

The Harmony of Drá

by Brad Johnson

Mikúsa hiKityónál of the Glass Spear Clan was about to complete her six-month acolyte probation at the Temple of Hnálla's Shrine of Méntukoi hiJér in Sokátis. Her task had been to keep the massive crystal clean so that its light could effusively shine on the children who were brought before it to be healed. It had been a gratifying tour of duty culminating in a two-week fast that would end tonight. She looked forward to the evening meal.

The pre-dawn summons from the su'umél-in-charge meant that her next assignment had been decided for her. Hopefully it was a position in the ceremonial troop for the Festival of the Shining Sun. She returned to her dormitory after the morning ritual and prepared for the meeting. "You look weary and excited, Miki." Her roommate Rayána commented as she came into their quarters.

Mikúsa hated that nickname, but complaining about it would only make it more intolerable. "I know," she replied. "I'll be allowed to eat soon, but first I have to report to our favorite supervisor."

Rayána was quite familiar with the lecherous sot. "Is this official business or a personal request?" she asked. "Oh Ra," two could play at this name game, "it's just my time to rotate to my new posting."

"Well, just be sure that it's the only thing rotated."

"Ra, your incorrigible." Mikúsa squealed as she left for the meeting.

Pi'úr hiMrékka had reached his career zenith as a mid-level administrative functionary in the temple. His low clan standing, mediocre talent and boorish personality prevented him from becoming anything more than the duty officer for the acolytes. However, it did have its advantages. The best assignments were just as often given to the wealthiest candidates as those with talent, but no money.

"The young follower was going to be disappointed when she finds out that he had already sold her requested position to a rich member of the White Crystal Clan," he thought and chuckled.

Mikúsa stopped just before Pi'úr's spaces and adjusted her robes. "No sense in making a bad impression now, this close to my dream," she thought. The priestess announced herself deferentially, received permission to enter the room, walked in and sat down in front of the Prefect. "Kengyelrákh Mikúsa hiKityónál," he began, "I have reviewed your record and have found an assignment for you. I know that you wished to be on the festival staff, but that position has already been filled."

Mikúsa's face fell in disappointment. He was amused. "What I do have for you is a liaison appointment to the temple of Drá." Now she looked perplexed. He found it difficult to keep a straight face.

"Take these papers and report to their Keeper of Reflections. You will be assigned further duties once you get there for the next six months. That is all." He looked down and resumed his writing.

Stunned, she picked up the papers and respectfully left the room. Once in the hall she walked around the corner, then behind a column and tried to maintain her composure. Standing there she was sure she could here muffled laughter coming from Pi'úr's room.

She had only been to the Cohort's grounds once, during the orientation tour when she was inducted into the Temple of Hnálla. She remembered it as a nondescript collection of buildings out behind the great white halls of the Master of Light. It could have easily been mistaken as mundane living quarters except for the large unadorned rectangular pool of mercury in the patio area used for reflecting the yellow-white light from Tuléng onto the faces of the worshippers.

She went into the courtyard and found no one on duty. It was a quiet area and the only noise that she heard came from the kitchen in the bottom floor of the dormitory. She looked inside and noticed a plump woman hunched over a large cooking pot. "Excuse me. Where may I find the Keeper of Reflections?" she asked.

"That would be me. Are you the new Hnálla liaison priestess?"

Mikúsa said, "Yes, Honored One, I am Mikúsa hiKityónál and I have my credentials here for your review."

"Never mind that," she replied, "You would not be here if you were not who you say you are. Go out to the patio area and present yourself to Shánu hiTúkimchash. She will show you what to do. I have to get back to my cooking."

Getting dismissed was becoming a habit Mikúsa didn't want to get used to.

Shánu hiTúkimchash of the Granite Lintel clan was busy feeding one of the Perfect of Drá. She had to clean off more gruel than the worshipper was eating. She often wondered how so many of them lived for so long. Perhaps their faith, being stronger than her own beliefs kept them going through this plane. She saw the young priestess coming down the path. "Over here Little One," She called.

"Great," thought Mikúsa, "just what I need, another nickname." She walked up to the side of the old woman and asked, "How may I help?"

"I will finish here. You should go to your new quarters on the second floor of that building and change into your work robes. Then meet me back here and I'll show you around," she replied.

"Yes, elder, I shall return quickly." And she went up to her room.

The dormitory was functional. The lack of ornamentation was striking. A simple sleeping mat, headrest and clothing chest were all that occupied the floor. She opened the chest and brought out the work robe. It was all white, in keeping with her chosen temple, instead of Drá's white and tan. The only clothing concession she would have to make is wearing the provided tan colored headband. She swiftly changed and went back down.

Shánu had just finished cleaning the Perfect One and was adjusting his body. "It is important that they face the sun as it crosses the sky," she explained, "We have to do this about six times each day. It will be one of your initial duties."

"Come with me," she motioned, "I will introduce you to your most important task." She set off with Mikúsa in tow.

They wound around several of the buildings until they came to one of great beauty. It appeared to be in the same plain architectural design as the surrounding structures, but even Mikúsa could see that the material was of the highest quality and workmanship. This was not the residence of an ordinary clergy of Drá.

"Be very careful here, young one." The old woman warned, "Do not say anything, remember what I say and do as I instruct." With that they entered the small courtyard and continued on to the apartment on the far side.

Shánu stood outside and made great entreaties and requested entry. There was no reply, but they entered anyway. The inside of the room held beauteous, ancient objects of great value. Mikúsa had never seen such things outside of temple collections. Ahead of them was a great bed with a fine transparent gidru cloth tent suspended from the gold leaf ceiling. Through it they could see a woman of ancient age on her back staring into nothingness.

Shánu gathered back the covering and lifted the unresponsive, frail body out of the bed and carried her the bathing area. After caring for the high one's bodily needs and cleaning her, wrapping her silver hair and clothing her in tan robes of the finest material, Shánu directed Mikúsa to help with carrying her to the patio to join the other Perfects of Drá. All of this activity frightened Mikúsa. Never had she been so close to a high born. She was terrified she would make a wrong move.

After carrying her to the patio and positioning her on the highest dais for worship, the two women withdrew out of the holy space.

As they got out of earshot of the worshippers Shánu began her explanation. "You were assigned here to take the place of old Dlamúz, who has passed onto the Isles. You will personally be responsible for the priestess we just took care of. Her name is A'én hiPáväre, of the Might of Gánga clan. She was born many years ago, during the reign of Emperor Heshtú'at' "The Mighty". Rumors are that she was his favorite and bore him a child when he was Prince." She paused as they entered the kitchen area and greeted the Keeper. "I do know for sure that she is the eldest member of the clan in the Empire and holds a very powerful title. None of that means anything to her now, but her clan demands that she be surrounded by her possessions of status and that she receives a personal aide. That is where you come in. Before she became totally uncommunicative as one of the Perfect, she demanded that she not receive any special treatment. That is why there is not a throng of servants residing in the temple grounds. You are the compromise between her wishes and the clan's demands. You should consider yourself honored."

Mikúsa could feel the panic rise up inside of her. She was to care for a member of a clan that could erase her from this world if something went wrong. "What if she were to die in my care?" she whispered.

"Don't worry about that too much. She has already lived longer than anyone thought that she would, in fact", Shánu moved closer, "there are certain members of her clan who would like to see her leave this plane and gain her titles that help fund this temple. Just be very cautious when her clan members come to visit her. They don't do that very often these days, but they like to check and make sure that she still is truly alive."

Mikúsa nodded thoughtfully. This was going to be a very long six months.

The next few days were tense. Mikúsa was always afraid that she had forgotten something. Slowly she became more comfortable about bathing and feeding the honored one and soon learned the routine of repositioning her to face the sun, making sure that the Perfect did not overheat, arranged for the singers to arrived on the appropriate holy days and all of the other assorted administrative matters that need attention at every temple. She soon realized that some of her duties were ones that she wouldn't perform at the temple of Hnálla until she was a much more senior priestess. There were advantages to this assignment.

Shánu was late for her meeting with the young agent. She couldn't remember how many years she had been doing this, but at least this time there was something new to report. She found him waiting behind the empty chlén stalls at the market. Today he wore the simple garb of a middle clan merchant.

"Greetings, Srúma." She said.

"You are getting disrespectful in your old age, Shánu. Is that how you address all of your superiors?" He asked, glowering.

"Drá cares little for such formality. Your grandfather understood that when he was my contact with the Omnipotent Azure Legion." She replied.

"Enough of this," growled Srúma, obviously distressed by the mention of his clanmaster, "what have you found out?"

"The new Hnálla priestess is working out well. I feel that she will soon gain the confidence of the Lady A'én." She replied, "Mikúsa seems to have a remarkable way with her."

"How much longer do you think I will have to wait?" he asked.

"The Legion has been waiting for two generations to find the Emperor's legacy, it may take some more time before we know anything more." She suggested.

"I desire to be the one to present the lost Orb to the Emperor. I don't want to wait long." He warned.

"With this much power at stake I understand your concern for the strength of the Empire." She said slyly.

"The Empire? Oh, of course, the Empire." He faltered and recovered. "Meet me here again in ten days to examine your progress."

"As you desire." She demurred.

He turned and walked through the stables to the busy street. She watched him go and thought fondly about his grandfather and could only imagine the amount of influence he had to expend to get such a dullard a posting with the Legion. The effects of the recent civil war and purges were still rippling through the society.

Every clear day just before noon the sun bore down from its near apex in the sky. The Perfects faced the light of Tuléng and its reflection from the mercury pool. The effect was unsettling to the observant Mikúsa. All shadow disappeared from their bodies and they appeared to shine. It was then that they began to harmonize. Each of the Perfects held a separate note that blended beautifully with the others'. There was great power being called upon in this worship of Hnálla.

Perhaps, Mikúsa became too familiar with her duties, or maybe caring for the unresponsive priestess made her forget her place. Whatever the cause, she began singing late one afternoon while reorienting the worshippers. When she approached A'én and reached for the reed-thin body she suddenly found her own arm grabbed by the old woman's surprisingly strong hands. Mikúsa froze in terror and waited.

"Bring me the blue box." The old woman rasped and darted her.

"Yes, High One." Was all Mikúsa could say as she dashed toward the quick survey. "A blue box?" she thought, "How am I going to find it amongst all of these treasures?" A grand apartment of the room showed no obvious blue box. She opened the chest at the foot of the bed, but it contained only ceremonial clothes. She checked the upright bureaus with the same result. Finally she looked under the bed and there sat a delicate stone mosaic adorned box about two hoi in length and maybe half as wide. Quickly she grabbed it and ran back to the patio and placed the container in the old one's hands.

A'én fumbled with the box as she tried to open the secret locks without the benefit of sight. In due course the case opened and she pulled out two golden musical pipes. Her fingers carefully examined each of the devices and finally decided on one. "Here, take this," she hoarsely commanded. Mikúsa took the cylinder with shaking hands. "If you are going to craft music here, then you must learn how to do it properly. Practice this at night until I am satisfied with your performance." Then with a wave of her hand she dismissed the young priestess.

Later that evening, in her quarters, after all of her duties were complete, Mikúsa finally had time to closely scrutinize the contrivance. It looked like the simple reed whistles that she played with as a child down by the river. However, this one was richly engraved with small colorful stones set in places along its length. Hesitantly, she put it to her lips and blew. A blare came out that reminded her of a cat in heat. She tried again but softer this time. The noise was still rough, but not so painful. She was amazed that one note could sound so different each time. It must have to do with how she controlled her breath into it. This was going to be more difficult than she first thought. She practiced until last gong when Shánu came by for night check. Mikúsa quickly placed the precious instrument in her small storage chest and put out her light under the disapproving stare of the matron. She had not realized that she had been at it for so long.

Shánu continued down the passageway checking on the rest of the tenants. She had not realized that the music had been coming from one of the old priestess' flutes. She would have to find out how the young one came into possession of it and report this new development.

For weeks Mikúsa practiced her one note song. Finally she thought that she had found the right combination of position and breath to produce the required tone. Excited, she decided to perform for the old one this morning. Tuléng was one hand below its zenith when she completed positioning the worshippers upon their daises. They set the lowest level (as was her place) making sure that she did not block the sun from any of them. After a few tentative notes to prepare herself, and with no reaction from the Perfect, they all waited for the transformation.

Mikúsa closed her eyes and could hear the busy city just outside of the temple walls. The bright light of the sun bore down hot from the cloudless skies. She practiced her breathing and concentrated on the coming event. One of the Perfect began to vocalize "Ik" and the rest began to join him. She lifted the instrument to her lips and started to play. The effect was immediate. She could feel herself being swept up into a current that moved down a great river with eddies that constantly pulled her towards the shadowed banks. Her own note kept her in the middle of the great stream. She opened her eyes suddenly when the song ended. The sun was well passed its peak and it was time for the midday meal. In fact, it was a little past time so she quickly put the flute away and ran down to the kitchen to gather the food.

Shánu had entered the courtyard earlier to chide the young priestess about being late picking up the pabulum. When she saw that Mikúsa had joined in the ceremony, she discreetly left and waited in the scullery. She watched as the girl hurriedly came in and carried out the gruel. Shánu returned to washing the dishes and contemplated what this new twist in the path would bring. None of the previous attendants had gotten this close to the Lady before today.

For ten days Mikúsa had joined with the Perfect in the ceremony and had enjoyed her travels. It became easier for her to steer the treacherous waters and she even attempted to go near the forbidding shore. That evening as she prepared the lady for bed the old one spoke once more and whispered, "You must try the side channels, for there lay all possibilities."

"I shall tomorrow, Honored One." Mikúsa replied as she rearranged the netting above the bed. She hoped that her fear was masked by her actions. She had an idea of what was meant by the demand. She hoped that she was prepared for it.

The journey began as the previous ones had. Slowly traveling down the ethereal flow she passed by several of the streams along the sides because they were too swift or too dark. Eventually she came to one she thought that she could handle. Turning into its path she let the current grab her and draw her in.

She accidentally dropped the piece of fruit to the market ground and reached down to pick it up. The Perfect wouldn't notice the difference in the quality of the food they ate, or even care, but she would and that made the difference. She made her final selections and paid the young girl from the Green Forest Clan.

The evening had been relatively cool and the wind provided a nice breeze through the booths. This side of the city had its advantages over where her clanhouse sat. Less smells and noise. She exited the market and headed back to the Temple. As she rounded the corner onto the main street a chlén cart rolled by her. As it traveled farther down the road she saw a small child of maybe two years run out of its clanhouse and into the path of the carts wheels. Even a slow moving chlén takes time to stop and it was too late for the child. She ran up to see if there was anything she could do to help, but the waiting Black Stone clan members were already viewing the scene and surrounding the small limp body. Mikúsa fell back along another path. She had seen this all before. How could it be?

Mikúsa slowly walked back to the Temple. She had many questions for the elder. Were these journeys during meditation actually into the future? Or were they merely insights into a possibility? Could she have saved the child's life? She she dare to and thus upset the outcome proscribed by the Gods?

She continued to think of how to broach the subject to the Perfect as she helped Shánu prepare the noon meal.

"What worries you Mikúsa?" Shánu asked after noticing the far away look in the youngster's eyes.

"It was a difficult morning. I saw a child run over in the market and killed." She replied.

"That is a difficult thing. Have you never seen anyone die before?"

"No, it was just horrible. I thought that maybe there was something that I could have done."

"What could you have possibly done?" the older woman asked.

"I don't know. It's just a feeling that I have. Excuse me I must deliver these to the worshippers." She said quietly as she gathered up the food. Shánu watched as the deject priestess carried out the meals. There was more to this than the death in the market.

Mikúsa delivered the meals and handed off all but the Noble One's to the young member of the Flowering Life Clan who was performing his requisite two-week tour of duty at the Temple. He was handsome enough to be distracting and had shown some interest in her, but duties and studies kept her from returning the attention. Perhaps at another time she might have considered a dalliance even with the difference in their clans.

She dared not ask questions of the High One to learn more about what she had seen. She was too tense to participate in the regular afternoon worship because of worry about what she might view along the stream.

The Lady was always the last to be taken back to the quarters for the night. As Tuléng cast its final beams of light onto the ground, Mikúsa prepared the old woman for transport. Again the Lady grabbed her arm and asked her why she had not traveled this day.

Stoically, Mikúsa told the story of what she had seen in the market.

"La," the blinded one said, "you wish to know if you could have prevented it?"

The young priestess gestured yes, and kept her eyes averted.

"It is our duty to follow the example of Lord Drá." The elder continued. "This reality is illuminated by Hnálla to show the path to the Supernal Light of His Being. Our individual lives and deaths in this existence are of no consequence. It is absurd to try and change what will be. It is possible, but to what end would you invoke foul change? Leave that to the impotent followers of the Tlokiriqluayal. On your journeys here, observe the future to better prepare your chusétl and balétl for final disposition into the Perfect Light."

"My time here is short," she continued, "so I will show you this now." She raised her arm and held her palm upward. The pool of mercury in front of them began to form a small bulge in the center. As it rose up the liquid metal poured off of the sides of the emerging sphere. The small hovering golden globe began to shine with increasing intensity. It lighted the entire courtyard and even caused panic amongst some of the evening passersby on the street outside of the temple walls.

"Behold the 'Orb of Fortitude'." she said, "It was a gift to me from an Emperor now long dead. It is what has kept the Perfect of this temple alive all of these extra years. But now its power is waning and my journey will soon come to an end." She lowered her hand and the Orb slipped down into its mantle of quicksilver. "Guard this secret well and when I have left this reality return it to the Emperor. The Servitors of Silence will know what to do."

With that the old woman collapsed into Mikúsa's arms. She felt for a pulse and still found one, barely beating against her searching fingers. Moving the old one might be dangerous in her failing condition so the young priestess held her as comfortably as she could through the warm night. Mikúsa had never spent the night outside before. The clear sable skies yielded light from the moons as they rose and set. She had never studied astrology and did not realize the importance of their present alignment. Throughout the darkness she heard the tunkúl gongs of the Change Gods' temples and shuddered with each somber note.

As Tuléng climbed above Hundránu Rise the river plain was awash in glorious light. She had never felt as grateful for Hnálla's arrival. The Lady moved under the first rays as they touched her skin. The many years of her worship had made her sensitive to the sun's gentle caress. She sat up and faced the dawn as she had done so many times before. Her weakness was evident, but she looked like she would make it through the day. Mikúsa took this opportunity to go perform her regular duties lest the others come and begin asking questions.

This day she joined the Perfect for noon worship. She began the session with a soft note from the flute and the worshippers joined her with their voices. She closed her eyes and found herself traveling along the stream. The current was swift and choppy and the air was filled with mist. She had never experienced this before. She could somehow feel the other worshippers around her. The Lady seemed to be guiding all of them up the channel through the murkiness. The fog suddenly lifted and Mikúsa could see an alley near the marketplace. This time she had no sense that she was physically there, but she was aware of everything around her. The time seemed to be near sunset and out of the lengthening shadows several figures came into view. One was Shánu; the other was a tall angry man demanding that they go back to the temple immediately.

The vision ended suddenly and she put away her instrument. What was she to make of this? Surely the meeting presented some danger to them. She continued with her afternoon duties and regularly checked in on the whereabouts of Shánu. Late in the afternoon her surveillance was rewarded when she saw the older woman leave the grounds heading in the direction of the market.

She ran back to report this to the Lady.

"Do not worry child. All is as it shall be. Remember to avert your eyes." She replied cryptically.

Mikúsa took her place on the dais below the Lady and faced the doorway where her fate would enter. She noted with some amusement as the other attendant came to return the Perfect to their quarters and found them to be uncooperative. Eventually he left the Perfect alone when Mikúsa told him that she would come get him when the time came. Satisfied he left the patio. She heard the visitor's approach as his hard-soled sandals hit the tiles in the outer courtyard. With great alacrity he entered the Perfect's area. The man she had seen in the market had removed his outer clothing and was now wearing the resplendent clothing of a member of the Omnipotent Azure Legion. Shánu followed closely behind with great trepidation in her face. Mikúsa did the only thing that one born into a very low clan could do; she prostrated herself before him on the ground and stayed silent.

With great self-control he faced Shánu. He could not talk to one of such low station as Mikúsa directly. "Ask her where the Orb is!"

"Young one, tell him where it is."

"I cannot" Mikúsa replied.

Outraged the legionnaire kicked the prostrate girl. "Ask her again!" He demanded.

He spun around when he heard the Old One quietly say, "You disgrace yourself, and your station young inquisitor."

Srúma knew that it was unwise to anger a member of the Might of Gánga clan so he chose his words carefully carefully. "Lady A'én hiPáväre, I am representing the Emperor in this matter. I must ask for the return of the Imperial property." "Such arrogance does not sit well upon you." She replied. "All things belong to the Emperor. Your job was to keep me under observation until it was time for the Orb to be returned upon my death. It is bússan to demand it before my time has ended to further your own desires."

He flushed when he realized that she knew more than she should.

"What you seek is in the pool." She continued.

Srúma approached the shiny surface and stared at his own likeness. He saw his own image joined by that of curious Shánu's. He quickly ignored his associate and said, "I see nothing but my reflection in the failing light." "The light never fails, but humans do." She intoned and lifted her hand as she had before. Mikúsa observed from her fetal position that the Lady was now chanting in a singsong verse that she had never heard before. She remembered the warning and closed her eyes and faced away from them. The legionnaire and his accomplice put all of their attention onto the bulging liquid and gasped when the Orb broke the surface. Srúma could not believe his luck to actually be the one chosen to deliver this prize to the Emperor. His rewards would be vast. He happiness was so great that he began to chuckle. Shánu looked at him and found the situation funny also. As the Orb rose higher it brightened as all of the Perfect began to sing. Srúma began to enjoy this even more and laughed even louder. The light from the sphere seemed to intensify and penetrate the surrounding structures. Magical wards in the neighboring temples were set off and a huge cacophony of alarms began to be heard around the entire city.

Srúma and Shánu continued their mirth even as their skin began to turn into dust. Their internal organs quickly followed and the wasting continued until all that was left was a pair of laughing skeletons. Finally their very bones began to glow and light up the sky. Then suddenly they were gone. The singing stopped. Mikúsa took a quick look to see if it was over. She saw the Perfect sitting in their usual positions as if nothing had just happened. The Lady looked years younger and much healthier. She went to her side.

"The Orb has been reinvigorated. Your mission to deliver it to the Emperor will not be necessary today. However, you must take this to the Palace of the Realm and tell that that I am not yet ready." She opened her hand and gave Srúma's golden badge of office to Mikúsa. "They will understand my message."

No one approached the Temple of Drá for the rest of the night. In the morning Mikúsa had to handle the questions of the local authorities with great diplomacy. She seemed to calm them with the story of how the Perfect were merely performing a ritual that had unforeseen effects. The head investigator put it down to the assumed magical sloppiness of the followers of Drá. Since no one seemed to be hurt and the local residents couldn't figure out how to explain what they saw and who to hold responsible, the matter was quickly dropped, but not forgotten. It was the talk of the city for many months.

Mikúsa took the badge as directed to the Palace of the Realm and presented it with great humility to the officer on duty. His supervisor was called and upon seeing the piece of fancy gold and hearing the Lady's message, he knew that he would never see that pompous Srúma again. He would have difficulty figuring out what to tell Srúma's clanmaster.

Epilogue

The six-month tour ended, as all tours must. There was no fanfare, only a quiet goodbye from Mikúsa to the unresponsive Perfect after positioning them for their morning devotionals. All that she took with her was the beloved flute and her memories. She would come back often to visit, worship and travel that stream of future possibilities with them. It was on one of these journeys that she had the vision of herself as an old woman finally delivering the Orb to Avanthár and back to the Emperor. Looking at Lady A'én she was glad that such a task was so many years away.

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