

# **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 Three :=-**

*The Long Road to Avanthár*

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
T'tket M'jer	enigmatic pé chói scholar & sorcerer	– David Bailey

## NPC

Biláish hiVrútla	balding and chubby Moon of Evening Business Manager
Ta'áné hiTlekkuné	dreamy scholar at the temple of Vimúhla, beau to Anka'á
Lady Janára hiKétkolel	no nonsense noblewoman and sometime gardener
Goree'shiang	Hokún technician from the College at the End of Time
Tarkuma hiTenkálu	litigious aspiring Tumíssan poet
Hu'hún Sé'iyau Artáo	eccentric mystic and dream voyager in the Kurt Hills
Jarshán hiValsur	conceited cult leader and failed demonologist

Written by Alan Ford, 2021-2022

Edited & compiled by Dermot Bolton, 2023

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¼

### Part the Seventeenth – Grumbles in the Jungle

Given that I doubt I will experience anything so mind expanding as my late travels, or indeed have much time left to experience anything much before the inevitability of my own extinction, I had considered there was little point in continuing my diary. Luckily, more clear, rational thought in the clean light of day, rather than the tear-filled dark watches of the night have won through. Indeed, writing my own thoughts down serves to help sort between what are my own thoughts pure and what come from elsewhere; whether locked within me, or forced onto me from the constant whisperings without. So, I will continue.

Predictably there was a deal of partying to celebrate our safe, and above all lucky and lucrative return from Gayél and our successful sealing of the skeins. The partying was a source of a constant babbling in my head, succoured only by meditative quietude won in the quiet cloisters of my sisterhood.

Tusilén took to strutting like a cock küni in season through the clan house in Butrús and soon secured himself a bride. Díyo, a pretty little thing, but spirited, and possessing a keen intellect. I was happy to delay our departure to Avanthár in order to accommodate the nuptials, despite the certainty of yet another monstrously dull round of celebration.

Our departure following the happy event was almost unseemly in its haste; as by Tusilén's own boasting, had been the consummation. He seemed only too happy to be running away from his new bride!

So, we are to take the Sakbé north to the red roofs of Tumíssa, then eastward via Katalál, the Kurt Hills and finally Béy Sü then hence to holy Avanthár, where my ultimate fate will be decided.

I have secured Talūvaz the reliable Livyáni's services for the journey there and back and will be accompanied by my friend and clan sister Chu'ésa, the noble Tusilén, the intriguing pé chói T'tket M'jer and the stalwart Hokésh of Shading Leaf. For the first leg we were also in company with possibly the dullest fellow I have ever met; a clan cousin called Biláish hiVrutla who has but one topic of conversation; finance. So dull were his chunderings that even my guests were lulled into a summertime stupor so profoundly stultifying that his converse almost became a relief to me.

As if being stuck with this conversation wasn't bad enough, this fellow Biláish had taken it into his head to showcase to us some of the supposedly profitable forest trading that he had arranged with the riches that we had brought to our clan. And lo! What wonders did he bring us to! A stench ridden enclave under the forest eaves called Ná dai. Steeped in noxious lacquer fumes and a populace so sulky, even I noticed their disquietude. The hetman was frankly rude to the point of insult and the atmosphere wasn't the only thing that was seething. Apparently, their Amber Leaf business partners in this neck of the woods had kidnapped a scion of the family and this could lead to the ruin of our fine investments. I already suspected that this had all of the hallmarks of a moonstruck teen romantic misadventure brought on by youthful high-spirits and a superfluity of the wrong sort of fiction.

Moving on to the Amber Leaf village of Jigánlyal, a place notable only for the even less polite welcome and slightly improved ordure, my suspicions were almost immediately confirmed. Here a young lady had recently gone missing and the lacquer sniffers were clearly to blame. Besides the mutual fulminations and recriminations between the villages, we ourselves had lost any remaining semblance

of respect for Biláish who had inflicted this ludicrous nonsense upon us. Indeed, much baited by Talūvaz, we were of the opinion that this was an investment that we could well do without.

Still, two teenage lovers were missing in the dark and dangerous woods. Honour alone dictated that we should act. Leaving Chu'ésa and Biláish to smooth ruffled feathers, cloaks and leaves, the rest of us set forth, muttering none too quietly under our breath, to find the missing twain; or at least their corpses. A friend of theirs accompanied us as a guide.

T'tket M'jer seemed positively ebullient as we headed up the trail and beneath the canopy; Tusilén was still muttering with Talūvaz gaily goading him. T'tket M'jer's ebullience was quickly evaporated when the danger of the woods was clearly demonstrated by the sudden co-ordinated onset by a trio of snarling, drooling Zrné. I was somewhat distracted by my internal trialogue to the point where my thaumaturgy had little effect on the ensuing melee. Luckily Hokésh was far more effective with his axe and Talūvaz with his sorceries, even Tusilén broke into a sweat laying his sword about him; T'tket M'jer got bitten for his troubles. As quickly as it had started, it was over, and we had the victory. However, hopes that we might find the couple alive faded.

I rendered what aid I could to the injured T'tket M'jer applying telekinesis to extract an errant fang from under his carapace. In so doing, I couldn't help noticing that his outer lacquering, where chipped by the bite, revealed underlying faded sigils and symbols in a form typical of at least a century ago. It seemed rude to probe any more than was necessary to remove the tooth though; nonetheless there must be an interesting tale here, possibly cogent to the unusual respect he generally receives amongst our own society.

Jigánlyal, while not as noxious to the nose, was equally querulous as their neighbour and similarly inclined to potentially violent action to settle their dispute over their young missing scion. After a short rest we left when our young guide divined that the two youngsters may have made for a secluded hut wherein to plight their troth. Mindful of the dangers so far encountered, I scouted forward into glade with the hut using my sorcerous sight. Good that I did, for there sitting on a felled trunk was a mighty three-eyed Dzór, idly picking at its gigantic beak. After some quiet discussion we decided upon the course of diplomacy and forward went T'tket M'jer to parlay, with resounding success. The giant informed him that our quarry had been startled here by zrné and fled along a rather more well beaten path than might be expected. We bid farewell and were somewhat surprised that we had completely failed to spot the giant's larger friend nearby. Mayhap not the teens we were tracking, but a trysting was nonetheless evident.

Onward we journeyed, Tusilén still muttering and fulminating. The surprisingly well travelled path presently revealed its secret. A smallish and rather dilapidated shrine entwined by undergrowth, roots and lianas, a central court containing a recess with a stained stone altar. Around this a partially collapsed colonnade covered in a language that skittered beyond understanding, even using my considerable linguistic talents and circlet. A hidden priestly tongue. A fresh rubble fall was visible sealing a breach and to one side of this was a sealed doorway. There was also recent zrné spoor.

Using my thaumaturgic senses I divined that the two youngsters were alive beyond the fresh rubble fall; driven in panic there by their pursuers and now trapped, alone in the dark. I attempted to placate them with some success, speaking to the mind of the girl who was of course likely to be the most sensible of the two. Relieved, they waited upon our succour. Succour that could be a long time coming as the recent fall had destabilised the structure. Leaving their friend to talk to them we sought another way through.

The neighbouring sealed door seemed to give the best hope for success. Again, I looked inward with sight, finding to my surprise a rather well appointed hallway, evidently much used. There followed a long discourse (well mainly diatribe from Tusilén) on the unprofitable nature of this pointless journey, the opportunity loss further compounded by the fact he would evidently have to waste a charge from his eye of portal opening. We let the tantrum run its course and when the dust had settled, after application of a charge (rated at some hundreds of káitars in worth!) we gained access.

We were in a quaintly rustic shrine to one of the seemingly innumerable Chákan aspects of Ksárul. The sort of place one might bring important and wealthy semi-devotees to witness some sort of supposed mystery; at a suitably exorbitant price of course.

Bearing rightwards we came to a room that to me resounded with a loud whispering; new voices in my head. A central warding contained a plinth upon which a strange three crystal pronged object of metal rested. It was this that was whispering to me, the voices just beyond my ken. There followed for me an awkward and uncomfortable inner struggle with my own conscience and quite literal inner demons; both of whom had now had their insatiable curiosities all too aroused.

Hokésh appeared to be the only one of us to be in any haste to be about what we had come for; the saving of a pair of unfortunate children from a lonesome death in the dark. I was fighting my inner demons whilst Tusilén continued to complain about the lack of profit; made only worse when it was pointed out to him that we could not remove anything from this shrine without breaking the law of the present hand and that we probably already owed shámtila to the Temple of Ksárul for the breaking of their door. Through this monologue of complaint, Hokésh diligently axed his way through a tangle of roots that blocked our way.

By the time Hokésh completed his labour, I had partially succumbed to my squabbling inner voices and chanced inside the warding circle. Within the voices were much clearer and the nature of the chamber revealed. It was a sanctum to demonstrate “inner mysteries” to paying lay devotees. What was more, to Tusilén’s intense disgust the crystalline fitment was almost certainly nearing priceless in worth.

With the way already clear, Talūvaz pulled the ace from his sleeve and summoned up a working party to clear rubble and generally tidy up. Tusilén was still complaining, I had a crashing headache and almost had to be dragged away from the podium. Hokésh crying out “will no one think of the children!” snapped me out of my reverie and between us we bullied Tusilén to forget monetary loss and his rising hatred of perfidiously incompetent clan factors and lead us onward to the final succour of the two unfortunates.

Once we had rescued the two youngsters we camped for the night in the courtyard, surprisingly undisturbed by the local fauna. Tusilén’s humour was improved none by the discovery of an abandoned store containing at least one excellent steel blade; something else that we could not in honour, or conscience make away with.

The woods creaked with the groans of Tusilén as we wound our way back to the villages. Here it was clear that we had been well and truly played by Biláish. We were the stick to beat both families with to prompt them to remove their intransigent hetmen so that business could continue in a better lubricated manner. Biláish and Chu’éša had applied reason and charm in our absence whilst our loud rumblings of disquietude and threats to take away our clan’s patronage did the rest. Situation resolved!

It was now finally time to leave these squabbles behind and pass on to Tumíssa. The boy we had rescued had shown some pluck and initiative, so it was decided we would take him away from his present trouble and see him into a suitable light infantry legion, to hone and season him for future leadership.

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### Part the Eighteenth – Red Tiled Tumíssa

It has been a while, but I believe I should once more commence upon my diary. Heaviness of heart, world weariness and the onset of an utterly unexpected condition rather dampened my ardour to continue; having my notes stolen from my very own lodgings was also a great shock to me.

Once returned from the forest we again made the Sakbé and headed north, Talūvaz travelling in an intriguing array of summoned palanquins of ancient appearance. I again found myself idly wondering if the families of the summoned bearers missed them? Each palanquin was a historic artefact of some interest and I whiled my time away on the road trying to make sense of the possible provenance. Only to be thwarted when the object of my study was promptly replaced by another.

The wonderment helped to ease my inner turmoil as my guests scrabbled for their own space in my mind and the gnawing hunger ate at me. Often in the dark watches I was forced to dip into my eye of retaining all things for the offal I kept therein. The whole process was sickening to me, accustomed as I have been to never eating meat, let alone wantonly gorging myself on the foulness of innards.

Tumíssa transpired to be a city where I was taken on an odyssey of conflicting emotions. Nestled in its great crater, on the edge of the limpid azure lake Néttu Tlakán, and overlooked by a rim of rugged hills, it is supposedly one of the Empire's gems. Alas, this was mainly lost on me, as our arrival brought almost overbearing pressure upon me! Journeying I had come to an accommodation with my guests, and with only my companions around me I could also close out the whisperings from their minds that intruded upon my own thoughts.

Tumíssa was something else entirely, thousands of minds in such proximity, all seemingly forcing themselves onto me in a cacophony of internal whispers; too many to make any sense of individually; just incomprehensible babbling. My inner demons of course did not help. One yearning incessantly for experience and the other contemplating running insatiably amok. It took every fibre of my psychic discipline to put up barricades and introduce checks and balances before I could cope. Even then I found the entire experience of being amongst crowds very deeply uncomfortable, and fatiguing, sometimes to the point of debilitation.

While in Tumíssa I therefore tried my best to remain closeted, avoided the great market and when within the city would often take rest and solace from the bedlam in the great botanical garden.

Tumíssa was, however, where Trakonel had sold the Dragon Warrior armour onto, to the Temple of Vimúhla. The thought of being able to see that again and continue its study was an exhilarating proposition. Persuading the Temple of Vimúhla that this could be possible proved surprisingly easier than expected. We literally just walked into the temple, stated that we were the ones who had found it. After some discourse, it was decided that there would be bit of a soiree to thank us for our Clan's benevolence. After that, I, as a scholar would then be allowed access alongside their own resident scholar of the Dragon Warriors, Ta'áné hiTlekkuné.

Ta'áné is a scholar of note, at that time of a similar circle within his temple as I was and is known to have personally led an expedition to the ruined temple of Tlárnesh. He is not typical of the average priest of Vimúhla, with a bookish nature and given to deep thought. It so transpired that Ta'áné's own

family within his clan of Red Sun had a potentially embarrassing problem at one of their secluded villas that we might be able to help resolve.

We were also subjected to a tour of the city and its many monuments to frankly rather modern military glories of its attendant Legions of Red Devastation and Legion of the Ruby Hand and particularly the heretic Emperor Hejjéka II, who left his seclusion to personally lead in the field! Of much more interest to me was our viewing of Thómar's automaton, a marvel of intricate clockwork in the form of a patrician girl attired in the Engsvanyáli way. On activation she sings a couple of Engsvanyáli folksongs and dances in what I am told is a pretty enough way.

This tour, Tusilén's obsession with matters mercantile, and the problem at the villa in the hills delayed further and much anticipated parlance and study with Ta'áné. The trip to the villa did however prove exceedingly interesting, no little dangerous, and profitable enough to even assuage Tusilén's greed for a while.

Ta'áné could arrange some favours for us, including access to the armour and seeing our young charge from the forest into a decent enough legion of crossbows. In exchange he would introduce us to an uncle of his: Lord Tra'suné hiKétkolel in order to undertake a delicate matter for him. The fellow had essentially mortgaged his estranged wife Janára hiKétkolel's forest villa to help pay off gambling debts. There were now questions as to the value of the property due to a potential haunting.

The journey to the villa might have been pleasant and quiet enough, but we were unfortunately forced to be in the company of the utterly obnoxious Kalodai hiKurúshuma, a kási within legion of the Lord of Red Devastation. This fellow takes the caricature of your typical Red Devastation soldier to unparalleled heights. Fond of his own voice, overbearing, and insistent on boring us to the point that I seriously thought about hurling myself off a cliff path, with dull tales of violence, executions and gossip about aristocratic debaucheries. I think even the sweet singer was getting bored of it by the time we finally and thankfully won through to the villa.

Lady Janára was an enigmatic delight by contrast. She first appeared to us playing the gentle conceit of pretending to be her own gardener. Having some knowledge of botanics, I found her garden to be a demi-paradise of flora unusual in the Chákas, and was rather shocked when Talūvaz, impatient with the obvious charade, inflicted a blight on one of its glories. How we were not ejected there and then with request for Shámtla I know not why. As it was, we were instead given a brief introduction to the problem in her cellar and sent curtly to our accommodations on short commons.

The next morning, we entered the troublesome cellar in question, a veritable junkyard of building materials, half-forgotten vintages of a'ásh grain spirit, jumbles of old furniture and military paraphernalia, artwork and sculptures. All in rather a sorry state and much afflicted with mould. Lurking in this jumble was the nest of some gerednyá worms, loathsome leathery horrors with wings, stiletto proboscis and tail stinger, surrounded by egg sacks of their next generation. These we duly despatched with a degree of ease. Tusilén was even somewhat mollified to learn that their wing cases were worth some 100 káitars each to discerning chlén hide workers.

It was rather evident that these things probably accessed the cellar via a fissure in the back wall and kit was to that that we then turned our attention. The fissure led to a tight passage that descended for some while into the bowels of the hill on which the villa stands before breaking into a labyrinth of lava tubes; dark and with a pervading rank odour. We progressed further into smoothly ripple walled caverns and thence into a cavern of most unwholesome stench in which the shadows from our lamps seemed to have a life of their own!



It quickly became apparent that the shadows did have a life of their own! Dwellers in Shadow! Horrific giant furry spider like minor demons intent of eating their prey's very souls! A short altercation with these vile things followed. Thaumaturgies were hurled with some, but not enough effect. All may have gone fatally awry for us then and there, but then our assailants became aware of what lay within me and recoiled themselves in fear from the threat of gnawing hunger. With them lurking just out of reach we reached an accommodation and passed on, thankful to have survived.

The subsequent chamber was no less horrific with a festoon of unknown twisted plant or fungi flourishing under the spots of daylight that penetrated the tunnel. At least one patently growing out of a corpse that seemed to be wearing antique and battered military equipment. These things sought us out with whip like tendrils and pink ejaculations of foetid spores. The whole area stinking of warm spices with acrid undertones. We dealt as much as we could with the infestation with axe, sword and fiery energies.

It was now dawning on the sorcerers amongst us that these last two infestations were all things from the planes beyond, and that there was a very real possibility that an open nexus lay nearby. Little wonder the more native gerednyá moved upwards into the cellar.

Moving onwards we came across a cleaner airier cavern with a breeze entering from one side, heavy with jungle aromas. Here a pitiful family of chnéhl cowered tending a wounded comrade. We spoke with them for a short time learning of the horrors that they had witnessed entering their home over the last weeks, and the injury done to them by some others of our kind dressed for war. They indicated the way onward, and also the way to the forest, by which they accessed their hunting and gathering territory. We passed on in the direction of those who had assaulted them and the dangers and wonders that awaited us in the long-lost Priory of the Eternal Pylon.

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### Part the Nineteenth – Proceedings at The Priory of the Eternal Pylon

Moving on from the chnéhl we quickly came upon a very sorry and pitiable grouping of six soldiers seemingly belonging to Red Devastation. Their armour and equipment was in tatters, but even so could be seen to be of no little antiquity. All were filthy, bedraggled, unkempt, starving and odorous; most were also wide eyed with shock, fear and horror.

For a while our two groupings stood off from each other, the menace of immediate violence in the air. From somewhere their leader summoned forth courage and pulled himself together enough to parlay with us. They comprised:

- Hejjéka hiKarishmu (Blazing Sphere) their tirrikámu, barely holding it together
- Usénu hiDaránu (Glorious Flame), seeming a little more stoic
- Vridamé hiShaia (Vermillion Peak). Clearly even to me on the edge of psychotic madness
- Thékku hiTenkálu (White Crystal), badly injured in the arm with infection setting in.
- Dha'ala hiQurruluma, (Flaming Blade), the only woman amongst them and possibly the most together of them all
- Lumetl Vreedi (Vriddi), unable to maintain eye contact with anyone and totally unresponsive to any contact.

Through discourse it was relatively easy to learn that they believed they were still in the time of the Emperor Hejjéka III, during whose regnal their expedition had been sent to investigate the ruins of the Priory of the Eternal Pylon that lay nearby within these lava caverns.

They were the sole six survivors from the 4<sup>th</sup> Cohort of the Legion of the Lord of Red Devastation, a group originally comprising two semétl (40) men, a molkár, an adjutant heréksa with two scholar and one ritual priests from the Temple of Vimúhla, along with 20 slaves. 65 people in total tasked with undertaking an expedition through the nexus within the priory to explore what the planes beyond had to offer. The gateway closed behind them, and they then travelled the haunted demon planes for years, finding or making 'nexus' portals when they could. By their reckoning they experienced horrors unbounded for some three years, during which attrition took their numbers down until only nine soldiers, one priest and four slaves stumbled back through the original portal they had entered so bravely a millennia ago.

In the ensuing two weeks, unable to find a way out of the labyrinth, the priest, three more soldiers, and all four surviving slaves died screaming at the agency of the nether-planar horrors that have leaked into our own reality through that unstable nexus.

Sombrely we informed the poor refugees that over a thousand years had passed since they marched through that first nexus. They took this as badly as one might have expected with lamentations and, in the case of poor Lumetl, a wandering off to a solitary self-strangulation. Clearly we could not proceed whilst leaving the poor wretches here but decided to escort them back to the villa in order to arrange their return to Tumíssa, their legion and their temple.

Lady Janára was much more fulsome in her hospitality on our return to the villa, laid on a fine repast and ensured her ancient guests were given opportunity to bathe and make the best of trying to pull themselves back from the brink of insanity.

Lady Janára also allowed access to her private library, wherein an ancient journal and guest book was to be found that helped throw some clarity on the situation, and provided pointers to further intelligence that might be gleaned from a study of documents held by the temple libraries of Vimúhla and Belkhánu back in Tumíssa.

Returning to Tumíssa with the refugees and through our connection with the oh so noble Ta'áne hiTlekkuné, it was relatively simple to gain access to the Temple of Vimúhla's records of the event. The Temple of Belkhánu was quite the opposite, and it is just possible that we thereby unleashed the subsequent chain of legal niceties in Tumíssa that would delay our departure to my surprise pleasure.

Although not all of the following historical recounting was fully known to us at the time of our studies, it became clear to us in time.

The records from the Temple libraries in Tumíssa recorded that a nexus point had been present here since the great cataclysm that sent Tékel into its pocket dimension. A rent in the fabric of the planes that apparently changes its destination over time. Sometimes it stays connected with the same plane for hundreds of years, other times merely minutes. It spent most of its early existence in darkness, hidden and shut off from the surface. Eventually the hill on which the villa now stands was 'cracked open', sometime in the mid-Engsvanyáli period, an event that very possibly involved the heroes of the age.

Following this, the temple of Belkhánu were then tasked with safekeeping and guarding it and records of its existence were expunged as far as possible due to the danger it posed. It became a place of learning and worship dedicated to the 53<sup>rd</sup> aspect of Belkhánu, *Chedhesú "Warden of the Pylons"*. A secretive inner aspect popular in the Engsvanyáli period, but now rarely mentioned.

Chedhesú is depicted as a four faced, four-armed humanoid with bulbous multi-faceted insectoid eyes wearing long robes of long separate yellow strips. He watches the gateways to the planes beyond allowing or denying passage. He knows the destination of any given nexus and can aid the devout in the seeking of knowledge of the planes within the barrier pylons.

In time, the great upheavals culminating in the sinking of Gánga caused the mountain here near Tumíssa to erupt, resulting in the Priory becoming entombed within a lava flow. The Pylon was 'locked' and the scholars fled. In the years of chaos and upheaval that followed, access and knowledge of the location of the already secretive priory was sadly lost.

Until that is, approximately a millennia ago, when in 1387AS, during the reign of Hejjéka III "The Fat", explorers associated with the temple of Vimúhla in Tumíssa gained access to the lava tunnels and came across the priory. They managed to deactivate the controls locking the pylon, thereby unfortunately giving access to 'undesirables' from other planes. To rectify this unfortunate action, this soon led to action from the temple with soldiers and sorceries deployed to fight off the 'demons'.

This culminated in the formation of an exploratory expedition party to go through the gateway to secure it against further attack. The party consisted of two seméti from the Legion of the Lord of Red Devastation, officers, a number of sorcerers and assorted slaves. None of whom returned alive (until, that is, the six we encountered, and finally found home a millennia later!).

With the apparent loss of the expedition and realising the dangers, the decision was then taken by the temple authorities of Vimúhla to seal the gateway. Not having the knowledge of how to use the control altar, powerful demonology rituals were instead deployed, and a pact was made with the demon Tkél, the Guardian of the Gates of Flame, for the complete barring of the pylon. Reading between the lines it is evident that the temple of Vimúhla in Tumíssa called in one of their most noted demonologists, Urukai hiVriddi from distant Fasíltum, to undertake this ritual. This pact was to last 1000 years. The temple then appears to have promptly forgotten about the matter, particularly the last, rather pertinent matter regarding the periodicity of the pact! Nor is it apparent, did they communicate the issue to the Temple of Belkhánu, within whose purview the entire affair of the pylon and its maintenance properly lay!

Now that both the temples of Vimúhla and Belkhánu were becoming aware of the situation, it was soon evident that a petty turf war was about to surely erupt, in which we would be embroiled. Both temples admonished the other that it was their business and not the others, and both temples definitively informed us, that it was certainly not ours!

All of this intellectual stimulation excited me, and I often found myself in closeted company with Ta'áné hiTlekkuné, locked in ardent discourse historical and philosophical, and quite freighted away from many of my tribulations. I think by now Chu'ésa was already beginning to give me sly and knowing looks and making quips at my expense that at that time passed entirely above my comprehension.

With the temples at loggerheads with each other, we for some reason decided to take the matter into our own hands to resolve the situation before it became too late, and the Nexus spewed forth something truly monstrous. Before we departed, I thought it only honourable to inform Ta'áné of our intentions, so helpful had he been. In response he promised to try and delay pursuit from his own temple but could not vouch for how long that may be, and that we should also be aware of the temple of Belkhánu's potential response. We had both by now also been approached by some rather dubiously interested members of the temples of Ksárul, Dlamélish and Grugánu! Speed was obviously of the essence!

So it was that once more we entered the lava caverns beneath Lady Janára's villa and proceeded direct to the cloisters of the Priory of the Eternal Pylon, the location and description of which had been described to us by those poor unfortunates we had lately recovered.

The Priory lay within a vast bubble in the solidified lava, testament to the level of wardings it had once been furnished with. We first encountered a plaza made of marble slabs, mostly heavily worn and cracked with plenty of rubble strewn around. In the centre was a broken and defaced statue of Chedhesú "Warden of the Pylons" 53<sup>rd</sup> aspect of Lord Belkhánu. Around this were free standing pillars bearing carvings of human figures, creatures and activities relating to the exploration of the planes beyond. The style was high Engsvanyáli – rather dainty and detailed work which had clearly been damaged by heat and thaumaturgies. Within this scene, four small odd looking creatures were making chirruping noises and throwing a ball to each other. They were about the size of a seven year-old with legs and arms made of entwined tentacles. Large eyes, a bulbous head and mouth encircled by fronds/tentacles. Their skin appeared to shift colour as they chittered and chirruped to each other. They seemed harmless enough, so we passed on to the cloister beyond.

This cloister contained an incredible alien 'tree'. Like a modest oak tree in size with leaves glowing a silvery amber colour, providing much of the dim ambient light of the chamber. Signs of scorching and

axe and blast marks were clearly visible on the tree trunk. The tree's canopy contained numerous multi-coloured seeds or fruits, many of which also littered the floor around it.

The courtyard also contained a number of "Chirrupapods", playing and running about. Some of them beneath the glowing tree sifting through the fallen fruits. Others apparently playing hide and seek in the surrounding rooms of the outer priory. Mainly these ignored us, although a couple attempted to come close and hug us. Once near us, we luckily discerned that they appeared to be infected by some form of translucent brain parasite that they were no doubt being controlled to try and pass on. A short and bloodless encounter followed, during which one of the parasites was passed to Tusilén prior to us managing to prevent infection. Without my notes I cannot remember the precise manner of resolution but believe that multiple uses of some cure scrolls proved efficacious on both the infected Chirrupapods and Tusilén.

Next we applied ourselves to searching through the surrounding dormitories, refectories, kitchens and halls. During this we recovered some items buried by the doomed expedition, including a credit note drawable on the Vriddi for 1000 káitars, but more pertinently a haul of antiquities of great historical interest contained within a large and beautifully inlaid wooden box.

These included a fine gold necklace, which we now know is a protection for Nentánte the Far Voyager alongside a variety of personal items and correspondence, including a memory stone belonging to Anúshra the Knowing. Also present was a beautiful Engsvanyáli ink pot and calligraphy set, an eye of safety amongst predators, a matching pair of eyes of efficacious transmission, a scroll of summoning of the voyager of the further isles and a cooking pot fashioned in the metal of the ancients!

After this, we finally entered into the inner sanctums of the priory proper and to be immediately confronted by two vléshgaya or "shunned ones", inimical enemies of mankind. These were protecting a portcullis and appeared to be just as surprised (if you can see surprise on something with the face of a dried prune!) by our sudden appearance as we were to be faced with such unexpected and unwholesome enemies of all mankind. They sported some form of technological blaster lances which proved useless to them. One pretty much accidentally despatched itself before being axed by Hokésh, whilst the other fled under the portcullis, triggering its descent as it did so.

Precious moments were then lost with the usual bickering over the profitability, or not of using the eye of advancing through portals, or not. In the end we did of course, breaking into the hallows beyond to be confronted by a fully prepared, but luckily largely still fairly incompetent array of foes. These comprised some five or six shunned ones with the blaster lances, and an array of magically summoned warriors; backed by at least one full vléshgaya sorcerer. A chaotic and brutal combat ensued, with sorceries and vallations being exchanged and brave hand blows from Hokésh and Tusilén. In time, through our redoubtable valour and puissance in arts physical and sorcerous we had the best of the engagement and passed on.

What we saw next was even more surprising and disturbing than meeting the vléshgaya. There within an inner sanctum was the coruscating nexus, evidently pulsating and linked to somewhere. There too were more shunned ones, but shockingly they were apparently in conflict with a glassy hokún! Yet another being utterly inimical to mankind!

Miraculously a short stand-off occurred whilst all three races somehow sought to converse. The hokún introduced himself as Goree'shiang, a 'technician' from the College at the End of Time and that he/it

was here to seal the troublesome nexus. The shunned ones just radiated inimicalness and were no doubt already plotting their next move. Inevitably battle again commenced; this time with a great deal more competence on the part of the shunned ones, comprising two sorcerers and a deadly warrior whirling multiple blades. We found ourselves desperately defending the hokún as he plied the controls of the nexus behind a rapidly depleting warding.

To make matters worse, the thing from beyond the gate apparently chose that moment to intervene, apparently hungering for all and sundry in gibbous, formless horror. I am embarrassed to say that a number of us, including myself, took it upon ourselves to retire to a previously prepared position of defence at this point, before being recalled by Hokésh who had discerned its true illusory nature.

The chaotic melee reconvened, in which the hokún (and various others of our party including poor T'tket M'jer and Tusilén) were briefly downed before being healed again, whilst the vléshgayal, particularly the warrior, proved annoyingly puissant. As the melee continued Goree'shiang called on myself and Tusilén's aid in trying to set right some of the techno-magical innards of the machine in the crypt above. This we managed to do, although interrupted and almost undone by sendings and wardings requiring me to temporarily take control of my own cousin through psychic means. All it required was a hefty tap from Tusilén to align some wottsathingmibob and everything seemed to be working again. While he was doing that, I had meanwhile stumbled across a priceless cache of Temple of Belkhánu records stashed in an empty sarcophagus.

Returning to the melee below, everything remained in chaos, made worse by the actual arrival through the nexus of something actually non-illusory and actually inimical to all and sundry. I was helping Tusilén and the Hokún at this point, manipulating the sparking controls. All seemed lost!

Surely it could get no more difficult to comprehend! But it could! as the demonic Dwellers in Shadow then arrived on the scene and proceeded to try and forestall the imminent arrival of what was striving ingress from beyond. They died, torn howling into the nothingness beyond, as did one of the surviving vléshgayal, which had decided at the last to throw in its lot with us. Luckily, myself, Tusilén, and the Hokún then finally re-orientated the nexus interdimension fluxgate refogulator, and the scene of writhing pulsating horror beyond was transmogrified to something a little more on the right side of sanity.

The last shunned one sorcerer, having been skulking both invisible and illusory, then made a dash through the gate. Overwhelmed by it all, I promptly lost control of Gurushá and don't remember anything else for a while. I am, however, told that Gurushá hungrily leapt through the nexus in hot pursuit of that sole surviving shunned one.

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¼

### Part the Twentieth – Tumíssan Trials and Titillations

I had apparently passed out after loosing Gurushá, and we all tarried awhile, whilst I recovered. My memory was actually frighteningly absent of any recall of what had transpired before the nexus. I am told that Talūvaz had again luckily proven himself to be a much better combative sorcerer than I, with his wardings and fulminations. I am told that towards the end of the combat, he had even taken to wielding one of the useless blaster lances as a mace, so desperate had the fight become!

I was also, peculiarly for the first time in a while, not feeling utterly ravenous. I did however have a very urgent recollection regarding the treasure trove of ancient records in the crypt upstairs, and it was to that, that I urged my companions to turn. Talūvaz handily summoned his little horde of industry to collect the pile of documents together for onward transit.

Luckily, we had at least two eyes of retaining all things, and into these the library was committed. We then exited those dreadful caverns by the forest entrance and made our way in what I thought was companionable silence back to Tumíssa. I am, however, told that I seemed to know the route by heart and was somewhat given to a cheerful whistling on the way back! I sincerely believed that this unlikely tale was just Chu'ésa playing another one of her sly little japes on me!

Having won the clan house after dark, we quickly retired for the night. We awoke to a day in which we would find ourselves embroiled in the first of our Tumíssan lawsuits. We had managed to avoid running into either of the expeditions sent by the temples of Vimúhla and Belkhánu, so expeditious had our adventure proceeded. Their mutual wrath with each other, and the unfortunate fallout that it had on ourselves was not so avoidable.

Days long wranglings over who actually owned the library commenced. I was only occasionally called to speak on abstruse historical points so had much leisure time. Chu'ésa was busying herself forgetting the recent horrors through enthusiastic carousing with an artistic set far too boisterous and over-sexed for my liking. For possibly the first time in my life I found myself totally unchaperoned!

I was thus completely at liberty to seek solace from the overbearing tumult of the crowds and instead could closet myself with Ta'áné hiTlekkuné, obsessing over, and ardently discussing the finer points of the histories and legends of the Dragon Warriors. Happy hours, days and, evenings we spent in each others' company, sharing our obsession, occasionally dining (when we remembered!) in the quieter and more genteel sort of hostelry, where the mental din left me largely untroubled. We played daghórr and here'úl as we studied and talked together. Only with Chu'ésa, and in a more alien way, with T'tket M'jer, have I ever experienced such companionable happiness in the society of anyone.

I am the first to admit that I am by no means a social creature, largely abhor and am inept in company, and have never had any conceit regarding my looks, rather small and mouse like as I am. Furthermore, apart from that silly time that I had fancied myself falling for Trákonel, I had had no thought of men. Indeed, the mere thought of the whole sordid, messy business of that sort of attachment, with all its sweat and other juices, had until that point in Tumíssa, largely sickened me to the point of retching.

It came as a shock to me when (probably far too late) I realised that not only was I suffering from a terrible yearning in Ta'áné's company, but that the surging feelings that broiled unbidden within me were actually being reciprocated. In short, Ta'áné, an actual man, actually found me desirable in "that sort of way". The glances, the accidental brushings against me, and the companionable silences, heads close together in thought, quickened breaths mingling, was no coincidence.

What occurred next in the quiet watch of the night in a temple library, scrolls, here'úl pieces, and clothing scattering to the pylons in the heat of our ardour, does me no credit. But by the Goddess, I do not regret it! It took us hours to carefully tidy the mess we had made in our ecstatic and contortionate thrashings from shelf to shelf, lectern to lectern and onto other furniture that I barely recall. Nor do I regret all of the evenings, mornings, afternoons, and nights that followed. Total immersion in each other in both body and mind (the latter, with my psychic talents, just as literally as the former)!

I was, therefore, not at all unhappy that our sojourn in Tumíssa was extended by an unfortunate event. This being the arrest of Tusilén after we had returned from some soiree one late evening to celebrate the happy conclusion of some profitable business or another. An altercation with some quarter police at a gate, túnkul gongs, and the noisy interruption of a famed poet at a recital, resulted in police at the door the next morning, with Tusilén being marched off from the very arms of his dear Díyo to his immediate incarceration in the pits.

Clearly, we now needed a good lawyer, not only to secure Tusilén's release, but also to oil the wheels of inter temple commerce that Talūvaz had been so diligently negotiating for us with regard to the recovered library. I also found myself in need of making my own accommodations with the temples of Dilinála and Avanthé to atone, and to secure future arrangements. I finally confessed what had been, and was still enthusiastically occurring, to Chu'ésa. She, of course, had already divined the truth, and actually seemed genuinely very pleased for me.

The lawyer we engaged came with excellent recommendation, not only from our factor Biláish, but also the magistrate of the market, Avéya hiBurutla, who had taken a profitable liking to us, as well as from T'tket M'jer. The said lawyer, a noble pé chóí by the name of M'nek P'tek was by no means cheap, but when it came to bettering his arrangements, and securing final release, the odd 500 káitars here or there, suddenly ceased to bother Tusilén.

Luckily, with a bit of application by the more socially nimble of our party, certain information about the sadly aggrieved poet Tarkuma hiTenkálu could be brought to bear on the case. With each passage of paperwork and inducements, the nature of Tusilén's accommodation improved to the point he even secured some of the best soft furnishings of the clan house to adorn his ever enlarging prison suite. It was also becoming evident that Tusilén's fate, and that of our clan, had been to an extent engineered by some shady agency acting against us using the poet's ire as a foil.

Talūvaz's suggestions regarding the library also fell onto fertile ground resulting in a very happy accommodation between the temples of Vimúhla and Belkhánu, and indeed with myself. The papers would go to the Temple of Belkhánu, as was only proper, but myself and Ta'áné would be given access to research them. The temple of Belkhánu would also publicly acclaim us for our diligence in averting catastrophe. I was so overjoyed by this, and indeed by life in general at that point, that I gifted him our Excellent Ruby Eye by way of appreciation; not only for this, but for sticking with us through some



pretty harrowing encounters, and thereby keeping us all alive. Tusilén was almost incandescently livid with me when he learned I had made such a princely gift!

I actually forget how many days, or even weeks passed. Chu'ésa was partying, Hokésh was playing with his shiny new axe and engaging in Shading Leaf business, Tusilén was having connubial prison visits from Díyo and settling great affairs of commerce, T'tket M'jer was with his pé chói friends and wandering the wonderment of the botanic garden; Meanwhile Talūvaz was apparently taking tuition in inscription (and if that's not a euphemism for something, I know not what is!) with some ink fingered Ksarulite scribe who constantly moaned about his superior.

And me? I was having the absolute time of my life immersed in abstruse learning and when not (and sometimes when) doing that, greatly enjoying the company of Ta'áné.

Our time in Tumíssa was however fated to finally end. Tusilén was released after the payment of a nominal 1 káitar fine. We were then feted for averting the nameless catastrophe by temples (our passage to the Isles is secured!) and the Governor himself, to the great honour of our clan; acclaimed by Lady Janára for our part in resolving some issues at her villa; and generally recognised hither and thither as persons of note to do good commerce with. We even had a puppet play about our heroic and noble actions performed in our honour! My puppet was far too impressive looking to be believable though!

The epitaph of our passage through Tumíssa is surely this accolade by which our noble acts were recognised:

*In the matter of the recently rediscovered most holy priory dedicated to Lord Chedhesú, 53<sup>rd</sup> aspect of Lord Belkhánu. Under the authority of his reverence the High Princeps, the Temple of Belkhánu in Tumíssa acknowledges the bravery and honour of the following individuals.*

*T'tket M'jer of the Joyous of Vrá; Tusilén hiUjjain, Anka'á hiSarashkü, Chu'ésa hiSarashkü of the clan of the Moon of Evening; Hokésh hiQolelsural of the Shading Leaf clan and Talūvaz Druob Shienaz of the Clan of the Bird of Paradise.*

*Upon their discovery these citizens and associates endured great peril to return this lost holy site to the father temple for the glory of the empire. They defeated many powerful and foul enemies of mankind and overcame great dangers in this noble pursuit.*

*The Temple of Belkhánu also acknowledges the generous return of temple records recovered from the site, and the recognition by all aforementioned parties that all texts they recovered are the sole property of the Temple of Belkhánu.*

*In recognition of the acts described the Temple offers the hand of friendship to these individuals and their clans in Tumíssa. This friendship will entitle them and current Tumíssan elders to funerary rites befitting of the status of higher clans – hastening their journey to the Isles of Teretané. Applications for schooling or for clan members to join the priesthood will be considered favourably. Other services available from the temple will be offered in a manner befitting that of a trusted friend throughout Tsolyánu.*

*Rijaz hiSsánmirin - Protonotary Hierophant*

*Temple of Belkhánu, Tumíssa.*

In this time I also passed wilfully and happily from the Temple of Dilinála to the Temple of Avanthé. Strange to think that Chu'ésa is now ahead of me in the hierarchy. She has always cared for such things much more than I; I even pretend that I am learning new things to keep her happy, despite having read and memorised all the required catechisms, and more, within those first heady weeks. Myself, Chu'ésa, Díyo and Tusilén then assisted in the delivery of a great ceremony at the temple (funded by Tusilén) to Quyéla the lady of fecundity (for Díyo's fertility) in those final days. And we thought that only Díyo's womb would be sown!

Tusilén even hilariously had a form of petty revenge on the odious Tarkuma hiTenkálu, self-proclaimed poet laureate of the Red Tiles. We attended upon a recital of his (I was with Ta'áné, so was bolstered from the cacophony of the crowd). Ta'áné told me that the poem was actually rather good, but alas Tarkuma mistimed his oration to the point that its end coincided exact with the ringing in of the kirén by the túnkul gongs. A sorry end in clashing metal and sniggers to his self-lauded artistic rise.

The only cloud to trouble the sunshine of my last days there was the small matter of the burglary of many of my notes on the records recovered from the priory alongside a small number of personal correspondences; some rather recent and intimate in nature. The academic notes are of no consequence. I of course have them all committed to memory anyway, and I can only assume that my personal correspondence was just mistakenly swept up in the larger heist. Nobody can have any real interest in a relatively irrelevant young ingenue such as myself from a middling clan anyway! Personally, I darkly suspect it was agents of the Cartographers of the Luminous Pylon (mainly highly dubious Ksárul worshippers of course!), who had earlier tried to unsuccessfully buy the library from us.

After a final long and ardent night of passionate farewell on my part, and with Tusilén and company having arranged a caravan of goods of our own to be taken in company with goods of Shading Leaf, we finally left Red Tiled Tumíssa by the Katalál Gate. Throngs had gathered to memorialise our leaving; there were even legionaries paraded in our honour; amongst them a proud young crossbowman, resplendent in his new mail. The boy from the forest was now a man.

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¼

### Part the Twenty-First – Onwards to Katalál

So we progressed into the dná grain lands of the central empire, endless dusty fields to the horizon Boring does not even begin to describe it, but I suppose vital! Our caravan was by no means inconsiderable, with many of the trade goods negotiated by Tusilén from the proceeds of our recent adventures.

As well as ourselves we were accompanied by thirty Turning Wheel porters protected by four Flaming Sword guards. I am told the trade goods included fine Mu'ugalavyáni red glass where, lacquered plaques, rare vringálu hide (some of it killed by ourselves!), fine tinalíya silverware and intoxicating chümaz powder to name but a few.

Talūvaz continued to entertain me with his daily new conveyance of antique nature, but now also took to retiring at night in a summoned pavilion of similar nature. It was rare for conveyance and pavilions to ever match each other in style and provenance. This just made the entire experience the more mesmerising. I wonder if Talūvaz knew how disturbing it was to my sense of order.

There was some discussion as to diverting north from the sakbé to visit the fabled Ksárulite enclave and holy crater temple at Hmakuyál. Wiser heads and the necessity for speed prevailed. We thus only experienced a simulacrum of the entirety at the temple's dormitory village at Hmankayél, beside the sakbé. A place given entirely to unseemly and shockingly profiteering commerce, directed entire to strip the unwary traveller of sense, reason and their purse! Awful place!

Whilst there we came across some less than subtle indications of troublemakers stirring up the local peasantry from their necessary labours. Some so called secretive society called the Black Sash, led by some dubious charismatic mendicant called Murásai the Just. We would not have been welcome at the meeting, yet Hokesh still contrived to saunter in to hear the words of near treason. Recounting it later to us, the gist that Hokesh witnessed was thus:

*"For too long the faithful yet poor worshippers of the sleeping Prince have suffered under the crushing demands of the central stability clans"*

*"The emperor means well, but is powerless to overturn the power and control of the metropolitan elites"*

*"I'm not saying that the powerful landowning stability clans do the work of the pariah gods, but they seem to be working to the same ends"*

*"Do not believe their lies, these peddlers of heresies, these suppressors of our destiny"*

*"Be not like the sleeping hmá, awaken thyself, the Lord of Secrets will show you the way!"*

*"The black sash binds us all, to help the poor farmer and the weary pilgrim, to help us reach our destined role in service of the Prince of the Blue Room."*

Somebody should probably do something about this festering boil. They aren't particularly subtle, so likely only a matter of time before they are crushed like little beetles underfoot.

The journey from there to Katalál seemed endless. I was missing Ta'áné immensely, his companionship, his attentiveness, his lively intellectual intercourse and our mutually satisfying frolics.

I was writing to him at almost every night tower, and some of my abject missives I even sent to him by courier. My misery was compounded by the onset of a vicious and prolonged bout of nausea, fatigue and listlessness. I am not commonly wont to tears, not experiencing emotions in a manner of the majority of my companions; but now, miserable I oft times retired from company to cry myself into what semblance of sleep I could muster.

It turned out that the same affliction, but in much milder form, had also contemporaneously beset both Chu'ésa and Díyo. I had no clue, so it took Chu'ésa to break the news to me that we all three were carrying new life within us. She was even more surprised than me to find herself in this condition as she told me that she had been taking the leaf. Something that had not even occurred to me in my ignorance of such affairs! Tusilén and indeed Díyo were overjoyed, and Tusilén immediately began to make plans for his son's future. Chu'ésa was pragmatic; but I fell deeper into my own well of misery and I am sorry to say self-pity.

Perhaps I had too much time to reflect to myself. Gurushá was no longer with me, so I was not so occupied with keeping him and Lelmiyáni in order. I could sense that the hunger would be back with a vengeance at some point, and I remained given to eating much more than I was formerly accustomed. Lelmiyáni was of course no help, as these flat, dull dná lands bored her to a level of ennui beyond anything that I could have conjured alone. To be honest, I just do not think that I have it in me to be a mother; I lack the instincts, I lack the capacity to understand others or know how to let others rely on me, or me on them.

By the time we got to Katalál, I am sad to report that I was a wretched, snivelling wreck with a festering resentment of the generality of my existence and an abject fear of what the future could hold for me in this unexpected condition.

Katalál was boring too. All commerce and politicking which was duller than the local ditch water in high summer. I so missed Ta'áné and so wanted him to give me the joy of my condition. I yearned for anything from him, but most of all, at the very least maybe a letter.

**\*Blotches from tears\***

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ¼

### Part the Twenty-Second – Shédra in Love!

We tarried just long enough in dusty, dry, dull Katalál for Tusilén to transact various mercantile endeavours. He was now keen to develop a triangular trade of goods from Vrá to Katalál thence Béy Sű and thence back to Vrá. I'm not sure anyone really took any interest in my ironic observations that this was near enough possibly the same geographical arrangement as was described by the proto-historical Three States of the Triangle, with their pylons.

Vrá spices to Butrús, Butrús timber and lacquer to Katalál, Katalál spirits eastward and southward. Maybe a side trade in dná grain. Mercantile alliances were being forged and agreements made. Tusilén was in his element it would seem and strutting like a cock küni.

One agreement was made with Ripened Sheaf but would require a detour from the sakbé east to a little place called Mishábar. Apparently grain shipments had been missed from a cadet family and explanation, restitution and potentially shámtnla for lost revenue was required. Díyo with Chu'ésa and the greater part of our caravan were to continue on the sakbé, whilst the rest of us went more direct, but by country tracks to Mishábar, which lay within low hills within the wider sweep of the Katalál to Béy Sű sakbé.

Our journey was hot and dusty, but we made good time before, close to Mishábar, we came across some trappy badlands in which the track became barely perceptible. The deterioration of the track and general unkemptness of the encroaching scrub strongly suggested that it had fallen out of use for the season at least. It also held danger.

Atlún! Erupting from their brood nests all around us. All leaping chitin, mandibles and venom. Talūvaz's daily wardings luckily prevented several of us, including myself, succumbing in the first onslaught. I immediately took to the air to put myself out of reach and commenced crushing the things with the administrations of Krá. My ground borne companions meanwhile remained in hand strokes and fulminations for a while. Tusilén (as is his wont) temporarily suffering paralysis. I took private pride that on this occasion my aerial thaumaturgy was more efficacious than Talūvaz's, able to pick and engage my foe with total oversight of the scene of battle.

As the dust eventually cleared, and the last of the atlún twitched on the end of Hokésh's hatchet, we recalled that this type of pest often hoarded the treasures of their victims in their nests. Once more my thaumaturgy came to the fore, with underground reconnaissance undertaken with cats-eyed clairvoyance quickly pinpointing where we needed to burrow to reach a small, but profitable cache. This cheered Tusilén up a trifle after his unfortunate envenomation.

It is pleasant to recount that since Trákonel left, we are more organised in our reconnoitres, with far less of the heedless rushing ahead into trouble. Such was the case at Mishábar where I could spy out with my sorceries the village, and what may have been occurring therein, from a safe distance so an informed plan of approach could be formulated. I was able to divine that the missing shipments were still stored in the courtyard at Mishábar, but that a group of ruffians appeared to be holding sway in the village. Had bandits taken over?

After some discussion whether to immediately assault from different directions or not, it was decided that until we could prove the bandits were actually bandits, then a more diplomatic approach should

at first be attempted. So it was that we entered the village, clearly demonstrating by equipage and mien that we could clearly deal violent business if such was required. The ruffians appeared to be there at the behest of the Hetman, however a clear recounting of why the stacked shipments were still here was not immediately forthcoming. There was certainly uneasiness in the village with both fear and we thought distrust of the largely unwanted garrison. The hetman was polite enough, but also in thrall to the ruffians. As guests under hospitality, our hands were tied!

Hints were made to us by worried villagers that maybe not all was as it should be, people had gone missing, and we should speak to the old priestess of Sárku in her little hut. A shockingly and disturbingly untidy hut festooned with unnerving paraphernalia, unguents, and symbology in direct discordance with my own philosophical view. How anyone can live with such disorder I know not, it near triggered palpitations in me! The crone was pleasant and polite enough though, and it was from her that we finally confirmed that there had been a daughter kidnapped (along with several others from the fields around) and perhaps we should visit the old, ruined fort on the hill. There were undead there, but she would be pleased if we kept an open mind. Both intriguing and disturbing!

To the fort we trailed. Hokésh blazing the trail finding and identifying tracks of the daughter and other victims. We entered the fort via a cave in the tor below it, where hidden shédra lurked but were efficiently dealt with. Soon coming across the unfortunate woman in question she was pale and obviously dangerously sick. Her condition was such that we decided that an immediate return to Mishábar to render medical aid was required. We gave her what unguents we had to delay the onset of death and moved to depart. Briefly discomfited by the onslaught of a biridlú, which was duly lanced by a bolt from Talúvaz, until we found passage up

I flew ahead with the stricken girl to bring her as quickly as possible to the old crone. The others followed on, again making a demonstration of martial skill as they entered the village. In the village there had meanwhile been a sort of coup with the hetman side-lined, and wiser, braver heads prevailing. There followed a brief altercation in which the ruffians briefly sought to overpower us and restore their desired ends. Their mistake. Released from guest bond, their leader's head was soon bouncing on the ground to a stroke from Hokésh. The rest seeing the presence of puissant sorceries, beyond their ken, and how easily their leader had been bested then promptly beslickened their kilts and made off.

Alas, there was nothing that could be done for the poor girl. The tomb disease was too far advanced in her. She clawed at her bedding and her restraints, crying out that she wished to return to the arms of her lover. It transpired that he had previously gone missing and had already become stricken. Neither had caused harm to a living soul, and the law (I am told) and precedent does not allow for the casual execution of any dead walking who are acting within the mores of normal society. And here was her lover, the cantankerous hetman, come at the point she passed from life into her unlife to take her home. Promises were exacted from them that they would continue to cause no harm to the living, and they were free. Thus, they walked, hand in hand into the sunset, and towards the not so distant fort that would become their marital home, for whatever portion of eternity is to be allowed them.

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ½

### Part the Twenty-Third – Remarkable Revelations In the Realm of Njénü

Tusilén had acquired a map, in the ruined fort I later learnt, while rummaging about in a wall. It seemed to show somewhere of note in the Kurt Hills. The map triggered an almost migratory obsession in our noble leader; and by lucky happenstance the Kurt Hills lay just to the north of the very sakbé we had to take.

We re-united with the rest of our party as planned at the appointed sakbé tower, having overnighted the night before in the wilds, as guests within Talūvaz's conjured pavilion. A marvel to see it now, both inside and out, and I swear it may even have been bigger on the inside than out! It may just have been a trick on the eyes bestowed by the lavish décor. All dreamt, and disquietingly I believe Talūvaz was party to all. Luckily my particular dream was rather duller than some of the more "lively" sendings that I have enjoyed since leaving dear Ta'áné in Tumíssa. Instead, a sense of ravening hunger (not unexpected) looking for me, and me following a whistling little girl through a pretty woodland, in search of I knew not what. Next morning, Tusilén was even more adamant that we needed to follow his map.

On the sakbé we were now joined in company with a number of pé chói of distinctly tribal, uncultivated and wild appearance. Residents of the Kurt Hills. Having fallen in with them, whiling away the long tsán in companionable discourse it was a pleasure to be invited to visit them at their village within the southern margins of the Kurt Hills. Again Díyo and the caravan were to keep to the sakbé, whilst a smaller expedition was to wend their way into the hills.

For me the Kurt Hills was a welcome relief from the overbearing boredom and blistering heat of the dull, flat monoculture plains of the dná belt. Great steep forested pinnacles between lush gorges; limestone again, but of a totally different nature to the slabby forestland of the eastern Chákas. With the height and shade of the woodlands it was much cooler too; for the first time in a while, I could actually feel clean, rather than feeling besmirched by sweaty grime. There were even cool pools to wash away the filth of the day. My spirits enlivened a bit from the depressive torpor that had been my wont since leaving Tumíssa. I even worried less about letters, rationally there was no way that my news could have got there and a return found me as yet.

The pé chói lived in their own enclave within an area of tangled upland jungle, festooned with lianas hanging from the majestic, ancient trees. We came across their village suddenly to our human perception. The pé chói houses were low, rounded domes of chitinous substance with a single oval door darkened by weather and age to a mottled brownish green, covered with bits of leaves, twigs, and boughs. The houses were connected together by narrow, tortuous pathways, many of which were concealed, or wandered up into the trees. Here and there under the trees were stands of smaller saplings, plots of bright yellow flowers, grassy mounds, and areas of apparently random tangled vines.

I am told that my companions found the place disquietingly quiet. To me it was a haven of quietude. The pé chói do not leak their thoughts in a psychic bedlam like humanity does, so apart from the hum from my own companions (which I have now learned to largely tune out), it was much more serene than the mind roar of the habitations with which I must usually contend. They even had a fascinating

library stocked with clay and wooden cylinders, largely devoted to abstruse mathematics, natural philosophy and the motions of the planets and moons. A demi-paradise for me.

That evening we were treated to the local cuisine: young bark, green tuberous root cakes (poisonous to we humans we were warned), yellow flowers, dark brown spherical tubers (fried or roasted), dark orange fungi, segmented tubular grasses, translucent purplish fruit, roasted insects and lizard kebabs. All washed down with a lightly fermented purplish dsach-nn-tk drink. It was the first time I have truly savoured a meal for a while; none of the cloying, vile meatiness and fatty liquor that my missing guest always forced on me. Pleasant and often surprisingly philosophical and intellectual discourse flowed, seeking its own path like a mountain cascade.

The village head and shaman, a venerable female by the name of Tií-pétk then sought to answer the questions we had concerning the map and other matters, first she divined what we might long for. This being:

- Myself – independence
- Tusilén – acceptance
- Hokésh – purpose
- Talūvaz – knowledge
- T'tkek M'jer – restoration

All were seekers.

She then directed us to seek out a holy man in these parts that the locals refer to as the Hu'hún Sé'iyau Artáo, but more widely known as the old traveller. A holy man with strange powers. Apparently, he lived alone, 'free from fear', near the Tear of Artáo. He should have the answers we sought!

Now, the Sé'iyau of Artáo take pride in their stoicism. They seek to honour Lord Hnálla and emulate the transcendental outlook of Lord Drá. Lord Drá's reward is not 'plenty' at some unspecified time in the future. It is freedom from fear of scarcity, right now. While the "city folk" below run shrieking for a Temple-trained healer at the least injury, Kurtáni apparently do not have that luxury in their wilderness. Instead, "noble action" is to accept crippling injury, horrific disfigurement, and death stoically, to face famine without complaint, and to maintain dignity, avoiding unseemly excesses, when there is good fortune to enjoy. I think I can appreciate the lack of excess!

Finding the Tear would require some handy triangulations taken at precisely noon from just the right part of the forest track taken on the summit of the spires of the Sun King's Daughter and Hekadásu. Between Tusilén's navigation skills and my mathematics and innate ability to find pretty much anything I sought at that time, this proved quite simple.

Our journey was interrupted by two mildly amusing encounters. The first was overhearing a hushed debate about us between a small group of rényu, showing remarkable facility with language, usually not expected from them, even when in our society. Somewhat disturbing was their reference to some form of potential threat that had the scent of cinnamon about it that was apparently being hunted in the region by a small army.

The second was when a resplendent and supremely arrogant young sérudla sought to block our passage via a makeshift bridge across a mountain stream. "*Toll or challenge!*" it declared. "*Challenge Accepted!*" cried Hokésh, promptly and adroitly drop kicking the unsuspecting mini-dragon direct on the snout, laying it low with a single blow! I am usually not really impressed with martial endeavours,



but even I was moved to click my fingers in delighted mirth at such a memorable display of unarmed prowess!

These amusing encounters aside, it was a relatively pleasant amble through hillside glades before we won through to our destination. A simple single roomed hut on stilts in a clearing with an attendant shed and outhouse. We were, unsurprisingly, expected and met by a jolly and spritely fellow, sporting nothing but a simple loincloth. Obviously old, but nevertheless young with it. Bald, but sporting a wizened white beard. His eyes were milky opaque. He welcomed us into his surprisingly tidy and comfortable single room abode and treated to us to a very fine tea in fine ceramic cups alongside some fresh fruit. Most of his converse was directed at us, but some, was to his companion kün; the two treating each other with the amused condescension of a long acquainted couple.

Njénü, the Lord of Dreams, had appraised him of our coming (if he wasn't in truth Njénü himself!) and the reason(s) and it was to that, that we then turned (why Njénü was taking a personal interest in us unbidden was not lost on me, and it still preys on my mind!). Having studied a simulacrum in relief of Tusilén's map, our sprightly host declared that we must travel the next morning by boat to an Isle of Dreams. All would not be as it seemed there, but we were not to worry although we would face some difficulties (I did worry!).

After a light breakfast and tea laced with narcotic lichen and honey, we proceeded to the lake, tendrils of morning mist clinging to its surface in the strangely chill morning air. There a skiff awaited in which are host (rather more sombre in mien than the eve before) guided us effortlessly, and with the surety of perfect sight to our island destination. We were not in Tsolyánu anymore (again!).

As we stepped onto the Island, we were all dislocated from each other and had to face on our own the subsequent trials and tribulations. In the first part a trial (in reality more of a ritual humiliation), and in the second part a dreaming of what we might seek.

**GMs NOTE.....Anka'á doesn't actually commend what follows to paper but instead adds a notification to herself referring to internal mind locker "Fears" and internal mind locker "Dearest".**

My personal humiliation placed me in a palace in the capital with my comrades, my belly swollen and obviously close to birthing. I was to have an audience with some senior imperial officials. I was thence called in to a chamber surrounded with purple curtains hanging from suspended poles from the high ceiling. My name was announced, and an official indicated that my comrades should be seated.

*"Anka'á hiSarashkü of Vrá province. You are called to give testimony as to your role in recent circumstances. Most notably in the foiling of enemy activity and your subsequent possession by demons in the west of the empire. Speak, so that all may hear!"*

The curtains were then drawn back and before me were a row of exceedingly important people on high daises. Surrounding three sides of the room seated further back were more nobles, purple being the dominant colour of apparel. I could sense the presence of hundreds, if not thousands, all staring at me intently. My fate and that of my clan rested on what I would say next!

I am poor company at the best of times, unsociable, naïve in society and do not suffer idiotic questions lightly when they are posed to me. I prefer to deal with facts rather than emotive issues and have a vicious temper when I am pushed beyond my limits of what I am willing to accept. This was why my clan cloistered me as a child, knowing that I was a liability (potentially dangerously so) in polite society.

Thus, it did not go well! Utter terror, humiliation, tantrum, tears and abject flight followed.

I believe that this exercise served as a form of emotive sacrifice to clear my mind for what followed; but we were dealing with a demon, the motives of which should never be trusted!

We were all thus transferred to the Atheneum of Envisaging, a lovely marble building of ancient style; its name proclaimed chased in golden Livyáni within its floor. Here we were met by a delicately sophisticated man of scholarly mien and middle years, wearing a starched robe and brocaded ornate sleeveless outer vestment. Like some sort of ritual priest of a bygone age. Thus, he spake, whilst recording our names and lineages in his ledger:

*"Welcome, please place your names on the roll. Once you have done so you may proceed to a chamber of envisioning. Please do not disturb any of the other guests. And do remember that the athenaeum is a place of study"*

Thence to my dream. The contents and direction of which were not so much something I sought, but more a statement/intimation of fact that left me stunned and terrified!

There in my vision was my dear Ta'áné hiTlekkuné at his clan house in Tumíssa ( I had an indescribable surge of emotion and surges elsewhere too!). The sun had only just risen, but Ta'áné was already reading and scribbling. Papers were scattered around (He is so maddeningly untidy!) with images of the suit of Dragon Warrior armour and the inscriptions it contains. We really love this research, and he seems to have made further advances already!

A slave then entered the room with chumétl and fruits for breakfast. Ta'áné acknowledged her (he's much more polite than me!), but ignored the food and continued to work (as is both our wonts when transfixed by a new conundrum or lead). An older man then came. Someone I have a sense that I have met, but not entirely recalled. His uncle perhaps? but certainly some form of mentor or tutor. He spoke:

*"you really must eat Ané. And all this study, while noble, is not all you think it is. You have responsibilities to your clan you know. You are behind on your other work. When was the last time you sparred in the practice yard... hmmm?"*

Dear Ta'áné rejoined: *"but uncle (using the form for an unrelated, but respected elder), there is so much to discover here!"*

The gent then replying: *"I know. Eat up, then meet me for practice in a kirén".*

Then I was seeing Ta'áné when he must have been about twelve years old. He was playing with other children outside the Tumíssa clan house. Some local older boys turned up and started bullying the Red Sun children. This quickly escalated into a full-on street brawl.

And there was the same gent, the tutor, but younger. He stiffened as if receiving a message (although no message arrived, and he cannot possibly have seen what was happening). The gent ran out to survey the scene. Poor Ta'áné was now being beaten by the bigger boys. The man watched carefully, but did not intervene, until one of the bullies picked up a large rock. At this, the man's fingers twitched, and the rock dropped on the toes of the bully. Ta'áné then got up, cuts on his face, and started fighting back until the bullies fled. The man smiled and slipped back into the shadows.

Then I see a mother from a wealthy clan holding her newly born to her breast, slaves were in attendance making her comfortable. A clan elder entered attended by three other figures. The slaves left hastily on being signalled. The leader of the three was an older woman dressed strangely, a high imperial official of some sort. She remained silent throughout the proceedings that followed. Another

was young and foppish, I think a young Dláppa hiSsánmirin! The third is the uncle, yet younger, dressed similarly to the imperious woman, but bearing the insignia of the OAL.

*"Milena, sweet child, we must talk"* the young Dláppa said.

*"NO! They cannot take him!"* Cried Miléna

*"I know, I know, and I will not let them. But even so, he must be protected. You know what is at stake here. You knew it that when you lay with him did you not?"* Quoth he.

Milena than replied in distress: *"I..... I..... yes, of course"*

The young Dláppa then continued: *"The empire demands it my child, but fret not for as long as the secret is kept he shall be safe. Why the lady herself has told me... at least in her own manner. Chiriné here will stay, long term. A tutor, a guide and protector. Nothing must be spoken about this matter after today, you understand?"*

*"Yes honoured sire, thank you, thank you all"* replied poor Milena, weeping in relief.

The tutor I recognise, Chiriné, then knelt down, stroked the head of the babe muttering something to him and smiled warmly to Miléna. He then turned to the imperial official and speaks as if responding to an instruction:

*"I will m'lady, with every fibre of my being I will do as I am bidden, for the glory of the emperor himself!"*

The implications of this suite of scenes is quite simply astounding! And soul clenchingly terrifying!

Insanely, once we were all gathered together once more, we treated further with Njénü, promising him access to one of our best dreams each month in return for a boon. In my case the ability to spread soporiferousness.

The Traveller was awaiting us and duly transported us back to the land and his little house on the shore. Here we woke up, enjoyed a final repast, were given some of the dream inducing lichen, and thus refreshed, passed onward to our next adventure.

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ½

### Part the Twenty-Fourth – Kidnap and Retribution

We met up with our sakbé bound companions again at the bustling town of Haumá on the south-eastern edge of the Kurt Hills. Set within undulating karstic hill pastures, the town has a thriving livestock market, and its main commodities are all based around the rearing of hmá and chlén. Wool, yarn, tapestries, rugs, being the staple, alongside chlén hide and some trade in timber and paper. Tusilén's kilt was twitching at the thought of getting a piece of this action!

We were lodged handsomely enough at the Lodge of the Blind Sentinel; named for a pillar of rock that overlooks it, which has been carved with a human face. Here, Tusilén and Hokésh were soon busy with the heady business of arranging trading agreements with the Standing Pinnacle clan, whose power base lies thereabouts, and who control the pulse of commerce in that district.

The rest of us were largely at leisure with a fine public library of the Temple of Thúmis, some rather splendid ornamental gardens, and some excellently quaint architecture to pique my interest. The Temple of Thúmis's pearly roof, is a case in point; fashioned as it is from slates made from the shells of some monstrous form of river creature! The whole roof shines in the sun with a nacreous lustre!

I again had to reconcile myself to the mental bedlam emanating from the gathered throngs, so largely kept myself to myself; penning some notes about our travels and some philosophical musings to entertain Ta'áné as part of my usual batch of correspondence with him.

It was thus very ill happenstance that during one of my few sorties into the bustling metropolis that I came to find myself firstly kidnapped, then offered for sacrifice, subsequently accidentally killed, and brought immediately back to life, and then instantly thereafter, finally reinhabited by my missing Demon! I swear that travelling the planes is safer!

I do not remember much about my kidnapping as I was drugged insensible by a draught placed within my tea. Immediately before this, I was apparently bamboozled by some actress claiming to be a scholar of the n'lüss migrations called Míselna hiQa'atkoi. Pretending to be in distress, papers dropped after being jostled in the crowd, she played my naivety, and off for a thrilling chat about things ancient I thought I was bound.

Instead, I awoke, actually bound in light steel chains, staring at the ceiling of rather a squalid cellar. Cowled figures were ambient around me chanting, capering and gesticulating. If I wasn't imminently about to have my heart torn out, I might have found the entire ludicrous pantomime quite hilarious!

Luckily my companions had fortuitously detected my vanishing in time to effect a search and rescue effort. The actress was easy to find, and from thence via a seedy drug and gambling den to a decrepit town house they made their way to the filthy basement predicament in which I had found myself.

I find those silly, pointless stories, in which the heroes always turn up just in time to rescue the poor maid from the clutches of the sinister cowled chap who is at the cusp of his ritual sacrifice, so tedious and lacking in imagination. Yet there I found myself, the very maid trapped in just such a farcical situation as the ritual reached its sacrificial climax! In stormed my companions right on cue! They might as well have been disguised in robes, pretending to be celebrants! In fact maybe they were!

A swirling and chaotic melee ensued with Hokésh, Tusilén and Chu'ésa hacking right and left. Talūvaz immolating anything that was (or wasn't moving), right. Left and centre. Including me! It actually took

the leader of the ritual to bring me back from the very gates to the Isles after I was struck by one of Talūvaz's wilder bolts! I now have a rather embarrassing network of fine scars, like to the veins of a leaf, about my neck to remind me of my first encounter with death!

The ritual celebrants were clearly fumbling amateurs of the first order. They believed they were summoning the demon Mikoyél, The Formless, Lord of the Thirty-second circle, the One of Knives, servitor of Prince Origób. It was obvious to anyone with even a smattering of demonology, from the presence of the Practices of Kyunúmu, that they had been right royally duped by whomsoever had given them the form of the ritual. They were instead summoning my old tenant, Gurushá, the endless hunger!

Finally released from my metal bonds by Tusilén before the fateful plunge of knife into my heart or throat, or wherever, I was for the second time in my life faced with the imminent ingestion of my closest companions and cousins. Just as last time, there was only one thing to be done. Unfortunately this meant that a number of silly young scions of some rather noble houses must now be listed as having disappeared. But a demon came and demons require sacrifice, or they become really quite huffy, and we couldn't have that in a bustling metropolis. The final sacrifice was still my own again, as Gurushá also required his old lodgings back. The sickening unquenchable hunger settled back upon, and within me. At least my cousins and companions were off the menu again!

If almost being sacrificed to the wrong demon wasn't complicated enough the ensuing legal wrangle was, if anything worse. There was an apparently missing demon, there were missing scions of some really rather important clans, others were dead (and dismembered!), and to cap it all off the lead celebrant belonged to Standing Pinnacle, the very clan that Tusilén and Hokésh were in the process of agreeing some hopefully very lucrative trade deals with. There was also the matter of why me, specifically?

This last was most particularly troubling. The idiot in charge of the sacrificial ritual, one Jarshán hiValsur, had been given my name by unspecified contacts in Béy Sü, who had also fed him the form of ritual to use. Somebody, or somebodies of great import, and with access to serious demonological works, had firstly heard of me in particular, secondly knew where I was (or at least where I was going to be!) and most pertinently and terrifyingly, clearly wanted me dead! Why? What, under all the Pylons have I done to attract such malicious attention?

Luckily, after our experiences in Tumíssa, Tusilén had become quite adroit in the matter of engaging lawyers. The whole farcically sorry incident was deeply embarrassing not only to Standing Pinnacle, but also to some other surprisingly august clans including Joyous of Vrá, Golden Sunburst and Emerald Kirtle, White Crystal and Sea Blue. Discussions ranged around shámtla that could be due. A paltry sum was on offer when you consider my entire body and soul was destined to be given to a demon by these silly little bratty shits! Total extinction! That is the way of shámtla between the mighty and the middling though!

Angrier than I have ever been before, I demanded of my cousins that we should instead go the route of an honourable duel. After much discourse and debate they surprisingly agreed with me. Indeed, Tusilén actually saw this as an opportunity for further advertisement of our clan through a declaration of our lofty honour. Standing Pinnacle could also see it as a handy way of sweeping the whole sorry mess under one of the locally made carpets. All parties could then get on with the serious, and more proper business of raking in the káitars for everybody's mutual benefit.

Preparations took a number of days, with me continually looking over my shoulder, as paranoia at the dizzying implications of the late attempt on my life settled upon me. It turns out that duels in the

hirilákte arena between sorcerers are almost entirely unheard of. In fact no one could think of a single recent case! Duels have to be fairly and honourably balanced, yet they also need to be entertaining for the crowd. Two incompetents going at each other with fists or staves was not really an option, yet our thaumaturgical practices were too diverse for a match to be properly weighed. Talūvaz came up with the elegant solution. Duel by scrolls!

Eight scrolls would be prepared, four nominated by each party, and placed in a basket. We would then each randomly select four. In the ensuing duel we could only use those four spells that we had chosen. After that it would just have to be an embarrassment of fisticuffs. Luckily it did not come to an embarrassment of fisticuffs!

Chu'ésa of course insisted that I must look the part, dragging me around purveyors of fine clothes and insisting that I had a "makeover". Possibly a worse trial than the duel itself! The hirilákte was duly booked, and I hoped that my cousins and companions placed their káitars on me.

Myself and Jarshán hiValsur strode out, dwarfed by the surrounding arena. We each selected our scrolls, more or less at random from the agreed basket. Then battle was engaged after we had proclaimed ourselves; an uncomfortable experience that I somehow managed to accomplish without embarrassment.

Our first pass was myself putting up a Circle of Quiescence. Totally useless against the Fist of Fire that he first slung at me! I amazed myself, and indeed all the gathered throng, by pulling off a miraculously acrobatic series of backflips and side rolls to totally avoid the onslaught. Galled, he then made the mistake of trying an unerring javelin on me, forgetting (or not knowing) that he needed to be much closer. The useless missile skittered on the ground far short of me. He then began to close further, preparing himself for physical combat. I was having none of that, and adroitly threw my own Fist of Fire downrange. Confused by my acrobatic manoeuvres, he catastrophically stumbled whilst trying to dodge, and took a bolt right in the middle of his chest. Down he went, and victory was mine!

Tusilén and the rest of my companions gleefully claimed their winnings. Jarshán's freedom was forfeit and he was passed over into my care as a near slave, his final fate to be decided in Béy Sü. And so, I became the first sorcerer in living memory to win a sorcerous duel in a hirilákte!

## The Diary of Anka'á hiSarashkü Aged 27 ½

### Part the Twenty-Fifth – An Interrupted Auction

Having concluded our business to everyone's satisfaction in Haumá, we thence took the sakbé towards Béy Sü. Another 25 days across the heart of the Empire, marvelling at Talūvaz's conjured palanquins and pavilions. Standing Pinnacle had disowned Jarshán and placed him in my care to seek justice in Béy Sü when we arrived. It was, however, soon apparent that my prisoner had contracted some form of terrible wasting disease. Unable to sleep, he was evidently wasting away from fatigue and the onset of a terrible madness. I can but presume that this was a demonic curse, linked to his amateurishly botched attempt to sacrifice me. We did what we could for him, giving him the lichen of pleasant repose and housing him overnight in Talūvaz's pavilion of pleasant soporific dreams.

These measures only delayed the inevitable and his soul passed (probably still screaming) to another place, even as the sun kissed domes and minarets of Béy Sü finally lay before us beside the shimmering Mssúma.

On our part, myself, Chu'ésa and Díyo were all fourteen weeks gone in our pregnancies on arrival, the date being 10<sup>th</sup> Halír, with the dná harvest all gathered. Fate would not see us through Béy Sü's gates though. Instead, we left the Sakbé and headed for one of our clan villas, set amongst vineyards, some 40 tsán distant from the city. Again, we had important commercial business to transact, this time the auction of numerous antiquities and curios that we had acquired during our travels. It had all been arranged ahead of time by our factor Biláish and Tusilén, I presume whilst we were at Haumá, or still on the Sakbé.

At the villa we were presented with an eclectic mix of would be purchasers.

- Hárisu hiSarélke of Rising Moon; a private antiquities broker;
- Chosún hiKarélsa of Dark Moon; antiquities librarian for the Temple of Ksáru;
- Hekélla hiVu'úrtesh; Grey Wand; scholar priestess with Temple of Thúmis; and
- Marála hiSharítla personal assistant to Lord Sagán hiTlakotáni

We were proposing to auction off a sizeable proportion of the techno magical, magical and provenanced antiquities of unique nature that we had in our possession. Tusilén's kilt was again twitching with the excitement of it all, and the expectation of the fountain of gold that would be ejaculated into our coffers.

The auction began uneventfully enough, Chosún and Hekélla clearly vying against each other, and Lord Sagan looking on with an air of serenely superior and amused jollity. Then everything went to the pylons!

Firstly Hokésh's little ru'ún came chirruping in and suddenly made a dash for it having grabbed one of the star lots, a charging device for eyes. It was out of the doors in a squeaking flash, pursued by Biláish. We had barely had time to leap from our daises in shock when the entire room was suddenly overcome by the vomitously cloying stench of soured milk as two of the attendant auctioneers assistants exploded into open nexus points. Innards splashed everywhere. Through the stinking nexus points issued a slithering horde of vile maggoty snakes: pe'deth, the spawn of Tsuru'u, servitors of She Who Must Not Be Named! As if that was not bad enough the rushing air from the nexus quickly plunged the ambient temperature towards icehouse or lofty peak level of chill. Chill enough that it actually began to burn extremities and eyes.

Faced with such an assault, we grabbed what we could from the auctioneers display and fled for the warmth and daylight outside. This did not achieve the return to greater normality that we perhaps desired!

Outside Hokésh's little ru'ún and Biláish were just diving through another nexus; this one purple and coruscating behind a trio of little cowled figures with glowing eyes. One was evidently controlling Hokésh's ru'ún, another casually incinerated one of the pursuing pe'deth with some form of eye.

A little separated from these three was none other than the Boneless King that we had met on Gayél. Dressed in his strange panoply, and hovering above his own personal shimmering green nexus.

And then there was the dragon! (the dragon didn't need a nexus!); belching a tongue of flame that immolated pe'deth and the front wall of the villa alike. Sitting astride the dragon was a warrior dressed in scarlet; Chekkán hiVríddi of the Legion of Searing Flame.

All desired that we accompanied them, and them alone. Gij and Sons (the cowled ones) stating that we must fulfil the geas placed upon us in Tsámra, and wonderful rewards would be ours for the taking. The Boneless King informing us that something was rotten on the Isle of Vrá that we should attend to. Chekkán hiVríddi merely had an Imperial Warrant to immediately convey us forthwith to Avanthár!

We chose Gij and Sons. I have absolutely no idea why!. Díyo meanwhile was off to Avanthár and T'tket M'jer to Gayél.

We so should have gone to Avanthár! We are so going to be in trouble for not doing so.