



THINGS THEY BURIED

a Thung Toh jig

SAMPLE CHAPTER

AMANDA K. KING &
MICHAEL R. SWANSON



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Aliara slow-blinked the pain away. With every few swings of his dangling legs, the tipsed man across the table kicked her just below the kneecap. She shifted position, yet no matter how she sat, the errant foot always found her. He didn't notice, but continued regaling her with his nonsense, brew-foam flying across the table at her with each sibilant. She decided to allow him one more kick and two more cups-full before leaving him behind the Barnacle for the gulls and alley cats, gurgling on his own blood.

“—so Hink said we wouldn't do it,” he said, words slick and slurry from the liquor Aliara's coin had bought, “but Luula, she goes, ‘that a challenge?’ an’ I says ‘ho-ho, sounds like one,’ but Brunk, he didn' like that—”

When she had slid into the seat opposite him, offering a full cup and sympathetic ear, he'd introduced himself as Frabo. Given or surname, Aliara didn't know, didn't care. He was a scrawny, cocoa-skinned minikin, one of the unnaturally small karju, and his diminutive frame enjoyed a surprising capacity for drink. One equaled, it seemed, only by his capacity for rambling drivel.

He was seated alone when she arrived that evening, bawling about the horrors he'd witnessed the previous night while patrons and employees went on with their business around him, unconcerned with his trauma. It was a tirade familiar at the Bitter Barnacle and

other bars of its ilk, and one most patrons had learned to ignore. But Frabo was loud and insistent.

Despite her best efforts to ignore him, Aliara had picked up the thread of the story. It was clearly embellished by drink and retelling, but when Frabo had begun yelping about the desalinization plant, her interest was piqued. She completed her business, slipped into place at his table, and made her offer. That was long before she'd realized just how tedious the minikin's tale would be.

"We needed tools, ya' catch? So Brunk he goes to ol' Purdy's pocky lil' shop—you know the one over on Pier Road? Right, well, he goes with Hink an' they grab this thing." He laid a finger across his snoot, the extra olfactory organ unique to his species, snorted deeply, and swallowed.

Aliara's stomach revolted. The little flap of flesh across the bridge of the karju nose was nauseating enough when used only to bolster the species' sense of smell. She did not enjoy seeing it employed so vigorously.

Waiting for something worth hearing, Aliara let her gaze drift across the room. It seemed as though every ship in the harbor had disgorged its crew on the wharf that led to the Bitter Barnacle's door. A crowd of boisterous sailors, reveling in their brief time ashore before returning to the sea, drank and laughed and shared exaggerated tales. The karju among them, broad and tall and all brownish-pink skin, curled over the little bar tables, almost dwarfing their sinuous, grey-faced chivori comrades. The biggest karju among them whooped with laughter and slapped his table, sending the coins and glasses on its surface skittering.

At the bar, a puka woman threw her dice at her opponent, her hairless head flushing a darker shade of olive with drink and annoyance. Her partner ducked, and the dice bounced off the shoulder of a mountainous rhochrot sitting behind him. The rhochrot rose, snatched both protesting pukas from their seats and scuttled across the room, all four feet moving nimbly between tables

and patrons, and threw them out the door.

Over Frabo's shoulder, a pack of inebriates threw silver Callas, tarnished coppers, and strips of sinewy meat at a sun-leathered karju woman, who gyrated in the swirling glow of the red glass lumia pillars flanking the stage. She wagged her unfettered breasts to the melody engine's loping beat, pausing occasionally to gather coins and nibble food. One of the onlookers dared to reach out and stroke the dancer's zoet-grown tail, an expensive addition that likely netted her extra tips for its outlandishness. She whirled and rubbed one of the greasy chunks of meat in the audacious chivori's long, grey face.

"—an' an'...listen to this: It goes tink! And Luula, she laughs." Frabo licked the rim of his empty cup, stubby fingers of his free hand tapping against the table in rhythm with the music.

His foot again slammed into her knee. Aliara winced and shifted, trying once more to adjust out of his range, her mind rolling over an image of shaking him until the right answers fell out.

"Now, now, this is important." Frabo reached across the table and patted Aliara's hand, his eyes wide, face earnest as though this part of the story was vital. "Like I said earlier, it's 'cause Brunk loves a good 'venture. Came back with a bottle'a khuit—strong stuff, left trails, ya' catch? Not that we needed it." He snorted out a chuckle, then his face turned down and he sighed. "Gonna miss Brunk..." The melancholy faded as quickly as it had come. "We downed that thing in oh...well, we drank it fast."

Aliara poked at the discolored globs of tonight's special in the tin bowl before her, small pools of grease congealed on the shiny surface. Dockhaven didn't see much meat. Given the island-city's location and size, seafood dominated the markets and restaurants. What livestock the Haven saw mostly passed through unbutchered, changing ships or waiting while the crew enjoyed leave. The Barnacle's cook, however, considered red meat a specialty of the house. He frequented the stockyards, paying a pittance for the sick and dying among the herds.

She dropped her fork, pushed the plate away, and held up a hand as grey as the meat in her dinner. “Stop.”

Frabo looked at her, expression curious, then tilted his head back to drain the already-empty glass. He grunted in annoyance, slammed it on the tabletop, and ran his tongue over his bottom lip in time to catch a tendril of ale-stained drool.

“How ‘bout another?” he asked, leaning across the table toward her.

“Fine.” She glared at him through narrowed eyes. “Then you *will* arrive at a point.”

“I’m gettin’ there.” He nodded, wobbling in his seat. “Gotta tell the whole story, or it don’ make sense.”

“No, you don’t,” she said.

He grumbled.

“You were half-seas over. You were behind the abandoned part of the desal plant. Start there.”

“It’s that Orono,” he blurted.

This time it was Aliara who bent closer. “What’s ‘that Orono?’”

Frabo leaned away reflexively. “The thing ...the thing that got ‘em. Hink ‘n Brunk ‘n Luula.”

She twirled a hand for him to continue. Frabo raised his glass in a silent reminder of his needs, and Aliara signaled for another drink.

“Haunts the Haven, ya’ catch?” Frabo said quietly, as though someone might be listening. “The mayor an’ all, they say he died down there, but...” He shook his head, clicked his tongue.

“I know the story,” she said.

She knew far more than the tale spread by locals. Aliara and Syl had been owned by and subjected to Kluuta Orono for nearly two decades. When he disappeared in the incident at the desalinization plant years ago, the Dockhaven chinwaggers transformed him from eccentric inventor to folktale bugaboo. She and Syl knew the reason for Orono’s disappearance, just not its result. That was what she sought, why she had sat here for what seemed like hours listening to

this tepid little moron.

“Continue,” Aliara said.

“We was playin’ round with the junk back behind the plant—you know what a mess’a feck that is—an’ Brunk, he starts diggin’ in this pile. Said he saw somethin’ sparkly, but it was dark, ya’ catch? He was full’a plop.”

The fresh ale arrived. Frabo took a long drink, his eyes fixed on the empty space over Aliara’s shoulder.

“He just wanted salvage, so he’s pullin’ out bricks’n tiles an’ tossin’ them behind. Almost hit Luula once.” Frabo chuckled. “Did hit Hink a couple’a times. Pretty soon, Brunk, he calls back, ‘found a hole!’ an’ we all hurry over. Now we can’t *not* go in, right? So Hink digs ‘round an’ finds a length’a rope. We hook it up, drop it in, and down we go.”

“Where is this hole?”

He didn’t seem to hear. “Was dark inside. Really dark. Neat stuff lying ‘round, mostly dross, but Brunk pocketed a couple-few bits. Luula, she started actin’ like she worked there, and we all had a good laugh... Slippery. Fell down lots. Kinda’ happened slow.”

He shrugged, took another drink, eyes still distant and glassy. “Suddenly Hink says ‘what in the depths? It’s gettin’ light already.’ An’ we look round, and it’s like dawn’s comin’, but not dawn, right, ‘cause it’s blue.” He caught his breath and squeezed his eyes shut. “Luula never saw it comin’.”

Aliara waited as he gulped the ale.

“It was big,” he said softly. Frabo’s eyes blinked open, and he flailed his stubby brown arms to indicate something grandiose, splashing brew-foam on his balding head. His voice rose, catching attention all around. “So big! An’ glowy, all blue-like. But not watery-like like lumia, but blue-blue. I ran. Ran so hard. I...I...I left ‘em all behind.” Tears dripped down his cheeks.

“Wait,” Aliara said. “What was big and gl—”

The stuttered scrape of a chair against the battered wooden

floor intruded.

“Give me that.” The darkly tanned hand of a reveler from the table at Aliara’s elbow groped at the lip of her bowl.

Without shifting her eyes from Frabo, she snatched up the fork from her dish and drove its tines into the offending hand.

The man yowled and leapt up, looming over Aliara, the sheer breadth of his karju frame casting a shadow across their entire table. The pong of sweat and dead fish washed over her. She couldn’t imagine how his sensitive nose could stand such a reek.

“You twitching quim,” he growled as he yanked the fork out.

Aliara’s gaze slid up to the man’s florid face. He was only a bit taller than her, almost twice as broad, and far more tipsy than he realized. She could rid herself of him in a heartbeat, but a death in the Barnacle on such a busy night would only cause her aggravation.

She uncoiled the fingers of her right hand, exposing the blackish nut of the bane gland embedded in the valley of her palm. She allowed the fine, bony needle at its core to emerge, poised to deliver its toxin.

The man’s eyes lost their heat as they shifted from her face to the hand. “My, uh, my mistake,” he said. He tossed the fork back to her, wiped the bloody back of his hand on his pants and returned to the next table with his friends.

Aliara coaxed the needle back into place and laid her hand palm-down on Frabo’s forearm. “Where?” she asked.

He winced, bleary eyes never leaving her hand. “Where, uh... where what?”

“The hole in the wall. The one you entered.”

“Oh...” He licked his lips and gently withdrew his arm from her grasp. “Don’t ‘member just right. ‘Round the back. Nothin’ but a crack ‘bout my size. Hard to see if you’re not lookin’ right.” He lifted the glass to his lips, only to realize it was again empty.

“What part of the wall?”

“Where a couple’a towers meet. We just kinda fell into it...” He

yawned elaborately. “Just went in...fell...” He trailed off, dropped his head to his chest and feigned a snore.

Aliara threw a Calla on the table to cover the drinks, drew the hood over her short black hair, and left the Barnacle.

She slipped through the streets, anonymous among the masses in the marina’s grimy spring mist. Traders, sailors, dockworkers, and street people blended with the ubiquitous thieves in a jumble of commerce and chaos. Aliara drifted between the bodies, their stench dissipating with each gust of sea air. She turned down a rough, cobbled alley hidden between towering heaps of tenements and businesses too vulgar or too shoddy to populate the northern islets.

A couple dozen strides down the backstreet, she was jerked from her thoughts by a loud “*pss!*” from the shadows. She froze, crowd breaking around her, and cocked her head toward the sound.

“Hey Rift, over here.”

Her eyes easily penetrating the gloom, she spotted the squat, shadowy body of Schmalch crouched behind the Order of Omatha. He rose, only so tall that his head reached her waist. When he smiled, his skin, the drab green of a not-quite-ripe olive, crinkled around the enormous brown orbs of eyes set so far apart they were almost on either side of his thoroughly hairless head.

Aliara was doomed, it seemed, to spend her evening with an array of irritating personalities. She stared down at his bald pate. “What?”

Schmalch looked up and gave her a dirty-toothed smile. He wiped a sleeve under the bony nose that sprouted from his forehead before running down his face like some wicked beak. He pulled open his grubby coat to reveal two sad daggers and an ornately engraved scattershot mag-pistol. Its ebony stock was inlaid with mother of pearl, the under-barrel opoli chamber shrouded in silver filigree. It was a curiously posh item for such a pathetic thief to have acquired.

“Picked ‘em today. Got a buyer for the stickers, but not the swish pistol. Still got opoli in it. I came to you first, Rift.” He nodded

enthusiastically, hand extended, palm up.

Aliara raised an eyebrow. She didn't use pistols, but Syl enjoyed a good firearm. She offered her own hand.

Still nodding, Schmalch drew the weapon and passed it to her. "Right, yeah, you'll want a look."

She wiped his dirty fingerprints from the curved handgrip. It was lovely. Expensive. On a whim, she flicked the power switch with her thumb, and the magnet inside hummed to life, tickling her palm. She pointed the flared muzzle at Schmalch's head.

He recoiled. "No, no, no, no!"

Her black-painted lips curved in a smile. "Tested?"

He gulped and shook his head as enthusiastically as he'd nodded. "Not yet. Didn't want the noise. City Corps don't much like me."

"Loaded?"

"I—I don't know," he whined.

She coughed a small laugh, held her position.

"C'mon, Rift," he whimpered.

She pulled a Calla from her cloak pocket and studied the moody face of the coin's namesake on both sides before lowering the pistol. Schmalch relaxed. Aliara fished out two more coins and tossed all three at his feet.

"But it's worth more—lots more," Schmalch said. "I brought it to you first, Rift. To you."

He wasn't wrong. The pistol was worth many times what she gave him. Why Schmalch continued doing business with her and Syl, Aliara would never know. This was not an unusual exchange.

Two more Callas tinkled to the ground. Schmalch snatched them up, alternately muttering giddy gratitude and whining complaints. She threw a final Calla over her shoulder and resumed her trek home through the turbid city.

Unlike most islands across Ismae, space on the atoll known as Dockhaven was at such a premium that the urban sprawl here spread vertically, not horizontally. Buildings nestled into the sides of bridges,

towered as high as sanity allowed, and burrowed underground until sea pressure forced a stop. Entire islets were consumed by single, massive structures. Even dockside, the hulks of abandoned freighters became apartment blocks for residents more plentiful than former crews.

Thanks to the perceived status of her mate, Duke Sylandair Imythedralin, they'd long ago obtained comparatively spacious accommodations in all this congestion. Though his duchy, Isay, sat on the low-caste rural island of O'atlor in the Dominion of Chiva'vastezz, neither she nor Syl shared that detail, instead trading on the locals' fanciful concept of a Vazztain duke. His clout was such that they could have chosen a more exclusive building on Dockhaven's Big Island, but both preferred to live in the seedier and more colorful Lower Rabble.

Aliara skimmed up the basalt stairs, their protective railing long since lost to wind and weather. The building, overlooking busy Rimadour Bay, had once been only three levels. Over the years, stories had risen atop stories, some in line, some askew, until its modern incarnation gave the impression of mismatched, awkwardly stacked packages.

Eight flights up, the steps ended at a weather-pocked patio. Aliara turned the key and slipped into their penthouse.

Sunk into the cushions of a wood-framed chair before a dying fire, looking as though he were posing just for her, Syl paged through a large book. He looked up and smiled.

"Pet," he said in that honeyed voice she knew so well, "done befuddling the City Corp so soon?"

She slipped out of her cloak and boots. "I met someone with an interesting story."

He placed the book on the smoking stand beside him, took a draw off his uurost pipe and patted his lap. "Sit and tell me about it."

Aliara drifted across the room, feet sinking into the plush Norian rug Syl had won in a card game months earlier. She stroked the long,

black tail of his hair, flecks of silver starting to reveal themselves, and bent to breathe him in, a scent as familiar as her own. They'd been together as long as she could remember, both owned by that whinging monster.

She laid the pistol atop his book. He picked it up and stroked the silver tracery with nimble, pale-grey fingers, examined the barrel, tested the grip.

“Beautiful,” he said. “Where did you get it?”

“Schmalch.”

“Pocky little douse must be growing better at his craft.” Syl smirked. “Or he found the corpse of an affluent suicide to pick before the Corps arrived. It’s wonderful, Pet. It will complement the topcoat I purchased last quartern.”

Aliara settled onto his lap, threw her legs across the chair’s arm, and kissed him.

Syl ran a hand down her thigh. “And this interesting story you heard?”

“Most was tiddled rambling. Something dangerous in abandoned section of the desal plant.”

“Really? That *is* interesting.” His forehead creased. “This is the first we have heard anything more than ‘my poor baby disappeared’ in quite some time. Who was your chatty friend? Were there any details?”

Her shoulders bobbed. “Some minikin named Frabo.”

Syl pulled a face, nose wrinkling in disgust. “Why the karju don’t drown their kind at birth, I’ll never understand.”

Aliara grunted. “Whatever it was, he called it ‘big’ and ‘glowy.’”

Syl’s brows went up. “Curious.” The brows lowered. “Is that even a word?”

“His group uncovered an access behind the plant. He claims he’s the only survivor.”

Syl caressed her breast absently as he considered her words, ending with a gentle push encouraging her off his lap. Aliara curled

into the cushions of the matching chair. He rose, smoothed the blackberry jacket across his shoulders, closed the last few buttons he'd undone for comfort while seated and began a slow pace before the fire, boot heels clicking against the slate.

"He claimed it was Orono," Aliara said.

Syl paused, brows shooting even higher before resuming his stride. "What in the depths put that in his head? Simply because he's the local haint? Or something more...tangible?"

She shrugged.

Though they'd been present for part of Orono's last great experiment, neither were certain of the fate of their former captor after the explosion, the one that had permanently closed a large portion of the plant. The city had presumed Orono dead in the blast, even erected a statue of him near the entrance, but she and Syl remained unconvinced. Whether out of fear or respect, city officials left that wing in its ruined state. Rather than rebuild, they rerouted broken pipelines and hoped the rest would need no maintenance or demolition; an astonishing decision, given the value of both land and plumbing in Dockhaven.

In the few years since they returned to the Haven, Syl and she had heard stories of children vanishing from the city streets in that neighborhood, their bodies never found. While such things were far from unheard-of in the city, the concentration of disappearances around the desal plant was notable. If it was the work of their old owner, his experiment with The Book had succeeded. If that were the case, they had good reason to return.

"We should have a look." Syl stopped pacing and tapped his upper lip. "We left him deeper in when we ran, not in the plant proper. The concussion and its accompanying flames reached the plant, so I am curious, did he move with them?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "It is an ill sign that only one of the runt's group returned. Did he say how many went down with him? Were they armed?"

“Three others, all half-seas on khuit. He didn’t mention weapons.”

“This glowing entity?” he said with a smirk.

“They could have come upon a vagrant with a crank torch.”

“True. Was he the only minikin among them?”

“Didn’t say.”

Syl took the poker from its rack and used it to turn one of the logs. He stood back and watched the fire for a few seconds.

“We may have the advantage here. We are both properly formed, unlike your friend, and we know how to handle weapons. Nevertheless, should we hire an escort? I do not relish the idea of involving others, but I like the thought of dying even less.” He walked to one of the windowed walls flanking the fireplace.

“Abog Union mercs?” she asked, tone dubious.

In the glass, Syl’s reflection made a face. “They’re as common as gulls, and about as loyal.” He ran a finger down the silver loops that lined the length of his ear, all the way to his lower lug, tucked where long lobe met jaw. “This will be an exploration, nothing more.”

“More feet, more noise,” Aliara said.

“And we do not want that.”

“A single person to reconnoiter?”

“Yes, someone compliant, with sharp eyes and poor judgement.”

He turned to face her, lovely mouth spread in a wicked grin. “You said you saw Schmalch. Would he be up for such a trip?”

“Most likely.” The Duin knew they’d persuaded the puka to do far worse. “For silver.”

“Yes. He’d cut off his own finger and eat it if enough Callas were at stake. I suggest we keep our true purpose confidential. The instant that idiot puka learns that we seek proof of Orono’s continued existence, no force in all the isles will compel him to join us. No, I shall explain to him that we are pursuing something mysterious. Imply value, financial gain. Allow his mind to conjure possibilities.” Syl bent over Aliara, hands on the arms of her chair, his nose to hers.

“We are agreed?”

“Yes.”

He smiled in that way she knew so well, ran his hand across her cheek and down, working the long line of buckles that held her catsuit closed. She arched to meet him as he wound his hands inside, fire-warmed fingers dancing over the scars that covered her like armor. He let his lips run the long line of her lobe.

“But that...” Syl murmured, “...is for tomorrow.”

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