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A Thief of Jakálla

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Lest someone think me a nobody, let me just say that I trace my lineage back many thousands of years to the original rulers of the Isle of Vrá. My name is Marétku vuUttáma-slóka and I am of royal heritage -- though I admit my present condition could not possibly be lower. I am in fact the lowest of the low: a thief of Jakálla, City Half as Old as the World, Mistress of the Mssúma River.

My ancestors, however, valiantly and loyally served both the Bednálljans and the Engsvanyáli. During the reign of Queen Nayári, the great Vrayáni warrior Khú'es vuNaóma struck out, with a simple slingstone, the fourth eye of the demon prince Kurritlakál and saved mankind. And later, before Engsvanyálu's decline, the feared Vrayáni sea-rover Tnéyu vuWasúma raided Hlüssuyál, home island to the Spawn of the Old Ones, and returned to great Gánga with his ships bursting with treasure, thereafter gifted by the God-King of the Golden Age with his weight in diamonds and rubies. But once Engsvanyálu fell, and Destiny's greedy scavengers had picked its corpse apart like Dláo-beetles, my forebears declared their independence and piloted the Isle's fortunes through the ensuing interregnum. The greatest empire known to man since the Time of Darkness crumbled and civilization itself crashed down, but Vrá remained a shining but secluded island of advancement and culture. Legend states that

the great hero Hagárr of Paránta found enlightenment in one of Vrá city's excellent colleges. Thus it transpired in the several millenia long Time of No Kings.

Even after the upstart Tlakotánis established the Second Imperium of the Seal Emperors of Tsolyánu, my ancestors continued governing their island free from internal strife or foreign war -- until the reign of Kurshétl Nikúma I, the "Siezer of Cities". He subjugated the Sea Peoples of the southern ocean, and their chief clan, that of the People of the Peak, fled and took refuge upon our Isle of Vrá. Aroused, the emperor sent emissaries to my forefathers, demanding tribute and obedience. We refused, and the great armies of Tsolyánu in the years soon following mounted two massive invasions of our island. The first the Vrayáni defeated by force, our warriors driving the aggressors back into Msúmtel Bay. The second invasion was larger and better prepared, but it we halted also upon Vrá's beaches while a sudden terrible squall arose to smash the Emperor's armada. The entire island had been united in a single fervant prayer to Hnálla, Master of Light, and he rewarded us with a victory which amazes the audiences of epic songs even to this day!

For over six hundred years my noble Vrayáni ancestors held off their enemies: the Tsolyáni, the Hlutrú, the Hlüss, and the innumerable pirates of the southern seas. But in the year 1115 after the foundation of the Second Imperium, the armies of Kánmiyel Nikúma IV, the "Flattener of Peaks", finally destroyed our defending legions and Vrá fell. The royal house suffered virtual extermination; the streets of its citadel, Vrá city, ran red beneath a carpet of human skins -- the citadel's famous slingers strangled with their own slings, their bodies mauled and mutilated by the Tlokiriqáluyal-worshipping invaders. The Tsolyáni carried the women and children of the High Pinnacle Clan off as slaves to work the hellish mines in the crags north of Avanthár. The Princess Eddyána, the Pearl of the South, sang from a golden cage for the savage Emperor's amusement, all to show what happens to those who defy the Imperium.

And I am called a criminal.

Merely a handful escaped the fall of Vrá, among them members of my lineage. They sailed in small boats across the perilous Chanayága Deeps: some drifted east into the clutches of the inhuman Hlutrgú; others landed upon Thayúri or one of the smaller islands nearby; and a few sailed several hundred harrowing Tsán to the ancient city of Jakállá. There, in her rank and overcrowded Foreigners' Quarter, the survivors of the noble Vrayáni settled. Miruéne vuUttáma, from whom, in direct decent, I spring, had been one of Vrá's greatest orators; he became a mendicant and a mute, a beggar, his voice choked shut by bitterness. Others of the Vrayáni lived or died as the gods decreed, but whether alive or dead, ignominy was their portion, and they were made to drink the drought of despair.

Ten generations passed before Emperor Hejjéka IV, the "Restorer of Dignities", reestablished the High Pinnacle Clan upon the Isle of Vrá, following his edict to end all ancient enmities and return the patents of nobility to them that had previously been foes of the glory of Tsolyánu. His agents searched the empire for descendants of our original nobility and found many of my ancient people still living in primitive villages high in the mountains near Avanthár, no longer slaves by now, but instead freeman herders and trackers. The coming of the marvelously arrayed Imperials to their primitive villages is recounted in Ndíu vuChráyu's *Hymn to the Light Above*. I have sung it to audiences in Jakállá and Béy Sü; it never fails to invoke reflection and repose in the hearts of those who listen. Instead of being slaughtered, enslaved, or skinned alive, the villagers were robed in the odd costumes of Vrayáni nobility and returned to our ancient island home with great sums of money, the treasures taken from our citadel, and local autonomy. Though they arrived in true splendor and were greeted enthusiastically by the subjects of their long-forgotten ancestors, the inheritors of Vra's original aristocracy had long since forgotten the skills of a sea people and were forced to learn life all over again.

Others of the Ilse's royalty emerged from Jakállá, including the direct descendant of the God-King of Vrá -- or so he claimed, having possession of the lost Sapphire Seal of the Vrayáni dynasty. Possession is everything, as any thief will tell you, but I believe the man to have been an imposter. So did my ancestors. As a result of their skepticism, they did not return to the estates which had been theirs for centuries on Vrá. Nor were they granted new patents of nobility by the Emperor Hejjéka V, "The Open-Handed". No. Instead they continued their squalid existence in the maze-like slums of Jakállá. That is why I am now called Uttáma-slòka: I am "Marétku of the abandoned Uttámas." For twenty generations more we have continued, our dead horribly buried in the grave pits reserved for the very poor, or thrown into the Gulf of Porudáya. Nevertheless, the Uttámas do not forget their origins. The tale of their fall has passed on from mother to son, from father to daughter. While the mantics of the marketplace convinced my mother of our eventual return to Vrá, I distrust such down-at-the-heels doomsayers. I am the last of the Uttámas.

The lineage dies with me.

And I will probably end my sojourn on this Plane with an impalement stake driven through me. You see the laws of the Second Imperium of the Seal Emperors of Tsolyánu are very stern: the penalty for most crimes is simply death. Thieves are dealt with ruthlessly; that is why there are no thieving clans, unless you count the Clan of Sea Blue! But there are thieves. I am one. In fact there are many thieves who are well organized in Jakállá, but its fingersmiths arrange their affairs in utmost secrecy. They are famous throughout the known world for their mastery: they pick pockets, cut purses, and fleece foreigners like timid Hmá-beasts; they break into palaces, slipping through windows, sliding over rooftops, and skulking through sewers and secret passageways; they search out and loot underworld temples, tombs, and troves. The thieves of Jakállá consider their vocation a high art -- an art which imitates life more perfectly than any other!

It is the year 2364 after the foundation of the Second Imperium and for as many of my twentyfive years as I care to remember I have been a thief. My mother taught me much; I had seen no more than three of Jakállá's sweltering summers when she took me to a jeweler's shop and bade me swallow a tiny, oval-shaped red ruby. I remember the incident quite vividly. The greasy Salarvyáni merchant threatened to eviscerate me, but my mother carried me into the underworld and we escaped. She was made to search my stools for the next several days, but ended richer for her pains. As was I. Unfortunately, the fruit of our little ploy was not precious enough to buy our fiefs back on Vrá, and my mother tried theft again and again, using me to advantage, until her acquaintances turned her in for fear of reprisals. You see, the law of Tsolyánu *must* be satisfied: if not upon the guilty party, then upon her family, her clan-relations, or even her friends. She was betrayed to the Imperials and given the "high ride" somewhere around my tenth birthday -- just after I believe. That period of my life is somewhat indistinct; I would rather forget the specifics.

My father I have forgotten for other reasons.

Reasons that are mine alone.

After my mother's execution I became a street urchin, but soon learned that to survive even an orphyn must have a patron of some kind. One cannot rely on charity. I found a patron by lingering near the House of the Pleasant Hour, where devotees of dark and sensual Dlamélish and her cohort Hriháyal amuse themselves with erotic diversions too numerous, and often too grotesque, to mention. The languid priestesses there would send me on little errands: a lovenote delivered here, a parcel carried there, etc. They fawned over my girlish looks. They giggled at my bravado and wit. And they marvelled at the alacrity with which I accomplished their simple tasks, furthering their nothing intrigues. I survived on the unreliable tips of copper or silver coins that the priestesses and their compatriots would give me. That is, until young and magnetic

Lady Mshén took me away from the House of the Pleasant Hour to be her own personal pageboy, then panderer, then puppet. After that I had no need of petty coin.

Lady Mshén hiSayúncha of the Clan of Sea Blue. She was dark and mysterious and much younger than her sophisticated demeanor suggested. Her needs, desires, and especially her lusts, had all matured well before their time. She was no more than twenty when she paused (after her performance of an erotic episode from the Epic of Hrúgga at the House of the Pleasant Hour) to watch me juggling five or six Gaún-fruit just outside. I was almost fifteen. She watched me with her sensuous mouth twisted into a wry smile while I dazzled a bevy of Thráyan merchants out of their Káitars. Perhaps she recognized a kindred spirit, or a desperate soul. I am inclined to think the latter. In any case, she rewove my Skein of Destiny in ways too profound to encompass in words.

It was through the Lady Mshén that I was taught literacy, languages, the Epics, history, and folklore. It was through her contacts in the Emerald Circlet Clan that I was taught the arts of the courtier, the entertainer, and the musician. (She it was who alone taught me the arts of love.) And it was through others of her patrons that I learned the arts of spying, of thieving, and of cold-blooded killing. I adored Mshén, and I did everything she asked of me: I spied for her, I stole for her, I even strangled for her. It was only years afterward, years of manipulation and near love-madness, that I broke the hold she had over me: a second reweaving of my Skein of Destiny. I used to fancy that Mshén's dominion over me was of sorcerous manufacture, but it turned out to be of my own making. Recall that I had been a mere gutter-child from the malodorous slums of Jakállá, and Lady Mshén transformed me into a cultured entertainer and accomplished espionage agent. I naturally thought that without her I would fall back into the city's stews, all brilliance in life gone, or even be killed at the behest of Lady Mshén herself. I loved her desperately but also feared her deeply; which -- love or fear - - was the stronger emotion I no longer know.

In any case I eventually became Lady Mshén's chief henchman. Clanless, I had nowhere to go and had nothing to do but as she commanded. I combined high skill with complete expendability: no clansmen or family would inquire after me should I suddenly disappear. I toured the noble clan-palaces of Jakállá and its environs as a musician, singer of epic poems, or actor in dance-dramas, but my actual task was to gather vital information for Lady Mshén hiSayúncha. Through secrecy, stealth and sleight-of-hand I snooped into every corner of the vast and rambling palaces that crowd the estates in and around Jakállá. I once even spied upon Governor Chiringgá hiTishkólun himself! What exact use Lady Mshén made of the fruits of my skulking has never been revealed to me, but the eventual results of her machinations are obvious enough. For example, the governor's recent house arrest -- I am certain it can be laid upon Lady Mshén hiSayúncha, whose clan has intrigued against that of the Golden Bough for over ten thousand years. I am certain because the charges are based upon information I obtained through my own crabbed scheming and night-crawling -- but that is another tale altogether!

As a youth I had furthered the petty intrigues of the young women who frequented the House of the Pleasant Hour. It appears I then graduated to furthering the greater intrigues of my mistress, Lady Mshén hiSayúncha. Eventually I realized that my escape from the streets of Jakállá was perhaps more illusory than real. At twenty I still had no prestige, no security, no clan: I was still 'abandoned'. Mshén played upon my hopes and fears; she constantly promised to buy my way into the Emerald Circlet or Bright Sword but never offered the ten-thousand Káitars it would take join either of these clans. Mshén also played upon my heart and spirit-soul; she promised one day to take me as her consort, to bear my children. These promises were designed to ensure my loyalty, and they were quite effective for many years. But as I matured and gained some distance from which to view our relationship, I began to feel doubt and confusion -- not an auspicious condition for one so easily obliterated as myself.

Lady Mshén knew my torment; she fed off of it and began testing the bounds of my devotion. She would lure me with the delights of her body, trap me with the opulence of her condition, but then require a proof of my love -- some small quest or adventure she had ready to mind. I found myself unable to resist, perhaps because Mshén offered me a taste of the life I had been told throughout my childhood was mine by rights: the life of the nobility, the life of Mshén and her Sea Blue clansmen, the life of Vrá's High Pinnacle Clan. I proved my love, or perhaps more accurately my fear, again and again, but each time her labors became more difficult and dangerous. One of the first was to capture a large, horned spider, that spits a blinding, bone-melting acid many man-heights in distance at its molestors, which had infested her apartments; one of the last was to steal from the sorcerer Ruvádis, who has sealed himself up in a guarded tower outside Jakállá, a golden magic ring. Mshén thought it impossible for me to elude the famous "Wearer of Eyes," but I returned a sixday later with her precious little trinket; that too is another tale.

Through all this Mshén promised me that marriage and clan-membership were just around the corner, but neither ever arrived. I became maddened and one night suggested to her that I may as well employ my skills for other less feckless masters. She turned her eyes upon me, now as cold as the northern Pentrútra Deeps, gave me that same sardonic smile she had given me when first we met, and sent me upon "one last little adventure", an emprise that would sever me from Lady Mshén hiSayúncha of the Clan of Sea Blue forever, that would sever me from all I had known forever, but that would heal that rift I had forever felt in my spirit-soul. I focused on my master's baleful eyes as she spoke.

"Go to the Garden of Weeping Snows -- you know in which direction it lies -- and take from the undying Nyélmu his Globe of Distant Discernment (a torment to him, a comfort to me!). Bring it here. Afterwhich I reward you with membership in the Bright Sword Clan and release you from my service. Nyélmu's device will be my

netherworldly eyes. I will no longer require your weak and worldly ones." Her voice was cold like her eyes as Mshén sent me toward what I am certain she hoped would be an excruciatingly painful death.

"Ssa! I know in which direction the Garden lies." I replied. But what I thought to myself was that the Garden of Weeping Snows lies in the direction of death-in-life, and of life-in-death too! -- both of them combined.

Muttering imprecations under my breath in the obscene argot of Jakalla's street gangs, I left my master's chambers in furious thought. What an impossible task: first, to penetrate the underworld far enough to come upon Nyélmu's palace in one piece; second, to confront the great wizard and gain his favor, for to displease him in any way means immediate torture and death; and third, to steal his most precious possession, for he has no other means of viewing the world outside, thereafter to escape the Garden of Weeping Snows carrying Nyélmu's crystal globe, heavy with his power, and to return it aboveground to Lady Mshén.

Suicidal. Utterly!

Which quality, upon reflection, was exactly what attracted me to the adventure and explains why I obeyed Mshén's command without complaint or even thought of escape.

The possibility of death made me yearn for a place where I might quiet my racing mind. I slipped through Jakalla's streets avoiding the guard patrols and exited the city via an old, narrow, little known gate near the Hirilákte Arena. I headed for a woodland vale I had discovered a year or more before, when that formless anguish over Lady Mshén had first burst through the gates of my heart. It was a small, round, secret clearing having a stone fountain at its center; the fountain was early Bednálljan or even older. I remember being amazed that it should have survived the slow but ceaseless reforestation that had occurred over what must have been the site of Jakalla twenty thousand years before. The vale had an aura about it, an other-planar presence, which

always calmed me like other people are calmed by the sound of ocean waves. I sat on the fountain's edge and, after drinking from its strangely metallic water, watched dawn begin its brightening of the eastern night while I considered how best to challenge the great Nyélmu.

It was then I saw the apparition.

I recall most distinctly the sky. It was such an incredible indigo-blue that it actually pulsed and vibrated against the orbs of my eyes. The planets had hidden their faces and the sun had not yet risen above the curve of the earth; the trees were shadowed and black. From where I sat the entire vault of the sky seemed an immense torrent of liquid color pouring down, down into that deep hollow, empty of foliage, where I had gone in search of tranquility. I will always remember that powerful awakening, as though a third eye had opened in the center of my forehead. Even longer will I remember the indescribable immersion into the Divine which followed, brought on by what at first glance appeared to be a mere ghost.

You see the god's Aspect composed itself of earthmists, which had glided silently into the vale while my attention was fixed above, and thus had that frail wraithlike appearance story-tellers use to describe the shades of men whose spirit-souls have departed for the Isles of the Excellent Dead.

Except this figure was anything but frail...

I make no attempt to describe in words my encounter with Jeléshqu, one of the nine Inner Aspects of Lord Ksárul. Words are paltry things and would only stain the experience. I only mention it because I left my hidden vale -- no longer mine but that of the Ancient Lord of Secrets -- with a gift from the god: a silver ring composed of several separate slender strands, which once joined together unleash the ring's magical power. No simple puzzle to solve; the strands might as well have been cast in quicksilver! Jeléshqu spoke no human words, yet a strange and ringing understanding surged through my mind; it bade me discover the ring's solution in order to access its powers. I

also understood that this truly magic ring (the one I stole for Mshén pales by comparison) would play an important part in my descent into the Garden of Weeping Snows. How precisely I knew not; nor did I demand an explanation from the Doomed Prince of the Blue Room. For as the poet Yetil has said:

*Such chiasma as rides the tides
Admits to nothing a million times*

Time passed. Jeléshqu's avatar finally dissolved when the first rays of sunlight thinly smote the treetops far above our heads. Slowly and on trembling feet I climbed out of the mist-filled secret vale and headed crookedly, druggedly south toward Jakálla, still clutching sweatily the undone puzzle ring. I felt transformed. My mind's eye perceived life-energies emanating from budding plants, from my own fingertips, even from the decaying trunks of fallen trees. They appeared ethereal and nimbus-like. Their colors included bright orange-whites, shimmering greens, and dying-ember violets. I was totally entranced. But the auras diminished as day advanced, until at noon they disappeared completely and I woke from my ecstasy to find myself on the outskirts of the City of the Dead. Fast as I could I raced straight away west to Jakálla's main eastern gate.

Once through I gathered such articles as I would require for a solitary crawl through the deeper underworld. These included rope, a long staff of stout Ssár wood, a few handtools, and a rare compass (a small glass-covered ceramic bowl containing oil upon which floats a sliver of magnetised iron). I marshalled such weapons as I would in desperation need -- a scallop-edged, double-bladed short-sword and a wickedly long iron knife that Mshén had given me sometime before -- but I planned to skirt traps and evade underworld creatures as much as possible. To this end I searched out and purchased fresh bunches of Tsúral buds, which repel the deadly Thúnru'u, and borrowed an amulet (a tiny mummy-shaped statuette of blue faience written over in

Bednálljan Salarvyáni) to turn away the undead creations of the Dark Trinity. My benefactor was Nríga hiViridáme, who had the disquieting habit of staring at a person, laughing weirdly, and predicting their immanent death or downfall. He was avoided by nearly everyone in Jakállá, not because his bizarre outbursts were breaches of etiquette, but rather because they were too often accurate. Had he the Plague of the White Hand, Nríga could not have enjoyed fewer friends. But I was one. Nríga counseled me on how best to reach the Garden of Weeping Snows, for, armed even as I was, my chances of successfully navigating the labyrinthine underworld alone amounted nearly to nothing.

"Seek the Endless Stair," said Nríga, "from the fathomless caverns deep beneath Téकुmel to the uppermost Engsvanyáli levels it climbs, though most think it was wrought in legend only or was destroyed in the wreck of the Kingdom of the Gods."

"But if known in fable only how may it be found?" replied I.

"A stretching forth of the arms! For one who knows the Powers and the Ways," he said with that weird laughter. "Return hither tonight, thief, and I shall place you upon the stairtop, within easy reach of your final destination." It seemed to me that special emphasis was laid upon the word 'final' (irony is, sadly, irresistible to savants and sorcerers of every variety). I resisted the urge to retort but instead asked with exaggerated deference, "What may I expect from the evil Nyélmu, and what information have you regarding his Garden of Weeping Snows?"

Again the weird laughter.

"You may expect to die, my artful friend, or at least to be imprisoned with Nyélmu and his ageless sycophants in their jaded and joyless orgies of unmeasured dissipation. That I know of, only two have escaped him. He is older than any but the gods, and he is madder even than they..."

"Is this one your infamous forbodings?"

The jackpriest twisted his arched brows dangerously at my discourtesy in interrupting him. "The Garden of Weeping Snows is Nyélmu's ensorcelled prison; he has been condemned by the gods through their magic to dwell forever within the white marble Palace of Frost which lies within the Garden. Legend states that Nyélmu offended the almighty gods by his delving too deeply and too keenly into certain mysteries of our uttermost past; he has been doomed, therefore, to suffer a terrible endless boredom inside his colorless and changeless prison; this it is that makes him fey. Beware!"

I listened attentively to the remainder of his tale, but nothing was said that I -- as an epic singer, entertainer, and thief -- had not already heard. He told of Nyélmu's origins during the late Bednálljan period, his reappearance aeons later during the great decline of Engsvanyálu, his learning by scattered clues the nature of Tékel's existence, and his doom at the hands of the Lords of Stability. At last I wearied of wringing information from him and graciously took my leave, reminding myself that 'those who know the most tell the least' -- An old Engsvanyáli saying. Before departing, however, I arranged to meet him again at the setting of Gayél, the small green moon of secret liaisons governed by Dlamélis, the goddess to whom Mshén was ostensibly devoted (though to my mind Lady Mshén served herself alone).

Again the weird laughter. Little wonder Nríga was never invited to the salons given so frequently by persons of high status in Jakálla.

The sun Tuléng was lowering over the swampy Flats of Tsechélnu by the time I reached the Sea Blue clan-palace where Lady Mshén had arranged quarters for me some eleven years before. I did not seek her out. Instead, I entered through the kitchens, wound my way back to the slaves' quarters, and climbed down to my chamber, situated beneath an old backwall corner turret. I was the only servant with his own private sleeping chamber, due in chief to the delicate nature of my services for the aristocratic Clan of Sea Blue and for the necessity of my unobserved arrival and

departure from the premises. Once there I began to methodically arrange my necessities in a battered leather backpack that I had used to hold certain tools and items of plunder on previous occasions. The small cellar stank with age and rotting mortar; the leather backpack smelled of blood. Few people realize how long the sweet stench of blood lingers once spilled; it can last for years. With thoughts such as these I finished packing and then lay upon my woven bedmat to rest.

Night fell.

I woke in the chill of the early morning, perhaps six half-hour Kíren before the sun's rise. I lay for a long moment before rising. I saw my mother's face; strange words fell from her lips. Sorrowful words. She looked wan, but no shadow of the shocking pain of impalement showed on the contours of her mouth or eyes. I was grateful for this; she was peaceful at last, there in the Paradises of Teretané. One tear welled over the rim of my eyes, and I leapt up to begin my laborious descent into Jakálla's deeper underworld, more extensive than any but a few in all the Five Empires.

Like my long deceased parent, I felt completely at rest as I slipped silently from my underground chamber, wound my way beneath slave-quarters, kitchens, and sculleries, and then dropped into the sewage tunnels which underlie all the better-maintained precincts of the city. I knew the rout. Heading away from the Eqúnoyel River I emerged through a drainage grate hidden within a thick grove of Gapúl and Vrés-trees just outside the pyramid of the Ancient Unnamed One. The night was utterly dark, as black above as below in the whispering, lightless tunnels. Carefully I crept through Jakálla's palace district, avoiding clan guardsmen at every turn, until I came upon a small but fabulously ornate clanhouse located near the abandoned barracks of the Legion of Hekéth of Purdímal, which had not housed its forces since the reign of the second Tlakotáni some two-thousand years ago. The neighborhood suited the Cloak of Azure Gems clan perfectly: on the edge of town in a old discreet district adjacent to the wealthy high clan palaces but not among them and their open pompousness. Near a

legion barracks that had not been used in two millenia. Near the walls. Near the tower of the sorcerer Ruvádis. Near the Bridge of Hejjéka II the Heretic.

The Cloak of Azure Gems Clan scrupulously maintained its clan-palace in the heavy style of the earliest Bednálljan dynasties.

Mother and I would shed our burdens of memory together, for Destiny has no power to sever on the basis of place or time once one has embarked for the Isles of the Excellent Dead.

...To be continued.