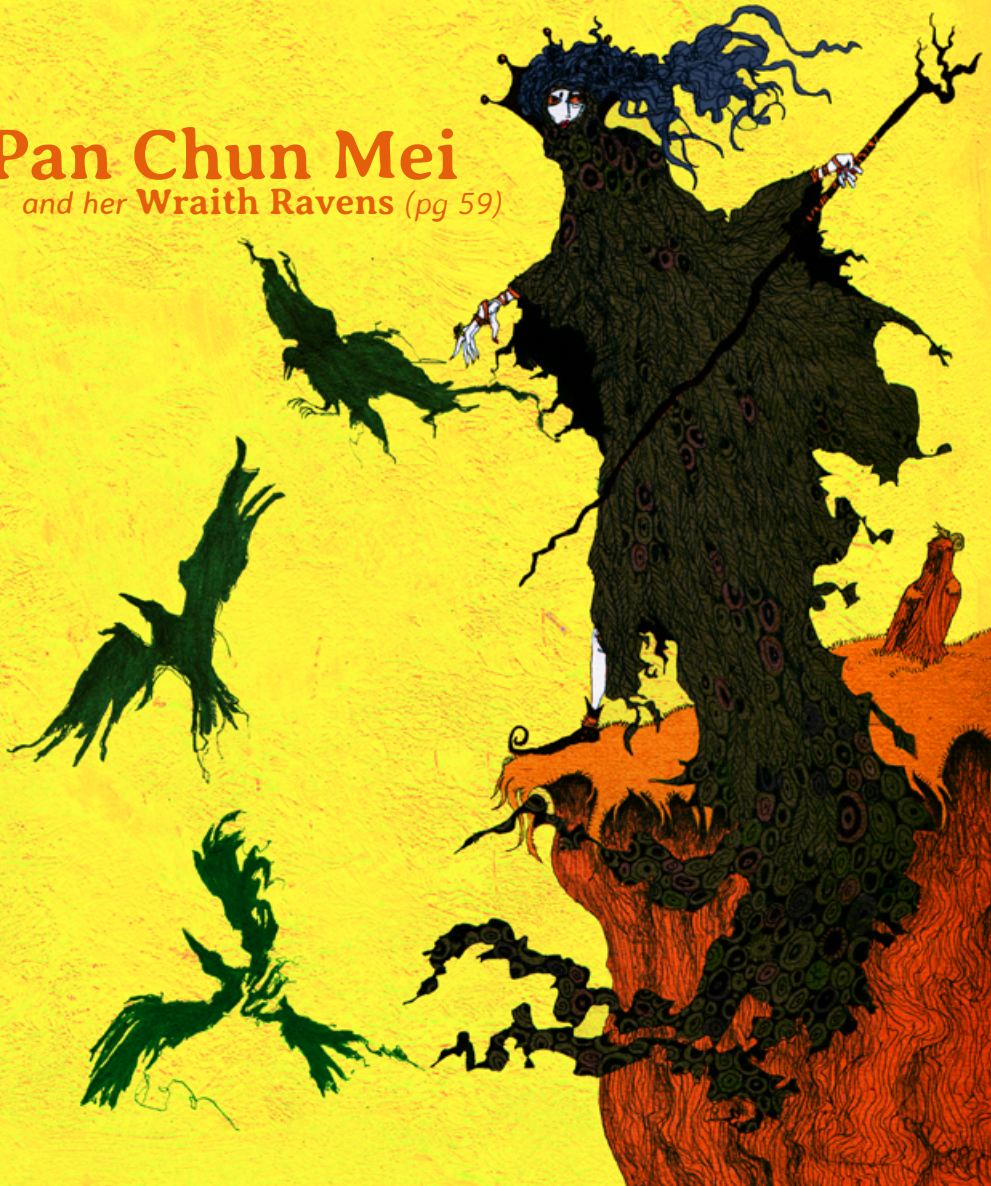


Spring 2016
Issue #1

the Peridot

Pan Chun Mei
and her **Wraith Ravens** (pg 59)



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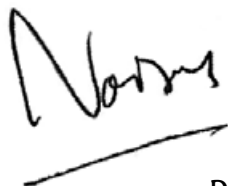
the Peridot

Hello, and welcome to Issue #1 of The Peridot, a new 'zine of RPG-related materials, fiction and art. In it you will find a grab-bag of stuff for use in your games, a mini-setting called 'Eshnunna' with over 30 keyed hexes and some monsters, and the beginning of an episodic Yoon-Suin novella.

I began creating The Peridot because I had a lot of (I thought) good ideas, too many to handle, but none of them quite fitting together. I decided that an irregularly published 'zine might be the best way to get them out there. But I also have grander ambitions. There is a lot of talent in the world: my internet circles are full of talented artists and writers. I want The Peridot to ultimately be a vehicle for this talent which accepts submissions and gives people an opportunity to be paid for their creative efforts.

In the meantime, however, it is just me, and I hope you enjoy the contents I've created. Be forewarned that, dinosaur and contrarian that I am, monster stats throughout this volume use descending Armour Class. I trust that you will be able to reconfigure this if desired for the edition or version of whatever role playing game you use.

Thanks for buying, and please feel free to contact me with feedback (I may even publish reader mail in future issues — why not?)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Noisms', with a long horizontal line drawn underneath it.

— David/Noisms

CONTENTS

WORDS

I Eshnunna

Introduction.....	1
Running a Game in Eshnunna.....	2
Partial Bestiary.....	3
Random Encounter Tables.....	6
Regional Map.....	12
Town of Eshnunna.....	12
Rumor Table.....	19
Regional Hexes.....	20
Jemdet-Nasr.....	34

II Miscellany

The Old Comrades.....	36
Ringed Toes on the Pickled Foot.....	42
Breath of the Saint.....	44
The Clock of Night and Day.....	45
The Ichthyosaur's Pool.....	46
Heron Men.....	51
The Weeping Woodwose.....	52
Black Dream of the Dying.....	54
The Bone Miller.....	56
Pan Chun Mei and her Wraith Ravens.....	58

III The Silaish Vo Saga

Part I.....	62
-------------	----

ART

Matthew Adams

<i>The Ichthyosaur's Pool</i>	47
<i>Pan Chun Mei</i>	front
<i>Heron Man</i>	back

Mark Hiblen

<i>The Pickled Foot</i>	43
<i>Black Dream of the Dying</i>	55

Cecil Howe

<i>Jemdet-Nasr Map</i>	35
------------------------------	----

Christian Kessler

<i>Eshnunna Map</i>	12
<i>Branzaman's Tower Map</i>	48

Nico Maioli

<i>Kusarikku</i>	5
------------------------	---

Alex Mayo

<i>The Weeping Woodwose</i>	53
-----------------------------------	----

Anxious P.

<i>Lammasu & Shedus</i>	20
<i>Vampiric Mist</i>	50
<i>Clay Golem</i>	57

Stefan Poag

<i>Ashme the Witch</i>	17
<i>The Bullrush Demon</i>	25
<i>Girtablilu</i>	27

Sean Poppe

<i>Hyena Pack</i>	23
<i>The Old Comrades</i>	37
<i>Lang-Ling</i>	59

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Eshnunna

In the ancient past, when the sun was brighter, plants were greener, and Gods walked amongst men; before there was iron, paper or borders; when legend was real; there was a town called Eshnunna. A place where a small shoot of civilization sprouted from the dusty earth, and men banded together against the hostile, strange and frightening world which surrounded them. This is an introduction to that setting. The rest of it is for you and your players to create.

How to Run a Game in Eshnunna

The following section contains a hex-map of Eshnunna and its surroundings. Each hex is keyed with useful contents. As well as this, there are three potential locations for dungeoneering—or megadungeoneering if you prefer.

The first of these is Apsû, the flooded underworld, home of the great god Enki, lord of creation, and his swamp palace. The entrance to Apsû is found in hex 6.

The second of these is Kur, the land of death, home of Nergal and Erishkigal, the god and goddess of the afterlife. The entrance to Kur is through the stele of the Girtablilu, found in hex 15.

The third and final of these is Jemdet-Nasr, the ruined city, haunted by ghosts, with tunnels underneath its ziggurats which do not lie empty. Jemdet-Nasr lies in hex 18.

The next few pages contain random encounter tables and monsters to use during play, and at the end of the town's description is a table of rumours for use at the start of the game to tie the players into the setting, or for use during play as the PCs explore.

A Few Creatures of Eshnunna

The Skin of Iluyanka

Demonic creatures formed from the fragments of skin shed by the god-serpent Iluyanka as it slinks across the land. Vaguely humanoid in shape, translucent, and full of the spite and deceit of their original host, they know only that they exist to cause misery and pain.

HD:1 AC:7 DMG:d2/d2 Move:120' ML:7

*If both fist attacks hit, the skin-demon will pull the target close and whisper to him or her a piece of information about the location of treasure or an apparently helpful detail regarding his or her current quest. This will be entirely false.

Kurgarra

They were created from the dirt under Enki's finger- and toe-nails, and formed by his hand into sticking, mucky, grubby travesties of life. They have no sex, language or culture; their single-minded aim is to extract the life force from living things, so that they can be taken back to Apsû and used in Enki's attempts to revive the dead goddess Inanna.

HD 1+1 AC 6 #ATT 2 DMG d3/d3 Move 120' ML:8

*Never surprise opponents due to stench, unless encounter distance is greater than 60'.

*If Kurgarra can reduce an enemy to 0 hit points, or subdue him or her (Kurgarra individually have STR 13), they can in the space of one round force the victim's mouth open and reach inside to pull out the soul. This they carry back with them to Apsû.

*Can transform into a giant fly with Move 120 (Fly 240), which does no damage with its grasping arms, but can carry off a target if both arm attacks hit in the same round.

Girtablilu

Created by Tiamat from the earth itself to wage war against the other gods, the Girtablilu are capricious and cruel – hostile elemental spirits of the soil who appear from cracks and ravines in search of human prey. Their torso, arms and head are human; their bodies scorpions; their male organs snakes.

AC:1 HD:8 DMG:3d6 weapon/1d4+1 claw/1d4+1 claw/1d6 tail Move:180' ML:10*

*The poison from a girtablilu's tail causes death on a failed save vs. poison, or 2d6 rounds of paralysis otherwise.

Kusarikku

The bull-centaur of legend: the muscular, bovine, stinking sweaty hindquarters of a bull, with the rippled trunk-like torso of a powerful oversized man emerging where the neck should be. Hypersexual, hyper-aggressive, and violently contemptuous of intruders, they live with their herds of cattle, with whom they breed vociferously. Occasionally a heifer bears a kusarikku son; these remain with their father until old enough to form herds of their own.

HD:5+1 AC:5 DMG:by weapon +2 or 1d4 trample Move:150' ML:10

*Can charge to attack, requiring a 50' run-up, doing 2d6 DMG and knocking the victim to the ground on a successful hit.

Urmahlullu

The noble man-lion hybrid, questor and guardian for the gods. They are mighty instantiations of holy power, stern and unforgiving of any hindrance. Where they walk, the earth gives birth to flowers and other plants; when they are destroyed, the earth quakes.

HD:10 AC:0 DMG:2d6/2d6 Move:180' ML:9

*Can cast spells as a 6th level priest.

*Can roar to cause fear: on the first roar all creatures within 360 yards must successfully save versus magic or flee for 3 turns; on the second roar all creatures within 200 yards must save versus magic or be paralysed for d4 turns; and on the third roar all creatures within 200 yards must save versus magic or be knocked over for 2d8 damage and be deafened for 2d4 rounds



2d6	Flood Plains
2	Hermit. An old man or old woman living a life of voluntary solitude. Roll a d6: on a 1-2 the hermit is 0-level; on a 3-4 he or she is a cleric of d6+3 levels; on a 5-6 he or she is a magic-user of d6+3 levels. Levelled hermits have TT: Nx2 and Ox2 in their lairs.
3	Giant scorpion <i>AC:2 HD:4 DMG:1d10/1d10/1d4+poison Move:150' ML:9</i> *1d6 appearing *Poison is deadly on failed save vs. poison; stinger hits automatically if both claw attacks hit. TT: V in lair.
4	Traders. 1d20 0-level humans, with hide armour, shields and spears. For each trader there are 2 mules and 4 guards. The guards are 1st level fighters, with banded mail, shields and spears. All traders and guards ride camels. Treasure: goods amounting to TT: A in value.
5	Small arachnid. A small trapdoor spider or scorpion. If the party is surprised, a random member is stung or bitten. Roll a d6: on a 1-2 the poison is sickening (incapacitation for d6 days; successful save halves this); on 3-4 necrotic (save vs. poison or lose a limb); on 5-6 deadly (save vs. poison or be incapacitated and die if not healed within a week).
6	Herd mammals. Antelope, camels, asses, etc., 2d20 in number. Males will attack if provoked; they do 2d6+2 DMG on a charge and have AC 7, Move 180, and between 3 and 6 HD as appropriate.
7	Herders. A handful of isolated, inbred, and suspicious peasants with their flock, which is all they know or understand. 1d100+50 sheep or goats, with d4+2 herders. Herder <i>AC:8 HD:1 DMG:1d6 club or 1d4+1 sling ML:7</i> *Sling attacks have a +2 'to hit' bonus.

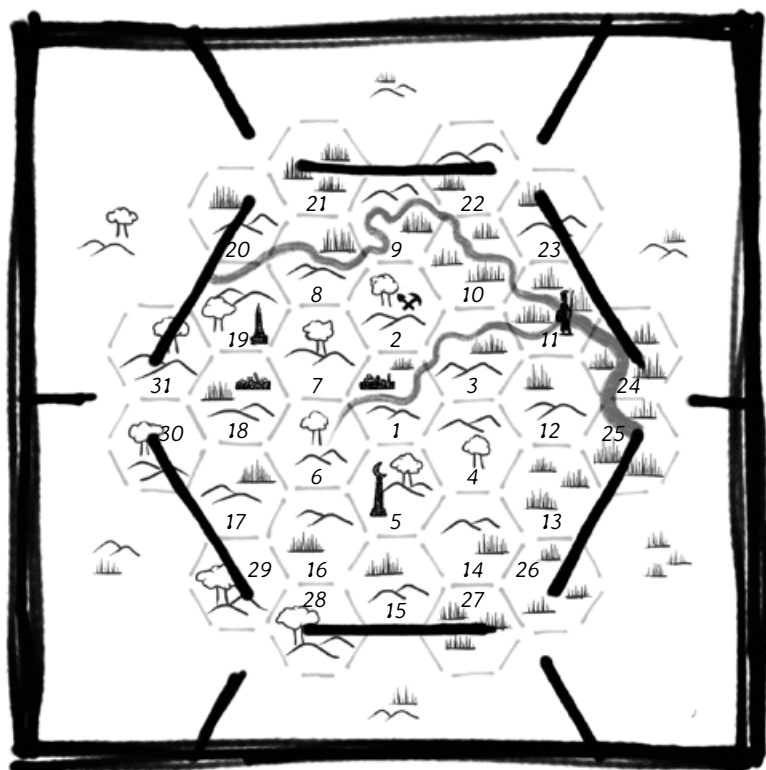
2d6	Flood Plains
8	Jackals. 1d12+6 cowardly canines who are attracted to the dead or dying. They will not attack an armed group unless one or more member has 1-2 hp remaining. <u>Jackal</u> <i>AC:7 HD:1+1 DMG:1d6 Move:180' ML:6</i>
9	Elamite raiders. 1d10+10 warriors come to the region for plunder and enslavement. All are riding camels; half have bows and leather armour; the others have lances, shields and banded mail. They are 1st level fighters, except for a 3rd level leader and a 3rd level cleric of the Elamite goddess. TT: V.
10	Lions. 1d6+2 hunters, who will target the weakest member of the party (measured in hp). <u>Lion</u> <i>AC:6 HD:5 DMG:1d4+1/1d4+1/1d10 Move:150' ML:8</i>
11	Giant spider. A hunting spider roaming the plains. <u>Giant spider</u> <i>AC:7 HD:4+4 DMG:2d6+3 Move:180' ML:7</i> *Bite is poisonous, causing paralysis on a failed save vs. poison (on a successful save the victim's movements rate is half and he always acts last in a combat round — the effect lasts 24 hours).
12	Girtablilu. Scorpion-men, the servants of Tiamat, born from the earth itself. 1d8 in number, or 2d10 in lair. If encountered in lair, one girtablilu will be a 13th level cleric of Tiamat, with 13 HD. TT: (V) J, K, Mx2. <u>Girtablilu</u> <i>AC:1 HD:8 DMG:3d6 weapon/1d4+1 claw/1d4+1 claw/1d6 tail*</i> <i>Move:180' ML:10</i> *The poison from a girtablilu's tail causes death on a failed save vs. poison, or 2d6 rounds of paralysis otherwise.

2d6	Scrub Hills
2	Hermit. An old man or old woman living a life of voluntary solitude. Roll a d6: on a 1-2 the hermit is 0-level; on a 3-4 he or she is a cleric of d6+3 levels; on a 5-6 he or she is a magic-user of d6+3 levels. Levelled hermits have TT: Nx2 and Ox2 in their lairs.
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4	Kurgarra. Enki's servants, carrying out their endless quest to bring souls to Apsû. 3d6 appearing. <u>Kurgarra</u> <i>AC:6 HD:1+1 DMG:1d3/1d3 Move:120' ML:8</i> *For special abilities, see bestiary entry.
5	Leopard. An ambush predator which will only attack if it wins surprise, in which case it will spring from a bush or tree to attack the weakest member of the party (by hp). <u>Leopard</u> <i>AC:4 HD:4 DMG:1d4/1d4/1d8 Move:180' ML:7</i>
6	Herd mammals. Antelope, camels, asses, etc., 2d20 in number. Males will attack if provoked; they do 2d6+2 DMG on a charge and have AC 7, Move 180', and between 3 and 6 HD as appropriate.
7	Herders. A handful of isolated, inbred, and suspicious peasants with their flock, which is all they know or understand. 1d100+50 sheep or goats, with d4+2 herders. <u>Herder</u> <i>AC:8 HD:1 DMG:1d6 club or 1d4+1 sling Move:120' ML:7</i> *Sling attacks have a +2 'to hit' bonus.

2d6	Scrub Hills
8	Traders. 1d20 0-level humans, with hide armour, shields and spears. For each trader there are 2 mules and 4 guards. The guards are 1st level fighters, with banded mail, shields and spears. All traders and guards ride camels. Treasure: goods amounting to TT: A in value.
9	Bear. A brown bear, with a 1 in 6 chance of being accompanied by d3 noncombatant cubs. A mother with cubs is especially aggressive. <u>Bear</u> AC:7 HD:6 DMG:1d8/1d8/1d10 Move:150' ML:7
10	Robbers. 1d4x10 in lair; 2d6 otherwise. One out of every 10 is a 2 HD leader; the entire group is led by a 3 HD leader with banded mail and a shield. 1 in 6 chance of being accompanied by 1d6 trained hyenas or jackals. TT: (V) A. <u>Robber</u> AC:7 HD:1 DMG:by weapon (sling, spear, club) Move:120' ML:7
11	Giant scorpion. 1d6 appearing. <u>Giant Scorpion</u> AC:2 HD:4 DMG:1d10/1d10/1d4* Move:150' ML:9 *The poison is deadly on failed save vs. poison. *Stinger hits automatically if both claw attacks hit. TT: V in lair.
12	Kusarikku. The bull-centaur of legend, with his 2d6 mates and a 1 in 6 chance of 1d3 sons. <u>Kusarikku</u> HD:5+1 AC:5 DMG:by weapon +2 or 1d4 trample Move:180' ML:10 *Can charge to attack with a run-up of 50' or greater; does 2d6 DMG and knocks the victim prone. TT: 1d4 random items of jewellery.

2d6	Forested Hills
2	Hermit. An old man or old woman living a life of voluntary solitude. Roll a d6: on a 1-2 the hermit is 0-level; on a 3-4 he or she is a cleric of d6+3 levels; on a 5-6 he or she is a magic-user of d6+3 levels. Levelled hermits have TT: Nx2 and Ox2 in their lairs.
3	Girtablilu. Scorpion-men, the servants of Tiamat, born from the earth itself. 1d8 in number, or 2d10 in lair. If encountered in lair, one girtablilu will be a 13th level cleric of Tiamat, with 13 HD. TT: (V) J, K, Mx2. <u>Girtablilu</u> <i>AC:1 HD:8 DMG:3d6 weapon/1d4+1 claw/1d4+1 claw/1d6 tail*</i> <i>Move:180' ML:10</i> <i>*The poison from a girtablilu's tail causes death on a failed save vs. poison, or 2d6 rounds of paralysis otherwise.</i>
4	Kurgarra. Enki's servants, carrying out their endless quest to bring souls to Apsû. 3d6 appearing. <u>Kurgarra</u> <i>AC:6 HD:1+1 DMG:1d3/1d3 Move:120' ML:8</i> <i>*For special abilities, see bestiary entry.</i>
5	Leopard. An ambush predator which will only attack if it wins surprise, in which case it will spring from a bush or tree to attack the weakest member of the party (by hp). <u>Leopard</u> <i>AC:4 HD:4 DMG:1d4/1d4/1d8 Move:180' ML:7</i>
6	Giant spider. A hunting spider roaming the hills. <u>Giant spider</u> <i>AC:7 HD:4+4 DMG:2d6+3 Move:180' ML:7</i> <i>*Bite is poisonous, causing paralysis on a failed save vs. poison (on a successful save the victim's movements rate is half and he always acts last in a combat round — the effect lasts 24 hours).</i>

2d6	Forested Hills
7	Baboons. 2d6x10 large and aggressive monkeys. Adult males (1 in 3 of the total) are fierce and testosterone-fuelled. <u>Baboon</u> AC:7 HD:1 DMG:1d6 Move:180' ML:7.
8	Robbers. 1d4x10 in lair; 2d6 otherwise. One out of every 10 is a 2 HD leader; the entire group is led by a 3 HD leader with banded mail and a shield. 1 in 6 chance of being accompanied by 1d6 trained hyenas or jackals. TT: (V) A. <u>Robber</u> AC:7 HD:1 DMG:by weapon (sling, spear, club) Move:120' ML:7
9	Bear. A brown bear, with a 1 in 6 chance of being accompanied by d3 noncombatant cubs. A mother with cubs is especially aggressive. <u>Bear</u> AC:7 HD:6 DMG:1d8/1d8/1d10 Move:150' ML:7
10	Giant centipede. A powerful, single-minded predator. <u>Giant Centipede</u> AC:8 HD:4+4 DMG:2d6* Move:180' ML:8 *Poison causes paralysis for 10 turns on a failed save vs. poison.
11	Giant scorpion. 1d6 appearing. <u>Giant Scorpion</u> AC:2 HD:4 DMG:1d10/1d10/1d4* Move:150' ML:9 *The poison is deadly on failed save vs. poison. *Stinger hits automatically if both claw attacks hit. TT: V in lair.
12	Mighty Urmahlullu. A man-lion lord on a quest for the gods – searching for an item, or person lost. <u>Urmahlullu</u> AC:2 HD:10 DMG:1d10/1d10/2d10 Move:180' ML:9 *Spells as a 10th level cleric.



1 Eshnunna

A town, if that is what you can call an oval wall some twelve feet high and six feet thick encircling two thousand or so souls, who shelter behind it in houses forged from parched mud and straw. In the hills around it roam sheep and goats which the inhabitants eat, herd, shear and drink from. In the floodplain on which it rests are fields of wheat. It is governed by Urguedinna, its king, who rules over it with what, in this region, passes for might.

The hyena pack from 7 can also be encountered in this hex.

The Temple to Tishpak

A large hall of stone, dedicated to the patron deity of Eshnunna, the sky god Tishpak. Its roof is open so that supplicants can gaze up to the vast and pure blue emptiness above them; it contains 12 statues forged from gypsum, each a different aspect of the bearded, wild-eyed and fierce deity of the heavens. In the largest statue, closest to the altar, we see Tishpak in all his glory: astride a sacred bull and carrying a mace. The eyes are made of red jasper and worth 1,000 sp each; the head of the mace is of solid gold and worth 20,000 sp. In his belt are 12 chunks of light orange carnelian, each worth 100 sp.

The great priest of the temple is En-Kirikiri, a 6th level Cleric who carries a sacred mace. This weapon only serves those whose dedication to Tishpak is pure and who have made the sacrifice of one of his enemies on the temple's altar. It strikes with the force of lightning, which courses through the veins of its victims, burning their flesh and hair and searing their skin. It does 3d6 damage, stuns for d6 rounds, and will kill the victim outright unless he or she can successfully save vs. death.

The Temple is also cared for by eleven 1st level Clerics and a 3rd level Cleric acolyte of En-Kirikiri. These spend much of their time catering to the every need of Tishpak's sacred bulls, two huge, muscular slabs of bovine flesh who twice a year trample criminals or adulterers to death in the spring and autumnal equinox festivals.

Urguedinna's Entourage

Urguedinna (3rd level Fighter) is always accompanied by the soothsayer Enheduanna, a 5th level magic-user, who the people suspect to be his lover and, perhaps, the ruler of his mind. She wears three lilies in her hair which never wilt or fade. By blowing on one of these lilies, she can release a cloud of pollen which has magical effects: one of the flowers causes sleep, one is a stinking cloud, and the last is confusion.

Urguedinna has two guards, both 5th level Fighters. The first carries a large two-handed bronze sword; the second, a two-handed hammer. They wear banded mail and their beards are curled around the femurs of men they have killed. Kab-kabu has eleven, Yasmah thirteen. Kab-kabu intends to overtake his rival, sooner or later.

Urguedinna's treasure is kept in the basement of his fort, a stockade of wood on a hill in the middle of the town, with a stone hall in its centre. It is the only stone building in the town except for the temple. The treasure is 7,000 sp in clay jars, each holding 1,000 sp; a gold wash basin worth 5,000 sp, and a silver necklace studded with carnelian, worth 2,000 sp in total.

Jushur, the Thief

A grinning, amusing, talkative shepherd who owns many flocks and considerable wealth. While careful to avoid any sense he may be a rival to Urguedinna—giving every indication he is merely a rich and inconsequential hedonist—he in fact has designs on some day being king himself.

Jushur's wealth was inherited but it is bolstered by his ties to thieves and robbers in the surrounding area. The band of robbers in hex 29 pay him a tithe of all of their gains, in return for his sufferance and protection; he is also served by the two-dozen or so beggars who inhabit the city and act as his eyes and ears. He plans to swell the ranks of his followers and ultimately bring Urguedinna to a violent death.

Jushur's wife and lieutenant is Ninshuel, of the Clean Hands. She never deigns to touch any object with her fingers, maintaining her cleanliness at all times; she is accompanied everywhere by two female servants, who feed, clothe and bathe her as she requires. It is rumoured that in her love-making with Jushur she positions herself in perfect stillness to minimise her contact with his flesh.

Ashme the Witch

Her bower outside of the city is formed from cedar trees which have curved together as they have grown, to form a round enclosed space like the upturned hull of some stranded boat made of living pine. Her two husbands are goat-headed men who protect and follow her in slavish obedience; she takes other lovers too, as her pleasure dictates.

Within Ashme's bower is her scrying pool, which she fills with rain water and uses to extend her vision where she desires. She will use this power for others, in return for:

- 1** *Sex (which drains a level of XP)*
- 2** *The sacrifice of a human life*
- 3** *A magical item of permanent effect (i.e. not a scroll, potion, wand, or other item whose powers can be used up)*
- 4** *A secret unknown to her*

Ashme is a 7th level magic user. Her husbands, Elulu and Balulu, have the following statistics:

Elulu & Balulu

HD:4 AC:6 DMG:by weapon +1 or headbutt for 1d3 Move:120' ML:10



Amarezen the Trader

Sharp-eyed, nimble-fingered, missing nothing and understanding everything, Amarezen knows all of the traders and caravans who pass through Eshnunna, and can ultimately find a purchaser for almost any item or treasure brought to her—at a price. She is an unprepossessing middle-aged woman, 0-level, with streaks of grey in her black hair, that match the flinty hardness of her eyes.

Amarezen charges 1/6 of the value of an item brought to her to find a buyer. She can sell it within one day if the correct type of trader is in town, but must wait otherwise: traders arrive in the following weekly pattern:

Textiles & furs, Jewellery, Commodities, Arms & armour, Magical & religious items

Amarezen has three servants, identical brothers, who can divide their bodies into three (legs, torso and arms, and head) and interchange these parts. Each of these parts grants a different ability in addition to the brothers' baseline stats. The first brother is white, the second black, and the third, blue.

Brother

HD:3+1 AC:5 DMG:1d6+1/1d6+1 (by weapon +1) Move:120' ML:10

	Head	Torso & Arms	Legs
White	Has <i>ESP</i> with a 12 yard radius	Cast spells as a 5 th level magician	Slow (Move 60')
Black	Can't turn head, only sees straight ahead	Climbs perfectly (as <i>SPIDER CLIMB</i>)	Walks on water
Blue	Additional bite attack (DMG 1d6)	Fixed digits; can't grasp or carry	Very fast (Move 180')

	Rumours
1	Jushur, the thief, wants magic items or treasures recovered from the lost city of Jemdet-Nasr, and will pay handsomely in return.
2	An amulet containing the souls of a dozen demons was cast by an exorcist into a pool in the flood plains by the Tigris River (hex 13).
3	A hyena pack is plaguing the village of Kanesh (hex 8). The people say that the hyenas are magical, and the head man will pay a reward for killing them or chasing them away (hex 7).
4	A handful of slaves have escaped from the Gypsum Quarry in hex 2, and they must be found.
5	Children from the village of Akshak (hex 23) have been disappearing. (This is the doing of the bulrush demon in hex 10.)
6	There is a stele created by Girtablilu in the arid hills South of the town (hex 15).
7	A spring in the forest hills lead to the underworld of Apsû, where Enki resides (hex 6).
8	Minussa, the mysterious shepherdess, has hidden treasure she found in the aftermath of the battle against the Elamites (hex 9).
9	One of Urguedinna's favourite concubines has fled and he wants her returned (see hex 23).
10	The devil-serpent Iluyanka slithered by to the South one night in the recent past, and in his passage gouged a ravine in the earth filled with treasure—and strange beings—he shedded from his body (hex 27).
11	A demonic Mukil-res-Lemutti is plaguing the land in the hills to the North of the town (hex 22).
12	A band of robbers (hex 29) is menacing local villagers and traders (hex 14).

2 The Gypsum Quarry

A wound in the hillside gouged out by generations of slaves, which supplies Eshnunna with the material for its statues, idols and jewellery, as well as one of its main sources of trade with other cities. In the summer heat dust rises in a pillar of cloud and cakes the sweaty skin of the slaves so they resemble ghosts or paint-daubed savages. In the winter the rains soak the earth, which is churned into knee-high paste by the efforts of the workers. Yet the work goes on at pain of death.

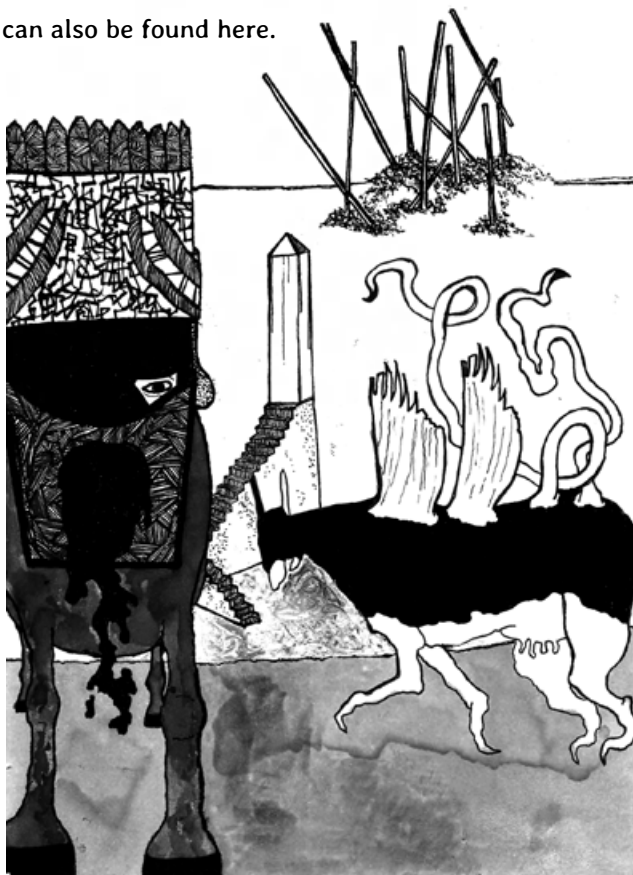
Puzur-Suen the Overseer is Urguedinna's cousin and a ferocious whip-hand. He has a tiger-eye silver necklace worth 1,000 sp, and a sea-shell amulet worth 300 sp. There are typically d6+3 other overseers at the quarry, each with 1+1 HD, AC:6, and other stats as Puzur-Suen.

There are also 36 slaves.

Puzur-Suen the Overseer

HP:9 AC:5 (banded mail) DMG:1d6 axe or 1d3 whip Move:120' ML:8

The hyena pack from 7 can also be found here.



3 The Battlefield

A place where the Elamite enemies of Eshnunna were crushed in battle a century ago, as they attempted to cross the river ford on their way to sacking the city. Arrows fell down on them like spring rain and their blood dyed the waters red and then brown for days afterwards. In the rout the warriors of Eshnunna rode them down in chariots all the way to the other bend in the river (at 11), crushing their bones beneath hooves and wheels. The bodies were piled high in a dozen locations and burned; bones remain scattered across this and surrounding hexes—the handiwork of hyenas, jackals and vultures.

An Elamite chief and his two warrior daughters were slain at the river crossing. Their treasures were never recovered. They were later found by the grandfather of Minussa, the shepherdess, in hex 9.

The albino buffalo from 12 can also be encountered here.

4 The Mute Woodcutters

Twin brothers, with bright, assessing eyes and unkempt greying beards, who have never been known to speak. They live in a hut made from earth and stone, hidden in a forest glade, and occasionally venture to Eshnunna to sell firewood for supplies or to pay for a few moments of pleasure with a woman. Children believe them to be cannibals; adults do not usually credit the notion.

The albino buffalo from 12 can also be encountered here.

5 Enlil's Tower

A twenty-foot tall spike of clay jutting out from the rocks in a secluded valley carpeted in forest, of which few are familiar and fewer still have visited. It is devoted to Enlil, the Seducer of Ninlil, Father of Nanna and Ninurta, and God of the Wind, of the Air, of Height and Distance. Inside, it contains an altar to his worship, with stone tablets devoted to his legends and four mattocks, one silver, one bronze, one copper, and one of gold. Each of these mattocks will provide a blessing if used to sacrifice a human life to the Lord of the Storm.

Gold: CURE DISEASE

Silver: POLYMORPH REVERSAL

Bronze: REMOVE CURSE

Copper: RESURRECTION

The Tower is guarded by two slaves of Enlil: a lammasu and a shedu. They are beings of such great power that the worshipers of Tishpak, in Eshnunna, dare not attempt to confront them.

Lammasu/Shedu:

HD:8+7 AC:5 DMG:1d6+2/1d6+2 Move:80' (Fly 240') ML:10

*Acting together, the pair can channel the power of Enlil to cast

Conjure Air Elemental once per week. This takes one round.

*Casts spells as a 7th level cleric and a 6th level magic user.

*Can cast *DIMENSION DOOR* at will.

6 The Spring from Apsu

The source of the Jak-Jak River, which wells up pure and sweet from the underworld, pools on the surface, and the flows in a great torrent down through Eshnunna. By swimming down into its depths, a swimmer may enter Apsu, though how far down one must go, nobody knows.

The water in the great clear pool where the spring comes to the surface throngs with life, amongst it large eels with rubbery-lipped maws and mysterious stunning power in their flesh. These are servants of the great god Enki, lord of water and creation, who resides in a vast swamp temple under the earth. **Anybody swimming in the water has a 1 in 6 chance per turn of attracting the attention of one of these eels, which will then use its power to send a wave of eldritch energy through the water around it. The swimmer will be stunned by this with no saving throw permitted, for 1d10+2 rounds. If he or she drowns, the body will sink down into Enki's domain.**

The hyena pack from 7 can also be encountered here.

7 The Hyena Pack

A cackling, smelly, vicious and uncouth band of toothy snarling brutes. They are led by a mated pair; the other four members, all young adults, are their children. The parent male is missing a front leg thanks to a fight with a leopard long ago: the leopard lost its eyes and died shortly after. The parent female's fur is jet black, and she channels wild magic when her ferocity overcomes her. Their lair is in a burrow dug under a fallen tree in the forest; they roam over hexes 1, 2, 8, 19, 18, and 6, scavenging and—if they can—killing too.

The Big Male

Hp:21 AC:6 DMG:2d6+1 Move:120' ML:8

The Big Female

Hp:22 AC:6 DMG:1d6+3 Move:180' ML:8

*Has a 1 in 6 chance of casting a spell each round a member of her pack is in combat. The spell cast is randomly determined and cannot be revoked; select it from the following list:

1 *HASTE* (centred on self)

2 *ENLARGE* (on self)

3 *BLESS* (centred on self)

4 *INVISIBILITY* (on self)

Pack Members

HD:2+1 AC:6 DMG:1d6+2 Move:180' ML:8



8 The Village of Kanesh

A village of herders, rivals of those in Akshak; the relationship between the two villages is characterised by blood feud, theft, and arguments over grazing land. The herds of Kanesh also roam over hexes 20, 21, and 9.

Kanesh has approximately 130 inhabitants, as mean and suspicious of those of their neighbour. The Headman is Babum; the priest, of Enlil, is Zuqaqip (both are 0-level).

Just outside the village lives the great hunter, Arwium. He is familiar with all local geography and wildlife, and is a 2nd level warrior, armed with a composite bow and killing club.

In the middle of the village is a stone circle of ancient heritage. The stones emerge from the long dry grasses like fangs. On the stones is inscribed writing in some unknown pictography; the villagers could not understand it even if they were literate.

The hyena pack from 7 can also be encountered here.

9 Minussa, the Shepherdess

Preferring solitude, Minussa, like her ancestors have done for generations, lives amongst dry scrub hills, hidden from prying eyes, with her goats and her sons. These three sons—tall, muscular, and heavy-browed—are rumoured to be their mother's lovers by those who know of them. Acting together, as a trio, these sons can cast *SUMMON INSECTS*, *ANIMAL SUMMONING I*, and *STICKS TO SNAKES*, each once per week, as a 9th level magician. They are otherwise 2nd level warriors. Minussa herself is a 5th level druid.

Buried under a bush near the family's hut is the treasure of an Elamite chief and his daughters (see hex 3). This is a suit of bronze armour decorated with copper, worth 1,500 sp, three helmets of copper inlaid with silver, worth 1,000 sp each, and a gold scabbard worth 2,000 sp.

The Kaneshi herds from 8 and the Akshaki herds from 23 can both be encountered here.

10 The Bulrush Demon

A swirling, shuffling, shaking, skinny humanoid figure made of green rushes, which lurks in the vast reed beds of the marshes. There it hides amongst the tall rushes with the babies it steals from local families—the unknown cause when a child goes missing in the night.

Bulrush Demon

HD:4+1 AC:4 DMG:1d6/1d6

Move:120' (Swim:150') ML:7

*Unharmed by bludgeoning or piercing weapons

The albino buffalo from 12 and the herds from 23 can also be encountered here.



11 The Priest of Utu

An old man wanders the plains here. He is a mighty priest of Utu, God of the Sun and of Truth and Judgement, and thus he manifests those qualities, albeit imperfectly. He always speaks the truth, and he will always give a decisive judgement if a request is put before him to do so. He carries a mace and a saw-edged blade, and always lives under the sun, so that his skin is ruddy and burned even when skies are clouded over.

The Priest of Utu is an 11th level cleric. The touch of his mace carries a permanent curse, which cannot be removed except by a *WISH* spell, by Utu himself, or by another God, to always tell the truth. His saw-edged blade is treated as a +4 Vorpal Sword.

The albino buffalo from 12 can also be encountered here.

12 The Albino Buffalo

A wild and solitary male river buffalo with white skin and red eyes, which was spotted by Urguedinna on a hunting trip. Unwilling to kill the beast, considering it a blessing from Tishpak, he issued an edict that it is under his protection. It roams the local areas, rarely straying by more than a mile from the river.

The buffalo may also be encountered in hexes 3, 4, 10, and 11. Its hide would be worth 400 sp if it were killed; its horns 2000 sp.

Albino Buffalo

HD:6 AC:3 DMG:2d6 Move:150' ML:6

13 The Pools

Small lakes dotted here and there, which replenish themselves each spring and autumn when the river floods, and otherwise are the homes of waterfowl, hunting birds and fish. It has long been said that in ancient times an asipui, or exorcist, cast an amulet, which he had used to imprison the souls of a dozen demons, into one of these pools. It surely remains there still.

14 The Village of Kuara

A settlement of peasants huddling together for protection behind the ancient earth walls of a ruin from the antique past. There are 97 inhabitants in total; they are exceedingly poor, and barely grow enough wheat or maintain enough goats to survive.

The reason for the villagers' impoverishment is the group of robbers living in hex 29, who raid it regularly for food and the pleasures of its women. Its headman is Balih and it has a priestess and a shrine devoted to Inanna, the goddess of love, fertility and war. The people believe Inanna to have deserted them, and a rival priest—a great flute player called Ilku—has some favour. All are 0-level.

15 The Stele of the Girtablilu

A great slab of gypsum, nine feet tall and four wide, decorated with one single image in bas-relief of a giant gate, guarded on either side by scorpion-men. Above the gate is a stylised image of the sun; beneath it, a crescent moon with stars. The rear of the stele is blank.

This stele was built by the Girtablilu to symbolise their guardianship over night and day, and the afterlife. **At dusk on the 26th day of each month, when the sun shines on its face**, a person can push against its surface with both palms and hence communicate with the people of Kur, the land of death, who eat soil, drink dust, and clothe themselves in feathers. Unless this person knows who he wishes to communicate with by name, all he will hear is a cacophony of voices which cannot be separated. If he does know the name he can communicate long enough to ask three questions. **There is a 1 in 6 chance that, during this process, Nergal, God of Death, will seize the questioner's wrists and pull him through the stele into Kur to face the judgement of Erishkigal, its ruler.** From this there can surely be no return.

16 The Persimmon Grove

A hillside thronged with date-plum trees, the fruits luscious and orange amongst fresh green leaves. The local people do not eat the fruit and children are forbidden from picking it.

Within the fruits lurk the larvae of wasps, which, if eaten, burrow into the gut of the eater and gestate. This process takes six weeks. After six weeks have passed an adult wasp bursts from the gut, causing 1d6 damage, a permanent loss of -2 to CON, and a fever which incapacitates the victim for d6 days.

During the six-week period the larvae protects its host as much as it can through the use of chemical stimulants which give the host a +1 bonus to saving throw rolls and +1 to hit rolls.



17 The Crevasse

A crack in the earth, ten yards long and one wide. At the very bottom, wedged amongst rocks, is the body of a fallen traveller, rotted away to a skeleton. He is dressed in an expensive bronze cuirass and greaves, with a shield and sword. He is the grandfather of the current king of the nearby city-state of Borsippa, missing for nearly a century. Close inspection reveals that his head has been pierced by some sharp metal implement. Around one wrist is a copper bracelet decorated with lapis lazuli; it is worth 500 sp and is an heirloom of the family. Wearing the bracelet gives the wearer great strength and skill (+2 to hit and damage rolls) but also makes him or her unlucky, failing all saving throw rolls. Once worn it cannot be removed.

18 Jemdet-Nasr

A dusty, dry and ancient ruin of tumbled-down homes, ziggurats and temples. Beneath its surface are tunnels and caves, containing treasures and spirits of the long lost past; in its streets lurk the gossamer-thin ghosts of the old days. The map to Jemdet-Nasr is on page 35, opposite the rules for its ghosts.

The hyena pack from 7 can also be encountered here.

19 The Wooden Tower

A tower made from the single, huge trunk of a solitary cypress tree, shorn of its branches. Strange letters and hieroglyphs cover its surface, carved into the wood. Carving a name into it will place the owner of that name in the wrath of the God An, who will curse the owner permanently.

The tower is guarded by two urmahlullu, lion-spirits who will not allow any to approach except those anointed by An — meaning anyone who has been struck by a bolt of lightning and survived.

Urmahlullu

HD:10 AC:0 DMG:2d6/2d6 Move:180' ML:9

*Can cast spells as a 6th level priest.

*Can roar to cause fear: on the first roar all creatures within 360 yards must successfully save versus magic or flee for 3 turns; on the second roar all creatures within 200 yards must save versus magic or be paralysed for d4 turns; and on the third roar all creatures within 200 yards must save versus magic or be knocked over for 2d8 damage and be deafened for 2d4 rounds

The hyena pack from 7 can also be encountered here.

20 The Gypsum Statues

Six statues of former kings, in various stages of dismantlement: most are missing arms and/or legs, though all have their heads. All are missing their eyes. Legend has it that if the eyes are returned the kings will be bound to serve he who returns them; treat as stone golems.

The herds from 8 can also be encountered here.

21 The Tomb of Udul-Kalama

A large pile of stones, some three metres high, on an artificial hillock, in which lies the corpse of an old king of Eshnunna, Udul-Kalama, together with thvis dozen concubines and treasures. The treasures are a cotton robe, miraculously preserved, which protects the wearer from poison; two pots each containing 500 gp; a sword +1 of telepathy; and two bracelets of copper decorated with single opals, worth 3,000 sp each. The king's concubines will rouse themselves from death to protect them—treat as crypt things (with 6 HD, AC 3, and the ability to teleport other).

The herds from 8 and the hyena pack from 7 can also be encountered here.

22 The Lair of the Mukil-res-Lemutti

A cave nestling in a rocky cleft, in a quiet, shaded valley sheltered from the wind. A demon lives inside; it has the body of a lion, and the head, legs and arms of a lithe and handsome man. It comes slinking out of its cave at night when the moon is full to prowl nearby hills, plaguing whoever it comes across; its very presence causes painful migraines which disrupt the vision and prevent concentration amongst those who come within 100 yards (-2 to hit; no spellcasting permitted). It wears a horned cap, a Helm of Human Control, which allows it to control the actions of any single person who comes within 12 yards. It wields a Mace +1. Treasure: a copper crown decorated with six carbuncles, worth 800 sp, and a belt of bronze scales studded with lapis lazuli, worth 600 sp.

Mukil-res-Lemutti

HD:6+6 AC:4 DMG:1d8+2/1d8+2 Move:150' ML:9

The herds from 23 can also be encountered here.

23 The Village of Akshak

A village of herders who supervise semi-wild flocks of goats and sheep who wander hexes 23, 22, 9, and 10. It has just over 100 squinting, suspicious, and surly inhabitants. The headman is called Urur; the village also has a small shrine to Tishpak, administered by the priest Puzur-Nirah (both are 0-level).

The village hosts a fugitive concubine of Urguedinna, whose name is Didila. She fled his harem when she discovered she was pregnant, returning to the village where she was born. Her extended family keeps her well hidden from prying eyes.

The villagers will sometimes attempt—through cunning or brute force—to subdue and sell travellers into slavery with the caravans passing East from Eshnunna to the lands of the Amorites and Elamites.

24 The Dancing Cranes

A flat expanse of flood plains which are sometimes submerged beneath the lukewarm brown waters of the river. Here, a large flock of cranes, white and with red crests, hunts and dances together throughout the year. Their dancing involves prancing about, hopping from one leg to another, and occasionally flapping a few feet into the air. They do this every evening; during that period, as the sun descends, the air begins to shiver with supernatural force. Anybody sleeping amidst the cranes for the night retains some of this magical energy, allowing him to cast a random 1st level spell the next day. However, if he is not a magic user, he must successfully save vs. paralysis or faint for 2d6 turns on casting. The magic summoned by the cranes' dancing dissipates by morning.

The mugger crocodiles from 25 can also be encountered here.

25 The Mugger Crocodiles

Here, where the river widens into a broad, flat, muddy expanse of slow-moving water, lurk a band of mugger crocodiles, led by a brutish bull male. They take great pleasure in sunning themselves on the dirty brown mud flats on either side of the river, waiting for a passing antelope or fish. They roam from here further downstream, and rarely move North beyond hex 24. They are 12 in number, with three big adult males, the bull male, and the others females and juveniles.

Mugger Crocodile

AC:5 HD:4/5/3 DMG:1d8+3/1d8+2*/1d8* Move:120' (Swim 180') ML:8*

*On a successful bite that does more than 4 points of damage the crocodile will drag the victim off his or her feet and then into the water. They are too powerful to resist. Once in the water the crocodile will 'roll' the victim, doing maximum damage each round, until death.

26 The Kusarikku Herd

A male kusarikku with his six cows. He guards them zealously and mates with them almost continuously; there are also a dozen calves. He will attack any male intruder in a frenzy, but can be subdued and conversed with by a female.

Kusarikku

HD:5+1 AC:5 DMG:by weapon +2 or 1d4 trample Move:150' ML:10

*Can charge to attack, requiring a 50' run-up, doing 2d6 DMG and knocking the victim to the ground on a successful hit.

27 The Path of Iluyanka

There is a rocky gorge gouged into the grassland here, a dozen yards or so deep, with trees growing from its sides and caves here and there along its length. Iluyanka, the serpent dragon, is said to have passed by these grasslands long ago; his body tore a great crack in the earth, and the caves lead underground to networks of tunnels filled with humanoid demons formed from fragments of his shed skin.

Skin of Iluyanka

HD:1 AC:7 DMG:d2/d2 Move:120' ML:7

*If both fist attacks hit, the skin-demon will pull the target close and whisper to him or her a piece of information about the location of treasure or an apparently helpful detail regarding his or her current quest. This will be entirely false.

28 The Cypress Spirit

A malevolent being, which has inhabited these woods since the time of the Neanderthals in the antique past, is present in the entwined roots of the trees. It thirsts for violently-spilled blood, which sustains it when it seeps down into the loamy soil.

The spirit exerts control over human beings who enter its domain, compelling them to attack one another and spill each other's blood. **Any person in the hex must successfully save vs. magic each day and each night** or come under the malign influence of the spirit and attack his or her weakest comrade until death. Solitary travellers are not affected.

29 The Robbers

A band of thieves who live in bivouacs and caves. They are led by Melem-Kish and his lover, Iltsadum. Melem-Kish is a 3rd level fighter; Iltsadum a 3rd level magician. They have 24 followers, each of whom is a 1 HD man wearing leather armour (4 in 6) or banded mail (2 in 6), and carrying a club (3 in 6), spear (2 in 6) or sword (1 in 6). All are also armed with slings.

Treasure: 3,000 sp in sacks buried in the earth; baskets of sea shells traded from distant Elam, worth 1,000 sp total.

30 The Poisonous Sap

The trees in this region are very old, very gnarled, and very tough. Their roots extend deep, further than is natural, into the borders of Apsu itself. There they suckle on the energy of the underworld, and bring it up into their trunks where it festers and stagnates. Gradually it becomes poisonous, and it can be tapped to coat weapons. Roll a d6 to determine the poison effect of a given tree (effects after the backslash on a successful save).

- 1 *Paralysis 2d6 hours/half movement rate and guaranteed initiative roll failure for 1d6 hours*
- 2 *All stats reduced by half, movement rate halved, guaranteed initiative roll failure, and -4 to hit rolls for 1d3 days/1d3 hours*
- 3 *Character loses 1 point of CON every day for 2d6 days, with death occurring if CON reaches 2/Character loses 1 point of CON every day for 1d6 days, with death occurring if CON reaches 2 (effects are cumulative with those listed in 2)*
- 4 *Death/20 hit points lost*
- 5 *Death/10 hit points lost*
- 6 *Insanity. Roll a d4 to determine insanity type:*
 - 1 *Narcolepsy (must save versus poison at the start of combat; failure means the character falls asleep)*
 - 2 *Paranoia (CHA reduced by half)*
 - 3 *Multiple Personalities (victim develops a second personality; each day toss a coin to determine which personality is in control that day — each personality has no memory or awareness of what happens when it is dormant)*
 - 4 *Lunacy (victim becomes utterly deranged)*

31 The Clay Man

A large man, composed of clay, lies in silent waiting here, in a grove amongst trees. He was created by a long-dead sorcerer of Jemdet-Nasr to be imbued with some task, and still to this day waits patiently for his master to return. He will chase and attempt to capture any human who passes close by, in order to interrogate the interloper about the whereabouts of his creator.

The Clay Man

HD:9 AC:7 DMG:2d8/2d8 Move:120'

Jemdet-Nasr

A dusty, dry and ancient ruin of tumbled-down homes, ziggurats and temples. Beneath its surface are tunnels and caves, containing treasures and spirits of the long lost past; in its streets lurk the gossamer-thin ghosts of the old days.

Ghosts

They are the sad, sorry remnants of the people who once lived in the city, before it fell. Weak, pathetic, and melancholic, in large numbers they can nonetheless prove dangerous: a grey, faded, translucent crowd of pawing grasping leechers of life.

The power of the ghosts of Jemdet-Nasr depends on how many are present. On an initial encounter, 1-3 ghosts are found. They have no strength and will simply follow intruders, at a distance. Each hour spent exploring, roll a d6. On a roll of 1, the number of ghosts increases by d3. Follow the same process every hour, increasing the dice for the number of ghosts in increments (d3, d6, d8, d12, d20, etc.).

When there are 10 ghosts, they begin to move closer and will attempt to attack magic users. Being ethereal, they can only be damaged by magic or magical weapons; if they hit successfully, they drain a spell. They have AC 9, HD 1-1, and Move 120.

When there are 15 ghosts, they can carry out physical attacks. Their stats are the same as above, but they can carry out 2 attacks per round, doing d2 damage.

When there are 20 ghosts, they do 2 attacks per round for d3 damage.

When there are 30 ghosts, they do 2 attacks per round for d6 damage.

When there are 35+ ghosts, they do 2 attacks per round for 2d6 damage and energy drain for 2 levels.

Ghosts will lurk outside tunnel entrances but will not descend below the surface of the city. While lurking they do not increase in number.



the Old Comrades

The Man-Child, Picozzi

Picozzi was castrated at a young age for his singing voice; he never developed into an adult as a result. But he has lived many decades, and his skin has begun to blemish and wrinkle; his eyes have begun to grow creamy. He is aware of this, and does his best to conceal his face, whether with a scarf or disguise.

The man-child Picozzi despises children, having often been mistaken for one, and he enjoys watching them suffer and die—particularly through the use of poisons or curses.

Picozzi

9th Level Magic User

STR 7

INT 18

WIS 13

DEX 8

CON 10

CHA 7

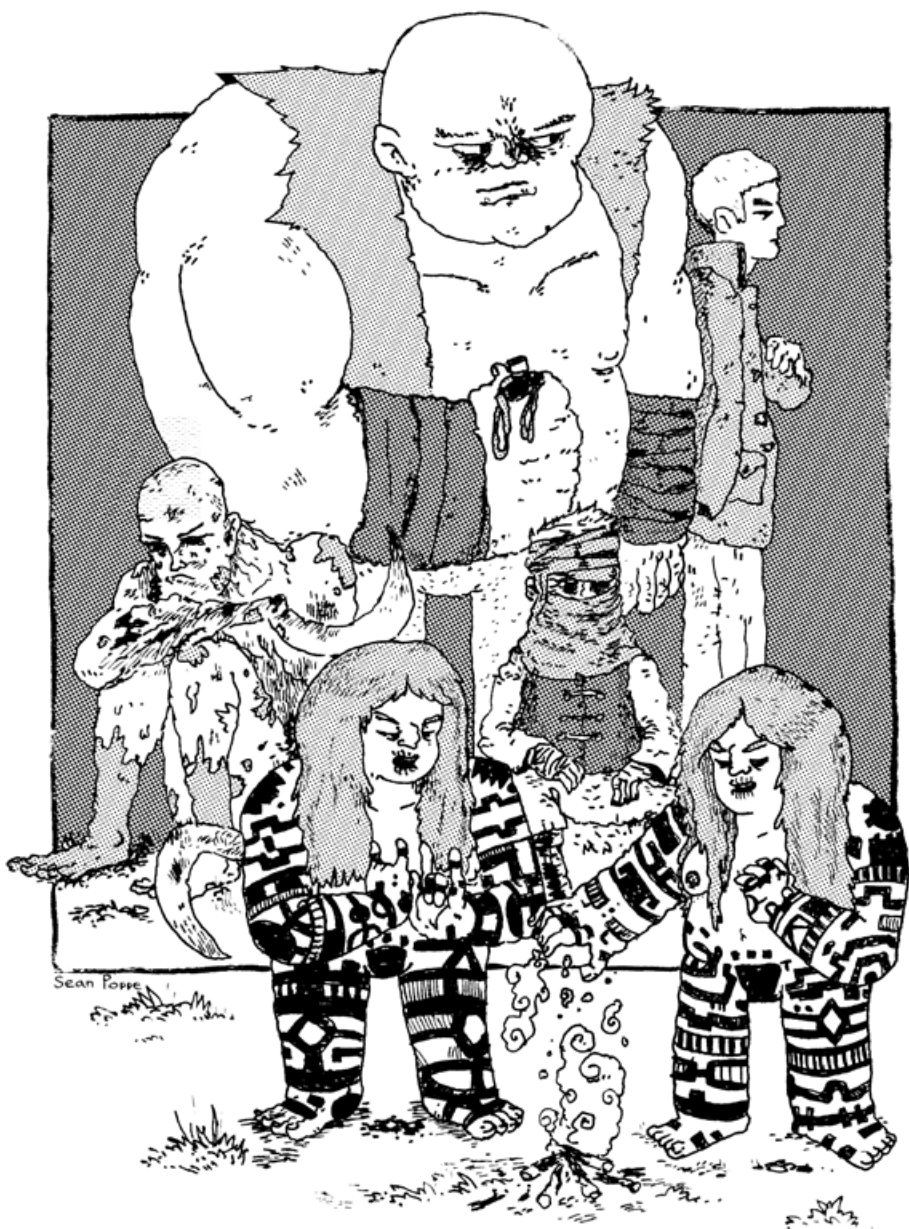
HP: 18

Saving throws as magic user

AC 9

Equipment: Wand of Paralyzation
(9 inches long, made from the ulna
of a ghoul)

Spell Book Contents: *MAGIC JAR*,
ANIMATE DEAD, *CONFUSION*, *WALL OF FIRE*,
ICE STORM/WALL OF ICE, *POLYMORPH OTHER*,
PROTECTION FROM NORMAL MISSILES, *HASTE*,
DISPEL MAGIC, *HOLD PERSON*, *CONTINUAL LIGHT*,
ENTANGLE, *LOCATE OBJECT*, *MIRROR IMAGE*,
WIZARD LOCK, *WEB*, *MAGIC MISSILE*, *SLEEP*,
SHIELD, *READ MAGIC*, *VENTRILLOQUISM*,
HOLD PORTAL, *FLY*



Zanzar, Priest of Gwayall

Huge, broad, and permanently frowning in confusion at the world, Zanzar can be accurately described as an idiot. He can barely speak, though he is easily driven to bashful laughter, and he obeys those he perceives as more intelligent—that is, everybody, but particularly Picozzi and Black and Blue—without question.

Yet Zanzar, perhaps because of the purity of his mind—a broad flat plain stripped of the topography and vegetation of thought—is a near-perfect channel for his God, Gwayall, the Prince of Time.

Ekusdai

Skinny, but possessed of the whip-like elastic strength of a greyhound, Ekusdai is a fighter with few peers: a warrior whose weapons move so fluidly and skilfully that it sometimes seems they are a part of him. On close observation, however, it becomes apparent that they are a part of him. Ekusdai has no hands, but sickle-like hooked blades attached to his wrists.

Ekusdai is bald and often naked. He has trouble dressing himself, and even more trouble maintaining cleanliness. A stench accompanies him everywhere.

Stellen the Unremarkable

Not handsome but not ugly; not tall but not short; not fat but not thin; not muscular but not scrawny; with a voice neither high nor low—Stellen the Unremarkable is precisely that. He is simply mediocre, bland, and average. In fact, he is so unremarkable, so utterly ordinary in every way, that he has no defining features on which to base a description or a memory. He is simply the picture of normality. **This is a power of great potency: it makes Stellen the perfect spy or criminal—**nearly impossible for a witness to recall or describe, and able to live his days in the open but completely unnoticed.

Zanzar

8th Level Cleric

STR 18

INT 3

WIS 18

DEX 8

CON 17

CHA 16

HP: 48

Saving throws as cleric

AC 4 (Banded mail)

Equipment: The Hammer of Gwayall
(freezes anybody it hits at that exact
moment in time – only to be released by
a further touch of the hammer)

Ekusdai

8th Level Fighter

STR 16

INT 8

WIS 7

DEX 18

CON 16

CHA 4

HP: 53

Saving throws as fighter

AC 6 (Naked)

Equipment: Two sickle-swords
(2d4+2 damage; +3 'to hit')

Stellen

11th Level Fighter

STR 11

INT 13

WIS 13

DEX 12

CON 11

CHA 9

HP: 49

Saving throws as fighter

AC 3 (Banded mail & shield)

Equipment: The Sword of Secrecy
(a Sword of Hiding and Silencing +3),
Displacer Cloak (enemies are at -2 to hit
with melee attacks and always miss with
non-magical missile fire)

Black & Blue

Black and Blue are twin female dwarves, whose names are unpronounceable to human beings and who are consequently named after the colours of their lips, which are thickly tattooed. Both have dark hair, brown skin, and tattoos on their bodies in geometric patterns; except for the colour of their lips, they are difficult to tell apart. Sometimes they coat their lips in paint to confuse matters further. They are of unknown age and unknown origin, and they do not speak of their past nor their family.

Black and Blue are magic users who transcend the innate magical illiteracy of their race by using the creative essence of human beings. This they steal by observing the act of creation: whether the drawing of a picture, the telling of a story, or the making of a tool. Something in the nature of human imagination sustains their power, and through observing its effects they can drain it and use it to cast spells for the rest of that day and the next. However, the human who has been observed by the two dwarves permanently loses the ability to create anything in the same fashion ever again.

Black and Blue tattoo their spells into their bodies, and braid them into their hair.

Black

7th Level Magic User/Dwarf

STR 12

INT 17

WIS 15

DEX 9

CON 16

CHA 13

HP: 45

Saving throws as dwarf

AC 6

Equipment: Dagger, the Necklace of Fa'aaogai (a necklace of 18 wooden beads, each of which can be removed and thrown to act as a spell of Conjure Animals; also provides a +3 bonus to AC)

Spells: *CONFUSION*, *DIMENSION DOOR*, *CLAIRVOYANCE*, *HOLD PERSON*, *HASTE*, *WEB*, *PROTECTION FROM NORMAL MISSILES*, *ENTANGLE*, *ESP*, *DETECT INVISIBLE*, *MIRROR IMAGE*, *SLEEP*, *CHARM PERSON*, *SHIELD*, *LIGHT*, *HOLD PORTAL*

Blue

7th Level Magic User/Dwarf

STR 12

INT 17

WIS 15

DEX 9

CON 16

CHA 13

HP: 45

Saving throws as dwarf

AC 9

Equipment: Dagger, Gagana's Drum (a palm-sized drum of shark skin which allows the player to conjure and command water elementals, three times per week)

Spells: *HALLUCINATORY TERRAIN*, *WIZARD EYE*, *LIGHTNING BOLT*, *FIREBALL*, *WATER BREATHING*, *INVISIBILITY*, *MIRROR IMAGE*, *MAGIC MISSILE*, *PHANTASMAL FORCE*, *WEB*, *VENTRILLOQUISM*, *LIGHT*, *ANALYZE*

Ringed Toes



on the
Pickled Foot

A large jar, containing a male foot severed diagonally across the instep, pickled in vinegar. On each toe is a ring. On the big toe the ring is copper, the next bronze, and then after that iron, silver and gold. Each ring can be removed and used for a one-off magical effect.

Copper

The ring can be thrown at a humanoid target. In mid-air it expands to the size of the victim's shoulders and falls down over him, binding his arms to his torso. The bond is unbreakable and lasts until removed, whereupon the ring shrinks away to nothing.

Bronze

The ring can be thrown at a humanoid target. In mid-air it transforms into a razor-sharp, flat disc which cuts through metal, flesh and bone alike. The victim is hit automatically and suffers 2d6 damage; a random limb — or the head — is also severed:

1 right arm 2 left arm 3 right leg 4 left leg 5–6 head

Limb loss causes unconsciousness on a failed save vs. death, followed by death in CON rounds from lost blood. After it has sliced through flesh, the ring evaporates.

Iron

The ring can be rolled along the floor. During this process, it transforms into a large iron ball. This will, on contact, break down any door or shatter any wall. After contact, the ring melts to nothing.

Silver

The ring can be dropped into any drink equal to or less than a litre in volume. It turns the drink into a poison which kills instantly, without any chance of a saving throw. The ring dissolves in the drink and disappears.

Gold

The ring can be thrown at a group of enemies. As soon as it makes contact with a living thing, it explodes into a poisonous gas equivalent to a *CLOUDKILL* spell. No remnant of the ring will remain.

Breath of the Saint

A bottle of thick green glass, roughly made and decorated and stuck fast with a cork. It is translucent and scratched, so that it is difficult to tell, peering into it, whether it is filled with the faintest mist or if that is simply a trick of the bottle's condition. It contains the last breath of St. Marcus of the Spire, taken against his will as he lay dying impaled on a lance by his assassin, the enchantress Devere, in centuries past. It has never been opened since, and thick mould has grown over its stopper.

This last breath has lived on in the bottle and retains something of St. Marcus's pain, sorrow and surprise at his death. It exerts a slow, malign influence over those surrounding it. Anybody who is in contact with the bottle for at least an hour a day will, the next morning, have all of his saving throws raised by 1. This continues each day cumulatively until the saving throws are all 20. The player of any PC subject to this curse should not be told that his saving throws have altered until it becomes relevant, and should not be told the reason why.

If the bottle is opened, the breath escapes. It will seek to enter the nearest person through the nose or mouth. Once this has taken place that individual immediately and vividly experiences the last moments of the saint in his own mind. This lasts three rounds, during which he can do nothing. Afterwards, he has a profound sense of the need to take revenge on Devere, who remains alive, somewhere in the world; he also has the feeling that if he manages to do so, he will receive a reward...

the Clock of Night & Day

A clock which stands around eight inches tall, heavy, and decorated with gold leaf. Behind the hands is a moon dial. It is in all respects an ordinary clock, except for one knob on the reverse which, when turned, causes the moon dial to glow very faintly. It does so for 10 turns.

During this period time day and night are reversed, so if the time is currently 3 o'clock in the afternoon it becomes 3 o'clock in the morning, and so forth, with light shifting to dark, and vice versa. This effect is local, being confined to a 100' radius around the clock itself, and can be used once a day.

the Ichthyosaur's Pool

Deep in the forest the Ichthyosaur's Pool sits silently, its blank surface reflecting the image of the motionless trees around its shores. It is cold, dark and still, filled with dead leaves and broken logs. Its quiet contemplation is only occasionally broken—by the rasping croak of a heron, or the whispered rumour of the wind.

Beneath its smooth surface lives the Ichthyosaur, baleful, old, and stranded. While once it knew the freedom of the ocean it now knows only the deep places in this forest pond. It spends its days and nights in quiet, uncomprehending anger as it swims slowly back and forth around its watery prison.

Within the Ichthyosaur's brain lives the soul of Branzaman, a priest whose greed was punished by his order through summoning a ravenous sea beast inside which he must live. In this way, he can comprehend the feeling of true unending and unassuaged greed—and how that greed can imprison one who falls prey to it.

Branzaman has learned, over time, how to control his Ichthyosaur host for brief periods. He will attempt to communicate with any person who chances by his pool, pretending he is a magician or prince who was wrongly imprisoned, and promising rewards (of land, gold, and so on) in return for freedom. A banishment spell will return the Ichthyosaur from whence it came and return Branzaman to his human form; naturally, he has no interest in honouring any promises he has made.

Branzaman's original home, a tower, was largely torn down when he was banished. It lies in ruins nearby, overgrown by nettles and moss. His treasure is buried in a pit underneath it in two chests; this is still guarded by two vampiric mists, one in each, which will emerge if the chests are opened.

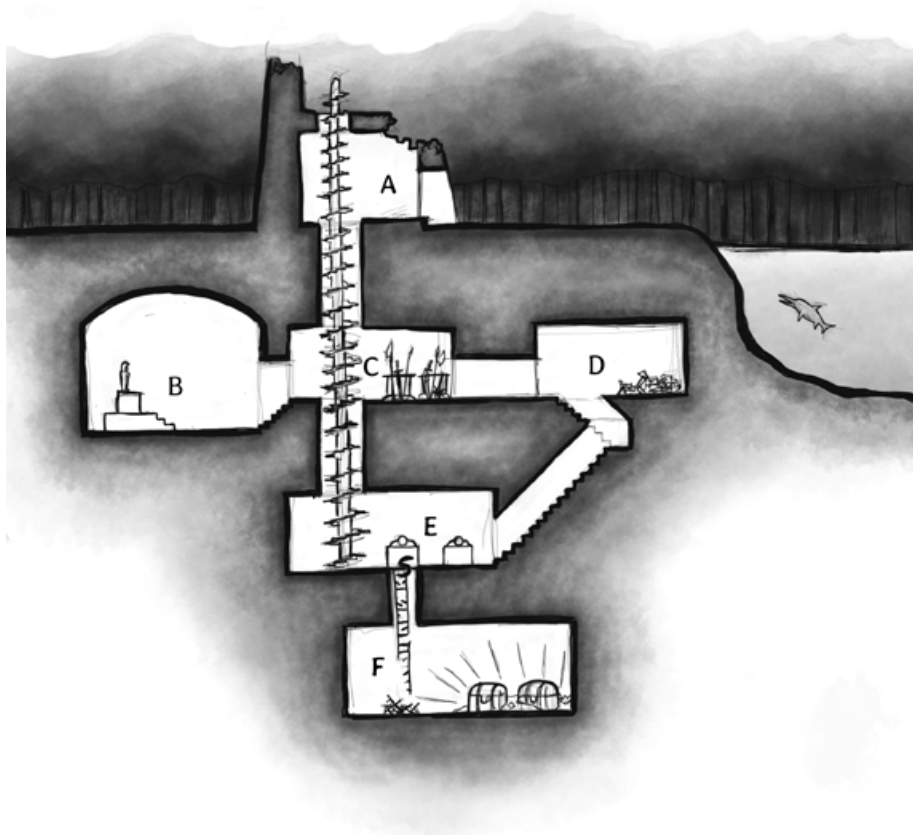


Ichthyosaur

HD:7 AC:4 DMG:2d8 Move:240' (Swim) ML:9

Branzaman

Level 8 Cleric. Spells available: *COMMAND*, *SANCTUARY*, *TURN UNDEAD*, *AUGURY*, *ENTHRALL*, *HOLD PERSON*, *CHARM PERSON*, *CURE LIGHT WOUNDS*, *SILENCE 15' RADIUS*, *DIVINATION*, *DISPEL MAGIC*, *WATER WALK*, *SACRIFICE*, *SPELL IMMUNITY*.



A Tower Entrance: There is little left of the roof and the walls have many gaps. The interior is overgrown with nettles and ferns. The spiral staircase heading down is made of stone and is slippery and worn; there is a 1 in 6 chance of falling each time somebody ascends or descends a flight; he or she must make a DEX check or suffer d2 hp damage.

B Altar: A statuette to Branzaman's deity, Kalasaphat, the God of Possessions. When Branzaman began to devote himself to greed and the pursuit of wealth, he turned away from his previous faith and began to worship at Kalasaphat's feet. The statuette represents Kalasaphat standing with his many grasping arms; it is approximately 18" tall. On the plinth read the words: "Give, and I will Take." If an offering of any treasure item worth more than 100 gp is placed on the plinth at the statuette's feet, the statuette rises six inches on a hidden column, revealing a lever which can be pulled. When nobody is looking and the statuette is alone, Kalasaphat removes the offering; it can never be recovered.

C Armory: This chamber contains rusted weapons which were once used by Branzaman's guards, leaning against the wall. These unfortunate men were kept in charms of bondage and over the years their loyalty became so ingrained that they serve Branzaman even after death. Their souls inhabit their weapons, and these animate themselves to attack if an intruder descends the spiral staircase. There are nine weapons, each of a type doing 1d6 DMG, and they have a THACO of 20. Divide the nine attacks equally between the number of intruders (for example, nine attacks against one intruder; three attacks each against three intruders; etc.). The weapons do not stray beyond their location on the map.

D Guard Chamber: This chamber contains long-rotted wooden remains of the guards' beds and other refuse. Damp has seeped in from the lake through the Eastern wall, and a mold has grown there, which releases spores as soon as it detects the presence of a living thing in the room. These spores cause hallucinations which last for the rest of the day and cause the victim to be at -4 to 'to hit' rolls (save vs. poison for half the effect). The mold can be destroyed with fire.

E Crypt: Here lie the tombs of Branzaman's father and grandfather. They were devoted to the God of Generosity, who Branzaman formerly worshipped: now they are badly defaced, with the words scraped away and the designs chipped and scratched to make unrecognisable. Close examination reveals rough grooves in the floor indicating that Branzaman's grandfather's tomb can be pushed to one side. The tomb is impossible to move unless the lever behind the statuette in room B has been pulled. If it has, the tomb can easily be shoved to one side with the strength of two men, revealing a ladder descending to room F.

F Treasure Room: Branzaman's hoard consists of two chests, each containing a vampiric mist. The chests contain the following treasures:

Chest 1: 537 electrum pieces, 3 aquamarines 500 gp each, 2 silver bracelets studded with opals 2,500 gp each, 2 rare fur coats 600 gp each, 30 sticks of incense 16 gp each, 6 bottles of rare wine 6 gp each, 4 copper chain armbands studded with chunks of amber 1,500 gp each.

Chest 2: Scrolls of *MAPPING*, *COMMUNICATION*, *CREATION*, *PROTECTION FROM UNDEAD*, *PROTECTION FROM ELEMENTALS*, AND *QUESTIONING*; potions of *TREASURE FINDING*, *POLYMORPH SELF*, *SUPER-HEALING*, *BLENDING*, *SPEED*, and *LUCK*; a lamp of long-burning; a helm of reading; and a brazier of commanding fire elementals.



Vampiric Mist

HD:3 AC:4/8 DMG:1d8 Move:120'/60'

*Damaged only by magic or magical weapons. Each touch drains 1d8 hp of blood, transferring these to the mist. When the mist is 'full' (i.e. 24 hp) its AC and Move rates worsen, and it can be damaged by normal weapons; this state lasts for d6 turns.

Heron Men

They live amongst reeds and bulrushes, on the shores of lakes and rivers. Long limbed, lurching walkers, with the feathered heads and beaks and sharp yellow eyes of the heron, and the gracile limbs of the man. Like the birds which are their namesakes they are patient and quiet; they prefer to wait for the chance to kill. Though they are neither great makers nor thinkers, their intelligence in the hunt does not waver; their eyes are as adept at spotting a chink in a man's armour as they are at seizing on the silvery flicker of a fish darting from shadow to shadow in the shallows of a pool. During the day they scatter around the waterways to hunt alone or in pairs; in the dusk they gather together in their reed huts, and sit with their heads hunched between their shoulders to sleep, stooped against the cold of the night.

Heron Man

HD:1+1 AC:7 DMG:1d6 (weapon) Move:120' (Fly 180') ML:7

- *Heron men receive a +2 bonus to hit rolls
- *They are never surprised, and surprise victims 5 times out of 6.
- *Number encountered: 1d2, or 3d20 in lair with a 3+3 HD big man and two 2+2 HD shamans

the Weeping Woodwose

The surface of the river is calm, smooth, inexorably slow. In places willows bow their heads over it, trailing their tresses to the point of touching the cold, clear water. In such places the weeping woodwose can be found. An old man, wizened but with the tensile strength of the hardest wood in his scrawny limbs. Naked, tanned like chestnut, with a long beard entwined with ivy and holly in his wisps of hair. Smiling, but with eyes as uncaring as the river's surface. Sometimes he can be found swimming, at others sitting underneath his willows, or wandering hither and thither nearby. Those who know of him know that he is the shape of death.

He brings the curse of melancholy. Anybody he comes across is struck by the profound sense that there is nothing but one natural world, composed of all living things, which cannot be escaped. One is born, lives, and then dies, but the world goes on as it will and has and must, and one's body will simply dissipate into the earth and into the bellies of the worms once the life has left it. It is no different to the body of a deer shot for a feast, a sparrow caught by a hawk, or a moth snatched from the air by a bat. An inconsequential stage in an endless cycle. Since this is the case, what is the reason for doing anything? What, indeed, is the reason to live at all?

The Weeping Woodwose

AC:4 HD:6 DMG:1d6/1d6 (quarterstaff) Move:150' (Swim 90') ML:9

- *Anybody coming within a 30' radius of the Weeping Woodwose is struck by ennui. He or she must successfully save vs. magic or be reduced to a fugue-like state of melancholia. This state lasts indefinitely, until death from thirst or starvation.
- *The Weeping Woodwose can pass without trace at will. He can also cast the following spells 3/day: *SILENCE: 15' RADIUS, SLEEP, GUST OF WIND, HOLD PERSON, WALL OF FOG, GROWTH OF PLANTS, RAY OF ENFEEBLEMENT.*





Black Dream of the Dying

Before the soul leaves the body at the moment of death, the dying person — coughing in a disease bed, impaled on a spear, sliced open across the neck, or gasping for the death rattle as relatives gather round — perceives darkness clouding his vision. This is not merely the feeling of life leaving the body. It is a black dream, sent by Death, to spirit the soul away to the afterlife.

Occasionally, this black dream goes awry. The dying person makes a startling recovery, or is healed by magic or prayer in the very instant of death. In that moment there is a possibility that the black dream is caught in the world of the living, where it must remain — haunting the body containing the soul it was sent to escort.

When a PC is brought to the threshold of death — 0 hit points or less — and either recovers or is resurrected, there is a 1 in 6 chance that he or she becomes haunted by the Black Dream of the Dying. The Black Dream waits patiently for the moment to strike, showing no inkling that it is there, except for appearing in the PC's dreams as a dark cloud which lurks in his or her vision, whispering cold, soft warnings that the time is near. The next time the PC comes within a single hit point of death, the Black Dream strikes and grasps his or her soul, tearing it from the body and fleeing with it to the afterlife. The PC dies immediately and cannot be resurrected.

The Black Dream can be removed by a *WISH* spell if its existence is known. Its presence can be discerned by a soothsayer or witch.

the Bone Miller

Bread contains the essence of its ingredients—as everybody knows. It contains the goodness of wheat, the life of yeast, the purity of water. This is why it is an excellent food for humans everywhere. So it only stands to reason that adding ingredients to it can supplement its excellence.

One miller noticed this long ago, and came to the conclusion that if one wished to find out what a person or animal knew in its bones, one should crush those bones into a fine powder and mix it with the dough before baking. This miller experimented with different quantities and proving methods, and was ultimately able to discover the secret of the knowledge of the dead.

The Bone Miller is old now, but has never betrayed this secret—not even to his sons, who work at his mill. They are forbidden from participating in the process. The Miller will make bread for anyone who brings him a body and is willing to pay 1,000 sp or equivalent. The process of obtaining the bones, grinding them, and making the bread takes two weeks; on completion, the single loaf of bread can be eaten (divided between up to four people) to gain the knowledge of the person or creature that died. The knowledge gained is only what the deceased being “knew in its bones”—who it loved, who it hated, what it feared, what it desired, and anything else that is felt, rather than reasoned.

The Bone Miller and his sons are 0-level humans. He uses his earnings to buy jewels, which he stows in a hidden panel in the base of his oven. He has three diamonds, each worth 3,000 sp, as well as 4,000 sp worth of topaz, opal, agate, tiger’s eye, and other semi-precious gems.

Next to the oven is a statue which The Bone Miller says he found buried in a nearby field. It resembles a thin woman, 8’ tall, with long, straight hair. It is in fact a clay golem, produced for the Miller by a wandering magician as payment in kind for his baking. The thing is bonded to the Miller and will come to lurching, brutish life if he is threatened. It will relentlessly and remorselessly pursue anyone who attacks him unless the Miller himself calls it off.



Clay Golem

AC:0 HD:10+10 DMG:2d8/2d8 Move:90'

*Suffers $\frac{1}{4}$ damage from slashing and piercing weapons, and full damage from bludgeoning weapons.

Pan Chun Mei

—and her—

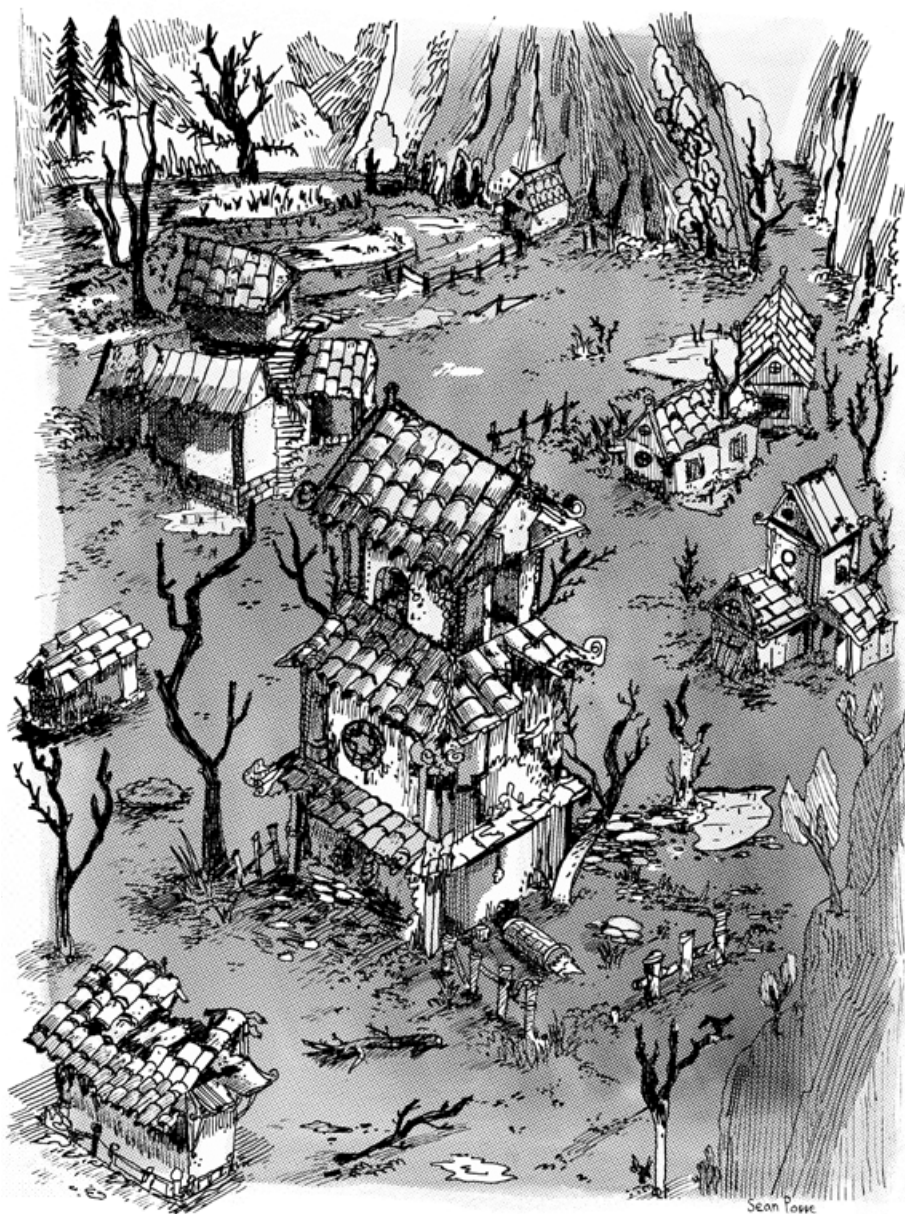
Wraith Ravens

The township of Lan-Ling sits grey, empty and crumbling in a fold of hills, where night falls early thanks to the high ridge tops surrounding it on three sides which block out the sun. Thick coniferous forests, quiet, dark and still, lie all around. The people were long ago killed by sickness. The houses they left behind rot and collapse. No living person bears witness to the process. A track lazily and apprehensively weaves its way there from the main Eastern road, five miles to the South. It is almost overgrown. The rice paddies which once lay beside it have turned to frog-plagued swamp, picked over by cranes and the occasional enterprising macaque.

In the cellar of what was once a brothel in the middle of the town, however, something lurks. The lich Pan Chun Mei, once the sorceress-madam who ran the finest and most well-known whorehouse in the region. Knowing the sickness was coming she performed the necessary rituals allowing her to cheat death. She did not fritter away any of her strength on saving her whores. Male and female both, she watched them die.

Pan Chun Mei's phylactery stores her soul. This is a large jade statue of a monkey bestride a tortoise, hidden under a trap door in a half-derelict belvedere in her overgrown garden. It is worth 25,000 sp and its weight is that of three men. It is guarded by three crawling claws, which wait motionless in the darkness for intruders, ready to leap forth and strangle or gouge. If the phylactery is destroyed Pan Chun Mei will instantly die; if it is stolen, she will pursue it to the ends of the earth.

Her only companions are her five raven wraiths, undead birds who do not fully comprehend their lot, but are cunning and serve their mistress with blind faith. They see everything in Lanling; and since everything they see is reported back to Pan Chun Mei, so does she.



Pan Chun Mei

HD:9 AC:3 DMG:1d10/1d10 Move:60' ML:12*

- *Pan Chun Mei can only be harmed by magical or silver weapons.
- *Her fist attacks cause paralysis on a failed save vs. paralysis, which lasts until dispelled.
- *She typically has prepared the following spells, which are carved into the large horn of a rhinoceros she keeps locked in her chest: *HOLD PORTAL, DETECT MAGIC, CHARM PERSON, SUMMONING, DETECT INVISIBLE, ESP, MIRROR IMAGE, STINKING CLOUD, FORCE OF FORBIDMENT, DISPEL MAGIC, HOLD PERSON, GASEOUS FORM, SLEEP, DIMENSION DOOR, POLYMORPH OTHERS, WALL OF FIRE, TELEPORT, CHAOS, WALL OF IRON, GEAS, FLY, MAJOR GLOBE OF INVULNERABILITY, PRISMATIC SPRAY.*

Treasure

With Pan Chun Mei, in the basement of her tumbledown home, is a library of rare books written in an ancient tongue. There are 36 of them, and each is worth 1d00 sp to a collector. On a shelf there is a small chest containing 300 gold coins, in a triangular shape; each is worth 30 sp. Next to it is a bronze statuette of a man and a woman engaged in a lewd act, as well as three large phalluses. These are each worth 3d100 sp to a collector.

Crawling Claws

HD:½ AC:7 DMG:1d6 Move:90' (Leap 120') ML:12*

- *The crawling claws are never surprised, and surprise opponents automatically who are not forewarned.
- *Crawling claws attack by leaping for the throat or face. If they hit, they will become attached and in the next round either gouge out the eyes or crush the carotid artery (roll to determine); the latter causes death within one round, the other permanent blindness. If attached, they can only be removed by a successful called shot, at -4 to hit. If the called shot misses, it hits the victim instead. If it hits the crawling claw, half of the damage is transmitted to the victim, but the crawling hands drops off.

Wraith Raven

HD:3+3, AC:4, DMG:1d2 Move:60' (Fly 240') ML:9

- *The Wraith Ravens are only harmed by magical or silver weapons.
- *They will spot anybody entering Pan Chun Mei's garden; roll a d3 for each individual crow to determine the number of rounds it takes to arrive.
- *They can attack the eyes, at -4 to hit; a successful hit causes permanent blindness in one eye.
- *They are semi-ethereal and can, for brief periods, insubstantiate themselves to pass through walls or doors. They can also attack in this way, diving towards their victim and becoming insubstantial at the very point of impact, passing through the victim's body and draining his life force, causing him to lose a level of experience on a successful hit.

the Silaish Vo Saga

Part I

Liangyu Hui's tearoom on a warm, late summer evening: there is no better place to sit and dream up ways to gain wealth, women and fame. Something in the backdrop — the mountains glowing orange-pink in the sunset, the scattering of flowers like snow in the valleys — inspires the mind to thoughts of transcendent grandness. And the whores inspire a man with thoughts of glories more prosaic. It is the perfect confluence of circumstances for the nurturing of ambition.

Three men we find in Liangyu Hui's tearoom on this particular late summer evening on which our story begins. One is a youngster, perhaps of fourteen winters, with the somewhat malnourished, poorly dressed air of the lowest castes. Probably, he is the son of a whore. His name is Dev. Another is Paras, an older man with a face dented by many breakages — clearly, he was once a club fighter, and perhaps not the best of them judging by the amount of blows he took to the face. The third is Po Le. Po Le is a slug-man, rare in these parts though not in the South, dressed with the flamboyance and speaking with the phlegmatism common to that race. His eyes, on the top of their stalks, seem somewhat disdainful.

"Our prospects of success in such a venture are slim to say the least," he is saying. "Is this really all you have managed to discover in the last two weeks?" He speaks the Yellow City Trade Tongue, that soft, vaguely hooting language which, lacking palatals and affricatives, is one of the few human languages a slug-man can speak without discomfort. It gives him an especially reedy, disgruntled air.

“It’s gold, Po Le,” says Dev. “Gold. And just one old man.”

“It is that which frightens me,” says Po Le. “People do not give gold in exchange for an old man unless the old man has something different about him to other old men.”

“That is quite true.” Dev says. “But who is to say that ‘something’ is dangerous?” He looks at Paras. “And even if it is, Paras can handle an old man. Although he is an old man himself, so it could be an interesting contest.”

Paras raises his hand as if to slap him. Dev smiles and sips his tea.

The three of them are the points of a triangle, and Dev is at the apex. He is the one who knows people, the one who hears things, sees things, the one whose cousin’s best friend’s sister knows a man who can get you one of those, the one who thinks, the one who is never flustered. But he is also the one with the energy, the cajoler, the one who carries the others along by his will. Yesterday he met with Gulgutta the Red, a sage at the Archive, and Gulgutta the Red told him of the mad old man who lives somewhere in the hills of Jomosom, and the gold that he would give if only that mad old man could be brought to him alive. And Dev means to get that gold. He may be the apex of the triangle but triangles need bases, and for him that is Paras and Po Le.

“Nevertheless.” Po Le is always the voice of suspicious, condescending prudence. “Simple economics would tell us that there is more to this than meets the eye.” His own eyestalks seem to grow inwards, folding in on themselves in an expression Paras and Dev have learned to recognise as nervous. “If the task were simple, there would be an abundance of greedy men searching for this old man, and the price would be low.”

Dev rolls his eyes.

“Yet the price is high,” Po Le continues, his rubbery mouth hooting in satisfied dubiousness, “Therefore we can conclude the task is not simple.”

Dev purses his feminine lips. For a moment, he looks like an old washerwoman taking a dim view of the behaviour of an errant child. But only for a moment. Then his smile flashes. “By the same economic calculation, the price is high, therefore the task is not simple, therefore we have no competition from other greedy men.”

Po Le’s eye stalks re-emerge to their full length and stretch apart in an unconvinced fashion. If Dev is the apex, the cajoler, the one who knows, Po Le is power; Dev knows that the slug man is arrogant, mean-spirited, rude,

deceitful, slimy, cowardly, and pseudointellectual, but he also knows that he has magic, and that is what Dev needs. Because if Gulgutta the Red wants this mad old man of Jomosom brought to him, it may only mean that he thinks of it as a curio, but what Gulgutta thinks of as a curio is never something that can be easily obtained.

Dev also knows that despite his many flaws, Po Le is lonely above all else. If Dev insists on doing something, going somewhere, and if he can convince Paras to come along, then Po Le will follow rather than face the prospect of days or weeks alone and friendless.

“Don’t you agree, Paras?” says Dev.

Dev is the apex, and Po Le is power; this makes Paras the brute strength. His mind moves slowly, at first, the same way a rock needs to be pushed from a cliff with great force before it has the momentum to move. Dev thinks that if he can give it a good shove Paras will come tumbling down the mountain on his side, and Po Le with him.

“Gold is gold,” he adds.

Paras looks at him with wide, pale blue eyes. “Gold is gold,” he agrees.

They strike South through semi-settled lands – a mixture of bamboo groves, pine forest, and flooded rice fields which shine in the bright clear sunlight. If you can imagine being a farmer who has never gone three miles from his birthplace, and who thinks of the city as a distant legend that sometimes sees on clear mornings from a hilltop while watching over his yaks, perhaps you have an inkling of the unfamiliar sight of the teenage son of a whore leading a slug-man and a retired club fighter along a path through a bamboo grove towards you on a late summer morning.

Such is the view confronting the farmers of the village of Jomosom as Dev, Paras and Po Le come striding out of the trees towards them.

The village is like many in the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon: a scattered number of dwellings thatched with bamboo, amidst rice paddies glistening like mirrors under the white-flecked blueness of the sky. Here and there is a heron and in the distance, by the forest, a pack of macaques; otherwise it is a miniature world of cows, rice farmers and children playing in what, to these town-dwellers, is the grubby opposite of a rural idyll. The

headman's hut also serves as what passes for a village hall; beside it is a small shrine where a grinning monkey skull sits on a plate of bronze.

In the cool dark of the interior the headman sits cross-legged. He is middle-aged, bearded, and small. When he sees Dev and Paras, he frowns, as if wondering what these effete city-dwelling low-lives are doing disturbing his daily nap. But when he sees Po Le, he clambers quickly to his knees and bows. "Brahmin! To what do we owe this honour?"

Dev steps forward. "I speak for the noble Brahmin!" At this, Po Le's eyestalks curve outwards and downwards slightly.

The headman sits up, looks Dev up and down and wrinkles his nose. "Very well."

Dev gestures floridly for Paras and Po Le to sit. Both begin lowering themselves awkwardly to the dusty floor. The head man, seeing this, blinks in surprise, springs to his feet, and rushes off to bring Po Le what may be the only chair in his hall. Po Le accepts this with a desultory wave and the headman retreats, bowing his head. Paras sits on his haunches with a low cough in his throat.

"If you've quite finished, we... that is to say, the noble Brahmin, is in this region in search of a certain person and wishes to make inquiries of you and your people," says Dev.

"Inquiries?"

"Yes. It means questions," says Dev.

The headman frowns. "I know." He examines the youngster like he might examine a lump of cow dung in which he has just stepped. "But what inquiries..." at this he turns to Po Le and puts his hands together. "What inquiries does the noble Brahmin wish to be answered?"

Dev rubs his chin. "There is a certain person we wish to make the acquaintance of. A certain mysterious person of some antiquity who is said to reside in these parts."

The headman sits staring at him.

"A person who is difficult to encounter and who may require cunning to meet. A person whose wild nature is not to be underestimated..."

"For the sake of Bupofe!" Po Le explodes. "Have you seen the naked and wild old man who is said to inhabit these forests?"

The headman blinks at that. "You must mean the Old King?"

"The Old King?" Dev and Po Le glance at each other.

The Headman nods and looks at them with bright brown eyes that suddenly seem almost black in the shade of the hut. "A naked old man who lives off bamboo and dew and what he can catch with his hands," he says. "He is sometimes seen, though only at dusk and dawn, by hunters or foragers. He is wild and fearful and spry. He has been known since long before I was born. They have always said that he was once a king." The dark spaces that are the head man's eyes seem to glow darkly with some strange anticipation.

Dev frowns. "Once a king? How is this known?"

The head man shakes his head. "It is what my father and grandfather and great-grandfather always told me. He was old even in the days of my great-grandfather's childhood."

Dev and Po Le exchange glances again. Paras is staring up at the ceiling as if attempting to count the number of straws in the thatching.

"Where was he king of?" says Dev. "Here?"

The headman licks his lips and both Dev and Po Le sense a change come over him, as if his body is suddenly filled with a kind of tense and nervous energy that is ready to spring out of him at a moment's notice. "All over these parts," he says eventually.

Dev rubs his chin again. "All over these parts, you say."

The headman nods.

"My colleague and I" — Dev gestures at Paras, who is now examining his toe nails — "Would like some privacy to discuss these matters with the noble Brahmin."

The headman bows his head. "By all means." He remains kneeling before them until Po Le finally raises a hand to wave him out of the door.

"So, then." Dev purses his lips. "An Old King."

"There can't have been a king in these hills for a thousand years," says Paras. He is trying to squeeze a blister on his big toe and wincing his crumpled face. Po Le simultaneously raises his left eye stalk and lowers the right to express his disgust.

“That’s right,” says Dev. “There can’t have been. How mysterious!”

Po Le swivels his eyestalks to examine the whore’s son. “You are getting ideas.”

Dev grins at him. “I always have ideas.”

“And?”

Dev winks. “Don’t kings have treasure and gold and all manner of shiny baubles?”

Po Le vibrates his mouth opening. “Not those who have no clothes and live off dew and haven’t had a kingdom in a thousand years.”

Dev laughs. “Gulgutta the Red wants this Old King for a reason.”

“Gulgutta the Red’s reasons are his business.”

“Gulgutta the Red? You are scared of that old tortoise?”

“Yes.” Po Le folds his arms. “And I am happy to admit it. If we are to capture this old man and bring him back to town, we shall do so without any speculation about treasure. Leave that to the sage.”

Dev rolls his eyes and reaches over to slap Paras across the back of the head.

“Paras! Are you hearing this?”

Paras glares at him. “Yes.”

“And? Po Le is letting his cowardice cloud his judgement!”

“What would you have us do?” Paras says, returning to his blister.

Dev shakes his head. “You two have always lacked imagination. It is simple. Gulgutta the Red wants an Old King. And an Old King we shall deliver. But not until we get to the bottom of where his palace used to be.”

They step out into the daylight. It is overcast, and the world is bleached of colour by the greyness of the sky. The hot air lies thick against the skin. The thronging sound of insects is thick in the atmosphere. Dev and Paras’ skins glisten.

“Where might we find this Old King?” Dev asks the Headman, who is waiting by the door.

The Headman rubs his nose on the back of his hand. “In the forests. In the hills.”

“Yes, yes, but where?”

"I do not know where he sleeps. He comes and goes. If you stay in the area long enough, you will see him." The Headman licks his lips again, a flick of his tongue-tip, like a lizard. "If the noble Brahmin wishes to stay here..." He lets the sentence trail away.

Po Le's eyestalks bend backwards. "When was the last time anybody saw him?"

"I can't be sure, noble Brahmin," says the Headman with a bow. "It could be some seasons ago."

Po Le and Dev look at each other. "That will never do," says Dev. "That will never do at all."

The Headman's tongue flickers across his lips once more. His eyes brighten like stars shining in a sky gloaming towards twilight. "But of course, you could ask the spirits."

"What spirits?" asks Dev, and then follows the Headman's glance in the direction of the shrine, where the monkey skull sits grinning widely. "You mean those spirits."

"The spirits of the hills," says the Headman. He smiles, showing a broken mixture of gums and teeth.

"I am not altogether persuaded that would be a wise course of action," says Po Le. "Who are these 'spirits of the hills'?"

The Headman bows his head again. "One would need to ask the spirits that question, noble Brahmin."

Po Le's eyestalks turn outwards. "And how would one do that?"

The Headman smiles. "One would need to ask the priestess, noble Brahmin."

The priestess is younger than any of the trio may have expected. Instead of an old crone there is a youthful one: small, bright eyed, with a hairy upper lip and a backwards-sloping chin. She looks at each of the visitors from top to bottom and back again as the Headman explains deferentially that they wish to consult with the spirits of the hills about the Old King.

"And which of them will pay tribute to the spirits?" She asks when he has finished, still with her eyes on these city-dwelling interlopers, with a look that is disdainful but contains the spark of interest nonetheless. They pause each time they find Po Le. "Not the noble Brahmin."

"Indeed not," Po Le hisses.

"One of these others then," she says, wrinkling her nose.

"What, might we ask, is involved in paying tribute?" says Dev.

Paras is carefully studying his feet.

The priestess wets her lips. "The spirits must be fed. They are fed with blood."

Dev turns to Paras, who is now examining the back of his hand.

"My friend Paras has particularly warm and potent blood," says Dev. The old club fighter looks at him reproachfully. "Isn't that right, Paras?"

Paras sighs. "I suppose it is."

"This way then."

The priestess leads them to the front of the shrine. The monkey skull glares at them balefully. Now that they are close, they can see brown stains on its surface which can only be old blood; the priestess lays her hand on it gently and mutters a soft prayer under her breath. Then she gestures for Paras to wash his hands in a small stone basin of water to its left. Dev and Po Le stand close by, watching carefully.

The priestess then reaches into her gown and withdraws a small, bronze, curved knife. "Hold out your hand," she commands the retired club-fighter.

Paras sighs and glances at Dev and Po Le pointedly, and then holds out his left hand, already wincing.

The priestess perfunctorily slices him across the palm. A thick ribbon of blood spills out. The priestess closes Paras's fist in her small hands and squeezes. Blood trickles through his fingers and out the bottom of his fist; she catches it in her palm and dashes it over the front of the monkey skull.

"Spirits of the hills," the priestess says in a whisper. "Enter me and speak through me, as you have done for my ancestors and their ancestors before them."

There are some moments of quiet. Somewhere, a dog gives a few perfunctory barks, as if fulfilling some mundane canine mid-afternoon ritual rather than due to any external factor. The grey sky is beginning to let fall a very thin, warm drizzle, which hangs in the air like steam. Then the priestess opens her mouth again, and speaks.

"Who comes?" Her eyes are unfocused and dulled.

Dev clears his throat. "Spirit of the hills. It is I, Dev, of Silaish Vo, son of Omritsa. With me are my noble Brahmin master, Po Le, a scholar from the Yellow City in the distant South, and our loyal guard and servant" — he looks sideways at Paras, who is wrapping his palm with a strip of cloth torn from his tunic — "who has accompanied us on many journeys and protected us from many dangers."

"To those who feed me with blood from the palm, I respond to three questions, Dev of Silaish Vo," says the priestess. "Begin."

Dev and Po Le turn to each other and confer in hushed tones. Then Dev turns to the priestess.

"First. Where can we find the man the villagers refer to as the Old King? Second, how can we capture this man? And third..." Dev clears his throat again, "Where is his palace?"

At this, Po Le's eyestalks retreat slowly backwards into his head.

The priestess's eyes roll upwards in her head for a moment before returning to look straight ahead. Her face is beginning to glisten in the rain. "In answer to the first question. The man the villagers refer to as the Old King currently nests amongst reeds in a mountain pool, five miles to the north-north-west of this very spot."

Dev raises his eyebrows.

The priestess coughs and, for a brief moment, appears to choke back saliva. "In answer to the second question," she begins, eventually, "The man the villagers refer to as the Old King can be captured by his hair."

"And third?"

"In answer to the third question. The palace of the man the villagers refer to as the Old King is now the abode of the sorcerer, Mahendra."

Dev looks at the priestess for a long moment. "And you will not answer us a fourth question?"

In response the priestess blinks twice, shudders, and then suddenly leans forward and retches.

They spend that night in the village. In a spare hut they watch the sun descend beneath the mountains and the sky slowly bleach itself of the day until the firmament is exposed against crepuscular blue.

Po Le has found a hookah from somewhere and the slug man now languorously sucks on it with moluscular delight. Paras is sitting in the entrance way, carefully polishing his teak club. Dev has been thinking for some time in a dark corner, chewing dried goat meat.

Eventually he says, "By his hair."

Po Le blows out a billowing cloud of smoke. "By his hair."

"Why his hair?"

"I can grab it," says Paras.

Dev puts another string of meat into his mouth. "Why don't you use your magic, 'noble Brahmin'?"

"The spirits said by the hair," says Po Le. "They were quite specific."

Dev nods. "They were, weren't they?" He thinks a little more. "By the hair, then. How do we get Paras into position to grab it?"

"I can sneak up and grab it," says Paras.

Dev is staring out into the night, now, his eyes glistening like mirrors of the stars above. "And I told you there would be a palace."

Unseen and unheard by any of our three adventurers, a dark lithe figure, which has positioned itself in the black shadows outside, amongst the bamboo trees shifting and stirring gently in the night's breeze, slowly and carefully slinks away.

The next morning we find them heading off into hill forests seething with the sound of birds, cicadas, and crickets. They have a plan, of sorts. If the Old King is hiding amongst rushes, they will sneak up on him and attempt to grab his hair. If not, they will try to track him. To that end, they have persuaded a young girl from the village, who is known for her skills in the forest, to accompany them. Her name is Asha. Po Le has promised to give her a nugget of gold if she helps; Paras, perhaps understanding the needs of a slip of a village girl better, gives her a handful of dried lychee and an awkward pat on the head.

Five miles through mountain terrain feels like fifty in the walking. Within an hour Dev is gasping for breath, and Po Le is oozing mucus from every pore. Only Paras can keep up with the girl. As a club fighter, he never fails to remind the others, he had to train every day for six hours, and every hour

of it was pain. Discussions of fighting are the times Paras begins to show a sense of life in his features and gestures, and he spends much of the morning in conversation with the youngster skipping along at his side.

By noon they have moved beyond the tree line and reached a place where they can see the mountain pool. It lies in a cleft of land, down a gentle slope. All around it the land is open. On its edges are thickets of reeds raised up like brushes. They watch it for some considerable time, trying to discern any movement. There is none.

No. "There!" says Asha, pointing.

Sure enough, the others follow the line of her finger and see something. Someone.

None of them have ever seen his like. Even at this distance, everything about him is strange. He stoops close to the ground, ape-like, moving on hands as well as feet. He is naked, his skin brown with both dirt and from the heat of the sun. And his hair and beard are long, thick, matted manes which bedraggle him, like ragged clothes. He moves in a wild, untamed fashion, looking this way and that like a beast. He creeps sideways from place to place, occasionally lowering his head to the ground. After a while, his watchers realise he is feeding from the grass.

"Well," says Po Le. "This may prove difficult. If he sees us, we cannot hope to catch him."

"Paras used to train every day for eleven hours, and that was just before breakfast," says Dev. "Chasing Old Kings is one of the few things for which he has his uses."

Paras sniffs and looks at his fingers.

"Across the open ground we have no hope of rushing him," says Po Le.

Paras looks up and nods.

Dev sighs and looks at him and Po Le with disdain. "Then we will capture him at night."

As the sun descends through the blue sky, casting its golden light at an ever-narrowing angle, the air turns mild, even chilly, and our adventurers shiver as they sit amongst mountain flowers, plotting. The Old King has not strayed far from his nest. He has ranged across the open ground, occasionally stopping

here and there to look up at the sky as if plaintively searching its empty blueness for something. Now he has slipped into the rushes by the side of the lake and out of sight. It lies there gleaming in the dusk light like steel.

“It is important to have the utmost silence when you approach!” Dev hisses to Paras. The retired club fighter glares at him with narrowed eyes. Po Le waves his tentacles to and fro in frustration; Dev has insisted he does not smoke in case light or flame alerts their prey. The young girl Asha squats to one side threading flowers together by their stalks in the dying light. She hums softly and, when she has finished, puts a necklace of pink and yellow around Paras’s neck. He nods his head and smiles.

As night falls, he creeps forward down the ridge towards the lake. After waiting some minutes, Dev, Po Le and Asha follow. They are like shadows under the starlight. Dev stops every twenty paces or so to listen. Po Le’s eyestalks thrash from side to side as he suppresses the urge to demand speed. Asha stays to the rear, watching with wide brown eyes. The firmament above them is a cloud of light — enough to see faint and silvery outlines and silhouettes.

After God-knows-how-long, Dev stops again and thrusts his hand back to stop the slug-man behind him. “Shh!”

There is a sound. A rustling. A thrashing of water. Then silence. And then a long, high, unearthly scream.

Dev darts forward. Rushing forward across the grass. There is another scream. More splashing. The lake appears before him like a mirror in the moonlight. A big expanse of smooth and gleaming water. He searches its surface, squinting. There! Two figures are wallowing in the shallows, wrestling each other, and one of them is screaming.

“There they are!” Dev yells in excitement, and turns around to find that he is alone. Sighing, he sprints forward to the lakeside and feels the icy cold of the water on his feet.

Paras is grappling with something big — a thrashing, wriggling, writhing, mass of muscle and hair and limbs and teeth. Water sloshes everywhere. They are waist-deep, but Paras is as soaked as thoroughly as if he has been dropped in the ocean. His hair is plastered to his skin. “Help, Dev!” he yells, as his foe almost breaks free. The retired club-fighter tries to grasp the arms of what Dev can now see clearly is the Old King — who lets out another hideous, bestial bellow.

“The hair!” cries Dev. “The hair, Paras!”

Paras looks at him for a second as if he can no longer understand human language. It is long enough for the Old King to squirm away. He thrashes and splashes his way clear. Dev gets a glimpse of wide, bright, fierce yet terrified eyes, like those of an ape caught on a hunter’s spear. He is heading for the bank.

Dev dashes forward, waving his arms and shouting, “The hair! The hair!” The Old King stops, befuddled. Dev moves into the shallows, still with his arms spread wide. The Old King’s eyes fix on his. They seem to gleam in the moonlight. Looking into them, the young son of a whore is suddenly confronted with age, and madness, and time, and distance. Looking into the eyes of the Old King is like looking into a well, whose bottom is an endless gulf away, yet still somehow visible, even if you can’t quite make it out. A vast expanse of time separates your mind from his, and you feel as though, even though you stretch forward, to try to touch his consciousness with the fingertips of your own, you will never reach it. You know that it is the mind of a human. Yet it is so old and isolated that it may have turned into something else. Dev feels all of this in the course of a brief moment as his eyes and those of the Old King meet.

Paras breaks the spell. The moment’s pause that the Old King has taken is enough. The old club fighter, who has fought so many battles, lunges forward through thigh-deep frigid water and fixes his fists on the thick wild locks of the Old King’s mane.

The effect is instant. The Old King sinks to his knees as if all power has left him. His arms and legs suddenly weak. He lets out a long, melancholic moan as he slumps down, defeated. Paras stands behind him, still grabbing his hair, chest heaving, mouth gulping in huge gasps of air.

Dev is frozen in place. Then the son of a whore hears movement behind him and turns around to see the dark shadow that is Po Le standing a few yards away, his eye stalks leaning slightly forward.

“I see you have him captured,” the slug-man observes.

They spend the rest of the night trussing up the Old King with rope and then half-dragging, half-carrying him back up to their hill top vantage point. As weak as a kitten as long as Paras maintains his hold on his hair, it is easy to keep him subdued, though the heavy work is hard and dangerous in the dark.

As dawn breaks the three adventurers study him. The Old King is powerfully muscular, but they are the sinews and tendons of a beast rather than a man: thick and rope-like. Shaggy hair covers his chest and back as well as streaming from his head, so that he resembles one of the lions of the distant lowlands. His stench is almost unbearable and clings to their hands. It is not the kind of smell that can be removed from a mere dip in the lake. It is the scent of something unutterably old and faded.

“What is your name?” Dev asks him repeatedly. Then, almost guiltily, “Where is your palace?” But he receives no answer that he can understand. The Old King whispers to him in words of some strange tongue that none of the three have heard before. It must surely be some old language of the mountains, but its sound is more like that of a collection of words that have been jumbled up and shaken so that it has become all back-to-front and up-side-down and backwards. His eyes glare at them like those of a captured owl or cat.

“We ought to take him straight back to Silaish Vo,” says Po Le.

Dev purses his lips. “We didn’t think about how to transport him.”

“We didn’t,” says Po Le, his eyestalks rotating slightly in irritation. “Can’t you do it, Paras?”

Paras, now dry, but sporting several bite marks on his shoulders and hands and with dried blood crusted around his nose, looks at him. “All that way?”

Dev puts two fingers to his forehead and taps them against his skull. “Very well,” he says eventually. “We’ll fashion some sort of litter...”

At that moment the young girl, Asha, steps forward confidently. “Wait! I will go back to the village and get some carriers. We will carry him home and then you can stay the night, and go back to the oligarchy the next day.”

Dev, Po Le, and Paras look at each other. “Sounds a capital idea,” says Dev.

“Don’t you think we ought to take him straight to Gulgutta the Red?” says Po Le. “The sage is waiting.”

“If you can think of a way to carry him, then that is what we shall do,” says Dev. “Notwithstanding that, let’s follow Asha’s plan.”

They watch the girl disappear off down the path back to the village and then settle down to wait. The Old King has fallen into silence, his eyes staring upwards at the sky.

“What does he see there, do you think?” asks Dev.

Paras shrugs.

“The bleak emptiness of infinity,” says Po Le.

“Those are the words of a poet,” says Dev. He looks up at the bleak emptiness of infinity himself. The sky is almost white with distant clouds.

While waiting, he and Paras explore the banks of the lake and the reed beds in which the Old King was nesting. Here and there is the faecal matter of the beast man, and his footprints in the mud. His nest, if it can be called that – really a bower of reeds made into a kind of ball – is small and empty. Dev and Paras look at it for some time. It reminds them of the kind of shelter a dog fashions for itself by trampling around and around in a circle to flatten high grass. Not the work of a man’s hands but of an animal’s feet.

Dev squats down and peers inside. The Old King had no possessions. No — that is not quite right. In one corner are a few duck’s feathers, gleaming with a soft purple iridescence. They are bound with several strands of the Old King’s long, thick hair. Dev puts them up his sleeve and then they go back to where Po Le sits smoking.

By noon, Asha has returned. With her are four men from the village, with sinewy arms and chests made strong by brutishly hard toil. They bow warily at Po Le and are warier still of the Old King, who begins to rouse himself as they approach. “Uesedevan pan agalaifamah!” he bellows. “Basdasopar mu eb a plab!” His muscles strain as he squirms on the ground and tries, through sheer strength, to break his bonds.

“If he looks like he will break free, grab his hair,” Paras tell them.

Eventually, with Po Le giving orders, they find a large log and strap the Old King to it, so two of them can carry it between their shoulders. Dev watches quietly, gnawing his lip and slipping a hand up his sleeve. “Be careful!” he says from time to time, when it looks as though they are about to drop the beast man, or when it appears they are pulling his bonds too tight. Paras and Po Le glance at him occasionally.

The journey back to the village takes them to dusk. The farmers rotate their carrying duties, with Asha leading the way; at times their progress slows to a crawl as they have to negotiate a steep slope or bend in the track. All the

while the Old King moans and sighs, straining to look skyward. He pays no attention to those around him, and has long ago stopped trying to break free. It is as if he is expecting something to fall from above to save him.

The headman and the priestess and a number of other farmers are waiting for them when they return, in the half-light of the evening, as the sky turns pink and golden.

"Welcome back, Noble Brahmin," says the headman, bowing before Po Le. The slug-man inclines his head.

"There he is," says the priestess, shuffling forward to examine the Old King, who the farmers have laid down on his side in the dust. She crouches beside him and stretches out her hand to touch him with her fingertips, caressing the skin of his shoulders, back, and face. He does not react, but stares upwards miserably. "Those who are mighty may yet be laid low."

"What do you mean?" asks Dev.

She looks at him and shrugs.

"Prepare our hut," Po Le commands the headman. "We leave at dawn, with all haste."

The headman does not reply, but glances uncomfortably at the priestess. As do the other farmers.

"Well?" says the slug-man. If eyestalks could bristle, his would surely do so.

But Paras and Dev are already drawing closer to each other, and to Po Le. They have realised that some of the farmers are carrying machetes and the others, hoes or thrashing clubs. Paras, whose instincts have not dulled despite the years and the injuries, has a hand on his club where it hangs from his belt. The two of them have been in such situations before. They know that they need to get between the farmers and Po Le.

The priestess rises to her feet. "You will not be leaving at dawn, Noble Brahmin."

"Why ever not?" Po Le says, stretching his head and eyestalks upwards, so he towers over her.

"The Old King is ours now," says the priestess. "Thank you for bringing him to us."

"We are taking him to the city of Silaish Vo, to the sage Gulgutta the Red!" Po Le announces, before Dev can stop him. "Cease all attempts to delay us!"

The priestess and headman crack broken-toothed smiles. It is only then that Po Le appears to realise their intent.

"This is a violation of the natural order of things," he says. "Move aside at once."

The four farmers who accompanied them from the lake side are gathering from one side. The other farmers moving in from others. There must be over a dozen of them. Dev and Paras glance around. "Po Le," hisses Dev. "The time for negotiation may be over."

Paras sighs, and pulls out his club and holds it ready to strike. He wears the expression of a youth who has been commanded by a parent to carry out some irksome task, and realises there is no alternative but to carry it out.

"You intend to profit from the Old King yourselves?" Po Le accuses the priestess and the headman as he backs towards his companions. Neither of them answers.

Then, suddenly, Asha cries out. "Paras, behind you!"

Two of the farmers have crept up behind the retired club fighter and are ready to strike. He whirls around and whips his club down from where he has been holding it at shoulder height. It hits the first farmer on the wrist, shattering it. The man goes down screaming. The other makes a grab for Paras's neck. The club-fighter simply deflects his hands sidewise, trips him with his foot, and then, as the farmer collapses in the dust, drives the point of his club into the side of the man's skull. This makes a nasty sound.

The rest of the farmers are darting forwards. Dev lunges in front of Po Le, between the slug-man and his attackers, yelling "Magic, Po Le!" Four or five of the villagers attack the small, slender son of a whore. He screams and holds his hands up to protect his head as he ducks to avoid their clumsy blows. One clatters him across his forearms with some wooden farming implement and he collapses to his knees. A machete whistles by his ear as he does so. Then Paras grabs him by the shoulder with one hand and yanks him out of the way, sending him sprawling in the dust. The farmers hesitate and draw back, recognising in Paras the look of a man who has killed, and seeing in themselves the weakness of a man who has not. "Kill him — there are a dozen of you!" shouts the priestess.

At that moment, accompanied by a muttered sibilant mumbling, the air suddenly thickens with green fog, which appears to coalesce out of the very ether. A stinging, stinking, bilious cloud of vapour clogging the air, the eyes, the throats of the combatants. Nobody can see further than a few paces even if their eyes were not screwed shut with pain and tears. Only Asha and Po Le, who has retreated to a safe distance, are safe. The slug-man's eyestalks are withdrawn in case any of the cloud reaches him. His countenance is self-satisfied, even triumphant. Asha is peering into the fog as if trying to make out what is happening within it. "You've killed them!" she cries.

Half-blind, half-dead, retching and spluttering, Dev comes crawling towards him from the cloud. He curls up at the slug-man's feet and lies there vomiting. "Was there not an easier way?" he croaks, eventually.

Po Le lowers his eye stalks to study the son of a whore. "Perhaps."

A moment or two later one of the farmers staggers clear. He looks at the slug-man, glances back at the putrescent green fog, and scampers away back into the village, shouting.

"Where is Paras?" Dev says, clambering to his knees.

"There!" Asha points. Sure enough, the retired club-fighter's bulky, muscular silhouette is striding towards them. He has lifted up his own tunic to cover his face, exposing his paunch. When he reaches them he removes it and gazes at them, red-eyed. "Close shave," he whispers hoarsely.

But Dev and Po Le are already staring back at the fog. It is starting to fade, leaving the exposed figures of the priestess, the head-man, and the other farmers. Some are prone on the ground, others are crawling, but others are already back on their feet. One of these is the priestess. In the gloom of the descending night she points at them and her voice calls out, "There!"

Po Le is already running off into the trees. "Come on!" says Dev, making to follow.

Paras is still standing there, holding his club and rubbing his eyes on a sleeve. He looks at Asha. "Thanks," he says softly.

She smiles shyly. "You are strong."

He shrugs. "Farewell," he says, and turns to lope off after the others.

After half-an-hour, when they realise that the pursuit has been called off, the three of them emerge from a bamboo grove and into an open meadow by a stream. It is night now, and the firmament hangs over them like a cloud of light as they sit recuperating in the darkness.

"They mean to take the Old King to Silaish Vo themselves," says Po Le. "It is an outrage."

Dev nods. "They must have overheard us discussing the matter. I bet that girl had something to do with it."

Paras, who has been massaging his feet, shakes his head. "I don't think so."

"Be that as it may, this cannot stand," says Po Le.

"Agreed," says Dev.

"Agreed," says Paras

They sit in resolute silence. Then Dev remembers something and pulls the duck feathers he took from the Old King's nest out from his sleeve. He gently strokes them between forefinger and thumb and ponders for a long moment, thinking about the Old King and his hair. "We need to rescue him," he says.

"Rescue him?" says Po Le.

Dev nods. "I may have an idea," he says.

...so concludes Part I.

