

Lost Odyssey 2

By KawaiiAmethyst

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Following the events of twenty years prior, a "Cult of Gongora" had emerged, causing chaos around the world. Chief Inspector Jien Austere has apprehended its leader and prepares to lead him to Uhra to receive justice.

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1 - What Are You?

LOST ODYSSEY 2

Chapter One: What Are You?

The land was barren and dry. Thick yellow dust was its sea, occasionally swept from one patch to the next by an indolent wind.

“By the Gods, I could do with a drink,” Haleigh sleepily sighed, rubbing the sweat from his burnt brow. “A bourbon, or a gin, hell some cheap ale would really hit the spot. Damn, I’m hitting a pub first chance I get.”

Haleigh had been perched atop a cliff for the last hour or so, hidden behind a pile of boulders. A policeman from Gohtza had been hot on his trail for the last week, and had tracked him to the Kelsah Desert just outside of the border. He’d surprised Haleigh, equipped with a lighter blade and proved to be a worthy foe. It wasn’t too surprising, given Gohtza’s military tradition, but it was surprising to face someone with his stamina. Haleigh tapped the earth with his blade, anticipating a further attack.

The young man’s usually bouncy long raven locks were drenched in cool sweat. He ran his free leather-clad hand through it, shaking out the salty water. Haleigh puffed out, exhausted by the heat. “God damn it, track me or piss off. I swear, Gohtza must be getting desperate to let bums like him to enlist in their two-bit – “

PPPPPWWWWWOOOOOOSSSSHHHHH!

Haleigh was knocked back. One boulder had been knocked clear. That wasn’t possible, surely. But there he was. Adorned in a suit of a black heavy puffed material, heavier steel boots that reached below his knees, and finished with black armour around his vitals, the policeman from Gohtza could have been imposing, if it were anyone but the Bandit General Haleigh Tanequa had he picked a fight with. Haleigh wasn’t sure if the Gohtzan was smirking, for his face was covered with a steel helmet. But there were more important questions that required an answer; for example, where did he come from, and how the hell had he survived that heat in that armour?!

There was no time for pondering the great questions of life. The Gohtzan’s blade was directed at Haleigh. “By the law of Gohtza, you are under arrest,” he declared.

“Yeah, yeah, so you keep saying,” yawned Haleigh, meeting his blade with his own.

The two resumed combat, clinking swords around the canyon.

“You know...you don’t...have...to...do...this...” assured Haleigh, keeping an eye trained on the edge. “You...must...be...awfully...tired...officer...”

The Gohtzan gave no reply, keeping full pace with the Bandit General. As the two neared closer to the edge, Haleigh turned around, pushing his foe from the danger; the fall would have surely killed the Gohtzan.

“Be careful...you...” He gruffly laughed, nodding toward the danger. The Gohtzan replied by rounding on Haleigh, now forcing him closer to the edge of the cliff. “What...the...hell do...you...think...you’re – “

A gust of wind blew the Bandit General’s footing from under him. The Gohtzan went to grab his hand, but it was too late. Haleigh went over the edge. The fall was long, too long. Chief Inspector Austere, the policeman from Gohtza, couldn’t make out what lay below from his immediate vision, but he knew too well the dangers of the Kelsah Desert; he had become prey to ferocious reptiles and fallen for a few too many quicksand traps. If the Bandit General had survived the fall, then the desert would have taken care of the rest. It was a disappointment, the fugitive was supposed to return alive for questioning.

Austere readied for the trek back down the cliff, keeping his light blade close in case another of those ghastly giant lizards decided he’d make a tasty lunch. The Chief Inspector skidded down the steep face of the yellow rock, landing knees first into a dune. Finding his feet, he dusted the sand from his jacket and peered around. The Bandit General was nowhere in sight, but he had definitely fallen to the east of the tower-like cliff.

Cutting down reptiles and swarms of beetles as he trod through the dusty wilderness, Austere’s gaze remained firmly on the east. His immediate vision was blurred by the heat, and the haze of the desert made it difficult to clearly see the foreground with clarity, but his internal compass knew the correct route.

The haze grew thicker. Could it have been a sandstorm? The ground shuddered. Austere jumped. The ground now shook with fury. Austere fell to his knees, and watched as the yellow sand tore apart. A billion giant eyes burst through the rip. A great wail shook the land once more. Austere reached for the blade that had fallen from his grasp. He promptly turned to face the owner of those eyes and that wail; it was a humungous grey snake. No, more like a worm. It was pudgy, and soft, and made up of five equal, pumping parts. It was at least twenty times the size of any human.

This was just another ordeal. Locating the Bandit General was more critical. Austere held his sword with both hands, and lunged for the creature. He raced behind, leaping to its ‘back’, plunging his blade into its hide. No pained cry. It hadn’t faze the beast. Austere quizzically withdrew the blade, going to face the beast head on. Perhaps a stab to the eyes was necessary, or its heart, wherever that was. How bothersome.

The beast snarled at Austere, spraying globs of mucus at the Chief Inspector. Disgusting. Austere bounded from one spot to another in an attempt to evade the goo, when he was struck down in midair. The mucus was heavy and kept him pinned. “shoot.” Letting out another wail, the giant worm turned on its quarry, seizing Austere with its mighty jaws. Austere was gripped in spiky teeth, hurling into the burning atmosphere.

He struggled till his sword hand was free. Muscle torn and blood rushing from his wounds, Austere screamed as he plunged the sword into a cluster of red jelly eyes. Austere was relinquished. He grabbed

hold of the lip of the beast, blade facing out, and carved a long streaming wound as he skid down. The beast's cries of agony had slowed to a whimper by the time Austere had landed on solid ground. It fell to the side, whimpering in defeat.

Austere breathed a sigh of relief, rubbing his sore joints. The bleeding had already stopped, and his muscle tissue had mended, as was expected. What did come as a surprise was the figure standing to the opposite direction of the beast. It was definitely the Bandit General. He stared from the beast to Austere, a mix of perplexity and sickening disgust.

Austere couldn't tell how he had survived, but he was grateful all the same.

"How is this possible?" Haleigh demanded of the Chief Inspector.

"You are under arrest." Austere ignored the man, there was no time.

Haleigh clenched his free fist, narrowing his eyes at the fearless Gohtzan. "You're...inhuman! There's no way a normal person could have lasted this long out here...and done that!"

Austere grimaced under his helmet; Tanequa was hardly one to talk. "Come quietly. Or you will join the worm."

"Go to hell, pig!"

Austere charged, leaping over the carcass, meeting Haleigh once more. They continued their duel, their blades clashing with ever more intensity and vigour.

"You're...NOT human!" roared Haleigh, clashing down. "I get it...NOW...you're one of...THEM! AREN'T YOU!"

Austere could only parry against his furious blows. When he had had enough of deflecting, he took a chance to kick his foe's abdomen; the surprise returned the battle to an even duel.

"I am...an...inspector...of Gohtza...now return...peacefully...Haleigh...Tanequa...!"

"Like HELL I – Waaaaaaahhhgggaaaaaarrrr!"

The ground swallowed them whole. No, it wasn't the ground, it was a second worm. The two were swallowed by the mate of the first giant worm, who lay dead on the sandy plains.

The land was still. Quiet. Peaceful. A gentle wind blew over the piece of land where the two foes once faced off.

PPPPPPPPSSHHHHHHHHH!

Deep purple blood sprayed like a fountain from beneath the sand. Two small figures weakly clawed their way through the thick of the blood and sand, collapsing to the warmth of the dusty earth. They gasped, rolling around, glad to have survived in one piece, but horrified by the experience.

Austere was the first to gather himself. His bones quivering from the impact, he sprawled on his hands and knees, staring over at Haleigh, who was on his back, trying to catch his breath. Haleigh barked out a laugh. "Oh my god!" he laughed harder, rubbing his chest, "What...WHO are...YOU?"

Austere grabbed his sword, and shakily rose to his feet. Each step was sheer agony, but he came to tower over the Bandit General. He looked down upon the fugitive, who was still laughing.

"Come on man," he jeered, "let's see your face! Let's see which man almost captured the Bandit General!"

Almost? Oh, he had also taken hold of his sword.

Austere stared at the man in contempt. A mass murderer was in no position to make demands of a Chief Inspector of Gohtza. It was stuffy in that helmet, though.

"If you insist." Austere, kept his gaze level as he undid the clips under his neck, and slid the helmet over his face. Austere breathed in the heavy humidity, coughing as the helmet rolled away.

Haleigh immediately ceased his laughter. His deep blue eyes widened, taking in the delicate pale features of his enemy, who glared in turn with striking aqua eyes. "You're a – "

"I am Chief Inspector Jien Austere of Gohtza Capital's third district. You are under arrest, Haleigh Tanequa."

"- chick." Haleigh shook off the shock, returning her glare. "What are you, immortal?" He scoffed, amused by his suggestion.

Jien Austere closed her eyes in quiet contemplation, before beating him over the head with the hilt of her sword. "Maybe."

2 - Request and Order

Chapter Two: Request and Order

Chief Inspector Jien Austere was met by two Gohtzan soldiers as she approached the gate of the border. They feared their eyes were deceiving them when she presented the infamous Bandit General confined in chains. Haleigh snapped at them like a wild animal. They jumped back, allowing the pair passage. Haleigh smirked at their idiocy.

Jien pulled the chain tighter. "Ouch! I call police brutality, you'll be reported, missy." He was ignored.

"A train will be along shortly to take us to the capital," she informed her prisoner, leading him to the platform.

It had taken more than ten years for the magical trains to be restored to their full working capacity. A devastating magical ice storm had destroyed the line, not to mention much of the grand city of Gohtza. The trains that were once used as a means of transportation for commuters and general travellers of Gohtza were repaired to be utilised for the reconstruction and management of the city. There was no telling when the trains would be used by the average citizen again.

"Ma'am," coughed one of the soldiers, "how...how did you do it?"

Jien turned to the soldier, "What would that be?"

The soldier, intimidated by tales of the dreaded Bandit General nudged his head toward the prisoner. "You know."

Jien cocked her head.

"I was captivated," cut in the prisoner, "by the dear lady's beauty."

The soldier's eyebrow rose, taking a minute to size up the Chief Inspector. It was impossible to tell her body type under her armour, though her soft golden hair fell neatly over her shoulders, and her cheeks were high and flush, her skin a delicate pale tan, and eyes sparkled aqua, like a clear ocean. She was good looking for sure, but captivating was overstating that fact. "Uh-huh."

Jien rolled her eyes, irritated to have one man demeaning her skills as a warrior, and another demeaning her femininity. It was a relief when the train arrived. When the doors open, she pulled the chains and pushed her captive through the doors. The soldiers weakly farewelled them as they watched the train leave.

The soldier turned to his companion. "So, how do you really think she did it?"

"I dunno," the other shrugged, "but I know I wouldn't want to piss someone like that off."

“Oh...yeah.”

Jien sat cross-legged, her captive sitting a metre away. She stared into space, counting down the hours she would be back in the capital, reporting to their superiors. Perhaps she would be commemorated for capturing the world’s most wanted fugitive; she hoped a pay rise would be involved.

Haleigh rubbed his small crooked nose, his wrists in chains. “Hey, would you mind loosening these?”

“Actually, I would,” she replied, closing her eyes. “Go to sleep, it will make the journey quicker.”

“Ugh, yeah, because that’s exactly what I’d want.”

Without looking at the man, Jien unsheathed her sword, presenting the hilt. “I could knock you out again, if you desire.”

Haleigh held out his chained hands in defence. “Um, no, no, sleep is good!” He feigned a yawn. “Yeah, man, I am so tired. I think I’ll take a nice long nap.”

The sword was returned to its sheath. The hum of the train was so relaxing.

The Gohtzan High Council had been notified when the Bandit General was in custody; the man had eluded the authorities of many nations for several months. It was an extraordinary morale booster for the country that they be the only ones that managed what appeared impossible.

The title of “Bandit General” had thrived for dozens of generations, passed down from father to son. The Bandit General lead a highly organised band of thieves, though their crimes tended to be reserved to larceny and the black market. This generation’s Bandit General had expanded the group’s repertoire to carnage and mass destruction.

The crime which elicited the manhunt, however, involved the destruction of half of the Uhra naval fleet and over a hundred merchants off the coast of Uhra. The King and Queen of Uhra personally issued the warrant for his arrest, and demanded he be brought in alive.

Now that Gohtza had Uhra’s most wanted criminal, the Gohtzan High Council was delighted to host the King of Uhra, and invited him to sit with them in their chambers.

“I cannot express the depth of my gratitude to the people of Gohtza for capturing this...man,” King Tolten considered stronger terms of reference for the beast who took so much from him, but decided on civility, in case he were to be swept away in rage.

Councilman Redgrave bowed his bald head from across the room. “Uhra was once the enemy of our nation, it is truly sad that we must unite under such circumstances.”

“Indeed,” interjected Councilwoman Teffing. “Two decades ago a common enemy seized hold of Uhra, and devastated the mighty kingdom of Gohtza. To think another would move to demobilise the world, and deem himself the successor of that...Gongora...is an outrage.”

Councilman Geuna stroked his long white beard, “This so-called ‘Cult of Gongora’ is quite a mystery, ay. All they do it cause devastation. What is their plan, I wonder?”

King Tolten clenched his teeth. The name ‘Gongora’ always sent a shiver down his spine. He would never forgive himself or that man, for the atrocities that still plagued the world. “Unfortunately, Uhan intelligence has been unable to determine the true goal of the ‘Cult’, however, their actions to date lead us to believe they are anarchists. Officially, we are calling them terrorists.”

Councilman Redgrave waved to a thin middle aged man who sat opposite King Tolten. “Dalquist, what say you?”

“Sir?” He questioned, straightening his monocle.

“Have your men secured new information from the prisoner?”

The High Council directed their gaze to Metropolitan Police Commissioner Edvard Dalquist, who coyly cleared his throat at the attention. “It is my dishonour to say not. The Bandit General is as steadfast as the stories claim. He will not respond to routine inquiry, nor of...less polite lines of inquiry.”

“I see.” The High Council was heavy of heart.

King Tolten felt the gloom of the room; he smiled, nodding his approval to Dalquist. “I humbly thank you for your efforts, Commissioner; your team have performed magnificently. You have much to be proud of.”

“You are far too kind, Your Highness.”

Big blue eyes beamed up at her, a smile cracked over the face of the young boy. He held out a flower wreath, placing it on her crown. “One day I’ll give you one made of gold, I will!” the boy determined, looking up at her. “It’ll be shiny and everything, you’ll see, big sister!”

Jien laughed, rubbing his head. “Sure, sure. Now run back to your mother, dinner should be ready soon, so you’ll need to wash up.”

The boy pulled a face, but reluctantly agreed. “I’ll see you tomorrow, big sister!”

What a sweet kid, she thought, petting her crown of flowers.

The air suddenly felt hot and putrid. Fire was everywhere. People were screaming, and running in a mad panic.

“Where are you? What’s going on?! No, this can’t be happening! Aaaaarrhhhhh!”

Jien fell from her stool, crashing to the hard wooden floor. A passerby helped her to her feet. “You must have had quite a nightmare.”

“Oh, nightmare...that’s right. It was a nightmare.” A trickle of cool sweat lined the frame of her face.

“Chief Inspector, have you tried out those herbal supplements I recommended?” offered Rosa, the owner of the café Jien frequented.

Jien nodded. “Yes, but I only take them at night. I can’t be sleeping on the job; at least, not on purpose.”

“Don’t you worry, hun,” assured Rosa, “After what you did, I bet the High Council will give you a year long vacation!” That prospect sounded rather pleasant.

“I can only dream,” she wryly smiled, paying the bill. She exited the café and began her walk down the street of the Third Precinct. She waved to the usual merchants and the construction workers out on break.

It was funny to think that twenty years ago Gohtza’s capital was divided into three unequal towns, High, Mid and Low. The magic snow storm had destroyed High Town and froze over most of Mid Town, leaving Low Town Gohtza’s primary hub. Since that time Gohtza had undergone a social revolution that reverberated across the entire nation; the caste system of ancient times was revoked and in that place emerged a system that based worth on the merits of the individual.

Gohtza relied on the wisdom of the elected High Council, and the strength of its police force to guide the rebuilding of the nation. Though they were no longer a mighty superpower, they were united. Jien Austere was proud to be a cog in the system, though she had been involved with the Gohtzan police force longer than any of her colleagues, not that she cared to dwell on that fact.

BUMP!

“Pardon me!” Yelled the young police officer who had rudely bumped into Jien. He didn’t sound apologetic. “I have been called to a domestic dispute!”

Jien grabbed the young man’s arm. “First, you will apologise properly.”

The young officer tried to pull away, “Do you mind? I have far more important matters to attend to! Now release me, you lowly beat walker, I am Tobias Rykiel, I am a Sergeant!”

Jien released her grip. “Well, do forgive my rudeness, Sergeant.” The Sergeant nearly fell forward. He regained his composure, huffed and ran on his way. Jien folded her arms; that young man was itching for a demotion.

“Chief Inspector Austere, do you copy?” muffled a voice in her ear.

Jien pressed a button on her belt. "I copy, where's the fire?"

"In the Police Commissioner's office; you know the location, correct? He has requested your presence."

"Now?" her heart skipped a beat; she would finally know what her reward would be.

"Yes, now. Now hurry, we've got a pool going on what the HC is offering. I say it's a tickertape parade, Jonas thinks it's gonna be a golden statue outside of the Council Hall, and Mala thinks – "

"Roger that." Jien turned off the radio. She pulled a wide grin, and began to sprint down the road at the speed of that haughty sergeant.

The last time Jien had spoken with Metropolitan Police Commissioner Dalquist was to gain permission to pursue the Bandit General. He had expressed little to no faith in her request, but agreed to it anyway. She could imagine the look of horror in his face when he had learnt that a little woman had overpowered such a brute.

Jien checked in with his secretary and was promptly invited to step into the commissioner's office. It was a spacious room, but felt cluttered; the walls were covered in paintings of eclectic styles; beside the left wall were rows of houseplants sitting and hanging; the office library was an odd mix of literature on constitutional law to a children's picture book of kelolons; and the commissioner's desk was cluttered with stacks of documents and snow globes. He was an odd character, but no one would ever deny the strength and genius of the man who had saved Gohtza from marshal law.

Jien bowed deeply to her superior, who sat at his desk signing documents. "You called for me, sir?"

Dalquist didn't meet her gaze. He instead motioned a large chair before him. Jien assumed he meant for her sit. As she reached around, she was startled to meet King Tolten of Uhra, who rose to his feet.

"Your Majesty!" she exclaimed, falling to one knee.

King Tolten smiled. "Please, do rise, Chief Inspector Austere. It is I who should be bowing before you."

Jien did as she was told, placing her hands behind and straightening her back. "Your Majesty?"

"Uhra and I, no, the world, owes you a great debt."

Jien blushed; it was quite true.

"I would gladly give you anything you desire – land, money, a title, a high ranking position in the Ufran army."

Dalquist frowned at that last suggestion; typical Uhra.

“But I fear that will have to wait. You see, I have a request.”

Jien narrowed her eyes at the king, “A request?”

King Tolten lowered his eyes, he appeared troubled. “You see, it would not be safe for the Bandit General to be ferried to Uhra by Uhrans. I cannot guarantee his safety from my men, or myself. If I were to meet this man alone I know passion would get the better of me, and I would take his life. Do you understand?”

She considered his words. She felt her own eyes lowering. “I...see.”

“If the Bandit General were to be slain, he would be martyred in the eyes of the Cult of Gongora. Chief Inspector, you had the intelligence and power to bring this man down, I believe you are key to bringing him to Uhra for justice.”

The carpet was chequered green and grey, there was a coffee stain by the desk that reminded Jien of Councilman Diorite’s head.

“Chief Inspector?”

Jien looked up, meeting the king’s expectant gaze. “I apologise, Your Majesty. I was attempting to compute the route I would take to reach your fine country.” She internally groaned. Wealth and an obnoxious title would have to wait – there was always more work to be done.

The King exhaled in relief. “Excellent, excellent, I am so pleased that you will undertake this mission!”

Jien forced a smile, politely bowing. “And I expect we will meet you in Uhra, Your Majesty.”

“Let us hope. Alas my work often takes me from my mother country. But I assure you, if I am not present, you will be warmly greeted by Queen Tisne and the Senate, who will take responsibility for the prisoner.”

He reached into a leather bag by his side and presented her with two golden wristlets, carved with ancient text. One held a blue stone, and the other, a red stone. “Chief Inspector, these bands were crafted by Uhra’s finest sorcerer; consider them to be magical chains. The prisoner will wear the red stoned band and you will wear the blue stoned band. If he attempts to escape or to harm you, all you need do is will him harm and he will be immobilised.”

Jien frowned. “I thank you, but I don’t believe that will be necessary.”

“Then consider it an extra precaution. One can never be too cautious, correct?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, that is true. Have they been tested?”

Jien swore she caught a vein on King Tolten forehead pop out. “Yes...I can guarantee their

effectiveness. The queen and I tested their power before I left for Gohtza.” The king cleared his throat, his eyes widening in terror as he recounted the memory. “Evidently the queen bears certain ill tension toward me.”

“That is typical of any wife, is it not?” offered Dalquist.

Jien lightly laughed. King Tolten politely nodded to Dalquist, not so reassured.

King Tolten suddenly took Jien’s hands; she felt a tingle down her spine; his touch beared a familiar warmth. “That monster took someone most important from me, a friend close to my heart; you have my personal appreciation for apprehending this villain and I am eternally in your gratitude. When you arrive in Uhra you will be treated as a hero. I swear, you will have whatever your heart desires.”

His eyes were so blue and so bright, but so sad and pleading. Jien relaxed into a warm, reassuring smile. “Your Majesty, I am humbled by your faith in me. I graciously accept in the name of the Gohtzan Police Force.”

“And if you’d refused, I’d have ordered you to anyway,” cut in Dalquist.

King Tolten went to protest, but was cut off by Dalquist. “Austere, you have a long trip to pack for, be prepared; you leave at the morrow’s light.”

Jien slipped her fingers from the king’s solemn grasp. She bowed to her superior. “Understood.” She bowed once more to the king and walked to exit the office. Just as she opened the door, she turned toward Dalquist, internally smirking. “Sir, I have a request of my own.”

“Say it.”

“Though I am strong, it will take more than one set of eyes to determine a given situation.”

“You request a team to assist you?”

Jien shook her head. “No sir, just one other will do.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

She nodded. “Yes sir. There is a talented young sergeant that would be a great asset to this mission.”

“That sounds fantastic,” remarked King Tolten, “I discovered many years ago the value of a team effort.”

Dalquist tapped his pen. Who was running Gohtza’s police force, again? “Yes, Austere, that will be fine.”

3 - This Is A Joke

Chapter Three: This is a Joke

Jien was standing by South Gate with her map; she was highlighting the quickest path to Uhra. If luck favoured their journey they would only need to cross the Ice Canyon to Saman, and from there board a ship to Uhra. However, if someone were to recognise Haleigh, it would be dangerous to spend an extended length of time on a ship. In that case they would have to cut through the Black Cave to Tosca, and from there travel through several forests and smaller settlements to the ranges of Ipsilon Mountain, leading them to Uhra.

In the distance she could hear the clanking of armour; a band of soldiers marched in unison: two stood at the front, two flanked on either side and four marched at the back. Inside this formation was Haleigh Tanequa, chained and gagged.

The soldiers came to a halt at Jien's feet, and bowed. Without a word they spaced out and presented the prisoner. Haleigh felt a sharp blade nudge him forward. He muffled something and tipped his head as a 'good morning'.

"Good work boys," the Chief Inspector complimented, "I'll take over from here."

The soldiers were hesitant to leave their post, lest the Bandit General were to assail the young woman. She turned on the soldiers that stood to the front and flicked their arms till they stood clear. Satisfied with the distance, Jien trotted back, drew her blade and ran at the Bandit General, dicing off the chains that bound him.

Panicked by the sudden act, the men all dispersed, drawing their blades, closing in on Haleigh, who didn't appear fussed. He cracked his knuckles, rolled his shoulder blades and ripped off his gag. "Honestly, you tell one lame knock-knock joke and you're gagged liked last night's pork roast."

"D-don't m-m-m-ock the d-death of K-k-k-ing M-m-mars!" fiercely stammered a middle aged soldier, pushing his sword closer to Haleigh's Adams apple.

Haleigh shrugged, noticing Jien's lip curled up irately. "Fine, fine, then would you like to hear some Numara gags? I have two words for you: dragon-sushi."

A golden band clasped over Haleigh's left wrist. "And I have two words for you," replied Jien, fastening a similar band to her wrist, "custody-pain."

"You wanna talk about pain," spat Haleigh, scruffing his unkempt dark locks, "I asked for chilled water and received lukewarm brown stuff; I asked for raisin toast and was given mouldy bread – which I suspect was poisoned, but let's go with a lousy kitchen." Haleigh leered at a random soldier, who drew back anxiously. "Perhaps you Gohtzans didn't hear about it, but treaties were signed assuring decent treatment of prisoners."

Jien admired the shiny blue jewel of her new wrist band. "Oh, yes -"

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaggghhhhhhhhhhh!!!" Haleigh fell to his knees furiously digging his fingers into his scalp. The soldiers spread out, watching the Bandit General writhe in agony, cursing bloody murder.

"I did hear about those treaties," continued Jien, idly stroking the blue stone, "but those only apply to prisoners of war, not felons."

Haleigh glared at Jien, who sweetly smiled, pointing to her new accessory. "This is a gift from King Tolten. According to him I only need will it to hurt you. Tell me, did you feel anything, a slight twinge perhaps?"

"I am going to kill y-yyy-yyyyyyyyyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaggghhh!" Haleigh punched at the concrete as jolts of electricity ran up his spine, blasting his brain.

"Ah, so you did feel something then," decided Jien, walking past him to stand before the soldiers.

"It's all covered here, you're dismissed," she advised them. They took their time to obey, but eventually the men pulled back. She watched them walk up the bridge, and would wave when they'd hesitantly look back. Once they were out of sight Jien returned to her map.

Haleigh limply rose to his feet, his knees shaking and his breath heavy. The Bandit General somehow found the strength to saunter over to Jien, and weakly caught hold of her shoulder. "That hurt."

"If you behave you will have nothing to worry about," she informed him, "and you'd better; I'll bet enough of those shocks could kill you."

Haleigh shook his head, gruffly laughing. He patted Jien's shoulder, "It's a good thing I can't die then."

Jien closed her eyes, scrunching the sides of the map, "Utter nonsense."

~@~

A haze of warm steam ever rose to meet the ancient figures chiselled into the walls of the queen's bathing room. Bright green ferns sat at the entrance and around the corners of the dim room. Rays of light radiated from a high barred window, bearing down on a jewel encrusted round golden bath that resembled a goblet.

Lazily seated within the golden goblet a young woman hummed. Engrossed in fumes of incense and her heated surrounds, she relaxed her position further back, arching one leg. Her hazel-green eyes sparkled, and her bronze tanned skin shone with sweat. The woman's dark chocolate hair, held up neatly with a silver comb, grew damp from the steam.

She was Tisne, queen of Uhra, the leading country of scientific magic study and commercial enterprise.

The country had continued its strong industrial growth following the demise of the pretender king, Gongora. With consent of the good citizens, King Tolten arranged a sizable degree of that wealth be put to funding the restoration of the damage caused by Gongora, most notably, the rebuilding of Gohtza. The king would frequently make trips to congregate with leaders, and ensure progress was on schedule, leaving his queen to manage the affairs of the homeland.

Tisne stretched one hand, searching for a small bottle. When she had found her quarry, the bottle was opened; a peach stream of gel released to her palm. Raising her already arched leg, the bronzed woman purred as she took her time to work the gel up the exposed part of her soft thigh, and over her knee to her well toned calf.

After lathering her other leg, the queen resumed her relaxed position. Sighing peacefully, she eyed a bowl of bright orange Quiberries by her side. She plucked the topmost of the pile, biting into its sour flesh, savouring the refreshing aftertaste.

There came a rapping at the door. The queen released the berry's head into the saucer beside the bowl. "Who is there?"

"Your Highness," began the gravelly booming voice of an older man, "it is I, Yudile."

"Senator, you are daring to try to catch a glimpse of a bathing queen," Tisne silkily jeered, "shall I hear you out, or send you to the stocks at once?"

Yudile heartily laughed, stroking the length of his braided silver beard, "My word, this generation has gotten soft. In my day the punishment for beholding the naked body of the queen was a trip to the rack."

Tisne paused to grin, reaching for a towel as she stepped out her bath. "Now then, I assume the cause of this visit was to be more than a history lesson, what brings you?"

"Yes, of course," began the older man, "there is word from King Tolten."

The queen stroked the towel over her right shoulder, slowing at her husband's name, "Oh? Did he see the prisoner?"

"No, Your Highness, though he did meet the young woman who caught the Bandit General and convinced her to transport the prisoner to Uhra."

Tisne threw the towel to one side to adorn a red silken robe. She seated herself at an ivory vanity, primping her damp brown hair, noting the deep rouge of her cheeks. The racing of her pulse informed her it was not due to the bath's steam. "One will hardly be sufficient, I would have preferred he requested aid from the Gohtzan army to ferry him to Uhra. After all, this is the demon who murdered...who decimated our navy."

"We are of a same mind, Your Highness," assured the senator, "which is why I requested to be the one to deliver the message. On behalf of the Senate, with your royal seal, I would like the Uhran army to meet the party at Paravey Rocks. That is, if the Gohtzan makes it that far."

“That is a fair distance from our country,” remarked the queen, “Would that not go against the king’s design? We are supposed to appear impartial to serve justice. If the army does walk through the gates with the Bandit General, our neighbours may think us hypocritical, and Gohtza will surely take offense.”

Yudile folded his thick arms over his rotund belly, bothered by the queen’s hesitance. “Your Highness, the closer he gets to Uhra the more likely is his bid for escape!”

Tisne closed her eyes, dourly rubbed her forehead.

“The army would only act as an escort, and will walk behind the Gohtzan,” Yudile pleaded, “this I swear. We cannot under any circumstances allow this fiend to escape justice!”

The queen coolly stared into the mirror, her bronze face flushed pale.

“Highness!”

“Very well,” Tisne sighed, dabbing a finger into a dish of moisturiser, one of dozen cosmetics by the mirror. “But if the army violates the terms of their issue, your position on the Senate will be under review. Do you understand?”

Though behind the door, she could sense his deep bow. “You have my gratitude, the papers will be written up at once.”

Tisne stroked the cool cream over the bridge of her nose and around her cheek bones.

~@~

“When do we leave?” yawned Haleigh, tugging at the gold band.

“When my assistant gets here,” replied Jien, eyeing the bridge. “I asked him to arrive a bit later than us.”

“So you could enslave me with the girly bracelet,” he casually noted.

Jien nodded. “I didn’t want to frighten the boy.”

“Aww, how touching. Say, is that the kid over there?” Haleigh pointed to a figure darting around the bridge. He appeared lost, or drunk.

“I...think so,” offered Jien, narrowing her eyes to get a better look. “What is he doing I wonder.”

The young man would jump to one side, peer around and move forward a few steps, and then bound to the other side and repeat. When he came within steps of the pair, he was greeted with quizzical stares.

“Madam, sir,” the young man exclaimed. “You must evacuate the area immediately! I can’t tell you why, but this is an order from the Metropolitan Police.”

“How scary!” shrieked Haleigh, clutching his sides in terror.

Jien rolled her eyes at the display. “We’ll be fine, my name is – “

“Madam, failure to comply will result in a fine,” the young man sternly warned, “I don’t want to write one, but I will if I have to. It’s for your own safety.”

“The kid’s right,” said Haleigh, nodding in agreement, “we’d better head back. I’m freezing my nuts off out here.”

“You are Sergeant Tobias Rykiel,” stated Jien.

The young man huffed. “That’s correct. Now please leave the area!”

“I have been waiting for you. I am Jien Austere.” She offered him her hand. Tobias stared at it suspiciously. Jien twisted her lips, and pulled her hand back. “Is there a problem, Sergeant?”

Tobias outstretched his arms, looking around the bridge in defeat. “OK guys, you got me! Ha-ha, very funny!” He turned to Haleigh, and gave his arm a good punch. “I’ll bet you’re a friend of the superintendant. Well you can tell him that I wasn’t fooled for a second! This is just like the last solstice party. Only this time, I won’t be the one hanging off the streetlamp by my breeches.”

Jien blinked. Haleigh quietly looked from his arm to the young man. “He...hit me.”

“I am Chief Inspector Jien Austere, and you are acting most erratically, Sergeant Rykiel,” Jien forced herself to be calm.

“Come now,” he gibed, staring her down with a knowing grin, “you’re far too young. And look at you; you couldn’t take down a kelolon, let alone a terrorist like the Bandit General!”

Jien grimaced.

“Bet she could take you down,” uttered Haleigh.

“And you!” Tobias barked accusingly at Haleigh.

“Me?” Haleigh peered around, yep, it was him.

“You’re way too soft to be the Bandit General,” Tobias declared. “The real one is so muscular he could tear a hole through you with his pinkie finger.”

“No way,” Haleigh gawked, “Damn, I am such a badass.”

The morning was wearing on and Jien was growing ever more impatient to set off. She stormed over to the young sergeant, sharply grabbing his earlobe. Tobias went to pull away, but was only met with more pain.

"I am Jien Austere – your su-per-ior," she pushed him to face Haleigh, "and that grinning idiot is Haleigh Tanequa, the Bandit General. I know he doesn't look too frightening, but he really did blow a hole off the western shore of Uhra."

"I reject that charge," interjected Haleigh. "I was merely at the right place at the wrong time."

Jien ignored him, instead pushing Tobias to face her. "Now that we have that straightened out, we have to get a move on. If we leave now we can make it to Saman before nightfall." She released the young sergeant, who began to edge back slowly. The joke was over.

"He's...really...HIM?" Tobias quietly gulped; his eyes were now wide as gulf balls. "But, but, but...he's NOT CHAINED!"

Jien scratched her head, "Yeah, you don't have to worry about that. He won't be going anywhere." She displayed her gold band and pointed to the similar one on Haleigh. While she realised Tobias wouldn't understand the meaning, knowing Haleigh's character, it wouldn't take her long to give a demonstration. "You'll have to trust me, Sergeant."

Haleigh cutely winked, sending a shiver down the boy's spine.

Tobias, a fair distance away now, pointed at Jien, "And you're the one who caught him?! But you're so _"

"Yes, I do look unimposing in plain clothes; that's the point of not wearing the uniform," she calmly explained.

"I don't believe thi –"

"And we're off," announced Jien, walking toward the gate. Haleigh obediently followed. Tobias glumly watched on debating whether to follow. Evidently, she was serious.

"Hey...wait Chief Inspector!"