

Realmslore
Laughing Lass, Part Two
By Ed Greenwood



The Truth

The roiling tides of Churning Bay wash occasional rags and sail-scraps to the wharves of Hlondeth, but never anything larger or heavier. Wise old salts say this means neither tides nor currents scour the bottom, and instead these tides and currents rage well above the shattered wrecks. If they could breathe water, they'd be out there in a trice, dragging forth chests of gold!

Those wise old salts are correct about Churning Bay. Despite its furious tides and surface waves, the waters from its bottom up to about the height of two tall humans remain fairly calm at all times, making for good visibility. The bottom is thin sand over flat, exposed bedrock, studded here and there with "wavegrass" (inedible-to-humans, horribly salty and tough marine plants that look like tall tufts of grass that cling to rock fissures). Every other surface has the broken ribs, spars, and planking of shattered ships often piled four deep.

Many aquatic monsters lurk here, drawn to the abundant food (eagerly visiting Sssrathluth). Sharks and giant squids are common, and giant octopi and even scraggs lurk in flooded holds and beneath riven decks.

The *Laughing Lass* sits apart from the general tangle, its two upright halves looking astonishingly intact, as if the carrack had sunk only yesterday. Powerful wardspells keep it that way, holding the wreck intact, preventing magical scrying into it, and foiling spells that might detect the trio of *portals* hidden in each half.

The *portals* exist because the *Lass* is indeed a lure for adventurers.

The Mrastaress of Hlondeth, Dediana Examinos (LE female halfblood yuan-ti sorcerer 10, legless but having a serpent tail), has for some time sought a counter to the activities of her son Dmetrio (more is said of such matters and of Churning Bay in the *Serpent Kingdoms* sourcebook, under "Hlondeth"), and she believes she has at last found a way to increase her reach and power, and win herself a private army.

The keys to Dediana's plan were two now-dead yuan-ti who fell into her power: Sriss Lavoenroes of Hlondeth, who devised the poison known as "aumrara," and the wandering "mystic" Haunta Dreen, who acquired spells (or found and mastered a magic item) that could create *portals*.

Dediana found it easy to strip Sriss of his alchemical secrets and then dispose of him, but Haunta was far more wily and dangerous. Dediana had to slay him after he crafted the *Laughing Lassportals*, when her attempts to learn exactly how he made *portals* caused him to threaten to assist Dmetrio against her. She exhausted several magic items in a narrow victory over Dreen.

Dediana has caused hundreds of gold coins to be scattered all over the wreck, and several open, empty chests are artfully arranged in its cabins, situated so that searchers are almost certain to fall through one of her *portals*.

All of them take creatures to the same place: one end of a cellar deep under the soaring castle of the Mrastaress.

The *portals* cause a chime to alert the Mrastaress whenever they operate, and then they deposit creatures several feet above the amber-hued tiles of the cellar floor; if they can't start to fly instantly, they'll fall a short distance to the floor -- which is slick since an amber oil that contains aumrara coats it (DC 17 **Reflex save** to avoid falling). Aumrara is a contact poison, and there's more of it in a dozen decanters of wine on a stone table at the far end of the cellar, which is otherwise empty.

The Mrastaress can see and speak down into the cellar through scores of small holes in its ceiling, which is some 30 feet above the floor. The cellar is 60 feet wide and 200 feet long.

Sounding concerned, Dediana Examinos will ask "guests" if they feel a burning sensation. If any say that they do, she'll not reveal what has afflicted them or how, but she claims that all of them have been poisoned by aumrara and must obey her henceforth or die -- since only she can provide them with the antidote.

She'll then issue orders, telling them to accomplish a particular thing, such as overcoming all opposition to seize specific items (magic items held by a wizard, temple, or ruler elsewhere in Faerûn). Sometimes they'll be sent to slay allies of Dmetrio or her many other foes.

If they return to the exact spot her "magic" (another *portal* that can take any living creature within 20 feet of the table when she activates it) took them to, she'll bring them back, and they'll then receive their "first dose" of antidote.

Captives who refuse are left to starve. Those who obey are **paralyzed** with spells when they return to the cellar, and the items they seized are taken from them (this paralyzation, they're told, is the antidote).

This existence continues for as long as captives survive or obey. In truth, there is no antidote to aumrara; captives who flee while out on a mission will escape the Mrastaress.

Poison	Type	Initial Damage	Secondary Damage	Price
Aumrara	Contact DC 20	Burning (Harmless; 4d6 minutes)	Paralysis (3d6 minutes)	3,000 gp

Aumrara is a soluble amber liquid that is unaffected by alcohol. The burning sensation it causes on contact with flesh as initial damage is completely harmless, but it causes paralysis as its secondary damage. Before this poison can be crafted by PCs, DMs are advised to allow the PCs to attempt to discover its secret ingredients from Dediana. Once they discover the crushed plant seed and two different plant saps that they require, they must make a DC 30 Craft (poisonmaking) check to ensure that they mix it in its proper ratio. Failure results in a botched batch. If added to traps, the modifier to the trap's Challenge Rating is +4.

About the Author

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Realmslore

The Black Mysteries, Part Two

By Ed Greenwood



First, take a look at thaebra and maeraede.

Thaebra: Thaebra ("THAY-bruh") is a dark blue, sticky paste that glistens when smeared onto a surface, but soon dries and hardens. Despite its blue color, Thaebra doesn't leave a stain. To make it, one boils the roots of certain plants found in the Shaar and adjoining lands (a tall, broadleaf grass; a small bright yellow ground-flower; and a tumbleweed, though precisely which ones are closely-guarded secrets) together in the same cauldron, stirring constantly.

Hardened thaebra is very like dried hummus or badly set plaster, and it can be scraped or rubbed off flexible surfaces such as cloth and flesh. Heat, flame, and impacts do nothing to ignite it -- you must drop maeraede oil on it (see Thaebra-Maeraede Firebirth Alchemical).

Merchants sometimes sell thaebra as a cosmetic because if smeared on skin, left for the better part of a day, and then removed, it takes most dyes and stains with it. It can also bleach to white any known hair, of any hue, when washed in water that contains as much powdered thaebra as will fill a fairly small human palm. Thaebra usually costs 8 gp for a small, palm-sized pot (4 ounces). This price can double easily if both buyer and seller know of the combined combustible qualities of thaebra and maeraede (see maeraede), and the buyer reveals any urgency of need.

Maeraede: Maeraede ("may-urr-AE-dd") oil, a brownish-orange, translucent, odorless distillate of the leaves of a swamp-weed found in the coastlands of the Inner Sea, is usually sold as a purgative. In most mammals even as little as four drops taken orally causes immediate and violent vomiting and diarrhea, accompanied by debilitating cramps that seldom last more than 3 rounds (DC 25 Fort save to avoid; failure means the creature is nauseated for 1d4 rounds). This unpleasantness always swiftly ends the effects of light drunkenness, and often entirely expels poisons, parasites, and food taints from a mammal. A dose of maeraede taken after the initial exposure to an injected poison or diseases grants the imbiber a +1 circumstance bonus against the secondary effect of the poison or disease. (This latter effect varies widely from individual to individual, or maeraede would cost much more.) Maeraede oil goes for 4 gp for a finger-sized vial containing about 1 ounce. This price can double easily if both buyer and seller know of the combined combustible qualities of thaebra and maeraede (see thaebra), and the buyer reveals any urgency of need.

Thaebra-Maeraede Firebirth Alchemical: A mere sprinkling (three or more drops) of maeraede oil on thaebra causes a hot white flame to instantly arise. If the thaebra has been applied to wood or cloth, it sets such substances alight in 2 rounds (unless water or other oils are splashed on its flame during the 1st round, which extinguishes that patch of thaebra forever). A thaebra fire causes an intense sensation of heat but no actual damage during the 1st round, but 1d4+2 points of damage per round thereafter when ignited in contact with flesh (or clothes directly worn by a creature), with the flames persisting for as many rounds as there is thaebra to feed them. A smear of thaebra that weighs a quarter pound is about as large as a modern hamburger patty and will burn for 2 rounds. Each additional quarter pound extends the burning time 1 round, but doesn't generate any more heat. For example a half pound of thaebra burns for a total of 3 rounds, dealing 2d4+4 points of damage.

The next most often seen firebirth alchemical pairing is ardrent and osbra.

Ardrent: Ardrent ("AR-drent") is a purple-brown powder derived from ground-up "leap-bugs" (locustlike hopping insects all too common in lands around the Shining Sea) and is usually sold in 1-pound "handsacks" for 1 cp. Nothing likes to eat it, and it resists molds and rotting.

Osbra: Osbra ("OZ-brah") is the dried, powdered form of the bitter, swift-to-rot tuber known as the tlardra ("Tuh-LAR-druh"). This mauve-skinned, "crooked sausage"-shaped shallow wild plant grows in lands south of the Lake of Steam. Humans consider it inedible but sometimes feed it to pigs and captive snakes, who seem to find it very nourishing. Tlardras rarely fetch more than 1 cp/lb., but osbra (which is sometimes used as a long-lasting, "fast" mauve dye in garment-making) is usually sold in carved wooden "slide-top" flat coffers that hold 4 ounces, for 1 sp/coffer.

Ardrent-Osbra Firebirth Alchemical: Since both ardrent and osbra are found in powdered form, peddlers easily hide them among the vials of spices they offer for sale. The two powders ignite only when mixed together (at least 1 ounce of ardrent, but only a between-the-fingers pinch of osbra is required) and the mixture is then moistened with the spittle of any mammal (human saliva is most commonly used).

An ardrent mix smolders for 2 rounds (during which it gives off smoke, due to a reaction with the air around it and not actual combustion), and then flares up in the 3rd round. If water or cold is applied to the mix at any time during those 2 rounds (and the cold effect must be intense enough to deal at least 1 point of damage), the mix becomes inert and can never ignite. In the 3rd and 4th rounds, the mix deals living creatures in direct contact with it 2d4 points damage. Damage falls to 1d6 points in the 5th round, 1d4 in the 6th, and then ends. Except when in contact with warm, dry material that readily ignites, ardrent-mix fires rarely spread or persist, so such mixes can burn holes, run along seams, and the like.

Many other, rarer alchemicals are known, but Order members and other clergy of Kossuth try to keep all details of them secret. Observations confirm that many of these are powders that can be thrown into existing fire sources (such as lit braziers in temples to the Firelord) to produce specific effects, most often fierce, short-lived jets of flames that gout in particular directions.

Black Flame Symbols

The Order of the Black Flame uses a few nonmagical designs as markers so that they can silently impart information. These symbols seldom change, but a ring of dots (some doubled or trebled) often surround them. These dots have meanings that *do* change -- and are widely suspected to tell Order members that the symbol they encircle is false, or has an additional or altered meaning.

Black Flame symbols are usually drawn on doors, sometimes in cobrascale ink (12 gp per 1-ounce pot), which is invisible except when heated by a torch, whereupon it flares into coppery orange brightness, only to fade the moment the heat source is withdrawn. The true formula of cobrascale ink is a secret known only to certain families in the Thayan tharch of Priador (and, of course, their ruling zulkir) and may have nothing at all to do with cobra scales.

Specific symbols used by the Order of the Black Flame, and more about their Mysteries, follow in the next installment of this column.

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Realmslore
The Realm of Nimbral, Part Five
Laws and Heralds
By Ed Greenwood



The laws of Nimbral, known as "the Tellings," are, simply put, the wills and decrees of the mysterious, seldom-seen ruling Nimbral Lords. They are codified and posted (with updates) at all inns and port offices of the realm.

The Tellings include voluminous Lords' judgments on individual matters (for example, "Thaldon Immertree shall touch or cause to be moved no boundary post of Faerond Mallow, or suffer the breaking of a finger and the payment of forty silver coins or more, per marker shifted"), but follow these general principles: instantly and utterly obey any Knight, Herald, or Lord or face a period of imprisonment; give (if one is a Knight or Herald) no overly ruthless, foolish, or needlessly tyrannical orders or face prison time; steal not, attack not, despoil not (trees and crops as well as citizens); and set no fires or perform other destruction -- or face both fines and longer imprisonment (depending on the degree of damage done).

Prison time in Nimbral is spent gardening or, for the worst prisoners, mining for copper and gems (mainly emeralds, but moonstones and sapphires also come to light) in mountain mines. The mines tend to be narrow, dangerous shafts and crawl-tunnels down which lone miscreants in harnesses are lowered on ropes to work with prybars and picks, in the light of enspelled *glowstones*.

Murderers (of Nimbrese citizens) are either slain or set to mining until they die or survive twenty summers. Folk who maim others often find themselves treated to the same disability they visited upon a victim. Those deemed to have slain or maimed whilst defending children, the wounded or sick, or in desperate self-defense, are usually given lighter sentences (often four or five years of mining, or service on a long and perilous Nimbrese naval journey). The Tellings place a high value on leaving alone growing things, and not harming or causing fear in any Nimbran, and a lower value on property -- and include many instances of "punishments fitting crimes." (A Nimbran who liked to beat his wife, for instance, was beaten in like manner by a larger woman, to collapse, every day for nine days; a Nimbran who continually stole from her neighbors had all of her belongings seized and distributed freely among folk of a distant port, and so on.)

It may take a visitor to Nimbral some time to notice that Nimbrese continually tell little lies (especially about their own pasts and deeds); this is a legacy of the realm's longtime state worship of Leira, as is the love of tale-spinning. Since the fall of the goddess in the Time of Troubles, the Nimbral Lords have sought to remove all power of illusions from the general populace, and to make lying about "things that matter" (current behavior, items and their amounts and whereabouts, things and events observed) extremely frowned upon. The Lords promote the idea that all organized worship is founded in deceit, and is therefore a bad and self-limiting thing. Therefore, no state religion or organized priesthoods are allowed in the realm, only small shrines and individual priests (whose doings must never offend against the Tellings, upon risk of exile after more usual punishments are administered). No law deems lying a crime, but all Nimbrese know that Heralds (and presumably the Lords) can tell truth from falsehood. Most don't know that this ability is conferred by *rings of truth telling* all Heralds wear.

Ring of Truth Telling: This ring provides its wearer with the combined effects of a *detect thoughts* spell and a *zone of truth* spell. The ring has 50 charges. One charge powers either *detect thoughts* or *zone of truth* function for 5 minutes.

Faint divination and enchantment; CL 5th; Forge Ring, *detect thoughts*, *zone of truth*; Price 15,750 gp.

Heralds of Nimbral do not discuss their specific duties, numbers, and orders with non-Heralds, but they seem to number sixteen or so. They deliver warnings and guidance (based on their exhaustive knowledge of the Tellings and the intent of the Lords), decide what matters to take to the Lords for judgment; deliver Lords' judgments to others; and can command all Knights as enforcers, bodyguards, and peacemakers.

Every Herald receives ongoing, specific operational orders as "voices in their minds" directly from the Lords, in a mental contact they have no control over (they can mentally "speak back" to a Lord when in contact, but can't "call" a Lord).

Read more about the Heralds and learn of the Nimbrese character in the next article.

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