



ENsider Presents:

Island at the Axis of the World

Part Three

A 5E-Compatible Adventure for 3rd-Level Characters



Act Three: Under the Wheel of Stars

High Elf Dreadnought Asrabey Varal. A centuries-old high elf warrior, Asrabey was born shortly after the death of the goddess Srasama. When he was old enough, he became one of the many husbands of Kasvarina Varal, a powerful matriarch who had survived the Great Malice. Kasvarina was unable to have children, and she encouraged Asrabey's resentment of the humans who had sentenced their people to death. For years he trained, and undertook many daring raids until he became famous as one of the greatest high elf warriors in the world.

Eventually Kasvarina and her clan realized that they needed to be more discreet to survive humanity's hunt of them. Asrabey left Elfaivar and offered his services to the Unseen Court, though he has kept a much lower profile for the past two hundred years. The fey lords have been content to squabble amongst themselves, and have only called upon Asrabey when someone of prominence in Risur starts to scheme against them.

Asrabey has not seen Kasvarina for fifty years, and he has not the slightest inkling of her affiliation with the Obscurati. He might respect a few humans from Risur, but he hopes that someday Kasvarina will come to him and ask him to lead a final war of retribution against the Clergy that ruined their race, and the nation of Danor, whose tiefling leaders bear the mark of their crime.



IN THIS ACT THE PARTY HELPS TAKE DOWN THE Duchess at last, but not before confronting a daunting emissary of the Unseen Court.

The Assault

Social/Exposition. Montage.

The PCs rest for an hour as their allies muster and assault the fortress.

Risuri warships sail into the harbor, firing cannons, arrows, and spells at the duchess's forces who dare to break from cover. The duchess's forces fall back to the walls of the Outer Fort while ships line up out the mouth of the harbor. Crews lash gangplanks from prow to stern so a thousand soldiers can march to the mainland.

The Second Invasion in a Week. Axis Fortress still has damage from the last time it was sacked, and so the Risuri loyalist forces have several options for breaching the defenses. They outnumber the duchess's forces five to one, and plan to quickly climb over the walls with the aid of siege engines they brought on the lead ships.

The fort is designed to be defended by people with muskets and cannons, weapons the duchess's forces aren't well-trained with, so the outer wall will be overcome within an hour. The inner wall is

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a tougher nut to crack, however, and so the plan is basically to surround it and assault different sides in turn, then fall back, forcing the defenders to rush from battle to battle. This should eventually cause them to leave an opening that can be exploited, while minimizing casualties to loyalist forces.

If the PCs failed to open the sea gate, though, the duchess's forces have more time to prepare and attack incoming siege engines, which makes it much harder for loyalist forces to breach the outer fort.

Mission's Not Over. The PCs have a chance to rest, and after about half an hour Captain Rutger Smith of the *Impossible* arrives at the lighthouse to speak with them and get a report. He offers them all cigars, but tells them not to smoke them until the mission is fully complete. He explains that with the tragic death of the infiltrators, they're technically the highest authority for non-military matters, so it's their responsibility to deal with the duchess once the soldiers reach her. Captain Smith suspects she'll hole up in the central keep, but the military should be able to surround her within a few hours.

If the PCs seem reticent to stay involved (such as if they're out of spells or consumables), they can arrange to get a small military escort of one **guard** apiece.

Guard

Medium humanoid (any race), any alignment

Armor Class 16 (chain shirt, shield)

Hit Points 11 (2d8 + 2)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
13 (+1)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	11 (+0)	10 (+0)

Skills Perception +2

Senses passive Perception 12

Languages Primordial

Challenge 1/8 (25 XP)

ACTIONS

Spear. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d6 + 1 piercing damage, or 5 (1d8 + 1) piercing damage if used with two hands to make a melee attack.

Alternately, if you prefer simpler rules with fewer minis in combat, you can give the PCs access to the following two abilities to represent the involvement of their allied soldier.

Allied Soldier Defense. You gain a +1 bonus to AC and to saving throws, since the soldier provides warnings and a handy shield. If you are knocked unconscious, the allied soldier stabilizes and protects you.

You can have your allied soldier suffer the effect of an attack in your place. The allied soldier is incapacitated until he can get a few minutes to rest and heal. If you have your soldier use this ability a second time in the same combat, it is killed instead.

Allied Soldier Offense. You gain a +2 bonus to your melee damage rolls, since the soldier aids your attacks. A soldier can also throw a bottle of alchemist's fire with a +2 bonus to hit.

Lieutenant Hessar Marseine. The only Danoran officer on Axis Island taken captive when the duchess invades, Marseine has a wretched wound to his eye where he took shrapnel from an exploding musket. Several generations of his ancestors died in wars against Risur, and he eagerly served in the Fourth Yerasol War, excited for the chance to repay his grudge.



The duchess's assault has caused his anger to flare back, and he's eager for a chance to spill Risuri blood. But Danoran tradition demands its soldiers to be cool and rational, so he seethes and tries to goad his captors into giving him an excuse for a fight.

Nathan Jierre. Cousin of Lya Jierre and nephew of Danor's sovereign, Nathan avoided politics and pursued science. After years studying theories of magic and astronomy, he came to Axis Island to understand how the two



are tied together. His attention easily drifts to cerebral topics, and so people often have to repeat things to him. But he has a knack for seeing what most people miss, and his enthusiasm for understanding complex interactions helps him unearth things that others are interested in hiding. Once he realized his people were building new weapons, he went to the duchess, hoping to avoid another war. He did not expect the duchess to attack. Now he realizes he's a traitor, and is afraid what will happen when his people find out.



Meet the Grunts.

Sergeant Glassman reports for duty to the PCs, and introduces the rest of his small detachment of warriors, who will be the party's allied soldiers.

Glassman has taken a vow of total honesty, which makes him appear rather fatalistic. If the PCs direct him and his men into harm's way, he'll remind them that it's likely they'll be responsible for his death. He'll obey orders, but he occasionally chimes in with off-color comments. For example, if the PCs decide to send an NPC into danger, he'll suggest, "Send Private Waterhouse first. I don't much like the guy."

The corporal has just finished introductions when a commotion draws the party's attention outside.



The Dreadnought

Action. Real-Time.

A servant of the Unseen Court, high elf warrior Asrabey Varal, makes an imposing and dramatic arrival.

Gunshots and screams of panic sound from one of the Risuri ships in harbor, hundreds of feet away from the lighthouse. A few flashes of fire light up the night, and then a massive ball of flame engulfs the ship. Smoke billows upward as the rigging catches ablaze, and the party can faintly make out a humanoid figure striding across the burning deck. He points a flaming sword and sweeps it in an arc toward the sea wall. All of the gas lamps shatter and go dark.

This is **Asrabey Varal**, armed with a sword of pure fire and a lion-faced shield that can fly and bite his enemies. He then leaps thirty feet from the ship to the sea wall, and his cloak transforms into a cloud of smoke, making him practically invisible in the night.

All this transpires in two rounds, too fast for the PCs to get close enough for a fight.

Asrabey stowed away aboard one of the warships headed for Axis Island, using fey magic to remain invisible in the hold. Once the assault began and the crew disembarked, he left his hiding place, but was confronted by the remaining crew. Refusing to be delayed, he slew the men and cast a spell to set fire to the ship, hoping the demonstration of his power would make others get out of his way.

A few sailors on nearby ships saw what happened, and if the PCs question them they describe the high elf as if he were an invincible demigod. They say he was shot by three men but did not flinch, and that his shield flew from his hand to maul a druid who might have had the magical power to stand against him. Messengers have already set off running to alert the rest of the military. The ship takes an hour to burn to a husk, by which time rowboats have nudged it away from the rest of the fleet.

Character Knowledge. From their own distant observations, or by examining the ship before it becomes too inflamed to be safe, the party might draw some conclusions.

- **Intelligence (Arcana) DC 10:** The magic used is fey in origin.
- **Intelligence (Arcana) DC 15:** The spellcaster was likely a high elf, probably a Vekeshi mystic, based on patterns of scorch marks and the way tongues of the still-active fire takes the shape of hands. A PC with the Vekeshi Mystic theme feat doesn't need to make a check to know this.
- **Intelligence (History) DC 10:** The attacker had a flaming sword and a flying shield. There was a fey warrior who matched that description at a battle two hundred years ago, in the First Yerasol War.
- **Intelligence (History) DC 15:** His name was Asrabey, and he fought to rescue a high elf woman who was captured by a Danoran general. He aided the Risuri forces indirectly, but was not technically an ally.
- **Wisdom (Perception) DC 10:** The warrior's flaming sword switched shapes between a short blade and some sort of long flaming flail or whip.
- **Wisdom (Perception) DC 15:** There is a little fresh blood on the sea wall, probably from the attacker.

One-Elf Killing Machine.

Asrabey is supposed to be much more powerful than the party under normal circumstances, but because he has to fight so many to get to the duchess, the PCs will have a chance to take him down.

Asrabey is a warrior of legendary power (about equivalent to a 15th-level character), but he has been worn down to 20 hit points by the time he reaches the duchess. His defenses are nearly unhittable, but the party can defeat him with lucky rolls, effects that damage without an attack roll, or by various clever tricks. Combat is likely to be fast and brutal, since if they don't drop him, Asrabey can easily take down one PC per round.

In essence, the PCs should be reluctant to engage with Asrabey, in part because they probably don't have any means by which to determine how wounded the high elf actually is. GMs should subtly help players understand that fighting Asrabey is a chancy gambit, one that could end with multiple character deaths!

If PCs succeed on both Intelligence (Arcana and History) checks at DC 15, they also conclude that Asrabey works for the Unseen Court himself, though they can only speculate for now as to why he's here. You might remind them that the duchess has been Risur's liaison to the Unseen Court for decades.

Pursuit. Asrabey is heading at break-neck speed for where the Risuri loyalists are setting up their siege engines. He'll rush to the top of one of those engines as it nears the fort's outer wall, killing anyone who gets in his way. Then he leaps with magical force over the wall and cuts through swaths of the duchess's warriors who make the mistake of attacking him on the far side.

From there he runs to the nondescript warehouse in the outer fort that conceals the *teleportation circle* and disables the defenses the duchess put up around it. His plan is to go to a less-defended section of the inner wall, where he will unleash the power of an ancient magical item to get him into the inner fort. He runs along the tops of the hedges of Gille Dhu's labyrinth, setting it afire, then jumps to the outer wall of the central keep. He uses *spider climb* to reach a window and tears free stones in the wall until he finds the gold thread designed to block teleportation. He then rips the golden ward out, teleports through the window, and battles his way to the top floor of the keep.

Asrabey ultimately plans to confront and kill the duchess, leave a scroll containing a letter for King Aodhan atop her body, and then rush back to the warehouse with the *teleportation circle* and teleport to the mainland using a brief ritual taught to him by his lords in the Unseen Court.

It's not particularly feasible for the party to pursue Asrabey, especially considering the battle going on at the outer wall. The adventure assumes that the party will next cross paths with him as he breaches the inner wall (see *Immurement*, below), but they might manage to run across him before then. Asrabey cares only about his succeeding at his mission, so he prefers to avoid protracted combats and eschew conversation as much as possible. If his movement is blocked, he will cut down one or two PCs, then flee over their bodies, unconcerned about opportunity attacks.



Brig and Belligerence

Social. Real-Time.

The PCs question Danoran prisoners.

About an hour later, a courier finds the PCs and reports that they've found a makeshift brig housing dozens of Danoran prisoners the duchess had captured. Twelve of them are tieflings, and so they thought the party might want to check to see if Nathan Jierre is among them.

The courier can guide the PCs (and their allied soldiers) to the brig, a stable that was hastily converted with iron bars to make cells out of animal pens. Along the way they spot a lot of wounded, a few dead on their side, and slightly more dead on the duchess's side. The soldiers are busy disassembling their siege engines, hoisting them over the outer wall, and reassembling them on the far side, all by torch or lantern light, and while ducking the occasional magical missile or arrow fired from the inner wall.

The brig itself sits about 200 feet from the inner wall, but at a location with minimal fighting. Inside, a single wounded soldier and a handful of enlisted sailors are trying to take a survey of the prisoners, but between the cacophony of livestock and the angered shouts of nearly a hundred Danorans, they're making slow progress.

Infantryman Sander Wodeham took an arrow through his hand, and so was assigned here. He says he was told to convince the Danorans to provide information that might make breaching the inner wall easier. Plus his superiors want a recommendation whether it's safe to release the Danorans and just keep them under watch, so the actual cells could be used to house prisoners from the duchess's forces. Wodeham gladly passes this task off to the PCs.

The Jail Boss.

Nathan Jierre is not here, but if the PCs can get the Danorans talking, they can learn what happened to him. Getting them talking could be tough, though.

Danorans think of Duchess Ethelyn of Shale as an infamous enemy, so when it was clear that the fortress was lost, many soldiers retreated into the island to prepare a guerilla campaign. Those who stayed behind were mostly non-combatants – cooks, maids, factory workers, and such.

Only one officer was taken captive, Lieutenant Hessar Marseine, who took shrapnel to his eye and was unconscious when brought to the brig. The lieutenant has the respect and obedience of the other prisoners, and has ordered them not to answer Risuri questions or help in any way. If the PCs want any information they're going to have to convince Marseine first.

If the PCs start asking questions, the crowd of prisoners yell at them until finally Marseine stands and gestures for them to be quiet. He says they should listen to what the PCs have to say before jumping to conclusions. In truth, though, this is just a polite and reasonable face. Marseine has a short temper and is willing to fight at the slightest provocation. He just wants out of the cell first.



Negotiating.

Marseine already knows the basic story of who's attacking whom and why. He says he'd be willing to have his people provide some help, on the condition that any Danoran who's willing be given weapons and allowed to join the fight against the duchess's forces. He insists on a show of good faith – he wants a pistol, a musket, and a sword – before his people will talk.

Marseine's cooperative if the party gives him what he wants, but if they mock him, question his combat skill, or even just remind him that he's in the brig because of a dumb accident, he'll get snippy, and will start to take everything in the worst light possible. If not handled gently, he might threaten a PC, possibly even attack one if provoked. This could ruin the party's ability to get some useful information.

What They Know.

If the PCs manage to get the prisoners to talk, they report that the duchess's initial assault used the teleportation circle located inside the walls of the fort. No one out of the group here knows much about how magic works, but they were led to understand that the key to activate the portal was secret. They suspect someone on the inside betrayed them. They can show the party in person or on a map.

Additionally, Lieutenant Marseine has a key to the roof door of the central keep, hidden under a pile of hay in his cell. An architect prisoner knows the route of the sewer system under the keep, and could provide a map to let PCs sneak into the basement of the central keep, avoiding the hedge maze labyrinth. The map starts in any of several buildings in the Outer Fort, and the only obstacle in the way to the central keep is some stinking offal and a couple of iron grates. Removing them triggers alarms, but the duchess's forces don't know enough about the fort to respond to the breach.





Immurement

Action. Real-Time.

Asrabey tears the fabric of reality to open a path to the duchess, and the PCs have a chance to follow him.

As the party is wrapping up their investigation of the prison, read or paraphrase the following passage, but give them a chance to interrupt if they want.

A flash of red-orange light illuminates the street from above, and as it streaks by you hear footsteps sprint across the roof of the brig. You hear shouts of dismay outside, a gunshot, and then more shouting. A soldier runs in from the street and yells, "The fire monster's coming!"

Outside you see an entity leap from the roof and into the street, sprinting for the inner wall. The figure resembles a cloud of smoke with a faint humanoid outline inside illuminated by an orange glow.

A couple of defenders on the wall start firing arrows, and you hear an audible curse of pain from the smoky entity. He ducks behind a bit of debris down the street, 80 feet away from the wall, 120 feet from the brig. He pulls out an orb that glows with white light, which pierces even his smoke shroud.

The whole street begins to shake, and the brig with it. Iron nails and iron prison bars shudder in their mountings, and a few rip violently free. In the street outside, cobblestones shatter upward and iron spikes burst out of the ground and float inches off the ground. Some of the Danorans in the brig cry out in shock as the space they're occupying becomes a tangle of jungle. Up on the wall, the duchess's defenders scream as the wall beneath them turns to mist and they plummet to their deaths on a lightly-wooded field.

In an area roughly 200 feet across, the landscape that was the fortress is comingled with a day-lit jungle landscape. Only in places with enough iron does the original landscape remain, while in a few pockets, typically along the edges, other landscapes flicker in and out — a fiery rockslide, a swamp with yellow frogs, a beige bank of clouds. You notice the edges are shrinking inward slowly, and you can guess the wildly powerful magic will only last a minute or two.

On the other side of the comingled terrain, you can make out the keep where you suspect the duchess is, and a huge tangle of brush around it. The smoky entity discards his orb and runs forward through the temporary gap in the inner wall. He casually lashes out a whip of flame to kill a defender who tries to get in his path, and then sprints onward toward the keep.

The light in the orb is slowly fading.

Asrabey has used a rare *immurement*, a type of magic item that houses a sliver of another world within it. The item's power was magnified by the fluctuations of Axis Island. The PCs have a choice between charging ahead into the center of the fort with minimal back-up, or hanging back and being cautious. After a few minutes the *immurement's* magic ends, and the fort returns to its previous shape. The *immurement's* power is expended, but it would be an interesting curio to keep.

If the PCs wait, they can sneak in through sewers, or wait until the military surrounds the keep, by which point Asrabey will have taken the duchess hostage.

If the PCs go in now, emphasize the strangeness of the overlaid world they run through, which is lit by a sun they cannot see. Moments after they clear the gap the *immurement's* magic ends, and the fortress wall snap back into existence. In the sudden darkness, a handful of the duchess's soldiers on distant walls fire errant bowshots. The party will want to make a beeline for the hedge maze only a few dozen feet away. This is the labyrinth of Gillie Dhu, a fey ally of the duchess. The tops of the hedges are already on fire from Asrabey's passage.



Labyrinth of Gillie Dhu

Action/Social. Tactical.

A furious fey tries to thwart the PCs' path to the duchess, but he can be convinced that Asrabey — who just set fire to his hedge maze home — is a greater threat.

Gillie Dhu

Medium fey, chaotic good

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 54 (12d6 + 12)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	19 (+4)	13 (+1)	14 (+2)	15 (+2)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws DEX +6, CHA +6

Skills Stealth +6

Damage Resistances bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks

Senses passive Perception 12

Languages Common, Elven, Sylvan

Challenge 2 (450 XP)

Burning Home. Gillie Dhu is mystically bonded to his hedge maze.

Whenever Gillie Dhu starts his turn, he takes 1 point of fire damage for each hedge square in the labyrinth that is on fire. At the end of Gillie Dhu's turn, every square of burning hedge adjacent to him burns up in a sudden flash and becomes clear terrain.

Hedge Meld. Gillie Dhu can meld with any of his hedges, similar to how the spell *meld into stone* functions. He can remain melded with a hedge as long as he wishes.

Magic Resistance. Gillie Dhu has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Innate Spellcasting. Gillie Dhu's innate spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 14). He can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

3/day each: *faerie fire*, *tree stride* (hedges only)

1/day: *entangle*

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Gillie Dhu makes two +1 *club* attacks.

+1 *Club.* *Melee Weapon Attack:* +3 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 3 (1d4 + 1) bludgeoning damage.



Tactics and Terrain.

When Asrabey reached the hedge, he ran across it, his footsteps igniting a few spots. If the PCs are in hot pursuit of the high elf, when they arrive here they spot Gillie Dhu beating his club at a burning hedge at the edge of his labyrinth. The fire goes out and the bit of hedge withers to ash, opening up a path into the maze.

When Gillie Dhu spots the PCs he disappears into the maze, shouting, "Your flaming friend may have gotten by me, but I shall not let you pass!"

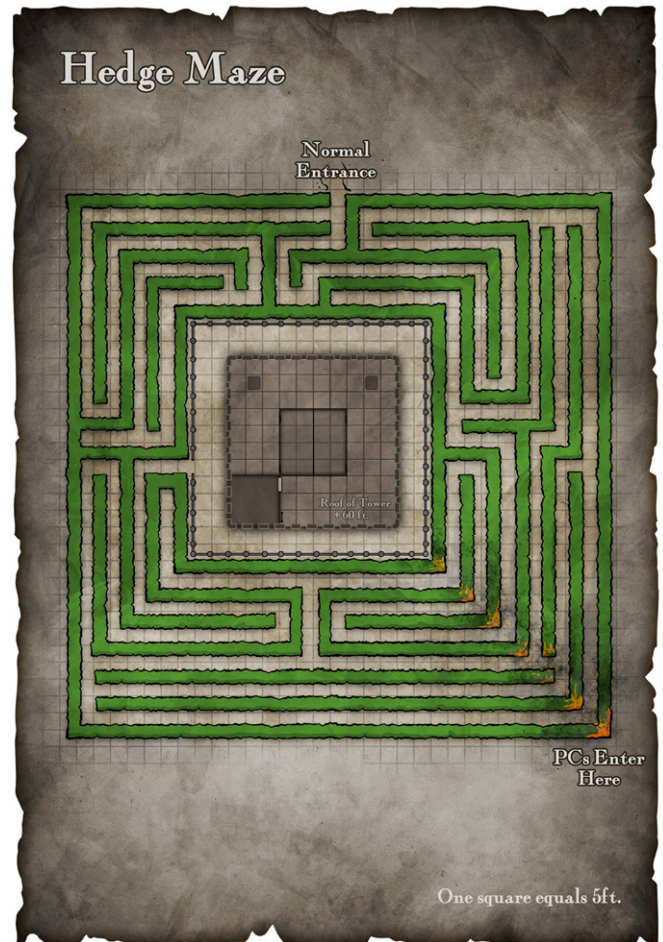
Hedges: Hedges are normally impassible, and they provide concealment and superior cover to those on the opposite side. A character can try to enter a hedge square; doing so requires the character make a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. On a success, moving through the hedges still costs 4 feet of movement for each foot moved. On a failure, the character cannot pass through at all that turn.

Hedges are 8 feet tall and can be climbed by making a successful DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check. The top of a hedge is difficult terrain, and every time a creature moves 5 feet across the top of a hedge, it must make a DC 14 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check, falling prone on a failed check.

Burning Brush: If a spell or attack deals 1 or more fire point of damage, any hedge squares in the area catch fire. A single-target attack can also be aimed at hedge square, and if it does 1 point of fire damage, the hedge square catches fire. A hedge that catches fire burns slowly; it might go out by itself or spread over the course of several minutes, but for the duration of the encounter the hedge simply continues to burn on its own unless someone puts out the fires.

Because each square of burning brush does damage to him, usually Gillie Dhu will disengage from the PCs and rush to put out fires on his turn. He assumes he'll have time to get back to the party before they can navigate the maze. If a PC is creating a lot of fire, though, he'll focus his attacks on that character. Even if the PCs themselves have no ability to deal fire damage, their allied soldiers each have flasks of alchemist fire. Clever PCs can manage to keep Gillie Dhu busy putting out fires until they get to the central keep.

Negotiating: Gillie Dhu gladly talks with the PCs during combat, calling them scalawags and fools for doing the dirty work for a bunch of Danorans. He assumes Asrabey came with the party and the fleet. If the PCs suggest that the high elf means to kill the duchess, and they just want to take her prisoner, that character may attempt to make a successful DC 17 Charisma (Persuasion) Diplomacy check to convince him to stand down and let them into the keep.



The Trio

Social. Real-Time.

The party must confront the deadly Asrabey before he executes the duchess and abducts Nathan Jierre.

At the center of the hedge maze sits the 60-foot-tall tower keep. It consists of three floors. The first two contain a command center, arrow slits around the outer walls, and quarters, with basement supply rooms to hold out in a siege. Cramped sewer tunnels lead into the basement.

The third floor, 20 feet above ground level, houses a library including maps of the island and the night sky, as well as a work room for scholars. The top floor, which has a 40-foot high ceiling, houses a telescope observatory, which Nathan Jierre and other astronomers





used to track the interactions between planetary or stellar orbits and magical fluctuations on the island.

In the observatory, a metal staircase leads to a door that provides access to the crenellated roof, where musketeers could harass any approaching enemies, though the duchess doesn't have enough forces to put troops there. The main bulk of the roof is a mechanically-operated hatch. Controls in the observatory can manipulate the hatch to provide a broad view of the night sky. The door and hatch are both locked from the inside.

The duchess has been directing the battle from the keep, and her non-combatant advisors and allies – including Nathan Jierre – fled to the observatory when Asrabey attacked. The high elf managed to breach the keep's defenses and kill the duchess's guards. If the PCs are in pursuit, moments before they arrive he defeats the duchess in battle, and prepares to execute her.

Getting In. If the PCs reach the front door, they find it ajar and burning, having been blasted open from within by Asrabey. If they took the sewer route, they emerge in the basement and find the lower level smoldering. The bodies of dozens of soldiers lie about slashed and charred, and as the party ascends the stairs it should be clear that Asrabey is far more powerful than them.

Alternately, the PCs might climb the outer wall of the tower and enter through the roof door, using a key provided by Lieutenant Marseine.

Eavesdropping. If the PCs reach the top floor after pursuing Asrabey, they hear Asrabey, the duchess, and Nathan Jierre arguing in the observatory chamber. A few of the duchess's advisors lie nearby, killed only moments earlier, as well as a dozen soldiers who had been protecting the roof. The duchess sits on the ground, holding a hand over her stomach, which is blackened and bloody. The bodies of slain summoned wolves are slowly fading away. Nathan Jierre cowers on the far side of the chamber, trying to hide behind an orrery.

Asrabey circles the duchess, limping slightly. He's covered in small cuts and bruises, and is managing to stay standing despite a handful of arrow and bullet wounds across his legs and arms. His wooden, lion-faced shield bears fresh blood on its fangs, and his flaming sword flares whenever he wants to emphasize a word or sentence. The smoke shroud does not hang around him.

Read or paraphrase the following, but give the PCs a chance to interrupt at any time. If the party decided to wait for the army to surround the keep, they can hear the details of this conversation.

You can hear the discussion clearly.

Duchess: "Asrabey, don't do anything you'll regret."

Asrabey: "Save your pleading breath for prayer."

Duchess: "If you have come for the reason I suspect, you should pray with me as well. You are a murderer, Asrabey. Did I so displease the Court that you needed to slaughter a hundred to reach me?"

Asrabey: "To forestall war, yes! Your people must not think we are the ally of a kingslayer. And worse," he sneers at the tiefling, "one who consorts with devils."

Tiefling: "Um, perhaps reason is bit much to expect at this time, but can we talk about this?"

The high elf flicks his sword, which extends out to a flaming whip and cracks the tiefling across his face, then snaps back to a longsword.

Asrabey: "You are lucky your cursed flesh will not burn. But I have other ways to make you suffer." To the duchess he says, "Prepare yourself, and you may die with dignity."

Duchess: "Wait! My brother won't execute his own blood, and so long as I live I can still oppose him. There are more important matters than—"

Asrabey: "You struck the first blow. Aodhan was a soldier, as I am, and forgiveness does not come easily to our kind. He'll never listen to you, not in the short years he has left. Already you are vilified. You promised your land would pull away from these fiends, would return to the old ways, yet you have fallen in with them yourself."

Duchess: "You don't understand. Nathan is on our side. There's a threat to Risur and the Unseen. I told the Court as much—"

Asrabey: "Enough. Ethelyn, please do not make me watch you beg."

Duchess: She glares. "Asrabey Varal, your closed mind has doomed us all." She sits up straight despite her stomach wound. "Very well. Finish it."

Tiefling: "Wait a minute, Varal? Are you kin to a Kasvarina Varal?"

The high elf stops before he has managed to raise his sword for a killing blow. He turns away from the duchess, grabs the tiefling by his vest, and leans close.

High Elf: "How do you know Kasvarina?"

Tiefling: "Um, what? She—she was here, months ago! She was on the arm of a Crisillyiri man. In the company of my cousin. They took a tour of the mines. They left a few days later. I... I think she was the one who crafted the portal ring."

Duchess: "Asrabey, I'm trying to tell you, he's an ally. He's seen things, and we're trying to find out what it all means. I think Danor means to destroy both our nations. My brother wouldn't listen, even the Court ignored me, but you have to believe me."

The high elf considers for a long moment, then he heads for the double doors to check his escape route.

If the PCs aren't here, Asrabey sees the battle outside and realizes that getting Nathan Jierre off the island will be difficult, so he changes plans and prepares a hostage situation. But if the PCs are here, Asrabey notices them. If they don't make the first move, he'll demand they leave or else he'll kill the duchess.

Hostage Situation. If Asrabey gets a chance to issue demands, he says that he intends to leave Axis Island with the tiefling. To that end, he explains that he first wants a message delivered to King Aodhan explaining that the Unseen Court did not endorse the duchess's actions and that they desire her execution as a traitor. Second, he wants a ship prepared with an unarmed skeleton crew. They will sail him to the Risuri mainland, at which point he will let them go. He will keep the duchess with him, but will hand her over once he boards the ship. He claims that he has no intention of harming the duchess.

The whole plan is a ruse, though. He actually intends to use the duchess as a human shield until he and Nathan Jierre can reach the outer fort. Then he will slit her throat, heave Nathan over his shoulder, and run for the *teleportation circle*. Once there, he only needs about a minute to complete his spell, which will teleport him to an old forest deep in the Risuri wetlands.



Brinksmanship. Asrabey hesitates to open combat, because he hopes to intimidate the party into leaving. He's not sure he has the strength left to take them in a fight. The party might likewise try to cow him into backing down.

The high elf is willing to talk for a few minutes to get a gauge of the party's intentions and willingness to risk their lives. The duchess – who recognizes any PCs she saw aboard the *Coalton-gue* – tries to break in and explain why she tried to kill her brother. She tells of her vision (see page [[xx]]), but Asrabey cuts her off soon after that. He's not interested in letting his hostages talk, and will try to cow the party into leaving.

Combat. If the party refuses to leave or raises weapons to fight, Asrabey will try to knock them all unconscious. The duchess is at 0 hit points and has no spells remaining for the day, but she's stable. She won't die from her wounds, but she can't fight unless a PC can grant her healing. Nathan Jierre is a noncombatant with **commoner** statistics.

Asrabey Varal

Medium humanoid (high elf), chaotic neutral

Armor Class 24 (+2 *plate*, +2 *shield*)

Hit Points 171 [20 remaining] (18d8 + 90)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	19 (+4)	20 (+5)	12 (+1)	12 (+1)	8 (-1)

Saving Throws Con +9, Wis +5

Skills Intimidation +7, Perception +5

Condition Immunities frightened

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 11

Languages Common, Elven, Sylvan

Challenge 13 (10,000 XP)

Elven Spellcasting. Asrabey Varal knows the *prestidigitation* cantrip, and can cast it at-will.

Fey Ancestry. Asrabey has advantage on saving throws against being charmed, and magic can't put him to sleep.

Magic Resistance. Asrabey has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Superior Heavy Armor Master. While wearing heavy armor, Asrabey reduces any bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage taken from nonmagical weapons by 5.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Asrabey Varal makes four melee attacks.

Vekeshi Blade. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +9 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 11 (1d8 + 7) slashing damage plus 10 (3d6) fire damage. As a bonus action, Asrabey can transform this longsword into a whip with a range of 15 feet. It deals the same damage as it does in longsword form.

Heavy Crossbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +8 to hit, range 100/400 ft., one target. Hit: 6 (1d10 + 4) piercing damage.

Inspiring Leadership (Recharges after a Short or Long Rest). As an action, Asrabey Varal rouses his troops to vigilance for one minute. Any nonhostile creature within 30 feet who can see or hear him adds 1d6 to any attack rolls and saving throws for the duration. A creature can only benefit from one Inspiring Leadership bonus at a time. If Asrabey is incapacitated or otherwise unable to speak, the effect ends.



High-Level Equipment.

Below are the listed rules for all equipment wielded by the Dreadnought Asrabey Varal. Take note that the equipment presented here is meant for GM reference only, and PCs should not be expected to acquire this gear under any circumstance, as it far exceeds their current power level. On the same note, statistics are presented here for Duchess Ethelyn, but she is left unequipped. GMs can assume she trusted her most precious items to minions, or GMs can craft their own item set for the noblewoman as potential extra rewards for completing the adventure.

Lion Shield

This wooden +2 *shield* can also be loosed to attack on its own. It fights for 4 rounds, using its wielder's Strength and proficiency bonus to bite its wielder's enemies (+9 to hit, 2d6 + 5 piercing damage). On a hit, it may grapple a target (escape DC 15). While grappling a creature, the shield cannot attack any other creatures. While attacking, it cannot make opportunity, and the person who activated it is not considered as having the shield equipped. The shield is considered wielded or attended by the creature for all maneuvers and effects that target items. While attacking, the shield shares the same space as the activating character and can attack adjacent foes. The shield accompanies the person who activated it everywhere, whether that person moves by physical or magical means. If the wielder who loosed it has an unoccupied hand, they can grasp it while it is attacking on its own as a free action; when so retrieved, the shield can't dance (attack on its own) again for 4 rounds.

Cloak of Smoke

An ornate cloak from the lands of the Unseen Court, this cloak fills the air around the wearer with a constant roil of smoke. This cloak's wearer can take the Dodge action as a bonus action.

Glamered Plate

Woven of a distilled essence made from stories of warriors dodging deadly blows, this cloth tunic protects its wearer as well as +2 *plate*, but does not impose disadvantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks.



Duchess Ethelyn of Shale

Medium humanoid (human), chaotic neutral

Armor Class 12 (15 with *mage armor*)

Hit Points 55 (10d8 + 10)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (-1)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)	19 (+4)

Saving Throws Wisdom +3, Charisma +7

Skills Arcana +4, Deception +7, Persuasion +7,

Senses darkvision ## ft., passive Perception 10

Languages Common, Sylvan

Challenge 5 (1,800 XP)

Spellcasting. Duchess Ethelyn is a 10th level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks).

She knows the following sorcerer spells:

Cantrips (at will): *fire bolt*, *light*, *mage hand*, *mending*, *message*, *prestidigitation*

1st level (4 slots): *detect magic*, *expeditious retreat*, *mage armor*, *shield*

2nd level (3 slots): *enhance ability*, *invisibility*

3rd level (3 slots): *haste*, *lightning bolt*

4th level (3 slots): *confusion*, *dimension door*

5th level (2 slots): *teleportation circle*

Metamagic. Duchess Ethelyn has 10 sorcery points to spend on metamagic. She has the following metamagic options:

Empowered Spell (1 sorcery point): When Ethelyn rolls damage for a spell, she can reroll up to 4 damage dice. She must use the new rolls.

She can use Empowered Spell even if she has already used a different metamagic option during the casting of the spell.

Subtle Spell (1 sorcery point): When Ethelyn casts a spell, she can cast it without any somatic or verbal components.

Quickened Spell (2 sorcery points): When Ethelyn casts a spell that has a casting time of 1 action, she can cast it as a bonus action.

ACTIONS

Dagger. *Melee or Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft. or range 20/60 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) piercing damage.

Tactics and Terrain.

The ceiling here rises an impressive 40 feet high. A 10 foot. high platform dominates the room, with a 20-foot high telescope mounted atop it, leaving a 10-foot space to a hatch, which opens up to allow viewing of the night sky. A control panel at the base of the telescope can be activated as a minor action to open the hatch to the roof. The panel can also adjust the aim of the telescope.

Someone inclined to climb the telescope can find easy handholds (Climb DC 8), though not much space to stand or fight.

Someone atop the telescope, or with a rope (or a whip, like Asrabey's sword), can spend a standard action and attempt a DC 12 Strength (Athletics) check to knock the huge object off its mount and crush those nearby. Those in the way must make a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw, taking 2d8 bludgeoning damage on a failed saving throw, or half as much damage on a success.

A few bits of furniture are covered in charts and old plates of food. Doors in the north corners lead to the hydraulic mechanisms that move the roof hatch, as well as rain cisterns.

A catwalk staircase in the southwest corner provides roof access,



but the door at the top of the stairs is locked from the outside. It can be opened with a successful DC 20 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. The roof itself has crenellations, but all the defenders who had been there rushed down and were cut down by Asrabey.

Fight. Asrabey charges into the midst of the PCs and tries to take them out as quickly as possible. Realizing that killing the famed investigators who saved King Aodhan might provoke further unwanted attention towards the Unseen Court, Asrabey uses only non-lethal attacks on the PCs.

Negotiation and Takedown. Truly bold PCs might convince Asrabey to leave without a fight. Even if the PCs convince him he can't win a fight, he at first demands to leave them the duchess, while they give him the tiefling. The party had better be very imposing to get him to leave and take nothing back. He definitely refuses to surrender, though he could be taken alive after a fight.

Aftermath

Social. Montage.

On behalf of the victorious forces, the PCs turn control of Axis Island back to Danor.

After resolving the situation with Asrabey, the party might have prisoners – or bodies – to take back to Risur. The navy came prepared to take spellcasters into custody, and can slap *mage cuffs* (see Player's Guide Part 3) on the duchess or Asrabey if needed. Nathan



Jierre cooperates, though he enthusiastically petitions the PCs to guarantee him passage to Risur, especially if he learns that his cousin Lya is coming.

With fairly limited time left before the island must be handed over, the party might search for clues of what was going on. It should be clear that Danor was experimenting here with merging magic and industry, and that they're on track to build military shipyards and gunworks. The excavations of ancient ruins might raise some suspicions, but there is no evidence of a direct, immediate threat to Risur.

Nathan's Knowledge.

Either by speaking with Nathan Jierre, or making a few Intelligence (Arcana or Nature) checks in the observatory, the party learns that the Danorans were interested in tracking an unusual interaction of magic and planetary movement. While the Skyseers and others long ago noted how the planets affect major types of elemental magic, Nathan was tasked with determining what magic is affected by the much more distant stars.

The star he has been observing the most lately is a bright blue one, the same color as the sun the PCs witnessed when reality flickered earlier. He also has, in a glass case, a dissected frog from that same strange place, pinned down with gold needles.

Departure.

The military grabs the duchess's forces, loads its people on ships, and departs. Eventually only the *Impossible* remains behind. Near sunset, a steam-powered Danoran warship named *Lux Profectusque* – squatter and slower than the *Coaltongue*, but sturdier for open seas travel – coasts into the Axis Fortress harbor. Lya Jierre disembarks, flanked by a pair of unusual bodyguards.

Lya's Retinue.

The first, **Rush**, is a snide half-elf who carries a pair of elaborately decorated platinum rods, slotted into holsters at his hips. Amid images of roiling clouds and celestial spheres, two golden buttons stand out by each rod's gripping end. The man's forearms are massively muscled.

The second, a hulking, half-deaf half-orc named **Merton**, wears a steel helmet with unusually thick protection over his ears, but otherwise has no armor. He holds a thickly-wrapped object, like an overlong walking staff, twice as thick at the top as where he holds it. Layers of white cashmere conceal the object's head.

These two warriors accompany Lya most everywhere she goes, and when the party finally gets an opportunity to face them in combat in a later adventure, they will discover that Rush fights with a pair of specially-designed extensible *immovable rods*, while Merton carries a polearm capped with an adjustable and powerful sonic tine, like a giant tuning fork. Lya Jierre, of course, has an arcano-technological *sword of sharpness (rapier)*.

Handover.

When Lya sees the party she smiles and asks if she can take back her country's island. She'd like to know what happened, especially

Punishments and Pardons.

A few months pass between this adventure and the next, *The Dying Skyseer*. In that time, the king gets his house mostly in order, though some protest groups are emboldened and treat the duchess as a hero, especially if she died. If she survived, a public ritual strips her of her title, leaving her with only weak magical powers. Now just Ethelyn, she's imprisoned in the Bridge Tower in Slate.

Nathan Jierre, if the PCs let him go to Risur, becomes a guest of a minor noble in Flint, but his movements are almost as limited as the duchess's. If the Danorans get him, he eventually flees a trial for treason and finds his way to Risur anyway.

The PCs get a very stern talking to if they killed Asrabey, because he was technically a diplomat of the Unseen Court, but circumstances justify their actions. If he survives, he is soon allowed to return to the Dreaming with no consequences. His sword, shield, and cloak are returned to him, or given to his allies if he died, along with his body.

to her cousin, but first she has to go through a few formalities. She produces a pair of matching documents, minor treaties that state simply, without any legalese or jargon that Risur condemns the duchess's attack on the island and will not press a claim to its ownership on account of this particular military event. The PCs are empowered to sign on behalf of Risur.

Lya is genuinely thankful the party has helped avert a crisis, and even if they have bad news about her cousin, she remains positive. She asks that the party leave soon, because not all of her people are as fond of Risur as she is.

But before the party leaves, find some way to work into the conversation that Lya Jierre is planning to marry King Aodhan if the negotiations over the next year go well. She might mention (if Nathan is headed to Risur) that she hopes she'll see him before the wedding; or she might simply invite the PCs by way of saying thanks.

With that, there's nothing left to do but board the *Impossible* and sail back to Risur. The mission is accomplished, but a mystery is just starting to reveal itself.

Conclusion

By the end of this adventure, the players should have a clear sense of the relationships among Risur, Danor, and the Unseen Court. The PCs have met several future power players, including King Aodhan and Lya Jierre, and they should realize that Danor is up to something on Axis Island, but they aren't equipped to find out what yet. And by finding themselves in the right place at the right time (more than one time, already), they've had a chance to shape the fate of their nation.

The next adventure, *The Dying Skyseer*, keeps the action and mystery entirely in the city of Flint, as a high-profile murder draws the party into an investigation of foreign doctors, fey terrorists, local corruption, and soul-stealing dark magic from the city's past. In order to prepare for these coming trials, each PC should be awarded an additional level, making them 4th level as the next adventure in the ZEITGEIST adventure path begins.



Hold the Lighthouse

Timeline.

Each round is one minute. Allies arrive in round ten, and if the sea gate is open, the PCs win. Each round, first all the PCs act, then all enemies act. Enemies that are destroyed still act and are removed at the end of the round. PCs reduced to 0 HP or less automatically stabilize.

Tracking Locations.

Place PC minis in the appropriate area whenever they move. Use coins or dice to keep track of how many enemies and barricade points are in each area.

PC Turn.

PCs move to an area, then take one action. Suggested actions include:

- *Assemble Barricade.* Strength or Knowledge (Engineering) DC 15. Create 3 points of barricade inside lighthouse, or 2 points outside lighthouse. On a failed check, create 1 point. Area must have no enemies.
- *Battle.* No check or attack roll required. Destroy 1 enemy, or 2 if clever or daring.
- *Brace.* Strength or Constitution DC 10. Barricade in your area resists first 2 points of enemy action this turn.
- *Set Trap or Ward.* Craft (Trapmaking), Disable Device, or Spellcraft DC 15. When enemies enter this area, destroy 1 enemy. The trap is expended.
- *Stall.* Diplomacy or Intimidate DC 15. Enemies don't advance this turn. +2 DC per round.

PCs can also cast spells or use potions/scrolls to heal or prevent damage without having to spend extra actions, but each such effort incurs a -1 penalty to skill checks for that turn.

Enemy Turn.

Enemies move as far as they can toward the lighthouse interior. They stop when they reach a location with a PC, trap, or ward. If there are any barricades in an area, they stop *before* entering that area.

Then for each enemy, act in the following order.



- Remove 1 point of barricade from an adjacent area until there are no adjacent barricades.
- Deal 2 damage to a PC that shares the area with the enemy. PCs can choose who among them takes the damage.
- Deal 1 damage to a PC in another area.

On the Sea Wall

Cannot be barricaded.

Outside Lighthouse

Can have up to 20 points of barricades.

Inside Lighthouse

Can have up to 10 points of barricades. PCs can't enter or leave this area if there are more than 5 points of barricades.