

The Tears of Chiténg

by Brad Johnson

Part I

Horú hiTúkkolmu was a true follower of the Flame. Growing up in the clanhouse of the Scarlet Sail he had always been fascinated by fire, its purity, and its color. He chose early to become a warrior for the Temple of Chiténg in Jakálla and rose quickly through the ranks of the temple guards.

Certain members of the priesthood came to notice his severe devotion and he was cleverly tested and found worthy of becoming a member of "The Order of the Devouring Conflagration". His duties now were to remain within the temple and prepare for the day that His gift of purifying burning that would release the world at the end of time.

Several years after joining the Order he was summoned one night to the quarters of a fellow member, Otú Omél hiSayíncha, the head of their local cell. There standing with his compatriot was a woman in the robes of a priestess of Vimúhla.

She appeared young and by the quality of her clothing, quite rich.

Omél began, "Horú, this is the Lady Nélel hiPágresh of the Sword of Fire Clan. She has requested a member of our temple to accompany her to gather "The Tears of Chiténg". I have chosen you."

The Lady added in her Béy Sü accent, "When we begin our journey you will be at my side at all times and follow my every instruction or we shall both perish before we complete His desire. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lady," Horú replied.

"Then gather these items and meet me at my ship in one ténnre." She turned and left the room in a way that only comes from the combination of youth and being high born.

"Do not worry that you will be going on a sea voyage." Omél said, "The ship is well captained and the crew well trained. This will be a trial of your devotion to Him. As for the Lady, she is impetuous and must be watched. Her intentions are not fully known. She will leave her regular bodyguards here in the city when you leave and you will be her sole protection. Here, examine the temple's contribution to the cause."

Horú opened the case and took out a long dagger of the finest steel. Its sinuous curves wavered in the light as if it were aflame. "This is a truly glorious blade!" he whispered as he felt its weight and balance.

The second item was a small medallion on a chain. It held symbols he did not understand. "It is for temporary protection from the warmth you will have to face. Put it on now." Omél instructed.

The rest of the items were traveling clothes and accessories for sea travel, including some herbs for motion sickness.

"This is all you will need. Lastly, I must tell you," he continued ominously, "that you will know what to do, when the time comes."

Horú bowed gathered up the gear and followed the Lady's path towards the harbor.

Part II

The ship was easily identified by the Lady's clan markings. She was making no secret of her presence. It appeared fast, but Horú did not know much about such things. Final preparations were being made. Longshoremen were retrieving their gear and the dockworkers were preparing to cast off.

Horú walked up the ship's brow and was met by an officious looking Swamp Folk. He (she?) pointed towards the stern of the ship and the imposing looking Shén standing near a door to a cabin. As Horú looked around he was struck by the lack of human crew. The ship appeared to be run by Swamp Folk and he was to report to giant lizard!

Horú walked the length of the ship and stood in front of the Shén. "I am Horú hiTúkkolmu of the Scarlet Sail clan, reporting for service to the Lady Nélel."

The Shén peered down at him, tilted his head and hissed in thickly accented Tsolyani, "I am Chrikh, the Lady's First. I shall be her attendant on this voyage and you shall learn your part as time goes by. Your station shall be here outside of her door. I shall be across from you. Our meals will be brought to us. No one is allowed into the cabin without the express consent of the Lady. Take your seat now."

Horú sat in the proscribed place and observed the crew casting off the lines and setting the sail. The flow of the Missuma caught the hull and they slowly headed downriver towards the sea.

Dawn would soon be here. Normally he would be dressing for The Opening of the Eye of Flame and later preparing the sacrifices. Now that had all changed, but he took great comfort knowing that Lord Chiténg had other duties for him to perform.

The teachings of Biyü the Inextinguishable require that those standing guard must observe and learn their surroundings in order to protect those put into their care, as Biyü protected Lord Vimúhla before the Battle of the Dórmoron Plain against the night-beasts of Ksáruł. Horú, being well trained, quietly recited his morning rituals and observed.

The Swamp Folk must have excellent night vision. The swiftness of the unlighted ship through the enveloping darkness would have been madness otherwise. The captain occasionally gave course changes to avoid things that Horú never saw. The crew appeared well trained and stayed at their posts trimming the sails and climbing about performing various duties. They markedly stayed clear of the aft cabin and also away from a large round blood-red clay jar lashed to the deck in the fo'c'sle. The jar was somehow visible in the dark. It did not glow yet everyone was aware of its presence.

From the intermittent noises inside the cabin it appeared that the Lady was prone to sickness under sail. She would not be appearing on deck any time soon. Chrikh would probably be busy ministering to her the entire trip. Horú took out his own medicine and chewed on a small amount. Sickness could not be allowed to prevent him from his duties.

Ironically, being from the Scarlet Sail clan he had never been on the water. His clan-fathers had determined that his propensity to start fires was too dangerous to deal with aboard a ship. Now that he was older he knew that fiery destruction was a tool wielded in His name and not to be used frivolously. The Final Conflagration could wait.

Part III

Four days out at sea and the sun had burned Horu's skin bright red. It was painful, but he gloried in the sensation. His perceptions became heightened with the rising of the sun and climaxed at noon when he attained an almost visionary state. Never before had he felt this way. The Temple had not prepared him for such experiences.

The Shén did not appear to be affected by the sun. Then again, with those black reptilian scales how could one tell? The lizard was becoming more difficult to deal with each day. The Lady's condition had not improved and Horú was the target of his frustration. As each day past Horú had assessed that the status difference between them was not significant. Only his duty to the Lady kept him from reacting to the constant nattering and hissing. Finally one day Chrikh pompously announced that Horú was too ignorant of the mission to be of any use and wondered if he wanted to learn anything? Horú replied, "I would like to learn the best way to slowly sacrifice a Shén so that he felt the most pain possible just before he slipped from his wretched life."

Chrikh's crest slowly rose and his mace-like tail twitched. "Perhaps would should continue this at a later time?" he said and walked away.

Horú continued sitting and his eyes were now drawn to the clay jar up forward. It seemed to be whispering something not quite perceptible into his mind. "Is this the means to enlightenment or madness?" he thought. Either way it was the only path open to him.

Part IV

The visions came more frequently now. Great panoramas of flame and torture. The cries of the sacrifices were ceaseless and pleasing to the ear. Time was ending and had no meaning except for its finality.

Brief periods of lucidity allowed Horú to see that the Lady was now up and about. He had not tracked how many days they were out, but they still headed west. The Swamp Folk appeared nervous. Their premonitions were legendary and not to be ignored. Suddenly, a whirring sound filled the air. The pair of attackers appeared to be small gauze-winged insectoid creatures with preposterously large tail stingers. The first one quickly plunged its menacing spike into the throat of a Swamp Folk standing near the rail causing blood to spew out and cover the deck. In his pained thrashing the victim fell into the water causing the rest of the crew to panic and began to cover the crew.

The second one hovered for a sível, scanning with its triple set of eyes until it targeted the Lady. It turned its body and flew straight towards her running form. Halfway to its goal it was intercepted with a flash of flame and impaled upon the mainmast by Horú's blade. Everything became quiet.

When no other threat appeared the crew began to come out from their hiding places. Horú walked up to the creature and removed the dagger from the wood. The winged death appeared lifeless and he slid it off of the steel to the deck. He cut off the finger-long stinger and observed the ichor flowing from it. Turning to one of the crew he demanded a writing kit and a small ship's brazier. He resumed his seat outside of the cabin and waited. The crewman quickly returned and proffered the writing kit and set down the brazier and lighted it. Horú took out several sheets of paper and began to tear them into thin strips. Upon these he began to quickly write jagged writing in sable ink.

The recovered crew stared at this ceremony. The Swamp Folks' eyes had grown wide, the Lady stood behind her Shén with anticipation. The lizard merely glowered in his shame for failing to stop the attack himself.

After covering the strips with symbols he placed them into a pile in front of him next to the fire. Horú rose, straddled the paper and disrobed. With his left hand he grabbed his foreskin and stretched it out in front of him. His right hand grasped the flyer's stinger and plunged it through his taut member. As the blood flowed and dripped onto the strips the poison flowed into his body. His body felt as if it was afire. Truly this was a great Visitation.

He reached down and lifted the blood-spattered messages and placed them into the flaming brazier. As they caught the flame a great smoke was produced and began to cover the deck and lift into the sky. As the vapours reached the gunwales the terrifying whirring sound was again heard. The captain let out a high lonesome sound and was soon joined by the rest of his crew as they decided which was the worst fate to endure.

The smoke began go grow until it enveloped the entire ship. The reverberating menace was stopped just outside of the veil and continued to circle around them.

The captain realizing that he was not about to enter The Sacred Halls ordered the crew to turn to and set the sails to get out of there. The smoke stayed with the vessel and after a seemingly endless period the beasts gave up their hunt.

Horú removed the stinger and staunched the flowing blood. He again took his place and began to revel in the pain from the venom. He knew he would survive.

Part V

Sometime during the night the smoke dissipated, but the acrid smell remained. The crew was too exhausted from fear to complain. Their captain had witnessed many things at sea in his time, but never anything that he could not avoid. Even the close encounter with the Hlúiss hive ship when he was young had not been as frightening as yesterday's event. And they had not even reached their first stop.

Lady Nélel meditated in her cabin. She now doubted that this follower of Chiténg was the simple tool of her destiny that she had been led to believe. His spell casting abilities showed great teaching. But by whom and why? Someone would have to pay for this error; she hoped it would not be her.

As the sun reached its zenith the day became blood red. Another haze settled onto the ship that smelled of brimstone. The farther they headed west the more the gloom increased and the more sulfurous it became. The captain was expecting this occurrence and tried to calm the crew with mixed results.

"Land ho!" cried one of the lookouts.

The captain peered out through the darkness and could see the glow coming from the crack in the tallest peak on the mountainous islet ahead of them. The active volcano heralded their arrival at the Whelp of Vimúhla. Its hungry maw beckoned them towards destruction.

Part VI

The captain maneuvered his ship as close to the shore as he dared without the risking the sails catching afire. A boat was put over the side and the rowers took their positions. Chrikh unlashed the jar, and lowered it down to them and then entered the boat himself. Horú was next and finally The Lady. As she stepped onto the soaked rope ladder she slipped and fell screaming into the ash covered sea. Horú quickly reached into the water and dragged her out apologizing for touching her person. She spluttered and cursed as she squeezed her clothes dry while the rowers deliberately stroked towards the beach.

Standing on the sand, watching the boat head back to the safety of the ship, the trio was suddenly bombarded by small hot rocks.

Chrikh put down the jar and helped The Lady to put on her protective cape. As she adjusted her clothes she gasped and fumbled around her chest searching for something. "I have lost my medallion!" she wailed. The other two began to search the sand around her. Chrikh advised her that it must have been lost when she fell in.

"What shall we do?" she asked. "I cannot survive this heat without protection." Horú stepped forward and removed the amulet from around his neck and handed it to her.

"Please use mine, Lady." He said.

Nélel accepted the necklace and looked at the amulet. Once again she was amazed at the resourcefulness of this man.

"What shall you use to protect yourself from the heat?" she queried.

Again, that flash she had seen on the ship appeared from Horú's hand and flew towards Lady where the dagger imbued itself into his neck. Chrikh stiffened, tottered and fell face first to the ground. The Lady stood stunned while Horú walked over to Chrikh's motionless body and turned it over.

"Why did you kill him?" she asked shakily.

"He is not dead, Lady. At least not yet." He replied as he took a flensing knife from his belt and began to cut a line down the centerline of Chrikh's torso from the throat to the groin. He lifted up the scaly skin and began to cut it away from the connecting tissue underneath.

"Chrikh," he said, "you should have told me the most painful way for you to die. All that I have to offer you now is an awareness of my skinning you alive."

"Your hide will be a fine sacrifice for me to use when faced with the flames." He continued. "I will try to keep you conscious as long as possible so that you may truly appreciate this journey to The Halls of Ever-Blazing Flame".

The Lady fell to her knees and stared.

Horú followed the first cut with ones along the inside of the arms and legs and around the face and tail. After cutting back everything on the front he turned the body over and continued peeling it off the back. When everything had been removed in one piece he used sand to remove the remaining bits of blood and gore from inside of the skin. "I'm afraid that we don't have time for a proper tanning, but this will do" he remarked.

Horú attached several ties from his clothes along the skin's arms, wrists, belly and legs. As the procedure continued he began to recite The Lamentations of the Flame with a resulting limning around the scales. When he was finished he stood up and examined his handiwork. Appearing satisfied he stripped, picked up the hide and stepped backward into it.

As he pulled the laces tight the skin appeared to join with his own flesh and began to glow even brighter.

Horú reached down and rolled over the Shén. He arranged the body so that the eyes faced the radiance of the volcano. "Chrikh, your final moments will be in the sight of the inferno. I envy you your death."

"Lady, it is time for us to continue up the mountain." He said to the still kneeling form.

Looking up at this black-scaled avatar of Horú she whispered, "I cannot go on with this."

"You must, Lady. To end our journey now would shame us all, especially Chrikh. Get up now, your destiny awaits." And with that Horú reached down, picked up his gear, put it on, grabbed the jar and started to walk up the slope.

Slowly Nélel lifted her feet onto the hot sand, stood up and began to follow the shadowy ophidian form.

Part VII

Horú's prediction came true. As the lava flow engulfed Chrikh it dislodged the knife that kept him paralyzed. He could now feel the searing heat as it burned through his body.

His last thought was not of his female or of his children. Nor was it of his first mating and her beauty. Neither was it of his first kill and the resulting rite of passage into adulthood at the Temple Cave of The One Who Rends. No, his final remembrance was as a child sitting in a newly sown dná field, under a lone séresh tree, eating a ch_melon.

Part VIII

The bronze coloured sky signaled the ending of the day. Soon the only light available to the travelers was from the glow of the eruption. The shaking that accompanied each noisome belch of fire threatened to cast them down the mountainside, but somehow the both of them managed to stay on their feet.

They eventually reached a small outcropping that overlooked a tremendous pool of molten rock. Horú put down the jar and gazed down into The Crucible of Spouting Flame that contained the Essence of Chiténg. The air, in an endless battle with the lava, wavered in the heat and fell back in great booming explosions. Tongues of fire darted across the surface that separated the two Planes, desperately seeking an entrance into this world. It was a mere prelude to the end of time.

Horú had to speak loudly over the roaring. "Lady, you must begin now. Chiténg will not suffer us to be here long. He grows impatient with hunger."

Nélel opened her kit and laid out the materials required for the summoning. She began by sweeping the area and constructing the Station of Kelúo. Its slanted shape stretched seven cubits, almost to the edge of the overhang. All of her previous renderings had been on the red marble floors of the temple. Here, on the uneven obsidian she had to take greater care in making sure that the lines fully connected on the glassy surface. She set the artefacts in their appropriate points and motioned for the Chiténg worshipper to take his position as she began the long litany with him.

Horú stood in the apex of the diagram, faced the Crucible and laid his fate in the gesturing hands of the priestess. He responded with the appropriate phrases after her invocations. As the ritual progressed the jar that he held in front of him began to glow. Strange markings radiated on its surface and writhed with the changing verses.

At the final invocation the pool began to swell upward and released an effulgent sphere that rose majestically to a final above their heads. It unfurled into the sinuous shape of one of the great Winged Serpents of Conflagration. Its smoldering eyes looked down upon the warded creatures with disdain. Nélel was using all of her powers of concentration to prepare for the final command. Horú removed the plug and lifted the jar up towards the beast.

Nélel spoke the words of domination and the Serpent slowly, reluctantly opened its beak and spat a great bolt of molten liquid towards Horú. The glowing death entered the gullet of the vessel and filled it with an impossible amount of fluid. After the stream had ended Horú lowered the jar and quickly replaced the seal. Nélel finished the ceremony with the order of dismissal and the serpent swiftly dove back into its fiery home.

Both participants collapsed in exhaustion. It was done.

Part IX

Dawn was about to break when the captain saw the signal from the shore. A boat was ordered away to pick up the survivors. He saw only two forms standing on the sand. This could complicate his plans. Word went out to prepare to set sail. They were going to finally leave this wretched, sudorific place.

The journey back from the place of summoning had been silent. Horú carried the jar proudly, as he would bear a sacrifice at the temple, for it was a holy instrument to be used in service of the Flame. And he fervently hoped that it would be by his hand that its power would be unleashed.

Chrikh's integument had served its purpose and was flaking off Horú's skin in great swaths. It was a relentless itching, but Horú dared not scratch and possibly lose his hold on the precious cargo. Perhaps this growing desire to scrape his skin was another test of his devotion.

There was great pleasure to be found in that.

The boat crew was horrified at the sight of the humans. They had never seen one molting before. They quickly took them on board and cast off to the ship. When would this journey ever end so that they could return to their beloved swamp?

Nélel signaled the captain to set sail once they had arrived. She went directly to her cabin. A good bathing would have been nice, but sleep won out. No dreams came to her, just the welcome emptiness of the exhausted spirit.

Part X

The following day Horú approached the Lady at the railing as she was getting some air and commented, "Gracious One, forgive me. I am not a sailor by trade but I believe that we are still sailing to the west."

"Yes," she replied, "the captain informs me that the winds are not favorable for heading directly back to Tsolyánu, so we must take a roundabout course."

"I see," said Horú, detecting the falsehood, "thank you for this most illuminating knowledge." He then returned forward to his new position next to the secured jar and began meditating.

For three days the Senior Arégh of the 13th Legion of the Fourth Palace had paced the outcropping of wave worn stones looking out at the horizon for any sign of a sail. He should be pursuing the Páchi Léi through the Chákan forests with his troops, but here they were, stuck on the coast, waiting to meet some Tsolyáni clan cousin and escort her to the temple of Hrsh in Tru'unkéť. It could months before he got back to the invasion.

"Why couldn't she just sail up to Khéris and take the sakbé road from there?" he asked his aide.

"Perhaps, she desires anonymity." the Pé Chóí suggested.

"One hundred troopers is not my idea of anonymity." the arégh growled.

"It is wartime, sir. We would not be noticed amongst so many other units traveling to the front." the insectoid replied deferentially.

"That is my point, it is wartime and we will be marching in the wrong direction!" he exclaimed. With that he took one last frustrating look out to sea, turned and went to his quarters to eat.

"Too bad he has not learned from the Forest Folk." thought the aide. "A good climb through trees would fortify his patience."

Part XI

Dawn arrived with the mythical blood red warning to all sailors of an impending storm. The forward lookout hooted out a danger signal. The crew gathered along the side and gazed upon a wondrous sight. A young man in cerise-orange robes walked barefoot across the waves toward the ship. He paused as the craft passed by and returned their stares one by one. His face showed the calculating concentration of a hmá buyer evaluating a new herd at the marketplace.

The captain now knew that his mission's success was in jeopardy. He decided to cut his losses and put these humans ashore as quickly as possible. He ordered his nervous people back to their stations.

As the sun set and the clouds gathered, the coastal woods appeared on the horizon. Horú could see Mu'ugalayáni banners on land being unfurled for their arrival. He also saw the Swamp Folk crew cautiously approaching him with their boarding pikes in hand. The Lady was behind them and ordered Horú to surrender his prize.

"I am sorry, Lady, this power was not meant to be used by the Red Hats and their abominable Hrsh believers." With that he quickly reached down, broke the seal on the cap and opened the way for destruction. The pikemen were too slow to stop him. Their fear of this man, bred from their experience on this cruise, sealed their doom.

The molten fury flew into the air and coalesced into a large spinning orb above the ship. Its brightness was that of a second sun. Slowly it began to break into small pairs of iridescent spheres. With a slight gesture, Horú sent them on their task. Like angry red insects the searing balls soared towards their targets.

The Arégh saw the shining globe appear soon after the ship became visible. The reports of Lord Fara'ákh's visitation in his ranks this morning now seemed credible. He prayed that Hrsh would have a place for him in His ranks. Tears began to well up and blur his vision as a brilliant twin set of flames approached him. His body was thrown back to the ground as they entered the bony eye sockets in his skull. The pain was overpowering, but would not let him slip into sweet death.

Horú grabbed the Lady as he went over the side, down to the boat. The flailing bodies of the screaming crew had tipped over the cooking stove and caught the ship on fire.

As Horú rowed away, he gloried in the sight of the Swamp Folk becoming living candles as the sails burned and the hull sank gradually beneath the waves.

The carnage on the ship had numbed Nélel to the sight that lay before her. The blind, broken warriors aimlessly wandered about the rocks and underbrush, their minds gone from the suffering. She went to the commander's tent and found her cousin in the throes of agony, holding his empty eyes. He did not respond to any of her entreaties.

She looked up at Horú and asked, "Why was I spared this fate?"

"Because your shame shall come by leading these soldiers back through the wilderness in defeat." he replied, "And considering the atrocities they inflicted upon its denizens, I doubt you will succeed."

And with that he turned and strode into the darkened forest.

Part XII, Epilogue

Horú knew that he was being watched as soon as he left the clearing. After several tsán he stopped and waited. The bulbous shaped grey-green creature came out from behind the bushes. One of its four arms motioned for Horú to follow it. He was led to a small clearing and other Páchi Léi soon climbed down and joined them from their tree dwellings. Many of them bore wounds from the recent fighting. One of the larger males(?) approached and spoke in heavily accented Tsolyáni, "We have heard of your deeds at the water's edge. Please join us in a feast of victory in your honor."

Horú accepted, and for the first time since leaving Jakálla he relaxed.

The Four Palaces received word of the destruction of the special unit from the 13th Legion and shuddered.

Soon, disturbing reports started to come in from the Chákas of a large band of Páchi Léi availed by a Tsolyáni madman known as "Horú the Kindler of Mournful Tears".

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