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In the Wrong Hands

A scenario of happenstance, coincidence and enemy action, by Dave Morris

Overview

These events are set in the summer of 2365 AS. Dchich'une sits on the Petal Throne and Baron Ald is his First General. Elselne and Kettukal are isolated in Paya Gupa. In the north-east, Mirusiya suffered crushing defeat from an army comprising both Tsolyáni and Yan Koryani elements, but he escaped and is rumoured to be heading for Fasiltum with the remnants of his troops. In various parts of the country, simmering discontent threatens to boil up into civil war. There are food shortages in the south, and riots and lawlessness are spreading.

The player-characters have travelled through the Kerunan protectorate down to Rü, intending to cross the border into Salarvya. Use any pretext that suits the campaign: the characters can be simple merchants, spies, refugees, or whatever. This adventure slots in conveniently as a sequel to Crystal Clear.

Arrival in Rü

Arriving at mid-day, the player-characters find the whole city hushed by the intense shimmering heat. Across a wide plaza, a couple of dogs bark at a trader dozing under the awning of his stall. Beside a still fountain, children laugh and shout until called into their clanhouse by a woman. The architecture is bizarrely ornate by the standards of most of Tsolyánu: many huge onion-domes, trefoil arches and grotesque carvings. The creamy marble buildings, splashed with colours of gilt and mosaic, gleam as though with inner light under a violet sky.

The characters have been given a letter of introduction to Tharan hiKunush, the Patriarch of the Victorious Globe Clan in Rü. Rousing the doorkeeper of the clanhouse, who was taking his siesta, they are shown into a hall panelled with dark wood. After their journey along the Sakbe in sweltering heat, the characters ought to be glad of the cool chumetl they are handed by a servant. The Patriarch enters and, after examining the letter of introduction which the doorkeeper hands him, gives a cordial greeting to each in turn. Glancing over to the doorkeeper, he says, "I suppose you have already put Utzar hiKusrem in the Tetel Rooms?"

The doorkeeper nods, thinks for a moment, then ventures to add: "But the servant took him along barely a few yom ago, sir. I should have thought he won't have unpacked yet."

The Patriarch is pleased by this. "I'm sure you'd be most comfortable in the Tetel Rooms," he says to the characters. "Utzar won't mind being moved. When the ksheshchal flies down to drink, the kaika must waddle aside, as they say! Ha ha! I'm sure you won't mention to Utzar that I said that, but the poor fellow really isn't used to such grand accomodation anyway."

Leading the way, the Patriarch takes them out into the central courtyard, along a tiled veranda fringed with ivy. He stops in front of a large door, brushes the wooden clapper with his knuckles, then strides in briskly. The characters follow in time to see the Patriarch stop short, obviously surprised to see two people in the room. One is a long-limbed fellow with a broad weather beaten face, who still has the dust of the road on his sandals. This is Utzar. The man he is talking to appears to be a person of respectable status – perhaps a bureaucrat or priest. The characters may recognize the design on his cloak as denoting the Black Stone Clan. Seeing the Patriarch and the characters, the two men stop their hushed conversation, smiling broadly to cover their surprise.

The Patriarch apologises to Utzar for the intrusion. "I had not supposed you would have any visitors so soon after your arrival here. But, as you can see, a party of travellers has just arrived." He makes a sweeping gesture to indicate that these spacious rooms are too much for one person. "Since I notice you've yet to unpack, perhaps you wouldn't mind being moved to the room just along the veranda?"

Utzar, apparently a humble trader of the Turning Wheel Clan, is quick to oblige. Shouldering his pack, he waits for his guest to precede him out of the room, nodding politely to the player characters as he leaves. If any characters dawdle out on the veranda, they will notice the doorkeeper leading Utzar and his guest to the door at the end.

Servants bustle in with the player-characters' goods. The Patriarch withdraws, saying he looks forward to seeing them at dinner. As a cool gust of wind stirs the chimes hanging out on the veranda, he casts an appraising look at the sky. "Ah, we're in for a storm."

After the Patriarch has closed the door, one of the characters spots a piece of paper lying beside a low table. It looks as if Utzar or his visitor must have dropped it. Picking it up, they discover it to be a crumpled letter addressed rather vaguely to "the Clanhouse of the Morning Haze, in the Far Chakas". The seal has been broken and scraped away, and the letter bears traces of blood and dirt.

Only a couple of minutes later, the characters hear the clack of the door-clapper. The door opens before they have time to ask who is there, and Utzar comes in. He is looking for something he's lost, a document. He wonders: have they seen it, please?

The wisest course is for the characters to "discover" the letter under the table now and pretend they had not noticed it before. Alternatively they might hide it in the hope of getting more time to study what it says. Utzar can be fobbed off with excuses (particularly if a point is made of his lowly clan-status). Not so his friend, however. If Utzar fails to retrieve the letter, Hejentu will come along a minute later and politely insist on a thorough search of the room. If the letter still does not show up, Hejentu will finally leave wearing a thin smile in which a sensitive character might well perceive the warming of heating irons and the oiling of thumbscrews.

If the player-characters look out from their rooms they will see Utzar and Hejentu walk together to the clanhouse gate, where they lean together in conspiratorial conversation for a moment. Utzar glances back in the direction of the veranda, but the foliage conceals the characters from him. He listens to what Hejentu says, then gives a sombre nod. As Hejentu leaves, the sky opens and the afternoon rain comes down in hissing sheets.

What has gone before

The letter is a coded document prepared by Arijan hiSamvara, a renegade agent of the Omnipotent Azure Legion. He was sent south by Prince Eselne to find out how people were reacting to Dchich'une's accession. The letter was his coded report, sent by runner to a contact in Sokatis who would know to forward it on to Paya Gupa. But the letter never reached Sokatis, as the runner was observed leaving the Sakbe and ambushed. He died, and the letter fell into the hands of a Yan Koryani spy (of Tsolyáni birth) by the name of Utzar hiKusrem.

Utzar returned with the letter to Rü where, in keeping with his usual practice, he went to stay at the Victorious Globe Clanhouse. He arranged to meet his contact there: Hejentu hiWorishar of the Black Stone Clan, a Palace of the Realm official loyal to the Emperor. But while they were discussing the meaning of the letter, the Patriarch inconveniently displaced them to another room because of the arrival of a bunch of hma-faced travellers. Only when they looked for the letter five minutes later did Utzar and Hejentu realize it had got left behind. What if those hma-faced travellers got hold of it? They might not be as stupid as they looked...

Truth

The meaning of the letter might seem transparent to modern eyes, but in fact is quite sophisticated code by Tsolyáni standards. It indicates that Arijan discovered the senior officers of the Omnipotent Azure Legion in Rü to be loyal to Dchich'une. While waiting to see what he could do about this, Arijan is in hiding at Tsayil, a little town seven miles south of Rü famous for its hot springs. This was the site of General Kettukal's victory against the Salarvyani nearly two decades ago. Arijan's letter also indicates that four or five thousand Yan Koryani troops have been sent into the Kerunan region. Arijan suspects that the two thousand or so local militia are not happy about Dchich'une's alliance with Baron Ald, which allows soldiers of Yan Kor thus to freely march within the Imperium's territories.

Vreshsheqmu was the commander of the Regiment of the Mace of Steel, turned back from an abortive invasion of the Kerunan protectorate by Kettukal in 2347 AS. Towards the end of the battle, Kettukal's squadron of hlaka were running out of ammunition to drop on the enemy and he instructed them to use hot mud from the springs. Some mud splattered Vreshsheqmu's helmet and he tore it off, exclaiming, "Shit!" Hence the local expression "Remember Vreshsheqmu's curse" which means to watch out for calamity from an unexpected direction. (However, Arijan is using it in a different context, to remind his superiors that they can get a reply to him by hlaka messenger.)

Consequences

Although loyal to the Throne, Hejentu hiWorishar is uncomfortable about the presence of Yan Koryani forces in the area. It makes him deeply uneasy about the future. Much depends on whether he believes the characters to be involved in current affairs. If he thinks they are agents of any other faction, he will not hesitate to have them assassinated. For this task he would use Utzar and some reliable Nighted Tower thugs whom he's employed for such purposes before. He cannot risk sending soldiers to arrest the characters as he does not want news of his own carelessness to leak out. Particularly not at the moment, when the Yor Koryani and Dchich'une's new men are assiduously weeding out time-servers like himself.

If Hejentu thinks the characters got a glimpse of the letter, his concern will be to find out what they intend to do about it. He might send one of his henchmen purporting to be an Elselne sympathizer, with a view to entrapment. He will certainly get Utzar to spy on them. If the characters show themselves to be only bumbling amateurs at the espionage game, they might get off by paying Hejentu and his cronies an inducement. If they look to be dangerous, there is always the assassination gambit.

If there is no reason to suppose that the characters even saw the letter in the first place, Hejentu is content to let the matter lie. Like many medium-level bureaucrats, he much prefers a quiet life. Utzar, on the other hand, is canny, suspicious and zealous. He might well eavesdrop on the characters or follow them if they go out.

Red Herrings

Naturally in a border city like Rü there is all manner of skulduggery going on. In various corners and crevices and shadowy back alleys are lurking agents of the Emperor, the Salarvyani, the various parties, the secret societies, the old guard OAL – and no doubt others as well. The characters could easily blunder into real trouble if they go nosing around the city without thinking things through.

It is quite likely that they will follow one of two leads: either the letter's reference to somewhere "warm and comfortable" or the line about "Veshsheqmu's curse". On the face of it, the former might suggest the Temple of Vimuhla. Indeed, the Flame-Priests will be interested in anything the player-characters can tell them, but this is just a red herring. Arijan really meant that he was staying near the hot springs at Tsayil.

Also the characters might question a clan servant about local expressions and so learn about "Vreshsheqmu's curse". Certainly there are one or two hlaka resident in Rü, at least one of whom fought at the battle in 2347 AS. This is old Kirichur, a seller of amulets who lives in a lean-to on the roof of a tenement block in the Foreigners' Quarter. Being raddled by age and somewhat bewildered in his thinking, Kirichur might well give the impression of understanding whatever the characters talk to him about. In fact his only interest is in selling his cryptic talismans and amulets. If Utzar follows the characters to Kirichur and sees him pressing an amulet on them, he will make the obvious aSsumption that the hlaka is involved in spying and will murder him once the characters have left.

The heavy rain keeps most people off the streets until evening, when the clouds roll back allowing the full light of Kashi to shine down on the glistening flagstones. The rain helps Utzar to tail the characters without getting spotted, but it is still their best time to act because (i) there are few militia patrols about and (ii) Hejentu will not go and summon his Nighted Tower henchmen until the storm passes over.

Taking the waters

For the characters decide not to cross into Salarvya, the adventure will take them no further. But Assuming they proceed up to the border they will pass through the town of Tsayil. A little further on, they see numerous tents set up in the fields close to the border post. The reason soon becomes all too clear. In an effort to make their mark, the newly-arrived Yan Koryani troops have clamped down heavily on border control, which in normal circumstances is quite a relaxed business involving a bottle of datsu or a new pair of sandals for the border guards. The new system requires each person to hand in all money and belongings, for which they are given receipts. There is then a wait of three or four days in the camp while their travel documents are studied and their belongings are searched. Surprisingly there has not been much pilfering, although characters would be wise either to hide really choice items or else to see that a high ranking officer countersigns the receipt.

While cooling their heels in the camp, the characters may wish to stroll back to Tsayil. The letters-of-credit handed out by the border guards are effectively worth only 90% of face value there. Arijan is being sheltered by some old war veterans who remember Kettukal, and is unlikely to announce his presence to the player characters without good reason.

In the fields outside Tsayil is a massive stela commemorating the victory of 2347 AS. This is a stone monolith about six metres high depicting Kettukal standing over a bound enemy warrior on a sacrificial slab. The stela has sunk into the ground over the years, and the base has become overgrown, until it is no longer possible to read the inscription: "He who loves his Emperor, let him stay his hand, for that love is a shield without which the Empire falls."

On the player-characters' second day in the camp, the Yan Koryani sappers are ready to pull down the stela. They intend to replace it with a new stela depicting Baron Ald. This has been prepared by Yan Koryani craftsmen and bears the illiterate inscription: "Beware to try conquer Ald, Army-Breaker."

The locals assemble in the field to watch the stela being toppled. Some of the old men growl and grumble under their breath, but with so many soldiers of the Legion of the Clan of the Red and Green Banner on hand, no-one dares to cause trouble. The work takes longer than expected, and by the time the great stela's roots have been torn from the ground the sky is darkening with the approach of the afternoon rains. As the storm hits, everyone runs for cover. The old stela is left face-down in the mud to be moved away the next morning.

The player-characters can go out in the storm to investigate without fear of discovery. The Yan Koryani soldiers are stationed within their camp and on patrols through the village, but the rain makes it easy to sneak past. The rain has washed away some of the earth beneath the uprooted stela, revealing a jumble of human bones. This is the remains of one of Vreshsheqmu's senior officers who was sacrificed after the battle that took place here eighteen years ago. Below him is a long stone box sealed with lead. This bears the same inscription as on the base of the stela. Anyone who opens it whose declared loyalty is not to the Emperor suffers a psychic blast causing a Grievous Wound and automatic lasting injury. Of course, when Kettukal's wizards sealed it they were thinking of the Emperor Hirkane. Ironically, the same spell will now harm any enemy of Hirkane's murderer, Dchich'une!

The box contains the battle-standard of the Regiment of the Mace of Steel, the group whom Kettukal defeated. Kettukal's astrologers determined that as long as the standard remained buried here, the Army of the Fist of Chaddarsha could never gain a hold in Kerunan. Naturally the ruling family of Koyluga, the House of Thirreqummu, would like to recover this standard. Many other factions, if they learned about it, would try to get their hands on it too. The player-characters cannot easily smuggle it across the border, and turning back if they were already signed into the border control and walk away, of course – but the referee ought to remind them that this is an opportunity that comes perhaps once in a lifetime...

THE LETTER

To Mirizhan, Major-Domo at the Clanhouse of the Morning Haze, the Far Chakas, Greetings!

I arrived safely in Rü, but found the local clanhouse unsafe for habitation by reason of woodworm. While repairs are being carried out I am staying with friends of our master's old comrade, who lament that they have not seen him for almost two months, but remember him with affection. Their home is very warm and comfortable, as you would expect.

On the road I passed a lady in a green cloak. She had with her four hunting dogs, or perhaps as many as five, and I am given to understand she will also be residing locally for a time. Why bring her own dogs? Well, in Rü there are only two, and they are old and even toothless, but they still have some spirit and I do not think they would take to the lady in question.

Your obliging nephew.

PS If there is any difficulty in making reply, and I know our master is busy, only say to his old comrade: remember Vreshsheqmu's curse.

MILITARY INFORMATION

The Legion of the Clan of the Red & Green Banner
General: Lady Hu'myek of Dharu
Base: Dharu, Yan Kor
Recent events: The entire legion (3000 medium infantry and 2000 light-armoured crossbowmen) has been assigned to the Kerunan Protectorate. Baron Ald is anxious to maintain his grip on the outlying fringes of Tsolyánu and not let the Imperium fragment in civil war.

The Regiment of the Mace of Steel
(Part of the Army of the Fist of Chaddarsha)
General: Lord Kurek Tiqonnu Thirreqummu
Base: Koyluga, Chalarvya
Recent events: A contingent of this force has recently occupied the city of Fenul, in the Chagari Protectorate. This contingent is commanded by Lord Arraqu Tiqonnu, the General's second son.