

# Untitled Document

## The Remarkable Captain Erit

The persons involved in the present mission are led into the hollow mountain Avanthar, through winding passages past statues and exhibits of past triumphs, to a room with ruby-beaded wall hangings, a gigantic mosaic map of Tsolyanu and its environs on one wall, scattered pillows and a low table surrounded by cushions of precisely metered heights.

The Imperial Chamberlain, Sionu hiMakkochaqu, introduces each person to all the others.

Once everyone is gathered, the Servitors of Silence admit a handsome, serious man in elegant armor of the Legion of the Mighty Prince. He is introduced as Captain Erit, but his face is familiar from coinage and tapestries as very similar to that of Prince Eselne, who has become the new Emperor.

Hand on sword-hilt, he begins to speak.

"As you know, the Sun is going out. It has grown dimmer without growing lower in the sky, speeding more quickly through its appointed circuit. Our savants tell us we are losing two minutes a day, an hour a month. In nine months, the day will be shortened to nothing, and in ten, the oceans will freeze. Even the loathsome Ssu will eventually perish."

"That is, unless something is done about it."

"His Majesty has arranged for an embassy to Livyanu, that strange nation of tattooed sorcerors. Some of you speak and read Livyani; others will be assisted with a sacred relic which understands the language better than any living soul. That is well, for what you overhear may potentially be as useful to our cause as what is formally said in conference."

"All the nations of Tekumel worship the same pantheon of twenty gods first described by the priest Pavar at the dawn of the First Imperium of the Priest-Kings of Engsvan hla Ganga. There are differences of emphasis, to be sure: we Tsolyani venerate Hnalla, Lord of Light, and Hru'u, Lord of Darkness, as first among equals, while our warlike neighbors in the land of Mu'ugalavya have especial fondness for Vimulha, Lord of Fire. The barbarous hordes of Yan Kor esteem Karakan, Lord of Ever-Glorious War, and Dlamelish, Lady of Wanton Delights, above all others, and the hierophants of sweltering Sarlavya pray to Lady Avanthé, Lady of Chaste Femininity, and Dlamelish equally under an assumed name."

"But Livyanu is different. They worship an entirely different and secret pantheon known as the Shadow Gods. Their names, even the number of them is a closely guarded secret. And no sorcerers are as powerful or subtle as those of Livyanu. They border the fiercest, grimmest land ever known, the warrior-state of Mu'ugalavya, and yet they prevail with a poor and despised army, owing solely to their mighty magics."

"We are sending this delegation to consult with the Livyani on the matter of the Sun. It shines on them as well as on us, and if Tekumel freezes in the dark, they freeze with it. They have agreed to broach some of their secrets and those of their Shadow Gods to us, although you must beware treachery, as once you have helped them to the solution, they may attempt to keep you from bringing these secrets home. They will most certainly try bribery, offering you whatever you most desire, to get you to remain in their land rather than return home. This is why I have only chosen Tsolyani patriots, who know that their homeland is not merely the comfortable setting they chanced to discover upon their arrival on this globe, but their heart and soul, the housing of their spirit."

Hakiron hiChankullar raises an eyebrow when this is spoken. This is perhaps the greatest compliment he has received from a Tsolyani.

"However, your mission is more than it appears. We have learned that the Livyani possess a great artifact, the Eye of Daybreak, which permits direct communication with Hnalla, Lord of Light. As deniers of Hnalla's divinity, the Livyani use this Eye as a source of illumination in their temple workshop! But in our hands, it could be used to divine Hnalla's exact wishes, and save the Sun."

"Diplomacy and scholarship are well and good. Perhaps consulting with the Livyani will indeed find a solution to our crisis. But your real mission is to steal the Eye of Daybreak. Our artisans have made an exact copy of the Eye to put in its place, allowing you time to

escape from Livyanu before the theft is detected. In extremis, there is a entrance to the ancient tubeway tunnels beneath the Temple of Twelve Trumpets of Revelation in the capital city of Livyanu. Kialandi, Hakiron, Vathek and Natoro have been there once before and can guide you to it if need be."

"Colonel Mekelu hiMraktine will command the military members of the expedition with Hakiron hiChankullar as his second-in-command. Princess Jadis will be in charge of the priestly contingent. She has chosen to travel incognito in the guise of an aide to Natoro, a priest of Thumis. In reality, Natoro is her bodyguard and husband, but you all must treat him as senior to her, difficult as that may be for we status-conscious Tsolyani. Kialandi of the Flowers is her lieutenant in command of the priestly contingent."

"Questions? You may speak freely, as you address Captain Erit, a wellborn but not especially notable servant of the Empire."

Kialandi asks graciously, "Will we be arriving overland? Or by tunnel I gather we will be traveling overland, if the tunnel is for emergencies only, but I wanted to be certain that I understood."

"Livyanu lies across the Chenegara Deeps from us, so you will travel by ship. Travelling by land would require you to cross Mu'ugalavya, whom we have just defeated in war, and that would not be especially prudent."

Kialandi nods and gives a mysterious smile. Inside she sighs, thinking, "I meant overland in the general sense, as opposed to underground...but it is no matter. Next time. I will be more specific. Now, he thinks I'm a geographical imbecile."

"Also, Kialandi," says Captain Erit, "we do not believe the Livyani are even aware that there is a tubeway entrance in their capital city. If you were to suddenly appear there, we would be admitting to them that it existed, and it may be helpful in future to maintain that terminus as our secret."

Kialandi bows gratefully, "Thank you. That is what I wished to clarify."

After Captain Erit has finished speaking, Hakiron looks down at his sword "Daybreak" and considers the glory in retrieving artifact that possesses the same name.

Hakiron looks to Captain Erit and asks, "Will you be coming with us?"

"How I wish that I were!" he says sincerely, his smile dropping away for a moment. "Alas, His Majesty requires me here, for various important errands as well as quite a few unimportant ones that he cannot ignore. Perhaps in the future, when His Majesty's reign is more settled, I will be allowed to travel beyond the Golden Tower and join you in the thrust and parry of desperate adventure for which I have trained and yearned my entire life ... but that time has yet to come."

"We will pray that day comes, Captain," Kialandi replies gravely.

Mekelu's innate sense of honor forces him to ask a question. "Your Highness, if we find the Livyani to be open and helpful, stealing the Eye of Daybreak could very well incite a war. Instead, if they are indeed open and helpful, might we negotiate or trade for it?"

"Of course!" says Captain Erit. "We would be overjoyed if the Livyani would part with the Eye willingly. Being sorcerors, they might esteem the Eye of Omniscient Understanding, which will travel with you, as a fair trade. And there will be money, of course, and some trinkets the wizards here can part with. But, you know, it really is not necessary to address a mere Captain of the Fifth Legion as 'Highness', though I appreciate the implied compliment."

"What size forces are travelling with us? Is Hakiron's noble cohort coming with us?"

"Ohe, there we are in luck, Molkar! The Livyani, you see, esteem sorcerors above all else, and are dismissive of mere soldiers such as you and I. We can safely send quite an escort without unduly raising their suspicions. A cohort of N'luss might be just the thing, in fact -- the N'luss are more than usually resistant to the blandishments of magic, you know, and their size and strength will overmatch even the Livyani Mortal Guard. Indeed, the only troops we have who are less heedful of sorcery are the Ahoggia, and with apologies to our good friend Chri, a cohort of Ahoggia rumbling through the streets of Tsamra WOULD raise more than a bit of interest!"

"Hakiron should select a score of his best soldiers, which is all a trireme can comfortably hold. And why not take a few of the estimable bodyguards of the Omnipotent Azure Legion, disguised as servants, cooks and porters?"

"One thing only, wise artificer in stone and steel. The soldiers cannot be told too much about the mission. The Livyani are subtle, and given twenty N'luss to ply with wine and women, one would surely bend to their blandishments. I leave it to you exactly how

much to reveal, but the mission cannot be compromised on the altar of fellowship."

"Our men are accustomed to knowing less than all the details of an assignment. However, Hakiron, if the Livyani do attempt to entice our men with any form of bribery, we should ask that they report to us what was asked. Knowing what the opposition is interested in learning can be valuable intelligence."

As a priest of Ksarul, i am more than pleased to lend my knowledge of magic and healing to this trip and only hope that in some small way we shall serve the greater Tsolyani with our sacrifice and determination.

Kagoth

To those who have not met me, I am Kagoth hiGachayal, Fourth Circle Initiate of the Mysteries of Ksarul. While i have not had the clearly illustrious career in the military of our captain of troops, my own additions to the studies of magic are not unknown to those within such circles, i pray. Either way, it is my honor and pleasure to serve with such patriots for such a quest. I only hope my service will find pleasure in the eyes of the Emperor and Ksarul.

Mekelu bows and replies, "Rest assured, from my previous missions, I know quite well the value of priests and mages. Your company is most welcome."

Kagoth bows in return and replies, "Sir, if your sword is as clever as your tongue, and your heart as true as your manner is kind, we can do naught but succeed."

"It is clear that Ksarul blesses this mission. It bears almost no requirement for note that the Shadowgods and their minions are clever in unfathomable ways with regards to sorcery and the mystic arts. We will do well to maintain a strong guard and careful watch." "It might serve us all to understand if there are some here who have a modicum of practice in these arts of sorcery. Modesty commands that i humbly maintain an awareness and small practice of these, though i'm quite sure other's here are far more adept than i. What strength i do have lie mostly in the healing arts, and these, in honor to Ksarul, i happily place at your disposal"

Kialandi glances thoughtfully back and forth between the two priests of Ksarul in their silver masks. Aloud, she says, "Pleased to meet you, Kagoth hiGachayal. I too am a healer. Perhaps, we should speak together at some point and compare our strengths, so

that we will know which of us is most suited to any emergency."

Kagoth replies, "Most honored priestess Kialandi, for whom surely the mysteries of your God have surely settled delicately into your hands as the re'amonh flowers bloom on moon-filled nights in the land of the H'luss, i'm sure your abilities in these arts far outstrip mine, but any moment of speech that we might share will certainly fill me with wonder and therefore be something to seek. I await with pleasure our talk and hold that what knowledge comes from such meeting be only as fair as you yourself."

Kagoth is dressed in robes of Azure and rich, vibrant green. The colors at the middle of the robe are darkest, fading slowly to lighter colors at the edges and hands. The hood is that color of blue just before all light leaves the starry sky, and set within the cowl is the silvery, shining mask of mystery that denotes the priest of Ksarul.

"Captain," asks the lovely Kialandi, lowering her dark lashes, "I do have a question. I am debating the wisdom of bringing Taluvasz of Livyanu with us. On one hand, his insight might prove invaluable. He could travel incognito to keep from drawing attention-- though in truth, it is harder to disguise a tattooed man than most. On the other hand, if the mission is so sensitive, it might be wise not to put undue pressure upon him. "What are your thoughts on this matter?"

"He would need a disguise in any case," says Captain Erit, "for the tattoos of a Livyani denote his name, clan and profession. Having defected to Tsolyanu, he will not be welcome in Livyanu."

"But that can be disguised by our wise practitioners of deception, using their subtle means. It would indeed be helpful to have a native guide for those hundred and one surprises that any traveller to a foreign land encounters. I would deem it wise to take Taluvasz with you -- he is even a native of the capital city of Tsamra, if I'm not mistaken -- but of course as Kethsamial, the Finder of Hidden Vipers, it is within your discretion to take him or no. And you might also take Hereschal hiTogu and Shishkresh hiBilburna, your other advisors, if you think it meet."

Kialandi inclines her head. Smoothing the fringe of her green and violet garment, she replies thoughtfully, "I will discuss the matter with Taluvasz. Unless he reveals some new information which suggests that his returning to Livyanu would be detrimental, I will ask him to accompany us. And, as gathering information will be one of our main purposes on this endeavor, I concur that it would be wise to have Hereschal hiTogu and Shishkresh

hiBilburna among our entourage." She gazes up at the captain and smiles kindly, "I thank you for the suggestion."

In considered tones, Kagoth suggests, "Perhaps, most honored Kialandi, this gentle Taluvasz of the Livyanu will be able to explain whether the removal or hiding of his tattos will in some way injure or affect the casting of his magics." "Should this be the case, we may have to find if one of the puissant magicians of this group might perchance use an illusion to cover their foreign wonder. If they have no relation to his arts and their exercise, and he will in no way be dishonored by the action, perhaps your powerful arts of healing can be used in some way to cover them, if but temporarily".

Kialandi nods graciously, "Thank you, honored Kagoth. I will inquire of him upon this matter."

Kigoth wonders, "Most gracious and honored Kialandi, if it would please you, treasured priestess, perhaps you would allow me the honor of your family name that i might speak to you with all such propriety that you deserve. While to speak with you so familiarly moves me powerfully, i am too bold for speaking so and thus would chastise myself and inquire this of you?"

If his mind is moving in that general direction, it might occur to him that the priest of Thumis under a vow of silence looks rather familiar. As does the young boy who serves him.

The priest seems oddly fit and bears battle scars. He pays rapt attention as people speak, usually looking them directly in the eyes. The page boy has full lips, long lashes, and delicate features.

A little mysterious smile dancing about her lips, Kialandi rises and curtseys\*, "I am Kialandi hiQadari of the Clan Sea Blue, priestess of Hrihayal." She then sinks gracefully back into her seat.

If his mind was moving STILL FURTHER in that direction he \*might\* even wonder why the squat fur-upholstered divan yonder there with the gaudy crimson-checkered seat cover, teal and gold tassels, and ornamental legs resembling four sets of hooked claws just shuffled slightly and made an ever so faint burp ... but that would probably be going



too far.

Kialandi

Here is a slightly longer introduction:

Kialandi hiQadari of the Clan Sea Blue, Priestess of Hrihayal: the Dancing Maiden of Temptation, Harlot of the Five Worlds and Mistress of the Thirty-Two Unspeakable Acts.

Kialandi is a lady of incomparable beauty with long, black, glossy hair, eyes like dark chocolate and wine red lips. She dresses in the diaphanous green and purple garments of her temple.

She is first and foremost a temple politician. She is also a dancer and a healer. Her priestly magic is almost entirely healing oriented. Kialandi participated in the Kolumejalim on behalf of then Prince Eslene and gave a fair accounting of herself. Pleased, the new

Emperor appointed her to the office of Kethsamiyal, the Finder of Hidden Vipers.

Hakiron smiles knowingly at his fearless comrade in arms. He still wonders how to pronounce 'tentpole' in ahoggya.

Meanwhile, Hakiron has something stuck in his mind. Where has he seen the word "Erit" before? It seems awfully ... short and flowerless for a Tsolyani name.

Then he digs out the golden Kaitar-coin he's carried around for a year now, minted on the accession of the Emperor Eselne. It shows a heroic profile not too different from Captain Erit's, and the letters E.R.I.T. across the reverse. The Engsvanyali script around the back of the coin reads Eselne Rex Imperator Tsolyani.

Hakiron gasps in recognition and restrains himself from running to greet his old friend. Prince Eselne here... Cursed Tsolyani social traditions... Why must we play these games!?

He looks from the coin to to "Erit" and sorrows fills his face.

"Ah, Erit, how things have changed, and you have changed. I sorely wish you could join us on this mission, it looks like it could do you good."



He looks away concerned that he may have offended the delicate Tsolyani sensibilities.

"Nonetheless, I shall bring what remains of my faithful cohort. 'Stonegrinder' is getting old but he can still heft a sword better than most, and 'Honest Chlen' who is stronger than a sandstorm. Yes, they are many in my cohort who are worthy veterans. I will handpick the most loyal to join us."

Hakiron begins to smile. "Did I hear that Hereschal is available to join us? I remember when he and I, and a handful of N'luss faced 400 redhats! He refused to retreat until they were all dead. Ah, what a brave man. It would be an honor face death with him again!"

"Yes, well," says Captain Erit, "if all goes as planned, you won't be facing anything more deadly than Livyani cooking! But how often do things go as planned, eh, Hakiron?"

Hakiron lifts back his head laughs his bellowing laugh, and looks for someone nearby to slap on the back. Then remembering how easily the Tsolyani are insulted, he decides not to slap anyone on the back.

#### Persons of Note

The expedition thus far consists of six persons of rank:

Natoro hiJevesan, priest of Thumis, and his aide, Laslo.

Kialandi hiQadari, priestess of Hrihayal, and her aides Taluvasz of Livyanu, Captain Hereschal hiTogu, and Shishkresh hiBilburna. Taluvasz is travelling in disguise, his tattoos hidden with cosmetic paint, his nose and ears reshaped by subtle surgery.

Kagoth hiGachayal, priest of Ksarul.

Vathek cwxtl-Q'or, priest of Ksarul.

Colonel Mekelu hiMraktine, commander of the 23rd Heavy Infantry.

Captain Hakiron hiChankullar, cohort-commander of the 232nd N'luss Rangers, and his twenty N'luss shield-brothers including Stonegrinder and Honest Chlen, and Chri the Ahoggya.

In total, there are 31 persons in the party, with an additional fifty sailors available on the trireme Blessed Eventuality, captained by Sea-Major Rikkert hiAuberiyal.

## Vathek

Vathek is of medium stature and build, draped head to toe in black, with black tunic, black hose, black gloves, black cloak. The lining, trim and hem are purple, buckles and clasps are silver. He wears a silver mask, ever-smiling, a black head cloth, and a mortarboard.

His voice is soft and musical, and he speaks with a painfully precise enunciation, as if he is trying to cover up any lingering trace of a yokel-hick-backwoods-we-marry-our-cousins-boondocks-fishermans-boy accent.

His insignia and ornaments proclaim him to be a 4th circle priest, the Imperial Keeper of the Keys of the Hidden Library of Kara-Korum. He also tends to hold himself so that his left hand casually just so happens to cover up his Clan insignia, a fishhook, the sign of the Barbed Hook clan of the Do Chaka forests, lake fishermen who make moonshine, kill revenuers, and drive Boss Hogg crazy. Vathek rarely will introduce his cousins Bo hi-Qo'or and Luke hi-Qo'or to anyone, even if Daisy hlo-Dook is kinda cute.

The modifier in his name 'cwxtl' is like 'Fitz' in England, and indicates that perhaps his mother and father were not fully and entirely married at the time of his birth in the technical legal sense of the word.

Some of you might recognize him because he is Famous (+1 to reaction!) because he found the legendary 777th page of the Book of Ebon Bindings, and was also a survivor of one of the only humans to enter the Dome of the Black Ssu at Bassa, and live. He also participated in the Emperor's trials and contest to assume the throne, the Karumjalum (sp?). He is also the nephew of the world-famous sorcerer Vthanid Qo'or.

He introduces himself: "Imperial Highness and glory to the nine lands beneath the nine mountains, Imperatrix, Sister to the Son of Heaven, I abase myself to your glorious majesty; world-honored Captains of valour, I salute you; Knowledgeable and gracious Seeker-of-Vipers, servitrix to the Dancing Lady of Temptation, I offer my humble welcome; Wise Brother in service to the Smiling God, the Doomed Prince of the Blue Room, He-Who-Waits, my fraternal salutations; outlandish clanless nonhuman yet brave and loyal colonel, I greet you; and another organism of less note, I see you."

"I am the humble Vathek of the Clan Ba--(he coughs quickly)--ook and also, sacerdote of the 4th circle of the temple of the Most Patient God, who is rightly called the All-cunning.

"It is not without pride that I also must mention that I have been awarded the rare pre-posthumous Memorial Ovation by the Reticent and Antique College for the Unwise Meddling in Ancient Mechanisms, of which I am a Fellow in the first rank: when it comes to Devices of the Ancients, there are no survivors of the Unholy Experiments, fully sane, and temporally continuous in three-dimensional space, that know more than this humble servant of the Doomed Prince.

"It is possible that the honorable Vishtir hi-Vrankenchtein has a deeper knowledge of ancient mechanisms, but we cannot tell where his screams are coming from; Ianen hi-Gryffen also was last seen dismantling the Imminent Dodecahedron of Apportation, but the quantities of blood found near where his tower landed after re-materialization is insufficient to account for a full-grown man, so it is possible, that, should he be alive as we understand life, his knowledge exceeds my own. Also, should the unliving servitors of Uem hi-Dalek ever release him from the Nutrient Pit where his "body" (and I use the word loosely) is kept, his wisdom might be said to overshadow my own: but, aside from these sages, however, I am confident that what few meaningless scraps of tempting knowledge have been preserved over the millennia concerning the unthinkableably dangerous other-planar and demon-irking tools and cursed artifacts of the ancient peoples we called The Hideously Destroyed Ones, are known to me.

"Lore of the Livyani tongue is also not utterly unknown to me. I have already completed by bribes to the guardians of the next life, and sacrificed to the Five Headed Worm, and so I am at peace. Since I was about to be granted an extensive landed estate next week, and get married, and sail around the world on my retirement yacht, the 2-live-4-ever, I think now is the perfect and auspicious time to venture into the sorcery-haunted lands of the Livyani."

Ce Fau

Ce Fau the Wanderer pulls aside the drapes with one slim hand and partially enters the room, his form half hidden by the rich draperies. A small green-grey renyu runs a few feet past him then stops....

Ce Fau the storyteller summons Tigerflower with a slight movement of his hand and fades into the shadows from which he may never return

Captain Erit sends a letter introducing Ce Fau, a traveller and storyteller, who is to accompany the expedition as a diplomatic aide. She will be under the priestly rather than the military component of the mission.

Hereschal has procured excellent maps of the city of Tsamra, seaport capital of Livyanu, and Taluvasz has annotated it with his own experience living there. Shishkresh hiBilburna of the Ministry of Barbarians has brought along a silken phrase book in a dozen languages, with copies for everyone. Embroidered thereon are simple phrases and words, with the translation below in neat rows in all the civilized languages of Tekumel and quite a few barbaric and nonhuman dialects as well. You point to the row headed by, say, "temple", and the person you are talking with reads down the row to find "temple" in his own language. Silk being marvellously compactible, the scarf holds several hundred words.

Into Natoro's hands is given the Eye of Incomparable Understanding, which is meant to help converse with the Livyani. An exact copy of the Eye of Daybreak is entrusted to Mekelu, with the understanding that he may assign it to whom he wishes. There is also an Eye of Joyful Conversation Among Friends, which banishes hunger, fatigue, fear and anger, which is entrusted to Kialandi and may be useful in trading with the magic-mad Livyani.

Chri brings lots of weapons ... oh, and Hakiron too ... but he accidentally eats his silk phrase-scarf.

### Aboard Ship

Hakiron makes sure that there are enough supplies for his men. And, he checks to see if he has remembered a lantern. (Why is it that he always ends up underground?) And it never hurts to have some stout rope either.

The men want to bring Hmelu-goats with them to cook along the way. Dried meat is so tasteless ... sure, it's practical on those long mountain treks, but this is a SHIP! With HOLDS and CARGO SPACE and stuff! Why not bring fresh meat?

Chon 'Stonebreaker' brings his edging stone and Varnulf tsoIlert his forge. When they try

to get a really hot fire going on the sterncastle to edge and strop their weapons, the men are surprised at the vigor of the Tsolyani sailors' reaction. They seem to have an irrational fear of fire at sea ... silly little fellows!

Kialandi brings clothes of various styles including dancing clothes, make-up and disguise kit, jewelry, simple tools, rope, lantern, dagger, medicine kit, poisons.

Yes. I believe that is true. Kialandi asks Hakiron if she should keep it or if he wants it back?

An incredulous look crosses his face. 'By Chiteng's fiery breath! Why would I want to use an accursed eye like that when I have steel Daylight strapped on my back?! That demon frosted thing is all yours! But be warned, it will probably be your death if you rely on magics for your sole defense. Now then, I have this spare bronze greatsword which I will offer you as well. It was this blade that split many a black Ssu, but for you Kialandi, my sweet hmelu, I would gift it without the need for a test of strength."

Kialandi takes the greatsword gingerly. (Moderator, is it bigger than me? ;-)

She says, "A wondrously kind gift, Hakiron, I hope I am strong enough to lift it. Tell me," she tilts her head, gazing up at him, "So, tell me, friend what are N'lüss women like? Are they as big and strong as their men? Or are they delicate and puny creatures?"

Hakiron belts out a laugh. "Ha! Ha! N'luss women are as mighty as the mountains and as stark as the desert. Their beauty is the rainbow after the storm."

He smiles down at Kialandi appreciatively, "Although you may be small in stature, you provide such delight that the ice heart of the tallest crag could melt before your smile, and at the sight of your dancing figure an enraged Chlen would be instantly charmed and fall into a blissful sleep."

Then he frowns, "By Vimulha, who taught you to hold a sword like that?!"

Kialandi says politely, attempting to balance the bronze implement that is larger than her head, so that she and the sword do not fall over, "Alas, kind Hakiron, no one has ever taught me to hold a sword at all."

Hakiron looks befuddled, the nearby N luss are stunned into silence.

Then, absentmindedly, Hakiron catches the sword as it starts to topple over. It never occurred to him that a person would not have been taught to use a sword as a child. He will never understand the Tsolyani.

He says slowly, I am sorry& I did not know. He then continues, I have yet to raise children and am not familiar with teaching sword, but if you decide you would like to learn, it would be my pleasure to teach you.

Once again he casually reaches out and prevents the razor sharp sword from grazing against Kialandi s leg.

"I should be honored if you would teach me," Kialandi says with a bow, "Though I do not know how apt a pupil I shall be, having never studied such an art. Perhaps, you could teach me first how to properly hold a sword." She glances at the great bronze weapon [I'm assuming she still has it, since Hakiron would have responded before she had a chance to hand it to Hereschel.] "I would hate to dishonor such a splendid weapon by holding it incorrectly. Perhaps, I should learn with something of lesser significance."

Hmmm, Yes. You are correct as always. Hakiron says with a grin. Now that I think on it, perhaps this blade, which I call the Suu Slayer, would not be the best for you to learn with. When we return from our mission, I shall find a suitable N luss children s sword with which you can begin your training.

Kialandi bows gratefully, "I am in your debt, good Hakiron."

Hakiron smiles casually, then he notices that the blade is slowly falling over. He quickly reaches out and retrieves the blade. He says, Perhaps I should hold onto this a little longer. He starts to laugh. Yes indeed. The eye that uses the souls of tortured ice demons to destroy your enemies might actually be safer for you to use. He states seriously, I honor your bravery.

He gives the eye of frigid breath a vicious glare as if warning it to behave itself.

Kialandi replies, relieved, "And I yours, good Hakiron. You are a most brave and valiant soul!"

The Blessed Eventuality weighs anchor at seven in the morning, catching the outgoing tide just as it clears the breakwater outside Jakalla's Opaline Docks. Captain hiAuberiyal

pipes the hands to the oars, but only needs one swift burst of cruising speed to get the ship over the swell and into the long, slow rollers of the Chanayaga Deeps.

Hakiron, mindful of Tsolyani superstitions concerning the flammability of tarred wooden ships and the undesirability of said fire (don't they worship Vimulha at ALL?), has the N'luss repack the forge and do as best they can sharpening their swords with the grindstone. Given the length of the voyage, everywhere out of sight of the coast but avoiding the Akho-haunted depths of the central sea, the N'luss get their weapons plenty sharp. Pity that bronze loses its edge so fast under use, but at least it doesn't rust.

Hereschal paints the map of Tsamra on the forecastle and suggests everyone study it. He and old Shishkresh play Missumvuk, or Dice-War, in the wardroom late at night. The game involves using dice and brightly painted miniature soldiers to re-enact historical battles, strange as that may sound.

Despite the captain's best efforts, an Akho looms into sight one day around noon, its prodigious green bulk gleaming against and beneath the sea to port. Ship's priest Seffan hiMachuryan gestures, drawing lightning from the clouds to strike behind the Akho's tail. Dead sharks float up, and when the Akho reverses direction, snapping its flukes momentarily above the water, they nearly strike the ship, though the main visible mass is hundreds of yards off.

Kialandi will spend her time writing in her journal, a requisite activity of all priestesses of Hrihayal. As is the temple tradition, the resemblance between the true events and the entries in the journal is kept to a minimum.

Thus, in Kialandi's recounting, the N'luss warriors light fire to the ship before they decide to put away the forge, and there is a long flowery description of the crew fighting the fire in the midst of a terrible storm, and of the aid she renders to the wounded once the danger is past.

The Akho's tail destroys part of the ship, and one portion of the crew rush to patch it while the rest of them fight the great sea beast, with two of their company being borne away when the beast dives, taking their harpoon with it -- and the rope leading from their harpoon to their hands, which they were holding tightly. (It does not matter to Hrihayal temple journal tradition that these same two crewmen may make appearances in later entries. Continuity is not one of the virtues they seek to practice through this activity.)



And the rowing period without winds lasts for two years, during which she hints that some love affair began, ran its passionate course, and ended sadly. She does not, of course, name any names.

Mekelu will just bring his usual gear, including his surveying tools...in case plans for a burglary are needed.

Mekelu will study the map, and play some Shishkresh if possible.

Shishkresh defeats Mekelu with great difficulty in the first game he plays; the others are draws, as Mekelu ties his flanks in with the terrain quickly and completely, making it impossible for Shishkresh to concentrate his force on any part of Mekelu's line. Of course, Shishkresh is playing with Yan Koryani pieces, and so he has no phalanx of heavy hoplites to break open the enemy line, as a Tsolyani or Mu'ugalavyani army could try to do.

Into Tsamra

Ill winds mean the sails cannot be used for most of a week, so all three rows of oars are put into play at steady speed. Before the third week is out, the ship has sighted the upraised scimitar of the Drowned Colossus, the traditional entry to Tsamra Bay.

Signals are made and answered, although the Livyani use colored smoke instead of flags, and their pale pink, blue and violet smokes are not easy to tell apart. Chri, the expert signalman, turns this way and that, using all eight eyes, to interpret the hail.

The Blessed Eventuality banks oars inboard and glides into a high-waisted slip in the shadow of a towering cathedral built on a very steep hill. Other such monoliths dot the cityscape here and there like tentpoles holding up the sky.

The people working the docks are foreign sailors from every land but one: there are no Mu'ugalavyani, who share a common border and a contentious history with Liyvanu. There are also many Livyani, covered with black, red and blue tattoos, especially on their shaven heads, although they also wear either a topknot or a strip of hair in the middle. Were it winter, it might be extremely difficult to tell the willowy men from the willowy women, but in summer Livyani do not wear much at all. However, many of them seem to be wearing cloaks of an identical lavender hue, as though all made by the same seamstress, and clutch their folds around themselves, as though the ninety-degree heat

is unseasonably chilly.

A Livyani whose tattoos cover him like a mesh of spidery black symbols comes to the dock. His hair is high and spiky in a strip two inches wide from forehead to the back of his neck. He raises a palm, on which is tattooed a staring yellow eye, showing it to everyone exactly as if he were giving the eye a good look at the ship and everyone on it.

"His marks indicate a Heirophant of House Recusant," says Taluvasz quietly. "This is a mark of great respect, as that House does not often involve itself in quarrels, and Heirophants have many duties."

The Heirophant then drops his hand to his side and walks off the dock. Several Livyani who are completely bald but wear similar black-silk garments and sandals fall in step with him as he merges into the crowd.

Taluvasz looks surprised.

"It seems he expects us to know what to do," he says. "The Shadow Gods regulate every aspect of life among us in Livyanu, through their secret police the Vru'uneb. Perhaps he assumes your own gods will tell you what to do now?"

He looks around expectantly at the priests.

Mekelu hides a smirk, turns to look at the priests and says with all due gravity, "Lead on. We will flank you. But as priests, you should probably be in the lead of our procession."

Indeed! Natoro holds the Eye of Incomparable Understanding up to his eye, squints, then hands it to his page boy, Laslo.

Vathek, that morbid fellow, will sacrifice a chlen-beast to the water demons by immersion, and burn a second chlen-beast to placate the air-demons, and bury alive a third chlen-beast wrapped in winding sheets to mollify the demons of the Isle of the Excellent Dead: he will offer to perform pro-active last rites, or to scriven a last will and testament for anyone nervous about voyaging aboard fire-laden ship.

He will explain to any interested listeners about the advantages of bribing the gods of the afterworld, Sarku and Belquenith, with added bribes for their cohorts, supernatural secretaries, and demon-scribes.

Remember, bureaucratic delays while waiting in the antechambers of the Sphere Beyond This Sphere is what causes manifestations of undead! One misspelled rune on a scroll in the hand of some Arch-heirophant of the Beyond-Palace, and znuuff! you find yourself assigned to someone else's afterworldly rewards or punishments!

Discreetly, the page boy will consult the Eye of Understanding to glean meaning from their actions.

Ce Fau who has been watching quietly, allows Tigerflower to run forward towards Hakiron and Kialandi. Following the little monkey, she catches him up.

"Naughty child" she says approvingly, then bows before Hakiron and more deeply before Kialandi.

"Most puissant barbarian and thou, noble daughter of dancing seductions, I greet you in the name of our beloved Emperor (May his sun forever shine upon us!). Please forgive this aged and unworthy person if her tiresome child has disturbed your conversation!"

"Ah me," Ce Fau muses, "Will this perverse son of demons never learn dispassion?" She strokes the little monkey and scratches under its chin. "Teaching a monkey the way of Dra' is a never-ending task, with little reward but my own amusement..."

Ce Fau is an old woman, her broad, open and genial face belied by surprisingly honey-colored eyes, grey-streaked hair wound in coiled braids about her head. She is plainly dressed in a simple grey-brown robe, sturdy sandals and broad woven hat.

We are going to have a devil of a time understanding them without it, mutters the boy under his breath. Anyone here know whether that last bit was about being given a night of entertainment or a decapitation?

Ce Fau spends morning and evening praying and meditating to Dra: She seats herself before the map of Tsamra, invokes the consort's name (O disinterested and harmonious One! May the words of my devotion wash across your Divine Attention unheeded!) and then fixes her mind on the map, until it is committed to memory.

Kialandi bows in return. "Gracious Mother, how honored we are to have you and your little one among our company."

Kialandi says, "I fear it was all gibberish to me."

Kialandi also studies the map, which she traces into her journal.

Following the, "they'll get back to us if it was something important" school of diplomacy, Chri disembarks and begins exploring the tastes and sights of the docks.

Following Kialandi's lead, Hakiron bows respectfully.

However, he is wearing a perplexed look on his face.

He then asks, What is this puissant? Does it mean that I smell like a chlen?

Following the, twenty N'luss shield-brothers landing ashore is usually considered a barbarian raid school of diplomacy. Hakiron decides to wait patiently aboard the ship with his men until Mekulu tells him that is clear to disembark with his men.

The scrawny old woman before him, returns his bow, albeit less deeply. "These unworthy ears have heard tales of great battles, powerful and potent in which men such as thou have struck strong blows against mighty opponants. These tales of puissant warriors please the young men in marketplaces who dream (to little point, I might add) that they too, might have such authority in sword-arms as thou, O Hakiron."

Hakiron brighten up considerably. He says, "Ah Yes, I am very puissant, but there are many puissant who I have faced, and I wasn't puissanter then them, then I'm sure I would have been cleaved in twain on more than one occassion. It is an honor to meet someone as wise as you, and I'm sure that in your own way you have had some piussance yourself!"

He nods to himself feeling quite self satisfied. Then he looks after Chri in alarm, and says, "Where that puissantless AhoggyÃ; think he is going?!"

"Ah, tempter--!" sighs Ce Fau. "My dispassionate calm ripples like a clear moonlit pool when large fat men jump into it...." She nods, "Perhaps I shall use that influence [\*] to teach this footling flower of mischief (she chucks the monkey under it's chin) to perform double backflips."

Kagoth will spend a time studying the map and then the rest in contemplation of the mysteries of Ksarul and the Blue Room.

To Ce Fau he will say, "Blessed are the mothers for they give rise to the Tsolyani's ever brighter future. I pray that we may all learn from your steadfastness and diligence."

Kagoth, the priest of Ksarul, bows his head and awaits a sign from that powerful deity. To insure that his waiting will be rewarded, it hums and sings prayers to Ksarul. After praying, he will scan the city for signs of Ksarul's will in action, standing at the edge of the boat while his robes of deepest blue and cerulean are teased by the winds. His silver mask occludes his expression, but it seems as if his interest is peaked by what he views if the movements of his body are any guage.

With no apparent reaction from the crowd, Mekelu sighs and stands at the top of the gangplank. He turns to Hakiron and says, "Let's clear some space on the docks for our equipment to be unloaded. Chri! Don't wander too far, but see what you can learn from your unique perspective!" With that, Mekelu will watch over the unloading of men and equipment, while the priests determine their course of action. He says in a softer voice to Hakiron, "If you wish, take three of your men and take a short walk about the area. But don't get out of range of my yelling."

""It is that footling flower of mischief I am worried about," sighs Kialandi, watching the Ahoggia scuttle toward the docks. "Let us pray that they mistake him for an ottoman on wheels and do not take his approach as an offence."

Seffan, the ship's priest, snaps a hand to his eye.

"Captain, we're being enchanted," he reports.

"Indeed we are," reports Laslo the page-boy, peering through the Eye. "We are to follow the man in black, bringing our decision-makers. We are allowed to bring advisors and armed escorts, though neither is required. Apparently they assume we can hear their intentions with our bare ears, as they can. All the Livyani I can see are receiving thoughts from somewhere, flowing along the streets like rivers."

Sailors have rigged a sling with the expedition's baggage and the N'luss, as well as the Blessed Eventuality's own marine archers, are holding ropes with which they can slide down to the dock. Although the Livyani give no sign of interest in the Tsolyani trireme, most of the foreign sailors are looking up at the ship, shading their eyes against the pale noon sun, taking in its lines, its gleaming paintwork, and the crisp activity of the crew. When the N'luss and marines take hold of their boarding-ropes, some of these sailors quickly find business elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Chri spies a fellow Ahoggia carrying a stack of brass urns stacked three high, while picking his teeth with a foreclaw, gesturing expansively to a human travelling companion, and picking said human's pocket.

Hakiron nods in agreement. "Varnulf and Black Renyu you are in the lead. Take our stone-brothers down to the dock and clear some room. No blood!! If there are Livyani in the way, then ask them to move. Oh, and no duels and challenges, and don't take any the Livyani's things!! Remember we are noble N'luss!!"

Hakiron pulls Chon, Deshna, and Zhitlin aside. "You three come with me." He then begins to scout the area.

"That makes sense," agrees Seffan. "I'm sensing a definite spell of the Communication or Knowledge variety ... associated with Lord Ksarul, if I'm not mistaken! But surely the Livyani don't worship Ksarul, as their own Shadow Gods deny the very existence of ours!"

"If you wanted to pin a name to the Shadow Gods, those hidden controllers of secret schemes, could you do better than to name them Ksarul?" remarks Captain Rickert. "Maybe they're all Ksarul worshippers in disguise."

Mekelu speaks to Hakiron. "I spoke too quickly. We need to gather our people and equipment and follow that man. Your scouts should keep that man in sight so we can follow him. We shall flank the priestly contingent." Mekelu will help unload the gear

from the sling when it lands on the dock, then organize the remaining soldiers to walk with the priests to catch up with Hakiron and his men.

Hakiron heads off with Chon, Deshnah, and Zhitlin with the goal of keeping that man in sight.

Before he heads out, he sets Varnulf in charge of the left flank and Black Renyu in charge of the right flank of the N luss shield brothers.

Kialandi tilts her head and regards the docks anew through narrowed eyes. She looks at the two priests of Ksarul thoughtfully.

"Perhaps, this trip will be more interesting than any of us had expected..."

Following the "If I were an evil wizard with a painted eye on my hand, I'd have woven the docks with the curse sub-energies of the twenty-second dimensional plane, known only as the Place of Interrupted Screams, and inscribed the underside of the dock with the Untiring Rhune of Dispelling Tsolyani Invaders with Nine Hued Fire; and since I AM an evil wizard (or, as we prefer it, conscience-handi-capable), I would expect the Livyani warlocks to act this way; so I will wait till the four-faced Ahoggia clanless outlander claws his way onto the dock; I will watch; and I will survive to report the effects of the Involutionary Discharge of Greeting once the Nine-Colored Flames begin to manifest" school of thought, Vathek, still slightly smiling his little silver smile (oh, wait, that's a mask.

Doesn't he get hot inside there?) will observe the Ahoggia thumping down the gang-plank, ready his counter-spell to ward off hostile magic, and observe the sequel to these events.

Vathek takes a candle out of his sleeve, lights it holds it briefly in front of one eye then the other of his mask, snuffs it. With the still-smoking candle, he makes squiggly smoke-letters in the air. He then takes a prism out of his pocket, holds it up to the sun, and bends his mask to study the pattern of colored lines that form at his feet.

Vathek clutches his mask with both hands. "Worshippers of the Doomed Prince in disguise?! Disguise, indeed! Preposterous! We are the most open and unsecretive of men!"

I signal to Kigoth in elbow-wagging code to ready his spells in case the events of Plan



Nine should come to pass.

Chri performs the honking bobbing turns of Ahoggya greeting with many a "ch\*rkle" and a "gRONfpt."

(in Ahoggya) "Say there old boy, I'm newly arrived having taken service with a ship load of two-legged barbarians. Do you know where I could get a stiff cold drink? We've been a-sea for some time now..."

Chri will slip into the non-stop banter of his folk, sparing one set of eyes to mind Mekelu (or at least the tall barbarians marking his general whereabouts).

Kigoth, with his appropriately timed code of feet shuffles and 'spell preparations' indicates assent and that all is in readiness for plan 9, dread though it may be.

Kigoth voices a prayer to Ksarul for direction and then continues to chant in a most priestly, sonorous fashion. The tilt of his mask suggests a smile or humour at some distant event, but the suggestion seems to pass for only a second. After Kigoth hums and chants and weaves his hands in what is surely some kind of prayer motions, he stills and is quiet and calm, as if awaiting the Storm.

"Well met, countryman! There are a couple of spiffing places I could steer you to," says the other Ahoggya. "I'm Dri, fresh off a Hluss-hunting vessel I'll NEVER set foot on again, brrr! Water's wet, and kinda cold, but too salty to drown a proper musty-thirst. Take a nip of this here and get your land-legs under you."

He offers a gourd to Chri's left-mouth, full of spicy liquor which is not exactly cold, but tingles like ice when it coats the tongue.

"Good, eh?" chortles Dri. "Make it around here as the runoff from some ghastly process, what, what? Gallons of the stuff pooling in the streets over yonder, near House Inexorable. Got there early one night with a barrel, because "To the early bird goes the late bird's portion," as the poet said. Honnk! I see you're of the fifth sex; pity. I was fancying a good hard snog. But there are plenty of our kind in the bourses here; the picture-wallahs give us a wide berth. Don't seem to know we're here half the time --

watch out you don't get trodden on!"

"I say!" says Dri further, seeing the N'luss debarking. "Respect for one's fellows' preferred posture and all that, but aren't those chappies taking this "stand on my hind legs" rot a bit far? Don't believe I've ever seen bipeds so ... so damn VERTICAL, what?"

"Lord Natoro," reports Laslo the page-boy, "the Livyani wish us to bring our "decision-makers" to their House Recusant, following the black-maned man. We are permitted to bring advisors and armed escorts. How say you?"

Lord Natoro, sworn to silence, raises a hand with the third finger crooked inward.

"Lord Natoro bids the priestly delegation accompany us, and the N'luss soldiers, with the ship's marines left behind to hold the ship," Laslo says. "He bids Captain Rickert cast off if an attempt is made to take the ship, and Magister Seffan to sound a spell of warning should the ship be required to leave. If three black flames rise from the city at any time, he is to cast off without delay and return to Jakalla."

Then Laslo walks down the plank to the space where the N'luss are holding back the curious while the baggage is unloaded. Lord Natoro joins Laslo, and looks back, expecting the priests to follow. He gestures to the N'luss.

"Perhaps the stout highlanders would deign to carry our supplies," says Laslo. "So trifling is their weight that one man would still have his hands free while the other shoulders a chest or crate."

Kigoth addresses the group and says, "Friends and honored compatriats in this most important work,  
in this place there are tides of thought and emotion which flow even as the current of rivers moves rapidly  
or eddies and swirls. Have a care if you are of a delicate mind or if you are sensitive to other's  
around you for these currents can carry one's mind surely away and direct you to the path that those who  
rule these flows direct." "We are in an uncharted sea and each of these towers upon those hills are the sources from whence these rivers spring. I surmise that in them shall we find the true rulers of the Livyani, who'ere they may  
be. I trust i will be able to serve you in some small capacity as a compass, since i can not

say guide,  
knowing nothing previously about these dangerous riptides and their motions." "At the moment, the currents direct us to follow their guide, Axo Velt, who will lead us to house Recusant. According to the meanings washing along these streets and paths of thought and emotion, no harm should befall us and guards should be unnecessary, but then it is an old Mihalli saying that one should always bring a dagger in a place where daggers are forbidden." "Since that is where we are bid to go, i shall make my way there and hope i am able, in some small way, to represent the temple of my most illuminating Ksarrul, whose smiling face showers beneficence upon us all."

Kialandi says, "Thank you for your wisdom, Kigoth. How eerie and outlandish these Livyani are." She examines the men working on the docks, "Yet, they look to be no less men than we. Perhaps their Shadow Gods play more of a part in their lives than our gods play in ours."

"Hmm? Oh yes those, my shipmates of late it seems, and quite the leggy pack of them to be sure (though from the smell you'd think there were rather more of them about). Say! This \*is\* good! Came from where you said? 'House Inexorable?' What's all that about then?"

After a bit more chatter ... and then a bit more ... Chri will scuttle back to the party as it leaves the docks.

Kigoth notes, "Gracious and Revered Kialandi, it may be as you have so directly stated but i wonder. While i spend my entire life and much of my days in contemplation of Ksarrul's wonder and mystery, perhaps it is the case that the average Tsolyani does not do so. Still, i have the feeling that the average Tsolyani engages in what religion they do because they are moved by both their own and the spirit of our GODs, whereas the Livyani seem far more moved by others, whether they wish it so or no. In short, it seems far less of a thing of respect and more of a thing of compulsion." "STill, as you note, it is fascinating. The

complexity of these currents is a wonder to behold."

"I look forward to learning more here," murmurs Kialandi in reply.

The expedition gathers on the docks and departs, following the man in black.

Fortunately, Hakiron and his buddies have been able to keep him in sight, without killing any Livyani in the process, or indeed, anyone at all.

Lord Natoro walks in front of all, with N'luss warriors to his left and right but not in front. Laslo is at his side and a step behind, with everyone else following in strict order of precedence.

(Chri catches up to the tail end of the procession, unwittingly taking his proper station as the least of the soldiers. He does have a rank as a signaller in the Fifth Heavy Infantry, "Legion of the Mighty Prince", after all.)

Tsamra's streets, like those of many old cities, meander this way and that following millenia-old cart tracks. Livyani men and women are hanging wash, repairing stonework, pushing carts, cooking meals. But one thing is odd, and it takes a while to pin down: no one is buying or selling ANYTHING. Tsolyani aren't so unabashedly mercantile as the pushy Sarlavyani merchant-kings, but you can't stand anywhere in Bey Su or Jakalla without seeing someone engaged in some form of commerce. After walking a mile through Tsamra's highways and alleys, no one has seen anything like commercial activity.

Nor is anyone wearing amulets, praying or imploring the favor of the gods for this or that everyday matter. That's pretty weird. And no one is armed.

Tsamra does not appear to have boulevards, or even comfortably wide streets; it has winding alleys and straight but very narrow alleys. And many of the stone buildings are over eight stories, so that sunlight never touches the street except for a few minutes at noon. They are, however, uniformly whitewashed, so the light at street level seems to glow from everywhere.

"Of course," says Shishkresh aloud. "The Livyani do not practice Ditlana, the custom of razing and rebuilding the city every few centuries, as we do. Instead of an underworld extending a hundred levels underground, they build upward. Some of these buildings must be unthinkably old."

The alleys trend upward, sloping steeply in places. Although Livyani balancing head-baskets of bread and cloth walk by on steps cut into the tops of the walls, the alleys themselves have no steps, not even cobbles, just tilted slabs of time-polished stone. The N'luss mountain men take it in stride, but Tsolyani flatlanders find it hard going. And compared to the near-vertical crags of the N'luss lands, all Tsolyani are flatlanders!

## House Recusant

The hill upon which House Recusant's tower sits appears to be made entirely of masonry. From balconies at seven levels, tattooed priests tend sacrificial fires, cast their beads out over the metropolis, and gather the power of the Outer Planes in balls of white, yellow, orange and blue light. People can be seen going in and out of walkways six, ten, fifty dizzying levels below the elevated walkway along which the Tsolyani trudge in the steamy heat. The Sun, visible as the party ascends above the surrounding rooftops, is a white ball blurred by sea-haze, humid rather than searing.

The man in black halts before a bridge which curves up to run perpendicular to the ground countless stories below, and waits for the Tsolyani to catch up. Then, making a pass in the air, he walks onto the bridge, standing at right angles to gravity with his robes and amulets hanging straight down.

Lord Natoro, with a glance at Laslo, follows, and he too defies gravity to walk sideways across the bridge. Laslo follows, then the others.

A little girl, with a single symbol tattooed in the middle of her forehead, gravely regards the party as it passes her balcony. Her eyes, fixed on the priests of Ksarul, are scarlet.

In the secret language of the Fourth Circle, she says, "Vidyetz."

The party follows the man in black and his escorts into a long hall with tables along the walls. Above the tables are scroll-pegs, thousands of them, stretching twenty feet up in dozens of neat rows. Sliding ladders on brass rails run the length of both scroll-walls. On the tables are maps, charts of the seas, drawings, tools, small models of the solar system and of Tekumel's fiery core, a circular Periodic Table of the Demons with considerably more columns than its Tsolyani equivalent, pens, and parchment.

The man in black bows to a man covered with a fine mesh of blue tattoos, as tiny as manuscript, which cover him in an interlocking network of diagonal lines. That latter bows in return, touches his fingers to the man in black's head, and raises them, as though removing an invisible burden. The man in black wipes his hands together, once, and departs, with not a look back.

The man in blue steps forward, a broad grin splitting his narrow face.

"Welcome, welcome!" he says. "How much do you know?"

Lord Natoro makes a gesture.

"Yes, well, the Vru'uneb are ever vigilant of our secrets," says the man in blue. "If it were up to them, we'd never speak to anyone but our own countrymen. But how then would we learn what you know, that we do not? I ask you that!"

"I am Valpurez, the ... our word is P'yegachnaion ... of this place. You might say, ah, "Deceiver of Nature to Reveal Her Secrets," perhaps. I help interpret indiscretions the Gods commit which may give us glimpses of what lies behind the curtain of the senses, to

deduce the underlying nature of things. And right now, this specialty's arguably blasphemous nature is entirely secondary to its potential utility in preventing the freezing of all Tekumel, ha, ha!"

Valpurez' face suddenly hardens.

"And if it is the will of the Gods that we all slowly freeze in the dark ... well, then it shall come to pass, and nothing we do here shall hinder it in the slightest. So we risk no impiety."

"I have brought together as many materials as I could find which seemed germane. We can send for more, of course. And I named a dozen specialists in various arcane fields whose advice would serve us well, but alas, none have yet been cleared by the Vru'unek's patient inquiries. One has been executed. I am confident that some of the others, at least, will be quickly found trustworthy to hold converse with Tsolyani. After all, our nations are friends, are they not? We are at war sometimes with the grim zealots of Mu'ugalavya, and so are you. We share no border and therefore have no conflicts of territory, and after all, who can lay claim to the Charangaya Deeps between us, except the Akho who live there? Eh?"

"Now tell me, fellow seekers after truth. What may I provide, that we may save the Sun while yet it shines?"

Vathek, in the darkness of his icy heart, thinks to himself that the priesthood of Ksarul should spend its days seeking the tools and antique lore and cunning need to hasten the DAY of RETRIBUTION, when the other gods shall suffer for the insulting nature of their mercy in sparing, rather than destroying, the Doomed Prince. On that day, all shall be monotheists, for none but one god shall remain, and perhaps the stars shall return.

Of course, Vathek reminds himself sadly, he had made a New year's Resolution to make himself sufficiently hard and cold to serve the Imprisoned God without and trace of pity or human weakness, and was going to go on a strict regimen of hauteur, arbitrary killing of slaves, devious machinations, and watching torture until it did not bother him.

He ponders: What did I do last Tlormekulu's day? Puttered about in the garden in the morning, delighted at the life of growing green things, took a long walk down by the market square, and spent the afternoon visiting my fiancée, chatting and joking and skylarking and writing bad love-poems. All the while there were antique and forbidden scrolls to pore over, dangerous experiments to conduct, unwise meddling in ancient machines simply WAITING in his basement to rip a hole in the thirty-third plane of the nine-angled sub-chamber of the Excellent Unvarying Towers of Silent Pain.

Ohe! Here I am a newlywed, and has my wife even once clutched my arm, shrieking, "No! No! As you love our unborn child, I pray you, DO NOT OPEN THE EBON CASKET OF MINOR INFINITY!" Not once. Has she stood on a balcony during a storm, shouting over the thunder claps, "Vow to me, husband, that you will destroy THE THING IN THE LAB,



or I cast myself this instant on the rocks!", while I reply coldly, "My Work is for the Dark God: what is one life, what is love, compared to that?" Not Once.

I wonder if she dosed me yet with the first half of the addictive binary poison known as "Faithful Unto Death" Has she?

It is because of my backwoods Clan, isn't it? My breath still stinks of Cajun-fried chlen-fish-beast, I betcha, and she will look at me sidelong if she knows I still eat grits with back-bacon. Had I been born and bred one of those /citified/ evil warlocks, she would have already been goading me to assassinate my superiors and frame my rivals.

But NOOOO, I'm just a bumpkin, so it's "Do you best, honey!" and "Be certain that your honest and hard work pays off in the eyes of the Emperor!" rather than "I want the head of Hrakul of Clan Hyarumeluku stuffed with olives and presented to me in a silver box, before I let you touch my warm and scented skin with so much as a finger-tip! I give the sweet gift of my body to no lesser man than he who holds the GRAIL OF DARKNESS, and has opened the Hexagonal Gate of the Interior Dimension of Ssubadim! Present me with the Mobius Throne, thou worthless poser, and I will present you with an heir! When you have learned how to call THE BEAST WITHOUT A TAIL, then maybe, you shall have the right to call me to your bed, you yokel!"

That would show she really loves me, the way an evil warlock is supposed to be loved, wouldn't it?

On the other hand, if she does not love me, and is merely using me for her political ends, that shows even greater respect, and, more importantly, ruthlessness.

OK, so I LIKE gardening and long walks at the market. Does that mean I cannot scheme to unlock the unknown, unknowable, and best-left- unasked?

Well, maybe I can be a henchman.

Mekelu has waited for the priests to speak, but as they remain silent and inscrutable, he finally speaks. "Our priests would first like to see the materials you have gathered. In return they will share what they have learned." Remembering the other part of his mission, he asks, "Myself, I am both soldier and engineer. I have heard much about your temple workshop. I was hoping to tour it."

"Have you indeed?" says Valpurez. "I am surprised ... but our mechanics are indeed wise in the ways of the Ancients. Perhaps you and I could visit the workshop now, together with such other engineers as would be interested, while your priests examine the exhibits I have gathered here."

Mekelu says, "I would find it most interesting, I am sure."

"Excellent! You may be able to explain to me what some of these ancient devices are



supposed to do -- some of the Eyes we have disassembled, for example, seem nothing more than a means of throwing energy away. My own specialty lies in material science rather than magical, so I may be of limited ability to understand your explanations, but nothing ventured, nothing learned, eh?"

Valpurez bids farewell to the other Tsolyani, inviting any non-priests who might have useful ideas to come with himself and Mekelu to the workshop.

Vathek secretly connects his drool-overflow spill cup to the inside lip of his mask, and goes to examine the disassembled mechanisms of the ancients.

Already in his imagination, the report to the Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of the Unwise Meddling with Otherplanar Mechanisms is being written. The Title: TRANS-INFINITE INVERSION--A Report on the Livanyu Event, with mathematical diagrams explaining how divine ulterior spaces of seventeen dimensional infinity can be compressed accidentally into normal three-dimensional space: including Eyewitness Descriptions of the oceans and continental land mass being sucked into the Hell of Upside-Down Swimmers, with speculations as to nature, cause and eventual diminution the indigo reddish discharges seen from up to one hundred miles away--as told by a survivor of the event, resserected at great cost from a fragment of his molor found blown half-way around the globe.

As they go into the workshop, Mekelu looks about, doing his best not to let his eyes settle on the light source that should be the Eye of Daybreak. His knowledge of the way these devices is practically non-existent, but he will try to sound impressive, mostly beginning with "Hmms," and other such deep noises.

Oh. Then that's pretty much a straight use of the Acting skill, isn't it? Which Mekelu does not have and has not, to this point, ever needed. It defaults to IQ-2, which isn't too bad, and Mekelu makes his roll, lulling Valpurez (who knows some, but not a lot, about Eyes) into thinking he knows more than he does. The language barrier helps, too, as Mekelu can always phrase something in elaborately circumlocutive terms (Tsolyani, as a language, has a LOT of those) which Valpurez, a non-native speaker, won't quite get, but will pretend to understand.

More detail when others have had a chance to accompany or not. Note that Valpurez' invitation specifically excluded priests, which means Hakiron, Ce Fau, and Chri are the only player-characters invited. Ce Fau demurs, citing the potential for embarrassment if her monkey saw the shiny things in the workshop, and Hakiron goes along, trusting his twenty-man escort to keep things safe in his absence.

Fair enough. But once the input from others is in, finally Mekelu will look at the light source and say, "Hm. Interesting. Using an eye for a simple light. I would have expected you to disassemble it long before now."

"Would you?" says Valpurez. "I realize Eyes are of some aesthetic value apart from their utility, but really, what else can you do with an Eye that emits a steady white light? It's not as if you can carry it around with you and illuminate dark places. Well, you COULD, I suppose, but when everyone knows the Overglow spell, what point in carrying a lump of crystal that does it, too?"

Hakiron nods wisely. Better to rely on one's own skills than on fragile machines that can break, get lost, or be stolen. Machines in general, he reflects, lack puissance.

"Now," continues Valpurez, surely the chattiest of librarians, "if one found an Eye of Discerning Wonder, or an Eye of Revealing Falsehood, or even, rarest of rarities, the Eye of Incomparable Understanding, well, you can be sure we wouldn't hang it up in a bracket to ease our nighttime labors! We do have two Eyes which appear to draw tiny dimensional tunnels to the surface of the Sun -- I think you in Tsolyanu know the "Eye of Red Devastation," do you not -- and we have been trying to discover whether they are less potent than before. If they are, why then, the Sun is getting colder, and the solution lies in somehow linking the Sun to a place of great warmth, such as the molten cosmos of Pahera Chenga. If not, then the Sun is either drawing further away (which it is not, for its visible diameter remains constant) or some translucent material is gathering between it and us, stopping some of its light and heat from reaching us. I am not certain what the solution would be, if that were the case."

"This Pahera Chenga may indeed be a hot place," says Hakiron, "but what about the Brazen Arena of Lord Vimulha?"

"Aheh," says Valpurez a trifle uncomfortably, "yes, your Lord Vimulha is indeed associated with the dimension Pahera Chenga in your cosmology. We treat with the dimension directly, without the need of the, ah, the Vimulha hypothesis, if you will, nor does any loyal servant of the Shadow Gods express belief in, ah, the Pavarian folk-deities popular in the rest of the Five Empires."

Hakiron follows the thread of this conversation and, rather than smiting the man for impiety as Valpurez no doubt expects, pities him for the cold, dark afterlife which awaits the unbeliever.

There are several other Livyani at work on their benches, using tiny tools to remove and manipulate infinitesimal bits of curved metal forming one Eye or another. Valpurez proudly displays an Eye made not of clear crystal or gray, blank stone, but of faceted black amber, translucent to show its inner workings.

"As you can see, we are well along in completing our knowledge of the Ancient Times,"

he says. "This is an Eye of Instantaneous Translation to the Plains of Teratane, of course, but it is entirely of Livyani manufacture, with no part whatsoever salvaged from Ancient workings. We cannot build as many as we like, but the next time the Red Hats come across our rune-borders, they are going to meet quite a different reception than they expect, ha, ha!"

Two men in black half-armor and black sandal-strapping to their knees come in. They have high, stiff combs of hair two inches wide from brow to nape, and wear black silken masks with cutout eyeholes. One points to the workbenches and says, "Come, Hegalli," and two of the mechanics down tools and come over to join them.

"Who are they?" whispers Hakiron.

"The Vru'uneb," says Valpurez under his breath. "Secret police. Don't make a sound ..."

The two Vru'uneb converse inaudibly with the two mechanics. Then the mechanics get a stool and climb up under the Eye of Daybreak, loosening it with their tools, and take it down. The Vru'uneb place the still-glowing Eye into a black bag and leave with it down a side corridor, taking the two mechanics with them.

Valpurez sighs with relief.

"Well!" he says. "That was stimulating. I suppose they took the mechanics because they'd be of no further use now that we know them for agents of the Vru'uneb. I do hope they don't report our conversation in an unfortunate light ... perhaps I'd better go and make sure no untoward inference is drawn. Let me escort you back to the library, quickly, for I must speak before the Vru'uneb make up their minds."

"Very well," replies Mekelu, furious at himself for not making a move to get the Eye of Daybreak. He tried to play it too nonchalantly. As they head back to the library, he will say, "Are you sure that Eye is nothing more than a simple light? Why would the Vru'uneb take it? If it is valuable, we might be willing to trade an Eye of Understanding for it."

"The Vru'uneb probably took it because you expressed interest in it," says Valpurez.

"Their job is to keep track of you foreigners and what you might be doing."

"For my part, I'd be happy to trade it for an Eye of yours -- surely you don't have the Eye of Incomparable Understanding, only one of which is known to exist, but there are any number of lesser Eyes worth more to us than the silly Eye of Illumination. And as the head of the House Recusant library, I have the authority to make that trade. Perhaps, though, you could request it rather than I? The attention of the Vru'uneb is best avoided by persons who reside permanently in Livyanu."

Vathek erects a scry-guard spell to block the spies on us, and leans in and whispers to Mekelu that he suspects an intrigue here. The tattooed man is too insistent on recovering

the eye of incomparable understanding--spies must have discovered that we possess it. This round-a-lay dance with the secret police might or might not be something to be taken at face value.

What if this is a worthless eye, whose only use is to emit a white light, and our Empire trades away an Incomperable Eye for a trinket?

Meanwhile, in the library ...

The N'luss deploy themselves throughout the building and settle into guard positions. Some of them unpack the supplies, including copious ink and paper.

Stonebreaker asks Lord Natoro where they can build a fire to cook lunch.

"Nowhere in this sacred chamber!" says Laslo after a look at Natoro's face. "The manuscripts herein are priceless, and worth the cost of a growling belly. Besides, I am certain our hosts will provide refreshments ere long."

A Livyani enters in the blue-tattoo raiment of the Seekers After Wisdom.

"Stonebreaker," says Laslo, "Lord Natoro wishes you to list each person's preferences for lunch. We will see how close the Livyani can come to our preferred fare, and there are small packets of spices in our luggage which may remind us of home."

The Livyani librarian looks quizzical.

"Is something amiss, man?" Laslo demands.

"You were expecting to be given food?" says the Livyani. "I fear you have been misinformed. Guests in the sacred precincts of House Recusant are here to think, not to eat. Study and debate with concentration, for only when your task is complete shall food and water be supplied."

Stonebreaker's brows darken.

"You expect these noble Tsolyani to starve all day for the sake of your precious studies?" he demands. "Have you any idea who you are treating as common slaves? These are priests of the Fourth Circle, colonels in the army, emissaries of His Most Eternal Majesty! At a word, I would strike you dead for your insolence. Lord Natoro, do you give the word?"

The other N'luss lean forward, raising their bronze blades.

"Kill me or not," says the Livyani with a perfect absence of the insouciance he is trying to project. "The rules of the House are written in iron, for there are many savants but few scrolls in this world. And we do not expect you to starve "all day," outlander. With proper concentration and effort, a day of panic will be followed by a day of hunger, then two days of the most exquisite concentrated thought, followed by a day of lucid delirium in which many connections transcending the limits of human wisdom can be made, followed by that less exalted delirium that presages death."

Lord Natoro gestures firmly. "We demand to return to our ship," says Laslo.

"That is impossible, and not for merely social reasons," says the Livyani. "Without the spell of Rotary Attraction, you would fall to your deaths across the Lefthand Bridge. And now, I bid you farewell, and leave you this warning: do not waste the time you have! The sooner you uncover the reasons behind the Sun's illness, the sooner we may celebrate with a feast fit for geniuses!"

Laslo, acting on silent instructions from Natoro, faces the Livyani with a cold eye.

"My master understands that every land has its customs," he says. "But we Tsolyani are accustomed to working with our allies without the threat of death hanging over our heads. People who threaten us are not our allies -- quite the contrary. I have my eye on you, Kravak'nez of Livyanu. I hold you personally responsible. You will bring food, water --"

"How did you know my secret name?" explodes the Livyani.

"Silence," says Laslo sharply, and his eyes fill with darkness. Kravak'nez sags to his knees, gasping.

"You will bring food, water and bedding for Lord Natoro's servants, sufficient for five days. You will do these things or you, Kravak'nez, will personally account for their lack. Go now; your further presence is not required by Lord Natoro."

Krava'knez stumbles to his feet, holding his heart with both hands, and staggers out. Stonebreaker grins and punches his comrade Varnulf on the shoulder.

"Guess the boy showed HIM who's boss around here!" he says.

"Boy? Surely it's Lord Natoro's doing," says Varnulf. "Did you see how he stood, how he watched? If Tattoo Boy had made a move on the page-lad, Natoro would have chopped him in half sure as slaying."

Presently Kravak'nez returns with an armload of cakes, fruit, long narrow loaves of reddish Dna-bread and strings of nuts.

"This is all I could find, mighty Lord," he says. "Water is being brought ..."

Indeed it is, by Livyani tattooed with black symbols up and down their arms.

Laslo watches Natoro's face.

"Your enterprise is noted, Kravak'nez," he says. "Pray continue."

Kialandi watches Laslo with admiration. "Nicely done," she murmurs softly, for only Laslo to here.

Gliding forward, she approaches the tattooed gentleman whose secret name is Kravak'nez and smiles through lowered lashes, "While we, being wise priests, are far from intimidated at the thought of spending long hours in a place of wisdom, I do wonder at the wisdom of our beginning here without any guidance. Surely, you have people who are already familiar with at least some of these works with whom we could converse? It would seem a shame to waste time and effort covering ground your people have already

covered. Would it not be wiser for us to speak with those among you who are pursuing this same goal and learn what they have discovered, or -- more importantly -- what they have already rejected as immaterial, so that we might concentrate upon unexplored territories?"

"Ah, yes," says Kravak'nez, "that would seem sensible. Valpurez is, ah, apparently detained, and none of the sages he recommended have yet been cleared by the Vru'unek's patient investigators, so at the moment there is no one who can assist you. But be patient, I pray, and soon advisors will be found with whom you can converse knowledgeably."

Kialandi says, "Then patient I shall be. I thank you for your kind efforts upon our behalf."

Kigoth looks up from his studied meditations of the materials that have been laid out. He states, "I give thanks to Wisdom-deep Ksarrul and to you Laslo, who by the study of the power of names has wrought this repast. Wisdom, it is said, grows from the understanding of the deep mysteries my God represents, but i might offer, without being too bold, that Wisdom is also shown when knowledge, used wisely, makes the world as we would wish it."

"And here, my good companions and fellow boon travellers, who by dint of your perseverance and inclination to endure hardship and difficulty for the pursual of the task at hand, the very saving of our world and our most honored Tsolyani way of life, may lie the answers which will make all possible for us."

"I believe in my perusals of this material, though deeper research may first be required, that i have struck at some of the foundation for what may yet embody, in Ksarrul's most grateful time, the very answer we seek."

[OCC: I continue to watch, and particularly with the aura sight and mind reading to note if those watching have made 'note' of this in light of my preparations]

"I believe that the Livyani have embraced an imperiled course and failed to recognize what has been clear to us for some time and by so doing, will not understand or have the ability to right what is now transpiring with our Sun and World. Still, with great diligence and sacrifice, it may be that we who are Tsolyani, can artifice what must pass."

"I believe the answer is here, and with more study, i believe that i shall discover a part of what must occur, though i pray Ksarrul to guide my mind and hands and lead me to true understanding."

Ce Fau, who has been quietly and (she hopes) unobtrusively examining the room, asks Kialandi if there is sufficient space and equipment here for her and the other priests and



priestesses to perform their necessary oblations.

"It would not do, of course, to incur the anger of the Gods--so inauspicious an advent for so important an endeavor. I have been careful to resist the desire to worship Dra at least five times this morning."

(OOC: I am unsure of the timing of the discovery that we could not leave the building and Laslo

shaming the Livyani, but sometime shortly after either event would like to recount an amusing tale

in which the stubborn Tigerflower comically ran upside down along a broad treebranch--

"like a stone road in the sky--" in order to steal some poor fellows shiny hat. Naturally, Ce Fau required the wicked monkey to return across the trees and take the hat to its owner. "Ah! to teach this little devil to eschew worldly desires---! Nearly as troublesome as this aged and unworthy woman's heart...")

(OOC2: Moderator--you did not describe the surface of the perpendicular bridge, so I assume that it was not polished smooth, but provides the kind of rough hand-holds a monkey could use. If not--never mind!) Attachment 3k

Indeed the perpendicular bridge was not worn smooth, and a monkey should have no trouble traversing it.

Kialandi immediately stops what she is doing. Gliding gracefully over to Kigoth, she bows and says, "Wise Kigoth, I am at your disposal. Direct me as to best my efforts. Is there some scroll that needs reading or some object that needs investigating? What use can I be in aiding you in forwarding our cause?"

Turning to Kialandi, Kigoth says, "Most gracious and beautiful of priestesses, if i may be peremptorily forgiven for any offense that i might offer one who so clearly represents the ideals to which mortals in service to her Goddess should so clearly aspire, i must admit that my humble knowledge of your Goddesses deepest nature has escaped my poor intellect and therefore i cannot predict as of yet what help you may, in your kindness, offer. If i may press further, i must admit just my vague and poor understanding of the thirty three unspeakable acts of which your Mistress is the greatest Practitioner makes the mere presence of one so honored by her in these arts a difficult to overcome distraction, though i hope and pray that through my diligence, that this difficulty too shall provide a small stone on my road to the attainment of the mysteries of All-Cunning Ksarrul."

"Without a long and winding speech, perhaps, Oh Mistress of the Greater Dances which give rise to Creation so holy, you may aid by perusing these documents and seeing if there are some mysteries known only to a practitioner such as yourself of such motions and actions which may, in some way, reveal the mudra of the magic which gives us



thought towards the mysteries of the Planes of Greater Divinity by means of those stairs of lesser Night, which do lead therein. For myself, i shall continue for i feel now that my inclusion in this event and this journey is well worth the while, for in my studies i have glimpsed the veils of Azhorrac and the Ways which lead to the Azure and Encrimsoned Heights of the Ways of Inestimable Enlightenment and i believe that these shall stand us now in good stead, if only my poor intellect shall encompass what is revealed before me. Still, what i do have of these arts both curious and hidden, i shall apply with all the diligence that i hope He of the Blue Room would expect of His."

Kigoth will later note, "It may be, my friends and companions that what must be done may be accomplished, though it shrive my soul and require much of me. I will almost, of a certain, need to confer with my brother of the temple of Ksarrul and perhaps Priestess Kialandi of the Flowers and Incomparable Beauty and Mistress of the Dance of 47 Steps shall be able to pursue this course to completion, though Ksarrul only knows if my will and mind will be strong enough for the course."

"One point that i must note is that before we left, we had discussed certain events that might take place, certain actions that should be taken and i say to you that it may be the case that those should follow for it is quite possible that it is the very nature of Tsolyani that will make this, our most important work, viable."

"Therefore, we will need to confer with our companions upon their return and discover of them the acceptability and likelihood of those actions here-to-fore discussed and see what may be seen, the Light of the God's shining forth on our endeavours, we may pray."

Kialandi lowers her lashes demurely, delighted by Kigoth's fair praise.

"I will do what I can to aid you. I speak and read the local tongue and can put myself immediately to work examining documents. Which documents would you wish me to examine?"

Kialandi will then sit down and examine whatever Kigoth wishes to have help with. At one point, she exclaims softly, but then she shakes her head ruefully. Should anyone ask, she explains that she thought she had found something, but realized that she had juxtaposed the letters of the word. Diligently, she presses on. She does take a break at one point to eat some of the food. She makes a point of expressing her thanks for this meal to Laslo.

Valpurez returns Mekelu, Hakiron and Vathek (and Chri) to the library, where

Kialandi and Kagoth are closely studying ancient texts, Laslo and Lord Natoro are facing down a nervous Livyani servant, and Ce Fau is watching Tigerflower climb the scroll rods.

Valpurez turns, and finds two members of the masked Vru'uneb police waiting for him. They escort him away.

Everyone, of course, begins talking at once ...

"Most gracious and lovely Kialandi of the Flowers, were you to take the time and peruse this set of volumes, perhaps they will reveal some information which must be known for the success of our mission, though it is not certainly so. I pray only that your good Goddess, to whom so much prayer is often devoted, be with us now as she is so surely with you, her stamp of devotion being shown so clearly upon thy form and graceful face."

Kigoth turns to his returning compatriots and says, "Noble Tsolyani, honored brother priest, masterful commander of the legions of Rangers and farseeing commander of our stalwart infantry, as well as you, most notable of our fellows, stalwart knobbed one; it does my eyes good to have you back with us here in our library/bedroom, for it seems as if our good Livyani friends have decided we will stay here, in this specific place until their mystery is solved. Thanks to our quick thinking allies (i indicate to Laslo), the Livyani were corrected in their belief that guests should be served food and drink and that hospitality needs must be observed by meeting the needs not only of the mind but also of the body.

Strangely, i would have thought folks so understanding of the arts of mystery and ritual would be more deeply touched by the rituals of such interaction in society, it being the very basis for civilized exchange.

I hope that all is well with you, though i must admit, that in your absence, we have found but great stacks of words and difficult texts. I have attempted to peruse these copious tomes but a little and already my brain is sore with thought. Still, i will press on if only to aid in my own small way, this quest."

Kigoth limps over to a chair and sits for a second, favoring his bad leg even as he occasionally did on the sea voyage. He bows his head and whispers a prayer or two to his God.

After his prayer is past, Kigoth looks up and says, "Brethren, i think the answer we seek is to be found here, in these books. Our guide Valpuras, while perhaps knowing little of the laws of hospitality and how one's guests should be treated - though i must admit, this may simply be a reflection of the House in general, did pick most excellently in assembling his texts. I believe that the very concepts needed will be supplied by diligent study here."

"This does bring to question one thing, though. I have to wonder at the reason for their returning everyone so quickly and placing us all in the same room again without any guards to 'overhear' of which we are apparently aware. Do they imagine that we will instantly indicate all of the things that may have been ascertained, though my part was certainly for the most minor of thoughts, without concern for their spying."

"Nonetheless, i imagine this opportunity at supposed privacy should be made use of," Kigoth notes as he coughs. Perhaps the air here does not agree with him. Kigoth shuffles his feet as if ... shy, and says, "I only hope that what small things we have seen suggested in these books may be true. But first, i hope you will excuse my over directness and let me inquire of you how each of you are and how things have

passed with you, for your worthiness and past deeds surely indicates that i should hear all you have to say ere i continue."

Kigoth turns to sit again and then watches the returning group with his eyes occasionally seeming to wander to Kialandi's fair form.

Mekelu once more reveals the fact he tends to speak bluntly. "The people of these lands are far too worried about the most minor things. They have many Eyes in their possession. one of which they use as a simple light. I made note of this, and shortly thereafter, their police took it away, along with two mechanics. Then our guide, as you just saw. I fear it is true they will not wish us to leave, even if we are successful in solving the mystery of why the sun is cooling."

Kialandi will study those volumes.

Kialandi commends her life to her goddess.

Then, she runs after the retreating Valpurez and, moving before the masked men, kneels and bows low to the ground.

"I beg your pardon most humbly," she murmurs, "But we have come a great distance to aid your people in our mutual goal of returning the Daystar to its proper brightness. But how can we accomplish this if we do not have the aid of one who knows these documents and has pondered the wisdom known to your country? I realize gentlemen of your stature would not request the presence of this worthy man unless you had some need of him -- still, I beg of you -- Could not your business wait until after he has had opportunity to aid us in this most important of quests?"

"For a man to complete his duties is both necessary and glorious. Yet, should the sun fail and all Tekumel with it, we shall all fail to complete all our duties."

Kialandi sits in one of the sixty-four poses of beauty, listening to the words of those who have returned. She schools her expression so as not to show dismay at any of the things she hears. Then, she rises and

glides gracefully to the window (if there is one) and gazes out thoughtfully upon the view.

Returning to kneel beside Ce Fau, she asks softly if one wished a slip of paper brought back to the ship, could some intrepid child be relied upon to deliver it? Or is that asking more than is wise of such a small one?

The two Vru'uneb look at each other, then at Valpurez.

"What do you say to this, Valpurez?" asks one at length. "Is your work with the Tsolyani more important than our inquiries?"

"I ... I have not the wisdom to weigh these great matters, kind observer. Whatever the Shadow Gods decree is correct."

Both Vru'uneb nod.

"Quite true," says the one who spoke before. "We will consult them. Remain here, Valpurez, so we may find you when their verdict is known ..."

"... or not," says the other. "We'll find you anyway."

They leave. Valpurez mops his brow with a handkerchief.

"I fear I may not be able to assist you much longer, if the Shadow Gods rule against me," he says. "With luck, should that come to pass, another of the sages of the land will be cleared by the Vru'uneb to speak with you. Let us use the time we have, then. Is there aught in these scrolls which I may illuminate further for you?"

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Kialandi speaks regretfully to Valpurez, "If by my action I have kept you from speaking on your own behalf and have thus endangered your chances, I most humbly apologize. Please allow me to help you should you need help avoiding any unpleasant fate." She gives him a significant look.

"But now, as you say, let us make the most of what time we have together."

She will accompany him back into the room and and introduce him to Kigoth.

"Wise Kigoth here seems to have insights greater than the rest of us. Perhaps, he is the best one of us to put out questions to you...but first i ask that you share with us any wisdom or insights you have gained upon this most urgent matter."

At some point, Kialandi passes the following information on to the group which she got from Taluvasz, one of her people and a native of this land.

Taluvasz says the issue of "who rules Tsamra" is a delicate one. Of course, the Shadow Gods do, and their priesthood has the final say on all matters ... but in practice, the great houses, each devoted to the service of one or another Shadow God in particular, have great influence, some more than others. He's been away for two years, but when he was here, House Inexorable devoted a great deal of effort to policing the population here, House Inquisitive knew much about foreign lands, and House Recusant, where you now find yourself, knew the most about magical devices, but kept that knowledge to itself except for trade. Unfortunately, you Tsolyani, selectede by your Emperor as his most wise, are now part of House Recusant's stock in trade -- they will likely want to extract all our secrets, which means a Scheherezade gambit, doling out a bit of wisdom every day, could keep us alive for a very long time. Another House might try to steal us (they would no doubt phrase it as 'help us escape') but that would be trading one cage for another.

Note that Livyani do not lock their doors, anywhere, ever, nor rely on armed guards. There is very little to physically prevent people from runnign all over this building, to any secret room they want. Their barriers tend to be magical, like the gravity-bridge leading to this spire, or social, like the

certain death that awaits anyone caught breaking any rule, or informational, as no one is told what various rooms are for until they need to know. A group of warriors, led by a native guide and shielded by expert mages, could no doubt escape this tower or run anywhere in it they liked, at the cost of turning your hosts from polite jailers into hunters.

Lord Natoro gestures to Laslo, who says:

"As long as our privacy, thanks to Kagoth's subtle preparations, persists, we can discuss our next move. Our hosts' behavior suggests we will not find easy cooperation in the matter of the item we seek, nor will they necessarily have the clues we need to riddle out another means to save the Sun. Who has a plan of action to propose?"

Thoroughly frustrated, Mekelu says, "I say we tell them if we get that one Eye, we might be able to solve the mystery. It is not necessarily a falsehood. Then we make a break for it." He sits back. "I am not sure how to leave this place, but we have some time for that."

"We have Valpurez here with us," says Laslo. "We could certainly tell him we need that one Eye to solve the mystery. Does anyone have any reason why we should not do this?" Kigoth eases himself out of his chair and stands.

He looks towards Lord Natoro and says, "Most Puissant Commander, that particular which we have mentioned heretofore and which was to us suggested by our masterful captain Erit, is something that we may not, perchance, do without. From what work and reading i have already done, i can see quite clearly that it could not be more vital to the course of action we must follow."

"Once it is found and uncovered, perhaps by my most honored brother priest Vathek, whose wisdom in such matters is certainly far greater than mine, i believe i may, now that i have been properly informed, attempt to make use of this item with those pitiful arts that i have by some small diligence gleaned from the very least of Ksarrul's wisdom to attempt to set things aright. At least, such a course of action



seems to be set forth before me from what i have read, though i believe i will now continue my researches and meditations until i can be sure."

"As for the carrying out of such actions, perhaps i should leave that to men and honored companions so much more skilled with such schedules and i will occasionally, if some small detail to which i have been privy becomes important, make note of what minor things i may."

Ce Fau glances sidelong at Kialandi, gives a soft almost sub-vocalized whisper and wipes her hands together as if shaking off some dust. Immediately, Tigerflower stops what he is doing, leaps from the scrolls stacks onto Ce Fau's shoulder and wrings his tiny paws. Ce Fau gives him a nugget of monkey chow. "Ah, beautiful Daughter of Desire, you have seen with your own eyes what a disobedient and unreliable child (though much beloved of this aged, and foolish heart) I have! Why it is all I can do to keep him by my side, not scampering about the place." Ce Fau makes rubs her thumb and forefinger together and Tigerflower runs along her arm and perches on Ce Fau's wrist. As the monkey eats the nut she gives it, she uses the other hand to tilt the monkey's collar up. Anyone looking closely will see a tiny slit along the inside. "Sadly, I may need to leash him...."

Hakiron martially assesses the livyani which he has seen. Are there men equipped with bows, swords, armor, etc.? Are any of them bigger than a N'luss? Has he seen anyone show any martial skill? Hakiron hefts 'Daybreak' and lets the light slide along the blade. He aks, "Can I speak freely, or will our will the hemlu who are our hosts hear my plan? For if I can speak freely, than allow me to present a plan that would perhaps give us an edge if Chiteng allows."

Hakiron assesses the Livyani as weaker than Tsolyani -- they are thinner, just as short, not as muscular, and uncoordinated. He estimates a Tsolyani soldier like Mekelu would defeat one Livyani easily and could probably defeat two at the same time. So a N'luss, picked by Hakiron himself, ought to be able to slay them as fast as they come forward! Laslo assures Hakiron that what the savants of Ksarul wish to keep secret, stays secret. He may speak freely, for now.

"We have Valpurez here with us," says Laslo. "We could certainly tell him we need that one Eye to solve the mystery. Does anyone have any reason why we should not do this?" Ce Fau slowly makes her way toward Laslo and murmurs very softly: "How long do you

wish him to live after he is told, most Honorable child of Heaven? Ten hours? Ten Days? Or--?"

Kialandi smiles at the monkey and chucks him under the chin if the little creature will allow her. "Alas, that would be a shame," she says smiling appreciatively. "But perhaps a leash would be useful as a last resort.

From her expression, she is not discussing leashes at all.

Kigoth awakes briefly from his meditations and prayers to many-wondered Ksarrul and states,

"I pray that my arts are worthy of such a task, most honored commander. Such as they are, my pitiful abilities are at the disposal of these, my companions, and for the nonce, our hosts seem as if they are not hearing us, though this could be pretense of course." After his speech, Kigoth rises gracefully and then dispels the illusion of grace by moving towards the place our victuals have been set and clearly favoring his left leg.

After Laslo's assurances, Hakiron clears his throat. "We should use their own tricks against them. Surely with the N'luss we have here and the magical support offered by the powerful priests and preistesses present we could strike into the heart of this palace. There we could capture their lord or someone who is of equivalant power. Once we have our prisoners, Chiteng be willing, the hostages can become the ransomers."

Vathek says:

"World-honored one, beautiful priestess, brother wise in the hidden wisdom, captains brave, and you others: we see two impossible things.

Here is the first impossible thing. I am wise in the knowledge of the machines of the ancient ones. I know the workings of the Seven Sided Prism; I have seen the innards of the Blue Vessel of Transcending Distance; I have disassembled and reassembled the Excellent Upright Object That Keeps Drinks Cold.

And yet I say the Livanyu are as far above me as a moon at zenith is above the mud of the lake bottom of Tsrulghu lake; for they are making and manufacturing Eyes before our eyes.

To use the Eye of Illumination as a mere lamp, perhaps a Nluss warlord might do, but not a Livyanu Warlock, not in the very room where technicians are making Eyes.

There is but one explanation to this first impossible thing: we have been told a bald faced lie.

Here is the second impossible thing: The Livanyu know the sun will die, and yet they hinder our efforts to help them to avert this catastrophe.

There are three explanations to this second impossible thing:

First, the Livyanu seek some temporary and petty advantage over Tsolyanu, and care nothing that all life hangs in the balance. In this case, the Livyanu are mad, and we are best served by departing from here until they beg us on bended knee to return.

Second, the Livyanu seek to embrace, rather than avoid the danger. Perhaps those servants of Sarku who do not live, and need neither air nor food nor light will not be disaccommodated when the sun is extinguished: the Livyanu may have been promised such an existence after the solar extinction. In this case, the promise of cooperation is a shame, meant only to placate some faction among them, a faction ignorant of the true purpose here.

Third, the danger is far less than feared, and the Livyanu, by means of their advanced science, know this; or even, they helped deceive the world by means that stagger the imagination. In this case, this whole stageplay is merely a deception, aimed only at winking the Eye of Incomparable Understanding out of our hands. In this case again, the Eye of Incomparable Understanding contains a power, or has a function, we have not yet guessed, as we are the ones using it merely as a lamp when its power is so much greater. I have a theory as to what function that is, and why the Livanyu desire it. May I hold and examine the Eye? I cannot say aloud my thought, for, if I am correct, it is dangerous to speak it." Vathek holds out his glove to whoever is carrying the Eye.

Lasl, finished leafing through the books, looks to Lord Natoro, who nods.

"Certainly, wise Vathek," Laslo says. He takes the Eye from Lord Natoro, peers through it at Vathek's face, nods as if satisfied, and hands it over.

"Hakiron, Lord Natoro sees your plan is sound, for it exploits our strengths vis-a-vis our captors. I fear we will suffer casualties, but if it must be done, our lives belong to the Emperor, after all. But if the Eye of Daybreak is so critical to our mission, as subtle Kagoth swears it is, could we not as easily use our brave N'luss and Tsolyani soldiers to seize it by force, then escape together with all the books and papers here assembled? Lord Natoro has it in mind to enlist Valpurez' cooperation, and offer him sanctuary in Tsolyanu, even as Taluvasz has taken. Valpurez does not seem entirely at ease in this spy-ridden environment."

"Noble lords of the sword and spear, I ask you: if we can, by Valpurez' help or sorcery, establish where the Eye of Daybreak is taken, can we win through to take it? And wise magicians, I ask you: if we carry away the Eye, together with all the written materials herein, is that sufficient to accomplish the Sun's rebirth? It seems to me that as we cannot trust the Livyani to aid us honestly, the Eye and the books are all we can expect from this mission."

"Tell Lord Natoro your rede, experts in war and magic, and he will tell us what must be done."

"My Lord Natoro," begins Mekelu, "I believe it can be done. However, it will require all of us present. I ask that you too accompany us, if for no other reason than once we begin this course of action, we must stay together if we are to succeed. I do not think the Livyani will expect so bold a maneuver. And even if they do, it has been my experience that forceful action, swift and sure, will frequently overwhelm those who rely strictly on the mystical arts, as they seem to. I would hope we can get close to the Eye using stealth and guile, before resorting to sword and spell. Then we must simply improvise. Fight our way to the Eye, secure it, then guard it all the way to the ship. And until it is away. Indeed, if we could somehow signal the ship we will be arriving with a desire for great haste to leave, it would facilitate things. As our ultimate objective is to use the Eye in saving our Empire, I will say that once we have the Eye, the soldiers, myself, Hakiron and his men, will do what it takes to get the scholars and priests safely away with the Eye." Lord Natoro nods grimly, making a series of hand gestures which Laslo interprets. "Lord Natoro expected nothing less, Colonel," Laslo says. "And you are right, we should get as close to the Eye as possible through stealth and guile before using our weapons. There is a device at my disposal which can signal the ship that we are coming, releasing three black flames which will be visible through stone and soil. You may recall that Captain Rickert and Magister Seffan are aware that this signal means they are to make ready to sail at once. By the time we reach the ship, I dare say all will be in readiness." "Lord Natoro wishes everyone to have opportunity to declare on this plan, lest some oversight betray us. Whilst you speak your minds to him, he wishes me to consult with Valpurez, to assess how much he may be willing to aid us, and how much we can trust him."

Vathek's face is a silver mask which bears the hint of a tiny silver smile carved into it, as if the wearer cannot cease from being amused at the unthinkable evils that await the Day of Release.

Vathek takes the eye and says, "Rumor says the shape-changing Mihalli rule the humans here in Livanyu; my studies tell me that the only device able to distinguish a shape-changer from a true human is the Eye of Understanding; the Mihalli recently gained possession of the Sovereign Eye that renders the dread and dreaded Ssu race, the arch-enemies of man, mind-slaves.

"Such an increase in the power of the Mihalli may have prompted the human Livyanu to attempt a desperate bid to win the Eye from us to use against their masters, or an equally desperate bid by the masters to keep the Eye from the hands of their human slaves, if you take my meaning."

"However, there is one here who knows both the Livyanu and the Mihalli, and, by curiously unlikely personal experience, lived to tell the tale."

Vathek puts his left hand under his voluminous cloak. He walks back and forth through the room as if seek a good place to stand.

Raising his right hand, Vathek points the Taluvasz and depresses the trigger.

If nothing particular happens, he puts Eye of Incomparable Understanding to his mask eyehole and looks through it.

At the same time, he casts the Charm of Obdurate Compulsion to Verity, also called Truthsayer, and says,

"Tell us by what means you escaped from the Mihalli, sir? What did they instruct you to do, and what did you promise them?"

(To Moderator: "Vathek puts his left hand under his voluminous cloak" means he has his left thumb on the button to the Eye of the Instantaneous Translation to the plains of Teretane. "He walks back and forth through the room as if seek a good place to stand." Means that he is trying to set up a shot so he can hit Taluvasz without hitting anything else aside from the wall behind him.)

"Tell us by what means you escaped from the Mihalli, sir? What did they instruct you to do, and what did you promise them?"

Taluvasz says:

"The Mihalli known as Ksamanduish took me in his tubecar back to Tsamra, interrogating me the while on what I knew of the Ssu and of the Tsolyani. He seemed utterly disinterested in what I knew of Livyanu, even though as a high-ranking spy, I knew much that was secret and potent about House Inexorable and several other Houses. Indeed, when I tried to mollify him with a particularly useful revelation (for I admit, in my terror at his sudden metamorphosis, I was at wit's end to tell him whatever would please him and spare my life) about House Recusant, he cut me off with a stare of his terrible scarlet eyes. He seemed disappointed that I was not better known in foreign lands, for it would have been useful, he mused, to kill me and imitate my form."

"When we arrived, he took the form of one of the Trumpeters of Revelation, bound me with metal rope, and led me out as though his prisoner. But I shouted for help, blaspheming the Shadow Gods as foully as I could, rousing the Trumpeters' Guards to righteous fury. The Mihalli tried to silence me with his hands, and I poked him in the eye with such force that he rebounded into his true form, showing the Guards who the real enemy was here. They attacked, and to my everlasting shame, instead of aiding them, I ducked back into the tubecar and pressed a button at random."

"I did not go to the island of the Black Ssu; I know this, for I would surely have been eaten or tortured to death. But I weakened and swooned from hunger, and when I awoke, the tubecar was docked in S'satis, the capital of Mu'ugalavya. I speak that language, fortunately, and though a Livyani in a land which loves my people not, was able to barter my way across the border to Tsolyanu, and make the acquaintance of an officer who took

me to Bey Su. In time I was trusted to enter the Golden Tower at Avanthar, where I met Kialandi again, and she asked for me to be added to her staff."

"This I swear by the true gods both stable and changeable."

Having already made one devastating sweep of such provender as was provided, and relying on his keen sense of timing, Chri now responds to the earlier movement from Ce Fau's quarter. Waddling over, he sets not one but two sets of hands wringing and rubbing together while a pair of his flat eyes stare fixedly into Ce Fau's face with what he assumes could only be read as an imploring gaze.

"N, m...hey...m-monkey-pellet? Hey..."

Ce Fau shakes her head sadly: "Abandon desire! It is a snare and a falsehood."

Ce Fau bows very low before Lord Natoro: "Oh great one, pardon this your miserable servant for reitirating what you have (no doubt, being wise among savants) already observed: The lobster enters the lobster pot with ease, but the shape of the pot contrains the creature to remain." "This little child of demons," Here she strokes Tigerflower "can scamper down a near-vertical bridge with ease--but how shall your humble servants, cumbered with books, scrolls and artifacts manage this task?"

Ce Fau falls silent, her face twisted in what appears to be a terrible internal struggle. After a time, she turns again to Laslo and murmurs very softly: "If it is your will, and that of your master (the God shower blessings upon your path), I may send a more complete message to the ship by means of this tiny monkey, to my counterpart amongst the Emperor's (May he live forever!) spies still on board the ship." She pauses, bows slightly and moves to where she has left her small sack, containing her writing supplies.

Hakiron nods in agreement. "Aye, I suggest we find someone who knows this place inside in out. Then we use them as a guide to take us to the most important person in this palace, the head chief or shadow lord priest. Then we make them transport us from this place safely, perhaps even by tubecar, with all that we wish to carry or their lives are forfeit. By Vihmula, we will use their own tactics against them!" Hakiron takes in the room, and asks. "How many of these eyes can be used as weapons? Mekulu, if we have not already done so, I suggest that we should gather them up and prepare them for use."

Vathek reports that this tale, to the best of the ability of his dark art to discover the hidden truth of things, is correct and accurate to the best recollection of the speaker. Laslo consults with Lord Natoro, then turns to the rest of the Tsolyani.

"Wise Vathek and subtle Kagoth, if you are finished establishing Taluvasz'



trustworthiness, let us proceed."

"I have spoken with Valpurez and he has agreed to aid us in exchange for our spiriting him away to Tsolyanu. He has informed me of the location to which the Vru'uneb will almost certainly have taken the Eye of Daybreak. It is a chamber within the pinnacle of this tower, where the continual chanting of the house-magicians converge to form a cone of unbreakable mystic fortitude. None can eavesdrop by sorceries subtle or direct, save from the bottom of the cone, which is open and faces down within House Recusant itself. If the Vru'uneb are concerned about persons interested in the Eye (and being secret-keepers, they can have no other interest in it, as both our Livyani allies attest), they will of course take it to a place safe from prying eyes."

"Lord Natoro has it in mind for us to go there, now, using whatever ruse or spell seems best calculated to get us there unmolested. Then we will take the Eye, by bargaining if possible, by force if not, and exit this tower either over the Sidelong Bridge (which Kagoth says he can lift us across, albeit one at a time) or at street level. Either way, we try to make it back to the ship, or to the Temple of the Twelve Trumpets of Revelation, beneath which is a tubeway car we can use to make our escape."

"If we are separated, make for the ship. Only if you cannot reach it are you to use the tubeway car; without the Oblong Key used to direct its motive spirits, the car can get us out of Livyanu, but there is no telling where we will emerge!"

"Now, what means do you propose to get us to the top of this tower without drawing the wrath of the guards? It would be well for us to go undetected, or at least unsuspected, as long as possible." Kialandi says, "By the grace of Hrihayal, I have been granted the Alter Visage spell, which allows one man to look like another. I also brought mundane means of disguise along, which I have a talent for using. Perhaps, we could, with Valpurez' help, transform some or all of us to look -- at least at a distance -- like people who would be permitted to approach this place."

Ce Fau gestures toward the walking ottoman, "A powerful spell indeed! This unworthy old fool also has the means to alter her own appearance to approach that of the Livyanni, but, is it not written that "the clothes make the man?" Alas, I have no skill with needle and thread, and no garments but those I wear.

With spells cloaking them as properly tattooed Livyani, the delegation proceeds up the angled stairs toward the Pinnacle Throne at the top of House Recusant. Laslo, peering through the Eye of Incomparable Understanding, sees beams of flowing instructions passing through the walls at various heights and, with the aid of a bit of colored chalk, helps everyone pass around them without interrupting the flow of Livyanu's magical messages.



Kagoth and Vathek peer in all directions, their mildly smiling silver masks smiling mildly. Of course, no one can see them, because when you look at one another you see cheerful, determined Livyani librarians covered head to toe with intricate blue tattoos. Several agents of the Vru'uneb pass by the party, always in pairs or fours, and though they give the disguised Tsolyani searching glances, so excellent is Kialandi, Vathek and Kagoth's illusion that they pass right on by, reassured that all is as it should be.

Finally Valpurez indicates a portal, beside which stand two green-and-blue-tattooed Livyani with enormous feather-fans on curved basilwood rods. A Livyani messenger, dusty from the road and bearing his scroll in a white-knuckled fist, approaches the portal and its beaded curtain. The guardians of the gate sweep their fans over his skin, brushing away every trace of his tattoos as though they were colored dust, and he enters as bareskinned as a Tsolyani, pushing the beads aside. The beads are obviously very heavy, and Kagoth thinks he recognizes the dull clink of leaden Dra-symbols, used to absorb and diffuse magic. Perhaps the entire chamber is lined with lead beads, or maybe just the entryway.

Laslo passes Mekelu a scrap of paper. Squinting to focus through the illusion-fog, Mekelu makes out the words,

"Valpurez swears the Eye is within. Rush the door, or pass through and trust to our disguise? You are the ablest of us all at assessing mortal risk, builder of artifice to resist sudden death."

Kialandi watches the tattoos vanish and looks at her companions whose tattoos are a mix of illusion and paint. Her fingers rest on the hilt of her knife as she waits for more militant minds to decide their first action.

Brita hiGaladar, friend and companion to Kialandi, points out that if the leaden curtain keeps the people inside from sensing what goes on outside, then the fan-bearers could just be quickly killed (or, perhaps, captured and silenced) and no one inside would be the wiser. Then the priests could adjust their illusion so we look like bareskinned Livyani rather than tattooed Livyani.

"And what does that mean, brushing off their tattoos, anyway? Cha!"

Ce Fau nods to Brita and plucks a simple wooden flute from her sash. "Ah! Happy are those men whose friends and companions seek wisdom. Is it not written that death may come on soft feet, all-unannounced whilst one is busy with mundane tasks that distract the mind?" Her wrinkled old-face smiles charmingly. "Such men," she gestures towards the guards, "are ripe for tales and songs which would bring their minds closer to Dra."

OOC: Ce Fau skips on her silk gloves and readies her poisons

Brita hiGaladar, a clean-limbed fighting woman, master of the sword and dagger, has no

idea what Ce Fau is preparing to do.

"Hakiron," Mekelu whispers, "and everyone else, be ready. We will approach, and I will step forward. Just before they use the fans on me, I will stumble to my knees. They will focus on me. Hakiron, you and your men take them out. I will help. The rest will cover for us if we are too slow." Mekelu leads the group forward, with subtle direction from the priests to avoid any last lines of communications. With the others a step or two back, Mekelu steps forward, but stumbles and falls to his knees. Just as quickly, he grabs the left hand guard by the ankle and yanks him off his feet...

Hakiron smiles a knowing grin and signals his men that they should silence the guards. As soon as Mekelu goes down he attempts cleave the other guard in twain.

MEKELU yanks the guard's foot out from under him, causing him to land hard. His feathered fan brushes Mekelu's shoulder, but causes no harm.

HAKIRON strikes the other Livyani guard on the head and cuts him in two, splitting the head and shearing off the left arm and leg. The Livyani collapses sideways, missing the leaden curtain. VARNULF the N'luss seizes his fan before it can fall from his fingers. "STONEBREAKER" MAKKOR, another N'luss, stabs downward to dispatch the guard MEKELU tripped, while NATORO holds his plumed hat over the man's mouth to muffle his cries.

A Livyani scribe comes around the corner, bearing a message for the men in the Pinnacle Room. CE FAU breathes a quick puff into one end of her flute and a needle pierces the scribe's neck, paralyzing him instantly. A N'luss grabs him and wraps his head securely in a cloak, leaving him alive for questioning.

Apart from Hakiron's grunt, a puff of air, and the thump of the other guard hitting the ground, the attack has made no sound at all.

The portal is taken. As Kagoth's inquisitive gaze affirms, no magic can penetrate the leaden barrier. But it can easily be pushed aside. The question becomes, shall the Tsolyani peer through it or enter, and if the latter, who shall go first?

Hakiron silently nods in satisfaction, and uses a cloak to keep the blood from the slain guards from spreading under the curtain.

Hakiron quietly asks the priests in the group if the fans can be used as weapons or to dispell magic.

Then he looks to Mekelu to see who should go through first and if the plan is to kill or capture those on the other side.

"I suspect the fans erase knowledge-spells," says Laslo quietly, "as well as removing fragile enchantments from the poisonous emanations beyond. They might be quite effective against magicians ..."

Mekelu says, "I like the plan of using the magic disguise to make us appear without tattoos. I will go first."

Mekelu shakes his head in embarrassment. "I misunderstood. In that case, peeking through will probably get us in trouble. I saw we walk in boldly, as if we belong there. Again, I am willing to go first. In fact, let me go first, wait a few moments before following. That way any response will be focused on me, so you can move with impunity." If Ce Fau is not too far away to hear this exchange or respond to it without having to raise her voice, she speaks: "The arts which befool the eyes of men are well known to the Honorable Priestess Kialandi-- no workings of Dra will dispell her handiwork..."

Chri waddles (sideways?) toward the curtain making bubbling noises deep in his craw. He heartily disapproves of Mekelu's offer to go first and take the brunt of any counter attack.

"Chri, my friend, they will be expecting one with our shape. Which may delay any attack a few moments longer." Then Mekelu smiles and adds, "So be right behind me, hidden by me."

Kialandi will stand beside Ce Fau and keep a sharp eye out down whichever direction that the honorable story teller is not looking. She will wait in the hall, prepared with a poisoned dagger ready in one hand and a healing spell prepared, in case our people meet some terrible fate as they enter the room and rush out again injured. If it becomes clear that back up is not needed outside, she will follow the others inside.

Mekelu walks through the beads first, with Chri toddling behind. As Kagoth has suggested, Mekelu wears Livyani clothes, with his hair tied back and dusted to look like the part-bald Livyani style. It need only fool onlookers for a moment, after all.

And it seemingly does. Inside a round room with a sharply vaulted, near-vertical roof are two groups, both in black. One man wears the silver mask of a priests of Ksarul, and his two companions in leaded steel armor bear steel shields silvered with the visage of the Smiling God - they are clearly soldiers of the 35th Medium Infantry, the "Legion of the Prince of the Blue Room", sacred to Lord Ksarul and well-equipped with sorcerous tools, including numerous Eyes.

This group is to Mekelu's right; if the door is at six o'clock, the Ksarulites are at three o'clock. At nine o'clock, to Mekelu's left, is another group of three, clad in rippling black

wrappings of silk so fine it curls around their limbs at the slightest movement, like fire on a burning branch. One is a little girl perhaps eight years old, pulling her lower lip thoughtfully. Another is a tall, stern-looking Mu'ugalavyani, swarthy and sunburnt like all of his breed, clean-shaven with sharp hawklike cheekbones and thick, forbidding eyebrows. The third is a wild-looking Yan Koryani, with upswept eyebrows, a two-forked beard and a mirthful toothy smile.

Each bears several Livyani tattoos on their cheeks and foreheads, and all of them have vivid scarlet eyes.

A woman stands between the groups, which glare at each other warily. She is tall and lovely, with a lissome grace and confident poise that seem perfectly natural, wearing scarves of green gauze and ribbons of white satin.

Inside the room, to one side of the doorway, are six Livyani - two librarians and four messengers. They are seated on the ground, watching the interplay. One of them whispers to Mekelu, "Shh. Important ritual. We're not to disturb till they're done. Have a seat, why don't you?"

(Such other persons as wish to enter can do so at this time, without drawing attention. The N'luss stay outside in easy earshot.)

The priest of Ksarul holds up a five-headed tool like a scoop or shovel, made of copper. "Behold," he says, "the Five-Fingered Spade, sacred to Lord Sarku, emblem and eidolon of the Living Death. Obtained at great cost and difficulty by our Ndalul Clan, now brought here to your kingdom."

"Show us," commands the Yan Koryani flatly.

"By no means," says the Ksarul priest. "I will demonstrate its identity from here. In your own house, we must take what precautions against theft as we can."

"You think highly of those precautions, Kerektu, priest of the Doomed God," says the Mu'ugalavyani. "Preparations and caution did not save your Doomed Prince from oblivion within the Blue Room - are you so proud that you believe they will change your fate?"

The Ksarul priest holds up an Eye with his other hand.

"I have the means to destroy the Spade, if you give me reason to doubt our exchange will end well," he says mildly.

"No!" gasps the woman in green and white, and the impassive-faced black-garbed trio agree.

"I will demonstrate that this is indeed the one true Five-Fingered Spade," says Kerektu.

"Do you still have the undead Mrur we brought with us from Tsolyanu?"

"Indeed," says the little girl. She opens a chest, from which a white-crusted hand gropes. Slowly a Mrur, one of the undead shamblers of the night, staggers forth, crackling and crunching as its funerary coating of salts and spices flakes away with every tottering step.

"The power of Lord Sarku is manifest in the world," observes Kerektu. "His will animates dead flesh, making the impossible into the commonplace. What fool could deny Lord Sarku's divinity, seeing this miracle with his own eyes?"

Kerektu rotates the Five-Fingered Spade, chanting words in a drowned language. The room grows cold with the accession of Outer Planar power.

And the Mrur straightens, crackles, then tumbles over, a lifeless heap of bones.

"A counterspell, cancelling the enchantment that animates the dead," says the little girl.

"So what? You promised us much more, Kerektu."

"I promised much, but I have given much. Consult with your puppets, if you doubt my word, as you should, of course. Lord Sarku's influence in this plane is symbolized and crystallized by this Five-Fingered Spade. Rotated as it is, I have directed his gaze and will away from Tekumel. Nowhere upon this world will any of Sarku's spells function, nor any of his priests draw inspiration from him."

The three strangers close their eyes, their lips moving quickly. The woman in green and white reels, clasping a hand to her heart.

"What have you done to me, sorcerer?" she wails in perfect, melodious Bednjallan. "I am undone!"

"Hardly, your Majesty," says Kerektu. "Your immortal body is animated by the grace of Lord Sarku, to be sure, but also by Lord Belkahn, the master of Life Eternal, and Lady Dlamelish, goddess of the Delicious Flesh. Of them all, Sarku's contribution was by far the least. This simple spell of Refreshment, a gift of my own god, will replace what we have taken."

Kerektu makes a few passes, speaks a word, and "her Majesty" feels better.

Mekelu, seeing her in profile, suddenly remembers long-ago school days, and a statue in a certain temple of Hrihayal in the northern plains. This woman is an exact double for Queen Nayari, founder of the First Imperium, mother of the Bednjallan Dynasty four thousand years in the past! What was her epithet attributed to her beauty? "Nayari of the Silken ..." something or other, wasn't it?

Chri notices she smells nice. Perhaps she rubs flowers on her skin.

Once Nayari recovers her composure, the three Livyani have returned.

"It is as you say, Kerektu," says the little girl. "All the undead have fallen, their strings cut like so many puppets. Priests of Sarku are suddenly bereft of their god's guidance. The star Crowseye, portal to the dimension of Undeath, has gone out in the sky. Indeed you hold the One True Key of Sarku."

"I said as much," says Kerektu with a smug intonation.

"Then see this, priest," says the Mu'ugalavyani. He holds up the Eye of Daybreak, whose white radiance floods the chamber. "The Eye of Daybreak, the Key of Hnalla. Its possession would aid you greatly in exerting control over Tsolyanu, where the priesthood

of Hnalla is greatest among equals, not so?"

"Indeed," says Kerektu. "But do you not fear to part with it? Hnalla's absence threatens you as much as it does ourselves, as the sun warms your shores no less than Tsolyanu's."

"We do not fear Lord Hnalla's wrath," says the little girl. "We Shadow Gods are owed favors from him of old. But without him, the Sun will shine on as before, displaying its blessings with fine impartiality. For although Lord Hnalla controls the Sun, he is not the Sun, and the one can exist without the other."

"Then why is the Sun going out?" demands Kerektu.

"Because it pleases us that it do so," says the Yan Koryani. "There are many worlds, and this one not the greatest of our holdings. But if you crave its warmth, by all means, take the Eye yourself, and unlock Lord Hnalla once more. It can be yours, if you bid highly enough."

"The Spade," says Kerektu. "Here, examine it."

Nayari takes the Spade from Kerektu and crosses the room to hand it to the three Shadow Gods. Mekelu notices that Kerektu and his escorts have not moved from their spot since he came in, and discerns faint chalk marks circumscribing the places where they stand. Nayari accepts the Eye of Daybreak from the Mu'ugalavyani and recrosses the room to hand it to Kerektu, who examines it with great difficulty through the eyeslits in his silver mask.

The Shadow Gods and Kerektu look up at the exact same moment.

"Not good enough," they say in near-unison.

Kerektu is the first to recover.

"What else do you want?" he says. "I have another Key, but it is vital to my temple's existence."

"You mean you have two Keys, priest of secrets," says the Mu'ugalavyani. "And they are not so much critical to the Temple of Ksarul as to the Ndalun Clan, your secret society within the temple which seeks political power above all else. But tell me, are they as vital as the keys to the Isles of Teratane or the Fields of Glory? For we have the Keys of Lord Belkhanu and Lord Karakan as well."

"Preposterous," declares Kerektu flatly. "The Key of Belkhanu is in Mihallu, the property of their Sacred Tetrarch. And as for Karakan, everyone knows the Adamant Shield lies at the bottom of the Perengana Deeps for lo, these thousand years."

"It did," says the little girl. "Until the Sarlavyani brought it up. It made its way to a temple offering to Shiringgaya, the Triple Goddess, and thence to this place."

"You stole from Shiringgaya's temple?" says Kerektu. "Her cult has entire orders of drug-addled assassins ready to throw their lives away at their high priest's whim - surely they will hunt you to the ends of Tekumel!"

The little girl laughs, and the laugh bells out and rings far deeper than it should.



"Foolish boy," she says at last. "How little you know of the very world beneath your feet!" "Yes, well," says Kerektu. "I'm empowered to offer you the Circlet of Darkness, sacred to Lord Hru'u, for the Eye of Daybreak. But I cannot, will not offer you the Eye of Omniscient Understanding, for it is sacred to Lord Thumis, my temple's arch-rival, and critical to our holding the gray-robles at bay. The Spade and the Circlet for the Eye of Daybreak - that is my best offer."

"Freeze in the dark, then," says the Yan Koryani wolfishly, turning away from Kerektu. The Mu'ugalavyani turns away also. But the little girl cocks her head to one side instead, studying Kerektu's masked visage.

"There is something not quite right about your words, Kerektu," she reproves in wondering tones. "You cannot truly believe you can lie to us? Surely not. But something is amiss ... you suspect your Eye of Omniscient Understanding is an imitation, not the true article. Is that what troubles you?"

"Demon!" says Kerektu suddenly. "No conceivable intelligence can read my mind - my shields are of the most intricate, most ancient imaginable!"

"Then the limits of your ability to conceive and imagine are laid plain for all to see, Kerektu," says the little girl remorselessly. "For you bring one sect's genius into the heart of an entire nation organized for magic and expect to keep secrets from its masters. Since the day you were born, Kerektu, we have trained telepaths and clairvoyants to study every particle of the matter of your mind. We marked your mind from birth as one of interest, and our interest only grew with every achievement you mastered. Here in House Recusant, six dozen adepts of the College of Clearing the Mists Away are currently in rapport with one another, to the exclusion of all else, monitoring every thought that flashes through your young, feeble, vacuous human mind. We are aware of your thoughts before you think them, before they even form in that sodden pit that animated your animal ancestors. I hope for your sake your misgivings about the Eye of Omniscient Understanding are untrue, for to send you here with a false offering means vengeance beyond description for your Ndalû Clan."

"And I myself?" says Kerektu. "I still have the Eye of Daybreak, and the means to -"

"Shatter it to bits?" says the little girl. "Go ahead, Kerektu. Doom your world. YOUR world, Kerektu. Not, as you will remember, ours."

Kerektu raises the Eye of Daybreak and the other Eye he carries, holding them close together.

"Ah," says the little girl. "There is some chance you might destroy the Eye, after all. That we cannot allow."

"My mystic shields will keep you at bay long enough to -" says Kerektu.

And then Nayari gives him a sidelong glance and touches his face with her fingertips, trailing them over his cheek just behind the silver of his mask.



Kerektu gasps, and his limbs go rigid. After a moment, blood runs in narrow runnels from the eyes, nose and mouth of his smiling silver mask.

Nayari expertly goes through his clothes, finding a crown of black crystalline thorns that pulsates with a purple radiance that is not light, but the antithesis of light, draining illumination from its surroundings.

The two soldiers of the Legion of the Doomed Prince start forward, lowering their spears at the Mu'galavyani and the Yan Koryani at the far end of the room. Those two men glance at each other and grin.

Their grins widen, splitting the skin at the sides of their mouths until they curl around to just below the ears. Yellow fur thickens on their limbs as their legs and backs grow longer, their clothing shredding away as they rise to their full seven-foot height, glaring from red, red slanted eyes under extravagant greenish manes.

These are MIHALLI, the dreaded shapeshifters of children's horror tales, shedding their human disguise like so much dried skin, flexing terrible claws and baring mouthloads of jagged needle-like teeth as they roar their challenge at the soldiers of Ksarul!

Kialandi, kneeling by the door and listening, gapes in astonishment. Keys? Mystic Secrets? The ability to turn the light of the gods on and off like so many lanterns? What do all these astonishing claims mean?

No wonder the Omniscient Eye is so important! It is the prime portal of the god of Wisdom, the eye -- literally -- through which he sees the world! Surely, these foul shapechangers must be slaughtered! And yet, what can she, a dancer with a poisoned knife, do against the likes of this?

Silently, she prays to Hrihayal for guidance, hoping that the eye that controls her goddesses influence has not been turned off too.

Indeed. Both he and your humble narrator noticed that it would be quite a coincidence if the shapeshifting secretive godlike race of Mihalli and the shapeshifting secretive godlike race of the Shadow Gods were entirely unconnected ... unless the world is full of races of secretive manipulative near-godlike beings, and why assume two such races when one will do? Call it Vathek's Razor.

Kialandi will listen to the subtle priest of the Doomed God of the Blue Room with more respect in the future!

Ce Fau, standing beside Kialandi and watching the corridor, every sense strained, hears the woman's slight, hard intake of breath. She bites a withered lip in indecision: To continue at her self-appointed task or discover what has shocked the imperterbable young priestess. She murmurs a prayer to Hnalla who has always guided her hand and allows her off hand to brush Kialandi's shoulder. She murmurs very softly: If you learn ought that dare not die with us--speak! If Kialandi moves into the room Ce Fau will

know--otherwise-- best that old eyes keep watch for unexpected dangers....

Kialandi whispers, ever so softly. "They can turn on and off the gods like so many hooded lanterns! These great eyes! They are the gods eyes!"

Ce Fau murmurs her reply: "Sharp indeed are the eyes of the young, to see the gods and to be certain of their actions... are these the Liviyani sorcerers of whom you speak or their shadow gods, made flesh?"

¿ "Neither, they are the horrid betrayers...the shapechanging Mihalli, like our friend who betrayed us..." Kialandi glances nervously at all her companions, waiting for the moment when yet another will reveal himself (or herself) to be a Mihalli.

Following an old maxim, "In Chaos There Is Profit," Mekelu decides to sow some confusion. He looks at the stunned librarians and messengers, saying with all the urgency he can muster, "Run! Tell people of the treachery here!" Mekelu holds apart the curtains for these people to flee, then ushers in the rest of his group. He says, "Let the others fight among themselves." He is already rushing, still weaponless, towards where Nayari is fiddling with the Circlet of Darkness. He dives and slides along the marble floor, his shoulder knocking Nayari onto her side. He quickly grabs up the Eye of Daybreak, and the other Eye Kerektu was holding.

"My apologies, Milady Nayari," he says.

A Livyani messenger comes jogging up the stairs to the Pinnacle room, bringing his message scroll in a tight-clutched fist. Fortunately, Kagoth has adjusted his illusion to make it appear that the two fan-bearers are at their posts, waiting to remove the tattoos of any who seek entry.

Ce Fau, who has fortunately not allowed herself to be distracted, puffs a sudden fluting note which stops the messenger in his tracks. He blinks, fighting the effect of the poison, and tries to speak, but a N'luss grabs him by the throat and strangles his cry a'borning.

Meanwhile, inside the Pinnacle Room, Mekelu shouts to the Livyani messengers to run and tell all of the treachery that faces them, holding the curtain open for them to exit and his allies to enter.

The Livyani messengers turn and crowd for the beaded curtain. The little girl, who has not yet shed her human disguise, gestures with both hands and speaks a many-vowelled word. The curtains slam closed and become as rigid as iron, trapping the messengers inside.

(Any Tsolyani who wanted to go inside were inside before this, of course. Ce Fau and

Kialandi are definitely outside.)

Ksamanduish, the Mihalli who was disguised as a Mu'ugalavyani trader, opens wide his leering toothy jaws and blows a curtain of fire over the two Ksarulite soldiers. One hurls himself aside, while the other catches the brunt of the fire on his shield and falls, stunned but not killed.

The second Ksarulite soldier attacks the Mihalli who was disguised as a Yan Koryani. That Mihalli wraps his hand in an intricate magical pattern and holds it forth, slamming the Ksarulite across the room with an invisible wave of force.

Mekelu now runs for the center of the room where Nayari is fiddling with the Circlet of Darkness. He dives and slides along the marble floor, his shoulder knocking Nayari onto her side. He quickly grabs up the Eye of Daybreak, snatching for but missing the other Eye which Kerektu was holding.

"My apologies, Milady Nayari," he says.

"Remain calm," says the little girl to the panicked Livyani. "The Vru'uneb will soon come and sort truth from error."

Outside, Ce Fau and Kialandi hear a torrent of sandaled feet rushing up the stairs ...

Mekelu is tempted by two things. The beauty of Nayari and the glory he could acquire by bringing all these Eyes and objects back to his Emperor. But he also knows how dangerous this woman is, having seen what she did to Kerektu. With no weapon to fight her for the Circlet, he makes one last grab at the other Eye Kerektu had, before scrambling away. In his hand is the focus of their mission. And if much of the local magic is stilled at this time thanks to the Spade, it might make their escape easier. If they can only leave this room...

Mekelu finally looks up to see how many of his party are in the room, and the status of the various fights.

Unless I hear otherwise, I believe Chri, Vathek, Kagoth, Natoro, Laslo, and Hakiron are in the room, together with Taluvasz, Valpurez, and two N'luss warriors, Stonebreaker and Varnulf.

Ce Fau, Kialandi, Brita and the remaining 18 N'luss are outside. Lots of people are coming, but still not visible.

Mekelu is indeed tempted by Nayari's breathtaking beauty, so much so that he almost forgets where he is for a moment. Had he been of weaker will, who knows what might have happened? Truly she has charms beyond this mortal sphere!

Nayari snatches the Eye of Daybreak from Mekelu's hand as he snatches the other Eye away from her. She points the Eye at Mekelu's head as if to activate it, which would blind him with dazzling light. Of course, the Eye he holds, if it could destroy the Eye of

Daybreak, would kill her instantly, and she no doubt knows that.

I'll await everyone's next move before telling you what Nayari and the others do. A recap: KSAMANDUISH the Mihalli, FU SH'I the Mihalli (the one who pretended to be a Yan Koryani) and the LITTLE GIRL are all three turning their attention to the knot of humans by the exit, having for the moment fended off the Ksarulite guards. We have seen that KSAMANDUISH can breathe fire (and as Vathek and Hakiron know, he has other, mightier fire spells at his disposal!), and FU SH'I clearly knows the Mighty Hands of Kra spell, which telekinetically extends his hand's reach and strength. The LITTLE GIRL hasn't displayed any offensive abilities yet ... or has she?

The Mihalli are massively tall, ropy rather than bulky, with thin, flickering yellow tails beating rhythms on the floor.

Chri is occupied pulling apart the nice soft metal curtain with the monstrous strength of his clawed hands and feet until he sees that flowery-bint point something at Mekelu ... at which point he utters a stunning bellow (do Mihalli have keen hearing?) and charges (running skill). Should he be blinded by her eye (he has no idea what all these gadgets are supposed to do at this point, having quite lost track) he'll simply rotate faces as he advances so as to have a fresh set of eyes ready when slapping (and hopefully disarming) the tart.

Ce Fau draws herself to up: She seems talker, and speaks aloud in the accents of a commander, her body language that of one used to being obeyed: Surely our clever priests can maintain the illusion of normality, while sweet Kialandi can charm all who come into accepting this as truth. If the doughty barbarian warriors will send--," she pauses, grimaces, "If the N'luss will ready themselves to slaughter all who walk into our ambush, we may yet buy ourselves time to retrieve our comrades within." She then smiles sweetly, and seems to shrink: "Everyone knows old women are helpless: I hope they will forgive me for fainting in terror." Ce Fau, confident that her carefully painted tattoos cannot be dispelled, wrests a message scroll from a Liviyani messenger, checks to see that any unusual accoutrements of hers are tucked out of sight and faints gracefully along the side of the corridor near one of her victims. OOC: The fan is tucked in the hand out of sight, the hand holding the scroll conceals the flute. She watches the corridor from beneath her lashes, waiting for an enemy shape-shifter or magician to appear...

"KSAMANDUISH!" Hakiron roars. He has not forgotten the betrayal. Hakiron assaults Ksamanduish with an aggressive attack. Please note that Hakiron is not trying to capture Ksamanduish, he remembers how deadly he can be.

Kagoth will attempt to use the ever so simple spell of aportation to remove the eye from the hand of Niyari, particularly while her attention is focussed on our brave Mekelu. If it

works, spell shield quickly follows.

Mekelu is so entranced he leans forward towards Nayari, saying, "Milady, I only wish to exchange the Eyes we each now possess..." but he feels the strength of her power drawing him even closer. He is almost powerless to stop her. But then he is shaken from the near-trance by the familiar battle cry of his faithful friend, Chri. He turns just in time to see the short one barreling towards himself and Nayari. If Nayari is also distracted by the charge, Mekelu will grab the Eye of Daybreak, then run for the door.

The three Mihalli act in concert, spreading their clawed yellow-furred fingers and gathering mystic energies from the Planes Beyond.

Vathek notes to himself that owing to the spell shields inherent in the construction of the Pinnacle Room, the Mihalli can only draw on what is directly below them; of course, that's a tower full of Livyani sorcerors, so perhaps that's sufficient unto the task.

The little girl says, "Fu Sh'I, gather in the Keys. Ksamanduish, the man-thing grasping at our Eye annoys us. I shall reduce the noise level forthwith, by quieting these chattering monkeys with the hush of Doomkill ..."

Her eyes jump from scarlet to incandescent yellow, and leaping sparks boil from them, whirling in the air as they grow larger and more brilliant, dividing into all the colors of the rainbow, as though the rainbow had been shattered into shards by a tornado, flattening its course and leaping to devour the humans crowding against the exit!

Laslo inclines his head, and when it snaps upright, his eyes are black, filled with darkness from rim to rim.

"Demons of Change, I loose my long-held sentry over your appetites! Raven, burn, slay and dissolve!" he cries. His hair flies out behind him, revealing him to be Princess Jadis, once and former master of the dark rites of Lord Hru'u.

The flood of howling, hissing, gnashing living ribbons of darkness made visible collide in mid-air with the twisting, glinting, razor-hungry shards of shattered light, and utterly devour one another.

The little girl raises an eyebrow.

"Oh, my," she says softly. "Competition."

Laslo/Jadis collapses in Natoro's arms, spent by her exertions.

Chri gives a bone-stunning bellow, shocking Nayari momentarily insensible. Mekelu snatches the Eye of Daybreak from her and pivots to run for the door, facing squarely the mutual annihilation of demons and Doomkill. So it's hardly surprising he checks his first step for a moment.

Fu Sh'I, the Mihalli formerly disguised as a Yan Koryani, makes swift passes and apports the Spade of Sarku and the Circlet of Darkness from Kerektu's limp form, as though directing puppets on invisible strings. His magic also plucks at the Eye of Daybreak, but

not hard enough to tear it from Mekelu's grasp. The Spade and Circlet soar across the chamber into Fu Sh's left hand, while Kerektu's other Eye rotates in place, its unwinking blue iris turning to face Mekelu and Nayari.

Another spell plucks at the Eye of Daybreak, yanking it from Mekelu's hand and sending it spinning across the room, diamond highlights twinkling, into Kagoth's outstretched midnight-blue gloves. He covers it at once, hiding its light as abruptly as sunset at sea. Hakiron charges toward Ksamanduish, roaring his name and beginning to froth at the mouth and nose. Ksamanduish drops back a step and cocks his fingers in the pose of the Torrid Eclipsing of Mortal Flesh, a spell of firey doom Hakiron has seen unleashed more than once.

"Come closer, man-thing," taunts Ksamanduish. "I want you to see your doom first-hand, as it devours your entire puny tribe!"

Vathek gestures impatiently, and the flames flickering over the inside of Ksamanduish's palms gutter out. Instead of an all-devouring eruption of crimson fury, his spell delivers up a cough of yellow sparks and dies.

"Ah," says Ksamanduish, as Hakiron's gleaming sword Daybreak carves through his midsection.

\*

Meanwhile, outside, a group of Livyani soldiers comes charging up the stairs, and is met by a squad of N'luss who, thanks to Ce Fau's redirection of their attention, are nearly all looking in the right direction.

The massive N'luss crash into the desperate Livyani like adult warriors facing skinny adolescents. The Livyani are actuated by a life-long reverence and dread for their Shadow Gods, but the N'luss follow Lord Chiteng, god of furious battle, and wherever they fight is their holy ground.

WHAP! WHAP! flash bolts of miniature lightning, sending one and another N'luss sprawling from the bite of several Eyes of Thunderous Rebuke. A Livyani gestures sharply with his hands, cutting deep into the armor and flesh of several N'luss with the invisible force of his spell. But several other Livyani raise amulets or Eyes only to lose the hands and arms which hold them, and most of the sorcerors in the struggling press of humanity are interrupted, battered and beaten down and broken, before their spells can even begin. In moments, six N'luss remain standing, and no Livyani live within the compass of their swords. The stairs are strewn with the slain.

One last Livyani warrior, carrying his long spear and his shadow-amulet, comes around the corner and upon the ghastly scene. The N'luss closest to him bares yellow teeth in a triumphant grin.

\*

Although nearly gutted, Ksamanduish's inhuman strength sustains his consciousness



long enough for him to clamp his crocodilian jaws over Hakiron's head, seize his upper arms with curving claws, and BITE DOWN HARD.

The little girl looks over at Fu Sh'I, who has the Spade and Circlet clamped in his left hand, and nods decisively.

"Too many variables here, I think," she declares. "Shield us, Fu Sh'I, while I deal with these pests."

Fu Sh'I begins another spell while the little girl throws back her head and speaks in a great, gobbling booming voice, gargling Livyani words of such acid clarity that all her listeners understand:

"Tower-priests of House Recusant, the Shadow God Esmea commands your obedience! Gather your energies as never before. Tap through the Abyssal Curtain of Subadim beyond which lies the hoarded strength of your mortality, and spend it in my name! Focus your wrath on this chamber until nothing with a soul survives!"

Kagoth's smiling mask illicit little of what passes through his mind and few can see the sweat that gathers around his brow as he is faced with what is certainly the most difficult set of quick castings within his life to this date. With words and an offhanded gesture, the stone in an area around Kagoth is cracked into a strangely occult shape, a pentagram. Seconds after that, Kagoth's chanting changes in pitch and the Pentagram begins to glow with unearthly power, even as his already existent spell shield begins to prepare for the incoming powers. The Pentagrams protection also flares in the presence of so much trained magical energies and produce fitful glows and then blaze into unearthly light. (OCC: Once the pentagram is up, i drop the spell shield) Kagoth then chants again and points at the Mihalli holding the Spade of Sarku and the Circlet of Darkness and using the Eye of Daybreak and the secrets he has pried from earlier readings, he uses what would have been only a simple flame jet spell and an appropriate turn of the Eye to create a torrent of flame that will bathe his foe in unmitigated devastation. (Watching the flow and power as it arrives, modify so as to avoid backlash as best as possible for myself and my companions). Kagoth says out loud, "Brother Priest, Beautiful Kialandi and those who are my companions, step within my warding for it is all the protection i may now offer." While he maintains a flow of man towards the spell of fiery destruction, Kagoth reaches his mind towards the words and thoughts that the 'Shadow God' is sending towards her tower and uses an illusion to cause them to sound as if she is "commanding all within the tower to immediately depart, to save their lives, for the Shadow Gods are delivering vengeance on all who stay". Assuming there is ever time, i have any possibility, am not slain already or my mind laid bare to the careful and loving ministrations of the mihalli, i will again attempt to gain the spade and circlet. This time using the 'Distant Blow' spell on the hand and an 'Air Golem' spell to catch and carry the



items to safety. well.... we can dream, can't we?

Mekelu of course changes direction back towards the fray, now that the object of their mission is there. "Chri, get the one with the Spade and Circlet!" The little one's legs are short, but he is faster than most anything. Mekelu himself charges into the little girl with a full body check, hoping his armor causes her pain.

Chri brings the hurt on as Mekelu bids. If he happens across any of the various baubles and bits that the two-legs are apparently fighting over he'll shove them into his mouth for safe keeping as he goes about dealing out thrashings.

Ce Fau waits until the last Livyani has been sent to his reward by the N'luss, then calls from her position on the floor: "It may be that we could discomfit our foes by damaging those they rely upon to support them. Surely there are other fell sorcerers in the tower that we may discover and destroy?" She will rise only if it appears this course of action is likely to be employed or if her original targets should appear Ce Fau's heart is saddened by the knowledge the red-eyed girl stands too far from the curtained doorway to appreciate the song of her flute. Yet she reminds herself: The hooded cobra [\*] must suffer the attack of the mongoose [\*], while the asp [\*] lying still amongst the dead leaves is free to strike... [\*] Or the cobra, mongoose & asp-ecological niche equivalents... "Doomkill," Ce Fau sniffs silently to herself. "DOOM-kill. Faugh!...In \*my day\* fell demonic mistresses of malignancy had more imagination and better sense..."

Hakiron's head is inside the mouth of the beast, and the beast has control of his arms&

He growls in fury and tries to roll backwards pulling the beast down onto him while planting his feet onto the beast's torso. Then he will use the strength of his legs to push the beast off.

#### OUTSIDE ON THE STAIRS:

Kialandi fleetly follows the advice of the learned Ce Fau and run to do her best to disrupt the wizard's concentration with the Eye of Frigid Breath. Spraying its white exhalation into every room she passes, Kialandi freezes several priests and many acolytes in their tracks.

#### THE PINNACLE ROOM:

FU SH'I, the Yan Kor Mihalli, opens a Nexus Point, a portal in space beside himself. CHRI rushes him. KAGOTH washes them with Eye of Daybreak-enhanced fire, but not in time to prevent CHRI and FU SH'I from toppling into the Nexus Point.

ESMEA, the Little Girl Mihalli, is attacked by MEKELU. She focuses her Soul Blighter spell on him, but several of her key priests downstairs are blasted out of the loop by Kialandi and therefore lose their concentration. Her spell fails to drive Mekelu's soul from his body, which is quite a comfort, all things considered. However, he does drop in his tracks, momentarily dead. As his heart resumes beating, ESMEA backs through the Nexus Point, scowling at Kagoth.

KSAMANDUISH, the Mu'ugalavyani Mihalli, tries to bite Hakiron's head off. Hakiron seizes Ksamanduish's arms and rolls backwards, tearing the Mihalli off of him. Teeth break and wounds slash Hakiron's head and chest, but he is free!

KAGOTH's smiling mask reveals little of what passes through his mind and few can see the sweat that gathers around his brow as he is faced with what is certainly the most difficult set of quick castings within his life to this date. With words and an offhanded gesture, the stone in an area around Kagoth is cracked into a strangely occult shape, a pentagram. Seconds after that, Kagoth's chanting changes in pitch and the Pentagram begins to glow with unearthly power, even as his already existent spell shield begins to prepare for the incoming powers. The Pentagram's protection also flares in the presence of so much trained magical energy and produces fitful glows that then blaze into unearthly light. His next planned action, to incinerate FU SH'I, cannot now be taken because FU SH'I is no longer present.

Kagoth says out loud, "Brother Priest, Beautiful Kialandi and those who are my companions, step within my warding for it is all the protection I may now offer."

Kagoth reaches his mind towards the words and thoughts that the 'Shadow God' is sending towards her tower and uses an illusion to cause them to sound as if she is "commanding all within the tower to immediately depart, to save their lives, for the Shadow Gods are delivering vengeance on all who stay".

All the Livyani priests flee the tower by any possible means, some leaping from high windows.

The N'luss tear apart the magically-held portal, bursting into the room just in time, as KSAMANDUISH draws himself up to his full seven-foot height and cackles triumphantly.

"Foolish man-things! Aberrant labor-beasts! How you ever managed to sharpen metal I will never understand, but your betters have once again bested you! We hold six of the Nine Keys now, and when we have gathered the seventh and eighth, your puny Eye of Daybreak will serve you not at all against the other Eight Powers of Heaven! But just in case you find some way to slightly impede our predestined triumph, perhaps it were as well if I were to release my hold on this mortally wounded form of flesh, and let the fire that burns in my Blue Sphere rage free ..."

He coughs, and thick sticky blood bursts from his mouth.

"ahem ... it seems the decision is made for me. Goodbye, old companions ... ha, ha! Ha

ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-haa!"

From his yellow-furred hand, a blue ball drops and rolls slowly across the flagstone floor. It glows and grows larger with every moment, spreading light so intense that it heats the room like a charcoal oven.

Mekelu rises from the floor and waves at Kagoth.

"Get out! Protect the Eye!" he shouts. "Hakiron, use your men to protect Kagoth! If we lose the Eye, our losses are for nothing!"

Then he runs across the room, apparently intending to smother the Blue Ball with his own body.

Since it appears that her advice has been taken, Ce Fau may now safely step aside from the 5th way of Dra. A low whistle--and Tigerflower dashes across to climb her shoulders and bury himself in her hood, his small body shaking as the blood smell (which had nearly overwhelmed the small beast) is allayed by the familiar almond scent of Ce Fau's favorite perfume. Tucking the fan into her sleeve, the flute into her belt and her small sack across her shoulders, she snaps out, "Warriors! Let the two champions of our shipboard competitions (for she noted how the N'luss contested amongst one another for sport during the long voyage) guard the entrance where they may take revenge upon the monsters within when the last of our comrades are slain!" "The rest, follow Kialandi! Let none trouble her, but your swords will rend them in twain!" She travels with the N'luss down the corridor, the serpent hidden within the tall grass...

Also, it appears Mekelu, instead of smothering the expanding blue ball with his body, slaps it with his hand as though in a game of Kering-ball and smacks it neatly into the closing Nexus Point.

Hakiron bleeding from multiple gashes staggers to his feet and bellows, "By Chitengs fiery breath! You heard Mekelu! Everyone out! N'luss guard Kagoth!"

Hakiron then scoops up his sword, chops off Ksamanduish's head, and staggers out of the room with the head in one hand and his sword in his other.

Good plan! What really happens is that Ksamanduish dodges to one side, skidding on his own blood, and lurches toward the Nexus Point. He sees the glowing blue ball pass through a step ahead of him, looks behind him to see Hakiron approaching with his sword, and immediately chooses the burning blue death over the devil with the brilliant sword.

Kagoth gathers himself up and addresses his companions: "My companions, we have come this far but now we must proceed further. Our enemy even now escapes through the tube beneath this city to attempt to reach the land of the dreaded black Ssu ere we

can bring what is obviously the righteous wrath of the Gods on their heads. They intend no less than to destroy the Gods influence within the world with these selfsame objects they have collected. With the affect of only one of these, you can see what has happened. The sun itself has grown dim and proceeds to go out. I can scarce imagine the horror that awaits when all of these things have been so worked!" "Let us cloak ourselves and move through this city with speed and gain access to that hidden place, that station in the depths where this transport may be gained so that we can block these dread foes from creating the doom of us all." With that Kagoth prepares to leave the chamber.

Oh! Well, in that case ... it's your IQ against his.

He loses. HANDILY.

The other two Mihalli are going to the tubeway station far below the city -- indeed, it's the same tubeway station you know about, under the Temple of the Twelve Trumpets of Revelation! They plan to take a tubecar to Bassu, Island of the Black Ssu, to recover the Eighth Key from around the neck of Bassa, King of the Black Ssu.

Why? Because these Keys are the material extensions of the Gods into this plane. They were originally used to lock Ksarul away in the Blue Room. Once the Mihalli have all nine keys, (and they now have six!) they can rotate them not just so as to cut the Gods off from this plane, but the Nine Keys can be used to support one another, so that none of the Nine can be re-opened without opening all at once! Then, of course, the Mihalli will just scatter them throughout a myriad of empty planes, so none can find them again, and then they will rule this world without the interference of the Gods!

This, by the way, is what the Mihalli race has been plotting since before the fall of Ksarul. They were CREATED by Ksarul to be his servants, but they secretly allied with the other Gods, and overthrew him from within. The Mihalli have been patiently gathering the Keys through a number of guises: they are, as you already guessed, the Shadow Gods of Livyanu. They also covertly rule the vast desert nation of Mihallu, whose name must certainly have been a clue. Shringgaya, goddess of Sarlavya, is another form assumed by Esmea, the "little girl" you just met and who almost slew you all. Fu Sh'i is the advisor and court sorcerer to the Baron of Yan Kor.

So of the five great nations of the world, the Mihalli control three! (Livyanu, Yan Kor and Sarlavya). Only the grim warriors of Mu'ugalavya and the learned nobles of Tsolyanu have remained free of their covert command. In Ksamanduish's mind is the belief that if only Mu'ugalavya and Tsolyanu would go to war once more, all the Mihalli-controlled nations would then be able to suddenly turn on Tsolyanu, attacking it from four sides and conquering it once and for all. And this is necessary, because the Ninth Key, the Key of Vimulha, also known as the Three-Bladed Sword, was found in a tomb by Mekelu's legion and returned to the Imperial Tower at Avanthar last year. The only way to get inside

there, now that the Mihalli ally Prince Dhi'chune has been defeated, is to conquer all Tsolyanu by force of arms. Ksamanduish, who has a false identity as a Mu'ugalavyani prince, was working to start another war in the West before he came here.

Whew!

Anything else you want to know before Ksamanduish dies?

Kialandi, armed with the Eye of Frigid Breath, has descended the spiral stairs into the core of House Recusant, freezing priests along the way.

This had the primary effect of disrupting the death spell that the Shadow God Esmea was weaving upstairs, but it has also aroused the wrath of all the priests and soldiers in the building.

If Jagi will permit me, I'd like to assert that Kialandi flees back upstairs before the Livyani catch sight of her. Otherwise, there's a rather one-sided fight scene coming up: her Eye of Frigid Breath makes it one-sided in her favor, unless the Livyani can somehow block or resist it, in which case it's thirty to one the other way.

By the way, as Kialandi glances behind her she notices Ce Fau has been following her, watching for attack from behind.

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Kagoth, meanwhile, is leaving the Pinnacle Room in a swirl of night-blue robes, protected and surrounded by Hakiron and the N'luss. Mekelu, after probing the spot where the Nexus Point closed over Chri and the escaping Mihalli, checks on the two Ksarul soldiers, gets them on their feet, and rejoins the company.

"I am Taman and this is my brother Namat," says one of the Ksarulites. "We were assigned as bodyguards to Kerektu, in order that his errand for the Ndalul Clan not endanger the Temple as a whole. He hoped to trade several items of great magical significance to the Shadow Priesthood in exchange for the Eye of Daybreak; it would not do to have that Eye fall into the hands of the Petal Throne, who would probably give it to the priests of Hnalla. Our Sleeping God is not immanent in this world, alas, so the other priesthoods have an advantage already. With a direct communion with their God, the Hnallists would be far too influential in Imperial affairs. Given their craven submission to Prince Dhi'chune's designs on the throne, we could not allow them to wield still greater authority."

"We certainly did not expect to meet the Shadow Gods themselves!" choruses Namat.

"But seeing that they are Mihalli clarifies much. All Livyanu is ruled by charlatans, nonhumans posing as gods. If nothing else, we must see that this information is borne back to the Temple of Ksarul, and of course the Omnipotent Azure Legion."

Queen Nayari glides ahead of Kagoth on slippered feet, halting him with a raised hand.

"Hear me, O Kagoth," she says in a voice like violin strings. "Once I was a queen in the South, feared and loved from Shenyu to Mihallu. Mine was the Bednjallan Imperium,

mine the hand which raised Pavar to the head of the priesthoods and held the parchment while he wrote his Summation of the Twenty Gods. Long have I lain in dreamless sleep, till my tomb was ransacked by followers of Lord Sarku. They sought my grave-crown, in which was set the Key of Belkhanu, the gateway to the Isles of Teratane. But they were not humans. They were Mihalli, and bound me to their service with that selfsame Key. They commanded me to use my wiles to help them gather the Nine Keys from all over the world, and so I have done, for the purpose of isolating each God in his or her own Outer Plane, leaving this world a dead and sterile thing of matter alone, which they intend to rule. This has been their purpose since time immemorial."

"They secretly control Yan Kor, and Sarlavya, and of course Mihallu, through their web of false identities. Only Tsolyanu and Mu'ugalavya resist their subtleties; Tsolyanu is subtler still, and Mu'ugalavya so blunt and direct that their tendrils can find no purchase on their stony surface. But even there, their possession of the Keys gives them great power over the priests of those Gods."

"Only Ksarul can save us now. Only Ksarul, alone of all the Gods, has no Key incarnating his presence on this plane. Why this is, I cannot explain; I am no priestess. But that means that, against the Mihalli, only Ksarul's priests will retain their spells, their vigor, and their clarity against their wiles. The Keys do not merely shut down the flow of Other Planar power to a priest; they rob that priest of the pillar of his self-confidence, the axiom on which he builds his inner universe. Priests faced with the Key of their God can be assailed by such melancholy that they will do anything the Mihalli suggest, finding all courses equal in despair, or at best, they will stand by and do nothing while their hearts are consumed within them."

"Think, then, O Kagoth. Can you trust the other priests, not of Ksarul but of other Gods, who accompany you? Would it not be best for us to leave them behind, and place our faith wholly on solid ground?"

Natoro coughs, indicating the dizzy Laslo.

"Quite right," says Shishkresh hiBilburna. "Kagoth hiGachayal, estimable Priest of the Fourth Circle, does not command here. The priests of this party take their direction from, uh, Laslo."

Nayari raises an eyebrow at Laslo, who is clinging feebly to consciousness in Natoro's arms.

"And when he is indisposed," says Shishkresh hastily, "then Kialandi is next in command of the priestly contingent."

Kialandi arrives at this moment, about to tell breathlessly of the angry horde of Livyani charging up the stairs ...

... and is surprised to find everyone, even some of the enemies of a few minutes ago, looking to her for direction!



Kialandi does indeed flee upstairs before they see her...While the eye is powerful, she is not so foolhardy as to assume that they might not have an archer out of her range or some other way of attacking her if she decided to blithely slaughter them all without backup. Kialandi takes a split second to compose herself. Then, she simultaneously spins about, so that she is moving backwards towards her companions, her Eye poised to blast any coming up the stairs and calls out, "Enemies come!" Turning her head to regard those who are not of her companions, she calls "If any among you can halt them, we need not fight. Otherwise, prepare yourselves!"

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... and is surprised to find everyone, even some of the enemies of a few minutes ago, looking to her for direction!

When the frenzy has quieted down, this is the scene:

Mekelu has revived the two Ksarul warriors, Namat and Taman, but Chri has been lost with the three escaping Mihalli.

A lot of Livyani warriors are coming up the long sloping stairs to the Pinnacle Room, but they haven't arrived yet.

Kagoth wishes to pursue the Mihalli to the tubeway station beneath the Temple of the Twelve Trumpets of Revelation. Ce Fau, who has memorized the city map, says that lies

but a few streets to the north, so that once the party escapes this tower, there should be no trouble reaching it.

Two barriers lie in the way: the Livyani guards and the Angled Bridge whose gravity runs sideways.

This might be a good time to discuss the next step. Kialandi asks, "What have we accomplished and what do we still need to do? Who has gained something? Have we lost anything other than Chri? Do we have any idea how to rescue Chri? Is there any reason to stay here?"

Hereschal says,

"We have learned the Mihalli's plans and have possession of the Eyes of Daybreak and Omniscient Understanding, which are crucial to the Mihalli's designs. Chri has passed through the Mihalli Nexus Point -- they are heading to the tubeway station, so if we get there quickly enough, we may be able to rescue him. There is no reason to stay here."

"Also, once we reach the tubeway station we can send the Eye of Daybreak directly back to Tsolyanu, or ... Kagoth, can we perhaps heal the Sun from here, now that we have the Eye?"

Kialandi says, "Then, let us head for the tube car immediately! Perhaps Ce Fau can consult with our native guides, Taluvasz and Valpurez, to determine between them the shortest path. On the way, perhaps Vathek, the eye expert, will aid Kagoth in examining the Eye of Daybreak and determining what might be done immediately, without pausing, and what needs to be done later, with careful study?"

Hakiron nods his head in assent and hefts his sword while his own blood trickles down to the floor. He staggers towards the stairs and pauses to remove a tooth of Mihalli that was still embedded in his flesh.

Hakiron notes that several of his shield-brothers are down, but more are standing.

"Stonebreaker" holds up four fingers.

"Valch, Heboca, Gwalchbog, Gorwyth," he says, curling one finger with each name.

Bacas, the light-haired thick-limbed hulk, holds up his left thumb, his right arm curled uselessly against his armor.

"Bacas can fight," Stonebreaker agrees. "The paint-kilts use Eyes instead of spears, Hakiron. Our armor does little good against them."

Mekelu, meanwhile, has sorted out the marching order. The priests are all in the back, of course, protected by Natoro, Hereschal and the Livyani allies. Namat and Tamar, the Ksarulite spearmen, will run down the center of the stairs, using their spears to push enemies out of the way to left and right. A wedge of N'luss will go between them and

finish the enemy as they push past them.

"We push down to the roseate level," he says, "then straight out to the Angled Bridge. The priests will help us across when we get there. Once there, we're heading straight for the Temple of Twelve Trumpets, no matter what."

"We are Tsolyani," he says, "on a mission for the Petal Throne. Nothing this country boasts can stand in our way."

"Ready?"

>From: "Erskine, Bill" <berskine@a...> >Reply-To: tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com >To: <tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com> >Subject: RE: [tsolyanu] A Pause for Breath >Date: Wed, 18 Jun 2003 13:13:03 -0400 > >Hakiron nods his head in assent and hefts his sword while his own blood >trickles down to the floor. He staggers towards the stairs and pauses to >remove a tooth of Mihalli that was still embedded in his flesh. > > >-----Original Message----- >From: L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright [mailto:lampwright@e...] >Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2003 12:00 PM >To: tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com >Cc: John 1Wright >Subject: Re: [tsolyanu] A Pause for Breath > > >Kialandi says, "Then, let us head for the tube car immediately! Perhaps >Ce Fau can consult with our native guides, Taluvasz and Valpurez, to >determine between them the shortest path. On the way, perhaps Vathek, >the eye expert, will aid Kagoth in examining the Eye of Daybreak and >determining what might be done immediately, without pausing, and what >needs to be done later, with careful study?" > > ----- Original Message ----- > > From: Steven Johnson <mailto:msolarman@h...> > > To: tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com > > Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2003 11:40 AM > > Subject: Re: [tsolyanu] A Pause for Breath > > > > > >From: "L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright" <lampwright@e...> > >Reply-To: tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com > >To: <tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com> > >Subject: Re: [tsolyanu] A Pause for Breath > >Date: Wed, 18 Jun 2003 11:30:16 -0400 > > >Kialandi asks, "What have we accomplished and what do we still >need to do? > >Who has gained something? Have we lost anything other than >Chri? Do we > >have any idea how to rescue Chri? Is there any reason to stay >here?" > > > > > >Hereschal says, > > "We have learned the Mihalli's plans and have possession of the >Eyes of > Daybreak and Omniscient Understanding, which are crucial to the >Mihalli's > designs. Chri has passed through the Mihalli Nexus Point -- they >are heading > to the tubeway station, so if we get there quickly enough, we >may be able to > rescue him. There is no reason to stay here." > > "Also, once we reach the tubeway station we can send the Eye of >Daybreak > directly back to Tsolyanu, or ... Kagoth, can we perhaps heal >the Sun from > here, now that we have the Eye?" > > >

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1397 From: L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright <lampwright@erols.com> Date: Wed Jun 18, 2003  
0:31pm Subject: Re: A Pause for Breath "Ready!"

----- Original Message ----- From: Steven Johnson To: tsolyanu@yahoogroups.com  
Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2003 2:48 PM Subject: RE: [tsolyanu] A Pause for Breath

Hakiron notes that several of his shield-brothers are down, but more are standing. "Stonebreaker" holds up four fingers.

"Valch, Heboca, Gwalchbrog, Gorwyth," he says, curling one finger with each name. Bacas, the light-haired thick-limbed hulk, holds up his left thumb, his right arm curled uselessly against his armor.

"Bacas can fight," Stonebreaker agrees. "The paint-kilts use Eyes instead of spears, Hakiron. Our armor does little good against them."

Mekelu, meanwhile, has sorted out the marching order. The priests are all in the back, of course, protected by Natoro, Hereschal and the Livyani allies. Namat and Tamar, the Ksarulite spearmen, will run down the center of the stairs, using their spears to push enemies out of the way to left and right. A wedge of N'luss will go between them and finish the enemy as they push past them.

"We push down to the roseate level," he says, "then straight out to the Angled Bridge. The priests will help us across when we get there. Once there, we're heading straight for the Temple of Twelve Trumpets, no matter what."

"We are Tsolyani," he says, "on a mission for the Petal Throne. Nothing this country boasts can stand in our way."

"Ready?"

Ce Fau bows to Kialandi "My pleasure is to serve, princess of the lotus blossom. Four\* streets North of this tower of decadent Demon Princesses, lies the tube station of your

desire." She unwinds her simple rope belt holding its length between her age-spotted hands. "Alas, that this is too short to span the Angled Bridge (though not too heavy for Tigerflower to carry across to a willing hand, of course)." As she reties her belt she cocks her head thoughtfully. "Do these aged and unworth ears hear the approach of the servants of our enemies? Would it not be... interesting, if their Shadow-Gods and overweening priest servants were to appear before them?" Ce Fau lightly twirls her flute between her fingers.

As Mekelu leads the charge down the stairs, a long pole comes bobbing around the bend in the spiral staircase, with an Eye affixed to the end. The pole has a string affair to allow the Eye to be triggered remotely and is about 10 feet off the ground. What would everyone like to do?

How evil and clever!

Kialandi hits the floor and shoots the eye with her eye...who knows, maybe it will freeze the trigger, at least momentarily! ----- Original Message -----

As Mekelu leads the charge down the stairs, a long pole comes bobbing around the bend in the spiral staircase, with an Eye affixed to the end. The pole has a string affair to allow the Eye to be triggered remotely and is about 10 feet off the ground. What would everyone like to do?

Mekelu doesn't even hesitate. He dives low, ricocheting off the wall, trying to come in at the knees of whomever is holding the pole and Eye.

Fwooshsssssh .... The Eye of Frigid Breath freezes the pole, its Eye, and the wall behind. Mekelu caroms into the Eye-holder and knocks him down. Right behind the Eye-holder was a squad of Livyani daggersmen ready to rush up the stairs in the wake of the Eye's effect and finish off the survivors. They now bend to finish off Mekelu.

Which is fatal, as the N'luss thunder down the stairs and attack them!

The two Ksarulites have long spears, and can stab Livyani daggersmen with impunity. The N'luss have long swords and axes, which could have been used at full extension to strike the Livyani without being struck in return, but they are not in fact used that way today. The N'luss slam into the Livyani, bowling over their slighter adversaries and sending them down the steps in a tangle of limbs and gore.

They then burst into a high-ceilinged chamber at street level, through the open arches of which Livyani can be seen on their daily errands, taking no notice of the carnage within. A Livyani priest at the center of the room gestures to summon a spell; Dwalgi the Axeman hurls his weapon overhand and cuts him down. Two more priests link hands and invoke the spells encoded in their tattoos; Tegri tsoBellon kicks one in the stomach and wrenches their arms apart, leaving a stuttering trail of ozone and sparks as their magical



connection is broken.

But across the chamber is a Livyani archpriest with an Eye of Thunderous Rebuke. He triggers it, spitting green flashes of shocking devastation. Cawraidd the Mighty, largest of the N'luss, charges him and takes every single bolt with his own body, saving half a dozen lives. He may or may not be still alive when he tackles the archpriest and smothers him under his own bulk, but it hardly matters; his name will live forever.

Namat, one of the Ksarulites, comes down the stairs and pokes his spear hard into a tapestry, behind which an assassin with a dagger was hidden. Another assassin bursts from the tapestry on the other side, chokes, and topples unconscious. Ce Fau waves aside the sharp odor of poison with her fan.

The streets are right outside, but this is clearly not the way to the Angled Bridge. Look for it, or head outside and make for the Temple of the Twelve Trumpets?

"We must make for the Temple of Twelve Trumpets, yes?" asks Mekelu. "If we are to stop their infernal plan, and rescue Chri!" He hesitates, then adds, "But we must keep the Eye of Daybreak safe..."

The Temple houses a tubeway station, which is the fastest way to get the Eye of Daybreak back to Tsolyanu. Of course, the Mihalli are heading there too. The other option is to return to the ship, which would probably have to fight free of Livyani spells and ships in leaving the harbor and would then have to cross the treacherous Akho-infested sea to reach home.

In sum: the sea route has many dangers, but all are known. The underground route through the Temple of Twelve Trumpets has some dangers which are unknown, but promises greater speed.

Ce Fau raises her voice: "O puissant warriors! O priests of cunning minds and subtle arts! Hear my words: The path to the Temple of the Twelve Trumpets lies straight before me. This way may be the swiftest and the most sure. "But let one youth with winged-feet, one priest with winged-thoughts speed word of our adventures to our shipboard companions that they may fight free of this accurst city. And if it appears (by some working) that our party is aboard as well, so much the better." Ce Fau makes her way toward the Temple, but with the tottering steps of old age as she fumbles within her sack to withdraw a sharpened charcoal stick and a strip of linen paper.

Ce Fau leads without appearing to lead, hobbling and peering about and counterfeiting harmlessness with all the art at her command. Her skills are taxed by leading a band of wild-eyed Nluss and some grim Tsolyani, albeit swathed in costumes and makeup. (Laslo counseled against using magical disguises in a city where magic is the stuff of everyday life, and Kagoth eventually agreed.)

And amazingly, the party makes it all the way to the Temple without incident! Although some Livyani did watch them go with interest, no one dared challenge them without the permission of the Vru'uneb, and by good luck none of those black-tattooed secret policemen chanced across the Tsolyani's path.

The Temple of the Twelve Trumpets of Revelation is a slope-sided quadrilateral, with columns supporting its front and back and flying buttresses its sides. No armed guards are visible, but acolytes in gold-spangled kilts bow and chant ceaselessly on the front lawn, forming a mystical alarm and barrier. Kagoth assesses the magical defenses of the building as equivalent to ten strong sorcerors, more magic than even this party can command ...

... unless, of course, the Eyes of Daybreak and Omniscient Understanding are added to the equation!

The rear of the temple is also open except for columns (in the heat of a normal Livyani summer, this is a necessity, although it is actually quite pleasantly cool today as the weakened Sun finishes its daily circuit), and priests and scholars come and go from the walled complex of buildings behind the temple. These are apparently libraries, refectories and dormitories, and they go all the way back to the Dlashal River's statuary-garlanded marble banks. The water in the river is stagnant, opaque yellowish soup, but the Livyani have so thorough a mastery of the magics of healing that no one ever gets sick from it. Fastidious Tsolyani and rough-and-ready N'luss alike are repelled by its cheerful squalor.

Hereschal nods to Mekelu, speaking in a singsong intonation that mimics the Livyani language to anyone overhearing.

"I've been here once before. There's an open courtyard inside," he says, "with access to the underworld. Circle around back and stroll in as though we belonged there, d'you think? Or we could mix with those folk washing their clothes in the river, and if we can stand the smell, walk up the bank to the side of the temple, then up the side wall and down through the open roof."

"Speed is essential," says Mekelu, "so we go in as if we belong there. If anyone asks, we say we have permission from the Vru'uneb." He then strides forward at a sedate pace.

The Temple of the Twelve Trumpeters is strangely lifeless once within its shaded walls. There is plenty of noise of people moving about and the clanging of implements, but all in another part of the temple.

Hereschal, noting the stairs he remembers from last year, leads you down two levels into an underground room, lit by lanterns suspended from brazen tripods above head-level. Most of the staff of the temple are here, hastily loading stores and equipment into a

portal in the curving stone wall. Pairs of soldiers, one with an oversized square shield, the other with a heavy crossbow, watch the shadows as if expecting someone to materialize from thin air.

Similar portals circle the room at regular intervals. Each has three dark glazed square tiles before it: red, blue and yellow.

In front of all the portals, the red tile is glowing, except for the portal through which the supplies are being loaded, which has the blue tile lit.

"Tubeways," whispers Hereschal. "The red tile means no car is present; to step through the portal brings instant death."

A pullulating black mass about chest-high lies near one of the portals. It looks like a heaping mass of thumb-sized Hqsa-beetles, thousands upon thousands of them. Near to this pile, some of the beetles are investigating the body of a yellow-furred Mihalli who looks as though all his limbs have been bent into impossible shapes. His green snout markings are those of Fu Sh'i, the Mihalli who posed as a Yan Koryani.

From the wriggling piles, a four-fingered Ahoggia hand gropes for air with a desperate-sounding belch.

Ksamanduish the Tall, back in his Mu'ugalavyani trader guise, holding his side and neck and bent into an odd position on a litter, looks up and spies Mekelu, Hakiron and the rest coming down the stairs into the gloom. No one else seems to recognize that the Tsolyani are out of place, given the N'luss are stooping low to hide their height and everyone else is in Livyani garb.

"The barbarian!" exclaims Ksamanduish. "We meet again, eh?"

He dangles strings of beads from three fingers of his left hand. Manipulating the beads like a marionetteer, he gestures at one of the Livyani soldiers, who stands unnaturally straight and charges his spear.

Then, in time to Ksamanduish's finger movements, the human puppet walks forward, running to spit Hakiron's breastbone on his spear point!

"Chri! Get the one on the litter!" Mekelu charges into the nearest soldier, trying to obtain a weapon or shield.

Hakiron roars in frustration and moves to dispatch the Livyani spear man. ¡ËBy Chitengs fiery breath! You thrice dammed Mihalli! Ksumandish you will die!Ë

Remembering his battle with the undead, Hakiron will attempt to cut down the Livyani spear man in a manner that will respect the fact that the Livyani spear man will feel no pain and fight until he can move no longer.

Chri will attempt to push through the heaving masses of beetles to find purchase on the floor with several of his clawed legs. If this much can be accomplished he will begin to

drag himself generally in the direction of Mekelu's voice (beetles and all) until his eyes are clear enough to see anything even distantly resembling a litter.

Kialandi whips out her Eye and trains it on Ksamanduish the Tall. If he is within range and shooting him will not entail shooting one of her companions, she shoots. Otherwise, she waits, poised.

CHRI slogs, hooting and chomping, in a rough circle, unable to find his way out of the beetle-pile.

HAKIRON swings at Ksamanduish's puppet-warrior, apparently misses, then chops his hamstring on the backswing. The puppet falls over, unable to walk, and Hakiron steps over him toward the next Livyani whose muscles are being taken over by Ksamanduish's sorcery.

KAGOTH and VATHEK deftly parry a bewildering spiderweb of spells directed at the party by the Livyani priests. Stray bits of statuary and furniture explode, melt, distort or become covered in beetles.

KIALANDI triggers the Eye of Frigid Breath toward Ksamanduish, who gives a rasping snort.

"Ice, against the master of the Planes of Flaming Bronze?" he cackles. A wave of his hands summons a filamented net of flames which dispel the Frigid Breath, although two Livyani standing near him are frozen to the spot. "You will have to do much better than that, my little - oh, Sleeping Lord!"

Because Ksamanduish, though mighty, cannot do two things at once, and having dispelled the Frigid Breath, he has neglected his Muscular Marionette spell, freeing Hakiron to dodge around his foe and attack him with renewed zeal!

The crossbowmen fire, but their bolts go wild, because every one of them has been stricken with a band of darkness about the eyes. Laslo/Jadis, peering through a blindfold of her own black hair, smiles a devilish smile.

One bolt does strike Hakiron square in the breastbone, whanging off his steel cuirass. The others miss all 20 members of the expedition.

The Livyani shield-men rush forward five paces, covering the crossbowmen while they reload and stabbing with their spears. The N'luss attack them, six against 20, and do some damage, although they pick up some spear wounds in the process.

ESMEA, the little girl, appears at the door of the tubeway, a petulant frown creasing her angelic brow.

"Ksamanduish," she sighs. "Can you do NOTHING for yourself?"

And her eyes fill with the murderous light of red Karakan, master of the lightnings.

MEKELU, in the meantime, has wrestled a heavy crossbow away from one of the Livyani temple-guards. Shield-bearers are trying to hem him in to block his shot, but a N'luss

body-slams one of them over onto his fellows, so Mekelu has a clear view of Ksamanduish quailing on his litter, Hakiron looming above him with his sword, and Esmea about to explode Hakiron's heart within his chest.

The crossbow is cocked with a 200-pound pull, but there's only one arrow ...

Mekelu shifts his aim slightly, from Ksamanduish, to Esmea. He exhales slowly, squeezing the trigger on the powerful crossbow.

The principles of the heavy crossbow are very like those of the field-ballista, with which Mekelu has worked for years.

THWACK!

The iron-headed bolt punches completely through Esmea's body, throwing her bodily back into the tubeway mouth. The inside of the car flashes red and green as her sizzling spell misfires.

Ksamanduish makes a desperate effort to roll off the litter and save himself. Amazingly, he succeeds, falling off the litter on the far side so that one of the litter-bearers gets in the way of Hakiron's fury.

Hakiron hacks him aside and goes for Ksamanduish, who scrambles into the tubeway opening. As Hakiron follows, the tile he steps upon changes color from blue to yellow.

"The car is going!" gasps Hereschal, hard pressed by numerous Livyani. "Get back!"

Hakiron howls in frustration but restrains himself from stepping into the tubeway opening.

He proceeds to rant in N lussa while he turns to wreak his fury upon the nearby Livyani.

Those that can understand N lussa make out something about Lord Mrugga, dragons, and Chiteng.

Oh, and lots of cursing.

Ce Fau edges quietly as she can to a position where she can watch the workers at the portal. Her mind is calm, noting their actions, as her hands move in the rote actions of decades. Reaching into the sack at her shoulder, carefully unscrews one of the ink bottles and tips three "sewing needles" into the contents. She loads her flute. She shall, if an opening arises, shoot Ksamanduish, but her attention is on the portals. OOC: Her ink is a botulinin-derived paralytic wh. targets (mostly) voluntary muscle action. If the antidote is given w/in a few hours there is a reasonable chance of survival.

OOC: A day late and a dollar short: Could Esme be both impaled AND paralytic? It's that little extra touch that would please Ce Fau. Ce Fau continues the "watchful asp" position, back to the wall, attention on tubeway entrances. Her mind is calm, undistracted by irritation (wasted dart!).

Pff. Tik.

Esme claps a hand to her cheek, feeling her muscles stiffen just before the arrow strikes home.

Paralyzed AND spitted. Let's see her get up from THAT one.

No, on second thought ... we don't want to see any such thing.

The N'luss and the Livyani soldiers clash with a mighty flurry of weapons and when it dies, neither a Livyani nor a N'luss is left standing. Hereschal has a leg wound which is rapidly staining the tiled floor and Namat of the Legion of the Doomed Prince has gotten a spear through the cheek. His brother binds his wound and Namat lowers his visor, a beatifically smiling silver mask, to hide his face. Taman does the same a moment later; once again it is impossible to tell the twins apart.

\*struggle\* \*struggle\* chew chew chew, swallow, chew chew chew ...

[OOC: remember H.J. Simpson in hell strapped to a machine and force- fed doughnuts?]

Mekelu will slide the heavy crossbow across the tiled floor, hoping it will stop where the doors to the car are, and that if it jams open, the car won't leave.

OOC: Hey, it's a long shot, but what the heck!

Needless to say Steve, the lives of my allies are more important. Therefore, i shall counterspell and aid noble Vathek in his work. Both his and my fascination with the eyes will have to wait to a more suitable time.

Kagoth will move to heal the wounded soldiers as quickly as he may, though first, the sorcerors must be held at bay long enough for more mundane means to dispatch them.

As no further threats emerge from the tube tunnels, Ce Fau glance back towards the knot of conflict. Seeing the priests still standing, she frowns, takes aim and shoots her two remaining needles. Then, tucking her flute into her belt, she holds her breath and pulls the fan free, careful to walk away from any tiny motes of dust her motion may have released. Stepping out of her sandals, she performs the "The dance of the open mind" a careful, off-cadence tread by which to approach the remaining priests. Kialandi's beauty



may cloud men's minds, but Ce Fau's "fan dance" will surely drive them mad...

Mekelu's attempt to halt the tubecar fails, as the closing door splinters the crossbow in two.

Fu Sh'i's robes stir, and from them emerges the Spade of Sarku, which floats through the air toward Vathek's hands, then fades from visibility. Fu Sh'i shudders and gives up the ghost, slumping into a puddle of sticky yellow ooze as his shape loses all volitional direction.

The Livyani priests continue to mime their dreadful spells until one, then the others, slump into a deathlike trance for no visible reason. The priests of Ksarul look smug, but then, their masks always seem pleased with themselves.

The beetles covering Chri, with the death of their controllers, wander off, leaving his fur piebald with beetle-bites in some places.

The only N'luss still on his feet is Hakiron, although others are moving on the floor, trying to bite or stab one last enemy.

So the tube station is taken, the Mihalli have escaped (though badly injured -- it's entirely possible both Esmea and Ksamanduish will die en route), and for the moment the party is safe. However, the temple above is now clattering with activity, Livyani yelling here and there, and the priests can sense the ebb and flow of powerful sorceries as the temple sends for help.

So remaining here is not a good idea.

With the tools at the party's disposal, it is possible either to follow the Mihalli to the island of the Black Ssu (where they hope to recover the Eighth Key of Dlamelish) or to go to Bey Su with the Eye of Daybreak.

Or both, actually ...

Hakiron helps ease the last moments of his companions. It is obvious from his grumbling that he wants to pursue the Mihalli and finish the job.

"Hkk ... be careful the Tsolyani don't lead you to die in bed, Hakiron!"

"Ahh, don't listen to him ... we'll see you in the Fields of Gwalcheym soon enough ..."

"N'luss to the front! Mark your foe and shame the devil!"

And the N'luss, together, howl their death-song, in which Hakiron cannot join, for he is not yet among the dead.

But if he did, y'know, I bet nobody would object.

Aloud she says, "I believe we have only one eye that operates the tube cars. So either we can follow the enemy, or we can use a tube to get the eye and the wounded home.

"However, we could use the tube to return home, and then give the tube eye to the warriors and let them set out in pursuit of our enemies at that point."

As it happens, two of the N'luss can be saved through magical healing. Four are beyond help.

Of the two, one shrugs and accepts the burden of further survival, while the other insists he has earned his death-song and will have it in accordance with the N'luss way.

The argument "it is our custom" is nearly unanswerable for a Tsolyani, much as "but that will get us killed" would be to a modern American.

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Also, Laslo points out that the tubeway settings for Bey Su and Bassu, both of which she has visited before, are known to her, so the party can indeed take two cars to two locations at once, but if so, the Oblong Key of Directing the Demons of the Underworld must be in one car, and Laslo herself in the other.

Ce Fau speaks: "O flower of the sun, light of princes, O Kialandi, beautiful serpent of desire, O Kagoth and Vathek and ye priests, O most puissant commander of men, O glorious warriors who even now lie writhing in honorable death amongst the myriad bodies of your slain foes, O unusual creature of some usefulness and interest!--" "The Eye of Daybreak must reach the prince of Heaven (may he live forever), with all speed. If any know the means of operation of these strange devices," Ce Fau gesturese towards the tube tunnels, "I should be pleased to see that the Eye reaches its destination." She falls silent, waiting for a response. As Ce Fau watches the dying N'luss, A brief shadow crosses her wrinkled face: Could it be pity? OOC: I strongly doubt anyone of the injured wants the kind of "help" Ce Fau can give!

Kagoth addresses the group after readjusting the deep blue robes hurriedly disarrayed during the combat. Strangely, his silver mask is as unperturbed as its expression. He notes, " My dear companions, perhaps we can render some of this moot. I believe that the researches that i was able to perform at the Livyani temple house were sufficient to allow me to undo their evil against our Sun. I may be able to reverse this ere we even take our leave of this place. It could be difficult and there is the chance of danger as well, but it may well be worth our risk. Without some of the information that i had access to, i have to wonder if anyone back home will know the way of its 'fixing'. This then i propose."

Hakiron looks back at Mekelu with a confused expression and rubs his head with one of his massive fists. Then he nods sagely and says to the N'luss that refuses healing, "Rejoice brother! For even the Tsolyani "dhunji" (N'luss for "little people") appreciate your death-song and are celebrating your passing! You have died in glorious battle and

the Lord Mekelu will sing your praises to his people and remember how you have died with the highest honors."

(Indeed he has, for there are FORTY Livyani lying dead, half crossbowmen, half sword-and-shield men. And five N'luss.)

To "Stonebreaker," the N'luss that accepts the healing Hakiron grins and says, "La! Too stubborn to take the glory that is offered to all the scions of the dragons riders. Tch! Well we shall see if we can't find you a death that will satisfy you!"

He throws back his head and laughs. He seems to have forgotten his rage for the Mihalli temporarily and sounds truly happy.

"Stonebreaker" takes the hand of Vigdulv, his brother who has chosen to die of his wounds. Together, they carve the rune of "Fire," Vigdulf's symbol, onto Stonebreaker's forearm.

"I will wear your rune until I can carve it in the foe, brother," he says.

Then he throws back his head and bellows,

"HOLODNA!"

The rest of the N'luss join in, forgetting their wounds in the joy of the death-song:

Holodna, hmura, I mrachna v dushe. Kak mog znat ya, shto ti umryosh?

Da svidania, bereg radnoy Kak nam trudna predstavit, shto eto nye son. Rodina dom radnoy,

I v pohod i v pohod nas volna marskaya zdyot nye dazhdyotsya. Nas zavut marksaya dal i priboy!

(Translation)

The moons are up, the night is still We move through hills like shadow's ghosts And every man among us waits the prize upon the far horizon. Hand and weapon! Heart and power! Cry it with the voice of heroes! We will kill a thousand foes Laughing Undefeated!

"Not a snake!" ;- ) Kialandi says, "Let us depart immediately in two groups, as previously noted. Alas, Kagoth, perhaps, you should return to the Emperor with the Vathek and the Eye of Daybreak, to complete your work. Once the Eye is delivered and it is done, perhaps you could come after the rest of us. "On the other hand, we could very much use your support." Kialandi steps up beside Laslo and asks softly, "Which journey do you wish to accompany? If you come with us, we can perhaps afford to send both masked priests home with the Eye. If you wish to accompany the Eye home, then we had best ask Kagoth to come with us...and hope he survives to return and set the sun aright another day."

Mekelu is correct. The noise of movement above has quieted, suggesting their preparations are complete. In fact, Namat turns to the priests of Ksarul and makes hand signs to indicate what's coming.

Vathek helpfully whispers "Eye-carriers. Three of them. And a snake, for some reason."

Mekelu begins barking orders as he moves to some of the furniture, selecting sturdy pieces to barricade the stairwell.

"Summon a car! Kagoth, prepare for the ritual! Hakiron, Chri, help me with defenses!"

Laslo manipulates the colored tiles, and one turns yellow, indicating that a car is on the way.

"Dear Companions," Kagoth notes, "having completed much of the required spell work already, the action will probably take no more than a minute or two. Then, the sun set aright, the Eye, with Noble Vathek, may return whence it came."

Moderator, noone objecting, i begin the appropriate ritual. Let the Sun be relit!

Kagoth holds aloft the Eye of Daybreak, flooding the dim chamber with golden light.

At least, it appears to flood the chamber with golden light, until he turns it just so while concentrating fiercely, and the chamber REALLY floods with golden light, the pure light of the Sun!

Laslo, once an acolyte of Hru'u, God of Darkness, gasps and stiffens in horrified wonder. The Livyani sneaking down the stairs gasp as well, as their shadows are thrown ahead of them by the sudden sunrise behind them! The Sun was still in the sky, but so dim that it seemed to be twilight. Now it blazes with its accustomed glory, startling the Livyani and catching them by surprise ...

... and clearly throwing the shadow of an Eye-hook, the extended pole used to fire an Eye around corners, held by the lead Livyani guardsman!

With a quiet "ping", the tiles before one tubecar portal change from yellow to blue, and the doors open, revealing a new car which has just arrived.

Kialandi shouts for joy when the sun brightens.

Then she echoes Mekelu's cry and starts herding people towards the tube car. She stands beside the door, making sure that everyone is coming and no one is being left behind. As soon as she is certain everyone is coming, or inside, she goes into the tube car.

Once inside (assuming all make it) she bows before Kagoth and praises his knowledge and the wonder of his wisdom. Looking back towards where the sunlight flooded the stairs, she says, "Right now, back at the capital, they will know that we have succeeded!"

Mekelu, barks, "Everybody in!" He will back towards the car, determined to be last aboard.

When all are in the tube [assuming nothing else interferes] Kialandi says: "Now that the sun is safe, we must decide where to go. We definitely do not want our enemies to get Dlamalish's key...who knows what they would turn off with that! "However, if we go after our enemies, the tube car will spill out into the water...and we won't have an army of Ssu to help us put it back...unless we can get the eye that controls the Ssu back from our enemies. "Nonetheless, I feel that stopping our enemies is our first priority, now that the Sun is invigorated." Kialandi turns to Laslo, whom I believe is carrying the Oblong Key.

He then stares down the shaft of his sword daybreak and smiles as the sunlight plays across the razor sharp steel. "By Vihmula's sacred flame, is it time to get Kumandish?" he asks.

As Kialandi, Mekelu and Laslo hold the doors open, everyone else hurries into the oblong tubecar.

The Livyani recover from their shock at the sudden sunrise quickly. Down the stairs come flickering blue phantoms, forming pale runes of twisting phosphorescence in the air as they seek and bind all spells in their vicinity. These are counterspells, or "spell-swallowers" in Livyani parlance, and they absorb Laslo's spell and Kialandi's Eye of Frigid Breath's sending without even pausing.

Then the Eye-hook is extended around the corner of the stair, exhaling interstellar cold into the chamber. Or at least attempting to do so until counterspelled by Vathek: a good trick works both ways!

Mekelu hurries his comrades in, Laslo pushes buttons, and the tubecar drops with a sudden whoosh, its door clicking shut.

"We have about twelve hours until we arrive at Bassu," Laslo says. Or rather, Jadis says, as among friends there is no point in keeping up her badly tattered disguise. "The Ssu have arranged a trap which casts tubecars into a pool of water; they wait for the occupants to drown or perish from lack of air, then loot the contents. If we are fortunate, the Mihalli

have fallen into the same trap. But we need to devise a way to escape once there; two years ago, when last we were here, we had the Eye of Commanding Enemies and made the Ssu themselves release us, but Ksamanduish stole that Eye and we must needs think of something else."

Kialandi says, " Ksamanduish was with us when we went there last time...he knows about the trap, so we can assume he will be ready for it, or have some kind of plan. He may have the Eye of Commanding Enemies with him...in fact, he must, else how could he hope to succeed Hakiron scratches his head and says, I recalled that it took a little while for the Ssu to roll us down into the water. They used poles to push our car down a slope into a deep hole filled with water where we sank. Perhaps if we jump out of the car as soon as it stops we can prevent the Ssu from pushing from the tube?

Kialandi, sitting gracefully upon one of the chairs, knees folded, leans her chin on her hand. "I cannot recall if we sank last time, or if we bobbed on the water...does anyone else recall? The freezing is a good idea! At least we could walk back to the tube, if nothing else..."

"How deep is the water?" Mekelu asks. As various replies are forthcoming, he begins to survey the equipment the group has, along with what he can salvage from the car. He hopes his engineering skill will help. He also offers, "Could we freeze much of the water with magic, so that ice forms around the car, lifting us to the surface? We then break open the ice and are in the air."

As the tubecar (a white-walled metal sphere, with seats and facilities above the equatorial platform and machinery below) whirrs through the molten magma of the planet at supersonic speed, everyone has a moment to take in all that has happened. I'll be updating the Narrative Page <http://www.graylensman.com/Tekumel/narrative.htm> with the latest developments next week.

A few points:

The car is speeding to Bassu, the island of the Black Ssu, where their king, named Bassa, wears the Eighth Key around his neck. Some of you have been there before.

Ce Fau has sent Tigerflower with a message to warn the Tsolyani ship on which you arrived, so she is without her frustrating student. Hakiron is a mass of fine, spidery stitches thanks to Kialandi's medical ministrations. Mekelu has a chance to remove his helmet after hours of battle. Jadis, no longer disguised as Laslo the page-boy, is recovering her strength after her epic duel of wills with Esmea the Mihalli. Chri the Ahoggia is wondering what there is to eat around here. Vathek cwxtl-Q'or seems serenely confident. Kagoth also seems confident, and has the Eye of Daybreak.



In addition to the player-characters, the following are also present:

Queen Nayari, immortal ruler of the ancient Bednjallan dynasty who was compelled to serve the Mihalli in their plans Namat and Tamar, twin soldiers of Ksarul who accompanied the doomed priest Kerektu in his mission to trade with the Mihalli Hereschal hiTogu, spymaster of the Omnipotent Azure Legion Shishkresh hiBilburna, savant from the Ministry of Barbarians Brita hiGaladar, swordswoman and friend to Kialandi Taluvasz, Livyani spy and agent of Kialandi Valpurez, Livyani librarian rescued from the suspicious eye of the Livyani secret police "Stonebreaker" of the N'luss

Kagoth will use powerful healing spells on those who need it, then also go for the sleep thing. When i awake, should there be time, i will meditate and find my balance.

Mekelu slumps in a seat, near exhaustion. He is tired, hungry and thirsty. But unless the car has a hidden larder, he will probably only be able to get some sleep. He speaks softly. "With any luck, when we arrive, we will find our foes in a pitched battle with the Ssu, but considering what they have, I doubt it. Regardless, we will fight smartly. As I recall, the Ssu are very susceptible to blasts of cold. It makes them sleepy."

A good order of actions; because when you awake, you are no longer in the richly sorcerous lands of Livyanu, but rather in a very magic-poor environment, a "spirit-desert" where the skin of reality is much thicker. Summoning forces from the Other Planes is three times harder than usual, making some common spells too difficult to attempt at all.

Of course, you do have a crystallized connection to one of the Other Planes right in your pocket ... !

"Who's first out the door?" says Hereschal, then after a moment, "sir."

"Two men can burst from the door side by side," says Namat. "My brother and I, can be in the second rank, because our long spears can thrust over the shoulders of the first rank and drive back our foes. But those first two men will have to not just beat their opponents but physically drive them back -- I hear the Ssu are smaller than men, but still, if the front rank does not press outward swiftly, we will not be able to secure a foothold."

Chri and Hakiron are the strongest; Hakiron and Mekelu are the best-armored. Giving Mekelu's armor to Chri is just not geometrically possible. Hereschal and Natoro are the fastest, and both are experts with the throwing-claw.

Of course, Kialandi has the Eye of Frigid Breath, which is very useful against massed foes.

"Hakiron and I will be in front. If I am unable to move our foes, Chri, shove me ahead of you, like a battering ram. There is little room to use the spear as well as I would like, so the second rank will be Chri and Stonebreaker. This should get us enough room for the spearmen to wield to even better effect. If there are too many, Kialandi, cry out, and we will all drop down so you may fire the Eye." Mekelu once more dons his helmet.

## Beneath the Black Isle

After about twelve hours, the car chimes softly and glides to a stop. Jadis scans the controls and announces that they have arrived in Bassu, the island of the Black Ssu.

As discussed, Hakiron and Mekelu are first out the door, with Chri, Namat and Tamar close behind. Weapons and shields at the ready, they threaten ... no one.

The blue-litten cavern is high-ceilinged, festooned with black shimmering globules of semiliquid stone in hanging stalactite-like streamers. Blue glowing nodules are gathered in the spaces between. The ground is carpeted with wide, fleshy fronds of a pink-purple-brown vegetation the color of a fresh bruise, known as the Food of the Ssu. Although narrow galleries rise and fall like fingers from the central cave, that cave itself has obviously been enlarged, not so much by tools as by generations of teeth gnawing organic, ridged curves into the living rock.

Some fifty yards from the tubecar is a black, still pool of mineral water, and ranged beyond it are four more spherical silver tubecars, their doors propped open with stone struts.

Ssu bodies litter the worn-smooth cave floor in clumps and clusters. They are gray, stick-limbed, with four legs and two arms, their bodies covered with loose flaps of peeling skin and the musk of old cinnamon. Some have been punctured, some hacked apart, others partially devoured.

Mekelu notices at once that there are no weapons or shields near the bodies: they've been plundered.

Hakiron notes that each cluster of Ssu dead has a bigger, blacker Ssu in the middle of it, as if he went down fighting surrounded by a circle of enemies.

Chri notices that the Food of the Ssu, and the dead bodies, ooze a brackish, bitter paste of iron and salt instead of blood. No race of Tekumel could possibly have eaten the bodies, save the Ssu themselves. But if they were eating their dead foes, why not eat the whole body, or drag it away for later?

"Ten minutes," says Hereschal. "The Mihalli had no more than ten minutes head start on us. Did they do all this in that time? Or is was this battle days or weeks ago?"

The silence, heavier and more complete than any above-ground midnight, swallows his words whole, leaving nothing behind.

Mekelu shudders, then tries to compose himself. "It doesn't matter. We need to find the Mihalli. Spread out, and look for tracks. But always stay in sight of at least two others." He begins to move in the direction of the cars.

## Links