Matar

by AJ Lowell

Outside the gated entrance of the monastery, a pair of priests stand watch. They pace back and forth in a lazy fashion. This duty is dull and mundane, but the guards are alert nonetheless. A moan of clattering footsteps echoes throughout the surrounding forest. It is followed by a buzzing sound. The guards stop and take notice. One of the warrior priests centers on the direction of the sound as it grows louder. He runs to inspect the road leading to the pavilion. To his astonishment, he sees hundreds of Mantidean's marching towards the walls. There are more than he can count, and they all look very angry. The teenaged monk runs past his bewildered colleague to the worship bell. With his friend on his heels, they both pick up mallets and begin hammering a rhythm. The large bronze bell hums away the alarm that something is wrong at the gate.

About halfway through their chess game, Master Kang and Ko Bunjen hear the interruption. Their eyes reluctantly move away from the board toward the direction of the metallic tones. Kang's remarkable intuition told him something is seriously wrong. He remembers the sound of the explosion a few hours earlier. Ambassador Bunjen stands up as they both look out across the open patio of the stone grotto. A single monk runs over to them. The monk is one of Kang's senior instructors, a priest named Master Gamo. He approaches Dr. Kang with a bright-eyed, slack-jawed expression.

“Professor! ...Please, come quickly!”

Kang looks at Ko.

“Please! Wait here comfortably my friend. I will look into this.”

“Master, please hurry!” Gamo urgently appeals.

Bunjen stands fast, while Kang and Gamo march off to the main gate. The entire class of weary monks spills from the halls of the dormitory. They carry lanterns from the pavilion and stand out on the grass. Fifteen of the most senior monks converge on the heels

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of their Master's. The guardsmen have stopped hammering the alarm-bell. The gates are opened up.

Kang walks out past the heavy wooden gates. Hiding his caution, he takes confident steps and greets the angry mob with a smile. With a hand signal, he beckons Master Gamo to draw near and whispers to him.

"...Quietly, open the armory...”

Master Gamo bows slightly to acknowledge his instruction. In a swift, yet deceptively casual fashion, he departs back towards the temple. Pi steps forward to confront Kang, who recognizes her from the circle of elders. Although they are not close, they are acquainted. Kang wants to disarm the mantid mob by remaining calm and subliminally pleasant.

“Good evening, Madam Pi... How can we be of service to you?”

“You ‘insulllt' us with your pleasant ‘façaaade!'...Where is the ‘Dystonnngee!'”

“Perhaps, if you told me what this is about, I could help you?” Kang replies, still calmly.

Gamo knows the Master doesn't make idle requests and orders the secret issue of weapons to the student priests, who now stand gathered at Kang's back. Swords, spears and shields are quietly handled and hidden from the Mantidean's view. Dr. Kang continues interviewing his neighbor, using soft language. He and Pi are familiar with one another. Kang recognizes the situation is volatile and wants to forego any confrontation. In the words of the sage, “A battle avoided, is one that cannot be lost.” As for Pi, this is a battle of opportunity, one of her own choosing. She continues.

“Quid has been ‘killled!' Did you not hear the ‘explooosion!?'”

“We heard something several hours ago. Are you certain my friend is dead?”

“He is dead, and the Dystongee is ‘responnnsible!'”

“That is a serious accusation. Ambassador Bunjen is, of course, my guest.” Kang responds.

“As ‘youuu'…are ‘oursss!' Stand aside, and we shall fetch ‘himmm!'” Pi asserts.

“I cannot let you do that. This is still our home, and I am quite sure you and your company have better things to do than to harass good neighbors in the middle of the night.”

“You assume a too many things, ‘Professsor!' We are not here to ‘negoootiate!' We are here to dispense, ‘Jussstice!'”

The Mantidean mob grows restless. A few sporadically buzz their wings out of irritation. Some even started to pick out their targets. The Mantid's are fierce fighters when the have to be. Pi's children have little patience for this back talk; they came here for a meal and care little about the source. Kang is beginning to realize there is no parley to be found here. He tries one last approach.

“Please, my friends. Go back to your homes. If what you have told me is true, there has been enough killing for one night. I beg you not to do this…ugly thing. We have remained friends under stranger circumstances. So, please... Go back to your homes.”

Pi hardens her stance as Kang motions back to the gate. Pi's antennae twitch with disdain as she yells.

“His death will prevent any ‘furtherrr!'”

“Goodnight, my friends,” came Kang's reply.

He doesn't show his back to the Mantidean. Instead he takes a step back towards the temple. To Pi, this dismissal is infuriating. She circles in front of him and gives her final ultimatum.

“Enough of you ‘Kannng!' You listen poorly, for a ‘humannn!' We ‘wannnt' the ‘strannnger!' ...If you do not deliver ‘himmm!' ...We will take ‘himmm!' Look at my warriors ‘behinnnd' me! You cannot stop ‘usss!'”

Kang firmly, but evenly warns.

“Now you listen, Madam Pi! If you, or any one of your soldiers takes one step inside these walls, I assure you we will stop you. Do NOT...DO this! This is the end of our discussion!”

“Then we are in ‘agreemennnt!'...'Killll themmm!'”

The Mantidians attack the monks. Pi snaps at Kang's robe, taking hold of it with her mandibles. He punches at her, missing as she moves away. The monks move in a well-choreographed defense of their master and form a tight phalanx around him. They jab at the attacking mantises with their spears, allowing time for Master Kang to find a weapon. With a “Jin” in his hand, he orders the gates closed. From the other side of the bastion, Pi could be heard screaming out her order.

“'Killll themmm!'...Find the ‘Dystonnngee!'...'Killll himmm!!!'”

All the students and priests rally to the walls. From the oldest to the smallest, they take up arms to defend their sanctuary. The Mantidea climb the walls, while the monks divide themselves into three tightly packed platoons. Once on the other side, the Mantids try to maneuver around the porcupine formations of spears, but are forced into a narrow corridor. Their paths blocked, the mantis' take flight and begin smashing themselves against the monk's lances and shields. The effort is suicidal, the monks slay each warrior as they attack.

Ko Bunjen did not understand what was transpiring, and was equally ignorant of his unfortunate role. He reacts as an old soldier, and has every intent of defending his host. He picks up his walking stick and wields it like a staff. He can see the platoon on the left beginning to buckle. He decides that is where he is needed, and runs into the fray.

Pi climbs to the top of the wall. It becomes her command post, and from there she continues organizing the attack. A group of three Mantidians grab hold of the defenders spears as they were thrust at them. The monks push and pull their weapons free of their foes, stabbing the mantises in the process. One Mantidean stabs a warrior monk in the eyes with his thorny foreleg. The priest squeals and falls to the ground writhing, blood spurting from his wound. Kang's sword swipes past his men, cutting the head off the invader. The

body of the Mantid continues to assault the bulwark of wood and bronze weapons, though it had no head to guide it. Warrior lances run the body through. It twitches and spasms as the weapons are pulled free. More and more of Pi's soldiers come over the walls, and run along the length of the stone bastions. Kang can see the Mantids preparing to flank him on both sides. Pi's forces number in the hundreds, and the Professor realizes this. He cannot afford to be encircled by the enemy on more than two fronts; he just simply didn't have the numbers to effectively combat them. He calls out to the priests over the fighting's roar.

"...FALL BACK TO THE TEMPLE!!!"

The Mantideans lack the running speed to chase down a human on foot. Knowing this, Kang leads a sprint to the main building. Kang spots Ko Bunjen fighting ferociously to defend his fellow bipeds. Master Kang rushes to his friend's side, while the monks continue their run to the temple. Pi's warriors also spotted Ko Bunjen. A squad of mantid soldiers close in upon them. Kang masterfully continues to swing the Jin. He cuts off legs and cracks shells. Now at Bunjen's side, he yells.

"...You can't stay here! They have come here to kill you!..."

"...Why kill me?!..." Ko says as he swings his staff hard, clubbing several mantises at once.

"...Never mind! We must get out of here!...Now!"

It is too late. Two more squads of mantidians converge with the first. Together they rain down upon the pair, and their wavering platoon. They are quickly being overwhelmed. Ko is growing tired and winded. Sensing the change in combat and seeing his friend drained, Kang opens his spiritual valve and proceeds to fight faster and swing harder than he has ever done before. Pi's soldiers have adapted and pick up the spears from the fallen Tao-Methodist monks. They grasp the javelins in their raptorials and jab at the Professor. Pi climbs down from the ramparts, and directs all her forces at Kang.

"...'KILLL KAAANG!'...'KILLL' THE 'TRAAAITORS!!!'"

Blood is in the air and Master Kang is beginning to lose. For every three shells he cracks, he suffers a bite or a puncture.

Master Gamo rallies a platoon of priests. He spies the Professor being buried by the Mantidea. He personally leads a charge from the temple to defend their falling headmaster. Four of the besieged students run to grab hold of Ko and take him to safety. Master Gamo leads his platoon from the front. They arrive on station and immediately they spearhead a defense of Professor Kang's foiled position. The grass around them has become slick with the spilled white ooze of the insect's entrails. Kang's attack has melded with Gamo's and together their spirit yells unite. The overlapping guttural spirit yells now frighten the attackers, a resonating war-cry that is felt more than it is heard. Surrounded by their brothers, Kang and Gamo make good progress. Their fists and swords pommel the invaders. Soon a gap in the lines makes room enough for them to fall back to the temple. Kang's voice rings out with the command.

“...TO THE TEMPLE!”

Masters Kang and Gamo, fold back with their platoon of battered monks to the great oak doors of the temple. Covering their retreat stands a dozen Zen archers. They had to hold their fire due to their comrades close proximity to the enemy. Now they draw their bows, confident they won't strike their brothers. They let loose a volley into the master's pursuers. The first barrage strikes six of the mantises. One-by-one, the giant insects drop to the gore-covered grass, writhing in circles. Retrieving a second arrow from their quivers, the archers ready a second volley and let loose. Eight more go down, and the insect mob shows no sign of stopping. Pi orders her army to attack the church. More than half of her warriors are now within the confines of the Tao-Methodist sanctuary. All of them now focus on the monks now standing on the high ground, atop the stone steps of the monastery. Master Gamo carries the Professor with his arm across his shoulders. They reach the top of the steps just as the bowmen launch a third volley. Eleven more Mantideans fall wounded or dying. The battered Christian Abbots push their way

past their brothers to find refuge in the temple walls. The archers cover them from behind. Master Gamo orders.

“Quickly, Bar the doors!”

Pi's Army of Empusa-Mantideans surge to the sanctuary steps. Just as the monks prepare to bar the heavy oak doors, strange lights pulse in the night sky like police strobes. A burst of flashing electric blue lights brilliantly rocks the darkness. The flash is followed by a cacophony of deafening thunderclaps. The clamorous melee has ground to a halt. Pi's brigade stands shocked, and they orientate themselves towards the slow pulsating strobes. Standing atop the bastion are security troops from the League of Planets' Embassy. The troops brandish plasma rifles and held them at the ready. Climbing up next to them are the eight other council members of the Circle of Elders. Cautiously the monks take positions, fanning out along the length of the grotto. Pi's army is now pinched by forces on two sides, and both held the high ground. Kang and Ko stand behind the phalanx of their armed brothers. Ko and Kang wave at their friends from the council. The Mantideans waving back are Orix and Ving of the Polyspilota and Maculata tribes. Orix steps forward and announces.

“Quid is ‘aliiive!'...He is being cared for by Doctor Kirkham in our ‘infirmmmary!'”

“The Dystongee is ‘responnnsible!'...He must pay for Quid's ‘innnjury!'” Pi calls out.

Ving steps up.

“No!...We have the saboteurs in ‘cussstody!'...Two ‘D'Namooori' and a ‘Sooolukai!'”

Pi assesses she still has sufficient warriors to achieve a victory, despite the presence of direct energy weapons. She pleads this to her colleagues.

“What you say may be ‘truuue!'...But the Dystongee helped in ‘somme way!'...I ‘knooow' it!...Your energy rifles are too few to stop ‘usss!'...We shall finish it!...'FORRRWARRRD!'”

Pi's battalion breaks for the church. The monks ready their bows and lances. The League Of Planets security troops activate

their rifles. To Pi's surprise the council members, standing high atop the stone walls are quickly joined by an army of their own. More than three hundred members of Quid's clan appear along the full length of the ramparts. The sound of the Tenodera tribe's approach was masked by the sounds of the previous battle. They stand out from the security detail, their bright green and shiny exoskeletons pulsating with the beacons of the League of Planets vehicles. At this point Pi knows she can't win. Orix speaks up again.

“You ‘seee!' With all schools of thought, there is ‘truuuth' and ‘liiies'...There are ‘perspectivvves' and ‘perceptionnns'...Things are not always what they ‘seeem' to...or ‘appeeear' to be! Madam ‘Piii!'...You ‘willl' vacate this embassy ‘immeeediately'...or face ‘forrrmal reprimannnd!'”

The monks sense the tactical change in the situation. The guardsmen, who first stood at the gate, run down the steps of the temple past the bodies of the dead Mantidean and those of their fallen brotherhood. When they reach the gate and unlock the bronze bolt, the men swing the doors open. They stand defiantly at attention, with blank expressions upon their faces. Pi is the first to leave. She walks through the gate, humiliated, with her followers in tow.

Kang has suffered multiple lacerations on his extremities and is bleeding profusely. Without a word being said, he is attended by his faithful students, and retires to the safety of the dormitory. As weary as Ko Bunjen is from the combat, he locates a bucket of water and follows them inside. Binding his wounds and preparing some tea is the least Ko can do for his valiant host who defended his guest with his own life.

Master Gamo answers questions for the council members. Ving and Orix are both satisfied by the outcome of their intervention, yet they regret the fact that one of their own council members had perpetuated the violence. Although they made no apologies, they did promise a full investigation.

For the rest of the evening, Gamo leads the senior-most monks in gruesome recovery efforts. Bilge flies gather from kilometers away

to feast on the Mantidian entrails and the plucked eyes of monks. The priests build pyres to destroy the remains of their dead enemies, and their friends. By their own choice, the Mantidian people have now been reacquainted with the vile and vulgar institution of warfare. It is during this unpleasant duty, Master Gamo makes a grim and disturbing discovery...

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