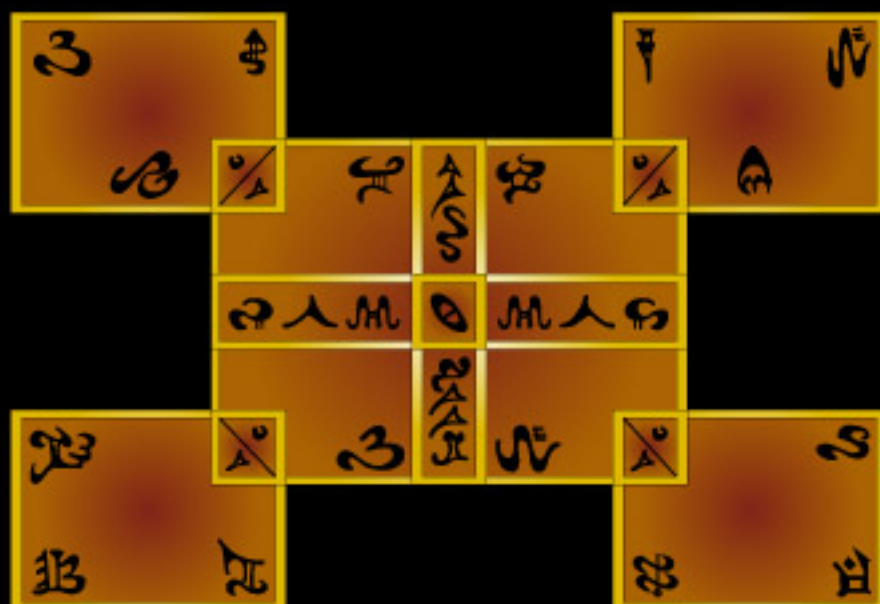




VISITATIONS OF GLORY



ISSUE 7

THE APA FOR THE WORLD OF TÉKUMEL





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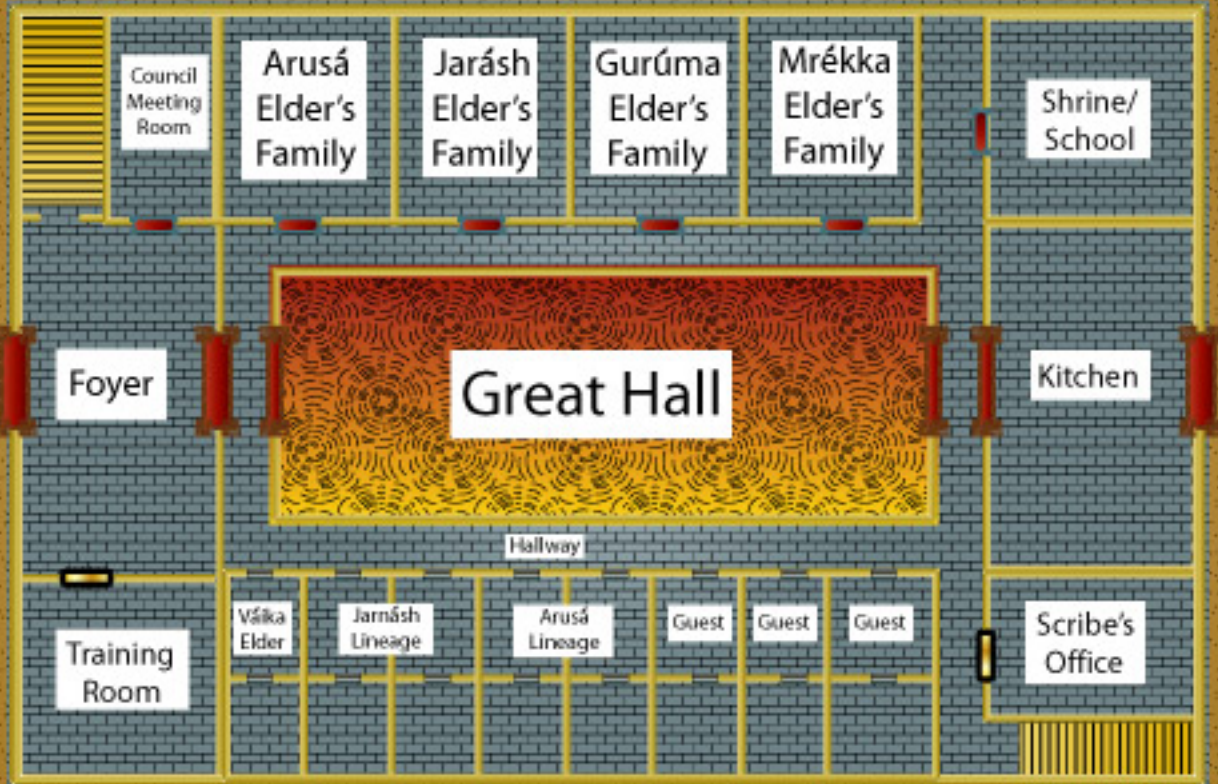
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by Krista Donnelly

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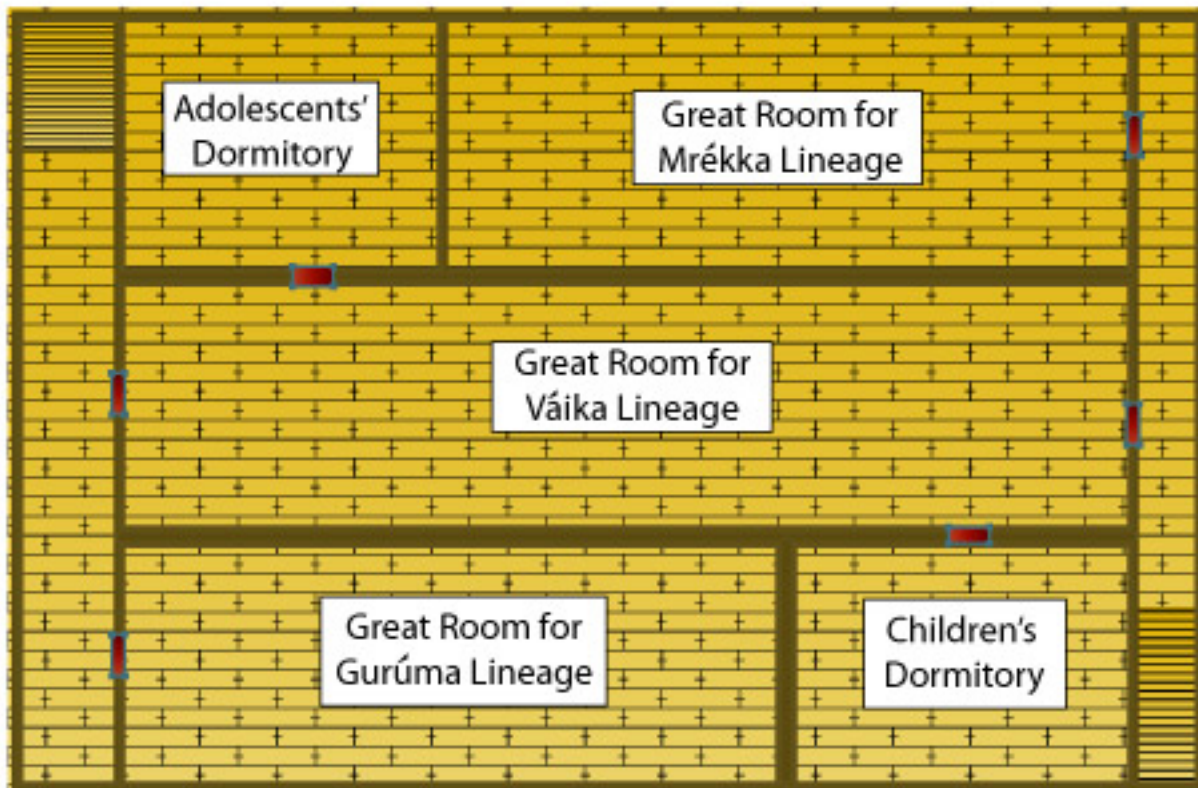
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A Feast of Troubles

by Krista Donnelly

Author's Introduction

The players in this scenario are children in a low status clan, Eye of Flame. The inspiration for the scenario was imagining the nightmares that children might have regarding the stability of the most important institution in their lives: their clan. Most of the scenario revolves around investigating rumors, piecing together the clan crisis, and avoiding adult interference. There's a possibility of combat if they venture into the sub-sub basement. The situation is not as out of control as they fear, but the intended solution involves the human sacrifice of a (unwilling) fellow clan member. Will they help poor Hóru escape?

Eye of Flame's occupation switch is canonical. Everything explaining it, as well as Eye of Flame's relationship with Sword of Fire, is my own invention. The Purification of the Flame holiday is canonical, but not the details of its celebration.

Game Master's Introduction

Eye of Flame used to be a barbering clan, but in the distant past switched to being bodyguards and soldiers. They have enjoyed a long and profitable client relationship with the high status clan Sword of Fire. The land for their clan-house was deeded to them in perpetuity by Sword of Fire, and Sword of Fire employs a significant percentage of their clan members as guards for their merchant caravan. Rumor 6 and the old woman's tale of The Exquisite Clippers of Skillful Barbering give the clan's mythology for the shift in occupation.

The scenario takes place on the 1st of Hasanpór, the first day of the year, as the festival The Purification of the Flame is being celebrated. Each of the players will start off knowing one rumor. Each rumor points to one piece of the puzzle explaining the clan crisis. The players will have until the climax of the festival to do their investigating and decide what they want to do to save the clan. The climax will feature the arrival of the patriarch of Sword of Fire to demand Hóru's handing over. If no one plays Hayalúkh, the sweet clan-girl, make sure they go to the kitchen early and hear the rumor about the Clippers from Isúru.

Background of the Clan Crisis

Last year Sword of Fire sent their annual trade caravan to Mu'ugalavyá. The fortunes of this caravan do much to determine the fortunes of the clan each year. Some years are profitable, other years less so. But last year, it simply disappeared in the Chakán forest. With it disappeared all of the Eye of Flame guards that were protecting it. All, that is, except Hóru. Hóru made his way back to the Eye of Flame clan-house and told his clan elders a terrible tale. The caravan was ambushed in the forest by Vriddi soldiers and priests. The Eye of Flame guards fought valiantly but in vain against the experienced and

powerful Vriddi. While the guards were slaughtered, the Sword of Fire merchants were taken alive whenever possible. When the battle was over, a priest opened a nexus point, and they all left. Only Hóru had survived.

Hóru's tale put the Eye of Flame elders in a terrible bind. Not only did they fail to protect their charges, but their own clansman is implicating, against all common sense, the most noble and powerful Vimúhla-worshipping clan in the nation. Even if his tale were true, they couldn't let him spread it. Spreading it would bring down the wrath of the Vriddi who could easily squash them like a drí-ant under heel. Undoubtedly it would also anger Sword of Fire since they would have to balance the preposterousness of the tale against the loss of honor they would suffer if they failed to demand shám-tla, as it would give the appearance that they were living in fear of the Vriddi. Lastly, though Hóru skillfully avoided mentioning it, he had obviously survived through cowardice, either hiding among the dead or running away. This would not reflect well on the clan. And so Hóru was hidden away in an apartment in the clan-house, forbidden to leave or speak to anyone.

In the meantime, Sword of Fire has not paid Eye of Flame for the caravan guarding duties. Traditionally they receive a percentage of the caravan's profit. Sword of Fire is claiming that since there is no profit, no money is owed. Eye of Flame suspects Sword of Fire's current (and, hopefully, temporary) straitened circumstances account for the non-payment. Eye's patriarch believes that another request for payment later next year will prove financially rewarding, particularly when coupled with a reminder of an ancient agreement about paying for deaths while in service to the clan.

The Solution

Meanwhile, Héttukeng hiArusá, the patriarch, has come up with a plan to solve the rest of Eye of Flame's problems in one fell swoop. Each year, the Purification of the Flame festival is celebrated to ensure prosperity for the coming year. Normally, it climaxes in an animal sacrifice to the flames. This year, he has convinced the council of elders that they should sacrifice Hóru. He listed many convincing reasons:

1. A human sacrifice would surely bring prosperity, desperately needed after last year's events.
2. It silences the teller of a tale that could wreck so much havoc for the clan if it reached the ears of the Vriddi.
3. If Sword of Fire learns of Hóru's survival, his death means they can't hand him over to be questioned. It successfully allows them avoid trouble with the Vriddi without openly defying the clan which provides them with so much patronage.
4. It allows Hóru to regain the honor he lost when he survived the battle.

The Opposition to the Solution

Hóru:

After convincing the council of elders, Héttukeng brought around the prominent members of Hóru's lineage to his way of thinking as well. The only difficulty that remains is Hóru himself. Hóru steadfastly refuses to agree that this is the best course of action for the clan. The coward who hide rather than fight also does not wish to be sacrificed to the flames. Héttukeng is planning on drugging him so heavily the night of the festival that he will appear to be cooperative during the sacrifice (a common practice in the Flame temples). Until that time, he is being kept locked up and alone in an apartment.

Omél hiMrékka:

Omél hiMrékka, the elder of the Mrékka lineage, is the main opponent of Héttukeng's plan. Omél feels the safest path is simply turning Hóru over to Sword of Fire and trusting that their patron clan will protect them from the Vriddi. When Héttukeng persuaded the others to follow his plan, Omél took actions into his own hands and quietly informed Sword of Fire of Hóru's presence.

Once they learned about Hóru, Sword of Fire searched long and hard for their founding contract with Eye of Flame. Having kept better records than the low status clan, they better knew what they might find. And find it they have. The original contract, dating from the reign of Hejjéka II "the Heretic," states that on the first day of each year Eye of Flame must cut the hair of the clan patriarch of Sword of Fire "to his satisfaction" in order to be held blameless in all their obligations to Sword of Fire. This provision has been long forgotten since Eye of Flame has not worked as barbers for centuries.

Sword of Fire's Actions

Sword of Fire sent a copy of the contract to Héttukeng last week, giving him until the 1st of Hasanpór to hand over Hóru. If Hóru is not presented to them, they threatened to invoke the haircut clause and then pursue devastating damages against Eye of Flame when the haircut is unsatisfactory. They don't want to be pushed to this extremis since such vindictiveness against a client clan will verge on ignobility. Their hope is that the threat alone will produce Hóru.

Background of the Caravan Attack

Hóru's tale is true. What Hóru doesn't know is that Sword of Fire recently stole an item of great value from the Vriddi. The item was being transported secretly to Mu'ugalavyá. Sword of Fire believed that the Vriddi didn't know the identity of the thief. Or, if they somehow suspected Sword of Fire, they wouldn't think it would be carried in plain sight, so to speak, with a common trade caravan.

Sword of Fire hopes that the caravan was a casualty of war but fears that the Vriddi may know the truth after all. An informant within Eye of Flame has let them know of Hóru's survival. They have determined to wring from him what he knows and to intimidate Eye of Flame into keeping silent about the whole affair.

The Rumors

Rumor 1

Eye of Flame's clan-house was accidentally re-built in the wrong spot after the last ditlána. The Palace of the Realm just figured this out and is sending someone who will make the clan dismantle it and rebuild it on another spot.

Truth: This rumor is a simplification resulting from children overhearing their elders' speculation. The full story is that Eye of Flame was deeded the land in perpetuity as long as all contractual obligations were fulfilled. This ancient agreement lived on mostly in the clan memory as the actual document was filed with the Palace of the Realm so many centuries ago that it's been virtually forgotten. The adults brought it up when Héttukeng proposed his plan for Hóru because they worried that by not handing him over to Sword of Fire they would be violating some obligation, and an angry Sword of Fire would demand the land back as revenge.

Rumor 2

A contract has just been unearthed at the Palace of the Realm. If the clan doesn't fulfill its conditions by the first day of the new year (today, the 1st of Hasanpór), they will be so heavily in debt that the most talented kids will have to be sold to the slavers to keep the clan solvent.

Truth:

The contract and the deadline are accurate. But the part about selling the kids is only speculation on how Eye of Flame might pay off debts.

Rumor 3

Eye of Flame guards the merchant caravans of Sword of Fire. But last year, the main caravan disappeared without a trace! Sword of Fire is so angry that they're accusing Eye of Flame of treachery and refusing to pay them. Eye of Flame is now so desperate that they will sacrifice a child to the Flame during this year's Purification in order to ensure prosperity in the coming year!

Truth: This is mostly true, getting wrong only the detail of who's being sacrificed and precisely why Sword of Fire might be angry with Eye of Flame.

Rumor 4

A clan member who went to Mu'ugalavyá has returned home sick and is quarantined within his apartment. If Imperial officials find out about him, they will quarantine the whole clan-house and burn it down to prevent the disease from spreading.

Truth: This rumor is based on the lie told by the council of elders to explain why someone is being kept locked up in an apartment and to prevent people from talking about it.

Rumor 5

The black hmá of the clan, Qárras hiGurúma, is shunned because he can't be trusted. He worships Ksárul for his own strange, twisted reasons. He's planning a demon summoning to mark the new year, and the demon requires a human sacrifice!

Truth: This rumor plays off well-known facts about Qárras. Not only does he worship Ksárul, he is a lay priest, and the clan shuns him because of it. However, he holds the interests of his clan and lineage close to his heart, since their fortunes dictate his as well. But as an outsider, he has little influence on clan decisions. He has learned of his lineage elders' acquiescence in Hóru's sacrifice and is furious. Depending on how Qárras is used during the scenario, he either wants to profit personally from the situation by smuggling Hóru out and bartering him to Sword of Fire, or he is very close to his clan cousin and simply doesn't want him sacrificed. He hasn't heard the rumor that Hóru is being quarantined due to a disease.

Rumor 6

Eye of Flame's prosperity was once assured by a pair of enchanted hair clippers, The Exquisite Clippers of Skillful Barbering. Anyone wielding these clippers gave the recipient the haircut of their heart's desire. But the Clippers were lost during the reign of Hejékka IV "the Rebuilder." This is why the clan works now as bodyguards and soldiers, mostly for Sword of Fire. But Sword of Fire wants to sever relations with Eye of Flame just so they can hire a cheaper clan, those Standing Reed upstarts! This is why their clan patriarch is arriving today. He's going to demand the traditional haircut and when Eye of Flame fails to give him a perfect cut, he'll use it as an excuse to cast Eye of Flame aside. Only finding the Clippers will save the clan!

Truth: The myth of the Exquisite Clippers of Skillful Barbering has been passed down through the generations to explain why the clan's occupation changed over the centuries. Knowledge of the patriarch's upcoming visit comes from Héttukeng's ancient aunt who loves to sit in the kitchen and pretend to more knowledge than she actually has. She is very close, though, to Héttukeng, both of whose actual parents are dead. She's embellishing on the rumor she heard from Fíru (rumor 2).

The Clippers do exist. Enchanted or not, their workmanship is exquisite. Anyone who uses them temporarily gains the Artisan (Barber) skill, level 6. More information about their location can be found in the encounter with Héttukeng's aunt, Isúra (in the kitchen).

Timeline of Events

Early evening: "Cleansing by Fire." The opening ritual of the Purification of the Flame ceremony takes some time to complete and is a physical representation of the abstract purpose of the Purification. Its essence is the burning by clan members of symbols of last year's problems. Many people 'write' down their problems on paper, papyrus or pieces of wood and burn that. [Since most of the clan members are illiterate, they draw pictures rather than actually writing out words.] There's a strict order of participation, from highest status to lowest. The kids go last, grouped by lineage. The status ranking of the main lineages are:

1. hiArusá
2. hiJarásh
3. hiGurúma
4. hiMrékka
5. hiVáika

It's the opening ceremony of the Purification of the Flame. The entire clan has assembled in the main feasting hall. Kids watch from the back of crowd, crouching down and looking through the legs of the adults or standing on tiptoe to peer over shoulders. All except Jáimukh and Hegár, the pampered twin sons of the clan patriarch. Hegár stands balanced on Jáimukh's shoulders and sees everything perfectly while blocking the view of those behind him. The object of everyone's attention is a long, deep sacrificial fire-pit running down the length of the hall. The heavy flagstones which normally covered it were heaved up and stowed away several days ago. Wood was brought in and laid down for the bonfire. Now Old Hárisu hiArusá, a lay priest of Vimúhla, stands proudly at its head, dressed in resplendent robes of orange with embroidered flames. Raising his hands, silence falls across the crowd. With a flourish of his hands, Hárisu begins striding around the fire-pit, uttering a long incantation, first in Éngsvanyali, then in Tsolyáni:

"Lord of Fire, Master of the Flame, Power of Destruction and Red Ruin, Maker of Thunders, All-Consuming One, The Catharsis and the Cleanser through Flame, the Flame Cupped Within the Lamp, the Burning Foretold, the Blaze Contained, the All-Cleansing One!"

Ending in a thunderous crescendo, Hárisu thrusts his hands out over the fire-pit and flames leap from them, igniting the wood in a roar of heat and flame. Looking exhausted, the priest steps backward. The patriarch of Eye of Flame, Héttukeng hiArusá, takes his place. Wordlessly, he holds up a scroll clenched in his fist. With a piercing stare, he gazes slowly across the room, meeting many a person's eye. Some shift uneasily and cast their gaze downwards, others nod solemnly. After a long pause, he tosses the scroll into the heart of the flames, turns and takes a seat on the only dais in the room, a low wooden structure. Rustling sounds fill the hall as others find their seats on their mats. It's time for the feasting to begin.

Mid-Evening: The Feast

Between the opening ceremony and the climax of the evening, the “Purification by Fire,” when the clan’s sacrifice to the god is made, the clan feasts. Serenaded by clan musicians, people eat, wander among the mats to visit with each other and offer (in strict hierarchical order) personal sacrifices for prosperity in the coming year. This will be take up most of the scenario and allow time for the kids to run around and investigate. You should interject events as needed to keep things moving along or give them a nudge in the right direction. Only specific events are listed here. For interactions with clan members as they investigate, check each person’s entry in the “Encounters” section. Feel free to move people around if they’re not meeting the people they need to.

1. Singing for Your Supper

Any of the lineage elders will snag a nearby child from their lineage to go stand in front of the musicians and sing “Burn, O Everlasting Flame” for the assembled clan. The children are supposed to have learned this song in class. It’s traditional to have the lineages compete to see whose kids sing it the best. An Arts (Singing) skill check should be made. If they do well, they earn a qirgál from the elder and praise from the crowd. If middling, they’re dismissed with a nod. If poorly, they’re chastised and sent to the kitchen.

2. Public Argument

Omél hiMrékka will argue with Héttukeng, standing in front of him and speaking quietly, then raising his voice. “You can’t defy them! Nothing good will come of this. We should just hand him over.” He is furious as he’s realized that Héttukeng hasn’t shared Sword of Fire’s ultimatum and is still planning to sacrifice Hóru. In the end, though, he won’t go so far as to hand Hóru over himself.

3. Visit from Chnesúru, a Salarvyáni slaver

This visit is highly embarrassing for Eye of Flame. He will not be announced by Pí’ur, and his presence will draw dark looks and low murmurs from the assembled clan members. But Héttukeng and the other clan elders will temporarily withdraw from the feast to speak with him in private. They will not be gone long before they return to the hall. They will all look grim. If their private conversation is overheard (say, from a secret passage), it will be about selling the clan’s slaves. They own about half a dozen and represent quite a large asset. The elders will agree to the sale and place their mark on Chnesúru’s contract, effective at dawn. This is to gain them enough money to tide them over to when Sword of Fire will hopefully compensate them for the deaths they suffered with the caravan.

End of the Evening: “Purification by Fire”

The climax of the evening and the scenario is the ending ritual, the “Purification by Fire,” where the main sacrifice is made for the clan’s prosperity next year. Héttukeng will stand and make a speech, announcing the fate of the caravan and the decision of Hóru to offer himself up for the good of the clan. A drugged Hóru will be brought in. Hárísu will be standing by, ready to make the offering.

Before Hóru can be sacrificed, the Sword of Fire patriarch, Tsodlán hiTánkolel, will sweep into the room with his retinue (palanquin, eight bearers, 2 dozen clan guards, and a chamberlain who will speak for him). He will announce that he is here for his haircut. The chamberlain will direct the guards who will push the elders off the dais (if they don’t get when gestured to do so) and pile up a luxurious pile of mats. The patriarch will seat himself expectantly.

At this point, if the players have retrieved the Exquisite Clippers of Skillful Barbering, they can be heroes. Shémek will come forward, heart full of dread. If he’s without the Clippers, he will have to get an Overwhelming Success in order to leave the patriarch so speechless that he can’t accuse Eye of Flame of having failed to meet the terms of the contract. Shémek has a Barbering skill of 1 and a Dexterity of 4. Thus, it’s impossible for him to reach this success level. If he (or someone else) is using the Clippers, the Barbering skill level is 6 and only a Marginal Success is needed to leave the patriarch speechless.

If Sword of Fire’s threat (of the breached contract) can be rendered null and void, Eye of Flame will be in a better bargaining position. The chamberlain will speak quietly with Héttukeng, offering to let them sacrifice Hóru and thus remove the evidence that would give the story legitimacy in society if only Hóru tells them the tale first.

If Sword of Fire successfully maneuvers Eye of Flame into a breach of contract, they will demand that Hóru leave with them, and the elders will be forced to accede.

The players can alter events mainly by their actions regarding the Clippers and if they decided to help Hóru escape. Obviously, if Hóru is not there to be handed over when Sword of Fire demands him, it’s the worst outcome for the clan.

Encounters

This is arranged according to where the person is likely to be encountered. Clues that can be noticed at each location are also mentioned.

Courtyards

All the doors are closed, and there are guards standing watch at all the exits, not the usual clan practice. Even more bizarrely, they are facing inwards. [They are to prevent Hóru from escaping.]

All the hmá and the hmélu have been shorn of their wool. It's not the normal time for this and leaves nothing for Okán to shear to get his sacrificial wool. [Shémek practiced on them in a panic after hearing the news about the possible haircut.]

Children in the Roof Garden

Some children younger than the players are in the roof garden. They will track the players, walking along the edge of the roof. They may throw rotten fruits or clods of dirt at them and then run away laughing. Mísa, Rísa and Tísa should be there is Zurnékh is in the courtyard.

Hodál and Firáz, Outside Slaves

These two scrawny, 30ish Milumanayáni men are prisoners of war that Mnéktu brought home with him. They sleep in the shed with the hmá and the hmélu. They are filthy and speak little Tsolyáni. Mnéktu warned them recently that the clan may be selling them. They will resent it if children try to order them around, but they will obey. They don't understand enough to follow complicated instructions.

Mottán hiMrékka, 17 year old drummer

He is sulking in the baths. He should be performing at the feast, but refused yesterday after Shémek butchered his hair. He'll bitterly tell that Héttukeng forced him to get his hair cut by Shémek. His hair is hideous – uneven lengths, completely asymmetrical.

Feasting Hall

Almost a quarter of the men are missing. This is due to the caravan not returning yet. Any sort of casual inquiry, even to an adolescent, will reveal this.

Careful scanning of the room will reveal that some adolescents are missing too. Inquiries will provoke puzzlement about their location rather than answers. [They're in the Adolescent Dormitory. Shémek is practicing cutting their hair.] Most of the adolescent boys there have new haircuts. There're lots of different styles, none of them done very well.

The musicians are 3 adolescent girls: Layéth (drums), Sídla (flute) and Visháya (flute). The best drummer is a young man named Mottán. Etiquette or Subculture check will reveal that Mottán should be the drummer tonight. He got a particularly disastrous haircut and is sulking in the Baths. After viewing it, Héttukeng let him stay there.

Pí'ur, the Chamberlain

- “You [Dishén or Okán], help Marján get more wood for the fire.”
- “Hayalúkh, Dzái needs help in the kitchen bringing food in.”
- He will also shoo them away from the fire, send them to run errands, and generally make up tasks if they're misbehaving.

Mnéktu hiJarásh, the retired Storm of Fire legionnaire

Since he's of high status within the clan, he'll give his sacrifice to the fire early and be available should a child come to him for help. He'll be most receptive to Zurnékh or anyone who invokes Zurnékh's name. Mnéktu doesn't know what's going on but will not oppose the wishes of the elders or Héttukeng or try to prevent Hóru from being sacrificed. He will help stop Hóru from escaping and will even go on an expedition to the Sub-Sub Basement (hey, he's bored and restless). He's gruff but has a soft spot for kids.

Mnéktu brought three of the clan's slaves back with him from the war. There's a 40ish Yán Koryáni woman who works and sleeps in the kitchen, and two scrawny, 30ish Milumanayáni men who live with the animals in the shed in the courtyard. Since they were prisoners of war, he feels responsible for them. He knows that Héttukeng is contemplating selling them to tide the clan through its current hard times and has warned them of this.

Héttukeng, his wife Chashána, and the elders

Héttukeng, his wife and the council of elders and their wives are all eating upon the only dais in the room, a long, low one at the head of the fire-pit. Their relative status is differentiated by the height of the piles of mats they are sitting on. They are, in essence, off limits to all, except Jáimukh and Hégar.

Misa, Risa and Tisa, Zurnékh's sisters

In the Great Hall, they will tend to hang out near the musicians. They range in age from 4 to 6 years old.

Hallways

Qárras hiGurúma (If not encountered in the kitchen.)

Qárras is meant to be a wild card, to be used to keep events moving along. If the players are lost, he can give them information. If they have no clue about what to do, he'll suggest his own plan: Free Hóru, take him to the Great Hall and have him tell his story to the entire clan. Let the clan decide whether he should be sacrificed or turned over to Sword of Fire. If they accept this plan, don't let it go smoothly. Hóru will try to bolt and run. Or he may decide that it's not in his best interest to speak the truth at the gathering.

If the players have some plans, he can be used as a less central encounter. In this case, he'll be trying to solicit aid so he can enter Hóru's room and get the full tale of what happened to the caravan. Aid will include actions such as sneaking the keys off the hook in the kitchen and being a look-out in the hallway while he's inside talking.

Qárras may also solicit aid to help Hóru escape. In this case, his motives will be more sinister. He'll have already communicated some with Hóru (through the door) and decided to sell him to Sword of Fire. Poor Hóru thinks his clan cousin is only trying to help him and will cooperate fully.

Qárras can be used just to create tension, having him show up when the players are trying to sneak around, trying to speak with them alone and so on.

He can be a spell-caster too, if balance is needed against the clan guards. If spell-casting is introduced, it's best to keep them relatively low-powered.

Márjan hiVáika

- He's carrying barbering implements in a fancy vase which Jáimukh or Hegár can recognize as belonging to their mother. He'll shrug if asked and say he's delivering them to Shémek.

Misa, Risa and Tisa, Zurnékh's sisters

They range in age from 4 to 6 years old. Use them as an encounter if running around the hallways is becoming too routine for the players.

Kitchen

There is a small vial sitting alone on a tray next to a goblet and a bottle of wine. If examined, it contains a brown powder. This is the drug mághz, and it will be administered to Hóru in the wine. It makes the user feel drowsy and peaceful.

Dzái, the Kitchen Head

- “I need someone to carry food up to old Balané.”
- Half-way through the evening, she will take the tray with the drugged wine up to Hóru. She will act furtive and try to shoo away any kids she runs into. [Successful Etiquette roll will reveal that if she’s doing it herself, it must be for someone important.]
- At some point, she will leave to make her offering in the sacrificial fire. She can also leave the kitchen and linger in the doorway to the Great Hall to chat with fellow clan-members.

Náitl, the Kitchen Slave

She tends the fire-place, turning the spit with the meat and vegetables on it. She’s a fortyish Yán Koryáni woman with a careworn face. Her Tsolyáni is rudimentary, and she tries to stay in the background when possible. Mnéktu brought her back as a prisoner of war. He’s warned her that times are bad for the clan, and she might be sold. She’s not happy at the prospect.

Mísa, Rísa and Tísa, Zurnékh’s sisters

They range in age from 4 to 6 years old. On the players’ second or third visit, they will be here, trying to cage treats from Náitl. They will want to follow the players once they spot them. Use them as a nuisance, but don’t have them disrupt things completely.

Isúra, Héttukeng's Aunt [Father's Sister]

Isúra sits in a corner of kitchen, nibbling on snacks, sipping chümetl and gossiping. Fíru confided his fears to her before he left. Her interpretation of what Sword of Fire is planning is told in Hayalúkh's section: They don't want to ruin Eye of Flame with debt; they want to break the contract to hire a cheaper clan (Standing Reed). She is eager to tell the full tale of the Exquisite Clippers of Skillful Barbering:

Eye of Flame was once a clan of great barbering fame. They snipped the lockets of only the highest of clans, the most fashionable of people. Skill and the grace of the gods guided their hands. But their great secret was the Clippers, blessed by the gods. Anyone wielding them would give the recipient the haircut of their heart's desire. They were wielded circumspectly, employed only on the most grave of occasions until that fateful day. It was during the Purification of the Flame, on the 1st of Hasanpór, and the new clan patriarch of Sword of Fire arrived in full pomp and splendor for his haircut. The Clippers were brought out. But the patriarch was a man of secret and twisted desires, and the haircut the Clippers wrought was hideous to behold. To hide his secret, the patriarch expressed outrage and vilified the barbering skills of Eye of Flame. His vicious slander spread like wildfire through the high clans, and no one would allow Eye of Flame to touch their heads any longer. Eye of Flame believed the Clippers had become cursed and hid them away in a dark place. In desperation they searched for a new occupation and that's how come we're bodyguards today.

Q: Are the Clippers really cursed?

A: No, they believed it at the time, but later the patriarch's nature became obvious. It was too late for Eye of Flame, though. Most people only remembered the slander.

Q: Where are they hidden?

A: Tales say "in a dark place." That must mean the sub-sub basement. There's a trapdoor in the basement. That takes you to the sub-basement where we store our junk, things that are broken but might be needed again some day. Look around there for another trapdoor. That takes you to the sub-sub basement. That's for things that are meant to stay lost.

Downstairs Rooms

Everyone except those physically unable to attend should be at the feast. Rooms are not generally locked. The only exception is Hóru's room.

Hóru hiGurúma, Massacre Survivor

Hóru's room is locked. All the rooms on the lower level have locks, but no one will be able to remember when they were last in use. Dzái keeps the keys on a hook in the kitchen (Etiquette roll to remember this if a player wonders about keys.) Otherwise, they can try to pick it. Only Hegár has any experience at this. If he reveals it, let the other players know that they should be shocked – it's a sign of much greater delinquency that anyone has yet realized about him.

This encounter will vary enormously according to whether it occurs before or after Hóru has been drugged. If the players arrive here in the first half of the scenario, or if they have found and disposed of the drugged wine, then Hóru is lucid. If Dzái brings him the wine, he will have drunk it (and the goblet and tray will still be there) and will be peaceful and languid. He will still be able to relate bits of information but in a disjointed fashion, and he will no longer hold any strong opinion on his impending sacrifice. He won't be able to engage in any actions independently (e.g. walking) but can be guided and coaxed along. A drugged Hóru can resemble a plague-ridden Hóru if the player fails a Knowledge roll.

If Hóru is lucid, then it's another story. He is in a tightly controlled panic and will beg for help to escape the clan-house. He will say anything to get aid, including accusing Héttukeng of plotting to murder him. He'll say that he has valuable information that must be relayed to the Palace of War, information that's so sensitive that he can't tell anyone else.

Hóru's Escape

If the players (with or without Qárras) decide to help Hóru escape, they have several options. If Dishén is there, or has told them about the secret passageway, they can find implements (in the sheds in the courtyard or in the basement) to pry a stone away and create an entrance to the secret passage. Otherwise, to leave the clan-house itself, they will have to travel through the hallways and exit either through the kitchen (which is always populated) or through the front door (right in front of a guard who's on the look-out for people emerging from the clan-house). The clan-house is surrounded on all sides by a court-yard with sheds and the bath house. The animals wander around freely here. The court-yard is surrounded by a high wall with only one entrance. Jáimukh and Hegár will have the easiest time getting Hóru over the wall (get on top of a shed, boost him over). The others can spend time piling up items to climb over the wall. If they come up with a good plan, it's possible to distract the guard at the front gate and let him slip out that way.

Helping Hóru escape is always good for Hóru (from his point of view), but is bad for the clan. If the players want to do it because they're horrified at the thought of a human sacrifice, don't try and dissuade them. They're playing children who are not fully acclimatized to the less pleasant aspects of Vimúhla worship, and this is an extraordinary circumstance. It's rare to sacrifice your own clan-member in your own clan-house. They will come in for a severe lecture at the end of the evening, if their role becomes known.

Balané hiJarásh, Old Woman

An old woman whom most kids fear, she is lying propped up on a low dais with pillows. She's fat and sick and can't walk well. At some point, Dzái will send someone to her with her meal. Balané will be eager to talk since she's lonely. She wants to tell a ghost story which has been a crowd-pleaser in the past:

In every clan there are deviants, those who would smother the Flame in favor of a lesser god. Why today, we have Qárras, that Feshénga-snake of a Ksárul-worshipping traitor. But even he is preferable to our home-grown Durúmu, the little Copper Blade of Sárku. Oh, you didn't know that we once housed within our bosom a worshipper of that god of death and dirt? His proper name has been lost, thanks be to the Flame! Now I'm as tolerant as the next of the other gods but our worm-boy gave Sárku a bad name. He used to roam the clan-house secretly at night, unseen by Flame-fearing folk. And when all the children were safe in bed at night, he'd creep out of hiding and snatch them away to tenebrous places! They say he was trying to learn how to create the undead. Finally our men tracked him down to the lowest depths of the clan-house and slew him. But he didn't journey on to the Isles of Teretané! His hlákme (mind) and his báletl (spirit soul) linger on over the site of his death. He desires to snatch the body of someone foolish enough to venture near him. The younger, the better for then he shall live longer. And that's why no one ever goes to the Sub-Sub Basement anymore!

Héttukeng's Quarters (Márjan the servant)

Márjan will be here, sifting through the mats, pulling out the best ones. He'll only say that the patriarch wants them. A successful Etiquette check will reveal that the pile he's collecting is very substantial, more than what Héttukeng himself sits on. So the patriarch is either expecting several medium-ranking guests or one very important one.

A search can be done after Márjan leaves. The contract scroll can be found in a scroll case hanging in the wardrobe with his clothing. [Remember that only Zurnékh can read. The others can only recognize the chop of one of the Imperial Palaces. They'll need a successful Knowledge check to figure out which one.]

Qárras' Quarters

His room is next to the hiVáika's elder's room. It should be suitably creepy if the children decide to look in it: volumes with odd designs on the cover; a strange glyph painted on the stone floor, normally covered up with straw floor mats; powders in a chest near his

sleeping mat; a statue of an Aspect of Ksárul and so on. Since Qárras doesn't know anything before the scenario begins, there won't be any actual clues here.

Clan Business Office/Scribe (Chúrisan hiArusá) - Unoccupied

A search for the contract scroll here will turn up nothing, but will take some time. Chúrisan does have a number of scrolls. The ones laid out prominently on the table will be from different clans asking for payment (food, weapons) and one from the Palace of the Realm giving a deadline for payment of taxes. He is in the middle of composing two messages. One is to the Palace of War asking for an audience to learn about the most recent news of fighting on the Chákan front. The other is to the slaver Chnesúru, asking him to come for a visit.

The contract scroll that Sword of Fire delivered to Héttukeng is not here because Héttukeng hasn't told anyone else of its existence. He's hidden it in his own quarters.

Shrine/School Room

The children are familiar with this room since they receive lessons here from Hárisu. If they're looking for anything different or out of the ordinary, there's rope coiled up by the altar. [It's for tying up Hóru in case the drug doesn't work.]

Upstairs Rooms

Adolescents' Dormitory

Shémek, the clan's animal handler, has been pressed into service as the barber if Sword of Fire's patriarch should actually appear for a haircut. Shémek has only trimmed the wool of hmá and hmélu before and is desperately practicing on people. A number of adolescent boys and girls have been ordered to be his experimental subjects (no adult wants the embarrassment of having their hair mangled). Shémek assumes all the elders know about what's going to happen tonight. Okán can get him to tell all he knows.

Children's Dormitory

Mísa, Rísa and Tísa, Zurnékh's sisters. They range in age from 4 to 6 years old. If they've been encountered somewhere else at least once, they'll be here, putting Mísa (the 4 year old) to bed since she's tired.

Secret Passages

The clan-house is old, with thick walls. Dishén found that if you push the stone on the outside northeast corner of the clanhouse, it shifts inward enough for a child or small-statured adult to slip in. The outside wall is actually hollow, with two rows of stone (or, half-way up the building, adobe bricks) nearly side-by-side. At the time of the original construction, they may have been snug and provided a cheap method of getting a thick wall (and cooling down the clan-house through the hot summer) but over the centuries, the construction has settled and shifted. It's a tight fit and dusty, but you can actually circumnavigate the clan-house by walking in the wall. To reach the second floor, you need to climb up the walls. Dishén, and past discoverers, have made this easy by carving hand-holds into the stone part of the walls. Once the wall becomes adobe, footholds (spikes, blocks of woods, etc) have been driven into the wall at irregular intervals. Where the wall is crumbling or offers no immediate opportunities, it's still narrow enough to navigate by placing your back against one wall, your feet against the other and inching along. No one with a Dexterity of less than 4 and a Strength of less than 3 should attempt this (add Difficulty modifiers). It's possible to eavesdrop in all the rooms (except the Great Hall and the Váika lineage room since they don't share a wall without the outside), and many of the rooms have a spy hole. Dishén doesn't know of any other entrance or exit to the secret passage. There is one, though, in the patriarch's quarters, a stone behind a wall tapestry which can be shifted if pushed correctly. Héttukeng, but not his family, is aware of it. If Dishén's player wants to try and find other exits from the passage into the clan-house, use your discretion to decide if it's possible and where they are.

The Basement and the Sub-Basement

The basement can be reached through a cellar door in the courtyard. Most of the clan's food supply is stored here so it's stuffed full with barrels and pottery jars and crates of grain, tubers, dried fruits, hénkakh beer, and so on. The Sub-Basement is reached through a trapdoor in the floor. This is the junk storeroom of the clan-house. It's got cast-off mats, broken masonry stones, dulled chlén-blades, piles of old clothes waiting to be unraveled or turned into rags and so on. There are lanterns at the top of the entrance to the basement.

A group of adolescents are here, having their own private party. They have hénkakh beer and are sitting on mats, paired up two by two. If they can't be lured out (and they can, if the kids think of something reasonable, like stating that Pí'ur wants them), the kids will have to have to sneak past them to get to the trapdoor. If they're successful at sneaking, they'll be able to open the trapdoor without being noticed (the adolescents are very preoccupied and not sober).

The Sub-Sub Basement

The Sub-Sub Basement is an actual room in the Eye of Flame clan-house, reached via a trapdoor in the sub-basement. The trapdoor entrance is not locked, but is simply a heavy wooden door with a copper ring to lift it. It opens onto a narrow steep set of steps leading down. The steps go down for ten feet, with no railings on either side. They are stone, set in an earthen foundation. There is no light in the sub-sub basement. The air smells musty, and a cold dankness sticks to the skin of anyone who descends more than a few steps.

Everyone without the Emotional Control attribute will feel uneasy upon entering. If Okán (or anyone with a high Psyche, like the priest Hárísu) spends more than a few minutes down there, he will start to hear someone whispering quietly. The whispering will slowly get louder until he will be able to see the outline of a young girl coalesce. Her name is Asháne, and she's the victim of a long-ago murderous Sárku worshipper (see Balané's entry). If Okán is willing to listen, she'll tell the sad tale of her abduction and death at the hands of the deluded man. If she gets to unburden herself, she'll grow grateful and friendly and warn them not to touch the fungus and alert them if something's coming up from the underworld.

If a lantern (available in the sub-basement) is taken into the sub-basement, it will be shown to be a long, low room, no more than 5 feet high. The light of the lantern will not reveal the end of the room. The floor is hard-packed earth, as are the walls. Covering the walls is a layer of blue fungus. Exploring the length of the room will show that it eventually narrows and trends downward. After 100 feet or so, an explorer would have to crawl through a 3 foot high corridor to continue forward. The Sub-Sub Basement does indeed eventually link up with the tsuru'úm. The last section of the crawl space that links to a tunnel of the tsuru'úm is carved out of rock. If you wish to add some combat to the game, a suitable creature can come up while the players are down here.

There are wooden crates stacked up to the left near the bottom of the steps. They are rotted through and will crumble if touched. The first one contains battered and bloody chlén-hide swords and some dirty, crumpled tunics. The second contains a young girl's skeleton (Asháne's) nestled in a pile of lengths of brown cloths. The third contains the Exquisite Clippers of Skillful Barbering (gives 4 levels of the Artisan (Barbering) skill). Made of resplendent chlén-hide with flames cleverly lacquered around the blades and rubies embedded in the hand guards, its most striking features are the finely honed steel blades. The chlén-hide looks new, as free from decay or brittleness as if it had been made yesterday. The Clippers will fetch a great price if sold, whether as a work of art or broken down into its component parts.

In addition to the crates, there are some moldering piles scattered here and there, but it's impossible to tell what they were originally. If anyone touches them, or the fungus that's growing on the walls, they will develop a rash that will slowly spread for the rest of the game. If the fungus is disturbed in any way, the characters in the vicinity will cough at

inconvenient moments for the rest of the game. The fungus is not life-threatening, however, and going to someone for a balm will relieve the rash.

The Roof-Garden

Some of the younger kids are up here, running around and having fun. They might pelt with dirt clods someone who's moving about in the courtyard.

Jáimukh hiArusá

Twin Son of the Clan Patriarch, Héttukeng

9 years old, Eye of Flame, Vimúhla worshipper

Description: Small, lean, athletic, impish eyes

Character Stats	Combat Values	Magic & Other
Strength: 3	Fast Play Value: 4	Pedhétl: 6
Dexterity: 5	Initiative: 13	Magic Resistance: 5
Intelligence: 3	Combat: 4	Energy Pool: 33
Psyche: 4	Health Points: 40	Respect: 0
Charisma: 5	Shock Value: 8	
Willpower: 5		

Skills	Attributes	Defects
Language (Tsolyáni, Spoken) 2	Attractive: Beautiful eyes	Younger
Knowledge (Tumíssa) 2	Decisive	
Etiquette (Low clan) 1	High Lineage	
Hiking 1	High Pedhétl	
Command (Clan) 1	Small Build	
Subculture (Clan kids) 1		
Charm (Social)- Familiarity		
Oratory (Command)- Familiarity		
Acrobatics (Jumps) - Familiarity		
Dagger – Familiarity	Initiative +2, Damage x2	

Notes: +2 to Charm checks, +1 to Etiquette for making smart remarks, +1 to Acrobatics. Your name means “to hurry” because you were born before your twin brother Hegár.

You’re the oldest son of Héttukeng, the clan patriarch. Yours has been a carefree life, basking in the admiration of your close-knit group of friends and playing with your younger (by 10 minutes) brother Hegár. The two of you are particularly good at acrobatics, and you’ve often balanced him on your shoulders to reach a windowsill or go over a wall or just to impress cute Hayalúkh hiVáika. If you should happen to provoke the ire of the stuffy clan chamberlain Pí’ur or the strict kitchen chief Dzái, you can usually charm your way out of trouble with your sweet smile and expressive, dark eyes. Your early skill with a dagger only confirms that one day you will grow up to be an excellent bodyguard which will pave your way to becoming clan patriarch when you wish to settle down and enjoy your own children.

In truth, you live in awe of your father. He seems stern and remote, though he’s kind enough to you when you interact at family meals. People in the clan clearly listen to him and tend to obey him, as does your mother. You model your leadership of your friends on him, smart, and firm but fair and consistent. Which made what you overheard yesterday even more disturbing. Your parents were arguing (unheard of!), and your

mother was clearly upset with your father. You knew the clan didn't seem to have as much money this year as usual, so you pressed your ear to the door and listened closely.

“Sword of Fire’s main caravan disappeared without a trace! We were supposed to be guarding it. No wonder there’s been no payment. The sacrifice is the only way we’re going to survive these troubles,” your father said.

“But a human! What will the children think? Will they ever feel safe again?” your mother’s voice rose tremulously.

Their voices dropped, and that was the last you heard of the conversation. Your mind has been racing as fast as a zrné since then. You know it’s honorable for a Vimúhla worshipper to die in the flames. You know that today is the feast of the Purification by Fire which culminates in an (animal, usually!) sacrifice to ensure next year’s prosperity. But only slaves and criminals and captured warriors died in the flames, and then only at the temple. That wouldn’t upset your mother. What’s really going on? Why was she worried about the children?

Goal: Find out who (or what) is going to be sacrificed at the climax of the Purification of Fire ritual.

Goal: Keep your brother, your friends and yourself safe.

Friends

Hegár: Looks just like you, except with an even smaller build. If you’re not standing side by side, people often mix you up. He’s wilder than you, always running around, and getting into trouble. You rein in his excesses, and he stops you from becoming too serious.

Okán hiGurúma: The warmest-hearted of your friends, he likes and is liked by everyone.

Hayalúkh hiVáika: You’d like to marry her! All the adults say she’s the perfect clan girl, but you suspect they don’t know her very well. She’s very good at getting people to do what she wants.

Dishén hiJarásh: The acknowledged clan troublemaker, he’s the most exciting of your friends. You go to him when you want to find something out or get something done.

Zurnékh hiJarásh: He’s the smartest of your friends, but you don’t envy him. Everyone has their own idea about what he should become in order to help the clan most, and he can’t seem to say no to anyone. He’s always working too hard to please everyone.

Hegár hiArusá

Twin son of the Clan Patriarch, Héttukeng

9 years old, Eye of Flame, Vimúhla worshipper

Description: Small, lean, athletic, impish eyes

Character Stats	Combat Values	Magic & Other
Strength: 3	Fast Play Value: 4	Pedhétl: 4
Dexterity: 5	Initiative: 13	Magic Resistance: 4
Intelligence: 3	Combat: 4	Energy Pool: 23
Psyche: 4	Health Points: 40	Respect: 0
Charisma: 5	Shock Value: 8	
Willpower: 5		

Skills	Attributes	Defects
Language (Tsolyáni, Spoken) 2	Attractive: Beautiful eyes	Younger
Knowledge (Tumíssa) 2	High Lineage	Impulsive
Etiquette (Low clan) 1	Small Build (Natural Gymnast)	
Hiking 1		
Acrobatics (Jumps, Tumbling) 1		
Charm (Social) – Familiarity		
Deception (Lying) – Familiarity		
Burglary – Familiarity		
Brawling- Familiarity		

Notes: -2 to resist Charm or detect lies; +2 to Acrobatics checks, +2 to Charm checks. Your name means “to hunt” because you’re always following after your brother Jáimukh.

You’re the younger son of Héttukeng, the clan patriarch. Your brother Jáimukh is 10 minutes your elder which has spared you no end of bother. When clan members size up the latest additions to the highest lineage in Eye of Flame, they always approve of your brother’s leadership potential and give you a pass for all your shortcomings. Not only is Jáimukh fun to be with, he also heads off a lot of the consequences you’d otherwise face from your actions. You’re a great acrobatic team too – you can stand on his shoulders to get in windows, over walls and out of tight situations. And he’s pretty imaginative, thinking of new things for your group of friends to do.

Recently, you were prowling around the clan-house. Partly you were avoiding being assigned chores by stuffy Pí’ur the chamberlain (really, who wants to lay wood for the sacrificial fire for tonight’s festivities anyway?) or by bossy Dzái, the kitchen mistress (let those from lesser lineages prepare the food for the feast), and partly you were looking for anything exciting left behind by guests to the clan-house. To your surprise, the doors to one of the guest apartments were locked. You walked away, debating whether to try

picking the lock when you heard the door open behind you. Turning, you saw your mother emerge from the apartment carrying a food tray with empty bowls on it. She set the tray down and locked the door. When she saw you, she looked flustered for a moment. Then she explained that a clan member who went to Mu'ugalavyá had returned home sick and is being quarantined within his apartment to keep the disease from spreading. Only she's allowed in because she's immune. Gazing into your eyes, she laid a hand on your shoulder, "Hegár, you mustn't mention this to anyone! It's very important no one sees him and catches the disease. Why, who knows what the Emperor would do to the clan-house if he found out?"

Goal: Find out who's in that guest apartment and why. Is he really a danger to the clan-house?

Goal: The feast is usually pretty boring for kids. Sneak some hénkakh beer out of the kitchen and organize a party of your own for your friends.

Friends

Jáimukh: Your twin brother; people are always mixing you two up. You suspect he's smarter than you, but the two of you make a great team.

Okán hiGurúma: He's a good friend, always willing to help and looking out for everyone's best interests. There'd be a lot more arguments if he weren't around.

Hayalúkh hiVáika: Jáimukh's in love with her as are all the adults. But you're a little afraid of her. There's a lot more to her than meets the eye. You keep on her good side because you know you don't want to be her enemy.

Dishén hiJarásh: You love Dishén! He makes you look like a saint, and he's game for whatever you think up.

Zurnékh hiJarásh: He's smart, but not smart enough to just tell everyone that he's going to be a lousy soldier so they should just let him go to Temple school. Mostly you feel sorry for him and try to help him enjoy himself more.

Okán hiGurrúma
Warm-Hearted Friend

9 years old, Eye of Flame, Vimúhla worshipper

Description: Stocky, with a big smile

Character Stats	Combat Values	Magic & Other
Strength: 5	Fast Play Value:	Pedhétl: 4
Dexterity: 3	Initiative: 7	Magic Resistance: 5
Intelligence: 4	Combat: 4	Energy Pool: 22
Psyche: 6	Health Points: 45	Respect: 0
Charisma: 5	Shock Value: 9	
Willpower: 4		

Skills	Attributes	Defects
Language (Tsolyáni, Spoken) 2	Good with Animals	Younger
Knowledge (Tumíssa) 2	Harmony Amongst the 5 Selves	
Etiquette (Low clan) 1	Aptitude (Negotiation)	
Hiking 1	Highly Skilled	
Negotiation (Social) 3		
Instruction (Social skills) 1		
Medical (Humans) 1		

Notes: +2 to animal handling rolls, can befriend domestic animals with a successful Willpower check. Your child name means “to groan” because your parents didn’t want a child yet.

You’re an only child, and your father’s gone most of the time working guard duty on caravans. In fact, he’s late coming back this year from Sword of Fire’s caravan to Mu’ugalavyá. But living in a clan-house means you’re never lonely. You have your friends, Jáimukh and Hegár, the clan patriarch’s twin sons, pretty Hayalúkh, mischievous Dishén and studious Zurnékh, and you have your animals. With your friends, you’re the peace-maker, binding them together. With your animals, you love to help out Shémek, the clan’s caretaker, caring for the hmélu, the hmá and the káika birds that the clan raises for food. There’s actually not that many since you live in a city, but then, you don’t get to eat meat too often either. It’s always tricky, though, becoming attached to something that’s going to die. You consider it a metaphor for life.

This metaphor has been weighing on your mind a lot lately. Last week, you were helping one of your clan cousins, Fíru, sharpen swords. It was hard work, mostly because neither of you really knew what you were doing. Sometimes you seemed to be dulling the blades rather than sharpening them. After you complained one too many times, Fíru grunted angrily in reply, “Just be glad the elders are only saving money right now by repairing

our weapons ourselves. It's going to get worse! Didn't you know that a contract has just been unearthed at the Palace of the Realm? It's a really old one with Sword of Fire. If the clan doesn't fulfill its conditions by the first day of the new year, we're going to owe so much money that they'll have to sell off some of the talented kids to the slavers just so we can keep the clan-house."

You were shocked. Fíru's not the kind to make things up. He's 15, practically an adult. When you pressed him for details, he shrugged. "A couple days ago Pí'ur had me escort a messenger from Sword of Fire up to the patriarch's apartment. I waited around to take him back and happened to hear the message. He handed Héttukeng a scroll, said it came from the Palace and that Eye had better be ready to do what needed to be done." He scowled. "Don't tell anyone! We're not supposed to know." A couple days later, you heard that Fíru'd gone down to the Palace of War and signed up for one of the legions. After worrying about it, you've decided to talk with your friends and see if they've heard anything. After all, if it's true, some of them could be in trouble.

Goal: Find out whatever you can about this contract.

Goal: Traditionally, you can sacrifice some wool to the flame at the Purification of Fire ritual to keep someone under Vimúhla's protection. It might be a good idea to do this for each of your friends tonight.

Friends

Jáimukh and Hegár hiArusá: Twin sons of the clan patriarch, Héttukeng. Light-hearted and fun, Jáimukh's a leader just like his father, and Hegár's more wild.

Hayalúkh hiVáika: She's from the only lineage lower than yours. There's really no future for her other than being a clan-girl, but she is really smart. It's just that lots of people don't seem to realize it.

Dishén hiJarásh: Wild and dangerous, he keeps life interesting. You watch out for him most because you fear that one day he's going to get into serious trouble.

Zurnékh hiJarásh: Poor Zurnékh! The patriarch wants him to be a soldier in a good legion, the priest wants him to join the Temple, lots of elders want him to join the government. He's so smart and hard-working, it seems like he can do anything. And since he can read, he'd definitely fetch a lot on the slave block.

Hayalúkh hiVáika
Sweet Clan-girl

9 years old, Eye of Flame, Vimúhla worshipper

Description: Picture of demure sweetness, but her friends know better

Character Stats	Combat Values	Magic & Other
Strength: 2	Fast Play Value:	Pedhétl: 4
Dexterity: 3	Initiative: 7	Magic Resistance: 5
Intelligence: 5	Combat: 3	Energy Pool: 22
Psyche: 4	Health Points: 30	Respect: 0
Charisma: 5	Shock Value: 6	
Willpower: 5		

Skills	Attributes	Defects
Language (Tsolyáni, Spoken) 2	Attractive: Clan-girl archetype	Younger
Knowledge (Tumíssa) 2	Aptitude (Etiquette)	Low Lineage
Etiquette (Low clan) 3	Emotional Control (level 3)	
Hiking 1		
Cooking 1		
Subculture (Clan) 1		
History (Eye of Flame) - Familiarity		

Notes: +2 to Charm checks when conforming to good clan-girl stereotype. +1 to Etiquette and Negotiation checks. +2 to detect or tell a lie. Immune to Intimidation or Charm. Your name means “ruby” because your parents valued you and hoped you’d be devoted to the Flame God.

The perfect good clan-girl, demure and polite, helpful in the kitchen and respectful of elders, that’s your reputation. You know exactly how to behave and what’s expected of you. By letting people see what they want to see, you have them all fooled. It’s amazing how transparent people are and how easily they are manipulated. You see how your friend Jáimukh smiles his way out of trouble caused by his twin Hegár, and how he’s always trying to impress you. You notice how the lay priest Hárisu subtly undermines the clan patriarch’s decisions; how everyone says they despise the foully selfish Ksárul-worshipping black hmá Qárras but are really afraid of him. The shouting of the chamberlain, Pí’ur, is mostly bluster. Dzái, the kitchen mistress, has no power outside of her small, circumscribed realm.

Slowly an idea has been percolating in your mind. What if, instead of becoming a simple good clan-girl, one day you became clan matriarch? You’ve watched how Héttukeng controls the elders, singling them out and keeping them in line individually so they never gather together to oppose him. You see him strive to keep malcontents like Omél

hiGurúma isolated. You know you could do that too. It's true that you are from the lowest lineage in the clan, but Jáimukh likes you and is the patriarch's son. It's a goal, anyway. In the meantime, you try to learn all you can about the clan and what's happened to it in the past. Mostly you learn by talking to the oldsters. They love to have you sit at their feet while they spin tales for you. It makes them feel loved and important. And you've learned much that others are just too impatient to find out. Old Isúra, the elderly woman who loves to rock next to the hot stove in the kitchen and listen to everyone talk, is particularly good source of information. Just yesterday, she told you something interesting:

Eye of Flame's prosperity was once assured by a pair of enchanted hair clippers: The Clippers of Skillful Barbering. Anyone wielding these clippers gave the recipient the haircut of their heart's desire. But the Clippers were lost during the reign of Hejékka IV "the Rebuilder." This is why the clan works now as bodyguards and soldiers, mostly for Sword of Fire. But Sword of Fire wants to sever relations with Eye of Flame just so they can hire a cheaper clan, those Standing Reed upstarts! This is why their clan patriarch is arriving today. He's going to demand the traditional haircut and when Eye of Flame fails to give him a perfect cut, he'll use it as an excuse to cast Eye of Flame aside. Only finding the Clippers will save the clan!

Dzái pulled you away at that point and set you to doing some pointless work. Everyone ignores old Isúra, but she's a reliable source. You've been pondering what to do ever since.

Goal: Find the Clippers. If they are needed, it will go down in clan legend.

Goal: Keep Jáimukh under your spell. Between the two of you, Eye of Flame won't never stand a chance!

Friends

Jáimukh hiArusá: Oldest (by 10 minutes) son of Héttukeng, the patriarch. He's cute, athletic, charming and infatuated with you.

Hegár hiArusá: Younger son of Héttukeng. He's fun-loving and bold, a good counterpart to Jáimukh and never far from him.

Okán hiGurúma: You like Okán more than anyone else because what you see is what you get with him. He's friendly and loyal and always has the best interests of his friends at heart.

Dishén hiJarásh: You respect Dishén because he has the courage to do what he wants, despite what others say. This also makes him potentially valuable to you in the future.

Zurnékh hiJarásh: He should enter the Temple and become the next lay priest for the clan since he's smarter than he is strong. He'd enjoy it more and be a good supporter of you.

Dishén hiJarásh
The Rascal

9 years old, Eye of Flame, Vimúhla worshipper
Description: You're always blamed, even if you didn't do it!

Character Stats	Combat Values	Magic & Other
Strength: 5	Fast Play Value:	Pedhétl: 4
Dexterity: 6	Initiative: 15	Magic Resistance: 4
Intelligence: 4	Combat: 6	Energy Pool: 23
Psyche: 4	Health Points: 55	Respect: -5
Charisma: 3	Shock Value: 11	
Willpower: 6		

Skills	Attributes	Defects
Language (Tsolyáni, Spoken) 2	Aptitude (Stealth)	Younger
Knowledge (Tumíssa) 2	Base Cunning	Bad Reputation
Etiquette (Low clan) 1	Physical Advantage (Hearing)	Nemesis
Hiking 1	Decisive	
Stealth (Urban) 2		
Planning – Familiarity		
Arts (Singing) – Familiarity		
Brawling - Familiarity		

Notes: +4 to Intelligence when in fear of imminent physical harm. +1 to Hearing rolls. +1 to Etiquette checks in snappy repartee. Your child name means “to hide” because you're never around when someone's looking for you.

Long ago you got tagged as the clan trouble-maker. It was probably because you ran away from the group to play on your own, avoided doing chores, and stole treats from the kitchen. It's unfair, but what can you do? Now certain busybodies have made it their business to reform you, in particular, Pí'ur, the chamberlain and Dzái, the kitchen mistress. Pí'ur is always seeking you out to give you extra chores to do, and Dzái specifically requests you when she has the most boring and tedious tasks lined up. In fact, you've spent most of this last week before the Purification of the Flame ceremony hiding in the secret parts of the clan-house to avoid both of them. Pí'ur wants you to help lay the wood for the sacrificial fires and to participate in the singing for the feast. Dzái's trying to get you to peel every tuber in existence.

You were sneaking along in the secret passage that you discovered a couple years ago when you overheard some low talking. Pressing your ear against the stone, you heard a disjointed conversation. The gist of it was that Eye of Flame's clan-house had been accidentally re-built in the wrong spot after the last ditlána. The Palace of the Realm just

figured this out and will be sending someone to make the clan dismantle it and rebuild it on another spot. You waited for the laughter that would surely follow such an absurd statement but it never came. Instead, the talking turned lower and more intense, and you couldn't make out words anymore. This conversation has disturbed you a lot. You love the clan-house; you know it inside out. You've decided that you need to talk with your friends; they can help you get to the bottom of this.

Goal: Find out if Eye of Flame is really in danger of losing the clan-house.

Goal: Avoid work and punishment from Pí'ur and Dzái.

The Passage

The clan-house is old, with thick walls. You found that if you push the stone on the outside northeast corner of the clanhouse, it shifts inward enough for a child or small-statured adult to slip in. The outside wall is actually hollow, with two rows of stone (or, half-way up the building, adobe bricks) nearly side-by-side. At the time of the original construction, they may have been snug and provided a cheap method of getting a thick wall (and cooling down the clan-house through the hot summer) but over the centuries, the construction has settled and shifted. It's a tight fit and dusty, but you can actually circumnavigate the clan-house by walking in the wall. To reach the second floor, you need to climb up the walls. You, and past discoverers, have made this easy by carving hand-holds into the stone part of the walls. Once the wall becomes adobe, footholds (spikes, blocks of woods, etc) have been driven into the wall at irregular intervals. Where the wall is crumbling or offers no immediate opportunities, it's still narrow to navigate by placing your back against one wall, your feet against the other and inching along. It's possible to eavesdrop in all the rooms (except the Great Hall and the Váika lineage room since they don't share a wall without the outside), and many of the rooms have a spy hole. You doesn't know of any other entrance or exit to the secret passage.

Friends

Jáimukh and Hegár hiArusá: Despite being the twin sons of the clan patriarch, Héttukeng, they're both easy-going and fun.

Okán hiGurúma: He's not smart or well-positioned but he's friendly, and he helps you out whenever you ask.

Hayalúkh hiVáika: Deep down you feel she's could be a bigger trouble-maker than you, but she's all the adults fooled into thinking she's the perfect clan-girl.

Zurnékh hiJarásh: He's smart. He just needs to learn to stand up for himself more.

Zurnékh hiJarásh
Hope of the Clan

9 years old, Eye of Flame, Vimúhla worshipper

Description: Smart and hard-working, but leery of clan ambitions for you

Character Stats	Combat Values	Magic & Other
Strength: 4	Fast Play Value:	Pedhétl: 4
Dexterity: 4	Initiative: 9	Magic Resistance: 5
Intelligence: 6	Combat: 4	Energy Pool: 23
Psyche: 4	Health Points: 45	Respect: 5
Charisma: 4	Shock Value: 9	
Willpower: 5		

Skills	Attributes	Defects
Language (Tsolyáni, Spoken, Written) 2	Aptitude (Scholar)	Younger
Knowledge (Tumíssa) 2	Highly Skilled	Nemesis
Etiquette (Low clan) 1	Good Reputation	
Hiking 1	Emotional Control	
Language (Engsvanyáli) 1	Got the Breaks	
Scholar (Alchemy) 1		
Scholar (Chákan History) 1		
Theology (Vimúhla) 1		
Axe 1	Initiative: +3 Damage: x3	

Note: +1 to Charm, Etiquette and Negotiation checks. Your child name means “sleep” because you never seem to.

You’re the golden child of the clan. When you learned to read and write on your own by watching the clan scribe, everyone knew you had a great future in store for you. You get private lessons from Hárisu, the clan lay priest of Vimúhla, in preparation to enter Temple school. Hárisu wants you to become a scholar priest of Vimúhla since he feels your talents lie best in the direction. But Héttukeng, the clan patriarch, has also arranged for you to have private lessons from Mnéktu, the clan’s retired legionnaire who once served in the Legion of the Storm of Fire. Through hard practice, you’ve become proficient (for a 9 year old) with the axe, but secretly you doubt that you have the raw strength and dexterity to make into a legion. Zagár hiJarásh, your lineage’s elder, has suggested to you that you join the Palace of War so you can be in a position to get other clan members into legions. You’ve still got time to decide, but you haven’t committed to anything yet because you can’t bear to let anyone down.

A couple days ago, you went down to the kitchen to pick up a snack while you studied. The mistress of the kitchen, Dzái, directed another kid to make you a tray of treats and stayed to chat with you. She was worried, fretting that the feast on the 1st of Hasanpór would be sub-standard because she hasn't had the money to buy quality ingredients. You were just about to ask her about that when Qárras entered the kitchen. Qárras is the black hmá of the clan, a man who made it into Temple school and then the priesthood, but he chose the Temple of Ksául rather than that of the Flame God Vimúhla. He makes money somehow and pays his tithe to the clan, but everyone shuns him. You've always wondered about his life and the choices he made. When Dzái saw you studying him, she leaned in closer and dropped her voice, "Avoid him at all costs! I just don't know why Héttukeng doesn't do something about him. I've heard that he's planning a human sacrifice on the first day of the new year to summon a demon!" You were about to ask her who told her that when your three little sisters ran into the kitchen after you. Tugging on your legs and jumping on your back, further conversation was impossible. You only got rid of them by going back to your study room and shutting and locking the door. If only they would find someone else to bother!

Goal: Find out the truth about Qárras hiGurúma.

Goal: Avoid your little sisters – Mísa, Rísa and Tísa. They drive you crazy with their constant demands for attention.

Friends

Jáimukh and Hegár hiArusá: The twin sons of the patriarch, Héttukeng. Jáimukh gives you advance warning when his father wants you to do something new. They have a lot more fun than you do.

Okán hiGurúma: He's a good friend, loyal and protective. He's the type of clan cousin that makes you want to fulfill all those hopes everyone has for you.

Hayalúkh hiVáika: She's the type of good clan-girl that you hope to marry one day. You mentioned that to Hegár once and he gave you a very strange look.

Dishén hiJarásh: He makes you uncomfortable with his flagrant flouting of clan customs, but everyone else vouches for him so you consider him a friend too.

Eye of Flame Clan Members

Héttukeng hiArusá	Clan Patriarch (and Elder of the Arusá lineage)
Zagár hiJarásh	Elder of his lineage
Kágesh hiGurúma	Elder of his lineage
Omél hiMrékka	Elder of his lineage
Gayán hiVáika	Elder of his lineage

These five constitute the Council of Elders.

Chashána hiArusá	Wife of Héttukeng, Mother of Jáimukh and Hegár
Hárisu hiArusá	Lay Priest of Vimúhla
Pí'ur hiMrékka	Chamberlain
Dzái hiVáika	Kitchen Head (Mistress)
Mnéktu hiJarásh	Retired Legionnaire (Storm of Fire)
Chúrisan hiArusá	Scribe
Shémek hiGurúma	Animal Handler, Caretaker of Clan Stores and Grounds
Marján hiVáika	Servant to Pí'ur, Dzái and Shémek
Isúru hiArusá	Old woman in the kitchen
Hóru hiGurúma	Massacre survivor
Qárras hiGurúma	Hóru's cousin, lay priest of Ksáru
Layéth, Sídlá and Visháya	Adolescent musicians
Mottán hiMrékka	Sulking adolescent drummer (in the baths)
Balané hiArusá	Old woman shut-in
Mísa, Rísa and Tísa	Younger sisters (4 to 6 years old) of Zurnéth
Náitl	Kitchen slave, 40ish Yán Koryáni woman
Hodál and Firáz	Outside slaves, 30ish scrawny Milumanayáni men
Asháne	Murdered girl (about 7 years old)



The Brass-Bound Bones

A Pi'úr Mígur hiZhalúkalel Adventure

By

Richard A. Becker

In the Clanhouse of the Jade Diadem, in Jakálla, one evening:

...I will not bother to explain here and now the method with which I single-handedly slew ten of the hateful and odious Black Ssú in the Ancients' Tsuru'úm not very far from dear Uncle Havárrí's estates in the Northwest; I have told my clan-cousins that story too many times now for it to remain fresh on my tongue. It is enough to know that I killed masterfully – truly, would you expect anything less from me? – until at last there were no more quadrupedal fiends at hand, and I leapt into the waiting Ancient carriage and pressed the jewel that caused it to gallop along its strange black rail-path.

A “tubeway?” Ah, of course my dear cousin knows what the Ancients would call their uncomfortable wizardry. After all, someone must step back and read musty scrolls rather than learn exquisite skill with all of one's weapons – and I do have exquisite skills, haven't I, ladies? In my seventeen years I have dealt the deathblow to many a foe with my blade, and the stroke of ultimate joy to many a bedmate with my other blade, and -- the tubeway? Yes, the tubeway. Very well, let us continue.

I had no certainty of where the Ancients' carriage betook me, only that it sped me at a rate unimaginable to those walking the many tsán of our sákbe roads. Even the Hláka could scarcely be said to equal its speed, were they to dive recklessly toward the ground, as we've all seen them do in their play, mating and hunting. Faster still than the course of an arrow in flight, or perhaps even of lightning in the sky, did the Ancients' disturbing contraption bear me away from where I had been. It was exhilarating!

Even as I felt the speed build up in the pit of my stomach, I was still clear-headed enough to take stock of my situation. I was alone, without even my hunting Rényu, and with only the scantiest of rations and equipment beyond my trusty sword, armor and javelins. Yet was I not Pi'úr Mígur hiZhalúkalel, puissant warrior, devotee of Karakán, blessed by the Gods, champion of justice? It mattered little where I was borne by the Ancients' miserable device, I would meet adventure as I always do: With a laugh and a snap of my fingers in death's eye. Lá!

At once, a strange and aggravating noise hammered at my ears, and I saw a jewel set into the wall begin to pulsate with red light. In the weird curved windows of the carriage the tunnel was visible, and I could see that in the distance there was a strange webwork of gleaming metal-like substance that obstructed my path. It grew quickly in my vision, for the tubeway carriage hurtled at a prodigious speed. My mind raced for a solution – I would need to escape the locked carriage! But how?

I prized at the nigh-seamless doorway through which I had been admitted, but it was no use. A dozen of the strongest Shén, and a platoon of brutish Ahoggyá besides, could not have moved that door so much as a hair's width. And though I did succeed in prying up loose panels hither and yon, never did they yield up a way out of the carriage. And indeed the web of crisscrossed metallic stuff was very close now.

But that thrice-damned noise the jewel was making was driving me mad! It was impossible to think clearly with that droning bell shattering my eardrums. Possessed by fury, I hammered with my fist at the red pulsing jewel and its fellows, heedless of which I struck. All that mattered was silencing that piercing noise!

Before I could do anything further, an invisible force flung me against the wall like an amorous Tinalíya kicked by a hmélu for his unsavory advances. I was pressed flat against that curved wall, my teeth digging into my lip and drawing blood, pulse pounding in my ears and eyes so that I could see naught but stars and darkness. For a moment I thought I might be about to die, and I was filled with regret that it was not in battle, that I had not yet tugged the high priestess of Lady Dilinála at Jakálla as I'd silently promised myself years earlier, and that that Gods-damned bell had not yet stopped its infernal clamor.

Yet the Gods are wise, if not always sweet, and their mercy is always shown to their favored son. Which is to say, myself. As suddenly as the invisible force – ah, cousin, you call it inertia? How very interesting (yawn), we shall have to (stretch) discuss it sometime – had taken me in its clutch, it released me and I fell to the carriage floor.

When I had collected my wits, I found that the bell had stopped (praise be to mighty Lord Karakán!), the red jewel no longer pulsed with weird light, and that the view outside the windows was quite different than before.

No longer did my tubeway carriage hurtle through nighted tunnels toward webby doom; instead, it shot serenely along an elevated railway – like a gleaming black ribbon many mens' height above the ground – through a forested valley I had never seen before. A canopy of flowering trees with smoky yellow petals nodded in a gentle breeze, and here and there I saw birds of scarlet plumage swoop and dive among their branches with an admirable recklessness. I occasionally caught glimpses of a shallow, broad, slow-moving river shining in the sunlight below the black rail; here and there were seen arboreal animals familiar and unfamiliar. The tubeway carriage was slowing, and its rail curved down underneath the canopy.

Yes, noble cousin, I suppose it is possible that my deadly blow to the screaming jewel may have caused the carriage to alter its course and prevent the imminent collision, just as you have broken the rhythm of my narrative with your comment. I certainly hope you have a better notion of rhythm in your bedchamber. I accept your apology. Now, as I was saying...

The carriage stopped altogether with a ratcheting sound, and its hatchway opened. I had no inkling of where I had been deposited, but I felt it ignoble to allow such a nattering consideration to slow me in the path of adventure. The fact, also, that I had consumed the last of my carefully rationed provender led me to a more curious disposition about my surroundings.

I stepped out onto a strange platform shaped with beams of an unknown substance, clad in yellowy clay tiles. It was shady, overgrown with tufted vines that drowsed in the zephyric breeze—vines that I was delighted to discover held a floral liquor within them, compounded of rainwater, dew, and plant-nectar. It had no ill effect, and I cut down vines for some few minutes and drank of them like our wastrel Aunt Kuda'ála in the brandy cellar. Oh, don't make that face, we're all family here, and we all know how Auntie is.

There was no food handy, but I made note of the plump-looking birds gliding over the brim of the valley and decided that I might soon hunt of their number. Before I could undertake that pleasurable mission, I decided that I must investigate the stelae-bordered passageway that led down from the platform.

Cousin, it was not incumbent upon me to describe every element of the platform upon its first mention. Do you expect me to embellish each tale with the number drí-ants toiling in the dirt at my feet, or to report accurately the number of clouds in the sky? To aver which of my gods-given testes hangs lower on most days? (It is the left one.) Nay, cousin Noyesamék, I fear that rather than my narrative being haphazard, it is you who are being obtuse. It is sufficient to say that there was a curiously carved stone doorway that led down and away from the platform, and that I chose that moment to ensure that I would not face further xenomorphic interference—as I had at the tubeway station where dwelled the Black Ssú.

I had no means of illumination – no torch, no oil lamp had survived my journeys. So I returned to the tubeway and used my trusty sword to slash away some of the weirdly frangible stuff that the Ancients used for cushioning, lashed it to a fallen branch (there were fallen branches and leaves on the platform, dear Cousin, are you satisfied?), and set it ablaze. Cousin Noyesamék... Cousin Noyesamék, your vituperation is entertaining, but pointless. I required the means of illumination, and I could not burn green leaves and attain anything but acrid smoke. The gods put the Ancients' cushioning in my path so that I might have light in the depths of the ground, and there it is. Now kindly shut thy chumétl-hole and let me proceed with my tale.

I stepped through the dim portal and walked carefully down the dusty corridor. Here and there lay bones, cast-off fur and claws and scales, dried dung, and other remnants of bestial habitation in the passageway. But this hallway had once been a place of human veneration—countless thousands of diminutive figures were carved into the gelid stone of the walls, floor, and ceiling, each and every one of them singing a silent paean to unknown gods of ages past. As I reached the juncture of the corridor with a vaulted staircase spiraling down, I fancied that the tiny manlings (and womanlings) were singing the praises of myself, and truly, who is to say that they did not? Could it be that in some bygone era, sorcerers more skilled than is guessed in our time found the vision of the future that could show them the very crescendo of manhood and heroism... myself... and that they had cut intricate sculptures into the living rock to pay tribute to my passage?

It is certainly to be hoped that they had such excellent taste.

Down and down the stairs circled, built around lotus-topped pillars nested one atop the other. I found that in a few short minutes the warmth of the upper world was lost and a clammy chill filled the air, but I did not turn back. I knew well that the Ssú often chose to dwell in those places no man, or even Pé Chói, would ever deign to make his regular home. It would be only meet for me to seek them on their own ground and destroy them, before making camp for the night on the tubeway platform.

I explored many cubbyholes, false corridors, side passageways, empty chambers, and more, in that morbid darkness. But it was only when I reached the very bottom of the long spiral staircase that I beheld the original masters of that place, who had nothing to do with the Ssú – and likely would have hated them as much as you or I.

It was a cavernous hall with walls of dressed stone alternating with once-smooth stucco. There were frescoes that sparkled indistinctly in the grime-caked flooring, most of them scuffed away by centuries of heels and toes. There were vessels for drinking and eating flung haphazardly here and there, the crumbled remnants of furniture and clothing that fell away at a touch, and throughout it all – bones. Full skeletons of men, all armed, lay amid the junk of millennia. Had they been heroes? Rogues? Bandits or barbarians? The retinue of a petty princeling, ready to slaughter his rivals in most uncivil but glorious war? Who could say?

Yet there was something strange about them that I looked closely to resolve in my mind. I must confess it was not a wholesome sight to behold.

Those mouldering skeletons had each been bound together with gorgeous, filigreed castings of sturdy brass. Here, a skull was bolted fast with a burnished plating of the stuff, there, a delicate toe-bone was inset with more of it. A hipbone lined with richly engraved metal! A spine turned into a brassy serpent by the many plates with which it was enringed! Each bony carcass was more than merely a treasure trove of lustrous ore; each was also a work of sinister artistry.

It grieves me to report that I had little time to admire their osseous splendour before, to my utter astonishment and dismay, movement returned to their limbs.

The sight of those brown bones drawing themselves up to face me, toe-to-toe, caused a most unpleasant horripilation to pass over my flesh. It was most uncanny to gaze into empty eye sockets and know that even without organs of sight; they did nevertheless return my goggling stare. Of course, a man of war is ever-practical, and so I found the most alarming detail was the fine chlén-hide weaponry clenched tightly in each skeletal fist.

They rose with a quickening pace, and I elected to strike before they were entirely ready. It would be unsporting against a noble foe, this is true, yet witness: It is truly said that the noble dead have the good taste to allow their flesh and bones to remain quiescent

whilst they sail for the Goodly Isles, save for those adherents of the gracious Worm, of course. Yet even they would not begrudge me the alacritous nature of my attack. I do believe that even the beloved of Lord Sárku appreciate promptness and a sense of brisk urgency in the doing of deeds.

With masterful speed and unerring precision, my sword swung in cleaving arcs, aimed at the neckbones of the walking dead. Against a normal foe, be they Human, Ssú, Hlutrgú, or other, I should have seen gouts of rich blood and an expression of consternation on their faces, mingled with a deep sense of disappointment in the brevity of their skeins. Yet it was not so! No, though my arm is mighty and my battle-wit puissant indeed, I found that the dead men's metallic chancing was no mere ornament but rather quite functional. The edge of my blade sang upon their brazen bones, and for a moment... a very brief moment... incredulous doubt took root in my spine.

Pray, do not gaze upon me so, my clansmen! I am mortal like any other, though you would not think so from my magnificence. It may seem ignoble for any to doubt the prowess of Pi'úur Mígur hiZhalúkalel—even Pi'úr Mígur hiZhalúkalel himself!—but does not wise Lord Thúmis craftily tell us that in each mind is found a universe in which thought is king and chaos alike? And is it not true that to know all things one must appraise all things, distasteful and unlikely as they may seem? So, then, we see that it is not lacking in nobility to consider the faintest possibility of my defeat. It is, on the other face of the coin, a fleeting and silly notion.

And a notion which I as swiftly dismissed! If my trusty sword could not easily cleave the thicker brass plating and wire, surely the thinner material would be the easier to sunder. The quartet trod toward me with a castanet step, lunging at me with a quick and surprisingly well-coordinated sortie. I gave back a step or three, adjusting my grip on my sword and shield, and chose my ground as the Lord Karakán instructs mortal warriors to do. I breathed deeply and assessed them: Four opponents, armed but shieldless, without benefit of missile or pole weapons, and no sorcery to give them unfair advantage. No significant advantage in reach, rather slower than myself, but without need for breath or rest. And dead or alive, or both as was more likely, they were obviously mustering for a rush.

I laughed and gave myself over to Lord Karakán's dance!

"I trample the unjust and reap the just who have strayed." My preceptor's words flowed through my mind as I whirled amid the enemy's hooked swords and barbed axes, ignoring tiny, meaningless cuts and lacerations when they struck home. "You look to my hand, and in it you behold the flowering of your mortality. You look to my eyes, and you gaze into the stern light of justice inescapable. You look to my armaments, and you see the masterful tools with which your five-fold jewel is prised from its material setting. Others shall conduct you from this plane of life, but I am he who shall cast you into their arms. Now you shall know death, and death anew."

The martial drums of the temple thundered in my brain as my heart pounded steadily in my breast. They were more skilled than many living men, were my opponents! They did not lack in courage, if one could allege that in foemen who lacked any vitals to skewer with a handy poniard. They were weird and tireless, and many lesser men might have felt terror to do battle with them. But those are lesser men, no?

And say what anyone may, a dead man is still a man, and the shape and the motions of men can only vary to a certain degree. The body is a miracle; anyone can see that mine is a greater miracle than most! But it is the mind of the fighting man that makes him great or puny, if all else be equal. These dead men had a certain limited talent. But it was not enough to face Pi'úr Mígur!

As my esteemed cousin has complained whilst trying to study musty tomes as I pleased my wives, I am gifted with prodigious endurance, among many other things. Out-maneuvering the bone-rattling enemy was a matter of superior skill and speed, and maintaining this advantage was a brisk test of endurance. But defeating them? That demanded matchless accuracy and a deft wrist. Who but I could have done it?

Though their horrid neckbones were strongly bound in metal, more delicate wiring was necessary to grant their fingers a dexterous range of motion. And even as they pivoted, spun, lunged, crouched, and whirled in an array of kinetic swordsmanship that might have bewildered any common bravo, I scanned their weapon hands at every opportunity. At the slightest hesitation or slowing on their part, I darted in and snipped a wire with a

flick of my sword's tip. One finger, two, three, more! The first bony warrior's sword clattered to the floor, and they paused in uncertainty. I laughed aloud. The dead feared Pi'úr Mígur!

The long-dead sorcerer-priests who had readied these men for the tomb had neglected to leave them armor or shields, trusting in their metallic sheathing and their fleshless state to make them invincible. This strategy had proven itself to be folly when facing a hero of my stature, blessed with elusive grace and stupendous fighting talent. I allowed the dead man whose fingerless right hand had lost his grip on his sword to pick it up with his off hand. I could think of few better ways to make him present that hand as a target.

That was their downfall, naturally. They could not hide their finger-joints from me and press their attack simultaneously. If they could not out-fence me, it was only a question of time before I would snip all their finger-wires and leave them no choice but to try and club me with fingerless limbs. How long could they last in such a clumsy contest if I were to change tactics and dismember their toes, leaving them unable to balance and stand up?

Not long!

When one plays the ancient games of strategy against true masters, it is readily obvious that they can perceive the outcome of a lesser player's gambits far in advance of their conclusion. It is even more exasperating for that lesser player to see the outcome also,

and to have no choice but to struggle for the rest of the match in futile anticipation of the endgame. One knows how it must end, but there is no alternative save to fight until inevitably being humbled. Instructive to some, enraging to others, unavoidable to all.

Dead they may have been, but my opponents were still vestiges of men, and as such they betrayed their frustration at the inescapable nature of their fates. My confident smile and steady respiration displayed no sign of fatigue; in fact, I could have continued for many more minutes before needing rest and refreshment. Fingers fell, and first one dead man had no hand capable of holding a weapon, then another, then another. I was becoming just a little weary when none of them could still face me nobly armed. They hesitated again, and I roared a challenge and stamped my foot thunderously on the flagstones.

And they fled!

I laughed then, to see dead men run away into their lightless hidey-holes. Later I would remember them and almost feel pity, for they were trapped in their metal-wrapped calcium frames with only crude stubs of bone where they had had hands. I pictured them struggling vainly to lift some elder artifact that had meant something to them in life, only to see it fall from their nonexistent grasp again and again and again... But Lord Karakán enjoins us to remember that justice is also the shadow of injustice, a reaction to the unrighteous deed. Often it is as if the unjust are suicides, and the just are merely the instruments of their self-destruction. “Mine is the Way that is Just, and it is neither

mysterious nor incomprehensible, therefore, know and cleave unto it -- or call down My wrath as if it were thy hand rending thine own heart.”

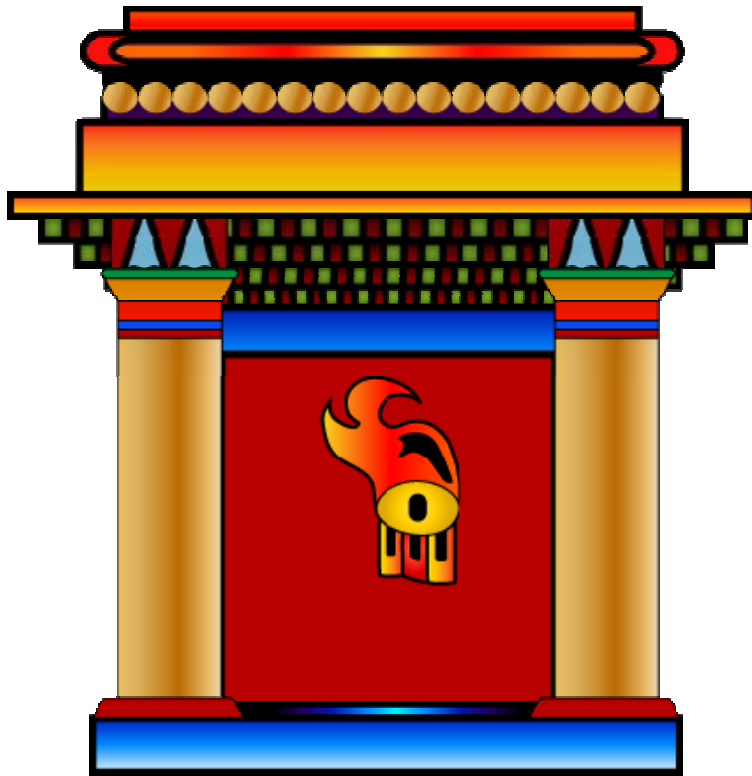
After their timely departure, I took it upon myself to examine my surroundings. In that tomb – no, cousin, it was no tomb of our Clan, nor even of a friendly one, but of some sept long lost to time! – I spied many costly things of great worth, and it seemed only right that a hero’s sparkling, faceted reward should be wrapped in a piece of kilt and taken home to our Clanhouse’s treasure vaults. No, I do not fear the vengeance of the centuries, for if a curse should bring the brass-bound bones to my sleeping mat some night, I shall give them another thrashing for the sheer fun of it!

And what of the rest of my long, long journeys? How I found myself amongst the Urunén, chased a Vringálu in a low-ceilinged cave, wed a blossoming sea-princess of the isles and was widowed not long after, gazed upon blackened fields and glowing green towers, matched wits with a Mihállí sorcerer, spat upon the head of Baron Ald of Yán Kór, nearly suffocated under sand in Saá Allaqiyáni, and more?

Those are tales of another day. For now, I must rest!

...as the slaves cleared the dining hall and their kinfolk shook their heads in wonder, Pi’úr Mígur hiZhalúkalel waved away his cousin Noyesamék’s thousand questions and went to find his hero’s reward for that night in the arms of his wives.





I am the least of warriors.
Although you beat me, crush me, destroy me,
I will fight on, stronger than ever.
In the name of the Flame I defeat my foes, yea,
Even though I am engulfed by a score of foes,
I punish them all without mercy.
Who am I?

- A Child's Riddle, gathered in Fasiltum