichor pouring out from the faults in Arikhe's stone armor seemed to eat through the painstakingly detailed marble tiles as if they were chalk in a rain storm.

There was, however, a single feature that seemed to separate Arikhe from not just frogs, but anything that could be found in the animal kingdom. It was only after Sarkiades had the chance to think about it that he realized the Onguloch's strangely elastic arms, which shot out at impossible speeds to snatch up soldiers five men's length away, had been modeled on the tongue of the common toad, not their limp and nearly useless forelegs. Except that Sarkiades had never seen a toad's tongue tear through a marble column as if it were a mound of ash.

The Piristran Guard fought as well as anyone could expect: rushing towards certain death in neat, geometric formations; standing firm as the Onguloch's ferocious limbs pulverized man and armor into the grotesque forms of poorly made shadow puppets. Despite their bravery, it was obvious that those men of flesh and fluid could do nothing against a creature of living stone.

If there was anyone in this company who had the power to stop Arikhe, it was the Minairoi standing beside King Vatrebian on the throne platform. As the last of the royal guard prepared for a final battle on the stairs, the three mages threw their thoughts into the underlying structure of the room, transforming the well-polished marble into jagged stalagmites that shot up from the ground like geysers, impaling dozens of the Ukni soldiers who came rushing in Arikhe's wake while the beast struggled against its bonds.

But there had been over two dozen Minairoi in King Vatrebian's service that morning, and these last three survivors had found their way to that position more from luck than a superior command of the Navarid magic. While there had been rumors that an Onguloch would accompany the expedition, none of the attempts by the Piristran high command to learn anything about the creature had borne fruit. They did not know that Arikhe had been designed from the ground up for the explicit purpose of bringing down fortified positions until

it burst through the city walls like a drunk stumbling through a paper screen. The generals, who had believed that the gates would be the only point of ingress into the city, had placed all of their mages and Zonos ballistae around a handful of likely choke points. After the city was breached, there had been a tremendous effort to redeploy their mages, but by then there was so much confusion that the enemy's Korvadun assassins had no trouble picking them off one by one.

The surviving Minairoi knew that they could not slay Arikhe. They focused their efforts on raising jagged stone towers covered in a distorted rendition of the narratives of Piristran glory that had lined the chamber a moment before, funneling the beast towards a choke point at the bottom of the stairs. But the Ukni had planned for this as well, and the moment the Minairoi were immersed in their magic dozens of archers came screaming into the hall, laying down a barrage of arrows as the royal guards struggled to throw up a shield wall around the helpless mages.

It was in that moment that Sarkiades realized he could no longer resist the itch that had been slowly building up since he heard news of the Ukni invasion. After King Telemeus had promoted him from the Lystian army, he had been handed a scroll nearly as thick as his arm detailing the thousands of formal regulations an official diplomat was expected to observe. The document covered everything from the proper titles of the numerous delegates he would be speaking with to the correct procedure for excusing oneself to use the bathroom. Yet if he had to pick a single taboo from that web of esoteric regulations, the one behavior that it was of the gravest importance for an ambassador to adhere to, it would have been the dictum that foreign emissaries should not personally get involved in the military conflicts of their host nation.

Somehow, though, Sarkiades could not imagine King Telemeus begrudging him the chance to die in battle. Like all high officials in the Lystian court, he had been drawn up from the military. Until a year ago, he had been nothing more than a common soldier, and despite the decadent hospitality, at his core he still saw himself as man of the walls. It was certainly a breach of diplomacy for him to join the Piristrans in battle, and doubly so when he was ignoring an audience with the king himself to do so, but he suspected that Telemeus would not be too angry at an old soldier's wish to die with his sword in hand, so he drew out his blade and charged towards the archers at the back of the hall.

As Arikhe threw it's house sized body against the Minairoi's defenses, Sarkiades crashed against a formation of Nashragha infantrymen screening the archers. The thick clouds of smoke blinded him to the enemy until he was nearly on top of them, but the Ukni soldiers were no better equipped to navigate the chaos than he was. Had he advanced on them in a company of soldiers, they would have almost certainly engaged him before he had a chance to react, but with messengers and officers sprinting in every direction, none of them thought to question the lone soldier rushing into their ranks until he'd plunged his blade through the first of their necks.

That moment of stunned confusion may have lasted but an instant, Sarkiades wrung every last drop from his sole advantage, delivering a fatal barrage of puncture wounds to four of the five surviving soldiers as the last man fell back and threw up his shield. Sarkiades rolled low, pivoting to the left as he sprang up and drove his blade up through the gap beneath the soldier's chest plate until he felt the tip scrape against the armor at his back.

The sound his blade was a beacon to the Ukni infantrymen. Like a beautiful singer pouring out gorgeous lies of love and happiness to an audience of lonely drunks, the clashing swords

sang of a world where skill and valor decided whether you lived or died even as the arrows and sorcery burst out at random from the smoky confusion, heedless of whether they tore through an unblooded novice or the greatest swordsman in Aios. Two men came screaming out from the murky abyss, their hellish cries dying in their throats as he hacked on and on. But no sooner did they fall gasping than another three were on top of him, driving him back step by step as he made use of his blade's superior reach to keep them from closing in with their short swords.

But the promise of meeting the hated enemy tempted more than just the Ukni. A team of Piristran infantrymen enveloped him from behind, bringing down their shield wall just as four more Nashragha rushed out to encircle him from the front. Having only his sword for protection, Sarkiades fell in behind them, thrusting his blade through the gaps between their shields, killing soldier after soldier as they crashed against the lines. He soon found himself in that familiar, oddly comforting world where big picture matters like the fact that they'd already lost this war and his own inevitable death were subsumed within the moment to moment struggle. He did not even realize that they had been pushed back to the base of the stairs until he felt a tug on his robes and heard someone shouting in his ear:

"King Vatrebian has been struck down. He is not long for the world, and he wishes to speak with you before he departs."

Sarkiades had taken Vatrebian's earlier request to be some kind of ritual formality ending the alliance between the two kingdoms, or perhaps some dying regret about the deterioration of Lyst and Piristrus' old alliances, but he had been around the king long enough to know that he would never waste his final words on courtly ceremony. Whatever Vatrebian had to say to him, it must have been pretty fucking important, so he pushed his way through the last of the royal guard, past the two visibly weakened Minairoi throwing the last of their strength into a final protective barrier, to a prone figure surrounded by nobles and attendants.

"Sarkiades..." King Vatrebian gasped. "My men told me you'd gone out to fight. I was worried that I wouldn't have the chance to speak with you before..."

"With all due respect, your grace, why is it that you wished to speak to me of all people. I know that Lyst and Piristrus have had their differences, but nothing to merit spending your final moments away from the company of your kin." Sarkiades answered.

"I must confess that I have broken the terms of our treaty. If I had only known about the Onguloch, I would have..."

"Save your words. None of us had any clue that the Dark God had fashioned a living siege engine. I can assure you that King Telemeus will not begrudge you for refusing to share whatever scraps of intelligence you were able to gather. None of us could have known what was coming."

"There is more... reports from spies deep within the Khavasak... a training facility... Telemeus must know..."

"Whatever it is that you wished to tell him, I'm afraid that window has passed." Sarkiades said.

"There is a passage leading out of the Temelrum. It isn't far. Ampetran knows the way."



There's a hidden council chamber within those halls. Go. There is something you must see."

A young noble gestured to him, leading him through a narrow exit at the rear of the throne room to a network of hallways that were typically used by servants. Ukni soldiers had already begun to fan out through the imperial palace, but their army's decision to tacitly allow the looting of besieged cities as an alternative to paying bonuses meant that they never encountered bands of more than two or three at a time, the vast majority of which were so busy with their armfuls of golden trinkets that they didn't even have the time to draw their swords.

Ampetran led him down what felt like an endless series of spiral stairwells, far outpacing the Ukni looting parties until they made their way deep underground. Yet after a few moments surrounded by nothing but the echo of his feet, Sarkiades was unsure whether he preferred that eerie silence with its promises of stealth and ambush or the chaos of the upper levels.

Suddenly, Ampetran was stooping down beside a marble sculpture of a young warrior. Even in the midst of battle, the young noble felt the need to explain the notorious appetites of the king who'd built the passage before he reached his hand beneath the soldier's tunic and gave the statue a tug as a false wall swung open behind them.

"This passage will lead you to the King's council room. The reports should still be on the table. When you're done you'll find a painting of the Silipian Forest against the far wall which conceals a lever for another passage that empties out near the Taevitra."

"Aren't you coming?" Sarkiades asked.

"My fight ends here." Ampetran replied, and Sarkiades could not help but be awed at the cold determination in his voice as he turned and strode back towards the throne room.

Sarkiades put the thought of Ampetran's fate behind him as he rushed down the corridor. Whatever it was that had inspired King Vatrebian to expend his dying words on a boorish envoy from some rustic backwater, it had to have been pretty fucking important. There had been a time when Lyst truly was the equal of Piristrus or the other great city-states of Naviras, but that was centuries ago. The reason that someone like him was given the same courtesy as the diplomats from Stakalphis or Aegerea had more to do with Piristrus' fervent traditionalism than his homeland's geopolitical relevance. Lyst's location in the middle of the Pythikas Mountains meant that the only exports she had to offer were wool from the rugged pastoralists who tended their herds in her foothills, and while her fortifications were as impressive as any, it had been centuries since she'd had the resources to man her walls at even half strength. There was but a single thing that gave Lyst any standing on the world stage, and that was the fact that those towering battlements happened to be positioned in the middle of the only pass through the Pythikas Mountains in all of western Iores. If the Dark God intended to make a rush on Stakalphis from the north instead of circling around to attempt a landing on the beaches near Boronea, then the only path available to him went straight through the gates of Lyst.

The strategy room was an odd amalgam of the regal debauchery that one would expect from the kind of ruler who hid the lever to a hidden passage under the robes of an anatomically accurate statue and the austere realities that come with keeping such a chamber out of the eyes of enemy spies. Golden busts of previous kings that would have glimmered from the labors of a dozen servants anywhere else in the palace sat caked in helms of dust while heaps of paper were scattered loosely over every available surface. At

first, he despaired of ever finding the documents King Vatrebian had mentioned amid that chaotic scene. He found himself nearly laughing aloud at the thought of a band of Ukni raiders coming upon him poring over old troop estimates as the Temelrum burned around him, but then his eyes latched onto an image so terrifyingly familiar that he could have picked it out at a dozen paces: a map of Lyst.

Only it wasn't the land of his birth depicted in that strange diagram. The city layout seemed astonishingly similar to Lyst, with the defensive walls and outbuildings positioned nearly identically to his homeland, but the surrounding landscape was completely different, labeled with rivers and mountain ranges located deep within the Dark God's empire. It was only when he began reading some of the scribbled marginal notes that he was able to make any sense of it at all.

The Ukni had built a full scale mock-up of Lyst deep in the inner Khavasak. Not just some dingy wooden facsimile but a painstakingly detailed stone recreation of the exact layout of Lyst's defenses. The fact that Saklugz undertook such an exorbitant expense suggested not only that he never intended to invade along the coastal plains to begin with, but that the destruction of his homeland was essential to the success of the his military campaign.

Sarkiades' horror only grew as the pieces fit themselves together in his mind. Growing up, he'd heard the same stories as any other child of the Naviras: that, for the kingdoms and city-states who continued to resist the Dark God's tyranny, there was no such thing as peace. That even centuries of silence from the dread tower of Dissak was nothing more than an armistice: a reluctant acknowledgment that, while those lands were rightfully nothing more than provinces of Saklugz' continent-spanning empire, the act of enforcing that dominion was not immediately feasible. Every officer in the free cities had a speech like that on hand for days when it seemed impossible to wring any work from his soldiers, but despite all that there had always been a part of him that held out hope that it would be someone else who'd bear the brunt of the next Ukni invasion. Even the fall of Piristrus couldn't silence that voice, it merely changed the language. Soothing lies about another generation or two of peace were quickly replaced by soothing lies about Lyst's irrelevance in the coming war. It was only now that Sarkiades realized that, even as the Onguloch was tearing through the walls of the Temelrum, he had still sincerely believed that his well fortified, politically useless homeland could last indefinitely as the shadows of war blotted out the light of Naviras.

But now the screen was removed; the guyropes of ignorance and delusion that held it in place snapping loose like cornered vipers. The enemy had constructed a full scale facsimile of Lyst for the purpose of training an elite group of soldiers to take possession of the pass. There was no way to look beyond a thing like that. And then there was Arikhe. An Onguloch that specialized in siege warfare, and the walls of Lyst were the only real barrier between it and the gates of Stakalphis. From the start, the enemy had intended to use Arikhe in coordination with those strike forces to quickly clear a path through the Gates of Menneas, at which point they could use Lyst as a landing site to bring the rest of the army straight into the heart of Iores without having to worry about contested beach landings.

Sarkiades now understood King Vatrebian's guilt, and he understood why King Telemeus needed to hear of this. A moment earlier he'd been resigned to his fate, basking in that strange calm that comes to fill the void once occupied by self preservation. He had listened to Ampetran's explanation of a hidden passage out of the city the way a mother might patiently listen to her child's naively simple solutions to the complex problems of human existence. Now, however, he knew that he needed to survive this. There was no other path

but a desperate drive out of Piristrus and south to the Aedonae channel with the dogs of war howling at his heels. While Lyst was no longer a great power, one vestige of her former glory that still remained were the Ourosai bolts that could draw the blood of even an Arkuloch, and with his intelligence about how the Arikhe dismantled the Piristran walls, his countrymen could maximize the effectiveness of those ballistae. It would not be enough to stand up against the full Ukni host, but it could buy them the time for Stakalphis to realize that the cost of maintaining a centuries-old rivalry with a city long past its prime paled in comparison to giving their most hated enemy a back door to the Darygian Plains.

The reawakening of purpose brought with it that old, familiar fear. He found his hands trembling for the first time in years as he grabbed the relevant documents and set fire to the rest, pausing only long enough to make sure the secret passage had sealed shut before charging into the darkness. Each turn down that labyrinthine passageway carried visions of enemies laying in ambush, every skittering rat a Korvadun spy with his dagger at the ready. But, true to King Vatrebian's word, the Piristrans had gone to great lengths to keep this passage a secret. His only company through that terrifying journey were the darting, skittering sounds of whatever creatures had made this tunnel their home. In time, he found himself before a gate covered in dozens of heavy latches.

Sarkiades shut his eyes as he kicked open the door, squinting just enough that he might have a half a second's warning before the blade of an Ukni infantryman ran him through, and finding himself walled off in a tiny alcove nestled against a large cliff face, completely screened from view. He pricked his ears to his surroundings, seeking out the usual sounds made by restless soldiers and hearing only deep, rhythmic thuds somewhere in the distance. At first, he couldn't quite place it, but as it grew closer and closer, it's tremors shaking the earth and sending birds scampering for cover, he knew that there was but one creature who could have authored such a cacophony.

There was nowhere to run. Nothing to do but to hide and wait for death to come pounding through the tree line. He had been foolish to believe that the Ukni would not use every tool at their disposal to stop those documents from leaving Piristrus. In all likelihood they'd scouted out this location long before the day of battle, or else they'd captured Vatrebian, Ampetran, or one of the other generals alive and made unusually quick work of the interrogation. Either way, it would be up to Telemeus to put the pieces together himself.

The thuds rushed towards him, each impact louder than the last, moving inexorably towards his tiny hiding place. Then, just when he was certain that the Onguloch was no more than a few men's length away, just on the other side of that tiny stone nook, Arikhe tore past, cutting a course straight for the Taevitra River. His first thought was that it was simply hunting for the exit to his tunnel, and so he dashed out from the cliff face and dove into a waist high bush, crawling forward at an angle to the Onguloch's course until the sound of voices in conversation caught his attention. It was Ka'inulz Hoshtrak, the high priest responsible for controlling Arikhe, speaking with someone whose voice he didn't recognize. Only Hoshtrak's words lacked the nauseating arrogance that had possessed them as he strode into the throne room behind his Onguloch. Gone was the cruel, mocking taunts King Vatrebian and the other Piristrans. Gone was that sickening laughter. Fear now rode upon his voice.

Every rational part of Sarkiades' body screamed for him to use this chaos to cover his escape, but the curiosity was too much to bear. Someone had drawn the Ukni's most powerful weapon away from the city it was supposed to be demolishing and out to this overgrown riverbank, and whoever it was, he seemed to have the Ka'inulz ready to shit

himself. Sarkiades told himself that whatever was happening out there would surely be of interest to King Telemus as he clawed forward through the underbrush.

What he saw strained the limits of his imagination. An old man, nearly as old as Telemus, shooting through the air like a falcon, alighting on branches that shouldn't have supported a tenth of his weight only to kick off into a barrage of diving attacks, striking Arikhe with what appeared to be nothing more than a flimsy branch. And somehow, he was winning. The boiling, tarry substance that the Onguloch used to digest its prey now poured from its every orifice, frothing and hissing as it ate through the forest floor. Every time Arikhe went in for the attack, the old man would jump halfway across the clearing faster than his eyes could follow. The Onguloch's own digestive fluid was now eating through its body, and being a beast of little more than size and hatred, Arikhe could do nothing but grow more crazed and desperate until its own insatiable anger ate through its muscle and ligament and all the life was thrashed loose from its body.

It was only then that Sarkiades got a good look at the old man's robes. Black with widened sleeves and a pleated lower section, white frills around the chest and neck lines and an all white belt. It seemed almost impossible to believe, that a member of that ancient order of mages who played such a role in the stories of his childhood, who'd done more than any other school or kingdom to keep Saklugz' power in check, could be standing before him. Yet who else but a Shugatyad could have single-handedly brought down an Onguloch with nothing more than a stick from the forest floor?

The Shugatyad turned towards two men in Ukni armor who'd taken advantage of the chaos to pepper the Ka'inulz with throwing knives. He spoke a handful of terse words and then turned and walked in the direction of the Silipian Forest with the other two falling in behind. Sarkiades wondered what it all could mean. What had the Shugatyad done to lure Arikhe out here? Who were those two soldiers? Had the mages managed to infiltrate the Ukni? If so, why would they wait until Piristrus had fallen before springing whatever trap they'd used to lure Arikhe out into the open? If that old man really did have a network of spies inside the Nalburz, would it not have been better to turn them loose, before they had a chance to take possession of the city? He wanted to get up and follow them, but he could not risk letting the documents stuffed into his jacket fall back into enemy hands. The more Sarkiades thought about what he saw, the less any of it made sense, but there was a single thing that he knew with absolute certainty: that King Telemus needed to hear this.

## PART 2: THE PURSUIT



Sarkiades watched the team of Kulnarn horse archers circle around the hastily extinguished campfire, resisting the impulse to release his grip on the bowstring as he lay concealed in a thicket of Greentongue Berries atop a nearby hill. There were five this time. That meant he needed to be careful.

The slaughter of one of the Dark God's fire born on the banks of the Taevitra River had apparently caused something of a stir in the Ukni high command, because the Gesatir wasted no expense in carpeting the Velian Plains with his tracking teams. Sarkiades had expected some kind of pursuit once the Korvadun agents realized that he'd escaped from the city with vital intelligence, but the fact that his trail happened to cross paths with the man who slew Arikhe had apparently promoted him to the second most wanted fugitive in all of Aios. He wasn't even sure whether the Ukni knew about the documents detailing their plans for a surprise invasion of Lyst, but he supposed that hardly mattered now. There was nothing quite like the death of an Onguloch to light a fire under the general's asses, and now the entire countryside was lousy with Ukni search teams.

Before now they'd been content to fan out alone or in pairs, and he'd been able to survive for a while just by using the woods to obscure his trail. With so many refugees fleeing the Ukni advance, a single traveler was not of any great interest, at least until a keen eyed Kulnarj spotted him in the bows of a Respite tree and he was forced to open fire. Since then, he'd had to contend with half a dozen small teams of two or three riders, and he'd ambushed each with little difficulty. Now, however, they appeared to be taking the threat more seriously, which meant that he'd actually have to use his head to find a way out.

Sarkiades watched the first rider dismount, tentatively kicking the smoldering remains of his fire as if he expected a Wyr to leap out from the embers. Typically, checking to see how fresh a campfire was was the sort of thing that required that required only a single soldier,

but he needed to know how much the enemy knew about him, and the fastest way to find that out was with bait. Knowing that none of the Ukni scouts would be able to read the Argovad script used by the city-states of Naviras, he'd scraped the ink off one of the less important documents and wrote out a few vulgar limericks about the depraved inclinations of the rider's mothers, then left it singed at the edge of the campfire as if he'd been in too much of a hurry to burn it properly.

While Sarkiades' heart leapt at the speed with which the commander jumped off his horse and pulled the paper free from the fire, he took some consolation in the fact that men were born with neither the limbs nor the minds to read and shoot at once. As the commander gestured over one of his subordinates, Sarkiades released his arrow, letting it fly free just as the man's feet left the stirrups. Within seconds he had followed this opening volley with a rapid fire barrage aimed at the other dismounted riders while the two still on horseback charged his position.

Sarkiades picked up the soaking rag at his feet, wrapped it around an arrowhead as he smashed his flint against the firestarter. He lit the rag and lobbed off the shot, then dove down beneath his cover, unsure whether he found his target until shouts of confusion came echoing up the hill. He had been fortunate that Krash, the strange intoxicant given to Ukni soldiers which amplified the arrogance and emotional inhibition of alcohol while severely attenuating the motor loss, was far more flammable than even grain, and doubly so that one of the first riders he'd killed had apparently been severely addicted to the stuff. He'd found two jugs tied to the man's horse. Enough to soak the rag and douse a flattened off section of the hill's defile that he knew the riders would have to cross. The blast alone wasn't enough to kill them, but those few seconds of shock were long enough for his arrows to finish the job.

Sarkiades hated the way he'd come to enjoy those screams, but a moment later he heard a sound that far less agreeable: horns. The first rang out from the other side of the burning clearing, but it was quickly echoed by dozens more in every direction. He was surrounded.

Sarkiades leapt up onto his stolen courser, pricking his ears to the deep, undulating calls as he spurred her as aggressively as he could. By his reckoning, the enemy had already established a decent perimeter, especially to the north, but there were only a handful of answering cries from the south. However, while most of the area to the north was open farm country, to the south the valley threaded itself through a narrow gap between two rocky embankments that would leave him completely exposed. If the scouting party had been nothing more than bait to draw him out of hiding, then whoever was in charge of the search would have certainly set up cordons at the other end of the pass. But if he truly had taken them by surprise with his ambush, then there was a real chance that the difficult terrain had slowed down the hunting parties in the south. There was only one way to find out, he supposed, and in the end either option was better than hanging around waiting to be discovered.

The trail plunged down into a strand of Blanket Trees, choking morning sunlight into a dusky haze as he struggled to guide his courser through the twisting passages. As the path wound its way back up around the embankment, the sight of a fallen tree forced him to jerk on the reins, his horse rearing back just as a barrage of arrows rained down from the surrounding hills.

Sarkiades kicked his feet free from the stirrups and sprung to his left just as his horse's lifeless body pounded into the ground. He had just enough time for a moment's glance at



his assailants before he was rolling down the side of the hill, but a moment had been all that he needed to confirm that he was fucked from every orifice. If the enemy had enough time to cut down a tree for the purposes of an ambush then they would have certainly taken the time to blockade the exit. As if to confirm his suspicion, a chorus of horns sounded out from both ends of the valley. Horns that had been silent when he'd ambushed the scouting team. He was hemmed in from all sides like a boar at the end of a hunt.

The funny thing about a cornered boar, though, was that no matter how skilled the tracker or how great their technological superiority, there was always that chance that those final moments would see the hunter gored through. In fact, it was not unusual at all for even kings of great courage and martial skill to meet their end from simple hunting mishaps. Up until now, every decision he'd made had been exactly what the enemy had wanted him to do. The Ukni had managed to lay an astoundingly intricate trap for him, but the mere fact that they had resorted to such measures revealed a deeper truth: they were afraid. Thinking about it, he realized that if the Shugatyad had concealed his presence from the enemy, as they were notoriously good at doing, then the most obvious candidate for Arikhe's killer would have been the man who'd escaped Piristrus with a cache of vital documents just as the city was in the heat of her death throes. A man whose trail happened to intersect the Onguloch's at the exact point where the beast met its end. If there was a way out of this mess, and he sincerely doubted that there was, then it would be found in yoking that fear to his advantage.

A sane person in that situation would have done one of a handful of things. They might have tried to return back the way they came, circled around the ambush in an attempt to reach the southern exit, or even laid a counter-ambush of their own. However, one thing that no sane man would ever do is to walk back up the way they came as if the ambush was nothing more than a mild inconvenience. It was, however, exactly the sort of thing that a gossip-addled soldier might expect from the man who single-handedly brought down an Onguloch.

As he walked back up the slope, focusing his thoughts on maintaining a straight spine and a firm, confident bearing, he listened to the ambushing party fan out beyond the trail. He watched tops of six helmets ride past, heading north to encircle him, but they continued moving down the trail, only noticing him as he casually walked back onto the path.

Shouts and cries rang out all around him, but the vast majority came from behind, along the ways he would have gone if he'd sought to outmaneuver them, but all that greeted him as he crested the embankment was his horse's body, five living Thekhaln coursers left behind as their owners walked through the heavy undergrowth, and the four soldiers who'd taken up positions behind the toppled tree. All around, the Ukni were screaming and rushing back to the ambush site, but those four men were frozen in place. Sarkiades did his best to put on a cold, annoyed expression as he strode forward in slow, measured steps, then sprang to life with terrifying forces, slicing out the throats of two of them as they fumbled with their bows, while the third caught him in the stomach with a firm kick.

Sarkiades rolled backwards, springing to his feet just in time to parry a thrust from the fourth. He leapt forward as if to counter, but just as the two soldiers jumped back he turned and ran towards the tethered mounts, cutting all five loose as he jumped up onto the back of the strongest and kicked it into a charge towards the southern exit.

The trail swung upward as he made his way around the bend, the trees giving way to an open expanse of hastily abandoned fields and farmsteads. But his enemy were not so

foolish as to grant him access to that perfect horse country. At the very edge of the forest stood a shield wall of twenty Nashragha infantrymen, the dawn sun glistening on their blades and chest plates while the black fields of their full body shields seemed to devour any trace of light. The exit was completely blocked, and he had no doubt that a similar scene awaited him were he to turn back. He'd done all that he could, but sometimes this world just buried you so deep in shit that you could never hope claw your way out. A smile came to Sarkiades' face as he drilled his heel into his horses flank. He'd been on borrowed time since the throne room anyway, and the best way of ensuring that the secret of the Shugatyard died with him was to give these sons of bitches a last stand worthy of the slayer of Arikhe.

Sarkiades loosened his feet in the stirrups, preparing to dive off his mount at the moment of impact. But there would be no steep embankments to save his ass this time. As the infantrymen threw up their shields against the force of a steed at full gallop, Sarkiades dove forward, clearing the first rank defenders and coming down hard on the second, who had raised their shields into the air to protect the men at the front from arrows. He suspected that the impact broke the arm of the first of the two soldiers to bear the brunt of his dive, for there was no resistance as he drew out his hunting knife and cut loose his throat. The second, however, still had some fight left in him. The soldier grabbed the wrist of his knife hand and pulled it back as he drove his free elbow towards his chest, sending Sarkiades to the ground as the man leapt up on him. But the man's helm had fallen off in their struggle, and Sarkiades hoisted up his chest like a man swimming the butterfly and brought his own helmet crashing into his exposed forehead.

He felt himself getting yoked up from behind, drawing up his knife before the infantrymen could fully surround him and digging it deep into the meat of his arm.

"I don't give a fuck if he cuts off your cock and eats it right in front of you, we need that one alive!" came the shouts of the Ashravid in command of the formation.

Concussive blows from shields and sword butts rained down on him. A flash of pain cut across his face, followed by a warm sensation and the realization that he'd lost vision in his left eye. A violent impact sent him sprawling to the ground with dozens of feet searching out the unprotected places in his comparatively sparse Navarid armor. Sarkiades' consciousness began to fade, and with his last thoughts he wondered at the fact that the Ukni were still shouting and struggling.

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A world of suffering enveloped Sarkiades' mind as it returned from silent oblivion. He felt as though his body had become some kind of perverse fountain, flooding his mind with a putrid mixture of every variety of burning, stabbing, and rupturing that he'd every known. Yet even that rancid cocktail of agonies was a warm spring breeze compared to the twin terrors looming over him: that his left eye was gone and that he had no fucking clue what had happened to him.

"Hell of a beating you took back there, friend." a voice called out from above. "Hell of a beating you gave out, too, but fortunately for us, my companions and I aren't in the business of mending Ukni soldiers."

Sarkiades rolled over, struggling to focus his gaze on the man standing over him. He wore the armor of a Piristran Naval officer, complete with the close-cropped beard and steely stare those types usually preferred. Yet there was a muted warmth in his eyes; the kind

that comes when men of compassionate temperaments are strengthened rather than melted down in the kilns of war and despair.

"Luckily for you, Falviun's mother was a healer who managed to pass on enough herb-lore to make him useful in a pinch; and despite her insistence that her true calling is in combat, Sevetria can put the Minair to good use mending wounds when she decides that she wants to. Unfortunately, even if Plotarkes of Boronea had been here it wouldn't have made any difference for that eye of yours, but at the very least you shouldn't have to worry about it going green on you." the man said.

"Well I'd take waking up to a blurry looking Piristran over the vivid image of a Korvadun agent any day." Sarkiades said, stumbling to his feet.

"That's the stuff." the officer said. "You know, you put up a hell of a fight back there. We were following those Ukni search teams when you came screaming outta that grove like the Dark God's own nightmare. To be honest it took me a couple of seconds to figure out if you were a man or a forest spirit."

"Well you wouldn't have had much trouble if you'd stayed hiding any longer. I can't imagine a Lithir woulda had any issues with a few dozen infantrymen."

"You coulda fooled us the way you leapt from that horse. I've seen my share of fighting and I've never once seen a thing like that. The name's Targan, by the way. Captain, or I should say former captain, of the Liviarus. And this..." Targan said, gesturing to the three men and one woman at his side. "is her former crew. Falviun here was my first mate. Despite how he looks he's actually not that bad to have around when things get hot. He was the one who had the idea to strip down the corpses to rig up a field gurney with their robes and lances. That woman who's looking at you like your decision to get your eye slashed open was a personal slight to her is Sevetria, our mage. She's not exactly known for her bedside manner, but you can take it from me that you're much better off with that stare than the one she's been giving those Ukni soldiers. She's half the reason any of us are still breathing, and the other half is that burly looking fellow standing next to her. That's Galtus. He was born a dozen miles outside Tarileum, and his old man was a hunter. He knows this land like he knows the folds of his dick. Hell, the only reason we've been able to keep our trail from the eyes all those search teams is because of his skill at covering our tracks. That young pup over there is Quistos. He picked a hell of a time to enlist, but he's figured out enough to make himself useful from time to time, like when we needed someone to actually haul that rigged up stretcher back to camp."

"Well you have my regards. I woulda been dead back there if it wasn't for you guys. But if you don't mind me asking, how does the captain and crew of a Piristran naval vessel end up this deep in the interior?" Sarkiades asked.

"It's funny you should ask..." Targan answered. "Because, while anyone who can get the Ukni as frothed up as you did is a friend of ours by default, the question of how a Lystian soldier ended up in the middle of the Velian Plains with half an army on his trail has been the subject of some conversation on our part."

So they talked. Targan told him about their ship. How they were stationed in Sallaninth far to the east dealing with the Ukni-financed privateers who raided the Nostrean when news of the invasion broke. According to the captain, the Navirark in charge of the city must have been on the Ukni payroll for quite a while, because he'd ordered the entire fleet into port for

an inspection before the invasion even began. Fortunately, the Piristran outriders had been faster than the Ukni scouts, so by the time they got back from one of their hunting expeditions news of the siege was already flying around the harbor. Realizing that the Navirark intended to hand the entire fleet over to the enemy, Targan took it upon himself to scuttle not just the Liviarus, but as many of the Piristran ships as they could manage. They'd gotten about a third of the way through the fleet before anyone noticed what they were up to, at which point they fled into the forest with dozens of Korvadun agents on their heels. Apparently they'd thought Sarkiades' ambush was meant for them, and decided to take the fight to the enemy just as he had. For his part, Sarkiades told them everything he'd seen during the fall of Piristrus: the fearsome Onguloch, King Vatrebian's final message and the documents still tucked safely within his robe, the appearance of the Shugatyard, and of course his own desperate flight.

"Well I figured you must have been pretty fucking important to merit that kind of manhunt..." Targan said as he read through the papers. "But I've never seen anything like this in my life. To tell you the truth, it puts me in a bit of an odd position."

"How so?" Sarkiades asked.

"Well those folks back at Sallaninth seem to be rather fond of throwing that word 'traitor' around. They were yelling it as we pulled into the harbor, they were yelling it when the Navirark gave that big speech about respecting the chain of command, and they damn sure were yelling it after we sent their fleet to the bottom of the Nostrean. Now they made a few convincing arguments about how this world would fall to hell if everyone went around doing whatever they pleased, but the problem is that none of those assholes were hanging around the day I was sworn into the service of my king and homeland. If they want to go over the words of my oath with a fine comb that's their business, but at the end of the day that vow was between me and my kingdom, and, given that there's no longer any Piristrus worthy of the name, it falls on me alone to decide what those words really mean. Truth be told, I figured that scuttling the fleet was as good a way as any to set things right before my crew and I went our separate ways. I was thinking I'd head south to Boronea or Aegerea to see if they had any use for an old captain, but if everything that you're telling me is true, well then it would seem that Piristrus still has some use for us yet."

"Well if that's the case then I hope you came prepared with a plan, because you can be as impressed as you like with my little show back there, but the simple truth is that people don't go charging headlong into enemy ambushes when they've got better ideas to work with." Sarkiades said.

"Well like I said, Galtus grew up hunting in these parts, and he has a real gift for sneaking right underneath the enemy's eyes. Now I couldn't say whether it was Arikhe's death or those papers you got with you that got the Ukni so worked up, but it's a pretty safe bet that they're not just gonna turn around and go home after this. So we know where we need to be, and we got a rough idea of how we're gonna get there. All that's left is for us to get up off our asses and do it."

"I mean I could of told you that much." Sarkiades replied.

"Well I've got a little more up my sleeve than just that. Up north things have sunk straight to the bottom of a plague infested cesspit, but there's still a bit of resistance further south. Hell, the only reason we ended up this way was because we'd heard the garrison at Tarileum was gonna try to hold out, but by the time we started passing refugees we learned that

they'd sent everyone with the strength to fight down to Fostrii. I guess they're planning on evacuating the women and children into Lyst and holding those passes to the last. From what I hear all those frontier fortresses through the Lianin passes are packed to bursting with Piristran loyalists. Those Ukni scouting parties have had free reign over the countryside with all the chaos and collapse, but there's just no fucking way a bunch of horse archers are gonna stand a chance against those mountain strongholds. They'll need to haul in a siege team and all of their heavy engines for that, which means that all we gotta do is get to the foothills of the Lianin Mountains and we're clear." Targan said.

"So it's a mad dash for Fostrii then?" Sarkiades asked.

"You got it. Move at night. Carry only what you need. Ride our horses 'til their legs give out then kill some more of the bastards and ride off on theirs. You know the drill by now."

## PART 3: THE BATTLE FOR THE BRIDGE



"What did you find?" Targan asked the shadowy figure making it's way down the steep gully that hid their campsite from view.

"A big pile of stomped up horse shit." Galtus replied. "No tracks. No sounds. Nothing at all that would suggest that there's a single living soul in that village."

"They wouldn't just leave a place like this completely undefended, would they?" Quistos asked.

"Yeah I'm sure that's exactly what happened." Sevetria cut in. "After mustering up a dozen of their best tracking teams and sending them loose in the countryside with orders to capture us regardless of the cost, the Ukni came to this shit little village with the only working bridge for miles and thought 'you know what, fuck it, none of this is worth the effort.'"

While Sarkiades liked to think that he would have phrased his objection more diplomatically, there was no denying that the Minairoi knew what she was talking about. With Galtus' help, their small company had been able to evade the Ukni search teams for days, and in response the enemy had switched tactics: choosing a handful of key choke points along their route and setting up elaborate ambushes instead of spreading their forces out across the countryside. The idea that they wouldn't notice the only bridge over the steep network of crags and canyons separating them from the southern foothills of the Lianin Mountains was as ludicrous as a wolf forgetting to use its teeth.

"So we know that we have to cross that bridge, the enemy knows that we have to cross that bridge, and we know that the enemy have some kind of ambush set up. All we gotta do now is figure out what we're gonna do about it." Sarkiades said.



"Well, if you were the enemy, what would you do?" Targan asked.

"I'd probably torch the bridge." Falviun answered. "Force us to abandon our horses, wait until we're far enough down the cliffs that we can't be a threat and then lay down a barrage of arrows from above."

"What a cunning plan." Sevetria snapped. "I'm sure the guys who forced half their cavalry to pull their dicks out of their horses asses to stop King Telemeus from discovering their surprise attack are just gonna be jumping up and down for a chance to destroy the only bridge for miles that has even a chance of supporting all that heavy siege equipment they'll need to actually capture Lyst."

"Well when you put it that way, it raises the question of whether that bridge should be standing at all?" Falviun replied.

"Now there's an idea I can get behind." Sevetria said.

"We can worry about burning the bridge just as soon as we're on the other side." Targan said. "Until then, our main concern is figuring out how we're gonna get across."

"I've come through this town a few times in my work for King Telemeus." Sarkiades said. "If I remember correctly, the gatehouse on the opposite side of the bridge was built fairly recently, but the one on our side is pretty old, from long before Piristrus took control of the region. If I'm right, then the northern gatehouse should be equipped with all the defenses and murder holes that you usually to see in wartime architecture. If I were planning an ambush, that's where I'd hide."

"Except for the fact that it's the dead of night. Even if they had an entire garrison's worth of archers stuffed into that tiny gatehouse, dumb luck would be the only thing guiding their arrows. We could just charge across and the odds are pretty high that none of us would get hit." Sevetria replied.

"So, does the enemy have any tools at their disposal that would allow them to illuminate an area on short notice. An area that happens to already be lined with torches?" Sarkiades asked.

"Oh fuck." Sevetria replied, a sentiment that slowly spread to the faces of the other crewmen as they recalled how Ukni priests would often use their magic to ignite large banks of torches in their temples and Zuthruhk rituals.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here." Targan said. "The Ka'ina aren't omnipotent. It's true that they can do all kinds of trickery with light and fire, but of all the schools of magic they are perhaps the most dependent on ceremony and preparation. In order for them to be a threat in a real fight, they normally have to inscribe their environment with wards and Zuthruhk runes ahead of the actual engagement. That's why the Ka'in prefer setting elaborate traps and working in small numbers to accompanying Ukni armies into battle, with the exception of certain specialized duties like controlling Onguloch. If our enemy intends to use one of the Dark God's priests to light the torches along the bridge and surprise us with a barrage of arrows when we're halfway across, then there should be some kind of glyph or inscription on each of the lanterns. Galtus, do you think you can--"

"It took him hours to scout out the city the first time around." Falviun cut it. "If we wait for him to make another trip then the enemy won't even need a Zuthruhk priest to see us coming."

"Then we'll stagger our arrivals." Targan said. "We'll give Galtus a bit of a head start and then move out in his wake. If he finds any evidence of wards on the lanterns or activity in the guardhouse, then he'll rush back and we'll just leave. It'll cost us a few days circling around the Lianin foothills but it's better than walking right into an ambush."

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Sarkiades crouched low, guiding the reigns of his horse through the narrow alley and up onto the main avenue. Despite the fact that an ambush lurked around every corner, his thoughts were pulled towards his last trip through this town, whose name he could not even remember, the way that waves are inexorably pulled to shore.

In truth, he had been more embarrassed than anything by the way the townspeople had lined the streets to watch King Telemeus' new ambassador make his way to the capital. He'd just been promoted into the world of diplomacy, and he still hadn't gotten used to all of the pomp and ceremony that came with it. Still, he could not forget the way those village girls came running out with wreathes and garlands, giggling and laughing as they hung them around his neck. At the time, it had seemed absolutely ridiculous to go to such lengths for a man who'd been an ordinary officer the week before. It was only now, when all those layers of formality were shed like the leaves of autumn, when the portents of a winter as bitter as any before covered the land, that he truly understood the significance of any of it.

Sarkiades wondered what had happened to those girls. If fortune was kind (as kind as she can be in times such as these), then they would have fled for Lyst days ago. If by some miracle he was able to survive this, he wondered whether he would pass them in the streets as he made his way to King Telemeus' throne room. He wondered if they would see betrayal in his eyes as he looked down from atop his steed, or whether they would even remember him at all. Maybe it was ridiculous, but he could not help but think that, were he to see them again, they would ask for everything back. Not just the roses and garlands and hand-picked fruits but the naive hope that all those rituals that they dutifully observed and all those the envoys and soldiers filing past their homes on their way to more important postings somehow had the power to keep this nightmare at bay.

Far more likely, he realized, they'd simply fail to recognize each other. If those girls did make it to Lyst, then the price of that journey would have veiled their faces in so much gaunt desperation that he could ride right past them without realizing it. They, for their part, would be far too preoccupied with their own survival to notice one more pompous fool that they'd once been stupid enough to hoist their hopes upon.

Sarkiades was so lost in these thoughts that he didn't notice the rest of the company stopping until Targan grabbed the collar of his robes. Looking out towards the bridge, he could make out a solitary figure creeping along the side of the buildings. He didn't need to see Galtus' face or hear a word from his mouth to know that something wasn't right. He'd watched him sneak out of their camps to hunt or scout a dozen times now, and he was like a buck in the prime of youth: alert to the dangers around him, yet moving with a grace and beauty that belied his true position on the food chain. Now, however, his eyes jerked in every direction as he dashed from cover to cover. Even in the dead of night, with no sound to guide him, Sarkiades could make out the words he was desperately mouthing:

"Run."

As if in answer, shouts and clomping hooves rang out from behind them. He looked towards the bridge just in time to see the lanterns spring to life one by one, casting the ancient masonry in a foggy, nauseating yellow hue.

"Sarkiades was right!" Galtus said as he sprinted over to them. "Those lanterns were covered in Zuthruhk runes and they must have twenty five archers in that gatehouse, but its worse than that. I was listening in on their conversation. They got half a Kechor of cavalry surrounding us. They're gonna drive us to the bridge."

"Get off the main avenues." Targan shouted. "If they're desperate enough to throw that many soldiers at us then they won't hesitate to put this whole town to the torch. We have to find some shelter, somewhere far enough from the main roads for us to regroup and come up with a plan."

By the time they'd led their horses from the freshly illuminated avenues, the Ukni cavalry had completed their encirclement, and had begun the process of sweeping through the outer perimeter and main thoroughfares. A Kulnarn horse archer rode down the avenue at a gallop, looking down each of the side streets for any hint of movement. The darkness of their alley suddenly seemed much less so, and there was a moment where Sarkiades was sure that the rider's gaze had locked upon him, but he froze as stiff as he could and a second later the man rode past, shouting to his comrades that there was no sign of them.

He felt another tug on his robe, and turned around to see that Galtus had found a narrow path leading the the rear entrance of a small tavern. The company led their horses inside, praying that no noise or sudden motion startled them as they moved through a maze of hastily abandoned chairs and tables.

"Alright, I can admit when I'm wrong." Sevetria said, turning to Sarkiades. "If you got any schemes to get us out of this flaming coffin then I promise I won't say anything rude about them until we've made it to the other side that bridge."

"Unfortunately, I can't give you any better odds than my charge through the gully, but if my lucky streak has enough wick left to burn a little longer, then there might be a sliver of hope hidden somewhere underneath all the shit." Sarkiades said. "There were a couple times back in Lyst when we'd have to do these kind of unexpected, urgent searches. It'd typically happen after some Korvadun infiltrator managed to escape from capture or custody. Now I can't speak for the Ukni, but every time we needed to muster that many soldiers on such short notice, the high command would just put out a call to every company who happened to be stationed nearby. They'd bunch whoever was around into impromptu groups without regard for the usual command hierarchies. It's possible that our enemy are more organized than we ever were, but if I had to guess, after their disaster at the ridge the Gesatir probably just put out orders for every cavalry unit not engaged in vital activities to converge on our location. That means that, unlike a dedicated unit, where everybody knows everybody, most of these soldiers have probably never met before a couple days ago. Given how spread out they are with the search, I can't imagine that anyone would think much of six riders they'd never seen before. If we can discretely steal enough armor for each of us, then I think we'd be able to just ride out and play along with them until we found a chance to sneak across the bridge."

"Well, I guess that's better than killing ourselves." Sevetria conceded.

With a plan in place, the company settled in, waiting for an opportunity to ambush a small patrol. Sarkiades' sense of time dissolved within clouds of confusion and terror, his thoughts were stripped down to nothing more than awareness of the succession of shouts and crashes. Seconds or hours later, his ears pricked to the sound of three riders approaching their position, and a gentle tap on his shoulder confirmed that Galtus had selected their first targets.

The two of them crept silently up the stairs, coming out a window opposite the riders and climbing out onto the clay brick roof, carefully laying in a prone position to disperse their weight as they crawled along the edge of the rooftop.

Once they reached the main road, Galtus turned towards him, sketching out the shape of a square with one finger, then pointing at two places in the middle of adjacent lines and a third in the far corner. Sarkiades, who'd been listening to the Ukni horse archers as they made their way around each building one by one, nodded his understanding.

Then, he waited, hoping on everything dear and righteous that the rest of the crew would have the sense to get themselves and their horses away from the windows, his one good eye fixed on Galtus in anticipation of the signal.

His hand went up, and two arrows sang out in an instant, lodging themselves in their target's throats with such perfect synchronicity that it resembled something out of an archery show. As similar as the two shots looked, however, they were not equal. Galtus' man fell silently to the ground, crumpling onto his own body weight in a neat pile at the edge of the alley. Sarkiades' target lolled to the left, sending a rain barrel spilling out into the road as he collapsed into the street.

The third rider, now alert to the danger, came charging around the corner with his bow notched and ready. However, his half a second of warning might have purchased him the time to spot his comrade's bodies, but it could not buy the man his life. The instant of recognition just barely covered the first syllable of his warning shout, which echoed through the darkness until the arrowhead cut the air loose from his lungs.

Within seconds, the two of them had leapt to the ground, stripping the bodies as quickly and as sloppily as his first night with a woman. Targan and the others came rushing out with the horses as the dead man's cry was picked up by the surrounding search teams, and the thrum of hooves rang out from all directions.

"What are we gonna do? There's only enough armor for three of us!" Galtus shouted.

"And there's only one of us carrying vital documents that the enemy means to intercept at all costs." Sevetria replied. "Targan's the only one whose Nezlugz can almost pass for native, and the two of you won't make it very far without Galtus to cover your ass. Go! Rush for the bridge. The three of us will lure them back towards the main avenue. With any luck they'll think we tried to break out the way we came."

Without another word, Sevetria, Falviun, and Quistos leapt up onto their mounts and kicked them in the direction of the closest team. The screams of horses and men rang through his ears as he struggled with the Kulnarn armor. Sevetria's battle cry, as fierce and desperate as a mother bear whose cub was caught within a gnashing metal trap, rose high above the others and fell silent. The three men leapt up onto their horses and spurred them through a gap between their pursuers, but by the time they circled back around and returned to the

scene in their looted armor, there was no sign of any of them.

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With the chaos of their failed ambush laying as a fog over the city, Sarkiades, Galtus, and Targan found that they could move more or less at will. They'd been smart enough to stash the three bodies in the tavern before they fled, and the one consistency in the dozens of conflicting accounts they'd overheard was that they were fighting a team of at least ten highly trained soldiers under the iron fist of some ferocious, screeching battle mage. It was clear that everybody expected this to end in a desperate last stand, and none thought to question the three men calmly riding their horses through the confused whirlwind of of Kulnarn riders, slowly approaching the bridge that had become the centerpiece of the Ukni defense.

As the hazy outline of arches and parapets emerged from beneath the Ka'ina's smoky haze and the clouds of dust kicked up by the Kulnarn, Sarkiades found his thoughts drawn to images of pestilence and famine. The way the sickly yellow light seemed to infect the pre-morning fog, veiling the bridge in a sepia haze of twisted silhouettes: it was as if the shadows themselves, those places forever obscured from light and warmth, had risen against them. No matter how often he reminded himself that it was nothing more than a trick of the lights, he could not shake the suspicion that the moment they stepped foot onto that bridge those shades would break loose from the bonds of their material hosts, falling upon them as one with nightmarish cries and gnashing teeth as they dragged them back to whatever lightless hell had spawned them.

But there were no unearthly howls or lurid phantasms as they crossed that threshold. Just the sharp cracks of hoof against stone and the same gnawing anxiety that had been with him since Piristrus, growing with the slow, unrelenting pace of a Blackgash Tree until he found himself wishing for the horrors of his imagination to spring to life just so he could get it over with.

Sarkiades felt a tug, and he looked over to see Targan gesturing toward a robed figure standing poised amid the rush of infantrymen and horse archers like a boulder rising up from pounding whitewater. A Ka'in: one of the priests in service of Saklugz who'd been granted the privilege of wielding his Zuthruhk magic. Of course, unlike Ka'inulz Hoshtrak, who was one of the highest ranking members of the Dark God's priesthood (excluding the members of the Grevaburz, whose twisted use of the Zuthruhk to extend their lifespans left them confined to the tower Saghbuzakh), this man was almost certainly a lesser ranked Ka'inur or Ka'inuv. Still, there would be no Shugatyad to save him this time, and the only member of their company with any experience facing mages in battle was busy building a palace from the bones of dead Kulnarn riders, if the stories he overheard from the passing soldiers bore any truth.

"You there." a stiff looking man with the shoulder insignia of a Nulaikulj said. "What have you to report."

"They appear to be attempting to break out along the northeastern perimeter, sir." Targan said in remarkably fluent Nezlugz. "They've taken cover in some of the houses near the outskirts but we're in the process of flushing them out right now."

"That's very interesting, because all of the reports I've received seemed to indicate that the fighting is taking place near the center of the city. Who's Hechor are you with?" the Nulaikulj asked.

"Sir, my friend and I serve under Satirkulj Gholk with the main expedition." Galtus said, his thick Piristran accent more than apparent. "They needed riders who knew the lay of the land, so they sent us out here to help Targan's Zechor with the search."

The Nulaikulj paused, placing Galtus' words on whatever scales he used to reckon their veracity before turning to stare directly at Sarkiades:

"So tell me then, how do two riders hand-picked for their superior command of the geography somehow manage to confuse the running engagements we've been fighting in the center of town with an attempted breakout along the perimeter?"

Like Galtus, the only thing that popped into Sarkiades' head were his earlier suspicions about a breakdown in the chain of command, alongside the newly acquired knowledge that this operation was being done with a mix of light cavalry and infantry units, with all the chaos that entailed.

"Sir, the three of us were participating in the peripheral sweep when we heard a commotion and hushed muttering in one of the houses in our search area. We proceeded to engage the targets through the window, but they put up quite a bit of resistance so we were forced to call in reinforcements, at which point high command sent us over to you to report what we'd discovered, sir."

"Let me ask you this. Were you able to visually identify that the targets were the six we've been looking for before you started shooting?" the Nulaikulj asked.

"Unfortunately it was too dark to confirm their identities, but as soon as we opened fire they immediately returned it." Sarkiades answered.

"You brainless shit-fuckers are attacking our own infantry! Of all the inbred country horse rapists who've found their way into the Kuln, you three have to be the dumbest yet. Holy fuck this could cost me my career. You three wait here and try not to kill any more of our own soldiers before I get back. I'm not done with you yet, do you hear me?"

They all nodded their heads as sheepishly as they could, but before the Nulaikulj had even crossed the dozen paces between him and the other commanders, shouts broke out from the direction of the city proper. Men were screaming and falling back as geysers of molten rock shot loose from cracks in the pavestones, giving three riders enough of an opening to come pounding out onto the bridge.

Galtus drew out his sword and rushed towards the cluster of officers, slicing straight through the neck of the Nulaikulj as he turned his head to look at them.

"Well, I tried." he said as he jumped clear onto his mount and spurred her forward.

Behind them, the Ka'in alone obstructed Sevetria's path. Lights and flames flashed as he raised up dozens of wards, but none of it slowed down her charge. While it was certainly true that Zuthruhk magic was the most feared strain of sorcery in Aios, and that the creatures forged by it could stand against nearly any mage, in a one on one fight without recourse to traps or schemes, Saklugz's priests were unambiguously inferior to the Minairoi. Still, Sarkiades could not suppress his fear as he watched Sevetria's molten geysers dissolve against the Zuthruhk wards. While immensely powerful, the Minair was at heart a



scholastic school. Unlike the more intuitive or emotional traditions of the Xunju or Ghazra, the magic of Naviras required years of monotonous study to even begin to be wielded properly. He simply could not imagine the coarse, foul-mouthed woman he'd come to know having any talent for the deeply contemplative process by which the Minairoi mentally ascended from the physical manifestations of our material world to the fundamental structure of those substances all the way up to the nature of reality itself, altering the character of their surroundings so that water can be turned into ice and solid stone transformed into geysers of lava.

Falviun and Quistos were now coming up from behind, sweeping around Sevetria just as the ground beneath their feet began to tremble like jelly. The instant they were past, the entire midsection of the bridge gave out in a tremendous firestorm, save for a narrow aisle just large enough for the two flame veiled figures it supported. The Ka'in threw everything he had into a blazing wall of Zuthruhk defenses, a sphere of flames and hazy light whirling around him like an agitated beehive as half a bridge worth of molten rock pounded him like breakers in a storm. Sarkiades had to shield his eyes from the brightness, and as he lifted them back up he saw the Ka'in standing there, his Zuthruhk shields expended, hunched over yet very much alive. But Sevetria was no delicate scholar. She didn't need to destroy all of the Ka'in's defenses, she just needed them gone long enough for her to close the distance between them. She leaned forward over the crest of her horse and swept out her blade. The Ka'in's head leapt up, dancing through the pallid torchlight and plunging down into the molten lake churning wildly beneath their feet.

"What the fuck are you morons waiting for?" Sevetria shouted. "Get moving before this whole thing comes down on us!"

Sarkiades spurred his horse into motion, unsure if he was more frightened of the hundreds of Ukni riders shouting threats and wheeling around at the other end of the bridge or the lone, enraged woman who kept any of them from following.

## PART 4: THE RETURN



The glorious peace purchased by Sevetria's rush on the bridge was short lived. Whether the Ukni were somehow able to salvage enough of the molten stone to get their riders across or if they'd simply scouted the area well enough to find some secondary route through the gully Sarkiades couldn't say. What he could say was that they hadn't even finished congratulating themselves before the first of the outriders appeared. After that, time collapsed back down into waves of desperation and tense relief. Every time they found themselves in a long straightaway, the enemy would open fire, compensating for their blindness by loosing volley after volley into the night. His world contracted around each of the hundreds of arrows raining down on them, turning his stream of consciousness into a succession of self-contained worlds whose rise and fall mimicked the course of lives and empires. Then they would hit a stretch of switchbacks, and his mind would expand out, taking in the broader world of distances, times, endurance, and tactics as the enemy waited for their next chance.

Of the two, Sarkiades almost preferred the danger of actual combat to the aching uncertainty that came whenever his thoughts began to move towards the big picture. Their stolen Ukni armor did quite a bit to protect them from the arrows, so it was only their horses that they had to worry about. Falviun had had the good sense to steal more than they needed before their breakout, but already Sevetria and Quistos were riding double, and that meant the enemy would soon outpace them.

The only source of hope in his heart was the very desperation that moved his adversaries. Everything from the slope of the terrain to the frantic cries of their pursuers screamed out that they were entering mountain country. And with mountain country came mountain fortresses and pissed off mountain men just praying for the chance to bring this fight to the enemy.

Relics from the days before Piristrus' regional hegemony, the fortresses of the Lianin Mountains had been nothing more than symbols of Fostrii's former glory before the Ukni invasion. They hadn't even been manned in centuries. But Sarkiades had grown up around the Fostrians, and he knew the pride that they held for their city's former glory. He was as certain that those outposts would be stuffed to bursting with soldiers as he was of the coming sunrise, though the question of whether he'd be there to witness either was still very much an open one.

A screeching neigh rose up to his left, and Sarkiades turned his head just in time to see Falviun roll off his courser as it came crashing down.

"I'll funnel 'em right!" Sevetria shouted as she leapt off her horse, a whirlwind of dirt rising around her.

The dust wasn't much on its own, but a few moments of blindness could buy Falviun the time he needed to get up onto Targan's horse, and that was enough to merit the effort. At least, that's what the riders at their back must have been thinking as one more ashen storm swirled up around them. They had no idea that the only reason Sevetria hadn't been doing more was because she had to focus the majority of her attention on making sure that Quistos didn't run their horse into a ditch. It was only as she leapt off her steed and turned to face them, and stone stakes tore loose from a ruptured boulder to impale the frontrunners of their formation, that the Kulnarn began to rear back their mounts in confusion and terror.

Sevetria had left less than a man's length between the stalagmites and a nearby Outlaw's Respite Tree. Just enough to give the riders the sense that it was a passable exit but not enough to prevent them from clumping together as their commander screamed out accusations of cowardice and drove them through the gap. Of course, one couldn't ask for a better killing zone than a dozen confused and enraged riders fighting each other over a narrow opening, and he and Galtus took advantage of the confusion to fire as many shots as they could into the gap. Trapped and desperate, blind terror drove the Kulnarn to press their horses even harder, trampling the bodies of their own comrades into the muck as each new wave was met by their arrows until the passage was so clogged with the dead that even their commander had the sense to have his men bring their horses around the embankment.

They had managed to buy their comrades some time, but not nearly enough. No matter how cunning or dangerous you were, there was no avoiding the fact that horses carrying two people could not move at the pace of a single rider. Within moments of taking off down the trail, they had already caught up with the rest of the company.

"She won't hold out much longer at this rate." Targan said.

"She won't have to." Sarkiades replied. "I might not be able to tell you exactly where we are, but I've spent my life on the other end of those straits, and I give you my word as both a soldier and a child of the mountains that it's not much further."

They pushed on. All eyes pinned to the eastern horizon. All ears pricked to the irregular footfalls of Targan's courser and the enraged shouts closing in from behind. Each time the gasps and whinnies crossed some unspoken threshold, Sevetria would slow her destrier down, toppling a strand of trees or raising a dirt embankment as Targan and Falviun jumped off their horse and sprinted ahead with the reigns while he and Galtus laid down more

covering fire. Eventually even the struggle for life itself became a thing of cold monotony. Sarkiades' mind grew so numb to the stupefying terror that he barely noticed the flash of green light at the peak of a distant mountain.

The first lights of dawn rolled over the peaks of the Lianin like the host of some ancient saga. Great lances of sunlight smote the veils of darkness within and without, illuminating the specters of terror and grief as the pitiful, malformed things they were in truth; laying bare the fear and desperation in the eyes of their Ukni pursuers. A moment before, it had felt as if he was traversing a land of shadow: some vague approximation of the place of his birth bound more to the phantasmal logic of delirium and nightmare than to any concrete reality. Now, however, every hill and valley echoed with the memories of his youth. He was home, and it took but a glance to the west to see the fog clad parapets of Novatus jutting out from the Lianin like a vein of gold in solid granite. The furthest of Fostrii's mountain strongholds. The final threshold of their arduous journey.

"This is it!" he screamed. "One last push and we're free!"

Sarkiades could hear the Kulnarn as they kicked their horses into a final, grueling charge. Arrows still rained down on them, but they were no longer the well-timed barrages of an army confident of its own invincibility. When the wolf pack hunt, they move in silence and tight coordination, but when the herd of deer flee, they do so as individuals, each concerned only for their own survival. It was as if, somewhere deep down, the Ukni riders knew they had crossed over that invisible line between predator and prey, and no matter how hard they tried to keep that truth away with hard orders and savage cries, it could not help but show in their panicked jostling and sloppy aim.

"Look! Riders, at the gates!" Galtus shouted

A deep thrum came echoing down the valley as the heavy portcullis creaked open and a great host of armored cavalry tore down the switchbacks. Their pursuers raged behind them, but nothing the Nulaikulj said or did could move the great scale that measured the decisions of all Ukni soldiers: whether they were more afraid of the enemy in front of them or the commander at their back.

"Our armor!" Quistos cried. "How are they gonna recognize us in our stolen Ukni gear?"

As the crew of the Liviarus set about arguing with each other, Sarkiades began to rummage through his bag. One by one, his companions fell silent as their eyes touched upon the object cradled in his lap. All of them save Quistos, who was so immersed in stripping off his gear that he hadn't bothered to turn around.

"Don't shoot! We're Piristrans!" he shouted. "And we're with an envoy from Lyst."

Quistos continued tearing off his Nashragha uniform piece by piece as the rest of the crew stared on with bemused looks. Sarkiades waited until he was sure that company of grim faced Fostrians could make out every detail of the nude figure frantically gesturing towards them before he put his signaling horn, the sigil of his office, up to his lips, letting its deep cry carry through the valley. He watched as the Fostrians, still wary about whatever it was that they were seeing, struggled to keep the grins from their faces. Then his eyes locked upon a man at the head of the column, Cascava, whose family had long ties of guest-friendship with his own, and the tension dissolved into a chorus of laughter. Sarkiades smiled as he put the horn away. If there was anyone in all of Aios who needed a good laugh, then they would

surely have been found in that strange company gathered together at the foothills of the Lianin.

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As soon as Sarkiades told Cascava about the invasion plans and the surprise attack on Lyst, he was rushed into the audience room of the garrison commander, at which point the company were given new horses and an entire regiment of cavalry to accompany them the rest of the way. At first, Sarkiades had thought this a well meaning but unnecessary gesture. As soon as it was obvious that the numbers were not in the Ukni's favor, they'd turned back towards the interior nearly as quickly as they'd pursued them. However, he soon realized that it was not the Ukni who the commander was worried about.

In the course of that brief trip through Novatus, the news of the attack had spread like a cookfire in a distillery. The accounts being whispered between the refugees invariably glossed over the fact that the Ukni were pursuing a specific individual, replacing those details with stories of a mighty host ten times its actual size with a dedicated siege train that would soon level the fortress to rubble. By the time they began to near Fostrii, terrified refugees were rushing up to them, convinced that the entire Ukni cavalry was riding their heels. At every village they passed, mobs of people rushed them, desperate to know how long they had to gather their possessions and flee, while the roads were lined with ghostly faces devoid of hope and humanity, dragging their exhausted, sobbing children towards the promise of safety. Everywhere he looked, Sarkiades saw mounds of discarded family heirlooms; treasures passed tenderly from generation to generation only to be discarded in a roadside ditch in the mad rush to beat the phantom army to Fostrii. None of it, however, prepared him for what he saw in the city.

It was true that Lyst was a Navarid city-state in every sense of the word. It was located on the isle of Iores, they spoke true Navirz rather the dialect of Peris used on the Velian Plains, and they were more bound up in the endless feuding that characterized political life on the islands than Piristrus' struggle for regional dominance. However, the Gates of Menneas, that long pass through the Pythikas Mountains whose terminus was the city itself, meant that they had much closer contact with Fostrii than any of the cities on the Eunesian Plains. Their closest ally, Boronea, was all the way on the western shores of the island, while a short ferry ride was all that separated them from Fostrii. Sarkiades had spent a fair amount of time there in his youth, which made the sight of her ruin all the more heartbreaking.

One of his earliest memories had been the day his father first carried him up the titanic walls that were Lyst's great claim to fame. Even in the prime of his youth, serving in the Lystian army, he had dreaded those daily climbs, but to the eyes of a child it had seemed as though his father had ascended the tower of Dissak itself. He remembered how his dad lifted him up onto his shoulders so that he could see past the ledge to the twin mountain ranges ensconcing the Aedonae. He could still remember how that distant collection of walls and towers, forums and market squares had looked that day. The shock of realizing that those hazy battlements belonged to a city completely distinct from Lyst, and that the world was filled with thousands of such settlements, each with a culture and architecture and way of life entirely it's own.

Now too, Sarkiades felt his legs quake from the shock of what he witnessed, but it could not have been more different from the awe and joy that emanated from the memories of his childhood. Replaced by a sickening cocktail of pity, revulsion, rage, and despair that nearly compelled him to empty his stomach onto the muddy streets. The excited shouts that echoed out from the forum like a beacon on the day his mother first brought him to see

their harvest festival had been exchanged for a cacophony of sobs and lamentations. The great peals of laughter that had risen up in waves as actors played out the lives of bumbling halfwits enmeshed in the schemes of the spirits of the Silipian Forest were replaced by the low thrum of ten thousand sighs from men and women whose tragedies were far too real for stage catharsis to be of any use. Great throngs of people still lined the city's avenues, but they were not jostling for the best place to view the sacred relics as they were paraded through the streets, but for the tiny scraps of rations that were being divvied out by soldiers who looked nearly as broken as the refugees themselves.

Sarkiades watched this same war of duty and pity playing out in the faces of his own guards. How the harsh shouts they used to drive back the desperate crowds pushing and crying and begging to learn the fate of loved ones were in truth flimsy masks that did little to conceal their terror at the thought of turning their weapons against their own people. He watched it all, for there was nothing else he could do in the face of such abject horror.

Things only degenerated further as they wound their way down to the harbor. While Lyst had been built from the ground up to withstand a protracted siege, having more than enough space to support the entire population of the countryside back when the city was still a major power, she no longer had the large fleet that would be necessary to actually bring these refugees into her embrace. Even with every merchant ship for miles being conscripted into a vast flotilla that operated night and day, the influx of survivors from across the Velian Plain far outpaced their efforts. The well-ordered port facilities he remembered had collapsed into a sprawling, open air encampment without the slightest capacity to meet the dietary or hygienic needs of the frightened, raging thousands who'd come to reside there.

While, on paper at least, there were still ships bearing the Lystian flag used for official communications, even these vessels left Fostrii's harbor packed to bursting with refugees. This, of course, undid all of the benefits of such a system. The crowds, knowing that these messenger ships were just as likely to be the instrument of their salvation as the merchant vessels that were supposed to be boarding, rushed the Lystian ships with the same fervor as any other.

Sarkiades lost count of how many sobbing children were held up before him as if he were in some nightmarish market where pity and desperation were all that was left to barter with. How many broken husbands held their eyes to filthy streets as their wives begged him to make use of the one treasure still remaining to them. How many times he heard that sickening crack of the quarterstaff as the crowd grew unruly. Then they were being rushed up the gangway, the helpless cries echoing in their hearts even as Fostrii faded into the distance and the walls of Lyst loomed overhead.

## PART 5: EPILOGUE



“What do you think of his tale?” Nestullius asked, as much to break the oppressive silence that had fallen over the throne room as from sincere curiosity.

“Even if he didn't come with documents spelling out exactly what the Ukni intend to do, I trust Sarkiades as much as any of the men in this chamber.” King Telemeus answered. “The veracity of his account, if not the precise interpretation, is beyond dispute in my eyes. Furthermore, exempting the appearance of the Shugatyad, everything he's said seems to accord with our other intelligence sources. We'd been wearing circuits through the marble trying to figure out why King Vatreuvian had suddenly gone mute at the exact moment our greatest enemy launched a full scale invasion of his kingdom. The only reason we sent Sarkiades down there instead of half a dozen more qualified diplomats was that many of you thought Vatreuvian was in league with the Dark God, and wanted to make sure that our ambassador had the skills and willpower to take initiative should the worst come to bear. Given that we can now feel fairly certain that he wasn't working with the enemy, the most plausible explanation for Vatreuvian's silence is that he'd uncovered intelligence that Lyst was the Ukni's primary target. If Arikhe had not torn down the walls of Piristrus; if Vatreuvian had been able to draw out that siege for months or years, then it is not difficult to imagine a situation where the enemy's desire to capture Lyst could used to lure them away from his capital. Sarkiades had indicated that all of the mountain fortresses were manned at full capacity, though he believed this to be a result of the influx of refugees. It is also possible that Vatreuvian understood that those passes through the Lianin were his best chance of victory. After all, it doesn't matter how large your army is when they're moving three abreast through a narrow defile.”

“But a Shugatyad?” Nestullius asked. “Nobody has seen any trace of the order for generations. For one of their mages to appear from the ether, slaughter an Onguloch, and then disappear into the forest in the company of two men in Ukni uniforms seems beyond

absurd.”

“Then let us pull our thoughts away from the order and find some firmer ground to rest upon. We know with certainty that the enemy entered the Velian Plains with an Onguloch that was built to bring down city walls. Given that we've seen no sign of the creature since the siege on Piristrus, and that any sensible general would be making use of Arikhe's abilities, it seems reasonably certain that the beast is dead. Now, if King Vatrebian had had the means to slay the Onguloch himself, then he certainly would not have waited until he was dead and his city was in ruins to make use of it. Given just these three pieces of information, Sarkiades' story about a single, independent mage slaying Arikhe is the most sensible account available to us. Thus, the only real question is whether this mage is truly of the Shugatyad order, or whether there is another, equally powerful, equally strange school of magic whose practitioners chose this exact moment to reveal themselves. In either case, however, our situation remains fundamentally the same.” Telemeus said.

“Then what will we do?” Nestullius asked.

“That, my friend, is where my confidence falls silent. The best reason I can think of for the Ukni to create such a painfully detailed mock-up of our city walls would be in the service of a lightning advance over the Velian immediately after Piristrus fell; using the Onguloch to tear down our walls so that the elite strike force they've been training can rush the royal palace, slaying me before I've had the chance to take any, shall we say drastic action. If the Dark God held the Gates of Menneas, then he'd be able to quickly build a pontoon bridge linking us to Fostrii and his army would have an overland route straight to the walls of Stakalphis.”

“And now that Arikhe's dead?”

“I believe that Sarkiades' mage has purchased us some time, nothing more. That does not mean that I'm not grateful for the Onguloch's demise, as we have every reason to believe it would have been just as effective against our walls as it was against Piristrus. Rather, it would be better to say that I don't believe that Saklugz would go through all the trouble of reconstructing our city in the heart of his empire without having a few contingency plans in case everything went to hell.”

“So what should we do from here?” Nestullius asked.

“Well the cost of ferrying those refugees has taken a hefty bite out of my treasury, but that doesn't mean that there haven't been a few fringe benefits from this ordeal. Our own intelligence network has always been laughably inferior to the major powers, but if I'm not mistaken just this morning you were telling me about a boat bearing two dozen of Vatrebian's spies swearing allegiance to us in their lord's absence. Given all that, my first order is the immediate integration of every Piristran spy at our disposal into our own network, at which point we will set them to work discovering everything they can about the Shugatyad and his two companions.”

“Do you really think they can save us?”

“No.” Telemeus answered. “Or, at the very least, I do not think that we should depend upon their intervention. The Shugatyads are justly renowned as the Dark God's greatest enemies: the one order of mages that can invoke fear in the Tower of Dissak. However, their reputation as a cryptic band of unpredictable lunatics is equally deserved. It is just as



likely that those two men in Ukni uniform were carefully placed spies acting out a long-rehearsed plan to draw Arikhe from the city as that they were two random Ukni soldiers whom he happened to take pity on. The Shugatyads have a deep reverence for the pacts of defense that their ancestors made with ours, but they do not understand them in the same way that we do. Were that mage to be standing on our walls when the enemy arrive, then I have no doubt that he would fight for us with the same fervor as my most loyal soldiers. However, that same mage could just as easily spend months in the forest following some mad impulse without the slightest thought for our survival."

"What are we to do then, sit around and wait to see whether he comes to rescue us before or after our city's been destroyed?"

"No. We prepare as best as we are able under the assumption that we're on our own. As we're doing that, we throw every free resource at our disposal into learning the identities of those two men in Ukni armor. Our best chance at discerning the Shugatyad's intent rests with them."

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Sarkiades found himself gasping for air as he made his way up the battlements. There could be no denying that his time as an ambassador had softened him. It was often said that the walls of Lyst were the source of that distinct combination of austerity and egalitarianism that characterized his people. Every male citizen, be they a king or a commoner, had to make regular trips up those grueling stairs, and the threat of being seen gasping and wheezing as the mountain herdsman who made up the bulk of the infantry rushed past was enough to stifle the pompousness and gluttony that often came over the high and mighty.

Still, he was glad to be back. After hearing his story, King Telemeus had offered him a position on the royal council, but he'd refused it. In better times, he might not have been able to resist the call of such a prestigious posting, but a storm was coming from the north. The strength of every child of Naviras would soon be tested, be they man or woman, peasant or noble. The only real question was where he'd be standing in the hour of his trial, and if his experience at Piristrus had taught him nothing else, it was that he'd much rather pay the price his city demanded of him up here, where there was at least the delusion that a single warrior's skill could affect the outcome of a war of hundreds of thousands.

Sarkiades walked over to the rail, looking down upon the bedlam in the harbor. Dozens of ships struggled over a few meager slips that, in better times, would have barely seen this much traffic over the course of an entire day. His eyes caught upon one particularly aggressive vessel shoving its way out of the press, and he wondered whether it might be Targan and his crew. Without a navy worthy of the name, King Telemeus said that he'd be unable to bestow the kind of posting deserving of their heroic efforts, but that he would send a letter in his personal seal to Soledis of Boronea, the city's newly elected strategos, attesting to their skill and valor. In the meantime, however, the needs of the evacuation were such that he implored them to lend their aid.

Looking further out, Sarkiades was shocked at how calm and familiar the hazy outline of Fostrii's walls looked. If it weren't for the scene in the harbor, he could almost believe that things were just as they were before he'd left. That the horrors he'd witnessed were the problems of Piristrus and the other power players. That if he simply planted his feet upon these ancient stones and returned to his old duties, everything would go back to the way it had always been.

It was a lie, of course. Sarkiades let his gaze drift even further out, to the distant silhouettes of the Lianin Mountains, imagining the thousands of enemy soldiers gathering behind them for the coming war. Further still, he could just barely make out the hazy green of the Silipian Forest rubbing up against the mountain's foothills, and he found himself wondering whether the Shugatyad was out there somewhere, waiting for the opportunity to reveal himself to the adversary in earnest.

He'd heard enough tales of the order to feel confident that, eventually, the mage would move openly against the Dark God. However, those same stories made it abundantly clear that such an encounter would happen on the Shugatyad's own terms. Whether that was before or after the tiny city that was his home was devoured in the fires of war was another question entirely.

Sarkiades let the matter rest. The good thing about being a soldier was that the only things you really needed to worry about were whether you were standing where you were supposed to be standing, and whether your sword found its way into the soft flesh beneath your enemy's armor. After everything he'd gone through, not having to think about whether his decisions would change the fate of nations seemed about as good as warm meat and cold ale on a feast day, which was nice because the way things were going he doubted there'd be much cause for celebration.

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## 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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