

The Voyage of the Princess Ark
Or
The Journals of Prince Heldamar of Haaken
Lord Admiral of the Mightiest Empire,
Captain of the Ever Victorious Princess Ark

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By Bruce A. Heard

from the Journals of PRINCE HALDEMAR OF HAAKEN LORD ADMIRAL OF THE MIGHTIEST EMPIRE Captain of the EVER-VICTORIOUS PRINCESS ARK IMPERIAL EXPLORER, ETC., ETC.

Nyxmir, 11, 1964 AY: I am astounded by the complete lack of interest in geographical matters on the part of Alphatia's younger mages. Worse, it has been found that the geographical teachings offered at Eriadna High are based on the fallacies of a Thyatian lowlife! This general-without a doubt a failure in the Thyatian legions-retired after a shabby campaign in Thothia. There he stole an ancient map of this world from a pillaged temple. The map was but a simple continental outline with a few words here and there. Upon his return, this lowlife invented kingdoms and empires, then placed them on the map and wrote tome upon tome about them. His knowledge of ancient Nithian and his interest in the truth being what they were, nothing good came out of this ignorant barbarian's overactive imagination. He made a fortune selling his books, and many took them as the final authority on the world.

His errors were legion. Ridiculous assumptions were made about the size of the Thyatian Empire. The map shows the limits of that empire stretching beyond the Wendarian Reaches, north of the Principalities of Glantri. Poppycock! There are at least a half-dozen countries between Thyatis and Glantri having nothing to do with Thyatis.

You can forget about these absurd borders, too. These were in fact various creases in the original crumpled map which that Thyatian dimwit mistook for actual borders. The "Empire of the Great Khan," east of our province of Esterhold, is another fantasy. There are indeed large steppes there, but no Great Khan-we'd know about it by now!

And, yes, about this Dorfin Empire: It was the joke of a certain gnomish king, the inventor of wondrous but totally useless contraptions, who went by the name of King Dorfin IV. His kingdom is, in truth, merely the workshop of a few hundred gnomes in the hills of Karameikos. One of Dorf's favorite pastimes was to send loyal followers beyond the Sind Desert. There, they would pose as plenipotentiaries of the imaginary "Empire of Dorfin IV," then hire local people to carry a sealed

message back to the real King Dorfin. These strange messengers, obviously from a distant place, seemed to make quite an impression on local Traladarans when they brought the gnomish king those phony and pompous greetings from his "imperial cousin to the west." These messages hinted at the outrageous size of this bogus empire, alleged to be twice the size of Alphatia! What nonsense! And the barons believed it, the fools.

I shall skip the details on other equally false kingdoms such as "Vulcania" (that was the Thyatian general's wife's name), "Cestia" (his mistress), "Brasol" (his dog), "Tangor" (a brand of cheap beer found in the streets of Newkirk), or "Zyxl" (a deceased gladiatorial hero whom the general claimed was also a fallen queen of that same nation). For all this, I find that I grudgingly admire such a bold and irreverent joker. After all, everyone fell for his fake encyclopedias.

I propose that in the name of grand buffoonery, we keep these place names, since they are now the ones with which laymen are most familiar, but we should use them in a purely geographic sense. For example, let's do away with the nation of Nentsun (an Ethengarian word for a Heldanner's arm pit) and simply call that land the Nentsun Peninsula. Similarly, we'll forget about the state of Izonda (Hin for "fruitcake" -it figures), renaming that area the Desert of Izonda, since this is what is really there.

So be it! It is time to see for myself if this old Nithian map has any truth to it. I, today, obtained permission from Her Imperial Majesty for the *Princess Ark* to be recommissioned for a last but glorious mission of exploration in the name of Our Illustrious Empire. . . .

Alphamir 15, 1965: Finally, she is airworthy again! It took no less than 35 master crafters and 300 slaves to refit the beautiful skyship. Her five masts stand majestically over her black hull, bearing the sails that will trap the magical wind. One can almost feel a strange life emanating from her as she gently pulls on her mooring lines in her desire to cast off and head into the sky.

The Four Kingdoms

WRONG
WRONG
WRONG!



The Known World

- 1 Addakia
- 2 Arm of God
- 3 Arypt
- 4 Barburians (not united)
- 5 Boera
- 6 Brasol
- 7 Cestia
- 8 Empire of Alphatia
- 9 Empire of Dorlin IV
- 10 Empire of the Great Khan
- 11 Empire of Tangor
- 12 Empire of Thyatis
- 13 The Coast (a.k.a. The Four Kingdoms)
- 14 Hyborea
- 15 Isle of Dawn
- 16 Izunda
- 17 Jen
- 18 Lower Arypt
- 19 Matriarchy of Pelasam
- 20 Minacea
- 21 Nentun
- 22 Norwold
- 23 Oceania
- 24 The Sea Kingdoms
- 25 The Sea Kingdoms
- 26 The Serpent Peninsula
- 27 Southold
- 28 Thosia
- 29 Volcania
- 30 Vulture Peninsula
- 31 Zyx

Sulamir 10, 1965: Days have come and gone since our departure from Sundsvall. After leaving the capital, I ordered a southerly course. Our *Princess Ark* sailed well into the clouds above Edairo, Caerdwicca, and Beitung.

Soon we reached the barbaric coast that lies east of the Thyatian Hinterlands. Some people refer to the region as The Coast, or the Four Kingdoms. The Four Kingdoms no more exist here than water exists in our bilge. As far as The Coast goes, we in Alphatia prefer calling it the Jungle Coast, because that's what it is: a forsaken, endless jumble of tropical growth. It is always hot and humid here, and torrential rains from the Bellissarian Sea drench

the place every day. If the boredom doesn't kill you, then the savages, diseases, and monsters will.

It is no wonder the stiff-necked Thyatians did not waste their time in conquering this foul region. The white sandy beaches are idyllic, but no pleasures can be found here. Immediately beyond the beaches stretch hundreds of miles of rolling hills. Dark jungles blanket the highest terrain, and repugnant swamps corrupt the lowlands.

Sulamir 25, 1965: The savages who live on the eastern Jungle Coast are quite different from those in the neighboring Thyatian Hinterlands. The latter are believed

to be descendants of slaves brought from the Nithian colonies nowadays known as Ostland and Vestland. The Nithians carved out a southern domain from the jungle for their priests. Then three tribes of slaves rebelled and escaped north, seeking their fatherland. Instead, these ruffians found (and founded) what would later become Thyatis. A century later, Nithia foundered. The unruly slaves who stayed south obliterated whatever remained of their Nithian origins; in a few centuries, all was lost to the jungle. These hardy, blond Hinterlanders survived and became savage jungle warriors who were capable of fighting the original natives on equal footing.

Sudmir 3, 1965: Terrible, those natives. We came close to a large town deep in the rain forest. Smoke from their fires could be seen from miles away. Thousands of huts sprawled across a clearing in the forest, with several stone buildings placed near the clearing's center. We spotted what seemed to be a temple of some sort. Upon our descent, it was observed that the natives were of a much smaller build than the Hinterlanders. Tattoos covered their copper skin, and most of them had long, black hair tied in the back. The natives immediately attacked our vessel, using poison needles and blowguns against our exposed crewmen when we came within range. The gray substance on the needles was deadly, and we lost two men. Magic from their barbaric sorcerers cracked and thundered, but the *Princess Ark* withstood the crude spell-strikes. As we sailed away, we spotted some of their shamans—or so we assumed those monstrosities to be, as they all had various snakelike features. Alas, we did not remain to study this culture any further. We will return at a later time to deal with these natives in a more fitting way. I sent an invisible messenger back to Her Imperial Majesty with our last position, then ordered the *Princess Ark* farther east along the Jungle Coast.

Sudmir 25, 1965: This morning I watched one of the nicest sunrises just as we steered eastward toward the Pass of Cestia. There we reached an unknown cape on the continental coast. I named it Cape Eriadna, in honor of Her Imperial Majesty. The place seems deserted. Despite the hot and rainy weather of this area, no rain forest grows here; instead, Savannah spreads out as far as we can see, with occasional clusters of trees dotting the land. Unlike the dominant northeasterly winds of the Jungle Coast, the winds here usually blow to the southeast.

Sudmir 26, 1965: Talasar, my second in command, is in charge of replenishing the *Princess Ark*'s food and water supplies. The magic from his Immortal patron is

powerful, but some of the supplies are now reported to be spoiled. This is quite unlike Talasar; he is a dedicated priest. This will be investigated at a later time. I am sending an away team to gather food and samples of the local vegetation.

Vertmir 1, 1965: The away team—or what's left of it—has finally returned. Xerdon, the captain of the guard, took matters in his own hands and mounted a rescue mission to find the team. I quote from his report:

"We had marched 30 miles south when we found the antelopes that the team was tracking. With their hunting wands, the men should have easily caught their prey, skinned it, and cut it up. But there was no trace of the team nor of any fight.

"Then Ramissur, my forward boltman, saw a glint on a nearby hill. I ordered the men into skirmish order and approached it. The grass was nearly 3' tall, and the ground was a bit marshy. Suddenly, one after the other, guards screamed in horror. I ordered the men into a tighter group but found that those who had screamed were missing. We made it to the hill and found two survivors from the away team. None appeared wounded, but they bore strange purple marks on their bodies, like bruises. Both were insane, and in their mad babbling they screamed of an attack by tentacles that shot from under mosses and peat. The other poor devils on their team must have been pulled underneath and devoured by foul beasts.

"Once warned, it wasn't difficult to spot the concealed creatures on the way back. My two elite boltmen on point took pleasure in blasting the things once they found them. Ramissur managed to stun one creature that had rags hanging from its tentacles, rags that probably belonged to Azoth, the Dispel Warden of the lost team. By Razud, I'll now have to train Ramissur in the art of magic dispelling. Azoth was a fine guard. I cast a binding on the creature's mind, then brought it back. And so we returned."

Vertmir 4, 1965: These beasts are quite a discovery—they are vegetable beings. I have named them "Cestian gobblers." Each appears to have a short, fat trunk with a slimy, sphincter-like mouth on top. Three to six gooey tentacles grow on the sides of each trunk, which are used to capture prey. The tentacles exude a substance capable of stunning an ox. When I brought fresh meat near the opening of one gobbler, small translucent tendrils stuck out of it like little tongues, each of them ending in a noisy, smacking suction cup. It took the gobbler very little time to suck the juices from the meat. Afterward, the opening widened and the gobbler gobbled its food.

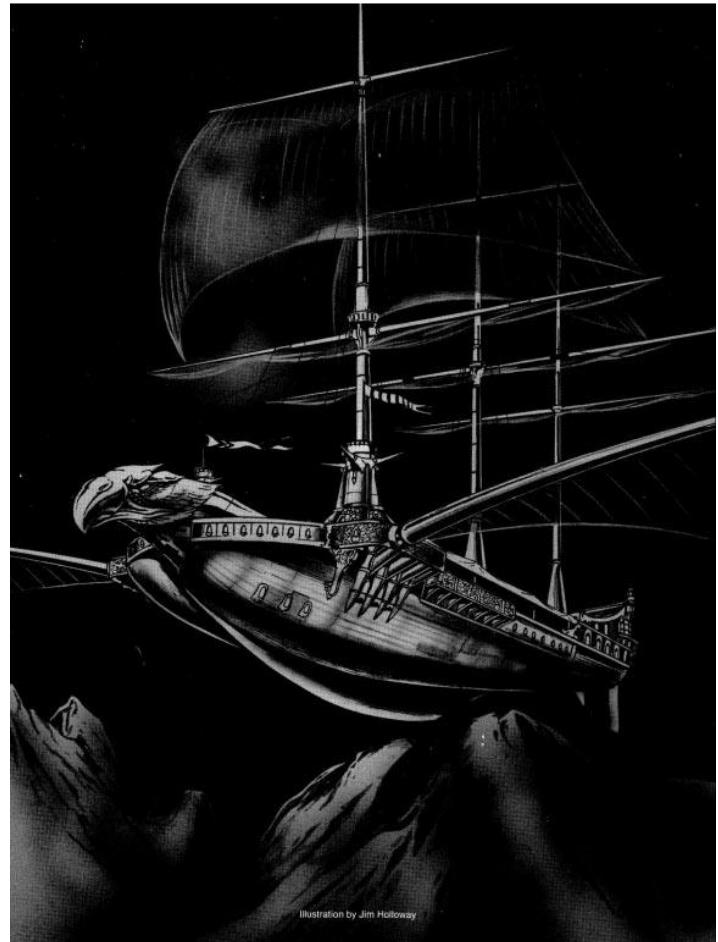
I was able to retrieve Azoth's partially digested remains from one plant, and after some cleaning of his remains, I animated the late warden's body and set it on permanent duty in the hold. There, away from the common crew, Azoth will cater to the Cestian gobbler, now properly restrained and potted in a large jar. I was surprised to see that the gobbler wouldn't attack Azoth in his present state. In fact, it seems the gobbler now looks forward to Azoth's arrival with fresh food. This unusual vegetable specimen deserves to be brought to the Imperial Greenhouse.

It appears these gobblers commonly grow throughout the coast in the Pass of Cestia. This explains why we've found no human population there. Beware of lowlands with high grasses in this region! This is where gobblers are most likely to be found. After this discovery, I ordered the *Princess Ark* back to her original easterly course.

Vertmir 7, 1965: After Cape Eriadna, the coast runs directly to the south. Another land lies to the east; the pattern in the clouds is quite clear about it. So far, it seems the old Nithian map is quite accurate. After pondering our course, I decided to head due east. Heavy clouds persisting in the south warned of violent weather; I feared the *Princess Ark* would hardly be able to climb above them. The eastern coast is no more than a few hundred miles away.

Vertmir 17, 1965: After reaching the western coastline at dawn, I decided to follow the coast to the north rather than penetrate this unknown land. The terrain is similar to the Jungle Coast, and so far no sign of population has been seen. By evening, we reached the northern end of the Isle of Cestia, which I named Cape Andor. Our choice is either to veer toward the isle to the northeast, or to follow the other side of Cestia, due south. Tonight I will consult the Auguries and make a decision. Which is the most interesting course?

Vertmir 18, 1965: At midnight, Talasar traced the circle around the mizzenmast, then inscribed the eight runes. The crew was silent, perfect in observing the ritual. The drummers, in trances, slowly beat the pace as the ship pivoted on its center, from starboard to port. The moon appeared late and low on the horizon. At the point where the shadow of the mast intersected with a rune, Talasar lifted his hand. The drummers and the ship stopped. It was the rune of Ice and Sun. So be it: Today we rested, but tomorrow we shall sail away from the coast to the northeast. So spoke the Immortal Razud.



Tslamir 8, 1965: Wise is the Immortal Razud! His path has lead us to a strange island, which we discovered after following the coast for a few days. This island is a large one by our standards (and probably bigger than what the Thyatians call their "Known World"). To the west lies the Bellissarian Sea; to the east is an ocean unknown to us. We named this place the Isle of Oceania.

To the south of Oceania is a smaller island, 200 miles long. This rocky formation is the realm of sea birds and large lizards; its rocks are almost completely covered with their droppings. The birds feed on the fish, the lizards consume the birds' eggs and remains, and fish feast on the sludge washed from the rocks into the sea by the storms. I shall name this place Everfeed.

A few forests grow along the rare beaches of Oceania, but for the most part its mountains form jagged cliffs that drop straight into the sea. The reefs and shoals around Oceania would be deadly to seafaring vessels. The mountains rise over 20,000' in height. We discovered the abandoned ruins of two towns built on ledges above the sea. Their architecture is unknown, and time has washed away any inscriptions or paintings. Judging from several imposing buildings, this must once have been an

advanced culture. No clue was found to tell us what may have happened to the "Oceanians."

In the morning, we'll explore a narrow mountain pass that opens over a small bay on the south side of the island. Through the pass flows a river that forms a high cataract plunging straight into the bay.

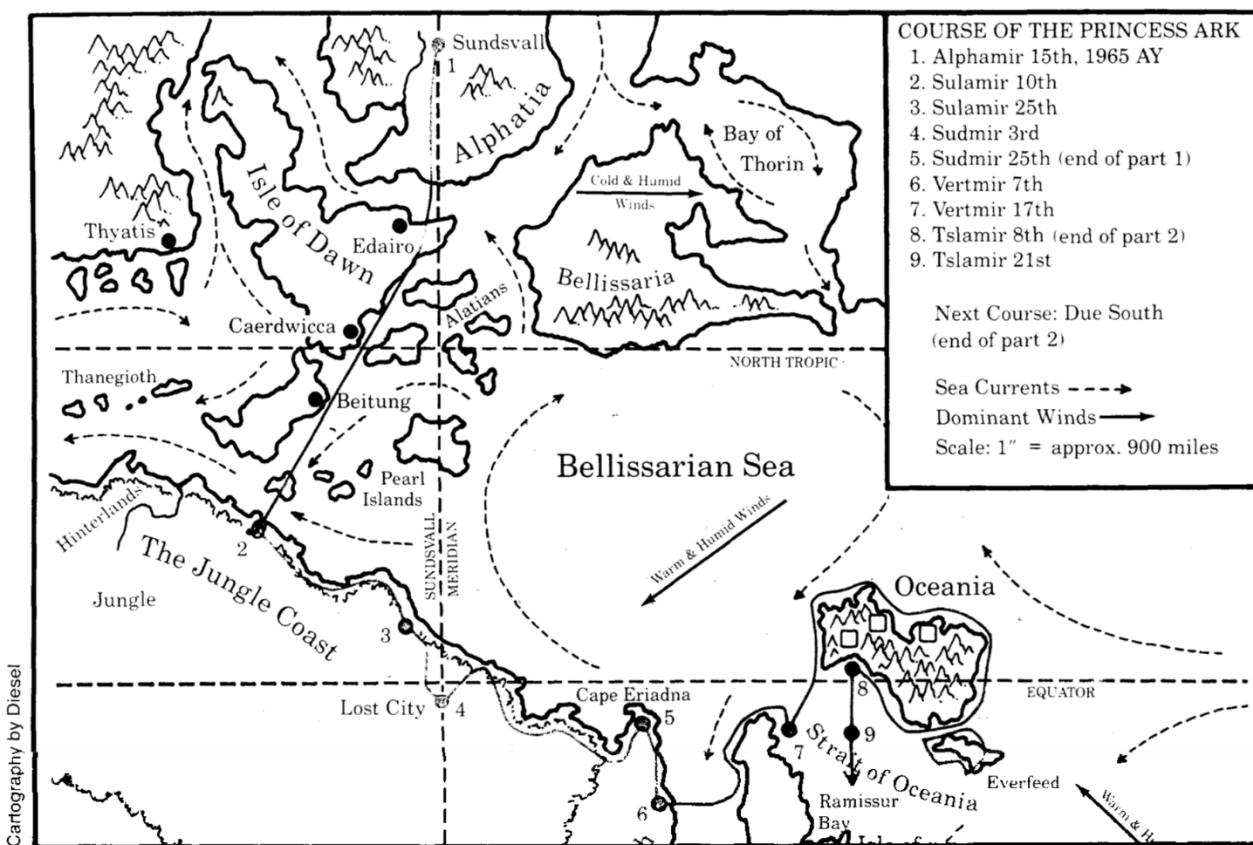
Tslamir 11, 1965: After days of trial and error, we are closer now to the center of the mountains. Many passes branched off the one from which we started, some forming a maze of jagged rocks and dizzying gorges, others ending in treacherous, impassable walls. Maneuvering out of these dead ends proved considerably more difficult than I had expected. The *Princess Ark* is a large ship and cannot climb above 10,000'. Several passes nearly reached that limit, one of them causing the ship to scrape her keel. The weather is much cooler here than near the coast. At sundown, we found another ruined town, this one quite huge and with a once-mighty citadel. Still no clue was at hand as to the fate of the Oceanians. We anchored off several promontories to prevent the *Princess Ark* from swaying into the cliffs on the wind. Clouds formed around us, muffling every sound. Now for our sleep.

Tslamir 16, 1965: By the blessings of the Immortals, we yet live! The crew is exhausted from a difficult day. Visibility today was reduced to less than 30'-a mere fraction of the *Princess Ark*'s length. Late during the night of the 15th, Second Class Petty Officer Nadonosor reported that the watch was missing, along with a launch. The deck watch was young Tarias, the midshipman sent along with us by the House of Arrogansa for his education in the science of sky navigation. I immediately ordered Xerdon and his men to follow me to the ruins. If Tarias died, then so might I.

We found the launch on one of the old bastions, where Tarias's footprints led toward the citadel. The place was ghastly at night. Murmurs and whispers could be heard everywhere, but never could we find their source. Tracking the boy took time and skill on the part of Xerdon. At last, when it seemed we would never find the boy in this maze of collapsed houses, we reached an open-air temple. There, chained to an altar in the center, lay Tarias, staring blankly into the sky. Our midshipman was someone's sacrifice!

Yet we could see that he still lived- and we could see his unhuman captors, who sent the chill of fear through me. A ring of translucent beings knelt around the altar!

Instantly, Xerdon ordered his boltmen to blast the ghosts away. Screams of unearthly terror and pain shook



the temple as the undead wisps were scattered like paper ash. Forward boltman Ramissur was the first to reach the midshipman, and he had nearly removed the rusty shackles when a swarm of shadowy apparitions swirled around him. The boltman was clearly dying! Fortunately, I could cast a magical light to relieve him. As expected, the shadows reeled back in terror from the illumination. We moved in and thought our battle over.

But as we rushed forward in the moment of our triumph, we discovered a terrifying presence that had remained unseen. A huge, pitch-black dragon emerged from the dark, looming over the altar. Xerdon's men froze as it advanced, and I am afraid that I did the same.

But the dragon stayed its attack. To our astonishment, it said in perfect Alphatian, "You are trespassing on lands which ought to remain the domain of my kin and of the dead. You who are called Haldemar- you have a choice: take back the boy, or save your warrior. Make your derision now, and you may return to your ship unharmed. I shall keep the soul of he who remains."

I had no certainty that the wyrm would be true to its word, nor that it would not come after us again. Yet I could see a multitude of ghostly shapes and unspeakable abominations coming up the streets of the ruined city. We had run out of time. I made my choice. I *had* to save Tarias of Arrogansa; his family is a terrible enemy. With deep regrets, I pointed to the boy. As I did, Xerdon turned to me with flames of anger in his eyes. I fear I have lost a friend as well as a superior boltman. As we hurried away with the limp form of Tarias in our arms, the wyrm's thundering laughter echoed in the ruins.

We reached the ship with no further incident. Suspecting more trouble from the monster, I ordered watches with torches to the prow, then cast off. Very slowly, guided by the words of the watches, the *Princess Ark* veered away from the ruins and moved down into the darkness of the gorge.

That Wiley wyrm! It did not lie, for it let us reach out ship in safety- but it promised nothing more! The expected attack came swiftly. Three lesser dragons were seen on the approach, and they swooped upon us three times. Each time, their teeth, claws, and wings ripped a whole sail to shreds. Each time, Xerdon's boltmen braved the danger in defense of our ship, while the boson exhorted his sailors to man the riggings at all costs. We could not afford to lose our sails here!

It was Talasar who saved the night. He later revealed that he sensed the nature of these dragons, which were clearly not of this world. Our priest of Razud had closed his eyes to better sense the presence of the wyrms. Then he cast his magic, and one of them, somewhere in the darkness, roared in pain and agony. It fell like a rock, and

the sound of its bones crashing into the jagged ridges below echoed through the gorge. An insane, monstrous shriek rose from the citadel- and the *Princess Ark* lurched forward as if struck by a storm.

We do not know if the ship moved on her own or if she was lifted and thrust away by some enormous force. In any event, the sudden movement was enough to outdistance the wyrms, though only by great luck did we avoid smashing into the rocks. We flew all night, and by this morning's dawn we had reached the cataract at the bay. The deck was a scene of utter carnage. The crew had suffered many wounds, though no deaths. However, the mountain passes are marked in our chart room. Someday I shall return, for if there are such powerful dragons, great treasures and magic must lie beyond. Alas, the fate of the Oceanians is now clear.

Tslamir 21, 1965: Makeshift repairs have been finished since our unfortunate encounter at the citadel. The *Princess* needs a complete hull overhaul, and the sails' enchantments threaten to fade. Fortunately, we escaped the Isle of Oceania without further difficulties and have now reached the eastern coast on the Isle of Cestia. Heavy forest and hills, however, have prevented us from landing the *Princess* where she could be properly cared for. We are veering to the west in search of a quiet bay.

Tslamir 24, 1965: We have reached a large bay with lower hills. No sign of active, intelligent life can be seen in this region. In honor of Xerdon's fallen boltman, I've named this place Ramissur Bay. I plan to land the *Princess* tonight in a clearing that was sighted this morning. The moon hasn't reached first quarter yet, but the night should be clear enough.

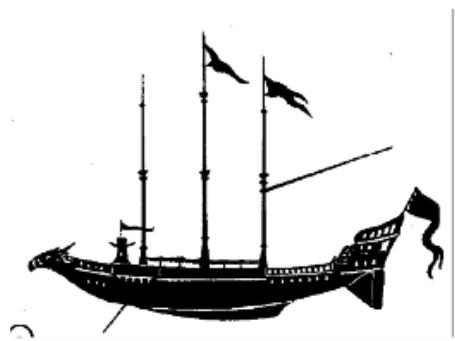
Tslamir 25, 1965: The landing was a success, considering the difficulties. Night landing with a damaged vessel has rarely been practiced. I sent the forward scouts ahead with the landing raft, and they revealed no impending danger. Three squads of boltmen and dispel wardens under Xerdon then secured the landing site. Raman, the chief carpenter, followed with his men and tools. They installed the wooden beams to hold the *Princess*'s hull off the ground, then placed the magical globes at the edges of the dry dock. Finally, I maneuvered the ship down into the landing joists. By then it was almost dawn, but the ship was properly secured and nearly hidden by the surrounding trees.

Our cleric Talasar took half the crew and a squad of boltmen into the forest in search of trees that could be used to replace the foremast, which had been damaged

during the final battle against the night dragons. Raman's crew began their work on the hull. I remained on board the *Princess* with the remaining boltmen and the rest of the crew to oversee the repair of the sails and the enchantment operations. The enchantment took until sundown, at which time I reached a break in the incantation sequence. I ordered the crew back on board to get some rest, while Xerdon and his boltmen set up camp around the *Princess*. Talasar and the away team have not yet returned. This is the most dangerous part of the operation. While the incantations are in a hiatus, all sails are off the masts. They must not be disturbed, for the magic would then be completely spoiled. The *Princess* will have to remain stranded for the night.

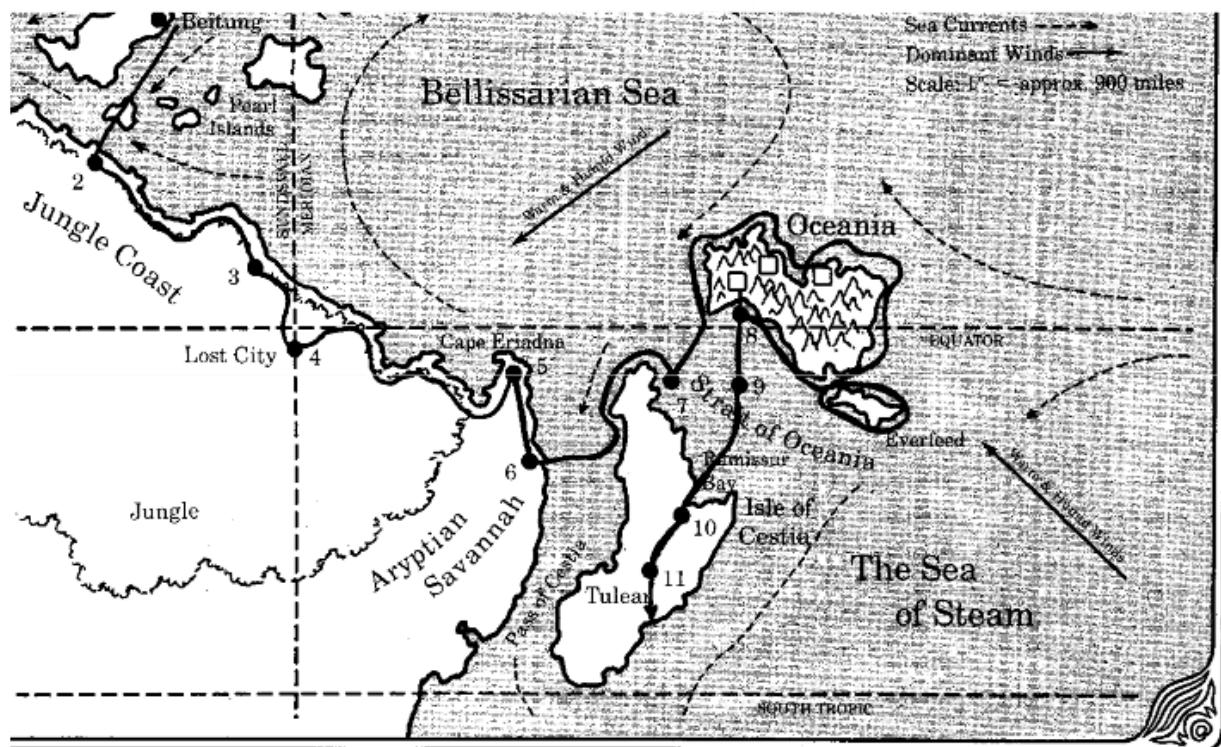
Tslamir 26, 1965: I should have known better. Near midnight, Xerdon quietly warned his men and sent a message aboard that movement had been sighted in the forest around the ship. It lasted a few hours but nothing else happened. This is when I noticed the real danger. Were it not for the stars that disappeared for an instant in the sky, I would not have realized the threat. The creature of darkness from the Isle of Oceania must have been tracking us ever since we left the citadel, seeking revenge for the death of its kin. With hardly a thought, I cast a *ball of fire* at the dragon. It roared with rage, which alerted Xerdon's guards and awoke the crew. Unfortunately, the beast was very hard to see. It swooped twice on the boltmen, and both times it seemed that several men disappeared into the dark wings.

Then the unexpected happened. A signal of light went off in the forest nearby. Whizzing balls were hurled from the surrounding trees and hit the dark dragon several times. The balls produced blinding flashes upon impact



COURSE OF THE PRINCESS ARK

1. Alphamir 15th, 1965 AY
2. Sulamir 10th
3. Sulamir 25th
4. Sudmir 3rd
5. Sudmir 25th (end of part 1)
6. Vertmir 7th
7. Vertmir 17th
8. Tslamir 8th (end of part 2)
9. Tslamir 21st
10. Tslamir 24th
11. Andrumir 7th (end of part 3)



with the dragon, causing it to lurch in its flight and wail in pain. A faint glow remained on its hide, apparently from a sticky substance within the balls. Almost immediately, a cluster of *bolts* shot up at the dragon from every point of the landing site. Xerdon and his guards would not miss such an opportunity for revenge.

But such was not the end of the dragon. It escaped, and it will most certainly return. At the end of the battle, Xerdon and his men searched the edge of the woods, but nothing was found there except dozens of broken jars attached to ropes. All of these were smeared with the strange glowing substance we had seen cast upon the dragon.

Tslamir 28, 1965: The crew was back at work when, soon after dawn, a scout brought news of Talasar's return. The priest, who has a knack for the grandiose, certainly

made a triumphant arrival. He had left with a few dozen men but returned with hundreds? There came drummers, trumpeteers, soldiers riding elephants, and a horde of totally mysterious people. Talasar and his men were carried on palanquins, obviously enjoying their ride. Several perfectly shaped trees followed, carried by an army of bearers.

It so happens that Talasar was captured by natives, whom we totally failed to notice in our preliminary observation. The natives are none other than the descendants of the ancient Oceanians! They fled centuries ago and constructed a new civilization here on the Isle of Cestia. Talasar was able to communicate with these people and describe our battle against the dragons. Tales of the death of one of these beasts caused great joy among the natives- I'll call them Cestians - who then honored Talasar and his men.

It was a group of Cestian scouts that routed the dragon two nights ago. The Cestians have developed a nonmagical substance that produces a blinding flash, which they hurl at their targets using jars attached to rope slings. They must still fear the dragons of darkness to carry these heavy jars around so routinely.

Andrumir 4, 1965: The Cestians are a fine bunch. They helped repair the *Princess*, then invited us to meet their king. Some of their warriors joined the ship's crew and began their training as sailors and boltmen. Learning our language and the work aboard the *Princess* will take time, but we need reinforcements. Their abilities with the anti-dragon balls are welcome, and it is an honor for them to serve on the ship that defeated a night dragon. While the other Cestians return home on foot through the forest, I set sail to the south with their guide, Abovombe, who provided directions to their capital. She is a rather sophisticated lady, which is a shock as we did not expect to find a civilized, educated people in such an isolated region.

Andrumir 7, 1965: We finally arrived at the capital city of Cestia. After the rugged, hilly terrain and heavy forest of Ramissur Bay came a series of plateaus on which the Cestians grow their crops. The plateaus are well irrigated, with many small canals and dams. Farming communities cluster at the crossroads.

The city, which the Cestians call Tulear, is a large urban center with high walls. Unusually high towers rise at many points of Tulear, each of them pointing huge, jagged stone spikes in every direction- not unlike the mountains of Oceania. Barbed chains stretch from tower to tower over the houses below. Abovombe explained the chains were a simple defense against the wings of low-flying dragons. The spikes are designed to wound dragons that come too close. (I could also see problems for skyships that attack such a bastion of ingenious traps.)

We landed at the gates of Tulear. There, Talasar and I reached the palace by way of a palanquin and met King Mananjary. Like many Cestians, King Mananjary is a tall person with dull brick-red skin and black hair. We used magic to communicate, and we learned that the Isle of Cestia has four kingdoms, the largest being King Mananjary's Manakara. The kingdom on the south of the isle, Androkia, is very hostile to foreigners. Here live the descendants of the island's original natives, who were pushed back when the ancient Oceanians fled their home isle. Two other Oceanian kingdoms lie to the north: Morovoay on the western shore, and Ambiroa on the eastern shore. (The ancient Oceanians apparently split up after their arrival and formed separate, sovereign nations.)

Most of the population of all kingdoms remains hidden in the mountains or in the forests, for fear of the dragons' return. Nonetheless, wars here seem to be as common as rainstorms. The people of Manakara, Morovoay, and Ambiroa seem to hate each other; it wasn't clear why. On behalf of Her Imperial Majesty, I formally established diplomatic ties with King Mananjary and bid him farewell.

Shortly after casting off, I summoned an invisible messenger and sent it to Sundsvall with our last position and royal greetings from King Mananjary. Our course is now due south.

Andrumir 12, 1965: Our flight over the kingdom of Manakara was uneventful. The high plateaus of Tulear eventually passed, and we reached the northern border of Androkia, near the coast. We then continued southwest over the sea to avoid direct confrontation with the Androkians, xenophobes about whom we were warned by King Mananjary himself. The decision was made more to please Lady Abovombe than to avoid difficulties with the natives. (I neglected to mention that the lady has stayed aboard the *Princess Ark* to join our voyage of discovery. Upon our return to Sundsvall, she will be King Mananjary's ambassador. Lady Abovombe has a refreshing personality, and the crew is becoming fond of her.)

As night fell, I heard a noise against my window, at the *Princess*'s stern. A small bat was there, apparently terrified by my presence but too exhausted by its flight above the sea to flutter away. I pitied the poor thing and put it in a cage in my room. It will be yet another witness to my long journey.

Andrumir 24, 1966: The journey across the southern edge of the Cestian Pass was quite an endeavor. The quasi-permanent storms that prevail in this region dropped so much rain on the *Princess*'s deck that she almost alighted on the roaring sea- a fate that would have destroyed her since she was built to fly, not to float. The *Princess*'s hulk is much too light to withstand even normal sea navigation, much less a violent storm. Fortunately, the crew performed splendidly in bailing out the water. Any navigation of these waters by a seagoing vessel would be excessively dangerous and thus should be avoided.

Andrumir 26, 1965: We reached the continental coast after sundown. I would have ordered a southerly course if one of the crewmen had not discovered some lights in the distance, perhaps a native village. I've

decided to investigate, using the clouds for cover. We shall see what we shall see.

Andrumir 28, 1966: Our approach toward what we thought be a native village became a very serious situation. We are fortunate to have survived. Indeed, there were lights, but not from a village- they came from a large, gloomy castle perched atop an incredible cliff overlooking the Gulf of Mar. All seemed to be fine as we observed the fortress from our position in the clouds, until I noticed that the princess was getting dangerously close to the cliff, despite my orders to stand off. Our strenuous attempts to pull away inexplicably failed. It was then I detected a powerful magical force that had locked onto the *Princess*'s bow. Nothing could break that grip- neither my powers, nor those of Talasar, nor those of the dispel wardens.

As we slowly drifted down to the black fortress, knights in armor could be seen standing motionless in the rain and the wind. All of them bore the coat of arms of the Heldannic Order. How such an insignificant clerical order built a mighty fortress so far from the Heldann Freeholds was at first inconceivable; later events would explain all, as we learned.

As soon as the range permitted it, the battle started. The boltmen and their Cestian squires did their best. But when the *Princess* reached the main Heldannic bastion, the heavily armored knights boarded the ship en masse and overwhelmed the crew. There was no alternative but to surrender in hopes of saving the ship.

Of course, for a wizard of my status, being "captured" is a relative term. I had copiously prepared myself, then allowed these knights to believe I was their prisoner. I followed their commander, planning to learn the Order's reasons for this act of war against a ship of Her Imperial Majesty.

As the commander of the *Princess Ark*, I was predictably and forcibly taken to the fortress's high priestess. Her welcome was very cold. These knights knew about wizardry and had made all the right moves to ensure I would not cast spells. I had a short conversation with the high priestess, which did not amount to much since she had protected her thoughts against any sort of magical *empathy*. Soon enough I tired of her charades, and I played my trump card.

Years ago, when I dabbled in spell research, I stumbled upon an interesting spell of *delaying* -a rather difficult spell, but if used successfully it confers the ability to delay a number of spells until a certain condition occurs. It will not work for more than an hour for me, but that was sufficient. A few blinks of my right eye and a

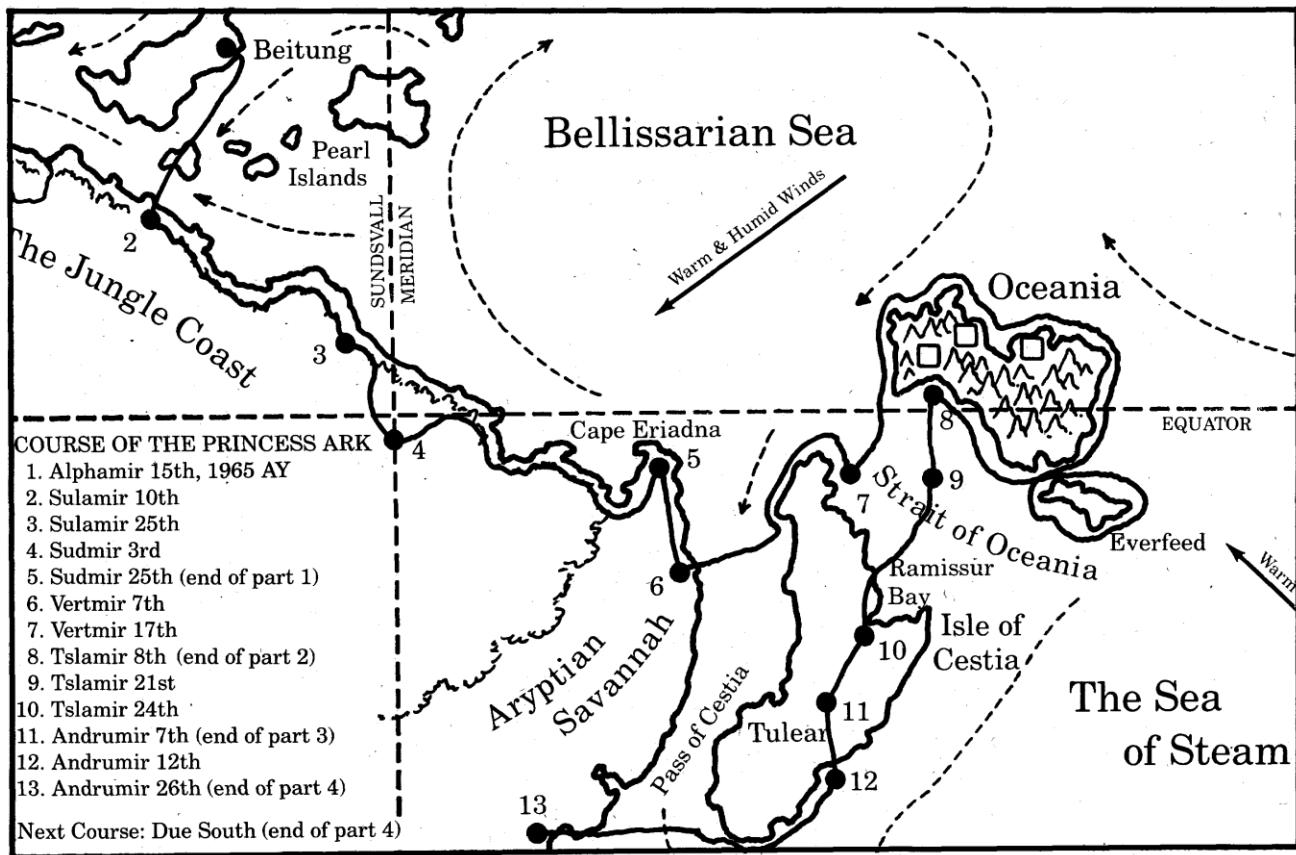


casual sniff were all it took to *time stop* this fine company.

My, what an interesting discovery I then made. A little *invisibility* here and a bit of *teleport* there, and before long I had found a temple at the center of fortress. A stairway spiraled down into the rock, leading to a crypt- a regular sort of crypt, mind you, like the ones that invariably contain someone's grave. After blasting away a few creatures that did not expect my impromptu appearance, I read the inscriptions carved just about everywhere. Crafty sculptors, these knights.

The Heldannic Knights have been on a quest for decades to find the mortal remains of their Spiritual Patron. One of their heroes had made it this far and had actually found the grave. The knights managed to create a permanent gate to this place, then built their fortress above the ancient crypt. So far, they had succeeded in keeping it secret, which leads me to believe they murdered the wizard hired to create the gate, as well as all those who built the castle. This explains why they might desire the destruction of the Princess.

It took some sophisticated magical doing on my part to remove the corpse and take it away into the planes, to a place of my knowledge alone. Just as I returned from my journey, knights poured into the crypt and captured me again- this time for sure. Their anger was as palpable as

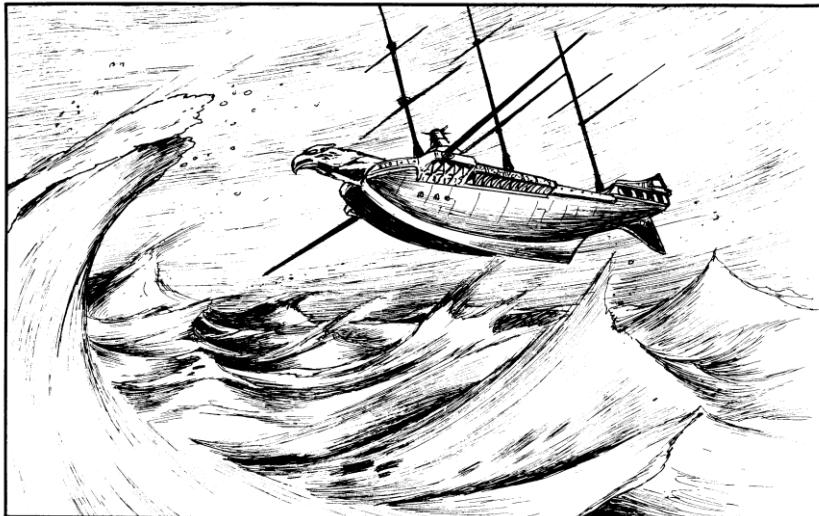


the many sharp blades they laid at my throat. It would have been over for me, but the high priestess arrived in time.

And she knew what I had done. It took some very careful discussing to sort things out. A shrewd negotiator, that lady; I grant her that. Eventually, she ordered the release of both ship and crew, in exchange for which she and I went into the planes the next day and recovered the body of the order's Spiritual Patron.

I must admit that I had a very tough time breaking away from the priestess. Her intention, of course, was to never let me go - I was too dangerous, now - but neither was my intention to stay. The priestess had what she wanted - the "holy relic" - and my ship was free and far enough from the fortress to avoid being pulled back. We left immediately; the empire has no interest in the clerical matters of petty knighthoods. My personal interest in this whole episode lies now in discovering the nature of the force that pulled the *Princess* down - and this I am intent upon unveiling one day. It will have to wait for now.

Cyprimir 1, 1965: After returning to the *Princess*, I ordered a new course, away from the fortress. These knights will probably be looking for us, but I care no more about them. We are now sailing south over the coast. The land has become an extremely rocky, uninviting region. Despite some rainfall, it seems the vegetation is getting sparser.



Varelya

Cyprimir 10, 1965: We have now reached the region called the Vulture Peninsula. It is a complete desert, where occasional sand dunes alternate with desolate rocky wasteland. According to the stars, we have sailed well south of the Meridional Tropics, and the winds regularly blow from the west. Despite the presence of the sea, very little vegetation grows here at all. Temperatures are similar to that of southern Alphatia in summertime. The very poor quality of the soil and extremely dry winds coming from the land contribute to this infertile wilderness.

Cyprimir 16, 1965: A large plateau can be seen on the peninsula, no more than a few miles from the coast, forming sandstone cliffs falling into the sea. The plateau reaches 600' in average height. So far, no sign of civilization has been encountered in this region. This place deserves its name, for the whole peninsula has the shape of a vulture's head, and vultures slowly circle underneath the ship. The refuse dumped overboard has attracted these clumsy birds. A lucky bird sometimes succeeds in catching some falling garbage, but most of them manage only to get splattered with smelly waste. If nothing else, the vultures offer the crew some amusement, making easy targets for the antiquated crossbows on board. At dawn I shall order a southern course to cross the peninsula's widest section.

Cyprimir 18, 1965: The vultures are getting bolder. They seem to have figured out our dining hours and know when to expect waste to come falling down. I caught one indolently perched on the railing next to my door. Another ruffled its filthy feathers while observing the ship boy scrubbing the deck- hungrily observing, I imagined. That's when a blood-curdling shriek from starboard literally froze everybody in place. It was Lady Abovombe.

The scene that greeted our hasty arrival was certainly a striking one. Lady Abovombe had been taking her daybreak stroll when one of the vultures perched in the riggings managed to soil her favorite décolleté dress. Furious, the ambassadress seized a boat hook and swung it at the bird, impaling the "criminal" -but further splattering her with its blood. Then she sought out the watch on duty, screaming at the top her lungs as to why such a slovenly creature could be permitted to remain on board, and she gave the watch a solid punch in the mouth. It is the first time I've noticed that Lady Abovombe has a hot temper, but she is extraordinarily pretty when her cheeks turn rosy.

Cyprimir 19, 1965: In the morning, the lookout called out a discovery on the ground below. At first we saw nothing, but after a few minutes we made out what must have been a road, centuries old- now merely a narrow band of a color different from the soil. Then I saw several other ancient roads. They converged to the east, and we followed them-and there it was. A ruined city! From the ground it would have been nearly impossible to see, but we were high enough to distinguish its shape. Streets, walls, buildings- we could see the outlines of them all, but barely even the walls remained now. The city must have been raised in the depths of times past. It had been built on a group of several small hills, with one larger hill, tapered on top, in the center. I decided to investigate this myself, and I ordered Xerdon and a squad of boltmen with me.

Cyprimir 20, 1965: There was very little to see on the surface- mostly dust and rocks. We climbed the peaked central hill and discovered the ruins of an old temple. The men started digging and sifting through rubble, in search of archaeological clues. We found plenty. There was indeed an advanced civilization here. It appears that at the time of its' splendor, the city was surrounded by fertile plains, lush forests, and several rivers and lakes.

Then, following the death of a great king, the king's two sons fought for the throne, dividing the nation in a bloody civil war. No other clues were unveiled as to the outcome of the struggle. It was getting late, and I ordered the team back to the ship for the night. We'll remain in this area and explore a bit more tomorrow at our leisure.

Cyprimir 21, 1965: Soon after sunset last night, a sentry interrupted my rest with news of movement down below. I had him order total silence aboard the ship while I took out my crystal ball for a little investigative work.

A strange creature was slowly walking by, hunched under the weight of a bag. It looked like an old man with the head of a vulture. Another hint at vultures! This could no longer be a coincidence. I decided to let the creature go its way, so I could quietly observe it.

The creature never showed any awareness of the ship above the temple. It marched away and kept going for hours along one of the nearly invisible roads to the east. Before sunrise, it crawled into a niche under a large rock and closed the entrance with a dusty blanket. It then went to sleep- and shortly thereafter, so did I, canceling our planned foray into the ruins.

Since this creature was the only apparent inhabitant we have met in this desert so far, I've decided to follow

its slow journey from a safe distance, observing it through the magical sphere again this evening. More later.

Cyprimir 24, 1965: It has been days now since I first saw the vulture-man. I discovered a fitting description of it in the ship's library. It is a nagpa, a creature found in other parts of the world and said to dabble in necromancy (how fitting). As usual, our specimen crawled out of its shelter after sundown and kept moving to the east.

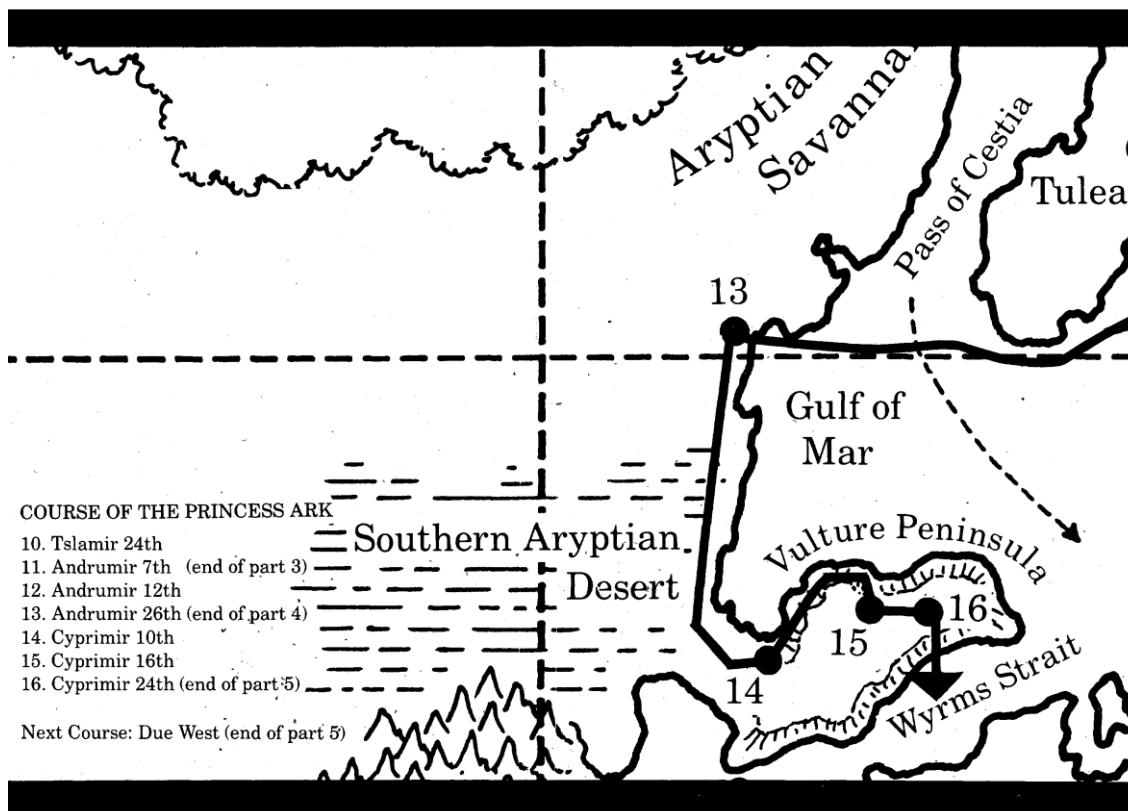
Its journey's end was at hand, however. Much later in the night, it reached the edge of a depression in the desert. Hundreds of other nags were walking down the slopes to the bottom, toward a large volcanic-like mound. They encircled it, then one after the other they climbed to the top of the mound to drop some jewelry into the dark opening thereon. Meanwhile, the other nags chanted a sad but powerful psalmody. The wind picked up, and the nags knelt down facing the mound, waiting.

Many long minutes, perhaps an hour, passed. Then faint lights appeared above the nags- at first only a few flickering auras, then hundreds and soon thousands of them, filling the sky above the depression. The scene was frightening. These illuminated shapes were undoubtedly the ghostly images of the people who once populated this region. These ghosts slowly reenacted scenes of battle and carnage involving a level of violence that I have never before witnessed.

Then a huge, ugly shadow rose from the opening of the mound when the horrifying war scenes reached their paroxysm. This shadow was, for me, the embodiment of fear and destruction. Even from this ship, stationed miles from the site, I could sense the evil of that grotesque being. Inexplicably, the apparition and the ghosts suddenly faded in the dark. The nags began searching the site, picking up round, black cocoons from the sand that had not been there before. Within the hour, most had left, headed in various directions. Our little nagpa is coming back toward the ship. It is time to know the truth.

Cyprimir 26, 1965: I decided to meet our specimen personally late last night, so I prepared myself and waited along the road for it. It was not surprised when it saw me. "You saw," it said somberly (its words translated by my spells). It obviously knew I had been observing it all along.

"Our" nagpa goes by the name of Abatu of Varelyya. It told me of its tormented existence. There was indeed a vast nation here once, and a brutal war. One of the two princes conjured a powerful monster from the Sphere of Entropy to destroy his rival. He clearly was unable to control the Immortal avatar, and when it had accomplished its crime, it turned on its summoner and obliterated his entire land. He and all his people would be



cursed to live, die, and forever return as nagpas- feeders on carrion as they had once fed on each other in war.

Every year for centuries, the accursed people of Varelyya return to the site of the ancient conjuration and sacrifice jewels, precious metals, magical items, books, knowledge, food, anything that may have any value to them, seeking atonement and an end to their wretchedness. Death itself will not break the curse. When death befalls, the souls of the Varelyans return to the mound. Every year at the same time, the ghosts fight their wars all over again, then materialize as embryos inside the black cocoons. Over time- I don't know how long- they grow to adult size and breach the cocoons.

Many nagpas wander the far reaches of the world, but they always return to Varelyya in soul or in body. Abatu pulled one of those black spheres from his robes and said, "You see, wizard, this is my father. He was the King of Varelyya, and I was one of his sons. Such is the-sentence for my crime. Perhaps one day the Immortals will forgive us, but until then we must go on. Feel free to plunder the mound, wizard, but beware of the risks."

I bade him farewell. As the ship continued its course to the south, I burned the map of the site and all notes on its whereabouts, then scattered them in the nocturnal wind.

Hastmir 4, 1965: Last night, Lady Abovombe and I had a fine dinner in my quarters. We spoke at length of the potential for enhanced cultural exchanges between our nations. I am convinced she is perceiving a certain charm in my Alphatian manners- or perhaps it is my gray hair. I got very close to a more personal approach to the subject but was interrupted by my little bat companion's sudden tantrum in its cage. Lady Abovombe took pity on the furry thing, pampered and petted it, then returned to her cabin.

The bat stared at me all along. I could have sworn I have seen that look before.

The air is much cooler now that we have reached the Wyrms Strait, on the southern coast of the Vulture Peninsula. The crew has switched to winter uniforms. Many of the Cestian squires are in sick bay with chills; they are not used to colder weather. We are proceeding due west.

Hastmir 6, 1965: The water here is dark green, thus the name of the bay- Green Bay. I ordered the ship to wait until sundown before reaching the coast. High mountains rise to the west, and I would like to examine them. There has to be some civilization in this region. Most of the coast is covered with forests of oaks, and game seems plentiful.

Hastmir 7, 1965: Aha! We have flown over several villages already. I was expecting human population, perhaps luckier people than the Varelyans of the Vulture Peninsula. Instead, we found very tall people, closer to the size of ogres but not quite as muscular. Detail were difficult to determine in the dark, so I ordered Xerdon and few boltmen to join me in a ground expedition to observe the natives. The ship is to go offshore to avoid frightening the local population and is to return tomorrow night at the same place and time to pick us up.

N'djatwaland

Hastmir 8, 1965: This was a rather surprising expedition. As planned, we left the *Princess Ark* and approached a native settlement. There must have been no more than 500 people there, with children and cattle. These people are indeed as tall as ogres, strong but not as massive. Their skins are red, and most favor a style in which their black hair is tied back in long, single tassels. They wore elegant and very colorful garments made of felt and wool, including hats and boots. The most surprising thing we noticed was their obvious elven physical features- delicate facial lines and pointed ears. Wood was a material commonly used in the construction of their houses. The logs were ornately carved and painted. At the center of the village stood a stone totem, with many sculptures of various animal heads.

I ordered Xerdon to remain at his post, then turned invisible to continue my observations. I visited a few houses, which looked very clean and quite comfortable. It was late and many of the natives were sound asleep,

although two woke up as I entered their houses. They must have the keen hearing of the elves.

I saw a house curiously built on top of a high menhir stone. Despite the precarious look of the house, it was very solidly built- as it should for people of that size. I levitated up to the door since I could not find a stairway. Fortunately, the massive door was ajar, so I peeked in. An old female was sitting on a rocking chair, reading a leather-bound book and smoking a pipe. A large cauldron was puffing steam in the fireplace, releasing the pleasant smell of stew.

This is when I noticed the female had lowered her book and was quietly watching me. She cleared her throat and pointed at another chair, near the table- a rather large chair, of course. It was all rather embarrassing.

After a final puff on her pipe, she pulled out what looked like dried lizard tongues from a nearby jar, then tossed them into the fire, muttering some incantation. I decided not to intervene. She turned back, and said, in perfect Alphatian, "Well, visitor, why were you sneaking around our village?"

After a number of probing questions, she was apparently satisfied of my intentions. She called herself Ngezitwa in her dialect, and said her people were the N'djatwa (pronounced: un DJA twa). They seemed to be a crossbreed of elves and either ogres or giants- and a very successful mixture at that, offering the strength of giant humanoids with reasonable spellcasting abilities. It seems that they kept the best of both worlds.

The N'djatwa have lived on the shores of the Green Bay for centuries, even before the Varelyans reached their golden age. In fact, the N'djatwa had regular trade with the latter until the culture of the Vulture Peninsula was obliterated. This did not hurt the N'djatwa, since they could no longer rely on the shipment of goods from Varelyya nor on any wealth created by commerce.

The N'djatwa did travel north in search of other people and met the bellicose Androkians on the Isle of Cestia. That proved disastrous to the expedition, of which only a handful returned. The N'djatwa shun the uninhabited desert, the Savannah, and the jungle. To the west lies a very large mountain range, and to the east a land of horrible monsters. The latter is mostly surrounded with mountains, but occasionally monsters wander into their lands, near the Green River. The N'djatwa built



fortified walls in several mountain passes to prevent these destructive incursions.

Most surprising was the old female's mention of the lands that lie farther to the east. Ngezitwa said that it was the realm of the titans, huge creatures that seem to spend their time fighting and destroying each other. Most intriguing, she pointed out that she had seen another flying ship- like the *Princess* -in that region!

Ngezitwa casually explained with a smile that village hunters had seen the *Princess* and had followed her moves until my arrival at the village. She added, "It really is a nice ship you have, but personally I prefer riding our giant pelicans. They are quite friendly, they do not rely on powerful magic, and they have no equal when it comes to bringing a load of fresh fish to the village." Well, I certainly felt I had been put in my place!

We spent a few hours talking about N'djatwaland and Alphatia. Ngezitwa didn't think the N'djatwa would mind establishing ties with Alphatia. She seemed very interested in the prospect of acquiring books and anything related to magic- definitely an elven attitude. As druidess of the village, she could speak for the villagers, but a more official approach for the whole nation would be to meet the head of the clan in the city of M'banyika. The druidess would not reveal where the city was, however, and she wanted it to remain hidden. I accepted her invitation to ride with her to M'banyika.

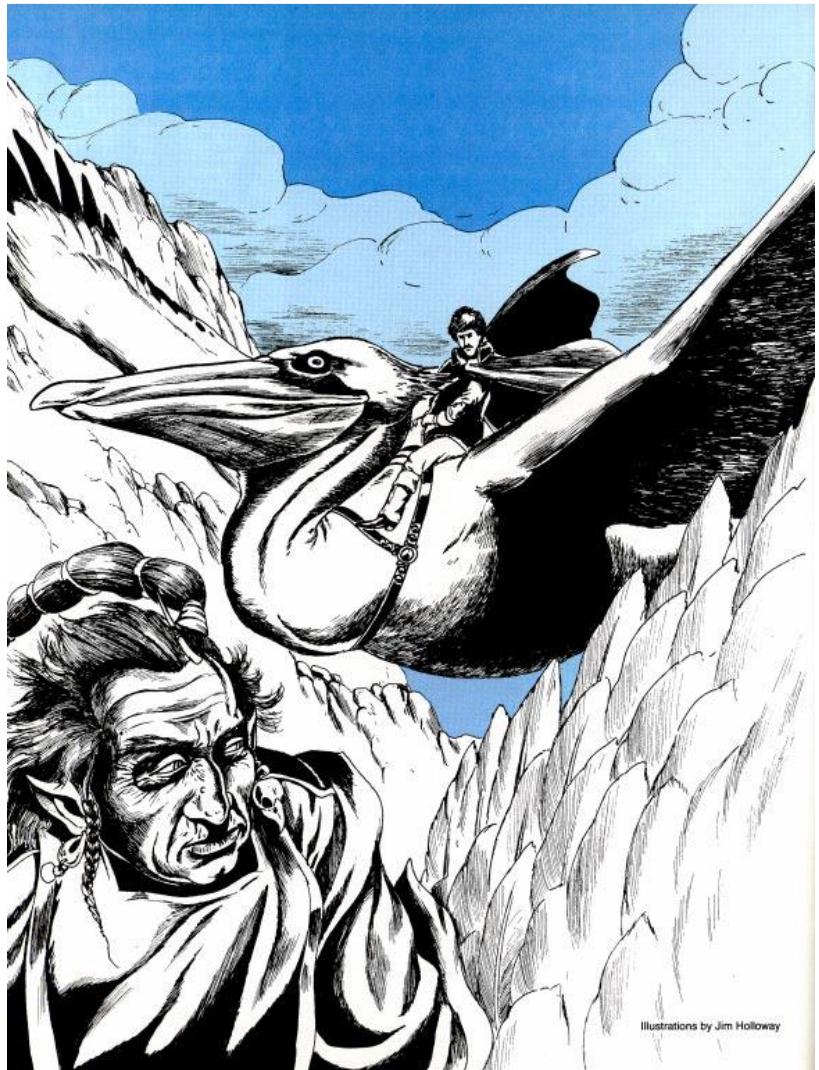
The next morning, I discovered Xerdon and his boltmen standing toe to toe with a group of N'djatwa hunters, defiantly gauging each other. Xerdon had come to the village looking for me. Fortunately, my intervention and Ngezitwa's prevented the worst. Xerdon will dispatch a messenger to the ship and remain at the village until my return.

Hastmir 16, 1965: The flight to M'banyika was pleasant, albeit too slow for my taste. The giant pelicans are comfortable birds, but they require constant care and time to rest. Halfway to the city, Ngezitwa requested that I wear a blindfold- which I did. This however did not prevent me from seeing the path to the city, at least partially; *wizard eye* spells are still fairly useful in this condition.

The forest of oaks gave way to the pines that grow on the mountain foothills. M'banyika lies 300-400 miles southwest of Ngezitwa's village, at about 3,000' altitude. It is a very nice city, with white fortified walls, slender towers, small water canals, and elegant bridges. It lies halfway up a tall mountain peak, facing south. A waterfall drops several hundred feet to the city, where the water forms a lake. The city seems to have underground sewers (which alone proves to me that the N'djatwa are good architects). The streets are rather narrow, and most residences have two to three stories. I would estimate the population at 35,000 souls. Evidently, it would be difficult to see the city from the mountain pass down below. Finding the city through the jumble of mountain peaks and ridges is an impossible feat without a guide.

I was adequately greeted at the palace and given a comfortable room to recover from the journey. Unfortunately, I had the distinct feeling the palace guard would not allow me to wander the city unescorted. I did, however, encounter little trouble in leaving my room at night without being seen. All is not as nice as it would seem. The N'djatwa are slavers. Several markets were still open, where N'djatwa bought and sold their captives- mostly gnomes and humanoids. I saw one human slave, too- a Heldanner, judging from his fair complexion and a black lion tattooed on his chest. One group of slaves was taken to what I would say was a slaughterhouse, while warriors entered the city gates, pulling several hundred captives in chains behind their lizard mounts. Apparently these N'djatwa haven't completely shed their ogrish attributes, either. It seems a great part of the food required for a large city such as M'banyika comes from these slaves; I saw almost no fields, cattle, or pastures near the city. I did not have time to investigate further.

Hastmir 17, 1965: I met His Highness Kitakanga, the Clan master of the N'djatwa, early in the morning. He



Illustrations by Jim Holloway

was just as eager to learn from the empire as was Ngezitwa. There was genuine interest on his part in the establishment of some commercial and diplomatic link with the empire. However, some tension grew when I brought up the slavery issue. If the N'djatwa wish to maintain any kind of relationship with the empire, I said, it is imperative that all Alphatian subjects must be absolutely immune to any law or situation in which N'djatwa could enslave or eat them.

N'djatwa laws are quite clear about their own attitudes: Non-N'djatwa are fair game, unless noted by proclamation from His Highness Kitakanga. Even then, any lawbreaker could be enslaved (and devoured). After much discussion, His Highness agreed to concede such a proclamation toward Alphatian citizens, provided Imperial Authorities would acknowledge (if not approve of) N'djatwa civil laws. Kitakanga would not negotiate that point. I had no choice but to agree to his terms and sign a provisional treaty. The Heldann slave I observed

earlier was offered to me as a sign of goodwill. Fine—I did wish to question the fellow, after all.

It was time to return. The Heldanner was tied up quite literally in the manner of a sausage— no allusion intended—and given over to my custody. Ngezitwa was happy that we had come to an agreement. The return to the village was uneventful.

Hastmir 25, 1965: Ngezitwa and I traded gifts. I received a pair of exquisite felt quilts bearing pelican emblems, several scrolls of N'djatwa poems, and a stuffed bread- no doubt a N'djatwa delicacy. I can only conjecture about the nature of the stuffing in that bread. It does smell good, though. Perhaps a small taste of it wouldn't hurt.

Myoshima

Eimir 3, 1965: It has been six days since we left N'djatwaland. We are now at the southern edge of the Green Bay, and the weather is getting much cooler- it is well into winter in Aasla, but it is midsummer in this hemisphere. Cold winds blow down a large valley to the south of us, between high, snow-capped peaks. On the west lies N'djatwaland's southernmost borders; to the east is the unknown.

I invited the Heldanner I extracted from the voracious N'djatwas' appetites to dinner (not "as" dinner) at my table. He apparently does not know of my little adventure at his order's citadel some time ago. He is neither a very talkative fellow nor a very thankful one. The man, who introduced himself as Rolf Schwartzen, is an arrogant Heldanner indeed.

Herr Rolf has been suspicious of my intentions since we took him aboard the *Princess*, tied up like a sausage. How petty. After all, he could have ended up as a package of steaks. He has been treated as befits common gentry, which is more than reasonable for someone who has failed to offer his rank, title, name (other than one that I suspect is false), and a plausible reason for his presence so far from his native land. He claims that slavers captured him near Ostland many years ago; since then he has been bought and sold, every time being moved farther away from Ostland. He admitted studying at the Temple of Freiburg at a younger age, after Lady Abovombe made mention of the conspicuous black-lion tattoo on his chest.

Eimir 4, 1965: This morning we veered eastward. At noon, a dangerous storm rolled down the mountains to starboard, and I ordered maximum altitude to avoid the

worst. *Airmasks* have been distributed to all personnel aboard, according to standard procedures. We will maintain this position until the tempest comes to an end.

After several unsuccessful attempts at conversation with Herr Rolf, I simply made use of certain powers at my disposal to pry into his thoughts during his sleep. That proved to be a difficult endeavor. The man is strong willed! Nevertheless, I learned that he is an officer of the Heldannic Order, as I suspected- but he left his citadel on a flying ship! So they do have such ships here, after all! His original mission had something to do with the stars. Then his ship was attacked by the N'djatwas, and he was captured. There is a recurring vision of his ship spiraling away from him into the sky. That annoys me greatly, as I cannot not find a clear explanation for it.

Herr Rolf is free to go about the deck, but he is being watched for his (and our) safety. Just to be certain, I cast a geas on him without his knowledge. He will not be able to do harm to the ship nor to any of the crew or officers aboard:

Eimir 5, 1965: The storm is still raging below. Late in the morning, the quartermaster sounded the alarm when several large cloud funnels soared up into the sky, surprisingly close to the *Princess*.

I would have ignored this harmless event- harmless to a seasoned Alphatian skyskipper like myself- had it not been for the Heldanner's reaction. Few people know about this rare atmospheric turbulence, and very rare indeed are those who have actually encountered it. I would not have expected this knowledge of Herr Rolf. However, he calmly secured himself, studying the largest and closest funnel. He seemed surprised, then a bit amused, when I ordered the *Princess* away from the turbulence. Most intriguing this was.

Eimir 6, 1965: I gave great thought to what happened yesterday, and I concluded there is something more about these funnels than is taught at Eriadna High- something that the Heldanners already know. And I was right.



Later in the day, a very large funnel rose near the ship. After ordering everyone and everything secured aboard, I commanded full speed forward- into the funnel. That obviously startled Herr Rolf, who got increasingly nervous as we approached the roaring funnel. Shortly before reaching the turbulence, he turned around, staring at me in panic, and shouted, "Fool, you will kill us all! Roll her over!"

Everything became clear to me at that instant. We were on Deaths doorstep. I maneuvered the *Princess* to the limit of her endurance. I heard a low groan rise in her hull, then a shattering shriek as the *Princess* flipped over-out of my control- and hit the funnel like a diving falcon, her wings bent back and almost touching the hull. The wood should have splintered, yet didn't. After a dizzying moment of whirling around, the sky became very dark, and the thunderous roar of the funnel came to an abrupt end. And there we were. . . .

What a discovery- the *Princess* has vanquished the skyshield! No Alphantian skyship in recent memory has ever sailed into the dark, unbreathable sky above the clouds. Yet the *Princess* has now done so!

There are legends of ancient Alphantian vessels capable of traveling beyond the skyshield, to moons, stars, and distant mysteries of the universe. That science was long lost- until I rediscovered it for the greatest glory of the Empire!

Eimir 10, 1965: The world below us has rotated already four times since we passed the skyshield.

Fortunately, our crew was wearing *airmasks* at the time we entered the funnel- a good thing, or by now we'd all be dead. What lies on this side of the skyshield is a vast, cold, and airless void. Our speed seems to be much greater than could possibly be reached in the atmosphere of our world. The studies we have now made reveal much about this environment and its laws. Only now do I begin to realize the incalculable consequences of my gamble! I must gather as much information as possible before I return to the Imperial Palace. And there is so much to do, so many questions to answer. . . .

Much to my astonishment, I also suspect there is more to the *Princess* than I once imagined. It isn't the first time that she has maneuvered in some unexpected fashion almost as if she were a living being. I recall the encounter with the night dragons back in Oceania, when the *Princess* seemed to act on her own to avoid a fatal blow from one monster.

And this enigmatic Heldanner! How could he have possibly known about the effects of such a reckless maneuver as I attempted into the funnel? This leads me to believe that we are not alone beyond the skyshield! Now the vision he had while sleeping does make sense. I can only conclude that the Heldannic Order is in possession of at least one skyship, and it has acquired the knowledge of reaching past the skyshield. But how? And from whom?

Our *guest*, Herr Rolf, has been totally mute about this whole affair. I had no choice but to clap him in irons and cast him into the brig. For him to know so much, he must

be a high clerist of his order and, therefore, a dangerous man. What else does he know?

Eimir 12, 1965: This day we made our first encounter in the Void- and a most unexpected encounter at that. It began while I was conducting research in my laboratory. Without warning, a flock of creatures dropped onto the deck out of nowhere, causing great surprise among the crew.

The fight was brief but fierce. Our assailants had not counted on our boltmen's firepower. Most of the attackers were quickly slain, and the survivors retreated. The attackers were catmen, much like the rakasta of our world- but they were mounted on sabre-tooth tigers! Shortly after they took off, the attackers vanished again into the void. But it was not my intention to give up pursuit so quickly.

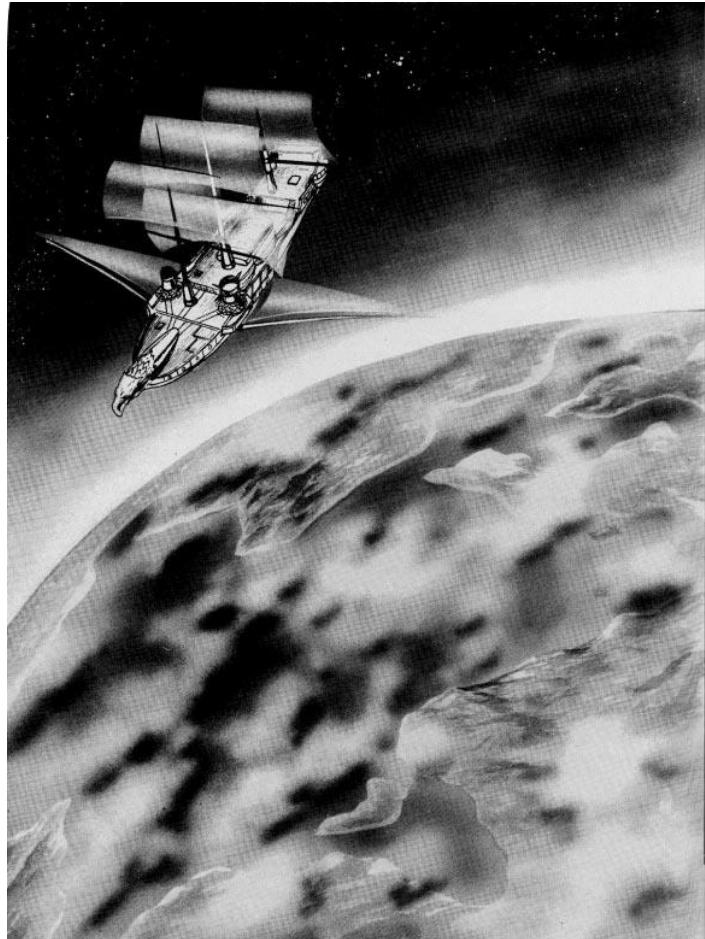
I ordered the *Princess* full speed ahead after the fugitives. It seemed we had almost caught up with those flying felines when, to our astonishment, an entire world appeared before our eyes- and between it and our vessel were many hundreds of rakasta mounted on their great cats, obviously waiting for us! By the time the *Princess* could come to a halt, we were surrounded.

It would have been stupid to resist their many bowmen. An emissary flew close to us and gestured for the *Princess* to follow him, as we are doing now. I must close and prepare for the worst.

Eimir 14, 1965: It appears now that we have found a previously unknown moon of our world, called by its natives Myoshima. Myoshima is not a very large globe, but it has its own atmosphere. From what we could see, it is mostly covered with jungle and mountains, a warm world by our standards.

We landed near a mountain city not unlike those of Ochalea. The buildings are elaborately carved with curved pagoda roofs, many dragon sculptures, and mansions made of wood and paper. First Officer Talasar and I followed the emissary to a palace, while rakasta warriors set up camp around the ship.

We were brought before a rather haughty rakasta noble who introduced himself- in very barbaric Alphantian- as Lord Katayama, Imperial Governor of Ichiyoda Province. In our discussion, Lord Katayama did not seem surprised by our arrival; it is clear that many other spacegoing ships have come and gone in this area! It was also clear to Lord Katayama and his generals that we were unaware at first of their existence, since he, as he said, "were drifting about, bobbing aimlessly in the solar winds like an empty gourd."



We had come very close to their world and were spotted by one of their scouts. He apparently saw a certain person with a black lion tattoo on our ship's deck. That person was wanted there, and Lord Katayama had ordered the *Princess* to be lured closer. Lord Katayama seemed very satisfied with the results of his plan.

In effect, Lord Katayama offered us a trade. He would release the *Princess* and her crew in exchange for the man with the tattoo- our man Rolf. In addition to this, Lord Katayama wished to establish ties with our Empire, and to that end offered to provide a gift from the Emperor of Myoshima to our illustrious Empress. All of this was acceptable to me, although rather abrupt in general approach.

The deal was done, and we stayed at the palace overnight. Clearly, we were "guests" so long as we did not try to leave. We had no freedom to move about the palace, and the governor's guard was very assertive. There were no friendly whiskers among the rakasta nobles. Why, some were at the limits of the most basic courtesy, while others even showed their claws at us!

Much was learned from our host. It appears that this moon, Myoshima, has a very strange nucleus, a core

highly magical in nature. It bends rays of light around its atmosphere, causing the moon to be invisible to onlookers outside its atmosphere! This explains how the scouts observed us without being seen, and how we missed seeing such a huge object while being so close. I do suspect the moon of being visible to those using infravision, though, because of the heat it would radiate.

Lord Katayama would not disclose the exact course of the moon around our world, so we are still uncertain of its position at any one time. These rakasta have good spell-casters among them, since they have developed items very similar to our own *airmasks*. Their tigers wear magical *flying collars*, which makes me believe that rakasta are capable of reaching our world. It is also possible that rakasta settlements in the more remote regions of our world are descended from these Myoshima felines. This would explain how Lord Katayama knew about Alphatia.

The most saddening aspect of our agreement with Lord Katayama is that we do have to let go of the Heldanner at once. He is one prisoner on whom I would have liked to have spent more time and effort. The Heldannic Order apparently committed some act of sacrilege and was outlawed on Myoshima by the Emperor. Lord Katayama would not expound on the subject, and palace etiquette required our tact and discretion.

Eimir 15, 1965: Talasar and I returned to the Princess with the imperial gift carried on a huge palanquin. The thing is a 10'-tall hunk of rock with a few sculptured figures on it. It is far heavier and harder than I had believed it would be. It radiates a pulsating, pale-blue aura. Its magic is so powerful it made the hair on my skin rise when I approached. There is much to study upon my return to Alphatia.

Reluctantly we parted with Herr Rolf, who showed a somber, expressionless face. He still refused to say a thing. The crew secured the imperial gift and prepared for the journey home.

Eimir 16, 1965: Lord Katayama's cats-at-arms boarded the *Princess* very late this night without warning. Their leader- a minor noble who called himself Kenju, complete with shining katana, do-maru armor, great kabuto helm, and a sabretooth tiger on a leash- approached and addressed first officer Talasar in mediocre Alphatian. "Haaken-San, Lord Katayama sends me. Man with lion tattoo has escaped. My master lose great honor if prisoner not brought back to Imperial Palace. Lord Katayama says maybe lion knights' ships set ambush for you if lion man not recaptured soon. Lion

man seen flying on stolen tiger toward south of your world. I go with you. Both our empires lose much if lion man succeeds."

At these words, a squad of pole-toting catmen seized Lady Abovombe and moved to take her off the ship. Talasar shouted a word, and every wand on deck came free. Katana-wielding catmen froze, as did we, poised for combat to the death. But Lady Abovombe, I knew, would die first.

There would be better times for battle. At my sign, Talasar accepted the generous "offer." The cat warrior then bowed briefly and stood back as Lady Abovombe was taken away. He was a bit smug and arrogant, and his tiger hissed in our direction.

Not that I cared about his tale of ambush against ships of Her Imperial Majesty- we can deal with Heldanners- but I want Lady Abovombe back, unharmed. She is important to my mission. And I might yet pry some information from that pretentious Heldanner. Alphatians have more than one way to skin a cat.

Lord Kenju and two of his followers were shown to their cabins while I ordered immediate takeoff. We headed for the south of Vulcania. Soon thereafter, the rakasta army escorted us to the edge of Myoshima's atmosphere. The *Princess* had no difficulty breaking through Myoshima's skyshield, a much weaker one than that of our world. Soon, Myoshima vanished into the dark, starry sky.

Eimir 16, 1965: It was merely a day after we left the moon Myoshima when the alarm was sounded. Five large ships were sailing through space on an intercept course with our *Princess*. They were very close, coming around a small field of asteroids that had shielded them from our view. There was no time for evasive maneuvers.

The ships were of a strange build, most of them bearing bird features. The largest of the five, a very large war galley, had an eagle figurehead, and its hull was engraved with golden feathers. Two large eagle claws jutted out on either side of the galley's prow. The vessel bore the banner of a capital ship. Many pennants and main sails revealed a black lion against a white background. Clearly, we had run into the clutches of a Heldannic war fleet.

The boltmen raced to their battle stations and braced for combat, while the sailors feverishly prepared the riggings for an imminent boarding. Yet the rakasta Kenju and his two henchmen remained near the center of the deck, calmly observing the proceedings with haughty and arrogant postures. They showed no signs of fear or nervousness.



DRAGON 41

Oddly enough, I soon discovered there was little activity aboard the Heldannic "warbirds"; certainly no Heldannic sailors were preparing for battle. The ships came almost within ramming distance of us- and inexplicably continued full ahead, totally ignoring our potentially doomed *Princess Ark*. I could clearly observe Heldanners moving about their ships, mending sails and scrubbing decks; one of their leaders casually paced the upper deck, mumbling some obscure prayer while picking his nose. They were totally oblivious to our presence!

The ships came so close that I could hear an eerie military march emanating from the war galley. I dismissed that as an auditory illusion, and all was fine. The ships sailed on and soon disappeared behind us into the celestial void. Kenju and his henchmen simply returned to their cabins, apparently satisfied and no more surprised at the results than they would have been had they seen another group of asteroids pass by us. Somehow, they had been confident of this event's outcome.

I had the chance to observe the Heldannic ships at my leisure as they unwittingly sailed by. The war galley was very heavily armed with catapults and ballistas. I could see metal bolts all along its hull, holding together an ominous coating of metal plates. This ship was not built to fly in the air, like the Princess; it would require far too much magic to be worthwhile. I suspect it was built in this airless void with the help of several smaller vessels. Large feathery oars slowly rowed the galley through space, occupying four decks of the ship. The strangest sight, however, were a half-dozen small black boats- for lack of

a better term- tethered to poles at the sides and stern of the galley. These were each large enough for one man and had man-made wings and tails like those of ravens. Two rods, probably weapons packed with Heldannic clerical magic, jutted from beneath the wings.

Escorting the war galley were four smaller ships, each bearing some resemblance to a vulture. More lightly armed, these lesser ships seemed built more for speed and maneuverability than for heavy assault. From astern, all four ships displayed appropriate birdlike tails. It was a sight I'll not soon forget.

Eimir 17, 1965: Our three rakasta guests haven't come out of their cabins yet. So much the better. At least they haven't interfered with ship's duties.

I have begun studying Lord Katayama's monolith. After several hours of experimenting, I determined that the monolith has the ability to bend light around a sphere with a set radius- a sphere large enough to encompass the *Princess Ark*. These are the same properties of Myoshima's core. Smaller fragments of the monolith retain this light-bending power, with areas of effect appropriate to each fragment's size. This explains why the Heldannic fleet ignored the Ark, and also why the rakasta felt so obviously secure. The Heldanners simply could not see us! The *Princess Ark* is practically invisible! This Imperial gift has proven to be a very useful contraption indeed.

Eimir 18, 1965: I observed the stars and their alignment with our world as a means of measuring the

speed of the *Princess*. Although it is hardly noticeable to the crew, our speed in the void has varied greatly. It seems that our speed has to do with the proximity of other physical bodies, such as ships on intercept courses, asteroids, moons, or planets. The farther we are from physical obstacles, the greater our speed potential becomes. This is vital for future voyages, since it would enable journeys into the void far from our world and at little risk of smashing into obstacles.

In effect, what seems to be “full speed ahead” on our *Princess* remains a stable constant when we are close to a moon, within our world’s skyshield, or within sighting distance of an oncoming ship. Away from celestial bodies, our speed could increase a hundredfold- indeed, perhaps even more. I do not have the means to fathom any conceivable limits.

It appears that the constant use of a means of propulsion such as magical power or very fine silk sails increases our speed, especially more so when traveling away from a world. Removing the means of propulsion would not be sufficient to halt the ship, which would instead continue on its course at a constant speed. Inertia remains a definite force in the void.

The Hollow World

Eimir 22, 1965: I have finally located Herr Rolf, our fugitive Heldannic knight, several hundred miles ahead of our ship and riding a winged sabre-tooth tiger common to Myoshima. He has put his few hours of lead time to good use. I am now tracking the knight with my crystal ball. Straps have kept him on the saddle during the times he has fallen asleep. Herr Rolf is getting very close to our world’s great blue skyshield, heading toward the south pole. The *Princess* is pursuing, following a southerly course slightly above the skyshield. It would be preferable to capture him while the Princess is still in the void, as that would save us the trouble of returning later to complete further studies of this outer space. I would intercept the man myself in normal conditions, but my inexperience in this environment demands that I remain aboard. We will maintain our course and pursue the fugitive.

Eimir 23, 1965: We are finally closing in on Herr Rolf. He is now in visual range of the common crew. It should only be a matter of a few hours before we catch up completely. Unfortunately, I fear that we must soon reenter our world’s skyshield, several hundred miles south of the N’djatwaland. We are much too close, and we can feel the effects of the skyshield’s pull on the *Princess*. There is no alternative but to carry on.

Eimir 24, 1965: Trickery! I should have known better. As soon as we entered the skyshield, the *Princess* began a dangerous dive. Every beam and mast of the Princess screamed in the dizzying fall, but the ship managed to progressively alter her course, heading away from the pole. This beautiful ship sensed the danger and acted on her own to save herself and her crew! She barely avoided the worst and landed heavily on a thick snow bank. The truth of our fate became as brutal as a frigid, antarctic wind howling around us in the night. We were stranded without magical power.

Herr Rolf is a devil of man. He must have been aware this region was *anti-magical*. Fortunately, the effects were progressive. Herr Rolf perceived he could not escape the *Princess*, as she was much too fast for his winged cat. He had to find a way to escape us. He’s probably flapping away on his winged cat even now. His assessment of the *Princess*’s speed was amazingly accurate- a fine mathematician, that knight. He obviously did not waste his time during his journey aboard our ship.

I will find Herr Rolf even if I must devote the rest of my life to the endeavor. But the task of saving the crew and the *Princess* remains a more pressing matter.

Eimir 25, 1965: Something very strange is happening. Night has now lasted far longer than it should, and the sun still has not risen anew. According to tome three of the *Arcanean Worlds*, by the respected sage Nesfutar, complete night never falls upon the frozen lands, and neither does the sun ever rise high above the horizon there. But here, neither the light of the moon nor that of the sun could be sensed at all.

The crew was given heavy winter gear and completed repairs of the *Princess*. Fortunately she suffered little damage. We are still stranded in this bleak land of ice and howling winds. Magic of any sort has been totally ineffective. The threatening cover of dark clouds hasn’t shown any sign of thinning so far. Snow storms occur with discouraging regularity. I estimate our position is due south of the Vulcanian Coast.

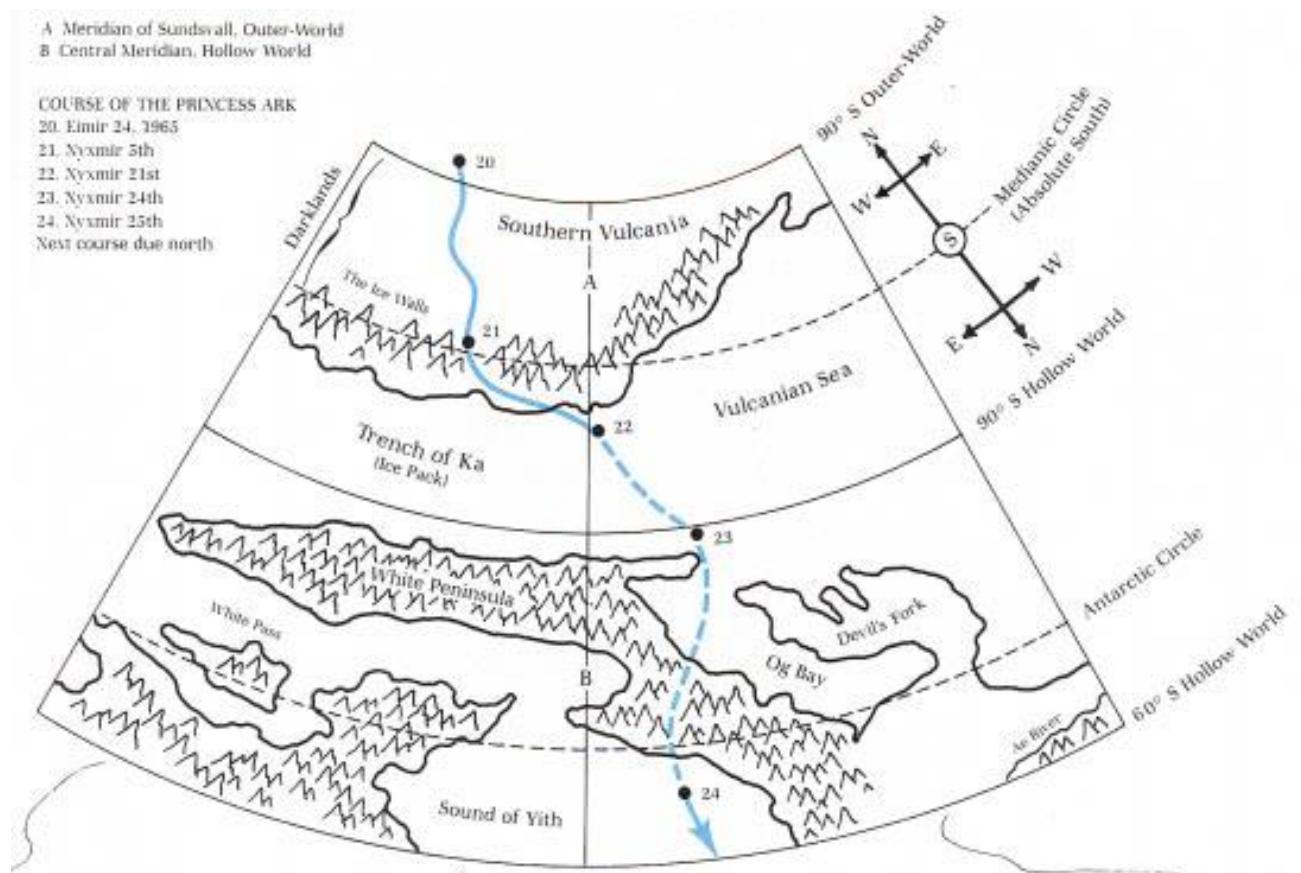
The rakasta finally emerged from their cabins, warmly dressed. They had also managed to totally cover their great cats with fur boots and several layers of coats sewn together. Kenju mentioned their cats were used to warm climates and wouldn’t last long without protection in these temperatures.

I plan to head a scouting party to seek out native villages for help, probably to the north- or what I surmise is north. In this kind of weather, I hope the remainder of the crew can survive several days without too many

A Meridian of Sundsvall, Outer-World
 B Central Meridian, Hollow World

COURSE OF THE PRINCESS ARK

- 20. Eimir 24, 1965
- 21. Nyxmir 5th
- 22. Nyxmir 21st
- 23. Nyxmir 24th
- 24. Nyxmir 25th
- Next course due north



difficulties. After that, I fear the *Princess* will have to be abandoned.

Eimir 26, 1965: The sun still hasn't returned. After a long discussion with the crew and our feline guests, it seems the best course would be for me to leave with Kenju and Myojo, his first henchman. The cats would be able to smell their own tracks and return to the *Princess* if we became lost. Traveling in the dark in these conditions- without magic- seems nearly hopeless.

I will be riding the third great cat, while Kenju's other henchman Jiro remains aboard the *Princess*. We would move much faster this way. Talasar argued vehemently against the decision, for I was quite vulnerable without magic and nothing so far could be said about the rakasta's loyalty. If I did not return within five days, my orders to Talasar were to execute Jiro, abandon ship, and proceed due north to the Vulcanian Line.

Burymir 1, 1965: Jiro's great cat has proven to be a difficult mount to control, but I've managed well so far. At least we've been blessed by the speed of these animals. We found no villages, and we lost some time hunting seals and polar bears to feed the cats. It was virtually impossible to keep an accurate orientation. The sky

remained overcast, masking the stars, and the uselessness of magic still prevailed.

In the course of our latest hunting expedition, our mounts followed a scent and stumbled upon the frozen remains of a dead winged cat. This must have been Herr Rolf's mount. So *Herr Rolf* is stranded as well! His cat did not survive the cold, and without his own clerical magic, he could not heal or revive the animal. Fine; then we know he is close.

Fresh prints of Herr Rolf's heavy boots were visible in the snow. According to Myojo, Herr Rolf camped there until recently. Many other footprints and signs of a fight were apparent in the snow, and Myojo concluded the aggressors pursued Herr Rolf back toward the general direction of the *Princess*- or so I judged, compared to our own footprints.

Ever since this discovery, Kenju and Myojo have acted even more insolent than usual. Kenju's subordinate was so bold as to even lay a hand on his swords hilt at my order to set camp. Apparently, the two wanted to go after Herr Rolf immediately and scorned the task of seeking help for the *Princess* and the crew. Eventually, Kenju disdainfully nodded his approval. I must use caution while I rest.



Burymir 2, 1965: My caution paid off. The two rakasta made an attempt on my life during my sleep, but I was expecting a move on their part. Kenju was observing from the other side of the campfire when Myojo suddenly reached for his large bow, on the back of his cat. But I was quicker. There are certain things that wizards do instinctively in the face of danger, things done without thinking. That saved my life.

As I uttered the last syllable of the incantation, I suddenly realized the futility of my reaction. I had been powerless for days. But no! Against all hopes, the spell did work! In a split second before the ball of flames flared up, Myojo ducked behind a snow drift, barely escaping a fiery death. His cat wasn't so lucky, however, and it died on the spot. Kenju jumped to his feet, already whirling his katana with blurring speed. But strengthened by my initial success, I drew two wands and roared "Go ahead, kittycat! Come find out if they work!"

Instantly circumspect, Kenju hissed at me and lowered his blade. There was no telling if magic would work again. But I won.

Myojo crawled out from behind the pile of melting snow, smoking but alive. The two must have thought they could go after Herr Rolf on their own and return back to Myoshima with the Heldanner. That would have gained them great honor and put us in a position of weakness, subjecting citizens of Her Imperial Majesty to ridicule. Fortunately, we must have unknowingly passed the limits of anti-magic. Herr Rolf failed to notice it. How ironic. He could have saved his cat after all! That will be his undoing. If only I could get the *Princess* this far!

I have maintained a safe distance from the two rakasta since the incident. They seem to fear my magic and have obeyed my orders—quite reluctantly of course. We followed the natives' footprints toward the ship, with Kenju riding the lead cat. The now charcoal-hued Myojo trotted at his best pace between Kenju and I. I, of course,

retained the other great cat—humiliating Myojo even more. I will make the stops as few and as brief as I can.

Burymir 3, 1965: Today we caught up with the natives. They were elves—but more like savages? I would say. Perhaps these people are the remnants of some forgotten tribe lost in the ice centuries ago, afflicted by this bleak lands *anti-magic* curse. Over the centuries, these elves must have then sunk into the abyss of barbarity and historical oblivion. But they still remembered how to fight.

They came by the dozens, screaming down an icy hill at us. I must say that Kenju and Myojo did wonders, chopping away at the howling mass. I, of course, remained mounted, displaying the most contemptuous and unconcerned attitude possible. I suspected my magic was gone again, as we probably had reentered the *anti-magic* zone. I would have died in the matter of a cat's eye blink if either rakasta had suspected my renewed weakness. I caught a few increasingly worried glances from a frantic Myojo as a wailing elven savage almost reached me.

All of sudden, a huge white monster rose from behind a hill. The thing was a hideous sloth, half the size of the *Princess* herself and equipped with flesh-rending teeth. It lunged for the savages, ripped two of them apart, and swallowed them in no time. The rest of tribe fled as swiftly as they came.

The growling sloth then slowly turned on our party. Kenju and Myojo rapidly executed a strategic retreat, standing behind me. Obviously they expected me to handle the situation. Not knowing what else to do, I remained calm and waited, too. The sloth was poised for attack, staring at me. It hesitated. It sniffed. It snorted.

And it relaxed. I noticed that the monster's eyes had the unmistakable flicker of intelligence. As I was thinking this, I was overtaken by a powerful feeling of warmth. It occurred to me the sloth was empathic; it could sense my feelings and bare its own to me! Apparently it felt only anger for the elven savages. Elves must have been ancestral hunters of its kind.

It did not take long for the beast and I to become attuned to one another. Somehow I managed to make it understand I needed its help, and it shuffled over to me like a huge puppy. Minutes later, I sat on the sloth's furry shoulders. Apparently the two rakasta were oblivious to the sloth's empathic powers. Myojo stood there, open-mouthed, until Kenju slapped him in the face and ordered him to mount my winged cat.

We were running short of time. Soon we resumed our journey back toward the *Princess*, along with our fearsome new companion. Herr Rolf would have to wait.

Burymir 4, 1965: We finally made it back on time to the *Princess*. There was no further hindrance from Kenju. Before leaving our last campsite, however, Myojo bowed deeply and presented me with his katana. He had offered me his loyalty! Aha! I could use this. Of course, Kenju was greatly angered, and the two haven't spoken to each other since then, except for occasional hisses and caterwauls.

Our arrival at the *Princess* created great confusion. My sloth wasn't sighted until the very last moment. Its white fur blended very well with the frozen surroundings. A few dozen crossbow quarrels were about to shoot forth when Talasar recognized me. I ordered Kenju to be sent to the brig. Jiro was to remain in his quarters, under guard. I sent Myojo to separate quarters with his gear, free to roam the ship.

Burymir 5, 1965: Talasar and I decided to spend more time with the sloth. It had curled up against the *Princess*'s flank like a cub against a she-wolf. We sat next to its chest in the warmth of its fur, while a raging blizzard blanketed out the rest of the world.

It was clear that the sloth was eager to help. It could not understand the concept of north or south, but I managed to make it feel that we were seeking warmth for the *Princess*. It took some work to set up the next step.

The *Princess* was eventually fitted with outrigger skis to prevent her from rolling on her sides, and the sloth was harnessed to pull the ship. As the *Princess* slid across the snow, the crew's morale began to improve. Myojo and Xerdon volunteered to mount to the two remaining great cats and scout the surrounding for signs of the elven barbarians. The sloth is moving very fast for its size; I had to stop several times to allow Myojo and Xerdon to catch up and get some rest. We are making great progress over the flat, wind-beaten ice pack, but still no sign of the sun. Why?

Burymir 12, 1965: Despite our great speed, we have not reached the limit of the *anti-magic* region. I suspect the sloth has perhaps taken us in a direction other than what we had expected. Despite this, it still communicated to me that it went "toward warmth." I was concerned. For all I know, it may be heading for a volcano, but we are too far into this journey to turn around now.

There is no sign of Herr Rolf. Without his magic, he must have starved and frozen to death- or perhaps he was captured by the elven barbarians. We may never know.

Burymir 19, 1965: The sun still has not returned. I know not what to think. If we were reaching the edge of the frozen lands, periods of day and night would become

evident, but this . . . Darkness has prevailed for days with no sign of change. Yet the sloth does not seem concerned.

Polar bears and occasional monstrosities from this dark world of ice have been sighted and hunted down. Unfortunately, none of these creatures has been kept for study. The need for restocking food supplies has remained a constant concern. Heating is an even worse problem. There are few places aboard where fires may be lit, and even fewer things that can be burned. During our occasional halts, the sloth digs through the ice pack to hunt and feed itself. Sometimes it returns with a hunk of whale or a mouthful of walruses. Their fat becomes vital for heating.

Xerdon caught two sailors attempting to cut away some of the rigging, hoping to burn that and get some warmth. I loathe the idea of turning the *Princess* into a mere source of firewood. The two were flogged and thrown in the brig.

Burymir 26, 1965: The crew is getting very weak, and desperation has affected even the toughest veterans. Food supplies are minimal. Many men are sick with fever, especially among Lady Abovombe's Cestian contingent, who among all the crew have suffered the most from the cold. Discontent among the crew is getting more apparent each passing day. Weapons have been locked in the armory. Only officers, the most trustworthy boltmen, Myojo, and myself are armed. Magic still does not operate. The sloth still does not seem to be affected by the darkness.

A late note: A large amount of food has been stolen. The guard was ill and fell unconscious during his watch. No trace was found of the stolen supplies. No doubt the culprits have already devoured it.

Nyxmir 05, 1965: Light has begun to return, and just in time. Talasar had major difficulties keeping discipline among the men. Even the Word of Razud brought little strength to his worshipers. A fight broke out, and Talasar barely escaped. The return of the light, as tenuous as it was, calmed the growing psychoses dividing even the oldest of friends.

Nyxmir 12, 1965: Indeed the light is increasing, although it has an unusual reddish tint. The ice, the snow, and the skies all range from deep purple to a fiery amber hue, unlike anything we have seen before. The temperature has risen substantially, and wildlife can be found more readily. Morale is improving among the crew, but uncertainty remains. The sloth persisted in its course, probably led by some Immortal will. It had been a month

since we left Herr Rolf's tracks. I have no idea where we are.

Nyxmir 15, 1965: Two men have been found dead. Both the guard on duty at the supply hold and the watchman at the stern had their heads crushed, each by a single blow. More food supplies were stolen, as well as one of the great cats. It wasn't long before Myojo spotted the cat's footprints. Judging from their depth in the snow, one man with some heavy gear has left the *Princess*, probably with enough food for several days.

Nyxmir 16, 1965: No one is missing among the crew, and both Jiro and Kenju are still being detained. How could this be? How could we have had a stowaway for so long without noticing it? Who that could have been is a mystery.

Myojo volunteered to go after the fugitive's track with the last remaining cat, but I refused. There is a better way. I have instructed the sloth to follow the track. The scent was faint, which has slowed down the huge beast's pace, but I think it is important we find out what happened.

Nyxmir 19, 1965: Myojo spotted the fugitive's last campsite. We knew then who he was. Heavy footprints were found near those of the missing cat-marks left by heavy boots, those of an armored knight.

So it was he whom I thought was dead! Herr Rolf must have discovered the *Princess* and climbed aboard during a snowstorm. Lord Katayama's monolith cannot magically conceal the ship in the *anti-magic* area as it had in the void. No one could have seen Herr Rolf, and of course none of the ship's magical wards would function. To think that he remained concealed within the *Princess*'s hull for over a month is unbelievable.

After some investigation, it is now clear that Rolf hid in the plant hold, where I had stored our Cestian gobbler specimen. The carnivorous plant had gone dormant from the extreme cold and thus ignored the knight. Rolf managed to take control of the animated remains of the late Azoth, which reinforced my conviction that Rolf is a powerful cleric. Talasar probably turned our undead Azoth with ease, then sent him back to his task.

Rolf was indeed the one who stole food from the unconscious guard and murdered the others, but those will be the last of his tricks. My magic has returned, and so has Talasar's. Soon we will get to the end of this knight's charade.

Nyxmir 21, 1965: It still isn't right. Light has returned indeed, but now it is night that is amiss! The

clouds cleared for a moment, revealing for the first time in over a month the warmth of sunrays- but strangely, the sun is red! It seems much smaller than usual, and most oddly it now stands motionless at the sky's zenith! It is a mystery as to whatever has happened to the Immortal clockwork of the heavens.

Unfortunately, the sloth stopped immediately upon witnessing the sun's appearance. I sensed this was the end of its journey with us. Already we could feel the *Princess* shivering with regained power, as if she were reborn. It was time to soar again into the sky and freedom.

Nyxmir 22, 1965: Finally, the Princess was ready to take off. The outrigger skis were discarded, the wings unfolded, and the sails repaired.

As we took off, the sloth roared. A brief moment of sadness overcame my thoughts. Then a roar of equal strength startled us all, as the *Princess* responded in kind to her gargantuan savior. Most peculiar that was. . . .

Nyxmir 23, 1965: This is a time of fantastic discoveries for the Sons of Alphatia. Upon soaring above the clouds, we discovered a totally different landscape than our own maps depict. This is not our world!

Oddly enough, the new sun really is red. The air remains very hazy to the point that it is difficult to make out the shapes of nearby coasts and mountains. What we observed of the lands below was completely alien to us. Visibility was limited to less than a hundred miles at most.

Most inexplicably, the clouds at the horizon always seem to rise up toward the zenith of the sky, anywhere one looks. No matter how far the Princess travels, she always seems to remain at the bottom of a circular bowl of clouds.

But the oddest part remains over our heads. The red sun stands still at the zenith. Dark shapes slowly cross the red sun's face and block sunlight at various intervals, just as the moon sometimes eclipses the light of the sun on our world. These celestial bodies seem to be of various sizes and move at different speeds. We need, once again, to defeat the skyshield and see for ourselves where we are.

Nyxmir 24, 1965: Again, the trusty *Princess Ark* vanquished the skyshield. In truth, it was much easier than the last time. This skyshield is much weaker than that of our world. With a decent breeze, full sails pushed the *Princess* through the skyshield. That was a relief for the everyone on board, given our last experience with this maneuver.

What we discovered beyond was just as incredible as our first journey into the void. It appears that we are

within a gigantic globe, perhaps the size of our home-world. A small sun shines in the hollow globe's center, while clouds swirl and stretch across the lands below. From this high up in the airless void, we could finally observe new continents and vast oceans. A continuous chain of mountains girdles the globe, separating the sphere almost perfectly into two hemispheres; we are at the top (or bottom) of one. A huge continent occupies almost all of one side of this inside-out world, nearly reaching to what I assume are the worlds poles.

The poles are the great clues to the identity of this new world. At the "poles," two large openings, each over a thousand miles across, lead out of this globe. Through them I can see the starry constellations so common to our homeworld.

This world is none other than the bowels of our own Known World! It seems our world is not a gigantic sphere filled with stone and fire. Our celestial orb is hollow! And probably inhabited! The inner surface has its own sun, although not hot enough to scorch all life from the lands underneath.

The world inside also has floating continents, much like our flying cities of Ar. They orbit the central sun, some within the airless void, others as low as the cloud cover within the globe's skyshield. The shadows of these flying continents provide regular nocturnal periods to those lands underneath their paths, though the rest of the lands remain in permanent daylight. The lands below, as well as some of the flying continents, have air, clouds, storms, and endless new mysteries to be unveiled to the Greatest of the Empires.

Nyxmir 25, 1965: It is now clear to me how we got here. The openings of- what shall we call it- the Hollow World produce a mirage that shield them from the view of those vessels flying outside, in the void above the outer-world. When we pursued Herr Rolf, we simply could not see the southern pole opening. That ignorance almost caused our doom.

The polar region where outside gravity curves into the Hollow World remains totally dark because neither the Hollow Worlds sun, nor the sun of the outer-world can bring light. Moreover, it remains conveniently covered with clouds and is the scene of constant blizzards. This region is the one producing the *anti-magic* effect that forced the *Princess* to land.

This also means that Herr Rolf knew where he was flying, and I suspect he also knew of the Hollow World. This is a most annoying thought. More than ever, the Heldanner must be found and returned to Myoshima.

Nyxmir 26, 1965: Further repairs were completed aboard the *Princess* since the return of magical power. Our long journey being dragged across the rough ice of the Hollow Worlds Antarctic Gate had caused much damage to the ship. Talasar has spent hours restoring order and healing the sick among the crew.

I studied in great detail the topography of the lands below, seeking the whereabouts of Herr Rolf, our Heldannic fugitive. He successfully evaded our vigilance and rode away on a stolen Myoshiman cat to some unknown destination. I am disappointed to notice that several spells no longer function in this new world. More importantly, some magical items are powerless as well, although they still radiate magic. Alas, I can no longer rely on my *crystal ball* to seek Herr Rolf, that fiend.

I could only conclude that we traveled mostly north through the icy mountain range past Southern Vulcania and the ice pack. Within recent days we navigated over a long, narrow stretch of steep mountains that I named the White Peninsula. Herr Rolf could be in any of this range's narrow, frozen canyons. I hope to catch him later on a vast frozen bay that offers little shelter. At least we have the advantage of speed and absolute mobility over his land-striding cat.

Nyxmir 28, 1965: Myojo spent long hours observing the ground with my spyglass, hoping to see the Heldannic knight. Earlier on this day, he spotted what could be a small campsite. After a short visit, Xerdon and Myojo determined Herr Rolf had been there recently. They found the dead remains of Kenju's cat, reduced to a mere carcass. Footprints revealed that a fight took place, possibly between Herr Rolf and a giant lizard. Myojo pointed out he did not smell the odor of human blood. Xerdon ended the report by adding that no footprints left the scene, which leads me to suspect the beast flew away with Herr Rolf. The question is: Was he prey or master?

Amphimir 3, 1965: An unforeseen event has led me to believe that we are being observed. I was awakened this night by a strange crying. It was reminiscent of 1st Class Boltman Ramissur's cry of agony when he was abandoned to the shadow dragon on Oceania, months ago. At first I thought I had been dreaming, but the noise persisted.

I arose and found the small bat I had recovered over Cestia, lying over my crystal ball and staring at the swirling mists inside the crystal. Although nothing else could be seen inside the sphere, the luminescent stone had dominated the little animals mind and was draining it of its life force. Somehow, the bat had unlocked its cage and pulled the velvet shroud off the crystal. The stone's

powerful hypnotic effect had seized the bat's gaze and prevented it from pulling free. I lifted the poor thing off the glowing ball and put it back in its cage.

I suspected foul play. The lock on the cage was not one that a mere bat could undo. It was also quite improbable that an animal would accidentally pull the thick veil from the crystal ball; it could have flittered across the cabin to seek a way out, or landed on my dinner's leftovers.

Amphimir 5, 1965: We pursued our course toward the northeast above a ridge of high mountains. I have decided to arise above the skyshield; it is much quicker to travel through the void. I am gambling on the chance that Herr Rolf needs to cover a long distance and therefore has done the same. Somehow, I simply cannot believe that someone like Herr Rolf could be taken away by a mere monster. By now he must have found a way to gain the upper hand. I would not be surprised if he had staged the whole event, both to cover up his tracks and to travel faster.

On an unrelated note, it occurs to me that the east and west directions are inverted in this world, compared to the Surface World. If travelers- such as ourselves- followed the Meridian of Sundsvall toward the north on the Surface World, West would be on the left, and East on the right. When continuing along this longitude we would enter the Hollow World through the Arctic Gate, then proceed *southward* along the Central Meridian. Assuming that West remains on the left and East on the right, the two directions then appear to be "reversed." In effect, 10o East on the Surface World would be exactly above 10o East in the Hollow World. Although confusing at first, this is a convenience when reporting relative positions on a map.

Amphimir 06, 1965: By luck and with my spyglass, I have spotted our fugitive riding a white dragon. The Heldannic Knight must have been nearing his destination, for he reentered the skyshield and dove into the clouds beneath, remaining within the thick cloud cover. The cloud bank had been slowly moving to the Hollow Worlds west and stretched several hundred miles across. I ordered the *Princess* to fly under the clouds in the event Herr Rolf would reappear.

Nithia

Amphimir 7, 1965: An interesting day, indeed. I had been avidly observing the land below the skyshield with my spyglass, spending long hours mapping out these new lands. We were far from the surface, but some detail was visible still. Near the eastern edge of the clouds lies a very large valley. A ridge of mountains forms its eastern boundary, with a large desert on its western reaches. A long river flows along the entire valley, ending at a large lake in the north. The valley seems to be fertile and probably harbors life- perhaps a great civilization.

While I was deeply involved in my thoughts about the world below, someone coughed softly behind my back. For an instant I believed Talasar had entered my cabin, but I turned to find instead a lady casually sitting on my bunk. A panther was lying at her feet, and a small goblin slowly waving a large feather fan. She had bronze skin and long, black hair. But what impressed me most was her eyes- immense and black as the night, yet intense like the sun. A long, white robe, Thothian in style, draped her body down to her feet. A beautiful lady indeed.

"The land you gaze upon is called Nithia," she said. "And, yes, as you thought, it indeed is the center of a great civilization. Perhaps the greatest ever."

"I suppose Nithians have no doors," I answered. "Else they should know it is customary to knock at one's portal before entering, dear . . . who, may I inquire?"

"Khufiri is my name." She smiled and added, "Of course, you do realize it is you who are prying into our ancestral lands. I don't believe you have been invited to enter the Sky of Nithia. Our priests have a habit of observing the sky, for it is sacred. New objects such as your wondrous vessel are a source of great interest."

"Then perhaps we might find a way to satisfy each other's curiosity. You may remain aboard, in exchange for which I request your guidance in these lands."

Khufiri accepted. She was friendly, but distant and a bit disdainful, definitely a sophisticated lady. She entered my cabin by secret magical means, I would guess, and was reading my thoughts. Although cordial, she could be quite dangerous.

We spoke at length about her lands and its people's common life and customs. Her temple had sent her through spiritual ways up to the *Princess*, essentially as an observer and escort through Nithia. Until such time our intentions are made clear to the temple, the *Princess* was not to land in Nithia- a directive that I intended to follow. Obviously, her temple had the means to observe their skies very well, for I had believed the Myoshiman monolith was still cloaking the *Princess* from normal sight.

The trio was sent to a separate cabin, with a special escort of boltmen to keep an eye on them. All this has been very disturbing and demands further observation. I then ordered the *Princess* to descend below the level of the cloud cover.

Oostdok Trading Houses

Amphimir 8, 1965: Khufiri has proven very useful in identifying and naming regions we flew over. We reached an expanse of water called Lake Thufu and followed a large river to the north—the River Hapta. The region is quite fertile and villages dot the river banks. After flying over the large City of Hapta, the lowering clouds were forcing the *Princess* closer to the city. Concerned, Khufiri asked that we regain altitude until the clouds cleared up again. Satisfied when I gave the order to climb, Khufiri retreated to her cabin, along with her purring panther and feather-fanning goblin.

At that point I decided to put that time to good use. I could not take the chance of missing Herr Rolf, should he unexpectedly decide to come down. I ordered the crew to prepare for a blind sail. First Class Navigator Ashari took her post at the prow and sounded the horn at regular intervals. A returning sound would indicate the presence of a very large obstacle—if any were possible at that altitude. Ashari was well trained in this technique and navigation went smoothly for several hours.

We got close to Herr Rolf. He appeared no more than 100 yards ahead, and I caught him glancing back over his shoulder several times when Ashari's horn echoed through the clouds. He pressed his dragon forward and dove back into dark, stormy clouds.

The cracking sound of bolts and the growing rumble of the storm greatly altered the effectiveness of Ashari's horn. Threatening flashes illuminated the clouds so often that I commanded the *Princess* to return to safety above the clouds.

And a good thing the *Princess* began her ascension! Just as her prow rose, the clouds cleared up ahead, suddenly revealing a huge cliff. Instantly I thought this could not possibly be, at such an altitude! But yet a cliff was approaching, and so at a frightening speed. I commenced an evasive maneuver, but alas, too late. The stern of the *Princess* was still low and hit the edge of the plateau. Within seconds, the entire hull had scraped the rough, jagged rock, and the ship dragged to a halt. Painfully evident were those planks that flew off the wounded flanks of the *Princess*. We were stranded. Rain then began to fall, and a raging tempest ensued. More later.

Amphimir 9, 1965: The gale has passed on. The clouds cleared up so that we could see for a few hundred yards. It appears we are perched precariously on a high, narrow mesa. The hull is so damaged that the *Princess* can no longer lift herself. Everyone aboard shares her silent pain.

Worse, we aren't alone. Several hundred feet below is a town, a large, populous town. All around our promontory are towers, mansions, and other buildings stretched as far as we can see under the gloomy clouds. No one in the streets seems to have noticed our unfortunate posture.

Much worse yet, an ominous white banner with the black lion emblem flutters in the breeze over a large fortification. On the ramparts pace the unmistakable armored guards of the Heldannic Order. Again we might meet Herr Rolf, but this time in the Black Lion's den.

Amphimir 10, 1965: Still no one seems to have noticed our presence. I suspect the storm muffled the sound of our crash, and since the Myoshiman monolith is intact, it cloaks the *Princess* from prying eyes. But we are dangerously close to a potentially hostile people, with the prow unnervingly jutting out over the edge of a cliff. Slowly, quietly, the crew has begun to repair damage.

It appears we are on a flying island or continent. The clouds do not allow better observation. Unlike the tall men-at-arms on nearby battlements, the people in the street seem much smaller. I will have to get a closer look later on. The clouds seem to get thicker and darker at regular intervals, pouring rain over the flying land. Amazingly, the storm acts to create "night," a period of sleep for the town people, while heavily armed squads of men-at-arms patrol the street.

I notice Myojo is spending much of his time with Khufiri. He enjoys the presence of her panther, which has adopted him. Khufiri shows much admiration and affection toward the Myoshiman warrior. This is useful for the moment, for Myojo is a loyal follower and I can thus obtain information on Khufiri. I must, however, remain cautious, for this relationship must not get out of hand. All this reminds me of my dear Lady Abovombe. Now that she is far away, I do realize how much I became accustomed to her presence. I long for this wretched mission to come to an end. I must return Herr Rolf to Myoshima and recover Lady Abovombe unharmed, and the sooner the better.

Amphimir 11, 1965: I was quietly but firmly awakened this morning by Talasar. The watch had spotted movement near my cabin. Indeed, observing through the stern's window, I could see a townsman. He was

casually walking about, holding a small umbrella in one hand and a pointy cane in the other. Humming and whistling, he was picking snails with his cane and dropping them into a pouch at his waist. I hoped he'd walk past the *Princess*.

We had no such luck. The townsperson came closer and attempted to hop onto a rock- under the invisible *Princess*'s hull. He bumped flat into the hull, dropping his belongings and sliding down several feet, then landing heavily on his posterior.

In pain, the townsperson whined loudly, holding his rather protuberant and now bloody nose. The whine stopped abruptly when two muscular boltmen hastily grabbed him, dropped a bag over his head, tied him up from toe to nose, and unceremoniously lifted him aboard. Nobody else seemed to have witnessed these events.

Amphimir 12, 1965: Talasar and I remained alone with our captive. He turned out to be a gnome, judging from his size, more-than-generous nasal appendage, and somewhat pointy ears.

"I say, once!" he spoke in his curious accent. "What's come into you heer? Theer I go, once, hunting snails, and Boum! I hit something, I thought, but no, theer's nothing heer, you know, but yet I say my nose bleeds and I sit on my reer, once, and I say but theer's really nothing heer, nothing I can see, so, I think I must be dreaming once, and then, Boum! The sky falls on my head, and it's all dark, you know. Is this the end of the world, I say. . . ." The gnome did go on for some time in this way.

Eventually I was able to slip in a word or two. It appears we landed on the floating Island of Oostdok. Our captive, now apparently a willing guest, goes by the name of Leopold of Le Nerviens Corporation (as Leopold said: a Duly Accredited And Consolidated Enterprise, Wholly Owned And Guildmarked By Le Nerviens Family Trust Incorporated- in other words, a respectable family of professional inventors).

Oostdok is an island, roughly 50 miles long by 30 miles wide, with a series of small mountains and plateaus such as the one on which we have crash-landed. It has a capital city, the one sprawling from our vantage point, called Schaerbeek. Oostdokers are essentially gnomes.

It seems the Oostdokers are divided into two main ethnic blocks, the Flamaekers and the Valoins. The problem is very old. It seems Oostdok was originally two separate islands, Oostmaeker and Waldok. The two islands collided and remained stuck together. Since then, both peoples have accused each other of causing the catastrophe. They've never really got along,

Both peoples excel in the art of creating machinery, a science purely gnomish in nature that I will not attempt to

explore further. Apparently, when a ship full of Heldannic Knights became stranded (like the *Princess Ark*), the knights offered great rewards to those able to repair their vessel. A large number of Flamaek and Valoin family corporations competed for the contract. One of them apparently built a device that would return the Heldannic ship back to its intended course.

This event was soon followed by a massive invasion by Heldannic Knights. They occupied all of Oostdok and forced both the Flamaekers and the Valoins to build wondrous contraptions for the benefit of the Heldannic Order. The Oostdokers' submission to the Heldannic Order is reluctant, and both Valoins and Flamaekers are waiting for an opportunity to throw them out.

Leopold was very interested in the fact we weren't Heldanners. He was all the more interested to learn that we in fact were opposed to the Heldannic tyranny and that we would be able to cause some trouble to the knights provided our ship could be repaired and returned beyond the polar gate.

Leopold's eyes had a sudden flicker of conniving joy. We could already see ideas and schemes crossing his mind. Leopold became very agitated and began pouring an endless stream of nonsensical sentences punctuated by sporadic giggles, while pointing in every direction at once. The gnome went literally all over the *Princess*, observing her structure, mechanism, and damage. He jabbered something like "Be right back!" and unexpectedly jumped off the railing, hopping away so fast that no one had time to intervene.

I was willing to take the chance. Repairing the *Princess* could take months. Perhaps this gnome will indeed find a way to help without alerting the knights. I only hope these gnomes would not damage the *Princess* further. This might be the ship's death.

Amphimir 16, 1965: Nothing has happened since Leopold's hasty departure. I am confident that he has remained on our side, since no Heldannic Knight has been seen anywhere close. Repairs are proceeding but slowly.

I had several conversations with Khufiri about Nithia and our current fate. She was of course quite worried. Khufiri said she knew about these gnomes and warned that they could bring only woe and chaos with their inventions. The rare times Nithians encountered Oostdokers have lead to untold disasters.

Amphimir 17, 1965: Repairs were temporarily halted as a violent thunderstorm struck Schaerbeek. Soon afterward, our friend Leopold returned. He approached the *Princess*, casually hopping about, hunting for snails after the rain.

Twenty yards from the ship, he stopped, looked over his shoulder, then leaped

forward, thinking the *Princess* was near. He was wrong; he flailed his arms, then fell heavily into a mud puddle. After a number of similar attempts, he eventually bumped into the *Princess*'s hull and was yanked aboard.

Leopold brought great news. The Vandermersh Corporation was sponsoring the annual Schaerbeek Regatta, when the most powerful family trusts would race in the skies above Schaerbeek with their flying contraptions. It so happens that the regatta's trajectory includes a tight turn right over the Tanneken-Pes, the steep mesa on which the *Princess* is stranded.

Leopold's commercial kin at Le Nerviens' Corporation had a plan. Their ship, *L'Epauleard*, would come very low over the plateau's edge and attempt to lift the *Princess* off the rock. Despite my absolute inability to grasp the technical details of Leopold's plan, I found the scheme nonetheless frightening. I am afraid my arguments didn't deter Leopold a bit, either. The plan was already in motion.

Amphimir 18, 1965: The regatta started shortly after another heavy rainfall. Over the edge of Schaerbeek, already dozens of gigantic, multicolored dirigibles were gathering for departure. They looked like incredibly huge, bloated whales, with plump fins at their rears. Each of these grotesque airships had a cabin underneath its chubby belly, with pipes, fans, and tubes sticking out in all directions. A crowd gathered in the streets, at balconies, and at windows everywhere. Great horns echoed through the city, and the crowd cheered, waving the flags and banners of their family trusts.

A deafening roar began as the airships began the race. Billowing clouds of smoke and steam poured out of the airships' cabins, as strange devices caused blades and other parts to propel the ungainly blimps. The *Demeulemeister III* lurched ahead, while the *VandenKoop* spun off course, bumping into *Le Gros Belouga*. The latter landed flat on a large cohort of Heldannic Knights underneath- causing great panic in their ranks- then promptly rebounded back into the race. The crowd went wild! Meanwhile, rattling and shuddering, *L'Epauleard* roared after *Demeulemeister III* along with a horde of other outrageous blimps.

Demeulemeister III came first above the mesa. It launched a grapple that caught on a ridge, using it to spin around the edge of the plateau. The pilot promptly severed the cable and raced back toward the center of Schaerbeek. *L'Epauleard* followed, very low on the ridge. I could see the pilot's head sticking out of a porthole; he was squinting and looking for something. With horror I

realized that Leopold had probably failed to tell his kin that the *Princess* was not visible.

That's when I noticed Leopold was missing. He was spotted a moment later, perched on the highest point of the ship, cheering and waving Le Nerviens' colors. He had attached a flag to a pole and had propped it up in the air in order to exceed the area of effect of the Myoshiman monolith.

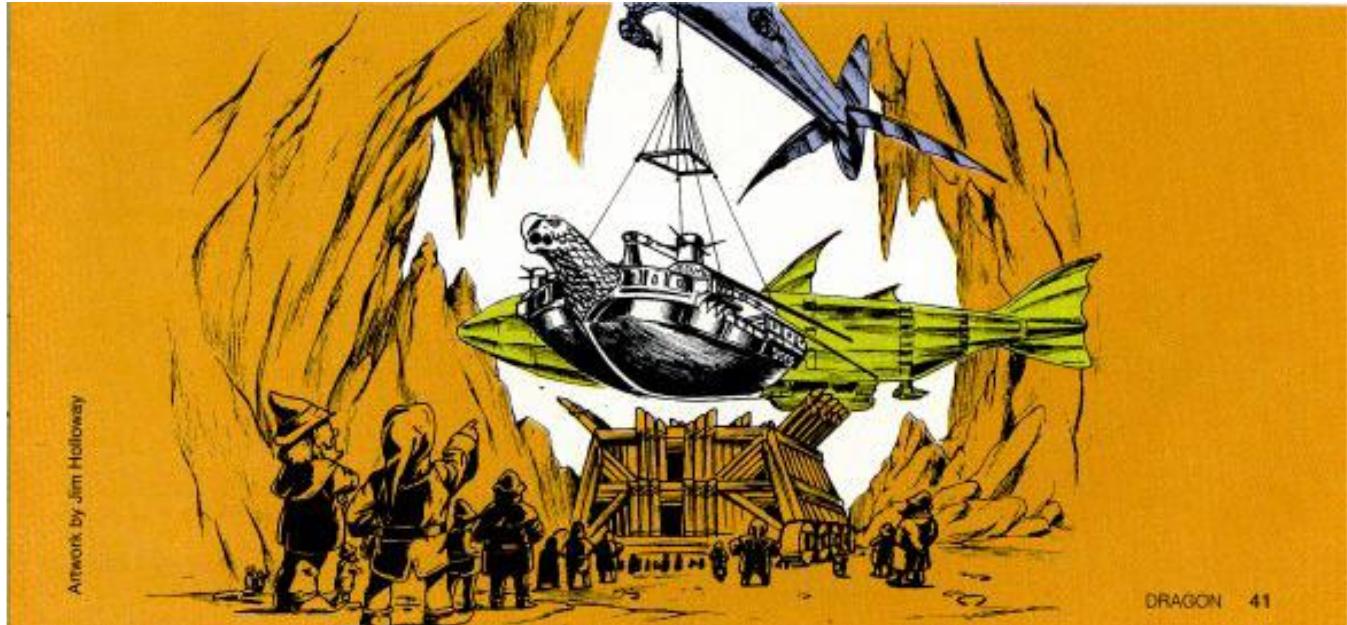
The pilot waved back and veered toward the *Princess*, cutting across the path of the wild, tubby pack racing after him. The *Montjoie Rouge* made a loop to avoid *L'Epauleard*, while the *Hembeek*, *Johanneke*, and *Broqueville* bumped into each other. *L'Epauleard* got through, scraping the edge of the plateau. It made a pass over our ship and decided to go after *Demeulemeister III*. The *Hembeek* and *Broqueville* followed, some of their riggings fouled together. Both pilots exchanged colorful vociferations on their way. Meanwhile, the *Montjoie Rouge* ended its loop and bumped into the rear of the *Johanneke*, pushing the blimp ahead of the pack. Not far behind, *Le Gros Belouga* and the *VandenKoop* were rushing back into the race.

Soon *L'Epauleard* caught up with *Demeulemeister III* and began the second lap. The crowd was hooting and cheering. The two airships prepared their approach of our mesa. *Demeulemeister III* launched its second grapnel but missed, spinning wildly out of control. *L'Epauleard* reversed its propellers to slow down, causing its whalelike balloon to bulge forward. At this very moment, a dozen cables shot down at us, out of the cabin. Some had hooks, others suction cups; I even saw a few with bola-type endings. Everyone on the deck of the *Princess* ran for cover. Amazingly, no one was hurt, but *L'Epauleard*'s machinery started roaring madly as the blimp made its turn and attempted to lift the *Princess*.

Lift her it did- but sideways. The cables did not hook up to the *Princess*'s masts and hull in an even manner, causing the ship to hang starboard down. Everyone aboard grabbed at anything within reach to avoid failing off. Most of the scene was obscured by the billowing smoke and steam pouring out of the blimp.

L'Epauleard's speed was greatly reduced, but its pilot decided to continue the race. *Demeulemeister III* was regaining control, while the rest of the pack was catching up. By then, the pilots on the *Hembeek* and *Broqueville* - still tangled up-had resorted to fist fighting, while the *Johanneke* took the lead, harried by *Le Gros Belouga*.

The end of the second lap came very fast. *L'Epauleard* was desperately trying to gain altitude while the *Princess* swung wildly underneath, threatening to hit some of the Heldannic Knight's upper towers. Sparks shot out of the blimp's portholes. Several cables were being cranked



Artwork by Jim Holloway

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back, slowly bringing the *Princess* to a more convenient posture, just in time for *L'Epaulard* to veer back into the third and final lap.

By then, *L'Epaulard* was in the middle of the main pack of airships. The *VandenKoop* was coming fast behind, and low, thinking it could pass *L'Epaulard* underneath! Its pilot, of course, could not see the invisible *Princess* dangling in its way!

At the last moment, *L'Epaulard* swerved aside, but the *VandenKoop*'s balloon caught the *Princess*'s wing, which scraped along the length of the balloon and finally pierced its thick fabric. The *VandenKoop* suddenly lurched forward as gas violently blew out of the gap at the rear- and it took the lead in front of the *Johanneke*, flying forth to victory!

Meanwhile, *L'Epaulard* dipped behind the mesa, abandoning the race. It flew at a very low altitude over a small river and left Schaerbeek. Everyone aboard was exhausted, panting, and sweating—except for one. Leopold was on the mast, still waving his flag and crying for an encore! But that was enough for the day.

Amphimir 22, 1965: The trip took a few days. We flew over a series of small farming communities and rolling hills. Storms and rainfalls continued at regular intervals on this gloomy land. At last, the pilot waved at Leopold; we were nearing our destination. Leopold pointed at a small rocky hill ahead of us. A large tower stood on the top, bearing Le Nerviens' colors. At last, the *Princess* stood a chance of rest and repair.

Amphimir 23, 1965: I woke up at the sound of my bat screeching under the veil of its cage. It must have been late, and the poor thing was getting hungry. Ever since the wild Schaerbeek Regatta, the bat had shown signs of agitation.

A soft knock at the door came next. It was Khufiri and her retinue; she had come to talk business. It was her opinion that the *Princess* had been so badly damaged that no magic remained in her hull. The ship's magic was not salvageable, certainly not within a reasonable period of time. She offered in the name of the king of Nithia a great amount of gold if the remains of the vessels could be left to her temple. As for the crew, the temple knew of underground passages linking the Surface and Hollow Worlds. She was certain the king would provide a suitable escort.

I found that offer outrageous. I would rather entrust the *Princess* to the care of the gnomes rather than abandon her for a mere pecuniary reward. Khufiri acted as if she was offended.

I also noticed that my bat was staring at Khufiri. She noticed, too, and gazed back at the animal. The poor thing seemed to be paralyzed by terror. Khufiri then turned to me and added "You really should listen to me. This ship will do you no good- and neither will these demented gnomes."

She left, and I pondered on what she was up to. Who was she truly? Blasted be this Hollow World, for I could not use many of my magical talents to pry the truth from Khufiri's mind. I requested Myojo to come to my quarters. The Myoshiman warrior did not notice anything

worth of suspicion so far, but he would keep a closer look. He seemed annoyed by the affair, but carried on.

Amphimir 24, 1965: After the gates of Le Nerviens' fortress swung closed behind the *Princess*, the gnomes led the ship down a series of colossal galleries. Two pilots levitated on metal disks ahead of the bow, leading the airship that carried the wounded *Princess*.

At first the stone galleries were tastefully carved into the rock, with bas-reliefs decorating much of their surfaces. Many openings could be seen among the sculptures, either windows or doors to gnomish dwellings. Exquisite stairways had been hewn in the walls, crisscrossing from bas-relief to door in an unending and mazelike pattern.

The galleries progressively turned to natural stone. Soon their surfaces became even smoother, totally unlike rugged caverns. After hours of meandering through the dark galleries, our two gnomish pilots finally reached a giant cavern.

Le Gros Belouga, their first airship, was already there, tethered to a stone post at the far end of the cavern. *L'Epaulard* slowly descended and positioned the *Princess* softly on a large wooden scaffold. The rickety structure creaked, gave a bit, and settled. I heard a sigh of relief from the crew when the *Princess* finally stabilized. *L'Epaulard* then severed the cables and cast three anchors nearby.

Amphimir 25, 1965: The gnomes of Le Nerviens have so far acted professionally, as befitting their prestigious Trade House. Leopold- Leo, as his friends call him- led us to his Conceptual Leader, who in turn introduced us to the Theoretician Supervisor, who took us to the Hypothesician Comptroller, who escorted us over to the Principlar Master, and so on. I stopped counting after 23 levels of hierarchy.

Eventually we reached the Canonic Convictor, apparently one of the highest ranking gnomes in Le Nerviens' trade counsel. The lady was quite charming and much was said about each other's cultures. Of course, the issue of the Heldannic occupation was covered in great length, and it was agreed that if our Glorious Empire of Alphatia could cause grief to the Heldannic Temple, then Le Nerviens would be honored and delighted to participate in our flight back to the Surface World. Several divisions of the most talented and skillful Le Nerviens engineers would be dispatched to the *Princess Ark* to begin complete repairs. The lady then took off to handle other immediate business as a tremendous explosion rocked the chamber (apparently a common occurrence here).

Amphimir 26, 1965: Hundreds of gnomes boarded the *Princess* with their tools and their plans. Trouble started at once. From that instant on, gnomes popped up just about everywhere on the ship, including the most unexpected places. Some of the crew resorted to fisticuffs when the gnomes invaded their privacy.

There was nothing one could have done to stop the horde. Hoping the *Princess* would not suffer at the gnomes' hands, I ordered the crew to disembark.

Amphimir 28, 1965: The crew and the officers celebrated the last day of the Alphatian year. I chose that time to climb the ledges of the cavern and meditate. From there I could observe the gnomes' work below and ponder their activities.

Alphamir 15, 1966: Myojo showed up later on with alarming news about Khufiri. He saw her discreetly speaking to one of the gnomes working on the *Princess*. She had often made a point before to show her distrust of the gnomes, and yet she did seem to maintain a connection with one of them. It also appeared like she did not want to be seen. That gnome hasn't showed up since his conversation with her, either. Worse, Myojo did not find a single worker on the *Princess* to be familiar with that gnome's description. This report is not a good omen. I've ordered Myojo to keep a close watch on her.

Alphamir 19, 1966: It has now been over a year since we left Sundsvall. Some of the crew are homesick. Others show signs of despair when dealing with the gnomes. Soon it will be time to cast off, when the gnomes are done.

A late note: I've received a message from the Canonic Convictor mentioning some activity outside the fortress. A Heldannic brigade has arrived at the gate and has demanded to enter. Parley is in process. I've ordered the crew to gather its belongings and be ready to board.

Alphamir 20, 1966: Leo returned today from the *Princess*, happy and proud. The Canonic Convictor joined the engineers in a blessing ceremony. Although I could not see anything different about the *Princess*, the gnomes showed great pride and excitement.

It was not to last. As the beer flowed and the gnomes celebrated their accomplishment, a horn echoed in the far galleries. The knights had broken in. A message arrived that a traitor had alerted the knights to the *Princess*'s presence, and later had allowed the knights to enter. Khufiri must have had something to do with this treachery.

The crew immediately began boarding and preparing the riggings. Meanwhile, the gnomes carefully began dismantling, the huge scaffolding. The preparations took hours. I suspected that Le Nerviens would not risk a battle against the tyrants. Heldannic troops were probably marching down the cavernous hallways, straight for the *Princess*. There was no time to waste; we had to leave unseen. Rolf had probably revealed to his minions our ability to bend light with the Myoshiman artifact. I suspected his officers would use clerical magic to see the *Princess Ark* in any guise.

The Heldannic Knights came almost in sight of the cavern, but the gnomes cleverly filled the cavern with smoke as two levitating pilots beckoned the *Princess* to another exit. The flight was frightening. Steering a large vessel like the *Princess* down narrow and poorly lit galleries was a strenuous task. The ship responded well to my commands, however.

Suddenly, the two gnome pilots ducked to the sides while the Princess screamed down a gallery, shooting out from the side of Oostdok. At last, the sky was ours again!

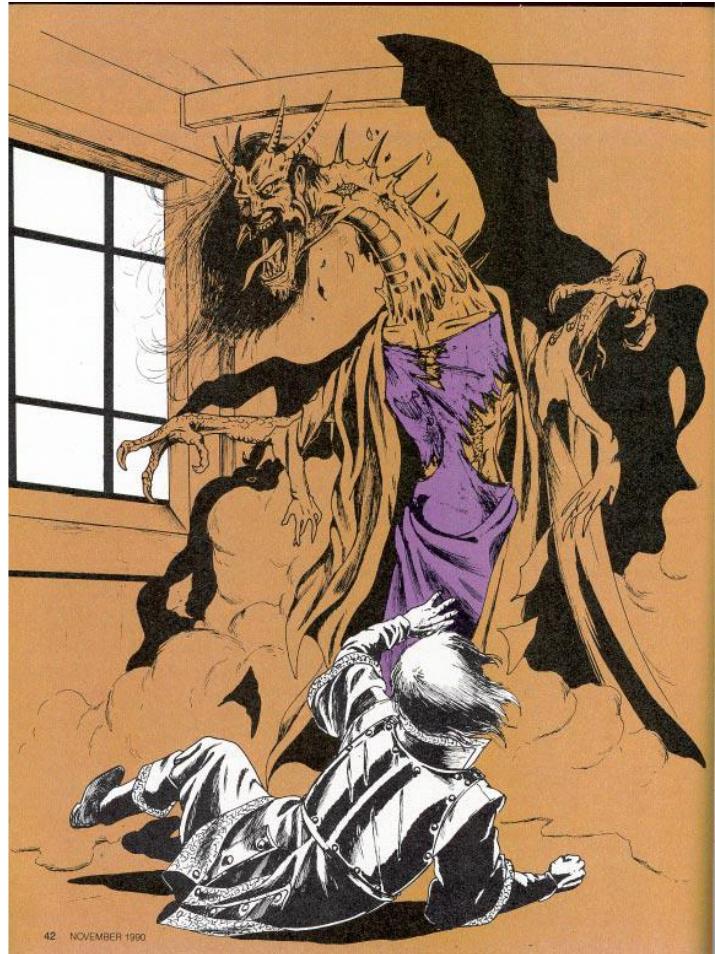
I have commanded the *Princess* to gain altitude and leave at once. Returning to the empire is now vital.

Alphamir 21, 1966: It took little time to reach the skyshield and gain enough speed to breach into the void. The stern watch has spotted five smaller vessels pursuing us. They seem to be quicker than the *Princess* and are slowly gaining on us. Our only hope is to fly out the arctic gate to the Surface World. The flight path has to be calculated with great accuracy; if we err so much as a few degrees off course,

the Princess will crash just as it did on its way in.

Alphamir 22, 1966: Our deciphering of the celestial forces is now complete. Talasar cast a *find the path* spell that greatly increased our chance of escape. We had to fly through a field of floating rocks that delayed our pursuers. By chance, none of the rocks hit the *Princess*. As before, she seemed to be able to avoid the threatening boulders on her own. Soon thereafter, we reached the anti-magic region that blocked the polar gate. All magic progressively died out aboard, and the *Princess* followed her course based on a purely ballistic trajectory. Our pursuers halted near the anti-magic area.

Alphamir 23, 1966: Fate was on our side, for we have crossed back out into open space. The *Princess* came terribly close to falling back through the skyshield, as the attraction of the planet below was frighteningly strong near the gate. But as the *Princess*' bow pointed



dangerously low, large panels opened from the sides of the hull and revealed two large oblong tubes. Without warning, flames shot out to the rear of each tube. The tubes exerted a force that kept the Princess level just long enough to exit the anti-magic area. Sufficient magic was restored just in time to resume normal flight.

There is no doubt that the gnomes installed this device. What else have they done to this ship? After examination, I conclude that the contraption was devised by an amazingly skillful alchemist, for no magic was used here. A very clever system of pendulums caused the panels to open and the tubes to be aimed and fired at the proper angle. Unfortunately, the tubes are now empty. Thank Razud nothing was in the *Princess*'s path. A collision in the airless void would have been disastrous.

I hope to recover samples of the substance remaining in the tubes. Perhaps my skills in alchemy will allow me to identify it. The tubes have meanwhile pulled back into their recesses, and the panels have snapped shut.

Our new course is set to Sundsvall.

Alphamir 24, 1966: "Ahoy, the *princess*!" The guttural shout came loud and clear "In the name of the Heldannic Temple, heave to and surrender your weapons!"

The warning came soon after we exited the gate. The voice seemed to come from every point of the *Princess*. A large war galley was then sighted, coming straight at us from the dark. We were too low above the skyshield, and there was no time to maneuver. It was an ambush. The knights knew their business.

The shouted voice seemed familiar. Yes, it was him again! Herr Rolf could soon be seen standing near the helm with a grin on his face. The boltmen prepared for a last stand; they knew I would not surrender to these fiends. The crew braced for a boarding.

Suddenly, a trapdoor popped open near the bow of the *Princess*. At first nothing came out except a faint squeaky noise. The sound of a ratchet followed, and a small platform appeared. It was surmounted by a fat, black tube with cranks and levers. And behind it sat Leo!

"Oh, greetings!" he said. "You wouldn't have a spare mallet, would you? I still have a problem with—" Noticing the crew, he turned around and gawked at the approaching warship. Scrambling with the cranks and levers, he pointed the tube at the galley and yanked a handle. A pulsating hum grew from the quivering contraption, with ominous hisses. Everyone ducked for cover.

A deafening explosion rocked the *Princess* as a black, billowing cloud obscured the deck. The smoke cleared slowly, revealing a scene of horror and confusion. Leo, now all sooty and smoking, still sat on his platform, holding the handle (which had broken free) and scratching his head. The tube was gone.

Ahead of the *Princess*, the Heldannic galley was reduced to little more than a wreck. Its crew stunned, it drifted on its course and merely bumped into the *Princess*. Xerdon seized the initiative and boarded the galley.

A raging battle took place between the heavily armored knights and the swift boltmen. I, for my part, had a personal account to settle. It took little magic to enter the galley and locate Herr Rolf in a small chapel at the galley's stern. Part of the altar had been ripped off its base. I felt a waning power fizzle from the unholy debris.

"You!" he said. "You shall pay for this!" In a fit of blind rage, Rolf seized a twohanded sword and took a wild swing. His blade crushed through a heavy chest, barely missing me. He lifted his weapon, preparing for another mighty blow- but I was ready for him. My word would be far quicker. How great the anticipation of arcane strands of webbing shooting forth from my fingers! Oh, what rapture! Revenge at last!

But alas! Fate again decided otherwise. Khufiri unexpectedly appeared at the door and struck a wicked blow at Rolf's back. The knight stared blankly, opened his mouth, and fell forward. The back of his armor was lacerated as if giant claws had struck him.

Khufiri displayed an evil grin, and she had death in her eyes as she laughed. "You are so easily fooled, wizard!" she hissed. "One does not rid himself so easily of my kind. I searched a long time for you. Neither the barriers of the stars nor those of the Hollow World can stop me. Now, gaze upon me, and see who I truly am!"

Khufiri's body began to warp and shake. Slowly it grew and expanded to the ceiling. The planks burst outward as the creature developed fully. In horror I realized what had happened. Khufiri was none other than the Oceanian dragon of darkness that had tormented us so long ago.

"You shall not be granted revenge, Haldemar." The dragon now towered above the war galley. All combat ceased immediately on the deck. "Synn is my name. You will learn to hate it for the rest of your miserable life." She picked up Rolf's unconscious body and added "You will never have this. His soul is now mine." Synn gazed a moment at the *princess* and snarled, "You can keep your abomination, wizard. It will not help for what is yet to happen!"

The night dragon breathed a cloud of utter darkness and disappeared. There was no sign of Myojo. Where was he?

The Future, Return to Alphatia

Alphamir 25, 1966: I write this down from a hazy memory of the day's events. Moments after Synn's strange departure, the sun rose from the east of our world, illuminating the battle scene in a grand display of celestial majesty. At the sight of Rolf's kidnapping, the few remaining knights had yielded. It took hours to transfer all worthy spoils of war off the Heldannic galley. These knights must have been plundering some hapless civilization somewhere in the void. We seized strange coins and items I've never seen before.

Supplies and captives were brought aboard the *Princess*. The Heldannic wreck was then set ablaze and left behind. The flames were rapidly consuming the ship's remaining envelope of air. As the *Princess* resumed her course toward Sundsvall, we watched the fiery hulk plummet toward the skyshield and disappear into the clouds below.

Within hours of our departure, however, chaos seemed to have overtaken the starry vault. Whirling clouds of luminous gases surrounded the *Princess*.



Flashes and bolts of magical energy raged everywhere. Somewhere in the distance I heard the voice of Khufiri-Synn. At first it was a mere giggle, but soon it turned into a nagging laughter. The storm built up to a demented maelstrom of energy. In the back of my mind, I could hear Synn's mocking voice: "For you, death is too sweet. So then, wizard, learn to deal with my reality!" There was a roar, and then oblivion.

It was hard to tell how long our unconsciousness lasted. The entire crew and myself had passed out. We apparently did not move from our previous position, which at first led me to believe that little time had gone by.

Then the frightening truth came forth. There, standing at the bow of the *Princess*, was an old lady. Her face was familiar. She rose upon my awakening and said, "Haldemar, why did you abandon me? Why didn't you return? I trusted you. I gazed at the red skies of Myoshima, praying for your return. Day after day, I hoped and cried. But never did the *Princess* reappear to take me back. I endured thirty-four years of misery in Myoshiman dungeons. And it is only now that I am old and tired that a creature of darkness finally returns me to you. Why, Haldemar?"

Alphamir 26, 2000 AY: The sound of creaking wood slowly woke me, as the solar winds softly rocked the *Princess Ark*. I have slept little despite the long hours of reflection and anguish that have followed the last incredible events. I shivered in the cold air and thought of what seemed to have happened only a day ago.

Somehow, Synn had anticipated the presence of a nebular storm near the Hollow World's gate. It ripped the very fabric of time, and the *Princess* fell through. According to my estimations based on the relative position of the stars, we have jumped 34 years into our future. I fear what may await us below, in our new world.

I conjecture that the wretched dragon waited all those years, meditating on her revenge. Synn must have returned to Myoshima exactly 34 years after abandoning the Heldannic wreck, recovered Lady Abovombe from the Myoshiman gaol, and returned her to the *Princess Ark* as the ship emerged into this new era. The hapless woman spent years in misery and hardship, obviously thinking that I had abandoned her to her captors.

I have a magical cure for Lady Abovombe's current age, but I am afraid that a much deeper wound may linger in her heart- and mine. It pains me to think that Lady Abovombe would doubt my feelings toward her. I suppose this is what that wretched Synn had in her twisted mind all along. Such a hateful and gratuitous act of cruelty speaks eloquently of the night dragon's utter evil.

Not only this, but Myojo suffered greatly during the last battle. The brave warrior had followed Synn closely prior to her treachery. He must have sensed her wicked intentions and attempted to stop the night dragon. But she turned against him and easily defeated him. It took many hours of praying and great skill from Talasar to pull Myojo back from the very threshold of death.

So be it. Rolf may be dead, but Synn has replaced him as a foe that I must destroy. But first, patience and time will be needed to regain Lady Abovombe's heart. I must find this elixir at once.

Alphamir 27: Again, Myojo's life came close to an end. As I left my quarters on my way to see Lady Abovombe, I noticed a furtive shadow quickly entering Myojo's cabin. I knew it couldn't be my feline companion, since he was quite feeble and still recovering. I crept up to the door as quietly as I could—quietly for a wizard, that is.

Three intruders were in Myojo's cabin, dressed in black from head to toe. One was poised to strike at Myojo's chest with a short sword. The two others spotted me and threw curious little metal stars at me. One got stuck in the wooden door, while the other grazed my throat. Almost instantly I spoke a command word, and my wand disintegrated one of the two, who shrivelled into a lifeless form. Unfortunately, the deadly discharge also damaged the wooden bulkhead beyond.

Immediately, a roar rocked the Princess, almost as if the ship had felt the blow from my wand. Myojo woke up and instinctively stabbed at the closest of his foes with a hidden dagger, while both myself and the other intruder lost our footing. A short scuffle followed, and my opponent ran down the passageway. He didn't go far however, as Talasar stepped out of his quarters and magically *held* the intruder. About the same time I heard some fighting on the main deck, followed by the familiar "zap-crack" sounds of boltmen at work.

The intruders were Myoshiman rakastas. Another two intruders had freed Kenju and Jiro from the brig, but they were all intercepted on the deck. All died except the one Talasar paralysed and the one Myojo wounded. According to Myojo, these are trained and highly skillful assassins, probably sent by Lord Katayama. Alerted by the recent disappearance of Lady Abovombe from their gaol, the Myoshimans must have dispatched their scouts to seek us out.

The two survivors would not utter a word, but there are ways to pry information out with a little talent and magic. The tall, wounded survivor was Uisuka-San, chief of his clan of assassins. The other was his daughter, Kitikata. It was a stroke of luck that I left my quarters just as the rakastas had entered Myojo's cabin, or else my companion would certainly have been quite dead by now.

I, however, released the two with a message to Lord Katayama. I informed the lord that Herr Rolf of the Heldannic Knights had been killed 34 years ago, and that his own envoys Kenju and Jiro had acted treacherously. One should not hope to acquire Imperial friendship with a gift in one hand and a dagger in the other. The two bowed abruptly and flew away on a black-moth ship that blended swiftly into the night.

Alphamir 28: I met Lady Abovombe again. I found her lying near the crystal bay, sadly gazing at the stars. She turned and watched me silently, with an expression of resignation in her eyes. Conversation was difficult, interrupted by many uncomfortably quiet pauses. I am not sure she truly understands what has happened. After all, only our appearance could testify to the time lapse.

I offered her my elixir, one of those potions that rejuvenates one's body by 10 years—but she refused to drink it. She firmly believed what had happened was the will of the Immortals. I advanced the argument that Immortals care little, and their will is more often than not that of the mortals. But the thought failed to comfort her, and she still showed reluctance to drink the elixir. There was little else I could do and so retired to my quarters. Time had betrayed her, yet time perhaps would heal her sorrow.

Sulamir 1: At last, the familiar coastline of Alphatia could be observed through the clouds. Everyone was very tense on board. The news of our time shift had reached the crew. Talasar was skillful in explaining the situation to all—their relatives in the Empire would now be dead, much older, or have mostly forgotten about them. Worse, they ran the risk of being arrested for impersonating people thought dead for decades. It will be difficult for the crew to understand and adapt. For my part, I am worried as to what may have happened during the last third century.

The answer came swiftly as we approached the aerodrome over Sundsvall. Three imperial skyships raced toward us. This, at least, had not changed. As expected of the aerodrome's Crimson Guard, they spotted our invisible ship and reacted swiftly. I ordered the Haaken colors to be hoisted, along with a parliamentary banner. Two of the crimson airships flanked the *Princess* while a squad of guards requested to come aboard. Much to everyone's surprise, the guards arrested both Talasar and me. We were immediately taken to the imperial dungeon under the palace. A chill ran down my spine at the thought of going to this ghastly place, but we had to cooperate in order to see this through.

Sulamir 14: I was finally granted a meeting with the Empress, as befitting my rank. Curiously, the palace had changed very little during all that time. The guards, the customs, and the court were all nearly identical to what I was accustomed to, except that many of my friends were now long dead. One that was still alive did not recognize me.

I was quickly ushered into the immense Throne Room. The Empress sat a mere 60' from me. Of course,

the guards had been exceedingly thorough in stripping me of my personal belongings. I had also been duly “processed” by the court’s magists to ensure that none of my magic could harm the Empress in any way. From where I kneeled, I could see a glimmer of magic encasing the Empress. *That* was new. The Empress observed me, and I hated it. She wasn’t merely studying me. She was steadily and progressively exposing my inner self, almost as casually as one would peel a fruit. She was browsing

through my mind and memories with all the delicacy of a gardener’s rake.

“Release him,” she ordered abruptly. “He is not guilty. Leave us alone.” The guards left swiftly and closed the doors behind them.

“That was quite a journey, Admiral,” she began. “Too bad you lost all that time. Your presence and knowledge would have been useful many years ago.”

I was relieved to see that the initial enmity was gone. “May I know what I was accused of, Your Imperial Majesty?”

She smiled briefly, but her eyes remained ice cold. “Simply of attempting an assassination on the person of the Heldannic Order’s High Priest! I believe you knew him as Herr Rolf. When you seek trouble, you certainly are thorough in your quest, Admiral.” Seeing the expression on my face, she immediately added “Yes, yes, I know you did not do it. Amazingly, however, I see from your memories that the man did indeed die!”

Something was amiss. How could they have known? There were no survivors other than the prisoners still in our brig. The Empress sighed, motioning me to come closer and sit near her. “But how?” I asked.

“My dear Admiral, all isn’t so simple. The ruler of the Heldannic Order died twenty-one years ago—while you were absent from the normal flow of history. Wulf von Klagendorf, the one you know as Herr Rolf, succeeded him and became the High Priest. Clearly, someone brought Rolf back to life after his death, which you witnessed thirty-four years ago. Since that creature of



Entropy, Synn, killed him, Herr Rolf must have had some ties with Entropic Immortals. Or else something very strange must be happening ‘up there.’ The Heldannic Knights are followers of Vanya, who is not a lord of Entropy. It’s a bad omen, in any case.

“You see, no one here at the palace could find any trace of you, even through the most powerful magic available. The only news about your expedition came shortly after Herr Rolf became the High Priest in Freiburg. An envoy came and declared you had attempted to kill their High Priest and that you were in hiding. Of course, I know the true story now—as amazing as it is. You do understand, however, that you and your men must avoid any prolonged stay anywhere and with anyone.

Your knowledge of the sky shield and most especially of that strange Hollow World must remain absolutely secret. Few would believe you, but this knowledge is far too dangerous to fall in the wrong ears.

"Now you have a choice, Admiral: Either leave and carry on your initial endeavor in the name of the Empire, or all of your crew, officers, and civilians on board must perish at once. Then I will deal with you and your first officer in my own ways."

I had no wish to ask what that may be, and I quickly nodded agreement with the first option.

"Very well, then. Carry on, Admiral. Your ship, or whatever you call that thing, has been restocked. And please, do show any Heldannic ships you encounter what a true Alphatian wizard can do. Those knights annoy me. Farewell."

Sulamir 15: Bitterness, bitterness: That was all I could see in their eyes. The crew had been under order to remain aboard above Sundsvall during the days of my confinement. None were allowed to disembark at any time, and now I bore the news of our imminent departure. For a moment I thought we would have a mutiny on our hands, but my harangue seemed to have some effect. The older crew members returned to their duties, some muttering, others showing outright anger in their movements and words. The younger sailors followed.

Suddenly, a sailor broke into tears. He screamed and ran for a small floating launch. Before anyone could react, the young man was already floating down toward Sundsvall. A single crimson frigate swooped by; much to everyone's horror, a blast of lightning shot forth. The man fell off the launch's remains and tumbled like a rag doll toward the distant earth. A deathly silence descended upon the crew. Slowly, one after the other, they returned to their quarters. That was all.

Sulamir 19: I had no immediate plans to leave for anywhere, not with the crew's miserable morale. I opted for a quick stop incognito at Starpoint. We stopped due north of the city above a small forest. Unseen, the crew left in shifts, all wearing civilian outfits and carrying copious gold to spend, courtesy of the *Princess*'s treasury. This took five

days. I must admit I never saw a crew as drunk as this one! But that was worth every pop of a cork. None of them deserted. They knew they would not last long in metropolitan Alphatia. Perhaps they feared me even more, for they all knew I could easily find any of them. The crew was mostly Amburese, and that stop in Starpoint went a long way toward improving morale.

Sulamir 25: I paid a short visit to my kin in nearby Ar. They were overjoyed to see me again, but were appalled at what had happened. All was fine at the family domain. They quietly hoped that I would someday, somehow, come back and settle there for good. That would not be for a long time yet. I gathered a few of my favorite objects, then returned to the *Princess*.

In the evening, while unpacking, I accidentally triggered an item of my making. The thing had never been fully completed nor properly enchanted. It popped. It hissed. It rattled. And by the beard of Pligzy Gladz, it smoked like the nostrils of a sleeping dragon! Soon the room was filled with a luminescent, swirling fog. That's when I heard something heavy rip loose from the overhead beam and crash to the floor.

The smoke cleared- and there was Ramissur! Wide-eyed, the man was on all fours- naked as a worm, mind you- holding a piece a fruit in one hand and with a foot tangled up in what was left of my bat's cage. He sniffed, squeaked, and scurried over to the other end of the room. All that time my bat had been none other than Ramissur himself! Why am I not surprised?

Talasar did wonders in bringing back the human side of Ramissur. The boltman had been under Synn's control, acting as her eyes and ears all along. The crew welcomed him back. By now, nothing could surprise them either.

Indeed, that would end a chapter of our saga. After the latest events, it was time for the Princess to head for



other horizons, and the sooner the better. The sun was setting, and once again we headed out under the stars.

Sulamir 26, 2000 AY: The departure from Starpoint was a grim one. I couldn't take the chance of being discovered. Em press Eriadna might have been watching, and she might not have tolerated a longer stay, no matter how helpful it was to my crew's morale. There would be other stops elsewhere, away from the Empire.

We are now sailing to the southwest, toward East Portage. I decided to remain within the skyshield. I have no doubt in my mind that the Heldannic Knights are aware of our emergence into this era. They would certainly intercept us if we breached the skyshield. Fortunately, their best ships are built in the void and cannot reach the *Princess Ark* within the atmosphere of this world.

Sudmir 17: I have conducted further research on the Myoshiman monolith during the days of our journey between Starpoint and East Portage. By luck, the Empress did not request this "gift" from Lord Katayama. I have devised a contraption for controlling the effects of the magical monolith. With a simple command word, Talasar or myself can now allow or disallow the *invisibility* to take effect.

Sudmir 19: We entered the sky above East Portage this dawn. As usual, a multitude of busy merchantmen crowded the port, some unloading their cargo and others picking up valuable merchandise from the west. I observed nearly any kind of flag at the docks, and several new ones, too. With pleasure, I noticed the Imperial Banner was still the most common.

Several medium-sized ships were being pulled out of the water and loaded onto large wooden cradles. Scores of logs placed ahead and under the ships allowed the massive hulls to move forward, pulled by hundreds of draft horses. The ships were to be slowly dragged 140 miles overland in this manner until they reached West Portage, on the opposite coast of the narrow Isle of Dawn. This was quicker for surface vessels than circumventing the Isle of Dawn. This is proof that skyships such as the *Princess Ark* are a blessing for all navigators.

The port authorities did not seem to mind our presence; after vague formalities, some of the crew went down, alternating shifts again. I thought it would be a comfort for Lady Abovombe to leave her quarters and visit the city with me. Talasar had spent many hours with her, providing counsel and spiritual help. I was greatly relieved to see that Abovombe had finally partaken of my

potions. She is clearly at her best now. Her looks could melt the heart of the coldest man.

We landed near a huge, paved avenue that divided the entire town of East Portage, from the port to the west gate. The avenue was wide enough for two seagoing ships and their horse carriages to pass through at once. Elephants and a number of other large creatures were also used as draft animals, depending on the ships. Heavily armed caravans lead the ships, often followed by impressive baggage trains and other travelers.

We took a stroll to the commoners' market. It was quaint. I offered Abovombe a selection from a "bird of fortune" at one of those stuffy Ochalean shops that one can only find in a small, isolated street. It is a local custom to pay the shop owner to have his bird pick one of several thousand scrolls in the shop. The scroll often turns out to be a poem, a luck sign, or some obscure saying. Lady Abovombe read her scroll, smiled, and placed it in her pouch. Tradition demands that the poem be kept for oneself, but I wondered what it said.

I then took her out for dinner at The Silver Snake, a native place of my knowledge. Amazingly, it was still there after all these years. Dinner was pleasant, but Abovombe still showed a bit of coldness in her eyes. I was about to reveal how painful that was to my heart when I felt my dagger quiver in my sleeve. Danger was close.

Suddenly, Abovombe screamed, grabbed my arm, and pulled me to the ground. A swarthy man hiding behind a pillar had stepped forward and tossed a dagger at my back. Abovombe was quicker and saved my life. The man shouted, "Death to the Profaner!" and escaped into the crowded street. The dagger stuck into a wooden pillar that had been behind me, the blade oozing a black, oily substance.

After an interminable string of abject apologies from the owner, we left and returned to the *Princess*. I wondered what I had gotten myself into this time. I could also not stop thinking that Abovombe saved my life, and that perhaps she still had some feelings for me!

Sudmir 20: It was quite inconvenient that I was unable to see my aggressor, for this denies me the option of tracking him with my crystal ball. According to Lady Abovombe's description of the man and his accent, he must have been a Thothian. So far, I cannot see in what way I would deserve such treatment.

Raman, our chief engineer, erudite in the matters of ancient history, confirmed the dagger to be Thothian- that is, *ancient* Thothian. Raman had years ago been part of an archaeological expedition in Upper Thothia and had unearthed items of this nature. Sages in the expedition

then began dying mysteriously during the excavation of King Haptuthep's tomb. Eventually, a native was caught while attempting to slit the throat of a sage who had fallen ill the evening before. The native had a weapon identical to the one hurled at me.

Unfortunately, the man never revealed whom he worked for. He died mysteriously within the hour of his capture. Magic was ineffective in retrieving the man's soul for further questioning. Rumors flew among the native workers that frightening, ancient curses were at work. The tomb was dug up at last, however, and its treasures were shipped back to Alphatia. All of the sages in the expedition died of mysterious causes in the following three years. Raman himself nearly lost his life in a fire that ravaged his personal library. Many ancient Thothian scrolls were destroyed in the blaze.

Lacking any other clue as to the nature of this problem, I have ordered an immediate departure toward Upper Thothia, into the neutral region.

Sudmir 25: We located the old excavation site that Raman described. It lay in a deserted, rocky valley; the tomb was abandoned, and no sign of life was visible. Sand filled most of the entrance left by the archaeological expedition.

Raman, Myojo, Ramissur, and a squad of boltmen came with me to study the tomb. Removing the sand from the entrance was no major problem, and soon we started searching the dark monument for clues.

The expedition team had been quite thorough in stripping the tomb of treasures or anything else worth studying. We visited a number of chambers and galleries. Extra attention was brought to the chamber where the assassin had been caught, deep inside the tomb. The chamber had only one entrance, so the assassin must have used a secret passage or magic. It was Myojo who found—or, rather, smelled—the answer.

Raman studied some hieroglyphs on the wall and unveiled an interesting parable which gave away the mechanism of a secret passage. We entered the passage and followed a long stairway down to a larger chamber. It seems the expedition picked up a false treasure, a lure left by the builder of the tomb to fool the grave robbers. This new chamber contained a large sarcophagus, treasures, and statues of ancient Thothian mythology. Especially worrisome was a series of alcoves in which stood the mummified remains of priests and acolytes who remained



in the tomb at the time it was sealed. In dark places such as ancient tombs where necromantic magic may be powerful, one must be naturally suspicious of any corpses.

My dagger quivered again. Ramissur and the boltmen took position against the corpses. However, unleashing *lightning bolts* in such closed quarters could be disastrous, and I ordered the boltmen out immediately. About then, a large slab of stone slammed shut with a thunderous rumble. Low voices rose from the corpses, chanting a strange hymn. The corpses did not move—but the walls did. They seemed to fade away into darkness, revealing an even larger chamber, a throne room lit by glowing braziers.

The mummified priests came alive, progressively regaining their former living appearances. On the throne was a black figure, King Haptuthep presumably. An unsettling, evil glow flickered in his eyes, almost overwhelming my senses.

As the king spoke, Raman translated his whispered words with some difficulty. "You, sage, are a thief in my abode. And you, sorcerer, are a profaner. Your magical powers are useless here, and your feline lackey is an insult to the Immortals."

I inquired of the being as to what I had that belonged to him, and he went on. "That magic you used to empower your ship with the ability to fly is mine. It was stolen centuries ago when your people invaded my land. You have been the last to keep it, and you committed a sacrilege when you invoked its power."

I was properly nettled. "Why have you waited so long to manifest your anger, may I ask?"

"My servants searched your empire for you for decades until an old friend of yours came to me. She revealed many things about you and your servants, Synn is her name. Now you shall become my servants."

Naturally, I didn't wait any longer and tried to *web* this sinister character. I felt the magic go off, but *nothing happened*, or at least nothing that I was aware of. If we had been standing within an *anti-magic* zone, I would have felt nothing at all. And that's what tipped me off. I've seen this kind of trick before. He was merely trying to make me believe that magic didn't work. This was one pharaoh who had lost touch with reality. Alphantian wizards are fully aware of the powers of *hypnosis*. It is the oldest trick in the grimoire!

Myojo swung wildly at the approaching priests, and Raman tried to fend off a few others with his torch. I feigned being a wizard incapable of casting a spell, dropped to my knees, and implored his royal highness for mercy.

The king stood up, already rejoicing at his victory. Then I added, "Oh, what the heck!" and fired my *wand of disintegration* with quite a bit of conviction. It worked perfectly well.

With a cry of rage, the king reeled back. He survived, so to speak, since he was undead as I had suspected. The marching of the dead priests was illusory, and so was most of the room. The old king appeared for what he truly was-a horribly desiccated body with glowing eyes, no doubt a lich. His left arm and shoulder had been obliterated by the wand, unveiling bones darkened by centuries past. He uttered a quick word and disappeared.

Sudmir 26: We had no trouble emptying the chamber of its treasures and scrolls. As I expected after yesterday's encounter, King Haptuthep's royal sarcophagus was empty. The king's lich probably has another lair somewhere in Thothia. We removed the other corpses and gave them a more permanent burial.

It was evident that his chamber had been regularly visited. There were many gifts, some quite recent, that could not have withstood the passing centuries. The lich probably maintained a group of living followers, fanatics devoted to their ancient king. I must have encountered one of them in East Portage. Well, I am not in the lich-hunting business. This will have to be left to the proper authorities in Edairo.

The most interesting discovery, however, concerns this ancient scroll of which the king spoke, which I obtained decades ago during the war. I am worried that, as a result of my use of the scroll to enchant my ship, the *Princess Ark* may be more than I first thought. But what could the scroll have been? I fear that I was not in possession of the entire spell when I conducted the original enchantment of the ship. According to my findings in the tomb, it seems I must perform a further ceremony to complete the full enchantment. I will have to study these new scrolls further. As an echo to my thoughts, a low groan seemed to arise from the *Princess Ark's* hull.

TangHwa

Vertmir 11,2000 AY: Many days and nights have passed since I began studying the ancient Thothian papyruses from King Haptuthep's tomb. One of them appears to be the missing fragment of my original scroll. As I grow closer to unveiling the key to the Thothian enchantment, my curiosity grows even greater, keeping my weariness at bay. The warm summer breeze plays with the flickering flames on the candelabrum, causing the tiny hieroglyphs to dance on the papyrus.

It is as though an uncanny life animates the symbols, telling strange stories of dark secrets, obscure magicks, and bizarre creatures invoked during the encryption.

Increasingly fascinated, I cannot truly discern where the reality of the pictograms ends and where the dancing illusions begin. Oddly, the symbols seem far away one instant, then inexplicably grow huge and very close the next- back and forth. Today as I was reading, my vision slowly blurred and my mind began to tip into an abyss of uncontrollable thoughts.

"Haaken-San?" The sudden voice rippled through my mind like the crack of a whip. I promptly jumped up, sending a flurry of notes flying off my desk and startling Myojo just as much. Dear Myojo- he hadn't seen me for days. He came to check on my well-being and in so doing saved me from complete insanity. It was clear that dire magicks protect this archaic Thothian papyrus- and I had almost been their victim. It had been far too long since I had some rest. It was time to put the papyrus away.

But a long sleep fraught with odious dreams and nightmares followed.

Vertmir 13: The deep sound of a distant gong awoke me. From the light filtering in, I could tell it was close to noon. I'd slept far later than I had wanted. I could hear the brief orders Xerdon barked to the crew while they clewed the sails up.

Despite a throbbing headache, I came up to the railing but left Xerdon in charge of the approach. We had reached our next stop at the far western tip of Ochalea. The small port of Tang-Hwa had an old custom of ringing huge gongs and blowing enormous horns both to greet incoming vessels-and as a means of calling the guards to their positions, just in case. This noise served only to worsen my headache.

Down below, a crowd of cackling onlookers gathered at the docks, pointing fingers up at the *Princess* with wide eyes. Skyships were not a common sight in these parts. Very soon came a dignitary, a Lady Ping, mounted on an elaborate palanquin. Talasar went down to greet her and bring her aboard the *Princess* for a visit of courtesy.

I invited Lady Ping to the officer's mess for a refreshment. The conversation was quite pleasant, except for some oddities. As we were talking, an ant came out of Lady Ping's nose, scurried over her face, then disappeared into her mouth. Xerdon and Talasar were also present but did not react, and neither did Lady Ping. Shortly afterward, the serpent tattoos on her face coiled and uncoiled. Nobody reacted to this, either. Talasar took Lady Ping for a tour of the *Princess*, and I took the opportunity to question Xerdon about the dignitary's facial tattoos. His answer of, "Tattoos, sir?" confused me even further. I retired to my quarters with an aggravating migraine.

Vertmir 15: The *Princess* remained two days above Tang-Hwa. Some of the crew went on leave while fresh supplies where carried in. I was ill during that time and delegated command of the *Princess* to Talasar. I've had several more nightmares that have perturbed my psyche, and I therefore prefer to stay away from the busy decks. Finally, our westward journey resumed with no further incident.

The Kingdom of Emrond

Vertmir 16: Today I felt much better and came up to the deck. My crew was relieved to see me there. My headache was gone, and I was no longer experiencing these upsetting nightmares. Everything was fine. The morning sun rose from the west, and purple clouds stretched along the horizon as fine gossamer, reaching toward the endless scarlet waves of the sea. I resumed command and ordered the *Imperial Ark* on a southward course across the emerald sky. Our heavy, bronze-clad man-of-war veered gracefully as its six wings fluttered in the late summer breeze. A flock of sapphire gulls glided in our wake, indolently waving their scaly tails. A lovely dawn indeed.

Vertmir 28: Days have past-very ordinary, fine days, I might add. We finally reached our next stop, on the northern coast of Davania, west of the Thyatian Jungle Coast. There had been rumors that a kingdom existed in this region. We expected to find coastal towns and ports, but instead the coast was almost entirely savage, overgrown with slender coconut trees and gnarled mangroves.

It was only because I used my spyglass that I spotted buildings in the upland hills. Vegetation partially concealed them. Most of the buildings had a dark green color, helping in their concealment, I could observe common activity taking place in the streets. I commanded the mighty *Imperial Ark* to be cloaked and sail forth.

Tslamir 1: We spent a day above these new-found people. Indeed, these are of a strange kind. These very tall, skinny people have pale green skin and long silver hair. Aside from this, it seems like a normal city and they did not seem a violent people. It was time to send down an away team.

Talasar will stay on board, while Xerdon, Myojo, and myself will go down to explore the place in more detail. We will descend into the forest and approach the town as travelers.

Tslamir 2: My adventures this day have been difficult to recount, for reasons that shall grow clear, and this entry and those following it have been written some days after they occurred. I shall start at the beginning:

The green people reacted with great curiosity when we entered the front gate. There was no sign of animosity. Soon enough, an official came forward with a small guard. The guards wore very elaborate armor, with graceful curves and sharp thorns perhaps designed to both decorate and defend. I could not tell what the armor was



made of; it wasn't metal, however. The blades of their weapons were similarly shaped.

The official came closer and inquired about our origins. It appeared they had already met Thyatian explorers a decade ago. The odd thing is that I could understand the official quite clearly, but Xerdon and Myojo could not. The official, Lord Verdlin, invited us to his residence, and we followed.

It was indeed quite a residence. The mansion was almost entirely built of wood, intricately carved and dyed in various tones of green, the dominant color here. It had an incredible garden with beautiful topiary, shrubs, and trees. The inside of the building had a more natural wood color, except for the very fine carpet of grass growing inside- comfortable, but uncommon. We sat next to a small fountain with Lord Verdlin and his wife, Lady Gruneel. She had her servants bring *unrah*, the local brew- a sweet, fermented tree sap of which we all partook.

We had a long conversation. The name of the city is Glauqnor; it belongs to the small kingdom of Emerond. The capital lies further inland. The Emerondians' skin color comes from vegetable dyes. They developed a civilization and culture based on the respect and love of nature, especially flora, and grew to understand all aspects of plant life and the magic devoted to that sphere. They live mostly on vegetables that they grow in small fields or pick from the forest. The Emerondians seemed like a very peaceful people.

As a sign of courtesy, Lord Verdlin invited our party to be his guests at the residence for the night. I accepted, and shortly afterward was led to my quarters. We spent the evening with a group of young nobles eager to show

off the best parts of their city. Gardens and ornamental plants were ever present in the streets and on the houses. When I grew tired of the tour, one of the nobles proposed a stop at an "elation abode." Having no idea what that was, I decided to go along.

The place was an indoor pool and sauna. A few nobles of both genders were already there, naked, waving at me while enjoying the hot, bubbling water. Myojo came out of the dressing room in the briefest of attires but still holding his sword. He looked down at the water, gazed at me in despair, then resigned himself to stepping down into the bath. He sat there, quite unhappy, as two cute courtesans delighted in scrubbing his head and scratching his chin. Xerdon came out next, clutching at a small towel, visibly embarrassed. I could have sworn one of the young nobles winked at him, but I could be mistaken. I couldn't tell if it was the hot water that caused Xerdon to blush.

Things got a bit less uptight as I discovered the water was laced with *unrah*. It was indeed a very pleasant interlude, until I noticed something strange. The cheeks of my closest neighbor, Lady Gruneel, began to stretch unnaturally until green thorns ripped through her skin. She opened her mouth to say something, but her tongue was turning into a slimy liana. It coiled out and lunged at me. In horror I jumped back and slapped at the obscene thing.

The entire scene suddenly changed. To my astonishment, I found myself standing next to the small fountain at Lord Verdlin's residence. At my feet lay a dazed Lady Gruneel, rubbing her cheek. I could see the mark of a hand slap on her face. Myojo sat nearby, staring at me with wide eyes, while Xerdon slowly shook his

head, looking at me with surprise and shock. It was as if nothing had actually happened since we had sat down for our fountain-side conversation!

Lord Verdin leaped to his feet. "This is an outrage!" he roared. Guards raced into the room. I wasn't granted time to explain my deed- I couldn't anyway. The offended lord had me taken to his prison.

Tslamir 3 (I think): Had I been dreaming? Was I losing my mind? I started to suspect the ancient Thothian papyrus had affected me far more than I thought. I could no longer rely on my senses. With horror, I also realized I could not recall any spells; my thoughts and memories blurred every time I tried. I was wholly powerless.

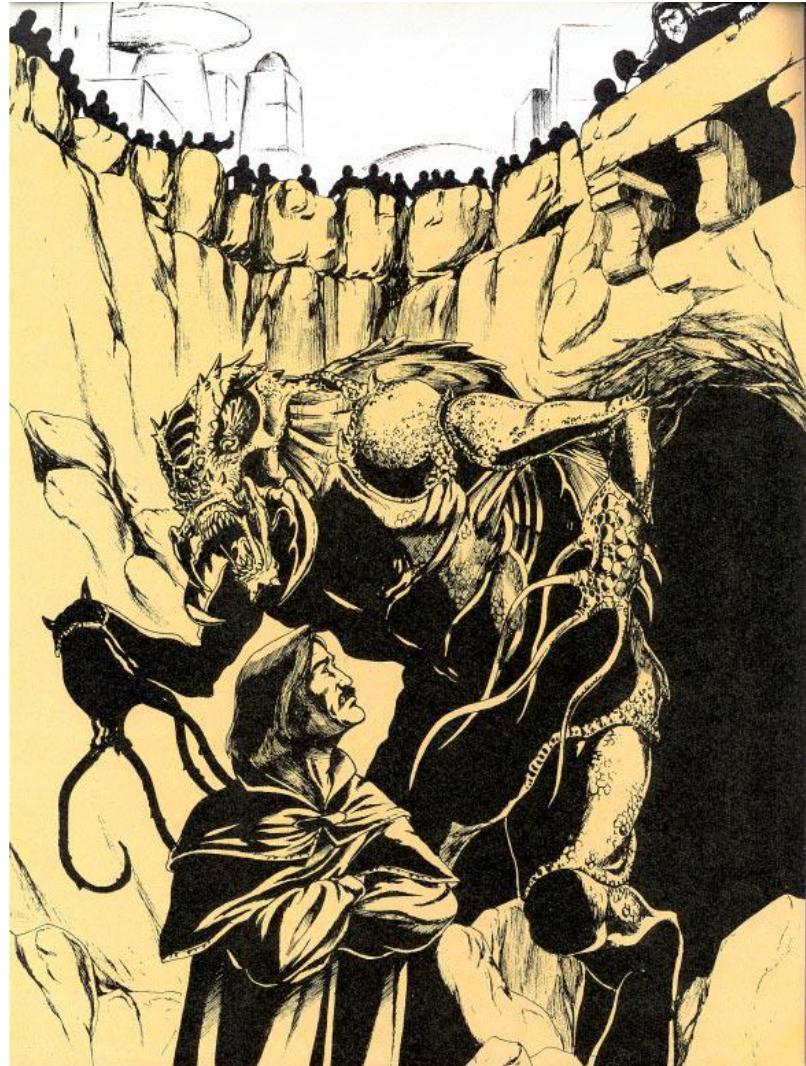
The cell was dark, humid, and absolutely silent, yet at times I could hear voices. One sounded like King Haptuthep, another like Herr Rolf or Synn, and Lord Verdin's cry of outrage echoed continually in my mind. The walls began to warp, turning into black, glossy sludge. With great difficulty, I shrugged the vision off, and calm returned for a while. I knew enough then to realize I was hallucinating. But I could not remain clear headed much longer.

Soon enough, my delusions returned along with a throbbing headache. Creatures of chaos marched all through my cell, roaring and screeching horribly. The infernal procession went on for what seemed an eternity, mimicking the uncanny ballet of hieroglyphs on the archaic papyrus. In the profound psychosis that overtook my mind, I discovered what I had been after. It was there, the key to the Thothian enchantment.

Oh, I wasn't truly mad. What I had failed to understand is that one must become a Gate to Chaos in order to use the powers of the Thothian enchantment. I had merely become a gate standing at the threshold of my world and of the Plane of Nightmares. I could see both at once; my world and the nightmare plane had seemed to be the same all along. The oddities that had occurred were chaotic emanations from the Plane of Nightmares of which only I was aware. Alas, this discovery did not grant me control over the visions. I still could not trust my senses.

The long, insane night went on.

Tslamir 4: The guard pulled me out of the jail this day and brought me to Lord Verdin. Xerdon and Myojo



were present under a solid guard, along with magistrates and scribes. I was informed that the penalty for my deed was death. But in view of the fact I was an important personality, I would be granted the right to something called "Trial by Fear."

I was dragged to a large wooden structure that looked like an indoor arena. The magistrates took places at a bench, while a number of nobles sat around a wide pit. The guards then lowered me into the pit, and a large iron grate squeaked open. A horrid miasma befouled the air in the pit, while creatures from chaos spewed out of the dark.

I couldn't be sure this was truly happening. Was I dreaming all this? If not, there was little I could do. Frustrated, I made a terrible effort to shut the gate myself. With a thundering crash, the iron grate slammed shut, and the visions blurred into oblivion-except for one. It stood tall and slimy, and it was snapping its mandibles at me. I

could see the many marks on its shell left by fallen warriors. And I was unarmed. Powerless.

Against a fragment of a dream. In anger, I faced the nightmarish phantasm and addressed it formally.
“Creature of the Dark, thou canst not harm me, for I know whence thou hast come! I fear thee not. Begone!”
Strengthened by my words, I turned away from the thing, looked up at Lord Verdin, and added, “Let this charade come to its end. This has lasted far too long!” Lord Verdin blinked at me, then gazed at the chief magistrate, who responded with a short nod. The guards lifted me out. The request was made that I leave with my two companions and never return. I supposed that was fair enough and proceeded back to the forest at once.

Hakh

Tslamir 5: I briefed Xerdon, Myojo, and Talasar of what had happened and why. It was imperative that I return to my quarters at once and complete the Thothian enchantment. This would be the only way of defeating the spells madness. I ordered I was not to be interrupted for any reason. Talasar will therefore assume command of the ship until my return.

On the way down to my quarters, Myojo mentioned how impressed he was by my inconceivable bravery and gall in the face of the terrible Emerondian monster in the pit. Confused, I stopped in my tracks and considered the implications of his comments. “What monster, Myojo? You saw it?”

Perplexed, he said, “Well, yes, Haaken-san. You ignored the beast and turned away as if you could not care less. The monster was so surprised that it backed off. Clearly, it sensed you to be a powerful wizard.” At the expression on my face, Myojo queried further, “Is something wrong, Haaken-San?”

“Never mind, Myojo. Thanks, anyway.”

Tslamir 8, 2000 AY -Talasar: Three days already. I, Talasar Ecbashur, have taken over this vessel’s command until the admiral’s return from his cabin, but his absence has lasted far too long. I thought several times of reaching him but have decided not to, for fear of disturbing his work. I could also sense magical wards near his quarters and so ordered everyone to stay away. I am hoping for some sign from the admiral. I could not order the *Princess* to head back to the Empire, for not much help would be found there. We have to continue on our primary mission, so I have decided to keep sailing west. Patience will be my guide.

Tslamir 8-Haldemar: Three days already. A sinister magic has overcome my quarters; the entire room seems to have shifted out of reality. Bulkheads feel much farther away than they should, and beyond the crystal windows reigns a perpetual realm of threatening shadows. I sense that I can no longer leave my quarters. From the corners of my eyes, I can perceive unnerving movements in the room, but as I turn to watch, the movements always dance away to the sides. Flames on the candelabrum are frozen as if time has stopped. In this unreal light, I proceed with the infernal Thothian enchantment, again struggling against the nightmarish delirium of the hieroglyphs. Patience will be my guide.

Tslamir 9—Talasar: At last, a sign! I was brutally awakened by the sound of thunder; we were nearing a large storm. Both Xerdon and I reached the upper deck at the same time. By then, the wind had picked up great strength. At this moment, a large blue whirlpool of light appeared directly in the path of the *Princess*. I ordered the helmsman to veer hard to the north, but in response a cavernous roar rose from the ship. The helmsman suddenly lost his grip on the wheel as it spun wildly out of control. The entire hull shook, and the *Princess* resumed her course straight toward the pool of light. This could only be the doing of the admiral. The blue whirlpool must be a magical gate. But to where?

Tslamir 9—Haldemar: At last, a sign! I unveiled a major axiom in the principles of ancient Thothian wizardry summoned in this papyrus. This dweomercraft was far more elaborate than the initial enchantment invoked on the ship. As I conjured the power encrypted in these runes, the papyrus consumed itself slowly. There was no stopping then, for the rest of the text would have disappeared and I would have remained stranded forever in this nightmarish netherworld. When the papyrus disappeared completely, new pictograms began to glow in the air, continuing their maddening ballet. The eerie markings transformed their shapes and forms as I read them, endlessly adding more depth to the sorcery’s mechanism. After I had deciphered the meanings of the mystic sequences, the hieroglyphs blended to form a whirlpool of blue light. I had opened another portal. But to where?

Tslamir 10-Talasar: Blue light everywhere … The place past the gate was amazing. The storm stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Its billowing clouds revealed a vast new world, much like the heavens beyond our skyshield. At first I reached for the airmask at my waist,



Artwork by Jim Holloway

but found there was no need for that. There was air- cold and pure like steel.

Above and below the *Princess* I could observe several worlds, some spherical and others more rugged, slowly following their celestial courses. In the distance, dark blue clouds seemed alive, with an eerie light pulsing inside them. The watch then sounded the alarm. There, coming from the clouds, a horde of draconic creatures flew toward us.

The boltmen quickly reached their battle stations, and the crew braced for combat. The creatures weren't dragons, as I first thought, but were more like wild cats with huge eagle wings and the tails of great wyrms. One among them was truly immense. Myojo was close to panic. At the sight of the great celestial felines, he clutched his sword and muttered his ancestral prayers.

The beasts began a gracious but sinister dance around the *Princess*. Suddenly, a younger cat broke from the ranks and lashed at the ship. Its claws seemed formidable enough to rip through the hull. A fury of lightning bolts converged on the cat, as testimony of the boltmen's power. Alas, despite the fiery conflagration they created, the bolts proved miserably ineffective. The cat didn't even twitch. Myojo prayed harder.

The cat roared and reached the *Princess* as the others dove in to join the attack when, suddenly, a frightening shriek rose from our ship itself! The cat's roar was a mere caterwaul in comparison. The younger cat froze in its path and hissed in fear; the others bristled up and hunched their backs at the *Princess*'s thunderous warning. At last, the largest beast with the lion face came closer, dwarfing its

lesser kin. It spat a bolt of lightning in the air; a clap of thunder then shook the skies.

The younger cats finally flew away. Their leader approached 'the aft deck where I stood, stretched a paw toward the starboard railing-and disappeared. In its place stood a woman of blue and silver light. Myojo steadfastly stepped forward, but she raised a hand. "There will be no need for this, my friend," she said. "The time for battle has passed. I must talk in peace with your Commander. I bear news of your master." To my question as to who she was, she merely added, "I am she who rules over this part of the universe. In this realm, a Princess I am."

Tslamir 10-Haldemar: Blue light everywhere... In some places, I could see beams of cobalt brilliance; in some others, wisps of dimness. Once past the portal, I could no longer sense up, down, or even keep a notion of time. I drifted in this azure void for what seemed an eternity. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear crystalline sounds. I came close to sinking again into insanity when I heard Abovombe's voice calling me. Memories filtered back.

Then I saw the *Princess*, and I was there on the deck, as if my thoughts had gotten me there in some obscure way. The ship was deserted, merely a ghostlike image of its former reality. I returned to my quarters and there, sitting on my chair, was a woman of shining sapphire and opalescent light. I didn't notice at first, but it soon became evident that she actually blended with the seat and the rest of the floor. She looked up to me and said, "I waited so long. I remained trapped here in this halfworld, with the other part of my soul in your hands, Haldemar. It is time

to finish what you started and set my mind free." To my inquiry about her identity, she replied, "In this realm, a Princess I am."

Tslamir 11-Talasar: A great blue sun arose in the distance. The mysterious wyrm requested that I come with her to her palace. I rode on her back to a great tower on a cloud, lost somewhere in a shifting, mazelike aurora. At the top was a hole into which the wyrm dove. The light ended in a vast hall made of solid, purple clouds.

There, the wyrm- Meryath, as she later introduced herself-offered me rest and sustenance. For the sake of my comfort, Meryath reverted to a human form. She explained she sensed the soul of her mother inside the *Princess Ark*. Meryath's mother died several centuries ago in a great battle against creatures known as spectral hounds, leaving Meryath to succeed her. The mother, Berylith, briefly contacted Meryath just seconds before the sky wyrms' attack. But that was enough to convince her daughter of her mother's existence. She later mentioned her imminent binding with a human, the master of the ship- the Admiral, no doubt.

Suddenly, Meryath stopped talking and listened. Her eyes widened. Then she uttered strange words and ran for the opening in the hall, transforming herself into a great wyrm while the younger beasts coiled up in the hallways in alarm. Perhaps some intrusion? A sinister baying echoed my thoughts.

Tslamir 11-Haldemar: A great blue sun arose in the distance. Its light filtered through the crystal windows, toying with the shadows in my room. I had lost consciousness for some time. The princess was still there, watching over me. I realized she was none other than the soul of the creature I had bound to my ship.

She called herself Berylith. She related how I had pulled her away from the realm of the Immortals when I used the Thothian enchantment on the *Princess Ark*. Berylith did not show anger however. She had come very close to becoming an Immortal being herself, but when she died in this world she remained a mere servant of the Immortals in the Draconic Plane. Her master permitted her to depart in answer to my conjuration, but only if she would accomplish a certain goal that would grant Berylith higher status among the Immortals upon her final return. What the quest was he did not tell her.

One thing is certain- I have to complete the Thothian enchantment. Without it, Berylith's soul will eventually decay into oblivion, and the *Princess Ark* will fly no more. Either way, a terrible waste...

It seems that what I had magically siphoned into the hull of the *Princess Ark* was only Berylith's life force.

Her psyche had been lost in this plane of torment and solitude. Only the completion of the Thothian wizardry could bring the two back together. More than ever, it was imperative I unveiled the final chapter of this enchantment. But what could it be? A sinister baying echoed my thoughts.

Tslamir 12-Talasar: Horror again. The spectral hounds had apparently returned, and I feared the worst for the *Princess Ark*. Meryath left me very little time to join her. It was a great sensation to ride on her back amidst her horde of ferocious sky wyrms. I uttered a short prayer and unstrapped my hammer. I was ready for battle.

Indeed, many hundreds of these evil creatures surrounded the ship. At the sight of our arrival, Xerdon opened fire on the hounds while the younger sky wyrms dove into fray. The battle was frightening. To the sky wyrms' ferocity and agility, the hounds responded with sheer numbers. Many came close to me, only to taste my war hammer's fatal might or Meryath's thunderous roar. Many sky wyrms died or faded away, weakened by their numerous wounds. Many more hounds perished at the boltmen's aim or at the wyrms' dizzying whirlwinds.

Suddenly, a horrible howl rose from the ship. It sounded like one of those hounds, but more powerful and much more frightening. The hounds instantly halted their attack. After a moment of anxiety, they mysteriously turned from the battle and fled. A clamor of joy rose from the sky wyrms and the men on the *Princess Ark*. We had won.

The sky wyrms commenced a war dance around the *Princess* to celebrate their unexpected victory. I could see Xerdon waving up at me. Soon he ordered the crew to attend the wounded. Meryath chose that moment to make a few loops in the air, which did not make me feel so glorious after all. I hoped that Razud had some cure for that.

As the celebration went on, I noticed from the corner of my eye that something was wrong with the *princess*. A plank fell off the bottom of the hull. A second later, a maelstrom of chaos overtook the ship. Whole sections of the ship cracked and splintered. Masts and their rigging collapsed on the decks. In shock, I witnessed the *princess* breaking up utterly before my own eyes.

Tslamir 12-Haldemar: Horror again. My presence in the Plane of Nightmares had finally attracted someone's attention: Hundreds of ghostly hounds surrounded the phantasmal image of the *Princess Ark*. Berylith said in a somber voice they were the spectral hounds that had killed her in centuries past-and now they were back to destroy her soul.

Suddenly, the hounds began racing around the ship, rushing forward and back, growling and biting at some invisible enemy. Some of them bled ectoplasmic ichor, while others were literally torn into spectral pieces. Slowly their foes began to appear, bizarrely fading into existence, but these twisted apparitions were all dead and gruesomely mutilated. Horrified, I suddenly realized what was happening. Both men from the *Princess Ark* and sky wyrms were fighting these beasts from another plane. Those who fell before the spectral hounds then reappeared in this plane of madness.

I had to intervene at once. Just then, phasing through the bulkhead, appeared the nightmarish muzzle of a spectral hound. It was much larger than the others and much more terrifying. Berylith looked frightened. The hound snarled at me and entered the room completely. Berylith implored my help, stretching out for me, incapable of defending herself.

To flee was my first thought. But where? The blue whirlpool was still there. It must be the way. Without realizing, I grabbed Berylith's translucent hand and ran for the magical portal. We both jumped through just as the giant hounds jaws snapped empty behind us. The gate led back to my room, the real one in the Prime Material Plane. At last, I was back.

The hound attempted to follow immediately but got caught halfway through the closing gate. It howled horribly as it was cut in two; its fore half fell at our feet, still writhing in agony. Then the monster faded away forever.

Berylith stood there a moment, almost completely human. She smiled, then cried out, "At last, I am whole again! I will remain within this ship for as long as you live, Haldemar, for you are now a part of it almost as much as I am. This is but a small price for my immortality. I will then be free to complete my own quest. Be wise in your command, Haldemar, for my fate is in your hands until then. But beware—the *Princess* must change..." Berylith's shape blurred in a flash of blue light, then blended away into the wooden bulkhead. The enchantment was finally complete.

I hurried up to the deck to resume command. The crew was quite surprised, and I must admit it was the first time ever I noticed a smile on Xerdon's face. I was about to reach the upper deck when a sudden, low, unnerving



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rumble shook the *Princess*. Railing, planks, and masts started to crack and splinter. In moments, wooden and metal debris was hurled about within an abominable shower of broken masts and rigging. In shock, I witnessed the *Princess* breaking up utterly before my own eyes.

Tslamir 13,2000 AY: I've entered this day's report from the back of a young sky wurm. Immediately after the ship started to crumble into pieces, the sky wyrms swooped down and picked up those crewmembers who did not have time to reach the escape rafts. We all watched the *Princess Ark* tumble down, breaking apart totally. Meryath ordered her sky wyrms to return to their fortress, while she and Talasar followed the wreck in its fall toward the small, nearby world that the sky wyrms call Hakh. She was paying a last homage to her mother's soul. I could not bear the sight of the destroyed ship.



Artwork by James Holloway

Tslamir 16: Talasar and Meryath have not returned; they should have been back by now. The sky wyrms are showing signs of irritability. I had to suspect foul play. I had a long talk with Meryath's elder seneschal, Fenroth, and we decided to return to the world where Meryath and Talasar were last seen.

Tslamir 17: Dense layers of blue clouds covered Hakh; spotting any sign of either Meryath or the wreck was clearly hopeless. We dove toward that perpetually dark world and landed in a dense jungle. Strange, gnarled trees with dark blue leaves and purplish vines seemed to creep away from the magical, golden light that I invoked to show our way. Fenroth growled and hissed impatiently when his huge wings got entangled in the labyrinthine foliage. He soon decided to revert to a rakasta's shape, that of an old one with silver hair and two small fangs protruding slightly under his upper lip. A chilling, oily rain began to come down, turning the ground into a muddy, smelly mire. Fenroth hissed and spat his disgust for this repugnant place.

Fenroth said he had heard of hunting tribes in these woods who might help us. He did not know whether they were peaceful or not. We would have to find out. We began our slow trek through the sticky mud and the tangled vines.

Tslamir 20: It had been raining on and off every hour since our arrival. Both of us were soon unrecognizable, covered almost entirely with mud, leeches, and clouds of tiny flies. Chilled to the bones and exhausted, we were debating on whether or not to leave

when my dagger betrayed some danger nearby. I looked but could not see much ahead.

All of a sudden, a heavy net fell from the branches above, and I felt ropes tightening around us. A trap! Fenroth snarled and was ready to revert back to his natural form, but I bade him not to, for we would then never find the hunters' village. He hissed to me how foolish that was—and perhaps he was right, for a terrible blow to my head left me unconscious for the remainder of the day.

Tslamir 21: It was clear these hunters were no friendly folk. Both Fenroth and I were tightly tied up, gagged, and hanging by our feet from a branch. Ignoring a fuming look from Fenroth, I could see that the village consisted of a number of spherical huts hanging from branches, each large enough for a small family. The hunters were tall humanoids, very similar to our hobgoblins but with jet black skin, long blue hair, and white eyes. They wore little more than leather breeches or skin cloaks that still seemed to protect them well from the cold rain. Amazingly, their skins were covered with tattoos that glowed in the dark, producing a strange ballet of monstrous images in the dark distance.

At the far end of the village, on the ground, was a huge mound where trees had been cut down and piled up. Closer to us was an altar, carved out of a large rock, on which I could see our personal effects. A very tall hunter was standing there, playing with my dagger. He turned to us with a sadistic grin on his face. He jabbered some apparent insult, then asked questions that neither of us understood. As he became angrier, he moved closer and started poking at me. Then an old wokan, a spell-caster,

walked up and silenced him. She pulled out slime, scum, wriggling slugs, and other disgusting mush from her side pouch, stuffed them into her mouth, and began dancing.

After a while, she approached and grabbed my hair, lifting my face close to hers as she spoke. Between her repugnant breath and the spit-out fragments of the black, gooey spell components she had been masticating, her words grew clear. "Morrre strangerrrs?" she said. "Good. The sky spirrit will be pleased. But firrst, you sufferrr."

More hunters came down rope ladders from their hanging huts. A cold hand clutched at my heart when I saw one of them wearing tattered parts of Talasar's uniform. They began dancing and feasting, a few of them tossing stones or daggers at us. Some missed; some didn't. The wokan brought a board covered with slimy creatures and applied it to my bare chest. The hunters greeted my muffled cries of pain with delight. A hunter stared at Fenroth with an insane look in his white eyes, slowly licking a long, serrated blade. He brandished the knife as the rain began to fall again.

The wokan suddenly barked an order. As if bitten by a snake, the hunter with the knife jumped back. The wokan snapped orders at two other hunters, and they ran off. The fun seemed to be over for the moment. The two came back, dragging behind them the unconscious bodies of Talasar and Meryath. What they had done to them I cannot describe in this log, but the sight sent horror and pity through my mind—then anger.

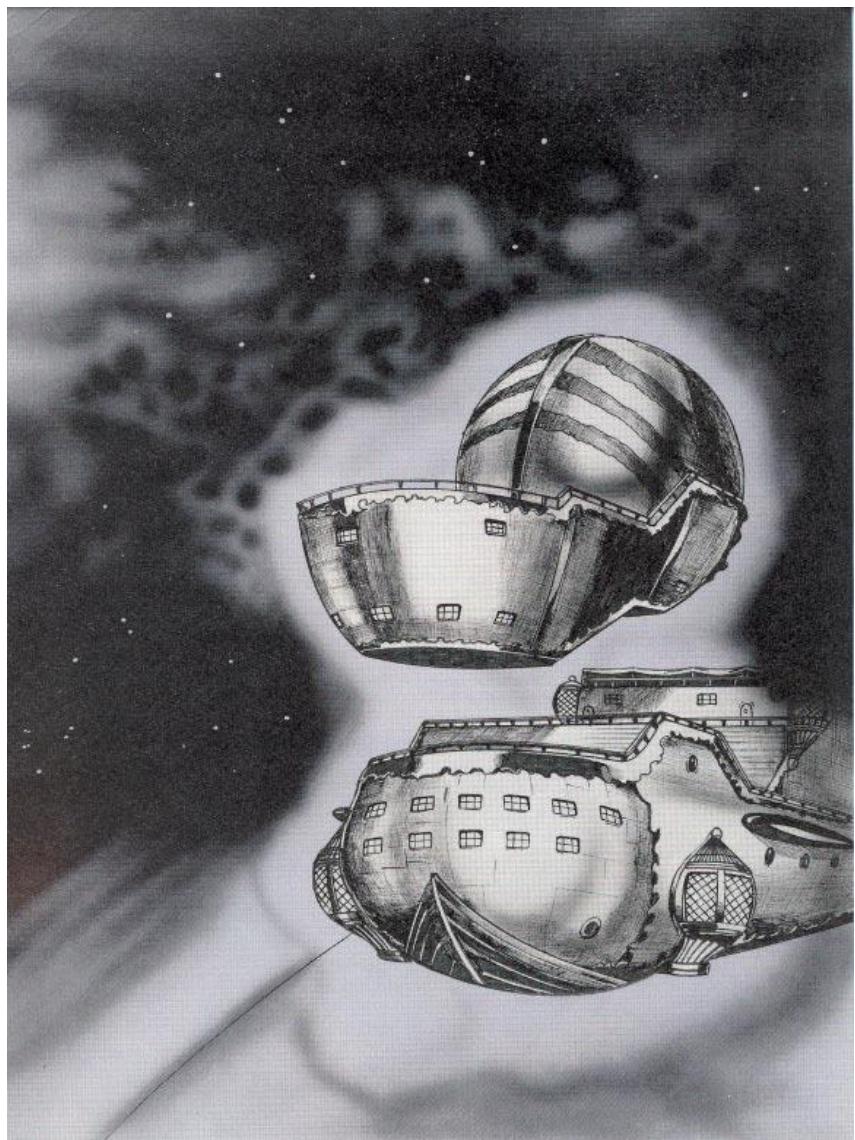
The humanoids brought all four of us to the mound. The wokan began chanting. A throbbing glow filtered from under the mound, between the wooden logs. The wokan's incantations grew louder and more insistent. When a growl rose from the mound, the wokan stopped. She came closer, holding a garrote that she slid slowly around my neck. Drummers began to pound on their drums, imitating heart beats. At first they grew quicker, then slowed as I lost consciousness. My last thought went to the *Princess Ark* and her soul. Dear Berylith, I wondered, where are you?

A log rolled off the mound, then three others. The garrote loosened as the wokan turned to watch. Suddenly, the whole top of the mound blew off in a frightening explosion of blinding light and crackling

bolts. The wokan screamed and fell to her knees. The other tribesmen dropped to the ground, prostrated before the sacred mound.

What seemed like the ghost of a great sky wyrm rose out of the mound. Meryath's strangled voice cried, "Mother?" The great beast turned toward the hunters and roared in the way the *Princess Ark* used to. So it was Berylith! But how? The hunters screamed, dropped their spears, shields, headdresses, and grigris, and fled as fast as their legs would allow. Trembling, the old wokan crawled over to us and cut us loose, revealing her black teeth in a pathetic parody of a smile. Fenroth immediately returned to his normalshape and ripped the wokan apart.

So, I turn my back for a moment, and the world falls apart! echoed a voice in my mind. *Look at you! Daughter, I thought you knew better than to meddle with the Forest People of Hakh. And Haldemar! Couldn't you wait just a*



little longer? I have been working very hard these past few days, and I needed some rest. You'll see. You'll be proud. Anyway, it's fortunate you called me, else I wouldn't be able to show you anything at all. That was a close one, wasn't it, my dear?

Berylith was using telepathy. More of the logs rolled off, revealing an incredible blue structure with windows and silver sculptures. By the beard of Pligzy Gladz! That was my skyship? In absolute horror, I recognized parts of my **Princess Ark** lost amid the massive creation. She wouldn't have dared! Or had she? I heard myself scream, "My ship! What have you done to my ship?"

Tslamir 22-Xerdon: Admiral Haaken left me in command of our new "ship" shortly after our departure from the sky wyrms' fortress. Commander Talasar is in sick bay, suffering greatly from wounds he received on Hakh, and the Admiral has retired to his quarters. The **Princess Ark** has been altered in some radical fashion. The result is an incredible vessel of a kind I have never seen before.

The large wooden hull is totally different from-and bigger than-the Haaken family's **Princess Ark**. It is also surrounded by a ghostlike aura shaped like a living sky wyrm. As a combat vessel, I must admit it seems impressive. I think the crew and the rest of the officers will enjoy this new ship. Unfortunately, the Admiral's opinion became clear when I helped him to his new quarters. Admiral Haaken seemed to cringe at everything he saw on his way down. I thought for a second he was being attacked when I shut the door behind him and I heard him scream, "My cabin! What have you done to my cabin?" He said many other things that I will not copy here. Perhaps all is not perfect, after all.

We bid our sky wyrm allies farewell and took off toward the magical gate in the sky. I was proud to command this fantastic ship and can only marvel at the way it flies. It is truly amazing.

Sind

Tslamir 23, 2000 AY: It took a day to reach the magical gate that had brought us to the sky wyrms' universe. It was a bumpy flight, and it took all the skill and prowess of a sky wyrm like Berylith to hold the course through the gate's storm. At last, we could see daylight piercing the billowing clouds at the peak of the storm. Everyone was longing for a moment of calm and rest under our golden sun. With a bang, the ship emerged through the gate into our own universe- and we nearly crashed into a desert sand dune!

The gate's exit had moved since we had entered the other universe, apparently by hundreds of miles north-northwest of our previous position. Worse yet, we showed up unexpectedly in the middle of a battle in the desert. Apparently, a smaller force had been surrounded and would have been butchered had it not been for our impromptu arrival.

I ordered Berylith to make her ghostly sky-wyrm aura turn invisible, wishing to stay out of what was clearly not our business- but no! Instead, Berylith felt this was not becoming of a true princess. She even roared to make her arrival more grandiose. Myojo held his head in embarrassment. Xerdon shrugged. And I was too numb to react.

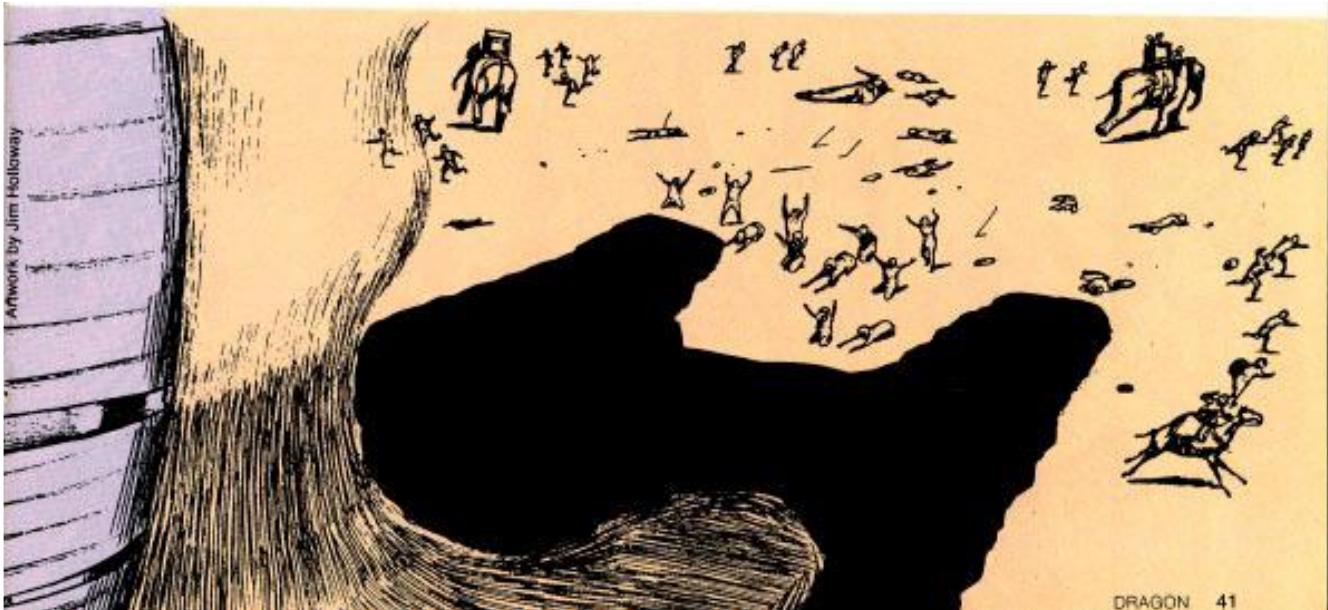
The larger army panicked immediately. Dropping scimitars, shields, and turbans, the soldiers rode off on their camels toward the southwest. As for the smaller force, its men dropped to their knees, bowing as low as they could. There was nothing else to do but make contact.

It took some convincing on my part to have Berylith go invisible. She obviously enjoyed the awe she caused and wanted to remain the heroine of the day. Finally, with the wooden ship alone being visible, I invited the leader of the defending forces to come aboard.

The man was Prince Dharjee, a polite and soft-spoken person. His father, the maharajah of Putnabad, ruler of the southern province of Sind, had sent him on a mission to King Chandra's palace in Sayr Ulan. He was to return with special orders for the king's future visit in the capital of Putnabad. A small army, sent by the rajah of Jaibul, had come close to capturing the prince. Jaibul, I learned, is a small, independent realm on the coast west of Sind, and it has been a rival of Putnabad for centuries.

Prince Dharjee was obviously very impressed with the **Princess Ark**, her magic, her workmanship, and, most of all, her decoration and style. His caravan being in such poor shape, he asked if we could transport him and his servants back to Jahore, the capital city of Putnabad. After our undue intrusion into the Kingdom of Sind, the only civilized thing to do was to accept. We picked up his camels, troops, servants, and even the caravan's royal elephant, and we headed south to Jahore, the pearl of Putnabad.

Tslamir 24: Berylith's mood was truly dreadful all morning. She complained without end about the elephant pacing from port to starboard all night, and about the camel dung all over the stern deck. She nearly ejected one of the crew for referring to that area as the "poop deck." And we were flying at a snails pace. I couldn't tell if it was because of the extra weight or Berylith's bad mood.



DRAGON 41

Talasar was still in sick bay, recovering from his misadventure on Hakh. I left Xerdon in control of the bridge and spent the remainder of the day with Prince Dharjee. He was amazed at the ship's construction, and he had no doubt that a great architect must have designed the plans of this marvel. He assured me his father "would certainly pay a thousand treasures of emeralds and rubies for the services of the divine genius who conceived such a masterpiece as the *Princess Ark*." I cringed. Berylith heard that – I knew it. Suddenly, the ship flew faster.

Tslamir 25: We reached Jahore this morning. The city is a sprawling megalopolis on the westernmost branch of the Asanda delta. High, fortified walls enclose the inner city, protecting middle and upper class quarters, merchant areas, and the maharajah's palace. Beyond the walls spread thousands of poor, overcrowded dwellings, a squalid collection of shacks and muddy passageways, occasionally divided by the main roads leading to the inner city gates and the numerous temple compounds. A shabby port occupies the southern edge of the city, allowing light ships to sail the grimy delta up to Jahore. Larger ships remain anchored in a small bay, at the mouth of the delta. A few stone bridges span the wide Asanda river within the inner city, while most of the population uses small barges to cross over.

Oddly enough, it seemed none of the main buildings were erected in a regular fashion. As we came closer, it became clear many of the onion-shaped domes were imperfectly built, the towers being crooked nearly to the point of collapse. Certainly none of the windows or doors showed any symmetry at all. This was totally unlike the usual Sind architecture.

As usual, the arrival of the *Princess Ark* caused quite a bit of agitation among the people and the guard. Prince Dharjee's appearance on one of the *levitating* life boats came as a relief to them. We were immediately whisked away to the maharajah's apartments.

Ashupta Khan, the maharajah, was very thankful to us for saving his son from the rajah of Jaibul. A great banquet was offered at the palace. Later, during the celebration, the maharajah leaned over to me and asked about the *Princess Ark*. Indeed, his son had described the vessel at length, and I could see a gleam of envy in the maharajah's eyes. I am afraid I disappointed His Highness when I mentioned the ship had been created by the magic of a creature from beyond this world, and that I was only its keeper.

The maharajah then explained what was happening in Jahore. It was believed that a great curse afflicted the city. Many people were unable to attain the greatness of skill of their fathers. Most of the upper castes were going through an inexplicable decadence and laziness, explaining the imperfect looks of the buildings in Jahore.

Last month, the Black Rajah of Jaibul visited King Chandra in Sayr Ulan, and he joked about the poor state of affairs of the "Pearl of Putnabad." This greatly irritated the king. He ordered a great palace be built there before the end of the year, or the Ashupta family would be stripped of its nobility and possessions. The maharajah's son was on his way to Sayr Ulan to obtain financial aid from the king when the Black Rajah's troops managed to intercept Prince Dharjee's caravan. Ashupta Khan was quite broke; he was totally unable to find a competent architect anywhere in Jahore as well. He was in a sticky position.

Of course, being a foreigner and the “keeper” of an incredible piece of architecture, I could not evade his interest. For my assistance he offered many things, including his prized stable, half of his harem, and even the diadem on his turban, none of which I could honestly accept. In time, though, Ashupta Khan was more than willing to offer “preferred client” status to Alphantian merchants in Jahore, with a 1% impost on port trade payable to the Haaken family. At that point, I thought that lending a hand would be a challenging enterprise. Based on this lucrative arrangement, I set forth to build a palace.

Tslamir 26: The crew was granted shore leave in Jahore after the elephant, the camels, and their owners disembarked. The scene drew a huge crowd of onlookers in the street below, as the large animals dangled from ropes underneath the *Princess*. Widespread betting took place in the streets on whether each animal would make it to the ground safely. The elephant drew record bets when one of the ropes began to give. A little *levitation* spell came in handy, and I won that bet (with 79:1 odds).

The officers discussed the palace project with me. Raman and Leo both showed great interest. Berylith was able to attend the meeting after a fashion, reading my mind as the discussion took place. She, of course, said she was skillful in matters of architecture and would gladly provide her knowledge. She also quietly requested that half of that trade impost be used to embellish the *Princess Ark* through the purchase of objects of art and other ornamental items. Once the details were worked out, Raman, Leo, and myself would disembark and conduct the construction, as per Berylith’s blueprints.

Tslamir 28: It took some time to find the proper site for the construction. It was finally decided to destroy the abandoned city library, which was threatening to collapse into the river. Unfortunately, the Sindian workers proved to be incredibly slow, so slow that I had to use the ship’s crew to accelerate the process. There was no telling how long it would take to level the older construction.

Late this night, after the moon had set behind the horizon, I felt the ship move. Berylith had decided to intervene in the construction. She moved close to the library and blasted it with her breath weapon. It created great confusion in the sleeping city, as people thought the monsoons had arrived. Berylith quickly gained altitude and remained hidden inside a solitary cloud until calm returned.

Andrumir 4: Despite the magic I used to help in the palace’s construction, I must admit that the people of Jahore are terribly slow workers. It has been very difficult

making them follow a construction plan without erring. Raman and Leo were near nervous exhaustion in their endeavors to explain the work to the Sindians and to avoid catastrophic mistakes.

Andrumir 8: I have noticed an increase in construction oversights. Raman and Leo seemed much more indolent and careless today. Worse, the crew has been acting quite sloppily on board, forgetting to clean the decks or to show up for duty. Some crewmembers did not seem to care at all. This was too much of a coincidence.

This lazy attitude struck me with its similarity to zzonga addiction, which ravaged our empire some time ago. However, I could observe none of the other symptoms normally accompanying zzonga addiction. It would take quite a bit of magic to affect an entire city— and so far I have not detected any sign of large-scale magic anywhere.

Andrumir 12: I found the source of the “curse.” The waters of the Asanda River have been poisoned with a rare alchemical substance. It is unlikely it could happen naturally, so I must admit someone has been seeking the doom of Jahore. But who? There was only one way to figure this out. Ashari and myself would leave the ship under disguise and blend in with the population. With some luck, we could unveil who was behind all this

Andrumir 14: It made sense that someone would be working upstream to contaminate the city waters. We explored the river banks just north of the Jahore and found several areas well concealed from sight. There I dropped hardened compounds of my creation that would take several days to dissolve. The solution, when mixed with the water, would immediately reveal any evidence of poison by coloring the water. We could then trace the colored solution back to the spot where the poison had been thrown into the water.

Indeed, we were soon able to trace the solution back to one of the hidden sources. Someone had dropped a sheepskin full of slow-dissolving poison into the river. It came in sufficient quantity to affect most of the population in the city for several days. We even spotted our culprit, a man on a horse. It was time to uncover the conspiracy.

We quietly followed the man back to Jahore. A bit of *invisibility* allowed us to enter his house just moments after him. There we saw him use a magical item that opened a small gate. He entered, and we followed closely.

On the other side was a palace—but not quite like the one in Jahore. It was darker and more sinister. The man walked past a corner and entered a room. Ashari tiptoed

up to the door and listened. She heard a discussion between what must have been a spy and his employer, and the sound of money changing hands. The man came back out carrying a goatskin full of poison and returned to the gate. Ashari barely had enough time to get through before the gate disappeared.

Andrumir 15-Xerdon: I fear that something has happened to the Admiral and his escort. Neither he nor First Class Navigator Ashari have returned from their foray into Jahore. I alerted His Highness, Ashupta Khan, who immediately dispatched his guards to search the city.

Andrumir 15-Haldemar (Text added later): The sun rose soon after Ashari's return to Jahore. I was able to explore the sinister palace and locate the ruler in his throne room; my spell of *invisibility* still protected me. From the visitors he met in the morning, I could deduce that he was no other than the Black Rajah of Jaibul. He was an old man, with a skin parched from age and the unforgiving sun of the Great Waste. Judging from his stance, I could not fail to recognize an experienced wizard.

The Black Rajah retired shortly after the meetings to his personal quarters, at the top of a high, narrow tower overlooking the town. There, he spent hours going through the bureaucratic paperwork that plagues so many rulers. While perusing about, I noticed antique clay tablets held together with a golden silk ribbon. The tablets bore the royal seal of Sind. While the rajah was busy elsewhere, I quietly took a few pieces of vellum and rubbed them with a bit of charcoal over the tablets in order to obtain an imprint of the ancient text. With luck, Raman could decipher the Sodian scriptures later on.

The sound of chains and men-at-arms echoed up the hallway. Soldiers were pulling a prisoner- a Pearl Islander perhaps, judging from the dark color of his skin. He was a bit small, though, with slightly narrow-lidded eyes and gracious facial features. He had a thin, neatly trimmed beard and wore a long red robe made of soft leather scales. The guards knocked at a door and while they waited, the prisoner glanced in my direction. I could have sworn he saw me, but the guards pulled him quickly into the other chamber.

Intrigued, I followed them. The rajah was there, sitting in a comfortable chair and toying with a small piece of jewelry. It looked like a replica of a small flame carved out of a topaz. He had the prisoner stripped and waved the guards out. Soon thereafter the rajah uttered a long invocation and brandished the jewel. Translucent flames began to glow on the prisoner's body. I could see the pain in his eyes, but he endured stoically. He remained

quiet and immobile while the magical flames grew and consumed his flesh. The rajah was watching intently, enjoying with a sadistic pleasure his victim's pain and agony. I realized then that the prisoner was staring into my eyes, despite my *invisibility*. It felt like he was looking through me. For a brief instant, I saw images of great battles, flying ships, death and pestilence, then a great continent sinking into stormy seas. My senses returned just as the man died.

I noticed a certain perplexity on the rajah's face. He squinted for a moment in my general direction. That would not do, so I ducked behind a curtain. The rajah quickly spoke another spell and looked around him, observing the room and listening carefully. I did not think he saw me, but he certainly suspected something. He quickly scooped up the bone cinders and the few ashes remaining where the prisoner once stood, poured them into a golden crucible, and walked out, swiftly shutting the door behind him. By the time I could safely open the door, the rajah had disappeared behind a corner or, more probably, through a secret door.

This was very strange. I had no clues as to how the prisoner could have seen me or what those visions were. Worse, I knew the rajah would use those ashes- and I suspected his intentions to be thoroughly evil. It wasn't until very late that night that I located the rajah and the ashes as well. He was in the palace dungeon, in a chamber that took all my skill to reach. I observed the rajah working at a small brazier. After a litany of incantations, he sprinkled the ashes that had been mixed with another substance. This produced swirls of acrid-smelling smoke with sparks of light. Inside, I was surprised to see the same visions that affected me in the rajah's apartments. The rajah was quickly taking notes with a quill and a piece of parchment. The same battles and cataclysms appeared as in my previous vision, up to a point when the rajah's apartments also materialized in the vision- with me standing near the curtains!

The rajah jumped to his feet and cursed. He dispersed the smoke and had the guard sound the alarm. If he had a doubt, it was now gone. He knew I was in the palace and what I looked like. I would have to be very careful in the future. The old man had many ways of finding me. It was time to skip out of the chamber. It was late, and I was getting very tired and hungry.

Andrumir 16-Xerdon: The ship has grown restless, somewhat skittish like a horse. I suspect she senses the disappearance of the Admiral. I attempted to communicate with the ship's entity but failed to obtain an answer. So far, the search by the maharajah's men yielded no sign of the admiral or Ashari. I recovered Chief Raman

and Mr. Le Nerviens, both of whom I found in an unclean condition and resting with the other construction personnel during work hours. This inexcusably lax attitude before foreign civilians is not permitted for an officer of Her Imperial Majesty's Navy and shall be stopped at once.

Andrumir 16-Haldemar (Text added later): I spent the night in a little stable. At dawn, I took a stroll down the streets. The town of Jaibul was as sinister and oppressive as its palace. This was a haven for thugs and cutthroats rivaled only by the rajahs guard, a brutal and arrogant bunch. The rajahs palace and his army's quarters were located inside an imposing citadel. A port opened directly on a small bay. There I noticed the rajahs guards were unloading another prisoner; he looked a bit like the one the rajah murdered earlier. He displayed the same, unmistakable dignity as the other. These people could be powerful seers, perhaps. I was getting horribly curious about their origins.

Aside from the unspeakable tortures and murders that had been probably taking place for some time, it was clear the rajah was up to something big. I had to return and find out, so I cast a new spell and *flew* up to the rajahs tower. There, from the window I could see the rajah sitting in front of a mirror. Instead of his reflection, the mirror revealed a man in black, wearing a hood. The rajah picked up the scroll containing his notes on the vision and stuck it through the mirror, causing strange ripples through its glassy surface. The man in black nodded, then quietly produced a pen and wrote something on the scroll before returning it. The rajah read the response- then said, in proper Alphatian, "Their destruction will be a blessing for us all. How soon, though, is the question, isn't it, my obtrusive friend?" The man in black faded away as the rajah turned toward me. "You didn't think you could fool me much longer, did you?"

Andrumir 17- Xerdon:

The ship has inexplicably broken her lines and set flight toward the southwest. I suspect she senses where the Admiral is. For lack of results from the maharajah's incompetent search of Jahore, I am allowing the *Princess Ark* to freely take us to wherever she wishes. I am cloaking the ship to avoid

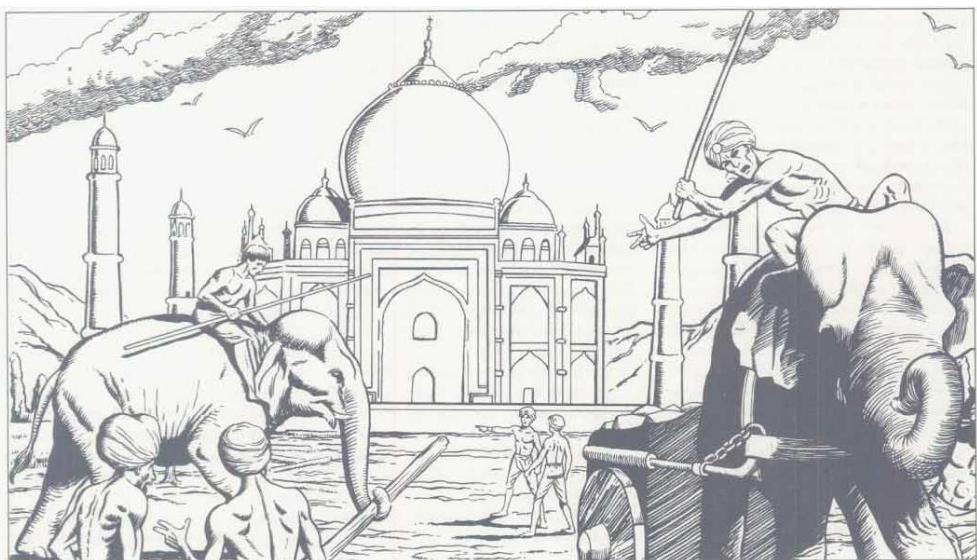
further problems with the local population.

Andrumir 17- Haldemar: I should have been more alert. No recollection of what had happened after my last encounter with the rajah came to my mind- that is to say, nothing else than a searing pain in my head. I woke up in the citadels dungeon, stripped, gagged, and shackled to the wall in a very uncomfortable position. I could not have done a better job of it myself.

The rajah showed up hours past my awakening. He came with a nasty grin and his dreaded topaz. "I didn't think you would cooperate, and as a fellow wizard I wished to spare you the commoner's fate," said he, while pointing at various instruments of torture across the cell. "The Fire Jewel is far more efficient in revealing someone's inner thoughts. And I am sure you will fully savor the refined magicks of Jaibul." The rajahs sinister laughter echoed in the dark dungeon. He began the Fire Jewel's incantation. I cringed.

Then a heavy cudgel landed on the back of the rajahs turban. He collapsed in a soundless heap. Someone stepped out of the dark. It was Ashari! The dear young woman had followed the rajah's lackey back to Jahore. Seeing that the gate had closed before me, she quickly "terminated" the river's poisoner and recovered the item he used to open the gate. By the time she had discerned its method of operation, I was already elsewhere in the rajahs palace. She had been looking for me ever since. Finally, Ashari had followed the rajah down here, and, as Glantrians would say, "Voila!" A master stroke! And she smirked, "I also, urn, accidentally dropped the rajah's poison in the citadels well." How thoughtful of her. This yeoman was due for a promotion.

After hooking the rajah to his own shackles, I was tempted to try the fiery topaz on him. After all, he, too,



had many things to tell us about. Alas, a squad of guard entered the cell unexpectedly. A prompt *reverse gravity* took care of them, except for a runty fellow in the back who ran for help. We ducked from pillar to corner for some time while men-at-arms rushed down the narrow stairwells looking for us. This was an exhilarating moment, although I had some trouble keeping pace with the nimble Ashari as this delightful game went on.

It was during this "dungeonesque escapade" that I located the prisoner I had seen in the port of Jaibul. Ashari defeated the crude lock that imprisoned him with barely two twists of her wrist. Our man bowed slightly and swiftly followed us. We could hear the rajahs hysterical holler echoing up the hallways.

It took Ashari some doing to find an exit—a filthy sewer grate in a deserted street. Something was amiss, though. It was high noon and no one was around. As we slipped down the street under the shadows of colonnades, guards suddenly poured out from every corner. We were trapped!

The rajah had recovered his senses more quickly than I anticipated. Within moments, there he was, sitting on a flying carpet and hovering above us. "You will suffer for a thousand days and thousand nights, each of you!" said he, pale and trembling with anger.

I grimly turned to my compatriots and noticed, oddly enough, a wry smile appearing on the face of the prisoner we had rescued. Enraged, the rajah raved on, "You will see your skin slowly ripped from your flesh and thrown to the dogs!" he cried.

Now the former prisoner displayed a very wide grin that infuriated the rajah even more. Perhaps he knew something I didn't. "You'll have each of your limbs ripped from your body!" spat the rajah. "You—" Suddenly the rajah jerked, his eyes growing very wide, and stopped in the middle of his speech.

"I doubt that very much, your highness!" came a voice behind him in the air. Slowly, the *Princess Ark* became visible just behind the rajah. And at her prow stood Xerdon, with his sword conspicuously jabbed into the rajahs back. The rajahs men fled at once in complete chaos. What wonderful timing.

Andrumir 18- Haldemar: With the rajah of Jaibul in our hands, I had no difficulty in retrieving my personal belongings—and the antique Sindian tablets and the strange mirror. According to Raman, the clay tablets were an old treaty between previous rulers of Sind and Jaibul. It attributed the ruler of Jaibul legal rights to the Province of Putnabad, should the Ashupta family become extinct or be stripped of its nobility due to royal discontent. The rajah of Jaibul had found a way to

discredit the Ashuptas by poisoning the people, thus causing their decadence. Jahore definitely looked like a mess. It was time to return to Jahore and finish a certain construction enterprise— and quickly so, before the king's visit.

As we veered over the port of Jaibul toward Jahore, Ramissur came up to me, holding the rajah by his collar. "Sir, what do I do with him?" Ramissur asked.

This was an unexpected problem. The rajah was too dangerous to keep aboard, and I had a hunch that our new guest, the ex-prisoner Yarani, could shed more light on what had been going on than could the rajah. I told Ramissur to do as he pleased.

Ramissur gazed at me for a moment, looked at the rajah, then shrugged and unceremoniously tossed his prisoner overboard. I suppose that sank our diplomatic ties with Jaibul for many years to come. Such is life.

Andrumir 19-Haldemar: Back to Jahore. The poison in the river has started to thin out. Already, positive results can be seen among the population. The building of the palace has resumed, and with a little magical help on my part, construction is literally progressing by leaps and



bounds. The "Raj Tahal" might be done well within the royal deadline.

I spent some time with our guest, Yarani. He claimed to be a citizen of the Yavdlom Hagiarchy, far beyond Jaibul. This was one place I'd never heard of. Yarani was a holy man, a noble of sorts. He wouldn't answer my questions regarding his uncanny ability to see *invisible* things, nor would he comment on the visions I'd had when I witnessed his compatriot's murder at the hands of the rajah. He seemed very concerned, however, and invited the *Princess Ark* to visit the Great Prophet, spiritual ruler of Yavdlom. There, he said, would be many revelations- some good, some bad.

Cyprimir 12, 2000 AY: At long last, the Raj Tahal's construction in Jahore approached completion. There was nothing left to do that the gentle people of Putnabad could not do for themselves. Talasar had finally recovered from his wounds and was back on duty at my side. With great fanfare and fireworks, we bid the maharajah farewell. At sundown, we set a southwesterly course heading for the Most Serene Divinarchy of Yavdlom. Yarani was kind enough to teach some of us the basics of the Yavdlom language.

Cyprimir 18: The Coast of Jaibul and the parched beaches of the Sind Desert proved so far to be of little interest, being an endless succession of sand dunes and rocky outcroppings crisscrossed by tribal caravans and desert thieves. At night, small raiding parties of orcs and goblins often became active, scouting caravan campsites and oases. No combat took place, however.

Surprisingly, we observed numerous merchantmen that bore Minrothad or Jaibul colors, sailing off the sun-baked coast. Their waterlines ran deep under the surface, betraying some heavy cargo, perhaps from the city state of Slagovich.

Yarani spoke of his fabled nation. It was a realm governed by prophets, and its clergy were soothsayers and seers that he described as the Great Watchers, Historians of Humanity. Their power over the people was so great that once their entire nation migrated to the Arm of the Immortals, far to the west, as a tribute to their Immortal patrons. Centuries later, a new generation returned and retook their ancient lands from the jungle and the swamp. This was a fascinating place that I wouldn't miss for the world!

Yavdlom

Cyprimir 24: It has been a few days now since we flew past the Western Thanegioth Archipelago. We had reached Thanegia Island, at the southern edge of the Serpent Peninsula. Despite omnipresent jungle and swamp on Thanegia, Yarani revealed villages and small towns hiding under a thick tropical haze. They clung precariously to the sides of steep hills or were surrounded by small patches of pasture land. These were the first settlements of the Yavdlom Divinarchy that we could see.

We reached our final destination just before sunset. There, sprawling before us, lay the Most Limpid City of Thanopolis. Yarani pointed out this was a name Minrothad explorers had given to the city. Native Yavdlom called their capital Tanakumba. It stood on a



few dozen small islands among a very complicated network of rivers, canals, and lakes that led to a chaotic delta on the city's south side. Imposing stone buildings dominated the center of each island, while wooden structures stretched out toward the river banks. On the banks, a jumble of light dwellings on bamboo stilts, tiny houseboats, and floating shacks invaded the murky city waters. Every where, crowds of people ran along pontoons and streets, rushing to fulfill their daily chores before nightfall.

The most fascinating features of Tanakumba were the clusters of huge shells sitting in the city's many lakes. These graceful edifices rose from no less than 30' to 100' up. Yarani, his chest swollen with pride, identified these as the Abodes of the Seers. Indeed, we could see hundreds of small windows on each shell, balconies cascading with colorful tropical flowers, and elegant bridges that arched between the giant shells. A ballet of sailboats took place at the water level, ferrying people and goods between the isles.

This is not to say Tanakumba had no streets, for many paved streets and a few large avenues ran through the small islands. Palm trees swayed in the evening breeze, alternating with neat rows of large potted plants along the malls where pebble mosaics in the pavement displayed colorful patterns. The important thoroughfares had massive, river-spanning bridges. The roads all converged toward the spiritual center of the Most Serene Divinarchy of Yavdlom: the Great Prophet's palace in the highest city-shell of Tanakumha. Yarani bowed deeply before this national monument.

By nightfall, the *Princess Ark* finally anchored at a large terrace of the palace. Although we noticed crowds of spectators watching from nearby islands, few of the palace's residents seemed to care about the massive *Princess Ark*. No guards were to be seen anywhere. Seeing my surprise, Yarani explained "They do not fear you. They know you." He then suggested we stay aboard until invited into the palace, which would probably happen in the morning. Yarani then left the ship, saying he had to meet relatives he knew in the palace.

The events that follow were entered into The ship's log after the officers' return to the Princess Ark

Cyprimir 25- Haldemar: At dawn and without notice, a herald of short stature entered the ceremonial deck and elbowed his way past the boltmen and crew, up to my position.

"Make way, make way, subjects of little consequence," he trumpeted. Looking around him, the fat little man then negligently waved at me and added, "Yes, yes, we knew you were coming. You, the one who seems

to matter-please come along swiftly! The Great Prophet is a busy person." By that, he apparently meant me. I was pleased to learn that I amounted to something!

I quietly followed the prickly squab to the upper levels of the palace. At last, I met the Great Prophet—Yarani! With a kind smile, he waved his disciples out and gestured me to sit on a large pouf. Small cups full of a black, steaming beverage sat on a golden tray next to some ring-shaped pastries. Heavily sweetened, the bitter drink became a delectable treat.

"Of course, you are surprised," said Yarani, between two sips. I had not spoken a word. "I did not mean to deceive you. I simply desired to enjoy a fine journey on a very fine ship without the annoying pomp and etiquette."

I couldn't believe a man of his importance would waste time in such a frivolous endeavor. But again, he smiled as I thought those very words and added, "Well, it had always been clear to me that Sésékumbo, my brother, would fall before the rajah of Jaibul. We both knew this would be the end of his path in this world. His ultimate fate was to warn you of a time yet to come — a destiny that he has fulfilled well. I came to Jaibul as his final witness."

"But, Your Grace," I began, "How could you have not used your prophetic visions to save your own brother? How could you have risked being captured yourself?"

Yarani poured himself a second cup. "Fate, you see, is the result of Immortal will. And who would I be to meddle with the wishes of Immortals? I was indeed blessed with the power of true sight, but it is wise not to use it inconsiderately. Would you want to incur the wrath of the Immortals? My own destiny is already written in the Annals of Yav, and so is yours, admiral. Our fate was to meet—here or in Jaibul, what difference does this make? You came, and you returned me here, didn't you?"

Although I admired the Great Prophet's style, I could share neither his incredible fatalism nor his blind respect for the Immortals. I am a gambler. If I can't win, I make it so that I can't lose, either, I make my own destiny—and to heck with what Immortals think! With a power like Yarani's, I could do amazing things.

The prophet chuckled softly, "Tsk, tsk. Such amusing thoughts! You'll learn however, at your own time and place. But, until then, please listen to my advice and heed Sésékumbo's vision. Great powers are growing in the dark, and you, my friend, have a place in their future. As you so succinctly put it, you will weave your own destiny. But you've yet to discover it."

Yarani would not elaborate on the subject of Sésékumbo's vision. Judging from what I saw of the vision in Jaibu, there was nothing charming about the future. I gazed at length into the prophet's eyes, but all I

felt was the burden of a mysterious and terrible fate now on my shoulders. Nations and perhaps whole empires were at stake. This much I could sense. His Grace Yarani bade me farewell, and I retired to a guest room in the palace.

Cyprimir 25—Tkilasar: Soon after the admiral disembarked, I ordered part of the crew off the ship on a 12-hour leave. Unexpectedly, this created quite a clamor among the native boatmen, who furiously competed for their share of the business, all to the amusement of the remaining crew aboard the *Princess*. Small barges flocked beneath the skyship, peddling fresh fruit, shells, flowers, ivory, up to the singular services of ephebes and maidens. But many hopeful faces among the crew turned sober at the sight of Lady Ahovombe, hands on her hips, frowning severely and saying, “Not on this ship you won’t, thank you!”

I allowed Xerdon to leave with the crew, to keep an eye on their behavior among the locals as well as to observe and enjoy this wondrous city. As for myself, I left Raman in charge of administering common duties aboard while I retired to my quarters. Thanegia’s weather was far too humid for me, which the wounds I received on Hakh reminded me. I needed to meditate on all that had happened these past weeks. Wounds taken on outer planes are always difficult to heal.

Cyprimir 25—Xerdon: The streets of Tanakumba were amazingly busy. After fending off tenacious peddlers and hordes of children, some of us managed to get past the populous mercantile street. Others of the crew remained there, spending fistfuls of Alphatian gold crowns to the joy of the native merchants. Souvenirs, trinkets, and other shiny bric-a-brac changed hands by the bagful, without even a whisper of haggling. Already some of my boltmen, wearing ridiculous feather headdresses—no doubt purchased at exorbitant prices—rode through the cheering crowd on bamboo palanquins. Fools.

Soon, I found myself walking down a narrow street between a row of large stone buildings. People there didn’t seem to mind the presence of a foreigner. I could not avoid noticing their strange similarity to elvenkind. These ebony-skinned people, although tall even by human standards, displayed graceful facial features—and, most notably, slightly pointy ears. Among the decorative patterns and colorful paintings adorning their clothes and houses, I discerned a few stylized elven patterns. Even their writing, although clearly unique to the Yavdlom culture, showed traces of elven calligraphy. There must have been a friendly elven presence among the Yavdlom many generations ago.

The hot noon sun hung high in the sky. I stopped at a tavern. Everyone became suddenly silent as I stepped in, staring at me through clouds of pipe smoke. Slowly, they turned back to their own business as I ordered.

I had merely sipped from a buffalo horn of ale when a towering man walked up to me. The white mohawk on his head made him look even taller. “Eh, mohn,” he said with easy menace. “Is no markie place for strangers. We make de tasty stew of elves hee’.”

So much for the friendly elven connection. I chose to ignore the insult and was turning away when he slowly pulled out a knife. “How much for ye pointy ears, mohn?” he asked.

Everyone was watching. He made a move toward me, and I jumped to my feet. My sword swiftly came out of its sheath—and just as quickly, knives and staves appeared among the crowd.

The sound of shattering glass broke the silence. I saw Ramissur near the counter, holding a broken bottle in one hand and a wand unsheathed in his other, and Leo, nervously fidgeting with a bizarre contraption. Luckily, they’d chosen the same tavern as I. It was not yet an even match, but better now.

The man before me smiled. “Just ye and me, thun!” A bastard sword was tossed to him from the crowd, but I could deal with that. The onlookers formed a circle, and the duel began.

Despite his large size, he was quick and accurate. His crushing strength and humming blade spelled death at every blow. It took all of my skill to fend him off. On the bright side, the man had an equally hard time trying to keep me from reaching him.

Our fight went on. Tables, pots, windows, and most everything on the shelves paid the price of our duel. In a single strike, the man smashed a support for a wooden stairway, which then collapsed under the weight of the spectators on it. This caused my opponent to laugh with a roar. He was clearly enjoying himself. The fight seemed to go on for hours.

Then, without warning, he stuck his sword into the floor and wiped his hands. “Is cool, mohn! I be done if ye be, too.” Something in his manner said he was sincere, so I carefully let down my guard. There was no point in further battle. This man was my equal in combat. He then produced two huge tobacco rolls. “Have a smoke, friend! De name be Swetanga Nyanga.”



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Nyanga lit the rolls in a candle flame as the satisfied crowd settled down again, and he handed one to me. I took one puff of the thing and knew I was in trouble. How anyone could smoke this was beyond my understanding. The smell was frightening, and the aftertaste was even worse. And soon it was making me sick.

Heedless, Nyanga roared with laughter again. "If all ye boys be half as good, ye gots me blade, mohn. Be hackin' desert raiders on de northern borders ain' no fun life. So be Tanakumba's, too."

Nyanga had potential. We could use a warrior such as he- and we could trade fighting skills, too. We discussed the pay as I grew even sicker over the nauseating smoke. The last I remembered that day was Ramissur and Leo gravely watching over me, and Nyanga laughing thunderously. I hate smoke.

Cyprimir 26- Haldemar: It wasn't long after I had left His Grace Yarani and settled down for the evening that I had a dream. I saw an ugly red mark circling the prophet's throat. He pointed at something behind me, and I woke up abruptly, just in time to catch some movement in the room. Someone was in the dark with me, holding a wire. I could barely see him in the moonlight filtering through the curtains. His intentions were plain. Without delay, I gave him a taste- a rather unpleasant one- of my closest wand. He raised his hands to protect his face at the last second, which cost him dearly. Alas, the thug's sizzling remains left little to be learned from them.

The dream bothered me. I feared for Yarani. I left quietly, suspecting the presence of other killers, and I was correct. I saw many dead people- all strangled- on my way to the prophet's quarters. There were no guards in the palace; everyone here relied on the prescience of their seers. They should have known ahead of time of any wrongdoing, yet no alarm had been sounded.

My dagger throbbed as I entered Yarani's antechamber, which confirmed my worst fears. Two masked men rushed at me from behind a large porcelain vase, brandishing daggers. Forthwith, more sizzling flesh befouled the palace's marble floor, and I pressed onward.

But I had been too slow. I noticed a shadow slipping out of Yarani's room, into a secret passage. Yarani lay next to his bed, a wire still locked around his neck. I relieved him of the deadly device. Perhaps Zdasar would be able to gain Razud's goodwill and restore Yarani to life.

Suddenly, a woman entered the room and screamed. She was one of Yarani's aides. Before I could do anything, she ran away, screaming "Murder! Assassins!"

I had more pressing things to do than to clear myself of the accusations that would inevitably follow. I entered the secret passage and pulled the door shut. I had to find out who was behind the slaying. A narrow flight of stairs spiraled down as far as I could see.

Much later, I reached an abandoned network of catacombs. Judging from the mildew-covered bones and stonework, this was an elven sanctuary. There was no time to ponder that piece of information. The gallery was partially filled with water, probably from the swamp or the city's rivers. I could hear someone moving ahead,

splashing through the water. There was no point in soiling my boots. *Flying invisible* would be a suitable way to quietly catch up with the fugitive- or, as I discovered, fugitives.

Shortly, I caught up with several masked men. They reached an exit and stepped into a canoe, pulling their masks off. I was surprised to see one of them was a native Yavdlom- a traitor, obviously someone who knew his way in the palace. The traitor snickered. "You should have seen it. The man didn't even fight. I pulled the wire and he died without a prophetic word. Peh, what a wimp!"

I was tempted to fry this happy bunch, but I needed to know more. They paddled down the river to one of the city islands, then got off at a pier that led to an elegant mansion. Soon, the thugs met in a room before a large mirror, just like the one I saw in Jaibul. I landed silently and hid near them.

Danger was close; my dagger throbbed again. A familiar dark figure appeared in the mirror. He exchanged messages with the traitor, then nodded. I was ready for the dark figure to attempt something, but the danger did not come from him. Suddenly, a dozen men burst into the room and hurled darts at the traitor and his accomplices. I found myself accidentally caught in the volley and felt a burning sting spread through my back. They were using darts with poison, the sort that paralyzes.

Helpless, I could only behold what happened next. While paralyzed, the traitor and his accomplices were coldly executed. The aggressors' leader exchanged messages with the dark figure in the mirror, bowed, and walked away. This would have been all- but, by some rotten luck, one of the men stumbled over my *invisible* body. These people knew their business, and they promptly tied me to one of the pillars. I spent the night there, unable to sleep or move.

Cyprimir 26-Talasar:

Common duties aboard were carried out as usual until dawn, when I observed a wave of boats approaching the ship. The boats were crowded with furious citizens toting pitchforks, sticks, and torches. The *Princess* herself grew nervous at the many sources of flame, and she began to pull on her lines. Something terrible must have happened during the night.

There was no sign of the admiral, Xerdon, or the crew on leave. I suspected treachery. I could not allow the mob to seize the ship; they might burn her to ashes. I ordered the *Princess* to take a position above a patch of low clouds while I went below and sought an audience with the prophet.

As I entered the palace, I met a group of armed soldiers. The palace had not been guarded earlier, and I remember thinking that these must have been called in for a crisis. I was apprehended at once and was taken to the herald who came aboard the day before. He was shaking with anger as he sputtered that several High Seers and the Great Prophet had been assassinated during the night. Worst of all, he said that the admiral had been seen strangling the prophet! Haldemar was said to have fled. I could believe none of this.

I was denied an audience with the Regent Seer, since all surviving High Seers were conferring- in a sealed room- until such time they could decide who the next Great Prophet would be. This could take days. I was detained and kept under heavy guard. I decided to wait. Razud would guide my path.

Cyprimir 26-Xerdon: Coming out of my temporary weakness during the night, I felt myself roughly carried by two rather loud drunkards. I was hanging between Ramissur and Nyanga, with Leo carrying my gear. Obviously, the two brutes got along well, with kegs of ale helping. I prepared to castigate Ramissur for so contemptuously ignoring Imperial Navy Regulations that specifically prohibited crew members from fraternizing with the natives. Unfortunately, rather than words a shameful gurgle came out, followed by some quantity of undigested substance.



"Eh, mohn," shouted Nyanga happily, "I be thinkin' ye chief woke up!"

I had no wish to expand on the subject, which was just as well as a vociferous mob came down the street at us at that moment, screaming insults and raising their fists. All four of us ended up in a prison cell, along with the remainder of the crew on leave. Soldiers came several hours later and took Nyanga away. He was subsequently returned (rather, was thrown into the cell), having obviously been beaten up. He said he had been accused of treachery and duplicity with strangers who had killed the Great Prophet. This seemed like a frame-up. We had no idea what was happening.

Soon, the soldiers came back and attempted to drag me out. I supposed it was my turn to be questioned. I feigned sickness- an easy thing, considering my condition- and the crew did the rest. The soldiers were swiftly neutralized, and the other guards surrendered quickly. After recovering our impounded equipment, Nyanga led us out. We escaped through a metal grate opening over the river, entering a forest of petrified tree trunks, supporting this part of the city. There, our group discovered the city's poor, pariahs, and criminals living on urban trash and unhealthy fish. They fled as we seized some of their canoes.

We had hoped to reach the *Princess*, but as we entered the open lake, we observed with horror the ship taking off without us! On our right, a flotilla of angry natives paddling toward the *Princess* now spotted our canoes. We turned around and headed back for the slovenly undercity. We lost our pursuers, but we ran astray as well. We ended up in a maze of tunnels the water had dug into the rock. We soon discarded the canoes and continued on foot. Mud and slime were everywhere. Perhaps we would find a way out of this stench by nightfall and leave the city. We could then signal the *Princess* from some vantage point in the jungle.

Cyprimir 27-Haldemar: "We've got the man, sir! We tied him to the pillar after he killed Swetanga Jio." Soldiers spewed into the room. I was rudely lifted from the pillar to which I had been tied since the previous day. Every bone in my body ached. The effects of the poison were wearing off, but I could move only the tips of my fingers. Spells were out of the question.

I was taken to the palace. The Great Prophet had been propped up on a dais, in a meditating position. Makeup covered the wounds on his neck. Members of his family and people close to him were quietly mourning his death. One of them was Yarani's aide, the woman who saw me in Yarani's bedchamber. "Is he the one you saw, Yaounda?" asked a soldier. She nodded. The man turned

back and hit me in the temple with the hilt of his scimitar. I lost consciousness.

Cyprimir 27-Vhlasar: At long last, an elderly seer came in. She ordered the guard out and sat next to me. "Greetings. It seems an explanation is overdue! Please accept my apology and that of my peers. We should have anticipated your mishap. None of this is your fault. You see, my predecessor knew of his imminent death. There is no bad feeling among the seers about his departure. Unfortunately, it will take our common people some time to get over the error of their ways and their pain. My predecessor was much loved by his people."

The old lady, it developed, was the Great Prophet's successor. The decision for his replacement had been made swiftly, by Yavdlom standards. "It seems an old foe of ours has found a way to harm our order," she said. "We are dangerous to him, for we know of his future.. Because of this, he desires our end. He knows of you also and will seek your demise. Beware of a man in black."

She covered her mouth and said, "Oh, but I forget- we must go now. Please come quickly!"

Cyprimir 27-Xerdon: "At last! The end of the tunnel!" Thanks to Leo, we had found a slope upward to freedom through the back side of a sliding stone panel, perhaps a secret door. I peeked, but no one was around. It seemed like a rich abode, perhaps someone's mansion. The sun had not yet dawned, so we risked a quick sortie.

Our little troop sneaked past several guards, ducking from room to room, seeking a way out. This proved a difficult task. Soon, the sun came out— and all became worse. An old servant saw us and sounded an alarm. "The assassins! The assassins are back!"

Assassins? There was no time for questions. We ran down a hallway as soldiers poured out behind us. We rushed into a room-and stumbled into a large group of mourners kneeling before the Great Prophet himself! Worse yet, a soldier was about to behead our admiral, who was prostrated at the soldier's feet. I quickly disarmed the man as guards stormed into the room. The fight was a brutal one. Native soldiers kept pouring in.

Then, suddenly, the soldiers pulled back, and the battle stopped. I ordered likewise. At the door stood Talasar and a lady seer, the soldiers kneeling before her. She somberly gauged the damage and bloodshed in the room, then sighed deeply. After much talk and explanation, the guards picked up their wounded and left the palace.

"Good," said the lady seer. "I see Swetanga Nyanga has decided to join you. Your path will be filled with excitement. This fine warrior is also known as the Bane of



Jaibul." Nyanga saluted her praise. "You must leave now," she finished, and waved us away.

Xdasar got the admiral to his feet, and soon the *Princess Ark* returned from her position above the clouds.

Cyprimir 28—Haldemar: Just before leaving Tanakumba, I paid a last visit to the ruffians who had executed Swetanga Jio—Jio the traitor, that is. But they had already vacated the house. There was no trace of the mirror nor of the thugs' bodies. It was imperative that we find out who the man in black was. Fortunately, I had a good look at the aggressors, especially their leader. My *crystal ball* would be helpful in this quest.

Our new recruit, Nyanga, the Bane of Jaibul, is a swetanga, formerly a noble with power who now remains as a knight errant of sorts. Nyanga explained that this situation was unique to the Yavdlom culture and politics. Some nobles did not always relish the idea of relinquishing their titles and possessions in the name of destiny. Jio may have betrayed the Yavdlom in response to his recent demotion to swetanga status. Jio indeed had power in the north, said Nyanga, where he commanded a fleet in charge of hunting Jaibul's slavers. Somehow, he fell into the clutches of the man in black. Perhaps he was promised power elsewhere but was ultimately paid back in kind for his evil deed. What more wicked justice than that of another murderer?

But Tanakumba was behind us. My *crystal ball* would not yield secrets about the man in black; magic protected him well from prying eyes. We would have to settle for his ruffians, and all indications pointed to Slagovich, a town to the northwest. So be it.

Slagovich

Hastmir 1, 2000 AY: I had a visit from Leo this morning. He wanted to show me some plans he was working on an elaborate series of masts, sails, and rigging that, according to him, would enable the *Princess Ark* to sail more swiftly when the wind was strong. It was an unconventional setup, however. He envisioned three pairs of masts in a V-

shaped configuration. The masts would jut out at a 45° upward angle on both sides of the hull, each bearing three sails with complicated rigging to operate them. The concept, although unorthodox, was fascinating. And any speed gain always remained an attractive prospect.

Velocity was definitely what I needed now.

I had been observing the swetanga's killers through my *crystal ball*. Once, their leader opened a scroll, the one given to him by the hooded figure in the mirror. It read, "Go to Slagovich immediately and meet Zgozod at the Black Samovar for your reward." That confirmed my suspicions. How kind of them to be so informative!

I had hoped to intercept the killers at sea, but they had a two-day head start on us, and a large water elemental propelled their boat very quickly toward the northwest—probably compliments of our dark friend in the mirror. It would take them at least two weeks to reach Slagovich, but we should be able to intercept them within four days.

There was no time for Leo's plan. The *Princess* would have been halted for days for construction material to be brought aboard. And there was no telling what Berylith's reaction would be. I had to unveil the mystery of this man in black first.

Hastmir 3: I had a strange dream last night. I saw the Imperial Palace in Sundsvall sinking into raging seas. I could not think of anything capable of causing this in Alphatia. Then the palace seemed to fly in a red sky, and my sister did not recognize me. I would have normally dismissed this nonsense, but I am afraid to admit that my visit to Tanakumba last month put some doubt in my mind about the nature of dreams. Perhaps Talasar could help.

Raman came up later that day with a scroll of spells. It held a series of enchantments that enabled recipients to speak, read, and understand foreign tongues. This wonderful discovery was obviously a must for those in our position. I ordered Raman to prepare more of these

scrolls in the future. These would be a standard element of all landing parties.

Hastmir 4: I was unfortunate enough to run into Leo on my way to the commander's deck. In an attempt to explain to me all the refinements he brought to his blueprints, the gnome had planted a small mast on the side of the ceremonial deck. He was perched dangerously at the other end, holding the loose edge of a mockup sail. Unexpectedly, a sentinel sounded the alarm in the middle of Leo's precarious lecture.

Swarms of large insects were headed toward us. The power of the boltmen came into action almost immediately; *lightning bolts* crackled and sizzled through the blue sky, while Berylith's frightening breath charred a huge gap in a swarm. Hundreds of giant red dragonflies assaulted the *Princess Ark*. The fight became even fiercer as the ship's heavy weaponry finally opened fire. The light ballistas turned dozens of the giant insects into instant chaff, while magically *webbed* creatures fell helplessly into the dark blue sea below.

Many dragonflies got through the ship's defenses, however. I caught a glimpse of crew members bravely jumping off upper decks to take a swing at low-flying dragonflies. Even the halfling cook and his stewards were out, chasing the giant insects with frying pans or butcher knives. Despite the slaughter, the insects came back for more, delivering their fiery breath whenever they could. Soon, crew, boltmen, and officers were all struggling to put out the many small fires on board.

The *Princess* suddenly began a vertiginous dive, leveling out just in time to avoid hitting the surface of the sea. There, Berylith used her last breath to cause a huge wall of water spray ahead of us, through which she flew. That put out most of the fires. By then, all the dragonflies were dead, littering the decks. It was clear these creatures had been summoned to slow us down. We were up against a very powerful person who knew how close to the killers we were. It was time to double the guard and halt the *Princess*. There was damage to repair in many places, and crew to heal.

"Ho, hum. Sir?" Leo was still hanging from his makeshift mast. "While repairs go on, could we take the opportunity to install the new masts? It can be done."

"No. Don't you dare."

"Please. It won't take more than a week, sir."

Hastmir 5: After conferring with the other officers, it was agreed we could not afford losing track of our fugitives. Xerdon and I would go ahead, while Talasar remained behind on the *Princess Ark* to oversee repairs. Talasar was then to set sail to Slagovich and wait for us to

make contact. Meanwhile, Xerdon and I would attempt to learn who was behind the slayings in Tanakumba. Raman dug up a number of references on Slagovich that helped me visualize the town through my *crystal ball*. As a guide for *teleportation* it was a bit vague, so I chose a spot above the city. We would have to fly down upon our arrival.

We were gone before the end of the day. The arrival over Slagovich was a decent one, though Xerdon almost caused a pelican to die of a heart attack. It would be days before our fugitives would show up. We would have to come up with a plan to intercept them upon their arrival and quietly follow them.

Hastmir 10: Xerdon and I posed as fortune-seeking adventurers. These seemed a common sight in Slagovich. We took a room at the Black Samovar but noticed nothing uncommon there, other than a truly dreadful cuisine. With a few days of waiting ahead of us, we went for a reconnaissance tour of Slagovich.

Slagovich was a large town built on a plateau, next to a cliff overlooking the opalescent Gulf of Hule. At the bottom of the cliff opened a large cavern mouth into which ships could sail. At the center of the town was a huge natural shaft connecting with the cavern underneath. For a very high fee, the shaft could be sealed and filled with water to bring ships up to the level of the city. A water lock then allowed the ship to enter an artificial harbor around which the town was built. There was no apparent mechanism for the water to be pumped into the shaft and maintained in the artificial port, which led me to believe the people of Slagovich controlled a gate to the plane of water.

Indeed, hydraulic mechanisms were present everywhere in Slagovich. Sleds, pulled by a network of cables, carted scores of people up and down the town's steeper hills. Drawbridges, water locks, and portcullises allowed ships to reach deep into the town to unload their goods. At least, Slagovich had wonderful engineers.

Despite a bustling merchant business and some rich nobility, it seemed the common population was rather poor. Many of the houses, especially those farthest from the port, were badly maintained. High, well-defended walls protected Slagovich, though not the slums outside the town. Town dwellings eventually gave way to farms and hilly acreage beyond. On a darker note, armed troops constantly patrolled the streets, and there was a harshly enforced curfew after sunset.

Much of the mortar and stonework there had a common reddish-brown color, much like the people. We could certainly not pretend to be natives, our skins being much too pale for this. Judging from the language and the

customs of the people, it seemed this area was populated by emigrants from the ancient Traladara era, back in the years of Halav, perhaps. Their culture evolved separately from there. Much of the region remained unclaimed, except for a few city states, like Slagovich, controlling territory in their immediate vicinities.

Hastmir 16: Day after day, Xerdon and I had spied on the central water lock, hoping to see our fugitives' boat. Today, it arrived. The men went straight to the Black Samovar. Standard procedure was followed immediately: Xerdon and I turned *invisible*, then went to observe the incoming party.

All twelve of them entered and sat in the tavern. A man in dull red armor entered sometime before sundown; as if on signal, the tavern's patrons quietly stood up and walked out. The innkeeper and his wench migrated to the kitchen. The red-armored man coldly gazed at the twelve men and tossed a pouch on their table. "Leech away, maggots!" he said with a sneer.

Four lunged to grab the pouch, pushing and shoving until their leader slammed the tabletop with the flat of his sword. "Sit back, you filth!" He poured the reward on the table, revealing a pile of bright, pink coins. With a small cloth, he picked up and gave a single coin to each of his retainers. Some received the coins with their own cloths and stored them in pouches. The others quickly placed their coins inside arm bracelets or into the recess of medallions. All this trouble for a single coin each. Odd.

The leader then returned the remaining eight coins to the pouch and dropped it into his shirt. Ominous glances went between the men and their leader. One by one, hands on hilts, the men left the tavern, never turning their backs until they were out. Only their leader and the man in the red armor remained.

"Was that you, Master Zgozod, bringing the red swarm the other day?" asked the thugs' leader. Without warning, the man in the red armor- Zgozod, I assumed- stepped forward and brutally slapped the leader across the face. The leader pulled out a dagger- but not quickly enough. Zgozod already held a sword at his throat.

"Never speak my name, ever," Zgozod said. He reached into the leader's shirt and pulled out the scroll I had seen in the *crystal ball*, then held the scroll over the flame of a candle, never taking his eyes from the leader. "Perhaps this will help you get wiser," he added when the scroll was only ashes, and he touched the leader with his sword. The leader fell to the floor, screaming. His hair turned white and wrinkles appeared on his face. Zgozod then walked out.

I looked out the window just in time to see Zgozod silently touch his forehead. He turned into a reddish

gaseous form and disappeared into the dark. This was no clerical magic, and the man wore armor no wizard would bear. I had no clue as to what kind of sorcery this was.

Hastmir 17: Nothing else happened during that night. We recovered Zgozod's retainer and brought him back to our room. He had lost consciousness after being touched by the sword and woke up only the next morning, solidly tied up. Xerdon remained *invisible* while I questioned him.

Other than his name, Pustek, he revealed nothing of interest at first. He obviously lied and made up answers during our conversation, but he turned very pale when I mentioned Zgozod's name. He came close to revealing more, but suddenly became quiet. Finally, I took his pouch of bright pink coins and threatened to keep them- and that finished him off. Whatever these coins were, they seemed quite valuable to him.

Pustek admitted his tie with Zgozod. Apparently, the latter was the commander of the Slagovich army, a ruthless and dangerous personality, second only to the prime hierarch of Slagovich. Zgozod used this thug leader's services occasionally, particularly in "spying" missions in the neighboring city states of Hojah and Zvornik. Pustek was otherwise mere riffraff from the streets of Slagovich, not really worthy of my time.

I could not yet let him go, however. I kept one of his coins and gagged him. Both Xerdon and I left for the hierarch's palace. Heavily armed troops still patrolled the streets and the walls around the city. It seemed like a city at war, or soon to be. We witnessed a number of troops rounding up younger civilians and forcing them into the city's army. Their methods were rather brutal.

An old beggar approached me at one point and discreetly opened his jacket, revealing a series of small chains, jewelry, and other trinkets. "Eh, care for the true stuff? Yeh, pure and untouched. It'll last years, good man." I figured it was all contraband- or fakes, more likely. The baubles were shining with the same hue as the bright pink coins I took from Pustek. There was definitely something odd about that pink metal. I ignored the man, and he spat in my direction.

I found a deserted street and turned *invisible*. The palace was near: a large, sinister fortress, with metal barbs, stone gargoyles, and other gloomy sculptures guarding the battlements. We decided to wait until nightfall before moving in.

The following events were entered in to the logbook in chronological order, after the return of the officers to the Princess Ark.

Hastmir 18-Haldemar: Last night was all but the quiet night we had hoped for. A fleet of ships sailed to the coast, blockading the cave's entrance and bombarding the city with flaming projectiles. Simultaneously, a land force assaulted the northern walls. Several buildings were soon in flames, and people ran through the streets in panic.

This is when Zgozod came back into the picture. He led a force of heavy knights wearing the same red armor as he, with golden tabards. The city's defenses threatened to collapse under the onslaught when Zgozod led a sortie against the aggressors. The results were simply amazing. Twenty knights charged the light infantry outside the city, trampling and slaughtering at will scores of their foes. They seemed almost invincible, literally plowing through the lightly armored men-at-arms. Nothing seemed to reach the knights. The mass of infantry retreated in disorder under a shower of arrows shot from the city walls. By the end of the battle, only three of the red knights had fallen.

We could hear the people cheering on the walls. The city of Slagovich had been attacked by a joint Zvornikian-Hojahite force, apparently a common occurrence there. So much for the friendly neighborhood!

We chose that time to sneak into the prime hierarch's fortress and find out a bit more about the ruler of Slagovich. We found him before long. The hierarch was a pale and frail-looking boy, no more than fourteen. He was watching the fight from a barred window. "How long will this go on?" he sighed. "Why can't they stay away?"

Zgozod rudely broke into the chamber, fuming. "I lost three knights in that battle. Every day you refuse to sign the charter, more of your people's blood soils the walls of Slagovich. This is hopeless. You must sign now!"

"But I don't trust him," said the young hierarch. "That priest scares me!"

Zgozod slammed the table with his fist. "You will sign, or there will be no one left to sign for!"

The argument went on a little longer, with Zgozod getting increasingly angry and arrogant. Trembling, the young hierarch huddled in a corner of his room and became totally mute. Zgozod grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him to the window. "Look! They suffer because of your foolishness!" he roared. The hierarch squirmed and dropped to the floor. Zgozod then threw him a scroll and a quill. "Sign or be damned!"

With tears in his eyes, the young hierarch scribbled his name on the scroll and fell to the floor. "At last!" barked Zgozod, and he left the room. I whispered for Xerdon to remain with the hierarch while I followed the sinister red knight.

Xerdon: The child-ruler wept until late that night. I noticed the door was locked, probably to keep the hierarch prisoner in his own quarters. Much later, I heard voices behind the door. The two guards and one of the red knights burst in, swords unsheathed. I caught the gleam of murder in their eyes.

I decided to intervene. The two guards died before they realized what happened. The knight was another affair. His eyes turned totally red, as if flames consumed him inside. Each time I struck a blow, it seemed the knight blurred out of harm's way, and a red haze flared up around him. Only once did I manage to corner him and get a solid hit. This would have split wide open any other armor. But this red metal proved more resilient than I thought. My blade found his flesh and consumed with delectation the knight's vital energy. Both horribly surprised and in pain, the knight finally retreated and called for the guard.

The hierarch had awakened and had seen me fight the knight. He was petrified by fear. I had to act fast, since I could already hear guards rushing up the stairs. I knocked the child-ruler out and discharged my wand of *lightning bolts* into the narrow hallway. While the bolt caused horrible damage to the crowd of men-at-arms, I retreated through another stairway with the child-ruler on my shoulder. With luck and the help of darkness, I reached the palace walls. I was forced to dispatch another guard at a postern before I could exit into the city. The trip back to the Black Samovar was a treacherous one. It seemed the entire city garrison was on the march. But I fooled them easily in the dark and safely reached the Black Samovar. No one saw me.

There, I found Pustek dead. His skin was the color of chalk, and his face displayed utter horror. Nothing was missing. He bore no wound, and I had no clue as to his death. I decided to dispose of the cadaver and await the admirals return.

Haldemar: Just past midnight, Zgozod reached his knights. He said to one that the hierarch had signed. The henchman picked up his sword and walked out. "Are they still at Grabana?" Zgozod asked another, who responded with a nod. Zgozod then declared, "Fine. Let us march! I want his uncle's head in a bag of salt."

And, indeed, they marched. In the middle of the night, Zgozod and his knights mustered the city's troops and moved toward the north. Just before sunrise, they reached a ridge overlooking the camp of the Zvornik forces. The brutal onslaught that followed was worthy of the most bloodthirsty barbarians. The massive Zvornik infantry was caught unprepared and was inexorably, systematically butchered. Without mercy, fleeing troops

and yielding knights alike were slaughtered. Only tattered and burning remains of their banners stood in the morning breeze. Clearly, Zgozod had many more troops than he had led the hierarch to believe.

A knight dragged an older warrior behind his destrier, and tossed him at Zgozod's feet. With a wicked smile, Zgozod said, "Good. The pleasure of beheading you, Stavro, will be all mine! Calling upon Zvornik to save your royal nephew was a pathetic move, old fool. And now you die."

But I grew tired of this knight's arrogance. He reminded me too much of the Heldannic Herr Rolf. Still invisible, I approached and cast a dimension door at the old warrior. He reappeared in the safety of thick brush, a little over 300' away. Despite his astonishment, the old warrior kept quiet and went his way, probably thanking the Immortals for their merciful intervention. Zgozod was not pleased. He cursed and rode back to Slagovich. I spent the rest of the day searching for Stavro.

Xerdon: With difficulty, I reassured the child-ruler and explained who I was and what had happened. The child-ruler called himself Miosz II of Slagovich. Zgozod was his "servitor," said he. He had Miosz confined to his quarters for his own security ever since his uncle disappeared, fearing someone would make an attempt on his life, too. Miosz said the charter was intended to provide the Hagiarchy of Hule with some political concessions over Slagovich, in exchange for protection. Soon after Miosz's uncle disappeared, the rival city states of Zvornik and Hojah allied and marched against Slagovich. Zgozod accused them of killing the uncle, and strongly suggested that Miosz sign the charter to defeat them. Miosz felt uneasy signing any such document without his uncle's advice. But Zgozod had apparently found a way to "influence" Miosz at last. It took some time to explain to Miosz that he was being manipulated and that his life still was in great danger.

The noise of heavy boots and metal interrupted our conversation. Slagovich men-at-arms were after us. As we left through the window, I saw the innkeeper down in the street, pulling Pustek's body out of the barrel where I had concealed him. A sergeant-at-arms was watching, hands on his hips. The innkeeper must have seen me and alerted the city watch.

We lost our pursuers after a long chase across the rooftops of Slagovich. Miosz then said he knew someone who would help. It was the old general of the army, whom Zgozod replaced a few years ago. He had been accused of treachery and made to work in the mines.

There was no apparent way to enter the heavily guarded mine. Miosz then thought of setting fire to the

smelting works to create a diversion. I am afraid I left a trail of dead guards behind us, despite the diversion, but finally we made it into the mine's gloomy galleries.

An eerie red glow illuminated the galleries. I had thought these were gold mines, but Miosz said they produced *cinnabryl*, some metal even more precious than gold. He said it was the source of Slagovich's wealth. He did not reveal more however. I quietly pocketed a small chunk of the ore for later study. It looked a bit like Pustek's bright pink coins.

Hours later, we located a man by the name of Enver, the one whom Miosz sought. Once out of his cell, Enver promptly freed another 12 men and women from their chains. They called themselves the Knights of Halav- a brotherhood obviously persecuted by Zgozod. Their order was almost extinct in Slagovich. Our arrival offered them a chance to restore justice at last. Enver directed us to a passage that ultimately led to the palace. His plan was to return Miosz to his throne and accuse Zgozod of treachery. By law, he could still challenge the red knight to a duel.

Guards poured in the instant we entered the throne room. A number of petty nobles followed in, with rather perplexed and annoyed expressions on their faces. The unarmored Knights of Halav bravely formed a wall before their child-ruler, while Miosz ordered the troops out. Zgozod stepped forward, followed by a man in a long white robe- perhaps a priest. The latter said, with a smile, "I dare say, young man, you seem to be mistaken. You are in no position to give orders, for this land is now part of the Great Hule. You should know. You did sign the Charter of Protection!"

"It was signed under threat," Miosz answered, "and for this, I repudiate the agreement!"

"Now, now. Surely you don't think anyone would believe this, young man?" said the priest. "No one among Slagovich's rightful nobility would attest to this! And as you can see, they are all here to witnesses that justice and order be upheld. Now, please, step down. And Lord Zgozod, would you kindly remove these ridiculous wretches from my presence."

Haldemar: I caught up with Stavro eventually and introduced myself. Stavro was the young hierarch's uncle. Zgozod had managed to separate him from his nephew in a conspiracy that could ultimately force Slagovich to become a protectorate of the Hagiarchy of Hule. Stavro opposed Zgozod's growing influence at the court and was nearly killed by Zgozod's men. He was forced to flee. Since then, he had attempted to retake Slagovich with the help of the city states of Hojah and Zvornik, who detested

any Hulean hegemony in the region even more than they hated Slagovich's odious merchant wealth.

From what I knew of Zgozod, I strongly suspected him to have shady ties with Hule- so it was very likely that Hule stood behind the murders in Jaibul and Tanakumba. And now this was happening here. I knew I was getting close to something very big. The only thing left to do was to find Xerdon and the hierarch. Avoiding the many Slagovich search parties that were after Stavro proved a dangerous exercise. All the trails were heavily patrolled.

As we approached the city later that night, we discovered an entire city quarter in flames. Stavro identified it as the mines' smelting works. The fire had spread to many houses nearby. This offered us a perfect opportunity to enter the city, as the night watch was too busy containing the blaze. Soon we crept into the palace through a secret passage Stavro knew about .

It lead to a small balcony in the throne room. It seemed we stepped right into another hot situation. Xerdon was standing next to the young hierarch, along with a dozen half-naked and hirsute people. They were surrounded by Slagovich men-at-arms under Zgozod's command. A man in white robes accompanied him. After hearing what the white-robed man said, Stavro addressed him from our vantage point. "I believe him, Your Grace, as a rightful noble of Slagovich. I also have knowledge of Zgozod's attempt to kill me and his false accusations against Lord Enver! I, Count of Bistr, Hetman of the Knights of Halav, speak against Zgozod's treachery!" For several long seconds, his words hung in the air. We waited for their result.

"Kill him!" roared Zgozod. The troops hesitated. The nobles pulled out their swords, but they looked away from Stavro and instead eyed Zgozod- albeit with considerable nervousness. It was obvious that the tide had turned. Zgozod must have made himself very unpopular with his own troops.

Suddenly, the white-robed priest raised a hand. He looked like a man who has seen his most cherished plans go up in smoke. "There will be no need for violence," he said. Giving Zgozod a burning gaze of blame, he added, "Clearly, I can now see treachery at work." The man then uttered a word of recall and vanished.

"You haven't won yet!" snarled Zgozod. A red blur surrounded him, and he disappeared as well. His henchmen, abandoned and surrounded,

dropped their swords and kneeled. The Knights of Halav cheered and placed the young hierarch back on the throne. Perhaps peace and justice would prevail, but nothing was sure with Zgozod at large.

Hastmir 24- Haldemar: At last, the familiar shape of the *Princess Ark* materialized in the sky. Familiar? Not quite. It dawned on me that something unexpected had happened. Huge sails had grown on the sides and bottom of the skyship- the handiwork of Leo. I should have known.

Hule

Hastmir 25, 2000 AY: This evening, I could hear the hull and the new masts creak faintly with the ship's slow pitch. The wide sails occasionally fluttered in the wind, the sound sharing the darkness with only the night bell. The crew was still learning to work the rigging, but Berylith nevertheless showed satisfaction with her new sails, like a bird with new wings. She enjoyed the sweet feeling of wind filling her sails, and she had maintained a good pace since our departure from Slagovich.

I could not get to sleep. The picture of the man in black behind the mirror haunted me. I got up, dressed and walked down to the laboratory, where I examined the strange mirror I had taken from the Rajah of Jaibul. I could push small objects through its glassy surface to the other side-wherever that was. I could not see what lay beyond. Only parchment or papyrus could pass, but I was careful not to let any paper fall completely through. Wooden, metallic, and mineral objects, as well as living flesh, would not go through, for the mirror felt cold and solid to my hand. Neither could air, water, or the flame of a candle get through.

Magic did get through, but not all magic. Some spells related to vision or detection could sometimes get through the mirror. By chance, a *wizard eye* paired with a spell of *infravision* made it through. It revealed an unlit crypt, a



scriptorium with many books, scrolls, and maps. One map displayed the familiar contour of the Great Waste desert. On it, little flags were pinned west of Sind, others very close to Slagovich. Their symbols looked orcish or goblinoid in style. These could have been Hulean-controlled forces.

Then I saw a dark veil on the scriptorium's floor next to the mirror. I realized in a moment that it was a covering for the mirror. Perhaps it had slipped off when one of the pieces of paper I had poked through disturbed it. I was lucky, for otherwise the *wizard eye* would not have functioned at all. I could not explore further since the scriptorium's door was closed, but at least I could now spy on that room. If another *wizard eye* could not succeed, my *crystal ball* would. At last, I had found a weakness in the dark figure's defenses and had even learned one useful thing: ***Keep my mirror covered.*** As the sun began to filter through the curtains, I dropped a black velvet cloth of my own over my mirror (fixing it carefully in place) and left.

Hastmir 26: At sunrise, we had an unexpected encounter. Just past the city of Raska, a small man-o-war descended from the clouds and veered toward the northwest. A flying warship was already reason enough to pay attention, but her banner was even more disturbing: a black lion over a white field. She was a Heldannic Prowler. And I wanted to know why she was here.

I had general quarters sounded immediately. We were at her stern, hiding in the rising sun; her watch was either sleeping or blinded. We got close enough for a warning shot. The light ballistas at the bow quickly shredded the Heldanners' main sail. Despite the surprise, her crew reacted swiftly and competently, returning a volley of arrows in little time. A blinding ray followed, punching a hole into the side of the *Princess Ark*. The wood crumpled and withered away where the ray had hit, causing Berylith to roar in pain. Berylith then responded with a devastating bolt of her own that blew off a large part of the Prowler's hull. The Prowler careened violently, causing topside crew to fall off screaming in space. Oil spilled over the deck and caught fire, spreading chaos aboard. Almost instantly, the Prowler struck her colors as she began to list severely and lose altitude. Alas, I failed to calm Berylith, and she roared again. With horror, I saw the surrendering vessel break up and crash into the sea.

Infamy! Shame! Even against Heldanners, there were certain rules of engagement by which all respectful commanders abided. Berylith felt my anger and ceased further attacks. We came as close as we could and rescued what little was left of the Prowler's crew. The captain had drowned, along with many of his officers. The few I could

question knew only of their next stop, a port called Boyâzka in southern Hule. They could not unveil the reason of their journey this far away from home. Rats.

Hastmir 27: Boyâzka was in sight early in the morning. Talasar activated the ship's invisibility while I convinced Berylith to fade away. For once, she did not argue. Talasar and I landed, while the *Princess* took position above the town. Xerdon remained on board. He looked pale, and Talasar ordered him to stay.

Boyâzka was a mean-looking little town. Decrepit and filthy, it harbored no more than two dozen ships. A handful of merchantmen flew Zvornikian or Hojahite banners. Many others displayed unknown flags that Nyanga said belonged to a series of shady coastal realms southwest of Hule. Among them were a number of heavily armed warships. Perhaps half of the ships mooring at the docks were Hulean, but these were old, rotting merchant or fishing vessels, barely fit for navigation. Hule could hardly qualify as a naval power in these waters; any of the regional city states fared better in that respect.

The people bore the same reddish skin as those in Slagovich, and they seemed just as poor. We learned that this territory was part of the Dervishy of Uzümir. The High Dervish of Uzümir himself sometimes resided at a small temple in downtown Boyâzka, a meridional retreat of sorts. Talasar and I found the temple and posed as Heldannic officers who had survived an unfortunate shipwreck.

Soon enough, a cloistress came trotting to us. "For Hosadu's sake, be quiet! No one is to know of your arrival. Follow me." The elderly lady brought us to our quarters and explained that her superior, the High Dervish, had not yet returned. He was up north, meeting with the Most Holy One.

Both of us scouted the temple during the night. We found the dervish's personal quarters and browsed about, looking for clues on the Heldannic presence. Among his papers was a message from the "Master," addressed to the High Dervish of Uzümir. It ordered him to escort the Heldannic envoys to Darkwood; their ship was to remain in Boyâzka until their return. Obviously, the Heldannic Order was conspiring with that "Master." By the same token, this made the "Master" the Most Holy One, Ruler of Hule.

Hastmir 28: The cloistress came back in the morning. She said her superior, His Eminence Ismet Atadervis, the High Dervish, could see us. She brought us to a mirror in an alcove of the temple's crypt. It was nearly identical to the mirror I took from the Rajah of

Jaibul, but perhaps larger. This one, however, allowed passage. It was a magical gate that led to a chamber in a much larger temple—somewhere north, judging from the cooler weather. Outside the windows spread a dark forest everywhere we looked. The temple itself looked more like a fortified city, with large avenues, smaller temples, huge statues, schools, and sprawling monastic quarters.

A man walked in with a broad smile on his face. “Welcome to Hule! I wished to see my Brother Knights before your meeting with . . .” He froze in the middle of his sentence, and we stared at him in shock as well. It was Zgozod, the “charming” warrior from Slagovich.

“You!” he cried. “What the—” Talasar’s hammer landed on his head before he uttered another word. We promptly tied him, gagged him, and hooked him up to the highest point of the chamber’s ceiling—and, for good measure, cast an *invisibility* spell on the scoundrel. We could always use him at some other time, perhaps.

A eunuch finally came in and led us to the cluttered office of the High Dervish of Uzümir. Another reunion—he was the man in white robes who had appeared at the court of Slagovich with Zgozod. My heart froze in my chest when I recognized him; unlike Zgozod, he could cast spells. Ismet did not seem to react, however. Perhaps I had stood in the dark behind Stavro when I first saw Ismet, so he could not recognize me. The thought of facing him was still unnerving.

Addressing Talasar with a smile, Ismet said, “Please enter. General Strohm, I presume?” Talasar clicked his heels in a perfect imitation of the Heldannic salute. With a slight bow of the head to me, Ismet added, “Your Grace Urqvart, my respects. We are so sorry of the delay on the Slagovich affair. We assure you that it is only a temporary setback, and soon the fortress shall be yours. Meanwhile, you are more than welcome to use our ports of Boyazka and Yenigaz.”

Talasar cleared his throat. “Ach ja. But your ports need major work, Your Eminenz! Silt threatens to block the main stream, and the state of repair of the docks is a disgrace. And we expected to control Slagovich by now!” I thought for a moment he was overdoing it, but I understood what he was trying to do.

“Yes, yes, of course, general.” Ismet was clearly embarrassed at Talasar’s rebuke. “I shall obtain new funds to begin improvements right away. Our forces are standing by in the desert east of Slagovich. If need be, we could overrun their puny army.”

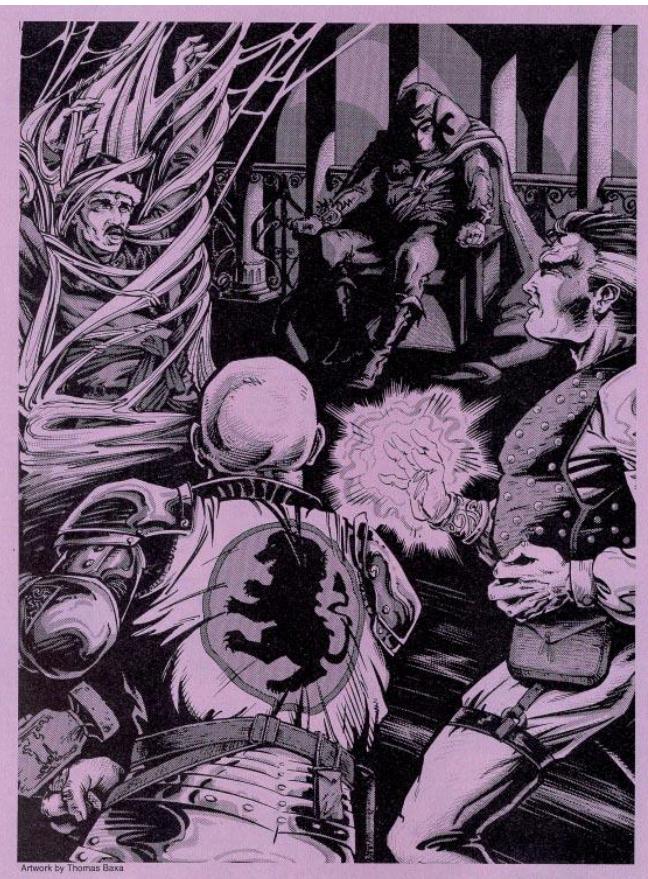
I intervened. “Well, there will be no need for this. I am sure that you have the situation well in hand. Now, if we could discuss what we came for. It is a long way back to Freiburg.”

Reassured, Ismet agreed. He led us to a large map on the wall. With a wink, he said, “We bought this wonderful trail map from the library of Rufus Omnibus in Thyatis. Amazing what these Thyatians can do with a piece of parchment, isn’t it?” With a wide gesture across the eastern portion of the map, he added, “Soon, we shall share all of this! As agreed, all coastal areas on the Western Sea of Dawn will belong to the Heldannic Order, and we shall keep the coastal kingdoms from Sind to the Five Shires! Together, we shall smash the Thyatian Empire!”

I nearly choked on that one. “Have you made plans for a possible Alphatian intervention? For this to succeed, we will need major support against their powerful magic.”

“Fear nothing. The Glantrian Council is unwittingly working for us. It is in their power to foment major unrest in metropolitan Alphatia, possibly destroying their main skyfleet and perhaps even assassinating Eriadna the Wise, the hag herself. This should delay the Alphatians long enough for us to reach our goals. Your Knights will have to do the rest.”

“Naturally.” Our recently departed friend Yarani did not jest when he had talked about dark plans. And I was right in the middle of them. I just hoped our masquerade would last long enough for us to ruin these plans.



I thought for a moment. "But we will need Slagovich now."

"We have already stockpiled enough depleted red steel to outfit several of your armies. We could ship these right now at our own cost, provided... that you relinquish your claim on Slagovich's port and its mines." Hurriedly, he added, "This would save time in both our plans."

I seized the opportunity at once. I had no doubt we could sink whatever Hule put to sea, thereby denying the Heldannic Order access to the red steel (some superior alloy, probably). At least, it could ruin their plans for some time. "Of course. I came to negotiate this alternative. We want the metal now. Do you have a sample here?"

The dervish sighed in relief and gave me a red, glistening short sword from a shelf. "'Very well, then,'" he said. "Let's sign the treaty now." After scribbling several more lines on a stack of scrolls, Ismet rang a small gong. The eunuch came back. Ismet murmured a few words to the man, and the eunuch ran off with the scrolls. Free to relax, our host offered us baklava and some of that black beverage I once had with Yarani. This version was much worse, though, almost syrupy with black mud at the bottom of the cup. The eunuch returned and whispered in Ismet's ear. "The Master waits," our host declared, rising.

We left the room and entered another chamber. There sat- the man in black from the mirror! Damn!

"Impossstorss!" he hissed- and disappeared before our eyes. If Ismet did not recognize me, the Master made no such mistake. The eunuch shrieked and fled. Ismet followed, but I intercepted him with a *web*. Talasar knocked him out promptly and recovered his scrolls.

We had to leave at once. Already we could hear ominous gongs echoing in the cavernous hallways. I had barely enough time to cast a *travel* spell before hordes of fierce janissaries poured into the chamber. I took both Talasar and the unconscious dervish with me as I returned to the *Princess Ark*.

Eimir 1: I ordered a course to the southwest after dropping the Heldanners off in the wilderness. Hule was a wee bit risky for us now. Talasar used his magical scroll to send a long message to his temple in Starpoint. He requested the message be delivered at once to Her Imperial Majesty. Starpoint acknowledged a few hours later and said we could trust the Temple of Razud. As for myself, I *teleported* a message to the Maharajah of Putnabad, warning him of a possible invasion from the Great Waste.

Once done with this, I returned to my quarters and observed the crypt through my *crystal ball*. By chance, I saw the man in black, the Master, angrily pulling flags off

his maps. I guessed that he would pull back his forces for some time, thus removing any proof of the conspiracy. I hoped Her Imperial Majesty would soon unveil what Glantrian treachery menaced our beloved Alphatia. The stakes were dreadfully high.

Then there was this red steel, which I examined. It had to have come from the mines in Slagovich. It was a mighty metal, hard like true steel yet light like wood. I had a hunch the nations to the southwest held more clues to that fancy metal.

Talasar soon came back with news of Ismet. He was found dead in the brig, apparently from the same causes that did for the ruffian Pustek at the Black Samovar. Talasar tried reaching the man's soul, but failed. Either something held on to it very tightly, or it no longer was in existence. Both of these alternatives sent a chill through my spine. A nasty business this Master was in. . . .

Eimir 5, AY 2000- Raman: after the admiral's visit to Hule, it was decided to halt our voyage for a few days. Xerdon has been feeling weak recently. Haldemar and Talasar took him down to a small deserted island for some rest and recreation.

From my vantage point far above them, I could see the officers and several boltmen enjoying their time in an idyllic cove. Xerdon was resting under a silk tent, sipping



through a straw one of Talasar's secret concoctions that he had carried with him from the ship. It must have been a new formula, for I don't recall any previous drink that required the presence of a pineapple slice, nor tiny Ochalean umbrellas stuck into cherries. Talasar spent his time demonstrating roast pig recipes from his homeland to the crew. I couldn't see Haldemar anywhere, however. I had thought he was swimming, but it must have been someone else. I did spy a boltman courageously standing on a flat piece of wood, riding on top of a large wave. Or was that indeed the admiral? My eyesight is not what it once was.

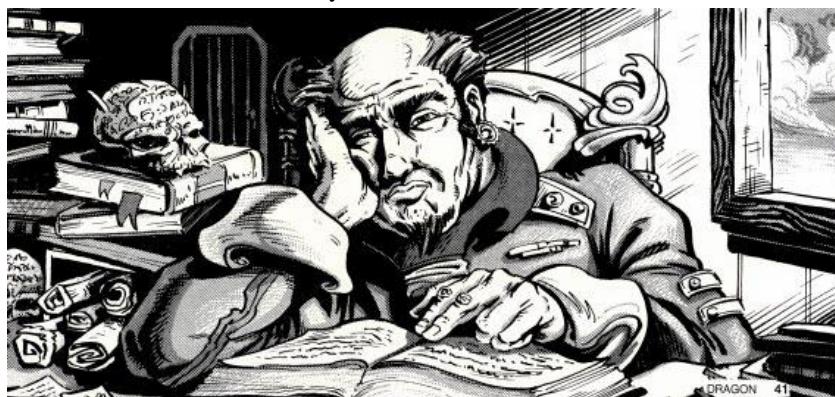
I sighed and returned to my duties. I had been asked to gather information on Hule and get it ready before the crew's return from R&R. I suppose everyone is entitled to a vacation once in a while. Children . . .

Savage Baronies

Eimir 7, AY 2000- Raman, from a later account:

After many hours of study, I came to the end of a large, black, leather-bound tome on the origins of Hule. It had unveiled many ties between the incredible age of the Hulean hero of legend, Hosadus, and the discovery of cinnabar. Perhaps his inhuman age was no holy gift, but rather the result of cinnabar usage. The so-called Immortal's favor could have been a lie as well. But then, there was still no clue as to Hosadus's ultimate fate, nor any apparent link with today's Master of Hule. It could be, too, that Hosadus had become undead.

A loud, cavernous snore pulled me from my thoughts. It was Nyanga. He had escorted me to this library in a town called Porto Preto, a nest of sea-going riff-raff. His Highness the admiral had judged the place somewhat risqué for the likes of me, and he had ordered me to rub red makeup over my face and hands before landing. The admiral also gave me several coins of the shiny pink metal from Slagovich, just in case. Fortunately, the majority of the population was of distant Yavdlom descent- not that they were as well educated and



well behaved as their mighty southern cousins, mind you. Anyhow, Nyanga fit in very well.

Porto Preto's library qualified more as a grossly mismanaged bric-a-brac of literature, probably booty plundered from hapless merchantmen. Indeed, there were volumes of material foreign from this rugged barony. Of course, this was obviously of no interest to Nyanga.

I was turning back to my studies when I noticed a small, slimy, and nasty looking creature crawling up Nyanga's leg. It looked like a tiny red man, gnarled and warty, perhaps some evil mandragora. Then I noticed one on Nyanga's shoulder, sucking at his jugular vein, and yet another two examining the contents of his pouch. I could not help gasping at the sight.

Nyanga woke up. The man-things trotted away with his pouch, chittering and giggling. The tall black man jumped to his feet and ran after them. With horror, I saw him swing his giant sword at the little creatures, wildly slashing though stacks of moldy scrolls and carelessly crushing tables, shelves, and other furniture. Soon, Nyanga ran down the stairs, cursing and roaring at his tiny tormentors.

Damp, stuffy, and dark, this remote crypt of the library was no reassuring place. A chill ran down my spine at the thought of staying here alone. I lit another three candles to chase away any suspicious shadow and evil spirits. That's when I saw her: a frail maiden with a pale white face, long black hair with pearls, and a sad

look in her eyes. Her beauty almost made me forget she was not of this world, for I could still see rows of books through her translucent body. I dropped my candelabrum in surprise, but she raised her hands in a gesture of friendship,

"Fear not, noble sage. I wish you no harm. Please listen to my plight, for I have sought eternal rest so long."

I could not take my eyes off the ghostly maiden. I was too shocked to answer. "You

bear the key to my freedom," she went on. "I beg you to help me end my torment."

After further conversation, I learned that she was referring to the pink coins with which the admiral had entrusted me. That seemed like very little wealth to offer in exchange for such a deed as freeing her, but she was adamant. "I am fading away into limbo," she whispered at last, "but only you can save me. Come at the Tower of Mercy and seek my grave at the chapel. Please come. On my knees, I implore you." She then vanished into the dark.

My heart was pounding in my chest. Her words echoed endlessly in my mind. I had to free my own self from an overbearing sense of grief and guilt. I had no choice but leave at once on a quest to save the maiden in distress. How quaint.

Eimir 8—Haldemar: Nyanga and Raman had been missing most of the night until the warrior appeared, alone, just before sunrise. His report to me: "De sage be readin' all day when de little mohn steal me pouch. Eh mohn, I say, give back me pouch. He run away! I be catchin' de little mohn, and then—poof—he go away! Tis' evil magic, mohn. Someone play de trick illusion to keep me away. When I be back, ye sage be gone. I be searchin' de crypt, I be searchin' de street. He be nowhere, mohn."

It could be that Raman had been kidnapped. But why? Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea giving him these coins. I was tempted to use the crystal ball to locate Raman, but he was wearing common garb, not his uniform robes. I could not recall any familiar object that the crystal ball could focus on. In addition to this, Xerdon was showing no sign of improvement from his strange illness, I left Talasar in charge of the *Princess Ark* and left with Nyanga to investigate Raman's disappearance.

Eimir 8—Raman, from a later account: It took most of this day to locate the Tower of Mercy. I learned from three drunken miners at a tavern that it stood on the northern border, on the trail north of Porto Preto. It was a fortified guard post, the last civilized spot before the Red Lands. Beyond it lay a desert filled with monsters, but also a haven for miners. In the evening, the three drunkards were to leave toward their promised land. Posing as a poet in search of inspiration, I decided to ride with them up to the tower on one of their shabby mules.



Eimir 9—Talasar, from a later account: A band of thieves triggered the ship's magical wards last night, several hours after the admiral's departure. They left promptly as the crew investigated, but not before causing great harm to Xerdon. Somehow, they managed to enter sick bay and stab Xerdon several times in his sleep, nearly killing him. By chance, they did not slit his throat altogether. With Razud's will, I healed the Chief of the Guard.

Although still weak from his unknown illness, Xerdon mentioned a pendant he had that the thieves ripped away. It did not seem to have much value at all, though. It was a small net in which he used to keep small objects. It held a piece of red metal he found in the mine under Slagovich. I examined his chest, and I noticed a small red patch on his skin where the rock had rubbed. The thieves took nothing else, except a few items of little value and some petty cash.

The rest of the day was uneventful until later in the evening. I caught Ramissur preparing to leave on one of the lifeboats without permission. He was drunk. He seemed somewhat embarrassed and admitted he had decided to seek out the chief's assailants and settle accounts with them. Although I would not condone his inebriated state or his intended use of violence as a way of gaining retribution, I authorized him to go on. I needed to find out why thieves wanted that piece of ore and how they managed to learn about its existence and the location of the *Princess Ark*. As tempted as I was to join him, I was the last able officer on board and thus had to remain. One condition for Ramissur's nocturnal escapade was that he was entirely on his own, and that he had to return before the end of the next day. Otherwise, I would be obligated to condemn him for his lack of discipline.

Eimir 9—Haldemar: In the evening, after a day of scouring the city without success, we returned to the library. At the sight of Nyanga, the old shrew who kept the library went into a frenzy. A crowd of shady-looking

fellows came out to observe the scene. The screeching librarian demanded payment for the damage Nyanga had inflicted. There was no point in further discussion, as we had other business to attend. I stared at Nyanga.

Reluctantly, he pulled out his pouch and tossed a coin at the howling hag. She stopped. She pondered. And shook her head.

There went another coin. Nope.

There went more, followed soon by the whole pouch. To no avail.

This should have covered whatever damage had been done to the shabby establishment. The crowd grew a bit restless. So there went my pouch too. But the truculent termagant then pointed at my cloak and my boots. Now that was enough! I nodded at an already fuming Nyanga, who dove head first into the vociferous crowd. The cantankerous crone jumped savagely on his back while I shot a few warning *lightning bolts*. The mob vanished, leaving the annoying nag before Nyanga's humming blade.

It's amazing how fast she spoke—and for free, too. It seemed our lad Raman had been seen with miners heading north toward the desert. Why? She couldn't tell. But perhaps we could catch up. We soon bought two fast steeds and galloped up the miners' trail.

Eimir 10—Ramissur from a later account: Upon my arrival in Porto Preto, I went to one of the shadier taverns in the older part of the town. After some preparation, I found the identity of a notorious band of thieves in the town and their habitual hangout. There, feigning to be drunk, I spread noises about some shiny metal I planned on stealing. It wasn't long before someone whispered me to come in the back street.

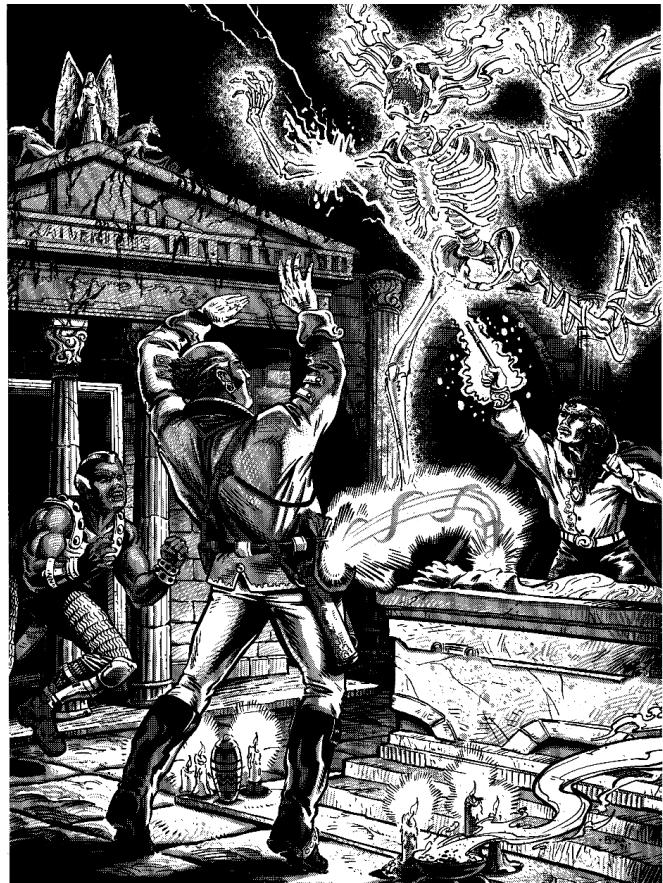
Five hooded people were waiting there. I posed as a deserter seeking revenge and wealth. I told them I had been in charge of security in a ship that had just been raided. In response to my failure to prevent an officer from being severely wounded, the ship's commander stripped me of my rank. I said I knew how to get past the ship's magical wards and how to reach the chest holding the precious metal. But I needed help in exchange for a fair share of the booty. Of course, for my own life's sake I wouldn't reveal anything more.

They said they would consider the idea and contact me later. I stayed at a tavern called O Valhacoito [The Cutthroat]. One of the men came back later and said his leader was interested. I was led to a crypt inside an abandoned family tomb in the cemetery, where six people were waiting. In colorful language, the leader asked, "Eh, meu bom [my good man], what tells me this is not a trap?" As I considered clobbering the happy bunch

myself, soldiers burst in, to my astonishment—and to everyone else's, as well. In the brief melee that followed, the soldiers slaughtered every one in the gang, except one—a stoolie. The troops held me at sword point.

With an excited grin, the stoolie pointed to me and said, "He's the one, *Senhor Capitão*. He said they still have the ore on board." The captain nodded and turned to his men, pointing at the stoolie. "Get him, too," he said. The soldiers brutally knocked out the screaming stoolie. We were both put in chains and promptly taken to the baron's keep by wagon. An hour later, my fiendish companion woke up beside me in the baron's dungeon. The place was poorly maintained, and I discovered that the mortar was crumbling where our chains were secured to the walls. We made a deal: If I could break the shackles, he would pick the locks to the dungeon doors. Although I could not trust him, there was little else to do.

After considerable exertion on my part, the shackles gave and soon I pulled the stoolie free. It was only after a copious thrashing from me that he recovered his nerve and endeavored to defeat the heavy grate's lock. After sneaking about the dungeon, we came to an exit. Two people stood on the stairs there, unaware we had escaped. The baron was there, speaking with a man with a slight Hulean accent. There I learned that an old acquaintance



Artwork by Thomas Baxa

was still interested in our ship and crew. The man said The Master desired that I be put to the sword, and the *Princess Ark* captured at once. The Master's spies had failed to seize any cinnabryl during the raid they had conducted on the ship. The Master wanted only the crew, especially the officers, and would pay a generous ransom for them. The ship could remain in Porto Preto. The man added he could help the baron's soldiers reach the ship.

That's when the stoolie started acting up again. He leaped forward and dropped to his knees before the astounded men. "Vossa Alteza [Your Highness], I beg your mercy! The foreigner forced me to come with him. Let me serve you better, Senhor Barão [Sir Baron]."

Fearing an attack, the two men ran away, calling for the guard. I took great pleasure at the sound of the stoolie's bones cracking when I got hold of his neck. I ran down a hallway and jumped through a massive stained glass window, the only exit. By chance, I landed in the keep's front court, under a pouring rain. I knocked a guard down and stole his horse, just barely making it past the portcullis. At last I retrieved the lifeboat and returned to the *Princess Ark*- without the stolen ore, alas, but with vital information.

Eimir 10-Haldemar: A thunderstorm had been plaguing us all day. It worsened when we reached the tower, on top of a high plateau. It was close to midnight then. The muddy trail was very steep in many places, and darkness made our task of following it rather perilous.

The guards at the tower were rather apathetic. When questioned, they vaguely pointed toward an abandoned monastery at the edge of a forest. We found Raman there, sitting inside a dusty crypt. Disappointed and confused, he was biding his time tossing small rocks into a broken urn. He was startled and ashamed when he saw us, but perhaps relieved as well.

"Forgive me, Your Highness," he said, red faced. "I don't know what's become of me. I felt compelled to come here at once after an encounter with a ghost in that library in Porto Preto. So eager was I to go that I omitted to leave proper notice. But perhaps the ghost was just part of a vivid dream I had, for I have waited here a whole day to no use."

As we prepared to leave, a form suddenly materialized above a tomb. It was the maiden of Raman's description. She stared at us, then motioned Raman to come. She was indeed fascinating, but something inside me cried foul play. Suddenly I snapped out of the trace. "Raman!" I shouted. "Back off, man!"

I was too late. An ark of crimson light fused the air between Raman's pouch and the grave. It sizzled and crackled . . . and it fizzled out.

The ghost wailed. Obviously in pain, she transformed herself into a ghastly, translucent red skeleton. This monstrosity then leaped at Raman and tore at him. A lightning bolt from my wand seemed to burn through her ectoplasmic matter, causing her to shrivel somewhat. Nyanga charged forward and, with a mighty swing of his deadly magical blade, hacked the fearsome apparition into spectral smither eens.

Raman felt weak. The pink metal in his pouch was gone. "Why, why?" he babbled in tears.

Nyanga pried the stone grave open. "Tis an evil spirit, mohn," he said curtly. "Only de powers of darkness know why it be wantin' ye soul. Open fire be de way of killin' de evil spirit!" He tossed a flask of oil into the foul sepulcher and set it ablaze.

I then cast a *travel* spell back to the ship. We arrived hours after Ramissur's return and found the crew at their battle stations. Talasar warned us of a potential attack from the Vilaverdan army. Indeed, a small flying skiff approached, its lantern flickering in the nocturnal sky. It made directly for the *Princess Ark*, despite the fact that our ship was invisible at that moment.

The baron's captain of the guard soon stood at the prow and hailed us. "*Senhor Capitão da Princesa!* This is an official visitation! You are transporting illegal metals. We request you turn your ship visible and allow immediate permission to come aboard!" He could obviously see us. I restored visibility to the ship's hull and acceded to the captain's demand.

He carried a small animal with him, like a fat ferret. He dropped it on the deck and it scurried away, sniffing and snorting, while he asked probing questions about our mission and itinerary. The creature came back later, whining and hissing. It had found nothing. The baron must have been after the pink metal from Slagovich. There was none left now. Perhaps that ghost had been of some use after all!

"It seems everything is in order. My apologies, *Senhor Capitão*. But you are requested to keep you ship visible at all times when visiting Vilaverde. *Muito Obrigado, Senhor* [Much obliged, sir]." The captain of the guard picked up his little beast and left. Whatever were the plans the baron of Vilaverde had concocted, they had just failed. He had probably hoped to delay our departure. Worse, perhaps he had expected to demand the ship be impounded and moored at a common dock. At least I presumed so, since I could not see any threatening force nearby. But there was no point in remaining in such a dangerous place any longer. The baron must have had a secret up his sleeve.

I ordered an immediate departure, full speed ahead. Already the morning wind filled the sails, and the



Princess Ark veered on a southwesterly course. In the rising sun, I looked down and saw that dozens of powerful ballistae dotted the farmland below. They had been rigged with ropes and large grappling hooks, some still aimed at the *Princess*'s previous position. They must have been pulled into position during the stormy night. Fortunately, the mud had delayed them long enough to allow for our departure. I could see crowds of soldiers and their baggage train slowly heading back toward Porto Preto. Indeed, we had just escaped another treachery.

Savage Coast

Eimir 12, AY 2000: We had just flown past the coast of Narvaez when a strange incident occurred. A small whirlwind materialized in the atrium where Lady Abovombe and I were taking our morning stroll. Seconds later, a handful of boltmen arrived, having seen the whirlwind from their posts nearby, and they made ready to open fire.

The whirlwind came to a halt, revealing a curious character: a halfling in buffoon's garb. Lifting his hat, he cried, "*¡Hola! Buenos días, Señores!*" Bowing deeply before Lady Abovombe, he added, "*Y Señora.*" He pulled a sealed scroll from his jacket. "I bear a cordial invitation from His Excellency el Baron de Saragón to you, in hopes that you will attend the annual banquet. His Excellency Don Balthazar will be honored by your visit." Kissing Lady Abovombe's hand, he murmured, "*¡Ay! ¡Que guapa!*" ("What a babe!")

The buffoon disappeared in a puff of smoke as fast as he'd come, making the boltmen all the more twitchy. Several sentries looked anxiously above and behind them,

and to their sides. Hands still on their wands, they left only after I dismissed them.

The scroll was indeed an invitation. It seemed someone had taken notice of our little performance in Vilaverde. We had no particular objective in the immediate future, and indeed, a friendly stop would be good for the crew. But first, I had to verify this Don Balthazar's intentions.

Eimir 13: A quick invisible visit to the Baron's mansion revealed it was a heavily fortified abode. The place was one that only an experienced wizard could build, judging from its many magical wards and arcane sentries. The arabesques on the walls, the fine colonnades, and the elegant tile works in the atrium reminded me of the style and color used by the Alasyian people. Curiously, more classical paintings, furniture, and wrought iron bars on the windows demonstrated a strong Guardiano influence.

The servants were feverishly preparing a great banquet. The broad fire in the kitchen roared under roasting piglets. Pheasants, stuffed boars, racks of lamb, and other delicacies littered the vast tables. Up in the main hall, I noticed the chamberlain debating with the lady of the manor about where to place the guests at the baron's table. I saw my name and Lady Abovombe's among the chamberlain's small plaques. Our plaque moved many times before the lady of the manor, Doña Teresa de Montejo y Sotto, the baron's wife, made her decision. So far, all seemed normal, so I returned to the ship.



Eimir 14: The *Princess Ark* made her formal appearance above Ciudad Matacan's Plaza Grande. The crowd was impressive. Although astounded by our arrival, the people showed no signs of fear.

Soon enough, a column of guards plowed through the spectators. An officer stood among them, signaling to the *Princess*. A fast lifeboat promptly fetched him. He introduced himself as our escort to the baronial manor house. As a dignitary of Imperial Alphatia with a beautiful lady on an official reception, we took along a proper escort in the person of Myojo Katamura.

Courteous and thoughtful, our guide took us on a tour of the town with a short stop at the flower market. The trip proved enjoyable, despite an all-too-evident escort of Torreón lancers riding before and behind our carriage. We reached the manor by sundown, where all three of us were provided with quarters for our stay.

Soon afterward, the major-domo announced our arrival in the main hall. A sumptuous crowd of petty nobles and ladies-in-waiting bowed respectfully before us. I was an Alphatian prince, after all. We looked just right. Lady Abovombe stood resplendent in a white robe covered with pearls. Myojo had simply outdone himself with a gleaming ceremonial armor that made the Torreón guards pale with envy. So far, so good.

"Welcome to Saragón, Prince of Haaken!" called Baron Balthazar as he walked up to us. "Your visit honors our modest barony. I hope your tour of the city was to your liking?" We were promptly and formally introduced, and the baron added, "Tales of your famous exploits have preceded you, Señor!"

Almost immediately, the minstrels began to play a fine minuet. Before I could react, a diligent and hopeful troop of hidalgos besieged Lady Abovombe for a dance. The baron won the first. For my part, I enjoyed a few steps with Doña Teresa. The dances went on between the usual court conversations and gossip. Many partners later, I finally gave up keeping track of who was whom.

I grew tired of the reception and so retired to my quarters with Myojo. Lady Abovombe remained, enjoying

her time tremendously. It is true that balls are not all that common on the ship. We'll have to work on this.

Eimir 14—Abovombe, from a later account: The emotion and passion in the people I met and danced with surprised me. I had grown accustomed to the polite and restrained ways aboard the *Princess Ark* and at my father's court. It was only because of Doña Socorro's help, the dueña [chaperon, an elderly lady in waiting] of the baron's daughter that I safely returned to my quarters. It nevertheless remained a delightful night.

No sooner had I snuffed out my candle, than there arose a sweet melody from the garden. A young hidalgo stood beneath my balcony, singing a love song under the full moon. Although old fashioned, it was very charming. Thinking himself in luck, he quickly climbed the vines and reached my room. Indeed, he was of the romantic, enterprising, passionate, and ultimately tenacious kind—in short, totally lovely. Also very, very difficult to get rid of.

Eimir 14—Haldemar, later that night: Foolish was I to believe the evening was over so quickly. I barely had time to pour myself a glass of that sweet Gargoñan sherry when a soft knock came from the door.

A colossal man with handlebar mustaches immediately pushed his way into the room. "Have a cigar, amigo! Sherry is best enjoyed this way." He opened a box full of odorous tobacco rolls and added: "I will meet any offer they made, plus a full cargo load. Well, amigo, have you decided?"

At a loss, I frowned and said, "I'm afraid you are mistaken, sir. Business was not the motive of my visit here."

He seemed disconcerted. "Ay! This is very unfortunate, amigo." I was about to further question this rather insolent character about his identity and the object of his visit when he suddenly pulled out a large knife. But Myojo's sword-drawing talent proved swifter, and the surprised—and quite dead—assailant fell heavily to the floor.

As the baron's guest, I couldn't possibly get caught with who-knows-who's dead body in my quarters. I thought of returning to the ship with the body, but soon discovered that none of my travel spells worked. The mansion was magically locked, it seemed. Drat! Finally, Myojo bound up the big man's wound, picked up the body, and hooked it up inside the closet. It would do for the time being.

Someone else then came to the door, a small, fat fellow. "My apologies, Señor. I hope I am not interrupting. But little time is left, and I must insist. When

the third hour strikes—" He stopped speaking and opened his eyes wide. "Caramba!" he whispered—and fell to the floor. A small dart was stuck in his neck. Alas, too late I noticed a shape jump off the balcony and run away into the garden. Double drat! Myojo dutifully picked up the new victim and propped him up behind the curtains.

One more visitor knocked at my door. It was an elderly lady this time. "Young man," she said, "you should know that great deeds make great men. For what you are to do tonight, you shall be rewarded in honor and status."

"Milady," I ventured, "might I inquire as to whom you might be?"

"Oh, puh-lease!" she said with indignation. She then motioned to Myojo, as if he should be doing something. He gathered she wanted a glass of sherry. She went on when he brought her the drink. "Listen carefully, for it must not be broken. Twist the skull to the—urk!" She choked on her beverage, then went into convulsions as her mouth began to foam. "*¡Que Barbaridad!*" she spat, then fell to the floor. Another one!

Myojo sighed and shrugged. He picked her up and pushed her under the bed. I tossed the dangerous beverage and my glass out of the window lest someone else be harmed. I heard a scream from below and saw a dark shape run back into the garden, holding his (or her) head.

Despite their sudden deaths, these strange people singularly amazed me. My curiosity was now greatly aroused. Would I have more visitors this evening? I wondered. And, sure enough, another visitor knocked at the door just then.

A Torreón officer fell forward into the room, a dagger stuck in his back. He whispered: "I am dying, Señor. Listen, for many other people have died this night. I can smell it."

Myojo sniffed around him and looked puzzled.

"You are the victim of an odious set-up," continued the officer. "You must leave at once. A secret passage exists behind the third barrel in the cellar . . ." He nearly passed out. "Adiós, Señor. My time has come." Now beyond our help, he slipped to the floor.

I rendered "number four" invisible and sat him at my chair when the door suddenly opened. A servant came in. That was enough! Myojo grabbed the steward and prepared to cut his throat. "Have mercy, Señor!" the man cried, frightened out of his wits. "I am only a poor peon working for the baron. I came to prepare your bed. Please spare my life. I will not disturb again, I swear!" He seemed rather honest. After some fruitless questioning



and many repetitions from him of "*¡Muchas gracias!*" I let him go—only to hear a scream of agony an instant later in the hallway. I refused to go look.

Minutes later, yet one more visitor came up. "Are you all right?" It was Lady Abovombe. She carried a black-eyed hidalgo on her back, dragging the recently departed servant behind her. "This one got a bit too daring," she said. "I knocked him out when I heard the scream in the garden. I couldn't possibly leave him behind! As for the servant, I don't know what happened to him. I found him lying in the hallway as I came to check the noise. He's dead."

At last, someone who didn't drop dead on us! After unceremoniously stuffing Lady Abovombe's two into a large chest, we left the room for fear of inheriting another macabre gift. It was time to pay a visit to our baronial host.

Eimir 15—Haldemar, early morning: I did not have much of a clue about where to go in this vast manor. I decided to follow the late Torreón officer's words. Indeed, a secret passage existed in the cellar, and it lead to a wizard's workroom.

Alchemical implements stood on a large bench, bubbling, puffing, and whistling, as glowing, multicolored liquids traveled through the glassware and the crystal tubes. On a desk sat a crystal skull with some other bric-a-brac that reminded me of my own office. Rays of faint, blue light from the skull's empty eye sockets illuminated a clock in the corner. It reached the third hour in the morning and struck its bell. I tried to reach the skull, but an invisible force kept me at bay. By the second stroke, I dispelled the force, hoping my magic to be strong enough. Indeed, by the third stroke, I turned the skull to the right and hoped for the best.

And the best happened. The two beams hit a golden Oltec sun sculpted on the wall. It shifted away, revealing a new chamber. There, sitting among an impressive library, was Don Balthazar, quietly observing us.

With a smile, he began “*¡Buenos días, Señor!* I am glad to see that you prevailed over my guests. I do apologize for the inconvenience, but a number of spies and traitors had penetrated my court, and I needed someone powerful from the outside to help me uncover them. I quietly had the rumor of your arrival spread among my subjects at the court. I made them believe you planned on stealing a great artifact from me, selling it to the highest bidder. Many rulers in the region would give their right arms to acquire such power. It was the only way I could seek them out, and for this I am in your debt, Señor.”

I wasn't amused. “Dear Baron, there are better ways of dealing with a prince of the Alphatian Empire. For your information, I do have other business to which I must attend, and I am not the least bit interested in your petty dealings.”

He stood up and pulled out a pipe. “Ah, Señor! You surprise me! On the contrary, a great adventurer as yourself should appreciate an evening such as this! Come now, my friend. Your time wasn't lost. I am prepared to make amends and offer Your Majesty's skyships unlimited access to my Plaza Grande—and for you, the usual commercial fee from all merchant deals. The wizards' empire is most welcome in Saragón!”

Indeed, this was one very-well-informed wizard. I pulled out my own pipe. “With one condition, then! I dare say, I would love to sample this fragrant tobacco of yours.”

Don Balthazar agreed with a broad smile, “. . . and a glass of sherry. The good sherry, of course!”

‘After a long and constructive conversation, we finally took a stroll back outside, in the garden. The sun was rising. As we stood in the alley before the manor, Don Balthazar wondered about the identities of those who had showed up in my room. He was concerned about an

assassin who had stalked him in the dark and was probably still at large.

Just then, a scream came from my apartment. Lady Abovombe's black-eyed lover appeared at the balcony, rather frightened. He probably had just awakened in the chest with a dead man resting in his arms. As he stood there on the balcony crying murder, another body slipped from behind the curtains and bumped against the young hidalgo's back. He screamed again and jumped off the balcony, landing on a thick bush. Almost immediately, he stood up and screamed once more. A tall creature in black was hiding there—a gnoll dressed in the garb of assassins. It, too, screamed, and they both ran off in opposite directions. Without a moment of hesitation, both Don Balthazar and myself pulled out our wands, and in a single motion fried the ugly beast.

“*¡Muy bien, Señor!* Excellent shooting!”

“Not bad yourself, dear Baron!”

I guess that took care of the wizard's night stalker.

Eimir 22: We enjoyed a few more days at the manor while the crew was granted a much-appreciated furlough. I introduced Talasar and Xerdon to the Baron, who was then given a tour of the *Princess*. He later revealed that he had traveled once to the Court of Eriadna the Wise and learned a lot about Alphatian ways. He had heard secondhand about my financial arrangement with Her Imperial Majesty, and when news of my visit to Vilaverde had reached him, he naturally thought of inviting me to Ciudad Matacán. The rest then fell into place.

We finally left the Barony of Saragón. With auspicious winds, the *Princess Ark* took a southwestern heading, toward more discoveries and adventures in the Savage Coast.

The Claw Peninsula

Eimir 24, AY 2000: Two days after leaving Ciudad Matacán, I changed heading and veered toward a curious place called Smokestone City. According to gazetteers I had gotten in Saragón, Smokestone City was the capital of a country- or “county,” as the locals called it—that seemed very different from the baronies we had seen in the past weeks. One of the gazetteers also alluded to a source of cinnabryl somewhere south of the capital. I was hoping to acquire a small quantity for study and magical experiments.

Raman returned from a quick visit to the place. He described the capital as a place somewhat more rugged than the Guardiano baronies but otherwise industrious and peaceful to foreigners. So confident was he that he even made reservations for four rooms at a hostel on the main



street The price seemed right, and it included hot bath for each room. Why not?

With relief, Raman received my thanks and authorization to return to his books. I left Talasar in command of the *Princess* as the landing party and I quietly went down to Smokestone City.

We found the place Raman had described, the Red Steel Saloon. However, this place was totally unlike anything I had seen before. A dozen tables occupied the main hall opposite a long bar, hosting people playing cards, drinking, and smoking. A charming lady was standing in a corner before a curious spinning wheel, enjoining people to try their luck and bet their money on a random number; judging from the vast possibilities offered, this seemed like a losing proposition.

Nonetheless, half a dozen men were tossing small ivory chips on the numbered carpet, wishing for instant wealth. Some things never change.

I faced an utterly shocking vision as I turned away from the glitzy, spinning wheel. Five ladies were dancing and singing in a scandalous manner before dozens of hooting ruffians. To the rhythm of a tortured harpsichord, the wenches suddenly lifted their dresses to reveal their legs, petticoats, and other frou-frou. Lady Abovombe fumed; "I'd better have a talk with Raman!" she muttered. Utterly embarrassed, our party quickly retreated to the front desk.

The party broke up into four rooms: Ramissur and Leo, Xerdon and Nyanga, Myojo and myself, and finally Lady Abovombe. As we prepared to climb the stairs to our rooms, a thunderstorm rocked the night. Talasar would have to leave the area and head for calmer skies. I had total confidence in the man and knew I needed not worry further about the *Princess*'s safety.

Escaping from the heavy rain, a dozen cattle drovers stepped into the main hall. They looked like trouble. By the time we reached the mezzanine overlooking the main hall, a brawl had started. One of the visitors had impulsively bet and lost his salary at the spinning wheel, which quickly ended up around the saloon owner's head. We paused, taken in by the spectacle and thinking ourselves safe above the fight.

While the fight raged on, the wenches and the insane harpsichord minstrel continued their outrageous show as if nothing was happening. The barman dove behind the counter as a bottle crashed into a large mirror behind him. Things were getting bad until one man entered.

Cool and quiet, with eyes of steel, he stared down one of the rowdier fellows. The leader of the cattle drovers walked up and stood rather arrogantly before him; he pulled back the side of his jacket to reveal a tiny crossbow. "Well, what have we here? Another yellow-bellied lawman." Silence overtook the place as everyone carefully stepped out of the way.

The steely-eyed man calmly answered, "You have ten minutes to leave Smokestone City, Baraboo Jack."

Suddenly the ruffian pulled out his crossbow, but the other man was even faster. Seemingly quicker than his own shadow, he had drawn his weapon and shot the ruffian dead, hitting him between the eyes. Several

troublemakers drew their crossbows out and started shooting. Amazingly, the lawman rolled behind a large potted plant, while shooting another five times with incredible accuracy! By the time he stood up again, five more men were on the floor, wounded or dead. This was no ordinary fellow. Theirs was no ordinary weapon. This was no ordinary place at all.

Eimir 24, Talasar—from a later account: The watch spotted large black clouds rising on the horizon a few hours after the admiral left with the landing party. I ordered a routine maneuver to climb above the storm. Unfortunately, we would have to remain out of touch with the admiral for some time, but the risk was too great to remain.

Eimir 25, Haldemar: After some investigating at the LB Trading Co., I managed to deduce the whereabouts of Cimarron County's cinnabryl. It was a place called South Gulch. I got only blank stares from the LB Trading Co.'s clerks when I asked about acquiring some of that red metal. Someone must have called their lawman—Sheriff "Wild Tex" Mokum, as I recall. "Pardner," said he with a slow drawl, "some questions are best not asked. The next coach out of town leaves at high noon." The point of this visit wasn't to stir up trouble, so I agreed to follow his advice: "Much obliged, pardner," he said.

Unfortunately, there was no coach departing for South Gulch. The heavy rain had turned the Wrangler's Trail in the south into a muddy mire. The coach official from Zachariah & Peabody Co. pointed out that the rainy season just had started in that region. Judging from the rumblings in the sky, more rain was obviously on the way. The coach would have to take the longer route off the trails, west of Cougar's Bluff, through Little Big Rock, Bushwack Prairie, Buffalo Run, and then to South Gulch. That was a four- or five-day ride. Unexcited at this prospect, the seven of us climbed into the coach and off we went on a long, uncomfortable ride. Rain began to fall again even as the driver whipped the six-horse team.

Eimir 25, Talasar—from a later account: An alarm was sounded in the morning. Five skyships had been spotted in a break in the seemingly endless clouds beneath the *Princess*. Judging from the reports, these ships were not of Alphatian designs, but more likely fast Heldannic Warbirds. It would seem the Hulean Master and his lackeys had not given up on us yet—and these people knew how to defeat the *Princess*'s invisibility.

I needed to learn more about their forces before engaging them. Damn this weather! The admiral and Xerdon were sorely needed. Routine maneuvering of the

Princess was one thing, but engaging in combat was another. I had no way of knowing how the ship would respond to my orders in the admiral's absence. Perhaps this ordeal was put on my path by Razud to test my faith. So be it. I had the skyship dive into the cover of the thick, billowing clouds. Navigator Ashari was at her post as usual, listening for approaching vessels. This dangerous game of hide and seek could prove deadly for all with a mid-air collision; lightning and fire were yet another concern. I could sense the *Princess*'s reluctance to enter the storm clouds. All was quiet aboard as the hunt began in the eerie twilight of the clouds.

Eimir 28, Haldemar: We had been riding in the wilderness since yesterday when the coach turned off Bugle Trail. We were following a bumpy path toward the south when I heard the driver exhorting his horses frantically, whipping them on.

"Them desperados are a-ridin' for us agin!" he shouted. "Better get yore shooters out quick an' start a-firin'!" Brigands were riding down the hills, trying to get ahead of us. Judging from their size, our attackers were goblins on ponies.

Nyanga winked at me and said, "Yo, goblins!" Ramissur responded with a sinister grin, whispering, "No sweat." In a single move, all seven of us pulled out blades, wands, and other implements of war, ready to jump out of the coach.

Already, one of the goblins had jumped on the lead horse, and the coach came to a halt in a cloud of dust. The rest of the badlanders formed two groups, one on each side of the coach. One of them pointed a large crossbow at the driver, a weapon so large that the goblin could barely handle it. "Put 'em up! Hey, you in there! Y'all get out with yer hands up!"

Armed to the teeth, our party leaped out of the coach on both sides, howling in our savage attack. I must say, it did surprise the badlanders. Half of their ponies either fell to lightning bolts or galloped away, dumping their riders in the process. Those goblins who fought us died. The surviving badlanders were rounded up with their hands high above their heads and rather contrite and fearful expressions on their faces.

"We better get a-goin' now!" said the driver. "Them badlanders normally ride by the hundreds." We could already hear the distant rumbling of hooves on the prairie, so we grabbed our prisoners' weapons and climbed back into the coach. As the driver whipped the horses, over 80 badlanders came charging around a hill. A wild chase began, the coach skidding and bouncing down the dirt path. Xerdon and Myojo hung out on the coach's footboards, having a grand time shooting the tiny



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crossbows we had taken from the badlanders—but not with much effect, I would say. Occasionally, when a couple of badlanders got too close to the coach, I would let go with a fireball, prompting a round of “Ooh!” and “Aah!” from Lady Abovombe and Leo.

There were far too many of these goblins to handle. Nyanga soon climbed out and sat next to the driver, who was wounded. Ramissur got on top of the coach, firing his newly acquired dartshooter.

Another wave of badlanders appeared ahead of us, clearly blocking the way. We thought our last battle had come, but the sound of a bugle tore through the clamor of the chase. It was the cavalry! A column of regular horsemen appeared behind the goblins and bravely charged ahead, lances and sabres forward. Soon the decimated badlanders rode back into the hills.

“Well done, captain!” said Lady Abovombe. The handsome officer in charge saluted briefly and responded, “Seventh Cavalry at your service, ma’am!”

Burymir 1, Talasar—from a later account: The thick clouds made it impossible to chart our position. For all I knew, we were hundreds of miles away from the admiral. I dared not climb above the clouds to sight on the stars, exposing the *Princess* to our pursuers.

We had been playing hide and seek with the five Heldannic Warbirds over four days and nights. These ships seemed to have guessed my moves, at least quickly enough to catch up with the *Princess* before she could effectively break away. I suspected they were using some magical device. Our encounters had been at closer ranges each time; I could sense their grip getting tighter every day.

I decided to somehow get aboard one of the Warbirds. Perhaps I could discover what their secret was and destroy it. I knew I might not survive the attempt, but the *Princess* would then stand a better chance to break loose. I would have to put Chief Engineer Raman in command, however. The man had never had the charge of a ship, and certainly not in an uneven combat situation. I had to meditate. Perhaps Razud would brighten my path through this darkness.

Burymir 3, Haldemar: At last, South Gulch. This mean little village had all the callousness of those greedy places built during a gold rush, except no gold was to be found here—just the deadly red ore, cinnabryl.

From what I could gather, South Gulch was a native tortle’s village, overrun by red-ore miners a decade earlier. Tortles are strange turtle-like people, rather Guardiano in style as an ethnic group. Peaceful and quiet, the tortles offered little resistance to the rowdy miners. Fortunately, most of the miners moved on years ago to the mine itself, eight miles northwest. Food shortages are a constant problem here, as bands of miners regularly come down from the hills and pillage whatever supplies might be in the village.

When the word got around that we weren’t miners, an old tortle came up to seek our help against the miners. He must have been a sage or a shaman, for he knew what had brought us here. (Of course, perhaps only those seeking the red ore would ever come here.) He said we would never get what we sought, as the mine was too well defended for this. The miners were notorious for not trading their ore to anyone but an LB Trading Co. representative. This was the law in this county. Red-ore trade was heavily regulated, and the marshals were

prompt to send out bounty hunters after those who had acquired red ore illegally.

The old tortle candidly offered us his blessing, his house, and his food if we decided to help him. How could I refuse? I sensed there was more to this old chelonian than his knobby shell, though I had never dealt with his kind before. I could always find red ore some other time. I accepted his kind offer, which provoked a raised eyebrow from Xerdon.

Burymir 3, Talasar- from a later account: The dampness of the heavy darkness chilled me to my bones. Ashari quietly stood at the prow of the lifeboat while the *Princess* disappeared into the night behind us.

Upon deciding to put my plan into action, I ordered the small skiff painted black and covered with a black canvas. When Ashari heard a ship approaching astern of the *Princess*, she courageously volunteered to come with me. I would indeed need her help to maneuver in the dark around our pursuer and board it.

Indeed, the massive hull of a Warbird passed just above our lifeboat. As Ashari silently fastened our skiff to the ship's claws, I climbed aboard. The deck was busy. The knights had removed their clunky armor and put out all lanterns to avoid attracting the *Princess*'s attention. This darkness would be their undoing, though, for it allowed me to get below-decks without being seen.

All hands were on the main deck for what seemed an imminent assault. There was no time to waste. I reached the stern of the ship unhindered, where I found a small chapel with an altar. From the icons, I could tell the chapel was devoted to Vanya, a warlike being.

Fastened to the deck was a large censer. Among the silver wisps of smoke I could see five golden sparks surrounding a red flicker. Each spark seemed linked to the other with a thin golden thread of light. It must have been their scrying device. Perhaps if I broke the link, all the enemy ships would lose their guidance. Pouring the contents of my flask on the burning incense seemed to do quite well in that respect.

I would have left then had it not been for a slight glow under the drapes covering the altar. There, I discovered a crystal urn; inside it was a hovering gem that pulsated and hummed as if a power radiated from it. I could feel my skin crawl and a slight tingle run through my hair, an ominous sensation that great magic was at hand. It was a great magic that only high clerics understood, and it tapped directly into the power of the Immortals. With a quick prayer to Razud, I slipped a glove on and moved toward the gem.

"Stop, you fool!" The warning came from another door; a knight had walked in, sword unsheathed. "You will destroy us all, and you with it!"

There was only one way to ensure this ship would not repair its scrying device. I grabbed the stone as the knight lunged at me. Suddenly, we were weightless; the Warbird rolled on its side and began a frightening dive. The knight and I fell tumbling across the room, each shouting in fear. In seconds, the vessel broke apart. The room itself split open, and I was hurled into the black, endless sky.

Burymir 4, Haldemar: It wasn't long before a new mob of miners came down from the hills. There were 50 of them, screaming and galloping through the village on horseback. One of them managed to catch a slow-moving tortle with his lasso, dragging the poor thing behind his horse. That was enough!

One by one, the miners fell prey to Xerdon's well-choreographed defense, in which we all had parts. Nyanga skillfully unhorsed a number of miners, casually striking them aside with the flat of his giant sword. Meanwhile, several young tortles knocked Nyanga's victims out and tied them up in neat piles. Leo had devised several traps to immobilize the miners. His best consisted of a series of four spears mounted on a ballista; when shot, the spears spread apart, deploying a large net. Lady Abovombe's bolas worked beautifully against the miners' horses.

Myojo then led a fine charge against a massive group of miners; behind him came a mob of tortles armed with pots, pans, pitchforks, and other bric-a-brac. As for Ramissur, he became an ace at shooting the tiny crossbows. I thought he overdid it when he walked across the main street, spinning the crossbows on his fingers each time he hit a target. How he learned to do that is beyond me.

Eventually, the whole fight came down to the miners' leader and myself. "Come out of yer rat hole and face me if yer a real man, wizard!" he roared. He stood in the middle of the street, waiting for me. I couldn't disappoint him. He had his dart-shooter, and I had my *wand of lightning bolts*. Fair enough.

It was high noon. I could barely see his eyes under the brim of his hat. No one moved. A tumbleweed blew across the street. A puff of dust twisted up in the air. His mouth twitched. Suddenly, the man reached for his weapon.

I was faster.

His charred remains were buried on Boot Hill by sundown. The tortles paid their respects to his grave, then quietly returned to their chores. The surviving miners left. They knew the tortles would fight them from then on, and they had no stomach for the battle.



Burymir 4, Talasar- from a later account: I fell through the blasting wind and thought that Razud had finally severed the thread of my life. But such was not my fate.

The gem I had captured from the Heldannic Warbird was what had kept it flying across the sky. The crystal urn enabled the gem's power to shoot forth in all directions. I had surmised that a number of receptacles to receive this magic had been spread out in the ship, solidly anchored in its hull. Once removed from the urn, the gem kept its magic to itself- and the ship fell.

Of course, this did keep me hanging in the air, desperately holding onto the gem as the Warbird's remains vanished into the cloudy depths below. Under my weight, the gem slowly dug into my leather glove. I was in agony and called out for Ashari. At last, she showed up, amazed at seeing me hanging there in the sunlit morning clouds. Exhausted from the pain in my hand and arm, I finally let go and fell into the lifeboat. Free, the gem shot up into the sky like a rising star. There was no telling where it went. Perhaps it returned to the celestial vault, to twinkle forever among the stars and the Immortals.

Burymir 5, Raman- from a later account: I was afraid to think the worst. Commander Talasar had not returned from his mission against the Heldannic Knights. I was the last officer left on board. I could maneuver the *Princess Ark*, but my attempts at communicating with her spirit yielded only sluggish responses. Nonetheless, I was fortunate enough to have pulled a few useful tomes from my library. I located a few pages in the Imperial Airman's Manual that provided me with tactical hints that came in handy later on.

At this point, either Commander Talasar had succeeded in his mission or he was dead. Judging from

Ashari's absence, I believed the latter to be true. If the Warbirds could still find us here- and they would, sooner or later- we would probably be better off fighting in the open, where the boltmen could see their targets. I managed to get the *Princess* to climb above the clouds. According to the manual, I would at least have the advantage of altitude.

There were no Warbirds there. Suddenly, the spirit of Berylith spotted something. Her spectral head turned down to starboard, allowing me to see what she was looking at. Far below, barely visible in the swirling clouds, was the tip of a mast emerging ever so slightly from the clouds. That could only be one of them.

I must have thought very "loudly" then, for Berylith reacted swiftly. She roared at the target, causing a hail of blue bolts and fiery death to pour over the Warbird's deck. We could hear the horrified screams of her crew. Their ship quickly performed an evasive maneuver and ducked deeper into the clouds. We had become the hunters, and they the hunted. Long live the Empire!

Soon after our attack came another surprise. Somehow, the Warbirds did not seem as coordinated as they had previously. Had Talasar indeed succeeded? Had the Warbirds been deprived of their cunning? The answer to this came from the thick clouds, as the diving Warbird collided with another vessel with an explosive bang. Both went down in flames. The *Princess* followed their flight down and emerged beneath the clouds, into a pouring rain. There, we watched the two Warbirds tumble down and crash into the dark, stormy sea below. In the distance, two other Warbirds dove out of the clouds and retreated, full speed astern. I knew we had won.

Hours later, we recovered Commander Talasar and First Class Navigator Ashari, drifting in the wind and frantically scooping water out of their lifeboat. At long last, it was time to retrieve the admiral.

Burymir 8, Haldemar: It would have been another week before the coach returned to South Gulch. The tortles kindly led us back to Smokestone City by taking a shortcut through the forest. Before we finally parted, the old chelonian came to me again. He thanked me for our help- and our martial training to his people- and handed me a small gift, a token of his friendship.

Later that day, Talasar greeted us back on the *Princess*. Raman was standing by with a broad smile on his face and a small ribbon on his chest: a red stripe with a golden bolt, the ribbon normally awarded after a commanding officer's first combat mission. Raman?

Commanding officer? Combat? I then noticed a small bandage around Talasar's right hand. I would have to ask him about that, but first I wanted to check that gift.

It was a skillfully painted tortle egg. Judging from the weight, it felt almost empty. The bottom easily came off, with a simple twist of the hand. Inside, wrapped in velvet, was a small rock. A small red rock. Cinnabryl.

Robrenn

Burymir 14, AY 2000: We had been flying over a previously unknown kingdom the day before, west of a small Vilaverdan colony. In the evening, we observed a large city near a forest, probably the capital of this region. Great beauty graced this city's all-wooden architecture, so I decided to have a closer look. Talasar, Myojo, Nyanga, and I landed just before dawn this morning, a few miles north in the forest. The rumblings of a storm echoed in the dark. The *Princess* remained up in the sky, watching for Heldannic Warbirds among the clouds; since Raman's battle last week, there had been no further sign of them. I put Xerdon in charge, with Raman at his side for in-depth combat training.

No sooner had we had set foot in this misty forest than the sound of a battle arose. The clang of metal and the mighty roar of a monster echoed through the woods. We hurried to investigate. In a small clearing stood a red dragon, poised to release its fiery breath at a gallant knight clothed in green. The raging storm of fire fell upon the man as he plunged his blade into the beast's crimson-scaled hide. The knight fell to his knees- alive, but just barely. Horrified by the spectacle, we reached for our weapons, hoping to aid the knight. Suddenly, I felt the cold edge of a blade under my throat. "Move not,

strangers," spoke a cool voice, "for this is not your battle." I glanced over and saw the warning came from another knight.

Six other knights appeared around us. They all wore the same green garb and armor as the noble warrior in the clearing. We were evidently not to be killed, so our attention went back to the fight. The dragon pawed at the sword stuck in its chest, trying to rip it out. It prepared to breathe again. Raising both hands toward the sky, the knight chanted a vigorous psalm. Lightning suddenly flashed and struck the sword's pommel, driving the searing electricity straight into the wyrm's heart. The dragon coiled and uncoiled in agony. Finally, roaring its pain at the thunder, the beast fell heavily to the ground.

This knight was not an elf, nor had he uttered a paladin's spell. What magic was this that allowed a knight to strike this dragon so deadly a blow from the skies?

At that moment, a curious character walked up to the knight. Bare-chested, wearing only striped breeches and a red cloak, the newcomer threw a golden braid back over his shoulder and began to play a lyre while reciting a poem, an ode of a sort:

"King Edwix had but one dread,
That fell the sky on his head.

"But fall it'll not by 'morrow,
So fear naught, O Night Harrow."

Rain suddenly began to fall. "Will you shut up, you blasted idiot?" roared the wounded knight, whom we took to be the king. "By Cernuínn, what is it with you? Have you signed a pact with Taranos to drown us all in his rain?" Vexed, the bard stuck up his nose and walked away.



Artwork by Thomas Blaxa

Clearing his throat, the knight before me put his sword away and added, "King Edwix does get rather punchy in the morning!" Indeed.

The king finally stood up and returned, wounded and burned, to his knights. He was either a powerful man or very lucky. "Who are you, strangers?" he asked.

"Prince Haldemar of Alphatia, and my escort," I replied.

"Eh? Never heard of it," grumbled the king. "I am tired. Follow me to my camp."

I could not help admiring the workmanship of the king's armor. Tiny leaves and branches were delicately carved into the plates. Then I realized this was no metal armor; it looked more like wood, perhaps petrified or somehow turned into metal. In fact, all these knights wore the same style of armor, and their weapons, too, were made of that odd iron. Dark green cloaks concealed the men well, except for the cloaks' delicate golden trim or the occasional glint of armor. Their helms all bore large deer antlers, and in the eerie morning mist they looked like surreal creatures of the forest. Without waiting, the knights and their king all rode away.

The bard alone remained. "They always do that," he said, "but don't let that intimidate you, my lord. They enjoy playing hard to get. Comes with the antlers. I guess we'll have to walk, then." With an inspired sigh, he added, "Might I compose a sonnet for our journey back to the royal camp?"

"Er, thank you, but no. We've already had our morning ballad, truly."

"Oh," he sniffed, disappointed.

On our way to the camp, our new friend and guide, the bard Voxpopulix, told us more about our bizarre encounter. The king was on a quest. Druidic tradition demanded that he return to the hallowed forest to meet his end should he fail his duty. He had until next summer's druids' gathering to complete his quest. He had to do so alone, without help from anyone, to prove his valor. This was very serious business for the druids. In this case, he was to slay a mother dragon, Greudnax. The one he had destroyed this morning was her daughter. The king was still seeking Greudnax's secret lair.

It soon became clear we were well inside the druids' hallowed forest. This caused great discomfort to both Talasar and Nyanga. My first officer detested treading uninvited upon others' sacred grounds; Nyanga had a great respect for things of nature, especially forest spirits.

A billowing fog rose from the ground. It was so thick it could only be someone's uncanny magic. Suddenly, a net fell from above. We were captured with ease; within minutes, we and our bard friend stood before the druids.

The druids were angered. Bound and gagged, we were brought to the sanctum sanctorum, the heart of the Great Druidess' hallowed grove. As we quickly learned, no one but a druid was allowed to enter the sacred woods. Until late that day, a crowd of druids debated on whether to sacrifice us to the Immortal Breig or the Immortal Cernuinn—by the sickle or by the cauldron. At last, the Great Druidess questioned Voxpopulix. Our situation greatly improved when they learned that the king had invited us to his camp after defeating Greudnax's daughter. Since we had a legitimate reason for being in this forest, they chose to set us free—up to a point, that is.

Talasar and Nyanga—why did it have to be them?—were kept as hostages. Myojo, Voxpopulix, and I were free to leave. We had until the next moon to accomplish our business; only then would the hostages be released. I had no quarrel with the Great Druidess of this kingdom, nor did I desire one. Since druids show only limited respect for foreign nobility, negotiation was of little help, and violence was out of the question. At Voxpopulix's insistence, we left without further argument. He feared for our safety, for the druids could be cruel when offended. Clearly, our presence was offensive.

Burymir 15: At last, we made it to the camp—but it was empty. Someone had ransacked it. Voxpopulix pulled a black arrow from one of the tents. "Cassivellonis—a northern orc tribe," he said. "What are they doing here?" It was hard to tell whether the king had been caught.

Their tracks in the wet soil were easy to follow. We had been trailing the orcs for hours when, inexplicably, the tracks ended. There, a small path seemed to wind through the thicket. I suspected an ambush when I heard leaves rustle. I could have sworn someone whispered my name, but it could not have been one of my companions. Myojo readied his great bow, expecting the worst, when a majestic stag stepped out of the bushes. It calmly gazed at us, then sprang back into the brush.

This couldn't be the orcs' doing. We followed. The stag appeared a few more times, always at a fair distance ahead. Oddly, every time I glanced back, I could no longer see the path we had followed. Obviously, we were being led somewhere. Fog rose again, muffling sounds and masking our sight.

Suddenly, in a swirl of the mist, a shape walked by, ignoring us completely. Grotesque and hunched, the figure snorted and cursed in a guttural voice. Myojo was ready, knee to the ground and arrow cocked. Voxpopulix was nowhere to be seen. Naturally, my wand found its way into my hand.

The fog dissipated somewhat, revealing about 30 orcs and a chieftain crouching behind bushes in a narrow

gully, watching the tracks they had left earlier. Their scouts had probably spotted us earlier, and their chieftain had set up an ambush. The mysterious path, however, had lead us to the orcs' left flank, at one end of the gully. We were perfectly set to attack.

Pandemonium and panic ensued as my *lightning bolt* struck their packed ranks. Many of the orcs died instantly. The survivors quickly scattered, running for cover. A deadly game of hide-and-seek followed, with enraged orcs sporadically charging out from hiding places. They quickly fell to Myojo's arrows or to his swirling silver blade.

I smelled the foul breath of an orc behind me, but it fell dead into my arms when I turned around. With a wink, Voxpopulix wiped his elegant ivory blade on the orc's garb. He had been hiding behind me, in the shade of the undergrowth. A curious character, indeed!

Soon enough, the few remaining orcs retreated and vanished into the forest. They left a prisoner behind them—one of the king's knights. His companions had all died while delaying the orcs, he said. The orcs had learned about the king's quest and had come to capture him. The king barely had enough time to escape and continue his quest—truly alone this time.

There was no time to waste. I had to find the king. Surely, there must have been more orcs around. It would serve no good purpose if the king died now. Voxpopulix and the knight argued against intervening; Almighty Breig would watch over him, they said. In a pig's eye! No Immortal is worth three feet of cold steel and good magic to boot when it comes to orcs. This was war!

Burymir 15—Talasar, from a later account: "And what sort of a cleric are you, stranger?" the young druid asked. The apprentice had been observing me for some time, clearly impressed with my hammer. "Do you honor Tuatis?"

I gathered that Tuatis was the local name for Thor, a powerful Immortal in the north, patron of wars. The young druid, Cucurbita (Pepo to his friends), proudly showed me his own wooden war mallet, a rather large one that he had used to crush several orcish heads in the past.

As we spoke, another druid came running down a path. He brought news of a nearby fire in the woods, obviously the work of Greudnax the dragon. The hour was grave; everyone marched toward the blaze. Neither Nyanga or I wanted to stay behind, and so we joined in the effort. The druids displayed great skill and magic in fighting the fire. Fortunately, my hammer could extinguish flames, too. I had used it to this effect a number of times on wooden ships. Its magic is potent.

This impressed the druids tremendously. Later in the night when the fire was contained, the Great Druidess declared, "Priest of Razud, the iron in your hammer we dislike, but its power to smother fire is a good portent. Your help was precious to us. You and your friend warrior are free to come and go as you please until the return of your companions."

Pepo stood by me, his hand on my shoulder. "He's my friend!" he said proudly. I guess we won't end up being nailed to an oak after all.

Burymir 16—Haldemar: The knight, Ariovix, woke me up when he jumped from a branch in a tree. "There was fire in the south last night," he said. "It was Greudnax's work, but the druids smothered it. I heard the dragon fly by just after sunset. Her lair could be close. Breig must have guided us here."

Indeed, we found a cavern by sunrise. The ground had collapsed recently, opening an entrance to a deep cave. The dragon must have moved there no more than a few months ago.

Voxpopulix and Ariovix refused to go any farther. If the dragon was there, so was the king, and this dragon was the object of the king's quest before Almighty Breig. I could not convince them otherwise. Myojo and I moved on.

We reached a ledge overlooking a deep cavern. The king was at the bottom. When he saw us, he yanked down the grappling hook he had used to climb down, denying us a way to reach him. Brandishing his sword, he shouted, "Return whence you came, wizard! She's mine!"

As I pondered on a way to help, we heard a beastly breathing from the sky. The dragon was flying back from a night of devastation. I hoped she had expended her fire.

Greudnax landed nearby, then crawled and slithered past without noticing us. The king ducked behind a rock. Within moments, Greudnax coiled up in a corner of the cave and fell asleep.

The king left his hiding place and began to move toward the dragon, his sword out. Movement caught my eye then. Above the king, on a ledge, an orc was watching. I saw the humanoid open his mouth to warn Greudnax—but his breath was cut short when one of Myojo's arrows struck him in the head. He slumped silently.

Greudnax snorted, then sniffed. She opened an eye, just enough to see what was happening. From where he stood, the king could not have noticed the dragon's awakening. With a spell of *ventriloquism*, I whispered a word of warning to the king. He responded with an angry look in my direction.

Suddenly, the dragon's head whipped toward the king. The king was ready for her. With his heavy broadsword, he hacked off a piece of the dragon's lip, infuriating the wyrm. Her cavernous roar was a deafening, blood-curdling sound.

Scores of orcs appeared on the ledge, alerted by the dragon. They encountered Myojo and me instead. We barely succeeded in stopping their assault, using spells and arrows. The orcs came in waves, indifferent to their casualties. Meanwhile, the king was engaged in a heroic fight against Greudnax. Several times Greudnax nearly caught and swallowed him whole, but always he managed to avoid her lethal bite. He was a true warrior.

In desperation, Greudnax reared back and breathed a vast cone of red flame upon the king. The monster had fire left inside her! The dragon's thunderous laughter shook the cavern as the king cried out in agony, wreathed in flames. The dragon turned toward us and thundered, "You are next, wizard!" I lifted my wand at Greudnax, meaning to *disintegrate* her ugly head.

"No! Leave her to me!" cried the king. Limping and bearing horrible burns, he dragged his sword behind him as he staggered into battle. "'Twas I who slew thy daughter, evil beast! And I shall slay thee, as well!"

The dragon glanced at the wounded king and brushed him away with her tail. Greudnax turned calmly back toward me. "Go ahead, wizard. Use your wand, if you dare! Slay me, and you'll sentence your king to death as well."

What could I do? Either I slaughtered this wyrm and the king would have to die before the Great Druidess, or I didn't- and the dragon would certainly kill the king then. Either way, the king was a dead man. I supposed that I could talk some sense into these superstitious druids later on. So be it.

"Well, old wizard, I want your answer," taunted the dragon. "Hesitating, are we?"

I drew myself up. "It seems my choices are limited indeed, dear Greudnax, but you know- I really don't care!" I raised my wand and aimed right at Greudnax's head.

At my answer, the dragon opened her eyes wide in astonishment. Ah, but this was one lucky beast. With horror, I saw my magic strike the monster- then fizzled and gurgle as it liquefied on the dragon's scales, dripping to the ground as nauseating, putrid ectoplasm. My wand should have *disintegrated* the beast- but she had resisted it. She laughed again and cried, "Now you are mine!"

She took a deep breath, ready to fry Myojo and me, when suddenly the king stood up before her and stabbed his sword into the dragon's neck. Valiantly, the king twisted the blade in the wound and, ripping a gash

through her scales, jammed it up to the hilt into the dragon's throat. Deep in shock, Greudnax had to release the fiery storm she had built up inside her chest. She turned and breathed heavily at the king, but no infernal blaze shot forth. Instead, a few flames hissed and sizzled through her throat wound. Then, unexpectedly, Greudnax's entire chest blew up, sending flesh, ribs, scales, and bits of incandescent ichor flying through the cavern at us all.

So died the red dragon Greudnax at the hands of King Edwix I, the Night Harrow.

Burymir 17—Talasar, from a later account: I witnessed a strange activity among the druids. Immediately after a messenger arrived, the druids sacrificed a lamb. They spilled its blood into a large cauldron, which the Great Druidess then used as a *crystal ball*. There, in the troubled fluid, she saw the mangled carcass of a red dragon. Beside it stood an orc chief. He dipped his sword into the beast's ichor, raised it, and with ugly cries exhorted his followers to revenge. I assumed that the king's quest had been successful.

For the next several hours, the druids worked around the cauldron, bringing various ingredients from the forest. When the brew was ready, the Great Druidess blessed it, and all present partook of the beverage. Nyanga and I were invited to join. It gave us strength, so much that I could wield my hammer with unusual ease. The druids planned to battle the orcs, and there would be no survivors among the defeated. We set out at once.

By nightfall, we had reached the savage horde. The battle was brief but deadly. Against us were many hundreds of orcs, ogres, and trolls. The orcs, infuriated by the death of their living idol, showed no fear of the druids and displayed great cunning in their tactics. Despite their knowledge of the forest and their powers over the forces of nature, many druids died. Pepo did well with his wooden mallet, and I saw him bash to death an ogre who hadn't seen him coming.

At the height of the battle, something odd happened. The sound of a hunting horn echoed through the forest. Fog rose from the ground, allowing our force to retreat up a small hill. Suddenly, bears, eagles, stags, boars, wild cats, black wolves, and even clouds of buzzing insects charged the orcs. Leading them was a ghostly knight with antlers.

Buckling before the wild charge, the orcish horde finally escaped down a small trail. I learned later that spirits of the forest had changed the path and led the orcs to a deadly cliff. No one could see far in the mist, and the entire horde met its doom over the ravine's jagged rocks.

Burymir 18-Haldemar: Ariovix and Voxpopulix somberly carried their wounded king. He hadn't uttered a single word since his battle against Greudnax. The other two said little more. By luck, we saw no sign of the orcs. We reached the druids' camp this inglorious afternoon.

The Great Druidess was waiting, standing among her entourage. Ariovix helped the king to his feet. "Great Druidess," he said, "the time has come to return to thee my father's sword and shield, for I have sinned in my quest. The beast has died, but fate allowed the hand of strangers to disgrace my endeavor. And for this, I long to embrace the spirit of Breig."

Whispers rose among the druids. "The honor is yours, Edwix, son of Othual. You have done well. The land flourished under your rule, and so will it bloom again. Your wish will be granted, O King of Robrenn."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. How could they part with such a great man? All this clerical mumbo-jumbo irritated me to no end. A horrible feeling of guilt and doubt clutched my heart. Desperate, I stepped forward and cried, "Great Druidess! I must respectfully object!"

Angry muttering rippled through the gathering, but I plunged on. "I ask you, who else but Almighty Breig could have led us to defeat your foes? Was it not She who cleared the way to King Edwix? Was it not She who guided my hand at the heart of the battle? This was Her will. I see no disgrace here!"

The Great Druidess silenced the crowd. "Your intentions are noble, O Wizard, but this is not our way. There are other matters than the death of a beast. In time, all that lives shall die, and all that died shall be reborn. Indeed, it was Breig who guided your hand- but She desires he who embodies Her land to stand by Her side. You shall take the sword, the shield, and the story of Edwix to his palace at Eyf, and present them to the son of the Night Harrow, for it is time for him to be king."

Burymir 20: It was with no pleasure that I greeted the rising sun this day. Ariovix led us to the great hall at Eyf, where we met the king's son. Our host knew what to expect when he saw his father's sword and shield.

My actions caused this young man's sorrow, and I was powerless to ease his pain. He took the sword and shield and placed them before the throne. He then gazed into my eyes, looking for a sign, but it was he who bore the sign, for I could see in his eyes the dark, intense look of his father. Truly, the father was reborn.

The young monarch finally left to mourn. I was lost in sad thoughts when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Ariovix stood by me. "Grieve not, my lord. You listened to your heart. You who scorn the Immortals should understand that they weave your fate and wove that of others before you." He handed me a braid of black hair, bound in a golden cap. "He wanted you to have this, and remember. Leave in peace, O Prince."

"At the song of a mage
"She roared all her rage,
"But the daughter of Nytt
"By a king met her blight.
"As her blood soaked the earth
"A new lord saw his birth,
"For the King of Robrenn
"In Breig's arms shall remain."





Eusdria

Burymir 23, AY 2000: No more than a day after the events in Robrenn were concluded, we reached a fortified city southwest of Eyf. According to the Saragón Gazetteers, this was the capital of Eusdria, a pious realm of knights and paladins whose main enemies were the humanoid tribes of Yazak. I sent Raman as an envoy to announce my visit, and he came back before nightfall with a message of welcome from the king.

Burymir 24: I ordered the *Princess Ark* to be made visible again and approached the city's main place. Lady Abovombe, Talasar, Myojo, and I were to meet His Majesty, King Sigismund. A solid guard of knights awaited us, keeping the crowd away from our lifeboat. They all wore dull red armor with black and gold tabards. We were greeted by the castellan in the castle's main hall, but as we prepared to enter the king's hall, the knights in red armor suddenly turned against us.

There was little we could have done; the knights were too many and too close, and resisting would have certainly cost the lives of my companions. I decided to go along with things for now. Perhaps we would soon discover the reason for this treachery. We were placed in shackles in the castle's dungeons.

Shortly thereafter, our cell was visited by a knight- a Heldannic knight! I should have known. "It seems that what five Warbirds could not accomplish, a provincial ally did all on its own," he said to us. "It is only a matter of time now before you will pay for your villainies against the Order." He turned to Talasar and concluded, "You, among them, will live the longest. You will wish you had

died with that Warbird you destroyed. I shall take care of you personally." He slapped Talasar in the face and walked away. Myojo hissed with rage.

There was no point in remaining here any longer. The knights had failed to remove all of my belongings; under my cloak, I still had a pouch that contained my wand of disintegration. Abovombe was kind enough to kick off her shoes and reach for the pouch with her bare feet. Eventually, she managed to get the wand and lift it to my hand. It pays to have dexterous toes!

The rest was easy. The knights expected us to be in this cell, so I had the chance to find the king and teach him a lesson. Myojo would remain with me, while Talasar and Abovombe were to return to the ship.

Unfortunately, the plan was only half successful. Shortly after Talasar and Abovombe escaped through a balcony of the main hall, a squad of guards surprised and captured Myojo and myself. These were well-trained guards, although different from our earlier captors. They wore normal steel armor with blue tabards, and they knew nothing about us. Immediately afterward, the knights whom we had first met came in, and an argument developed; there was clearly tension between their two leaders. The captain of the guard arrived and inquired about the commotion. Eventually, it was decided that we were to be kept under guard of the "blue tabards" until a council could be held. The "black tabards" seemed rather angry at the decision, but bore it.

Burymir 24- Talasar, later that day: The *Princess Ark* was gone when we escaped from the palace. Three Warbirds swooped over, not seeing us, sailing full speed toward the southwest where we caught a glimpse of the

Princess turning invisible on the horizon. She was ready for battle, but we could not intervene.

We turned back to rejoin our companions, but it became evident that the admiral and his aide had been captured again. We saw the guards take them upstairs in the keep. Lady Abovombe and I agreed to investigate the situation further and free the admiral from his captors.

Burymir 25- Haldemar: We spent the night in rather spartan quarters in the castle's keep. It was a far cry from our earlier dungeon cell, though. At least we had some hope of discovering what was going on.

The captain of the guard came in the morning and led us to the king: a kind and impressive man. I could tell he had elven blood in his ancestry. Fortunately, he had heard of our visit in Robrenn.

Among the people in the king's hall were knights of different orders, including the "blues" and the "blacks," I gathered that the "blues" were the king's personal guard. Several nobles attended the hearing, including a few magistrates and, of course, the Heldannic envoy who visited us in the dungeon.

"Your Majesty," I began, "how is it that a visiting prince from the Empire of Alphatia is treated in such dishonorable fashion? We came in peace and with a message of welcome from Your Majesty."

"Silence, Alphatian dog!" the Heldannic knight interrupted. "You stand accused of piracy and murder!"

The king raised a hand. "Steady, Herr Ulrich. There is the question of a certain message given to Prince Haldemar- a message given in our royal name. We, King of Eusdria, would want this issue clarified first."

The captain of the guard stood up and said "Your Majesty, someone indeed spoke in your name. The royal mayor of the palace received the prince's messenger and arranged for the Knights of Harstal to capture the prince and his retinue. The royal bailiff and the lord of the squires will testify to this."

The king signaled his guards. "Very well. Have the royal mayor arrested at once and brought here for questioning. We shan't tolerate undue use of our Royal Seal: Several nobles muttered in anger as the king postponed the hearings. The king's guard escorted us back to our quarters in the keep. Our sergeant-keeper turned out to be a fine fellow. He explained that the presence of his men were both to protect the king against foreigners, but also to protect us against foes. It seemed there were long-lasting feuds among many of the factions in the palace. He requested that we swear on our honor to remain in our assigned quarters, and this we did."

Burymir 25-Talasar, later that day: Lady

Abovombe and I had hidden ourselves on the balcony that led to the Heldannic knight's chamber. In the darkness of the evening, we began climbing the north side of the keep to find the admiral, hoping that no harm had befallen him. Soon we heard the Heldannic knight's ranting. We listened.

"What an outrage!" fumed the knight. "How dare they even speak against the mayor! I'll have the captain's head for this." We peeked in and saw the knight was addressing the men who had captured us on our first day here. "Once this Alphatian wizard is dispatched," he continued, "be prepared to act. No matter what happens, keep Morgund near the throne. The king must be removed from power for your order to rise. You shall receive more red steel, as agreed."

This talk of treachery went on for some time. We had to reach the admiral at once. Alphatia had no business in this affair, but anything benefitting the Heldannic Order could only mean trouble for Alphatia.

Burymir 26-Haldemar: The hearing started anew.

Both the royal bailiff and the lord of the squires testified against the mayor of the palace, who was promptly sentenced to the dungeons. He was dragged away, claiming he had been framed by the captain of the guard.

The Heldannic Knight then stood and said, "Your Majesty, these people are notorious pirates. Clearly, they have come here to seize Your Majesty's treasure. It wouldn't be above this wizard's ability to forge your Royal Seal or to have the mayor of the palace framed as a way to escape. It is a disgrace to see that the captain of the guard and his cronies are using this opportunity to damage their rival's longstanding reputation of loyalty to Your Majesty and to the Kingdom of Eusdria!"

"We are not pirates!" I objected vehemently. "We are a legitimate vessel of Her Imperial Majesty's fleet. We are here only to establish a diplomatic link between Your Royal Majesty and the Empire. We are the ones being stalked and attacked by the Heldannic Knights!"

The knight laughed. "Ha! Listen to this fiend talk! He has become an outcast in his own nation. He has been rejected by the very Empress Eriadna herself and forever exiled from his own empire. He treacherously attacked a Heldannic Prowler on a mission of peace over the coast of Hule, the Heldannic skyship being mercilessly obliterated after it had stricken its pennants, thus murdering all aboard! How could anyone trust such a criminal? Your Majesty, I beseech you in the name of the Heldannic Order to have these brigands executed at once!"

The king's face became grave, "Is it true, Prince Haldemar, that you are guilty of such an act?"

I nodded. "Heldannic vessels had been stalking us for a long time. The Heldannic Prowler refused to heave to after our warning shots, and then used a magical power that almost destroyed our vessel. We had no choice but to prevent this magic from being used again. This was indeed a tragic episode, Your Majesty, but in times of war, incidents such as this one are bound to happen."

The king sighed. "We see no evidence of treachery so far. However, since you cannot prove your absolute innocence, you will have to leave this kingdom at once. True justice cannot be rendered today."

The knight stood up and said loudly, "Ah, but it can, Your Majesty! There is a way! The Eusdrian Code of Chivalry allows trial by combat. The Immortals will see that the culprit is punished. I demand a duel by the sword with this pirate!"

The captain of the guard raised a hand. "Your Majesty, His Highness, the Prince of Haaken, cannot possibly defeat a knight by the sword. There would be no honor in this duel!"

The king was solemn. "Indeed. Well, then, the Code of Chivalry allows one who cannot fight to chose a champion! What say you, Prince?"

Of course, I immediately chose Myojo. He would be more than capable in this situation. The king accepted this and postponed the fight until the next dawn.

Burymir 26—Talasar, from a later account:

It soon became evident that we could not enter what we suspected to be the admiral's quarters. We spent most of the day trying to find a way to get around the guards in the hallways, but the place was too well guarded. Both the king and the admiral seemed out of reach. At last, we decided to return to the Heldannic knight's chambers. If all else failed, we could capture him and trade him later on for the admiral. The knight left the castle in the evening, and we followed him.

He went to a tavern where he spoke to a wench wearing a hood. He gave her a vial and left. We attempted to capture him in a quiet street, but we discovered that he was a good warrior; he resisted my magic and fought well. We wounded the man but did not capture him. The noise of the fight attracted far too many bystanders, and we had to retreat.

I could only think of one more thing we could do. Razud had no following in these lands, but a land of knights must certainly follow some

friendly Immortals. There were many temples in the city. Perhaps Razud would show us a path there.

Burymir 27—Haldemar: All parties were at the site of the duel. Skittish horses with jousting lances and bardings were ready for both parties, but the Heldannic knight was nowhere to be seen when the time came.

He arrived a bit later, with some help from a squire. The man bore a bandage around his chest and looked pale. "Your Majesty, I was treacherously attacked last night by followers of the pirate. I am powerless against their poison, and thus unable to fight this day."

"You must then choose a knight champion," announced the king calmly. "The fight must take place, for today the Immortals watch!"

With a grin, the Heldannic knight responded, "Your Majesty, I see only one knight here whom I can trust. It is your sword that will bring the truth. I choose you as my champion!"



There was an uproar. The captain of the guard begged the king not to fight, as it would be to the death, but the king accepted. It was a matter of honor. The king requested and received a moment of peace in his tent so he could prepare for the battle.

Indeed, the fight took place. Myojo was tremendously worried and embarrassed. He could not possibly bow out, yet he was requested to strike a king. The battle began. The king soon forced Myojo off his horse and continued the combat on foot, where both displayed great swordsmanship. This was a very short fight, though. No more than a few strokes into the battle, the king suddenly dropped his guard and Myojo's blade hit him an inch above the heart. The king fell without a murmur as the crowd roared. The captain rushed to his help, promptly carrying him back to his tent. We quickly learned that the king was dying- the second king whose death would be on my hands.

The Heldannic knight smiled tightly at me. "You seem to have won, wizard. What a shame."

A stuttering noble seized this tragic moment to claim his right to the throne of Eusdria. Behind him stood the Knights of Harstal, who wore the red armor. "The King is dead! I, C-count of Harstal, thereby c-c-claim my right to be the K-k-k- . . . my right to the throne!"

"Not so, dear count!" A knight who had been standing on the sidelines since the beginning of the duel now walked over and stood before the count. He opened his helm. He was the king! What magic was this? How could he have died by Myojo's sword, then stand here in a suit of armor?

Clearly the king understood everyone's confusion. "Indeed I died, count, but there are many things in my power. You will have to wait your turn to rule this land. As far as these "pirates" are concerned, Herr Ulrich, my death warrants their innocence, since it proved you to be wrong. I order you out of my kingdom at once."

Burymir 28- Haldemar: When at last I was allowed to see the king at the palace, I discovered both Talasar and Lady Abovombe sitting near him. "Prince Haldemar," he said jovially, "you have two very loyal friends. By chance, it seems, they reached the Temple of Tiuz and revealed what they had overheard in Herr Ulrich's chambers. The temple reached me with a message of warning against Morgund, my servant, who meant to slay me if all else failed. She was found in her chambers last night with a dagger and vial of blade poison."

He then offered Lady Abovombe and Talasar quarters in the palace where they could rest. I was left alone with the king, and we relaxed as he explained at length what a predicament he was in. King Sigismund

was very powerful from his use of cinnabryl, whose potencies he detailed for me. The red metal gave him unusual abilities, such as the power to create an alchemical ego that allowed him to dodge death.

Through the Heldannic knights, the king found a steady supply of cinnabryl- but he also suffered an unfortunate dependence upon the knights' services. Worse, the Heldannic envoys were gaining influence among his knights by offering them red steel. If the Empire of Alphatia could provide the king with a cure for cinnabryl addiction, he would gleefully outlaw the Heldannic knights from the Kingdom of Eusdria. Otherwise, he could only struggle behind the scenes to oppose Heldannic influence. His nobles were growing restless, and he could count on only a dwindling number of loyal knights for his defense.

Until such time as I could help him, I was to leave his lands, for he could not guarantee our safety within Eusdria. He was a wise and noble man, this King Sigismund, for he could see how his own thirst for power was leading him to his doom and to the ultimate corruption of his gallant kingdom.

Renardy

Burymir 28, AY 2000: After our misadventure in Eusdria, I almost forgot about the arrival of the end of this year. The crew was a bit gloomy, being so far from home. I suggested to Talasar and Lady Abovombe that they organize a night of revelry. Everyone then got very busy, hanging garlands and paper lanterns and setting up tables. A marvelous smell soon rose from the galleys, and smiles began to show on some somber faces.

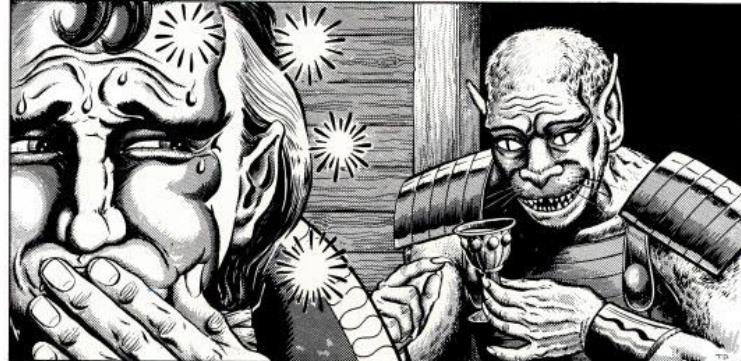
The celebration of the new year's eve was indeed memorable. The ship's band played marvelously well, adding a touch of magic to their own talent. Lady Abovombe and I opened the ball, quickly followed by officers and their partners and finally by the crew. By midnight, several barrels of punch accomplished what several days of furlough couldn't. The polite festivities of the evening turned into a cheerful carnival, especially after Leo unveiled a chest full of confetti bags, rolls of streamers, toy flutes, and ridiculous gnomish hats with feathers, pom poms, and other garish things.

They were an instant hit, but they left a horrendous mess on the deck. I myself concentrated on more upscale pleasures, enjoying some wonderful sparkling beverage from Glantri. I discovered that I knew the steps of a square dance I had seen in Cimarron County. Things got a bit fuzzy after that. It was Myojo who kindly helped me back to my quarters, I think.

Nyxmir 1, AY 2001: The sound of gigantic waves crashing on the deck, as if from a storm, woke me up that day. The roar was unbearable. At the thought of water on the decks of the *Princess Ark*, I jumped up, bumping my head on a joist. It felt like Talasar's mighty hammer falling upon an eggshell.

Forever cursed be thou, Immortal patron of hangovers! I should have never looked at anything Glantrian. That was no storm outside-only the ship's boy sweeping heaps of confetti off the deck, as I discovered with a few shouts from my room.

A thunderous knock at the door then rippled through the cabin, shaking the windows and echoing forever in my head. I staggered over to see who dared disturb my agony. "Haaken-san, the city of Louvines is in sight," Myojo said briskly, neatly attired and brushed. After a moment, he added, "You look pale, Haakensan. Glantrian sparkling wine is no good? Please try ancient Myoshiman hangover medicine." My good friend left, then re turned to hand me a tiny glass of his native medicine: saké. Soon, nausea was added to my throbbing migraine.



Slightly green-faced, I went topside to observe the city Myojo had named. Perhaps fresh air would do me good. I saw two crewmen still snoring away, one perched on a mast and the other's lower half hanging out of an empty barrel. I also found Talasar, who looked rather shabby as he rubbed the back of his neck. I couldn't tell anything about Xerdon's condition, as he was bending too far over the railing.

Raman returned from a quick visit to the capital of royal Renardy. "Your Highness," he said, sweating heavily, "King Louis IV is expecting you to visit today at the palace. He was very excited by our arrival." He looked very queasy and added hurriedly, "May I return to my quarters now? I feel a bit fatigued." Without waiting for my answer, he ran toward the head, holding his belly.

No one volunteered for this diplomatic visit, of course, so it had to be Talasar, Myojo, and myself. I heard several sighs of relief behind my back as we boarded the lifeboat.

A crowd of Renardois- why is there always a crowd?- awaited our arrival. They cheered. They applauded. We cringed. Some of the Renardois even howled, as hounds apparently made up the majority of this crowd. I feared for a moment we had run into a werewolf lair, but these dog-people looked friendly. Ah, yes, lupins they were. Good fellows, if only they could yowl more quietly.

Myojo hissed when he saw and smelled the lupins. "Shut up, you!" muttered Talasar under his breath.

At last, we arrived at the palace. Great brass horns announced our arrival, the horrendous sound echoing interminably through the courtyard and the hallways. We reached the throne room and the king, feeling barely alive.

"Ah, *cher Prince!*" cried the monarch, arms wide and a broad smile on his lupin muzzle. "*Bienvenue* to Louvines! *Sacrebleu*, you look so tired! Ah, but of course, eet must be zee navy food. Please honor my table. Our chef, he has prepared zee best banquet for you. *C'est magnifique!*"

There was food. There was wine. Then there was more food and more wine. A bottle of Glantrian sparkling

stuff came around again. Much to my surprise, even the king sounded Glantrian- how could that be? The *pièce-de-résistance* finally showed up: a glazed boar with an apple in its mouth, stuffed with marinated pheasant *du chef* and potato-soufflé à la *Barbassone*. We gorged ourselves as best we could.

The king then stood and proudly announced this year's Boisjolis-Nouveau vintage would be offered to all, an amazing first that overjoyed everyone but myself and Talasar. Queen Fifrelyne whispered to me this great vintage was normally served only after the Brotherhood of Vintages had determined which wine was the best of Renardy. This Boisjolis-Nouveau was the king's family pride, his true *joie de vivre* (and, no doubt, soon to be my *coup de grâce*). The king was breaking with tradition to honor our visit. I knew I should be grateful, but . . .

The king clapped his hands and called out, "Bring le Boisjolis-Nouveau at once!"

There was a crashing silence.

The king's steward bent down and muttered at the king's ear, too loudly to keep his secret a secret. "*Votre Majesté*, le Boisjolis-Nouveau- eet is gone!"

Flabbergasted, the king replied, "*Comment? Plus de Boisjolis-Nouveau! Vite, vite! Retournez à Clairvaux!*"

With astonishment, the other nobles added, "*Morbleu! Quelle horreur! Trahison! Aux armes! A la guillotine!*"

The royal lupin guards trotted off in all directions. Gongs rang. Horns bellowed. In dismay, the chef threw his cap on the floor. The king walked away, furious, loudly voicing an endless stream of colorful imprecations. The banquet ended in total chaos. We promptly retired to our chambers so that Talasar and myself could hide our tortured heads under the pillows.

Nyxmir 2: A soft knock at the door woke me, early in the morning while it was still dark out. Queen Fifrelyne entered quietly. "Please forgive this intrusion, monsieur," she said. "I had to speak to you about what happened yesterday. You see, this wine is much more than it may seem. It is a symbol of prestige and power in Renardy. My husband is too proud to see you again after yesterday's humiliation. Worse yet, he fears that he'd become the kingdom's laughing stock if he sent his knights to seek the wine. I can hear the words of the town criers now: "Royal knights on a quest for the holy vintage!" Only you could find the wine without compromising my husbands honor. Please, I implore you, find what happened to this wine and who was behind this treachery. I fear this might lead to a dark conspiracy."

How could I refuse? This lupin lady had a way of batting her eyes that went straight to my heart. I agreed to

look into the theft, and she left quickly. She didn't want to be seen alone with me.

Later that morning, I took a stroll by the king's cellar. There, Mordicus, the royal steward, explained that he had left the cellar locked. The lock had been forced open during the banquet and the barrels stolen. Someone had them loaded on a wagon under cover of darkness, after a load of 13 barrels of Château Médor had just been delivered next door.

Mordicus knocked at a large barrel that sounded hollow. "*Parbleu!* There eet is! They took all twelve barrels of the king's precious wine instead of zee empty barrels. Eet's terrible! In a few days, the Brotherhood of the Vintages, they will meet again and the king, he will not have his wine. The king, he made a bet with Monsieur le Duc d'Ysembragne that his Boisjolis-Nouveau was better than Monsieur le Duc's Château LaFifi-Trotteschild! If he loses the wager, oh la la . . . Madame Fifrelyne, she will be very, very angry with him."

Looking around, I found footprints in the cellar's soft ground. They looked like goblin-style hobnailed boots. In shock, Mordicus gasped, "*Mais Monsieur, comment... Des gobelins, ici? Saperlipopette!*"

Indeed, this was very fishy business. So far, I had three suspects: the Duke of Ysembragne, who had something to gain from all this; goblins; and the owner of the Château Médor vineyard, who delivered the wine and stole the barrels. Mordicus identified this wine as coming from a vineyard in Ysembragne, past the village of St. Vézy. We had at least one link!

I needed Mordicus' help as a guide to reach St. Vézy. Mordicus suggested that his younger nephew, Croche-Patte, come with us, as the latter knew many people in the shadier circles of Louvines. For my own safety, I brought Myojo as well. Myojo hissed upon meeting Mordicus and Croche-Patte, and Croche-Patte growled, but politely so, and he apologized immediately after Mordicus jabbed his nephew in the ribs. Myojo then sniffed, and Croche-Patte snorted. As for Talasar, he had gone off with a group of nobles for a visit to the Great Wall of Louvines. I envied him for a moment. He was getting off easy this time.

Nyxmir 3: We quietly went through St. Vézy and found the path to Château Médor. The lord of the mansion, Monsieur Ducroc, received us. He explained his two retainers came back from their trip to Louvines, having been beaten up by dwarves a few miles before the bridge there. The dwarves then stole their wagon, horse, and wine barrels. Monsieur Ducroc was very surprised when he received payment from the royal reeve for receiving the wine shipment.

We questioned the two other fellows about the dwarves who attacked them. "Well, *M'sieur le Prince*," said the first, "the dwarves, they were ragged, a bit skinny with a sickly green skin." The second added, "*Oui, oui, M'sieur le Prince*, their beards, too, they looked full of moths!"

We saw none of the king's barrels in the cellar. Without any other evidence to the theft, we had to follow the goblin lead. We reached the site of the fight before evening, near the bridge of Louvines.

There, Croche-Patte recognized the odor of the two beaten retainers from Château Médor. He also identified the odor of goblins- not dwarves. The goblins had obviously been wearing shabby disguises. But there was not one set of wagon tracks- there were two, both coming from the general direction of St. Vézy. The first set went no further than the bridge and then doubled back, while the other went on, presumably to Louvines and back, then headed north. There was no way to tell if the tracks had been created at the same time. On the other hand, the tracks were the same depth, which lead me to believe both wagons had been loaded at all times. Also annoying was the stench of wine spilled on the river bank, near the spot where the second set of tracks doubled back.

What had happened? The extra set of wagon tracks was very suspicious. Presumably, the tracks that went to Louvines would have been the goblins'. But whose was the second set, and why did it come as far as the bridge and then double back? It had to be our two fellows from Château Médor. So they lied, since they obviously returned with their horse and a loaded wagon to St. Vézy. I was beginning to think the goblins and the two fellows were in cahoots from the beginning. But what did goblins have to do with this? In any case, we still had to recover the wine, which I assumed was in the goblins' hands. And I had a hunch it was not the Boisjolis-Nouveau that had been spilled on the bank.

Nyxmir 6: Mordicus returned to the palace to help prepare for the gathering of the Brotherhood of Vintages. Croche-Patte, Myojo, and I went on. Croche-Patte had no difficulty dogging those tracks, which were as clear as if the goblins did not care if they were followed. The wagon tracks crossed the army trail north of Château-Roan and went east to the River of Dreams. Fortunately Croche-Patte had brought a set of herbal masks to protect us from the effects of the Plain of Dreams' amber lotuses. We reached a small camp of goblins just as evening fell.

The few goblins there hadn't a dog's chance of defeating us. They gave only token resistance and surrendered rather quickly, except a couple who managed to escape on their dire wolves. We had to move on, fast,

for these two would be back with reinforcements. Those goblins we interrogated knew nothing.

We discovered 13 barrels nearby. Twelve bore the mark of the King's Boisjolis-Nouveau, which brought a sigh of relief from Croche-Patte, and one had the mark of Château Médor. The latter was empty, however. It had contained wine several days ago, since the barrel wood was still wet with the beverage. Instead, this barrel now held four shabby dwarven disguises, goblins' weapons, and a large sack of Renardois silver coins. The king's wine was untouched.

Perhaps the thirteenth barrels contents had hidden the goblin's silver. I did not recall of any silver being stolen from the palace. So, whose silver was that? Someone must have paid the goblins; was it to steal the king's wine and let them keep it?

"*Scrongneugneu!*" said Croche-Patte, lost in his thoughts. "*Comme c'est bizarre.*" We had to leave at once. The 12 barrels were hastily loaded on a nearby oxcart, and off we went.

Nyxmir 6- Talasar, from a later account: The admiral had been gone for three days with no news from him. Later this day, I met the duke of Ysembragne, who was visiting the king. He inquired about the admiral and was surprised of my lack of information. He said his troops had reported seeing the admiral cross the border into goblin land. The duke thought the admiral had gone on a private goblin hunt, which was not an uncommon thing among nobility. Seeing this was not the case, he said he would arrange for reliable warriors to help me determine the admiral's whereabouts.

Indeed, by evening, a group of the duke's knights offered me a horse. We rode north toward the spot the admiral was last seen. The knights seemed confident that the admiral and his companions would be found.

Nyxmir 7- Haldemar: What I had feared the most was beginning to happen: Croche-Patte's herbal masks were drying up. The substance in the herbs protected us less and less from the *sleeping* effects of the amber lotuses, and Château-Roan was still some distance away. The heavy wagon was slowing us down. Without warning, my horse collapsed, as its mask no longer protected it. Our plan was going to the dogs.

As we debated what to do next, a howl rose in the distance. The goblins were following the wagon's tracks. It wouldn't be long before they would catch up with us, awake or asleep.

Radical problems demanded radical solutions. We tied the barrels together and threw them into the river. The barrels had only slightly more buoyancy than rocks.

We whipped the ox and horses away, hoping to mislead the goblins, and grabbed the barrels. Slowly, we floated downstream. At least the goblins would have a tougher time getting to us.

The plan worked for a few hours. Alas, the masks were truly failing us. Myojo was already deep asleep; Croche-Patte and I were having a tough time keeping awake and holding on to him. Then a large raft came into view downstream. Unfortunately, it looked like some goblin-fortified river barge. We tried to maneuver around it, but I fell asleep just as our barrels bumped into the raft. I felt dog-tired.

Nyxmir 8- Haldemar: No goblins here! I woke up this morning among a group of large tortles. One of them bowed slightly, holding his wrist up to his forehead much in the fashion of mystics. These were missionaries sent by the grand abbot of Dunwick on a quest to convert the impious goblins. They belonged to a lawful order of tortle mystics. The raft was theirs. By chance, they had recovered all three of us and the precious barrels. They expected an attack from the goblins, however, as goblin scouts had seen the tortles retrieve us from the water.

The raft was an interesting device. Within the fortified part of the raft were four oxen. Two were harnessed to a horizontal wheel that drove a paddle-wheel through a series of pinions and shafts, while the two other oxen rested and fed. The bunker protected the oxen from projectiles and the cursed river's plants. Clever, as long as the paddle-wheel worked.

That point made, a burning projectile suddenly hit the back of the raft, setting the straw on fire. Two tortles ran out of the raft's wooden bunker to put out the fire, and several more arrows came down. Amazingly, one tortle demonstrated an incredible ability to deflect arrows with a stick. The rest bounced off the shell on the other tortle's back. As if the goblins were angered with the tortles' performance, a furious shower of flaming arrows followed. Both tortles then retreated into their shells, and the arrows bounced off them harmlessly.

The fire was getting worse, though. Soon we lost our steering and ran aground. A pack of goblins mounted on dire wolves

quickly charged onto the boat. The tortles fought like none I'd seen before. They didn't run very fast, but they didn't need to: Anything within reach of their legs, arms, or sticks was destined to be bashed, chopped, or thrown into the air. One of the tortles hid within its shell, and each time a goblin or a wolf peered at an opening, a deadly blow would shoot out, followed with a heart-felt scream of "Hay-yah!"

"Copycat!" murmured Myojo when he saw this.

A heated battle was on. More goblins rode onto our stranded raft. Suddenly, cheers rose from behind the goblins. There, Talasar and a company of heavily armored lupin knights charged into the goblins' rear, brandishing the banner of Ysembragne high above their crested helms. Losing heart, the goblins retreated.

The paddle-wheel and steering devices were hastily fixed, and off we went, slowly sailing down the River of Dreams alongside "*les chevaliers du duc*" and my loyal



friend, Talasar. We reached the walls of Louvines in the night. Mordicus greeted us at the dock, overjoyed by the recovery of the royal vintage. “*C'est formidable, non?*” he cheered, “We'll make a winestomper of you yet!” One of the tortle mystics asked if we would make a donation to the order, obviously eyeballing one of the barrels. Mordicus sighed, “*Oh et puis zut!* Just don't tell anyone.” Thus we parted with our tortle saviors.

Nyxmir 9: The precious barrels had been returned to the king's cellar just in time, for the Brotherhood of the Vintages was meeting this morning. I, however, still hadn't gotten a clue as to what exactly had happened.

Someone knocked at my door. It was one of the tortle mystics. “Your Highness,” he said, “I believe you have been fooled. Why, no later than this morning, we stopped at a tavern in Louvines and sampled its wine before returning to Dunwick. Lo and behold, its wine was no better than the Boisjolis-Nouveau we had yesterday. Come to think of it, it tasted very much like it.”

With all due respect to King Louis, this Boisjolis-Nouveau you gave us was not what it used to be. And how could a tavern already have some anyway?”

Mordicus and I rushed back to that very tavern, where we discovered the owners were selling Château Mé dor wine that they had legally acquired “weeks ago.” That's it! It was the missing clue. This Château Mé dor was the same wine that now filled the king's barrels. Of course, the two “roughed-up” retainers were in cahoots with the goblins, to whom they must have paid that silver. Both parties came together, each with a load of thirteen barrels of Château Mé dor. The goblins indeed stole the 12 barrels of the king's vintage, then switched barrels. They poured the king's vintage into Château Mé dor barrels, and vice versa. For this they needed an empty barrel—thus some wine poured into the river. The goblins then went north with their payment and their phony barrels of Boisjolis-Nouveau, while our two fine fellows returned home with the king's wine, marked as Château Mé dor.

Why? Mordicus knew. Monsieur le Duc d'Ysembragne had probably engineered all of this to win his bet. The trail to the goblins was after all not all that difficult to follow—a bit risky, yes, but not impossible, as we had demonstrated. Monsieur le Duc wanted us to find the phony wine and bring it back to Louvines. Château Mé dor had never won an award from the Brotherhood of Vintages, and it seemed clear it wasn't going to win one anytime soon, as it was rather average. If the jury of the Brotherhood sampled that wine instead of the true Boisjolis-Nouveau, they would surely not give it any award, thus allowing Monsieur le Duc to win his bet with his comparatively excellent Château LaFifi-Trotteschild.

In addition to this, the sample marked as Château Mé dor, which belonged to the Duke of Ysembragne, might even win the award this year, adding insult to injury. *Voilà!*

Of course, it would be best not to involve Monsieur le Duc, since nothing could be proven. We had to rush back to the palace. The Brotherhood of Vintages was in the process of sampling all those wines—including the ones with the wrong labels! We had to act at once! With horror, I discovered how the competition was set up. Hundreds of anonymously numbered samples sat on a huge table in the throne room. There was no way to tell which sample was whose. More samples came into the room, on trays carried by the king's servants. I had an idea.

I had Croche-Patte don servant's garb and carry a tray to the table. There, he would sneeze violently, at which point he would tuck a corner of the table cloth into his belt and walk away. Those samples would be ruined, and the competition would have to start over.

While Croche-Patte went to do his worst, Mordicus and I went to the cellar where samples were secretly numbered by the Brotherhood. We had to get the wines switched back to their rightful barrels—a tough task, since no one but the Brotherhood could now enter the cellar.

Invisibility helped us both. Once inside the rather dark cellar, we rolled two of the mislabeled barrels around the cellar, playing hide and seek with the members of the Brotherhood working there. One confused brother saw my barrel at several different spots in the cellar. He looked at that barrel every now and then, walking away muttering and scratching his head. Eventually, we found a quiet spot with an extra empty barrel where we could switch wines. For the moment, one single barrel of each vintage would do. Soon after we returned the barrels to their proper spots in the cellar, word came that all the samples had to be redone and renumbered, as some fool upstairs had utterly ruined the current session. Grumbling and growling, the members of the Brotherhood went back to work.

Nyxmir 10: “And zee winner is... an exquisite although discreet, delicate yet rustic, flowery if mellow, fruity albeit dry, light but not too much so, historical vintage that we unanimously enjoyed and which therefore earned our unequivocal preference without zee shadow of a doubt. And so, eet is our honor, and doggedly so, to award in zis Year of AC 1001, by zee grace of St. Mâtin and Malinois, zee Golden Leaf Award to... Madame la Comtesse de Marmandie's excellent Côtes du Grognes! Other nominees for the Golden Leaf Award will be posted at once.”

Monsieur le Duc and King Louis stared at each other in total amazement, then both stood up at once and marched over to the list. Both the Boisjolis-Nouveau and the Château LaFifi-Trotteschild were listed among the other nominees. The king called the archbishop of the Brotherhood of Vintages and demanded to know which of the two wines was best.

"*Votre Majesté*, eet is not customary to rank nominees, as eet is honor enough for a vintage to be listed. In our eyes, we feel all nominees to be of equal quality and enjoyment. You should be pleased to know that your entry, this *je-ne-sais-quoi* of amber lotus and ever-so-slight aftertaste of St. Vézy vine stock, was absolutely, hmmp, *délieux!* This unique and original blend might win you another golden leaf, *Votre Majesté!*"

So ended this day in Louvines. King Louis was satisfied that no bet was lost and that his vintage had come so close to winning. The bet with Monsieur le Duc had not been revealed, and no harm to either party had come from it. Queen Fifrelyne was greatly relieved that the honor of her royal husband was safe, and she quietly rewarded my help by permitting unlimited furlough for the crew and a free load of that excellent vintage, Le Boisjolis-Nouveau. At last, all was quiet in the Kingdom of Renardy—at least until next year.

Bellayne

Nyxmir 18, AY 2001: Soon after loading several barrels of genuine Boisjolis Nouveau from Renardy into the Princess Ark, our mighty ship steered to the southwest. Several days passed as we continued our exploration of the Savage Coast. The term "savage" has little bearing on the people who dwell on these shores, yet their societies have remained very fragile, nevertheless. Massive Hule looms to the northeast. Far to the north reign the barbarian hordes. Great tribes of humanoids hold the Yazak Steppes. There is cinnabar, too, the vile substance that gives power but corrupts its user. All this could sweep the coast, brutally returning these budding kingdoms to lawlessness and the darkest barbarism.

As I reflected on these possibilities, Myojo informed me that we had reached the southernmost cape of a kingdom called Bellayne. He was excited, for he had heard this was a nation of rakastas. Surely their queen would have heard of our performance in Louvines. This presented a problem, since the Renardois and the Bellaynish were bitter rivals. We might be perceived in Bellayne as lupin sympathizers, and therefore suspicious visitors.

So be it. The *Princess* was made invisible, and I decided to disembark with Myojo and Raman, going incognito as travelers from Dunwick. We would visit the countryside and observe the people of Bellayne, which would be helpful later should I decide to meet their queen. It wouldn't do to commit an unfortunate faux-pas on our first visit there.

I chose an old ruined castle as our landing point. The gloomy fortress stood over a cliff, overlooking the Western Sea in the sunset. The Saragón Gazetteer indicated this to be Castle Malburn. It would be an easy spot for Talasar to find. As we left the ship, I ordered Talasar to keep exploring the coast- and especially to

keep moving. There could still be Heldannic prowlers in the sky, looking for an opportunity to lash out at the *Princess*. Talasar was to return in two days. We would spend the night there and begin our visit in the morning.

Nyxmir 19: Something terrible happened during the night. We awoke to find our old friend Raman dead, with neither any sign of a fight nor any wound on his body. Had he been killed during his watch? Who could have done this,



and why? He had an expression of horror on his face, his eyes wide with fear. He reminded me of the man we found dead in Slagovich- the one called Pustek, if I remember it. We never knew what had happened to him. Was his fate linked to that of our Raman? The Master might have been behind this, but why Raman and not me?

There was little we could have done for our friend. With pain in our hearts, we wrapped Raman's body and his beloved books in his blanket, then placed them inside a large barrel. Once the barrel was covered with stones, we somberly left. We would recover the body when Talasar returned. A few hours after our departure, a farmer on his way to Theeds picked us up on his cart.

Time unknown- Raman, from a later account:

"Hey, what happened? Where am I?" My words echoed in the dark. I thought I must have fallen asleep during my watch. I'd had a horrible nightmare in which the ghost I met at the Tower of Mercy in Vilaverde had found me. She attacked me again and again, moaning "Revenge... revenge..." I woke up just as she struck the final blow, and a chill ran down my back.

The sun hadn't come up yet. Good, I thought, I had not been asleep too long. I must have somehow wandered away from the ruins. I started to return and check the safety of my two companions, but it was dark and I had difficulties finding my way back.

Nyxmir 20- Haldemar: Theeds-upon-Blythe was a city like many others we had seen on our journey. The majority of its people were indeed rakastas. Humans were not uncommon, including polite locals, quiet merchants from Dunwick, brash bankers from Smokestone City, and refined exporters from Boa Mansao. There were even a few elves and dwarves, probably Eusdrians, and a handful of native halflings. The latter seemed perfectly suited to Bellayne's orderly ways.

We entered a small tavern called Ye Olde Shoppe to rest from our journey from Castle Malburn. "Tis not opened yet, milords!" said the rakasta innkeeper. "The meat pies aren't ready."

"I beg your pardon," I responded, "but we are tired from our journey. We hoped to find rest and refreshment here."

"I'll say!" intervened the serving wench. "You can't possibly send our guests out this way! 'Tis almost tea time, my dear!"

"Great Cats, you're right! Steam the kettle, love. I'll fetch the crumpets at once!" said the innkeeper.

"A cloud of milk, milord?" asked the wench of Myojo. "And where might you be from? I don't know

your accent. Dear me, of course, you must be from the Forest Marches, true?"

Wide eyed with confusion, Myojo muttered, "Yes... yes... Forest Marches."

"Truly amazing," she went on. "One lump or two? I never met the forest folks. I always pictured them with green overalls and feathered hats, you know. Any kippers? Or a slice of pudding, perhaps?"

"You are annoying our guests, love," intervened the innkeeper. "Let them rest, and stoke the fire, please."

The folks of Bellayne seemed a friendly people. The day went on in this way as we visited the city and learned about its people. But nothing could truly ease our hearts after the death of Raman. I could still not understand it. It was so sudden and meaningless. I wished I could still see his face and hear his voice.

Time unknown—Raman, from a later account:

Something was terribly wrong. The sun had not risen for what seemed an eternity. There was no castle to be found. The cliff was gone, and so was the sea. Could have I wandered so far to be this lost? I kept running into crisscrossing dirt paths and bare rocks. The trees here had nothing in common with what I had seen before. This was too confusing.

"A penny for your thoughts, Raman," said a voice behind me. I turned and saw her, the ghost I first met at the library in Porto Preto. However, she now wore the leather cuirass of an adventurer and held a serrated sword. Her skin bore the red mark of cinnabryl. "Welcome to my world, old sage," she said with a wicked smile.

"Your world? What world?" I asked.

"Have you not found out yet? You disappoint me. Come now, old sage. This is your last discovery. This is Limbo, my dear, and you are the merest reflection of what you once were. You are mine now."

"You lie, fiend! This is all trickery!" I responded, feeling a terrible sense of coldness in my spine.

"Spare me. You failed me once and now I've come to make you my servant—and serve you will, old sage, for I need your soul to guard my grave." She brandished her sword. An evil glint came from its blade as she turned into a vile, crimson spectre.

I screamed in horror and ran. The nightmare would not end. Many times she found me cowering behind a rock or trembling in the shadow of an ethereal tree, but I was lucky and escaped her for some time. So it was true—I was dead, dead and lost in Limbo.

Nyxmir 21—Haldemar: Despite our depression, Myojo and I saw that Bellayne was a very likable place, except for the food. It seemed no real enmity existed

between the Renardois and their feline neighbors, other than a natural dislike of each other. A question of taste, I guess. At least they had common foes in the north, and that alone kept them from the worst. Their queen, Her Gracious Majesty Catherine "The Lioness," is both honored and beloved of her people. She was seen as a strong and wise ruler, which was what I wanted to hear. This place seemed pleasant enough, but it was time to return to the *Princess Ark* and give Raman a decent burial, then to mourn our loss.

In Limbo—Raman, from a later account:

account: In my flight from the red spectre, I discovered a strange place that looked like a city. All was dark and crooked, as if the very forces of Chaos had built its streets and houses. There were people there, many people, the souls of lost creatures like me, all seemingly stranded there. Since I was dead anyway, there wasn't much I could lose, so I entered and explored this bizarre place.

Nobody seemed to mind my presence. There were shops selling various baubles, tools, and weapons—but no food. Indeed, I felt no hunger. Like any other city, it came with rather obnoxious folks, pick-pockets, haughty lords, and beggars who looked shrivelled, as if the light in their souls was fading. One faintly begged me, "Have pity, master. Have pity for one who withers. Please, bestow me with the gift of life, and I'll serve you, my master. A mere shred of your life . . ." I kept moving.

I found what looked like a twisted hostelry, where I rented a room where I could rest. The keeper, probably another lost soul like me or perhaps a deceased innkeeper himself, asked for his dues. I dropped a few coins on the desk; I seemed to have all my old clothing and items, even in death. The innkeeper looked up, surprised. "A newcomer, eh?" He blew on the coins and they dissipated into thin air. "Your wealth is no more in the world beyond. I request your true wealth."

"And what might this be?" I asked nervously.

"A mere shred of your life, stranger," he said, pointing to a vial. "Touch here." I did, and a cold sensation crept up my arm. I felt a bit more tired. So this is what a "shred" was! In this world, only one's lifeforce had any value. I'd better learn quickly how to use it. I went to my quarters.



I was happy to discover I still had my trusted library scroll, and it worked. Perhaps this was a mere reflection of my true books, but I could still browse. How long would it last? I had no way to tell.

I spent a very long time there, alone and quiet, studying what little information I could dig up on Limbo and its laws. The city was a safe haven, but also a backwater, for it led nowhere. Many souls ended up there, afraid of Limbo's wilderness. Those who were strong of heart and faithful to their Immortals could find a way to eternal rest, somewhere beyond this Limbo. Others cowered in the City of the Dead, safe perhaps but stranded until they decided to meet their fates.

Someone knocked at my door. A tall figure stood there, wrapped in a long black robe with a hood. It whispered, "You seek escape, human. I can sense it."

"What do you want?" I inquired.

"I know what you seek, and I know where it lies," it hissed.

"What do you know of what I want? And what does it matter to you? Begone!" This character was truly disturbing.

"Your companions are grieving," it whispered again. "They await your return from beyond."

"No one can leave here. What happened has happened. Now go away."

It slowly shook its head. "Not so, human. There is a way. You can return to your friends, and I know how."

It dawned on me that perhaps this could lead somewhere. "And you'll reveal to me your dark secret if I pay you—don't tell me—a shred of my life!"

"Five, human. Five shreds of your life, or darkness forever," it whispered.

"Prove to me first that you don't lie! I will not let go of my life so easily!"

The gaunt soul breathed deeply, then whispered, "In the City of the Dead, no one can cheat on a pact. The law of the Immortals binds me to my word."

"So be it. Tell me your secret, and I will pay you."

"Seek the rock on which an obelisk stands. Beyond, at the bottom of the fallen bridge, lies a gate. It leads back to your world. Go quickly, for your time now runs faster."

The gaunt creature grasped my wrist with a skeletal hand. I could see spectral flesh materializing slowly on its bones as it drained my lifeforce. Then it left, quietly and mysteriously. I felt very weak, and I could see in a mirror I had faded a bit. This was troublesome. I had to move on. It seemed to me I had been here for over 10 days already.

Nyxmir 22—Haldemar: At last we recovered Raman's body and returned to the ship. Consternation overtook the crew at the sad news. Talasar began to prepare the mourning ceremony and the last prayers for Raman.

His remains were brought to the chapel, and incense was lit around them. A few candles were all that brought light to the chapel. The crew entered one by one to pay their last respects to Raman. Later that night, the officers, Lady Abovombe, Myojo, Nyanga, Leo, and myself remained for an eve of mourning. Talasar then began the prayer for the dead.

In Limbo—Raman, from a later account: At last, here it was—I had found the obelisk! From where I stood, I could see a fallen bridge below. I started scrambling toward it when I heard a familiar voice.

"And where do you think you are going, old sage?" The red ghost was there, standing in front of me. "It took you some time to get here. I thought you would never

leave that city. Your five shreds of life felt so sweet, old sage! How kind of you to bestow me with something so dear."

This evil soul had lured me out of the city's protection. I had no hope of defeating her now; I was too weak. I knew the pact was still good, but I would have to reach the gate first.

Again, she turned into her dreadful spectral incarnation and approached. Other voices then rose in the distance. Faint at first, they grew in strength. I could have sworn I recognized Talasar's voice among them. It was compelling me to move toward the bridge.

The crimson spectre screeched and charged, her sword raised to strike me. Suddenly she stopped, dropped the sword, and fell to her knees, screaming in pain. She had hit a magical barrier around me, like some sort of protection from evil spell.

"Cursed be thee, cleric of Razud! Cursed be all your crew!" croaked the crimson spectre. I had no wish to hear more. I ran to the gate, and all became black again.

Nyxmir 23—Haldemar: The night of mourning was over. It was time to return Raman's mortal remains to the care of the sea by the light of dawn, as demanded by naval tradition. The crew stood at attention as Raman's shrouded body was placed on the plank. Talasar uttered his last prayer and farewell when Ramissur blew his whistle to signal Raman's final departure, with two long, saddening notes.

Suddenly, Raman's body lurched, moaned, and sat up on the plank. Frightened out of their wits, the sailors holding the plank screamed and accidentally dropped the plank overboard—along with Raman's body!

Ramissur immediately dove overboard to recover our friend. By some miracle, Raman had come back to life, barely avoiding another death by drowning this time. Pale, exhausted, and visibly shaken, he was brought back to his quarters a mere shadow of himself. After a long rest, perhaps he could tell us whatever it was that happened to him. Until then, Talasar would remain with him at all times. There was no telling what might come from beyond to reclaim his soul.

Nyxmir 24, AY 2001: After Raman's return from beyond, I decided to quietly drop Xerdon at the gates of Leominster during the night. I then ordered the *Princess Ark* back to Malburn Castle, where she was made visible again, 300' above a lighthouse. Xerdon would announce my visit at the palace. I hoped that everything would work out well.

Nyxmir 25: A Vilaverdan warship sailed by and attempted to attack our vessel. Its ballistae could not reach us, and soon our foe made for the open sea. This short episode surprised me. Here was a foreign warship openly hostile to a visiting ship from a neutral power within waters under Bellayne's control. Even so, the vessel came and went with total impunity, like a privateer.

Nyxmir 26: Xerdon returned from Leominster alone, riding a curious creature that was part horse and part cat. He bore news from the queen. He could not meet her directly, but her advisor told Xerdon I was invited to a hunting party tomorrow, at the palace of Uxington. Xerdon felt a certain suspicion of us on the part of the rakasta establishment, but the hunting party seemed legitimate, since many at the court were chatting about it when he arrived. It was an event, planned weeks ago, that no self-respecting noblecat at the court would miss. I accepted the invitation and steered northwest, inland, toward the royal palace.

Nyxmir 27: We arrived late in the morning. Many noblecats, the queen, and her retinue had arrived the day before. Rakasta ladies played with wool balls on the front yard, and noblecats took lazy strolls in the palace's many gardens, watching the birds in the trees. Others quietly catnapped near the fountains, purring in the warm sun or casually playing with the fishes. An occasional guard patrolled the area. The atmosphere was very relaxed.

I came with Myojo in hopes that his presence would ease the suspicions I expected from the queen. Soon after our arrival, we were shown to our quarters. Hunting horns echoed through the hallways early in the afternoon, and everyone gathered in front of the palace. Servants held the mounts while noblecats climbed onto their saddles. At last, the queen appeared with her guards. Hunters brought the dogs, then played a hunting song on great brass horns. Everyone was ready.

The queen rode up to me. "We are pleased to see you among us, Prince," she said, then glanced at Myojo for a moment and frowned. She then looked back at me and added with a smile, "We hope you will enjoy the hunt. The fox has been found."

She then rode toward the other noblecats, and everyone lined up with her. That's when I heard a low hiss nearby. Myojo and I turned around and

faced an unexpected problem. There, riding a large sabre-tooth tiger, was a visibly angry rakasta dressed in every way like Myojo. This was no Bellaynish noblecat. It seemed we had just encountered an envoy, perhaps an ambassador from Myojo's homeland, the moon Myoshima. And he obviously recognized Myojo, who was now regarded as a traitor by his people.

The hunting horns bellowed again, and the dogs were released. Everyone rushed after the pack. An old rakasta noblecat, whom I was later told was Duke Purceval of Pawcester, rode at my side for some time. "Her Majesty is in a joyful mood again!" he said, laughing. "Today she decided to hunt the fox. This is meant as a joking insult to the King of Renardy."

"How so?" I asked.

"King Louis's symbol is the fox!" he answered. "This is a bit unexpected, though. Her Majesty usually does this when a Renardois ambassador comes on a visit, but I don't see any lupin among us."

Avoiding this latest topic, I asked, "What do you normally hunt?"

The duke turned and gave me a blank stare. "Well, what else? The giant rat! They infest Uxington Woods. That's why the palace was built here."

Of course. Why did I even bother to ask? The hunt went on until I discovered Myojo no longer rode behind me. The Myoshiman envoy was also missing. After riding around the woods with the duke, I finally found them, facing each other with swords poised for a duel. Neither of them paid any heed to my words. The last thing I wanted was to lose Myojo or create a diplomatic incident at the queen's palace. As I considered what magic would stop them both, the queen rode up to the scene.

"It seems we arrived just in time. Now, now, gentlecats. We do not wish to see violence on such a nice day. And we do not permit duels in Bellayne," said she.



Artwork by Terry Dykstra

"Your Majesty," answered the Myoshiman envoy, "This wretched individual is a traitor in Myoshima. This is a question of family honor. Allowing him to go freely in your kingdom would be an insult to our emperor."

The queen looked at me with inquisitive eyes. I intervened, "My guard Myojo has acted wisely and bravely in a difficult situation. He has remained an obedient and faithful servant of Imperial Alphatia. I see no need for retribution, Your Majesty."

The queen was clearly embarrassed and couldn't make a decision either way. "Well, then," she declared, "You must resolve your quarrel in a civilized manner. It is our wish that you compete in the upcoming Tatterham-Glenswych Derby. He who arrives before the other will decide who must leave."

The brass horns sounded in the distance. "Your Majesty," said the old duke, "we mustn't miss the quarry."

"Very well. Carry on, Milords!"

Nyxmir 28: Tatterham lay just a stone's throw from Uxington Palace. A great crowd occupied the center of Tatterham before the race, and many chariots with those strange cat-horse creatures cluttered the streets. Admirers asked questions of their favorite drivers and placed wagers. Every charioteer bore a banner representing his master, including representatives from every dominion of Bellayne as well as Vilaverdans, Texeirans, elves from the Barony of Savaria, tortles from Dunwick, Avarican bards, and participants from Slagovich, Gargona, and faraway Yavdlom. The queen's team arrived, resplendent with its six-mount turn-out and a red-and-gold chariot.

Our rival, the Myoshiman envoy, arrived just as we applied to enter the race. The whole thing had been organized by the Leominster Tymes, a guild of minstrels interested in creating a new sensation in the kingdom, some sort of traditional event that would take place every year. The grand prize was 500 pounds of gold and a seat at the queen's banquet.

Our first difficulty was to find a chariot and suitable mounts- or so I thought, until a minstrel walked up to us and proposed an arrangement. He represented the Theeds Royal Heralds, a rival of the Tymes. He could make a chariot available provided that we would take him with us on the race. He would act as a storyteller extraordinaire, observing all that happened during our journey in order to later entertain those people who couldn't come themselves (the guilds were not permitted to join the race on their own).

We later received an invitation from the duke of Pawcester to stay at his palace for the night, where we briefly ran into the Myoshiman envoy. Myojo later

explained the envoy belonged to the Kitahara clan, which was related to the Myoshiman emperor. The envoy certainly knew all about the history behind Myojo and his defection to a human's service, and our meeting was cold beyond what little formalities were exchanged.

Amphimir 1: We found Puttsworth, our minstrel from the Theeds Heralds, and our chariot. The latter had been freshly painted with the Haaken colors, to which Puttsworth had added those of his guild. I wasn't enthused about the clashing and somewhat disrespectful result, but it was a bit late to do anything about it. All participants had gathered at the starting line by early in the afternoon.

We saw Kitahara, his Myoshiman bodyguard, and another rakasta whom Puttsworth described as a lowlife working for the Oldsbury Sun, a rival guild. The bodyguard was arguing vehemently with the "lowlife" about the sun symbol painted over Kitahara's clan colors on their chariot. The envoy was not amused, and I sympathized with him.

Horns echoed in the streets; the race was about to begin. The crowd massed along the route, forming dangerously narrow passages for the chariots. At last, the Tymes official waved the starting flag. The crowd cheered. With wild cries, the charioteers urged their chariots lurched forward and raced en masse down Tatterham's main avenue before separating into smaller groups to take the side streets. Fortunately, Puttsworth proved an excellent guide.

Soon, we reached the fields outside the town. Puttsworth opted for a northern route through Uxington Woods. It was a dangerous passage because of the giant rats, but it was otherwise shorter than the trip through Wallingford and Theeds. I noticed Kitahara's chariot several hundred yards ahead of us. He, too, had chosen the forest route. This would be a tight race.

Before long, we heard shouts ahead. The Myoshiman team had run into a large pack of giant rats. All three rakastas were tearing through the rodents with their swords, but it was certain the rats would soon get the upper hand if we did not intervene. Surprised, both Puttsworth and Myojo gazed at me when I decided to help our rivals out. But they followed my lead and drew their weapons, and soon the squeaking, crawling mass was reduced to cat food.

With the battle done, Kitahara grunted and bowed briefly. With a haughty expression on his face, he motioned us to pull ahead, his way of being thankful. As we drove away, Puttsworth murmured (practicing for later recital; I thought), "And so, in the name of fair play, the noble prince of Alphatia came to the help of his rival, perhaps at the cost of his own victory. In response to this

gesture, Lord Kitahara stepped aside to show his gratitude. The race went on."

Rather than doing all that in the name of fair play, I was hoping to gain an edge on Kitahara. He owed us one now. Perhaps this could help defuse our dispute. I had no quarrel with Myoshima, and neither did Myojo. He had not meant to betray his masters by becoming my bodyguard and friend.

We reached the village of Rockburn later that night, where we rested.

Amphimir 2: We left Rockburn early. Late in the day, we finally reached Oldsbury. All would have been fine except that a band of ruffians grabbed our mounts and attempted to push us off the chariot.

As we fought, Puttsworth shouted these were supporters of the Oldsbury Sun who were going a bit too far to ensure their team's victory. Kitahara arrived about then and brought his chariot to a halt. The lowlife riding with him vehemently exhorted the Myoshiman envoy to move along, but he just stood there, coldly looking at the supporters. They quickly got the message and let go of our chariot.

I guess Kitahara was simply returning our previous day's favor, a debt of honor. Well, then, I could only show the same attitude and motioned him to go on ahead of us. He lifted an eyebrow, grunted haughtily, and rode away with his team without a word or a smile. Nevertheless, I began to understand how to deal with this Myoshiman. He was all honor.

"I say! I can't believe this! How could you?" argued Puttsworth.

"My dear sir, courtesy goes both ways. Bellayne is, after all, the land of sportsmanship-isn't it?" I said.

"Oh . . . well, never mind," he answered.

Amphimir 3: We were still riding our chariot after nightfall when rain began to pour. Soaked and exhausted from our journey, we finally stopped at an old tavern just past Bromstow. Several chariots were stopped at the front, left there by other competitors who had decided to rest, too.

The old tavern was a large, abandoned structure at the edge of a dark wood. It had a dozen rooms on the upper floor and a single large room on the ground floor. Water leaked through the rotten thatch. Between cobwebs, dust, and darkness, the place bore a sinister look. Rumors had warned of the existence of many haunted mansions in Bellayne, indicating something odd about this kingdom.

An Avarican bard roasted a hunk of wild boar in the fireplace, while a Garganen chariot driver played his lute.

Several people later moved upstairs while their teammates remained in the main room. Our small group began to wind down, quietly keeping a close watch on each other as the fire dimmed to crackling embers. Lightning soon flashed outside, and the wind howled as a thunderstorm rocked the night. A window shutter began to rattle. The wooden ceiling creaked. I had difficulty falling asleep, my gaze wandering the room.

Then I noticed Myojo's sudden attentiveness. He opened his eyes wide, his ears pointed up. Other rakastas copied him, staring at something in the air near the chandelier. The Avarican, the Garganen, and I looked at each other. Our daggers slowly came out.

Kitahara's lowlife then leaped onto the table, evidently trying to reach some invisible creature. Whatever it was came near Myojo, who tried to paw it. Kitahara's bodyguard then sprinted across the room, almost running into the front door when he slipped on the wet tiles. Puttsworth, poised to leap with an expression of utter excitement on his feline face, suddenly trapped something on the floor with his paws.

I threw aside my blanket and moved in close to see . . . a fly. A fly?

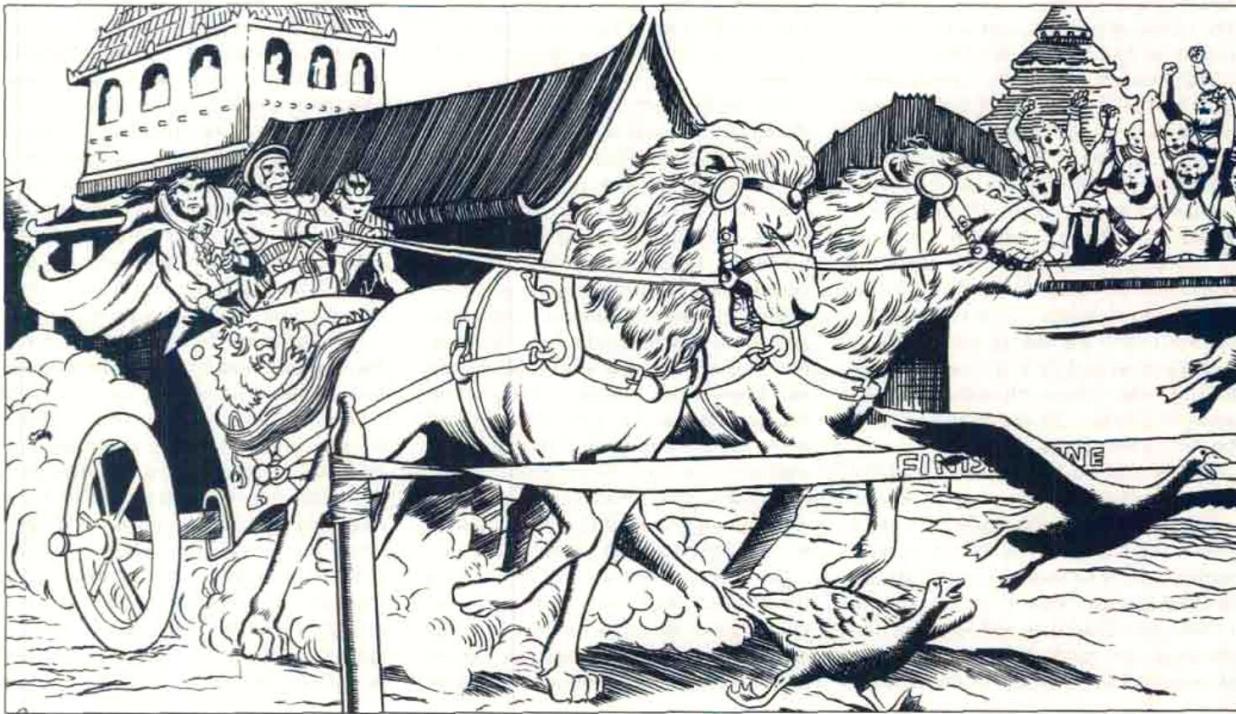
Puttsworth then noticed all three of us humans watching him. "Oh. Sorry," he said. He released the fly, which pitifully crawled away for its life, and returned to his spot near the fireplace. Myojo looked away, innocently licking at his paw. The other rakastas looked as if nothing at all had happened.

Cats. I should have known.

Amphimir 4: Thanks to Puttsworth's guidance, we avoided Norchester altogether and cut overland toward the Felfolk trail. This allowed us to catch up with the derby's leaders. We reached Felfolk just after nightfall; this was a small village, with a few hundred people at most. All of us ended up at Felfolk's sole tavern. No leaky roofs this time, and at least we had some decent, warm food. The innkeeper served beer, cider, port, and tea, with milk for the younger rakastas. We enjoyed a far more relaxed atmosphere for dinner than at the "haunted" cottage.

The Earl of Penwick had thoughtfully sent men-at-arms from Norchester to ensure the safety of the derby participants and their mounts. This relieved us of the need to watch the chariot and allowed a good night's rest. The final stretch of the race would take place the next day, so we would have to get up early. Everyone wandered back to their rooms or to a spot near the fire in the main room.

Half-asleep in the middle of the night, I blinked and saw Myojo sit up and watch something intently. "Leave that fly alone, Myojo," I muttered.



He slowly unsheathed his sword, which lay by his bedside. "No, Haaken-San. No fly. Someone creeping in hallway." He breathed. We both got up at once.

He tip-toed to the door, with me close behind, and opened slowly it a crack. Right across the hallway, three rakastas wearing dark outfits and red steel claws were furtively entering Kitahara's room. Myojo gazed at me for a moment, and I motioned him to go in. He quickly nodded and went after the nocturnal visitors—who turned and saw him, their blades drawn.

Almost instantly, the sound of the fight awoke the inn's patrons. It was brutally fast, with the three intruders against the two Myoshimans and Myojo. Kitahara's bodyguard was badly wounded, but Myojo's intervention undoubtedly prevented Kitahara's death. Before I could get off a spell, the three intruders were dead, and Myojo and Kitahara were tending to the bodyguard.

The constabulary arrived almost immediately afterward. The sergeant examined the aggressors and declared these were outcast rakastas, probably spies, from Leãoça, a Vilaverdan colony to the south. These three were wanted in Bellayne for a previous assassination. Why they attempted to eliminate Kitahara? I suspected Vilaverde's ties to the Heldannic Knights had something to do with this. After all, Heldann and Myoshima were not exactly friends.

Myojo had earned some respect from the envoy. Kitahara would not show it—he couldn't—but I knew Myojo had scored points. The envoy bowed slightly and

returned to his quarters. No other event interrupted the night.

Amphimir 5: By sunrise, our chariots had already begun the last part of the race, thundering down the trail toward Glenswych. It was a wild dash to get the lead. Chickens, geese, and other small and unwary farm animals were mercilessly trampled on the road. Peaceful peasants turned into a furious mob when a hay wagon was run off the road into a muddy pond by the wild chariot horde racing down the road. Whips cracked with growing rage as the town drew nearer.

On the last mile, the tortle team cut ahead of my chariot, sending it off on a side path. Before we could get back on the track, our mounts bolted toward a small farm. Thinking we had found a short cut toward Glenswych, Kitahara steered after us.

Our wagon flew over a bump in the path, knocking us all off balance. Out of our control, our mounts then headed into a series of large coops, flinging into the air thousands of mice! We were crashing through a large mouse farm, ruining months-worth of the breeding and rearing of fat market mice. A few yards from us, Kitahara's chariot created its own wave of destruction, ruining hundreds more of the fragile cages. In the wake of the horrendous pandemonium, Puttsworth grabbed a terrified mouse that clutched his sleeve. "I say—a Glenswych mouse. What a treat! I'll save it for later." He stuffed the hapless farm rodent into his pouch.

The good news was that we did indeed open a short cut to Glenswych. The bad news was that Kitahara's chariot took the lead. A few hundred yards away was the finish line. Puttsworth, in sudden fury, whipped his mounts in hopes of catching up with Kitahara. I could hear Kitahara's lowlife exhorting his mounts just as rudely. The rest of the pack appeared around a corner just behind us, skidding on the street's cobblestones and madly jockeying for third place.

Suddenly, a bump on the street crushed a wheel on Kitahara's chariot. It skidded wildly, sending the lowlife hurling into the packed crowd. Kitahara hung on desperately to his uncontrolled chariot. As our chariot rushed past, Myojo grabbed the envoy and pulled him free just before the latter's vehicle slammed sideways into a building and was smashed to kindling. The crowd went wild as we flew past the finish line.

The queen's trumpet sounded the end of the race. Supporters of both the Theeds Heralds and the Oldsbury Sun carried all four of us on their shoulders. It seemed both our teams had won! Kitahara briefly gazed at me, rather embarrassed. The crowd transported us all the way to the queen's stand, in front of the Abbey of Kittings.

"Well, then," she declared solemnly, "we do hereby pronounce both the honorable teams of Alphatia and Myoshima the winners of the derby! Both parties are therefore summoned to the royal banquet this night."

Nice- but this did not resolve our problem. None of us had lost, and so no one could expel the other from Bellayne. I wondered how the queen would solve our little dilemma.

The Leominster Tymes provided Kitahara and I with 250 pounds of gold each. We donated our prizes to the "mouse farmer" on Kittings Road whose livelihood had been so totally ruined as a result of our crazed passage. The crowd applauded, and we were carried to the lord bishop's residence.

The banquet was served later. I cared little for the boiled slice of "stuffed giant rat stomach Uxington," a delicacy in Bellayne. The typical social conversations that could be expected at a royal banquet seemed to go on forever. I caught Puttsworth casually toying with his farm mouse between two courses. The local conversation on our side of the table came to a halt when all the noble rakastas begun staring at the appetizing rodent, hoping it would perhaps run away- toward them. Puttsworth noticed my disapproving look. "Oh- so sorry," he said, pocketing the animal.

Shortly afterward, the queen raised her hand. "The time has now come to solve a quarrel." The banquet's hurly-burly died out in the background, everyone now staring at both Kitahara and I. "Fate has decided to make

both of you the winners of this race. Gentleman and gentlecat, the choice is now yours. You may both leave at once and never return to Bellayne, or both remain at peace in our kingdom. We shall not tolerate any foreign quarrel within our land. You both have proven your courage and your honor in this memorable race. In our eyes, you are both worthy of our royal respect and welcome."

Rakasta noblecats sitting at the table muttered for a moment, nodding their approval of the queen's approach. It was the only possible decision. Lord Kitahara then stood up and curtly announced, "The presence in Bellayne of the Lord of Haaken is acceptable to us." He bowed ever so slightly in my direction- and in Myojo's, which was most amazing. This meant personal respect from a lord toward a member of lower social standing. By Myoshiman standards, this was almost unheard of.

It was my turn to repay the courtesy. "It was an honor and a pleasure to race by the side of Lord Kitahara's courageous team, and we, the representatives of Her Imperial Majesty of Alphatia, hope that our journey remains a sign of friendly sportsmanship for all. We are satisfied with Lord Kitahara's decision and wish him a pleasant stay in beautiful Bellayne."

Old Duke Purceval raised his cup, "Here! Here! To the victors!"

Despite Kitahara's continued relative coldness, this turned out to be a memorable banquet. At last, I had managed to speak with the queen about warranties for future Alphatian tradesmen when a certain farm mouse- newly escaped- interrupted our conversation, scampering across the long banquet table. I dare say Her Majesty got somewhat distracted and even took a few royal stabs at the runaway rodent. A hail of forks followed immediately, all the way down the table, until the poor thing leaped from the table and disappeared into a hole in the wall. After giving Puttsworth a very stern look, I managed to regain the queen's attention.

Our mission was soon over. We had discovered first hand the beauty and character of Bellayne. A message was sent to the *Princess Ark*, summoning her to Kittings. We were on our way a few days later. Without a doubt, that Puttsworth fellow would have a few interesting stories to tell his compatriots after our departure. Perhaps I should have asked for a fee.

Herath

Amphimir 11, AY 2001: Our Saragón Gazetteer mentioned something about a wizard's nation, the Kingdom of Herath, southwest of Bellayne. Unfortunately, no capital was shown. I decided to stop at the largest city and send Ashari ahead as my envoy.

She returned a few days later with good news. Although she couldn't reach officials of the royal court, she had come into contact with a noble related to the wizardking, Duke Yaluughu of Ensheya. Ashari had also managed to arrange an audience with the duke, at his palace in Sorodh.

Indeed, I did meet the duke, a very austere and somewhat sinister character with whom conversation was often terse. I finally reminded him I was an official representative of Her Imperial Majesty of Alphatia and that I sought an audience with the wizard-king of Herath. That seemed to embarrass him. He eventually revealed the wizard-king should already be aware of our presence, and if he had wished to see us, we would already know. He later added that the Royal Citadel was located at the center of the king's domain, a thick forest ("a forbidden land infested with horrible monsters").

For a fellow wizard, this was no friendly welcome. Empty-handed and rather disappointed, I took my leave from the duke and returned to the *Princess Ark*. Judging from the "forbidden forest" hint, I was clearly not to go there. I soon got a confirmation of this from Ashari. She had found that the woods in question, the Forest of the Magus, were indeed strictly prohibited by law to the common population. It was a place only nobility was permitted to enter, and only with a royal invitation at that.

I found all this rather rude. I was not the representative of some third rate, petty kingdom-like Herath! I was upset and felt insulted. Well, then, if I could not enter the forest, fine- I would then fly over it!

I ordered a northerly route at once. I may not be granted any favors as a result of all this but, by the Eye of the Newt, I would not be ignored!

Amphimir 11-Baalhoth, from a later account: His Lordship, Duke Yaluughu, summoned me this evening. I was to board the outsiders' flying ship and find out who they were, unveil their intentions, and retrieve any magical secrets. His Lordship provided me with a magical brooch of spying into which I could store all that I saw and heard. I was to report back to the Watcher with the brooch, after my mission.

I began my duty after a quick prayer at the Temple of Enebaan. I cast a spell of *invisibility* and approached the outsiders' flying skiff. The sailor noticed nothing. Soon after my arrival, the outsiders' commander returned with



his rakasta guard and they boarded the skiff. I followed. We reached the outsiders' flying ship just before nightfall, when I began exploring the large vessel.

Amphimir 13-Haldemar: At last, we found the citadel. I didn't want to antagonize the wizard-king further and decided for the moment it would be best to keep the *Princess Ark* visible.

I signaled the citadel's guards I was coming down, and they formed a double line and stood at attention. Their trumpets announced my arrival. The guards all wore high pointed hoods and sinister black robes that covered their entire bodies. Of all visitors, of course, I would be the least prone to be impressed by such a display. I went on by them.

I met the Viscountess of Berevrom, a lady of great beauty and mind. She was far friendlier than the duke. She apologized for His Majesty, saying he was busy at the time and could not receive me. She showed me to my quarters and verified that I was comfortably installed until such time as I could meet the wizard-king. I saw very few people in the palace other than the hooded guards. A magically animated table knocked at my door, bringing a cup of steaming tea and a few pastries. The viscountess

returned with an invitation to the wizard-king's dinner that evening.

The evening came soon enough, and guards escorted me to the banquet hall. There, three dozen nobles and their spouses sat at a large table, along with the viscountess. They were mostly humans, with a few lupins and rakastas. Strangely, none of the last two seemed the least annoyed of each other's presence at the same table. In fact, a deadly silence filled the room.

The wizard-king and queen arrived shortly thereafter, and everyone rose. He quietly motioned everyone to sit down. Still, no word had been uttered in the entire hall. The queen clapped her hands twice, and a wooden statue came alive, playing a lute. A group of magical trotting tables then entered with food and beverages. The high point of the dinner involved the serving of large, plump houseflies the size of fat chickens. Everyone picked up sharp silver tubes, inserted them into the flies, and, with great delight, began noisily slurping out the juices. Courtesy demanded that I go along with the other guests. Could it be worse than stuffed mice à la Uxington? (It was.)

After no word had ever been spoken, the wizard-king and queen left and everyone returned to their quarters. The magical trotting tables began cleaning the remains of the feast, occasionally grunting and fighting for leftovers.

Amphimir 13—Baalboth—from a later account: This ship is truly wondrous, although it presents a difficult endeavor for spies. I soon learned to stay away from the floors, since they create glowing marks around footsteps. Fortunately, the wooden bulkheads were no match for my eight claws, and I could easily cling to them and to the ceilings and move unhindered. The stairways, also magically protected, forced me to waste precious *dispel magic* spells to get through. I heard the outsiders' officers utter magical words before entering certain areas, and I concluded some doors were also enchanted. I quickly followed them into those rooms I wanted to visit.

After long hours of poring over an immensely revealing log book in the quarters of the outsiders' commander, I examined a big gem, a fiery topaz of great value. Surely, it must be the magical stone mentioned in the entry dated Andrumir 15 in Jaibul. The Watcher will be pleased with it.

An outsider female then unexpectedly entered the room. Surprised, I dropped the precious stone. The female



did not see me but noticed the gem fall to the floor. She looked perplexed, then began moving back toward the door. I picked up the gem as she turned back, and tried slipping past her, but she caught one of my legs in the door. I screamed.

The female immediately started slashing wildly with a short sword she had quickly drawn, wounding me badly. Some of my ichor stained the floor, and the female sounded the alarm. I had to flee, triggering almost every magical ward in my way. I then ran into a row of heavily armed outsiders standing on the deck. Next to them was a tall, hairless outsider with a big hammer. I hate big hammers. Seeing my ichor spilling on the deck, the bald outsider cast a spell that negated my *invisibility*. Almost instantly, the other outsiders started firing *lightning bolts* at me.

Fools! Their aim could not match my superior agility. I leaped out of harm's way and clung to the underside of the ship. I immediately secreted a long strand of silk and began descending toward the forest. I had to warn The Watcher I had been seen.

Amphimir 13—Xerdon, from a later account: A monstrous creature was aboard the *Princess Ark* late this night. Lady Abovombe reported she had heard some noise in the admiral's quarters and went to investigate. There she saw an object fall to the floor for no apparent reason, which it seems had been held by an *invisible* creature that Lady Abovombe wounded shortly thereafter while it was caught in the doorway. The alarm was sounded, but the creature escaped. It appears the creature stole a precious object from the captain's quarters. Nyanga and I are going down into the forest to pursue the creature.

Amphimir 14—Haldemar: At last, I had a chance to meet the wizard-king. He pointed out that he was a busy man, but he would do what he could to accommodate me. We discussed that which wizards often enjoy to chatting

about. He said he was an astrologer by profession and could see in the stars some of the great events of this world. He gazed at me for an instant and added he had seen in the stars the end of a great empress. Treachery from an ancient mountain wizard threatened her rule. He said perhaps I had something to do with this, and I should return to Alphatia to seek out the danger. Then he burst into diabolical laughter. Surely, this was a joke. There were no mountain wizards threatening Her Imperial Majesty. There couldn't be.

The meeting came to an end, and I was asked to leave. The wizard-king needed to work on a complicated problem of astrology, and he required absolute silence and tranquility. The viscountess escorted me back to the tower on which I had originally alighted, and she bid me farewell as I climbed aboard the life boat. The leaving seemed too easy. There was something very odd about the wizard-king's jest. This monarch seemed decidedly too suspicious to me, and I wanted to know more. As the skiff flew back toward the *Princess Ark*, I instructed the sailor to keep going and to ask Commander Talasar to feign a departure and turn the ship *invisible*. I cast a spell of invisibility of my own, and flew back to the wizard-king's keep. I was intent on figuring this wizard out once and for all.

Amphimir 14—Baalboth, from a later account: By Yehm, what arrogance! The outsiders have followed me down into the Forbidden Forest. Blasted be this wound that slows me. This will be the outsiders' undoing. I know cousins of the Astafirs have a village nearby. They'll help, I'm sure of it.

Amphimir 14—Xerdon, from a later account: The creature left footprints in the forest's soft soil. A *light* spell prolonged our search into the night hours. We were getting closer to our fugitive when we ran into trouble. A magical illusion concealed the terrain before us, which caused both of us to fall into a ravine—or, rather, into a very large spider web in the ravine. Our legs were caught. Three huge spiders approached, while a fourth, wounded, remained aloof. One of them hissed and clicked, "Now you die, outsiders!"

Nyanga glanced at me and asked with a grin, "You be ready; mohn?" His giant blade hummed as he tore a wide gap through the web. We fell heavily into the bushes underneath, as the three spiders reached the gap. Just then I cast a *wall of fire* around the spiders, setting the entire web ablaze. The spiders had no choice but to jump off as well. The rest was standard procedure; the three giant arachnids were soon chopped to bits. The wounded one fled.

Both of us had seen creatures such as these, in the rain forest of Yavdlom and the dark woods of Shye Lawr and Blackheart. Araneas—vile intelligent spiders, deadly creatures. What they wanted with us, I had no idea. But we had to capture the fugitive, alive.

Amphimir 14—Haldemar, later that night: I finally managed to get past the hooded guards and the magical wards that defended the wizard-king. Carefully, I snuck into his quarters. There, I discovered a semicircular door, about 3' high. It was a secret door that someone had considerably left open.

It led to a spiral staircase to the top of the keep. There, hidden under a one-way mirror dome, was a huge spider web. At its center stood a giant spider, gazing at the stars through a looking glass, or "longview." I cast a *wizard eye* and sent it closer to the spider. There it was, watching through its longview, and making notes with little insectlike fingers.

The creature wrote in a language I couldn't read, but I did recognize an old rune. It came from an alphabet once taught to young Alphatian students of wizardry. The rune alluded to Followers of the Fire, ancient foes from Alphatian mythology. More followed, among which I recognized the symbol of Alphatia, the Immortal. I had to unveil this mystery, at any cost.



Suddenly, the web vibrated, like the cord on a lute, but much deeper. The spider hissed and clicked as it put away its longview. Images appeared in the web, near the center. It was Xerdon and Nyanga. What were they doing in the forest? I saw them fall into a giant web, escape, and defeat three large spiders.

The creature I was watching dissipated the image and moved to the edge of the web where I was. I hid in a corner, hoping it wouldn't see me. Indeed, it went out through the open secret door. This was the chance I was hoping for. I crossed the large chamber and reached spiraling stairs at the center, which led up to the web's nexus. There, I stretched up to reach the notes, carefully avoiding the mess of sticky strands. Unfortunately, my sleeve caught some of the web and caused vibrations to ripple all the way out. The spider reappeared at the door—and then fled!

Drat! It will alert the guards. I shoved the notes into my shirt and ran after the creature. I heard a door slam and a lock bolt shut just as I crawled back into the other room. The spider was gone, but the wizard-king stood there, holding a key. He cast a spell that ended my *invisibility*. Beside him, 30 guards aimed cocked crossbows at me.

"I seriously advise you not to make a move nor to utter a word, admiral. These guards are very twitchy. You have come here without an invitation and disturbed my research. Despite all, I have received and entertained you at my court. And you have the gall to return here, like a thief, to spy on my research and annoy my familiar. Worse yet, your men have entered the forbidden forest and harmed my pets. This angers me greatly. I have no concern for what nation you belong to, nor do I care about who you might think you are, admiral. Since you are so interested in Herath, I invite you to extend your stay among us for some time—a very long stay, admiral. Guards, throw this fiend to the dungeons!" I was trapped and defenseless. The wizard-king cast a *web* spell at me, and the guards carried me to the dungeons.

Amphimir 15—Baalboth, from a later account: Enebaan the Wise has abandoned me. I've had no rest since my flight from the outsiders' ship. My pursuers haven't halted their hunt, and they are but a few instants behind me. I am exhausted. The death of the Astafir cousins causes me great sadness. They must be avenged. There is still hope for this. I must reach the citadel. I must keep going. The tunnel is close.

Amphimir 15—Talasar, from a later account: Late last night, the wizard-king's guards treacherously attacked the ship despite our *invisibility*. The wizards in the citadel

must have discovered our presence and directed their troops' fire. I fear the admiral was either discovered or captured in his covert visit to the citadel.

The attack began just past midnight when the guards began firing globs of webbing from the highest towers of the citadel, probably in an attempt to pull the *Princess* down. Failing this, giant spiders attempted to climb aboard, running up the silk strands, but we successfully repelled their assault. Unfortunately, the citadel used a magical shield that absorbed the *Princess*'s breath weapon. It proved only marginally effective against the assaulting spiders. The boltmen now show signs of fatigue after this long night of fighting. The sight of so many giant spiders severely tested their nerves.

The aft sight spotted packs of spiders gathering in the citadel. They seemed to be coming from the forest en masse. They must be preparing for a massive assault. Vats of boiling slime from which the webbing shots came have been replenished. With the sun rising above the forest' the crew finally managed to cut off the majority of the web strands that held us fast despite volleys of arrows. We lost several sailors overboard due to the arrows and stray web strands; those who survived their fall were mercilessly slaughtered by the giant spiders. This is perhaps our last chance to leave, for another assault would certainly crush our defenses.

Alas, I've yet received no message from either the admiral or our hunting team. In the face of the grave danger threatening the *Princess Ark*, I am obliged to order her withdrawal to a safer altitude. I pray to Razud that our companions are safe. I will advise a new course of action as soon as the *Princess Ark* is out of danger.

Amphimir 15—Xerdon, from a later account: It was fortunate that the sky had remained heavily overcast this night, for we would have otherwise lost track of the fugitive. When my magical *light* had run out, infravision revealed faint spots of warmth on the leaves and on the soil, no doubt ichor from the monster's injury. My experience in tracking the woods of Blackheart had again paid off. By sunrise, the spots of ichor and the footprints had led us to a small cottage. We knew the fugitive hid there.

Nyanga kicked the door open, and a woman screamed. There stood a wench whom I took to be the wife of a forester. She had almost convinced us she had seen no monster, but said she had heard some noise in the rafters. As I considered her words, Nyanga noticed blood dripping from her hand. Before I could intervene, his blade swung wide, beheading the wench.

"Eh mohn," he said to my horrified protests, "I be sure de monster spirit be inside her. I be taking no

chances with de magical spiders.” He had a point. The wench’s wounds did look like several deep sword slashes, yet there really was no way to tell. She looked very human to me, even in death. This could mean trouble later.

A search revealed a black brooch, a fiery topaz, thieves’ tools packed in a weblike net, the remains of a pickled house fly the size of a chicken, and a secret passage leading down to a tunnel. It ran for hours. We finally reached the bottom of a dungeon well, just above the surface of muddy, fetid water. Unidentifiable, putrid flesh bobbed at the surface as we forced the tunnel’s rusty grate open. I cast a *dimension door* to reach the top of the well and tossed a rope to Nyanga. Just then, we heard shouting and the sound of people running toward us. Perhaps we had triggered some unseen alarm.

Madly racing down the hallway came the admiral, shouting “Jump back, you fools! Jump!” A few paces behind him followed a crawling mass of huge, repulsive spiders, hissing and clicking furiously. All three of us reached the bottom of the foul pit in no time. Nyanga slammed the tunnels metal grate behind us.

Choking and gagging, the admiral sputtered a spell with such volubility I thought for a moment the spell would fail. But just as the spiders ripped the grate right off its hinges, the *travel* spell took effect. At last, we were back on our way to the *Princess Ark*.

Amphimir 15—Haldemar, epilogue: I

congratulated Talasar and Xerdon for a job well done, as well as Lady Abovombe, without whose alertness many questions would have remained unanswered today. The ship was safely headed north. Xerdon had retrieved from the intruder—the creature called Baalboth—the stolen Jaibuli topaz and a magical black brooch. The latter turned out to contain Baalboth’s comments, magically etched inside—comments that I have entered into my log book at the appropriate spots. I can only hope it really was Baalboth that Nyanga eliminated. It knew far too much about the *Princess Ark* for my own comfort.

From this and what I had seen in the citadel, I must conclude the wizard-king has allied himself with a tribe of araneas, either by common accord or by coercion. Was the Great Magus an aranea himself? I strongly suspect it but don’t have irrefutable proof. Wizards do have strange ways at times.

More interesting were the notes taken from the spider in the wizard-king’s keep. The dungeon’s muddy sludge had ruined part of the parchment, but Raman still helped me decipher the runes that survived. There were hints to waves of magical power being sucked into Glantri, a nation northwest of Thyatis. The wizardking of Herath

had scribbled some concerned comment that perhaps this had to do with the overall impoverishment of mortal magic on Mystara, our “Known World.” I had no idea what he was alluding to, but the thought was nevertheless worrisome. The wizard-king of Herath seemed neither a prankster nor an incompetent fool. I would have to investigate this myself soon. Perhaps his warning should be brought back to Her Imperial Majesty after all.

The Squamous Kingdoms

Amphimir 23, AY 2001: There was a reference in the Saragòn Gazetteer about some savage kingdoms hidden in the dark forests of the Shady River. We had been meandering above those thick woods for a week and had almost given up hope of finding anything when we discovered some structures below.

There was a small clearing in the woods in which several very large mounds of dried mud had been erected. At first we thought they were giant termite colonies, but the painting on the mounds and the size of the entrances and windows alluded to humanoid origins. By our standards this was a large town, considering the number of mounds there.

Moving the invisible *Princess Ark* closer, we observed great activity among the lizard men in the woods. Several lizard men carried the body of a dead warrior on a small bier. From our vantage point we clearly saw the eyes were missing from the dead warrior’s head. Perhaps this was some ghastly local custom.

Some lizard men blew auroch horns and others beat drums, while the bulk of the crowd followed, weeping or looking somberly at the ground as they marched toward the burial grounds we’d earlier spotted from our vantage point. There, they dropped the body into a funerary urn made of terra cotta. They then added weapons, colorful feathers, ornamental trinkets, and other personal effects. The urn was then sealed and was lowered with ropes into a hole in the ground, over which a large flat stone was laid down. Finally, a shaman—an old hag of a lizard woman—painted a regular pattern of symbols on the stone while making bizarre incantations with her raspy voice. From this we gathered these lizard men had some sort of written language—quite unusual for lizardkin.

Raman was ecstatic to be able to observe such a ceremony. The behavior of such a primitive race of nonhumans was of great interest to our sage. He said he would really love to obtain one or two of the urns for study. I found that rather ghoulish, but I could see usefulness in any findings he might make.

Later that night, I sent Raman and several of the crew down into the graveyard. We could observe them from above, aboard the *Ark*, and warn them if anyone approached. Fortunately, the lizard men were diurnal creatures- most were asleep except for several warriors walking the streets around the mounds.

As Raman was loading a second urn onto the lifeboat, a horrible shriek echoed from the lizard-man town. Raman and his crew quickly repositioned the tombstones and hurried back to the ship.

Soon, we found out that one of the warriors guarding the streets had been killed. A number of warriors standing around his body formed a protective circle with their spears, staring into the darkness. They looked terrified. The shaman, kneeling next to the corpse, lowered her torch to reveal a horrible wound on the warrior's face. His eye sockets were now two gaping holes. Perhaps some wild beast preyed on the lizard men. I had never seen such a wound before.

Amphimir 24: I ordered the skyship to a higher altitude while Raman began his study of the two urns. His library came in handy in the deciphering of the symbols. The urns had prayers written on them, and such words as "Be you blessed, O Warrior Ss'akh, for your defense of our ancient city Ah'roog. May the Mighty Ka'ar keep you safe forever."

Both corpses found in the urns were rather recent—no more than three or four days. There was nothing of great value inside the urns. Medicinal herbs had preserved the bodies somewhat. Both bore the same facial wounds as the guard. Further observation revealed their brains were also gone, as if they had been sucked out. What manner of monster could have done this?

We returned the two urns to their graves. After Raman had completed all of his observations, it seemed no one had noticed our visit. I then ordered a course to the northwest, toward a large bay marked on our Gazetteer. I had no wish to find out what kind of monstrosity lay behind the gruesome lizard-men deaths.

Amphimir 25: The sound of flapping wings drew my attention. Just after nightfall, something came straight at us out of the

night. I ordered an evasive maneuver, but that "something" screeched and kept turning back in our direction. It was clearly chasing us.

We heard a thud. Something had hit one of our masts and had fallen to the deck. There, rubbing its head, sat a lizard man— actually a lizard woman. It was the old hag, the shaman from Ah'roog. Next to her lay a giant bat with a broken wing. It was an old thing, with holes and rips in its leather wings. Totally exhausted and suffering from its shattered limb, the poor creature passed away.

A ring of befuddled boltmen encircled the shaman, wondering whether to roast her with their wands or toss her overboard. She began talking in a succession of quick rattles, clicks, snaps, and raspy lizard words. After some I performed some spell-casting, I could understand what she said. Then, pointing a gnarled finger at me, she added "You, I know you. I saw you in my dreams. Ka'ar sent you to help us!"

These lizards were truly strange. She went on, "I am Haz'ar, the wise one of Ah'roog. Ka'ar has spoken to me in my dreams. He told me of you and your wondrous ship. He spoke of the great beasts you once defeated, O Great Hero of the humans."

Immortals speaking of me? To lizard men? Hmm, this did not seem right at all. I invited the wretched creature below and further questioned her. She told me some monstrous fiend had begun stalking the city of Ah'roog about a week ago. The lizard men could not catch it. They lost warriors during the nights to the fiend, sometimes just one, other times up to five or six. All of them bore the same horrible wounds.

Days ago, Haz'ar began having her dreams. She believed they came from her Immortal patron, Ka'ar, and in this she seemed truthful. Her dreams showed the four



eyes of the monster stalking her warriors, and from them came visions of war. These visions, however, she didn't understand. They showed humans fighting humans, the symbol of an eagle in the sunset, and that of a winged bull against a sunrise. Then followed the image of an hourglass tumbling in the night, and always the gaze of the fiend would appear at the end of her visions, as if they had been sent by him.

I was utterly astonished! A chill ran down my back as I realized the eagle and the winged bull could be the symbols of Thyatis and Alphatia! A war? Again? No, this couldn't be. But what was this hourglass? A symbol of times to come, perhaps. Somehow, this fiend was at the center of the puzzle. Surely, it must have been playing tricks on the mind of this old hag. This fiend knew enough about Thyatis, Alphatia, and me to fabricate fantasies and get an obscure lizard shaman to find me. Why? What did it want with me? This was all too strange. I had to find out who or what was behind all this.

I agreed to help Haz'ar find the fiend. With a wide smile revealing the rotten and broken teeth on her reptilian face, Haz'ar fell to her scaly knees. "Praise Ka'ar! Ka'ar preserve us all!"

Alphamir 4: In the days following Haz'ar's visit to the Ark, we disembarked and went to Ah'roog. We heard of a few more slayings occurring near a village called T'lak, and we began our journey north after the fiend. The pattern then continued in the direction of Ryt'takk. The fiend was on the move. Perhaps it sensed we were tracking it. Several times we came close to encountering it, but it always seemed to outguess us and escape safely into the dark forest. At best, we saw a vague shape vanish into the shadows.

Soon we reached the border of the Kingdom of Cay. Haz'ar described it as a nation of cay-men—small, pretentious people, half-human, half-caiman, and about half as tall as lizard men. Haz'ar's nation, the Kingdom of Shazak, was presently at peace with Cay. Perhaps the fiend thought of entering the other nation to throw off his pursuers. Haz'ar insisted she wanted to continue the hunt, for the fiend might return. It had to be destroyed once and for all. So we marched. Unbeknownst to Haz'ar, the *Ark* was flying just above, observing each of our moves. This was very reassuring.

Alphamir 8: Our trail led us to Tu'eth, the capital of the cay-man. It seemed that slayings of cay-man hunters had preceded us by a day or so, and they were happening twice as often now. Already, word had come of more hideous murders within the city of Tu'eth. At least we hadn't lost track of the fiend.

A band of armored warriors riding chariots met us at the entrance of Tu'eth. The diminutive warriors stood arrogantly behind their lizard striders, proudly wearing peacock feathers on top of their scaly heads. One of them, waving his puny little javelin at us, said with a strange squealing and wheezing voice, "Strangers, state your business or succumb to the wrath of Cay!"

Seeing my hand slip to my wand, Haz'ar put her hand on my arm and answered "We come in peace, O noble cay-lords! We seek to slay the fiend that killed the mighty hunters of Cay!" She bowed deeply.

The leader of the cay-men rode up to me, and, with his fists on his hips, stared up at me inquisitively. "I don't trust them. Let's take them to the queen! March ahead, strangers!" We complied.

Cay-man guards on the palisade surrounding the Queen's compound sounded their trumpets when we arrived. We were "loaded" into a large net and hoisted to the other side by a crane. There, the Royal Guards of Cay escorted us to the queen's throne, where she sat brooding. Before her lay the body of someone important, judging from the jewelry and feathers. His eyes were missing.

"So," she squealed, "you have come to slay the fiend. You are late. He who lies at my feet is my younger brother. He too has fallen before the fiend. He tried to battle the beast and lost. It seems that both Shazak and Cay are suffering from the same plague."

"Your Majesty," I dared, "it is indeed our quest to slay the beast. With your permission, we must be allowed to continue. Many more lives are at stake."

The queen, observing me with suspicion, said, "Why do you wish to help, human?"

"I too seek revenge, your Majesty. The fiend had tasted human blood before he harmed your noble subjects. No one is safe. Where was your brother found?"

The cay-men whispered and whistled among each other, glancing often in my direction with distrusting looks. The queen then shook her rattle-scepter and said, "He was found in the Mines of Hwezzah. Go there, human, and take your lizard shaman with you. If you slay the monster, you shall go free. If not, I shall condemn you to work for the rest of your lives in the mines. Leave now."

Alphamir 9: Not until the evening did we reach the mines, a terrible place with a single narrow shaft going straight down. We descended and entered a network of tunnels with little cubby-holes dug into the walls that were the resting places of the slaves working there. Most had gone nearly blind from the darkness and screamed in pain at the light of our torches.

A cay-man guard cracked his whip to send the slaves back to work, but most were too terrified to leave their holes. The fiend had indeed been here, judging from the number of slaves' bodies. All work at the mine had come to a halt because of the fiend's presence.

The guards weren't in much better shape. They walked in little groups, cautiously staring around them. Beyond one point in the cave, they would not advance further. One of the guards pointed forward, "He was found there." The guards then retreated in good order.

Haz'ar and I walked down a tunnel, bent low to avoid hitting the ceilings with our heads. I heard a clicking sound. "What's that?" I asked.

"My old knees," answered Haz'ar. It was obvious she was almost petrified with fear, yet she continued down the tunnel.

"This is silly. There is no need for us to do this alone," I said. I cast a *travel* spell and returned us both to the *Princess Ark*. Talasar was relieved to see us both safely back aboard. I had to rest and meditate for more appropriate spells. Our next day would be a difficult one.

Alphamir 10: I returned to the tunnel the next day with Xerdon, Nyanga, Haz'ar, and Talasar, all ready for battle. Nyanga stood in the front, his huge sword strapped to his back—only a smaller blade could be used in these tight quarters.

The tunnel led to a larger chamber. The light from our torches glinted off the red ore on the vault. The cay-men had found a small vein of cinnabar. Perhaps this is what attracted the creature in this mine.

Suddenly, a large blob of hideous orange flesh appeared from the shadows. It moved fast, as much on its six crab legs as on its dozens of tentacles. Without a moment of hesitation, Talasar, Xerdon, and I let our spells fly at once. Almost instantly, the creature grabbed a pillar and caused the chamber to cave in.

Everyone ducked and scrambled. Talasar, Xerdon, and Haz'ar dove to one side, Nyanga and I to the other. The torches went out as billowing clouds of dust filled the chamber. Soon, I discovered tons of rubble separated us from our companions. We were trapped in darkness.

The sound of something fleeing echoed ahead. I cast a spell of light, just to see the shadow of the fiend writhing away down a tunnel.

"Come," I said to Nyanga, "We must chase it, the others will catch on and follow if they can." We ran down the tunnel, which grew narrower with an underground river running down the middle. We could see the creature ahead, swimming away. Several dugout canoes of cay-man workmanship lay by the side of the river. We jumped into one and paddled frantically after the fiend.

Much later, when the river had gained dangerously in speed, we could no longer see anywhere to put ashore. Centuries of roaring waters had smoothed out the sides of the tunnel. The water rushed down the passage at a frightening speed, and the canoe shook so much I could not cast a spell to save my life. We both grabbed the canoe's sides and held on. Before we realized what was happening, the canoe was sucked into a vicious whirlpool. Everything went dark as my head hit a rock, somewhere in the roaring waters.

Alphamir 10, Talasar: It was a trap. The fiend must have known that the pillar supported the chamber's vaulted ceiling, and deliberately caused the cave-in to split our party. It must have guessed that we were too much for it to fight as a group. We had to find the admiral at once. We went down another tunnel, trying to find a way around the rubble. At first, all we achieved was to run into small groups of cay-men guards. To them, we were dangerous intruders. They all ran away, but we could hear their leaders trying to rally the troops. They were organizing a man-hunt.

It became clear we could not fight their well-organized search parties. Mobs of cay-men guards ran down the tunnels with javelins and nets, hoping to find us. We played hide-and-seek for hours before Xerdon spotted the admirals footprints. At least, he and Nyanga were still alive. They had gone after the fiend.

Soon afterward, we reached a series of dugout canoes. We could hear cay-men chiefs shouting orders and the sound of war trumpets echoing in the tunnel. We fled in one of the canoes after setting fire to the others.

Paddling downstream, we could see the cay-men guards jumping up and down, waving their short arms at us. Haz'ar smiled smugly, and as the water gained speed, she said, "They want us to come back! Su-ure... well, that's one man-hunt going down the drain!"

Alphamir 11, Haldemar: Lucky that Nyanga was there, else I would have drowned. We had reached a siphon bubbling up into an aboveground river. Nyanga managed to swim back to the canoe, drag me aboard, then collapse inside, totally exhausted. We drifted downstream most of the night, without strength or paddles.

The sun rose above the fog. The river had entered a swampy region. It was hard to tell where we were. The canoe then hit something and stopped.

"Eh mohn, there be a tree trunk in the way," said Nyanga. Suddenly, he pulled out his giant sword. "That be no tree trunk, mohn. It moved."

"Yo, who you callin' a tree trunk, punk?" A seven-foot-tall creature stood right behind the canoe. It looked

like a giant cayman, but with huge jaws and jagged teeth. Nyanga took a swing at it, but another swamp creature rose behind him and grabbed his wrist. Two others rose out of the muck and caught me before I could cast a spell.

"Hey, dey're no lizers. Whaddya think, Gnarfi?" said one.

"Yeh, dat's weird. Dey ain't got no scales. Let's eat 'em!" said Gnarff.

"Nyeh, I dunno. Let's take 'em to Gurr'ash. Maybe the chief'll rewar' us" intervened a third with an eye patch. They tied us up, sank the canoe, and swam away, carrying us on their scaly backs.

Alphamir 11, Talasar: This was indeed a rough ride. The whirlpool that spewed us out of the bowels of cay-men tunnels had split our canoe down the middle. We ended up swimming back to the river bank. Beyond lay a realm of swamps. Wild-eyed, Haz'ar said, "We can't go any further. This is the Bayou, the land of the gator men. They're big, they're fierce, and they're always hungry. And they hate lizardkin."

Well, we couldn't abandon the admiral. Our best chance was to get back to the *Princess Ark*. Of course, she was *invisible*, but perhaps we could attract her attention. Xerdon cast a *wall of fire*. If the fire didn't catch, at least the smoke would be visible from miles away.

Alphamir 13, Haldemar: I landed heavily in a mud puddle when my reptilian captor shook me off his back. We had been swimming down the Swamplight River, according to Gnarff. We reached a spot in a huge lagoon where these giant alligator men crowded the water. Without warning, Gnarff dove underwater and swam down to some cave. Beyond lay a vast complex partially filled with water. Of the three races encountered in this region, this one was the most primitive. No paintings, sculptures, or feathers here. Just filthy, smelly muck. And lots of tall gator men. "You wait 'ere," said Gnarff.

Hours later, an even bigger and meaner-looking gator man approached. He wore a strange armor made of lizard skin and bones, and on his head was a spiked helmet made of crocodile skin. He yanked both Nyanga and I off our feet and carried us down to a large chamber. From the looks of it, it had to be some temple. There were pits of bubbling mud, cracks in the ground from which rose blue flames and an 18'-tall statue of a reptilian humanoid with two apelike heads, tentacles instead of arms, and a forked tail. That couldn't be good. Nyanga and I were tied with bamboo strips to a large altar. That wasn't good either. The big gator man then said, "Tomorrow you will be sacrificed to the Avatar of Gorn." That was bad.

Alphamir 13, Talasar: Blasted be the swamp fog! We were lucky enough to get the *Princess Ark's* attention, but we haven't been able to find the admiral so far. I fear the worst.

We've reached an island at the center of a large lagoon. Haz'ar says it is the heart of the Kingdom of Ator, a huge swamp ruled by brutish, cruel gator men. We circled the island several times, but could not see any towns, mounds, or burrows of any kind. Haz'ar suspects the gator men live under the water in subterranean dwellings. Had the admiral been a lizardkin, they would have killed him instantly. But humans—they wouldn't know what to make of them, according to Haz'ar. Thus, there still is a small chance that he and Nyanga are inside the gator-men's lair, somewhere beneath us, under miles of swamps stretching below the *Princess Ark*. But where?

Well, it seemed a gator hunt was due. I ordered the crew to drop lines with hooks and bait. Perhaps we could force a few gator men to speak.

Indeed, a gator man swam by and stopped near a hook. After observing the bait, he grabbed the line out of the water and saw the hook. He then gazed at the line, following it up to the point where it became *invisible*.

"Hey, how dat get up dere?" he mumbled while tugging on the line. He then started to climb the line. Ramissur was at the other end, waiting with a big mallet. That gator man never knew what hit him. When he wakes up, he'll have a long conversation with us.

Alphamir 14, Haldemar: The time had come. Neither Nyanga nor I had managed to loosen the bamboo strips that held us on the altar. The gator men now filled the chamber, chanting crude incantations. The queen of the gator men appeared and took her place on a throne to the side of the chamber. Then two gator men cranked up a large bamboo gate, revealing the entrance to a dark cavern.

From behind the gate came gurgling, hissing, and growling sounds. Soon a horrible creature crawled out. The gator men cheered. Suddenly, I recognized the monster—it was the fiend that we had pursued down into the mines of the caymen. It stopped its bizarre noises, then sighed. "Oh, so sorry. I didn't know it was you! You didn't believe I was going to eat you, now did you? All I really want is your brain. Hold on a minute."

It turned toward the gator men, roared, and writhed its tentacles menacingly at them. The gator men bowed deeply and quickly left the chamber.

"Now, that's better. The fools believe I am the avatar of Gorn, the Immortal patron of the gator men. What a crock!" the fiend added.

I couldn't believe my ears. Perhaps the evil creature was just toying with me before killing me. There was nothing I could do, so I decided to find out what he was up to. "Now, what is a fiend like you doing in a swamp like this?"

It looked truly surprised. "A fiend! Me? Oh come now, you don't see any batlike wings on my back, do you? Do I wear any horns or a forked tail, hmm? Can't you tell? I'm a Neh-Thalgu, from the University of Jawwag-Uf. I'm a student in interplanar cosmogonic magic."

Totally baffled, I asked, "Well, in what manner may my brain help you? I know nothing of interplanar cosmogonic magic, whatever it is."

The creature writhed its tentacles. "I didn't think you would. You see, I am studying the cause and effect of the magical drain on the world of Mystara. In order to complete my thesis I needed to acquire the brains of typical wizards of this world. I've already got a Nithian from the Hollow World, a Glantrian, and a Herathian. I couldn't possibly leave without an Alphatian specimen, now could I?"

That was totally bizarre. I still had to know about Haz'ar's dreams and those symbols. "At the risk of boring you out of your brain my friend, do tell me of the shaman's dreams, and what the eagle and winged-bull symbols have to do with all this?"

Several blobs of orange flesh began pulsing on the Neh-Thalgu. "I haven't a clue of what you are talking about. By Qywattz, don't get weird on me! What dreams would these be?"

I answered, "Well, the ones you sent Haz'ar, the lizard shaman of Shazak, of course!"

The Neh-Thalgu's four eyes squinted. "What hazard, what shaman? Say, wait a minute now. I think I know. You see, I was until recently a prisoner of the Wizard King of Herath. I was captured just after acquiring the brain of one of their noblemen. I became the object of his studies, and later he had me thrown into his dungeon. Many years later, I saw you running down a hallway of the very same dungeon, just past the door to my cell, with hordes of giant hunting spiders after you.

"The next thing I knew, the Wizard King came and visited me, told me of your brilliant mind, cast a series of spells compelling me to feed gruesomely on the saurians' eyes and brains for some time— yuk!—and had me released at the edge of the Bayou. Now I understand why.

"He must have done all this to set you up to find me, so I could acquire your brain. That lizard shaman of yours became a convenient tool to get you to hunt me. I do know for a fact the Wizard King knew how to send dreams. He tested that on me several times. The Wizard

King also knew the kin of Shazak fairly well, since his people trade with them on a regular basis. That lizard shaman must have been someone he knew to be resourceful enough to get in your way—so he must have been the one sending those dreams. What can I say, the man is brilliant! Of course, I don't mind this arrangement at all. Now, about that brain of yours..."

I had to think fast. "Hold on for a minute, young man. You said you collected a Herathian brain. Now, wasn't there something odd about that Herathian? I truly must know."

"Odd? Like what?" it asked, crossing its crab legs.

"I'm not sure." I ventured. "Something about spiders. Big, ugly, hairy spiders."

The bloated hump that I presumed contained the Herathian brain pulsed and jiggled for a minute. The Neh-Thalgu then said, "Hmm, Wait... Hard to tell with those aliens. Oh yes, that's really odd, never noticed that. What the..." The Neh-Thalgu opened its eyes wide as drool dripped from its gaping mouth. Suddenly, it straightened up, haughtily looking down at me with its four yellow eyes. With an imperious voice it then inquired, "What are you doing in my presence, human? I am Lord Achym of Ensheya, spider-lord of Shahav!" Then, confused, the Neh-Thalgu hesitated. "No, wait."

I could have sworn this was someone else speaking. Judging from its looks, this Neh-Thalgu was going insane. It looked like it was suffering from an acute split-personality syndrome. What could have caused this? Perhaps all those alien brains—must be unhealthy after a while.

The Neh-Thalgu drooled more. "Aha! I know now. I am Lady Aliana Nyraviel of Glantri, Countess of Seth-Kabree, Dragonmaster of the second circle! And what's with you, Alphatian?"

I risked a last question. "I seek an hourglass tumbling in the night."

"An hourglass? The one I honor is the symbol of the d'Ambrevilles! And why would you care? Why would I care? Just who am I?" The befuddled Neh-Thalgu drooled even more. Then suddenly, it began chanting what seemed delirious Thothian incantations, and added "It's breached! It's breached! The Old One comes!" Finally, the Neh-Thalgu screeched horribly and ran away screaming into the dark.

Fortunately, he forgot his scalpel! Nyanga managed to grab it and free us in no time. We had to get out of there quickly; there was no telling how long the Neh-Thalgu's insanity would last. I didn't know what went wrong with that Herathian brain, but it certainly confused the Neh-Thalgu's wits.

We could not escape with a *travel* spell—I had already used it to enter the cay-man mine, days ago, and I hadn't meditated for new spells since. But Nyanga had a brilliant idea. While I cast a *light* spell, he threw the chamber's torches into a puddle. Then, Nyanga pulled a bamboo mat off the throne, covered it with a thick layer of wet mud, and tossed it on one of the two flaming cracks in the rock. The hissing gases soon blew the mat off, but the flames were already extinguished. He repeated the operation on the other crack. Flammable gases rapidly began filling the chamber. We had to act fast.

Nyanga then rang a gong at the chamber's entrance. He hit it strongly enough that it echoed down many galleries winding away from us. I then cast a spherical *force field* around us and hoped our plan would work.

Alphamir 14, Talasar: That gator man would not speak. Even Haz'ar's tickling act with a feather failed miserably, despite the gator-man's thunderous laughter. I considered with great reluctance the possibility of certain, more extreme interrogation techniques when Xerdon had an idea. We tied the gator man to a rope and dangled him in front of Berylith's mouth. We then asked her to become visible. That did it. The gator man sang like a scaly bird.

The problem was that the gator-man's "capital" was nowhere to be seen. The whole thing lay below ground, under tons of the lagoon's muck. We considered using some *water breathing* potions, but we would still have to, contend with hundreds of rather large gator men.

Just then, a low rumbling came from the water. At first, there were just a few large bubbles, but then the entire surface of the water seem to turn into a volcano, with rocks, flames, and bits of gator men flying in all directions, just barely missing the *Princess Ark*. The brutal eruption ended as quickly as it began, with tons of greenish water rushing back to fill some underground vacuum. Surely, if the admiral had been down there, he would be dead by now.

A sphere covered with mud came bobbing up at the surface of the water. The sludge dripped off, revealing the Admiral and Nyanga, sitting inside a translucent sphere, laughing hysterically. We immediately sent a life boat down to recover them.

Epilogue, Haldemar: A mystery unveiled only other mysteries. What the Wizard King of Herath had told me during my visit at his palace seemed pure fantasy. Perhaps some warped truth lay behind his words, perhaps not. He knew the dreams of eagles and winged bulls sent to Haz'ar would be of interest to me. Was that only a trick to get me involved?

Yet, the creature told of his studies concerning the loss of magic in Mystara. This corroborates the scroll I took from the Wizard King¹. How could this be mere coincidence? And then, I cannot ignore the Neh-Thalgu's comment about the hourglass of Glantri—information that presumably came from the Neh-Thalgu's Glantrian brain. Who are those d'Ambrevilles? Who is that Old One? These could all have been the delirious words of an insane alien. But what if they weren't? This uncertainty is eating at me. As soon as I can, I must unveil that which lies in the dark, be it truth or trickery.

Wallara

Amphimir 17, AY 2001: Three days have passed since we left the gator men's Bayou. All that talk of Alphatia and Thyatis was a troubling matter. I found the Wizard King of Herath's ability to send dreams to people extremely disquieting, and I asked my old friend Talasar for a special prayer that would protect us. I could not run the risk of having any of my officers' minds affected in such a treacherous fashion. I was deep in my thoughts when the snap of thunder shook the *Princess Ark*. What now? I heard Talasar sounding the alarm on the upper deck, and squads of boltmen running up to their battle stations. This was no ordinary storm. I rushed topside.

The *Princess* was climbing to get above some big thunderheads when three silvery creatures swooped by. I thought at first these were dragons, but the unusual silver



color made this improbable. They looked more like wyverns. One of them suddenly released a *lightning bolt* at us. No, they weren't wyverns either.

Another flew past us and spat a second bolt just before disappearing into the storm clouds. Its bolt shattered a mast and scorched much of the rigging. Luckily, no one was hurt. The boltmen released their anger and their wands at the "wyverns," but their bolts did not seem to hurt the creatures much. Perhaps they had some immunity to lightning- it would make sense.

More of the creatures attacked. The crew was better prepared now and met the assault with determination. The magical fire of the light ballistas traced graceful arches through the dark, forcing the creatures to jink and roll before diving on the *Princess*. One got its wing caught in a heavy ballista's magical *web*, screeched, and tumbled down into the clouds. Another vanished instantly as it ran afoul of the catapult's devastating magic. Berylith defeated several others in her path, but the attacks continued, unrelenting.

It became clear that the attacks were not meant to destroy the *Princess Ark*. The creatures were directing their assaults at masts, sails, and other unoccupied areas. Despite damage and utter chaos on deck, no one aboard had been hurt thus far.

I took a gamble and ordered a cease fire. The creatures swooped a few more times, observing, then disappeared into the dark clouds. I still had no clue as to why the attack took place, other than something or someone wanting to disable the ship. The *Princess* showed damage serious enough that repair was required at once. When the storm ended, we would descend to the land below, and mend the masts and rigging.

Amphimir 18, Haldemar from a later account: We found a secluded clearing in the forest. The *Princess* slowly descended to the treetops, and the crew fastened lines to hold her steady. The plan was to acquire several good quality logs for the masts, but this would expose the crew as they would no longer benefit from the *Princess's* invisibility. Xerdon and Nyanga returned after a few hours from their scouting mission. They had seen no one in the woods. All seemed peaceful. Work began immediately.

When I was convinced all safety measures had been taken, I left the ship to oversee repairs. I had to pick the trees needed for the masts. I was best qualified for this, because of the enchantments that would be needed eventually. The raucous laughter of a bird echoed strangely somewhere in the forest. Moments later, the crew began cutting down a majestic tree. I sat on a mossy rock next to a pond, as the tree trunk creaked and groaned in its fall.

Some time went by as Raman and the crew examined the log for any splinters or irregularities. Satisfied, he turned toward me and began, "This one's perfect, Your High... Admiral?" He turned around several times, apparently not seeing me. Hands on his hips, he added "Well, by Yiggureth, where is he now?"

How could he not see me? I just sat there, amazed. I walked up to him. Strange- he seemed twice as tall as he used to be. Indeed, I could barely reach his belt. Perhaps this place was magical. I tugged on his belt.

"Eh, what's this? Shoo! Out of my way, you, I'm busy." said Raman. He shoved me off to the side, into a bush. "Boltmen," ordered Raman, "sound the alarm, the admiral is missing."

I tried to call, but only a faint squeak came out. A squeak? I realized with horror that I had somehow transformed into some lizard with a big, scaly frill around my neck. A lizard? Me!? Who could have dared try such insolent trickery?

The crew stepped aboard the lifeboat. I rushed to get on board, but a boltman grabbed me by the tail and tossed me off the lifeboat. "Hey! Get off, you. Go away, shoo!"

Now what do I do?

Amphimir 18, Talasar: I fear the worst may have happened to the Admiral. None of our search parties have revealed his whereabouts. So far, I've discounted the possibility of wild animals or monsters. No traces of combat were found, nor any remains. I suspect he was abducted. Why, I do not know yet.

Native tribesmen have been sighted leaving the forest, south of our position. They could have had something to do with the admiral. I sent Xerdon and Nyanga to observe them. Lady Abovombe decided to join their party. I will remain to oversee repairs. I've doubled boltmen patrols in the vicinity. No one is to be alone at any time until this mystery is unveiled.

Amphimir 18, Haldemar from a later account: Alas, I had to leave the forest after running into several unsavory critters with cravings for lizard flesh. I discovered I could frighten smaller animals by stretching out my frill and standing up menacingly. This was useful since I couldn't cast any magic in my current shape. I also discovered I could run quite fast as well. I've done a lot of that lately.

I was north of the forest, in open grassland. I must admit I'd lost my way in the tall grass, with no possibility of reaching the ship. This could be trouble.

Some sudden noise in the grass got my attention. A tribesman squatting nearby, observed me silently. He must have had some lizardkin blood, judging from the

very fine scales covering his skin. He otherwise seemed almost human. I looked him in the eyes, hoping perhaps to communicate.

"Friend... Help..." I thought very hard.

He began aiming his spear at me. Well, that didn't work. Time to run!

I ran until I ended up in a dead-end, at the base of a large rocky monolith. Drat! I tried to use the frill thing to intimidate my pursuer. The tribesman, raised an eyebrow, pulled a curved piece of wood and hurled it at me. It spun in the air and flew right past my head. "Ha!" I thought. "Missed me!" That's when the wooden missile suddenly came back and hit me in the back of the head. That was it. I thought I was to end up as some tribesman's dinner after all. What a pity. All went dark.

Amphimir 18, Xerdon: We followed the small native hunting party. They had no prisoners, nor any way in which to conceal them. We were about to give up the observation when all 12 tribesmen suddenly vanished from the path. They were nowhere to be seen.



Later in the night, the tribesmen returned. They quietly entered our campsite, without any warning. Nyanga, who was on watch at the time, saw no telling sign of their arrival—they just appeared next to us.

Fortunately, these tribesmen were peaceful and simply curious about who we were. They tossed a strange creature's carcass, which they called a *roo*, onto the campfire and roasted it. One of the so-far silent tribesmen spoke after the roo feast.

They knew nothing of the admirals fate. We were the first people of our kind that they had met. The leader of the tribesmen said he knew some magical place farther south where we could find out about many things. Perhaps the medicine men there would help us. We agreed and decided to leave the next day at dawn.

Amphimir 19, Haldemar from a later account: I woke up with a throbbing headache. I thought it all had been a bad dream, but I had no such luck. I hung from a branch, with my tail tied to a string— how discouraging.

The tribesman sat nearby, fixing embers in his campfire, probably to roast me. Lizard or not, it was time to act. I swung a few times at the end of my tail, leaped, and ended up perched on the branch. That caught the tribesman's attention.

I stood up, pointed a little reptilian finger at my captor, and then down at the offending string still at my tail. The tribesman took a few steps back in amazement. He scratched his head, then regained his composure. He approached and removed the string, watching me carefully.

He considered me for an instant, then stirred up his campfire again. Embers crackled and sparks rose above him as he began chanting. This was a shaman perhaps, who knew magic to talk to lizards. He said he was Gagidju, a walkabout medicine man.

"Ooh," he said. "You are gondaman. Barramundje cursed you."

"Who's that, and why was I cursed?" I asked.

"She Spirit Mother of Wallara. She protects land, water in the billabongs, trees in the outback. Should listen to kookaburra's call when you hear it. You angered Barramundje. Unwise..." said Gagidju. "Now, you gondaman."

"Well, can you break the curse?" I asked.

"Ooh no. Very unwise. Only great spirit breaks Barramundje's curse. We can go to

dreamstone. There, the Eagle Spirit will help," answered Gagidju. He then added "Maybe."

Amphimir 20, Xerdon: We reached a small town in the rocky hills. It looked like an ancient archeological site. Judging from their architecture, the buildings must have been erected centuries ago by some advanced civilization. They had fallen in ruins at some point, and the tribesmen had taken over the site. They tried to rebuild some of the structures, using mud and straw, but clearly none of the original work was theirs. They religiously cleaned up the older structures and revealed long forgotten runes that their medicine men studied at length.

They called the place Risilvar, the lost city. Our arrival caused some agitation. Medicine men looked at us and said, "Balandas—evil spirits" From then on, no one would speak to us. Even the tribesmen who had led us here shunned us. We were free to go about Risilvar as we pleased, but everyone kept their distance.

Lady Abovombe had seen this kind of behavior among the tribes in her nation. She believed we had stepped right into these medicine-men's beliefs. They associated us with some ancestral enemy in their mythology. We had to prove our peaceful intentions.

She later found a wounded tribesman in one of the ruins. Fortunately, she had brought an *ointment of soothing* that she put to good use. A medicine man called Kapurugi was watching and appreciated the act. He later agreed to help to us.

Lady Abovombe explained, "We are strangers in this land, Kapurugi. We never meant harm to anyone here. We are seeking a lost friend. Those who had led us here thought that the mystery of our friends disappearance could be solved here in Risilvar."

"Many secrets can be unveiled in the lost city," said the medicine man, "but first we need a corroboree."

He called upon a few of his friends, and they built a fire in one of the alleyways and began dancing and chanting around it. Strange colors appeared on their skins, and kept changing as the corroboree went on. Sparks and smoke rose from the fire. In the flames there appeared a fish, then a strange lizard with a frill. Finally a great eagle appeared and took the lizard away into a mountain.

"Your friend is alive. But he's a gondaman, a cursed one. He roams the outback now," said Kapurugi.

"What do you mean, he's cursed?" asked Lady Abovombe.

"He is a lizard. You must leave him alone. He caused a quarrel between the Spirit Mother and the Eagle Spirit. This is bad. You must leave the lost city now."

This wasn't much help at all. There must have been some mountain somewhere in the grasslands north from here. Perhaps we would find the admiral—or a lizard—there. This was rather bizarre. We had to return to the *Princess Ark* and report all this to Talasar. Kapurugi met us at the gate of Risilvar. He held three very large, flightless birds. He handed us their reins and mimicked the position of a horseman. "Take emus. You will need them to travel the outback. Good luck."

Amphimir 20, Haldemar from a later account:

After a day's march across the outback, Gagidju and I arrived at the Wallabong dreamstone. The great stone monolith rose straight up from the grass. On our way to the top, I noticed several ancient paintings, and finally the entrance to a large cavern with a small billabong.

Gagidju set up camp in a sandy corner. I had ample opportunity to observe this medicine man during our journey. The very fine reptilian scales covering his body had a tendency to change colors slightly, depending on the surrounding or the light, very much like a chameleon. The skin had a shimmering quality that unnerved me several times.

Gagidju lit a small fire, and he carefully livened the embers. This time he pulled out small chips of opal and played with them for some time. He then tossed handsized pieces of painted bark into the fire and began chanting. The ceremony lasted hours, until well after sunset. The flames were casting odd moving shadows against the cavern's vault. At times I could see the shadows of birds among the rocks. Mesmerized, I began seeing images in the shadows, as if I were dreaming. Soon my mind was lost in the pattern of moving dark shapes.

Amphimir 21, Talasar: Xerdon finally returned

from his mission. At the idea of the admiral being turned into a lizard, I prayed all night for all manners of removing curses. A long day lay ahead of us. The task of hunting down every frilled lizard in the region was both ludicrous and daunting, but nevertheless seemed crucial. Where could the admiral be?

I sent out the crew in small hunting parties with nets and bags, and the hunt began. Xerdon, Abovombe, and Nyanga would ride their emus, scouting the grasslands for signs of the admiral. Meanwhile, I would examine each and every one of those lizards. Perhaps I could discern which was the admiral.

Hours later, some of the teams began returning with bags full of lizards. Soon the deck was rampant with runaway frilled lizards, goannas, and other unrelated animals. Later in the night, natives began following the crew to the *Princess Ark*, gleefully selling anything they

could lay their hands on, including amazing creatures that delighted Raman. The deck became a racing track for platypuses, spiny anteaters, flying squirrels, dingoes, koala bears, wombats, and kangaroos. This happy crowd was soon returned to the ground below so I could concentrate on the remaining frilled lizards at last.

Amphimir 21, Haldemar from a later account:

Gagidju had already left when I awoke from the magical dreams. Gagidju's dreams were truly amazing. I saw the eagle that Gagidju had spoken of.

It had risen from the furtive shadows of the cavern and turned into a man with small flames coming out of his eyes. At his feet sat the silvery "thunderheads," the creatures that had attacked the *Princess Ark* during the storm. They seemed very small next to him. An hourglass appeared in his hand, and he hurled it against the ground, shattering it. He finally said "Beware of the mountain wizards. They bring the doom of your world." Finally, a fish approached the edge of the cavern's pond. It transformed into an elven maiden with a gem in her forehead. She waved her hand at me and I regained my former human shape. Mist then rose in the cavern and I lost consciousness again.

Upon my awakening, Lady Abovombe appeared at the cavern's entrance, riding a strange bird. I thought for a moment I was still dreaming. After my companions' arrival in the cavern had finally dispelled my confusion, we gathered near the pond and spoke at length about what had occurred. I could have talked at length about all I had experienced lately, but it was clear that we had to return to Alphatia without delay.

Far too many clues about an ominous future had kept surfacing in our path. They could no longer be ignored or dismissed as mere coincidences. Neither was there any evidence that my dream of the hourglass symbol and the new mention of mountain wizards—presumably Glantrians—came from the sinister creatures I had met several days ago, namely the Neh-Thalgu or the Wizard-King of Herath. Perhaps I had indeed met with the Immortals. With a chill I recalled the vision of Sésékumbo, the Prophet of Yavdlom's brother, when he died in Jaibul six months ago. The empire was in danger, and we had to warn Her Majesty at once.

Amphimir 25, AY 2001- Haldemar: After the strange discoveries of the past weeks, I decided to return to Alphatia and warn Her Imperial Majesty. I couldn't take the time to fly the *Princess Ark* all the way back, nor did I want to take the risk of breaching the skyshield for a faster journey. The ship still needed repair anyway. So, despite Her Majesty's orders to stay away from the

empire, I took along Lady Abovombe and faithful Myojo when I cast a *travel* spell, Talasar would take the *Princess* out of the land of Wallara and seek another repair site.

I had to find a short cut through the outer planes. Soon after leaving the Astral plane, we reached the plane of Draesten, a cluster-universe of raw energy in the outer planes. There, we appeared to be standing on a high mountain peak Rainbows of magical might shimmered across the sky all around us. We flew for some time among Draesten's dizzying flashes and bursts of hue and energy when I noticed a flickering silhouette following us. It was so faint I had missed it earlier, but it was there, and it was alive. The silhouette, possibly 20' long, seemed to follow our flight, occasionally coming up to our side.

I spoke to it, but it did not respond. I tried sign language, with the same ineffectual result. At last, I gambled a *read magic*. Success! The flickering light was sentient and friendly She stated she'd be willing to carry us to the site we sought, in exchange for a burst of magical energy- mere food for this creature. I suspected curiosity to be her motivation, for this place was filled with all sorts of energy.

As the deal was struck, the three of us found ourselves within the multicolored entity and shot across the sky, hurtling through Draesten like comets in Mystara's firmament. It took little time to reach the end of our journey in this strange world. The creature- I called her a *flicker*- stopped among a cluster of floating rocks. Floating above one, it created a gate of blue, crackling light.

I cast a minor spell as payment, then we bid the flicker farewell and entered the gate. Alas, I soon discovered it led not to the place we had sought. I had expected to see the Hardball arena in Sundsvall. Instead, we stood in the Ethereal plane, observing through the wisps of ether a very large and unknown cavern somewhere on the Prime plane.

The gate faded away behind us. Trapped! The flicker had tricked us. But why? I had no *travel* spells left. So, while I could rest and meditate for new spells, Myojo and Abovombe would watch for any activity in the cavern and around us in the Ethereal plane.

Amphimir 26- Talasar, from a later account: Not far from the lands of Wallara, we found a patch of very tall trees towering over the forest. We could see no activity below, save for some unusually large raccoon-faced monkeys casually jumping from branch to branch- nothing to worry about. They'll make a good stew for the crew.

I had the *Princess Ark* hover above a clearing, and sent the crew down to prepare for the ship's landing.

Once they were down, I ordered the ship to become visible to ease repair. Work was proceeding at a good pace. Several trees with perfectly straight trunks were soon cut down. Raman and Leo were doing wonders directing operations.

Suddenly, a volley of stings, stones, sticks, spears, and arrows came pouring down on the crew. Sentries were the first to fall, most of them without a word. I saw Ramissur pull a sting out of his arm, take a few steps, and fall flat on his face. Poison! Our attackers were hiding in the bushes and the trees. I could not see them. Feeling a burning sensation on the back of my neck, I turned around and barely had the time to notice a strange, raccoon-faced monkey staring back at me from under the shadow of a large fern. It held a long blowgun. The scene blurred and all went dark.

Amphimir 26-Haldemar: It appeared the cavern was made of black stone fused by great heat. Approximately 500' in diameter, it had the shape of a sphere except for the flattened floor. A dull-gray structure, almost 200' long, occupied the center. Nearby stood a large statue with an inscription at the bottom: "Alexander Glantri- Still He Protects."

Glantri? Perhaps we had entered a secret crypt somewhere in Glantri. The Draesten flicker clearly had something in mind when it lead us here. There must have been someone else behind its actions- someone powerful. Who?

I studied the gray structure and found no way to enter it. The whole object was magical and impervious to my influence, even from the Ethereal plane. I tried *dispelling* its fields of magic and casting a *magical door*; but these attempts and several others proved futile. The mysterious structure either exuded powerful *antimagic* or it was an artifact. Considering the size of the structure, either possibility seemed mind-boggling. Even Alphatia could not produce something like this! To think Glantrians concealed such a device sent a chill down my spine.

I had guessed I'd have to deal with some sort of mystery here and had studied my spell of *lore* last evening. The spell revealed the structure was called the "Nucleus of the Spheres." It also unveiled its function: to enhance one's magical prowess while forever draining magic from the world of Mystara.



I felt a ghastly hand clutch my heart. How could they? The Glantrians were using some sort of evil magical device to destroy the most precious element of our world. Life without magic? Inconceivable!

All I had learned in the past weeks now made sense. The clues about Glantri, Alphatia, and magic being drained were pulling together. Somehow, I was linked to all this. Perhaps my destiny had already been woven, and it led me to this obscure place. Else, someone wanted me to come here, despite my journeys away from the Known World.

I had to do something about this Glantrian scheme, whatever it was. If there was something like *forbidden magic*, this was it. If I warned Her Majesty, it would mean war. Surely, the empire would not ignore this fiendish magical device and would have to march against Glantri sooner or later. Thyatis would, of course, inevitably rise against Alphatia, given my country's actions. Knowing Thyatians, they just would never allow an Alphatian presence in what they've always considered as their backyard.

What was I to do? I had fought before and knew all too well the savagery and sorrow of war. Many would suffer and die. Should men die for magic to exist? How right was this cause?

My dilemma was eating at me. If I did nothing, magic and all that is wondrous would disappear forever from our world. If I exposed the Glantrian scheme, empires would clash in perhaps the greatest of all wars, bringing misery and darkness to many. What if Alphatia lost the war?

No. I wasn't brought here merely to do nothing. If so, they should have chosen someone else instead. I just was not that kind. Perhaps without magic there would be neither man nor world- indeed, it was time to leave this forsaken place. I had seen enough.

Amphimir 27- Talasar, from a later account: I awoke to find myself tied to a tree trunk. Next to me was Raman. The remainder of the crew was slowly waking up as well. The entire crew was similarly tied, dangling from branches or tied to masts on the *Princess Ark*. With horror, I realized our assailants had taken over the ship.

They were halfling-sized creatures, more or less like monkeys. They were intelligent. Two of their war-party leaders were arguing, perhaps about what to do next. I asked Raman, “Are you hurt, man?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve been listening to them for some time. I can understand some of their words. If only I could move, I might be able to communicate with them.”

Raman tried to twist out of his ropes.

I could move one hand. I managed to loosen some of Raman’s ropes and they began to give way. The natives began playing drums and a distant echo respond. Good, that kept their attention away from us. Raman eventually freed himself and untied me. Before anything else, I prayed for Razud to bestow upon my companion a blessing to neutralize poison. He would need it to approach the natives—soon-as my voice attracted the natives’ attention.

Raman stepped forward, cleared his throat, said, “Gentlemen, would you please—” and went on chirping at the natives in their strange speech, making gestures. After a moment of silence, a wave of rage overtook the natives. Raman had perhaps insulted one of the leaders. A cloud of poisoned stings came flying in his direction. A moment later, Raman was still standing there, trying to protect himself while removing the prickly stings. The natives became suddenly quiet.

In apparent awe, they all dropped to their knees and bowed before Raman. “Oh, by the Brow of Smaarad!” said Raman. “They think I’m some sort of forest spirit!” His ability to resist their sleeping poison had truly impressed the natives. They were ready to obey him, up to a point. Raman convinced his followers to untie me, but they refused to free anyone else. Soon afterward, the natives carried us toward their village.

Amphimir 27—Haldemar: With the help of a *travel* spell, we returned to the location in Draesten where we had last seen the flicker. She was gone, and so was the magical gate. As I suspected, further attempts to return to the Glantrian device through the outer planes failed completely. Without the gate, I was unable to retrace our path to the cavern.

Our journey led us to the Hardball arena in the Imperial capital. It was a game day. The place was crowded and no one noticed our arrival. We entered the palace grounds thanks to my family seal. Seals are

magical items that Alphatian nobility often use to enter or exit the Imperial palace. It gives the Lord of the Guard a convenient way of locking out unwanted families and checking on who visits the palace. I was relieved to see that the Haaken seal was still acceptable. The magical door opened after I removed my seal from the recess. We entered.

Palace halberdiers came to attention as we walked down the cavernous main hallway. Noblemen and palace officials politely nodded as we went by, largely minding their business. So far, things were going fine.

At regular intervals stood pedestals with the busts of past rulers and legendary state figures. Unfortunately, they were fitted with *magic mouths* that emphatically announced our arrival, according to the seal I had presented at the entrance. Much to our discomfort, their calls echoed down the long hallway. We would’ve preferred inconspicuousness to pomp and circumstance just then. After some time, nobles began giving us furtive looks, while people whispered behind our backs.

The Imperial Herald walked up to us and discreetly slipped a note into my hand. It said that Her Majesty wished to see us at once. At least she had found out quickly enough about my return. Unusually, we met in her quarters in a rather informal way. It appeared that she was more concerned about avoiding public attention than displaying any outgoing friendliness. Fortunately, Empress Eriadna did not bring up the topic of my obligation to stay out of Alphatia.

Empress Eriadna nevertheless enjoyed the presence of Lady Abovombe and even showed some curiosity toward Myojo. She had never seen a rakasta before. Then came the more serious business. I informed her of all that had happened lately, and of the Glantrian device. She considered the information at length.

“I do trust you, Admiral, but I doubt that the Council of Wizards will. You have no tangible proof of these incredible things you just told me. It will take time before I am in a position to back your discovery. Even then, there is dissension among the council. A faction secretly works to split the council, perhaps conspiring to seize the throne. I haven’t yet identified who is behind the treachery. I am convinced that this faction would push the council to discredit you and your discoveries in order to get to me.

“Unbeknownst to the council, I have pursued a quest to unveil that hollow world of yours. I have now received proof of its existence beneath our world, and started establishing a way to reach it more quickly. Some day, that new world will be Alphatian. Should anything happen to the empire as a result of the Glantrian scheme,

look toward the hollow world. You might very well find me there.

"You find my words rather gloomy, but I have been suspecting some great evil at work. I have known for some time now that magic is slowly waning from Mystara. The temple priests have spoken of friction among the Immortals, and it seems to have something to do with magic. If this is true, Admiral, someone far greater than even kings and emperors of Mystara has guided your path ever since you left the empire. If so, even the whole of mighty Alphatia may not make a difference at the end."

"I will speak to the Glantrian wizardprinces. I will pray that they listen to the voice of reason. Should I fail, a great war will follow. I am not certain we'll win, but this empire will fight like never before. The world will not be the same again."

"Admiral, it is time for you to return home. I want you to stay at your ancestral domain in Floating Ar. You will be safe there. Be patient. I may need your help and the service of your loyal crew in the difficult times to come. You have done well and shall not be forgotten."

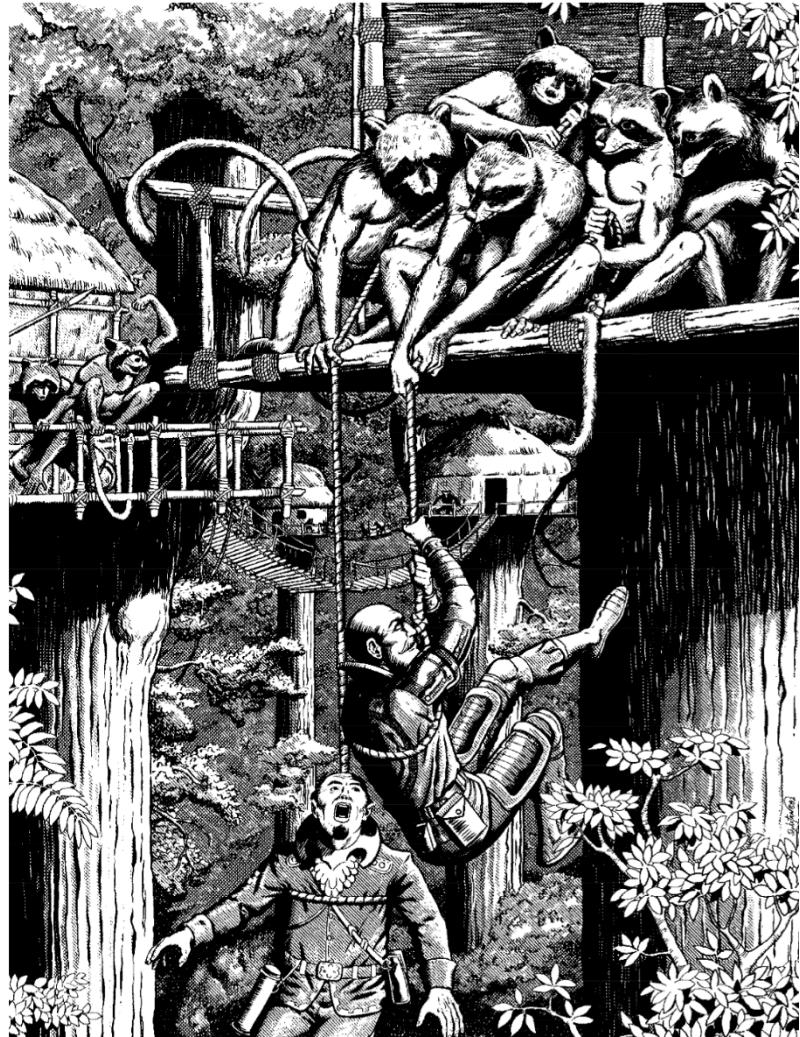
Amphimir 28—Talasar, from a later account:

Some time before arriving at their village, the war party halted the march. Everyone rested from the long, difficult journey through the woods.

Sometime after our meal, both Raman and I began suffering from severe cramps. A shaman had made us drink a magical potion of his making. As a result, we both shrunk to the natives' size. The shaman watched us and laughed, "You not spirit! Not spirit!" That was bad luck.

We eventually reached the village—a place named Cafua—if Raman got the name right. The village sat up in the branches of the tallest trees. Precarious, hanging bridges linked a multitude of platforms on top of which sat the natives' huts. They had to haul us up with ropes, since we couldn't climb the tall trees at all. We were allowed some rest in the shaman's hut—a detestable place with all sorts of dried insects pinned to the walls, all manner of snakes and arachnids hanging from the roof, and, worst of all, an impressive collection of mummified skulls, most of which looked like shrunken human heads,

The shaman showed up with a sly grin. After a rudimentary conversation with Raman, we learned that these were the phanaton people of Jibaru, forest hunters and tree dwellers. It took some doing to convince the



shaman that we weren't from Herath—apparently people they didn't like. He still seemed suspicious. A phanaton warrior entered the hut and motioned us to follow him. The village chief wanted to see us.

He, too, was very suspicious. Then, the shaman told Raman to enter a large cage that sat on one of the tree platforms. It was filled with large spiders. I quickly bestowed upon him the same magical protection against poison, but that did not reassure him one bit. He hated spiders. At the sight of what lay in the cage, so did I. There was little choice there. Dozens of warriors aimed their bows at Raman and I. The chief then said "You enter cage, or Ixu make trophy of your head."

Raman entered. The spiders all leaped on top of him. I could barely see his hands and feet sticking out from under the crawling mass, as he screamed in abject terror. The village chief raised his hand and a volley of blowgun stings neutralized the spiders.

Moments later, the phanatons pulled Raman from under the dozing arachnids. It seemed the spiders did not

react as expected. The shaman then said, "He not man from Herath; spiders attack him." The phanatons quickly applied herbal concoctions to Raman's wounds.

The rest of the day went more peacefully, thank Razud. We learned that the phanatons of Jibaru were spider-hunters, and not surprisingly, had gotten in trouble with the neighboring Herathians over the years. Not having seen many humans, they thought we too were from Herath. Had the spiders not attacked Raman, by now our heads would be adorning the chief's hut, soon to be followed by those of the entire crew,

Finally, the Jibaru released us and the crew. They brought food (baked spider legs), fruits, nuts, and other forest goods, while the crew worked on the ship. After a night of feasting, drum-beating, and dancing around a large campfire, we took our leave and returned to the *Princess Ark*. It turned out these phanatons were good fellows after all.

Amphimir 29—Haldemar: After another *travel* spell, we were back aboard the *Princess*. I was pleased to see repairs were on schedule and that everything had gone well. At least they had an easy time!

I announced the news of what had happened to the crew. Everyone was stunned and overjoyed. At last, we were going home for good. I couldn't help thinking about what was to come, though. What did the future hold for the *Princess* and her loyal crew? It seemed that the

adventure was over for now. But does adventure ever really end on Mystara?

The End



