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Book of Visitations of Glory



Issue 8

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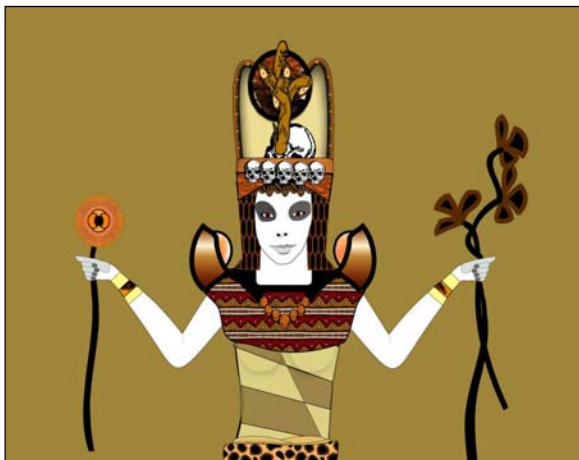
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UPDATES FROM THE PALACE OF THE **PRIESTHOODS OF THE GODS**



Lady Osúre hiTukimchásh of the Dark Fear Clan, High Ritual Priestess of Sárku. She is no longer in Sokátis but has now managed to get a transfer to the City of Sárku to serve there as a priestess in the shrine of Lord Siyenágga, the "Wanderer of Tombs." She was very happy to get out of Sokátis after the violence and fighting of the past few years. She was not hurt when the Salarvyáni invaded that city, but her clanspeople had their clanhouse seriously damaged, and she lost some jewellery to Salarvyáni looters.



The First Temple of Lord Vimúhla in the Chákas has announced that Elder Mígor hiTúkkolen of the Eye of Flame Clan, Shrine Guardian at the Aspect of Púrukasài, formerly of The Legion of The Storm of Fire has journeyed on to the Halls of the Ever-Blazing Flame. His long and devoted service to the Lord of Fire is to be held out as an example of true devotion in preparation for the Final Conflagration. His ashes shall be entombed in a place of honor below the flagstones of his beloved Shrine.



Omél hiViridáme of the Cloak of Azure Gems Clan, Preceptor of the of the Hall of Sapphire Glory in Mrélu, Ascendant in the Society of the Blue Light has been appointed by the "Speaker of the Will of the Gods Within the World" to the Court of Purple Robes and will soon report to the Hall of Supernal Radiance for the First Enclave of Emperor Mirusiya's reign.



This story utilizes Professor M. A. R. Barker's creation of the World of Tékumel but is not to be considered 'authentic Tékumel' and is in no way 'approved' by Professor Barker. For more information about the World of Tékumel, visit www.tekumel.com.

Dedicated to my wife Annette, for her unequalled love and support, and to David C. Sutherland III, an artist who helped create Tékumel: the glories of the world fade, but your visions endure.

I thank Belinda Kelly, panchakahq, and my parents for editing earlier drafts of this story that badly needed it. Also, I was grateful to have panchakahq's remarkable Gazetteer of Butrús as a Pán Chákan complement to Prof. Barker's Northwest Frontier Gazetteer, my source for details of that region of Tsolyánu.

THE SHADOWS OF THE GODS

Nick Bogan

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This story is the sequel to **Death in Dó Cháka**; if you are unfamiliar with any terms herein, see the footnotes in that story.

Chapter I

Aíjom¹ hiKharsáma woke up late, grinning hugely. The celebrations last night at the clanhouse of the Green Bough and, later, at his own clanhouse of the Golden Dawn had been wonderful, and not so exciting that a still-recovering young hunter couldn't enjoy them without collapsing. Today he would set forth for home; in little more than two weeks, with luck, he would be safe at home, telling tales that, even properly altered, would frighten his nephews and nieces so badly that his clanbrothers and clansisters would never forgive him. Aíjom thought on his homecoming for a few moments before he left the guest chamber, made a short brunch in the crowded dining hall, and went to meet with his clan's elders, to properly thank them for their hospitality before leaving Chéne Hó.

He walked through his clan's hall, favoring his left leg that had been wounded only days before battling a Pé Chói warrior. He was unable to believe his luck in surviving the past few weeks' events. His step was light as he passed faded murals and bas-reliefs depicting the Golden Dawn's honorable, if modest, history: here, a Tirrikámu, commander of a semétl of twenty troops, who won distinction battling the invading Mu'ugalavyáni legions in the War of 2020; there, a follower of Hnálla, Lord of Light, who had attained high status as an administrative priest by exemplifying his clan's characteristic attention to detail and accuracy in their records. He wondered, with a touch of immodesty, if his own deeds, which were of a somewhat different nature than the orthodox paths to recognition shown in these murals, might someday be recorded in the annals of his clan.

He presented himself to the formally clad boy who met visitors outside the clan's meeting-rooms, where already some of the elders were conducting business, and waited contentedly for an audience. He was surprised when one of the elders came forth shortly to greet him. He made obeisance; the short-bearded man

¹ Literally, "thirsty" in Tsolyáni.

gravely returned the honor, then fixed him with a stare. “You have been sent for,” he said, distaste evident in his voice. “You are to report to the temple of Vimúhla, and ask for a man named Sikún². A messenger was here early, and asked that you report promptly.”

A wave of unease shook Aíjom, but he made little sign of it. He thanked the elder for his hospitality, which was politely received, and walked back to his chamber, to gather the few possessions he had carried from Khirgár. *Am I to be sent on Imperial business already?* Lacking an answer to his question, he was sorely frustrated. He quickly left his clanhouse and stepped out into the bustling streets.

Aíjom moved as quickly as he dared and kept close to the walls he passed. He was fearful of assassins sent by the Íto or Golden Sunburst clans as revenge for his recent setback of their schemes to dominate the rich lands west of Chéne Hó through the use of raiding parties of Pé Chói and sérudla mercenaries. Last night, Sikún had promised that the local hunter Tsókalon, the strangely-wise Shén Chhkk, and Aíjom would have the protection of the Petal Throne against such vengeance, but Aíjom knew that such tiny drí as themselves could easily be crushed without notice from their guardian tlékku high overhead. It was too long a walk through the crowds, full of potential killers in Aíjom's eyes, before he saw the high-combed temple of Vimúhla, its sloping walls alive with workmen who carved, patched and painted the temple of the fiery patron God of the new Emperor Mirusíya.

He could not help but feel foreboding as he passed through its ornately decorated, fortified walls; he had never set foot in a temple of the God of war in the service of Change, who was set in opposition to his own Lord Karakán. Once within the walls, he walked through a crowd of babbling worshipers, all sporting red on their garb and all hungry for audience or favor. He spotted a priest who was less beset with petitions, a grey-haired, grandfatherly man who to Aíjom seemed out of place here, and asked for Sikún. The priest's placid features rippled into attention at the name, and he assessed Aíjom sharply. “Follow me,” he rumbled, and spun around, his heavy robes swinging about him. Aíjom could feel the

² “Little man”, after a humanoid creature from the south.

envious gazes of the worshipers in the entrance room as he walked deeper within the temple with his own escort, past an antechamber filled with a sumptuously clad array of chanting red-robed priests, a hierarchy of voices raised in praise "to the Great God Vimúhla, Lord of the Singing Flame!"

Aíjom was led to a small door, elaborately worked with glyphs that presumably glorified the Flame Lord, and was left by the priest. He felt uncomfortable here, deep in a temple of one of the grim Tlokiriqáluyal, the Gods of Change, who stood eternally opposed to the Lords of Stability whose teachings Aíjom followed. He waited for a yóm, then the door opened, and Sikún, clad in a priest's rich garb, looked at him from within. If he had seemed commanding when Aíjom had met him yesterday in the clanhouse of the Green Bough, here in the heart of his domain he looked as mighty and fell as a sérudla. Aíjom quavered inside.

"Come in, Aíjom," Sikún said pleasantly. Aíjom ducked into the room. He was surprised to find it filled with books and scrolls--he had half-expected a terrible inner sanctum full of leering masks and bloody sacrificial knives--and to see a large, impossibly intricately graven, lustrous blue stone on a desk. In the rear of the long room, small torches burned, their smoke wicked away by cunning vents in the walls.

"Be seated, and take your rest," Sikún said, proffering a sweat-beaded cup of chumétl. Aíjom sat carefully on a flame-red, richly detailed ceremonial mat that was probably worth more than a village's harvest, and sipped slightly at his chumétl; its cold sweetness did little to calm him.

Sikún gazed piercingly at him. "As I told you last night, our Emperor occasionally employs men such as yourself to ensure the well-being of the Empire. Today, I give you such a charge." He sat behind the desk, grasped a sheaf of papers, and stacked them atop another heaping harvest of the bureaucracy. On one splendidly worked document, Aíjom spied a line without meaning to: "they do not advance, but run like lean and desperate tlékkú". He was trying to make sense of this when Sikún spoke again, his voice grave. "The naval commerce of the Empire, far to the south, has long been vexed by the piracy of the Hlüss. Their depredations

have worsened in recent years.”

Aíjom shuddered at the mere mention of the hideous foes of man, whose great floating island-ships were said to wander the waters, ever eager for prey to devour. He had never been anywhere near the ocean, but every Tsolyáni heard of these monsters in their childhood. *I am to be sent immediately on business of import--maybe far away*, he thought morosely. *I was a fool to accept Sikún's commission.*

“There is a monastery of Lord Chiténg, the Reaper of Cities, the God of Pain, and Cohort of my Lord Vimúhla, in the hills a few days south of Chéne Hó. The priests of this monastery have offered the use of an ancient device that is said to be effective against the Hlüss. Your task is to carry it in safety to Penóm. There you will board a ship that will bear the device to the enemy. You will be accompanied by a priestess of Chiténg who has studied the device and who will instruct you in its use. Chhkk and Hájit have already gone south to the village of Purússa; you must meet them there three days from now.”

Confusion now gripped him. What had he or Chhkk to do with Hlüss? The Shén might well be familiar with the ocean--his people mostly lived south of far-distant Livyánu, and traveled to Tsolyánu over the waves--but he knew nothing of it. Aíjom felt as trapped as when he had huddled in the dark below the earth, at the mercy of the Pé Chói of the forest. He was to march to Penóm, at the other end of the Empire, which would take a whole season if the stories of traveling merchants were right; then he would board a ship and sail out to face the dreaded Hlüss, a task at which the mighty hero Hrógga would have quailed.

Sikún smiled slightly, seeing his dismay. “It is indeed a heavy task that I set before you. Yet know that an Imperial servant's reward is commensurate with his service.” He assumed a more serious manner. “This matter must be dealt with as speedily as possible. You may spend today arranging your affairs and sending letters to your family, as you wish. But you must not mention the particulars of your mission to anyone else. Tell your clansmen here that you return to Khirgár. These papers will describe your mission and identify you to the priests of the

monastery.”

Aíjom nodded numbly. He slipped the papers into his belt-pouch, bowed to Sikún, and walked slowly back to his clanhouse. Being of a merchant clan, he needed no scribe to write his letters for him. He composed them in a formal style, both to help him sustain an optimistic tone and because he thought it fitting for the seriousness of his mission. He wrote to his wife and parents that he was bound for Penóm on military business, that he would soon return to them, and that he hoped to bring honor to the Golden Dawn. He glumly rolled the letters, sealed them with wax, and entrusted them to a clansman he had met last night, who seemed honored to be of service to such a notable figure.

As instructed, he told his elders that he was headed home, and was gratified that they did not trouble him with questions. He packed his hunting armor, traveling food, and clothes, and then headed for the quiet of his guestroom. He fell asleep early, though his mind was a roiling river.

He awoke in the dark, grabbed his pack, and left his already-wakeful clanhouse. The streets were silent, though some noises of the morning's chores could be heard from the dimly seen clanhouses, as he limped southward through the rings of the city's inner walls. *If I do not work through this injury soon, my journey will take a year*, he thought, and forced himself to quicken his pace. Soon, he walked through the city's cavernous southern gate, which opened to the great south-faring Sákbe-road and the commerce of empires, and the buildings of Chéne Hó fell away. Even now, a thin stream of people passed through the gate; it was as though they walked under a mountain.

In a kirén, the dawn glowed over the rich plains. Aíjom was happy that the terraced, fortified Sákbe-road stood between him and the endless Chákan jungle. His stride faltered, but it was already improving. He wished for someone to talk to about what he faced. The pain was a constant drain, and worse, it reminded him that he was bound for the temple of awful Chiténg, Cohort of fiery Vimúhla, who delighted in suffering and torture. Aíjom resolved that he would give the priests of that horrid God no

satisfaction by showing his injuries, and walked yet faster.

The road soon was busy with farmers, legionaries, and Karakán knew who else, including shining black and white Pé Chói; Aíjom watched them lope by with ill-concealed wariness. As the sun rose to the center of the sky, the heat grew quickly, and Aíjom knew that tomorrow was the first day of Firasúl--it would get much worse. He stopped before noon and rested in the shadow of the tall west side of the Sákbe-road, looking west, where the forest of Dó Cháka shimmered in sinister silence through the haze. He had a small lunch of local sweetbread, melon, and hmélu; he had been offered smoked hmá by his clansmen that morning, but refused it, as he still remembered the stink of hmá on the long wagon-ride back to Chéne Hó. Aíjom couldn't stay awake in the heat of summer with a full belly; it was a full ténmre before he arose and again walked to the south.

Fortunately, the Sákbe-road now shaded him; every traveler was visibly happier and more energetic. His leg had stiffened with rest, and his shoulder, which had been pricked by an arrow as he fled from malevolent Pé Chói, itched terribly under his pack strap, yet he walked on well after sunset had faded into gloom, along with many other travelers who preferred cool to light. Aíjom finally stopped at a guard-tower when he found that he could not see his feet clearly. He ate somewhat, drank like a chlén, and fell asleep as fast as a child.

The next day was the same, although Aíjom had to slacken his pace slightly. A swell of rocky hills rose to the east, and he learned from a sweating fellow traveller that they were the Vrí-Mkét Highlands. "Acrawl with vicious sérudla at night, they say," the old man panted, and Aíjom shuddered, fearing that he might be found by a band of the poisonous dragons who remembered him from the Chákan forest. He felt only a little better that evening, with the massive, torchlit fortress of Tón-Zhú above him, towering atop the Highlands and staring west toward Mu'ugalavyá, Tsolyánu's ancient enemy.

On the third day, Aíjom felt his leg strengthening with time and the journey, but the rising midsummer heat slowed him as much as his injuries had. It was late when he finally sighted the

rude buildings of Purússa from the road. He went to the village's tiny market, already closing up its shops, and had a delicious stew and a wonderful cup of cool chumétl. As he drained the cup, he saw Chhkk, standing still as an Aílur-statue of a lordly warrior of old in a temple of Karakán, in shadow outside the market, watching him with a hunter's eye. He looked around for any obvious trouble, then worked his way over to the Shén.

"You are late," Chhkk growled. "We had begun to despair of your arrival. I am glad to see that you had an uneventful journey." He strode off quickly, and Aíjom struggled to keep pace as Chhkk led him to a boardinghouse, an unfortunate necessity as the Golden Dawn had no clanhouse in this village; it was simple but clean. Chhkk had taken a private room for them there, rather than simply renting cots in the common hall. This would not be seen as unusual, since few Tsolyáni felt comfortable bedding down with a Shén. The rényu Hájit waited within, looking out the door as they entered as though he expected sérudla to storm down the hallway.

Feeling secure at last, Aíjom related his orders to Chhkk. Chhkk nodded. "Tomorrow morning, we set out to the east, toward the monastery of Chiténg." *East! Where noble Khirgár stands tall amidst the mountains!*, Aíjom thought sadly. "We are fortunate that the Zhemré lineage, who hold all the lands around us, do not appear to have been involved in the power struggles to the northwest. We may yet leave this place with our skins intact."

Aíjom confessed puzzlement. "Why did you leave first? I would have felt safer with the two of you at my side."

"Then your feelings deceive you," Chhkk stated coldly, as the last rays of the sun faded from the high slit in the wall that lit the room. "Sikún was wise to separate us. There were survivors of the battle that had seen us approach the valley, and others at the Temple of Karakán who knew those who had set forth with their supplies. Neither the Golden Sunburst nor the Íto know much about us, but either clan would pay well for our heads in spite of the Empire's decrees. We were far less recognizable apart than together. Hájit walked two tsán ahead of me for much of the trip." Aíjom was disconcerted by the look Hájit gave him; it was strange

to see eyes he suspected to be as intelligent as a human's look forth from a tlékku's face.

Chhkk settled into a crouch, aided by his powerful, coiling tail. "From here, we will travel together until we arrive at the monastery. We must take care to not exhaust you--I can see that your leg has not yet healed, and we will need our strength and wits when we meet the priests of Lord Chiténg. We should arrive at the monastery in two days. For now, rest." Chhkk unceremoniously rolled to the floor and was silent. Aíjom found a bedroll and lay down carefully, finding that he had pushed himself harder today than he had realized. The sounds of other boarders hummed through the plastered walls, and Aíjom reflected that he had felt more at ease sleeping beneath the canopy of the Chákan forest on his way back to Chéne Hó than he did now, with naught but uncertainty ahead. Despite his exhaustion, he awoke thrice in the night to sounds from without the room. Each time, though it was pitch black, Aíjom knew Hájit was awake, staring blindly at the door, listening for danger.

The morning broke with a knock at the door; a boy brought a broad platter, balanced on his head, of fresh-baked bread, butter, sliced fruit, and a mound of grilled, steaming hmélu meat cut in thick strips, with a pitcher of clear well-water swinging heavily from one arm. Aíjom gave the boy a full handful of Qirgáls and dug in. He felt that his skein was finally looking better, although he got little enough of the hmélu with Chhkk and Hájit attacking it as well. With only a small grunt, he shouldered his pack and left the clanhouse with his strange companions.

The morning was crisp, as it had been clear last night, and the three travelers set a strong pace. It was good to walk the rich fields of Tsolyánu and get away from the overcrowded Sákbe-road--not to mention the threat of assassins sent by the Íto and Golden Sunburst clans. And although Aíjom knew that he was not walking home, it felt good to travel toward the rising sun.

The fields here were well kept, with smooth-trampled dirt roads threaded through and a sprinkling of huts. Aíjom saw groups of children reaping dná-grain, still energetic enough to sing in the morning cool. It was a very pleasant scene. Even the breeze from

the west felt good, smelling of rainfall behind them. Eventually, they left the fieldhands behind, and walked alone through the grain.

“It is strange to me that the priests of the God of Pain should establish a monastery in this happy land,” said Aíjom, eager for some conversation. “It does not seem meet for them.”

“Do not misjudge them,” Chhkk rumbled. “They are not madmen who ceaselessly whip beasts and burn captives to please their God. Indeed, they are very subtle. Did it never occur to you why they might have agreed to grant the Emperor a boon?”

“I admit that I have been concerned with other matters,” replied Aíjom lamely. “But now that you mention it, I suppose that they hope to curry favor, as the Emperor worships Vimúhla, the master of their God.”

“And the gift of a weapon of the Ancients is a great favor indeed,” Chhkk continued. “But I have learned that the Zhemré lineage, who own all the lands between Purússa and our destination, are great benefactors of the monastery. It is also notable that the whispers I have heard do not implicate the Zhemré or their Red Sword clan in the Chákan power struggles which we... interrupted. I believe that the priests did not act purely to ingratiate themselves to the Emperor. The old competitors of the Red Sword clan for power in the Chákas are now humbled and impoverished, their secret armies gone, and the Vimúhla-worshiping Red Sword clan is more to the liking of the Emperor. The Red Sword may soon become lords to the west of the Sákbe-road as well as here, to the east.” Aíjom was once again humbled by the Shén's superior grasp of their situation, and said nothing.

Chhkk paused, and then bared his teeth. “I am concerned that the priesthood of Chiténg may yet regret their deed, while they have ample time to undo it. Not lightly are such gifts given. It is for this reason that we were sent to accompany the priest of Chiténg--the monastery has guards aplenty, but we must guard against the guards. We must be ever watchful, and ever mindful of our task.” With this, Chhkk broke off, seeing farmers pulling a cart high-piled with wheat toward them. Aíjom hailed the men and exchanged pleasantries, while vowing to himself that he would

learn more of the perils that confronted them.

The tsán passed, stubborn as ever, and the heat grew. Ahead, the steep, bare sides of the great hill called Kú-Zhém, crowned by a low, dark-walled fortress held in fief by the Zhemré, filled the eastern horizon. They paused for only a kirén, and pressed on. “We should reach the foot of the hill before we rest,” Chhkk said with an enviable ease of breath. “We will have hard walking on the morrow.” Aíjom was healing, but his stamina was not yet the equal of the hulking lizard's, and when Kú-Zhém loomed over them, blocking the horizon and glinting at its top with the last glow of sunlight, he gratefully bedded down. The farmer's huts and outbuildings were behind them, as was the fortress, and although this was still farmland it had a feeling of emptiness that was disconcerting. Aíjom looked above, where he thought to see the sparks of torches. There, he knew, stood their destination: the monastery of Lord Chiténg.

Chapter II

The next day they climbed Kú-Zhém, and it was slow going. There was a hind breeze, ascending the slopes more quickly than Aíjom could hope to, but the sun was intense. There was a path, but it had seen little use in recent years. The pain that Aíjom thought he had escaped returned with doubled force, cutting him with each heavy step. The view of the fields and the Sákbe-road beneath them was breathtaking, though, and Aíjom took an ignoble joy in Chhkk's difficulties with climbing. Only Hájit seemed comfortable, even jumping shortcuts across switchbacks occasionally. They rested well before noon, and had a lean meal; their supplies were running low, as they had meant to travel light. *I hope that the priests of Lord Chiténg are hospitable*, Aíjom thought, and chuckled. He resented the pain that hampered him; the mountains were his element. He felt like a küni-bird surveying its domain and watching for prey. Then he thought that fiercer predators roosted above them, and he swallowed.

All too soon, they resumed their climb. The flinty hillside was barren and treacherous, and the already-uncertain path was gullied in several places. After two kirén, Aíjom saw an orange-red building, and looked at Chhkk.

“The monastery?” he asked with a wheeze.

“Yes, or at least an outbuilding,” Chhkk replied tiredly, his every breath a reedy hiss. “Let us hurry.”

They found the strength to walk faster, and soon they surmounted the slope, to stand atop a plateau of massy rock outcrops bound by the questing roots of gnarled trees. Near the plateau’s edge, a large complex of jagged-roofed buildings stood proudly. The buildings were close-set, connected by high stone walls, with only narrow windows, and Aíjom realized that the monastery was very defensible--if any army ever marched up the hill to attack it! They walked up to a weathered black door, carved with glyphs of orange and red and flanked by bas-reliefs of fearsome monsters that Aíjom did not wish to contemplate closely. A faint noise, as of chanting, could be heard from within, just audible over the wind. Chhkk struck the small, pitted gong that stood beside the entrance. In a moment, the door swung slowly open. Aíjom could not see inside, for the sun was fierce.

“Enter if you will,” said an annoyed voice. “I won’t hold the door open for halfwits.”

Aíjom strode in, and found it much cooler. The narrow foyer in which they stood was not nearly as richly decorated as the temple entrances that Aíjom was accustomed to; he was reminded of the smaller, rural temples of Karakán that he occasionally visited while traveling among the villages south of Khirgár. He hoped that his assessment did not show on his face.

The door boomed shut, and the doorman was now visible: a grey-haired, stoop-shouldered man clad in rough, simple robes of orange and purple. He looked like a clan-uncle of Aíjom’s, and this resemblance made Aíjom inclined to like the man. The feeling withered when the man looked them over with küni’s eyes. “Why are you here?” he asked with a voice obviously accustomed to quick and respectful replies.

“I am Aíjom hiKharsáma of the Golden Dawn clan, from

Khírgár. This is Chhkk and his rényu, Hájit. We have traveled from the Temple of Vimúhla in Chéne Hó on the business of the Petal Throne,” Aíjom said, feigning confidence. He produced Sikún’s papers, as did Chhkk, and the man squinted at them with interest.

“So... you come to escort our weapon to the sea.” He guffawed. “It is quite a trip!” He looked at the three again. “I trust that Sikún sent bearers worthy of their task? You look a sorry enough lot to me--a lizard, a tlékkú and a Khírgári grain-merchant.” This last item was said with the most disdain, much to Aíjom’s displeasure.

“We are proven servants of the Emperor,” Chhkk hissed. The man assessed the tall, powerful Shén with a more respectful look than he had favored Aíjom with. Aíjom, annoyed by the disparity and determined to regain the initiative, cleared his throat. “We hunger and thirst, for your eyrie is difficult for wingless travelers to visit. We ask for your hospitality.”

“Indeed. We do not entertain many guests here, and I have forgotten my manners.” The man bowed with the sarcastic air of a superior. “I am Dogéngor³ hiBeshyéne, the prior of this holy place. Come with me, and you shall dine and rest. We have much to discuss.”

They followed Dogéngor through another door, just as stout as the first, and entered a low, broad room with doors in every wall. Here, the decorations and sculpture were more familiarly ornate, albeit unpleasant to look at overlong. A recurring image was a reptilian figure that Aíjom remembered was the primary image of their God. *I forgot that they worship a great Shén*, he thought with a carefully repressed surge of irrational humor.

“This is our Room of Reflective Obeisance,” said Dogéngor, a tendentious love of his fell God alive in his voice. “You may not pass any further within until you have paid your respects in silence to Lord Chiténg. Do not worry--we do not expect you to denounce your own Gods, only to honor ours.”

Aíjom was relieved at this, yet was still uncomfortable. He

³ “Correct”.

knelt, stared at a mural of the lizard-God wielding His great sword Bloodsong against hideous demonic enemies, His eyes alive with expertly painted fires, and tried to clear his mind, then thought simply, *Lord Chiténg, I mean no disrespect by visiting Your holy place.* A shiver, whether from heat, cold or simple fear he did not know, suddenly passed over him, and he was intensely grateful to see Dogéngor give a barely perceptible nod signifying his satisfaction.

They passed through the left door into a low-ceilinged refectory, in which a few similarly clad monks picked over the last bits of their noonday meals. Dogéngor merely nodded to a younger man as he left them, and they were presented with mugs of water, cups of chumétl, and plates of meats, cheeses and vegetables, wonderfully prepared. Aíjom devoured his share like a fierce, spiny-backed hyahyú'u. He recognized the light seasoning as a Chákan touch, and found it remarkable that the priests of Chiténg did not chew throat-searing hlíng-seed for their nourishment. As they finished their meal, a young priestess of severe mien approached them on silent feet, her short-cropped hair so black it was almost blue.

"I am Jalésa hiChunmíyel of the Red Stone clan. You have come to bear our gift to the sea," she said, her voice as uninflected as a hmá's bleat. "I have studied the device, and shall travel with you to ensure that it works its purpose."

Aíjom felt a quick jab of antipathy toward the acolyte; her utter seriousness reminded him too strongly of the never-silent priest of Thúmis on his long walk to Chéne Hó whose orations had filtered into his nightmares. *Yet I should not be so quick to judge, especially not a woman who will travel with us for many months.*

"I am Aíjom hiKharsáma of the Golden Dawn," he said after swallowing his last precious bite. "We appreciate your monastery's hospitality."

"It is good to have gracious guests," said Jalésa in an unmistakably Chákan monotone. "I am glad that the Empire has sent such renowned functionaries to assist us." She swept them with a short glance and walked off.

A young boy with a face as unmoving as a board, wearing

similar robes, silently approached; he gestured for them to follow and led them through the refectory to a bare-walled hallway of many doors.

“You will stay here until we call you,” he said with an awful gravity belying his few years, and glided away. Aíjom did not care for the depths he saw in the boy’s eyes, or for what he thought he saw flickering there.

They entered the small guest room, and as a sense of uneasiness bound their tongues, they simply slept in shifts. The same strange-eyed boy returned later and left a dinner platter without a word, which they again dispatched quickly. The whole monastery seemed as quiet as a tomb.

In the late evening, as the sun burned through the window slits, the boy came to their door and beckoned. They followed him out into a completely silent hallway; even the wind had muted its voice. Jalésa stood beside a large double door leading further inside the compound.

“You must now meet with the elders. Be silent unless you are asked to speak.” She swung open the doors, and Aíjom saw that they opened upon an inner courtyard, lit by two broad bowls of flaming oil upon a low, grooved, blackened central altar. Inside the walls, the shades of night already gathered. Five elderly priests, looking like statues of old, sat upon mats on the cobbles; one of them was Dogéngor, looking more fearsome than before. The workmanship of the carvings and gilded bas-reliefs set in square panels along the walls here was superb, outdoing the Room of Reflective Obeisance as an artisan’s crafts outshine his childrens’ imitations. Aíjom stared wide-eyed, amazed that such a terrible cult could produce such beauty.

“We are flattered that you appreciate our sanctum,” one of the five said croakingly. “We have few visitors, and far fewer whose skeins bring them to this courtyard. It is beneath the open sky that we show our finest works, for Chiténg’s approval. Approach the altar.” The three did so, Aíjom wondering what horrid rites took place upon it, and how recently some poor Tsolyáni had screamed his last words here. He saw that the bowl in the center of the altar also held oil but was unlit, and that a small

brass bowl sat beside it. The two larger bowls sent bright, smokeless flames up in smooth, sweeping columns, swaying slightly in the faintest of breezes.

“It is our custom that visitors here feed the flames.” Aíjom looked at the priest for further guidance, but his face was as hard as a chlén-hide mask. He dipped the small bowl in the oil; it held perhaps a tsértse. He knew somehow that if he allowed any oil to spill, he would have failed whatever test this was, but he was afraid of being burned. He turned to his left, where the flames seemed perhaps a trifle calmer, and willing himself to be steady, he quickly poured oil into the burning bowl near its rim, then snapped the bowl back. The stream of pouring oil flared sun-bright, but his bowl did not catch fire. Much relieved, he turned to his right and poured the remainder into the fire; although this time it flared more sharply and singed his hand, he made no sound. He stepped back in silence as Chhkk and Hájit in turn fed the flames, Hájit with understandably greater reticence. At no time did any of the five watchers evince a reaction.

“You know the Flame,” the priest pronounced solemnly. “You know how to feed it, and how it rewards its benefactors. You may be seated before us.” The three walked around the altar and sat upon the cool stone. Aíjom set his burned hand against a smooth cobble and tried to ignore the pain.

“We have offered the Petal Throne a device of the Ancients, and you are to help bear it to the sea. But so that we might not think our gift wasted on the weak, we must know of you. We are not disconnected from the world; even here atop Kú-Zhém, we hear much. There has been a great unrest in Dó Cháka, and I understand that you three were involved. Tell us your tale.”

For over a kirén Aíjom and Chhkk spoke of the secret war in the Chákan borderlands. Shadows grew about them like climbing ivy, filling every crevice, but the light of the flames did not abate. The priests’ faces looked more and more like masks as the sky darkened. They did not speak, only nodding or giving questioning gazes. At last, Dogéngor cleared his throat.

“It is as Sikún wrote, though he left much behind his words for your stories to coax forth. You are indeed worthy of this

purpose.” He motioned with an arm, and two strong warriors, one an Aridáni woman, emerged from a side door, bearing a long, narrow casket of light wood without ornament of any kind. “As you can see, the box bears the waxen seals of our priesthood, to warn of any attempted openings. Be watchful of it, and of Jalésa, who shall accompany you, for she alone knows how to employ the device. You shall depart in the morning for Páya Gupá. Go now, and rest; you have much ahead of you.”

Excitement, dead for many days, awakened in Aíjom’s mind. He would see the cities of the West! And he would be undertaking a mission of great honor. He nodded deferentially to the priests, rose, and departed with his companions. Behind him, the warriors carried away the casket, but the priests did not move, and Aíjom felt that a strange rite, unwatchable by any save the priests and their God, would soon begin.

They returned to their guestroom and lay down in the dark. As the sleep-demons began to cast their nets, Aíjom could hear the priests’ voices echoing from the courtyard, chanting a chorused, melancholy litany. He only caught a few words, many of which he did not understand. Thrice he recognized the same threnody chanted; then he heard, or felt, something from *below*, something that seemed like an answer. It was deep as a mountain valley, and wordless, but Aíjom thought it was the voice of some great, half-slumbering thing deep beneath the hill. It seemed to *echo*--or was it many voices in unison? He looked over at Chhkk and Hájit; they were nearly invisible in the dark, yet he knew that they had also heard the sound. He lay as stiff as a chlén-hide shield for nearly a kirén, but did not hear any more from below; nor did the priests continue their chanting after the shuddering cry.

It was long before the sleep-demons returned to favor him, and they brought barbed gifts that pulled him gaspingly awake twice in the night, cursing as he struck his still-tender hand on the cot’s side. Indeed, Aíjom’s dreams--and his nightmares--had been more vivid since his adventures with the wild Pé Chói of Dó Cháka.

The second time, he heard a humming whisper not of the wind from outside the wall. He peered forth from the narrow

window slit, and saw the rough flanks of Kú-Zhém limned by pale light from a line of floating balls of blue fire. They slowly, inexorably marched down the hill and through the fields toward the Sákbe-road beyond. Aíjom prayed to Karakán that the terrors he would face on this venture be mortal; though they were as cruel as sérudla, he would embrace them as brothers before facing the things he had heard and seen that night.

The morning came early, it seemed, and breakfast was not the equal of their previous meals here, but this was fine for Aíjom; he had had enough of this place, and could not depart quickly enough. Hájit's eyes had seen terrors last night too, if he was not mistaken. Chhkk was much less subdued; he sang to himself in low, gravelly tones and ate on a scale Aíjom had never seen before, tiring the servant-boys with his demands for more hmá steaks. This was confusing until Aíjom remembered, from his few past experiences with the huge lizard-men, that today was the first day of the new year in their calendar. Breakfast would be Chhkk's only chance to feast today.

This morning, they were joined in the refectory by Jalésa and the two warriors who had carried forth the casket last night. They again bore forth the mysterious box, now fitted with palanquin-poles. The warriors, splendidly outfitted in their polished, fearsome heavy armor, introduced themselves as Fyérik hiPurushqé and Nikána hiChiréngmai, both from the Pán Chákan city of Butrús far to the south, of the Black Pinnacle clan, and members of the famed Legion of the Givers of Sorrow. They were part of a unit on assignment to the monastery in recent months at the request of the Zhemré lineage, who had girded themselves and their allies against trouble as the Pé Chói and sérudla raids worsened. Aíjom wondered numbly if the Zhemré knew just how unnecessary their aid was.

"We shall carry the box in shifts," Fyérik said brusquely. "There are five of us to bear it, so each shall have four kirén to walk free. We should make it to Páya Gupá in three weeks." He and Nikána were clearly mates; each looked at the other without the martial hardness they reserved for all others in the hall. Aíjom

was grateful that he knew Chhkk and Hájit, at least, then laughed at himself; they were hardly ideal companions for conversation! *Yet their talents may prove more useful than we wish.*

Their leave-taking was unceremonious, perhaps because last night's discussion had said all that was needed. Dogéngor gave them papers stating their business and forbidding the confiscation of their cargo on penalty of imperial and ecclesiastical wrath, then saw them off. He looked peaked and drained in a most unmonastic fashion; Aíjom could guess why.

For the trip down the mountain, Fyérik and Chhkk, the strongest, took the fore of the casket, and Nikána and Aíjom took the rear. Chhkk used both hands, but Aíjom knew that this was purely out of politeness; he could have carried the casket himself if need be. The box was very heavy, and it was a perilous thing to bear such a load down the loose-sided hill. Aíjom recalled carrying dead vringálu down mountainsides, careful to avoid scraping their prized wings, while on more than one occasion, servants of their hunters had borne the bodies of unfortunate beaters who had felt the vringálu's poisonous sting. But at least the weather was kind; it was clear, with a light wind, enough to cool but not strong enough to unsteady their feet. Hájit walked before them, watching for obstacles or snares, and Jalésa lagged behind. Aíjom wondered how long it had been since she had set foot beyond Kú-Zhém's peak, or even outside the monastery's walls.

It was not quite noontime when they stopped at the base of Kú-Zhém to rest and eat. Fyérik and Nikána appeared unwearied despite their armor and load, while massive Chhkk and still-healing Aíjom were glad to stop. Jalésa stood apart from the group; Aíjom could not tell how she had fared. Though he had fought to moderate his breathing and seem relaxed, he doubted he was fooling anyone.

"We should make the Sákbe-road tonight," Nikána said with a satisfied air. Aíjom thought he heard a groan escape Jalésa's lips, but he was not sure. It would certainly be a long walk for Firasúl!

Predictably, with the challenge of negotiating the steep trail

behind them, conversation began, with Fyérík sounding the first theme. “It will be good to return home. I have always disliked the weather in the north. You will love Pán Cháka,” he said expansively. “It is fair and lush, not a drab expanse of brown fields with lumps of bare rock like warts upon the land.”

Aíjom saw the bait, and felt loquacious enough to take it. “And I suppose that we will be won over by the splendors of your mold-encrusted, overheated province, with bugs the size of overfed tiúni to keep us company!”

“Cha, you know not of what you speak,” Nikána replied. “You describe Penóm, far to the south. Pán Cháka is the most splendid region of the Empire. But I do not expect a Khirgári merchant to look up from his scrolls long enough to notice the beauty of our land. And why should you notice the world beyond your clanhouse, when your home is nearly as barren as sand-swept Fasiltum!”

Their less than scintillating exchange of provincial stereotypes continued for a kirén, as each side castigated the deplorable shortcomings of the other’s cuisine, entertainment, and civic life. It was, Aíjom thought, rather a better way to pass the time than in silent brooding, or hushed contemplation of the many dooms that might befall them. Unsurprisingly, Jalésa played no part in defending the honor of the north, preferring to walk apart, a near-smile occasionally pulling at her lips. She looked to Aíjom like a troubled young clansister worrying about making a name for herself in trading or being wed to a suitable spouse. But this was as he expected. The device they bore may well have been the subject of her priestly Labor of Reverence, and they were going to wield it against the horrid Hlüss, with a chance of losing it forever. Meanwhile, Chhkk affected what Aíjom had come to recognize as a stoic snarl, and Hájit followed them absently.

Of course, the small talk died out, as even the hardened legionaries grew weary of tromping through the fields. The heat worsened as the afternoon grew late, until Aíjom could think only of the cool antechambers of his clanhouse. At length, the Sákbe-road shimmered far ahead through the heat and vapors rising from the grain, and Aíjom was ecstatic. They did not reach the road

until after sunset, long after Aíjom was ready to drop. Their papers granted them the privilege of a small but private berth inside a guard tower, which Fyérik and Nikána looked over sharply before accepting. Aíjom thought, or at least hoped, that their concern was premature; he slept much better that night, both from weariness and because he had walked so far away from Kú-Zhém, now a distant swelling behind them.

The next day, thunderstorms struck, and their pace was lighter--a good thing, for Aíjom awoke with muscle spasms in his legs and realized that he had not yet been ready for yesterday's exertions. Still, he worked through it, and over the next few days found himself growing accustomed to the burden of the casket, though ever grateful when it was his turn to walk free. Jalésa was taciturn to a fault, Fyérik and Nikána were gratingly provincial, and Aíjom became less and less talkative as the tsán passed. It seemed to him, based on updates from fellow Sákbe-road travelers, that they should arrive in Páya Gupá in less than three weeks.

As always among travelers, the mood lightened at night, when the best meals were had and there was rest at last. Aíjom was interested to watch the legionaries and Jalésa conduct nighttime rituals in honor of their God of Pain. They were surprisingly dignified: the three would stare into the night's fire--always lit, even if the evening was still too hot--for two or three yóm to focus their minds, then chant melodic poems in Classical Tsolyáni, in two voices and a vocalized melody, apparently from memory, though Aíjom did not hear any repeated and they were long. The poems were somber yet beautiful, if one ignored their occasionally graphic revelations of the sanguinary nature of Lord Chiténg's faith; they spent much time recounting the deaths of cities and nations under the heels of the ancient Dragon Warriors, who worshiped Chiténg and His fiery master Vimúhla, with too great an enthusiasm for his tastes.

Hájit seemed to be acting more bestially than Aíjom had ever seen; Chhkk had also changed, lapsing into silence since the monastery. Aíjom worried that they may have seen reason to conceal their intelligence from their current companions. But Chhkk's silence was swallowed up by Jalésa's loquacity; having

recovered from the shock of leaving the monastery, she had apparently decided that theological debate with the group was the best way to pass the hours. Aíjom wished at first that Lord Karakán's lightning would smite all such jars of ill wind; yet he had to admit that once again, he was interested in such discourse as a way to adorn the passing tsán. *Surely I have missed my calling--I was meant to be a scholar priest!*

One such exchange stuck out in his memory. Jalésa seemed almost affable, if a bit strident, as she related her teachings. "What my faith teaches us is that individuals, in perfecting themselves, are able to perfect society--and the road to perfection is a painful one. Pain does not kill, but rather hardens us, as chlén-hide is hardened to become arms and armor in the service of the Empire. If the chlén-hide be weak or flawed, then the curing will destroy it as it should, but none will emerge unchanged."

"No one will argue that we should forego development into lán citizens," Aíjom replied, feeling at once outmatched in rhetoric and bemused by Jalésa's fervor. "Yet I fail to see why pain is so vital to our development."

Jalésa gave him an acid glance. "Pain is a signal--the purest form of communication from the Gods to mortals--that our skein is flawed, and that we must change it. To embrace pain is to embrace Change, in its splendor and its power to bring ablaze the banked fires of our pedhétl.

"The greatest civilizations that this world has ever seen embraced the power of Change as they conquered and built their mighty cities and monuments on the backs of defeated peoples. It was in their senescence that they became stolid, averse to growth and to pain--and hence, change and pain came to them, as ruination."

"You speak of the greatness of empires," said Aíjom severely, "yet your God is the Hliméklukoi⁴ of Vimúhla, Lord of Fire, who would consume all the universe to feed His hunger. I am unconvinced that you are as concerned as I for the endurance of Tsolyánu."

"We seek to forge the Empire into an instrument of perfect

⁴ "Cohort".

power, for the glory of the Flame--and this can only be done by forging its people into such instruments.”

“People are not instruments. Lord Karakán does not teach us to strengthen our nation in order to heap the bodies of our enemies to the heavens, but because that is the path to safety and security. And pain does not speak to our best nature, to the part of us that wishes to protect our clans and families; it tries to turn us into frightened beasts that would do anything to avoid its touch. I cannot see growth emerging from pain alone.”

Jalésa sniffed at this, and said no more. Aíjom knew that proselytization was not the way of the priests of Tsolyánu, but it seemed that something more was at work here. Jalésa had the sputtering fire of a person whose convictions shifted within her like an overheavy grain-bag, too unwieldy to lift, that sought to settle back to the ground.

Aíjom was at last feeling freed from his burdens; he had lost most of his pains by the side of the Sákbe-road somewhere, and with every step south he was farther from the sources of his fear. Yet he could not forget that he was also farther away from his wife, family and clan, and he rued the day that the jájgi Kuréshu had called him forth from his homeland. It was little help to have to listen to Fyérik and Nikána’s low evening conversations and think of Tsunúre lying alone with countless tsán between them. *She will probably take a second husband soon*, he thought, then laughed to himself. *She will not choose so poorly next time*. Indeed, Aíjom never had determined just what had drawn the usually practical Tsunúre to a slightly out-of-place hunter-merchant, nor did he ever hope to.

As they bore their charge south, the land grew greener, the weather hotter and more humid still, and the villages more open. The tension Aíjom had felt around Chéne Hó faded; the troubles of northern Dó Cháka had not visited here. Just as Aíjom had trained in Dedarátl with Srúma while walking to Chéne Hó, he now spent a kirén or more each evening in swordplay and wrestling with Fyérik and Nikána, improving his never-impressive ripostes and developing his balance. They showed him a whirling style of constant movement that seemed showy to Aíjom; but their greater

talents were indisputable, and he had many bruises to show for it. They praised him as a quick study, and he began to feel prepared for what lay ahead.

Jalésa seemed to have hardened to the pace, and her spirits rose as the outlying villages grew larger, more well-built, and prosperous, signaling that Páya Gupá drew near. One morning she deigned to speak to Aíjom of the matter.

“In Páya Gupá, we shall visit the temple of Sárku, Master of the Undead, where a scholar-priest named Jagétl⁵ hiHarisáyu resides. He and I share an interest in this device, and we have written one another of what we know of it.”

Aíjom was dismayed at the news that they would be entering a stronghold of the faith of the Worm Lord. The horrid doctrines of His religion--the supremacy of death and the desirability of continued existence, with only two of the five selves, through all the long ages of the world--were surely the very antitheses of those of his own Lord Karakán. Worse yet, he feared discovery of his role in the destruction of the jájgi Kuréshu, who had infiltrated the temple of Karakán in Chéne Hó and sent him to die in the Chákan jungle, and his undead warrior minions. Kuréshu might well have come from Páya Gupá, if what he had heard from Chhkk and the priests of Karakán in Chéne Hó was true. He had little doubt concerning the fate of those who slew the Worm Lord's chosen ones.

Chapter III

For sixteen days they trudged along with their weighty charge, until Aíjom's thoughts, disturbed by a mixture of dread and simple weariness from the endless trek over the Sákbe-road through unbearable heat, sounded like a hmá's complaining bleating. It was the 19th of Firasúl when they finally spied the bastions of Páya Gupá, brazen in the sunset; not until the next afternoon did they

⁵ “Far distant”.

pass through its redoubtable gates of rough red sandstone and walk toward the high, jagged-roofed temple of Sárku, visible throughout the city, without pausing to rest or visit their clansmen.

Jalésa's manner became authoritative; now they dealt with the temples, which were her domain. "Fyérik, Nikána, Chhkk and Hájit--carry the box to the temple of Chiténg and wait for us there."

Jalésa clearly expected Aíjom to accompany her into the temple of Sárku, and Aíjom did not see any means of politely or quietly avoiding the situation. His stomach roiled as they left the busy street and joined a cluster of the brown-clad faithful who approached the temple of the Worm Lord, ascending the steep, glyph-incised stairs of the monstrous dun pyramid atop which stood the temple of Lord Sárku. It was larger than any other construction in Páya Gupá, save the great grey temple of Thúmis, Lord of Wisdom, that stood silently yet seemingly in fierce opposition, with half the city between the two megalithic complexes. Along the stair's sides, rows of carven, painted figures, from peasants to elaborately costumed lords, stepped timelessly toward the summit that Aíjom would soon reach. He surmounted the stairs and passed slowly through the forbidding doorway atop them, with neither a backward glance at Páya Gupá sprawled beneath them nor a sidelong glance at Jalésa, and squinted in the inner dark as the worshipers filed past them.

The entrance hall was so broad that it felt oppressively low, and all around them was assembled a great panoply of nightmare. A dozen corpses wrapped in ochre windings lay on basalt biers set into niches in the sculpture-strewn walls, attended by grieving relatives with faces painted white. The dun-robed priests of the Worm Lord were everywhere, speaking softly with the laity or tending the huge, fuming censers that filled the hall with coils of brown smoke. On the other hand, it was refreshingly cool, a virtue not lost on Aíjom.

A priest walked toward them through the clouds, spoke briefly with Jalésa, then smiled and turned to Aíjom. He was round-faced and pallid, like a great grub that had fattened on the flesh of the faithful of the Worm Lord. "I am Jagétl hiHarisáyu of

the Dark Moon clan, a scholar-priest of great Lord Sárku. In my studies amongst my temple's libraries, I have discovered some references to the device you bear south. Jalésa and I have recently corresponded regarding this matter, as it became clear to us that our glorious God-Emperor would require its use. She and I have much to discuss."

Jalésa bowed respectfully, in deference to Jagétl's hospitality and high clan. "We appreciate your assistance, Jagétl. This is Aíjom hiKharsáma of the Golden Dawn, a servant of the Emperor who has accompanied me from Chéne Hó." Aíjom wished strongly to flee this place, yet he was still and wore a calm face.

"We are all servants of the Emperor," Jagétl said, smiling just a bit too broadly. Aíjom had no trouble seeing why the temple of Sárku would volunteer its services in the service of Emperor Mirusíya, in the wake of the collapse of the short, bloody reign of their beloved Dhichuné, ironically throne-named 'Eternal Splendor'. "Come with me. We must consult the temple libraries together, to see what may be of value. As we will be traveling, it would not be practical--or safe!--to bring all works of our temple that reference the device." Jagétl swung around and floated away into the swirling smoke. Aíjom was surprised that they would be taken within to such a place, but perhaps this was also part of the facade of willing cooperation that the hierophants of the Worm Lord wished to present. Surely he would not speak of anything within, for fear of Sárku, or at least of His minions.

They were led to the back of the great hall and through a squat, heavy door, a panel of fabulously finely carved basalt that swung on thigh-thick, grease-blackened posts, watched by a bored temple guard in stunningly ornate armor that gleamed even in the smoky darkness of the cavernous chamber. They walked down a narrow stair, its steps of crusted stone bellied by the tread of innumerable priestly feet over countless years. Aíjom suspected that they were already in a portion of the temple that predated the last ditlána⁶ of Páya Gupá, now surely centuries past.

⁶ "The renewing": an ancient and widespread tradition, performed roughly once every five centuries, in which all structures in a city are demolished, and new

A dim grey light sifted down from the receding ceiling like dust in a granary, perhaps through unseen lattices in the combed roof. They met a priest ascending the steps, smelling unmistakably of carrion, and Aíjom could not repress a shiver of fear. Down they walked into the gloom, into a twisting, lamp-lit hallway that was cool enough to bring shivers, and they followed a winding path that Jagétl alone knew; surely he had crawled it many times. Jalésa exuded unease, noticeable to Aíjom after the last three weeks spent in her company, and Aíjom saw that Jalésa had wanted his company not only as a proclamation of her prestige, but as protection. Apparently, Aíjom thought with the sorely needed relief of a silent chuckle, the cold caress of the Worm was not a kind of pain that Jalésa would exult in.

After many steps, they came to an especially ornate door, inlaid with glyphs of amber and copper, and Jagétl opened it to reveal the libraries of the Temple of Sáрку--or at least, those that they would show to visiting unbelievers. Aíjom had expected a more impressive hoard of books and scrolls, but only a few lightly laden shelves stood here and there. Mostly, the smallish room was full of priests, older men and women in simple garb, softly chanting prayers. There were only a few lanterns, and they did not shed enough light for Aíjom to read by. Jagétl approached one of the priests slowly, and slowly he looked up at them.

“Master, these are members of the delegation from Chéne Hó. We wish to speak of the device of the Ancients that they have brought with them.” Aíjom detected a note of reverence in Jagétl's voice; perhaps this priest was a mentor of his, or a holy man of note.

“Sit, and we shall speak thereof. Thus do we serve when called.” The priest had a low note of annoyance in his high voice, and Aíjom thought that elder, more secluded priests like him were perhaps less amenable to this scheme of servile cooperation with the Empire than the more worldly younger generation.

For over three kirén, the elder spoke of his knowledge of the device, which was apparently great, if assembled from fragmentary and conflicting sources. He occasionally sent Jagétl

buildings are constructed atop their ruins. Dítlána is believed to purify the land.

to fetch scrolls from the walls, a duty which he performed as eagerly as a schoolboy, an amusing sight. Mostly, however, their discussion was from the elder's memory. Aíjom gathered that their cargo was a mighty weapon, capable of destroying the Hlüss' huge ships. The device, or one like it, had been used by Mshúruish, "Killer of Akhó⁷," a great admiral of long-drowned Engsvanyálu-- or perhaps by one of his near-contemporaries, no more than a few centuries distant in time; Jagétl seemed to favor this viewpoint. None of the priests were clear on the fine details of its use, though they hotly disputed the meaning of a description of the device from a work penned during the Time of No Kings that they had clearly all committed to memory. Neither could they agree as to when it had been made: Jalésa insisted that the Great Ancients had crafted it uncounted eons ago, while Jagétl and the elder gestured at age-faded scrolls and swore, heads bobbing sharply, that it had been made later, during the still-inconceivably-ancient Latter Times when the Time of Darkness was new to Tékel. Aíjom remembered learning as a child of this beginning moment, when the sun set for the first time and Night came to the world. He could not believe that they bore a relic from that mythical age.

Aíjom greatly wished to learn of the nature of their cargo, but he did not understand many of their terms, and had not so much as sipped from the fountains of wisdom from which they had slaked long years of scholarly thirst. What was more, he could not focus well on their discourse when all around him muttered and hummed the high priests of the deadly faith of the Worm, perhaps even now discerning his thoughts and his sins against their church. At length, he felt the need to make water, a minor matter under other circumstances but torture here, where he dared not excuse himself, did not know where the privy was, and would not risk asking one of the grim priests about such a base matter. Slowly, it became a pain, then an agony; coupled with his slowly growing fear of discovery of his crime, it was seemingly worse than the ache of his leg had been three weeks ago. At last, he gained Jagétl's attention, and asked for directions in a voice lower than the floor. Jagétl glared at him, then broke off from the discussion and

⁷ Terrible, many-armed sea monsters.

led him to one of the other priests, a grandmotherly figure in soil-brown robes heavily worked with symbols of her awful God, with a pleasant face and long, straggling locks of grey hair drawn up like dry grass cut in autumn.

"One of our guests needs to leave us, mother." Jagétl clearly used the term as an honorific, rather than a statement of kinship. "Perhaps you could assist him?"

"Surely," she said, unexpectedly sweetly for a priestess of the Worm. "It is past time that I go up and see the gardens in any case. Perhaps our guest will enjoy them as well."

As if by a miracle of the Gods they left the library, wound their way back through the deep-burrowed halls of the temple, back up the stair, through the chamber of smoke and death, and out into the sweet air of Páya Gupá. The heat was shocking after kirén in the cold of the bowels of the temple, but Aíjom could have wept at the splendid, burning afternoon light that brought good, clean sweat, the sweat of the living, to his brow.

'Mother' led him down the steep stairway, to a rest hall in the temple grounds, where the brown-wrapped faithful ate wafers of flat bread and drank draughts of a beverage Aíjom did not know--perhaps a variety of beer--from smooth, small, unglazed cups. It appeared to his hurried eyes to be a ritual. At last, he relieved himself in the privy behind the hall, almost as great a relief as escaping the temple's library.

'Mother' stood outside, looking around the grounds. Aíjom saw that she was to be his guide, or his watcher. He joined her beside a long, low-walled plot of ground covered with variegated rocks that had been raked into swirls and tracks, often parting around protruding boulders of darker stone. A still, silent, small family in vestments of earthen hue stood at the far end, staring along the grooved trails in the rocks. Aíjom thought that the parents looked somewhat familiar, but could not place them.

"It is beautiful," Aíjom said, and he meant it. He had not seen such decoration before. "Who does it commemorate?"

'Mother' looked at him with pursed lips. "This is not a memorial. Do you think that we who follow Sáрку think of

nothing but building tombs, piling up corpses, and raising up demons to terrorize our enemies?" He did not nod outwardly, but her expression showed that he might as well have done so. She gestured sweepingly about them. "Many who do not know our faith and but see its trappings think, as you do, that we are devotedly morbid; but it is not so. We love Death because it embodies Change, the endless gift of our Lord, without which we would be bound more hopelessly than any prisoner could imagine.

"This is a garden," she said in the tone of a tutor. "I used to tend it myself, but these days I leave its care to the younglings. It is interesting to see what they have done."

"A garden of stones? Many southerners I have known joked that my home city of Khirgár must have only such gardens, with its cold nights and dry days, but never have I seen one in person."

"Khirgári." This word, Aíjom knew, was a complete story to her. "You come highly recommended by the priests of Lord Vimúhla in Chéne Hó, as I understand it. Your travels have taken you west. And now they have carried you south."

"Yes." Aíjom hoped to avoid springing the trap, if trap there was. The family at the other end of the 'garden' had left at some point, and now they stood alone in the shade of the temple, a dark mountain that split the bright sky.

"I did not hear your name," she said in a friendly tone, and Aíjom breathed again.

"I am Aíjom hiKharsáma of the Golden Dawn clan," he said with a smile. "And you are..."

"Prazhúri⁸ hiDaishúna of the Glory of the Worm clan." She again turned to stare at the raked lines of pebbles. "I suppose that it is the farmer in me that has always drawn me here to the gardens."

"I do not wish to offend, but I do not understand what these plots of stones have to do with gardens."

"You are of a grain-merchants' clan," Prazhúri said amusedly, "and further, you do not know the teachings of my Lord Sárku. You judge a garden by what it grows, by what you remove

⁸ "Eternity".

from it; if it look the same from year to year, from generation to generation, you are well pleased. I do not judge a garden by its produce--at least, not by the produce you take from it. I watch for its changes in itself, as it is sculpted by time, which slowly perfects the garden as it does all things. Do you see that swirl of granite in the center?"

"Yes," said Aíjom, looking at the chips of glittering stone, not sure where she led him.

"Those stones were among the rest when I first tended them, but not gathered together in the center as they are now. They were moved there--but not by picking them, as you would pick fruit. They were moved there with the rake at times deemed worthy by the astrologers: a vastly slower process, but vastly more rewarding, as it shows the true development of the garden. Perhaps later, the granite will be drawn out into a long line or curve; perhaps it will again be dispersed amongst the other stones. Or perhaps it will remain at the center, tended by generations of young aspirants, until ditlána forces us to rebuild the garden elsewhere. The gardens show us much, if we are wise and humble enough to learn. Of course, there are always fools who see a quicker path to their small goals, and meddle in the garden; but it is always to their detriment." Her hands worked at her sides, as if in anger, but Aíjom was distracted from his observations by a sudden sense of vertigo and a wavering of his vision. The day's heat had evidently affected him more severely than he had known, yet he would not seek to quench his thirst with drink from the Worm Lord's cellars.

The strange feeling passed, but Aíjom remained nonplussed and not minded to discuss the foul teachings of Sárku through strange metaphors of gardens of stones. Momentarily, he had an idea of how to right the foundered cart of their conversation. "I was... honored... by being admitted to your temple's library. Surely all the wisdom of the long ages of the world is stored within its works."

"You are kind," Prazhúri said drily. "But of course, it was not as impressive as you had expected, here in the great city of Páya Gupá, famed for its dedication to wisdom." She made a

dismissive gesture at the walls of the compound, toward the city and presumably toward the temple of Lord Thúmis. “You anticipated endless antechambers filled to bursting with all the works of the Engsvanyáli. Perhaps we showed you only a study room, full of drowsy old priests like me, rocking on our prayer-mats, and hid away our real treasures.” Aíjom had the sense to not respond to this.

“You see a library as a place of wisdom, and a book as a record of the past,” Prazhúri said lightly. “Have you read many books?”

“No, not since my school days,” Aíjom said unashamedly. “Most of my reading is part of my work--reviewing contracts, military records, bills of sale and the like.”

“And you believe that these things tell you the truth.”

“Yes, unless their authors lie.”

“But think, Aíjom! The words you read are nothing but marks on paper! Their authors are not there to tell you of their purpose. It is only in reading them that you decide what they mean, and this meaning exists only in your mind. Consider the differences in interpretation between two people, the reader and the writer, each with their own skein of destiny. Now consider how great the differences are when the writer comes from a different time when thought and custom were not as they are now, or uses a different language that the reader understands but poorly.” Prazhúri snorted. “The priests of gentle Thúmis hoard books like drí, piling rotten seeds in their burrows without noticing that they have already gone bad. We who follow Lord Sárku know that the ‘meanings’ they draw from their moldering tomes are nothing but fantasies from their own chusétls⁹. We build our libraries of better stock.”

“What would one fill a library with, if not books?” Aíjom felt uneasy, as if he anticipated a yet-unseen drop on the high, crumbling path ahead.

“Our libraries walk, and talk, and think. They are the jájgi, the favored ones of Lord Sárku, whose memories span many brief

⁹ One of the five selves of Tsolyáni philosophy, the chusétl is the Shadow-Self: that part of us that dreams at night.

mortal lives. We do not blasphemously pretend that one can bind the hlákme¹⁰ with pen and parchment, and weave it into a book like a helpful demon, to communicate its secrets whenever summoned by a gaze. Our records are the ever-living minds that have witnessed history themselves, some for many hundreds of years.”

Aíjom's mind was clouded by fear as she continued, a genuine fervor glowing in her eyes. “The priest with whom Jagétl and your companion confer is a great scholar. He does not speak of it often, but he remembers the provincial rebellions at the beginning of the first millennium 'after the Seal', as you Tsolyáni measure time. He has seen the celebrations of the accession of every Emperor of Tsolyánu since Nríga Gaqchiké, 'the Spider', and the carefully organized weepings at their deaths. Through all this time, he has watched, and his memory is vast as the Chákas... What is wrong, Aíjom? You look ill!”

“It has been a long day, madam. May I sit?” At her amused nod, he swayed down beside the garden of stones, watching her as a mouse might watch a tiúni. One of his selves--his hlákme, ever cold and sardonic--was surprised at her distaste for Tsolyánu; it was easy for him to forget that for many Chákans, Tsolyánu was an occupying country, not their homeland. It was further surprised at her willingness to admit this distaste to him, as he was on Imperial business. His other selves decided that he had best say something to cover his still-burning fear. “So why, then, do you have any books at all?”

“Because the High Ones are not available to tutor each budding scholar. And because it is only through studying books that the pupil will one day learn of their ultimate emptiness.” Prazhúri sat down beside him with a smile. “Once I knew a priest of the Grey Lord, named Khirengá hiKurúsme, who was accounted the greatest scholar of the Chákas by his fellow bookmongers. He came to the monastery of Yakhishán¹¹, where I stayed before I

¹⁰ Another of the five selves of Tsolyáni philosophy, the hlákme is the conscious mind, or intellect; it is much like the ego of Freudian psychology.

¹¹ Literally, “not Khishán” in Tsolyáni, i.e., not of the Khishán family of languages, of which Tsolyáni is a descendent. Aíjom would understand it colloquially as “not language”.

came to Páya Gupá, in a state of great excitement.

"He was a student of all books concerning art and science and nature, and for a week he regaled us with his great theory, the work of his life. He believed that he knew what Change would bring, by virtue of his long reading of his Temple's huge pile of books ancient and modern, and set out to describe what he expected in the time to come. He was convinced that he could describe the effects of time so well that the priests of the monastery would leave off their watching of Change, as our Lord has commanded us to do, content that their efforts were in vain, as he had already foreseen all. But of course, he convinced none of us that his folly was true; nor could we dissuade him.

"Years later, we brought him back to the monastery, and saw that though time had brought Change to him, yet was he still obdurate. We brought him into the courtyard at the center of the monastery. There stood a small tree in a stone pot, in a garden like this.

"He was confounded. 'Why do you bring me here, within your walls?' he asked in a haughty voice. 'Why do we not travel the land and see how well the Eye guided my predictions of what should happen in the world?'

"'Have you not yet learned wisdom?' I asked him. 'Attend, and you shall see that which you could not see before.' I pointed down at the stone pot. 'Your predictions did not touch on this tree. Did they tell you how its leaves would spread in this indescribable pattern with the rains, and how they would wither and curl in the drought of summer? Did they speak of how this branch would be chewed by devouring worms, and fade, and become woven in the worms' nests, or of the paths that the worms would choose to walk over the branch? Did one of your scrolls show how the raindrops would shift the pebbles that cover the pot, or how the shadow of the tree breaks upon these pebbles in uncountable ways with every rising of the sun?'

Khirengá looked in wonder at the tree, and said nothing for a while. Then, slowly, he said, 'I did not. Yet if there were ten thousand scholars armed with the puissance of my Lord to consider such matters, I think that they could have predicted this.'

"But they could not have foreseen"--Aíjom noted how she struggled with the word, distaste plain upon her face--"all that could be seen of this tree, which endless words could not describe. The world imagined by your scholarship is bare and dead; you seek to paper over all that you see, but you succeed only in shrouding your eyes. You cannot foretell Change, because words cannot tell of it: only the power of witness is given to us, who cannot speak with the words of the Gods."

"But if all my learning was not capable of describing even a single tree," said Khirengá, "then why did you not argue this when first I came to you?"

"We tried, but you did not understand us then," I said. "Each tree, each rock, each insect, each person is such a thing. There is no sure knowledge of the present that can be told; still less can we replace the witness of Change with our dim fantasies. And it is folly to imagine otherwise."

"In that moment, Khirengá was enlightened, and ever after he stayed at our monastery, forsaking the grey world of Lord Thúmis for the unspeakably richer one our Lord Sáрку hath gifted unto us."

Prazhúri sighed, as Aíjom's elder clanswomen did after long remembrance. "But enough of stories and arguments; they are as pallid and false as books to their receivers. It is enough--nay, better--to sit here and watch the garden." Aíjom agreed wholeheartedly, and they sat in silence, staring at the patterns of the stones, watching as the afternoon started to let shadows crawl out of their burrows between the ridges of rocks. As he grew calm, he wondered what message they were meant to convey, and what the garden's purpose was, if the conveyance of messages was as difficult as Prazhúri suggested.

The sun sank low, and the shadows fattened and flowed together in the garden; the sounds of the nearby rest hall died away, and the last few worshipers left the grounds, gesturing reverently toward the steep pyramid behind them. Prazhúri was silent, visibly content to sit in the cooling air and watch the sky burn into embers and streaks of reddened clouds. Aíjom was afraid to sit here in the dying light with only a priestess of Sáрку

for company, but preferred the gardens of the temple to its inner sanctums, where dwelt undying monsters that looked like men, praying to their God of Death as they had for hundreds of years.

After a time, he heard approaching footsteps, and Jagétl and Jalésa strode toward them, animated and excited. Apparently, Jalésa had overcome her fear of the Worm and regained her earlier enthusiasm; the lure of new knowledge was obviously not only a temptation to the priests of Thúmis or subtle Ksárul, His counterpart among the Lords of Change.

Jalésa spoke, happier than she had been since their descent from Kú-Zhém. “Come, Aíjom. We should rest, for tomorrow we begin our march to Tumíssa.” Jagétl nodded, and Aíjom knew then that they would have the grub for a traveling companion. “We thank you, Prazhúri, for watching him. Often it has been that priests' orations have driven away the laity, but he looked like a pardoned criminal when he left!”

Aíjom nearly shuddered at this, but Prazhúri merely laughed. “He has been better company than many I have known. I always enjoy seeing the garden with one who knows the fruits of the earth.” She drew herself up, slowly yet more smoothly than Aíjom could manage after sitting so long, and bowed slightly to him. “We wish you luck, Aíjom hiKharsáma. Do not lightly regard the gift we have given you.” She glanced at Jagétl with this.

Aíjom bowed back. “Your courtesy to guests is admirable. Perhaps when I return, I shall see your garden again.”

Prazhúri arched an eyebrow, an ungrandmotherly gesture. “Perhaps.” She turned and headed back to the high stairs of the temple of the Worm, and Aíjom, Jalésa and Jagétl walked out of its quiet, carefully tended grounds.

Chapter IV

Fortunately, as far as Aíjom was concerned, they avoided the center of the temple of Chiténg altogether and headed directly to its surprisingly elegant outbuildings, built in an airy style of brightly lacquered wood. Their guest quarters were generous, if garishly decorated. Fyérik, Nikána, Chhkk and Hájit had already taken supper, but more was brought for them--again, underseasoned for Aíjom's taste, but refreshing, centered around a light stew of sweet potatoes and river fish served in heavy red bowls that were much like cooking-crocks. Soon, the others settled down, enjoying the most comfortable accommodations they had been granted so far.

Aíjom was also exhausted, but he needed to speak to Chhkk of what he had seen. He declared his desire to see the city by night, left the temple of Chiténg, and waited in shadow outside. After a kirén, Chhkk, subtle as always, wordlessly joined him, signaling in hunter's sign: *They are asleep*. They would have all night to talk and plan if they wished. They left the grounds and wandered the broad streets for a while, watching for followers; a tracker would have been difficult to spot amidst the swarms of children out to play in the cool, moonlit night, not exhausted as their rural counterparts would be after the labors of the day.

After some considerable walking, and after the children had vanished inside at the undeniable summons of their mothers, the temple of Thúmis towered above them, a ghostly peak in the dark, graven with dozens of huge eyes symbolic of the God's omniscience. Chhkk hissed, a short, snapping sound. "I believe that we can talk now. I know somewhat of this city from past years, and this should be a safe place. Tell me of your visit to the temple of Sáрку." Aíjom recounted his experiences, and Chhkk listened in silence while the trees flanking the street rattled in the evening breeze, until he mentioned his leaving the temple with Prazhúri. At this, Chhkk bristled, spines rearing on his head like a human's hackles, and hissed sharply.

"You are sure of her name?"

“Yes,” Aíjom said, confused by Chhkk's interest in the anticlimactic end to his overexciting visit, and related his discussion with her by the garden of stones.

Chhkk snarled something that sounded very much like invective, and looked around as though he expected zrné to leap from the scalloped, high-railed balconies of the clanhouses. “You have walked into a sérudla's den this day, Aíjom. Prazhúri surely knew Kuréshu, for he came from this city and was a priest of the same God.”

Aíjom was reminded yet again that this Shén knew more about the paths they now walked than he did, and sensed a story about to bubble up from his deep voice and unplumbed mind.

“I have heard her name only once before: over three years ago now, while hunting chólokh at the feet of the Átkolel Heights.” Aíjom recalled long-ago bedtime stories of the huge flying insect-things, and was once again surprised to find that the nightmares of his childhood were real and waiting, somewhere out in the darkness.

Chhkk continued, quietly yet tensely. “I hunted by Imperial command, with a group of trackers from the village of Sechín, west of here, and of the Broken Reed clan. They were fine companions for the hunt--brave, silent, and careful. But two among them, Arkútu and Giriktéshmu, were as notable as hyahyú'u amongst tlékkú. They were cousins of the Nokór lineage, and old hunters. They knew the dangers of hunting chólokh, and of the cliffs of the Heights, yet wished nothing more than to test themselves against both enemies.

“It was the last day of our hunt, and the bearers complained that our ropes would break as we lowered the chólokh's carapaces down the cliffs. They had been hard-won, for the beasts had taken three of our number: a bad way to die, as the chólokh kills by ripping loose the extremities with its tentacles, interspersed with dropping its prey from a height as a bird drops a snail, to break it. One man survived this for yóm before he was silenced. Two other hunters had lost their climbing holds and fallen many dháiba onto deathbeds of broken rock. The mood of our camp was foul; the men picked at their last trail-meal and glared up at the Heights that

were now mostly behind us.

“Giriktéshmu was well pleased by the success of the hunt, but wise enough to hide it from the others. He spoke of returning to Chéne Hó, which cheered the men somewhat. He was anxious for the festivals of the summer solstice, as his eldest son was coming into manhood, a proud time. He was a worshiper of Sárku, and mentioned that he hoped to have words with a visiting priestess of Sárku whom he felt had shown inadequate attention to his family’s mausoleum near the end of the ceremonies of the Touching of the Worm of Copper, in which those ordained by Sárku honor the graves of his dead. ‘I will teach that detestable hag Prazhúri that our clan is not to be trifled with,’ he said, and the camp went silent. I wondered why, until Arkútu spoke.

“‘You have brought doom on our clanhouse, cousin,’ he said, fear filling his face for the first time since I had known him, and I had seen him win free of a chólokh’s embrace two days ago. ‘If I had known of this, I would have foregone the hunt and begged pardon from Prazhúri! Why have you done this thing?’

“‘Why do you fear her?’ Giriktéshmu’s temper, the worst of the group’s, burned hotter than our campfire’s coals. ‘She did not respond when I challenged her! She is only a withered old gardener who wanders the temple grounds and chases the children out of sacred places. She is demented, and holds the duties of her office too lightly.’

“‘You say she is old, and you are more right than you know,’ Arkútu said, and the silent group nodded like scared children. ‘I know the tales that the folk of Páya Gupá tell of her, and I have seen reason to believe them! She is the greatest of Lord Sárku’s jájgi, the most powerful of His sorcerers. She is as old as death, as old as the world, and you sport with her as though she is some Úrmishite¹² dandy whom you will challenge to a duel at the hirilákte¹³! You have surely slain us all with your arrogance!’ At this accusation, Giriktéshmu jumped up and tried to attack Artuku, but I prevented it; we would need all our strength to carry back the carapaces.

¹² From the southern city of Úrmish.

¹³ Gladiatorial arena; also used for duels of honor.

"The Empire was well pleased with the results of our hunt--chólokh attacks on the villages and Legion outposts near the Heights were greatly reduced--but six months later, I was ordered to return to the Heights, as the chólokh had grown numerous on the carrion of your endless wars with Yán Kór and were troublesome again. I began by going to the clanhouse of the Broken Reed in Sechín and asking for Arkútu and Giriktéshmu hiNokór, but was met with terrified silence by their clansmen, even those I had hunted with only a half-year before. It was as if the Nokór lineage in their clan had never been. They refused to speak of them to me, and begged me to leave, even trying to bribe me to go, as though my questions alone would bring them to further harm. They were a haunted folk, and their clanhouse stank, as if they no longer bothered to remove their chamber pots. The Broken Reed no longer maintains a clanhouse in Sechín, or anywhere within many tsán of Chéne Hó.

"I do not know that she was responsible for this," Chhkk said, and Aíjom leaned closer to catch his sibilant whisper. "But I will say this: if you can choose your path, do not let it lead back to Prazhúri's garden. I doubt you would leave it again."

They were silent for a while, walking around the sprawling temple of Thúmis in a blackness lit only by its high-set torches. Then Aíjom spoke. "You have been mute since Kú-Zhém. Have you wished to appear as a dumb beast to the others?"

Chhkk nodded, concern somehow showing through his demon's face. "I trust neither Jalésa nor Jagétl, for each has reason enough to prevent us from carrying our cargo to the sea: what priest in your land wishes to give an artifact of old to the Empire? Neither do I trust the soldiers; they might well make common cause with Jalésa, as they have a common God. I think the instruction they have given you in swordplay is poor, though it is difficult to judge such a thing unless you are engaged in it."

Aíjom reviewed his memories of his training with the pair, fearing that Chhkk's concerns might be well-rooted, as they drifted back through the quiet city, breezes floating down the streets behind them, until they returned to the guestrooms of the temple of the God of Pain. Aíjom did not want to remember the sendings of

the sleep-demons that night, but he knew all too well of their fanged courtesies, and he knew they would bring these wares again.

The next morning, Aíjom learned that Jalésa and Jagétl were both busy conferring with the senior curates of their temples, and thus that they would not be departing until well after noon. Aíjom did not mind the delay, so long as he did not have to speak with any more thrice-cursed priests of maleficent Gods. With time at his disposal, he visited the local clanhouse of the Golden Dawn, a rather ramshackle complex of buildings, roofed with dull red tiles, that lacked the tidy precision of his own. He intended to call on a clan-cousin named Urúme hiZhnáyu, who had moved here from Khirgár in pursuit of an ecclesiastical career in the service of the Grey Lord, but he was told that Urúme was at his post. This was acceptable to Aíjom, as he thought that he might seek knowledge of the device he carried from the famous library of the city's temple of Thúmis. He had not been swayed by Prazhúri's dismissal of the value of the inherited words of the dead.

Urúme had grown, gained weight, and proudly wore the insignia of the Fourth Circle, a high rank for a young man. He appeared much happier than the disinterested junior recordkeeper Aíjom remembered from years gone by, and long changed from the boisterous boy who had lobbed rotten dlél-fruit at him when they were children. He embraced Aíjom warmly and helped him gain access to the jealously watched storerooms of the God of Wisdom.

After some thought, Aíjom saw a way to stalk his quarry without revealing his intent. "I am interested in learning of the naval exploits of the noted captain Mshúruish, as one of our clansmen in Chéne Hó is an avid listener to all tales of the distant sea, and wishes to hear of his great deeds." Urúme complied unquestioningly--apparently he had grown used to odd requests--and called over a scribe to copy any notable passages for the enjoyment of Aíjom's phantom clansman. Unfortunately, no text that they could find in over a ténmre of searching and consultation made any reference to the device, though Aíjom read such

voluminous choruses of praise to the genius and heroism of Mshúruish that he thought it a wonder that the man did not have a shrine within the martial temple of Karakán. At last, he resigned himself to ignorance.

"I will have tales to tell of Mshúruish until my voice fails," said Aíjom with false good humor, as he paid the scribe and gathered up his transcriptions. "Even now it is parched. Shall we seek refreshment?"

Urúme happily agreed to this, and they took a pleasant, if too-rich, lunch in the city square. Afterwards, Aíjom told Urúme of how his clansmen fared in Khirgár, and told hunting-stories, which Urúme enjoyed surprisingly well; his last and best such tale he kept to himself, as it would be unwise to advertise his hand in those events. In turn, he learned of Urúme's marriage and children (two, with a third being discussed, likely for next year), and heard endless talk of his struggles for autonomy and resources within the temple of Thúmis. *It seems that the intricacies of temple politics are more difficult to understand than the swirls and flourishes of the seals of the great clans!*

There was another topic that Aíjom wished to broach, though he had little time to do so after Urúme had given his autobiography. His hours of burdensome marching had given him plenty of time to mull over personal concerns, and he wished to be prepared for them. He turned to Urúme with a conspiratorial look.

"I am traveling to Tumíssa, and will of course be staying in the southernmost of our clanhouses. I am minded of an old dispute concerning missed payments between the Tumíssan branch of his clan and our own, in which our branch claims grievance."

Aíjom could see that Urúme knew what he would say before he spoke. "The problem from 2352," he sighed. "My father was plagued by that as though he had personally squandered the sum on dissolute entertainment at the temple of the Goddess Dlamélísh! He tried to obtain redress, but was thwarted by silence; it was as though he argued with a wall. No one here in Páya Gupá will admit to any knowledge of the matter."

Aíjom could well imagine why. Their Tumíssan clansmen were wealthier merchants; his clanhouse in Khirgár was regularly

bled dry by bidding wars for harvests or poor sales after a bumper crop, without the huge markets of Tumíssa, 'the gateway between the Chákas,' to palliate their losses. His clanhouse was thus dependent on trade with Tumíssa for its ongoing survival, and their Tumíssan 'cousins'—at this, Aíjom thought ruefully of the Chákan Pé Chói--exploited this, making forgiveness of the debt a condition of ongoing business. This had worked doubly well because members of the two clanhouses had not seen each other in over a generation, and as Urúme had noted, their clansmen in the intermediary cities wisely forbore from involvement in the dispute.

"In my estimation, you should not waste your time sorting pebbles on the road," Urúme said in an annoyingly priestly tone. "The Tumíssans will not change their stance. I suspect it is due to pride, but who is to say?"

Aíjom gestured angrily; his frustration over his conscription for this mysterious mission had found a target that at least seemed vulnerable to attack. "We will see if they find a representative of the Khirgári branch at their doorstep as easy to fan away as a chrí-fly. I am no stranger to the record-book, and I will make them prove their innocence or pay." *If I have time to address the issue when we are in Tumíssa*, he thought bitterly; *but I may well not*.

Urúme laughed. "I always admired your righteous fire, Aíjom! My pedhétl burns for wisdom, not battle or business, but I can understand how your skein looks to you. I wish you luck in bringing the Tumíssans to heel."

"I thank you for your priestly blessing," Aíjom said, and the two laughed together as they had years before. "There is one more tidbit for us to nibble at, and then I must be off. Have you ever heard tales of a priestess of the Worm Lord named Prazhúri hiDaishúna?"

Urúme's face curled reflexively in disgust at the mention of Lord Sáрку, but it showed no recognition. "Should I have? I am too busy to listen to the deluded whispers of those who long for the tomb."

"I have heard that she is a notable sorcerer."

"From whom? A local villager who chews grass-stalks and

believes that anyone who knows entertainer's sleights is as puissant as a God? There is much baseless superstition in the land, Aíjom; in particular, there is far too great a dread of the priests of the Worm and their disgusting parlor-tricks. Do not let these rumors confuse you."

They parted, and Aíjom headed back to the temple of Chiténg, weighing the wisdom of Urúme's advice. He was stopped by a well-groomed man in dark, middle-clan dress, whose muscled arms swung easily at his sides.

"Are you Aíjom hiKharsáma of Khirgár?" The question was asked with grave respect.

Aíjom trusted the man as much as he would trust a zrné, and felt that lying would not be bússan under the circumstances. "No, nor do I know the man."

"Are you sure?" The man looked solicitous as his hands moved for the folds of his robe, but stopped as Jalésa walked up to them.

"I doubt that my friend's memory is so poor as to forget his own name," she said, and the man stepped back a pace. Aíjom slowly breathed in. *Who would wish to suffer pain at the hands of a priestess of Chiténg?*

"I apologize for the confusion," the man said, and left, quickly yet without the impression of hurry.

"He has stalked our outer courtyard for at least a kirén," she said. "I understand that you may have made some enemies in Chéne Hó."

"I fear you understand rightly," Aíjom said reluctantly. The man had almost certainly been sent for revenge by the Íto clan--although the Golden Sunburst clan might also stoop to such means, if they could not have the courts work their will on him.

"We have been waiting for you for two kirén," she said. "Our discussions were shorter than anticipated. I do not want to wait for you again."

Aíjom nodded, resentful of her arrogance but still grateful that she had kept him from being neatly butchered before the temple of her God. He wondered if Lord Chiténg approved of such clemency.

Chapter V

The group set out from Páya Gupá in but a few yóm. Jalésa may have seemed unaccustomed to the rigors of the road at first, but round, corpse-pale Jagétl seemed to be surprised that he had legs, and their way was often blocked by chlén-cart caravans that moved slower still. Despite longer days, and Fyérik and Nikána's best efforts and worst threats, their pace was slowed yet further, yet Aíjom was not disappointed. Some film of the charnel temple of Sárku had been wrapped around him, like an old peasant's winter shawl of dirty, tattered hmá-wool. He watched, oddly amused, as his feet moved down the Sákbe-road, able to avoid the thronging crowds of farmers and merchants on their own. Thunder rumbled around them every evening, yet no cooling rains fell.

For four days, it was all Jagétl could do to keep breathing as they walked, and he was silent, save for wheezing. Aíjom bore his heavy pack of scroll-cases when he was not helping to carry the casket, with its unknown weaponry from the unknowable past. But by the fifth day, it was clear that the road was starting to cure the ills of Jagétl's bákte, as Srúma had spoken of so long ago. By the seventh day of marching, the Sákbe turned and walked beside the broad Turín river, and Jagétl had begun to talk, in a hollow voice like the night wind through the Turín's reeds.

If Jagétl's gasping silence had been awkward, his return to oratory was intolerable. Aíjom and the others were ignorant of, and indifferent to, the finer points of theology and philosophy, and thus had made poor sparring partners for Jalésa; but Jagétl, who shared a wealth of knowledge of their cargo and a devotion to the proper understanding of the Gods, was a perfect traveling companion for her. At least, Aíjom thought wearily on the third day of debate, the elder priest of Thúmis who had walked beside Aíjom on his journey to Chéne Hó had not argued his theses, but had simply stated them, knowing that his meek priestly companion would accept them as if Lord Thúmis Himself had spoken the words in a voice like a túnkul-gong from the roof of His temple. Where Jalésa had failed to press her discussions with Aíjom, who

was not a rhetorician, she reveled in arguing with a fellow child of endless temple lectures and debates for their own sakes. Jagétl responded promptly to each feint and thrust, though it seemed that his temper threatened to spoil his rhetoric; he bore even the slightest concession with a singularly ill grace.

As fiercely as Jalésa and Jagétl had sparred with each other, the group's religious arguments grew fierce and loud as battling love-crazed tsi'il when they chanced across a young ritual priest of Thúmis named Bashán¹⁴ heading to Tumíssa, an ideologue who did not compare favorably in Aíjom's eyes to his clan-cousin Urúme. He, Jagétl and Jalésa sank into a veritable orgy of disputation that threatened to rend the ancient Concordat of peace between the Temples into shreds. Fortunately, they were amongst a comically bucolic crowd of Dó Chákan woodsmen on a short, inter-village trip to hew lumber for new barns and granaries. Some of these peasants, by their occasional, confused glances at the arguing priests, seemed only passingly familiar with the doctrines of Thúmis or Sárku, let alone Chiténg. If they had been in a city, amidst a better-educated crowd, violence might well have been the fruit of their heated ploughing of the barren fields of religious dispute.

"Memory is a useful servant," Jagétl was saying to Bashán, his voice now strong as a chlén's, "but a servant it is, and a servant it must remain. We are not made of our memories as a house is made of mudbricks. We are, first and foremost, our hlákme, which acts and chooses from the sacred First Principle of Lord Sárku Himself, that will is all. Still less are we made of *things*"--Aíjom was surprised by the hate and contempt ringing clear in his voice--"outside ourselves, such as books and scrolls." The priest of Thúmis launched into a counterattack that reviled the idiocy of conceiving of self and thought apart from memory; his fury and copious spittle reminded Aíjom of a sérudla on the attack. He glanced down again at his feet, now accustomed to the poorly surfaced Sákbe-roads of the south, and watched as the group's shadows flickered and wavered over the shamefully uneven cobbles, now long and angular, now soft and uncertain. It would

¹⁴ "Wisdom".

be a long walk to Tumíssa.

That night, their march ended with no village in sight, and the Sákbe tower's guest chamber was occupied by a large party of well-connected Tumíssan merchants whom they had no hope of displacing. Their little group made a campfire outside the tower, and the woodsmen joined them, trading smoked, rich cutlets of jungle fowl for some of the heavy bread they bore. As their consequently much-improved supper ended, the woodsmen began telling local tales of vengeful ghosts and bloodthirsty demons, old stories they had learned as children, that had been polished like a treasured heirloom shield of steel by each generation. Aíjom had heard some of them, or at least Khirgári variants, but many were new, and he enjoyed them greatly; they distracted him from his lingering aches and, far worse, his frustration over walking this dangerous trail in the dark.

A talkative woman masterfully told a harrowing tale of the gruesome demise of a curious young man who had secretly entered the fabled and jealously guarded First Temple of Vimúhla, deep in the jungles of Pán Cháka; it was well received, particularly by Fyérik and Nikána, who seemed to approve of stories of their homeland. The storyteller then called to Jagétl, her voice light with long-delayed rest and company. “Tell us a tale of terror, priest of the Worm! Surely you must have a myriad stories of death and despair with which to regale the little grubs of the faithful!”

Jagétl stiffened, and Aíjom was surprised that he had not before seen through Jagétl's corpse-paint and dolorous demeanor to realize just how *young* he was; he seemed a child abashed before his peers, but only for a moment. “I will tell you a tale, but not some child's story of rotting corpses and ghostly malefactors. Instead you shall hear an old tale told amongst my priesthood, of the horrors that Lord Sárku can visit upon those who truly displease Him.” Aíjom sat up a bit straighter; this sounded interesting, if too personally relevant for his liking.

Jagétl cleared his throat. “Long ago, there was a priest of Sárku who betrayed Him; the years do not let us know how, except

that it was horrid beyond the petty offenses we know of today. One night, he awoke from a troubled sleep to an awful sight. His room was filled to bursting, stacked to the rafters, with the dead that he had been closest to."

"I would think that a priest of Sárku would be happy to have his clan's dead resurrected by his Lord, and brought back to him," Jalésa interjected curiously. "What sort of punishment was this?"

"You do not understand," Jagétl said, his voice cold with what Aíjom would have sworn was genuine horror, a strange emotion to see in a priest of Death. "These were not the bodies of dead clansmen or lovers or friends. These were the bodies of himself, at every moment of his life, staring at him with judging eyes. Dozens of children, the children he had been years before, squatted by his cot. Scores of young men, afire with the transitory ambitions of his youth, stood in ranks and stared wonderingly at him. He leapt from his bed and ran forth into the night; they did not hinder him, but everywhere he ran, he saw them gathered in their hundreds. Many were preoccupied with the fancies he had clung to in the past, but always the bulk of them stared coldly at him--and always, he knew what they thought. He flung himself into the pursuit of the Green Lady's pleasures, drinking and taking powders enough to drop a chlén, yet always could he see them, always was he surrounded by them, and always could he almost feel their clammy touch, so close did they cluster. He soon ended his miserable life, pleasing Lord Sárku. For none defy the Worm Lord in the end."

This was a strange tale, and its effect on the group was mixed; it was not the sort of story they had expected from him. Finally, one turned to Jalésa. "Priestess of Chiténg, dread Lord of Pain, tell us a story of woe! Do your priests whisper of secret terrors that you do not reveal to the faithful, as do the priests of Sárku?"

"I seem to remember such a story," Jalésa said distantly. "We also have an old tale of a traitor priest, who knew the doctrines of our God as well as any other, yet rejected them utterly in secret. Yet Chiténg did nothing, and the priest died in his sleep

at a ripe old age, attended and honored by his family.

“In the next moment, he opened his eyes, and saw a new place, a peasant clanhouse, barely more than a hut. He looked down at his hands, and saw that they were strange, twisted as with many years of labor, and dull as raw chlén-hide. A woman walked in and spoke to him in a strange tongue, yet to his wonder he understood it. It was Mu'ugalavyáni. In confusion and despair he dashed outside, and saw his dominion--a patch of dirt, new-plowed, ringed with gnarled trees. He was a farmer, as deeply rooted in the soil as his másh-trees.

“He tried to kill himself, but his pedhétl was cold ashes, and he could not use his short, worn knife to do so much as pierce his skin. He could not even bring himself to leave his hut and see the lands beyond the trees. It was as though he was a statue, unable to act. Many years of gruel and warm days and cold nights went by, yet always was he conscious of despair, and though he prayed to Chiténg, earnestly for the first time in his memory, he found no relief. At last, with the years piled high on his stooped back, he fell ill, and lay gasping for many days on the floor of his room, his grey-haired wife listlessly removing his wastes and watering him like a plant. He could feel nothing at this point; no pain pierced the shroud of his living tomb. He glimpsed the Isles as if from afar, and then the mists, cold and numbing, closed in around him, and all grew dark.

“When he awoke, again his body was strange, a basketweaver and a woman, young yet already burdened with her toils, and he lived in this sad role for many more years; when she died, he awoke again in another place. It is said that the priest's báletl¹⁵ still wanders Tékumel, traveling from life to life, each more cold and lifeless than the last.”

This seemed to satisfy the woodsmen's taste for fear. *More terrible to them than the beasts of the jungle is the thought of becoming Mu'ugalavyáni, or a woman*, thought Aíjom with no little amusement.

He then heard Bashán harrumph. “The temple of Thúmis

¹⁵ One of the five selves of Tsolyáni philosophy, the báletl is the Spirit-Soul, that part of oneself that ventures after death to the Isles of the Excellent Dead (q.v.).

also knows tales of horror. But I will not tell of dull-eyed priests who scaped their callings. My tale is of a priest who performed his duties too well, and was struck down for his genius." Jagétl's great globe of a head swung up from a bored contemplation of his lap at this; it seemed he knew somewhat about the imminent tale.

"Many years ago, when I was new to my studies, I chanced upon a near-forgotten shrine in the back of our mighty temple, raised long ago to a saint of the faith of the Eye. There was a dedicatory inscription in Classical Tsolyáni to the man, hight Chirringgá hiKurúshma." Aíjom started at the name; it was surely similar to that of the priest that Prazhúri had told him of in Páya Gupá. "I had never heard of the man, and asked the temple's librarians to tell me of his service to the Grey Lord; they told me the tale of woe that I am about to tell you.

"Long, long ago, during the reigns of the great Engsvanyáli Priestkings"--the simple mention of such awesome antiquity set the woodsmen to gesturing and glancing about--"Chirringgá hiKurúshma, a great disciple of Thúmis, lived in Páya Gupá. Sagacious beyond the fallen standards of these latter days were the mandarins of the Grey Lord in the millennia of the rule of mighty Gánga, but Chirringgá saw far beyond his fellow scholars, as the kúni sees beyond the worms of the field." Jagétl twitched at this analogy, but Aíjom scarcely noticed, so horrified was he by the implications of Bashán's tale. *Surely Prazhúri merely recounted an old folk-legend to me. Yes, it was but an old story she told; surely she could not have witnessed the rule of the Empire of the Gods.*

"Chirringgá studied the effects of water on the land: how it washed away soil and smoothed stone. He read the records of weather that his temple had amassed for a dozen long lifetimes of men. He learned of the nature of the rocks and plants of Dó Cháka from a score of preeminent experts.

"Finally, armed with a pack filled to bursting with his scrolls of notes and maps, he went far outside the city to the Sárkuite monastery of Yek-hishúna, wherein were said to dwell the oldest of the Worm Lord's Undead servants. Six times he banged the great green copper door-gong at the entrance to the compound,

and one of the gruesome Undead opened the black doors.

"I have a message for you and your kind," Chirringgá said calmly, and the thing gestured for him to come in. He walked through the fetid darkness of the monastery, led by the shambling doorman, and was brought before the council of the Undead.

"Horridly they squatted there, rotting and foul of aspect, yet Chirringgá showed no fear. He sat down before them and took off his pack. 'I know that you Undead are Watchers, staring endlessly at the world around you. I have here a message for you: I can free you from this burden! I know what is to come! My studies have showed me what will happen to the fields and hills and rivers of this land for the next thousand years. You need not wait a millennium to see it come about: only give me a week, and I shall show you.'

"For six days, from before the dawn till the deep of the night, he showed them his scrolls and maps, only pausing briefly to sleep or to break his fast from the orchards and wells of the Undead. He told them how the population of the land would grow and change, in what places the people would build up new villages and new clanhouses, and how their styles would vary. He told them how the local streams and rivers would turn and cut deeper into the land. He told them what trees would wax and wane, and the schedules of their growth and decay. He told them how the huge rocks in the fields around the monastery would slowly crumble and sink into the loamy earth, even to the rate at which they would subside. He told them all that anyone could imagine to consider about the land and its coming changes for centuries to come. All throughout this, the terrible Undead made no comments, but watched him as they might have watched a field of grain in a rainstorm. At last, the eldest of them spoke through its dry-rotted throat, as the dust of its body sifted down onto its Bednálljan cerements.

"You are arrogant, scholar. We watch the world to see Change, as our Lord has commanded us to do. We do not presume to know what will come, nor do we believe that you know. Leave your scrolls and maps with us, and we shall see if you are right, even if your descendants of the fiftieth generation shall crawl

toward their deathbeds by the time of our decision.' Chirringgá nodded and left that house of walking death.

"Time came, and Chirringgá died at a ripe old age; his descendents multiplied, and were fruitful, and brought forth no end of useful and noble works. And for century after century, the Undead watched, and compared the changes they saw with those foretold by Chirringgá long ago. And they saw that he had been right in every particular. The trees rose and fell, and the rivers shifted, and the habitations and numbers of men changed and grew, exactly as he had predicted. And a terrible despair came over them, as they saw that they watched in vain; for all that was to come, they needed but to read from his now-ancient scrolls.

"After over six hundred years, in the thirty-third¹⁶ generation of the progeny of Chirringgá, their despair overwhelmed them. In a fit of terrible fury, the Undead marched forth from their monastery, and commanding all the fell powers of sorcery that their Worm Lord could grant, they stalked the land tirelessly, slaying even to the last babe every descendent of Chirringgá hiKurúshma; and when their bloody work was done, they sank down into the earth, moaning in dread that their Lord's great purpose was dross, and that a mortal man, blessed with the vision of the Eye, had seen that which they had dumbly waited long aeons to witness. And so was the line of a great man brought down by hate of my Lord's gifts."

Jagétl had been silent throughout the tale, but as Bashán ended, Aíjom expected that one could as soon stop a rushing chlén as check his rebuttal. Indeed, Jagétl immediately sat upright, assuming the pose of the orator and speaking in curt, clipped tones.

"Your story is entertaining, priest of the Grey Lord. I have heard it before--or rather, I have heard the true version. I should note that five knocks only¹⁷ did Chirringgá make upon the door to the monastery before the jájgi opened the way to him. But more importantly yet, the jájgi felt no despair. They saw Change shape the world, and that sight is a thing that cannot be replaced by the

¹⁶ In Tsolyáni numerology, thirty-three is a number beloved by the Gods and despised by demons.

¹⁷ In Tsolyáni numerology, six is Thúmis' number and five is Sáрку's.

predictions of your Temple. How strange it is that those who worship the Eye of Thúmis are so eager to blind themselves!

"Indeed, in the eleventh generation of the children of Chirringá his predictions were overturned beyond all recognition: for then it was that proud Gánga fell, and the world burned, or drowned." This, predictably, brought more gesturing from the woodsmen. "After this, the land was torn by war, wasted by plagues, reshaped by the movements of men this way and that; and the jájgi watched all.

"In the thirty-third generation of the children of Chirringá, the jájgi did come forth from their monastery, but they were not wroth. Solemnly did they journey to the low and sunken stone that was the monument of the Kurúshma lineage, who were far-scattered by the wreck of Gánga and heedless of the honors due to their dead. With bloodless hands they unearthed the remains of the priest Chirringá, and they bore them back to their stronghold. There, with the mighty spells that are of the purview of the Lord of Death, they remade his body, and recalled his báletl from its centuries of wandering among the Blessed Isles. Chirringá gasped and shivered on a bed of stone, his newly re-fleshed frame coated in the sacred anointing oil of our temple, as the jájgi watched all around him.

"'I have slept for a while, I think,' he said.

"'Yes; even unto the thirty-third generation of your children have you slept,' said the eldest of the jájgi. 'And we have witnessed Change, as our Lord has commanded us to do. Come now, and see what Change has given us.' Wordlessly the jájgi helped him from his bier, and brought him new robes of dark grey and his scrolls and books of old. Together they left the monastery, and walked the land for five days, seeking out the places and features that Chirringá had spoken of in the overweening pride of his first life. Everywhere his predictions were seen to be false; nothing had elapsed as he had foreseen, though the term of his prophecies was far from over. Frantically, Chirringá stirred through his writings day after day, looking for something he had said that agreed with what he could see, but he found no consolation; in every place, his words turned upon him like epéng-

vipers.

"How could I not have foreseen this?" he cried in his despair. "Did my Lord Thúmis not grant me the fullness of His vision, as it seemed to me and my colleagues? Did He not show me what would happen in the world?"

"For those who have not learned how to watch Change, the world is error," the eldest jájgi said. "You thought to instruct us in the ways of the world; look how it has repaid you."

"Then Chirringgá sank to the ground and moaned, and not the jájgi, as in your curious corruption of the tale. Then he arose, and begged the pardon of the jájgi, who pitied him as they pity all who are blind. They elevated him to their ranks, and it is said that in that long-hidden stronghold of our faith, Chirringgá still watches the world from a high window, and from time to time marvels that it should ever have spoken of foretelling."

"And with this," said Fyérik quickly, his voice creaking with weariness, "we must leave off our propitiation of the sleep-demons, and hope we have summoned up enough terror to make their sendings unneeded tonight."

This staved off Bashán's incipient objections to Jagétl's version of his story. Aíjom could have embraced Fyérik; no mere fear could long keep him from sleep now.

But Aíjom's sleep-demons were, of course, not to be deterred from their duty. He dreamed that he was in a moonless dark, and that he battled a grey shape, many-limbed like a spider, that struck faster than he could see. He collapsed to the warm, wet floor, and looked up at a turbulent sky. Nikána's face fell before him, rage and horror warring to control her visage, and he knew that everyone around him was dying. Pain filled him as smoothly as a bowl is filled with oil.

He turned away--this was nearly impossible--and saw Prazhúri sitting beside her garden, looking down at him curiously. The family he had glimpsed briefly that day stood beside her. Their faces were indistinct, obscured as if by fog, yet Aíjom realized with wrenching fear that the tallest figure was himself, Tsunúre stood beside him, and the children they had not yet had were gathered before them, all silent, none moving. Prazhúri

moved closer, and the world wavered.

"Do you know what has brought you here?"

Aíjom tried to scream, but no sound came, and he slashed at them with the great dagger-like claw, smooth and heavy as stone, that lay in his hand. Space split into tubes and banners, whirling about him as he sliced it, and again the question spiraled down a thread that bored through his body: "Do you know what has brought you here?"

Chapter VI

On the 4th of Pardán, over a month after Aíjom left Chéne Hó, they saw a great promontory ahead, like a range of low, square hills dressed in fog, and knew that they looked on mighty Tumíssa, 'the gateway between the Chákas,' and the largest city any of them had ever seen. Aíjom was dismayed, and already felt that his hope of demanding repayment of the old trading debt from his clan-cousins here was doomed. He could not prevail against the cunning, powerful people of such a great city. The others' reactions were stronger still, as they were used to Chéne Hó or Páya Gupá, which were much smaller than tall, strong-walled Khirgár. Neither Chhkk nor Hájit evinced emotion, though; whether this was because they were familiar with the vast metropolis, or because they were still determined to conceal their sapience from their comrades, Aíjom did not know.

Other travelers around them pointed and muttered softly, and the local peasants in the roadside villages chuckled at all of these awestruck pilgrims to their familiar home. It was not until the next day that they entered the city through one of its yawning, overwhelmingly massive gatehouses, passing through cloud-high walls aswarm with Imperial soldiers.

Aíjom was even more awed by Tumíssa once he was inside. To their right stood the proud, intricately decorated barracks and outbuildings of the mighty Legion of the Lord of Red Devastation, alive with the sounds of drill and chorused marching

songs. Aíjom realized that he actually missed the homey routine of life in the Regiment of Noble Ssiyór of Mrelú, despite having found military life tiresome.

To their left, a lake, a broad field of rippling azure, lay content in the heart of the city. Around it lay platforms on the water, countless fine clanhouses, tree-lined promenades, and a huge tangle of color and noise he could not have imagined. He gestured to one of his fellow travelers, a pottery merchant if he remembered rightly. "Is that a festival?"

The merchant laughed. "No, that is the city market. Watch yourself there, or you will spend your clan's monthly earnings on lunch--or worse yet, lose them to unscrupulous bauble-sellers!" Aíjom chuckled in turn, and his eyes turned across the lake to the mountainous pyramid of the Temple of Karakán; he felt a now-unfamiliar sense of safety under its watch.

Jalésa shouted, and he realized that he had been lost in the spectacle of the city. "Look sharp, Aíjom! We will proceed to the Plaza of the Flame Eternal, and register ourselves and our purpose with the priesthood of my Lord Chiténg here." Aíjom looked sourly to the west, where the temples of the Tlokiriqáluyal clustered like fat frogs, with the hill-broad temple of Vimúhla towering formidably over all.

They were shortly stopped at the sky-spanning Arch of Hejjéka II by a group of local officials, serious-faced people burdened with their papers and finely lined robes of office as a chlén is burdened by its hide. All around the arch, slaves were hurriedly unbundling their packs of cargo, while their owners flitted about them, quick to curse their carelessness with the goods they bore.

"We are inspectors from the Office for the Regulation of Foreign Goods," a young woman said unaffably. "Your cargo"--with this, she glanced with nascent but not yet squalling disapproval at their pole-borne casket--"is entering the city from Dó Cháka, correct?"

"Yes," Jalésa said, annoyance far too quickly bleeding into her voice that was already roughened by the dust and thirst of the Sákbes. "We are on Imperial business, and our cargo is part of that

business. It is not available for inspection."

"That is not for you to decide," the inspector said, dropping what little cheer she had carried to scatter on the ground. "Tumíssa is famous as 'the gateway between the Chákas', and its gatekeepers take their responsibilities seriously. If you will not submit to inspection here, my fellow inspectors will escort you down the Avenue of the Mighty Prince behind us to the Palace of the Realm, where your claims will be assessed."

"We await your convenience," Jalésa retorted. Aíjom could not believe that even a cloistered priestess could know so little of the proper handling of Imperial bureaucrats, and cursed her precedence over him in even such matters as these. Behind him, he heard a hiss of air, faint as a night breeze, from Chhkk, and almost laughed aloud at the thought that even the fearsome Shén was annoyed at her impolitic stance.

After what felt like a kirén, three inspectors and a like number of legionaries of the Lord of Red Devastation detached from their supervision of inspections and escorted them down the Avenue of the Mighty Prince, past the butter-yellow shrines of unworldly Belkhánu and His Cohort Qón, and amidst the four marble-built Palaces, each a legion of bureaucrats unto itself.

As any fool could have foreseen--even Chirringgá, Aíjom thought, with an unpleasant mix of humor and well-remembered fear--the Palace of the Realm was mobbed all about with supplicants and the summoned, most of whom bore expressions that would befit a rotting, skeletal mrúr. A number of their predecessors were clearly also bound for disputation of inspection, as they were surrounded by their cargoes and squatted about them like qásu-birds defending a carcass from lesser scavengers. Even with the miracle of their papers from Sikún, which would free them as long as the officials could read, they could be bound here for a week awaiting dismissal. *At least I have nothing to fear here*, Aíjom thought resignedly, and sat down with Fyérik and Nikána to play kévuk--an expensive entertainment, as they were skilled players and he an indifferent one, but he was willing to bear the cost for a time. After he had lost over a Káitar, he thought better of the venture. Uninterested in practicing the Way of the Mrúr

himself, as Chhkk and Hájit had begun to do, he began to converse with his fellow captives of the Palace of the Realm, who were well-paid for their information by the delight of schooling a hick from the desert north in the lore of fabled Tumíssa.

The sun sank lower, and Aíjom heard much, at least half of which he considered credible. Most displeasing to him was that his surreptitious queries regarding the local might of the Íto and Golden Sunburst clans had revealed that they were both active here, though the latter clan was oddly disparaged both here and in Pán Cháka to the south due to a peculiar superstition. He had not yet escaped their reach, and despite his official protection felt a shudder.

He then noticed that Jagétl had left the group, but only yóm later the round worm-lover returned from the indescribably ornamented Palace of the Priesthoods with a white-faced priest of his curiously manifold faith.

"I suspect that I can be of some help expediting your clearance," the richly-dressed priest of Sárku said to them, and strode confidently through the crowd, none of whom would challenge a local and important-looking priest of the Worm. A few yóm later, the priest returned with an elderly inspector, who glared at their casket.

"Let me see those papers," the inspector grumbled, and Jalésa produced them. He squinted at them, then back at the group, his gaze lingering longest over the curiously calm Chhkk and Hájit. "I can't let them just walk through. We've had well-forged papers lately--"

"But as their cargo is the property of the Temple of Chiténg until its delivery," and with this the priest glanced at Jalésa and Jagétl, "the Palace of the Priesthoods should conduct the inspection. It would be one less case for you." The priest ostentatiously looked around them at the crowd.

"Well, if their goods are temple business..." The inspector scowled. "I suppose you've seen the right path."

"May Sárku guard the tombs of your ancestors," the priest pronounced with a ponderous benevolence, yet Aíjom noted the glint of gold in his palm as the two clasped hands, and saw that

Jagétl was less than ecstatically grateful for their deliverance. They got up and carried the casket to the splendid Palace of the Priesthoods, but were stopped at the entrance by sour-visaged soldiers in gleaming red armor.

Jalésa had regained her composure. "Jagétl and I will continue inward, to conduct this business of my temple. The rest of you are free to do as you wish for the remainder of the day. We shall meet at sunset at the Temple of Chiténg." With this, Aíjom and the others handed off the casket to the guards, and left the teeming avenue of the Palaces. Fyérik and Nikána vanished almost immediately.

"Any further news?" Aíjom asked, and Chhkk shook his head. "Then what shall you do this evening?" Chhkk seemed strangely listless.

"I have old friends in Tumíssa whom I have not seen in years," Chhkk hissed quietly. "And you?"

Aíjom's mouth twitched. "I must pay my respects to my clan."

Aíjom walked under an arch of intricately carved, night-dark wood, and stepped down a broad, worn stairway of the same wood into the Golden Dawn's meeting room. The floor was a curious mosaic of light wooden squares and jasper inlays; the room was lushly decorated with brightly-dyed wall-hangings and floormats of excellent quality. He saw that his clan was as wealthy and powerful here as he had heard on the Avenue of the Mighty Prince-and was reminded of the ongoing deception and bad faith that fattened his Tumíssan clansmen, while in the north his kin struggled amongst the hyahyú'u. A clanswoman of middle years was seated in a far corner, pensively rolling up a scroll.

"Please be seated, Aíjom," she said with a clearly forced grace, and he wondered how she had learned his name when he had arrived quickly and, he thought, unannounced. "I am Dláramei¹⁸ hiVordésa." A boy walked in softly yet quickly and brought chumétl to both of them, in cups of glass; it was past its prime. Aíjom was further angered by the indignity of being served

¹⁸ "Scabbard".

poor fare by his clansmen.

"You are engaged in the business of our clan at a late hour," Aíjom said, though he knew she was not. He was determined to stay calm. "Surely the gods smile upon your industry, as do we." *Yes, we. I will not be dismissed like a lying Salarvyáni peddler!*

"Would that it were business," Dlárumei said heavily. "It is a letter from my uncle Verússa, currently in Butrús. My uncle Hóru has been stricken by a wasting disease, and the priests can neither persuade it to leave nor force it out of him. Verússa fears that Hóru will not live to see Halír." This was an exceedingly bad time to start a negotiation with her; yet Aíjom would not be turned from his path, though he could now see it to be steep and bladed with shards of flint.

"Are you close to him?"

"Somewhat, though he has always walked the Sákbe-roads, traveling with the caravans to bucolic Butrús or fetid Úrmish." She shifted slightly, and her mouth twitched into a momentary scowl; whether she frowned at the sourness of her memories or her chumétl, Aíjom did not know.

"I do not envy him his work. I am accustomed to staying within a few days' travel of Khirgár, and travel can be unpleasant." Khirgári of their clan seldom traveled this far south, but she showed no surprise. Aíjom expected that she had heard his life's story before he crossed the doors of her clanhouse.

"I agree, and thus I stay here, working for the good of the clan, and grateful that there are others to walk the long roads of the Chákas. I see that you are not so fortunate."

"The Weaver works my skein with a longer thread than I had hoped for," Aíjom said drily. "But I am content. My skein has led me here, for instance, where I can be of some help in righting the affairs of our clan." The first spear had been thrown, and now Aíjom watched the old zrné shift for a leap, hoping that he would not lose her in the forest.

"And how may I help with this righting?" The spear had fallen at her feet, yet she disregarded it. Aíjom felt unwelcome anger in his blood, quelled it, and drew his longbow, pulling up the

facts in his mind.

"Our clansmen in Khirgár have long been aware of an error in our accounts. In the autumn of 2352, your bursars here failed to send us payment for a caravan shipment."

"So long ago!" Dláramei's smile was only a thread-width thick. "How could such a mistake have gone uncorrected for so long? Surely it is you who are mistaken." *How curious, that this little creature threatens me with sticks! Is he sure that he walks the road of wisdom?*

"I know that my father Eléchu hiFershéna"--this brought a slight reaction from Dláramei; obviously she had heard of him, probably from his missives regarding the missed payment--"has been chief accountant for the Khirgári clanhouse of the Golden Dawn for seven years, and that both he and his predecessor noted this error and corroborated it with our records."

"So you accuse we Tumíssans of your own clan of lying," Dláramei said angrily. "Should we then spend the next week poring over half-rotten old bills of sale and bales of halves of tally-sticks recording our payments in order to convince a suspicious northerner that his own clan is honorable? Have you any proof?"

"I do not carry the financial books of my clanhouse, nor do I pull a hay-cart full of our tally-sticks," Aíjom said smoothly, seeking to restore calm, as only thus did he have any hope of beginning the skinning of this chlén. *Odd that she speaks of falsehood, and not of error. Surely she has heard of this matter before.*

Dláramei was not calmed by his tone. "I cannot believe that a clansman would accuse us of wrong dealings! You should know that I will be discussing this impropriety with your elders--and betters--in Khirgár with my next missive thence. Leave me, and do not return here until you have learned better manners, and more regard for the clan that upholds you!"

This outburst was more than Aíjom had expected. Had he held the documents she spoke of, and perhaps been aided by a Khirgári clansman or two, he felt that her suspicious anger would have been an opening to exploit. In his current position, however, he would be reduced to once again begging for a room from the

priests of the God of Pain, and bedding down with the rest of his ill-matched group. He had sorely wished for the comfort of a clanhouse of his clan, even if it was not his own, but that was not to be. He left the clanhouse of the Golden Dawn in a storm-cloud mood, and with no other goal in reach, decided to see the city market.

In Tumíssa's sprawling market plaza were many wonders: foods for every taste, ceramics so thin and finely glazed that they seemed translucent, fabrics colored so brightly that they seemed to be holes in the world. Particularly interesting was the goldfish-seller, a pleasant matron in festive, flowing robes of blue and green and with her hair drawn back in a bun to keep it out of the water, who chatted easily with customers as she netted her iridescent wares. She kept them in a dháiba-wide, man-height-deep cistern set in the market's floor; with sides of light blue glazed tile cunningly set with ribbons of green, and with a sandy bottom, it appeared as a weedy riverbed. With a wistful glance, she would drop the fish into a head-sized bowl of pale green, bubbly glass filled with water by her assistant (perhaps her daughter?) and pass it to its buyer, along with a last few suggestions for the fish's care. Many children, from the noble sires of the high clans to the rough-clad children of the low, gathered around to watch the fat shapes, glowing in the slanting evening light, as they slipped slowly through the water or sucked grain from the surface when the children were allowed to toss it in. The goldfish-seller did not mind them; their wonderment drew business, and the older ones gladly ran across the plaza and to the end of the low wharves to fill buckets from the Lake of Néttu Tlakán, as Aíjom had learned it was called, when she called for more water "to keep the fish wet," which made the little ones giggle. He wondered what it was like for the fish, suddenly scooped up and made to live in a bubble, not understanding the world outside their bowl.

Aíjom was not much in the mood for shopping, however. His failure to overthrow Dlárumei's objections to the repayment of their old debt would not sit well with his elders when--if--he returned home. And his weariness and homesickness squatted heavily upon him like the weird incense-burning toad-idols that

squatted in the back of many a merchant's stall here. He finished a bitter salad and a dubious square of pan-fried lake-fish, and was lost in thought when he was accosted by a wild, unkempt man in ragged robes who had been huddling quietly at the market's edge.

"You are a newcomer here--you can help me! I have petitioned for thirteen years, but they will not listen! This place is accursed!"

Aíjom had never seen such a demented figure before. He stepped back a pace in disgust, but did not leave. "How so?" He had nothing else to do--why should he not seek the council of madmen, when he was on a mad quest across the world?

"The very stones of this marketplace are accursed! Long ago, before our great Empire reared its cities and monuments, before even the Engsvanyáli who ruled the universe for three eternities ploughed this soil, a foul being was worshiped here--I cannot tell its name! We stand near the site of a temple to its unutterable evil!"

Aíjom looked around in annoyance; people were beginning to stare at them. "But this temple has surely been cast down, for at least three eternities. We have nothing to fear."

The man assumed a fiercely exaggerated knowing look, and sidled closer, his reek stronger than the smell of the fishmongers' booths. "You are right that the temple has been shattered--but the foolish, forgetful lords of Tumíssa unearthed its stones and reassembled them! Look around you! The very cobbles and wall-stones of this marketplace were once the stones of the temple! I have studied their patterns for years, and they are indisputably the stones spoken of by Bednálljan commentators on the extirpation of heresy! Look at their divergent whorls--but not too closely! They draw our pedhétls into themselves, slowly, like long-fattened leeches, and someday they shall bring doom to all the Chákas!"

Aíjom looked around and saw that, indeed, the cobbles and building stones were of a different sort than that used elsewhere in Tumíssa, but the light-veined, dusty, round-cornered blocks did not frighten him in the least. He stepped away; this strange man was no longer entertaining.

A young, splendidly dressed man of high clan hailed him, kheshchal plumes fanned around his head. The grace of wealth and power lay on his broad, emerald-clad shoulders, yet it seemed to Aíjom, looking at his bearing, that there was a stronger grace to the man that wealth and power alone could not grant.

"You have woken him. It is not often anymore that he rallies."

"Who is he? Has he no clansmen to aid him?"

"No, he is lost; he does not even have a name. It is rumored that he was an acolyte of Hrū'ū, and that he failed his initiation years ago. He has stayed here since. Some of the superstitious country folk feed and clothe him, as they think he's a holy man. Who knows--perhaps they're right!" The young man laughed easily. "I am Panjáang¹⁹ hiVu'úrtesh, of the Jade Diadem clan." Aíjom immediately bowed deeply. Panjáang accepted this with a casual expression. "You are not of Tumíssa, I take it?"

"No. I am Aíjom hiKharsáma of the Golden Dawn clan, from Khirgár, defender of the North."

"A military man, or I am mistaken," Panjáang said, and Aíjom nodded. "I am an administrative priest of Lady Dlamélish, but though She is not often thought of as a warlike Goddess, I have spent much time consulting with the war-temples regarding the defense of Tumíssa, defender of the West." Panjáang looked closely at Aíjom, who felt mean, insignificant, and transparent as the goldfish-seller's bowls beneath his commanding gaze. "I hope you enjoy our city, Aíjom of Khirgár. I think that we will meet again."

With this, Panjáang walked away, leaving Aíjom feeling relieved; he had no courtier's manners with which to treat with such noble lords. Yet though Panjáang had unnerved him, he had at the same time put him at ease despite his vastly higher status. He had not been anything like the obsessively pleasure-seeking worshipers of the green-eyed Mistress of Demons that Aíjom had known. He looked around; the crazed acolyte of Hrū'ū was nowhere to be seen, and the shadows of the evening grew long and hungry. He turned his feet west, toward the temple of Chiténg, his

¹⁹ "Desire".

only sanctuary in this multitudinous city.

Chhkk, Hájit, Fyérik and Nikána were gathered there, waiting in a courtyard painted with an old yet well-executed mural on plaster depicting the fiery and weapon-filled Paradise of Chiténg, filled with the exalting báletls of the faithful. The soldiers ate dlél-fruit while Chhkk and Hájit gnawed and cracked hmá leg-bones. Chhkk looked weary, a feeling Aíjom had not before thought to attribute to the powerful Shén. None had seen the priests return, nor were any interested in braving the mazy, aggressively guarded Palace of the Priesthoods to learn how their case went.

"So we'll be here for a while," said Fyérik philosophically. "That's nothing to weep over. You can have more fun in Tumíssa than anywhere else in the Empire." He turned to Aíjom. "If we're still here tomorrow, you should go with us to the hirilákte-arena, which was just renovated. We checked it out this afternoon; it looks spectacular. And the swordmasters cluster outside like chríflies, eager to train newcomers or perform incredible demonstrations for a few Hlásh."

Aíjom doubted that any swordmasters sold their services that cheaply. Even if they did, his purse was quite light these days; it seemed that the rewards of service to the Empire were delayed at best, and he would have little success requesting funds from his Tumíssan clansmen. But though he had never been a great fan of the arena, a bit of entertainment sounded like a needed supplement to idling around the marketplace or strolling endlessly through the city gardens nearby. He nodded to the soldiers. "I shall join you."

The priests did not return until well after sunset, and noticeably, they did not carry the casket, nor did bearers bring it for them. They looked as though they had worked a week in the fields and fought with each other the whole while. Jalésa bore an expression that did not invite questions; fortunately, Jagétl let a few crumbs of news fall.

"The councillors insisted on seeing our cargo, and then locked onto my throat like a tlékkku on the hunt, demanding to know what business I had with the Temple of Chiténg's sendings. The faith of the Worm is well-liked here, but its Dó Chákan

adherents are denounced as greedy traitors after the unfortunate events of the reign of the God-Emperor's predecessor. They would have believed the words of a Salarvyáni over my testimony!"

Aíjom knew that it must be hard and shameful for Jagétl to admit that Dhichuné's rule had been anything other than glorious and underlong; he did not envy him his ténmre of trying to convince the ecclesiasts of the Palace of his loyalty to their mission.

"At least you quieted them," Jalésa said angrily. Aíjom figured that regret at her discourteous handling of the inspectors fueled her displeasure, and knew enough to avoid asking her how Jagétl had done so. "The elder administrative priests of the Palace are all doddering appointees of Emperor Hirkáne, and worship distant Hnálla; they had little regard for the dignity due our mission and my Temple. We must wait here until they receive confirmation from the Palace of the Realm that we are who we say we are. Evidently, they do not know this priest Sikún in Chéne Hó, or do not trust his seal." She turned to Jagétl. "Why you thought we would be better off dealing with them, I will never understand."

"Then you have not listened," Jagétl said, now fully as cross as she. "If we had gone through the Palace of the Realm, the questioning would have been at least as probing, and our dignities would have been as peasants' mats to those provincial bureaucrats."

Odd that the citizens of mighty Tumíssa seem provincial to him, Aíjom thought with an inner smirk.

Jagétl rebuilt his calm. "This was the better choice, even if it will be a few days until they give us leave to continue our trek."

Aíjom gritted his teeth. He would be reduced to begging for money from his companions, or for alms from the Temple of Karakán, by tomorrow. He thought that he might approach the Palace of the Priesthoods and demand wages on the strength of his servitude to the Petal Throne, but feared that hidden beasts guarded that watering-hole. He lay down with a troubled mind, and sleep came slowly.

Chapter VII

In the morning, they attended a breakfast surrounded by saffron-robed priests of Chiténg of every age and temperament. The stirfried káika-meat and roots had a welcome touch of heat after their many unseasoned Dó Chákan meals; Jagétl disliked this greatly, reaching again and again for his chumétl-cup like a deprived drunkard. After their meal, he spoke quickly to Jalésa and set out for the temple of the Worm, his foul mood of the night before apparently forgotten. Jalésa vanished into the depths of the temple, her anger not yet abated. Chhkk and Hájit contented themselves with lying in the already-hot morning sun, scarcely seeming to breathe.

Aíjom went out with Fyérik and Nikána toward the mighty hirilákte-arena, glumly clutching his last few Hlásh. The huge arena was built in the monumental, formal style typical of Imperial constructions, and as they approached it they could hear the crowd within roar lustily, approving an unseen struggle. They paid over their entrance fees, Aíjom as reluctantly as a peasant surrendering his finest hmá to the village tax collector, and climbed the endless tiers of stairs that led to huge rows of benches, already largely filled with members of every clan and worshipers of every God. They sat down near the top of the massive arena. Aíjom looked over the horde below in awe; he had not seen this many civilians gathered together except on high festival days, when the Khirgári plains were emptied and all came inside its proud walls to watch parades or fete the changing seasons.

The combats were fiercer and more expertly fought than in Khirgár, and the onlookers cheered and heckled with verve, but Aíjom's long-building unease hampered his appreciation; too, he had always thought the arenas to be wasteful, both of their combatants and their attendants, despite their being of the domain of his God Karakán, Lord of Glorious War. *I have inherited the wise parsimony of the North, and cannot set it aside even to humor lordly Tumíssa*, he thought.

In truth, he was more interested in turning away from the

lunging, struggling gladiators and viewing the eastern half of the city from the vantage afforded by the highest of the tiered rows of seats. Its size was truly apparent from here; its clanhouses, temples and shops seemed to stretch to the horizon.

It struck Aíjom as he looked around that despite the massiveness of its outer wall set with great towers as the ring of a wealthy noblewoman swells with fat gemstones, the city was as hollow and vulnerable as an egg. No inner rings of walls stood ready to deter besiegers; indeed, he saw little in the way of defensible structures within the walls, save to the south, where the sprawling temples of Karakán and Chegárra stood sternly beside a fortress guarding the southern Sákbe.

But despite its lack of defenses, or perhaps because of this, the city was beautiful. The lake of Néttu Tlakán was bluer than the sky, alive with skiffs and rowboats, and thronged with water-drawers, fishermen, and children sporting in its waves. The teeming marketplace; the majestic high clanhouses with red-tiled roofs, gardened terraces, and courtyards the size of village squares clad in glazed brick; the broad and open avenues lined with glossy-leaved trees; the long city garden that looked like a patch of the Chákan jungle set within Tumissa by the Gods--these things made him dizzy as if he had tripped near a high cliff's edge. He was distracted from his reverie by a sudden roar from the crowd, as loud as a bellowing chlén-herd, and turned to see a sword-wielding warrior stride stiffly about his fallen opponent, his arms stretched to the sky.

"By Bloodsong's molten edge, Aíjom, you missed a spectacle!" Fyérik's eyes burned like unto the painted eyes of his God in the far-distant monastery where Aíjom's burden had been laid on him. "That is Émra²⁰ hiKhanúma, the great and famous Tumissan master of the hirilákte-duel. It is not often anymore that he deems a foe worthy of his time. Surely the favor of Lord Chiténg burns about him!" Aíjom could not manage a very regretful expression at missing the fight while looking down at Émra's adversary, his arms splayed, his bloodied face set in an oddly peaceful expression. He had always hated the arena, and

²⁰ "Rib".

now he remembered why. One had enough of Death without inviting him to lunch.

"I had a Káitar and a half on Émra, Mnélla," a bleary-eyed middle-clan man in front of them said, gloating as his sour-faced companion counted out his winnings in silver Hlásh; his voice was a deep croak, as if he worked in a grain-bin or a meat-smoking house. "Don't be so smug, Chamáng²¹," she said quietly. "I will win someday."

After a sparse noontime meal with Fyérik and Nikána, whose pedhétlš shone through their faces after the excitement of the arena, and noting that he had eaten the last of his Hlásh, Aíjom decided to petition the Palace of the Priesthoods for disbursement of the wages that must surely be due to him after nearly two months engaged in Imperial business. His visit had two goals, of course; he also wanted to know when they would set out from Tumíssa, and he had little faith that Jalésa and Jagétl would keep properly atop the matter when they had the comfort of their temples to distract them and they had been received so rudely at the Palace of the Priesthoods. The soldiers were uninterested in this errand, preferring to talk with the swordsmen who stood around the arena as they had spoken of the night before.

Aíjom headed north, through the lovely city gardens that were set with tiny flower-ringed pools and shrines to local heroes, ghosts and spirits, and shaded by the verdant canopy of its ancient trees, to the forbidding Avenue of the Mighty Prince and the Palace of the Priesthoods. The same red-armored guards looked unpleasantly at him as he approached the main entrance-arch; he briefly introduced himself and stated that he was a member of a group with a pending case within, who needed to speak with a priest.

"When we get a yóm free, we'll see if any of them are available," one of the guards said blandly, with a meaningful look at Aíjom's empty belt-pouch; without a bribe, he saw that he would have to wait. As before, he had no end of talkative locals and other diversions. Indeed, the avenue was itself a marketplace in miniature, with swift-moving vendors darting here and there with

²¹ "Idolator", i.e., worshiper of a foreign God.

woven baskets of hot food and tight-wrapped bundles of scarves and other luxuries among their captive audience, ever careful to avoid the occasionally watchful guards of the four Palaces, who disapproved of sales in an unapproved part of the city from which they did not profit. Even if their prices had not been notably higher than those of the official marketplace, Aíjom could not have bought any of their fetching charms or tempting sweetmeats. The kirén floated by as slowly as high clouds, and his frustration grew fierce as Jalésa's had been last night.

At last, one of the oafs at the door sauntered inside the Palace of the Priesthoods, and not long afterwards, an elderly priest of Hnálla came out with him and was directed toward Aíjom. Aíjom bowed gratefully to the venerable administrative priest, whose heavy white robes were worked with the insignia of his many titles. "Come within. I wish to speak with you," the priest said sharply, and spun about. Aíjom followed, wondering at the priest's air of gravity but still pleased that he had managed to attain an audience.

The interior of the Palace was gorgeously decorated, if in too formal a style for Aíjom, and it was notably cooler than the avenue. It was quiet, though not sullenly so as outside; small groups of priests, wearing robes of many colors, conversed with softly inflected voices over scrolls of indifferent calligraphy. The elder priest of Hnálla shuffled through them with a curt surety indicative of rank, and led Aíjom through a heavy door to a small room, with bare walls painted with a pleasant mural of the city and its environs through the seasons of the year, and a heavy, curving wooden table set with flowers and crowned with a broad white marble bowl heaped with luscious dlél-fruits and vegetables. Aíjom ate like a hmá in spring when given leave.

"So," the priest said, looking askance at Aíjom's bulging cheeks, "you are Aíjom hiKharsáma, the Khirgári soldier named by this Sikún hiRi'inyúsa, the fire-priest in Chéne Hó?"

Aíjom nodded, struggling to swallow enough of the fibrous sweet-roots to respond.

"I am Fúrodhu²² hiNrashqéma, an administrative priest

²² "Explosive".

whose church has seen fit to exile him amongst moths drawn to fire and gruesome worm-lovers. If there were a decent mind among them, I wouldn't object so much... But I shall shine no more light on my skein. As you are the Aíjom named in these papers given me by Jalésa hiChunmíyel, you can tell me what you know of your charge from Chéne Hó. I have heard little from the priests who came with you but puffery."

Aíjom recounted his all-too-brief understanding of his mission. Fúrodhu frowned and sighed. "You know less than they! At least you did not interpolate so tiresomely." He leaned forward and looked intently at Aíjom. "I am given to understand that you earned the privilege of accompanying this--convoy--by notable deeds in the service of the Emperor in Dó Cháka, done while in the company of a Shén hunter and his rényu."

Aíjom had not seen any such specific reference in the papers Sikún had given him--*How foolish of me to come here and put my leg in the snare!*

"My clan has suffered many indignities in these provinces, hiKharsáma," Fúrodhu said, in a quiet but rising voice that grew great as a puff-frog that confronts its enemies. "But to be expected to cheerfully give passage through my city to some low-clan man and a Shén thug, when they slaughtered my clansmen of the Golden Sunburst, is beyond the bounds of reason or loyalty! I will have you both worked in the Imperial tin mines until the flesh falls from your bones like well-cooked káika-bird!"

Aíjom knew that only quick and cunning words offered him any hope. "You have misheard of these events, reverend elder. I killed no soldier in the service of your clan--nor, indeed, did I kill any of the clansmen of your enemies." *None that had been alive, anyway*, Aíjom thought. Fúrodhu's forehead pulsed ominously, but he did not interrupt.

"I battled the Pé Chói of the Chákan wilderness who had sided with the Íto clan against yours, and who had raided farming villages at the Íto's behest." Aíjom felt indignant at yet another self-interested challenge to the rightness of his deeds; despite Fúrodhu's vastly higher status and power, his anger bled into his voice. "Chhkk, Hájit and I but dug a firebreak that prevented your

feud from further ravaging the Chákan countryside--and in so doing, we worked the Emperor's will. He would not have been pleased with the rotten fruits of your schemes, and his servants watch, that such unrest will not arise again."

Fúrodhu shook with rage, yet Aíjom saw that his invocation of Imperial authority had had the desired effect. Too many questions would arise if Aíjom or Chhkk disappeared. Indeed, Aíjom realized that his visit here had been overdue; Fúrodhu surely learned of his presence yesterday, and might already have contacted the assassins' clans through secret channels. His plans for vengeance were likely the prime reason for their delay.

"You plead well, man of the Golden Dawn." *Every man bargains hard as stone when his life is for sale*, Aíjom thought, but knew better than to speak it. "I feel gracious today, and thus shall spare you, for you are as a child who did not see the consequences of his actions." He motioned to the door, and Aíjom bowed carefully and rose. Fúrodhu had composed himself now, and smiled calmly. "We still await communications of import regarding your mission, but they are expected this evening. You and your companions should return here tomorrow morning; we will return the weapon to you then."

Aíjom wished to leave before he gave Fúrodhu reason to doubt the wisdom of his clemency, yet he could not help himself. "The priests of Chiténg did not see fit to show me this weapon, or to explain how it is wielded. Is there anything you might tell me?"

Fúrodhu smiled again, but his eyes were as cold as the dlél-killing frost of the north. "Only, hiKharsáma, that my ill will toward you is no doubt superfluous."

Aíjom jogged away from the Avenue of the Mighty Prince in high spirits. He might not have been able to defeat Dlárumei on her home ground, but he had survived a talk with a powerful man who had reasons to want him dead and the means to accomplish this. He had not gotten his wages, but one did not steal a nraishu-leg from the zrné's jaws. Perhaps Jagétl, a man of high clan, would assist him.

Unfortunately, despite the lateness of the hour, his group

was not reassembled at the temple of Chiténg. Fyérik and Nikána sparred with some of the younger priests who fancied themselves warriors, displaying graceful new moves that probably came from their meetings with the swordmasters that day. Chhkk and Hájit sat dumbly; Chhkk's skin, or scales, seemed to have a different shade, and his eyes looked glazed. Aíjom remembered that this was the time of year when the few Shén he had known of in Khirgár had sought seclusion. He went to Nikána at the end of her dueling, while she was still flanked by pained but eager opponents, and asked where the priests had gone.

"Jalésa received an invitation from a nobleman named Panjáng to attend the evening's festivities at the temple of Dlamélísh," she said, her breath short after her exercises. Aíjom recalled meeting Panjáng in the marketplace; it had not felt like a chance event, he realized.

She had already recovered from her exertions. "Apparently there's a conference involving devotees of the Green Lady and Her consort--something about the significance of the pains of the five selves to their pleasures? I can't recall."

"What about Jagétl?"

Nikána's mouth twisted in a dismissive smirk. "He's been gone all day. We've longed for his enthralling company, but with no luck." Aíjom cursed, and relayed Fúrodhu's news of their probable departure tomorrow. Nikána shrugged; with her mate at her side, on a special assignment that brought her closer to her home, she showed none of the urgency that Aíjom felt. "We will take our spades to the temple of Sáрку, sift through the dirt, and pick Jagétl out from the other worms. You'll have to fetch Jalésa."

"Why is that? The temple of Dlamélísh will surely be more populous this evening, and harder to search alone."

"Some worshipers of the Green Lady will ask for that which they do not truly want." Nikána's teeth flashed in a tlékkul's smile. "And therefore, we are no longer welcome at the temple of Dlamélísh in Tumíssa."

Aíjom wondered at the brutality it would take to be banned from the temple of the Obsidian Princess of the Damned as he left the guest quarters of the temple of Chiténg and made his way,

through the followers of the Tlokiriqáluyal who had begun to gather for evening rites in the Plaza of the Flame Eternal, to the temple of the Goddess of Pleasure.

Aíjom walked slowly through the temple grounds, astonished at the variety of strange things sold here by the enthusiastic vendors. He had never gone to the temple of Dlamélish in Khirgár, and at any rate this one was much larger. He cursed the uncertainties of Imperial bureaucracy that had made this necessary as he strolled up the low, hugely broad steps that extended across the whole front of the triangular temple complex. He shouldered curtly through swarms of flushed, eager celebrants as he headed for the great central doors, only to find himself confused: there were three doorways before him, each thronged with worshipers. He wished that he could speak with one of the temple attendants, but quickly saw that they were constantly getting better offers than he would or could make. With no other guidance, he decided to start on the right and work his way through.

He emerged into a vast, open-aired courtyard, filled with sights, sounds and smells that overwhelmed him and made the outer grounds seem fit for a temple of virginal Lady Dilinala. He shuddered at the endless parade of debauchery that churned around the room, clumsily seeking its own tail, ever failing to find it. From the walls the Goddess looked down in a multitude of carven guises clad in glittering swirls of silver and jade, each more salacious and disturbing than the last; the statuary was so dense and clutchingly intertwined that the various Aspects were as indistinguishable bits of froth in a boiling pot. *How could this mound of degeneracy harbor scholars?* But, Aíjom reflected, the surpassingly mournful outer face of the Temple of Sárku bore little resemblance to its interior, whose studious, quiet denizens would have not looked much out of place in a Palace of the Realm; and Sikún's peaceful, contemplative office in far-distant Chéne Hó did not seem to agree with the martial and sadistic atmosphere of the outer shrines of grim Vimúhla. The Tlokiriqáluyal were a strange group. Aíjom realized, with an unpleasant crawling sensation, that he knew nothing of the inner workings of his own faith.

Picking his way carefully across the unclean floor, occasionally stepping over the prostrate forms of the faithful that babbled nonsense and smiled vacuously at the stars overhead, he worked through the room, yet saw no sign of Jalésa, nor of any one he would call a scholar. Nor could he speak with, or even identify, any officials of the temple. His stomach growled like a wild beast after the exertions of the day, and when a bearer-slave stumbled by with a huge platter of káika meat and roasted vegetable skewers, he seized a fistful and swallowed it hurriedly. He struggled to an inner door along the eastern wall, finding with disgust that he felt offended at not having been propositioned by even the most dissolute of the Green Lady's faithful. *Perhaps they bear a sign that I do not know*, he thought in wry self-deprecation.

The door let upon a confluence of four hallways, each with many doors, and though it was crowded, it was as the cool, open skies of a Khirgári evening to him after the courtyards of the temple. There was no filth on the floor, and he could easily go through any door he wished. Resigned to a long, distasteful, and probably fruitless search, he turned right, determined to be systematic.

He stepped through the first door of the rightmost hallway, noting that guards blocked a closed door to his right. *The inner temple. Perhaps it is indeed full of scrolls and ritual priests.* The room he entered was dimly lit, small, and triangular, with another door in the north face. The people within lay as if dead; only careful observation of their sides, and the flagons of wine and platters of powders piled about, convinced him otherwise. With a rising sense of dread he walked through the mounded bodies, hearing the quiet tinkle of a stream flowing through a trough hanging from the ceiling, the moan of the wind from the open-roofed three-walled room beyond, and the moans of its occupants.

For kirén, he wandered from room to triangular room, feeling lost in a way he never had before. One of the attendees had told him that there was a room here for each lesser Aspect of the Green Lady, and Aíjom saw that She must be protean indeed. He quickly learned that his failure to worship the Demon Lady of Delights was no barrier to propositions. He was invited to sample

piles of strange drugs, to lie with squirming masses of worshipers in which one could not be certain where one person ended and another began, to feel the slice of knives or to slice others and lap up their blood; each time, it was harder to maintain his composure. Hands clutched at him, less cognizant than a tlékku's tail. The endless warren of triangular rooms, each with two ways out, and the ever-present water flowing northward through slowly descending troughs, its calm flow somehow disconcerting when paired with the tableaux they passed over, were driving him mad.

At long last, he came out into one of the hallways and spied Jalésa far down toward the inner temple. She walked slowly and spoke in a low voice with a stooped figure who was clad in splendid green robes and crowned with an exotic headpiece of graven and dyed chlén hide inlaid with chips of obsidian that shimmered in the torchlight. Fighting down the urge to summon her with an undecorous shout, the sooner to flee this strange Hell, Aíjom yet ran down the corridor, earning him sour looks from the wandering faithful.

Jalésa looked up at him with a mischievous smile; the old man beside her merely squinted, as if he struggled to see in the murk. Panjáang was nowhere to be seen. "I did not know you for a celebrant of the Green Lady, Aíjom," Jalésa said archly. "I have misjudged you."

"I am not one of Her worshipers, nor have I come to sample the... teachings... of Her temple." Aíjom realized that it was ill-considered to express disgust at the worship of the Demon Lady of Delights in the presence of one of Her elder priests, yet his revulsion at the place could not be held fully back despite all his past custom with followers of the Tlokiriqáluyal.

The elder looked on him as on a thing newfound and unexampled; his timeworn face was of a cast that Aíjom would elsewhere have associated with sagacity. Then something changed in his visage, and Aíjom could not look away from the priest's eyes that were grown darker than the obsidian inlay of his helm. He felt unsteady, uncertain, while suddenly he felt the south wind stir slowly in the hall, ruffling every hair, caressing each pore; it was as if he could feel the stream of time made tangible all about him

and slowed to where he might touch it, swim through it with languorous strokes to any moment he wished, and there float in timeless ecstasy. Then he peered harder yet into the priest's eyes, and felt his gorge rise as he felt their *cold*, deeper than the chill of the Pé Chói's underground cave in the Chákan forest. He looked into a blackness beyond moonless night, wherein light failed and fell away from the world.

He realized that he was falling over, with the slowness of a dream; he broke away from the priest's terrible gaze and righted himself. *Surely one of those cursed degenerates smeared me with an opiate paste, or perhaps it was that dung-fouled káika*, he rushed to assure himself; yet not again would he look into the eyes of the thing in the semblance of a man that now smiled radiantly at him.

"It is the blessing of the Gods to know how you truly wish to see your skein woven," the priest pronounced in a voice swelled with solicitousness and empathy, the very sound of concern. "What more can any of us ask? But I wonder: what has brought you here, if not the ineluctable call of the Goddess?"

Aíjom looked at Jalésa and felt his composure seeping back through the smothering malaise of this place. "I have come to tell you that the Palace of the Priesthoods will confirm the authority of our orders imminently, and thus that we should be ready to depart on the morrow."

"I thank you for the message," she said uninterestedly, and turned back to the unsettling gaze of the priest and his undoubtedly entrancing theological perspective. Looking beyond her, Aíjom saw an impossible sight: Jagétl, clad, as Aíjom had never before seen him, in simple lay robes. He stumbled forth from one of the many doors of the hall, entwined with a wheat-stalk of a girl whose dress, if one wished to exaggerate such a slight thing so, lay green against his dark. Aíjom turned away from Jalésa and walked down the hallway, but soon nearly fell over again, this time with laughter that tore its way forth from his throat like a dnélu breaching a new burrow-hole on the Khirgári plain. He staggered away as if he was drunk himself, and that he might have been, for the air within the temple seemed to waver with doubtful fumes. *Surely, that one*

sight has very nearly repaid me for all the suffering of this journey!
He did not stop laughing until he was nearly abed, but no one he passed in the Plaza of the Flame Eternal looked askance; those coming from the temple of Dlamélísh often bore away stranger moods.

Chapter VIII

They gathered well after sunrise at the Palace of the Priesthoods. Chhkk was missing some of his scales; it seemed that this was his molting-time. Aíjom still felt queasy, despite a carefully chosen breakfast of hmélu-steak, soft bread and hmá-milk, and cursed the rutting fools held in thrall by the Green Lady, as well as the skinflint priests of Chiténg who had refused him aid that morning despite his service to a mission of their Temple. Jalésa and Jagétl went within, and again the rest waited outside the Palace. Some of the people waiting here had been here when they had first arrived in Tumíssa, and their expressions had been not a grain less despairing when Aíjom had first seen them.

After a kirén, Jalésa and Jagétl returned, with two of the Palace guards struggling to bear the casket behind them; it had been resealed, with the huge and florid stamps of the Tumíssan Palace of the Priesthoods on the light wax globs. Aíjom saw with satisfaction that the laboring guards were the same two who had snubbed him yesterday. They handed off the device rudely, and the group finally left the 'dungeon of the open air' outside the imperious Palaces. They headed south through the majestic city, to the forbidding gate-fortress guarded by the temples of Karakán and Chegárta, the war-deities of Stability. Aíjom called for a stop at the temple of Karakán, publicly to call for the blessing of his God and privately to call for the generosity of His priests. Unfortunately, he received only a handful of Hlásh and a patronizing look, despite his entreaties for more substantial aid. His companions looked crossly at him when he emerged, though it was only a few yóm later, and they left Tumíssa.

The Sákbe was thick with travelers, but after the respite of their stay in Tumíssa, the group kept a good pace. Aíjom strove to make it yet faster, until sickness twisted his guts and he had to stop, to the further displeasure of his companions. He pulled at his water-flask, but a second bout of illness left him feeling much like a wrung-out dishrag. The wells were not that frequent along the Sákbe; he would need a larger canteen, and frequent stops to rest and eat, if his illness persisted. Chhkk seemed no healthier; he shuffled his feet and swayed slightly, like a shallow-rooted tree in a storm.

That night, Aíjom approached Jagétl as Jalésa and the soldiers began another paeon to their vicious God. "Jagétl, I fear that I must trouble you for a favor," he began, anxious to flatter the priest of the Worm. "My service to the Petal Throne will soon be hampered by my lack of funds. You seem to enjoy the favor of the Worm Lord. Might I borrow but twenty Káitars to buy food and drink to strengthen me in my work toward our common objective?" He could probably make it clear to Penóm, let alone Úrmish, on fifteen Káitars plus the Hlásh from the priests of Karakán if he ate cheaply, but he did not know exactly what lay ahead, and he wanted some room for the worm to wriggle down from his request.

Jagétl snorted. "Do the servants of Sárku work and wisely store up treasure only so that an inconstant follower of the fickle storm-god might profit from their labors?"

The notion of this round grub working nearly caused Aíjom to snort back, but he restrained himself. "I am not inconstant, but merely unfortunate. I lack the support of my clan in Pán Cháka, and as I am of the laity, I cannot call on my temple as you can. This would be an investment in the success of our task, which you have made willingly before. I know by what stratagem you avoided our internment awaiting the judgment of the Palace of the Realm in Tumíssa." These last words, spoken fulsomely, brought a gleam to Jagétl's eye; his quarry was almost within reach.

But it leapt away just as quickly, as Jagétl frowned. "It is precisely because of the necessity of such *stratagems* that I cannot underwrite your dinner-table! Go beg the Shén for funds. Perhaps

he will let you have some of his shedding scales; the peasant clanhouses may mistake them for Káitars if you are lucky! Or perhaps his rényu will fetch you game-birds and forest mushrooms!"

Aíjom's patience was already burdened, and Jagétl's mockery tore it in twain. "I had thought for greater understanding of the needs of the flesh from such a worldly man! You cite the guidance of your temple as paramount, yet I saw no hint of black on your robes or white paint on your face when you patronized the temple of the Green Lady last night! Did you hope to persuade your companion of the supremacy of the Worm? If so, you have a strange manner of lecturing! Is that the way of your faith?"

Jagétl's jowls had gone slack, and his eyes darted about. For a moment, Aíjom feared that he had made an awful mistake, as Jagétl's face darkened, but then he saw that he had skewered his prey neatly. "I... of course, I understand that exigencies occur in your... situation..." Scores of coins tumbled from his purse, including a good number of Káitars; Aíjom did not count them now. "I can, needless to say, rely on your stern silence, an admirable imitation of Lord Karakán's own..."

Silence was not one of Lord Karakán's qualities, but Aíjom felt no need to correct him; indeed, he rushed to appear friendly, not wishing to let this turn Jagétl into yet another implacable enemy when he had so few friends. "Of course. I apologize for my stridency, and thank you for your aid. May your God smile on you." This was as close to invoking the favor of Sárku as Aíjom intended to get.

Jagétl crept away, thoroughly cowed in spite of Aíjom's conciliatory finish to their conversation, and Aíjom found that he had been given twenty-three Káitars, seventeen Hlásh, and fifty-nine Qirgáls, a decent sum that would give him some leeway when they ate at the Sákbe-tower villages. He had to wonder: was Jagétl's fear of revelation as a reveler typical of the priests of the Worm? He had known many people who had no interest in the Green Lady's temple orgies, and many who relished them, but very few who enjoyed them secretly.

The next few days were finally cool with the first hints of

autumn, though the evening downpours and thunderstorms were still regular. Aíjom's sickness passed, though not without much pain and a lingering weakness. Chhkk's molting was plainly evident now, and he was completely withdrawn and inscrutable. Aíjom continued his nightly swordplay with the soldiers, mindful of Chhkk's warning in Páya Gupá yet trying not to show wariness. He was now well accustomed to the weight of the once-burdensome casket.

At a Sákbe-tower, when they prepared to march again after lunch, Hájit drew briefly near Chhkk, then loped away from the Sákbe to the west and vanished in the rough, lushly overgrown hills. Jalésa wondered at this, then watched Chhkk, who watched Hájit go but made no sign. "I've heard that the beasts can be fickle," she said at last. "If neither of you object to his departure, then I will not. I never liked rényu much." Aíjom presumed that this was Hájit's homeland; clearly, the rényu had been under no charge from Sikún. He would miss the enigmatic humanoid, even if only as one more tie to the somewhat-familiar north.

As they walked, the Turín again drew near to the western side of the Sákbe, and they often sat near it while resting or washed their clothes on its rock-strewn banks. It cut deeper into the land as they went south, becoming fierce as it tore through deep ravines whose stony sides had long-running layers of color and texture. At one stop, a cross-eyed, disarmingly friendly old woman in a charmingly archaic and rural costume of plant-fiber cloth proclaimed her conversance with the river-spirits, and pledged to tell the stories of travelers' lives for only a few Hlásh. Aíjom was suddenly reminded of a long-ago harvest festival in Khirgár, when one of his aunts--which one had it been?--had taken him to a local astrologer, a strange, short, overdressed man bedecked with amulets of Avanthé and Thúmis. *Wasn't he of my lineage? Was his name Oqún hiKharsáma? No, hiKharsán--that was it. He told me that my life would be filled with adventure.* Aíjom laughed to himself. *I wish I could have convinced my aunt to save her Hlásh!*

The next day, Aíjom saw strange creatures, somewhat like shell-less, heavy Pé Chói that had melted like candles in the burning heat of the south; Nikána told him they were another race

of non-humans called the Páchi Léi. Even the animals grew weird as they followed the southward flow of the Turín. Strange, pale beasts began to appear on spits in the restaurateurs' clans: huge things like scaleless lizards that were claimed to be salamanders caught under the earth. Aíjom knew of many caves in the Khirgári mountains, all rough, dry holes no more than a few dháiba deep, and the one salamander he had seen in the Dó Chákan jungle would have had to stretch to span the length of his hand. Thus, he believed not a word of their tales, but sampled the beasts and found their meat delicate and tangy, and wonderfully complemented by the sweet yellow tube-fruit called bananas that were widely available here. Fyérik and Nikána knew some of the locals here, and spoke to them with high, happy voices. *They are almost home, while half the Empire lies between me and my clanhouse*, thought Aíjom with a sudden flare of bitter jealousy.

On the 14th of Pardán, as they walked through tall hills shrouded in fog, which the roadside locals had called the Hills of the Harnessed Crane, Aíjom saw a sparse flock of huge, strange birds ahead, and pointed them out to Fyérik. He laughed at him until he threatened to lose his hold on the casket. "Those are no *birds*, Aíjom," he said between gasps, "but kites. Butrús is famous for its kite-flyers." Aíjom goggled at the shapes, some boxy, some with arcing wings broad as those of the vringálu of the mountains; some sat contentedly above the world, while others whirled and dove like küni on the hunt. He had seen kites before, but only tiny childrens' toys, never ones so large and so expertly controlled as these.

A few kirén later, the Hills of the Harnessed Crane parted, to overlook a huge, perfectly square city with monstrously thick walls sitting in a vast plain of harvest-ready crops, with an enormous canal dug parallel to the Turín, as though the Butrusáni had not been content with one river and had made another. The kites soared masterfully above the splendid scene.

"Surely this is as great and lordly a city as Tumíssa!" Jalésa had spoken, but Aíjom nodded agreement; the words might have been his.

Nikána laughed, less cheerfully than Fyérik had at Aíjom's

confusion. "Butrús is indeed a great city, but nowhere near as large as Tumíssa. Our last ditlána planned for half the people of the Empire to live in Butrús, yet most of this work was for naught. See how much of the land within the city walls is only farmland, or even lies fallow! And the Lúshmun Canal that you can see from here was a boondoggle. It was meant to bear food to the masses that never came, it was made too large even for that unneeded work, and it was left unfinished. The book-wise and worldly-foolish priests of the Grey Lord are to blame for these expensive follies, yet they are still accorded honor in the Butrusséne government. They have impoverished the whole province with their plans." Fyérik said nothing, but spat eloquently.

That night, Chhkk clung close to the fire, as he had begun to do a few days ago; his freshly-scaled skin looked as tender as a newborn snake's. Indeed, Aíjom had begun to see the silent Shén as somewhat snakelike; their discussions of their common plights were long gone, and Chhkk now did naught but watch them all with unblinking eyes. *I do not know what he thinks, but I am beginning to think that I should. How do I know what Sikún charged him to do? After all, Sikún is a priest of the Flame; might he not also wish to reclaim the device from the Empire?*

Fyérik and Nikána were ebullient, and even the rest of the group was in good cheer, as Butrús stood at the midpoint of their journey. Aíjom could scarcely imagine that the Empire stretched so much farther, when already it seemed as though he had walked to the end of the world, but he did manage to cheer up as he nursed his beer, a good, sweet brew, and settled in with calmer thoughts than he had dwelled upon in a long while. Two days later, they crossed the Turín and arrived in Butrús, the center of Pán Cháka.

Butrús' inspectors of trade were less busy and considerably less irritable, and Jalésa conducted herself in a more moderate manner, much to Aíjom's delight. They were let through after a quick look at Sikún's papers, and stood within the city, flanked by broad, low clanhouses that were surrounded by beautiful lawns and gardens. It was quite different from densely piled Tumíssa. Jalésa called for their attention.

"My colleagues!" *Odd choice of words, that.* "We have traveled very far, and exceeded the pace required of us as an eager tlékku outstrips its packmates; as well, it is a long road from here to Úrmish. Thus, rather than continue uninterruptedly as though we were driven slaves, I suggest that we pause here in Butrús for four nights. Jagétl and I have correspondents here to meet, and Fyérik and Nikána undoubtedly would enjoy a chance to visit their families. As for you," she said, gesturing vaguely at Aíjom and Chhkk, "I am certain that you would also benefit from a rest. We shall depart at dawn on the 20th from the temple of Chiténg; in case any of you become lost and seek directions, you should know that He is known locally as Chedán. May the Gods smile on our time here." With this admirably nonsectarian benediction, they headed to the temple of Chiténg, deposited the casket in their safekeeping, and scattered like chaff in a wind.

Aíjom decided that he should find Dlárumei's uncle Verússa and see how her uncle Hóru was faring. Decorum demanded it, and if he should find them, he might leave a better impression of the Khirgári branch of the Golden Dawn with his Tumíssan clansmen than he had left with Dlárumei. As Verússa was a merchant, Aíjom decided that his best bet to find him was going to the Palace of the Realm and obtaining his registered address. With much help from bemused Butrusséne (as they called themselves here, mangling the language), he found his way to the Palace of the Realm: smaller than Tumíssa's, but not by much, it was newer, with a magnificent roof-comb, and the feeling of despair that filled the air around Tumíssa's Palaces as stench surrounds a corpse was entirely absent. There were no despondent crowds of detainees, only quickly shuffling delegations of bureaucrats headed this way or that. Aíjom had a good feeling about his chances here.

Indeed, his first contact with an official of the Palace of the Realm was not with a surly guard but with a receptionist, a pleasantly serious young man who instantly identified the department he needed to see. "Go to the seventh suite of the second floor, wherein lies the main office of the Bureau of Revenue. Once within, ask for Jugár hiSayúncha; he will direct

you to the Department of the Marketplaces, wherein lies the Office of Approval. They should have the current address of your clansman, since he is engaged in trade within the city." Aíjom was so amazed by this that he gave the man a gratuity without prompting; incredibly, the receptionist was impressed by the amount. *Would that our Palaces were so well-ordered*, thought Aíjom as he climbed the curious ramps through the labyrinth of the Palace, impressed by the clear correspondence between the placement of suites and the function of their occupants. Jugár was not as pleasant, but he was still a joy compared to the administrators of Aíjom's experience; he directed him further within the Bureau of Revenue, and soon Aíjom stood in the very department he had sought, as if Lord Thúmis Himself had helped him to understand the way. For a nominal fee, he obtained the address of his clansmen Verússa and Hóru, and decided to first call on the former.

Verússa was not in his apartment, but one of his servants was; she said that he had been at the hospital adjacent to the temple of Keténgku, Physician of the Gods, for three days now. "Hóru is very ill," she said indifferently; apparently he had not inspired much loyalty. Aíjom thanked her, gave her a few Qirgáls (he would have given more, but her disregard for his clansman grated) and headed onward.

In a way, the temple complex of Keténgku was more unpleasant a place than the funerary temples of Sárku or Belkhánu; here, the dying still clung to hope, but their soft coughs and muttered, incomprehensible conversations, and the louder moans and screams of the severely afflicted and the subjects of surgeries, could be heard as soon as one was within the limestone-clad entrance hall of the hospital. A weary man in robes of grey and white asked Aíjom who he wished to see, and upon hearing of Hóru of the Golden Dawn from Tumíssa, he sighed.

"His báletl has drifted away from us, to seek the fairer shores of Teretané," the priest said, with an almost theatrical sorrow. "It was but this morning. His brother--I believe his name was Verússa--went to the temple of Belkhánu not three kirén ago. You may still catch him there."

And catch him he did, in the middle of the huge, overwhelmingly yellow great hall of the temple of Belkhánu, Lord of the Excellent Dead. Verússa looked to be a hard man, his face set as if it were one with the walls of Butrús, to turn back importunate bargainers, but he received Aíjom graciously. "It is good to have the comfort of a clansman at such a time," he said haltingly, and Aíjom knew that the two had been close. He learned that the funeral would be tomorrow, and that his arrival was auspicious--as itinerant merchants who often were in Úrmish or Penóm, Verússa and Hóru had made few local friends, and Aíjom's presence meant one less professional mourner to have to hire to present a proper crowd.

The two left the sorrowful temple of the Opener of the Gates of Heaven, and dined at length and in style at a crowded hostel of high status for their clan. Verússa seemed a likeable man to Aíjom: worldly, but still with a sense of humor, and possessed of an endless rain-barrel of news about Butrús, Úrmish and Penóm, which Aíjom wished greatly to drink from. He drank more moderately from his goblet of local wine, which, though he hated to admit it, was better than any Khirgári vintage he had drank.

Verússa gestured through the candles and bouquets at the table's center with a rib-bone that was not quite denuded. "Every time I tell our roustabouts to pack up for a trip to Úrmish, they wail as though we were headed to the Hell of Lord Chiténg! The Butrusséne--don't ask; I've been here for seven years off and on, and have yet to make sense of their mutterings--have a great rivalry with Úrmish. Why, I don't know, but it makes for a decent living for us, as not too many locals care to travel to their enemies' stronghold very often. They do like Úrmishite wares, though, as long as you don't proclaim their origins with criers."

Verússa gulped at his goblet. "I agree with them, though, when it comes to traveling to Penóm! It's a foul morass for tsán and tsán there, and the bugs! they could devour a man whole, or drain his blood as he walked the Sákbe until his dried-out body fell into the swamp!" Despite these dire warnings, he gave Aíjom many tips on how to avoid the worst of the pests, and proclaimed the trip tolerable if one was prepared.

Their meal concluded with a remarkable assortment of pastries and pies, which left Aíjom barely able to rise from the table. Verússa paid for both of them, much to Aíjom's relief, and they returned to his apartment. Aíjom thanked him effusively for his hospitality, and it was heartfelt; it was a great pleasure to not have to be surrounded by followers of the God of Pain, at least for one night.

The next day broke to find Aíjom still abed, feeling better than he had in many weeks. He confirmed that he should arrive at the Temple of Belkhánu by the third kirén after noon, and set out for the Palace of the Priesthoods, determined to collect his back pay. *The Golden Sunburst and Íto may be powerful, but surely they cannot rule over every office of government from here to Penóm!*

Indeed, they did not, and after a few kirén while runners went to the temple of Chiténg to check his claims, Aíjom obtained one hundred Káitars, a writ for one hundred Káitars more, and papers confirming his title to two hundred more upon arriving in Penóm. His skein was now being woven of golden threads; he could pay back Jagétl (the memory of his technique of obtaining funds from the young worm-lover still bothered him) and travel to Penóm in the style of a nobleman if he wished.

Aíjom's cheeriness was set aside as he headed to the quiet temple of Belkhánu, whose túnkuls now rang out the sound of Horu's báletl, and presumably others', leaving the realm of the living. Aíjom easily found Verússa in one of the funerary antechambers of the great hall; he was surrounded with swaying mourners, whose wailings and protestations seemed undecorously exaggerated to Aíjom. He whispered to Verússa, who gestured to his hirelings, and their tempo became more moderate.

A yellow-robed priest with a yellow veil shuffled unsteadily through streams of incense-smoke toward the lustrous altar of amber, gold, brass and butter-yellow tilework before which Hóru lay in state. The priest brought forth with grey-haired hands a flute of bone, upon which he played a short, classical song of mourning; Aíjom, Verússa and the hired mourners sang its well-known accompaniment. The priest put away his flute and began to

speak in soft tones of the glory and power of the Gods and the wonders of the Paradises of Teretané. After but a kirén of this, Aíjom found himself growing unwontedly tired, even struggling to listen to the priest.

"The purpose of our own life is unknown to us, the servants of the Gods; yet upon our deaths, the skeins of our lives are complete, each a wondrous work of the Weaver. May the light of Hnálla show us the meaning of Hóru's skein, the work of his life." They mumbled assent, and the priest bowed slowly toward Hóru's body and walked away. From behind them in a balcony, a choir began to sing the great Lament to the Wheel of Black. Aíjom looked questioningly at Verússa, who nodded. *It seems excessive, but I suppose it adds solemnity to the occasion,* thought Aíjom, still fighting off his unaccountably fierce sleep-demons. He pinched himself sharply, thinking ruefully that Jalésa's vicious God could be of service to him now, but he grew more and more weary.

The unseen singers droned on in their Pán Chákan monotones like mazhán²³ flitting through a grain-field, and the sleep-demons finally overpowered Aíjom, chanting in tune with the epic when one of its stanzas sounded false to him:

"Then did the dawn-pale Face of Hnálla rise from the East
 And bring Light to Dórmoron Plain²⁴.
 And all the demons therein howled,
 And were fain to crawl back below the burnt earth."

And Aíjom saw a woman in the dark, her face drawn from the long burden of her treasures, shod with sandals of stone, running from the east, where her fair home had been overthrown by her mortal enemies. More tired she was than the dead, but she ran lightly as a nraishu startled in a glen, for the home of her brothers lay close to the west, and she might yet outdistance her pursuers. Even as she fled, however, they were strengthened by fellow hunters from the south, who bore torches from their masters

²³ A bumblebee-like insect.

²⁴ The legendary Battlefield of the Gods, where the rebellious Lord Ksárul was defeated and imprisoned by the combined forces of Stability and Change (though Lord Ksárul is a God of Change). There is a region of the same name in Mu'ugalavyá.

high over their warlike faces, and flung them beyond her, kindling a great fire from the north that brought her flight to a halt.

The woman struggled then with her captors, but could not overmaster them; she fell to the plain, and her treasures scattered, tumbling into the bushes and grasses about her. The fire that her pursuers had kindled now burned over the land and threw back its erstwhile bearers. When the fire at last died down, a mass of glistening, glittering vermin swarmed up from the south. They crawled over the fair treasures of the woman, and fattened on her provisions, and filled the burnt-over plain; but they did not venture into the swamps of green-scummed water to the southeast, and the fire still burned in the cold north and its embers smoldered here and there about them.

Then a simple-faced man in a white cloak came from the swamps with simple-faced friends, carrying vessels of clear water strained from their stagnant pools. They marveled over the treasures about the woman, and did hold them up, and say, "Here are wonders that fire cannot destroy." They beat back the *osó* and *shqá* from about the woman's form, yet pierced and painted with white the shells of *aqpú*²⁵, and held them high, saying, "These crept most closely about our treasures; surely they must love them as do we." They put out the smoldering embers where they threatened to once again set fire to the plain, yet bore crackling brands to guide their steps. They crushed the *riyúl*-worms with disgust, yet held up yellow glow-worms in imitation of the sun. For a long time they traveled the length and breadth of the land, bearing hot coals from the plain in the soles of their sandals, and beetles in their cloaks, and they grew fat, and happy at last to bed down with worms.

Then did the woman rise, after a long sleep, and look about in dismay, for her treasures had been taken by the swamp-folk, that even now built their low home in the marshes up into a high tower that they might see the world they thought was theirs. And she looked to the south, and saw her enemies nodding to the simple fools, yet they would not bow to the swamp-folk, and she knew that even now they felt her stirring. Desperate to win through to her brothers, she went to the high place of the swamp-folk, and

²⁵ *Osó*, *shqá* and *aqpú* are different species of beetles.

told them some of the secrets of her treasures. And they were childishly pleased with this knowledge, and neither remembered her from the plain nor knew that the treasures had been hers, and brought her in to their tower that she might further enlighten them. And the woman was glad, for soon she would reclaim her treasures from the swamp-folk and use them to escape.

But the masters of the south heard her every footfall, and did rise up of a sudden and draw out the foundation-stones of the tower, so that it fell into the marsh even while she walked within, and many of her treasures were lost in its fall. And the swamp-folk wailed, and flung ashes over their heads, and scattered throughout the world.

And Aíjom stood in the plain, looking toward the swamp that was now thick with frogs, and saw a crouching figure befouled by mud. He ran to it, though it took a time he could not have foreseen, and held out his hand to help the figure up. Then the cowed head swung up, and Aíjom saw that it was the woman he had seen fall, and rise, and fall again in the tower. And though he had felt sympathy for her plight, her visage, despite the muck, was proud and terrible, and Aíjom felt gut-tearing fear as he tried to see into her eyes. He was not great enough to face her. She opened her mouth, and upon hearing her, he wakened with a jump as though she were a sérudla tensing to strike.

"What insolence is this?" hissed an acolyte of Belkhánu who had moved beside him. "You *sleep* during the singing of the sacred Lament to the Wheel of Black? I fear for your báletl if you pay so little attention to the Gods!" Aíjom muttered the expected apologies, including to the manifestly displeased Verússa, but his mind remained focused on the woman's grave face. *What does the dream portend?* he thought nervously. *She was not Jalésa or Prazhúri or Dlárumei, nor far-distant Tsunúre. Will I meet her--or have I already?*

Chapter IX

Unfortunately, despite his extensive apologies, Verússa looked darkly on him and left, taking with him Aíjom's last hope of leaving a good opinion of the Khirgári branch of the Golden Dawn. Aíjom groaned and tried to figure out what had come over him, but with no success. He headed for the temple of Chiténg, hoping to meet Chhkk and find a quiet place where he could talk with the Shén. *Surely, with Hájit gone, he is as lonely as am I.* He found the temple alive with junior priests who industriously hung orange ragged-edged tapestries, which looked much like the flames of Chiténg's master Lord Vimúhla, from the ceilings of the central hall of the temple. After some searching, he found Jalésa, and asked if she had any news of the others.

"Fyérik and Nikána have not seen me, nor do I expect them to before tomorrow," she said distractedly. "Neither have I seen Jagétl. The Shén is somewhere about, but I am not sure where; I think he may have headed for the Foreigners' Quarter to fraternize with his fellow lizards." Aíjom considered it folly to try to root out Chhkk from amongst his fellow Shén, who were now near the end of their molt and probably all possessed of foul temperaments and little regard for strangers. With nothing else to do, he resolved to talk with Jalésa.

"What ceremony do the priests prepare for?"

"The Litany of Bloodsong, in but two days' time. Its celebration is more properly conducted in Chéne Hó, where I usually attend it, but it is good to be able to celebrate my Lord's might with His fellow worshipers."

As he had been with Jagétl on the night of story-telling weeks ago, Aíjom was struck by her callowness: rather than imperious or belligerent, she looked displeased at being so far from home. He had no interest in staying in Butrús any longer, but knew that he could not persuade her to depart the city, which apparently held Chiténg as its special patron, before His holiday.

He would walk a different path, one aimed at lessening her disregard for him, which could prove dangerous in the future. "It

must be strange for you, to carry a relic of your temple to the end of the Empire."

"I have studied atop Kú-Zhém for much of my life," Jalésa said deliberately, "and I have readied myself to serve the Petal Throne."

"I think that your mentors chose well in sending you on this mission. You have grown more sure; the pains of the journey have strengthened you."

Jalésa smiled, then was lost in thought for a time; finally, she looked back at him. "It is incredible to me, the thought of traveling to the sea! I wonder what it is like?"

"As do I. I have been surprised by much that we have seen."

"Indeed."

Aíjom tried another sally, this time to see if he could draw any knowledge of coming troubles from her. "The trip has at least been without disastrous incident. I do not presume to know that our skeins will be woven so softly in the future."

She nodded. "I share your concern. I have had a feeling of unease for some time now. But I cannot name a reason why," she said more lightly. "The device is safe here. The only foes we are likely to need to concern ourselves with are the Hlüss."

"Indeed." Jalésa was distracted by a coterie of priests struggling to bear an elaborate statue of Chiténg forth from the inner temple. Aíjom saw that he would gain little more from her at the moment and walked out into the Avenue of the Gods, along which Butrús' ornate, if somewhat archaic, temples to the ten Tsolyáni deities were assembled. His anger at being kept from knowledge of the device, his lingering sense of worry and his homesickness together buffeted him until he swayed on his feet.

With nothing else to do, he decided that he would prepare himself for unknown dangers in the only way he could, by bettering his skills in combat. He went back inside the temple of Chiténg and asked some of the younger priests where a traveler might study the use of weaponry; he was directed to the Field of Strenuous Application, a reputable-looking school of the warrior. Although they specialized in the two-handed sword, a young, quiet

teacher named Runmáru, sporting a white turban, was available, for a rate that Aíjom was willing to pay under the circumstances, to train him in the proper use of the shortsword.

At first, Aíjom used the sparring as a bonfire upon which he could throw the scrolls of his unhappy thoughts, but a few vicious blows reminded him of the folly of unfocused emotion in battle, and he soon focused on the matter at hand. Runmáru did not stop grimacing at him, however.

"I hope I do not have to teach too many more would-be swordsmen from the cold North," he said with a woefulness that was only half in jest. "Your swings and ripostes are so slow and checked that were I a tree and you wielding an axe, I might still evade you!"

Aíjom nodded wearily. So Fyérik and Nikána had been mistreating him--perhaps deliberately?--as Chhkk had suspected, and his attempts to compensate had been insufficient without proper guidance. He spent the rest of the day straining to hone his blunted style, and Runmáru seemed to recognize this, muttering invectives at Aíjom's imagined previous instructor.

By sunset, Aíjom was thoroughly exhausted, but felt a little better nonetheless. He decided that he should brave the dens of the rescaling Shén to find Chhkk and see if he had any further news, but two kirén of searching brought him nothing but unnerving snarls of negative reply. He returned to the temple of Chiténg, which was now heavily decorated for the coming festival, and spent a troubled night.

The next morning, he returned to the Foreigners' Quarter, and was again unable to find Chhkk. Now quite angry, he returned to the Field of Strenuous Application, only to find that Runmáru would be busy until the afternoon. As the other instructors did not teach his weapon with any frequency, and since Runmáru was already acquainted with his embarrassing deficiencies, Aíjom decided to reserve the afternoon with Runmáru and return to the temple of the God of Pain for another attempt to learn something from Jalésa.

As he approached the temple of Chiténg, however, he looked up at the enormous, adjacent temple of His Master Vimúhla

and started; through a high window on the back side of its central pyramid, he would vow that he had caught a glimpse of Fyérik. After a moment's consideration, he entered the campus of devotion to the Lord of Fire. Despite its size, he thought that he might see the two soldiers, whom he distrusted more now.

He wandered, as in a fever-dream, through a maze of forbidding shrines, devotional chambers filled with the voices of the faithful calling for the annihilation of the world in their Lord's fire. He slipped quietly past public halls ablaze with torches, arm-thick candles and hulking braziers and thick with beseeching laity, some of whom held their flesh in the flames and cried out in a hideous exaltation at their ruin. Finally, in a quiet side corridor, he spied the two soldiers in hushed conversation with a red-robed priest of the Flame. He ducked into a side door and waited there until they had left. He had not caught a word of their discussion, but it had not felt much like religious talk. With grave concern, he went out of the temple of Vimúhla.

Something was wrong. Chhkk's absence and prolonged silence were suspicious; he found that he did not trust the Shén as he had before. Fyérik and Nikána had not seemed to be dealing well, but he did not dare speak of this to Jalésa. The three were all worshipers of Chiténg and had been together at Kú-Zhém before Aíjom arrived. Indeed, it was possible that they conspired to secretly return the device to the coffers of their temple, leaving the others to face the wrath of the Petal Throne. Nor did he think that trying to learn about Fyérik and Nikána from their fellow legionaries of the Givers of Sorrow, headquartered here in Butrús, would go well for him; one did not seek advice on how to evade a bauble-thieving kurukú-beast from its fellows. Incredibly, his best hope was probably to confer with Jagétl. Aíjom could not determine how his skein had become so twisted that he again turned to a priest of the Worm Lord for succor, but nonetheless he headed over to the strangely pleasant-looking temple of Sárku to find him.

Jagétl sat in the cool breeze atop the temple pyramid, surrounded by dark pillars and fellow aspirants to Sárku's grace. As Aíjom approached him, he saw with surprise that tears coursed

down Jagétl's round face as he muttered quickly--whether to himself or to his God Aíjom did not know. He stood near Jagétl for a time, until he paused in his prayers and looked up at Aíjom.

"I... am sorry..." Embarrassment was graven as clear on Jagétl's face as were the glyphs on the pillar beside him. "Do you bring word of a change in our plans?"

Aíjom felt pity for the young man. "In a sense. But first, I wish to apologize for my ungentlemanly treatment of you on the way here."

Jagétl's mouth twitched. "It is hard, to watch Change, without wanting to make it... But you would not know of this. Your God calls for action; mine disavows the path of error."

Aíjom was not certain that this was the creed of every worshiper of the Worm Lord, or even that this was the philosophy of Prazhúri sitting by her garden of stones back in Páya Gupá, but did not feel like debating Jagétl's faith with him. "I can now repay the debt I owe you," he said peremptorily, and gave him twenty-four golden Káitars. "I thank you for your generosity in the time of my need. I have another need now: not for money, but for council." He proceeded to tell Jagétl of his encounter with Fyérik and Nikána, while the two looked out over the splendid temples of the Gods and the city beyond them, its blocks arrayed in rows and columns as though the Butrusséne had made the very earth march in ordered battalions. He did not see fit to mention his concerns about the others.

"I do not think it is unusual for followers of Lord Vimúhla's Cohort to pay their respects in His temple," Jagétl said, abruptly resuming his mask of authority. "I can think of no useful advice to give regarding them, in any case. If I were you, I would find out where the Shén has gone. I trust him less than you trust the legionaries."

Aíjom nodded and left. He might have mollified Jagétl, but that was the best that he had done. With his frustration as acute as it had been at any time during the last week, he returned to the Field of Strenuous Application and Runmáru's terse company, where he spent the remainder of the day, swinging, thrusting, dodging and jumping until he could scarcely lift his arms.

Runmáru approved of his effort, and even remarked not unfavorably on his skills: "It may be that you are not irretrievably ruined," he said, slightly tired himself. After his last lesson, the two sat silently at the Field's edge for a while, drinking mugs of cool water brought by servant-boys from deep wells beside the Field's main building and watching the setting sun: trailed by a long, high arc of golden cloud, it looked like a torch tossed by a fire-juggler at a festival, and it clad the world in sheets of burning copper.

Runmáru, like many in the city, was a follower of Chiténg, and looked forward to the morrow's celebration of the Litany of Bloodsong; upon hearing that Aíjom followed Lord Karakán, he chuckled. "That would explain your clumsy swordplay," he said with a smirk. Aíjom was quick to defend the martial prowess of his temple, if not of his person, and Runmáru was not an ideologue or contentious and let the matter pass.

Reflecting that this was the first argument he had cleanly won that he could remember, Aíjom slowly, painfully walked back to the temple of Chiténg, which was surrounded by anxious young folk unable to bear waiting for their roles the next day, and alive with activity within. Aíjom felt as unwelcome in the midst of the preparations as an epéng-snake at a banquet. As before, only Jalésa was there, and she was deaf to him amidst the excitement of the coming Litany, which was just as well in Aíjom's current condition. He ate--his jaw was the only part of him that did not ache--managed to find an unoccupied servant to give him a badly needed rubdown, then nearly crawled to his cot. His dreams were jumbled fragments: bowls of fire, gardens of stones, and elegant, tiered courtyards alive with streams and fountains of blood.

The next morning, Aíjom was awakened, not by the dawn, but by the roar of the crowd that clustered around the temple of Chiténg. Unfortunately, in the commotion, he could not obtain a breakfast. He left the already-crowded temple, ate in the market plaza, and went to the temple of Karakán. There, he joined with a small, somewhat defensive crowd in singing the praises of the High General of the Gods, though it seemed that every other resident of

Butrús sang outside of the glories of Chiténg today. After this chorus, he approached a priest of Karakán, struck, as he never had been before, by how like the red of Vimúhla was the priest's robe.

"I seek guidance from those who know the will of the lightning, O hallowed one," Aíjom said awkwardly. He had never been a passionate follower of Lord Karakán's faith, except as it suited his own propensities.

"I stand ready to assist you, seeker," said the unremarkable priest, who might have been a warrior of past renown or a bureaucrat of many years; Aíjom could not tell.

"I have traveled from Khirgár, bastion of the north, at the behest of the Petal Throne, surrounded by followers of the Tlokiriqáluyal," Aíjom said, uncertain of how much he would tell. "I am not yet halfway done with my task. Yet it is in danger of failure, though I cannot point out the flaw that threatens to unravel my skein. How do I decide between paths whose ends I do not know? How do I select those who I will trust, when doubt fills my mind like smoke?"

The priest thought for a moment, then gave Aíjom a practiced smile. "Look to the sky, and to your pedhétl, and they will tell you. Do not listen to the soft words of pedants; they will only ensnare you. Stand apart from others, breathe in the good air Lord Hnálla gives us, and listen to the many voices of your bákte. It tells us much if we but listen."

Aíjom had hoped for at least the spoor of more specific advice, but this would not happen unless he told of the specifics of his situation, which seemed unwise at best. However, several of his dreams of late had seemed portentous, and he could talk of them without worry of revealing the secrets of his mission. "Thank you, sagacious one. I have another question: are you experienced in the interpretation of dreams?"

"The visions of the chusétl are often merely fancies," the priest said, with but a grain of condescension. "But dreams can carry messages from the Gods. Tell me of the visions that concern you."

Aíjom first told of his dream of the last night, which caused the priest to grimace slightly, but which he attributed to the time

Aíjom had spent among the unwholesome followers of the gods of Change. Aíjom then told of his dream in the temple of Belkhánu, even admitting to the humiliation of his having fallen asleep during the funeral of a clansman. Though this dream was less unpleasant in its details, for some reason it affected the priest far more profoundly: his facade of calm guidance crumbled away, leaving a look of frank horror.

"Wait here, sir, while I confer with my colleagues regarding this... dream," said the priest, and scuttled away like a scared water-bug, as though Aíjom was a murderous, tentacled chólókh loose in the temple. He strove to make sense of this when he heard a bit of conversation from near the entrance.

"...the temple's in an uproar--apparently someone's stolen a relic brought from the north, and the priests have called for the Givers of Sorrow to cordon off the grounds."

Aíjom could, indeed, hear the sounds of unrest outside. With fear crushing his chest, he leapt up and, disregarding all decorum, ran to the speaker, an older man whose wife held his arm.

"Is it the temple of Chiténg of which you speak?"

Upon his nod, Aíjom ran frantically across the Avenue of the Gods, passing scores of curious onlookers, including a trio of Shén and groups of Páchi Léi, and nearly tackling the legionaries who held the celebrants of the Litany close to the temple of their God.

"What business have you in here?" This came from a Tirrikámu of the Givers of Sorrow with a scarified and brutal face, who looked excessively eager to spill blood on his Lord's holiday. "The temple's been robbed, and no one may leave or enter its grounds by order of the priesthood."

"I was in a group that brought a relic to this temple from the north," Aíjom said, hating to tell of his task but seeing no other path inside. "I think that it was what was stolen."

"When a priest comes by, you can ask him for permission to enter," the Tirrikámu said, none too patiently, as his attention was needed to restrain the surging crowds on either side of him. The ornately costumed, beweaponed young people whose violent

'dance' had been interrupted by the commotion looked especially ready for bloodshed.

Aíjom stepped away before he aggravated the man any further. *Who could he trust?* The priest of Karakán had been of little help there, but at least he had given advice. Despite the noise of the crowds, Aíjom took a deep breath, stood apart, and thought about what he knew.

I trust no one completely, but who has done this? I cannot imagine Jagétl stooping to such bússan behavior, even if it would obtain a prized trinket of the Lost Ancients for the coffers of his temple. Nor do I see him allied with any others to such an end.

Chhkk has been silent and watchful for a long time now, but he saved my life, and though he is not human, I think that he is as lán as any of us.

The soldiers may well have helped with this. But how? How could anyone have removed the casket from the temple in the midst of these crowds? Perhaps the device has been hidden away inside the temple by the local priests of Chiténg, who decided that they would countermand the profligacy of their northern brethren. All well and good, except that our lives will be forfeit as penalty for the loss to the Empire.

Aíjom sighed, barely aware of the rising noise and dust around him. *All depends on Jalésa. If the priests here took the casket, she would know of it if any of us did. If she made a pact with them, or with Fyérik and Nikána, I shall try to read it from her face, playing fortune-teller for the day.*

A yóm later, Jalésa hove into sight, expertly moving through the surly crowd in a manner suggestive of long martial training. Perhaps she was not the coddled scholar he had taken her for. She spoke shortly with the Tirrikámu, who gestured at him, loudly admonished the laity of her temple who pressed to leave, then walked through the line of the Givers of Sorrow to Aíjom.

"What happened?"

"A ritual priest of the Third Circle went back to the storeroom a kirén ago and reported the loss," said Jalésa, as anger and fear wrestled to master her. Aíjom believed then that she had not had a hand in the disappearance of the device. "None saw the

thieves, nor did any leave the temple with the casket."

"Are you sure of that?" Aíjom asked fiercely, determined to know the truth. "Many people have passed through, and many have carried carcasses and other large offerings to your God. Could none have slipped away through their ranks?"

"I cannot imagine that happening," she said, fear seeming to win out.

"Have you seen anyone else of our group?"

"Not for two days." Jalésa smote the air in frustration. "The priests here are in an uproar, and rue the day that the relic came into their temple. All now speak of ill omens they have seen or heard: the sourceless quenching of flames, the subterranean mutters of earth-demons--"

"Earth-demons?" interrupted Aíjom, an idea falling on him like a diving vringálu. "When did the priests hear them?"

"Last night; but the relic was undisturbed then. What do you make of this?"

Aíjom took a deep breath; perhaps the priest of Karakán had not spoken empty platitudes after all. "If you have any trust in me, then fly to the temple of Vimúhla, with any elders of your temple you can muster, and demand to see the priest of the Flame Lord that spoke to Fyérik and Nikána yesterday."

"Why did you not tell me of their conference before?" yelled Jalésa, and Aíjom was grateful that he was a dháiba out of her reach.

"Because I was not sure with whom your loyalty lay," Aíjom said. "I believe that Fyérik and Nikána entered the temple from below, through the tsuru'úm²⁶, and carried the device back down. I am not sure of where they took it. You must see if anyone in the temple of Vimúhla guided them or induced them to take the device. It may well be there now."

Jalésa was horrified. "You expect me to accuse the curates of the church of Lord Vimúhla of *theft*?"

"No, but I know that the soldiers spoke to one of them, and they may have knowledge of the two that can help us now."

²⁶ The "underworlds" beneath most cities of the Five Empires, largely created by the custom of ditlána (q.v.).

"Where are you going?"

"To the only other place the device might be."

She looked at him as if he was insane, which was more plausible than he cared to admit. "You will need help to overpower the thieves if you find them!"

"You are the only priest of Chiténg here whom I trust to speak with the priests of Vimúhla. Any of the others might have collaborated in the theft. And if I am right, a large war-party would only hamper me on my path."

Aíjom guessed that Jalésa would kill him if did not speak plainly. "Where does your path lead?"

Aíjom cleared his throat. "West through the jungles of Pán Cháka, to the First Temple of Vimúhla."

Chapter X

Aíjom ran as swiftly as he ever had, through tsán after tsán of impossibly lush jungle beside which the forests of Dó Cháka were as bare and open as the Khirgári plain. He held his short sword loose and ready, but rarely wasted the energy to cut vines from his path, preferring to dodge them, just as he evaded the stumps of ancient, moss-covered foundations and fallen stelae to forgotten kings. He was especially careful to avoid the telltale depressions that the locals said showed the mouths of sinkholes, beneath which lay caverns as wide as cities and deeper than a line could plumb. There were many tracks of animals here, but he scarcely paid them any heed in his haste and concentration on his quarry.

As he had expected, the farmers and woodsmen of the border villages had a broad consensus regarding the direction of the legendary First Temple and which forest trails had borne visitors from Butrús to its fabled gates. Their opinion of any who sought to go there was even more certain, but Aíjom did not have time for their derision. As he had suspected, they had seen strangers bearing a heavy burden into the forest in that direction that morning; this was not at all unusual, as traders often went back

into the forest to bring goods to the remotest villages, but Aíjom was convinced that they had seen Fyérik, Nikána, and their accomplices. Their trail was hard to follow amidst the trample of forest peasants' feet, and the task grew more difficult as the sun set; but he had tracked wily predators for years on harder ground than this, and these predators were burdened with their prize.

The marks that had drawn him to his conclusion were small and scattered, but they made a visible spoor. The soldiers had spoken to a priest of Vimúhla, and they had been nowhere to be seen, despite their charge to guard the weapon. They must have been involved.

These fragments of rumor were not what had drawn him out here, to charge through the deep, steeply hilled Pán Chákan jungle. He had been more persuaded, strangely, by flashes of imagery--Fyérik and Nikána's briefly avaricious looks on that night on the Sákke north of Tumíssa when the woodsman had told a tale of the First Temple of Vimúhla, and the treasures of the strange woman from his dream in the temple of Belkhánu, that flashed as they rolled into the brush.

There was a lunatic sense to the theory. The priests of the cities were conservative in their actions, and well aware of the power of the Empire, but the fanatical holy men and women of isolated temples and monasteries had no such reservations. The priests of burning Vimúhla would not care about the political considerations Chhkk had mentioned to him as they walked through the lush fields about Chéne Hó; ingratiating the Red Sword clan to the current Emperor would be as chaff to them beside the folly of giving up one of the treasures of their faith. They very well might have decided to revoke the rash decision of the clergy of Vimúhla's Consort, and reclaim the weapon for the Flame Lord. Or Fyérik and Nikána might have decided that the priests of the First Temple would richly reward two soldiers with the courage to do such a deed of their own initiatives.

There was a final seasoning to the stew. Jalésa and Jagétl were initiates who held little power in their realm of priestly matters, but Aíjom had no voice there. Here, in the wilderness, he commanded all the powers of the hunter. He had spoken rightly to

Jalésa--he should not have brought any others with him. His fragments of proof would have convinced no one; and besides, there were no others whom he could trust, in a city devoted to brutal Chiténg. *Who would have accompanied me? Legionaries of the Givers of Sorrow, shieldmates of Fyérik and Nikána? Warrior-priests of Chiténg, who were as likely as not to be sympathetic to the demands of the wild-eyed priests of the Flame Lord? Jalésa, who might still obtain valuable information from the temple of Vimúhla in Butrús, and, despite her martial training, was no hunter? No, this is a path for my feet alone.* Despite the folly of his plan, he felt light-hearted as he dashed under the fallen pillars of once-lordly trees, their corpses lovingly decorated with shrouds of moss and creeping vines. Their spoor was still clear in the deep layers of humus. He knew how the weight of the casket would hamper them in spite of their haste. He knew that he would face them soon.

The sun had set so far that the frequent valleys were growing difficult to traverse, and Aíjom had had more than enough time to wonder if he was stalking only traders porting cookpots and dishes to the hinterlands, when he heard a voice. As carefully as he could, he came to the edge of a narrow, stream-cut ravine, its sides littered with sharp-edged chunks of rock, and peered down. His hope and fear were both well-fed: Fyérik and Nikána walked below, together with three rough men, probably natives with a sure knowledge of the forest. None bore the colors of the Flame, being cloaked in nondescript peasant's clothes of tree-bark cloth. Aíjom slowly lifted his shortspear to his side, determined to slay Fyérik, or at least wound him badly enough to take him out of the fight. He was confident that with surprise, the advantage of height, and handy stones for use as missiles, he could kill or maim two of them, enough to slow them greatly, then take his time stalking the rest.

"Put down your spear, Tsolyáni," a soft voice said, perhaps six dháiba behind him. Aíjom set down his shortspear, but did not let go of it, and turned to face his captor, whom he could not see until he emerged from cover. The man was small, scruffy, lightly clad in a dirty tree-bark poncho, and armed only with a thick-

bladed dagger of flint at his side and a flimsy-looking bow that was currently pointed at Aíjom; despite his slightness, he looked capable of battling a Sró-beast. "Where are your companions?" His captor gestured meaningfully with his bow.

"Behind you," said Aíjom, feigning confidence as he had learned while bargaining in the grain-market of Khirgár amongst richer clans. His captor looked carefully from side to side, paused for a fragment of a sível, then laughed cruelly. "I am insulted that you believe me to be so stupid," he said easily; before Aíjom could throw his shortspear, he loosed his bow, skewering Aíjom through his left foot and forcing him to cry out. There was a commotion below in response to the noise as the man leapt atop Aíjom with his knife at his throat, as a butcher straddles a difficult hmá who objects to its demise. "You will find that we of the jungle are just as displeased by insult as your haughty lords. Indeed, we are more direct with our objections," the man said musingly, as his wickedly sharp dagger scored the skin of Aíjom's throat.

The man brought Aíjom down into the ravine, where Fyérik and Nikána waited with tlékku's toothy grins. "I had thought better of you, Aíjom, after the recommendation you came with from Chéne Hó," said Fyérik merrily as he crouched beside the casket they had carried so far together. "We did underestimate your lizard friend, though; he played the part of the dunce very well. He gathered a troop of his fellow Shén and tried to head us off in the catacombs! Unfortunately, that left us a bit short-handed, but we took care of him. I'm sure the sewer-rats will have a good winter, with all the carrion we left them."

Aíjom considered the manner of Fyérik's speech, and hope came to him on broad wings. "You do not know if your allies killed him while you fled." Aíjom had the satisfaction of seeing his guess confirmed by Fyérik's rage before he smashed Aíjom to the ground, cracking his jaw.

"We misjudged the Shén," Nikána said a low timbre, "and we misjudged you as well: we thought you were a cunning hunter, when it seems you thought we were meek nráishu to kill for your clan's stewpot!"

"Didn't know... who you'd bought..." Aíjom could scarcely

speak.

"Indeed. The Imperium planned poorly, sending the relic it commandeered from those weak-willed northern priests with such poor guards. The masters of the First Temple will reward us when we bring back this treasure of the Ancients that is the rightful property of the Flame Lord."

Aíjom struggled to breathe in spite of the pain, but his ears could still pick out her uncertainty as it stalked through the lush wheat-fields of her hopeful words. "You don't know... they will be pleased... do you?" This brought a kick, fortunately to his ribs this time. Apparently they didn't want him unconscious yet. Perhaps they intended to bring him to the terrible jungle shrine of Vimúhla for sacrifice.

"They will gladly receive our offering," she said, and Aíjom saw in her eyes that same awful flickering that he had seen in the eyes of the strange boy atop Kú-Zhém. Aíjom struggled with his pain, trying to recall the words of the secluded hilltop monks of Chiténg, for whom Pain was their God. *I have seen the Flame, and how it rewards its benefactors. And I shall feed it now, with the lightning of my Lord Karakán.* He tensed, readying himself to spring at Nikána. He would not be brought alive to the sacrificial altars of the Flame.

The ravine was suddenly filled with a chorusing snarl, loud as the bellow of a sérudla, and all around him there was chaos. He rolled back and grabbed his shortsword, then righted himself and faced off against Nikána. The ravine echoed with the clacking of their swords, until the howls of beasts overpowered them. Aíjom fought masterfully--for does not every man bargain hard as stone when his life is for sale?--but Nikána wielded her ornate sword like a Demon of her awful God. He charged her like a zrné and slashed with his remaining strength, cutting her left arm; she snarled, and with a massive thrust, she knocked his sword aside and swept her blade through his gut.

Aíjom fell to the earth with a splatter. He could not see very far now, but he had landed so that he was looking towards the battle. The jungle hunters were being torn apart by brown shapes that growled like battle-mad tlékkú, while Fyérik fell battling a

massive Shén. Nikána charged the figure, but the snarling, furred things pulled her down and smothered her dying shrieks as they clawed and bit. He could see now that they were rényu. The Shén ran to him, very quietly, as did one of the rényu.

"You are wounded, Aíjom," Chhkk said, and Aíjom nodded. This was much like his dream of battle and horror. Perhaps he but slept, and these things would vanish with the dawn.

"We will do what we can for him," the dog-man said, and Aíjom knew he was dreaming. "Too, we will help you bring the artifact back to Butrús. And then my debt to you is repaid, and I will remain with my pack, and soil my feet on the roads of men no more."

"Your debt was repaid long ago, Hájit," Chhkk said, his voice coming slowly now. "I am in yours now." He looked down at Aíjom. "I suspected how they would take the device, and tried to stop them, but I did not guess where they would carry it. If I had not heard of your destination from Jalésa, I would not have given chase, or called Hájit's pack from where it waited in the jungle ready to aid me. Fyérik and Nikána would have carried you to your doom."

Aíjom's head lolled, and he looked at a stone whose surface was ornamented with rippling lichen. *Look how richly it is ornamented, by the slow growth of year after year! It has the lordliness of a quiet mountain in the evening.* And he sank into silence.

Aíjom awoke in a pain he had never experienced before. He saw that he lay on a bier, or palanquin, shaded by a veil of red and carried by torch-bearing figures of shining black and red with helms that seemed to be afire. He lifted his head and looked ahead, and saw that a great lizard-man in military gear preceded him, turning its head this way and that. His pain, annoyed by his distraction, tore at him like a zrné enraged, and he fell back moaning.

Again and again he awoke, but although the pain was different every time, it was always working within him, and always the bearers and their reptilian leader bore him, to where he did not

know. Heat lay over him like a tomb-shroud. Faces appeared before him, muttering soft, strange words, but he could not understand them. He cried, screamed, vomited bloody froth--but none of these would placate the demons that rent his flesh. Finally, in a flash of insight, he saw what had happened.

I died failing in the service of the priesthood of Chiténg, and thus the god's demons and Lord Chiténg Himself bear me to His hell.

Although Aíjom thought briefly that vomiting seemed to be a thing of the bákte, not the báletl, still he was convinced that this sad fate had befallen him. He beseeched Lord Karakán, his voice a slurred whisper, to rescue His faithful servant, to bring surcease to his suffering and let him voyage to the Paradises of Teretané in peace. He made many prayers, and suffered many tortured awakenings, and lapses into sleep, but still no answer came. Finally, croaking in despair, Aíjom turned his prayers to his captor, fell Chiténg, who walked aloof and terrible before him. *Release me, dread Lord! I did not mean to fail You, nor am I schooled in Your ways! Have mercy!* But perhaps more predictably still, Chiténg did not turn and answer him; instead, his agony reached a new pitch, thrumming like a loose Tenturen string. Aíjom bawled like a babe, then again drifted into the grey.

He awoke--for how many cycles had this torture continued?--and saw a city ahead, shrouded in fogs and smokes, with red-lit walls. One of his demon bearers thrust its monstrous head through the veil of his bier and spoke to him, its voice deep and slow. "Do you know where you are?"

"Surely this is the capital of Lord Chiténg's Hell," Aíjom said, his face ashen, his strength crushed from him by pain as wine is pressed from grapes.

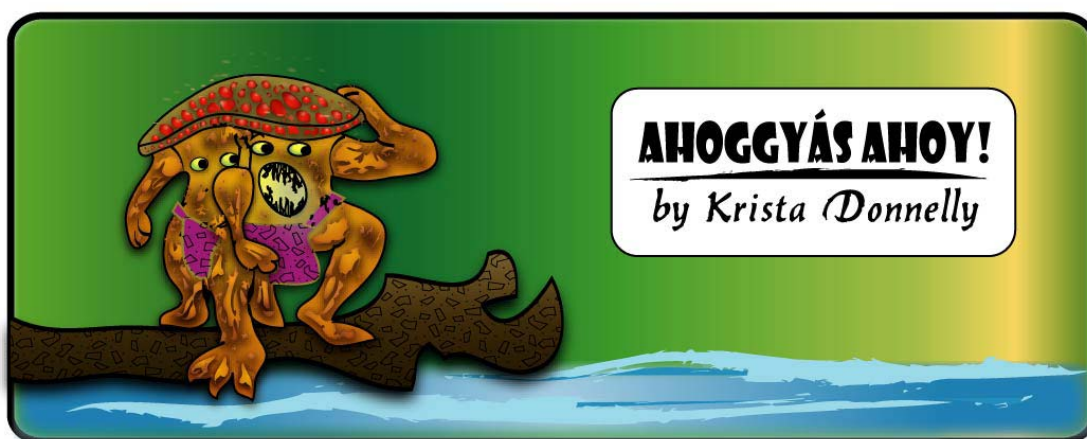
The demon pitched back its head and laughed, and Aíjom noted that its throat was human beneath its gleaming shell. "No, though a better description of the city has never been given. This is Úrmish, a foul and disreputable place, but its denizens do not yet inhabit Chiténg's fires of torment, however deserving they are."

Chiténg came back and stood beside the demon. "It is good to see you awake and aware, Aíjom," He said, in tones that were

deep as a chlén's yet familiar to him, bestial yet improbably cultured. "It has been many weeks."

Aíjom fell back, and though it worsened his pain, he laughed until he cried. He was not dead! And in his delirium on the long road from Butrús to Úrmish, he had prayed repeatedly to Chhkk to release him from torment!

Chhkk and the soldier let the veil fall, and Aíjom laughed until he fell back into sleep, as they passed into thick-walled Úrmish. He was insensate when the soldiers bore him from his red-veiled palanquin, within a low, long building of many wings, and departed in silence. The sun set, and the flowers of shadow bloomed across the land from their deep roots in valleys and foundation-stones; and if any who lived, or who once had lived, knew what Change would bring, they kept their counsel to themselves.



Author's Introduction

This scenario is set somewhat before the events in A Death of Kings. Thus, the mad king Griggatsétsa is still on the throne, and Prince Zhurrlúgga is the power behind the throne. All depictions of Salarvyáni politics are completely non-canonical, inspired by the off-hand comment from the book that, “the Ahoggyá who dwell in the Sharúna Lowlands rise and massacre every human they can find.” Normally, Ahoggyá are depicted as loyal, if short-term, members of the various legions from the Five Empires. This scenario is a riff on what might have set them off.

Most of the Ahoggyá information is taken straight from the Swords and Glory Source Book, Volume 1 and from Blue Room posts. This includes the Eye of Absolute Depilation, the descriptions of Ahoggyá poetry and standard Ahoggyá behavior toward human visitors. The poetry slam, its connection to the ritual dances, and specifically identifying the dances as mating rituals are my additions.

Referee's Introduction

The scenario is for 2-7 players. It's divided into a series of sections. The first is the shipwreck itself, next is swamp travel and survival, and the last section deals with meeting the Salarvyáni soldiers and encountering the Ahoggyá village and its inhabitants.

A brief synopsis of events is as follows: The players are merchants, plus an Imperial envoy and his OAL bodyguard, who are on a ship bound for Tsatsayágga. (The character sheets detail their motivations for being on this trip.) The ship will never reach Tsatsayágga since it is attacked by an akhó at the start of the scenario. The players will have to flee the ship as it sinks and venture into the swamps of the Sharúna Lowlands. Unbeknownst to them, the Ahoggyá are being riled up by an unwise offer from the powerful Hrúchcháqsha Family. Meanwhile, the Khekhkhéssa Clan got wind of these goings-on, and secretly sent in some soldiers to snatch the Hrúchcháqsha agent. [See **The Background** and **The Sniping**]

In the swamp, the players will encounter the Khekhkhéssa soldiers and come out of the encounter as captives, partners or reluctant collaborators in their schemes against the Hrúchcháqsha agent who's holed up in the Ahoggyá village. The Ahoggyá themselves have some exciting events of their own to attend to before they're interested in dealing with all these

annoying humans in their midst. The last scenes of the scenarios will probably be in the Ahoggyá village or just afterwards, as the players make their way out of the swamp.

The Background

Most of the characters have at least a tangential connection to the gathering political storm in eastern Salarvyá, though no one knows enough to piece together what's going on. Western Salarvyá is divided politically between two of that country's seven great feudal families: the Khekhkhéssa Clan, based in Héru, and the Hrúchcháqsha Family, hailing from Chame'él. The Khekhkhéssa Clan is one of the smaller of the Great Families. They have only 3 legions: the Nchesh of Lord Dreshú'uga Khekhkhéssa, underfunded and mainly used to protect Héru and the approaches to Tamkáde Bay; the Nchesh of Lord Zrelléshqya Khekhkhéssa, famed for its hlutrgú-hunting ability and frequently on patrol on the Tsolyáni border in the Gilráya Forest; and their small Ahoggyá force, the Nchesh of the Two-Pronged Spear, which is patrolling the dangerous northern frontiers of Salarvyá. Dreshú'uga's parsimonious side shows through in his dealings with Zhúrak, the ship captain and merchant. When his underlings first chanced upon this unexpected source of vrélq, he saw the chance to free himself from trading with the Hrúchcháqsha Family for the essential black dye derived from the vrélq which is preferred for most Salarvyáni clothing and armor. By buying every shipment and carefully cultivating the crustaceans, he's building up colonies that he can exploit for himself. Eventually, he hopes to enter the larger market and break the Hrúchcháqsha Family's monopoly. As far as Dreshú'uga and his son and heir Vindumákh know, no one is aware of their vrélq plans.

The Hrúchcháqsha Family is headed by Vrummíshsha Deddlaqa'â. Vrummíshsha is ably supported by his son Hu'úgga. It's a sign of the ambition and ruthlessness of the Deddlaqa'â lineage that they have taken over control of the Family from the more senior Hrúchcháqsha lineage. Vrummíshsha aspires to complete domination of western Salarvyá. But, though stronger than the Khekhkhéssa Clan, his four legions are not enough to launch an attack. His somewhat theoretical interest in expansion was renewed as he watched vrélq black-dye sales to the Khekhkhéssa start a slow but steadily increasing decline. Turning ideas over furiously, he got to thinking about his Ahoggyá legion, the Nchesh of the Circle of Light. They were all mercenaries from the Flats of Gyógma, across the Straits. Yet they served as long (only several years) and as loyally (very) as the local Ahoggyá recruited by the other Great Families. His eye turned to the Sharúna Lowlands, located within his territories. A virtually autonomous Ahoggyá province, the nonhumans there had little interaction with the outside due to the inaccessibility of their swamp homeland. If he could reach them, he could recruit whole legions which could easily overwhelm the Khekhkhéssa forces. But how to pay so many? Ahoggyá wanted very little, but they did love the taste of human flesh which they got it so rarely. And battles were always so bloody. The solution was obvious. Send out a highly trusted subordinate to secure the loyalty of the wild Ahoggyá of the Sharúna Lowlands with a little gold and lots of promises of the flesh of those they defeated in battle. This is how Hu'úgga came to spend much of the last six months in the swamp.

Prince Zhuririlúgga, of the ruling Chruggilléshmu Family of Tsatsayágga, has heard rumors of this conflict, and is astute enough to recognize that civil war is on the verge of breaking out in his country. In the hopes of preserving Salarvyáni unity by drawing the Tsolyáni in as aggressors, he's sent for an envoy from Tsolyánu (Achán). Once Achán arrives, he will spread rumors among all the families that the Tsolyáni Emperor has presented demands on Salarvyáni territory and will use this threat to call a levy of troops from each of the families. In theory, this will disrupt plans for an internal war.

The Sniping

An invasion is a fine idea, but it doesn't solve the immediate trade crisis. Vrummishsha decided on a two-pronged attack on Dreshú'uga. In the event that the source of his vrélq was external, he began paying Háida Pakálani pirates to risk attacking traffic in Támkade Bay itself. Zhurák's ship, while not targeted specifically, did fall victim to this tactic. This line of attack was followed up by obtaining a supply of fake inspection certificates (some came from Bálesh), and sending "inspectors" out to search incoming ships for vrélq (whose actions shook Mottán's confidence).

But Vrummishsha also entertained the idea that Dreshú'uga had come up with something that didn't involve an external supply, however unlikely that was. And so, through intermediaries, two years ago he hired an assassin to kill Dreshú'uga. The assassin attacked at a party, throwing Pa'íya's Kiss (a glass object filled with the juice of the Food of the Ssú) but only succeeded in burning Dreshú'uga and alarming several by-standers (including Achán). The assassin subsequently used a letter (created by Bálesh) to join the Nchesh of Lord Zrelléshqya to investigate the Tsolyáni border.

Lord Dreshú'uga may be a cheapskate, but he's not an idiot. After the attack at the party, he began investigating his enemies to find out the culprit. Being the head of a Salarvyáni family, this required an intensive investment of time. In the end, too many signs pointed to the Hrúchcháqsha Family to ignore them. One persistent rumor had the heir Hu'úgga off in the godsforsaken wilderness of the Sharúna Lowlands. On the chance that this was true, he directed one of his best units from the Nchesh of Lord Zrelléshqya to infiltrate Hrúchcháqsha territory, find Hu'úgga and smuggle him out. One way or another, Dreshú'uga would have his revenge.

It's unfortunate for Dreshú'uga that Vrummishsha's assassin happened to be in the unit sent to hunt Hu'úgga down.

Events in the Sharúna Lowlands

Hu'úgga Deddlaqa'â has spent the last six months traveling through the swamp, visiting Ahoggyá villages and signing them up to join the Hrúchcháqsha legions. In each village, he's offering an immediate payment of 5 sacks of the gold Nzúggesh coins (each sack contains 1,000 coins, the equivalent of 5,000 Káitars) and explaining about the payment in flesh after the battles. The Ahoggyá are illiterate but conform to human standards enough to place their mark on the treaty that Hu'úgga is carrying in a scroll-case at his side. They are also passing along primitive messages with Hu'úgga that he doesn't understand. These messages are in the form of small leather bags filled with common objects (leaves, sticks, pebbles, bits of bone or rotting meat) which can be "read" by an Ahoggyá recipient. Hu'úgga is carrying dozens of such messages from the local "Beloved of Eight Sexes" which he shows at every opportunity to prove that others have agreed to the treaty. What he doesn't understand is that the simplicity of the message that these bags can convey has greatly distorted his message. The Ahoggyá understand that they will be able to kill and eat all the humans that they desire for the duration of their service. In their excitement over this unprecedented offer, they've also passed along the news to the Ahoggyá who live across the Straits in the Flats of Gyógma. From there, the misconception has been filtering back to Ónmu Tlé Hléktis, the Ahoggyá nation to the far east. In another six months or so, a flotilla from Ónmu Tlé Hléktis will arrive to join in on the fun.

Yesterday, however, events took an unfortunate turn for Hu'úgga. While approaching the last Ahoggyá village he had to recruit, he ran into scouts from the Nchesh of Lord Zrelléshqya. He

was being carried on a litter by his Ahoggyá [see **Encountering Hu'úgga's Boat** for more information on his current situation], clutching each side with a death-grip. When they rounded a bend in the trail, they came across the scouts who immediately opened fire with a rain of arrows. While doing minimal damage to the Ahoggyá, Hu'úgga was wounded in the right foot and the abdomen. The Ahoggyá chased down two of the scouts and tore them apart limb from limb. The third scout successfully fled and warned the others. The Ahoggyá continued into the village, snacking on their human drumsticks as they went. Hu'úgga is now resting in the village, waiting impatiently for his business there to be concluded. The soldiers are planning an assault. The assassin is plotting how to keep Hu'úgga safe without revealing his identity.

A Brief Ahoggyá Primer

Ahoggyá stand 4 to 5 feet tall and have thick-barreled bodies topped by a domed armored carapace. Set just under the rim of the carapace are four equally spaced arms and four splayed legs. Between the arms are four pairs of independently moveable eyes and other organs.

Village

The village is typical of all Ahoggyá villages. The larger huts are gathered around a central dance ground, and the village as a whole is surrounded by quagmires and encircled by a fence of venomous hooked spines. Each hut is a single-story, 1-room wattle-and-daub structure built up on stilts above the bog with a pitched thatch roof. The center of the floor is open so that a stout ladder can be let down to permit entrance and exit. The floors of these huts are clean and bare with personal possessions being hung from the rafters in string bags. They sleep in a sitting position with their four legs tucked under their thick, cylindrical body. They don't use equivalents of a bed or blankets.

Eating

Ahoggyá eat squatting on the floor, the ground or on a log, and devour their food with a delirious frenzy. They mostly eat smelly, unsavory vegetables. However, they will eat the corpses of other sentient species (but not their own corpses). Human flesh is considered a delicacy, one they don't understand why it should be denied to them. They don't drink alcohol since it's mildly poisonous to them. If they should ingest any alcohol, it will produce severe cramps, nausea and diarrhea. They know about several narcotics but use them only as medicines.

Laws and Customs

No human is aware of the code of conduct in an Ahoggyá village. It is known that, in Ahoggyá lands, there's no administration higher than the village level. Each village is ruled by one who's called "Beloved of All Eight Sexes." Records are kept by a system of knots in cords. Otherwise, most can't read or write. Land is owned by the village as a whole, but there's a complex code of individual ownership and business procedures. Violence and killing are not considered crimes. The mentally ill are routinely killed. Insults and slander are normal conversation. But theft, fraud, cheating and breaching a promise are serious offenses. If any of these events are

witnessed, the witnesses may take violent action or impose punishments that seem bizarre to a human.

Ahoggyá are loyal to their village and the co-participants in the frenzied, hooting, screeching ritual dances that they perform. Their general attitude is one of rudeness, constant peevishness, and a lack of sophistication bordering on intolerable vulgarity. And their fur stinks of the swamp.

Ahoggyá toss the bodies of their dead out upon a refuse heap on the outskirts of their village.

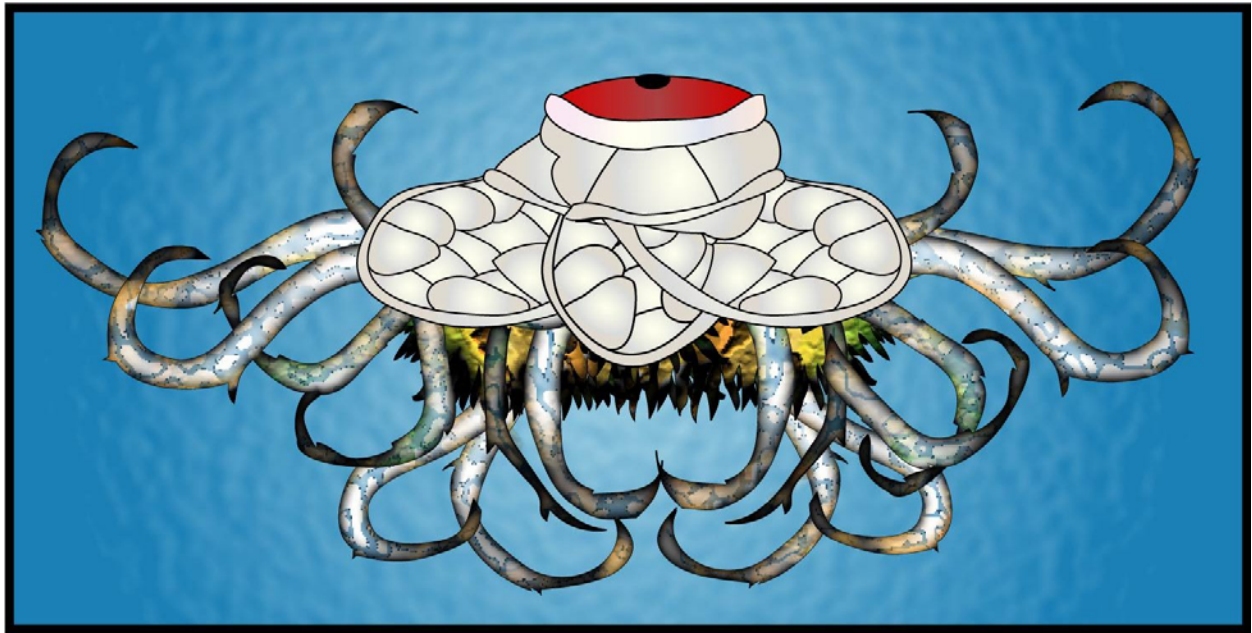
All Ahoggyá names are unpronounceable to humans, given that humans lack the proper number of orifices and limbs to make the required noises. Ahoggyá also have 8 sexes though humans aren't aware of their mating practices. They have no religion, and about 1 in 10 are psychic dampeners.

Players' Introduction

Your voyage to Tsatsayágga has been uneventful thus far. Since leaving Jakállá, you had a brief stop in Tléku, and then several days in Petris Layóda as the captain took on water and lots of provisions, crowding the storage hold. He then delayed for several days in a remote cove off the southern coast of Gángá while conducting various repairs of the ship before leaving Tsolyáni territory. The most surprising event so far was the captain's announcement after leaving Gángá Isle that the traditional stop in Héru was being skipped. Instead, he was heading across the water straight for Point Hricháku for the next provisioning stop. The sailors were visibly nervous at the thought of crossing the open water like this, but his gamble paid off and cut at least a week from your trip. Your last stop was another brief provisioning at Sharkúo. Currently you've been hugging what passes for a coast as you sail by the mangrove swamps that constitute the Sharúna Lowlands. The sailors have been entertaining you with tales of the carnivorous Ahoggyá which infest this particular corner of Salarvyá.

Quarters are close on the ship, and the Imperial envoy tends to commandeer the shady part of the deck whenever there's a breeze. Otherwise, he keeps to himself in his small cabin. Though the rest of you are all from Green Malachite, sailors included, there's little fraternization between merchants and sailors, undoubtedly due to the fact that the sailors are all from poorer lineages within the clan. When you went to bed, all you knew was that you'd been making good time for the last few days, with a steady breeze filling the sails.

You wake from your sleep to a loud noise. You're confused at first; you can't place it. Has someone come to repair the clan-house wall at last? Are the food riots starting early this year? And why is the floor tilting? As you fall out of your hammock and slide across the floor, you realize you're hearing shouts all around you, and the ship is shuddering from regular impacts. Grabbing the wall and pulling yourself to your feet, you look out the porthole and remember that you're on a merchant trip to Tsatsayágga, you're essentially unarmed and a few hours ago, the porthole was considerably further above the water than it is now. Looking out, you see by the green light of Gayél one of the ship's boats hit the water as it's hastily lowered. What looks like most of the crew of 10 sailors is in it, rowing frantically. Bobbing in the water all around are the wooden barrels that carry your cargo. Another one sails over your head and into the water as you watch. It occurs to you that someone must be on the deck, tossing over the cargo that was lashed to the deck. As the ship shifts again, it also occurs to you that it must be sinking and perhaps you should do something. What do you do?



The Attack & Shipwreck

The merchant ship, *Heart's Delight*, is a small Hrí-class ship. It's single-masted with a triangular lateen sail. It's 48 feet long, 20 feet across the beam and has a cargo capacity of 15 tons. The crew complement is 10 sailors and the captain. Up to six passengers and/or fighting men can be carried.

The player characters are awakened by an attack on the ship by a medium-sized akhó (20 feet long). This is normal behavior for the akhó. The captain unfortunately sailed into its home waters off the coast of the Sharúna Lowlands. The attack consists of it hitting the hull of the ship repeatedly with its 20 steel-hard tentacles. It snatched two of the crew off the deck and then started snatching at the barrels lashed there. The rest of the crew panicked and decided that they could escape by taking one of the boats and leaving while the akhó was still concentrating on the ship. This will leave the players with the 2nd boat and a ship that will sink within 10 minutes.

Akhó

Stats

Strength 12, Dexterity 8, Intelligence 2, Psyche 4, Willpower 4, Charisma 1

Initiative 12, Combat Value 10, Health Points 100, Shock Value 20, Magic Resistance 3, Pedhétl 4, Armor Value 5

Attributes: Armor, Extra Limbs (20), Tough 3

Natural Multiple Weapons: Level 10. Akhó have 20 steel-hard tentacles, and can use 10 of them to attack each round.

Natural Weapon: Level 10. Akhó attack with their steel-hard tentacles with a Damage Multiplier of 10.

Physical Impairment (Awkward Size): Level 2. This akhó is large.

- If the characters observe the water at all, trying to figure out what's going on, they'll see glimpses of long, gray things whipping around, churning the water. Anyone who remains standing still on the deck will become a target.
- The boat will head out to sea. When it's still within eyesight, the characters will see long, gray tentacles whip up high out of the water and come down on the boat, smashing it to bits. One by one, the sailors will be plucked out of the water and dragged under.
- If, despite this example, the players try to take the second boat out to sea, have the akhó surface in that direction, one glaring red eye set atop a cucumber-shaped body. It's rather full, having feasted on the crew, and will be more leisurely as it comes towards them, picking debris from the water and tossing it into its mouth (which is beneath the body).
- The 2nd boat is large enough to hold all 6 characters and some personal baggage, and a few barrels of cargo. The ocean is filled with barrels floating everywhere.
- If the players work together, they can get some supplies into the 2nd boat and head toward the "shore." If anyone is left behind, they can grab some of the flotsam, and the current will carry them to the "shore."

The Swamp

The entire coast of the Sharúna Lowlands is a swamp so no matter how far the players go up or down it, they'll still encounter the swamp when they come to shore. Use the akhó to keep them out of the deeper waters of the open ocean.

Eventually, you'll want the players in the swamp. Sane players will probably try to avoid the swamp as much as possible. Two options are to have the Lrí (see below) come out of the swamp and attack them. If it's successful, it will be taking a character back to its lair in the swamp, hopefully drawing them in for a rescue attempt. Another option is to bring encounters out of the swamp. Specifically, they can encounter Ahoggyá salvaging in the ocean, or, if needed, they can be accosted by the Nchësh of Lord Zrelleshqyá while skirting the edge of the swamp.

Travel

Heart's Delight was off the Sharúna Lowlands, a dense coastal swamp which is very similar to a mangrove swamp. The water here is very shallow, and once they get among the trees, the going becomes quite difficult. There are some channels of water between the trees where it's deep enough for the boat to continue (about 3 feet deep), but more often it's a shallow (1 to 2 feet) layer of water over deep, dark, sticky mud. The water is murky, stained with tannin from the mangrove trees, so it's not possible to look at it and judge its depth. Even in the channels, the boat will get frequently stuck. If the players use the oars as poles, they can pole the boat loose and try other routes for a while. If they have bad luck doing this, they'll lose the oar to the mud (though they can always try to recover it). Walking is almost impossible. The mud beneath the water is several feet deep so a person trying to walk will sink in up to their knees with water up to their waist. Unless they're grabbing onto something for leverage, they won't be able to pull their feet up out of the mud in order to move.

The channels twist and wind so it's very easy to get lost. After they've spent a while trying to navigate things and survive in the swamp, they will encounter the Ahoggyá who are out foraging salvage from their ship.

Atmosphere

A swamp is a nasty place to be. It's hot and very humid. A nasty, rotten egg smell permeates everywhere. The air is filled with biting midges and annoying insects, both small and large. It's filled with dangerous vegetation (the Food of the Ssú) and dangerous creatures. Anyone lucky enough to be stuck here deserves to experience the full range of possibilities.

"Color" creatures include horóks, frog-like creatures. They have four limbs and soft, moist skin. They come in a variety of colors and some are quite beautiful. There's also the chnáu, a black, segmented, snake-like creature, from one to three feet long. It has rows of tiny swimming limbs all along its tubular body and a long, needled-head. Its sharp fangs carry lethal poison but one won't come near the players. Instead, they'll see them periodically darting through the water or over the mud. If they are attacked, they'll flee, if possible.

Chnáu

Strength 2, Dexterity 9, Intelligence 1, Psyche 2, Willpower 2, Charisma 1

Initiative 11, Combat Value 4, Health Points 20, Shock Value 4, Magic Resistance 2, Pedhétl 4

Natural Weapon: Level 5. Chnáu attack with its sharp fangs with a Damage Multiplier of 1. A successful attack that's not defended against injects a single, lethal dose of poison.

The Food of the Ssú

The swamp is threaded through with the Food of the Ssú. There are several species resident here: large, acid-filled bluish globes, purple tendrils, thick-leaved red-brown vines. Touching any of these burns like acid. The purple tendrils float in the water, intertwining themselves with the roots of the trees that stick up out of the water. The brown-leaved vines tend to twine around the trunks of the trees and the bluish globes hang overhead from the red-brown vines. Anyone walking will brush up against the purple tendrils soon enough. Grabbing for support or leverage at the tree trunks will eventually put you in contact with the thick-leaved red-brown vines. If anyone is so foolish as to eat any of the Food of the Ssú, it will be fatal. This is highly unlikely, however, as it burns on contact and if they don't recognize it on sight, they'll recognize it from its effects. The characters will all be familiar with the purple tendril variety. Use Intelligence checks (or any applicable Skill checks) to see whether they recognize the others or will have to learn from bitter experience.

Use a Dexterity check to avoid Food of the Ssú. Failure means suffering 1d10 damage per round (armor does reduce damage). Extended contact means that in addition to the damage suffered per round, a successful Strength check must be made every 3 minutes to avoid suffering a fatal heart attack.

Lrí, “the Flying Stinger”

This is a stilt-like, dark green, six-legged, winged, insectoid creature related to the Hlüss. It stings with its long, segmented tail, paralyzing its victim. The Lrí will then try to fly off in random and misleading directions with the victim to its lair where it will feed it to its young.

Once the players have had contact with the Food of the Ssú, they should encounter the Lrí. The smallest person, or anyone who’s separated from the others, will be singled out for an attack. It will attack in the early morning, as the sun is rising, coming down from a tree. The first sign will be a loud whirring noise from its wings. Alighting on the victim’s shoulders, it will attempt to sting its victim in the back. If successful, it will wrap its six legs around the person’s body and take off again. Since this is a heavy victim for it, it will fly through the channels between the trees. It’s flying slowly enough that if the players make an effort, they can follow it to its nest. The nest was formed by piling up mud between two mangrove trees, using their roots as its support. It looks like a monstrous hornets’ nest.

Stats

Strength 6, Dexterity 6, Intelligence 3, Psyche 4, Charisma 3, Willpower 4

Initiative 10, Combat Value 6, Health Points 50, Shock Value 10, Magic Resistance 4, Pedhétl 4
Armor Value 2

Flight: Level 2. Lrí can fly well and carry heavy burdens.

Natural Armor: Level 2. Their chitinous exoskeleton acts as the equivalent of medium armor.

Natural Weapon: Level 2. Lrí attack with their paralyzing tail sting with a Damage Multiplier of 2. If the stung character fails a Strength check, he is paralyzed. If the Strength check succeeds, his Dexterity is lowered by 1. When the Dexterity reaches 0, the character is paralyzed.

Encountering the Ahoggyá

The players will hear the Ahoggyá before they see them. At intervals they will hear hooting calls in the distance and loud splashes. They will first see them in the distance. One of the barrels from the ship will be bobbing along in a channel of water in a purposeful manner. When they’ve all noticed this odd sight, they spot the Ahoggyá swimming behind it, using a kind of crazy breaststroke, propelling itself with a sort of frog kick, one opposed pair of legs kicking and then other pair, popping up its head at an angle every few strokes to look around and give the barrel another push. The Ahoggyá is moving considerably faster than the players and will pay no attention to them unless spoken to. It will respond with insults, such as “Foul-smelling idiots. Get out of the way, weaklings.”

If they move into a more open channel, an appropriate Skill check (e.g. Hunting, Observation, Tracking) will reveal that a stand of reeds up ahead is actually moving. If they close in on them, an Ahoggyá will break the surface of the murky water and overturn the boat unless everyone in it makes a Dexterity check. The Ahoggyá are walking in the mud, carrying barrels and breathing through the straws.

Keep in mind that Fíru has been given an Eye of Absolute Depilation. This is an example of the odd type of Eye created by the Lords of the Latter Times. Used on a human, it removes all body

hair except for that on the head. Used on an Ahoggyá, it strips the sentient of its outer skin layers and enrages it.

Hu'úgga's Boat

If the players choose to follow the Ahoggyá, they'll encounter Hu'úgga's boat not far from the village. If they don't follow them, they will encounter the Khekhkhéssa soldiers first. Hu'úgga has been travelling in the company of four Ahoggyá from their Nchesh of the Circle of Light. They have been using a typical flat-bottomed Ahoggyá boat with a tent set up in the middle of it. Within the tent, it's as luxurious as Hu'úgga could make it. Supplies are in lashed down barrels which line the inside of the tent, forming a wall. The barrels contain such items as: drónu wine, food, water, soap, perfume, clothes, tablecloths, medical supplies, oil and oil lamps, paper, ink, reed pens, and so on. The center of the tent has layers of carpets. A mosquito net for sleeping is rolled and stored to one side. He's also kept a desultory journal of his time on this hideous assignment.

Since the boat can't go everywhere, Hu'úgga also originally brought along a palanquin for the Ahoggyá to carry, but they promptly broke it. Now when he has to leave the boat (as he has now), they carry him in a makeshift litter created from the remains of the palanquin. In the tightest of situations, they simply carry him. He never walks unless they're on one of the infrequent islands within the swamp.

The boat is currently abandoned because Hu'úgga and all the Ahoggyá are in the village.

Not long after the players find the boat, they will be found by the Khekhkhéssa soldiers.

Encountering the Nchesh of Lord Zrelléshqya Khekhkhéssa

Leader: Quméch (Lt.) Triggumarékku Khekhkhéssa

Strength 7, Dexterity 6, Intelligence 5, Psyche 4, Charisma 5, Willpower 5
Combat Value 7, Health Points 65, Shock Value 13, Magic Resistance 4, Pedhétl 4

Sword, Short 4 Damage Multiplier x 3
Spear, Short 4 Damage Multiplier x 2
Bow, Short 3 Damage Multiplier 3

Soldiers:

Strength 6, Dexterity 5, Intelligence 3, Psyche 4, Charisma 3, Willpower 5
Combat Value 6, Health Points 60, Shock Value 12, Magic Resistance 4, Pedhétl 4
Sword, Short 3; Spear, Short 3; Bow, Short 2

The unit of approximately 20 soldiers from this Nchesh is a group of hardened veterans, used to hunting and fighting the vicious Hlutrgú. Skilled swamp fighters, they are armed with curved short swords, short spears and light bows. After only a month in the Sharúna Lowlands they've hone in on Hu'úgga's party through the simple expedient of seeking out the Ahoggyá and inquiring about the human. Yesterday, three scouts caught up with him with disastrous consequences for two of them. Their orders are to capture Hu'úgga alive and bring him back to Héru. Speculation has been running high about what Hu'úgga is doing here. Some feel he's plotting out an invasion route to their lands and secreting caches of weapons and supplies with the Ahoggyá. Others think he's spreading propaganda to try and persuade them not to serve in

the Khekhkhéssa Ahoggyá legion any longer. Whatever it is, it's obviously highly sensitive politically or such a high-ranking person wouldn't be involved. They're in a bad humor at having been forced into this swamp due to his actions.

When they find the players, they will surround them and demand their surrender. Their first suspicion will be that the players are working with Hu'úgga, and their leader, Lt. Triggumarékkku, will demand their cooperation in drawing Hu'úgga out of the village. (They do not want a pitched battle with the Ahoggyá. They know they would lose.)

What if the players try to run or fight?

The soldiers will fight to subdue. They're experienced fighters, so anyone except Qiláin really doesn't stand a chance. Triggumarékkku will promise Achán that, at the worst, he can be ransomed later.

What if the players simply refuse to cooperate?

Triggumarékkku will plan an assault in the night, jumping the fence, hoping to run in, capture Hu'úgga and escape before the Ahoggyá know what's happening. He does not want to do this because he knows he will lose some men. The players will be left on the outskirts of the village, lightly guarded. In this instance, they will encounter Hu'úgga as he flees the village, aided by the confusion of the assault.

What if Achán reveals his identity and throws his diplomatic weight around?

This is a workable strategy. Neither the Khekhkhéssa or the Hrúchcháqsha family want trouble with the Tsolyáni. Triggumarékkku will offer to take them out of the swamp after they've finished their business here. He will hint that the business would go much quicker if they were to help. In no case will he now allow the players to leave; Achán is too valuable.

What if Zhúrak overcomes his bitterness towards the Khekhkhéssa Clan, reveals his identity as the vrélq trader and demands special treatment?

This will be a somewhat less successful strategy. Triggumarékkku is an intelligent man, but not aware of sensitive political information. He knows his Duke has found a new supply, but doesn't know the source. He will require some proof from Zhurák. If he is convinced, he will not allow the players to leave, and will protect Zhurák. He's too valuable to simply let him die.

Bálesh recognizes Dággala

Bálesh, of course, doesn't know Dággala is an assassin. He simply knows he works for the Hrúchcháqsha Family. If the player doesn't catch on that something is odd here, have him make an Intelligence Stat check to realize he doesn't work for this family.

Triggumarékkku won't believe this about Dággala without proof. He'll point out that he was recommended by Lord Dreshú'uga himself. If Bálesh can recite the recommendation letter (Intelligence check), that will be proof enough for Triggumarékkku.

Dággala has a chance at recognizing Bálesh (Intelligence Stat check). He'll decide that Bálesh needs to die before he can ruin his cover. Whenever there's an opportunity, he'll try to create a

fatal accident for Bálesh – shoving him into Food of the Ssú, tossing a chnáu his way, accidentally shooting him, etc.

Mottán recognizes Dággala

Mottán will recognize Dággala as the inspector on his last trip who tore the ship apart looking for something. His “merchandise” only escaped because they concentrated on the holds of the ship and didn’t search the cabins. Mottán was simply grateful at the time, but now realizes this was suspicious. It meant they were looking for something in particular and knew it wouldn’t be found in the cabins. Dággala will not recognize Mottán.

The assassin: Daggála

Strength 6, Dexterity 7, Intelligence 4, Psyche 4, Charisma 3, Willpower 8
Combat Value 7, Health Points 70, Shock Value 14, Magic Resistance 4, Pedhétl 4

Blowgun poisoned with Food of the Ssú juice

Garrote 3 special rules, page 100.

Dagger 4 Damage Multiplier x 2

Sword, Short 3 Damage Multiplier x 3

Spear, Short 1 Damage Multiplier x 2

The assassin is posing as a common soldier, Daggála. He knows that Hu’úgga isn’t supposed to spend any extended length of time in any particular village. He’s surprised that he hasn’t moved on already. If his identity isn’t revealed by Bálesh or Mottán, he’ll try to recruit either Fíru or Mottán to work for him. He’ll ask them to simply talk with Hu’úgga, finding out if he needs any help. He’ll give them a token by which Hu’úgga will know him. The token is a small scrap of paper with something scrawled on it in an Old Bednálljan script. In return for help, he’ll promise large amounts of money and his personal protection to get them out of there.

One way or another, whether working with the soldiers or as their captive, the players should end up at the village.

Approaching the Ahoggyá village

As they approach it, they will have a close encounter with a qásu bird. It’s the largest and most vicious of the scavenger birds. It’s 3 feet tall with a wingspan of 15 feet. It’s purple and black and will be swooping down outside the village, feeding off the pile of dead bodies that the Ahoggyá have left there. The qásu is a carrion-eater and will not attack. In addition to a couple Ahoggyá bodies, there will be a few human body parts: heads, feet and hands mainly. If counted, they came from two bodies. These are the casualties of yesterday’s fighting. The rest of the bodies are being eaten (arms, legs, thighs and breasts).

The dead body pile is about 50 feet from the outer stilt-huts that make up the village. The water’s only about a few inches deep here and is sludgy, mixed with mud. It’s possible to walk through it with difficulty, but it’s too shallow to take the boat in any further. Drawing nearer to the village, they will come upon orange vegetation that’s been torn up and tossed into ragged piles. It was torn up recently (within the last day) as it’s still withering away.

The center of the village (the dance ground) is solid ground, built up around the massed roots of mangrove trees that are growing close together. The atmosphere of the village is raucous – Ahoggyá wandering around, stacking and smashing barrels. Some are being hauled up the ladders into the huts whole. Others are being smashed open and having their contents picked over. In general, the Ahoggyá are disappointed in the contents; they're trying the food and tossing it around. Bolts of cloth are thrown disdainfully away. The mushrooms and the fruit are a hit though. They'll be added to the (human) shish-ka-bobs being cooked.

The Ahoggyá are preparing for their poetry slam and mating dance by eating huge amounts of food and then defecating in huge piles at various locations about the village. This is creating a soothing aroma for them which inspires their creativity. The fruit is thus very popular. They're eating it in large quantities and appreciating its effect on their system.

Exploring the Village

Communicating

The Ahoggyá will tend to ignore the players, even if directly addressed. None of them speak Tsolyáni, so to be understood the players must use Salarvyáni. Most attempts at communication will only elicit statements such as: "It's the time of [guttural sounds, hoot, sharp fart]," or "It will be time for [more guttural sounds, three hoots and a clap with both pairs of hands] later." (Translation: It's time for the poetry slam and sex right now. We'll get around to killing and eating humans afterwards.)

If the Ahoggyá are offered bribes, they may respond, "Preparing for the feast, for the [hooting and clapping and jumping – i.e. orgy]. Need to choose before it begins."

Provoking

The Ahoggyá are currently obsessed with the color blue. If they see a blue object, they'll approach and seize it. The village grounds and huts are draped in blue plants which have been torn up and thrown everywhere. If the players have anything blue visible, the Ahoggyá will take it from them. If the player is very quick to negotiate, he may get something in return for it.

Conversely, the Ahoggyá are irritated by the color orange. They've removed any orange vegetation within eyesight of the village (and thrown it away outside the confines of the village). If the players have any orange objects or clothing, Ahoggyá will snatch it from them and destroy it, stomping it thoroughly into mud. They will not negotiate any trades.

The penalty for provoking them in other matters is to slather the offender in mud and shit and demand that he hop around the circumference of the village on his right foot.

The Ahoggyá don't care if the players salvage any of their goods that the Ahoggyá didn't want. They will punish anyone who tries to take an unopened barrel.

They don't care if anyone enters a hut, but if they carry something out of one, it will anger them.

The Ahoggyá aren't interested in fighting right now and won't attack unless attacked first. Even then they're simply brushing away annoyances.

Hu'úgga Deddlaqa'â

Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Intelligence 6, Psyche 4, Charisma 8, Willpower 5
Combat Value 4, Health Points 45, Shock Value 9, Magic Resistance 5, Pedhétl 4

Short Sword 2, damage multiplier x 3. He tries to keep this hidden behind him.
Charm 3, Command (Political) 3, Language (Tsolyáni) 2, Negotiation (Political) 2

Hu'úgga is lying on a makeshift litter, under a large, central hut in the village. There are some particularly large piles of shit near him. He's trying to tend to his wounds and is close to hysteria. He doesn't want to die here and doesn't understand why the Ahoggyá are refusing to negotiate with him, and why his Ahoggyá are ignoring him. Usually he's good at playing along with them but his injuries have made him desperate. He tried to force the issue yesterday, thrusting the treaty at them to get the Beloved of Eight Sexes' "signature" and then leave. The Ahoggyá, Stinky Fur, wouldn't sign. "Wait. Not now; later." He's surrounded by his 5 heavy-duty leather bearer packs, each stuffed with 1,000 Nzúggesh (the Salarvyáni gold coin, worth 5 káitars each). There is also a sixth pack filled with the small "message" leather bags. But he had only a small amount of food with him which he consumed last night. He's unsuccessfully begged for food and water from the village Ahoggyá.

When the players approach, they will hear him calling out, begging for some of the fruit. He still has the scroll-case containing the treaty hanging from his belt.

If Hu'úgga is touched or attacked, any nearby Ahoggyá will start hooting, and his Ahoggyá will stop their eating and fraternizing to run over to protect him (will treat the players as if provoked). His Ahoggyá are eager to participate in the mating dance, and will refuse to allow him to be moved until they're done. This way, they can have their fun and still fulfill their agreement of guiding him safely.

Hu'úgga will be excited to see the players and will ask for help in getting out of there. He'll plead with them to stay, saying that his Ahoggyá will come to their senses soon. He'll mention his boat and supplies and the fact that his Ahoggyá can guide them out of the swamp, offering to take the players along and share supplies with them. All he wants in exchange is their help (with his wounds) and their company. He'll guess, judging from their appearance, that they were shipwrecked.

If asked why he's here, or how he became wounded, he'll say that he was attacked by Khekhkhéssa soldiers. His family had heard that the Khekhkhéssa Clan was stirring up the Ahoggyá against the Hrúchcháqsha Family to disrupt their legion recruiting. He was sent out to refute their lies. His policy is to lie by retaining as much of the truth as possible, simply reversing the roles of the two families. It's much easier to remember your story that way.

If he finds out that they're working (however reluctantly) for the Nchésh, he'll try to talk them out of it, offering them huge amounts of money and warning them of Khekhkhéssa treachery.

Despite his desperation, he will try and talk them into waiting out this odd behavior and only leaving the village after he gets his signature from Stinky Fur, which won't happen until after the poetry slam. The poetry slam will begin shortly after the players arrive.

Ahoggyá

The leader of the village, the Beloved of Eight Sexes, is an Ahoggyá that Hu'úgga has named **Stinky Fur** (for obvious reasons). Other Ahoggyá, who've served in the military, will call themselves Big Belly, Mud Splasher and Ole Three Arms.

Stinky Fur's stats are:

Strength 9, Dexterity 2, Intelligence 3, Psyche 2, Willpower 8, Charisma 4 (0 to Humans)
Combat Value 6, Health Points 95, Initiative Base 10, Magic Resistance 2, Pedhétl 2

Large Build: Increases all damage multipliers by 2.

Natural Armor: The central barrel (but not the arms or legs) is naturally armored to the equivalent of heavy armor (Armor rating of 3).

Natural Extra Limbs: Can make 2 attacks per round, though not on the same opponent.

Physical Advantage (Expanded Field of Vision): Their 360-degree field of vision makes it impossible to sneak up on them, unless under concealment or using magic.

Stinky Fur has a short sword which it would use in a fight. Damage multiplier is x 5 due to his size. Other Ahoggyá will use improvised clubs (damage multiplier x 4).

The Big Delay: Poetry, Dancing and Sex

The Ahoggyá are quite excited about the Hrűchchàqshsha treaty. They regard it as already agreed to, and are impatient to start the fighting and the feasting. They simply haven't left yet because it's almost time for the Great Dance. They feel that it was kind of the humans to offer them a tasty morsel before the Great Dance began.

The Great Dance is the height of the mating cycle for them. The Ahoggyá have eight sexes, and each sex has a different time of fertility. Sex for Ahoggyás is done in the frenzied dances held in the solid dance ground around which each of their villages is gathered. While the dances happen all the time, only during the Great Dance are all the sexes fertile and able to procreate.

The Poetry Slam

The Great Dance begins with a display by which the Ahoggyá choose their partners. This display is one of poetical skill. The Ahoggyá will be gathered on the dance ground and restlessly moving around. One will make a great hooting noise and began to recite. Ahoggyá poetry is loud, and uses bodily sounds as an integral part of the piece: vocalizations are combined with the slapping of hands, snorting, loud reports from various orifices, whistling and wheezing from other orifices and so on. A proper performance is combined with wild dancing movements.

Once one begins, another will take it up. To the human eye, it will look like chaos. But gradually they'll group off into sets of eight, and the dance proper will begin.

If the humans don't keep their distance, they could be accidentally injured. Plenty of insults will be thrown their way if they get in the way.

The Great Dance will last through the night until the participants drop of exhaustion and sleep on the dance ground. While the dance is going on, they are oblivious to anything the characters do (even removing Hu'úgga) as long as it doesn't interfere.

The Aftermath

The next day Stinky Fur will approach Hu'úgga, demand the treaty and sign it. They will then assure him the Hrúchcháqsha family's generous offer has been shared; that the armada's on its way but that they've decided not to wait for it. They bid him goodbye and the entire village leaves. As long as the players don't try to interfere or follow them, they'll make it out alive.

The armada from Omnú Tlé Hléktis is still far enough away that the players will have time to get home and warn their government.

Meanwhile, as the Great Dance has been completed, the Ahoggyá all across the Sharúna Lowlands are rising up and leaving the swamp to indiscriminately kill and eat the humans.

Possible Conclusions

If they try to get home by sea, either with the long boat from the ship, or Hu'úgga's boat and supplies, they have a fighting chance. If they can appropriate Hu'úgga's payment to the Ahoggyá, Zhurák and the merchants can recoup the losses from the shipwreck.

Achán will learn enough from Hu'úgga's treaty to justify to the Palace of Foreign Lands and the Emperor his early return. It provides indisputable proof of the Hrúchcháqsha family's role, and will be a powerful political tool for the Imperium to use in manipulating the Salarvyáni. In hands other than Achán's, it can be sold for large amounts of money to many possible buyers.

If the players stay long enough to learn about the armada, and still manage to escape, it's an overwhelming success.

Zhurák hiNezár
Ship Captain

Green Malachite, Avánthe, 35 years old		Health Points	50
		Shock Value	10
Strength	4		
Dexterity	4	Combat Value	4
Intelligence	6	Initiative Base	10
Psyche	4	Respect	10
Willpower	6	Magic Resistance	5
Charisma	4	Pedhétl	4

Attributes: Good Reputation 2, Highly-Skilled 3, Older 3

Defects: Impulsive 1, Physical Impairment (Lame), Responsibilities 1, Ugly (scarred)

Skills:

Charm (Professional) 3	Language (Salarvyáni, speak & read) 2
Etiquette (Middle Clan) 1	Language (Tsolyáni, speak & read) 2
Knowledge (Jakálla) 2	Merchant 3
Knowledge (Héru) 2	Navigation 2
Knowledge (Southern Islands) 2	Sailing 3

The adventure and risk of international trade always appealed to you. Long before you ever reached the age of majority, you shipped out, participating in your clan's mercantile trips to the Tsolyáni islands and the Salarvyáni coastal cities. It took years of work, trading and investing, but you finally made enough profit to buy your own ship, *Heart's Delight*. It would have been safer to buy a share in one of the clan's ships, but you weren't interested in safety. For the last five years, you've made regular runs from your home port of Jakálla to Tléku, then Petrís Layóda and ending in Héru.

It was when you took shelter from a storm in a cove along the southern coast of Gánga Island that you made your great discovery. A strange crustacean was swarming over the rocks and in the shallow water. One of your sailors, Gámalu, excitedly identified it as the vrélq that was so prized by the Salarvyáni for its black dye. On impulse, you captured some and offered them for sale in Héru. An agent of the Khekhkhéssa family quickly bought them and asked for more, and for you to keep a lower profile. You now earn fantastic amounts of money by stopping at the cove to harvest vrélq on every trip. You've told no one of your new trade goods. Partly, it's to spare the clan trouble with the Hrűchcháqsha family of Salarvyá who currently hold the vrélq monopoly. And partly, it's to keep your discovery to yourself. If no one learns of it, no one can share in your booty. In addition to the vrélq, you transport exotic foodstuffs: spices, unusual herbs, succulent mushrooms, hybrids of fruits and so forth.

Everything had gone so well for so long that you forgot about the risk. That is, until your last voyage when a Háida Pakálan pirate ship swooped down on you in the midst of Tamkáde Bay. In the fighting, you were maimed by a vicious clubbing to your knee, and your left hand and arm were scarred, but you bought the lives of your crew by divulging the location of your hidden safe, and losing all your cash and valuables. In one swift blow, you were brought to the brink of financial ruin. You ground your teeth in fury at the incompetence of the Nchësh [Legion] of Lord Dreshú'uga Khekhkhéssa, which is charged with guarding the bay. If only Lord

Dreshú'uga weren't such a skinflint, his troops might be properly equipped, and the artillery might actually defend the approaches of the bay from marauders.

The more you pondered your ill fortune, the more you felt the Hrúchcháqsha family must have set the pirates on you. Why else would they bother with such a small ship? You weren't going to let them intimidate you out of the vrélq trade, but you also weren't going to reward the Khekhkhéssa family that couldn't keep you safe. When the Palace of Foreign Lands came to Green Malachite looking for an inconspicuous way to transport an Imperial envoy to the Salarvyáni king in Tsatsayágga, you jumped at the chance. Here was a way to guarantee a profit on a trip where you could seek out new trading partners in the ruling Chruggilléshmu family. Undoubtedly, they would be just as eager to get out from under the Hrúchcháqsha's vrélq monopoly.

The only downside is that your clan master required you to help some fellow clan members by allowing them to accompany you. They're from your lineage, but you've been away enough that you don't know them. Mottán is quite charming, the better to sell his fine thésun cloth to the ladies, no doubt. Bálesh, the grain trader, seems uptight and tends to keep to himself. Fíru, the youngest member, is quite talkative. In fact, he's in danger of embarrassing the clan by attempting to be too familiar with the high clan Imperial envoy.

Goals

1. Deliver the Imperial envoy safely to Tsatsayágga.
2. Get revenge (discreetly) on the Khekhkhéssa and the Hrúchcháqsha families.

You have a statue of the goddess Avánthe in her Aspect as Keréna "The Wind" on your ship. This talisman ensures fair winds on land and sea (+1 to Sailing check), but the maintenance superstition to keep this bonus is that no creature of the air may be harmed or imprisoned in your presence.

You stopped and harvested some vrélq in the Gánga cove at night, with the help of Gámalu. It's just enough to prove your point when you negotiate in Tsatsayágga.

Gámalu loves to drink. You keep him supplied with alcohol and bonuses with which to buy more alcohol, and he's happy to keep his mouth shut and work with you.

Heart's Delight

Single-masted with a triangular lateen sail, 48 feet long, 20 feet across the beam, cargo capacity of 15 tons, crew complement of 10 sailors, and able to carry up to six passengers. There's a long boat kept on the deck of the ship, and a dingy floating behind, on a tow rope.

Mottán hiNezár
Merchant

Green Malachite, Avánthe, 27 years old	Health Points	60
	Shock Value	12

Strength	4	Combat Value	4
Dexterity	4	Pedhétl	4
Intelligence	5	Respect	0
Psyche	4	Initiative Base	4
Willpower	6	Magic Resistance	4
Charisma	7		

Attributes: Attractive (Classic: muscular, square-jawed, hawk-like features), Older 2, Tough
 Defects: Clumsy 1, Greedy 2, Tough 2, Secret 1

+2 bonus to resist poisons

+6 bonus to Charm checks

Easily succumb to bribes (-4 penalty). Must make Willpower Stat roll to resist temptation when presented with illegal or dishonorable ways of obtaining wealth

Skills:

Charm (Professional, Seduction, Social) 3

Bribery 2

Etiquette (Middle Clan) 2

Knowledge (Jakállá) 2

Knowledge (Salarvyá) 2

Language (Tsolyáni, speak & read) 2

Language (Salarvyáni, speak) 1

Merchant 1

Scholar (Liquor) 1

What can you say? With your looks and your personality, you've never had to work hard for what you want. But what you get is never enough. There's something about the good life that always leaves you wanting more. Fittingly enough, living the good life showed you the way to enjoying it more easily. While lounging in your lover's chambers, sipping wine, you heard a most interesting business proposal: accompany a certain package to Salarvyá, keep it off the official manifests and earn a profit. After a large sum of money changed hands, you did just that. Once you saw how easy it was, and how good you were at bribing your way out of dicey situations, you realized the potential in this line of work. While you occasionally still transport items for your lover, you mainly work for yourself.

You are a specialist. You smuggle the high-end liquor tsuhóridu into Salarvyá. With the taxes on this luxury item often tripling its price, you make out like a bandit. But to the world, you're only a cloth dealer, taking the sun gauze to Salarvyá and bringing back the favored silky güdru cloth. Your modus operandi is to rent space on someone else's ship and carry your real cargo in your personal baggage. This trip you have five finely cut glass bottles hidden away, each filled with thousands of káitars of tsuhóridu. You chose *Heart's Delight* because the captain was sailing for Tsatsayágga. Normally you sail for Héru, the closest major Salarvyáni city. Less travel time means more trips which equals more money. But Héru is becoming an unfriendly place. The last two times you traveled there, the ships were inspected twice. On each trip, the first time the inspectors met the ship far out from shore and searched the ship from top to bottom, refusing all bribes. Clearly something was very wrong. And when the ship was stopped again,

the second set of inspectors denied that they were repeating the inspection process, though they could be easily bribed. Suddenly, it seemed like a wise idea to spend more time on a trip to Tsatsayágga. Maybe things will have calmed down by the time you return.

In the meantime, this trip has presented another opportunity. An Imperial envoy from the Palace of Foreign Lands, Achán hiHlissána, of the high status Purple Gem clan, is accompanying you. In the close quarters of this small ship, you hope to be able to make his acquaintance and perhaps gain access to his wealthy social circle once you reach Tsatsayágga. Who knows, even if you don't gain any new clients, maybe you get yourself invited to some fancy parties.

Goals

1. Become friendly with Achán, the Purple Gem Imperial envoy.
2. Make a profit on the trip.
3. Keep your smuggling a secret. (You really don't want to have to pay back taxes to the clan or end up in prison.)

Báles hNezár

Merchant

Green Malachite, Thúmis, 31 years old		Health Points	50
		Shock Value	10
Strength	3		
Dexterity	7	Combat Value	5
Intelligence	6	Respect	0
Psyche	3	Pedhétl	4
Willpower	7	Initiative Base	7
Charisma	3	Magic Resistance	4

Attributes: Highly Skilled 4, Older 3

Defects: Bad Day 1, Impulsive 1, Responsibilities 1, Secret 1

Check for a Bad Day when the GM desires. On a roll of 9 or 10, the day is bad. Any 10 is an automatic critical failure. Any critical successes are normal 1s.

Skills:

Calligraphy (Tsolyáni, Salarvyáni, Forgery) 4

Bribery (Government) 2

Deception (Offensive) 3

Etiquette (Middle Clan) 2

Knowledge (Héru) 2

Knowledge (Jakálla) 2

Language (Salarvyáni, speak & read) 3

Language (Tsolyáni, speak & read) 3

Merchant 2

Subculture (Middle Clan) 2

Can you help it that you fall in love so easily? Is it your fault that your feelings are constant, not wafted away on the next breeze sent by gentle Lady Avánthe? And who could complain about the blessings of fertility that the goddess chooses to bestow?

It's just that, sometimes, you feel under a lot of pressure. When you married the first time at 14, you were already working in addition to studying at the temple school. Your successful balancing act encouraged you to marry your second love at 16, and your third at 19. By the time you were 24, you had 4 wives. Now at the age of 31, your wives have borne you 16 children, and your first wife is pregnant again.

It's not that you fear there won't be enough food on the table or a roof over their heads. The clan will always take care of that. And when all the children grow up, you'll be well set. It's just that you can't stand those little talks from the clan elders about giving as much as you receive, and the gentle reminders that each person should ask themselves not what their clan can do for them, but what they can do for their clan. You keep careful track of where you're seated during the festivals and how many mats your wives are given to sit upon at mealtimes. It's quite clear that if you don't contribute more than enough for your family's upkeep, your status will fall within the clan.

But how can you bring in that kind of income? Certainly not from your trade in grain, dependent as it is on the vagaries of weather and the market. Far more steady and profitable is the forgery business. You stumbled on this lucrative field one day as a young man when your first wife sighed wistfully over a party she hadn't been invited to. You hated to see her disappointed. Knowing the guest list was large, you decided to add one more and drew up an invitation for her.

It worked like a charm. Gradually, you expanded your business from party invitations to tax receipts, ship's manifests, inspection certificates, letters of introduction, and so forth. The key is quality. Fine, thick firyá-paper, well-cut seals, the best inks and flawless calligraphy. Your documents often look better than the originals. You quietly work for many people. In fact, many people think you work only for them and their close circle of friends. You choose your customers carefully, looking for mostly honest folk.

But sometimes you can't turn down a client. Two years ago, you were brought into the presence of Hu'úgga Deddlaqa'â himself, scion of the Hrúchcháqsha Family of Salarvyá. He informed you that you were now on retainer, answering to Daggála Jaggäsh. Daggála was a man of few words, tall, muscular and swarthy. At first he required an invitation to a party hosted by Dreshú'uga Khekhkhéssa, the head of the Khekhkhéssa family. Then he required dozens of writs from the Ebon Palace itself authorizing ship inspections. Then it was a letter of recommendation from Dreshú'uga for service in the Nchésh [Legion] of Lord Zrelléshqya Khekhkhéssa. Salarvyáni politics scares you to death, and you wanted out of this situation. So you leaped at the chance to travel to far-off Tsatsayágga. But you're still not away from politics. For some reason an envoy from the Palace of Foreign Realms is traveling on this small, obscure ship. You've simply kept your distance from him, and hidden all your equipment and supplies carefully, but if anyone should choose to search your baggage, your secret will be out.

Goals

1. Don't get arrested by Achán, the Imperial envoy.
2. Keep up your good reputation by helping your fellow clan members out.

Fíru hiNezár

Merchant

Green Malachite, Karákan, 23 years old

Health Points 45

Shock Value 9

Strength 5

Dexterity 4

Intelligence 4

Psyche 4

Willpower 4

Charisma 4

Combat Value 5

Respect 0

Pedhétl 4

Initiative Base 8

Magic Resistance 4

Attributes: Attractive (muscular), Friends in High Places (General Tlanéno), Older 1, Physical Advantage (Good Eyesight, Hearing, Taste), Stamina 1, Tough 1

+2 bonus to Endurance Stat or Skill checks

+1 bonus to resist poisons

Skills:

Administration (Clan) 1

Calligraphy (Tsolyáni) 1

Etiquette (Middle Clan) 2

Knowledge (Jakállá) 2

Language (Tsolyáni, speak & read) 2

Style (Jakállá) 2

Hiking (Civilian) 1

Language (Salarvyáni, speak & read) 1

Merchant 2

Observation 3

Subculture (Middle Clan) 2

Clan business is the dná-grain of life; it nourishes the body but deadens the soul. Everything changed the night of the festival. Who would have guessed that you were having sex with an attaché of General Tlanéno himself? When she invited you to visit her at the legion headquarters the next day, you went with some trepidation. After all, the tedium of a soldier's life was not for you. However, she had other plans in mind for you. It seems that the general was keen to learn about the Salarvyáni political situation, but as the commander of a legion of "river police" he lacked legitimate methods of gathering information on his own. Since your clan traveled regularly to Salarvyá, you could easily ask a few questions and keep your eyes open. She promised that the general would recompense you for your troubles, in direct relation to the value of the information you brought back.

You turned the offer over in your mind. You were being recruited as a spy. But spying for the emperor was noble. And if it wasn't precisely for the emperor, it was pretty close. Sure, General Tlanéno had favored Prince Eselné in the civil war, but so had many loyal citizens. And you would be spying on a foreign power. It didn't seem ignoble to you, and the money was very tempting. So you left the headquarters pledged to Tlanéno's service. You decided not to test your logic by informing your clan elders of your new position. Instead, you simply asked to travel to Salarvyá.

Zhurák's trip seemed the most intriguing. His destination was the capital, Tsatsayágga, which was promising. And you found it curious that although Zhurák and the other merchants, Bálesh and Mottán, are all old Salarvyáni hands, none had gone to Tsatsayágga before. You wondered if it had anything to do with the rumor that you heard when you studied up on the ruling families and legions of eastern Salarvyá: A power struggle is going on within the Khekhkhéssa family

which rules in Héru. The son Zrelléshqya tried to assassinate his father Dreshú'uga at a party two years ago. He also seems to be recruiting factions within the bureaucracy that answer to him.

To justify the trip, you need to have trade goods. So you lobbied all your closest relatives and came up with a few barrels of disparate goods. If you can sell them at market price and not be gouged too badly by customs, you should break even.

You're not sure if it was a joke or not, but before you left, the attaché pulled an eye out of her pouch and handed it to you. "If you ever need to get out of a situation with Ahoggyá, use this to buy yourself a little time. And then run away as fast as you can."

Goals

1. Gather interesting political information to pass on to General Tlanéno hiVoródlaya's attaché.
2. Try to break even financially.

Your Knowledge

Khekhkhéssa Clan

Rules Héru Headed by Dreshú'uga Middláqsha Khekhkhéssa

Son is Vindumákh Khekhkhéssa.

3 legions

Nchésh of Lord Dreshú'uga Khekhkhéssa. Under-funded. Guards Tamkade Bay (the approach to Héru) and Héru.

Nchésh of Lord Zrelléshqya Khekhkhéssa. Mighty fighters who patrol the Gilráya Forest and fight the vicious Hlutrgú in their home swamps.

Nchésh of the Two-Pronged Spear. Dreshú'uga reluctantly sent this legion off to patrol the dangerous northern border.

Hrüchcháqsha Family

Rules Chame'él. Headed by Vrummishsha Deddlaqa'â. Son is Hu'úgga Deddlaqa'â.

4 legions

Nchésh of Power Upon the Land. Their traditional defense. Stays mostly at Chame'él, and used as marines to guard shipping and the vrélq trade.

Nchésh of the Sable Sea. Sent off to guard the northern borders against the Tsolyáni & Ssú.

Nchésh of Sóngyal Isle. Oddly, devoted solely to defending this island.

Nchésh of the Circle of Light. Ahoggyá mercenaries who come from the Flats of Gyógma, across the Straits.

Gámalu hiJarášh

Sailor

Green Malachite, 38 years old, Avánthe

Health Points 65

Strength 5

Combat Value 5

Dexterity 4

Shock Value 13

Intelligence 3

Initiative Base 8

Psyche 2

Magic Resistance 3

Willpower 4

Pedhétl 4

Charisma 2

Respect 0

Attributes: Base Cunning 2, Good with Animals 2, Older 4, Tough 2, Stamina 2

Defects: Addicted (Alcohol), Uneducated

+4 to Intelligence Stat when figuring out how to avoid imminent physical injury

+2 to animal handling skill checks. Can predict wild animal behavior with a successful Intelligence check.

+2 to Wilderness Survival checks involving animals

+3 to resist poisons and similar effects

+4 to skill checks relating to endurance

When presented with an opportunity to drink, must make a Willpower check every 5 minutes to resist the temptation.

Skills:

Brawling 3

Knowledge (Jakálla) 2

Climbing (Rigging) 2

Language, Spoken (Tsolyáni) 2

Cooking 1

Language, Spoken (Salarvyáni) 2

Etiquette (Human, Medium, Tsolyánu) 1

Language, Spoken (Hijajái) 2

Fishing (Ocean) 1

Navigation (Familiarity)

Hiking (Civilian) 1

Sailing (Small Boat, Sailing Ship) 3

Knowledge (Western Salarvya) 2

Teamwork (Physical) 1

Gambling (Kévuk) 1

Dagger 1

Dagger

Damage Multiplier x 2

You've been sailing forever on Green Malachite ships. You've shipped out to every port in western Salarvyá, gambled and boozed your way across the southern islands of Tsolyánu, and had a fist fight with lowlife nakomé from every nation from Háida Pakála on down. You've been swept overboard twice in storms, stood stock-still with fear once as the humming of a Hlüss ship grew in the distance and survived three pirate attacks. The last pirate attack was the closest call. You were serving on the same ship you are now, *Heart's Delight*, when they came up out of nowhere in the middle of Tamkáde Bay. They were Háida Pakálan, mean and vicious. You could understand the shouts they called and realized they meant to kill you all. Zhurák, the ship's captain, seemed to instinctively understand this, and quit fighting, throwing down his dagger and calling out that he would buy their lives, but if he died, they'd never find the money. You prayed they wouldn't just take the money and kill you all afterwards, and thankfully, they didn't. Zhurák must have lost a great deal to them to improve their mood so mightily. From that day onward, you swore you would always ship out with him.

You've known Zhurák for a long time actually, but never thought much about him one way or another. He always seemed to like you though. Once, years ago, the ship was taking shelter from a storm in a cove along the isle of Gánga's southern shore when you saw a strange sight. Vréllq, the small ugly crustaceans that the Salarvyáni treasure so highly because of their black dye, were swarming over the rocky shore. You'd never seen them this far north before and pointed it out to your companions. No one was interested except Zhurák, who'd overheard your comment. He went out with you in one of the ship's boats and had you catch a bunch of them. He wanted to keep them alive for some reason, so you thought about it and improvised cages in water for them in the ship's hold. At the next port, Héru, Zhurák was really pleased and gave you a big bonus. He'd obviously found something to do with those ugly buggers because every trip he stops in that cove and harvests more. You've had to remind him about not taking the breeding females and the young so that this odd colony won't die out. Surprisingly, he listens to you.

Overall, life is good. Zhurák pays you well, even slips you some bottles of drónu wine occasionally. You like what you do, and you're good at it. The only thing you dislike is that Zhurák doesn't want you to drink except when you're in port. You're pretty certain he doesn't hold himself to that standard, though, and has got something stashed away in his cabin.

Goals

1. Get drunk at least once.
2. Defend Zhurák.

Qiláin hiSsaivra
OAL Bodyguard

Golden Sphere, Chegárra, 25 years old Health Points 65

Strength	7	Combat Value	7
Dexterity	6	Shock Value	13
Intelligence	5	Respect	0
Psyche	1	Pedhétl	4
Willpower	6	Initiative Base	15
Charisma	5	Magic Resistance	4

Attributes: Decisive 2, Stamina 1, Highly Skilled 2, Older 1, Poor 2, Responsibilities 2

+2 bonus to Stat or Skill checks relating to endurance
+2 bonus to Will check to recover from surprise
+1 bonus to Agility checks
+1 bonus to Etiquette checks
+1 bonus to bargaining checks

Skills:

Etiquette (Tsolyánu)	2	Observation (Military)	2
Etiquette (Middle Clan)	2	Shield, Small (Protect Other, Protect Self)	2
Etiquette (Military)	2	Sword (Short, Long)	2
Knowledge (Béy Sū)	2	Bow (Short)	3
Medical (Human)	1	Subculture (Military)	1
Language (Tsolyáni, speak & read)	2	Teamwork (Military)	1

Uniform: Blue-plumed helmet with gold crest and white trim; white kilt; dark-blue and gold shield with white trim, sandals. Routinely carry the short sword and small shield. Long sword and bow are in your quarters.

Short Sword Damage Multiplier x 3
Long Sword Damage Multiplier x 4
Short Bow Damage Multiplier x 3

You're a tirrikámu in the Omnipotent Azure Legion. Given that you're from a medium status clan, this is a very prestigious position. It took a lot to get here, both natural talent and money. You're prepared to work as hard as you must to make good on the clan's investment in you. Assignment as a bodyguard is tricky. If your charge dies, you look bad. If nothing threatens your charge, your value is unknown. So you spend your days hoping that something will happen to Achán, but not something that you can't handle.

The trip hasn't offered many opportunities yet. The ship is small, and you've managed to intimidate everyone, merchants and sailors alike. But the destination is promising. It's never safe to conduct politics in Salarvyá, and Achán is headed straight for the capital. You also heard whispered over morning chumétl that Achán survived an assassination attempt at a party two

years ago. That's sliding over into the too dangerous category, so you've vowed to keep a very close eye on him once he's in the presence of Salarvyáni.

Achán himself isn't unreasonable. For one thing, he doesn't expect you to be his servant, which is surprising since he doesn't have any servants on board the ship. He must be expecting to pick up a retinue from the embassy in Tsatsayágga.

The ship itself is unremarkable. It's smallish and not too clean. It belongs to the Green Malachite clan and everyone, other than yourself and Achán, belongs to Green Malachite. You think Green Malachite is a medium status clan like Golden Sheaf, but you've heard that down in the south, it's considered high status. This has helped you maintain a professional distance from the others. Your assessment of them is as follows:

Zhurák - A dedicated businessman, but maybe not the wisest of men

Mottán - Seems a little too friendly with Achán. You're keeping an eye on him.

Bálesh - Seems skittish. Could just be nervousness about being around his betters.

Fíru - Friendly. Likes to chat with everyone. A little too friendly with Achán.

The crew – unremarkable, careful to keep their distance from you and Achán.

Goals

1. Keep Achán safe.
2. Be noticed for a job well done.

Achán hiHlissána Imperial Envoy

Purple Gem, Ksáru, 30 years old	Health Points	40
9 th Circle, Palace of Foreign Lands	Shock Value	8

Strength	Combat Value	4
Dexterity	Respect	0
Intelligence	Pedhéti	4
Psyche	Initiative Base	12
Willpower	Magic Resistance	4
Charisma		

Attributes: Attractive (mellifluous voice), Decisive 2, Emotional Control 1, Highly Skilled 3
 Defects: Bad Days 2, Nemesis (Hrúchcháqsha Clan)

Check for Bad Day when GM desires. On a roll of 6 or more, the day is bad. Any 10s are automatic critical failures. Any critical successes are normal 1s.

+3 bonus to Charm checks
 +2 bonus to Etiquette checks (talent for snappy repartee)
 +2 bonus to Will checks to recover from surprise
 +2 bonus to any type of bargaining attempts
 +1 bonus to Agility checks

Skills:

Calligraphy (Tsolyáni) 1	Language (Salarvyáni, speak & read) 2
Charm (Professional) 3	Language (Tsolyáni, speak & read) 2
Etiquette (Government) 3	Politics (Salarvyá) 3
Etiquette (High Clan) 1	Subculture (Gov) 1
Culture (Salarvyá) 3	Subculture (High Clan) 1
Knowledge (Avanthár) 2	Theology (Ksáru) 1

You come from a long line of courtiers and were born and raised in Avanthár. Fortunately you spent the civil war abroad, accompanying the ambassador to Tsatsayágga when you were only a youth. Consequently, you speak Salarvyáni fluently, and have as good a grip on Salarvyáni politics as a foreigner can, which is to say, rather shaky. The political situation is very complex and constantly changing. The great families are constantly plotting against each other, and the families themselves are each riven with factions. To wit, the last time you were in country, you nearly died. You were attending a party two years ago, and just as you greeted Lord Dreshú'uga Khekhkhéssa, ruler of the city of Héru, a small object whirled over your shoulder and shattered against the wall just above the man. Droplets of purple liquid flew everywhere. Fortunately, you flung your arm over your face and dropped to the floor in time to avoid most of Food of the Ssú juice. Dreshú'uga was badly burned, but survived. It was clearly the assassin's weapon known as "Pa'íya's Kiss," but perhaps wielded by a less-than-professional assassin. Shaken and angered, you investigated the best you could. All you could come up with were two possibilities: Dreshú'uga's son Vindumákh may have been hurrying along his father's inevitable death, or the Hrúchcháqsha Family may have been expressing its displeasure. Relations between the two families are at a low point, some say due to the Khekhkhéssa family breaking the Hrúchcháqsha

family's monopoly on the vrélq trade; others say due to the Hrűchchąqsha's designs on the territory of the Khekhkhéssa family. Either way, you want revenge.

But on to your present business. The God-Emperor Mirusiya has sent you to Tsatsayágga after receiving a communiqué from Prince Zhurrlúga of the Chruggilléshmu family (the power behind the mad old king Griggatsétsa) urging a meeting involving a “matter of utmost urgency to both our nations.” Mirusiya is privately doubtful that the matter is so important to the Petal Throne, but he's also interested in getting a feel for what's going on in the court around the Ebon Throne. And so you've been sent. Your orders are to uncover any immediate threats to the Petal Throne, and to avoid entering into any agreements.

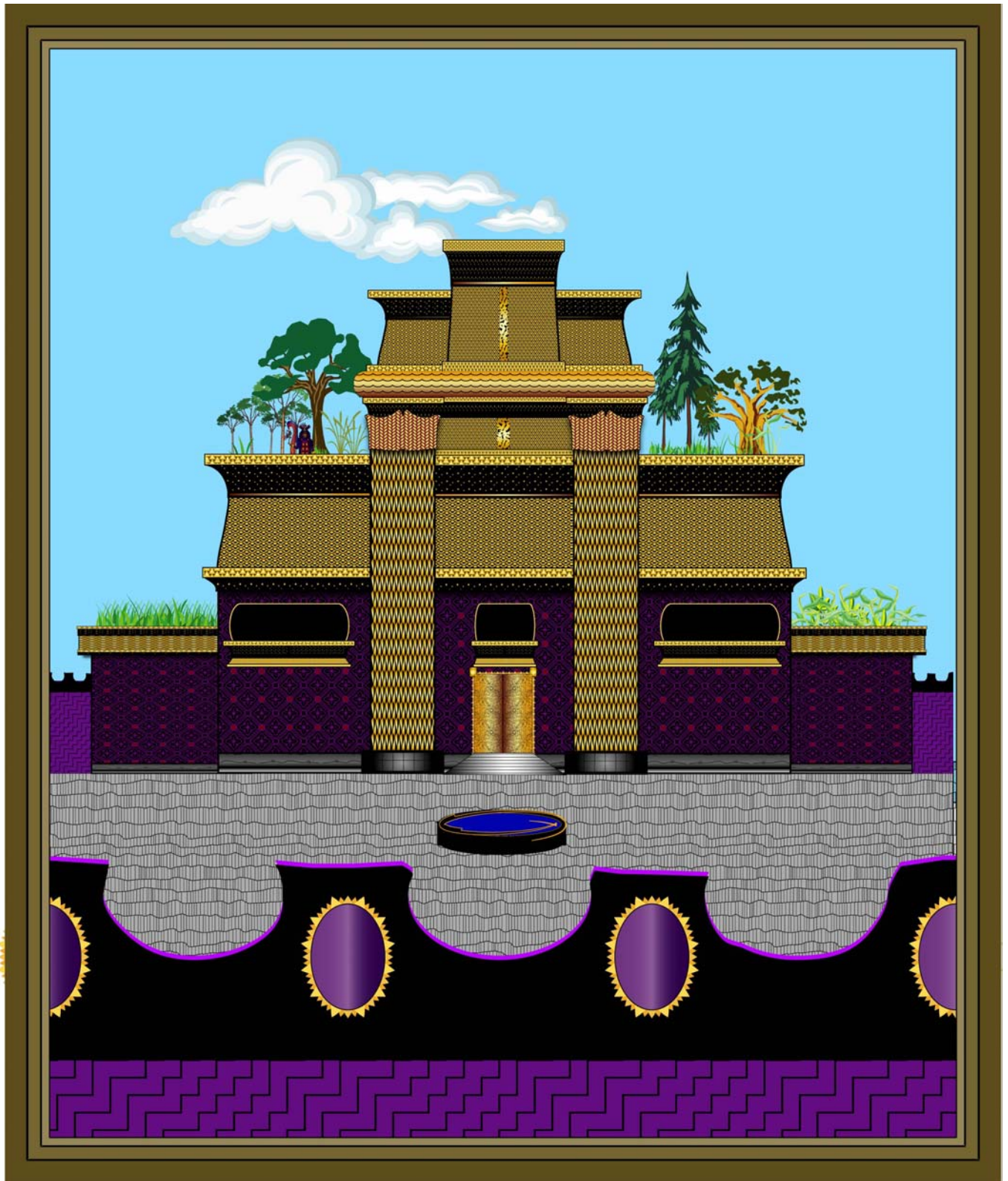
You suspect you've been sent not only because of your qualifications, but also because you lack a sponsor at the court who's looking out for your best interests. It's the age-old drawback of spending too much time abroad. Making matters worse, you must travel inconspicuously, and so can retain only one bodyguard. You will not even have any servants until you procure some at the embassy in Tsatsayágga. Thus you find yourself aboard this small, cramped ship, surrounded by common merchants from the medium-status Green Malachite clan.

Goals

1. Discover what, if anything, is brewing in this hellhole of a country.
2. Make a name for yourself, so you can avoid assignments like these in the future.

Information You've Gathered Lately

1. Hu'úga Deddlaqa'â, scion of the Hrűchchąqsha family, hasn't been seen all year out in society.
2. Vrélq prices have dropped due to a lessening in demand on the part of the Khekhkhéssa family. (Vrélq are crustaceans from which black dye is obtained.)
3. Religious fanatics are running wild in eastern Salarvyá.
4. The Temple of Shirringgáyí has quietly been gathering some very strange materials, fueling rumors of preparations for a historic demon summoning.
5. The Nchësh [Legion] of Sóngyal Isle (run by the Hrűchchąqsha family) has greatly expanded the perimeter that they defend around Sóngyal Isle. It's rumored that they've even started sinking ships.



Chief Ritual Priest Èsasüni hiKoyúga of the Dark Moon clan strolls the rooftop gardens of his clanhouse before preparing for midnight services at the Temple of Grugánu in Hmakuyál