

# **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 One :=-**

*Dlántu has a Toothache*

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                      David Bailey

## Clan of the Moon of Evening

Anka'á hiSarashkü	naïve scholar priestess of Dilinála and diarist	– Alan Ford
Trákonel hiSarashkü	impulsive ex-legionary and group leader	– Dave Morris
Chu'ésa hiSarashkü	vivacious ex-marine, lay-priestess of Avánthe	– Dermot Bolton
Tusilén hiUjjain	miserabilist sea captain and navigator	– Oliver Johnson
Portso vuKutl	lecherous chef and aspiring crime boss	– Jamie Thomson

## NPC

T'tket M'jer	enigmatic pé chói scholar & sorcerer	– David Bailey
Vrána hiPávu	dishy headmaster and priest of Grugánu	
Lady Ejél Ndalú	priestess of Ksarul and devotee of the N'dalu society	

Written by Alan Ford, 2020

Edited & compiled by Dermot Bolton, 2023

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 26 ¾

### Part the First – The Journey to Úrmish

Our clan gave us a hefty working stipend to draw upon for our journey and we were supposed to also take a pair of timber assayers with us. After a bit of discussion, it was decided not to head for Jakállá and then coast it, but to take ship directly over the big blue with an advantageous wind to Penóm on the festering flats, then sakbé up to Úrmish. The front would be that Trákonel was leading a trade delegation (true enough) to hide (about as well as a celebrant of the Emerald Lady's pudenda veil) our true purpose.

However, no sooner had we thought we had a fine ship to sail on, it transpired that it had "inconveniently" started a seam (which I believe is some silly nautical attempt to make sprung a leak sound more interesting). This seemed to me to be somewhat suspicious! Tusilén investigated further though, and appeared content that it was just something that ships did from time to time; including this one. Hardly reassuring!

It then transpired that Trákonel had also been approached to run an errand for the Duke of Lnóris to the other side of Gánga; taking a simple message that any fool could have delivered. Another transparent attempt at inflicting dither and delay on us! We finally prevailed upon him the foolishness of such an enterprise, and he arranged to have the pointless message sent by courier.

We also had the small matter of getting a pé chói (notoriously afeared of the watery realm) aboard. In the end, heavy sedation seemed to be the only and finally utilised option. And so, we finally set sail with the voyage promising little except boredom, being closeted too close to the unsavoury Portso all on a rather unsanitary ship where all sorts of despicable and unclean practices appeared to be the norm.

Chu'ésa and Tusilén were also briefly close to each other's throats as to who was captain, before, quite rightly, the quietly competent Tusilén prevailed.<sup>1</sup> Tusilén also seemed to have his eyes on one of the crew, a particularly dirty and suspicious little fellow who was a late replacement for a crewman who had gone missing; Just how stupid did the various factions that appeared to be spying on and/or obstructing are little enterprise think we were?!!

With all the filthy goings on deck and Portso leering hungrily at Chu'ésa as she capered around doing nautical things, I soon got tired of the muck and disturbingly wide and somewhat mobile horizon and headed to keep the poor pé chói company where such sights could not affront me.

This proved to be profitable to both of us. It kept his drug calmed mind off the fact he was but a hól (12cm) away from watery death and gave us both time to investigate the delights and insights of the cartographic gem together. It also allowed me to teach him here'úl and daghórr; games of immense subtlety and tactical skill that were largely beyond my hidebound companions, who appear to be more of the ridiculous and illogical betting on stick throwing into patterns bent.

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<sup>1</sup> Chu'ésa disputes this interpretation, both that she sought to be captain and that Tusilén was quietly competent. She said as a former marine lieutenant she was merely securing the ship, I didn't want to argue. On reflection Tusilén did seem unnecessarily upset that she seemed to get along with the sailors so well.

The voyage proceeded without any undo problem and we reached Penóm in good time. Here a strange occurrence apparently occurred whilst I and the pé chói were finishing up our last daghórr refight of Dórmoron Plain. The unsavoury and suspicious replacement sailor tried to make off with a scroll case that Tusilén had secreted on his person. A short chase and a scuffle later, and the fellow was overborne on the dockside and the case retrieved. Alas, little could be divined from questioning the impudent wretch.

And so, onto Úrmish where it dawned on us that we had left the timber assayers behind on Vrá. Despite my best attempts at persuasion, backed up by Portso, Trákonel insisted that we continue on without his able sword arm (despite the fact we were obviously the target of at least one, if not more plotting factions to forestall our progress; potentially violently) whilst he turned back to rectify the situation. Tusilén meanwhile sought another stick thrower out to get a new and no doubt expensive and multi-interpretive, astrological reading as to our next steps, and particularly the status of the special scroll that he bore. He of course told us nought of the results of this.

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### Part the Second – Dodgy Dead Blokes on the way to Butrús

Trákonel abandoned the rest of us and strode off leaving us to start on the journey to Butrús. We put our baggage onto a barge, and I was briefly hopeful when it appeared some of this baggage might be Portso, even if I would have to miss his lovely cuisine. Alas not, but luckily his palanquin kept the worst of his lecherous antics veiled from view on the road and allowed me yet to sample his artful creations of an evening. Sometimes I even tried to persuade myself to converse with him more as some of his dishes closely matched examples of the receipts quoted in the dusty old and fascinating Bednálljan treatises on domestic affairs and housekeeping that I had archived for the temple some years ago.

Tusilén meanwhile became convinced that we were being followed by a family of octuplets; this seemed rather improbable at first and I was initially of the opinion that it was just one person, who was regularly changing their attire. Setting a little tail on the suspect with a couple of bodyguards proved that there was indeed actually a party of eight or nine, who sloped off of an evening to some ruins distantly visible on the edge of the marshes some tsán away to the south.

Somewhat to my surprise, Trákonel made good time and he caught up with us well before we were even half-way to Butrús from Úrmish. He had a pair of timber assayers in tow and brought a letter from my temple. The letter was a pointless reminder of the conversation already had before we left about lady Echélú's narcotics smuggling enterprise and that I was to keep tabs on anyone who appeared to be involved. Trákonel on being told of the shadows was all of the opinion that we should have pursued them to their hideout, then and there.

As it transpired, we didn't need to, for at some miserable little collection of huts squatting on the river bank, the shadows sprung their ill-conceived trap. Eight squatly stocky look-a-likes and an Íto priest of the Worm Lord in all his ludicrous pale painty-faced glory. T'tket M'jer was agitated and when quizzed in our normal mind meld indicated that although these things were not personally known to him, he knew of their blasphemous and dangerous ways.

The priest demanded we handed over the case (now largely believed by all to be containing the teeth of important personages) and threatened us with the direst consequences if we failed to deliver. Chu'ésa and Trákonel strode forward bravely with our guards, blades unsheathing. A tingle of excitement passed through me.

Everything then happened so quickly! Chu'ésa decided this was a good time to practice her petty ensorcellments to no effect, swords were swung and for the first time since the küni bird incident I unleashed a Hands of Krá the Mighty in anger seriously injuring two of the octuplet dwarfs but only giving the treacherous Íto horror a gentle squeeze. The Íto unleashed a domination that took one of our guards out but was barely noticed by me. For once, Portso was using his fat jowls to good effect by pipping off a blow dart. Trákonel was moving and swinging nimbly all muscle and motion, clearly at ease in such a martial endeavour. I'm not sure what Tusilén was up to; protecting the package to our rear I believe.

It was T'tket M'jer who brought the proceedings to a close with a lancing psychic burst that made the Íto forget who or what he was, thus relinquishing his control over himself, his undead automata and our dominated casualties. Short and sharp! Too short! I was still rather excited! and to my shock had to actually drag my eyes and reverie away from Trákonel's heaving torso.

The blasphemous constructs were weighted down and sent to the river bottom. The Íto loaded with some handy bronze chains and squirreled away in a sack on the barge, just as a squad of the emperor's finest road guards arrived. They claimed they had marched quickly to save us from a bunch of rough looking types they had spotted tailing us (I think they might even have been familiar with those funny little Engsvanyáli comic novels full of literary references and clever conceits about a troop of town guards that I found time to read during my duties in the archives).

The rest of our journey continued without incident. I continued to have conversations in the mind with T'tket M'jer, who was full of insights as to the nature of society in Butrús and the nearby Chákas. We also continued with our games of here'úl and daghórr and studied the high cartography.

This little trip was turning into something so beyond my ken; it was like scales falling from my eyes! The cloisters are indeed no place for me. There is so much more to learn here in the wide world than I could possibly have imagined only a few short weeks back. I am in a story that might be sung in ages to come; a memory like those in the dusty tomes I have studied.

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### Part the Third – Into the Underworld

My conversations with T'tket M'jer have unlocked my own recollections of some ancient history that might be pertinent. As you are undoubtedly unaware, I dabble a bit in the archaeology and history of the Fisherman Kings alongside my greater studies of pre-Bednálljan and Engsvanyáli times. I really should have made the connection before, but this apparent link between this machine here in Butrús and the doings in Vrá brings to mind some of the ancient lore. It may be pertinent to our being here; or it may not.

Many scholars have noted that what evidence that is available dating certainly by the Bednálljan (but also potentially to the period of the Fisherman Kings and before them the Llyáni) period points to a strong similarity in material culture, social organization, and cultural behaviour between what is now Pán Cháka, the highlands of northern Vrá, lower Putuhénu basin and the flats of Tsechélnu.

I also seem to recall from my Engsvanyáli studies that the Íto clan became powerful here during the final cataclysmic centuries of that empire and even then were parted into bitterly warring factions which only intensified further in the Time of No Kings before the destruction of ancient Butrús. There's something about the worship of Ksárul here in the Butrús area that is also in the back of my mind. Ohé! if only I had brought my library with me!

Before we wander into this underworld I should also add that there is evidence that foundations and other remains dating to the period of the Dragon Warriors from I think the very latter part of the Llyáni epoch can reportedly be found here under the modern city of Butrús. This despite the fact that the modern city has been rebuilt away from its cursed predecessor that was abandoned, levelled and salted sometime in the period of No Kings.

I shall discourse more with T'tket M'jer. Don't worry about our silence; we are doing it with our minds. It's much clearer that way and the way he/she is used to. ....by the lady. I haven't even thought to ask if there were male or female! <sup>1</sup>

Ahhhhhh now that makes, more sense!

Modern Butrús lies on the site of pre-Bednálljan Butrús. It was Bednálljan Butrús that was levelled and salted and the city moved back here sometime during the Engsvanyáli! Aye! it's all clearer now! Even so we can expect there to be Bednálljan and earlier Engsvanyáli ruins here under Butrús. Oh this is really, really exciting!

Those Íto have been into their worm since they coalesced out of the competing and ever internecine fiefdoms of the Dragon Warriors and the masked one gained early traction in this very area too upon his revelation.

Oh la! This really is going to be fun!

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<sup>1</sup> Looking back on this entry now I realise just how naive I was back at the start of our journeying. T'tket M'jer has a proud shiny black chitinous exterior and is therefore clearly male. Whereas the female pé chói have a white exterior as everyone (apparently) knows. That convent really did not prepare me for the wider world!

Of no help in Tsuru'úm, but just in case we do end up actually returning to the timber trade: T'tket M'jer tells me that the locals have some strange linguistic idiosyncrasies. Heavily cradled in Classical Mu'ugalavyáni, but most pertinent to us is that the timberers and loggers hereabouts do all of their accounting using the Classical Tsolyáni system of numbering (I can be of great help with that at least, you will be pleased to know) but will discourse amongst themselves in some sort of local patois; as this has some Classical Mu'ugalavyáni roots I will be a bit stretched as I only have the modern of that tongue. Still I have it to such a degree I can probably work a bit out I should think. T'tket M'jer of course knows it, so between him and I we can muddle through.



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### Part the Fourth – Getting to the teeth of the matter

During our journeying I discoursed much with T'tket M'jer, largely unnoticed in a conversation of linked minds. It was much clearer that way and the way he/she<sup>1</sup> is used to. We also explored together the high cartography gem; itself psychically activated.

As we get closer to Butrús my excitement is rising at the thought of being at an epicentre for the study of Engsvanyáli history and even more excitingly the history of the Dragon Warriors, with a very reputable school of classical thought. As an acknowledged scholar of Dragon Warrior and Fisherman King History myself I look forward to seeing the libraries and speaking to the local historical augusti. I am also looking forward to gazing upon a wonder of our age: This being the vast city map model of Butrús that extends over an area the size of a temple precinct. This marvel was constructed to demonstrate how the city would be built following its last ditlána!

Surprisingly Portso has also led me to practice my Bednálljan by bringing me a little book of recipes to help translate. The Book of Sapid Delectation. I must confess that it is really putting me to the test as I am more used to histories than cookbooks. Nevertheless, I am learning new words and inflections and the understanding of some culinary terms makes some abstruse references, idioms, and comparators in some of the historical works I have read clearer to me.

Pondering on the matter of the Íto personage we had in a sack I recall from my Engsvanyáli studies that the Íto clan became powerful here during the final cataclysmic centuries of the Age of the Dragon Warriors and even then, were parted into bitterly warring factions, which only intensified further through the Bednálljan and Engsvanyáli periods and into the time of No Kings before the destruction of ancient Butrús. I still feel something niggling in the back of my mid about the local worship of Ksárul in the Butrús area, but I can't quite place it!

Drawing on my otherwise excellent mastery of my memories, I recall that these Íto have always been at their own throats and now also estranged from their northern kin. They have also been closely involved in the earliest worship of the masked one, who may have first revealed himself in this very region of Pán Cháka. They have many strange ways, including some ancient and disquieting ideas regarding a fusion of the worship of the worm and the mask.

It is this fusion of ideas that might have led to a worm worshipping Íto being in company with undead automata of the prisoner in blue. The very existence of these horrors, let alone their attempted use on us, was a blasphemous breach of the Concordat and should have been punished severely as such. Apparently, however, this was not for us to decide for fear of bringing the ire of the Íto upon us in our endeavours. Cooling from the heat of the little fight, I suppose I also agree. So, on getting to Butrús we handed him over to members of his wider kin, cousins in rivalry with, and having little love either for him or his closest kin.

No sooner had we deposited the man in the sack than Tusilén was adamant that we proceed directly, unwashed, and unkempt to the Halls of the Gleaming Teeth. Shocked by such impropriety I had little choice but to accompany our reeking and filthy company through the city and to the parkland beyond in which the hospital is located.

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<sup>1</sup> He, as explained in the footnotes of my previous entry.

Too conscious of my own and my companions' reek, I was a little distracted by embarrassment, but nonetheless what wonders were there to behold. The preceptor was pleased to see us and hid his revulsion at our feculent state well. He immediately set to showing the wonders that there were to be seen in his halls. Walls decorated with carved teeth awaited us as we were led down into the heart of the precinct to deliver our charge. Not teeth, but apparently spare parts for the hospital's legendary Calcinator that had ceased to function. This immediately begged the question as to what exactly these spares were doing on distant Vrá to mind!

My conversations with T'tket M'jer have unlocked my own recollections of some ancient history that could well be pertinent to this point. I really should have made the connection before, but this apparent link between this machine here in Butrús and the doings in Vrá brings to mind some ancient lore. Many scholars have noted that what evidence that is available dating certainly by the Bednálljan (but also potentially to the period of the Fisherman Kings and before them the Dragon Warrior and Llyáni) period points to a strong similarity in material culture, social organization and cultural behaviour between what is now Pan Chaka, the highlands of northern Vrá, lower Putuhénu basin and the flats of Tsechélnu. Surely this must be the link!

Indeed, on the way down it became clear to me that we were passing down through the remains of first Engsvanyáli, then Bednálljan and finally to my extreme excitement, ruins that could only be from the Age of the Dragon Warriors. More of my previous reading and my conversations with T'tket M'jer made so much more sense now. Here was the proof that remains dating to the period of the Dragon Warriors and from I think the very latter part of the Llyáni epoch can indeed be found here under the modern city of Butrús. Modern Butrús lies on the site of pre-Bednálljan Butrús. It was Bednálljan Butrús that was levelled and salted, and the city moved back to its present location sometime during the Engsvanyáli, possibly destroyed in the cataclysm before being built again on this spot after the last Ditlana. Fascinating!

My enjoyable, if somewhat overly sweaty, reveries were at this point brought to a sudden conclusion when we came to the sanctum of the Calcinator. Here we found the corpses, long cooled, of the attendant priests and startled what the preceptor at first took to be his chief calcinatorixist. This fellow immediately turned and fled into a breach in the wall shifting his form to what Chu'éša, the only one of us to get a good look, believed to be a Mihállí in the process. Chu'éša pursued a little way into the Tsuru'úm only to see her quarry disappear into what appeared to be a closing nexus point. It also became apparent that an aqáà had burrowed its way into the halls below!

We immediately prepared to pursue but were delayed by an ecumenical matter as the priesthoods of Keténgku and Thúmis had a mild and rather embarrassing disagreement about how it had come to this in front of us. Their mutual conclusion being that some poor fools needed to be found immediately to put things right before the shit really hit the fan. Those poor fools were evidently going to be us.

The delay gave me time to have a bit of a look around and the wonders in that sanctum as well as change into my silly expedition outfit. The Calcinator is evidently an integral part of a piece of Dragon Warrior period architecture. Furthermore, that piece of architecture can be identified as belonging to the highest pinnacle of one of their legendary sky towers. A location that would once have risen above the clouds in that age and from which the fabled iron stirrups operated! Now what did they need with a dental machine at such a height? Also, it suggested that there could be hundreds, if not thousands of feet of Tell beneath our feet!

Some other recollections of my conversations with T'tket M'jer on the journey here came to me. These included the fact that there may be an account of the labyrinth that awaits us within the historical works of *Tolugget Dihrun*, a noted spelunking Thúmis priest. This also records the closing of the

Tsuru'úm with the application of black 'bang-bang' powder following its infestation by malign intelligences (some say the Ssú!). The Tsuru'úm had again to be closed when the blasphemous Great Brethren of the Hand of Ink Stained Knuckles fled there into hiding (apparently, they are a strange criminal underworld drawn from lower status adherents of both Karakán and Wurú! and may have links to the Ndálu Clan as well as potentially being an echo of the feared secret police of the Black Theocrat and therefore clearly linked to the masked one too). T'tket M'jer also told me that there is a chthonic race known as Well Visitors or Damp Citizens. Web limbed slimy goblin sort of things, supposedly very strong and toothy and given to pilfering, and some say baby snatching and the like. They have a fondness for melons and squashes. Oh! and they are greatly feared of a river in the Tsuru'úm. They absolutely will never cross it.

Trákonel, being a clever fellow, listened avidly and with interest to all my expostulations as we all fussed and fiddled with our equipment. I could feel the thrill rising in me again as we prepared! Trákonel also took immediate charge of the situation; so commanding! He and Chu'ésa will take the lead with Tusilén detailed to protect me. Portso, somewhat to my surprise volunteered to join us too.

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### Part the Fifth – Of Maggot and Mihállí

What a thrilling day! I am utterly breathless and exhausted from all the excitement.

As the ecumenical discussions came to an end with the only absolute certainty that none of the blame should rest with them, it became clear that we were being asked, nay requested even to aid the gathered Grey Robes sort their little problem out. I must admit that I was with the rest of my party in thinking this was a bit rich unless they were willing to offer inducement to rally us to their cause.

After all we were certainly talking about a deadly giant aqáà worm in the basement and the very high probability of a Mihállí sorcerer being on the loose too. I pointed out that as were obviously dealing with a master of visual deceit, then we couldn't take its apparent disappearance into a nexus as absolute fact. As such we should at least in the first instance take a cast around where it disappeared.

Alas this perspicacity on my part was utterly forgotten as Tusilén, Portso and Trákonel fell to squabbling about who was in charge, who was paying for our bodyguards, and given this, exactly who they would be bodyguarding. I felt very much like stamping my foot and telling them all that as a 6<sup>th</sup> Circle Priestess (albeit now only Lay) then I probably had the overall seniority. Alas though, my usual shyness amongst others exerted itself and anyway Trákonel seemed to be carrying the day with his usual commanding and reasonable mien.

The Grey Robes were concerned that the aqáà, was running amok in their library and treasury below and were at pains to point out to us that any succour they may be able to give us was lodged there. We thus made what preparations we could, including securing a small siege dart thrower from one of the local garrisons, and made our plans. Frontal assault down the stairs into the basement! All sorts of strange tingling's and thrills passed through me; I felt both deliriously and happily light-headed and sick in the stomach with a troubling yet peculiarly pleasant disquietude in my loins all at once!

What horror awaited us in that basement I can barely recount. Entire library stacks had been destroyed by our loathsome quarry which was writhing and twitching gibbously in a slick of its own ichor. Trákonel and our two principal bodyguards leapt immediately towards its maw and the encircling tentacles. Oh! What bravery! I followed Chu'ésa and Portso to get at the other end of the vile behemoth.

The initial volley of crossbow shots was utterly useless, and it soon came to hand-blows with Trákonel and two bodyguards taking the maw end and Chu'ésa the flapping bulbous tail. Portso and his bodyguard continued to work around the beast to bring the siege weapon into the fight. I hurled Hands of Krá after Hands of Krá at the monstrosity, keeping back as ordered. At first, I thought Tusilén may have been immediately engulfed by the horror as I saw him not during the mighty affray that followed; he certainly wasn't at the place beside me as appointed to him in the plan.

Trákonel was a colossus of might raining blow after blow down on the beast alongside our two principal bodyguards. Chu'ésa troubled its rear diligently, quickly picking herself up and rushing back into the fray when it smashed her backwards with a contemptuous flick of its tail. Portso got a splendid shot in with his siege weapon and then to my utter surprise threw himself uncaring of his own safety at the tail of the beast. For a while it was even difficult to discern where the beast ended and Portso began, so close did he press his attack with nothing but a flensing blade!

And aieeee! Then my heart was stopped in my throat for Trákonel was seized and being drawn to his certain death in that ravening maw. I screamed in anguish! But so puissant! So, so puissant! Trákonel jammed his shield and a lanthorn into that which sought to engulf him and twisted himself barely free aided by his two cover-men. Never have I experienced such a wash of joy! It was difficult even to drag my eyes away from his heaving torso and the bravado grin that broke out across his oh so handsome face!

And then suddenly it was all over, the beast collapsed into the spreading gelatine of its own filthitude, overborne by the cut and thrust of my companions, encrushing by my Hands of Krá (although the beast was surprisingly resilient to that, so no mean Sorcerer can have summonsed it!) and its own internal tearings from having engorged the Calcinator, which appeared to be cutting itself out from the beast's innards.

The room reeked of filth, ichor was besplattered everywhere and on everyone, and a corpse stench pervaded everything. I could not stay in such a scene and maintain my sanity, so retired upstairs to gain fresh air and to ensure that Trákonel was fully cleansed in the hospice's bathing rooms. By the lady I almost forgot myself and came close to joining him in the shower; I had to nonetheless fight to take my eyes off him. Finally though, propriety and self-control rightfully restored, I waited until he had finished before taking my turn.

Meanwhile our other companions explored the reeking, vomitus, flotsam and jetsam of the wrecked library. Tusilén had by now reappeared from wherever he had been (He had stepped out to save a goodly proportion of the priceless scrolls and I believe only briefly thought of carrying them all away before saner counsel prevailed!). Portso took it upon himself to butcher the carcass of the beast to recover the Calcinator, apparently under the beady eyes of one of the priests.

But aye! Our travails were not over! Tusilén noted that a very large jar that he had seen in one of the library stores had disappeared, an impossibility! A warning was shouted as my initial fear that a disguised and thaumaturgically hidden sorcerer was at large proven completely and comprehensively correct.

This time Portso found himself at the centre of the unfolding drama as I hastily pulled a towel around myself and ran back to lend whatever aid I could (the thaumaturgical barrage I had launched into the Aqáà had left me rather drained). The watching priest on touching the Calcinator found himself transformed back to his true form. It was a Mihállí! His attempts to cow Portso into carrying away the Calcinator failed, and another struggle of hand-blows ensued, largely hidden by shelving from me as I ran to block off the breach made by the arriving Aqáà to try and forestall an escape by that route.

As I worked my way around, I attempted to communicate with the Mihállí, using what little I possess of their language. Alas just simple phrases such as stop, surrender, can we talk. It was surprised to be thusly addressed and replied in turn largely in the negative calling upon us to leave him be and calling us names such as monkey puzzles, ape nuts and the like. One sentence he was very keen to convey though and spoke it loudly and slowly as I would to a foreigner... *"The Other Thing is Crippled and All Nature in Danger"*... What could this mean?

I tried to prevail upon my companions the need to preserve the Mihállí so we could converse with it; to her credit, it was Chu'ésa who took the most notice of my implorements; hurling herself thoughtless of her own safety upon the creature's back from the loftiness of a bookshelf to keep it grappled. The Mihállí meanwhile attempted to fight itself clear, paralysing Portso's bodyguard and keeping Trákonel at bay with further ensorcellments. I had closed to its rear and levitated myself to finally get a glimpse of the goings on just as the combination of Portso's stout defence of his charge, Chu'ésa's grapplement

and Trákonel finally being able to force an intervention brought matters to a close. Having failed to escape and severely injured, the Mihállí activated some sort of device that dislocated him from our reality. Visible, still and yet untouchable within a coruscating sphere, still grappled by Chu'ésa, who joined it in involuntary imprisonment.

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### Part the Sixth – Of Chu'ésa's Dreamtime

There it was in all its legend, a Mihálli, visible, still, and yet untouchable within a coruscating sphere and still grappled by Chu'ésa, who had joined it in involuntary imprisonment.

Having failed to banish the stasis with a reversed Excellent Ruby Eye there did not appear to be much we could do until either the Priests of Thúmis and Keténgku worked a ritual powerful enough to break the thaumaturgy; or the Mihálli's friends and/or family turned up to release their similarly trapped companion. We sat down to take watches. Portso of course perching himself on a stool where he could have a goodly view most unbecoming to Chu'ésa's frozen dignity. I at least arranged for a mattress to be placed to catch her fall when she was finally released.

As it transpired the Mihálli's friends arrived to rescue their companion first. Happily for me during my own watch, so I witnessed the manner of Chu'ésa's release. Suddenly there in the library with me was a coruscating portal that appeared to be held open by a delightfully beautiful human girl child with startling hair and eyes and playing upon a flute. Behind her came four more Mihálli!

I gestured to the bodyguard with me to be at her ease and began to speak with the girl, addressing her in Ancient Mihálli. She seemed puzzled and amused but did not pose or expect a threat. I asked for our companion back and indicated they could take their companion, but that the Calcinator would have to stay where it was for now (I had spent hours practising the phrases in my head). She assented, indicating that taking it by this means was impossible anyway it would seem, but that for my temerity and forbearance I could at some point in the future ask a boon of her; but for now, they would depart. Others would come for that which they sought. And so they departed the way that they came, leaving Chu'ésa with us to tell us her remarkable tale and me to ponder on my brief meeting and survival of the Demon Lelmiyáni, sweet singer of doom, opener of the ways.

Chu'ésa's remarkable tale was recounted breathlessly as she recovered upstairs. I think it made little if any sense to any of our companions besides me, and even I had to ask Chu'ésa's blessing to touch her mind to grapple with elements that she found almost impossible to articulate otherwise.

Even so I cautioned all present to put aside preconceptions; on one part the men of our party, with nursery closed minds<sup>1</sup> believed too little (if anything) of what Chu'ésa had to say of her experience;

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<sup>1</sup> *Our other companions are by no means dullards; indeed I suspect they all (particularly Trákonel) have very agile minds; but totally untutored in the nuances and mysteries that are commonplace understanding to those of us devoted to the Temples (and even there, there are many, many who ignore, too often wilfully, the self-evident truths!). There is a reason we tell lies to children in tutoring history and theology; too many shades of grey and uncertainties becoming so broadcast could so easily upset the balance of black and white that Pavár sought to leave us with for our own sanity and the World's safety. Oh heh! I did not mean to digress, but I truly never expected to find myself so enthralled in my own studies on what I thought was to be a pointless waste of my talents on a simple trade mission. I now begin to believe (or at least like to believe) that there was higher artifice in my being chosen.*

yet Chu'ésa too, maybe put far too much store in what a proven sorcerer, and master of deceit planted in her mind whilst they were so intimately embraced. It is after all, a truth universally acknowledged that falsehood is best artfully woven within the skeins of actuality, or at the very least a weft of perceived certainty.

The actualities and perceived certainties of Chu'ésa's tale are that history and theology are far more complicated than most can comprehend in an entire lifetime or more. That the past is a different country almost in its entirety is abundantly clear to anyone who has marvelled at the eye of the ancients they point at a foe in the hope it will bring swift victory or at a friend in the hope it will save their life. The myriad of ruins and preserved fragments of historical and other texts speak volumes for the context that we have to hang our present realities on (and even if this is an original reality).

Our present reality is that we have a pantheon of deities that are acceptable, and all others are not. Pavár ordered it so to save the world from those even more unspeakable than the Lord of Worms or the Sleeping Prince of the Blue Room. Past realities were different and the construct of Godhead itself something that may have been entirely defined by our own minds to try and make sense of something that is in essence entirely unfathomable. Certainly in the past there were a myriad of Gods, acceptable and/or not, many, many of which may have been distilled and/or blended as a fine tsuhóridu liqueur in thought to achieve our current compromise. Entire civilisations over eons, many powerful beyond our current ken with access to devices of unsurpassed power have risen and fallen; all have had their Gods; some clearly related to our own to a great degree.

Everything hinged with Dormorón Plain after which the Gods (or at least their servitors and worshippers) had to be given structure and rules to avoid further and utter destruction. Even the servitors of the Blue Prince accepted this, despite their Lord's imprisonment outside of this world that he sought utter dominion over. It is even accepted in great part by the non-humans that share this Téकुmel with us and the other human civilisations; albeit they call their Gods other names, and their theological nuances and origin stories seem rather alien to us Tsolyáni. Yet we must logically accept that their truth is just as much an actuality (at least to them) as our own!

Gods and their worshippers who did not accept this new reality were placed outside of the law; declared pariah. This is a truth and is the canon we teach the masses to keep them and the entire Empire from outright iconoclasm and the horrors that that would entail. Yet the Empire itself is founded on much older truths and at least one of what are now called the Pariah Gods is accepted to have been entirely on the right side at Dormorón Plain; you do not even have to delve too far into theological history to know this. This is the One Other, who gave fiery lord Vimúhla the blade Flamesong, so that the masked Lord could be driven from this reality for the sake of all. Yet the masked followers of the Prince of the Blue Room accepted the compromise and thus won themselves theological respectability. The One Other chose for inscrutable purposes not to, and was thus cast forth from acceptability under the aegis of the reforms of Trákonel I. This despite the fact that this entity had clearly been a major (if not the guiding) part of the pantheon of our ancestors from the earliest of times when the marvellous devices of the ancients were created right through Llyáni, the Three States, the fabled Dragon Warriors and the Bednálljan Empire and even into the Empire of Engsvanyáli.

This is the actuality woven into Chu'ésa's tale. What I cannot be so certain about is the rest of what I saw in her mind: That the Mihállí was/were evidently seeking to undertake something heretical in the eyes of most of the Empire; the merest breath of which could end with us on the high ride. They sought (or so it said) to serve the tenets of the One Other by repairing a rift in the fabric of our own reality through which She Who Must and Cannot be Named slavered hungrily to devour our world and into



which the Prisoner of Blue could see a reflection of one of the keys that would free him to subjugate us all to his infinite will. Here again, logic dictates that if we accept that things can be outside of our reality, there must be other realities which our own also lies outside of.

This rift had inadvertently been caused by some “Heroes of the Age” during their adventures on the far Southern Continent in thwarting the designs of the Five-Headed Lord of Worms in the aegis of his earthly avatar. There is clearly truth hidden in this, as the servitors of the Master of the Undead has certainly been pushing firmly against (if not beyond) the bounds of the Concordat in recent years and presently appears more quiescent to the natural propriety of things. That a rift is possible is unquestionable. Whether it is truly a reality and needs mending is an entirely different matter and one that I will need to meditate on most ardently.

What is used to mend can necessarily also be used to rend and herein lies our problem. The Calcinator is clearly a device of the ancients, claimed by the Mihállí to be fully ancient before even the Dragon Warriors had the wit to find a way to mount it on one of their legendary sky towers to (allegedly) defend their own reality. They claim to wish to prevent the end of our reality by putting this remarkable device back to its proper use rather than its current languishment as a simple tool of dentistry. Others, including apparently elements of the priesthood of the Ancient Lord of Secrets seek to use it to open the ways to at least one of the keys that will bring their Lord back in all his splendour. Yet others according to the Mihállí may seek to open the way for She Who Must Not be Named. These are again both awful eventualities that would be too easy to believe. Never have I felt so excited at such a conundrum, nor as terrified of the outcome if we; and I find myself strangely companionable in this respect, have to make the choice. Yet it seems we will have to.

The Mihállí tells Chu’ésa that servitors of the Doomed Prince even now search the catacombs below to their own ends, in unholy company with servitors of the Worm no less. There are missing parts of the “Calcinator” (or whatever it truly is), one of which is buried below. Perhaps truth will be found there. And so we prepare, after yet more negotiation with the priests here, to depart.

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PS: We are literally on the point of leaving to delve the catacombs here and I have had the Law of the Present Hand explained to me by a priest of Thúmis. Never have I heard such a sloppily contrived piece of ridiculously tortuous logic. I am not even sure it could actually be on a statute book, so open to abuse it is (I will have to check). Any decent Historian can tell you that if you bother to look at the epigraphy and try to work it back to fragmentary records you will often come up with an answer that could suit you either way! This law is there to satisfy lawyers only, and of course, those who seek to rob tombs. This is a prime case in point where we are apparently going to investigate tombs that lie outside of the historic record; yet there is clearly enough of a historic record for us and various and allegedly nefarious others to know that what is sought is there! My mind is almost unhinged at the acrobatics expected of it!

PPS. In Chu’ésa’s mind I saw images of both Dragon Warriors and one of their cities. Remarkable. Breath taking and so, so different! The dusty tomes will never be enough again after that!

PPS. Why by the Goddess do I find myself wanting to go and disturb Trákonel to blurt this all out to him! Why when I am so excited do I find him in my dreams!?

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 26 ¾

### Part the Seventh – Negotiating the Necropolis

Suitably refreshed and re-equipped after a brief visit to the temple and what passes for a clan house in town, we descended once more into the awaiting catacombs to search out the various malefactors reported to be there about their nefarious businesses.

Regretfully we had not had time to research the works of the spelunking priest of Thúmis, which may have given us a better idea of what could be expected. No matter though, as speed was certainly of the essence. The priesthood of Keténgku kindly loaned us a pair of indentured servants as torch bearers, at least one of whom was also to prove himself exceeding useful as a scribe. We were also given several items of the ancients from the library vaults to borrow and thaumaturgically enfavoured in case of the inevitable unpleasantness.

My companions of course were mainly oblivious to the historical wonders and architecture that awaited us below. A strangely eclectic mix of the ancient and modern that in places did not even really make any particular sense in terms of how it had been constructed. Here might be an isolated Bednálljan tomb amongst a cluster of positively modern delvings. Passages amongst the catacombs must have been cut this way and that intersecting at times with much, much earlier construction.

Although most of the recent tombs were of course those of devotees of Thúmis there were some oddities. At least one priest of Ksárul and a number of warriors from an election of faiths. Not surprisingly there were also Íto, both ancient and modern. I have of course already mused much here in my diary on the rather quirky local theologies and the great, great antiquity of the Íto (in particular) in these parts; as well as the great antiquity of the worship of Ksárul in different forms hereabouts. Despite the obvious pertinacity of all of this to our current endeavours it was galling to just be met with blank uncomprehending stares for the most part, despite my best attempts to summarise and simplify. Not surprisingly it was only Chu'ésa, with her temple training and recent insights, who grasped much of the wisdom and learning that I was so freely offering them.

We had just negotiated a probably more modern cut through when we came upon our first pair of malefactors. A brace of foul necrotic spawn of the worm slavishly hacking open at a tomb. Trákonel and his men of course dispatched them in short order, barely breaking into a sweat themselves and disturbing my marvellings but little.

My marvellings were, however, exceeding disturbed a little way beyond when we happened across a sorcerer priest of Sárku with a coterie of very recent and foul necromantic formulations. Freshly broken tombs, all relatively recent and clearly identifiable were to either side. A clear and mortal breach of the concordat itself, let alone any other more petty secular laws! For reasons unbeknownst to me, my companions fell to talking with the necromancer in chief. I was adamant that battle must be quickly joined and chivvied Chu'ésa, who had suddenly got an affliction of overly extreme curiosity, down a side passage to get another approach to our mark. Portso waddled along behind us with his bodyguard.

The necromancer soon tired of discourse and briefly forgot our presence whilst he returned to his cadaverous creations. I almost had to drag Chu'ésa away from her sudden intense obsession in archaeology and communicated with my mind to Trákonel that we would attack from a flank if he would pin from the front before any more detestable undead could be created. Portso and his

bodyguard continued to work around the necromancer's rear whilst we unleashed our joint assault from front and flank. Chu'ésa engaged with her crossbow and I had the satisfaction of seeing some sort of bendy over backwards gymnast ghoul splash apart from my first Hands of Krá. Apart from a brief discommoding of myself and Chu'ésa by a 'Sending of Evil' that required a brace of charges from the eye of healing I bore to cure; I am pleased to say that the fight was almost entirely one sided. I am told that even Tusilén joined in with some gusto in order to prevent one of our superlatively resolute torch bearers from having his head wrenched off by the thighs of another of the bendy over backwards gymnast ghouls. Trákonel and his chaps waded manfully into the shambling horrors that beset them landing blow after blow to steadily dissect them as they clawed largely ineffectively back. I crushed a brace more in close attendance to the Necromancer and even gave him a squeeze he wouldn't forget for the rest of the (non)heartbeats of existence left to him. Chu'ésa rained missile shot down on anything she could see (and occasionally actually hit), but it was Portso who pulled the metaphorical tiúni out of the bag by blindsiding our, by now, thoroughly confused foe and hitting him with some sort of lich repellent chef's oil that sent him screaming into smoky perdition.

As silence fell it was clear that once more we had entered an area with an eclecticity of tombs of various ages. Luckily the senile necromancer can't have had a clue what he was about! Trákonel, Tusilén and Portso, recking nothing for the antiquities around them swiftly moved on. Here I must admit that the reason for Chu'ésa's dalliance on the outset of our recent battle was entirely understandable in the warm light of not having any more profane filth being summoned in our proximity. Here in our passage were a number of exceeding ancient tombs, one at least Bednálljan. Chu'ésa and I set to investigating and happened across a number of items of note. To wit a frog idol representing one of the local (and apparently heretical, even to most parts of the Silver Masks) aspects of the Doomed Prince, two potentially useful thaumaturgical coronets and a rather interesting tome, principally written in oh so ancient Ái Chè, but with a rather handy Classical Tsolyáni primer worked into its preface from which it could clearly be deciphered!

The boys, their blood up, were by now utterly beyond reason and met my expostulations of excitement with incredulous incomprehension. The tome was titled "reflections (or musings?) of the Prisoner in Blue" ... or something similar and could well be one of the earliest holy books of the Ksárlite faith that has ever been found. Very possibly beyond priceless, and very probably supremely dangerous in the wrong hands. The area that is now the Chákas is where the worship of Ksárl first became properly established (as I have mentioned before) and this tome was probably most exceeding ancient even before it made its way into the Ksárlite tomb in which we found it.

It was with some shock then that wandering up a passageway deep in reverie with the book I suddenly found myself directed by Chu'ésa to hand over the said tome to a priestess of Ksárl, a Lady Ejél - almost certainly a member of the so called Ndálu clan, who had been looking for it and was willing to avoid bloodshed for the price of some 20,000 Káitars (most of it promissory) and the forbearance to not unleash her accompanying Yéleth on us. I must admit that it was by no means a trade I was happy with; but what option did we have? I would of course have been utterly immune to the blandishments of that beauteous ancient construct; but I could not count on any of my companions being even in the slightest resilient, and I have absolutely no doubts as to who would win the final foot race and ensuing murder should Trákonel have been set on me.

Hand over the book I did. I very greatly fear that that will have been a very silly thing to have done!

Whilst this negotiation was going on, Trákonel, in our van, was having quite a different negotiation of his own. Through a freshly broken passage he had come across yet another priest of the Worm with the usual shabbily dressed and malodourous attendants and a rather dapper priest of Grugánu. Some

sort of sorcerous vallation had immediately been thrown up and there was yet another portal to the beyonds coruscating in the centre of the room. Roundabouts were neatly labelled and recently de-tombed artefacts of very great antiquity, including silvered rods and daggers in the metal(s) of the ancients. Unleashing one of the handy eyes we had been loaned put paid to the servitors of the worm, who fled incontinently (if such is possible for them) up the passage beyond. Trákonel then took a scroll out of Chu'ésa's case and placed himself in a position of empowered discourse by putting the priest of Grugánu into a choke-hold from which he could not escape.

Rather gentlemanly conversation then transpired. Vrána hiPávu<sup>1</sup>, was the Rector of the Tower of Indigo Thought and Sea Blue was his clan. Maybe a better cologne was in order in Trákonel's case, one has to make do with the companions with which you are foisted: incompetent, untrustworthy and larcenous though they be. He too had come for the spare part for the Calcinator in order to mend the rent in our reality. Rather worryingly the priestess we had just let wander off wanted the book that we have just sold her and little else. He sought to bargain with us and again I had to steer the middle line between the absolute belief of his propriety evinced by Chu'ésa and the blink eyed bafflement of our men companions when confronted with yet another thesis on ancient history and theology (that really by now should not have been coming as a surprise to them, if only they would take the ear buds out and listen). Tusilén was of course interjecting through all this (especially once he learned the gentleman was an august of Sea Blue and the local preceptor of indigo in the temple of Grugánu here in Butrús) that he was the leader of our little expedition and that all this converse should be liaised through him. He really can be insufferable!

After some argument, it was finally agreed that we would return to the temple above, having alleviated our new very noble companion of some undesirables that he had, alas, been forced into company with; there to discuss matters in a more civilised mien. Chu'ésa's observational skills, coupled with her recent sojourn away from our present actuality, had by this time divined that this (so called) priest of Grugánu was not all that he seemed to be. He bore, surprisingly clearly, the symbol of the One Other and from what we could glean was allied with the Mihállí we had lately encountered to a very great degree. He wanted the spare part too and expected that contemporaneously other allies of his would be whisking away the Calcinator to the place where it could be utilised to its best effect in order to close the (alleged) tear in our reality.

Again, I was at pains to explain to my companions that caution was required. What is used to mend can also be used to rend! We could not take his claims at anything more than face value (at best). Chu'ésa again was too inclined to believe, the boys were just frankly uncomprehending and appeared to have closed their minds to anything beyond the no doubt fine epicure that would accompany further discourse in the temple above. Before epicure was called for though we had to address ourselves to the chamber in which we found ourselves. Our new companion dispatched his remaining servitors through the portal, and we set to looking around.

Oh he! There before us was a tomb of a Dragon Warrior! Concerned there may be traps Tusilén bravely volunteered me to investigate. Luckily our new companion had already divined how to gain ingress and following his direction we were inside to find... wonderful things!

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<sup>1</sup> *I didn't entirely notice it at the time but Chu'ésa was rather quiet and turned a little red when talking with this rather handsome fellow. This may be relevant to things that happened some time later.*

Immediately in front of us was an armour stand with what I am told is some of the finest armours ever witnessed upon it and an exceedingly fine two-handed sword of exquisite manufacture in some form of metal. Beyond lay a large sarcophagus with drawers in its pedestal. Again, the oh so chivalric Tusilén, was happy to direct me to investigate these in case of traps. I did so, and luckily there were none, although it took one of the daggers of the ancients to beach the metal cords that held the drawers to the rear closed.

Herein I found ahead of opening through true sight a number of eyes and other artefacts, one of which I divined was an eye of encompassing all things in which I reasoned was held that which we sought. Through my true sight I also looked into the sarcophagus. There in a full panoply that rendered what we saw in front of us as we entered the tomb a mere ceremonial piece, was the breath takingly well preserved body of the incumbent in a truly unimaginable armour, holding in his two hands a massive sword that wholly eclipsed the sword held by the mannequin. For a moment I was stunned by the scene of a Dragon Warrior of yore in all his resplendent glory. So beautiful, so serene..., so well endowed! I had to shake my head to clear the reverie and returned to the now.

We had that which so many had sought and returned to the temple above for a splendid repast with the Preceptor of Indigo and the great and good of Thúmis and Keténgku in these parts.

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 26 ¾

### Part the Eighth – An Unwelcome Visitation by the Black Rényu

I really was entirely unaccustomed to such a hugely overwhelming feeling of achievement. Excitement continued to thrill through me; intensified as it became apparent just how much we had accomplished for the clan and the huge personal share of an undreamt fortune that was soon to be realised from negotiations regarding the artefacts recovered from the necropolis. Near a million Káitars in total, the large part to the Clan of course, but nevertheless some 50,000 would be coming to me personally. We had overnight become the most successful company to have ever been sent forth by our Moon of Evening in all of its, so far, rather unremarkable history. Tusilén appeared to be immediately cashing on our suddenly won fame by allowing himself to be in the market for the highest ranked, most wealthy and above all pliant bride that could be provided for him.

I have never been known for my jollity, ever serious and studious has been my life before now. However, now riding high on such well won laurels, I found myself in a most troubling state of heightened elation; bordering perhaps even on ecstasy!

Trákonel of course led our negotiations with his usual skill, tact and aplomb, very much to our all of our great comforts and benefits. I also called upon his considerable experience for advice as to the hiring of a suitable bodyguard for myself so as not to burden my friends in any future jaunts into danger that may lie in our future. Trákonel, bless him, went further and advised that we should hire a thaumaturgist to help us prepare for future travails on our journeying, handed into my care certain scrolls that would be of use to us all in my hands, and advised that I should personally purchase as an insurance policy an eye of unimpeachable shielding as a last resort to preserve my person from harm. All sound advisories that I welcomed. He even winked at me claiming I appeared to think that his protection was not enough! Which set in motion within me yet more peculiar sensations unbidden, formerly unwelcome, yet strangely for this time not unwholesome and even pleasurable.

Giving thanks to my maiden and emboldened by our late success I even plucked up the courage to a do little dealing on my own accord; having learned that the Temple of Keténgku had traded on the Circlet of Comprehension that we had uncovered to the Temple of Avánthe. News of our recent success had evidently run ahead of us, for my own Temple of Dilinála was only too happy to press my suite with the mother temple to have the said article issued to me for my use in our further adventures. I was also invited to a private soiree at the Temple which at first, I was rather worried may have been one of those debauches that I find so utterly distasteful. Not so I was assured, it was merely to be one of those pointless little evenings of dull girlish tittle tattle and general mutual prettyfying that I so loathe. Yet, I saw it as my present duty to both clan and temple to assent and so agreed with heavy heart to attend at the appointed hour.

We had evidently also drawn attention to ourselves from other perhaps less welcome quarters, as myself and Chu'ésa were called forth to attend upon a not so minor functionary of the Palace of the Realm here in Butrús. An effete gentleman of impeccable manners who was nevertheless not given to any hyperbole as he drove his chlén cart of a message home to us through the proverbial local topiary. He, speaking as a prominent local bureaucrat (and chief of the local OAL detail) did not want to disturb the quietude of the Flaming Governor of hereabouts, or more's to the point the wider Empire at Large with some of the more disquieting aspects of our recent adventure; most particularly the curious

tokens and their theological history. Something best forgotten for now, although any further information in that regard we were of course to ensure came privily and timeously to him so as he could decide the way forward. He also extended his air of general forbearance towards the peculiarities and oddities evident within the local temples and their mutual interweavings, that might be considered at best strange elsewhere. Even staring into a maw of a writhing aqáà did not disturb my courage as much as this chilling encounter dressed in sumptuous silks and perfume. It also raised many more questions than it answered and sealed further within my mind some of the musings I have been putting together from garnered snippets regarding some of the more hazy aspects of the current Imperium's more ancient history. Although frightening in the extreme, the trepidation this encounter left could not survive the general warmth and geniality that our present success had otherwise settled on me.

Even our eternal and usual bickering seemed to be undertaken in more genial tones as we worked towards deciding exactly what we should do next. That scion of Sea Blue and probable heretic Vrána hiPávu that Trákonel had grappled in the catacombs, had confirmed to a certain extent the yarn that the Mihállí had spun us. The Calcinator and all its parts were required to seal a dangerous rent in our reality and needed to be taken to the fabled Temple in the Forest of Black Leaves and there affixed to the river of thaumaturgy that would allow it to perform its proper function before she who ravens could claw her way in to our utter perdition (That and/or allow the sleeping child to rise from his bed of blue imprisonment). The priests of Keténgku listened but seemed to pay no immediate attention, only happy to be reunited with their charge. The Scion was discretely handed on to the authorities and passed (surprisingly without mortality) beyond our present ken. Had the effete one intervened I wondered?

That aside, Trákonel was all for rooting us all into the Chákan forests in search of the said fabled Temple in the Forest of the Black Leaves. No matter that absolutely no one knew if it existed or not, or for that matter where, when or indeed how! Bless him, but he just can't seem to be able to grapple with the fundamental concepts of deep time and alternate realities! Again, I had to remind him (and everyone) that the Calcinator was no doubt already very ancient when it was moved to its present location ON TOP of one of the Dragon Warrior's sky towers. Before the Fishermen Kings, Pre-Bednálljan! So, it was likely that the temple in question was unfathomably old and we could not even be sure it was actually in our present reality and if it was, there was no particular reason (yet) to believe it was in the Chákas. Thinking more, about the Calcinator's reaction to attempts to take it through a portal, I am, however, now coming to the belief that the Temple must at least be achievable via mundane means. I have even begun to get lingering hints following my hours on the journey here from Vrá, closeted with T'tket M'jer and his gem of high cartography. It has imprinted something in my mind, that when the matter of the temple is discussed brings me to recall the mental journeyings that the gem took me on. I have a sense that all I need is a point of reference to work from and clarity will follow. I must speak to him again! And soon!

The boys' eyes of course glassed over again and Tusilén even mistook my much needed repetition of my previous lessons to them on the peculiar history we had uncovered as some form of agreement with Trákonel's preposterous idea that we could just wander off into the jungle and stumble across a legend. Nothing was further from the truth; indeed I was much in accord with Tusilén for once, that we properly should be getting back to the clan business of securing timber for the ships of Vrá and that the matter of the Calcinator, and the potentially incipient disaster that could be nearing was, now passed onto higher powers to reflect and act upon. We did, however, agree that taking a wander towards the ruins of the so called Vu'ul Pesh Kârvm Domes some 10 Tsán north of Butrús. It was towards these that we had divined that the aqáà was supposed to have taken the Calcinator and

Tusilén was furthermore convinced from his astronomical observations that the location was significant. The gem whispering in the shadows of my mind seemed also to concur. These ruins are attributed to be a very ancient Temple to Sárku; if anything like the other ruins we have seen here in Butrús I would be in wonderment if they did not pre-date Pavár's ordinances. Although no doubt infested by untold and unmentionable horrors, they do at least have the good grace to be situated under the eaves of the very forest from which we can source our clan's timber.

By now we had in train the development of a sizeable entourage to accompany us. We had hired on a Sorceress from the Temple of Belkhánu; a certain Ajái hiAmiyála to cast protections and healings upon us from the safety of our camps; in addition I negotiated the continued service of our exceeding stalwart torch bearers and had considered three applicants for the post of my bodyguard; finally settling on what I reasoned to be the ideal candidate of Chrása hiChélekem of the Amber Bird Clan; a doughty former militia woman and sapper who as well as having combatative skill, knows a thing or two about woodcraft. To this coterie we had our own pair of wood assessors, T'tket-M'jer (Oh how happy am I that we can re-join our converse!) and some form of valet for Chu'ésa, who has an inkling she will need a coiffeur rather than a wardrobe bungle in the jungle. This, of course in addition to our two existing bodyguards and a number of bearers. Portso to my surprising upset had chosen to retire on his wealth and his laurels; strangely I feel I might even miss him (I am lucky to be the plainer of the ladies in our company), although I doubt Chu'ésa will given the incessant lechery she endured.

We still had other business to attend too, including a soiree at the clan house that Chu'ésa was keen to arrange to celebrate our success and to announce our triumphant arrival in Butrús. I can't think of a worse form of torture, barring the even bigger party she plans for after our trip to the Chákas. Still I have to agree the wisdom of it; even if it will be an utterly hateful experience with the usual babblement of utter nonsense.

The soiree with the sisterhood of Dilinála was just as awful and dull as predicted. All vacuous, irrelevant tittle tattle (mostly about makeup and girls) with a side dish of utterly mediocre tedium. I played along with the charade and was able to pull off answering when required whilst inwardly continuing to unravel in my mind the puzzles that had been set before us by our recent adventures. To give them their due though, I did leave feeling cleaner, more refreshed, manicured and coiffured than I had been since before we left Vrá and almost found myself skipping to engineer another meeting with Trákonel.

I may as well not have bothered; he did not notice my new look one jot and then to add insult to injury proceeded that very evening to keep me and the rest of the clan house awake with the sounds of him bedding one of the local clan girls. I actually threw up with the shock and briefly lost control of myself, unleashing a torrent of petty thaumaturgy to dash all the breakables I could find in the room against the walls. I then wept and screamed myself to sleep; no doubt entirely unheeded due to the ongoing din of the pleasures being given and received. What by the maiden has come over me!? I have never wanted that; the sweat, the mess; the very revulsion that the mere idea of it caused me. I thought maybe I saw Trákonel as a sort of brother but now the full horror of how low I have fallen struck me like an Ahoggyá falling on me from a cliff. The tearing pain and unfocussed inner bleatings and wails left me gasping for breath under a pillow drenched in my own tears, almost choked by my sobs. And Aya! The terrible, yawning, sickening sensation that I just so wanted it to be me being so thoroughly pleased by him. I did not get any sleep, and must have looked a terrible mess in the morning as I apologised for the unheeded breakages in my room and the pools of cooling vomit I had left in my retching jealousy.

Chu'ésa was of course the only one of my companions to notice my obvious distress the next morning and was at some pains to try and offer me comfort. Even though I had by then retreated into my inner



fortress, I found myself against my better judgement appreciating her attempts to console me; hopeless though they may have been. She has survived a much greater betrayal and loss than I, with far more fortitude. Her sisterly hugs of solace made me feel very uncomfortable, but I endured them as much for her sake as for mine. I could not even look at a widely beaming and clearly satisfied Trákonel (He of course noticed me not as is clearly his habit) as he strutted off to his discussions with the local Temple of Vimúhla concerning the fate of the Dragon Warrior's armour that we had found. I suppose he must have bedded the high priestess there too considering how successful his and Chu'ésa's pressing of their suite to let bygones be bygones between the Givers of Sorrow and Vrá over the unpleasantries of the past. Chu'ésa arrived breathless some hours later to warn us of an impending visit to our humble clan house by the worshippers of the flame.

In the hours of their absence I was dragged from the misery of my internal dialogue and reverie by the sight of the mannequin that bore the armour of legend. The armour had been stripped away for cleaning and there, clear as the kohl that had run down my face last night, was a swirling myriad of script. It was the language of the Dragon Warriors themselves! With a sniff I set to study the sigils, using the circlet of comprehension to help understand what I was reading and giving myself some minor aeriality so that I could see high enough to read all that was visible before it was once more covered up in haste in advance of the arrival of our guests. Here perhaps is the greatest treasure of that tomb, once I fully comprehend what was written there. Trákonel was too briefly banished to the darker corners of my mind until he came preening back, all swagger and cheery bonhomie.

The flame worshippers then proceeded to insult our clan (as if putting cities to the flame and sword with concomitant rapine, pillaging, enslaving and casual butchery that accompanied it was not enough) by demanding that they be allowed to place a guard on this treasure just gifted to them, obviously and rather publicly dismissing the possibility that we could and should continue to do so ourselves until the ceremonial exchange could be arranged! Trákonel, continuing to be a stranger to the finer points of history of course acquiesced.

I made my excuses and retired early to bed to once more sob myself to sleep, wholly uncomprehending of the sensations that were overwhelming me. I fear that they will not replace the breakables in my room again after another tantrum of my mind in the small hours. Luckily there was nothing living in my room to suffer death apart from a beetle and a spider; the messy (if slow) demises of which barely intruded any semblance of minimal pleasure on my abject grief. I am amazed what can be done with a neatly finessed combination of telekinesis and oh so subtle hands of Krá'ings!

The next day, still sleepless, I was dragged off to the Temple of Ksárul, following, as appears to be my wont, Trákonel, as some sort of appendage to show how clever he is in his companions. Given our recent adventures I was exceeding wary of the potential eventualities and counselled against it. Trákonel, as usual ignored me; a stranger of course to the ecumenical non-subtleties of exactly what a truly faithful adherent to Ksárul seeks and that the sleeping child in blue was very likely not a present signatory to the articles of Pavár but did so through the aegis of (potentially imprisoned) temple scribes, no doubt keen to save their own lives and livelihoods.

Nevertheless, and against my better judgement; to the Temple of Ksárul we went. I kept a brooding distance from the preening one but was then utterly overwhelmed by the excellence of the botanic garden. Again, wonders were before me; exotics undreamt under fantastical houses of glass that positively steamed inside! For a while I again forgot my misery with the wonderment and glory of it all.

To her apparent credit, the high priestess is no lover of the Ndálu clan and has of late made much of rooting them out from the temple here. What a high ranking Ksárlite intends, and what they do is, however, as different as white priestess to black sakbé tower! I was entirely on my guard and rightly so. To the preening one it would appear that transactions are all, and that the high priestess was known to trade in favours. Favours we could win with the right gift. That gift was the statuette of the smoking toad (and most particularly its accompanying pearl), a very ancient and local avatar of the prisoner in blue. Unfathomably ancient to the point of perhaps even being the first avatar to that deity ever worshipped and one that still has an immensely strong local tradition here in Butrús and the Chákas (I believe I have previously mentioned that Ksárl may have first gained a following in this area those many aeons ago). Ksárl appears to weave through everything hereabouts; there are even local ecstatic cults that blend his worship with that of Avánthe!

These nuances aside the high priestess lived up to her reputation. A keener mind I do not think I have ever come across. Trákonel to his credit realised this and was at least circumspect. It was Chu'éša who then blurted more that she should, letting on to a question regarding the possibility that we had found the cogitations of the Prince in Blue, that an important book had indeed been found by us, but that we knew not what it was and had sold it to a member of the Ndálu clan to ensure she did not call her Yéleth on us. I felt that Chu'éša's keen, but simple, mind could be about to be opened like a book for reading so quickly interjected the truth of the matter and that what we had found was indeed the cogitations and that it was written in Ái Chè with a classical Tsolyáni primer inserted as preface. The book again was no doubt in origin more unfathomably ancient than either of my two companions could truly comprehend. The High Priestess no doubt feigned non concern with this particular matter, and we turned to the Toad and what favours she would be willing to give for it. Trákonel, still strangely obsessed with the Temple in the Forest of the Black Leaves asked for a pointer towards where it could be found. I winced at the clear indication that we also sought that which so many of the tenet of Ksárl sought; his overweening arrogance really will doom us all! Feigning a degree of only idle interest, she showed us to the mathom house of their library; a spectacularly and vomitously disorderly museum; a veritable chaos of exhibits; chief of which she wished to show us was a drawer full of eyes beside a rather troubling collection of string from around the World. She of course agreed to the favour, and I fully expect that this, like so much else will come back to bite us hard in the future.

Our business seemingly concluded to the satisfaction of the preening one, we then retired to plan our journey to the eaves of the forest. I for one returned to my room, now bare of breakables, and sobbed myself to sleep again; a sensation made immeasurably worse by the prospect of my next travail being attendance at a party. It already filled with me with me abject dread before the incident of the noisome pleasures in the night. Now I am wholly and absolutely terrified at the prospect of what I may have to witness on top of the usual discomfort that such occasions instil in me.

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 26 ¾

### Part the Ninth – The Mannequin's Tale and Torture by Party

Rather than continuing to wallow in the festering cess of my own misery I decided that I would, in the short time available to me (after Trákonel's oh so noble gifting of the priceless treasure) study the armour, the writings upon the mannequin and some of the other items we had recovered from the ancient tomb.

Luckily I have a smattering of ancient Llyáni and Ancient Mihállí in which this script appeared to be rooted; with those and the circlet of comprehension and a deal of help from Chu'ésa, I was able to decipher the script on the mannequin that the fancy armour was on. It was indeed Dragon Warrior, armour and script. That is much older than Engsvanyáli, much older than Bednálljan, older even than the Fisherman Kings. That's before Pavár and before Dórmoron Plain. Even before the full revelation of some of our current Gods.

It is said that the Dragon Warriors could traverse the immensity of distance across Empires and Oceans in a matter of hours, borne aloft by their fiery steeds. The tale told upon the mannequin confirmed this, although I believe the more proper words it used alludes to chariots rather than steeds. The armour itself is also recorded in the writings to be a techno-magical marvel; when worn by the Dragon Warriors it tapped into an ancient form of power/sorcery that apparently differed to that which the ancient Llyáni gifted us. Harnessed thus, a single Dragon Warrior had the combat powers of legions and could brave combat with entities we would now call Demons or Gods. This is one of those armours. More specifically the armour of one of the greatest of the Dragon Warriors: Aflagh Vorunikiki. A hero who apparently did much to save the World from utter destruction. And even he needed help.

Seized by a sudden whim I actually tried on the helmet of this legendary armour. I was surprised at how comfortably soft and snug it fitted despite its great size. Despite the aeons it must have spent in the tomb, it still had the barest lingering of power within it; an intriguing tickle in my mind.

After what must have seemed quite a comical digression for any witnessing it I then applied myself to the mannequin. The story it told is that towards the end of the epoch of The Three States of the Triangle, something unutterable catastrophic was unleashed, apparently by one of the awesome weapons deployed during their internecine wars. And here the story confirms what the Mihállí told Chu'ésa while she had it in her embrace: Reality (or realities?) was/were being unravelled and through the open tear(s) she who must not be named could see that which she had long sought to devour in her ravenings. What the Mihállí did not tell Chu'ésa was that they may have had a part in this, and that they consequently suffered greatly there and then from it, being almost wiped from the annals of the World in their ruin. There are hints in the writings too that other horrors also sought to claw their way in through the rents.

This existential threat to the World caused the Dragon Warriors to go to war against The Three States of The Triangle, so that the situation could be rectified. That which came against them, was however too great, even for them to best alone. The great energies that powered their armours, the magics gifted by the Llyáni and I presume other great weapons, was being leached away and worse still reflected against them. The horror(s) that came not only drained these powers but could even steal life force itself.

So the Dragon Warriors, facing defeat, called upon the aid of a rather mysterious entity referred to on the mannequin as the Boneless King, otherwise known as, or possessing “The Most Puissant Sealer of Bones, Mender of Scaffolds”. I don’t think anyone truly knows the provenance of this entity although the library here in the Butrús clan-house actually contains some legends that intimate he (presumably a he as he went on to have a wife) fell from the skies sometime in the Time of no Kings into the waters off the Chákas. Recovered by the local tribes of the area, he was then deified by them, and his cult persisted through the eons in this region only to be suppressed in the Great Inquisition of the 1200s; barely yesterday in the timescales I am dealing with here. Nobody records what became of the God himself beyond the fact that he may, or may not, have been the being also known as Archer Hmi who ended up being married to what could be an actual avatar of Dlamélísh; the one responsible for Moon Blossoms when she went gallivanting off to experiment with alchemy on Gayél whilst he was saving the world from destruction. Ohé! and that after he saved the world (Called the Well of Heaviness) before returning to his seat of no weight in the sky to recover from his travails.

Now what I am about to write now is entirely my surmise and I must be careful as it could pose an easy route to the high ride!; but I believe it eminently feasible that the Boneless King and the One Other could very well be the same thing as they both seem to possess mighty thaumaturgies dealing with the portals between the interstices of different realities and that they also appear to share a common symbology.

That, however, aside. It was by himself manipulating the boundaries of realities that the Boneless King was able to prevent the horror(s) from entering our World. He contacted and summoned forth Valédh the Flayer who wrought fiery destruction that laid waste entire territories, liquifying rocks, bekirtling himself in obsidian and raining snows of ashes and tears of flame, etc., etc. This all apparently happened near some place called Porubél Ta, wherever that may be; it was enough to drive her not to be named ladyship and accompanying horrors(?) back into the rifts from which they sought to escape.

The Boneless King and the Dragon Warriors then set up mighty wards built around the Boneless King’s most Puissant Sealer of Bones and Mender of Scaffolds. To which they added further copies! Together these formed a triad of all powerful wardings to keep the tears between realities sealed. One, possibly the prime, is the Calcinator, being the Sealer of Bones and Mender of Scaffolds situated at the pinnacle of one of the Dragon Warrior’s fabled sky towers in the old Dragon Warrior city of Vutarrash (confirmed by other means to be located in modern Butrús); the very pinnacle I pointed out to my companions (to their great disinterest) in the master chamber of the Calcinator in the Hospice!

There are however two others. One was situated on a southerly isle and the third as we have now been told by third parties and confirmed by the mannequin is under the black leaved forest. I would posit that the location of the second, upon a southern isle, explains the parts found and brought by us from our home. This gives us two localities of reference that must form the baseline of a triangulation from which the location third can be divined. I believe such tricks are known in architecture, but above all navigation. I have sound numerology, but alas am not a noted trigonometrist. I presume, however, that we would first need to know the exact nature of the triangle in question?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *It seems I must, with all due trepidity, consult with Tusilén as he is a scholar of the navigational arts, or so he has told me on many occasions. Maybe he would also like to accompany me to view the “model” of new Butrús that they have at the Palace of the Realm!?*

Now there is both confirmation and denial of the various yarns we have been spun by Mihállí and errant Preceptor of the Indigo Tower on the Mannequin. Yes, the Calcinator is a device to mend and keep the fabric of realities from being rent asunder again. Yes, it may very well be associated with the entity that later came to be known as the One Other (my own surmise). However, moving it from its place in Butrús is not what should be done. It already lies in its original installation at a specific nodal point, no doubt chosen to be the most thaumaturgically efficacious. Also, it is clearly not the only such device. There are at least two others set in a triangle with it; one of which logically appears to be on Vrá. So, as I predicted both the Mihállí, and the Preceptor of Indigo the Tower were either singularly poorly informed (I posit this as actually being the most likely explanation) or were deliberately hiding falsehoods within their truths for their own inimitable, and potentially inimical ends.

As we now know, Aflagh Vorunikiki was entombed here under modern Butrús, despite the fact that the Boneless King had, according to this tale on the mannequin, offered him an eternity of life. With him were buried certain artefacts to ensure that the wards that had been set would continue to function for perpetuity. We know what one of these is, as it was the very part kept within the Eye of Encompassing All Things. This was the final handle (I think) for the triad of wardings; something to help keep them properly attuned so they can continue in their function. But there is more. We also recovered a learning sphere that contains the instructions how to properly use and maintain the wards and further devices to aid in navigation for those whose role it is to maintain n the said wards. These servants are called on the mannequin the Maintainers of the Mender of Scaffolds. There is also the matter of the nagging whispers that I continue to have from T'tket M'jer's High Cartography gem, which appears to also be related to this puzzle.

I took these findings away and in a secluded corner of the clan house, with guards on the door so they couldn't escape, I presented my findings to Trákonel and Tusilén. They listened diligently enough, which is more than I normally get from them, and even swiftly acted on the information I recounted. Trákonel again wading into ecumenical matters with a letter to the temple of Thúmis proposing we investigate the matter of the Temple in the Forest of Black Leaves through the use of the learning sphere, the other instruments, and T'tket M'jer's high cartography gem.

Strangely I then found myself accompanying Tusilén to the Temple of Keténgku to discuss the matter further with them. On the way Tusilén had the affrontery to bring up the recent disturbances he had overheard coming from my chamber of late and even inquired as to whether he could be of assistance in some way! I was uncomfortable enough with Chu'ésa's attempts to mollify me after the "incident of the night-time pleasurings of Trákonel" and this unexpected probing on Tusilén's part briefly threw me into a chasm of embarrassment and despair. Luckily, my flustered and barely coherent stammering reply in the negative immediately put him in his place and he proceeded back into his habitual sociopathic sulk. A much more comfortable place for him to be in my view!

At the Temple of the Lord of Wisdom it became apparent that the priesthood there were happy to cut the deal that Trákonel had so impertinently offered them. And so Tusilén, Chu'ésa and I were sat down to be taught how to safely use the learning sphere. A matter of fasting, mediation and patience with frequent watering that is of course utterly familiar to someone from the cloisters such as Chu'ésa and myself, and it transpired (to my immense surprise) not quite so alien to Tusilén either. He might actually have a keener intellect, capable of finer control and training, than he readily lets on.

It was, however, evident that learning from the sphere, as well as further research alongside T'tket M'jer with the high cartography gem would be a matter of at least several days study. Our planned trip to the old ruined Temple of Sáрку under the eastern eaves of the Chákan Forest would have to

come first. But before even that I had to survive the party that Chu'ésa was arranging with all the terrors and trepidations that came with it.

It was of course just as unpleasant an experience as expected. Chu'ésa no doubt really means well, and I even understand that the jollity is a societal norm for us from Vrá. Nevertheless, I could not wait to make my excuses and leave, especially after I utterly broke down in sobs when Chu'ésa presented me with such a thoughtful and beautiful gift in the form of a book recounting the adventures of Hrugga and a really exquisitely useful bandolier for me to wear on my future adventures! Idiot that I am, I of course had utterly forgotten to get her anything in return! I then compounded my embarrassment (I must admit I may have drunk a little too much, too fast in my fear) by having a rather noisy fit of the giggles from behind the pot plant I was trying to hide behind (so as to avoid having anyone talk to/at me) during Chu'ésa's little gift to Tusilén; a recounting of his recent "heroic" exploits by a notable local bard. Everyone else took it so seriously! Never have I heard such a comical piece of utterly over-prosaic fiction! I fled soon after to my bed before I was forced to witness anything that Trákonel may have been involving himself in, let alone anyone else taking an interest, or worse pity on me. I've now taken to jamming wax in my ears just in case "it" happens again and pondering on the abject failures of my evening, sobbed myself once more to sleep.