

The New Arrival

by Peter Gifford

Jegrish felt the world under him pitch from side to side as he left the gangplank and stood on the dock. Behind him, from among the crowds of peasants, shuffling slaves and sweating workers, the heavy-set man called Hunúmal came forward to roughly grab his arm.

"La, young Jegrish, you gawp like a new arrival from the backward isles of Tsoléi. But wait - by Avánthe's rosy nipples, I forgot, that's just what you are!"

The young man smiled crookedly at Hanúmal's hearty guffaws and made a mental note to try not to stare at the wonders before him. It was difficult, however. Here at last, after more than a month on the stinking ship The Brow of Blúmish, was the great city of Jakállá, famed throughout the five Empires. Here was the traditional first port of call for those new to the great Empire of Tsolyánu. Here country bumpkins (like myself, he thought ruefully) could rub shoulders in the street with noblemen and priests, soldiers and clan-lords. Through the morning haze, beyond the buildings that crowded the shore, he could see the tops of mighty pyramids, vast temples dedicated to one of the Lords of Change or Stability. And the throngs of people! A boy from a small fishing village could scarcely imagine that there could be so many people gathered in one place. The wharfs were thronged with stallholders selling goods, beggars crawling through the dust, slaves running errands ... there, a palanquin holding a fat nobleman bobbed above the heads of the crowd. There, members of a Tsolyáni legion, dressed in blue and gold lacquered armour, tramped efficiently along the shore, the crowd parting before them. Their scalloped Chlén-hide swords clacked against their thighs as they walked. Jegrish felt his eyes smart with so many wonders. His nostrils, too, filled with exotic odours he could not identify, mixed with the sharp scent of sweat and the dry dust the crowds kicked up.

"Come Jegrish," said Hanúmal above his left ear, "shall we plunge into the river of life together?"

Jegrish shook his head eagerly in assent, looked up at his new friend, and began the walk down the dock to the shore. He had not gone ten paces before he found his way blocked by a crowd milling in confusion before a row of Tíu-wood tables, behind which sat several officious-looking functionaries. Here was the place, Jegrish realised, where newcomers to Jakállá were quizzed about their future plans, and non-residents were directed to suitable accommodations within the Foreigner's Quarter. Ship talk had warned him of the procedure. Out of his belt pouch he drew a much-folded document, his recommendation from the Old One at the Clan of the Wicker Brush back in Miyél on Llürúra Isle, and for the hundredth time stared at the strange characters and pictures. They meant nothing to him, but he had been told to present them on his arrival, and he would find a related clanhouse in Jakállá who could give him a sleeping mat and perhaps even a few copper Hlásh with which to start his new life.

Before long he found himself the subject of a piercing black-eyed stare through heavy brows. The official, dressed in a stained white tunic with an elaborate pectoral and leather skullcap, looked bored and hot. Behind him a looming hulk of a man in Chlén-hide armour stood ready to back up his edicts.

"Name and clan?" said the official, bending his head over a parchment crowded with writing.

"Jegrish Meshmúyel, Clan of the Wicker Brush, Miyél, Tsoléi." answered Jegrish.

The official scowled in a dismissive fashion. "Do you have papers?" Jegrish hurriedly handed over his parchment and the man unfolded and read the characters. Jegrish, distracted by the site of a hulking reptilian Shén conversing with a market-seller, did not see the official's expression change slowly from boredom to shock, and thence to wonder.

"Boy ... errr ... you are sure these are your papers? Speak truly now, and swear by Lord Hnálla's changeless light that you do so!"

"Of course master," answered Jegrish, feeling fresh sweat break out on his brow, "I've carried them close all the way from my clanhouse. Is there something wrong? I have only the need for a place to lay my head, perhaps ..."

The official was on his feet now, whispering something to the guard, who saluted and walked rapidly off into the crowd. "No, no, my young master, nothing is wrong, we just wish to talk with you a bit further, that's all. Standard procedure for all new arrivals from the Isles, you know. Just wait here by my desk while we arrange a fitting reception ..."

Jegrish felt panic grow in him now. Behind him, Hanúmal was getting restless; asking him what was going on. Was this to be the end of his great adventure, snuffed out before it had even begun? Had he committed some great breach of etiquette already? Perhaps he had been mistaken for some known felon, and even now the guards were on their way to escort him to take the 'high ride' on an impaling stake, or to languish for years in some forgotten dungeon. Should he run, taking his chances among the crowds or wait to see his Skein of Destiny unravel? By the Gods, what had he done?!

Hanúmal had submitted his papers and all had been found in order, though it was quickly apparent he intended to stay with his friend to share his fate. Jegrish tried to dissuade him, but secretly he was pleased at the noble action of his friend. Fisherman of a lowly clan he may be, but he would not trade the big man's friendship for the a piece of the Egg of the World itself! It was a friendship that would soon be tested, thought Jegrish, seeing the guard shouldering his way back through the crowd with a tall, black robed man at his side.

Jegrish studied the man as he drew close. He seemed unnaturally tall, an impression emphasized by the long black flowing robes he wore. On his head rested a squarish mortarboard-shaped headdress of black velvet, and below this a smiling silver mask hid his features. There was an eagerness about his movements Jegrish found disturbing. A priest, perhaps, or some functionary of the temples, probably those of one of the Gods of Change or one of their Cohorts.

The man immediately spoke whispered words to the official, then turned to face Jegrish. "Ahhh, so this is the young new arrival, I seee" - he had a disturbing way of elongating his words - "weeeell, come with me young Jegrish, and let us see what can be done about a place for you to staaaay ..."

Hanúmal moved Jegrish aside to stand before the black robed priest. "Lord, Jegrish here is a sworn clanbrother of mine. I have taken an oath on our clan hearth that I will accompany and protect him."

If the silver face could have scowled, it would have done so. "Very weeeell, but be quick about iiiit. Commmmme." He turned and began moving off into the crowd, the guard with him. Jegrish and Hanúmal looked at each other in puzzlement but could find no excuse not to obey. Whichever way his Skein was woven, thought Jegrish, he could do nothing yet but follow this strange priest.

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