

The Wealth of Meshmúra

by Brad Johnson

Hrithik hiFeshengáru of the Green Opal Clan was an incorrigible gambler. He spent all of his free time and money in the pursuit of winning that one great elusive prize. A true follower of the teachings of Meshmúra of the Divergent Skeins, an Aspect of Dlamélish, he was a constant visitor at the wagering tables in the low clan gaming houses of Usenánu. His passion would often cause him run a debt, usually to a clan brother, sometimes to a moneylender but he would then work extra time tending the lisútl plants to earn the money to pay them back.

Shortly before the Intercalary Days a message came from the clanhouse in Jakálla requesting a shipment of roots to supplement the poor harvest down south. Due to the shortage there was great profit to be made due to the seasonal demand. Hrithik was chosen to accompany the cargo to the Great City of the Green-eyed Lady of Fleshly Joys. Such an honor sent him to the Temple to thank the Goddess. Upon arriving at the Shrine of Meshmúra he presented the last of his personal wealth in the form of tikánta blossoms before her visage. Even though he still owed a substantial sum to the Golden Lintel Clan he felt this sacrifice was more fitting. Besides with his share of the profits he could pay off the debt and still have some left over. The nubile priestess led him through the sacrificial ceremony and he prayed for Her guidance.

Upon finishing his meditation he stood up and left the shrine. As he was about to exit the temple grounds he noticed a priestess signaling to him. She was strikingly beautiful and wore a garment covered in faceted dark green gems. Did she need someone to help perform the evening ceremony? He had the time.

Hrithik approached her and she asked, "What do you most desire?"

"The blessing of the Lady to enjoy the gaming houses of Her city would be most welcome." He replied deferentially.

"Then you shall have it. For your piety you are rewarded with this pouch of silver. Take it to Jakálla and enjoy." She handed him a soft green leather sack that jingled with coins.

Hrithik opened it and looked inside. He could see a large handful of hlásh pieces. It was more than he had ever owned before. As he looked up to thank her, she was nowhere to be seen. With his small riches in hand he quickly left the temple.

The trip along the sakbé road was onerous. The chlén beasts were smelly enough in the streets of Usenánu, but there he didn't have to be around them the entire day and night. There were many kévuk games going on between the other travelers at the various stops, but Hrithik always claimed that he had no money to spend on such sport. He had decided to save the money for the tláshten tables of the Jakállan Green clans.

Thus, with no interruptions he began to think about his situation. "Maybe I should save this for my future needs." He thought. "When I am old man I may wish to purchase the services of a young girl. If only to rub my feet." Soon his thoughts were filled with what he might desire in the years to come.

Upon arrival in Jakálla he reported to the clanhouse. He was greeted warmly and put up in the guesthouse. A young nephew named Gáyan was assigned to show him around after their work was done. "Uncle, what do you wish to see in our city? Perhaps a visit to the Dome of Moist Pleasures? Or maybe the Halls of Ineffable Fortune?" he asked.

"I cannot afford such luxuries." Hrithik replied. "I am but a poor clansman."

"I am sorry Uncle. I noticed your full purse when you were unpacking, so I naturally thought that you intended to celebrate on your trip here." Gáyan remarked.

"Never mind that." Hrithik scolded. "I have nothing to be wasted on trivialities." So, he spent the rest of his time in the city at the clanhouse selling lisútl root, never venturing out in case he might be tempted to spend even a single copper qirgál on an unnecessary item.

His farewell was not as warm as his greeting. The clan had soon tired of their taciturn cousin and was glad to see him go. The clanmaster gave him a letter of credit for the goods they had sold and sent him on his way.

Hrithik returned home dreaming about his comfortable old age. Only a few more years tending the roots and then he could start to spend his funds. "La, what a time that will be." He thought.

Back at the clanhouse he presented the letter to his clanmistress, Dzái hiChankólu. "Hrithik, did you enjoy yourself in Jakálla?" the dlántukoi asked.

"I am too poor to enjoy such an expensive place, esteemed one." Hrithik replied.

"That is most unfortunate since I have recently been given a summons demanding the repayment of your debt to the Golden Lintel Clan. You shall bring shame upon this house if you do not immediately tend to this matter. You are dismissed." And she waived him out.

Hrithik scurried out of the meeting hall and went to his room to retrieve his money. He realized that the honor he had received for a successful trading trip had been entirely erased by the moneylender's demand for his personal debt. All that he could do now is make sure that this problem would not grow. He nervously walked as fast as he could to the Golden Lintel's clanhouse in the entertainment district. It was difficult to maintain the proper dignity when thoughts of bussán laid heavily on his mind.

Upon arrival at the Golden Lintel's storefront he announced himself and requested to see his creditor, Achán hiSsaívra. He nervously waited outside trying to keep from sweating. He failed.

"Hrithik hiFeshengáru," Achán said as he entered the area, "please join me in the side room."

The space was elegantly decorated with a celebration of precious metals. This clan made it clear that the pursuit of wealth was their main objective. They sat around an ornate round table. "So, you have come to balance your books?" Achán continued.

"Yes." Hrithik replied. "Please forgive me for my lateness. I offer shámtila to compensate your clan for my error."

"Very well. An extra five percent of your debt will be adequate. Let us count out the money." Achán recommended and put out a thick cloth onto the inlaid wood.

Hrithik took out his sack, opened up the strings and upended the contents onto the cloth. What came out were not silver hlásh, but small flat green river stones. Perplexed, Achán looked up and said, "What have you brought me?"

Horrified, Hrithik stared at the stones. "I do not understand. Only this morning there were coins in there."

Achán stood up and said sternly, "You have shamed me in my own clanhouse. I shall immediately make claim on your clan for full recompense of your debt and shámtila for your actions today. Leave now."

As if punctuating the meaning of his demand two burly clan guards appeared at the entrance to escort him out.

Dazed by what had just occurred, Hrithik wandered the streets of the district. Afraid to go back to the clan, but knowing that it was inevitable he could think of no defense for his actions.

The Green Opal clan could not afford to pay off his debt. His future was bleak.

As night fell he found himself outside of the temple of Dlamélish without realizing how he got there. "Perhaps I can find some solace in here." He thought. The temple was preparing for the nightly crowd.

It was difficult to find a quiet place to pray and he had to keep searching until he saw a small delicate shrine with no patrons and a lone priestess sitting in meditation.

"Revered One," he began as he entered the shrine. "I am a poor man who will soon lose what I have left. I need guidance."

As the priestess looked up recognition spread across Hrithik's face. This was the same one who had given him the pouch.

"A poor man indeed." she said sadly. "You were gifted with a purse of endlessly flowing silver and you did nothing to appreciate it."

"An endless amount of silver?" croaked Hrithik. "I did not know!"

"Of course you did not know because you did not try to spend it." She chided. "You hoarded it and did not even share with your clansmen in Jakálla."

"But I was thinking of my future." He moaned.

"The Lady is not about the future!" the priestess reproved, "She is of the pleasures of this moment. You could have had untold enjoyment but you chose the secure path. You have failed miserably in your devotion and for that you shall be punished." With that said she returned to her meditation and as he watched the shrine began to shimmer and change.

He found himself standing in the noon sun facing the clan hall entrance. The commotion inside drew him forward. As he entered with trepidation the clan cousins recognized him and the assemblage quickly silenced. The dlántukoi called to him, "Where have you been for the last three days? Your absence has brought even more shame onto the clan."

"I do not know, honored one." Hrithik replied.

"Fhá," the dlántukoi exclaimed' "then do you know how you will pay these debts?"

"I cannot." he sobbed.

"Then the clan council has no choice but to sell you into slavery in order to not lose any more honor." She signaled to the guards to take him.

"Wait," slobbered Hrithik, "I claim the Right of Meshmúra to become chattel of the Temple of Dlamélish for my loss of property through gambling." He said this thinking that being a slave at the temple for following Her doctrine was better than being a slave anywhere else. He felt that he could make his case.

A rumble went through the assembled crowd. Such a request had not been made in generations. Perhaps this could be a way to keep some of the clan's honor intact.

Dzái turned to the elderly clergywoman sitting next to her on the dais. "Clansister, does the Lady accept this cousin and his debts into Her Temple?"

Closing her eyes the priestess announced, "No, we find him lacking. He did not earn the Right."

Dzái stood and proclaimed, "I declare this man to be nakomé. Take him to the slave market and return with the proceeds so that I may personally delivery it to the Golden Lintel clan."

As Hrithik was taken from the room he saw through welled-up eyes that no one recognized his presence. Even his mother tuned her face and his father looked straight through him. He had become a symbol of their collective disgrace and his name would not be mentioned again.

The end was slow in coming. Hrithik was sold to the Emerald Circlet clan and performed as an entertainer who worked between acts as a human target that ran around the stage while drunken revelers threw darts at him. He stood as witness to their merriment. His true punishment was to observe those who truly understood how to enjoy this life. Finally, one evening while playing his role, he slipped on some patron's vomit and fell onto a phallic shaped stage light. His body was dragged off broken and bleeding as the customers showed their appreciation by tossing qirgáls. This was an appropriate beginning for his journey to the Plane of Unfulfilled Desires.

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