

Child of the Black Hand

by Brad Johnson

Part I

The huqundáli, the Great Morass, was particularly noisome that day, even in Old Town Púrdimal. The summer heat was a burden to all who walked outside. Tsútel hiSenkolúm arrived at the clanhouse of the Black Hand at noon. He stopped at the simple gate and announced his presence to the young girl sitting there beading necklaces. His dark robes and tall headdress must have frightened the child because she did not say a word as she voicelessly acknowledged the priest, got up, turned and quickly went to get one of the elders.

The majordomo came out to meet this priest of Grugánu. "Ngángmuru brujutlé, Learned One. How may we serve the Temple of the Knower of Spells?"

"The Cohort has sent me to deliver onto him a great gift" he replied. "Let us talk in a more secure area with your dlántukoi." He added as he looked around at the prying eyes that had gathered.

The majordomo led him to the visitor's area and left him in the capable hands of his clan cousin Tzél to see to the priest's needs while he went to inform his clanmaster of the message.

"What do you think he wants cousin?" the dlántukoi asked as he put on the appropriate level of dress for the meeting.

"I do not know. We have already paid our annual stipend to the temple, and we could ill afford that." Perhaps they are in need of some of our beadwork." He suggested.

"Fah, the priesthood of the Black Sword of Doom has never been a large buyer of our work. Maybe they desire a custom piece? We could use the revenue during these lean times. Come, let's find out what the priest has to propose," he said as he put on his headpiece and walked out of his quarters.

Tsútel carried the child under his robe as he entered the decaying Splendid Paradise quarter of the city. He quickly proceeded to the shrine's grounds and entered the ancient structure, then down to his work spaces deep below. He placed the infant into the iron cage that he had been preparing for many weeks.

The materials and security he had bought for this enterprise had been very costly. His fortunate find of a Dlamélish treasure trove in the tsuru'úm had paid for all of it. He was sure that the gems had made their way back to the Green Lady's temple by now with no trace of who had found it.

His luck had held as he located a clan woman in Old Town who was due to give birth at the prescribed time of planetary alignment given in the ancient tome that he had found along with the Lady's emeralds. This book they would not be getting back.

He had stealthily researched the Clan of the Black Hand and found that it was in rather poor shape. Much of its trade to the north had been blocked for the last several years and money was becoming scarce. The offer was simple. In exchange for the remainder of his wealth and an agreement to visit the clanhouse weekly to medically treat the clan members for their ills, Tsútel would receive any child born on a particular day one month from then.

The dlántukoi had hesitated at first, the thought of the many clan girls that were pregnant at the time, and the extra mouths that needed to be fed, grudgingly put him into a bargaining mood. The trade would ensure his clan's success for years to come and he would be serving his dark lord's wishes. The deal was struck after much haggling, followed by the noon meal.

Two children had been borne on that fateful day. When the clanmaster heard that the priest had arrived to collect his due, one of them had to be chosen. He chose the one with the slight disfigurement in its foot. His duties as the head of the clan were sometimes harsh as he had the newborn taken from its mother to be delivered to the gate. He had ordered his second wife to comfort the mother during her loss and to remind her of her clan duty.

Inside his work chamber the months passed quickly. Tsútel fed the child the food prepared using the recipe found in the mouldering book. Some of the rarer ingredients had required him to hire several of the local Hehegánu to obtain them. He did not care how they did it as long as it was discrete. The baby grew quickly in the cage. The vapours that rose from the large cauldron below the infant kept it in a dream state, interrupted only by hunger. After eight months its body had grown to the point where it actually pressed up against the bars on all sides. With neither of the moons, nor any of the planets shining down, the time had come. Slowly Tsútel lowered the cage down into the now boiling pot. The child only let out a small whimper as it touched the enchanted liquid. The priest's eyes gleamed in the light.

The cage was raised after all the flesh had come off of the skeleton. Tsútel opened the door, retrieved the bones and took them over to a stone bowl and ground them into powder. He then returned the fine particles to the steaming solution and waited for it to completely boil off.

The residual at the bottom of the vessel was carefully retrieved. It represented the essence of the child that had been sacrificed and with great intonations he placed the material into the carved out core of a walking staff. After skillfully sealing the top so that no one could see that it had been removed, he began the carving of the outside wood. With practiced hands from his younger days as a carver in the Flat Peak Clan, he began with chiseling out the rough features of the Aspect Tekóth Dmúmu, The Opener of the Gates. He finished the fine carving of the long skeletal inhuman skull and started on the depiction of ókh, Warder of Devices, just as the planet Zirúna began its course across the night sky.

The finishing touches and polishing took several more nights to complete. In the end Tsútel stood back and admired his work. Its hidden power would be revealed to its possessor in mysterious ways. It was unfortunate that he would not be around to see its effects. Lord Grugánu had other plans for him.

Part II

A new source of minerals had been discovered in the northern region of the Kurt Hills. The Clan of The Black Hand had been invited by the local governor to setup a long-term mining operation near the discovery and exploit the wealth for the Empire. The dlántukoi of the clanhouse in Púrdimal was given a quota of providing 100 clan members to go to the new location. This was a great opportunity for his younger leaders. They would have the prospect of bringing glory onto the clan.

The day before the chosen crew was about to set out a messenger arrived at the gate. The majordomo met with the Hehegánu and reported back to the dlántukoi. The courier had delivered a tall carven staff with instructions that it be sent with the settlers. He also informed the clan of the death of the priest Tsútel hiSenkolúm and that their bargain was now complete.

The dlántukoi examined the staff. He noticed the carvings of the Aspects and the curving inscription "The Child Always Returns to the Clan". All these years he had never inquired of the priest about the baby that had been taken. The cleric's weekly medical visits had greatly improved the health of his house. He would now have to find a replacement. He remembered that the mother of the newborn had volunteered to go south with the new group. She had never quite recovered from her loss. Perhaps this was a way for her to start over. He decided to entrust the staff to her to take with them to the new settlement. He figured that every new clanhouse should start out with some artifact from the previous place. This would do quite well.

The mother was at first surprised with the assignment. The thought that anything received from that beast that took her baby was repugnant. She even refused to see him when she was sick. Still, as she held the staff she felt some kind of connection with her lost son. She would treasure it always.

Part III

Mnéktu hiNátsura of the Dark Fear Clan was returning to Mekú from delivering drónu wine to the temple of Ksáru in Hmakuyál. He often took these assignments because it gave him an opportunity to pursue his true interest of collecting old religious artifacts. Unfortunately for him he was not very good at distinguishing a truly old piece from a recently manufactured copy sold to unwitting tourists in the market of the Ruined City. It was not until he returned home that the resident scholar at the clanhouse would declare the historical worthlessness of his most recent acquisition.

He could probably claim shámtnla against the seller, but that would require him to admit that he was an ignorant lout. It was best to just hang his items on the walls to learn from his past mistakes. Although this rarely happened.

On this trip he had been instructed to take a side trip into the Kúrt Hills to check on the vineyards to assess the quality of the next crop. Recent bad weather and reports of vine rot made the clan elders nervous about this year's wine. They had to know now if it was necessary to find another source to supplement their normal supply.

The village that he was about to visit was relatively new. Only 200 years before a band of colonists had come from Púrdimal to settle here. Since that time several other groups had joined them. His business was with the Clan of Deep Flowing Water who had set up a large vineyard in the region. There appeared to be some sort of symbiotic relationship between the fine quality of their fruits and the mining operations nearby.

Mnéktu had sent his assistant, Párshi out ahead of him so that he would have to deal with these low clans people as little as possible. He arrived at his camp early in the day and began to receive visitors. There was the usual prattling about how they were honored to provide their crops and how they would meet their commitments even with the poor weather. That was good news for the clan, if it were true. He looked at his assistant who signaled agreement. Satisfied, Mnéktu told them of his clan's approval and hinted at future business. He then motioned them out.

Párshi came up to him and whispered that there was still one visitor yet to see. This one concerned Mnéktu's personal hobby. With controlled excitement he agreed to the meeting. The dlántukoi of the Black Hand Clan appeared in front of him wearing clothes that were at least a century out of fashion. It never ceased to amaze him how these backwaters were so far behind in the civilized arts.

"What do you have to show me?" Mnéktu queried distantly.

Part IV (Conclusion)

Back on the sákbe towards home Mnéktu was smugly sure of his prize. The staff had the provenance of minor antiquity, but its mysterious origins had made the deal. The fine craftsmanship and underlying story made this worthy of fine conversation during the next feast. The dlántukoi's story of the disastrous cave-in at the mine and his need for money to buy new equipment gave Mnéktu the bargaining edge he needed to get a good price for the artifact they called Child. He agreed to pay the minimum needed for the clan to buy its tools along with the understanding that Dark Fear could count on Black Hand's support during the next trade negotiations.

His reverie was broken by screams as he felt his palanquin plunge to the ground. Furious, he clawed open the gauzy curtain of the tilted vehicle. He saw attendants rushing to help him out and just as he was about to order the execution of the incompetent litter bearer he noticed the look of terror on the faces of the surrounding servants. Párshi breathlessly explained, after he quickly arrived, that the caravan had been attacked from something from the swamp. A large, swift fiend had come over the edge of the causeway and snatched away the slave bearer before any of the guards had time to react.

Mnéktu chided the captain of the troop who quickly found a replacement for the lost bearer. It was not as fulfilling as an execution, but it would have to do, for now.

The following days brought with them great misery. The loss of several cart wheels resulted in the breaking of numerous casks of Hmakuyál liqueur that he was planning to serve at his return banquet. The morning mists had brought a sickness that spread throughout the caravan. He sent his personal doctor to help treat his fellow travelers before he lost anymore profit on this trip. Then the rains came.

The sullen, soaked Mnéktu arrived at the clanhouse. He had to postpone his formal dinner to attend to the funeral arrangements of his clan uncle and when he did have the party it was a dreary affair with mediocre food and poor entertainment. Even his story about the mysterious staff had only lukewarm interest. The death of the majordomo had obviously left a great void in the entertainment planning skills of the clan.

A malaise began to spread among the cousins. Business was off. Long held agreements had expired and were not renewed. The caravan had brought the sickness with them and it spread throughout the living quarters. And still it rained.

Eventually, Bótu the clan seer was asked to perform an investigation into this string of unfortunate events. He was seen wandering about the clanhouse in search of something that only he could find. The children ran in mock fright when they spotted the half-crazed Ksáru priest coming towards them. Everyone noticed that Bótu KAU MED TALE S at Mnéktu's room and then continued on his circuitous path.

Later that night Mnéktu received a summons. The elders on the upper dais were presently a rather sickly lot. The fever affected all of them and the resulting wheezing, coughing and blowing of noses was distracting to the dlántukoi who was trying to ask questions.

"Cousin," he began, "we have called you here to continue our search into why this plight has befallen us. Many here have remarked that it all began when you arrived from your last trip, and that even along your way back there were many inopportune occurrences. Can you explain any of this?"

Mnéktu started to sweat even though his fever had broken several days ago. He hoped that his perspiration would not be noticed in a room full of ailing clan members. He now began to worry that he would be blamed for everything! His position was threatened.

"Wise One," he began, "I am as distressed as anyone else about our problems, but I know of nothing that could help explain the situation."

"Tell us again of the prize that you brought back." One of the elders demanded.

After Mnéktu related the story to the assembly a grumbling began. Bótu then delivered his report about the strange disturbance that he detected near Mnéktu's room. Everything that had gone wrong recently was discussed and somehow was connected back to the now distraught defendant.

"Enough," the dlántukoi announced, "I have determined that the evidence points to the poor trading practices of Mnéktu. His wall of worthless trinkets is well known and that was acceptable because it is a minor disgrace that he brought upon himself. However, this taking advantage of an allied clan in need of help so that he could procure one of their clan treasures is dishonorable to the entire Dark Fear."

"Mnéktu," he ordered, "you will immediately return this artifact to its rightful owners and when you return we shall discuss the rest of your future."

The caravansari thought their fortune had changed when the rains finally stopped. Riding along, Mnéktu hoped that this was the end of his bad luck. Then the insects arrived. The plagues had kept the pests down for too long and now they were back with an immense hunger. Appearing out of the miasma they attacked in huge swarms. Several chlén were so thickly covered with the biting parasites that they were driven insane and began to run through the crowds crushing everything and everyone in their way until a few brave soldiers of the Legion of the Prince of the Blue Room took them down. Mnéktu observed all of this from his level of the sákbe and regretted that exalted status is meaningless to small vermin.

Normally most travelers would make room for a member of the Dark Fear, but his reputation as a harbinger of ill fortune had preceded him and the road was cleared for several tsán ahead to quicken his passage. An open follower of the pariah gods would have gotten less attention.

Upon his arrival at the mining camp, the weary, bug-bitten and somewhat drunk Mnéktu received the dlántukoi of the Black Hand once again.

"Here, take your worthless stick back and never let me see it again." He bellowed as Párshi delivered the staff.

"Great One, we cannot return your money for we have spent it on our needed equipment." The dlántukoi pleaded.

"I care not for what I have already given you. Just get out of my sight before I change my mind." And with that the meeting was over.

Mnéktu returned to Púrdimal and was reassigned to escort the wine shipments to the merchant clans outside of the City of Sárku with the express orders not to bring back any antiquities. These dismal trips and subsequent dealings with the mirthless followers of the Worm Lord led him to drink most of his profits away. His weight gain was legendary and a larger palanquin was built to carry him. He was last seen ordering his bearers to take a path that lead into the forbidden areas of the Kráa Hills.

The cave-in that had nearly ruined the Black Hand turned out to be a blessing. With their new equipment the clan opened up a new mine nearby and discovered a large deposit of high-grade ore. The clan became wealthy and grew as other members from all around Tsolyánu came to join them in this fresh find. As they arrived they learned the stories of their new land. They all agreed when they heard the legend of the staff that it was the foundation of their destiny.

As is inscribed "The Child Always Returns to the Clan" to thus serve the clan.

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