

Visitations of Glory

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1 The Great Chlén Race

by Krista Donnelly

Author's Introduction

This is a scenario for up to 8 players, emphasizing role-playing and puzzle-solving skills over combat (though there is a brawl) and magic (though it's there too). The players are low clan members trying to get through their clan's rite of passage, the Great Chlén Race, who unfortunately have to deal with a chlén epidemic as well as a dangerous device of the Ancients. They'll be tempted to work against each other, but things will probably work out better if they stick together.

Player's Introduction

It is the dawn of the first day of the Great Chlén Race, a warm and sticky spring day. Almost the entirety of the High Tower clan has gathered at the foot of the ramp to the Sákbe road on the northern outskirts of Thráya. Curious on-lookers from various low and very low status clans crowd around the edges, sharing in the excitement of the historic Race. For members of High Tower, it is more than a Race; it is a rite of passage required of all young adults. Knowledge that your performance in the race will be praised or ridiculed for years to come tightens your stomach. You stand next to your chlén and chlén-cart while excited clan-children run screaming around you, and a sullen-faced clan-cousin wanders by, making last minute adjustments to your equipment. You remember that last year he came in last. He's been cleaning up chlén-shit ever since. Finally, the clan-master climbs up on his make-shift dais and clears his throat, preparing to address you. Gradually, the crowd quiets down, and he begins:

"History records that the Great, Ever-Glorious Emperor Métlunel II had urgent need of materials to rebuild Béy Sü. He called for wood to be brought from Thráya, and we answered the Imperial Call. In his pleasure at our service, the Great Chlén Race was begun. Of course, we will not go all the way to Béy Sü," he pauses and fixes you all with a glare while chuckles drift through the crowd, "but great honor will come to him who finishes first at Tékrís in three days' time. May the Gentle Lady Avánthe bless the best chlén."

You know he's left out a lot, but he was never one for speeches, and you know it all anyway. You know the secret to the Race's fame among the lowest of the clans and the clanless is that whoever finishes first is automatically granted membership in High Tower clan. This uneasy tradition also dates back to Métlunel II who was so pleased with the timely delivery of materials that in a public proclamation he praised, "these, the members of High Tower clan." Unfortunately, High Tower had conscripted some even lower status locals to help drive all the carts. So, to keep the Emperor's words true, the Palace of the Realm made all the drivers of the carts into members of High Tower clan. And thus a tradition was born.

The Race lasts for three days and covers 30 miles. Given that chlén only travel at an average of 1.5 miles an hour, making 9 miles a very respectable distance for one day, you'll have to make them move faster than normal to finish the race on time. Additionally, the course does not stay on the Sákbe road. The second day of the race consists of a five mile detour on dirt paths through dná-grain fields to the village of Mmórch. You have to pick up a chit from the village elder, Akársh, to prove you made it there before heading back to the Sákbe road on another dirt path. On the third day, you must cover the last ten miles to the village of Tékrís where your clan members are waiting for you. The second day of the race

is regarded as the most difficult challenge.

Now that the speech-making is over, you climb up into the carts and coax the chlén into action. There are eight contestants this year, five 15-year-olds from High Tower, two entrants from very low status clans and one clanless scumbag who puzzled everyone by showing up with a chlén and a cart at the last moment. Let the Race begin!

Arkútu hiHlissána

High Tower, Avánthe, 15 years old

<i>Strength</i> 4	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Dexterity</i> 4	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Intelligence</i> 6	<i>Initiative</i> 4
<i>Psyche</i> 2	<i>Health Points</i> 55
<i>Willpower</i> 7	<i>Shock Value</i> 11
<i>Charisma</i> 7	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 4
<i>Good Reputation (Hard Worker), Highly Skilled, Uneducated, Younger</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[Intelligence]
<i>Knowledge (Sákbe Road)</i> 1	[Intelligence]
<i>Etiquette (Low clan)</i>	[Intelligence or Charisma]
<i>Subculture (Low clan)</i>	[Charisma]
<i>Animal Handling (Chlén)</i> 2	[Willpower]
<i>Brawling</i> 1	[Melee Attack Value]
<i>Bribery</i> 1	[Charisma or Intelligence]
<i>Occupation (Chlén-cart driver)</i> 3	[Willpower]

You hate Drésu. Just because he's the son of a clan-elder, he gets all the breaks. He conveniently got first choice among all the chlén for the race. Though frankly, you're a little surprised that he chose Siyuzhárin (Smart One) rather than Mazákin (Strong One). Mazákin can travel faster than any of the other chlén, and doesn't tire as easily. So, Drésu's made one mistake already. But he's still starting in a better position. Some of his uncles are the best drivers and chlén-handlers in the clan, and he's had private lessons with them.

But you knew this was happening and last year you found a way to even the scales a little. While you were in the market, you wandered past an old tribal shaman sitting in front of a mat in the market-place. He was passing through town as part of a caravan from some little nation in the far north-east that you've never heard of. He offered a plant for sale, mitláríkh, which he praised to the gods as a wonder herb. It was cheap so you bought some. You fed some to a chlén, and the chlén did get a boost of energy. So you embarked on a secret experiment, growing more mitláríkh and giving it to chlén to see how it affects performance. The more you saw, the more wonderous the herb seems. A chlén can be made more energetic for days. And the ones you fed it to didn't get sick as often. The only side-effects seem to be a temporary lethargy afterwards and, occasionally, a coat that doesn't peel as well. You've found what you feel is the perfect balance between performance and side-effects. You haven't mentioned it to anyone, but you're taking quite a few bags of it with you on the Race.

Additional Information

1. You were given 10 qirgáls to use for any unexpected expenses on the road.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.

3. In addition to the mitlárikh, you took along everything you saw Drésu loading, including a long, spiked goad; a stiff-bristled, long handled brush for scratching around the joints (they like that); giant sharp forceps for removing parasites; pots of grease for the cart axles; buckets of tarry ointment to slather on any abrasions or injuries that tear the skin; a massive coarse file in case the most recent peeling hasn't gone quite right and you need to do a little grooming; and supplemental bags of good dná-grain.
4. Food and water for the chlén are available at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch due to standing agreements your clan has with Flat Rock.

Goals

1. Win the race.
2. Try to get the others to follow you instead of Drésu.
3. Uphold the clan reputation and defend its interests.

Drésu hiVravodáya

High Tower, Avánthe worshipper, 15 years old

<i>Strength</i> 3		<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Dexterity</i> 4		<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Intelligence</i> 5		<i>Initiative</i> 4
<i>Psyche</i> 4		<i>Health Points</i> 45
<i>Willpower</i> 6		<i>Shock Value</i> 9
<i>Charisma</i> 4		<i>Magic Resistance</i> 4
<i>Friends in High Places, Good with Animals, High Lineage, Responsibilities, Uneducated, Younger</i>		
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2		[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Knowledge (Sákbe Road)</i> 1		[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Etiquette (Low clan)</i>	1	[<i>Intelligence or Charisma</i>]
<i>Subculture (Low clan)</i>	1	[<i>Charisma</i>]
<i>Animal Handling (Chlén)</i> 1		[<i>Willpower</i>]
<i>Occupation (Chlén-cart driver)</i> 1		[<i>Willpower</i>]

You are the son of a prominent clan-elder, part of a lineage with a well-deserved reputation for knowing how to breed and manage chlén. You've been carefully taught by your fathers and uncles and shown many tricks on how to handle different situations and how to judge chlén. You carefully selected the chlén you'll be using in the race. His name is Siyuzhárin (Smart One). While he's not as strong as Mazákin, he is smarter than all the others. He responds readily to your commands and is well-motivated. You've followed your father's advice that a well-stocked chlén-cart is more advantageous than a lighter, emptier one. Thus, in addition to your own food, water, blankets and camping burner, you have added bags of nutritious dná-grain (in case the Flat Rock peasants who traditionally supply you on the route have only greens available), sweet melons that chlén love, and various other fruits, gourds and sweet roots that have served as treats in the past. You're confident that you'll win the race.

But winning personally is not enough. The clan stakes its reputation on the line every time a Race is run. If any clan member disgraces himself or herself, it reflects badly on the whole clan. And every chlén is a major investment, a beast of burden that should be able to serve the clan for a good 50-75 years (longer than you probably!). Frankly, other than Arkútu, you're not sure about the abilities of your fellow clan-members. It wouldn't do for one of the non-High Tower people to show you all up.

Additional Information

1. You have 20 qirgáls to spend on bribes. Everyone else has been given 10, but your father slipped you some extra. He's warned you privately that some bribery is expected as a standard business expense, but that there are also always unexpected expenses on the road.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.

3. Your equipment includes a long, spiked goad; a stiff-bristled, long handled brush for scratching around the joints (they like that), giant sharp forceps for removing parasites, pots of grease for the cart axles, buckets of tarry ointment to slather on any abrasions or injuries that tear the skin, and a massive coarse file in case the most recent peeling hasn't gone quite right and you need to do a little grooming.
4. Food and water for the chlén are available at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch due to standing agreements your clan has with Flat Rock.

Goals

1. Win the race.
2. Watch out for the well-being of the other chlén.
3. Try to prevent your fellow clan-members from making fools of themselves.

Dridákku

Clanless, No deity, 21 years old

<i>Strength</i> 7	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 7/5
<i>Dexterity</i> 6	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 6/4
<i>Intelligence</i> 4	<i>Initiative</i> 6
<i>Psyche</i> 5	<i>Health Points</i> 80
<i>Willpower</i> 6	<i>Shock Value</i> 16
<i>Charisma</i> 5	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 4
<i>Low Status, Hard Luck, Tough (-3 to resist poisons), Uneducated</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[Intelligence]
<i>Knowledge (Thráya)</i> 2	[Intelligence]
<i>Etiquette (Clanless)</i> 1	[Intelligence or Charisma]
<i>Subculture (Clanless)</i> 1	[Charisma]
<i>Brawling</i> 4	[Melee Attack Value]
<i>Streetwise (Thráya)</i> 1	[5]

You know nothing about chlén, except that they're big and strong, and you better get out of the way if one is coming towards you. You wouldn't even be here if it weren't for the strangest encounter that you had yesterday. You were hanging out like usual in the Foreign Quarter, trying to get some work as a laborer or a bearer for some clueless foreigner who wouldn't realize the ignobility of hiring a clanless scum like yourself. Or, if that failed you, mugging said clueless foreigner. Though you prefer honest work, you are extremely capable at defending yourself. But last night . . .

You were approached by a woman. She wouldn't give her name, but judging by her clothing, she was a Ksárul priestess. She made you the best offer you'd heard in a long time. In exchange for a chlén, a chlén-cart, and some money (5 hlásh and 20 qirgáls), you are to take a small sack and a small, rolled-up piece of parchment to some guy in the Ksárul temple in Béy Sü. Probably realizing you didn't know anything about driving chlén, she instructed you to enter the Great Chlén Race run by the High Tower clan. It only goes for 3 days toward Béy Sü, but you'll have learned enough by then. And when you reach Béy Sü and have delivered the package and parchment, you're free to sell the chlén and cart or try and set yourself up as a chlén-cart driver. You haven't decided yet which would be the best course.

Before she left, she threatened your life if you opened the sack or what was in it. She wouldn't have to kill you, she said. You wouldn't live long enough for that. You're not sure if she was telling you the truth or trying to scare you. You're also not sure why she entrusted it to you.

Additional Information

1. Your chlén's name is supposed to be Thusún (Tasty!). The cart came with a long, spiked goad. You've seen chlén-cart drivers use a goad in the past to urge the chlén along. There's also a sack of uninspiring dná-grain cakes, waterskins, and a blanket for you in the cart.
2. No one's talked to you since you showed up that morning and announced you were taking part in the Race.

Goals

1. Keep the chlén moving so you can reach Béy Sü.
2. Get revenge on anyone who treats you badly (but, obviously, do it stealthily).
3. Sure wouldn't hurt to win the race and pick up clan membership along the way too. Though that does seem like a long shot.

Ghúru hiChayón

High Tower, Avánthe worshipper, 15 years old

<i>Strength</i> 6	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 6/4
<i>Dexterity</i> 5	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 5/3
<i>Intelligence</i> 5	<i>Initiative</i> 5
<i>Psyche</i> 6	<i>Health Points</i> 60
<i>Willpower</i> 6	<i>Shock Value</i> 12
<i>Charisma</i> 5	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 5
<i>Impulsive, Uneducated, Younger</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[Intelligence]
<i>Knowledge (Sákbe road)</i> 1	[Intelligence]
<i>Etiquette (Low clan)</i> 1	[Intelligence or Charisma]
<i>Subculture (Low clan)</i> 1	[Charisma]
<i>Brawling</i> 1	[Melee Attack Value]
<i>Bribery – Familiarity</i>	[Charisma or Intelligence]
<i>Occupation (Chlén-cart driver)</i>	[Willpower]
<i>Streetwise (Sákbe Road)</i>	[6]

You're strong, you're smart, you're quick, and nobody pushes you around, so why aren't you doing better? The thing is, you just don't care about chlén. They stink, they're stupid, and they're constantly bellowing, farting, belching and just plodding along. But you were born into a chlén-raising clan so you're stuck with them. Well, at least until this god-cursed Race is over with. The way to better clan jobs is through the race. If you do well (you don't have to win, just place in the top 3), you might only have to put in a couple years as a driver before you finagle your way into some more desirable position, likely guarding the clanhouse or keeping the books or something. You know Drésu, the clan-elder's son, is probably going to win. You figure it would be wise to watch him closely and imitate what he does. And if you can think of a way to put some of the others at a disadvantage, you'll take it.

Additional Information

1. Your chlén is named Razhín (Happy Guy). He seems easily manageable. Your equipment includes a long, spiked goad and a bucket of grease for the cart axles. For yourself, you have food, water, blankets and a camping burner. You were given 10 qirgáls for any unexpected expenses on the road.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.
3. Food and water for the chlén are available at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch due to standing agreements your clan has with Flat Rock.

Goals

1. Finish in the top 3.

2. Uphold the clan reputation and defend its interests.

Júgar hiBa'áshcha

Arch of Heaven, Avánthe worshipper, 20 years old

<i>Strength</i> 5	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 5/3
<i>Dexterity</i> 4	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Intelligence</i> 5	<i>Initiative</i> 4
<i>Psyche</i> 4	<i>Health Points</i> 50
<i>Willpower</i> 5	<i>Shock Value</i> 10
<i>Charisma</i> 6	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 4
<i>Low Status, Highly Attractive, Uneducated</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Knowledge (Thráya)</i> 1	[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Etiquette (Very Low clan)</i> 1	[<i>Intelligence or Charisma</i>]
<i>Subculture (Very Low clan)</i> 1	[<i>Charisma</i>]
<i>Animal Handling (Chlén)</i> 2	[<i>Willpower</i>]
<i>Artisan (Brewer) – Familiarity</i>	[<i>Dexterity</i>]
<i>Brawling</i> 1	[<i>Melee Attack Value</i>]
<i>Bribery</i> 1	[<i>Charisma or Intelligence</i>]

You're a member of Arch of Heaven, a very low status clan which makes its trade in the dná-grain beer brewing business. You have no problems following your clan's trade, but when your elders observed how attractive you were and how good you were with animals, they conceived another plan for you. In exchange for monetary payment, they accepted a young chlén, captured in the wild. At first, the chlén was sickly. It shook a lot and had trouble breathing, so you stayed by its side, scratching its joints with a stiff-bristled brush, and feeding it a diet heavy in beer-soaked grain. To your delight, the chlén took to the diet and recovered. You named her Kumésukh (Treasure). She even seems a little frisky. You've spent the past year working with her, and think you've taught yourself the rudiments of how to drive a chlén-cart. Now comes the big test – entering and winning the Great Chlén Race.

It's a long shot for you to win, but it's a cheap investment for the clan that could pay off big. If you win, you become a member of High Tower, one step up on the status scale. Not only will this bring prestige to Arch of Heaven, but you'll also be in a position to give the clan breaks on cartage fees. You hope you won't disappoint your clan elders.

Additional Information

1. You've been given 8 qirgáls to grease the palms of any officials you may meet during the Race. The Sákbe road guard are notorious.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.
3. You know that food and water for the chlén are available for High Tower members at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch due to a long-standing agreement High Tower has with the Flat Rock clan. You think the water is free to anyone. But you don't want to have to purchase food. Thus, you have filled your cart with

bags of dná-grain to feed Kumésukh. Your clan buys it in bulk so it's not that expensive for you. You also have the long, spiked goad that chlén drivers use as well as the stiff-bristled brush that Kumésukh likes so much. And, most importantly, you have your secret weapon: kegs of dná-grain beer to soak Kumésukh's grain in.

Goals

1. Win the race!
2. Or, if winning doesn't seem like an option, make some friends. After all, you reason, there is more than one way to join a clan. And you **are** far more attractive than anyone else here (and, you suspect, the only one with beer).

Nebússa hiHlisséna

High Tower, Avánthe worshipper, 15 years old

<i>Strength</i> 7	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 6/4
<i>Dexterity</i> 4	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 5/3
<i>Intelligence</i> 3	<i>Initiative</i> 6
<i>Psyche</i> 7	<i>Health Points</i> 60
<i>Willpower</i> 5	<i>Shock Value</i> 12
<i>Charisma</i> 4	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 5
<i>Attractive, Decisive, Hard Luck, Uneducated, Younger</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Knowledge (Sákbe Road)</i> 1	[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Etiquette (Low clan)</i> 1	[<i>Intelligence or Charisma</i>]
<i>Subculture (Low clan)</i> 1	[<i>Charisma</i>]
<i>Dagger</i> 1	[<i>Melee Attack Value</i>]
<i>Occupation (Chlén-cart driver) – Familiarity</i>	[<i>Willpower</i>]

Your ambition is to join a legion, any legion. You settled on this early in life and did a lot of manual labor for the clan in order to build up your strength. But when you approached the Palace of War and applied, you were turned down by the legions. It seems that the other recruits already had some weapons training and were preferable to you. It probably didn't help that your clan couldn't afford any bribes on your behalf. As a parting insult, they suggested you apply for the Sákbe Road Guard. Fuming, you returned home. You haven't given up hope, though. If you can get some money, maybe you can get some training from an ex-legionnaire. Your first step is to pass the hurdle of the Race. Then you can start working as a chlén-cart driver and doing some transporting of your own on the side.

Additional Information

1. Your chlén is named Leláin (Wonderful). She's a fine, strong-looking chlén. You actually don't know much about chlén but you think she's a good one. Your equipment includes a long, spiked goad and a bucket of grease for the cart axles. For yourself, you have food, water, blankets and a camping burner. You were given 10 qirgáls for any unexpected expenses on the road.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.
3. Food and water for the chlén are available at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch due to standing agreements your clan has with Flat Rock.

Goals

1. Do well enough in the race to not be humiliated.

2. Your cart is mostly empty. Most people prefer it that way because they think the chlén will be able to move faster. You really don't care. You'd prefer to fill it up along the way with goods for transport and start earning money immediately.
3. Keep as much of the 10 qirgáls for yourself as possible. And it wouldn't hurt if some of the money from those non-High Tower interlopers ended up in your pocket too.

Notáza hiChayón

High Tower, Avánthe, 15 years old

<i>Strength</i> 4	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 6/4
<i>Dexterity</i> 7	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 6/4
<i>Intelligence</i> 7	<i>Initiative</i> 8
<i>Psyche</i> 5	<i>Health Points</i> 40
<i>Willpower</i> 3	<i>Shock Value</i> 8
<i>Charisma</i> 5	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 5
<i>Behavioral Characteristic (Fear of chlén), Tough (-1 bonus to resist poisons), High Stamina, Uneducated, Younger</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Knowledge (Sákbe Road)</i> 1	[<i>Intelligence</i>]
<i>Etiquette (Low clan)</i> 1	[<i>Intelligence or Charisma</i>]
<i>Subculture (Low clan)</i> 1	[<i>Charisma</i>]
<i>Artisan (Cartwright)</i> 2	[<i>Dexterity</i>]
<i>Artisan (Leatherworker)</i> 1	[<i>Dexterity</i>]

You have been dreading the Race for years. You would really rather do anything else than be around chlén. It wasn't always that way. But then one day when you were a young child, you were playing with a cousin while feeding the chlén. He slipped and fell, and a chlén casually lifted a leg and put it down, crushing his neck. You've never been able to look at one of the beasts in the same way since. You flinch when they bellow and jump back when they snort, groan or start moving. Life in a chlén-raising and -driving clan has not been easy for you. Fortunately, you were smart enough to think of work arounds. There are other aspects to the clan's business besides dealing directly with chlén. So you devoted yourself to learning the support aspects. For your age, you are extremely good at repairing carts, leads, and all the equipment needed to keep a cart in good working condition. And you're not bad at working the hide of a peeled chlén either. You petitioned to be allowed to skip the Race, but you were turned down. It's a tradition, a rite of passage. No one of able mind and body is exempted. So you're gritting your teeth and going near a chlén for the first time in a very long time.

Additional Information

1. Your chlén is named Bajékh (Trouble). You don't know anything about him other than his name, which scares you. He was the only left after everyone else had chosen theirs. Your equipment includes a long, spiked goad; a bucket of grease for the cart axles and any equipment you imagine could be needed if a cart broke down for any reason. For yourself, you have food, water, blankets and a camping burner. You were given 10 qirgáls for any unexpected expenses on the road.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.
3. Food and water for the chlén are available at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch due to standing agreements your clan has with Flat Rock.

Goals

1. Don't die.
2. Get others to do as much of the chlén care, feeding and driving as possible.
3. Uphold the clan reputation and defend its interests.

Onél hiKóyuga

Artificers of Iron, Avánthe worshipper, 20 years old

<i>Strength</i> 4	<i>Melee Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Dexterity</i> 4	<i>Missile Attack/Defense</i> 4/2
<i>Intelligence</i> 4	<i>Initiative</i> 4
<i>Psyche</i> 6	<i>Health Points</i> 60
<i>Willpower</i> 8	<i>Shock Value</i> 12
<i>Charisma</i> 6	<i>Magic Resistance</i> 5
<i>Low Status, Highly Skilled, Uneducated</i>	
<i>Language (Tsolyáni, speak)</i> 2	[Intelligence]
<i>Knowledge (Thráya)</i> 1	[Intelligence]
<i>Etiquette (Very Low clan)</i> 1	[Intelligence or Charisma]
<i>Subculture (Very Low clan)</i> 1	[Charisma]
<i>Animal Handling (Chlén)</i> 3	[Willpower]
<i>Artisan (Smith)</i> 2	[Dexterity]
<i>Brawling</i> 2	[Melee Attack Value]
<i>Bribery – Familiarity</i>	[Charisma or Intelligence]
<i>Streetwise (Thráya)</i> 2	[6]

This is the third time you've entered the Race. Your clan bought this chlén two years ago, and you've been entering the race ever since. But the chlén's performance demonstrates why you were able to afford it. It's reliable but extremely slow, plodding along no matter what you do to encourage it. Although you want this year to be different, you really can't see how that's possible. The only thing you can think of is to sabotage everyone else, but that's ignoble and would be difficult to do without being noticed. Maybe you can just enjoy the trip, and convince your clan to sell the chlén and pocket the money. After all, the clan could always advertise it as "a chlén from the Great Race!"

Just in case sabotage is possible, you've secreted in your cart, a long sharp knife to saw through leather straps, acid in bronze cylinders to pour on hooves, some poisonous plants (to sicken, not kill) to mix in with the other fodder (in case they're feed greens instead of grain), and metal filings to jam up the axles. This is well concealed since your cart is filled with bundles of greens and bags of grain to feed the chlén so that you don't have to spend any money for food en route.

Additional Information

1. Your chlén's name is Okánikh (the Groaner). You named the chlén after seeming how much it doesn't like to work. You have 8 qirgáls to use to bribe the Sákbe Road Guards and the village elder at Mmórch. Through experience, you know that you only need to give them a qirgál each. The rest are for emergencies.
2. Chlén eat an average of 100 pounds of feed a day (less if it's good quality grain), drink 45-50 gallons of water a day, and can pull 350-450 pounds without being stressed. A chlén can die of thirst in 3 days.
3. Water for the chlén are available at any big platform on the Sakbe road and at the village of Mmórch. Extra food is too, but if you're not from High Tower, you have to pay for it.

Goals

1. Win the race, but not at any cost. Don't get caught in sabotage and disgrace the clan.
2. Enjoy yourself. At least you're not working at the hot forges.
3. Don't let anyone get away with bad-mouthing your clan or your chlén.

The Race

The Race is very important to the High Tower clan. It not only tests their young adults, but also showcases the chlén's abilities. It's a great loss of face if a non-clan member comes in first. This has only happened three times in the history of the race. One suspects that High Tower members have banded together to prevent this outcome on more than one occasion, though sabotage is officially banned.

In addition to testing chlén-driving skills, the race is meant to test resourcefulness, response to pressure and clan solidarity. Entrants are rated as to how they responded to bribery situations, how they looked after the chlén and whether they resorted to dirty tricks (and if so, what kind did they use). Sabotaging another driver is only ignoble if you're caught (much as is the case in real life when competing with another clan), but harming a chlén (the life-blood of the clan) is unforgivable. Abandoning a sick or injured chlén is also ignoble and will disqualify a potential winner. This is general knowledge within the clan, though it's never explicitly stated. Players should roll versus their Subculture skill if they're in doubt about their actions. Of course, none of this applies to the non-High Tower entrants. By tradition, they only need to follow the prescribed route and arrive at Tékris first.

With regards to bribery, the PCs are expected to spend the normal amounts at each situation. Spending more will get them a lecture from the clan elder at the end, spending less will raise eyebrows and initiate inquiries to ascertain whether anyone was insulted or threatened (and thus made into enemies of the clan).

Joyous Burden Society

Joyous Burden is a society within the Temple of Avánthe devoted to enhancing the capabilities of chlén. They are interested in breeding greater strength and speed, intelligence and docility, and greater fertility and survival of the young. It's a curious alliance of wealthy mercantile clans, the shipping and chlén-raising clans and some of the lowest clans, such as Polished Stone, whose task it is to keep the Sákbe roads clean.

Joyous Burden has assisted in the breeding of Siyuzhárin, Lélain, Mazákin and Razhín. Naturally, it is an historic advocate of the Great Chlén Race. Some members dream of the day when chlén will be able to trot right along as they traverse the empire.

The society is present during the race through its representation among the Polished Stone clan members. They keep a close eye on the entrants throughout the segments of the race run on the Sákbe road. Naturally, some of them are betting on the outcome. If their favorite isn't in the lead, they'll approach the driver with offers of help and suggestions. They will not harm a chlén, but will suggest (and help provide) a richer grain diet, melon treats to entice better performance and tips on how to use the goad better. They can also be sources of other kinds of help – running to the nearest platform to get supplies needed for repairs, trying to find someone to help in other situations or spying on someone who's further ahead or behind in the race. Be flexible with them, but remember that they have no money and can't read or write. They also won't fight unless a favored chlén is in trouble. They'll report any abuse of the chlén.

The Breathing Disease

The Breathing Disease is well known and widely feared among the specialists of the Temple of Avánthe. It's a serious threat since it spreads quickly and is usually fatal within two days. It is spread by proximity and is usually controlled by killing all infected animals and burning their bodies. Due to this quick and ruthless response, the Breathing Disease is rarely seen. However, it occasionally crops up again, particularly in wild chlén. Chlén, hmá and hmélu are the most susceptible. Humans and the non-humans races are not affected.

Symptoms

In the early stages, there's swelling around the jaws and down the neck. The animal then begins to exhibit severe shortness of breath, often holding its head low and outstretched. Fatigue sets in, and then progresses to tremors. Finally, the animal gives up and tries to lie down on its stomach or side. After collapsing, the animal will die in 8-12 hours.

Anyone with knowledge of chlén will recognize the disease by the second day.

Cause

Kumésukh, the chlén from Arch of Heaven, is a carrier of the Breathing Disease. Arch of Heaven doesn't realize this since they have no other chlén. By the end of the first day, any chlén who have been in close proximity with Kumésukh will exhibit early symptoms. By the end of the second day, unless a chlén has consistently been at least half a mile away from any infected chlén, they will also be infected. The sole exception is Mazákin, since he has been fed the plant that cures the disease.

Cure

The Temple of Avánthe knows of no cure. Spells of Alleviation and Healing do not affect non-magical diseases. Júgar may think that the alcohol in Kumésukh's diet cured it, but that was only a coincidence. Arkútu has accidentally hit on the cure, a plant from the far north-east known as mitlárikh. He bought it from a shaman who was passing through with a caravan last year. The shaman praised it as a wonder herb, and he's been growing it and experimenting with it ever since. Any chlén fed mitlárikh will cease progression of the symptoms and gradually recover. He's not carrying enough to completely cure all the infected chlén (unless only a few get infected), but it will stop them from dying.

If this knowledge is shared with Joyous Burden, High Tower will enjoy great prestige and favor with the Temple of Avánthe for generations to come. While mitlárikh has a perfunctory entry in the 30 volume set, *The Scrolls of Knowing Those Things Which Rejoice in the Soil*, its curative powers were previously unrecorded.

The Artifact and the Society of the Blue Light

Background

Several Ksáruł priests from the Béy Sü faction of the Society of the Blue Light were investigating an underground Engsvanyáli-era complex which utilized a natural cave system not far from Thráya. Since the complex had been known to their society for millennia, they didn't expect to find anything exciting. This made the discovery of the Artifact both

surprising and complicated. The priests were unwilling to give up such a valuable find to anyone but their patron in Bény Sü, but leaving would not only alert the temple in Thráya (who would undoubtedly plunder the site in their absence), but also highlight their lack of trust in the Thráya temple and cause political difficulties.

Thus, the priests decided to keep it with them until they finished the exploration. However, one priest, Íssa, was ambitious. So one night she took it and went out to the Foreigners' Quarters in Thráya where she found a clanless tough, Dridákku, and set him up in the race so he could leave Thráya conspicuously but without suspicion and take it to her patron in the temple in Bény Sü. It's risky, but she feels she intimidated him into obeying her, and that due to his participation in the race, he'll be easy to track down later if he betrays her.

Artifact

The artifact is dangerous. It's a green pyramidal box with leaves and nature designs inscribed on the outside. Its top tilts open to reveal an opaque, blue, regularly faceted ball inside. The ball is obviously a device of the Ancients since machinery can be dimly perceived within it. In fact, it is an eccentric Eye created by one of the Lords of Latter Times. When activated, the ball creates the equivalent of the Ksárul temple spell "The Affable Blight of Lord Uni." Unfortunately, the Eye is stuck in the 'on' position. So, many millennia ago, an Avánthe priestess was called upon to cast special Warding spell on the box to contain it. As long as the box is closed, the Eye is cut off from other-planar energy and unable to function. Opening the box is the equivalent of casting the spell.

Effect and Solutions

While shutting the box stops the continual casting of the spell, the bluish-white fungus that resulted will remain on anyone and anything within a 30 foot radius. It will spread for another 12 hours until dying naturally. The fungus can also be destroyed by fire. Victims of the fungus will die with 12 hours of exposure unless: (1) a spell of Alleviation is cast on them, (2) the affected body part(s) are amputated and (3) the fungus is burned off the body.

Temple of Avánthe

The temple has records of this spell they performed for the temple of Ksárul so long ago. In fact, the warding spell must be renewed every 500 years. When the box was moved, the temple was magically alerted. A priestess, Mríssa hi Tishkolén, and a contingent of temple guards were sent to the complex to investigate. The Ksárul priests refused to say what had happened. Unable to press the matter any further, the Avánthe priestess left. Guessing where the artifact would have been sent, she has exerted the temple's influence to get the third tier of the Sákbe road to Bény Sü shut down. In conjunction with the Sákbe Road Guard, they are searching all travelers for the artifact. This will affect the PCs when they return to the Sákbe road on the third day. If Dridákku's player opens the box early and causes a major disruption, you can speed up the arrival of the priestess so as to prevent the premature death of all the PCs. Give them a good scare though. Have the encounter be early enough so that the Breathing Disease is not noticeable enough to be diagnosed yet.

If the party decides to travel along or away from the Sákbe road after approaching it and learning of its closure, they will be chased down. If the artifact is found on Dridákku, no harm will come to him. It will simply be confiscated and taken to the temple of Avánthe in Thráya for more secure safe-keeping.

Mríssa hiTishkolén is a 14th Circle Sorcerer Priestess from the Golden Bough clan. Her spells are Alleviation (U2, G2, G4), Healing (U1-U5, U8), Fructification (T3, T6, T8) and Nutrification (U3-U6). For the purposes of the scenario, she has enough spell points to cast whatever she wants, and her spells will be successful.

Non-Player Characters

1. The Sákbe Road Guard

The captain is named Chamáng. They will stop the PCs when they water the chlén on the first day and delay them until they bribed (one qirgál). They know it's the race, and that time is important to them. They take great pleasure in this, but will not actively harm the PCs or confiscate anything unless they are attacked or insulted. They wear no armor and are equipped with short swords. They will cooperate fully with the Temple of Avánthe.

Chamáng	Short Sword 2, damage modifier x3.
Guards	Short Sword 1, damage modifier x3.
All their stats are 3s.	
Melee Attack/Defense 3/1	Shock Value 6
Health Points 30	Magic Resistance 3
Initiative 3	

2. The Peasants

The agitator's name is Sangár. He is drunk and spoiling for a fight (as are his friends) to break the tedium of agricultural labor. They will only be dissuaded from fighting if offered Júgar's beer and a little money. They are from Flat Rock, worship Avánthe, and work the fields for Golden Bough. They'll throw Golden Bough's name around a lot when reciting their incoherent grievances to justify the fight. They have self-fashioned clubs that they intend to use. They're not interested in killing so anyone who stays down is safe. They are from the village of Mmórch and are obedient to their clan elder Akársh.

All their stats are 4s.	
Melee Attack/Defense 4/2	Shock Value 8
Health Points 40	Magic Resistance 4
Initiative 4	
Club – Familiarity, damage modifier x2	

Chlén

- **Bajékh** (Trouble). Wants to dominate the others. He'll often start rumbling challenges, especially with Mazákin and Siyuzhárin. Will prefer to walk next to Leláin. Driven by Notáza.
- **Kumésukh** (Treasure). Named hopefully by Arch of Heaven. She is the carrier of the Breathing Disease. She's somewhat frisky. Driven by Júgar.
- **Leláin** (Wonderful). She's beautiful by chlén standards and has a history of bearing strong, healthy children. She'll work well but not spectacularly. Driven by Nebússa.
- **Mazákin** (Strong). He's the strongest of the group. He can pull more and work longer than any of the other chlén. Has a bad temper though. Driven by Arkútu.
- **Okánikh** (Groan). He does not like to work. He'll move slower than the others and will bellow and stamp his feet if prodded. Driven by Onél.
- **Razhín** (Happy). He's placid, not easily alarmed by rumbling challenges or other distractions or provocations. He's hard to prod to into working faster. Driven by Ghúru.
- **Siyuzhárin** (Smart). He's smarter than the other chlén, responding readily to commands. He's also willing to work harder or longer if compensated for it (treats, grain to eat). Driven by Drésu.
- **Thusún** (Tasty!). He loves to eat. He'll stop and graze whenever he's presented with the opportunity. Driven by Dridákku.

Course Route

<u>Mile</u>	<u>Description</u>
1.	Sákbe Road, Thráya: START
2.	Sákbe Road
3.	Sákbe Road; Big Platform and Tower
4.	Sákbe Road
5.	Sákbe Road; Food and Water
6.	Sákbe Road; Big Platform and Tower
7.	Sákbe Road
8.	Sákbe Road
9.	Sákbe Road; Big Platform and Tower
10.	Sákbe Road; Day 1 Goal
11.	Dná-Grain Fields
12.	Stream
13.	Dná-Grain Fields
14.	Dná-Grain Fields
15.	Village of Mmórch; Food and Water
16.	Dná-Grain Fields
17.	Dná-Grain Fields
18.	Stream
19.	Dná-Grain Fields
20.	Dná-Grain Fields; Day 2 Goal
21.	Sákbe Road
22.	Sákbe Road; Big Platform and Tower
23.	Sákbe Road
24.	Sákbe Road

25. Sákbe Road; Big Platform and Tower; Food and Water
26. Sákbe Road
27. Sákbe Road
28. Sákbe Road; Big Platform and Tower
29. Sákbe Road
30. Village of Tékrís: THE END

Every mile on the Sákbe road, there's an on/off ramp. Players can exit the road and travel alongside it, but this is unusual behavior for a Tsolyáni. The dirt paths next to the Sákbe road and through the dná-grain fields which line the road on either side are wide enough only for single-file travel.

It's illegal to allow the chlén to graze on the fields (theft), and if players try this, they'll be reported to the Sákbe Road Guard.

Every half-mile, there's a small tower on the road. These are usually deserted, but provide shelter during inclement weather.

Traffic on the Sákbe road is normally single-file, keeping to the right. However, if the PCs want to pass each other or travel two abreast, there's enough space with some room to spare for pedestrians. When a chlén-cart approaches from the opposite direction, however, there will be problems.

Event Schedule

If you can find them, it's fun to use little miniatures to keep track of everyone's progress. (I bought bags of dinosaurs from a dollar store and used the stegosaurus.) I created a "track" by using index cards to mark each mile of the race. Or, you can just make notes next to the Course Route in the scenario. Use the chart to help you keep track of who falls sick when. Since this is variable, I won't make much mention of the appearance of the Breathing Disease symptoms. Slip these in subtly (and then not so subtly) as appropriate.

The second wild card is, of course, if/when Dridákku opens the box and unleashes The Affable Blight of Lord Uni. Give him a magic resistance save. If he saves, let him live long enough to complete the scenario (or be cured by Mríssa) but stress his rapidly declining health and hideous appearance. If he fails, let him linger until the next day – no sense in ending the player's fun immediately. Feel free to have NPCs shout advice from a distance ("Burn it!" "Cut your hand off!") that will save him, though at a cost.

Players may choose to exit from the Sákbe road and travel on the ground alongside it when the road gets congested. This is possible but unorthodox. Have them harassed occasionally by other travelers (e.g. waste thrown off the road at them, insults shouted), and add a +1 difficulty modifier to attempts to increase the chlén's speed (the path is inferior to the road).

Since chlén can normally pull 350-450 pounds, do not penalize the PCs for taking on cargo unless they could reasonably be exceeding that amount.

Day One

- As they start up the ramp, a clan kid will run after a random PC (but not Drésu or Arkútu), holding their goad and shouting, "Forgot something!" The crowd will laugh. Háikon, the sullen clan-member, took it.
- Nearly everyone will get an offer from a group of friends from the Scarlet Planet of Knives, Émra, Hóru and Sánjesh. They'll spread out and approach the PCs individually. They're hunters and will offer to sabotage opponents in the race: at the next watering stop, they'll steal equipment, pour sand on greased axles or pick a fist fight to delay the opponent. Their asking price is 5 qirgáls but they can be bargained down to one. If anyone gets into a fight with one of them, use the stats for the peasants. If they get in real danger, they'll use their knives instead of their fists. Treat the knives as daggers (damage modifier x 2). They'll back each other up, and try to keep any bargains they make. They have good relations with the Sákbe Road Guard.
- If the PCs choose to continue travelling during the heat of the mid-day, emphasize how grumpy the chlén seem and how few other people seem to be moving around. If they continue moving, keep track of how long they're on the road that day as they'll probably exceed 7 hours and earn the "tired" penalty for the chlén on the second day.
- At mid-day, when they're watering the chlén, the Sákbe Road Guard captain Chamáng will demand payment for the water. The water is, of course, free. But the guard regards this as the traditional payment for the race. They have a point in that the race usually causes more problems than a normal carting journey. One qirgál per PC is sufficient. If a PC refuses to pay (or to offer a monetary equivalent), they'll declare that they've heard a rumor and need to search for contraband. Anyone searched will be delayed an hour. If Dridákku is searched and the artifact is found,

they will be surprised and frightened. Chamáng will read the parchment and carefully replace everything. He wants no trouble with the Temple of Ksárul.

- If Nebússa wants to find cargo to haul, direct him toward the Woven Mat merchants on the big platform. They're makers of cheap furniture and would be happy to make a deal for less than the going rates to haul some furniture to Tékrís.
- By the afternoon, bring up any idiosyncracies of the chlén that haven't shown up yet. Bajékh will start a rumbling challenge and Mazákin and Siyuzhárin will respond. The challenge will go through the third day, unless they get sick, whereupon they'll drop out. Bajékh will try to match pace with Leláin.
- Also by the afternoon, if any PCs have been alert, they will realize they are being followed by the street cleaners. At this time, Polished Stone members will start approaching their favorites in the race. Polished Stone is a very low status clan responsible for cleaning the chlén-shit off the Sákbe road – they'll smell, be filthy and carry various implements to aid them in their job. They are, however, also members of the Joyous Burden society (though this is unknown to the players. You can have them roll versus Subculture to figure this out). They'll offer praise or suggestions as appropriate.
- Turning Wheel, the main rival carting clan to High Tower, will approach from the opposite direction and jeer the PCs. If any chlén are in the earliest stages of the Breathing Disease, they'll mock the PCs as being unfit drivers who are obviously overworking their animals. If the PCs are travelling two abreast, Turning Wheel will demand that one of them give way. They're more than willing to get in a fight over this, if it comes to that. The Sákbe Road Guard will be attracted by a fight, and will side with Turning Wheel.
- At mile 9, the PCs will encounter a traffic jam that will cost them half an hour. It seems that a large group of workers from Glass Spear are working on inlaying a mosaic into the side of the Sákbe road leading up to the 2nd tier. It is very elaborate mosaic in honor of the new governor of Thráya. They are blocking half of the road and there's barely enough room for one chlén cart at a time to pass by. Nothing can induce them to stop or make more room. (Though if Nebússa wants to, he can pick up some cargo business from them too.)
- Presumably, the PCs will stop for the night at the big platform at mile 9. Or, if they push on to make the goal for day one, they'll need to take the ramp off the Sákbe road and camp by the roadside. If they're off the big platform, let them find any reasonable vendor that they're interested in. They'll be by themselves if they make it to the mile 10 goal.

Day Two

The PCs will not awaken at the crack of dawn to get started unless they have specified some method of doing so (drinking a lot of water the night before, stressing their desire to do so + making a Willpower stat roll, etc.).

Sometime in the morning of this day, they'll be leaving the Sákbe road to start traveling on the dirt path through the dná-grain fields to the village of Mmórch. Traveling on a dirt path is a dusty matter – unless you're in the lead, dust will get in your face. Some of the chlén won't like it and will snort and shake their heads from time to time. If they're not allowed to drink vigorously whenever they cross the stream, they'll protest.

The other aspect of the dirt path is that the PCs will be traveling next to dná-grain fields. All the chlén will want to stop and graze on the grain. Thusún will be especially prone to this, requiring a Difficult (+2) modifier on the roll to get him moving again. He'll try to stop and eat once an hour. If the PCs allow them to eat a lot of grain, this will negate any "overworked" modifier that might be earned today.

Confrontation with the Peasants

At mile 13, the lead PCs will encounter a group of angry, drunken peasants, led by a loud-mouth named Sangár. These guys are itching for a fight (have them number a couple more than the PCs). If the PCs have been allowing the chlén to graze, they'll have a ready-made excuse. If they haven't been, Sangár will make up an offense ("Your fat chlén are too wide! They're destroying all our crops along the path.") The peasants are from the Flat Rock clan, the one which traditionally supplies the chlén of High Tower, though the fields they work belong to Golden Bough. If the PCs deny any wrongdoing, they'll start throwing Golden Bough's name around with abandon. There's really no reasoning with them – they're bored and want a fight. The only way to avoid fighting is for Júgar to offer them beer instead. They're carrying clubs but will also fight with their fists.

If they're being beaten, near the end of the fight some will try to run away. If they make it, they'll high-tail it back to Mmórch to tell their version of events. ("We were peacefully working in the fields when these ruffians attacked us!")

Village of Mmórch

The PCs need to get a chit from Akársh, the Flat Rock village elder, to prove they went on this leg of the race. If any of the brawlers made it back first, they'll have to do damage control. Akársh is not an idiot; he knows who was responsible for the fight. But he's not going to lose face and apologize for his young men. If the PCs make an indignant case, he'll gravely promise to investigate and get to the bottom of things but won't allow any retribution. If they make too big of a fuss, he will become hostile and require a bribe of 2 qirgáls instead of one before giving them their chits.

If they don't make an enemy of Akársh, he'll try and persuade them to take some broken plows on Tékrís in exchange for not paying for the chit.

If the PCs haven't figured out that something's wrong with at least some of the chlén, and this is the second day of the Breathing Disease for at least one chlén, Akársh will point it out to them. Unless it's pronounced, he won't know exactly what it is yet. However, if some were infected early on the first day, it will be far enough along that he will be horrified and identify it. In this case, he'll rush the PCs out of the village and warn them that their animals are carrying a horrible plague.

Breathing Disease Symptoms

By the time the PCs make it to the stream in mile 18, any chlén infected on the first day will want to lie down in the stream and not get up. The PCs can try twice an hour to coax them into moving again – be sure to pay attention to the accumulation of penalties on the chlén chart. At this point, it's likely that if they aren't working together, chlén may have to be abandoned while the PC runs to find help.

Day 3

Road Block on the Sákbe Road

The third tier of the Sákbe Road will be road blocked on the third day by the orders of Mríssa hiTishkolén, 14th Circle Sorcerer Priestess of Avánthe (see Temple of Avánthe section). She is searching for the artifact hidden by Íssa in Dridákku's cart. Actually, she's lounging in a palanquin on the 2nd tier while her temple guards along with Chamáng and his road guards search all the travelers. She'd dearly love to search those on the 1st and 2nd tier but recognizes the limits of her authority. There's a long line of people waiting to be searched since the searches are thorough. Unless the PCs do something to attract attention (like running to the front and begging for help from an Avánthe priestess), they'll have to wait the entire morning. If they see the line and try to avoid the Sákbe road (by turning around or traveling alongside it), they will be chased down by guards.

Mríssa & the Breathing Disease & the Blight

If Mríssa is approached about the Blight, she will recognize it immediately (and know the source). She will withhold her Alleviation spell until she obtains the artifact. Then the PCs will have to endure a long lecture on not meddling with things above their station before she cures them.

Mríssa will be sympathetic to tales of sickened chlén, but won't be distracted from her primary assignment. She will consent to sending out a tirrikámu with two soldiers to investigate. They'll be able to diagnose the illness and give the verdict ("There's nothing that can be done. You must kill them immediately before they spread it others.") When the soldiers return with the news, she will be upset and order them to conscript some people to help them go out and slaughter and burn the chlén. The PCs will need to talk fast to slow things down. If they haven't wondered why all the chlén aren't sick yet, have an NPC (Aréli, a Polish Stone member of Joyous Burden) bring up the point. Mríssa, of course, cannot help them save the chlén, though you can use her to point out connections or ask questions that the PCs haven't thought of yet.

Possible Conclusions

The best outcome will be for the PCs to figure out the curative properties of the herb Arkútu is carrying. This is really the only way to save the chlén, and will bring great prestige to the clan as well. If no one has figured it out, at least have a popular outcry save the "healthy" chlén (Kumésukh and Mazákin, "Protected by Gentle Lady Avánthe!"), though if the PCs want them slaughtered for the good of the clan, their wish will prevail. Of course, if Kumésukh is brought into the clan-yard, it will spell doom for the clan's herds.

If the truth about mitlárikh emerges, Mríssa will immediately offer her Fructification spell to grow enough of the plant to save all the chlén.

If they can't figure it out and all the chlén are slaughtered, all is not a complete loss. No one understands why the disease suddenly appears again after long absences, so no one will be blamed. The PCs will be praised by the clan for making the hard, but necessary, decision to kill them. It will, however, be an economic blow to the local clan chapter.

The Artifact

Dridákku will only be able to conceal the artifact if he hides it in the fields and then comes back for it later. Losing it to Mríssa will earn him no repercussions from her, but will get him into trouble with the Temple of Ksárul, unless he specifically asks her to intervene for him. If he offers it up to her, he'll earn a reward from the Temple of Avánthe, and Mríssa will deal much more calmly with the Breathing Disease situation.

Completing the Race

By the morning of the third day, any chlén infected on the second day will be moving very sluggishly and by late morning will want to lie down and not move. If they make it to the Sákbe road, anyone experienced with chlén will recognize the Breathing Disease and be horrified.

If any PCs have healthy chlén and want to continue the race after waiting to get searched, by all means let them. This may be Júgar's chance to win. However, any High Tower clan member who abandons the others like this will face severe consequences from the clan. Most of the people they meet on the road will be speculating on what the Temple of Avánthe is looking for and how this will affect the Great Chlén Race. ("Good thing this didn't happen during Metlunel II's reign!")

Status List

- Drésu Clan-elder's son
- Arkútu Hard worker
- Ghúru Slacker
- Notáza Slacker
- Nebússa Wannabe soldier
- Júgar From Arch of Heaven, a brewer's clan
- Onél From Artificers of Iron, a smithing clan
- Dridákku Clanless scum

Game Mechanics

If die roll – skill level +/- modifiers < Stat THEN attempt succeeds

- If you lack the relevant skill: +4 modifier
- If you have only a familiarity: +2 modifier
- In combat, you can take one action per turn. If you choose to attack, you can't defend against a successful attack upon yourself.
- Defense roll: Die roll – skill + modifiers + attacker's Degree of Success < Defense Combat Value, then defense is successful. You blocked, dodged, ran away or whatever.
- In combat, note the attack's Degree of Success (the amount the check succeeded by). Multiply the Degree of Success (treat a zero as a 1) by the damage modifier of the weapon to determine the damage done. Subtract the damage from the defender's Health Points. If you want to pull your punches and not cause any damage, you may do so.
 - Bare fists = damage modifier x 1
 - Club = damage modifier x2
 - Short Sword = damage modifier x3
 - Chlén stomp or kick = damage modifier x6

Chlén Chart

Name	Notes	Day 1				Day 2				Day 3			
		Sick	V. Sick	Tired	Thirsty	Sick	V. Sick	Tired	Thirsty	Sick	V. Sick	Tired	Thirsty
Bajékh	If rumbling, +1 to rolls												
Kumésukh													
Leláin													
Mazákin	-1 to rolls												
Okánikh	+1 to rolls												
Razhín	+1 to rolls												
Siyuzhárin	-1 to rolls												
Thusún	If can eat, +1 to rolls												

- Mechanic: Die roll – skill level + difficulty modifier < Stat THEN attempt succeeds
- Difficulty ratings:
 - Increase speed (.5 miles/hour) = Difficult (+2)
 - Increase speed again (another .5 miles/hour) = Extremely Difficult (+4)
 - All other actions (Stop eating, pay attention, move in a certain direction) = Average (+0) to Nearly Trivial (-3)
- If character doesn't have the relevant skill, add +4 to the roll.
- If character only has a familiarity with the skill, add +2 to the roll.
- For each mark in a column, add +1 to the roll. Success for a sick chlén means normal speed (otherwise, it's halved). Success for a very sick chlén means half speed (otherwise, it's quartered).
- Treats add –1 to –2 to the roll, depending on amount and type of treat. Mazákin can't be motivated by treats.
- Tired means working the chlén for more than 7 hours the previous day. Feel free to add an extra +1 for very tired on Day 3 if the chlén was overworked the last two days. Mazákin can work 8 hours before tiring. Thirsty means less than 2 good (not quick) waterings.

2 *Árjai's Dream*

by Joe Zottola

Joe says: "This dream occurred after a gaming night in 2001. The dream was so vivid I had to write it up the following morning."

2371, 13th Trantor

Árjai awoke in a cold sweat.

He looked to his right and realized Chitlásha was gone. He looked around the room in an attempt to find her; however she was not within the chamber. Árjai put on a kilt and went to the door. He tried opening the door, but it would not open. He looked closer at the door and it appeared that the seam of the door was sealed: the door appeared to be melted into the frame. Árjai began to panic. He went to the balcony and looked out over Tummísa. It was mid-morning and the city was deathly deathly quiet.

Árjai realized something terrible was wrong.

He looked down from the balcony into the courtyard. It looked to be about twenty-five feet to the ground. Árjai attempted to cast an Aireality spell. The spell was weak, almost as if the power needed was being siphoned off.

Árjai rose slowly in the air and over the side of the balcony. Halfway down from the balcony, Árjai felt the spell running out. He attempted to re-energize but to no avail. He looked below and noticed an awning off to his left. Árjai maneuvered towards the awning. Without warning, the spell stopped and Árjai fell. Luckily for him he had moved closer to the awning. Árjai fell catching the outside edge of the awning. He landed in a heap tangled in the fabric and supports of the awning. When he finally freed himself he looked around the courtyard. There were people in the courtyard but they seemed to take no notice of him. He approached a servant. The servant looked at Árjai smiled and kept going. Árjai attempted to say something but the servant kept walking.

In the Red Mountain Clanhouse, Arumél awoke from a relaxing sleep. He noticed that Iyéna was already up. He went to the baths and soaked for awhile. Soon, Kagór joined him. Kagór asked, "Arumél, where are the servants?"

Arumél who had been enjoying the bath now noticed that the usual servants were missing from the baths.

Arumél looked around the room and noticed that other than he and Kagór, it was empty. Arumél also noticed that the atmosphere was almost suffocating. Arumél lay back to think this all through. As he did this he noticed the carving in the ceiling seemed to be getting closer. Arumél suddenly realized that something was coming out of it. He quickly leapt from the bath, grabbing Kagór as he did. Arumél and Kagór exited the bath just as a large reddish thing crashed into the pool. The water boiled turning bright red and then dark brown. In a matter of minutes the bath was empty. The water was gone and on the bottom of the bath was a reddish-brown smudge. Arumél and Kagór were un-nerved by the event that had just occurred. They proceeded back into the main chamber.

Arumél proceeded to put on his armor. Kagór began looking for others of the party. Kagór found Arjutmé sleeping soundly. Kagór reached down to wake him. When he touched Arjutmé he felt his hand passing through what seemed like a thick gooey substance. Kagór moved his hand some more and it seemed as if Arjutmé was covered with the invisible substance. Kagór began removing the substance from Arjutmé. Finally he was able to actually touch him. When he did, Arjutmé awoke slowly. Kagór asked Arjutmé if he was okay. Arjutmé told him that he had been having a wonderful dream concerning Hrü'ü. Kagór told Arjutmé what had happened in the bath and that he should get dressed. Kagór waited,

admiring Arjutmé's form as he slid on his kilt. They proceeded back into the main chamber finding Arumél coming out of Hórsu's chamber. Arumél informed them that Tára and Hórsu appeared to be encased in a ruby eye. He tried using his ruby eye but it seemed to have no effect.

The trio proceeded into Ba'ísa's chamber. There they discovered her to be covered by what seemed to be a ruby eye. Arumél tried again to free her using his ruby eye with no visible results. The group discussed what to do next. It was decided to go find Árfjai.

They went to the door. Kagór discovered that the door was sealed shut. Kagór informed the rest of this. Arumél told Arjutmé and Kagór to stand back and he would try a spell. Just as Arumél was about to do this Kagór reminded Arumél he was wearing steel armor. Arumél did not seem to hear this and continued casting. The door simmered with a feeble red glow and stayed in place. Kagór again tried to open it with no effect. Realizing they were trapped, the group went to the balcony. Once there they discovered Drichánsa also encased in the same material as Hórsu, Tára and Ba'ísa. As Arjutmé looked out from the balcony, he noticed for the first time that the city not its normal noisy self. Arjutmé looked into the courtyard and saw people but no sound was being made.

While Arjutmé surveyed the courtyard Arumél and Kagór looked for a way down. Luckily the interior wall of the clanhouse was built as a terrace with the lower balconies jutting out farther than the ones above. The group slowly made their way down by climbing from balcony to balcony. Soon they found themselves in the courtyard. Numerous attempts were made to speak to the various persons there. But to no result the only response the group received was a smile. Arumél lead the group through the main gate, which strangely was open to the outside. They made their way to the Cloak of Azure Gems clanhouse. As they walked Arjutmé noticed for the first time a low chanting coming from the direction of the governor's palace. He mentioned this to Arumél and Kagór. The people they passed all seemed passive and no sound emitted from them. Kagór too noticed that all of the people they passed were members of the change temples. Kagór began looking for people wearing stability markings.

When they arrived at the Azure Gems clanhouse they discovered the gates wide open and unattended. Inside they found Árfjai attempting to get a reaction out of the people there. Árfjai was busily placing things in front of people. The people would simply walk around the objects and smiling at Árfjai as they passed. Árfjai even placed himself in front of a guard, the guard simply walked around him. Arumél approached Árfjai and said hello. Árfjai jumped back startled. It had been several hours and had not heard a human voice for some time. Arumél explained to Árfjai what had transpired at Red Mountain. Arjutmé and Kagór told him what they had discovered. They group discussed what should be done. They decided to find the source of the low chanting sound.

Once again Arumél led the group out of the Azure Gems courtyard. As they exited the chanting became louder. Immediately, Kagór noticed the streets were now deserted. As the group proceeded closer to the governor's palace they passed the various temples. Suddenly Kagór noticed that the great Stability temples were encased in what appeared to be the same substance as what Ba'ísa, Tára, Hórsu, and Drichánsa where coated with. The Change Temples were undisturbed, yet seemed deserted and looked old. For the first time Arjutmé noticed that Arumél's armor was glowing, a soft orange color that seemed to cut the air. Arjutmé attempted to go towards the temple of Hnálla.

But as he stepped from behind Arumél, Arjutmé found the air was like thick honey impeding his progress. He stepped back behind Arumél and the air thinned back to normal. Arjutmé asked the party to stop. Arjutmé told the group his findings.

Árjai tested the theory by stepping away from Arumél. Árjai found he could move about four feet away from Arumél in any direction. Any more than that and the air became thick.

The group resumed their walk towards the palace. As they came within sight of the palace, they noticed for the first time a large black oval hanging over the palace. It was decided they should not enter via the main gate. The group went to the side of the palace. The chanting became more pronounced as they came closer to the walls of the palace. Árjai found a servant's entrance and the group entered. Inside they found the hallways deserted. Everything seemed covered with a fine dust, making things seem old. They followed the passages using the chanting as a guide. As they got closer Arumél's armor began pulsing orange and red hues. The air seemed to be charged with magic. They reached the central courtyard.

Árjai looked out and saw a shocking scene. In the center of the courtyard constructed of black stone was a giant circle with a raised circular dias in the center. He observed that the circle was positioned beneath the black spot in the sky they had noticed earlier. Arumél pointed to the dias.

To Árjai's horror, tied to the dias were Chitlásha, Iyéna along with Oyáka and three other priests Árjai assumed they were from the other change temples. Standing over them was a priest in black robes the priest turned to face them. Before Árjai could react, Arumél charged the dias. Árjai recognized the priest as Mengán, the renegade Ksáru priest who really worked for the One Other. Mengán stood defiantly readying a spell. With the flick of his wrist, a black pulsating orb flew towards the on rushing Arumél. The orb struck Arumél full in the chest. The armor flared brilliant orange almost blinding Árjai and company. When they looked again, Arumél was standing back up looking a bit tarnished but still mobile. Arumél continued his advance. As he did so he palmed an Eye and fired it at Mengán. Mengán was engulfed in a bolt of flame which burned brightly as it struck him. Mengán simply made a gesture and the bolt was redirected towards the sky. Arumél continued on. Mengán again flicked his wrist this time. Arumél was encased in what appeared to be a black glossy substance.

Árjai realizing this lull would not last. He attempted a spell, casting 'Antechamber of the Blue Room' on Mengán. Once again Mengán was encased. Slowly the blue light of the spell was repulsed and defused. Once again Mengán stood un-harmed. Suddenly there was a loud cracking noise. Kagór looked to the source of the sound. It was coming from where Arumél stood. Kagór yelled get down just in time. Arumél exploded in a blaze of orange light. The black material became flying knives. As Arjutmé lay on the ground he saw a servant cut in half by the flying black substance. As people recovered from the explosion, Arumél with his last bit of energy rushed Mengán. Out of nowhere, Mengán produced a sword. Arumél and Mengán closed to engage each other. Árjai noticed for the first time that other than Arjutmé, Kagór and Arumél, Mengán and himself, no one else was moving. This puzzled him; he looked up and noticed that they were within the influence of the black circle which seemed to be slightly larger than the symbol on the ground. Árjai stood completely still drawing upon what power he could and focusing it into one spell.

Árjai cast the spell. The black circle in the sky simmered and for a brief moment became translucent. This event distracted Mengán allowing Arumél to drive home his sword into Mengán's chest.

As Arumél stood over the dying form of Mengán, the black circle began to dissipate the black stone circle began to dissolve along with the dias. Kagór, Arjutmé and Árjai rushed forward to untie the sacrifices. Árjai released Chitlásha who embraced him. He also released the other sacrifices. Iyéna went to Arumél and hugged him. As they celebrated their victory a loud voice resonated through the courtyard: "Fools, do you think it would be so easy?"

To the horror of the party the black circle reconstituted in the sky. The black stone circle did the same. Those in the middle by the dias found themselves unable to move seemingly frozen in place. Mengán reappeared, the hole from

Arumél's sword slowly closing.

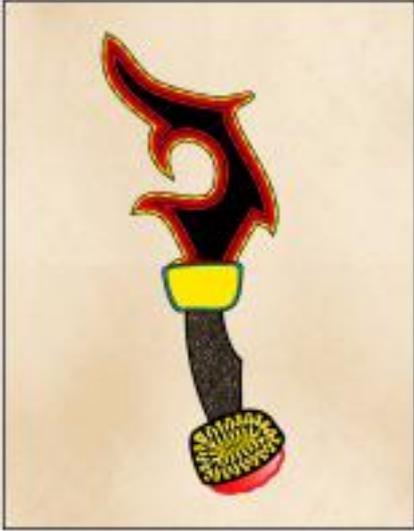
Mengán laughed as he approached he looked at Arumél and told him the circle is now complete and drove a jagged dagger into Arumél's chest. Arumél became translucent and dissolved. Iyéna was next: she burned a bright flame orange and then became translucent and dissolved. Árjai noticed a white haired woman standing behind Mengán, smiling. She seemed to be enjoying the carnage. Slowly Mengán made his way around the circle sacrificing each priest in turn. Finally he reached Árjai and Chitlásha. Chitlásha vainly tried to fight but was unable. As the knife entered her chest she raised her hand touching Mengán's arm. For a moment his arm flared with the blue light of Ksárul, but to no effect. Mengán smiled at Chitlásha twisting the knife as it went in telling her: "This is for your little act of defiance!". Finally Mengán came to Árjai. Árjai tried to fight but found himself unable to. The knife slid in just below his breast. He felt his life energy flowing out of him and he died.

Árjai awoke in a cold sweat. His bedding and blanket were soaked through. He immediately looked to his left. To his surprise he found Chitlásha sleeping there. He woke her. He told Chitlásha his dream. She listened to his tale. When he finished she told him he was simply dreaming and perhaps he should not have those sweetmeats before bed anymore. Chitlásha left the room.

Árjai looked down at his chest and noticed a faint scar that was slowly fading away. With that he passed out. Later Chitlásha woke him. Strangely he remembered nothing of his dream...

3 The Jewelled Pommel Clan

by Belinda Kelly



Jewelled Pommel is a High clan based around Usenánu but with clan houses in Penóm, Butrus, Thráya and Béy Sü. The clan claims its ancestors made armour for Lord Karakán's armies in the Battle of Domóron Plain. In Engsványali times, Jewelled Pommel made armour and weapons for the Priest-Kings and their courts. However in the Second Imperium, due to changing trade routes and the scarcity of metal deposits, Jewelled Pommel has become mainly a mercantile clan, specialising in exotic trade goods such as fine liqueurs and narcotics. The most popular of these narcotics are stimulants, sold to warriors, gladiators and high-clan duellists, although many adherents in the Temple of Karakan frown on such substances. Although the clan claims to proudly uphold its heritage, you'd be hard-pressed to find a clan-member who remembered the clan's original metal-working secrets. However, the clan continues to prepare and decorate Chlén-hide armour and weapons that will be mostly used on a ceremonial basis. Jewelled Pommel's merchants are always looking out for expensive stones for their decorations.

Traditionally, Jewelled Pommel's rivals have been the Great Stone clan, who are an important trading clan within Usenánu. Jewelled Pommel traditionally supports the Blade Raised High clan, although tensions between the two clans have become strained of late. In terms of business relationships with other clans, Jewelled Pommel traditionally deals with Green Malachite for river shipping and travel arrangements and often obtains worked jewelry from Silver Lightning to set upon armour or weapons. Many of the clan's house servants and labourers are hired from the Scarlet Mantle and Broken Reed clans respectively.

The clan traditionally favours the gods of stability, especially Lord Karakán and Lord Chegárra, however worship of the Gods of Change have become popular with some of the younger generation, much to the disapproval of the clan's older members.

In recent centuries, the resources, influence and prestige of Jewelled Pommel have declined. Several of the clan's traditional sources of income are unavailable and the clan owes several important debts to the Blade Raised High clan in Usenánu. Some members of other clans will warn others that Jewelled Pommel suffers from some strange curse, but the

clan itself claims that its travails are nothing but happenings of unfortunate circumstances. Nonetheless, the clan proudly upholds its heritage.

Jewelled Pommel's main clanhouse is in Usenánu. The main clanhouse is reached by heading through a huge set of wide gates, located on Etukómel Street, and then by navigating along a rutted track through towering stands of dark-leaved tiu trees. A strange, lightning-blazed tower is located to the left of the main courtyard, richly decorated with symbols of Lord Karakán. Clan-members will tell you that this tower of the 'The Tower of Indomitable Might' and was constructed by the clan's last leader, Bálesh hiPagártra, who claimed that Lord Karakán commanded him to build the tower in a dream. However, one night when Bálesh was surveying his construction during a storm, the tower was struck by lightning. Bálesh fell from the parapets and the tower was never completed.

The main clanhouse is wreathed with vines and the western section of the clanhouse has a newish, plastered look, as though it were recently repaired. Upon closer inspection, although these repairs seem highly competent, they fail to match the squat grandeur of the other side of the clanhouse and give the structure a lop-sided appearance.

The clanhouse is usually busiest in the early morning or evening, as clan members and visitors are constantly in attendance. Porters wait in hidden shelters cut into the clan house's outer wall, ready to assist at a moment's notice. A rutted track splashed with dried Chlén-droppings cuts away from the courtyard, heading southwards through overgrown stands of trees. The main clanhouse consists of a main house which holds the clan's meeting chambers, official dining hall and administrative rooms. The massive entrance way to the clan house is a wondrous display of wealth and serves as testament to the clan's past glory, with suptuously decorated samples of armour and weapon on display.

Visitors may notice that a room in the western part of the clanhouse is sealed by a set of double bronze doors, heavily inscribed with glyphs of warding and protection. Around the edges of the doors, the pale red plaster of the walls and ceiling is heavily cracked and faintly scorched. Clan-members however will deflect any questions about this section of the clan-house and offer to show the visitor some of the historical trinkets in the clan's trophy room instead. Some curious visitors claim that they can hear, usually late at night, faint scratchings on the far side of the door, but they are always assured it is merely insects or grain-stealing lizards.

At the back of the clan-house is the clan's apartment buildings for its members: a lodge for its non-human members (Jewelled Pommel has a long historical association with Pachu Lei (due to Flame Opal trading) and Pei Choi), a lodge for unmarried men and women and a lodge for married couples and families. There is a practice field 'The Field of Glorious Victory' when young clan braves are taught the art of weaponry. The clan has its warehouses and workshop areas at rear-end of the clan's territory, where rough Chlén-hide is brought in and then sculptured to suit the extravagant tastes of buyers. Newer warehouses holding the items of the clan's recent trading developments, including popular stimulants such as the 'The Fiery Blood of the Inexorable Reaver' and 'The Dust of One Thousand DownwardCuts.'

Like most clans, Jewelled Pommel observes a variety of important clan rituals. Most of these rituals are conducted by the clan's High Ritualist, who is usually a priest of Karakán. Marriages in the Jewelled Pommel involve the groom dressing in elaborate, ceremonial armour and fighting a ceremonial duel in order to 'win' his bride, although Shéresa hiSaika (an aridáni woman) set a precedent over four hundred years ago when she donned the armour herself and won her husband. Births are celebrated with tiny gifts of decorated Chlén-hide swords (for boys) or shields (for girls). In times of crisis, a member of the clan has traditionally volunteered to become 'The Exaltd Messenger to the Warrior on the Final Day' and are gloriously sacrificed to Lord Karakán, after several months of lavish gifts and sumptuous feasts. This is believed to bring good luck to the clan as Karakán remembers his brave armourers at the Battle of the Domóron plain and

smiles upon them for their noble sacrifice.

Some of the clan's treasures include the shards of an ancient sword 'The Esteemed Blade of Mizhotl the Vanquisher of Hosts', which is used as an oracular device. The shards are tossed into the air and the pattern is deciphered by the clan's High Ritualist, usually a priest of Karakán. Although this oracle is said to be fairly potent, it is only employed on rare occasions, such as before important weddings or trading missions. Another treasure is drinking cup made from a human skull that has been capped with bronze, although the legends around its acquisition are conflicting. The clan also has several sets of steel armour that date from the Engsványali period and are relics of the clan's past glory.

Jewelled Pommel has not held a social function for some time, and members of other clans are quite curious (and perhaps a little indignant, as Jewelled Pommel's members often show up at feasts at other clanhouses).

Jewelled Pommel has the following lineages:

- **Pagártra.** This is the clan's highest lineage and traditionally is seated at the highest place in the clan's feast hall. The Pagártras have traditionally been the clan's leaders and decision makers. Many of the clan's stories and sagas tell of the deeds of the Pagártras and young Pagártras strive to be as heroic as they can (although some find them to be overbearing).
- **Qúrroddu.** The Qúrroddu lineage are perhaps the second-most prestigious lineage in the clan and tend towards administration and organisation. Many of Jewelled Pommel's clan members in the public service come from the Qúrroddu lineage. Qúrroddus are usually typified as being obsessed with minutiae but are supposed to be very good at organising. Qúrroddus who fail to live up to this stereotype are gently teased, with jokes about having too much Chagotlékka blood.
- **Sáika.** The Sáika lineage is a low lineage in the clan and traditionally tends to the clan's business that deals with the decoration and embellishment of Chlén-hide armour and weapons. Sáikas are supposed to be dour, no-nonsense folk with a traditional of respectable piety. Many of the Exalted Messengers to the Warrior on the Final Day come from the Sáika and this has increased this lineage's respect within the clan.
- **Chagotlékka.** The Chagotlékka lineage is associated with the clan's long trade journeys and are some of the best travelled clan-members. It's said that Chagotlékkas can't stay tied down for too long and they have a reputation for frivolousness.
- **Tigál.** This is the clan's lowest lineage and is always seated at a lower place in the clan's feast hall. New members who join the clan are traditionally inducted into the Tigál lineage. Many of the other lineages look down upon the Tigáls, as they are 'full of foreign blood'. Tigáls are also associated with the clan's new industry of trading in stimulants, and are thought to be hedonistic and somewhat laconic.

Notable members of the Jewelled Pommel clan in Usenánu are:

- **Zagár hiPargártra.** 'Uncle Zagár' is a legend throughout the clan because of the long trading journeys he has made. A favourite with the children, Zagár is fond telling impossible stories of how he fought off bands of marauding Shen or negotiated with an incredibly beautiful foreigner for a clutch of precious 'dream stones'. Two years ago, Zagár left on a trading journey to Ka'um and is somewhat over due for return.

- **Vayésh hiPargártra.** Vayésh is currently the Jewelled Pommel clan leader, although his attention has been known to wander a bit during clan meetings. Often, he will come up with some very strange pronouncements. It is generally accepted that Vayésh will retire in four years when his elected term as Clan Leader ends.
- **Rimóka hiQúrroddu.** A worshipper of Lord Qón, Rimóka runs the day-to-day administration of the clanhouse. Rimóka is a snide, long-nosed woman (of which there are some jokes about her relations to the Vríddi clan) and generally knows most of the clan business. If she doesn't, she makes it her business to find out.
- **Anjésh hiSáika.** Anjésh is a high-ranking priest within Usenánu's Temple of Karakán but of late has been increasingly devoted to his temple career of late and now only rarely attends clan festivals on special occasions.
- **Rajésh hiTigál.** Rajésh has a bit of a stigma in the clan as his great-grandfather bought his way into the clan. The clan elders see Rajésh as a symbol of the problem with the clan's current crop of youth, as Rajésh is a follower of Hriháyal and is a fixture at most of Usenánu's important parties. Rajésh is desperately trying to convince the clan council that Jewelled Pommel needs to hold a lavish feast, and soon, otherwise there is the danger of losing status.

4 Death in Dó Cháka

by Nick Bogan

Nick says: “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. In particular, I haven’t read *Prince of Skulls*, which describes events in the Chákas; caveat lector.

“Dedicated first to my wife Annette, who read and liked a partial early draft, encouraging me to finish; next to Professor Barker, for giving us all the world of Tékumel; last to the late Peter Hathaway Capstick, whose gripping stories of hunting adventure inspired this story.

“Special thanks are due to Bob Alberti, who helped me bring this story a little closer to Real Tékumel. Any failures in that regard are entirely mine.”

Chapter I

Aíjom hiKharsáma stepped back from his bloody work with great satisfaction. The Dnélu had grappled viciously with him, but had not counted on his fierceness, or on his scarred but sharp Chlén-hide dagger. The local villages would not complain of children lost in the fields as often now, particularly after his guides spread this beast’s blood near the watering holes to scare off others. It was a large one, its eyes still gleaming dully, with powerful clawed legs and long, feathery, now-broken antennae. Aíjom put a hand on one of its rough-sided flanks with a mix of admiration and disgust. Despite his limited experience with Dnélu, he still thought it looked to have fed too well recently. He moved his hand absently to his own side, feeling the bruise where its barbed tongue, now extended and menacing even in death, had tried and failed to lance his gut. He would certainly continue to wear his light armor in the future when dealing with them. He whistled, and his assistants—local farmers, eager to aid in dispatching the beast—approached, after a long delay. Clearly they wouldn’t have pried the thing off him had it bested him, and it would have hauled him down beneath the rough, dusty soil of the Khirgári plains to feed upon. Aíjom noted that new guides might be in order for the next time he hunted Dnélu.

As he strode carefully back to camp, listening to the guides groan under the load of the Dnélu’s corpse and mulling over what placement of blood and viscera would best deter attacks in the near future, Aíjom’s mind wandered, trying to ignore the low, insistent crying of his aching legs and arms. Returning to Khirgár was inevitable, but distasteful, as his new assignment as supply chief in the Regiment of Noble Ssiyór of Mrelú would begin immediately. He grimly contemplated the coming months arranging the affairs of this young Legion, founded only 18 years ago, in the wake of three previous political appointees to the supply chief’s position under two Emperors and shuddered. Perhaps there were worse fates than being food for Dnélu whelps.

Aíjom chuckled, wondering what had possessed him to agree to take the supply chief’s position. Perhaps it had simply been loyalty; the upheavals of the recent civil war had undermined Khirgári faith in nonnative troops, and he and other Khirgári, followers of Lord Karakán and known as lán subjects of the Empire, had seen fit to publicly take certain positions in distrusted legions as a placation of restless Temples and citizenry.

But that explanation sounded in his mind like the low, restless reverberations of Lord Hrü’ü’s Túnkul gongs, deceptive and unsettling if listened to for long. He knew that he was not a man well suited to the legionary’s life. His lifelong hunting expeditions, sometimes as a guide for one of the huge hunts of the high-clan bravos, palanquin-borne to their prey, had instilled in him a kind of wanderlust and a desire to personally grapple with the Enemy, whatever that might

be—for did not Lord Karakán teach that conflict and even killing were worthy tools if used against that which threatened society?

Killing the Dnélu was a small blow in this war, that would no doubt improve the harvests here; but he loved the work more than its result. He could already smell the campfire and feel the pleasure of laying down to watch it flicker, perhaps with a bit of Hnéqu weed after a rough supper of Gáinikh bread, gazing betimes into the darkness above, and thinking on the stalking and killing of the beast. Nothing excited him more than combat with a strong and worthy foe. The prospect of these heroic struggles had drawn him from bird-hunting to more challenging adversaries despite the fact that as he was of the Golden Dawn clan, he was perhaps too high-clan for such activities as this errand to be truly suitable. Was he trying to hide from that which he most desired?

Not for the first time did Aíjom think that he would have served his interests better signing up with the Legion of Mnáshu of Thri'íl, a Legion composed of hardy northern mountaineers and devotees of the hunt that was based in Khirgár and looked to be there for some time. Its soldiers were often his companions in hunting, and he enjoyed talking with them of tactics and great achievements of old. But this was, of course, why Aíjom had not signed up with this Legion: his father Eléchu had advised him in those terms when the talk of taking the position came up. "You would be ever pulled to the hills chasing beasts when the common troops went on leave, to the detriment of your work—and thus to the detriment of our good name," Eléchu had said, more stern than Aíjom had heard him in years. He had seen this for himself, though, and thus had signed up with the Regiment of Noble Ssiyór of Mrelú. He would need to devote himself to his work if he was to represent his clan and lineage well.

Indeed, thought Aíjom sleepily, his interests were overly broad for his own good—or his clan's. He vowed, as he did on occasion, to formalize and increase the frequency of his devotions to Lord Karakán, and to immerse himself in his work. With such pleasant thoughts of conformance to the principles of Stability running through his head, he stopped the guides and instructed them to besmirch with blood the trees ringing a pool surrounded by the tracks of the beasts.

The next morning, Aíjom brought his grisly trophy back to the village of Turán, near the great Sákbe-road that bore north to Khirgár, and placed it in the village square. The locals applauded his work and looked at the Dnélu's stake-impaled head, impressed by its lolling tongue and opaque stare. After a few yóm of this, a man Aíjom did not know, who bore the raiment of a priest of Karakán, approached him. Aíjom stepped away from the small crowd, which was not difficult as they were more impressed by his trophy than by him, and motioned the man to follow.

The priest's manner communicated urgency. "I am Kuréshu hiChagotlékka of the Ripened Sheaf clan, an administrative priest in the service of Lord Karakán. You are Aíjom hiKharsáma of the Golden Dawn clan, visiting here from Khirgár on... business." Kuréshu looked askance at the Dnélu's head, surrounded by villagers. "I have been sent from Chéne Hó, guardian of the west, to send you in turn to do Lord Karakán's bidding."

Kuréshu's stern demeanor bespoke a faith that matched his words. Aíjom knew that the journey to Chéne Hó was a fortnight long. What business could be so important that a priest would walk for two weeks to fetch him? And why him? Aíjom wondered what Temple intrigue he was to be used for. "And where am I to be sent?" he asked warily.

"I have been instructed to give you papers"—which he did, curtly; Aíjom recognized his Legion's seal on one—"and direct you to Dó Cháka. A great unease has gripped the border villages there, and your talents are deemed suitable to address the source of their trouble."

"They are plagued by mismanaged Legions?" Aíjom joked, thinking too late that although this opinion of the Khirgári visiting garrisons was prevalent even among the sterner of Lord Karakán's militarists, that he might still have been more

cautious in his humor with a priest of Stability's god of war.

"No," said the visitor in—happily!—an unruffled tone, "the talents I refer to are your abilities for the hunt. Many luminaries of the Golden Sunburst clan have recommended both your skills and your outlook as being suitable for this task."

"What is to be hunted? and why are no more suitable candidates to be found in the region, who know the beasts and the land?" Aíjom was both confused and excited. Between the unusual nature of the request and the fact that this assignment in a distant region would delay his politically useful assumption of the supply chief position, the whole business was beginning to reek of importance.

The man turned to Aíjom with a curious look on his face. "Those who decide such things do not trust the hands of any closer to the Chákas. What you will hunt—this is unimportant now; you will know when it is time. Leave here for Chéne Hó within the kirén. Go to the Temple of Karakán there, and you shall learn of your mission." With this imperious pronouncement, the priest walked off stiffly.

Aíjom did not doubt his charge; the assignment papers that the priest had delivered looked official, and his recent training for his post and lifelong acquaintance with Temple business dealings made him a very good judge of local seals and stamps of authority. It was with an untroubled mind that Aíjom set foot on the great Sákbe-road and began his trek.

Turán was near the Sákbe-road leading north to the border of Tsolyánu, and not far from his home. Within a ténmre his long strides were climbing the foothills toward Khirgár, and he was in sight of the Peak of the Warrior by evening. He would, of course, report to his new superiors at the Regiment of Noble Ssiyór of Mrelú, but this would not be a lengthy exchange, as he would and could do little more than present his orders. He wondered wryly if their reactions might reveal understanding. He had to assume that the Legion would not tell him anything about his mission deliberately, given the secretive demeanor of the priest.

The season was not meet for long journeys; it was Drénggar, and although that did not spell death to fools who ignored the sun as it might in Jakálla, it made the walk arduous. Fortunately, the Sákbe-roads of the region were not damaged by constant rains as in the south and stood on bedrock; they were some of the best in the Empire. "Everything here is preserved like mummies of the temples of the Worm Lord in this dry heat," the nonnative legionaries would sometimes say, thinking fondly, for Karakán only knew what reason, of their fetid southern homes. Still, the flagstones were worn, and could be treacherous when wet. The dramatic views of the steep, flinty hills and fierce border fortresses—ringed Aqúr and tall, heavily walled Tusún, each standing proudly on its promontory—were poor consolation for his pains, as he had seen these vistas many times in his life. With this thought, he quickened his pace, for he felt a growing interest in the new horizons that the priest had opened for him.

He was caught deeply in reverie when he approached the city's outskirts. The Citadel of the High Gods Eternal stood atop Khirgár as a spire on a temple, gazing protectively down upon the fields and groves that fed the city. The road was flanked by deep rows of Dlél and Másh trees, heavy with sweet fruit. Here he had spent many a holiday as a little one, picking baskets of fruit for the evening's dessert while learning even at a young age to judge such produce with a keen merchant's eye. These pleasant sentinels stood before the Peak Gate, which let him through the outermost walls of mighty Khirgár.

As he had expected, his superiors at the Regiment of Noble Ssiyór of Mrelú did not reveal any knowledge of his destiny. Indeed, they seemed so genuinely surprised by his orders that he thought it possible that he really had been snatched away without explanation by the priest Kuréshu. This would mean that his new 'errand' was of far more import

than the hunting of a Dnélu, which was both encouraging and troubling.

With his official business taken care of, and the heat of day fading, Aíjom went to his clanhouse of the Golden Dawn. He first found his parents in a reception room selling grain—the lifeblood of the clan here and throughout the north, though elsewhere other enterprises were preeminent—and waited until the negotiations were complete. He told his parents of his latest hunt, then what he knew of his new assignment, and bid them farewell. Eléchu was clearly surprised that it was Aíjom's hunting that had drawn him a task of import; he kept a quiet demeanor, but Aíjom felt his pride as the heat of the sun is felt through a curtain.

His mother Essília was more concerned. "This mission will keep you away from your clanspeople here, Aíjom," she said almost querulously, "but they shall think of you, and we shall most of all. I look forward to hearing you scare the young ones with the tale of your deeds."

And having me safe at home, Aíjom interpolated. "I shall tell them tales that shall send them running to their beds soon enough!" He embraced them both, then left to the common hall of the clanhouse, to speak with a few of his clan-siblings. They were used to Aíjom the Hunter going forth and slaying the Sró-beast-or whatever troubled the farmers, anyway—and did not make a fuss. Aíjom played down the significance of the mission for them, as well; he did not feel like boasting of deeds undone.

Last, he went to his wife Tsunúre. They had not been married long, and he did not know how she would react, although he certainly knew that her northern sensibilities, which would have suited any free-spirited Aridáni woman of the Empire, would not hold her tongue. He soon found that he needn't have worried; she was impressed by the apparent significance of his latest assignment.

"This task, if well done, may even give you a path to a different skein," Tsunúre said quietly. She wore an old, simple outfit after her day's work conducting business for their clan, but her eyes were still lightly brushed with the black eyeshadow that was her namesake.

"What do you mean? I am very happy with my career, and with you—"

"You know—or should know—that I do not speak of us. But it is as clear as a crystal of Lord Hnálla's temple that your new duties, now postponed, were already vexing you."

Was he that obvious? "The opportunity to serve the Empire—"

"Wasn't enough to make you happy in the Regiment of Noble Ssiyór of Mrelú, mired every day in bickering and adjudication over supplies as deeply as if you had to bargain with five Salarvyáni merchants for your life," she finished for him, again interrupting in that irksomely knowing northern woman's way that she excelled at. "I think that there are other ways for you to serve the Empire—and clearly, so do others of more import. Let us not speak of these matters longer now. You have a long journey ahead, and I will not see you for many nights."

Aíjom, sheepish after having his inner deliberations as neatly eviscerated as the Dnélu by his guides, complied. Perhaps she did know best, this time.

Chapter II

At morning, he headed west out of Khirgár, toward Chéne Hó. The walking did much for Aíjom's spirits as well as his body. The injuries inflicted by the Dnélu, as well as the slight weakness born of inactivity that had been creeping up on him for months, were slowly fading. He now admitted to himself that he was excited at the prospect of seeing the

oft-mentioned yet mysterious western border of Tsolyánu, and with his arrival, to learn of what he was to be hunting. When he tired, which was often in the heat of midday, he could amuse himself by watching the long slave-caravans, with their endless variety of wares, and the occasional Chlén-cart, hauling the least valuable goods of the Empire at a pace that would surely drive a transcendent Perfect One of the faith of Lord Drá into a fury. The higher-clan processions above him were both infrequent and comparatively dull, for all their opulence, and it was wise not to gawk at them in any event.

At evening, he ate with the caravans, sharing in their simple pleasures, and sometimes sought the relative comfort of a roadside village. He was an unremarkable character to all he walked with, as they had seen the legions of the Empire march up and down these roads fighting the Yán Koryáni incursions, accompanied by a thousand messengers and functionaries. Most people probably would not have cared to hear of his mission if he wished to speak of it. This was perfectly fine with him.

At the end of the fourth day of walking the Sákbe-road as long as he cared to, he came to the village of Tmérsu and, like most of his companions on the road who were not part of one of the great caravans, decided to seek good food and some diversion there. While getting a very large loaf of Gáinikh bread, which was made with more coarsely ground grain here than in Khirgár but which was good in its own way, he heard some local clansmen of his discussing the hunting of Dnélu that had become daring enough to prowl the outskirts of the village. Here, too, Aíjom thought, their boldness could lead to farmers' deaths. He introduced himself, which was a reassurance after even but a few days spent away from the comfort of his clan and speaking only to strangers, and fell into the conversation with a description of his recent kill.

"How large was the beast?" asked a seasoned, hard-looking man named Hijók who spoke in low tones. His demeanor was somewhat withdrawn now and difficult to place—either a slight deference to his relatively high lineage in their clan, the reticence of a local when speaking to those of Khirgár (that seemed unlikely here, where so many visitors strode through), or maybe an attitude of assessment.

"It seemed big, though I've seen few Dnélu. I think it stood about a dháiba tall, and weighed maybe 70 psé."

Hijók arched his eyebrows. "And where were its packmates when you dropped it?"

Aíjom was taken aback by the question. His conversations with the soldiers of the Legion of Mnáshu of Thri'íl had never touched on Dnélu, which were beasts of the plains and not familiar to the mountain-bred hunters. "I know that they sometimes hunt in packs, but I thought they were often alone when they're not hunting."

"They get distant from each other, maybe, but not alone," said Hijók, looking into the distance as recollection filled his mind. "That was indeed a large one. Your tracking was good to have followed it unseen from the water, but I'd bet a Káitar or two that it would have been within running distance of at least four of its fellows, maybe six, that were most likely tracking you. Ones that big lead packs, more often than not."

A cold shudder took Aíjom suddenly. Had he seen others? It had been difficult to tell in the rush of the chase at the end, but a few half-remembered images of quivering, feathery stalks in not-too-distant cover suddenly bloomed darkly in his mind. It only now occurred to him that he might owe his local guides much more than the curt thanks and merely adequate pay he had given them.

"At any rate, you sound like someone with experience in these matters. What is it you usually hunt, if not Dnélu?"

Aíjom decided not to take Hijók's bluff-sounding statement badly. "I've spent time south of Khirgár breaking up Hyahyú'u packs that get vicious and attack livestock or their herders, and I've been a guide for some men of the Golden Sunburst on occasion, hunting Vringálu."

That brought back any face his ignorance of Dnélu might have lost. Another member of the group spoke up now.

"Vringálu? The flying snakes with poison in their mouths that will burn through a Chlén-hide helm and empty your skull just like drinking Tshórido straight from Púrdimal?"

"They aren't that dangerous, but they must be dealt with very cautiously," Aíjom said, now himself abruptly lost in remembrance. "We would scare them so they'd fly from their hiding-holes and perches for archers to sport with—it's really the only way to avoid deaths among the hunters. My job was to scout and find their roosts, then guide beaters to flush them. They don't scare easily—it takes at least four men, and better five or six, that have the courage to really face the things and make noise to cause some of them to bolt far enough away for a clean shot by the hunters."

"What if they decided not to fly off—thought you were easy pickings?" Hijók asked interestedly.

"We had staves, and these worked well to fend them off—again, if your men worked with you. Three men could hold off a small flight for a time, but the flights were hardly ever small. We tried spears, which had an obvious advantage, but if they caught in one of the beasts, you might lose the spear and weaken your line. Besides, you'd often tear the wing that way, and that was frowned upon. Even the archers below would hold their fire if they didn't have a clean body shot. They always wanted to single out a big one, and that was hard; the big ones were the least intimidated by us, and stayed close to the roost. We brought Tsúral-buds with us as remedy for their poison, but it was of little use to apply them while the things were still diving at you."

The men had warmed to him now, and invited him to stay in the local clanhouse, a welcome treat even if it was to be expected. They retired to the simple meeting room, decorated with murals depicting the local history of the clan, and rested on mat-covered, earthen tiers according to their lineage. Their conversation continued over a hearty dinner, and they were joined by curious women and children, as well as a clan elder named Drésu who seemed to be cut from the same cloth as Hijók. Aíjom reprised his earlier stories, finding Drésu to be just as sharp an observer as Hijók had been. Aíjom was not surprised to learn that Drésu was Hijók's father, or to learn that he had traveled far in his youth, even entering the Dó Chákan forests while stationed in Chéne Hó as a guard against Mu'ugalavyáni incursions. As the evening wore on, most left the meeting room. Eventually, only Aíjom, Hijók and his father, and a few others sat and sipped Chuméll contemplatively in the twilight that shone through the narrow windows and the flicker of a small light-fire in the hearth.

Drésu looked at Aíjom with an air of measurement. "I would guess that no normal business of our clan calls you westward alone," he said slowly.

"You are right, O one of honorable age. I go to serve a Lord in the hunt." Neatly true, he thought, and he would come no closer to the mark than that.

"The hunts of those of high clan are a varied thing," Drésu said in an expository tone. "Some are almost worthy of the praise their minstrels compose for the ride home." The group indulged itself with a laugh at the expense of such higher-clan fops, unthinkable outside the walls of their clanhouse. "I was myself working as a guide for hunts during my time in Chéne Hó, as were some of my fellows. One had to have something to do, and I soon tired of the more urban entertainment my fellow legionaries enjoyed when I could be filling my purse instead of emptying it. Some of these hunts were little more than chasing Nráishu out of cover for a few hours, although I admit I enjoyed those more than those occasions when a high one was after Tsi'fl." This drew low chuckles from every listener; everyone knew of the gargantuan beasts, even if they had never seen one.

"There was one hunt"—here Drésu paused and looked truly distant—"I shall not forget until I voyage to the Isles. The hunters were two young brothers of the Sword of Fire clan, who might have been Vríddi for all their humility. They scorned the hunts of others as effete and dull, the affairs of children and bird-watchers. Their goal was to stalk an animal

that would bring them fame, and due to the difficulty of finding assistants and guides for such a dangerous task, they were bússan and told us that their hunt had no special purpose. Only when we were seven tsán inside the forest—already deeper than it was wise to go—did they tell us they wanted Zrné."

Aíjom, recalling long-ago bedtime tales of the predatory forest monsters, felt a shiver even in the still-warm Drénggar evening. "Surely you could have returned home without having done wrong in anyone's eyes!" he said with feeling.

"Perhaps—although it is ever unwise to cross one's betters so directly. Certainly, had I known what would happen, I would have done so; they could have had a year of my pay as Shámtila if they saw fit to bribe a judge to see their side, and I would have considered it a fair price. But I was also young and hotheaded, and thought that on the whole, the idea was not a bad one. There would be glory for me in the enterprise if it were successful; and there were six of us, all experienced guides, as well as the two hunters, so success seemed likely if we found a Zrné. No less important, there would be pay if, as I thought, we blundered around all day and couldn't find one. My fellow guides and porters either felt the same way or were not brave enough to give voice to their fear.

"So, with none to oppose them, the hunters told us some few pieces of information they had gleaned from border villagers regarding the habits and haunts of Zrné. It was a pity the villagers were either reticent or ignorant. We all knew that the beasts' bites were poisonous, and that they could jump like Dlákolél, but nothing else; the hunters had learned how to identify their tracks and spoor, and what areas were likely to be haunts.

"We voyaged so far that day into the forest that I thought the sun had surely set, for all the light we saw. I was at the time more scared of encountering Pé Chói than any Zrné, for I thought it certain that we would not find one of the beasts. It did not occur to me how eager they would be to find us."

"Why such a fright of the Pé Chói?" asked Aíjom. "I know that some live in the forests and claim no fellowship with man, but I have never known them to be warlike if unprovoked."

"You know the Pé Chói of the cities and towns, who indeed bear no hatred of us. But the Pé Chói of the Chákan forest are different. They are devoted to their own gods, and hold their own council. They regard any human in the forest as an intruder, and are happy to dispatch him if it please them to do so. Earlier that year, stories had flown around our barracks as if borne by Küni when a border patrol went missing and were eventually found only a few tsán into the forest. What drew them there none knew, but who killed them was clear. They were butchered like Hmá, and were carved with markings that the local scholars identified as being made by Pé Chói who followed the Black Old One."

Drésu sipped his chumétl again, and was quiet for a moment. Aíjom could not have been more interested if he was the greatest entertainer in Khirgár. "We moved quickly. I wonder if, even then, the hunters guessed that they had taken on a task too great for them and ran partly inspired by fear. I lead, as the senior guide, and within at most five kirén of our true purpose being revealed, I saw tracks that looked to be of the sort the villagers had described. They were deep and broad, showing the size of the thing, and I admit that a sudden terror almost drove me to erase them. It would have done no good, though; there were other tracks, of course, and the other guides would probably have feared the wrath of the Sword of Fire more than a pack of Zrné, at least then.

"We followed the beasts' tracks for many tsán. Although I bore the hunters no love, I will admit that they were fit and did not shirk from the chase, and that they were skilled in the hunt, making no undue sound. They each bore a steel-tipped shortspear, an extravagance that no doubt goaded some of my fellows on, thinking of the rewards that might be theirs if we could indeed slay one of the foul beasts.

"As before, I was in the lead, and we moved at a near-run, for the tracks were not hard to follow in the spongy

forest soil. This ended abruptly, though, when in the midst of a grove of short, broad trees the tracks scattered, and it became difficult to determine where the original trail led. The hunters realized that this must be a place where the beasts congregated, and ordered us to hide.

"We baited the grove with a well-wrapped haunch of Hmá that one of my fellow trackers was glad to rid himself of. We found cover well enough, as there was some loose undergrowth, and went into crouches in a semicircle open to what we had determined to be the most heavily-trafficked direction. We agreed that when one of the beasts approached, we would rise up and throw spears, then rush to enclose it with secondary weapons, thus surely sealing the beast's doom. We counted on being able to rise unnoticed before throwing our spears and rushing, for as you know, most animals cannot perceive vertical movement as well as horizontal shifts." Aíjom, Hijók and the others nodded at this well-known piece of hunting lore.

"In less than a kirén, when the afternoon was late and the sun had begun to shine in at a steep angle through the canopy far overhead, we saw one of the beasts come over a hillock and shuffle near us. It ambled slowly, and at that distance did not seem as menacing as the stories told; I thought for a crazy moment that it looked a bit like a brown, misshapen Hmá with a long, heavy, twitching tail, or perhaps a fat spider lumbering over the mossy ground. That last thought was prescient, for we were already caught in their web."

Their web?, Aíjom thought, uneasy at another reminder of how dangerous his Dnélu hunt had been, but was silent.

"The Zrné shambled up to the meat, sniffed at it, and lunged at it with a huge snap. That was our agreed-upon signal to rise. I slowly straightened up, watching the Zrné as a Küni watches its prey, staring as if hypnotized at its three deep, yellow eyes. It didn't react to us or appear to see us, and kept eating. Now that it was closer, I thought I noticed something most odd—markings on the Zrné's flank that looked like writing, not birthmarks.

"Just as one of the hunters raised his spear to his shoulder, our signal to throw our own spears, the beast leapt up onto one of the tree trunks. It looked for all the world like it had vanished into the sky; the already half-devoured haunch still sat on the forest floor. We might have been able to follow it better, had not a second one then leapt down from one of the trees of the grove and crushed one of my fellow guides—Súran, a good friend; we had grown up together. None of us had noticed the beast watching us from above in the kirén we had been in the grove.

"The hunters bellowed warcries that they no doubt learned as children from the temple of Vimúhla. I wonder if such devotions eased their trip to the Isles. One also had the sense to shout to the rest of us, "Watch above for the other!" They flung their spears at the second beast, but only one hit solidly. The hunters then pulled out their second spears—Chlén-hide, these; even they weren't rich enough to bear that much steel—and charged. The second one roared, a horrible sound that still seems to ring in my ears when I think of it, and jumped toward them, knocking me aside. It was large, certainly, looking over two dháiba long to me at the time, but the power of the animal was even greater than its size suggested. I felt like a Chlén had headbutted me. It snapped at another guide in midleap, then smashed one of the hunters down. The Zrné pawed his second spear aside, then bit his head, muffling the man's dying screams.

"The other hunter did something I still admire—he jumped onto the Zrné's furry side, gripped the protruding spear his brother had thrown, and used his weight to plunge it deeper into its guts, drawing a howl even more awful than the first. The rest of us, five now, had regrouped together, and one of the others had grabbed the fallen steel spear. We were about to charge the Zrné and save the second brother, now holding onto the spear to keep himself from the Zrné's jaws, when the first Zrné jumped from one of the trees from a height and ripped him off its fellow. I noticed, just as we all turned to run, that on the second Zrné's hide were markings, clearer now in the slanting light, identical to those I'd seen on the first.

"We ran as though Origób was on our heels, but neither saw nor heard any sign that the two Zrné were chasing us. After a long run, we left the forest, emerging several tsán south of Chéne Hó. It was only when we began to breathe the blessed open air that we realized the danger we would face when we returned. The hunters were of the Sword of Fire clan, now both dead in our company, and one of their steel spears was lost. Also, the guide who had been bitten–scratched, really; the wound was very slight–was already feeling weak. He died before we got back.

"Upon returning to Chéne Hó, we immediately went to the Sword of Fire clanhouse, presented the remaining spear, and told our story. The clanspeople there had not known the true purpose of the brothers' hunt, any more than we had before it was well underway. They were wholly unimpressed with our stories and probably would have sent the lot of us to the Tólek Kána pits to see if we could think of better ones. Fortunately, two things saved us. First, the brothers had done a bit of boasting outside the clanhouse, and there were witnesses more reputable than we who could vouch that the two had indeed sought Zrné. Second, the clawmarks and bruises on my side–I thank Karakán that I was not bitten, for that would have meant death–where one of them had knocked me down were identified by a priest of Belkhánu as being from a Zrné. The other guide's death was identified as being from their poison, though this was not hard; one of their narrow teeth was stuck in his arm! I suspect that in addition, the heartfelt admiration we all expressed for the bravery of the brothers–if not their honesty or common sense, though we kept those opinions well hidden–mollified their clansmen. We didn't get any pay, of course, but that was unimportant.

"On the next day, I went to the local temple of Thúmis, and asked to see a priest wise in local lore. I drew, clumsily, the markings I had seen twice; there was little danger of my ever forgetting them. I said that we had seen these markings in the woods, carved on bark, and none had known what they meant.

"The priest, like everyone else in the city, had heard of the hunt. The clan was trumpeting their fallen heroes; they must have decided that they might as well capitalize on their loss. He goggled at the markings for a time, and said that they were signs in the Pé Chói language. He wasn't sure, but he thought it likely that one of them indicated ownership."

The group was hushed now, and Aíjom noted briefly that by their response, Drésu could not be one who sang tributes to his own deeds often. As for himself, he was amazed at the tale. "So these things were pets of the Pé Chói?" he asked, in a voice he hadn't used since he was a child asking about the wonders of a magician's or puppeteer's show.

"Not pets," Drésu replied with a hard stare belying his years. "Sentinels of those who served the Black Old One, their god of Change, who does not wish men to invade their land. But take my advice, Aíjom: do not hunt the Zrné. If you encounter them, do not assume that you can shift up or down without being seen, as you might with a Dnélu or Vringálu. Watch for them above. And do not go where men are not welcome." Drésu stood. "It is late, and such events as this are best not spoken of after nightfall. Sleep well, and may your voyage proceed quickly." He left the meeting room, as did his clansmen.

Aíjom was conducted to a small, simple guestroom, where he fell into a troubled sleep, stalked by night-demons through heavy grass under the green light of the moon Gayél. He could only hear his short, gasping breaths, the deep rumbling of their calling to each other, and the swishing of the grass-stalks, and only occasionally did he see them through the thick cover, their sleek, powerful forms and burning eyes slowly encircling him.

Chapter III

In the morning, Aíjom left the clanhouse in Tmérsu and resumed his westward trek. He found himself wishing that he was of higher clan this day, for a breeze from the north could be seen blowing across the topmost level of the Sákbe-road, causing pennants to flutter and clothes to flap slowly, while Aíjom and the others below on the inside of the road felt little of its cooling touch. Now that he was well out of the Khirgári hills, the heat was damper and more oppressive. Despite the heat, he walked farther than during the last four days, as Hijók had told him that a long day's walk would bring him inside the walls of Si'ís. He also strove to use exhaustion to keep from brooding on the unknown nature of his quest. He sighted Si'ís on the horizon as his shadow grew mercifully long, and made it to his clanhouse there just as the sleep-demons were about to wrestle him to the floor of the Sákbe road.

Despite Aíjom's exhaustion, he made a cursory survey of Si'ís, a town he had not visited before. It was smaller than Khirgár, and the town gave the strong impression of being a wide place where the Sákbe-roads met, even smaller than it was. Many here, including those most visible at this late hour, were visitors passing through: soldiers and traders headed to the garrisons and marketplaces of Chéne Hó, Khirgár, or other places.

The Golden Dawn had a clanhouse here, but it was scarcely larger than that in Tmérsu, and his clanspeople here were not of the same mind as those he had guested with there. They were focussed on trade and crops, and gave little thought to other matters; he was treated as an annoyance, taking up space that could have been given to visiting traders of the clan. For his own part, Aíjom did not mind this coldness much; it gave him an excuse to speak only briefly of his mission, saying he was bound to Chéne Hó on military business. Still, he found little comfort in his stay there until the morning of his departure, when Kágoth, one of his clansmen, cast his gaze away from grain and its buyers long enough to speak to him before he set out the next morning. Unfortunately, his words were not consoling.

"The road ahead will be hotter than those which you have come from, as the Atkolél Heights prevent winds from the north from being strong. Also, Aíjom"—here Kágoth looked worried, an expression Aíjom hadn't seen on the face of any of his clansmen here—"you should be ever more cautious as you approach the western edge of the Empire. The Chákas are a place of unrest and ancient troubles. Be wary of deals there." Aíjom thanked Kágoth for his words, and left pondering his last warning: if a trader immersed in his work had heard of unrest, he might well have cause for concern awaiting him on the road ahead.

When he left Si'ís, he intended to redouble his pace, anxious to be in Chéne Hó where he would learn of his purpose here, but could not bring himself to do so. He had been hardened by his walk, but still could not run like an Imperial messenger in the Drénggar heat; furthermore, the air was indeed hotter and heavier than it had been before Si'ís.

There were some amusements, however, that compensated in some way for trudging through the heat. Among the usual traffic of slaves, porters, farmers and soldiers trudging forth from Si'ís, there walked a pair of priests clad in the soft grey of Thúmis. Aíjom gathered, over the course of the day, that the younger of the two was from the Monastery of the Sapient Eye, attending the elder on a voyage to Chéne Hó before himself traveling to the south. The elder was very clearly in control, monologuing at a measured pace in a soft, gravelly voice that was almost hypnotic. It was difficult for Aíjom to understand aught but a few phrases, for the elder's voice was low as the embers of a campfire at midnight, but he seemed to speak of arcane theologies of some subsect of his temple. He spoke ceaselessly, as if he had to recite the contents of the libraries of the temples of Thúmis before leaving for the Isles. Aíjom never learned whether this was because he was trying to indoctrinate the younger priest, or win him over from a hostile sect, or whether his companion had been charged with remembering and recording this information. The intent, if cowed, look of the younger made the

latter seem most likely.

As the tsán slid by, the older priest spoke, talked, argued and declaimed, his font of inspiration as endlessly bountiful as the lands of the Empire. Aíjom was initially interested enough, and weary enough, to slow to their pace to listen. His exposure to religious argument was as limited as that of most Tsolyáni who lived outside temple walls, and he welcomed any diversion from his worries about his mission, which ate at him like the hungry worms of Lord Sárku worry a corpse. But as the kirén passed, Aíjom realized that no uninvolved listener could long focus on such a torrent without drowning. He occasionally walked closer to them after a time to see if the elder priest had finally run out of theses to propound, and never did he detect so much as a pause in the elder priest's oration, except on those rare occasions when he saw fit to query his companion on some matter.

That night, Aíjom's dreams were again troubled by bright-eyed night demons; but now Káshi shone redly in the sky, and the night-demons were joined, most incongruously, by the never-silent priest, who sat atop one of the things as if it were a palanquin bearing him through the grass. The priest's orations were still soft and measured, but now they concerned horrible things that made Aíjom moan affrightedly, though he could not remember them even a moment later. Nor could his mind's eye leave the priest when he saw him pet the demon he rode as if it were a child's favorite Tiúni. He awoke gasping as a fish on the deck of a boat, but laughed deprecatingly at himself when he reawakened at sunrise—the dream had been awful under Tékumel's utterly dark night sky but was ludicrous by the light of Tuléng.

The next day was surely even hotter, a day fit for Firasúl. The whole of the plains were a stewpot in which bits of meat walked around. Amazingly, the elder continued to speak without ending as before, despite the miserable weather. Aíjom, left with a lingering dislike of the priest by his dream, never heard any repetition in his monologue, and marveled at the man's memory—or was he composing some or all of his material extemporaneously? He could not tell. He forced himself to outdistance the priests and walk faster, consciously exercising himself, trying to prepare for the dangers ahead. Still, the tsán lumbered by as slowly and heavily as a stubborn Chlén. Aíjom fervently thanked Lord Karakán that his skein had not directed him, as the younger priest's had, to the Monastery of the Sapient Eye, doomed to spend his life with such mind-numbing work.

Before the torment of midday, Aíjom arrived at the eastern side of the River of Red Agates, whose source was somewhere to the north in the massive Atkolél Heights. He would have been happy if the Gods had favored Yán Kór and shattered the Heights, clearing a path for the Yán Koryáni armies to march into northern Tsolyánu, if he could only have had some of the blessedly cool northern breezes to dry his dripping brow. The river was low, and he had heard tell in Si'ís that the fishing was not good here even in better years. He would have to eat another simple meal of Gáinikh bread, he thought ruefully, lonely amidst a crowd of travelers of every status and vocation, and no doubt it would hardly be his last.

So soon do you become homesick for the pleasures of clan and hearth! His thoughts rarely left his foibles unskewered. Lá! Such a mighty warrior! "Yes," he replied to himself, "but the fiercest warriors are not immune to complaint and longing. I do not grudge the pains and risks of the hunt, if only I might eat like a hunter afterwards!"

In fact, this was a blessed pause from his march. The riverside was quiet, grassy, and somewhat shaded by brush. Aíjom lay back after his meal to watch a Kúni circle overhead, wondering aloud to a fellow traveller where it found the energy to fly at midday. "No doubt he's got a wife and brood to feed, who won't give him rest 'til he returns with his weight in meat," the older man replied, chuckling. Aíjom laughed politely, but found little humor in it, for it reminded him of his own Tsunúre and the many tsán he had to walk before he could begin to walk back home.

Feeling the need to shake off these depressing thoughts, Aíjom introduced himself to the man, who was named Srúma

hiMráktine. Srúma was a native of Chéne Hó, returning home after a stint working in the villages south of Si'ís for his clan of the Green Bough and with workers of the Flat Rock clan to improve harvest yields there, as he had done before west of Chéne Hó. He was slightly built, but moved with an ease suggestive of martial training. His hair was graying; his face was somewhat broad, and bore a worldly look. He was a peculiar man, speaking of efficiency and coordination and other terms that were too suggestive of collusion with lower workingmens' clans for Aíjom's comfort. Aíjom's family had traded grain for many generations, and he knew its properties and value as he knew his own face, but he was not greatly familiar with the fine details of its production. He did find himself warming to the topic, though; unlike the torrent of the priest of Thúmis' words, this stream was of clear value to him, and he interjected both with his own suggestions on the subject of animal control and with bits of farming lore he had picked up wandering the villages south of Khirgár. Indeed, Srúma seemed to take a liking to him, telling Aíjom that it was to his credit that he could take a broader view of these matters than could many of his clansmen.

The sojourn at the river raised Aíjom's spirits; it was the most pleasant place he had found to rest since Tmérsu, and it was difficult to leave its banks. Only a strong desire to know what was expected of him drove him to rise and walk again, feeling very much as a Mrúr eight centuries dead would feel if it could. Srúma was even more reluctant to return to the road. "The Kúni can take me to his nest, if he can lift my carcass from the ground! More likely he'll have to share me with a flight of others to take me anywhere, or else content himself with my eyeballs," he grumbled. But despite his grouching and his greater age, Srúma and his companion, a short, dour, elder clansman of his named NgangmoréI, set out at a pace that challenged Aíjom. He kept up in order that he might continue his talks with Srúma and perhaps apprise himself of any knowledge Srúma might have of the Chákan wilds. They were long out of sight of the river and its brief site of respite when they stopped again to sleep; it was the seventh night since Aíjom had left Khirgár. Fortunately for him, his dream of the demon-riding priest did not recur.

More fortunately, he continued speaking with Srúma. One of Srúma's hobbies was practicing the art of Dedarátl, which Aíjom had some training in but wished to master further. At midday, Srúma assented to Aíjom's request to train and spar with him. The two commenced to perform exercises, hold stances, and throw each other to the ground, all under the glare of the summer sun. The caravan of porter-slaves that they had overtaken at midday glanced inconspicuously at them, with a look Aíjom knew well: it was the same look he had tried to hide when a noble of the Golden Sunburst that he was guiding on a hunt decided to do something suicidally stupid that he couldn't stop. Despite this unvoiced criticism, he flung himself back to his sparring with great vigor, losing four rounds while winning twice. Against a practitioner of Srúma's experience, that was indeed a good showing.

After the training, they drank warm water from the skins they carried and rested silently for a while. "It is not common to meet a sparring partner so well-matched when on the road," Srúma said eventually, with obvious approval. Aíjom, who had pushed himself hard and who felt a number of pulls and bruises slowly stiffening, only nodded. Srúma laughed. "Ah, to be young and ambitious! But worry not, friend—the road cures all ills of the bákte, if not gently. It can even cure the ills of your other selves, if you know how to perform your own ministrations." Aíjom, too tired to spar with Srúma at platitudes as he had just sparred with him using Dedarátl, and concerned about his mission, again only nodded. Srúma, seeing a darkness pass over his face at this, said no more.

Thus did the next two days pass, with Aíjom slowly strengthening and improving his skills by training at midday and nightfall. While resting, they would occasionally leave the Sákbe road and look north, where they could see the forested, fortified foothills of the AtkoléI Heights through the haze, with the Heights themselves appearing almost as a storm front

behind them. The balance of the day was spent in talking of many things: farming, then hunting (which Srúma did not do but which he was interested in somewhat; Ngangmorél less so), then from this to talk of the Chákas. Aíjom learned that Srúma worshipped Thúmis, a common faith around Chéne Hó, and that Ngangmorél was a worshipper of Lord Sáрку, whose faith had been strong in the Chákas since before the Empire was formed. Ngangmorél warned Aíjom to be wary and respectful of the Íto clan, who worshipped the same dread Lord as did he but whose power was far beyond that of his Green Bough clan.

"Their influence rests on the land, all-covering and ancient, like a dusty shroud over a corpse," Ngangmorél said in his heavily accented Chákan voice. "You would do well to avoid their wrath in any of your doings." Aíjom thanked him for the warning, even as he warned himself not to get overly friendly with this adherent of a Lord of Change; he might well have been the sort of influence the priest had warned Aíjom of at the start of this journey.

Aíjom was leery of Ngangmorél, and waited until an illness pulled him away from Srúma, on the night of the ninth day since Aíjom left Khirgár, to recount Drésu's tale of the Zrné and their strange markings. He did this with a casual air, but did not dare to openly tell Srúma that he did not trust his clansman. *If Ngangmorél is untrustworthy, then I can only hope that Srúma knows this and will act with discretion*, Aíjom thought, almost desperately. He needed to learn more of the dark side of the Chákas, and the tale seemed like the perfect opening.

Srúma seemed as impressed as Aíjom had been at the tale, although Aíjom had to admit that he was not as strong a storyteller as the elder. He leaned forward, the grey in his hair a green glimmer in the moonlight. "This confirms other stories that I have heard from clansmen of trouble in the Chákan forests for many years, even worse in recent years than in the story you told. Beasts of the wood have attacked border villages with great ferocity, and great effect. Our clan and many others find their livelihoods imperiled, though this misfortune varies." Srúma shifted even closer and dropped his voice to a low tone, not obviously a whisper but not likely to carry far. "It is often observed that the holdings of the Íto clan endure these attacks as the rocks endure the pounding of the sea, while our storage buildings and fields are as sandpiles that wash away."

"Do you know if the Pé Chói guide these beasts, as in Drésu's account?" Aíjom was openly plying the man for information now, but still felt it worth the risk; besides, the priest had not prohibited him from learning useful information, so long as what little he knew of his mission remained secret.

"Who knows? The Pé Chói, the Mu'ugalavyáni"—this being a possibility Aíjom had not seriously considered, yet which now gaped before him like the shadowy entrance to a Dnélu's den—"it could be anyone. Or perhaps no one is causing the attacks. But it seems to me that they are controlled, and involved in the Dén-dén games of the lords of the Chákas." At this pronouncement, Srúma broke off uneasily, and motioned for Aíjom to speak of other things; Ngangmorél came by shortly thereafter, groaning and cursing the demons that tore at his guts. So Srúma doesn't trust a clansman in this matter, Aíjom thought grimly. That bodes worse than I had feared for its seriousness. He bedded down and slept an easy sleep; having faced his fears by day, they saw fit to leave him during the night.

Two more days passed. Aíjom became the match of Srúma in Dedarátl matches, which pleased him considerably even if it was due in large part to Srúma's greater age. The villages were hospitable, though there did seem to be a growing wariness and reticence in the basketcapped villagers he spoke to as they approached the Uplands of Zarúva and the western edge of the Empire. Aíjom began to seriously question his judgment in these matters, however; being around Ngangmorél had made him suspicious. By the morning of the eleventh day, they could see the Uplands, and the ill-named Fortress of Nurgáshte atop them; the great concentric walls of Chéne Hó loomed dark before them at sunset, wreathed in

the smoke of a myriad hearthfires, and they were within the city's deep gates by nightfall. Aíjom was sorry to part ways with Srúma, but anxious to report for his mission.

The Golden Dawn clanhouse here was on the western side of the city. It was at least as large as his own in Khirgár, and busier; he was not troubled by overtalkative clansfolk, and was allowed to eat and sleep without any formal greeting, which suited him perfectly.

The next day, Aíjom awoke before dawn, eager to learn of his mission here, yet was rested—a benefit of a real bed. He breakfasted on fried Hmélu cutlets, Káika eggs, and soft bread, with a cup of Chumétl, brought up from the basement of the clanhouse, that was actually cold. It was the best meal he had eaten in a long time, and the young clansgirls serving those awake at that hour giggled to see him devour their food—"like a Chlén that has just crossed a waste," an older one said wryly. In fact, that was about how he felt.

After breakfast, he had the expected, formal meeting with his clan's elders here, which was made somewhat awkward by Aíjom's need for secrecy. However, the elders seemed harried and distracted, and did not pry as they might have. He asked for arms and armor, and they proffered worn but solid pieces of good quality, as well as the somewhat ostentatious luxury of a clan servant to bear his gear, without question. Are they truly distraught, he thought, or am I still seeing shadows where none fall?

After the meeting, he left the clanhouse, followed by the servant, and stood in the streets of Chéne Hó. He knew that he would not have time to see the city before reporting to learn of his mission, but on a whim, he wandered westward, to the nearby outer walls. On his route, he noticed some male and female Pé Chói striding about easily in the morning's cool amidst the traffic of human feet on the already-busy streets. He ascended the worn steps of a watchtower at the city's edge, to be met with a sight he had never seen the likes of before.

The Chákan forest stretched before him, rising slightly as it met the horizon. It was a sea of green as far as he could see, but in so many different shades and stirring to so many morning breezes that Aíjom felt mesmerized, as though he was looking into a campfire. The vapors of the night had not yet fully burned away, cloaking the treetops in shifting wisps. To the south, the River of White Bones seemed to be a thin, silver snake lying torpid in the grass, with its tail hidden somewhere in the forest's depths. Aíjom had seen many small copses of trees on the northern plains and in the Khirgári hills, but the enormity of this forest was shocking. In the foreground, he could see houses and farmlands, and he could not help but think that the people living there were like Drí-ants, toiling in a world meant for giants. He found it difficult, and even somehow unnerving, to turn his back on the forest and leave the tower, descending to the world of his fellow humans.

The sojourn had cost him time, but after the conditioning of the past two weeks, he could run as well as a legionary, and he had little trouble spying the profile of the Temple of Karakán standing proudly above its neighbors. He shortly approached the great, colonnaded building, the servant struggling to keep up while bearing his gear. Rounding the last corner and looking at the temple's landscaped entrance, Aíjom was surprised to see a furry, loincloth-clad Rényu squatting on its haunches at the edge of the temple gardens, looking bored as it sniffed the air with its canine snout. Aíjom had seen Rényu before—some of the high-clan hunters of Khirgár had kept them, more as a display of opulence than for practical reasons, although Rényu were more intelligent than the four-legged Tlékku they resembled and could even hold weapons. What such a beast was doing at the temple Aíjom couldn't imagine.

He told the servant to remain on the temple grounds while he was inside, then entered the outer gardens, unconsciously moving his hands in quick ritual devotions while he strove to compose himself, and walked at a measured pace toward the

temple itself. The main hall was not as big as that of Lord Karakán's temple in Khirgár, but it was still a massive room, festooned with detailed friezes and carvings depicting deeds of martial glory from the time of the Engsvanyáli Priestkings to the War of 2020 against the treacherous Mu'ugalavyáni, and overarched with a gilded dome.

Aíjom presented himself and the papers given to him by Kuréshu to a sharp-eyed, heavysset priest named Changékte hiTíshkolen, who appeared by his easy air of authority to be of some seniority. The priest scanned his papers quickly. "So you come to speak to our visitor from the south," the priest said in a low, gravelly voice. "He has been active in proselytizing since his arrival, and has won support from many of the highest clans for our campaign against the monsters of the jungle, though we have seen little of him. He waxes impatient to meet you. I shall announce your coming." Changékte walked away to the back of the temple; after a short while, he returned with a more hurried air, accompanied by a heavily armored man bearing a vicious Chlén-hide sword who was not dressed as a temple guard, and motioned him to follow. Perplexed that he still had not learned anything of the purpose of his mission even here, Aíjom followed, wondering if the 'visitor from the south' was sent by the Petal Throne.

The priest guided Aíjom to a door, which bore familiar symbols: beyond would be a Hall of Memory, where the deeds of great generals of the past would be remembered and their relics preserved. Once Aíjom had set his hand on the door, the priest turned and left in moderate haste, while his escort stood to one side of the door. He entered the room, but did not marvel at its collection of golden Aílur-statues of heroes long gone, nor stare at the weapons and banners that had played their parts in famous battles; instead, he was astonished to see Kuréshu, the priest who had sent him here, seated cross-legged on the floor.

Chapter IV

Kuréshu looked up rather slowly at him, smiling with the same slight slowness. Aíjom thought it might be the local custom—no one he had met outside his clanhouse for the past few days had seemed truly outgoing—or perhaps it was his mounting nervousness making him see demons in every shadow. At any rate, he decided that the man must be important enough that his clear preference for avoiding purposeless questions, such as how he had beaten Aíjom back, should be honored. Still, he had to know why he was here, and he was not feeling overly deferential.

"This commission has been most strange," Aíjom said carefully, listening to the faint echo of his voice die somewhere in the rafters of the long hall. "I expected as much, given your earlier manner and the apparent importance of the deed. But now is the time to unseal your lips. What have I been summoned to do?"

"It is not yet time for you to learn what you will hunt," Kuréshu said quietly. "First you will meet your companions in this work, and you will be given to understand what its purpose is." He gestured to the swordsman, who had been watching them speak and who now ducked out into the hall. "You have waited throughout your journey here to learn of its goal," Kuréshu said sardonically, "and I trust that waiting for a few more sível will not make you burst."

The escort—whether he was legionary, bodyguard or other, Aíjom could not tell—came back, escorting a hulking Shén! Aíjom's eyes bulged; he had seen Shén before, although they were not common this far north, but had never imagined one striking out on its own in this manner. It was the last creature on Tékel he had anticipated hunting with.

"Chhkk," Kuréshu said, sounding the name as one aping the hiss of steam, "this is Aíjom, the hunter I spoke to you of. He has stalked the Vringálu, and knows both the mountains and the plains. You will have to teach him of the forest." The Shén grinned, or at least that was what Aíjom hoped his fang-filled grimace was, and nodded to him.

"It will be a pleasure to hunt with one so skilled," the Shén said in correct and remarkably lightly accented Tsolyáni. Aíjom thought that the Shén must have been long away from home to be so versed in the language.

"The two of you are to be the leaders of an expedition, and shall be given command over your fellows. It is, of course, not only because of your talents that you have been called here." Aíjom, provoked by the comment, wondered how far the Shén had had to walk. It had to be farther than my own trek, he thought. He also noted that the first armed man had left again. "You are both known and trusted as lán warriors, who would act here without any heed to those who would turn your spears from their target. It is this impartiality that has caused us to bring you here, as a Küni spies a Jakkóhl from a distance and flies to bring it to its chicks." The metaphor did nothing to ease Aíjom's worries. He also was puzzled; how had a Shén become known for lán behavior in the eyes of Kuréshu's superiors?

Several hard-looking men and Aridáni women, rural locals of middle and low clans from their dress, filed in, with the bodyguard type in the rear. Aíjom covertly watched their reaction to the Shén and was unsurprised to see them as shocked as he had been. They appeared to worship a mix of deities: all the more evidence that this matter was considered a serious issue, that nonbelievers should be allowed into an inner room of the temple of Aíjom's war-god. He was impressed in spite of his fears by their obvious strength and assured manner. Yes, his thoughts said severely, and Drésu was impressed by his hunting companions, yet they did not avail him against the Zrné.

Kuréshu introduced them all tersely, then gestured for silence. "It is now time for you to hear of your mission. As you locals know, conditions on the forest border have been hard for some time now. Many of your clanspeople have been killed by beasts, and those who are not beasts have been suspected in these deeds. We have learned that a group of Pé Chói is behind this unrest. Certain others will be dealing with them. Your job is to scout the forest for us, to locate the Pé Chói, and to deal with any dangers of the forest other than the Pé Chói themselves." At this pronouncement, the men blanched slightly, which was undoubtedly a good sign: it meant they knew somewhat of the Chákan forest and its threats.

"There are many dangers that you will be expected to face, but the chief of these shall be watching and, if needed, killing Zrné." There it was, and Aíjom was a fool to have not expected it. On reflection, he found that the only shock was that this priest did not expect him to wrestle Feshénga into submission and bring them back to Chéne Hó for a temple procession. The locals did not show much emotion; clearly this had come as less of a surprise to them. Chhkk appeared to be almost happy, and Aíjom was not sure whether he would chide the Shén for his foolishness or let a Zrné do this for him.

"Your first task, however, is both an easier and a heavier burden." Kuréshu smirked ever so slightly. "You will bear supplies to our camp within the forest. The most direct way there follows the River of White Bones; this will allow you to bring the supplies in by raft much of the way. Thereafter, you shall be able to travel light, as you will need to."

Kuréshu stiffened; his mien grew fierce, his voice quiet. "The chief obstacle you will face in this first portion of your mission will be the possibility of encountering Sérudla, who venture forth from the forest in the vicinity of the river at night to hunt on the plains on occasion. Thus, stealth must be your watchword. You shall walk south a few tsán to the village of Sélzhine, which is to the east of the Sákbe-road and by the river, and hence is where we have stored supplies for the mission. You will depart from there tomorrow morn." With this, he opened his hands and fell silent, a clear sign that he would answer the leaders' questions.

Aíjom seized the opportunity to finally get some information. Kuréshu said that he had recently come here from a small temple near Páya Gupá to lend his experience to the defense of the border farmlands. He explained that he had been assigned, by unspecified superiors, to gather a team to support the troops that had been sent to end the menace of the wild

Pé Chói. Aíjom guessed that his superiors, unspecified though they were, were almost certainly members of the Imperial bureaucracy. Well, thought Aíjom, this is plausible; the Empire would frown on a sustained disruption of the harvests.

The matter of local interests wishing to disrupt the expedition impinged on Aíjom's thoughts, and he knew that being prepared for these disruptions would be vital. Yet he did not wish to reveal what little information he had gathered on his journey here, with the locals and the enigmatic Shén around him. "You said that there would be those near the Chákas"—not in, Aíjom thought—"who might wish ill to us. Who are they, and how might we avoid them?"

"The chief suspects in this matter of collusion with the Pé Chói are those who stand to gain from disruption of Imperial commerce. It is thought that reactionary factions within certain high clans"—Aíjom had no trouble in guessing one such clan—"may have availed themselves of the decreased oversight from agents of the Petal Throne under Dchich'uné's cursed reign and established unmeet pacts with the insects during those grim times."

The priest had no more to say of the matter, leaving Aíjom to think about his words. The level of secrecy seemed excessive to him, although this could be because he could not perceive the might of his opponents. And there was the matter of time. Dchich'uné's short reign had not encompassed the span of the tales he had heard from Srúma and Drésu. Might the Íto clan merely have expanded the scope of a long-standing relationship with the Pé Chói? And if this were so, would the insects not be reviled? Yet Aíjom had seen them coming and going in Chéne Hó that morning with nary an opprobrious glance from the locals. Of course, the Pé Chói were hardly all of one mind; mayhap those of the deep forest were seen completely differently. The matter made less sense the longer he thought on it; he felt as if he were drunk on Másh and thought to spy the Egg of the World amidst the pebbles of the plains, only to stumble trying to grab a rock.

With no more questions in evidence, and upon seeing the group nod agreement, the man got to his feet, apparently with some trouble—perhaps he was older than he looked—and handed Aíjom a sheaf of papers. "These will authorize your departure from Sélzhine with the supplies. We have completed our business here. I wish you luck in Dó Cháka."

Aíjom, Chhkk and the rest of the hunting party rose and went forth from the temple. The locals' spirits appeared to rise, but they were not excited at what faced them. Chhkk walked up to the Rényu and spoke to him in a low growl; apparently he owned the beast, which was even more unusual. The Shén appeared as pleased as he had within the temple. Aíjom was, admittedly, excited at the prospect of adventure, but not so unimaginitive as to be happy about a mission that might involve Sérudla.

They left the Sákbe-road where the River of White Bones flowed under it, the road arching over the riverbed. Aíjom saw that the river's name was warranted; bits of bone did appear beneath the river's rippling waters every few minutes, seeming to become more frequent as they approached Sélzhine.

The evening in Sélzhine was tense. Aíjom and Chhkk presented Kuréshu's papers to the village elders, who pronounced them satisfactory. The locals who accompanied them were fatalistic, some turning to drinking and reveling as the night grew dark. Each person faces Death in his own way, Aíjom thought, yet he could not help being nonplussed at their abandon. Chhkk was imperturbable, sitting quietly and eating far more hugely than Aíjom had managed at his clanhouse that morning.

Later in the night, when the rest of the party had settled in for sleep or more of whatever they had been doing, and Aíjom's clanservant had arranged their lodgings, Aíjom approached the huge Shén as he gazed enigmatically across the plains. He was the most alien element of this group; he might even be here on Imperial orders as an observer, although Aíjom could not adjust to that idea. In any event, he was likely the most knowledgeable member of the group—and certainly the most dangerous. Aíjom proceeded cautiously.

"Perhaps you find it less surprising than I to be involved in this expedition," Aíjom said, somewhat slowly. He still could not believe that the reptile was as fluent a speaker of Tsolyáni as he had appeared earlier; the few he had known of struggled with the language.

"Indeed," Chhkk replied, his voice flat and slow. If Chhkk had been human, Aíjom would have sworn he was mocking him. "I have hunted many beasts for many years. But I am troubled that hunting—even for Zrné—was considered important enough to call me north from Páya Gupá."

Páya Gupá was even farther away from here than Khirgár! The worries that had plagued Aíjom for many days grew more ominous. He decided to start tossing the Kévuk-dice; he needed to play at some point, or he would not win the information that he was beginning to suspect he needed in order to survive.

"Kuréshu said to me that those closer to the Chákas could not be trusted. Has he spoken to you of this?" Aíjom was certain, from Chhkk's accent if nothing else, that he had not been a long-term resident of the Chákas.

"When he arrived in Páya Gupá, he told me the same thing. I do not understand the struggles of power here, yet I have inquired of whom I might for several days, while waiting for you."

Aíjom's mind was now racing; he found it difficult to select a single question to pose. "When did Kuréshu meet you in Páya Gupá?"

"About a month ago. Why?"

Circumstances were ever more curious. For Kuréshu to have beaten Aíjom back from Khirgár was certainly possible, if improbable for one of his apparent age. It was far more difficult to imagine him marching from Páya Gupá to Khirgár in anything near two weeks; he would have had to march harder than a legionary! Why had another messenger not been sent to collect Aíjom? Kuréshu might be a sorcerer, or have access to their powers. This raised the oft-repeated question: why had they been called for this mission, when such powerful men were closer at hand?

Aíjom told Chhkk that Kuréshu had come to get him in Khirgár twelve days ago; from Chhkk's short hiss, he saw that he didn't need to point out the difficulty of his covering that much ground in that time. "It seems that Kuréshu is a remarkable man," Chhkk said, more quietly than Aíjom had heard a Shén speak before. Aíjom was now, no doubt foolishly, more inclined to trust the Shén than Kuréshu. Something about Kuréshu rubbed him the wrong way, and the Shén he had known of were honorable beings.

"He is, indeed, far more remarkable than I had guessed," Chhkk reiterated shortly. "I have learned a few things while I waited for you that you may find as interesting as I did."

The Shén glanced around quickly, which almost made Aíjom laugh—it seemed ridiculous for such a powerful creature to be nervous—and hunkered down, a sure signal that his tale would be long in the telling. Aíjom sat down too, eager yet fearful to broach the matter of treachery.

"The lands here have been troubled for generations by incursions from the beasts of the forests, although in the past, there were plenty of men to build walls and hold spears against their attacks. They were regular in their intensity. After the turmoil of Dhich'uné's ascension, the attacks worsened."

Aíjom interrupted to repeat Srúma's accusation that the holdings of the Íto clan had been spared by these attacks. "I had heard some rumors of this," Chhkk replied, "and had observed firsthand that although Íto lands had been struck by forest beasts, the damage to their crops and stores was far less telling than in other raids. But it is not that simple. Some farmhands working the lands of the Golden Sunburst clan have, no doubt unhealthily, remarked on the good fortune of their masters as well. There have also been unprecedented attacks by Sérudla—whole villages have been stripped and

crushed like a miller grinding your Dná-grain. These seem to have struck the Íto and their allied clans more often than not, though I cannot be sure. There have been accusations of complicity or alliance with the terrors of the jungle against nearly every clan that owns land west of Chéne Hó, as the panic has spread. Of these, the name of the Green Bough clan has come up most often, though perhaps only because it holds lands in this region that are disproportionate to its influence."

If thinking back to his then-unknown peril in facing the Dnélu alone made Aíjom shudder, this statement shook him as a tree in a gale. He had chosen his confidants badly, it seemed. He had told Srúma nothing of great importance, but he had discussed his interest in the control of the attacks; by now, he could have been identified as an outsider who would intervene in the matter. But Srúma had cautioned him not to let Ngangmorél know of his interest! Aíjom was as addled as a priest of Dlamélish on a holiday, and resolved to hold his tongue for the moment.

"So it seems likely, based on what we know, that some of the locals have decided to treat with the wild Pé Chói of the forest as a way of strengthening their position here. But this would be a dangerous gambit. If they are caught, Tsolyáni bureaucrats would be most unhappy with their means of competition—disrupting the commerce of the Empire and killing loyal subjects of the Petal Throne."

"Then, as outsiders uninvolved with local affairs, we have been brought here to confirm that the stain of corruption has been removed. It is not our expertise but our probity that is most valued." Aíjom frowned. "My clan has some holdings here, but it must be considered to be uninvolved, or I surely would not have been selected. I am known as a lán citizen, though I am not of exalted rank or greatly accomplished. How came you to be selected?" He was rolling the dice again, driven by his need to assess the Shén.

"I have wandered farther than many Shén," Chhkk said, "and in my travels have done deeds that have pleased high ones in your Empire." High ones? Town headmen, or I'm Pé Chói, thought Aíjom, but he kept a somber expression. "My conduct in these—affairs—must be what recommended me for the task, though as an outsider I am of course of far lesser status than you."

"So if the affair is important, why have we been selected? Why not those of higher importance?"

"Because it may be that our hunting skills are more important for this mission than we suspect. And perhaps also because we are unimportant, as it is not so unfortunate if we fail." The consequences of failure in the depths of the Chákan forest did not need to be spoken. The two stood silent for a time, then retired for the night. Aíjom slept uneasily, the heat and his confusion threatening to smother him at any moment.

In the morning, Aíjom sent his clanservant north to Chéne Hó, and the hunting party gathered by the riverside, struggling to port the mass of provisions that Kuréshu had spoken of from the local clanhouses. It was a huge quantity—Aíjom's eye, trained by growing up around measurement of grains and other foodstuffs, estimated that a hundred men could feed for a month on the food he and his men were carrying, and there were dozens of Chlén-hide swords and pieces of armor as well. Fortunately, the river was high enough to float craft that would bear the burden without complaint, and three sturdy rafts were tethered by the river's silted banks. The village headman, a weathered, balding, sun-blackened old farmer in hard-used garb, came to see them off and offered a few desultory words of encouragement; Aíjom couldn't tell if the headman didn't care or didn't know of their purpose. Aíjom took the lead raft with two others; Chhkk, his Rényu and a local woman took the second; and the last three locals manned the last raft, which was the most heavily laden with supplies. With a mix of excitement and apprehension, Aíjom gave the order to shove off, and the three rafts began the long task of poling upstream into Dó Cháka.

Chapter V

The first few tsán passed by very quietly. The locals were positively taciturn, and Aíjom certainly wished to keep his own council amidst strangers he had reason to distrust. Chhkk looked like a statue of a demon when he paused from poling occasionally, and his Rényu looked comical to Aíjom as it stolidly poled in time with its master. They soon came to the arch in the Sákbe-road where they had left it to walk to Sélzhine; passing under it felt very final, especially since the forest was now visible before them, albeit far off. It looked different here than viewed from the ramparts of Chéne Hó, seen only on its edge and in a brighter light; it appeared that Lady Dlamélish had girdled world and sky with an emerald belt.

The heat and the summer insects were annoying, and Aíjom found it awkward to be standing on a shifting raft, having spent all his days on land. But his Dedarátl training had given him the strength and balance to pole without much trouble, despite never having done it before. The river was calm here in the plains, and passed by many fields and homesteads, many of which were smashed or evidently abandoned by the locals. More and more as they approached the edge of the forest, the fields had been allowed to go to seed, their tall grass waving in gusty afternoon breezes. It did not escape Aíjom's notice that this untended state made attack even more likely, as cover was much thicker here than in the worked fields. The steadily fewer locals they saw looked inscrutably at the convoy as it worked its way toward the burgeoning wall of the forest. None spoke a word of greeting to them; Aíjom thought jokingly that he must be rafting to the Isles of the Excellent Dead, but found the humor too poor to share with his raftmates.

Their progress was slow, and the afternoon's heat and humidity did not aid them, yet they eventually left the neat fields and entered a still wilder yet mostly open terrain. They approached the forest's edge before sunset, as the sky was darkening with summer storm clouds, which promised a poor first night's rest. The world was flat and open behind them, but a solid and impenetrable wall of green before; Aíjom felt as though he had joined a sappers' legion and was about to lay siege to some impossibly huge Yán Koryáni fortress.

This was an uncertain region, but the locals Aíjom questioned thought it fairly safe to camp here. They securely tethered the rafts in a side pool deep set in the bushy river bank and covered them with branches and reeds so that they would appear to be mats of vegetation, to keep their cargo safe from animals. By then, they had swum ashore, except for Chhkk, who waded ashore bearing their camping gear on his head while waving his tail sideways for further propulsion. Aíjom was frankly interested in seeing how Chhkk dealt with the water, and amused by the Rényu's swift-limbed swimming, which made it look even more like a Tlékku.

The sun's reddening light was quickly dimming due to the thickening clouds and the forest. The group quickly struck a simple camp at a site that Chhkk peremptorily selected—a small, low, bush-skirted clearing with an uneven, tufted floor of spiky grass, set well back from the river and the web of well-trodden game trails that radiated from its banks. It would drain poorly in the near-certain event of rain, and it was not a commanding position from which to keep watch, but it was well suited for concealment. Chhkk, to Aíjom's further surprise, ordered that their tents not be raised. "We would be seen too easily by any passing enemies," the Shén stated, and Aíjom had to admit that here on the edge of the forest, they were probably in hostile territory. He had another motivation to accede to the choice: although he might argue with a fellow Tsolyáni, Aíjom feared that disputing with Chhkk might seriously threaten the stability of the mission. The locals were no doubt already unimpressed with the legitimacy of Chhkk's authority, and that attitude could quickly transfer to his own right to command; he, too, was an outsider. Ridiculous as it sounded, the Shén was more trustworthy than his countrymen.

Two of the locals were sent to gather firewood, and soon supper was being prepared by the oldest of the locals, a scarred, rough-looking man who was, appropriately for their mission, named Tsókalon, or 'scout'. His cooking was not

rough, however, but made skillful use of the traveling supplies available and of local plants for seasoning. Aíjom liked this trailwise man; he was his sort of seasoned hunter, a better companion for the hunt than the men of high clan, who were daring but lacked knowledge beyond what their weapon masters had told them of within the city walls.

The group ate quietly, a few coarse mats serving as platforms to distinguish their status and as minimal shielding from the harsh stubble of the grass. Savory steam rose from their bowls in the gathering dark, lit from behind by their campfire, only to be dispersed by the winds that blew ever harder. The rumble of distant thunder grew louder by the moment, and a wall of rain was dimly visible on the horizon; with the wind sweeping westward, the rain would be on them tonight. Aíjom decided to start gaining these locals' confidence, and at the same time learn something of their preparedness for the hunt, with postcibal conversation.

"I presume that you all have been selected, like Chhkk and I were, for your hunting or tracking skills. You also know at least somewhat of the Chákan forest, which I do not. Perhaps we could share what we have seen of the hunt and its ways." This was a surefire bet, of course—hunters never failed to swap stories in his experience, and their stories might include some vital information about the Chákas.

Tsókalon the cook nodded. "I have hunted these forests for long years—more than any other of you, I suspect. I have stalked Nráishu for the pot, and many other animals besides. I have sighted Tsi'íl in the deep forest, though, thank Belkhánu, I did not attract the beasts' attention. But my most dangerous hunt was many years ago, against a flight of Gíríku that was preying on our village's flocks of Hmélu.

"The accursed vermin swarmed our herds while we grazed them in the evenings, leaving only bones and a stench all around that the herd couldn't be led near for a week. The herders could not fight them off; indeed, two boys were killed trying. As our grazing must be done over large areas, and particularly since the land here is overgrown and thus offers poor visibility, stalking the flight from its kills was impossible. The only option was to find their nest in the forest and ambush the flight there, or scare them off.

"I chose five other men whose mettle I knew, and our clans outfitted us well. Still, we had only a general direction to follow, and some folklore about how far Gíríku might fly from their nest. It was a large flight, and we might well run into other beasts. I was not sanguine about our chances of doing this without loss of life.

"Just before we left, I consulted with my father, who had discussed the matter with other elders. We had never dealt with such a large flight before, so our usual reactive approach was not suitable. It was then that I—"

A bolt of lightning struck loudly nearby. Aíjom jumped, then laughed at himself; he had been on mountainsides where the risks from weather were much greater. "It seems, Tsókalon, that Lord Karakán Himself wishes to lend drama to your story. We shall have to wait till the next evening to hear the end of your tale."

At this, the group smothered the fire, which was already flickering in the wind even in the shelter of the clearing, and retired for the night. Aíjom took the spot closest to the rafts, wishing to listen for any sign of trouble. He found himself staring uneasily at the others' open eyes, which were dimly shining in the gloom. He had scarcely begun to drowse when, less than a kirén later, he heard the rush of the approaching rains. In but a moment, they swept over them, as abrupt as a slap from a clan-mother when he was young. The rain was torrential and blotted out all sight and sounds of the forest; all he could hear was the rapid, hollow pok-king sound of the cold, fat drops hitting his soaked clothes and bedding. Occasionally, lightning struck nearby, giving a few glimpses of the wind- and rain-lashed fields and bushes.

Aíjom looked around. His fellow hunters huddled watchfully under their bedding as he did; if anything, they seemed to hunker lower to the ground. Chhkk was in a crouch, looking every bit a demon from legend, his slitted, scale-guarded

eyes gazing southward toward the river; his Rényu hunkered down near him, watching to the west. Aíjom could not imagine any patrol traveling in such conditions and thought of asking the hunters what manner of beast might be away from its den on such a night, but decided that their fear was based on a deeper knowledge of the Chákan woods than his and forbore from speaking. Less than a yóm later, a flash of lightning from the north lit a looming face that made Chhkk's appear as a clan-maiden's by comparison.

It was an elongated, fanged visage, bedecked with scales, that stood above the plain; it looked to Aíjom like some long-necked, long-faced Chlén from a child's nightmare, or a Gíriku grown impossibly huge on foul provender. Its eyes flashed blue-green in the light of the bolt. A moment later, it was again invisible and inaudible in the downpour. Aíjom lowered his body into the pooling mud of the clearing with enormous caution, desperately willing the monster to ignore them and find prey better suited to its appetites, such as an overweight Tsi'íl. He clutched his hunter's shortspear and pulled it close, then slowly looked back at his companions. They were transfixed too—but they were gazing to the north, away from the beast Aíjom had seen! Could there be a pair—a pack—of these things stalking them through the storm?

A deep, bellowing, utterly terrifying cry from the north crystallized his fears into a hard, bitter lump in his gut. Then, even over the roar of the wind and rain, he could feel the one he had seen force itself through the brush, just east of their camp, and travel toward the call. The noises recurred, now clearly from more than one throat, and then a series of noises from cracking branches and an occasional vast form visible in a flash of lightning told Aíjom that the pack was heading upriver.

He did not sleep that night; all he dared to do was periodically shift his feet to keep from miring in the softening ground. The others were also sleepless, staring out through the gaps in their cover as though their eyes had become the legendary sorcerers' weapons with which they could blast the beasts to ashes. The rains came for hours, slowly abating, leaving the plains a silent void. Through it all, Chhkk glared, seemingly imperturbably, into the darkness. Aíjom could not help but see his demon's visage as too akin to the monsters that had almost slain them and left their bones to lie beneath the alluvial mud.

Morning found their camp a muddy shambles. It took two kirén to clean their gear, verify that their hidden rafts had weathered the night without incident, and bathe away the worst of the dirt. Aíjom, Chhkk and Tsókalon set out from camp to examine the spoor of the huge beasts; the others spoke briefly in low tones, then turned to Aíjom, Tsókalon with a flat look on his face, Chhkk's expression enigmatic as always. It was Tsókalon who spoke.

"Sérudla, and big ones." Aíjom had heard stories of the great, six-legged, poisonous forest dragons from some Chákan legionaries of the Legion of Mnáshu of Thri'íl; for the first time, he regretted having denounced them as drunken liars.

"As you can see, they came from the east, having crossed the river, then returned to the forest after passing here. I count three, but the Shén says there were four; the rains make it difficult to say, unless we follow the trail into the forest." Aíjom had to agree; the rains would have obliterated the tracks of any smaller animal, and even these huge footprints had been distorted and confused by the weather. Of course, the foul weather had no doubt greatly aided their efforts to hide from the Sérudla, and so Aíjom was very happy to contend with blurred footprints.

Stalking the Sérudla might give them the advantage of surprise when (if?) they next met, but it could only be done by a small contingent—three at most—without abandoning the rafts, and so Aíjom decided against it. "Will they be a danger during the day if we continue by raft?" If so, their mission was doomed, unless they returned with a better-armed complement.

Chhkk hissed, a menacing sound even by morning's light. "We are armed, and Sérudla will be much more careful

by day. They will prefer easier prey." This last was said in a decisive, heartening tone meant for the locals; once again, Aíjom was amazed at the Shén's grasp of human psychology. Eager to capitalize on a chance to build certainty and morale among the other hunters, Aíjom gave brisk orders to disembark and resume their westward journey by raft.

In but a few yóm, they were within the first ranks of trees marking the edge of Tsolyáni rule and the beginning of an uncertain land, neither Tsolyáni nor Mu'ugalavyani, which was unquestionably dangerous. Aíjom had one man on each of the first and last rafts stand watch with crossbows, which hampered their progress upstream but seemed necessary. Given the thickly thatched cover of weeds, vines and bushes that lined the river, their shots, should they be needed, would be taken but a few dháiba from their targets.

The hooting of Khéshchal and many other birds filled the still air as a band of ill-matched musicians at a rural celebration. The light shot through the trees ever more narrowly, and Aíjom soon found it unwise to blind himself looking at the rare glimpses of sky, although he found it comforting to see that all the world was not swallowed by this cloying, verdant hell. The river itself ran more strongly here, much to their dismay, yet was clearer than it had been on the plains, with its stony bottom sometimes visible even in the muted light of the forest floor. This was a mixed blessing; Aíjom started a time or two at the sight of large, indistinct shapes moving at the bottoms of deep pools.

Talking to the local hunters, Aíjom learned that there would be a waterfall ahead, which they should reach a few kirén before sunset. It was their wish to clear this obstacle today rather than start the next day with it, and he concurred wholeheartedly. It had not escaped his attention that this would be the best point of their journey for ambushers to strike; whether they had more to fear from Red Hat squads, wild Pé Chói, vicious Zrné, or something he had not been warned of, he did not know. At least there had been no sign of the Sérudla.

As evening fell, and the forest grew disconcertingly dark, the sound of the falls could be heard ahead. The group permitted themselves quiet mutterings of congratulation, and redoubled their poling efforts. Chhkk gestured to Aíjom and the others, pointing out that the game trails that breached the solid wall of vegetation bordering the river were becoming much more common, and wider as well. Many followed small streams that fed the river, and it was with hope and slight relief that Aíjom saw that their flow was unreddened by passing feet in the unseen forest beyond. It was not conducive to hopefulness, however, to see the Rényu sniffing the air as intently as a Tlékku cornering dangerous game. At last, rounding a sharp bend in the river, the rafts came in sight of the falls, with a fairly large pool at its base.

The river fell as if from the sky, streaming like last night's rain down a five-man-high cliff of crumbling shale and throwing off mercifully cool clouds of fog and droplets. Aíjom had seen waterfalls while hunting in the Khirgári mountains, but only along streams; even given the dryness of the past months, this cascade outshone anything in his experience. The wet cliff was as lush with growth as a temple garden, and beautifully lit, as the pool allowed some of the evening sun to reach the earth.

Abruptly, he brought himself back to awareness. The game trails here cleared fully half of the shore around the pool. If there was a watering hole big enough for the great beasts of the forest, this was it. He looked to the locals, and asked quietly how they should traverse the falls. Tsókalon pointed at a wide trail to the right of the falls. "I came here once as a youth, and recall that there is a broad and passable trail to the head of the falls there." Another hunter nodded at this advice, and the group grounded their rafts here, in a dark patch near enough to the falls that Aíjom felt the dampness of the cascade's fog.

Here was where he would begin to prove his worth, by scouting the path. He put on his light hunting armor and shouldered a pack of provisions and a just-armed crossbow, trying to hide the strain and almost succeeding, and began the

slow walk up the path. Chhkk walked a pace behind, just within Aíjom's peripheral vision, bearing twice his burden and a great weapon that looked like a ballista ripped from a castle's tower without any sign of fatigue.

The forest here was oddly quiet; perhaps the noises of animals were simply being muted by the falls. The cover of reeds was interrupted by the trails, and thus visibility was a few dháiba, but still Aíjom could not still his heart. The path was steep, slick, and covered with loose, flat stones, and demanded concentration he was loath to give. With a start, Aíjom's attention was drawn to the trail. It was heavily trodden by game, but among these tracks one could pick out human footprints—many of them. He turned and motioned to Chhkk, who glanced down, nodded, then pointedly looked out toward the forest.

Chhkk was right. This was no time or place to try to decipher mysteries. He bore a dagger in a sheath on his right; if he was attacked and his bolt did not fly true, he might be able to draw it before—

Aíjom was smashed down to the ground by a hideous weight, his crossbow forced uselessly to the ground. He heard and felt Chhkk roar, then he tumbled, his great pack of foodstuffs tearing loose as he rolled into a crouch. He looked to his left, and saw the thing that had just tried to kill him. Its mouth gaped, bristling with teeth as a field is bladed with grass, and its furred legs tensed for a second leap. Aíjom fell back, grabbing his crossbow, fumbling desperately for the trigger. Chhkk's bolt was now buried deeply in its side, but it leapt forward with undiminished strength, emitting a howl Aíjom somehow could barely hear. He brought his crossbow up and fired as the beast came toward him, swallowing the world into its glistening maw. In that split second, he saw his bolt hit low, in its guts; perhaps a fatal hit in time, but not enough to stop its charge. Amazingly, his body relaxed, unable to throw itself from death's path. Then he saw a flash of green, and death was cast aside as Chhkk, charging as quickly as had the monster itself, slammed a spear two-handed into the beast's flank, turning it from its charge by main force.

Aíjom leapt to his feet, feeling a tearing pain from his side. The beast must have clawed him in its first attack. He flipped out his dagger and turned to face the monster, which had rolled with Chhkk's charge and now had the Shén pinned with two huge, clawed legs. Its attention was turned from Aíjom. He jumped at its head, bringing his dagger down and in with all his strength and weight, aiming for its face, hoping to blind it or have some hope of piercing its skull at a vulnerable point. His dagger slammed up one of its nostrils, tearing its alien flesh and breaking bone with a popping, rending sound. The beast flipped its head back with incredible force, smashing Aíjom's jaw and sending him flying into a tree trunk headfirst. His vision went black and cold. The last thing he saw was the monster lunging down at Chhkk, bloody-mouthed, and tearing at his torso with its rear legs.

Aíjom awoke later in the evening in great pain. Tsókalon was applying a poultice to his right side. He jumped up, looking around. Had Chhkk been killed? Had any of the others been attacked?

"Patience, and lay still until I'm done with you. These herbs cost me a kirén out there to gather."

Aíjom started, belatedly realizing the indignity of being touched by a man of lower clan, only to feel great, throbbing pain from his left shoulder as well. Tsókalon noted his reaction, nodding with what looked like satisfaction.

"From what the Shén told us, the Zrné jumped you first. Two things saved your life. First, the stupid thing bit your pack instead of you." At this, Tsókalon brought Aíjom's pack into his view. The pack and its cargo of stoutly cord-bound bundles of rations had burst as though a Chlén had trod upon them. They were now studded with vicious barbs. Aíjom brought up an arm to point at one, and Tsókalon pulled the pack aside.

"Those are its teeth—they're poisonous. Touch those, and my work will have been in vain. It would not have been needed at all, but for your second piece of good fortune. When the Zrné jumped you, it clawed your right side, cutting

the pack's right strap. It was a light slash, and your armor mostly turned it—barely scored your ribs. You dislocated your shoulder when you fell, which let the pack roll loose and freed you from the Zrné's grasp. I set your shoulder only a yóm ago; it seemed to bring you around."

This was a lot to take in. Aíjom worked his jaw, and felt no sharp pains. "Did Chhkk survive?"

"La, he looks prettier than you!" Tsókalon laughed harshly, and Aíjom imagined he had been frightened to lose a member of the group, even a stranger, on such a dangerous journey. "We heard the attack, and came into sight as it threw you back. A few shots took care of it. We Chákan hunters know how to drop these animals with a single shot, if it be well placed."

"You must show Chhkk and I how to do this sometime." Aíjom looked around, and now saw the Shén lurching up the path. The great lizard had clearly suffered at the Zrné's hands, having lost many scales and showing rent flesh between the gaps, yet he had shouldered another pack of gear! Aíjom turned to Tsókalon; he would not let himself be shunted from authority by being bedridden and perceived as weak. "How much longer will you be?"

"Only another few yóm. Don't worry—you will have plenty to carry later. The rafts themselves remain below the falls."

Aíjom gingerly rolled his left shoulder, then more carefully rolled his right, an unpleasant yet necessary experience. He could lift a pack—and more pertinently, he could wield a weapon, which appeared to be more vital to the success of their mission.

With his physical concerns addressed for the moment, he turned to consideration of his situation. The attack had come very early in their journey; he could only assume that beyond this point, more would come. Tsókalon and the others had not anticipated the attack. Every porting and every camping would be fraught with danger.

Concerns stirred within his brain like the great river-fish prowling the deep. According to the priest Kuréshu, the Pé Chói of the forest were hostile, the root cause of the attacks. In that case, there were too damned few of them to ferry valuable cargo safely upriver through this gauntlet, if the Pé Chói could conjure up Zrné when they wished as in Drésu's tale! Surely the priests of Karakán knew this; unlike Chhkk and him, they were unlikely to be ignorant of the dangers of the Chákas. Why had they been sent up the river with so small a force? But they had not been, he finally realized. There must be a scouting party from the temple of Karakán somewhere nearby keeping watch over them. Perhaps they had even lured away the Sérudla that had menaced their camp. He resolved that he would find them tomorrow.

With this resolved, Aíjom sat up, a painful task but less so than he had feared. He worked his way slowly back down the slick, crumbling stone of the trail to where the rafts were tethered near the base of the falls, and joined in the task of carrying pack after pack of gear above, and finally to drag the rafts up dháiba by dháiba.

After the evening's exertion, supper was as subdued as any Aíjom had ever seen: they might as well have been grazing Hmá. He attempted to revive the group by asking Tsókalon to complete his tale of hunting Gíriku.

"Our strategy was simple enough. We carried offal from the butchers in great jars, as far toward the Gíriku as we dared, scattered it in an open place, and waited. We knew that the wind would carry its scent to them, and bring them in numbers. After a time, they flew in; they could smell us, I don't doubt, but they had grown confident from killing children and were not scared. We let them pick at the offal for a yóm or so, then attacked with nets, spears and arrows. In the open, we fared very well against them; only two escaped. I lost a friend that day to them, but the village did not lose another herder for years." The group nodded approval at Tsókalon's story, then shambled off to their mats.

Aíjom could not help but sleep soundly that night, but something worried at him like a Tlékku gnawing a bone. When Tsókalon had shown him his ruptured pack full of rations—a grim reminder of his brush with death—something had caught

his eye, astounding even surrounded by Zrné teeth. Within the pack, there was a large patch with a dull gleam, like that of the moons on water, that he knew, though he had seen it but little. It was the glint of steel.

Chapter VI

Next morning, Aíjom curtly stated that he and Chhkk would be scouting the jungle ahead of the boats to prevent any more surprises. He was somewhat dismayed when Tsókalon volunteered himself for the mission—he only dared trust the Shén—but could think of no plausible reason to deny the wisdom of a third scout. The three headed through the dense growth at the river's edge into the darkness of the forest floor. They kept tabs on the rafts, whose progress was slowed by the loss of polers, but moved farther afield as the sun rose, checking game trails, occasionally wondering at strange spoor.

Tsókalon was nearly silent, which even given Aíjom's limited knowledge of him seemed unusual. Aíjom needed to discuss their situation with the Shén, but could not bring himself to do so with a local listener present. It was more than a kirén after they set out, and the rafts were hidden behind low hills of growth, that Tsókalon stopped and turned with downcast eyes to Aíjom. Both men tensed; Chhkk seemed to merely pause.

"You saw the steel in your pack, of course," Tsókalon said in a low voice. The Shén hissed, showing that he had not known. Aíjom glanced at the cook quickly, finalizing the decision that he had mulled over all morning. He would trust Tsókalon. His trust had been freely given so far, possibly to his detriment later, but here he had no choice. "I did," he replied, with an openly questioning tone.

"I could not check the other packs in camp, but I suspect many others contain such wealth. I bundled your pack and hid the steel from sight. None were anxious to pick at it for fear that I had missed a tooth or two."

"So you did not know that we bore steel?"

"No. It was a broad dagger of elaborate make. I am no priest, but?"

"What?" Aíjom needed to know what they bore. Every yóm spent in ignorance was another yóm that their enemies could stalk them unseen.

"It appeared to bear symbols of the temple of the Worm Lord."

This was dangerous ground indeed. Aíjom now knew nothing of his situation. Why had the temple of Karakán sent them with an implement of the priesthood of dread Sárku? Surely, if it were the plunder of an age-old battle, they would have reformed the steel into a shape pleasing to Lord Karakán. It made sense that they had not been told that they bore treasure, to keep the men from fleeing with their packs—but why an item belonging to Lord Sárku's temple? And why did supplies for a jungle force include a priceless steel weapon, when steel would rust or be lost in battle?

Chhkk cut short his ruminations, again speaking with remarkable quiet. "It is good that I learned of this now. It confirms some of my suspicions about our purpose here. And it confirms that we can trust you," his muzzle indicating Tsókalon. Aíjom began to suspect the Shén of deep understanding of human subterfuge; his offering of trust could well be a bluff.

The Shén continued. "I, too, must now share with you something that is not as it should be. The Sérudla still follow us."

Aíjom almost dared to laugh at this. "Surely we would have heard the huge beasts if they romp after us like Chlén through a market!"

"They are keeping their distance, and they are more subtle than you think. But I can smell them. Even now, they are within a tsán of us."

Tsókalon spoke now, his eyes wide. "Do they hope to lure us into their kingdom until we are too far to flee?"

"We are already too far in to flee," Aíjom observed, his voice hollow with crushing fear. "They could kill us at any time. Thus, they must be following us for another purpose." He was shocked as he saw the only possible meaning of these facts. "They are? guarding us, from the Pé Chóí. They may then know that we bear steel and that there are but nine of us."

"I agree," said Chhkk in a low rumble. "There are many powers afoot in this forest, and our group appears to be the least of them."

Tsókalon's eyes narrowed. "The steel we bear must be payment. But for who?"

The question went unanswered, as a great cry arose from the rafts. The three turned toward the river and began to run, but they were stopped by gleaming black shapes emerging from the bushes of the riverside to the north. The three froze, listening to the shrieks of their companions and staring at six silent Pé Chóí warriors, arms casually holding fearsomely quick-looking weapons.

Aíjom readied his sword, as did the others. He would at least face them bravely. One of the Pé Chóí raised a limb, a menacingly fluid motion, and spoke.

"There is no time for fighting. Drop your weapons and we will not kill you."

Amazed, Aíjom complied. He was, he supposed, too much the grain-merchant to turn down such a good offer.

"Come," the great insect-being said. "We run now." Others darted in, snatching their weapons before they could react—except for Chhkk, who grabbed a Pé Chóí by the upper body with one scaled arm and looked up at the speaker for their band. "Release us, or this one dies," he said in a cold, level tone, his captive's chitinous sides visibly flexing with the force of his hold.

"You do not know what you do! Release Ntk'teqtk, or we will gut you and leave you for the Sérudla to devour."

Chhkk hesitated but a moment—then released the Pé Chóí when he heard the nearby bellowing of the great Sérudla. "We shall follow you," he said quietly. The Pé Chóí, now escorting them as captives, began to run to the north. The noises of battle from the river behind them quieted and died away.

None spoke as they ran, for many tsán. Chhkk and Tsókalon appeared bitter yet thoughtful when Aíjom could manage to see them. After a time, he saw three other Pé Chóí behind them, escorting another member of their group. He was pale with fear.

He could also see, even while struggling to keep up, that the land here was crisscrossed with the tracks of the Pé Chóí, and occasionally other spoor, seen in flashes, elusive and fearful as nightmare. The trees, which even by the river had seemed huge to him, grew ever larger as they traveled. His lungs and legs burned, but he dared not slacken his pace, let alone try to resist his escort, who held their weapons ready and close even at speed.

They slowed after three kirén. The trees—higher-limbed, thicker-barked than before—blocked out almost all light. The undergrowth was now only moss and small plants, and the soil was thinning, broken as the land rose by escarpments of the same shale Aíjom had seen at the waterfall. Coming over one of these walls, he beheld a cluster of structures, camouflaged by lush growth, many cut into the bedrock. Aíjom gazed around in awe. He had been taken to a fastness of the Pé Chóí of the forest, a place few humans must have seen before. There were over a dozen Pé Chóí, male, female, and children, watching them. Aíjom was uncomfortably reminded of barracks-room tales of lurking flocks of Qásu in the

great southern swamps, watching an animal in a sinkhole as it fought to escape.

One of his guards turned to him and stared inscrutably. "The elders have asked to speak with you. Follow, and pay heed." The fourth man was led away from them now, shaking. "What are—" Aíjom began to ask, only to be silenced with a gesture from one of his beweaponed escorts. The group slowly approached a great, squat structure roofed by a megalithic slab, and entered through a low gap in the stone wall that led down into the darkness below the ground. Aíjom hunched over, careful to avoid the bellying ceiling. He noted quickly that a great stone wheel stood inside, ready to seal the passage by rolling down a track cut in the stone. Hard hands clutched him, but he knew that his danger was no greater now; the Pé Chói could see in the gloom, and knew where they were headed. He could hear the tight breathing of his companions behind him, and the shuffling of human and taloned feet. The Pé Chói might as well have been spirits for all the noise they made.

Time dilated as wide as his pupils seeking light, yet still they stumbled down into the dark deep, below the muted sound of the forest. Cold welled up around him; he seemed to sink into it as a child wading into a river. At length, after turns and many steps, the floor leveled. His guards pushed him down, and he sat on a damp stone floor. The Pé Chói departed beyond his hearing.

By sound and sense of skin Aíjom knew that his group was yet unbroken. He shivered as his nerves got the better of him. It was as if he had been brought into winter night. His ears caught the sounds of the surface, distant as Khirgár, almost drowned out by the seeping and dripping of water along the walls, and by a wide hiss, as of a breeze in the caves. The yóm floated by in unreal, funereal procession.

"When will your masters send the next shipment to the Sérudla?" The voice that split the silence was a new one, reedy yet firm. Aíjom found it difficult to sense its general location, let alone to see anything. And what was this about supplying the Sérudla?

"We carried supplies to soldiers sent by the temple of Karakán—", Chhkk replied, then was cut off somehow.

"Ntk'teqtk told us of your? playfulness." The voice was inflected, perhaps with bemusement, or anger. "We do not play with you. We have heard of you, Shén, and of you, man of Khirgár. It puzzles us that our enemies would trouble to bring you here."

Tsókalon's voice rang out stridently. "You have ravaged the villages west of Chéne Hó! I have lost clanmates to your attacks—"

"Your clanmates do not die at our hands. Your struggles are with our misguided cousins, who like you play when they should be wary. Yet they have played better than you. They knew of your mission, and tracked you despite the Sérudla. It was a great risk, but they captured the goods you bore. We did not have the numbers to face them, much less the Sérudla that followed you.

"But enough. We will learn the truth now."

Aíjom felt dizzy, as if he stood at the edge of a precipice overlooking the Khirgári hills. His throat grew tight. His vision swam with bright shapes, and strange voices whistled behind him. Then the sensations ceased, and he felt completely alone in the void.

"You knew nothing." The voice bore a different inflection now. "They must have planned for you to hunt us to our villages and lead their troops to the kill, and to return saying that we would not menace your farmlands in many years, ending the conflicts here in the eyes of your Empire.

"But one from your band knew that you would be raided. That one was a traitor sent by the Íto, guiding our cousins

to you with signs. Our cousins have devious friends."

Aíjom felt that he was very near to understanding. Between what he had heard and what had been seemingly intimidated by the voices he could not understand—Of course! It was blinding even in the blackness. He saw now what had been happening, and what web he and his comrades had been pulled into.

It began many, many years ago, when the Íto, the ancient human lords of the Chákas, worked with Pé Chói of the forest, perhaps to combat a Mu'ugalavyani invasion, or to shelter the Pé Chói from the xenophobia of a distant Emperor. Over time, the Íto clan grew to view the Pé Chói they communicated with as a highly useful means of applying power. Their human troops, even in disguise, could not be used to despoil the lands and holdings of rivals; there would be Imperial inquiries and revelations most unwelcome. But the Pé Chói, or those they commanded, could strike from the night at the enemies of the Íto clan for a suitable price. Aíjom was not sure what that price was, but it surely involved treasure, and likely also aid against both Mu'ugalavyani and Tsolyáni armies.

At some point, other clans, relative newcomers to Dó Cháka such as the Golden Sunburst, established a relationship with the fearsome Sérudla, who must be far more intelligent than Aíjom had thought. Perhaps the powerful clans of Stability realized what the Íto were doing, but could not prove it, and thus resolved to reply in kind. Or perhaps they had been the first to ally with nonhumans, in an effort to control Dó Cháka.

But now, the two sides were locked in a furious struggle. The civil war during Dwich'uné's short reign had weakened the already tenuous influence of external, Imperial authority, and the simmering conflict had turned into a war by proxy. It was an expensive and bloody affair, as these forces could not be sent to strike with soldierly precision without raising too many eyebrows even in the Chákas. So for every Golden Sunburst or Íto field destroyed, other fields of other clans had to be despoiled to allay suspicion. The cost in treasure and lives continued to rise, and yet neither side dared to concede and yield to the other. So farmers' families died and villages for many tsán burned as a result of their power struggles. As a side effect, the weaker clans were being driven from their lands, which no doubt pleased both the Íto and the Golden Sunburst greatly.

This was a dangerous game for the nonhumans as well. The Sérudla and the Pé Chói, acting at odds for their Tsolyáni employers, would inevitably come into conflict during one of these attacks. Worse yet, the raiding, as careful and as often conducted by trained beasts as it was, was building a terrible hatred among the Tsolyáni, who were emerging from the preoccupying chaos of civil war and would soon send troops to exterminate any nonhumans suspected of the attacks. Indeed, Aíjom and his group had ostensibly been sent to resupply just such a force, sent by the temple of Karakán but funded by the Golden Sunburst and other wealthy clans favoring the Tlomitlányal.

Of course, it had all been a sham. Their group had been discreetly accompanied by a guard of Sérudla, who wished to make sure that their next payment of steel arrived safely. Aíjom and Chhkk had been sent by the locally powerful clans of Stability to observe and participate in a pogrom against the Pé Chói, leaving their Sérudla allies alone, and to conclude that the nonhuman threat was eliminated.

But even this must have been false! They had carried weapons with the sigils of Sárku, not meant for the Sérudla. And the voice had spoken of a traitor in their group. The camp of Stability, and perhaps even the very temple of Lord Karakán, had been infiltrated by agents of the Worm Lord, and their supply mission effectively hijacked, Pé Chói raiders sent to confiscate the cargo. Yet the Pé Chói of this village had intervened, saving them. They were not allied with the Íto. Perhaps they were isolationists, or xenophobic, or simply distrusted the Íto.

Suddenly, Aíjom felt the murmuring of the alien voices quickly swell and diminish. "You have seen far, man of

Khírgár," the voice interjected, shockingly loud in the sepulchral silence. "Matters are much as you see them."

Aíjom snorted. "I see only blackness."

"Just so. Our cousins have foolishly trafficked with humans until your Empire will attack us in force. And worse, your clans' struggles have set us against the Sérudla, the lords of the forest, with whom we cannot contend. Sooner or later, we will be forced to war with them, with terrible results. This must not happen."

"There is a way out of this darkness," Chhkk said. He must have come to much the same conclusions as Aíjom as he sat in the dark—or perhaps the Pé Chóí had commingled their thoughts as they were read, and his insights had been shared. "The two sides must be forced to face each other directly."

"But they have said that they cannot fight the Sérudla." Aíjom did not want his companion to anger their captors with heedless calls to war.

"Of course. I speak of the belligerent Pé Chóí, and more importantly, their human allies, soldiers sent by the Íto, who we know walk the deep forest. They must be forced to fight the Sérudla and their human allies from the clans of Stability. Only then will the shadow war end."

"How do you know that soldiers of the Íto are here?" asked Tsókalon.

Chhkk gurgled. "Our mission was to bring supplies to the troops of Stability, and to help them combat the Pé Chóí. But our group was compromised by agents of the Íto clan, and our supplies were captured—at great risk, with our Sérudla escort. It stands to reason that the purpose of this infiltration was to divert our supplies to their forces in the forest; what use would the Pé Chóí have for Tsolyáni foodstuffs, especially in such quantity?"

"Their purpose might simply have been to prevent the resupply of Stability's forces," Tsókalon said uncertainly.

"Do you truly doubt that the Íto have sent troops here?" croaked Chhkk; perhaps his Tsolyáni faltered when he became emotional. "It would be seen as legitimate, even lán, for them to attack the nonhuman threat; and for their own purposes, they surely wish to prevent the Sérudla from further raiding. Both sides have committed very seriously to this." Aíjom wondered fearfully what force the Íto could send that would avail against the Sérudla.

"Could you persuade your 'cousins' to fight the troops of Stability, or to end their raids?" Aíjom asked. "They must see the Qásu-birds circling them even now."

"We have tried persuasion," the voice said sadly. "They will not listen. They hate you humans for your age-old cruelty to us during the wars of your empires. And they will not mass to face human troops, for they fear that sorcerers would decimate them before they could attack."

"I know somewhat of these lands," said Tsókalon hopefully. "With help from you Pé Chóí, we could involve the others—force them to fight—"

"You humans are ever eager to solve problems with death," the voice sighed from the darkness. "You speak of killing our cousins. We disagree with them. But we will not war with them, or help others to do so."

Aíjom spoke with conviction. "The troops of the clans of Stability are in this forest to fight and kill your 'cousins,' and the soldiers of Change seek to attack the Sérudla, no doubt. As long as Tsolyáni does not kill Tsolyáni, unwanted interference from outside can be avoided, and the killing will continue. But if the Tsolyáni forces are made to fight, to defend their allies, then the conflict will escalate past hope of further concealment, and it will become clear to both sides that their strategies are untenable."

"There are five sides at least to this story," the voice observed—"two human, ours, our cousins', and that of the Sérudla. And we tire of manipulation at Tsolyáni hands. But if you can cause the humans to attack one another, then I could see

an end to our troubles."

Aíjom could think of nothing more to say. His position was very weak; he could only wait for this (these?) Pé Chóí to decide. His frustration mounted. Then, he heard their whistling speech echo faintly from the stone that entombed him.

"We have captured your companion, Shén." Chhkk hissed at this, though Aíjom was certain what emotion he expressed. "We will take you to him. We will also send two scouts with you to the camp of our cousins' friends."

"What of the traitor of our group?" asked Tsókalon harshly.

"He will be held here, or killed, as you wish. He has learned too much to be released until after this matter is resolved."

"Hold him," Aíjom said quickly. "Too much blood has been spilled already. We must be careful in how we spill any more, or the clans will have that much more reason to continue their war."

"It shall be as you wish," the voice said. Its presence seemed to recede somehow. Hard hands again grasped Aíjom's arms, lifting him up, and guiding his steps. For a time, his only sensations were of the sounds of his companions' footfalls. It was not until he saw a glimmer of light above that he realized how desperate he had been to leave that chthonian chamber. He gasped as he stepped out onto the surface, blinding for all the denseness of the canopy above. Their guards left them, heading for some other part of the village.

Chhkk's Rényu ran up and almost seemed to speak into his ear. Chhkk's face split in a fearsome baring of fangs; Aíjom thought that he must have been ecstatic. The traitor was nowhere to be seen, and Aíjom did not envy the man his accommodations.

Two Pé Chóí, carrying their confiscated possessions as well as short swords similar to the other Pé Chóí's weapons, approached them. One looked askance at the Shén, and the other raised a forearm. "We will go with you and help to kill the human troops that occupy our land."

Tsókalon grimaced at this; Aíjom steadied him with a glance. "We are grateful for your help. How far is it to the Íto camp?"

"More than a day's travel for you, to the west. How are we to cause the humans to fight each other? The humans who befriend the Sérudla are even farther away, to the south."

"The two armies seek to war with each other's allies, yet to avoid any direct confrontation," Aíjom said. "It will be difficult to bring them together, much less to cause them to fight."

"The Íto clan took a great risk in capturing those supplies," said Chhkk with a growl. "They must have a large force here, and be planning a decisive action against the Sérudla, to have done so. All we should need do is to involve the soldiers of Stability and the Pé Chóí allied with the Íto in the battle."

"I have heard tales of you Pé Chóí commanding the beasts of the wood," Aíjom said hopefully. "Could you make them drive the Golden Sunburst troops to the Íto camp?"

"If we could do that, then we would not need your help," one of the Pé Chóí snapped. Then he cocked his head. "But we could use them to lure the humans into a chase."

"Especially if you accompanied them," Tsókalon observed. "These soldiers are charged with assaulting the Pé Chóí of the forest."

"So we will do this—draw the troops of your Father of Nests to face the Íto." The other Pé Chóí spoke somberly. "What shall you do to help?"

Aíjom squinted in the afternoon light. "We shall involve the Pé Chóí who fight for the Íto. If they do not engage, then the rot will not be exposed, the Íto will simply retreat, and the war will continue later. This battle must be final."

"As you say," the first Pé Chói replied flatly. "Ntk'teqtk will guide you to them. May this carnage end our woes." The two Pé Chói parted ways. Aíjom, Chhkk, Tsókalon and the Rényu followed Ntk'teqtk as he dashed between the great tree trunks, following the setting sun.

Chapter VII

Though Aíjom had become stronger over the past weeks, Ntk'teqtk's pace was murderous, and his step as sure as a mountain-bred Hmá's. Tsókalon looked ashen at times, and Chhkk's breath came in great heaving gasps. Only the Rényu looked comfortable running through the woods. They did not stop until after it was so dark that even the pillar-like trees were difficult to avoid. Ntk'teqtk counseled that they were in unsafe territory, so no fire should be made; the group sat close together, eating and muttering to one another in the night.

"We should lay traps to hinder their pursuit of us, or else we will not live long enough to lure them to the fight," Tsókalon said with certainty.

"But of what sort? Deadfalls, or springing saplings? We cannot dig pits, or make caltrops from Chlén-hide," said Aíjom dejectedly.

"My kind are more careful than you know," Ntk'teqtk said lightly. "And we have no time for such subterfuge. You will have to trust to your wits and legs to survive."

"And our prowess in battle," Chhkk said darkly. "We may have a running fight for tsán."

"We must hope that we can win through to the force of Stability," Aíjom pronounced. "Else we are doomed." The group abandoned the fruitless conversation and began the task of sleeping in shifts. During his watch, Aíjom found that it had become easier, somehow, for him to see in the night, as though he had carried away a mark of darkness from the Pé Chói's underground chamber, or as though he was becoming a forest beast himself. His dreams that night were the worst since his flight from night-demons on the Sákbe road so long ago. He fought in the night with Pé Chói, and they toyed with him as a Tiúni plays with insects before gutting him and smearing the trees with his blood.

Dawn had not come when Ntk'teqtk woke them. "At yesterday's pace, it will be well past midday when we come to their camp. Sip dew from these broad leaves, eat what you will, and follow as swiftly as you may."

That day, fear drove Aíjom as never before. They flew like Kúni, Ntk'teqtk in the lead, ever watchful for scouts of the enemy. Over fallen, mossy trees and deep-cut streams and great walls of shaling stone they leapt and scrambled, and the sun slid higher. The forest floor was open here, and the steamy, green-canopied landscape looked like a vast, many-pillared temple of Dlamélish; Aíjom knew that Dó Cháka had its own demons waiting in hiding all around.

Near noon, Ntk'teqtk abruptly held up his right lower arm, the signal for silence. The heat hit them as they stopped, and Aíjom and Tsókalon nearly fell to the ground. Even the Rényu was tired, its tongue lolling wetly, but it looked alert, its ears pivoting. Chhkk stared fixedly to the west. Aíjom noticed a faint scent that he remembered once before: when the Sérudla had surrounded their camp. He slowly, silently lowered into a crouch. Ntk'teqtk stepped backwards toward them and bent his double-jointed legs to hunker down.

"There is a bull Tsi'íl ahead," the Pé Chói whispered, and Aíjom held back a sigh of relief at his error. "We must avoid it, for now is its time of mating, and Tsi'íl are often violent then. We are fortunate that the air is still. Move carefully, but quickly." Ntk'teqtk stood up and began loping down a slope to the northwest, scarcely less fast than before. Aíjom struggled to follow while being quiet.

Two yóm later, as the group stole through the trees, Aíjom was cursing the lack of concealing undergrowth when the smell intensified. He could tell now that it was different from the Sérudla's reek. He looked upslope, to his left, and saw the great beast, only a score or so dháiba distant: far too close. It tore up the mossy forest floor in cart-sized chunks, eating hugely, with a gurgling noise as deep as the Pé Chói's underground chamber. Its slowly undulating, clubbed tail looked ready to batter down the gates of Khirgár. The sun played along its broad, spiked back as on a rocky streambed. Aíjom broke out in a cold sweat. He had seen many Chlén, but this monstrous forest beast seemed to be from the fables of old.

As they continued to walk, now more cautiously, Ntk'teqtk looked sharply to their right, sniffed, then swung his arm, the signal to run. A moment later, the Tsi'íl reared up almost to the canopy with a shuddering bellow, terrifying Aíjom; it fell massively back to earth, and charged down the hill toward them, sod flying behind it. They sprinted as never before, and the Tsi'íl crashed past them to the north like a rockfall, its flailing tail gouging the trees along its path.

Three yóm later, they stopped. Ntk'teqtk looked around, then drew near the others. "What startled it?" asked Aíjom. The Pé Chói looked at him and cocked its head. "We did not startle it. It scented another male in its territory." Aíjom could now hear smashing wood and the struggle of titans to the north, muffled by a great distance. "We have lost time. Be quick." The group resumed its hard run westward, toward the territory of the Íto-allied Pé Chói.

Kirén rolled past, more ponderous than the Tsi'íl, yet still they ran. Aíjom's lungs and legs burned. They approached a looming outcrop of rock, cut with sigils. Ntk'teqtk stood tall. "We must be most cautious now," he whispered. "My cousins consider this rock a marker of the southern edge of their lands. They could approach in force at any time." The humans clutched their shortspears and checked that their hunting swords, light, sharp, and simple, were ready to draw. Chhkk still bore his fearsome crossbow and spear. They gazed about wide-eyed, then, more slowly and carefully, resumed their westward journey.

Perhaps four kirén had passed since his warning when Ntk'teqtk again signaled them to stop near the top of a small rise, gesturing at a tangle of leaves that Aíjom could not read as spoor. "They are near, in numbers," he hissed. "We must run, as fast as we can." A gut-twisting rumble to the west underscored his point. The band fled, again at full speed, now heading southward toward where the Sérudla and the Íto should be fighting. Aíjom was not sure, but behind them he thought to hear sounds of pursuit.

As they surmounted a scrubby hillock, he saw with horror that ahead stood a huge Zrné, easily half again as large as the one that had ambushed them at the waterfall. It roared and leapt toward them, time slowing as it flew ever closer. Aíjom flung his shortspear at its throat, trying to aim higher now, but missed; it was deceptively distant. As he drew his sword and prepared to jump aside, a bolt appeared in its skull, and the Zrné fell heavily to earth.

Aíjom looked at Chhkk. "Tsókalon showed me how to kill them after we felled the first," he said quickly. Aíjom barked laughter, and ran past the beast to reclaim his spear. His companions rushed past him, and the sounds of pursuit came clearer now. He gasped short prayers to Karakán and ran faster yet. He felt a pain in his shoulder, and realized that an arrow had pierced his hunting armor, albeit barely, at an off angle. He swatted it out with a grunt of pain, and asked Ntk'teqtk, "Poison?" He hoped that Ntk'teqtk's quick wave of a hand was a negative reply.

It seemed that he surely could have run back to Khirgár by now, yet the forest stretched endlessly ahead, and their pursuers grew closer still. Another arrow struck Tsókalon, low on the back, and he screamed; it must have sunk deep, but he was still able to run. Chhkk sighted a sloping outcrop ahead. "We stand there!" he roared. Ntk'teqtk looked at him, seeming to object, but soon nodded. They gained the height of the rock and sank low behind its jutting face for cover. Aíjom glanced at Tsókalon's wound and saw that it was not fatal, but had only cut muscles. Tsókalon gritted his teeth

and clutched his spear all the tighter; Aíjom's own wound burned like a brand. Below, they could hear the enemy gather. Among them, Aíjom heard all too clearly the snarl of Zrné.

So I die today, Aíjom thought coldly. May it bring some good to my people. He loosened, swung his weapons up, and prepared to strike. He looked to the side, already hearing the Pé Chói approaching, and was amazed to see Chhkk gesture him to crouch down. He watched as Chhkk drew something from a pouch, perhaps a tiny stone or button, and stood up to face their pursuers. Then a great flash and roar came from his claw, lighting the forest all around, and screeches of pain rose from below. In unison, Ntk'teqtk gave a soft, wheezing cry that seemed to come mostly from his abdomen. Chhkk sprang upright, and bellowed, "Follow!" Feeling lost in a dream, Aíjom leapt up and ran off the back of the rock, the others surrounding him. He could already smell burning wood and burning flesh behind them.

It did not sound like their pursuers followed them now, at least not closely. Ntk'teqtk spoke as they ran, his voice cold and hard as stone. "So many of my cousins are gone to the Forest of Hh-Kk-Ssa, never to return! It seems that you came well equipped to face my people, Shén."

"I did not kill many—perhaps not enough. But it has achieved our goal. Their whole force will now follow, intent on capturing my Eye and avenging their comrades."

An Eye! Chhkk was surely full of surprises. How a Shén hunter had obtained such a weapon of the Great Ancients was beyond Aíjom's understanding. Perhaps his deeds really had won him favor with great nobles of the Empire. He struggled to keep up with the group and to ignore the pain from his shoulder as he ran, hoping that Ntk'teqtk led them to the Sérudla—and nearly collapsing in hysterics from thinking that he fled to the monstrous forest dragons.

After a kirén or two, it sounded as though their pursuers had returned, now more numerous. They fled desperately. Aíjom ran alongside Chhkk and asked, "When will we stop and use the Eye again?" Chhkk looked at him, and hissed, "I cannot. It is discharged." Aíjom's fear, all the more powerful for having been deferred, rose to choke him; yet on he ran, as the afternoon crept along on Chlén's legs. Flashes of white and black appeared in the woods around, like fish in the river.

Suddenly, from ahead, Aíjom heard a faint sound, a howl or roar. His hope rose at last: they must be approaching the battle! It was then that a Pé Chói warrior sprang at him from their flank, brandishing swords in an easily swirling pattern.

Aíjom lashed out with his shortspear, but the Pé Chói batted it aside with a flick of a black-lacquered arm. He tried to break away from the fight and travel south, but the warrior cut him off at every move. Aíjom's sword whistled and spun, and he dodged and jumped, desperately striving to parry the Pé Chói's effortless blows. It slashed his left leg, causing him to stumble badly, and the Pé Chói toppled him with a charge, brandishing his weapons for the kill. Aíjom stabbed it at close range in the abdomen with a crunching sound as it rushed in, causing it to shriek and fall back.

Aíjom staggered to his feet and looked down at his leg. The wound was long, and every step would be torture. He looked about and saw Chhkk, his Rényu, and Tsókalon hard-pressed by a wall of sword-wielding Pé Chói, Ntk'teqtk trying to fight in from the other side. He picked up his spear and screamed, charging through their ranks, impaling one with his spear and cutting another's head badly. The pinned trio fought through this break in the line and sprinted southward, Ntk'teqtk rejoining them. The Rényu was matted with blood—whose, Aíjom could not tell—and Chhkk bled from many cuts. Aíjom did not know how badly he was hurt; he could scarcely think for the pain, and stumbled badly. Still, he ran, and fought with his comrades.

The group broke through another line—though this time, Tsókalon was slashed across the gut and was reeling with shock—and cleared the crest of a ridge to see an amazing sight. Two forces of well-equipped human troops, each over a

hundred strong, contended in a lush, deep valley below, one force slowly retreating toward them. Some proudly bore the insignia of their clan; others were cloaked, meant to strike covertly. Bodies and blood were scattered all around. Behind them all stood over a dozen huge, long creatures, some bleeding from gaping wounds; wreckage about the battlefield suggested that ballista had been used to attack them. Yet even the wounded among them seemed fiercer than fire and strong as demons. The Sérudla were armed with enormous swords of glinting metal, and watched the battle with expressions of bloodlust.

"We have won through!" Tsókalon cried. But Aíjom saw that their battle had just begun. The force that had tried to fight the Sérudla—the one that now came toward them—was a private army of the Íto clan, allied with the Pé Chói that even now sought to drag them down. "Follow me!" he cried, and sprung eastward, along the rim of the valley. The others followed him, aided now by their pursuers' shock at this new situation.

The Íto army, seeing the Pé Chói arriving, rallied and turned back to the fray. A great blast of lightning streamed from a figure near their vanguard, aimed not at the troops of the Golden Sunburst but at one of the Sérudla behind them. The huge creature arched and convulsed as it was incinerated by the bolt, lighting the whole valley in a hellish purple, then its body fell to earth and shattered into ashes. At this, the other Sérudla roared louder than any noise Aíjom had ever heard, and stampeded down, surging through their human allies to crush the sorcerer. One flung a spear, tall as a clanhouse, and smote him in two. Others threw similar bolts at the Pé Chói behind the Íto, one spear slicing two Pé Chói in half before slamming into a tree. The Pé Chói now rushed to fight alongside the Íto against the army of Stability.

"The Íto are poor tacticians, it seems," said Chhkk with a positively terrifying grimace.

Aíjom laughed, half-mad with pain, and turned to the Shén and his comrades. "We must flee this place!" he shouted, and all nodded. They had done what they meant to do, and now must let the skeins of the armies unfold. Unfortunately, several Pé Chói had held back from reinforcing the Íto ranks, and now pursued them. They fled east, trying to outflank the two armies and win away from them, but the Pé Chói stayed to the outside at every turn, driving them down into the valley, and outfought them at every stand. Aíjom lost his sword as one of the Pé Chói battled him. He crouched back and rolled toward his comrades, but the warrior was on him instantly, raising his swords for the kill. Ntk'teqtk leapt beside him, hacking maniacally at the other Pé Chói, freeing Aíjom to rise and recover his sword. Two other Pé Chói approached Aíjom. The others were once again being encircled, and they tottered from wounds and weariness. Aíjom nearly fell as his leg screamed with agony, but he used all his might to jump up and at them, hoping to kill one before he died.

A great wall of gray flashed above his head, and the two Pé Chói fell, cut in two. Aíjom turned around, to see a Sérudla looming overhead, its eyes flashing with the fire of the setting sun. Íto troops and Pé Chói had won through the human troops of Stability, and a force of them charged the monster, shooting crossbows and bows, and flinging spears. It gave a bone-shaking cry of rage and reared up, bleeding from a score of wounds, and lashed out at them, mowing them down as a storm fells the grass. It spat a vomit of acid at its attackers, and the bodies of humans and Pé Chói alike melted into ruin. Their ranks broke like water before the Sérudla, and its footfall crushed the fallen. It lunged down with its huge head and bit the midsection of a screaming soldier. Its head reared back up, and the two halves of the soldier fell back to earth, his entrails still caught in its teeth. The Sérudla turned to Aíjom and his group, who had not yet managed to flee, though their attackers were long gone.

"I have a message for your masters, humans," the Sérudla said in an impossibly deep voice, the soldier's blood still streaming from its hideous maw. "Tell them that we tire of their games. Today will remind them that we are the true lords of the Chákas, and we will tolerate no further insults." The massive creature swung away with a crash to rejoin his fellow

Sérudla.

The battle was quickly dying, soldiers of both sides fleeing east for Tsolyánu as fast as they could run. Already, many Pé Chói had been killed, although they had exacted a heavy toll from the troops of the Golden Sunburst. The rest of the Pé Chói were nowhere to be seen. Many Íto troops lay dead, killed by their fellow Tsolyáni or crushed by the Sérudla, who had departed into their forest realm. Aíjom fell to the earth. He turned to face his companions, and saw another Pé Chói approach. He found that he could not even stand to face it.

"You have survived, Ntk'teqtk!" it cried to their guide, and the two clasped hands. Aíjom only then recognized it as the other Pé Chói from Ntk'teqtk's village, who had gone to lure the troops of the Golden Sunburst to battle. The two whistled and chattered, and Aíjom looked toward Chhkk and Tsókalon. Tsókalon lay quiet, his breathing shallow. Chhkk, for all his own gashes, was examining Tsókalon's abdomen. He turned to the Rényu, who was so coated with dark blood as to look a bit like a Pé Chói himself, and hissed; the Rényu dashed into the forest. Aíjom crawled over and sat beside Tsókalon, who stared emptily.

"His wound is severe. Hájit goes to retrieve herbs that will clean the wound and stem his bleeding, but he needs food and rest. Can you help to carry him?"

"No," Aíjom said, through clenched teeth. Chhkk glanced at his leg, and grunted. "You are scarcely better off. We must leave this place." His eyes suddenly locked on something behind Aíjom, who turned around, to look down at the battlefield.

The figure of the Íto sorcerer, who had been cloven in two by a Sérudla's spear, was whole again, and standing up. It swayed to its feet, and looked at them. Aíjom's blood froze. It was the priest, Kuréshu.

"You have not done what I sent you to do," Kuréshu said, turning to face them. "You sent us to die!" Aíjom yelled, sitting up and reaching for his spear. "Just so," Kuréshu said icily. "Matters are now worse for my masters. But they will be pleased to have you to speak with."

Chhkk exploded into a charge, but Kuréshu merely glanced at him and he fell to the earth. "I would not trouble yourselves with resistance, or flight," he drawled. "I hold an Eye, whose effectiveness you have already witnessed." Other shapes that had been felled and mangled in the battle now arose and joined Kuréshu.

"They are Jájgi," whimpered Tsókalon, even paler than before. Aíjom now saw Kuréshu's betrayal. He was no priest of glorious Karakán, but a foul spawn of the dread Lord Sárku that had wormed his-its-way into its opponents' camp to sabotage their plans!

"My Lord Sárku is generous, and gives life everlasting." Kuréshu actually smiled now. "Perhaps he shall be generous to some of you. After an age, you may even come to appreciate His bounty."

Aíjom's head fell to his breast. They could not fight an undead sorcerer and its undead guards. He hopped up on his right leg, ignobly using his spear for a crutch. Chhkk got up slowly and returned to Aíjom, Tsókalon and the two Pé Chói. None dared to run. The Jájgi soldiers, seven in all, surrounded them, and the group marched stiffly out of the valley, back to Tsolyánu.

A few yóm later, the Rényu Hájit leapt out at them from behind a hillock, limping badly. He fell against Kuréshu and tried to bite him, but the guards shoved him aside, and he joined the bedraggled group. I have already traveled to the Isles, Aíjom thought miserably, straining to walk fast enough to avoid jabbings from the Jájgi's swords. None in the group made any sound, save for quiet moaning and ragged, gurgling breathing.

Far past sunset they stopped by a stream, as Tsókalon was becoming delirious, muttering and weeping. The captives

cleaned themselves and tried to dress their wounds, all under the unblinking eyes of the undead. Tsókalon drank like a Chlén, then quickly fell asleep, his gut coated in forest herbs. Aíjom stared out into the forest, already feeling like a Mrúr. Chhkk crouched beside him.

"Remember Tsókalon's tale, Aíjom. We shall survive this." Chhkk said nothing more, lying down carefully. Aíjom did the same, and saw no night-demons: why would they bother, when demons walked with him by day?

The morning brought the horror of their captivity back to them. They again marched toward Chéne Hó, now more insistently. Aíjom's leg felt a little better after last night's ministrations, but every step still brought pain, and the Jájgi were quicker to jab him. It will not be long, he thought.

To stave off madness, he gazed around at the forest, almost horrible in its beauty. Birds called high overhead, and the sun shone warmly. The sights brought Aíjom to bitter tears. Another sight would have frightened him, if he had any fear left: the deep tracks of Zrné on the forest soil.

Through hushed groves and down verdant slopes they marched with the dead. Aíjom felt much as had Tsókalon the previous day. Tsókalon, for his part, looked better, if still dazed. Aíjom started to stare fixedly at the Jájgi sorcerer who had led him to his death. Kuréshu led the group, walking oddly—perhaps a consequence of having been smashed to pieces by the Sérudla spear. His back was mottled with mud, and—What was that darker patch on his shoulder? Surely Jájgi did not bleed! At that moment a noon-bright hope flared in Aíjom's mind. Tsókalon's tale—

A huge brown shape fell from the sky onto Kuréshu, again smashing him flat. Aíjom whipped his crutch-spear up and drove it through the face of the Jájgi nearest him. Chhkk gave a deep roar and toppled another of the Undead. Chaos erupted; the Jájgi suddenly found themselves evenly matched and without Kuréshu's sorcery to protect them. Ntk'teqtk dove away from them, toward the huge, wild Zrné that gnawed and tore at the tearing, crumbling pile that had been Kuréshu. The sorcerer's limbs still moved; one clutched his Eye—but Ntk'teqtk cut off the hand that bore the Eye, and wrestled it away from its still-active grasp, careful to avoid the Zrné's snapping jaws.

The warrior Jájgi were cut down, Chhkk alone destroying three of them, bellowing like one of the Sérudla as he clawed, bit, and clubbed with his tail. The Zrné crouched and faced them, but the six warriors yelled and brandished their spears, and Ntk'teqtk stood ready to blast it with the Eye; cowed by the display, or perhaps only by the Pé Chói, it snatched up the remnants of Kuréshu and scuttled off. Silence returned to the forest. The group looked around at one another. None could speak.

Aíjom swallowed, then looked at Chhkk. "It is a pity that the Jájgi could not smell Hájit's blood on Kuréshu as clearly as the Zrné," he said matter-of-factly.

"Indeed," the Shén replied, as dryly as a noble in Avanthár.

The group disintegrated into joyous laughter.

"I pity that Zrné its lunch," Tsókalon said through guffaws. "It will need to eat a Tsi'íl to wash the taste out!" They laughed as though drunk on Másh, giddy at avoiding a horrible fate.

Chapter VIII

At length, Ntk'teqtk spoke. "We will escort you to the forest's edge, but no farther. Our people are unwelcome in the border villages. As for the Eye, I will take it to my elders. If the Sérudla try to seek revenge, we will be ready for them."

"A fair bargain," Aíjom said soberly. Then he frowned. We face Drésu's dilemma now—we cannot return, he thought

bitterly. "What troubles you, Aíjom?" asked Chhkk. Aíjom shook his head. "There are many powerful lords of the Chákas who would like nothing more than to see us dead now."

"I have trustworthy friends in Chéne Hó, who can keep us from harm," Chhkk declared; after the events of the last few days, Aíjom no longer doubted him. "But getting there intact will not be easy."

Aíjom thought, then sniffed. "If we can make it to a village I have heard of west of Chéne Hó, and speak to clansmen of the Flat Rock, then we should be able to travel to Chéne Hó in safety." With this, the group began to walk eastward again, now more slowly without Jájgi spears at their back. While they walked, Hak'ntu, the other Pé Chói, related his adventures leading the troops of the Golden Sunburst to the battle.

"I called three Zrné that I knew, and we approached their camp, flanking it broadly to give the impression of a larger assault. I fired a quarrel of arrows from three points of cover, then fled. The first soldiers pursuing me encountered the Zrné, and quickly called for more. The Zrné ran with me, and we led them for a merry chase.

"It was good that I led them to the Íto when I did. Kuréshu was armed with the Eye, and they had brought siege machines; the Sérudla were pressed, for the valley they fought in was difficult to leave from their end. The humans I led saw the fight, and were hesitant, but they were seen, and their chiefs ordered them to break through the Íto army's flank and join the Sérudla. They were about to drive them off when you came with the Pé Chói."

The rest of them related their narrow escape from the hostile Pé Chói. "It was a bitter thing, to use the only charge of my Eye," Chhkk hissed. "It was a great gift. Yet it was well used." The Pé Chói looked down, no doubt thinking of their dead 'cousins', yet said nothing. Aíjom hoped that they felt the heavy price of peace to be fair.

That night, they lit a campfire at last, and feasted on a fat Nráishu that Ntk'teqtk felled with bow and arrow, garnished with forest herbs that Tsókalon and Hájit dug up. The sweet, roasted meat was, without a doubt, the best meal that Aíjom had ever had.

The next day was unmarred by incident, save a steady, chilling rain. The forest thinned above, and growth thickened below, so that travel was more difficult. By evening, they could see the scrubby fields of eastern Tsolyánu through the trees. The Pé Chói turned about. "We wish you well in your travels," Ntk'teqtk said. "We will give word to release the traitor when we return. If you ever return to the forest, you will find welcome." They bowed, and left in silence, vanishing as quickly as dreams. The four remaining members of the group left the forest, the sun already behind the trees, and began the walk to the village that Srúma had told Aíjom of.

They arrived late that night, making no attempt at stealth for fear of being thought raiders. Aíjom approached the tiny clanhouse of the Flat Rock, hardly more than a family's home here, and knocked at the door nervously. A large, scarred man opened the door, and gazed at them with something less than approval.

"We are friends of Srúma hiMráktine, of the Green Bough," Aíjom blurted. "We return from fighting the monsters of the forest, but we are in danger. We need shelter."

"Srúma," the man said slowly. His gaze returned to the massive Shén and the Rényu beside him. "Give me your weapons, and you may stay within." They hurriedly complied, Aíjom frantic to get off the street. The clanhouse was dirty and cramped. The man took their names, and led them to their 'guest chamber,' a windowless grain storage room that was barred from without when they were all inside.

"You have surely doomed us! We could have simply approached the city directly!" Tsókalon whispered harshly. "We would not enter Chéne Hó alive!" Aíjom retorted angrily. "We could head to my clanhouse, or to yours, or split up; but our faces are known, and assassins would leave us dead in the streets however we went. We must gain protection first."

This is the best way." Chhkk was clearly unhappy to be imprisoned, but he nodded. The group settled in for an uneasy night.

In the morning, the door was unbarred, and the man from the night before entered. "We have sent word to Srúma," he said. "He and I know each other well. If he knows you, then we will conduct you to him in secrecy." He looked knowingly at Aíjom. "You are not of the Chákas. It shows poor judgment to involve yourself in intrigues here." "I know now," Aíjom replied with a lopsided grin. They returned to their room, now unbarred, and waited in the gloom. They left only for meals, mostly of the coarsest Gáinikh bread Aíjom had ever tasted, with the silent, abashed Flat Rock clanspeople. Aíjom and Tsókalon sat on lumpy mounds of crude mats to distinguish their higher-clan status; Chhkk and the Rényu snorted at this affectation and took their meals standing. It was intolerably dull, but Aíjom for one was glad for the rest and the food.

The next morning, the elder again spoke with them. "Our messenger has returned, with Srúma's approval. Follow me." The group was led out of the clanhouse, blinking in the light, to a massive Chlén-cart, and clambered within. They were covered with blankets that stank of wet Hmá, then the cart was festooned with hay, and a while later, they felt it lurch down the road.

Even after the wait in the clanhouse of the Flat Rock, this slow, uncomfortable journey seemed interminable. They amused themselves by whetting their blades; they did not dare talk, for fear of discovery, and often simply slept. Chhkk wrote secretly with a quill on paper that he carried with him; no one troubled him over this. The kirén passed. Aíjom worked his legs, happy to see that he was recovering well, if still stiff. He vowed to never eat Hmá again.

Finally, the sun overhead was blocked, and the cart lurched to a stop. Bundles of grain were removed from above them, and the blankets were flung aside—to reveal Srúma, grinning hugely at them.

"Welcome to Chéne Hó. You do know how to travel!" he exclaimed. He assessed the others. "It is as I have heard. You have much to tell me."

"First," Chhkk said, "I ask a boon." He fished into a pouch, and produced a packet. "Take this to the Temple of Vimúhla, to a man named Sikún. The priests there will know whom I speak of. He will arrange for our protection." Srúma called a younger clansman, handed him the packet, and whispered instructions to him; the boy looked up nervously at the Shén and ran off as though Srúkárúm slashed at his back.

Srúma led them into his clanhouse—needless to say, much more comfortable than that of the Flat Rock—and fed and gusted them well. Aíjom was surprised to see old Ngangmorél among his hosts, but Srúma explained that Aíjom had nothing to fear from treachery. "Ngangmorél is honest as an earthworm of the field, but he does tend to gossip with his fellow worshippers of Lord Sárku, and I feared he might reveal your purposes before they were worked." Ngangmorél nodded soberly, and Aíjom struggled to envision the old Mrúr gossiping to supplicants with corpse-painted faces amongst the horrors of the Temple of the Worm Lord, but soon abandoned the effort for another helping of Kafka meat. He was even more astonished later, when Ngangmorél's large, bustling family came in and settled around him, including his adorable infant granddaughter, who reminded Aíjom of one of his clannieces.

As the afternoon grew long, they were led to a private guestroom. Into the evening they talked, of all that had happened to Aíjom and his group, as well as what had happened in Chéne Hó.

"The city is in an uproar. Rumors fly of great armies of Pé Chói coming with their Red Hat friends to cast down our walls. Others speak of a hundred Sérudla ready to eat us all and still not fill their gullets." Srúma laughed. "I am very surprised to hear how close to the truth these rumors have been. The great clans seem? uneasy. I have never known them to be reticent before. The fear of the Empire forcing them to pay Shámtla, the failure of their schemes, and their losses in

the forest paralyze them. If matters are as you describe, then you have dealt them a heavy blow indeed. It will be many years before they again try to fatten their coffers using the blood of the farmers."

Aíjom smiled. "Then perhaps some good did come of all this death."

A knock came at the door; Srúma opened it. A clansman of his approached nervously, and gave him papers bearing great florid seals. Aíjom's eyes widened, as did Srúma's. He stepped back, and a short, wiry, wise-looking man in rich, ornate, flame-red robes strode into the room with an easy air of authority.

"Chhkk," he said, sounding a bit like a Shén himself. "Sikún," Chhkk replied, a note of quiet respect somehow sounding in his inhuman voice. He motioned the men of the Green Bough out, closed the door, and turned. "And these are Aíjom and Tsókalon. We have heard much of your exploits." Aíjom swallowed; Tsókalon glanced over at him quickly.

"You have done a great service to our Emperor," Sikún said. "We have suspected much of what Chhkk told us, and our study today further confirms your story. Our Emperor is just and kind, and his power covers the land. I am here to tell you that missives have been sent to those who think you have wronged them, and that they have been told not to harm you or yours, lest they wish to court our Emperor's wrath, to their certain doom."

That sounds good and proper, Aíjom thought, but the sooner that I'm away from here and back to the safety of Khirgár and my clanhouse, the better. "Thank you, O one of high exaltedness," he said lamely; he had not addressed one of such apparent power before.

Sikún laughed. "You flatter me. I should say to both of you that your perseverance and resourcefulness recommend you highly. Our Emperor has much need of men like you, to smooth the waters of the rivers of the Empire, to keep events unfolding as they should. I extend an invitation to you, to gain the glory of aiding the Petal Throne."

Aíjom realized that whatever he was being offered, Chhkk had accepted, perhaps long ago. Tsókalon spoke up. "I serve my Emperor in all things," he said earnestly, "but I love my clan and my family, and do not wish to leave my homeland. I will be grateful to serve here, in the Chákas."

Sikún arched an eyebrow. "That will be easy to arrange, hunter," he said. He turned to Aíjom. "And as for you?"

Aíjom knew that he was committing himself to travel and danger whenever—and wherever—men like Sikún thought they needed him. He thought that it was unlikely that he would ever be needed again, but he could not deny a summons if called after accepting. He thought of his wife Tsunúre, and of his parents, and of majestic Khirgár. Then he thought of the great forest of Dó Cháka, and the many regions of the Empire that he had never seen, and of their beauty; of the good that had been done here, and of the honor he had won, and would gain by his acceding.

"I humbly accept your generous offer, O one of great wisdom."

"You have chosen well." Sikún smiled thinly. "Again, I extend my thanks." He gave scrolls to Aíjom and Tsókalon, telling them that the scrolls would clear the way for them should they have trouble while travelling, nodded deeply to Chhkk and Hájit, and left. Aíjom felt a curious mix of unease and exaltation. "What have I done, Chhkk?" he asked querulously.

"What I once did, and have yet to regret," the Shén said, smiling toothily. Tsókalon leaned forward, clearing his throat. "It has been an honor to fight alongside all of you," he said with emotion. "Yet now I would return to my clan, and to my family." "As would I," Aíjom said with feeling.

Srúma, who had stood close by after Sikún left, stepped in. "Ohé, surely—but honor us, and feast again in my clan's hall before you leave."

They all voiced agreement to this splendid idea, and left to join Srúma's clanspeople in their great hall.

Glossary

A glossary of terms from the story:

Chéne Hó: a great city of northwestern Tsolyánu

Chlén: a huge, slow, six-legged beast of burden.

dháiba: 1.333 meters.

Dnélú: a predator of the plains.

Drénggar: nearly the hottest month in the Tsolyáni calendar.

Eye: a magical item, often made for attack, made by the long-lost Great Ancients.

Karakán: the Tsolyáni god of war for Stability.

Khírgár: another great city of northern Tsolyánu.

kirén: Half-hour.

Mu'ugalavya: Tsolyánu's hostile neighbor, west of the Chákas.

psé: 0.75 kilograms.

Sákbe-road: the fortified highways of the Five Empires.

Sárku: the Tsolyáni god of death and the undead.

Shén: huge reptilian humanoids.

tsán: 1.333 km.

Tsolyánu: the Empire of the Petal Throne.

Vringálu: a poisonous flying snakelike creature.

yóm: 90 seconds.

Zrné: a poisonous, six-legged forest predator.

5 Gallery

by Brad Johnson



