



Signs & Portents

THE SIEGE OF AMORY - A SHORT STORY BY THE LEGENDARY JOE DEVER!
B5 - THE NEXT EPISODE OF THE LEGACY OF WAR - A 14 PART CAMPAIGN FOR
UNIVERSE OF B5
TRAVELLER - BELTSTRIKE ERRATA FROM THE WRITER
NEW SUPPLEMENTS FOR CONAN -
ALSO RONEQUEST, DRAGON WARRIORS,
TRAVELLER, PARANOIA AND MUCH
MUCH MORE!!!

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Another month of fun and stress at Mongoose has whizzed by and the summer is finally here. This month saw the staff of Mongoose breathe a sigh of relief as the long Easter weekend allowed for a much needed catch up on sleep!

Matthew and Kelly travelled to Las Vegas for Gama and we've had a couple of interns in the office gaining experience in the publishing industry. Most notably for me has been the much awaited approval for *Hammer's Slammers*, the chance to edit the first two books from our new writer Simon Beal (*Price of Honour* and *Tripwire*, both of which are excellent I might add!) and I've been putting things together for the upcoming anniversary of *Paranoia*.

The latter was the most fun. For someone who has nothing to do with the music industry, the chance to go into a Recording Studio for a day and play was immense fun! Not to mention the hilarious consequences of bringing the Computer to life and giving it a voice (or two).

Lone Wolf fans will be over the moon with me this month. Not only is book 10 out now (with 11 and 12 hot on its heels); Joe Dever has published a short story in this issue. *The Siege of Amory* is a short story based around the events in chapter 5 of *The Dragons of Lencia*. It was prepared for the novel but was too long to include in the final cut (it was replaced with an abridged version) so Joe has been kind enough to release it to Signs & Portents... good man!

Well I am off to play with Friend Computer some more... have a good month one and all.

Charlie

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Contents



Mongoose News

Editor Charlotte Law fills you in on the latest Mongoose info **6**



May 2009 Releases

A rundown of everything to look forward to in the way of new releases for the coming month **7**



Press Play

Mongoose Writer Bryan Steele continues his monthly mission to bring gamer friendly movies into the spotlight **10**



TRAVELLER

The Legacy of War

Episode 6: Searching the Abyss (Part 2) by Simon Beal. The 6th in a 14 part epic campaign for use with the new *Universe of Babylon 5* rules **14**



Man's Best Friend

A *Conan* Supplement by Stefen Strysky, detailing the use of canine companions in your *Conan* campaigns. **24**



The Siege of Amory

A short story by Lone Wolf creator Joe Dever, which expands on the events depicted in chapter 5 of *The Dragons of Lencia*. **31**



Paranoia Live! 2009 Report

James Barrett fills us in on all of the action from this year's event **46**



Arcana of the Elements Combined

Carl Walmsley's new supplement for use in both *RuneQuest* and *Dragon Warriors* **54**

TRAVELLER

Beltstrike Errata

Some additional information from writer Lawrence Whitaker **59**

TRAVELLER

Kresdekka I

Dale C McCoy Jr brings you a new supplement for *Traveller* games **60**



The Palace of Cetriss

A *Conan* adventure setting by Stefen Strysky based on the novel *Conan and the Emerald Lotus*. **65**

Convention and Events Diary	4
Write for the Mongoose	73
Mongoose Product List	74
Mail Order Form	87



Convention and Events Diary

**Dragonmeet Southwest
10am-6pm
The Croft Sports Centre, Swindon,
Wiltshire, UK
SN3 1RA
Sun 28th June 2009
www.mongoosepublishing.com**



Tentacles 2009

Castle Stahleck, Bacharach, Germany
Fri 28th May - Mon 1st June 2009
www.tentacles-convention.de

UK GAME EXPO 2009


The Clarendon Suites, Stirling Road,
Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK
Sat 6th - Sun 7th June 2009
www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk

AmberCon UK '09

Harben House, Newport Pagnell,
Buckinghamshire, UK
Fri 10th - Sun 12th July 2009
www.ambercon.org.uk

Yog-Sothoth.CON 2009

University of Bradford, Student's Union,
Bradford, UK
Fri 10th - Sun 12th July 2009
www.yog-sothoth.com



Constitution 2009

New Hall Cambridge, UK
Fri 31st July - Sun 2nd August 2009
www.constitution-con.org.uk

Gen Con UK 2009

University of Reading, Berkshire, UK
Wed 2nd - Sun 6th September 2009
www.horsemenevents.com

Furnace 2009

The Garrison Hotel, Sheffield, UK
Sat 10th - Sun 11th Oct 2009
www.rpgfurnace.com

Ludicrus '09

Kesgrave Community Centre, Ipswich, UK
Sat 5th - Sun 6th Dec 2009
www.ludicrus.org

More events will be added to this list on a
monthly basis as they are confirmed

April 2009 Releases



Conan: Catacombs of Hyboria, MGP 7817, \$24.95

The perfect companion to both Ruins of Hyboria and Cities of Hyboria, this book provides several fully detailed underground-based encounters that can be played throughout the Hyborian Kingdoms. Each is laid out to be run after just a glance of a few moments, ensuring a Games Master is never caught off balance whenever his players choose to go somewhere unexpected – keep this book near your gaming table, and your players will marvel at detail you have worked into your campaign!

Noctum, MGP6133, \$39.95

We summoned it with our malice. We made it grow by the strength of our hatred. We let it stay because we can't change our very natures. Nothing can force humans to commit acts of evil, only endow us with powers to indulge in our own sadistic proclivities. It's all around us, on every news channel and in every paper. The vile nature of man is evident. Some of us kill our parents and forsake our children, greed is our creed and instant gratification our pastime. There is no God; there is no heaven or hell. There is only the ancient darkness and the evil of man. Hope is fleeting and grace is no longer in our grasp. We gave the darkness a form and a realm of its own. It wishes to feed upon us but now some parts of it want more. Humankind has taught it to relish in the suffering of others in a way only humans can. Enter Noctum, an inner tale of survival horror. There is nothing more evil than your fellow man.



Project Steel, MGP6134, \$24.95

A controversial initiative to open up a continent of the world Steel for Imperial development. Fraught with political compromises and operating on a shoestring budget, the project offers a chance to reduce tensions between the Imperium and the Sword Worlds, perhaps averting future conflict.



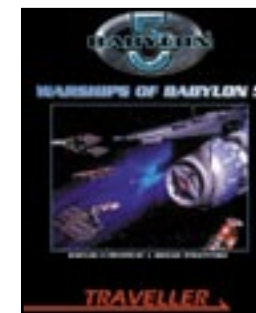


Runequest: Guilds, Factions and Cults, MGP8160, \$24.95

Suitable for all RuneQuest settings, including Elric and Hawkmoon, Guilds, Factions and Cults opens up the possibilities to players seeking to ally their characters with greater forces. From humble craftsmen guilds and cults following demonic demigods, to nation-spanning political forces and the mightiest gathering of mages, this book allows players and Games Masters to create new guilds and cults within their games, detailing their membership, benefits, and rivalries. As players ascend through the ranks of their cult, they may get embroiled in guild wars and missions vital to the survival of their allies.

Warships of Babylon 5, MGP 3813 , \$29.95

From the humble Hermes to the mighty Victory-class advanced destroyer, this book features many of the ships found in the Babylon 5 universe, provides all the rules you need to use them in Traveller and features extensive deck plans for all of them! Whether you need a small frigate for players to crew or a terrifying Sharlin warcruiser for them to escape from, everything you need to ply the space lanes of the Babylon 5 universe can be found here.



War On [insert noun], Paranoia, MGP 6654, \$9.95

The Computer, in its gracious wisdom, has decided that the citizens of Alpha Complex are at their mandatory happiest when terrified! A new wave of threats is sweeping Alpha Complex, and the Troubleshooters will have their work cut out for them in battling these dangers. War on Commies! War on Mutants! War on Poorly Serviced Food Vats!

Press Play

DVD Reviews for Gamers

By Bryan Steele

Welcome to this month's edition of *Press Play*, DVD reviews for gamers by a movie fanatic game designer! This month we take a look at some interesting movies; one 'sequel' that felt much more true to the license than its predecessor, one prequel that made me want to run a White Wolf Studios game, a cultish movie that made me laugh as the 'regular joe' saves

the day and a first for us here at Press Play – I review a movie that is still in theatres!

Game playing, writing or designing requires us to come up with new scenarios and plots to bring to the table, and movies often help me get an idea of many of mine. I hope that by reading at these DVD and movie reviews you might find a few new ideas of your own, whether or not you agree with me.

The Press Play Gamer Rating System

1d4 – Not a DVD I enjoyed or recommend; definitely not a worthwhile rental.

1d6 – A rather negative experience with a few shining moments; rent it if you are bored.

1d8 – The average movie-watching event. Rent it, watch it, and buy if you like it...but probably do not buy it without watching it first.

1d10 – I liked it and found it inspiring in some way for my gaming; an overall enjoyable experience. You should really go out and rent this DVD if you are fan of the genre.

1d20 – This was a great movie and I highly recommend it to anyone reading this column. You may as well go out and buy it, because I think you probably will after you see it anyway.

1d100 – Why are you still reading this? Go and get this movie!!!

Punisher: War Zone

Lions Gate Films

The 2008 return of the ever-shooty, ever-violent and ever-entertaining Frank Castle to the silver screen was unexpected, considering the somewhat lukewarm reception the 2004 *The Punisher* received at box offices. I liked it a lot, so when I heard about *Punisher: War Zone*, I was excited. I found it strange that Marvel Enterprises did not simply continue the franchise and instead created a re-invisionment sequel of sorts.

I am a big fan of the old Punisher comics, especially the Marvel Knights series that gave the anti-hero the blood and violence factor that the old ones just could not come close to. This movie felt a lot like those comics. Frank Castle, known better as the Punisher (played by *Rome*'s Ray Stevenson), had seen his family killed by a mob hit and turned his extensive military skills



and unbridled capacity for bloodshed to the streets as a vigilante. The movie does not make you wait for the violence, either. We are treated at the very beginning to a very comic-esque scene of Castle cleaning house at a mob head's family dinner – and it is *brutal*. Guns, knives and hand to hand combat get the job done...with all the bone breaking, throat slitting and body puncturing action that you would expect from the Punisher.



The Legacy of War Episode 6: Searching The Abyss (part 2)

TRAVELLER

TRAVELLER

by Simon Beal

This episode follows on directly from Episode 5. Amur and the players should be fairly conversant with each other by now, so to speed up game play you can allow most communication tasks to be an automatic success.

Meeting the Council

While Amur arranges a meeting with the council, the players are unbound and their wounds will be tended to. Their possessions will be returned and hooded garments will also be provided to hide themselves when walking amongst other Arraki.

If the players are not already in the capital, they will need to travel there. Amur will provide horses and wagons for the players to ride in. The players may suggest that they take their ship but Amur will refuse as consenting to use technology is the worst crime an Arraki can commit. The journey will take between one to seven days, depending on their current location. Amur will send a messenger ahead so the council will be awaiting the player's arrival.

As you arrive at the capital, a small group of armed escorts will greet Amur who will ask you to put your hoods up and follow him. The guards seem a little

cautious but they are not making any aggressive gestures.

As you are led through the streets, some people will stop and look out of curiosity. You seem to be heading toward the centre of the settlement and eventually you will arrive at a large stone building. Its architecture appears very old with some extensions having been built on at a later date.

You are led into a reception area where several clerks are sitting at desks with piles of papers. The guards will say something and Amur translates, saying that you must leave all weapons here. They will be returned when the meeting is over.

It is up to the players what they do at this point but the guards will not take anyone further unless they remove their weapons. If any of the players wish to remain, they will be taken to a separate room where they can wait.

An aide puts the weapons in a wooden container and takes it to another room. The guards will then escort you down a hallway to a pair of large wooden doors. They knock on the door and wait. After a short time, the doors are opened from the inside and the guards gesture for you to go in.

Inside the council chambers are seven Arraki seated around a large table. Two guards stand either side of the door and three more guards stand at the far end of the room. As you enter the councillors will stand up as the doors are closed behind you. They motion for you all to sit and remove your hoods.

They look shocked as your faces are revealed. After a moment they regain their composure and gesture for you all to be seated.

When everyone is sitting down, the meeting will begin and Amur will continue to translate. Amur will tell the councillors everything the players have already told him. The councillors will need to be convinced that the players are not a threat to them. They will also want to know how and why the Star Dancer found them.

A Deal is Struck

Once the councillors are convinced that the players are not the aliens that have been abducting people (this admission will not go unnoticed by Amur) they will agree to aid the players in their search for a cure and Amur will assist them in this task (although reluctant, Amur will travel on the Star Dancer if necessary now he has the blessing of the council).



However there is a price tag attached. The players must agree to keep themselves hidden for the time being - confirming the existence of aliens at this point could still cause panic and the council have ordered that knowledge of their existence must remain secret for now.

The councillors also want the players to investigate the abductions and try to determine who is behind them and why. If the players do find out what is going on, the councillors also ask if they can find a way (preferably diplomatic) to make them stop.

Once the council has more information, they can decide how to proceed and how to explain it to their people without causing too much disruption to their way of life.

Future Contact

The players may try to negotiate some kind of trade with the Arraki but they are simply not interested, they have everything they need. In fact, most of the council will be concerned that when the Star Dancer and her crew return home, more unwelcome visitors will come to Arraki III.

Some of councillors will suggest that the players must remain on Arraki III as guests, as they can not allow their presence to be known but they will not force them to stay. The players will need to convince the council that Arraki III will remain a secret, so explaining that others have the directions and are likely to send more people if the players do not return, will certainly work in their favour.

Searching for the Cure

Hall of Records

Amur will take the players to a different part of the building called the hall of records. It is a large room full of shelves crammed with books and parchments. As well as a library of births and deaths, it also has historical information of note such as the code of laws, changes in the council and details of other major proceedings.

The records are indexed chronologically, so finding details of the first colonists does not take long. The recording was not as thorough then as it is now but Amur does find some information on Dr Ikulo, the author of the journals found on Ikarra VII.

All his successful experiments that resulted in cures are now in use by the Arraki medical practitioners. There are no details of his research but it is noted that he set up an isolated laboratory in the mountains directly west of the capital.

If the players ask why he went to the mountains, Amur will read more of the documents and come to the conclusion that it would be a controlled area due to the mountain grass. The players will no doubt ask about the grass and Amur will explain that it grows around the base of the mountains and since it is poisonous no creatures enter into the mountain region.

Dr Ikulo's Descendants

The players can also trace Dr Ikulo's family tree to find out if any of his descendants are still alive.

This will take a few hours but eventually they will discover a farmer by the name of Icuso who lives in a settlement by the mountains south west of here.

If the players wish to meet him, they will need to travel to the settlement. The quickest way to get there is for someone to bring the Star Dancer near the capital and then flying to the settlement. Amur will suggest landing out of visual range of the settlements to avoid drawing any attention.

Once they arrive at the settlement, Amur will go ahead to arrange a meeting with Icuso and suggest only one or two of them attend the meeting.

Icuso lives with his wife on a small farm on the outskirts of the settlement. He will explain that he does not know much about his ancestors but he does have a family heirloom that has been handed down since the colonists first arrived here.

He will then produce a small amulet from around his neck. It is made from a black metal and is triangular in shape. He is not sure what it is but he was told by his father that one day it could be important. Icuso can be convinced to give them the key if the player's give a good enough reason.

Speaking to the Doctors

If the players ask Amur if they can speak with the doctors about Dr Ikulo's cures, he will arrange some meetings. The meetings will take place in the council chambers but the players must remain hooded throughout.



Speaking to the doctors is difficult and time consuming due to the technical nature of the information that must be translated. If any of the party have any medical knowledge and are involved in the discussion, the DM for translation will be -3, otherwise the DM will be -4.

Any information obtained will only reveal cures for diseases common to this environment. They will know that most of their current cures were created by Dr Icuso when the colony first arrived here.

Nothing the like Drakh plague has ever been experienced amongst the Arraki. Although many know of the plague created by their ancestors, there is no technical information about it to prevent anything like that from happening again.

The Mountains

The quickest way to get to the mountains is on the Star Dancer. The players can also make an aerial survey to find the laboratory. As before, Amur will suggest landing out of visual range of any settlements to avoid drawing any attention.

As you fly over the mountains you can see the remains of a small wooden building part way up the eastern side. There is nowhere to safely land the ship here, so you will need to land nearby and make the journey on foot.

Remember that the crew must fully cover their hands, feet and legs whilst negotiating the mountain grass or they risk being poisoned as detailed.

The players may suggest hovering the Star Dancer and climbing down on ropes. This can be done but is quite dangerous and Amur will refuse to do it. For each person attempting this, they must make an Athletics (Co-ordination) check.

Failing the check means they come down too fast and if they then fail an Endurance check, they will sprain an ankle giving them a -1 penalty to all movement related actions for several hours. On a critical failure, they will break their ankle which will require medical attention and they will be unable to stand or walk unaided until it is treated.

The Ruined Laboratory

Unless they climb down from the Star Dancer, it will take several hours to reach their destination. Once there, they will see that the laboratory is quite small, consisting of three rooms. It was never built to last and the last thousand years have taken their toll. The timbers are rotten and the roof has collapsed.

The first room you come to is quite small and has the remains of a bed but little else. This leads through to a room of similar size which appears to have been a storage area, littered with broken shelves and smashed vials. Some vials are intact containing various liquids and substances.

A doorway to the right leads to the biggest room which must have been the laboratory itself. Rotten tables and broken chairs fill this room, as well as more vials and containers.

To find anything of note, the players must search the building more thoroughly. Searching the lab area will reveal several boxes of old papers but exposure to the elements have left them unreadable. If the players move some of the rubble, they will find an organic data scanner buried under a broken table.

It is almost identical to the one they discovered on Ikarra VII, except for a strange triangular hole

in the top. A successful Intelligence check will suggest it is some sort of key hole.

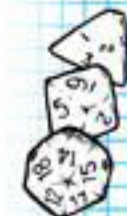
Further analysis will confirm that a key is needed to activate the scanner. The key has been handed down through Ikulo's family which can be traced in the hall of records. Even if the crew acquire the key, translating the data will take time and would best be done on their way home.

They players may also wish to take some of the vials for further study to see if they contain anything useful. These will also take time to examine and can be done on their return journey.

Abduction Investigation

Amur has been one of the biggest abduction theory supporters for some time. As well as being abducted himself, he has spoken to many who have also had the experience. If the players spend some time with him, they can find out the following information. You may request that the players ask specific questions and roll as required.

- Few abductees have actually seen the aliens, some say they look reptilian and some say they are thin grey beings with bulbous heads.
- The fact that people have seen different types of aliens has perpetuated the belief that there are many different species involved, which also explains the reaction when the party arrived on Arraki III.
- Some people have reported seeing space ships which have a flower like appearance and are coloured yellow and black. If any player who has seen a Drakh vessel succeeds on an Intelligence check, they will recognise it as such.



- The most common experience shared by abductees is the memory of being secured to an operating table. Bright lights are usually shining in their face and quiet but high-pitched voices can often be heard. Many abductees often experience some sort of pain before they fall unconscious.
- Most abductees are returned to their homes after the event but occasionally some are left wondering outside their settlement.
- Amur himself has one of the most remarkable tales. On one of his abductions, he was left unattended and managed to free himself of his bonds. He was locked inside a room but he noticed a type of shutter that covered a window. He was able to raise the shutter and looking out of the window he was quite astonished to see a planet.
- If the players ask, Amur will describe the planet. He saw five or six continents separated by vast areas of ocean. He could see areas of plains, forests and mountains. The description will sound much like this planet and if asked to sketch the view it will confirm that the planet he saw was this one.

The players may wish to speak to other abductees but since the council wants to limit their exposure, Amur will advise against it saying it is unlikely they will learn anything else.

Another avenue to investigate would be the locations where people have been taken and returned. Amur can provide this information but no pattern or strategy is evident.

The final line of investigation is the fact that Amur was orbiting the planet when he was abducted so the players can search for any nearby vessels in orbit.

Zener Space Station

The Zener are one of the races who served the Shadows. These grey skinned beings have bulbous heads and large black eyes, giving them a similar appearance to the Vree and Streib. The Zener are a race of scientists and technicians, altered by the Shadows.

The station is a strange looking structure. It was constructed using organic technology giving it smooth edges and mottled brown skin. It has a modular design of spheres and connecting pylons. At its core is the primary sphere, from which two pylons protrude at right angles. At the end of each pylon are the secondary spheres. Each of these has another pylon connecting to the tertiary spheres.

The primary sphere contains the command centre, engineering controls and armoury. One of the secondary spheres has research laboratories whilst the other serves as the living area. The tertiary spheres house the docking bays, each capable of holding two gargantuan sized vessels.

Each sphere has its own power reactor, which can power up to two spheres, allowing the station to remain operational if any reactors are offline.

The primary and secondary spheres each have turret mounted, twin-linked fusion beams. They are positioned for maximum coverage around the station.

The interior of the station is metallic and has a distinct clinical feel to it. There are no adornments or decoration. It is simple and functional.

Due to the design of the station, each sphere is treated as an individual ship as detailed below.

The pylons are also treated separately but they serve only to connect the spheres and relay power from a neighbouring pylon if required.

Although the Zener originally followed the Ikarrans by order of their masters to see if they had any further potential, it soon became obvious that they did not. They had become more united and conflict between them seldom occurred.

However, the Zener remained to further the goal of their long term plan to distil the evolution process. This isolated colony of Ikarrans is a perfect laboratory for them and the Shadows allowed them to remain. When the Shadows left over five years ago, the Drakh allowed the Zener to continue their experiments as well as performing other tasks for their new masters.

The station is in high geo-synchronous orbit near the Arraki continent allowing them to easily monitor their subjects when necessary. It is mainly populated by Zener but there is also a small contingent of Drakh who oversee the operation and pilot the ships when needed (such as resupplying or taking more subjects for the experiments).

Five Drakh officers oversee the running of the station and a number of pilots are always on standby.

Drakh Officer (5)

Str: 9 (+1), **Dex:** 9 (+1), **End:** 9 (+1), **Int:** 9 (+1), **Edu:** 8 (0), **Soc:** 8 (0)

Skills: Athletics (Co-ordination) 0, Computers 1, Diplomat 1, Gun Combat (Energy Pistol) 2, Melee 1, Persuade 1, Recon 1, Stealth 1

Traits: Cloak

Equipment: Flak jacket, PPG



Signs & Portents

Zener Sphere			Tons	Price (MCr)
Hull	400 tons	Hull 8 Structure 8		—
		Atmospheric Seals		—
Armour	Bio-Lattice	14 pts	40	—
Jump Point Generator		None		—
Manoeuvre Drive		Thrust 1	3	—
Power Plant	Bio-Fusion	Rating 4	13	—
Bridge			20	—
Computer	Model 5	Rating 25		—
Electronics	Ancient	DM +2 Survey Sensors	1 1	—
Weapons	Double Turret	Medium Neutron Cannon (see <i>Warships of Babylon 5</i>)	1	—
Fuel	100 tons	Four Weeks of Operation	100	—
	Internal Fuel Generation	Full Refuel in Two Days	50	
Software	Manoeuvre/0			—
	Intellect			—
	Library			—
	Auto-Repair/5			—
	Evade/3			—
	Fire Control/2			—
Total Tonnage & Cost			229	Priceless

Zener Pylon			Tons	Price (MCr)
Hull	50 tons	Hull 1 Structure 1		—
		Atmospheric Seals		—
Armour	Bio-Lattice	14 pts	5	—



Finding the Station

The Zener space station orbiting Arraki III is cloaked and can only be found if the crew are specifically looking for it. Performing a general sensor sweep has DM -3 but if the players narrow their search it has DM -1. A successful sensor scan will reveal the location and basic structure of the station.

Scanning for Life Forms

An Sensors check (DM -2) will reveal the number life forms present on the station but their species cannot be determined. There are 15 of one species (Drakh), 30 of another species (Zener) and 2 of a third species (Arraki).

Docking with the Station

There are four docking bays, one in each of the tertiary spheres. One of them will have its bay doors open ready to receive incoming vessels. When the Star Dancer gets within a few hundred feet of the station, it will be inside the cloaking field and the crew will be able to see the station in full.

A Pilot check is required to fly the Star Dancer into the docking hub; from then on the station's docking computer will take over.

As you approach the station, your vision briefly flickers as you pass through the cloaking field. Looking upon the station with your own eyes, you can see the smoothness and simplistic elegance of its design. Its mottled brown skin is a good indication that its origin is of Shadow technology.

The Star Dancer flies through the outer doors into a docking hub where it lands on a platform. The interior of the station is constructed from more conventional materials giving a sharp contrast to its organic exterior. It is well lit giving it a clinical feel.

The outer doors close as the hub is pressurised. After a short delay, the inner doors open and the platform transports the ship to its bay.

The docking area appears to fill the entire sphere and is empty except for the Star Dancer. Another bay can be seen a short distance from the Star Dancer but no vessel is currently docked there.

Authorised Approach

If the players were able to jury-rig the control nexus from the previous episode and they currently have it activated, the Star Dancer will be perceived as a Shadow vessel by the station's automated tracking system (no explorers have been in this region since the colonists so manual sensor operation is not required).

The players will hopefully try and dock with the station and explore it. If they do not think to do this, one of the NPCs can prod them in the right direction. See the panel above for details on docking.

Exploring the Station

The docking area has nothing of interest other than a door on the far wall. There is currently no security on the doors since no unauthorised access has been detected to the station. The doors will automatically slide open by simply touching them.

This docking sphere leads to the research sphere, which can be reached by walking through the connecting pylon. Small windows line the pylon revealing the sprawling station outside.

The research sphere consists of laboratories, storage areas and containment cells. Many of the containment cells are located in laboratories so the Zener can study the specimens inside. The storage areas contain equipment and consumables required for their work.



The first few rooms the players check will contain various items of scientific equipment, operating



tables and even computer terminals. Although currently not in use, the rooms will be as clean and clinical as the rest of the station.

If they have not triggered the alarm, the players will eventually encounter the Zener in one of the laboratories or in the corridors. The Zener are not fighters and after the surprise round (when they are unable to act) they will try to run away from the players and sound an alarm. If they are unable to run they will cower and hope the players do not kill them or if they can get hold of a weapon they will fight.

Zener Technicians (30)

Str: 7 (0), **Dex:** 9 (+1), **End:** 7 (0), **Int:** 12 (+2), **Edu:** 11 (+1), **Soc:** 8 (0)

Skills: Computers 2, Engineering (Electronics) 2, Engineering (Organic) 3, Medic 3, Space Sciences (Xenology) 2

Equipment: Surgical tools (improvised weapons), syringe injection (victim falls unconscious for 1D4 + 6 hours, antidote can be administered with Medic check)

Sounding the Alarm

Any Zener that gets to a terminal will spend one turn to activate the intruder alarm. If they are injured whilst doing this they must make an Endurance check. Alternatively, if the players get to the primary sphere, they will encounter some Drakh who will signal the alert using their telepathic communication.

Once the alarm has been sounded, two Drakh officers and four pilots will come to investigate.

The Drakh will take several minutes to get to players where they will attack them on sight.

During the fight with the Drakh, the station will come under attack giving the players a diversion if the fight is not going well. Alternatively, you can have the players get captured and interrogated by the Drakh.

Accessing the Computer Terminals

If the players access the computer terminals, they will need to translate the language with a Social Sciences (Linguistics) check (DM -3 or lower if they have previously translated Drakh) and then make a Computers check (DM -3).

For each task they wish to perform (e.g. initial access, copying data, releasing bay doors), the same two checks must be made. Failure at any point will trigger an alarm (see below) and result in the terminal being locked down.

Freeing Captives

As the players explore the station, they may, at the GMs discretion find a laboratory with two Arraki subjects. One of them is unconscious in a containment cell and the other is in the process of being cut open by three Zener scientists.

The cell will need to be unlocked or destroyed (see below) and the other Arraki will need medical attention. Once they are conscious and the players successfully communicate with them, they will say they are from the northern most coastal settlement. The players will also have to calm them down and explain what is going on.

Unauthorised

Approach

If the players are actively scanning the station and do not have the control nexus active they will be detected and the Drakh will want to find out more about them (no one has found this place in 1,000 years).

Drakh Pilots (10)

Str: 10 (+1), **Dex:** 12 (+2), **End:** 10 (+1), **Int:** 9 (+1), **Edu:** 8 (0), **Soc:** 7 (0)

Skills: Astrogation 1, Comms 1, Computers 0, Gun Combat (Energy Pistol) 1, Gunner 1, Pilot (Spacecraft) 1, Recon 0, Sensors 1

Traits: Blast (2d8)

Equipment: Flak jacket

The Drakh will send out two Drakh Raiders (detailed in *Warships of Babylon 5*) to greet the players. The ships will suddenly appear as they exit the cloaking field. If the players have already encountered Drakh vessels they will recognise them as such, if not they will not know who they are but the spacecraft do match the descriptions given by the Arraki abductees.

The Drakh will contact the Star Dancer in Interlac, using audio only, requesting that they dock with the station. If the players attempt to flee or attack, the Drakh will launch two more Raiders and give the players one more chance to stand down and dock. One of the station's turrets will also fire a warning shot which just misses the Star Dancer. The Drakh Raiders will then escort the Star Dancer to one of the docking bays.

Once they have docked, there will be an eerie silence as their captors make no further move.



Outside the Star Dancer, the docking area is empty and all they can see is an open door at the far end leading into the pylon. Eventually the players will need to leave the ship and find out what is going on.

If the players walk to the far end of the pylon, they will discover the door is locked with no apparent means of opening it. Eventually, the Drakh will have learned all they can from observation and they will release a gas into the pylon. Each character must make an Endurance check (DM -4) or fall unconscious. The Drakh, assisted by some Zener technicians will then enter the pylon and secure the party in containment cells.

Arrival of the Equinox

If the players do not discover the station, the Equinox will make a timely arrival; otherwise it will arrive later as described below.

If the Equinox arrives and the Star Dancer has not docked with the station, there will be a moment when they will think they will be boarded as they were in episode 2. However, Seth's motives are different this time and will ignore the Star Dancer.

After scanning and discovering the space station, the Equinox will immediately start its attack run flying past the Star Dancer and opening fire on the space station and the battle will proceed as detailed below.

Captured

Anyone who was captured will be placed in containment cells. The facilities here were never intended to hold large amounts of subjects so there are only 6 cells. Two of them are already

occupied by some Arraki abductees (see above) so the party will be split amongst the remaining four cells.

The cells are made of a reinforced glass. They are very small and consist of a bed with restraints for the intended subject. There is room for two more people per cell but this leaves little room to move around.

Since the players have already seen part of the station and/or its occupants, they will not be kept subdued like the Arraki subjects. Give the players some time to discuss their predicament before a Drakh officer and two pilots assist a Zener technician in taking one of the human players for interrogation.

Interrogation

Three Drakh and one of the grey technician aliens lead you through to a small dark room. You cannot make out much detail in the room except for a chair which looks like it is used for surgical operations. The grey alien pushes you into the chair and presses a small hand-held device. Metal restraints secure your wrists and ankles to the chair.

He then places a device on your head and pain erupts in your temples as you feel two needles drive into your brain.

This device is used to determine if individuals are telling the truth. As the probes bury themselves into the brain, the player will take 2 points of non-lethal damage.

The Drakh and the technician then leave the room, the door closing behind them. You are left sitting there for some time before a soft voice speaks to you from the shadows.

"Human. Your kind should be dead by now. Why do you live?"

The player will probably reply with something like "What do you mean?"

A Drakh steps out of the shadows. He is holding what appears to be a translation orb in one hand and another device in his other hand.

"We attack your home world. We destroy humans. How is it you live?"

If the player explains the failed invasion of Earth, the Drakh officer will not look happy. However, if he discovers that the plague was released, a cruel smile will spread across his face.

If the player lies, the Drakh will press the device, which electrocutes the player for 1 non-lethal damage. The Drakh will keep asking until he gets a satisfactory answer. He will continue like this until all of his questions are answered:

- "How were we beaten?"
- "How did you find this place?" (meaning both the planet and the station)
- "How did you board this station undetected?"
- "What do you want?" (i.e. why are they here?)
- "How much do the Ikarrans know about us?"

Once the Drakh has finished questioning the player or if the player falls unconscious, they will be escorted back to the cell. As the player is being put back in the cell, the station will come under attack giving the players an opportunity to escape.



Attack on the Station

At an opportune moment (GM's discretion) the Equinox will attack the station, most likely giving the players a much needed diversion to get out of whatever fix they are in. Alarms will sound (different to the intruder alarm if that is already sounding) and the station will shake from the impacts of the weapons fire.

Equinox Reprise

Seth has two methods for finding out what the players are up to. Firstly, he has the tracking device he planted in episode 2. Secondly, one of the group's agents periodically hacks into their files to find out what they are up to.

Both of these methods have provided enough information to follow the Star Dancer, even though the tracking device went out of range as they navigated off the beacons. The Equinox will not be detected by the Star Dancer as its sensor equipment is more advanced so that it can stay out of range of the players, whilst still being able to monitor their ship.

When the players have been on board the station for some time, Seth will order the Equinox to attack the station. This is partly for revenge on how he and the Legacy Group were played by the Drakh (he will recognise the station for what it is and be confident that the Drakh are in charge) but also because he wants to give the players a chance to get out of the station as he still has plans for them.

As the Equinox attacks, it will launch its six Star Furies. The Drakh will be quick to respond and all four Drakh Raiders will be launched to help defend the station. The Equinox will do strafing runs, attempting to take out the station's weapons,

staying out of range between each attack run. The fighters will adopt a defensive formation to protect the Equinox from the Drakh Raiders.

Escaping from the Station

If the players were captured, the Drakh who are putting them back in the cells will be thrown aside with one of the impacts allowing the players to overpower them. To break out of a containment cell, the cell must be opened from the outside (Engineering (Electronics) check DM -2) or destroyed with a weapon.

If the party is fighting the Drakh, the officers will fall back to the primary sphere once the attack begins and the pilots will head to the docking bays to join the battle outside.

The station is taking quite a pounding so the players will need to get to their ship before the station is destroyed. They must either get to the command centre in the primary sphere and release the docking bay doors (very difficult) or simply try to blast their way out in the Star Dancer.

Luckily for the players, the inner bay doors are still open so they will have no problem returning to the Star Dancer. They can lift off and fly to the outer doors where they can attempt to blast them open.

Joining the Battle

As the Star Dancer flies out of the station, you find yourselves in the midst of a mighty battle. To your surprise, the attackers are a Hyperion cruiser and several Star Furies. As you look more closely you realise it is the Equinox. The victor has yet to be decided but debris can be seen scattered around the combat zone.

At the point the players emerge from the station, the cruiser has sustained some minor damage but lost four of its Star Furies. The station has taken a fair amount of damage, lost one of its weapons and one of the Drakh flyers has been destroyed. The players will either choose to flee the combat zone or join the fight.

If they flee, the Equinox will win and destroy the station but all the Star Furies will have been destroyed and the cruiser has taken a lot of damage (but will still out gun the Star Dancer) and they would have lost many of their crew.

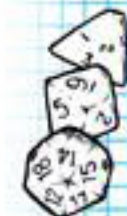
If they join the fight, their best tactic would be to attack the flyers since only two Star Furies remain and more damage will be directed at the Equinox. During the fight, the Equinox will destroy the primary sphere, splitting the station in two. One half has already lost its weapons and so is out of action. The remaining half will then be targeted by all weapons and will explode leaving nothing but debris floating in space.

Aftermath

Once the station has been destroyed or disabled, a boarding party will be sent to any remaining sections to retrieve anything of value to the Legacy Group.

The players will then be contacted by the Equinox. As the communication is put on a view screen, they will be greeted by the familiar face of Seth.

"Hello Captain. I just wanted to thank you for your assistance in both leading us to this base and helping us destroy the Drakh. I look forward to working with you again."



At this point Seth smiles and terminates the communication. He will make no attempt to prevent the Star Dancer from leaving or returning to the planet. The players will hopefully be a little confused by all this and wonder what he is up to.

Seth and the Legacy Group will have no interest in Arraki III or its inhabitants. They are no threat to the group's plans and they have nothing of value. Once Seth has what he wants from the space station, the Equinox will leave.

Returning to Arraki III

The players will most likely want to return to the planet and report back to the council on the events that have transpired. The council will thank the players. They do not have much to give but they will resupply the Star Dancer with fresh fruits and vegetables for their return journey, which will be a welcome change to the rations they are used to. A generous amount of alcoholic drinks will also be included.

If the players managed to rescue the abductees from the station, the survivors will be taken away and looked after. The players will be thanked again.

If the players ask the council what they will do regarding the conspiracy theories now the truth is known, the council will say that now there is no threat, they can reveal the truth. Lies and paranoia destroyed their civilisation once before and they now have a chance to prevent it from happening again.

A Second Chance

If the players did not get the key for the data scanner, you can reward them for saving the captives. One of the abductees was the wife of

Icuso. To thank the players, he will give them the key and explain that it has been handed down for generations in the hope that it will one day be used by the right people at the right time.

Returning Home

The journey home will be uneventful but will give the crew plenty of time to follow up on anything they retrieved from Arraki III, or continue any other personal projects they may have.

Translating the Data

Scanner

If they have the key, the scanner can be read and translated. If the key is placed into the hole, the scanner will ripple as the key is absorbed, activating the scanner.

All of the information contained on the scanner is of a medical nature, so someone with suitable experience will need to help the translator if necessary.

The data consists of formulae and methods for creating the cure to the plague developed by Dr Icuso. Details of the plague itself are not present so adapting it as a cure for the Drakh plague will not work without that point of reference. However, if combined with the data from Kandar III it will certainly put the scientists on the right path and will take years off their research.

Analysing the Vials

The contents of the vials are 1,000 years old and so most of them have degraded over this time. Analysis will reveal that most of them were chemicals that would be found in most laboratories.

A few samples have remained preserved but there is nothing of interest.

Mission Debriefing

All the crew will be invited to join Chen for the debriefing session. Garibaldi will not be present at the debriefing but Chen will ask everyone to fill him in on everything that happened in the months they have been away. He will be extremely pleased if the data scanner was recovered with the key.

Chen will inform Garibaldi of the players' finds and a Ranger will come to collect the scanner and deliver it to the right people. Garibaldi will also send a personal message of thanks to each player, together with a bonus of 1,000 credits each and several weeks R & R.

Ending the Episode

The episode ends once the mission debriefing has been concluded. The players will then have three to four weeks (depending on how long they spent on Arraki III) for personal time before the next episode begins.

Next Time in the Legacy of War

The players investigate an outcast Brakiri cult who are rumoured to be immortal. During their investigation, the players discover information on the Ghost of Hyperspace. This leads them to the Legacy Group's secret base, where they are confronted by the Equinox and the Shadow Striker.



Man's Best Friend

Stefen Styrsky

Illustrated by Furman

'Suddenly a figure appeared at the fringe of the trail, under the trees and began gliding toward the fallen timbers. Balthus' bow-string twanged and the Pict yelped, staggered and fell into the shadows with the arrow through his thigh. Slasher cleared the timbers with a bound and leaped into the bushes. They were violently shaken and then the dog slunk back to Balthus' side, his jaws crimson.'

Beyond the Black River, Robert E. Howard

The last stand of Balthus and his dog Slasher against Picts swarming into Aquilonia's Westermarck is one of the more affecting scenes in Robert E. Howard's Conan stories. History and legend (from which Howard drew many of his ideas) is also filled with tales of men and their loyal protectors.

The rules for *Conan the Roleplaying Game* do not account for this character type. There is the beastmaster prestige class from *Bestiary of the Hyborian Age* but that class does not always fit the flavour of the archetypal man-and-dog team. Borderers or other characters who want a loyal "animal companion" are left with a few tricks under the Handle Animal skill and a rather paltry selection of cohorts. Even if a player wanted to run this type of character the standard dog in the 2ed rulebook would not last very long in most combats.

This article attempts to correct that situation. While the information presented below is intended primarily for dogs and dog-like animals such as the wolf, most of it is applicable to any animal. The new tricks and feats will also help make canine (or other) sidekicks relevant through a greater range of levels and turn them into the stalwart companions of the story.

Dogs in the Various Nations

All of the Hyborian nations employ dogs to some extent. Most are simply used as alarms, a sharper set of eyes and ears that notice threats much sooner than their human companions.

Outside western lands dogs are not as numerous. In the Black Kingdoms dogs are very rare. The deserts and jungles south of Stygia are not hospitable to dogs and resources are scarce. In general the great civilized areas of Hyboria, which produce an abundance of food and thus allow humans to keep domestic animals, do not exist in the south.

Turan, Vendhya and the Himelian peoples all regard the dog as unclean, because the dog will sometimes eat its own filth. These cultures hold no special respect for the domestic canine in the

way that Hyborians will often consider a dog to be a member of their family.

In Hyrkania, the dog serves three purposes: protection, service and food. Hyrkanians keep dogs to warn of approaching enemies and to signal when wolves or bears are near. Hyrkanians will also train dogs to herd goats and sheep. Hyrkanian war dogs are taught to avoid a horse's hooves and either attack the mount's legs or drag a rider from his saddle. In times of famine Hyrkanians will also eat dog meat.

Khitans regard the dog as an astrological symbol and a focus for certain magical practices. As such, keeping a dog is considered unusual. If a Khitan has a dog, he is most likely a scholar or sorcerer.

Animal Training

Teaching an animal to perform on command is a laborious, patience-testing process. Only those skilled in the art, with a natural connection to beasts, are suited to it. This does not mean training an animal is impossible for relatively unskilled people. What it does mean is that getting an animal to perform in extreme situations is difficult. Teaching your dog to sit and fetch is easy. Training that dog to go for a ghou's throat is an entirely different matter.

While the methods described here are the most common, they are not the only ones. Techniques differ from trainer to trainer.

Training a dog to track by scent requires several days of effort. Starting with a simple game of fetch, the dog is rewarded for returning an item that its trainer has thrown. The complexity is increased when the handler throws out several identical items, only one of which is scented with a piece of food. The dog is rewarded for returning the food-scented item. Eventually this progresses to a point where the trainer can give the dog the scent of any item and then command the dog to locate the same scent in the distance.

Training a hound for war is more difficult. While a system of food rewards is employed, war dogs are also conditioned not to retreat in the face of resistance. This is accomplished by teaching a dog to attack a handler outfitted in leather armour. As the animal gets better at this, the “victim” will strike it in the face with a stick; lightly at first but with increasing force as the lessons progress. Each time the dog keeps up the attack it is rewarded with food and praise.

Selective breeding also aids dog training. It is easier to train an animal if it possesses traits that complement the task it is being taught. War dogs are usually heavier, more muscular specimens, bred for a naturally aggressive temperament. Tracking and guard dogs are bloodhounds or retrievers with a naturally keen sense of smell.

New Uses for Handle Animal

A character with ranks in Handle Animal is more than just a person who is good at training animals.

These ranks are earned from long experience raising, breeding and living alongside beasts. To reflect this special knowledge, a PC with the indicated number of ranks in Handle Animal also gains the following benefits.

5 ranks: You have an eye for quality animals. You can spot a superior specimen even when it is young. Any animal you raise to maturity gains Toughness as a bonus feat and an inherent +2 bonus to Strength, Constitution or Dexterity.

8 ranks: You can handle an animal as a free action and ‘push’ an animal as a move action. You also gain a +2 synergy bonus to Survival checks to forage for food if an animal is able to help you hunt for game.

11 ranks: You are an expert trainer. Every animal you train gains one bonus feat (subject to the Games Master’s approval) and may learn two additional tricks if it has an Intelligence score of at least 2 or one additional trick if it has an Intelligence score of 1.

14 ranks: When you train an animal for a general purpose, the training time is reduced by one week. Also, if you are incapacitated in combat and can not act either through paralysis, unconsciousness and so on your animal Sidekick (see below) goes into a fighting rage (as per the Inner Beast feat) and guards your body until it is either killed, you are revived or allies come to your aid.

NEW FEATS

HUMAN FEATS

Most of these feats allow a character to improve an animal he has trained and designated as his Sidekick (see the feat of the same name below).

They reflect the increased rapport between the man-dog fighting team that has learned to depend on each other for their lives.

BLOOD LUST

Your animal increases its ferocity when it is engaged in combat.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 6 ranks.

Benefit: Whenever an animal you have trained to fight attacks a foe in combat that has already suffered a wound, it gains a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls against that creature.



HERO’S FRIEND

Your animal’s courage equals your own, even fighting to the death.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 18 ranks, Borderer level 15, Sidekick, Strength of Two.

Your Sidekick animal may use the Heroic Sacrifice borderer class ability as long as you are within 30 feet of it. You may choose whether the animal keeps fighting or collapses as though Left for Dead.

IMPROVED ANIMAL

Your care and feeding of an animal has enabled it to grow stronger and hardier than its cousins.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 8 ranks

An animal raised under your care advances three Hit Dice without increasing its size. In addition to any ability-score increases that the animal gains through increased Hit Dice, the animal also gains a +1 inherent bonus to Strength, Dexterity or Constitution. You may take this feat a second time. Its effects stack. If the same animal receives the benefits of this feat a second time you may choose to increase its size by one category.

INNER BEAST

You have instilled in your animal a sense of its feral heritage.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 8 ranks, Blood Lust, Sidekick.

Benefit: With a DC 25 Handle Animal check you can, as a move action, command your animal Sidekick to enter into a fighting rage and attack a foe. While in a fighting rage, the animal gains +4 bonus to Strength and Constitution, +2 to Will saves and -2 penalty to defence. The fighting rage lasts a number of rounds equal to 3 + the animal's (improved) Constitution bonus. It attacks until it or its target is killed or the rage ends. The only command that the animal will follow while in a rage is the command to end the attack, thus ending the fighting rage. You can do this a number of times per day equal to your Charisma modifier (minimum 1).

SACRIFICE

Your animal is so loyal that it will interpose itself between you and an enemy, even taking a blow meant for you.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 10 ranks, Sidekick, Strength of Two

Benefit: Once per round, as a move action, you may command your animal Sidekick to place itself between you and an attacker, taking a blow meant for you. You must succeed on a DC 25 Handle Animal check and your animal must be in a square adjacent to you when the attack is made. If a foe makes a successful melee strike against you, the attack is resolved as if your animal had been struck instead. The animal can avoid taking damage on a successful Reflex save (DC = attack roll).

SIDEKICK

You have developed a special rapport with one animal.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 5 ranks, Animal Affinity.

Benefit: Choose one animal you have trained, raised from birth or discovered under special circumstances (such as rescuing it from certain death). This animal is considered your Sidekick. You gain a +2 bonus to Handle Animal checks for this animal. The animal does not need a command from you to attack an enemy that you have already attacked. It automatically attacks the closest such foe unless instructed to do otherwise.

You may only have one Sidekick at a time and the animal must spend a significant amount of time in your presence (as determined by the Games Master) to maintain its Sidekick status and the benefits of this feat.

STRENGTH OF TWO

You and your animal companion grant each other support in combat.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 5 ranks, Sidekick.

Benefit: Whenever you and your Sidekick are within 30 feet of each other you gain a +2 bonus to Initiative checks and a +2 morale bonus on Will saves and saves against Terror. As long as you are unaffected by fear or Terror your animal uses your ranks in Handle Animal as its base Will save bonus.

TRAINED ATTACK

You have trained an animal to attack the vulnerable parts of a humanoid.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 7 ranks.

Benefit: Whenever an animal you have trained to attack scores a critical against an animal, humanoid or monstrous humanoid in combat it creates a ragged, bleeding wound. On the rounds following the critical hit, the victim takes 1d4 Con damage from blood loss unless he makes a Fort save (DC = 10 + ½ animal's HD + damage dealt). This continues for a number of rounds equal to one-half the attacker's Hit Dice or until a successful save. A DC 15 Heal check will also stop the bleeding.

WILD ANIMAL

You have raised and domesticated a wild animal without weakening the creature's natural ferocity.

Prerequisite: Handle Animal 5 ranks, domesticated wild animal.

Benefit: When you command a wild animal you have domesticated to attack a creature it gains a +2 bonus to hit.

ANIMAL FEATS

As detailed in *Bestiary of the Hyborian Age* all monsters and animals advance just like characters with class levels. If a character's animal advances in Hit Dice, its ability scores, base attack bonus and saves all increase. It also gains a new feat every third Hit Die. Some feats such as Lightning Reflexes and Great Fortitude might be good choices (if the Games Master allows a player to choose feats for his animal). Below are a few additional feats designed specifically for animals.

IMPROVED DAMAGE

REDUCTION

The animal's naturally tough hide grows even thicker.

Prerequisite: DR 1.

Benefit: The animal's DR increases by two. This feat may be taken only once.

IMPROVED NATURAL

ATTACK

Either through training, high-quality care or increased ferociousness, the animal's main attack becomes more damaging.

Benefit: The damage of the animal's main attack increases by one die size. This feat may be taken twice. Its effects stack.

IMPROVED TRACKER

Time in the wild has improved an animal's ability to track by scent.

Prerequisite: Scent, Track.

Benefit: When moving at normal speed an animal suffers no penalty to its Survival roll to track

enemies by scent. If moving at double normal speed it suffers only a -10 penalty.

New Tricks

Home (DC 20): The animal returns to its 'home' at its best speed and most direct route. Home is any area you designated while teaching the animal this trick but it can not be more than 500 miles away from the animal's present location and the route the animal takes must avoid crossing large bodies of water.

Warning Bark (DC 25): The animal must be trained for guard duty. The animal can be taught

to recognize by sight or smell three different types of creatures. Whenever your animal is on guard duty it will bark if it smells or sees an intruder. Its bark indicates if the detected creature is human, animal or other.

Flank (DC 25): The animal must know attack as well. The animal will move as quickly as possible to flank any target you designate. The animal uses the most direct route, even if it provokes attacks of opportunity but will not cross through obviously dangerous areas such as lava, fire or over a cliff edge.



Growl and Bark (DC 15): The animal bares its teeth, barks and growls but does not attack. Any Intimidate check you make while your animal performs this trick gains a +4 circumstance bonus.

Sign Language (DC 20): The animal now understands hand movements as commands to perform tricks in addition to any commands you give it by voice.

Silence (DC 15): The animal does not bark, growl or whimper, even if attacked, unless you command it to do so.

Special Items

Dog Jerky: Dried meat. If used as a reward during the training process it adds +2 circumstance bonus to Handle Animal checks when teaching a new trick or training a dog for a general purpose. Cost: 2sp/week.

Leather Barding: Fitted animal-sized armour for dogs. Animals not trained for combat suffer a -4 penalty on attack rolls and skill checks that involve moving while wearing leather barding. Cost: 10sp; DR 3; Max Dex: +6; ACP: -1; no speed penalty; Weight: 3lbs.

Package Collar: This collar is outfitted with a small leather case that can be used to carry items weighing up to two pounds. Cost: 5sp.

Skunk Oil: An alchemical compound that smells horrible and is particularly effective against animals. A single application lasts one hour and forces animals that attack the wearer to make a Fortitude save (DC 15) or refuse to attack. Those



animals that successfully save still suffer a -2 penalty on attack and damage rolls against the wearer. Cost: 25sp/application.

Spiked Collar: Canines and other four-legged animals wearing a spiked collar gain a +4 bonus to resist grapple attempts. Cost: 3sp.

New Dogs

These dogs represent the two main types most useful to adventurers. The frontier dog is a tracker and stealth animal, a bit hardier due to its wilder lifestyle. Although war dogs are descended from wolves, years of breeding have eliminated their feral nature in favour of size and strength. It is common for a war dog to be outfitted with leather barding. Some armies supplement their ranks with packs of war dogs trained to attack as a group.

Frontier Dog

Medium Animal

Climate/Terrain: Temperate plains, temperate forests

Organization: Solitary or pack (5-12)

Initiative: +6

Senses: Listen +5, Spot +5, low-light vision, scent

Dodge Defence: 14

Hit Points: 15 (2 HD); DR 2

Saves: Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +1

Speed: 50 ft.

Melee: Bite +4 finesse (1d6+1)

Base Atk: +1; **Grp** +2

Abilities: Str 13, Dex 17, Con 16, Int 2, Wis 12, Cha 6

Feats: Alertness, Stealthy (B), Track

Skills: Jump +7, Hide +5, Listen +5, Move Silently +5, Spot +5, Survival +2

Advancement: 3-8 HD (Medium)

Skills: Frontier dogs have +4 racial bonus on Survival checks when tracking by scent. Frontier dogs have a +4 racial bonus on Hide and Move Silently checks in outdoor environments. Frontier dogs have a +4 racial bonus on Jump checks.

War Dog

Medium Animal

Climate/Terrain: Temperate plains, temperate forests

Organization: Solitary, pair or pack (5-12)

Initiative: +6

Senses: Listen +5, Spot +5, low-light vision, scent

Dodge Defence: 15

Hit Points: 19 (3 HD); DR 2

Saves: Fort +5, Ref +6, Will +1

Speed: 40 ft.

Melee: Bite +6 finesse (1d6+1)

Base Atk: +1; **Grp** +2

Special Attacks: Trip

Abilities: Str 14, Dex 17, Con 15, Int 2, Wis 12, Cha 6

Feats: Track, Weapon Focus (bite)

Skills: Jump +8, Listen +3, Spot +4, Survival +2

Advancement: 4-8 HD (Medium); 9-10 (Large)

Skills: War dogs have a +4 racial bonus on Jump checks.

Trip: A war dog that hits with a bite attack can attempt to trip the opponent (+1 check modifier) as a free action without making a touch attack or provoking an attack of opportunity. If the attempt fails, the opponent cannot react to trip the war dog.

END



FURMAN: FREELANCER, INTERIOR SPOTS



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The Siege of Amory

Joe Dever

Heavy rain splashed down upon a sea of plate armour, driven by the bitter winds that whipped the fortified town of Amory. From her position several hundred feet from the town's protective wall, Haleka could see the desperate defenders as they leaned over the battlements, dodging arrows as they struggled to aim their crossbows at the armoured men pounding at their gate.

Twenty of the attackers bore the battering ram that, a few hours before, had been a majestic elm tree standing just south of the town. Its stripped trunk was now being used to batter the defences of the very city by which it had grown for more than a hundred years. The team's gruff sergeant-at-arms kept them focused on their task despite their casualties, his rasping voice rising above the howls of the wind and the wounded. The men waded calf-deep in mud, some labouring at the thick trunk; others attempting to shield them with their pavises against the crossbow bolts that hammered them from above.

Soldiers lay dead and dying all around the ram team as it toiled to break through the iron-shod gate. A lucky few of the wounded were rescued and dragged to safety, but most drowned in the bloody mire. But for every besieger who fell, another would be sent to take his place.

Seated astride his white stallion, Prince Darthon of Rhem watched the slow progress of the vanguard besieging the gate. Droplets of rain hung

suspended in his thick black beard, like morning dew on a gorse bush. He, like every other soldier on this inglorious field, was soaked through to the skin. The sodden silk of his tabard clung to his armour as if it had been painted on, the blue and gold of the grail emblazoned his chest transformed to a muddy brown by the deluge. Alongside sat his Honour Guard, bearing aloft the battle banner of Salony - an iron portcullis upon a black field. These were hard men who had been forged in the fires of countless Stornlands battles. They bore their discomforts without complaint and waited in silence for the signal to attack the instant the gate was breached.

Behind the prince was arrayed the mainstay of his army, the men-at-arms of Rhem, bedecked in the livery of the Salones capital. Halberdiers and swordsmen, in serried ranks, unmoving, unflinching, steadfastly awaiting their commander's order for the final assault. And behind them, the mercenary companies of which Haleka's was but one. Five hundred swords whose services had been purchased by Prince Darthon.


She captained a troop of eighty hirelings, every one as loyal to her as the Honour Guard were to their Prince. Not simply for her reputation as a shrewd and fearless leader, but also in great measure to the profitable spoils she had secured for her company, and that she always ensured they were distributed equitably among its members. Where other mercenary captains put personal

enrichment above the rewarding of their men, and by consequence would struggle to find good men to enlist with their companies, Haleka often found herself having to turn away potential recruits.

Prince Darthon had promised them rich rewards in exchange for their services at Amory. And although the Prince's gold was good reason enough to pledge him their swords, it was not the only reason that Haleka had committed her company to the attack. Amory was a mysterious place. Only a very few knew a fraction of the secrets it harboured, but every mercenary had heard tell of the rumours of its hidden wealth. The town had long been a safe haven for embezzlers, thieves, fraudulent aristocrats, and any one of a hundred other kinds of swindler who wanted to hide from their victims and enjoy their ill-gotten gains. All had been given sanctuary by the rapacious Lortha, the highborn Duke of Amory, in return, of course, for a cut of their capital. Prince Darthon had declared that all mercenaries in his pay were free to loot the Duke of Amory's chateau upon its successful capture, and Haleka, like her rival captains, were happy to take him up on his word.

But it was not the promise of rich pickings that had prompted the Prince of Rhem to hammer at the gate of Amory. Darthon's spies had been tasked with discovering the true nature of the Duke's clandestine activities and their most recent reports were as detailed as they were deeply disturbing. Scores of peasant farmers had disappeared from

the lands surrounding the town during the past few months, inexplicably and without trace. Petitions delivered to Lortha from the loved ones of the missing had been met with indifference. Any who dared persist with their demands were soon counted among the ranks of the disappeared. In despair, some had travelled the long road to Rhem and petitioned the Prince directly, begging him to intervene. The Prince leant an attentive ear to their pleas and subsequently he had sent his agents to infiltrate Lortha's stronghold, in the heart of Amory. Their most recent reports had shocked Prince Darthon to his ferrous core. Duke Lortha was in possession of powerful Nadziranim magics, the sorceries and spells once employed by the Darklords of Helgedad. Armed with this forbidden knowledge, his intention was to summon forth a host of demonic captains and muster an army of undead beings to attack the capital and seize the crown of Salony for himself. Prince Darthon knew that he must act swiftly to destroy this terrible threat before Lortha could enact his insurrection.



The gate of Amory broke to the ram with a thunderous crack of splintering timber and tortured iron. The Prince looked to his Honour Guard and men-at-arms as he unsheathed his broadsword. He raised the heavy blade with one hand and his waiting troops bellowed their approval. It was the sign they had been waiting for; the signal to assault the breach. Two hundred halberdiers moved as one towards the broken gate, in support of the Honour Guard who had been designated the first of the Prince's regiments to storm the town. The mercenary companies were third in line and began to ready themselves for the advance. A snorting noise at Haleka's shoulder told her that Gorth was preparing himself for

the battle. He was inhaling huge lungfuls of air to saturate the purple blood in his veins. This in turn raised his blood pressure and his pulse rate, and sharpened his senses for the coming fight. The huge Ogron was like a boiler engine building up steam. For all his noise, Haleka was glad to have him standing by her side; he was a good ally to have in a tough battle. He was not her second-in-command, that was Du Bere's job, but there was nobody in her company whom she trusted with her life like Gorth. Her recognised second-in-command, Under-Captain Du Bere, was a dependable man and highly skilled with sword and bow. But his loyalty was always to the gold. 'No Pay, No Stay' was the motto he lived by.

'Forward Salony!' Prince Darthon shouted and spurred his steed into action. The heavy warhorse lowered his head and thundered towards the open gate, scattering the ram team and their pavise men as he bore down with gathering speed upon the town. With his Honour Guard at his heels, and a spearhead of charging halberdiers in their wake, the Prince burst through the broken gate and into the square beyond.

'This is it!' shouted Haleka, looking around at the wild-eyed and eager expressions on the faces of her men. 'Move fast and watch each other's backs. Stay on your feet. A fallen man is a dead man. Listen for Du Bere. Rally on his voice. Once we're into Amory we'll regroup. No plundering 'till we've secured the market square inside the gate. Am I understood?'



'Aye!' they thudded the hafts of their weapons against their armour.

As the warriors of Salony poured through the town gate, Haleka took the lead and brought


her mercenaries forward. Glancing to her right she noted how her rival captain, Gael Hallis, was leading the men of his own company. Hallis was a consummate professional and almost as good a sword-hand as she was, or so she liked to think. If there were rich pickings to be had in Amory, Gael Hallis and his ruthless band of blade bandits would likely prove to be their most worthy, and dangerous, competition.

The mercenary companies trudged through the shin deep mud and blood towards the town's shattered gate. The muddy road into the town had become a bottleneck, constraining the attacking force as it surged forwards. Confusion raged as the press of bodies became steadily worse, and any who stumbled and fell within fifty yards of the entrance were immediately trodden on by the hundreds that followed behind. None who went down in this manner ever surfaced again. The only comfort was that the sheer weight of numbers decreased an individual's chance of being killed by a missile before entering the town. Most of those advancing hung on to this shred of hope as they fought to stay on their feet amidst the crush of their loot-hungry comrades. Haleka had lost sight of the entrance and was forced to let herself be carried forwards by the mass of bodies as they surged like a swollen river into the breach. Only the hulking frame of Gorth was clearly visible, towering head and shoulders above the other mercenaries.

By the time her company had gained entry to the market square, the town was already ablaze. Before the attack, Darthon had ordered that the townspeople of Amory were to be spared their lives, and their personal property was not to be plundered. The mercenaries would be permitted to sack the Duke's stronghold, but all other



dwelling were declared sacrosanct. The native people of Amory were, after all, Salonese subjects and as such they came under Darthon's protection. However, as is so often the case in battle, good intention is invariably one of the first casualties. Whether by accident or design, several fires flared up around the town soon after the spearhead of the Prince's attack entered the market square, and by the time that Haleka's company were safely through the gate and moving towards the Duke's fortified chateau at its centre, smoke from the many fires that were feeding on the damp buildings had reduced visibility to no more than a dozen yards at best.



Haleka watched the tail-end of the Prince's Halberdiers tramping into the smoke-wreathed thoroughfare that led to the middle of Amory. Predictably enough, they were keen to surround and capture the Duke before he could flee his chateau. The quicker Lortha was apprehended and killed, the sooner this battle would be over and the looting could begin. The town's garrison, who were steadfastly loyal to the Duke, were swept off the battlements and scattered among the streets. But there was still some fight left in them, and they took advantage of the smoke to regroup and take up positions on the rooftops and in upper storey windows of fire-free dwellings, from where they could snipe effectively at the Prince's men.

Gael Hallis rallied his company the moment it arrived in the market square. His standard bearer sounded their recall on his battle horn, and the well-drilled troop responded to the call with impressive speed. Hallis pointed the way with his sword and the company marched off at the double towards Lortha's chateau, eager to be among the first to plunder its treasures after the

Prince's troops opened the way for them. Haleka gave silent thanks that Hallis and his company were so utterly and predictably greedy. They were seemingly leagues ahead in the race for the Duke's treasure, but as always, shrewd Haleka was focusing her efforts on securing the biggest prize, not necessarily the most obvious one.

'We'll end the day broke if we don't beat Hallis's troop to the Duke's chateau!' gasped Du Bere, his voice hoarse from breathing smoke and bellowing at the company.

'Let Hallis and his bandits go chasing minnows,' retorted Haleka. 'We've bigger fish to catch.'

She cast her eyes around the smoke-wreathed square, noting the street signs fixed to the corner houses. Stornway, the main thoroughfare which bisected the town, ran due northwards from the breached gate. It was along this broad avenue that Hallis and his men had gone off in pursuit of their fortunes. East from the square lay Sow Dung Street, an apt enough moniker, thought Haleka, if the gut-churning reek of that squalid passage was enough to go by. And away to the west lay the avenue she was hoping to find - Tallow Road.

Shouting the order for her company to fall in behind her, she turned and ran towards the entrance to Tallow Road, dodging between the overturned carts and the spilt wares that littered her way. Among this debris lay several dead soldiers clad in scarlet surcoats. They were some of the Duke's men who had been mortally wounded during the gate assault and had stumbled, crawled, or been carried away from the battlements. Haleka's men drew their swords and stabbed at their bodies in passing, a practical precaution to take in a fast-moving street fight. Enemies had been known to



play dead, only to rise up and fire arrows into the backs of those who had not taken the trouble to make sure.

A hundred yards along Tallow Road, Haleka turned down a side street, closely followed by her men. The way ahead was deserted and the mercenary captain was thankful for that small mercy. The sooner she got what she was looking for and left this miserable town, the better.

The side street narrowed and became little more than a passageway, with brick houses crowding in on either side. Haleka could almost smell the money in this concealed backwater of Amory. In a place like this, only the wealthy could afford to construct their homes from heather grey bricks purchased and transported all the way from distant Eldenora.

She halted before a door adorned with the faint sigil of swampsnake's head. This was the place she sought, the home of Skarlan Slowhand, a notorious Varretan swindler. Her contact in Rhem had informed her of where to find Skarlan, and his fee had been well deserved. Skarlan had disappeared from Rhem some months previously, taking with him the fortunes of a dozen wealthy, credulous widows. The shock of their financial ruin had already despatched three of their number to an early grave. Not that the base injustice of his crimes had prompted her to try and right his wrongs and return the money to its destitute owners. It was gone anyway and they wouldn't miss what they no longer had.

Haleka stood to one side of the door. She nodded at Gorth and then looked to the door's sturdy lockplate. The huge, blue-skinned Ogron snorted



as he raised his oversized warmaul and slammed it down with shocking force. The lock shattered and the door burst inwards, wrenched from its hinges to clatter noisily on the floor of the hallway beyond. If Prince Darthon had enlisted Gorth to attack the gate of Amory, the entry of his army may have been far quicker.

The Ogron stepped back with a grunt of satisfaction, allowing his leader the honour of first entry into the hallway. Haleka yelled Skarlan's name, hoping to draw out the swindler from hiding, but almost immediately regretted her clumsy error. A door at the end of the hallway creaked on its hinges and Haleka motioned Gorth forward to investigate. The eager Ogron kicked it disdainfully with his iron-shod foot and it swung open. Beyond it lay an opulently appointed parlour. Skarlan was here but he was not alone. And he was no longer breathing.

'What took you so long?' Gael Hallis's words hit her like a punch in the face. The mercenary stood in the centre of the room, smiling self-assuredly, savouring the disappointment etched on her smoke-grimy face. A body lay motionless on the floor at his feet, which Haleka could only assume was Skarlan, recently deceased. Encircling her rival, their backs pressed to the parlour wall, she could see several of Hallis's men. All were armed with loaded crossbows and every one of them wore a copy of their leader's disdainful smile.

Du Bere came rushing into the room and instinctively reached to the hilt of his sword. 'Don't!' hissed Haleka, raising the palm of her right hand towards him to emphasise her command. Her left hand was otherwise employed holding back the seething Ogron

'Very wise,' replied Hallis, smirking. 'It wouldn't do kill a fellow mercenary and see no pay for the trouble. Even an Ogron's thick hide is vulnerable to bolts fired from a range as close as this.' Gorth growled his frustration and spat at the floor, but he managed to control his urge to rip the sickly smile from Hallis's face. He took a begrudging step back and Haleka finally exhaled the breath she had been holding.

'To the swift the spoils, Haleka my dear. Is that not the way of our business? You were quick; I'll give you that, but just not quick enough this time. Don't be too aggrieved, there's always next time.'

Haleka looked away from Hallis's leering face and assessed the strength of his party. There were just five of them, but they were his best five, and their levelled crossbows left little room for argument. She had enough men to overwhelm and slaughter Gael's group, but a handful would surely die during the fight, and she knew that if she attempted to rush them then she would be the first to fall.

She forced a smile and conceded victory to her hated rival, though it stuck in her craw to do so. 'This time, Gael, you were lucky,' she said, and motioned with a nod of her head for Du Bere to retreat slowly from the room. He obeyed the signal and Gorth followed. Hallis was happy to let them go. 'Don't think too ill of me, Haleka,' said Hallis, as she backed up to the doorway. 'There's still time enough for you to seek solace at the Duke's chateau, though I fancy the Prince and his guard will have had first pickings by now. You had best be swift.'


The door to the parlour was slammed shut the moment she stepped from the room. The scraping

sound of heavy furniture being dragged across the stone floor told her that Hallis's men were barricading it shut as a precaution. It would not have stopped Gorth, but she was not minded to pursue the matter further. She had been humiliated, yet she'd bide her time for now. She would not let herself be goaded into an act of hot-headed reprisal that would likely endanger her life, and the lives of her company. She would get even with Hallis, of that she had no doubt, but revenge is always a dish best served cold.

Her company were waiting expectantly in the passageway outside the house. It stretched her considerable acting talents to placate them whilst suppressing her own feelings of failure and frustration. But eventually they were, and despite their curses and threats of mutiny, the thought of turning their back on her never entered their heads. 'There'll be rich pickings for us all at the Duke's chateau,' she told them, convincingly. 'Now quit your bellyaching and look lively. Under Captain Du Bere – double 'em up. It's payday. Time we called upon the good Duke and collected a generous share of the spoils.' And with that, she took her place at the head of the column and led them back to the market square.

Duke Lortha's fortified chateau was easy enough to find. Every soldier in the Prince's small army was making his way there; all she needed to do was follow their procession along Stornway towards the middle of the town. But upon their arrival she was surprised to see that the flag of Amory was still flying from atop the building's central watchtower. Despite their best efforts, the Prince's vanguard had not yet breached the stronghold.

The defenders were laying down a murderous hail of arrow fire upon everything that came near them. Dead halberdiers lay heaped around its fortified gate, most of the corpses riddled with arrows and bolts, but several burned beyond recognition, their bodies fused together. Haleka raised her hand and brought her company to a halt at the entrance to the wide plaza surrounding the Duke's stronghold. She needed time to assess Prince Darthon's assault. The bearded noble was riding back and forth along the ranks of those waiting to attack, barking orders and extolling them to greater effort. Lortha's chateau was a formidable stronghold, encircled by a high stone wall and accessible by only one fortified archway. Its gate had been forged from black iron, reinforced with riveted bands of steel. Above the portal was a granite barbican, its facing wall pocked with arrow slits through which the Duke's men poured forth an unending stream of missile fire. Begrudgingly, Haleka had to give Lortha due respect for the design of his bastion. As a small defensive stronghold it was one of the best she had ever seen.



Daunted but undeterred by the unexpectedly difficult task at hand, Prince Darthon had his lieutenants of ordnance bring up the siege ladders from his army's baggage train. They had been deemed unnecessary during the assault on the town's gate, but now they might be put to effective use. Haleka and her men watched the ladder teams arriving. Under the protection of pavise carriers, they rushed across the killing ground to the base of the chateau's fortified wall and set the ladders against them. At once the defenders along the parapet above attempted to dislodge them, but in order to do so they were forced to expose themselves to missile fire from the Prince's

archers. Several ladders came crashing down, yet a handful remained upright and the assault teams wasted no time in commencing their perilous ascents. Haleka watched one of the hand-picked squads of armoured Salonese swordsmen as they struggled to the top of their ladder and leapt onto the battlements. The fighting was brutal and unforgiving, but the Salonese were by far the better armed and tougher combatants and, after a few tense and bloody minutes, they had cleared one length of the wall and permitted more ladders to be raised. Sensing victory, Darthon ordered his Honour Guard to dismount from their chargers and ascend the ladders. Their battle mission was to capture the barbican and open the iron gate. The waiting mercenary companies cheered as these elite knights began their climb, in part in the hope that they would encourage and bolster the fighting spirit of the Honour Guard, but in the main out of relief that the Prince had seen fit to spare them this dangerous task.

The order was given for the halberdiers to pull back from the gate and for the mercenary companies to move up into position, in readiness to enter as soon as the gate was opened. Haleka's unit was chosen to lead the attack. She turned to her men and shouted: 'Let's show 'em how an elite company fights! Move fast, stay close, watch for snipers on the walls above. Take no prisoners; give no quarter. If a man goes down, don't stop for him. Don't stop for anything. We'll retrieve our wounded after the area is secured. Watch out for murder holes. If we hit an obstacle on the other side of that gate, we go through it. If you get separated, look for Gorth and rally to him. Ishir be with you. Under Captain Du Bere, conduct a weapons and equipment check.'

'Yes, Capt'n,' retorted her second in command, and saluted briskly. Then Du Bere turned to face the company and bellowed: 'You all heard the Capt'n. You all know what to do. Now present yourselves like a fighting company should.' The men were a little slow to respond to Du Bere's order; they were still digesting the unwelcome news that they were to be the van of the gate assault. 'You need tellin' twice!' he roared, indignantly. 'Nay sire!' responded the men, and this time they busied themselves with preparing their weapons and armour ready for inspection. Prince Darthon sought out Haleka and made his approach, weaving his warhorse through the retiring ranks of his halberdiers in order to reach her company and speak with her in person. Haleka was drinking from her water bottle when he halted his horse beside her and leaned down from the saddle. 'Captain, I want you to clear the area beyond the gate so that my men-at-arms can hold it. Do this without fail and I promise you and your men shall have first dip into Duke Lortha's purse. What say you?' Haleka wiped her mouth with the back of her hand then looked up unblinkingly into the Prince's steely grey eyes.


'I say we're agreed.'

'Good,' replied Darthon, 'I've not forgotten the Siege of Duadon. I would be entrenched around its walls to this day had it not been for the valour of your company when the time came to attack the breached wall. I trust you will prevail again, no matter what you may encounter once your men are inside the gate?' Haleka's instincts for survival told her that perhaps the Prince was not being entirely candid about the strength of the Duke's garrison.

'Have no concern, my Lord,' she answered. 'We will earn our pay this day, and you shall have this errant Duke's head upon a spear point before nightfall.'

'So be it,' Prince Darthon replied, smiling beneath his beard.

Then a cheer arose from the depleted ranks of his halberdiers now positioned along the perimeter of the central plaza; the gate of the fortified chateau was beginning to open. A trio of Honour Guards appeared and signalled that the barbican was secure.



'Your cue, Captain,' said the Prince, pulling his warhorse away from Haleka's company so as to allow them to advance unimpeded. Haleka raised her sword and pointed at the opened gate. 'Company advance!' bellowed Du Bere, and the men set off at the double, in perfect parade ground order.

The Honour Guard had done their work well. The barbican was clear, and so too was the murder hole beyond the main gate. Haleka led her men through the area and past a second gate into the courtyard which surrounded the Duke's residence. Darthon ordered his men-at-arms to support her assault and they came streaming across the plaza and into the stronghold at a run. Haleka was drawing her men up into a spearhead formation in preparation for an attack on the chateau itself, when the men-at-arms came pouring through the second gate and into the courtyard behind them. Elated by the ease with which they had gained entry, the sergeants commanding these men-at-arms failed to check the headlong, undisciplined rush of their troops. They flowed around Haleka's

compact unit and surged en masse towards the chateau's seemingly unguarded door. Anxiously, Haleka's men looked to her, imploring her with their eyes to order them to attack, fearful now that the Salonese regulars would be first to sack the Duke's residence and secure the best plunder. But as the first of the men-at-arms came to within a few yards of its grand oak door, it was flung wide and a host of defenders came rushing out to counter their haphazard attack.


Haleka felt the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end. These were no ordinary garrison troops, like those previously encountered at the entrance to the town or posted in the barbican and along the battlements of this stronghold. These were wholly unlike any soldiers she had encountered before. It took several moments before she determined what was different, what was wrong about them. Then the sudden realisation made her blood run cold.

An unholy horde of undead humans was pouring out of the chateau like some hellish flood tide of death and corruption. The leading men-at-arms barely had time to scream in horror before they were leapt upon and dragged to the ground. Some of these cadaverous zombies were armed, but most of them used nothing more than their broken, blackened teeth and rotting hands with which to tear into their victims. At first the Salonese put up a brave fight, but after a few moments of combat against an enemy that was already dead, their nerve broke and they turned and ran screaming towards the gate.


As the fleeing Salonese streamed past her company, Haleka and Du Bere shouted at the men to steel their nerves and stand their ground. They began

to shuffle uneasily as the horde drew inexorably closer. The ghastly sight of the rotting faces was made doubly worse to behold now that they were spattered with the fresh blood and viscera of their victims. 'Ishir save us,' breathed Haleka, shocked by the sight of these hellish abominations. Then her mind cleared and focused once more and she barked out an order to her faltering company. 'Retreat twenty paces. Form two ranks. Prepare to receive their charge!'


Without any conscious thought, her disciplined company heard her command and responded automatically. As one, they turned about and sounded off the paces as they changed formation and took up their new position in the centre of the courtyard. Du Bere was retreating with his face to the enemy when he noticed something and shouted to Haleka. 'Look there Capt'n, on the balcony!'



Haleka followed the line of Du Bere's extended hand and saw a figure, swathed in black robes, standing on the balcony of the chateau's upper floor, directly above the doorway from which the hell tide of undeath continued to flow unchecked. She could see very little of the figure's features, save that it was the size and shape of a man and, unlike the animated corpses, this human still comported himself in a mortal fashion. Slowly, almost languorously, he raised his right arm and twisted his fingers. A baleful blue light sprung into being in the centre of his palm. Rapidly the light intensified until it pained Haleka to look directly at it. As she raised her arm to shield her eyes, there was a loud crack and the baleful light shot like a tiny meteor from the figure's outstretched hand. It screamed across the courtyard and exploded into the backs of the retreating Salonese men-at-arms.



Steel was sundered and flesh was torn from bone as a wave of blue-white light slammed into their fleeing ranks. In an instant, dozens were dead, and everything the sorcerous substance touched was destroyed; it melted through plate armour, dissolved stone, transformed living flesh into a bubbling, smouldering ruin. Of those left alive, a further score were maimed or disfigured. What had been an undignified retreat in the face of an undead enemy was now transformed into blind panic and rout.



The unexpected confrontation with an undead horde had unnerved Haleka's troops, but their discipline and training had helped them to muster their courage and ready themselves to stand against the ghoulish tide. But having now witnessed the terrifying effects of dark sorcery at close hand, this proved to be the breaking point for her company; their ranks wavered and collapsed. They turned away from the chateau and fled the courtyard with the last remnants of the Salonese, just as quickly as they were able, fearful that at any moment they, too, would suffer disintegration or hideous wounds before they could reach the safety of the plaza. Haleka ran for her life, as did Du Bere and Gorst, whose blue skin had turned a sickly shade of green from fright. As they ran towards the stronghold's inner gate, the grievously wounded men who were lying on the ground reached out to grab at their legs, pleading with them to save them. Gorst snatched up one poor soul whose left leg had been blown away below the knee by the explosion. He swung him easily over his shoulder and continued to run for the gate without slowing his stride. This wounded man would count himself very lucky, for no others were saved. Anyone who could not fend for himself was left behind in

the courtyard where they were torn apart by the slaving horde.

Prince Darthon watched with dismay as the remnants of his shattered assault units came streaming out of the Duke's stronghold. The terror and desperation of their hasty withdrawal was written clearly on their faces. Defiantly he raised a mailed fist and shook it at the walls of the fortress. 'Curse you Lortha. You cannot resist forever. Enjoy your brief reprieve for I will see you dead soon enough.'


Despite the Prince's brave words, Haleka found it difficult to imagine how he would fulfil his vow. Word of what had befallen the attackers spread like wildfire through the rest of Darthon's army, sapping their resolve and melting their confidence. With a fearsome and fearless contingent of undead under his control, and the battle magics of the Nadziranim at his command, the Duke's position now looked unassailable.

The heavy rains returned, compounding the misery of their defeat. The Prince withdrew his men to the safety of the streets around the plaza, and posted lookouts to keep a watchful eye upon the stronghold. A mood of despondency had engulfed the Salonese and their mercenary allies, and Darthon knew that it would be impossible for him to raise their shattered morale enough to launch another assault this day.

The Prince mustered his unit commanders and set up a command post in a tavern overlooking the entrance to the fortified castle. Squads of archers were posted around the plaza, under the cover of wagons that were commandeered from the town's traders. They were given orders to shoot anyone


or anything which presented itself as a target at the iron gate, or along the battlements.

Haleka and the other mercenary captains billeted their men in the stores and dwellings in the side streets. They were thankful to be out of the pouring rain, and to have been spared a second, pointless assault before nightfall. Few felt minded to discuss the horrors they had witnessed earlier, or speak openly about the dwindling chances of acquiring plunder enough to compensate for the perils they must face. No one spoke of it, but few could think of anything else.




As night fell around Prince Darthon's crestfallen troops, the heavy rain finally abated. The last of the town's fires were extinguished, but not before a fifth of its shops and houses had been destroyed or made untenable. Despite their close proximity to Lortha's unholy horde, the mercenary units tried to regain some of their lost optimism. Their sergeants organised distractions to keep their minds off the daunting task of capturing the castle. Songs were being sung, games of cards and dice were permitted, and wagers were struck up between the rival companies. The most popular wager was estimating how many days it would take for Prince Darthon to secure the Duke's fortress. Few were willing to bet on anything less than ten.

Haleka had found shelter for her company in the hayloft of a livery stable. It was a dry and comfortable billet and did much to restore their damaged confidence. A messenger from the Prince had arrived to summon her to a council of war at the Prince's command post. She left Du Bere in charge of the men with instructions that he was to ensure they ate and slept well this night.



She took her leave and made her way through the narrow streets that led her towards the Prince's makeshift headquarters. By the look on the faces of the Salonese troops that she passed along the way, they seemed in no great hurry to repeat their attempt at taking the Duke's chateau. The chances were that they would be stationed here for quite a while, and most seemed resigned to it. They would be paid regardless of whether they fought or not, and so they busied themselves with making best of their unexpected spell of encampment in the town.



This mood was not shared by the mercenary companies she passed. Like her own, they were not here for the paltry retainer that the Prince provided. That was barely enough to meet their expenses. They had been drawn by the promise of rich pickings once the chateau was taken, and every additional day that slipped by meant less profit for them all in the long run. Haleka surmised that Prince Darthon would choose to lay siege to the chateau and starve the Duke into surrender. This was the traditional method of warfare employed against a stubborn defender who was holed up in a stronghold that could not readily be taken by force. But she knew, in this instance, that this traditional approach was unlikely to work. For all his failings of character, the Duke of Amory was a shrewd man. And shrewd men always make plans of contingency. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that he had a secret escape route from the chateau, and if this were so, then a long siege would prove both costly and ineffectual.

Haleka was recognised by the Honour Guardsmen on duty at the door to the Crescent Moon tavern, the premises requisitioned by the Prince to serve as his command post and headquarters. They

saluted as she approached and stepped aside to allow her through its glass-panelled door. In the tap room beyond awaited all seven of her rival mercenary captains, including Gael Hallis. He regarded her with his usual leer. She smiled back as nonchalantly as she was able, but the wound of being beaten to Skarlen's gold still burned like a brand against her flesh.



The Prince appeared at the top of the staircase which served the lodging rooms on the first floor of this draughty establishment. Slowly he descended the stairs, regarding the captains arrayed before him with a steady gaze. Darthon was an experienced leader, as well as an accomplished statesman, and he valued the services of the mercenary captains whom he allowed to operate within Salony. It had served him well to treat them with due respect for they had proved their worth in his service on many previous campaigns.

'My dear friends, despite our earlier setback I am confident that we shall prevail, and quickly, against the recalcitrant Duke,' he said, exuding confidence. The gathering did not share the Prince's optimism, but they were careful to mask their true feelings. Darthon was a skilful tactician and a reliable paymaster. If only by virtue of the latter fact were they willing to indulge his ebullience.


'I have a plan to breach the chateau's defences. Truth be told, it will be a dangerous undertaking, which is why I have summoned all of you here to give it your consideration. Any of you who are willing to enact my plan shall be paid a special compensation. One thousand Gold Crowns. What say you?'

Darthon cast his steely gaze around the gathering, as though he were expecting one of them to step forward immediately, but none of the captains were foolish enough to volunteer the services of their company until they had heard the detail of his plan. Darthon smiled and began stroking his beard thoughtfully.

'Very well, my friends. I understand and I approve your caution. Perhaps you will be more receptive once you have heard me out. I have procured a consignment of boom powder from the Kingdom of Bor. It will arrive by wagon at dawn tomorrow. There will be powder enough to blow two breaches in the chateau's wall. I propose that one charge be placed against the gate, and another against the rear wall of the stronghold. My Honour Guard have reconnoitred the wall in the past hour and have determined where it is weakest. Part of the Duke's chateau abuts the fortress wall at this chosen location. Demolition of this section will grant us direct entry to his abode. The charge at the gate is to be set off first. This will destroy the iron portal and draw the Duke's attention. We will mount an assault upon the destroyed entrance, but this shall be merely a feint. Our effective attack will be launched at the rear wall. Once the Duke has committed his unholy horde to the defence of the destroyed gate, the second charge will be detonated. I am looking for one among you who is brave enough to place the second charge, set it off, and then lead an assault directly into the heart of the chateau by this way. My Honour Guard will support this attack. Those of you who do not wish to volunteer for this mission will be required to commit your companies to the feint at the main gate. Be aware, it is unlikely you will gain swift entry to the chateau by this way. I do not anticipate that we shall secure the gate, and



the courtyard beyond, until the assault team at the rear wall have completed their task. Lortha will be reluctant to withdraw his hellish garrison from the defence of the broken gate until he is forced to do so. An invasion of the chateau itself will be reason enough. Oh, and there is one final requirement for the captain who undertakes the mission. You must find the Duke and kill him. Payment of the special compensation will be made when his head is presented to me.'



Haleka could hear sharp intakes of breath from her fellow captains, and thought that several of them might be tempted to volunteer for the mission at the rear wall. Then a ghastly howl echoed through the rain-swept streets of Amory. It chilled the blood of everyone who heard it. Haleka likened it to the plaintive cry of a wolf baying at the moon, although the creature that issued this cry was certainly no mere wolf. The cry had an alien timbre, unlike anything she had ever heard before. She harboured no doubt that the noise had been made by an entity not entirely of this world.

'By Ishir, what was that?!', gasped Yorda Malevian, captain of a Lyrisian company.

'Perhaps the reconnoitre made by your Honour Guard was not thorough enough, Prince Darthon' growled Klorn Vaklan, a battle-scarred captain from Delden, and a veteran of more than a dozen Stornlands campaigns. 'My men and I may be willing to risk our lives for our livelihoods, but we shan't risk our souls. You can count us out.'

One by one, the captains declined the Prince's offer to undertake the assault at the rear wall, until only two were left: Haleka and Gael Hallis.

'Well?' pondered Prince Darthon, 'which of you will it be?'

'My company will undertake the mission, my Prince,' replied Gael immediately.

'Wait just a moment!' interjected Haleka, 'I say not!' She succeeded at sounding threatening enough for the Prince himself to take a step back.

'Decide among yourselves,' said Darthon, regaining his composure. 'But I need a decision by the time the boom powder wagon arrives at dawn tomorrow.'

With that, he dismissed the captains and climbed the tavern stairs. He had been awake for more than thirty-six hours and was sorely in need of sleep. Tomorrow would likely be another demanding day, and he was determined to get some rest while he was able.

When Darthon was out of earshot, Gael turned slowly to Haleka. It occurred to her that his freshly-shaved face was perfect save for one thing: her mailed fist ploughing into it.

'Dear sweet Haleka, why don't you first go and ask your men if they have stomach enough for this mission? By all accounts I hear they turned tail and ran from the fight today.'


'At least we entered the fight. Where were you and your precious company?' retorted Haleka, struggling to suppress her rising anger.

'Oh, we were busy elsewhere.'

'Busy doing what, may I ask?' said Haleka.

'Busy counting our gold,' replied Hallis. 'It's such a time consuming business but it must be done, especially when one has come into the possession of so much of it recently. I must say I had underestimated old Skarlen. He must have been an exceptionally gifted charlatan.'

'Alright Hallis,' hissed Haleka, her eyes narrowing with disdain. Her ferocious glare told Hallis that she was no longer in any mood to tolerate his unabashed gloating. 'Let's cut the crowing and settle the matter in hand. My company is best suited for this mission, by virtue of our expertise and experience if nothing else. Siege assault and explosives are our speciality. Even you must concede this.'




Hallis stared back into Haleka's blazing eyes for several seconds before their burning intensity made him glance away. Begrudgingly, he nodded his head. 'Aye, Haleka. I cannot deny you that truth. But my company is equal to the task and fresh for the fight. I say we take the mission.'

'I say you don't,' she replied, defiantly.

'Well in that case, we shall have to settle the matter in the traditional way,' said Hallis, and motioned Haleka towards a table set against the tavern wall.


'Very well,' said Haleka. 'The traditional way.'

Hallis walked ahead of her towards the table. The tap room was empty now, save for just the two of them. The other captains had gone back to their companies, Prince Darthon was soundly asleep upstairs, and his personal bodyguards were posted near his room, and outside the tavern door under cover of its tiled porch.



As Haleka followed her rival towards the table, she watched him pull something from his belt pouch.

‘One round of “barrels”,’ he said as they drew up their chairs and sat down at the table. He placed two diamond shaped dice on the ale-stained surface and cocked his head. Haleka gave a nod, and picked up the dice. Before they had even stopped rolling she knew it would be a low throw. Haleka never gambled, never left anything to chance because her luck was uniformly bad in games of chance. Now it was no different.



‘Twenty two,’ said Hallis as the dice rolled to a standstill. It was as though he was already consoling her loss. He quickly snatched up the dice and threw them himself. ‘Seventy’ he said, trying hard to mask the delight in his voice, but failing dismally. Haleka could feel the muscles knotting in her neck and shoulders as she ground her teeth in frustration.

Hallis said nothing. He did not have to. But before he could pick up his dice and tuck them back in his belt pouch, Haleka sprang to her feet. She swung her right fist against Hallis’s jaw, just below the ear. Even Gorth would have struggled to remain conscious; Hallis had no chance.


Quickly, she concealed his unconscious body in the tavern’s cellar, taking the precaution to tie his hands and gag his mouth with rags. Satisfied that he would not be able to raise the alarm upon regaining consciousness, Haleka closed the cellar door and made her way upstairs to Prince Darthon’s room to formally accept the mission. She hoped that he was not sleeping too deeply and would be receptive to her request. As she climbed

the stairs, she could not resist breaking into a grin. Gael Hallis had been right about one thing when he had goaded her at Skarlan’s house. She did win the next one after all.


The explosion was deafening. Haleka had expected only a small section of the rear wall to be demolished, allowing her company access in single file. But when the debris stopped falling and the acrid smoke cleared, she could see a gaping hole over ten feet wide had been blown through the base of the wall.

‘Company attack!’ she cried, as she scrambled to her feet from behind the wagon she had been using for cover. Her men were ready and eager to follow her lead. They rose up and surged after Haleka as she leaped over the rubble that had been spread in a wide arc across the plaza. With sword raised, she ran into the cave-like breach, checking left and right for any sign of enemy movement. The explosion had ripped through a storeroom on the other side of the wall, destroying the casks of ale and crates of food that it contained. The floor was awash with foaming beer, desiccated vegetables, burning fragments of wood, and the rotting body parts of a dozen zombies. Haleka could barely hear the noise of the battle that raged at the chateau’s destroyed gate for the ringing in her ears. Gorth had also been temporarily deafened by the shuddering explosion, but needed no orders from his Captain as he barrelled into the devastated storeroom and saw the crumpled remains of a metal door set into the fire-scorched wall ahead. He swung his warmaul into the door, ripping it from its twisted hinges and sending it cartwheeling into the corridor beyond. Haleka motioned him to enter, and then she followed on his heels with her men grouped close behind her.


They had been given no map and had no idea of the layout of the chateau, or where the Duke’s chambers were located. They had also been denied the support of the Prince’s Honour Guard that Haleka had been expecting. When Gael Hallis failed to show up at dawn to lead his company at the muster of the troops, Prince Darthon quite rightly suspected foul play and assumed Haleka to be responsible for his inexplicable disappearance. She was, after all, the last one seen in his company the previous evening, and she was the one who stood to gain the most by his absence. Mindful of this setback, Haleka had ordered her men to form into pairs and commence a search of the chateau as soon as they were safely inside. Du Bere was detailed with ten men to remain at the breach in the wall in order to keep secure their escape route if things turned bad.



Haleka had chosen Gorth to be her search partner. She was hard pressed to keep up with him as he strode along the dimly-lit corridor. His huge bulk took up most of the passage width, which would make it impossible for him to wield his favoured weapon if he were to meet an enemy coming in the opposite direction. Fortunately, the corridor soon ended at an open doorway into the chateau’s entrance hall. Haleka had only just registered that there were several living, breathing guards posted in the hallway before Gorth bowled into them with a roar. The guards were taken aback by the size of the Ogron and the ferocity of his attack. Gorth’s initial target stood open-mouthed in shock as the enormous warmaul came hammering through the air towards his startled face. There was a sickening crunch as the luckless man’s head was torn clean from his shoulders and sent spinning through the air. It bounced off a wall and rolled across the flagstoned floor before coming to rest at the feet



of one of his comrades. The man looked down at the ruined features of his friend, and vomited. His three other companions screamed with terror as Gorth raised his weapon once more, and immediately turned and fled into an adjoining room. Haleka signalled to Gorth not to pursue them. The noise of the explosion at the rear wall was sure to have alerted everyone in the chateau to their presence, so there was no need hunt down the men and kill them to preserve any element of surprise. Haleka gave Gorth a thumbs-up sign to convey her approval, and the blood-spattered giant beamed delightedly. Then she signalled to the rest of her company to split up and begin the search. There were several rooms and passageways off the entrance hall, and any one of them could lead to the Duke and his hidden treasures.



At the north wall of the hall was a huge marble staircase that ascended to the chateau's upper floor. Haleka recalled the black cloaked figure that she had seen during yesterday's battle in the courtyard. She now surmised that it must have been the Duke. He was standing on the first floor balcony when he unleashed his battle magic, and Haleka had a suspicion that the first floor was where she would most likely find him now.

Haleka signalled to Gorth to follow as she bounded up the wide marble steps. Upon reaching the top of the staircase, she was met by a sight that made her swallow hard. Three cadaverous undead were shambling along a wide corridor towards her. But these three were not typical of the ferocious warriors that had seen off Prince Darthon's troops the day before; they were two young women and a child. The women's unseeing eyes were milky white, and their once pretty faces were wan and decaying. Tattered ribbons of putrid blue-black

flesh hung from their hands and arms as they came stumbling forward, their bony fingers reaching out as though they were about to embrace and caress their sweethearts. Between these undead maidens was a small boy. Maggots writhed in the bony sockets of his blackened skull.



Gripped by an overwhelming sense of rage and revulsion, Haleka stepped forward and beheaded one of the zombie women with a whirl of her sword. The head arced away, trailing a stream of black ichor, and her decapitated body dropped to the ground like a rag doll, where it shuddered and convulsed for several moments. Gorth crushed the second woman beneath his warmaul, and Haleka put paid to the undead child with a forceful blow of her sword that split his skull cleanly in two.

The three decapitated bodies lay twitching on the floor and Haleka struggled to drag her eyes from them. She was shocked as much by the dreadful sight, as by the realisation that Lortha was using women and children in his army of the undead. It repulsed her to the core that the Duke had kidnapped innocents, murdered them, and with his new found powers of darkness, used their dead bodies for this terrible purpose. She would have no qualms in slaying this evil man. In fact, she was now more determined than ever to kill him at the earliest opportunity.


She took the lead and ran along the wide corridor towards an open door at its far end. The room beyond was empty, but the foul smell that hung heavy in the air sparked her suspicion and her curiosity. The room was furnished in a grandiose style that reminded her of opulent chambers she had seen in the royal palaces of Tekaro and Suentina. But unlike the pristine splendour of

those halls, the fixtures and fittings of this room were stained and tarnished. Everything here reeked with the stench of premature and unnatural decay. It was as if the very fabric of the room was falling victim to the curse of undeath.

Gorth entered the room and grunted his disgust at what he found. He cleared his throat and spat a wad of phlegm at the far wall. Haleka watched the gob of mucus roll down the mottled silk wallpaper and settle on the floor where it seemed to glow strangely scarlet. Suddenly fascinated by this, Haleka approached and bent down to take a closer look. It was not the spittle itself that was glowing; the scarlet light was emanating from a horizontal crack that ran along the skirting board, parallel and close to the carpeted floor. Haleka traced her finger along the seam. It rose vertically at the corner of the room. She tapped the wall with her knuckle and heard a flat, tell-tale hollowness. 'It's a concealed door,' she said to Gorth, who was looking on, bemusedly. 'Smash it down.' Haleka stepped back to let the Ogron get a good swing. With a grunt of exertion, he drew back his heavy weapon and swung it with all his might against the wall. The head tore through the silk wallpaper and disintegrated the wooden panel that lay beyond. The blow had gouged a ragged channel through this concealed door and, as Gorth tugged it free, its hidden latch broke and the cunningly camouflaged door was pulled wide open. A narrow corridor of mouldering plaster lay beyond, its powdery surface lit by an eerie scarlet light that emanated from an archway several yards distant. Haleka could hear a low voice coming from somewhere beyond the arch. It was intoning a foul-sounding language, harsh and guttural, with a resonance that no human throat should



have been able to produce. The voice was getting louder now. It rose to a crescendo of ugliness and then there was an abrupt silence. Haleka drew her sword and motioned to Gorst to stand guard at the entrance. The passage was far too narrow for him to enter. Then she stepped into the sinister corridor and took her first few faltering steps towards the scarlet light. Her mind was telling her not to go any further, but to turn around at once and flee from this passage while she still had the chance. But her instincts and her heart were telling her otherwise. Lortha was here, and so was his money. She could smell both.



Haleka reached the end of the narrow corridor in time to see a black robed figure kneeling at the centre of a bare wooden room beyond archway. He was surrounded by thick red candles that glowed with an unnatural crimson light. Sigils and wards of evil design adorned the bare floorboards, painstakingly applied with brush and blood.

‘Why will you not answer me?’ sobbed the kneeling figure. ‘I have performed the sacrifices. I have enacted the ritual. I have done all you ask.’

Haleka lifted her blade and edged forwards very slowly. Then one of the boards creaked beneath the heel of her steel-shod boot. The figure glanced over his shoulder and quickly scrambled to his feet when he saw her. Beneath the hood of his black robe, Haleka could see that the man’s face was deathly pale. The pupils of his bloodshot eyes were fully dilated, and the rings beneath them were almost as black as his funereal robe. He had endured many nights without sleep. Upon seeing Haleka advancing towards him, desperately he cast his doomed eyes around the chamber, as if


he were seeking the aid of an ally or a weapon. He found neither.

‘I am Lortha, son of Roark,’ he said, in a haughty voice. He raised his chin so as to look down his nose at her, conveying his contempt for her intrusion. He raised a bony hand and pointed a blood-stained finger at her midriff. ‘Put down your sword and I shall spare your life. Take another step closer and I shall plant a fire in your belly that will burn you to death where you stand.’ Haleka did not flinch. She sensed that his threat was empty and knew that his bravery was feigned. She had confronted many cowards, on and off the battlefields of the Stornlands, and she knew all of their loathsome traits. She was not taken in by the Duke’s desperate bluff. He was a coward; one of the worst kind.


‘I am the tenth Duke of Amory, I command you—’

Haleka sprang forwards, thrusting with her sword and plunging its sharp blade deep into the Duke’s chest. The steel slipped easily between his ribs, puncturing his heart. She twisted it twice for good measure before tugging it away. The Duke’s tortured eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed in a heap to the floor. The crimson flames of the candles crackled fiercely and a frosty chill engulfed the room. Then the crackling abated and the flames changed from crimson to yellow. Haleka reached out her hand towards one of them and felt it warming the tips of her fingers. She felt reassured, for she sensed that a great evil had left this chamber and the natural order of the world had been restored. She kicked the Duke’s lifeless body so that it rolled over with its dead eyes staring at the ceiling. Then she raised her


sword and beheaded the corpse with one jarring blow, cutting clean through the Duke’s throat and severing his spine. She stripped the corpse of its black robe and used it to wrap up the decapitated head. Prince Darthon would be pleased when she delivered this, and her company would be pleased with the one thousand crowns bonus it would fetch. But she was not done yet. She had achieved only half of her mission, the remaining half – the plundering of Lortha’s hidden fortune – was yet to be completed. As she was wrapping the head, she noticed a ring on the middle finger of the Duke’s right hand. It was made of solid gold and bore his heraldic seal. Using the stiletto dagger that she kept secreted in her top of her left boot, she severed the finger at the knuckle and retrieved the ring. She was minded to keep it as a souvenir, but then she decided that she wanted no lasting memory of this encounter and would sell it as soon as she returned to Rhem.



Leaving the Duke’s remains where they lay, she turned her attentions to the room. The chill had gone now and the temperature was rising steadily. The room was sparsely furnished and the prospect of finding anything of great value here seemed remote until she drew back a heavy damask curtain that covered the far wall. Here she found everything she had hoped for, and more. In two large wooden trunks she discovered gold coin and bars of silver, fine jewellery and myriad gemstones, some the size of hen’s eggs. She could barely contain her excitement as she scooped up the gold crowns and let them run through her fingers. She estimated that there must be more than ten thousand crowns here, and that was without reckoning the value of the silver and jewels. She made her way quickly to the passageway and called out to Gorst. ‘Go and get some of our men, bring them here fast. Payday has come at last!’



Gorst's task was made far easier now that the Duke was dead. The dark spell that he had employed to bring his corpse army back to life had been destroyed the moment Haleka's blade had pierced and twisted in his heart. With the spell broken, the undead horde was no more. True death reclaimed them and their tortured souls were at peace again. Gorst dutifully conveyed the news of the Captain's discovery, and her elated company beat a hasty path to the once-opulent first floor chamber. They were eager to congratulate their brave leader and assess just how rich she had made them. None of her men were disappointed with the haul. Each man carried an empty sack in his pack in which all battle plunder was stored. After a battle, it was Du Bere's duty to gather up these sacks and divide the combined loot equally among the men. Today the company would fill all of their plunder sacks and be left searching for more in which to carry away their haul.



Haleka was the last to leave the chamber after having made doubly sure that not a single item of value had been overlooked. As she walked the long corridor back to the top of the stairs, she saw the decapitated bodies of the women and child. They were lying in such a way that it seemed as if both women were embracing the child, as if they were protecting him in death as they had been unable to do so in life. Haleka stopped for a moment and looked down at the child's blackened hand. On the middle finger was a gold ring with a heraldic motif. She reached to the pocket of her battle tunic and withdrew the ring that she had cut from Lortha's finger. The motif was identical. Her stomach churned with the sudden realisation that here lay Lortha's young son, cradled in the arms of his elder twin sisters. *What manifestation of evil could corrupt a man so that he would do*

this to his own children? Her silent question went unanswered. But in the back of her mind she knew that one day she would find the answer. She could only hope and pray to Ishir that the answer did not find her first.

Prince Darthon, as Haleka has expected, was as good as his word. The one thousand gold crowns bonus payment was handed over within minutes of her delivering Duke Lortha's severed head to the Prince's headquarters at the Crescent Moon tavern. Haleka's men were beside themselves with joy. It had been a very profitable day. They had amassed a small fortune in gold, silver and gems, more than they could reasonably have expected to earn in a year of hard campaigning. They had used some of it to commandeer a tavern called the Scarlet Nettle, located near the town's gate. It had a well stocked wine cellar, and a strongroom with a sturdy lock. Du Bere was sure that the company's loot was locked up safe and sound, but even so, the men took turns to guard it. They were determined that nothing was going to spoil the fruits of their victory.

The Prince had ordered his Honour Guard to oversee the burial of the dead, including the poor wretches who had been brought back from the grave by Lortha's foul sorcery. Then the chateau was put to the torch. It burned throughout the night, illuminating the surrounding town with its soaring flames. None were sorry to see it fall.

'I suppose congratulations would be in order?' The voice was strangely familiar, yet Haleka did not recognise it at first. She turned her head and found Gael Hallis standing at her shoulder. His hand was extended, seemingly in friendship. Warily she got up from the tavern table and grasped his

forearm. In turn he gripped hers and smiled as best he could, though his jaw must be paining him. Haleka saw that it was badly bruised.

'To the swift? What in Ishir's name was I thinking!? I suppose I asked for this,' he said, pointing to his purpled jaw and neck.

'Yes, you did,' replied Haleka. She was taken aback by Hallis's apparently philosophical attitude to what she had done. It was uncharacteristic of him to be so forgiving, especially when his honour was at stake.



'Don't worry, Haleka. You can relax. I bear you no grudge. Not that I would have pulled such a low trick on you myself, you understand. But I have always admired your ambition and your temerity. Reminds me a lot of myself in many ways.'

'That's very generous of you, Gael', replied Haleka, barely able to believe what she was hearing. Perhaps her punch had knocked some sense into his thick skull, she thought.


'I can afford to be,' said her bruised rival. 'We have both prospered in Amory, though I'd wager that you have come out ahead on this occasion. But that's of no great concern to me. Skarlen's gold will keep the wolves from my door for several moons to come. What you say we share some ale and toast our continued prosperity?'

'Very well,' said Haleka. She raised her hand and drew the attention of the tavern-keeper. 'A flagon of your best, and two tankards!'

As the man went about drawing the ale, Haleka took the opportunity to cast her eyes around the



tap room of the Crescent Moon. She was here alone, having only just concluded a meeting with the Prince in his room on the floor above. Darthon was keen to secure the services of her company in his future campaigns, especially after the success of her mission at the Duke's chateau earlier. Once she was satisfied that Hallis was here alone, she allowed herself to relax a little. She had suspected that his new-found friendliness towards her was a ploy to catch her off guard. It would be a long walk from the Crescent Moon to the Scarlet Nettle, where her company was now billeted, and she had no intention of falling foul of an ambush along the way. She drew up her chair to the table and motioned Hallis to join her.



'What do you intend to do now that the job is done here in Amory?' said Hallis.

Haleka was still having great difficulty getting used to the politeness of his tone. He had never shown her this much respect before. Perhaps she should punch him more often, she thought.

'You know me Gael, one war at a time. The Prince has offered my company work in Obisko. It seems the Baron there has taken it into his head to withhold his taxes and spend them instead on swelling the size of his private army. The Prince is inclined to teach him a lesson.'

'There's always work of that kind in the Stornlands, though it rarely pays well,' replied Hallis. 'I would have thought that after today's success you would be seeking out something a little more worthy of your elevated status?'

'Such as?' said Haleka, trying to coax it out of him.

'Such as Lencia, my dear. It must be the worst kept secret in all of Magnamund that they are preparing for an invasion of Nyras. And you know what King Telnac is like.'

'Yes,' said Haleka, thoughtfully. 'Generous.'

'Just so. Very generous. Especially when he comes recruiting for swords in the Stornlands.'

The tavern-keeper came back with a flagon of his best ale and two pewter tankards. Hallis poured out the ale and proposed the toast.


'To the brave!' he said, cheerily.

'To the swift!' retorted Haleka, and the two of them shared an easy laugh, the first they had ever shared during the many years of their professional rivalry.

By the time Haleka found her way back to the Scarlet Nettle, most of her company were already drunk on Salonese ale and Deldenian wine from the tavern's copious cellar. Only Gorst was stone cold sober, for the Orgron made a point of never consuming intoxicating drink. Like all the members of his race, his metabolism was not best suited to alcohol. Even half a cup of weak ale was enough to send him off to sleep for several hours. Consequently, Du Bere had detailed him to guard the strongroom while the rest of the company set about the serious business of drinking the tavern dry.

'Gentlemen!' shouted Haleka, as she lifted her third tankard of ale from the table. 'I think we've had our fill of this filthy Stornlands weather. I fancy it's time we took in some clean coastal air. Tomorrow we depart Amory for better climes. Onward to the Tentarias, then onward to Lencia!'

'To Lencia!' they shouted, drunkenly. Then the men gave a cheer of approval, though most had no idea what they were cheering for. All they knew for sure was that every single one of them was far richer this evening than they had been last night. And for that very happy state of affairs they had their Captain to thank. At that moment, they would have followed her anywhere, even into the formidable citadel of Darke. As Haleka looked around at their loyal, smiling, drunkenly ebullient faces, she could only pray to Ishir that their next campaign would not be their last.





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By James Barratt

Since 2001 I have been running a Paranoia LARP at MegaCon in Orlando Florida. This year's game was one of our largest and I think one of our all time best. Paranoia LIVE! 2009 took place Saturday February 28 2009 from 2 PM to 6 PM.

Glypher and I got to the con on the Friday morning for check in and got to work signing up players. Having finally purchased a megaphone we were, as we had aimed to be, the loudest thing in the convention hall lobby. This year we also offered a Friday afternoon rules panel. Potential players received a unique weapon – a Nano-Net Gun – for attending. The panel went quite well and helped push our Friday signups to 51, more than halfway to our goal of an 80+ person game. Friday night thankfully saw us with very little left to do to prepare for Saturday's game. I remember many years past where we had to scramble the night before to get all of the prop building and spray painting finished.

On Saturday we got to the con bright and early to begin signups and unload the many cars full of props and game materials. Players had the option of showing up 30 minutes early for "Officer Training," and all of those who did received a free clearance upgrade. By 1:30 PM, we had 88 people signed up for the game. Of those 88, 70 actually showed up to play.

With players assembled and character packs dispersed we explained our storyline for the game: Every yearcycle Friend Computer calls together all of the Service Groups in Sector CON for a fiscal budget meeting. These meetings usually result in hundreds of accusations of treason and thousands of casualties which in turn translate into sector wide work stoppages, instances of massive sabotage and millions of credits worth of lost productivity. This yearcycle The Computer decided instead to simply have the Service Groups field a champion 'Kaiju' – either robotic or mutant – to fight for the biggest operating budget in KAIJU SUPER BUDGET BRAWL X009! Naturally the Service Groups – really just fronts for Secret Societies – are broke and must rely on their agents to procure the necessary funds and parts to get the gigantic, Godzilla-esque Kaijus powered up.

Players were then released upon Sector CON to perform missions. Our game is GM-less and could best be described as resembling a team-based MMORPG. Teams of eight or so players (representing various Secret Societies) can perform missions from the various Service Group Stations out on the floor in any order they choose. Stations are manned by the GMs, who give the mission and also serve as head of a Secret Society. Completing missions pays the players in 'Widgets' – junk item cards – certain pairs of which are being sought by different Secret Societies. For example I was GM at the Food Vats and my Secret Society was the Frankenstein Destroyers. We were looking for Clamp Distributor Widgets to power up our mutant Kaiju fighter, BLENDRO. Every time one of my SecSoc players brought me a 'Clamp' Widget card and a 'Distributor' Widget card, I rewarded them with a Mutant Power card which they could use later to affect combat.

We had a lot of cool missions and Stations this year. At the Food Vats (Frankenstein Destroyers) players had to take a box of junk and a length of duct tape and build and install an upgrade to the Vats. At Robotic Engineering Design and Services (Corpore Metal) players had to interview a bot (a non-playing convention attendee dressed like a robot) about what kind of upgrades it would want and then draw the redesigned bot. The Reactor Core (Communists) had one player from a team blindfolded and forced to insert new fuel rods into the Core with verbal help from the rest of the team. Teams Visiting Alpha News Net (Free Enterprise) made short 'Troubleshooter Training Videos'. Over at R&D Bio Weapons Division (Psion), players distributed 'Lukewarm Fun' (cherry applesauce) to Infrareads and polled their opinions on the new product. Internal Security (Anti-Mutant) required teams to survey other teams' awareness of security clearance protocol. At Happytime Re-Education Center 17 (Death Leopard) players designed and tested a new fitness regime for Troubleshooters. Lastly, CPU (FCCCP) saw players on a deadly 'forms race', to collect and fill the correct form to secure permission to install a much needed Comp-U-Threader at the Station.

During the course of performing missions players could also visit C-bay to buy new weapons or check out new clones after dying.

Teams had a little over two hours to perform missions. Afterwards, at 5 PM, all players returned to C-bay and were split up into Service Group cohorts to program their Secret Society's Kaiju fighter with a series of paper-rock-scissors moves. Kaiju HP were based on how many Widget pairs agents turned in to their SecSocs and Kaiju attack power was based on how many plasticreds they turned in.

The giant Kaiju finale was our crowning achievement for this year's game. We built eight Kaijus and they fought in single elimination bouts, scored like boxing – win by knockout or hits connected. BLENDRO (Food Vats) lost to REDZILLA (R.E.D.S.) in the first fight; The Infrared Menace (Reactor) lost to Gambletron (A.N.N.) in the next. Mutatia (R&D Bio) defeated Samurai Sentinel (IntSec) in bout three and Rock-Bot (Re-Edu) took down Cross-Bot (CPU) in the last fight of the first bracket.

In the Second bracket REDZILLA crushed Gambletron, then Rock-Bot annihilated Mutatia.

In the final fight Rock-Bot brought the hurt and wrecked REDZILLA. Happytime Re-Education Center 17 – secretly Death Leopard – won KAIJU SUPER BUDGET BRAWL X009 and next yearcycle's largest operating budget.

After the smoke cleared, the winning teams were Team G in second place with 27 points and Team I in first with 33. 176 clones perished during the course of our game.

Running Paranoia LIVE! is something I look forward to every year. It is a chance to get together with old friends and create something that I think people really enjoy. I have met a lot of great people and made a lot of new friends. I love Paranoia and it is my goal to introduce as many people as I can to the game. Our game is unique in that we are very accessible to new players. Most of our players have never played a LARP before and many have never played a tabletop RPG either. We always have a lot of returning players, a few that have even played since our first game in '01!

The generous support of Mongoose Games continues to inspire us to excellence. They are to be commended for bringing the word of Friend Computer to a new generation of gamers. I would also like to thank Beth Widera, owner of MegaCon. She has been absolutely wonderful to us and

her help and willingness to put up with our shenanigans is why Paranoia LIVE! calls MegaCon home.

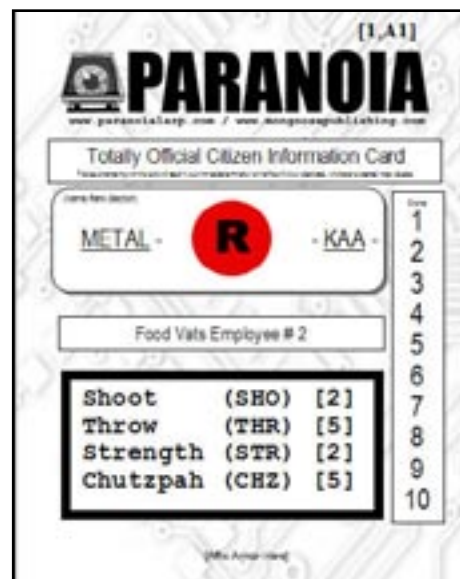
Running any LARP is a big investment in time and money but it is worth it. It is easier to do than you think. If you think that you might want to run a game yourself contact us through our website www.paranoialarp.com or directly at paranoialarp@gmail.com.

How the Paranoia LIVE! Combat System Works

Our combat system is GM-less. Players can resolve all combat on their own. Players have four stats—Shoot, Throw, Strength and Chutzpah. The stats range from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Players have a little vending machine bubble with a d6 inside and they simply roll against a relevant stat when they are trying to do something. To succeed they must roll less than or equal to their stat.

Instructions for firing a weapon are printed on the weapon item card itself.

Combat resolves simultaneously and to initiate combat you merely raise your hand yell “Combat!” and count backwards from five. Everybody freezes and



Signs & Portents

everyone who gets their hand up gets to participate in that round of combat. You state your target and tear off an ammo chit from your weapon. Assuming you are firing a laser gun you roll against your Shoot stat. If you succeed, you roll on the little damage chart on the gun. The weapon will either Kill, No effect or Mishap! If you get a Kill your target is dead. If you get a Mishap! you roll on the little Mishap! Table also printed on the gun. At that point, your gun might jam or explode and kill you.

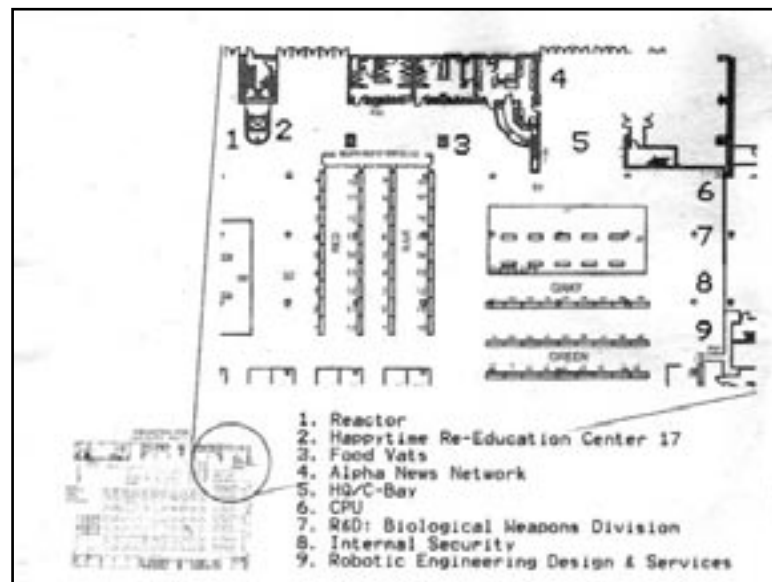
As you can see the system pretty much just handles combat. Everything else that a player might want or need to do they must actually, physically do. Whether it is getting Infrass to stand on an 'X', fill out some paperwork, move a box or build a Transdimensional Collapsitron, they have to really do it.

Chutzpah is kind of a GM discretion 'luck' roll – if you are feeding the GM a really unlikely story the GM might make you roll it to decide if they buy it.

I love our system because players pick it up very quickly and it does not get in the way. Combat happens, it resolves, some people have to get new clones and the teams continue on their way completing missions.

Mutations are made to look like CCG cards so the players are comfortable with them. In play they most typically modify combat variables. For example Hypersenses gives you an automatic Shoot, Throw or Strength Success. You still have to roll for damage but at least the shot connected. Outside of combat they might let you steal an item from another player or turn in a form without fear of reprisal.

Players receive Mutant Power cards by turning in the correct Widget pairs to their Secret Society. Players earn Widgets by going on missions.



Signs & Portents



Paranoia LIVE! 2009 Flier



The sign-up booth



Officer training commences



The Friday Panel!



Signs & Portents



Addressing the new recruits



C-bay, open for business!



Important business at R&D Bio



A meeting of the minds, at CPU



Team B installs the new Orgone Collection Dish at Food Vats



Many upgrades were installed to Sector CON Food Vats this yearcycle

Signs & Portents



Kaiju Super Budget Brawl X009 begins!



BLENDRO vs. REDZILLA



The Infrared Menace vs. Gambletron



The Infrared Menace vs. Gambletron



Mutatia vs. Samurai Sentinel



Mutatia vs. Samurai Sentinel

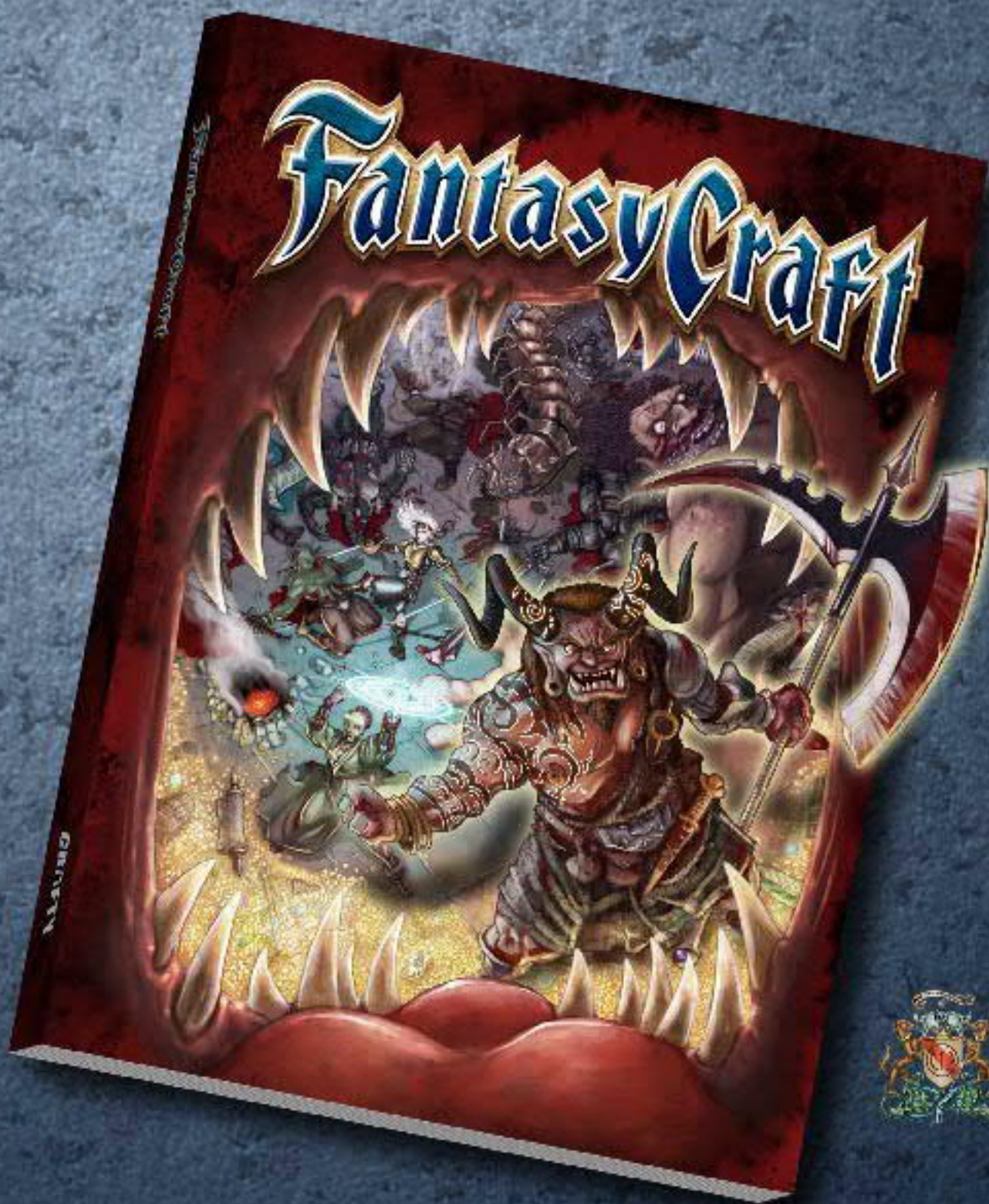
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Cross-Bot, transform!



Cross-Bot and Rock-Bot square off



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Arcana of the Elements Combined

By Carl Walmsley



There are many mages who devote themselves to mastering the elements and fashioning items that channel the eldritch force of nature. However, when the elements are not just tamed but combined, artefacts of rare power may be forged – with the interplay of these raw energies producing some quite startling results.

Presented here is selection of several such items, including statistics for their use in games of both *RuneQuest* and *Dragon Warriors*. Note that the abilities of the items have not necessarily been duplicated between the two games but have been adjusted to better reflect the sensibilities of each system.

Amulet of the Deeping Sea (Air and Water)

At the heart of each such amulet is a blue-green stone that ripples as though seen through clear water. A salty tang also fills the air and the cry of gulls is sometimes heard, even many miles from the sea.

The wearer of an Amulet of the Deeping Sea is at home beneath the waves as he is on dry land. He still breathes but his body extracts the oxygen it needs from the water. Furthermore, the pressures

exerted at extreme depths pose no threat to him and he is able to see clearly – even in the inky darkness of the deepest ocean.

RuneQuest

The wearer of such an amulet may ‘breathe’ indefinitely within water. He is also highly resistant to pressure: this provides 2 points of natural armour, without any Skill Penalty, so long as he is immersed in water.

Finally, the wearer benefits from the Excellent Swimmer (+30%), Dark Sight and Echolocation Traits whilst under water (*RuneQuest Monsters*, page 11).

Dragon Warriors

The wearer of this amulet is highly resistant to external pressures: he has a natural Armour Factor of 1. This stacks with any protection offered by any armour he is wearing.

He may breathe underwater indefinitely and is able to see clearly even in the inky gloom of the deepest ocean.

Elemental Bow

This arcane weapon combines not just the power of two elements but that of all four. Accordingly, the white *bonewood* used in its construction is shot through with runnels of red, blue, silver and black.

When its string is drawn back, an elemental bow produces an arrow imbued with the power of one of the elements – either diamond (Earth), Flame (Fire), Ice (Water) or Wind (Air). The wielder is free to choose the type of arrow created each time the weapon is fired.

RuneQuest

Elemental Bows are always Marvellous Quality or better weapons (*RuneQuest Companion*, page 65).

A diamond arrow (Earth) is razor sharp and ignores 3 AP when determining Damage. It also has a far greater chance of impaling a target: accordingly, the bow wielder’s critical score is doubled.

A Flaming arrow scalds its target and may be used to set fire to flammable substances. So long as a flaming arrow does enough Damage to penetrate the target’s armour (causing at least 1 point of Damage), it inflicts an additional 1D4 fire Damage.

An Ice arrow is much heavier than a normal arrow and is wickedly barbed. However, its shaft and head are very brittle. An Ice arrow inflicts an extra 3 points of Damage but the target’s AP is doubled when determining how much protection it offers.

A Wind Arrow takes the form of a buffeting gust that can knock a target prone. Any target struck

by a Wind arrow must succeed with an Acrobatics check or suffer Knockback and be slammed to the ground.

Dragon Warriors

The severity of wound and Armour Bypass die used by the elemental bow is determined entirely by the sort of arrow it fires.

Arrow Short	Damage	Armour	Bypass	Die
Diamond	4 points	d10		
0-50m	51-125m		126-250m	
Flame	5 points	d6		
0-50m	51-125m		126-250m	
Ice	6 points	d4		
0-25m	26-75m	76-150m		
Wind	special		special	
	0-50m	51-125m	126-250m	

Any target struck by a Wind arrow must roll under his Reflexes or be knocked prone.

Cloak of the Scalding Sands (Air, Earth and Fire)

Fashioned from the hides of fearsome desert beasts and imbued with the power of three elements, these cloaks are highly sought after by adventurers and explorers. They bestow protection from even the most hazardous desert environments both for their owner and in certain circumstances, for his companions.

A typical cloak is a burnished tan in colour, fringed with golden thread. It comes complete

with a hood that may be laced tight to provide protection from fierce desert sandstorms

RuneQuest

The wearer of a Cloak of Scalding Sands may treat any strenuous activity as one category less so long as he is in the desert. For instance, running – normally a Medium Activity – is instead treated as a light activity. The wearer will also recover from Fatigue at twice the normal rate.

So long as he wears the cloak a character may survive for twice the normal number of days before succumbing to starvation.

At night, the cloak is able to expand to form a tent under which up to six people may shelter from the bitter desert cold. Characters resting in this way recover from Fatigue and experience natural healing at twice the normal rate.

The wearer of the cloak may see clearly in even the fiercest sandstorm and benefits from the Dark Sight Trait.

Dragon Warriors

So long as he is in the desert the character is shielded entirely from the heat of the sun. This means that he will tire no more quickly than if he were in a temperate climate. In addition, he need consume only half the normal amount of food. Recovery from wounds occurs at twice the normal rate.

The character's senses are heightened and he may ignore all PERCEPTION penalties relating to darkness and sandstorms.

Sword of Wind and Flame (Air and Fire)

Tales of heavenly warriors wielding swords that can tame the air and conjure flame have provided inspiration for elemental artificers across the ages. Where most have failed, a few have learned the art of crafting these legendary blades.

Fashioned from silver white metal that burns and shimmers in the faintest of breezes, these swords are as light as air but wondrously sharp. Many are emblazoned with the likenesses of fiery beasts, including lions and eagles.

By spinning the blade, the wielder of such a sword may summon a fearsome whirlwind of roaring flame. This can be used either to protect the wielder or to destroy adversaries.

RuneQuest

A Sword of Wind and Flame is a blade of at least Marvellous Quality, benefitting from the Keen and Swift Item Effects. It inflicts an additional point of heat Damage when it strikes a target, as its blade glows white hot.

Conjuring a protective whirlwind requires a single Combat Action. This will then last for up to 5 Combat Rounds, during which time the wielder of the sword must use one action each round focusing on maintaining the whirlwind.

The whirlwind provides complete protection against arrows, thrown weapons and other such ranged attacks: they are simply deflected away by the raging winds.

In addition, there is a 30% chance that any melee attack made against the sword wielder will be 'parried' by the wind. This reduces the damage inflicted by such an attack by 10 points. Note that the wielder may still attempt to Parry as normal.

Finally, the wielder of the sword may not be Grappled and any creature that tries to touch him – including making an attack with natural weapons – suffers 1D6 fire damage.

A Sword of Wind and Flame may alternatively create a fiery tornado that is directed against an enemy. This attack hits automatically – though may be avoided with a successful Dodge check – inflicting 1D6 Damage to each body part. The target must also succeed with an Acrobatics check or be knocked prone.

Using either type of flaming whirlwind drains the sword of its power for 1 hour – during which time it becomes simply a Marvellous (or better) Keen, Swift sword. After this time has passed, it functions as normal.

Dragon Warriors

A Sword of Wind and Flame rolls a D10 for Armour Bypass Rolls and inflicts a 5 HP wound.

The sword may conjure a whirlwind of flame that protects the wielder from all ranged missile attacks (and prevents him from making any himself). In addition, the winds act as a shield – providing a 1 in 6 chance of negating any blow struck against him. If the wielder carries a shield, this functions as normal. The protective whirlwind last for 1-6 Rounds.

Alternatively, the flaming whirlwind may be directed against an enemy. This attack hits automatically but may be evaded (SPEED 14). It automatically bypasses Armour and inflicts a 5 HP wound.

A Sword of Wind and Flame is capable of conjuring a single flaming whirlwind of each kind once per day.

Molten Axe (Earth and Fire)

It is said that only dwarves and giants have the knowledge and skill required to craft these mighty weapons. They are forged in the fires of the deep earth and bestowed with the magmic might of the molten core.

RuneQuest

These axes are always of Surpassing or Heroic Quality and have the Enduring and Keen Exceptional Item Effects.

Each time that a Molten Axe strikes a target, the AP of any armour it is wearing is permanently reduced by 1 in the relevant location – it either burns or melts away. Note that natural armour cannot be reduced in this way.

In addition, the wielder should roll twice when determining Damage and select the higher die roll(s). Note that bonus Damage dice for high Strength and Size are not rolled twice.

Dragon Warriors

This weapon inflicts a 5HP wound and uses a d8 for Armour Bypass Rolls. If the first Armour Bypass Roll is not successful, the wielder may re-roll the die.

Stormwalk Boots (Air and Water)

The wearer of these enchanted elemental boots may stride freely across water, cushioned by a thin layer of air. He may also 'bounce' upon this air cushion, allowing him to move at exceptional speeds and to leap high into the air.

What is more, he is immune to even the most searing of lightning bolts: the boots simply absorb and dissipate any electrical discharge with which they come in contact. Finally, a kick delivered by a character wearing these boots unleashes both a blast of air and a surge of electricity – often sending targets tumbling away.

RuneQuest

A character wearing Stormwalk Boots may move freely over water exactly as though it were solid ground. When moving over solid ground, he may use the boots to generate great bounding strides: this doubles his Movement and bestows a +40% modifier on Athletics (Jumping) checks – including those made to reduce damage from a fall. The character's maximum jump distances are doubled.

The wearer may not be harmed by electrical attacks – whether as a result of spells such as Skybolt or Electrical Blast or natural phenomena.

A kick from a character wearing these boots delivers normal Unarmed Combat damage, plus a further 1d4 points of electrical damage. As long as the target suffers at least 1 point of damage, the attack also causes Knockback.

Dragon Warriors

A character wearing these boots may walk on water and run over solid ground at twice the speed of a normal man. He may also jump twice as far and twice as high. If the character suffers a fall, he suffers only half the normal damage so long as he can roll under his Reflexes – and thereby land on his feet.

The character may kick an enemy, inflicting a 3 HP wound – a point of which is brute force, with the rest electrical damage. A d4 is used for Armour Bypass rolls against an opponent who is not wearing metal armour and a D10 against one who is.

Scimitar of the Raging Storm (Water and Air)

These blades of blue steel are curved like the crest of a breaking wave. Their hilts are set with sapphires and opals, often depicting oceanic beasts such as kraken or sea dragons. To wield one is to feel at peace with the oceans – a prince of sea and storm.

RuneQuest

These blades are always of at least Marvellous Quality and benefit from the Warrior's Exceptional Item Effect.

Whenever at sea, the wielder is as surefooted as a cat – he never feels sea sick and is almost impossible to knock over. In fact, any Acrobatics or similar check he is required to make whilst on board ship benefit from a +60% modifier.

Any water-going vessel that the wielder travels in is shielded from even the most fearsome of storms. In such situations its Hull characteristic (*RuneQuest Companion*, page 70) is increased by 4 and the ship's pilot receives a +30% modifier on any checks made to guide it safely through dangerous waters.

Dragon Warriors

This blade inflicts a 4 HP wound and uses a d8 for Armour Bypass Rolls. So long as the wielder is at sea, his Reflexes characteristic is increased by 5.

No ship upon which the wielder sails will ever sink as a result of a storm – though it may fall foul of cannon fire, pirates or other sea-born menaces.

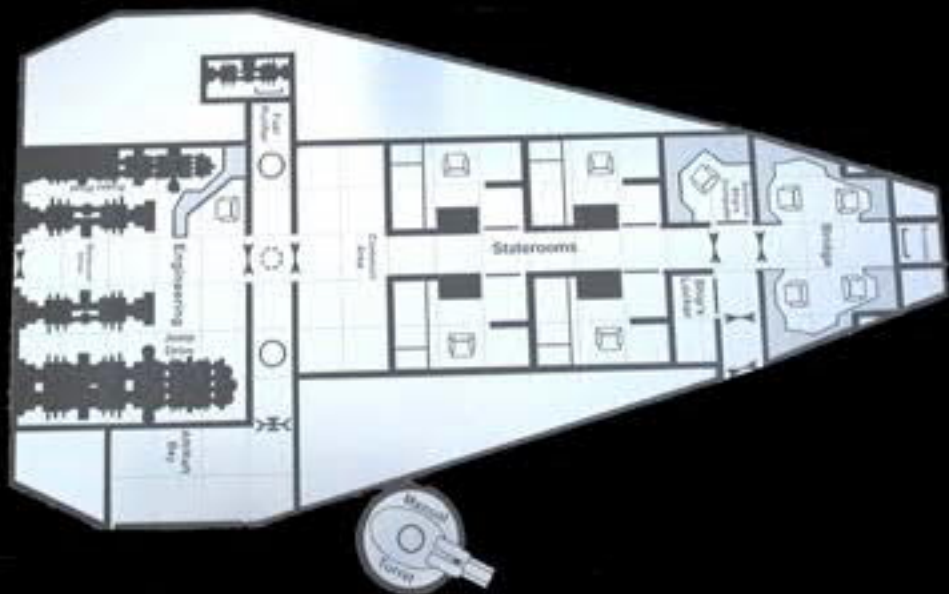


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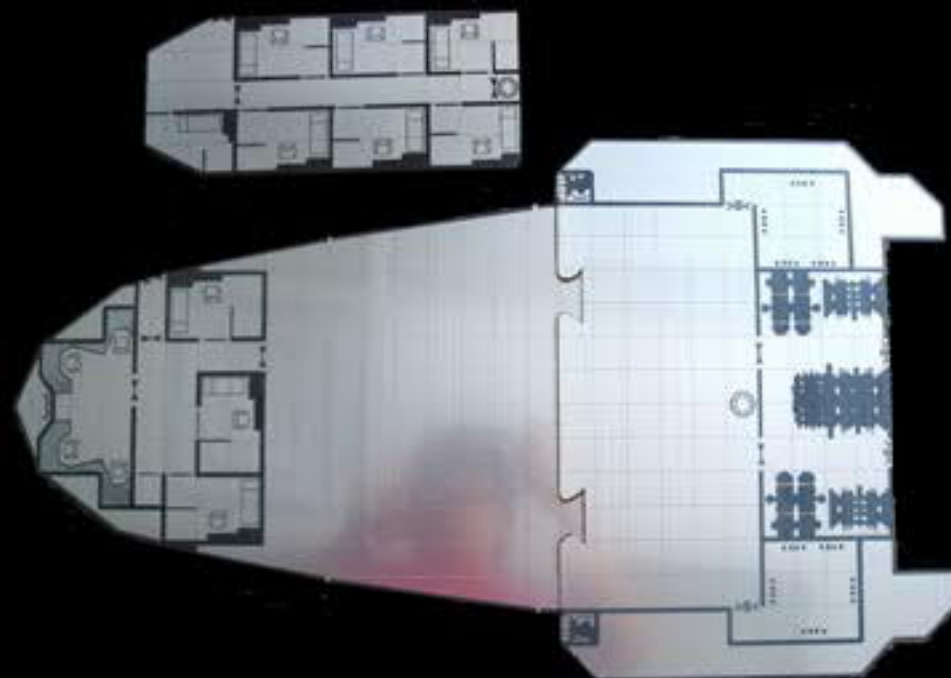
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TRAVELLER

By Lawrence Whitaker

TRAVELLER

These are the base travel times at Thrust 1 (with constant acceleration and approach deceleration) for travel around the Schaeffer Belt, from mid-point to mid-point. When travelling through an asteroid belt cluster, adjust the distance by either +/- 1d3 or 1d6 days depending on the point of origin (outer, mid or inner belt).

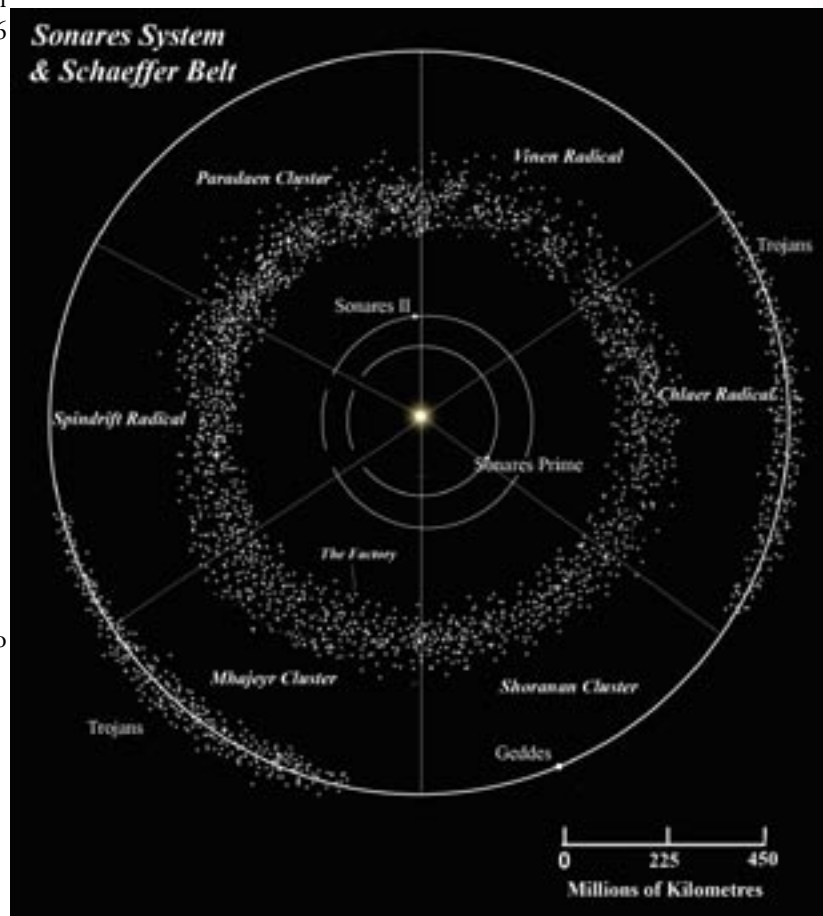
Standard Travel Times in the Schaeffer Belt (at Thrust 1) in Days

	Vinen	Paradaen	Spindrif	Mhajeyr	Shoranan	Chlaer	Sonares Prime	Sonares II
Vinen	0	3.5	7	7	7	3.5	4.5	3
Paradaen	3.5	0	3.5	7	7	7	4	2
Spindrif	7	3.5	0	3	7	7	3.5	2.5
Mhajeyr	7	7	3	0	2.5	7	3	2.5
Shoranan	7	7	7	2.5	0	7	3	2.5
Chlaer	3.5	7	7	7	7	0	3	2.5
Sonares Prime	4.5	4	3.5	3	3	3	0	2.5
Sonares II	3	2	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	0

Travel times to the gas giants depend on the orbital position of the gas giant relative to the inner planets and asteroid belt.

Gas Giants

	Geddes	Forlneaux	Masaron	Chaseus
Sonares Prime	10	18	18.5	28
Sonares II	8	16	16.5	26



TRAVELLER **KRESDEKKA I** TRAVELLER

By Dale C. McCoy, Jr.

Planetary Readout

Planet Statistics: D4E2469-B, Ni
 Size/Gravity: 4 (7,000km in diameter, about 40% standard gravity)
 Atmosphere: 3 (Very Thin, N/O mix)
 Surface Water: 2 (17%, 100% of which is frozen)
 Population: 4 (43,000, 48% human, 21% Canine, 18% Feline, 8% Insectoid, 5% Various.)
 Government/Ruler: 6 (Prison Planet, Thomas Sals - Warden and Corporate Rep.)
 Classifications: Non-Industrial

Major Population

Centres

Subterranean Factory I (prison facility). Population 18,000. Class D starport (Berthing fee: Cr 100).
 Subterranean Factory III (prison facility). Population 15,000. Class D starport (Berthing fee: Cr 100).
 Subterranean Mine VII (prison facility). Population 10,000 (Berthing not permitted).

Local Law Summary

Weapons: All weapons illegal outside of spaceport for non-prison personnel.
 Drugs: Medical drugs tightly controlled.
 Information: All data from offworld censored.
 Technology: All tech above TL 4 evaluated.

Offworlders: Offworlds must remain in visitor areas.

Psionics: Psions not permitted on world.

Other: All traffic near planet must respond to communications or may be shot down.

System Details

Kresdekka I is the largest moon orbiting the third gas giant in this system, Kresdekka. Kresdekka II has an elliptical orbit around the planet. The ice moon melts slightly as it skims the giant's atmosphere, giving it a halo appearance every four months. Kresdekka IX has a refuelling station and serves as a trading post for planets deeper in the system. Closer to the sun reside two dwarf planets; these warm weather worlds orbit each other. Both dwarf worlds house small colonies. A total of 12 worlds and dwarf worlds orbit the star Pesridian. Station Quinn rests inside a planetoid along the Berkelium Belt. Miners extract the naturally occurring Berkelium (Bk-247). Additional bodies in the system: 58 moons and seven comets. A cloud of micro-asteroids throughout the system gives the system a hazy appearance. Sun Color: Orange.

Known Imports/

Exports

Basic Consumables (Food) – Major Imports
 Basic Machine Parts (Manufacturing Equipment) – Major Imports
 Basic Raw Materials (Iron Ore) – Major Imports

Basic Machine Parts (Mining Equipment) – Minor Imports
 Advanced Machine Parts (Jump Drive Parts) - Major Export
 Advanced Electronics (Sensor Equipment) – Minor Exports
 Advanced Machine Parts (Engine Parts) – Minor Exports

Major Corporations

and Contacts

Falcore Prison Facilities (Prison Management Corporation) - Kade Smith (Assistant Manager), Rek'sar (Family Relations), (Sales)
 Titan Securities (Security Service) - Paskira Finch (Assistant Manager)

Threats

Criminal/Pirate Activity: Minimal outside of facility. Heavy inside facility
 War Threat: Minimal.
 Radiation Level: Moderate (Berkelium Belt emits high levels of radiation but is only dangerous at close range).

Referee's Eyes Only

Description and Characteristics

Kresdekka I possesses an atmosphere so thin that facilities had to be built underground to take advantage of the increased pressure the moon's bedrock provides. Even with this increased pressure factories must be pressurized to allow humans and similar races to comfortably operate. Falcore Prison Facilities finds this quality optimal for their business. Since pressure on the surface is so low that most races cannot survive unaided, few prisoners attempt an escape without an elaborate plan for survival. New prisoners are paraded before the bodies of those that tried to escape and died a horrible death on the surface waiting for an escape ship that was shot down.

On the moon's surface rest countless micro-craters. Countless impacts from the micro-asteroid cloud throughout the system damage all surface features on planetary bodies without atmospheres or those with an atmosphere too thin to adequately protect them. Unarmoured ships and facilities on such worlds require constant upkeep. Titan Securities calculated this would be an excessive financial burden and placed their base on Kresdekka IX, a moon with an existing refuelling station and an atmosphere thick enough to burn off the continual bombardment of tiny rocks throughout the system.

The total population of Kresdekka 1 oscillates around 43,000. Of that figure about 2,000 are guards and another 1,000 handle support functions such as coordinating shipments,

scheduling prisoner transfers, cooking meals, washing clothes, educating inmates, inspecting manufactured goods and so on. Kresdekka I holds the high security prisoners from every world within eight parsecs. Of these the most dangerous serve their time in the mine. Inmates frequently try to escape but few succeed. Those quick enough to slip past the guards and smart enough not to get shot by the automated security systems tend to die from exposure before a vessel arrives.

Various caverns, craters and cracks on the moon's surface allow for relatively easy access to altitudes low enough not to require an oxygen supply. The largest ones allow for a 50 ton craft to pass through such an opening. Other such cracks allow for a person to climb through and arrive on the surface. Players standing on the surface without an air supply should use the suffocation rules but take damage every ten minutes. Those with an air supply but without a vacc suit take suffocation damage every 30 minutes from the insufficient pressure the thin atmosphere provides.

Recent History

Subterranean Mine VII opened last year and was forced to become fully operational within four months. The lower reaches of Mine VI collapsed during a prisoner riot killing 352 prisoners and ten guards. With no alternative until Mine VII came fully online, Falcore ordered prisoners to continue to work in Mine VI. The mine claimed about one life every week due to various accidents resulting from the earlier collapse.

The labor union representing the workers at all three of Kresdekka's prison facilities are currently negotiating for a better contract with Falcore. The corporation's negotiators angered union members by belittling the work they perform. The union plans to implement a strike the moment their


contract runs out. Without the union cooking meals, cleaning laundry and maintaining the health of the facility, Falcore Prison Facilities could be looking at a deadly riot. Given the opportunity, the Blood Fangs already have their plans to use such a riot to further their plans.

One of Titan Securities' fighters crash landed on the surface of Kresdekka I opening up a sink hole into the remains of Subterranean Factory II. Titan's standard procedure is to retrieve the downed fighter and conduct an investigation into the cause of the crash. Because the crash entered one of the old prison facilities, Falcore is forbidding the investigators entry. Titan does not have the resources to investigate in secret but is searching for alternative means to conduct their investigation.

Points of Interest

Subterranean Factory I: The main shipping facility. Shipments to and from the mine pass through this facility. While only authorized personnel may gain access beyond the visitor's area, corporate representatives frequent the restricted areas. Their presence maintains the quality of the products produced and ensures that an adequate quantity leaves the facility. After a few inspectors were roughed up by inmates while guards were not looking, corporate reps no longer enter this area without their own muscle. Even though the number of incidents continues to increase, corporate representatives feel safer and continue the practice.

Subterranean Mine VI: Even though this mine is closed, protocol still requires that the collapse be investigated. A small team of excavators operate several robots from the surface as the machines slowly chip away at rocks. They operate with slow



precision in order not to cause another cave in; their instructions are to repair the mine so that additional resources can be extracted. Bringing in relief workers and supplies via ground vehicles to this operation requires special permission from the main factory on the planet, as well as paying off the right guards. The alternative involves vac suits and carrying supplies on foot. Landing space craft at the old space port is strictly forbidden. Even the excavators are not permitted to take ground vehicles there.

Defences

Fighters: ten Wings of 48 multi-mission fighters. Two wings of 24 bombers armed with basic torpedoes, stationed on Kresdekka XI.

Gun Boats: Five 1400 Ton spacecraft optimized for heavy combat, stationed on Kresdekka XI.

Satellite Defense System: 20 remote operated satellites each equipped with Beam Lasers.

Groups

Guards: The guards working for Falcore supplement their meagre incomes with bribes from prison inmates that want a favour as well as from those that want to smuggle items in to the inmates. Credits, drugs and information are the guards' preferred currencies. All new inmates know to watch their back when the guards happen to look away.

Blood Fangs: The Blood Fangs represent the largest gang on Kresdekka I. Over 90% of the Canine population belongs to this gang. These are some of the toughest inmates and they frequently

brawl with the other gangs. Their signature move involves savagely biting their opponents in order to spill blood. The Blood Fangs arrived on Kresdekka I when one plant tried to break up a small street gang by sending them to work in the mines. Instead it served only to strengthen the gang and increase their membership to numbers the original politicians could not have imagined. Several original members will finish serving their time soon. They plan to continue to spread the gang's influence to nearby worlds.

King Cobras: While the other gangs fight with each other, squabbling for scraps, the King Cobras sit back and watch. They have all the drugs they could desire and live lives more comfortable than any of the other inmates. This gang happens to have the dirtiest lawyers and friends on the outside willing to do whatever they ask. Whenever a guard or inmate needs to apply pressure to someone's family or a prisoner wants to maintain control over the gambling operation he left behind, the King Cobras handle that operation with few fingerprints leading back to the facility for investigators to pursue. Admittance to the Cobras requires the inmate to order a hit on someone on the outside and without it being found out by the Warden until the deed is over.

Torch Bearers: Among the educators, cooks, janitors and other staff workers resides a group of missionaries that work to help rehabilitate the prisoners. Their goal is to spread their religious beliefs and help turn the criminals from their life of crime to being productive members of society. Individual members that believe in the conversion of a particular inmate will frequently speak on their behalf at their parole hearing. Some prisoners use the Torch Bearers as a means to get

released early. If an inmate can convince several members of the religious community that their conversion is genuine, express the right amount of remorse and so on they may be able to wrangle a reduction in their sentence.

Patrons

Balkins Hedilson:

Corporate

Representative

Required: Admin, Advocate, Melee, Streetwise
Reward: Cr. 12,000

Players' Information

Balkins Hedilson works for Rogers Industries, a company that hires Falcore Prisons to produce Sensor Equipment. Falcore reported several delays to Rogers; Rogers instructed their representative in the region to perform an immediate inspection of Falcore's bookkeeping. With his main crew inspecting another facility's books for another two weeks, Hedilson needs another crew to handle the inspection work. He requires the crew to be able to handle themselves in a fist fight since weapons are not permitted onsite. Hedilson will accompany the crew to provide them access, but he hires the players to perform all other duties.

Referee's Information

When Hedilson and the players arrive, Falcore Prisons attempts to delay them as long as possible. During the course of their investigation, the players discover:



- 1-2. A prison riot resulted in several key components going missing. Prisoners involved have been in lockdown since that time while guards search for the missing components. Falcore is within their contract to delay for this reason, but simply does not want to admit the problem and potentially lose their contract.
3. Prison guards used production equipment to maim a dangerous inmate. Falcore would prefer to pretend the incident had not happened and are still cleaning up.
- 4-5. A competitor of Rogers Industries hired Falcore to ship three fully functioning copies of their sensor arrays. The units shipped while Falcore delayed the crew.
6. An inmate received a shipment of drugs inside some new machinery shipped to the facility. Unfortunately he sabotaged the machine to extract his goods. Production has subsequently been delayed. Falcore does not want to face a fine and attempts to hide the incident.

Charles Peznix: Member of the King

Cobras

Required: Gun Combat, Stealth, willingness to assassinate a judge.
Reward: Cr. 125,000

Players' Information

Charles Peznix is a member of the King Cobras and has paid off a guard to permit him a private conversation with the players for five minutes. He asks the players if they have any problem

performing a hit on a corrupt public official, one that has sent several people to Kresdekka I needlessly. If they agree, Peznix gives the players a plastic capsule, instructs one of them to swallow it and retrieve it once they are safely off world. If questioned about payment, Peznix tells the players that the interested party promises Cr. 125,000 and all the information necessary to retrieve such a payment is inside the capsule.

Referee's Information

The capsule includes three small scraps of paper with something on each. Having a computer scan the information and increase the magnification is the only way to read them. The first piece of paper is a picture of a middle-aged feline female with the name "Judge Rasser Hak'Zes" and the name of a nearby planet. The second scrap of paper instructs the players to seek out Kamal Chazren, provides his address, and tells them to give him the third piece of paper. The second scrap also informs the players that a hit will go out on them should they fail to take care of their mission within one month. The third scrap is a letter to Chazren that it is time for him to pay for his freedom and to give the group Cr. 125,000. The following are several possibilities that could happen to the players while they work this mission.

1. Chazren went to ground after being released from Kresdekka I. The players need to track down Chazren if they want to get paid. The King Cobras are less interested in the players getting paid than they are in the mission getting accomplished. Should the players fail to complete their mission, the Cobras will send out a hit on them.
2. The players discover that Judge Hak'Zes is not "corrupt" but routinely hands out excessively

strict punishments for even the most minor of infractions. Kresdekka I is suppose to be reserved for the harshest of criminals only. She sentences embezzlers to 15 years on that rock. The public likes these punishments as it serves their desire for vengeance, but other judges and prosecutors do not like her style of "justice" as it breeds resentment among families and friends of those improperly sentenced. Finding individuals that will assist gaining access to Hak'Zes (for a small price) is not a difficult task.

3. Judge Hak'Zes survived several prior assassination attempts and does not take security for granted. Her home is armed with several alarm systems, her personal vehicles are heavily armoured, and she employs security guards that travel around wherever she goes. One of the guards frequents a local singles bar when off duty.
4. While the players investigate Judge Hak'Zes they discover she possesses trinkets from every inflated prison sentence she hands down and acquires them by hiring local thieves to break into the person's home and steal them. Each trinket is a personal possession of the convicted. A Simple Advocate check will reveal this to be highly illegal and a window of opportunity for the players to reach the judge.
5. As the players search for information, they uncover that Kamal Chazren and Charles Peznix are both friends with a local politician. An investigation into the politician's office continues to be lead by Judge Hak'Zes.

Sk'tzak'kst: Escaped

Inmate

Required: Investigation, a spaceship

Reward: Cr. 15,000

Players' Information

The players return to their ship after doing business on Kresdekka I. After entering jump space, the players notice food missing from the galley and various supplies missing from the rest of the ship. From time to time, a player thinks they see something human-sized moving throughout the ship. Eventually the players discover an insectoid creature standing in a torn prison uniform identifying himself as Sk'tzak'kst. He admits to being an escaped convict and tells the players a hard and difficult story of his wrongful conviction. He claims to know the location of a long forgotten pirate treasure and promises the players a cut of Cr. 15,000 if they assist him to retrieve it and drop him off at a civilized world afterwards.

Referee's Information

As the players probably guess Sk'tzak'kst's story of a false conviction is not exactly true. He murdered several men who tried to steal this very same treasure before he had a chance to hide it. Now he is willing to part with some of his stolen treasure as

the price of his freedom. But the Five Guns pirate organization kept tabs on his time in prison and watched for his re-emergence. Their people inside the facility watch departing ships for suspicious activity and pay guards to inform them of any developments. They heard of his disappearance from the prison facility some time ago.

1. Some of the prison inmates working for the Five Guns released a micro-drone that latched itself to the player's ship. It transmits the coordinates of the jump the players programmed into their computer and a long range scout ship launched to meet the Five Guns a few hours later.
2. The players arrive on the asteroid that Sk'tzak'kst hid the treasure and they find the entryway relatively quickly. They activate the defences that Sk'tzak'kst set up years ago and has since forgotten about and the players must fight their way in.
3. The asteroid has long since been pulverized by collisions over the years. While scanning for what happened to the money the players' sensors will detect tiny pieces of gold and other metals about the size of coins scattered among the other asteroids in the area. They also encounter an active mining base which has no doubt collected some of these metal "chunks".
4. The stolen pirate treasure is in fact Sk'tzak'kst's mate. He freed her from the pirates before being sent off to Kresdekka I. When the players arrive at his mate's hiding place they discover the pirates raided the safe house and recaptured her. Sk'tzak'kst reveals that it is almost his mate's time of year to lay her eggs and they need to rescue her before that begins.
5. The treasure is on a world that has since been conquered. The government is now held captive by an off-world power and the people have no personal freedoms to move around as they wish. The players must pass through several check points simply to get close to the treasure.
6. The players encounter few difficulties retrieving the treasure. Afterwards, Sk'tzak'kst asks the players to stay with him to help him get revenge on those that sent him to prison falsely. Sk'tzak'kst does not simply want to kill them but wants to have everything they have and hold dear slip away from them before their eyes. Their new friend offers to pay them for their efforts. His initial requests are simply to have the players gain information on old associates of his but as time wears on Sk'tzak'kst's request become more hate-filled and vengeful.

The Palace of Cetriss

By Stefan Strycky

Amid the southern wastes of Stygia in an area little known or travelled there is a row of small peaks called the Dragon's Spine. Legends tell that three thousand years ago when Old Stygia waged war against Acheron, Cetriss, a powerful Stygian sorcerer built a temple in the maze of canyons that form the approach to the Dragon's Spine Mountains. In this palace Cetriss discovered the secret of the Emerald Lotus. The plant's properties enhanced sorcery and allowed the Stygians to defeat Acheron.

Afterwards Cetriss disappeared into his palace never to be seen again. Some say he discovered the key to immortality and elevated himself alongside the gods.

The Dragon's Spine and the Palace of Cetriss make a tempting destination for adventurers. The area is remote enough to have kept away robbers and looters and the secrets rumoured to exist in the palace are too much for a hardy band to resist.

Getting There, Environment and Region

The Dragon's Spine lies far off the trade roads in the desert of southern Stygia. A few brave caravans pass the jagged peaks on their way to Shem or Keshan but the area is mostly devoid of

life. Except for time-haunted Pteion to the east there is very little evidence of civilization.

Characters will need some expertise in overland survival to live through the trip. Knowledge (geography) and Survival will be essential to staying on course and not getting lost in the sandy wastes.

The terrain is so barren the DC of all Survival checks increases by 5 when a character is attempting to find water or food.

Dust storms are a constant threat. If encountered these reduce movement to one-third and increase all Survival check DCs by 10.

There are other threats besides the environment. Small groups of bandits patrol the caravan road running north to south. Horrible creatures residing in forgotten Pteion occasionally make forays into the desert and woe to anyone who meets them among the dunes. Yizil, desert ghouls whose strange night-time calls sound like hyenas, haunt lesser ruins scattered in the desert. A few of these ruins – outposts of those who built Pteion – also contain demons bound to the sites through ancient magic.

Even though the Dragon's Spine is visible from a great distance the mountains are not easily reached. They sit amid rocky uplands that form a maze of canyons, cliffs and cul-de-sacs. The

DCs of Survival checks to avoid getting lost in the canyons are 5 higher than normal.

The palace itself sits at the end of a canyon on the north side of the Dragon's Spine. Rather than a free-standing building, the Palace of Cetriss was carved out of the canyon wall. Only the front façade reveals its presence as an artificial structure.

Water sources in the uplands are non-existent except for the shallow pools and ephemeral streams left after a rain storm. Half a day's walk north of the Palace there is an oasis. South of the Dragon's Spine the arid land eventually falls towards the Jeluba River.

Flora

The canyons surrounding the Dragon's Spine are devoid of all vegetation except scrub brush and stunted trees. None are good for human consumption and they do not grow in sufficient amounts to make for anything better than kindling.

Inside the Palace of Cetriss only the Emerald Lotus grows and then only under special circumstances. Depending on when PCs explore the palace the Lotus may be fully grown or in its inert spore phase. (See the Lotus Room below.)



Fauna

The area around the Dragon's Spine supports a few animal species. A breed of miniature antelope lives in the area, existing off scrub and the water that accumulates after the infrequent rainstorm. They can be hunted for their meat. Scorpions infest the canyons but are little more than a nuisance.

Palace of Cetriss Layout

Exterior

A narrow canyon lane leads to the Palace of Cetriss. The lane broadens into a wide cul-de-sac – a natural courtyard – at the opposite end of which the palace is carved into the canyon wall. The courtyard is smooth, having been levelled by the palace's builders.

Four massive pillars front the palace. These pillars support an overhang at the canyon's rim that prevents anyone atop the canyon wall from dropping things onto those standing before the entrance.

The pillars flank the palace's main entrance. Above the entrance are two rows of square windows that let in on the palace's upper levels.

The easiest route into the palace is through the main entrance. Characters can scale the palace's face with a DC 25 Climb check and enter through one of the windows. Those approaching from the opposite direction can lower themselves with ropes over the cliff face. There is also an entrance atop the cliff that lets in through the roof of one of the rooms on the palace's third floor.

Interior

The palace of Cetriss has three floors. Each is identical except for the Audience Hall and Chamber of the Sphinx on the first floor (see map).

The palace is barren of furnishings. Over the long centuries all furniture and doors have deteriorated into dust. The functions of most rooms can only be guessed at. The only illumination is sunlight which never reaches much beyond the windows and doors.

Interior Features

1. Audience Hall

This vaulted chamber is the second largest in the palace. Three thousand years ago, Cetriss used this room to receive guests, worshippers and vassals.

2. Chamber of the Black Sphinx

A strange sense of foreboding and dread suffuses this room. Dominating the space is a massive ebony statue of a faceless sphinx. Even without eyes, the sphinx seems to stare at each character entering or even passing the room. Lying between the sphinx's outspread paws is a slab of ebony the length of a man and affixed with four manacles that indicate it was once used in human sacrifice.

Bones of small animals, rodents, antelopes and dried scorpion husks cover the slab. Close examination reveals many of them to be of recent origin.

A DC 25 Knowledge (religion) check is enough to reveal the black sphinx is one of the Dark Gods still worshipped in Stygia. With a successful DC 30 check the name of the Dark God is recalled: Nyarlathotep.

This idol is not an inert piece of rock. It is still a powerful channel for the deity and it hungers, as it will for eternity.

If a sorcerer of at least 6th level takes up residence in the palace for more than two days, the character will be compelled to make sacrifices before the Black Sphinx. It begins with the sphinx haunting their dreams, an ever-watching monolith that somehow menaces them even though it never moves. In the dream a voice will demand "tribute" and "sacrifice."

Upon waking the character must make a DC 16 Will save or be forced to make a sacrifice once per day on the altar. At first he will choose animals but after one week if he does not succeed on a DC 18 Will save he will attempt to bind a human to the altar and cut out the person's heart.

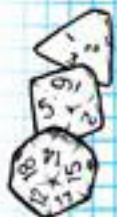
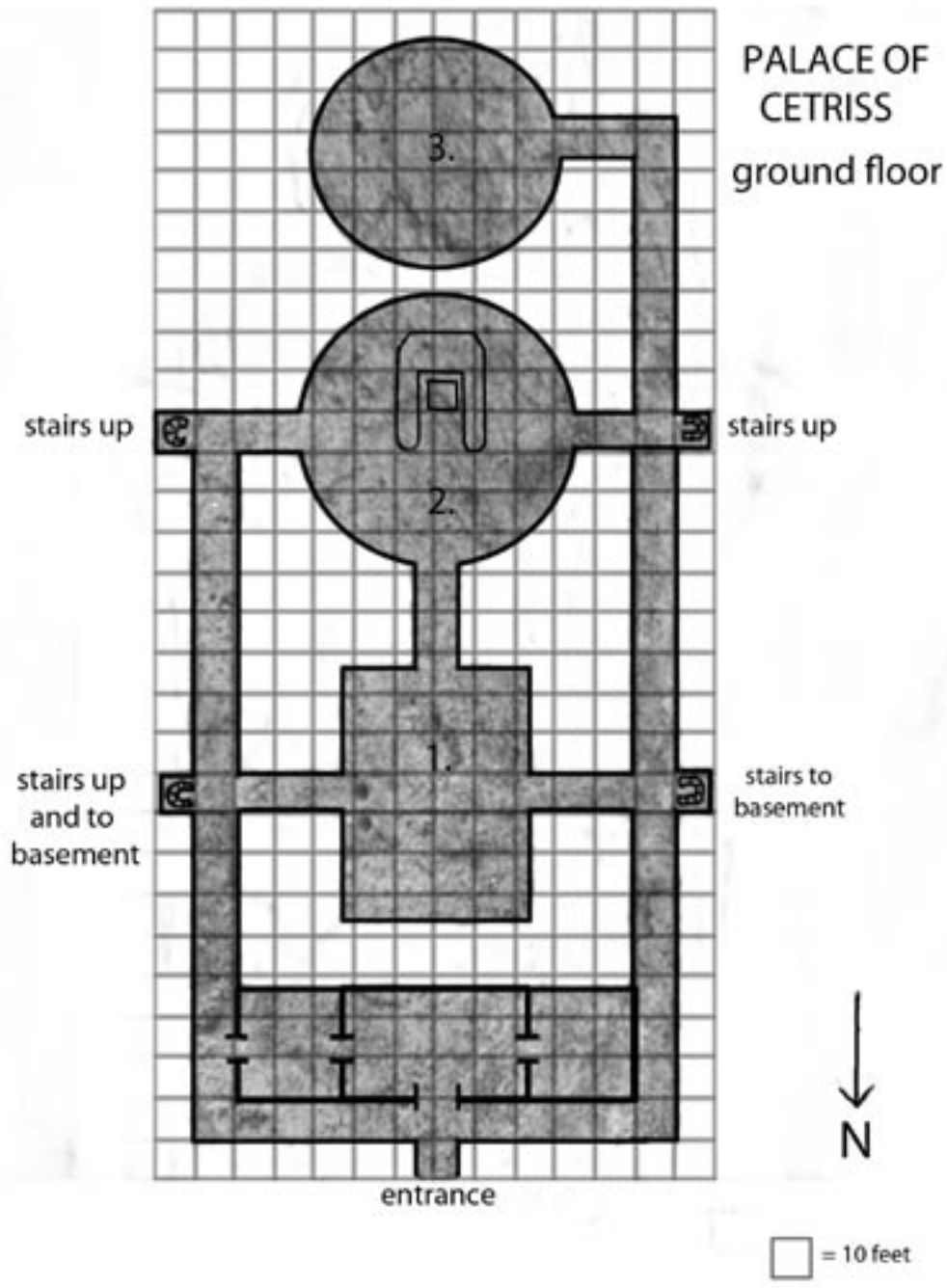
If the character successfully saves against the compulsion to make a sacrifice the DC to resist the effect raises by 1 each day.

Anyone who makes a sacrifice on the altar gains Power Points as if they had the Ritual Sacrifice feat. If the victim is tortured as well, the character also benefits from the Tortured Sacrifice feat. The sphinx takes half the Power Points generated from a sacrifice, while other half goes to the creature making the sacrifice. Each time the sacrifice is enough to generate Power Points the character automatically gains 1 point of Corruption but stops ageing for six months.

Once the character has gained 10 or more Corruption points, he becomes a slave to the monolith. He is from then on considered an NPC and will take the place of Cetriss (see below), who



Signs & Portents



will wither and die without the sphinx's power. The new NPC is now immortal until the black sphinx finds a different creature to corrupt.

If there is no sorcerer among a group residing in the palace the sphinx will target the strongest character or one with a Code of Honor.

3. Lotus Room

At the rear of the palace is the Lotus Room. This chamber is a circular shaft that rises all the way to the palace's third level. Each floor above lets onto the lotus room with an iron balcony that runs around the perimeter. In the past this allowed Cetriss to observe and harvest the plant's blooms as it grew in size.

The room's floor is covered in ancient bones, ribs, femurs and skulls. Their great age has made them brittle. They crack underfoot and rough handling causes them to break. If this occurs a black powder – the spores of the Emerald Lotus – pours out of the bones. The spores are harmless. However if the lotus spores are irrigated with the blood from a living creature they sprout and bloom within hours.

Old Stygian hieroglyphics run around the room in a band of writing 12 feet off the ground. With a DC 25 Decipher Script check the hieroglyphics declaim this room as the place where the Emerald Lotus was first created. Anyone deciphering the glyphs can make a DC 25 Knowledge (arcana) check to learn how to cultivate the lotus.

Upper Floors

The two upper floors of the Palace are identical to the ground floor except they possess normal

rooms where the Chamber of the Black Sphinx would be and a second hallway connects with the east side of the Lotus Room.

Basement

One circular staircase leads downward into the basement. This area is a series of five large rooms once used for storage of food and water casks.

Denizens

The palace of Cetriss contains two residents. The first is Cetriss himself. The second is the Emerald Lotus.

Cetriss

Cetriss was the supreme sorcerer of his age. After bargaining with the Dark Gods for the secret of the Emerald Lotus he retreated into his palace to pursue the goal of immortality. He discovered the secret of everlasting life but at a high price. Nyarlathotep, the Dark God he worshipped, kept him alive while at the same time drawing away Cetriss's intelligence and power. The Cetriss that now wanders the palace is a gruesome, vile creature not much better than a ghoul.

He stalks the palace and nearby canyons, trapping antelopes and other small creatures for sacrifice before the Black Sphinx. If the opportunity presents itself, he will attack and slay lone individuals in the palace or wandering the canyons. He will remove their heart as a gift for the Black Sphinx.

Cetriss no longer recalls his earlier life. He only knows he must present his god with bloody tribute to remain alive.

Cetriss

Medium Monstrous Humanoid

Initiative: +8

Senses: Listen +5, Spot +5; Darkvision

Languages: Old Stygian

Dodge Defence: 17

Hit Points: 42 (6 HD); DR 2

Saves: Fort +7, Ref +8, Will +2

Speed: 40ft.

Melee: 2 claws +10 (1d4+4, AP —) melee finesse

Base Atk +6; **Grp** +10

Special Attacks: Deadly Surprise +1d6, Improved Grab, Throttle 2d8+4

Abilities: Str 18, Dex 16, Con 15, Int 5, Wis 6, Cha 12

Feats: Alertness, Iron Will, Stealthy

Skills: Hide +12, Listen +5, Move Silently +12, Spot +5

Deadly Surprise: Cetriss deals an extra 1d6 damage against surprised and flat-footed enemies.

Improved Grab: To use this ability Cetriss must hit with a claw attack.

Throttle: If Cetriss is grappling an opponent he can strangle him. Each round Cetriss grapples an opponent he deals 2d8+4 points of non-lethal damage. Damage reduction from armour does not reduce this damage. If the victim falls unconscious, Cetriss then makes a coup de grace against him, tearing out the person's heart.

Skills: Cetriss is so familiar with the area around his palace he gains a +4 circumstance bonus on Hide, Listen, Move Silently and Spot checks while within 1 mile of it. (Already included in his stats.)

Corruption: 10



Emerald Lotus

The Emerald Lotus is not of earthly origin. Speculation suggests it arose on some distant planet ruled by the Dark Gods or their minions. For sustenance it requires only the blood of other creatures.

The Emerald Lotus is detailed in the *Bestiary of the Hyborian Age*.

If a character successfully harvests and dries the petals of the Emerald Lotus he can create a potent, magic-enhancing drug.

With a DC 20 Craft (herbalism) check, a character can gather a dose of Emerald Lotus Powder. (This check increases to DC 25 if the Emerald Lotus is growing wild in a certain area.) The size of the plant limits the number of doses the lotus provides. For each Hit Die it possesses, the lotus can produce 1d6 doses per week plus any additional doses acquired because of a gatherer's Craft check.

A newly bloomed lotus has one Hit Die. If fed a meal of blood at least once per week, the lotus will grow one Hit Die per week.

Until the Emerald Lotus reaches the four Hit Die creature described in the *Bestiary* it can not attack or move and must be cultivated and fertilized like any other plant. A character can harvest the blooms from a full-grown Emerald Lotus only after it consumes a large meal of blood, when it is relatively docile and less likely to attack. However as an Emerald Lotus grows in size so does its hunger. At some point even a meal does not sate it and anyone wishing to take its petals must come up with special means to control it.

Other Inhabitants

If the Palace of Cetriss is not enough of a challenge for the PCs in its current abandoned state, the Games Master may populate it with a few other threats. (Remember, this is a remote site. Too many inhabitants will detract from its mystery.)

The first is the sorcerer Ethram-Fal and his band of Stygian mercenaries. Ethram-Fal has established a base inside the palace, and now grows the Emerald Lotus in the Lotus Room. He will not brook intruders who might steal the secret of the lotus or disturb his research. If possible, he will capture Player Characters and feed them to the Emerald Lotus.

Or the palace could harbour a pack of Yizil, ghouls or risen dead.

Adventure Hooks

A scholar hires the PCs as bodyguards while he journeys to the Palace of Cetriss.

The PCs have heard of the powers of the Emerald Lotus and journey to the palace to learn its secrets.

The PCs travel to the palace to learn Cetriss's secret of immortality.

The PCs are hired as caravan guards. A bandit gang attacks and drives the caravan into the deep desert. After losing their way during a sand storm the PCs come upon the Palace of Cetriss.

Emerald Lotus Powder

The powdered flower of the Emerald Lotus is a potent magical aid. It enhances the eldritch power in a living creature, pushing them far beyond their normal limits but leaving them wan and drained after it wears off. The side effects of Emerald Lotus powder are extremely debilitating and anyone using it for a prolonged period will find themselves addicted to the substance.

As a move action a character can take one dose of the powder to gain an additional 1d4 + Charisma-modifier Power Points.

The powder grants the user greater control of his magic. Anytime the character has unused power points from a dose of Emerald Lotus he gains a +2 bonus to saves to resist runaway magic, a +4 bonus to all Concentration checks to cast spells and a +4 bonus to enter into or resist a war of souls. His maximum Power Points are also increased by +4.

Once the extra Power Points are expended or wear off the character must make a DC 14 Will save or be compelled to take another dose the following day. The DC of this save goes up by 1 for each time the character has used Emerald Lotus powder within the past week.

If he can not take another dose the character takes 1d3 Con and 1d3 Cha damage. This damage is immediately reversed if the character imbibes more powder.

Those who think they can use Emerald Lotus power infrequently and not suffer from its side effects are mistaken. After six uses a character



becomes addicted to the powder, no matter the length of time in between each dose.

Once addicted, each day the character does not consume at least one dose of the Emerald Lotus per day he must make a DC 14 Fortitude save or take 1 point of Con and Cha damage and become fatigued. These effects (and any earlier ability-score damage from Emerald Lotus addiction) are immediately reversed if the character consumes a dose of powder. However this damage is not healed until the character is cured of his addiction. The DC of this Fortitude save goes up by 1 for each day the character does not take a dose of the powder.

Death from withdrawal is a slow, agonizing process. The character at first suffers nosebleeds and debilitating headaches. Once the Con drain reduces him to one-half his original Constitution score, the character is so wracked with agony he can only take single actions and is exhausted. At 0 Con the character dies, a withered husk.

Even if a character has nearly unlimited access to Emerald Lotus power he still suffers debilitating

effects. After a month of use the character takes 2 points of Con and Cha drain and gains a minor insanity. Each month the character continues ingesting the powder he suffers another 2 points of Con drain and gains a major insanity.

Escaping the hold of Emerald Lotus powder is difficult. To do so a character must consume a small amount of the powder for a number of days equal to the time spent using it to increase their Power Point total. Using the Emerald Lotus this way does not increase the character's Power Points or grant them any other benefits. If this schedule is interrupted, the PC must begin Fort saves as above and once they resume they must begin the process again.

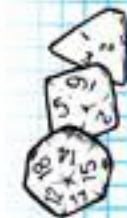
Conan and the Emerald Lotus by John C.

Hocking

This pastiche novel has Conan and three companions journeying through Stygia's wastes to confront the sorcerer Ethram-Fal in the Palace

of Cetriss, and stop him from using the power of the Emerald Lotus to wreak havoc among the Hyborian nations. Along the way, the group battles Stygian soldiers, bandits, ancient demons and an animated corpse.

Two of the novel's pleasures are the way Hocking seamlessly weaves together several plot lines and the many references he makes to Cthulhu-mythos deities. Readers will also appreciate Hocking's ability to create atmosphere -- his descriptions of the palace, the black sphinx and the Emerald Lotus all strike just the right note of gruesomeness and dread.



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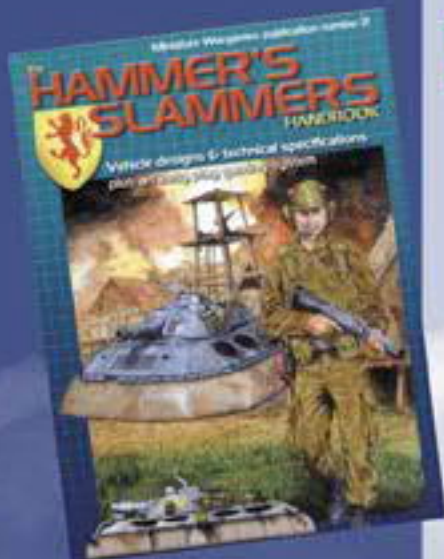
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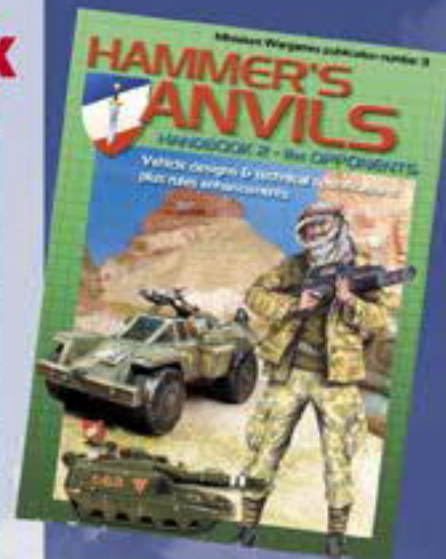
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