

AETHER TORRENT #6  
"RANNOM'S RULERS"

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. RANNOM FIELDS - DAY

Great fields of tall grass roll in the wind.

TORI, AVANI and CIRBUS (human) trudge down a country road. Avani leads KLAUSER by a rope tied around his saddle's handlebars. Tori and Avani's bags are tied atop the saddle.

Avani's stomach GROWLS. Klauser looks down at her and she scratches the brown plumage of his neck.

TORI

I don't need a reminder, Skirt.

AVANI

My name's Avani. And forgive me, my stomach prays.

TORI

Huh?

AVANI

It's an old saying. Teizen's role in how the planet works includes growing food, so--

TORI

--Religion, got it.

Avani scowls a little at her.

TORI (CONT'D)

Tell your stomach to wait. Our next stop is a rare city, a culinary capitol in the middle of nowhere. We'll be so full we can't stand it. Cured meat, sweet fruit, that expensive bread with the swirls in it...

Tori's stomach GRUMBLES.

Cirrus tilts her head up and SNIFFS. She furrows her brows at something in the distance.

CIRRUS

I don't smell any of that.  
(sniff)  
More like smoke.

EXT. RANNOM - DAY

White smoke rises from tall, red brick chimneys.

A wall surrounds the city. The lower half of it is red brick. An upper layer of pinnacled gray stone makes it a castle wall, with the odd feature of no doors in its main gateway.

Tori and company stand far enough back to appreciate the wall. Bas-reliefs in the red brick depict lots of food.

TORI

I can't believe this! It's a complete 180 from when I came through a couple years ago!

AVANI

What could have happened?

CIRRUS

If I had to guess from the walls, somebody new took over.

Tori's gray eyes blaze.

TORI

This place was a treasure.  
They'll pay for ruining it.

EXT. RANNOM STREETS - DAY

Rannom is paved in brick and built largely of it. Every other building has a chimney and every chimney spits white smoke.

No one walks the streets but Tori and company. Outdoor markets are closed and shops boarded up.

In the middle of the city stands a brick castle stacked three levels high like a layer cake. A flag sticks out of the top.

The flag flaps once in a breeze so we can see its design. It's a shiitake mushroom.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - DINING ROOM - DAY

A severely chapped upper lip curls in annoyance, revealing a mouth full of shiny red-orange fangs.

SIR BEAU  
I'm disappointed, Shiitake.

The teeth belong to SIR BEAU, a thick-muscled man with a wide face and short fire-red hair. He sits at the head of a long dinner table. Several GUYS, thugs in red robes, guard him.

SIR BEAU (CONT'D)  
We've done an awful lot for you,  
but we aren't of infinite  
kindness, here.

LADY SHIITAKE, a blonde mafia queen wearing a jazzy purple pantsuit, sits at the other end of the table. Beige-suited heavies, also known as TROOPS, stand behind her.

SHIITAKE  
I know, I know, but the people  
out there can't produce as much  
anymore 'cause they're starving.  
*Starving*, Sir Beau. If you'd  
just up the food shipment a  
little...

LOUIE, a skinny hoodlum in a green zoot suit and matching hat, rushes into the dining room.

LOUIE  
Lady Shiitake! The whole  
castle's out of meat!

Shiitake SLAMS her fist on the table.

SHIITAKE

You see? We're running out of everything!

SIR BEAU

Then you'd better get the goods, else I'll take this castle. And you aren't leaving its walls 'til I get one or the other.

Shiitake glares down the table at Sir Beau.

SHIITAKE

Troops. Scrape up all the tribute you can. That goes for you too, Louie. Tell the others.

LOUIE

Right away, Lady Shiitake.

EXT. OTEND INN - DAY

Klauser stands hitched to a post outside a hotel marked "Otend Inn." The luggage is off his back.

INT. OTEND INN - LOBBY - DAY

The INNKEEPER, a fat man with a thick mustache and comical Italian accent, smiles widely and rubs his hands behind the front desk. He wears red and olive green.

INNKEEPER

Oh, thank-a you so much, we so rarely get visitors these days.

Tori and Avani are the only patrons at the desk. Tori takes some bills from her wallet. Cirrus sets down the luggage in the background and stretches her back.

TORI

I bet. Now, I'll pay even more if you can answer something.

INNKEEPER

Anything!

TORI

Why are all your restaurants closed?

INNKEEPER

(drops smile)

Oh. We don't-a need them no more.

AVANI

But the market is empty and the fields are grown wild. If there are no restaurants, where does your food come from?

INNKEEPER

(nervous glance around)

From-a the rulers of this polis. We have to pay-a them tribute.

Avani SLAPS her hands on the desk. Tori moves to calm her but thinks better of it. She stays back.

AVANI

Tribute? For food?! That's an affront to the gods!

TORI

Hey, take it easy. Why would your gods care?

AVANI

*The gods always care if people suffer, and paying tribute in order to enjoy the bounty of nature does just that.*

Tori looks at the Innkeeper. The Innkeeper nervously scratches his mustache.

TORI

So what do you pay for tribute? You seem pretty fat for an innkeeper with no visitors.

KITCHEN

The inn's kitchen looks more like a blacksmith's shop. Several working forges take places obviously meant for ovens.

The Innkeeper leads Tori and company in. Cirrus wrinkles her nose at something not apparent.

INNKEEPER

This-a used to be our kitchen.  
Hey Todd, we have-a guests!  
One's even a wind tiger!

TODD, a teenager in a white apron, prods something in a forge with a poker. The nearest sink to him is full of water.

TODD

Cool. Now *shh*. It's almost done.

INNKEEPER

That's-a my son, Todd. He makes  
our orichalcum.

Tori, Avani and Cirrus's attentions are suddenly grabbed.

CIRRUS

Orichalcum? The Fire vessel?  
That explains it. This room  
reeks of Fire magic.

AVANI

So you're an elementalist?

INNKEEPER

I'm-a not, but the Shiitake  
Troops are. They kicked out the  
Ishyo family and-a took over.

TORI

Now we're getting somewhere. How  
do they operate?

TODD

They don't. Not by themselves.  
(MORE)

TODD (CONT'D)

Some foreigners armed with Fire magic helped them take over and started bossing them around after a week.

Cirrus looks at Todd in shock. No one but us sees her do it.

Todd pokes in the forge some more.

TODD (CONT'D)

The foreigners made it illegal to make our own food, not that there's anything to cook anymore thanks to them. So every month, they visit, take their tribute and come back with rations.

TORI

Let me guess. Their tribute is a big shiny pile of orichalcum.

TODD

From every household.  
(chuckle)  
At least my talent's useful now.

Avani quickly boils to anger again.

AVANI

Useful...?

CIRRUS

Uh-oh.

EXT. RANNOM STREETS - DAY

A four-door internal-combustion gangster sedan rolls down the brick road.

Louie drives alone. The back seat is full of filled sacks.

LOUIE

Tribute... that lousy stinkin' crook's got us all over a barrel...

Louie's stomach GROWLS. He keeps his eyes on the road.

EXT. OTEND INN - DAY

Klauser preens himself, still hitched to the post.

Windows and doors across the street are open just enough to peek out of.

Klauser blinks and lifts his head to the sound of an approaching car.

Louie continues driving. He sees Klauser out the window.

Louie HITS THE BRAKES.

Every cracked-open door and window in sight suddenly closes.

Klauser tilts his head.

Louie presses his face against the window, wide-eyed and drooling slightly.

Klauser blinks.

INT. OTEND INN - KITCHEN - DAY

Avani addresses Todd, angrier than she's ever been.

AVANI

How can you be content with being "useful," especially to your unholy oppressors? All people deserve the same access to the same food regardless of wealth or social standing! What they're doing is evil!

Todd slips on a pair of oven mitts, unfazed. He then grabs a long pair of black tongs and reaches in the forge with them.

TODD

I'm not doing this to be useful, I'm doing it because I like it and it allows me to eat. Now don't get me wrong, I like what you're saying, but it's not exactly helping us, is it?

Avani takes a moment to breathe.

AVANI

No. Words alone rarely do.

The molten red contents of a thick black crucible pour into the deep sink. Steam BURSTS out.

AVANI (CONT'D)

I'm going to free this polis.  
Tori, Cirrus, please lend me  
your strength.

TORI

Wow. I was in the mood to just  
kick a few asses over how they  
ruined the city, but you're  
really taking this personally,  
aren't you?

AVANI

All food is a holy gift. To  
withhold it like this from a  
whole populace is... disgusting.

Todd sets the crucible and tongs aside. The sink keeps on steaming. Physics doesn't seem to apply here.

INNKEEPER

Oh, you're-a so kind! But, ah...

TODD

You're crazy. The foreigners are  
visiting the castle right now.

CIRRUS

Even better. I'd like to see  
what sort of tyrant's in charge.

TORI

So are we all together on this,  
then?

Avani and Cirrus nod and smile, respectively. The sink still steams.

TORI (CONT'D)

Just one thing first.

(to Todd, points at sink)

How does it keep going like that?

TODD

(well duh)

Magic.

EXT. OTEND INN - DAY

Louie approaches Klauser hungrily.

LOUIE

Beautiful. Lookit those legs.

You'll make for a nice dinner.

INT. OTEND INN - KITCHEN - DAY

The sink is finally empty of water.

Todd reaches in barehanded and pulls out a misshapen lump of shiny red-orange metal.

TODD

Beautiful. Look at that shine.

This'll be worth a nice dinner.

CIRRUS

(tilts head, raises hand)

Wait. Shh.

Klauser's GWARDING can be heard faintly.

INNKEEPER

What's-a that?

TORI

Klauser. He's our dire kiwi.

Well, not legally ours--

TODD

--You left livestock outside unguarded?!

EXT. OTEND INN - DAY

Klauser JERKS violently at the rope around his stirrup,  
GWARING repeatedly.

Louie stands back and slips on a set of brass knuckles lined  
with orichalcum spikes.

LOUIE

Settle down already. You'll  
stress out the meat.

Tori THROWS OPEN the front door. Avani and Cirrus follow.

TORI

Hey, get away from our bird!

LOUIE

It's my bird now, toots!

Louie THROWS a haymaker at the air, spikes-first.

A heat shimmer SHOOTS OUT and IGNITES into a huge fireball.

Avani flinches. Tori reaches for her knife.

Cirrus tenses her hand --

The fireball smothers out with a quiet WHIFF.

Cirrus raises her tensed hand.

CIRRUS

Want to try again?

Louie clenches his spike-knuckle fist.

LOUIE

A wind tiger, huh? Okay, no  
prob, I just won't throw it.

Louie PUNCHES the air again.

The front of Tori's vest IGNITES in flame.

Tori YELLS in surprise and THROWS the vest off, dropping her knife in the process.

AVANI

Tori!

Cirrus DASHES at Louie.

Louie PUNCHES again --

Cirrus's clothes IGNITE. Cirrus YELLS OUT and summons a WHIRLWIND.

Louie staggers backwards.

Tori's hand clutches her knife.

Avani breaks her shocked watching and scrambles in her skirt pockets. Klauser continues freaking out.

Tori's knife rises between her eyes, already dripping wet.

TORI

*Over here, pal!*

Tori SWINGS her knife, firing a gallon-sized water bullet --

Louie PUNCHES at her again --

The projectile EXPLODES into steam.

Louie squints and steps back from the blast.

Tori launches through the steam cloud --

And DECKS Louie in the nose.

Louie stumbles backward.

Tori turns her head.

TORI (CONT'D)

Avani! Snare him!

The ground RUMBLES and SINKS six feet under Louie.

A six-foot high circular wall of earth and brick pavement rises around him. He REACTS in ad-lib panic.

Avani lifts her mythril ingot from the ground.

PIT

Tori's hands grab the rim of the pit and vault her head and shoulders over it. Her orange hair clashes with her dark blue shirt.

TORI (CONT'D)

That was my favorite vest, you  
son of a sandworm!

Louie kneels at the bottom of the pit, begging upwards.

LOUIE

Please, you gotta help me! My  
boss is trapped in the castle!

Tori's expression communicates "huh?" better than words.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - THRONE ROOM - DAY

Sir Beau seats himself in a thin yet opulent plush throne. It CREAKS under his weight. Two doorless doorways flank the throne about twenty feet apart.

SIR BEAU

Ahhh yeah. I think I'll make  
myself at home right now.

Shiitake looks on in disgust. The throne room is supported by pillars on the long walls.

SHIITAKE

Don't get used to it. Louie'll  
be back with your dirty  
orichalcum.

She turns and heads for a pair of huge red double-doors.

Sir Beau grins, watching Shiitake walk away. His orichalcum teeth shine and he gives a lecherous CHUCKLE.

Shiitake keeps walking.

The handle of a parasol sticks out of an umbrella stand near the doors.

SIR BEAU

(speaking up)

It won't matter how much he brings back, I'll just tell the division head it wasn't enough. Then this whole place will be mine. Better get used to calling me King Beau!

Shiitake grabs the parasol handle --

YANKS it from the stand, SNAPS it open --

And holds it to her side, her back to Sir Beau. The peak and tips are all orichalcum spikes.

Sir Beau frowns at her.

Shiitake turns around and SWINGS the parasol forward with a TWIRL, trailing fire behind the spikes --

Summoning a HUGE FIREBALL straight at Beau.

Sir Beau SUCKS AIR through his fangs --

And spits a HUGE FIREBALL from his open mouth.

The fireballs race toward each other and collide in an anticlimactic WHIFF of thin smoke.

Shiitake clenches her jaw.

SIR BEAU (CONT'D)

Bad move. *Guys!*

Six or seven red-robed Guys appear from behind the pillars, each armed with orichalcum-tipped pikes.

Shiitake drops the parasol.

SIR BEAU (CONT'D)

Jail. Now.

INT. OTEND INN - LOBBY - DAY

Louie sits humbly on a lobby couch. Tori, Avani, Todd and the Innkeeper surround him.

LOUIE

And knowing her, she's probably got herself jailed by now.

TORI

Okay. I understand your problem, and I'm willing to help, but for one thing. *You set me on fire!*

AVANI

And Cirrus too.

LOUIE

I was hungry and you were in the way. I ain't a sage, here, but I'm downright pleasant compared to Sir Beau. So are you gonna help me or not?

EXT. OTEND INN - DAY

Cirrus (wind tiger) lies in front of Klauser.

Klauser looks spooked.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

(raises head)

Oh quit fretting, you only got a hot breeze. Decency's got me stuck like this.

Klauser continues fretting.

CIRRUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)

If you have to worry, worry about this: elementalists supporting a coup, then turning the place into a big vessel-making factory. I've seen it happen. But why are they doing it all the way out here?

Tori and Avani exit the inn.

TORI  
 Cirrus! Good news! We're  
 toppling a government.

AVANI  
 Take it seriously, Tori. You  
 make it sound so criminal.

Louie follows, his nose bandaged.

LOUIE  
 Nothin' criminal about whacking  
 a crook.

Tori looks over her shoulder at him.

TORI  
 Nobody's whacking anybody!

EXT. RANNOM STREETS - DAY

Avani rides Cirrus in flight.

Tori rides shotgun in Louie's sedan. She SLAPS his sentence  
 short.

LOUIE  
 Most of the Troops are out  
 getting the tribute, so at least  
 you chicks got *some* luck--ow!

INT. OTEND INN - LOBBY - DAY

Klauser pecks inquisitively at a potted plant in the lobby.

The Innkeeper watches him from behind the desk. He licks his  
 lower lip.

TODD (O.S.)  
 Don't even think about it, Dad!

INNKEEPER  
 I wasn't-a!

EXT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - MAIN GATE - DAY

Several Troops stand guard by the castle's front entrance.

Louie pulls up and leans out the open window. He thumbs at the back seats.

LOUIE

Got a load of orichalcum here.

TROOP

Who's the chick?

LOUIE

Your mom. Open the gate already!

The main gate opens. The car SCREECHES into drive and enters the castle.

SECOND LEVEL

The second level of the castle is a big brick cube standing on the first. It has arched gateways but no gate.

Cirrus lands on the roof of the castle's first level. Avani hops off and Cirrus flies up to the third level, a smaller copy of the second.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - FIRST LEVEL - DAY

Louie's car barrels through the first level. Thankfully there aren't many obstructions, except for a couple Guys he HITS. They roll off the hood.

LOUIE (CONT'D)

I'm comin', boss!

TORI

Drive like a sane person *right*  
now or I'm bailing out!

Louie unbuckles his seatbelt.

LOUIE

You might wanna do that anyway.



CIRRUS

I take it you're Lady Shiitake?  
I'm breaking you out.

Shiitake averts her eyes.

SHIITAKE

Buck naked? What kinda breakout  
*is* this?

Cirrus flips through the keys for a larger one.

CIRRUS

Hon, when you get to my age  
you'll wish you look this good.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - STAIRS - DAY

Tori RUNS up a wide spiral staircase.

A pair of Guys run down and stop when they see her.

STAIRS GUY

Hold it right there!

She doesn't.

The Guy who spoke SWINGS his pike, trailing a whip of fire  
behind the tip.

Tori DUCKS and the fire whip passes overhead. She uses her  
positioning to LAUNCH herself forward --

GRAB the pike and TWIST it out of the Guy's hands.

She CRACKS it upside the disarmed Guy's head, rushes the  
second Guy --

PARRIES a downward swing, and THRUSTS the blunt end at his  
solar plexus.

The second Guy doubles over and drops his weapon. Tori drops  
hers too.

The first Guy holds his head, looks up the stairs --

Tori KICKS the second Guy towards him. He rolls down the stairs --

CRASHING into the first. The two of them ROLL out of sight.

Tori wipes her nose with her thumb, turns around and continues up the stairs.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - SECOND LEVEL - HALL - DAY

Avani hides behind two pillars as four more Guys run past. Curiously, they zigzag on the floor.

Avani peeks from behind her pillar.

She leaves her cover in a long hallway which ends at huge red double-doors. Decorative circles are etched in the floor.

Avani walks towards the doors, silently readying herself.

She walks right into the middle of a circle.

She vertically drops two inches with a mechanical CLANK. A metal curve SWOOSHES up towards her.

She ducks. Another curve meets it directly above her head and they LOUDLY CLANG together.

Avani stands in the middle of a giant bear trap. The bars meet just above her ducking head.

She BREATHES RAGGEDLY and clutches her heart, eyes huge.

She reaches in a skirt pocket and pulls out her ingot.

The hallway floor suddenly RUMBLES. Six or seven more traps hidden in the circles SNAP SHUT on nothing but air.

THRONE ROOM

The double-doors swing open.

Avani pushes them in, her posture ready for a fight.

Sir Beau occupies the throne, slumped forward and asleep. He SNORES.

Avani stares at him.

AVANI

Wake up, you!

Sir Beau stirs and YAWNS cavernously.

The floor RUMBLES and RISES UP under the throne, toppling Sir Beau out of it.

HALL

Tori and Louie enter the hall, PANTING.

The hall is broken up and all the traps are sprung.

TORI

Man-traps? Who *designed* this castle?

THRONE ROOM

Sir Beau stands back up. He bares his teeth, sucks in a breath and SPITS A FIREBALL.

Avani ducks it.

It keeps going --

HALL

Right out the doors.

Tori and Louie evade it to the right and left.

THRONE ROOM

Sir Beau chases Avani and SPITS more fire, taking a breath before each one.

Avani ducks and weaves. She hides behind a pillar and one of the fireballs extinguishes against it, leaving a scorch mark.

Sir Beau takes another breath, but lets it out harmlessly. He looks dizzy.

Avani STRIKES the pillar with her ingot.

The floor under Sir Beau CRACKS. He gets over his dizziness fast enough to JUMP away.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - FIRST LEVEL - DAY

A hole CRUMBLES open in the ceiling, raining bricks below.

Several bruised Guys run for cover.

INT. CASTLE SHIITAKE - SECOND LEVEL - THRONE ROOM - DAY

Tori and Louie enter the throne room. Tori takes out her knife.

Sir Beau backs up to the toppled throne. He points at Louie at the second "you."

SIR BEAU

I don't know who you people are  
-- except you, I'll fry you  
later -- but nobody messes with  
the new King of Rannom!

Sir Beau INHALES until his lungs are at full capacity, then SPITS one fireball after another at the intruders.

Tori SWINGS water projectiles at each one. Notably, the steam from each impact flies back to her knife between shots.

Behind Sir Beau, Cirrus (wind tiger) and Shiitake enter from the doorless doorways.

Avani sees them first. She points at Sir Beau.

Cirrus straightens her wings, but Shiitake runs ahead --

Grabs the throne by the back --

Swings it around with a HEAVY GRUNT --

SLOW-MOTION:

And SMASHES it against Sir Beau's head.

REGULAR SPEED:

Sir Beau goes down.

Shiitake drops the throne, leans her hands on her knees and catches her breath.

Louie beams with happiness.

LOUIE

Boss! You're all right!

SHIITAKE

Of course I am. Now fry his  
worthless hide!

Louie slips on his spike-knuckles.

LOUIE

Can do.

TORI

(points knife at him)  
Hey! No whacking!

AVANI

Please, Lady Shiitake, be  
content with imprisoning him for  
now. We need to know who  
commands him.

CIRRUS (V.O.)

Unless you know that already...?

Shiitake straightens up and tugs at her sleeves to de-wrinkle them.

SHIITAKE

Okay. Louie, lock that bastard  
up. We can interrogate him later.  
(addresses the trio)  
And as for you three, who and  
what are you anyway?

Tori dramatically sheathes her knife and turns to Shiitake, conscious of preparing a killer closing line.

Her stomach GROWLS instead. She grimaces at the sound, ignores it and turns her expression dramatic again.

TORI

*Hungry.*

Shiitake stares. Her only reply is an amused nasal SNRK.

Cirrus's muzzle breaks into a grin.

Avani covers her eyes one-handed and unsuccessfully stifles her snickering.

Tori looks away, trying to ignore them.

FADE OUT