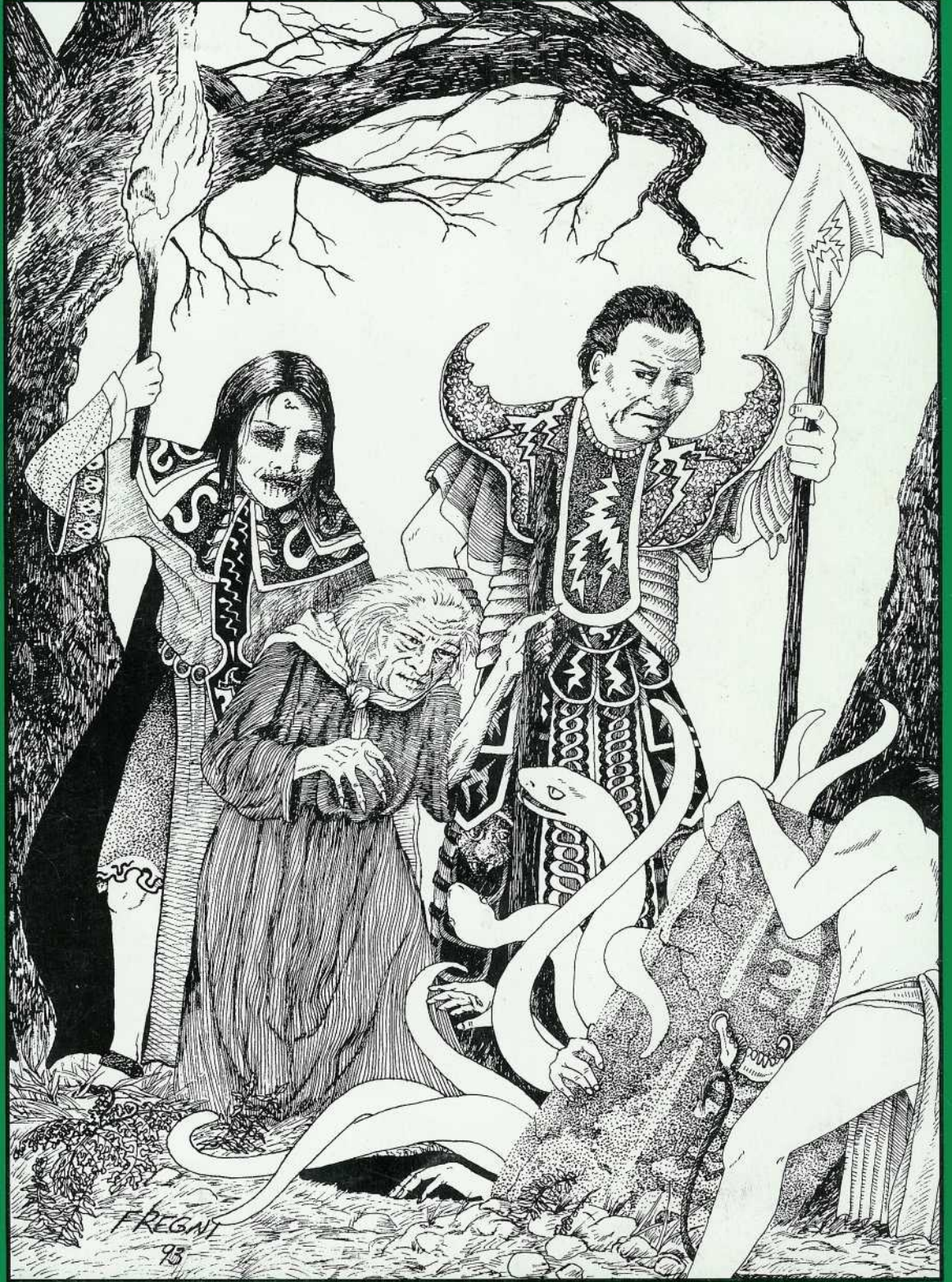


ADVENTURES ON TÉKUMEL

PART TWO/VOLUME THREE: BENEATH THE LANDS OF TSOLYÁNU

Solitaire Adventures by M.A.R. Barker



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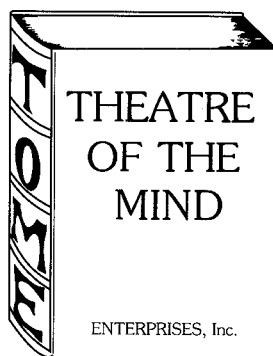
**Part Two, Volume Three:
Into the Underworld's of Tsolyánu**

**Solitaire Adventures for Tékumel
by M.A.R. Barker**

Illustrations by Giovanna Fregni

**With special thanks to:
Thomas Juntunen**

Adventures on Tékumel Part Two, Volume Three Into the Underworld's of Tsolyánu A TOME, Inc. Presentation



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SOLITAIRE ADVENTURES

Part Two is devoted to “solitaire adventures.” It assumes that you have developed a character in Part One, and that this person is now about fifteen years old and ready for the “on-the-job” training young aristocrats (both male and female) receive in Tsolyáni society.

This is Volume Three of Part Two, so some characters may be coming here from adventures in Volumes One or Two and be more experienced. The adventures start with Sec. 22 and concern exploring the underworlds and the nether places of Tsolyánu. Sections 10 through 14 are repeated here for your convenience.

10. DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Instruction: Part two of this book is divided into three volumes. In volume 3 you go on adventures H (Monastery) and I (Archaeology). In other volumes there are other adventures. Most of these adventures do not overlap or repeat more than the initial combat Sections (Secs. 11, 12, and 13), plus the short Section listing some useful “Eyes” (Sec. 14). Each set of adventures thus stands on its own, with a few exceptions that direct you forward or back to other parts of this work.

You may go on any or all of the adventures in Part Two. You cannot go on the same adventure twice, nor do you need to go on every adventure. You should at least go enough to raise yourself above the level of a novice when you start the rôle-playing game. When you have finished an adventure, you return here to Sec. 10 to go back to school the following year (repeat Sec. 9., ff. in Part One), choose a new adventure, or enter the rôle-playing game.

The adventures are not necessarily sequential: you can select “I,” and come back to “H.” There is a logical time-continuity in the case of the “historical” adventures, however. The time frame will be obvious.

Instruction: if you go off on a mission and return home alive (i.e. are not killed, enslaved, or delayed abroad), you still get a HALF year’s worth of skills and hobbies in Sec. 9, ff. in Part One, just as if you had stayed home for six months! Very few journeys last as long as a year, and it is assumed you spend the rest of your time in school, the temple, or the practice-yard.

Instruction: record changes in your personal attributes on your Character Record Sheet. Keep a careful check on the number of years you spend adventuring so that your character enters the rôle-playing game at the proper age. If you wish, you may space your adventures farther apart in order to develop an older character. By the time you are thirty, however, you should choose a career and settle down. Keep track of your possessions. Money and prices are stated in Tsolyáni Káitars; cf. Sec. 4.3 in Part One. Ranges of amounts instruct you to roll a D10 or D100. For example, 1-100 Káitars = a D100 roll; 100-1,000 Káitars = a D10 roll x 100; 1,000-10,000 Káitars = a D10 roll x 10, etc.

Instruction: whenever you wish to join the rôle-playing game, the gamesmaster will provide a rationale for your character to be in the proper place to join the players’ party.

Your adventure choices for this volume of Part 2 are as follows. Good luck!

1. You are sent off to a monastery — for your own good of course! But there is more to wisdom than musty tomes and the mutterings of priests... even in a monastery!
2. Another long, hot and humid summer stretches ahead. Nothing much to do until a friend of yours makes you an unusual offer...

11. I DON'T THINK THEY LIKE US!

When you are instructed to fight, you are allowed only ONE D100 ROLL, whether you are alone or whether you are accompanied by comrades or even a whole Legion. This roll is based solely upon your own fighting ability. Combat is thus very different from the rôle-playing game. In this book all weapons, magical devices, and spells are abstracts: they are identical for combat purposes! In the rôle-playing game each has its powers, strengths, and weaknesses. Clever uses of a weapon, spell, or item are thus not possible here but can be done in the rôle-playing game (to the frustration and fury of the gamesmaster!) In every combat you have three choices:

1. Fight physically: use your modified Height-Build-Strength number (Sec. 6.4) plus FIVE POINTS per skill level in the weapon you wish to use: i.e.:

$$\text{H.B.S.} + (\text{Weapon skill level} \times 5) \\ = \text{your combat number}$$

For simplicity's sake, this applies whether you use a hand weapon or a missile weapon. Cross-reference this with your opponent's "type" (identified whenever fights occur in the text of this book) on the combat table below. Now roll D100: if you score lower or equal to the number listed in the table, you win; go to Sec. 12; if you score above the listed number, you lose. Go to Sec. 13.

2. Let your comrades fight for you: if you have no warrior skill, and/or your magic is not powerful enough to help, you may fight physically using only your Height-Build-Strength number, or you can make your one D100 roll based upon the 101-150 column of the table below; this simulates letting your friends fight for you. If you win, you still go to Sec. 12, and if you lose, you go to Sec. 13.
3. Fight magically: find your "sorcerer level" (first through fourth only in this book; cf. Sec. 8.5). Cross-reference this with your opponent's "magical resistance" type number in the lefthand column. You cast your "aggressive" spells at this level. Aggressive spells from Book I include only "Domination," "Soporiferousness," "Terrorisation," and (for animals) "Zoic Domination." More are provided in Sec. C. ff. below. If you have a magical weapon (e.g. an "Eye"; cf. Sec. 14), you may use it instead of a spell (you can't do both!) Your opponent's magical resistance number depends upon size and strength, plus any skill levels in sorcerer. In this book, each opponent's "type number" is given in the text. When you have found your level and the opponent's number, roll D100: if you score lower or equal to your opponent's number, you win. Go to Sec. 12. If you score above this number, you lose. Go to Sec. 13.

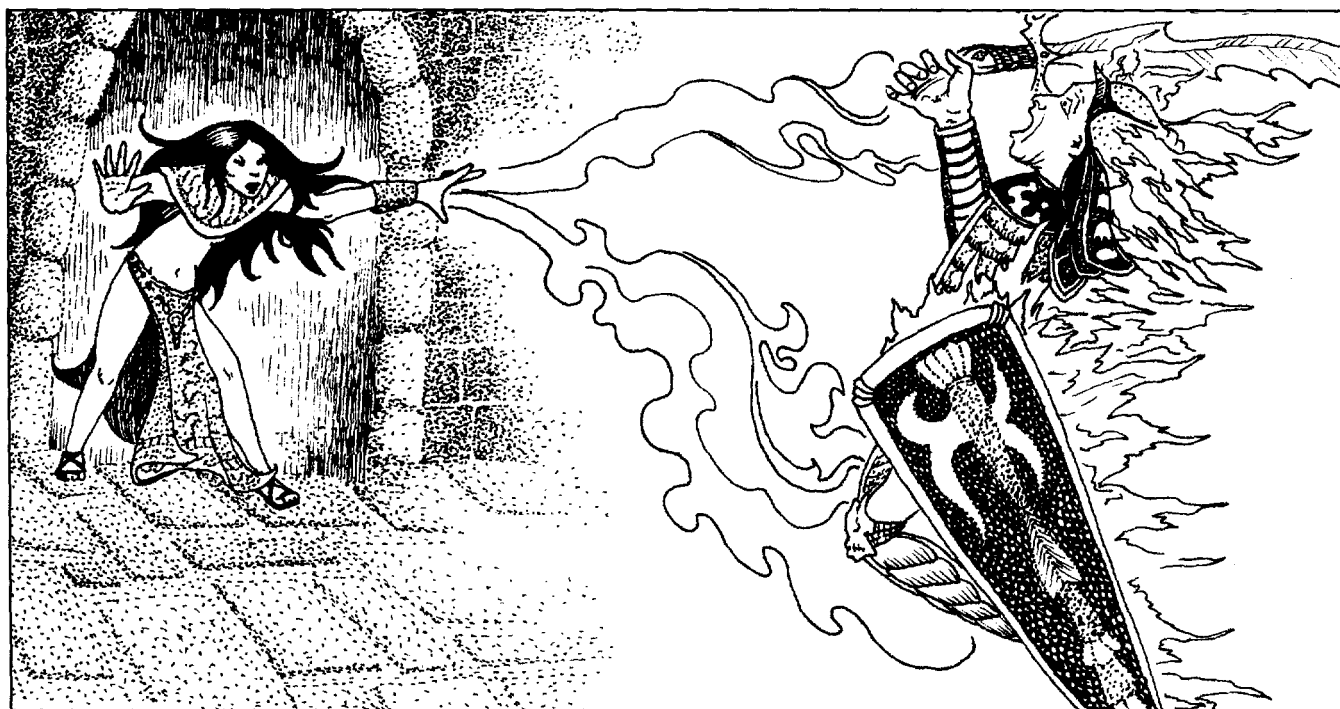


TABLE 11.1: PHYSICAL COMBAT

ENEMY'S TYPE NUMBER	YOUR H.B.S. + (WEAPON SKILL LEVEL X 5)						
	0-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201-300	301-400	401-up
Type 1	40	50	60	70	80	95	99
Type 2	35	45	55	65	75	90	95
Type 3	30	40	50	60	70	85	90
Type 4	25	35	45	55	65	80	85
Type 5	20	30	40	50	60	75	80
Type 6	15	20	25	35	50	65	75
Type 7	10	15	20	30	40	55	65
Type 8	5	10	15	20	30	45	55
Type 9	1	5	10	15	20	35	45
Type 10	You lose!	1	5	10	15	30	35

TABLE 11.2: MAGICAL COMBAT

ENEMY'S TYPE NUMBER AND DESCRIPTION	YOUR SORCERER LEVEL				
	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	FOURTH	MAG. WPN.
1 Small animal; human of Type 1	65	75	85	95	90
2 Large animal; human of Type 2	50	60	70	80	85
3 Bigger animal; human of Type 3; First Level sorcerer	35	45	60	70	75
4 Very large animal; human of Type 4; Second Level sorcerer	20	35	45	55	65
5 Gigantic animal; monster; human of Type 5*; Third-Fourth Level sorcerer	10	25	35	45	55
6 Big monster; Fifth-Sixth Level sorcerer	5	15	25	35	45
7 Gigantic monster; Seventh- Eighth Level sorcerer	3	15	20	25	35
8 Absolutely world-shaking monster; Ninth-Tenth Level sorcerer	2	10	15	20	25
9 Eleventh-Twelfth Level sorcerer	1	5	10	15	20
10 Thirteenth-Fifteenth Level sorcerer. Pray you never meet one of these, in this book at least. Higher levels exist	You lose!	3	5	10	15
*No human is more powerful than Type 5 unless he/she/they have levels of sorcery.					

12. BANG, IT'S DEAD! YOU WIN!

Instruction: when you win a combat, roll a **D10**: 1-9 = you get nothing and are lucky to be alive; 10 = you gain one skill level in the weapon you are using, or one spell if you used sorcery. If you had your friends fight for you (option 2 in Sec. 11), you get no benefits — but at least you're still live!

Instruction: animals and monsters do not carry cash or valuables, but humans often do. If you have defeated

bandits, mutineers, etc., roll **D100**. The score is the number of Káitars you find. Again, if you had your friends fight for you, you get no plunder.

Instruction: return to the adventure Section you came from and continue.

13. BANG, YOU'RE DEAD (YOU HOPE NOT!) YOU LOSE!

Instruction: if you lose a fight, roll a **D10**: 1-3 = you're dead (sorry!); 4-5 = you are seriously wounded; 6-8 = you are lightly wounded; 9-10 = you are miraculously unharmed and return to the adventure.

Instruction: if you are lightly wounded, you lose 1-10 (a **D10** roll) Body Damage Points (Sec. 6.5). You may choose to employ only Body Damage Point totals, or you may roll randomly to see which body part is hit. If this kills you, apologies! A serious wound loses 2-20 (a **D10** roll x 2)

Body Damage Points. You regain these points after you have returned to Tsolyánu: i.e. to Sec. 10. If your Body Damage Points fall below your total in Sec. 6.5, you are dead. If you live, return to the adventure.

Instruction: if you have the skill of "physician," a spell of "healing," or an "Eye of Healing" (Sec. 14), roll a **D10**: 1-6 = your wounds are healed without any loss of points; 7-10 = you do not use your device, spell, etc. in time: go to the preceding paragraph..

14. THE EYES HAVE IT!

During various of the adventures in this book you may find an "Eye." These are devices of the Latter Times, which perform functions similar to magical spells. Eyes were developed later after humankind had become adept in penetrating the "Wall of Reality" and bringing energy over into Tékumel's Plane. An Eye is about the size and shape of a human eye but is made of ancient non-conducting metals, which do not impede spell-casting. An Eye has an aperture in front, and a firing stud on the back. Some also have a little charge-counter beside the firing stud with numerals written in the unreadable languages of the distant past. Later owners

sometimes added translations in Llyáni, Bednálljan, etc. An Eye may contain up to 100 charges, but most have been depleted over the centuries.

Instruction: roll a **D10** to determine which Eye you have found. Then roll **D100** TWICE and subtract the smaller score from the larger score to discover how many charges it has. (Eyes with many charges are rare.) Eyes affect varying numbers of targets: e.g. 1-5 = a **D10** roll ÷ 2. Eyes marked "A" are "aggressive and may be used as weapons. All Eyes and spells allow unwilling targets a "saving throw" in the rôle-playing game; this is assumed in the "magical weapon" column in Sec. 11.

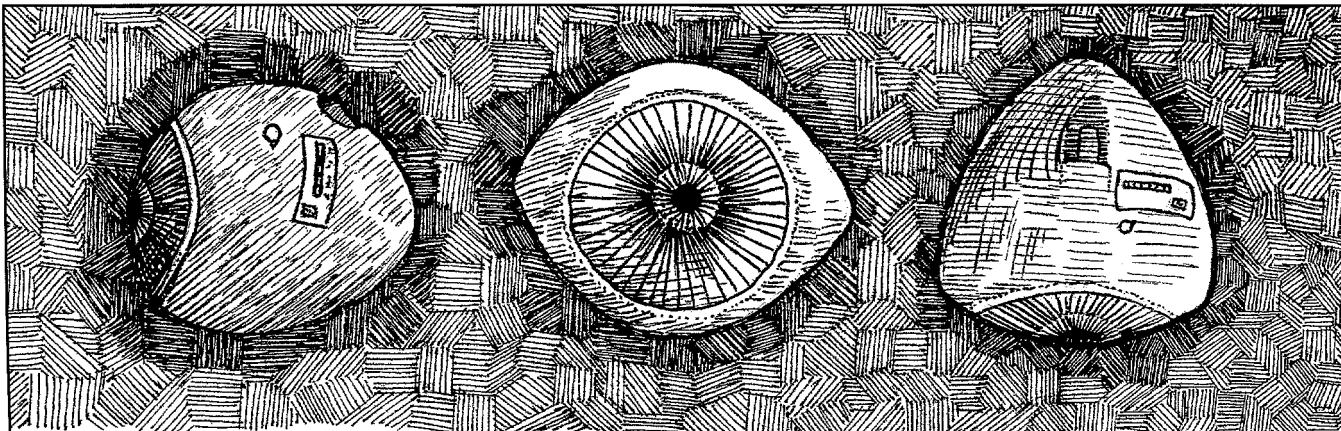
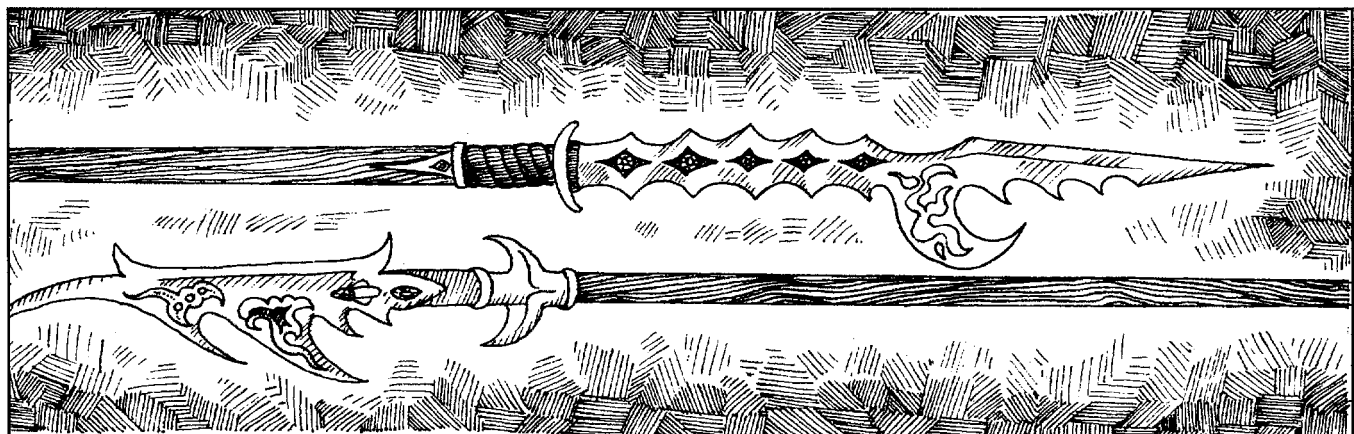


TABLE 14.1: THE "EYES"

NAME OF THE EYE	DESCRIPTION
1 The Excellent Ruby Eye	Puts 1-5 human-size beings slightly out-of-phase with this Plane, causing them to be "frozen" in a faint reddish glow. Victims cannot move, think, or act. They cannot be harmed or touched. Time stops for them until another charge of this same kind of Eye releases them. Range: 50 feet; instantaneous.
2 The Eye of Aerial Excellence	The user and 1-5 comrades may fly up to 300 feet per minute. Lasts 10 minutes. Persons or equivalent weights must be within 5 feet of the user in order to be picked up, and a saving throw is allowed to a target who does not wish to go along on the ride!
3 The Eye of Frigid Breath (A)	Projects a beam of intense cold, which freezes 1-5 targets solid (and dead!) Range: 50 feet. Instantaneous.
4 The Eye of Incomparable Understanding	Translates any spoken human or nonhuman language (but not the languages of the Latter Times, the Great Ancients, nor the secret tongues of the various priesthoods, however) into speech intelligible to the user. It does not act upon written materials. Its effects last 4 minutes and have a range of 20 feet.
5 The Eye of Non-Seeing	Renders the user and 1-5 comrades (within a 5 foot radius) invisible; foes of invisible beings go up two rows in Sec. 11. Lasts 5 minutes.
6 The Ineluctable Eye of Healing	Heals 1-10 lost Damage Points and cures diseases. Range: 5 feet. Instantaneous.
7 The Terrible Eye of Raging Power (A)	Fires a charge of raw electricity that hits 1-5 targets; takes away 3-30 (a D10 x 3) Damage Points! Range: 100 feet, but will rebound upon the user in a smaller space. Instantaneous.
8 The Eye of Hastening Destiny	Causes the user and 1-5 comrades to move at 3 times their normal speed. Comrades must be within a 5 foot radius of the caster. Lasts 2 minutes.
9 The Eye of Allseeing Wonder	Projects a beam which reveals invisible objects or beings, nexus points, and enchanted items. It does not reveal ordinary secret doors. Range: 30 feet. Lasts 1 minute.
10 The Eye of Being an Unimpeachable Shield Against Foes	Provides immunity from hand weapons and physical missiles for the caster and 1-5 comrades within a 5 foot radius. It offers no protection against spells or magical devices. Lasts 5 minutes.



22. MONASTERY!

H. SOUL FOOD

Most of the temples have “monasteries”: remote cloisters which provide privacy for asceticism, meditation, education, and scholarly research. The term “monastery” is only half correct, however. The “monasteries” of Téकुmel are also “nunneries”: both men and women (and a few nonhumans) lives and work in these places.

There are perhaps fifty or so of such cloisters in Tsolyánu alone, but only a few are famous. For instance, the priesthood of Lord Thúmis operates the Monastery of the Grey Cloak in the Dó Chákan forest and the Hauninngákte Monastery near Kayál Peak. The temples of Lord Ksáru and Lord Hrü’ü both have large establishments in the ruins of the deserted city of Hmakuyál, and it is rumoured that a secret academy for Lord Ksáru’s “inner mysteries” stands on a lonely peak just east of Thri’íl. Lord Hnálla’s Domicile of Radiant Splendour lies in the desert north of the same city. Lord Vimúhla’s shrine in the jungles of Pán Cháka is said to exist partly upon this Plane and partly in a pocket Plane of its own. Lady Avánthe has her largest centre near Chéne Hó, while her Cohort, Lady Dilinála, possesses a nunnery near the town of Tu’unmrá and another on the Island of Gánga. The sects of Ladies Dlamélish and Hrihayál share facilities for demonic research in the ruins of the city of Ngála in the swampy Flats of Tsechélnu not far from Jakálla. Lord Karakán’s followers are proud of their House of Heroic Swords near Katalál; Lord Belkhánu’s people travel to the Abbey of Aureate Peace near Thráya; and Lord Sáru’s devotees gather at the Tower of the Copper Disc in the Kraá Hills south of the City of Sáru. Space prevents the mention of others.

You need not become a lifelong member of a monastery but may go for a day, a month, a year — whatever you wish. Reasons for retiring to a monastic community are numerous: spiritual malaise, boredom with the humdrum life of the cities, a yearning for fresh air — a need to get away from an Assassins’ clan, a dangerous enemy, or a clan scandal. It takes all kinds. Your own motive for going on a retreat to a monastery of your faith are your own business, and you need answer to no one for it. On the advice of your priestly teachers and your clan, you agree to spend a year in a monastery of your faith in the northern mountains near the Desert of Sighs.

Instruction: go to H.1.

H.1. ABBEY OR NOT, HERE I COME!

Panting and perspiring, you trudge up over the last rise. The dun-coloured buildings of the monastery have shown bright and clear in the clean mountain air, so close that you could almost touch them. Yet you have been walking for more than half the day, clambering up slopes, picking your way carefully down into rocky gulleys so deep that they lie in perpetual shadow, and crawling up the other side again to find only more slopes and gulleys ahead. The road ended three *Tsán* back, and the narrow path petered out a *Tsán* or so after that. You have left your palanquin behind at the last walled Milumana-yáni town. Your feet hurt, the straps of your luggage chafe — your one remaining servant, a sturdy old fellow named Rusán, can’t carry everything — your stomach rumbles from gulping water out of a leather bag and eating nothing since dawn, and the taste of the lump of rock salt the locals insisted you suck on to replace the salt lost in perspiration is dreadful on





your tongue. All in all, you are not what another age might have termed a happy camper.

An old man unfolds himself from a rock in front of you. Rusán halts and stares suspiciously; Yán Koryáni and Tsolyáni deserters have been reported in these parts, and the Milumanayáni tribesmen are famous for their ambushes as well. This person seems harmless: an emaciated, sun-blackened herdsman with a flock of six-legged Hmélu frisking around him amidst the boulders.

"Ohé," you call. "Greetings! Can you tell me how far it is to the monastery?" You address the oldster as *Tùsmiketlân*, the "'You' of Polite Anonymity," which is reserved for respectable strangers of unknown status. Of all the thirty-odd Tsolyáni pronouns for "you" this seems the most appropriate under the circumstances.

He does not answer. Rusán lifts his staff. This is no way for a lowly Hmélu-herder to treat a high-born person! You repeat your question.

The old man scratches beneath his coarse robe. "You are here."

Rusán looks to you for instructions. A good drubbing is your servant's solution for most personal problems.

You think you understand. "La! Of course! We stand on land owned by the monastery. Hence we are

'here' in the exact sense of the term!"

A new voice speaks from behind you: "Not so, seeker. The monastery is near if you wish it so. If you desire it not, then it is far away."

You whirl to see a second man, a smooth-shaven, sophisticated-looking individual, squatting above you on a rock. He is as old as the first but is dressed in a light desert cloak and sandals. When you turn back to the Hmélu-herder, you find that he and his flock have vanished. You stare wildly about.

Magic! You sense no hostility, but your fingers wander to the concealed pouch in which you keep the Excellent Ruby Eye your clan-elder gifted you.

"I am the real Herder," the second man says. "My animals are nearby." He hops down off the boulder. "Come, I'll show you to your quarters. — Oh, those buildings on yonder crag are not the monastery at all. They are all that is left of an Engsvanyáli villa. We maintain illusions of ghosts there to keep the Milumanayáni nomads in a perpetual state of awe — and off our property!"

"Then, where — ?"

The man chuckles. "You're in it!" He waves, and the barren rocks shimmer and become a stone-flagged courtyard. The rough, blank wall of the gulley is now pierced with doors that open into spacious corridors, caves and shrines. Half a dozen men and women stand watching you with amusement.

One of the younger women giggles, points a finger at you, and says in the most rustic accent imaginable, "Ye'd best git t' veggy-tubbles out of t' sun afore they rots!" Her audience breaks into peals of laughter. You guess that this illusion trick has been played on visitors before.

You put the best face on the matter and grin weakly back. Two or three of the younger folk take your

luggage and help a very suspicious Rusán to unload as well.

You are shown to a barren cell cut out of living rock. It has one window which is little more than a tunnel leading through ten or twelve feet of solid stone to the brilliance of the noonday landscape outside. The furniture consists of a thin sleeping mat rolled up in one corner, a clay bowl and a waterjug. Nothing else. You look for your luggage, but it does not arrive. Neither does Rusán.

Annoyed, you start back out into the dark corridor and almost run down a skinny youth coming from the opposite direction. He thrusts a bundle of rough cloth into your arms. "Where are my things?" you demand. "My servant?"

He points to the cloth. "Strip and put this on." The bundle contains a simple tunic of the coarsest fabric. "Here we have no possessions and no servants. Your man has been sent back. We shall summon him again for you when you leave." He makes a shooing motion. "If you are modest, you may change in your cell. I shall await you here."

"Cha! An outrage! I was not told —!"

He shrugs. "A seeker's quest demands full concentration. Later, when you have rested, I will take you to the refectory, where you will receive exactly one bowl of *Dná*-porridge and one jug of water. Tomorrow you will meet our Prioress — do not inquire her name, for we have no names in this place. Afterward you will be asked which pursuits you will take up while you are here."

You are upset but curious. "What are my choices?"

"Spinning, dyeing, weaving, pottery-making, manufacturing reed mats —"

"Cha! Are there no scholarly pursuits? No philosophical debates — naught but peasant crafts? I can go to one of my clan's villages to master such common tasks! Indeed, if your Prioress had informed me in advance of a need for cloth, mats, and clay vessels, I could have ordered fifty slaves to provide them!"

The boy explores a nostril with one slightly grubby finger. "What can I say? Go and prepare yourself. If you miss the dinner gong, it is assumed that you are meditating and your food will be returned to the kitchen, from whence you cannot retrieve it."

In a state of bemused dismay, you attend the meal. The monastery houses perhaps a hundred members in all. Most are elderly, but there are three or four young boys and about the same number of girls and younger women. No one speaks during dinner, and when the bowls have been cleared away (another duty you will soon learn), everyone retires to the inner shrine to hear hymns sung in an incomprehensible tongue, witness complex rituals, and be half choked with incense fumes. Later, limbs aching from hours of sitting crosslegged, you limp back to your cell. Your sleeping mat is so thin that you might as well lie directly upon the hard, lumpy rock. Thus far your accommodations leave much to be desired.

Before sunrise on the following morning you are awakened for prayers, then taken to the Prioress' chambers, a cell identical to your own. The lady is a rather stern-faced matron in her mid-fifties, with iron-grey hair cut as short as a man's. Combs, fillets, and other items of personal adornment are not permitted here. Once greetings have been exchanged, you inform her, as politely as possible, that you have urgent business elsewhere and must regretfully leave the monastery at once.

She only smiles and says, "Join in meditation with me this morning. We go to the Shrine, where we shall lie face down for half the day, full length upon the floor, with our arms and legs extended toward the cardinal points. Thus the Powers of the Planes Beyond can flow through our physical forms, and we shall be purified. At noon we shall each take a cup of water and a bowl of porridge, after which you will begin your lessons in spinning *Hmá*-wool. Afterward, you will be instructed in dyeing. I think the black will suit you best. It requires much trampling in the vat, which provides an opportunity to consider the concentric construction of the metempirical universe."

You open your mouth to refuse. She gazes upon you not unkindly. "Contumacy reveals a failing to comprehend the immutability of the decrees of the almighty Gods. Free will is a fallacy: a trap for the weak and decadent. You have generously offered to join our community for a stated period of time, and as our letter of invitation clearly enunciated, you are liable to the rules of the monastery while you are here. These include various forms of gentle correction. Think, thus, before you speak, seeker!"

Instruction: if you really want to go home, no one will stop you. Go to Sec. 10. If you say something rude to the Prioress, you are incarcerated without food for two days in a windowless cell only four feet square. Further insubordination gets you flogged with a cane and sent back for a full

ten day stint. Be nice! Afterward, you are given a choice of accepting the monastery's discipline or being expelled. Go either to H.2 or to Sec. 10. If you put up with these initial lessons — and they are just that — go to H.2.

H.2. AVOCATIONAL THERAPY

You soon discover that the Prioress is both the head of the ritual branch of the monastery and also an skilled glassblower. Her tiny animals are so realistic that they seem almost to live, and her goblets would put many a proud Mu'ugalavyáni craftsman to shame. You learn to use the bellows, replenish the charcoal, and puff away at the long blow-tubes, but you realise that it would take you ten years to produce one little bird that could match the Prioress' poorest creation. You also find yourself learning much about your religion, however, for she lectures as she works, stopping now and then to gesture with a tube or a rod of hot glass.

The same is true of most of the older members of the monastery: each is expert in some academic discipline as well as a simple, useful craft. The senior Weaver, for example, is an historian specialising in the arcane periods just after the sinking of the island of Gánga and the death throes of the Engsvanyáli Empire. As he cards, spins, and weaves, he lectures. He uses no books. You are expected to memorise his words verbatim and repeat them back to him after just one hearing. This is hard at first, but your powers of memory soon sharpen, and you make fewer and fewer mistakes. The old man nods and smiles.



The Dye-Mistress is a scholar of the Planes Beyond. Her favourite text is "The Book of Presences": the most authoritative compendium of Engsvanyáli demonology. She is less friendly than the Weaver, and her lessons are more difficult since they are filled with foreign names and quotations. All you can do is nod frantically and trample harder upon the gooey herbs from which the monastery's black dye is produced. She pays you little attention otherwise.

The Potter is the philosopher. His disquisitions upon Being, the nature of the Gods, and the "Scrolls of Pavár" are exciting. He has no interest in ethics, however; for this topic you must repair to the Mat-Maker. He — or she — is of great age and indeterminate sex, a bald, parchment-faced ancient of whom nothing remains save for nimble fingers and a terrible eagerness to impart his (her?) wisdom before he passes on to the Isles of Teretané. As you fumble and cut your fingers on the sharp-edged reeds, the Mat-Maker lectures in a dry, whispering tone that requires absolute concentration; you become so engrossed that you do not notice or care.

Another scholar, the Herder, whose illusion you met when you first arrived, is the sorcerer of the group; he amuses himself by producing sparkling patterns in the air between his fingers, creating a reddish-pink goo that — he warns — can ooze in to fill up whole universes if not rigidly controlled, and doing tricks with coins, sticks, and strings.

You encounter others: the Hunter, who supplies meat to the monastery and whose knowledge of botany and zoology is broad indeed; the Water-Bearer, who fetches water from the well deep in the tunnels below the monastery and who speaks learnedly of relics and instruments of the Great Ancients before the Time of Darkness; the Shoemaker who deals with alchemy and pharmaceuticals; and the Fowler who harangues you about geography and the mysterious engraved stones of High Cartography of the Latter Times. The Gardener is an expert on linguistics and languages; he builds elaborate models of their patterns and structures, using wood, glass, metal, gems, and other substances. You pick up a smattering of various tongues just by helping him. The Hearth-Mistress is both a skilled player of the *Ténturen* and the community's epic-singer. The Cook is the expert on mathematics, astronomy, and astrology, and the Sweeper declaims on the intricacies of political and social theory. Without books or notes, all you can do is listen, but this in itself is instructive.

Instruction: choose three of the individuals named above, whose scholarly specialties you wish to learn. Roll a **D10** for each: **1-2** = you learn nothing of the subject; **3-5** = you acquire one skill level of the topic; **6-9** = you learn two skill levels; **10** = you gain three skill levels. If you choose the Linguist, you must select one language from Sec. 8.2 to learn. You also automatically gain 2 skill levels of the craft specialty in which these three teachers excel: e.g. "gardening," "glassblowing," "weaving," etc. Add these levels to any you may have acquired in Sec. 7.3 ff. You spend almost a year in this fashion. When you are finished, go to H.3.

H.3. UNDER NEW OWNERS

One day you ascend to the peak above the monastery by means of steep tunnels, staircases, ladders, and finally a dizzy precipice that offers only handholds hacked into the stone. In a hollow at the top is the aerie of the greybearded patriarch called the Sentinel. Here he sits, day after day, year after year, with nothing but a sunshade of tattered canvas to shield him, gazing out over the blindingly hot, dust-dry landscape for whatever might come. No one has ever mentioned his academic specialty.

"Greetings, Father of Wisdom," you pant. "May I sit with you?" You address him as *Tùsmiyálu*, the "You' of the Seeking of the Spirit," reserved for senior scholars.

His eyes appear filmed and rheumy, yet you have heard that his sight is so keen that he can spot a sand-snail on a rock a *Tsán* away. He gestures to a flat stone, and you squat crosslegged on it.

Nothing happens. He does not move, and neither do you. A *Selé*, a harmless lizard found in the Desert of Sighs, runs across your leg. It climbs onto the Sentinel's lap and blinks up at him from bright ruby eyes. He absently strokes its head. The day is clear, the sun just beginning to pour its molten heat onto the empty vista before you. You wonder whether this is yet another test.

An hour later, the Sentinel speaks in a cracked whisper. "They come. There, to the left of Konór Peak, along the gorge of the River Chné." He points.

You squint into the shimmering sunlight but see nothing at first. Minutes later, you catch a glint from the depths of the gorge. A black line snakes along the steep banks of the dry riverbed down there. An hour passes before the line sorts itself out into ranks of marching figures.

"They'll never see the monastery," you aver stoutly. "Ah... will they?"

The Sentinel looks. "Yán Koryáni," he declares at last. "If our Herder's illusion holds, they will climb Tléku Melél Bluff, find the Engsvanyáli ruins there, and go away again."

You have always been curious about those ruins, the buildings you saw on the first day you arrived at the monastery. You ask about them.

The old man replies, "Once, before great Gángá sank, much of Yán Kór was a shallow sea. Ships plied the waves where the desert is today. These peaks — ours included — were islands. If you seek, you will find the shells of sea creatures, stone wharves and bronze mooring rings high above the empty sands, and the foundations of mighty buildings that once were seaside villas and the houses of commerce. Now the ships are ghosts, and the roaring seas sound only in dreams." He shakes himself. "Cha! Come, we must inform the others. There are preparations to make, just in case."

The Yán Koryáni approach the base of your hill. They consist of two companies of twenty-five troopers each, plus half a dozen individuals who



must be officers, and a gaggle of Milumanayáni tribesmen in voluminous grey-white desert cloaks. The soldiers are a rag-tag lot: they are attired in Milumanayáni cloaks, dust-streaked green tunics, and bits of armour, and they carry spears, swords, and odd, flanged maces. You see hardly a helmet or a shield amongst them.

As the Sentinel predicted, the soldiers halt at the riverbed. Somebody points, and a small, bowlegged officer steps out to shade his eyes and give an order. The Milumanayáni swarm up the slope of Tléku Melél Bluff opposite the monastery. You hear distant shouts as the exploring party calls down to their comrades below. They are probably reporting nothing but wind-worn stones and sand.

The Prioress speaks to calm the younger members, "They cannot see us as long as our Herder's illusion holds." Several acolytes utter murmurs of relief.

The officer beckons to a hunched, older man in a dust-streaked black robe. They confer, then the second man points an arm straight up at you. The officer issues guttural commands, and the remaining squad of soldiers begins to scramble up the scree towards the monastery.

The Herder grunts, "Unh. They have a magic-user. I must go down. Perhaps I can still direct them towards Lake Vánir and the empty village of Vatára. If they drink from that lake, they'll discover why the village is empty! I'll leave the illusion of the barren ravine in place here."

"Too late," the Weaver groans. "They're too close. If they have anybody with any psychic sense at all, they'll 'feel' you putting up the illusion of the ravine."

"Forget the illusion. Invite them in," the Prioress commands coolly. "We have nothing they want except water and food." She smiles over at the Water-Bearer, who quietly rises and enters the cave-hall leading to the shrine.

You wait. A *Kirén* later, a dark-visaged Milumanayáni scout appears at the entrance to the courtyard, followed by two lighter-skinned, hard-featured troopers. They stand facing you, swords out and as nervous as wild *Nráishu*-gazelles. One of them shouts down for reinforcements.

Time passes; then the short, bowlegged officer arrives. He looks around at your semicircle of ragged, barefoot, sun-baked clerics and scholars. You look about as prepossessing as a gang of road-slaves. He

grunts, blows out his cheeks, and snaps his fingers at a woman soldier: a stringy, thin-faced creature of indeterminate age. You have heard that the Yán Koryáni depend heavily upon female soldiers. Their Legions, called *Gurék*, are not divided according to armour and weapon-types as are Tsolyáni units, but contain heavy-armoured spearmen, archers, crossbowmen, swordsmen, and light skirmishers all together. The woman has strange, light-brown eyes and glints of red in her tangled, frizzy hair. She stares at you all, then focusses upon the Prioress.

"You," she rasps in a thick, northern accent. "Who? How many?"

"You see us all," the Prioress replies. "We are humble ascetics who seek solitude for our meditations."

The squat officer grimaces, scratches under his green-enameled breastplate, and says something. You see the Gardener stiffen. The woman swivels to face him and gabbles at him in her own tongue. He answers her, then says to all of you, "They've picked me out. I don't know how. They know we're a monastery and not just a commune of peasants. The Milumanayáni must've told them. Bastards!" he adds unnecessarily.

"Ours, now," the woman grins, waving a hand in all directions. "Tsolyáni army — our army — same. Land — we want, we take."

"Like hell!" the Prioress mutters.

The officer blinks at her, then opens his broad mouth to reveal chipped yellow teeth. He embarks upon a long harangue that sounds both pompous and threatening. The woman translates: "This man, name Mrgái Chkél, Nümür of Halór ["Lieutenant of a Company of 50"] of *Gurék* of Valiant of Ke'ér. Now! Speed! Haste! Water! Wine! Food!" She leers at the monastery's three or four female acolytes and junior priestesses. "Those! Entertain men!"

Instruction: if you are a man, you must decide how to help yourself and your female colleagues. (1) You can fight the Yán Koryáni. The soldiers are a Type 3 opponent, but they have a magic-user who makes them a Type 7! Use any spells you have. Go to Sec. 11 and fight. If you win, you are either cheating or incredibly lucky! The Prioress gives you a big smacking kiss and her heartfelt thanks. Go home to Sec. 10. If you lose, the Yán Koryáni make you the *pièce de résistance* at their evening religious sacrifice. (At least you perish bravely!) (2) You decide not to resist. You are forced to watch (and participate) in the entertainment. When their troopers are finished, they turn you over to the Milumana-

yáni, and things really get ugly. Roll a **D10**: 1-4 = the tribesmen kill you, which is a relief; 5-8 = they leave you battered and bound in a corner; you wriggle free and after three months manage to stumble home to Tsolyánu. Go to Sec. 10; 9-10 = the Yán Koryáni woman soldier enslaves you to carry her armour. Go to H.4. (3) You drift back to the rear of the crowd to find the Sentinel standing there. He grasps your arm and pulls you cautiously back into the shrine. Inside, the Water-Bearer holds a small secret door open. They help you through into total darkness. A slit of grey light appears to tell you that the Water-Bearer has reopened the panel to enable others to escape. The Sentinel's bony hand drags you along unseen corridors, through echoing chambers, over what sound like causeways above subterranean chasms — you can't see a thing. Go to H.5.

Instruction: if you are a woman, do NOT risk (1) or (2), above! Go to H.5!

H.4. HELP YOU WITH YOUR PARCELS, MA'AM?

The woman's name is Siyádz Mshá, as near as you can pronounce it. She hales from a village near the Yán Koryáni capital of Ke'ér and worships some quaint form of Lord Chiténg. She has been in the army for five years and has seen — and caused — just about every type of human misery imaginable. You quickly discover that she is capricious, cruel, and no fun at all. Carrying her armour is just one of the many menial tasks she devises to humiliate you. During the day, you tramp along behind her laden with armour, baggage, and miscellaneous plunder. At night you are tethered and guarded, with no bedding but a cast-off desert cloak. Fortunately, your mistress has no interest in sex, either male or female, and spends her free time playing at dice with her companions. If she has any emotions at all, they centre entirely around greed.

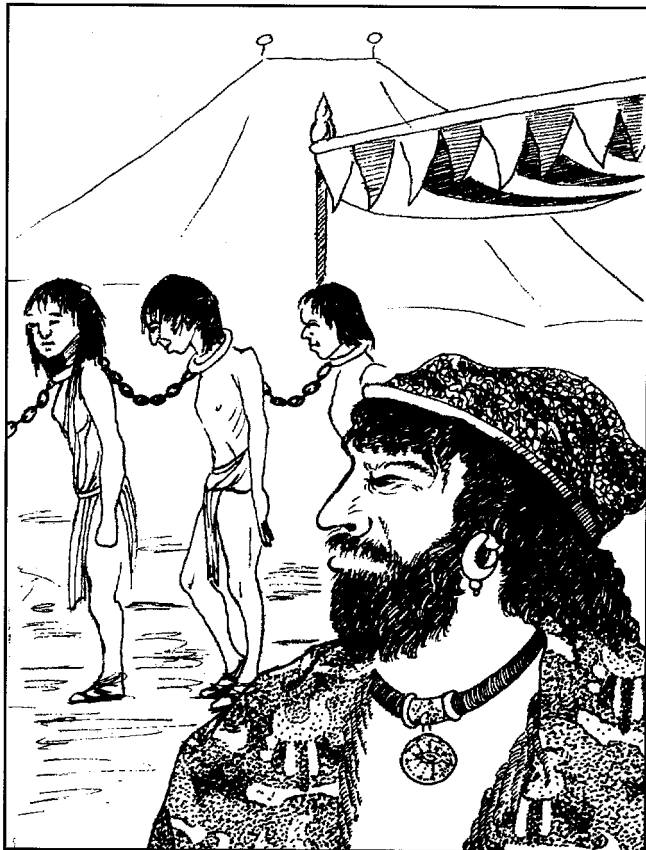
Marching, carrying, scrubbing utensils with sand, washing your owner's ragged uniform whenever you come to a stream, eating crusts and unnameable desert creatures, sleeping on stones inhabited by insects and serpents, you sink into a mindless daze. You attempt escape at first, but the desert provides little food or water. The Yán Koryáni effortlessly catch you again, beat you, and return you to Siyádz, who beats you some more. You have no idea how many weeks or months you spend in this hell: blazing sunlit days, succeeded by black, cold nights, poor food, ill treatment, and no rest or relief. Death would be welcome, but you cannot bring yourself to seek him.

You are little more than a walking corpse when at last your party emerges from the desert and

enters more fertile terrain. Your Yán Koryáni owners halt beside an icy, rushing river, and you dully perceive that there are others here, too. Men, women, and children come with fruits and vegetables for sale. They speak Tsolyáni. Some stop to stare at you curiously. Siyádz feels generous and throws you a *Másh*-fruit peel to chew on. The Nümür, Mrgái Chkél, guffaws and growls something to her in their own tongue. She has never taken the trouble to teach you Yán Koryáni, but you have picked up a few words. You understand "sell" and "slave," and this makes you uneasy.

Two days later you enter a walled city. Siyádz orders you to follow her and leads away into the densest section of the marketplace. She makes imperious inquiries here and there and stops at last in a district of sheds and tents. Here she speaks to one man, then another, while you stand dumbly waiting. You feel stirrings of a yearning to escape, but you have suffered in the desert sun so long that it is hard to put two coherent thoughts together.

A stout, bearded fellow in a gaudy fringed shawl, feels your limbs, opens your mouth, and peers into your eyes. "Won't do," he says to Siyádz in Tsolyáni. "Nobody'll buy him! Sacrifice? What temple would sacrifice a wreck like this? A proper God would be insulted and retaliate with storms and lightning! Fa!"



"Take!" Siyádz commands. "Give gold." She fingers her sword-hilt. "This one Tsolyáni — from monastery — we capture. Know much."

"Alas, Lady, you have — uh — exhausted his value. You won't even get a trade-in!" He bends close, and you smell bad breath and powerful perfume. "Mayhap you have others? I might throw in a *Káitar* or two if you can give me other slaves in better shape. I'd put this poor wretch out of his misery just as a kindness."

"No! Strong! Give money!" Siyádz rears back, a stance you recognise as dangerous.

"Not a *Hlásh!* I have to make a living! We Salarvyáni are not wealthy!"

Siyádz' curved sword comes whispering out of its belt-clip. The Salarvyáni squawks, bleats something in his own language, and retreats. A second Salarvyáni, a huge individual with a club the size of a small tree trunk, emerges from the slavers' tent. You squat on the filthy paving stones, indifferent to it all.

"What's going on here?" a new voice snarls. You see a pair of soldiers in copper breastplates and helmets. The Salarvyáni falls on his knees before them, babbling in a mishmash of several languages at once. Siyádz readies her sword.

"Put it down, Yán Koryáni. You're not lording it over your poor, dumb slaves now! This is Aukéshe, in Tsolyánu, and you'll obey our laws, whatever your damned Baron Áld says!" The man spits. His comrade edges around to get behind Siyádz.

She knows a bad situation when she sees one. "No. I go. I take slave. Go." Her eyes dart this way and that.

"She admitted to me that this slave is a Tsolyáni," says the Salarvyáni piously. "She said she captured him from a monastery. He could be a high person. Possibly a reward, eh?"

"The monastery!" one of the soldiers exclaims. "Remember, Jónu? Nobody ever found the Yán Koryáni troops who massacred all those priests!"

"Aye, and the Baron had to promise to hand 'em over to Tsolyáni law if they were ever caught! Otherwise the temples wouldn't approve him as High General!"

Siyádz curses and lunges, but the man with the club cracks her behind the ear and lays her out on the

dirty paving stones as neatly as an embalmer arranges a customer. The soldiers mutter to each other, then gruffly order the Salarvyáni to be on his way. He protests, but they ignore him. "You're lucky to be out of it," one tells him, "since maybe you had something to do with the massacre, eh?" The man protests but eventually sidles off.

"Here!" the other soldier, Jónu, says to you. "Pick up the woman and follow us. We're off to the Palace of the Realm. If you really are from the monastery, we get the reward, and you get your freedom. I hate to see a Tsolyáni in the clutches of these Yán Koryáni slime anyway." He turns to his companion. "What say, Kágesh, doesn't a person who's wrongfully enslaved get to enslave the slaver in turn? I'll bet this poor sod can think up some jolly games for the bitch, here!"

"Oh, aye, especially if my uncle, the judge, happens to be on duty." The other man chortles. The two soldiers stride off toward the cluster of taller buildings in the distance. You pick up Siyádz' limp form and stagger along behind them.

Your steps grow ever lighter in spite of your burden.

Instruction: you can forgive Siyádz and let her go. On the other hand, many Tsolyáni have an ethical attitude similar to "an eye for an eye." It's your choice. Go to Sec. 10.

H.5. CACHE ME IF YOU CAN

You have a barked knee, a stubbed toe, and a bruised shoulder by the time the Sentinel lets go of you. You hear mumbled syllables, and then a ball of dim radiance appears on the palm of his hand. As your eyes adjust, you see that you stand in a cyclopean hall. On both sides rows of monumental bas reliefs march off into the darkness: kings, princes, gods, worshippers, and monsters, sculptured in a blocky, jagged style that reminds you of Llyáni art. But did the Llyáni get up this far into Milumanayá? And wasn't this whole area underwater then, as the Sentinel told you? No, it can't be Llyáni. Bednálljan, possibly?

The Water-Bearer appears out of the shadows, and you forget your questions. "I left the panel open a crack," he says. "Arún and Liésa know about it. We'd better wait here and see if anybody else escapes."

"What about the Yán Koryáni?" you ask.

"They'll be along soon. All too soon. They have help."

"What do you mean?" the Sentinel pants. He is an old man, and he is breathing hard. You wish there were someplace to sit.

"The black-robe with the officer! I recognised him from before — from Yán Kór. I was with General Bazhán's Legion on Srigásh Field when we captured the Baron's mistress, Yilrána, the one we impaled in front of the gates of Ke'ér."

The Sentinel is silent, then says, "The Lady Yilrána, eh? So that's why you've been up here all these years. I never knew."

"Aye, old friend. Same as you. People we don't want to meet, eh?"

"Different ones," the other answers shortly. "So who is the man with the officer?"

"His name is Nyérig, as I remember. He was one of their sorcerers at Srigásh Field, but he escaped after we sacked Ke'ér. I heard he went on to become a student of Lord Fú Shi'í, the Baron's chief counsellor. He's a high mage now. And the unit that just captured our monastery?"

"What about it?"

"The *Gurék* of the Valiant of Ke'ér: that's Lord Fú Shi'í's personal Legion. I think they've been sent here deliberately. This monastery sits atop a treasure house, as you well know."

"Unh. All right, what do we do now? You know this hole better than I do."

"We're in the Hall of Nine Kings. We can go straight ahead, into the Labyrinth. I can get us out of there, but we'll come right back to the monastery, and that's liable to be a very unpleasant place for a while. If we take the next tunnel to the left, we come out in the Catacombs. The Engsvanyáli left some nasty tomb-guardians there, and I didn't have time to pick up my amulets and Eyes."

"How about straight back, behind us?"

"Hmph. I've never gone in that direction. My predecessor, the Water-Bearer before me, said that a whole Bednálljan regiment chased a local nobleman, his soldiers, his household staff, and fifty concubines down that passage. None of 'em ever came out."

"Ah. Hmph. Not good. Well?"

"We can make for the storerooms. There're weapons in there from the Latter times that'll blow cities away."

"We don't want to blow cities away. A good Eye of Raging Power, now..."

"Hóí!" the Water-Bearer hisses suddenly. "Somebody's coming!"

The three of you dodge back against the wall, and the Sentinel drops his light spell. The world reverts to darkness. You hear shuffling, then the sound of weeping.

The light flares up again. "Liésa!" the Water-Bearer calls. "And Dása and Táreth!" Two women and the boy who met you when you first arrived are staggering along the corridor toward you. All are dirty, and the taller girl, Liésa, you think — this is the first time you've heard names — has a bruise on her cheek.

"My Lord!" the smaller woman, Dása, sobs. "Lord—"

"No names!" the Water-Bearer snaps. "Not mine, at least! Here, you're all right now." He gestures to you "Take care of her! Táreth, where's Arún?"

"Dead. I hope," the boy answers. "The soldiers were — doing things — to him." He offers no details.

The Sentinel curses, then says, "We have to move on. We go to the storerooms!"

The Water-Bearer leads the way. You would miss the little side-corridor between two of the sculptured kings if he didn't show it to you. The tunnel beyond is barely four feet tall and half as wide.

There are stairs here, leading down. You come to cross-corridors, all barely high enough to squat in, and then to a curious, slanting tunnel that is a tall triangle in cross-section. It seems older than the rest. It also feels subtly alien.

The Water-Bearer stops. "Built by the Shunned Ones long ago, before humankind ever came to what was then an island. They left when human shipping got too close. You, Dása, go about fifty paces down this triangular tunnel to the left, and you Táreth — you're small — go about fifty paces to the right. Then come back here. That ought to confuse 'em!"

You all go on again, through more halls and passageways, then down a staircase that is made of some ancient, uncorrodible metal, then into a hallway that is amazingly clean, airy, and lighted by long,

glowing rods that run down the length of the ceiling. Many of the rods are dark, however, and there is a strange smell. Doors line both sides of these passages.

"In there," the Water-Bearer pants. "Air-cars, weapons, *Ru'ún* — " You have heard of *Ru'ún*: creatures made all of metal. They are said to be very dangerous.

"Won't do. This one. What's in here?" The Sentinel stops in front of a door farther on.

"Little things. Who knows? Up ahead, there's some great machine — don't know what it does — left, lots more — books, treasure." You realise that the Water-Bearer is at least as old as the Sentinel, and neither could win a footrace against healthy soldiers. You signal as much to Liésa; she takes the Water-Bearer's blue-veined hand and urges him to slow down.

"To the right, the — the — " The Water-Bearer slumps against the wall. Liésa gapes at him from fear-wide eyes. The Sentinel returns and bends down beside his friend. Dása and Táreth go back up the corridor to stand guard.

After a moment the Sentinel looks up. "He's going," he announces sadly. "A few breaths more, then on to the Isles of Teretané." Liésa suppresses a sob.

Dása comes running back, her bare feet slapping on the smooth metal of the flooring. "They're here!" she blurts. "The Yán Koryáni!" You don't need to be told: the clatter of heavy boots is quite audible.

"Here — in here!" Liésa calls. You help her drag the Water-Bearer inside one of the rooms. The Sentinel joins you. His features are pale, and his eyes have a far-away look about them. You hope that he is not going to die on you too! In a moment both Táreth and Dása are with you. The boy closes the door.

"If they have Rényu — or tracking spells — we're caught," the Sentinel mutters.

Without warning ceiling lights flash on above you. You turn to look upon a chaos of shapes and colours: boxes, cartons, tubes, glass bottles, things shrouded in some sort of transparent wrapping, and objects so alien that you can't take them all in at once. Dása squeals, and Táreth goes to her.

The Sentinel says, "Nothing to fear. The Lords of the Latter Times hoarded everything. I think they realised they could never produce these items again, and so they collected all they could. They also fought over whatever they found in the ruins of the

cities of the Great Ancients. It was that fighting that hastened their downfall."

You walk gingerly through the aisles, towering shelves packed with incomprehensible artifacts on both sides of you. Liésa and Táreth follow you, while Dása stays with the Sentinel and the Water-Bearer. Neither of the old men looks well.

"Touch nothing!" the Sentinel calls. "This place holds terrible weapons — unknown substances — dangerous machines — !"

Táreth says, "The door: can you lock it?"

You already had the foresight to check. "I saw no key or keyhole. There's only a little panel of nine glass boxes next to the door-handle."

Liésa starts to say, "Ask the Sen—"

The door bursts open. The *Nümür* is there, his troopers behind him. At his side you see the scarecrow figure whom the Water-Bearer named Nyérig.

None of you has a weapon. Dása shrieks as the soldier in the lead slaps her aside with the flat of his sword. The Sentinel raises a hand, but the Yán Koryáni reach him first and wrestle him down. The *Nümür* comes forward and orders his men to wrap a length of metal chain around the old man's neck. Now the Sentinel can cast no magic, psychic or ritual.

Instruction: if you decide to surrender, go to H.6. If not, continue in this Section.

Liésa and Táreth stand frozen beside you. The enemy has seen you, but there is still time to claw among the objects on the nearest shelf for a weapon. You realise that you have almost no chance of finding one, or of knowing what it is and how to use it if you do! Any hostile action will only make the *Nümür* angry, and you don't want to know what he will do.

Instruction: if you still want to fight, choose one of the ancient artifacts from those available beside you on the shelf, listed below. Only one will stop the Yán Koryáni. No peeking!

Instruction: take your chosen object from table H.5.1 on page 16 and go to H.7.

H.6. THE SENTINEL HAS THE LAST WORD

"All right!" you call in desperation. "We surrender! We're coming out!"

TABLE H.5.1: STOREROOM ITEMS

ITEM	DESCRIPTION
1	A dark grey tube as long as your forearm; it has a square box at one end and a glass disc at the other. There are buttons and controls on the box
2	A short, stubby canister of greyish metal. It featureless and is sealed at both ends
3	An L-shaped black tube. The short end of the L comes to a point. At the apex is a tiny, round bead of clear glass
4	A round, flat, red-enameled case about three finger-widths in diameter; there is a latch on one edge and a hinge on the other; there are glyphs on top, but they make no sense to you
5	A pyramid the size of your fist, made of clear glass. It has no visible controls, but you can dimly see something inside it
6	A sealed bottle with what looks like a push button on the side; it has unintelligible, squarish symbols all around its circumference and a picture of some animal resembling a dog
7	A heavy, round ball-like object, as big as your head and made of a hard, marbled, brownish substance; it has three holes in it, spaced about two inches apart
8	A knee-high tripod, on top of which balances a forearm-long object shaped like two cones, base to base; there are tiny glass discs spaced irregularly all over the latter. The cones look like they are made of iridescent glass
9	A small, thin, blue rod with a sharp point at one end and a push-button at the other; it is as long and as thick as your little finger
10	A wafer-thin golden disc the size of your palm; there are grooves and symbols on both sides, but you can't read them

You feel a hand clutching your shoulder. It is Liésa. She places a slim, *Chlén*-hide dagger in your hand. “Please!” she whispers urgently. “Kill me now! I have heard what they — do — to prisoners.” You stare at the wicked little blade.

Táreth reaches over and pushes the knife aside. “No, Liésa!”

“Yes!” She reaches for the weapon. “If neither of you will, then I must!”

From near the door, he translator woman shouts, “Come! We not kill!”

Táreth grits his teeth. “You two run for it — back into the aisle!” He turns around and yells, “All right! I’m coming!”

You and Liésa melt back into the piles of crates and boxes. You glimpse Táreth as he goes forward, hands raised. You also see Dása, she lies sprawled on the floor, red seeping from beneath her long, black hair. A Yán Koryáni soldier is just straightening up from beside her, wiping his hooked short sword on her tunic.

Táreth screams, just once.

“Now!” Liésa orders furiously. She shoves the knife-hilt back into your fist. You shake your head. The time still hasn’t come.

The Yán Koryáni officer barks commands, and you hear his soldiers spreading out through the storehouse. An open carton the size of a small house stands at the end of a row of shelving. Inside is a machine of some sort, with dust-hazed glass windows and rotted seats for several occupants. One door is ajar. You see no wheels, so it cannot be a cart. For want of anything better, you hustle Liésa into it, tumble in beside her in the musty darkness, and hunker down. The enemy will surely find you if they search the room. All you can hope for is that they are in a hurry to loot and get back up to the monastery.

You are surprised to hear the Sentinel’s voice. Apparently the *Nümür* is interrogating him. He gasps, “Let — them — go! I know what you want!”

The mage, Nyérig, asks in Tsolyáni: “What you know?”

“I can guess. Lord Fú Shi’í must have found the records of the original owner of this cache. There’s only one thing he could want so badly: a replacement engine for the Weapon Without Answer! We heard it was ruined at the Battle of Dlakár, and he can’t repair it unless he finds the right parts.”

It is the woman who replies. She snarls, “You know? Where? Show!”

"Let me up. Swear that you will not harm my young companions." You sense that the Sentinel is stalling for time, but you can't see what he is doing.

"Stand! Good. Where, now? Tell, or — !"

The old man raises his voice. You know he is addressing you and Liésa. "My friends, if you can hear me, I have no academic specialty, no spells, no weapons. Yet I do have one function: I am the Sentinel. As my predecessors were commanded, all the way back to the Lords of the Latter Times, so was I entrusted with just one task." Suddenly, he shifts into ancient Llyáni. If you do not know this language, Liésa does, and she'll translate for you. "Go left out of this chamber! There is a round door at the end of the corridor. When I have — done my duty — the Yán Koryáni will flee. Pass through that door and dog it shut from the other side. You'll find a tunnel that leads out to the ruins of the Engsvanyáli villa on the opposite side of the valley. Go! You'll be free! I—" He breaks off, gagging, and you realise that one of the Yán Koryáni must have struck him.

"No foreign talk!" the woman soldier shrills. You hear more blows.

Nyérig squawks in protest: "Wait — ! Why me? I do not know that tongue!" You hear more blows and guess that the soldiers are beating Nyérig for good measure.

"I need no spells!" the Sentinel cries. "I wear my badge of office around my neck! See, I pull it out on its neck-chain and offer it to you, noble officer! Oh, it is valuable! Just look at the pretty ruby button in its centre!"

There is a sound like a tiny click. You hear a soft, sibilant, rushing noise. One of the soldiers bawls words in his own tongue. Then there is chaos: men shouting, the woman soldier shrieking, things breaking, then running footsteps. You peer out from your hiding place to see a faint, greyish mist drifting down like soft, summer rain from little pipes in the ceiling. Some noxious vapour!

The *Nümiur* stops just long enough to hack the Sentinel's head from his body; then he follows his troops as they scramble back the way they came. You drag Liésa out of the machine by dint of sheer terror, race past the bodies of your friends to the door, and out into the corridor. Instead of turning right, the way you and the Yán Koryáni came, you follow the Sentinel's instructions and turn left. The heavy, round door is visible at the end of the passage. You stumble through and thus live a while longer.

Instruction: you have no time to snatch up any of the items in the storeroom. Go to Sec. 10. If you are a man, you can marry Liésa if you wish, when you get home. Liésa *hiViridáme* is a scholar of Llyáni and *Bednálljan*, interested in history, and is a Third-Level sorceress (choose her spells for her from this book). She has an Intelligence of 90, a Psychic Ability of 89, a Psychic Reservoir of 81, a Comeliness of 88 and a Charisma of 83. She's 18 years old, comes from *Tumíssa*, and belongs to the White Stone clan. She is also of the same religion you are. You are lucky! Of course, if you are a woman, you can't marry Liésa, but you and she can be good friends and hang out together. She's clever, loyal, and honest, and the pair of you get along famously. Go to Sec. 10.

H.7. YOUR CHOICE?

What did you choose? The answers in the following paragraphs are deliberately out of order so that those with weaker willpower may restrain themselves from snatching a quick look.

Did you take item no. 4? You click the latch on the case, and the it flips open to reveal the "Star of Sirius," perhaps the finest blue-white diamond ever discovered in Humanspace. You can throw it at the Yán Koryáni, but it doesn't stop them from killing you and Liésa.

Item no. 9 is a special light-pencil that adds captions to home video films. No help there either!

Item no. 5 is a hologramme: set it on a flat surface and warm it for a second with your hand, and a picture of a young boy lights up inside it. A voice says (in words you can't understand), "Happy birthday, Dad, from Rekki!"

Item no. 10 is not a compact disc, as you may have thought; those were obsolete by the start of the twenty-second century. This is the command control disc for a tubeway car: slip it into the slot under a car's control panel, and it gives you ten pre-programmed destinations (some of which may no longer exist). The disc is valuable, but it doesn't stop enemy soldiers.

Item no. 1 is a long-distance telescopic camera for taking pictures of moons and planets and the girl in the apartment down the block. You can point it at the Yán Koryáni *Nümiur* and take his picture! Smile! You're on less-than-candid camera!

Item no. 6 is what you want: push the button and the bottle's nozzle emits a spray of a chemical much like Mace. It disorients its targets, makes their eyes

water, and brings on paroxysms of sneezing. Too much, and they go unconscious. The inscription on the bottle (in Third Cycle Rigellian Imperial script) says: "Dog-Away! Repels Dogs, Phagomytes, Distors, Frabgas, and *Ahoggyá*." While the Yán Koryáni are clawing at their eyes, you and Liésa grab the Sentinel and make your getaway!

Item no. 2 is a sealed can of Ardzberry jam from the *Pé Chóí* Confederation; it's still tasty, but it will not deter the Yán Koryáni.

Item no. 8 is the most dangerous of the lot: it is a *Ssú* anti-personnel device which is activated by a knob on top. Within a few moments the double-cone-shaped object on top begins to rotate, then to emit laser beams from the little lenses on the sides, then to tilt up and down like a gyroscope. The lasers crisscross the room, slicing anything in their way to pieces. Depending on what the *Ssú* programmed it for, the device will eventually either go inert or explode. This will certainly kill the Yán Koryáni. Unfortunately, it will slice and dice you and Liésa,

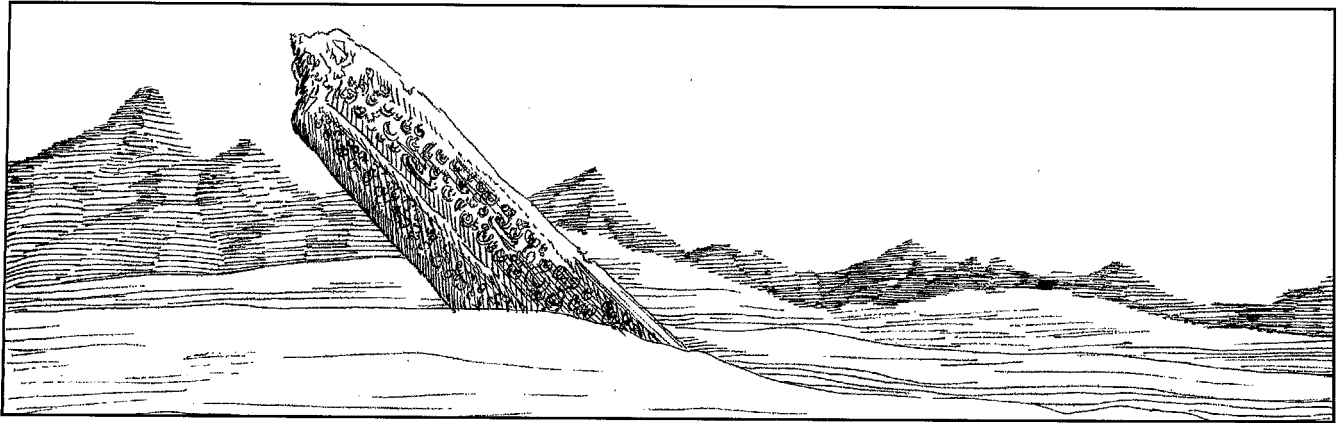
too, before you can figure out what is happening and get out of the chamber.

Item no. 3 is a physician's light for examining ears. The battery is dead, however, and it is doubly useless.

The last item, no. 7, is not a bowling ball. It is a rock-hard globe of *Shén Gádr*-cheese, not seen on Tékmel since the last *Shén* cargo ship arrived just before the Time of Darkness began. You can roll it at the enemy and perhaps knock over one of them, but you can't do them all!

Instruction: if you picked the wrong item, the Yán Koryáni off you and your friends in a very unpleasant fashion and go on to loot the installation. (Too bad for you!) If you chose the correct artifact, the Sentinel guides you out. You make it home in time to learn that the Baron's aide, Fú Shi'í, has repaired his Weapon Without Answer and is taking the huge machine on special Chlén-carts either to use against Prince Mirusiya's Vriddi rebels in Fasiltum or against Prince Eselné's battered army in Chéne Hó. Go to Sec. 10.





23. ARCHAEOLOGY

I. DIGGING IN

Your studies take you to Jakálla, the great seaport at the mouth of the Missúma River on Tsolyánu's southern coast. The pastimes of this famous metropolis hold your interest for a time, but even such diversity palls, and you cast about for new pursuits. Commercial journeys are both tedious and dangerous; the army is even more perilous; foreign travel is out, now that the Five Empires seethe with political turmoil; scholarly pursuits have lost their charm; and affairs of the heart have become tedious and fraught with emotional pitfalls. What to do? You have better sense than to involve yourself in Imperial politics, sexual deviations, or the deadly drug *Zu'úr*. Likewise, you have no desire to suffer death or wounds in the *Hirilákte* arena — or to commit either murder or suicide! Outside your clanhouse, the oppressive heat, the dank, muddy, spicy smells of the ancient city, and the endless buzzing of the *Chrí*-flies are enough to madden a stone idol. You pet your dog, fondle the cat, caress your slave lovers, polish your feast-day armour and weapons, and lazily peruse a treatise titled "Seventy Secret Ways to Attain Sweet Breath, a Flashing Eye, and a Glance That Will Forthwith Cozen the Opposite Sex into Your Impassioned Embrace." It is doubtful whether the author ever achieved an embrace of any kind, much less one of passion.

One afternoon you are roused from a sweaty, fitful nap by a slave. "Most noble one," the girl says, "a high person would see you below in the atrium."

"Fá!" You are irritated. "Did I not hang the *Méshqu*-plaque of 'Unavailability' on the hook outside my door? Are you colour-blind that you cannot see green with two rows of white ovals?" You thumb through the stack of little painted plaques of *Chlén*-

hide on your hall table. "Here, see: the pure green of the 'Badge of Immediate Availability.' Here is the green and red-striped 'Badge of Solemn Contemplation.' And here, idiot, is what I have for you: the chequered red and black 'Stern Fist of Retribution!' Shall I demonstrate?"

The slave quails. "Oh Shadow of Beneficence, Nourisher of the Poor, I plead mercy!"

You are not really angry, of course, but it is needful to maintain a severe mien with slaves. You pretend to think. "Well, next time you must look at the *Méshqu*-plaque before entering. Else comes retribution, indeed!"

The slave bows low, knowing full well that this is bluster, a game everyone plays in order that the world may remain on an even keel. She helps you on with your kilt, sandals, and light over-tunic. You descend to the cool, pillared hall where your visitor awaits.

It is Jórudu hiTétkolel, one of your friends from school. He is tall, stooped, and so skinny that his nickname is "the Bent Twig." He is unabashedly intellectual, which has cost him much popularity.

"Ohé!" you cry, feigning more gladness than you feel. "What brings you out in an afternoon sun that would melt brass?"

Jórudu does not reply at once but peers all around like an old woman looking for *Atlún*-spiders under her sleeping mat. "Hói, listen," he mutters at last in a conspiratorial whisper. "I have news. Have you heard of the village of Nisuél?"

You yawn. "Headquarters of the clan of the Golden Sunburst, is it not?"

"Yes, yes — near a hundred *Tsán* north of Jakállá — "

"What of it? Has it suddenly become the capital of the Empire? Or sunk into the sea like ancient Gánga?"

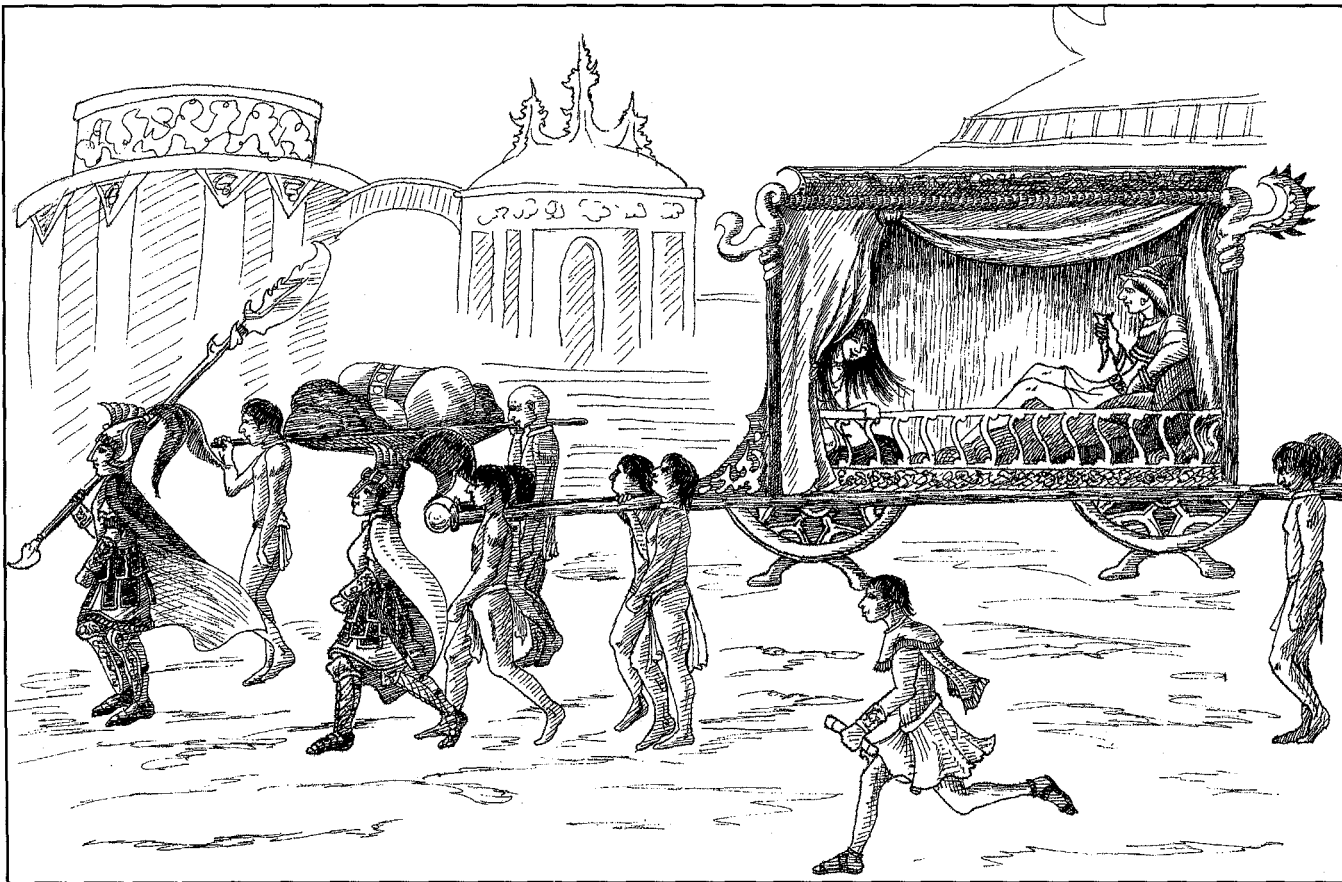
"No — no — of course not! Do not mock me. I have news you will want to hear."

"I'm listening."

"Nigh another hundred *Tsán* beyond Nisuél, there is a little fief called Jikutlár. It is run by some petty lordling of our clan. You won't believe what they've found there! I heard it in the temple today."

You wake up at once. "Nonsense! The *Ssú* never lived in this region, not since the Time of the Gods! And how could anybody find a ruin here in the delta anyway? All lies buried under twenty man-heights of river mud."

Each year the delta floods, and the river turns yellow-grey with silt from the fertile plain to the north. Here and there low hills and ridges rise above the flood-plain: the remnants of higher peaks before the cataclysm that bore the island of Gánga down below the waves of Msúmtel Bay, taking with it the glories of Engsvanyálu. Now many of the Priestkings' cities are no more than ruins, while of others not even the



"Found? A *Hmélu* with two heads? A stone dildo belonging to Lord Hrógga, the Hero of the Gods? A *Dziya*-melon the size of Lady Disúna's left breast?" You know that Jórudu is enamoured of Jakállá's famed courtesan, Lady Disúna hiTánkolel.

"Will you be serious? I mean it!" He bends so close his perfumed pomade well nigh strangles you. "They have found a buried ruin! A ruin built by the *Ssú*!"

names remain. Thus it is with the Munificent Municipality of Zru'ó, the fortress of Ngála, the City of Nine Walls, the Singing Towers of Cháimu, and, greater than all the rest, Purdánim the Glorious, the capital of Queen Nayári of the Silken Thighs, she who founded the First Imperium in a sea of blood.

Jakállá, fortunately, is not one of these lost metropolises. She survived the earthquakes, the floods, and the wear and tear of centuries to remain the capital of the south, the cynosure of beauty, the arbiter of

fashion, the apex of literary style, the centre of elegant cuisine, and the touchstone of sophistication. Some call Jakállá the Whore of the Missúma; those who know her better name her the Forever-Maiden, the Courtesan Whose Charms Cannot Fade. Love her or hate her; you cannot forget her.

"What proof is there?" you sigh, then add: "And what if it is a *Ssú* ruin? What if be a city crammed full of living, breathing, dancing, jiggling *Ssú*? What has that to do with you or with me?"

It is Jórudu's turn to sigh. "You're always the one who was interested in the *Ssú* — at school, at least. My clan-father at Nisuél — Clan-Elder Srikandómo hiTétkolel — is in charge of selecting an expedition from our temple to go and join in the digging."

"Digging? Do I resemble Vrishtára the Mole? I do no digging!"

"Of course not!" Jórudu clenches his hands impatiently. "No high-clan person digs! I meant that you would be part of the archaeological team. The diggers will be slaves or peasants. The temple has appointed Lord Dalkén hiQolyélmu, who is the son of the Clan-Patriarch at Nisuél — a distant cousin of mine — to head the work."

"*Ssú*, hmm?" By now your interest is piqued. "Is there proof — real proof?"

Mutely Jórudu holds out a roll of *Hruchán*-reed paper. It is a rubbing, done with a piece of hard wax. It shows three lines of indented, rounded ovals, circles, dots, and depressions in what appears to be weathered stone. You recognise it at once as the script of the *Ssú*.

Instruction: if you have 2 or more skill levels in the hobbies of "nonhuman arts and crafts" (Sec. 9.3.1), "nonhuman artifacts" (Sec. 9.3.2), or "nonhumans" in the "Science and Knowledge" category (Sec. 9.3.9), you are well qualified. Otherwise you must give Jórudu an "inducement" of 1,000-5,000 Káitars (roll a D10 ÷ 2) to pass on to his clan-elders. If you do not have the money, you can borrow it from your clan, but you must repay it as soon as possible, plus 10% interest.

Jórudu's excitement is contagious: anything to relieve the tedium of life in the clanhouse. You inform your clansmen, arrange for a favourite body-servant, a litter and sixteen bearers (two shifts of eight), a boy to fan you and act as a messenger, your most versatile slave-lover, and four baggage-bearers. As an afterthought, you add a pair of bodyguards. These are

poorer clan-brothers who hire out for jobs like this. Your entourage grows until your own clansmen point out that if every junior member of the team brought this many retainers, there would be no room for the archaeologists! You cannot do without your comforts, of course, and your decisions prevail.

Instruction: go to I.1.

I.1. THE SCHOLARS GATHER

Nisuél is a civilised place. Jórudu's clan-father displays the hospitality expected of a great and wealthy clan. Lord Srikandómo is the clan-archivist, and he shows you the record rooms where thousands of genealogies and biographies are kept. He opens the clan's museum with its lead-shrouded *Káing*-standards of a dozen deactivated Legions under a forest of tattered banners, shields, swords, armour, trophies from forgotten battles half a world away. He also unlocks the cabinets full of citations from the Engsvanyáli Priestkings in whose time this clan grew to prominence. It is quite impressive.

Jórudu is in a hurry to go on to Jikutlár, and so you must miss some of the fine food, the comfortable lodgings, and the entertainment. You leave the following day before the sun rises and turns the land into a blaze of heat.

The region around Nisuél is lush and green. It is crisscrossed by canals and secondary roads, for this is the produce-garden that feeds Jakállá and its suburbs, Músa Jakállá and Pála Jakállá. The great clans that own these lands are old, wealthy, and — to be honest — stodgy. The peasants you meet bow humbly as your litters pass; the slaves tramp in endless columns off to the fields in the morning and back again at night; the *Chlén*-carts are laden with vegetables and fruits and grain; and the tax-collectors appear, obscenely sleek and well-fed. This is the Empire as it has been for almost two thousand years (except for civil wars, plagues, religious strife, and the usual contrempts of history). Were it not for the present political situation — one claimant to the Petal Throne raising an army in Páya Gupá and another gathering strength in Fasíltum, always the seat of troubles — one could almost believe the Imperium to be at peace.

Four days later you enter the fief of Jikutlár from the southwest. You halt in the prosperous village of Cholúga, where the headman (Tsolyáni: Laithturún) is one Vriyádu hiChittén, of the High Sun clan, an elderly, rather stiff old man, and a worshipper of Lord Qón. He puts you up for the night and tells you

that there are indeed strange goings-on up at the fief's headquarters, some twenty-five Tsán farther on.

"Who is the fiefholder?" you ask, and Jórudu chimes in with, "Yes, what's the problem?"

"Our Lord is mighty Tékonu hiQolyélmu of the clan of the Golden Sunburst," replies the headman. "As for the troubles, you'll have to ask him. Not for the likes of me to say. But there're high folk from all over the Empire coming to Jikutlár these days. Priests and priestesses of several temples, officers of Legions, and even a delegation of brown-robés — Sárku priests — sniffing about."

"What can they want?" Jórudu puzzles.

The old man frowns. "Nothing good, young Sir. Folk say they want to lay claim to the fief and take it away from noble Lord Tékonu. They're looking for an excuse: an unpaid assessment, an outstanding debt, a tax somebody forgot, a fault in the deed given to Lord Tékonu's ancestor, General Hémeth hiQolyélmu, by Emperor Gyésmu 'the Iron Fist,' back in 2,028 A.S., shortly after the war with Mu'ugalavyá. Any reason will do."

This is all beyond you. The lamp is guttering down to a spark, the sleeping mats are laid, and your slave-lover awaits. You take a last sip of the good Ngálu-wine and go to bed.

The next day you travel on, and by evening you sight the brown tile roof of Lord Tékonu's pretty manse, half hidden among the broad-leaved *Gapúl*-trees. The house has two storeys, with a little columned pavilion surrounded by potted plants and flowering trees on its flat roof. Lord Tékonu is said to be a good amateur botanist. Just beyond the northeast corner of the main building, stands an open colonnade with some sort of private building inside. The kitchens and servant quarters are also separate, located directly to the east, behind the mansion, and these block your view of barns, *Chlén*-stables, storage bins, and other facilities still farther off. As you approach, you notice a gang of slaves excavating a pit in the gardens to the northwest of the house. Your pulse quickens. This is what you've come for!

Jórudu sends a slave ahead to seek Lord Tékonu and also to find the priest of Lord Hnálla appointed by the Palace of the Priesthoods in Jakálla to co-ordinate the dig. His name, you have been told, is Jijékmu hiTikésmu, and you are to report to him. The mansion is crowded with people: servants, guests, locals, and priests of Belkhánu, Thúmis, Karakán,

Avánthe, and even a plump and sensuous-looking priestess of Lady Dlamélish.

Lord Tékonu himself emerges to greet you. He is a huge man, well over a hand and a half taller than the average Tsolyáni, bluff, jolly, and rather refreshingly bucolic. He introduces you to his colleagues, who are also of his own Qolyélmu lineage and fellow members of the clan of the Golden Sunburst: Lord Dalkén hiQolyélmu, a handsome, severe-faced man of medium height; and Lord Kerek hiQolyélmu, a sharp-featured, scholarly man who serves Lord Karakán. You also meet the chief archaeologist, Jijékmu hiTikésmu. He is also of the Golden Sunburst clan but of a less prestigious lineage. He is in his early thirties, pleasant in appearance, and devoted to his studies.

At dinner you hear the story of the find. Lord Dalkén tells you that peasants clearing the field in front of the house first came upon what they thought was a large boulder. Digging down to remove it, they discovered that it extended far underground and was not natural but a great monolith of squared and worked stone that entered the earth at a sharp angle, as though tilted over on its side. Thinking they could hoist, pry, or chop it out, they dug still deeper, and on the underside of the block they found rows of little dots and circles: the alien script of the *Ssú*. Lord Tékonu informed colleagues in Jakálla, and scholars began to arrive. Subsequent digging revealed more *Ssú* artifacts and a collapsed chamber that had



apparently once been the top-storey attic of a deeply buried building. At the far end of this attic was a vertical chimney that opened down into a fireplace in the storey below. Eventually a tunnel was discovered behind what had been a secret panel at the back of the fireplace; this led into caves and stairways, and on to a network of ancient, metal-walled passages. These could only be the work of the Latter Times — or of the Great Ancients before the Time of Darkness. Interest in the dig burgeoned among the scholarly community, and more experts arrived to enjoy the hospitality of genial Lord Tékuu. All of the temples — and the Imperium — demand shares in whatever is found.

Other events are afoot as well: the temple of Sárku appears to be behind an attempt to frighten Lord Tékuu's peasants off their land. Magic was used, a priest of Karakán sent to look into the matter — one Ranúa hiZhayárvu — was slain, and *Ssú* were reported seen in various places around the fief. The temple of Karakán dispatched a second investigator: Lord Kérék hiQolyélmu, whom you have just met. He is accompanied by a “sniffer” from far-off Rannálu, a tribesman named Júrshu, who is experienced at tracking the *Ssú*. This strange man descended into the excavation, and reported that no *Ssú* were involved! The spice *Máughá* was used to imitate the musty-cinnamon smell of the *Ssú*, and blue-glass lanterns were used to simulate the light the *Ssú* prefer. Still other strange events have occurred, but these are all you can assimilate for now.

You are fascinated by the “experts” who have arrived before you. Dijái hiMrélsa is an aged and erudite priest of Belkhánu and a member of the Amber Cloak clan who is skilled with devices of the Ancients. He has brought an “interfogulator”: a machine that detects and sorts Other Planar vibrations and alignments. Lady Odušana hiVessúra, of the White Stone clan, is a priestess of Avánthe; she is concerned with Tsolyáni history. The objectives of the Dlamélish priestess, Thikénta hiVasháka of the Green Lintel clan, are not obvious; she appears more interested in Lord Dalkén than in the ancient artifacts of the *Ssú*! The most senior scholar, however is a priest of Thúmis, Ejél hiKaráktu of the Golden Bough clan. He is a serene, cherubic-faced old man who is said to be highly skilled in the sorcerous processes of regeneration and revivification.

Halfway through dinner there is a commotion at the door: tossing torches, a babble of voices, people getting up and going out to the atrium, and shouted orders from Lord Tékuu's staff. More of your fellow junior archaeologists have arrived!

Leading the party is a girl you recognise: an artist named Hajára hiVu'unávu of the Cloak of Azure Gems clan and a Second Circle priestess of Lord Ksáru. Behind her are two youths who both wear the clan-glyphs of the Purple Gem clan; they are twins. With them is a prim, scholarly-looking youth who is the very picture of a budding intellectual. The second woman in the group, Dína hiSayúncha of the Grey Cloak clan, is tall, bony, and flat-chested: she wears the blue and white livery of a priestess of Dilinála. The third girl is stocky but well-curved, vivacious, with long dark hair and bangs that almost cover her eyes. There are several more whose affiliations you cannot at once determine. The newcomers' luggage is transported up to the guest rooms on the second floor of the manse; servants, slaves, and litter-bearers are sorted out and sent off to appropriate quarters; and Lord Tékuu's staff raises a great cacophony by serving dinner out in the garden-house to the northeast of the palace. The evening devolves into a social occasion.

You and Jórudu find yourselves sitting next to the young intellectual. His name is Jánash hiSsáivra, a Second Circle priest of Hnálla and the son of one of the most famous sages of the temple of Lord Thúmis: Kashónu hiSsáivra of the Green Bough clan, whose treatise “The Phenomenal Manifestation of the Eye” has excited the philosophers of Jakálla. You quickly become bored with Jánash: he is a snob and a prig who has opinions on every subject and a passion to express them to all within hearing. You are relieved when Lord Dalkén comes and takes the fellow away. Later you are a little jealous when you learn the Lord Dalkén has asked Jánash to join him and Lord Tékuu's party in tomorrow's exploration of the metal-walled tunnels. Why he did not choose you or Jórudu is not obvious, unless he prefers the zealous and glazed look in the young man's eyes!

You soon discover what motivates Lord Tékuu: you hear a squeak, then a muffled remonstrance from the dark-haired girl, Sharídza hi-Somebody. A few moments later the artist, Hajára hiVu'unávu, emits a similar gasp and glares back over her shoulder. Lord Tékuu stands there grinning. Hajára utters no rebuke, however, and later she quietly disappears out into the garden with your genial host. Lord Tékuu is certainly tall and massive enough to be attractive to the opposite sex. You note jealous looks on the faces of various female slaves and servants, young and old alike, and curiosity impels you to inquire from one of the male butlers. He informs you that Lord Tékuu has two wives, three sons, a daughter, twelve concubines, and recognises almost ninety

bastard children as his personal contribution to the Empire. La! Hajára will have some fine competition!

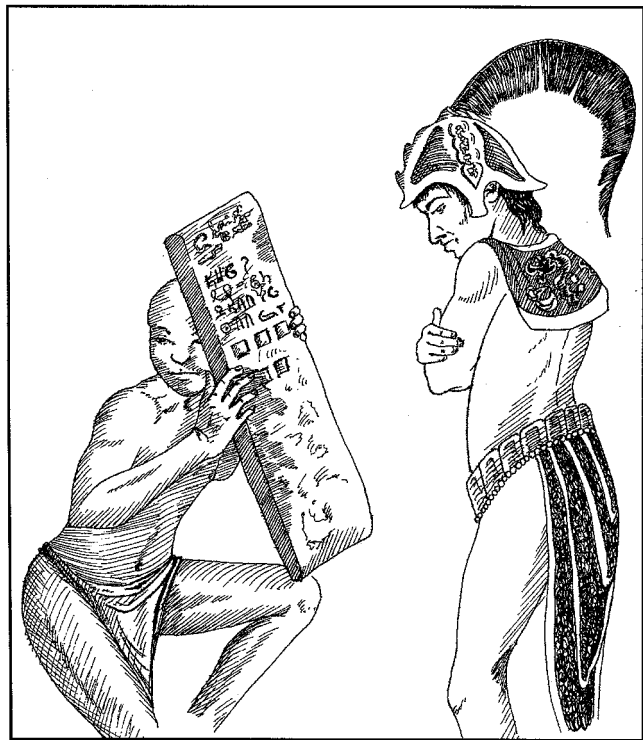
Instruction: go to 1.3.

I.2. GO HELP THE PRINCE!

You and Lithéni hiKarélsa reach Nisuél about the same time as the other apprentice archaeologists. Lithéni is now no more a Sa'á Allaqiyáni but a Tsolyáni girl who goes by the name of Sharídza hiTlakán of the Great Stone clan, a good upper-middle-class background. Since several temples are supplying personnel for the party your presence goes unquestioned, but Lithéni provides an explanation for your unfamiliarity with the dig at Jikutlár: you have only recently returned from an expedition funded by the temple of Lord Thúmis to investigate *Pé Chói* ruins in the Dó Chákan forests, and your superiors sent you here.

The trip up from Nisuél is uneventful, and you pass Chólúga without incident. The twins, Kamár and Trímur hiVu'úrtesh, of the Purple Gem clan, both worshippers of Lord Thúmis' Cohort, Lord Keténgku, prove to be pleasant companions. Young Jánash hiSsaívra and Hajára hiVu'unávu, the pretty, spoiled-looking girl who considers herself the leader of the party are the least appealing. The others are friendly and appear to be exactly what they claim to be.

You meet the first sign of anything unusual a few *Tsán* before you reach Lord Tékuu hiQolyélmú's



mansion. A young peasant boy stands in the road before your column of palanquins and bearer-slaves. Lady Hajára's major domo steps forward to order the lad aside, but Lithéni intervenes and asks what he wants. (This earns her a fierce glare from Hajára.)

"My Lords — Ladies," the boy says, "Be you the folk sent to help us?"

"No!" snaps Hajára, but Lithéni answers, "Yes — or at least maybe!"

"The vegetables, they be dyin'." He holds out what you take to be dried and blackened sticks. You look closer and see that he holds a sheaf of *Dná*-grain stalks. The leaves are shrivelled, and the kernels are tiny and deformed.

"They be all like this," the boy says. "Fruits — produce — all. Started last year. All over the fief now — and some other fiefs nearby as well."

Lithéni rubs a leaf and whispers, "Magic! The temple of Sárku has such withering spells."

"But so widespread? Over several fiefs?"

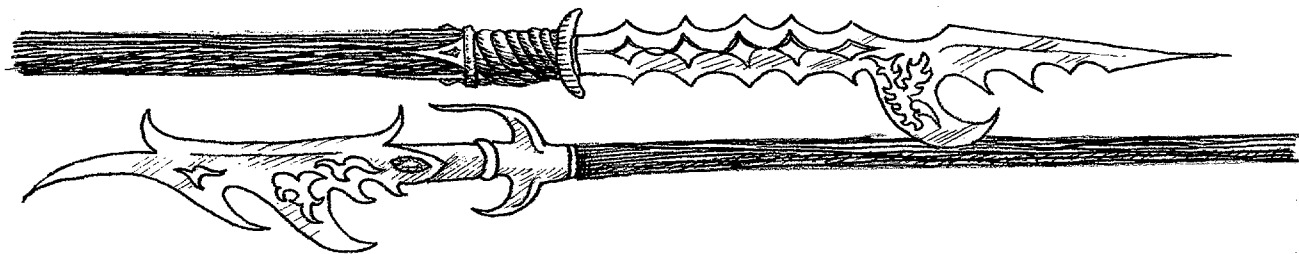
"Who can say? We know they have potent weapons we have not seen. The temple of Sárku seeks to drive out the old clans and put in their own people."

"Can we do anything to help this boy?"

"Later. First let us complete our mission for the Prince." She tosses the lad a silver *Hlásh*.

You catch up with the rest of the party and soon arrive at Lord Tékuu's mansion. It is lit up as though for an Imperial reception, and you discover that others are here before you. A servant ushers you out to the garden-house, where the guests are eating dinner. You suspect that not all of these people are interested in what is buried beneath the ground, however, as Hajára is the first to prove. She prances off upstairs with Lord Tékuu, and neither is seen again that night.

The man you have come to find, the Thúmis priest Ejél hiKaráktu, is seated in the midst of an admiring throng, telling stories and chortling at each sally. Lithéni signs to you and goes to stand behind the old man where she can lean down and flirt. A wiggle here and a light touch there, and she speedily finds an opportunity to whisper in his ear. She signals to you again, and after more repartee she and the old



priest stroll off toward the empty sitting room at the end of the dining hall. You follow.

Ejél hiKaráktu looks askance at you, then back at Lithéni. “I see,” he sighs. “Well, what do you two want? I know it can’t be my youth and virility, since I mislaid both of those back about fifty years ago.”

You and Lithéni take turns telling him about Prince Eselné’s fate. Ejél clucks like an old *Káika*-bird and says, “I suppose you’ve come with an Imperial writ to drag me off to Páya Gupá? — Not that I can revivify a man slain with *Onúmish*-leaves with any certainty! You did get his — ah — corpse into an Excellent Ruby Eye before it dissolved completely into grey ash, you say?”

Lithéni nods. “Sir, you must make up some excuse to return to Jakálla. You’ll set off in my litter. When you are out of sight of this house, we have an aircar waiting to take you to Jakálla. There we have arranged to use either a tubeway car or a mage specialising in nexus points and interplanar travel to get you to Páya Gupá. You’ll be with the Prince within a day or two.” You are bemused by the powers this girl commands; ninety-nine percent of the Five Empires has never seen an aircar, much less travelled in one!

“Ah, sad! I would remain and see what relics lie here at Jikutlár.” Ejél scratches his shining, bald skull. “Cha! I suppose I must go. I cannot stomach the idea of a Vimúhla fanatic like Prince Mirusíya on the Petal Throne, and the very thought of Princess Ma’ín Krúthái makes me shudder.”

“Emperor Dhich’uné has even less appeal,” you tell him softly.

Ejél groans. “You have me there! I’ll go. There is no other course. Do you two accompany me?”

“No,” answers Lithéni. “Too suspicious. We’re archaeologists for the time being, and there are some further matters in this area that bear investigating.”

“Well, too bad.” He looks at her from head to toe. “Yes... too bad indeed! Take my advice and do not fall into the coils of Lord Tékuu or his prurient companions! Oh, Lord Dalkén and Lord Kérék are pleasant enough, but when their companion, Arái hiQolyélmu, returns — well, strange practices, indeed! Ugh!”

You have not heard of this Arái. A servant tells you he has gone to Jakálla to enlist more temple support for the dig. It is just as well; Lithéni does not enjoy casual gropings, and some of her responses tend to be lethal.

In the morning you learn that Ejél hiKaráktu has departed in the night. Everyone is puzzled except for the two of you.

Instruction: go to I.4.

I.3. ENTRY PROHIBITED

The sun seems to rise earlier in the country than it does in the city. You are awakened at dawn by a spindle-legged slaveboy who sets down a moisture-beaded clay cup of hot-spiced *Chumétl* next to your sleeping mat. You yawn, summon your slaves to bathe and dress you, and go down to a breakfast that is both simple and hearty.

Most of the others are present, but Jánash has already gone with Lords Dalkén, Kérék, and Tékuu out to the excavation. Hajára, you are informed, is sleeping in today.

The dig is now more advanced. Slaves and peasants are systematically carving away the topsoil around the tilted monolith, revealing collapsed and shattered slate roofing nearby. Farther off, to the northwest, a new hole has been dug down to reach the top of the vertical chimney, and baskets of earth are coming up out of this to be carded and sorted by your crew. Lord Tékuu has ordered a stairway dug down to the original ground level, to keep from continually having to make the undignified descent down the chimney! He has also had flowerpots

brought and landscaping begun in completed areas of the dig; no sense losing an opportunity to beautify the premises, says his steward, Jórul hiKarchán, who shows you around. Lord Tékuu is indeed an expert amateur botanist and flower-fancier.

The chief archaeologist, Jijékmú hiQolyélmu, hands each of you a little paintbrush, and you spend the morning brushing dirt from shards of pottery, pieces of bone, and other items brought forth by the slave diggers. Most of this stuff is recent — a scullery girl identifies a potsherd as one she personally threw out into the field only last month. The excavation deepens and broadens; the sun grows ever hotter; and the heap of “finds” becomes higher.

Dijái hiMrélsa employs his “Interfogulator” machine, and Jijékmú uses an especially powerful spell of Clairvoyance to “see” beneath the soil. Their results are interesting. This region was once the heart of the Engsvanyáli Empire. It subsided when the island of Gánga sank into Msúmtel Bay, a thousand *Tsán* to the south, although it seems to have partially risen again later. The only buildings protruding up through the alluvial soil deposits are those which stand on tall, broad, and solid foundations, such as hills or outcroppings of rock. The monolith thus once crowned the top of a hill which has lain buried for millennia. The edifice next to the monolith was once a two-storeyed, tile-roofed mansion, built in Engsvanyáli style. Off a few paces to the northwest, and down-slope from the monolith, was another structure, the subterranean basement of which consists of the network of metal-walled tunnels of which you have heard. More buildings stretch off along the top of an underground ridge toward the northeast, but these are too deep to “see.” To excavate the whole site one would have to dig a hole as big as Músa Jakállá Harbour!

On the surface, directly above the buried labyrinth, is the shell of a small, modern house, perhaps inhabited by a family of Lord Tékuu’s tenant farmers. It is here that *Ssú* are said to have appeared and attacked members of Lord Tékuu’s staff. The Rannálan tribesman, Júrshu, opines that they might not be *Ssú* at all but humans disguised as such. Why he says this is not clear.

“Is the buried maze of *Ssú* manufacture?” Kamár hiVu’úrtesh asks.

Jijékmú wipes perspiration from his forehead. “Doubtful. The underground foundations are metal, and metal — of any kind — has not been used as a

building material since the Time of Darkness — or the Latter Times, at least.”

“These various structures may be unrelated,” concludes Sharídza hiTlakán. “We have a *Ssú* monolith next to a complex of very ancient human-built metal tunnels — next to an Engsvanyáli manorhouse!”

“Riddle, riddle!” cries Trímur hiVu’úrtesh, the more impatient of the twins. “Perhaps humans were once friends with the *Ssú*!”

“La!” the priest Dijái snorts. “No trace of that — not in any legend, nor in any record — ”

You are interrupted by a noise. One of the younger boys, a know-nothing from the temple of Qón by the name of Ménggan hiKúrodu, has collapsed into the ditch you have spent all morning digging. His face is pale and sweaty, and you know at once what has happened. The sun is a white-hot coin in the dust-pale sky, and sunstroke is almost a certainty for someone. A squad of slaves carries poor Ménggan into the house, and in unison the rest of your party abandons the dig and heads back in search of a bath, cold water, and lunch.

You drowse away the afternoon in your chamber, cooled by a sweep-fan pulled by a slaveboy behind a partition. It is too hot to think of moving, much less working! You give your slave-lover the rest of the day off. Erotic acrobatics lack charm when one is all sweaty!

The late afternoon is more comfortable, and digging resumes. Jijékmú insists upon neat vertical cuts, test-pits, and measuring sticks. He assigns Kamár to keep a written record and Hajára to draw sketches of each item found. She is a good artist. You, Sharídza, and two or three others wield the trowels and brushes.

The most interesting discovery is a toy cart of an unknown soft, red material, no more than a thumb-joint long. Only one black wheel remains, corroded to the cart’s body. The vehicle is strangely designed: rounded at both ends, the sides marked as though for windows (but quite solid), and with no signs of poles or harness for the *Chlén*-beast or a seat for the driver. Jijékmú declares that he has seen similar articles in the museum of the High Chancery at Avanthár. He says they usually come from the Latter Times or earlier.

In the evening Lord Tékuu’s party returns, elated with their day of discovery. Lord Kerek displays a blue-glass sculpture of a *Ssú* just a handsbreadth

high: four bowed legs, two upper arms, and a noseless, oval head with two huge eyes. The thing is unsettlingly realistic.

"There are hundreds of these glass-sculptures in the chambers there," says Lord Tékuu. "Almost all are smashed. It took Kerek three *Kirén* and two cut fingers to find one that is intact."

"A dozen colours," Jánash adds excitedly. "Red — yellow — blue — green —!"

"Here is something else," says Lord Dalkén. He summons two slaves who bring in a metal plaque half a man-height square. It is covered with peeling,

white enamel and displays two rows of squat, squarish, raised, black characters in its centre. It looks for all the world like a signboard, but no one has been able to read that tongue since before the Time of Darkness!

"And nearby was this," Lord Dalkén continues. He points to a second plaque of green-splotched bronze. It, too, bears an inscription, but this is one that many can read: in the curleque Engsvanyáli script, it says:

**SEALED AND FORBIDDEN, BY COMMAND
OF THE EVERLIVING AND EVER-GLORIOUS
PRIESTKING DHÁRUMESH MSSÁ THE SIXTH.**

"Was this to keep people out of the metal labyrinth—?" Kamár wonders.

"Or to stop them from going up the hill to the *Ssú* monolith on top?" his brother finishes.

"There must be records of this place," Jánash puzzles. "Dhárumesh Mssá VI is a well-known monarch."

"Such records must have been lost beneath the sea when Gánga sank," replies Kamár.

Lord Tékuu signs to Hajára, who dimples prettily. "Tomorrow we shall dig deeper," he declares. She follows him up the staircase, as pleased as a dog following its dish.

Sharídzá hiTlakán sniffs disdainfully. "I should have fixed that lecher when I had a chance!" she whispers to you. "When he pinched me last night I should have returned the favour — with sharp fingernails coated with a drug that would loosen his bowels for a week!"

Instruction: go to I.5.



I.4. IN PURSSÚT, OF THE PSSUDO-SSÚ

Lithéni — now Sharídza, as she keeps reminding you — has made further inquiries. Many of the fields hereabouts are wilted and blackened, and there have been deformed births, spoiled milk, dead *Hmélu* and *Hmá*, and other signs of a traditional village “curse.”

She frowns. “Create panic, and Lord Tékuu harvests nothing; his peasants flee; and his income diminishes. Then hit the fief with a tax assessment he cannot pay, and la! you are the new owner!”

“He would protest an unfair tax,” you muse. “His Golden Sunburst clan is powerful.”

She shakes her head violently. “A lawsuit could take years. The fief would be long gone by the time he won — if he won. Remember who is Emperor.”

“What do we do? I thought we were only to find the priest and return to Páya Gupá with him. That we have done.”

Lithéni has a maddening way of always knowing things. She smiles and says, “He’s in good hands. My superiors want me to stay on and see what the brown-robos are plotting — and what lies buried here, if anything.” She twists a lock of hair about a finger. “You can go, if you wish. You are attached to Prince Eselné’s Legion staff anyhow, are you not? Do you have duties elsewhere?”

You do not. In fact, you have neither money nor the desire to tramp back all the long way across the Empire to Páya Gupá! Indeed, you will have to write to your Legion liaison officer in Jakálla to ask for aid in rejoining your unit. To go Absent Without Leave now would be stupid! You could be impaled before your letter reached Páya Gupá!

Lithéni lays a hand on your wrist. “Look, I’ll see that you are sent back to the Prince within a few days.” She smiles engagingly. “In the meantime, stay on here. I need you.”

Instruction: if you are a man, you get ideas about her intentions. If you are a woman, this is less likely. She may actually need you.

You soon find that Lithéni is not interested in romance. After dinner she draws you outside and says, “Tonight we watch by the ruined stone farmhouse, to the northwest of the dig. Lord Tékuu has already set

a watch there, but we shall hide in that copse of trees farther back and see what transpires.”

You had hoped to rest your aching, sunburned body in order to prepare for another day’s digging, but this is not to be. The bushes are full of gnats and biting bugs, and the ground is hard and damp. Lithéni curls up under her dark cloak and you do the same. Gayél rises and edges the velvety shadows with an eldritch, emerald glow. Then Káshi appears to glare red-eyed down upon the world. Something hoots in the Miché-tree above your head, and something else croaks loudly farther away, by the little stream that crosses the back of the estate to the north.

“See!” Lithéni whispers.

The hair on the back of your neck rises. From the northeast you see a line of tiny lights approaching. They are a deep, indigo blue. Then you hear chiming: a faint carillon up and down the scale. You are up before you can think, and only Lithéni’s restraining hand prevents you from making a dash for the mansion.

The sentry has heard the sound, too. The man’s helmet gleams as he turns his head from side to side. Then a second helmet appears from inside the house. Lord Tékuu has sent two sentries! Or perhaps it was Lord Kerek; as a devotee of Lord Karakán, he is skilled in matters of security.

The lights disappear, hidden from view by a clump of bushes. Then you see them again, closer this time. There are figures with them, figures that are decidedly not human!

The two soldiers retreat into the house where they can defend its one door. Blades gleam darkly in the moonlight. Two of the *Ssú* separate and go around to the rear of the building. The rest — five or six — halt in front, and the chiming rises to a crescendo. The blue lights dance before the dilapidated doorway.

Why don’t the guards on the roof of Lord Tékuu’s palace see and hear this? You squint and perceive a palpable, cloudy wall between the excavation and the house. Lithéni draws in a sharp breath. “A wall of invisibility,” she mutters. “Blocks sight and sound in the direction of the mansion.” She rises and draws a slim dagger from a wrist-sheath. “Come on — those men have no chance — !”

She is right. Four of the monsters rush the door. You hear surprised shouts, the clack and rattle of *Chlén-*

hide weapons on armour, and then a cry from inside the building that is quickly silenced.

The two of you race across the stubbly, uneven field. Two *Ssú* are still outside. One of them hears your footsteps and alerts the other, and you crash into them full-tilt.

Instruction: go to Sec. 11 and fight. The two *Ssú* count as a Type 3 opponent against you and Lithéni. If you win, go to the next paragraph. If you lose, go to Sec. 13 and determine your fate. Roll a **D10** for Lithéni: **1** = she is killed in the melee; **2-3** = she is seriously wounded; you must take her back into the mansion immediately where *Dijái* can heal her; go to I.5; **4-10** = she is unharmed and can carry you back if you are injured. If either of you die, *Dijái* can revivify you with a charge from an Eye of Bestowing Life that he secretly carries. If neither of you is seriously wounded, go to the next paragraph.

You stumble into the ancient, crumbling house. Two dead *Ssú* lie just inside the threshold, and one of Lord Kérék's troopers is sprawled nearby. The other man is fighting the two remaining *Ssú* at the back of the room. You glimpse a little door in the rear wall there. This is how the monsters ambushed the sentries from behind!

Between the soldier, you, and Lithéni, the *Ssú* are quickly defeated. What happens next is unexpected: you feel a deep thrumming vibration, and the *Ssú* slowly fade from view!

"Illusion!" Lithéni shrills. "Phantasms! An advanced level of the spell!" She grasps the soldier's mailed sleeve. "Do not be afraid!"

You know such magic cannot be cast from any great distance. You scramble out into the open air again, seeking the enemy caster.

"There!" you cry, "There!" A dark figure melts back into the forest near the place you and Lithéni had first lain hidden. "Come on!"

Something icy cold crackles past your ear. More magic! An Eye of Frigid Breath, possibly! You duck and weave but continue to follow. Lithéni and the trooper are behind you.

You see a glittering object on the ground in front of you, and you slow down to look. It is a sandal — a woman's small, gilded, open sandal!

"Here — !" you call. Lithéni comes up, and you start to hand her the sandal.

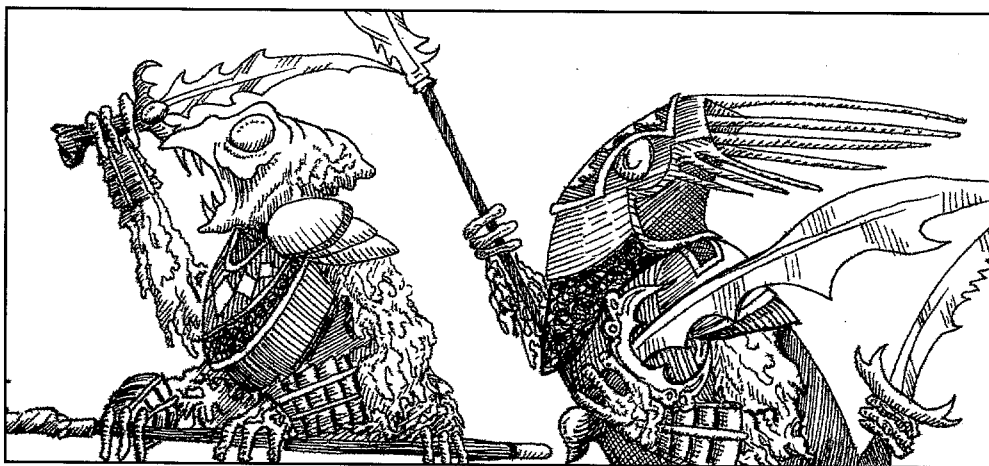
Instruction: roll a D10. Add your Dexterity score and your Intelligence score (Secs. 6.2 and 6.3 in Part One) together and divide by 2. If the result is between 81-90, add 1 to the score of your D10 roll; if your total is 91-98, add 2; if it is 99-100, add 3. A modified score of 1-6 fails; 7-10 succeeds. If you succeed, you hurl the sandal away from you in time, and it explodes harmlessly. Go to I.5. If you fail, roll a **D10**: **1-3** = you and Lithéni are both blown to bits by the magically booby-trapped sandal (*Dijái* has a Revivification spell, so don't order your funerary bouquets yet! You die for good on a D10 score of 1 and are revivified on a score of 2-10); if you live, go to I.5; **4-7** = both of you are severely wounded. The soldier runs to the mansion and brings *Dijái*, who has you carried back and healed; go to I.5; **8-10** = you are both stunned and deafened but not seriously injured. go to I.5.

I.5. SSÚ YOURSELF

Instruction: if you and Lithéni *hiKarélsa* enter this Section from I.4 and are brought back to the mansion, go to the following paragraph. Others proceed to the next Instruction below.

The two of you lie wrapped in blankets while Lord Dalkén and Lord Kérék make inquiries. The sandal is a

dead give-away: no *Ssú* ever carried a human sandal, much less planted a delayed-action explosive spell in one! You are dealing with foes who probably have the same number of limbs as you do. You suffer a mild case of the "shakes," drink a cup of hot broth, and allow *Dijái* to complete his healing ministrations. Then you're ready to go again.



Instruction: those who enter this Section from I.3, use the following paragraph:

You are catapulted from your bed by the boom of an explosion outside the house. You seize a heavy walking staff — the only weapon within reach — and rush down the stairs to find your companions and most of Lord Tékuu's household crowding into the dining hall. Shortly, Lord Kérék comes in to tell you of an attack by phantasms made to look like Ssú. One of his guards has been killed, and one or two other people are wounded. Sharídza hiTlakán and another of your comrades are brought in, spattered with blood, but you cannot tell whether it is theirs or some opponent's. Those with healing spells rush forward to help, while Lord Kérék organises a pursuit.

Instruction: all go to the following paragraph:

Torches flare outside, and Lord Dalkén strides in to announce that the entrance to the excavation itself has been tampered with. Someone has entered or left —no one knows which — the stairway leading down to the base of the chimney. Lord Tékuu appears yawning at the head of the stairs (without Hajára, you note) to call for volunteers to guard the house and grounds. Confusion reigns, as you might expect.

Instruction: choose (a) to join Lord Kérék's pursuit party; go to I.6; (b) go with Lord Dalkén's party to guard the excavation entrance; go to I.7; (c) prowl around the mansion itself; go to I.8; (d) go back to bed. You aren't the adventuresome type. Go to I.9,

Instruction: those who come to this Section with Lithéni hiKarélsa from I.4, must choose option (a). She wants to find that sorcerer, and you want to stay with her.

I.6. NIGHT MANOEUVRES

You plunge off into the night after Lord Kérék and his posse. He has brought eight soldiers from his own personal bodyguard, and he sends four of these. The locals supply fifteen or twenty brawny villagers. Torches and lanterns light your way over the weed-grown fields. The darkness comes down around you like a bowl of blackness. The moons have set, and there is no sound except for the crunching of boots among the damp leaves.

"Smell that!" Lord Kérék says suddenly. You detect the a whiff of the sweetish fragrance of musty cinnamon: either the Ssú or the spice Máugha. It could be either.



You troop down to the banks of the little stream to the north of Lord Tékuu's manorhouse. Lord Kérék says, "Here's where they found the palanquin and belongings of my teacher. Never discovered his body or what happened to him."

This is news to you. Sharídza — Lithéni — asks, and Kérék tells you the whole story. Lord Kérék came here at the behest of the temple of Karakán to look for his old teacher, Lord Ranúa hiZhayárvu of the clan of the Blade Raised High. Lord Ranúa is a priest of Karakán and an acknowledged authority on the Ssú. He came to Jikutlár in response to rumours of sightings of the Ssú, and has been missing for several days after his litter and belongings were found on the banks of this stream. Of Lord Ranúa himself and his servitors and bearers there is no trace.

"Júrshu?" Kérék calls, and the strange tribesman silently appears at his elbow from the forest. "Anything?"

"Much. Party passed this way. Two-three Kirén ago. Five men, one woman. Go north."

Kamár sniggers at Júrshu's guttural accent, but you look at his tall, muscular figure, his jutting jaw

covered with tiny ceremonial scars, and his needle-sharp, fire-hardened wooden spear, and you decide you do not want to cross this man. He ignores Kamár.

At the front of your column, one of the villagers straightens up, throws his head back, emits a squall like a slaughtered *Hmá* and goes crashing down into the brush. Everyone dives for cover. There is no sign or sound from the forest. The man threshes, then goes silent.

One of Lord Kerek's soldiers crawls back to report: "Trap, Sir. Sawtoothed branch from a Bisówa-tree, lashed to a springy sapling and tied to a trip-cord. Cut the poor bugger in half."

"Advance but watch your step," Kerek orders. "Extra caution!" The man salutes and vanishes into the underbrush.

"Camp," Júrshu warns. "Fire. Burnt out. Ashes covered. Still hot. There!" He points up a slope toward a grassy hill that rises from the forest just ahead. He sniffs again. "All people gone."

"Tékunu and Dalkén found a campfire back in here once before, a few days ago," Kerek muses. "The bastards are watching the house from the height!"

It is hard to restrain the peasants. The party clammers up the steep slope, clutching trees, branches, and clumps of grass, and arrives at the campsite. Júrshu is right: no one is here, but the fire-pit still contains a few glowing coals. A breadcrust, *Másh*-fruit peels, and a handful of nutshells are quickly discovered. Júrshu sniffs them all, and Kerek uses a spell to elicit their last owners. "Dark robes, masked faces," he says regretfully. "That's all I can see. Be careful, though: I caught a glimpse of two of them doing something right over there." He points near to where you are standing.

Instruction: roll a **D10**: 1-2 = you are run through by a bone-tipped spear that hurtles at you from a hidden makeshift catapult. You have no chance to escape. You are taken back to the mansion, dead but revivable on a D10 score of 2-10; on a 1 you stay dead; if you live, go to 1.9; 3-4 = it is *Lithéni* who is skewered by the spear. Take her back to the mansion for healing; go to 1.9; 5-6 = one of Lord Kerek's troopers is killed; continue in this Section; 7-8 = it is a villager who buys the proverbial farm; continue in this Section; 9-10 = the weapon misses everybody and goes whirring off into the night; continue in this Section.

The trap has frightened the peasants, and some quietly drop away from the party and head for home. Lord Kerek sends Júrshu off to scout and asks

the locals what lies ahead. A farmer describes the area, and Kerek says, "They could be anywhere. Unless Júrshu comes up with something, we might as well search the whole Empire! Look around here, if you wish, but be careful!"

No more traps are found. Somebody revives the dying fire, and you squat on the damp ground. After a *Kirén* or two Júrshu reappears to confer with his employer. Lord Kerek rises and asks, "What's the next village north of here?"

They look at one another as if somebody had asked them to calculate the distances to the two moons! Then one of the older men says, "Ay, Lord, there be *Diridé* up to the northwest, and *Máshtla* on back northeast again from there." He plucks at his straggly moustache. "S'pose that puts *Máshtla* almost like direct north of here..."

"There must be a road, then, from Lord Tékunu's manor north to *Máshtla*," Kerek says, "Or else from the little town we passed just before we arrived at the mansion."

"Nay, Lord, no road from the Great House nor from *Numár*—"

A younger man interrupts impatiently: "Say it out, *Hrukár*! Ain't no road thither, Lord. Got to go to *Diridé*. Then you travel on to *Máshtla*."

"And why is that?" Lord Kerek frowns. "No way to reach *Máshtla* by the shortest route?"

"No way, Lord." He clicks his tongue in negation.

"No path? No hunting trail? Mayhap a deep woods blocks the way — or a river — or a bottomless hole in the world?"

The older villager looks uncomfortable. "S'pose they might be a path ..."

"*Kiridán* hunted up there last year — " another man puts in. "Said he'd visited his cousin at *Máshtla* — "

"Something you lot are not telling me!" Lord Kerek says genially. "I have both a temple writ and an Imperial writ to look into suspicious matters. A den of thieves, perhaps, or a nest of smugglers? Perhaps someone holds my old friend, Lord *Ranúa*, hostage for money? Well?"

There is considerable foot-shuffling. The whitehaired oldster grumbles, "*Mebbe Dáragma* would know..."

“Dáragma? Who’s that?”

“Be Gubánu’s father—”

Kérek looks like he wants to tear his hair. Of all the creatures on Tékumel, the run-of-the-mill peasant of the Five Empires is certainly the most obtuse! “Damn it! I don’t want to hear whose father he is — or the names of his wives and sons and daughters and cousins and grandmothers!”

“Grandmothers both be dead, Sire—”

Kérek restrains himself. “Who — just tell me who — is Dáragma? Where do I find him?”

The villager blinks with all the sweet innocence of a newborn babe. “Why, Master, he be Lord Tékunu’s huntsman. Ye’ll find him in the manorhouse kitchen, belike.”

Lord Kérek rises. “Hói!” he calls. “Return to the mansion! Return! We’re going back — supper, a little wine, and bed!” Cursing, mumbling under his breath, and shaking his head, he leads the way back down the hill.

Instruction: go to 1.9.

1.7. AN EMERALD INTERLUDE

The excavation entrance is damp and chilly. You stand with your comrades at the top of the newly laid stairway leading down into the ground to the base of the Engsvanyáli chimney, imagining what lies beyond that black aperture below. Glass sculptures of Ssú? Warning signs in Engsvanyáli? Cave monsters—? Lord Tékunu’s slaves whisper of terrible creatures vanquished by their master and his comrades a night or two before your party reached Jikutlár. There are different paths below in the labyrinth, you learn: some lead to metal-walled chambers of the Great Ancients, others to natural caverns, and some are still unexplored. It is all very exciting.

A servant, Gubánu by name, appears with a brass pot of hot *Lás*, a tea made from the black needles of the stately *Tíu*-tree. Gubánu reports excitedly that there has been an attack by phantasms made to appear as Ssú. One of Lord Kérek’s bodyguards has been slain, and a few other people are injured. Jórudu hiTétkoel urges that you and your party go and see what has happened, but you veto this; the attack may be a ruse to draw you away from the entrance to the labyrinth. You wish you could build a fire, but you settle for another clay cup of *Lás* and a warm

blanket. You agree on watches with the two soldiers sent by Lord Kérek, Jórudu, three of Lord Tékunu’s henchmen, the girl-archaeologist Dína hiSayúncha, and two other junior archaeologists whom you do not know. You curl up by some of Lord Tékunu’s flowerpots and go to sleep.

Gubánu takes the empty teakettle and departs. The moons soon set, and the night becomes as black as the inside of an inkpot. You wake to find a soldier shaking you. “Your watch,” he whispers. Your watch-mate is the gaunt, bony priestess of Dilinála, Dína hiSayúncha. You yawn, mumble, and wonder if your breath smells as bad as your mouth tastes. Ugh.

The sword the soldier loans you feels awkward and unbalanced. You lean on it, wrap your blanket closer around your shoulders, and prepare for two hours of discomfort. Across, on the other side of the excavation, Dína’s silhouette looks as forlorn as yours must appear to her. You wave reassuringly, and she waves back.

Someone is coming. The gleam of a dark lantern sways toward you across the trampled field, briefly illuminating the monstrous, tilted block of the Ssú monolith. You tense, but is only the priestess of Dlamélish, Thikénta hiVasháka. She has wrapped her somewhat over-generous figure in a green velvet cloak, but you recognise her at once by her waist-length tresses and glittering ear-hoops of gold set with tiny emeralds.

“My Lady?” you say, a trifle apprehensively.

“Sleep eludes me,” she replies in her soft, dark voice. She comes to stand near you. “Here, I brought you some nuts and a slice of cheese from the kitchen.”

The snack is welcome. “What of Lord Kérek’s party? Did they catch those who cast the spell of phantasms— the false Ssú?”

“No. He and his people returned and went straight to bed. All are asleep.”

“None were injured? I thought— ?”

She shrugs. “I paid little heed.”

Whether you are a man or a woman, you are very much aware of Thikénta beside you. She offers you more nuts and murmurs, “Come, let us wrap ourselves together in your blanket and my cloak and thus keep both our bodies warm.” Her fragrance reminds you of the slithery feel of *Güdru*-cloth, of



coiling incense smoke, and of slow and languorous caresses. You can almost feel real heat emanating from her. You open your mouth to speak, but the words never reach your lips.

Instruction: roll a D10: if your Intelligence score (Sec. 6.3 in Part One) is 81-95, add 1 to the score; if it is 96-98, add 2; if it is 99-100, add 3. A modified D10 score of 1-6 fails; 7-10 succeeds. If you succeed, you see the stiletto blow she aims at you and dodge. Go to the following paragraph. If you fail, you do not see her attack in time, and she pricks you lightly. You are alive but paralysed and unable to move. She leaves you and goes down into the excavation. Two hours later, feeling returns to your limbs, and you gasp for help from the next person to come on watch. Your comrades take you back to the mansion. Go to I.9.

Astounded, you automatically dodge her blow and slap at her with the flat of the soldier's sword. Thikénta ducks and slips by you, down the steps to the excavation entrance. Your shouts bring Dína and your other companions scrambling after you. One of the soldiers snatches up Thikénta's lantern, and Dína stops to cast a light spell, too. Without considering the consequences, you and most of your party plunge down into the tunnel after the woman. One of the soldiers goes back to inform Lord Kérek.

Instruction: go to I.10.

I.8. A BED-TIME SMACK

Most of the mansion's inhabitants are asleep, but Lord Tékuu has posted servants and guards almost everywhere. You quickly grow bored with prowling empty corridors where silent servitors squat crosslegged, waiting for someone to summon them. Clan braves in leather tunics stand at the doors leading out to the gazebo and outbuildings in the garden, and others sit in the entry hall. You see no one of your party, or of your host's other guests.

The kitchens, in a separate building behind the main house, are lighted and busy. You hear raucous laughter that stops abruptly when you appear in the doorway. A dozen servants, male and female, stand up, bow, and mutter respectful greetings. You are, after all, a high-clan guest.

The centre of attention in the hot, smoky room is a slender, wavy-haired man in his late twenties or early thirties. You recognise the type: smooth, quick, full of flattery for his betters and scorn for those under him, and a trifle devious but not stupid enough to be caught. He holds a clay mug of aromatic *Lás*, the tea made from *Tíu*-tree needles favoured in the north of the Empire and Yán Kór. The moment he sees you he puts this down, leaps to his feet, and executes a graceful bow.

"Great One? I am Gubánu hiTurúgda, of the clan of the Broken Reed, humble servant to mighty Lord Tékuu. How may I serve you?"

"Nothing — nothing now. I could not sleep and thought to explore the mansion."

"Tomorrow you must allow me to show it to you! Hói, Arkó! A goblet of our best wine for the visitor! You, Bédha, see if there is aught left of that joint of roast *Hmélu*! A seat, Oh Nourisher of the Poor? Allow me to find sufficient mats to erect a dais exalted enough for your refulgent dignity!"

You are soon esconced on top of a pile of reed mats. Gubánu counts them zealously, making certain that their number and height is appropriate to your clan status. A hastily washed goblet is thrust into your hand, and a smiling fat woman sets a salver of roasted meat before you. All watch as you eat and drink. "Continue," you say. "Don't let me interrupt." You know that this can have no real effect: servants never speak openly before their masters.

A grizzled, middle-aged man with a cap of iron-grey hair stands up, stretches, and says, "Son, I'm on my way to bed. Do you come soon?"

The servant, Gubánu, answers dutifully, "Yes, father." To you, he adds, "Godlike One, this is my father, the huntsman Dáragma hiTurúgda."

The older man grimaces. "Tomorrow I must take a party north through Anján Wood to Máshtla."

The cook, Bédha, looks oddly apprehensive, and you are moved to ask, "Is it an arduous journey, then?"

"Nay — just thick woods most of the way," Dáragma answers for her.

"Ay," grumbles the butler, Arkó, "if ye don't meet the *Feshénga* or the *Mnór* or the *Sérudla* what lives there!"

"T'ain't them ye worry about!" the cook, Bédha, snorts. "Ye meets the ha'nts, ye're gone!"

"The what? 'Haunts?'"

Dáragma sends the woman a venomous glare. "Nay use t' frighten folk, be there?"

Gubánu echoes his father's rebuke. "Old tales! Village talk! If the high lords wish to hunt in Anján Wood, who dares say them nay?"

Everyone seems to remember your presence at once. The room falls silent. Dáragma rises, joints creaking. "I'm for bed." He stares meaningfully at Gubánu. "See noble Lord Tékonu's guest back upstairs."

"But, father—"

"Hear me, boy! Upstairs!" Something in Dáragma's tone carries more force than you expect. "Obey me!"

Gubánu opens his mouth and begins a new protest. You are amazed to see his father reach out and slap him!

"Uh — No need for that!" you tell Dáragma.

He gives you an oblique look and bows low. "As ye command, Omnipotent One! Whate'er ye say." He gestures sharply to Gubánu, who sidles toward the door, one hand to his cheek.

"Good night to ye, then, High One!" Dáragma calls after you.

You follow a silent Gubánu back up to your guest room. On the way you pass Hajára hiVu'unávu. You are still pondering the servants' remarks and so almost run her down. She pulls her lacy black night-robe tightly about her shoulders and slips past without speaking. Is it your imagination, or is she weeping? What might Lord Tékonu have done to her? There'll be time to find out tomorrow. You are half minded to accompany Dáragma's party — whoever they may be — to Máshtla, if only to see those "ha'nts" the cook mentioned.

Instruction: if you choose to go back to the excavation tomorrow, go to I.9. If you decide to accompany Dáragma, go to I.11.

I.9. THE MORNING NEWS:

Breakfast is a mixed blessing. Several people have stories to tell and questions to ask, and the long, wood-panelled chamber echoes with confused voices.

"One at a time!" bellows Lord Tékonu. He looks bleary-eyed and out of sorts, but obviously in control of the situation. You see that Hajára sits wrapped in her shawl in one corner and does not look at him.

Lord Kerek rises. "Two things: firstly, my party encountered traps in the forest. Traps set by human beings, not *Ssú*. Some of our people were wounded. Today I propose to send a party across country to the village of Máshtla, where the trail seems to lead." Lord Kerek indicates one of his warriors, a man who wears ex-Legion armour and the lightning bolt of the temple of Lord Karakán. "Here is Helél hiSakódla of the clan of the Blade Raised High. I appoint him leader of the party and give him three of my soldiers. Any of the rest of you who want to go may do so." Everybody looks at one another.

"Secondly," Kerek continues, "one of my men brought me disturbing news: some of those set to watch the excavation entrance last night entered the tunnels and have not returned! The man who reported to me said that they went in pursuit of a — a certain person."

Lord Dalkén shakes his head sadly. "Idiots! They should know better than to run after shadows. We must go after them. I've been down there, and they could easily become lost."

Before you or any of the others can volunteer, Lord Tékonu says, "Let the party consist of Dalkén, Kerek, Júrshu, and myself — it is too dangerous for the inexperienced." You suspect that there are things in

those tunnels that your host wishes to keep for himself — or for his clan or his temple.

The Avánthe priestess, Odusúna hiVessúra, says quietly, "I can help." Dijái hiMrélsa echoes her, but Lord Dalkén indicates that not everyone should go. You feel a pang of jealousy when he points to Jánash and the twins, Kamár and Trímur. "These as well. Plus a couple of Lord Kerek's warriors and three or four slaves to carry lanterns — they are all we need. The rest of you stay here with Jijékmú and continue the excavation."

Kerek collects his party and departs.

***Instruction:** if you go on the expedition to Máshtla, go to I.11. If you came with Lithéni from I.6 and want to stay with her, then you join the Máshtla expedition. Others continue in this Section.*

Thikénta hiVasháka enters the dining hall. She yawns and gives everyone a charming smile. "I went to bed late last night, but the excitement of the dig gives me energy." She accepts a cup of *Chumétl*, a piece of *Dná*-grain bread, and a slab of cheese. Whatever kept her up has certainly made her hungry.

You are close enough to see Lord Dalkén approach her and murmur, "Lady, a word." He draws her aside but not quite out of your hearing and says, "One of Kerek's soldiers reported that you visited the entrance to the excavation late last night."

"I? I? Late last night?" Thikénta frowns. "La, I did not! I slept all too well!"

"Truly? This is important."

"You doubt me?" She draws away, offended. "Here — ah, good Kágesh! A moment please!"

You have not seen much of Kágesh hiDirikte till now. He is a staff-*Molkár* in the Legion of Sérqu Sword of the Empire, and you suspect that he was sent up here to help Lord Kerek find the missing Karakán priest, Ranúa hiZhayárvu. Kágesh belongs to the Red Sword clan and hales from Khirgár. He is a pleasant-spoken, unassuming, blandly handsome officer in his mid-thirties. He puts down his breakfast plate with careful dignity and comes over.

Thikénta says, "Lord Dalkén wishes to know where I spent last night."

"And what business is it of his?" Kágesh scowls from one to the other.

"A very important reason, Sir," Dalkén replies. "One of Kerek's men reported that this lady, Thikénta hiVasháka, visited the excavation last night after the moons set. He also said that she attacked one of the young archaeologists and then entered the tunnels."

"Ridiculous!" Thikénta bristles. "Cha, do I look as though I assault children?"

"The attack was committed with a poisoned needle or dagger. You — or the perpetrator — thus entered the excavation."

Kágesh stands in front of her. "The accusation is an insult, Sir. There must be an apology, a duel, or a suit for *Shámtla*! No one may utter such calumny against this Lady!"

Dalkén bows formally. "As you wish, Sir. But this is a serious matter. I intend no insult." He reaches into his pouch and pulls out something small and glittering. It is a ring set with a blue stone: the symbol of the intelligence arm of the Omnipotent Azure Legion. Lord Dalkén is more than he appears.

Thikénta sighs, "Oh, tell him, Kágesh! We are adults and have nothing to hide."

The big man says slowly, "Lord Dalkén, I tell you true, as mighty Lord Karakán is my witness, that I spent the night with this lady. The entire night. You will find servants who saw the two of us enter her chamber last night and then saw us leave together for breakfast this morning. Never would I have spoken of this, save that you have shown me that ring."

"If you would observe my movements, Dalkén, then you should do as Kágesh has done. Come to my chamber tonight!" Lady Thikénta smiles, draws a finger across Lord Dalkén's cheek, and takes Kágesh' arm. The soldier does not look pleased; yet what fidelity can he expect from the temple of Lady Dlamélish?

Jijékmú marshals the archaeologists, while Tékmú organises the party that will enter the metal-walled labyrinth. You would dearly like to be in that number, but he and his comrades have already made their choices and soon leave to collect ropes, weapons, climbing gear, and lanterns. The labyrinth is indeed likely to be very dangerous.

Instruction: go to l.17.

I.10. DOWN, DOWN, DOWN...

You know that to the east, the chimney opens into the collapsed ruins of the Engsvanyáli building. Behind what was once the fireplace, to the west, is the narrow passage that leads to the mysterious metal-walled labyrinth. You call to Dína and point in that direction.

A few paces farther on, you come to a square room with a single opening in the far wall. This gives upon a narrow, winding stair that descends into a natural cave, roughly oval in shape and some ten paces in diameter. In the centre of its floor is a deep, irregular pit, while in the north and west walls there are six cramped tunnels that each lead off in different directions. The place stinks of death and mold and dead air.

You halt, and Jórudu bumps into you from behind. "Which way?" he pants.

The soldier, Migán Dasár, urges caution. He has come with Lord Kérek all the way from Pecháno, the little nation just south of Ssuyál, the home of the hated Ssú. "Can't follow anybody down here," he says in his guttural Pecháni accent. "No proper tracker — no equipment — naught! Best to report back to Lord Kérek."

The three local men grunt assent, but Dína and the two young archaeologists — Relé hiSsáivra and her cousin, Kému hiSsáivra of the clan of the Golden Bough — are not eager to return.

"The Dlamélish woman tried to stab you, did she not?" Relé asks you haughtily. "For a person of a clan as lowly as the Green Lintel to strike one of your high birth is unthinkable! She must be caught and punished!"

"Besides," her cousin adds, "this may be our only chance to see what lies in this catacomb." He turns to the others. "Gold — jewels — wonders — treasures!"

This has the intended effect upon the three local men. Jórudu, Relé, Kému, and Dína also are clearly tempted. The soldier, Migán, looks dubious.

"Which way, then?" he growls.

Dína's light reveals tracks in the age-old dust around the entrances to the three northernmost tunnels. The passages to the southwest show no signs of any disturbance. One of Lord Tékonu's men bends down

and says, "Lots of footprints. New ones on top of old ones. Here's a lady's boot. The prints go this way." He indicates the tunnel in the northeastern corner."

"One woman," Dína says in a worried tone, "can defeat a Legion, if she is a powerful sorceress."

"Cha! Coward's talk!" Relé sneers. She turns to Lord Tékonu's three house-guards. "Come, then, whoever wants a share of any treasure we find!" She makes a brave and naively pretty picture as she starts off into the gloomy passage. You can only follow.

Twenty paces, and you enter a round room, apparently a natural cave, then another fifty paces through a narrow, winding tunnel. The walls are covered with tiled inscriptions done in black on white. The letters are short, squat, and do not join to one another, as does the Tsolyáni script. Relé pretends to read it — you know she cannot — and says, "It welcomes us to the treasure-house of the Ssú."

The soldier, Migán, inquires sceptically, "You can read Ssú, then, Lady?" These are not the hollow dots and circles of the Ssú; the letters resemble the writing of the Latter Times or even of the Great Ancients before the Time of Darkness."

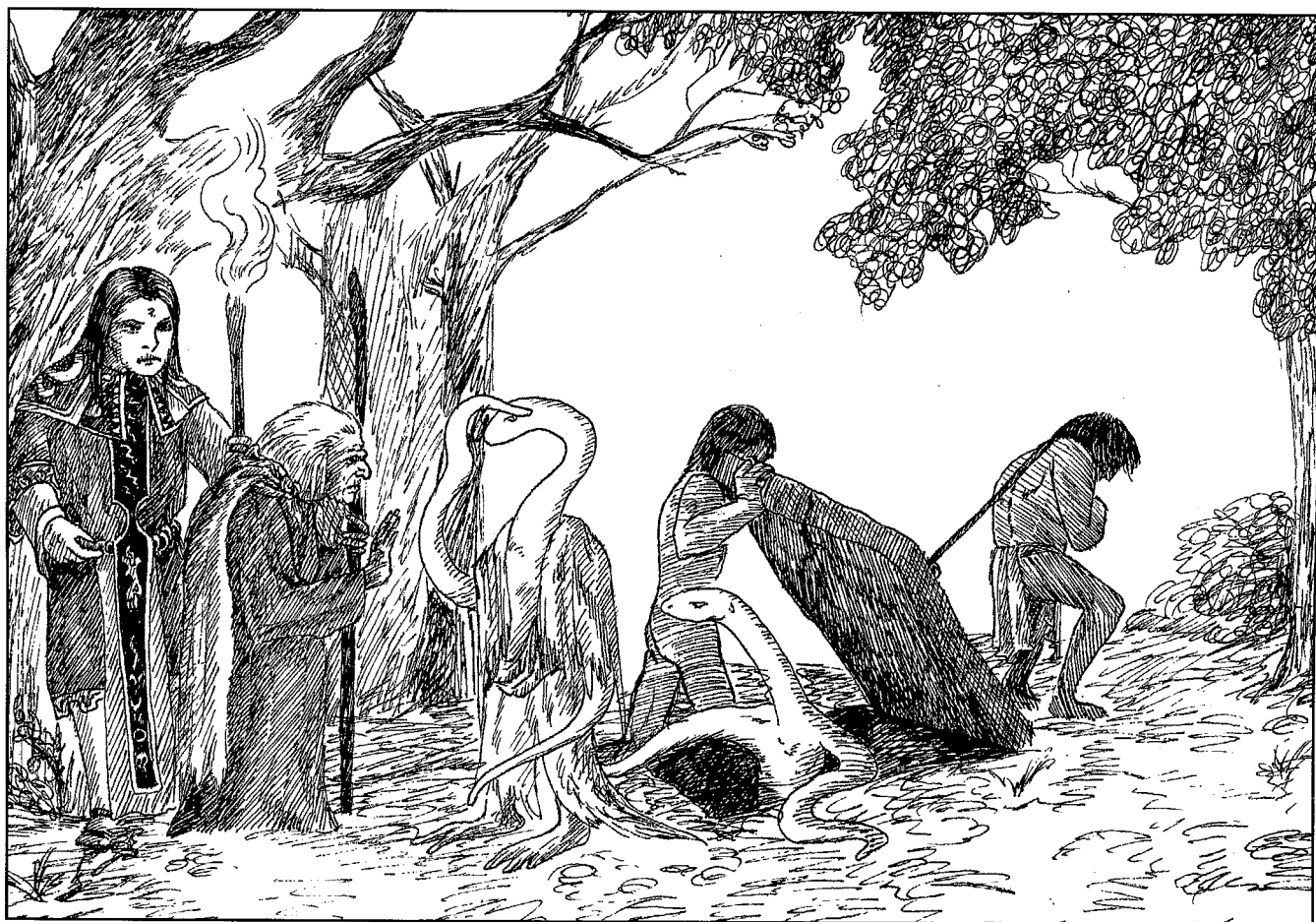
Relé opens her mouth to reply, but her cousin, Kému lets out an excited yelp. "Look!" he cries, "A sceptre — a mace!" Your lantern faintly illumines a glittering object on the floor ahead. Kému advances into the dank tunnel and returns with a heavy steel bar with a flanged head and a knob at the other end. "A mace — a hero's weapon — perhaps of mighty Hrúgga himself!" He is beside himself with excitement.

"Don't be a fool!" Jórudu snorts. "Lord Tékonu's party must have seen this and ignored it — or dropped it themselves. Their footprints go right past it."

"So do the lady's boot-prints," the oldest of the three local men adds."

Kému swings the weapon experimentally. It emits a strange, keening, whistling sound. You gesture to him to stop. The thing may be more than just a tool for head-splitting.

The tunnel debouches into a huge, empty, natural cavern. The walls slant away into darkness, and the roof is an unseen vault high over your heads. As you advance, your light is swallowed up in the Stygian gloom. You hear rustling and see faint, luminous flickerings: phosphorescent worms? Snakes? Or worse?



Dína calls a halt. “How can we follow the Dlamélish priestess in here? Her footprints are muddled with earlier — or later — ones.”

Migán kneels to peer at the accumulated dust. “*Ssú!*” he declares sharply. “I’d know the spoor anywhere. It’s impossible to tell how old these markings are, but they are *Ssú*.”

The very name brings a sudden chill. Kému says, “Come on, Relé, let’s get out of here!”

The girl begins to argue with her cousin. One of the locals is examining something beside the path, and you go over to look. The man shows you a sticky, brownish stain: dried blood, not more than two days old. You had heard rumours that Lord Tékonu and his party had met with trouble in here. Here is the proof.

Instruction: if you choose to return, go to I.12. If you want to go on exploring, go to I.13.

I.11. THE FOREST’S PRIME EVIL

Helél hiSakódlá is an excellent soldier, just as Dáragma hiTurúgda is an experienced huntsman.

Your party sets out along narrow paths, through meadows and dells, and up one wooded slope after another until you are panting in the hot sun. Most of these rises are steep but not very high. Lithéni keeps up, as do the others: Lord Kérék’s three soldiers, five of Lord Tékonu’s house-guards, four of your young archaeologist colleagues, and Júrshu, who stays unseen in the trees. You are surprised to see Hajára hiVu’unávu in your group. Did she not have more sketches to make today? Lithéni narrows her eyes and goes over to talk to her.

The underbrush grows thicker. There is no path now, just occasional game-trails: *Okhíba*, perhaps, or a herd of *Nráishu*? Above the green canopy of leaves, the sun grows hot, and your pack of food becomes ever heavier. Dáragma has refused to allow bearer-slaves since such people only get in the way in case of an encounter with beasts. A *Khéshchal*-bird leaps into the air in a flurry of reds, yellows and blues. Something farther back in the thicket goes “thump-thump,” and Dáragma announces: “*Nyár* — a grass-eater related to the *Tsi’íl*. It stamps its feet to warn its kind. It will not harm us.”

"How far is this Máshtla?" gasps Odíl hiChaisyáni, a young student from the temple of Thúmis. She is slender, small, and has kept up this far, but she is clearly tiring.

"All day," grunts Helél. "We'll be there by sundown." Everyone lets out a collective groan. Most of your colleagues are more city-bred students than athletes.

Just after midday Dáragma calls a halt beside a pool that is perhaps thirty man-heights long and nearly as broad. The banks are nearly vertical and are overhung with vines and foliage. The water is so dark as to be black. Anything could be lurking amidst those tangled fronds and tendrils.

Lunch tastes good, even cold. The cook, Bédha, has prepared leaf-wrapped parcels of roast *Hmélu*, folded sheets of unleavened *Dná*-grain bread, fruit, and cheeses. Lord Téku's bodyguards also carry hardened bladder-bottles full of thick, sweet *Ngálu*-wine.

Lithéni brings Hajára over to sit beside you on a fallen log. The girl's reddened eyes and pinched lips show that she has been crying. "Tell us what is wrong," Lithéni commands.

Hajára lowers her eyes and blushes, something you never expected from this brash, sophisticated girl. "He — he refused me —"

"Who?" you ask. "Lord Téku? Why?" You cannot conceive of any man rejecting such a pretty girl!

"He — said he preferred more experienced women — the priestess of Dlamélish, a trained concubine from the slave-market — even an earthy farm-girl! He — he turned me out."

La! This rustic lordling is like many of his kind: high clan, the master of his little empire, and addicted to hunting, wine, rough sports, and the bawdy life of a gentleman farmer! He is used to rollicking, common, bawdy women, rather than sophisticated urban ladies. Hajára, for all her beauty and city-wise smartness, has as much in common with Lord Téku as a fish does with a fowl! This is a case of hurt vanity! At least Lord Téku was honest and did not take advantage of her naiveté.

"Next time," Lithéni mutters ominously, "I shall give you a potion for him. His innards will rage with flames for a week!"

You are not sure what is fair. After all, Hajára did openly offer herself to the man, and he seems to

have behaved toward her with restraint. You know of lechers, young and old, who would have bedded her, persuaded her to do all sorts of things, and then discarded her when the sun rose! If she threatened a lawsuit, such a man would have paid a thousand *Káitars* of *Shámtla* as easily as he might buy a *Chlén*-beast in the market! Is not this ever the way of high nobles and holders of office?

Lithéni suddenly lays a hand on your wrist, and you see Dáragma staring off into the blank wall of forest. Júrshu appears silently beside him and whispers. The huntsman gestures for silence. Helél quiets the local men, and everyone ducks down into the ferns.

A *Kirén* passes; then you see figures on the other side of the pool: ten, fifteen, you cannot be sure. Most wear peasant garb: a tunic, kilt, and buskins. Two stand out: the leader is an old woman attired in a tattered, grey, homespun robe. She has straggling white hair and leans heavily on a staff. The perspiring, red-faced man behind her is middle-aged, with thick, broad features. He is clad in scuffed armour that bears the lightning bolt of a warrior priest of Lord Karakán.

Dáragma hisses, "Murúsa, the witch-woman, our midwife and healer!" Helél adds, "The one behind her — none other than Lord Ranúa, he whom my master, Lord Kerek, seeks!"

"Down!" Dáragma waves sharply. "They're no friends of ours!" Behind Lord Ranúa comes an ugly, younger man who wears a brown robe. "That be Ba'éku hiGaján, the priest of Lord Sárku at Máshtla! What's he doing with Murúsa? She's as faithful to Lady Avánthe as the moons to their sun-lord!"

The old woman pauses by the pool, gazes around, then brushes leaves and twigs away from a section of ground. Two of the locals come forward and help her raise a slab of stone, revealing the mouth of a black pit. You cannot hear what they are saying, but you can see what emerges from the hole: two ebon-robed creatures with white, scaleless, snake-like heads and arms that end in coiling tentacles.

"Qól!" Lithéni breathes in your ear.

"I thought the Serpent-headed Ones served Lord Ksarul," you whisper back. "Are they not created by the mages of his temple?"

"Aye, but they are controlled by sorcery. Lord Sárku's skull-priests have access to that aplenty." She rolls over and extracts two small, grey spheres from her

pouch. “Here: an ‘Excellent Ruby Eye.’ It has five or six charges. Don’t fire unless you must! I have an ‘Eye of Raging Power’ for myself.”

Across the water, the Qól are shading their ebon eyes from the sun as they help their party enter the passage beneath the stone. Helél waits until they are all inside and the trapdoor is shut again; then he orders you cautiously forward. The ground around the trapdoor shows scuffing, broken shoots, and partial footprints. Júrshu studies them.

“What’s a trapdoor doing here in the middle of the forest?” Helél puzzles. “No sign of habitation — no ruins — no people?” He turns to you. “Hói, can you climb a tree? This is the highest place in this whole area. Shinny up that *Miché*-tree there and say what you see.”

Instruction: if your modified Height-Build-Strength number is over 80, and your Dexterity score is over 75 (Secs. 6.4 and 6.2 in Part One), you do this easily. If not, roll a **D10**: 1-2 = you fall and are stunned. Lithéni has your fellow archaeologists carry you ignominiously back to the mansion; go to I.15; 3-10 = you reach the topmost branches of the tree and look down. Go to I.14.

I.12. OOZE WITH AN ATTITUDE

The trip back up out of the catacombs seems longer and more frightening than the descent. You are very glad indeed to scent fresh air and the leafy fragrance of Lord Tékonu’s garden. It is late morning, and you realise you’ve been down in the excavation all night.

Lord Tékonu’s chamberlain comes out to welcome you. “We feared you lost!” he says. “My lord has taken a party down into the pit to rescue you. They are not yet returned.”

This is not good news. You saw no one. You worry that ill has befallen your host and that you are somehow responsible. As you enter the house you are amazed to meet Lady Thikénta hiVasháka. This is the woman who lured you into the labyrinth last night! You glance about for somebody in authority and see Lady Odusúna hiVessúra. A word to her, and the matter should come open like an overripe *Másh*-fruit!

She shushes you, however. “One of the sentries did inform Lord Dalkén, but we found that Lady Thikénta slept soundly in her room last night. There was a — um — witness. Perhaps you saw someone disguised to look like the lady in the dark.”

“I know what I saw —”

“A shape-shifter, then, or a phantasm. Several temples possess such spells.”

You let the matter rest. There is little you can do. In the late afternoon Lord Tékonu’s party returns, tired and dirty — and too close-mouthed for your liking. You glean hints that there are several passages in the maze, not all on the same level, and not all built during the same time-period. You overhear whispered discussion of *Ssú*, of strange types of *Ru’ún*, the metal automatons of the Great Ancients, and of hidden treasures beyond reckoning.

At dinner you are regaled with the reports of your fellow archaeologists; they have discovered the plinth of a huge stone statue just beyond the ruined cottage to the north. The statue itself is long gone, but the feet are still there, and there are four of them. *Ssú* have four lower limbs. There are more buildings down the slope to the north, too, buried beneath underbrush and scrub forest that Lord Tékonu has never had cleared. If you were already not so excited about what is in the labyrinth itself, this would be heady news indeed.

You wake the next morning with a headache and the impression that someone has been calling you. This is not so; you have been awakened by noise outside your second floor room. People are yelling and running to and fro. You throw on a tunic and hasten out into the shadowed corridor.

Lord Dalkén dashes by, his face grim and set, followed by Lord Tékonu and a horde of guards and servants.

You snag a chamberlain, who wriggles in your grasp. “The lady,” he pants, “Murdered — flayed and sucked under the black mud — ghastly!”

“WHO?” you demand. He jerks free and scuttles away. Over his shoulder, he calls, “Lady Odusúna! In the cellar!”

It is a long time before you have the story straight. Lady Odusúna hiVessúra had ventured into the cellar with Lord Tékonu in pursuit of a chest of clan documents. He left her alone while he went to discuss water leakage along the north wall of the cellar with his steward. When he returned, he found Lady Odusúna lying dead and hideously disfigured in the blackish ooze. There was no trace of whatever had killed her. Lord Dijái hiMrélsa is sent for, since the temple of Lord Belkhánu is more skilled with extra-planar magic than the other temples. He reports powerful skeins of force in the cellar, and he also declares that he senses ancient hostility, layer



upon layer, in that corner of the cellar where the blackish leakage stands in a stagnant pool. "There is old death here," he says. "It emanates from the Engsvanyáli period, also the Latter Times and the millennia before the Time of Darkness, then the *Ssú*, and beyond these, back to some primordial age of hoary antiquity. I sense it, yet I know not what it is. There is no accounting for it, no placating it. It is as though the Master of Death, Lord *Srúkarúm*, himself stood here, behind a curtain of many veils."

Lord *Tékunu* can do no more than set guards upon the cellar and command them to watch. He asks *Dijái* to use his healing devices to revivify *Odušana*. This is speedily done, but the poor woman is in such terror from her ordeal that she cannot tell what occurred. *Tékunu* also sends for *Séshmel hiVessúra*, Lady *Odušana*'s husband, who is headman of the village of *Kondúshul*, several *Tsán* to the northwest. At the same time, gloomily, he sends runners with urgent letters for the high priests of the great temples in *Jakállá*. This has now become a matter beyond his coping.

The following day you draw lots, and the gods choose you to oversee the excavation near the statue plinth your comrades discovered. The sun blazes like a white-hot ingot in the sky, and no amount of water quenches your thirst. Potsherds, broken tiles, pieces of coping stone, bone fragments — likely discarded by previous diners — and an Engsvanyáli copper coin of no great rarity: these are all you find.

That night, too, you are awakened by a hubbub of shouting. Something black and horrid is reported to have flown into Lord *Tékunu*'s room and attacked him. His guards have orders to protect you students, however, and it is difficult to find out exactly what happened. No one seems to be seriously injured, and the mansion returns to normal after an hour or so.

Instruction: go to I.17.

I.13. AN OLD CHEST-NUT

Going on is a dangerous — a stupid — choice, you decide. You have no warriors, no phalanx of wizards with powerful spells, not even a serviceable rope! You might as well dance naked in a den of *Zrné*-beasts, as the old proverb has it.

The farther walls of the cavern are honeycombed with tunnels, shafts, and holes, big and small. Anything could dwell here. You clamber over boulders and fallen stalactites as big around as the columns of a temple. You hear shuffling and gasping, but you cannot tell whether this is an echo of your own group's tortured progress or something other. Water drips silently from the ceiling.

"Lights!" *Dína* warns.

"Naught but luminous mould on the wall," grunts *Migán*. "Seen its like in the *Ssú* caves in *Pecháno*." This is not reassuring.

"Treasure!" gasps *Kému*. He points at what appears to be a chest, half buried in fallen stones and debris.

"Don't open it, fool!" *Dína* snaps. "The ancients often set traps for the greedy!"

The youth is already tapping at the corroded lock with his new-found mace. The chest appears to be made of age-blackened wood, about a pace long, half a pace wide, and almost as high. The lock does not break, but the wooden lid does. There is a sick, ripping sound, and the top of the box slides to the ground.

What lies within is wondrous. Coins, medallions, heaped gems, chains, a tiara of gleaming red stones, a coiling tumble of golden bracelets — !

"Don't — " you start to say, but Dína pushes past you, her features a mask of astonishment.

"Oh, look at the beautiful doll!" she cries. "It is Engsvanyáli, is it not? I saw one once in the Governor's museum in Jakállá!"

Relé gapes at her. "Doll? Doll? It is not a doll but a crown, a sceptre — the regalia of the Priestkings of Gánga! Look how they sparkle!"

"Gold — enough for us all!" growls one of the locals. He raises his crude scythe warningly.

"Wait — !" shrieks Jórudu. "WAIT! I see no gems, no crowns, no dolls! I see books, scrolls, and leather-bound tomes! There — there is some magical device, an amulet, an astrologer's astrolabe!"

You stare at one another in consternation. The gems you see begin to shimmer and fade, and the outlines of several books take their place. Dína's joy turns to dismay. "An illusion spell!" she hisses. "We each see what we want! Let no one put a hand into that box!"

You hear rustling, and your lantern light flickers as gaunt, black, bat-like shadows swirl up around you. It is too late. You hear nothing, feel nothing, no flutter of air, but you sense you are surrounded, assaulted by insubstantial beings, as gossamer as ghosts. You realise that they are flitting right through your skull into the corridors of your mind!

"Back!" you shriek. You claw at your head and clutch your ears to keep the creatures from entering, but they need no physical openings. Colours glimmer before your eyes, strange sounds and musical notes ripple around you, your limbs begin to dance uncontrollably. One eye shows your comrades jiggling and convulsing in the midst of whirling, jagged shadows; the other eye displays fireworks and scintillations of light. You try to shout, but your tongue and jaw muscles refuse your commands. You struggle, collide with Relé, and collapse together upon the broken stones beside the chest. She strikes and claws at you in terror, but you cannot feel the blows. It is only a matter of moments before the creatures begin to play with your heart, and your blood ceases to flow — or surges in the opposite direction! All is turning dark...

Instruction: if the sum of your *Psychic Ability*, *Psychic Reservoir*, and *Intelligence* (Secs. 6.3 and 6.6 in Part One) is less than 200, you become insane, wander howling through the caverns, and eventually fall into a pit and die (pity!); if these three abilities total 200 or more, roll a **D10**: 1-2 = the

result is as for a person with a total of less than 200; 3-7 = you go mad, but Kému comes to your assistance: go to I.15; 8-10 = you maintain your sanity; go to I.16.

I.14. SSÚ CITY

You struggle up through the foliage, bat away a flying bug the size of your hand, and peer down over the canopy of the forest. At first you see only what you expect: green hills and vales, a small stream, the bright oblong of a small lake, the rocky summits of a number of low hills and bluffs. Then things begin to take shape. The lake is too square to be natural; that sharp hilltop is too perfectly quadrangular, and you perceive grey carved friezes along the upper surface, very much like the swooping, curved roofs of the temples you know at home; the hills and vales are squared off and neatly aligned — streets and buildings!

As far as you can see, you are gazing down over the ruins of a mighty city, buried in the jungle!

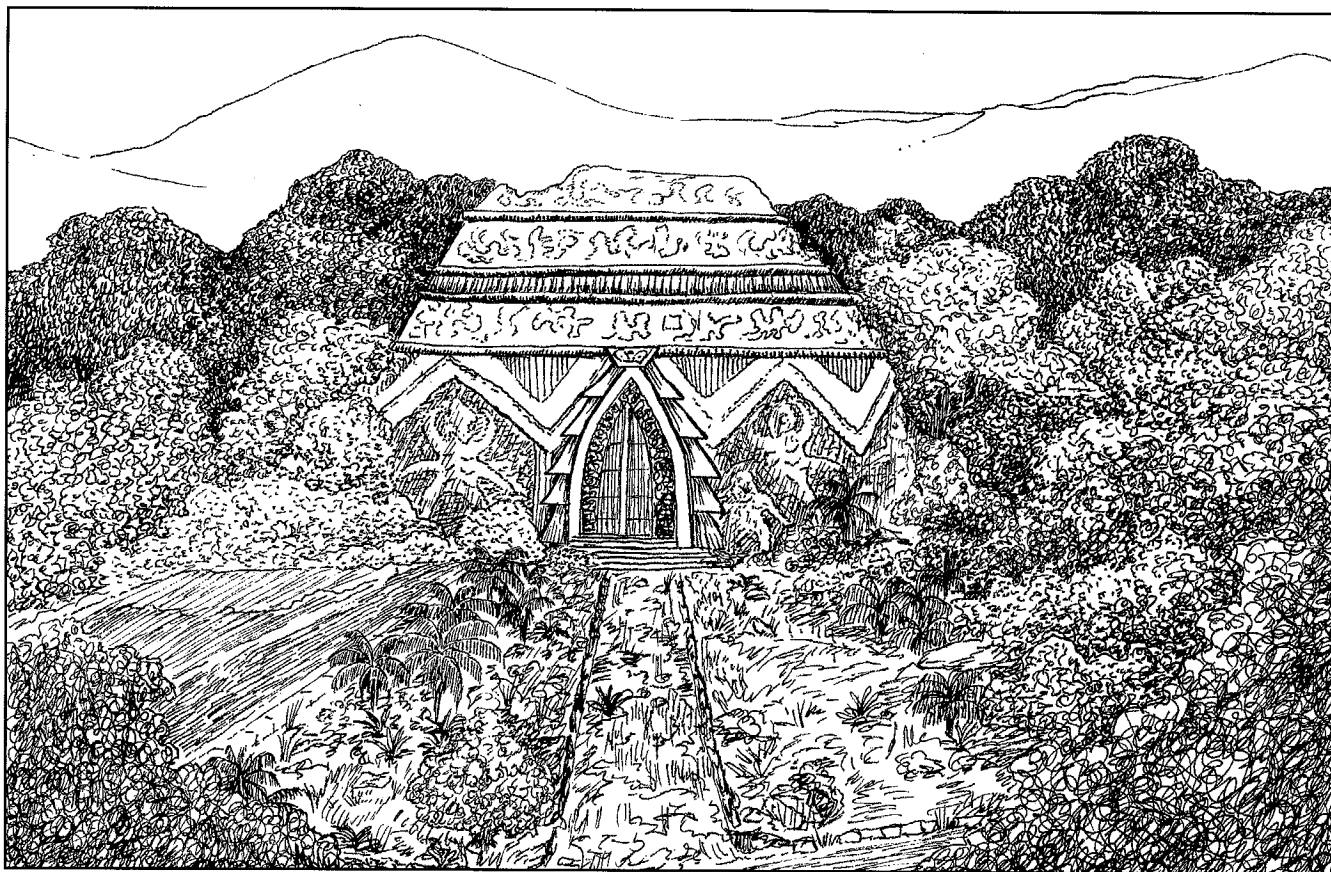
A hand clutches your knee, and Lithéni comes panting up to perch beside you. "As I suspected," she breathes. "Here — look through this." She hands you a tiny metal tube, the ends of which are plugged with clear glass discs. "A device of the Great Ancients. My superiors gifted it to me when I received my last promotion."

You ask no questions. Your eyes are riveted upon the mysterious ruins. The tiny tube brings distant walls and towers and pyramids swooping up to you. Once you realise that you are not actually flying off, away from the safety of your tree, looking through it is rather fun. A façade, a broken portico, the architrave of some vast hall or palace —

The figures carved high up under the overhang of that architrave are decayed and mossy, but you recognise them at once. They have four legs, two arms, and a soft, sinuous look that is not due to the shroud of moss.

They are Ssú. Dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of the monsters, carved in bas-relief, marching, standing, squatting, bearing unknown objects, and doing homage to some larger figure that is now buried beneath a hanging curtain of vines and greenery spilling down over the corner of the distant building.

"Ssù-Takán," Lithéni whispers, awed in spite of herself. "The capital of the Ssú before the Great Ancients exiled them to the reservation they now occupy, in Ssuyál, north of Pecháno. This place is older than their deserted capital there, the fortress of Ssuganá. This is



where they dwelt before the Time of Darkness — no, before the Ancients came to Tékumel!"

No wonder the villagers do not come this way, and no road exists between Jikutlár and Máshtla! You have only heard wisps and snippets of legend about the Great Ancients and nothing at all about this place. The scholars of Lithéni's temple obviously know more. This is a find indeed!

From below, Helél hisses something. Suddenly there is violent action, a scream, and crashing in the bushes. One of your local men staggers out into the clearing clutching a spurting scarlet gash in his chest. He falls, and a black-robed creature emerges to stab at him with a curved sword. The assailant's head is flat and ophidian, the skin of the long neck white and smooth and pallid. You see Júrshu run by, then several locals — of which faction you do not know — then Hajára and Dáragma. He clutches her with one hand; in the other is a bloody dagger. The younger girl, Odíl hiChaishyáni races through the clearing, eyes wide with terror. The old woman, Murúsa, rises before her, yelps something, and seizes her tunic, which rips away. The Karakán warrior-priest, Ranúa, comes to help subdue the girl, but his steps seem slower than normal, his features show no expression, and his efforts are listless. Odíl screams

again, jerks free, and runs right into the arms of a squat, brawny man — the priest of Lord Sárku at Máshtla. He buffets Odíl to the ground and summons two of the serpent-headed people to carry her away, toward the trapdoor. Of Lord Kérek's soldiers, your local men, and the other archaeology students there is no trace.

Lithéni shudders. You have rarely seen her afraid, but now she is trembling. You hold her as best you can and stay hidden high in the tree until nightfall. In the distance you see firelight, then some yellowy-brown radiance. Voices, chanting, and the thutter of drums come to you across the silent jungle. You think you hear the echo of a scream. The voices, which do not sound at all human, shout and yammer and rise to a crescendo. Then there is silence.

You wait until long after midnight, then descend. Lithéni has recovered enough to take her bearings from the two moons, and you begin the long walk back to Lord Tékunu's mansion.

About half way, a figure detaches itself from the shadows. It is Júrshu. "We sought you," he grunts. He says no more but leads you home.

Instruction: go to I.17.

I.15. DESIRE UNDER THE ALMS

Kému screeches wildly and thrashes about in the blackness above you. Relé has dug sharp fingernails into your shoulders, and you struggle to wrench yourself free. Strange images form in front of your eyes, and you sense urges and thoughts and bodily demands that no human can or should ever experience. Ebon darkness swoops down to becloud your last conscious thoughts.

A sound penetrates your madness: a humming, rising, falling, keening sort of sound, like a giant insect. Your mind seizes at the sound as a dying man clutches at the last thread of his Skein of Destiny. The sound somehow offers solidity, security, and protection. It increases in intensity, becomes a deep-throated, thrumming roar, and resonates through the innermost recesses of your brain, driving the black, fluttering creatures of chaos assaulting you.

Your sight begins to return. Your lantern lies overturned in the midst of a jumble of human limbs: your comrades, most of whom are now sitting up and staring around. Kému stands over you, and now you perceive the source of the vibration that fills the air. It is the odd steel mace he found in the corridor.

Kému is swinging the mace around and around his head, as though he has no will of his own. The head of the mace is a glittering blur in the darkness, and it is from this that the roar emanates. Whatever it is, the ghostly mind-stealers do not like it. Beyond your circle of light and sound, you can see them fluttering and dancing in the tenebrous gloom. You hear a soundless furious chittering, sense their hunger and their hostility to everything alive on your Plane. You have heard legends of the Servitors of the Goddess Who Is Not to Be Named, the most feared and inimical of the Pariah Deities who stand outside the Pantheon of Pavár, and whose objective is the end of sentience as you know it. Something tells you that these are what face you now.

The great mace whirls round and round. Kému is tiring. Sweat pours down his face. His limbs are knotted bulges of straining muscle. As you rise to help him, you glance down into the broken chest. It contains no jewels, no gold, no books, or magical artifacts. Instead, you see only a strange, grey beetle-like object, perhaps as big as your thumbnail. It does not move and appears to be a stone scarab-beetle.

You motion to your comrades to get up and follow Kému toward the entrance of the cavern. As you do

so, you hear a strange, flat voice that seems to be speaking from within your own skull.

It says, "Take me along, fool! Any longer in this musty chest, and I die of boredom, something none of my species has done in an aeon! Come, take me along, or I turn you into a pisspot!"

You realise that your companions do not hear the voice. Dubious and fearful of a bite, you extend a finger into the chest and touch the dusty, gritty, grey scarab-thing. It seems to be completely inanimate, like a piece of stone sculpture. Some sort of amulet, perhaps?

"Well? Get on with it! Pick me up!" The voice contains both humour and impatience. "I can be useful: leave me where your foes can find me, and I shall bewitch them! I become their heart's desire, the thing they seek the most. While they are bemused with my seemings, you creep up and slay them with ease!"

"Uh — what if I do not wish to slay anyone?"

"Kick them! Kiss them! Pinch their arses, then! Do whatever you want to do to 'em! I hold their attention; you do the rest!"

Your comrades are moving away. You reach one hand into the chest and seize the scarab. "What — who are you? A living being? An ensorcelled object? A magical device of the Ancients? What do I call you?"

"I am a native to a Plane far from yours, though not one of the Goddess' flitterers — information I squeezed into your brain just now! My being and essence are quite other. I do not possess life as you know it but am most certainly alive. No silly enchanted sword or trumped up, demon-filled mace — not I! I have my existence on a Plane where the laws of Being operate differently. What you see here is only an extension of me into your space. As for my name, you cannot pronounce it. My former owner, an Engsvanyáli sorcerer, named me 'the Superbly Puissant Bestower of Heart's Desire.' You can call me 'Desire.' That will get my attention."

Still dubious, you thrust the scarab into your pouch, making sure it is well buried beneath your stock of small coins. Dína sees you do this and raises an eyebrow. You return her a sardonic look. "If we get out of this hole alive," you say, "I am going to donate a month's worth of my family allowance to our temple! I shall offer alms to every shrine on the road back to Jakáll!" You pat your pouch.

Clearly, Dína does not believe you, but she says no more. When you reach the entrance of the cavern, you and your companions make an undignified rush for the surface. You reach the mansion without further incident. Lord Tékuu demands and receives the mace from Kému, but you keep Desire to yourself.

Instruction: go to I.17.

I.16. AN ACE OF A MACE

You suck in a ragged breath of dank, cold air and gaze around. Your companions are writhing on the cavern floor. Two of the local men and Lord Kerek's soldier, Migán Dasár, have their eyes shut and their teeth clenched. One man has bitten right through his tongue. Those trained in the temple magic are doing better. Kému, Relé, Dína, and Jórudu are grimly struggling against whatever is trying to take over their minds. You get up onto one knee, joints cracking painfully. A scene shimmers before your eyes: a crazed, alien world with walls that spawn black blisters that sag open to reveal — you don't want to know! As long as you can maintain your sanity there is still a chance!

Instruction: you have three options: (a) run back toward the cavern entrance to seek help; (b) grab up the nearest weapon and strike out at the mind-stealers; or (c) use a magical weapon or a spell, if you have one. Decide which you will choose before reading on.

All of your friends are now sinking down into unconsciousness. Dína, the best-trained sorceress in the group, expends her last energy to fire an Eye at the whirling host of bat-like tormentors. Whatever the Eye does, it does not help. Dína is swarmed by fluttering, ebon shadows. She goes down. You judge that magical weapons and spells are not likely to work (option (a), above). Running also appears useless (option (c)), but if you have decided to flee then do so. You leap over the broken chest, stagger past Migán's supine body, and are off into the blackness of the cavern, pursued by a horde of silent, fluttering mind-stealers!

Instruction: (1) if your Dexterity score (Part I, Sec. 6.2) is 81-100, you escape the creatures and eventually make your way to the surface. Go to I.17. Under the protection of the magic of the priest Dijái hiMrélsa, Lord Kerek's troops later bring up the bodies of your companions. If their families are wealthy enough to afford spells of Revivification, they may be restored to life; otherwise they will be mourned. (2) if your Dexterity score is 01-80, roll a **D10**: 1-8 = you die in the labyrinth, a victim of the mind-stealers (sorry!); Dijái and the soldiers eventually find your body; it will cost your

family 30,000 Káitars to restore you to life. Your relatives will reluctantly pay this, but you must repay them, either from your current wealth or from future earnings! 9-10 = you escape from the cavern, as for (1), above.

If you chose to use a physical weapon (option (b), above), the only one near you is Kému's mace. He is unconscious, and this weapon lies beside him on the stone floor. You snatch it up and swing it at the mind-stealers. As you do so, you hear a faint humming that seems to come from the mace itself. The cloud of attacking shadows appears a little thinner, and you whirl the mace harder. The hum grows to a deep-voiced drone, and the creatures back away. Encouraged, you flail away still more vigorously. Now you can see your friends and the fallen lantern once more. Migán and Dína are sitting up, and you shout for them to help get the others out. Migán crawls over to Relé and calls out that she is dead. He goes on to help Jórudu, and one of the local men slings Kému over his shoulder. Under the mace' umbrella of safety, you get your party back to the surface.

As you go, you sense, rather than hear, voices. There seem to be two speakers. The nearest is yelling at you in some language you do not understand. You stare around but see no one other than your terrified companions.

The louder voice switches over to Tsolyáni. "Yes, YOU!" it shouts. "You with the mace!"

"Who? What—?"



"Brainless are you? Nothing in your skull but wind-farts? Hóí! You!"

"Who speaks?" You glare suspiciously in all directions. Migán, nearest to you, appears to hear nothing. He glances over, startled.

"That mace you are fumbling with is not for just anybody! Only persons of the highest intelligence and ethical standards are allowed to use it! Who and what are you?"

You stop whirling the heavy weapon over your head and peer dubiously at it. A single row of unreadable glyphs winds along the shaft. The flanges glow with eldritch bluish-green light, and the numbing roar continues. You think your name and clan at the mace, feeling foolish as you do so. Something seems to ruffle your mind, stirring up everything from childhood memories to recollections of what you had for lunch yesterday.

"Hmmp, I suppose you may carry me," the voice says. "I am a relict: a construct of Qiyór the Magician, of whom you have doubtless heard wondrous tales. He it was who loomed high over all the other sorcerers of the Dragon Warriors as a god towers above *Drí*-ants!"

"Um — of course." You cannot recall hearing of Qiyór, but why confess it?

"Amongst all of my master's beauteous and perfect creations, I am doubtless the most noble and puissant," the mace adds modestly.

"What — what would you of me?"

"What else? Seek out the servitors of the Goddess of the Pale Bone and slay them, as you have used me to slay her mind-stealers just now! Smite them hip, thigh, and tentacle! Be a mighty hero, a paragon for all time to come! Dare fearsome dangers! Combat inimical monsters! Adventure far beyond the frontiers of your tiny world! Hurl your puny being against powers so terrible that all others quail! I shall provide assistance in your grand and glorious mission!"

This is not what you had in mind as a lifetime job description. "Ah — why me?"

"I have looked into your heart and found you a candidate of dauntless virtue — at least until a better one comes along," replies the mace primly. "Now carry me properly and say nothing to your comrades!"

You find that you must obey. When you reach the mansion Lord Tékuu asks what you carry. You tell him only that it is a weapon found in the labyrinth.

"Ha, then, give it to me!" he commands casually. "It is doubtless an interesting archaeological relic — and something found on my property. Hence it is mine." He holds out his hand.

Instruction: if you give the mace to Lord Tékuu, it screams soundless pleas and imprecations but does you no harm. If you want to retain the mace, you need only think it. The mace promises to return to you, no matter who or what tries to keep it from you. You sense that Lord Tékuu will be in trouble if he attempts to retain it, but whatever problems it gives him are richly deserved.

Instruction: go to I.17.

I.17. ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

The following day Lord Tékuu takes his party back down into the excavation. Lords Dalkén and Kérék are included, as are the priests Dijái and Jijékmú. Of your archaeological colleagues, only Jánash is invited. This leaves you in an envious, bitter mood. You are not inclined to sweat in the hot sun all day, digging for potsherds and soupbones, while others are having exciting adventures and finding great treasures!

Lady Thikénta takes her friend, Kágesh hiDirikte, off to visit her home village of Chorkúda, some 70 *Tsán* away, and Séshmel hiVessúra also departs with his wife, Lady Odusúna, who is still suffering from the horror she experienced in the cellar. The place seems emptier. Two days pass, and Lord Tékuu's party does not return.

On the third day, some of those who went to Máshtla come straggling back to the mansion. The huntsman, Dáragma hiTurúgda appears, as does Júrshu, together with Hajára hiVu'unávu, Sharídza hiTlakán, and one or two more of the archaeologists. Helél and two others of Lord Kérék's soldiers arrive safely, as does one of Lord Tékuu's soldiers. The others are presumed dead or lost in the forest. Helél describes the trapdoor in the forest floor, the Qól, the witch-woman, Murúsa, the reappearance of the missing Karakán priest, Ranúa hiZhayárvu, and Lord Sárku's priest and his followers from Máshtla. He ends with a narrative of the running battle in the woods.

Instruction: if you enter this Section from I.14, Lithéni has already warned you to keep silent about the ruined Ssú city. She wants to report it to her superiors before matters get more complicated. She has forgotten about her little far-seer

device, and you absentmindedly stuff it into your pouch, along with the "Excellent Ruby Eye" she also loaned you.

Without Lord Tékuu or other senior members of the party, a mood of depression settles down over the fief. More animals have mysteriously died or run off, crops are withering, slaves are reported missing, digging in the excavation slows to a stop, several of the archaeologists are packing to return home, and chaos prevails. The steward, Jórul, tries to calm everyone, but you sense a growing panic. Hajára breaks into paroxysms of weeping and is calmed by Lithéni. Helél and Dáragma begin wrangling over matters of command, and the refectory echoes with argument and dispute.

Instruction: go to I.18.

I.18. THE WORM STRIKES

The following day Dína leaves with a cart carrying Relé's tarpaulin-shrouded body. Poor Odíl has not been found, but no one wants to go into the forest to look for her. Lord Kerek has taken Júrshu and some of his soldiers with him, and the remainder see no other course but to depart for Jakálla. Jórudu, Jánash, Hajára and Sharídza (Lithéni) pack their baggage, ready to leave as soon as there is word of the exploring party. As the days pass, however, it seems more and more likely that your host and his friends have perished in the caverns.

The fifth day after Lord Tékuu's departure you wake to find the servant, Gubánu, standing over you. He puts a finger to his lips. "They's here, Eminence!"

"Who's here?" You yawn. "Has Lord Tékuu come back?" Good news perhaps?

He points to the door to the verandah. You step out and look down into the open yard in front of the mansion.

A sea of copper and blue helmets, tossing *Khéshchal* plumes, spearpoints, and lacquered armour meets your eyes. There must be a full *Karéng* — a hundred troops — down there!

"Who are they?" you hiss at Gubánu.

"Soldiers, Exalted One. They have a writ to take over the fief! They say Lord Tékuu owes taxes from his great-grandfather's day, and they're here to claim Jikutlár for arrears!" The youth looks to be close to tears. "They're ordering everybody to get their personal gear and get out."



"But — ?"

"Except for us slaves and Lord Tékuu's peasants — we go with the land. We belong here. We'll work for the next fiefholder."

You consider your courses of action. You must leave, obviously. The Imperial soldiery will not detain you. You can make your way to Lord Tékuu's clan-headquarters in the village of Nisuél and ask them to begin some legal action. This doesn't seem very promising, however. Court cases have been known to drag on for a hundred years or more, particularly when the Imperium wants something. There is no way you can fight these people, no way to reach Lord Tékuu even! What to do?

"There, Mighty One, that's the new owner!" Gubánu points. You see a thin, white-haired woman dressed in russet travelling clothes. Beside her is a squat, bandy-legged, fifty-ish soldier in elaborate copper-chained armour. Behind him are the witch-woman, Murúsa, the young Sárku-priest from Máshtla, and a soldier-priest in battered scarlet armour. Can he be a follower of Lord Karakán? His features have a greyish cast. Either he is very ill or else he is beyond curing: a Jáigi, one of Lord Sárku's hideous Undead!

The old woman is giving instructions to a gang of naked slaves, each of whom wears a copper neck-band. They are unloading furniture and baggage from a row of heavy *Chlén*-carts. The troops squat down under Lord Tékuu's spreading fruit trees and wait.

There is a commotion below. You see a squad of copper-helmeted soldiers dragging someone out of the mansion.

It is the girl, Sharídza hiTlakán (Lithéni hiKarélsa, if you came with her from Páya Gupá). She is bound, and two of the troopers are clamping a metal collar around her throat, the surest way to prevent a sorcerer from casting spells! Others are shackling her threshing, flailing limbs, and two beefy soldiers are simultaneously gagging and blindfolding her. Her struggles eventually cease.

The military officer and the old woman approach her, and you can just hear what they are saying.

"Spy! Traitoress!" the elderly woman snarls. "At last! No more mischief shall you do!"

The soldier takes out an official-looking document and reads. "'Lithéni hiKarélsa ... accused of high treason against the God-Emperor, the Master of Eternal Splendour ... a danger to the Empire of Tsolyánu ... murderess ... agent of subversion ... to be taken to the Imperial Prison in Jakállá for interrogation and final disposition...'"

Instruction: your options are few. (1) you can run downstairs and fight, using Lithéni's Eye (if you came with her from Páya Gupá) or other magical weapons or spells; (2) you can try to rally your remaining comrades to oppose Lithéni's arrest; or (3) you can let the Sárku troops take her — and say good-bye! You may then want to head for Nisuél to report all of these events to Lord Tékuu's clansmen. They may know what to do. You cannot trust the Omnipotent Azure Legion now; too many of its members are devoted to the current Emperor!

Instruction: if you choose to fight, go to Sec. 11. The Sárku priest, the old woman, and the soldiers together constitute a Type 9 opponent. If you win (by some miracle), you take Lithéni and head out into the villages. She urges you to make for Prince Rereshqála's palace, southeast of Jakállá, where those devoted to the old Emperor and to the Lords of Stability have a centre of power. If you lose, you and Lithéni are sent to the dungeons of Tórunal Island in Jakállá Harbour, where indescribable things are done to you. Since you are of no political importance, you are soon allowed to die, but poor Lithéni suffers on for years. She is eventually forgotten and escapes to live out her old age as a blind, tottering beggar in the Jakállan slums.

Instruction: of your companions, only Hajára hiVu'unávu joins you. You and she march out into the blinding sunlight where the soldiers are loading Lithéni onto a Chlén-cart. As you approach, the bandy-legged officer turns to squint at you.

"Sir," you begin, "we request that you free this woman. She has committed no crime."

His mouth widens in a grin. "That's for us to know and you to accept. Go your way. We have no orders concerning you."

The white-haired woman approaches, notes that you are persons of quality, and says, "I am Chirukála hiVorússa of the Domed Tomb clan. What business have you here?"

Hajára explains about the archaeological dig, though she has the good sense to keep quiet about the rest of your adventures on the fief. You add a protest over the brutal arrest of Lithéni, ostensibly a young woman of high clan and family.

The old woman fingers a copper brooch at her throat and muses. "I can do nothing about it," she states at last. "Molkár Hénggis hiKhánuma, here, has a writ for the girl's arrest. My hands are — figuratively — tied."

Spots of colour appear on Hajára's high cheekbones. "We do not tolerate this!" she grates. "The girl is my friend, and she shall not be handled like a slave!" You are horrified to see her draw a slim dagger and advance toward the cart, apparently to cut Lithéni's bonds.

One of the soldiers misinterprets her purpose and raises his sword. Lady Chirukála shrills a warning, and the officer, Hénggis hiKhánuma, yells something too. Hajára dodges to get past the man, he snatches at her, and suddenly bright, red blood spurts out over the his copper-banded breastplate. She has slashed the soldier's jaw!

"An accident!" you cry. "Wait!"

The burly trooper falls back in disbelief, one hand to his cheek. Others come racing over. One buffets Hajára on the side of the head, and the rest seize, strip, and bind her. You move to protest.

"Don't." The elderly woman is looking straight at you. She holds an "Eye," its aperture pointed straight at your face. "Don't even think about it!"

"She meant no harm! She only —"

The Molkár stares at you coldly. "Her motives are irrelevant. She has attacked a soldier of the Imperium. Put her in the cart with the other one. Tonight my lads will have a little pleasure with her. Tomorrow she will either be impaled or sold into slavery."

"She is of high clan!" you shout. "Her people will pay *Shámtla* to the soldier! You cannot treat her so ignobly!"

"Do you wish to dispute it?" the officer purrs.

There is no point. The Eye is still trained on you. You spread your hands. "Her people are very highly placed. They will sue."

"Let them. These days a new wind blows through the crannies of the Empire."

"What will it take?" you plead, "to buy her freedom — hers and that of the other girl? I offer writs against my clan. They will pay."

The *Molkár* ponders. "You cannot have the first woman," he replies at length. "We have writs for her arrest that come from a very highly placed source. The other girl — la! — I cannot accept *Shámtla* for one who assaults an Imperial soldier, but I can sell her to you as a condemned criminal — as a slave." His eyes narrow. "Ten thousand *Káitars*?"

You grit your teeth. "Three thousand."

"Seven — and five hundred for my wounded soldier, here."

You settle for five thousand *Káitars* and are glad enough to rescue poor Hajára for that! The troopers dump her unceremoniously off the cart and leave you to cut her bonds and cover her with your over-tunic. You cannot help Lithéni.

The *Molkár* snorts. "Take your slave and your baggage and depart! The God-Emperor has appointed a new fiefholder here."

He and Lady Chirukála watch as you collect your things. They make no protest when you add Hajára's baggage and servants to your own, although the goods of a condemned criminal legally belong to the Imperium. They even let you take one of the *Chlén*-carts.

Hajára weeps as you escort her toward the road leading back to Jakálla. As soon as the mansion is out of sight, you unbind her, get out a cloak for her, and throw an arm around her trembling shoulders.

When you reach Nisuél, Lord Tékonu's clansmen send an urgent message to Hajára's clan, the Cloak of Azure Gems. They reward you with ten times the sum you paid the *Molkár*. The girl comes from very wealthy stock indeed.

Instruction: if you are a man, and if your Comeliness and Charisma average 81 or more, Hajára offers to marry you. Your own clan concurs. This is a matter of clan honour: after all, you did rescue the girl. Hajára is pretty (a Comeliness of 85 in Sec. 6.7 in Part One), graceful (a score of 71 in Sec. 6.2) and intelligent (82 in Sec. 6.3). She is also quite talented as an artist: 10 skill levels of "Painting and Portraiture" in Sec. 9.3 (1). She is delicate and not all that sweet-tempered (a Charisma of 45 in Sec. 6.8), however. You can't have everything!

Instruction: if you are a woman, Hajára thanks you and goes her way. You must be satisfied with the money and the satisfaction of having done your good deed for the year!

Instruction: if you elect not to fight or to protest Lithéni's arrest, you, Hajára, and the rest of your party leave Jikutlár and travel to Nisuél where you report to Lord Tékonu's clansmen. The clan is very upset over the disappearance of Lord Dalkén. His father is the Patriarch of the Golden Sunburst clan. They promise to investigate the seizure of the fief and also to look into Lithéni's arrest. They are the sort of people who will accomplish what they set out to do. You say farewell to Hajára and your companions and head for home.

Instruction: if you came from Páya Gupá with Lithéni, you retain her far-seeing device and the Eye she loaned you. If you entered this adventure in any other fashion, you manage to keep two of the glass statues of the Ssú. These are worth a D10 x 1,000 *Káitars* apiece. You may also still possess either "Desire" (I.15) or the magical Mace of the Wizard Qiyór (I.16). If Lord Tékonu took the latter from you, you wake one morning to find it silently leaning against the wall next to your bed. It's yours — until it chooses to be otherwise!

Instruction: if you are a follower of Lords Sárku or Durritlámish, Lady Chirukála and her *Molkár* question you, then say pleasant good-byes and let you go your way. If you are a man, the old woman lets you take one of Lord Tékonu's steel breastplates (it's too big for almost anyone, but you can have it reworked). It is worth perhaps 4,000 *Káitars*. If you are a woman, he gives you a chest of gold and gems worth the same amount. Those who worship the Worm Lord the way she does are not likely to care for such worldly objects.

Instruction: all who participated in this adventure gain 1-3 skill levels of "Archaeology," plus 1-3 skill levels of "Historian" in Sec. 8.1 or 9.3. Roll a D10 for each of these: 1-3 = 1 skill level; 4-8 = 2 skill levels; 9-10 = 3 skill levels.

Instruction: return to Sec. 10 or enter the rôle-playing game at this time.

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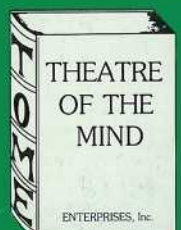
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