



Rajuban

High Priest Rajuban wound his way down the dank steps below the old foundation of the palace. His desire to be closer to the Lugienese conquests in the east was deferred by the picturesque preparations he made while remaining in the Capitol. At least for now. I've always preferred to play the long game. The foundations of this great construct are nearly complete. There will be plenty of time to decorate later.

He smiled to himself as he recalled the years of subtle comments, favors, and humiliations he had been forced to endure before he was able to finally dislodge one of his oldest enemies, Grobennar, from his seat of favor with the God-king. There had been times when he had despaired, believing the task too great even for his masterful schemes, but at long last, he had succeeded in ascending to the highest position possible, and his momentum would continue until he was marked the greatest High Priest ever to don the sash, perhaps more. He sighed, but for every great accomplishment seen in the light, one must complete a great many more in the shadows.

His nose twitched at the powerful scent of sulfur while the bottom of his robes grew heavy with the mire from the perpetually damp, stone corridor. Rajuban carried in his left hand,

a single torch, the illumination from which served only to confirm that the door he sought remained several paces away. I really should talk to Magog about having this prisoner relocated to the main dungeon. How dangerous could the washed up old man truly be? Perhaps not at all. However, the best kept secrets are best kept secret. He nodded to himself and increased his pace.

Reaching the door at last, Rajuban pulled out the key he had borrowed from the two guards stationed at the entrance to this long-neglected section of old fortress. The hinge creaked as the High Priest pushed. The mixed scent of human waste, filth, and sulfur assaulted his senses and Rajuban shuddered as he worked through an incantation that would dull that aspect of his senses. Even still, he could taste the stagnant, putrid air. He walked over to the sconce along the adjacent wall and lit an additional torch, then set his own upon the floor beside the stone chair he had forced the guards to carry down several moons earlier.

A tangle of greasy, shoulder-length curls dangled from a downcast face. The former High Priest sat with his back against the wall, knees apart, elbows resting atop them, leaving his forearms and hands dangling limp above bare feet. He looked the part of a defeated man one thousand times over.

Rajuban did his best to greet the man in a voice of joviality, though he knew there was no way he could wash away the sound of condescension that came with his station, especially when conversing with he who sat before him, a living obscenity. “Now, now, is this any way to greet your High Priest, old friend? I know it has been a long time since you yourself wore the robes of honor, but this is not my first visit.” He exhaled. “I only ask for the smallest semblance of respect. After all, I’m the closest thing you have to a friend in all the world. You should be thankful I

come at all. Klerós alone knows the depths of suffering that comes with all these years in isolation.”

The man did not move, hadn't so much as acknowledged his arrival. Rajuban leaned in closer, listening now for breathing. Don't tell me the man has gone and died on me.

He took a step closer, then squatted down, just beyond reach, and listened. He heard only the faintest sound of air, a wheezing of the lungs. Alive. Good. Very good. I'm going to have to have him fed a little better though. He is far too close to death for my liking. How am I to extract secrets from a man so near to death that he might cross over at the mere suggestion of pain?

“Baldemar, you know why I have come.”

The man remained a deathly statue. Rajuban grunted, then stood so he could pull out the loaf of bread, along with a skin of wine. The cheese he set aside, that was the treat this man would be denied until he offered a proper greeting. Rajuban took a long pull from the skin, reinserted the plug, and dropped it between the man's feet. He then extended the loaf of bread. Baldemar still gave no reaction.

“Hey!” Rajuban smacked the living corpse across the face with the bread. “Take your gifts. Unlike you, I have a schedule. You know, with events and meetings. You remember having responsibilities now, don't you? Now more than ever. Yes, did you know? The purge is well underway. I believe this slipped my mind during our last visit. Anyway, I've many strings to pull in order to stay ahead of my enemies, both within and without the Empire.”

Red, bloodshot eyes slowly rolled up to meet the extended bread. Then a set of filthy, shaky hands took hold.

“That’s it, good. To receive a gift with gratitude is a sign of a healthy, humble spirit. Alright then. Down to business.”

Rajuban walked over to sit in the chair facing the prisoner, then brought hands to his lap. “Now. Word of our conquests has brought about renewed interest in a topic that I believe you may be able to assist. In exchange for your compliance, I am willing to offer you something grand. Are you ready to hear my offer?”

The broken soul looked up through the breaks in his hair and said in a hoarse voice, “I have been down here for many years. I have told you, and the High Priest before you, and the one before that. I have told each of you everything I know. Just let me pass on to the next life of suffering that awaits me. I could use a change of scenery.”

Rajuban scoffed, “I am not like the others. They were all fools with no grasp of the bigger board upon which this game is played. Now. Questions. Word has traveled here from our conquest of Brinkwell that there was a contingent of women who wielded a form of magic that resisted castration much like the tazamines we find from time to time within the Empire. They were said to wear gray cloaks.” The prisoner attempted not to react, but he was no master of deception like Rajuban. His face may as well have gone wide-eyed in recognition.

Rajuban continued, “It is my understanding that the prisoner who seduced you all those years ago fit well the description of these women, including the garb, well that is, before she was imprisoned. It was also said that she resisted the castrations set upon her. You spent months questioning her before she convinced you to betray your loyalties to Klerós and the Empire. And as I said, I am no fool. I have a new theory about the extent of your relationship.”

Rajuban tsked, and walked over to crouch before the man. “I believe that you betrayed more than just your political oaths...” He waited for a response, but the man awarded him nothing so he continued. “You defiled your oath of purity to the Lugienese race. You allowed not only one prisoner to escape, but two.”

The man paused as he chewed the bread, but only for a moment before resuming. He made no other show of reaction. Let’s see how he does with this. “We have found the child, though this abomination is now grown. However, the expected propensity for betrayal appears to be hereditary, and has been revealed to the fullest extent. If you help me, I will allow you to see the fruit of your lust. It will not be long until this anathema, this abomination has been taken into our custody. And after this, I may even allow you to at long last enter into the next life. But none of this can happen if you don’t first help me understand this witchcraft of theirs.”

The prisoner began to struggle for breath. Was he choking? I’m going to have to touch this disgusting bag of flesh, aren’t I?

Just before he did, he realized he had been wrong. Baldemar wasn’t choking; he was laughing. Rajuban’s blood boiled. How dare he? And what could possibly be so humorous about this? I’m offering to reunite him with his only living kin before finally ending his torment. He drew in his magic, a dark rage threatening to overtake his need to keep the prisoner alive.

Baldemar spoke then, “Finally. I thought she had been wrong. After so many years, I’m ashamed to say that I doubted. I started to believe that I had imagined her last words.” He had returned to his mad-man’s laughter, the sound echoing around the small prison of stone and mud, each hearty exhalation, a slap to Rajuban’s pride.

“What are you—stop laughing!”

Baldemar did not stop. The chilling sound intensified as he spoke, each word blending into infuriating guffaws; Rajuban felt his grip on restraint slipping.

“I feel your magic, but you won’t kill me. Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.” The man was taunting him. He’s gone completely mad. There is no use for him.

His words continued, stilted by his boisterous laughter. “She was right all along. You are a fool; you’ll fail to collect all of the pieces in time to stop them. You’ll—”

Rajuban’s anger overtook his good sense, and he sent a wave of air at the man, knocking him hard against the wall. But recognition of the man’s last words prevented him from finishing the job.

He couldn’t possibly know about the stones. He must have been speaking metaphorically. He’s a raving lunatic. But if this man did know about Magog and Rajuban’s active search to reunite the ancient relics of power, what else did he know? Rajuban had attempted to delve into the man’s mind on two occasions, but had found nothing but dead ends. His mind had been somehow damaged, or perhaps protected. The man was right about one thing: Rajuban could not kill him. Not yet. He needed to secure this man’s kin. Perhaps that would be enough to turn him.

Rajuban turned and started out of the cell, then paused and stooped to retrieve the cheese he had set aside before departing. Definitely no gift today. Rajuban’s anger had become a sort of nervous energy that he had not felt in some time. This was a wrinkle in his plans that he had not expected, and the unexpected was always dangerous. He clenched his jaw as he slammed the

door to the cell closed behind him. The man is trapped hundreds of feet below ground. He is no threat to anyone.

Then the voice in his mind that had remained obediently silent spoke. “You should just kill him. He reeks of the enemy’s schemes. Every wretched breath he takes is a step toward disaster. Feed his blood to the stone beneath your feet!”

Rajuban’s hand went to the place on his chest, just beneath the skin where the red gemstone had been buried. “I will not throw away valuable information. Not yet.” That last word resulted in a mouthful of bile as he recalled the man’s maniacal words, “Not yet. Not yet. Not yet”.

“As you wish, Raj. But do but not think to blame me when the enemy’s wicked scheme comes to pass. And I will not withhold the ‘I told you so’s’.”

Rajuban ignored the spirit, and said to the guards as he passed into the clear air of the palace beyond the stairwell, “Ensure that the prisoner is nursed back to health. He may have an injury to his head.” The guards nodded their understanding. “And double his rations. I need him healthy for questioning when next I visit.”

Rajuban tossed the cheese to the guard nearest him then headed straight for Magog’s chambers.