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I wasn't expecting mercy to be the rule of the day, but still, Miyako was a ninja, not an Amazon. She was a bystander in our feud. In hindsight - that was a totally irrational line of thought. My closest ally pulled another of her wedges from somewhere and stabbed my first opponent in the throat three times. I hadn't killed him, so she did. I reassessed our situation. Our opponents knew we were up and about.

The final southern stretch to the bridge was eight to ten meters of open ground and the width grew to almost eight meters. I returned my axes and unslung my shotgun... I had loaded it with slugs instead of shot. I am a 'one shot/letting you know I'm pissed with you' kind of guy. By sticking to the eastern side of this gully, gulch, micro-canyon, we remained immune to the sniper fire from the top of the mesa.^{wwW.nóV^{Elw}0w0r^M.c0M}

As the bad guys were coming to the conclusion that their three-man troop was being born away on black wings for a long-overdue, one-way trip to Diyu (Chinese Hell), they realized we still needed to be dealt with. Either the dying gasps alerted them, or they found a lack of radio contact disturbing, I'll never know. Miyako and me, we sprang upon them unprepared, but not surprised.

As I had feared, they were shoring up the bridge with semi-portable hydraulic jacks. That segment of their plan had barely reached its conclusion so the seven battle-clad types didn't have their weapons up and ready to fire. There was an eighth guy who was looking right at us and two tortured ghosts flanked him. One was the female spirit I'd seen in the caves.

That guy had on less physical protection than the others for reasons I couldn't fathom. It was a combination of oriental lacquered wood, metal, ballistic cloth and silk sleeves and pants. It appeared to allowed greater freedom of movement, but left his hands and head uncovered.^{Ww^w.n0^(v)El^w0rm.©(v)©}

His bald Han head was covered with tattoos that screeched "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" at me for no rational reason.

"Rènwù wánchéng. Qù," the man snapped. The ghost I hadn't seen before took off to the southwest. In that freeze frame instant, I could make out semi-translucent erosions in the ghosts' bodies. They were frayed around the edges. The best parallel I could draw was the way a sheet of fine paper starts to curl around the edges in that first second it catches fire.

Every second in that perverse continuation was a further mutilation of their essence. At the same time, the other seven guys went combat-unfriendly. Shooting the fanatic sorcerer glaring at me served my sense for the dramatic. I put a solid slug into the guy behind him... because he had his back to me and couldn't see it coming ... just like the SD ladies at the range taught me.

Naomi wouldn't clap me on the back for the hit. But she would have been disappointed had I shot someone else, or missed. Doing my duty was the minimal expectation. The 12 gauge projectile caught the man between the C2 and C3 vertebra. It didn't matter if the slug penetrated his fancy suit of body armor - the impact snapped his spine and severed his spinal column.

One down, seven to go. They were about to get their turn, but not before I put lead in one more. This one saw it coming. He was also kneeling and aiming my way. It hit him just below the knee-guard, snapping his tibia. I threw my back into a groove in the gully wall. It was more Aya-sized then muscle-bound me-sized. It had the benefit of being the best of a bad lot of choices.

Dry rock walls splintered, projecting fragments all around. A few stung, but I had bigger problems. Bad things often come in threes and tonight was no exception. First on the list didn't even involve me. A fist-shaped divot exploded from the wall of the gulch across from me - that sniper was shooting at Miyako who had moved to the east side of the gully.

My secondary concern was the team of killers walking their fire into my hiding place. Two or three were shooting at me so the others could edge around for a clear shot. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop them. The tertiary issue was the chthonic ramblings of the Han warlock.

Maybe it was my imagination, or maybe my shelter really was decaying at an accelerated rate. The rubble at my feet was inviting me to slip and fall into the open. Of course, that line of thinking was superstitious nonsense. Next time I was nearly killed I'd ask my goddess, Dot Ishara, about it.

A dozen firecrackers went off, the ditch flooded with a blinding light and I ran for it. I even picked up a bullet along the way. Sweet Mother Ishara! It was a searing burn along the back of my right thigh. I could hear all the pain receptors on my left side rejoicing that for once, it wasn't them squealing in pain.

The far/west side of the ditch had a better niche to hide in with the disadvantage being it would leave me open to sniper fire from the mesa. I'd asked Rachel what her best shot had been. She was my detail's sniper as well as its leader. 1. 8 kilometers... then she'd promised me that any shot over 500 meters was pretty much a crap shoot.

Oh, I knew she was lying to me, but it was sweet of her to try. Now I was hoping an elite Seven Pillar sniper would be daunted by a one kilometer-distant target. I was feeling lucky. Actually I was feeling like I had no choice, but being so screwed I had to trust in luck would elicit more sympathy in the retelling. What I did know was that I had to get under the bridge and waiting for those guys to run out of bullets wasn't the solution.

I knelt down as low as I could go, leaned out and started firing. The Chinese gentlemen were nice enough to keep firing at my old hidey-hole, their muzzle flashes clearly visible in the wispy ninja smoke. It was more than I expected from a handful of tiny flash pellets. It was the flash that had saved me. The smoke was a bonus.

I fired at the target closest to the west wall. He'd have the best shot at Miyako when she showed herself. Quick-firing meant I had to aim for the center mass - their best protected region. I compensated by using the 'automatic' in my automatic shotgun. I switched to 'select fire'. Three slugs hammered him back.

An advantage of moving to my new cover was I cut down the range between us to three meters. Was he alive? Most likely, but he was feeling like an exceptionally malicious Red Cap had performed a River Dance on his chest. The one next to that guy shifted toward my firing spot. He had a half second on me. I'd give him this much, he knew his shit.

His 'shit' meant he had expended his mag and was putting in a fresh one without missing a beat. Wieslawa couldn't have been smoother, chambering that first round flawlessly. Several successive hits from his rounds walloped me back into the crevice even as I pulled the trigger. My ballistic vest had saved me, though I had a whole new set of bruises to explain to Rachel.

I'd been aiming for the fuckers face mask, so odds were good that if my first shot missed, so had the other two. My magazine had two shots left. I went back to single shot and propelled myself out far enough to invite more punishment. I was having an awesome firefight, compared to the Seven Pillars hit-man I'd tried to kill.

If you put three 12 gauge slugs into a person's jaw and throat at close range, their head really does pop off - shades of the shootout at the Medical Examiner's office. Of more immediate concern was Evil Han Wizard guy looking right at me. Before I could squeeze of a shot some sixth sense told me I was too late.

The closest armored companion to his left had sprouted an arrow in the gap between his underarm and chest plate. All three of us were shocked. Not only were they both surprised to be dead, but the one arrow that had done them both in had come from the west - away from camp. As the two Chinese death-dealers harvested their own cursed reward, I saw the ruin of the sorcerer's left ear.

That was correct - someone shot Mr. Evil Tattoo-head through this skull and punched into the second man's chest from the side, piercing his heart. Yikes! Wilhelmina Tell? Then I got a clear look at the long, obsidian shaft that seemed to suck in the light and at the fletching made with oily black feathers donated from a bird that had never truly lived.

It wasn't like there weren't dozens of people around willing to kill me. What was one more? I had a bridge to sabotage and that Chinese warlock had already sent the message, via the enslaved ghost, that the bridge was secured for their cause. There were two more men to kill, so off I went. There was another reminder I wasn't alone.

One of the two remaining bad guys was being reacquainted with the gulch being three meters high. He was kicking out his life, hanging from the bridge while his companion was shooting into said pathway from below. I had unfinished business to take care of. The man I'd crippled was gamely bringing his QCW/Type-05 to bear on me, so I put a round into his face.

Mr. River Dance earned my final round into his respirator as he tried to sit up. Whoops; left my Glock behind and I doubted my .380 could cut the mustard against their body armor. Axes it was, proving I was an amateur. To prove they were professionals, the hanging man flipped out a blade, cut his noose and landed facing me. His remaining companion turned to face me as

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My favorite ninja wasn't done yet. As the second man turned, Miyako stepped from behind one of the false pylons and kicked the gun out of his hands. The ex-hanging man had the choice of reaching for his dropped Type-05, thus letting me chop him in the back as he bent over or... draw a sword?

I was a tad curious why he didn't draw his silenced pistol until I saw it lying next to his submachine toy. Go Miyako! He'd dropped his big gun when she snared him and she'd somehow knocked the pistol out of his hand when he went for that next - most likely to shoot her as she was securing his necktie to the bridge. The sword it was then.