

### 30th Harvest Moon - 3rd Hunting Moon 14 AR Background

The previous summer the Alliance was beset by a curse that caused its own children, and those of other towers, to fall in to a deep slumber, their souls called elsewhere. Around this time we met with a the former Celestial Beaurocracy Master Alchemist and Sorcerer Zvang Ze. Years before at the Grand Conjunction he had been part of a pact with 3 others to gain immortality, the price being these children's souls. He agreed to withdraw from this pact if we did a service for him. Hence we travelled to Akari Island to his garden that had fallen out of his control and recovered a plant known as the Black Lotus for him. Somewhat unwittingly we also released an entity known as the Spirit of Manchu from its tomb within the garden. Most (though not all) of the children's souls were released as a result of this deal. In subsequent meditation it crossed my mind - what was so valuable about the Black Lotus plant that Master Zvang Ze could value it more than immortality? We soon learned.

Summer turned to spring and I found myself on a mission sponsored by High Priestess Rahima to recover some Rangers lost in the borderlands of the Oasis of Souls. The area was rife with addicts of the Black Lotus plant, which caused them to act in a somewhat free spirited and disordered fashion. It transpired that some of the Quahib tribe were peddling this dangerous drug; their suppliers were a high status group of Akari Islanders whom we defeated. I, and others became dependant on the drug through deception.

Spring turned to summer and it became apparent that many of the Celestial Beaurocracy (CB) patrols were suffering great losses. Around half of the patrol members would be found dead. The rest had vanished. Our superiors felt it would be politic to offer assistance to the CB in resolving this problem, possibly to forge greater ties with them and reduce the growing threat of the Northern Alliance. Coinciding with this, the supplies of Black Lotus held by the Hospital were running dangerously low. Supplies were needed to slowly wean those of us addicted to it, off the drug. It was felt that the answer to both problems might lie on Akari Island itself. An appointment with the Dyfer Dyne (DFD) at the World Window was made on our behalf.

On this mission:

Orlando	Veteran of the Crusaders, Leader of the mission
Tornado	Sorcerer of Blue and Green schools, Wizard of the Red School
Gilreyhan	Sorcerer of the Red School, Follower of Umbari
Jack	Druidic Priest
Sophie	Journeywoman Pathfinder, Gauntlet Priestess

Nero	Priest of the Grey Path
Kalliste	Veteran of the Rangers
Lupacuore	Veteran of the Rangers
Andarta	Veteran of the Iron Guard, Druid of the Crone
Cynnon	Wizard of the Grey School, Ovate
Myrtle	Wizard of the Brown School
Toshiro	Veteran Ranger
Myself, Teppic	Priest of the Grey Path

### **Waterday - Finding the World Window**

We approached the area of the World Window with some trepidation. Since the fall of the DFD tower we were unsure as to who would now hold it. Night had fallen a few hours before and Portis, a Pathfinder assigned to us, led us down through driving rain to a distant pinprick of light. Howls were heard, and the shapes of unnatural beasts were glimpsed in the undergrowth. We were assailed, they were strange hairy beasts, in some way linked to the spheres and not commonly known to infest this region. After defeating them we moved forward to the increasingly inviting light.

The building housing the World Window portal looked a little poorly maintained to me, perhaps as the DFD have fallen on hard times. Many folk of many different towers sheltered from the rain within. As we entered we were greeted by Hamash - the World Window Engineer, still openly wearing his DFD colours, though strictly speaking he should now be referred to as towerless. Next we met a Shadowsfall representative who would not give his name, for reasons best known to him he seemed quite well disposed to the 'towerless' World Window Engineer he resided with. Also present was Captain Dunloss of the Kalid Dothloddass. I talked with him for some time, as he seemed a man of reason rather than dogmatic prejudice. We discussed the Northern Alliance, which he sees as an instrument of peace. It became clear to me that although we know little of their towers, they also know little of ours, as violence usually cuts such discourse short. A Reader trader was also in attendance. Jered a pathfinder had arrived there ahead of us a shared some of his delicious warming soup with us all. During our meal several Morgothians of Barad Tirgul passed through, they partook of the freely given hospitality but mostly seemed to be scouting out the premises.

### **Bundled off into the night**

We talked with Hamash over dinner; he was cordial company but seemed a little naive regarding the vulnerability of his position at the World Window. As one of maybe half a dozen or so remaining engineers his skills were much sought after, as we had Sorcerers capable of negotiating for their Schools we offered him entry to our Alliance but he declined. We offered him our protection for as long as we stayed nevertheless, as we were concerned he may be coerced to the service of another Tower. Things were in disarray at the World Window, upheaval had caused delays and errors - a recent group had attempted to travel to a plane

called 'Kalimar' using 'unverified earth'. As a result several unwelcome entities had slipped this way through the portal, including the beasts we faced in the woods earlier.

The Morgothians returned, this time in force, they quickly bundled Hamash out through the front door. However we were expecting this and quickly wrested him back slaying his abductors. He was most grateful.

We were keen to travel promptly to Akari Island, and gave Hamash our bag of earth from Akari Island to begin preparing the Window. He began his ritual but had to stop several times, claiming there were problems with the Window. The ritual was not going to plan and magical entities of an unknown plane slipped through the opening and closing rifts in the window. Soon we were overwhelmed and it was a struggle just to protect Hamash and stop him from being disrupted. The Window snapped open, Cynnon stepped through first; I was last, foolishly trying to gather up my scattered casting kit under a barrage of magic. Hamash stayed on Orin Rakatha, refusing to come through under our protection, what became of him I do not know.

### **Mistaken for Ninja**

I came through at the rear to find my companions engaged in a desperate fight. We were in a strange building with walls and screens constructed seemingly of paper. It seems we had caught the occupants unawares and they had decried us as Ninja sent to kill them and defended themselves with gusto. Most were well skilled, like Masters in our Monastery. Their leader was a man of military bearing, dressed in a silk kimono, a 'sunrise' headscarf, and a truly magnificent trailing moustache. He was a champion of great skill, moving with economy and grace, his blows biting hard. Cynnon fell to his skill and we felled one of his folk too I think. Having had chance to weigh us up he now realised we were not Ninja, called parlay and for the return of each sides fallen.

It transpired he was none other than Shogun Mikanawe, Governor of the Southern Province of Sokoku; we were not on Akari Island at all! He was also a man of diplomacy yet a stickler for protocol and became gravely offended if any turned their back on him or even pointed the toes of their feet in his direction. He recognised that we were not Ninja but barbarian peoples, and recalled that our folk had done some good work on the neighbouring Isle of Akari before. Nevertheless he was offended by our rough intrusion into his tea ceremony, alarmed at the gouges and slashes in the screen walls and (most grievously of all) the fact that we had disturbed the finely balanced 'Feng Shui' of his 'Paper Room'. We told him of our mission and our need to reach Akari Island.

He offered us the concession of the hospitality of a nearby camp whilst he retired and considered the price of his leniency. We moved to the comfortable encampment, under the awning of a large tent. Jo-San the Shogun's advisor came to us. The Shogun had calmed down and the price of our vandalism and lodgings was explained. On the morrow we were to travel south across the marginal lands towards the sea. There were many Ronin (Masterless Samurai) there, having no leader to instil them with honour they would often take things from the Shogun's people and cause trouble. If they were killed or driven into the sea our debt would be considered paid. Beyond these lands lay the sea; there lived a Boatwoman who could take us over the sea to Akari, for a price.

We settled into the camp, several Pathfinders had come through the Window to assist us and would be seen from time to time securing the area or camp. We sat and talked for some time, not for the last time, JACK began lapsing into strange personalities and talking through them.

### **Earthday - The Ronin Borderlands**

We gathered at the Paper Room a few hours after dawn. A Sokukan chef had been assigned to cook for us and we ate heartily. We set off through a forest not unlike on Orin Rakatha. For the first of many occasions we met and destroyed Elementals of Steel that seem common here, as I believe these lands has an affinity to the element of steel.

The forest faded and turned to rolling grassy dunes. There was the taste of salt carried on the steadily rising breeze. We slew a small band of Ronin who would not talk with us but barred our passage nevertheless.

A lone Ronin approached us over the dune tops. He neared, and upon seeing Toshiro came to talk with him. His name was Yohiro, he knew Toshiro of old in the days when they both served the same Master - Hatori Hanzo. But Yohiro was now Ronin, and despite old alliances, honour forbade him to let even his old friend Toshiro pass without protocol being observed. The two warriors ascended the peak of the highest dune; Toshiro planted the Sashimoto banner he always carried in the ground where it fluttered in the now strong wind. No rules were discussed - both warriors understood what was expected of them by ancient tradition. They stood two sword lengths apart and would draw at the same time and (very) briefly spar until a single clear blow was struck, then both would respectfully withdraw. Things looked dire as Yohiro struck the first two blows, but Toshiro summoned up the skill to reply with two of his own. The final two blows landed simultaneously, yet it was Yohiro that bowed to Toshiro, as it was he who had trained and improved the most since their last meeting. Yohiro bid us pass in peace but felt the other Ronin would not show so much honour. He commented that most of the Ronin were currently being recruited by the Samurai Oshiro Yamamoto and formed into a unit, also that he maybe

recruiting them on behalf of his own Master, whomever that may be. We left, Toshiro bid him seek out the service of Shogun Mikanawe and end his life as a Ronin.

We fought strange 'Sand Devils' - elemental creatures linked to the dunes themselves. Soon after we dispatched them we noted a large group of Ronin. They moved to a defensive high position while we sought sheltered ground to cast. We approached; again they were not interested in discussion and began rhythmic and repetitive postures and exercises to prepare for battle. The battle was a tough one, uphill all the way, and the Ronin displayed skills and techniques with blade and staff that many of our Alliance could only dream of. A hard won victory was reached.

### **The Boatwoman**

We travelled about a league over the dunes, the sound of the sea was heard over the last rise. Here we met Ho Li, a monk 'of the Temple' - a reflective man who seemed keen to engage us in conversation. He was a man who would often be able to talk to the spirits of those who had passed. We asked if he knew of the Boatwoman and what her price would be to travel to Akari. He explained that the Boatwoman was a Makame (some kind of immortal elemental spirit?); she has absolute control over the waves and all that passed above or below them. We should be careful how we speak to her and what we offer her. Days before, Ronin marching under Oshiro Yamamoto's banner passed this way and demanded passage through the waves, she was displeased with them, perhaps by their arrogance, and with a word she caused mighty waves to rise, and there they drowned in their armour.

We bid Ho Li farewell and crested the dunes onto a wide beach, the tide was out and lapped the fine sand in the far distance. To our left was a small river, where it met the sea, there were many rocks and a lone distant figure could be seen partially submerged in the river. We approached, kneeling respectfully before the Boatwoman, as she stepped forward from the water onto the sand. She was a tall figure, centuries of age were etched on her eerily pale flesh, and her sunken eyes peered out over a long hooked nose and under a wide brimmed reed hat typical of these lands. She demanded one of three things if she was to take us to Akari Island - gold, a year's service, or to conquer the sea itself. In true Valley style we chose the latter, slowly the sand, rocks, seaweed and water itself coalesced to form of figures and they began their assault. I remember standing with Toshiro and Orlando who fought with much valour against their vile poisoned blows. We were victorious, the lady beckoned us to follow her into the waters, and hesitantly we followed until all were consumed by the waves. We were spirited by tides and currents through the sea itself for nearly four hours, a most difficult and uncomfortable journey for most of us.

### **The Shores of Akari**

Tired and drenched we waded out of the waves to a different coast, relieved by the feel of the sand between our toes. We followed a shallow river valley inland. Here we met what we assumed to be provincial guards, but they behaved rashly and strangely, lacking the reserve and dignity that most folk in these lands value. They chose to hide their faces with white masks and seemed able to focus on great feats of psionics with little effort.

We deviated from the river across rough land. Perched on a mound we saw some strange figures. On closer inspection they were mostly humanoid of form but with avian features. They were known as 'Tengu' and it transpired they greatly value 'shiny things' and would hoard them in their nest - in this case they had 'hoarded' two Steel Elementals. They offered to swap them for Tornado, who they felt would come out far more shiny and blue if they could buff him up just a little. Unsurprisingly it came to blows, the Tengu being more impressive foes than their light frames would suggest, fleet of foot (or claw) and combining spiritual blows and Ki in an effective manner.

### **Number One Son**

From here on, all changed for the worse, we approached forest and were tired and somewhat strung out as is often the way. Figures were seen in the trees, they moved forward quickly and gathered into a fearsome warband. First to speak was Oshiro Yamamoto resplendent in a fine kimono. It became apparent he was the same Samurai we had met several moons ago running Black Lotus to the Quahib tribe at the Oasis of Souls. He could not hide his anger at having been previously bested by the Valley, he did not hide the fact it was he who had been recruiting Ronin on Sokoku. Indeed it became apparent he had gathered this private army together at the bidding of his Master - none other than Zvang Ze! Alongside Oshiro and his Ronin and Ninja warband stood the silent and brooding figure of another Samurai, dressed in rich ceremonial armour. The group referred to him as 'Number One Son', the Son of Zvang Ze himself. They began their punishment for our interference in the Black Lotus trade, it was brief, bloody, and overwhelming. Oshiro once again displayed his Horselaying/Whoreslaying technique to cut through armour as if made of paper. But it was Number one son who was the more accomplished. In the melee I briefly faced him, a swift blow underneath my sword arm deftly found the plexus of nerves that lie there, after sudden searing pain, my arm lay numb and useless at my side, my sword in the dirt. A second slash did likewise to my upper leg and it crumpled beneath me. I gave praise to the Evil Sphere for sparing me from a third (and probably fatal) blow as a second assailant Power Drained me to unconsciousness.

I awoke in a ruined and overgrown courtyard. Others of the group were on the floor, many were bleeding, and all were either incapacitated or tied up. A few of the group were not present. A Ronin and a Ninja of Oshiro's group stood guard over us. A couple of us that could set about tending those whose spirits were being called away from their shattered bodies, did so. Suddenly our guards were assailed, two Ninja dressed in the colours of the forest assailed our

guards. They were of the Sisterhood of the Red Lotus, a (relatively) secret society that protects the down trodden and oppressed, with whom we had good dealings last time we came to Akari. They dispatched our guards; their style was unorthodox, but effective, using their signature 'striking jellyfish' technique to good effect. Others of our group who had avoided the dishonour of defeat (Andarta and Tornado I think) joined us. We were freed of our bonds, and thanked our liberators. They ushered us quickly through the forest to their Safe house, which they shared with a detachment of the Celestial Beurocracy sent to Akari to find out more about their slain and missing companions.

### **The Safe house**

The hospitality of the Celestial Beurocracy was most welcome, as all we had encountered in Akari Island so far was hostility. Their leader Chow Fat told us of how his people had come to grief due to the Black Lotus, which the Akarans seemed to be particularly keen to sell to them. He and his group had come to find out more, despite our difficulties with the Northern Alliance of late, he welcomed our help too. Many of his folk back on Orin Rakatha had become addicted to Black Lotus and left the safety of the Tower, half were subsequently found dead, and the other half vanished. They knew about Zvang Ze, he had once been a notable Blue Sorcerer and Alchemist in the Celestial Beurocracy, but a year ago he left for Akari Island. He has been using his warlord, Oshiro Yamamoto to recruit both Ronin and Ninja to his cause. Oshiro fights alongside Number One Son, who is indeed Zvang Ze's son and a master of the blade. We were somewhere near Zvang Ze's Garden, which we had visited a year before at Zvang Ze's request, to harvest cuttings from the original Black Lotus plant. If we wanted to go there, entry would be more difficult now as the only way to get in was with a Jade Key he always kept on his person.

Whilst on Akari, the CB had developed an association with the Sisters of the Red Lotus, whom we had met before, a year ago. It appears the Red Lotus Society were involved in the overthrow of the old Governor, and the appointment of the new Governor Cheng Wang. It seems that although on the face of things, times are stable in Akari, the Sisters of the Red Lotus are some kind of splinter group of the Red Lotus Society that are unhappy with the Governor claiming he is oppressive to women and accusing him of holding a harem of Concubines under his thrall by the use of the Black Lotus.

A dinner of Akaran food was served; it was strange, but most delicious. After dinner we suffered further attack from the Steel Elementals that seem endemic to the plane. We lit a fire beside the doorway of the shelter to raise our spirits. Soon a couple of those visible in it's light suffered painful assaults on their mind. Occasionally soft footsteps could be heard skirting around the building, we realised Ninja had been sent to kill us. A brief attempt at striking out of the building to the nearest sound of movement failed as they ran into the darkness, waited, then assaulted us again with their psionic powers. A new more successful plan was hatched, a small squad of Tornado, Jack, Orlando and I set off into the woods and laid low until a Ninja could be heard

moving or bothering those around the fire. Being close alongside the ninja, with dark-accustomed eyes we were able to pick them off one by one as they revealed themselves. This continued for perhaps a couple of hours.

### **Fireday - Training with a Wise Master**

We had retired to the CB camp, whilst they set guards for us. Over breakfast Chow revealed that he might be able to train us to avoid Number One Son's 'Dragons-touch technique' that had felled most of the group. We were heartened to hear this, for we feared meeting him again. So we split into groups and spent the rest of the morning studying and training. There was training in meditation; this was expected to be difficult for us, so our senses were fortified by an herbal infusion known to help in these matters. A few (predictable) members of our group were poor at this. There was also training in fighting multiple opponents and also duelling - the winner being first to quick-draw a sheathed sword and strike his opponent cleanly, without reply. Intermittently our training would be disturbed by some of the strange Steel Elementals and psionic creatures native to the place, perhaps attracted by our activity.

### **The Governor arrives**

Training finished and we withdrew to the building for sustenance. A retainer called How Fat entered and announced the approach of Governor Cheng Wang himself. He was a finely dressed man in a rich green kimono, wide brimmed hat and had great volumes of grey hair and a beard, both of which were neatly plaited. He leant heavily on a great spear but nevertheless I got the impression that both his mind and body were still sharp. We were respectful, as protocol dictates in these parts. He announced he was well disposed to the Valley in general as the Valley's previous activities here had resulted in him reaching the Governors post. He was clearly a politically astute man used to trading in favour, rank and alliances. We discovered that Zvang Ze was one of his advisors, but he was not so close to him that he would not entertain helping us against him, or at least not to intervene against us. If we were to solve a politically inconvenient problem for him, he could be persuaded to allow us to pursue our own agenda on Akari without restraint; he would also use his influence with the Ninja Clans to see that they did not bother us again also. The political problem he wished us to remove was that of some political dissidents in a nearby village. He would send a guide to help us identify those dissidents hiding there that he wished to be destroyed; if we were successful there would be further reward that evening. We agreed, though in our hearts we strongly suspected that it might be the Sisterhood of the Red Lotus he was sending us to destroy.

### **The rise of the Cult of Manchu**

We set off in the company of How Fat, the Governor's guide, once again dealing with more native psionic creatures. On a steep rise in the path we met a man dressed in a black gown. He appeared to be alone, but he mentioned there were more of his folk in a clearing at the top of the hill. He described himself as a follower of Manchu. This was the Undead entity we had



inadvertently released from Zvang Ze's garden a year ago. I mentioned this, thinking it might make him well disposed to us, so we could talk further. Cynnon was casting, when he finished we entered the clearing, there was at least a dozen followers of Manchu lined up within. We engaged them in conversation but it was a sham to allow their Yellow Sorcerer to cast, in hindsight we were lax to let him do so. He unleashed a mighty bolt of chain lightning that fizzed back and forth, amongst the front of the group, biting hard, without Tornado's well-timed static field I would have died. The followers of Manchu were a fearsome mix of warriors and monks and pressed us hard, nearly to breaking point, Orlando and Kalliste fell but could be saved from death. The Sorcerer's spear burned as it struck, fortunately power hammers kept him from unleashing a fair amount of mana, and he was finally felled by Andarta, who threw his weapons aside to lunge at him and drain his power. We pieced ourselves together in the aftermath of the fight. I found Sophie lying on the floor, tired and lacking imagination, I defaulted to Valley Protocol Number 6 'The Approach to the Incapacitated Adventurer'. Step 1 - 'Check Wounds' - She was not wounded, Step 2 - 'Check that the Adventurer has Power in their Body' - Yes, Step 3 'Check for the Effects of Invocations' - No, Step 4 - 'Assume Adventurer in under the effect of 'Sleep Spell' and rouse with Big Stick until responsive'. She did indeed become responsive as I disturbed her from her meditation, not sleep, for which I apologised, and hopefully the protocol will be amended soon. We wished to interrogate the Sorcerer so we weakened him with disease before he woke, he was crazed with fervour for Manchu, his parting gift to Andarta was to reach out and fry his leg down to a charred stump with stored magic before expiring.

### **Double-cross at the village**

We met further Tengu and fought them when they became threatened as we came close to their nest on the way to the village. After this our guide met with two others of the Governor's men sent to rendezvous with us and help us against the dissident villagers. They had been watching the village and it lay around the bend in the path. Whilst some of us talked with the two newcomers, a few of us went ahead to try and talk to the villagers before the Governor's men were in earshot. The village was a rather pathetic gathering of hovels. We instantly recognised two of the women villagers as the Sisters of the Red Lotus who had helped us the day before, though they were now dressed in peasant garb. We explained that the Governor had sent us to kill them but we intended to turn on the Governor's men at the right moment instead. The Governor's men approached and identified the two 'Sisters' as the political dissidents that we had been sent to kill, by virtue of the distinctive necklaces they both wear. We quickly turned on the Governor's men, weakened them with diseases from the evil sphere so they could not run far, then efficiently dispatched them. The bodies were burnt and the Sisters of the Red Lotus thanked us, a good friendship was forged with them and one gave their necklace to Kalliste as a gift. We set off again back to the CB hideout.

### **Caught with our Guard Down**

Our training in the morning had been intense and we were now tired and lax. We approached the building in dribs and drabs, we expected the welcome smell of the cook's fire not the assembled hoard of Oshiro Yamamoto's Ronin. Orlando, and Sophie were first back, they saw

a few of the CB lying dead on the floor and were immediately assaulted by the Ronin, the shout went up and the rest of us hurried to help. The battle was not a long one but brutal and intense, Cynnnon valiantly fell under a mass of blows, Jack to the harmful influence of the evil sphere followed by a couple of quick ninja blows. One by one the Ronin fell until Oshiro and one of two ninja remained, Oshiro displayed his masterly swordsmanship again, slicing through armour like paper, but the age-old Valley tactic of weight of numbers saw us through and he fell. It took us some time to recover from this assault and use scrolls to return the spirits of those who fell. Soon after this we met the Governor again, explaining to him how we had killed the political dissidents his men had identified, but that they were skilled opponents, the women especially, and that his own men were zealous and brave yet had died in the fray. We showed him the necklace we claimed to have taken from the dead woman as proof of our success. He was pleased and announced that he had arranged a banquet for this evening, to which he had invited many notable dignitaries, which we may talk. Indeed his advisor Zvang Ze himself was invited.

### **The Great Banquet**

Dusk arrived, many minions had been dispatched by the Governor to construct a long, low table in the clearing beside the building we stayed in, The weather was kind to us, the sky was clear, many paper lanterns were hung in the surrounding trees to light the banquet scene. Tornado had busied himself collecting as many vessels of water as possible and had arranged them in the building to facilitate the casting of Green High Magic to replenish his mana. Mid way through his casting a flash and smoke emerged from a previously unoccupied corner of the building, a massive framed, dark skinned creature with long green hair bearing a great spear appeared, Tornado was broken out of his casting in anticipation of combat. The visitor was the Dai-Oni, an entity perhaps in some way related to the Ogre-Magi of our plane; he was ruler of the Oni, who are a native race on Akari. He was the first of the guests invited by the Governor for the evening Banquet. Tornado huffed and puffed around for a few minutes complaining about being disturbed. The Dai-Oni was cordial enough and happy to talk, each time we filled his glass with the limited supply of Orin Rakathan beer we had left, he effortlessly drained it in one, and expected those around him to do the same. We tried to rotate ourselves to keep up but he soon noticed. The Governor returned this time in the company of a Geisha girl, an immaculately dressed and presented young lady, schooled in protocol, fine arts and all the other skills required to attend to her master's needs. Next to arrive was Shogun Mikanawe, Governor of Southern Sokuku, whom we had recently had favourable dealings with, and he was pleased to talk with us again. He announced in his ever-booming voice that as this was a festival, protocol could be relaxed and he would not be offended by guests turning their back on him or even pointing their toes at him, so that we might all enjoy the banquet. Two individuals dressed in a slightly different style came, the first was familiar and introduced him self as Zvang Ze Manchu. He was now using the name of the undead creature we released a year ago as his own! We mused whether this meant he was a descendant of Manchu or whether he now embodied the spirit of Manchu, and that the Manchu cultists we had fought earlier that day were now his followers. If word had spread from Oshiro and Number One Son to Zvang Ze he must surely have been aware that we were on Akari Island to thwart him. However, he talked to us in a cordial fashion, either from ignorance of our purpose, respect for Governor Cheng Wang, or in

order to learn more of our ways. His companion was Li Fang of the great land Empire of Chung Po, He spoke little, and when he did it was to Zvang Ze in the strange language of Chung Po. There was clearly bad blood between Shogun Mikanawe and Zvang Ze on account of Zvang Ze recruiting Ronin in the Shogun's lands, exacerbated by the old Sokoku/Chung Po rivalry. Li Fang had another companion, who described himself as Li Fang's entertainer and Fool. All the other guests saw nothing strange in him, regarding him as a harmless Akaran Prestidigitator, but to all of us who had met him before he was clearly Abadon Dreamweaver, 11th Sorcerer of House Tumdurgal, perhaps disguised with the aid of some illusion.

All gathered and sat cross-legged at the long banquet table, Governor Chen Wang in the middle. Things proceeded cordially but the Shogun baited Zvang Ze constantly. Between courses they stood alone together away from the table and argued in raised voices, we fully expected to hear the drawing of steel and release of mana, but peace returned, in accordance with Governor Chen Wang's wish. Many other things came to pass. Li Fang revealed his addiction to Black Lotus as Zvang Ze sprinkled it liberally in his tea, much to his delight. The Shogun confided his intention to go to Emperor Tokugawa of Sokuko to enlist help so they might bring about action to stop Zvang Ze recruiting Ronin on Sokuko. Tornado, in his position as Sorcerer proposed a deal with Governor Chen Wang to allow 8 Akaran students to train with our schools of magic, as magic is rare on Akari. In return we might send 8 students from our Monastery to learn more of their skills. Late in the night Kalliste used her charms and nimble fingers to relieve a slightly drunken Zvang Ze of the Jade key to his garden. Abadon performed several illusions for us, making things disappear, and pulling silk scarves from nowhere to the amusement of the crowd. Following this he gave card readings to those that wished to have them. Orlando's was most troubling, the details now escape me but it transpired that Orlando is deeply troubled that we did not recover all sleeping children's souls on our previous mission the year before. According to the cards the one entity that might be able bring back these souls is the evil entity known as the Oppawang that had troubled Akari Island before. The subject of the Oppawang recurred later in the evening. Rumour had it that the Oni were in the process of trying to return the Ochimo, great spirits of nature to existence. In the past they had been corrupted, and in their corrupted form it was they that had caused the Oppawang to return to Akari Island.

### **World Window Repair Team**

Our guests slowly left and without the throng of voices the forest seemed deathly quiet all of a sudden. We talked about ninjas again, or the possibility of attacks directed by Zvang Ze now he knew where we were, and paranoia descended. We decided the building was poorly defensible so moved to the nearby abandoned stockade to sit in the dark, waiting, several of us started casting as it made us feel more prepared. The air cracked and fizzed, many elementals formed before our eyes, all with dazzling, blinding lights bursting from their faces. They bore down on Myrtle particularly. I remember sitting next to her as we were both casting, she was disturbed, then so was I. We both escaped our dead end corner of the stockade through a small hole in the fence we had noted as we sat down. It was a confusing battle, but the elementals were

defeated. Why were they especially after Myrtle? On further questioning, we had our suspicions why - after crossing the World Window to Akari, Myrtle had been noted to have 'acquired' a piece of the apparatus for operating the Window - a handsomely crafted timepiece. How this came to be on her person, she did not know, some suggested it was her curious nature, but it did seem to me she genuinely did not know how she got it. We decided that the elementals were sent to recover the timepiece and it would only cause us grief and diversion to keep defending it, so we buried it in the dust by the palisade wall, perhaps for the next group of elementals to find, or to recover later.

### **Steelday - Return to Zvang Ze's Garden**

Our sleep was comfortable. After breakfast we met some locals, they were not well disposed to us and attacked us with psionics. They seemed intoxicated; I believe it may have been from them that we first heard mention that a White Lotus existed as well as Black Lotus, and that they were addicts of White Lotus.

We went in search of the tunnel that led to Zvang Ze's Garden, which we had visited the year before. The entrance was barred by an unseen force until we held the Jade Key near. We began to crawl through into the darkness, scrabbling noises were heard in the dark, and the lead members of the tunnel were attacked by Rodents of Unusual Size. It was a difficult struggle as the tunnel had partially collapsed from the previous time we travelled through, and two people could pass each other in the tunnel only with difficulty. With the rodents defeated we emerged in the garden, and Tornado and Gilreyhan teleported through with all our baggage. Standing at the entrance to the garden proper were several Terracotta clay Warriors, which we had met the previous time, but perhaps Zvang Ze had perfected them now as they were not so slow any more.

### **The rise and rise of the Cult of Manchu**

We made our way down the path into the bowl-like depression that lay in the middle of the garden. We saw a couple of dark clad figures at the far side, which saw us also and called up others from the distance. They were mostly dressed in black, yet several were familiar to us as Chow Fat and his Celestial Beaucracy companions who had sheltered us the day before and trained us. We asked what had happened; they explained that they had seen the true path, that is - following Manchu. His group had taken Black Lotus, some, including him, had turned - others resisted and were killed. A desperate battle ensued, Nero who was always a most reliable battle healer during our journey, had been exhausted of power in the tunnel fight and we had to make do with minor cures and again were hard pressed. The followers of Manchu were competent warriors and displayed great skill in channelling spells and invocations through their weapons.

Victory was ours and, running low on resources, we bound our wounds. Further into the garden, the foliage moved, some half walking/half shambling, roughly humanoid creatures emerged. They were draped in creepers and vines, Unsurprisingly Jack moved forward to communicate with them, he got close to them and declared them to be 'Black Lotus Seedlings' and headed off into the distance with them, comfortable in their company. I too had tasted Black Lotus and I too felt drawn to them, but I received a well-timed Sleep spell before I'd even walked five yards. Apparently the others followed Jack to a part of the garden where the original Black Lotus plant itself was found. Jack had been behaving strangely for sometime now slipping into one of four other personas every now and then, at this point these Black Lotus induced personalities became flesh and blood, and the party fought them (called Tumbleweed, Jude, Agro and Magnox) along with the seedlings, and destroyed them. The Black Lotus was dug up and put in a bag. Nearby, an almost identical plant, this time purest white was found, the source of White Lotus we presumed, this we also dug it up and kept it.

### **The Teleport Disaster**

When we returned to the tunnel, our resources were at rock bottom, the first few folk got inside but were waylaid by large spiders in the tunnel, which proved difficult to kill. This is where we made a big mistake. Tornado was casting a teleport for him, Gilreyhan and Lucy to go to the other side to arrive when the first people in the tunnel would climb out. Tornado's Teleport had not been disturbed so they arrived whilst the rest of us were bogged down in the tunnel. They emerged amongst a group of Drow, who owned the spiders in the tunnel. Gilreyhan and Lucy were felled, Lucy died, Tornado fled. The Drow called through the tunnel to give them the Black Lotus or they would make sure our fallen were really dead. Having little choice and suspecting the Black Lotus was in one of the bags teleported through I made a deal with them to go through and find it for them if they ceased the spider attack. I climbed out into the middle of the Drow; they were from Orin Rakatha but had removed their house colours as we were on Akari, Island. I rifled through the bags to find the Black Lotus but the bag was not there, Tornado was gone, I assumed he had it so said I would find him, to give it to them for the survival of those in the tunnel who were still struggling against the spiders. I searched for Tornado but never found him.

I got back to the camp half and hour later to find all calm. Unlike me, the Drow had eventually found the bag with the Black Lotus plant in it and left with their spiders. Those in the tunnel got through, and Tornado turned up. One of the Pathfinders who had come to Akari with us returned and said a couple of his junior pathfinders had come across one of the Drow and finished him off. A letter found on his corpse detailed orders from someone high in House Tilduring ordering them to get the Black Lotus from the Valley group.

We spent some time resting, and then a message from the Dai Oni, carried on a Whispering Wind reached us. It confirmed some of what we suspected the night before. The Bakemoni -

Oni Priests, had indeed restored the four Ochimo that had been killed by Arakis's group years before, however they have once again come back corrupted and together were able to summon the Oppawang. The Dai-Oni does not want the Ochimo corrupted, so they must be cleansed of their taint and the Oppawang sent back too. They will be drawn to a nearby fort, the significance of which I was not sure. Orlando was filled with resolve to pursue this lead, and cleanse the Ochimo in order to have some power over the Oppawang to force him to release the trapped children's souls. I suspect this matter has prayed on his mind for some time and he may have had knowledge of this task before coming to Akari.

### **The Night of the Oppawang**

We set forth for the fort, which was a crumbling shell of old stone surrounding a flat, grassy courtyard. A force of Zombies approached, led by the corrupted Ochimo water spirit. He declared himself to be 'The Poisoned Well. His zombies hit with great strength and were no slower than a normal man'. He had mastery of both water and the evil sphere. I struck him, was harmed by the evil sphere then felled with a single blow for my trouble. His warriors fell and Gilreyhan, Myrtle and Tornado struck him again and again with fire, which hurt him greatly, until he declared we had cleansed the taint from him. He said other Ochimo would be drawn to this place. He would now go forth and cleanse his corrupted brother - 'The Flaming Forge'.

Another wave of zombies came. There were several junior pathfinders with us, mostly working around the periphery helping tend the fallen, doing sterling work. Another wave crashed against us, this time lead by the 'Pestilence of Air' which Myrtle did fine work against with Magic Missiles. Upon defeat he sought to go and cleanse his brother the 'Baron of Stone'. Somewhere in all the melee Lupacore sadly succumbed to the blows of the Zombies and died.

Another wave hit us, this time lead by the Oppawang himself. It was a strange, horned Hepath like creature, each sweep of his great sword wreaking huge spiritual injury. A stalemate was reached and the fighting lulled as he spoke for a while, he spoke of Arakis, and how he waited a decade for revenge on the Valley people. With the restoration of the corrupted Ochimo, he had been summoned again, but the Ochimo were now defeated, and without them he would once again fade from this place by dawn. We learned more of the Oppawang as he spoke to us; almost in passing he mentioned that it was he who caused the Celestial Beaurocracy to come into being. He talked of two opposed Akaran families on his land, the Ming (represented by white) and Manchu (represented by black) in some way he had caused them to be bound to one mind or pool of thought. These two aspects balanced each other, represented in their tower colours and symbol and so they became the Celestial Beaurocracy on Orin Rakatha. Yet the Black Lotus that Zvang Ze peddled to them broke this link and made them more free of thought. The half of the Celestial Beaurocracy that descended from the Manchu family and took Black Lotus were freed of the balance and would return to the company of those of the Manchu family on Akari who were like minded, who indeed were the very ones who deliberately supplied them

with the drug for this purpose. Those descended from the Ming family were less fortunate and would disappear, usually immediately slaughtered by their newly mentally liberated Manchu companions. He acknowledged the existence of the White Lotus too which was more potent than the Black Lotus, perhaps four times so and was responsible for great psionic properties, and if taken may return one to the balance of Ming and Manchu and to the thought pool. Some of the madder locals that rambled on about White Lotus earlier on in the day, had taken too much of the White Lotus. Referring to our mission the previous year, Orlando asked what the Oppawang wanted in return for returning the children's souls as this troubled him, and it was foretold he had the power to do this. He agreed he could, but that he really didn't care, and that he might do it for the price of 'one soul'. He returned to the theme of revenge for his previous defeat at the hands of Arakis, the price of this would be the permanent death of two of our number if they were freely given, if we stood up to him, he would take more. Orlando and Tornado offered to do this noble sacrifice but consensus was against this, and the fight resumed. The zombies fell one by one, the Oppawang stood firm, finally, Orlando fell to his terrible blows and died. The Oppawang stood alone over him and decreed that Orlando will die permanently in one year's time, and that he will return to see it, if Orlando is deemed worthy he will be reaped, if not then it will be the turn of his companions. He left, perhaps in order to cause further carnage during his one night of freedom on Akari Island.

### **Sunday - The Refinery Raid**

We had spent a further night in the CB safe house, but all were weary now and disheartened by the previous nights events. We resolved to return to Sokoku for two reasons. From our investigations on Akari and discussion with the Shogun at the Banquet we were now aware of the location of Zvang Ze's Black Lotus refinery in Southern Sokoku in the area where he had recruited his Ronin. We were also aware we needed to return to Sokoku to return through the World Window at the appointed time.

Despite his previous problems, Tornado was confident of Teleporting us back to Sokoku, now being familiar with the place. I am happy to report that this went very smoothly. We arrived beyond the sand dunes and headed in to the forest where the refinery apparently lay. Along a path we met a group of Ronin guards and quickly overwhelmed them. We sat in a slightly exposed place and began to cast before intending to attack the refinery. The noise of combat drew others from the refinery stockade, which was just around the corner, although we did not know this yet. They had a psionist who disrupted us from our rituals with psionics from a huge distance. Slightly unprepared we pushed forward to the stockade. At the head of his warband was the mighty Number One Son. We thought back to our training with our wise masters to resist his 'Dragons-touch' technique, and as one the group busied themselves with the stretches and breathing exercises we had learnt to prepare ourselves to stave off his mighty blows. The group were mostly Ronin, with a couple of monks, the psionist who also seemed also to be a good sphere user, and a Blue Sorceress (perhaps an apprentice of Zvang Ze). Battle began with us spread out but then became funnelled through the gate, however there were other entrances which they occasionally sallied through. Number One Son's blows were not quite so

fearsome after our training but he still had great skills. One of my companions was mind-locked by the gaze of the psionist so I stepped across to block his gaze with my shield. At the same time Number One Son had sheathed his sword, and quick-drew it in a wide arc sweeping down to my leg. I watched as my knee, shin and boot flew up in the air severed free of the rest of my leg and gently bounced down the hill, I toppled down after it. The battle raged on and we were close to breaking, but came on to fight with new vigour when Nero returned to heal us after a very timely speed meditate in the middle of the fight.

The refinery was taken, with a fair amount of Black Lotus inside too. The Blue Sorceress was captured and proved to be fairly compliant so we intend to return her to the White Retreat for questioning. We also intend to return White Lotus to the Celestial Beurocracy to restore the balance between Ming and Manchu and improve relations in this time of difficulties.

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