

The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü

**of the Clan of the Moon of Evening
Priestess, Scholar, Sorcerer**

**Loyal Citizen of the Empire of Tsolyánu
Resident of Lnóris, Isle of Vrá**

**2387AS - In the Reign of Emperor Mirusíya
“The Flame Everlasting”**

-=: Part Four :=-

A Long Detour

Being the personal musings and recollections of a socially awkward and hitherto cloistered young woman, embarking on an expedition that could change the world of Tékumel forever.

Cast

Game Master Dermot Bolton

Clan of the Moon of Evening

Anka'á hiSarashkü	naïve scholar priestess of Dilinála and diarist	– Alan Ford
Chu'ésa hiSarashkü	vivacious ex-marine, lay-priestess of Avánthe	– Dermot Bolton
Tusilén hiUjjain	miserabilist sea captain and navigator	– Oliver Johnson

Other Comrades

Hokésh hiQólelsural	Shading Leaf, taciturn and short warrior	– Steve Foster
Talūvaz Druob Shienaz	Aloof Livyani combat sorcerer & hireling	– Dave Morris
Kumésu hiYirau	A tomb guide who latches on	– Dave Morris
T'tket M'jer	enigmatic pé chói scholar & sorcerer	– David Bailey

NPC

Gij and Sons	Interplanar merchants and dodgy geezers
Nyélmú	An undying wizard in the garden of weeping snows
Dláppa hiSsánmirin	An agent of the OAL intelligence arm
Tanmuruktu	An astronomer and wizard of note
The Archer Hmí	The man on the moon (Gayél)
The Archers wife	Probably a goddess
Chékklan hiVríddi	Air car operator

Written by Alan Ford, 2021-2023

Edited & compiled by Dermot Bolton, 2024

The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ½

Part the Twenty-Sixth – Do Not Go to The Garden of Weeping Snows; It is a Silly Place

Thus we were translocated to Dláš. I was almost incandescent with my companions, and Chu'ésa in particular for her determination that we should see to the geas first. I would of course be proven right in time, not that it gave me any comfort. We really should have gone to Avanthár!

I largely sulked through what seemed an eternity of wrangling and negotiations. Vast wealth was on offer in techno magical devices, and all manner of other wonderments including a device that could restore the potency of eyes and other devices. The sheer enormity of the inducement, and how easily it was won really should have given us pause! I really didn't care and was talking to no one at the time. My companions had been frankly driven insane by sheer greed. Why Talūvaz decided to come with us on our descent into insanity will particularly always be a mystery. His contract with me had ended, and he politely refused another; yet still he joined us. Maybe he actually liked us, maybe he had orders to keep reporting back to his masters about us. A cipher to the end.

Now Gij and Sons are some sort of gestalt extra planar and probably interdimensional entity (very possibly from the end of time). They are collectors and curators who trade in the most abstruse and fantastical devices imaginable. All they asked for this vast wealth, was for us to take a little trip to the Garden of Weeping Snows and bring back an item that lay therein. We would recognise it when we saw it. If we lived that long they should have added.

The Garden of the Weeping Snows is a prison to hold the blasphemous and voyeuristic Undying Wizard Nyélmu, sent here for eternity by the Gods themselves for his sin of challenging them. He was apparently a Necromancer whose exact place in history is a little vague, certainly earlier than Engsvanyáli, and maybe even from the time of Dormorón Plain itself. Who imprisoned him is also a little vague; common belief has it that it was the Gods of stability who were affronted by his challenge; yet his prison may even have been part fashioned by Ksáru! He is perhaps most famous for his spying upon the fabled Princess Ma'ín; whether purely lascivious, or as a wider plot to gain a unique hostage (or ally) by which he could secure his release, who really knows?

More certain is that his prison is also his playground. Here he parties orgiastically without pleasure with his sycophants his only fleeting pleasure being when new victims are given to him to assuage his ennui; playthings that he watches contest the myriad dangers of his prison. Once they have finally had every ounce of interest sucked from their hapless adventures, he freezes them for eternity in their last despairing pose. Nobody in living memory has got either into, or out of it alive (or has told the tale); it has swallowed the whole elite Legion of the Mighty of Jakállá in its time. It is also famed for its traps and monstrous guardians, its yéleth-like Pale Legionaries, but most particularly for its befuddling labyrinth and the fact that the only known entrance to it lies under Jakállá. The mere fact that all this is known gave us some false hope; after all, if this knowledge exists, people must have been there and back to report it.

We also had one final and critical advantage. The Garden of Weeping Snows is a dimension home for Lelmiyáni; she of faultless navigation, thus I had a map of the prison maze in my head bestowed by her, as well as her direct inner direction. I therefore preternaturally knew where there were traps, where there were guardians, and where there were stairs between levels. As long as Lelmiyáni was

happy, and we were still working towards the boon and freedom that she sought, then we were safe. I tried to stress this to my companions, but, alas, only with partial success.

Deal sealed, we were translocated once more, this time to just outside of an already regenerating rent in the outer wall of the gardens. We really should have considered that rent, how and why! Beyond was a shadow garden adorned with stands of white fluffy trees surrounding the Palace of Frost, in which the prison proper rests. In the garden we could clearly see that lost cohort, frozen as if on a parade ground; we could also see numerous other poor souls turned to statues in their terror and flight. There too were a number of the Pale Legionnaires, the guards who kept Nyélmú in his prison.

I psychically reconnoitred a route to the mansion that would avoid the patrolling pale sentinels. We were in with only a few heart-stopping pauses when one or another of us dislodged some gravel or shivered a bush. Now the true terror of the place began to encroach on our sensibilities. It was evident that our pedhétls and the charges in all our devices were being subject to a permanent seeping drain. Our time here would be limited or permanent.

It is hard to describe the prison proper. It does not exist in a physical reality but must be a form of pocket plane, which is still being created as interlopers explore it. We as physical beings did not exist there but were just two dimensional blocky shades of ourselves moving around a maze of drawn coloured lines. A map that wrapped around itself too. If you exited a portal at the top, you appeared again at a reciprocal portal at the bottom; same with left and right.

There were ten individual levels that we needed to access. The levels appeared to become less complicated in detail as you descended; almost as if those were unfinished, a work still in progress by the prison's creator. Thinking about it then and since, I think that Nyélmú had in fact been imprisoned within a dimension contained by the labyrinths of his own mind, such ironic artifice! We were merely sprites of conjoined independent thought within the construct of that mind prison. As we progressed it was soon evident from occasional visions of a huge blinking eye that Nyélmú knew of our presence and was watching, at one point I even believe he and Talūvaz briefly spoke! The trick was to make sure he didn't become bored. We also began to appreciate that time was likely progressing much faster outside of the prison than it was for us within.

Our descent continued, the maze simplifying, but the denizens, traps and puzzles becoming more lethal in the process. There were also wonders, magical and historical treasures curated in little glass kiosks here and there. I admonished that we should take nothing but memories and leave nothing but footprints. I must admit that my memory is poor regarding exactly what transpired (I had to erase most of it to conserve my sanity towards the end); and anyway, I wouldn't want any casual reader of this record to miss any of the excitement of discovery for themselves should they be idiotic enough to go there!

I do remember that with my inner mind map, we were largely able to avoid many of the encounters or could be fully prepared when there was no way around. The usual underworld horrors: mrúr, biridlú, dlaqó, shédra and thúnru'u alongside puzzles both delightful and lethal. We even discovered that an adventuresome party of five with powerful sorcerers, excellent warriors and an arsenal of techno magical devices can indeed best a single already damaged pale legionary. Just! The problem with the pale legionnaires is that even if you destroy one, there must always be the same number in existence, another will just pop into existence and immediately start looking for you.

We were all getting a bit fraught by the end, I was even the target of some invective from some of my companions. This just served to rile Lelmiyáni to the point that her advice became somewhat

haphazard in terms of accuracy and precognition of threats. Then, to use language I am not much given to: it all went to shit!

We came across a chamber containing a hulking shadow of a beast. It turned and myself and Chu'ésa (neither of us aware of our fatal danger) were looking a hli'ír right in the face. Both being psychically gifted we both immediately lost our minds and reason entire. Talūvaz's remedy was to immediately fulminate us both to death. Tusilén too in time. We were left as corpses whilst the hli'ír were despatched (another turned up!), and that was nearly the end of the child that I carry within me. It was also almost the end of our companions, as with me dead, it was only a matter of time before Gurushá bounded forth in slaving majesty. It was also the last straw for Lelmiyáni; she did not enjoy sharing my death pains.

The hli'ír killed, myself and the other two deceased were brought back from death with our Eye of Bestowing Life, before both my inner demons manifested. I and Tusilén somehow returned with sanity restored; in my case Gurushá had literally eaten my nightmares. Chu'ésa was not so blessed and was effectively crippled, incapable of independent thought or deed. There was no way she could survive down there and through our return, I was distraught!

To keep Chu'ésa moving I was initially forced to use chanrága magics to seize control of her mind and direct her actions. This whilst also arguing with Lelmiyáni and my other companions about routes to take and why we were in this mess in the first place and providing what scouting information I could with fapané (perceivance) sorcery. The latter allowed me to identify a party of ssú, blocking the entrance to the final level of the maze. I needed all my remaining pedhétl to try and do something about Chu'ésa's shattered mind, so left Hokésh, Tusilén and Talūvaz to manage the ssú.

We are taught, quite rightly, in the Temples formulaic ritualisations for how sorcery should be utilised. I have, however, known since I was a child that it does not strictly need to be that way, especially with thaumaturgy of the mind, which is a very personal ability contained entirely within. A skilled practitioner such as I, can manipulate the energies to achieve so much more than the formulaic. It is abundantly clear from the tales of the greatest wizards of history that this is very much the case! Thus, in much less than ideal conditions, with friends battling ssú just around a corner, I undertook some psychic surgery on Chu'ésa. Control of Self on myself to guard against contagion, I then telepathically linked with Chu'ésa, monitoring her emotional state and vital signs too. I already had Chu'ésa controlled mentally so could then bring her to place herself in the same degree of control over her own body as I through her own hlakmé, and then practice the meditations I have been teaching her. All the while soothing and caressing her mentally (something I had tried previously in my unions with dear Ta'áné). As she calmed, I then gently began to release my control over her and withdraw from her mind. It was by no means perfect, but it did give her back a high degree of autonomy. I certainly believe that I saved her life.

Once within the final unreality, Lelmiyáni finally showed her real colours and led us to her own prize, a crystalline techno magical device; apparently the key to her own freedom from being bonded to that awful place. She then departed gaily, although I note she has not packed everything that she keeps within me!

After some bitter words, Talūvaz with Hokésh in tow decided to leave us there and then and try and make their own way out of what was rapidly becoming not only our own prison, but likely our tomb. We cousins, by contrast chose to complete what we had started. I still had the map in my head, and I still knew where our true target was. We had come so far, this was no time to turn back in failure.

Alas, by this point, exit from that dread place; there could be none! Alarums were sounding as other interlopers were in the prison. Gij & Sons, having used us as a diversion had made their own entrance and the wards came down with Pale Legionaries fully alert. Luckily for us, there was one in that place who was more incensed by the turn of events than we. Nyélmu! It was with some satisfaction that we witnessed Gij & Sons fail where we had largely succeeded; we had also entertained Nyélmu enough for him to treat with us.

Tusilén and Chu'éša thus treated with the undying wizard and managed to secure our escape from the maze (it seems others apart from Nyélmu can leave!) for the price of giving Nyélmu glimpses of the world beyond. Chu'éša was gifted a strange metallic tablet by which to do just that. A gate to reality was provided, and out we all stepped from the blank face of a stela within the Necropolis of Palá Jakállá.

The stunned tomb police who witnessed this strange event still had the presence of mind to inflict a sizeable inducement on us before letting us pass on in search of our clan house. We had survived, barely having recovered the interfogulating rod that we had been sent as decoy to collect. Distressingly though, Chu'éša was still a broken reed of her former self.

The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¾

Part the Twenty-Seventh – Five Arrive in Palá Jakállá

Palá Jakállá stinks of fish! After the flinty dust and dung aromas of the mid Empire, it made the senses reel. Somewhat more foetid than the cleaner air of my home near Lnóris; the sluggish Mssúma, bearing the cess of Empire and the nearby coastal flats and marshes no doubt adding to the general noisome miasma.

I also had to contend once more with seething masses with all their babbling, both voiced and in my mind. Gurushá was becoming restive too with such an abundance of prey around and the stink of offal. We had also very evidently been within the Weeping Snows for a couple of Months, despite it only seeming but a day! Both Chu'ésa and I were now very decidedly gravid.

Notwithstanding all this, it was so good to feel alive and to be breathing real air, no matter how foetid and sweat laden, under the light of Tuléng. Our unexpected descent on the Moon of Evening clan house caused no little stir with our affidavits initially questioned before we were made welcome. Talūvaz very soon, and rather unceremoniously, bade us farewell; livid at having been duped and having his prize eye drained to nothing; he stormed off swearing revenge on the treacherous Gij and Sons. At least he hadn't been killed or lost his mind, or both, and had his eyes and every other device drained. Tusilén took to his appointed suite and locked himself in there for a full week in the dudgeon of all dudgeons. Eating little and apparently washing even less. Chu'ésa was still barely capable of rational thought; we had to do something about that. And soon.

Even what Chu'ésa would normally consider a jolly little jaunt to a party down by the open sewer that is the Mssúma for the Festival of Numberless Lights failed to really raise her spirits. There were also very worrisome rumours circulating. No ships had arrived from Vrá for a season and the last one to arrive might also have brought a wasting disease to the city. Moon of Evening had also lost contact with one of their outlying farming villas. All was decidedly not well, and it seemed very probable that the sour chumétl stench of the maggot lady that we had been warned about was well and truly established on Vrá in the person of the Duke of Lnóris.

Somewhere amongst all this we also saved the life of a poor bravo from Golden Sunburst who managed to drink himself into a stupor in our clanhouse wine cellar, severing a number of important blood vessels in the process. He was distributing some scurrilous pamphlet going by the grandiose title of Palá Jakállá Times, whilst playing incognito, an embarrassment that his clan was only too happy to sweep below the plushiest of rugs and pay for the privilege of doing so. The poor boy himself gave us a map to a nearby tomb in the local necropolis by way of thanks.

By this time, we had also become acquainted with a strange rotund dwarf of a man with the face like unto an abused hmá. Kumésu hiYirau of Open Sepulchre, a tomb guide who latched onto us, and was only too keen (well as keen as any devotee of Dra can be) to aid us with any necropolis meanderings. Meanderings we had absolutely no intention of undertaking. We had Gayél and Avanthár to go to with alacrity; and more urgently, we had to save Chu'ésa from any return to fatal insanity.

Favours to Golden Sunburst alongside banking our eyes, and other expensive recovered antiquities, with the clan house's jolly gossip of a treasurer, bought us the wherewithal to spread inducements around the temples of Avanthé, Belkhánu and finally Dra. These inducements secured a regimen of mental exercise and healing for poor Chu'ésa, as well as allowing both myself and Chu'ésa to take our

circle examinations. The temple of Belkhánu would not even let me within their precincts due to the hungering demonic contagion within me; but it seems that with every temple I frequent I am gifted yet another protective amulet or other trinket. It still amazes me that they don't just lock me away or just kill me; but at the rate of acquisition of such charms and totems I will soon be able to furnish myself with a full cuirass of demonic protection.

Chu'ésa's healing took some weeks of diligent exercise on her part with me serving as the anchor around which her therapy swung. The success on the endeavour was by no means certain at the beginning, indeed there was a high chance of a broken mind and even death. Chu'ésa carries a lot of emotional baggage, and blames herself much, much too much for past despairs. Nonetheless she has inner reserves of will and a single purposedness of mind that served her very well. The only person who could heal her of this horrible mind injury was herself. This she did.

She is different now, more centred, not quite as driven by instinct and physical desire perhaps, but for the most part still the lively socialite that, against my own inner nature, I have come to love and respect.

Tusilén worried me too. It was now a week or so since he had locked himself away in a festering and incommunicado sulk. I behaved myself to write him a turgidly trite little note expressing my appreciation of his brave and honourable leadership in our recent extremis, and how we couldn't have won through without his steadying hand. It almost came as a surprise to me that I actually meant every sentiment of it. It did not have an immediate effect; his self-imposed imprisonment continued for a while.

With Chu'ésa largely absent about her healing I had ample time to write to dear Ta'áné, entrusting my missives to our own clan's postal factors, that are eminently efficient in that maritime trading city, as well as to the Imperial service. I also had ample time to ponder on the puzzles of the inner workings of the mind, and the traps and prisons that we can set ourselves. I have now spent the best part of a year compartmentalising my own intellect to host two demons alongside my own personality and sanity. I have existed outside of my physical body within nexuses of others minds; tents, pavilions and lodges of communed thought; most particularly. I have experienced the mind bedlam of humanity packed into bustling cities and the more polite and controlled genteel converse of the pé chói. Now I had experienced the inner workings of the mind one of the greatest wizards to have ever lived; a mind that even then had been engineered by outside influence to fabricate its own intricate and eternal prison. I had shared the inner thoughts and intellect wounds of my dear cousin and sister Chu'ésa; I had even formed a union with that broken mind to place a tourniquet upon it until more proficient aid could be secured. I have literally and figuratively had to wrestle with my own inner demons. The ramifications and possibilities of this were whirling around in my mind when I was awoken by the loudest mental thunderclap I have ever experienced, It was enough to sap strength and induce nausea. It was me overhearing a long distance telepathic communication.

It went thus:

This message will, I hope, have finally reached you. It is very difficult to track persons across our great Empire, but I was fortunate in that one of your cousins stands out like a flaming beacon on the hilltop every time they come near a major temple. if I was you, I would stay near them. I do not normally commandeer the Imperial Psychic Network for trivial matters, but I thought you might appreciate some stories to while away the hours while you regroup and replan. I have left some of the names and parts of the stories out, for reasons that you might appreciate later.

The first story goes a little like this...

Once upon a man, or rather there was once a time, or perhaps it was just a place in which he was, but there was a king, who was loved and fated and adored by all his people. He was a champion of accuracy with, let us call it, a bow. Every year he would stage a competition amongst the citizens, and every year he would win.

His kingdom was beautiful and peaceful and full of the most learned folks, and it had a very well managed militia. People could come and go freely through his demesne. It lay on cross-roads, of sorts.

And then one year he realised there were fewer citizens at the competition. And the next year, fewer still. And in the third year, there was only one person who turned up at the competition, and the king asked him "where are the other citizens?" and the man said "they were devoured by She Who Would Be The Queen Made Of Ivory who rampages through your lands "

And the king was alarmed, and he ran off with his bow to seek this Queen and defeat her.

At this point, I could tell you about an epic battle, as in some of our legendary stories, such as the Lament to The Wheel Of Black, or I could simply tell you the truth: he lost, and he had to flee, and the Queen ate his entire kingdom, and then there was nothing. That was not, fortunately for us, the end.

At the last second of the last minute of the last instant of his kingdom, he invoked the power of all the gods and fled from his kingdom to another, and then another, and then another, and each time he found the blind not-dead servants of the Queen chewing on those kingdoms and each time he fought her valiantly, and each time he lost.

And he lived a very long time, as was the nature of people, and he always carried his bow with him. He lost many times.

One day, while practising, he met a beautiful princess, who caused uncontrollable lust to arise in anyone who saw her, only he was not moved, except by sympathy for her plight, and she married him immediately and she took up his cause and made him ever more powerful bows and arrows.

And they have many children, although those children did not look much like them, and they set about repairing the worlds, where the evil Queen had been chewing, and eventually they came to a lost and forlorn place where a mad king had given his soul to a dark and unchanging god. They could both love this new place, and they helped the heroes of that land shut the dark and unchanging god in a quiet and safe place.

This will be where we stop the evil hungry Queen, they declared.

Then they set up a home in a remote island floating in the sky. She made a magical tree, and he stood up as high as he could and fired his arrows, and sent his children into war.

So, the battle against by She Who Would Be the Queen Made Of Ivory continues.

Does this make him a god? We do not think so, and heresy is ugly. Is he a Demon? We do not think so, and heresy is ugly. But he is true and good and honest and useful to all he chooses to

aid. Those who serve the Emperor know him as a friend, and as a friend who works tirelessly to aid us all.

I have other stories for you, perhaps you would choose to read some to your clan cousins, but only your clan cousins, in a private dining room?

Very recently, a group of low-level merchants were sent to examine a fiefdom that they had been gifted through a legal settlement. The place was in ruins, but they were sent to attempt to reclaim it. They found the place in disarray and inhabited by ancient horrors and their beautiful offspring. While they were attempting to bring order to this fiefdom, against the traps and lies of ancient forest clans, the quiet fiefdom was invaded by red hats and the enemies of a man. By luck, or perhaps by the word of the gods, or perhaps with a little bit of help from He Who Rules In Glory, those attacks were beaten off, and the fortunate merchants, although they had all died, were returned to Butrús where the eye of the Emperor now lies upon them, and he is minded to reward all of their relatives if only they will follow the noble path.

The Emperor also fears that the ancient forest clans grew over-bold while supporting a dead and not-dead king, and need to learn some manners before they can be allowed to have good things again.

Perhaps, just perhaps, the Emperor will be able to use his leverage to lift up a tiny chink in the great edifice of the clans, and insert this otherwise insignificant clan one brick higher in the edifice?

Another story I have, for you involves an unlikely alliance of two normally opposed goddesses.

Not so long ago, a man cried out for an heir to his estate, and by pure happenstance two goddesses, or perhaps two goddesses and two demons, or maybe something else, were listening, and against all the experience of millennia, they chose to agree with each other for once and make the man's wish come true. Well, they agreed on the principle if not the precise means.

The first goddess, eager to ensure that germination of all good things continued appropriately and in a stable manner, chose to quicken a life in the man's wife.

But the second goddess, looking on, whose inclinations are much more towards burgeoning growth and confusion, ensured that the same quickening also occurred in all those around the man and his heir.

The problem with these wiles of the goddesses is that they were not properly paying attention to who the fathers of all these new lives were. Perhaps some other forces were masking the father's identities to enable them to play as white characters on the board until they are turned over and revealed to be black counters?

And now there are four lives about to enter the already crowded Empire and all of this game is a-tangled with the weave and weft of the parents and the clans and the Empire and the goddesses. Such is the way of men ... and women.

Another story happened far away and then nearby.

A group of rapacious merchants known for their rare and cunning wares, tricked some silly young people into running an errand for them. The errand should have been fatal, and should have resulted in catastrophe, for thus the merchants had planned for they themselves had been duped and deceived by a far more devious and cleverer enemy posing as a buyer who asked them to secure something rare and valuable of unusual power and value.

It turns out the rapacious merchants were not as clever or as careful as their reputation might have advertised.

The silly young people not only found that item, and did not all die at once, but returned home with the something of unusual power and value even though they did not really know what it was or what its value might be. On the way they made a friend of a man who hates all the gods and all those who can never die for ever and ever and ever. The man who has no friends now has at least one, and thus the universe turns slowly to balance.

The silly young people fled to lick their wounds, and quite forgot to return the valuable thing to the rapacious merchants, who sent others to find them. This may end badly for all concerned.

And another story is still happening:

A little girl who is not a girl but is really a thing that can never be lost and can always find other things, recently got her home back and this made her very happy indeed. So happy that she stopped taking people to a white place that they could not leave and stopped being irksome to the man who lived there. She even found for him a mirror that he had lost, and this made him so happy that he gave that to one of his new friends so he could always see them.

The little unlost girl was now so wrapped up in decorating and repairing her home that she stopped answering the door, even to kings and mighty warriors and princes and sorcerers; and all of them are distraught that things that they have lost may never be found or that some of them may never get home again.

She has one more thing to find for her home, and if she should ever decide to find it, it is likely that she will show her new friends where it is first. A good friend might ask what the consequence of giving it to her might be.

One last story for you:

There once was a young, brave sea captain, who sailed away from his home, against the advice of all his instincts, and his clan, to seek adventure in a larger land. Adventure found him, as it often does, and in it he also found the gift of leadership, although he may not quite know what to do with it yet. He was carefully watched over by an old and brave friend, who was called away on duty, leaving the sea captain exposed to the winds of chance and change.

Sadly, while he was away, a creeping blight began to eat at all that was good in his homeland, and that land may be sicker than can be cured with simple potions. Surgery, or even sacrifice may be required.

The sea captain is now without compass or rudder. His story is not ended yet.

I hope you enjoy these little stories, and they help to make your little rest more pleasant. Do not worry about mere gold, because the Empire ensures that gold flows, as naturally as rivers flow downhill, to those that have prestige and are noble. (I am sure you are worrying about

gold, however). Time is now pressing, and a good leader would make a firm decision, abandoning other opportunities and committing to one thread, wherever it may lead.

You are the leader. Right now, the fate of many rests on you. If you crumble, there are others that will be forced to step up. Personally, I think you are doing fine, and would be happy if you continued to do fine. Perhaps then, you might ask the venerable clan elder to open the little safe deposit box left with him by the Astronomer. You may find something useful within it, and, if you do, you may decide what to do with it.

No need to reply unless you want to.

You do want to? Right?

Yours, as ever,

Dláppa hiSsánmirin of the Jade Diadem clan

PS: That something rare and valuable thing of unusual power and value? Feel free to drop it off at the Palace of the Realm or use it as it is meant to be used or give it to the rapacious merchants who have now had their mistake explained to them and who are rightly chastised and apologetic. Just don't hang onto it for very long. Please. It smells bad and will attract maggots.

This arrival caused me to have crushing a headache, so much so, that I was in no way prepared for Tusilén's stunning return to society. In all his eccentric glory and clearly as mad as a box of frogs. He had a plan. A plan that showed that at an intellectual level Tusilén had been wrestling with the exact same conundrums of the mind as I. Even if he didn't realise it.

Tusilén's plan was breath-taking in its audacity, its insanity and I fear its cruelty. It would also have taken a stunning facility with psychic manipulation to encompass. Other than that it was simplicity itself.

Tusilén would declare himself nakomé so that nothing of what followed could rebound on our clan. This would leave him as outcast to pursue his own private revenge on Gij and Sons who (which?) had caused such treacherous injury to us. That was the easy part.

Before this though, Tusilén desired that his memories; his very essence. were to be replicated and somehow placed into the mind of his yet unborn son and heir. My mind was turning somersaults as to how this could be done; and why.

It did not end there! The growth/ageing of Tusilén's son (if it is a son) was then to be somehow accelerated so that his son (or daughter!) could then immediately take his (or her) rightful place as Factor General of the Empire spanning trading concern that Tusilén has so adroitly woven.

It went against everything Avanthé stands for; it was insane, cruel beyond measure to poor Díyo and to the unborn child, A misplaced childhood, a script for a jester's tear. We were all aghast. Rendered utterly speechless!

The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¾

Part the Twenty-Eighth – Tanmuruktu's Tower Palá Jakálla

My mind already reeling from the experiences in the Garden of Weeping Snows and the Palace of Frost, I was now trying to understand the implications of the message that had caused my latest migraine.

First and foremost is that last we knew of Dláppa hiSsánmirin, he was in faraway Butrús. How could he know we were now in Palá Jakálla? Secondly, I cannot believe that the Psychic network of which he speaks can so easily be overheard by the truly sensitive. Was it deliberate on his part to force me to eavesdrop? And if so, how? I shall discuss with T'tket M'jer when we finally meet again. If not, somebody needs to communicate how open to eavesdropping this psychic postal service actually is!

Then there was the content. The tale of the King and his Queen is easy enough; we have met them on Gayél (the remote Island floating in the sky) and hopefully will do again soon. The one other and possibly at least an avatar of Dlamélish, his wife. The message speaks of several Worlds though, other planets such as Téकुमेल? They have even helped repair some? Where? Then, there is the mysterious dark and unchanging God who appears to have been found native here on Téकुमेल? but now chained away. Does this mean Ksáruł, but why unchanging, is he in fact a God of one of the native races, such as the ssú or hokún, or both and all? Does this mean Dlamélish (and others?) come from "somewhere else"?

Then there is the strong hint that the Imperium (particularly the Servitors in Silence and OAL?) have close links to the One Other (a Pariah!); and have done for millennia. Just how wrong was Pavár!? Or is he just a foil to keep warring cousins from each other? Like the lies that get told to children to simplify things, that so confused and angered me as a youth? Whatever, his symbol appears to be everywhere we look now, including around my own neck.

I have no idea who these people are (who appear to have died, but been resurrected) who are spoken of in connection with a lost fief regained, and restless Forest Clans? No idea about the dead, but not dead King (There appear to be a frighteningly numerous suite of potential candidates!). In Butrús though, so maybe a by-product of us passing through all those Months ago?

Finally, if it isn't bad enough having actual demons taking lodgings and having occasional disagreements with each other in my head; it appears that a brace of Goddesses (Avánthe and Dlamélish I believe) are playing games with my womb, and the wombs of Chu'ésa, Díyo and one other. Who is the one other? Why is she linked to us three? Does Ta'áné have another lover or whoever fathered Chu'ésa's child? There are also hints that Ta'áné is not the only father of note amongst the seed sowers. What have we and the Goddesses got ourselves into?

The rest is simple enough to decipher, being related to the late treacherous behaviour of Gij & Sons, the spread of the Ivory stench over Lnóris (and elsewhere) and Tusilén rather losing his way (and mind?) after the Weeping Snows.

Life was so much simpler in the convent of the maid! But, so, so crushingly dull!

The missive did mention the local notable, Tanmuruktu the Astronomer. Chu'ésa had been keen to visit, even before Tusilén revealed the content of his message. Hoping that a visit there would divert Tusilén from his insane, cruel and possibly fatal path, we duly sought the strongbox from the clan

treasurer and behaved ourselves out into the teeming mires to Tanmuruktu's Tower. We engaged Kumésu hiYirau as guide.

It surprised us not at all that Tanmuruktu already knew we were going to pay him a little visit; most welcoming and affable was he in his greetings of us. Locked away in his safe keeping he had a near identical box as that which we had collected from the clan vault. Inside was the other half of the broken Imperial Seal that had adorned the paper transcription of the psychic message sent to Tusilén. Lodged (By Dláppa!?) with Tanmuruktu years ago. Truly someone was really playing with our heads, as well as time and relative dimensions in space.

Discussions passed backwards and forwards as to where next and why. We had to lose (somewhere safe) the interfogulating rod that the ivory minions sought for their queen. Discussions drifted from Gayél to Avanthár with Kumésu generally looking at us as if we were all on Zu'úr. To put off actually making a decision there and then, we instead asked if Tanmuruktu could summon Gij & Sons to us, here in his tower so we could treat with them again.

Somewhat to my surprise he acquiesced without demur, just the usual admonitions that they really were the most literal of fellows (or gestalt entity of a fellow). He even seemed to be amused at the prospect. Nevertheless he took some minor precautions with wardings and summoning the sulphurous demon Tkél, to hide behind a mirror/nexus wall. I was pleased and amused to note that he did this without the usual chanting and flummery of ridiculous ritual beloved of the hand waving and gesticulatory sort of sorcerer; just a bit of casual banter and bartering; much as I have become accustomed to with my own "guests". He also created a facsimile of the interfogulating rod with which to beguile Gij & Sons with.

Gij & Sons were then duly summoned, and the real bargaining began. On a number of occasions one of the entities was allowed to portal out to fetch and carry. Leaving the other two as hostage. For the princely sum of an interfogulator that didn't actually exist at all, we had all our eyes and other devices returned to the state they were in before we entered the Weeping Snows and a few other treasures, including, for me, a rather fancy interphasic dagger with potentially nexus destabilising properties. I hope I never have to use it.

Honour and revenge satisfied, I am glad to say that Tusilén promptly put aside his insane plan. We would instead take the real interfogulator to Archer Hmí on Gayél and thence make our way to Avanthár (possibly via time skip to avoid impalement for ignoring an Imperial warrant?) in time for our birthings. Kumésu just blinked and shook his head in disbelief. First, however, Tanmuruktu was to receive yet another expected guest and invited us to sup with him, and then before we made our departure.

And what a guest! Her nose was so regal it arrived almost a kirén before the rest of her face. Certainly not young, but also not old, and as beautiful as sunrise over the holy peak of Avanthár. Without a doubt Tlakotáni. With her was an only slightly less prepossessing handmaiden, who never spoke a word when she was with us. Very probably an actual Servitor in Silence.

The lady's arrival appeared relatively normal, although Kumésu did notice that she stepped into the tower from out of a dusky gloaming, when as far as we could recall it could be no later than noon. The guest clearly came from somewhere distant (possibly very, very distant) from Palá Jakállá. Somewhere at least some 6 hours ahead of Palá Jakállá for sure, possibly even a Moon! I tried to explain to Kumésu that we could both be right about the time of day, the planet is a globe that spins as it circles Tuléng after all! He just scoffed at the thought of anything but the world being flat. I offered to show him the geometry of it, and that we could even be fairly certain from such studies as to diameters, radii and

the like. That pitying shake of the head again! Perhaps I can teach him in time? A little trip to Gayél, if he was willing, would surely help?

Introductions were made on our part, not so much on the regal lady's part, although Chu'ésa believes her to have been Ma'ín 'Krütháin' hiTlakotáni. She was certainly high Tlakotáni enough to take affront at our footwear, strongly suggesting that we change into something more decent; she would provide. Our old sandals may as well be burnt in a brazier outside! She invited the others to depart outside but bade me stay with her a while. It was very clearly still early afternoon outside!

New footwear was (literally) summoned. Chu'ésa was very pleased with what she assures me are a pair of little bootees of the very highest quality and fashion. I was just as happy with my comfortable footwear of extreme sensibleness. Hokésh had a new pair of reinforced kicking boots.

With the others outside the noble lady put me gently to the question as to my demons, my child and its father and whether he appeared to have a guardian. I was of course truthful in my responses. She then confirmed what I already knew; that the demons pose a great danger not only to myself, but also my unborn. She also confirmed that my life was, and would continue to be, "complicated" by everything that she was gently interrogating me about. She then gifted me yet another amulet to add to my ever-growing cuirass of demonic protection, this one to ward particularly against the pretty flautist who had presently left me, but not packed her bedroll from my head. Any more amulets and people will begin to think I actually have a bust!

Tanmuruktu also took away a number of our eyes for investigation, those traded to us back in Dláš; Every single one of them was defective and very slowly, but steadily leaking charges. With the natural drain in Nyélmu's prison it is doubtful we would have noticed, even if we had lived long enough to do so! Any qualms at our revenge on Gij & Sons were entirely dispelled by this affirmation of their perfidy in both intent and deed!

After this we joined my companions outside in the afternoon sun, just in time to be afflicted by the sour chumétl stench emanating from our burning footwear. The Ivory Lady had been tracking our progress after we stepped in something nasty somewhere. Before Haumá? Before Katalál even? Tumíssa? Before? The noble lady again stressed that we should rid ourselves of the damnable control rod to the Pylons.

Meanwhile, Kumésu's sharp eyesight had already noticed a number of circular motifs with dot in the centre borne by the probable servitor in silence. We even discussed openly with him that it could mean in terms of Pariah implications of the One Other, yet Imperial at the same time!

Before we finally departed for Gayél, we entered a final deal with the lady and Tanmuruktu. This was to deal with Nyélmu once more. Nyélmu would be relieved of some of his ennui by Chu'ésa passing the tablet of communication to the noble lady. Allowed more sights of the world beyond his own mind prison. Nyélmu would in turn return his last surviving living servitor as well as his (now useless to him) key to the College at the End of Time! The deal was done, and before us from the same stelae that we had emerged stood a mighty legionary in steel. He had never doubted that he would return. He was by no means as mind injured as the poor chaps we rescued from under the villa near Tumíssa. Quite the opposite in fact. Chu'ésa had by contrast, a rather non-descript slip of etched metal.

We thus returned the martial fellow to his clanhouse of White Stone. We expected questions, but his name and title are etched in marble on the very portico. He was instantly recognised for who he was: Kakagánu hiMiridai, Kérdu commanding the lost Legion of Mighty Jakálla; welcomed in with

celebrations and promises that they would not forget our efforts on his and their parts. The Once and Future Kérdu!

This duty done, it was time to burn the amulet of the One Other. Tusilén promptly did so. And nothing happened! Confused, we went about our business for some hours, when suddenly we were all translated from our various localities to that alien landscape in shaded green and grey hues known to some of us from our previous visit. There at angles to us hung variously Tékel, Tuléng and Káshi. I wished I'd looked round to see the look on Kumésu's face; instead, I immediately reached out with my mind to T'tket M'jer, who I hoped was here. He was, but in very great danger. It would appear that the minions of the Ivory Queen were already there. Alacrity was very much required!

The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¾

Part the Twenty-Eighth – A Foul Stench on Gayél

Gayél was just as strange as I remembered; but different. The beauteous lady was not tending her cardamom tree and no aqáálings were being launched towards the disc of Tékel that hung in the black sky. We thought that once again we would be surrounded by the bubbles of rapidly diminishing breath as we made our way from the nexus point on the edge of the mercury lake towards the portal to Archer Hmí's abode. However, it seems that one of the trinkets we acquired at the Priory of the Eternal Pylon surrounded us in a protective field of its own, leaving us less panicked than we might otherwise be. On arrival I immediately reached out with my mind to T'tket M'jer and was gratified to feel his presence and then immediately distressed by the fear and worry that he was exuding; Gayél was already under assault by agents of the Pale Bone! He sent me an image of the assailants, some ten in number accompanied by some form of techno-magical cart full of rampant energies, "*Make haste!*" he bid.

Within we found a scene of carnage. Smashed portals, scorch marked walls and destroyed equipment amongst which was scattered a perdition of little ru'ún, blasted into fragments. Hokésh's little silvery automaton was obviously disturbed by its destroyed brethren, and immediately set hither and thither to collect together the myriad scattered parts.

The portal to the aqáà hatchery had also been violently breached and subjected to fiery devastation and violent catastrophe. The portal to the Archer's lair; impervious to anything we could throw at it on our last visit was also explosively breached; our pariah foes must have brought some serious heavy weaponry with them. We were investigating this breach when Kumésu spotted an impending ambush from the little cavern with the floating repair net in it. Two foul miscreants sneaking into our rear. Fortunately, I had already prepared by activating my unimpeachable shield and got the jump on one of our assailants by mind nudging the fire pot he was about to throw onto the floor behind him. Resulting in his rapid immolation as well as severely burning his companion. A companion who was then quickly and deftly despatched by Hokésh. After ensuring this time that our rear was truly clear of foes, we continued onward to the grand stair.

The grand stair was in its undeployed state of chasm. A chasm which Kumésu rappelled down with remarkable alacrity and no little bravery. The rest of us persuaded Hokésh's ru'ún (apparently now named 'Yu'án') to work the damaged controls to deploy the spiral stair and made our way down to the calcinatory ring below by more pedestrian means. At the bottom, partially blocking the leftward corridor, was the blasted corpse of a small aqáà. That corridor was also blocked by the filthy weblike excrescence, the spoor of our foe. We headed rightward along the outer rim. I still remained in mental contact with T'tket M'jer who only added to my worries and abject disquiet by his imaging to me of the fallen archer being tended in the hall of control by his goddess wife. I could also feel the pulsing anger of a myriad aqáà minds, thirsting for revenge. I bid them come to slake their detestation on their persecutors, even as my own guts churned with a rising and relentless hunger as my remaining houseguest made his own feelings on the subject known.

Our forward progress was briefly interrupted by a chamber teeming with chittering and sharp toothed jaws impeding our progress skittering across the floor towards us. Chu'ésa duly deployed her, till now little used, eye of membranous collation, which picked up and wrapped the toothy horrors into a handy sack, which we then imprisoned in a handy jar. Just beyond at the entrance to the control suite

we encountered our foe. The doors to the control room itself had been sealed with the foul excrescence whilst opposite the corridor to the pylon engine was occupied by at least six opponents, most of them clustered around the energy engine that they had brought with them. Chu'ésa applied another Gij obtained eye to try and clear the blocking webbing on the control suite doors.

Meanwhile, a savage exchange of sorcery ensued. Conjured darkness, then one of those clouds of horrible black butterfly things, followed by a gutting blast that opened Chu'ésa's torso from throat to sternum spraying her blood everywhere. Somehow, she retained consciousness (her psychic control is really improving) allowing her to heal herself with a scroll. I was wrestling with the crescendo of starvation rising within and tried an unsuccessful soul theft whilst Hokésh rushed into close combat with the nearest two sorcerers, quickly hacking one to the floor before unaccountably pirouetting awkwardly and savagely breaking his own leg in open fracture, falling to the floor insensible. This left me most uncomfortably at the van of our assault. We could not tarry, the infernal machine was screaming towards the conclusion of its business, the walls were whispering with aqáà and The Starveling was rattling his mental chains. I had to press the attack!

Chu'ésa used the eye of bundling things up in a sack to control the fluttering black horrors beating against my shielding. My own handy use of Mind Bar overwhelmed the nearest sorcerer and I set him to despatch a crossbowman who had the affrontery to try and shoot me. I darted to the left as my captive sorcerer despatched both the crossbowman and the blood horror that was summoned from the wreck of his corpse in short order. Chu'ésa had meanwhile recovered Hokésh's somnolent form and healed him with another scroll brought to the front by Tusilén, who had finally ceased sightseeing and decided to join the fray. Of Kumésu, there was no sign; although he is really good at hiding, so he could have been anywhere!

To the left I was faced by another crossbowman who I quickly mentally dominated and set him around the middle ring to attack his allies. He may even have got a shot in before they killed him. I followed, so as to take the tantrum in my head away from my friends whilst they deployed to the right led by a sprinting Chu'ésa. Hokésh heading, as is his want, straight down the centre, before it became blocked by yet more of that filthy webbing. The enemies clustered around the infernal machine had by now detected our approach, and a storm of sorcery engulfed us, luckily with minimal effect, beyond minorly draining a number of our eyes and utterly draining my eye of retaining Gurushá's larder. This did not sit well with my guest who briefly broke loose from my control in hungering apoplexy, seriously disturbing Chu'ésa, Tusilén and Hokésh as they worked the opposite flank, before I managed to wrest him back into my own head.

A bloody brawl around the pylon engine and the infernal energy machine ensued, which I largely missed due to trying to keep my guest from getting free again. Chu'ésa briefly attempted to bring the pylon engine back under control before then pressing her attack with both sorcery (she's actually getting quite competent now) and blade. Tusilén luckily intervened just in time to prevent an unfortunate shutdown of the engine that keeps our reality together, before he too closed to hand strokes. Hokésh was of course at the forefront of it all, laying about himself right and left. We were in the end victorious, but at cost. Hokésh was downed again, grievously injured and the damage to the reality engine remained uncertain. Somewhere, we had also somehow acquired a small army of little gestalt ru'ún welded together from spare parts. We all (particularly Chu'ésa) looked like we had been partying in a charnel house.

We paused briefly to inspect our fallen foes, despite my estimation that haste was needed to lend succour to T'tket M'jer. Doing so raised some immediate concerns as a number were obviously natives of our home isle of Vrá; indeed, Tusilén even believed that he recognised one. Others were dressed in

outlandishly noisome rags of leather and fur. All bore strange and disturbing organic multi-coloured amulets embedded in the flesh above their manubrium that we forbore to touch.

By this time Kumésu had finally reappeared having found a little haul of plaques bearing symbols not unlike the Oblongs of Surety. These were in fact the keys to the warding engines that could protect this little haven on Gayél from extra-planar interlopers. Chu'ésa had also found some slightly dislodged panels behind which were hidden a pair of learning spheres. The instruction manual! Duly informed we set to work inserting the plaques and plied the control mechanisms to bring the damaged pylon engine back into fully protected equilibrium. During this exercise we also hauled our foe's de-interfogulating engine to somewhere it could do no further harm.

Our labours were occasionally disturbed by the sounds of despairing shrieks as my controlled army of aqáálings and Yu'án the ru'ún's little army of reconstituted brethren sought out and brought to painful execution any remaining foe. Once all the remaining foes had been despatched, they then commenced clearing up the mess. The aqáálings, still singing, consuming the corpses and foul excrescences, whilst the little ru'ún busily set to repairing smashed machinery, controls, doors and each other. I'm sure I even caught sight of one refreshing some scorched paintwork and signs!

Finally, it was time to lend aid to poor T'tket M'jer, the Archer and the Archer's Wife. Having gained access to the planet observatory we were disquieted to be unable to find any of those that we sought. We didn't really have much time to marvel at the view from the great windows; the entire of creation within our own particular plane hung in the air. Mighty Téकुमेल, circling the blazing orb of even mightier Tuléng. There too in crescent was Káshi. A marvellous sedate courtly dance of the heavens. A lime green haze was steadily consuming a festoon of red and amber lights across the master control board. The inserted oblongs seemed to be doing the trick. Close at hand through the window we could see that the cardamom tree was blistered' leaking vapours and sparking. Aqáálings and ru'ún appeared to be disconsolately tending it and other nearby damage.

We finally found T'tket M'jer and the Archer beyond a round hatch in the ceiling. Poor T'tket M'jer was in an awful state. He had lost an eye, had several broken limbs and was desperately trying to staple a number of gaping rents in his carapace closed. In mind communion with him I was subject to a barrage of anxiety, stress, pain, fear as well as unusually barely comprehensible thought speech. The Archer was clearly at least unconscious, and possibly even dead.

T'tket M'jer's ramblings largely orbited the following particulars:

- Has anyone got any water, or fruit?
- You took the gods' damned time enough getting here.
- My last eye of healing?
- Vrá has not fallen!
- Hmí's wife is missing, can someone please find her.
- The aqáà won't stop screaming; please make them stop!
- If her followers are not stopped here, they will bring her back, and Qárqa along with her.
- Closing down sale at Gij and son(s)!
- Use the Oblongs!
- Can someone get me a Mihálli?
- The Emperor is going to be so pissed off with me if the Universe ends.
- Fuck the Fucking Accelerators and their heresies.

- Which one of you turned on the 3LD at Dláš, you lunatics!

We did what we could to lend him aid with all that we had at hand. In time with at least a reasonable degree of success, meaning that he could be cajoled into not screaming so loudly and incomprehensibly into my mind. Once back in a semblance of a stable state we could converse more clearly and in more equality. We should secure the installation (done). We should use the oblongs (done), Archer Hmí's wife was last seen defending her tree, if that is still there then she must still live! Someone should go and find her. We also needed to somehow find a way of healing the Archer (and one supposed his wife too, if, as was likely, she was injured too).

T'tket M'jer had an inkling that succour for the Archer could be found in that being's quarters close by the entrance from the cardamom tree. The task was much, much, easier said than done. The Archer was utterly flaccid, like unto a rolled duvet, yet weighed considerably, despite the light and buoyant sensation we were becoming accustomed to on the Moon. The Boneless King indeed! Manoeuvring this awkward mass up and down shafts, down ladders and around awkward corners took more wit and agility than we initially accounted for. Yet in the end we were successful and won through to his resting chamber; adorned with nought but a massive central plinth with two large recesses on its surface. Into one of these we plopped our floppy load. Nothing immediately apparent, we decided to recover his goddess lady wife too. Somewhere on the suffocating surface!

Luckily there were means to keep us alive. Collars, bracers and anklets that when initiated surrounded us with life giving air. Onto the green hued surface we bounced, awkwardly at first; but in time we got the measure of the peculiar sensation. All around was signs of frantic and awful combat. Smashed and scorched rocks, blasted corpses of foe and aqáà and ruined ru'ún. A path of violence which made it relatively easy to trace our quarry.

The Archer's Wife had hauled herself into a small cave and blocked the entrance behind her with a rolled rock. There she lay half buried in the dust and almost unrecognisable. Gone was the impossible and almost mortal to view beauty. Instead, she had become a curled husk or pod, hard as the teak of Ksáru! with her face blistered almost beyond recognition. Moving her immobile form across the hazard strewn surface of Gayél proved just as difficult as our efforts with the Archer, yet manage we finally did, laying her in the second recess on the plinth in the Archer's quarters. The Archer had already recovered sufficiently to rise and proceed back to his room of the windows over the heavens.

Myself and Chu'ésa foolishly stayed with Archer Hmí's wife as the plinth worked on her. This resulted in us being overcome in paroxysms of crushing and knee shaking ecstasy that nearly rendered us both entirely insensible. Despite the quaking of a multiplicity of spontaneous climaxes, we managed to scrabble for the exit and the quietus of the outer chambers, where panting, sweating and barely able to stand we had to be aided to a place of rest to recover ourselves. Ta'ané hadn't had such an overwhelming effect on me, but it did leave me yearning piteously for him and his touch again nevertheless.

Back with the Archer with his overlook of Tékuamel we discussed with him the next steps. With the interfogulator closed and warded he could no longer whisk us hither and thither to wherever and/or whenever we pleased. Instead, we had five options:

- The first was to take one of Gayél's lifeboats (that was the sense I got in my mind anyway) which could only now deposit us far to the west of Mu'ugalavyá in the Plain of Towers. Not a prospect to be relished.

- The second was for his wife the goddess to transport us to her temple under the Chakán eaves close to Butrús. Tempting, but this was not going to help us avoiding the Imperial high ride for being indecently late to obey the Imperial Writ of Summons.
- The third was for the Archer to arrange for a totally different, and hopefully infinitely more pleasurable high ride, by contacting Avanthár to have us picked up by the Imperial Flight!
- The fourth was to return us to Tanmuruktu's tower (again a bit too distant from Avanthár to be polite), and
- The fifth was to take us to the College at the End of Time.

This last sounded to me to be a much less terrifying prospect than the Imperial Court, and surely, I could learn so much more there!... Loyalty to my companions won through. We chose the Imperial Flight, I was beside myself with excitement at the prospect of crossing the void betwixt Worlds!

We had two days to await our void car to arrive. In the interim, the Archer, or at least his wife, had not finished with us yet. Chu'ésa and I in particular attracting her almost full attention. She was so beauteous, that even if we had been asked I doubt we would have refused her next ministrations. T'tket M'jer, by contrast, was firmly of the opinion that what then happened was going to complicate matters!

With her undivided gaze on us, my cousin and I began to glow a translucent hue of blue green within which the very organs of our body were visible alongside the now rapidly burgeoning contents of our wombs. Months of development occurred within seconds causing our bellies to distend. Suddenly we were mere days from birthing. The whole experience was just so strange I cannot pen words to describe the sensations. Within me a dark hungering shadow was also witnessed to gently relinquish its clutches on the now full term child within me. Archer Hmí's wife smiled, obviously content. I on the other hand now had a terrible fear that I would give birth in the void between Gayél and Avanthár and rather spoil some Imperial upholstery in the whole messy business!

The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¾

Part the Thirtieth – Converse with the Boneless One

We still had three days to wait for our sky-chariot to arrive. And what days of wonderment they were! Myself, Chu'ésa and Tusilén all braved the learning sphere again to unlock the comprehension locked within it. Just an immediate recognition of the immensity of the knowledge being passed to me as it began slowly to burgeon within my mind was enough to lay me on my back with the shock and awe of it! Our minds yet grapple with what that sphere contained as thought paths and connections are gradually formed, compartmentalising and filing the intelligence and analysis for future use.

We had time to speak more with Archer Hmí, who drew our attention to the potentiality of skeins of destiny, interwoven like the tangled branches and roots of a tree. There before us were potential futures, all dependent on which shoots and branches were pruned or pollarded. Using the window of wonder as a mirror of tomorrows, the Archer showed us potential fates of Vrá. One a festering boil off the cost of Tsolyánu seeding its rot into the Empire. Another future saw Vrá being smashed into oblivion, like Gánga before it, by the fall of some blazing comet. Then there was a repeat of the razing of the entire Island and the slaughter of its folk by the Legion of the Givers of Sorrow. More hopeful was the driving back the forces of the corrupted Duke of Lnóris to his hill-top lair and into the darkling tunnels beneath. At least one of these futures saw the Moon of Evening clanhouse refurbished and renewed, extended, and furnished with beautiful gardens and decorous roofing. In all, three locations glowed with importance Avanthár, beacon of the World; then Tsa'avtúlgú in central Salarvyá where She Who Must Not Be Named is locked in eternal combat with Black Qárqa inside a constantly refreshing onion skin of petty béthorms; and finally somewhere in Mu'ugalavyá.

We also talked with the Archer about his journey to his own present. The ancient struggle against She Who Must Not Be Named. The destruction of a myriad other trees, other béthorms, lost to her ravaging before he finally came to this béthorm to make a stand here. We talked of his fall from the sky into the waters off Ngéshtu Head, a happenstance occasioned by an accident involving a sky-chariot sold to him with some faults by none other than Gij and Sons!

Our conversation of course then flowed through to the nature of Gij and Sons; what they may be and their motives. I seemed to be impressing the Archer with my ponderings on them being like earthworms re-working techno-magical devices like tilth across our béthorm. Other béthorms too he thought! Demons or constructs they do what they do, because it IS what they do; it is their reason for existing. Finding, purchasing, re-cycling. The Archer bears them no real grudge, despite their faulty merchandise plummeting him into the ocean and a long convalescence all those millennia ago. They are honest in their own way. He was quite amused by our last meeting with them and our transacting with them in exact the same way they would have with us; no lies, but trickery none the less. The Archer was also impressed at our survival of the Garden of Weeping Snows and our tales of meeting the wizard Nyélmu.

I remained in awe and wonderment again about the disc of Tékelmel hanging in the sky, landmasses clearly evident and I had to wonder why spirals of large white cloud appeared to go only one direction at the top, yet the opposite at the bottom. He showed us forests, deserts, mountains, seas, plains and hills of ice at top and bottom. The world we know only encompasses a quarter of the totality! The rest according to the Archer must remain inscrutable to us.

My gravid condition led me also to ponder with the Archer on the subject of what would happen to our excreta, both here on Gayél and in the three days of transit we could expect by sky-chariot. A demonstration followed of machinery on Gayél, involving a sieve contraption, that converted waste to water and dust. I really didn't want to consider what happened with it next! For the transit to Téकुमेल? A bucket. Possibly worse!

During all this the Archer also managed to persuade Hokésh that his trusty axe could do with re-working. Reforged it looked as if bronze but with fine cat motifs worked into it. Hokésh now swears blind, after some practice, that it is much superior to the steel of which it had formerly been forged. Apparently, it also sings to him! Hokésh also appeared to have acquired a second ru'ún as companion to Yu'án. Occasional maintenance will be required through requiring a trek to the temple of the Cat Goddess under the Chakán eaves close by Butrús. Butrús again? Was this the same temple as that dedicated to the Wife of Archer Hmí, whence we could have been delivered?

Ah, but again I could have stayed there on Gayél forever drinking in the wonders so revelatory with the petty struggles of all humanity and the other races locked within, and without Téकुमेल totally invisible and perhaps almost irrelevant against the immensity of the whole creaking and barely functioning edifice on which those struggles are contested.

Speaking of barely functioning, my fears as to the ablative arrangements of the finally arriving were duly realised. A bucket to be shared between all eight of the crew and passengers on the three day descent from Gayél to Avanthár. The seating arrangements were only marginally more comforting, hard backless lattices on poles. Even less comforting was the that my limited knowledge of Llyáni and the Language of the Ancients allowed me to grasp the endless litany of the direst warnings of things not working or at best functioning sub-optimally being outlined by the brain of the arrived air car.

Meeting us on the device was none other than the Dragon Rider Chékłan hiVriddi whose imperial warrant we had so idiotically chosen to delay on that sour worm infested estate near Béy Sü. He was as imperious as might be expected but did not seem overly angered with us. With him he had a funny little priest of Ksárul, who Chékłan obviously treated with a degree of amused disdain bordering on contempt. I wriggled my way to the front of the queue to board, which gave me not only a splendid view of our destination and the controls of this fabled device, but also put me as far away as possible from the stinking feculence of the chamber bucket.

The funny little devotee of Ksárul, our pilot, then proceeded to prove yet again my theory that all this ridiculous arm waving, finger contortionating, mumblings, mutterings, intonations and such like, so beloved of ritualists, is nothing but nonsensical flummery; born of ignorance, fear and lack of confidence in the face of the unknown and unknowable. Just there to keep their minds off the fearsome realities before them. It really was comical to behold!

Ohé! But the view as we returned with the planet itself turning under us even as it loomed larger and larger before us. The terrifying thrill as we were surrounded by buffeting fire, before we burst into the black night sky above the upper reaches of the mighty Missúma just south of Avanthár. Sworn to utter secrecy we landed without fanfare a discreet distance from prying eyes (and evidently quite devastating defences of the ancients designed to protect the city).

Exhilarated by the ride, I was nevertheless conscious that we stank of an open sewer in high summer and was thus greatly alarmed by Tusilén's petulant demands that we were immediately to be about our business and should be immediately introduced into the presence of notables evidently more powerful and politically dangerous than we had ever encountered before. Welcome to Avanthár!