

THE MERMAIDS' KNOT

AN ADVENTURE LOCATION BY MICHAEL PRESCOTT

THE SITUATION

The village of Magda stands on the slopes of Wint Mountain. On a high plateau above it is an ancient and terrible pond, home to the **chalk mermaids**.

Under the **mermaids'** direction, the village has grown strong and prosperous. It is also unjust and cruel.

Every year, the **mermaids'** need for sacrificial victims grows.

D8 RUMORS FOR NEARBY

1. The wilds around Magda are thick with huge locusts.
2. Magda is ruled by a powerful priestess.
3. Great wisdom and healing can be found in Magda, but the price is high.
4. A man I know apprenticed his son to the priestesses in return for a great healing. When they reunited, the boy fled from his father and was not seen again.
5. When the priestess of Magda is angry, swarms of locusts fly.
6. Magda buys fine sand in quantity, and blows the clearest glass with it.

7. Tinkers never wander alone near Magda; they say the locusts will take you.
8. The priestesses of Magda pay well for rare eggs.

MAGDA VILLAGE

Two hundred souls live on the terraces of Magda village.

They herd goats, grow legumes, blow glass, and serve the priestesses.

Magda is not an innocent, naive backwater: it is an organized, carnivorous community designed to exploit visitors.

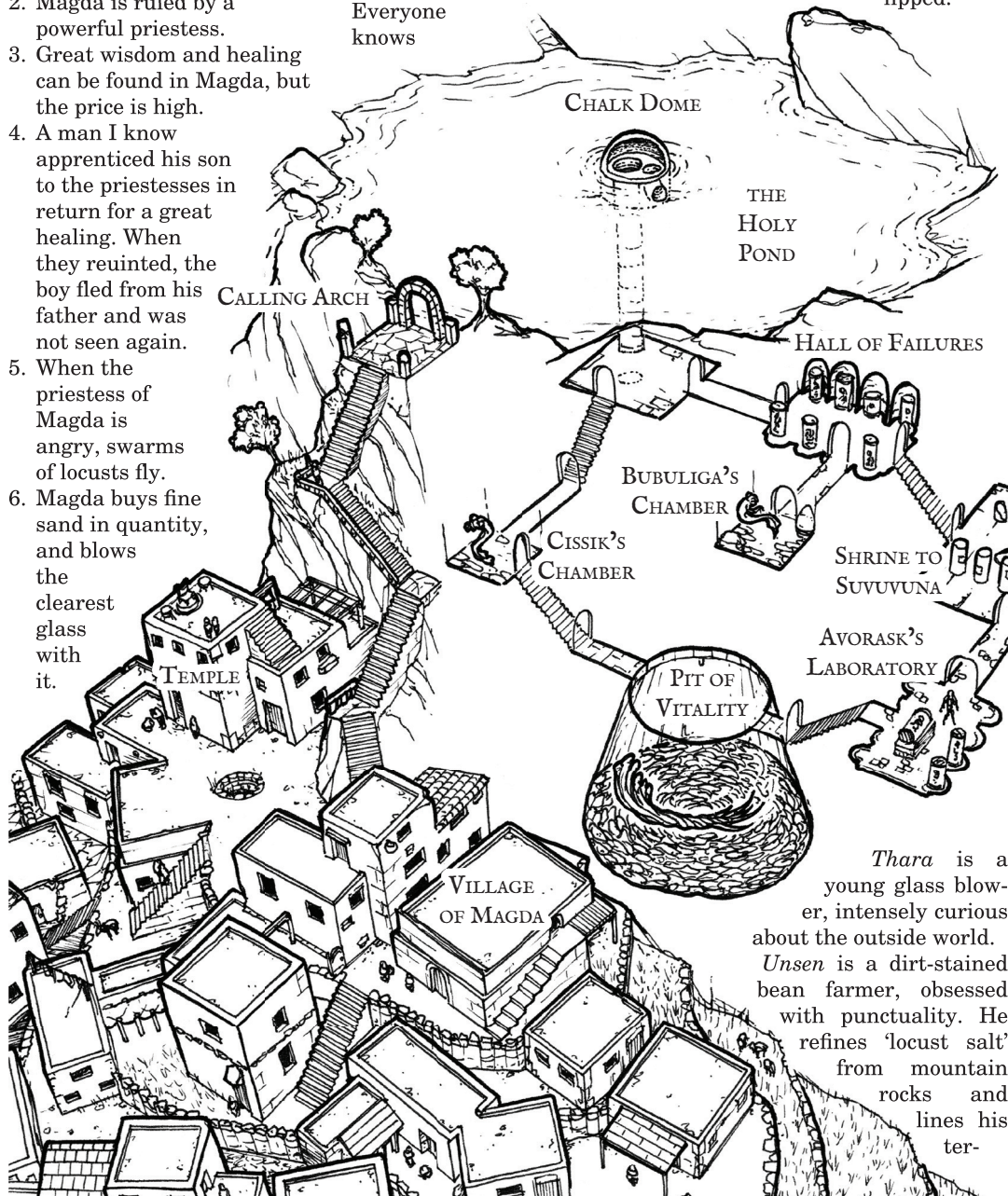
THE FUNNEL
Everyone knows

their part in a choreographed pattern that has played out many times:

1. Welcome outsiders in a friendly manner.
2. Introduce them to someone more senior at the first opportunity.
3. Discover a reason for them to petition the priestesses, and bring them for an audience.
4. Never speak to outsiders alone.

THREE VILLAGERS

Yossan is a middle-aged goat-herd, tight-jawed and tight-lipped.



Thara is a young glass blower, intensely curious about the outside world. *Unsen* is a dirt-stained bean farmer, obsessed with punctuality. He refines 'locust salt' from mountain rocks and lines his ter-

race with it, to 'keep away the chirpers.'

THE WIVES OF SPRING

One in four villagers that visitors meet is in league with the 'Wives of Spring', a secret nature cult.

The Wives have worked their way into Magda, and seek to undermine the priestesses.

They warn off the most pitiable visitors, if they can do so without raising suspicion.

When they meet armed and capable visitors, the Wives advise them to stay alert and together. They encourage visits to the priestesses in the hopes of upsetting the status quo.

They may suggest presenting the priestesses a gift of a small mirror, in the hopes of starting a fight.

THREE WIVES OF SPRING

Doffna Strand is a midwife, sad-eyed but warm. She stoops to conceal her full height.

Beeran is a sunburnt and leathery village warden who is fiercely protective of the village, despite its conflicts.

Mise the Dull has a deformed arm. He feigns stupidity, but his eyes twinkle with clever schemes. He is always armed.

THE PRIESTESSES

The uppermost houses and the temple building are occupied by twenty white-clad priestesses.

Most are village natives, but eight are from abroad and have been trained to fight with knives and short swords.

They are led by *Sanesta*, a woman with piercing blue eyes and a chiselled jaw.

SUVUVENISM

The priestess would say they reverse "the mysteries of life." In truth, they practice a distorted version of **Suvuvenism**, taught to them by the **mermaids**.

Suvuvenism reveres the perfection of life through chimeric transformations.

Mirrors are blasphemous, as they are associated with vanity and love of the present form.

PETITIONS

Sanesta receives petitioners in the temple, a large house decorated with mermaid imagery.

THE NAMING OF BEASTS

The priestesses use ceremony to prevent casual conversation during petitions.

They begin with a long, admiring chant about strange beasts from afar. They then wait for petitioners to answer in kind, naming exotic beasts they know about.

The priestesses do this to extract knowledge from visitors. They crave news of such beasts, their eggs and their young, to pass on to the **mermaids**.

GOALS OF THE PRIESTESSES

The priestesses attempt to use visitors for one or more of the following:

- Any visitors of unusual descent or who are obviously magical will be told they are special and must see the **mermaids**.
- Up to two visitors will be told they 'show potential' and urged to remain behind for training (so they can be turned into **chirpers**).
- Petitioners who are seeking a **great act** will be used to settle scores.

GREAT ACTS

Sanesta is known to perform four miraculous acts:

- a profound healing of disease or injury
- a divination or wise pronouncement in answer to a question
- creation of a magical ingredient, poison, or alchemical reagent—or at least knowledge of where it can be obtained
- bring a reasonably intact body back to life

Afterwards, Sanesta enters a trance and intones one of three things as a price for her miracles:

- three months of service performed by the petitioner, or someone with them who 'shows potential'
- a sacrifice of a rare animal

- an act of violence against someone else in their group (e.g., "The price is Martak's hand!"), or someone in the village who happens to be out of favor

THE CHIRPERS

Anyone foolish enough to remain behind alone with the priestesses is later drugged and taken to **Avorask**.

In his laboratory, he removes lung tissue and implants a pair of immature *spayid locusts*. These parasitic creatures cause the lungs to atrophy, but oxygenate the blood in the place of the original organs.

Victims immediately lose all power of speech. Instead, when they open their mouths, out pours a ghostly chirping wheeze.

Victims are told they are blessed and are made to serve the priestesses silently.

In a few months' time, the irresistible compulsion to flee into the land around the village sets in. (See **Chirper life stages** table.) The priestesses do not interfere.

LOCUST COLLECTING

Villagers are forbidden from harming giant locusts, but may shoo them

away from crops. Locust salt is preferred for this.

Every few months, the priestesses venture into the wilds at night to catch the noisy locusts in large sacks. These are brought back to **Avorask** for egg harvesting, and to feed to the **hydra**.

d6	Chirper life stages
1	Terrified, mute villager fleeing contact while making ghostly, chirping wheezes
2	Feverishly digging a hole with bare hands
3	Nestled in a hole, apparently sleeping
4	d2 huge, moist locusts emerging from the husk of the buried villager
5-6	d6 mature giant locusts, the size of a large dog

THE HOLY POND

This pool of black, still water has been hewn from a plateau on the mountainside.

At its edge is the calling arch, a marble platform and archway from which the priestesses can call forth the **chalk mermaids**.

Close inspection reveals the stains of hundreds of



TRILEMMA ADVENTURES

sacrifices, mostly washed away by wind and rain.

The pond basin deepens very gradually and is only three paces deep around the **chalk dome** at its center.

THE CHALK DOME

The chalk dome's underwater entrance rises up into a dark, air-filled crevice.

The walls are plastered with sacrificial fat which the **chalk mermaids** smear on themselves before going out into the harsh sun.

A wide tunnel drops down into the mermaid's lair. It appears empty, but is actually filled with **light water**.

THE LIGHT WATER

The entire cavern system is filled with light water, an alchemical amniotic fluid.

It is quite clear (turning to cloudy yellow at about sixty paces), but has the same index of refraction as air, making it hard to notice.

Unlike water, surface dwellers can breathe and speak normally in it.

As it is less dense than normal water, unprepared swimmers will sink immediately.

Falls in light water cause no damage, but only strong swimmers (e.g., aquatic creatures, athletes) can leave the ground.

Running is impossible. The extra buoyancy makes climbing much easier.

Flame stays lit if immersed, but weakly and without much heat. Starting new fires from flint and steel is impossible.

INCREASED VITALITY

Anyone breathing light water for more than an hour begins to feel an increased vitality.

Exposure to it doubles the rate of healing within the caverns.

THE CHALK MERMAIDS

The sisters **Bubuliga** and **Cissik** are hideous, not true mermaids but albino brine trolls fused to the tails of giant lungfish.

They are the sole surviving creations of a long-dead dradkin chimeromancer, Vmnn.

He impressed upon them the mysteries of the creature-god Suvuvena: the gods' act of creation is not complete. Flesh is merely the raw material for the ongoing task of perfecting living forms.

They fervently believe that foolish, delicate humans are a dead end.

Above all else, the sisters seek magical lore and the raw materials for their own chimeric experiments.

BUBULIGA

Outwardly more calm and reasonable than her sister, Bubuliga trusts no one.

She moves about with a bodyguard of d6 enthralled, early-stage chirpers.

She responds to intruders with patience and reasonable offers, but only to buy time to find reinforcements.

She has more technical mastery of chimeromancy than **Cissik**, and it was she that tied the eight serpents to form the **hydra**. She loves the beast as her own flesh and blood.

Her touch instantly bonds flesh to flesh, as if one piece from birth. If attacked, she will use this to deform enemies or affix them horribly to one another.

Bubuliga is wracked with doubts about **Avorask**, fearing he may be a warped creation.

CHAMBERS

Her chambers hold an oversized set of platinum surgical tools and a three-volume set of notes she made while learning from the plates in the **shrine**.

CISSIK

Younger than her sister by a hundred years, Cissik was blinded by a venomous creation a century ago.

She relies on her keen sense of smell and her ability to detect fine water currents.

Over the years, she has put a lot of crystal in her brain (see *The Full-Dark Stone*). She may use any of these powers at will:

- control fish
- venomous bite (paralytic)
- crabskin (as plate armor)
- Once per day she may:
 - freeze water (blocking a corridor, or a 2-pace sphere)
 - ray of weakness
 - stunning thunderclap
 - water to mucus (3-pace radius)
 - inhale magic (counterspell)
 - summon demonic fish
 - disorienting glare (victims confuse which way is up)

Cissik is impetuous and hot-headed, but she respects strength. Magic use impresses her, especially if it hurts her.

If impressed, she may call for a truce (restraining Bubuliga if necessary) and propose sharing knowledge rather than wasteful fighting.

CHAMBERS

Cissik has a collection of wooden tablets etched with Seree spells. Most are incomplete, but the whole ones include lesser telekinesis, flight, and the ability to see through stone (100 paces).

SHRINE TO SUVUVENA

In the center of this large, pillared hall is the ruin of Vmnn's earthcraft—a granite conveyance he used to flee the depths of his underworld homeland.

A hundred etched metal plates he brought with him have been affixed to the pillars; together they form a course in chimeromancy.

Mastery of chimeromancy and worship of Suvuvena are synonymous.

Well-read readers may find uncomfortable similarities between prayers to her and the healing petitions made to other gods.

THE HYDRA

Two decades ago, the sisters succeeded in splicing eight mighty serpents into a single creature.

When alarmed, the hydra cries out with the stolen human voices of the chirpers.

It sings like a choir, a mighty organ of flesh, but discordant-

ly—with joyous, ecstatic, and terrified voices all intertwined as one.

There is something irresistibly primal about the sound. Only those of great will can resist joining its dreadful song, singing wordlessly at the top of their voices.

The especially weak willed can do nothing else while they sing.

The hydra spends most of its time floating in the **pit of vitality**, occasionally swimming around the pillars of the shrine. It will respond to the sisters' calls.

Hydra blood and eggs are alchemically auspicious, nearly as potent and useful as dragon ingredients. Bubuliga used both in their next creation, **Avorask**.

HALL OF FAILURES

A narrow hall, lined with glass containers. Each writhes with one of the sisters' flawed creations.

Lopsided horrors made of tentacles, exposed organs, teeth, and eyes press against the glass.

These are not originals, but replicated painstakingly by **Avorask** from the sisters' plans; it set them here as a reminder of their ineptitude (as he sees it).

Apart from the obvious insult, the sisters view this enshrinement of forms past as a hair's breadth from the vanity of mirrors.

AVORASK

Building on their success with the hydra, the sisters went on to create a composite being of their own design.

Avorask is a man made of arthropods, fused together by hydra's blood and prayers to Suvuvena.

His lungs are locusts; his skin is a carpet of beetles. His eyes are holes filled with flies. A huge centipede makes up his guts; his hands are clusters of mantids.

He comes to pieces when you fight him, but can reassemble at will.

Like Bubuliga, he can knit flesh at will, but his chimeromancy is so great that flesh

responds to his directions at 20 paces' distance.

He can sew shut mouths and eyes on sight.

AVORASK'S VISION

As an intelligent, composite being, Avorask has rather alien ideas about identity and individuality.

After absorbing Vmnn's teachings, he began referring to himself as Vmnn, and sometimes as Suvuvena.

The sisters correct him compulsively, but as a behavioralist, Avorask dismisses the distinction: in carrying out Suvuvena's divine commands with such skill, he *is* her, is he not?

Avorask's goals exceed anything the sisters imagined. They intended to create new and better forms for the glory of Suvuvena. Avorask dreams of welding all life into a single, ecstatic organism.

THE PIT OF VITALITY

This dark, natural cavern is much murkier than the others. A reddish glow filters up through the sediment-filled water.

Those descending will find that the bottom is a carpet of human organs, knit together by Avorask's chimeromancy.

Scores of victims, barely recognizable as people, squirm and heave as one, silently mouthing the ecstasy of flesh united.

The light water is made of their exhalations, and their ecstasy is the cause of its healing potency.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Bubuliga—buh-BOO-lih-gah

Cissik—SISS-ick

Suvuvena—suh-VOO-vuh-nah

Suvuvenism—suh-VOO-vuh-nism

Edited by Andrew Young