

The Chronicles of Atys

January 2019

Contents

1	About This Document	4
2	Before the Great Swarming	4
2.1	Fire of Coriolis	4
2.1.1	The Fever of Discovery	4
2.1.2	The Siege of Karavia	5
2.1.3	The Company of Loria	8
2.1.4	The Youth of Loria	12
2.1.5	The Assassination of Loria	15
2.1.6	The Liberation of the Trykers	16
3	Chronicles of the Great Swarming - From 2481 to 2484 (JY)	17
3.1	Massacre and flight	17
3.1.1	A Kitin Story	17
3.1.2	Monsoon Sunset	22
3.1.3	My Karavan Guardian	26
3.1.4	Kitins's song	27
3.2	The return of Hope	29
3.2.1	First Chronicle	29
3.2.2	New Day	29
3.2.3	Opportunity awaits!	29
4	Chronicles of the New Beginning - From 2484 to 2525 (JY)	30
4.1	Chronicles of Aeden Aqueous	30
4.1.1	The Secrets of Tryker engineering	30
4.1.2	Flyner Evasion	31
4.1.3	The Story of a Young Corsair	33
4.2	Chronicles of the Verdant Heights	42
4.2.1	A little bedtime story	42
4.2.2	Ciochini learns of His Heritage	44
4.2.3	Chrysalis	46
4.2.4	Screaming Shadows	53
4.3	Chronicles of the Witherings	57

4.3.1	Tears of Serenity	57
4.3.2	The Crying Mektoub	58
4.3.3	The Stance of Daïsha	59
4.3.4	Mabreka	62
5	Chronicles of the New Beginning - Since 2525 (JY)	66
5.1	Erlan's Chronicles	66
5.1.1	Preface to Chronicles	66
5.1.2	The Revelation of Tryton	67
5.1.3	The Call from the Powers	68
5.1.4	The Dunes of Aelius	69
5.1.5	Forgotten Places	70
5.1.6	Kitins Stir... Homins! Prepare!	71
5.1.7	Spring, when tents blossomed	71
5.1.8	Annex to Spring, when tents blossomed	73
5.2	Chronicles of Aeden Aqueous	76
5.2.1	Ardan Keale, Tryker Entomologist	76
5.2.2	A Tryker wedding story	78
5.2.3	Wirell Aelan, Decent Tryker	79
5.2.4	The Traveller returns	81
5.2.5	Tryker Constitution	82
5.2.6	Lady Chiabre's Social Diary	82
5.3	Chronicles of the Burning Desert	84
5.3.1	Story of a Young Fyros	84
5.3.2	Ibian Peldix, bark Sculptor	106
5.3.3	Dexius Apokos, Fyros Genadier	108
5.3.4	Menia Pyron, engaged Fyros	110
5.3.5	Interview with Lekos Daraan	111
5.3.6	The Mystery of the Renegades	112
5.3.7	Meeting with the new Senator Dios Apotheps	114
5.3.8	A New Face	116
5.4	Chronicles of the Verdant Heights	116
5.4.1	An Interview with Cuiccio Perinia	116
5.4.2	Bebi Cuirinia, royal Embalmer	118
5.4.3	Viero, young married matis	120
5.4.4	Fight for Praise	121
5.4.5	Autumn	122
5.4.6	Foul Fruits	124
5.4.7	The Tear	125
5.4.8	Melario Estriano, history of a Matis	126
5.4.9	The torments of a queen	126
5.5	Chronicles of the Witherings	128
5.5.1	Cioi Ba-Nung, Tattooist for Homins	128
5.5.2	A Zorai Wedding	131
5.5.3	Yi Be-Pian, Old Zorai of the Company of the Eternal Tree	132
5.5.4	Unfortunate Night	135

5.5.5	Equal to Atys	138
5.5.6	The Story of Sian Gai-Lua: A Fateful Hunt	138
5.5.7	Tribes of the Witherings and Goo	141
5.5.8	Teleportation Sickness	143
5.6	Trytonist chronicles	144
5.6.1	In The Beginning	144
5.6.2	A new Seeker of Elias	145
5.6.3	Hiaoi, seeker of Elias	145
5.7	Marauders chronicles	147
5.7.1	Stabre Sicco, Marauder Prisoner	147
5.7.2	The misadventures of Arty Mac Keaggan	149
5.7.3	Marauder Wedding: "Where Wedding is Synonymous with Challenge"	150
5.8	Chronicles linked to the Temple War	151
5.8.1	Announcement of the construction of the Karavan Temple	151
5.8.2	Fao the Zoraï	151
5.8.3	The Zora sanctuary	152
5.8.4	The outlying areas of Zora	153
5.8.5	Meeting in Zora	153
5.8.6	In Jena's light	154
5.9	Chronicles linked to Spring, when tents blossomed	162
5.9.1	For a Few Dappers More	162
6	Diverse chronicles	163
6.0.1	The Shadow Runners	163
6.0.2	The Mektoub Affair	164
6.0.3	The Memoirs of Kedgy Be'Cauny	168
6.0.4	The Legend of the Blue Ocyx	169
6.0.5	When Jena Comes	170
6.0.6	A Very Special Drink	171
6.0.7	The Circle of Darkness	174
6.0.8	Clandestine Attack	176
6.0.9	An Ancient Conflict	177
6.0.10	Bloody Dusk	179
6.0.11	The Kami of the Lost Souls	180
6.0.12	The Followers	188
6.1	Anlor Winn Tales	205
6.1.1	The Legend of the Ghost Yubo	205
6.2	Atysmas Tales	206
6.2.1	The Gingo Who Ate the Sun	206

1 About This Document

This document has been compiled by Drummyfish on 2019-01-14 from Ryzom Lore texts at Ryzom Wiki (https://en.wiki.ryzom.com/wiki/The_Chronicles_of_Atys and <https://atys.ryzom.com/projects/4/wiki/Chronicles>). Ryzom is a FOSS game whose media are freely licensed, including the Wiki content and lore. The license of the chronicle texts has been explicitly confirmed to be CC-BY-SA by Tamarea at https://en.wiki.ryzom.com/wiki/Talk:The_Chronicles_of_Atys, just to be sure. This document is released under CC-BY-SA 3.0 as well, available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>. Credit goes to the authors, the Ryzom Lore and Event teams. The texts were copied and modified only to the extent of formatting. The intent of this document is to make it easy for the fans of the game to read the lore offline, as a book.

2 Before the Great Swarming

2.1 Fire of Coriolis

2.1.1 The Fever of Discovery

It was under the authority of the Counsel of Chroniclers, instated by the Emperor Abylus the Learned, that the miners' guild was founded to investigate ruins uncovered in the plain of Coriolis. Despite some opposition in support of the Karavan interdiction, a vote was cast in favor of a motion to allow miners to dig to reveal the truth behind the dragon of the myth, and the secret treasures or evils that Atys was thought to hold in her bowels. The general consensus was to rather brave the truth than live in falsehood, such is the credo of the Fyros people. But the path to the verity is not always a merry paddle down tranquil waters...

A team was digging in the region of Coriolis, encouraged by the discovery of fragments of a strange material, when they hit upon a vein of acid which quickly set fire to the surrounding parched wastelands. Prevalent easterly winds pushed the fire on swiftly before reinforcements could be called in. The fire devoured the town of Coriolis and blazed a trail like a rabid gingo consuming every form of life in its path. Abylus the Learned sent in an army to combat the fire but worst was yet to come.

The fire had spread across to the Matis frontier creating a firewall and preventing Tryker water supplies from getting through. The Matis king, Aniro III, taking advantage of the smoke screen, whipped up an army to rout our water watcher regiments, take over the water route and were turning their eyes to the Lake Lands. But as the song goes, "as long as breath shall fill our lungs our hearts shall beat bold and true, and as long as the night shall bring the morrow we shall struggle through and through!" For weeks the fire of Coriolis raged. But then better fortune blew our way and the clouds thickened and broke into heavy rainfall to take care of the fire as if by magic. Not wasting a single mo-

ment and though the troops were fatigued, Pyto, the son of the aged Emperor, set out on a heroic campaign to reconquer our vital link to the lake lands.

— as told by Apocasmus Menix, a Fyros chronicler

2.1.2 The Siege of Karavia

Part One

Karavia, the Matis fortified city built on the site of the first Karavan-Matis encounter, had fallen to barbarian Fyros forces during the reign of King Noblis. Situated at midpoint along the water route linking the Lake Lands to Fyros territory, the city had become a vast garrison town providing armed cover to Fyros outposts running north and south. Three generations had not sufficed to quell our deep-seated humiliation wrought upon us by the infidel invaders that continued to grow fat on the holy land, our land.

But at long last, out of the ruins of our revolt-stricken dominions, came a new hope in the guise of the valiant warrior-king, Aniro III, second son of Danido the Decrepit. Aniro set out on a campaign with a contingent of faithful knights to reconquer the hearts of the people and to forge a new army to fight under the one banner against the common enemy.

One of those knights was Gioni di Tylini, a sure-handed colossus of Karavian stock, and a fervent believer in Jena. Tylini went on to distinguish himself in the battle of Thormes where he converted his tribal prisoners into loyal subjects. His return to Matia, the Matis capital of the old lands, was marked with great pageant and no sooner had the fanfare died down than he was summoned by the king. Time had come for the spurs of Matis knights to drive the heathenish imps from the holy land.

Moreover, victory at Karavia would open the road to the sea shores further west as well as giving a virtually unhindered passage to the proverbial riches of the Tryker lake lands to the south. However, the walls of the fortified city were strong and high, the occupants could hold out against a siege at least till Fyros divisions of relief troops brought support, which would reasonably take them a little over forty days.

- "But, my liege," said Tylini, "by the time we have taken up our positions the Fyros will surely have sent the full brunt of their army from their homelands to Karavia to relieve the city. We shall be outflanked and caught between two armies..."

- "Worthy Tylini, you would acquiesce that an essence to victory is knowing how the land lies. You shall be the bait to lure the Fyros to a battlefield of our own design!"

- "With all due respects, my Lord, we shall be unable to maneuver and our strike force shall be reduced to half..."

- "You would believe your King would lead you knowingly unto the jaws of death, Gioni di Tylini?"

- "No, my Lord!" protested the knight.

- "Then hear me out." The king rolled out a map on the long syre wood table. "You shall lay siege to the city of Karavia. Our informers tell us there is

a permanent contingent of but 5000 spears. But even if you outnumber them, remember, you will first let time wear down the enemy's spirits, no Matis homin must be needlessly lost, wounded or even fatigued by futile raids. Our force of strike will depend on their good condition and by consequence the outcome of the greater battle. Now, you conclude as will Abylus that the Fyros shall have no choice but to rally to their defense taking the long march south from their northern homelands or face losing their vital water link to the Lake Lands. But your king shall be lying in wait in the forest set well back from the road. Our scouts shall watch them as they pass..." As the King's leather gauntleted finger traced the route over the map Tylini began to fully take in the king's plan.

- "Mmm, and once they are past, your highness would send me word, close in on them from the rear and push them on to where we would most desire them." The king gave the great knight a comradely pat on the back.

- "Have our battleground carefully prepared by your engineers, good Tylini, and the rest shall make noble reading in our history books!"

Part Two

There was one major obstacle to the king's plan, the march to Karavia would reasonably take two months meandering between the great trees, clambering through the dense vegetation; a march that would leave nothing of the benefit of surprise. However, Tylini, renowned for his resourcefulness, enrolled an extra company of two hundred craftsmen. Then, instead of heading northwestward straight for Karavia, the king and he took the three day march east to the great falls of Ria where the vast river widens out. In little more than a week, working day and night, engineers and crafters had felled over seventy tall bolka trees and turned them into fabulous rafts for transporting the army smoothly down the Ria. Between the vales of Bero and Ronda, riverside tribes stood amidst the luxuriant foliage in marvel at the awe-inspiring fleet of 300 vessels floating over 30000 homins, provisions, mektoubs and 150 trained ragus tranquilly down the Ria to war.

Within the week the army had arrived at the confluent of the Darone where they were forced to disembark because of the rapid waters there. The king, at this point, led his army north, Tylini headed west. The forest from there on became less dense and barely two days later Tylini had his army positioned at but a day's march north of the holy city. The whole journey had not taken twenty days!

Outposts and villages on the water route going south were surrounded, neatly silenced and razed in short sharp night attacks. Any enemy fleeing to the woods was systematically tracked down by ragus and executed. It was vital that Abylus did not get wind of the extent of the army that was awaiting him, else he would deploy double the force.

Before coming upon the holy city Tylini split his army into three divisions each consisting of upwards of five thousand homins. Moreover, Tylini was careful to display only a portion of the force, just enough to encourage the Fyros to stay put. At last, standing on a flat hillock where his tent had been pitched, Gioni could cast his eyes upon Karavia, the grand wooden towers, the elaborate edifices, and the massive living wall of prime roots that had so often played on

his mind as a boy. All was as his grandfather had depicted and portrayed in landscapes on the walls of the family residence. That is, with the exception that the ground immediately surrounding the city walls had been cleared of vegetation and that the road leading into the main gates lie straight as a bolt. To preserve the city, and so as not to attract needless curiosity of the Kami things, Tylini decided that no fire lancers would be used for the assault. When the time came the city would be overrun by stratagem and pure force! Engineers devised siege engines, crafters began felling trees while soldiers set to work preparing the stretch of turf land leading some way beyond the city walls to the north. Thousands of spears were planted in the ground devised to spring up at a forty five degree angle to meet the Fyros relief warriors from the north in their course of attack.

The besieged Fyros in the fortified city were at first content enough to bide their time believing that an army would be sent in as soon as the administrators saw that the water convoys had ceased. But on perceiving the battle ground being carefully prepared as aforementioned they began to realize the extent of our determination. Underestimating our forces, they began making forays which they came to quickly realize could only result in mass suicide. Though the harassing ceased, many a Fyros was captured endeavoring to get through our water tight ring with the aim of making for Fyros homelands with tidings of our preparations. The culprits were invariably sent back to the city gates tied to a mektoub with their heads set in their laps!

It should be said that at this epoch the Fyros, having manifested disobedience as to the given Law, had fallen out of favor with the Karavan. Thus Tylini knew there would be no chance of any teleportation unit within the city. What is more, Jena, having given all homins of Atys the freedom of thought, her disciples had no right to interpose in homin affairs.

By the second week of the siege the battle field preparations were finalized, the homins were growing restless, news of the Fyros army was expected any day. But a twist of fate was soon to change the course of events.

Part Three

A bloody sun was rising and gradually cracking its ruddy hues upon the leafy high boughs above Tylini's tent and upon the vast green and brown sward yonder where the battlefield lay in wait. A rude hullabaloo was rising from the citadel where the pagans, peculiar to their inferior station, were giving themselves to summer solstice festivities as if to mock our heritage further. Tylini was contemplating the skyline and the thickening clouds when there came a galloping from behind accompanied by some commotion. Gioni turned to see a mounted mektoub give a heave of the head and collapse in sheer exhaustion. The messenger, who had leapt off the mount just in time, true to Matis breeding, straightened his green and crimson tunic, gave a bow before stepping over to the great knight handing over a scroll whose seal was embossed with the flower of the baylona and tagged with a crimson silk ribbon. Tylini took the royal billet with slight agitation which visibly increased as he perused the contents. He then looked around at his entourage of knights.

- "Sirs, by the love of Jena, our King sends us word: Today Karavia shall

regain her dignity! Today we unsheathe our blades; today we ride on the winds of fortune!” He then pointed to the northern sky at the confirmation of the king’s message: thick trails of smoke carried by the warm summer solstice winds were straggling over the sky from the northern frontier. ”Fyros lands are raging with a conflagration of castigation! Providence is on our side today!” vociferated Tylini.

Indeed, what came to be known as the great Fire of Coriolis was raging over the Fyros wastelands, had cut off the water route and by consequence impeded Fyros troops from reaching Karavia. The great battle, for which the ground had been laid, would come later. Meanwhile, the smaller poultry was fatigued and cornered, now was the time to roast it!

Tylini sent in a mock siege engine force early that evening to hassle Fyros archers while a company of knights with trained ragus managed to get close to the wall where Tylini knew from his grandfather of a shallow part in the prime root foundation. The ravenous hounds dug away the shallow soil making a gap under the prime root wall. On the given order they then poured out on the other side creating havoc while the knights crept in and cut down the great wooden drawbridge.

The battle horn was sounded, the drums rolled in the dimming light and the Matis army charged down in a colossal, dark and glimmering wave to take the city by storm. Tylini spear-headed the surge hacking and thrashing his way perilously, boldly through the milling heathen mob which all night long put up resistance to the last. But by the light of the misty morn, once again Matis colors flew high and proud over the holy city of Karavia.

Standing triumphantly upon the steps of the keep, Gioni di Tylini turned his face to the heavens in thanks to Jena and large drops began to splatter upon his forehead. A deluge then broke the silence, he turned his bloody palms upward to cleanse them as all around heathen blood that swamped the holy city was being flushed away in rivulets. Tylini’s heart swelled in the knowledge that these lands were now his as his gaze wondered south over the road to the Lake Lands...

— as told by Pergio Vasti, a Matis military-chronicler

2.1.3 The Company of Loria

Part One

For many a year our people prospered in the ancient lands of Trykoth in the force of the peace that our alliance with the Fyros procured.

The original deal was we’d supply Fyros cities in the north with water for their expansion, and they’d provide us with protection against our Matis neighbors who’d been blatantly casting their greedy eyes over our lands. Incidentally, this was about the time that the Matis had dammed the great Munshia river that takes its source in their territory and rolls on to the Fyros wastelands. So as it happened, not only would we be running a route through a sliver of their land but also nudging them out of the water business, hah... Still, I say it served

them right for overtaxing their water in the first place. Just like the Matis to spite their own noses, no sense of commerce...

More than ten thousand free homins, Trykers and Fyros alike slogged away four and a half years solid carving a twenty foot wide aqueduct through 500 miles of flat bark along the Matis coastline. Thirty great mills along the way churned the water along feeding it in an endless flow from the Trykoth lakes to the Fyros desert dunes in the north. Settlements sprang up along the way many o' which grew into protection outposts or trade towns, it was the beginning of a whole new way of life.

The North-South water route paved the way for new trade, anything from silverweed sap and moon linen to auberwood resin and prakker grease. Those were the glory days as old pa used to say, bless his soul... Oh, no doubt it weren't all glad-rags 'n' lily-paddlin' everyday, I grant you. There were some troubles, in the shape of the Matis mostly, as green as a sap-pickled toad, they were, and biting their fingers for being so greedy! But all in all folk lived a merry enough life; plenty of food 'n' drink, dancing and dallying and not to mention bags of work all year round, what with upkeep, repairing and peddling...

Yep, everything was swell as a clam in a shell when the Fyros - never happy with their lot - as per usual went poking their noses where they shouldn't and inadvertently set off a huge fire stretching from Coriolis to Destranon.

Well, to cut a long story short, the new Matis king, Aniro III, took advantage of the Fyros being all caught up in fire and swept through the city of Karavia at midway on the water route killing everything that so much as raised an eyebrow! Everyone dead, gone, all in one night. Horrendous, it was, unthinkabubble... I get a lump just thinking about it...

T'was indeed sad times that befell our fathers. Well, after ploughing his way through water route villages and outposts, razing everything in his path, the dark Duke, Gioni di Tylini sent an ultimatum at our mountain gates for us to lay down our arms or have our wives and children cut to the marrow. Well, true to our life-loving spirit and always quick to adapt to a tricky situation, the Tryker tribal chiefs thought it best to stay with the livin' so as to fight another day!

That notwithstanding, though, many a Tryker took their chances in the hills that backed onto the great impassable wall of the Zorai. But once the Matis closed in on them they were like sitting game for the picking and the Matis made examples out of most of them.

We were herded off like yelks in our thousands, driven to the Matis territories where we were divided up and dispatched over the lands. We were set to hard labor making arms and general skivvying for over fifty days and fifty nights till the answer to our prayers came, not from the sky but from underground : Loria and her company of intrepid Trykers were to change our way of thinking, and bring out our true colors in a way that we would never have dreamed...

Part Two

Loria was the daughter of a beachcomber, a slight built but hearty maid who knew the underground caverns better than any who ever lived. Legend has it that before beginning the forced march under armed escort out of the lagoon

region of Trykoth, one night she slipped out of the stockade, unshackled a burly bunch of beachcombers and led them clean past the Matis watchmen into the hills south. But no sooner had the sun began to rise and dissipate the summer mist than the Matis chief got wind of the escape and sent out a search party twenty strong on mektoub-back, spurred on by the incentive of reward if they brought back every head before nightfall.

Despite the Trykers wading up and across streams whenever possible to avoid leaving tracks and dropping their scent, the Matis were soon on their tails. By late morning, whenever the breeze lifted and shifted inland the unmistakable sounds of steady mektoub canter and Matis tongues came into earshot, meaning the pursuers were but an hour's ride behind! Still Loria pushed her company on keeping true to her initial course south by southeast, though not without having to give the company some reassurance. "Mountain to the left, Zorai wall ahead, Matis behind, to my mind we'd stand more chance heading west!" said Bodley Shaines, a stout fella who Loria knew from childhood.

- "No, our only sanctuary lies where the Matis dare not tread," she replied, "where you see the great root springing forth yonder from the belly of Atys. From there we follow the galleries east under the great mountain into Matis land, to free our brethren!"

- "We'd be more help to our brethren if we saved our own skins first, I say!"

- "No, Bodley," said Bremen Layley, "Loria's right, the west of Trykoth is riddled with Matis gingo handlers hunting down runners." As if to second Bremen's reasoning there came a sickening howling echo from a hunt somewhere afar in the west.

- "Well I'm stickin' with Loria," said Ticker O'Flaney.

- "So am I," seconded Binney Torly.

- "Trust me, Bodley, another hour's march and we're safe!" Loria insisted.

- "Oh, well, I s'pose I ain't leaving you now. Besides, someone's gotta look after you, little princess!"

- "Good, now let's save our breath for striding!" Without further ado Loria dug in her heels, lengthened her stride and fixed her sights on the high plateau yonder followed by Ticker O'Flaney, Bremen Layley, Binny Torly, Jeffy Payne and last but not least Bodley Shaines keeping up the rear. On they trekked, threading through the dense bushes and shrubs of the lowland forest, over grassy ridges and down slopes in the early summer sunshine that warmed the magnificent irin flowers deliciously enhancing their fragrance. T'wasn't always an easy thing to concentrate on escape and murder and such like in a land blessed with such natural harmony. At one point, Ticker O'Flaney couldn't help a whistle but was then rebuked by Loria when he broke out into song, you can't blame the fella, such is the Tryker love of free living, is it not?! Another time Bodley Shaines got a good scolding for picking scrath berries and general dawdling.

At last they found themselves at the top of the plateau in the middle of which was a deep cleft where the great stalk reached down into the forbidden bowels of Atys. All six Tryker homins stood in wonder at the great root that weaved its way up to the canopy, then they turned in unison to take in the view of the blue lagoons shimmering in the distance like silken spreads 'neath the

midday sky.

- "Look yonder to the sea," observed Bremen Layley, "looks like our salt vessels are on course for Karavia."

- "Maybe our folk are fleeing to Fyros lands..." added Binney.

- "To join them to wage war against the invaders!"

- "Three cheers for freedom!" rejoiced Ticker, but Loria held up a hand.

- "Look again," she said solemnly, "the royal flags you see are of no tribe of Trykoth!"

- "Matis!"

- "See the water route, see the droves down there being driven away to slavery..." As Loria pointed out the dark masses representing the thousands of Tryker prisoners, her ears were suddenly alerted of the galloping of mektoubs coming up the trail not nine hundred yards on the other side of the plateau behind them. The Matis knights must have spotted them and had taken the bridle track round to take the Trykers by surprise.

- "Quick, to the cavern!" cried Loria.

- "The slope's too far, we'll never make it in time!"

- "To the edge of the cleft, there's a vine we can climb down!" shouted Loria. The Matis were but three hundred yards away as the Trykers grasped the vine, all swung over the ledge and began to slip down the fifty foot scarp, that is, all except one.

- "Come on, Bodley! What are you doing?!" called Loria from over the ledge.

- "Keeping the Matis from our backs, you follow the lads now, Loria, you'll be down by the time I've cut this through enough!"

- "But Bodley!!"

- "I trusted you, now it's your turn to trust me! Go on now, I'll be alright long as you get a move on." Bodley continued slicing the vine with his penknife as the Matis closed in.

Part Three

The first knights wielding their swords were but ten yards from Bodley when he turned and threw a pocketful of prickly scath galls in their road. The mektoubs reared on the prickles and threw their riders giving the bold Tryker an instant to see that the company had touched the ground and that Loria was already two thirds down the scarp, and then he too slipped over the ledge. A furious knight scrambled after him but on seeing the state of the vine turned to his chief.

- "The wretch has cut the vine, it won't hold us, sire,"

The Matis chief advanced to the ledge. "Get back on your mektoubs," he ordered and swiped clean through the remaining strands of vine. "They're heading for the cavern! To the path on the other side!" he bawled before making off in a lightening gallop. Bodley was halfway down when the lifeline was completely severed. But the artful little fella kicked from the scarp wall at the last second to fling himself on a leafy flowering irin branch, so breaking the fall, but which then delivered him to the ground with a thud smack in the middle of a generous pile of dung! He got to his feet, pretty disgusted but none the worse for wear amid some laughter and cheering now that the Matis had been foiled. For the

slope running down into the bed of the cleft was some three hundred yards on the far side, whereas the Trykers had just thirty yards separating them from the Prime Root entrance, and they all knew the Matis would never go against the Law and venture in after them. But Loria, the only one without a grin on her face, took the Tryker by his dung stained lapel, and gave his arm a sniff.

- "Torbak, and fresh..." she uttered with a dark glance to the cavern of their haven. At the same moment there came from within a horrible roaring yawn that numbed their senses.

The Matis were racing across the plateau to the far slope and Loria knew they would be within the arena outflanking them in less than a minute. Bodley sank to his knees as much through moral exhaustion as despair.

- "Get up, homin!!" cried she, "we're not done yet, get up, there's a greater battle awaits us. Now swallow your pride and do as I do, all of you!" She took a large Prime Root leaf, smeared it into the torbak dung and proceeded in rubbing it into her clothing. The others reluctantly did likewise as the Matis mektoubs came thundering down the slope. "Now, brace your hearts, remain calm and don't run, the scent you now wear will cover you." Loria then stepped forward as the Matis came charging over swords outstretched with the captain crying: "Only their heads!"

Unperturbed by Matis cries of slaughter, Loria continued her sure and steady progress towards the dangerous Prime Root haven with her company close behind all in one block. The Matis were but twenty yards from their heads as they came into the shade of the gaping cavern entrance when all at once, there was an appalling roar and a pack of five great torbaks pranced before them. Even one step from the jaws of death Loria did not falter in her stride, and led her company between the formidable creatures without them giving the Trykers so much as a sniff! The galloping mektoubs stopped dead throwing the first astonished riders into the path of the awesome predators who then lunged their saber-horns into the soft Matis bellies to secure each unexpected morsel before going on to the next in a frenetic binge of killing.

Only two Matis out of the whole party made it back to tell they had been trapped by a witch, claiming that not only had she the power to conjure evil creatures and set them on her enemy, but she dared breach the Law and descend into the forbidden caverns of the underworld!

The Company of Loria didn't hang around for the feast but continued on to meet their heroic destiny through the Prime Roots under the great mountain to the greater battle.

— as told by Derry O'Darren, Tryker chronicler

2.1.4 The Youth of Loria

Narrated by Ailan Mac'Kean, young girl of Loria.

As the courageous leader of the Guild of Try has explained to you, my name is Ailan Mac'Kean. One of my ancestors was the great Lady Loria. History is transmitted in my family from parents to their children, and in this way our

history has persisted through the centuries. I am happy to be able to tell it to you. Listen well, Homins... this is part of your history as well.

Loria was the only girl raised in a humble family of rafters. All day long, instead of doing the chores her aunt had given her at home, she played and watched her cousins pushing logs up the river. Despite the reprimands she received, she could always be found by the river. Loria was full of energy, joyful and free as the wind, chasing after yubos and crossing rapids better than any boy.

One fine summer day, as she jumped across some stones in the shallows around Barley Bay, she stumbled over an unstable stone and discovered a crevice in the ground about two feet wide, just big enough for an eleven-year-old girl to squeeze through. She ventured into the crevice and descended along a great root in the soil, arriving, much to her surprise, in a cavern full of ancient ruins.

With a pocket full of the white coral stones that she had collected along the lakeshore to mark her trail, she explored the enormous rooms all afternoon, using the bright glowing flowers she found there to light her way. The following morning, instead of going to school, she ran to the temple and entertained the elders with stories of caverns and strange glowing plants.

The old sages joked about her exuberant imagination, but the next day, she had a surprise for them. Offended by the elders' mockery, Loria brought back three beautiful plants to the temple. The elders could hardly believe their eyes and they asked Loria to show them this cave.

When they approached the crevice, the elders were appalled to learn that Loria had ventured into the forbidden Prime Roots. She had broken the Law of Jena, and if the adherents of Jena ever learned of her transgression, they would come down on her like a ton of bricks. Loria was confined to her house for twenty days and the entrance to the cave was sealed with muck and loam. Her imprisonment taught Loria a precious lesson: she would not go back to the crack, but she would say nothing if she ever discovered another one.

One day, there was a terrible accident at the lake. Her cousin Bodley had fallen and bashed his head; he had been found at the lakeshore half-dead. He desperately needed one of the precious seeds of life, but his family was too poor to buy them and too proud to accept charity. Loria knew that Tryker traders sometimes sold the flowers of their lake to the Matis and she knew they would pay handsomely for the rare glowing flowers.

With a knapsack full of coral stones, she went back to the crevice and descended once again into the Prime Roots to explore more of the galleries leading under the great mountain that separated the vast Matis forests from the Lake-lands. Soon the air changed, refreshing itself and taking on an entirely different smell.

Seeing a point of light at the end of a tunnel, she heard chattering in an unknown language. She cast a furtive glance and there, in a pool of clear water encircled by tall trees, she spied a group of young women bathing. At the side of a bush, she saw strange and beautiful clothes; she could not help but touch the cloth from which they were made. She picked up a huge shoe as it sparkled in the sunlight, and inside it, she found the most beautiful seed box she had

ever seen.

She opened the seed box, made from coral and mayleaves, to find the answer to her prayers: three precious seeds of life. The chattering became louder. With barely any time to think, she grabbed the seeds and left the glowing flowers she had picked along the way as payment before running at top speed back toward the entrance to the cavern. Hidden behind a bush, she watched the scene and the astonishment on the faces of these tall ladies, who she later recalled were Matis. She also realized that she had walked under the big mountain for only two hours before reaching the Matis territory, which normally took an entire week through the mountains.

When she returned home, she crushed the precious seeds and poured the powder into Bodley's tonic so that no one could guess what she had done, as she was afraid of being grounded for having violated the law enforced by the Karavan, disciples of Jena. The next morning, she returned to the cavern under the great mountain. Around the cool and clear pool, she saw the beautiful box open and filled to the brim with seeds. She waited to be sure that the way was clear and that it was not a trap. She began to throw the precious flowers near the box of seeds, but when no-one grabbed them, she rushed over to take the seeds and returned again to great mountain and home again to tend to her injured cousin.

There were enough seeds for five days of treatment and he began to recover, but then there was a heatwave and Bodley became feverish. Loria returned to the cool road of the Prime Roots, picked some flowers and went back to the place where the Matis girls bathed.

No-one.

She left a single flower in the usual place, hoping that the girls would come back the following day so that she could get more seeds.

The next morning, she set off again, her heart heavy with anxiety but full of hope. Arriving at the place of the bath, she saw to her great relief the box full of the precious seeds. She hurriedly repeated her careful actions of the previous day and then took the box. As she turned, she thought she would faint. The way was blocked by an old Matis sage accompanied by two girls! Even worse, two men were slipping behind her with a net. From what she could understand, the old man said to her that she could not return through the Prime Roots, because he used words "Jena" and "Karavan", which are the same in all homin languages, and he had the same expression of reprimand as the elders of her village.

But Loria was not in the mood to listen to a lecture. As a diversion, she threw the flowers at the girls, pocketed the box of seeds, dived across the legs of the old man and rushed as quickly as she could into the bushes and back towards the cave. Once again at home, she gave the precious seeds to her suffering cousin who recovered fully.

She continued to turn logs for many years, and ever since then, the family always succeeded in making ends meet somehow. As for the box of seeds, Loria hid it away from everyone because she knew that someday, the seeds would prove useful. But this... this is a story for another day...

2.1.5 The Assassination of Loria

As expected, the target has left the royal palace in the middle of the night, quickly leaving the city of Matia to head south. As agreed, we made a cautious advance; we were warned repeatedly to not underestimate her abilities.

It has been a year since Loria started to taunt the forces of the Duke di Tylini organizing numerous attacks and releasing more and more slaves, who then swelled her ranks. Today, this dark farce would stop, and I was finally able to establish an enduring position for myself amongst the Matis.

As Loria broke through into the forest, my Matis companion silently signaled to me: we had to wait an hour before moving to the ambush site by another route, so that we could be waiting for them. Having monitored them for some weeks, we knew her path perfectly, and even her shortcut into the Prime Roots was now well known. More than that, traps had been set in the hiding place that she had made in case of any problems.

Under the visor of his parok helm, Rocho whispered softly into a Karavan communicator to prevent the others from leaving the target. Although I had my doubts about the identity of our sponsors on the Tryker side, those on the Matis side must be extremely powerful to have two of these very holy relics.

The hour had passed and our mektoub now raced through the forest, toward the shafts that lead down into the Prime Roots. This entry was not as convenient as those with a vortex, and despite their prehensile feet we left our mounts on the surface, descending along a vine recently moved by the weight of a petite homin. She had definitely been past here; the net was tightening around her.

When we finally caught up with her, the others had already surrounded her in a narrow passage that she generally used to avoid being detected by predators. Although she appeared ready for combat, the confusion on her face was plain to see when she realized that there were Trykers amongst her assailants. Our chief, Pebre Frelde, simply announced to her that it was time to pay for opposing the great ones of this world, the craftsmen of Jena's design, and that her soul would rot forever for her many sins.

When we attacked, we could truly see what heroes are made of. She was an exceptional fighter, but refused to land fatal blows on the Trykers among us. That earned her a helping pike in the side, but by some miracle she managed to escape the ambush. After all, it was her excellence at escaping that had led us to this in the first place. Leaping astride a nearby mektoub that didn't even have a saddle, she quickly outdistanced us.

As might be expected, she fled to her hiding place; with her injury she could not leave the Prime Roots as the smell of blood would attract all kinds of predators from miles around. Pebre ordered everyone to put filters in our helmets, and to start heading to Loria's refuge.

When we arrived, she was crawling out towards the exit, trying to escape the cloud of gas our trap had released. Even the great Loria could not survive the deathly vapors of the largest Prime Roots yolks after all. We all looked on as she painfully crawled, unable to even leave the harmful green tendrils; finally, Pebre declared her practically dead.

While everyone else had turned away and left her to her fate, I took a last look at the one who had caused us so much trouble. Lifting her head, she appeared to be transfixed by a ray of light that had broken through the darkness of the Prime Roots. Finally, she looked at me, and asked with her last breath: "... Why ...? "

— Excerpts from the journal of Dissan Mac'rinin, entered (2436) II, Harvestor 28.

2.1.6 The Liberation of the Trykers

Narrated by Derry O' Darren, Tryker chronicler

Using the calamity in the north to break the Fyros-Tryker alliance, the Matis king, Aniro III, led a searing campaign into the Lakelands. Although the surviving Trykers were reduced to servitude at the hands of his forces, one organized company of rebels, led by Loria, managed to escape and took refuge in the depths of Atys.

Traveling through the Prime Roots, these Tryker heroes succeeded in breaking the chains of their brethren and smuggled them through the roots of Atys, braving dangers of the worst kind.

At the same time, Abylus the Erudite, then old, feared the collapse of the Fyros empire without water from the aqueduct that crossed Matis territory from the Lakelands and into the Desert. He launched a massive attack on the Matis front, hoping to restore the aqueduct. The Matis force, deep in the throes of war with the Fyros, could not quell the uprising led by the Company of Loria which brought back the Trykers to the Lakelands.

Loria then divided her people into battle groups, each led by a member of her Company. Their purpose was to lead repeated attacks on the southern front. This tactic caused much damage and helped the weakened Fyros force that fought the Matis in the north and west.

Aniro III, confronted with Fyros-Tryker pressure, made the decision to withdraw from the Lakelands rather than lose them completely. The road of water was opened once more and the now more war-like Trykers concentrated on building their defences against future attacks.

Only two generations later, the Matis people once again turned their gaze to the west and the south, hoping to take advantage of the Kitin plague that decimated the Fyros population, but never again would the Trykers face the Matis armies in the Lakelands. The Kitin left the Fyros region in the north and advanced into the forests of the Matis, devouring their troops and attacking them from behind. It was not long before the Kitin advanced into the Tryker homeland and eliminated all traces of the homins there.

3 Chronicles of the Great Swarming - From 2481 to 2484 (JY)

3.1 Massacre and flight

3.1.1 A Kitin Story

Part One

Deep down in the darkness of the roots, extending below the bark of Aty's, many workers were busy mining. They brought valuable amber, tons of it, to the surface and their profession was valued and respected by everyone. Deep down below the desert of the Coriolis Empire, many men worked hard, day and night, to multiply the fame and fill the treasury of the reigning house.

It was a day like any other in the routine of the mines. The men were sweating in the damp air of the deep, and in the light of their torches they lifted amber pieces as big as their heads from the dark wood of the branches. Today they hoped to close a mined-out section of the tunnels, so that the animals and plants down there could recover. In this section of the roots were no aggressive animals, so there were none of the usual guards present. All precautions were taken, and the Matis-trained botanists already had their tools and strange liquids ready to inject into the plants. They wanted to let a few strong rootlets and a bed of moss grow over the entrance to serve as a cover for the tunnel until nature itself had reclaimed the area. Even today nature would claim its right, but in a totally different manner than that which they had anticipated.

Overseer Benodir Nussami looked down on the working homins. With great skill they threw ropes around a strong branch in the ceiling of the cavern, so that they were able to use these as winches. "Careful that the ropes don't slip. If the branch snaps back, it can mean the death of us all!" he yelled down to his subordinates. They briefly turned and nodded back at him. He knew very well that he was getting on their nerves with his constant warnings. The workers had done this a thousand times already and never had anything really bad happen. Still, he thought to himself, it was always better to keep one's eyes open and not succumb to the carelessness of routine. One small moment of inattention could destroy the whole cavern and with it everyone standing in it. As soon as the branch had been connected to the moss and the floor of the cavern, they would no longer need to be careful, but until then, he made his people check everything twice.

Rabur shook his head in anger and flexed his muscles as he pulled with all his strength on the rope which he and his brother Medrik had just thrown over the branch. This Nussami was an overly careful idiot who loved to boss around his workers. He should try installing one of those winches himself. Then he would see what kind of work this really was and that one had to know exactly what he was doing, or the branch would not be your only concern. The Fyros now refocused on his work. While his skilled brother was busy attaching the main rope to the winch, he struggled to hold the tension of the rope that had removed a single branch from the ceiling. Slowly, he pulled it down as far as

he could, allowing Medrik to throw the thicker main rope over it. Later, the whole mesh of branches could be pulled down in turn, allowing the botanists to do their work. When they started to inject their strange brew into the roots, these would start to grow wildly. It was a matter of timing, to pull the branches down and connect them to the rampantly growing moss, allowing the gap to close completely. Medrik nodded at him, Rabur pulled one more time, as hard as he could, and his brother threw the roll of thick rope over the branch. There it stuck in place, its end rolling towards the ground. "Let go", Medrik said, and Rabur let the thinner rope glide through his gloves. With a sudden jerk, the thick branch snapped back into the mesh of entwined roots. Now, all the two Fyros had to do was climb up the rope and to attach it, as best as they could, to as many root branches as possible. The brothers grinned at each other; they enjoyed this part of their work.

Those crazy brothers were again holding their climbing contest! Mydix Bedax ran to his colleagues and joined the cheering, which served to drive these two up the ropes even faster.

"10 dappers on Rabur! - 15 on Medrik!" sounded through the torch-lit cavern, and Benodir let his workers enjoy the fun of their bets on these two crazy guys. They tried to gain an advantage over each other when the lower one pulled on the pants of the higher one or by shaking the other's rope, much to the laughter of their colleagues. The fall was not a deep one and both of them had had many of them, so he was not too concerned about the health of his men. Even he had found pleasure in these contests of the brothers, who left no opportunity out to find out who of them was the better and faster climber. It didn't matter to him who won since this all meant that the job would be done much faster. Smiling on the inside, but stony-faced, he watched the spectacle on the brim of a slope. Mydix looked up and cheered on his favourite, Medrik. He liked both brothers, but Medrik wasn't as quiet as his brother and he preferred him. Both brothers were level and there was no telling who would reach the ceiling first, which was still a good 15 meters above them.

Something touched his cheek and he brushed it away. Soon after, something fell down into his eye from above and he ducked instinctively and was cursing. It hurt! Rubbing his watering eye, he looked to the ground until a frightening thought hit him. Ignoring his pain and fighting back the tears, he looked into the twilight of the cavern ceiling. Still there were small particles touching his face. He brushed one of them off his cheek and had a closer look. Dry wood; covered with traced of a grey fluff. Mould! Again, he looked up and through the haze of his watering eye he saw something that made him freeze. He rammed his elbow into his neighbour's side, and when he turned to him in anger, he only shouted: "there!!!" A shimmer of light was showing in the ceiling, small at first, but growing quickly. The wood creaked and cracked and began to break. His straining eyes could just see that it was covered with mould as it slowly broke up under the weight of the two sturdy Fyros, dangling from their tightly-woven ropes.

Part Two

Benodir's eyes followed the worker's extended arm and at that moment he

became fully aware of the danger. "The ceiling is collapsing!!! The ceiling is collapsing!!!" he screamed at the top of his voice.

The group scattered. Everyone ran for their life and the brothers, who were joyfully climbing up the ropes just moments ago, descended as quickly as they could towards the ground to join the others in trying to avoid the pieces of wood falling from the ceiling.

The spores had affected the base of the root node that the workers were going to use, and now it was breaking from the ceiling with deafening noise. It rained branches and pieces of roots as the heavy base crashed to the ground, leaving a large hole. The ground was shaking as if hit by a giant's fist, dust, spores of fungi and moss were whirling around in the dim light and there was a huge crater in the ground, where the power of the impact had penetrated a relatively thin layer of the groundwork.

Within seconds it was all over and Benodir got up from where he had thrown himself down onto the ground, dusting off his clothes.

A remarkable chasm had appeared in the cavern's floor. The edges showed clearly that it could easily support the weight of a Homin, but had no chance of resisting the weight of the falling wood. He looked around and saw that none of his workers were injured and were already, like himself, carefully getting on their feet again. His workers gathered around him and they glanced curiously down into the lightly glowing darkness below them.

Just like everywhere else in the roots; there was not complete darkness down there. Glowing moss and fern had claimed the ground and were spreading greenish twilight. But there was something else shimmering down below.

Embedded deeply into the intertwined roots lay a huge shield. A polished plate, decorated with strange signs, such as none of the workers had ever seen before. Next to it, lay the wood node that had fallen through and left a small pit.

"What kind of thing is this?" Rabur asked finally.

"The shield of a giant. Anyone can see that." his brother replied. There were a few quiet giggles from the relieved workers. Relieved, that none of them were hurt. Benodir looked at each in turn, the hearts of his workers were clearly burning, like his own, with curiosity.

Quickly he decided to get to the root of this mystery.

"The two climbing artists of you. Get yourselves a rope and get down there first. I will follow later with anyone who also wants to join. Let's see what that is down there."

Rabur and Medrig looked at each other, grinning. "And no silly bets this time. You have caused enough trouble already." the overseer added quickly.

The cavern was not very big, maybe 20 meters in diameter, its ground covered with a thick layer of moss that silenced each step. The air was filled with a stench of damp and something else indefinable.

Mydix let go of the rope and caught his colleague Barnus, who had climbed down with him. Ahead of them, the overseer and the brothers were already circling the strange object. It really did look like the huge shield of a warrior. He advanced towards it and sat down. Its edge connected with the surrounding

wood almost seamlessly, but as he touched it, he discovered that this was no wood. The material was cold and even. There was no moss on it and the roots were covering it, but didn't seem to be able to attach to its surface. Only in the engraved deepening of the strange symbols there was a little water, where a few delicate young shoots could be found. The dark surface was flawless, but its shimmer in the dim light told him that it would surely shine silvery in sunlight. Strange. What could this be? And what was it doing here? Who had left it here?

While Mydix was following these thoughts, Rabur had reached the fallen root base and was inspecting it. A disgusting stench awaited him. That must be the dratted spore, he thought. He walked around the big node of roots and almost fell into another hole when his foot slipped on the wet moss.

"Over here! There's another hole!"

The Fyros gathered around the opening, which was around three meters in diameter and had jagged edges, trying to look down. A shadowy movement made them jump briefly, but then only a small glowing bubble came up from the darkness and slowly made its way towards the ceiling. Soon after, there was another bubble and the Fyros looked at it curiously.

"There's got to be sap down there, judging from these bubbles." Benodir exclaimed and sunk onto his knees. "Hand me a torch." Barnus passed one over and Benodir lay on his stomach to shine it down the hole.

A movement so fast, that none of the men could really follow it with their eyes. Something greenish flashed briefly from the hole and the foreman was pulled down into the dark depth.

His cry stopped with a dreadful gurgle and the remaining Fyros stared in horror at the opening at their feet. Before anyone could move again, they could hear that something heavy was being dragged over the ground.

Rabur was the first to react.

"A young Vorax!!" he yelled. He held his torch in front of him and jumped into the hole with a wild scream on his lips. His brother and Mydix followed him closely. Meanwhile Barnus called for the others to bring weapons.

Part Three

The tunnel was just big enough so that the Homins could walk upright, and wide enough for three of them to walk next to each other.

Its walls were smooth and polished, and nothing grew inside it. As they travelled quickly through it the realised that one end was exactly underneath the strange shield on the ground.

They could still hear their foreman being dragged along the ground, but they also knew that even a young Vorax would be a serious opponent for them. They only carried torches and their small daggers, and these beasts were rarely afraid of fire.

They followed the noise deeper into the darkness, passed forks and crossings in the tunnel system, until it suddenly stopped. As they passed through the passages, they could hear faint groans, and finally a bloodcurdling scream that suddenly stopped with a tearing sound.

Rd-oo-fy-th-2004-1-19.jpg

As one, the Fyros stormed ahead and into a small cavern. As quickly as that they came to a halt, since what they now saw went far beyond their wildest imagination.

Something similar to a huge spider was chewing on the foreman's flesh and was drinking his blood, making disgusting sounds as it fed. Its body was green with white speckles, and stained with fresh blood. It had six legs and a slim body and on its back, which was drawn underneath its torso, it had a vicious looking sting. A second being, exactly like the first one, joined the scene and also started chewing on Benodir's dead body, tearing large chunks of flesh from his thigh. Then, the second creature noticed the men and briefly reared up to its full size. It was almost as tall as a man. A threatening hiss left its mandibles and blood sprayed towards the men.

This was too much for the proud Fyros. They stormed through the cavern and a wild battle began. Medrig took a painful sting to his leg, which went numb right away and made him fall over. Only with much trouble did the men manage to defeat the creatures and Rabur helped his brother up immediately, supporting the weight on his strong shoulders. None of the Fyros spoke a word. Mydix lifted the foreman's corpse onto his shoulders and they began to head back the way they came. When they had made it half way back, passing one of the many crossings, they heard the clatter of fast legs. Many legs. . . . There were more of these beasts!

They ran towards the exit, where Barnus and the others awaited them. They were carrying swords and shields, weapons they were able to find in all haste. The fleeing men climbed out of the hole as fast as they could when the first claws hit their legs. One of them cast a small fireball into the depths below, giving them a little room to breathe. But no one was prepared for what happened next.

A flood of giant insects appeared from the hole and the men fought desperately over the rope to climb up to safety. Rabur tied the rope around his injured brother's hip, while around them the battle waged. Men cried; creatures screamed and hissed. A second rope was thrown down, then another one. As Medrig was hastily pulled up, he could only look down at his brother trying to ward off tens of the evil creatures simultaneously.

Then his eyes fell onto something unbelievable.

The heavy wood node that had created this mess for them slipped and swayed. It started swinging wildly, and finally flipped over leaving another hole in the ground. From this hole came a horror that no one had ever seen before.

A brown insect, gigantic in proportion, as tall as three men, climbed out of the hole into the narrow cave and started to lash out with its enormous claws. It threw down the men like blades of grass on a field. Lightning bolts surrounded its gruesome presence, numbing everyone who was hit. Then it continued the bloody massacre of the brave Fyros.

"Raaabuuur!!!",

Medrig yelled down into the hole as he was dragged up from its edge. He watched in horror as all the other ropes came up empty.

Some time after that, a team of experienced warriors started from Coriolis

to clean the mine with rocket launchers and rifles. They would surely get rid of the strange insects, the hysterical men were talking about. The warriors all agreed on that. A decent battle would be good for morale.

As they left the city towards the mine, they saw a cloud of dust on the horizon. A sandstorm! That would make things a little more difficult. There was to be no turning around now though, and the company rode cheerfully on.

After a few minutes however, they became aware of a strange trembling beneath the ground. The desert was quivering as if Atys shook itself in disgust, and when the squad of 50 men and women reached the peak of a high dune, they suddenly became aware that they had never been so wrong in their lives.

The Great Swarm had begun.

— A Kitin Story, or how it began in 2481(JY)

3.1.2 Monsoon Sunset

Part One

The Treaty of Karavia brought a truce in the feuding between peoples and trade routes soon paved the way for a new age of prosperity and understanding. For two generations our Empire shone in all its splendor brandishing the torch of discovery on the road to knowledge. Indeed, you know, even Zorai scholars came to find enlightenment in the great halls of learning of our capital city of Fyre.

Fyros settlements thrived along the Matis frontier where war once raged. The remotest though none the least important of these trading outposts was Colomo, which took its name from the aqueduct that tapped into the river Munshia at that point. Colomo was such an animated place what with trade fairs and convoys, traveling merchants and crafters with their tales of close shaves with wild beasts and such like.

But as they say, the more we are dazzled by the mirage of good living, the less are we given to focus on gathering evils. And indeed, the years of political discord over the running of the neutral zones situated between Matis and Fyros lands began to take its toll, for the border trails were becoming more and more dangerous with ruthless tribes holding up travelers for their wears and not always sparing their lives. No longer were merchants free to venture out as they pleased, the only sure way to travel was to stick to the timetable of the imperial convoys whose job it was to conduct groups of travelers.

So it was with some surprise that one fall evening the mayor of Colomo was alerted of the arrival of a lone Matis on a mektoub packer asking for board and food and permission to speak with the villagers. The mayor at first wondered how a lone traveler could have made it through tribe infested regions unscathed, that is, until he set his eyes upon him.

The Matis introduced himself as Angeli di Fabrini, and was clothed in the simple, homespun garments of his office, that's to say, those of a novice preacher. He'd been sent on an initiation mission to prove his commitment to the church of Jena. The mayor immediately understood why he hadn't been robbed, he quite simply had nothing to rob! Nothing to attract the scouring eye of a tribal scout,

not even a single dapper piece to pay for his keep! The mayor then left him in the charge of Abecus, the joyous village mage, for the apprentice preacher to be entertained for the night before being conducted safely back to the nearest Matis outpost. In this way the mayor was reassured that the lad wouldn't go stirring up the population with his words of Jena. The last preacher that passed had only left dispute in his wake.

- "Good, sir, I am most honored and would gladly accept your hospitality, but my mission is to speak with your people," said Angeli.

- "Come, lad, we'll talk shop together first," said Abecus and led him away to his residence, a fine building of hues of yellows and blues contrasting beautifully with the ochre of the desert...

- "Julea, tell your mother to prepare the spare room, we've a visitor," called Abecus to his daughter on entering the cool vestibule. Julea, a headstrong girl of fifteen, stood riveted for an instant on the cool stairway leading down to the living quarters, it was the first time she'd ever seen a Matis in the living flesh. He stood tall and proud, his hands were slender, with long fingers and trimmed nails... He had an aquiline nose, fine fair hair swept back from his forehead with a boyish curl that kept dropping rebelliously over his left eye. Angeli di Fabrini spoke our language fluently with the singing accent of his people which flutters in the way the Kineli butterfly of the woodlands. He bowed rather pompously to her in salutation, she gave an amused smile then turned and continued down the stairs to give her mother the message.

Inside the main room, decorated with beautiful tapestries representing stories of bygone times, the temperature remained constant and dry despite the mugginess outside. The savory smell of mektoub trunk soup and spicy cactus wafted in from the kitchen. Abecus presently placed his young guest at table with his wife and two daughters. Silva, the youngest, a girl of twelve, and Julea. As soon as everyone was served the Matis cleared his voice which rose up in prayer :

- "Praised be Jena, for this food you give
In every crumb do you help us live
Bless our souls as we work, rest and play
Till we earn our place on judgment day"
To this Abecus returned:

- "Thank yee wife for these morsels here
Goes to show you love us dear
Bless your love that bears this table
And touches our hearts like there's no one able!"

Part Two

The mage's wife gave a blushing wave and gestured everyone to stop standing on parade. The young Matis missionary ate heartily and without so much as a slurp on his soup and took up his heart of cactus at the tips of his fingers, breaking off little delicate morsels before filling his mouth, which made Silva laugh. She was rebuked directly.

- "Oh, I am not offended, but tell me, what gave her cause for laughter?" said Angeli.

- "The way you have your fingers do the work of your teeth!" said Julea. "Here we pop the whole pulp into the mouth, so we don't get our fingers messy, see?!"

- "My way is the observance of Jena. As I observe the different parts of the cactus to better judge how it has grown, so Jena seeks into our heart and soul to examine our overall worthiness."

- "Well, here we are accustomed to tasting the cactus heart as a whole, tasting odd bits will only distort the overall picture. In the same way, a homin has many humors, to take only the one will make him your sweetest friend or your bitterest enemy!" returned Abecus all in good humor.

- "Yet fully appreciating Jena's creation enables us to make pertinent offerings to her Karavan disciples."

- "Hah, Jena, Jena, a figment of the imagination!" laughed Abecus.

- "But, noble mage," returned Angeli in all seriousness, "then from whence do you derive your magic?"

- "Not from the spirit of Jena, I can assure you! No, it is born of the knowledge of objects, thinking about them, learning how to look at them so that a science can be physically built up around them. I am sure that not one of your lot has ever seen Jena! Let a lone found out where she comes from!"

- "Jena is in the breeze that caresses, the gusts that derange, the emotion that moves the heart. Thus we may feel though we cannot see. Only such sensations can allow us to suspect there is life after death on Atys," returned Angeli.

- "You answer well, Angeli, but with respect, Jena has no place in this house! And when the Matis come down from their cloud to...."

But the words of Abecus were suddenly drowned out by a great howling.

- "Gingos in these parts?" questioned Angeli.

- "No, that's the wind of the desert monsoon, when it howls like that through the storm-sounder it means we're in for a burst of rough weather, it means too you'll have to hold up here till it passes. It will do you no harm to learn our ways. Now, I must go warn folk to keep their mektoubs inside tonight, before Jena, disguised as the wind, comes to ravish them away!! But stay, young friend, I shan't be long, Julea will give you conversation. She is to step into my shoes, it will give her a chance to air her learning."

So under the watchful eye of the matron of the house, Abecus left the young novices. And they talked till late each testing the other's grounds of reasoning, prying into one another's cultures.

- "Is it true that the Matis keep their lower castes from learning to read and write to more easily bend their minds to your laws?" popped Julea.

- "It is the Law of Jena, but the answer is yes, one must first acquire the necessary training to affront the doubts of this world. Needless knowledge is a danger to the simple homin only leading to torment and misery and finally to perdition amidst the jaws of the dragon," replied Angeli.

- "So you predicate blissful ignorance!" mocked Julea gently.

- "Well, I suppose, if you put that way..."

- "And what of equality, I suppose Jena's Law doesn't account for it..."

- "Yes, it does, but it is up to every homin to learn it! A place near Jena must be strived for, deserved, else it would be enough to wander through life as a common carpet seller!"

"At least you don't dodge my questions like others of your race, Angeli, and though I cannot adhere to your ways, the honesty of your faith seeps to my heart," vowed Julea.

- "And I, Julea, though I share it not, bow to your sharp wisdom," was Angeli's reply.

Such was the tone of their conversations and despite the divergence of opinion each brought the other new matter to further their learning. For three days the burst of the autumn monsoon drenched the desert delta where life was soon returning in all its glory. But the weather all too soon abated and the Matis was shortly to be making tracks with the imperial convoy.

On the eve of Angeli's departure, having exhausted their capital of learning, the young homins sat silently on the dune overlooking the now flourishing desert delta. The beautiful monsoon sunset huddled around them in silence, a silence clad in the hue of friendship, a mutual friendship whose thoughts needed no robe of words...

Part Three

At that moment in time, I promise you, Julea would have followed wherever which way in the footsteps of Angeli di Fabrini, be it to Jena or to the Dragon, what suddenly counted was sharing the journey... Then, beyond all her hopes the young Matis turned to her, his beautiful eyes were glistening...

- "Julea," he said, softly breaking the purple silence. "I believe my feeling for Jena is not that of love, for that feeling you have taught me, and I would exchange my religion for its supreme power..."

- "Hush," said Julea raising a hand and smiling gravely, she touched the tear that now spilled from his eye and then the brow where she smoothed back his curl. Their arms enlaced, their lips touched, the warmth of the day exuded from their bodies, keeping the chilly monsoon wind at bay.

- "I must speak to your father," said Angeli at last.

- "Wait, Angeli, this is too grave of consequences to be taken lightly, let the night weigh upon our hearts and bring counsel, and then we shall see, my love."

Julea's sleep was fraught with dreams of repudiation and disownment by both her and Angeli's people, and of Jena condemning them to a nightmare journey to the underworld of the Dragon. Even so, she rose to the new day ever more determined as to the path she was set to follow. But with the morning came another nightmare, a living nightmare that would change the face of the world.

The great village bell was sounded giving the alert of some imminent bane. Messenger yber birds had been sent across the dunes with news of a terrible march of monsters creating havoc in the west. The emperor was calling for all able homins to join the imperial armies to fend off the dreadful legions of kitins, while children and homins unfit for battle were evacuated towards the north to rejoin the city of Piros in case rebel tribes launched an assault in the absence of warrior protection. Angeli was told he'd better leave for his homeland, there

would be little chance of the rebel tribes impeding his journey now, they would have received the news and their eyes would be elsewhere.

Amid the commotion the two novices could only find a moment of seclusion where they embraced and exchanged lockets inside which each placed a lock of hair. Angeli swore he would be back just as soon as the menace was over. But alas, if Julea knew then what she knows now, she would never have let him take that cursed road back, where the kitins would march but hours later razing every trace of hominkind in their path...

Julea? She survived, yes, to another monsoon sunset, to another destiny... Yes, young homin, you guess right, t'is indeed a lock of fair hair I have inside my locket.

— A forbidden love, 2481(JY); as told by an old Fyros Lady Mage.

3.1.3 My Karavan Guardian

Love the Karavan Guardians as you love your brethren, young homin, and you too shall be thankful to their generosity. Indeed, if I live today in this old sack of bones it is thanks to a mighty Karavan Guardian who took myself and my loved ones under his wing, broken though it was. I was but a young girl and my father with the other men was away on campaign to recover our lands to the west when an army of kitins swarmed in from the north bent on the destruction of hominkind.

My grandmother, mother, my elder sisters, our maids and myself evacuated our majestic city merely hours before it fell taking with us but a single mektoub packer and provisions for a week. We trekked to the east for days until we came to the great falls of Ria where my grandmother knew we could find refuge in the caverns there. We were foraging for the season's mushrooms amid the fallen leaves when all of a sudden the birds and the animals made an awful din, then, all went silent as before a storm...

There came to my ears and then to my eyes the appalling thumping of a thousand feet marching down in the valley below. An awful tide of giant insects was rolling up fast scything and flattening the beautiful flora and crushing the slower animals under foot. My grandmother called us together and we waded into the cold river for some distance before crossing further upstream to avoid leaving our scent, then we climbed behind the pummeling waterfall.

From our vantage point we could spy, between the gushing rivulets, the kitins romping through our camp ravaging our make-shift habitat and spoiling our hard earned provisions. But to our relief the terrifying legions continued their march on over the hills towards the south. We remained behind the chilly but protective curtain of water the whole night through clustered together to keep warm. The following morning the kitins were gone and we returned to our make-shift camp to find the surrounding area devastated where the mass of destruction had trooped. There wasn't a sound to be heard, not a single bird, the frightened animals having all moved on.

But of noble heart and strong fiber, we dallied not on our sorrows, we were still alive and we mucked in to recover some order though exhausted we were.

But then, horror struck thrice... Three enormous kitin scouts suddenly appeared from three points to surround us as we backed towards a near cavern. I was petrified, one of the evil creatures came and snapped at me, but my grandmother dragged me back behind her telling me to run to my mother... From the cavern my mother told us to kneel and pray for the soul of our grandmother and for our savior when another sound, more familiar, met our ears and we looked up at the godsend.

A Karavan vessel lurched into view and shielded us against the kitins that were crawling upon us as we knelt. The craft sent a massive lightening charge through the kitins as they tried to butt it out of their way. A Karavan Guardian, wounded in the arm, jumped out of the vessel and fired into the eyes of the stunned creatures who were still fumbling to reach us. The Guardian gave us some fresh seed to revive our spirits and signaled to us to follow him into the vessel before the main kitin force was upon our heels. But the vessel was wounded too and would not take to the air... Though I still conserve the memory of the magic inside, the cold flashing lights and the warm vroom of the vessel's waning heart.

We continued on foot in the cold driving rain. For two days he led us on to the east, hunted game for us, protected us from the wild bests, and healed our wounds calmly, silently in his tranquil force. Every morning we prayed to Jena to help us through the day. Then after a week of traveling we came to a vast plain and in the distance our eyes caught a glimmering sheen of a bow of many colors.

My Guardian lowered me from his shoulders to the ground and spoke for the first time in a deep but tender voice : "There, you are safe now," he said. "Go through the rainbow, I will stand and watch you till you are all through." I plucked up my courage and asked if he would come too.

He said there were many more children of Atys to be saved, that his mission had only just begun. I could not resist jumping up to him and throwing my arms around his neck, for he had carried me when my little legs had failed, despite his ailing limb. He put me down and pushed me on and I followed the others, reassured in the aura of his smell. When I looked back from the rainbow he was still watching as he said he would be, and as if to urge us through the rainbow, he gave a flick of the hand which he turned into a wave, I am sure.

I am the last survivor of that expedition of nearly three generations ago and everyday I give thanks to Jena for my children, and my children's children, and for sending us our great Karavan Guardian.

— as told by Nina Tinaro, an old Matis Lady

3.1.4 Kitins's song

I

It was in the reign of Cerakos, the one they called the fated
That befell the greatest loss in history ever related
The leaves were gold in other lands, the sun had ceased to glare
When Fyros bold with miners' hands came upon a lair

With watchful eye and ready sword did the captain look inside
To find his fate and meet his Lord, for the soothing silence lied
There came a terrible clamor, from the source of an imminent bane
The company could but stand and stammer, the kitins was their name!

Chorus

The kitins crawl the kitins come and woe betide the lagger
But we'll stand and fight till kingdom come with gun and blade and dagger
The bigger they come they harder they fall, we'll learn to zigger and zagger
We'll find their chink, we'll brave the brawl and woe betide the lagger!

II

The miners spared not a beast for their chief and twenty lay by smitten
When a din from the holes announced their grief and it seemed their fate
was written

But a noble hand threw a fireball to hold off the tide of death
Our heroes sped to alert the mayor who cried at the top of his breath:

Chorus

The kitins crawl the kitins come and woe betide the lagger
But we'll stand and fight till kingdom come with gun and blade and dagger
The bigger they come they harder they fall, we'll learn to zigger and zagger
We'll find their chink, we'll brave the brawl and woe betide the lagger!

III

But then came a sight to blacken the brow and melt the mettle inside
A terrible blight, a marching file as evil as t'was wide
Fighting a losing battle will sap the will of war
Best flee the serpent's rattle and live to settle the score

Chorus

The kitins crawl the kitins come and woe betide the lagger
But we'll stand and fight another day with gun and blade and dagger
The bigger they come they harder they fall, we'll learn to zigger and zagger
We'll find their chink, we'll brave the brawl and woe betide the lagger!

IV

The legions ploughed across the lands of desert, woodland and lake
Strewing death and destruction in their wicked wake
But as long as breath shall fill our lungs our hearts shall beat bold and true!
And as long as the night shall bring the day we shall struggle through and
through!

Chorus

The kitins crawl the kitins come and woe betide the lagger
But we'll stand and fight till kingdom come with gun and blade and dagger
The bigger they come they harder they fall, we'll learn to zigger and zagger
We'll find their chink, we'll brave the brawl and woe betide the lagger!

— Lyros Melion, a Fyros troubadour

3.2 The return of Hope

3.2.1 First Chronicle

COMING SOON

3.2.2 New Day

COMING SOON

3.2.3 Opportunity awaits!

I

Livin' on a shoestring, walkin' on a tightrope,
Waiting for the day to come
From out of a nightmare, I'm heading for the one hope
I'm leaving on the rise of the sun

Chorus

Gotta get out of here, find a way to leave
Not gonna take the easy way out, cause I've found something to believe
Gotta get out of here, find a way to escape
My thoughts are spinning though my aim is clear, opportunity awaits!

II

Pressure's rising, blood is boiling,
Sap is running low
Kitins are thumping, screeching and scouring,
I ain't stayin' in these lands of woe

Chorus

Gotta get out of here, find a way to leave
Not gonna take the easy way out, cause I've found something to believe
Gotta get out of here, find a way to escape
My thoughts are spinning though my aim is clear, opportunity awaits!

III

Hacking through the bush like a ragus tracker
I been huggin' this old road like a kin
Alone out here, lost my mektoub packer
And my soul's sure wearing thin
But as long as I live, I'll keep kicking along
Keep pushing till my blood runs dry
To the newfound lands, to the place I belong
I can make it if I push and I'll try

Chorus

Gotta get out of here, find a way to leave
Not gonna take the easy way out, cause I've found something to believe
Gotta get out of here, find a way to escape
My thoughts are spinning though my aim is clear, opportunity awaits!

— A Tryker song from the time of the Exodus by Kerman Aeron

4 Chronicles of the New Beginning - From 2484 to 2525 (JY)

4.1 Chronicles of Aeden Aqueous

4.1.1 The Secrets of Tryker engineering

As an engineer I have traveled the whole of Atys and studied the Homin choices of architectural solutions adapted to their environment. And I find Hominkind admirably clever. In my studying days, we learned how to create foundations for typical Zoraï buildings. A lot of thought goes into creating sturdy foundations as the structures we love to build are heavy, and furthermore we like to apply the ground's inherent ability to bear their weight. This is not always easy to predict, and often the plans need to be adjusted as we dig the building site. But enough boring talk about the Zoraï delving into the ground; let's have a look at what the Trykers face with regards to challenges!

The Trykers love to build stilted buildings just off the shore and connected with walkways. This requires sturdy pile foundations below the main buildings and it is rumored the Trykers have come up with a secret way of treating the piles to prevent them from rotting in the water. My good friend, Pealiam Parman, a well renowned Tryker engineer, has been so kind as to offer up the story behind this phenomenon.

It goes a long way back in history when a clever Tryker noticed some dead trunks of a certain type of palm standing on an islet that been flooded as the water rose in the small pond it was situated in. This came about because a waterfall feeding the pond took a different course and doubled the water flow. This little pond quickly became a favourite for Tryker kids to play, and the palms served as climbing frames, diving spots and various props in whatever games the tryker kids played.

Time passed; the children grew, and had their own small ones, and so on and so forth, but the palms never became rotten. An enterprising soul called Keety Jiler one day decided to get to the bottom of this mystery from his childhood. It turned out to become his lifelong pursuit and obsession. Firstly he studied the palm type and compared with other types of palms, but this track did not lead anywhere. However, taking samples of the trunks could indicate they were slightly different to the ones of the same sort growing in nearby dry places. To be able to detect the difference with certainty, he had to develop some laboratory procedures that are still the secret of the tryker engineers.

Whenever he traveled in Trykoth, he tried to sample as many palm trees as he could lay hands on, but it was not an easy task, and often at the risk of his life. His search were finally crowned with success after an especially daunting expedition, where he managed to take a sample of a palm growing near a lake in the middle of an island. He died in the effort, killed by a menacing Kirosta and was rescued by faithful friends.

In his laboratory he found similarities in the wood structure and he realized that he had finally taken a step further in the solution of this puzzle. But what

could cause this change to occur in a very few palms? The answer he decided must surely lie in the ground; and the next step would have to involve some digging. That said, he set out for the little pond equipped with a sturdy pick.

The water around the palms was deep enough to prevent him from standing on the bottom. In the end he was forced to dive, dig a little, get some air, and dive down again. But after what seemed like an eternity and a lot of huffing and snorting he managed to get a little sample of red hot sap. Triumphantly he returned to his laboratory and starting planning an expedition back to the island to check out the ground around the palm tree he had sampled.

It took weeks to get the expedition together and he was fuming with impatience, but it took a lot of work to gather supplies, equipment and friends that could accompany him. In the end they managed to reach the spot he was aching to examine, and while his friends kept watch and cleared any Kitins and Torbaks getting too close, he dug and to his immense delight found some red hot sap!

The rest is history as they say, to this day the palms with this ability is very scarce. Experiments have been carried out planting more palms, but nature has its ways and refuse to grow many of them. They are used only below the most precious buildings and show a remarkable resistance against rotting. To this day tryker engineers send warm thoughts to Keety Jiler and his lifelong pursuit of the secret of the palm trees in his childhood playground.

— as told by Guni To-Sa, a Zoraï engineer

4.1.2 Flyner Evasion

Chronicle of an episode in the life of Rosen Ba'Darins. Written in the year 2486(JY), by chronicler Derry O' Darren

Rosen Ba'Darins was still in his youth when this story took place, in his "blooming age", as some might call it, but this young man nearly lost his life, due to his fear of the unknown: a fear that overcame the comfort of knowledge.

Rosen was a slave among slaves, held captive by the Slavers tribe, which planned to sell him and many other captives. Like many other captives, Rosen dreamt of casting off the shackles that held him and fleeing his captors. Trykers have long been the advocates of freedom, and the fate awaiting these captives, to serve under some Matis or not very conscientious Zorai, became more unthinkable with every passing day. And so, the Trykers kept searching for a way around their intended fate.

Flight from the Slavers was a daunting task. Through the chinks in their corral, they could see vast steps on which the corral was placed, too high to scale easily, and beyond that, many predators that they would have to either elude or kill: Torbaks, Zerx, Ragus and, even worse, the feared Kitin. The Slavers were carelessly confident about leaving the pen partly open as they were quite sure that their captives would not dare risk the teeth and claws of their living enclosure. The Slavers took great delight in telling their captives tales of impending Tryker death and dismemberment if they so much as thought about an escape.

Even so, Trykers draw their greatest inspiration from the power of dreams, and there is no inspiration stronger than that of Freedom. The Tryker slaves, Rosen included, debated among themselves about every possible way to regain their freedom.

One evening, one of the Trykers, Jigden, recited his latest idea over the glow of a small fire, which burned in a corner as far away as possible from their captors' hearing: "We should grab every opportunity we can get to escape from here," whispered Jigden to the dozens of united Trykers, their large wide-open eyes shining with enthusiasm. "This region is packed to the teeth with things that would like to eat us for supper, but we will be able to avoid them if we are clever enough."

These words made everyone gather together even closer around the fire. Lowering his voice even more, Jigden resumed, "We cannot travel the lands surrounding us, but even so, none of us want to live the rest of our lives as slaves, right?" His words left the others silent and wondering. He pointed his finger to the sky. "Let us find our way to the Canopy. There, up high, we shall be free again."

"And could we reach the high branches of the bark?" asked Dachan. "Have you invented a way to fly?"

"Why invent something that already exists?" said Jigden, with eyes glowing with sheer pleasure. "I have often told you, Dachan, that Atys itself is the greatest creator!"

"You want to use Ybers? They never fly that high, you know," another one said.

"Botany, Chychy," answered Jigden. "Let us use Flyers! They are lighter than air and are only attached to the soil by a slim root. If each of us were to hang on firmly to a flower and cut the root, we should gain enough altitude to reach the Canopy, and there, in the heights, we shall be free!"

There was a buzz of conversation amongst the slaves then, but they quickly hushed themselves and pondered the idea. It was Rosen who spoke next, "But... what if we fall? If one of us drops his flower, what will take us there? Your plan is very risky, you know."

"It is most definitely a risky plan, but for my part, I am not going to spend the rest of my life in this camp, or worse, to be sold to an arrogant Matis or one of those strange Zorai." He then took a more serious tone, "No, I will take any chance possible to gain my freedom."

Some of the others agreed to Jigden's statement in whispers, but many others, like Rosen, pictured themselves falling through the branches of the Canopy and down to a painful and tragic end on the bark. The more adventurous Trykers decided amongst themselves that the lightest of them would attempt such an escape the following day.

The next morning, under the pretext of picking berries for the sleeping Slavers, fifteen of the Tryker prisoners made a discreet sign of farewell to the others before disappearing behind a cliff.

It did not take long for the Slavers to notice the missing Trykers. Several armed groups explored the region the following evening and over the next few

days with hopes of finding the missing fugitives, but they found no trace of them. Given that it would be extremely unlikely that all of the Trykers would have been eaten by predators in the same day, it seems indisputable that these Trykers accomplished their dream: to gain their freedom in the the Canopy above.

Rosen and the others who stayed in the Slaver camp often regretted not following their more adventurous friends, but they never tried to escape using a Flyner, as Jigden had proposed. For years they remained prisoners of the Slavers tribe, with the regular addition of new captives from time to time, until one day, when an expedition of Corsairs attacked the camp and liberated the slaves.

To this day, Rosen Ba'Darin can still be seen staring up at the Canopy, secretly regretting not joining his friends before his age would prevent it, to be free high up in the Canopy.

4.1.3 The Story of a Young Corsair

Part One

The water was cold, but fish didn't seem to care. They were dancing in a colourful pantomime, no sound to be heard by a Homin's ear. Each of them seemed to know exactly where it had to be or go, their ballet always a thing of grace and beauty, as if repeated for centuries. Young Bremmen O'Derry was watching them. He had always been a proud Tryker, and a fierce warrior with his weapon... but he had never discovered anything more beautiful than the natural spectacles such as the school of fish to be found in his beloved lakes.

Little waves rippled across the surface, and the fish turned to flashes of colour as they darted from sight. He looked the other way, and saw a patrol of Trykers swimming incredibly fast. He recognized them immediately: they were the Corsairs who often patrolled in Liberty Lake, never afraid of swimming to reach farther islands where they had many interesting, and useful tasks to do... At least was it what Bremmen believed. His father had always told him about his own past, when he was younger, in the tribe of Corsairs. It had shaped him, both body and mind; it wasn't far from a kind of tour of duty in fact... apart from the fact that they weren't officially offering their services to the Federation.

By the time Bremmen looked back to the lake, the Corsairs were already disappearing into the distance. He jumped up and dived into the water. He had to follow them; he wanted to follow them and to join their tribe. So many young Trykers already had... and they filled him with longing to emulate them, only two or three years older, yet they were respected by everyone. But it was not long before he was so out of breath that he was unable to continue. The patrol, meanwhile, had failed to notice him and continued on its way. Lost in the middle of the Lakes, Bremmen tried to reach the first island to regain his breath. His lungs were burning, like the very day when his grand father offered him to smoke a pipe.

- "I want to try!" Bremmen said to his grand father.
- "Sure, try it" he answered, offering him the pipe.

He got the pipe between his lips, took some smoke in his mouth and spit it out.

- "Not like that! Breathe!" Bremmen's grand father said.

He tried once more, breathed in and coughed immediately, choking on the acrid smoke. His grand father roared with laughter and Bremmen never tried again... But today, he was feeling as if he'd smoked and coughed for hours. Corsairs were really good swimmers. Certainly the best of Atys! He couldn't see them anymore. The fish had retaken their places, and once again resumed their silent dancing as if nothing happened.

Bremmen stood up again, and climbed up a steep cliff in the middle of the island he had found. From the top, he had a panoramic view of Liberty Lake and the island which he now rested on. On the West side, he saw something that made his eyes light up! It was less than 400m away from his position, but too far for him to see exactly what was happening. He looked up at the sky, and smiled. According to his calculations, it should be the Corsairs camp!

Bremmen ran down the western face of the cliff and reached the beach. Only a little swimming time separated him from his aim now. He took a deep breath, and dived in again, and began swimming quickly in the hope that it would make a good impression on the corsairs.. Unfortunately, he kept his rhythm for less than 250m, and by the time he reached the beach he was as red as some of the fish he had observed earlier, gasping for breath.

He stared at the floor, an attempt to hide his shame from the scrutinizing look of Codgan Be'Yle. He was relieved when he looked up again, and saw that nobody had noticed his presence... It had taken him so long to catch his breath they all had moved on to other tasks...

Bremmen quickly combed his hair with his hands, and walked at an assured pace toward the nearest Corsair he had seen.

- "Hi!" He said to the welcomer.

- "Hi young boy" The welcomer answered.

- "Young boy? I'm not a young boy anymore. I'm a young Homin now, brave and bold"

Bremmen shifted the weapon strapped to his back, so the welcomer could be awestruck.

- "Brave and bold homins do not take five minutes to catch their breath when they swim slowly and only a short distance... Anyway, my name is Codgan Be'Yle. I'm the Corsairs' welcomer. What could I do for you? Try to sum it up quickly, for I have a lot to do"

Bremmen's cheeks turned bright red. But it was his only chance, so he quickly answered Be'Yle.

- "My name's Bremmen O'Derry. I'm Arty O'Derry's son. Do you know him?"

- "No" replied the welcomer.

- "But, he was in the Corsairs, some years ago"

- "You know, boy, there are so many young Trykers who come to serve our cause everyday and who finally leave some years later... I cannot remember everyone"

Bremmen restrained his anger when he heard Codgan calling him “boy” again.

- “I came a long way, from the city of Fairhaven, to meet you and to serve your cause. My weapon is yours, if you agree to enrol me”

Codgan laughed.

- “Well, try to find Derren Be’Lauppy then. He surely has some tasks to give you. Come back after you’re done and maybe I’ll think about giving you something else to do”

- “Ok! Who is he?” Bremmen asked, looking at the homins in the camp.

- “He’s not here. He’s a scout. You should be able to find him in the Winds of Muse”.

- “The Winds of Muse? But that’s very far! And dangerous, isn’t it?”

- “Surely not for a brave and bold Homin such as yourself. Did you really think I would tell you “welcome to the corsairs” simply because you made from Fairhaven to our camp? Now go, and don’t come back until you proved you are useful.”

Bremmen stared open-mouthed. A test, of course. . . Or maybe the welcomer was too busy to deal with every young Tryker that came this way. . . Either way, Bremmen prove himself and go find the scout.

Part Two

It had been three days since Bremmen had left the camp. He had reached the Winds of Muse the night before, and met many Trykers there. . . All silt sculptors. . . none of them were however able to tell him where he could find Derren Be’Lauppy. . . but at least he could sleep in a tent rather than lying on the cold sand that he had been forced to endure on his travels. His trusty weapon was proving very useful in converting the prowling cloppers to food. His thirst he quenched from the water of the lakes. Still convinced that he had to impress the Corsairs, he continued to look for the scout in every possible location.

He spent five days this way. The sixth night saw him thoughtfully consulting his map, and drawing the last crosses. . . He was sure that he had looked absolutely everywhere and he was starting to believe that Codgan, the Corsairs’ welcomer had played a nasty trick on him and he was deciding whether to walk and swim back to the camp and give him a piece of his mind. He made his way slowly through the many Cloppers, holding them off with his weapon. He had improved greatly in this discipline almost without realizing it from all of the cloppers he’d encountered in his searching. Emerging from the cloppers, he spied a man he’d never met, just behind a herd of Ragus. He was peacefully wandering around, and taking down notes as he rambled. Could this be the scout he was looking for? He ran toward them and began to speak:

- “Hi! Would you be Derren, by any chance?”

- “Hi young Homin” replied the strange Homin, agreeing with a grin.

Bremmen was so excited that he couldn’t even ask Derren where he’d been the last few days but in a flash Bremmen realized something. This Homin was a scout, and a scout isn’t supposed to stay in the same location. They walk the ways of Atys to observe the fauna, the creatures’ behaviour, the outposts, the

groups of travellers. . . Bremmen introduced himself and explained why he was looking for Derren. They chatted for nearly an hour. Derren was sympathetic, open-minded and very happy to help anyone sent by Codgy. Derren gave Bremmen a quest to fulfil: observe the Cutes around the area, and mark the location of their groups on his map.

Our young Homin began to patrol the area and tried to locate the Cutes. He had improved so much in holding creatures off with his weapon that his task only took him three days. Finally, the sole place he hadn't visited was Windy Way. He had kept this area for the very end, since he knew it was the most dangerous. Fulminating Ragus were a plague, and he hardly managed to survive the last time he went there. He hurtled forward, ducking through the crowds of Gnooffs. He lay low, crawling between plants, controlling the wind's direction to prevent predators from smelling him, trying to get closer to the southern pools where it would be safer.

Finally arriving, he glanced around the area, and noticed some other groups of Cutes. He went forward to examine them, camouflaging himself in the flora to write down their location. He was staring at one of them, studying its behaviour, when a scream froze his blood; another Cute was returning to the group and Bremmen was exactly in its path. He took out his trusty weapon, and shot several times, enduring the cute's assault without a word. Less than a minute later, our Tryker had managed to kill the attacking cute, though sustaining grave wounds in the process.

Danger was still present unfortunately, as he turned back to the group he spotted very big Cute advancing towards him. It looked different from the others, but Bremmen didn't hesitate. He sprinted for the water, escaping the Cutes claws with a dive into the welcoming lake. The Cute stopped at the waterside. Bremmen looked at him. "Like the Ragus", he thought. "It is afraid of water, so it must be closer to creatures than to Homins." Bremmen stepped out on the opposite side of the lake, and made his way back to Derren. He had all of the Cutes' locations, thus completing his task, so he was certainly eligible to join the Corsairs, now!

Just a few minutes later, he met the scout.

- "Hi Derren!" He said.

- "Hi Bremmen!"

- "I've marked every group of Cutes on my map as you requested"

- "Well, that's impossible young Homin. You've only worked for a few days, and the groups will move with the seasons. . . Come back in one year" Derren concluded with a big grin.

- "What? You must be joking!"

- "I am!" He said laughing. "Give me your map and I'll add your information to the ones I already gathered."

Derren took the map, and looked at it.

- "The Cutes were hard to observe", Bremmen said. "They kept attacking me when I was close to them. I've even seen a very big one, different looking. I almost thought it was a Homin, for one second. . . But it attacked me like the others"

- "Oh, you met Doren. Anyway, they only attack you when you disturb them. In fact, those creatures are more or less placid, but they feel threatened whenever you enter their hunting territory. So observe them from afar, and if you really want to talk with some of them, try to meet the Cuzans."

- "The Cuzans? What are they?"

- "Higher Cutes. That will be your next mission: get to their tribe, and come back to tell me what they prefer to eat."

- "Where are they?"

- "In the Lagoons of Loria."

- "But..."

- "Good luck. And take care there, that region is not as safe as the Winds of Muse"

Bremmen was astounded. Having little choice if his ambition was to be fulfilled, he accepted the challenge and left the scout, heading towards the Lagoons of Loria.

Part Three

Bremmen had never been as hungry as he was by the time that he finally reached the Cuzans' camp. As soon as he entered the Lagoons of Loria, his weapon became useless: creatures there were so swift that he could barely target them. Instead, he moved slowly through the landscape, avoiding potential trouble as he had learnt to do in the Winds of Muse.

He glanced carefully around at the Cuzans. They looked very much like Cutes, after all, and might prove to be equally dangerous, so he tried to stay a safe distance from them. Unfortunately, his stomach was aching and grumbling because of his hunger. A couple of minutes later, a Cuzan approached him, slowly, holding some big fruits. What a surprise for the little Homin! The Cuzans were not like the Cutes he had met up until now. They displayed no aggressive tendencies and moreover, they seemed to be... almost Homin-like.

- "Hello Tryker" The Cuzan greeted Bremmen. "You seem to be hungry and tired, eat those fruits and come. Follow me to the camp".

Bremmen gulped the fruits as if he hadn't eaten for weeks... which was almost the truth. Reassured, he followed the little Cuzan to the camp. Some other creatures from the tribe gathered around him, and began to search curiously in his belongings. Bremmen walked over and picked up a book which they were all gathered round.

- "Are you interested in this?" He asked.

- "Yes. It is a book; there is special knowledge in it!"

- "Then take it, it is yours in exchange for the fruits" Bremmen answered with a smile.

- "Thank you Tryker. Eat as much as you wish of these fruits and berries. This means such a lot to us."

Bremmen was far happier with food than with the book at that moment. He also knew that he could find the same book again in Fairhaven where he had bought the first. The Cuzans still clustered around the book, and as some tried to read it, painstakingly spelling out a word or two, an older one took it into his

carefully into his keeping. Bremmen speculated to himself that this was surely the chief, but was too busy with his meal to really care.

Our Tryker stayed nearly a week with the Cuzans. He learnt a lot about them, discovering which of the different berries they liked, and identifying the ones they would not eat, as Derren had asked him to do. They were so grateful for the book that he had donated to them that they showed him many of their spots for gathering fruits and other food, replying patiently to his insistent questions about their lifestyle. Finally, when he had all written down, he decided to head back to the Corsair scout, laden with gifts of fruit.

On his way back to the vortex, Bremmen camouflaged himself to avoid as many carnivores as possible. He did it so well that that he even managed to remain unnoticed when he spotted two Matis chatting about twenty meters from him. He could hear every word.

- "Greetings!"

- "Hail to thee"

- "Is everything in order?"

- "It is. They arrive in exactly one week, and we will attack the outpost on Quinteth, just on sunset."

- "Perfect! The surprise effect will give them no chance. Farewell and good luck until we meet again on Quinteth."

One of the Matis left, another arriving a few minutes later.

- "Greetings!"

- "Hail to thee."

- "Everything is in order. The outpost will be taken on Quinteth in one week, just at sunset."

- "Our troops should split up somewhat to avoid detection."

- "Those orders have already been given."

- "Mine will come from the Winds of Muse. We will split when entering the Lagoons of Loria and half of us will head straight to the north, with the others heading south-east."

- "May they gather at the right moment for us to be ready to defeat them. That is my sole desire, and what I am paid for."

- "It will be done as you command. For the Queen!"

- "For the Queen!"

Both of them departed, leaving Bremmen astonished. What were they planning? Where did they come from? Who were they? So many questions were remaining unanswered. He carefully noted down what he has heard, his location, and the place one of the Matis was pointing to when he talked about the outpost. This could be very interesting if he could find out whom to pass the information on to. He waited a short while longer to make certain that he would not be detected leaving cover and sprinted straight to the Vortex, as fast as he was able to manage, to enable him to discuss the matter with Derren as soon as possible.

Reaching his goal took him a further day of running and marching, but he managed to find Derren far sooner than he had anticipated.

- "Hi Derren!"

- "Hi Bremmen. So, have you met the Cuzans?"

- "Yes, and I wrote everything here on this parchment.

Bremmen gave his notes to Derren who began to look at them as he continued to speak.

- "I have other, stranger news, Derren. As I was travelling back, I overheard some Matis who were talking about invading an outpost in the Lagoons of Loria."

- "What?"

Derren dropped the parchment immediately and stared at our young Tryker.

- "Pray tell me more!"

- "I have written everything down here. I thought someone might be very interested in this information."

- "I am sure that the Corsairs will be. I, however have to remain here. Run to Codgan, as fast as you can and give him as many details as possible."

- "The welcomer?"

- "No. Codgan Ba'Nakry, our current leader. Hurry up now!"

Bremmen left the scout quickly, and headed to the Corsairs' camp, instinctively aware that the outcome would depend on his speed.

Part Four

Codgan hadn't really listened to the young Tryker. He'd just taken a look at his notes, and asked him if he was a fighter. Bremmen wasn't sure of his answer, but nodded and thus, he found himself in possession of a shiny new set of armour in the Corsairs' colours, moving swiftly in company to the Lagoons of Loria. Five days after the meeting between the Matis, the corsairs reached the vortex between the Lagoons and the Winds of Muse. During their travel they had come up with a plan of action.

First, they would spy on the group of Matis travelling from the Winds of Muse, and then attack each part of the Matisian army after they had split. Following this, they would sweep the area to ensure that no other Matis were present, ensuring that any attack on the outpost would be so weak as to not stand a chance. Every Corsair seemed to know exactly what he had to. Bremmen had been asked to use his weapon on magicians, and preferably to target their head so as to stun them.

They established a camp just south from the vortex. A scout had been sent to the Winds of Muse to locate the Matis and ascertain their numbers. During the period of waiting, Bremmen collected some fruits and mushrooms while the better fighters went hunting for meat. They ate together, and talked for a long time around the campfire, narrating tales of the old land. Bremmen could hardly believe he was sharing so much with the Corsairs. Definitely his heart belonged to them. They slept well, taking shifts on guard duty, with someone always to make sure that the carnivores kept their distance from the camp.

At sunrise, the scout returned. He gulped some food before making his report. There were sixteen Matis on their way, so they would certainly split into two eight-people groups once they had passed through the portal. They would arrive at noon. The Corsairs decided to attack them right at the vortex: as they were far more numerous and would have the element of surprise. Time

was of the essence as they also had to stop the other group coming from Verdant Heights. So they headed north, and camouflaged themselves with mud to blend in with the surrounding environment.

The sun was at its zenith when the Matis came through the vortex. Their black armour stood out easily against the yellow sand of the beaches of the Lagoons. They stopped and were awaiting the order to split ranks when the call to attack was shouted. All the Corsairs sprang up and began to move in on their target. Bremmen took his weapon, and hit a destructor right in the middle of his head. The magician didn't fall, but was completely stunned. Then he aimed at the healers. The warriors were closing in on him, but the two healers were quickly stunned and surrounded by other warriors from the Corsairs. Bremmen was going to flee, but the Corsairs were able to overcome the remaining warriors. It took less time than expected: the Corsairs were indeed good at warfare; their opponents had stood no chance. Some of the Corsairs looted the bodies, taking anything of value.

They healed their wounds. . . they had very few in fact, and not one of their ranks had died. But their time was counting down. They sent three scouts to explore the Lagoons of Loria, and moved to the outpost targeted by the Matis, to establish a defence. No creature dared attack them, and they arrived at the outpost in a couple of hours. They examined their surroundings, and established a strategy for the final conflict.

Night fell on the the Lagoons of Loria, and they camped like the night before. The next morning at first light, two of the scouts had already returned. Two groups of fifteen people had been located. There were both coming from the North, but one group was ahead of the other and would doubtless stop and wait to combine forces for the attack on the outpost. The dune selected by the Corsairs would surely be the one they would choose to assemble at due to its view of the outpost.

They guessed right. They saw Matis warriors coming from the horizon, fifteen of them. They were heading right for the dune the Corsairs were hiding behind. The Corsairs, camouflaged again against the vegetation, lay still and awaited their prey. The Matisians arrived and were quickly overcome by the Corsairs. Some Corsairs looted the opponents' bodies then all returned to their position only to see two other groups of fifteen people arriving at the outpost, one from the north, and the other from the south. This time, the battle would be much harder. But Bremmen quickly turned to the leader of the Corsairs with a plan.

- "That's dangerous and very risky for you. Are you sure you want to try it?"

- "I am. And this way only one of us takes a risk. If it works then we'll have no trouble defeating them"

- "Try it then, take these clothes, and good luck!"

Bremmen put on a set of Matis armour, and ran to the south, straight up to the group of approaching Matis, while the Corsairs went quietly northwards. Our Tryker was less than 50m far from the Matis when one of them made a sign. He stopped and shouted:

- "I come in peace. Some of your friends seem to be in trouble not far from here, fighting the Cuzans, but I cannot approach them and give them a hand alone"

The Matis leader hesitated, and made another sign for him to come closer.

- "How are they dressed?"

- "All in black armour, Sir. They're less than 500m to the east. I can lead you there, if you wish"

- "Led by a Tryker? Somehow I don't think so..."

- "Then I can just point to the place. Do you see that tree on the dune? Just head towards it, and then 200 meters straight to the east"

- "You are coming with us. Your kind is known to lie!"

Bremmen swallowed slowly. He followed the Matis, trying to stay as far from them as possible, but one of the warriors put his sword against his back, ordering him to walk before him. He had no choice but to obey. They reached the tree, and looked to the east.

- "So, where are they?" One of the Matis asked.

- "They should be there, but we cannot see them from so far away..."

- "Go on then!"

They walked the 200 meters, but of course, there were no Matis, and not even a sign that there had ever been a fight. The Matis glanced at Bremmen, and our Tryker began to wonder if his last hour had come....

Part Five

Bremmen was sweating abundantly. The Matis put his sword under Bremmens chin, and asked him if he had any last words. The Tryker looked at him, his knees going soft, when suddenly the Matis fell.

The Corsairs charged them from behind. Bremmen didn't think twice and ran toward his friends. One of the Matis began to cast a spell, but he was too late: the warriors were already on them. The Matis were caught unprepared, and a few minutes later, they had all fallen. Bremmen looked at them and said: "You see, I'm not a liar, there are Matis lying here..." Some Corsairs looted the homins, and Bremmen gave them a hand.

- "Why are we looting them?"

- "That's our reward."

- "But... ok."

He didn't ask for more information, he sensed he wouldn't get an answer... He decided to ask Codgan Ba'Nakry later on.

The Corsairs went back to the camp weighed down with their loot. On the way home Bremmen tried to understand the reasons why the Corsairs decided to attack the Matis in such haste without knowing what was happening to him. It was explained that they didn't really need a reason: the Matis were there, and made a good target to pillage since they generally are well equipped and carry many goods and dappers. He didn't ask for more information.

Once back in the camp, he bowed to Codgan, and began to speak to him.

- "Hello Codgan."

- "Greetings, young Corsair!"

- "Our mission has been..."

- "I'm already aware of what happened. Go straight to your questions, I suppose you have a lot."

- "Well I've been told that we had no reason to attack the Matis, other than pillaging them?"

- "Yes, but they are enemies above all."

- "Why are they enemies? Matis and Trykers are supposed to be united."

- "Yes, but all Matis aren't allied to Trykers"

- "And those weren't?"

- "You'd better assume they weren't if you want to avoid any guilt..." he replied with a smile.

- "Sure. But if we were wrong... Maybe the Federation would be angry at us..."

- "The Federation? No, they wouldn't. They appreciate our services, and even pay us for it. And remember that the Governor Still Wyler was our chief before me."

- "I have been told about that. But why did he leave?"

- "Because he had higher goal. And he achieved it. He was elected to replace Beadley Nimby in 2508. Moreover, many young Trykers join us when they're young. But as years pass on, they become less and less fiery... so less and less useful to us as well."

- "But one thing is strange. You told me the Federation was paying us for our services... But... They believe in Jena, and we..."

- "We are loyal partisans, and play a preponderant role in warfare. Isn't it enough? And well... many Trykers do not understand they shouldn't trust the Karavan. Kamis are our friends of nature, but we cannot force our brothers to believe in them. Let's wait until they realize it themselves."

Codgan's speech was wise, and Bremmen's heart was touched. He understood all that his father told him about the Corsairs, all what he could learn from them. And in return, he kneeled and pledged allegiance to the Corsairs. The tribe chief smiled.

- "Please rise. You already are one of us, Bremmen."

He was welcomed into the group and was shown to a tent he would share with two others. His new home; his new family. A few minutes later, he saw a young Tryker speaking with Codgan Be'Yle. Shortly after, the young Tryker was swimming to the Winds of Muse... and choking every hundred of metres. Bremmen laughed, and found himself something to do to help the Corsairs.

— a young Corsair, the legendary fighter Bremmen O'Derry

4.2 Chronicles of the Verdant Heights

4.2.1 A little bedtime story

Many homins discussed the happenings of the last days. As the little Anisse asked the elders lots of questions concerning what they knew about the Karavan. But nobody had the time to answer the small girl's questions as they were overwhelmed by all the things that were going on.

In the evening when her grandmother was taking her to bed Anisse asked again. Her grandmother answered.

- "Now my child. I don't have real knowledge. But when someone is as old as I am, one has heard lots of legends, stories and rumours. Though I think that most of it is likely to be exaggerated or simply from the feather of a talented storyteller."

- "Please tell me though grandmother", said Anisse with eyes shining out of curiosity. The grandmother arranged Anisse's blankets, nodded smiling and made herself comfortable on the side of her granddaughter.

- "Child, surely you've heard about Zachini? It is told that he was the first one contacted by Jena, who united the Matis and became their first king. I tell you now what happened as legend states it; in a time when the Matis were split."

- "The Tryker in this time were loved servants within the households of the Matis. In exchange for food and a place to live, they carried out our more regular and small tasks. They were very unhappy and called us slave keepers behind our backs. Jena saw the misery and came down onto Atys to appear to the most powerful leader of the Matis. This was the noble Zachini. In his wisdom he did as Jena bid and promised all Trykers under his reign that they were allowed to leave whenever and wherever they wanted. It is told that his speech was thrilling. Naturally this caused a lot of fuss in our household, as they were emptied of servants from that day. And through all the mess and excitement this caused it was nearly missed by the people, that Zachini was negotiating with the envoys of Jena, the Karavan. At this time no homin doubted the word of Jena. Even the barbarian-like Fyros didn't dare to doubt the words of Jena."

- "Zachini sometime later, in the year of Jena 2197, over 200 years ago, spoke the 10 commandments of Jena from the Karavan, At the place where these were handed over a great city was raised: Karavia. Karavia was a wonder of architecture. When you ever come to Pyr, the capital of the Fyros, you can get a small glimpse of how beautiful Karavia was. The walls were bigger and more beautiful than those of Pyr. They were built of roots, as big as our houses, the houses were like big palaces. Shining floors, shimmering fountains with the clearest water from the near river Ria – all this was Karavia."

- "Zachini was the first of our kings and his contact with Jena helped him to win the trust of the Karavan. They entrusted him with secrets which were passed down the generations of our family. Child, don't look so surprised. Yes, we are far descendants of Zachini."

The grandmother acknowledged her granddaughter smiling.

- "One of our ancestors was the daughter of Zachini and her son became his heir of the throne, This, that I am saying to you now is given for generations only to the female descendants of our family."

- "The Karavan are the chosen of Jena. From Jena they got the gift to visit the stars. But the dragon possessed some of them and their homeworld became uninhabitable. During the search for a new home many fell to the rage of the dragon. Some found a inconspicuous planet. It turned out that the dragon lived on this planet and held many different peoples enslaved. The Karavan were very sad to see this and bid Jena to help these poor creatures. Jena heard them and

filled the dragon with infernal fire which would consume him if he tried to spit it out.”

- “The icy crust of the planet was thawed due to the dragon’s attempts to lessen his suffering at the same time as Jena started the green surge. From a dreary planet the life emerged at fantastic speed and tied the dragon to the planet’s centre. With the help of his self-consuming fire the dragon tried to free himself and burned lots of the sprouting plants. Jena’s might though was too strong, the dragon could do little against it. Atys was created and Jena commanded the Karavan to watch over the peoples; Homins, who were filled by her light and free from the influence of the dragon.”

- “Though Jena warned the Karavan that the dragon would awake and hereby consume himself and all of Atys. So tells the legend at all...”

The grandmother paused a while and a gentle smile came onto her lined face when she looked at the peaceful beauty of her deep sleeping granddaughter.

— anonymous author

4.2.2 Ciochini learns of His Heritage

Ciochini Cuisi was a young Matis from a good family. When he didn’t have to attend to the lessons given to all young Matis of his age, he liked to stroll through gorgeous Yrkanis, the capital of Matis. And like the others, he dreamed of far-off lands with more passion than he showed in learning his lessons. His dream, however, was not to become an explorer delving through lands empty of homin presence. No, the dream of Ciochini was to become a famous historian like the chronicler Erlan, of whom he had read all writings. The young Matis loved his people, even more than most Matis did. This love for his fellows was extended to the history of the forest people, and he wanted to know every little detail of the days and years that passed. All the way from the first tales of the Matis up to the actual reign of King Yrkanis, through the tragedy of the Great Swarming and the Kitin War. . .

To satisfy his thirst for history young Ciochini often visited his grandmother Miarni Cuisi. The elder Matis had experienced the Kitin War as well as the historical crossing of the Prime Roots. Each wrinkle and crevasse in her face told its own story, with each being more fascinating to than the next. With each story Ciochini learned a new facet of the history of his people. Of course his grandmother was not a historian, as she did not know everything, and her tales were often embellished by time. But she mastered some periods of the history with such a perfection that she was a better tutor than many a royal historian. And to add to that that, she never forgot to flavour her stories with some personal comments, totally subjective of course, and sometimes unimportant. Such was to be expected from an old Matis woman with such a resolute character. . .

This day, as he had no class with his private tutor, Ciochini walked with a firm stride to the magnificent town-tree that housed the apartment of his grandmother Miarni. The Tryker domestic of Miarni let the grand son in. Ciochini walked as usual to the office of his grandmother and entered without

a second thought.

- "Ciochini, my child, I was just wondering when you would come to visit me again."

- "Hello grandmother," answered the young Matis, "I must admit that I was missing you too... especially your stories."

His grandmother chuckled. "Fortunately I still have some untold tales that will entice you to return. I fear that you would soon forget about me if I ever ran out. Soon I will have to invent some if I am to continue to enjoy your company."

- "Grandmother, I will always come to see you! But your stories are such a treat," finished the boy with a mix of mischievousness and anticipation for the stories to come.

- "Thank you Ciochini, you are a loving child... and you know how to get what you want, which can be a very important quality. Come, sit and tell me what you would like to hear."

The grandchild sat down in the magnificent seat in front of the mother of his father. The Tryker domestic appeared and served them a plant infusion. The old woman took a cup and his grand son did the same.

- "I would like you to tell me about our King Aniro I, grandmother."

The Matis thought for a moment while her grandson concentrated on the content of his cup.

- "I do not have a lot of knowledge about his reign Ciochini," she said. "But I will do my best."

- "Aniro I was one of our first Kings. His reign began in 2295, a time of conflict between the homin civilisations, and ended in 2333. Easy to remember that date isn't it? He reigned during the same period as Hempios, Dalynder and Krythos, the Fyros Emperors. Never forget that my boy, never forget the history of the desert. Knowing one's rivals, their history and their weak points can be very important.

- "But let's get back to our King. Aniro was surely one of the greatest kings that our people have ever known. To understand his decisions we must know the political climate at the time his reign began. Dyros the Great, Fyros Emperor, began to construct an aqueduct stretching from the Tryker territory to the Fyros regions and passing through the Matis lands. You surely have already heard about that? Its construction lasted from the year 2289 to 2293. Hundreds of kilometres of bark were excavated to create this edifice. Our King couldn't in all decency accept the intrusion on our land, as the aqueduct was going to give our Fyros adversaries too much influence over Matisian soil. This was the beginning of the war of the civilisations. It began in 2295 and ended in 2436 with the Treaty of Karavia, signed by Aniro III.

- "As you can see, the reign of Aniro I did not begin very well. I will also add that the Fyros and the Trykers signed an alliance treaty in 2293, two years before the war.

- "Aniro did what he had to do if you want my opinion. The Fyros shouldn't have built this aqueduct through our lands without our asking... even if it was obvious that we would never have given any permission.

- “However, the war wasn’t the only event where Aniro made a prominent figure. Our departed King had done much for our relations with the Karavan and the Goddess Jena, and we will always be grateful for that.

- “In 2329, near the end of his reign, the Karavan gave a divine mission to our King. At the time Aniro made a wise decision in accepting the mission. In that it is one which has brought us closer to the Karavan. He threw himself wholeheartedly into the task of creating a good relationship between the Goddess and the Matis and he rallied his people in the name of Jena. It quickly became clear that nothing was too good or too grand for Her. As a part of this Aniro also build a ziggurat. This monument was built in the spot where the Matis people had met the Karavan for the first time: the holy city of Karavia. The construction lasted for three reigns of Aniro I, Nero and Manalitch. According to the legend, only the good and noble hearted Matis could participate in it, and it was a real honour! These Matis gained favour with the Karavan and the King as reward for their contribution. The ziggurat was the most glorious wonder that our forest knew! It reached high above the lofty trees and consisted of as many floors as there are days between two full moons. The fabulous monument was crowned by a single magnificent chamber that looked out over the lands and shone like a beacon in the sky.

- “There you are Ciochini. I have given you the two most important parts of the history of the reign of Aniro I, a real Matisian king.”

— told by a grandmother of Aniro I, old Matis King”

4.2.3 Chrysalis

The escape of Yrkanis in 2506 after the murder of Yasson by Jinovitch, told by Baldi Dalia, a witness of the event:

The Forest, barely awake, was hemmed in by fog and a blanket of white cotton. Having embroidered immaculate flannels with delicate laces and silky hemlines, Mystia, by his stall, candidly announced the cold winter. The carter blew in his stiff hands to give them a capacity more than out of necessity. Numerous shovelfuls of manure had been enough to warm them up and Lebi Cabelo was, at present, of courage and of little time before needing to take the reins and guide the wagon to the Royal Conservatory of Jino.

Gasping, the red-faced Matis climbed up into the seat. The squeak of the apparatus was immediately stifled by the high-pitched hiss of Lebi and the snap of leather straps on the sides of the mektoub. The animals hung back before dashing forward on this well known path they would have been able to go on without their master. Tighter than the brake he reluctantly released he knew this would be his last trip to the Conservatory.

Thick, faintly blue steam rose in volutes off the load, soft, almost lascivious, writhing to the rhythm of the uninterrupted jolts of the dumper truck. As a ghost captain of ancient vessels, Lebi seemed to float under a tablecloth of vaporous sky and crested on the white caps of a boreal sea. Backs and horns appeared from the fog, imaginary monsters of the Tryker maritime tales. The mektoub no longer existed as the Matis driver gripped the reins as the sailor

serves a rudder with his empty eye and mind in the distance.

"Captain!" he thought and almost turned around.

Something glittered, reminding his wandering mind like the end of a thread which has been pulled taught. Stealthy white light, mirage. It is first the body which reacts as the hairs bristle and the heart springs up. Jena... The train passed in front of the Karavan with white flashes of lightning, pearl black leather of liquid and milky images, subjects made iridescent by the unknown, hooded, immense, venerable silhouettes. The time waned, the fog gave way as Lebi turned his head slowly, the coxswain of a ship which passes by an attractive yet inaccessible island, as in a dream.

"Nec menates!"

Words that demand! Words that knock without beating around the bush. As a blow of an elbow in the chest of a gentle sleeper with still heavy eyelids of morning, the dream came to an end.

The mektoub reacted first, stopping quickly and blowing loudly. Lebi pulled on the reins, only by reflex, the last privilege of the homin animal when instinct predominates.

Five guards and coughing spell for the carrier...

"Stop!"

- Kof! Kof! Kof!

"Order of the King Jinovitch, son of Jena, we control any suspicious load in Jino."

- Kof! Kof!

"Grip the brake and cease coughing!"

Lebi hesitated a moment and grumbled, "The thought of it! Cease coughing!"

- Kof! Kof! Kof!

"Cease coughing!"

"I do not cough!"

"You cough!"

"No I laugh."

"Ho?!"

"Kof!"

"I laugh at my health to deliver this manure in the Royal Conservatory of Jino every week!"

"Yes..."

"Of course!"

"Really?"

"Let me go Silvo, you do not know me? I come from the stables with a load of manure for the Conservatory as every week which our well loved King allows."

"I know Lebi... But I have orders..."

"Then search the load if you think that a prince hides in a heap of shit!"

"Lebi!"

"What?"

Silvo and the four other guards planted their pikes in the heap of manure. They withdrew only sucking noises and an unpleasant smell from it. The disapproving carrier moved with pride in which the guards missed in this setting.

"Silvo?"

"Yes?"

"Will you let him pass? Do you really think that a Matis king would go to the Conservatory?"

"A king?"

"Shut up Silvo!"

Two things differentiated Lebi from one of the dead: a little erratic rhythm of the heart and ten strides of mektoub before the Royal Conservatory.

In the morning Sebio entered the home of his master. It was the unique instant in which he similarly waited every day since he had been in his service, as a Sap slave in lack of narcotic. He stopped on the threshold and in an instant he was disoriented by the teleportation. This was not the reason that he deferred opening his eyes. He liked to use all that progressively, systematically, as though his own conscience refused to be allowed to take. He would never forget the first time however, when he had sunk, the mind broken up as the pollen in the tempest, thrown to the soil bluntly by its own senses and taken by attack. Ruined.

Could he be a traveler without moving? Knowing the world on a doorstep, such was the power brought to these places. To enter, to him, was to come back to life. It was like entering the forest on a summer evening, after a whole life of insensitivity, everything was only smells, colors and sounds. Life, emotion, death, blended, in the service of only one homin.

It is first the sound which transported him, the tremble, scratching, boiling, moan, crack. His master had revealed to him one day the secret of this noise, nature itself. "There is music in any thing," his master reminded, "give you trouble to hear it. Life gives a shape to the void and music, to the silence."

Space did not exist here. Unique fragrances blended, sometimes soft, sometimes strong and aggressive. Sebio inspired profoundly, taking this present of fragrance at the top of one's voice.

When finally he decided to open his eyes, at the edge of the asphyxia, he heaved a sigh of relief, enraptured by the vision which presented itself to him: veined and venerable trunks which disappear in foliages, arlequines clouds, ivory and deep green, pouring out their rain of colors, on a turf, staked out by amber and white, of the flower corollas. Slender butterflies flitted here and there, glided over channels in the vigorous stream, their wings opened as they settled on languorous petals. The solitary scholar in the middle of his art, sat at his desk.

Sebio had, for the first time, the impression that his master moved against his harmonious environment. He then understood where the scratching came from, which he had heard by entering. The venerable Matis, barely dressed, blackened anxiously with the feather on a parchment leaf. There were whole piles put down here and there all around him.

"Master?" asked Sebio.

The old homin did not answer right away, continuing to scrawl on his pages as though nothing else mattered.

"Master Lenardi?" takes back the attendant courageously.

"Ah! Sebio. You are there."

"Yes, Ser."

"Loyal supporter Sebio... I liberate you! You can go back home," Lenardi announced while scratching the parchment with his feather.

The young attendant did not understand.

"Master? You liberate me?"

"Yes my friend, go back home, you are no longer an attendant, at least not mine anyway."

"Did I serve you badly?"

"No, Sebio. Contrariwise, I no longer require your services, that is all."

"But Master... I..."

The Royal Botanist stopped one instant and raised eyes towards his servant. He then saw the tears running on the cheeks of Sebio.

"I... I have a last request to entrust to you."

"Sir?"

"If I disappear, I want you to gather all my notes and hide them until a Matis who will carry the locket of Manalitch rightfully claims them."

"But Master, you do not go..."

"Make what I say to you the last time, by Jena!"

"Good. I shall do it, my Master."

"Now leave me, I have a job to do."

The air was lively this night, with eyes reddened by the lack of sleep the Matis waited, hidden in the shrubs which edged one of the roads of the region of Zachini. For some time countless patrols were within the capital and a curfew imposed at the dusk.

"Heretofore everything goes well," murmured one of the unknowns.

"All shall be quiet when we all regain our quarters and you will be outside," dropped another one.

"It weighs me to make you run this risk in all."

"Everything has been weighed and set in motion for a long time. We all know what we risk this evening."

The lantern of a patrol put an end to debate. The tops of Paroks spears of high-pitched angles sparkled and reflected the light of the living lamps. The fugitives held their breath to avoid the announcement of their warm breath in the cold winter air. The guards passed without looking, one of them coughed twice, it was the sign. The four waited an instant as the patrol moved away before dashing forward, stumbling, made numb by their immobile wait.

They joined the target a few hours before dawn. Holding their breath in unison, they crept along the stable wall, hoping that the guards kept their sights diverted. They listened to the gentle shuffles of mektoub, waiting for distraction and found peace.

"Yrkanis... My son... It is necessary for you to escape."

"How? There are no exits. I am as the prisoner butterfly of a lamp."

"I shall put it out for you."

"To put out the lamp or to liberate the butterfly? Zoraï imprisons insects in their light, is it there that it is necessary to search resolution?"

"The time is not in contemplation, but in action. Zoraï congeals living beings in the amber to mark their power at time. You, the heir of Zachini, will engrave your footprint on history."

"Master..."

"Cease calling me Master! You know almost as much as me currently. Your father made me your godfather a long time ago.... Yasson died prematurely and..."

"Yes! Slaughtered."

"...I promised him to instill in you the values which we shared, those of the Matis. I promised him to make a noble and valorous homin of you... A model as he was."

"Father..."

"Yes... I would have liked to be yours. My grandest work."

"But Lea?"

"I cherish Lea because she is my flesh. I shall cherish her even when my destroyed body will not find the way of life. The time will come where Jena will break my life alliance and receive me in the breast as She announced. But it is you, the heir... Son of Yasson and I must be faithful to my given word. Leave the city. Banishment waits for Jinovitch has seen your escape, but it will not take place as he envisioned it."

"My uncle knows?"

"Certainly, he calls it of his wishes because he wants to kill you as he killed your father."

"What must I do?"

"You must act as an insect. But not the butterfly whom all expect to capture in their net to crush it better, no..."

"What would I be, Father?"

"A worm, you will be a worm..."

They were swallowed one after another by the darkness of the stable like a protective belly of a mythological animal. The mask was hidden in the entrails of the hay. A simply made case, a jewel of science.

They looked one instant without speaking, they would have liked to throw themselves into each others arms, to give big slaps on the back to stifle sobs and to stop the tears which betrayed their sadness. But they were Matis, noble and proud and did not show their weakness.

"Eh! Definitely it is time," said one to break the silence and steady his voice.

The cold made things easier as it reddened eyes, turned cheeks crimson, and the tears congealed in stalactites of frost to conceal the emotions much better than the best of assurances.

"Filenai! Nai Sondei!" he went on.

"Na Karan!" they answered from the heart.

They had said farewell before leaving with no outpouring of emotion. They all knew what guided them and their fidelity did not have fault. Among them no Fyros yet they all burned with a sacred fire which enlivens and burns those who brush death in unison, the fire of affinity.

The Matis got undressed completely. Leaving the faded fineries of a past life, Yrkanis prepared for something else, a fragile and difficult gift, future destiny. Prisoner of earthworms or perhaps the sky waited for him a present of Jena and final judgment of errors made.

The prince thought profoundly before swallowing the beverage which would help him to hold stilled for a long time, depriving him of sense, by blending essence and time. The heart slows, not to beat more than in the scope of the unconscious jolts of the wagon.

Rodi helped to thread the mask on his King and to then stretch him out in the dumper truck. It was necessary for him to come back to life. They planted the kernel of a millennium tree in the manure destined to nourish the humus of their forefathers. This was necessary to break the enchantment of a shitty King by the power of the manure.

Lebi Cabelo pulled on the reins to stop the harness at the back of the Great Greenhouse. Rests dried out by the previous delivery formed a black plate against the gray trunk of the building. The carter sighed by noting that he was in time. The day got up slowly but the shade of the big tree with a pediment of chitin still covered the stage of a protective darkness. Having capably maneuvered the animals, he gripped the brake, liberated the clamp which supported the towrope and jumped nimbly down before taking over a shovel which sat enthroned, planted as an altar in the middle of the load which poured slowly.

"Deles silam!"

Lebi, occupied to push manure with shovel, suspended the gesture, by hearing the rasping voice.

"DelEes silAam! I am BAaldi DaliAa, gAArdeEEner of the GreEnHhouse!"

"Hummm...."

"You are LEebii CAabelo, Ii was told about YoouRR aRRIvalL!"

"Sil..."

"Ii am hEre to chEck your lOAd."

"I see, then go there. Check."

"FilAa!"

The young gardener collapsed in manure, skull smashed by the shovel of the carter. Lebi gasped, his hair glued together by the sweat of effort and stress remained immobile as he gripping the handle of the spade, the blade raised and covered with blood.

Something slid suddenly quietly off the wagon into the smoking heap. A moan... Lebi prepared for battle! He suspended his gesture on time, as though

he woke up from a nightmare at the top of the lethal staircase. He threw the shovel to the distance.

"Na Karan!" he cried by rushing to the embryonic form which gesticulated in sludge.

- Dou doum dou doum dou doum dou doum dou doum dou doum dou doum...

The heart of the Prince pumped the blood, eradicating the toxins from the body of Yrkanis.

"Hhhhhhhhheuuuuuuuuffffff!" bawls the Matis by tearing off the mask and absorbed with avidity the air which he had missed. He knelt near Lebi.

"Prince! Prince! It is necessary to run away!" mourns the carter.

But he did not hear him as he was still put out of reason. With confused senses he vomits.

"P.. ince...flew...Karav...to resuscitate...young gardener...killed."

"Siil..."

"Ah! My Prince! Na Karan, all that you want! Do not stay there I ask you!"

"Hummpfff..."

"We must leave, follow the plan. He will be found and the guard alerted!"

"Nae...te..."

"Naete? Please!?"

"Naete... Cease shouting! You bore my temples!"

"Ah Na Ser! You come back!"

"Sil, this goes but by pity cease howling!"

"Master I killed the gardener, the guards will come, it is necessary to leave right away..."

"You know what this means?"

"Yes I know it... I shall postpone them... Na Karan... Run away now."

Two matis locked eyes, prince and carter, reins and reign. Suddenly, Yrkanis turned away, seizing the mask which was lying at his side, he rushed into the back cellar window of the Greenhouse which was for use of the supply in manure. He went down in an instant on a slide of oiled wood before breaking shortly at a dry pile of old manure. He sat on the odorous but saving throne given by Lebi, he thought of the carter, he would never forget him.

The prince knew the Great Greenhouse well, the work of Lenardi. He easily joined the rooms of embalming, borrowing from the unknown ways of the Practitioners. He feared this instant.

Folklore gave to understand that the Sap of the noble bodies was withdrawn, given to the parents to nourish the home, the envelope was digested by the plants chrysalises. But Yrkanis knew that Sap is not, to the homin, a physical substance and harvested.

He took a ceremonious dirk left there by an embalmer before going up to a plant chrysalis. He undertook to incise it at the base liberating an orifice at the foot of the broad stem. The changed plant subsided fast, being in its death throes, as butter which melts under the sun. But it was the untenable smell which came out of the hole that encouraged the prince to put back his mask.

He did not hesitate for long before plunging his head into the narrowed opening. His bare body was inhaled with a noise of sucking and his tense toes, were the last to disappear in the organic entrails of the Royal Conservatory.

Time was suspended while he evolved in the bowels, guided by the movements of the chyme of the plant guts, which burned his skin on the way. No homin still knows where he appeared; red, as the caterpillar of the angelio. But when Yrkanis, son of Yasson, legitimate King of Matis, sniffed the air of the Forest, far from Jino, he was no longer worm nor caterpillar, he was chrysalis and almost a butterfly.

There remained numerous years in banishment before history and Matis gives him reason. During this flustered time, he never forgot those who had allowed him to escape. Among those many were tortured. Lebi the carter, two of the escaped partners, Lenardi Bravichi and many other unknown homins were burned alive. Jena now keeps them.

Rodi di Varello, did escape Jino on time, during a royal hunt. He is now one of the advisers of the King and is heralded as the one who put the mask of survival on the face of the Prince akin to the announcement of a coronation. Some people say that it is because of this mask that Mabreka received the King in the Witherings, they are wrong. It is destiny. Jena is the witness who guided it. But what is destiny when to die is nothing and we can come back to life? And whom am I, the one who narrates you this story?

I am Baldi Dalia and I once died.

4.2.4 Screaming Shadows

Ive found this old cracked parchment, buried deeply under piles and piles of others. It is a Story told by a dying man at his deaths bed. It contains what were probably the last words and confessions of a consciousness that could not keep this terrible secret any longer, to someone he either trusted with them, or who simply did not care. A tale of suffering and regret. The Name of the confessing Man is not know, for the document was torn and smudged in many places and barely decipherable at all. Also the name of the one taking the confession and writing it down for others to read is not known anymore. I will give them to you to read, so that you may come to your own conclusions and judge by yourself the deeds of a desperate man. Dictating his sins at with his dying breath. The document reads as follows:

I remember... yes, I remember. It isnt even hard for me to recall those hours and moments, for they're burned into my mind forever and the sights of this night have been etched into my brain with the sharp blade of a master craftsman.

I was a young member of the city watch. Just a few short weeks ago I had joined up and I was hoping to be promoted into the palace guard someday and from there eventually into the royal guard. Little did I know that my promotion was only to come at a great cost and in the twilight of the prime roots, for I was one of the few guardsmen left, that could be promoted at all. But I still dont

know if Im even worth it, because of my deeds that night. Thinking of what came of them later, but thats not our point here, isnt it? And theres not much time left for me, so let me tell you my Story and then let me die in peace. You want to know about the last night of the old empire, the “Night of Claws”, or “Night of screaming shadows” as some like to call it oh so poetically. Well, a night of claws it definitely was, and also many screaming shadows. . . I surely was one of them.

The previous day our army had left for Trykoth to officially “reclaim” some territories that would guaranty our kingdom a steady water supply in the years to come. As the last of our soldiers vanished between the forests trees I longed to be with them. To reach glory and claim heroic deeds that would ensure my name a place in the records of our people. Little did I know that this night would bring more “heroic” deeds for me to last more than one lifetime.

Me and a few comrades were on our way to the watch house to begin our shift from dusk until dawn. It was warm and the streets were filled with the normal hustle and bustle of the hours just before the closing of the shops. We all were speculating on how long it would take the army to return and what might be keeping the Fyros from their duty of protecting the Tryker borders.

- “Maybe the water rats have let them dry up lately?” One of my friends exclaimed.

Another replied: “No, theyre sending water alright, but the Fyros are fed up with constantly “guarding” their their own latrines.”

We all laughed at that, except for Girio an older member of the watch, our squad leader. He looked on with a thoughtful expression. “I heard theyre fighting. Some speak of a new great fire, others of an unknown army that is attacking the empire from its southern border. Still others speak of monsters. . .”, his voice trailed off.

- “Monsters?!” I replied laughing. “Surely these monsters will run from the Fyros upon first sight, for no self respecting monster will hurt something more ugly than itself.”

Even Girio laughed at this and I momentarily felt proud. Silly, I know. . . We walked on to the watch house unaware of the change that went through the city at first. Then one of our comrades fell behind, walking slower, his head slightly tilted to the right, as if listening to something. We stopped our banter and waited for him to catch up.

- “What is it?” I asked.

- “Dont you hear that?” he replied.

Now we all stopped and listened. A strange buzzing sound was beginning to fill the night air and from far off the crackle of branches was becoming audible, as if something huge was moving through the undergrowth. Before we could puzzle much a scream pierced the warm night air. Coming from above, we all looked up and at first I wasnt sure of what I was seeing. Atop one of the walkways spanning between two hometrees people were running from the middle of the gentle arch. A dark shadow moved there with unnatural speed, strangely flickering in the half-light of the canopy. Then something dropped over the railing of the walkway and fell down right on top of us. At first I thought it was

a branch or part of the ornamentation of the bridges arch, but as something wet splashed against my cheek and the thing landed right before my feet with an audible thump I realized what it was. Dumbstruck we all stared at the severed arm that lay before us. Horrified I saw that its fingers were still moving in a spasmodic clutch. When my own raised hand came away from my face it was red with blood. And again we heard screams. All around the city now voices were raised in alarm and pure terror. As I looked up again what I saw almost made my own blood curdle in my veins. The strange shadow we had seen moved away from the archway. Flying through the air with predatory ease, its huge wings buzzing and trailing blood behind it, flowing in crimson streams from the struggling form of a man speared on its front extremities. Then the giant locust like insect shook itself violently and the man was dropped from its sting. Limply falling to the ground and crashing into a shrub beside the street. The crash startled us from our shocked stupor. As one we began running to the guard house, around us panic and confusion began to take their toll on the late night pedestrians. Everyone was running somewhere and or looking for someone. Panicked screams echoed through the streets and all around the city the forest seemed to move with unseen presences. The bells of the guard house began tolling their shrill notes to summon every available man to arms and as we arrived many of our comrades were already armed and ready to move out against whatever was attacking us. But still many didnt have a clue to what we were up against. And Jena, I wish we had never known. Over the confused din our Captain shouted orders for us to calm down and do our duty.

We grabbed our Kara Krop pikes and ran out into the streets again. My squad tried to make its way to the outskirts of the city, but before we were even halfway through town center, people came running towards us. I never saw so many terrified eyes again. Many were shouting and screaming something about the forest coming for them and snatching away friends, loved ones and strangers alike. Some spoke of Monsters that suddenly appeared from the undergrowth and attacked whatever was in their way, others told of flying beasts that tried to enter the upper floors of hometrees. We ran on and with lungs hurting from the effort our squad finally reached the outskirts of our appointed district. Strangely all was quite except for the buzzing that became louder by the minute. No Homins were about, the smaller buildings abandoned and all hometrees locked against intruders. Cautiously we moved towards the forests edge. Never before had these woods seemed so dark, so malignant to me. I thought I saw movement there, between the tall trees and the lush underbrush, something incredibly fast scuttled there and as we neared the dark bushes, a deep hissing sound emerged. We took a halting step closer and suddenly something leapt at us. It was fast as a falling star, its dark green carapace glistening in the glow of the streetlights behind us. It rushed at us with a sudden ferocity that took us all by surprise, its 4 legs tapping a staccato on the hard ground, front legs raised to sharp points, flat, wide head lowered like a shield to protect its torso. It was about half as tall as a grown man and hacked at us with its front pair of legs. Together we nine quickly killed it with our pikes, keeping our distance, trying to avoid its mad slashing. As it lie twitching before us we gathered around it.

- "What in Jenas Name is that!?"
- "Dragon fetch me, if I know."
- "Its a spider, see its legs?!"
- "A spiders got eight legs, thiss got only six. Its some kind of bug."
- "Tis a really big bug."
- "Keep it together folks, we dont know if there are some more out there."
- "Right, we better keep our eyes open. At last theyre easy to kill..."

Right at this moment the buzzing wed heard the whole time increased even more in volume and a blood freezing shriek came from the darkness beyond the city limits. Answered by another and another a little further to our left and right, other shrieks and deep growling, chattering sounds emitted from the forest all around the city now and from above we heard the sound of breaking branches. Big things were crushing though the canopy and behind us, we heard homin screams and the frantic ringing of the guardhouse bells. Then the darkness beyond our sparse light came alive. I still only remember impressions of giant, slender legs and bodies dislodging themselves from trees where they had crouched camouflaged against the deep brown bark and green bushes. My mind having mercifully spread the shroud of shock over these initial glimpses of the horror that was to come. All around us the forest began moving toward us. Horrified we turned and ran. I freely admit it and Im deeply ashamed of it. But all of us ran that night. Nobody didnt run that night. We didnt stand a chance. Many poor souls stayed behind to fight and were torn to pieces. But just as many of us simply ran and never looked back, or ran right into the waiting claws of other Kitin.

Of course back than they didnt go by that name. Nobody had yet bothered to attach names to the different monsters. How would they? Oh, dont look so surprised. Do you really think someone would see a 7 foot insect come charging right at him and think in his head: "Oh, Ill call that think a Kipuka from now on." and live to write that down?! Ha, silly youth. You think everything is and everythings all been as it is now, eh? Tcha! They had no names. They simply were there, nameless horros, killing everyone the got their claws on. Man, woman or child. They moved through the city like reapers through a field of wheat, harvesting terror and blood. Streaming in thousands from the forest. Dropping onto archways from the low canopy. Climbing up and down hometrees. Simply ripping away the bark of their higher, younger parts, like it was so much paper and crawling into them to get at the soft life hiding there. They were flying through the air, picking up people in full flight, with pincers and stings sharp as swords, ripping and tearing them apart letting the parts drop onto the terrified homins below.

I remember all too clearly my fist glimpse of what came to be known as a Kipesta. It swooped down from the sky unto a group of homins huddling beneath the great root of an old hometree, at first trying to reach them with its sting, but realizing that it didnt fit into the opening and the homins proved to defensive, it simply deflated its strange secretion sack into the hollow. The small space beneath the root immediately filled with searing flames. I was too far away to do anything and too surprised and appalled by this perversity against nature

I was witnessing to do anything about it, but the screams of those trapped and burning alive in that confined space still haunt my dreams after all these years. I hope my release from this torment is soon to come. I saw the heavily armored forms of Kipuka drop down from the canopy like giant pine cones, crushing lucky homins beneath their weight. Unlucky homins were torn limb by limb seconds later, when the Bub emerged from the gore stained craters with clicking pincers to wreak more havoc. I'm not certain I'm lucky that I survived, - Jena knows its more of a punishment. I simply ran, dropped my pike and ran. Dodging other homins and giant insects alike, fleeing headlong into the forest, running until my legs wouldn't support me anymore and I dropped to the floor unconscious from shock and exhaustion. Later I found another group of refugees and we made our way to a Karavan camp they had heard of. Now Im here, at the end of my life. This is my shameful tale and I will tell no more. Now, let me rest.

— excerpt from "Witnesses" from Ridio Sillia, itinerant bard.
(Special Thanks to Acridiel for this chronicle.)

4.3 Chronicles of the Witherings

4.3.1 Tears of Serenity

Many years ago, when homankind had barely ventured forth from the darkness of pre-existence, a nomadic tribe was camped in the heart of the ancient forest lands. The Zoraï chieftain, whose name was Cho, was set back from the campfire under a tree in contemplation of the night sky when a strange presence enlivened the fiber in his body, warmed the liquid within his temples. He closed his eyes. He experienced an inner completion which soothed the wounds within as his eyes welled exuding the first Tears of Serenity.

He slowly opened his eyes and through the blurred vision he saw the source of his inner peace and harmony established upon a tree. The visitation blinked back at him, vanished and then reappeared in front of him. Cho bowed in an act of prostration and the entity spoke: "Kami, hungry," and placed its hand on its chest. Instinctively realizing that the Kami was hungry of heart, Cho rose to his knees and moved his hand to his heart likewise: "Yes, Cho desires more friendship, divine Kami, how can I earn your love?"

The Kami pointed to the tree upon which it had first appeared and Cho immediately understood that the infection of goo there gave rise to the Kami's concern. "I shall settle here, Kami, my people shall serve you and cleanse the land of the devouring sickness as you have cleansed my spirit."

Cho spread the word to his brethren throughout the lands to bring them together around the Kami experience so they too might feel the peace and ease their anguish within. The first magnificent temple to the glory of Jena and her Kami Guardians was built on the very spot of Cho's enlightenment and grew into Zoran, the ancient capital of the Zoraï. And let us remember Cho's words: "It is within the grasp of every homin to feel the Tears of Serenity."

— a Kami story, as told by Jai Bai-Wong, a Zoraï

4.3.2 The Crying Mektoub

My friends please gather round, for I have a story to tell you all. This was first told to me by one I once loved, and sadly haven't seen in many cycles.

Before the Kitin over-ran this land, the Mektoub Breeder, Zhai-Fo Quan and his family lived in the old Zorai homelands.

He was a Homin rich in dappers but poor in love and understandings, yet the only thing he worried about was his daughter, Lio. Unfortunately, to his everlasting anger and bitterness Lio was badly injured by a scared Messab when she was very young. Her leg was broken several times and it never fully healed again. Due to her injuries she was never able to play and run like the other children, and therefore she spent a lot of her time with the Mektoubs of her father.

However, one day when she walked to the feeding place, she realized that a tiny white mektoub, shivering and covered with blood, was standing all alone in the middle of the herd. When Lio walked towards it, it tried to run but didn't get far as it was limping badly. The girl walked home as quickly as she could to tell her father about this odd gain for the herd, and he took her back to the feeding grounds.

There it was, a small distance away from the other Mektoubs, still shivering. Quan ran to it and caught it with a rope to have a better look at it.

- "It's badly hurt; I don't think it will survive. We should put it out of its misery," he mumbled to himself.

Lio however heard this and stumbled to her father begging him not to kill it. "Look at me, father, I can't run like the others and yet I may live. Please don't kill it, let me keep it and take care of it. It will need someone that understands its pain and I do!" she cried.

Zhai-Fo, whose heart could only be touched by his daughter finally agreed, and he handed his daughter the rope that the tiny white Mektoub was tied to.

- "I will call you Xia-Lu Xuangi and I shall take care of you my little friend," she whispered happily into its ear.

From this day on Lio was never seen without Xia-Lu Xuangi and was never unhappy.

Her father was never really reconciled to caring for this little Mektoub, as it was eating as much as the others but was unable to do any work. However, he kept it to make his daughter happy, and when he saw her one day riding the little Xia-Lu Xuangi he couldn't help but smile.

Unfortunately, those days didn't last forever, and soon came the message of a great and unknown threat. Giant insects that would kill Homins and animals alike, never showing any mercy. Many people from around fled to the bigger cities but Zhai-Fo Quan did not want to believe in the danger, because he would have to give up everything he owned, so he stayed on, and with him remained his family.

The day soon arrived, however, the day that screaming and blood-covered Homins passed their home, hysterically crying about great Insects slaughtering everyone!

In shock, they packed the most essential things on several mektoubs and prepared some mounts. When Quan saw his daughter preparing Xia-Lu Xuangi with a saddle, he snapped at her, “You will not take that crippled Mektoub! It won’t be fast enough and we need to flee now!” Lio cried and screamed that she didn’t want to leave her best friend behind, but her father replied even more angrily that she wasn’t to worry about a simple Mektoub.

Quan grabbed Lio and pulled her on his mount after he checked on his wife and his two sons. With much protest from the girl, they rode with a fast pace towards the nearest bigger city, hoping to find peace. Lio couldn’t but cry and finally she managed to loosen the grip of her father and look back.

In a cloud of dust, with a determined face, she saw Xia-Lu Xuangi running as fast as she had ever seen him running after them. He was a bit behind but he could almost keep up and the girl did not know if she was supposed to cry or laugh.

At one point the road was blocked by a fallen log, and they all had to dismount from the Mektoubs and lead them over the log. Lio used this situation to run back and meet with her little white Mektoub. She cried and hugged it, petting it and telling it how sorry she was for leaving it behind. At this moment however, an immense insect came out from behind the trees only several yards away from Xia-Lu Xuangi and Lio. All screamed out in horror and backed away from it, except Lio who hadn’t seen the creature yet. But the little white Mektoub sensed the danger and with a quick and strong move, it pushed the little girl towards her family. Quan used this moment, pulling his daughter away from the monster and moving back, step by step.

His daughter was not crying, but rigid with shock, as the last thing she saw before the branches of the log blocked her way was her little white Mektoub rearing up, ready to fight the Kitin and yet looking at her with tears in its eyes.

From this day on, Quan was poor in dappers but rich in love, for he had seen what love and friendship can accomplish.

— Ci-Quang Juani

4.3.3 The Stance of Daïsha

During the authority of Lin Cho, the Fyros carried out an incursion on Zoran, the Zoraï ancient capital. The Fyros were successfully pushed back and the great wall thereon was extended to encompass all frontiers with barbarian dominions. Thanks to the impressive observation towers, the city bore hardly any damage though the little damage that was inflicted sunk like an arrow into the heart of Zoraï culture. Indeed, the fire blasting of the national library – whose holdings included many centuries of scriptures inscribed on mektoub parchment – made the grand council of sages realize the fragility and the bulk of their files of learning.

High magicians came together and a stanza was devised to reduce the volume of the parchments into spheroids thus allowing greater expanses of knowledge to be transported more easily. But there was a drawback, resisting properties

were lost or weakened in the process and a container was needed to protect the spheres from the ravages of time and fire.

So it came to pass that, by order of the high authority of Lin Cho, master crafters throughout the land were summoned in the event of a competition to find a new non-perishable means of storing the wisdom of ages.

By and by the day approached and villages and towns all over the land were sending their prime candidates into the village of Tai-Toon where the new library was to be set up. About fifty master crafters in all with their apprentices were soon adding their final inspirations to their fabulous fabrications amid much ceremony. There were finely carved magical boxes, urns and jars of every shape, color and size made for the storage of the spheres of knowledge.

One young crafter by the name of Hari Daisha, from the remote village of Din-Tin, had opted for a more rustic style and had ingeniously hollowed out a bodoc horn so that it could contain up to five spheres of knowledge. On the eve of the grand day, squatting outside his tent, Hari was busy applying the final coat of his fire proof potion to the horn when a well known city crafter stopped by and cast and amused eye.

- "What is this, yama (young homin)? The musicians' quarters are nearer the exhibition grounds, up near the podium!"

- "No, Master Seng, this horn is my competition piece. See, it closes the spheres of knowledge in with this watertight flap, it is resistant to fire and, best of all, can easily be dissimulated in nature in case barbarians come looking."

- "Amazing! A stack of bodoc horns, how deceiving!" jibed Seng who then perched a heavy hand on the young crafter's shoulder. "Heed my words, sages will always enjoy a pretty design. If you want them to cast so much as an inquisitive eye at your effort, I'd brighten up the coarse exterior!" With that Seng continued on proudly to his own camp where his chela was giving a last polish to a magnificent box of amber.

The young Zoraï looked down at the crude bodoc-horn receptacle. "Mmm, old Seng may be right, tomorrow the jury must study many innovations and then pronounce their verdict before the great assembly. I'd better add a little extra sheen to it to make it stand out a bit! Huh, I may not be able to afford amber but there's plenty of sap in the river yonder."

Jungle Night was closing in as Hari, fatigued and irritated at Seng's chaff, squatted down to his chore of boiling down some sap to produce a firm jelly which he could then use to rub into the receptacle to give it a green sheen. The night lamp attracted all the fireflies of the night, Hari grumbled at yet another that danced between his eyes. "Ah, get lost before I zap ya!" he groused waving a sap sodden hand. But the firefly was determined to make a nuisance of itself. "Right, you asked for it!" Hari took a scoop of sap, rolled it into a ball, thought up a binding spell off the top of his head and zapped the insect which fell to the ground in a prison of eternity. "Wow!" exclaimed Hari, "Look at that! I've bound it in sap!"

On retrieving the translucent green ball of sap, he was able to marvel at the intricate anatomy of the creature and behold the full beauty of its highlighted wings that no homin had ever seen before. "Any sage would give his book of

stanzas for that," he thought, and an idea was borne into his head. All night long he practiced zapping and dezapping fireflies to perfect the power words of the stanza until at last, in the small hours of the morning, a firefly was able to slip its tarsi from its spherical prison and flew away totally unscathed.

Early next morning, the hustle and bustle of competitors getting ready and making their way to the parade ground soon gave way to the stillness of the vacant tents. Vacant, all except for one. Hari, still under the effects of the sap fumes and a hard night's work, had fallen back into deep sleep and slumbered on and on.

It was the distant sound of horns signaling that the judges had reached their decision that finally stirred him from his dream. No sooner had he opened an eye than he was running with his beads of sap over to the podium where none other than Master Seng was proudly holding up his box for all to see. "Amber," he intoned, "will last forever and this box will give lifelong protection to anything stored inside it." He then turned, according to tradition, to give the box to the master sage in exchange for the winning medal.

- "Master Seng," began the great sage in his ceremonial voice, "I proudly pres. . ."

- "Wait!" piped in Hari, all out of breath and squeezing himself out from the front row of spectators. "Your reverence, my piece has yet to be judged."

- "W. . . what do we have here?! Silence, the winner is chosen. . ."

- "My lord, if I may," interrupted Seng, who then pulled the sage aside. "I recognize this lad, he has an uncommon mind, one of a fool or of a genius. To discourage his efforts now, could mean killing a bright bird of fancy in the egg later."

- "Yes, Seng, I see your point, it takes every twist of nature to make the world whole," agreed the sage then motioned to Hari who brought out a bead of sap from his bodoc horn and held it up to the sun for all to see. The sage examined the sap-bound fly not without wonder.

- "Interesting. . ."

- "It's a new process, your reverence." Then, with a wave of the other hand and an utterance, Hari conjured his reversing stanza releasing the firefly which took to the air amid the "oos" and "ahhhs" of the surrounding spectators. "Is there anything more fragile than a firefly?"

- "Very interesting," conceded the sage, "but sap won't resist against the first drop of rain let alone the ravages of time!"

- "No, but amber will," put in Master Seng stepping forward to Hari offering his beautiful creation in one hand and a sphere in the other. "Come, young homin, take the amber you need from this box and show us what your magic can do with this sphere of knowledge. If you succeed, you can pay me back with your winnings!" chuckled the great crafter.

In the twinkling of an eye, the young crafter had dissolved a portion of amber which he then directed to seal the sphere of knowledge. The whole crowd clapped and cheered as the sage, muted by the clamor of praise, took young homin by the arm and raised it in the air.

The balls of amber were thereafter perfected into cubes for easy storage with the help of Seng, who, incidentally, also made the first great Chest of Wisdom to store them in. To add security, the council of Sages added a special binding seal to ensure that only initiated fellows could handle the precious contents.

— as written by an anonymous Zoraï scribe

4.3.4 Mabreka

Part One

After the destruction of the rainbows during the kitin war I had taken to the bush with my family and a dozen survivors from our village. I still recall the continual pang in my stomach, the anxiety, the insecurity. We roamed from one shelter to the next oft times sleeping in trees whenever the smell of kitin was still thick in the air. We had been living this precarious life for full four years when one day tidings came to my father from a Kami of a road that would take us to new lands, where the rainbows had delivered our brethren.

- "We must leave before the hot summer sets in," urged my mother clasping her hands in hope when my father announced the news to all the group.

- "But there's a problem, the road lies in the northern regions."

- "Then we cannot go," said Si Li-Ching, our village spiritual elder.

- "But why?" my mother implored. The deception in her plea shot like a bolt through my heart.

- "Because it would mean crossing Matis and Fyros territory."

- "The old one is right, Lian, not only would we have to avoid the kitins, but also the blade of the barbarians. He knows, he has seen the wars between the three peoples, their thirst for blood has no end..."

- "For many seasons now, the relentless force of the Kamis and the Karavan has been bending the kitins in their resistance, and like the tallest tree in high winds, before long they will be completely broken, before long these lands will be ours again to rebuild..."

- "But when, your reverence?! How much longer must we endure?!" pleaded my mother who then turned to my father with a hand on her swollen belly, I'd never seen such fire in her eyes: the desperate passion of a mother for the life of her children. "No," she said, "this may be our only chance to start afresh, we must leave, Leng. Look at us, we become more like savages everyday, nothing is clean here anymore! I go, and I go now, Leng!" My mother turned on her heels, sped round our makeshift quarters like a whirlwind gathering things together and took off out of camp with my little sisters tagging on her dress behind her. I turned to my father whom I loved dearly, but what son could leave his mother alone in the wilderness?! So I skipped off to join her myself despite him calling me back. To my relief we hadn't traveled three hundred yards when my father was level with us. He tried to reason with my mother but her eyes were blazing before her and she marched on as mulish as a madakam.

- "Lian, listen to me!"

- "No, Leng, I won't fester in these lands no more!"

- "Wait, Lian. Hold on!!" My father took her by the arm and then perched his large hands on the rounds of her shoulders. Her eyes fired their determination at him.

- "I'm determined, Leng, I want to live under a roof, I want my children to have a proper education, a future..."

- "Lian, my dear Lian, but you're going the wrong way, the north is in the opposite direction! Besides, the night will soon be upon us, better head out in the morning..." My mother, now that she took in the full meaning of his words, slung her arms around his neck and pressed her head into his chest.

Part Two

The next morning we left amid tears for the life we were leaving and determination for the new one beyond. The others of our village would not be persuaded to join us, preferring to stay behind in the lands where they were born.

Before we set out my father pulled me to one side: "Son," he said gravely, "in the jaws of strife every homin is equal, you must be brave and now learn to be as good as your elders." He then gave me a dagger which I tucked into my belt like a sword. "I want you to watch over your mother and your sisters at all times. My hands will be full with finding resources and nourishment and steering the mektoubs through the barbarian lands to the great road."

It took us a full season to reach that road. Fresh new colors danced before our eyes and strange whooping and cackling played on our ears as we threaded our way through the lush forest where we learnt to pick berries and fruit. My father provided venison with his magic, some of the game we found there bore a likeness to that of the jungle often differing only in the color of the hide.

The desert was hardest going of all and the fat of the land was oft times pretty thin there. Worse than this, the Kami had told my father that we would come to a 'line of water' that would lead us west to the great road, but when we arrived at the given place guided by the stars, we found the river had run dry. We could but trek on along the barren riverbed though my father was none too easy about riding like this in open country, especially as our mektoub packers had become strangely restless as if they sensed something following us over the ridge of the bank. Fearing we were being tracked by some wild beast or barbarians, he spent many a sleepless night keeping watch over us. One morning the mektoubs were particularly jittery, my sisters were placed on the beasts so that we could lengthen our stride before the heat sapped our energy. "The river must resurface somewhere yonder," he said, "the Kami could not have been mistaken. Besides, I can almost smell it in the air." We trudged on along the soft dry ground as best we could sucking coral pebbles to deceive our thirst and humming songs to take our minds off the droning insects and our aching legs. It was my mother who suffered most.

I remember noticing her feet were swollen with so much marching in the dry silt. She never complained though I knew she was in pain and that it would do the baby inside her belly no good. We'd halted in the shade of a badoa tree to take refuge from the scorching sun a while until it abated. I slipped up the bank in search for takoda leaves to bathe her feet despite my father calling me

back. Over the ridge of the bank my eyes were met by the sight of the ruins of a deserted settlement. Carefully, dagger at the ready, I sneaked to the nearest tumbledown dwellings. There wasn't a soul to be seen, just the sound of the wind playing on the creaking bits of doors. From what I could make out it had been an outpost of some kind and I must have hit upon a guard room. Under a pile of rubble I caught sight of the tip of a boot. I pushed the debris away and found its double, just the thing for my mother! I tugged at both boots till they came loose to reveal the bony feet of a skeleton no doubt belonging to a guard buried under what must have been the roof. I gave a yelp, tucked the boots under my arm and bolted down the embankment as fast as my legs would carry me.

My panic and fright was well worth my mother's delight, though none too feminine, the desert boots fitted her like a glove though I didn't say who they'd belonged to! I remember how she clapped her hands just like a child. It suddenly struck me that, beneath her mothering ways, there still resided in her the little girl she had been at my age. I was swollen with pride in the secret knowledge that now she knew she could lean on me. And at the grand age of seven and a half I felt as tall as my father.

When I told of the outpost my father gently clipped the back of my head. "Come, brave little frippo," he said, "I've a feeling your outpost has another surprise in store for us. Where there's a homin settlement there's a water well!" We all pushed up the bank to the highest point of the dune, and there, on the other side of the village, not fifty paces from where we had been trekking along the dried river bed, a beautiful shimmering ribbon of water thread its way as far as the eye could see from the east to the west. It in fact turned out to be a narrow canal five paces wide that must have been dug by the hands of homins. "This is the water line the Kami spoke of!" exclaimed my father. "To think we've been walking virtually parallel to it, which explains the mektoubs' restlessness. They've smelt it for the past days!!"

But our high spirits were quickly dashed on perceiving a dark spec way yonder where the dust was kicked up which, we figured, could only be a large company of barbarians making their way too to the grand route. "We need not fret," concluded my father, "they are at least half a day's march ahead of us and have their sights fixed as do we to the west. We shall ride along the water line as long as we keep our distance."

So thereon we followed the water canal which assured us of fish and refreshment, virtually all the way to the grand road. What is more, we no longer needed to worry where to set up camp for the night, we simply had to follow in their footsteps, we even became reassured by their presence ahead. For the way was no longer an unknown passage as we could see with our own eyes others preceding us, be they barbarians they were still homins with similar needs to us. That much we'd grasped on walking through the ruins of the ravaged outpost. Rummaging through them instructed us as to their desert ways and their ingenuity never ceased to make us marvel. On settling into camp one evening, my mother found an ingenious instrument for peeling succulent cactus fruit that the barbarian convoy had left behind.

Relief and jubilation filled our bodily fiber when at last we came upon the first sign post as promised by the Kami that pointed the way to the newfound lands. Every sign post thereafter never failed to lift our spirits in the knowledge that there would be an end to our ordeal, just as long as we pushed on. We knew too that it would take many more seasons for us to reach our final destination, and that no doubt heartache and anguish lay in wait. I well recall one incident in particular that came to give us another vision of hominity...

Part Three

We were traveling over some grueling terrain following a canyon ridge when the trail forked off into two tracks. From where we were standing we could see that one sloped round the canyon to the bottom and up again. The other track cut a path to a wooden bridge spanning the ravine to the other side. We were desperately lacking water at that point, it was sweltering and we were tired. Across the bridge the going looked all the smoother, the vegetation so much greener and there was a waterfall glistening in the scorching sun. But what really made my father's mind up was seeing the silhouettes of barbarian mektoub cavaliers ahead on the slow track in the distance climbing a hill, brandishing their swords, then riding back up towards us. "We have at least a two hour start on them, we can make it to the bridge if we hurry, once over we'll cut it down, it's our only chance!"

We hurried on towards the bridge with the barbarians at our heels and closing in fast. I couldn't make out why they were so determined to catch us, though I had no time to dwell on the thought, I had all my energy fixed on moving my legs and controlling the sinking feeling that we wouldn't make it. We were but fifty paces from the bridge and the galloping of mektoubs rumbled louder in my brain with every step. "Don't look back, run for the bridge!!" shouted my father.

We pushed on, I looked back despite myself to see three roaring riders brandishing their swords not four hundred paces behind us. The bridge was but thirty yards ahead but then our mektoubs became panicky, started to rear up, and my father reached for my sisters just in time before they bolted! Still we pushed on, we were barely twenty paces from the bridge, but then as we passed an alcove in the canyon wall horror struck twice!! In the form of two great kirotas, kitin soldiers, that had been lying in wait!

They came lumbering at us clicking their enormous powerful pincers. My father stood alone before them trying to hold them back with his magic as we got to the bridge only to find that planks were missing making it impassable.

My father was weakening before my very eyes, his spells now failed him, and his mace was becoming slower, the kirotas would soon be on top of him. I expected the barbarians to halt in their chase on seeing the creatures but they broke into a faster gallop and came storming towards us. I drew my dagger and stood before my mother and sisters as suddenly arrows, spears and magic unknown to us went hurtling through the air then hitting the monsters full on. The riders jumped off their saddles to fight side by side with my father sinking their lethal weapons into the chinks of the kitin carapace to finish them off.

A great Matis barbarian strode up to my sapless father who had sunk to his

knees in shear fatigue. The Matis warrior whose name was Matini, took him by the shoulders and lifted him back onto his feet.

- "Homin," he said, "never have I seen such a show of magic."

- "Never in my life have I seen one homin hold off two kitin soldiers!" said Kalus, the Fyros.

- "I thought we'd never make it to yous in time," said Bremmen, the Tryker.

Though the words we did not thoroughly understand, the meaning was plain to see. It was plain too that my father was moved by their fraternity.

- "We've been following your progress since you joined the water line at the ruins of Pekith. We saw you take the bad road, we tried to signal warning of the kitin ambush, then we doubled back."

- "Homins... brothers, now I see clear, how can I repay you?" gesticulated my father with his right hand on his heart.

- "By riding with us to the newfound lands, in unity we shall stand better chance," said the Matis. "Come, we must be on before other soldier kitins appear, the area is infested, there is a Prime Root opening nearby where they nest."

- "There are many more of our company yonder, we shall give you food and drink," reassured Kalus.

- "By the way, I hope you liked the cactus peeler, madam!" winked Bremmen to my mother. "My wife thought it would come in handy for you."

Our mektoubs were retrieved for my sister and mother. "Come, there is room for two," said the Matis to my father and heaved him onto his saddle. My youngest sister took place behind the Fyros, and I had a great time traveling with Bremmen, the bravest and wittiest of homins there ever was.

My baby brother was born on that road amid homins of every race. As a tribute to our peoples united my father named him Matini Bremmen Kalus Cheng-Ho! Though we called him Mabreka for short!

— as told by Gangi Cheng-Ho, a Zoraï Sage

5 Chronicles of the New Beginning - Since 2525 (JY)

5.1 Erlan's Chronicles

5.1.1 Preface to Chronicles

Time is like a river which passes endlessly towards an ever distant horizon on its journey to its end, evading those that travel on it by always remaining out of reach. As far back as I can recall there have always been parchments or amber cubes to tell the tales of our forefathers who lived before us. The long succession of these borrowed stories tell of the tortuous and hard ways. One thousand times they have been interpreted and one thousand times retold by other hands.

I rarely questioned in the course of my life my ultimate and unfailing memory. But now the years are taking toll on my old and weary bones and I feel it is my duty to entrust, as others have done before me, the history of my life. As long as it is possible to bring forth from this old memory, which sometimes hesitates but still remembers, I will leave behind my steps, my footprints on my beloved Atys. What nicer wish could I ever pronounce than that my writings will one day join the esteemed records of those chroniclers who came before me. Today I dare to finally narrate to others all of the memories of intimate friends and all which I observed, and to write, in my turn, chapters of the Chronicles of Atys.

Erlan, Chronicler

5.1.2 The Revelation of Tryton

The year 2528 turned out to be a profound turning point for the people of Atys. While the Powers seemed to be on the wane and many guilds were growing in volume, an event uncovered a crucial issue: the destiny of the homins, facing their gods.

One guild that had lingered in obscurity for more than two decades began to re-emerge: the Guild of Elias, a group of homins who follow in the footsteps of the mysterious Elias Tryton, a mythical character who had appeared during the dark ages of the Great Swarming. Members of the guild have been seen in several cities, apparently gathering information. They were hunted down by Karavan followers, who view this guild as a band of dangerous heretics. The Kami worshipers intervened, and the tensions between the disciples of Jena and those of Ma-Duk increased another notch.

The Elias guild organized a secret meeting that was attended by several homin representatives. Speaking on behalf of Tryton, the guild made this revelation: the Goddess Jena would soon be making a personal appearance on Atys, leading her heavenly legions, to destroy Ma-Duk and the Kamis. By revealing this news, Tryton was announcing a holy war between the Powers, a war that would tear Atys apart and lead to the deaths of many homins. The Elias guild beseeched the people to unite in order to prepare for the worst.

Tryton's announcement spread quickly all over the Bark and the reactions were swift. The Kamis asked their followers to join forces to defend the planet against Jena and her supporters, who had nothing to offer but death and servitude. The Karavan cursed Tryton for revealing the Goddess's intentions to the Kamis, and in turn stated that the true design of Ma-Duk was to devour the vital force of the homins to enable him to survive the Goo. The four homin sovereigns, the Great Sage Mabreka, King Yrkanis, Emperor Dexton and Governor Still Wyler, all spoke to their people to enlist their support in the coming war. There were some homins who publicly renounced any involvement, others who espoused union and freedom for all hominity, some joining the ranks of the Tryton followers.

And so began a troubled time, filled with agonizing choices and the re-emergence of old, but forgotten, conflicts. Several centuries after the dawn of civilization, the divine powers that had guided the homin people were heading

for a confrontation.

— excerpt from The Erlan Chronicles, by Erlan, chronicler.

5.1.3 The Call from the Powers

Some time after Elias Tryton's warning to the homin peoples, his prediction became reality. The sacred war left the domain of preparation and entered the battlefield.

The emissaries of the Karavan organised a big assembly at Yrkanis while the spokesmen for the Kami gathered their faithful at Zora. Homins worried about their fate attended in great numbers. Each power exhorted its listeners to rally under their banner, condemning the other because of past sins and current intentions. The Karavan promised to protect the homins against the peril of the demons of nature, who wished to "assimilate" the homins. The Kami promised to safeguard Atys and to defend the homins' freedom.

The homins reacted enthusiastically to those speeches in which their suzerains took part. A large number of them lined up under the banners of the Kami or the Karavan, ready to take up arms in order to defend their faith and their future. Others were appalled by the thought of the hardships that the war would bring upon them.

After the two big Kami and Karavan assemblies, their representatives came to preach among the four peoples once more. The Karavan asked its faithful to build temples to Jena once again. The previous temples had been devoured by the kitins during the Great Swarming. These temples would be the home of the Goddess, a shelter for the faithful, and the base on which Jena would once again found her church. Ma-Duk asked her faithful to build sanctuaries so that her spirit was ever closer to her adorers and ever ready to protect them. The faithful joyfully welcomed the divine word. The Emperor Dexton and the Grand Sage Mabreka promised to construct Ma-Duk's sanctuaries and reject the temples of Jena. In contract, King Yrkanis rejected the sanctuaries of Ma-Duk and promised a temple to the Goddess Jena. Alone among the homins, the Trykers agreed to build a place consecrated to each of the divinities.

Finally, the long-awaited or long-feared day arrived. The building of the temples could commence. Around Zora, Yrkanis, Pyr and Fairhaven the building sites of the temples and sanctuaries were erected, waiting for the homins. In a torrent, homins rushed to the building sites, received their missions and left their lands far behind, heading for the bleak place which had once been ravaged by the Great Swarming. For the first time in many a year homins once again trampled the ground of their Ancient Lands. Some homins didn't share in the jubilation, their hearts being heavy with worry, and secretly they hoped for a message from Elias Tryton.

— excerpt from The Erlan Chronicles, by Erlan, chronicler.

5.1.4 The Dunes of Aelius

Emotions ran high among the homins that day. They tread once more upon the lands of their ancestors, a few dunes lost in the desert where the Fyros had lived before the Great Swarm came. But the homins weren't there to reconquer the land nor to feast; the divine powers had sent them there to collect the resources needed to build their temples. The collection of these resources was to provoke a veritable blood bath on the Dunes of Aelius.

The same raw materials were needed to build both the temples of Jena and the sanctuaries of Ma-Duk. Within a few minutes, the Kamist and Karavaner harvesters were fighting over the deposits they had discovered. The warriors grabbed their weapons, the magicians invoked the supernatural forces and soon a pitched battle was under way.

Day and night, the homins clashed in the name of Jena and Ma-Duk. The battlefield fluctuated, each side taking it momentarily before being pushed back under the weight of a counter-attack. In the meantime, the harvesters filled their bags with the shells, resins and wood of Aelius. The presence of kitins made their task extremely dangerous. Fighters were kept off the front line to repel the kitin attacks. Fortunately, this homin intrusion didn't provoke any reaction from the kitins.

Weighed down with raw materials, the harvesters returned to the construction sites and handed their precious loads over to the master crafters, who then distributed them to the crafters to turn into parts for the future temples. The heroes' hearts were filled with joy and pride. Their names would be recorded for ever more on steles created by the gods, saving them from the oblivion and the void into which ordinary homins sink.

Not all shared this joy and pride. Some homins were disgusted by the suffering and death brought about by the divine quarrel. These unfortunates wept to see their dream of universal fraternity shattered by divine will. In their time of despair, Tryton sent them his emissaries, but the message delivered aroused anger and exasperation and was swept aside in shouts and recriminations. Tryton once again warned the homins about Jena and Ma-Duk. He also maintained that, as long as the two powers were fighting each other, homins still had hope but, if one defeated the other, then homins would be enslaved for evermore. So Tryton asked the homins to take part in the fight in order to maintain the balance of power and to keep hope alive...

Some time later, the deposits on the Dunes of Aelius began to dry up. The homins were still far from finishing the parts of the temples to be built using the resources extracted from the Dunes. However, the two sides were on an equal footing, no faction having managed to gain the upper hand. Impressed by the devotion of their respective followers, both Jena and Ma-Duk helped them. The parts needed to build the temples were multiplied through divine intervention! This miracle strengthened the faithful's fervour even more. It was now time to leave the Dunes of Aelius; the building of the temples would continue in another place, on the peaceful banks of a forgotten lake.

— excerpt from *The Erlan Chronicles*, by Erlan, chronicler.

5.1.5 Forgotten Places

At the request of the divine powers, homins were sent to the Old Lands to collect the resources needed to build the temples. Because of these expeditions, places that had been forgotten since the Great Swarm, such as the Dunes of Aelius, the Lake of Olkern and the Wood of Almati, were rediscovered. Each of these regions was named after a celebrated homin from the time when the civilisations were at the height of their splendour.

Aelius was a famous Fyros general.

He was greatly interested in the training given to young Fyros recruits; his favourite saying was "sweat saves blood". In his opinion, the training given didn't go far enough if the Fyros were to be the best warriors on Atys. After years of trying in vain to change the Fyros traditions, Aelius resigned from his position in the Imperial Army to devote himself to improving the training of Fyros warriors. Accompanied by some of his friends, he disappeared into the desert to look for a suitable place to train future Fyros warriors. A formation of dunes encircling a plain attracted his attention; a few months later, the camp was ready.

Over the years an ever-increasing number of Fyros came to complete their warrior training at the Dunes of Aelius. The prowess of these volunteers proved Aelius right. His training programme was officially adopted and is still used by the Fyros Empire.

The training camp was destroyed by the kitin invasion. Its remains are most likely situated under the camp installed by the Kami.

Olkern was one of the Tryker people's greatest poet-adventurers.

The exploits, both real and imaginary, which he put into verse were much loved in his day. Some tales, such as "Matis and King of the Bodocs" even enjoyed success among the other homin peoples, with the exception perhaps of the Matis aristocracy itself.

Olkern had chosen a peaceful place to write his poems, an isolated lake, upon which he built himself a floating house. He disappeared in the Great Swarm, along with his house and many of his works.

Almati was a celebrated Matis botanist.

Towards the end of his life, he became the royal court's Master Botanist. His responsibilities included the sylviculture of plants destined to house the royal apartments of future generations. Almati chose a place suitable for the development of these plants. Over several years, he planted hundreds of young seedlings in an area which soon bore his name.

His learning enabled him to accelerate the growth of these young trees. The beauty of these trees and the soft light dappled by the dense foliage made the wood a favourite spot for a stroll among those Matis with melancholic tendencies.

Rumour had it that Almati was also an alchemist and that he indulged in reprehensible work. His close ties to the royals discouraged any attempts at investigation and provided him with ample means. Almati's detractors discreetly put it about that the old man and his devoted young assistants worked in a

secret laboratory situated in mysterious caverns buried under the trees' roots. None of his enemies ever succeeded in finding the entrance. Several curious homins disappeared in the Wood of Almati in mysterious circumstances.

As the rumours increased with the disappearance of melancholic subjects, the King finally resolved to ask his Master of the Palace to look into the affair and this person who had become rather troublesome. Luckily or unluckily for Almati, a few days later the Great Swarm beat down upon the Matis kingdom. Like many others, Almati disappeared in the turmoil and his caverns became a place which both alchemists and botanists longed to visit, but which was completely inaccessible.

— excerpt from *The Erlan Chronicles*, by Erlan, chronicler.

5.1.6 Kitins Stir... Homins! Prepare!

Kitin Stir... Homins! Prepare!

During the winter of the 3rd Cycle, 2544, while the fertile forests of the Matis froze under harsh wind and blowing snow, the Fyros demonstrated their dangerous curiosity once again... with destructive consequences.

Reports from the Rangers mention the appearance of a Kizarak of exceptional size. It is impossible to know how this discovery reached the ears of the inhabitants of the Burning Desert so quickly, but nevertheless, it piqued the appetites of the curious Fyros.

Ignoring the lessons of the past, the Fyros Scholar, Daeronn Cegrips, spear-headed an expedition to the depths of the Prime Roots and descended with his troops into Demon's Lap, his expedition making its way with Stavon swords and Cleven axes into the mass of Kitins. Nothing in the *Chronicles* mentions if they managed to find and kill the monster, but the consequences of their folly are well known.

The Homins of the Bark paid the price for this transgression, because the enraged Kitins did not delay in their response to the intrusion. Bursting from the soil, pouring out of their invincible nests, the Kitin reminded all life on Atys that the depths of the Prime Roots was their Kingdom alone.

...

The news of the Fyros' carelessness spread, as though carried by the wind, through the New Lands. Terrified of a re-occurrence of the terrible events of the Great Swarm, the leaders of the four regions summoned their people. In the Agora of Pyr, in the Palace of Yrkanis, at Frogmore Place in Fairhaven and at the Stage in Zora, all Homins presented themselves, fearful and with weapons in hand, determined not to abandon their homes once more to the Kitin.

Erlan, Chronicler

in *The Columns of Erlan*, on 2544 CA III

5.1.7 Spring, when tents blossomed

In autumn of the 1st AC in 2546, the leaders of the four peoples were each seeking to assemble their people. Thus it was that during that time, the town

criers of the Desert Empire, of the Forest Kingdom, of the Federation of New Trykoth and of the Theocracy of the Witherings called for all homins to gather.

Following the announcements, Patriots, Subjects, Citizens, Initiates and non-citizens of all races met their respective leaders at the same time*, converging on the Agora in Pyr, the Yrkanis Stage, Fairhaven's Frogmore Place and the Grand Place of Zora.

Even though none of the announcers gave reason for the meetings, rumor ran rampant across the bark of Atys. The activities of the imperial, royal, federal and dynastic agents gave reason to believe that the leaders were, each on their own, working on comparable projects and would be calling for their peoples' help and good will in short time.

And so were the similar plans revealed by the leaders. Homankind seemed willing and able to strengthen its grasp and dominance on the lands chosen for the New Beginning.

Even after two generations, the events and trauma of the Great Swarming was so deeply rooted in the minds of the peoples that, when the leaders announced their scouts reporting unusual Kitin activity in the New Lands, the homins reacted immediately.

As this threat was found to be significant, the leaders began the construction of new encampments throughout the territories their peoples had settled more than sixty Jena Years ago to escape the Kitin. It wasn't beofre long that caravans of Mektoub packers, guided by Patriots, Subjects, Citizens and Initiates were making tracks in the New Lands to supplies for the construction of the military encampments being erected across the bark.

Many hands were needed to aid in the construction of the encampments; people to harvest raw materials for defense and construction and people to transport the heavy packages to the construction sites. The representatives overseeing the work were quickly approached by homins eager to help with the construction of the camps. Patriots went to speak to Abytheus Abygrain on Cheapside Market in Pyr, Anibro Listy near the stables in Yrkanis was the destination for Matis Subjects, Baksan Ba'Darins at the entrance of Fairhaven gave direction to Citizens and Ba-Ci Du near the Zora stables instructed Zoraï Initiates.

Time has passed and despite the best efforts of harvesters and suppliers, they were struggling to erect the military camps. Patriots, Subjects, Citizens and Initiates worked hard to finish the projects as quickly as possible, but progress was far short of the planning made by the engineers, and the Kitin threat was brewing... Each day, valiant fighters, covered with scars and bruises, fought back the Kitins. However it appeared that, despite their small numbers, the Kitin of the Depths did not want to give up their foothold on the surface.

There were some notable developments that accelerated the progress. Emperor Dexton accepted the help of the Barkers tribe, which aided the completion of the camps in the Burning Desert. In the forest domain of King Yrkanis, the royal botanist Perinia developed new fibers that greatly accelerated the construction of the tents. The Tryker sites received unexpected help from the Silt Sculptors tribe: One morning, builders in Aeden Aqueous saw them come in

a long Mektoub caravan loaded with parts that any builder would consider a treasure. As for the sites in the Witherings, the Kamis undoubtedly used their magics to help the Masked People.

These developments gave short bursts to the establishment of the military camps, but it was mainly the tenacity of the peoples that managed to construct most of the towers, and saw the first towers and tents completed in the last hours of the 1st AC 2546.

In the spring of the next cycle, the Kitins once more showed their appetite for conquest, conquest of the bark of Atys.

Slowly but surely, from the depths of Atys, the Kitins invaded the new lands.

Slowly, without faltering, they became more and more numerous in homin territories.

Slowly, the homin's fear grew. A new invasion had begun.

Certain peoples had succeeded in finishing their construction sites before the invasion began. The Fyros had completely finished their towers before the Kitins rose from the depths, as well as the Trykers. The Matis and Zoraï towers, however close, were not all finished in time. Soon one could hear cries in the cities, cries of disbelief, cries of sorrow, cries for action.

The new camps found themselves isolated, and soon, no caravans were able to reach them anymore to bring them the necessary provisions.

The leaders reacted fast, each raising an army of voluntaries to stave off the enemy of the Homin races, and open the roads for caravans through the massive amount of Kitins.

For the weeks to come, the Homin peoples continued to push back the Kitins from their lands, supplying the new camps with the necessary provisions from their warehouses.

— excerpt from The Erlan Chronicles, 2546 AC I, by Erlan, chronicler.

5.1.8 Annex to Spring, when tents blossomed

Speech of Emperor Dexton to the Fyros people

“Fyros, the time is grave!

A few of my spies have confirmed the rumors we have been hearing for some days now. The Matis have decided to build encampments throughout their territory. The reason for these projects is vague, and this is troubling. But our Empire is not weak! The efforts of the Akenak have resolved the water shortages we used to suffer. Nevertheless, we must be prepared for all eventualities.

Even more important, it seems other reports indicate unusual Kitin movements, in all four corners of the Desert. As you know, the Fyros people have suffered a number of tribal attacks. All too often were we not prepared.

Today we to be prudent, and look to the future. These events are good reason to recommence the conquest of our lands, of our desert. The perfect dunes have to be tamed. Its terrible winds have to be appeased.

I have thus decided to construct camps of our own, throughout the Desert, to make sure not even a Yubo can take breath without the Empire knowing!

Emperor Dexton laughed.

Fyros people! Our work will be very important. We will need everyone, and I mean everyone, to construct these camps, which will protect us, our children, our clans, our very culture, from the dangers of destruction and oblivion.

To direct this project, worthy of the greatest moments of the Empire, I have appointed Abytheus Abygrian as project manager. He will organize the construction of the six camps from his location at Cheapside Market, and will give you more information.

Our Empire is proud and strong, so I do not doubt that this undertaking will advance swiftly and well. I have confidence in you, Fyros people! The Empire stands before a great challenge. Together, We will succeed!

Truth! Discipline! Honor! Justice!

— transcribed by Epus, personal adviser to the Emperor.

Speech of King Yrkanis to the Matis People

“Matis subjects, honorable servants of Jena!

For long we have been masters of the Verdant Heights, and in control of all of Majestic Garden! Sixty years have passed since my father, King Yasson, shot an arrow which landed here at this location, and determined where to build the city of Yrkanis! Shortly after, the cities of Davae, Avalae and Natae were founded, shining with the marvels of our people.

Over sixty Jena years have passed since the Great Swarming and our arrival in these virgin lands, now the seat of our existence and growth. Today, my people, We will confide in you a mission, for time after time you have exceeded Our expectations. Against the Marauders, against the Kitin, against our enemies. Now you, My subjects, will build encampments all over the Kingdom, to fight the ferocious nature of Our forest, to bend it to Our will, and that of Jena! These camps will help surveillance of our neighbors and the Kitins, who, as it seems, are acting strangely these days. We thus need to keep our eyes open. This is the perfect opportunity for us to tighten the Matis reign on the Forest!

Subjects! In the name of Jena: Conquer the forests, erect encampments in true Matisian style! Elegant, proud! Infallible! Be quick, intrepid! Do not be hindered by snow, wind, rain, or even the Fires of Coriolis should they return! Build the Kingdom of tomorrow, spread our influence, let the light of the Goddess shine on everyone! And witness tomorrow the dawn of Our followers, of whom We are King!

To oversee the construction and direct the work, I have appointed Anibro Listi, whom you can find near the stables. He will guide you in the construction of the six camps.

Only the most dedicated of My subjects will have the privilege of working on the most remote camps in the Kingdom, where the danger is most immediate. But understand that I will reward all those who work hard!

King Yrkanis lifted his arms to the sky.

Jena Aiye!”

— transcribed by Cuccio Perinia, Chronicler and Royal Botanist.

Speech of Lady Ailan to the Tryker People

“People of the Lakelands!

I want to thank you for having responded in such numbers to the call of the Federation, and I am proud to see how many of devout People have responded to the needs of New Trykoth!

Time after time in the past, since our people have resurfaced from the Prime Roots, we have had to fight to keep these lands, Aeden Aqueous, united, undivided, the lands of the New Trykoth citizens! At numerous occasions, our enemies, homin or non-homin, have tried to destroy the unity of the People and enslave them. Never have the Trykers failed their ideals. Which is why, over sixty years later, our Federation, our unity, and our lands still stand.

Nonetheless, we can not just be proud of our past, of the Legends of the Tryker people, but we have to look at our future as well!

I asked you to gather here today, in our capital of Fairhaven, the heart of Aeden Aqueous and the Federation, because I wish to share with you, in the name of New Trykoth, a mission of the utmost importance.

The times our enemies could easily move around in our lands, under the noses of our People, have to come to an end! Even more so, because I have recently been informed of a strange increase in Kitin activity.

I have thus, together with the Vice-Governor, decided to build surveillance camps under the winds of Aeden Aqueous. Their role will be to keep us informed of all unusual happenings in our lands. This is a grand project, worthy of the architectural genius of the Tryker, which will assure that we will never again be taken by surprise!

Well, now, I suppose you all want to get to work! Six camps will be erected at the four corners of Aqueous Aeden. I appointed one of our best engineers, project supervisor Ba'Darins Baksan, located at the entrance to Fairhaven, to lead this endeavor. Volunteers will be redirected from there.

People of the Lakes! New Trykoth is counting on you and will reward loyalty!

Tryka! Meer! Sella!

Glory to the people!"

— transcribed by the Chronicler Derry O'Darren.

Speech of Mabreka Cho to the Zoraï People

"Zoraï!

Over sixty years ago, we have left the refuge of the Prime Roots, to come build the first of the Cities of Intuition. Over sixty years ago, we discovered for the first time the Witherings, our lands. Those sixty years have been troublesome, tumultuous, and have brought us where we are today.

Meanwhile, during those sixty years of turmoil, we have neglected our most sacred duty towards the Kami. During these sixty years, the Goo has progressed, and brings pain to our lands... Our world suffers and fills us with guilt for we have not fulfilled our duty towards the Kami and Ma-Duk. If this were not enough, we have seen signs of disturbing movements by Kitin everywhere in our beloved jungle. We need to learn from the past. So now we will do what is necessary to prevent a repeat of the Great Swarming.

It is for this reason that I have asked you to come here today, and request your help. So that we never again allow the Kitin to take us by surprise, never again allow the Goo to progress, never allow the menaces who are preying on

our lands to succeed, and to banish all these dangers, it is time, Zoraï people, to build!

Everywhere in our lands relay camps will be constructed, fortified camps to serve these goals, for protection and for the purification of our lands. These camps, Zoraï, will be built by you, putting all your genius and work into their realization.

To guide this, we turn to the Master builder Ci Ba-Du who will supervise the construction of the six camps from the Zora stables. Only Initiates, the most loyal, will be allowed to work on the most important sites, but all those support us will be rewarded commensurate with their efforts.

Zoraï! More than ever, the Witherings need us.

O Atys'o mayumé, tseu'ito sok Kami Myan ayumé!"

— transcribed by Kiei Xuan.

5.2 Chronicles of Aeden Aqueous

5.2.1 Ardan Keale, Tryker Entomologist

In response to certain rumours of the Kitin becoming agitated, we went to meet a scholar from the Lakes, an insect specialist, who has studied these creatures for many years. He received us at his underwater residence in Windermeer.

Thank you for allowing us the honor of visiting you, Master Keale. We know that you are extremely busy.

I have in effect a lot of jobs, but when it is a question of enlightening minds, I try to be available. I was pleased to receive, just this morning, an interesting specimen of Hymenoptera Sylvanus Aeris, sent by an associate from the Majestic Gardens. I am eager to examine it.

What is a Hymenoptera Sylvanus Aeris?

It is an insect of the forest, better known under the name of Buzzing Sower. It is easily recognizable by its yellow and brown striped body and its translucent green wings. It has amazing ability to cause the pollen it harvests to glow. Did you know that this pollen was used by the master lamplighters in the ancient times?

To be honest, we did not know. You have an amazing collection of insects on your walls, as if Atys was revealed before our eyes!

I prefer observing insects living in nature and I am loath to kill these splendid living beings. They are so perfect! I sometimes have the opportunity to recover the undamaged bodies of some specimens. Over the years, I gathered this collection. But the dance of the insects is a show that cannot be captured in amber.

Would you consider Kitins superior to homins?

There are numerous types of Kitins, and, for the most part, they seem at first glance to have a purely instinctive behaviour. Yet Kitins are also much more than animals. The sovereigns who control them have plans that concern us, that is for certain.

That is not reassuring at all... Who are these rulers that you mention?

Kitins are organized in swarms and colonies. According to my research, these large groups develop under the command of the individuals of a distinct type called Kizarak. In a way, Kizaraks are the Kitin generals. Only a handful have ever been seen in the new lands. The Emperor Dyron was nearly killed by one during the Battle for the Knot of Dementia. Even so, Kizaraks are not the leaders of Kitin colonies. The supreme rulers are in fact sovereign: the Queens, mothers of all Kitin.

Queens? And they would give birth to all other Kitins?

Yes, they are the founders of colonies. In my knowledge, no queen has been seen in the new lands for 50 years. I had the huge privilege to observe one for a minute and to live to tell about it.

How did you manage to do that?

I had some help from some friends who have developed some particular techniques to approach Kitin. We exchanged information and, thanks to them, I was able to make some very interesting discoveries. For instance, there are four different types of Kitin eggs, and the diet of the grubs is critical in the determination of the social role of future members of a colony.

Who are these mysterious friends of whom you speak?

All that I can tell you is that they are members of the Rangers of Atys. Until now, discretion has been essential in their ranks, but with the increasing threat of the Kitin in the ancient lands, the Rangers have decided to take a cautious step out from the shadows.

Have you been in contact with the famous Fyros scholar Daeronn? He has numerous theories on Kitin and some notable thoughts about the influence of seasons on the Kitin.

I do not work with Daeronn and I disagree with him on a number of points. Based on my observations, for several decades, Kitin have been adapting to life on the bark. Let's not forget that they come from the depths of Atys, and so, the behavior of swarms is not influenced by seasons. Daeronn founded his theories on studies led by the Force of the Brotherhood at the end of the 25th century, an epoch in which the Kitin workers appeared to leave for the winter. Kitins have evolved since then, and like the Homins, they continue to harvest during the cold seasons. As for Daeronn's hypotheses about the reproduction of Kitins in the spring, they are in complete contradiction with the existence of the Queens. I imagine that Daeronn refutes their existence.

An unrelenting hate seems to exist between Kitins and Homins. How do you explain it?

The Karavan tell us that the Kitin are the children of the Dragon, having been born after the Green Rising, and that their hate comes from the anger of the beast that growls within them. I have not found any other explanation, but I think that it shall be difficult, or even impossible, to live in harmony with the Kitin on Atys. Unless they are only a stage towards a kind of supreme being capable of transcending the anger of the Dragon, perhaps... but I digress.

Thank you for answering our questions, Master Keale. Any last words to be said to our readers?

I recommend that they observe all the small animals that swarm about on the Bark to amass knowledge.

5.2.2 A Tryker wedding story

Today we present an interview with Satty Ribben, an old Tryker Dame who has officiated at several generations of Tryker weddings. Satty is here to give us an oversight of how such ceremonies are preformed.

Interviewer: Greetings Satty, so you are a priest of the Tryker?

Satty Ribben: Oh no, not at all, our weddings don't work in that way. I am rather what you would call the Mistress of Ceremonies. The master or mistress of ceremonies does not need to be a fully trained priest or priestess. All that is needed is to be familiar with the wedding ritual and happy to conduct the ceremony in our tightly-knit community. Of course, there is also the proviso that they have been happily married for at least three years, so reflecting our Tryker principle of practicing what you preach!

Interviewer: Can you tell us about a traditional Tryker wedding?

Satty Ribben: Well the first thing is it does not happen for three months. To avoid any future problems we have a tradition that before taking the plunge couples must first respect a period of engagement lasting three months. During this time the couple lives together and sees how they get on together. Only at the end of this engagement period may friends and relations officially speak about the place and date of the wedding. Nevertheless, traditionally the wedding ceremony takes place on a Holeth (the day of Jena) on the fourteenth week of the engagement period.

Traditional Tryker weddings can last for days and involve much gaiety and merry making. Tryker marriage customs generally reflect the cooperative and brotherly spirit of the community, and are full of laughter and song and not a few jokes and tricks.

According to our ancient Tryker tradition, the bride and groom are honoured by anyone's presence at their wedding as it means that they care about the couple. Therefore anyone who cares may attend the wedding!

Traditionally guests give money, the amount of which should be of multiples of two. However, it is becoming more and more fashionable among young Trykers to give finely crafted objects instead. Of course, food and drink also play an important part in the celebrations!

Interviewer: That sounds fascinating, where would all this take place?

Satty Ribben: Tryker weddings usually take place outside on a beach, under a canopy, if possible. Homins sit on the ground or on mats behind the sacred fire which symbolizes the consummation of time and the warmth and comfort it can bring. The groom's party arrives first at the wedding spot followed by the bride's party

Interviewer: Are rings exchanged?

Satty Ribben: Yes they are an important symbol of the eternity of love. Rings which can be crafted by the couple or their witnesses are always exchanged

by bride and groom, and traditionally the groom presents the bride's mother with a small token as does the bride to his mother.

Interviewer: So there are witnesses as well as a Master of Ceremonies?

Satty Ribben: Yes the bride is supported by her parents or close friends, and she will need two witnesses, one of each sex. The groom has the same requirements. In addition there are bridesmaids, and a chorus of tuneful Trykers to sing the old well-loved melodies.

Interviewer: Is there a dress code?

Satty Ribben: Dress is generally colourful, black is to be avoided. A wedding is a time to flaunt your best jewels. Of course, liberties can be taken regarding the dress. One rule which shouldn't be broken, though, is that anyone who enters the wedding area must remove their shoes or boots. Both bride and groom customarily use pigment to decorate their faces. This tattoo symbolizes devotion. It is said that you can tell how well a new bride and groom are being treated from how long it takes for the dye to wear off!

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time, and this insight into the old Tryker ways. Now I can't wait to attend one of these weddings!

— interview with Satty Ribben.

5.2.3 Wirell Aelan, Decent Tryker

We're at the site of the Kami sanctuary currently being built on one of the islands in the north of Liberty Lake. But, hang on, there's an old Tryker over there who seems to be very unhappy here...

Interviewer: Hello, who are you?

Wirell Aelan: Wirell Aelan, most definitely not at your service.

Interviewer: Oh dear, you don't seem in a very good mood... what's wrong?

Wirell Aelan: It's this building site! Can't they do it on their own land? They've got all the Zorai and Fyros territories to build their bloody sanctuaries on. But no! They have to build them just where I'd decided to spend my holidays!

Interviewer: Holidays?

Wirell Aelan: Yes, holidays! You know, sooner or later, everyone needs to spend a bit of quality time with themselves! Just because we Trykers like to party doesn't mean we don't need to have a rest every now and then! Especially when you get to my age!

Interviewer: Is it the noise that's bothering you?

Wirell Aelan: If only that's all it was! Nope, the excavations, the workers' singing, the shouting, there's no escaping it. You know, we Trykers are a happy people! But still, I'd chosen this little beach to spend a bit of time away from the noise of Fairhaven, to relax, reflect upon my life and all that kind of stuff, and what do you know, two days later this bunch of idiots turns up! Because not happy to just get on with their work, they also talk non-stop about the Kami!

Interviewer: And is that a problem for you?

Wirell Aelan: Well, y'know, I'm a Tryker me! Even if I've got nothing good to say about the Kami, I know that not everyone thinks like me... But what gets me is that they're building their sanctuary... Given the current situation, that's only going to confuse people! As if the Trykers needed that debate to start up again! We haven't a hope in hell of agreeing on a single government as it is, - you know, the federation and all that - if we start bringing up religious questions again as well...

Interviewer: Do you believe in Jena?

Wirell Aelan: Yes! The Karavan's presence reassures me. With them by our side, I know that we don't have much to fear from potential enemies, even if I don't agree with them getting involved in this futile war... And their sanctuaries don't help matters either... But I'll support the Karavan anyway, because those Kami, I tell you, I don't trust them. Don't you think it's a bit dodgy though, that those creatures want so much from us but give nothing in return? Where were they during the Kitin Wars? They come out of nowhere, act like they're our best friends, and then at the first sign of trouble they run off, not to return until they know who's going to win. It's a bit much, don't you think? Of course, we don't really know who the Karavan are either, or what they want, but at least when they say they'll protect us, they protect us. I trust them. And just between you and me, that Jena, she's certainly more attractive than those furballs...

Interviewer: So that's it, is it? You believe in Jena just because she's more attractive!

Wirell Aelan: Now, now, no need to get offended! Y'know, I'm just saying that, but I do believe in Jena really. I respect the fact that she created Atys. When all's said and done, if she's planning on coming here, we'll soon be concentrating on her world. When the Kamists see her pretty little face, and see that she's ten times their size, they're going to be pretty fed up with their non-existent Ma-Duk... And then they'll stop building sanctuaries right where decent Trykers are trying to get a bit of rest!

Interviewer: Why don't you go and relax somewhere else?

Wirell Aelan: Oh I see! So you reckon that those who are the most annoyed are the ones who should leave? I mean to say! And where's the freedom in that?! It seems that they're free to build their sanctuary here, so I'm just as free to spend my holidays here if I want! When you get to my age you get stubborn! I'm here now and I'm not going anywhere!... And, despite everything, it's still one of the few places on the whole damn lake that's peaceful and hasn't yet been invaded by those damn cloppers. In any case, instead of backing this kind of building work, Wyler would be better occupied cleaning all the lakes once and for all, so that we can finally move about as we please without always running the risk of losing a leg...

— interview with Wirell Aelan.

5.2.4 The Traveller returns

Arty Mac Keaggan left his animals at the stable and continued on foot towards the tavern. He had returned with goods from Zorai and had paused in the Tryker capital of Fairhaven on his way. There, he learned many new rumors and wild speculations about who would be the candidates for the upcoming election for governor.

- "Hello Naroy" he greeted the barman with a smile.

- "Welcome back home" the barman replied. "The usual?"

A small nod from Arty was enough and Naroy Ba'Dardan went to work. Only a little later he placed a fresh beer in front of Arty.

- "What news did you bring from the jungle?" Naroy asked, while Arty took a big mouthful of beer. Arty replaced the glass, now half-empty after one sip, wiped the beer-foam from his mouth with his hand, and sighed deeply with content. "There is not much happening in Zorai lately. All is quiet. I was not able to sell all my goods, either".

- "The Lakeland, however, are like a bee-hive lately" the friendly barman replied.

- "Tell me about it?" encouraged the barman to go on. "It seems that the time for the election of a new governor is coming soon. Not only are messengers busy all over the lakelands, but also more and more reporters from other lands are arriving every day."

- "Good for your business" Arty said with a grin. "And also for yours" Naroy was also smiling.

After Arty had emptied his glass and received a new one, he was asked by one of the other guests: "You stopped in Fairhaven, didn't you? How are things over in the capital?"

- "I can only confirm Naroy's observations. Fairhaven is all busy with the preparations for the upcoming elections for the new governor."

- "Any word about who the candidates will be?" "Only rumors so far. It seems certain that Lady Ailan will be a candidate. There's also talk about Shaley Nara and Roggan Adgan running for office. But we will know more after the official presentation of the candidates."

- "Hoho", came from a stately bejeweled Fyros, sitting at a table encircled by a group of fawning women. "I will simply vote for the prettiest woman for governor and afterwards flutter my eyes at her." He laughed raucously and let a woman feed him some berries.

- "But you are not allowed to cast a vote", came from a neighbouring table. "Actually he will be allowed" Arty corrected, "from what I heard from an officer with whom I talked in the Fairhaven tavern, not only will Tryker people by birth be allowed to vote, but also homins of other races, provided they have since become permanent residents of the lakelands."

The discussion about this was short. Soon the talk went on about less serious topics and when someone finally began a funny song, all thoughts about politics moved further into the background.

— conversation between Naroy the Barman and Arty Mac Keaggan.

5.2.5 Tryker Constitution

COMING SOON

5.2.6 Lady Chiabre's Social Diary

Part One

A certain document has come into the hands of our social reporter today, purporting to be the social dairy of the Lady Chiabre of the Matis court. Whether this is genuine or not, we will leave you to judge...

Off to the Palace today for a state banquet. I was exceedingly nice to Rodi De Varello, who I was seated next to – I can't help but think he would make a perfect husband for my little Rosino when she gets over her schoolgirl crush on that unspeakable Ranger person.

The De Varellos are an old family and she would have dappers to meet her every desire, not to mention the status. I must hold a party soon and invite some desirable parties for her to meet. I am sure that if she got out more, that *déclassé* ranger would be history!

And talking of the Rangers, I have no idea what Orphie Dradius thinks she looks like in that outfit of hers, it reminds me of a peeled psykopa. Now that she is out of active duty, she could at least have the good sense of dressing in something more flattering. But what can you expect of a Fyros woman!

Yesterday I spotted toadface Bebi Cuirinia slinking off in a corner with one of the rangers, that Melga Folgore! He who thinks he is Jena's gift to females. He is always traveling around talking to all sorts of people. I cannot begin to think what dealings he has with the Royal Embalmer. Maybe he has plans for his own funeral and wants to have her touch up his ugly mug. Well, to be honest I can't see her outlive him, she looks like she is about to have her seed fail any day.

Poor little Still Wyler. You would have thought with all those people there, someone could have done something. But no – not only did they let the assassin get away, but they were unable to save his life seed. Hope Ulyros is up to the job of unmasking the killer...

Can only look on the bright side, maybe the next Tryker Leader will have a tad more uh "je ne sais quoi" Some decent decorum and sense of protocol would definitely not go amiss in the Lakelands. Black is however always becoming to one.

Xalis, now there is a man that has his uses, in so many ways. Even though Matis males are superior of course, he has a kind of rugged charm that intrigues me. If he can serve my purpose as well, it looks like we are going to have a prosperous relationship. I will have to take precautions to make sure he is not double crossing me, however. My maid Cinni will have to apply her special talents to check a few things.

There is a spreading fashion at court I really can't bear to see. Some people have no shame what so ever and dress up in those dreadful tryker outfits that shows so much bare skin you can hardly call it dressed at all! The latest victim

of this misguided sense of the appropriate was one of the Queens new maids. The Queen was of course furious and the silly maid was promptly dismissed. But it shows that we need to carefully nourish the Matis virtues and it makes me even more steadfast in my beliefs that the old ways are the best!

Queen Lea, of course, there is a Lady who knows how to dress. She always looks such a picture and is the perfect consort for our handsome and elegant king. I wonder when we will see some more additions to the royal family? It's certainly been a long time since the last one. She was actually looking a little plump the other week, but I expect that is just overeating, these Royal banquets play havoc with one's diet. – all those rich foods..

Oh well, time to prepare for the Zorai ambassador's ball tonight, let's hope they cut the pre - food meditations a bit shorter this time – 35 minutes is rather too long in my opinion...

Part Two

Hello again, style-lovers!

I have been following the circus-like antics of the recent Tryker election closely, and my maid, Cinni, has been doing a little investigation for me in addition. All I can conclude is that the Tryker state must be at a very low point indeed when it comes to class, decorum and the basics of style management.

Would you believe the candidates that have stood in this election? An upstart little twerp of a tryker called Learoy Shilly, who is obsessed with standardization of tryker armor and the values of anything tryker made. And to show his faith in his own ideas he is wearing a Matis caster pants! It had my poor maid in stitches for ages when she described his choice of attire. How stupid can you be?

The Skipper is actually boasting of being a pirate and seems to regard money laundering as a legitimate means of financing the tryker government and economy! No wonder he has to turn to such illegal means when all he can do is to construct sinking boats and salivate over the Mayor of Windermere. Perhaps he needs the sinking boats for all his money washing...

Now the Mayor of Windermere is a personage I would not let over my doorstep, not even on a sunny day. O'biggan Brassen is her name, my maid tells me and she is about as big and brassen as her name suggests. I doubt even Learoy Shilly would manage to standardize her bodice, which my maid in a fit of giggles called the Bodice of Doom. I'd say the tryker would be facing both doom and gloom if the good Skipper had won the election. To top it all, that drunkard Rehn Kirran joined the race and was pretending to be serious about politics, as if he could be serious even in his most sober moments. His pretty doll of a wife has about as much wits as her husband and my maid tells me she has not shown up much in the campaign. I think Rehn is afraid she will show just how silly she is and ruin his assumed gravitas. I would not put it past her to show up and drag him out of a debate or campaign meeting to come home and pick flowers for her. Silly romantic snippet! Now Cinni tells me that Rehn is actually to be Deputy Governor in charge of all Tryker defense! Was I a Tryker, Jena forbid, Gosh that would make me sleep soundly in my bed not.

The only serious candidates in all this were the Lady Ailan and Shaley Nara.

It seems that Shaley should have kept to her guard job; as the Trykers ignored her in the 1st election round. It is a shame really, Shaley is a decent girl and devote Karavan follower as is proper and right.

That's more than can be said about Ailan, calling herself Lady, as if the Trykers have any aristocracy! I don't care if she descends from Jena herself, it is indecent to pretend to be a tryker and a Lady! She is just as plain and homely as the next tryker girl and the way she flirts with the Fyros is sickening. How can she do this and hope for support amongst the Trykers? Still Wyler should have taught her some political maneuvering in the 10 years she was his advisor, or maybe the advisor role was of a different kind?

Still, now that it appears that she will be the new Governor, I will have to gain an introduction, perhaps she would like to come to my next dinner party. She'd better not wear that hat though, it looked strange enough on old Still Wyler! Indeed maybe I could give her some style counseling.

— a social reporter

5.3 Chronicles of the Burning Desert

5.3.1 Story of a Young Fyros

Part One

Night had just fallen. The last rays of sunshine had dipped below the horizon, taking their comforting warmth with them. Wrapped up in his cover, Aedon was cursing his boldness. He should never have trusted what the old fool had said. A new world being built in the west? How could he have believed such a thing? There was nothing but desert as far as the eye could see. Not even the slightest trace of civilization out here.

It had been almost five months now since he had left his clan. For five days now they had been wandering in no man's land searching for the path of the exodus towards the new cities. An old traveler who they had taken into their camp and helped regain his strength had told them the story.

- "My Fyros friends, the world is healing. The Kitins are now under control. Our people are retaking their place on Atys, he had told them, once he had eaten his fill."

Scornful smiles had broadened on the faces of the fifteen members of the clan. Nobody could believe such a story. Everybody knew that nowadays the world was populated by nothing more than small tribes and nomads living a hunter-gatherer existence. There was not a single city that had managed to repel the invading monsters that had streamed up from the depths of the planet. Nonetheless, nobody challenged the words of the old man. It was very common for men of a certain age to begin to lose their faculties. In any case, even if nobody believed such stories, everyone loved to hear about them as they harked back to childhood memories of dreams of fantastic worlds.

Despite this, Aedon had taken the words of the old man quite literally and when the men and women of his tribe had turned in for the night, he sat with the traveler so he could ask more questions - and he was astounded by the answers

he received. He had finally found a way to escape his dull and humdrum destiny, as he had always wanted. He would become a hero. He would show everyone what he was capable of. He would prove to his people that the world was blossoming once more.

At dawn, his parents pleaded with him to change his mind, but being as stubborn as a madakam, he was not about to change his course for anything. And so begrudgingly, but knowing full well that he would return very quickly, they decided to prepare a pouch of takoda roots for him by way of nourishment, as well as a blanket to keep off the cold of icy nights.

The jeers and laughter of his fellow youngsters was ringing in his ears as he left the camp. Only the old Fyros offered him a friendly gesture of good luck.

- "I'll be the laughing stock of all of them, if I come back now! he said to himself, clenching his fists."

A strong wind had come up in the night, and grains of sand were buffeting his face, half-hidden under his blanket.

He had hardly any provisions left and knew that he would very soon have to decide to go back or else carry on. If he continued, he knew that he would not have enough food to make the journey back. Unless he managed to kill one of those lousy yubos with the knife his father had given him.

In the end he slept until early morning, when he was pleasantly surprised to see that the wind had died down and a glorious sun was shining overhead.

He climbed out from under his cover and had a long stretch. Suddenly he saw a yubo. He was rooted to the spot and hoped that luck would be on his side. He lowered his head and noticed a large block of amber less than a meter from him. He bent forward and grabbed hold of the amber, all the while making sure that the animal munching on a pine tree did not notice him. Once he had a good hold of the chunk of amber, he drew back his arm and threw it with all his strength at the yubo.

There was a sudden loud bang and the amber exploded in a thousand shiny fragments in mid-flight.

Aedon' jaw dropped and he was dumbstruck on the spot. With that, the yubo fled at breakneck speed.

- "Am I losing my mind?" he said to himself, having just seen the impossible.

A shiver ran down his spine. It was the beginning of the end. The sun must have driven him crazy. He heard a short laugh behind him. He spun round, but there was nobody there. Fear mixed with a feeling of disquiet took hold of him. I've gone mad! he said to himself again, terrified at the idea of dying in this way. Again, he heard the laugh behind him. Turning his head quickly, Aedon thought he made out a strange shape that vanished in an instant.

- "Who are you?!", he shouted.

I have to keep calm, he tried to tell himself. There must be an explanation for this.

- "Show yourself!, he roared.

One thing for sure, he had enough strength left to put up a fight. He could feel his heart beating in his chest like the drums of his uncle Denarius. Then, out of thin air, a being hardly one meter high appeared, floating at eye-level.

- "Well met, young Fyros, what is your name?"

- "Aedon, he replied trying to fathom what has happening."

That's it - I've gone mad! Unless...? But that's not possible. Nobody in his clan had ever seen what he was thinking of. Believing in the world being reborn was one thing, but in legendary beings such as these?!

- "Don't be afraid, I'm a friend of your people", he said before smiling at Aedon.

- "There wasn't a tooth in his head. How could he possibly chew his food?" thought Aedon, who shook his head, rebuking himself for thinking such stupid questions at a time like this.

- "You are a Kami? he said, hardly believing it could be true."

- "This is indeed the name for our people in the language of homins, the Kami replied."

He disappeared suddenly. Aedon rubbed his eyes, believing that his reason had been playing tricks on him - but suddenly there was a tug on the sleeve of his jacket. He turned his head and to see the Kami had returned.

- "How is this possible?!" he said, astounded.

The Kami smiled again.

- "There are many things that you must learn and many you must forget. Atys is much more complex than your people can imagine. We, the Kami, are capable of marvelous feats and are willing to share them with you, if you learn to trust us. Atys needs young men full of keen spirit. Atys is far from being fully cured. We are counting on the young generations to repopulate and bring life back to Atys."

- "Can you teach me how to disappear and reappear again? asked an enchanted Aedon who no longer had any doubts about the truth of what he was seeing."

- "That and many other things. But patience and hard work I ask of you. There are many young men such as you who I have brought to Kaemon to serve their apprenticeship only for them to become vulgar layabouts, hungry for wealth and power."

- "I am not like that! I swear to you! he said before lowering his voice somewhat. I beg you not to leave me. I will do anything you wish so that you might take me to this town. I will prove to you that you were right to trust me."

The Kami floated up two meters in the air and looked down on him from this height.

- "So be it, ready yourself then for a great journey. The nearest city is very far from here", said the Kami.

Aedon stuck out his chest and stared defiantly at the floating being.

- "I am ready to follow you to the ends of this world. I will be able to face up to whatever dangers come our way", he said with genuine enthusiasm.

- "Never lose this adventurous spirit, young Fyros, as you will learn very quickly that life can be just as dangerous in the towns as in the more remote areas."

The Kami came back down, floating near Aedon. He looked him straight in the eye and added: "You will need all your strength for your apprenticeship. You are very lucky indeed that you came across me here, as you may have wandered for many years without ever finding one of us. I'm also going to save you a long walk and teleport you to your destination."

- "Teleport?" said Aedon.

He knew the term from fables, but a strange feeling was coming over him. Dissolve into nothing in one place and re-appear hundreds of kilometers away? Despite the heat, an icy shiver ran through his bones.

- "Are you afraid?"

- "No," said Aedon, unconvincingly. "I am ready."

The Kami smiled and was in no way fooled by the bravado of the young Fyros. He made a single gesture and suddenly the ground all around Aedon seemed to disappear. Very quickly however, Aedon vision became perfectly clear again. Tears welled up in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. A small village stretched out below. Buildings. Homins like him. It was unbelievable. He had done it! He was a hero.

A hand slapped him on the shoulder. He cried out in surprise. A female laugh greeted him. A young Fyros girl was next to him.

- "You're a newcomer and should learn to be more discreet if you want to survive", she said pointing to a capryni who was watching them menacingly.

- "These herbivores can be very nasty when they sense hostility!"

Aedon nodded, momentarily dumbstruck.

- "Come with me, you have to go and see Boethus Cekian. He will explain many things to you - there is a lot to learn before you can think about going to the great cities."

A light wind refreshed his memory.

- "I have a whole new life ahead of me here", he said to himself, heading down towards the tower.

Part Two

Night was falling on Pyr, the capital city of the Fyros Empire. It had been almost a month that Aedon was living in the city, and he was becoming familiar with all of its nooks and crannies. He went into a shop and caught the attention of the merchant.

- "Dylion, look what I have for you! Two magnificent gingo skins. I skinned these beasts just for you!" He laid his pack down on the counter.

The old merchant rubbed his chin and finally, halfway convinced, touched the skins.

- "These weren't young gingos! The skin isn't soft anymore. What do you expect me to do with them?" the merchant mocked. "Here, I'll give you two hundred dappers, because I'm in a good mood."

Many a warrior would have felt the blood rise to their faces and turned to seek another merchant, ranting all the way. But Aedon knew his homin. He knew that this was only his way of starting the bartering.

- "Two hundred dappers! That's not even enough to pay for a night at the inn. Normally, I would ask you for three times that much! But I believe that

you might really be one of the poorest merchants in town, so I'll let you have them for five hundred dappers."

Dylion Tindix lifted his eyes to the sky, as if he had been stabbed. The bargaining went on for a good ten minutes until they had finally agreed on three hundred dappers. Feeling rather satisfied with his day's accomplishments, Aedon hefted the beads in his palm. He wandered aimlessly into the Bath Lane and stopped in front of the city hammam. He looked at the sky and decided that there was enough time before dinner.

He entered the lobby, where he was met by an attendant.

- "Good evening. May I help you?" He asked with a honeyed voice.

- "Yes, show me to a dressing room so I can undress. I'm in a hurry to take a bath."

The homin bowed quickly and invited him to follow. The place seethed with a hot, heavy atmosphere. Going down a long corridor with many doors, Aedon congratulated himself for making the right choice. He had spent the day hunting and sweating under the hot sun. His muscles needed to relax in the heat of the baths. He went into the cubicle that his guide had shown him. He undressed completely before opening the other door that led into the steam baths. Steam filled the entire room, which was lined with green amber. He came up to the big pool and felt vexed by the large number of bathers, who were mostly Fyros.

He sat down on the edge of the pool, leaned forward and stretched out his arm. The water was very hot. He frowned and hesitated for a second before deciding to slip into the water. He inched his way in slowly, controlling his breath as he went.

He stretched his arms out along the ledge of the pool and closed his eyes.

- "This is the first time I've seen you here. Have you been in Pyr very long?"

Aedon opened his eyes and turned his head to the left. He saw a Fyros who was perhaps in his early forties.

- "A month, but I don't plan to stay any longer than I need to," answered Aedon, hoping the conversation would stop right there.

- "Why leave us so soon? Don't you like Pyr?" the stranger continued.

Aedon smiled.

- "I want to discover new homin lands and see their wonders. I'm thirsty for knowledge."

- "I thought so!" he said, laughing. "My name is Partacles, I'm one of the senators who governs our people in the name of Emperor Dexton. I'm in charge of military affairs and the Kamis know that that is important business!"

- "Except for the Kitins, I don't see any conflicts to worry about", said Aedon, who didn't like the turn this conversation was taking.

Partacles moved closer to Aedon and added in a low voice: "Do you really believe that peace among homins can last forever? Think of the Karavan's ambitions and you'll see why the Matis will jump at our throats as soon as they get the chance. Peace has only lasted because each group of people is still too weak to think of expanding their territory. But things happen faster than you can imagine. The four homin races are rebuilding their lost empires. Our good

emperor will rebuild his imperial residence, and I have personally named several generals who will be in charge of recruiting for guilds for future stakes.”

Aedon frowned worriedly. He had no desire to enter into such considerations. He was a warrior and an adventurer, and he didn't care about politics. Why was he being told all of this? Partacles laid a hand on his shoulder.

- "I need young Fyros like you to be my agents. We don't have all the information we need about what is happening among the Matis and the Trykers. Are you willing to be one of my spies? Before you answer, know that there is plenty of fame and fortune to gain. Plenty for a young homin. Think of all the things that you'll be able to buy..."

Aedon's mind began to swim in confusion. When he left his village, he had no idea how much the world was changing. War between homins might well come again. He felt a bitter taste in his mouth. He shook his head and looked Partacles straight in the eye.

- "I'll think about it, but I'm not promising you anything," he said.

- "Take your time, young Fyros. There is nothing worse than excessive zeal and rash decisions." With these words, Partacles let go of the ledge, swam to the steps of the pool and climbed out. Aedon relaxed at last. He had so wanted to be left alone. He knew nothing about the ways of society, and he really had no desire to learn about it.

He lingered for several long minutes, steeping in the hot water and the steam that rose from it. Before leaving the hammam, he took a cold shower that tightened up his whole body. Once he was dressed, he went back out onto the street and savored the gentle breeze that made its way into the narrow streets of Pyr. Partacles' words seemed to be far from his mind. His stomach had been rumbling for several minutes and his thoughts were on having a very substantial meal. He went up Dexton Street and came to the Fountain Square. The bar was on the left. Without a moment's hesitation, he went into the building and sat down at a free table.

A trio of musicians was playing a traditional melody. Three young Fyros women were dancing very gracefully between the bar and the front tables. In the light from the lanterns, their movements were subtle and delicate. Aedon ordered a scrath beer and a grilled rib of bodoc with braised larvae. Despite the harmonious swaying of the young women, his thoughts finally returned to the words of Partacles. With money, everything would be so easy! No need to spend long hours hunting just to earn barely enough to pay for lodging. He could live however he wished without worrying about tomorrow. Even girls would be easier! He shook his head with a sardonic little smile. Only the ancient ones still thought women could be bought. Ever since the forced exile into the Prime Roots, Fyros society had seen drastic changes. Fyros women, inspired by the example of other peoples, learned to assert themselves, and the regent Leonon was a prime example. If a Kami could read my thoughts right now, he would teleport me instantly to the middle of the desert, he thought, letting a smile light up his face.

- "Do you mind if I sit next to you?" said a voice with a very distinct accent.

Aedon lifted his head and met the eyes of a young Matis.

- "Please be my guest," he answered.

The Matis sat down next to him. He had a rather debonair sort of face, with large blue eyes and a trim beard that aged his appearance a little.

- "I love your city. You are very lucky. Did you know that Pyr is the largest homin city on Atys?"

Aedon shook his head, although his eyes were on the beautiful Fyros dancers who were starting a new dance.

- "You aren't very talkative, but maybe I should introduce myself. Lato Nivaldo, Matis ambassador. I am here to build ties with your people. I like to believe that there can be lasting peace between us."

- "That isn't what I have heard elsewhere. . ." Aedon began.

- "Oh, really?" said Nivaldo, surprised. "Tell me, what have you heard?"

Aedon was furious with himself, and lifted his beer to his lips. He had been caught out like a beginner! The Matis was trying to milk him for information. Maybe he had even seen him talking to Partacles. He had to watch every word he said.

- "The Karavan don't like us very much, and they say you are among their strongest defenders," he said, choosing his words very carefully.

- "That's true, but it's no crime to have an opinion. Jena is our Goddess, and she guides our actions, but nowhere do her precepts teach us to use force to spread the good word."

Aedon made a skeptical face.

- "No. But do you really respect our beliefs?"

- "Do you really think that I would have volunteered to be an ambassador to your people unless I loved them? If only you could visit our country, you would see how mistaken you are to think of us as crazy fanatics."

- "That would be wonderful, but what would I do there, with no dappers and no place to sleep?" said Aedon, who hoped this would end the conversation.

Nivaldo looked concerned and furrowed his brow.

- "Yes, money is getting more and more important in our world, but maybe there is a solution. I have been appointed by Duke Rodi di Varello, who is the equivalent of one of your senators, and is in charge of commerce among other things. He sent me to bring back some of the bitter aromatic plants from your country."

Seeing Aedon's inquisitive look, he answered without waiting for the question.

- "The nobles of my people are very fond of rare things, including these herbs. Bring me back, let's say, five bags of them and I will talk to the Duke about you. I am sure that he will have some lucrative missions for you once you are there."

Aedon told himself that there was no escaping his destiny. Between Partacles' propositions and those of Nivaldo, he was going to have to leave the region. So be it! It would happen. But one thing was certain, he would be working for the Fyros and would never betray his people.

- "I will think about it, but I have to say that your proposition is tempting, and if you buy the next three rounds, I think my decision could be easily

influenced in your favor.”

The Matis smiled and took some dappers out of his coin purse.

- ”Here, I think this will be enough to let you finish your evening in the finest establishment in Pyr. Come back with the plants to this same place in four days,” he said, moving towards the door.

Aedon looked down, took the dappers and weighed them in his hand.

- ”So, is this the price of treason. . . ?”

Part Three

- ”I’m glad that you’ve made the right decision,” said Partacles once Aedon had finished telling him about his meeting with Lato Nivaldo. ”You have to be as wary of the Matis as you are of the Goo.”

Aedon had returned to the hammam twice in the hope of finding the senator again. Second time around his luck was in. The homin made the most of the beneficial effects of the waters in the large pool.

- ”I’m a Fyros and I would never have accepted to work for them. I love my people,” replied Aedon.

Partacles smiled broadly at him. He liked this kind of young homin who put honour and their homeland before money.

- ”Well, let’s not disappoint our Duke. You’re going to accept his proposition, and give him as many aromatic plants as he wants. It’s a good way to gain his trust.”

- ”I’ll need help,” said Aedon, who realised the significance of his decision.

He would never again be the innocent and carefree young Fyros that he’d been up until now. He was entering another sphere, for better or for worse.

- ”You will make contact with the master forager Galeos Ion. As head of the Black Faces guild, he will be able to help you find the necessary men and equipment to collect the plants. He’s a bit of a rough character, but you can trust him, the Black Faces have always served the Emperor. You’ll go and see him tomorrow, the guild hall is on Leanon Street.”

Aedon nodded and was about to leave the bath when the senator grabbed him by the arm.

- ”Be very careful, young Aedon. No one will be able to help you if the Matis find out that you’re deceiving them. Don’t talk too much. Silence is you’re best ally.”

Aedon thanked him and took his leave.

Instead of feeling calmer after he left the hammam, he was instead exhausted by the conversation. He had just entered the service of the Emperor and already he felt the pressure weighing on his shoulders. It was abundantly clear that he would not be allowed to fail.

Aedon went to the Black Faces’ guild hall the next day. The building was a hive of activity. Those who were returning from expeditions showed off the fruits of their labour as they recounted the previous day’s exploits. Others, meanwhile, were preparing to leave and were checking their equipment one last time, as well as the location of the supply fields that they intended to work. Still others seemed to run the guild itself, since they were answering all the various

questions that were put to them while at the same time giving out orders left and right.

Aedon asked to speak to Galeos Ion. A homin of a certain age, deep in discussion with three Fyros that Aedon identified as desert foragers by their equipment, was pointed out to him. The fine dust covering their clothes indicated that they had undoubtedly returned from a hard night's work.

- "... an excellent quality! I see that you have mastered the extraction of dzao fibre. Not before time. Go and see Mila Abygrian, he may be able to put you in touch with a craftsman looking for raw material."

As they thanked Galeos and took their leave of him, Aedon, who was patiently awaiting his turn, approached.

- "Ah, you must be Aedon, they told me you'd be coming. I'm Galeos Ion..."

He called over two young homins who were talking in a corner.

- "... and these are Eree et Mokra. They belong to the Black Faces guild, which I run. They will help you in your task."

The young homins greeted each other briefly.

- "We know that there is a place on the edge of the burning forest where the ground is rich in aromatic plant grains," said Galeos. "Be very careful, they aren't easy to extract. The supply field there is of excellent quality too, so again, be careful. You'll have to handle the spring cautiously if you don't want it to explode and all the precious materials to disappear into the ground again. But if you manage, the three of you should be able to extract eight bags in a day. As long as you don't blow it up!"

Galeos let out a great booming laugh.

Aedon was dismayed. This was a funny way of receiving him. He raised an eyebrow.

- "Eight bags? I only need..."

- "What did you expect, young Fyros?" Galeos cut him off dryly, all of a sudden serious again. "That we would work for you for free?"

"That I should put two of my apprentices and three mektoubs at your service just because you ask for them?" Aedon felt the hairs on his arms stand on end. He almost reacted to the violence in Galeos' words but thought back to Partacles' advice: silence is your best ally. Aedon scowled and bit back a retort.

- "I see that you've understood. Perfect. We're already well into the morning. I advise you to get going if you want be back before nightfall."

- "I like working by star light," said Mokra.

- "Much good it'll do you, I'm sure that the goaris will agree. I wouldn't like to lose three good mektoubs for no good reason. Go on, leave, and bring honour to the guild and the Emperor."

Galeos returned to his business without another word, leaving the three young Fyros together.

- "Don't worry, he's always like that, but he's a decent bloke," Eree assured him when they had left. "Come on, let's go to the south stables straight away, the mektoubs are ready to leave."

Once they got there, Eree exchanged a few words with the stableboy, who brought three animals out of the paddock.

- "I hope that you've ridden a mektoub before, otherwise you'll have to join us on foot," Eree mocked him, holding out the reins. "But we're sure to have finished before you arrive!"

Aedon wasn't sure he appreciated the young girl's sense of humour.

- "Don't make that face Aedon, she's got the same sense of humour as Galeos - you'll get used to it eventually, just like sawdust under rain."

Aedon wasn't sure he understood the comparison but didn't ask for an explanation. He simply walked up to his mount and jumped into the saddle with the greatest of ease.

- "Okay, forget I said anything," commented Eree.

- "We're going along the pass through the canyons. I love it there, there's hardly anyone around. Lots of people are afraid of those lands. It makes me ashamed to know that there are so many fearful Fyros!" said Mokra.

- "We're here to prove the opposite, right?"

- "You said it!" replied Eree.

Whooping in unison, the three young Fyros cheerfully spurred their mounts into a gallop across the desert.

They galloped for almost an hour before arriving within sight of the big, charred trees. Sweat ran down their foreheads. The animals, continuously beset by kicks, hadn't been able to relax their efforts and bellowed with exhaustion as long strands of drool hung from their wide-open mouths.

- "This area looks good to me, what do you two think?" asked Mokra.

- "As good as any other," replied Eree.

Aedon nodded. He got down from his mount and stroked its trunk. She had earned a little reward. He took a ball of crystalised honey out of his bag and gave it to her. The animal devoured it in seconds.

- "Now, leave me to it," said Eree, taking a few steps forward.

Aedon watched her with curiosity. She took some green powder out of a small pouch and began to rub it gently between her hands. Her expression betrayed deep concentration. The powder started to glow weakly as her face screwed up with the effort. She threw the powder onto the ground. All of a sudden, Aedon saw the sawdust sucked into the ground in several places. He couldn't get over it. Either she had been very lucky or she had an exceptional sixth sense. Four green bubbles, the springs, had risen out of the ground.

- "So, who are we thanking?" she boasted, hands on hips.

Aedon couldn't hide a smile. Finally, he liked this girl. Her rebellious attitude, her tomboy ways, her beige hoben uniform - she was sublime!

- "Thank you, thank you, but don't think you're getting off that easily. Catch!" replied Mokra, throwing her a pickaxe.

These two have known each other for a while, thought Aedon. He felt a stab of jealousy.

Aedon took his own pickaxe down from his saddle as Mokra and Eree began extracting the plants. More at ease with a sword than a pickaxe, Aedon watched them for a moment. Eree dug into the spring's green gangue to collect

the precious plant it had brought to the surface while Mokra busied himself strengthening the spring's sides so that it didn't suddenly blow up, wiping out all their efforts.

He turned towards Aedon.

- "Never used a pickaxe before? Come on, I'll show you how, we'll need a hand soon, you'll see."

They spent nearly four hours digging non-stop. They swapped over at regular intervals: one used the pickaxe, the other strengthened the spring, the third rested.

By the end of the day they had filled their bags. After loading them on the mektoubs, they finally rested and took time to eat. The sun was disappearing behind the horizon as the first stars begin to twinkle in the sky.

- "I think we've earned our salary," said Mokra.

Despite his training as a warrior, Aedon could no longer feel his muscles. He never would have thought that digging could be so tiring.

- "But's it worth it," he said, stretching out on the desert sawdust.

- "Dappers too, yeah, that always helps," said Mokra.

- "To pay for the journey, yeah..." he let slip before biting his lip.

Why do I always say too much? he thought.

- "What are you talking about?" asked Eree, interested all of a sudden.

He wanted to keep quiet, but as Eree looked at him, burning with curiosity, he knew that the battle was over before it had even begun.

He told them everything, making them promise not to reveal a thing.

- "What a story! To think that all of Pyr has been watching you since your arrival!... And you really want to go there?" asked Mokra. "Ugh, nothing in the world could make me do that!"

Eree remained silent. Aedon leaned towards her.

- "You won't say anything, will you?" he asked, praying that he could trust her.

She seemed to hesitate, then answered.

- "If you'll agree to let me come with you, I promise not to say anything."

He had expected anything but that. He didn't know how to reply.

- "You said that the Matis was struggling to find Fyros prepared to work for him," she insisted, "so he shouldn't have much problem accepting it, should he?"

- "...But... what about Galeos?"

- "Galeos? He's not my keeper! I'm sick of digging up sawdust. I want to see what the rest of Atys looks like. Anyway, whether you like it or not, you haven't got a choice. I'm coming with you and that's that!"

Aedon was careful not to say anything, but, as they started their return journey, his face was lit up by a big smile.

In the offices of the Black Faces guild, Galeos welcomed the three bags that were brought to him more warmly than he did the news of Eree's departure. He grumbled for a little while, but, faced with her determination, had no choice but to let her go.

Lato Nivaldo was much easier to convince.

- "Gladly, I'm happy that you've been able to win people over to my cause," the ambassador smiled, once Aedon had finished explaining the reason for Eree's presence.

- "Even if I've trouble imagining that Yrkanis could be as beautiful a city as Pyr, I'm in the mood for an adventure."

- "Very well, go to the Karavan altar to the south of Pyr. The Karavan Host knows me, he'll give you pacts for the capital of the Verdant Heights. Don't worry, the quality of the plants that you brought me will easily allow me to pay for both of your journeys. I'll let the Duke know you're coming, he's all you'll need..."

Listening to the Ambassador's final instructions, Aedon felt his heart accelerate in his chest. He was going to discover a new region, another people. Eree and he looked at each other and their eyes shone with excitement at the thought of the adventure which awaited them.

Part Four

Before opening their eyes, Aedon and Eree took a moment to clear their heads. Karavan teleportation felt different to what they were used to. During the journey, the feeling that they had been wrapped up took hold of them. Cut off from the exterior, they hadn't felt their bodies being dispersed into the network, as they did during Kami teleportations. However, they had felt the same heat start off in their skull and then spread to their whole body.

They opened their eyes and saw the gray shape of the altar. A quick look was enough to tell them that they had reached their destination. The immense trees, scorched by the autumn, removed all doubt. Yrkanis, the botanic city, greeted the two young Fyros.

They took the closest street, towards the centre of Yrkanis. Staring all around to examine the architecture of each building, they didn't notice some of the Matis giving them suspicious looks.

- "It's magnificent!" cried Eree. "I would never have believed it could be so lovely, all this vegetation. It's so..."

- "...overwhelming," finished Aedon.

Eree smiled and took his hand.

- "Have you been sent by Ambassador Lato Nivaldo?"

Aedon and Eree turned round. An old Matis with thin, expressionless lips was watching them coldly.

- "Yes, we're to meet Duke Niero di Va...", began Eree.

The Matis cut her off dryly.

- "Fine. Follow me, if you please!"

The two Fyros looked at each other, surprised by his manner. The Matis had already started down a street without so much as a backward glance. With a shrug of his shoulders, Aedon followed suit, accompanied by Eree.

- "I am Dino Valetti's steward," he said. "He charged me with coming to find you and taking you to his office."

Aedon was very annoyed by their guide. Eree, in contrast, was making the most of the city and taking everything in.

- "Do you think it will work?" he murmured in Eree's direction.

- "Of course. The script's already been written for us. We just need to be good actors," she replied softly. Aedon felt his stomach knotting with nerves. He concentrated on remembering the meeting they had had with Partacles in his office before their departure.

- "What we say here doesn't leave this room. I chose you because Di Vanochi will see in you two young, gullible and easily-manipulated Fyros."

Aedon was astonished by the senator's words, but said nothing. Partacles seemed a lot less relaxed and friendly than during their meetings in the bathhouse.

- "Di Vanochi is a treacherous homin but very intelligent. So you'll have to pay attention to every single word you say!"

He got out of his chair to walk round his office.

- "The Zoraï Guide, the Great sage Mabreka, wishes to get the Book of Revelations to us, in which the words of Ma-Duk are recorded. The relic is of the greatest importance for our two peoples!" he emphasised.

- "Surely you don't want us to transport it ourselves?" asked Aedon, incredulous.

- "Of course not! I'm not that crazy," he said with a smile. "I want you to go and see Di Vanochi and make out that you're two young Fyros hungry for dappers. We know that the Duke has got wind of this shipment. But he has no idea when it will set off, or what route it will take from Zora. I want him to stop investigating it... he's perfectly capable of finding it out."

He paced in front of them, head bowed. He seemed to be thinking as he spoke.

- "So you're going to give it to him."

With these words he turned towards them. He had a worrying smile on his face.

- "Sorry?" asked Aedon, amazed.

- "You're going to reveal the right date to him, but a completely different route. The one that you're going to tell him about leaves only one option for an ambush... the Knot of Insanity gorge. The group he sends will get a little surprise there. Then we'll have, I hope, proof of Di Vanochi's guilt to present to the King of Yrkanis. Mabreka also counts on ridding himself of the tribe which acts for the Duke. Lately, those mercenaries have greatly upset the Zoraï's plans."

- "But he can't attack a Zoraï convoy. That would be tantamount to declaring war!" Eree exclaimed.

- "Of course he can't. Apparently he'll use a tribe from the Witherings. Di Vanochi is prepared to do anything to attract the favour of the Karavan and the king. He's convinced that afterwards he'll be a hero to his people and that Yrkanis will shower him with honours. However, he prefers to cover his back and not run the risk of being discovered."

- "But... if he discovers the deception, we're dead!" cried Aedon.

- "You didn't think it would be easy, I hope?" asked Partacles, feigning astonishment. "You'll have to justify yourselves to the Duke, and I've already prepared an explanation for you. Your contact with the Black Faces guild wasn't

insignificant. Their close link to the Burnt Faces, the elite imperial guards, allowed Galeos to get the information which you now possess. His penchant for alcohol revealed this little secret to you," he said to Eree, smiling.

He approached the two Fyros.

- "You will be handsomely rewarded by the empire once your mission has been accomplished."

He leaned forward and put his hands on their shoulders. He gripped them with a formidable strength.

- "But, if for even one second you think about betraying me, I promise that you'd rather find yourself in the middle of a kitin colony."

He hadn't raised his voice, but there had been no need. His expression and his grip were proof of just how dangerous and determined the homin was. He paused, staring at the two Fyros, who were trying to ignore the pain, and, as if nothing had happened, smiled again as normal and let go of their shoulders.

- "In spite of all that, bon voyage! I hope that you appreciate the exoticism of Yrkanis. We'll meet again when you get back."

The senator didn't give them a chance to respond. He sat back down at his desk and returned to his affairs.

The steward led them to a circular building set back slightly from all the rest.

- "If you want to come back here, this is the south-east of the Yasson district," said Dino Valetti. "This is the Duke's private building."

Two guards were posted at the entrance. They paid no attention as the steward and the two Fyros passed.

Dino Valetti stepped into the lift, followed by Aedon and Eree. At the first floor the lift opened onto a bright room. A Matis in his thirties was sitting behind a desk, head bent over some documents. The two Fyros stepped into the room, and, without a word, the steward closed the lift doors again. The two young homins were left alone with the man whom they could only assume was the Duke.

Part Five

Aedon and Eree felt uneasy. The Duke still hadn't raised his head from his documents.

- "Excuse me, we..."

- "One moment!" the Matis interrupted.

The room fell silent once again. The two Fyros were still standing in front of the lift, and looked at each other apprehensively.

Finally, the Matis put the documents aside and raised his head. He stared at the two young Fyros before him at length.

- "Welcome to you," he said with a smile. "I am Duke Niero di Vanochi. I'm very sorry, but my role requires me to take care of incredibly boring paperwork and I very often forget my manners."

With these words he stood, and with a grand gesture invited them to sit on the two chairs facing his desk.

- "Move a little closer, that's it. The ambassador was full of praise for you in his last dispatch. You have done excellent work with those herbs. Just as

well, for yubo meat is so flavourless without them.”

He sat back down at the same time as them.

- ”Lato told me that you would like to stay here for a while, is that correct?”

- ”Yes, but money. . .” began Aedon.

- ”. . . is always a problem!” exclaimed Di Vanochi. ”Don’t worry, I have a few missions for you. Oh, nothing too bad, mostly just collecting raw materials, since you’re so good at it.”

He stared at the two homins, who felt ill-at-ease once again.

- ”What’s wrong? You seem afraid. And yet Lato told me that you dreamed of coming here.”

- ”It’s just that. . .” began Aedon uncertainly.

The Duke leant towards him, suddenly more interested.

- ”Yes?”

- ”Well, we aren’t here to earn a few dappers with little missions,” continued Aedon.

- ”What?! I grant you the honour of being the first Fyros to work for me. I trust you and you throw it back in my face?” bellowed Di Vanochi.

- ”Not at all,” Eree hastened to say. ”We would be honoured to carry out those missions for you. But we have something much better than herbs to offer you.”

The Duke’s face lost the red which had coloured it for a few moments. He had now regained his calm and his smile.

- ”Tell me.”

- ”We want to be paid five hundred thousand dappers. We won’t say a thing till we get it,” said Eree.

- ”You must understand, some of my business has nothing to do with the crown. I can’t withdraw such a sum from my personal accounts when I don’t even know the nature of the information,” he said with a sad expression. He stood up and moved to the right of his desk.

- ”I’ll need a lot more than a simple promise to give you that amount,” he said, folding his arms. ”Tell me a bit more, I’ll decide if it’s worth it.”

Aedon looked at Eree. Each seemed as unsure as the other.

- ”I’ve been able to obtain important information on a Zoraï convoy leaving for Pyr,” admitted Eree.

- ”Why come and see me?”

- ”I heard that this kind of information was of interest to you. My meeting with Aedon gave me an unexpected opportunity to make money from it.”

The Duke seemed to doubt Eree’s words.

- ”The only problem is that I already know a lot about this convoy. What information do you have?”

Again, the two Fyros looked at each other, each waiting for the other to make the first move. The formidable Duke left them no choice.

- ”We know the date of the convoy, as well as the route it will take.”

- ”And may I ask how two young Fyros, without experience, without connections, without dappers and without loyalty, came by information for which my best agents have searched in vain?”

He had looked round. His smile had disappeared, he examined their reaction closely.

Eree kept her cool.

- "Oh, I've got connections, believe me!" she said, raising her voice. "I'm a member of the Black Faces guild!"

- "Congratulations!" replied the Duke, a fake smile on his lips. "I still don't see how someone as insignificant as you would come by this secret."

Aedon began to stand up. He had had enough of the Duke's manners.

- "If you wish to see out the day, I advise you to sit back down, young homin."

He hadn't moved, but his gaze forced Aedon to sit back down.

- "Apologies for the interruption, please continue," he asked Eree impatiently.

- "My guild has close ties to that of the Burnt Faces, the elite imperial guards. The head of my guild knows about all their missions, they haven't done a thing wrong. He also has a good relationship with shooki alcohol and he bragged too much to the wrong person..."

Eree gave a wry smile. Di Vanochi, hadn't moved. He looked at her, searching for the slightest sign of weakness.

- "I don't believe you..." he began.

A shiver ran down Aedon's spine.

- "... but given that I don't currently have any other sources of information, I'm going to try placing my trust in you."

There was nothing reassuring about his smile.

- "I'm listening, what do you know?"

- "The money first," said Aedon, who had regained his composure.

- "You have understood, I think, that I believe you are lying to me. I therefore hope you understand how generous my offer is. I suggest two hundred thousand dappers straight away and an extra five hundred thousand if the information is revealed to be correct."

- "But that's more than we asked for!" said Eree, astonished.

- "I know. It's just a little bit of encouragement to help you give me the right information... but if you need any more encouragement, my guards will be happy to provide it."

He returned to his desk and picked up a small bell. He shook it quickly and Dino Valetti entered the room straight away.

- "Yes, my Duke?" he asked.

- "Bring a bag of two hundred thousand dappers, quickly," ordered the Duke.

The steward left right away. The Duke stayed where he was, staring at the two homins without saying a word.

A few moments later, the steward returned holding a bag. He put it on the Duke's desk and left as quickly as he had come.

- "There's your money. Take it," said the Matis, pointing to the bag.

Aedon stood up and grabbed the purse.

- "Now, tell me everything," he said, smiling.

Eree revealed everything they knew.

- "I thought that those vermin would pass through the portal. They hope to reach Pyr as quickly as possible."

The Matis rolled a map of Atys out on his desk.

- "Here's where we'll have to ambush."

He pointed to the Knot of Insanity gorge.

- "You like to travel and discover new cultures, isn't that so?"

The two Fyros looked at him, incredulous.

- "Magnificent!" he said, without waiting for an answer. "In that case you'll organise this attack for me!"

- "What? Us? But..."

- "Of course, one of my most loyal guards will accompany you... For if you have deceived me, I want you both dead instantly."

He hadn't lifted his eyes from the map. His last words had been uttered in a frighteningly casual manner.

- "Sorry?" said Aedon, astonished.

- "Enough talk! You leave in an hour. You have a long journey ahead of you. Natto!" he shouted. "Natto will accompany you in the

Zoraï land and look after your... welfare. You're going here, into the Grove of Umbra."

The two Fyros turned round to see the Matis warrior who had just come in.

- "May I introduce Natto, the head of my guard."

The Matis greeted them with a nod.

- "You're going to meet a friendly tribe which has already... worked for me: the Antikami," continued the Duke. "Natto will be there to make sure everything goes smoothly. They are to attack the convoy. The booty will be divided in two: the pillage for them and the Book for us. Natto, you will bring it to me immediately, accompanied, I hope, by our two friends. You have little time, leave now."

Natto gestured for them to leave the room.

The time that followed was devoted to preparing for the journey.

- "We'll use Karavan pacts to get to the Grove of Umbra. There we'll have a day's walk to the tribe's camp, if we're lucky."

The Matis talked as he walked. It hadn't taken long to buy their scant provisions.

They were now heading for the Karavan alter.

Aedon and Eree had had little time to visit the magnificent Matis city. They had made the most of every second, looking round wide-eyed. This short visit had allowed them to forget their mission a little. The Matis warrior, who had seemed so cold at first, explained the history of the city to them.

- "I know that you'd like to see a bit more of Yrkanis, but we have too little time. You'll have plenty of time to make the most of the city when we get back. I think that you should stay here. Or far away from the Kamists at any rate."

He looked a lot friendlier than he had in Di Vanochi's office.

- "This is us. Wait for me here, I'm going to speak to the Karavan Host."

The two young Fyros remained at a distance as Natto headed towards the Host.

- "It's working so far," said Aedon.
- "Yes, I think he trusts us," agreed Eree
- "Shame we have to betray him. . ."

The two Fyros looked at each other sadly.

- "What's wrong with you two," asked Natto as he came back. "Don't be afraid. The Zoraï lands where we're headed are hostile, but I'm used to going there. There won't be any problems."

- "We're all set," Aedon said to him joylessly.

- "Are you still having doubts about your actions, is that it? Listen, you have to make choices in life. You've already made yours. You can't back out, no matter what happens. So accept it and live with your decision!"

The Matis' words made Aedon feel even more downcast. He tried to smile nonetheless.

- "You're right. We're going to a new country. I'll have seen more new things in one day than in my whole life."

The Matis burst out laughing.

- "There you go! That's much better. That's what teleportation's for!"

He gave them each a pact.

- "Before you break it, I want you to remember a few rules. You walk where I walk, you speak when I tell you to speak, you obey my orders without discussion and you don't play at being heroes. Can I trust you to do that?"

Eree and Aedon both acquiesced.

- "Excellent. Alright then, lets go!"

He crushed the pact in his hand and disappeared the next instant.

- "He's right, we can't back out now," said Eree.

She broke her pact and vanished too.

- "Okay. . . let's go."

This time the journey was better. Ignoring a slight headache, Aedon opened his eyes.

Several strange animals were watching him. They were rotund and enormous. Their globular yellow eyes were pointed at him. One of the animals began to approach him. It had a long trunk from which protruded small tongues of fire. Aedon instinctively put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Natto held him back.

- "Don't worry, it's just curious. Wombaïs are as gentle as lambs, as long as you don't bother them. Some Zoraï tribes have even ridden them!"

The wombaï was in front of him and began to snuffle at his tunic with the end of its trunk. Natto gently pushed it away. The animal hesitated then turned back to rejoin its herd.

Aedon looked around. He was in front of the Karavan alter, right in the middle of a plain.

- "Is this the land of the Zoraï!?" he exclaimed.

Eree also looked disappointed.

- "I thought it was a jungle."

- "Apart from the grass, you'd think we were in the desert," agreed Aedon.

- "This is normal, we're on the border of the country here. It allows the Karavan to carry out the tests they need to on the Goo. They don't react the same way as the Kami to this disease, they think that studying it will allow them to control it and thus eradicate it. It's better than running and asking for help from homins. Would you fight that if a Kami asked you?"

He turned round and pointed towards the horizon. Aedon saw the disease which was eating away at the country. A lilac sea extended from one edge of the plain to the other. Vapours escaped from the earth as it was consumed. The smell was unbearable, even from this distance.

Aedon instinctively put a hand over his mouth and nose.

- "Don't do that, even if the vapours are toxic, at this distance, there's no risk. The Goo only infects homins when it's concentrated or when there's been a prolonged exposure. We have a certain amount of resistance to its destructive powers." Aedon moved forward to get a better look. Natto quickly grabbed him.

- "You're better not get any closer, there can be Goo springs under the earth which rise up when someone walks over them. It seems that this thing, whatever it is, is intelligent. We'd better leave, the further we are from here, the better."

They moved away from the altar, heading west.

- "This region is very dangerous, there are more than just wombaïs here. Occasionally you come across kitins, and there are bandits.

The worst, of course, are the gibbaï which wander about everywhere."

The Matis waked quickly.

- "It's not far to the camp, but I prefer to keep away from the Goo, we'll have to make a few detours."

Part Six

As Natto had said, they often had to stop and choose another path. Several times, they turned back to avoid groups of gibbaï, who were easily spotted thanks to their midnight-blue fur. They could even make out a primitive red. He was a lot bigger than the others and his bristling hair made it look as though he was on fire.

- "That one is called Gibbakya by the Zoraï. He leads the degenerates of the region. I've already had an encounter with him, believe me, we're better off getting out of here."

The primitive raised his head and began to snuffle around.

- "Hurry, I think he's spotted us."

They walked for a long time without saying a word. Finally they saw the distinctive lilac of the diseased earth in the distance.

- "I thought that you wanted to get as far away from the Goo as possible," said Eree.

- "What you're seeing, even if they're the same colour as the Goo, are the tents of the Antikami tribe's camp. It's the traditional colour of the Zoraï. I don't know why they kept it if they hate their people so much. These madmen go so far as to mutilate their masks to challenge the Kami. They only keep the bare minimum, without that, they couldn't survive."

- "What do you mean? It's only a mask, the Zoraï wear them to be close to the Kami."

Aedon had never had much to do with the Zoraï. He saw their masks as religious snobbery.

- "Not at all!" replied the Matis. "The Zoraï mask is fixed to their soul by Kami magic. To remove it is to lose their vital essence. Just taking off little bits, even that's complete madness. The Antikami don't have any horns on their masks. What's left are the bits they couldn't take off. Hurry up, we're running late."

They approached the tents. They were immense, and had been made from rich, costly materials. The three companions advanced cautiously, Natto in the lead. Four Zoraï appeared at the corner of the first tent, blocking their way. Each one was armed with a long pike. Aedon glanced back. Four more Zoraï stood behind them, blocking their escape.

- "Don't worry," said the Matis, "they've recognised me. The chief will be here soon."

Aedon and Eree didn't feel at all reassured. The Zoraï came closer, their threatening pikes at chest height.

- "My name is Natto," he shouted. "I wish to talk to Pei-Jeng Luun."

- "And here I am, my friend."

The four guards before them moved aside to make room for another Zoraï. Smaller than they, he nonetheless moved with confidence.

Behind his mask, his eyes didn't have the mystery of the other Zoraï that Aedon had already met. They were plain, almost empty.

- "Welcome. Have you brought us some new diversions?" he asked.

- "Yes, another favour for the Duke. I've brought the usual payment."

- "And them?"

He pointed at Aedon and Eree.

- "The Duke wants to be sure of their... loyalty."

- "I see."

He turned his gaze away from the two Fyros, who were of little importance in his eyes.

- "How much have you brought us this time?" the head of the tribe asked.

- "The usual amount: three hundred thousand dappers."

- "The usual amount has doubled, my friend. The last mission cost the lives of seven members of my tribe."

The Matis didn't seem surprised.

- "The Duke thought that you would want a little extra. He has therefore provided for another five hundred thousand dappers after the mission. And there is the small incentive of serving your own interests as well."

The head of the tribe looked at the Matis intently.

- "Our interests? You'll have to explain, my friend."

- "The mission is to attack a Zoraï procession and retrieve the precious Book of Revelations."

- "What's the catch? The Duke has never been generous. Why this sudden change?" asked Pei-Jeng Luun.

- "Let's just say that he's very keen to see this mission carried out successfully, as I'm sure you are. Consider it a bonus for your previous service."

- "This is momentous news. We will strike at the heart of our enemies. Tonight we will throw a great party, tomorrow we will leave."

- "No," said Natto dryly. "We must leave as soon as possible. We have to be at the Knot of Insanity gorge tomorrow at dusk for the attack."

- "As you wish."

The head of the tribe turned towards a Zoraï beside him.

- "Pingi, my daughter, you will head the tribe in my absence. I want thirty warriors ready to leave in an hour. In the meantime, you can rest in my tent," he said to Natto.

He invited them to follow him. The guards had already left to get ready.

Night had just fallen. The Zoraï tribe had marched at the double throughout the previous night and had arrived at the gorge in the afternoon. All but the look-outs had been able to rest.

The whole tribe was ready to fight. They had spread out around the gorge so as to leave no way out. They had been waiting for over an hour, with no sign of the procession. The two Fyros began to worry.

They had remained on the cliff top, Natto beside them. Once the attack began, Aedon knew he would have to act fast and kill the Matis. Although he liked him, he knew that Natto was too loyal to the Duke to let them live.

Aedon could just make out two of the tribe's look-outs. They had returned to report to Luun. It only took a few moments. The chief turned to Natto and quickly signed to him.

- "They're coming. Just ten guards and two chariots, they'll be here shortly. Ten guards? Impossible! Why are they protecting such an important convoy with only ten guards?" said Natto, worried.

He suspects, thought Aedon. It's almost time.

A few minutes passed in total silence. Aedon could no longer see the Zoraï below them at all. Then, little by little, torch-light transformed the gorge. The rocks were turned from dark black to orange.

The first Zoraï guards were visible, each one holding a torch. There really were only ten guards. They surrounded two chariots pulled by mektoubs.

The guards were heavily armed and looked closely at every little crevice in the gorge.

They quickly reached the ambush point. The Antikami silently moved under cover to get into attack position.

Just as the tribe was about to launch the attack, a blue light appeared in the first chariot. All the Antikami stopped, taken aback. The roof of the carriage exploded. A Zoraï magician was in the middle. Magic particles were still running down the length of his amplifiers. Around him, another three Zoraï also stood up. Then the second chariot exploded. In this one stood a Fyros magician. Four other Fyros had already jumped down from the chariot during the explosion. Aedon had never seen them before, but he knew they were Burnt Faces, the elite guard. They ran towards the Antikami, who were still dazed by the effect of the surprise. The first fell quickly from a sword blow.

Pei-Jeng Luun pulled himself together and ordered the attack. Unfortunately for the Antikami, the Kamists were too organised. The Zoraï warriors fiercely protected the chariots from which the magicians cast their incantations. The tribe's marksmen were the primary targets of the fast Fyros warriors.

Aedon didn't see the rest of the fight. He had been so astonished that he'd forgotten about Natto. With a violent back-hand, the Matis drove him to the ground. Eree tried to attack the warrior from behind, but he blocked her hand and her dagger fell into the gorge. With her other hand, Eree tried to hit him, but the Matis was much faster than she. He broke her left wrist with disconcerting ease. She let go a cry of pain before being thrown to the ground.

Natto turned back towards Aedon who was getting to his feet.

- "I trusted you, traitors," he roared.

He had unsheathed his sword.

- "We remained loyal to our people, and to homins."

Aedon did the same with his weapon.

- "Remained loyal to homins? You've been manipulated and controlled like puppets!"

He made a first attack. Aedon knew that he couldn't beat the Matis' strength and dodged it. The blade missed him by a few centimetres.

- "Why look for conflict at any price? The people are at peace and the Duke looks for war."

Now he attacked. He aimed a quick blow at the Matis' neck. But the warrior was experienced. He blocked the attack and put out his hand to take the hilt of Aedon' sword. Brute strength won out and Natto sent the Fyros to the ground with a blow from his shoulder.

- "The people will never be at peace! Face it!"

The tip of his blade touched Aedon' throat, who felt the blood begin to flow down his neck.

- "Miserable servant of the demons, you should have picked on someone your own size."

A rock hit him right in the face, crushing his nose in a crunch of broken bones. Aedon turned his head. Eree was on her feet, holding her arm, and grimacing in pain.

Natto grunted. He had let go of his sword and was clutching his face. Aedon didn't wait any longer and kicked the Matis violently in the chest. He was caught off guard by the violence of the unexpected blow. He took a couple of steps back and his foot hit the cliff-edge. He disappeared with a horrifying scream.

Aedon stood back up and approached the gorge. Natto was at the bottom. One of the Zoraï warriors approached him with a torch.

The Matis' body was deformed like a dislocated puppet and his blood stained the rocks below him.

The Zoraï looked up and signalled to the two Fyros to come down.

The Kamists hadn't suffered a single loss. Only one Antikami had been taken alive. The rest of the tribe had been destroyed. The magicians healed the two Fyros' wounds and put them into one of the chariots.

- "We're going back to Zora. Mabreka wants to thank you, you've done a good job. The journey will take some time, rest while you can."
— the Chronicles.

5.3.2 Ibian Pledix, bark Sculptor

Part One

Dear reader, today we are going to meet one of the greatest Fyros crafters that I know. His wood sculpting talent is unrivalled on Atys. I am all the more eager to interview him because he is currently working on construction sites on Fyros territory, so I hope he will be willing to share a few words with us.

Interviewer: Hello, Ibian. Thank you for allowing us to ask you a few questions. To begin with, could you introduce yourself to our readers?

Ibian Pledix: My name is Ibian Pledix, and I live in Dyron and work as a bark sculptor.

Interviewer: When did you decide to become a bark sculptor?

Ibian Pledix: Oh, well, I guess we can use the word "vocation". I can remember the day when my father offered me my first dagger job. He hoped that I would follow in his footsteps and become a hunter like him. But he was thoroughly disappointed when he saw that, instead of hunting yubo, I spent my time carving bits of bark to make little wooden gingos and bodocs. Still, he did nothing to prevent me from leaving when I found a master crafter who was willing to teach me the art of woodcarving.

Interviewer: And what does it take to be a good wood sculptor?

Ibian Pledix: I would say that you must be very meticulous and focused. The slightest error can ruin many days of work! One misplaced cut and your whole design is thrown off.

Interviewer: How long have you been practicing your art?

Ibian Pledix: Well, it has now been more than forty years that I have been working in this profession. I became a Master Jeweler at the age of thirty, then I diversified into more ambitious work, especially in decorating and then in construction. Without boasting, I can say that I am still one of the best crafters on this side of the Bark.

Interviewer: Your work is indeed very admirable; how do you achieve such finesse? Which tools do you use?

Ibian Pledix: You know, each crafter has his own little peculiarities. I happen to use jeweler's tools made of ragus bone. They are not as robust as wood shears made of kitin legs, but they are much finer and they allow more meticulous work.

Interviewer: And what are you working on right now?

Ibian Pledix: Well, now that the Karavan have unveiled their sanctuary construction project, I can tell you about it openly: I am working on the plans for a sanctuary dedicated to Jena. Here - just before you arrived, I was putting the finishing touches on the miniature model of one of the columns, made up of thousands of different pieces. Of course, I will not be building the sanctuary myself. But there will be hundreds of homins working on this project, I hope.

Interviewer: And why are there plans for a Jena temple?

Ibian Pledix: Well, there is an interesting story to that. Several weeks ago, while I was scraping some bark to collect raw materials, I found myself surrounded by a pack of gingos that I had been too busy to notice as they approached. I can still remember a moment of terrible pain - and then everything went blank. A total blackout. Then I heard a voice telling me that I had been chosen for a grand mission because of my talents and my devotion. Jena wished that I, Ibian Pledix, help her servants erect an edifice to her glory! The image of an amazing temple was impressed upon my mind, and I think that if I had been fully awake, I would have wept at such beauty! The voice spoke again and I can still remember the words: "Make the plans for this building, so that the homins may build it and thereby give glory to Jena, the one who shall soon save all of you!" I finally opened my eyes, and found that I was in the Dunes of Exile, near the Karavan altar. Had I merely dreamed? But the image of the temple reappeared to me suddenly, clearer than ever. My last doubts vanished when the Karavan host, who I knew well, came up to me and said, "Now you are blessed above all, Ibian. Jena has shown her faith in you today. I believe in you too, homin, and I know that you will not let her down."

Ibian had grown misty-eyed by the time he finished speaking, filled with adoration and his heart set on something that only he could see. The image of the temple must have appeared to him again. I left him to his thoughts for a moment, so he could collect himself.

Part Two

We are now visiting with Ibian Pledix, sculptor emeritus, who is currently working on a very special project. Jena herself purportedly asked him to design her new temple in the land of Fyros.

Interviewer: You were telling us about the divine mission that Jena assigned to you. But aren't you worried about what other Fyros might think of you?

Ibian Pledix: Well, I happen to be a Karavan follower. Oh, I understand that might surprise you! There aren't many of us, but there are some and we are very wary of Ma-Duk and the so-called "Kami Age". After all, where were the Kamis during the Kitin War? It is thanks to the Karavan that I have my life. But that isn't the question; my mother was raised in the Jena faith and, all through my life, I have never had reason to doubt her servants. I hope that my compatriots will respond to Jena's call as I have, so that this temple to her glory may be built.

Interviewer: So this is an act of devotion for you?

Ibian Pledix: Yes, I believe you could call it that. Helping build this temple is a way for me to thank Jena for her good will and her protection. I also hope to help many homins contemplate the path of Jena's light, as I have. I am proud to work on this project. And too bad if some do not like it. However, I am not one of those fanatics who attack homins just because they might be Kamists. In any case, I would have a hard time mowing down the Fyros empire all by myself! (laughs)

Interviewer: And what is it like to be a Jena admirer in the midst of a group of people who are mostly Kamist?

Ibian Pledix: Please do not misunderstand my words. It is not because I do

not revere the Kamis that I do not trust in the Emperor. My life is first of all dedicated to the Emperor, even though I deplore the fact that he tends to favor the Kamis, far be it for me to criticize him. After all, Emperor Dexton has his reasons, and they are beyond the comprehension of a simple crafter such as myself. Anyway, that is how I put it. For the time being, I have not encountered any serious risks, but if my Emperor were to ask me to take up arms against the Karavan, I wonder what I would do... And, aside from my own seeking, it is not easy on an everyday basis. I have had my share of problems. It is no accident that I have chosen to practice my craft in the remote area of Dyron rather than in Pyr, where customers might be far more numerous. But here, at least, there are only the cloppers who bother me. Anyway, I hope that if Dexton decides to forbid the Karavan project, things won't go worse for me.

Interviewer: But why ask a homin to design this building? Can't Jena's servants design them?

Ibian Pledix: Well, besides the fact that I consider it as a reward for my devotion to have been chosen, I think that they want to get homins to participate in this great work, and in order to do so, they need plans that all homins can understand. So who could be better suited to making them, other than a simple homin, especially if he is one of the best crafter on Atys? (smiles) Now I hope you will excuse me, but I must be getting back to work. I have to deliver the final plans tomorrow and if I want them to be as perfect as Jena, I had better get busy right now.

— interview with Ibian Pledix, a bark Sculptor.

5.3.3 Dexius Apokos, Fyros Genadier

Today, we have decided to turn our attention to those who are devoted to protecting the Fyros empire. You can find them regularly patrolling the streets of Pyr: they are the Emperor's soldiers.

Interviewer: Who are you?

Dexius Apokos: Dexius Apokos, Imperial Fyros Fifth Legion Artillery, at your service.

Interviewer: So you are in the Fyros army?

Dexius Apokos: In the service of the Emperor, yes.

Interviewer: And how long have you been a soldier?

Dexius Apokos: I joined the Imperial Legions five years ago, though I entered the military academy when I was just a young homin. The training was hard, but the instructors are always right.

Interviewer: What is the training like?

Dexius Apokos: The first months are especially devoted to physical training, handling weapons and military discipline. Only then are we ready to begin with the actual techniques for protecting our territory. Saving our borders and keeping the Empire together are our top priorities. However, the kitin threat is still with us today, so we had to learn to recognize the various species, know their weak points and evade their deadly attacks. Then gradually, there are some who stand out in one specialized area or another. Those who show good

leadership abilities are quickly promoted to commanding ranks. The lighter ones who show little aptitude for physical activities are taught to ride on mektoubs so they can become scouts or messengers, and so on.

Interviewer: And what about you - what is your specialty?

Dexius Apokos: I was immediately attracted to the firearms. You could even say that I am gifted. Since my abilities with an ax were pretty miserable, I was quickly integrated with the Emperor's artillery sections, which is as much of a relief to me as it must be to Sergeant Zerisse, who couldn't bear to see me drop my ax. I think it's significant that when I was young, I had little occasion to handle any arms and other Fyros made fun of me.

Interviewer: You had never handled a weapon, you say? So why did you choose the army?

Dexius Apokos: Since I was little, I dreamed of wide-open spaces. And the proud look of the Fyros warriors, the honor of serving the Emperor, the idea of serving my people - all those things appealed to me. My father happened to be a crafter, and wanted me to follow in his footsteps. He was very authoritarian and forced me to spend hours working leather at his side, while other young Fyros were out hunting yubo. I couldn't stand being shut inside that way. So one day, I up and ran away to enlist with the recruiters.

Interviewer: And do you ever regret this?

Dexius Apokos: Sometimes. Although serving the Emperor fills me with pride, it is true that I have never really had an opportunity to live the adventures I was dreaming of. You know, the life of a soldier is mostly about patrolling the streets of Pyr, endless guard duty in the heat and flames at the gates of Pyr, the risk of being sent to a frontier post way out in the desert for weeks on end, where there is nothing happening and not much of the heroic activity that you hear about in tales when you are a child. My biggest regret is leaving my mother. That is why I asked to be assigned to the sanctuary guard detachment.

Interviewer: The sanctuary?

Dexius Apokos: Yes, the Kami sanctuary! You must be aware that the sanctuaries are being built on the outskirts of Pyr. With those satanic Karavan followers always hanging around, looking for any pretext to attack us, they will need guards to protect the building sites.

Interviewer: So why did you want to be a sanctuary guard?

Dexius Apokos: So I could be closer to my mother. I heard that she was very ill. I feel bad about leaving her without saying a word, the poor woman must have been sick with worry. If I could become a sanctuary guard, then maybe I could go to see her regularly without the risk of being called to a frontier post for months on end. And I know she would be proud to see me serving the Kamis, and it would reassure her to know that I am assigned to a sanctuary rather than being sent to clean out a kitin nest.

Interviewer: And what about you - how do you feel about serving the Kamis?

Dexius Apokos: I feel honored! While I am loyal to the Emperor, my heart will always belong to Ma-Duk. And to tell you the truth, I am a little tired of these unexciting patrols through the streets of Pyr. I will get a chance to see some action alongside the Kamis. I wouldn't want to miss it when war breaks

out against Jena! Then I will finally get a chance to show the Emperor that he can be proud of me, and show my father that I have become a true homin.

— interview with Dexius Apokos, a Fyros Genadier.

5.3.4 Menia Pyron, engaged Fyros

Today our social reporter brings you an exclusive insight in the ceremony and symbolism involved in arranging a wedding in Fyros. She interviewed Menla Pyron, a bride who will be getting married next week.

Interviewer: So is the Fyros wedding ceremony religious-based? Are the Kami involved?

Menia Pyron: No, – it is not like that really.

Our weddings are steeped in historical tradition but they do not have any religious undertones. Weddings are civil acts and although devoid of any spiritual ritual, are celebrated by the whole community as we understand that marriage enhances the solidarity of the community so increasing its capacity to contribute to the state.

Well, that is what it says in the book I was given but basically we get married because we love each other and we want to become part of the community as a couple.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about the build up you have just come through?

Menia Pyron: Oh this is really fun! .The engagement period usually lasts for about two months during which we had to overcome a certain number cleverly thought out difficulties together. This allowed us to find out if we actually got on together and could work with each other. The tasks were set by a mutual friend of our parents, if you like an elder of the community. And boy did she come up with some tough challenges for us. But we made it through and now we are more in love than ever! After this the banns were published and the invitations sent out asking our guests to share our joy next week.

Interviewer: And the wedding itself?

Menia Pyron: Here, traditionally the celebrations can last an entire week, from Holeth to Holeth. According to our best warrior traditions, it is technically my husband who marries me, but that's so old-fashioned now and the law has recently been changed to reflect this making sure that we both give typically, we choose to get married in spring or autumn. As the days are more clement and it is not so hot for the dancing and partying.

We prefer a wedding set around a sacred fire, to bring us closer to our roots in the past, I have picked Pyr gate for mine! This is quite a popular spot and sometimes you will even see wedding parties waiting their turn here, but I have made an arrangement. Oh and we mustn't see each other all the day up until the ceremony – that would bring shocking bad luck so the two processions of relatives, friends and witnesses will assemble in different places.

Then we all sit around in two semicircles with on the left hand the females, and on the right the males, and the wedding ceremony begins. Of course we exchange rings as a symbol of our love as an unbroken circle and my husband will

wear his best uniform and weapons. In fact, in the ceremony itself he pledges me his sword – It’s a lovely moment and I can hardly wait! Me? Oh my finest dress and jewels, I’ve managed to talk daddy into a very nice new outfit!

The guests too of course will all dress up to the nines in an attempt to outdo each other, and the pictures are always a splash of colour.

My mother’s old friend will be conducting the ceremony, we normally have someone of status in the community to do this and it will be lovely to be married by someone who has known me since I was a baby in a carved crib.

Hmm what else? Oohh I know, presents! Well the guests used to give money, but it is also becoming increasingly customary to give finely crafted objects instead.

This bit is really funny, in the evening I am “sold” by my best five female friends who put on their finest medium armour and dance for the assembly collecting money and gifts for me and my new husband. This is always a riot!

Then we have fireworks and singing and dancing and sometimes people compose special poems and songs to perform in the evening. I am really hoping some of our more creative guests will do this for us!

Interviewer: Menla, thank you very much for sharing your big day with us, we wish you all joy and happiness for the future.

— interview with Menia Pyron, a young engaged Fyros.

5.3.5 Interview with Lekos Daraan

We travelled to the burning forest, to meet the Watchers. We had been told they were pretty important for the Fyros so we decided to interview Lekos Daraan. He is the current chief, a Fyros.

Interviewer: Hello. We have heard a lot about your tribe. Could you introduce yourself for more homins to know who you are?

Lekos Daraan: Sure.

Interviewer: I noticed that he was keeping a sharp watch around him, while speaking.’

Lekos Daraan: My name is Lekos Daraan. I’m the tribe chief of the Watchers. Our tribe was created in 2484. We are in charge of watching over hotspots in the Burning Forest, and maintain their activity so that they never go out or go out of control.

Interviewer: What for, I mean why do you do this?

Lekos Daraan: That’s obvious: this forest is a source of Magic Fire. If we weren’t keeping Watch, how would Fyros maintain the fire at Cerakos Gate, for instance?

Interviewer: I understand. But wouldn’t it be simpler to burn some wood there?

Lekos Daraan: That’s not the same fire. Look at these campfires.

Interviewer: Lekos showed us three campfires with strange-looking flames.

Lekos Daraan: Don’t you see it with you eyes, if your mind still cannot comprehend it?

Interviewer: So, this is a magic fire?

Lekos Daraan: It is.

Interviewer: But isn't it dangerous to keep this forest on fire?

Lekos Daraan: As I told you, this is a magic fire, so we can control it, thanks to the Kamis' teachings. If a blaze was to be put here, it would be far more difficult for us to extinguish it.

Interviewer: But the Kamis do not like fire...

Lekos Daraan: No, they don't like it. But we are here to ensure there won't be any risks taken, and a Kami watches over us.

Lekos pointed at a Kami.

Interviewer: There was a forest here before. Is it because of you, that it is now burnt?

Lekos Daraan: No. We just maintain some hotspots in activity. But this ancient forest had been consumed by a great fire far before Fyros arrived in the Burning Desert in 2483. When we arrived, however, the forest was still harbouring numerous hotspots of glowing embers.

Interviewer: And now only remain grey ashes and charcoal... But trees and flowers are also growing up again. Wouldn't you be pleased to be helped by Matis botanists?

Lekos Daraan: You fool... Matis are manipulators of nature. They don't care the Kamis' teaching, and moreover they can be dangerous. Are you spying for them?

Lekos looked at us with intense suspicion.

Interviewer: No, of course not. We just wanted to learn a bit more about your tribe.

Lekos Daraan: I suppose you have enough information. Now leave please, I have other things to do.

We didn't want to ask him more questions, since Lekos was apparently very irritated by our last one. We will try to return another day...

— interview with Lekos Daraan, tribe chief of the Watchers.

5.3.6 The Mystery of the Renegades

Today, our roving reporters met a Homin who was sent to go and kill some renegades on the orders of Xan Zessen. Intrigued by this, we decided to ask exactly why a captain of Dyron is asking the homins to kill the renegades.

Reporter: Hello Captain Zessen, we hope we are not disturbing you.

Xan Zessen: Greetings, I am afraid that I am very busy today, so please keep this short..

Reporter: Thanks captain. We have just met a Homin who was asked by you to kill some Renegades. The name that is given to them surely gives some indication as to their nature, but can you tell me more about this matter?

Xan Zessen: Ah, I see where you are coming from... As a captain, however I only apply the orders. I'm told to give the mission to kill the renegades, and I only obey as a good Fyros!

Having replied thus, Xan Zessen kept quiet, clearly watching for our reaction.

Reporter: Err, we never doubted you Captain...

Xan Zessen: Good.

Reporter: But... Can't you tell us more about the renegades?

Xan Zessen: Some people just don't know when to give up, it seems. Very well, I will give you some very basic information.

Reporter: Thank you Captain.

Xan Zessen: So... The symbol of the renegades is a tower on a dune. You may not have seen it, but the tribe itself is formed by Fyros and some Matis. These Matis are actually mercenaries who work for the renegades. Their enemies are the Fyros and the Kamis, which is why the Kamis would like to see them removed.

The Captain fell silent again, and it was clear that he did not wish to expound further.

Reporter: Ack, so you have no other information to give us?

Xan Zessen: I told you that I am a busy homin. Please go now and let me continue my duties. Perhaps if you search, you might find somebody who can tell you more. I strongly suggest that you start in Pyr.

Reporter: Thank you, Captain.

After this brief discussion with Xan Zessen, we made the journey to Pyr.

Considering all aspects of the problem, we hoped that the best person to give us information would be the chief guard of Pyr.

Reporter: Hello Chief. We hope that we are not disturbing you.

Guard Chief: No, not at all, come in and take a seat.

Reporter: Thank you. We have recently been to see Xan Zessen to ask about the renegades, but the captain wasn't very loquacious and didn't seem to want to tell us very much. Can you talk to us about them?

Guard Chief: Well, what exactly did you wish to discover?

Reporter: Hmm, for a start we would like to find out why they have that name?

Guard Chief: Very simple; these individuals were banned from our beautiful city of Pyr in 2497. Their goal is simply to provoke a revolt, as they intend to overthrow our Emperor. What preposterous idea! Our glorious Emperor who does so many things for our people!

Given that the Guard chief looked ready to carry on about the Empire all day, interesting though his speech was, we cut him short.

Reporter: We know all of this Chief, and we share your sentiments, but perhaps we could get back to the focus of this discussion, namely the renegades?

Guard Chief: Yes, of course. Where was I...

Reporter: That they want to overthrow our Emperor.

Guard Chief: Yes! and by any means possible. Initially our spies indicate that they will attempt to raise a rebellion, which has to be a crazy idea, as who would follow them?. Laughs. Finally, they will try by force too. Our information sources suggest that they will attempt to build an army to march on Pyr. You will note the Matis who work for them. These are of course mercenaries.

Reporter: Yes, Xan Zessen explained that to us.

Guard Chief: I am not really telling you anything fresh then....

Reporter: Of course! And what you are teaching us is quite frightening.

Guard Chief: Don't be scared, my guards are strong and will protect us all. These renegades have absolutely no chance in the long run.

Reporter: Thank you Chief, your words and attitude show that they are doomed to fail.

Guard Chief: I hope so!

Reporter: Their goal then is to take control of the Empire?

Guard Chief: Indeed. They will stop their revolt only in exchange for the capital. The Fyros would then be subject to a merciless dictatorship, which would be a catastrophe. Moreover, I have a very low opinion of these trouble-makers. It is even said that some of the tribe's dignitaries would leave their place for an important position in our society... you see their concept of honour...?

Reporter: Yes... Thank you Chief for all this information. We can enlighten our readers on the matter now!

Guard Chief: You are most welcome! It is always a pleasure to read your interviews.

— interview with Fyros officials on the topic of the Renegades.

5.3.7 Meeting with the new Senator Dios Apothebs

Our reporter snatches a brief chat with the extremely busy new Fyros Senator - Dios

Reporter: Congratulations, Senator Dios, for winning the election to the Fyros senate! Now we would be very much interested in some historical and political background to the senate, if you can spare the time?

How long has the senate been in existence, for example?

Dios Apothebs: The Senate is an old form of political support for the emperor, via the people. The exact year of the founding is unknown, though the old writings that survived the exodus do tell us that the senate was founded to make decisions easier for the emperor.

Back when the land of the Fyros was still big and their honour unbroken, the emperor had to make daily decisions about the wellbeing of the people. The senate was founded to deal with the small day-to-day tasks of ruling a great Empire. Small tasks needed to be solved quickly whereas the bigger ones required wisdom and consideration. Therefore it was that the small tasks were first brought before representatives and ultimately before the scholars. However, the emperor at that time saw that this could not go on forever, on an informal basis and so he gathered the scholars around him and following consultation, founded the senate. After the teething problems were resolved a simple yet effective system was created that was of great benefit for both the people and the emperor.

At the time when the languages of the peoples were still different from another, the senate used to be called "assembly of the three chambers", and the senate is still based on these three chambers today.

Reporter: How is the senate structured, and of whom is it composed?

Dios Apothebs: These three chambers are as follows:

- The first outer chamber is composed of exactly 21 scholars, of which I am one.

- The second, inner chamber is composed of the 13 most wise and experienced scholars from the outer chamber.

- The third chamber is composed of former members of the inner chamber, who are trusted by the emperor.

The outer chamber was tasked with the administration the municipalities. Most of time a scholar from the outer chamber was assigned a town or district to govern. His duties included the tasks of city administration, provision of sanitary services and supplying the people with all governmental services. Members of this chamber were initially elected by the people.

The inner chamber was given the power to raise taxes and run the treasury. Furthermore it is the duty of the inner chamber to ensure sufficient supplies and training for the imperial troops. Members of this chamber were elected by the outer chamber.

The third chamber was entrusted with supervising the actions and decisions of the two other chambers.

In the early days of the senate there were frequent decisions made which were not brought before the emperor for signature. These decisions were often of no benefit for either the people or the emperor and were made directly by scholars on their own account, taking for themselves the emperor's sole right to sign decisions. After this became public, and the scholars who were responsible had departed hurriedly, the third chamber was founded.

At first, the third chamber was composed of members of the military and scholars whom the emperor trusted, though later the members of the military were replaced by elders for unknown reasons. So it evolved that the third chamber included former members of the inner chamber.

In addition to these problems of the outer, and especially the inner chamber, came the fact that the scholars from the outer chamber were elected by the people. In times of unrest, it often was the case that only the wildest and quick-witted were elected. Accordingly, after only seven years of foundation, the system became subject to change. The emperor decided then that the oldest and wisest senators - the members of the inner chamber - should choose which scholars should be elected to the outer chamber. Nevertheless the outer chamber had to supply a list of suitable candidates no shorter than five names.

Additionally, the members of the inner chamber were given the right to vote out a scholar from the outer chamber, if the vote was unanimous. Furthermore, the members of the outer chamber themselves could vote out one of their own; however an absolute majority was required to take this step.

Reporter: And how are the common people of Fyros included in the process of making important decisions?

Dios Apothebs: Well the most striking example of this was the string of events that led to my becoming a Senator. The Inner chamber for the first time in its history had a vote of 5 for each candidate and 3 abstentions, and the situation was deadlocked.

It was the decision of the Third chamber after consultation with the emperor, to revert to the age-old process and in this unique situation let the people of Fyros themselves decide the result. I hope to live up to their expectations and do my duty to the emperor, the senate and the people

Another way the people can make an impact is as follows. Historically, whenever there was the wish for change, this could be brought before a scholar – now called a Senator. The outer chamber would then discuss this request and if it could be of benefit for the public, it was then submitted to the inner chamber. The inner chamber would then decide if the wish was feasible and of benefit for all involved. Should this be the case, a letter would be sent to the emperor, including the names of the people and guilds requesting this change and the opinions of both the outer and inner chamber. The emperor would then make a ruling on the requested change.

The senators of the outer chamber now have the sole right to choose a representative for the affairs of the people, whose duty it is to receive such requests from the common people and to bring these before the outer chamber. Likewise it is his right to decide whether to permit further discussion about the request, making his role a key one in the process of government.

Reporter: Thank you very much, Dios, for these detailed explanations. We all would like to wish you success in your work for the benefit of the people of Fyros.

— interview with the new Senator Dios Apothebs about the Fyros Senate.

5.3.8 A New Face

COMING SOON

5.4 Chronicles of the Verdant Heights

5.4.1 An Interview with Cuiccio Perinia

We visited one of the magnificent town trees in Yrkanis to meet Cuiccio Perinia, a famous Matis botanist and historian who was kind enough to grant us a brief interview in his Sylvan abode..

Cuiccio Perinia: Come in! Come in!

The genial botanist greeted us at the door, and invited us to be seated with a sweeping hand gesture.

Reporter: Hello, and thank you for receiving us here, Cuiccio Perinia.

Cuiccio Perinia: It is a great pleasure to share my knowledge with you and your readers.

Reporter: We came here mainly to see if you can answer some of our questions concerning the Tribe of the Ancient Dryads which is to be found in the Grove of Confusion. Their guards attack us on sight, as indeed they do many Homins, and we wanted to know: Why are they attacking us like this?

Cuiccio Perinia: It would perhaps be interesting if we begin at the beginning, don't you think?

The Homin looked at us a trifle sardonically as he waited for us to reconsider our question.

Reporter: Yes, of course. Well, to start with, could you tell why the tribe is found at this spot?

Cuiccio Perinia: Ah! That's a long story! But i will explain it to you briefly. You must have noticed that the tribe is chiefly composed of Matis.

Reporter: Yes...

Cuiccio Perinia: Well, at the beginning this tribe was composed of Matis botanists. These botanists were sent by the court to study the intelligent plants of the Grove of Confusion, but they never returned to civilization...

Reporter: Do you mean they are ... dead?

The botanist began to laugh.

Cuiccio Perinia: Dead? With time perhaps. But that is not the reason why we never saw them back at court.

Reporter: Ah? But then ... what happened to them?

Cuiccio Perinia: Different theories exist on this, and noone really know the truth. It is my opinion, however, that one theory stands out above the rest.

Reporter: Could you please explain it to us erm ... briefly?

Cuiccio Perinia: I'm going to, I'm going to. Don't be so impatient. So... some of our specialists think that these botanists used substances which have altered their mental state, undoubtedly produced from sap and under the ... harmful ... influence of the Kamis.

Reporter: Ah, that would explain the presence of the Kami ambassador in their camp?

Cuiccio Perinia: Exactly! That's the main explanation that we consider reasonable..

Reporter: Could you explain any of the other theories to us?

Cuiccio Perinia's face suddenly lit up with amusement.

Cuiccio Perinia: There is one that I can think of, but its rather more unlikely.. Still we can't ever be sure, can we?

Reporter: True.

Cuiccio Perinia: So, this theory, if I can remember the details ... ah yes! Some scientists from Yrkanis think that the unnatural change in the behaviour of these botanists stems from the very plants which they went to study...

Reporter: Sorry?!

Cuiccio Perinia: Well ... according to these scientists, the intelligent plants may still harbour unknown abilities. For example they could influence the botanists' minds; making them crazy... to our point of view. In that way, these plants, that we can definitely qualify as intelligent plants, transform simple Homins in real protectors.

Reporter: Protectors?

Cuiccio Perinia: Yes! Protectors!

Reporter: Their goal is then to ... protect the plants?

Cuiccio Perinia: Oh! It could go even further than that! It has even been suggested that they would want to invade Verdant Heights and create a huge plant kingdom!

This was our turn to suppress a brief grin.

Reporter: Mmmhhh . . . More seriously, why are they attacking us?

Cuiccio Perinia: I think you can work that out for yourself. . .

Reporter: They attack the Matis because they disown their own country?

Cuiccio Perinia: Exactly.

Reporter: For the Fyros, they control fire – that real danger to plant life?

Cuiccio Perinia: Correct.

Reporter: So why do they attack even Trykers?

Cuiccio Perinia: Well, people are saying that they hate the Trykers because they have devastated plants for their resources. . . Where? When? In which circumstances? I know nothing more than you on this. Finally, the Zoraïs are allied with the Kami, so their tolerance of them is perhaps understandable. . .

Reporter: Thank you very much Cuiccio Perinia. I think that the situation is much clearer now.

Cuiccio Perinia: It was a pleasure to talk to you!

Ah! One last thing!

Reporter: Yes?

Cuiccio Perinia: Their symbol is a tree starting to grow in the heart of a Homin; that might make a little more sense to you now. . . .

Our host allowed a faint smile to cross his face.

These sort of details can make the difference between a good article and a common interview.

Reporter: Thank you!

— interview with Cuiccio Perinia, Matis Botanist and Historian.

5.4.2 Bebi Cuirinia, royal Embalmer

With war threatening to break out, we decided to pay a visit to someone directly connected to coming events. . .

Reporter: Good day Lady Cuirinia, thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Could you please introduce yourself?

Bebi Cuirinia: My name is Bebi Cuirinia and I have the immense honour of being the royal embalmer.

Reporter: Where do you perform your duties?

Bebi Cuirinia: In Yrkanis of course! Where do you think? A whole floor of the great greenhouse is dedicated to caring for the dead.

Reporter: Excuse our ignorance but. . . what exactly does your job involve?

Bebi Cuirinia: I prepare for their final journey those whose seed has incurably withered.

Reporter: Er. . . in other words?

Bebi Cuirinia: Well, there are two stages to our work. When a person whose sap has dried up is brought to us, our first task is to make them presentable for those who loved them. The body is also treated so that it doesn't start to rot in the days to come. Many people appreciate being able to have a last look at their loved one so that the image of their beauty may be forever engraved in their hearts. There are rooms under the fountain set aside especially for that

purpose. Once the living have been able to say a final farewell to their late relative, we treat the body in order to extract its essence.

Reporter: Meaning?

Bebi Cuirinia: I don't really like to discuss technique, but if you insist. . . The deceased is placed for several days in a funerary cocoon prepared through the genetic manipulation of several plants. The sap of the homin is then gradually collected in a pouch in the cocoon. The length of the process varies depending on the size of the body. When the cocoon reopens, there's nothing left but the sap, the homin having been entirely reduced to their essence.

It's an extremely delicate operation to carry out successfully. The cocoon requires around-the-clock care and surveillance to make sure it doesn't open too early.

Reporter: What do you do with the sap that you collect?

Bebi Cuirinia: You don't know? The sap is given back to the family of course.

Reporter: What do the families do with the sap?

Bebi Cuirinia: The families collect the sap of their ancestors to incorporate into their houses. It's a way of carrying on their memory. In the old lands, very old families could live within walls which were themselves "inhabited" by dozens of their ancestors! Unfortunately, with the great exodus all those houses were lost. That was a significant trauma for we Matis. In losing our homes, we also lost our memories.

Reporter: The Matis must never want to move home then!

Bebi Cuirinia: It's often heartbreaking for a Matis to move house. To ease the sorrow, it's traditional when moving to bleed the roots of the old home in order to pass some of the ancestral sap onto the new home.

Reporter: And Royal remains, are they integrated into the king's palace?

Bebi Cuirinia: Not exactly. Actually, the sap of the Royal ancestors runs through the tree supporting the throne room. That way, the current sovereign continues to be guided by the light and wisdom of the kings who preceded him.

I had the immense honour of being able to take care of our dear departed Yasson whose sap is with his son and whose soul is in the company of Jena.

Reporter: So all the Matis that die will always be a part of Yrkanis. . .

Bebi Cuirinia: Hmm, no. You seem to be unaware of this, but the technique is reserved exclusively for a deserving elite. The others are simply buried in a cemetery. Embalming is a hereditary privilege which the king grants only to those families whose members have won renown for the greater glory of the Matis, the most famous example being that of the Di Tylini family.

Reporter: Is it an old profession then?

Bebi Cuirinia: Certainly. My profession is extremely old because, unfortunately, birth is always followed by death. While it's true that the techniques and the rites have evolved and been refined over time, it's also true that there have been homins taking care of the dead since Jena first gave light to Atys. And for as long as there are those living, there will be embalmers to take care of them once their seed has died.

Reporter: And what about resurrection?

Bebi Cuirinia: Aaah, finally, an interesting question. To tell you the truth, I can't say anything for sure, I don't know the secrets of the Karavan or the Kami. But my own, personal theory is that if the seed somehow plays a part in the resurrection of a homin, that doesn't keep it from being altered. When the grain is spoiled, unfortunately there's nothing more that can be done for the homin. As for resurrection... no doubt followers of the Karavan will be able to tell you more than I can, but from what I understand, Jena and the Kami are the only judges of who will or won't be resuscitated. Who's to say that the fight to which you succumb won't be your last? What makes you think that the divine power which protects you now will protect you always and forever?

Don't look at me like that, I've no answers for you. I've only got one bit of advice: make sure you don't find yourself in my hands too soon.

— interview with Bebi Cuirinia, Royal Embalmer.

5.4.3 Viero, young married matis

Today, our roving reporter interviews a newly-wed Matis bridegroom, to gain some insight into the customs and ceremony that surround a Matis wedding.

Reporter: Hi there, Viero, I understand that you were married a few weeks ago, and I would be very grateful if you could share your big day with our readers.

Viero: Yes, I would be happy to do that – but the first point to remember is for us Matis, getting married is as much a religious as a civil occasion and indeed, during the ceremony we affirm our commitment to Jena as well as to each other. It is not an event to be taken lightly or frivolously.

Reporter: I understand, could you explain a little of the background please?

Viero: Because of the social, financial and economic implications of getting married, our courtship is a very formal and stylized affair, normally conducted in the presence of a chaperon. This formality surrounding our meetings allows the lady Homin to send someone to make an excuse if she does not wish to be seen or if she wishes to curtail the relationship. Of course my Gini never did this, but it does happen.

At this stage of courtship it is also common for the groom to secretly send the bride gifts of jeweler and such like, to show that his intention is serious.

The agreement to the engagement from both parties is publicly announced and ritualized through the exchange of gifts which symbolizes the mutual joining of the two Matis.

Courtship and marriage can be costly and is unthinkable before a Homin is economically sound. Apprentices and common homins are advised against getting wed until they have sufficient experience and means. I, myself, had to wait almost five years before I could contemplate such a course of action.

Moreover, divorce is severely frowned upon. However, if proved absolutely necessary, it can be pronounced by a senior ranking citizen after the payment of 500 000 dappers. Many Matis therefore prefer a separation rather than an official divorce, unless a second marriage is envisaged. Should you be divorced,

the stigma is such that you will no longer be invited to official ceremonies, or indeed, the best parties.

Reporter: And the Wedding itself?

Viero: The wedding month is traditionally the month of Harvestor, a time when resources are plentiful in our forests. The wedding takes place on a Holeth, to establish communion with Jena and pray for her benediction.

The master of ceremonies is generally a respected married member of society, having traveled the length and width of Verdant Heights. We were married by an official of the Queen's court, my mother having important friends. Who you know is still very important in Matis society.

Our guests received a formal invitation which invited them to honour us by their presence during the ceremony and throughout the festivities held afterwards. Of course we received many gifts; normally these are items rather than cash which used to be seen as a rather brash gift, effectively giving the couple the means to divorce

Our wedding day was gorgeous! Our vows were exchanged in Jena's name and were not spoken lightly by either of us.

The whole ceremony is a very solemn and religious occasion, and we could really feel Jena's blessing on us at the final moments. It was almost...emotional.

Of course, after all this we had a very expensive party which I believe went on all night. We led the dancing with the traditional circle dance of Jena, and after that the eating and drinking started in earnest. Some people suffered for it the next day, I believe!

Reporter: Thank you for explaining that for us, Viero, may I wish you a long and prosperous married life together.

— interview with Viero, a young married Matis.

5.4.4 Fight for Praise

In one of the highest rooms in the palace, close to the summit of the Royal Tree, the King of the Matis, Yrkanis, liked to contemplate matters while looking out over the beautiful city that carried his name. The great city swarmed with life, and the sovereign could even hear the dealers in the South Market calling out, luring their customers with the finest of Matis craftsmanship.

Grabbing his shining living blade, he took a few steps and turned in a circle, considering. He was thinking about the recent battles won by the Rangers in the green lands of the Nexus. The Rangers had provided him with a rather brief, crude report on the battles, who was involved and the various maneuvers and strategies.

"Ridiculous," he thought to himself, crumpling the report between his fingers.

Immediately after the battles, other reports had already been brought back to him, notably by the the Guild of Karavia, which had participated inconspicuously in these battles.

"Once again, the Matis have proven their capabilities in battle and the art of war. A reward, hmmm, yes... this can be..."

He quickly moved to a small office hidden in one of the corners of the room, where, waiting as always, was his secretary. He dictated rapidly:

"People of the Forests! Know that your King has noticed your recent victory during the battles fought by the Rangers of Atys. Such victory is expected, of course, but nevertheless, it deserves a reward. Therefore, there will be a tournament, and the team that wins the tournament will be rewarded! In the Matis Lands, there is no reward for second place!"

Chronicles of the time of the King Yrkanis by Cuiccio Perinia, Royal Historian.

5.4.5 Autumn

Autumn...

Movement...

Colours...

Changes...

Leaves gleam orange...

Trunks shine bright...

Skies turn gray!

Blue...

A cry!

Red...

Jena Aiye!

King Yrkanis sat unmoving, the eternal and powerful face of the Matis Sovereignty. Wivans bustled around his majestic form, removing pieces of armor and massaging his painful muscles with an immaculate linen cloth soaked in pure water from a mother-of-pearl shell. Yrkanis dozed off amidst the fragrance of the flowers, his attendants ever attentive to his sighs as they combed his hair.

Envinenai, a long time valet to the king, entered and bowed. In his advancing years, he found bowing more and more difficult. The king stood before him, naked. None other than the royal healers or the the most faithful attendants would have been able to glimpse the king so vulnerable. The king, His Majesty.

Queen Lea entered the chamber, her eyes following the light of Sagaritis as it lit the king's white face before illuminating his pendant. She murmured:

"Jena! Kainae!

Mailya i alyei se veleis Se!

Manya sa mindalena!

E ne!

Jena! Kainae!

Ye ne ereis?

Lae wivanae?

Lutae

Karanae cil cirhia?"

"Na Karan." said the attendant slowly. "Na Karan. The Court waits for you..."

Yrkanis opened eyes and waved a hand towards the wivans who then disappeared into the trunk of the great tree without a sound.

...

"Ma aiyates Karan!"

"Ma aiyates uma Karan!"

"Ma Jena aiyates i Karan!" the noblemen echoed in the passage of the King. The King would occasionally nod at one and the lucky noble's chest would swell, which then prompted the others to redouble their efforts.

Yrkanis walked up the steps to his throne and turned around suddenly, "Cuiccio!" he shouted.

The Botanist and Royal Historian ran forward promptly. "I am here, my King!" he shouted to the assembled nobles.

"Cuiccio, I count on you to report to all what is said here."

"Unquestionably, na Karan!" Cuiccio replied, calling the attention of all the courtiers.

The King of the Forest sat down slowly on the finely crafted throne which sat at the heart of the Tree-palace. So began the royal audience.

Ordinarily, King Yrkanis was pressed back into his seat by a barrage of sterile complaints, flavorless reports and endless stories without pause from the noblemen, but this evening, the King's attention did not wander. A letter had attracted his attention and that of all the sycophants present.

The letter was penned in a nervous hand that streaked the paper black with ink, like many blows of a sword on badly tanned leather. It was written in a sweeping style that took up space, vigorously candid but with imprints of intelligence. In the letter, a certain Akilia Ash Storm defied him, threatened him. She announced that she would soon possess the glorious throne of the King. She would attack Yrkanis at the head and would exterminate the followers of the Matis King and reduce his people to serfdom.

Indignant exclamations rang out. The noblemen were outraged and called for her death. King Yrkanis said nothing, but he watched... faces, attitudes, looks... and he listened... voices, shouting, sighs, silences... The King knew each of them. He had watched them for so long now and he was wary of them all. Certainly, he liked them, but he could not put his trust in any one of them.

The Court of the Matis Sovereignty was more alive than ever. The assembly of the noblemen danced like leaves in the wind, brilliant as the foliage of Alineai on Charmers Way. The Charmers, he wondered, who did they support? Who were they?

Yrkanis got up, his face smooth and unreadable... what would he do?

"I liyumelame ereis ena," he said in an even tone. "War is here, the war you have been waiting for all this time. Swap your pretty finery for your Paroks now... I will await you on the battlefield."

Chronicles of the time of King Yrkanis by Cuiccio Perinia, Royal Historian

5.4.6 Foul Fruits

Frelde Cuirinia gulped down the fruit of the cactus, the clear juice running from the corners of his mouth. Corolla Fumaroli's eyes followed the scintillating drops sliding slowly along his neck until they were lost in the creases of the laughing nobleman's rich wiva collar.

"Why do you laugh so, sir?"

Frelde chewed another piece loudly and swallowed before turning to the other Matis, "Because I eat these fruits as the Fyros do! The hands do not soil when they do not do the job of the teeth, as they say."

Corolla instantly froze. She could not help looking at Frelde's teeth, which seemed to suddenly grow like those of a hungry gingo.

"Our botanists created quite a few varieties of these desert plants without prickles. We can therefore take pride in being able to eat their fruits without soiling our hands, either with their juice by eating them or with our blood by picking them. And you, Corolla, do you know how to taste these fruits without soiling yourself?"

The young Matis noblewoman looked at Frelde with veiled annoyance. His mother-of-pearl complexion was a contrast to the black parok below it. An empty sheath hung at his right hip and he reached for it nervously from time to time. He smiled, followed the look of Corolla and then gestured toward the absent weapon.

"These Fyros... They are not stupid. They attempt to understand our knowledge, our culture and the force of our civilization. This is why they detest us: because they do not understand us. But you did not come to speak to me of barbarians. Come, walk with me."

Corolla smiled thinking of the words of her mother:

"A flower opens only when it is ready! Colored petals can be seen all year long. It is the plant which chooses the moment, not the season... Do not allow yourself to be influenced by the stings of the winter, the shades of the autumn, the warmth of the summer or the promises of the spring. Be like the Bark! But... if your heart tells you to open, only then unfold your charms. There is a Fyros tree which flourishes only in the winter. You will adapt and you will be strong."

Corolla smiled. When she finally spoke, it was without passion.

"The King is very much displeased. His vassals beg for everything and his noblemen did not move during the attack of the marauders. Eat, Frelde, eat. Stuff yourself with these fruits from which the Matis botanists have removed the prickles. Soon, Yrkanis will deprive you of their softness as well."

...

Two guards and a finely wrought door stood between Queen Lea and the Royal Chamber.

"I'm sorry, my Queen. The King gave us orders to let no one enter."

"But I am the Queen!"

"He said that no one enters."

Lea looked each of the guards in the eye but neither one flinched. The King's anger was rare but it could cost one's life. The Queen's anger was common but its only threat was that of an imposing presence. The Queen disappeared in the shade of the hall, but the guards heard the whisper of her dress for an eternity.

...

The King was sitting on the bed, almost naked, a talisman laid on his chest: a red kirosta, writhing in the embrace of a shaded green root that resembled a curved homin. Yrkanis held the pendant between his fingers and murmured, his eyes fixed on an effervescent image before him.

"Jena! Kainae!" As the King hurled the talisman to the ground, the shimmering form became clear.

Jena! Jena had appeared in front of the King of the Matis. She sat with crossed legs, motionless, and smiled at him. A bright, radiating light struck his heart, the heart of the son of Yasson, like his father's shooting arrow which marked the site of the Matis capital. It was sublime! So powerful! Yrkanis yearned for it, going through each gesture, never wearying...

Every day, the King locked himself up in his chamber, just to look at her. Her, Kainae! The Goddess... No-one but he had seen her and he took a certain pleasure from that knowledge. She seemed to always speak at the end, but what did she say? What language did she speak? Mateis? Every evening, Yrkanis hung on the lips of Jena and tried to determine what she spoke.

...

The King had arisen early to sit on the throne. Adorned in his battle armour, he listened for several hours to the reports of his most faithful soldiers.

The marauders had manifested themselves, led by a certain Akilia, and had penetrated into the Majestic Gardens. They were not very numerous this time, but they had crept far into the Matis territories without being caught. A small worry, certainly, but who knows what the strange Fyros of the Ancient Lands had in store for the Matis? This time, they had been pushed back by a band of Matis refugees. This time.

Yrkanis, King of the Matis, was furious. His noblemen had not moved. Few were present this day.

Siniello Anindi faced him. "Na Karan, I already have a number of homins capable to serve you. They have fought again and again and they will not back down in the face of this threat!"

"Who are they, Sir Anindi?"

"Refugees, my King."

"Then you are more perceptive than I would have believed, Siniello Anindi! Contact the leaders of all the Matis guilds to send us these refugees as quickly as possible. Tell them that their King commands them."

Chronicles of the time of King Yrkanis by Cuiccio Perinia, Royal Historian.

5.4.7 The Tear

COMING SOON

5.4.8 Melario Estriano, history of a Matis

COMING SOON

5.4.9 The torments of a queen

Correspondence between Tridi Lillo and her son, made public in 2582, in which the few copies were very quickly confiscated. Nonetheless, the publication had been copied and several amber cubes still circulate within the Kingdom, including this one.

Letter dated Nivia 10, 2nd AC 2517

My beloved son,

I'm writing you from the Royal Palace where, as you know, I'm now living since I've occupied the honored rank of Lady in Waiting to the Karae Lea. Here I have the privilege to encounter many influential homins. Each day spent in the royal residence slightly advances the reputation of our lineage within the High Court.

The Karae, the young wife blessed by Jena, appears to be a homin of great beauty. But what is most impressive is the strength of character that emanates from her, surrounding her with an almost divine halo, inspiring both respect and admiration. I hope one day you will have the privilege to approach her, my son. Then, you'll understand the meaning of my words.

I hope this letter finds you in good health and that you prosper in the art of weapon training. Do not forget to recite your prayers to the Goddess Jena, asking her to fix Her eyes upon you and flood you with Her benevolent Light, conveying to you all my maternal love.

Your beloved mother,

Tridi Lillo

Letter dated from Medis 27, 1er CA 2518

My dear son,

I'm very happy to hear of your new position ! By Jena, you, so young and yet sublieutenant ! One, day, I'm sure, you will be telling me that you're promoted to General of our armies.

Here at the palace, life rolls along. The Jinovitch era seems already so far off, but the tyrant died only four years ago. Time eases the spirit, like Jena's tears falling from the sky.

However, there is still one troubled soul here; a person that I hear scream at night from my nice room, and that I have difficulty calming down. It's the Karae herself. She often wakes up with a start, sweating, wide eyed, seeing again that nightmarish vision: her father, the great botanist Bravichi Lenardi, being burned alive on a pyre.

I pray to the Goddess that the coming royal birth calms down the torments of the Karae. Son, I know that it's difficult to believe me when you see the self-confidence she has in front of everybody. However, it's the truth.

I send you all my love with this letter, my beloved son.

Jena Aiye,

Your mother, proud of you.

Tridi Lillo

Letter dated Pluvia 13, 2nd AC 2518

My beloved son,

Your guardian has already explained to you the reasons of the wedding between the Karan Yrkanis and the Karae Lea. But I doubt that you know the underlying reasons for this, therefore I'll try to explain them to you.

Lea Lenardi's father, the illustrious botanist Bravichi Lenardi, creator of the famous Green Wall in the Fleeting Garden, didn't have the good luck to have a son. Now, of what use would it have been to pass on his knowledge to his daughter when only males should have the power?

Now, it happened that the Karan Yasson charged the tutelage of the Karin Yrkanis to Bravichi, to ensure the heir of the throne would benefit from his erudition. Imagine the botanist's joy! The Mother hadn't given him a son, but Yasson had entrusted him with his! It is with a limitless enthusiasm that Bravichi Lenardi brought up the young Karin. And soon, he loved him as his own son.

Of course, Lea still held her father's love, but no matter what she did, she still remained a mere girl. To her eyes, Yrkanis was stealing her father from her, and no prayer to Jena could dispel her torments.

King Yasson and his botanical architect, Bravichi Lenardi, decided upon the future union of their respective children. This promised alliance delighted Bravichi's heart, because his two favorite children would unite. True, he hadn't sired a King but, through his daughter, this gap would be filled. He would at last be recognized, and his power emerged greater from this.

Years later, after Yrkanis had ascended the throne, the wedding was celebrated. Yasson and Bravichi had both joined the Light of Jena by then but, by marrying before Jena, their children had obeyed their wills.

By the Goddess, I'm taken away in this long explanation and I forget to ask after you, my son! May you pardon your mother and deign nonetheless answer this humble letter.

Jena Aiye,

Your mother,

Tridi Lillo

Letter dated Germinally 2, 3rd AC 2518

My dear son,

Have you ever heard of the chest of Bravichi Lenardi, the father of the Karae?

History notes that all the knowledge of Bravichi is forever lost. Can you imagine? He died on a pyre, not because he was a heretic, but rather because he supported Yrkanis. Obviously, helping Yrkanis to run out the Kingdom and saving him narrowly from a murder ordered by Jinovitch was not out of this.

All his work was publicly burned. To not keep the least memory from what a heretic wrote, that could take the heat of Jena. What an era! Divert in such a way divine will for man's own glory! Jinovitch's end was predictable, the Goddess could not tolerate such abuse eternally...

Whatever, Bravichi Lenardi succeeded in preserving the main amber cubes containing his knowledge. Karae Lea herself said that to me, saying that her father confessed to her, very near before his arrest, that he left a box to a "person of confidence".

I think that the Karae will never recover from what she considers as a betrayal from her father. Who was this person in who he has got more confidence than her? Why didn't he entrust this so precious trunk to her, his daughter? Is it really to protect her, as he said? Was it Yrkanis? Was it somebody she knew, and who continues to bow down in front of her, as if nothing happened? And what, if the knowledge of her father was hidden out of the Kingdom? One of the tracks she followed secretly led her to the Empire, can you imagine?

My son, the Karae is young and her pregnancy is rather near to term, but, despite of that, look how determinate she is in going on in her quest of this box! I have the chance to serve a great Queen. Her presence, her authority, the art in which she drives a large-scale investigation, without anybody else from her relatives to know it - even not the Karan - all that proves it.

My son, one more time I forget my duties about you. How are you? You said in you last letter, that your superiors think about a promotion for you. How is it? Do I have the benefit, without knowing it, to be the mother of a Lieutenant of our armies? I can't wait to read you to know more!

May the Goddess look after you, my son. And may she give me the pleasure to see you again soon.

Jena Aiye,
Your mother,
Tridi Lillo

5.5 Chronicles of the Witherings

5.5.1 Cioi Ba-Nung, Tattooist for Homins

Many homins ask themselves questions about the masks that the Zoraïs wear. After a long research, a Zoraï has accepted to lift a curtain on this so sensitive subject.

Reporter: Good morning to you, thank you for accepting to answer our questions. Could you please introduce yourself?

Cioi Ba-Nung: My name is Cioi Ba-Nung, Ma-Duk follower and tattooist for homins in Zora.

Reporter: All the homins wonder about the passion of Zoraïs for masks, tattoos and hairstyles. Can you give us some explanation for this keen interest in adornments?

Cioi Ba-Nung: Let's begin at the beginning. First of all, the masks are the only things to be really sacred in the eyes of our people. Tattoos and hairstyles carry out cosmetic functions, shared by all the homin peoples.

Reporter: Our subject is becoming clearer, thank you for this remark. What is sacred about these masks then?

Cioi Ba-Nung: Our masks are the living sign of the alliance forged between our people and Ma-Duk. They are also the link that ties us to him and make each Zoraï one of its relatives. That is why we call our masks, the kinship masks.

Reporter: And do you know who forged this alliance?

Cioi Ba-Nung: All the Zoraï children know that! This alliance was forged by the great and wise Cho. He was the first Zoraï to wear a mask and from then on, tradition has handed down the wearing of the mask, and that since 2201. This alliance follows the encounter between the Kamis and Cho.

Reporter: Well, why choose a mask as the tangible sign of your alliance with Ma-Duk?

Cioi Ba-Nung: The Kamis refuse duplicity and lies; the homin face is not the window of the soul but a deceptive façade. For the initiated, kinship masks are the true windows of the soul, no lie, no dupery is then possible.

Reporter: You mean the mask you wear represents your... soul?

Cioi Ba-Nung: As a matter of fact yes! I understand your astonishment. How can a soul be read on a mask? Do you think our kinship masks are only masks?

Reporter: Hum... After what you've just said, certainly not... By the way, where do your masks come from?

Cioi Ba-Nung: Our masks are given to us by the Kamis at the end of the adoption ceremony. Our masks are a Kami creation and not the result of homin labour. The adoption ceremony marks the transition between childhood and adulthood for the Zoraïs.

Reporter: A ceremony... can you describe it to us?

Cioi Ba-Nung: Sure. Each cycle, children old enough to take part in the ceremony are invited to Zora. This meeting is followed by a big celebration, the adoption celebration. It is a great moment of joy and communion. The celebration lasts six days and six nights during which access to the city is forbidden to strangers. At the end of the celebration, the Kamis take the children.

Reporter: You mean the Kamis take your children?

Cioi Ba-Nung: Yes... Could you let me finish please?

Reporter: Hum yes, please go on.

Cioi Ba-Nung: The Kamis teleport themselves with the children into the Eternal Tree. It is a wonderful place where an everlasting spring reigns, animals live in peace; I still remember the raguses that played with us. It's a pity Atys was corrupted by the Goo and the Karavan.

Reporter: What about the children, what do they do?

Cioi Ba-Nung: They take part in the adoption ritual. It is composed of four ceremonies.

The first one is collection. The Kamis ask each child to collect certain items, and then the children scour the Eternal Tree for them. When each child has filled his Hai-Phon, a bag weaved by his/her family, the second ceremony can begin.

This is the one of separation. The Kamis invite the children to make the collected items into a figure. The making up must bring the child to distinguish

between truth and illusions. This ceremony is very long, every one of them taking their own path. Some achieve it in a few months, others in a few cycles.

The third ceremony is that of purification. The children meditate, focused on their making up in order to free themselves from illusions and lies. There again, this ceremony takes months, even cycles.

The last ceremony is that of adoption. The young homins then go down to the chambers of dreams, hidden deep into the roots of the Eternal Tree. They stay there for a few days, deep in a trance that enables them to initiate harmony with Ma-Duk. During this trance, the Kamis give each child their kinship mask. When the child wakes up, s/he is back in the jungle, not far from Zora and will wear his/her kinship mask forever. From now on, s/he is no longer a child but an adult.

Reporter: So many revelations! Do all the children succeed in passing the ceremony?

Cioi Ba-Nung: They do. It can take years but all the Zoraï children complete these ceremonies. Some Karavan agents say that Zoraï children were eliminated by the Kamis because they refused the ritual. It is pure calumny!

Reporter: A question comes to my mind, are there Zoraïs who end up following Jena's path?

Cioi Ba-Nung: The path of each homin is known only by him/herself and Ma-Duk. Our brothers and sisters you are talking about have this passage written in their lives, in their selves. It is not a betrayal, only a necessary detour, an experience which will get them even closer to Ma-Duk and which will guide them towards Illumination.

Reporter: Your faith is admirable. I would like to come back to the masks, are they alive, as some say?

Cioi Ba-Nung: Yes, they are alive and delicate, as much as the face of each homin. They are made of bone, of cartilage, of flesh and of sap. Kinship masks are obviously irremovable, who would want to mutilate oneself like that? Such an act would be suicide by the way, a Zoraï cannot survive without his/her kinship mask. Our masks are the reflection of our souls, our passions, our feelings, our fears and our hopes. They are certainly the most intimate part of our selves.

Reporter: What do the horns displayed on your masks stand for?

Cioi Ba-Nung: I cannot reveal you everything, you are not initiated. Just know that these horns are there in honour of the great Kami-Ko of Equilibrium that Cho met.

Reporter: One last question, how do the Kamis make those masks and how do they fix them on your faces?

Cioi Ba-Nung: I cannot reveal this piece of information to you either, but your curiosity is a gift from Ma-Duk. I invite you to follow the Kamis' teachings; you will find the answer to this question and to many more. May Ma-Duk give you the serenity of the sage.

— interview with Cioi Ba-Nung, a Tattooist for Homins.

5.5.2 A Zorai Wedding

Today our social reporter concludes our series on Homin weddings by interviewing Nuani Lei, the chief flower girl at a wedding that took place in Zora last week.

Reporter: Hello there, Nuani, and thank you for sparing the time to talk to me.

Nuani Lei: Heh, that's no problem, while I am doing this I don't have to be doing my homework!

Reporter: Er right, perhaps you could start by explaining some of the background behind the traditional Zorai Wedding?

Nuani Lei: Sure thing!

For us Zoraïs, though marriage is set apart from Kami enlightenment and that religious stuff, the older folks like it 'cos it keeps things stable. It's also supposed to help us understand the opposite sex better, but I don't see how anyone who has met my brother can believe that's possible! Anyway, understanding of any sort is good, and helps us all on the Kamic path, I guess. The bride and groom have to be engaged for ages – at least three seasons, and they are meant to look after each other during that time, the groom doing all the work for a season, then the bride, then both taking mutual responsibility.

If it all goes horribly wrong they can get divorced, but it's very expensive and people still don't really approve of it.

Reporter: Is there a formal day for the wedding?

Nuani Lei: Yep, The date of the wedding ceremony is then fixed and normally falls on the Quinteth. Weddings may not be celebrated on the Holeth, the day of Ma-Duk, nor during Remembrance Week – this is considered extreme bad luck.

Reporter: And the ceremony?

Nuani Lei: Well, the wedding is conducted by an experienced and respected Homin, typically a magician who knows the Prime Roots and has traveled widely. When they arrive, the guests have to show the official invitation at the entrance of the sanctuary.

The bride and groom spend weeks crafting little tokens to send out as invites. Anything will do as long as its traditionally Zorai-crafted. However once the boring stuff is over, anyone in town is welcome to the party! Of course, Zoraïs are not materialistic like some folks, but gifts are always welcome when you've got a home to set up.

Our weddings are not especially religious, so it's up to the couple how they want the ceremony really. They can be held it anywhere, from the guild hall to the Kami sanctuary. The one I was at last week was held at the castle in Zora, a very nice location for the party after. The bride and groom make each others rings which we wear on the index finger because we are told this is the one that links to your soul. Life giving rings are a nice gesture, to indicate the long life of the marriage.

Someone always brings along a foraging tool too, this is supposed to symbolize Atys itself, and well, you know, fertility. They usually have a bit of fun

with these later; we put one in the honeymoon bed!

Other items people bring are rare prime roots materials bought by the witnesses to show the diversity of life and how we rely on Atys, and the bride makes the groom a set of purple Zorai clothes, I'm not sure if this is supposed to show who wears the trousers!

Reporter: On the subject of dress, what is the code for attire?

Nuani Lei: Oohh well, dress is always colourful of course, no one wears black. We all wear our best jewelry and put new tattoos on our masks too. Traditionally, the bride wears an elaborate hairstyle for the occasion, and a purple dress. The groom starts out wearing only a loin cloth at the beginning but the bride hands him the purple clothes she's made to show that they are now a sharing couple. In return he offers her the foraging tool.

All the guests sit in a circle around the Homin in charge, and we flower girls scatter petals on the ground all around. The groom arrives first on his mek wearing only basic clothes or a loin cloth. His friends and relations draw him into the centre of the circle where his bride who is usually a few minutes later arriving joins him. Then they have the ceremony bit; oh and at the end they bathe each other in the light of Ma-duk - that bit always makes me cry - then it's time to party!

Usually some friend will compose a new song or dance to perform at the party, often as the guests offer their congratulations to the couple. They start the dancing, and the festivities usually go on all night!

Reporter: Nuani, thank you for your insights into Zorai wedding lore.

— interview with Nuani Lei, a future-married Zoraï female.

5.5.3 Yi Be-Pian, Old Zoraï of the Company of the Eternal Tree

We have travelled deep into the Haven of Purity to meet the homins of one of the Bark's most important tribes, the Company of the Eternal Tree. Having made contact with Bian La-Viang, the welcome host, he finally directs us towards an old Zoraï stooped over an earthenware vase.

Reporter: Hello, who are you?

Yi Be-Pian: Ssh... Just a second if you please...

He taps the vase for a moment before putting it down.

There you go, isn't that better? Thank you for waiting. Patience is a great virtue. What are a few minutes at my age? No doubt not more than my life in proportion to that of the Progenitor... They call me Yi Be-Pian. They say I'm a sage, but no doubt that's just a polite way of saying I'm the oldest in the Company of the Eternal Tree.

He smiles.

Reporter: Let's talk about the Company. When was it founded?

Yi Be-Pian: I may be old, but I'm not so old that I was around when our company was created by the revered Mai Loo-Kai, may we all follow her example, in 2364. Few like to remember that time. Zoraï society had developed and, despite its devotion to spiritual matters, it began to turn away from the Kami to concern itself with much more... material matters. Seeing the Zoraï

put homins before the Kami more and more often, Mai Loo-Kai, may her spirit guide us for a long time, gathered many of her friends around her and decided to found a guild entirely dedicated to the Kami. In its great wisdom, the council applauded her initiative and gave her its full backing. So Mai Loo-Kai created the Company of the Eternal Tree. Along with those who soon came to be called her disciples, she preached respect for the Kami and regularly called the Zoraï to order.

Reporter: But aren't you a tribe?

Yi Be-Pian: Ma-Duk didn't create Atys in a day, I can't tell my story in a sapbeat.

He smiles.

So there came a day when Mai Loo-Kai, may her sap flow through the veins of Ma-Duk, realised that those who called themselves sages weren't following the advice that they encouraged her to give. So she turned and addressed her reprimands to them as well. They didn't appreciate being called to order in the slightest and so the guild's problems began. The council began to criticize it, accusing it of trying to spread trouble with the aim of obtaining power for itself. Feeling that if she stayed in Zoran the power of the homins would end up corrupting the guild and its ideals, Mai Loo-Kai gathered those who had remained faithful, dissolved the guild and left to establish herself far from the authority of the council which was perverting her noble design.

Reporter: And the central power of Zoran left her alone?

Yi Be-Pian: Mai Loo-Kai, praised be her wisdom, stopped preaching, preferring to devote all her energy to those she revered, the Kami. In so doing, she proved the council wrong and the example set by her devotion had more effect on Zoraï society than all her preaching. By distancing herself from homins she led them along the path of enlightenment. Ashamed, the council asked her to return, but she refused. Nowhere in Zoran could she live in such symbiosis with the Kami. Not long afterwards she disappeared, the first to have attained the Kami Age. Her sap is now one with Ma-Duk. Soon, I know, it will be my turn to rejoin her.

Reporter: Observing your camp, there's something I've been wondering. There are many different peoples here, and yet you have only spoken to me of Zoraï. . .

Yi Be-Pian: Observation. A great quality for those who know how to see. My people remained very inward-looking for a long time through fear but, also, I think, through ignorance, ignorance having led to vanity. But when the Kami recognised us as their most loyal servants, we were induced into bringing the sacred word of Ma-Duk to other peoples. Meeting souls desirous of following our path, we opened our doors to all homins that the Kami considered to be worthy of serving. Then came the great wave of kitins which swept away all civilisation, including much of ours. The Kami fled, all the better to return after they'd gathered their strength, as we later realised. Once the Bark was accessible to us again, we retook our place beside the Kamis in 2483. The tribe had lost many members, so we opened our arms wide to all those who wished to rebuild a world of harmony with the Kami, whether they be Zoraï, Trykers,

Fyros or Matis. It's time for me to perform my devotions to the eternal Ma-Duk. Hold on to those questions you're dying to ask, the answers will come in their own time.

I left Yi Be-Pian to his meditations and made the most of the time to soak up the atmosphere of calm which reigned in the tribe. As I silently observed the camp, I didn't immediately see Yi Be-Pian sit down beside me. Smiling, he finally broke the silence.

Your respect for our traditions honours you. It seems that the day hasn't yet come for my return to Ma-Duk. So some of your questions will be answered.

Reporter: There's something I don't get. You swear by the Kami and yet you don't seem to have that bad a relationship with the Matis.

Yi Be-Pian: We may condemn their tendency to help the Karavan, but we respect their love of plants and the research they carry out in that field. We only hope that one day we can open their eyes and convince them to use their immense scientific learning for the good of the Kami and the fight against the Goo. No, those we consider to be real fools are the Fyros. They're worse than children. We can't tolerate their government's acceptance of their dangerous games with fire. They say that they're devoted to the Kami but, like the sages of the past, they put their own personal interests before those of Atys.

Reporter: How does one become worthy of serving the Kami in the Company?

Yi Be-Pian: The Kami alone decide. Those who respect the sacred rules most faithfully and learn to know all the Kami have the immense honour of being chosen to serve. Before, when the tribe was respected for its immense valour, its members were considered by all to be sacred beings and, although there existed many religious orders, the Company of the Eternal Tree was considered to be the elite and we were regarded as the most pious of the pious.

Reporter: How do you serve the Kami?

Yi Be-Pian: There are a thousand ways of serving the Kami. Dedicating prayers to them and looking after a corner of the land is already a way of honouring them. However, the tribe's most important task is spreading the teachings of Ma-Duk, may her sap flow eternally, and making homins aware that they must safeguard Atys. Those who have been chosen to serve the Kami directly have the honour of serving as their spokespersons. They go to live with the Kami in order to familiarise themselves with their way of life and to better learn their language. These elect will be the first to attain the Kami Age, I'm quite sure, because they understand the word that they bring to us better than anyone. Our devotion also requires lots of practical action to safeguard Atys. We work the land to remove harmful things or, conversely, to resow the springs which have been dried up by unscrupulous foragers. Finally, we try to protect Atys from its most dangerous enemies: The Karavan and the homins who have debased themselves to serve them, the Kuilde. One of our encampments is situated just inside Nexus in order to try and restrict their harmful actions.

Reporter: But why in Nexus?

Yi Be-Pian: There you go again, asking questions without thinking. Consider the geographic location of Nexus, which is strengthened by the three vor-

texas. You see, the answers are sometimes closer than you realise, you just need to take the time to think about it. Nexus occupies a central position on Atys. Nowhere else are you so close to all the regions at once. The Kuilde tries to use it to strengthen its control over all of Atys' resources and in particular those of the upper Primes. The Karavan cares little for the equilibrium of Atys; we have to stop them from using those stinking, toadying ragus, the Kuilde, to devastate the regions. Mind you, at least by concentrating on Nexus, they leave us alone to carry out research into our ultimate enemy, the Goo.

Reporter: Tell me about the fight against the Goo. How can it be that with all the time the Kami have known about it, they still haven't found a way to eradicate it?

Yi Be-Pian: The Kami are powerless against it. What's more, they are extremely vulnerable to it. I've seen with my own eyes a Kami being sucked up by the Goo before I could intervene. No, I tell you, it's up to us to protect them. Did you know that homins have a better resistance to the Goo than most other living creatures? Our latest findings seem to bear this out. So the Kami protect Atys and we protect the Kami. There is equilibrium in everything.

Reporter: How do you explain the fact that it's only in the jungle that the Goo is to be found so persistently?

Yi Be-Pian: Despite all our research, unfortunately we haven't found the answer to that question. However, our most recent observations lead us to believe that if the Goo attacks Atys in the jungle, it may be due to the greater presence of plant life. The Goo attacks any living matter. If it feeds off it, it makes sense that it will take hold where life is most flourishing...

Reporter: Does the upcoming conflict risk compromising your fight against the Goo?

Yi Be-Pian: We fear so. All our forces will be mobilised to defend Ma-Duk, revered creator of everything, which will stop us regulating the Goo. To that is added our fear of seeing the Karavan try to use it to attack the Kami and, in doing so, hastening the end of Atys. We hope to be able to stop those fanatics before they resort to such extremes. Part of me, though, is happy to know that I will soon join Ma-Duk. I no longer have the strength to take up arms and it would eat away at my soul to witness an event, one which is likely to be a major turning point in the history of hominity, and not be able to take part in it. May I attain the Kami Age before the arrival of Jena!

— interview with Yi Be-Pian, an old Zoraï of the Company of the Eternal Tree.

5.5.4 Unfortunate Night

Written by a Zoraï copywriter in 2536(JY):

Heading for the prison quarters, Sorrow's head was filled with questions which he knew would remain unanswered. He greeted the guards and nodded at them to open the door of the cell behind them.

"Sage Sorrow, the prisoner is particularly agitated today. Should one of us come in with you while you question him?"

"Do not worry about me, Dai-Nug, the Kamis watch over me."

"As you wish. We are here if you need assistance."

"I shall not hesitate, but I am sure that will not be necessary."

The sage entered the cell of Nuo Tong, who was sitting down with his back to the wall, his mask cradled in his hands. "Nuo, how are you today? I was told that you are disturbed?"

The other Zoraï did not answer, oblivious in his confusion to Sorrow's attempts to calm him. Sorrow continued, "I assume you know why I am here."

"Yes," the other homin spoke to the mask in his hands.

"You must answer me, Nuo. We need to know. I will ask you again... Who are the True Sons of Jena? Why did you speak about Goo at Jen-Lai? Why do so many homins seek you out? Please..."

"Why do you still ask me these questions? I will not answer them and you know it. It is already too late. A fate much worse than death is reserved for me..."

"Well then, let me try to help you," said the Zoraï Sage, as he seated himself in front of the other homin. "Nuo, you put your people at great risk. I have told you so many times."

Nuo Tong would not answer the sage's questions. "All I ask is to be forgiven," Nuo sobbed, "I am so afraid... They deceived me. I realize that they...", he choked on the words as if speaking of the mystery sucked the air from his lungs.

"But who are 'they'? I am sure that if they had been able to kill you, they would have already done so. But they cannot, as we protect you."

The Sage remained for several hours, as he did each time he visited Nuo Tong, trying to make him speak through gentle reassurance and patience. At last, Sorrow emerged from the cell, once again without answers. The Zoraï Sage was worried about Nuo, worried that he might be sick, although he wasn't delirious and seemed to know his own mind.

"Did he say anything?" asked one of the guards. Sorrow breathed deeply before answering, "No, he was in his own world as usual."

"Perhaps he's just crazy," the other guard said as he glanced at his partner.

"Is it possible that a crime is so heinous that its burden cannot be relieved by a confession?" countered the first guard.

The Sage left the prison quarter to return to his work. "Always the same; questions and never any answers," he muttered, so quietly that no-one could have heard him.

The guards remained outside the prisoner's door all day and all night, as much to keep him contained as to ward against attack. That night, Nuo Tong's sobs were much louder than usual. It was painful for the guards to hear him in such a state and they moved a little away from the cell door. He cried all night, muttering alone in his cell, but as dawn approached, the sounds coming from his cell subsided.

"He does not cry any more. Perhaps the dawn has put him to sleep."

"You think so? I find that a bit strange. I think we should take a quick look."

The other guard hesitated a moment, looking at the door of the cell anxiously, and then he opened it. Inside, Nuo Tong lay splayed out on his back, with wide open eyes and clenched fists. It was clear that Nuo Tong was no longer among the living.

"He's dead!" shouted the guard, "Dai-Nug, go and get help!"

In the end, there was nothing to be done. The healers could only say that the seed of life had broken and that Nuo Tong died without apparent cause.

=====

Sorrow decided to brief the Council of the Sages as soon as possible about Nuo Tong's death. The people must be told, but also, an important decision had to be made. A new Curator of the Jen-Lai Archives had to be appointed: someone who could be trusted to shed light on the mysterious situation in Jen-Lai but who was also open-minded enough to hold a position involving controversial knowledge.

The Zoraï Council met at the first hour. "We need someone with a great heart for the Kamis and the people, in whom we can place our trust: a Kamist believer with a fresh approach, young enough to learn and study all the numerous important archives."

They reviewed the list of candidates. "What about Lingi-Chon Vao? She is still a little young for the position of Curator, I grant you, but she is trustworthy, from a family faithful to the people and loyal in their ways. Unquestionably, time will make her a fervent maidservant of Atys. What say you all?" asked one of the members of the Council.

"She is very young, in my view. She will not be able to handle the position," said one of the others.

All eyes turned to Sorrow for his opinion. "Lingi-Chon Vao. I know the girl. I could not have found a better replacement. We will make her responsible for announcing the death of Nuo Tong to the people. I am sure that she will be able to bring support and consolation to the people during this difficult time," he said confidently.

The Council parted ways, but not without some whispers.

Sorrow left to inform Lingi-Chon's father immediately, and although the appointment honoured Lingi-Chon's family, her father was deeply worried by the mystery surrounding Jen-Lai. "Sage, I would request that Lingi not be alone during the symbolic trip between Zora and Jen-Lai."

"Of course, I understand. We are going to ask the people to accompany the new Curator there."

"Thank you, Sorrow, thank you very much."

And so that all could read, it was posted at the entrance of Zora and all the other towns of the Witherings:

"Zoraï Citizens!

The new Jen-Lai Curator is to be named on Quarta, 4th Winderly, 4th AC 2536(JY).

You are called to join her in her journey between Zora and Jen-Lai to show your support of her in her new position.

May the Kamis keep you!

Sorrow, Sage and member of the Council of the Sages.”

5.5.5 Equal to Atys

Chronicle extracted from the Notebooks of Wan Fai-Du, in the 4th AC of 2539(JY)

My Master had spent the entire night engrossed with the amber cube of knowledge between his hands, perfectly immobile. Across his mask, images in shadow were marching in disorder, pouring out a stream of knowledge which the Sage struggled to disentangle.

As I entered the room, I moved carefully so that I would not interrupt his work and I slid like a flower on a pond into my seat. His perception of the world which encircled him went well beyond this room, but I knew that he noticed my every movement despite my attempts to not distract him.

The atmosphere was hot and still. The air was so light that breathing was effortless. No noise reached this place from the city. Alone with my Master in his contemplation, I felt the presence of Ma-Duk, which filled the room in which the wise Suffering worked.

After a time, Suffering’s laboured and raspy voice dispelled the silence, ”They are so few and I cannot manage to compose the collective to know what they say. Wan Fai-Du, what says Zoraï this morning?”

I composed my sentences slowly and carefully so that I would not upset my Master with too lengthy an answer.

”The Hunters said that a big mask had been seen, some days ago, in the Void region. He did not entrust his name, but he will walk towards the Cities of Intuition soon, because, he said, ’Zoraï must now be guided towards the place which is theirs to fulfill the designs of Ma-Duk.’”

After a short silence, I dared to question, ”Who is he, Master?”

The Sage said nothing, but again immersed himself in his contemplation of the amber. A moment later, a shiver ran through him, as though a chill had entered the room, one that I did not feel.

”The autumn approaches,” he concluded.

5.5.6 The Story of Sian Gai-Lua: A Fateful Hunt

Part One

The night sky was deep black above the jungle, dotted with myriads of small stars, which sent their bright light towards Atys. The picture that Sian Gai-Lua was presented with when he opened his eyes was simply incredible. For some minutes he enjoyed the sight Ma-Duk gave him, and remained lying on his back listening silently to the sounds around him.

Everything meshed together in a harmonious vision of peace.

When he tore himself away from the sight it felt like waking up from a pleasant dream to the harsh demands of reality. Every attempt to move his body was punished by immediate and relentless pain, so he abandoned the

attempt for the moment to look around a bit. Where was he? The jungle looked the same wherever he looked.

He tried to remember how he had come here but it was a waste of time. Except for a few single pictures which emerged incoherently from his mind there was nothing. He took a couple of deep breaths and tried to concentrate.

For a long time his thoughts circled around one burning question: "How did I get here?" But no matter how hard he tried to concentrate, he didn't find the answer.

- "Ok then" He tried to calm himself down. "Slowly but surely and one after the other."

In his thoughts he returned to the moment when he had left Hoi-Cho with his companions to hunt. He was still able to remember how they had roamed the dense jungle, always being on guard against wild animals and always searching for some worthwhile prey. It was after that his recollection faltered and became incomplete. The more he tried to sum up what had happened, the more the incoherent pictures in his head found their place in the shattered mosaic of his memory.

They had been on their way for some hours when it started to drizzle. Then the rain had fallen in torrents, as if Ma-Duk had decided to drown the world. And with the rain the fog had come. First it didn't really surprise them, sudden changes in weather like this was nothing new after all, so they had continued their hunt. Gradually, however, the fog got thicker and thicker. In the end it had been so thick, that they were unable to see more than a few steps ahead and they had decided to stop hunting for now and return to the village.

Part Two

Now that Sian stopped to think things over, he understood how they had been wandering aimlessly through the fog as it had become thicker and thicker. Soon they had not even been able to see their hands in front of their faces, and thus it was not a complete surprise to end up in a totally unfamiliar region of the jungle. They could discern not one landmark or reference point that would indicate the way home. No fork or junction in this confusing jungle was recognisable to them, but still they had kept on walking. After all, this was Zorai and the jungle their home. They would find their way back. At least that was the assumption. . .

After only a short while, which actually felt like hours, Miu, the youngest member of the group, suddenly and without any previous symptoms began coughing her heart out. Sian noticed that he was also having more trouble breathing than normal, but he had presumed that it was the combination of the exhausting hike and the appalling weather. All too soon however, his other companions had started to suffer from the first aches and pains.

Losai developed all the symptoms of a bad cold; sneezing hard and obviously shivering, despite the humid warmth of the air.

It was Kia who started scratching her whole body relentlessly, desperately trying to assuage the feeling that she was covered in some disgusting rash.

Sian himself was not spared. Initially his legs started to ache and with every step he had a harder time walking. Endlessly they had struggled on until the

moment when Miu had collapsed with a final racking cough.

Sian felt the tears well in his eyes when he thought back to that moment. How could they have been so very ignorant and miss the obvious signs?

A shiver ran down his spine as he relived again the horrific scene when Kia had bent down anxiously to the prostrate Miu, only to jump up the next second, screaming in fear and horror as she waved a misshaped lump in her hand.

The next instant she threw it wildly into the jungle undergrowth and took off in blind panic through the fog.

- "Kia" he had heard Losai's desperate shout, "Kia Stay! What in Ma-Duks name is wrong with you!?"

There was no reply, as becoming muffled by fog and distance; the only sounds were desperate screams and the babbling of terror. Leaving Losai to deal with Kia; Sian had kneeled down on the wet ground to look after the motionless Miu. When he got close enough to actually see the body of a homin instead of a shadowy something in the fog, he finally recognized what had affected Kia so badly.

The ground on which Miu was sprawled was a darkish purple colour. As he gazed down, he felt himself going rigid with terror as he suddenly realised what was happening. His mouth went dry and he had to swallow a few times before he was able to utter the one word churning in his mind - "Goo!"

Part Three

Although Sian's voice was the merest whisper, Losai had still heard him.

- "What?" He asked, frightened.

Then it happened. As if something had taken control of Sian and he no longer was able to act of his own volition, it was as if he was a spectator to his own life that he saw himself rise up straight, grab Losai by the arm and run as if their lives depended on it. "We have to leave this place at once!" shouted someone who sounded remarkably like him. It was at this point that his coherent memories ceased and chaos took over.

Everything that happened after this split second of duality was a mixture of wild pictures and cascading impressions in his mind, and it was impossible for him to put them into any sense of order. Here, he was pulling Losai with him through the fog; there, he remembered the fog getting thinner but clearly a poisonous violet in colour. In another fragment he felt that his companion had managed to break free of his grip, or maybe had even fallen, yet he had carried on regardless. He couldn't grasp it all, just as he was unable to tell how he had managed to leave the Goo and reach this place. All his certainties were focused on one fact, he was alive!

He had been in the middle of the Goo infected region, far beyond any place any Homin had gone before and he had survived. Now, though, he was lying on the ground, helpless, waiting for the next Torbak to choose him as breakfast? No, he would fight for life.

Using the power of this thought he tried to stand up again, and finally he managed with great pain, to struggle into an upright position. Paralyzed with shock, he remained rigid in this pose as he saw his legs for the first time.

What was that?

The skin of his legs, once clean blue in colour, was mottled with dark spots from the feet to the thighs, here and there crossed by a violet vein.

- "What is that?" he mumbled to himself.

- "A souvenir..." Came the unexpected reply in Miu's voice...

He looked around surprised, but couldn't see anyone.

- "Miu" he asked aloud. "Is it really you?"

- "Oh yes, I am here" The familiar voice was almost shocking.

- "But... where are you?"

- "Here and here and here. Beside you. . . . around you. . . . within you. . . ."

- "We are all here." It was Losai this time.

- "All of us - with you for ever. . . ." added Kia.

- "But how?" asked Sian, searching the area around him with frantic eyes in the hope of finding his fellows. This time the response was clear, and sounded within his own head.

- "You bought us with you. Together in the goo. . . ."

— anonymous author.

5.5.7 Tribes of the Witherings and Goo

The Goo is a blight gnawing at the heart of Atys, from its deepest roots to the heights of its canopy.

This evil is spreading like a disease in our world, and yet there are homins working to spread this evil further. In the Witherings there are The Masters of the Goo, the Black Circle, the Antikamis, and the Goo Heads. Each tribe has their own goals which lead them all to spread this evil.

One of the more famous tribes of those mentioned is without a doubt, The Masters of the Goo. Their foundation dates back to 2503, where some of their founding members were officers of the surviving Wall of Zoran and have kept the ancient Zoraï ways. Following the Great Swarming, the natural suspicion of the Zoraï people towards the barbarians had been driven to extremes by these officers who proclaimed that as elected representatives of the Kami's, the Zoraï were responsible for delivering order amongst the barbarians using magic and weapons for the barbarians own good and that of Atys. However, these extreme views were greeted with suspicion by Hoi-Cho, who preferred to spread the word of Kami's peacefully with other homins. Suspicion turned to pure hostility from the Kami's when one surviving general proposed to use the Goo as a weapon against the enemies of Zoraï to obtain more power and terror than even the kitin had aroused.

At that time the Fyros trade caravans began to regularly follow paths through the Witherings. General Kim Jong-Faw perceived this as an additional threat to Zoraï, and broke away from the council having decided to become an insider in the goo. Accompanied by a band of followers, he took up an entrenched camp in the region of the Void to pursue his project. The following year, the Great Sage Hoi-Cho joined the Kamis followed by the Great Sage Fung-Tun to focus on the conflict between the Empire and the Witherings, as at the time they did not consider the Masters of the Goo to be a threat, despite

their misgivings about the tribes activities. This had the effect of distracting the Council of Sages from the growth of the Masters of the Goo tribe.

Since then, Bo-Qung Fao who is the son of Kim Jong-Faw, took up the leadership of the Masters of the Goo. He led the descendants of the Masters of the Goo, furthering the research of their predecessors to use Goo as a weapon. Their objective, however, had changed in the sense that realized they must begin taking control of the Witherings before they could realize their dreams of conquest, and spread the Goo as a weapon to control Atys.

Contrasting the Masters of the Goo, are the Antikamis. They are also renegades, having failed to integrate into the Zoraï society and have a decidedly fierce hatred for anything Kami. They do not try to control Kamis as the Masters of Goo do, instead they opt to attempt to destroy the Kamis. However there is one bond that unites them, giving rise to a group where only hatred prevails, making them one of the most petty and pathetic tribes of Atys, whose greatest dream is destroy the Kami Temple of Zora. This tribes hatred is so vile and putrid that they even cut the horns off their masks of kinship in an attempt to escape the purpose of Ma-Duk, and intentionally spread the Goo to affect both Zoraï and Kamis.

Whatever meanness and hate the Antikamis demonstrate, there is a more sinister concealed reality: The Black Circle. Founded in 2507, the precise origins of the Black Circle remain obscure. Their actual leader, Ba'Wity Codgan, arrived at his position by the power of intrigues, and seems to hold a network of contacts in all ancient and new lands. Contrary to the Masters of the Goo and the Antikamis, the Black Circle have their dark fingers encircling Atys, putting pressure on the governments in power to recognize the legitimacy of their research. The exact extent of their influence remains to be defined, but they are the ones who encourage the activities of the subversive and destructive Antikamis. They also serve as instigators, working with Matis to supply them with Goo, and it is known that they welcomed Horongi and his pupil as they were plotting against the dynasty of Cho. Without any doubt they have relations with numerous Marauder Clans. To preserve their power they convert into cash the fruit of their research to acquire the objects they desire.

Finally, the Goo Heads are another group of the manipulators of Goo. Of all the tribes spreading Goo, their philosophy is the one that stands out the most because they believe they are acting for the good of all. This community is also one of the oldest which can be traced back long before the Great Swarm. They are more of a "philosophical" movement than a community with political objectives. These homins believe and see the Goo a means to enlightenment. The consumption of different drugs made from contaminated raw materials is their main occupation. In a perverse impulse of altruism, they decided to take their next revelation to spread the Goo in a chaotic and disorderly manner to whatever they can, whether homins, animal or plant.

Obviously, there are many other tribes who spread Goo on Atys and quoted here only those with an interest in the Witherings because they are the ones who are able to do extensive harm to the bark. Know how to use wisdom when dealing with them as none of them hesitate to make you taste the evil of the

Goo that they are manipulated by everyday.
— cube of amber acquired in 2544 (JY).

5.5.8 Teleportation Sickness

Standing still, the mektoub was patiently waiting. It knew from experience just how long its mistress could remain in this place, almost motionless, letting only a sweet melody with soothing powers slip through her lips.

As I watched the mount, lulled by the Zorai's chant, I too was half hypnotized by the surreal lights sparking from the magnificent white and orange temple intertwined with harmonious roots, whose delicate and majestic summit seemed to reach for the sky.

It was the first of the Dynastic Healer's outings since her bed confinement a few weeks before and Tao Sian took advantage of the nice spring morning during the second cycle of Foliolly of the year 2574, to walk to Zora's temple. I, her young scribe, took care in escorting her and quietly watched her in her still fragile health. As I sat there, not far from her mount, dozing off to the wispering of her gentle voice. . .

- "Ochi Kami no!" The male voice startled me!

Opening my eyes I saw a tall figure, coming from I do not know where, praying next to the Healer.

- "Ochi Kami no!" echoed Tao Sian, following with a respectful, "Kamia'ata, Sage Sens."

Without thinking, I took my writing kit upon my knees, and began to write down the conversation as accurately as possible.

- "Ata'Kami, Tao. How are you feeling?"

- "By the grace of the Kamis, I'm feeling better. But having to undergo several teleportations in so little time, when even a single one makes me sick for several days... I hope never to experience again such a thing. But I had no choice. The infected rangers, the ones from the Almati Woods Kitin lair, they needed my help! And they will need it again. . ."

I felt the anxiety in her voice and after a bit of hesitancy she added: "Why do the Kamis inflict me this trial every time? Am I not devoted enough?"

The Sage sat silent, his deep gaze seemed to probe the Dynastic Healer's soul. "Your question is both legitimate and filled with anxiety, Tao. I could give you an answer but the answer would not be yours. It is important that you seek the answer yourself. Question yourself, Tao. You have perfected your healing skill but yet you do not know how to heal yourself."

Tao Sian sighed, "By Kami, I need the answer! I have tried to reason with myself to overcome my fear of teleportation as I went to treat the Goo contaminated Rangers; it was my duty as a healer. But look where it led me! Many weeks of headaches and irritability to everything around me. Dare I look homins in the eyes? What of the Rangers?"

It was then that Sage Sens placed a soothing hand on Tao's shoulder, "Do not close your heart, Tao. Hominis know your value and trust you, trust them in return."

With these wisdom filled words, the Sage turned and quietly left Tao Sian to her meditations.

— Excerpt from Volume 1, “In the Shadow of Tao Sian”, written in the winter of 2574 by the scribe Kuangi Wu Shi. Available in the public library of the Temple of Knowledge.

5.6 Trytonist chronicles

5.6.1 In The Beginning

Various extracts of “very confused memories” of Shrewd Gibbaï, seeker of Elias.

It is decided. From desire to know more about our movement, starting today, I will lead an investigation! Then everyone can simply enjoy speaking with the oldest of us after our informal meetings.

...

This movement, as it exists, is more recent than I thought. It had been, at the very most, five or six years of the calendar of Jena when the most ancient members were contacted by homins of Elias’s guild to found the movement and to aid them. It was shortly after the War of the Temples. I should learn more about this guild.

...

By chance I fell on Elias’s letters in our archives! I learned a little more about Elias’s guild. Although they no longer appear, I discovered that it was they who announced the arrival of Jena to the leaders of guilds, clans, brotherhoods and other groups of homins. They wanted homins to prepare for a struggle for their freedom...

Were they liars when it was all said and done? Jena has never come, as far as I know... but there was the War of the Temples a little less than two years later; perhaps it was that threat...

In every war, Elias’s guild has reappeared in the Lakes. If homins could read these letters as I have, they would realize the messages are not really of peace, but of a fight for equality and freedom.

...

I was interested in researching how they began. They had many missions, even as a small movement. Elias was especially concerned about the matter of Trytonists being imprisoned by the authorities. When I read of a Zoraï who had died in his cell, having been killed by the guards of his own people, my blood ran cold. I know my people are very religious, but never would I have believed such a thing possible.

The Karavan has, in turn, an odd method to judge the faith of homins. They asked Doran, a loyal supporter, to throw himself into the void... Kegan of Elias’s Guild teleported just at the right instant. When I think of it, this Kegan is gifted to be able to compete with those in authority.

...

5.6.2 A new Seeker of Elias

COMING SOON

5.6.3 Hiaoi, seeker of Elias

Part One

Hello. Today, our meeting is a little bit unusual, because I am not authorized to tell you where I am. The person who is coming was only willing to meet with me anonymously, because she wanted to talk about her guild, the Guild of Elias.

Interviewer: Who are you?

Hiaoi: Call me Hiaoi. As a member of the guild, I unfortunately cannot reveal my real name, because of the ban on the guild in Zoraï country.

Interviewer: What do you do in life?

Hiaoi: I am a peddler. My business takes me on the road all the time, from one region to another, to find new goods and sell my merchandise. Because of my constant travels, I take on a parallel function as a "seeker of Elias" for my guild.

Interviewer: What is a "seeker of Elias"?

Hiaoi: Seekers of Elias are both messengers and informers. You see, the Guild of Elias is extremely scattered all over Atys and tries to stay as discreet as possible, ever since it was banned by the Karavan. So the guild needs homins like me, who can discreetly carry the message from one cell of the guild to another. Since I am called to travel between countries regularly, I also try to keep the guild informed about the political and religious situation in each of the major countries. So we seekers are the eyes and ears of Elias.

Interviewer: You said that the guild has to remain discreet. Yet I have the impression that there is a certain degree of tolerance.

Hiaoi: Perhaps in Tryker and Fyros lands, yes. They understand our desire to find the truth. And although they do not support us, they have also not declared a merciless war on us. But among the Matis, the prohibition of 2504 has never been lifted. And even though they have given up burning our Guild members at the stake, they continue to hunt us in the name of their sacred Karavan. As for my own country - few are aware of it, but we are not welcome there either. The problems really began under the madness of Fung-Tun. We tried to oppose the slavery, but Fung-Tun was intolerant of our ideas about the equality of different people, as well as our opposition to his regime, and he has not hesitated to massacre us in the name of Ma-Duk. Today, the sages still look at us with disdain. They do not like the idea of a united hominity that we promote, because they continue to see the Zoraï people as the elect of the Kamis.

Interviewer: A united hominity? Is that the guild's credo?

Hiaoi: In a way, yes. We believe that the homins are the genuine strength of Atys. Jena and Ma-Duk are only imposters. I hope with all my heart that I will live to see the day when all homins will realize the destiny that awaits them in the name of hominity, rather than in the name of false gods. One day,

I know that Elias will return to liberate homins and show them the true path, the path of free will.

Interviewer: So you reject both Ma-Duk and Jena. Does that mean that Elias is your god?

Hiaoi: Well, it's hard to say. Some of us believe that. They see Elias as the creator of all things and consider Ma-Duk and Jena as minor gods or mere imposters. Others think that he is a homin like the rest who runs the guild from the shadows. Still others believe that he is a homin of the ancient lands who has mastered great powers and mysterious technology. Personally, I think that this debate is unimportant. I joined the Guild for Elias for his ideals. When I hear my companions get upset over vain arguments, I start to wonder whether Elias isn't a myth invented by the ancients to stir up new hope among the homins during the war with the Kitins. Which is exactly how I think the Karavan invented Jena and the Kamis invented Ma-Duk, to justify their oppression of us. But at least we don't use Elias to try to get some kind of control over homins!

Interviewer: Forgive me for asking, but certain "events" have shown that you do in fact collect a lot of information about various homins. What is this information and what is it used for?

Hiaoi: Hmm, well, this is information that is supposed to let us find individuals in the population who might be of interest to the guild. So we observe influential homins, what they do, where they live, etc.

Interviewer: But - that's spying!

Hiaoi: It would be if we misused the information! But we are only seeking to assess the forces at work in order to protect ourselves, while making it possible for those who appear worthy to join us. Now if you keep twisting my words like that, I am not sure that I should continue this interview.

I ran after Hiaoi to hold her back. She angrily replied that she had things to do, but that if I insisted, we could resume the interview in two days.

Part Two

So we are speaking with Hiaoi again, in order to complete our interview on a calmer note. To avoid upsetting her again, I decided to continue the interview with a more neutral topic.

Interviewer: What made you decide to become a member of the Guild of Elias?

Hiaoi: I joined the guild in 2506. My sister had been a member for a long time, but she died in 2504 while trying to defend one of our Tryker members, who the Fung-Tun slave masters had come to capture. Some homins came to see us the next day to tell us that she had been punished by Ma-Duk for infringing on the laws of his representative, the great sage Fung-Tun. My sister was not the only victim; the reign of Fung-Tun made me aware of how dangerous fanatics can be. That is why, two years after my sister's death, I decided to follow in her footsteps.

Interviewer: How did you become aware of the existence of the Guild of Elias?

Hiaoi: The first person to tell me about Elias was our neighbor. He traveled a lot, but he was always sure to visit us whenever he returned home. I was still very young, but I loved to listen to him speak of his travels. And then, one day, he spoke of Elias. My mother, who was a kamist believer, didn't like him talking about Elias and always looked for a way to interrupt the conversation. I barely paid attention at the time, but this only piqued my sister's curiosity. She spent more and more time with our neighbor, to our mother's despair. When I decided to join the guild, I tried to make contact with him. I thought he must have helped my sister get into the guild. But it took me two years to find him, because he had fled from the repression that came after the guild's fight against slavery. But I have never regretted it.

Interviewer: How does one join the guild?

Hiaoi: Well, to tell you the truth, it isn't really that you join the guild, but that it comes to you. When it was first created, the guild recruited everyone on the basis of their good will, but today, with the tensions between Kamis and Karavans, the guild cannot take the risk of recruiting everyone indiscriminately. The risk of a new round of repression, at a time when homins need us more than ever, is far too great. When a homin seems suitable to us, we contact him. If he shows an interest, then we give him permission to learn the teachings of the guild. If he is still interested at the end of this learning period, we put him in the position where he can be the most useful. But even though we limit our recruiting to avoid drawing attention to ourselves, we need sympathizers now more than ever, to spread the message of Elias. I hope that this interview will give homins a chance to know us better, and make up for the risks I am taking by speaking with you.

— Excerpt from Volume 1, "In the Shadow of Tao Sian", written by Kuangi Wu Shi in the winter of 2574.

5.7 Marauders chronicles

5.7.1 Stabre Sicco, Marauder Prisoner

When we heard that a Marauder had been imprisoned, I immediately asked for authorisation to meet him. I was taken to his small cell, from which he answered me in a perfectly intelligible homin, despite a strong accent which I had never heard before...

Interviewer: Who are you?

Stabre Sicco: So my torturers didn't consider it advisable to give my name? I am Stabre Sicco.

Interviewer: You're a Marauder then?

Stabre Sicco: I imagine you already know the answer to that question, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Have you lost faith in your brand-new country's justice system already?

Interviewer: Who are Marauders exactly?

Stabre Sicco: The arrogance of your peoples in defining yourselves as "Trykers" or "Fyros", even "Homins". Just because the tyrants of the old civilisations

have rebuilt their so-called empires in what you call your "New Lands", do you think this means you speak for all the homins on Atys? Marauders are Marauders, free homins worth just as much as you, but who are perhaps a bit less self-important...

Interviewer: Where do you come from?

Stabre Sicco: Where do think we come from? We too have known the magnificence of the Old Lands! When the kitin armies ravaged everything, however, we weren't lucky enough to be able to flee like frightened yubos to the Prime Roots. When we realised that our guides, our wise leaders - what am I saying - our devoted chiefs, had run away without so much as a thought for us, we had no choice but to fight for our survival.

Interviewer: You were there?

Stabre Sicco: This cell is dark and gloomy, but even so, for you to think I'm that old when you're standing just there... Have my charming jailers made that much of a mess of me? This story is that of my parents and of all my people. But just because I didn't live it myself doesn't mean it isn't mine, too. If our kings, emperors and sages hadn't given us proof of their cowardice by preferring to worry about their miserable selves instead of fulfilling their duty to protect their people, there never would have been any Marauders.

Interviewer: Did Melkiar found the Marauders?

Stabre Sicco: Melkiar...? Melkiar the Black Varinx...? (Sniggering) I don't think you really understand what Marauders are... Melkiar is only one leader among many. He proved through valour that he was a good leader in war, but we are a free people. Melkiar may lead the Marauders as a whole, but he has no authority inside our clans. We have remembered the lesson taught to us by our late, dearly-beloved leaders. We can't rely on anyone but ourselves.

Interviewer: What exactly are you looking for by coming to our lands?

Stabre Sicco: Do you think that we like living on land still infested with kitins? You left us there to rot, don't you think it's fair to give us a bit of room now? Even more so since, no doubt, you're oblivious to the presence of Matoxia on your land...

Interviewer: Matoxia? What's Matoxia?

Stabre Sicco: What do you know about Matoxia?... I'm such an idiot... Nothing, of course. How could you know? You have neither the allies nor the necessary technology. And to think that you call yourselves the future of Atys...

Interviewer: But what does this "Matoxia" do?

Stabre Sicco: Tut tut, don't you know that it's very rude to press a subject which your interlocutor clearly doesn't want to go into? I've already revealed its nature to you, you know it's a material. You don't want me to tell you how it's made, what it's used for and its different properties as well, do you? And I certainly wouldn't want to spoil the surprise for you. You know, we learnt another lesson from the kitins: "Only by outlasting your enemy can you have time to get to know him"...

Interviewer: I've heard about someone called Akilia Ash Storm... Who is she?

Stabre Sicco: Akilia... The deliciously lethal Akilia. The future of the Marauders, without a shadow of a doubt. A daughter worthy of her father, Melkiar! There's no doubt that she's waiting for the death of the Black Varinx, to take his place... if she doesn't execute him herself! Isn't that adorable?

Interviewer: And why Ash Storm?

Stabre Sicco: It's a bit childish. It's all that's ever left behind when she passes...

Interviewer: Don't you people have any morals?!

Stabre Sicco: And your Yasson? And your Rigan Mac'Darrell? Did they have morals when they fled into the Primes, leaving all their people behind?

Interviewer: Don't you believe in anything?

Stabre Sicco: Oh yes! We believe in the only law which is always borne out, the law of nature, the survival of the fittest. The Kami and the Karavan have no rights over us. We, on the other hand, we know how useful they may be to us once they've been... liberated.

Interviewer: "Liberated"?

Stabre Sicco: (Yawning) Excuse me, but I'm tired. No doubt my jailers will have lots more questions to ask me tomorrow and I'd like to be at my best to receive them. I wouldn't want to disappoint them and repeating myself bores me. Good night to you.

— interview with Stabre Sicco. Unknown Source.

5.7.2 The misadventures of Arty Mac Keaggan

Arty: Come on, Naroy! One last drink before I take my mektoubs to the stable.

Naroy: No, Arty! You've been saying the same thing all morning, without ever leaving my bar. It's high time you left for Zora. Think of your customers!

Arty: How cruel of you, Naroy, forcing me to go on a difficult journey when I can't even stand straight.

Naroy: And whose fault is that? If you didn't like my beer so much you'd already be in Zora!

Swearing, grumbling and cursing, Arty Mac Keaggan leaves the bar and with a hesitant and unstable walk heads for the cattle shed. Naroy Ba'Dardan keeps an eye on him for a moment and then turns his attention back to his customers.

Night falls slowly over Avendale. A stampede on the pontoon grabs the attention of the barman. Breathless, scratched and ragged, Arty Mac Keaggan bursts into the bar.

Naroy: Arty Mac Keaggan! If you purposely went and threw yourself in a wigweed to look like that so that you could come and ask for a beer to perk you up, you wasted your time!

Arty: You're no way near it, Naroy! I fell into an ambush!

Naroy: What? Whereabouts? The surrounding area is safe.

Arty: At the Whirling Stronghold!

Naroy: You really take me for one of your stupid animals, don't you? That outpost has been in ruins for ages.

Arty: Listen Naroy. I left a little drunk, I agree, but I still managed to get to the vortex for the Lagoons of Loria. When I got there, I was surprised to find it was nighttime. As I didn't want to travel at night in an area infested with Kipuckas, I went in the direction of the Whirling Stronghold. I thought I'd find the usual ruins but, to my surprise, I collided into a barrier and fell over backwards with a crash. Then I was immediately surrounded by Matis speaking homin with a strong accent. Straight away I thought it was the Marauders everyone has been talking about so much lately. They came upon me and assaulted me and I barely managed to make a desperate escape on the rump of one of my mektoubs.

Naroy: Marauders have taken the Whirling Stronghold? What a worry! Quickly, Arty, lets warn the Chief of the Guards!

— conversation with Arty Mac Keaggan. Unknown Source.

5.7.3 Marauder Wedding: "Where Wedding is Synonymous with Challenge"

An ordinary evening at the camp in Hidden Source. Around the fire the marauder guards sent from the Old Lands mix with the young marauders recruited on the New Lands. One of them asks:

Do you also get married, in the Old Lands?

Of course. A wedding celebrates the fact that two people have found and can always rely on each other. By getting married, each has to demonstrate to the other, along with their family and clan, that they are worthy of belonging with them.

How do they prove their worth?

Ah, the marauder love ritual! Long before speaking of marriage, each one takes the time to test the other with various trials and small challenges. But it's when the question is officially made that the real fun begins. The engaged couples lay down a challenge to each other that they must complete or not return. It is a very delicate time, since of course you don't want to send the one you love to their death, but if the challenge is too simple, you put them to shame... So you've got to find something that pushes them to their limits, without going overboard. It's also sometimes a way to get rid of a clingy suitor! My dear Lokiukas had sent me fighting a renowned kirosta with my bare hands and I thought for a moment that she no longer desired me... But she got it right. I brought back the kitin's sting as wedding gift for her. As for me, I asked her to tame a wild varinx. She arrived at the wedding riding on the back of the terrifying beast... *has a tender look*

And if the challenge was meant to get rid of an undesirable, and they are still successful? There's nothing for it but to make yourself understood by way of arms! But it's rare. And it's only the beginning of the ordeals...

Only the beginning? What happens after that?

It's now up to our family, our clan, and our guests attending the wedding to make sure that we'll remain close in the battle! Each wedding offers the chance for new challenges. Usually, both fiancés have to fight several teams

in a tournament. It is said that the longer they stay on their feet, the longer the wedding will last! The ordeals are also more or less harsh depending on the way the entourage consider this union. Here again, whatever happens, no pain is spared to them, they have to prove what they're really worth! At each successful fight, the defeated team offers a weapon and a piece of armour, or sometimes rare materials to craft their gear afterwards. In some clans, it is also the opportunity to organize a great hunt for prestigious creatures, and the loot is offered to both lovebirds.

Indeed, if after all this they're still alive and in love, they should spend their lives together! But how does the wedding itself take place?

We don't bother much with chitchat. Someone reputed in the community, often the leader of a clan, gives a quick speech on the importance of being united in the face of adversity, then asks them to confirm their will. The married homins seal the agreement by drinking from the same goatskin, a way of expressing that they will share everything from now on and that they trust each other. Generally, the master of ceremonies has filled the goatskin with brandy and the party begins.

Are there things to do or not to be done during a marauder wedding?

Hey, we're marauders! If you do something stupid, you're either strong enough to take responsibility for it, or you'll feed the Bark! But regarding the customs, the married-to-be often wear red, or at least one piece of their outfit is red, symbolizing the blood shed together. And after a day of tournaments and hunting, most attire are in shades of red and black... Some also exchange rings, a custom from before the First Great Swarm, but it's a bit dated and has lost all of its meaning.

And after the ceremony?

After? We drink, we laugh, and it often ends up in a general fight... out of friendship of course. As for what the newlyweds do at the end of the evening, it does not concern you, but be sure that a little runt such as you won't be invited to that part!

Everyone bursts out laughing, while the chat moves to other topics.

5.8 Chronicles linked to the Temple War

5.8.1 Announcement of the construction of the Karavan Temple

COMING SOON

5.8.2 Fao the Zoraï

When the sun goes down over Liberty Lake, the Avendale bar fills up with homins who are impatient to imbibe in the cool, frothy beer that is skillfully served up by Naroy Ba'Dardan. His bar attracts a large crowd of customers from many walks of life, whether they are the homins who work in the region or those who use the nearby vortex for travel, ready to brave the dangers of the Loria Lagoons.

Today, among the many conversations, let's listen in on Fao the Zoraï, a follower of Ma-Duk, as he explains his take on recent events:

- "Of course the Karavan want a war! Every day, they increase their provocations of Ma-Duk, under their false pretexts. Every day, they inflame their homin followers against the Kami faithful. Their latest trick is to say that the Kamis are supposedly going to attack the Karavan followers. This is pure nonsense! A Kami, who represents the life force of Atys, would never threaten the life of a homin without cause. But by making us into the popular scapegoat, the Karavan are running the risk of the wrath of Ma-Duk."

- "What's more, I have also recently seen the Karavan becoming very busy on Atys. Their envoys are gathering in the capitals, accompanied by homin crafters, and they seem to be exchanging plans and information for some unknown purpose. There is no doubt that something big is cooking. But we will not fear it, because Ma-Duk and the Kamis are watching over Atys and will not permit it to be disfigured by the works of the Karavan."

— Fao the Zoraï about the activities of the Karavan

5.8.3 The Zora sanctuary

Naroy: "Hi Arty! When did you get back? Already tired of Avendale? So where did your business take you this time?"

Arty: "Hello, Naroy Ba'Dardan! Give me a drink first, at least. I'll tell you everything as soon as my thirst is quenched."

Naroy: "The usual? A house beer?"

Arty: "You know me! Your beer is always cold and light. It's the only thing I could think of since getting back from Zora."

Naroy: "So, what's the news from that place?"

Arty: "There are still kamists at work all around Zora. I had picked up my animals from the stable and I was leaving Zora by the Goo Chase district gate. In the plain right outside of town, I took a little detour to see if the Kami fanatics were still there. I could hardly believe my eyes!"

Naroy: "Really? What were they doing, Arty? Still praying to Ma-Duk?"

Arty: "Ha! Since I last saw them, the Kamists had lighted huge torches and set up a stable and corral for mektoub, as well as a wooden building of a kind I had never seen! There were several men taking turns speaking with the grand Zoraï. I was intrigued by the new building and I wanted to go pump him for information.

Naroy: "Did he tell you anything?"

Arty: "He said to me, "I am the Kamis Representative," and he started giving me his memorized spiel. With all his tirades of "The Karavan are going to attack our followers!" and "Have faith in the Kamis," he gave me a headache. But in between all his rhetoric, I gathered that the structure I had seen was going to be a Ma-Duk Sanctuary, when the kamist followers had finished putting it all together. Can you imagine that, Naroy? They are building a house of Ma-Duk! Some news, huh?"

Naroy: "No kidding! Still, it would be bigger news if a Kami came and tried to stop me from selling my beer!"

Arty: "You're right. And the worst of all would be if a Karavan came along and tried to keep us from talking. Hey, how about another round."

5.8.4 The outlying areas of Zora

Arty: "Hello Naroy!"

Naroy: "Arty Mac Keaggan! I haven't seen you around Avendale for a long time! What will you have?"

Arty: "Your house brew, as usual. That's what I need to recover from my trip."

Naroy: "So where have you been to this time?"

Arty: "I went to Zora, with my little convoy of mektoubs. Business is pretty good with the Zoraïs."

Naroy: "Good for you. So what's the news from there?"

Arty: "Some really strange things, let me tell you. I was going to the stables to collect my animals, when a Tryker came up to me and asked if I supported the Kamis and wanted to follow them."

Naroy: "From the looks of it, I would say that guy had joined the Company of the Eternal Tree"

Arty: "That's right! He took me for a kamist. The little worm practically forced me to follow him to the plains just at the edge of Zora. There were about a dozen of his companions from the Eternal Tree and a small crowd of homins running around doing I-don't-know-what. In the middle of them all, there was a Kami Preacher Lord, accompanied by a grand Zoraï. The Kami Preacher Lord had difficulty speaking, but the Zoraï faithfully interpreted his words of devotion to Ma-Duk. His exhortations were repeated by all the homins in the crowd. Since there was no prospect of either selling or gathering anything, I left this crowd of worshipers to their collective trance."

Naroy: "Wow! Can I get you another beer?"

Arty: "Sure!"

5.8.5 Meeting in Zora

Arty: "Say Naroy, do you remember that Tryker I told you about, the one I met at the stables at Zora?"

Naroy: "Of course, I remember. Have you seen him again? Is he still with the Company of the Eternal Tree?"

Arty: "Believe it or not... he quit."

Naroy: "Really? Have the recent events convinced him to join the Church of Light? You seem to know quite a bit about this loafer. Have you seen him recently?"

Arty: "Yes, during my last trip to Zora. And he's no longer a loafer since he and I have become acquainted. His name is Dany O'Doyley. He has fallen madly in love with Geng Xo-Yuang, the range weapon merchant in Zora. Incredible,

isn't it? To prove his love for her he left the Company, sold all his belongings at once and went to see the Dynasty Magistrate of Zora to plead with him to grant him Zorai citizenship. The magistrate tested him before allowing him the rites of passage to becoming a citizen. Danny had to give his dappers to the dynasty treasury."

Naroy: "And he gave them without shilly-shallying?"

Arty: "Yes, and happy to do it! Then the Magistrate questioned him about the Zorais, their history and values. I don't know if Dany really knew the answers to the Magistrate's questions, or if it was just good luck, but he got them all correct."

Naroy: "Mmmm. . . Perhaps he has kept some of his good-for-nothing tricks up his sleeve?"

Arty: "Maybe, but before I had a chance to ask him about this, he left for a trip across the whole Zorai territory to prove he can pass the test. Naroy, do you realize what love can do?"

Naroy: "Huh! Come on Arty, this round is on me. Lets drink to Dany's health!"

— Arty Mac Keaggan, the Chronicles from the Temple Wars

5.8.6 In Jena's light

Part One

The blood flowed from Ameriana's deep wound. Bright-red blood which dyed the Bark a deathly hue. But the young Matis paid no attention. She didn't feel the pain. The energy of Atys crackled in her hands. The sap flowed through her entire body, while she concentrated on channelling her destructive magic forces. For the first time, she was doing battle in the name of Jena. And in her golden eyes shone the light of the Goddess.

Ameriana had been waiting for this day for a long time. Since her arrival in Yrkanis, the capital of the Matis kingdom, she had been on the lookout for signs. Signs from Jena, Goddess of the Sun, Mother of Atys and of all homins. She had searched in vain for a temple where she could gather her thoughts. The Chosen Ones of the holy Karavan had tried to dispel her doubts, without ever really succeeding.

For the flame of faith flickered deep within her. So many homins had already rejected the teachings of the Goddess! The barbaric Fyros, who dug into the Bark despite the Karavan's warnings, looking for the Dragon that in their madness they believed they could defeat. The mysterious Zoraï, who hid behind their masks and venerated the diabolical Kami. Many Trykers, who lost their way on illusory paths in the name of freedom. Even among the Matis, a noble and most faithful people, seditious discourse was now widespread, calling for a rejection of the powers which had led them till now. The imminence of a holy war frightened the homins, and many preferred to deny the evidence rather than face reality.

Ameriana, however, had refused to turn her back on the Mother of Atys. She had simply needed to be confirmed in her faith.

So, when a Karavan envoy had announced the construction of a temple to the glory of Jena, the magician had been immensely relieved. Finally, a sign from the Goddess! The time had come for the faithful to gather. Ameriana had eagerly gone to the chosen site, not far from Yrkanis, to offer her help. No matter what mission she was given, she would be honoured to accept it. A black-clad Karavaneer combatant had entrusted her with the task of protecting the gatherers, who were assigned to collect the raw materials needed by the craftsmen. The precious resources had been located on the far-off islets of the old lands, but the distance posed no problem thanks to the Technolords' powers. Ameriana had been teleported to the heart of the Dunes of Aelius, to a camp established close to the supply fields.

The place was a hive of activity. The fences crackled with some unknown energy protecting the installations. Large metal columns stood as watchtowers, surrounded by halos of light. Several Karavan vessels hovered above the camp, reassuring silhouettes outlined against the late-afternoon sun. Soldiers armed with pikes were patrolling to prevent attack. Groups of the faithful were organising themselves into expedition parties. The young Matis had been tempted to join one, but in the end had decided to explore the island a little. She had left the encampment to venture into the west, following the cliff which edged the area.

An arid wind had begun to blow, its burning currents sculpting the sand on the dunes. With it came the sound of fighting. Ameriana looked into the distance and saw lights. Silhouettes were running to and fro. The gatherers and their protectors were under enemy attack! Fyros supporting the Kami were trying to plunder the sites on behalf of their masters. Apeing the Karavan, the Kami had decided to build their own mockeries of sanctuaries in honour of their leader. Ameriana threw herself into battle without a moment's hesitation, driven by a fierce desire to defend the cause of the Goddess.

The magician completed her incantation despite her assailant's blows. The shaggy-haired Fyros cried out in pain when the acid clouds crashed headlong into him, greedily devouring his flesh. Despite the serious wound that he had inflicted upon the young Matis, he realised that he had lost the advantage of surprise. Ameriana noticed his hesitation and invoked the elements once again. The barbarian brandished his clevan axe and attempted to strike a powerful blow with it to break his enemy's concentration, but he was too late. Amplified by the gloves wrapped around the magician's hands, the energy from the depths of Atys poured onto him. He collapsed in a death rattle and sank into unconsciousness. Ameriana remained on the look-out, fearing the intervention of a Kami healer. But soon the body of the Fyros disappeared. The demons had taken it to their infernal dwelling-place, so that it could be brought back for a new life of servitude.

The young Matis looked around her. The Kami's followers seemed to be beating a retreat. Many homins were still lying in the hollows of the dunes, evidence of the fighting's violence. Ameriana briefly inspected her wound. The blood had finally stopped flowing from it. The magician thanked Jena for her protection, and quickly healed herself. A great pride filled her heart. In bringing

down her enemy, she had shown herself to be worthy of the Goddess.

Suddenly, she heard a crackling. Ameriana felt her long black hair stand on end. A pungent odour attacked her nostrils. Before she could react, a flash of lightening struck her with full force.

Dazed, the young Matis almost fell to the ground. A Zoraï stared at her, impassive, his mask adorned with four menacing horns. Sparks pirouetted around his gloved hands.

The battle wasn't over.

Part Two

Ameriana concentrated. The magician knew that her adversary would leave her little time to react. Before her, the elemental Zoraï entered into a trance, rising into the air with all the grace of a dancer. He turned, crouched, then suddenly relaxed to release a spell. The young Matis felt a wave numb her body and mind. Her incantation was broken. Calling upon the mystic forces of the lakes, the Zoraï had weaved a stun link. Ameriana was tangled in her enemy's web like a panic-stricken butterfly.

She was at his mercy! An intense terror overwhelmed her.

The Kamist sorcerer prepared to call upon the lightening a second time. Powerless, the magician could make out his cruel smile behind the pale mask.

The Zoraï raised his arms. Suddenly, he gave a cry of a pain. A figure had leapt out behind him and drawn two bloody lines across his back, breaking his concentration. He turned round. Fyler daggers cut into his ribs. The sardonic face of a Tryker could be made out behind the non-stop ballet of the two daggers. The sorcerer tried to call upon the elements, but his adversary was too fast. The repeated blows and burning pain made any incantation impossible.

The stun link lifted. Ameriana came round, paying thanks to Jena. She channelled the strengths from the depths. An acid projectile flew towards the Zoraï. The Kamist tried to flee, but it was too late. He collapsed beneath the combined assaults of the blades and the magic.

The Tryker juggled his knives with ease.

- "I permitted myself to interrupt the course of your debate with the no-face, fair lady. I hope that you will forgive my intrusion. But you seemed to be running out of arguments."

He burst out laughing. Ameriana felt her face flush.

- "I see nothing funny about the situation," she replied coldly, "I almost lost my life!"

- "Come now, death is but a passage, a painful parenthesis in the glorious story of your destiny! And the bosom of the Goddess is quite a hospitable place..."

The magician frowned. This Tryker was so impudent! She was about to reply, but the knife-wielding Tryker began to move away.

- "We'll continue this discussion later! The foragers need our protection, or else the building work won't make any progress. Come and see me at the encampment after nightfall, honourable intentions only, of course. I'll try not to stun you like that crazy Zoraï did!"

With these words, he disappeared behind a dune. Ameriana looked for the body of the Kamist sorcerer, but it had already been recalled by its impious masters.

A group of Karavaneer gatherers was approaching, in search of wood and resin. The magician headed towards them to offer her help. She glanced behind her. There was nothing to indicate that a fight had taken place just a few moments earlier, and that she had almost been killed.

She didn't even know the name of the homin who had saved her life.

- "Caugan the flyerist? He pitched his tent in the north of the camp, near the energy barriers."

Ameriana thanked the guard and approached the yurts. Stars dotted the night sky like golden threads on black brocade. It hadn't been difficult to find out the Tryker's name. His reputation as a ferocious fighter preceded him. He had been one of the first Karavaneer warriors to back the project to build temples for Jena. He had left for the Dunes of Aelius and put his daggers at the service of the Goddess. Ameriana believed that her encounter with the Tryker had been down to more than just chance.

Sparks danced like fireflies above the camp's fires. Homins were talking, warming themselves round the fires, drinking big glassfuls of dandelion wine. The majority of them came from the forests or the lakes, but among them were some Fyros, followers of Jena, encased in their kostom armour burnt by the desert sun. They seemed to be preparing for an expedition. It was a still night, but the magician knew that the calm was deceptive.

The tent flap was rolled back, revealing the silhouette of a Tryker sitting cross-legged before a fire. He seemed to be busy examining a cube of yellow amber.

- "May I enter, Master Caugan?"

Ameriana adopted a deferential tone, which she wasn't accustomed to using when addressing homins who weren't of Matis sap. But she was aware that she was speaking to a person of considerable merit, to whom she felt indebted.

- "Well, well, if it isn't our young follower of arcana! I'd given up on you. Come closer, don't be afraid, I'm as gentle as a gnoof!"

The magician tensed. Caugan certainly knew how to get on her nerves.

- "I haven't been a fledgling for many cycles. That Zoraï took me by surprise, and I would have been quite capable of..."

- "I didn't mean to offend you, Lady Ameriana of the Verdant Heights. Have a seat, and join me in a few mouthfuls of lake beer. A spoonful of honey sweetens the bitterness."

Caugan stood up and bowed to her, inviting Ameriana to sit upon a cloth cushion. The two homins sat down by the fire. The warrior picked up a pitcher and filled two goblets with a bluish liquid.

- "This beer is brewed by my friend Naroy, who runs a bar at Avendale. It's one of the best bars in all of Aeden Aqueous! Its distinctive colour is the result of a secret mix of berries and algae."

The young Matis timidly took a sip from the wooden goblet.

- "I was just reading a cube of amber which was given to me by the Fairhaven intendant," continued Caugan. "We can learn interesting things from it about the origin of our money. . ."

- "I came to thank you for your intervention this afternoon. Your help was timely."

Ameriana looked the Tryker straight in the eye. She expected a snigger, but Caugan was not a predictable homin.

He crossed his hands in front of him, saluting in the manner of the Matis nobility.

- "It is the Goddess who wished our paths to cross, fair lady. I am at her service, just as I am at yours."

Ameriana smiled. She took a closer look at her host. Locks of scarlet hair fell onto his forehead, giving him a pugnacious air. His green eyes were small for a Tryker. His round cheeks were embellished with winding, red and green tattoos.

A few minutes passed, punctuated by crackling from the fireplace. Caugan stirred up the embers then began to talk again.

- "We didn't finish our previous conversation. Allow-me to ask you an indiscreet question, Lady Ameriana. Have you ever felt the breath of death upon you?"

The magician lowered her eyes.

- "Jena has not seen fit to recall me to her."

Ameriana raised her head to meet the warrior's gaze.

- "...and for that I thank her. For sometimes I'm afraid that I won't be good enough, and that I won't return from the darkness to which death sends me."

Caugan twirled the goblet in his hands, looking thoughtful.

- "It's natural to be afraid of the unknown. But you have nothing to fear. The strength of your faith will bring you back to Atys. The Goddess grants us a certain amount of time, and yours isn't up yet. Of that I'm convinced."

- "I would like to be as sure as you," replied Ameriana sadly. "I defeated a Fyros today. A Kamist, a follower of the demons. In fighting him, I felt a great elation, as if I was bathed in Jena's light. But the light disappeared. I dread whatever the future holds for us. . ."

The Tryker emptied his goblet in one. His face was lit up by the flames, and his eyes shone like suns.

- "Only the Powers know our future. As for the past, it lies with the dead. Our world is the present. It belongs to us alone, never forget that."

Caugan smiled and threw his goblet into the fire. He invited Ameriana to do the same.

- "And so all doubts and shadows disappear. Into the jaws of a wild beast tamed by homins!"

The magician burst into laughter. She copied the Tryker, making a shower of sparks fly out of the fireplace.

Outside, the stars seemed to shimmer with a new intensity. They hailed the friendship which had just been born.

Part Three

In the months that followed their meeting, Caugan and Ameriana didn't leave each others' side. When the Holy Karavan brought the prospecting in the Dunes of Aelius to an end, they explored the Olkern Lake together. The Karavaneer gatherers worked the supply fields looking for fibres, resin and bark. These materials were necessary for the construction of the walls of the temples built to the glory of Jena.

The encounters with Kamists were becoming more and more violent as the building works progressed. Several battles had taken place, and the sap of the homins had flown in abundance. The time of peace had passed.

The two friends led many fights, driven by a faith which became stronger every day. Death didn't seem to be interested in them, preferring to turn its hollow gaze on easier prey.

Finally, the Technolords announced that the Olkern Lake had given the building sites all the necessary materials.

The last stage of prospecting in the old lands was launched: the Karavaneers were transported to the Almati Wood, a wild forest hiding outstanding supply fields in its depths.

It was in the heart of this land that the eyes of Death fell upon Caugan and Ameriana.

Dawn's first mists tinged the trees with a pearly veil. The small troop of homins came to a halt in the clearing. The eldest of the foragers called out to the Tryker leading the march.

- "Are we still far from the site, Master Caugan?"

- "We'll arrive soon. Once we get there you'll need to hurry. It seems that a large group of Kamists was teleported onto the islet last night. No doubt they will try to secure the sources of stellar amber."

- "We'll do our best."

As the group prepared to set off again, a slender silhouette appeared between the trees.

- "Ameriana! Any news?" Caugan asked the magician as he offered her a gourd of cold water.

- "Yes, the Goddess is with us!" replied the young Matis, quenching her thirst. "Our enemies are only just beginning their preparations. We have several hours head start on them."

- "Jena be praised! Let's get going straight away."

The Karavaneers moved towards the east. A few moments later, a large, clicking shadow entered the clearing. It stopped for an instant, as if listening for the forest's secrets. Then it left hurriedly, leaving deep grooves in the humus in its haste.

The springs shone like botanic gems scattered on the ground. Revealed by the drilling powder, they seemed to throb to the rhythm of Atys. From these the gatherers extracted the stellar amber, which would be used to build the master room of the temple of Jena.

While the prospectors were working, a handful of warriors surveyed the surroundings, looking out for any intrusion by the Kamists.

Caugan was sitting on a tree-stump, his gaze travelling from one tree to the next. He seemed nervous.

- "You haven't said anything for almost an hour. Is something wrong?" asked Ameriana, concerned.

- "I've got a bad feeling. I feel like a whole army is suddenly going to come out of the woods to crush us."

- "The demons don't have that many followers. Before they arrive, we'll already have left with bags full of amber. And we..."

- "Shh! Listen!"

The magician listened intently. She heard nothing. The birds had stopped singing. The whole forest seemed to be holding its breath.

Caugan stood up, watchful. He frowned.

- "It's as if..."

He was interrupted by a shout. Large green silhouettes appeared among the ferns and threw themselves upon the homins. As if the trees had raised their roots to punish those who dared to disturb their rest.

The Tryker jumped up, drawing his two knives.

- "Kitins! Kitins!"

The big kirostas swept the drillers aside like wisps of straw. Their sharp stings pierced the lightweight armour and injected a poison which burned in the veins. Protected by their thick shell, the kitin soldiers' limbs slashed out as their mandibles clicked to give rhythm to their danse macabre.

Once they had overcome their initial shock, the Karavaneer fighters reacted. Led by Caugan, they placed themselves between the monsters and the prospectors. The healers began their incantations. The warriors searched for weak points in the kirostas' armour. Caugan struck without respite, the points of his daggers working their way into the slightest joint.

Ameriana unleashed the energy of the depths on the creatures. But the kitins withstood her acid-throwing spells. She then used the magic of her people, invoking poisoned jets. A kirosta finally collapsed, hunched up in a last spasm like a huge clawed hand. Another monster took its place.

A wave of terror washed over the homins. Were they all going to die here?

- "Ameriana! Get the gatherers away from here!" cried Caugan, removing his daggers from the body of a kitin soldier.

- "We can't win this fight. My group will try and hold them as long as possible."

- "No way, I'm not leaving you!"

- "There's no time to discuss it! The stellar amber must get to the Karavan camp. That's our mission!"

The young Matis gritted her teeth. Her friend was right. Jena had given her a task, she had to do all she could to complete it. Caugan approached her and took her hand.

- "Remember, death is but a passage! If I don't return, we will see each other again in Jena's light!"

Ameriana had no time to respond. Already, the Tryker was regrouping his remaining fighters.

- "Let's show these creatures how a Karavaneer dies! For the Goddess!"

He threw himself into the scramble, attracting the attention of the kirostas. His daggers described deadly, arcing blows. He seemed invincible.

The magician quickly rounded up the drillers. The homins rushed off one after the other, laden with the precious resources, running as quickly as they could to escape the implacable monsters. They headed west.

Tears coursed down Ameriana's cheeks. Rage and despair mixed together in her heart.

When the last warrior fell, the clicking soldiers cried out in triumph. Then they merged back into the trees.

Soon, the birds began to sing again.

The waters of the bay of Avendale shimmered under the fiery glow of the setting sun. Ameriana got off her mektoub and led it to the village stables. Then she walked towards the pontoons. The scarlet banners rippled in the dusk breeze. The lake-dwellers returned home from their working day. Some travellers heading for the Lagoons of Loria were loading their animals with packsaddles. Everything here was peaceful, far from the commotions of the Tryker capital. Ameriana asked for directions to Naroy Ba'Dardan's bar.

The magician had lost hope of seeing Caugan alive again several days ago. After having led the prospectors safely to the Almati Wood encampment, Ameriana had waited in vain for the return of her friend. She had headed back to the amber supply field at the head of a group of Karavaneers, and had found one of the Tryker's daggers stuck in the corpse of a kitin. In the absence of a body, the young Matis had hoped that Caugan had been blessed by the Goddess and brought back to Atys thanks to the miracle of resurrection. She had gone to Yrkanis and Fairhaven, without success. No one seemed to have seen the knife-wielding warrior.

Overcome with grief, Ameriana had remembered that night when her friendship with Caugan was born, when the Tryker had shared a drink from his homeland with her. So she had set off for Avendale, to the north-east of Aeden Aqueous. She wanted to taste once again that lake beer, its bitterness sweetened by honey. She wanted to remember.

Ameriana walked up to the bar and called over the barman. Naroy Ba'Dardan served two fishermen who were arguing about a game of dice before coming over to her. His bristling hair of blonde tufts topped an honest and kindly face.

- "Good evening," said the young Matis politely. "I would like to drink to the memory of a departed friend. Could you please bring me glass of the house beer?"

- "With pleasure. Welcome to my humble establishment, Ameriana."

The magician stared wide-eyed in surprise.

- "How did you know my name? I've never been here before."

- "The warrior sitting at the table at the back told me that you would come here," answered the barman, filling a pitcher carved into the shape of a shell. "It's not good to drink alone on such a lovely night as this. Look at how the stars are shining tonight. Lake beer should be drunk with old friends."

Naroy nodded towards a silhouette sitting at the back of the room. A scarlet-haired Tryker was contemplating the waters of the bay, juggling with a knife.

Seeing Ameriana, he stood and then bowed, crossing his hands.

- "I've been waiting for you, kind Lady. Will you do me the honour of sharing my table? Together, we can talk of the destiny of homins. Who knows, perhaps we can get rid of doubts and shadows!" As Ameriana ran towards him, Caugan smiled like a child.

— the Chronicles of the Temple Wars

5.9 Chronicles linked to Spring, when tents blossomed

5.9.1 For a Few Dappers More

Archiver's note: This message was marked to send to O'Duffy Garmer, responsible for the suppliers of the military encampments, built during the "Spring, when tents blossomed" event.

Lordoy nair-O'Duffy Garmer,

I have just inspected the sites and have seen that the work is progressing rapidly. At least as far as Witchy Coves, Resting Water and Twin Tops are concerned... The camps of Loria Ponds and Hush Hole are less advanced. I went there, thinking to find a beer merchant had come to interrupt the Trykers at work, but no, nothing! So i went to the camp builders, and they assured me they were spending long days, without beer or rest, so to speak, waiting for materials and components to be assembled at the warehouse.

I interviewed several vendors, beer in hand, to understand the reasons for the delays supplying the sites furthest from the capital. My small investigation leads me to believe that the road to the most remote camps is a bit... dangerous. Hunting grounds of some large predators, if you know what i mean... So most Mektoub drivers refuse to lead their mount or packer through there, claiming the journey to be too long and dangerous, and the feeding costs too high.

So for the good of the project, I decided to offer something that should motivate people: to accelerate the construction of the camps, I will reward Mektoub drivers who make a delivery with a sum of 10.000 dappers at the time of delivery. This will compensate them for the cost of food for their Mektoubs. "Rest or dappers, you must choose", my uncle Ba'Dairi always used to say!

The carrier of this beautifully written letter (you will appreciate the effort, I hope) shall deliver a small wooden chest, containing enough dappers to pay for deliveries for several days, to the overseer of each camp. They will be resupplied on a regular basis. Note that those dappers may not be spent on anything else!

I leave you to your work,

Ken bai Winni kard sul, yem tala,

Tor Lochi,

Ba'Darins Baksan, AC II 2546 JY

— letter written by Ba'Darins Baksan.

6 Diverse chronicles

6.0.1 The Shadow Runners

As we walked through Maiden Grove looking for momentous events to report upon, we came upon a Tryker and a Zoraï conducting some intense negotiations. We approached the pair, and as they finished their talk, we spoke to the Zoraï.

Interviewer: "Excuse me Sir Zoraï! Could you spare us a few minutes of your time?"

The zoraï looked back, and even through his mask we could tell he was perturbed.

Zoraï: "Sorry... Can't stop now..."

Interviewer: "Please wait! We only want to ask you a few questions about that Tryker."

The Zoraï turned in our direction.

Zoraï: "You saw me with the Tryker?"

Interviewer: "Well, yes."

Zoraï: "Erm, you won't talk to anyone about it, right? I... I will answer to your questions."

Interviewer: "Of course, don't be frightened. To begin with, what's all this about? And why don't you want anyone to know?"

Zoraï: "That Tryker is a member of the Shadow Runners tribe. They sell different things... I have some transactions with them and I think that my family, ever conscious of their pride would disown me if they knew."

Interviewer: "Hum, and where can we find this tribe? I have some questions to ask them."

Zoraï: "Ask them questions? I can't remember where they can be found, sorry I can't help you."

Interviewer: "Think about our arrangement..."

Zoraï: "But I... Oh ok then... you can find them in the north east of Maiden Grove."

Interviewer: "Thank you very much, you won't regret this..."

Due to the extreme stress evinced by our zoraï friend, reluctantly we let him leave.

Our next stop was obviously the camp of the shadow Runners. As we approached the Homin who seemed to be their leader he accosted us directly.

Shadow Runner: "Hey you! What do you want here?"

Interviewer: "Well, we came for..."

Shadow Runner: "Let me guess. You want a sword? A spear?"

Interviewer: "No, not really..."

Shadow Runner: "A mektoub then!"

Interviewer: "No, we don't want to buy anything... We only want to ask you some questions..."

Shadow Runner: "Questions? Sorry we don't do questions here – you hear the Homin, lads?"

As the camp broke into raucous laughter, we gathered that commerce was their only interest.

Interviewer: "We write interviews, and if you answer our questions, think of the publicity you might generate for your sales"

The leader stopped laughing.

Shadow Runner: "Mmmh... Thinking about it... you are right! But make it fast, time is dappers. I don't want to miss a good deal because of you."

Interviewer: "Thanks. Can you tell us a little about you and your tribe?"

Shadow Runner: "My name is Ba'Roley Hathy. I'm the leader of this tribe, the Shadow Runners. We sell pretty much everything to everybody. We are all Trykers and as you can see, our symbol is a Tryker hidden in Jungle."

Interviewer: "When exactly did you settle here?"

Ba'Roley: "We created our first camp in 2505, after our release."

Interviewer: "Your release?"

Ba'Roley: "Yes... you know... release!"

Interviewer: "Explain it to us; we don't understand what you mean?"

Ba'Roley: "Well... we were slaves and slavery is a sickness that we must fight! Some people still hold to this sick philosophy to this day!"

Interviewer: "Er who?"

Ba'Roley: "I'm not going to talk about this."

Interviewer: "Ok, that is your decision. But then... You were slaves? of who?"

Ba'Roley: "Of the Matis Hamazans. They were using us... then one night the Masters of the Goo attacked the Hamazans and we took the chance to run away, taking Mektoubs and arms with us and hiding in the jungle undergrowth. So we came here and now we are our own masters."

Interviewer: "That's an interesting history Ba'Roley. And what are selling to who?"

Ba'Roley: "To everybody with the dappers. We sell them what they want."

Interviewer: "Even to the Hamazans?"

Ba'Roley: "Of course! There is a special price for them though..."

Interviewer: "But they don't want to exterminate you after your... common history?"

Ba'Roley began to laugh.

Ba'Roley: "No, they need us too much! Still I told you that my time is precious and I have spent enough of it on you. Just tell your readers that that we have the lowest prices."

Interviewer: "Erm well... Thanks for all the information!"

Ba'Roley: "It was a pleasure... Looking forward to all the business you will be generating for us!"

— interview with the Shadow Runners.

6.0.2 The Mektoub Affair

Part One

Of all the Trykers I have ever met, my uncle was by far the biggest. Of course, this greatness wasn't simply the fact of his height, which was actually modest as is normal for our folk. In fact his stature was even insignificant if we compared it to his inseparable friend Zhuangi. No, it was more from his largeness of spirit and his unrivalled powers of deduction. My uncle is, and will remain the hero of my childhood; his tales and deeds will always echo down my peaceful nights. Moreover, there is not a single place on Atys which does not hold fond memories of him. . .

But all great Homins have to begin one day, even when they were unknown and unheralded for their skills. Uncle Mac'leaffy was no exception to this, and he too had to show to the world what he was capable of. So began his very first investigation: the Affair of the Devious Mektoub.

In those days Mac'leaffy Roner was very young and his vision of the world was still limited to Fairhaven and its surrounding area.

- "Why should we roam far when our own landscape holds so much detail and so many mysteries to solve?"

Thus were his words to everybody who vainly tried to goad him into a sense of adventure.

- "Each mote of dust has his own history and somebody has to listen to all their tales"

Was his only reply. He had a passion for the infinitely small, for everything that was at the limit of the visible, unthought-of of by most Homins. This had meant that throughout his adolescence he had been a rather lonely figure, not having yet met his great friend Zhuangi; and only the notorious Tepsen and his crazy theories seemed occasionally to awake his curiosity. As for his love of justice, it might as well not have existed, because everybody who knew him before the affair dismissed him as an idle dreamer, who did not fulfill his role in Tryker society. . .

All was due to change on the stormy day of Thermis when this story starts. The sky had been overcast all day and the air had slowly become laden with humidity. Each second dragged longer and more heavily than the one before, and everyone was praying for the anticipated thunderstorm to break. . . The weather being the ally of the patient Tryker, the thunderstorm crashed into action at the end of the afternoon. The wind tore across the lakes as the lightning scrawled yellow over the dark skies and all sensible Trykers took to their homes to sit out the storm. Mac'leaffy Roner, however, was determined not to miss the free fireworks.

After some hours, the washed out skies cleared and people filed out into the streets to enjoy the fresh cool air. The red sun was low in the sky as night fell over the now calm waters, when a sudden rumour animated the capital into agitated life. A stable boy had begun shouting and crying that he had lost valuable animals when the storm was raging over the city. Speculation and theory sprang from every corner,

The Mektoub Affair had begun. . .

Part Two

Every Tryker in the neighbourhood rushed to the stable. They looked questioningly at their neighbours wondering who could be guilty of this heinous act. The stable boy continued to scream robbery at the top of his lungs, uncaring who he accused. As for the Mektoubs' owner, he was huddled with the guards, hoping vehemently that he would gain justice for this crime.

My uncle stood in the middle of the crowd, with a strange expression on his face as he gazed into nothingness. Looking at him, you would have thought him uncaring of all the fuss, as gradually a faint smile spread across his visage. Around him, conversations flowed and broke with strange theories and wild assumptions:

- "The wind must have carried away the Mektoubs!"

- "It was a big Kami who did it and teleported away! I'm sure that my explanation is correct – no you are quite wrong!"

Slowly the talk gelled and some names began to appear on peoples lips:

- "It's Aesken the merchant who has taken them! I saw him riding a mektoub during the storm earlier"

- "Aesken? But he is an honest homin! His prices are more than moderate. Besides, he has his own mektoub whereas Eoxy haven't got one"

- "Yes that's so true and yet I heard a rumour that he was also riding one. . . strange isn't it?"

- "Stop that innuendo! Eoxy is a good homin, simple and discreet. How can you imagine him doing such a thing? You would do better to look at Gether's activities. I don't trust him at all. And after all, he has been seen riding a mektoub too. What could he be doing during the storm?"

Speculation surged through the crowd, the Trykers enjoying the disturbance and the guessing games. Even the guards began to listen closely to the tide of surmise. . . . Ropan, the chief of guards, ordered that the three main suspects Aesken, Eoxy and Gether, together with the owner and the stable boy be detained for a closer examination.

But the result was as uninteresting as we could have guessed. The stable boy had only noticed that there were Mektoubs missing as the storm raged overhead. So he could have told his boss just half an hour after the last blast of wind. As a matter of course, the owner corroborated this version. And none of the three suspects confessed to being the thief.

It was at that moment that Mac'leafy Roner commenced his new vocation; that which was to bring him such success in life.

As it was obvious that no one was going to be able to resolve this case, he decided to come to grips with the story. Taking a small notebook from his pocket, he inspected the crime scene. He believed as always that his close friends the details would cry out to him, bringing him the explanation. Carefully he ran his hands lightly along the ground, as his eyes flickered here, there and everywhere; searching the one vital clue. He stood serene, an island of calm in a lake of turmoil, unconscious and uncaring that he looked a fool indeed.

He wrote: "Two dusty Mektoubs. One injured mektoub." His look was almost mischievous as with a smile and a flourish he added: "Aesken: guilty. Eoxy: guilty. Gether: guilty."

And yet, Roner knew that he hasn't found the real culprit... not yet. He mulled over all the conflicting stories he had heard. But of course!

Now he only needed one last, but by no means least, proof.

Part Three

One, two, three Mektoubs; as he gazed over them, my uncle couldn't stand still. Two were dust laden and one was lame. Mac'leaffy walked frenetically around them, tracing circles of his passing in the dusty ground. He could count and recount the basic facts in his head, but nothing changed and the missing spark of awareness refused to come. He could almost feel his head throbbing with the knowledge that some obscure detail was eluding his grasp. Aesken, Eoxy, Gether... one two three. As he was thinking aloud, everyone began to look at him curiously.

- "He must have lost his mind – not that there was much there to lose" was the popular consensus. Suddenly, a small child appeared through the curious crowd. His eyes sought the unconscious speaker and it was almost as if he understood the turmoil that was raging through him. Cautiously the lad approached and tapped my uncle on the leg. Mac'Leaffy stopped his restless wandering, as rigid with surprise he faced the toddler.

- "Four?" added the small one, calmly joining in the rote session.

- "Four!" cried my uncle with such a joy that the child ran off scared. It was as simple as that!" cried my uncle with such a joy that the child ran off scared. It was not a case of seeing what was there in front of him, but searching rather for what was missing. The details often confused him like this until he got used to seeing their patterns, and the traces of what was not.

Immediately he ran to the stableboy and tried to extract the truth from him by looking at him straight in the eyes

- "How many Mektoubs are you missing?"

- "Erm, four" was the response, as he asked himself nervously where all this was leading.

Four! He was approaching the goal. He questioned further – "It's nice stock that you have there! How many animals are there in total?"

- "Twenty five" answered the stableboy mechanically...

One, two, three, four... twenty four. My uncle had his proof at last. Each and every Homin who witnessed that scene will testify that it was at that moment that my uncle truly came into his greatness.

He walked slowly towards Gether, having regained his composure.

- "An innocent homin does not have to take the blame for a theft, my friend." he told him, all the while watching his impassive visage.

- "Why take this mektoub if it was to give it back?" he mused, considering every word.

Gether finally conceded a response "We prefer to keep our convictions to ourselves."

Mac'Leaffy went then to Eoxy. Eoxy, eaten by fear and guilt, looked like one who was living in his own nightmares... "I believe in your innocence. But for the others to believe me, I must know your secret. I will guard it, of course..." Eoxy was on the verge of collapse, but in a last effort he whispered something

to my uncle. I never knew precisely what was said; only that it was an old story of love and betrayal

Finally, my uncle walked over to Aesken, but had no further questions. He already knew everything. . .

What happened next is very confused in my mind and it may be that in my childish innocence I misunderstood some of the nuances. My uncle talked a long time with the Tryker authorities and it transpired that the stableboy was the real culprit. Aesken, Eoxy and Gether had all made individual mistakes, but none of them were guilty of theft.

It seemed that the stable boy had gone out to count his Mektoubs at the height of the storm and seeing that three were missing, had panicked. Taking a mount, he rode off after them, but the sharp peal of the thunder had made his mount throw him and run off. Dejectedly, he returned home, and not wishing to admit his losses, cried thief.

He was not to know that the missing mounts were quietly returned, after all.

The famous “Mektoub affair” was thus resolved, changing my uncle’s life forever. It even had an impact on me, leaving me with a distrust of merchants that I hold to this day. Having heard, sometime later, my uncle asking Aesken to take his injured mektoub and give back the one he had taken, probably compounded this. And to be honest with you . . . it’s hard to not to be involved when in your childhood it was you who uttered that pivotal word: “Four”

— the investigations of Mac’leaffy Roner.

6.0.3 The Memoirs of Kedgy Be’Cauny

As Hominity ages and slowly becomes time-worn, the weight of months and years eventually takes its toll. Even the most powerful, the bravest themselves among us cannot ward off this tragic destiny. Sooner or later, time wins the terrible fight.

There was one Homin that I would have given much to see to live longer, a Homin whom I could have loved but who seemed to care more about all living Homins than everything else on Atys. I would gladly have given my life to bring him back.

My Master will always be, for me, the one that we should thank for this new world. Without his tenacity and his gallantry, I would not even be here to write these words. Neither an emperor nor a king was he, but only a Fyros; only a Homin. That doubtless, is why fickle Atys has forgotten he who once was my master.

Stories rarely concern ordinary Homins, even if this one was called the Surveyor of the Rainbows and even the Navigator of the Stars. But who remembers what our world was like in those distant days? Most of those who travel around Atys do not even know what a rainbow is. It would take time and patience to explain our life : the leaving without hope of a return, the blind trust in an irrational hope, those chill days snuggling up to each other in the darkness as

we hid from the invisible enemy, the final bravery for taking again that road which led to elsewhere. . .

All that struggle and hardship to find, after three long years that seemed to last an eternity, Coriolis' fields. All that toil to earn the new beginning, to rebuild and to strive and to be forgotten in turn; to be nothing more than a legend, a fireside tale. My master never lived to see how his work has ended up.

Of his great art, his reading of the stars, his caution and skill in extreme danger, he has left us almost nothing. Except for me, there must be only Deutheus Xaphaan who is still alive, if I can trust the last travelers who dare to walk in the deep lands of Atys, and with whom I can talk sometimes.

Deutheus is so strong! How could she still live in the light! I wonder if she has found a place in this new world. As for me, the simple sight of Atys' surface brings me back memories that are simply too painful. Here, my life seems to have a sense and a purpose. I help people in need, rescuing the unlucky and the foolhardy alike from danger. . . Who could know the Road of the Umbra better than me? Even the Pyromancers, who finally adopted me, rarely leave their village. Remaining here is the only way I have discovered to relive and act upon the teachings of my Master.

Time wipes out slowly our footprints on Atys. . . What remains from what we once were? Who remembers the Homin that was Rydon? Homins leave us in death, and the things that they have made will equally decay with the long years' turn.

My master, however, will always cast his rainbow shadow on Atys as long as I endure to keep alive what he once was, and that great deed that he performed for all Homins. . .

— as memorized by Kedgy Be'Cauny.

6.0.4 The Legend of the Blue Ocyx

Alervinda was a huntress, as were her parents, her grandparents and their ancestors before. She had grown up with the necessity of killing but with an almost unlimited reverence for life in addition, based upon the knowledge of death. She would never kill an animal without good reason, never destroy a life just for fun. . . that was her way of life and how she wanted to live in years to come.

Now, however, there was this task she was appointed to. . . and the thought of fulfilling it was laying heavily on her heart. She was told to kill the Blue Ocyx, and, Ma-Duk, for no reason but the order of this old witch. Indeed Ocyx were aggressive and hence enemy to Hominkind, but they never attacked Homins as long as they stood out of the herds' domain.

For more than three hours she had been sitting in the Canyon where she intended to conjure the Ocyx, who was a mighty spirit. The horn with the subtle tracings was lying across her hands. More than once she had actually lifted it to her lips, but something kept her from casting the call. Was it because of the stories her grandmother had told her about a blue Ocyx being the lord of all the other Ocyx on Atys, with a skin blue as the lakes of Aeden. . . was it the hot, whispering wind, or the voice of Ma-Duk himself?

She stood up, opened her bag and threw a piece of bread towards her yubo, which sat patiently next to her.

Suddenly she heard the hoarse barking of a gingo... and as she looked to the north she saw a young Fyros huntress together with an equally young and bumbling Ocyx, fighting against four gingos.

Within a glimpse she realized that both were in a hopeless situation. She hesitated just a second and in the next she was running towards the fighting, and commanding her yubo to join in she attacked the strongest gingo. It was a short, clean fight.

The young Fyros was only slightly wounded but in her arms she held her dying Ocyx. Alervinda bent down, and indicated to the girl that the Ocyx was beyond any help, but the Fyros, with tears in her eyes, was not listening; rather shouting a name over and over again while petting the blood stained fur of her Ocyx. Seeing the love and deep mourning displayed, Alervinda came to a decision. She put her hand on the girl's shoulder, causing her to stand up with questioning look on her face. She pointed towards the Ocyx herd, standing dull in the evening sun, and giving an encouraging look to the Fyros, she lifted Ma-Duks horn to her lips...

From the shadows of the Canyon, majestic and dignified in his appearance, came the giant Blue Ocyx. Gracefully he bowed to Alervinda before he faced the young Fyros huntress.

- "You, little one, have fought well and lost your fellow. From now on it should be known that you are under my protection and never again will need to fight alone."

Then he once more faced Alervinda.

- "Huntress, you have shown great wisdom. Through my death you would have served no one but this old Homin, who never meant for anything good. Death and destruction would have come towards the burning desert as it has happened before. But now I may serve you and help in the fighting against the evil. But know: Never I shall help you against my own kind if they are attacked without reason. Then my protection of your people shall pass and change to hate and revenge and you will be doomed indeed."

He seemed to shrink and turn paler and a shadow flew to the young Fyros, engulfing her completely. Fixed to the spot, Alervinda had merely stared without words, but now she looked at the huntress carefully in a new light. She had after all come through this abominable canyon unchallenged. Why hadnt Alervinda noticed those bright blue eyes before? Thoughtfully, she turned the horn in her hands. Then a smile came to her face and she bowed into the direction of the little huntress.

— anonymous author.

6.0.5 When Jena Comes

There appears to be a new ballad floating in the air around the Karavan lands - our reporter has obtained an approximate transcript, reproduced here for our

readers. What this means, we can only attempt to guess, if indeed it has any more depth than a song to lull the children to sleep. . .

When Jena Comes
There will be light and laughter,
There will be joy and peace,
Atys will shine ere after
Crying and hate will cease
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Homins will sing her praise
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Her Sisters lead the way
For Jena killed the Dragon,
Jena brings hope from afar
One day she will fly again,
Take us all to distant star
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Homins will sing out loud
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Her Sisters stand so proud.
The goddess made all Atys green
A gift of grace to Homin kind,
And under root and over tree
Her glowing light of hope did shine
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Homins will kneel and pray
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Her Sisters mark the way.
Jena, now we cry to you each day
Across the hollow void of space and time
Return, forget not hominkind we pray
And send the Sisters to us, as a sign.
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Homins will hide their sight
Oh yes, when Jena comes
Her Sisters blaze with light.
— transcript of the poem "When Jena Comes".

6.0.6 A Very Special Drink

At some point during the last few days, an observant Homin may have overheard the following chit chat in Pyr Tavern.

Lydix the Barman and an attractive red-clad Fyros lady were having a quiet but heated conversation. On the ground, all around the lady in red lay several Bags full of Yubo-leather Drinking-Tubes. In her right hand she held a small wooden cup which she filled with a brownish liquid from one of the tubes.

- "This my friend, is Anichios Mead." she said, handing him the half filled cup. "A Tryker specialty, from somewhere in the Lakelands."

Lydix took the proffered cup and gave a tentative sniff, his forehead wrinkling slightly.

- "Hmhmh... Smells like honey, herbs and something else..." carefully he sipped a mouthful of the liquid and let it roll around his tongue. The unknown lady watched him intently as he tasted the beverage..

- "Interesting. It tastes warm and soft. Spicy but not too much. - Pretty good actually. - Just where was it made again? I have not heard of this 'Anichios Mead' until now?"

With a small nervous gesture the Fyros smoothed her fiery, unruly hair down and a slightly frozen smile appeared on her face.

- "I'm so glad you like it. How many Tubes do you want?"

- "Are you avoiding my question?"

- "I'm not avoiding anything at all." A look of indignation shot across her face. "I'm just so happy that you like my product and I'm absolutely sure your guests will like it too. So, how many of these Tubes to you want to buy again?"

She bent down and with a small grunt heaved one of the bags filled with mead-tubes onto the counter. Lydix gaze was drawn to her slender form and he quickly averted his eyes. He knew well about these female sales tactics. But he would not let himself be distracted.

With an angry look he asked again:

- "Just tell me where and how is it made? It could well contain something unpleasant, so unless you tell me I won't buy anything from you. You can grease your hair with it if you want too."

Surprised by his outburst the Fyros looked at Lydix. "How?", but she caught herself just in time and murmured.

- "What an amazing guess; hair is indeed the charm."

Now it was on Lydix to be surprised. "What?"

With a sigh the Fyros in red leaned over the counter to speak into Lydix's ear. Once again he almost fell victim to her charms and the medium Fyros Armor...

- "This drink has its own little story. A legend if you will. You'd better not let any of your customers hear this."

Lydix nodded wearily. "Shoot."

"There once was a Matis Smugglers Captain in the lakelands. His Name was Piro Anichio, and he was the grandfather of the recent captain. It is said that whilst he was a pretty vain guy, not unusual for a Matis, he was also a very good salesman, or he would never have made it to become the Smugglers' Captain. His family having fallen on hard times due to a frenzied Kitin attack on their prized vineyard; he was forced into becoming a freebooter. Accustomed to a better lifestyle, he never let go his vanity and remained obsessed with his hair and his good looks. He had a special ointment for his hair, passed down from his grandmother's side of the family that he rubbed in to give it that special shine he so rejoiced in. And although his men often laughed behind his back, they were loyal to him, for he was a fair and just Captain.

One very hot day in the lakeland, when the Sun was parching the beaches around the hideaway of the Pirates, Anichio rested in the sun's rays applying his special hair lotion made from his grandmother's recipe of honey, special herbs, animal fats and water from a hidden fount on the family lands."

Lydix face began to show a bit of concern.

- "As he stepped out into the baking sun it wasn't long before the first bugs arrived. He swatted at them, for they were a customary annoyance on such a hot day. A few moments later unfortunately he had the misfortune to pass by a beehive hidden in the bushes near the hideout. As you can imagine the Bees were pretty busy on such a hot day and they found the good-smelling thing wandering by their home an unmissable treat."

Lydix grinned in appreciation.

- "Well, under the roaring laughter of his men he ran back into his cottage and doused his head in a barrel of water standing inside. So angry was he that, cursing his grandmother, he threw the small keg of ointment right into the barrel and forgot all about it while one of his men treated his swollen face."

A mirthful smile drew over Lydix face.

- "A few days later the pirate band returned weary and sunburned to the security of their homes. One of the men entering the cabin first noticed a pleasant smell emanating from the barrel in the corner. He had no knowledge of what was inside and took a cup of it outside the hut and drank thirstily. Gradually, word spread about the delicious new drink the captain was brewing. When he discovered what they were all drinking Anichio realised what must have happened as the ointment dissolved in the water and the mix fermented into an unusually good drink in the hot summer temperatures.

He saw his chance and took it. And, as they say, the rest is history."

She leaned back and smiled knowingly at Lydix, who broke out into a loud laugh and patted her on the shoulder.

- "Well told, young lady. And a good story to boot. Alright, I'll buy the whole lot and I'll even help you getting it into the cellar."

With that he stepped around the bar and opened the door down into the cool cellar.

- "And yes you are right. It's better not to tell the customers about it." he winked at her. As they carried the heavy bags down the stairs their laughter echoed in peals from the cool wooden walls.

A nosy Homin might now have the unique chance of sneaking up to the bar and maybe sampling a free taste of this special brew from the abandoned tube and the half-filled cup standing on the counter. Whilst doing this he may also notice the label made of heavy parchment dangling from a thread on the cork.

On it there is an exquisite drawing depicting the dashing figure of a Matis. A pistol and a saber are pushed through his belt; there is a tube very similar to the one in the room in his right hand, and a small keg in his left. His hair is matted to his head by sweat or water, his head is surrounded by small black dots. Behind the figure stands a wooden barrel.

In equally fine handwriting the legend is written beneath the feet of the figure:

- "Captain Anichios mead. Traditionally made to an old family recipe!"
— anonymouns author.

6.0.7 The Circle of Darkness

Part One

This is not a tale of love or happiness or peace,
But one of death and murder in the name of science.
Mayhap murder lacks the proper sense,
Rather, a Homin life is changed for aye
As power heeded not the price to pay. . . .

Galhara, was a young Fyros, who had been blessed by Ma-Duk not only with a well-formed body and a good-looking countenance; but also with a lively spirit. Galhara lived near the southern gate of Pyr where she traded as a merchant, leading, on the whole, a comfortable and quiet life. Additionally, being a loyal follower of the Kami, she was well-liked, and given many privileges in her home town. She had free access to the senate meetings, as she was on good terms with several high-ranking politicians of the empire.

On a day like any other, as the birds were singing and the gingos howling in the wind, there was a noisy debate in the senate, with the final outcome that it was decided to keep Galhara away from any future senate meetings for security reasons. This would have been unremarkable, except that immediately after; she disappeared without a trace.

At first, there were rumors amongst the people that Galhara had been killed for political reasons, which later, however, turned out to be false. The senators swore before the emperor, who had taken charge of the situation personally, that they had never murdered anyone, nor hired someone else to have anyone murdered, and so the rumours gradually dissipated.

With increasing frequency, however, the neighbors began to talk of strange shadows they claimed to have seen behind Galhara's windows, and immediately new rumours appeared. "She is experimenting with forbidden magic" or even "she withdrew herself with her lover" were the most often heard. Even a person so valued in a city like Pyr can quickly find their name blackened in this manner.

What really happened back then, nobody really cared to find out. The people actually preferred to have something to gossip about.

Galhara awoke in a dark room. She was naked and her body felt slimy. Surrounding her there was bubbling and occasionally there was a spark that let her see things that were probably never meant for the mortal eye.

- "She has woken up, master!" the voice sounded very submissive, almost frightened.

- "Good, take care of her. Clean her, and then get her new clothes."

These words were spoken in a voice full of hate, greed and all the evil of this world, a voice that made your hair stand on end. The darkness around Galhara did not allow her to make out movement or even any details of her surroundings. Nor could she place the sounds that reached her. She was having

a problem orientating herself, and indeed, just seconds after the words of evil it became even darker around her and she lost consciousness again.

When Galhara awoke again, she was dressed and clean. She was obviously lying in a tent. Light streamed in through small holes in the ceiling and touched her body. She looked down full of surprise. She was wearing the light armor of the Tryker people. Completely black, save the purple sleeves.

- "Do you like what you see?" the evil voice that she had heard before, asked her.

- "Where... where am I?", Galhara replied to the man's question.

He was a small man, a Tryker with a flat face and blonde hair, which was plaited with many knotty pigtailed. He, too, wore the noble armor of his people, in those same colours.

- "You are in the Grove of Umbra, in the camp of the Black Circle." The man replied calmly. "We found you in the sewers of Pyr. Dirty. A wonder that the rats hadn't started to gnaw on you yet, the way you stunk, Galhara."

- "You know my name? Where from?" Galhara asked full of surprise. She was more concerned, however, as to how she had supposedly got into the sewers of Pyr and why she had been brought here instead of the hospital.

The Tryker gave her a smile and explained to Galhara that she had to be patient before she would find out everything. She doubted his words, as she was right to do, but having no choice at that moment; she surrendered herself to her fate.

Part Two

- "Are you hungry?" the Tryker asked more kindly than one would have expected from him. It was impossible to tell if he was truly being friendly or if he simply was a very talented actor.

After a good meal – roasted Igara and boiled psycola sprouts – Galhara was returned to the tent in which she had awoken earlier. She had not been shown the way between the two tents. Her eyes had been covered with something gross and slimy for the trip.

Back in the tent, the Tryker with the light-colored hair was already waiting for her. He dismissed the guards after they had removed the strange mass from her eyes.

- "Excuse this procedure. This is the way we deal with all homins when we don't know if they're going to stay or leave us again." The voice no longer sounded evil, indeed, with every word it became more appealing and persuasive.

- "My name is Ba'Wity Codgan, I am the leader of the Black Circle." The Tryker bowed courtly and bid her to seat herself.

- "How did you get the idea, that I could possibly stay, honoured leader?" she asked with skepticism. She did so with a smile on her well-formed face. Her tone of voice however left no doubt that her words were more than sarcastic. There was a pause, while he watched her with sharp eyes. One could literally smell the tension between them. Not until he took his eyes off her and started fumbling with a few bottles, did the tension ease.

- "Well, many do stay, after they learn about our way of life and ideals." With these words, he handed her a glass and motioned for her to take a sip.

The color of the drink seemed very unusual to her. She took a smell of the blue liquid that also had a light red shimmer to it – almost violet. The liquid had a soft and sweet smell and so she carefully took a sip. Surprised by the pleasant taste, she immediately raised the glass to her lips again, and took an even greater swallow.

With a smile and another expression that Galhara could not interpret, Ba’Wity Codgan watched her. “So let me tell you about our goals”. He started a long monologue about the importance of research, but avoided all questions regarding the subject of this research. Also, he ignored all her questions about the financing of this research. Cogan was a very skilled speaker and Galhara was beginning to feel heavy headed with all this information after only a few minutes. As time passed, it became increasingly hard for her to think logically with her swimming head. That this could have been due to the drink she had earlier, failed completely to occur to her at the time. Indeed in only a few more minutes her senses left her and she collapsed onto her seat.

The Tryker rushed to the entrance of the tent, ordered the guards to remove the Fyros and sent for his deputy.

- “I did warn you.” were the first words of the deputy, as he rushed into the tent with long strides. “To make things worse, she is of no use for our research.”

- “Let this be of my concern” Ba’Wity Codgan answered. “We move to the next phase. Our last job brought us a nice sum of money.” The laughter that followed had less to do with humour than with evil. “I would have really liked to see the eyes of our fellow countrymen, widened in shock “ – here he spat with derision – “when he slumped to the ground despite all their fancy security measures.” Again, one could hear the ice-cold laughter. “But this here”, with this he pointed to a large, only half closed chest, in which one could see plenty of dappers, “this is also a nice payment. And SHE will have the honour to participate in the next phase of our research first.” The horrific laughter went on for a long time, ringing in the still night airs of Atys.

— a meeting between a Tribe Chief and a Homin.

6.0.8 Clandestine Attack

”They... they are everywhere! Please help us!” the young, injured Fyros, Xiari, implored as she stumbled, exhausted, into the safety of Pyr. The remaining Frahars that pursued her so closely had been quickly subdued by the Pyr guards when she reached Pyr’s fiery gate.

Wiping at her bloodied face, Xiari explained her situation. Her party of Fyros had left Thesos at the first light of dawn. For many long hours, they walked under the sweltering sky with no trace of shade nor hope of finding any. They sought to reach Pyr, the City of Sand, but as they pressed on toward their goal, their luck deserted them.

All of a sudden, from out of nowhere, the party was ambushed by a horde of Frahars! No-one knew where these primitive beings had come from, but it seemed like the Frahar had sprung upon them from the sand beneath their feet. Xiari could only watch as many of her companions died or were taken prisoner,

their fates unknown. Escape being her only option, Xiari ran for her life to get help for her captured, and likely doomed, companions. There was nothing else she could do.

Inside Pyr, a crowd had gathered to hear her story. A voice from the crowd shouted, "Fyros and friends of the Fyros gathered here! We must rescue these ill-fated travelers!"

Homins may speak of war, but when it comes to a common danger, they know that the sap of Atys runs through them all. The impromptu army swelled as volunteers appeared from everywhere and fell in step with the rest, side by side. There were the Fyros of course, but also the Matis, the Tryker and the Zoraï. Passengers, traders and travelers all came to save those prisoners who still breathed. Everyone knew that even a small wound could be lethal in the desert heat and so they traveled quickly and with purpose. Although some had to stay in Pyr, those who went to recover the fallen companions would make certain that these Frahar would be well-repaid for their cowardly attack.

The rescuers crossed the distance in a huge cloud of desert sand raised by their passing, in numbers so great that they could not be counted. Many relentless hands unsheathed their weapons and readied their magic as they had been trained to do as the children of Atys. They would not be defeated! They pressed forward, exterminating gingos and Frahars alike, leaving many bloodied corpses behind them.

"A survivor! There is a survivor!" He was the first, and at seeing him, the homins of Pyr cheered!

As luck would have it, that day, they found more survivors, six in total, dispersed throughout the region. The united force hunted the Frahars to the very depths of the most remote caves in the desert. The long column of homins raised their many weapons together and advanced with purpose into the caves. Numerous homins fell or were wounded that day, not from foolishness but in the spirit of cooperation and friendship. This is how the people of the desert live and long will they continue.

Young Xiari felt dread in the pit of her stomach as she waited in Pyr. There had been no news. How many remained? Who would she never see again? She waited silently in anguish, but when she saw the first familiar face, relief flooded through her. Despite the many companions who had fallen, she cried tears of joy for those friends who had been returned to her.

That night, the Thesos travelers sat around a large fire in Pyr and contemplated the stars. There were final words spoken for lost friends, tears shed, and reflections on life's lessons and the sweetness of revenge carried out. A simple day, but one which would remain forever in their hearts and minds as a reminder of the harsh realities of life on Atys.

6.0.9 An Ancient Conflict

"It is strange, really..."

"What?"

"This violent attack... why do these primitives take so many risks to come here? And how could the Karavan warn us of their approach?"

"Pooh! You know that they had to pass through the Prime Roots, so the Karavan could see them, and since the Matis are our allies and draw on the treaties, we have no choice!"

Fairhaven found the preparations difficult. There were too many misunderstandings about this unwanted war. It would be short, surely, just an anger to be subjugated and tranquilized, but what had happened exactly?

"They appealed to the Matis also, giving the impression that all this is happening just to bring us closer!"

"Rah! Hush up you! Look to your weapons, they are blunt! Do you want to come back in one piece or not?!"

The debates had lasted for two long days without anyone knowing exactly what was going on. When a decision was reached at last, we chose an emissary to travel to Yrkanis. No-one was really surprised by this 'happy alliance', or at least, like me, no-one dared to ask questions. Time has passed since our people freed themselves from the Matis, but our history remains stained by them.

Nevertheless, when the need arises, one should not refuse help, undesirable as that help might be.

"Master? I received some strange information from the lands to the south. The Goo is surely spreading!"

"We know. They informed us and will speak to us very soon. Prepare your weapons, our curse begins again."

"Forgive me, but I am not sure I understand..."

"Understanding will be subsequent, nothing serious. Dispatch a messenger to Pyr. The recent agreements require implementation."

"Very well, Master."

As I bowed and left the residence of the elder, I found myself lost in my thoughts. All around me, the young were already shouting for battle but no one really knew against what. It seemed impossible to imagine the Goo encroaching on our lands. Who had informed the Sages? The Grand Kami? If that was the case, the evil is very great... let us hope that we can repair our errors.

"Fu Jih-Ko! I need your help..."

"What with?"

"Stay with the young ones as they prepare for battle..."

"So it remains unavoidable?"

"I still do not know. Excuse me, the time is pressing and my way is long."

"Where do you go?"

"To Pyr..."

No answer came, other than perhaps a greater fear. I understand that if indeed such an alliance becomes mandatory, the outcome could be lucky. We walk towards a new time together in which we shall build... but, perhaps it is still too early...

Who are they? Why must one run towards destiny without understanding? Zoraï or Tryker, Fyros or Matis: even with so much hatred between them, they face a similar battle. Where does the blame lie? Is it in anger or even in illness? Who created this conflict? Is there any hope for those who want such conflict?

Alliances can be powerful, striking at evil without understanding where the evil truly lies, but this is much more than the conflict between Homins; it is the conflict between those they respect and fear, the Kami and the Karavan. One must surrender the mind to follow the Powers in faith without questioning. In such comfort, someone else is always bad and fault is deferred. The Karavan are responsible for the appearance of the Goo, the same Goo which has poisoned Atys in these times, but the Kami in their anger push the primitives to take revenge on Homins. Who can be believed? Is this a simple quarrel between them or is conflict their true wish for Atys?

Days passed without explanation, each side blaming the other. After many fierce battles, the Homins found their way to the Prime Roots. Sap spread among the shouting and pain, but in the hours that passed, a common ground was found. Although the Karavan and the Kami were both present, this battle being much more theirs than ours, it was we who fought to the end.

In the end, all were slaughtered, whoever they were. Whether primitive tribes or tribes corrupted by Goo, our blades and sap descended on them without remorse. Enemies? Perhaps. Who knows?

However, on this day, Fyros, Trykers, Matis or Zoraï, all fought back to back, aided at times by cries of hatred against a common foe.

Losses were heavy but the Goo was stopped, allowing Atys to return to its repose. Although none would say it, it was accepted that the alliance of the Zoraï and the Fyros was the more valorous, and the Kami came to thank them. Disappointment and resentment washed through the Tryker and the Matis, however, for although they fought well, after the battle, the Karavan left without even a thank you.

Some days later on Atys, in fear of the future, lines take shape, even if Homins do not desire it. The ancient quarrels resume with the days of peace upon us.

6.0.10 Bloody Dusk

And so it was planned that we would meet in the Nexus and we quickly formed our ranks. The Kami and the Karavan, the allies of Hominkind against the Kitin, had each called on their homin supporters to find a mysterious artifact. We were in a deadly race that we could not afford to lose.

I trembled as I followed my companions, fighting off a desperate sense of isolation despite the crowd. The mood was electric and spirits high as we found ourselves being led into danger. We knew that we would do battle with the Kitin in our mission to reach our objective. Our help was needed and this expedition would likely cost us our lives... what could be so important?

We marched on, axes on our shoulders, proud to fight for a worthy cause. I was about to enter my first great battle!

We joined with the main camp in preparation for the fight. Soon we found some kitin and the battle was on. The first skirmishes were well-fought and boosted our confidence, but these kitin seemed different... I'm no expert, but these did not behave normally. They appeared to be hypnotized perhaps, possibly by the very artifact we were sent out to retrieve. We wondered about this but the Kami told us not to concern ourselves and urged us on.

Our concern about the kitin was quickly forgotten. The sound of Karavan troops, our competitors, could be heard in the distance and we had to hurry. Still in our ranks, we headed out towards the distant lights at the center of the Nexus. We broke through far more easily than I had imagined we could and I knew that it was only because of the many experienced soldiers around me.

I felt myself becoming more and more confident and my swings became more accurate, more deadly. In my excitement, I even charged ahead on my own! I knew that I was being rash, but it was then, in that moment, that I felt the other soldiers had accepted me. I was no longer just a follower, but a warrior! I was one of them!

We fought long and hard. Rage and blood lust took over and we fought relentlessly until we encountered something new: a strange Kitin, beautiful and deadly, with wonderful blazing colors. She slaughtered the men around me and I was hard-pressed to avoid her attacks. Even in the heat of battle, I could not help but admire her terrifying beauty. She was huge, far larger than the other kitin and far more powerful. Her screams were deafening. We fought as best as we could but it was in vain. We could not win. We attacked relentlessly and yet we fell, one after another, to her vicious onslaught.

And then it was over.

I do not know how I got here. Clearly it was a miracle of Atys and the will of Ma'Duk that I survived at all.

It was a bloody night, a battle against death itself, but it was the Karavan, not us, who emerged victorious. Our efforts, those of the Kami and the friends of the Kami, had been in vain. The Karavan, those foreign traitors to Atys, had remained and recovered the artifact. All our efforts, all those lives ruined and lost, were for nothing.

The Karavan had stolen the artifact from the Kami and we would make them pay. It would not be long before open war was declared, but in the end, the only victims would be the homins of Atys.

6.0.11 The Kami of the Lost Souls

Part One

The rain suddenly came down even harder, and lighting flashed across the evening sky. Lipsen ran towards the nearest tent to find shelter. She lifted the heavy leather curtain that protected the entrance. As she had expected, the tent was empty, except for a tiny fire grate; the occupants, whoever they were, had long since deserted the place. The abandoned camp was like a ghost town. The young Tryker shivered.

She set down her boomer rifle and her hunting bag against one of the wooden arches, then quickly cleaned the grate so she could light a flickering fire. A peaceful warmth began to fill the yurt. Lipsen slipped off her tashok armor and relaxed, silently thanking the Goddess for giving her this refuge. Outside, the grumble of the storm rolled like a war drum. The shadows cast by the slight flames in the fireplace seemed to dance to the rhythm of the rain that hammered down on the tent, furious that it wasn't invited inside. Lipsen retrieved a piece of dried fish from her bag and chewed on it distractedly. Her golden eyes stared off into the void, while she pondered her reason for being in the forest of Nexus.

Lipsen Be'Laury had braved many dangers in order to meet the Kuilde chief. The tribal guards had been surprised to see a young Tryker hunter approach the entrance of their camp, carrying a torbak carcass. It was a gift for Mithus Xalon, she had said proudly. She wanted to join the ranks of the Kuilde, in order to serve the Goddess Jena and her disciples of the Karavan. The guards had laughed at the boldness of this little homin. Who did she think she was? To become a member of the tribe was an honor and a privilege that was granted to very few. But Hiang Sai-Ju, the host, had stepped forward and welcomed Lipsen. All homins who sought to serve the Goddess should be warmly welcomed. He suggested leaving the torbak with the tribal meatcutter, then offered to accompany the young woman to the chief's tent.

Lipsen followed Hiang Sai-Ju, walking under the shadow of the metal vessel that hovered over the camp. The green rays of a Karavan signal swept the surrounding area. A feverish atmosphere seemed to reign over the village. Hiang Sai-Ju explained that the Kuilde were at war against the Recoverers tribe, who were Kami worshipers. The Recoverers had attacked the camp the night before, stealing their precious sacred objects. They would surely destroy them, as a sacrifice to their demonic masters. They had to be recovered at all cost.

Lipsen finally found herself facing Mithus Xalon. The Kuilde chief was a tall Fyros with an impassive face. He examined the young Tryker from head to toe, and Lipsen felt herself redden all the way to the roots of her blond hair under this intense scrutiny.

- "So you want to join the Kuilde? Why?"

- "The most powerful agents of all the Karavan belong to your tribe. Your faith in Jena is unshakeable. My grandfather was one of your members, when your influence extended throughout the ancient territories. He died like many others under the kitins' stingers, during the Great Swarming. I want to reclaim my heritage and honor my ancestor. I want to serve the Goddess."

- "What can you contribute to our tribe? You seem very young to me."

- "I am an experienced hunter, despite my young age. I track all kinds of game, from peaceful armas to fierce bodocs. I track predators. I can imitate the cry of many different animals and I know the art of camouflage. I will hunt for the tribe. I will fight your enemies."

- "You seem to be very brave and determined. But these are only words. You must prove yourself, Lipsen Be'Laury."

- "I am ready. What must I do?"

- "For one season, you shall live in the forest of Nexus. If you are a huntress,

nature will provide all that you need. You shall not sleep among us but you shall be serving the Kuilde. Hiang Sai-Ju will tell you the tasks you are to carry out. Follow the way of light in order to be worthy of the Goddess.

Lipsen made a disappointed pout, which she quickly hid, bowing to Mithus Xalon. A whole season of waiting!

- "I shall do as you wish. I will prove that I am one of yours"

Several weeks had passed since this exchange with the Kuilde chief. Lipsen had accomplished several missions for Hiang Sai-Ju. She had explored the entire northern part of the region. She had hunted arma, yelk and even bolobi for their meat. She had defended herself against cuttlers, those carnivores whose striped hides are nearly invisible among the ferns. She had carefully avoided the bandits and gibbaïs that haunt the forest. Nexus was a dangerous land for imprudent travelers.

She had slept out under the stars, enjoying the mild early autumn weather. Lipsen was not afraid of solitude, but she still appreciated her brief stays at the Kuilde camp, when she came to bring the spoils of her hunting. The tribe still had not managed to recover the relics stolen by the Recoverers, despite several attempts. The Recoverers' goal was to "cleanse" Nexus of the Kuilde influence, in the name of the Kamis and their master, Ma-Duk. These fanatics had announced a great ceremony for the end of autumn, practically challenging their enemies to stop them from sacrificing these precious objects. Lipsen was horrified by the situation. It was difficult for her to understand these homins who had sworn to be faithful to the Kamis. The nature demons were twisted beings, with a disturbing appearance and who did not hesitate to kill without remorse any miners who were too industrious. She had met one of these spirits near Fairhaven. The horned creature had tried to lure her with words, but the young Tryker did not fall into the trap. Lipsen had mocked the Kami, making fun of its hesitant voice and ridiculous posture. The demon had not reacted, returning to its silent contemplation of a flower that waved in the breeze. Such inconsistent creatures cannot be trusted to direct the destiny of homins.

Lipsen began to explore the southern part of Nexus when the weather began to turn bad. The first downpours were soon replaced by violent storms, and the young Tryker longed intensely to be finished with her initiation period so she could be safe and dry inside a Kuilde tent. That is when she found the abandoned camp. It almost seemed as if Jena had taken pity on her and had sprouted this providential shelter directly out of the Bark.

The young Tryker sneezed loudly, sending the flames dancing in their grate. Oh, great, she thought - all I need is to get sick! She must not give in. The rain was still beating on the leather walls of the yurt. Lipsen wondered who might have built this camp here. Explorers, bandits, smugglers? And why had they fled? Maybe the kitins, who had been active in the region for a long time... These questions were running through Lipsen's mind. Then all of the fatigue that had accumulated throughout the day suddenly overwhelmed her, and she stifled a yawn. She had certainly earned a bit of rest. A few minutes later she was sleeping a light but restful sleep.

Lipsen awoke abruptly. The fire had gone out. The rain had stopped, and

snatches of voices reached her ears. She recognized the staccato cadence of the Zoraïs' speech. Squelching a sneeze, she slipped quietly to the entrance of the tent and gently lifted the leather curtain. There was a group of Zoraïs gathered around a campfire. With their faces lighted up by the flames, they looked like ghosts, with pale masks and large white armor made of willow. They were wearing crimson boots. Lipsen held her breath. She had recognized the colors of the Recoverers!

Part Two

Hidden inside the tent, Lipsen Be'Laury kept her eyes on the group of Recoverers. The night was black, but the tall silhouettes of the Zoraïs were perfectly recognizable in the light of the campfire. Their voices reached the young Tryker's ears; they were speaking in the common homin language, like all tribes that lived in Nexus.

- "... is expecting a new attack by the Kuilde. That's why Liangi Do-Vi left this morning for the Company of the Eternal Tree camp. He will be back tomorrow. He wants to confer with their war chiefs in order to form an alliance against the Karavan followers. If these crazies dare to show up, our two tribes will crush them like insect larvae!"

The Zoraïs laughed sarcastically. Lipsen clenched her hands around her boomer rifle, sniffing. If these villains were fewer in number, she would not hesitate to give them a good lesson in humility!

- "I heard talk that a Great Servant of the Kami will attend the Fallenor ceremony. It isn't every day that we get to sacrifice Kuilde relics; Ma-Duk will be satisfied. May he grant us his blessings!"

The Recoverers near the fire all chanted, "Praised be the Great Life Giver, and cursed be the name of Jena, Empress of the night!"

They then pounded their chests and began to sing a war song, while others began to set up a spit over the fire. They roasted a quarter arma and then shared the meat while blessing the Kamis for providing this food. They passed a gourd around.

Lipsen felt her stomach grumbling. The dried fish had done little to appease her appetite.

- "A few wild berries would be a nice addition to our meal," suggested one of the Zoraï with short hair, rising from his seat near the fire. "There are some nearby."

- "Good idea, Fa," said another. "But watch out for bad encounters like last time. We were afraid that raging gnoof was going to manage to take your crown jewels. That would be a tragedy for the Gai-Gun family and its future heirs!"

The other Recoverers laughed. The homin shrugged, then surveyed the surroundings. He moved away from the fire, with a bowl in one hand. He stopped near the tent where Lipsen was hiding, scanning the bushes.

The young Tryker carefully and silently let the curtain drop to a thin, bare crack and stayed as still as she could, listening with one ear. She could feel the blood rising in her temples and tried to calm the pounding of her heart. She told herself to imagine that she was stalking a prey, that she was accustomed to doing this. No need to panic!

After a seemingly endless moment, the sound of the Recoverer's boots seemed to move away.

Everything's all right, thought Lipsen, good fortune is still with the Trykers! But fate would have it otherwise.

Without warning, Lipsen felt an overwhelming tickle in her nostrils; in seconds, she felt like her nose was in a vise, as she clamped down hard on the urge. She sneezed.

Through the crack in the tent flap, she saw the departing Zoraï freeze, then turn back towards the tent.

She pulled quickly away from the crack as he turned, then listened as he retraced his steps and stopped in front of the flap.. Lipsen cursed herself for her clumsiness. Was she going to die for a sneeze? Because of a little chill? Hardly a heroic ending! A pause, then the Recoverer hailed his companions.

She heard the approaching footsteps of two more Zorai and the soft whissppp!, of tchai pistols leaving holsters.

Lipsen's mind raced. The image of the meat roasting over the fire, the dried fish, the prayers to the Kamis, the Zoraïs with their frightening masks, were all vying for her attention. How was she going to escape this? An old legend of her people came to mind: the story of the young Wiksie, the first homin to encounter a Kami.

Without thinking any further, Lipsen swallowed, then emitted a sort of sharp croak. She pronounced a few words in a distorted voice.

- "Kami hungry!"

Outside, the surprised Zoraïs stood still and exchanged baffled looks.

- "Kami, hungry!" Croaked Lipsen, more confidently. "Homins hard of hearing you are! Wild berries, bring me!"

Taken by surprise, the Recoverer holding the bowl turned towards the bushes and quickly began gathering some red berries. The other Zoraïs hesitated, then one of them finally took the initiative.

- "Oh, revered Kami, what type of spirit are you?" he asked carefully.

- "The Kami of the Lost Souls, so may you call me," she croaked in reply. "During the Fallenor's nights, I appear in this place. Terrible things have befallen here. Abandoned souls wander. Have you forgotten everything, homins?"

Lipsen had no clear idea what she was talking about. But the words of the would-be Kami seemed to trigger some specific memories among the Recoverers. Some of them made a sacred sign to protect themselves from misfortune.

The Zoraï finished gathering berries and came back to the tent.

- "Here are a few berries, O spirit of Ma-Duk."

The young Tryker thought for a moment. She recalled the legend of Wiksie once again, and another tale, a Zoraï legend, that spoke of the conversion of the jungle people to the illusory precepts of the Kamis.

- "These fruits of nature, you must share among yourselves," she finally replied. This way, by your faith, my hunger shall be appeased."

These words seemed to dispel the Recoverers' last doubts. They knelt and ate the berries, while praising the wisdom of the Kami. Lipsen thanked Jena; her strategy seemed to be working! Now all she had to do was to get the Zoraïs

away before they got too curious and asked to see the spirit. Could she get these gullible fools to all leave?

- "And now, you must leave this place. In this place, only the afflicted souls may linger. Here is death and torment for the living! Leave, leave!"

The homins stood up and gathered their belongings silently, but quickly. They threw a last look at the tent and its mysterious occupant. A few drops of rain were beginning to fall, landing on their white masks and looking like tears on their impassive faces. A bolt of lightning flashed over the abandoned camp. As if obeying a sign of wrath from the Kamis, the Recoverers disappeared into the forest.

Lipsen held her breath for long moments, until she was sure they were long gone, then breathed a sigh of relief before bursting out laughing. She had managed to fool the enemies of the Kuilde, but she knew she had better leave this place. Still laughing out loud at the trick she had managed to pull off, she quickly put her armor back on, adjusted her hunting bag and grabbed her boomer. She carefully lifted the leather curtain that covered the entrance to the yurt and peered about. It looked like the Zoraïs had really left. Lipsen emerged into the storm, surveyed the surroundings more carefully and then set off towards the North. She had to warn Mithus Xalon of a possible alliance among his enemies.

After climbing a small hill, she turned around to look again at the deserted camp. Her eyes rested on the outline of the tents that were awash with rain and another idea, a crazy idea, occurred to her.

Slowly, Lipsen smiled again; this was going to be good!

Part Three

- "Your plan is quite... unusual."

Mithus Xalon scrunched his eyes and thought. His face had a bluish tinge, colored by the glowing cube that lighted the inside of the tent. In Lipsen's mind, the Kuilde chief was practically a guardian of the Karavan, a being of masterfully restrained power. Sitting across from him, the young Tryker could barely conceal her anxiety. The Fyros truly impressed her.

- "But it might work, and the stakes are far too great for me to commit the error of excessive caution."

Lipsen felt an immense wave of pride well up inside. She was going to show the whole tribe what she could do!

- "Do you think you can do it alone?" Xalon asked, getting to his feet.

- "Yes," she replied, nodding and rising as well. "A whole army of warriors would do me no good in this plan." Although she was smaller than the Fyros, she felt confident in speaking so boldly to him.

- "That is not what I was thinking of," answered the Kuilde chief with a smile, as he opened a carved wooden box on the floor beside him. "The blessings of the Goddess are a kind of assistance that one cannot refuse."

The Kuilde chief held out a small object to the young huntress. It was a crystal with a rounded shape, as clear the water in the lakes of Aeden Aqueous, with its iridescent reflections.

- "This is a teleportation crystal," the leader said, handing it to her. "Break the crystal and you will be transported to a safe place." Lipsen bowed before the Fyros and thanked him respectfully.

- "Now I must prepare the tribal fighters, in case the Company of the Eternal Tree decides to lend its assistance to the Recoverers." He smiled softly again and laid a hand on her shoulder. "May the light shine on the perilous path that you have chosen, child of Jena." Lipsen nodded again, smiled, then left the tent.

In the late afternoon, the sun's rays could barely pierce through the clouds. Lipsen left the village carrying a large sack that contained all that she would need. She had to hurry to reach the abandoned camp before nightfall.

The moon was ensconced in the middle of the sky when the Zoraï saw the tents. A light drizzle was forming droplets of water on his tan-ko armor, like night-time dew. The Recoverer entered the camp, drew out of his bag the amber vase that he had taken from the foot of the sacrificial pillar and approached the yurt with hesitant steps.

- "Revered Kami of the Lost Souls, I have brought you this object as an offering, so it may be returned to nature in accordance with our customs."

He placed the vase before the entrance to the tent. A few minutes passed. Emboldened, the homin leaned towards the leather curtain in order to lift it.

Suddenly, a plant-like hand shot forth from inside the yurt to seize the offering. The recycler leapt up, crying out in surprise. Then a voice came from within the tent.

- "With this sacrifice, you shall receive the favor of the spirits. Your name is known to the Kamis, Fa Gai-Guan!"

The Zoraï recognized the strange voice of the Kami of the Lost Souls and fell to his knees, then prostrated himself on the ground.

- "Glory be to Ma-Duk, glory be to his Disciples!" he shouted with fervor.

- "You have faith," came the quiet reply. "A sacred mission you are worthy of accomplishing. Do you accept?"

Fa Gai-Guan lifted his head. He put his hand on his chest before speaking.

- "Yes! I am at your service, O Guardian of Atys!"

- "A greater sacrifice, the tormented souls demand," intoned the Kami. "Only then will they be granted rest. There are impious relics held by your tribe. Let Liangi Do-Vi, the Recoverers' chief, bring them here before dawn. My messenger you shall be, Fa Gai-Guan! Go. Now!"

The homin jumped to his feet then flew like the wind to the Northeast. He seemed to be filled with a fervent zeal and nothing could have stood in his way.

After a few moments, in the tent, Lipsen slipped the amber vase into her sack with a chuckle; everything had gone exactly as planned. She carefully removed her tashok gloves. The camouflage of moss and twigs had convinced the awestruck young Zoraï, but now she now had a few hours to perfect her disguise, before the other Recoverers returned with her "disciple."

The young Tryker feverishly set about her work.

Darkness still swallowed the first tentative rays of sunlight when the Recoverers turned up again at the camp. They came in a large group, guided by Fa Gai-Guan. In the midst of the warriors marched Liangi Do-Vi. His bald head

looked like a threatening skull decorated with mortuary paintings. He brandished an imposing kanka mace. Two homins followed him closely, each one carrying a closed willow basket. The Zoraïs gathered in front of the yurt. Fa Gai-Guan got down on his knees and spoke.

- "Your will has been done, O Kami of the Lost Souls! This very night, we have brought to you the most powerful Liangi Do-Vi, supreme guide of our tribe. Praised be his name!"

The Recoverers' chief stepped forward.

- "Spirit of Nature," he prayed aloud, "grant us the privilege of beholding you with our eyes. Then our hearts will be filled with your presence." He spoke with calm assurance and just a touch of cynicism. His prudent attitude was in contrast to the mystical exaltation of Fa Gai-Guan; he wanted to see this mysterious Kami with his own eyes before giving up his precious cargo.

The moment of truth had arrived.

A form leaped forth from the tent, slamming back the flap with a loud snap! The Zoraïs, startled, stepped back. Despite his small size, the Kami of the Lost Souls made an impressive spectacle. He crouched, like the salamander spirits of the desert, his moss-covered body bristling all over with branches. His head resembled a fish of the forest oceans. Huge autumnal ferns adorned his back, like sylvan wings.

- "Good you have been, to respond to my command," cried the Kami, in a high-pitched voice. "A sacrifice for the lost souls! Did you bring the objects taken from our enemies?"

The two porters with the baskets moved forward and laid their precious cargo on the ground, then stepped back, bowing all the while.

- "Here are the Kuilde relics," Liangi said. "Just from their appearance, there can be no doubt that they are from the Karavan." The Recoverer reached into a basket and displayed two metallic cubes covered with strange inscriptions.

- "These sacrilegious objects to nature shall be returned!" exclaimed the Kami, adding, "And so, by this offering, the homins who have died here may return to their long path to the happiness of Ma-Duk!"

The Kami accompanied his words with strange signs that only he understood, then spoke again.

- "Now go you must!" it said, pointing back the way they had come. "The living are unbearable company for the dead. May the Great Life Giver bless you!"

Rather than turning and leaving, Liangi Do-Vi laid his hand on one of the cubes. "O Guardian of Atys, we would like to watch the sacrifice. By bringing you these relics, have we not earned this privilege?" The Kami jerked with surprise and gave him a look that seemed to say, "Who is this homin to challenge my authority?"

Under her plant-covered helmet, Lipsen was sweating and not from the heat. This damn Zorai seemed determined not to leave and she could feel her costume starting to come apart at the seams, just a little bit. If she didn't get them out of here fast, it might come apart and then the fat would be in the fire. Her fat, their fire.

No choice, she thought; time to kick it up a notch.

- "For your accomplishments, you shall be rewarded," she croaked approvingly, then hardened her voice into a command. "But the offering must be made by me alone. So it is demanded by the spirits of this place. Now go!"

The Recoverers looked at one another, troubled, but their chief held his ground.

- "We have always served the Great Life Giver loyally," he stated, standing his ground. "The sap of my tribe has been spilled to obtain these relics. We deserve to be present. We do not fear either the dead or the living!"

The Kami remained silent. He seemed to be thinking, then finally spoke again.

- "Loyal servants, you have proved yourselves. I shall grant you this favor. Stand back, homins, lest the recovery take your life!" he cried, waving his arms.

The Zoraïs quickly took a few steps backward as the Kami approached the cubes, murmuring incomprehensible words. In his right hand, crystalline particles shimmered, sparkling with rainbow colors.

Liangi Do-Vi's eyes narrowed; where had he had seen lights like this before? It seemed familiar... Yes! In the hands of Karavan followers! He instinctively jumped towards the relics...

Too late. Scooping up the sacred relics against his chest, the Kami of the Lost Souls crushed the crystal and disappeared in a gale of laughter as bright as the rising sun.

Lipsen Be'Laury was invited to join the Kkilde at the end of the autumn. Over the years, she became the tribe's greatest huntress, the stuff of legends.

Nowadays, she ranges throughout the northern parts of the forests of Nexus, tracking wild beasts to help feed her clan. She avoids wandering towards the south and has never, ever, returned to the abandoned camp.

Maybe she won't return out of fear of meeting a real Kami of the Lost Souls.
— about the adventures of a young Karavaneer in the Nexus.

6.0.12 The Followers

Part One

- "Its quite a sunny day today isn't it Chao-Li?"

- "Yes, it's a perfect day to set up this new stable here. Pass me the hammer will you Feier'an"

- "Here you go, good thing that you are the tall one here right, haha"

- "Well, I am a Zoraï as tall as they come."

- "Yeah, and I am just the sneaky Tryker, I know I know."

- "Yeah, sneaky alright, hold the plank still so I can nail it here will you."

It was a warm day this summer day. Even the animals around them seemed to be affected by this sudden heat, but for them it was also welcome. They could spend some time to continue to build the stables, which was long overdue since the weather had been bad recently, and it would also do good for their crops as the rain had nearly drenched their small meadows. But it seemed as

the tide of luck had finally swept the other way around and brought them some good weather.

It was not long ago since they had left the old homes in order to find a new place to call home, a safer place for their children to grow up. A place where everyone could get old together and hold found memories of days passed.

It was pure accident that had placed them together, these two families; one of Tryker and one of Zoraï. Through the interference of a Kitin they had been molded together in friendship and trust.

It had been a rainy day a bit over a year ago as they had met near a tunnel's exit out through a cave. Not more then the courteous greeting had been their first impression, but that was to change quite rapidly. Not far outside the entrance to the cave from which they emerged there had been a Kincher roaming around, and as they came unknowing of its presence it had caught their scent. And set out for the easiest target; their children.

Nih'na and Feuor were young then, so young that they had not seen any of the Kitin previously. And when one came running towards them they had not seen its dangers, but seen an animal rushing to greet them. They were used to have their parents tell them not to touch anything, so they ignored their calls and happily waited for the funny thing to come to them.

As Nih'na was the longer of them she was the one it saw first. They smiled and laughed as it came closer and in a flash it held Nih'na in its claws. She screamed from the surprise and the sudden pain around her waist, it was not until now that Feuor grasped the serious in the situation, he fell back on his back and fear struck through his body. He could not move. Another scream from Nih'na told them about the hardening grip it had.

Another bellowed scream roared of a sudden and Nih'na fell to the ground, next to the Kincher stood Feuer'an holding a sword, he just looked at the Kincher as its blood came running out from the deep cut he had made in its arm. It turned to him, but he did not notice its leg as it came swooping around and hit him hard over the head, he fell backwards and tried to stand up immediately. The world spun around him, it had been a fierce hit and he had taken serious damage, he needed time to recover. Time he did not have as the Kincher now laid its eyes on Feuor.

He started a rush, but he knew that he would not make it in time yet he ran. Suddenly a bolt came flying through the air hitting the Kincher placing it out of its course, but it was soon back up again and continued. Another bolt stunned it and as it staggered around confused roots shot up from the ground gripping it and pulling it down holding it hard. This was all that Feuer'an needed as he now was at the Kincher, a jump and a concentrated attack on the Kincher's head made the battle short.

As the roots let go of their hold the Kincher stood up then to fall down onto the ground, dead.

It was then Feuer'an noticed the small dagger in the Kincher's leg. He knew that dagger, it was Feuor's.

Nih'na had some bruises on her waist but she seemed to have got no more wounds other than the shock. Same was for Feuor, he was still shaking as he

came into his mother arms comforting him and soothingly talking to him.

- "Daddy, it was bad to her." He said through his shakes.

- "Yes, it was bad for us all. You have to be more careful and listen to your parents Feur." He said smiling at the little one lying safely in his mothers arms.

- "You might be short, but you are brave." A voice behind Feier'an said.

- "Short yes, but our temper and will cannot be measured in height." Feier'an said as he turned and looked up at the Zoraï facing him. He knew the origin and beliefs of them, as he was certain they knew his.

The Zoraï moves his hands and Feier'an made himself ready to counter any attack, he was surprised. The Zoraï removed his amps and extended his hand.

- "I am Chao-Li, thank you for rescuing my daughter from this Kitin." He said.

Feier'an was stunned at first, this was the first time he had met a Zoraï on such grounds. Not that he had met many before, but those had been more hostile.

- "I am Feier'an." He said as he extended his hand and shook the hand of the Zoraï. He could instantly feel that this was a true and honest gesture with no hidden notions. How strange.

- "I am glad that your brave little one is well too." The Chao-Li said as he turned and looked at Feur.

- "Yes, thank you for your aid. How is your daughter?" Feier'an asked still surprised over what had happened.

- "She is well, thank you. She is cared for by her mother, my wife, Naom'Chi. Her name is Nih'na."

- "My son's name is Feur and his mothers name is Limeh." Feier'an replied to answer the courteous gesture.

Since that day much had happened and many things had passed. Through these interventions of the Kitin they had become friends. They had decided to continue the journey together from that point as they knew that together they would have had a bigger chance to survive and manage. It had also turned out that they were both almost looking for the same thing, a new home. And weeks later they had found a place near a village and they were not working on building the stable for their mounts to rest in at nights. For what mission they had undertaken it seemed as the two families had grown more and more together, this day something started to move.

Part Two

- "There, finally the last joint is in place." Chao-Li said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

- "Well, for the roof at least." Feier'an replied as he smiled towards Chao-Li.

- "Well, it wasn't there two days ago. So it is progress." Chao-Li replied, knowing that Feier'an was intentionally teasing him a little, a not uncommon and indeed a welcomed event. The free minds of the Trykers. . . .

- "Haha, yes indeed it is, great work there tall man! Feier'an concurred as he gathered the tools they had used during the day.

The warm sun slowly moved across the sky followed by an orbiting planet with rings that sparkled as the rays from the sun shined through them. It had

taken some waiting and some hard work, made even thirstier due to the warm sun, but finally the frame was done and crossing boards that supported it. The roof was constructed so that it would stop the sun from reaching the ground in the middle and also hold off what rain that fell onto it. Even though it was not entirely finished; the troughs were missing and the food holder, it had already started serving its purpose. Underneath the cool shade, their mounts and packers stood together enjoying the fresh breeze in the shadow. They grunted delightedly as Feier'an placed a large bucket of water in front of them and they noisily drank the fresh cold water.

- "You have both done well." Naom'Chi said as she approached them holding a tray with two large tumblers. She was accompanied by Nih'na and Feur who each held smaller cups which they were drinking from.

- "Here, have some refreshments!" she said as she held up the tray.

- "Mmm, this brew sure serves to put the energy lost back into the body! I guess that we have to thank the Fyros for that one, haha" Feier'an laughed as he took a huge sip.

- "Yes, it was a very successful brew this one." Chao-Li agreed as he tasted it.

- "Daddy, can I have some?" Feur asked as he had seen how delighted his father had been with the drink, yet not knowing what was in it.

- "Yes you may." Feier'an replied.

- "How strange, I knew that Trykers are spirited and free in mind. But as free as this?" Chao-Li asked himself when he heard Feier'an's reply.

- "When you are older, my son. For now this is just for me and Chao-Li." Feier'an added, greatly reassuring Chao-Li.

- "Daaaaddy..." Feur said a bit disappointed.

- "There, there. In time you will understand. Now finish your drink, it is good for you." Feier'an said as he grabbed Feur and lifted him up into his arms. "You want to be as strong as your old dad, don't you?"

Feur nodded his agreement while he was almost gulping down his drink. Soon, Limeh came to them holding a bag. In it she had packed some bread and food put on bread to make a sandwich; it was time to celebrate the almost completion of the third building in their little place.

The first two buildings to be raised were the houses. After they had met in the cave, they had chosen to travel together to find a new home. They had wandered through the lands seeking for a place to settle down, and eventually they had found one not far off from a small town. Just across a small mountain, near some clear waters they had started to gather the necessary materials. Some kind Homins had lent them rooms to sleep in while they were working on the houses. Everyone had helped as much as they could; Chao-Li and Feier'an had found jobs to get dappers for tools and materials. During their off days they had worked on the houses and hunted to gather materials from the animals around, both for crafting and to render the area safe.

It had transpired that the area held many materials of fine qualities and they had harvested as much as time allowed them to, giving both Naom'Chi and Limeh items to use in their crafting.

Naom'Chi was very skilled in making jewelry of all kinds while Limeh was working on her armour crafting.

It had taken them some time, but as they saw the first house completed, it felt as time had flown them by. They had moved in the same day, both families in the same house while they were finishing the second one. It had been a fun time for them all, the more so since it was something they could never have imagined the first time they met.

- "Aahh, that was a good drink." Feier'an said as he placed the empty tumbler on the tray and grabbed another sandwich.

- "Mmm" Chao-Li replied as he closed his eyes and took another sip.

- "Seems like they like the effort we placed in it." Feier'an said as he looked at the construction and the Mektoubs in it. It had been a great relief the day they finally could afford the packers. It made the transportation of materials much easier for them, and it had turned out that word of mouth had made both Limeh and Naom'Chi a name for their crafts as increasing numbers of Homins asked what they would charge for various sets of armours and jewels. Nih'na and Feur had worked hard to help their mothers; handing them materials, fetching new ones from the store room or cleaning up the left overs.

- "How was your crafting today?" Chao-Li asked his wife.

- "It was very successful; it seems as if all my hard work and concentration have given good results." Naom'Chi replied.

- "Yes, very successful, I even wore out my tool. I need to buy another one tomorrow." Limeh filled in as she saw that Feier'an was about to ask her.

- "Haha, how many does that make this last week?" Feier'an asked her teasingly.

- "Lucky for you that my goods sell so we can afford to buy new." Limeh said to him and extended her tongue towards him and pinched his arm.

- "Ouch, guess I deserved that!" Feier'an said with a happy laugh.

Chao-Li smiled to himself as he took a last lingering sip.

- "These Trykers are fun; I never thought I would end up like this." He thought to himself as he opened his eyes and looked at his family and his friends around him. "This is a good life."

Part Three

- "Well, tomorrow we will finish the stables; we just need a few things from the town." Feier'an said as he placed Feur in his lap. "You want to come with dad to the town and buy some things; we can even get your mom a new tool? Oh and candy!"

- "Yeeyy" Feur replied happily. "Can Nih'na come to? Pleaaase, pleaaaaase."

- "Haha, I guess I can't get out of that one... Yes of course she can. Let's all go together!" Feier'an said and grinned towards the others who silently agreed.

- "But not too much candy you two, you hear." Limeh added.

- "But moooom..." Feur said saddened; candy was a favorite treat, after all.

- "Don't worry; the moment she looks away we sneak off and Ooouch!" Feier'an didn't have time to finish his sentence before he felt a pain in his arm again.

- "I heard that, love." Limeh said with a firm gentle voice.
- "Alright, alright I give up, I give up. Surrender!" Feier'an laughed out.
- "Yes, let us all travel to the nearby town; it has been ages since we last went there together." Naom'Chi smiled. Chao-Li and Nih'na joined her in agreeing the plan.

They spent the evening sitting beside the stables talking about times past and the fun they had had. The sun moved across the Atys sky, and soon enough it hid behind the mountain tops, allowing the stars to take over raining them with brightness. It was a nice evening, as if it had waited for them to finish so they could just relax a moment. In the raw new building, the Mektoubs added their part with grunts and thumping sounds as they moved around getting accustomed to their dwelling.

- "You have done well today dear, and so have you Nih'na." Naom'Chi said as she leaned towards Chao-Li and the side of the stable. Nih'na was lying between them sleeping calmly as she breathed softly into the cool evening air.

Next to them Feier'an sat with Feuor in his lap and Limeh leaning towards his right shoulder. Both were soundly asleep and Feier'an was staring into the sky. They sat there for a moment longer until the breeze became colder before they stood up as gently as they could in order not to awaken the sleeping children. Silently they moved away into the house, only noted by one of the wakeful Mektoubs. They whispered good night before entering the houses and heading for bed.

The morning came early, or so it felt for Chao-Li and Feier'an, but in fact it was most likely due to them working so hard the previous day. Excited about going to the town with the family Feuor came almost running out into the kitchen to have breakfast. He was greeted by Feier'an and Limeh whom had just sat down to start eating. It seemed as everyone was excited this morning as the breakfast didn't take as long to eat as it usually did with Feuor complaining about having to eat vegetables and clear the table. Feier'an looked at his son eating and he smiled on the inside.

As they got outside they were met by Naom'Chi and Nih'na, Chao-Li were already at the stables preparing a packer to carry some of their crafted goods.

- "This will certainly be enough to cover the expenses today don't you think Feier'an?" He asked as Feier'an came to the stables.

- "Oh, I see that there are some fine things there, perhaps we will even be able to afford a nice dinner while we are at it." He replied with a smile. Could anything be better than this?

Since the town was not actually too far away, it didn't take long to wander there. They did not hurry as the packer was carrying a heavy burden for them. Soon enough the stables and gates of the town appeared in front of them, as both Feuor and Nih'na ran off in advance ignoring their parents' warnings about getting lost. They stopped at the guards by the gate and looked at them in amazement as to how well trained they were, with their bright swords shining in the morning light. Feuor decided there and then that when he grew up he wanted to be a swordsman and a user of daggers. This was his destiny.

Nih'na looked at the guards as she stood beside Feuor; she found them to

be impressive, but almost too rough for her liking. She, with her short slim body, was not cut out for the use of swords or pikes. She could probably handle them, but she was not certain if she would be capable of more than scaring off straying animals around their houses. Then she thought about That day.

She and Feur had sneaked behind the house as she had wanted to show him something. She had been practicing since she had found out how to do. As they stood there she held out her palm and asked Feur to look at it closely. They sat down on their knees and she closed her eyes and concentrated on a chant she had read in one of her mother's books. As she chanted something started to whirl in her palm, as if it held a small tornado which started to drag small blue sparkles out from thin air into the center forming a small globe. She shut her eyes harder and focused more; - she wanted to really show Feur. As she opened her eyes she saw a ball rotate in her hand, it was the largest one she had managed to summon yet and it even lit up the face of Feur as they stared at it in amazement.

- "What is it?" He asked as he leaned forward.

He came to close and suddenly the ball made a swift movement and hit him on his nose. He fell backward while shouting "Aaahh".

Nih'na got scared that she had harmed him as she didn't really know what sort of chant it had been. She hadn't looked that closely in the book after reading it. She stood up and ran a few steps to Feur who was still lying on his back. When she saw his face again she saw that he was smiling.

- "Aahh, that felt really good Nih'na, what was it?" He asked her as he opened his eyes and looked at her.

- "I don't really know. I read it about seven days ago, I didn't read it till the... Feur, your scratch in your face, the one you got when hitting the door..." She said abruptly.

- "Yes?" He asked as he touched his tingling cheek.

- "It's... gone..." Nih'na said as she stared at his face. The spell had been a healing spell.

- "Nih'na, Nih'na! Let's buy some candy before our mothers arrive." Feur interrupted her reverie and dragged away to the merchants.

She knew what she wanted to be now; a user of the elemental arts. Both caster and healer, this was her fate.

Nih'na and Feur found their parents at the stables as they tied the packer, and watered it. Both children were clutching a big bag of flavored Shooki Seeds and chewing without a care in the world.

- "Haha, that sure is our kids, isn't that right Chao-Li!" Feier'an said when he saw them coming.

- "It sure is" Chao-Li said and smiled.

Part Four

- "Kids, please don't run away like that again, you never know who you might meet here." Limeh reminded the children as they met again outside the stables.

- "I know, Mama." Feur grinned apologetically as he helped himself to another seed.

- "So where should we be off to first then?" Chao-Li asked everyone as soon as they had all gathered.

- "I have some orders I need to deliver." Limeh said peering into the large bag filled with various Light Armors.

- "As do I, I shall accompany you Limeh." Naom'Chi added.

- "Alright then it seems like it's just you, me and the kids." Feier'an said.

Limeh and Naom'Chi took a left at the next junction, heading briskly for the market place, where they planned to meet their customers. It was not just the normal Homins who appreciated their careful crafting, even the merchants were happy to snap up their wares. So, it was to the marketplace that they usually headed unless there was a request for a special delivery.

Chao-Li, Feier'an, Feuor and Nih'na headed off in the other direction as they had decided that they wanted to have a look at the town itself, perhaps have something to eat before they wandered around the marketplace. They walked through some small avenues, lined with booths along the narrow streets, the merchants each crying their goods for sale. It was one of the reasons they had chosen to take this route; for it was among these merchants that the rarer and more diverse items could be found. As they were walking slowly along the street, chewing the sweetened seeds now and then, they heard the echo of a booming voice carried on the wind above the normal cacophony of the stall holders.

Following it, they soon found a larger intersection where booths were set up in a ring around a fountain in the middle.

Beside the cool fountain stood a Matis man, holding some pamphlets. These he thrust into the hands of the bustling crowd, all the while shouting "They are weary for now, but they will retaliate, they will strike back. Join Defencia Academia today and do your part to keep the village safe."

- "What is this Academia you speak of?" Chao-Li asked the man as they came closer.

- "It is an institute where young warriors, fighters, mages and magicians will undergo basic training." He replied proudly as he held out a pamphlet. Chao-Li accepted the gift and gave it a good look.

- "What's the requirement and who are you talking about?" Feier'an asked thinking that it was likely to be some crazy talk from a pale white skinned man whom might have had just too much sun.

- "The Kitins of course, the Kitins are just waiting for their chance to strike back at us." He replied with a look of pure amazement that these Homins were blithely unaware of what he considered to be the greatest threat to Atys. "But that is ancient history, The Karavan and The Kami drew them away. That is why we can walk safely on the surface here today!" Feier'an was slightly worried that the man would scare the children.

- "Calm down, Feier'an. Even though he is exaggerating somewhat – there is still some truth in his words." Chao-Li remarked as he finished reading the pamphlet. "It says here that the Defencia Academia will tutor any Homin no matter what age and help them find their abilities. But that it is only in preparation for what might come - you do not provide a full training?" Chao-Li asked the man.

- "No, we can only harness the basic attributes of a Homin. To see what they can do and help them train towards their abilities." The Matis replied as he handed out yet another pamphlet to a passing Homin.

- "I see, so where can one register and when is a suitable time for this?" Chao-Li asked. Feier'an and the children just stood there looking at Chao-Li.

- "Whenever the time is suitable for you good sir, and the place is not far away from here. Pass through two arches, then head left and you shall see the gates of the Academia." The Matis man said, excused himself and walked away.

- "Chao-Li, what are you thinking. You have that look again..." Feier'an said.

- "Well, he is right and you know it. Perhaps it is what is best for our children. You do remember the way we met, don't you." Chao-Li replied still looking at the pamphlet, his mind full of thoughts.

- "Yes, you are right there... But the children? What about them?" He asked.

- "I want to be a fighter dad; I want to wield swords and pikes!" Feur added all of a sudden. He had only heard parts of the conversation but in the little that he had noticed he realized his chance to live his dream to become like one of the town guards.

- "Uhm..." Was all Feier'an could manage, before Nih'na interrupted.

- "And I want to learn the ways of the magician father." She said.

- "I have practiced dad!" Feur shouted as he grabbed the dagger that Feier'an had in his belt and started to wave it around.

Feier'an almost lost his jaw when he saw his son grabbing the dagger, but even he could see that the boy was capable of wielding such a small weapon. Feur kept on swinging the dagger wildly, but one of his circles took him too close to the leaning walls and his hand connected with a crash, making him drop the weapon and hop in pain. Feier'an had barely picked it up and placed it back in his belt so that he could administer first aid, when Nih'na brushed past him.

- "You klutz, you should be more careful. Let me see your hand!" She almost shouted as she took hold of it and placing her free hand above the small wound began to do something curious. Slowly a small blue glow formed and the edges of the scrape healed and smoothed. "Did you know of this ability Chao-Li?" Feier'an asked as they both looked at the children.

- "No, I did not. But it seems as this is something that fate may have decided for us." Chao-Li replied as they walked up to their children. "I see that you have inherited your mother's skill of healing, Nih'na."

- "Dad, I . . . I just read in one of her old books. . ." Nih'na said, trying to excuse her behavior as she had not told her parents of what had happened that day when she had showed Feur.

- "Ahh, do not feel any shame Nih'na, you seem to hold a natural gift for the healing arts. Your mother will be pleased to hear this." Chao-Li comforted her as he examined Feur's fingers. "Feier'an your son is in good hands indeed, there is not a scratch is left."

- "Well, isn't that the twist of fate then?" Thank you Nih'na." But what are your thoughts about this Chao-Li?" He asked.

- "I think we should enjoy the rest of the day here as we intended in the first place. Then this evening we should all sit down and talk about this." Chao-Li said as he folded the pamphlet and placed it in his side bag.

- "Yes, that sounds fair. Let's enjoy it as much as we can. When we get back home your mother will probably bash me into a pile for even considering this, Feur." Feier'an said and laughed.

They continued their travel through the streets and alleys of the town, until they were eventually rejoined by the women who had sold all their goods and were looking for some bargains on their own account.

In this quiet way do the years roll over us all.

Part Five

Some time had passed since the day they had met the Homin handing out pamphlets in the town.

The evening had brought a somewhat reflective mood since there were now serious matters to discuss.

Initially, Limeh had refused to even listen to the pleading of Feier'an and even Feur. She considered that it was dangerous to have the children to walk around the town alone and Feier'an had agreed but had gently pointed out that this was not the subject of the discussion. After a few moments however, she had regained her composure and listened to what they both had to say; becoming gradually convinced that in these dire times it might indeed be essential for Homins to be able to defend and protect themselves and their loved ones. The security and safety of the Defencia Academia was appealing and she finally agreed to let Feur apply for training there. When hearing that Chao-Li held the same thoughts for Nih'na, she became increasingly convinced that they had all made the right decision.

For Nih'na it had been easier, as her father, Chao-Li, had embraced the idea of his child as a scholar and when he spoke to Naom'Chi he had such calm and confidence in his manner that she was convinced instantly. He had told her that not only had Nih'na inherited her mother beauty, but also her skill in the magical area. When he explained how their daughter had healed Feur's wound earlier that day and that not even a scratch was left, Naom'Chi had smiled at her and nodded. She had been delighted when both her parents had agreed to allow her to join the Academia together with Feur. She had happily studied the books that her mother had fetched from the small library, just one precious shelf in the larger living quarters, and she had instantly taken the book in which she found the healing spell.

In the days that followed, the parents had not seen much of their children as they had been busy with their chores while Feur had been given an old dagger, a sword and a pike that Feier'an had purchased a long time ago when they had just started to settle in. He had used them to rid the area of the dangerous animals that roamed there in that time. With these old weapons Feur spent as much time as he could in training. Since he knew what was awaiting him, he practiced harder, reminding himself of the accident that day they had spoken to

the tall pale man. Feier'an had shown him the standard stanza from which to begin the wielding, and had made sure that he had grasped it before teaching any other moves. "Basics are basic" he had stated when Feur had complained about the monotonous training, and after learning it he had understood what his father had meant. The more he trained, the easier it was to wield the weapons and soon he was practicing switching between them as fast as he could in case it was ever needed.

Nih'na had studied most of the books her mother had handed her, devouring their contents with a raw hunger for the knowledge they contained. There were not only books about how to cure wounds in battle, but also how one should focus the energy in order to extract stamina and increase the sap flowing in Homins. A few of the books she was given later on in her training spoke of the other kind of magical skills to learn; the destructive ones. Her parents had told her that she should study them equally so as to know how and what kind of damage they would inflict on their target. It was good to understand this since some animals could easily resist some sorts of magic yet be vulnerable to other kinds, and it was also very useful information when one was healing. At first she had been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information, but after a week she had read most of the books containing basic knowledge and becoming tired of her own room, had taken to sitting outside with her books, choosing a spot near to where Feur was training. At times, with his consent, she had tried the heal spell on him. It had been small bursts of magic, but he had felt the difference that they made.

One day her Chao-Li and Feier'an had come to them as they were training. Chao-Li had extended two large glove-like things to Nih'na. She had looked at them strangely, recognizing them as they appeared to be similar to the old ones her father had lying on the shelf with all the books. She had never asked about them, not deeming them to be important. When he asked her to put them on she was surprised; why wear gloves on such warm day? As she had put them on, however, she felt that they were not warm at all, in fact they seemed altogether lighter than their appearance suggested. Chao-Li had told her that they were magical amplifiers which he had crafted for her. She was stunned as she had never known that her father was able to make such things. She tried them on Feur with no warning and the sudden rush that went through his body as Nih'na levitated, turned in the air and shot a larger blue bolt right on him, made him almost stumble and fall. Chao-Li had smiled while Feier'an had laughed and thrown something to him with a "Here, better use this to support yourself my boy".

Feur had grabbed the stick but as soon as he regained the balance he had seen what it really was. It was a well crafted pike, a thing of both function and beauty. He looked at it in awe and then at his father who just nodded and said, "Yes, it is yours, my son."

Examining it further, the materials seemed to be of some special variety that Feur had never seen around their home. As he studied the fine weapon he found the inscription,

- "A pike as mighty as its user!"

Nih'na looked at her amps as she removed them and she also noted that they were also inscribed

- "To cure and give strength is to care".

They had both wondered what these inscriptions meant but their fathers' had just shaken their heads telling them that in time they would know their meaning. Their mothers joined the group, bringing more items; Naom'Chi had secretly worked hard to find materials and craft two sets of jewels in which she had set sap crystals that gave their bearer the ability to receive more hits.

Now Limeh approached and unfolded a light armour made with the softest of cloth and hardest of threads. She had also used sap crystals so that the armour held the same ability as the jewels. When Feuor had changed into his armour, she had turned to Nih'na with a smile handing her another set of armour, crafted for a girl and a Zorai. Feuor's eyes widened when he saw his friend stand tall and proud in her new identity.

Today marked the day that their practice had ended with this small ceremony, it was a brief time to enjoy the feast that all had made and to look forward to the future and all it might bring

The last lazy afternoon passed at the table, eating and talking. As evening stole the colour from the skies, the adults started to clear the table and prepare for the night, while Nih'na and Feuor, still clutching their armour and jewels, wandered off to a spot where they used to sit when both were reading. They lay in the grass for a moment and looked at the brightening stars.

- "So, tomorrow it is then, when it begins" Feuor said.

- "Yes, tomorrow all will change." Nih'na replied.

The following day they stood before the Defencia Academia looking at the high gate in the grey dawn light, wondering what their futures behind it would hold.

This was two years ago.

Part Six

Two years had passed since they stood in front of the gates, two long years for some that had passed by like a flash for Feuor. He had found that his early practice had paid off when came to the wielding of weapons; he excelled in the arts of swordsmanship and was among the top five in his year with a pike. He worked and trained hard each day to improve his skills, always striving to use the pike that was his father's gift for joining the Academy.

- "Very well... Well done Feuor, you can handle that sword pretty well it seems. Bring on your shield and we shall run through some evasive manoeuvres." The trainer appreciated his hard work and was keen for him to learn ever more difficult passes in his quest for perfection.

Feuor quickly found his place in the Academy; he enjoyed everything about his training and mixed well with his fellows, at ease both on the practice ground and in the common-room.. Indeed, some of the girls seemed especially keen to mix with him, even if he was an outlander; his fighting skills and well-developed muscles more than compensated for his origins.

For Nih'na alas, it was otherwise, although she had found herself to have a gift for all magical skills and proceeded to learn them with ease.

Unfortunately, however, she was the only Homin in the class who was of Zoraï birth and it placed her somehow outside the group of her peers in a way that the more outgoing Feur had not had to contend with. The fact that she was knowledgeable and clearly skilled, merely added to the jealousy and pettiness of some of her classmates.

They did not often talk to her or invite her to work with them, unless they were especially stuck on some magical problem, usually they ignored her, or she caught the glimpse of a grinning face or the tail end of a whisper as they made fun of her Mask. She responded by turning to her books, her only friends, and studying harder than ever.

Feur had noticed that she often seemed to be alone when he was walking from one class to another, and he always tried his best to share lunch with her whenever he could. When they were together she smiled and joked, but he had noticed that when he caught sight of her at other times, the smile was absent and she hurried along with her head down in the pages of a book. Not even to her parents did she mention the loneliness and unhappiness that she was enduring due to the cruelty of her fellow students.

The classes that they had first joined mixed Homins of all abilities together to see who might shine at what, but after a year things had shifted and the very best students were selected to work together. In these new, more specialised classes many came from the better areas of the town, families with a heritage or a fortune and the leisure time to devote to such studies instead of the daily grind of existence. To them, the fact that this outlandish, blue skinned figure was doing better than all their wealth and family influence could manage was galling in the extreme, and the teasing gradually became something rather darker.

One day things went a step too far.

Part Seven

Nih'na had finished the day's lessons and was hurrying to the market to buy some special spices her mother had requested. In her hurry to be home, she tripped over a small rock and went flying, her precious books scattered everywhere. Feur, who was practicing defensive wielding in the training yard, had seen her fall and he asked his tutor if he could leave his class early as he wanted to walk her home. He could sense her increasing unhappiness, and he wanted an opportunity to see what was really troubling her. Changing quickly, he raced in the direction of the market.

Picking herself up and dusting off her books, Nih'na had continued her way towards the market, but in her consternation she had failed to notice that she was being followed. Suddenly, something hit her head and everything spun into blackness for a brief moment. When she regained her sight she was lying on the ground again, and her books were once more scattered around her, but this time it was no accident. Rough hands grabbed her and tossed her in a small alley and as she hit the wall she was finally able to see who her attackers were. Two Matis and a Fyros boy were standing there, eyes dark with hate as they blocked the only exit from the alley.

- "You are a nuisance, you know that? You're always in the way acting as you know everything. Answering correctly every time..." One of the Matis

boys said.

- "Teacher's pet... I bet that is not all you do for them..." The other one said.

Suddenly she felt a sharp blow and realised that one of them had kicked her. She fell backwards and landed on the ground, turning in pain and trying to protect her head as she curled up into a ball. Tears started to trickle out through her mask as she wondered if this was the end of everything she had strived for.

There was a strange stillness to the air, and no more blows followed. Slowly she opened her eyes, to see that the dynamics of the scene had altered, as a tall shape, eyes blazing with anger, stood rigid at the entrance to the alley.

- "I have already killed a Kincher who tried to harm her, do not ever think that I would hesitate to do it again to anything or anybody that threatens her." As he spoke with chilling precision, she noticed that he was holding a dagger to the throat of the Matis boy that had first spoken and she recognised the fear stamped on the boy's face as a reflection of her own, earlier terror.

- "Who are you to judge someone that you do not even know! How can you cast judgement on her when your only measure is in the twisted lies of old stories?"

- "I... she is ... she is..." The Matis boy squealed out.

- "She is Nih'na and she is my friend. And I will do what it takes to defend my friends, never forget this." Feur said in a tone that made even Nih'na shiver as she gazed up at him, holding his knife steadily and speaking with such determination that none of the other boys dared to move.

- "Feu... *cough* Feur. " Nih'na managed to say, but her stomach hurt too much.

- "Leave, and if anyone of you ever lay a foul hand on her again, I shall make sure that you boast one hand the less." Feur said and slowly removed the dagger. The boys faded quickly into the alley, not one of them wishing to make a fight of it.

- "There, Nih'na. Let me help you up back on your feet."

When Nih'na looked at him it was as if the previous Feur she had seen was washed away. He was smiling as he extended his hand to her and his eyes were kindly and calm. She hesitated for a second but after an encouraging word from him she took his hand and he helped her back on her feet.

- "Are you Ok, Nih'na?" He asked her.

She could not help it, tears started to fall from her eyes, as she hugged him tightly. Why had she not told him how she had felt from the start? Why had she held it so deep inside when someone who would understand was already so close to her? There were so many questions in her mind, but for now all she could do was to cry and to wash away the months of hurt.

Feur stood there holding her, speaking soothingly to her as he rocked her in his arms. He knew that in time she would explain everything to him, but he did not rush matters. For now all she needed was a kind shoulder to rely upon, and this he could do for her.

- "I am here Nih'na; here as always for you."

Part Eight

A day had passed since the incident in the alley. Nih'na had stopped crying but she had turned silent even to Feur. She was ashamed that she had not been able to tell him of how she had felt recently and that events had become so serious in order for him to find out. Attempting to resume some normality, she had returned to the Academia but she now ensured that she took the lesser used corridors between the classrooms. She tried to make herself as small and invisible as possible in fear of the aftermath of the incident. As she trailed along her solitary path, however, she felt her arm seized in a tight clasp.

- "Nih'na? Why are you hiding like this?" Feur asked calmly.

- "Fe..Feur, I am .. " She tried to explain, but the words just stuck in her throat.

- "I am your friend Nih'na, not your enemy. You can trust me I swear." He said with a voice full of kindness. A voice she recognized.

- "I know, I am sorry. I thought that... I wanted to spare those important to me from this pain, sorry." She said as she felt the tears starting to come.

- "Come, lets go somewhere. " Feur said and walked her away still holding her arm.

They hurried through the doors leading outside and then rounded a corner and soon they found themselves on a small field a few hundred meters behind the school.. It was a place that was sporadically used for combat training or magical learning. But it was not as large as the main practice grounds so it was mostly used by students that wanted to work in peace.

- "I think we are pretty safe here Nih'na. No one usually comes here. So what is it that you want to tell me?"

- "I.. I don't know what to say Feur. I though it was my fault, I am the only Zoraï in the class, and a short one too. I thought it was why.." She started to confess.

- "You know that that is just your imagination Nih'na. You are not the one at fault here, they are, for hitting out at what they do not understand and are jealous of. They are weak cowards acting as they did."

- "I am alone, I don't have any friends and indeed I feel as if no one wants to be friends with a strange blue Homin like me." Tears wandered down her cheeks as she finally was able to tell someone how she felt.

- "You have at least one friend, there was one that came looking for you right?" Feur said with a smile. "We have been friends as long as I can remember Nih'na, don't think for a second that I attacked that Kincher only so you could get hurt through the whim of some Matisian rich man's kid and his skewed views."

- "But.. what will happen now.. What will they do to me now?" She asked him, afraid of their reaction now someone had finally fought back

- "I have already sorted that out too; I confronted him during a training session this morning and made him confess in front of everyone how brave he was attacking a lonely girl with two trustworthy men on his side. I don't think he will try to harm you again, especially not if he wishes to keep his hands attached to his arms." Feur said, as he winked at her and smiled.

Nih'na remembered what had happened in the alleyway and suddenly she did not see him as the frightening Homin she had seen him as back then. Now she could see that there was a reason behind his anger, and she understood his actions. Although it was disquieting to see him transform like that, she now realised that he could never act in this way towards her, only to those that tried to harm her. He was her friend. A little smile started to form behind her mask as she considered this.

- "Uhhh, excuse me. But I want too... ehm.." A voice said from behind them.

- "Oh, hi there Dinah, didn't hear you." Feuor said. "I'm sorry, but I am busy for the moment could we..."

- "It's fine Feuor." Nih'na said, and she did actually smile for what felt like the first time in an eternity.

- "You sure Nih'na?" He asked her and she nodded yes. "Well then, what was it Dinah?"

- "There is , ehm.. an assignment... for school, that requires... ehm.. " She started to explain.

- "Don't be nervous, just say it, will you?" Feuor said with a broad smile and a little tease in his voice.

- "There is a requirement for an assignment for school which needs you to work with someone else. And I was wondering if you wanted to... ehm.. work together with me.." Dinah said it as fast as she could and she was almost surprised that she had just said it.

Feuor looked at her and then at Nih'na and smiled. He had heard of the assignment; it was a preparation for a crafting lesson where they were required to hunt and harvest for materials so they could craft. No specific materials were needed, the main idea was to train the ability to work in team, and to ask for Homins to form teams.

- "Well, I have sort of already promised Nih'na here that we would do it together." He said, and it was an obvious lie, since he had not said a word to Nih'na about it. In fact she had almost forgotten about it herself.

- "Oh. Well then I am sorry for disturbing you both." Dinah said, bowed and started to walk away.

- "Hey Dinah, stop will you." Feuor looked at Nih'na with eyes telling her he had something on his mind and she looked at him and nodded without really knowing why she did. "You know, a team can be more then two Homins, do you want to join me and Nih'na?"

Dinah stopped and turned around quickly looking back at them.

- "Are you sure that is alright?" She asked. Nih'na was surprised that it seemed as if Dinah was not bothered by the fact that she would be in the same team as her.

- "Haha, it seems as we have ourselves a team of three then." Feuor said happily and stood up. "I'll be your warrior; taking hits and dealing blows."

- "I will heal as it is what I do best..." Nih'na said with a lowered voice as she thought that her interference might burst the bubble of happiness that had formed in the last few minutes since Dinah had arrived.

- "That is great, so what do you want to do then Dinah?" Feur asked and smiled so much that Nih'na thought that his jaw would come loose.

- "I have had.. ehm.. some ease for the afflictional skills.. I was wond.. hoping that I could.." She started to say and found her voice to become even lower than Nih'nas.

- "Haha, wonderful then we have the fighter, which is me, the healer Nih'na and Dinah the afflictionist. Sounds like a team to me. Come and sit here with us, we are a team now!" Feur said.

Dinah did as she was asked to and sat down next to them and Feur started to talk about the objectives of the assignment and how they should plan it, and soon they all found themselves involved in heated but cheerful conversation. They devised some tactics after discussing what they wanted to craft and Dinah and Nih'na agreed to look up what animals they needed to hunt in order to get the materials they needed, while Feur would investigate where and what to harvest for the rest of the parts. It seemed that after a while it became natural to them all to divide tasks quickly and sensibly and to come up with new ideas as they melded into a team indeed.

As Feur and Nih'na waved good bye to Dinah for the day and walked home they stopped at a small cliff and watched the evening sun shining red as it descended.

- "What do you say Nih'na, are you looking forward to tomorrow and the hunt?" Feur asked her as he stared into the darkening sky.

- "I am.. I really am Feur, thank you."

- "It's a nice evening tonight. Remember this Nih'na; there are days that are rainy, it's natural. But there are also days that are like this one. And if it rains too much you have friends that can give you shelter." Feur turned back to the path that led home.

Nih'na stood there for a moment looking at the vanishing sun, astounded by Feur's words. Sometimes he could make so much sense. Then she ran to catch him up and walked companionably beside him thinking that even though she had been through some bleak times, they faded in comparison with the events of today and her hopes for the future.

She was looking forward to tomorrow.

Part Nine

The next day seemed to take forever to arrive as Nih'na lay in bed in a restless tangle of blankets.

Over and over, she replayed recent events and the way that Feur seems to be changing before her eyes. Maybe the constant battle for survival had stopped her noticing the imperceptible changes,

as he had grown and matured in front of her.

She contrasted the mental image she had of Feur from the day that he had turned into a vortex of fury when he had defended her from her attackers. He had been so strange, so determined and fierce, but in the blink of an eye he had suddenly been the caring Feur that she had grown up with.

Maybe it was a one-off, as she had seen no more sign of the harsh and angry Feur since that terrible day?

Somewhat comforted by the direction her thoughts had led, she drifted finally into a light sleep.

The next day they met up outside their houses as they always did before going to the Academia to start the long walk into town. They had arranged to meet Dinah on the road just outside the town, dressed for a fight since they were to do the hunt first. Nih'na and Dinah had looked in a few books during their discussion yesterday and found some animals they would focus on. According to the documentation of their habits and what they ate they were most likely to be found near watery areas and fortunately there was a small lagoon not far away from the town which had become their destination for the hunt.

As they approached the town they saw someone standing at the roadside in the distance but initially they had trouble in recognizing her as Dinah.

The armour she had worn yesterday had been of a lower quality so the details and colour she wore today confused them initially.

Perhaps knowing her as little as they did, just seeing her in the Academia and having only spent a day with her, had accustomed them to seeing her in simpler garb.

- "Wow, your armour is really a masterpiece Dinah. We almost mistook you for someone else." Feur said with a smile.

- "Th-thank you." She replied with a lowered voice.

- "Is there something wrong Dinah?" He asked her with concern, surprised at her reaction.

- "Well.. ehm.. thank you then." She said and raised her head looking at Nih'na and Feur. "I thought everyone knew that I come from a less fortunate family. And I.."

- "Dinah, with a friend like you; who could ever be poor?" Feur stated with great conviction and started walking down the road leading from the town towards the lagoon.

Dinah and Nih'na just stood there gazing at his departing back, he had done it again; said something serious and meaningful in his casual, throwaway manner. They looked at each other in silence and after a second they both broke into a smile and followed after.

The three new friends continued down the road at a fast walk, and even though conversation lagged a little at the start, they were soon chatting as if they had known each other for ever.

The journey took them an easy hour's travel to arrive at the small beach bordering the lagoon, where they flopped down, glad to be relieved of the burden of their equipment and stretch out on the inviting sand.

— anonymous author.

6.1 Anlor Winn Tales

6.1.1 The Legend of the Ghost Yubo

Here is the tale of the Ghost Yubo.

Long, long, long ago in the Old Lands, yubos were not as weak as they are now. They were little (and sometimes not so little) balls of fury if you angered them. Their urine was so potent it could eat holes in your boots.

But they were not so strong that they could not be brought down by homins and used for food and the crafting of useful items.

But as years went on the yubos became weaker. Over time homins only used them for target practice and did not bother to quarter the bodies for materials as they had before and the yubo bodies were left to rot.

One season during Anlor Winn, the evil wind blew upon a dying yubo and filled it with malevolent purpose. The yubo rose up as bones and he fled to where the wind issued from the spirit world and entered there.

The next time the Anlor Winn blew, the little Ghost Yubo came back into the world. As it wandered the bark, it took flesh from the corpses of slain yubos and grew stronger, then returned to the spirit world.

Each Anlor Winn the Ghost Yubo would return to add more flesh to its bones. Over time the Ghost Yubo grew stronger and stronger, and larger and larger, but the bones still showed through the flesh it took.

Finally its power grew so great that it could make other yubos look like itself when the Anlor Winn blew. You have all seen this, no?

Sometimes it sends minions, little copies of itself, out to gather other yubos and bring them to the Ghost Yubo, who will absorb them into its being so that it can grow ever larger.

Sometimes these minions will attack other creatures as well, even homins!

In the season of Anlor Winn, beware of yubos! The Ghost Yubo is out there... waiting.

— as told by an Old Tryker during Anlor Winn Story Tales in the 3rd CA of 2575.

6.2 Atysmas Tales

6.2.1 The Gingo Who Ate the Sun

One Atysmas evening, a yubo was chasing after snowflakes when it heard someone weeping.

As it got closer it discovered a baby gingo.

The meek yubo was prepared to scamper off, but the baby was crying, crying...

Even if it was a gingo, and even if in other times they would have been enemies, it was Atysmas evening, and the yubo just couldn't stand seeing someone sad on such a day.

But it wasn't about to let itself be munched on either, so it formulated an idea.

It retraced its footsteps and retrieved some capryni horns it had seen laying on the forest floor.

The yubo tied them on its head with a slaveni liana, and hid the knots with a bit of red fiber that the wind had brought.

Then, in this disguise, it introduced itself to the gingo and said that it was the emissary of Atysmas.

- "I've heard your sorrow on this evening when all should be smiling," it told the gingo.

- "Tell me what is making you miserable!"

The gingo choked back its tears, surprised by the apparition.

It explained, "I've eaten the sun! Now there will be no more daylight!"

The gingo continued,

"I was born in the first rays of dawn,

I played for the whole morning in the snow.

Then I found a big tree full of light.

I jumped and jumped to catch all the lights,

knocking all of them down,

and when the last one fell,

the night came..."

The yubo thought hard. It then had another idea. It explained to the gingo that, by breaking the Atysmas lights, it had offended the Festival Kami. But, in order to fix the affront, it had to do exactly what it was told to. The gingo, delighted to get a chance redeem itself, promised to the Atysmas yubo to do everything it would be told.

Then the yubo led it through the forest, to the foot of the Rotoa, where the buzzing of a hive could be heard. Since the Rotoa blooms even during winter, the bees were still busy making their sweet honey. The yubo instructed, "Tell your story to the bees and convince them to give you honey in order to make the sun reappear!" The gingo spoke so well and the bees enjoyed her story so much that they brought her a huge honeycomb.

- "Don't lose it, we're now going to the desert," said the yubo.

They traveled to the flaming forest, where the Bothaya heat up the atmosphere. The yubo told the gingo to spread the honey on one of the young sprouts, over and over again. As the gingo completed her task, she became all sticky. But on the sprout, because of the heat, the honey cooked and hardened. Then, with a stroke of its teeth, the yubo cut the cane and took it.

Then they navigated to the lakes. There the yubo had the gingo collect many shells of all colors.

Then they trekked to the Jungle and the yubo had the gingo shake the caramelized honey stick. Soon fireflies arrived, attracted by the smell, many of them getting stuck in the gingo's tacky fur.

- "Now, to the Atysmas tree!" the yubo cried.

Quickly, they returned to the forest.

The gingo jumped and jumped and jumped to hang up the shells she had gathered in the tree.

The fireflies enjoyed making them sparkle.

The baked honey cane released a sweet perfume.

The gingo looked at the new shining decorations.

The yubo smiled, very pleased with itself.

And then the sun started again to pulse.

They had been running all night through the lands to decorate the tree.
From that day on the yubos began wearing disguises during Atysmas and
Atysmas canes became symbols of the celebration!
— as told by Lutrykin during Atysmas Story telling, 3rd CA 2576.