

Issue Four | Spring 1995

Going Underground

Mark Wigoder-Daniels goes poking about in old tombs

This fragment is all that remains of a monograph said to have been penned by Jichka of Jgresh, a Salarvanyi who died in the 8th Century AS when apprehended by priests of Ksarul just outside the Garden of Weeping Snows underneath Jakállá. He was the acknowledged master in tomb robbery of his generation (and for several centuries to come). For some reason he never raided the underworld in his home town of Jgresh. His escapades included the theft of a Mallet of Inimitable Fealty from the drowned tomb of the Engsvanyali Priest-King Girandu I on the Island of Ganga. This feat involved the destruction of an "Embracer of Ships"—one of the dread akho—as well as the evasion of a Semetl of demons and the passing through of a slim corridor seven hundred yards long whose every surface was lined with deadly poisons and trapped with needles, pits and projectiles which emerged from hidden openings. According to the historian Hisun the Ugly, writing five centuries ago, Jichka was brought back to half-life by the priests of Ksarul.

Expeditions to the underworld are best performed when the moon ületl is not visible in the skies, as the Lord of Worms might well take offence at your presumption. If you would raid the shrines of Hrü'ü do so when Ziruna is hidden behind clouds and Tuleng is hovering on the horizon. If Riruchel joins with Kashi in enjoying the delights of the heavens of Vimuhla and Karakan you shall be asSüred of success when investigating the riches of the nobles of the Time of No Kings.

Do not forget to sacrifice at the shrine of the Guardian of the Gates of Hell Against Those Who Would Come Forth two nights before your descent. This is Eklun's ritual. Eklun raided the shrine of She Who Cannot Be Named during the Time of No Kings and sacrificed at the altar of Ancient One of Pleasures while it was still a ruin. He found an enchanted rod in the tomb of Rekmelish I which he sold for a fortune to the Patriarch of the Clan of Sea Blue. Litheni hiMoshan would never follow Eklun's ritual, praying instead at the Temple of the Doomed Prince of the Blue Room. She fell to a hli'ir in the tomb of an Engsvanyali prince and had to be left behind.

Another who refused to flow Eklun's custom was Lord Mriddu of Pala Jakállá. He was crushed by a Golden Age statue which pinned his leg after which he was (unusually) eaten alive by kurgha while his fellows fled. If you will not follow Eklun's ritual then avoid the Engsvanyali level!

When Pendarte of Kheiris entered the underworld beneath Ch'ochi he wore an amulet of bronze inscribed with the glyph of Noss, rakh the Deep-Dwelling, an aspect of the god Wuru. It brought him much felicity in his evasions of the guardians of the tombs therein. Many Engsvanyali explorers would take a kheshchal plume with them. My grandfather told me that these were quills that had been used by priests of Ketengku and that they bring luck and aid the memory. His uncle possessed such a plume that was Engsvanyali and smelt slightly of hmelu milk. You should also take rope (a length of no more than twenty metres), the sandal of a dead grandmother (preferably your own), many torches (tiu wood is best) with oil, hling seeds and salt, fresh flower-buds, and the big toe of a corpse. If you cannot acquire a big toe, descend only on the nights of Mugun or Zaqe (the second and third days of the week).

There are many different entrances to the underworld. They can be via temple basements, tombs in the cities of the dead, ruined shrines, sewer tunnels or the cellars of aristocrats. Those beneath temples are usually the most difficult to penetrate—excepting those through the temple of Durritlamish. Underground entrances are usually the best. Beware of creatures lurking over the entrance especially of vorodla in shrines of Sárku or at the tombs of Sárku prelates. Entrances with mosaic wall paintings often lead to rich treasures which are well guarded by the undead.

History 101

When you explore the levels dating back to the Time of No Kings, be warned that kurgha are very common. These are furry six-legged creatures with multiple eyes and sharp beaks. They feed on carrion and corpses but are not averse to fresh meat. They are half as tall as a man and stink mightily. Use pikes, spears or swords when you fight them.

Tombs of nobles from this era are often lacking in sorcerous items and are not well warded. Beware of collapsing ceilings and false doors.

The Engsvanyali regions are easily recognised by their delicate masonry, spider-like glyphs and fancy appearance. Rooms fashioned of red stone are often unlucky for worshippers of the Tlokiriqalu. Door lintels are frequently trapped and can collapse on your head. It is best to shutter lamps while passing through a major portal.

Engsvanyali tombs are often sealed with locks which contain poison needles. Treasures to be found include much magic such as the Amulet of the Great God, a blue stone which is not large and sparkles with golden motes, being shaped like Lord Hnalla's sacred oval with dagger-like writings along the sides of the stone. If it is held to the light and Hnalla is invoked in Engsvanyali, the creations of the Priesthood of Ksarul can be driven back for a time. Certain Eyes will also be commonly found, especially those of Non Seeing, Incomparable Understanding, Frigid Breath and Raising an Infernal Barrier. Nor think that magic and money form the only sources of wealth. A mosaic from the pyramid tomb of Queen Choleyn was sold to a noble in Jakállá for five thousand kaitars.

The Bednalljan areas are of heavy ponderous masonry, dagger-like runes, thick pillars and massive stone blocks. The first doorway on the left in a large hall is often troublesome, and if locked should be avoided. I have never regretted this advice, which came from my wife's father, who survived many a journey into the underworld and only died when he fell into a chasm while fleeing the horrid Ssú. These creatures are easily recognised by their incessant chiming, which resembles that of the bells sounded by the priestesses of Whore of the Five Worlds during their evening benisons. The cinnamon like stench of the Ssú is readily identifiable, as are the dim blue lanterns they favour. The Ssú can seize control of your mind and cause you to attack your comrades. Flight is always the best option. Flee downwards and leftwards and open no doors. The Ssú will not cross water if no light is showing.

The Bednalljan nobles secreted their treasures in burial chambers hidden under their death domes. The shaft down from inside the dome is usually concealed under a slab. The entrance to the burial chamber itself may be masked by another slab. Beware collapsing ceilings, hidden pits and moving walls. If rest is needed it should be taken in a rubble-filled room and you should hollow out hiding places in the rubble. Janule the Tall did this and hid while priests of the Doomed Prince were stalking her; so she escaped. They caught her two years later when she attended a party at the Governor's Palace. Her head sits by my feet as I write.

The tips of the trade

Before proceeding to a discussion of the dangers to be faced within the underworld, I shall include some advice of a general nature. Should one of your party be killed while in the underworld it is essential to take certain steps. First paint his face yellow to invoke the protection of Opener of the Gates of Heaven, then cut off his toes to prevent his being made to walk again as a mrur. Sealing his eyelids with thorns of the kaya bush will prevent his ghost from haunting you. If it was your own blow that killed him, you should urinate on him too.

Before entering the underworld you must deal with the tomb police. The ideal is to avoid contact with them altogether, but in other circumstances you will have to come to a financial arrangement. It is best to do this before descending into the underworld, as the police are more likely to be content with a few kaitars if they do not see you with a sack freshly filled with antique loot.

Critters

The weakest dangers met with in the underworld are the lesser undead. The Eaters of the Dead, the shedra, are ambulant corpses whose bodies are grey and shrivelled. They carry iron swords. If you give them a second death, drop the bodies down a chasm or immerse them in running water. The mrur are another variety of walking dead, less wily than the shedra and often rotting and smelly. Burn them in oil and scatter hling seeds on the fire. Chargesh hiKhanmra used powdered ssalan leaves until he was dragged into the pyre by a blazing mrur and eviscerated while his party fled.

Qol are recognised by their serpentine heads and arms and humanlike bodies. They were created by the Priesthood of the Prince of the Blue Room and fear light and salt. They use poisoned weapons and are cowardly.

More powerful creatures include the birdlu, dingy mantles with claws hanging from the edge of their wings and teeth lining the inside edges. Small spikes emanate from their heads like a crown. They engulf victims in their muscled folds and then constrict until bones crack and life-essences seep forth. To rescue a trapped victim the birdlu must be cut open. Chlen-hide knives are not strong enough for this; steel must be used. The famous explorer Keletla the Fair used to burn them, but I found that they ignite only with great difficulty and that even then one's comrade will be dead and cooked too.

Another ferocious enemy is the dlaqo, a giant species of carrion beetle. It has a shimmering green body and walks on many legs. Like the kurgha it feeds on corpses. Its mouth parts are very powerful and can chop a man in half.

Priests of the Guide into Darkness are very dangerous. They have many powers which include bringing the dead back to half-life. They also have spells to take over the minds of their foes and cause them to obey any command. They know secrets that can destroy a man's mind, leaving him a drooling idiot, and can summon the worms of death which crawl on the ground and devour the flesh those who tread on them. These worms burrow their way through one's body until they reach the heart. The blessings of Qon are the best defence, although metal shod boots provide some temporary protection.

More fearsome still is the Beast with the Unendurable Face, the terrible hli'ir. It is so horrible to look upon that one can be driven insane. The only sure way to defeat the hli'ir is to strike with a club upon whose surface the glyph of the demon-lord Ka'ing has been engraved. The madness which the hli'ir induces can be cured by priests of Ketengku, but they ask too many questions.

Another peril, comparable to the hli'ir as a threat, is the fearsome qumqum. This is an invisible thundering creature which may be repelled by fire, especially if seresh-wood splinters are used. The protection of the Lord of Red Spouting Flame is here most efficacious.

The priestesses of Shiringgayi are possessed of powers enabling them to sorcerously crush their foes with inexorable forces, to infest them with lethal cankers, create walls of water which advance to drown their opponents, and send forth green vapour tinged with black which causes suffocation.

Beware the Priests of Hr, ', Dispenser of Calamities. They seek large silver items and will slay any who seem to possess such. It appears that they seek some form of sorcerous armour which was mislaid or stolen from a crypt or shrine. They are able to spread mindlessness and insanity amongst their chosen targets; they can freeze a man's heart or reduce him to a pool of slime.

Priests of the Ancient One of Pleasures are fanatics who can expel their enemies from existence and bring stone statues to life. They are also proficient with the Silver Halo of Soul stealing and can furthermore summon great gusts of wind.

The flame-priests of the Maker of Thunders are possessed of great powers of conflagration and explosion. They can turn walls into burning stone, throw incendiary bolts and strike their enemies with the spell of Doomkill.

Saturday night specials

The most deadly dangers to be encountered are now listed. The Flowing One, the nshe, is a sentient liquid which crushes and drowns its foes. The only known defence is the Amulet Against the Iniquitous Nshe, which should be used as Metallja suggested when his Blasphemous Accelerators fought against the priests of the Lord of Thunders beneath Tumssa.

The priests of the Ancient Lord of Secrets are fearsome wizards. They can cover their foes in a fatal blue mould, cast them to distant planes, or turn them into cocooned corpses. They are attended by potent demons who smell of rotted meat and sour wine.

The bamir are flying demons surrounded by a deep brown aura and are dedicated to the service of He of the Rotted Face. They fight using crushing copper flails. They must be fought with bronze weapons whose copper has been slightly adulterated with silver and then blessed by the adepts of the Watcher over the Gates of Hell.

The worms of the catacombs, the aqaa, are a demon race of the God of Five Heads. They can grow up to twenty metres long, with a maw which can swallow men whole. A venomous tail whose strike is oftimes deadly makes them fearsome indeed. To cure their stings, rub Shén urine, Ahoggyá spittle and the juice of a dlel fruit into the wound. This will prevent the toxin spreading. It may be necessary to surgically remove the affected part. The aqaa are best avoided, even if this entails dropping all encumbrances and fleeing.

Lastly are the ru'un, great bronze demon sentinels dedicated to the Pariah Gods who control them. Their touch burns and they curse their foes in Llyani as they fight, weakening their will and their strength.

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