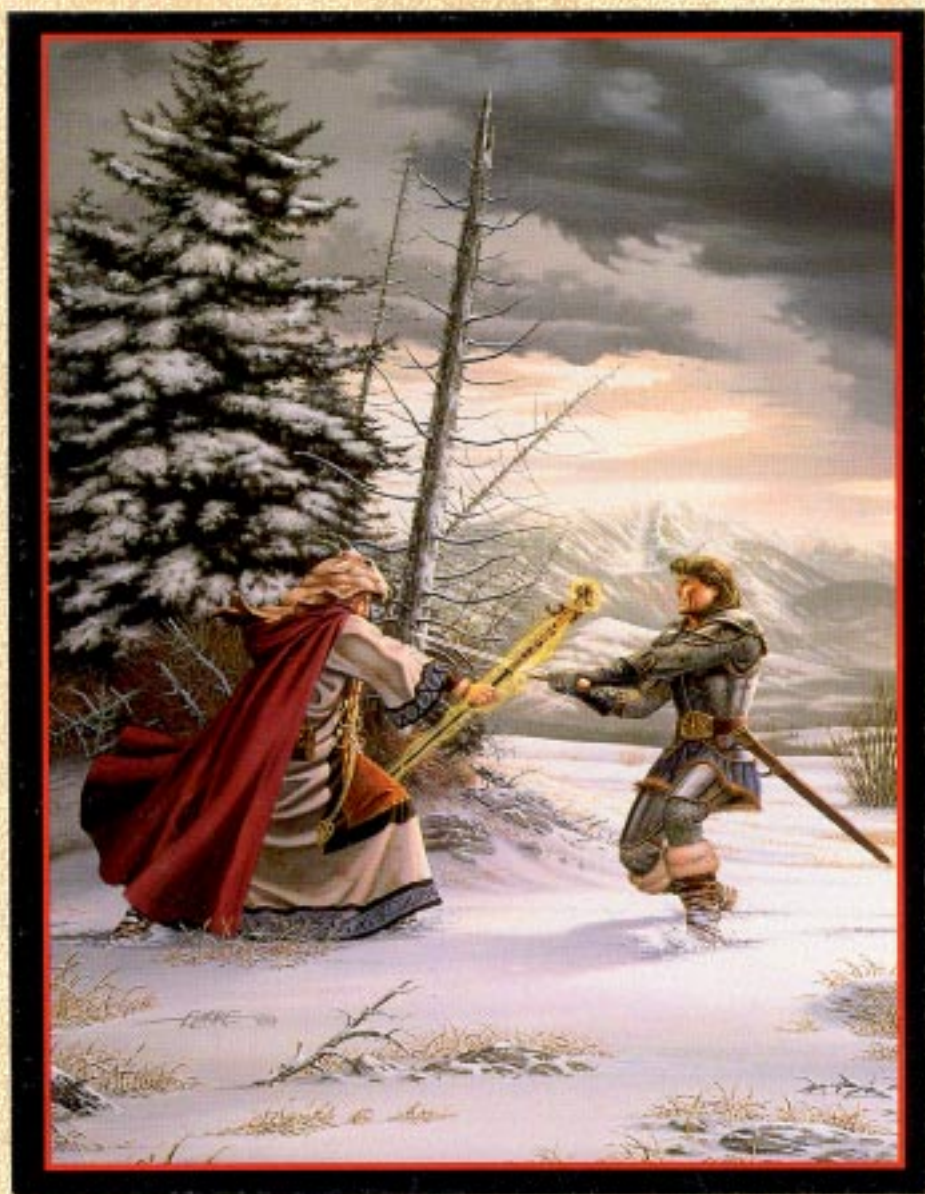


Advanced Dungeons & Dragons®
2nd Edition

Player's Guide to the



Campaign





The Player's Guide To The Forgotten Realms[®] Campaign

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Introduction



lore! Welcome to the FORGOTTEN REALMS® World.

If you're a newcomer, the dozens of novels and game volumes may seem daunting. Where do you start reading?

Don't worry. Start here!

The book in your hands is both an introduction to and reference for the fantasy world beloved to ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game players. But you don't need to know the game to discover the world within these covers—there's no jargon or lengthy statistics here.

Journal entries from the *Annals of the Seekers*, a half-elf's chronicling of the many exploits of his adventuring company, allow you to explore the Realms firsthand. Live their triumphs and dangers! Unravel their mysteries! For the brave of heart and keen of wit, glory awaits. Safe journey!

What are The Forgotten Realms?

Some theorists explain dragons and other fantastic occurrences by postulating parallel worlds. In times past, they believe, travel between mundane worlds—like our own—and more exotic locales was easy and frequent. But we have lost contact, and lost the worlds themselves. Lost, or forgotten.

Abeir-Toril, more commonly Toril, is an Earth-sized planet dominated by a continent in its northern hemisphere. Called Faerûn in the west, it is here that the Forgotten Realms lie. Although other large landmasses sprawl across Toril's surface, and indeed, other civilizations share the continent with Faerûn, these regions are merely rumors and legends to most Realmfolk—perhaps known, but rarely visited. They do not concern us.

Turn Back To Medieval Times

In many ways, the Forgotten Realms are similar to our Earth of the 13th and 14th centuries. Until recently, much of the area was wild forests and unsettled grasslands.

Civilization is still a novelty. The births of the oldest of cities on the Inland Sea—even the founding of Waterdeep, now jewel of the North—lie within the memory of some ancient elves in Evermeet. History is young.

Faerûn's peoples share the mindsets and advancements of 13th-century Earth. City-states are common, and organized nations are rising where wilderness is pushed back. Farming and craft-industry skills are widespread. Swords and heavy metal armor are readily available, and too-often put to use.

Literacy and the quest for knowledge continue to advance civilization. The





recent innovation of printed hand-bills has transformed alley walls in Waterdeep. As markets and resources are discovered, the merchant class grows in both wealth and power.

Though not as dominant as it was in Europe of this period, faith is a major force in people's daily lives, be they commoner or noble. Realmfolk pay homage to many gods.

Here Be Monsters and Magic

There are also tremendous differences between the world of the Realms and our own. There, monstrous beasts and evil humanoids prowl the wilderness, sometimes to the very outskirts of cities and settlements. Travel, whether by land or sea, can be treacherous.

Most differently, the Realms have magic.

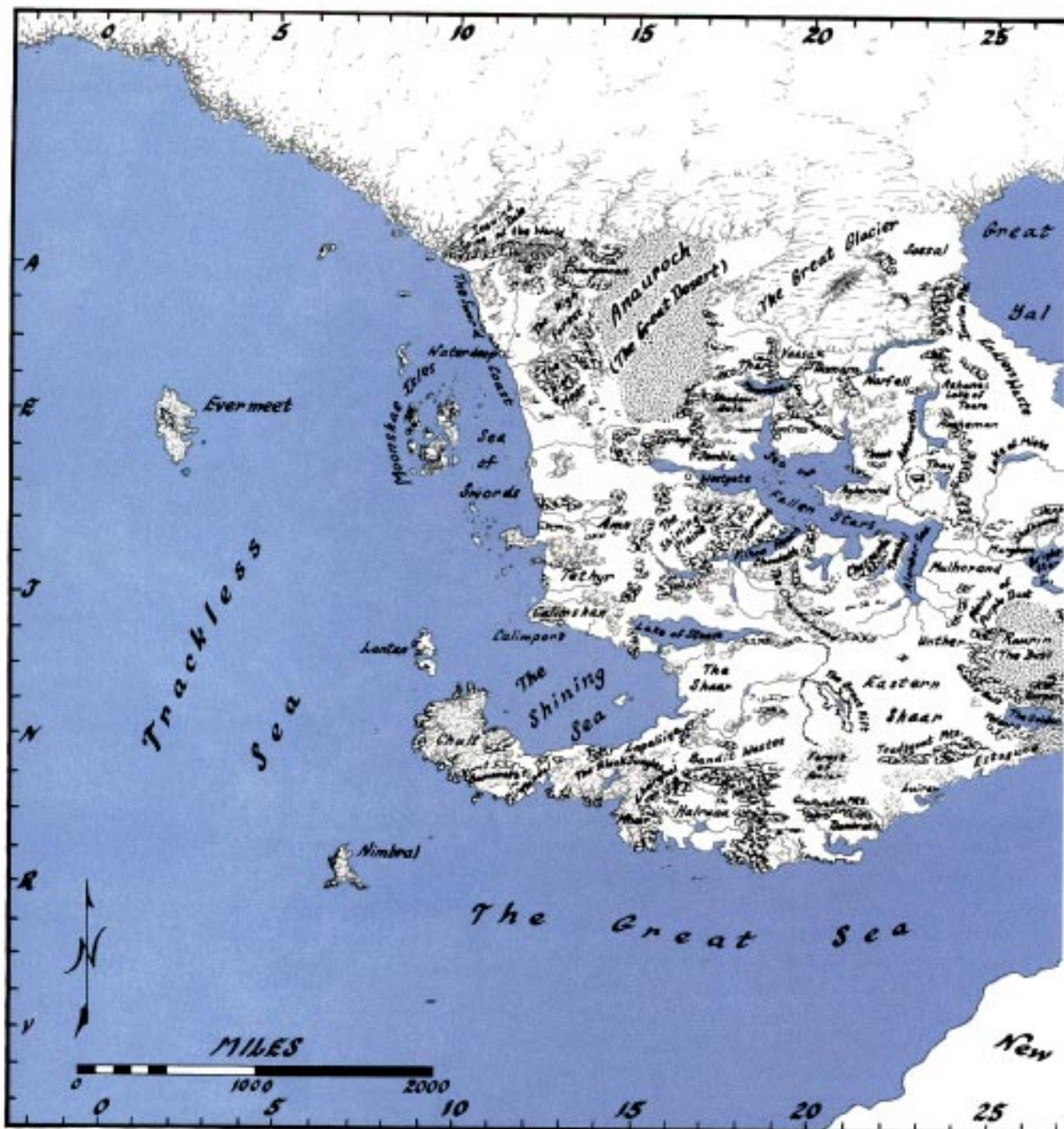
Some say magic (or the "Art") was a gift to the Realmfolk from the goddess Mystra, who later regretted her charity. With or without Mystra's blessing, some individuals study the Art. These wizards have learned the ability to channel magical energies.

And not only wizards handle extraordinary power. The gods here allow believers to work miracles in their names. Priests and clerics perform acts of healing and power our modern world might well call sorcery.

In the Realms, such mages and priests can alter the very face of the world. Indeed, they have done so over the millennia. Mountains may walk, and hills and forests appear where none stood before. In the heart of the Realms, an immense sandy waste spreads southward. An equally relentless glacier advances to its east.

Kings rise and nations fall. Evil forces gather like thunderheads. And the need for valiant action calls the hero forth.





Cross Section at F: Western Realms

Evermeet Trackless Sea The Moonshades The Sword Coast Evermeet The Sea of Fallen Stars The Eastern Shear Ashae The Horse

Cross Section at N:

Trackless Sea Jungles of Chult The Shining Sea The Shear The Great Rift Eastern Shear



Hordelands *Eastern Realms*
 Plains Quoya Desert Dragonwall Chukai Plateau Yellow Sea Wa & Kozakura Eastern Sea

The Golden Kingdom The Yehima Plateau Shou Lung Fu Lung The Blood Plains Eastern Sea





The Seekers: Who They Are



Bublim Barboast, Gnome Illusionist

From the Annals of the Seekers, as written by Furian Arcanus:

Bublim Barboast is one of the most interesting (and strangest) individuals I have met. In many drinking establishments, this friendly gnome is known as “The Stupendous Bublim Barboast,” a name he considers his “stage-name.” He amuses patrons by performing feats of dexterity, juggling, and tumbling, and by his enchanting illusions, in exchange for an ever-growing bar tab.

When performing, Bublim dresses in blaringly colorful clothing ornamented with tinkling bells and various other trinkets. While adventuring, he has the sense to dress appropriately, and displays considerable wisdom

and caution in dangerous situations. However, he cannot quite control his obsession for practical jokes, with Lorrick being his primary target. Through minor illusions and mundane pranks, Bublim loves to get a rise out of the surly dwarf. One of these days, Bublim will likely get more than he bargained for (just ask Samkin!).

From what Bublim has told me, he was separated from his family many winters ago, during an untimely war—between humans and goblins—that rolled across his homeland, causing much confusion. Though he wants to find his family, the gnome does not seem concerned about commencing this personal quest. He has been with us Seekers from the beginning, and plans to remain until he has enough good stories to tell his family. Then, he will begin the search for them.

Though this seems strange to me, I suppose it is quite typical of gnomes—they seem to twist whatever struggle fate brings them into a happy ending. After all, Bublim will be happy—when he is reunited with his family. And the stories he will have to tell!

Gnomes

Gnomes are a short, friendly race common in most of the Realms. Smaller and less stocky than dwarves, they are thought to be distant relatives (though among gnomes, only men have beards).

Regardless of age, gnome faces are creased with smile and frown lines, as if carved from wood. Their natural skin coloring, from light ash and maple tones to the warm darkness of varnished and buffed oak, increases the tendency to think of gnomes as a woods folk.

Gnomes seem unbothered by the world, and only rarely become involved with it. They have no written history, preferring to keep records only in the memories of the eldest clan members and the songs of legend. Gnomes value their families first, then whatever other relatives they encounter, then other gnomes, and finally the world, in that order.



Esta Starchild Elven Priestess

Esta Starchild is a moon elf. Her skin is the color of snow, and her long hair shimmers an enchanting blue-black shade. Motes of gold adorn her dark blue eyes, like the early morning sky with the faintest traces of yellow stars. She possesses a majestic, exquisite beauty that holds my gaze and my heart. Alas, only this journal knows of my true feelings for her.

Starchild chose not to make the Retreat to Evermeet with the rest of her family. She has told me that the goddess Selûne has other plans for her, and requires Esta to remain in the Realms. This gladdens my heart. Perhaps when the fateful day arrives that she must finally depart, I might be allowed to make the journey with her. I have faith that both Mystra and Selûne will hear my prayer.

Starchild is certainly a devout priestess of Selûne.

Whenever possible she sets out alone upon moonlit walks, which she calls night-stalks, to commune with the goddess. Only twice has she invited me to join her. I cherish the memories of these peaceful walks, for without them, we are seldom apart from the company.

Perhaps next walk I will have the courage to tell Starchild of my love. . .

Elves

The elves once ruled large portions of the Realms—after the time of dragons and before the coming of humans. Elven numbers in the Realms have since dwindled, as the majority have retreated before the onslaught of mankind, seeking quieter forests.

Elves are of human height but much more slender, with light, strong bones. Their delicately tapered fingers and hands are half-again as long as those of humans. Elven faces are thin and serene; their ears are pointed. Elven lifespans are counted in centuries, not in mere decades.

There are five known elven sub-races in the Forgotten Realms, and four of them live in relative harmony.

Gold Elves, also called sunrise elves or high elves, tend to be recognized as the most civilized of the elven sub-races and the most aloof from mankind.

Moon Elves, often called silver or grey elves, are more tolerant of humans than the other elven sub-races.

Wild Elves, sometimes known as green elves, forest elves, or wood elves, are reclusive and distrusting of non-elves, in particular humankind.

Sea Elves, having webbed feet and hands, along with the ability to breathe water, seldom encounter humans within their aquatic domains.

Dark Elves, also called drow or night elves, are the most sinister and evil of the elven races. Most have been driven underground, and are shunned by the other elven sub-races.





Furian Arcanus, Half-Elf Mage- Priest

I myself am a half-elf, the male child of a female human and a male moon elf. My skin is pale by human standards, with just a hint of blue. My eyes are blue, and my hair as black as night.

I have never met my father, though I know of him, and hope to meet him one day. He is an adventurer of some renown. Consequently, he is always traveling. Whenever I get close to finding him, he eludes me. I hope this is not intentional. Starchild assures me only that when the time is right, my path will cross with that of my father. She gives me hope, but little else.

I was raised by my mother in Waterdeep, the City of Splendors. In this fabulous place I learned the Art, and became a priest of Mystra, the Lady of Mysteries. She is a goddess of magic. I wear her symbol, a blue star, tattooed upon my brow.

It was also in Waterdeep that I met Starchild, and

joined the Seekers at her urging (and with the permission of my order, of course). This was without doubt the wisest decision of my life. Thoughts of the adventures yet to come (and a future with Starchild) set my heart ablaze.

I have taken it upon myself to keep a record of our journey. I believe an accurate accounting is important, both as a source of information concerning the many and varied Forgotten Realms, and as a warning against their frequent dangers.

Half-Elves

Half-elves are a mixture of human and elf. They are more slender than humans yet stockier than elves. Though they may or may not have pointed ears, all half-elves have the elf's finely-chiseled facial features. It is possible for a half-elf to pose either as fully human or fully elf, but usually such a ruse is soon discovered.

Half-elves are not a true race, and as such have no national or racial heritage beyond that of the area in which they were raised. A half-elf raised in an Elven Court thinks like an elf, while one from Cormyr, for example, thinks as a human.

Moon Half-Elves tend to be pale with just a touch of blue around the ears and at the chin.

Gold Half-Elves are bronzed of skin.

Wild Half-Elves are very rare; their bronzed skin is touched with green.

Sea Half-Elves commonly have a light green fleshtone.

Drow Half-Elves are very rare indeed and tend to be dusky-colored with white hair.

Half-elves may mate and breed. Such unions always produce the offspring of the other parent (a half-elf/elf pairing produces elven children, while the children of a half-elf/human pairing are human). Second generation half-elves may be born – but only if two half-elves marry.





Lorrick, Dwarven Warrior

From what I have observed in the short time I have known him, Lorrick is quite typical of his race—sullen and quick to anger. And yet, beneath his stern exterior I have glimpsed the noble heart of a warrior and a loyal companion. Of all the members of this company of adventurers, I would most readily place my safety in the rugged hands of this quiet dwarf.

From the few occasions when Lorrick has told me of his past, I have learned that his homeland is Adbarrim, a subterranean realm beneath Citadel Adbar. He became an outcast due to some transgression or other against the teachings of Moradin Soulforger, Ruler of Dwarven Gods. Lorrick will not speak of his wrongful act. I suspect he is innocent, for it is difficult to imagine this noble dwarf committing any crimes against his own kind.

However, against his enemies, particularly goblins, Lorrick's anger comes quickly, like a roiling storm. I

remember well the day we came upon the den of a band of goblin cutthroats. Lorrick demanded to enter alone, and scarcely an hour later he returned, dripping with gore and grinning broadly. Now that I think upon it, I believe that is the only time I have seen this fierce dwarven warrior smile.

Dwarves

Dwarves are a short, stocky people who look as if they have sprung from the earth itself. Their skin tones range in shade and hue from a rich earth-red to a granite-stone grey. Both dwarven males and females have beards, though the females usually shave.

For ages the dwarves have engaged in wars bordering on the genocidal, fighting against those races—particularly orcs and goblins—who sought the same caverns and mines the dwarves considered their homes. Unlike the goblin races, however, the dwarves are slow to recover their populations, and in time their numbers have diminished greatly.

As a result, dwarves tend to melancholy and defeatism. However, many find relief in their crafts or adventuring.

Most dwarves remain secretive about their homelands. Their small kingdoms are known only in a general fashion. Commonly, dwarves identify their home as some long-abandoned or enemy-occupied hold, such as the dwarves that were of Hammer Hall, or the Iron House, who had been driven out of the Mines of Tethyamar.

Dwarves remain deeply tied to a sense of family and nobility. As their race declines, so too do the nobles, who are treated with respect, despite any long-running feuds between dwarven kings.

Finally, deep beneath the surface of Faerûn dwells a race of twisted dwarflike creatures called the duergar. Surface dwarves despise them with a hatred that exceeds even the hatred of elves for the drow.





Samkin Silvertooth, Halfling Thief

Samkin is not so upitty as most halflings are. This is due in part to his acquisition of the name Silvertooth. His front teeth are made of silver. He lost his original teeth to the mouth-smashing fist of an enraged dwarf upon whom he had played an elaborate trick.

Samkin has sworn never to raise the ire of another dwarf, and often warns Bublím Barboast against teasing Lorrík. Bublím ignores these pleas. With his everpresent smirk, Samkin awaits the day he helps pick the gnome's teeth up off the ground.

Samkin's talent for surreptitiously gaining wealth amazes me. It seems that after every successful adventure, the halfling comes away with more than his share of the booty. This bothers me little, for money is not what motivates me. I do not mean to imply that Samkin overtly steals from us. I suppose he would describe it as to "discreetly borrow."

Halflings

Halflings are the smallest of the major races, and resemble little street urchins, wise beyond their years. They have a light covering of hairy down all over their bodies, most noticeably on the backs of their hands and tops of their bare feet. Their faces are usually bare, though there are more than a few fullbearded halflings as well.

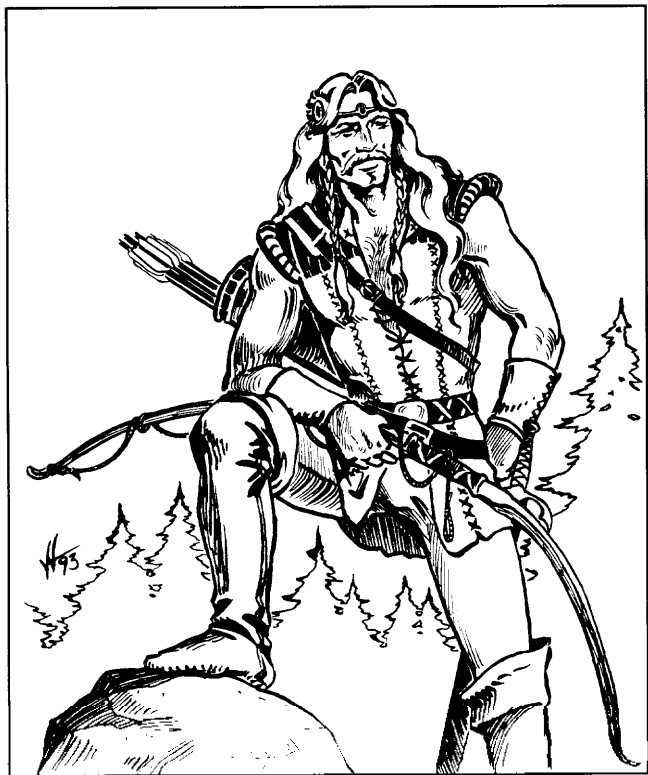
Halflings live by an old saying: "First there were dragons, then dwarves, then elves, then humans. Now it's our turn!" This attitude that all will turn out to their benefit (served up to them on a silver platter, no less) is typical of the halfling mindset—cocksure, confident, and with more than a streak of larceny.

Though halflings look like small human children, this belies the fact that their race has the same basic needs as any other. They live in many of the same areas as mankind, and may be considered a competitor. As opposed to being openly hostile, however, halflings have the smug, far-sighted attitude that these lumbering giants (humans) will eventually leave, destroy themselves, or give themselves up, and that which remains will be theirs.

From this, one should not make the mistake of believing halflings to be evil, for they would do nothing to harm another unless harm had been inflicted on them. Yet the tendency in them to take advantage is strong.

Halflings are delighted by the concept of money, a human invention which goes a long way toward redeeming the race in their eyes. They delight in gathering bunches of money, but unlike the dwarves and their ancient hordes, halflings do not see the point in keeping it. They would much rather fritter money away on gifts, parties, and purchases. For these little folk, money is a way of keeping score on how well you are doing against lumbering humans and other races.





Trothgar, Human Ranger

Trothgar is a burly human with brilliant red hair and beard. He was born on the Moonshae Isles, the offspring of a Northman raider and a maiden of the Ffolk. Having lived with each people for a time, he displays a strange mixture of the two cultures: the ferocity and bloodlust of the barbaric Northmen and the love of nature typical of the gentle Ffolk.

Trothgar is without doubt the leader of our company. His wisdom and courage have gotten us out of many dangerous situations. He can be quite stubborn, however, expecting his orders to be carried out without debate. When blows begin to fall, and this huge man whom many call the Thunderer shouts a command, I find even myself acting without thinking. Trothgar has a way of instinctively knowing what to do, and brings this out in the rest of the company.

Though I respect him for his talents, Trothgar is no gentleman with regard to women, a trait of his Northman blood, I am sure. Fortunately, he seldom makes

advances toward Starchild, and she remains aloof to him. Even so, I sense a spark between them, a spark I must somehow extinguish.

Trothgar's motivation for leading the Seekers seems to be a desire to gather booty and fame for himself. (While there is certainly nothing wrong with these aims, my own goals tend to be less materialistic.)

And yet, I sense a greater substance to Trothgar's actions, particularly in regard to his sensitivity for woodland creatures and the purity of wilderness settings. I suspect he raids the lairs of evil creatures not merely for their booty, but to cleanse the world of their presence.

Humans

The most populous and strongest of the major races, humans are considered dominant. Humanity is also one of the most aggressive races, equal to goblins in ferocity and dwarves in their singleminded drive when aroused to battle.

There always seems to be someplace in the North where one group of humans (often with nonhuman allies) fights another group of humans (also with nonhuman allies). The dwarves shrug that human lives are so short they do not matter to them, while the elves say humanity has not yet figured out how to communicate properly.

Humanity has no subraces, as all nationalities can interbreed without difficulty, and their children (unlike the elves) may have traits of either or both parents. After time, any removed group of humans has its own identity—which changes in a few generations with the introduction of new settlers or invaders.

Humankind's attitudes range from the beatific to the diabolic. Its greatest advantages are its persistence, adaptability, and potential, which raises the question: Will there be any room left for the other races of the Realms?





The Journey Begins



From the Annals of the Seekers:

I said my farewells to my mother this morning. She was tearful and worrisome. I believe she does not expect to see her son again. Perhaps she will not, for the journey ahead is long and no doubt dangerous.

We Seekers plan to travel the Realms extensively, witnessing as many of its wonders as time and fate will allow. Our adventuring company is quite new, as such parties go, and we remain untested. I—indeed I believe I speak for all of us in this matter—feel we have a great potential to leave our names and our company's emblazoned upon the history of the Forgotten Realms. Glorious deeds await. I look to the future with open eyes and a hungry heart.

Though we are untested, we do at least have our first commission. Through a friend of a friend, Trothgar was able to acquire a contract for us with the Highmoon Trading Coster, a merchant company of good repute. As caravan guards, we are traveling with them north to Neverwinter.

While this is certainly no glorious quest, I am steeled to reality—we desperately need the funds to finance our travels beyond Neverwinter. Besides, the road north is smooth and makes for easy traveling. The threat of bandits is great, but an armed caravan offers more protection than our little company would alone. Of course, we are part of the merchants' first line of defense, and have agreed to safeguard their wares with our very lives.

Samkin, Trothgar, and I spent much of the day purchasing the various items the company needs for the first leg of our journey, including horses, provisions, and basic gear. We have agreed to pay for such things out of our company's group fund. We have also agreed to split any magical and monetary treasures we acquire on an equal shares basis. With respect to dividing money, the group fund is considered to have one share, which fund can be used by any member to

Adventuring Companies

Bands of adventurers are commonplace in the Realms. Tolerated (occasionally encouraged) in most areas, they have a long tradition. Certain lands, such as Cormyr, require companies to have a royal charter if they operate therein. Others, like Amn, forbid adventurers altogether within their borders.

Adventuring groups are established, vanish, and change names and haunts continually. The Seekers are only one band. Others include:

The Company of the Wolf: This small band of adventurers operates out of Nesme in the Evermoors of the North. They are expert woodsmen and trackers and know the North well, tangling often with orcs and wild beasts of the forest.

Halfling Inc: One of the few well-known groups of non-human adventurers, this party is entirely halflings. They have gained notoriety throughout the Sea of Fallen Stars for their adventures and con games. More than one Large Folk has been left holding a gem-bag filled with rocks (their signature).

The Knights of Myth Drannor: These adventurers first came to prominence as rulers of Shadowdale, successfully defying the armies of Zhentil Keep. They were instrumental in defeating Lashan of Scardale, and remain able foes of the Zhentarim and of the drow beneath the Inner Sea Lands.

Mane's Band: Originally from Shadowdale, this group of 10 adventurers formed around the charismatic local warrior-hero Mane, a black-bearded man of middle years. Over time, one member has deserted the group and two have been slain. The band nearly met their collective doom in the Yuirwood, scattered by many fearsome beasts and their summoner, a Red Wizard of Thay. Almost a year later, the group reformed.





They are believed to still wander the wilderlands east of the Moonsea.

The Nine: This powerful, long-lasting band of adventurers wandered the Realms for over 30 winters. The Nine were said to have maintained a subterranean stronghold east of Waterdeep, on the banks of Unicorn Run. They were led by the mighty mage Laeral, now known for the magical items she created later in her career. The Nine had links to the Harpers and to the Lords of Waterdeep, but have not adventured “in public” for many years. They are rumored to be very rich, needing to work only when they please, and hence have largely vanished from public memory, save for Laeral herself.

The Savage Seven: An adventuring band active in the North against giants and goblinkin, the Savage Seven have undertaken many commissions to assassinate this or that orc chieftain, half-orc spy, or giant ruler on behalf of interested parties in Waterdeep. The Seven are renowned for slaying the giant Tyrus of the Peaks near Mirabar.

The Swords of Leilon: Based in the small coastal town of Leilon on the High Road north of Waterdeep, this ragtag band of local toughs has done surprisingly well in a brief career: plundering at least six of the Mage-Tombs in the mountains east of Leilon, slaughtering a colony of lizard-men in the nearby Mere of Dead Men, and guarding a few caravans for merchants in Neverwinter. Not long ago, they lost some of their number in a bloody fight with hobgoblins in Ironford, and are spoiling for revenge.

The Valiant Warriors: One of the longer-lived adventuring groups, this band has had a large and ever-changing roster over the years. Based in Telflamm, they have done much to establish trade routes and keep the wilderlands north and east of the Inner Sea safe for humans, as far as Rashemen’s western borders and beyond Impiltur’s northern borders into Damara. Followers of Tymora to a one, the Warriors truly live life dangerously, following the reckless path or “the Lady’s Way.”

buy those items useful to the entire company, such as provisions.

As I wandered the streets of Waterdeep with my new friends, going from shop to shop to find the best prices for the things we needed, a sense of awe filled my thoughts. I had lived in this city all of my life, and now as I prepared to leave, its wonders stood out afresh. I felt like a young shepherd from the hills, making his first trip to the city.

I opened my senses to the City of Splendors, and luxuriated in my last hours here. The colors! My eyes were drawn from place to place so rapidly it dazzled me. Such a kaleidoscope of hues: the brilliant gowns and sparkling veils of noblewomen; the fluttering banners of men of valor and merchant houses; the brightly painted shop windows; and the horses and carriages of the wealthy dressed in full, colorful regalia. Even the most common folk wore a dash of color upon their persons: a gay hat, a striped doublet, a bright-hued cloak, or the rich brown of a tanned jerkin.

My ears were filled to bursting with the clamoring. Merchants and peddlers of all stripes and stations hawked the value of their wares, calling out to passersby. Children laughed and cried as they played their games amid the crowds. Carts, wagons, and carriages clattered noisily over the cobblestones. I overheard snippets of talk at every corner and from every open window. Waterdeep was alive with conversation.

My nose tingled with tantalizing smells. Sweetmeats and pastries mounded in abundance at the stalls of street vendors. Aromas from the kitchens of the finest chefs in the Realms wafted from restaurants and inns, mixing with the salty sea air. The perfumed scarves of passing maidens left scented trails through the throng, invisible tendrils to tug the heart-strings of lovesick lads.

And yet, my senses were not truly those of the rural shepherd boy. As my legs grew weary and my patience thinned before the pushing, rushing crowds, I saw the city beneath its finery. Without her facial pigments and scented veils and ornaments, the true visage of the worn, old woman was revealed.

Beneath the bright colors I saw the decay that comes with age, on the faces of the weary people and



in the dry rot of the buildings. Brackish rivulets of waste ran along moldy cobblestones. The fringes of crowds were knotted with homeless people: maimed veterans of war, diseased folk, cripples, and begrimed street urchins left to their own devices. Devoid of pride, these turned their pitiful gazes and raised their gritty hands to the masses for succor.

Waterdeep is a place of garish beauty concealing an underlying blemish. I was, after all, ready to be away from her. . .

After making our purchases, we wound our way to the Topsy Nymph tavern by the docks. Here, we met two more of our company—Bublim Barboast and Lorrick.

Under an enchantment of levitation, Bublim hovered above the long, ale-stained bar. Spinning head-over-tails in midair, the gnome caused chicken squawks to come from a burly giant of a man sitting nearby. The tavern shook to the timbers, though the immense sailor seemed little amused.

Samkin, Trothgar, and I joined Lorrick at a table in the back. Sounding basso through the jeering hecklers, the dwarf merely grunted his approval of our purchases. I felt a bit miffed. We had done quite well with the merchants, or I should say, Samkin had done. The halfling has a gift for haggling. His method is simple: he bores a merchant to tears telling long-winded tales with no beginning and no end. All merchants come to the same realization—it is worth a cut in profits to be rid of the bothersome halfling with the silver-toothed grin.

Bublim finished his performance by vanishing in a cloud of sparkling motes. The sailors banged their tankards in approval, and the place grew noticeably quiet as all turned to the task of draining their mugs.

A moment later, the garishly attired gnome appeared out of thin air at our table, a frothy tankard in hand.

“A toast to our journey,” he said with a wink and a grin. “Then let’s gather Esta and be off to Neverwinter, for I crave a fresh audience. These Waterdhavian sea-dogs don’t know pure talent when they see it!”

After tipping our tankards back, we were off to the House of the Moon, where Esta Starchild awaited us.

Waterdeep

Waterdeep, named for its outstanding natural deep-water harbor, is the most important and influential city in the North, perhaps in all of Faerûn. More than 100,000 people make their homes in Waterdeep. The city hugs the Sword Coast, and welcomes overland trade on paved, well-patrolled roads.

Humans and other races come from all over the Realms to earn hard coin in the City of Splendors. Over the years successful merchants have set up guilds, and themselves become nobility, supporting the secretive Lords of Waterdeep. These lords police the city fairly, yet with a light hand, supporting a superb city guard (soldiers), city watch (police), and over 20 black-robed magistrates. As a result, Waterdeep is a place tolerant of different races, religions, and lifestyles. It has grown into a huge, eclectic city.

It is known fact that Piergeiron Paladinson, Warden of Waterdeep and Commander of the Watch, whose golden-spired palace dominates the center of the city, is a member of the Lords. The archmage Khelben “Blackstaff” Arunsun is guessed to be a Lord as well, and perhaps chief among them. The identities of the rest are pure conjecture.

The Lords appear only in the Lords’ Court, hearing all cases of murder, treason, misuse of magic, and appeals from lower courts. At least four Lords sit, sometimes six or seven, and rarely as many as nine. Piergeiron chairs the Court and asks all questions, for the other Lords speak through him.

In chambers the Lords all wear the same robes, formless and black, with black capes and masks completely covering the head and face. These masks have featureless visages with mirrored crystals over the eyes, save for Piergeiron, who has had his mask separated from its helm so the condemned might see his face.





At the Temple of the Moon, we met Esta Starchild in a high-walled garden of night-blooming flowers and gurgling fountains. She was dressed for the road: high boots of supple doeskin, black leather breeches, deep green jerkin worn over a billowing white shirt, light green cloak and matching silk riding hat.

Her appearance surprised me, for until this moment I had only seen her radiant in her fine clerical robes. Even so, her beauty is such that not even ordinary traveling attire can hide it. Esta is an enchanting elven maiden, confident and wise.

"I am ready to depart," she said, "but before we go, the High Priestess has requested an audience with all of us. Will you please follow me into the temple proper?"

All was quiet in the splendid temple. As I understand it, the majority of services to Selûne take place at night, while the shining orb that bears her name crosses the sky. The days, such as this one, are spent in contemplation and learning.

Esta led us into the central chamber—a huge, oval room supported by immense pillars of swirling marble. A hole in the ceiling opened upon the sky. Flowering vines, where song birds nested and bees buzzed, hung down through this portal into the chamber itself.

The High Priestess was waiting for us. An ancient human woman, she was sumptuously dressed in a shimmering gown of silver threads. The symbol of Selûne was sewn into the fabric of her gown—a circle of seven stars around a pair of feminine eyes.

"Welcome, and peace to you, friends," she said.

As venerable as any person I have met, the High Priestess possessed as well a beauty time itself could not vanquish. Her white hair hung about her in glorious waves, spilling nearly to the tiled floor. And her emerald eyes! I felt calmly lost in the green depths of their soft beauty and confident wisdom.

"You and your journey have the blessing of Selûne," she continued, "for you shall undertake a great task in her service."

Here was news! I glanced around our party, to see a startled look play across each face in turn. Only the elven maid schooled her features to polite attentiveness.

"I'm meaning no disrespect, noble lady," spoke Trothgar, "but the paths we stride are surely of our own choosing, and we serve only those who have the coin to pay for our services. We are adventurers, not pilgrims."

"Though you may choose among many trails," said the High Priestess, "who is it that places those paths before you? All that is asked is that you pay heed to the council and wisdom of Esta Starchild. The final decision is yours to make. And now, it is time to say farewell. May Selûne watch over you and protect you from the dangers of the land."

She turned slightly from us, signaling the end of the interview. Instantly, but not hastily, the High Priestess' attention fixed on an amber blossom of the cascading vine. We were dismissed.

I had many questions for the old woman, as I am sure we all did, but I held my tongue. We followed Esta out of the temple without saying another word, not even amongst ourselves. We all had much to think about. What had—moments ago—seemed like a simple journey to see the land and find fortune, now appeared to have some deeper meaning. What lies ahead that is so important it has drawn the attention of a goddess?

As we rode through the streets toward the High Road, some common impulse caused our silence to shatter into a merciless string of questions for Esta Starchild.

"Why is Selûne interested in us?" asked Trothgar.

"She honors all of us by choosing us to fulfill a vital quest," Starchild replied.

"And for what are we searching?" I asked.

"As yet, I do not know," she said. "All will be revealed in its proper time. We must have faith Selûne will guide us through our journey. One thing I do know is that something important awaits us atop the Hill of Lost Souls."

"I thought we were going to Neverwinter!" cried Samkin. The halfling's shrill tone sounded to my ears like a child denied a sweetroll by its mother. How familiar that tone would come to be, I had little inkling then.

"We are," replied Trothgar firmly. "We have a contract, and we will not let it be said that the Seekers are untrustworthy. Besides, we need the money."





"I agree," said Esta. "Perhaps after visiting Neverwinter, and fulfilling our contract, we can travel to the Hill of Lost Souls. It is a sight worth seeing, is it not?"

Her suggestion was reasonable. I could see the light of argument dim among us.

"Aye, it be that," spoke Lorrick. "Somewhere upon that hill lies the lost tomb o' Thelarn, son o' Mongoth. I be hearin' tales of his adventures since I was a little lad. Indeed I would be likin' to visit that place and to pay homage to the noble dwarven warrior known as Swifthammer."

"Anyplace with a name like the Hill of Lost Souls sounds like a place to be avoided by the living," Bublun countered, not swayed by the dwarf's gruff reminiscence. "Why would Selûne send us there?"

"We will know when we arrive," replied Esta.

"Aye, *if* we decide to go there," Trothgar said pointedly. "For now, let us concentrate on earning our pay and arriving safely in Neverwinter."

With that we rode in silence, out of the city. I did not look back.

Along the road, the wagons of the Highmoon Trading Coster were making preparations to leave. We joined up with them and were on our way within the hour. . . on to Neverwinter.

Religion in The Realms

Like ancient civilizations on Earth, the folk of the Forgotten Realms worship many different gods. These deities have unique personalities, spheres of influence, and physical powers. The concept of multiple planes of existence allows for other places gods might rule or retreat to when they are not manifest in the Forgotten Realms.

The gods of the Realms, also called Powers, are important beings: they grant magical spells to their worshippers, involve themselves in worldly dealings, and grow or diminish in personal power in relation to the number of mortal worshippers they possess. Priests and priestesses in the service of a god may advance only if they please their deity by remaining faithful to the god's rules and aims, and acting as the god wishes.

The plethora of divine beings, even among humans, and the wide variance of ideals which they represent or epitomize, has led to general, wary tolerance of differences in beliefs and worship; a willingness to let strangers be. This extends to all who do not break laws—among the general populace, the Court, and the soldiers of the King. Human sacrifice is considered murder in lawful realms, and the use of another's goods as offerings is both theft and wanton destruction.

Some individuals of course, particularly but by no means limited to priests and priestesses (who generally believe passionately in their own deities), may not be beneficently all-tolerant of the beliefs of others. Theological arguments can grow heated, and there are always bellicose fanatics.

While it is wise to learn the religions of any persons one must trust, do business with, or adventure with, it is often an affront of the highest order to ask such information openly. Some people have been known to attack individuals inquiring as to their faith.







On To Neverwinter



s I write this entry, I am riding in a bumping, jostling wagon. Please forgive my unsteady hand.

There are twelve wagons in our caravan. This is only a portion of those operated by the Highmoon Trading Coster. The majority have remained in Waterdeep, as did Guldeph Maremmmon, the caravan master himself.

Guldeph's son, Farlin, is in charge of our expedition. I suspect this is a test of the young merchant's skill and ingenuity, for Farlin will one day take his father's place as caravan master, I am sure. Quite a responsibility for such a young man.

Our cargo consists mostly of exotic spices and blue wine, to be traded in Neverwinter for the waterclocks and colored lamps that city is famous for. After doing his trading, Farlin returns to Waterdeep and rejoins his father. Of course, we are not accompanying him on that trip. I am certain Farlin will have little trouble hiring trustworthy guards in Neverwinter to replace us Seekers.

Eighteen other guards share our duties. All are human warriors, and seem to have chosen their work as a career. My companions and I don't fit in with their taciturn attention to duty, and are left to ourselves. They are not unfriendly, merely reserved. I hope we will be accepted among their ranks more as the days pass.

This is the first time I have witnessed the workings of a merchant company firsthand, so I will elaborate upon our disposition a bit. We guards are split into pairs, with each pair assigned to a different wagon. One guard rides on horseback near the assigned wagon, while the other sits next to the driver (as I am sitting now). We are responsible for helping the driver to tend the horses, to maintain and repair the wagon, and to ensure that the cargo is fastened securely. At odd times during the day, six guards are chosen to ride ahead and scout the road—for danger, to find suitable water and pasture for the animals, or to locate a good campsite for the night. All said,

when it's going well it is easy work. The difficulty lies with bandits. . .

Merchant Companies

The life-blood of the kingdoms in the Realms is trade, and it is through trade that many of the nations have come to be. The keys to this trade are the various merchant companies, which carry, protect, and store goods. The merchant companies of the Realms are both numerous and ever-changing in roster.

Most trade goods travel in caravans for safety, and the great majority of caravans are run by independent caravan masters, who display no badge or colors at all. A few caravans are sponsored or directly manned by a city or country, and typically bear the sigils of that place. The caravans of Amn are so marked, as are those of the Zhentarim.

Large companies, or "Priakos," are created by the permanent amalgamation of smaller caravan companies, usually to control a trading route. Alliances of small, independent companies into caravans for safety alone are "Costers."

Dragoneye Dealing Coster: Based in Cimbar, with way-bases in Iriaebor and Elturel, this is the oldest of the costers. It was begun by two merchant brothers who tired of shipping things overland to avoid the Inner Sea pirates—only to lose them to bandits on the long land routes west of Westgate.

Highmoon Trading Coster: Headed by Guldeph Maremmmon, this flourishing concern dominates the Sword Coast overland routes from its bases in Scornubel and in Waterdeep. It carries everything, but has exclusive supply rights to kaorph ("blue wine") and certain exotic spices of the far south and east. Its colors are a white crescent on a black, star-studded oval.

The Seven Suns Trading Coster: This group's name celebrates the widely-separated partners who





converted their own small merchant companies into regional bases, providing horses, draft oxen, and wagons, and hiring local guards. This coster provides the leanest guards and the worst wagons, and is inclined to be slow and often bandit-struck as a result. However, it also undercuts its competitors on most routes.

The Six Coffers Market Priakos: Named for the six wealthy merchants who sponsored it, this Priakos is run by Thelve Baruinheld of Berdusk, and has “bases” in that city, in Waterdeep, in Silverymoon, in Priapurl, and in Selgaunt. It is large, efficient, and prosperous, though only four of the six original partners are still alive.

Surefeet Trademasters: Headed by a council of merchants, and based in Scornubel, the Surefeet specialize in providing expert guides, escorts, and guards for all concerns—their own caravans and those of any overland traveler. Their rates are high, their men good, and it is rumored they gained much wealth through several rich tomb and temple-ruin finds made by guide-members.

Thousandheads Trading Coster: Run by the former adventurer Bharavan Bhaerkantos from his stronghold east of Riatavin, this coster operates only on a single route—from Waterdeep to Hillsfar, via Scornubel, Berdusk, Iriaebor, Priapurl, Arabel, and Essembra. Its name refers to the “thousands” of small one-to-twelve-wagon outfits that benefit from this coster.

The Trail Lords: A mysterious, pompous outfit (whom some say are ruled by Thay), the Trail Lords have been known to hire half-orcs and worse as guards. They are said to be merchant kings (none has ever seen them) with seemingly boundless funds.

Trueshield Trading Priakos: Based in Telpir, this professional organization builds its own wagons and equips and trains its own guards—and does both of these very well. Few bandits tangle with its caravans; even orcs leave them alone on most trips. Its rates are expensive, but it almost always delivers, so money has been pouring into its coffers.

We began to earn our pay in earnest while traveling along the mountains. The road meandered through wooded hills for a time, before climbing to pass alongside a very steep and rocky hillside. It was here the ambush was laid for us.

It started as a trickle of stones rolling down the slope, and suddenly erupted into an avalanche of boulders. One of the wagons was swept away. I can still hear the screams of the horses as they tumbled and were crushed. Rolling logs—their branches shaved to sharp points like spears—followed, blocking the road to the front and rear of the caravan. We were suddenly trapped.

I saw Esta scrambling over the loose rocks toward the crushed wagon. One wrong step and she would find herself buried or tumble to her death. I jumped from my skittish horse and raced to her.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

“Tarkesh is still alive!” she said.

Tarkesh was the driver of the doomed wagon. We found him buried in the rubble. Indeed, he was still breathing, though his life was swiftly flowing out upon the rocks. I quickly and carefully uncovered him, while Esta used her healing magic to stop his bleeding. Thanks to Starchild’s bravery, Tarkesh would live.

We had no time to give thanks, however, for the next moment we heard Trothgar bellowing orders: “Dismount! Stand and fight, you dogs!”

I looked up beyond the road to see a half-dozen ogres loping down the steep hillside, led by a lumbering hill giant. Our men heard the wisdom of Trothgar’s words and leapt from their horses, which were as dangerous to us on the treacherous footing as were our attackers.

“Fire crossbows!” cried Trothgar.

The guards responded like seasoned soldiers. A volley of bolts whirred into the charging ogres. One of the creatures, pierced through both legs, lost its footing and tumbled down the rocky slope. That ogre did not get up again. All the others were struck with bolts, but kept coming.

“Draw swords and stand fast!” thundered Trothgar. Once again, the guards responded like veterans, starting bravely into death’s face.

Though we had them outnumbered, ogres are huge





brutes, and they crashed into our ranks like juggernauts, the hill giant first among them. Men screamed out their dying breaths. The smell of hot blood and the sounds of clashing steel drove the horses into a frenzy. With nowhere to go, the wagons became hopelessly entangled. All was chaos.

I tried not to let the noise and confusion befuddle me, and concentrated upon a spell. The giant raised his spiked club high, preparing to bring it down upon Trothgar's head. I let loose a volley of magical bolts, blasting the giant's club into shards. Suddenly disarmed, the huge creature yelled in surprise. Trothgar took this opportunity to strike a mighty blow, and the giant bellowed once again—this time out of fear and rage.

Hearing their leader's cry of pain, the ogres faltered. The guards pressed the attack, and another ogre fell to their blades.

I saw Samkin stumble before a looming ogre, and in horror I realized there was nothing I could do to help the halfling. But in the next instant, a stream of sparkling motes passed over Samkin, striking the ogre in its face. *Bublim!* The gnome had been invisible. Confused, the creature fell to its knees. Flashing a silver-toothed grin, Samkin was upon the ogre's back in a heartbeat, driving his dagger deep into its flesh. It died swiftly.

Vastly outnumbered, and losing their gusto for the fight, the remaining three ogres were slaughtered. Having suffered wounds from Lorrick's axe and Trothgar's sword, the hill giant took three strides backward, and promptly fell on its rump. It sat stunned, bleeding heavily and breathing hard. Fear swelled its eyes wide.

It was a strange moment, standing there watching the hill giant die. The moans of the injured and the shuffling of the horses seemed distant and quiet. I remember the loud, mechanical sound of crossbows being wound.

And then, in a deep, calm voice, Trothgar the Thunderer ordered, "Fire."

The Goblin Races

The goblin races, also called goblinkin or goblinoids, include all creatures such as kobolds, goblins, orcs, and hobgoblins. Some sages extend this definition to ogres, bugbears, trolls, and half-orcs. In general, they are uncivilized bands of sentient creatures that prey on other beings, raiding and pillaging when they can, stealing quietly when they cannot.

The goblinkin have existed in the Realms as long as the elves, for elven histories mention the various creatures as brutish invaders harassing the borders of their realms. The goblin races were involved in genocidal wars with dwarves for the mountain peaks, and with men for the lowlands. Usually the goblinkin have been repulsed or crushed, but many dwarven halls now molder in orcish hands.

The goblin races are generally under-organized and under-equipped, and would have been wiped out several times over were it not for their rapid breeding cycles and strong instincts for self-preservation. Faced with overwhelming odds, most goblinkin waver and retreat. For this, the tag "cowardly" is usually added to their other names.

The goblin races tend to be cruel, evil, and malicious, aping humans in dress and title, but with a slant toward harm as opposed to help. The greatest orc citadels are governed by a King and Royal Court in a rough travesty of Cormyr. Similarly, those goblins living near Waterdeep fear lords who rule from disguise in the manner of the Lords of Waterdeep.

Despite their history, some members of these races, particularly half-orcs, brave the well-deserved hostile attitudes of the rest of the world to seek an honest living. These are exceptions to the general character of these savage creatures, however.





We lost five good men in the battle with the ogres and hill giant. Thankfully, none of us Seekers was badly injured. My healing magic, and Esta Starchild's, was put to good use on both men and horses.

The first-hit wagon was damaged beyond repair. We salvaged what cargo we could from it, and made room on the remaining wagons. Several other vehicles needed repair, but were mobile enough that we could move to a better location before fixing them. It took several hours of hard labor to clear the road and bury the dead.

We rolled forward in quiet the remainder of the day. The dangers of the wilderness had marked all of us. No longer could we cling to the illusion of a leisurely journey along the High Road. We knew we trekked through hostile lands. I was more eager than ever to reach Neverwinter.

That night I made my way to young Farlin's wagon before taking my turn with the night watch. All day, he had appeared withdrawn and sullen. I was worried about him, and the effect his mood would have on the rest of the men.

I found Farlin alone, but for the half-empty bottle of blue wine in his hand.

"Care for a swallow, Furian?" he said. "My father's kaorph wine is the finest to be found. And the only to be found, since he's cornered the market on it!"

I accepted the bottle and sat down beside him.

"It's my fault, Furian," he continued. His words were a bit slurred, and I was surprised to see that he had been weeping.

"I should have had the road scouted properly. A caravan master who leads his cargo into an ambush is a fool, or a dead man. Those men had families. They were my friends. I killed them just as surely as those ogres did."

I said, "Aye, they were fine men, and I wish I had known them better. But they knew the dangers. They chose to be here. Perhaps the ambush could have been uncovered, but it wasn't. What is important now is to get safely to Neverwinter, for the men who yet live have families also. Your responsibility remains with the living, and not the dead."

"Aye, we still have far to go," he said with a sigh, "and surely more dangers to face. I will not let my friends down again. I will rest now, to be ready for

what tomorrow brings. Thank you, Furian Arcanus."

I left Farlin to his thoughts. I hoped my words had soothed his sorrow. He is a brave and good-hearted lad. He will make a fine caravan master, if he survives his apprenticeship.

We made it out of the mountains without further incident. Farlin's morale, and consequently that of the others, improved greatly. However, danger did indeed await us once again, along the vast swamp by which the High Road passes.

I was scouting ahead with five other guards when the incident occurred. My adventuring companions remained behind, on duty within the caravan proper.

It was a fine, warm day full of sun and clouds. Swarms of insects buzzed over a ditch of brackish water along the road's western side. Farther west, the terrain became increasingly soggy. The trees grew stunted and twisted there, and the underbrush stood in thick clumps atop muddy hillocks. We had seen no sign of other travelers or dangerous beasts, and I must admit we became lax in our duties, lulled by the buzzing insects and the day's heat.

We were virtually on top of the creatures before noticing them. Their reptilian skins granted them a perfect camouflage with the greenish water and underbrush.

Eight lizard-men riding giant lizards arose from the muck and charged us. I am not a proficient horseman, and my startled mount threw me. I landed hard on my back in the middle of the road. My companions fared much better, and managed to draw their blades to meet the lizard-men's charge.

I managed to roll away from the stomping horses' hooves and plodding lizards' feet, and tumbled down the steep east bank of the road. I quickly regained my feet, uttering a spell as I rose.

Wise that I did, for on the road above me loomed a giant lizard and rider. As the lizard-man raised his barbed javelin to throw, a bolt of lightning erupted from my outstretched hands. The searing arcane energy slammed into both rider and mount, slaying them instantly. The hair on my body stood on end as the electricity in the air dissipated quickly. Such power! I am awed at the gift Mystra has granted her priest.

For an instant, sounds of the battle on the road





above, which I could not see, stopped. I could imagine the surprised faces of the combatants as they saw the bolt of lightning rip skyward above their heads. An instant later, the battle sounds began anew.

Rather than rushing into the fray, I decided to find a vantage point for making better use of my spells. I rapidly levitated high into the air, and began conjuring another spell.

A volley of magical bolts flew from my fingers, felling a lizard-man, whose mount turned on its former master. The giant reptile devoured the rider where it lay.

My companions slew three other lizard-men, whose mounts either lumbered off or ate the dead. The remaining foes spurred their reptilian steeds for the swamp, raising great spumes of muck as they fled.

We lost no one in the battle. I used the magic given me by Mystra to heal those who had been injured, and we made haste to return to the caravan. As we galloped, I noticed the men keeping their horses apart from my own. My display of potent magic has given me greater respect among the guards. Just as I was beginning to develop friendship with them, it seems I am to remain an outsider.

We reported what occurred to Farlin. I was proud to see he quickly realized the danger of the lizard-men who escaped—they would likely return to the High Road with their entire tribe in tow.

We drove the wagons hard on Farlin's orders, racing past the swamp. Either we escaped, or the lizard-men chose to let us pass, for we did not encounter them.

My exploits with the lizard-men made for a fine tale. The worry and concern in Esta's eyes made it worth every ache and pain.

We have finally arrived in Neverwinter. Other than a broken wagon wheel and a lame horse, we had no further problems after the attack of the lizard-men.

As I write this, I am sitting comfortably in my room at an inn called the Weary Traveler (how true!). The huge feather bed standing nearby beckons, but I wish to put pen to parchment for a moment.

Farlin was so pleased (and relieved) with our safe arrival that he treated us all to an immense feast at this very fine inn. Trothgar made a glutton of himself,

eating everything that passed beneath his nose. Lorrick was sullen as usual, though I believe I saw him grin at one of Samkin's jokes. Bublun entertained all with his cantrips. And Esta, sweet Starchild, joined us later after bathing and dressing in a silken gown emblazoned with the symbol of Selûne. Esta stole all of our hearts tonight.

We have fulfilled our contract and been paid. We now have the funds to travel where we wish. Tomorrow we say our farewells to Farlin, and decide which path to tread.

Neverwinter

Situated along the western coast of Faerûn, Neverwinter is a bustling city. Regarded as a friendly city of craftsmen, Neverwinter trades extensively via the great merchants of Waterdeep. The name refers to the skill of city gardeners, who keep flowers blooming throughout the months of snow—a practice they continue with pride.

"By the clocks of Neverwinter" is a watchword for accuracy and delicate precision. The water-clocks produced here are accurate to within five minutes a year, provided that sufficient water is available. These expensive treasures can be carried by a single man using both hands, and are quite in fashion in wealthy households throughout the Forgotten Realms. The craftsmen of Neverwinter are also renowned for the multi-hued lamps they produce. Carefully mixed colors and blown glass designs create pleasing displays against the walls at night. Such lamps are sold in most cities and towns of the Realms.



Talk of Evermeet



awoke with the dawn in my bed at the Weary Traveler, and went in search of food. I found Esta Starchild downstairs, already at her breakfast.

She smiled and said, "Please join me, Furian. I have more than enough food here for two. It's a beautiful morning, is it not?"

I agreed to both the food and the weather. We ate quietly for a while, enjoying one another's company. It is unusual for us to be alone, away from the others. I was not sure what to say, but I was certain I didn't want the moment to end.

"The gardens of Neverwinter are said to be splendid," I ventured finally. "After last night's feast, I'm sure the others will not be rising for some time. Perhaps we can find a nice garden and enjoy the morning sun."

"Wonderful!" she said. "Let's take our breakfast with us and go now."

The innkeeper's wife was more than happy to pack a basket for us, and direct us to her favorite garden.

"It's a nice secluded spot," the woman said with a smile.

Indeed it was. The small garden was surrounded by a high stone wall covered with all manner of flowering vines. Other than numerous songbirds, we were alone. Sitting on the close-cropped grass among beds of glorious flowers, we returned to our breakfast.

"Have you ever been to Evermeet?" I asked. From the look she gave me, I felt quite the fool.

"No, I have not," Esta replied. "When I do go, I am sure I will never leave. People who make the Retreat seldom, if ever, return to Faerûn."

"Please forgive my ignorance," I said. "Though I share your elven blood, I was raised by my human mother in a human city. What I know of our people is from tales told by them."

"Then it is time you heard of your heritage from one of the People," she said. I settled back in the lush grass to listen.

Evermeet

Evermeet is a large island several thousand miles to the west of the Moonshae Isles, and of similar size to those islands. Despite this great distance, the island of Evermeet is known to most knowledgeable persons of the Realms as the final home of the Elven Nations.

Evermeet is a happy realm of deep forests and much laughter. Here golden elves, under the leadership of the Moon Elven Royal House, live in rich splendor. Art, music, magical research: all peak far above achievements reached elsewhere, even in Waterdeep the Splendid. All elves save the drow and half-elven are welcome, and many sea-elves live in the surrounding waters.

To guard this wondrous realm against men, particularly the aggressive raiders from Ruathym and the Pirate Isles, Evermeet has the mightiest navy in the known Realms. Based in the fortress of Sumbrar, with smaller outposts at Elion and Nimlith, the vessels of Evermeet's fleets patrol from the Wave Rocks to the Gull Rocks and "the Teeth" in a wide circle of ocean.

Boats are built and repaired at Siiluth and call at only a few ports in the lands of men: Eskember, the Moonshae Isles, Neverwinter, and Waterdeep. In the past, the ships of Evermeet have fought many battles with Ruathym, the reavers of the Nelanther Pirate Isles, and Calimshan, hurling back all attempts to seize the island or its treasures.

Many of the Elven Nations from the Realms have sought haven in Evermeet, and the navy ensures safe passage to the island for these peoples. How those Elven Nations far inland made their way to Evermeet has not yet been revealed. While the Elven Court has vanished from Cormanthor, there are no recorded observations, among humans or other races, of what surely must have been a mass migration by the elves.





"As you likely know," continued Esta, "Evermeet is the island kingdom of all the elven race, though drow are not welcome upon her shores. Half-elves, such as yourself, are seldom welcome either, although exceptions are made for those half-elves who show unwavering loyalty or perform a great service for the People.

"Do not look so sad, Furian. You have a good heart, and may one day be greeted by the Queen at Evermeet."

I said, "I long to know more. Tell me of the Queen."

"Queen Amlaruil has governed alone since the death of her husband King Zaor some 30 winters past," continued Esta. "She is said to have the wisdom of the gods, and I do not doubt this. The Queen is assisted in her rule by a royal house of moon elves. The royal family includes six princes and princesses who are all masters of the various professions of warrior, priest, and mage."

"Knowing you are a moon elf," I said, "I cannot help but ask if you are of the royal house, Esta."

From the look in her eyes, I knew I had touched on a sensitive matter.

"My family shares no direct attachments with the royal house. All of my family have made the Retreat. I am alone in the Realms."

"Why have you remained behind?" I asked, already sensing the answer.

"Selûne has need of her priestess here in Faerûn. When my work is done, I will sail west, away from the lands of humans. All of this talk makes my heart grow heavy. Let us sit here quietly for a while."

I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted to know more, but not at the price of Esta's happiness. All I managed was, "Thank you, Starchild."

I have so much to learn from Esta. Alas, she does not speak of these things often because they involve her family, and are thoughts and memories full of emotion.

The calling of Evermeet tugs at Starchild's heart, but she is duty-bound to pursue the mysterious quest set before her by the goddess Selûne. One day, when her trials are done, she will make the Retreat. And I hope to be with her.

The Retreat

The oddest phenomenon of elven life (to human observers) is the Retreat, which humans imagine as a lemming-like drive to sail beyond the sea. The Retreat is not some biological drive, however, but rather a conscious decision by each leader of an elven nation to withdraw to less hostile lands. The decision is made after years (generations, to humankind) of thought and meditation, and once made, is irrevocable.

In the case of the recently-voided Elven Court, the decision to retreat was reached some 500 years after deliberation began. While humans regard the disappearance of the Elven Court as a sudden vacuum in the heart of the Realms, for the Court it was as inevitable as a merchant moving his shop to increase the distance from a competitor.

Elves in retreat always make for Evermeet, where they in turn strengthen the navy and the defenses of the island nation that is their races' last and strongest haven. Whatever nobles led the retreat swear their fealty to Queen Amlaruil.

Elves on the Sword Coast and others with easy access to the sea make the passage to Evermeet by ship. How those farther inland cross is not known, for none sees their passage out of the world of humans. Not even everyday elven folk know the method—by some magic they suddenly awake in their new homes.

The former elven nations of the Realms include Illefarn, near Waterdeep; Askaver, now called the Wood of Sharp Teeth; and the Elven Court, which once ruled Cormanthor, a forest country that ran from Cormyr to the Moonsea. Current elven nations include Evermeet and Evereska, a colony in the Greycloak Hills. Scattered groups of elves remain in the Realms, including wild elves, groups without noble rulers, the dark elves, those who have found Evermeet not to their tastes and departed, and adventurers.





After feeding the crumbs of our breakfast to the songbirds, Esta and I left our little garden and headed for the inn. We spoke no more of elves and Evermeet and the Retreat, but made idle talk about the glorious weather and pointed out the sites of Neverwinter to one another. By the time we returned to the Weary Traveler, she seemed in much better spirits, much to my relief.

The innkeeper informed us that our companions had not yet come down from their rooms. Esta left for her own room in order to pack, and I returned to my room as well. I needed to pack, too, but I also wanted to meditate upon the wisdom of Mystra's teachings and beseech her for the spells I might need during our travels. I also took time to study my spell books.

Several hours later I left my room, and found my friends downstairs finishing a late breakfast. After the amount of time they spent drinking and eating and drinking again last night, I was happily surprised to see them so well-rested and in such high spirits.

"Is Esta still in her room?" I asked.

Trothgar said, "I suppose. We have yet to see her today."

"She sure is sleeping late," chirped Samkin. "I'll make a halfling of her yet!"

I smiled, but did not tell them of our trip to the garden. We had shared a private moment, and I wanted to keep it that way.

"While she is not here," said Trothgar, "I say we take the opportunity to discuss her idea of journeying to the Hill of Lost Souls amongst ourselves. I, for one, fail to see the advantage in going. What do the rest of you think of it?"

Lorrick was the first to speak.

"I be likin' to find the tomb o' Thelarn, son o' Mongoth. I says we go."

"Is he buried with treasure?" piped up Samkin Silvertooth.

"Aye, that he be," growled the dwarf, "but I'll be takin' no part in robbin' the tomb of a noble dwarven warrior. And be warned, halfling, for I'll not be standin' idle while others do so!"

"Just asking, just asking."

Bublim spoke up.

"The Hill is not far from Corm Orp. Last night I overheard some grim looking fellows discussing the

fact that Corm Orp's lord, one Dundast Hultel, is looking to hire adventurers. They said the lord is looking to eradicate bandits operating in the Far Hills. Apparently, the rogues have had quite a bit of success in raiding the village and waylaying travelers. I would not be surprised if they have amassed a fine booty."

"That sounds more like the work we want," rumbled Trothgar. "You remain quiet, Furian. What think you of this?"

"I feel this is of the utmost importance to Esta, and she will go with us or without us. And I will not let her go alone. Rather than splitting the company, I suggest we all make the journey. We lose nothing, since the possibility of a commission in Corm Orp sounds promising indeed. And do not forget, something that has drawn the interest of a goddess awaits atop the Hill of Lost Souls. Can we truly call ourselves adventurers if we do not investigate this?"

"Well said," spoke Trothgar. "Then I believe we are agreed that we should accompany Esta. And once that is done, we shall travel to Corm Orp and liberate some bandits of their ill-gotten wealth."

Esta Starchild then joined us at our table.

"We're going with you!" cried Samkin.

"Then the speech I have spent the last hour preparing to try to persuade you will not be needed," she said with a smile. "Thank you, my friends. I knew you would not disappoint me, or the goddess."

We spent the remainder of the morning debating the best road to travel. We could ride with Farlin's caravan back to Waterdeep, then cross the High Moor to reach the Hill, but we all agreed that this seemed too much like a step in reverse. We wanted to see as much of the country as possible. Finally, we decided to follow a trade route south and east that crosses the High Moor. After buying fresh provisions, we rode away from Neverwinter.

I shall always remember a certain garden in that city, and the sunny morning I spent breakfasting with Esta Starchild.





Horrors of The High Moor

The trade route we followed out of Neverwinter became little more than a game trail after several miles. After riding for many days along the twisting path, my skill at horsemanship improved greatly. I grew to view my horse as more than a riding beast, but as a friend, and decided she deserved a name. I called her Wind, for she was a swift racer, and had the personality of the wind—calm most of the time, but with the potential to be an angry storm at a moment's notice.

The land we passed through was pleasing to the eye, consisting mainly of light forests, grassy meadows, and low, rolling hills of clover and wildflowers. The weather was pleasant as well, with only the occasional rainstorm.

The journey was easy-going. Our spirits were high, and we enjoyed one another's company. If only we could have known of the evil awaiting us on the High Moor.

The High Moor

The High Moor is a vast, rocky wasteland rising to a gorge-scarred plateau cloaked in grass and scrub trees.

Often shrouded in mist, the moor is home to many trolls and bugbears, as well as assorted goblin races. The monstrous inhabitants often raid the roads, so that merchants tend to collect in large caravans and hire additional guards when passing through.

The soil of the moor is too thin for farming and its rock, mostly granite, too poor in valuable ores to support permanent mining settlements. The barbarian humans found in these lands depend on herding sheep and goats and overland trading for their livelihoods. They fight constantly with any and all goblinoid tribes.

We followed the trail up and across the rocky plateau of the High Moor for several days without incident. The landscape alternated tall grasses and short, bushy trees. A continuous wet mist made the moor seem surreal and moody.

The mist and deepening night also concealed the carcasses until we were upon them. Scores of sheep and goats had been slaughtered and left to rot. Sadly, among the dead flock we found the corpses of three human boys. All wore primitive garments of sheepskin, and all had been savagely murdered. It was a nightmarish scene of blood-stained grass and buzzing clouds of green flies.

While I helped bury the dead, Trothgar looked for signs of the boys' killers.

"A pack of wolves did this," he said finally. "From the size of their tracks, they must be huge for such creatures. The attack took place early this morning, before first light. 'Tis nearly dark now. Leave off with your digging, and let us be away."

"We can't just leave them lying here," said Esta.

Coldly, Trothgar replied, "Whether the ravens eat them, or the worms, they are still dead. Even as we speak, worse creatures are awakening from their daytime slumber and crawling from their dens to prowl the night. We should go. Quickly."

A sudden wolf's howl to the north made us jump. Others to the east and west answered its call, and a piercing howl to the south, quite close, completed the circle. It was too late to run.

"Furian!" yelled Trothgar. "Build a fire—quickly! Lorrick, tie the horses to that tree! The rest of you light torches and form a circle around the fire. Now!"

Lorrick was having trouble with the horses, which were rolling their eyes with fright and stamping their feet. Trothgar, Samkin, and Esta helped him tie them. I used magic to kindle a nearby bush into bursting flame, and Bublím helped me to keep the blaze going by tossing dried branches upon it. We all





lit torches and formed a ring around the fire, the tree, and our mounts.

The howls grew in number, and drew closer. We were on the verge of panic, but held our ground. I stuck my torch in the turf at my feet to free my hands for casting spells. Esta did the same, and the others quietly readied their weapons.

Suddenly, the howling stopped. All we heard was the neighing and stomping of our horses.

"I saw something in the mist!" cried Samkin.

I looked and thought I saw the glow of red eyes for an instant. Then the arrows came. A cloud of whirring black barbs swept among us.

Two shafts pierced my left arm, and a third entered my right thigh. The pain was intense, and by the way it spread through me like liquid fire, I knew the barbs were poisoned. Fighting against the hurt, I concentrated upon a spell and unleashed a flashing arc of lightning at the wolf-shapes circling in the mist. From the yelps and cries of anguish, I knew I had found my mark. Alas, before I could conjure more, the poison found my heart and I fell to my knees, wracked by convulsions.

Someone called my name. I rolled onto my back and looked to see Samkin running to me. The next moment a huge wolf leapt over me and bowled into the halfling, clamping its slavering jaws into his tiny shoulder. The beast shook its head viciously, whipping Samkin about like a rag doll. His screams hurt more than the poison in my blood.

Before I lost my sight, I saw Lorrick. He had been pierced by several arrows also, and yet fought on. A wolf leapt in front of him. Clinging to its hairy back was a grinning goblin. In one mighty swipe of his axe, Lorrick struck the goblin's yellow head from its shoulders.

The poison then clouded my eyes and all was darkness and screams and the howls of many, many wolves. Before I lost consciousness, I thought I heard the keening of a distant hunting horn. . .

I was jostled awake to find myself snuggled under sheepskin blankets on a primitive litter being pulled by my own horse, Wind. Esta rode beside me. I nearly wept, I was so relieved to see her alive and unhurt.

"And so the sleeper awakes," she said. "Feeling better?"

"I'm starved!"

"You should be. You've slept for two days."

Two days! Suddenly I remembered the poisoned barbs of the goblin wolf-riders. I threw off the blankets to see that all of my wounds had been mended. Esta's healing touch, no doubt.

"Lie still, Furian," she said. "Enjoy the ride."

"Where are we?"

"Still on the High Moor, but with an escort of human barbarians. They had gone in search of the three missing boys, only to rescue us from the goblins in their stead."

"But I don't see anyone."

"They are riding up ahead," she said. "Seeing the carnage wrought by your lightning—you killed six wolves and their goblin riders, by the way—they decided you are a mighty sorcerer. They seem to fear magic, and are giving you, and me, a wide berth."

"Let us stop. I want to ride upon Wind's back, and not this infernal litter."

"A mighty wizard should show no weakness, eh?" she said with a grin.

She helped me unhitch the litter. Still weak, I finally managed to climb upon Wind. I ate as I rode, and soon felt much better.

As she had said, the barbarians were indeed riding ahead of the group. They wore sheepskin jerkins decorated with beads and bangles. For weapons, they carried spears, short bows, and finely-crafted two-handed swords. Though lacking the fineries of city-folk, they are a proud people.

Esta told me that Samkin and I were the most seriously injured of the company. The halfling nearly bled to death before Esta could close his wounds, but he recovered quickly thereafter. It seems they all feared the poison would claim me, but once again Esta's healing magic was successful.

We would have all been killed if not for the barbarians. They agreed to lead us across the High Moor, in return for a small sum in gold, which Trothgar gladly paid from the company fund.

Tomorrow we part company with the barbarians at the southeastern edge of the moor, near the Serpent Hills. And soon we will reach the Hill of Lost Souls.





A Vision upon The Hill

We crossed the Winding Water and reached the Hill of Lost Souls without mishap. Though still wilderness, this country was much more pleasant than the High Moor. We all agreed we had underestimated the dangers of the moor, and the large numbers of evil creatures that stalk its misty terrain—a mistake we will not repeat if ever we return.

We approached the hill under cover of darkness. Wise that we did, for we soon saw the glow of several fires and heard the beat of war drums. Samkin agreed to scout ahead, and Bublím made him invisible, for added protection. We settled back to wait, as the halfling's light steps faded into the night.

Hill of Lost Souls

Once in the years before even the elves lived in the North, this was an extinct volcano, but the passage of many winters has softened its cone to a hill with a cup-like peak. Its sides are covered with soft, shiny grass, and only the occasional outcropping of hardened lava or a scattering of obsidian chips advertises its true origin.

These grassy slopes were an armed camp during the Battle of the Bones. Here the armies of men raised their standards and tended the wounded. In recent times, the peak has been used by rogue mages as a meeting-place, and by the Hierophant Druid Phezeltan to work mighty weather magics. Today the hill is abandoned, save by the spirits of fallen men and tribes of goblin races.

Somewhere on the Hill of Lost Souls is the tomb of Thelarn "Swifthammer," son of Mongoth. This dwarven adventurer is said to lie entombed with his favored weapon, a mighty war axe named *Sky-splitter*. The Tomb of Thelarn has not been uncovered, and at least one group of adventurers—the Men of the Blue Blade—has met its end at the hands of orc bands while looking for it.

It was not long before Samkin returned. "Orcs," he said. "I counted seventeen of them."

Trothgar asked, "What are they doing up there?"

"Dancing about their fires and beating drums," replied the halfling. "They seem quite drunk. I saw several human bodies, most likely tortured to death. I suppose the orcs are celebrating their victory. The biggest and ugliest one was wearing a bronze helm with silver-tipped horns. He also carried a shield emblazoned with what looked like a lightning bolt and crossed hammers."

"Them be some of the battle-dress o' Thelarn, son o' Mongoth!" rumbled Lorríck. "These foul creatures've plundered his tomb. We must be avengin' this!"

"Let us not be too hasty," said Bublím. "They outnumber us by nearly three-to-one."

"If I must be goin' alone, then so be it," growled the dwarf, flashing the gnome a steely gaze.

He hefted his axe and strode toward the hill. But Trothgar spoke up.

"Hold a moment, Lorríck. 'Tis true they are many and we are few, but orcs are cowardly, even when drunk, and they are not expecting further strife this night. Let us form a plan, and catch them unawares."

His heart must have yearned for orc blood, but Lorríck saw the wisdom in this and rejoined us. Though he is brave, Lorríck is no fool.

After discussing the layout of the orc camp, we gathered our weapons and stalked slowly and quietly up the slope of the Hill of Lost Souls. We left the horses behind, as they would be too noisy and difficult to control on the steep terrain.

Occupied with their drunken revelry, the orcs had no idea we were watching them and preparing to attack. Esta Starchild and I acted first, conjuring spells that held six of the creatures immobile. Samkin, Bublím, and Trothgar let loose with sling stones and arrows, felling three more orcs. Screaming a dwarven battle cry, Lorríck charged into the camp, his axe held high.





I suppose the fact that they had just looted a dwarven tomb added to the orcs' fear of Lorrick. At the sight of the crazed dwarf, those that could turned and fled.

I could have slain them all with a bolt of lightning, but Lorrick would surely have been struck as well. Instead, I flung a volley of magical missiles, which always strike their mark, killing three of the bellowing monsters. Another stumbled, and Lorrick was upon it, his axe biting deep. Four remained, and of these two were slain by sling stones and arrows. Only two orcs escaped into the night.

We bound the six orcs that had been magically held, and Lorrick questioned them in their own gruff tongue.

"They're o' the tribe o' the Gory Snout," said Lorrick. "The large one lyin' dead yonder, the one that dared to wear the helm o' Thelarn, is a sub-chief. He was leadin' this war party when they came upon them humans."

I looked over at the corpses. There were eight human men. Some appeared to have died in combat. I will not describe how the others were tortured and killed, for it is too gruesome for words. From their dress and equipment, they appeared to have been adventurers.

"Them men uncovered the tomb o' Thelarn," continued Lorrick. "Them orcs ambushed 'em as they emerged from the tomb, and defeated 'em swiftly, just as we defeated them orcs in turn. They be sayin' the tomb is near, at the top o' the hill in the depression there. I must be returnin' Thelarn's things to him, and resealin' the tomb."

"What should we do with our captives?" Samkin asked.

"Kill them," answered Trothgar. "They are murderers. It would be wrong to give them the chance to kill again by setting them free."

No one objected. I felt no qualms about killing the orcs. In the wilderness, he who bears arms is the law; there are no courts and no magistrates.

"I'll be doin' it," said Lorrick firmly. The dwarf led the orcs down the hill, and returned alone.

We had no difficulty in finding the tomb entrance. Using picks and shovels, the deceased adventurers had uncovered the tomb's buried capstone, which now lay pushed to one side. Rever-

ently, Lorrick carried Thelarn's helm and shield into the dark tunnel, and we followed quietly, holding sputtering torches.

Once, Thelarn's remains had lain upon a cairn of goblinoid skulls. Now, the dwarf's bones lay scattered about the crypt; the result of the tomb-robbing humans and orcs, no doubt. There were treasures as well—urns filled to overflowing with gold and gemstones, and a mighty hammer. Strangely, the orcs had left these. I suppose they planned to collect them after the night's drunkenness.

The only thing that appeared untouched was Thelarn's fabled war axe, *Skysplitter*. The charred remains of an orc lay next to it. Apparently, the magical weapon had the means to protect itself, if not its former master's remains.

As we watched, Lorrick placed the shield and helm on the cairn. He then gathered Thelarn's chain mail, which still held some of the dwarf's bones, and put it on the pile. Carefully, he sorted through the scattered skulls and picked out the rest of Thelarn's skeleton, which he placed on the cairn.

Then something strange occurred. A bluish light appeared above the cairn, and slowly took the form of a dwarven warrior. The ghost of Thelarn spoke with a heavy accent.

"Me rest was disturbed. I thank ye fer returnin' me to peace once again. In me gratitude, I've two gifts fer ye.

"Firstly, ye may be sleepin' safe upon the Hill this night. Me spirit, and those o' the Fallen, shall be guardin' yer slumber. If ye do this, a great wonder'll be revealed.

"Secondly, I be passin' me weapon unto ye, Lorrick. 'Tis called *Skysplitter*. Wield it with courage, for 'tis me favorite. And do not be forgettin' the deeds o' Thelarn, son o' Mongoth."

With that, the ghost began to diminish. Ere it vanished utterly, *Skysplitter* rose into the air before Lorrick. Weeping proud tears, he took it in his scarred hands.

We left the tomb, leaving Thelarn and his treasures behind. I saw Samkin look back at the gold and sigh. I believe he mumbled one word: "Wasteful."

We helped Lorrick return the capstone to its proper place, then bury it once more. I trust that we con-





cealed it well enough that no one will disturb Thelarn's rest again.

Using the picks and shovels, we hastily buried the bodies of the orcs and men. The hour grew late, and we were all exhausted. After a cold meal of bread, cheese, and jerky, we settled down to rest, but sleep did not come easily.

From under his blankets, Samkin said bluntly, "I'm scared. I don't like it here. I don't want ghosts watching me sleep."

"I second the motion," said Bublím with a nervous laugh.

I said, "Thelarn spoke of 'the Fallen.' What did he mean, Lorríck?"

"Many brave men died on these slopes durin' the Battle o' the Bones," he replied. "Their spirits wander here, forever lost. 'Tis why it's called the Hill o' Lost Souls."

"I don't care for this myself," said Trothgar. "Perhaps we should camp elsewhere."

"We have been invited," said Esta. "You must all have faith no harm will come to us."

"Aye," said Lorríck. "We're as safe here as in any king's castle. Let's be sleepin' now, and see what the night brings."

"I'll try," said Samkin. "I hope I don't have nightmares."

A dream. At least we agreed later it was.

I awoke in the night to the sound of war trumpets. The armies of men were making a stand on the Hill of Lost Souls. All around were leering goblin hordes.

My friends were with me, but they appeared transparent, ghostly. I felt as light as air, and looked down in shock to see my body sleeping peacefully. In this place, we were the ghosts, and the spirits reality.

With a final trumpet blast, knights in battered armor charged in a desperate attempt to breach the goblin army. They drove deep and killed many, but were soon enveloped and pulled from their screaming mounts.

The goblins surged up the hill. The soldiers stood calmly. Many prayed softly. Death was coming with a horde of gleaming fangs, glowing eyes, and flashing blades.

Suddenly, the night sky brightened. A glittering meteor swept high above, leaving a trail of sparkling

motes. It arced through the air, disappearing over the horizon far to the north and east. A terrific thunderclap echoed across the world, and a sphere of blue light grew from where the meteor landed, expanding to reach the battlefield instantly in a surging wave. It passed through the goblin hordes, obliterating them, then through the army of men, and left them unharmed. I felt its power in my very soul.

I was being pulled back into my body. Before I returned to my peaceful slumber, I saw the haggard soldiers kneeling on the bloody grass, their swords raised toward the glowing night-orb named Selúne. As one they said, "Selúne weeps for us. Woe that her tear is lost to the world, as are we."

With the morning, we all awoke feeling refreshed, and excited. What could it mean?

"Selúne has sent us a vision," said Esta. "Long ago, she shed a tear, which fell to the world. I believe we are fated to find it."

"What's so important about a tear?" asked Samkin.

"It is not a literal tear," she replied. "Not salted water such as we weep, but a piece of Selúne herself—a stone fallen from the sky. Such a tear can work potent magics."

"But surely the vision is wrong," Lorríck said, "fer there be no tales o' the goblin army bein' swept away upon a tide o' blue light. The Hill was used to tend the wounded. The major battle took place further to the south and east."

"Perhaps it was not a vision of the past," said Esta, "but one of the future."

"This talk is getting us nowhere," grumbled Trothgar. "I suppose you wish to go in search of this mysterious tear, Esta. From what I saw, it landed far to the northeast. Crossing the Great Desert would be foolish. Let us continue our original plan and journey south to Corm Orp. From there, if we choose, we can head west through more hospitable country than the desert."

The company was agreed. After packing our gear, we rode south. But we never reached Corm Orp. . .



Lost Among The BONES



day's ride southeast of the Hill of Lost Souls, we came upon a peaceful meadow with a small, clean brook. As the sun sank below the world, we made camp.

Taking his bow, Trothgar strode off.

"'Tis time we had a hot meal," he said. "Get your stew pot bubbling, Samkin. I'll be back shortly with fresh meat."

Indeed, scarcely an hour passed before the ranger returned with three plump hares. Samkin's stew of wild tubers, onions, and various herbs accepted the meat. It was delicious. I have yet to meet a halfling who could not turn the simplest fare into a feast worthy of any lord's table.

With our bellies full and warm, we lounged upon the soft grass. Lorrick produced his pipe, and packed it slowly and methodically. I knew a tale was soon coming.

"We're quite near the site of the Battle o' the Bones," he said. "Never been there meself, but I've heard it spoken of. A vast army o' men and dwarves clashed with the Goblin Nations there. Some say the ground shook as far away as Waterdeep when those two juggernauts collided.

"The battle were joined for an entire tenday ere the goblin races were defeated. 'Tis said all that remains be a sea o' white dust and bones. Many, many young warriors died heroes that tenday.

"A battle also took place in Skull Gorge, where many orc and hobgoblin chieftains and shamans had fled."

The dwarf drew on his pipe. It seemed he had lost interest, but Samkin urged him on.

"What happened at Skull Gorge?"

"Ye can be findin' Skull Gorge south o' here on the River Reachin'. Its steep walls run almost to the river's edge, and be riddled with caverns.

"As I said, 'twas in this steep-walled valley that the survivin' orc and hobgoblin leaders gathered followin' the Battle o' the Bones to stand off the armies o' man and dwarf. The goblin races summoned aid of a diabolical origin, includin' many devils and a great

floatin' skull glowin' with red flames, but were nevertheless defeated. The gorge be deserted now.

"'Tis said much treasure was hurriedly concealed among those many caverns lacin' the stone walls o' the gorge. Few who have gone seekin' it ha' been seen again. I've heard it said that fell beasts appear from nowhere to attack travelers in the gorge."

Lorrick paused once again, and Samkin opened his mouth to speak, but Trothgar interrupted.

"The hour grows late, and we still have far to go. I will take the first watch."

Battle of The Bones

This region lies at the midpoint along the western edge of the Great Desert, between Evereska to the north and the Sunset Mountains to the south. Travelers moving into this area first note a withered land with a few stunted scrub trees. The soil has a dusty, chalky pallor. Nearing the site of the battle, outcroppings of bone jut from the soil, until the bones outnumber the rocks themselves and the adventurer is moving through a wasteland of remains.

On this site, in a shallow valley some 200 winters ago, a titanic battle erupted between human forces and the various goblinoid races. The Goblin Nations, along with orcs, hobgoblins, and their allies, had overrun the North after the fall of the Early Kingdoms of humans and the dwindling of the dwarven peoples.

After almost a week of continuous fighting, the humans triumphed, but at a horrendous cost. So numerous were the dead that even today their bones are said to cover the ground to a depth of one foot.

Most travelers avoid this region because of the great numbers of undead creatures said to haunt it. Those who do come this way, seeking a route along the edge of the desert, speak of some power organizing the undead into patrols. No one has yet investigated these claims.





I awoke several hours later and realized it was past time for me to relieve Lorrick of his turn at the watch. I saw him sitting away from camp, and was surprised to hear him speaking softly. Curious, I crept toward him, and before he noticed me I am certain he laughed and said quietly, "I knew the legends were true!"

I stepped on a twig, and the dwarf whirled around, clutching a gleaming *Skysplitter* in his hands. He was alone.

"I thought I heard you speaking to someone," I said.

"That I was, me friend," he said. "I hear *Skysplitter's* words in me head. This war axe has a will of its own!"

I was dubious. A talking axe? Lorrick tells many tall tales, but he is no liar.

"What does it tell you?" I asked.

"It speaks of its many victories in the hands o' The-larn, son o' Mongoth. It tells me it has the power to summon lightnin' from the storm to smash its foes."

"A mighty weapon indeed."

"Perhaps I'll share its tales with ye later, Furian." He then walked back to camp—humming a merry tune! Curious.

My watch passed without incident. I woke Samkin to relieve me. My sleep was troubled with dreams of a talking axe and a power-mad dwarf. . .

I was awakened by shouts and screaming horses. A band of orc raiders had made off with two of our pack animals. Foolishly, we hastily gathered our weapons and began pursuit at a full gallop. I shall not soon forget that feverish ride through the moonlit landscape. How we managed to keep from injuring our mounts or ourselves, and to stay together as a group, I do not know.

As we were about to give up the chase, our mounts suddenly stopped dead in their tracks, utterly terrified. Their stomping hooves stirred up a cloud of chalky-white dust. It could mean only one thing—we were at the Battle of the Bones!

How far into the region we had come, we could not say, and had little time to reflect upon, for the wispy shapes of undead creatures were already encircling us. Starchild and I presented our holy symbols in an attempt to destroy the creatures. To our dismay, the power of our faith had no effect—the horde of the

unliving kept coming, intentionally forcing us to retreat deeper into the bone-covered battleground.

We were compelled to dismount, for our horses were literally frothing at the mouths with fright. To our shame, we retreated from the poor beasts, who were too horrified to flee for their lives. The undead swept over our screaming horses, butchering them before our eyes.

Anger burned the common sense from our minds, and we made a stand. Though we destroyed dozens of skeletons, we were greatly outnumbered. The ghostly forms of more powerful undead began to appear, and once again we were forced to retreat.

The horror began to unravel the fabric of my very mind. I saw, or thought I saw, familiar faces amongst the undead—those I have loved and lost, those I have fought and killed, and those I have yet to meet. From the shocked faces of my friends, they too were experiencing similar visions. I have never felt such fear and utter hopelessness.

As one, we turned to look behind us, to see where the undead were driving us like cattle. Rising from this land of ancient remains was a tower made entirely of twisting bone. The invisible evil beaming from there felt as real and as strong as any unseeable force of nature—the pull of the earth, the heat of the sun, or the might of the wind. I knew then that that is where we would die, only to live again as the undead. Crazily, I began to hasten my pace toward that place, for only there would I find a quick end to the terror and despair gripping my heart.

But Starchild began to pray in her sing-song voice, and my love for her returned to fill my heart. I followed her gaze up to shining Selûne. To my joy, brilliant moondust swept down and around us, banishing our fear and taking us away. We awoke to the sounds of birdsong, miles and miles from the Battle of the Bones.

I shall never return there.





In The Forgotten Forest

At the depth of our dreadful encounter at the Battle of the Bones, we were rescued—whisked away by the divine power of Selune. For reasons unknown to me at the time, the goddess swept us to the heart of the Forgotten Forest.

I had heard many tales of the dangers of this enchanted forest, and now I have my own tale to tell.

Being in the wood is disorienting. Even Trothgar, a talented ranger, did not seem to know north from south, and began leading us in circles, though he was too bull-headed to admit it.

Soon, we began to hear a lively tune played on pipes, drums, and harps. It was glorious music, and before we realized it, we had walked into the midst of a celebration.

Dancing in a moonlit glade were six very odd creatures, which I later learned are called korred. They stand as tall as gnomes, with wildly flowing beards and hair snaking out in all directions. Their small bodies are likewise hairy, and they have the hooped legs of goats.

The korred danced circles around an ancient, gnarled tree. Strangely, their music seemed to mock the tree, as if attempting to provoke it. Their music must have been some sort of enchantment, for we soon found ourselves joining in the dance, no matter how hard we struggled to resist.

Though I must admit the dance was enjoyable at first, it built in tempo until we were jumping and twisting in a mania of exertion. The more I struggled to stop, the more I felt my very life slipping away. This was no longer a dance of merriment, but a dance of death.

Suddenly, the old tree moved. I could then see that it had a human-like face, arms, and legs. Shaking its branches crazily and stomping about, the tree shoed the korred away, and we were free of their enchantment. All in the company collapsed to the ground, utterly exhausted.

The tree-that-walks then picked up Starchild in its arm-branches, and started off into the forest with her. I tried to stand, but I was so tired. As if sensing my

alarm, the tree said in a booming voice: “I mean no harm to the elven maid. Rest here a while. Treat yourselves to the korreds’ wine. They will not be back for it. I assure you!”

And so we did. After one sip of the tasty vintage, I fell into a luxurious slumber.

I awoke hours later to find that the tree-that-walks and Starchild had returned. To my relief, I saw that she was virtually beaming with joy. In her delicate hands she held a beautifully carved oaken staff set with a strange crystal.

“The crystal is a fragment of the Tear of Selune,” said Starchild. “’Tis why the goddess has brought us here. The powers of the staff will guide us upon our quest.”

She introduced the tree-man as Fuorn. He is the ruler of his kind in the Forgotten Forest. Though gruff, Fuorn is a likeable creature, so long as one means no harm to his kind or the forest. I would not want to face his wrath!

The Forgotten Forest

Near Anauroch, between the Marsh of Chelimer and the Lonely Moor, stands the Forgotten Forest, a rich, mature wood filled with oak, walnut, and shadowtop trees. The foliage is so thick as to cast the interior in deep shadow.

This forest is the remains of a larger wood that diminished with the spreading of Anauroch. It is a mysterious, deeply overgrown forest of huge trees, and travelers who have skirted its edges have reported seeing sprites, korred, and unicorns within its depth.

The Forgotten Forest is said to have the largest population of treants in the North, ruled by one known as Fuorn. In addition to the treants, the Hierophant Druid Pheszeltan makes his home somewhere in the depths of this land. Travel through the forest is discouraged, and those in the area are highly encouraged to build their fires only using wood from deadfalls.





Fuorn offered to lead us out of the forest, and we gathered our things to leave. We had walked only a short way, however, when an owl landed among the treant's branches and whispered in his ear.

"Someone of importance in my woods wishes to speak with the bearer of the Staff of the Shard," he said. "Follow me, and I will take you to him."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"His name is Pheszeltan," replied Fuorn. "He is a holy man whose love of the forest and its creatures equals that of my own. I respect him greatly. It would indeed be wise for you to hear his words."

We walked quietly for a time. Esta Starchild's step was light. She smiled constantly like a giddy child. The staff she carried had given her direction, strength, and hope. The stone set in it gleamed with blue sparkles, as if it too were happy to be in her company. I could no longer contain my curiosity about the staff.

"What do you know of the staff, Esta?" I asked.

"Very little, really. I first learned of it during my studies at the House of the Moon in Waterdeep. It is ancient by human standards, and was fashioned by priest-mages shortly after Selûne's Tear fell. Somehow it was lost to the order. No one knew of its whereabouts, until now."

"You speak the truth, little sprig," interjected Fuorn. "A woman dressed in shimmering moondust brought it unto me many winters ago. She bade me to keep it safe, for its bearer would one day come for it. And this I did. When I saw you, I knew were the bearer, little sprig."

Esta smiled up at the Treant-King. She turned to me and said, "As I remember, it is said to have an innate connection to the Tear, and draws its power from it. Because of this connection, the staff can lead its bearer to the Tear. I am certain it has other magical functions, which will be revealed to me in due time. Is your curiosity satisfied, Furian?"

"No." I frowned, and Esta smiled.

Druidic Circles

In the northern Realms from the Sword Coast to Impiltur, druids in lightly settled areas tend to gather in small groups, often with rangers and other allies. These groups, usually numbering a dozen or fewer druids and 20 or fewer allies, vary widely in prominence and working relationships. Some druids live together in a woodland grove. Others are widely scattered, with non-druid members serving as go-betweens. In some groups, druids and rangers deal as equals, and in others the druids are revered by those who work with them.

These groups are known as "Circles." The term harkens to the unending cycles of natural processes, and emphasizes that no one creature is intrinsically superior to another.

In the Dalelands, recent warfare has destroyed the last two known and long-established circles: the Circle of Shadowdale and the Battledale Seven, although a few individuals from each of the groups have survived. Many circles still exist elsewhere in wooded areas of the Realms, and these may be of great local importance, often working with non-human woodland beings to maintain wilderness areas and keep the peace in their territories.

In the Realms at large, these circles provide a network of communication and aid for those who venerate Chauntea and similar Powers. In general, druids of the Realms seek balance between man and nature, at the expense of neither.

Druids have several major areas of power, including the Border Forest, the Forest of Guthmere, and in particular the Moonshae Isles. In the last, druids are worshippers of a possible aspect of Chauntea known as the Earthmother, and form the native faith. Conflict between these druids and clerics of the invading settlers' "new" faiths is more extreme than normally found in the Realms. The trouble is as much varying cultures as it is differences in belief.





We soon came to a glade in the woods where a waterfall crashed and butterflies danced in its rainbow spume. Multi-colored fish streaked through a pool of clear water like tiny lightning bolts.

Suddenly, a massive gray wolf jumped out of the bushes and stalked to the water's edge. In one swift motion, Trothgar readied his bow and took aim, but Fuorn lowered a branch and spoiled the ranger's shot.

"Have no fear," said the Treant-King. "Watch and learn, for not all things are as they seem in the Forgotten Forest."

I was shocked when the wolf began to change shape. Its form altered swiftly, and soon an elderly man with a long gray beard stood before us.

"Well met," said the shape-changer. "I am Phezeltan. Welcome to my grove. Please, refresh yourselves at the pool and relax upon the mosses. Let us talk in comfort."

We did as Phezeltan suggested. The spring water tasted as light as honey mead, and was just as invigorating. I felt the fatigue of our trek through the forest sluiced out of my body.

Standing on the bank, Fuorn sent his roots snaking down into the water, and sighed heavily. His leaves rustled as if tousled by a breeze.

"'Tis always a pleasure to meet with the Druid Phezeltan," he said. "Perhaps I will spend a season standing in your grove. I feel as lively as a sapling!"

"As always, you and your kind are welcome here, Treant-King," said the old man.

Our elven cleric cut to the heart of the matter. "I am Esta Starchild, and these are my companions—Bublim Barboast, Samkin Silvertooth, Trothgar, Lorrick, and Furian Arcanus. We are questing for Selúne's Tear, and though we are thankful for your hospitality, we have need of haste. If there is—"

"You think I do not know this?" interjected Phezeltan with a smile. "For what else would the bearer of the *Staff of the Shard* search? You have months of travel ahead, Starchild. Surely you can spare a few moments to satisfy an old man's curiosity. Perhaps I can offer something in return."

"What is it that intrigues you, Phezeltan?" asked Esta.

"I was curious to know why the goddess has chosen you. From the courage behind your eyes, and the love

in the eyes of your friends, my question is answered before it is asked. I thank you for coming before me, and allowing me to see the staff. Do you know how to use it yet?"

"No."

"I suspected as much. Seek out the Scribes of Candlekeep, for in their dusty tomes is written much about the history of the *Staff of the Shard*. Perhaps you can glean some useful information there."

"I know something of Candlekeep," I said. "Only the most renowned wizards, or those bearing the sigil of a prominent mage, may browse the collections. Even then, the gift of a valuable book is expected in thanks. We'll never get through the front door!"

Phezeltan tugged at his long beard and thought for a moment.

"I could write you a letter of introduction. I am known to the scribes, though I must admit that I carry little weight with them."

"Thank you, Phezeltan, but I do not think your intervention necessary," said Esta. "One of the scribes is a very dear friend of mine. I suspect he will be eager to accommodate me."

He? I did not like the sound of that. I already had a rival in Trothgar. I did not want another, especially "a very dear friend."

"Candlekeep lies far to our west," I tried again. "Surely you can investigate the powers of the staff as we travel, Esta. It would save us so large a detour."

Though I glared at him as if to say 'Shut up, old man!,' Phezeltan spoke.

"To truly bear the staff, you must learn its powers. The elves of the Greycloak Hills can sell you swift horses to speed you to Candlekeep."

"I agree with Phezeltan," Esta said.

"And I agree we need horses," spoke Trothgar. "Let us go to the Greycloaks, and there make our final decision about Candlekeep."

And so, after bidding farewell to Phezeltan, Fuorn guided us safely beyond the forest's boundary, and once again we were on our way.





Elves of The Greycloaks

On the southern edge of the Forgotten Forest, near where it meets the Lonely Moor, we parted company with Fuorn. He seemed truly sad to see us go, and I will miss him. Perhaps I may return to spend a season dipping my toes in a gurgling stream with the Treant-King. It harms none to dream.

As we left, Fourn boomed a final warning.

"Stay clear of the moor! You will only find bandits after your purses and evil beasts out for your skins upon the Lonely Moor! Farewell! May the winds be gentle, and the earth moist where you plant your toes!"

The Lonely Moor

This region on the borders of Anauroch is not as great a wasteland as that desert, but similar in its desolation. It is a dying, empty land of scrub and dust.

Named for its isolation from civilized areas, this stretch of moorland is wilderness territory, populated by fell and dangerous creatures. Even so, the region is heavily traveled by men, for the Zhen-tarim and others seeking to avoid the normal channels of traffic skirt this land en route to the northern town of Llorckh.

The Lonely Moor was once the western edge of a kingdom that stretched north roughly from Evereska to the Nether Mountains. Known as Netheril, the kingdom was said to have been ruled by mages. Today, little is remembered of the former realm save that many items of magic were fashioned there. Legends say the Great Desert advanced across Netheril despite the effort of its wizards.

The northern ruin of Dekanter is the last known vestige of the kingdom's cities, and that is little more than a set of tumbled stones and crumbling pillars. Some say that Dekanter holds the entrance to a vast land beneath Faerûn, but none have admitted to finding such an entrance.

We followed Fuorn's advice and stayed away from the Lonely Moor. From what we could see of it at a distance, it held little appeal, being no more than a wasteland of stunted trees and rocks.

After a long day of marching, we made camp in a copse of trees beside a small lake. Our provisions were running low, and there were still a few hours of light remaining, so Trothgar left to hunt.

"I'll feed you all well tonight!" he said haughtily, and strode off. The Great Provider.

"I'll show him!" Samkin said.

The halfling took fishing line and hook from his pack, along with a hunk of bread, and walked down the lake shore until he was out of sight.

The rest of us relaxed under the trees, lost in our own thoughts: Lorrick mumbled to his beloved axe, Starchild said a prayer to the rising moon, Bublím had a huge grin on his face as he fiddled through his pouch of spell components, and I busied myself with this very journal.

"Shall we dine on fish or meat this night?" I asked. "Who shall be successful, the fisherman or the hunter?"

"I'll eat what I eat," grumbled Lorrick, as if annoyed that I had interrupted his conversation with *Skysplitter*.

"I'll wager a gold coin on Trothgar," said Bublím.

I agreed to the bet. Esta did not seem to hear our talk, for she was either asleep or meditating.

With a mischievous glint in his eye, Bublím looked at me and said, "Come, Furian, and watch a master prankster at his craft."

How could I resist? I smiled at the gnome and we sneaked down to the lake.

Samkin was not difficult to find. We heard him thrashing about and cursing before even we saw him.

"This stupid line has more knots in it than Lorrick's beard! Ouch! You stupid hook! You're for hooking fish, not halflings!"

"Perhaps we should up the wager," whispered Bublím. "What say you to five gold coins?"

"I say I am probably soon to be five coins poorer."



Greycloak Hills

High, rolling ridges of earth, the Greycloaks are covered by weedy grasses and occasional patches of small trees. They are considered a northern outpost of the elven homeland of Evereska, though they are isolated from it. The site was settled less than 30 years past by a contingent of elves and half-elves.

The normal grey garb of these elvish settlers has given the hills their current name. Previously referred to as the Tomb Hills, the region holds the final resting places of long-dead warrior-kings, and was haunted by banshees. Adventuring companies once made forays into the area to loot these old tombs, but with the current settlement of elves under the Evereska Charter, such activities have ceased.

The elves and half-elves of the Greycloaks are of silver blood, though there are a few wild elves among them. They are friendly with the group known as the Harpers, but wary of the Zhentarim and their allies.

The Greycloak elves make musical instruments for trade with men, though they work quietly through certain merchants in the town of Hill's Edge to the south. The settlement is ruled by the elven lord Erlan Duirsar, who the women of Hill's Edge vow to be both very tall and quite handsome.

The reason for the new Greycloak settlement is unknown, and puzzling considering the general withdrawal of the Elven Peoples from the Realms. The ruling elves keep their own council, but it is surmised there is something in the Greycloaks that the elves wish not to fall into the hands of others.

The diminutive fisherman finally got his line baited and in the water. To my surprise, it was not long before he hooked a fish.

"Yipee! I'll show that Northman half-breed how to survive in the wilderness, all right!"

From behind a bush, we watched Samkin land the fish, a good-sized speckle-fin.

"Now watch this," giggled Bublin. He conjured a simple spell, one to make his voice seem to come from the fish.

"Oh please, master halfling," said the Bublin-fish, "let me go and I'll make you rich!"

"A talking fish!" cried Samkin. "By my mother's hairy feet, what a catch! Did you say rich?"

"Oh yes, indeed! I nest upon a chest filled with gold coins. Remove this painful hook and I'll take you to it. It lies near the bank. You can wade to it."

"I'll remove the hook, but only after I have the chest. Do you take me for a stupid fool?"

"Oh no, master halfling. I am sure you are a smart one, and I agree to your terms."

Samkin tossed the fish back into the lake, and it tugged hard on his line. He then stepped into the water, and immediately disappeared, only to return a moment later sputtering and thrashing.

"Help! I can't swim!"

"This has gotten out of hand," I said. "I'm going to get him out of there."

"Hold a moment, Furian," laughed Bublin. "Samkin swims like a rat. I've seen him."

Sure enough, the halfling pulled himself up onto the bank. He did indeed look like a waterlogged rat. Miraculously, he still had hold of his line, and pulled the fish up after him.

"You're a tricky rascal," he said. "You may have fooled me, but not all of us put together. Just wait until my friends hear you talk!"

Bublin and I ran back to camp. An excited, dripping halfling soon followed.

"Look what I've caught! A talking fish! Go on, say hello to my friends, or I'll toss you in my skillet lickety-split!"

The speckle-fin rolled its eyes, and opened and closed its mouth as a landed fish will do. I couldn't hold back any longer. Bublin and I both rolled about, doubled up guffaws.

Lorrick caught on. Grinning, he said, "Fer once I'm not the butt o' yer jokes, Bublin. I thank ye."

"Very funny, Bublin," said Samkin. "But I'll have the last laugh. Just wait until I get that gold!"

He then sloshed off toward the lake. Bublin and I burst out laughing anew.

Shortly after dark both Trothgar and Samkin





returned to camp. The ranger was empty-handed, and offered no apologies, only excuses.

"I had a shot at a deer," he said, "but the poor light spoiled my aim."

Samkin, however, was more successful. He returned with six large speckle-fins.

"What about the gold?" asked a grinning Bublím Barboast.

"There wasn't any, as you well know," Samkin replied.

"No, really?" I said humbly.

"Do you two funny fellows wish to eat fish tonight, or cold rations?"

We kept our mouths shut, and had a fine meal of fried speckle-fin. Afterward, I gladly accepted five gold coins from one master prankster.

The journey to the Greycloak Hills proceeded without further mischief. Along the way, we questioned Esta Starchild about the place, as none of us had been there before.

"Do you have friends in the Greycloaks, Esta?" I asked. "Will we be well-received?"

"It is possible I have friends who are visiting there, but I do not know any of the regular inhabitants. As we come in peace, I am certain we will be welcome, however."

"What sorts of elves live in the Greycloaks?" asked Samkin.

"The majority are Moon Elves such as myself," she replied. "We will also see many half-elves of mixed blood like Furian. And there are said to be Wood Elves in the settlement as well."

"Tell me of their leader," said Trothgar.

"Erlan Duirsar is an elven lord. He is said to be as courageous as he is handsome."

Of course, I thought. And he'll probably fall in love with you, Esta. When would these feelings of jealousy end? Somehow I had to tell Starchild of my feelings for her, but the time was not yet right, and the thought of rejection made my heart weak.

The Greycloaks rose before us. Esta pointed to the clouds and said, "Look there. We have been spotted."

A giant eagle soared high above. I swear I saw a rider clinging to its feathery back.

We had just begun to walk through the lowest hills when we were intercepted by a patrol of

mounted elven warriors. They wore finely-crafted leather armor studded with silver and bronze, and delicate silver-plated helms with green plumes. The warriors were armed with long spears (used as lances, I suspect), short bows, and long swords. I also noticed that they and their horses wore garlands of fresh leaves and flowers, which seemed odd at the time, considering they were on patrol.

The elves pulled to a halt, eyeing us warily.

"What is your business here?" asked their leader.

"My name is Esta Starchild. I am a priestess of Selûne, and have come seeking an audience with Lord Erlan Duirsar. If you would—"

"We have gold for horses," interjected Trothgar bluntly.

"N'Tel'Quess," spat the leader.

Starchild flashed Trothgar a harsh look as if to say Shut up and let me do the talking. She then looked to the elf warrior and smiled her smile.

"'Tis true he is not of the People," she said. "Please forgive his lack of manners. These all are my friends, and I shall vouch for them while in your domain. We are on a quest for the good of all the People, and it is important that we see Lord Duirsar."

The warrior's frostiness melted. "Let me be the first to welcome you, Esta Starchild. My name is Luirlan Duirsar, eldest son of Lord Erlan Duirsar. The timing of your arrival bodes well, as a celebration is planned for tonight."

"What is the occasion?" she asked.

"I have the joy of taking a bride this evening."

That explained the garlands they wore. We joined them on their horses, and rode deep into the Greycloak Hills.

By nightfall we reached the stockade of stone and wood that surrounded the main settlement. We rode in on the cheers of the palisade guards, who greeted Luirlan Duirsar as if he were a returning king.

All were happy to see the bridegroom home safe. Elf maidens tossed flowers for his horse to tread upon. Garlands strung with blossoms and glowing multi-hued lanterns hung between the houses of the elves. Everywhere were smiles and cheers. The air was filled with excitement and merriment.

We dismounted and followed Luirlan into the Great Hall, where maidens busied themselves with







decorations, and halfling cooks—brought from Corm Orp specifically for the night’s feast—scurried about.

“The ceremony will take place outside under the light of the stars,” said Luirlan. “Afterward, all will gather here for the wedding feast. Of course, you are all invited to dine with us, but please understand that the wedding ceremony is a private affair for family and dear friends.”

We thanked him, and followed Luirlan through a door at the back of the Great Hall, which opened onto Lord Duirsar’s council chamber. The elf lord stood upon a stool, his arms outstretched. A trio of elven maidens bustled about him, pinning and measuring a beautiful green robe he wore. He appeared quite embarrassed.

“Um, I see you have brought unexpected guests, my son,” said Lord Duirsar. He quickly unbuttoned the robe, and the giggling maids scampered from the chamber with it.

“Father, my patrol found these people on the northern border of our realm. They say they have words for you, and request your council in return.” Luirlan then excused himself, saying that he had to prepare for the coming ceremony.

“Then, please be seated at my council table,” said Lord Duirsar, “and tell me what it is that has brought you here this night, if not my son’s wedding.”

The elf lord himself then dipped flagons of evermead from an urn for us all. The glorious wine tasted like a honeysuckle breeze.

Wines of The Realms

Besides the basic red and white, many other types of wine are found around the Forgotten Realms. A few of these include the following:

Arabellan Dry: This fine red wine is very dry and should be served at cellar temperature to best exhibit its woody undertones and slightly berry-like taste.

Berduskan Dark: Berduskan dark wine is a heavy, sweet, and burning wine. It is very dark in hue, almost black, and high in alcohol content.

Blood Wine: A product of Aglarond, blood wine has a heavy body and deep-red tone. The taste is lush and full, with a slight afterbite. The wine comes from shriveled grapes said to be possessed by those dead who enacted petty cruelties upon others while they lived.

Clarry: A blend of table wines sweetened with honey and spices, pink clarry is a treat for any special occasion.

Evermead: This is the elven mead—the one against which all other meads (and any other drink) are compared. A sip is reputed to be a taste of the higher planes themselves. Made according to closely guarded traditional methods in Evermeet, and allegedly aged for hundreds of years, very few kegs of evermead ever reach non-elven hands.

Fire Wine: This thick, dark, almost black wine, made in the Old Empires, is named for the fire it creates in one’s belly. Fire wine is an extremely strong and spicy wine, reputed to have medicinal qualities.

Kaorph: Exclusively imported by the Highmoon Trading Coster, this fine wine is exceptional for its clear, tropical blue color. Kaorph’s flavor is more floral than fruity, making it a ladies’ favorite.

Mead: A delicate, slightly sweet wine made from honey, mead is slow to ferment and in scarce supply compared to grape wines or those of other





fruits. Mead from the fantastic honey bees that inhabit the gardens in Neverwinter is said to be the finest in the North.

Saerloonian Special Vat: This pale red wine leaves a tingle on the tongue. The recipe for Saerloonian special vat is rumored to be over half raspberry and strawberry, with some grains added for smoothness and body.

Saerloonian Glowfire: A pale chartreuse wine renowned for its faint luminescence, glowfire is neither sweet nor very dry, and has a taste reminiscent of pears.

Saerloonian Topaz: A yellow-amber color is what lends this wine its name. It is slightly dry and has a nutty quality balanced by bold fruit overtones.

Undermountain Alurlyath: A surprisingly sweet white wine with a slightly nutty aftertaste and a prominent silver and green luminescence, this wine is very rare. It is stored in ceramic bottles and kegs to prevent its light from fading during transport. Without contacts to its secret creators, one cannot even buy more than a hand keg from Skullport, its port of origin.

Westgate Ruby: A bold crimson wine with a slightly acid inclination, Westgate ruby is best served with a hearty stew or beef.

Wine, Spiced: Typically from Calimshan and Tethyr, spiced wine is a taste treat and a sovereign remedy for many ailments, including nausea, cough, and huskiness of the throat. Raisin, cinnamon, fennel, anise, nutmeg, and clove varieties are available.

Wine, Table: This good wine, red or white, is often bought in bulk as provisioning for a tavern, castle, or manor. It supplies a merry evening and is unfailingly tasty.

Winter Wine: Indigenous to the North, this unusual wine is a purplish-blue in hue, often leading to jokes that the grapes "caught a chill." This is quite true, as the grapes are allowed to freeze on the vine. They are then harvested and crushed while still frozen.

Esta Starchild sipped of her evermead and spoke to Lord Duirsar.

"We have set upon a very long and dangerous journey to find Selûne's Tear. As you can imagine, we are in need of haste, and walking is slow."

"Then you need horses," said the elf lord. "Tomorrow you may select from my own stock. Consider this my contribution to your noble quest. I expect no recompense."

"Thank you, my lord," she replied. "We respectfully accept your gift."

"You are welcome to share the hospitality of my house as long as you desire," he said. "But I can see that you are anxious to be away. Tell me, Starchild, where does your path lead from here?"

"We know the Tear lies somewhere far to the north and east, but the Druid Phezeltan has advised us to seek its lore from the Scribes of Candlekeep, which journey pulls us west, as I am sure you know."

"Phezeltan is a wise man. I should pay close heed to his words, if I were you."

I said, "Perhaps you can save us a trip to Candlekeep, my lord. If you can instruct Esta on the uses of the staff, then we have no need of the scribes."

"Alas, I am but a mere warrior who relies upon his swordarm and wits, and not a sage of ancient texts or magics. I will speak to my court wizards on this matter, though I suspect they know little more about the *Staff of the Shard* than you, Starchild."

There was a knock at the door, and an elf boy entered, carrying the same green robe we had seen before.

"Forgive me for interrupting, my lord," he said with a hasty bow. "But your presence is anxiously awaited at your son's wedding!"

"Has the hour grown so late? Forgive me, my friends, but I must make haste. I trust you will be at the feast?"

"I wouldn't miss it!" said Samkin, licking his lips.

"Maasli," said Lord Duirsar to the boy, "escort these good people to my guest house and let them wash and rest before the feast." He hurried off through the Great Hall, donning the green robe as he walked.

The guest house was large, but nearly full due to the many people there for the wedding. Esta Starchild shared a room with three elven women from



Evereska, who had not been present when we arrived, as they were in the wedding party. Samkin Silvertooth stayed with the halflings from Corm Orp, who were also away, busy in the kitchen of the Great Hall. Lorrick, Trothgar, and I shared a room.

We were all weary from the day's travel. After a warm bath in scented spring water, I sat upon a comfortable bed, meditating quietly. My mind kept wandering to the vision I had had upon the Hill of Lost Souls. If what I saw was true, and I had little doubt of it, then Selûne's Tear could be used to wreak horrible destruction if it fell into evil hands.

The importance of our quest began to sink in, and I meditated upon this awhile. Esta Starchild needed my full support. I could not let my petty jealousies interfere with her decisions. Going to Candlekeep was the wisest course, for without the staff's guidance we would likely never find the Tear. If she still wanted to go to Candlekeep, I decided to help Esta persuade Trothgar.

After an hour or so, Maasli returned and escorted us to the Great Hall. The place was full to the rafters

with smiling, laughing elves and half-elves. Scurrying halfling cooks brought a never-ending supply of tasty delicacies and fine wines.

Luirlan Duirsar introduced us to his new wife, Gwynnestri. She was an elegantly beautiful moon elf adorned in the finest silken wedding gown I have ever seen. I doubted that even the dressmakers of Waterdeep could match it, and told them so, which drew smiles from them both.

Musicians played lively tunes, and we ate, danced, and enjoyed ourselves tremendously. To my chagrin, Trothgar spent so much time dancing with Esta, it looked as though I would not get the opportunity myself. Remembering my earlier meditation, I swallowed the bitter taste of jealousy, and found my own dance partner.

Hours later, I saw Esta leave the Great Hall alone and followed after her.

"Starchild! Hold a moment. Where are you going? The feast is far from over."

"I have had my fill of merry-making this evening. I thought I might take a walk under the stars."





"May I join you?"

"Yes."

We climbed steps twisting around a tall tower along the south wall of the settlement, and gazed out upon the moonlit landscape. She stood very quiet. I knew something was making her heart heavy, but I was patient and held my tongue.

Finally, she said, "I know it is impossible, but if I look hard, with my eyes nearly closed, I think I can see the lights of Evereska. Do you see them, Furian?"

"No. Tell me what they look like, Esta. Tell me about Evereska."

She sighed, and I saw a glittering tear on her soft cheek.

"It is my birthplace. It is my home. I miss its many-colored towers and happy avenues."

"It is not too far, Esta. We could stop there on our way to Candlekeep."

"I would find only memories there, Furian. My family has sailed across the sea."

She began to weep. I reached out to her, and she fell into my arms, sobbing.

"I cannot bear this burden, Furian. The goddess asks too much of me."

"You are our heart, Starchild. If you lose faith, the Seekers will drift apart, scattering to the winds like the seeds of a dandelion. You must be strong, and trust in Selûne's wisdom, for she surely would not ask of you what you cannot give."

I cupped her face in my hands and wiped her tears away. Lost in her sapphire eyes, I kissed her gently. She smiled up at me and said, "We should return to the feast. The others will talk."

Let them talk, I thought. I wanted to declare my love for all the world to hear but I held my tongue.

Evereska (Eh-ver-EH-ska)

Evereska (which means "fortress home" in the Elvish tongue) is a rich and fabled valley nestled in unbreachable mountains, tucked against the borders of Anauroch. With the elven court deserted and its inhabitants passing out of the Realms, Evereska is the last large concentration of moon elves in the North, possibly in the Realms themselves.

Its resources are rich and abundant, dwarfing the meager resources of the wastes beyond its mountain walls. Elven lore and wisdom are held in high esteem, and have been cherished down through the centuries. Temples of all the elvish deities may be found within, tended by priests and priestesses of considerable abilities. Evereska also maintains a college of elven and select half-elven mages who make their specialty the ethereal and astral planes.

Evereska has been a refuge of the elven peoples for over 7,000 winters, and has never fallen to any outside attack. It is said to be guarded by Corellon Larethian himself, when that Power is in the Forgotten Realms. Several times in its long history, the mountain fortress has been attacked by goblin and orc armies, but these armies have been eradicated by screaming magical bolts from the sky.

Evereska also has other defenses. Its only entrances are either well-guarded and difficult ascents, or secretive tunnels known to few. Constant guards and watchposts lace the mountains surrounding the domain. The elves also maintain several wings of giant eagles, which are used as mounts for the more slender members of the race. Finally, those who seek to enter by magic find all such magical methods mysteriously foiled. Thus, the best method of entering Evereska is as an elf or in the company of elves, in an open and honest manner.





Late in the morning following Luirlan and Gwynnestri's wedding feast, Maasli awoke us with a knock at the door of our guest room.

"Lord Duirsar requests your presence in his council chamber, kind sirs." The boy then left to rouse Esta Starchild and Samkin Silvertooth.

Lorrick, Trothgar, and I were slow to get out of our beds. We had drunk much elven wine and eaten more than is healthy. After splashing cold water in my face from a washbasin, and taking a long drink of evermead (I found a half-full flask in my bed!), I finally felt awake.

We all followed Maasli to the Great Hall. Amazingly, some revelers were still present, sitting and talking in small groups, or asleep where they had fallen the night before. Elf boys and girls went about the hall, picking up the hundreds of plates, cups, and utensils quietly so as not to disturb the sleepers.

In his council chamber, Lord Duirsar greeted us with a weary, yet proud, smile.

"The feast was grand, was it not?"

We all agreed to this, and thanked him once again for allowing us to partake. We seated ourselves at his long council table. A smiling maiden served warm slices of elven bread and cups of hot, spiced wine that tasted of cinnamon.

"I spoke to my wizards earlier," said the lord. "I am sorry, but they had little to offer. They believe, as do I, that you will find answers in the libraries of Candlekeep."

"Thank you, my lord," said Esta. "You have been a gracious host. It saddens me that we must take our leave so soon."

"You are all always welcome here. Take your breakfast with you, and come with me to the stables."

We rose to follow Lord Duirsar out of the council chamber. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Samkin stuff an entire loaf of bread under his Jerkin. He met my gaze and raised an eyebrow as if to say, 'He said to take it!'

As we walked across the settlement, a hot wind blew in from the desert. I looked to see sandy Anauroch stretching to the horizon.

Trothgar said, "Do you know of a safe route across the desert, Lord Duirsar? If so, it would save us weeks

of travel, and we might find the information we seek in one of the eastern cities."

"There is no safe trail across Great Anauroch," replied the elf firmly.

We arrived at the stable to find our gear stacked in neat piles. Maasli was there, holding the reins of six beautiful white horses.

"They have unicorn blood in their veins," said Lord Duirsar proudly. "Treat them with kindness, and they will remain loyal even unto death." I remembered Wind's pitiful screams, and prayed that such an act of loyalty would not be needed.

We thanked him, gathered our things, and rode through the gates. Maasli called after us, "Sweet water and light laughter until next!" We waved, and rode on.

Anauroch (ANN-OAR-ock)

This barren wasteland dominates the North, a huge mass of steppeland, rocky wastes, and true desert that runs from the Uttermost North almost to the Lake of Dragons. The Great Desert was not always so huge, and has grown remarkably in the recent millennia, driving wild men, goblins, and other evil creatures farther south into the lands of humans. Many human and elven kingdoms were swallowed by the wastes, and their ruins remain buried beneath the sands.

The area of the Great Desert is in fact a collection of different types of deserts, and includes the hot sandy wastes similar to the Dust Desert of Raurin, rocky badlands with very sparse scrubs and no available water, basins filled with salt flats and prickly cacti, sandstone mountains carved by wind into bizarre shapes, and polar steppes and icy wastes in the north that rival those of Vaasa. In general, it is as inhospitable a place as can be found on the surface of Toril.





A Tale of Prince Chelimber



s we rode out of the Greycloak Hills, our conversation turned to the road ahead.

"Where are we going?" asked Samkin.

"To Candlekeep," I replied hastily. "Both Phezeltan and Lord Duirsar advised it, not to mention the elf lord's wizards."

"Who put you in charge?" growled Trothgar.

I turned in the saddle to glare at him.

"What would have us do, ranger? Crossing the desert is death. You heard what Lord Duirsar said."

"Stop yer squabblin'," chided Lorrick. "What's it gain' to be, Starchild? West to Candlekeep, or south to the Far Hills then east 'round the desert?"

She rode silently for a moment, then said, "I am going to Candlekeep. I hope you all come with me, for I need your strength, especially yours, Trothgar."

I was taken aback. That bitter specter of jealousy began to rise, but before I said something foolish, Esta favored me with a furtive glance and a wink, and I saw she was adeptly soothing the ranger's pride with her soft words.

Trothgar was actually blushing.

"It would be unwise for us to separate," he said. "I never wanted to travel the desert, anyway. I was only exploring our options. If Starchild thinks we should go to Candlekeep, then to Candlekeep we go."

Bublim argued, "What about the potential commission in Corm Orp? I thought you wanted to go there as badly as I, Trothgar. What about all that bandit loot just waiting for us to claim it?"

"We can still pass through there on our return from Candlekeep," said Trothgar, ignoring the gnome's light jab.

"I'm hungry," moaned Samkin, but even as he spoke, his nimble fingers denied the complaint. "Hey! My saddlebags are full of elf bread and evermead! Bless that Maasli! He's a fine lad, all right!"

Breads of The Realms

If wine is the nectar of the gods, bread is their staple meal. A few types include:

Blackbread: The sweetest, strongest molasses from Amn is used in blackbread. Wastel flour, the finest grind available, forms the basis of these tasty loaves.

Crackers: Delightful with tea or other beverages, these crispy tidbits are flavored with the freshest herbs and spices from the Dalelands. Typical flavors include onion, garlic, or pepper.

Elven Bread: Shipped from legendary Evermeet, this is the lightest, sweetest, finest-grained bread in the Realms, with extraordinary nutritional value.

Fruitcakes: Flavored with rum or brandy from the Pirate Isles of the Inner Sea, and studded with dried fruits and nuts, fruitcakes make for a hearty dessert. Let them age long enough, though, and they also make fine missile weapons, doorstops, paperweights, and ballast.

Gingerbread: This bread has a very distinctive flavor, and is often served with whipped cream or rum sauce.

Hard-Tack: Although it is difficult to understand why anyone would willingly partake of this dry, bland, flour-and-water, unseasoned biscuit, apparently there are those who became fond of them during their time at sea.

Sourdough: A curious concoction from the Pirate Isles of the Inner Sea, this bread is made with a bit of dough from the previous batch, left to "go sour" in order to leaven the next batch. It has a pleasantly heavy texture, and a hard, flaky crust.

Tarts: Delightful little pastry shells from the bakers of Waterdeep, these are about a palm's width across, and are shallowly curved to hold jam, lemon curd, mincemeat, or whatever savories or sweets one cares to serve in them.





Fortified by Maasli's thoughtfulness, we rode until dusk without need of a rest. The horses seemed strong enough to ride across the world without a stop.

Traveling southwest, we made camp along the outskirts of the Marsh of Chelimber one evening. Lorrack favored us with a tale as the embers glowed. The gist of it follows:

"In the early days o' Waterdeep, before the marsh, Chelimber the Proud ruled here.

"When 'tis said Chelimber was rich, 'tis usually added he was rich beyond most kings in gold, in beautiful tapestries, and in gold once again. Yet he disdained all these things for the thrills provided by the flask, and blood of the dyin' boar.

"In those days, the Winding Water welled up from the heart of a rocky crag to the south and east of Chelimber's Keep. One spring, a mage built his tower on that crag, usin' elemental forces and takin' but a few days. Chelimber took up arms to sweep the intruder from his lands.

"But the Wizard o' the Crag turned Chelimber's warriors to stone and flung balls o' fire into the

prince's keep. At a loss, Chelimber summoned an archmage from Iriaebor, one Taskor the Terrible, who specialized in killin' other mages for a fee.

"Taskor and the Wizard o' the Crag contested on Midsummer's Eve, each raisin' mighty magics and counterin' with spells and elemental forces and such, and their battle wreaked great destruction. The crag crumbled, and both sorcerers vanished in the fight. The water elementals the Wizard o' the Crag kept in his tower ran amok, layin' waste to the prince's land, flooding his keep, and slayin' Chelimber himself.

"And such was the creation of the marsh yonder, which bears the prince's name. His keep, now called the Keep of the Drowned Prince, is lost among the many trees and hillocks that rise from the marsh's water.

"Some whisper that Chelimber still lives by arcane means, and guards the riches in his sunken keep from those who would seek 'em. As for meself, I'll believe he lives when me axe bites into his ancient flesh, and me pouches are filled with Chelimber's gold!"





The Pegasus Rider



we were on the trail several miles south of Boareskyr Bridge when we saw the pegasus crash to the ground. A pair of shrieking griffins swooped down to finish off their prey, but we managed to drive them away with a hail of arrows and spells.

The pegasus was near death, but Starchild's gentle touch and healing magic were able to keep its life within its noble body. To our surprise, the animal wore a fine saddle of supple leather. A brief search turned up no rider, and we decided that perhaps the creature had escaped its owner. We continued on to Boareskyr Bridge. The pegasus remained docile, but would allow only Starchild to lead it.

"A fine animal such as this must be worth quite a sum," said Samkin, always quick to sense an opportunity for coin. "We found it, so let's sell it to the highest bidder once we arrive at the Bridge."

"We may have found it, Samkin, but it is not our property to sell," replied Starchild. "I'm taking it to its rightful owner."

Realizing only Starchild could control the beast, Samkin grumbled and shuffled his hairy little feet. I mentioned the prospect of a reward, and he quickly brightened up into a silver-toothed smile. Halflings!

At the Bridge, we found a small city of tents and wagons. The merchant banners of the Thousandheads and Trueshield Trading Costers fluttered brightly, as did the colors of a variety of independent wagoners. Nearly everyone present was either a merchant, or in service to a merchant. I felt the press of a market day before opening.

Our approach, the injured pegasus on lead, caused heads to turn. A burly human with a brisk air of authority confronted us.

"What are you doing with Aluena's pegasi?" he asked.

Though his manner was gruff, he seemed more concerned for Aluena's health than with accusing us of thievery. After hearing our tale, he gave his name as

Barim Stagwinter and directed us to Aluena's estate, upriver along the southern bank of the Winding Water.

Boareskyr (Boar-reh-SKEER) Bridge

The bridge is a massive structure crossing the Winding Water along the Trade Way from Waterdeep to Scornubel. Built of gray stone, it is wide enough to carry two wains side-by-side in either direction. On the southern side of the bridge sprawls a large encampment of tents and wagons.

"The Bridge," as it is familiarly known, is named for a famous adventurer of the early days of human settlement. Boareskyr built the first temporary crossing here to rush an army across the river and assail an unsuspecting Bloody Tusks tribe of orcs, who were wiped out as a result. Since then, several other structures have been erected, the most recent being this massive bridge that spans the Winding Water in five arches of gray stone.

Boareskyr Bridge has no permanent settlement, but almost always sports a fluid city of temporary tents and half-loaded wagons, regardless. Caravans stop to trade goods; buy mounts, wagons, and necessary provisions; and perform maintenance tasks in the relative safety of numbers. The Bridge is the last "organized" post on the Trade Way from Scornubel to Waterdeep, until a traveler reaches the Way Inn.

Law is a rough-and-ready matter at the Bridge, but several powerful adventurers who respect law and keep order frequent the tent-city: the fighter Barim Stagwinter, a priest of Tyr named Theskul Mirroreye, and wizard Aluena Halacanter. The last spends much of her time training pegasi as mounts.





From the size and splendid condition of her estate and grounds, it was obvious that Aluena was an influential person in the region. We found her in a training area, schooling a young pegasus in his gaits. At the sight of the animal we rescued, she was openly shocked.

Once again we related our tale. Or rather, Trothgar did. He had that look about him. The look he gets whenever he meets a beautiful woman—back straight, gruff voice, and yet, somehow shy. Aluena seemed likewise smitten. She looked only at Trothgar as she thanked “us” for bringing the injured pegasus home.

However, all was not well, for the winged horse had indeed had a rider. One of Aluena’s trainers had taken the creature for a flight above the forest east of the Bridge. He was likely lying injured still, even as we spoke. Trothgar blurted that we would find the trainer and bring him home as well, or die in the attempt, without even consulting the rest of us. I wish our glorious leader would think with his head, and not his. . .

Although Aluena offered us the use of several pegasi, none of us, not even Trothgar, felt we had the skill to ride the flying beasts. We stuck to our trusty wingless mounts, the proud horses given us by Lord Duirsar, and rode into the forest. Aluena joined us on the ground at first, though her pegasus longed for flight.

Somehow, the wizard had communicated with the wounded pegasus, and led us to the area in which the trainer, Alonn, had been thrown. At last taking to the sky, she scouted the forest canopy for the broken branches and torn leaves that would mark the exact location where Alonn had come to earth. She found it. But he was not below.

Trothgar, casting about, located Alonn’s trail in the scuffed undergrowth. Aluena again joined us, and we proceeded.

Trothgar lead, walking slowly ahead of his horse. The ranger studied moss and leaves intently, his eyes roving restlessly, watching for signs of Alonn’s passage.

The attack came suddenly, catching us off-guard.





A giant spider dropped from the leafy canopy above and landed squarely on Trothgar's back. From the corner of my eye, I saw a blur of movement and ducked just in time as another spider, which had leapt from the side of a tree, passed over me. Someone screamed, as more spiders jumped about on their spindly legs.

Trothgar was spinning about, trying to get the creature off his back. As I uttered a spell, I saw the spider sink its fangs into a weak spot of the ranger's armor. In the next instant, my spell was complete—I blasted the arachnid's bulbous abdomen into a sticky mess with a flurry of magical missiles.

But Trothgar fell to the ground, convulsing from the spider's deadly venom. Luckily, that very morning I had prayed to Mystra for a spell to aid those who are poisoned. I ran to the ranger's side, and saved him from a painful death.

Drawing my long dagger, I stood above Trothgar, prepared to defend us both from further attacks. But when I witnessed the deadly precision of my friends, I knew the fight was all but done.

A gout of flames flew from Aluena's outstretched hands, searing a spider to ash in mid-leap.

Starchild struck a spider with the *Staff of the Shard*. The staff's gemstone flashed, producing a deafening thunderclap and blowing the spider into gruesome pieces. Her eyes huge, Starchild stared at the weapon in her hands with an almost comical look.

Lorrick ripped a horrendous wound in the final spider's abdomen with *Skysplitter*, and the battle was over as swiftly as it had begun. All that remained were twitching legs and gore-soaked earth.

Though shaky, Trothgar recovered quickly. Alonn was not so fortunate, however. We soon found his body in a hole camouflaged by a trapdoor of webs, leaves, and sticks. Injured and dazed by his fall, Alonn had apparently stumbled into the nest of giant spiders. The arachnids had already fed upon him—only a withered husk remained. Aluena wept as we freed the body of its webbing, blaming herself for the young man's death.

We returned to her estate, where we buried Alonn in honor.

The wizard had rooms to spare in her manse, and invited us to stay the night. Trothgar heartily agreed

for all of us. I suspect he did not sleep alone that night.

The following morning, after a tasty breakfast of honey cakes, we said our farewells to Aluena, who gave Trothgar a small wooden disc carved with the images of the moon, a harp, and a pegasus.

"If you do not find what you seek at Candlekeep," she said, "show this to Elminster in Shadowdale, and tell him of me. He is the wisest sage in all the Realms, and owes me a favor."

I knew the moon and harp were the symbol of the secretive Harpers, and I suspected the pegasus was Aluena's own device. I did not ask her of her involvement in that group, however, for to have done so would have been inexcusably rude.

We simply thanked her, and rode on.

The Harpers

The Harpers are a mysterious organization of powerful adventurers, particularly bards and rangers, who operate in the North. Their exact numbers and full identities are unknown. Though their aims are also mysterious, they are known to work for the causes of good, and to oppose the Zhentarim and the more aggressive trading kingdoms (such as Amn)—any who cut trade routes into wilderness areas, fell trees and mine precious things with little regard for local nonhuman inhabitants. They also work to maintain peace between human kingdoms, and to thwart at every turn the burgeoning goblin races in the North.

Known Harpers include Alustriel, High Lady of Silvermoon; the archmage Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun of Waterdeep; the ranger Dove; the late witch Sylune; the bard Storm Silverhand; the late ranger Ascore of Elventree; and the adventurer Sharanralee.

Some who help the Harpers are not thought to be members of the organization, but clearly friends of powerful position, with similar goals. Known allies include Elminster the Sage; The Simbul, ruler of Aglarond; and Mourngrym, Lord of Shadowdale.



Samkin's Past Catches Up



fter parting with Aluena, we followed a trail south and west from Boareskyr Bridge toward Baldur's Gate. The land we passed through spread open and rolling around us, a land of shepherds and farmers.

As we rode along, Lorrick said, "This whole wide region, from the Windin' Water to the north and the River Chionthar to the south, be called the Fields o' the Dead. 'Twas no less than five-hunnerd winters ago, ere the foundin' of Amn, that this region were a favorite battleground for them contestin' for the lands north o' Calimshan.

"The bloodshed were continuin' fer centuries o' war-seasons," he continued. "The land were littered with the cairns o' the dead and the booty o' the fallen. I be speakin' true, when I tell ye that even today them farmers' plows turns up skeletons in rustin' armor."

"What about the booty?" asked Samkin.

"Well, now," answered the dwarf, "where lie the dead o' war, there oft be treasure as well. I heard o' more than one humble farmer who give up the fields for the city after his plow turned up a magical blade or bit o' jewelry.

"Ye be thinkin' of strappin' yerself to a plow, then, master halfling?"

"No. I'd rather meet those humble farmers in the city, and invite 'em to lighten their pockets in a friendly game of chance. Why should I break my back, when I have the wits to win what others have?"

"Or nimble fingers and a sharp blade for cutting purse strings," said Bublun wryly.

Trothgar didn't share our laughter. He had been sullen all day, glaring broodingly at the wooden disc Aluena had given him.

"This country reminds me of my homeland," he said finally, putting the disc back in his belt pouch. "I've not been away long, yet it seems a lifetime."

"Tell us of the Moonshaes, Trothgar," I said, hoping to take his mind away from Aluena. Since becoming interested in her, Trothgar had hardly looked at Esta Starchild. I suppose I was feeling guilty of my jealousy toward the ranger earlier.

Moonshae (MOON-shay) Islands

The Moonshaes are a large collection of islands well west of the Sword Coast, politically divided into more than a dozen small kingdoms. Those kingdoms in the southern parts of the islands are held by the Ffolk, farmers and fishermen who are the original human inhabitants of the islands. The kingdoms of the northern regions are ruled by the descendants of Northmen raiders.

Blanketed with forests, the islands boast quantities of oak, hickory, birch, yew, and pine. The trees cling to rocky mountains or skirt low, flat bogs. Moonshae beaches run to surf-battered stone, and brutal winter storms sweep the islands during the cold months.

The Northmen invaders are descendants of the same stock as the men of Luskan and Ruathym. Their depredations gradually claim more and more territory from the peaceful Ffolk. Often, the raiders simply snatch livestock or hostages for slaves, though occasionally they claim a fertile coast as their own.

The kingdoms of the Northmen are run by warlords—strong and brutal men who have won their posts through a combination of might and cunning. These kingdoms generate food through agriculture and farming only to a subsistence level. The Northmen feel it more honorable to pillage and plunder for a living than to till the soil or fish the sea.

No single king of the Northmen rules the others, though the larger an army or fleet a ruler can muster, the more influence he holds in council. Thelgaar Ironhand, Grunnarch the Red, and





Raag Hammerstaad are among the more powerful current kings of the Northmen.

The Northmen worship a stormy aspect of Tempus, God of War, through their own shamans. These shamans encourage Tempus' teachings which support their conception of the world as a victim, waiting for the raiders' plundering boots to grind it under their heels.

The lands of the Ffolk are also broken into small kingdoms. Unlike the Northmen's loose federation, however, kings of the Ffolk owe fealty to the High King, who resides in his fortress at Caer Calidyr on the island of Allaron.

The Ffolk concentrate much more heavily than their neighbors on the peaceful pursuits of farming, fishing, hunting, and trading. The lands they hold tend to be more hospitable than the domains of the Northmen, and consequently provide a wealth of agricultural produce. They also serve as an ever-present invitation to the raiders' greed.

Traders and able seamen, the Ffolk ply the waters of their native islands and the far Sword Coast in sturdy vessels. Known for their capacity to weather the roughest seas, these cargo ships are necessarily slow and ponderous, easily overtaken by raiders' longships.

The Ffolk worship a goddess visualized as the mother of all life; indeed, of the earth itself. She is often referred to as the "Earthmother." The words of the goddess spread through her druids, humans who dwell in her wildest and most sacred places, dealing more directly with the earth than with the humans who live upon it.

A small portion of the largest of the Moonshae Islands, Gwynneth, is still inhabited by the islands' original residents. Known as the Llewyr, this elven people's numbers have shrunk dramatically with the coming of humans to the Moonshaes. The Llewyr have the physical appearance of slender gold elves. Their ways and attitudes are more in line with wild elves of the continent.

The Llewyr share Myrloch Vale, a broad valley centered around a huge, cold lake, with enchanted creatures favored by the Earthmother. These include a unicorn, faerie dragons, and a pack of wolfdogs said to slumber for decades, only awakening when the goddess calls them for some important task.

At my urging, Trothgar told us of his past.

"I was born during a howling gale on one of the southern Moonshaes," he said. "My mother, who was of the Ffolk, told me later that my cries at birth were louder even than the storm. She said she knew then that I would be trouble, for the Northman blood burned strong in my veins. My father, you see, was a Northman raider, and had killed my own grandfather before ravaging my mother and burdening her with me.

"The Ffolk treated me well nonetheless. My mother was kind, though often sad, for I caused much mischief. The other children learned of fishing and farming, but I was not content. I wanted to learn the ways of a warrior. I was big for my age, and often found myself starting fights with the older boys. Each beating I took only fueled the fire in my blood.

"I was only five winters old when the raiders came again. They burned the village, killing everyone, including my mother. Though I fought them tooth and nail, I was spared, for they could plainly see my likeness to their bloodlines, and admired my ferocity.

"For the next eleven winters, I lived among the Northmen, and perhaps guiltily, for the first time in my life I felt truly at home. Rorryck Stonefist and his wife Sel took me into their home as a son, for they had no children of their own.

"Rorryck was a skilled warrior. My guilt faded in the sunshine of his praise. From him I learned of weapons and fighting, the lore of hunting and tracking. I was a hungry pupil. I learned quickly and well.

"But in the end I dishonored Rorryck. The day came for me to sail with the longships and pillage the southern isles. But I had vowed I would never spill the blood of the Ffolk. I refused to go. Deemed a coward, I was banished from my home.

"I sailed to Waterdeep and found work among the ranks of a mercenary company for a time. But my heart still hungered for more, to be a leader and not a follower.

"I'd heard many glorious tales of adventuring companies, and seen many renowned adventurers spending their wealth in the taverns of Waterdeep. I then



knew what my heart longed for." He looked around, pride polishing his features.

"And so, I decided to form my own adventuring band. And here we are."

As we rode toward Baldur's Gate, I kept thinking of Trothgar and how it must feel to have no home to return to, no family. I knew my own mother would be waiting with open arms upon my return to Waterdeep. For the first time since our journey began, I felt homesick.

Baldur's Gate

Baldur's Gate is located 50 miles up the Chionthar River from where that waterway enters the Trackless Sea, at the southern reaches of the Sword Coast. It is situated on the northern shore of the river, astride the Trade Way from Amn to Waterdeep. Baldur's Gate consists of a "lower city" outside the stone walls, and an "upper city" within those walls.

This important independent city is known as one of the most tolerant, and quietly well-policed, places in the western Realms. It is home to many adventurers and entrepreneurs as a result. The city is ruled by the "Four Grand Dukes," though the title of "Duke" is an honorific one taken upon ascending to the Council, and is given even if the candidate is female or of a race that uses other titles.

The city was originally completely protected by walls, with gates to the north for the Trade Way and to the south leading to the docks. With the expansion of foreign markets and the founding of Amn, trade has become so profitable in the relaxed climate of Baldur's Gate that the city has now burst its bounds. The original wall allows some minimal demarcation of class lines. The upper city is both older and of a more permanent nature. It is here that nobles, rising merchants, and newly-wealthy adventuring companies rub shoulders.

After many days, we reached Baldur's Gate without incident. The road from Boareskyr Bridge had been long, and we were ready to give up the hard ground for soft beds.

We rode through the lower city of Baldur's Gate, past the hovels of the poor, standing rickety and haphazard on the outskirts, and onward, by the homes and businesses of those who are neither poor nor especially wealthy. Everywhere merchants hawked their wares, and common folk bought them. Farmers driving carts burdened with produce and shepherds taking their flocks to slaughter clogged the roadway.

Finally, we made our way through the crowds and past the northern gate into the city proper. The upper city is crowded with the establishments of wealthy merchants, along with many fine inns and taverns.

After leaving our horses and gear with a stable boy, we decided to wash down the road dust choking our throats at the nearest tavern. As we approached the sign of the Smilin' Boar, a commotion in the street drew our attention away from the tavern.

Clanking and jangling down the avenue, riding slow and proud, three-score knights sat upon heavy war horses. In contrast to our dusty, trail-weary selves, this troop sparkled like an armorer's dream. Both the warriors and their mounts wore clean, shining plate armor. One toward the front carried a tall banner emblazoned with the sign of a fist surrounded by flames.

At the head of the knights rode an imposing figure with piercing gray eyes and jet-black hair. His seat was relaxed in that commanding ease that tells of months, nay, years in the saddle. He carried a plumed helm under one arm. His breastplate was polished mirror-bright, and reflected the sun in brilliant flashes. From his saddle thongs dangled an immense warhammer.

"That be Duke Eltan," said an old man who had emerged from the tavern to watch the procession, a frothy mug still in his hand. "He'll give 'em what fer, all right!"

"I've heard of him," said Trothgar to us, "during my days as a mercenary. He's the commander of the finest





mercenary company in the Realms, the Flaming Fist, as you can no doubt see from their banner. He's also one of the four Grand Dukes of this city. A noble and skilled warrior is Eltan."

Obviously, we saw a war party setting out from home. But we had not heard news of any skirmishes.

"What be the trouble," barked Lorrick at the old man, who jumped as if just realizing he had been speaking aloud to us before.

"Well, friend dwarf," replied the old man after taking a nervous drink of his ale and wiping the froth on his sleeve. "About a tenday ago, a caravan was ambushed at Trollclaw Ford. Them evil creatures killed every man, and even their poor horses, too. The merchants hereabouts have been clammerin' for justice ever since. I reckon Duke Eltan got his fill o' their bickerin' and decided to do himself a little troll huntin'!"

"Where's Trollclaw Ford?" asked Samkin.

The old man drew a deep breath as if he would need it for a long-winded reply, but Lorrick cut him off.

"'Tis a ford across the Windin' Water, north o' here along the Trade Way to Waterdeep. I been through there meself once. With steep hills on both banks o' the river and lots o' trees fer cover, 'tis as good a place for an ambush as any rogue could be hopin' fer."

Lorrick then looked to Trothgar and said, "Yer friend'll be needin' every one o' them sixty men, if a troll band has set up an ambush fer him. Now let's be gettin' that drink we come fer. Me throat's parched!"

Before I stepped into the tavern, I watched Duke Eltan and his brave knights pass through the north gate, to cheers from the guards stationed there. I whispered a prayer to Mystra on noble Eltan's behalf, and was thankful that I was not accompanying him to Trollclaw Ford.

We sauntered into the Smilin' Boar and seated ourselves at a long, ale-stained table. All we wanted was a quiet drink to unwind the kinks of our journey, before finding a hot meal and warm bed for the evening. But our stay was far from quiet, or peaceful. . .

Mercenary Companies

There are a large number of private groups unaligned to king or crown, who fight solely for gold and possible loot. These groups, the mercenary companies, are a common gathering point for exceptional individuals who may change the course of the history of the Realms.

Mercenary companies are long-established and famous institutions in the uneasy Forgotten Realms. However, they are constantly appearing and disappearing with the passage of the seasons. Listed below are some of the more prominent outfits active in the North, the Inner Sea lands, and the long trade route between them.

Blacktalons Mercenary Company: Based in Iri-aebor, the Blacktalons do most of their business on the trade routes east and west of that city, either as a large and well-armed guard for valuable caravans, or as hired raiders of caravans guarded by someone else. There are those who whisper that the Blacktalons sometimes attack caravans "for free"—just to make those who didn't hire them as guards wish that they had.

Bloodaxe Mercenary Company: Based in Sundabar, the Bloodaxes were founded some 40 winters ago. A group of dwarves known as the "transgressors" for crimes or acts not in keeping with the teachings of Moradin Soulforger, they were cast out of Adbarrim (that area of dwarven subterranean lands beneath citadel Adbar in the North) and began hiring out as warriors to whomever would pay them.

The Flaming Fist: One of the largest of the mercenary companies currently active, the Flaming Fist is usually based in Baldur's Gate. The Fist numbers some 2,000(!) strong, and requires the resources of a city (Baldur's Gate) to keep it in supply when not actively on duty. It is the best organized of the companies, including scouts, support, transportation, and other areas that most companies leave to their employer.



Due to its numbers and the fact that even its frontline troops are talented veterans, the Fist is expensive even by mercenary standards. Only nations or the very, very wealthy (and very, very angry) can afford to hire this company.

Mindulgulph Mercenary Company: Based in Priapurl, the Mindulgulphs are perhaps the most unique hireswords in the Realms. They are a band of seasoned warriors of all races, including some not normally thought of as intelligent, such as cave fishers and mimics.

The leader of this band of misfits is the extremely charismatic Gayrlana, "Lady Bloodsword," who in addition to her beauty is a tactical genius, exploiting the varied natural talents of her troops to the full. Gayrlana is famous for slaying Though Mirr, a Red Wizard of Thay, in the streets of Teziir in single combat. She explained this feat with the words, "The blade is faster than the Art," and those words have become a popular saying in the Realms today.

The Order of the Blue Boar: Based in Castle Spulzeer in Amn, the Order is a group restricted in membership to experienced, veteran fighters of some wealth, each of whom must be approved by the "Boar's Heads," or governing council of seven warriors. The council maintains a membership roll of "Swords" (approved members), each of whom they can expel at will for unprofessional conduct.

Members can elect to participate or not in any Order activities. Each member taking part gets a share of the fee, and can act alone or involve any assistants or agents they wish, though they are responsible for the deeds, payment, and care of the hirelings.

The collective experience of the Order's members has earned it the reputation of being wary, cunning, and alert in its endeavors-for-hire. The active membership of the Order is known only to the Heads, although most members in any given

No sooner had we sat down and started on our first round of drinks at the Smilin' Boar, than I noticed someone staring at us. At the time, I was not sure if he was human or elven, for he wore a heavy hooded robe (dyed purple-black and trimmed with silver) that covered most of his features. From the shadows of his hood, I could see covetous eyes staring at Esta Starchild's staff.

Sitting with the mysterious robed man was a dwarf, who had his back to our table. The dwarf wore spiked plate mail and a helm topped with wickedly pointed horns.

The robed one nodded toward us, and the dwarf spun about to have a look. His face was horribly scarred, as if it was badly burned at one time. The scars streaked down his jaw and under his chin, leaving his beard splotchy and misshapen.

The dwarf pushed his way through the tables and chairs, knocking to the floor the old man we had earlier talked with, and stopped at our table. He slammed a mailed fist right next to Samkin, who was so shocked, he spilled his drink.

"Be ye recognizin' me?!" bellowed the dwarf, right in poor Samkin's ear.

The halfling wheezed like a landed fish before choking out one word. "Ba-Ba-Barstaag?"

"Aye, 'tis me," growled the dwarf.

Both Lorrick and Trothgar tensed, and Samkin noticed this. The fear in the halfling's eyes turned to a mischievous twinkle.

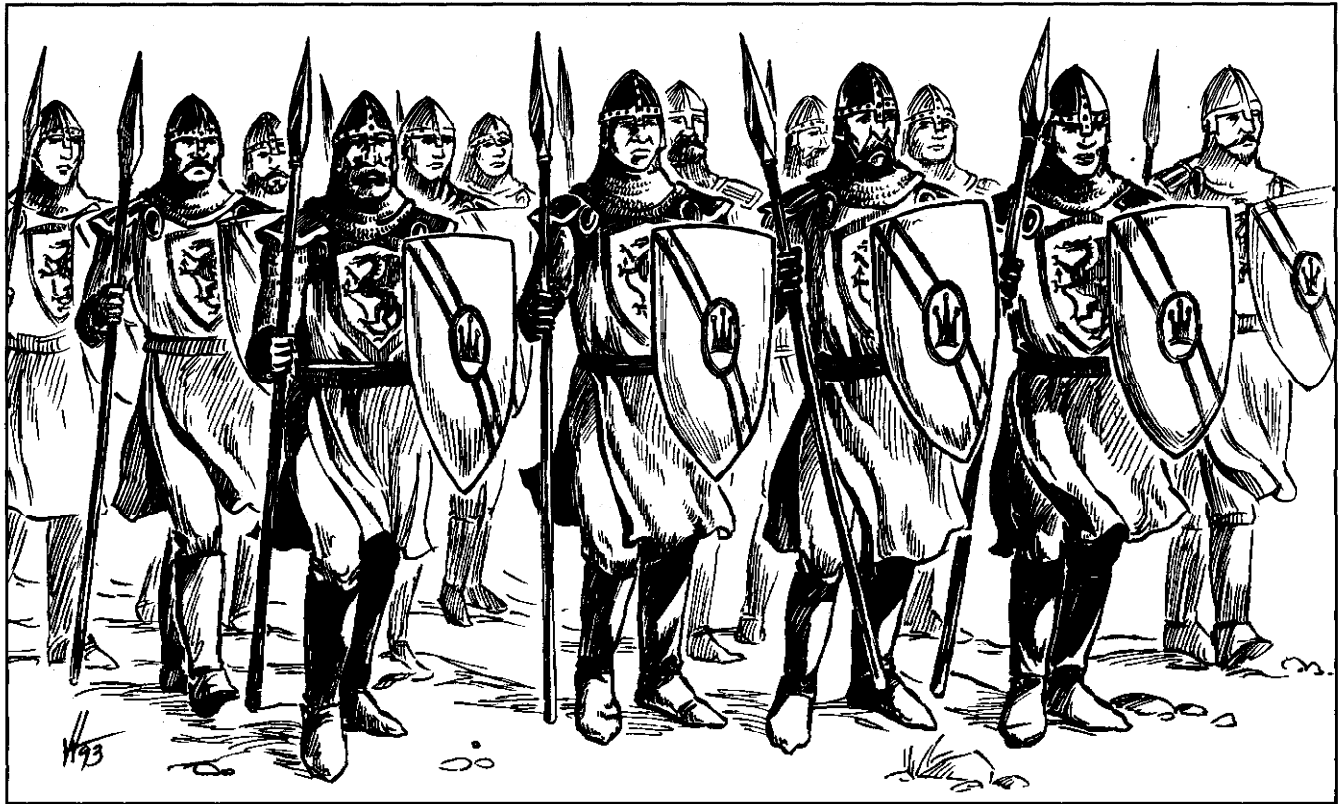
"I see your beard has grown back. Sort of!" said Samkin with a silver-toothed grin.

The dwarf smiled evilly and shook a small leather bag at his belt, producing a rattling noise.

"And I've still got yer teeth," he hissed. "But I be likin' them silvery ones better. Let's see if I can pop 'em out as easy!"

The dwarf drew back a mailed fist, but before he could smash it into Samkin's mouth, Trothgar had hold of his wrist. The ranger followed with an elbow to the dwarf's bulbous nose, squashing it flat with an awful crunch. Blood ran through the dwarf's motley beard.

Someone cried, "Fight!" and the tavern erupted into a hailstorm of flying mugs, chairs, and people. Samkin's sturdy attacker shook off Trothgar and



lunged for the halfling, but nimble Samkin had already ducked under the table. Before the bloodied dwarf could follow, Lorrick hit him full tilt, sending him tumbling across the tavern floor and into a wall, where he lay in a heap.

All was chaos. "Out the back!" yelled Trothgar, and we hurried to the rear exit.

I was last out, and stopped to toss the barkeep a handful of coins to cover the damages. I also wanted to have a last look at the robed man, but he was nowhere to be seen. As town guards crashed through the front door, I stepped into the back alley, and we were away into the night.

Several streets from the Smilin' Boar, we ducked into an inn. After ordering, we had a few questions for Samkin Silvertooth.

"Who was that damnable dwarf?" rumbled Trothgar.

"He's called Barstaag," replied Samkin sheepishly. "I played a little joke on him some time ago."

"Some joke," I said. "His face was a ruin."

"I didn't know the pan had acid in it!" cried Samkin. "I thought it was water. It was an accident, I tell you!"

"Whatever it is ye done," said Lorrick, "ye lost yer teeth fer it, and that's enough for most. But his beard's a dwarf's pride, and that Barstaag don't seem like he's ready to be forgettin' nor forgivin'."

"Who was the robed man?" I asked. "He seemed overly interested in Esta's staff."

Samkin shrugged his shoulders, and Esta said, "I don't like any of this. I noticed him too, Furian. He had an evil look about him."

We agreed to leave Baldur's Gate before first light, and took rooms at the inn. After a night's rest, we made our way through the quiet streets of early morning, and awoke a very drowsy stable boy. The guards at the south gate hardly raised an eyebrow as we rode through. We crossed the River Chionthar and were on our way to Candlekeep once again.



STRANGENESS IN CLOAK WOOD



e made the mistake of camping too near the borders of Cloak Wood. But we needed fresh water, and we had found a nice spring there, and comfortable grass to sleep upon. Oh, well. Learn through living, I always say.

The nervous stomp and whinny of our horses woke us. Samkin *had* been on watch.

But the halfling was missing.

We began a search. It was not long before Trothgar found the tracks of a troll. From the signs left in the soil and grass, the fell creature had crept out of the forest and made off with Samkin. The hapless halfling had no doubt fallen asleep on guard duty.

We quickly helped our warriors don their armor, gathered our weapons, and headed into Cloak Wood. Soon, the tracks led to a cave set in the side of a low, rocky hill. Approaching, we heard the rumbling voice of the troll.

"Me like yer shiny teef, little man-thing," it said. "Me take!" This was followed by a high-pitched squeal of pain from none other than Samkin Silvertooth.

Rushing into the cave, we caught the troll completely off guard—a mighty hack from the axe of Lorrick, a slash from Trothgar's blade, deadly spells of flaming missiles by myself and Bublím, and the troll lay dead.

Samkin was excited to see us, but obviously embarrassed at allowing himself to be featured on a troll's menu for a midnight snack. He was unhurt, except for the fact that one of his silver front teeth had been yanked from his jaw.

With a malicious grin, Bublím called him Samkin Gaptooth. 'Tis the first time I have seen the halfling too embarrassed to offer a snappy reply.

Apparently, the troll had made a habit of robbing and killing travelers on the road. We found an assortment of valuable jewelry amongst the litter of its foul lair.

However, our troubles in Cloak Wood were just beginning. I have heard of magical gateways to other worlds hidden in the forest, and I doubt such tales no longer.

Shortly after departing the dead troll's den, unearthly trumpets raised a bleating cacophony through the forest. Drawing nearer, they recalled the tones of common hunting horns, yet were unique.

Woodland animals crashed through the forest toward us, ahead of the mysterious trumpet-blowers. Conjuring his magic, Bublím Barboast concealed all of us under a spell of invisibility. We waited quietly.

It still seems as a dream, for the beings I saw were utterly fantastic. There were thirteen of them, and they raced through the trees on horses made of steel. The beings wore armor of a silver-like metal, yet the armor hugged their humanoid bodies like supple cloth. Their heads were covered with round helmets, and their faces concealed by visors of black glass. The short, metal lances they carried belched beams of red light to deadly effect, slaying the terrified animals running before them.

As the silver hunters swept past on their mechanical mounts, I was gripped with the realization that I was witness to something not of my world. After the sounds of the strange trumpets grew faint, we made our way out of the Cloak Wood. I don't think any of our company slept well that night.

Cloak Wood

The Cloak Wood is an old, thickly grown forest marking the southern end of the Sword Coast. Just south of Baldur's Gate, the Cloak Wood is a perilous place, and home to quicklings, satyrs, stirges, kampfult, and other less common monsters. This high number of creatures has turned the wood into a battleground between rival races.

The sages of Candlekeep have sufficient evidence to indicate at least one gate exits in the wood, but the exact number and possible destinations of these gates is unknown. They may lead to other parts of the Realms, to an alternate material plane, or to the Beastlands. Few who have investigated the matter have returned to report on it.







The Lore of Candlekeep



side from the trouble in Cloak Wood, the journey from Baldur's Gate to Candlekeep ended without incident. Reaching toward the sky from atop a high cliff

overlooking the sea, the many towers of Candlekeep were an imposing sight. Finally, we had arrived.

The acolytes welcomed us to a generous table set with common, though delicious, fare. To our surprise, their chants had predicted the coming of the bearer of the *Staff of the Shard*. I believe this is why they welcomed us so warmly, for our arrival was confirmation of their faith and endeavors.

Although they favored us with abundant smiles and welcoming nods, the acolytes chose not to engage us in conversation. In fact, they talked very little among themselves either, and then only in low whispers. The reverent quiet was contagious, and I soon noticed that even we were talking in low voices.

"Well, what now, Starchild?" mumbled Trothgar quietly.

"I suggest you enjoy the hot food," she replied, "and take the opportunity to rest in a comfortable bed. I suspect I'll be haunting the libraries most of the night. There is little for you to do."

Indeed, after the meal, we were escorted to humble, though comfortable, rooms with a view of the moonlit sea.

Shortly after I retired, a quiet knock at my door woke me. Starchild stood there, her exquisite features aglow in candlelight.

"I have made arrangements to browse the collection," she said. "Will you help me?"

How can one refuse the glorious creature who has stolen his heart?

As I changed out of my nightclothes (with Starchild waiting discreetly outside, of course), I could not help wondering how she had managed to gain permission to browse the keep's collection of books. Her mysterious

friend must certainly have considerable influence among the scribes, for otherwise the requirements are quite stringent: one must bear the seal or sigil of a powerful mage, and one must gift to the keep a book valued at no less than 10,000 gold pieces.

As I write this, Starchild and I are sitting at a huge

Candlekeep

Candlekeep is a complex of clustered towers perched on a spur of volcanic rock overlooking the sea. It lies 120 miles south of Baldur's Gate. Lights burn in the windows of the keep at all times, and travelers approaching the structure can hear a low chanting.

This center of learning preserves the predictions of Alaundo the Seer, a singular sage whose prophecies have all proved correct over the years. Upon his death, his citadel at Candlekeep became a haven both for veneration of his prophecies and for the accumulation of all knowledge. The acolytes of the keep continually chant the remaining prophecies of Alaundo, which grow shorter over the centuries as they come true and are retired. Candlekeep boasts one of the finest libraries in the Realms.

The fortified keep derives much of its income from finding and copying specific passages of information from books of lore, magic, and philosophy preserved there (for clients all over the Realms), and from issuing new manuscript books for sale in Waterdeep and Baldur's Gate. These new manuscripts are created by collecting certain passages from older texts together. The Scribes of Candlekeep also make additional copies of books brought to them, but there are others in the Realms who provide this last service for less severe fees.





table in just one of the many libraries of Candlekeep. Even at this late hour, acolytes move silently around us, chanting quietly like murmuring ghosts.

We have been researching anything relating to the *Staff of the Shard* for several hours. Merely locating the books we wish to browse among the thousands of works on the stacks around us is a tedious task.

We had a brief reprieve from our labor a short while ago when Starchild's friend, a male moon elf named Sunbrow, arrived. As I suspected, he is a scribe of considerable station here at Candlekeep.

To my relief, I could see by the looks they exchanged that their friendship was just that. And only that.

To my surprise, Sunbrow furtively produced from beneath his robes a small tome bound in bronze plates. He set it on the table before Starchild. From what I could gather of their whispered conversation (I do speak elvish, though I must admit, interpreting Starchild and Sunbrow's whispers was tricky), Sunbrow had taken this bronze book from the keep's Inner Rooms. If discovered, he would face serious reprimand.

"This is what I was hoping to find, Furian," whispered Starchild excitedly. "These are the prayers that evoke the powers of the staff, and guide its bearer to the Tear of Selûne."

As I returned the books we borrowed to the stacks, Starchild began copying the prayers from the bronze tome onto a long scroll of parchment.

Though I did not get much rest the night Starchild and I browsed the libraries, I awoke refreshed and invigorated. I was happy for her, and for all of us. We now had the staff's guidance, and the sense of direction we lacked. I felt as if we were beginning the journey afresh.

After a splendid breakfast, we bade farewell to Sunbrow and rode away from Candlekeep. I should like to return one day, for the history of what has been, and what might be, is contained in its many towers.

As we did not have the opportunity to buy the provisions we needed at Baldur's Gate, we decided to ride south to Beregost.

"I think maybe we should stay away from Baldur's Gate for awhile," said Samkin shyly.





Barstaag's REVENGE

We came to Beregost to sell the jewels we liberated from the troll in Cloak Wood, and to purchase fresh provisions. The town was bustling, as a large caravan made preparations for an expedition into the southern lands of Amn, Tethyr, and Calimshan. It appeared we would have little trouble finding a merchant eager to buy our jewels.

As we rode into the town, Starchild pointed out a large, scarlet-hued building, which was a temple to Lathander, the Morninglord.

"Perhaps we should stop and receive their blessing for our journey," she said.

"Starchild and I have little use for merchants," I said, sensing an opportunity to be alone with her. "The rest of you deal with them, while Starchild and I beseech the followers of Lathander for their blessing."

I expected resistance from Trothgar—habit, mostly—but his mind remained elsewhere. Starchild and I left them to the merchants, and rode to the temple.

The temple complex was quite large, virtually a fortress. Two hundred men-at-arms protect it and the town. The shrine also houses over thirty priests and priestesses. Starchild and I were impressed, but somewhat taken aback by the over-extravagance of the place. Obviously, the wealthy merchants of Beregost favored Lathander.

The priests and priestesses were friendly, resplendent in their scarlet robes. We gave them a considerable tithe for the promise that they would pray for all of us Seekers. The followers of Lathander then invited us to return upon the morning to witness the *Song of Dawn*, a ritual praising Lathander and the coming of a new day. Starchild and I politely left the temple without committing ourselves to a return visit.

However, I wanted to accept the invitation, as it would have given me a few more precious hours to be alone with Starchild. Besides, I did not believe it would have threatened my own faith to witness a ritual of the followers of Lathander. I was curious about the ceremony.

Unfortunately, company business once again came

between Starchild and myself. We would not have the pleasure of witnessing the *Song of Dawn*, for the others had come to the attention of the wizard Thalantyr, who sent a messenger inviting us all to meet with the mage at his home.

Alas, Thalantyr was not the only one whose attention we had drawn. . .

Beregost (BEAR-eh-gost)

Beregost lies on the road south of Baldur's Gate with Cloak Wood to the northwest and the Wood of Sharp Teeth to the east. It is a small town of about 40 central buildings, with several larger estates at a distance from the town center. The town is dominated by a large temple and its attendant buildings. East, on a low rise overlooking the town, looms the shell of a ruined castle.

The town of Beregost is first and foremost a trading center, and a jumping-off point for expeditions into the Southern Kingdoms of Amn, Tethyr, and Calimshan. It is also the home of several notable individuals.

One of the foremost smiths in the Sword Coast area, Taerom "Thunderhammer" Fuiruim, has his estate and shop here. Beregost is also the abode of the wizard Thalantyr, a mage who specializes in magic of the conjuration/summoning type. Finally, Beregost is the home of a large temple to Lathander, God of the Morning. The high priest of this temple is one Kelddath Ormlyr, once a merchant of note, whose ships plied their trade up and down the Sword Coast.

On a hill east of town lie the burned ruins of a school of wizardry, founded some 300 years ago by the mage Ulcaster. It was destroyed 80 years later by Calishite mages, who feared the school's collective power had come to rival their own. Interestingly enough, the Ulcasterian school was also a school of conjurers and summoners.





The mage Thalantyr welcomed us to his home, an opulent manse nestled at the base of the hill beneath the ruined school of wizardry. He was a middle-aged man with a well-oiled beard, balding head, and friendly eyes.

After exchanging pleasantries over a glass of fine Arabellan wine, the wizard came to the point of our meeting.

"I have need of the services of adventurers such as yourselves," he said. "I am prepared to pay your standard fee, whatever that might be."

"We have a long journey ahead," replied Trothgar, "and no time for an extended commission."

"Oh, it is a simple exploration," said the mage. "Surely you can spare a day or two?"

"Go on," said the ranger.

"I recently acquired a map of the school of wizardry, as it was before it was razed nearly three-hundred winters past."

Thalantyr waved his hand, and a rolled parchment appeared in it with a *poof!* He unrolled the map on the table before us.

"As you can see," continued the mage, jabbing a long finger at the parchment, "a secret door within the bowels of the ruin is clearly marked on the map. I require that you discover where that door leads, and return any intriguing objects to me. You keep any monetary treasure you uncover."

"We need some time to discuss this," said Trothgar. "We can give you an answer in the morning."

"That will be fine," agreed the mage pleasantly. "Already the hour grows late. Please stay as my guests."

We agreed to stay, and Thalantyr showed us to his guest rooms. He then left us to discuss the matter privately.

"Does anyone object to taking this commission?" asked Trothgar.

"I am eager to be away," replied Esta, "but we could surely use the money."

"What's our standard fee, anyway?" asked Samkin.

"Say one hundred gold per day," I said.

"Best make it two hunderd," said Lorrick. "I've got the feelin' this here mage has more money than he knows what to do with."

"Agreed," said Trothgar.

Mages' Sigils

Mages of the Realms often develop a "signature rune," which they use to identify their belongings, sign as their name, and mark or warn others. As a mage gains in power, more individuals recognize the rune and connect it with a mighty wizard not to be trifled with. Since some runes are connected with magical spells, this enforces the tendency of ordinary people to shy away from such magically-marked items.

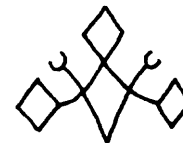
Mages' Sigils



Sylune of Shadowdale



Vangerdahast of Cormyr



The Simbul



Aerbront of Daerlun



Aldeguth of Mulhessen



Mages' Sigils



Baskor of Suzail



Durlan of Selgaunt



Elminster of Shadowdale



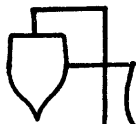
Gondal of Baldur's Gate



Gondeth of Westgate



Khelben "Blackstaff"
Arunsun of Waterdeep



Tandar of Waterdeep



Tersonm of Westgate

Early the next morning, we agreed to Thalantyr's offer. He provided a copy of his map, and after gathering our gear, we set off for the ruin.

Thalantyr's map was accurate, for we immediately found the secret door. Using my magic, I searched the portal for traps. Wise that I did—for, enhanced by the spell, I could see a mage's sigil glowing brightly upon it. Conjuring further magic, I was able to dispel the door's protections, and we entered safely.

Stairs beyond the secret door led deep underground, into darkness.

"Strike torches," said Trothgar.

"That won't be necessary," replied Esta. She intoned a brief prayer, and the crystal in her staff flared up, bathing us all (and a wide area around us) in its soft glow.

We descended the stairs, emerging into a wide chamber from which passages and alcoves branched like the spokes of a wheel. As my previous spell was still functioning, again I scanned the room for traps. This time I saw none.

A scraping noise alerted us. We turned to see a towering form emerge from a shadowy alcove—a stone golem, an enchanted guardian. The living statue's eyes glowed green, and my still-enhanced vision caught, glittering upon its massive chest, the same sigil as had marked the secret door.

The guardian advanced with thunderous steps. Both Bublim Barboast and I flung a volley of magical missiles, but to no apparent effect. Likewise, a sling stone from Samkin bounced off the thing's head with no result. It was nearly upon us.

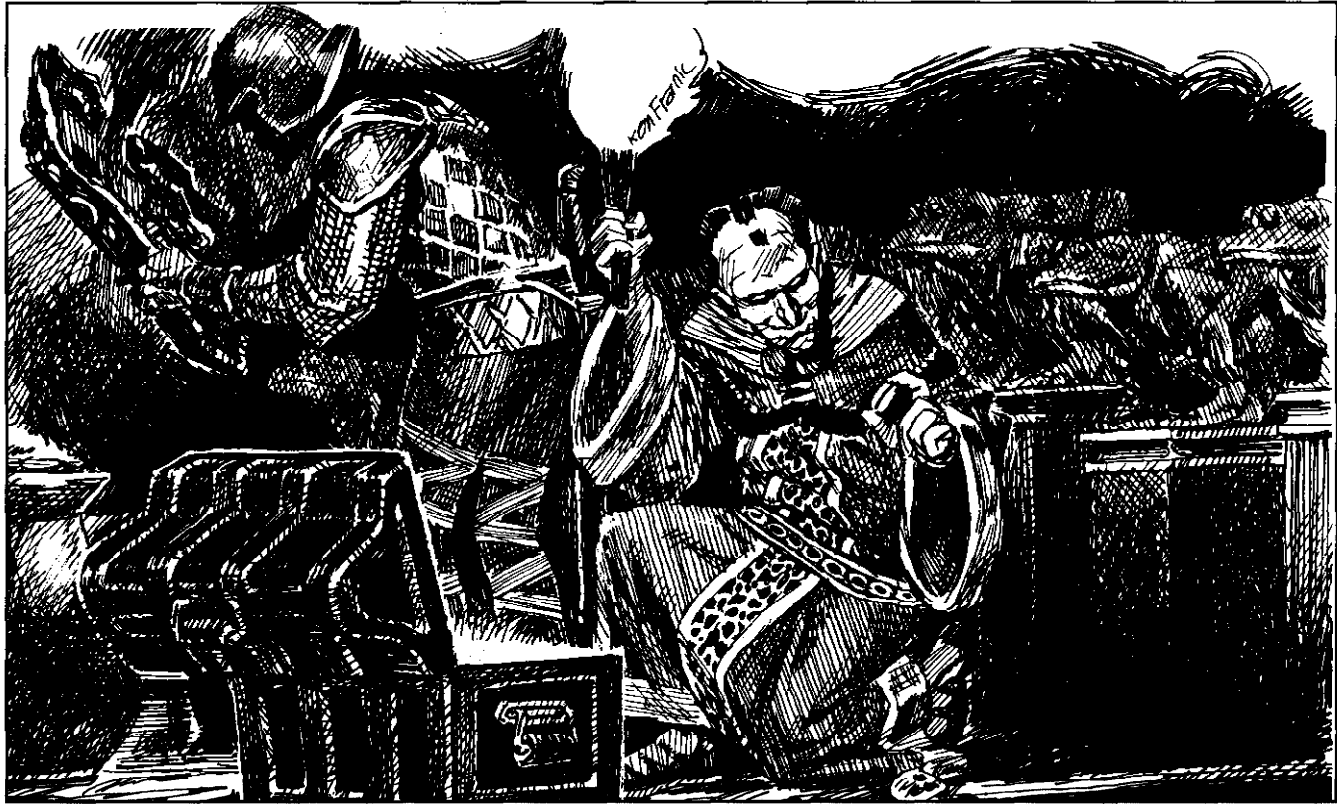
"Skysplitter!" cried Lorrick, hurling the axe end-over-end. The weapon tore a large chunk from the golem's head, and spinning and flashing in a wide arc, the axe returned to the dwarf's hand!

And yet, the enchanted guardian kept coming.

Trothgar banged his broad sword against the creature, but inflicted no wound. The sword rang and whined in his hand as if it screamed in pain.

The golem struck out with its rocky fist, glancing a blow off Trothgar's helm, and punching a hole in the wall behind him. The ranger slumped to his knees, stunned.

Esta Starchild struck next with the *Staff of the Shard*. She hit the thing squarely in one arm. The



staff's crystal flashed and thundered, and the golem's limb exploded into chalky dust.

Possessing the fortitude of an enchanted thing, the golem still had strength to strike a mighty blow at Esta with its remaining arm. But Lorrick was there, deflecting the attack with his axe, and spinning to drive his weapon deep into the creature's side.

The stone golem broke under its own weight, like a felled tree, falling in two halves. The green glow faded from its emotionless eyes.

Esta gingerly removed Trothgar's helm, and massaged the growing lump on his head with her healing hands. Soon, the ranger was fully alert and well.

"Ye be needin' magic to slay them golems, Northman!" said Lorrick. He held *Skysplitter* before him, grinning at it affectionately.

We set about exploring the side passageways, and soon discovered that all ended abruptly after traveling fifty feet or so. And each was lined with barred cages. These held withered remains, one or two per enclosure. The hapless creatures—experiments? familiars? spell components?—appeared to have died of neglect,

most likely having been abandoned in the attack so many years ago. I could find it in my heart to feel pity for even the most remorseless monster expiring that way, without honor, without need.

With no obvious exits to explore, we began a systematic search, and succeeded in finding a secret alcove. Inside, we were delighted to find a small urn filled with gemstones.

The search had taken many hours, and we were weary. Though I suspected we might have missed a hidden entrance to more of the dungeon, or perhaps even a lower level, we now had enough money to get us far across the Realms. We also agreed that we had enough information to satisfy Thalantyr, and decided to leave.

We had just returned to the large central chamber when Starchild's staff suddenly winked out. We were engulfed in pitch darkness. Even my infravision was useless.

"I can't see!" cried Samkin.

"'Tis a globe of magical darkness!" said Bublím.

Then all was chaos as missiles whizzed through our



ranks. One scraped across my cheek, taking a bit of my ear with it, I would later discover.

“Charge!” thundered Trothgar.

I heard Starchild yell something, and her staff flared once again, banishing the globe of darkness. Our enemies were revealed.

His spiked armor clanking and warhammer held high, Barstaag the scarred dwarf charged across the chamber. Five human warriors wielding swords and axes followed upon the dwarf’s heels. I also noticed a slinking figure in the shadows behind our charging foes, and recognized the purple and silver-trimmed robes of the mysterious man from Baldur’s Gate.

Both Trothgar and Lorrick had already charged ahead. As he ran, Lorrick cried “Skysplitter!” and flung the axe, cleaving the head of one of the humans from his shoulders. The axe returned just in time to deflect Barstaag’s vicious blow.

Trothgar squared off against two humans, defending himself with both sword and shield against their furious onslaught.

Esta, Bublím, Samkin, and I stood at the entrance to the chamber, stunned to inaction by the sudden battle unfolding before us. I heard Bublím mumbling something to Samkin, and the halfling suddenly vanished.

“The robed one is back there,” I warned, and began casting a spell to silence him and prevent him from conjuring more globes of darkness, or something much worse.

As I finished my incantation, I heard Esta cry out and looked to see that both she and Bublím had been frozen rigidly in place, as if paralyzed. The robed one had magically held them, and I wasn’t certain if my spell had silenced him.

I began casting another spell, one more potent than mere silence, and scanned the room looking for the robed man. He had moved somewhere, most likely away from the area of silence I had created.

Standing next to Starchild’s glowing staff, I felt vulnerable, but I could not risk breaking my concentration and losing the spell by seeking cover. Besides, I would not have left her side if all the Nine Hells opened up before me.

Suddenly, movement flickered in the corner of my eye. The robed one stepped from behind a pillar, his

long pale hands weaving and dancing, drawing magic in the air.

But I was the quicker. A bolt of lightning streaked from my palms, slamming the enemy spellcaster against the far wall. He fell to the floor, his purple robes burning. He did not get up.

I glanced over to see Trothgar had mortally wounded one of his opponents, and was faring well against the other, even though the ranger was bleeding from numerous cuts.

Lorrick had made short work of three human attackers, but Barstaag was proving to be his better. Falling back from a mad flurry of swings from Barstaag’s black warhammer, Lorrick stumbled upon the remains of the stone golem. Grinning evilly, the scarred dwarf leapt over Lorrick and raised his warhammer high to deal the killing blow.

I watched in horror, for I could do nothing quickly enough to save my friend.

“Arghhh!” cried Barstaag, his arms held high and wide, the black warhammer falling from his hand.

Samkin Silvertooth suddenly appeared, his dagger plunged to the hilt in the evil dwarf’s back. In the confusion, I had forgotten that Bublím had made the halfling invisible. Luckily, he had not been in the path of my lightning!

Barstaag fell to his knees and slumped forward, heaving his last, dying breath.

“It was an accident,” whimpered Samkin. “Why couldn’t you leave me alone?”

Suddenly, there was the clang of sword-on-sword, and I whipped around to see Trothgar parry his opponent deftly. The ranger followed with a swift backhand, opening a gash across the man’s throat.

The battle was done. All our foes lay dead.

Trothgar dropped to one knee, lowering his head wearily. He was bleeding heavily.

Lorrick sprawled unconscious. His armor was battered from Barstaag’s mighty blows, but he was breathing. In fact, I recognized the saw-blade rhythm of a snore!

I rushed to Trothgar. Summoning the healing magic of Mystra, I closed his wounds and gave him renewed strength.

As I cast the same spells for Lorrick, the dwarf snapped awake, grasping my throat in his gnarly





hands. From the fierce look in his eyes, I feared he would crush the life from me, but his angry gaze suddenly turned to one of confusion, and he released me with a mumbled apology.

I dispelled the magic holding Starchild and Bublím. The Seekers were then well and whole. . . and victorious.

"What'll we do with them?" asked Bublím, pointing toward the corpses.

"I says we leave 'em fer the rats to gnaw," grumbled Lorríck.

"Let us tell Thalantyr of what has occurred, and leave him to clean up the mess as he sees fit," said Trothgar.

I could not resist my curiosity, and crossed to the robed corpse to have a look. He was horribly burned, but I could see that he was indeed human. Under the charred remains of his robes, I found a mace and belt pouch filled with platinum and gold coins. The dead man also wore silver bracelets with the symbol of a skull at the center of a dark sunburst. I took the money, as well as the bracelets and a strip of his robe emblazoned with silver trim, hoping Thalantyr could shed light upon his identity.

We then made our way back to the wizard's manse. Though we had uncovered only little of the dungeon, Thalantyr seemed not at all disappointed—there are always more adventurers for hire, I suspect.

I showed him the bracelets and bit of cloth I had taken from the robed man, and we told him our tale.

"These are the trappings of a priest of Cyric, a most evil deity," said the mage. He gave us a concerned look and continued. "I fear you have garnered the enmity of the Zhentarim, for they are the servants of Cyric. You should be away from here swiftly. They are all-but-certain to investigate the disappearance of their priest. If so, I will see that they do not leave to follow you!"

We took Thalantyr's advice to heart, though his promise seemed more hope than truth. Soon, we were riding east into the wilderness. . . with the Zhentarim after us.

The Zhentarim

This powerful group, dubbed "The Black Network" by its foes, is a widespread organization of evil individuals commanded both by priests of Cyric and by powerful mages. Not all Zhentilar (or Zhentishmen) belong to the Zhentarim. The Network also includes several nonhuman monsters.

To enrich themselves, the Zhentarim desire to control the most economical trade routes between the established lands of the Sword Coast and the rich young kingdoms about the Moonsea, eventually achieving political control of these regions as well. Slaves are an important commodity in which they already specialize, trading their "wares" with evil or nonhuman groups, or even sending them south into the ancient lands of Condath, Uther, and Mulhorand.

The Network has begun seizing lands along its chosen route. From its stronghold at Zhentil Keep, it has taken Voonlar and ruined Yulash. It rules the Stonelands through bandit-allies.

The Zhentarim alone have the power to maintain a trade route through the Goblin Marches. Darkhold, the great Zhentish fortress, commands the Yellow Snake, the only pass north of High Horn, and its reach extends throughout the Far Hills.

In addition, the Zhentarim are in an excellent position to brave the heart of Anauroch, the Great Desert, and to discover either a safe trade route through its depths, or the riches and magic of its lost civilizations.





The Night of Sharp Teeth

We rode from Beregost, driven by the irrational fear that the entire army of the Zhentarim was right behind us. To our chagrin, we left the place in such a hurry that we neglected to buy the provisions we needed.

"I'm hungry," complained Samkin. "We should've bought fresh food. All that's left is moldy cheese and stale bread."

"Game is plentiful," Trothgar said. "I shall hunt each night while the rest of you make camp. I'll fill your bottomless belly, little man!"

Samkin disdained a reply, merely chewing a hard bit of bread with a frown. It looked as though he might actually cry at any moment.

"I still have a morsel of elven bread," I said to him. "'Tis as fresh as the day it was brought from the oven. Maybe it can soothe your aching belly, Samkin."

"And yer bellyachin'!" grumbled Lorrick.

We decided to make for Elturel, north and east of us. Soon, the tall trees of the Wood of Sharp Teeth appeared on the horizon.

"There's as vile a place as any," said Lorrick, as we drew nearer to the twisting trees.

"South o' here," continued the dwarf, "stands the tower o' Durlag, son of Bolhur. Some called him Trollkiller, fer he never met a troll he didn't kill. Durlag amassed such treasure as to be legendary, even fer a dwarf."

Lorrick stopped and packed his pipe, spilling quite a bit of pipeweed due to the jostling of his horse. Several minutes passed, but I knew he wasn't finished talking, for when Lorrick brings out his pipe, a tale is soon to follow.

"I be tellin' ye true," he continued, "when I say that ol' Durlag had so much treasure he had to hire an entire clan o' dwarves to build him a tower to put it in!"

"Durlag chose a fine spot, too, it bein' atop a plug o' volcanic rock juttin' up out o' the ground. Them dwarves hollowed out that mountain, usin' the rock

to build the tower. Some say even the caverns runnin' through that mountain're full o' Durlag's gold, not just the tower itself."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" piped Samkin.

"Now, ere ye be gettin' greedy and headin' south," replied Lorrick, "hear me out. Ol' Durlag weren't no damned fool. He was as shrewd as any dwarf, and filled his tower with all manner o' magical wards and mechanical traps, as well. Many of the most devious he designed hisself, 'tis said.

"Durlag's been dead fer a long time. Some say he fell to one o' his own traps, but I doubt this meself. Anyway, lots o' treasure hunters have gone in, but none be comin' back out. Ye best be steerin' clear o' Durlag's Tower, halfling!"

"Okay," replied Samkin, as if he had seriously been thinking of going and suddenly changed his mind. Halflings!

The Wood of Sharp Teeth

This forest is a maze of undergrowth, tangled with nettles and thorn bushes. It is named for its complete wildness and the abundance of creatures dangerous to man. Satyrs dwell here in numbers, and there are rumored to be dryads. No elves of any type are believed to make this woodland their home, though this belief is fueled more by supposition than investigation.

The wood is most feared for its less intelligent denizens, which are numerous and savage enough to have discouraged woodcutting and hunting among the local citizenry of Baldur's Gate. Many valuable duskwood trees can be seen from the safety of the road. However none have dared to fell even these tantalizing treasures in years, for death comes swiftly to those who pass into the trees. Local legend in Baldur's Gate holds that a lost, ruined city lurks in the green reaches of the forest depths.





While the rest of us set up camp several hundred yards away from the edge of the forest, Trothgar left to hunt. It was dark by the time he returned—empty-handed.

"Looks like cold rations tonight," said Bublím Barboast.

"What?!" cried Samkin, his lower lip trembling. "But I've got a hot broth of tubers and herbs all ready. I just need a hunk of meat for a nice stew, and. . ."

"Too bad there's not a lake nearby," taunted Bublím. "You could've caught us some more of those tasty talking fish!"

That was it for Samkin. Up-ending the pot like a child out of temper, he stomped off. Trothgar brought him back shortly.

"Listen, everyone," said the ranger. "I shot a black deer at the edge of the forest. I followed its blood-trail into the woods, but I soon heard something huge crashing through the trees. I had to leave the deer, but I'm certain, had you been there, you would all agree a cold meal was preferable to facing that creature, whatever it was."

"Perhaps we should be movin' the camp farther away," said Lorríck, shifting his gaze toward the forest and tugging his beard slowly.

"No," shouted Samkin, stamping a hairy foot. "We just got everything set up. I'm tired!"

"If we must stay," said Trothgar, "I want double watches tonight."

That agreed, we sat down to a cold meal of cheese and bread. No one spoke. Morale was at its lowest.

Bublím and I volunteered for the first watch. Mere minutes passed before I heard everyone's rustling and breathing settle to the steady rhythms of sleep.

Both Bublím and I struggled to keep our own eyes open and focused upon the Wood of Sharp Teeth. But the night breeze blowing from those trees smelled of sweet honeysuckle and warm summer nights. . .

I awoke to a pain in my back. I was sleeping on a large tree root. Suddenly, I realized there were no trees in our camp, and awoke fully.

"Ouch!" cried Samkin. "Put me down, you overgrown shrubbery!"

A small grove of stunted, twisted trees hovered all around our camp. One of them had picked up the halfling, and was holding him in its thorny branches.

Though surely of a similar kin, these were not good-hearted creatures such as Fuorn the Treant-King. They were not full of life as he had been, but reeked of rot and evil.

Raising their root-like feet in a stomping dance, the evil treants chanted a litany of "Doom! Doom! Doom!" They were an awful sight, silhouetted against the moonlight.

The one whose root had awakened me bent low, its thorny branches rasping. I rolled onto my back and hastily intoned a spell. Lightning rushed from my palms, blasting straight up through the tree's many limbs.

The creature screamed horribly and caught fire. It thrashed about, tangling with its fellows and setting many of them alight as well.

Six flaming trees bolted for the forest fringe. I feared I had made a terrible mistake, for the creatures could have set the entire woods ablaze, but the evil treants toppled before they reached their goal, burning fitfully.

Three remained at our camp, one of them still clutching Samkin. I didn't dare unleash my lightning again, for fear of catching the halfling in the subsequent inferno.

Another loomed before Esta Starchild, but she raised her staff and its crystal flared, filling the camp with a blue glow. All three of the creatures moaned in pain, covering their gnarled faces with wooden fingers to ward off the light. They turned and fled, taking poor Samkin with them. Though lumbering trees, they were incredibly swift, and soon disappeared into the night.

"Let's be gettin' after 'em!" bellowed Lorríck, hefting his axe.

"We can't ride the horses in there," said Trothgar. "The underbrush is far too thick."

Esta cast a spell and spoke to the horses in a tongue I could not comprehend. The animals' eyes, liquid black, gazed intently.

"They will stay," she said.

With that, we were off, running through the grass toward the forest. All we had to guide us were Samkin's fading cries.

The underbrush was indeed thick, and we soon found ourselves struggling to move forward at all.



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Samkin's mournful wails faded altogether.

"Strike torches," said Trothgar as we paused to catch our wind. He then dipped several arrows into his flask of oil and wrapped strips torn from the hem of his cloak about them.

"If fire's what they fear, then that's what we'll give 'em," said the ranger grimly.

"The torches will attract other creatures," said Esta. "I can dim my staff's light further."

"We don't want to burn the forest to the ground," I added.

"We already be makin' as much noise as an army o' me kin," said Lorrick. "If anything wants us, it'll be findin' us whether we have light or no. As fer the forest, who in the Nine Hells cares if this evil place burns?!"

I do, I thought. But I realized I would set torch to the woods myself if it would bring Samkin back safe.

We plunged onward, steadily heading in the direction we had last heard Samkin. The forest was dark and noisy. Creatures skittered in the underbrush all around, disturbed by our light and noise. Nothing attacked, however. At least, not right away.

We strode right under the boughs of an evil treant before realizing it was not solidly rooted. It reached down and hoisted me up by my arms, whipping at me with other wickedly barbed branches.

Bublim uttered a spell, blinding the creature with a blast of sparkling motes to its face. It thrashed about crazily, twisting me to-and-fro.

I saw Lorrick lunge beneath me. With two swift chops of his axe, the dwarf cut a massive wedge from the treant's side. Bloody sap flowed in a torrent.

Lowering his shoulder, Trothgar charged the trunk. With a sickening tearing sound, the treant toppled, broken in two, and dropped me to the ground.

We hurried on, fearing other creatures would soon arrive. Clearing a low hill, we were brought up short by a bizarre scene.

The down slope of the hill sank in a wide bowl-like depression. Jagged rocks jutted from a large pool of water in the center. Upon the rocks the carcasses of many forest animals sprawled. Their blood, flowing down the stones, gave the pool a sickly pink hue in the moonlight. Samkin sprawled among them, and he was not moving!

Towering at the center of the pool was an immense treant. Its trunk was as far around and as tall as the pillars at the House of the Moon. A forest of evil treants hugged the edge of the pool, quivering their branches as if in anticipation of ripping us apart.

"Doom to ye, fire-bearers!" boomed the massive treant, its voice echoing through the forest.

Trothgar clenched his broad fists in rage. My own apprehension drowned in a surge of anger.

"Aye!" I cried. "We bear fire, and have no fear of using it to set this forest ablaze!" I tried to moderate my voice. It was hard, very hard. "Let us take our friend, and we will depart in peace!"

"Come for it then, and be gone, for its blood is too sweet and stings my toes!" bellowed the tree.

Dared we trust it? The halfling moaned. We had no choice.

"I'll go," I said to my friends. "Samkin needs healing quickly."

I waded through the slimy water to Samkin's side. Before I could take him in my arms, strong tendrils gripped my legs. The treant's many roots writhed around me.

A pair of flaming arrows scorched past above me, sticking into the treant's trunk. A flask of oil followed, which shattered and caught fire, sending flaming streaks down the monster's side.

It bellowed and shook its myriad branches, causing a rain of strange insects and bracken to fall all about me. It also loosened its grip. I grabbed Samkin and fled.

We all ran then. I looked back once, to see the other treants rushing into the pool. They flung great globs of muck at their leader, perhaps attempting to extinguish the fire consuming their evil king.

We ran all the way back to camp. Samkin had been badly cut from being thrown upon the rocks, and had lost much blood, but he survived. The healing magic of Mystra saw to that.

We rode for the remainder of the night, only stopping to rest when we were miles away from the Wood of Sharp Teeth.



The Black Hood Bandits

Tired and hungry, we rode within sight of the River Chionthar and the towers of the city of Elturel. Since our harrying encounter in the depths of the Wood of Sharp Teeth, we had not slept well nor eaten a good meal. Contrary to what Trothgar had promised, the hunting was poor. We subsisted mostly on our meager rations, and the hope that we would soon find comfort in Elturel.

On the road near the south bank of the river, a patrol of thirty-two mounted warriors halted us. They were well-armed and equally well-equipped. The horse soldiers wore plate mail of crimson and white marked with an upturned crescent. I noticed that one of them was a priest of Helm, his breastplate being emblazoned with a great golden eye in the center.

"State your business," said the leader gruffly. His plate mail was trimmed with gold filigree. The men behind him appeared anxious, keeping their hands near their sword hilts.

"We have been on the trail many days," I said, "and seek only the comforts and hospitality of fair Elturel."

"Where is it you have come from?" he asked.

"Beregost," replied Trothgar.

"'Tis a long journey indeed," said the warrior, looking toward the priest, who nodded once. All in the patrol appeared somewhat relieved at this silent exchange.

"What trouble is it that you must stop friendly travelers wishing only to visit your city and spend their coin within its walls?" asked Publim Barboast.

"Bandits have been plying their trade along this road, all the way to Berdusk," replied the warrior. "We have orders from Lord Dhelt himself to question all travelers."

"Surely you have not mistaken us for brigands?" asked Esta Starchild with a charming smile.

"Nay, I have not. My scouts reported your approach from the southwest a full day ago. What is the news out of Beregost?"

"All is well," answered Trothgar. "We've seen no sign of your bandits."

"That does not surprise me," said the patrol leader, "for we suspect their lair to be somewhere east of this road."

"Can we go now?" asked Samkin. "I'm real hungry."

"That you may, my little friend. I thank you all for your honesty. Safe journey." Almost an afterthought, he added, "While in Elturel, seek out the Inn of the White Gauntlet, and mention my name, Marshal Hern. My brother owns the inn. He has soft beds and brews the finest ale in all the Realms. Until swords part, friends."

The patrol rode south down the road at a steady trot, and we traveled north a short distance to the River Chionthar. There, we lead our horses onto a wide barge. Two brawny men poled the vessel across the river to the docks of Elturel.

ELturel (ELL-tur-ELL)

Situated on a bluff overlooking the River Chionthar, Elturel is divided between a lower city, known as the Dock District, and an upper city called the High District. In size and capabilities it is similar to its upriver rival, Scornubel.

This agricultural and trade center is known for its strong, well-equipped mounted troops, "the Hellriders," who patrol and provide caravan escort from Waterdeep to Iriaebor.

Elturel boasts two major temples and several shrines. Helm's Shieldhall is the most powerful church in the city, and stands as one of the most influential churches of Helm in the North, mainly due to the patronage of Lord Dhelt. The other major temple is that of Chauntea, and is called the High Harvest Home. Elturel also holds shrines to Ilmater, Lliira, Tempus, and Tymora.





The Dock District of Elturel was full of fishermen and the smell of fish. We hoped further progress, into the High District, might net us fresh breezes and better inns. We were happy to find both, including the sign of the Inn of the White Gauntlet.

In the inn we met Marshal Hern's brother, Taskal Hern, and told him of our encounter with the patrol.

"I had heard my brother was patrolling the road to Berdusk," said Taskal. "Hunting for them Black Hood Bandits, no doubt. I pray he doesn't go and get himself killed."

"What do you know of the bandits?" I asked him.

He didn't seem as driven to apprehend the menace as his brother. It came to me that bandits were just pub gossip unless they harmed the patrol. "They've been robbin' and killin' travelers on the road. Typical bandit fare. But I've heard some scuttlebutt that not all of 'em are human, some of 'em being orcs or goblins or some such. No one's got a real good look at their faces, just those evil, shapeless hoods. That's why we call 'em the Black Hood Bandits.

"Anyway, once they started hittin' the caravans, Lord Dhelt decided it was time to take serious action. His men have been stoppin' everybody on the roads, hoping for clues as to where to find the bandits' hideaway, I reckon."

"We've heard that the people of Corm Orp have been having bandit troubles as well," said Bublím.

"I don't know much about that," said Taskal, with a dismissing shrug. "Care fer a drink? I brew the best ale you're likely to pass down your throats. I call it Heavy Hern Stout."

We took Taskal up on his offer. He proudly drew six tankards of his namesake brew from a huge cask set in the wall behind him.

The ale was indeed stout, being as black as night and as thick as syrup, with a rich brown foam. It was a hearty drink, and sat well in my belly after such a long journey without a good meal. I had drunk many tasty ales since leaving Waterdeep, and Taskal's was indeed the best.

Lorrick belched his approval. Taskal grinned proudly.

Ales & Beers of The Realms

Nearly every dale, village, town, and city in Faerûn has a brewery that makes a local concoction of variable quality. Such brews entertain a following among locals, who seem to take as much pride in the parochial ale as they do in home and country. The list that follows includes the most famous and widespread—in actual distribution as well as in reputation.

Bitter Black: This hearty stout from Arabel is one of that city's major exports, and deservedly so. Best served at cellar temperature (Arabellans sniff at any other way of serving this drink), this stout is heavy and jet black with a dark brown head of foam.

Dragon's Breath Beer: A Sembian brew of strong, harsh temperament, dragon's breath is often served with a platter of dark rye bread and death cheese.

Elminster's Choice: Made and shipped from Immersea, this dark beer, cloudy with yeast and having a heavy head, is of standard quality. Its bitterness leaves a smoky aftertaste, preferred by adventurers around the Wyvernwater.

Golden Sands Brews: Southern brews, including these Calishite brews, are rare and lighter drinks known as lager. They are lighter not only in taste, but in color and weight, and have more effervescence. Golden sands brews come in varying types, each with different additives to alter the taste of the base beverage: basic, gold, and orange.

Iriaeboran North Brew: Passing fare for tavern or home consumption, this dark amber liquid has a harsh, bitter aftertaste (revered by Iriaeborans as "the bite of the north wind") that is, for many, an acquired taste.

Luiren's Best: Brewed by the Smokardin clan of coastal Luiren, this hefty stout is as black as ink and nearly as thick as the snows at the Spine of the World. Possessed of a sweet flavor and a frothy head, this halflings' brew lives up to its name. Found easily in Luiren, Halruaa, and the the rest of



the Shining South, it is rarely transported north aside from limited export to Sembia.

Old One Eye: This beer, its containers stamped with a stylized cyclops' head, is brewed in Llorbauth on the southern coast of the Deepwash, just north of the Thornwood. The local brewer, Araneth Idogyr, learned the recipe from a cyclops he met and, strangely, befriended during the local Goblin Wars of 1358 DR. This relatively new brew is akin to the lagers of Calimshan—lighter and less opaque than the standard stouts of the North, but with a higher alcohol content. Old One Eye's fiery color comes from its secret brewing process. Its odd "hot" aftertaste makes this beer a one-of-a-kind drink that is growing in popularity with adventurers south of Cormyr.

Shadowdale Ale: This frothy ale is almost sinister in appearance, with pale yellow foam atop a cloudy brown, bubbly liquid. Despite a daunting demeanor, this ale is excellent, with a light bitter taste. Brewed in Shadowdale, it travels easily, and is found as far away as Luiren.

"Suzale": This fine-quality ale is specially prepared by the royal brewer of the House of King Azoun IV of Cormyr. Though its proper title is Purple Dragon Ale, the name listed is its most common appellation. First brewed for the royal servants and household of the Palace Royal, suzale now spreads its nutty flavor throughout Faerûn.

Tanagyr's Stout: This product is one of few exempted from trade embargoes against Zhentil Keep. It is a heavy, pitch-black stout with a low, rich malt flavor—the richest, smoothest, headiest drink this side of Evermeet. The drink has long been limited to the Moonsea region, but is expanding its trade farther south. Still, Tanagyr's is shipped using unmarked barrels to avoid the stigma of its point of origin.

We were standing in the Inn of the White Gauntlet, sipping tankards of Heavy Hern Stout, when someone spoke behind us.

"Put that on my tab, Taskal," said a burly man wearing a smith's apron. His face was stained with

smoke, his huge hands blackened with soot. He was sitting alone, and invited us to join him.

"My name's Thom Gestr," he said. "I heard you talkin' to Taskal about the Black Hoods. If yer thinkin' about trying for that reward, let me be the first to warn you against it. If you go stickin' yer noses in other people's business, yer likely to get 'em bloodied."

Lorrick opened his mouth to speak, and I knew no kind words would be coming forth.

"Thanks for the advice," I said quickly.

"Just you remember it," said the smith. "I best be gettin' back to work now."

With that, the fellow drained his tankard in one large gulp, wiped a streak of soot across his lips with the back of his hand, and stormed out of the inn.

"Charming man," said Esta Starchild.

"What reward?" asked Samkin, brightening.

"Lord Dhelt's offerin' a thousand gold coins for news leading to the whereabouts of the Black Hoods," Taskal said, bringing us another round of tankards.

"I'm too tired to discuss this now," Trothgar announced a bit too loudly, with a significant glance toward the innkeeper. "Do you have rooms available, Taskal?"

"Yep."

We spent two days resting in Elturel. The beds at the Inn of the White Gauntlet were indeed soft, and the food good.

We did not speak of the Black Hoods much. We were agreed we had enough money. The reward was not worth the time or the risk.

Instead, we busied ourselves purchasing fresh provisions. The hardships of the journey from Beregost to Elturel were on our minds. We bought more food than we would likely need, and even had to buy a pair of pack animals to carry it all. Though it was foolish, we were determined to never eat moldy cheese and stale bread again. Besides, we couldn't resist packing along a small keg of Heavy Hern Stout.

In those two days, we came to know Elturel well. It is a fine town, well-organized and clean. The people, who are mostly traders, craftsmen, and farmers, seemed content with their labors, though they appeared much poorer than the working folk of Waterdeep.





The citizens of Elturel showed open admiration for their protectors—the Hellriders. Every inn and tavern seemed to hold its own resident storyteller, eager to relate the tales of the Hellriders' exploits.

From what I heard, the Hellriders are very loyal to their leaders (called Marshals) and to each other. They take their name from the story that long ago a company of Hellriders rode into Avernus, first of the layers of the Nine Hells. It is a fascinating tale, but much too lengthy to be retold in these pages.

Elturel is governed by High Rider Lord Dhelt, formerly the leader of the Hellriders. I was told that he is a bold and proud man who shares the protective nature of his men.

Current scuttlebutt in the taverns was that Lord Dhelt had been seeking ways to unseat Scornubel as the major trading town on the Trade Way between Waterdeep and Iriaebor. Of course, the Black Hoods have become a thorn in his side, causing merchants to steer their caravans well clear of Elturel. The lack of trade was showing.

We rode from Elturel early on the morning of the third day, well before daybreak. We were refreshed, and eager to get moving.

Traveling along the northern bank of the River Chionthar, we made our way toward Scornubel. Once in that city, we would decide upon our next destination.

We had ridden for only an hour or so, and the sky and the songbirds were just beginning to hint at the coming of the sun, when a dozen riders stormed up and over the river bank. They pulled up a mere stone's throw ahead of us. I knew they had to be desperate men to ford the swift Chionthar, and indeed they were.

I recognized Thom Gstry, the burly smith, immediately. He held a heavy warhammer across his lap. With a sick feeling, I noted the black hood hanging from his saddle.

The bandits didn't have a secret hideaway after all! They were living right under Lord Dhelt's nose, within the very walls of his city. No doubt they were returning from a night raid when we happened upon them.

"I warned you," Thom growled. "Now you best be leavin' your purses and keep ridin' east, away from Elturel. Don't make me kill ye."

It was a tense moment. These were not evil treats or the hired swords of a priest of Cyric. They were common folk who had turned to thievery to put food on their tables. My stomach tightened.

"They've seen our faces, Thom," said a thin man with hawkish features, clutching a loaded crossbow nervously.

"Lord Dhelt'll have our heads!" cried another.

Before anyone could reply, the thin man raised and fired his crossbow. The bolt bounced harmlessly off of Lorrick's helm.

Suddenly, chaos reigned.

Other rogues fired crossbow bolts. One plunged into my leg, and memories of the poisoned barbs of the goblins we fought on the High Moor flashed through my mind in the same instant as the intense pain and shock of being shot scored my nerves.

"No!" I cried out, as Lorrick raised his axe to hurl it. The dwarf looked at me as if I were mad, but he paused a moment.

"Hold them with magic, Esta!" I gritted through my teeth.

The Black Hoods were charging, but Esta and I both conjured similar spells before they closed with us. Eight of the twelve rogues, including Thom, suddenly froze, magically held. The four remaining robbers veered off, down the river bank and into the water. We did not pursue them, knowing that they had nowhere to run—their homes and families were in Elturel.

With grim purpose, we bound Thom and his comrades, and quickly led the procession back to the city. Though Lord Dhelt greeted us as conquering heroes (and presented the full reward to us himself), I was not proud of what we had done. However, I was relieved that no one had been killed, neither in our party nor theirs. I had faith Lord Dhelt's justice would be both fair and swift.





News Spreads To Scornubel

After the encounter with the Black Hoods, the journey from Elturel to Scornubel was uneventful. We regained our high spirits along the way, for we had ample provisions and our money bags were filled to bursting.

We rode into Scornubel near the docks, at first pleasantly shocked to see that some of the people recognized us. Apparently, news of our victory over the Black Hoods, much elaborated upon by many tellings, had arrived ahead of us. Most likely the tale had spread from the crews of small cargo barges and fishing boats out of Elturel.

"There go the Seekers!" cried a young boy. "Bane of the Black Hoods! Is that Trothgar I see?"

Grinning broadly, the ranger raised his broad sword high, twirling it about and making it flash in the sun.

"This is not good," said Esta Starchild.

"Put up yer blade, ye fool Northman," Lorrick growled, bringing us all back to reality. "Be ye forgettin' the Zhentarim?"

Giving the dwarf a sheepish look, Trothgar sheathed his sword.

"We should get out of sight," I said. "Let's discuss this matter privately."

We ducked into the first inn we came upon. I cannot remember the name. Luckily, the establishment was equipped with its own stable. The beautiful white horses gifted to us by Lord Duirsar could give us away as surely as our own faces.

We rented three shabby rooms, and skulked up to them like thieves on the run.

"What use are fame and glory when you can't enjoy them?" asked Trothgar.

No one replied, and I don't believe the ranger expected an answer. He was still embarrassed about his display at the docks.

"We should be away from here swiftly," said Starchild. "In any city the size of Scornubel, there are certain to be agents of the Zhentarim."

"I've got an idea," Samkin said with a silvery grin. "When we leave, let's tell the innkeeper we're going to Corm Orp to take care of the bandits there. Then we can backtrack and head in a different direction!"

"Well spoken," said Trothgar.

"All this time," rumbled Lorrick, "I thought ye were only good fer sneakin' about and eatin' three times yer share o' food. Wonders'll never cease!"

We agreed upon Samkin's ruse. Though the inn we had chosen stood at the heart of a major city, we set watches for the night.

The following morning during breakfast, we made certain everyone could overhear our plans to travel to Corm Orp. We then rode north and east out of Scornubel, but we didn't continue in that direction long.

Scornubel (SCOR-noo-bell)

Scornubel is a huge, open city set on the north shore at the confluence of the Chionthar's South Fork and the River Reaching. It is an unwall'd town buzzing with continual activity. Travelers wade through a large number of pack animals, wagons, and a variety of merchant companies' symbol-blazoned tents. Most buildings are low—one or two stories—with a smattering of larger buildings and towers in the center of town.

Scornubel is one of the key cities on the Trade Way leading from Waterdeep to the lands of the Inner Sea. Like its rivals, Elturel and Iriaebor, it is a town of merchants and those things of concern to merchants—warehouses, transportation, and protection (usually from other merchants).

The "Caravan City" is ruled by shrewd, elderly and regal Lady Rhessajan, who was in her time a daring explorer and wandering trader. She is still famed as "Rhessajan of the Tents."

The Lady Rhessajan is supported by three Lord High Advisors named Burdan, Deep, and Phantar, who are all middleaged adventurers and retired caravan masters themselves. The Lady and her advisors pass judgments on activities in the city based on one key factor—what is most profitable for the city and its merchants.

Key To Scornubel

1. Trail Lords (merchant company) headquarters; office and warehouse (A), warehouses (B-E)
2. Highmoon Trading Coster (merchant company) warehouse (C-J), office and stronghouse (A), and staff quarters (B, K, L)
3. Highmoon Trading Coster stables and paddock
4. Trail Lords stock pens and stables with paddock
5. The Stags Caravan Company stables and stock pens, with paddock
6. Ferry dock and route of *Southroad Ferry*, a large barge operated by Burlin (N hm F6) and two 3rd-level warrior bravos
7. Arkaras the Shipwright
8. The Red Shields stables and paddock; office at (A)
9. Tallahabur the Wagonmaker (sheds A-D, house E)
10. The Walk (public meeting place and market)
11. The Windriders Trading Coster stables (with paddock) and stock pens
12. Surefeet Trademasters (merchant company) stables with paddock
13. The Purple Sun Trading Coster stable with paddock and stock pens
14. The Windriders Trading Coster (merchant company) headquarters; office (F), and warehouses (A-E)
15. Purple Sun Trading Coster warehouse (A-D)
16. Surefeet Trademasters headquarters; office and stronghouse (D), warehouses (A-C)
17. Red Shields warehouses (A-C and D-F)
18. The Stags Caravan Company headquarters: warehouses (A-H)
19. The Jaded Unicorn (tavern and inn of very low quality)
20. The Thirsty Thunder Beast (tavern)
21. The Dusty Hoof (tavern and inn)
22. Traveler's Rest (inn)
23. The Fishym & Smoka Inn (the "Fish-smoke"; tavern and inn of low quality)
24. The Nightshade (festhall and nightclub)
25. Kaerus Thambadar's smithy (blacksmith and ironmonger)
26. Fish market
27. The Green (assembly area for outbound caravans)
28. The North Green (see 27)
29. The East Green (see 27)
30. The Spice & Wine Shop; Ulder Mooroo (N hm W3), proprietor
31. Malikhar the Outfitter (leather straps, packs, tarpaulins, weather cloaks, harnesses, boots, etc.)
32. Purple Sun Trading Coster (merchant company) office
33. Purple Sun Trading Coster hirelings' barracks

34. Angah Lalla (fence for stolen goods; ostensibly a curio trader in items from exotic lands)
35. The Free Traders of Scornubel offices (run by the city); a registry of unemployed, casual journeyman drovers, guards, animal trainers, etc., and stronghouse)
36. Free Traders public warehouse (rental storage space guarded by the watch)
37. Free Traders public warehouse (rental storage space guarded by the watch)
38. Headquarters of the watch (D) with barracks (A-C) and enclosed stables (E)
39. The Randy Wench (tavern and gaming rooms)
40. The Jester's Bells (tavern, festhall, and scented baths)
41. Thruu's Way Rooms and Dining (the "Through-Way"; inn)
42. Scornubel Hall (meeting chambers

- available for rent, quarters for the local council and visitors, the city's emergency granary and deep wells)
43. The Raging Lion (inn; tavern and rooms at A, stables at B)
44. Mother Minx's (festhall)
45. Thyumdar's Reliquary & Eremosckh (general store for all goods; large and prosperous; Thyumdar (N hm W7) often uses the *wizard eye* spell in his business dealings)
46. The Everfull Jug (winery and drinks shop)
47. Ehaevaera's Beauty Rooms (hairstyling, scented baths, massages, manicures, body painting, and tattoos for women)
48. Ssimbar's Fine Clothes
49. Preszmyr the Herbalist (herbs, drugs, phylacteries, perfumes, and scented powders)
50. Far Anchor (inn)





The Star-Spore

Departing Scornubel, we rode north along the River Reaching for a day, looking all the while for a suitable point to cross the flow. Several times Trothgar had us conceal ourselves off the trail, where we waited and watched for pursuers. We saw none.

Finally, near dusk we found a spot that looked to have been used as a ford. Crossing the river was tricky, but our horses were sure-footed and strong, and got us safely up the east bank.

We headed due east through an immense forest of tall beech and oak trees. This place was much different from the Wood of Sharp Teeth, for we sensed no evil presence, only the natural goodness of living things. The underbrush was light, and Trothgar soon found a game trail that made the journey easy.

We planned to pass near Hluthvar, then ride south along the Sunset Mountains. Eventually we would come upon the road from Iriaebor, which would take us north and east into Cormyr.

Samkin wanted to stop in Hluthvar for a night in a warm bed, and Lorrick assured us the people of that town were notorious for their hatred of the Zhentarim. But for that very reason we chose to avoid it, for there would surely be spies of the Black Network there.

Hluthvar (Heh-LUTH-var)

This circular town stands at the foot of the Far Hills, surrounded by a wall of stone. Three gates pierce the wall to allow travelers entrance and egress. The top of the wall is constantly patrolled. Hluthvar's largest building is a temple to Helm near the center of town.

The streets of the city radiate from the central open market like spokes of a wheel, with the largest street being the north-south road that follows the Trade Route. At the southern edge of the market stands the local inn, the Watchful Eye.

We skirted Hluthvar at night. The many lights burning in its warm homes beckoned appealingly, but we turned our backs on them and rode on.

Several miles south of Hluthvar, we crossed the trade road that leads to Asbravn and eventually Iriaebor. Though the road would have made for swifter travel, we did not linger upon it for fear of being spotted by a patrol from Hluthvar, or even worse, one out of Darkhold.

By morning we had come to the edge of the Far Hills. Beyond them loomed the tall peaks of the Sunset Mountains.

"We could save weeks of travel by cutting straight through the Far Hills," said Esta Starchild.

"We want to be stayin' clear o' them hills," Lorrick replied. "Forces out o' Darkhold stomp all about there. The whole region's no more than rocky upland full o' hidden valleys and dense groves o' trees. Plenty o' places fer us to be ambushed."

"I suppose you are right, my friend," she said. "We cannot risk letting the *Staff of the Shard* fall to the Black Network."

"Or our throats," said Bublím Barboast grimly.

We rode on for several days, passing around the southern range of the Sunset Mountains and heading in a more southeastern direction toward Easting. All was well.

"Ah, the Sunsets be a splendid sight," said Lorrick whimsically late one afternoon, his gaze toward the mountains.

"If I listen close," he continued, "I can hear the hammers of me kin ringin' in the mountains, diggin' the ore and refinin' the metals as our grandfathers did so long ago."

"Really?" asked Samkin. "Are there dwarves up there?"

"Aye, 'tis said the Hidden are still there. But ye'll not be finding 'em, little man, fer they keeps their homes secret. One loose word into one greedy ear and the wonders o' me kin are once again threatened."

"I won't tell," Samkin said earnestly.

"Do you think it would be safe to stop in Easting,





Lorrick?" I asked.

"Much safer than Iriaebor, I'm certain," replied the dwarf. "'Tis less likely there be Zhentarim agents in Easting, but I wouldn't be surprised to find them devils under every rock and behind every tree."

"We have provisions enough to reach Cormyr," said Trothgar. "Let's stick to the plan. We bypass Easting for Cormyr."

We all longed for a warm bed, but saw the wisdom in the ranger's words. We rode on.

Darkhold

The Darkhold is a high-spired keep of black stone rising from a bare rocky spur of "the Grey Watcher," a mountain among the Far Hills. Small figures moving along its battlements give an idea of the massive size of the keep.

The stone of this ancient tower is not of local origin, and has been fused together by some unknown power into a single piece. Legend says that the tower was constructed by elementals commanded by a fell sorcerer in the waning days of Netheril. It is also said that the sorcerer, now a lich (or undead enchanter), still inhabits the secret ways and chambers beneath the keep.

The keep itself can house 1,000 men-at-arms, though its present garrison is likely much less than that. Tunnels and storage cairns lace the mountainside beneath the keep, and a number of escape tunnels have been bored through the living rock by various owners. The keep has belonged to many organizations, wizards, and companies, and was most recently a bandit-hold before being "appropriated" by its present owners.

The fortress of Darkhold is part of the Black Network of the Zhentarim, and is currently the westernmost established refuge of that organization and their allies. Caravans controlled or guarded by Zhentarim forces make this place a regular stop when traveling to and from the Sword Coast, and representatives of Darkhold can be found in merchant trains from northern Mirabar to southern Calimshan, and east to Zhentil Keep itself.

I barely have the strength to write this entry. Please, dear reader, forgive my unsteady hand. . .

It was along the southern-most hills of the Sunset Mountains, while evading a patrol from Darkhold, that we stumbled upon a strange crater and were poisoned. We had seen a brilliant shooting star the previous night, and made the mistake of believing it to be another Tear of Selûne, or perhaps the very Tear we were sent to find.

We should have paid heed to Starchild's staff. Its light never changed, continuing to glow brightest when pointed half north and half east, as it had always done before. But our curiosity got the better of us, and we veered north into the hills, the domain of the Black Network.

Not long after, a patrol out of Darkhold spotted us. Perhaps they too had come to investigate the falling star. Outnumbered by more than four-to-one, we fled.

The pack animals lagged too slow, and we were forced to release their reins. Now much less encumbered, our swift white horses sped us from our pursuers.

Riding pell-mell at night, we came over the lip of a crater before realizing it was even there. The hole made by the falling star was at least a hundred strides across. Pulling our mounts to a halt, we paused to have a look. I wish now that we had not.

Amidst the upheaved earth were junks of glittering rock covered with a strange mold that glowed yellow in the moonlight. It was unlike any fungus I have ever seen. Glowing spores formed cloudy wisps in the air. We must have breathed some of these into our bodies, for we quickly became ill.

We fled the area, and found shelter in a narrow cave, with room enough for our mounts. Trothgar was successful at concealing our trail—our pursuers from Darkhold have not found us. Perhaps they too came upon the crater and fell ill.

Though weakened by nausea and fever, Starchild and I managed to build a fire and prepare a healing broth. However, all of our remedies, including magical ones, had no effect. Secluded in our tiny sanctuary, we all huddled together for a long night of feverish sleep and disturbing dreams.

With the morning, I could not rouse Bublím Barboast! I feared him dead, for he was as cold as stone. I







managed to get some hot broth down his throat. The warmth returned to his body, though he remained in a deep slumber.

Of the rest of the company, Lorrick and Samkin seem better, and complain only of nausea. I attribute this to the stout blood of their races, and not my healing broth.

Our splendid horses are likewise unaffected. Perhaps this is due to their unicorn blood.

For Starchild, Trothgar, and myself, matters are much worse. It will not be long before we lie on the verge of death, as Bublím already does.

I can no longer write. I must rest. . .

I have sent Lorrick and Samkin to Easting. It is not far. The sage Rulthaven resides there. He is a master of herbal lore. Perhaps he can help us. . .

Two days since they left, I think. My sight is nearly gone. Can hear Trothgar gibbering madness in a fevered dream. Starchild and Bublím are asleep. Or dead. . .

Blindness. The pounding in my head! Let me sleep! Just let me sleep. . .

This morning I awoke to the smell of frying bacon, and was delighted to feel my stomach rumble hungrily. As I write this I am lying in a cozy bed in Easting.

Lorrick and Samkin were successful. Whether by luck or fate, while still several day's ride from Easting, they ran into none other than Rulthaven himself. The sage had also seen the falling "star-spore" (as he calls it) and was coming to investigate.

Rulthaven told me he had seen these spores before and long ago he'd devised an antidote. The sage speculated that the spores fall from the green planet Coliar. He said that the life there (if there is life on that distant orb) is possibly so different from our own as to be poisonous.

When Lorrick, Samkin, and Rulthaven found us, we were as close to death as one can come and survive. Though the medicine was given immediately, it was several days before any of us regained consciousness. During that time, Rulthaven tended us, and also

visited the site of the crater. He gathered samples for further study. To my dismay, considering the deadliness of the substance, he seemed very excited.

As far as the rest of us are concerned, we care little about the star-spore, and wish to be on our way. Lorrick has already purchased fresh provisions and a pair of pack animals to replace those we lost.

The sage's studious manner does not make for the best of company anyway, and I fear we have already overstayed our welcome, becoming an interruption to his work.

Besides, once again the Zhentarim know of our whereabouts. . .

Easting

Situated east of Iriaebor, the town of Easting is a small community. Less than 40 buildings house the town proper. Easting is typical of little villages throughout the Forgotten Realms, with a few exceptions.

The town's small size, and its convenience to the Sunset Mountains, makes it a preferred meeting spot for dwarven artisans working out of hidden delves in those peaks. Smiths and miners can grab a meal or an ale without undue notice. Their smithy-work is above the human average. Informed individuals wishing to contact such craftsmen—or indeed, dwarven communities at large—usually start in Easting.

Easting is the home of Rulthaven the Sage, whose area of expertise lies in the study of plants and their uses, including herbs and poisons. Rulthaven is neutral both in politics and in religion. As a result, the sage's opinions are sought alike by priests of good and representatives of the Darkhold.

Finally, Easting is the home of at least four noted horse-breeders, whose stables do a brisk trade in remounting travelers heading from the Sword Coast to the Inner Sea.





Empty Purses in High Horn

After parting with the sage Rulthaven in Easting, we followed the road north and east into the mountains along Cormyr's western border. Taking the road was a gamble, for patrols out of Darkhold could have intercepted us. Thankfully, they did not.

I suspect—I hope—that the patrol that spotted us in the foothills of the Sunset Mountains perished from the mysterious star-spore disease which nearly finished us. They likely died before returning to Darkhold to report our whereabouts.

We arrived at the fortress of High Horn late this afternoon, just ahead of a tremendous storm. I can hear booming thunderclaps as I write this entry.

The Lord High Commander graciously allowed us to settle in the keep's guest quarters for the night. Though I do not wish to slight my host, this is foremost a military post—our rooms are not particularly comfortable. Even so, they are certainly better than sleeping in the storm. Besides, with so many armed men guarding the keep, we can finally sleep peacefully, without fear of encountering a Zhentarim patrol.

Earlier, I had time to explore the fortress, and discovered it manned by some four hundred men-at-arms and at least forty warriors of rank. The position of Lord Commander is appointed annually by the King, and is currently held by one Thursk Dembarron, a proud warrior reputed to have great prowess, both tactically and as a fighter in his own right.

There are extensive facilities here, certainly more than enough for the forces currently stationed at High Horn. In questioning one of the men, I learned that this fortress is the wintering quarters for half the Cormyrian army, and has the capacity to host both human and beast through a season-long siege.

I also found that an outpost of Cormyrian War Wizards makes its base here. To my surprise I recognized one of their number as a man who attended the same school of wizardry as I myself had, in Waterdeep. We spent the evening reminiscing old times over a bottle of Saerloonian glowfire wine.

I was able to glean a bit of information from my old friend. When we first arrived at High Horn, all in our company were asked to submit to a search of our persons and belongings. This seemed quite unusual, as travelers in Cormyr are generally treated with less suspicion than in other nations. Thankfully, they found nothing incriminating upon us, though the finely cut gems we found in the ruins of the school of wizardry in Beregost raised eyebrows.

I asked my friend (whose name I have intentionally deleted from this journal) about the search. He was reluctant to speak of it at first, but a few mugs of glowfire no doubt loosened his tongue.

"The King has given orders for his commanders to search all travelers in the realm," he said. "Someone is smuggling great fistfuls of gemstones out of the royal mines near this very fortress. I have heard that gemstones have surfaced as far away as Mulmaster. The King is in quite a rage. I suggest, my friend, you think twice before purchasing gemstones from strangers."

"But we have gemstones on us," I said. "And the guards appeared merely curious when we showed them."

"The gems they search for are uncut," he replied. "Yours have seen the grinding wheel of a jeweler. Still, I would be reluctant to sell them while in Cormyr."

Advice well-taken.





High Horn

High Horn is a great, grim fortress of high curving walls and frowning towers. It is the center of Cormyr's military operations.

The huge towers of High Horn were once essential defenses, but in peace are no longer so heavily used. The fortress is still the strongest defensive position in Cormyr. High Horn guards the road to the west, and a strategically important mountain pass.

The following morning we were prepared to depart High Horn. We planned to travel the road due east through Cormyr to Arabel, then take another road north and east all the way to the Moonsea. Starchild was certain that somewhere in the dangerous lands north of the sea awaited the Tear of Selûne.

However, we were detained by the guards at High Horn. Lord High Commander Dembarron had "requested" an audience with us. We were escorted to his council chambers by an armed escort, which made us all a bit nervous. Perhaps they had decided our

gems were contraband after all.

"The Court is very sensitive to the presence of armed men within the kingdom," said the commander. "Mercenaries such as yourselves may not gather, while armed, in groups of more than five in any place save public markets or inns and taverns. Violators face immediate disarmament, forfeiture of goods, and imprisonment at the hands of the local watch or soldiers of the King."

The High Commander gave us all a stern look. I felt we would find ourselves in the dungeon for certain.

"Of course, there are exceptions to this decree," he continued. "I have the authority to grant your company a royal charter, which allows you to legally carry weapons and accept adventuring commissions while in Cormyr." I got a glimmer of his purpose.

"Excuse me, Lord," I said slowly. "But how much does such a charter cost?"

"One thousand pieces of gold," he replied. "Of course, there is also a tax of three-hundred gold coins per year, with the first year's tax due upon receipt of the charter."





"Of course," grumbled Lorrick, looking toward Samkin, whose mouth had fallen open.

Purchasing a charter would drain our company fund to nothing, and cut heavily into our own private money. Even though we still had most of the gems taken from Beregost, we would be left virtually penniless once again.

"We cannot pay the entire amount in coin. Will you accept gems?" I asked hesitantly, then quickly added, "Cut gemstones, of course."

"Yes," he replied with a frown. After the thefts from the royal mines, I imagined that gems were the last thing Lord Dembarron wanted to see. How embarrassing if he should accept payment in the very stones stolen from the King. But both he and I knew well the contraband gems were uncut.

"I have the papers right here," he continued. "Sign your names, or make your mark." This last comment was made with a look toward Lorrick, as if the commander assumed the dwarf couldn't write.

Of course, we signed our names, paid him the majority of our wealth, and took the charter. But Lord High Commander Dembarron was not through with us yet.

"There are a few restrictions you should be aware of," he said. "Your company may not number more than thirty persons at any one time. All members must display the arms or badge of your company at all times when armed in Cormyr. And, finally, any roster changes must be reported to me promptly."

"But we don't have any badges," Samkin said meekly.

"Then I suggest you devise some before you leave," he said gruffly. "And now I must leave you myself, for I have many duties to see to."

We returned to the guest quarters. Everyone was very quiet for a while.

"We've been swindled, I tell ye!" huffed Lorrick.

"The charter looks to be in order," I said. "It's official, and legal."

"We're broke," whimpered Samkin.

"Well, maybe we can make use of this charter while we are in Cormyr," Starchild said. I was sure she was trying to cheer us, though I could not find much cheer myself.

"Let's just get moving," Trothgar replied. "I've had my fill of High Horn's hospitality."

Before leaving we agreed upon the emblem of the Seekers—a circle of six stars with a shooting star through the center. Using the bed linens from her room, Esta hastily sewed six badges, and we were on our way.

Cormyr (Core-MEER)

One of the handful of proper nations in the North, Cormyr straddles the land between the Dragonmere and Anauroch in the northeast region of the Sea of Fallen Stars. It was once heavily wooded, but is now a region of small forests and organized farms.

Cormyr, also "the Forest-Country" and "the Land of the Purple Dragon," is a rich kingdom. Its southern, eastern, and northwestern areas have many farms, offering abundant trade goods. The middle of the kingdom is yet wooded and yields good timber and much game (which all may hunt, if they hunt alone).

Cormyr is also well-located on overland trade routes, connecting it to the cities of the Moonsea to the northeast; the Dalelands to the east; the Inner Sea (with two major ports, Suzail and Marsember); and the rich city-states and kingdoms of the Sword Coast.

A wet land, Cormyr receives plenty of rain in the growing seasons, and heavy snow in winter. Those cold winters stretch long, and summers run short but hot. The moist weather keeps Cormyr's farms and forests green, rich in both yield and splendor. Mists are common along the seacoast, and the High Moors, reaching thick tendrils into the pass at High Horn and the gorge north of Eveningstar.

Cormyr is a hereditary monarchy. The present King is Azoun IV, a regal middle-aged man of sophisticated tastes and keen wits, son of the famed warrior-king Rhigaerd II. Azoun rules from his hilltop palace in Suzail and in the "Royal Court" of interconnected public buildings below it. He is rarely, if ever, seen in the forest towns (though the King is rumored to travel in disguise when he must leave Suzail).

Azoun's banner—a purple dragon on a black field—is flown by a strong standing army under the



command of the Lord High Marshal of the Kingdom, Duke Bhereu. The king also takes counsel from the Royal Magician, Vangerdahast, a mage of renowned power.

Cormyr dates its years from the founding of House Obarskyr, 1339 years ago. For the bulk of its history, Cormyr was little more than a single city (Suzail) and a few fortified outposts. In troubled years the King might be forced to rule from those outposts, abandoning the throne. The current King is the fourth of his name and the 71st of his line.

The land has been officially "at peace" for many years, since Rhigaerd overthrew the Border Raiders. Its forces have taken part in actions in nearby regions, however. They recently mustered against Gondegal, the rebel of Arabel, and Azoun led a crusade against the Tuigan horde from the east.

Additionally, patrols often skirmish with bandits, and at present battle orcs and other creatures in Tilver's Gap and Daggersdale. Both of these areas are threatened by evil raiders, who will menace Cormyr itself if they overrun Tilverton. Cormyr built Castle Crag to defend against any such attack.

The King rules through his Lords, one in each town, and by the fealty of rich "merchant lords." The merchant lords are too numerous to mention (at any one time, perhaps 20 hold prominence), and change with the shifts of fortune.

Each local Lord defends the local farms, dispenses the King's justice, keeps the peace, serves as the King's eyes and ears, and collects tithes for the King and for himself or herself.

Each Lord is allowed to maintain personal troops known as men-at-arms. Volunteer town guardsmen form "the watch," and may, upon the judgment of the Lord, be exempted from tithes if their service has been valuable.

The Lords are also requested to stable and maintain a fit, swift horse of the best quality for use by the King's Messengers (who ride fast and far, changing mounts at every stop). Each Lord also employs a right-hand man, who serves as a clerk and record-keeper, and is a trained herald.





A Mystery in Arabel

The ride from High Horn toward Arabel was pleasant. However, the long journey from Easting to High Horn had used nearly all of our provisions. We were forced to sell the pack animals to help buy food and lodging in Cormyr. We must find a commission soon, for the trek to the Moonsea is long indeed, and we need fresh provisions.

Cormyr is the most civilized and orderly realm I have visited. The government operates smoothly in its dealings with the populace. In return, the people are very loyal to both government and king, and seem exceptionally law-abiding and peaceful. The noble class is strong, the common folk industrious, and the merchant class vibrant. All said, the Cormyreans seem content.

We have been in Arabel for a tenday, seeking an employer for our specialized talents. It has been an enjoyable visit.

Yestereve, we joined in celebrating the *Night of Musks*, a festival in which everyone dons fanciful costumes and parades through the city. It is also known as the *Night of Many Thumbs*, as there is much drinking because the local taverns lower the price of a hand keg of ale to a mere copper piece—or “thumb”—to attract as many celebrants as possible.

Even the knights of the local lord, a handsome woman named Myrmeen Lhal, took part. In full battle armor, they rode their prancing mounts through the streets. It is customary for young maidens to toss garlands of flowers, colorful scarves, and other trinkets for the knights to catch and carry upon their lances.

The city watch had little time for celebration, however. They had their hands full dealing with drunken revelers. All told, the festival was tame compared to those I have witnessed in Waterdeep, with the most serious incident being a mysterious fire at the Wink and Kiss tavern, which nearly burned the establishment to the ground.

Arabel (AIR-ah-bell)

Arabel is a mid-sized eastern Cormyrian city, situated where the East Way meets Calantar’s Way. Famed for its jewelry, this merchant city boasts several major trading company outposts. Mercenaries can pick up work at any time. The city is also Cormyr’s main shipping nexus for coal, gathering the fuel from mines in the Gnoll Pass area.

For a brief time in recent memory, Arabel was the center of a swordsman’s empire. Gondegal, the Lost King, attempted to carve a kingdom for himself, centered in Arabel and extending north to the Desertsmouth Mountains, south and west to the Wyvernwater and the farms outlying Eveningstar, and east to Tilver’s Gap and the mountain passes.

However, Gondegal could not hold against the might of Cormyr, Sembia, Daggerdale, Tilverton, and several other dales, from all of whom he drew blood and ire when seizing his throne.

Gondegal ruled for less than a season (he actually reigned for scarcely eight days), spending most of his days fighting scattered battles against one foe or another. His treasury of seized goods was small and soon gone, for his troops were mostly mercenaries. ‘Tis said that one night Gondegal’s army simply faded away before the advancing host of Cormyr and was gone.

Gondegal’s body was never found. It is believed he fled north and then east, where his fate becomes a matter of rumor and legend. Most think he still lives and holds court with a score of loyal followers somewhere in the wilds, acting as a careful and ruthless bandit.

Arabel is currently ruled by Myrmeen Lhal, a ranger. Her rule turns on the fact that she permits the traders and merchants to engage in whatever tactics they see fit, so long as no one is hurt and the crown not endangered.



News of a missing caravan spread through Arabel. Apparently, the entire caravan disappeared somewhere on the road to Gnoll Pass, north and east of the city. The name Gondegal was on everyone's lips, in phrases such as, "The caravan's gold'll soon be gilding Gondegal's throne."

It was not long before a worried merchant approached us with an offer.

"My name is Pekal," he said. "I have urgent need of your services. You see, my daughter was traveling with the missing caravan. I've also lost a valuable cargo of cheese and wine, but that is unimportant. Please, bring my daughter home. I'll reward you well."

"How well?" asked Lorrick.

"I'll pay you a thousand gold coins for her safe return," the merchant replied. Then he sadly added, "Or half that sum for her body."

"Do you have something belonging to your daughter, a bit of clothing, perhaps?" asked Esta Starchild.

"Why, of course, at my home. Certainly."

"Go and fetch it," Esta said, "for we should be leaving quickly."

"And bring half the fee," added Lorrick. "We'll be needin' it fer food and such."

"Agreed," Pekal said before hurrying off.

"Why do you need the girl's clothing?" I asked Starchild.

"So my staff may lead us to her."

"Great!" Samkin chimed in, with an almost proprietary glance at the staff. "This should be easy!"

Soon, Pekal returned with the money. Before departing Arabel, we sent the halfling to buy fresh provisions. Samkin made a glutton of himself by purchasing several large wheels of Arabellan cheddar cheese.

"Next to halfling's cheese, this is some of the best cheese I've ever tasted," he said.

Indeed, it was tasty. The orange cheese had a sturdy flavor, and the shopkeeper who sold it to him assured us that it travels very well. I hoped so, for we certainly had enough of it.

Cheeses of The Realms

The cheeses of Faerûn are as diverse as its cities, with nearly as many varieties. Cheese is an excellent foodstuff for a long trip. It stores well, travels without undue spoilage, and adds flavor to even the most common meal.

Chessentan Lotus Cheese: A novelty cheese popular in Chessenta and the old empires that crouch on the southeastern side of the Sea of Fallen Stars, lotus cheese is flavored with flower petals.

Death Cheese: From the swamps bordering Sembia and Cormyr, this cheese takes its name not from its effect but from the creature it comes from—the deadly catoblepas. This creature can kill with a glance. The cheese is reputed to come from the dairies of blind monks, who locate their herds by sense of smell and milk the creatures.

Damarite Red: Bloodcheese from the lands of the bloodstone, Damarite is made of goat's milk, giving it a sharper, heartier, more pungent tang. The cheese travels well in its heavy, black rind.

Elturian Grey: A heavy, whitish sheep cheese with black veins, Elturian grey is also known as stonework or dwarfcheese. Despite such daunting names, the premiere cheese of Elturel is a tasty, pungent treat.

Farmer's Cheese: Also called pot cheese or cottage cheese, farmer's cheese is a simple cheese, little more than aged milk strained through a cheesecloth sieve and drained of most of its whey into large curds.

Green Calishite: Sample at your own risk, for the Calishites mix ground curry in with their cheese as a preservative and flavor-enhancer. Many a northern barbarian has been brought low by grabbing a hunk of green, thinking it an ordinary cheese, and biting in. The curry gives Calishite its radiant aquamarine hue, as well as its very spicy flavor.

Luiren Spring Cheese: Also called halfling's cheese, mind cheese, or simply "cheeese," this cheese is available on a limited basis in Waterdeep





only, and then only with the express written permission of Lord Piergeiron, Khelben Arunsun, or the patriarch of an established temple. While not the most pleasing of cheeses to the human palate, its effect on halflings is markedly different, inducing a state of inebriation similar to that caused by strong wine.

Mist Cheese: The Loudwater Vale produces some of the richest cheeses in the North. The elves call this soft white curd the ethereal cheese, for if sliced thinly it becomes translucent while retaining all of its succulent bite. Mist cheese owes its appearance and taste to the practice of ripening the rounds in caves, and the unique taste of mist has never been duplicated elsewhere.

Turmish Brick: This is a crumbly, square burgundy cheese made with the heavy red wine of the region. Made in great platters, the Turmish brick is ripened and carved, and each loaf is wrapped in red wax.

Vilhon Blanc: A light reddish cheese which gains its color and complexion from the lighter wines mixed in during initial straining, Vilhon is a delicate cheese in comparison with Turmish brick, which uses a heavier wine.

We traveled north on the road for nearly a day before Starchild's staff directed us to head east. To the north loomed mountains, where the road meandered through Gnoll Pass. Somewhere among those peaks also stood Castle Crag. Only foothills and wild country lay in the new direction.

Trothgar was dubious, and said so.

"Surely wagon tracks would show in this soft turf. Can the staff be mistaken?"

"No," replied Starchild firmly, guiding her horse off the road and into the short grasses. We followed.

We had traveled about an arrow's flight from the road when the wagon tracks Trothgar had expected started abruptly.

"This is magic!" he said.

"I suspect you are right," I replied. "Somehow they moved the wagons through the air to this spot, probably thinking no one would find the trail this

far from the road."

"Maybe they levitated the wagons," Bublilm Barboast offered.

"To move such weight would require a powerful wizard, or several wizards," I said. "When we find the bandits, we had best be alert for spellcasters, dangerous ones."

"And just which wizards ain't dangerous?" Lorrick asked wryly.

Toward dusk, the wagon tracks (and Starchild's staff) led us to within sight of three tall hills clustered together.

"I'm bettin' there in them hills," Lorrick said.

"Aye," replied Trothgar. "We had best go no further until dark."

We concealed ourselves in a dense copse of trees, and waited for night to come. Not daring to risk a fire, we ate our food cold. Samkin didn't seem to mind, for he happily gorged himself on Arabellan cheddar.

When it was fully dark, we set off once again. As the trail climbed into the hills, the ground became more dry and rocky. We lost the deep grooves of the wagon tracks, but Starchild's staff led us on with its dim glow.

In a valley created by the convergence of the three hills, Starchild's keen elven eyes spied a concealed cave entrance. It was a considerable distance away, and it took some effort from Starchild to point it out to the rest of us.

"See?" she asked, pointing. "Tree branches have been cut and placed in front of the cave mouth. Already their leaves have begun to turn and wither."

Finally we saw what she meant. Though there were a number of bushes and trees clinging to the hillside, the clump she pointed out was of a slightly different hue, as if the tree had died.

"The entrance looks big enough to allow the wagons inside," I observed.

"There will likely be guards just inside the mouth, looking out," Trothgar said.

"Make me invisible, Bublilm!" said Samkin. "And I'll go have a peek."

Nearly an hour passed. We began to worry about the halfling.

"The guard was asleep!" Samkin said, making us all jump, for he was still invisible and we had not



heard his approach.

"So I snuck on inside," he continued. "Right under his nose! And cleaned out his pockets for him on the way out, too!"

"That was too risky," I chided him. "I warned you against spellcasters. They might have used magic to detect you."

"Well, I thought Lorrick would yell at me if I didn't find out how many of them are in there."

"Aye, I probably would've," said Lorrick. "So then, how many be in there?"

"I counted twenty-three. All of 'em sleeping like babes. There's twelve wagons as well, and lots of prisoners all tied up."

"It must be a very large cave," I said.

"Aye, it is," replied Samkin. "The cave mouth goes in a little way, then it opens into a really big cavern. I didn't see any side passages, but I wasn't really lookin' for those."

"Do ye think ye could eliminate the guard, quiet like?" Lorrick asked.

"You mean you want me to kill a sleeping man?" said the halfling incredulously.

"That may not be necessary," Starchild said. "I can magically hold the guard."

"We'll be heavily outnumbered," warned Bublím, already reaching for his weapon.

"If Starchild holds the guard," I said, "then Samkin can sneak in and quietly free the prisoners. Surely they will fight to gain their freedom."

"That's what we'll do," Trothgar said. "You will have to be very quiet, Samkin, and make sure the prisoners don't get jumpy and attack before they're all unbound. We'll be waiting at the cave mouth. Come and tell us when they're all free."

"Okay."

Esta Starchild successfully immobilized the guard. He never even stirred, though his snoring halted abruptly.

We gathered quietly just inside the cave mouth, and waited anxiously for Samkin. Finally, his voice sounded in our midst.

"They're all free," whispered the halfling. "I told 'em to wait for my signal. I even managed to give a few of them weapons I found by one of the wagons."

Suddenly, the cavern echoed with an agonized scream, followed by the unmistakable sounds of battle.

"Hey, I didn't give the signal yet!" cried Samkin.

"I feared this," muttered Trothgar as he ran forward into the cave. The rest of us followed hard on his heels.

The cavern was indeed huge. Lanterns resting upon stalagmites rising from the cave floor created a confusing contrast of shadows and light. In the center a swirling melee raged between the caravan guards and their former captors. It would have been impossible to tell friend from foe, had the guards not still been wearing cloaks adorned with the emblem of their caravan.

Lorrick and Trothgar charged into the fray. I lost track of Bublím Barboast, and of course had no idea where Samkin was, for he was still invisible. Only Esta Starchild and I remained near the exit, just inside the great cavern.

Three figures rose from the cave floor to float high above the battleground. From their purple-black robes I knew they were followers of Cyric. We were fighting members of the Zhentarim!

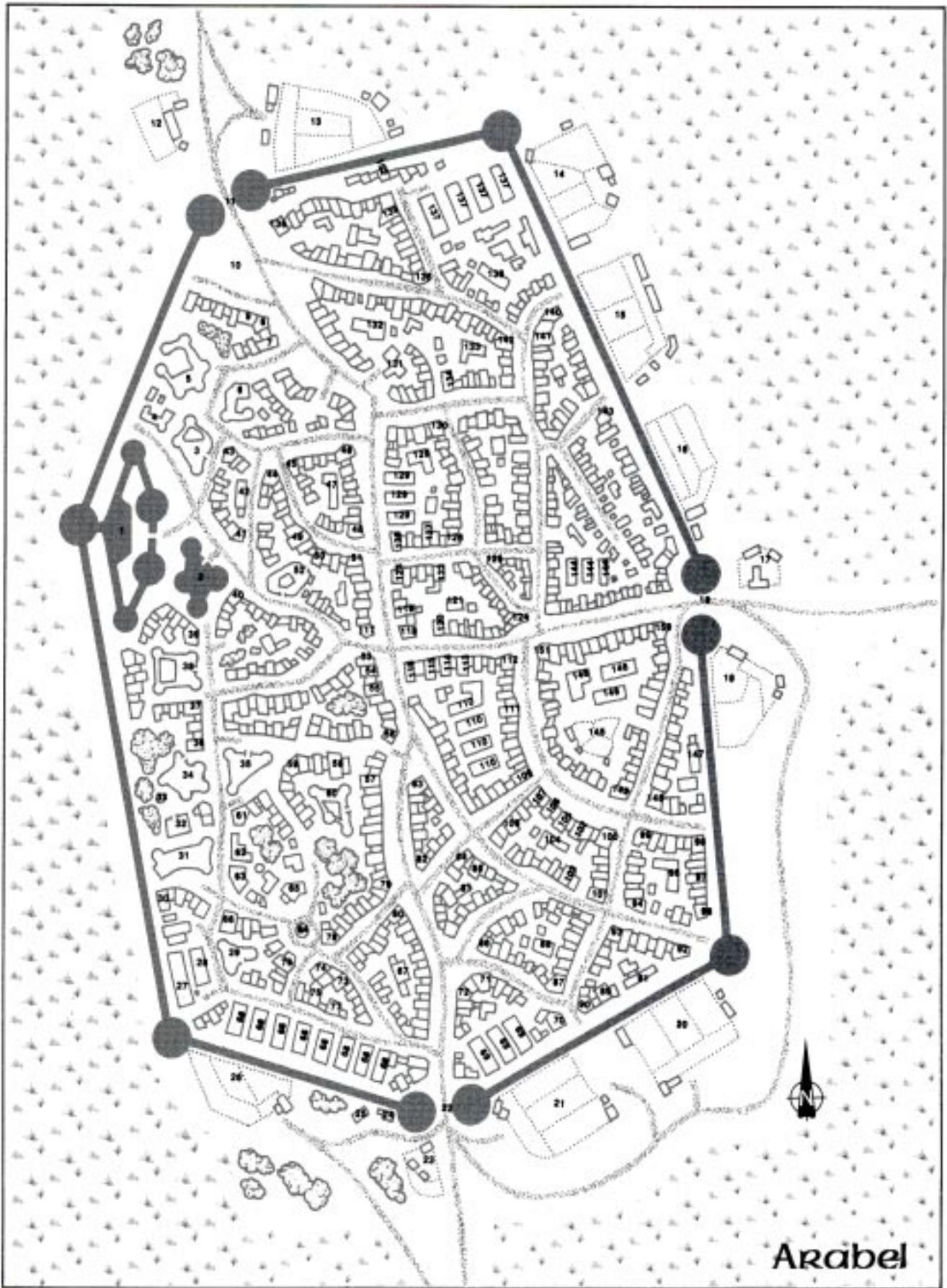
The three hovering wizards rained a flurry of magical bolts down into the melee, felling several caravan guards. They had not yet seen me.

I concentrated upon a spell and waited for two of them to hover close together. Lightning streamed from my hands, striking both of them. The bolt continued on, slamming into the ceiling and bringing down a shower of stalactites and rock chips. Though dead, the evil mages' bodies still remained aloft, spinning crazily, burning all the while.

I suppose those falling spears of rock gave the remaining wizard his evil strategy, for he unleashed a rapid stream of magical missiles into the ceiling above me. A massive stalactite broke free. Starchild pushed me away, taking the blow meant for me. The stalactite hit her squarely on the head and shoulders, pinning her to the floor under its great weight.

The searing pain of magical missiles peppering my body tore my stunned gaze away from the unconscious, broken body of Esta Starchild. I magically held the evil wizard, freezing his hands in the midst of casting yet another spell.





Key To Arabel

1. Citadel (and jail)
2. Palace (court, assembly hall)
3. House Marliir (noble family)
4. The Weary Knight (inn of good quality)
5. The Lady's House (temple of Tymora)
6. The Dragon's Rest (guesthouse and barracks, owned by the crown for quartering of its guests)
7. The Whistling Wheel (inn)
8. The Traveler's Banner (inn)
9. The Lamps (hardware store)
10. The Bazaar (market area)
11. Eastgate
12. The Eastwatch Inn
13. The Iron Throne yards (merchant company yards)
14. Milzar's Yards (rental stockyards)
15. Thousandheads Trading Coster yards (merchant company yards)
16. Dragoneye Dealing Coster yards (merchant company yards)
17. Elfskull Inn
18. Calantar's Gate
19. Red Raven Mercenary Company HQ
20. The King's Trading Yards (crown-owned, but available for rental)
21. Trueshield Trading Priakos yards (merchant company yards)
22. The High Horn Gate
23. The Night Wolf Inn
24. Mother Lahamma's House (boarding house)
25. Raspra's Kiss (Festhall)
26. Six Coffers Market Priakos yards (merchant company yards)
27. Gelzunduth Warehouse
28. Gelzunduth Warehouse
29. House of Gelzunduth (local merchant)
30. Rhalseer's (boarding house of good quality)
31. House of Kraliqh (local merchant)
32. House of Bhela (local merchant)
33. Well
34. House of Misrim (local merchant)
35. House of Hiloar (local merchant)
36. Shassra's (boarding house of good quality)
37. Falcon's Rest (inn of good quality)
38. House of Nyaril (local merchant)
39. The Watchful Shield (rental bodyguards)
40. Dulbiir's (rental costumes and finery, escort service)
41. Mulkaer Lomdath, fine tailor
42. The Silver Tankard (tavern)
43. Mhaer Tzintin, Moneylender/moneychanger
44. Eighthlar's Fine Wines
45. Jhamma's Silks and Furs
46. Dhelthaen (butcher)
47. The Strongwatch (rental warehouse, heavily guarded)
48. The Pride of Arabel (inn of good quality)
49. Orbul's Fine Carving & Furniture
50. Khammath's Crystal (shop)
51. The Black Mask (tavern)
52. House of Thond (local merchant)
53. Hawk's Perch Trading House (pawnshop)
54. Szantel's Ropes, Cords, Chains, and Mesh
55. The Wary Warrior (weapons of all types)
56. The Two-Headed Lion (tavern)
57. The Striking Snake (tavern)
58. The Coiled Whip (tavern)
59. The Gentle Smile (festhall of good quality)
60. The House of Baerlear (local merchant)
61. The Black Barrel (tavern)
62. Hundar's Fine Carpets, Perfumes, and Lanterns
63. Iardon's Hirelings (rental servants, escorts, loaders and lifters, mourners, message or errand runners)
64. Monument to Dhalmass, the Warrior King
65. The Silver Stallion tack shop
66. Green Phial medicines & physics shop and clinic
67. Mhaes's (festhall)
68. House of Thond rental warehouse
69. Six Coffers Market Priakos warehouse (merchant company warehouse)
70. The Bent Bow (tavern)
71. Laeduth's (boarding house)
72. The Red Sword (tavern)
73. Vaethym Olorar, rental falconer
74. Saerdar's Silks and Flowers
75. The Hungry Man (restaurant)
76. The Chalice (fine brass and metalworks)
77. The Net of Pearls (gowns, jewelry, and lingerie)
78. Nelzara's (boarding house)
79. Buldo Cravan (butcher)
80. The Eyes and Ears of Arabel (messenger service, caravan guard hiring service, fast delivery service within Arabel)
81. Kelsar's Fowl (live poultry & game birds)
82. Ssarra's (restaurant)
83. The High Moon Inn
84. The Orange Banner Inn
85. The Lady's Tastes (fine clothing)
86. Soldiers Boots (tavern)
87. The Red Stirge (inn)
88. House Misrim Warehouse
89. The Velvet Couch (festhall)
90. The Burning Blade (tavern)
91. Nathscal's (rental) Warehouse
92. The Lavender Lion (festhall)
93. The Smoky Skull (tavern)
94. The Old Warrior (inn)
95. Zelond's (rental) Warehouse
96. Zelzar's (pawnshop and used goods)
97. Naneatha's (festhall)
98. The Dancing Dracolisk (tavern)
99. Thael Diirim's Parchment and Proclamations
100. The Roll Roast (Inn)
101. Daglar Maermeet (armorer)
102. Orphast Ulbanath (scribe, cartographer, genealogist)
103. The Moonlit Touch (nightclub, festhall)
104. Quezzo's (rental) Warehouse
105. Dhaliima's (boardinghouse)
106. The Three Sisters (pawnshop, used and damaged clothes and goods)
107. Nuirouve Dornar, Potter
108. Fillar's Overland Food (barrels of fish, etc., from the Sword Coast and Inner Sea)
109. The Blue Mace (Inn)
110. House of Baerlear Warehouse
111. House of Lheskar Bhaliir (owner of the Dancing Dragon and the Dancing Dracolisk taverns, fence of stolen goods)
112. The Dancing Dragon
113. The Open Casket (pawnshop, used goods, caravan liquidations, and fence of stolen goods)
114. Ghastar Ulvarinn, Stonecutter
115. Baalimr Selmarr, Carpenter
116. Dazniir Relharphin, Wheelwright
117. Cheth Zalbar, Purveyor of fine perfumes, soaps, lotions, dyes, and cosmetics
118. Bracerim Thabbold, Bedbuilder
119. The Lamp, Lantern, and Candle Shop of Nphreg Jhanos
120. Tamthiir's Leather Shop (fine clothes made to order)
121. Psammas Durviir (tailor)
122. Elhazir's Exotica (rare and unusual gifts and treasures)
123. The Baths (bath house, wrestling gym, and beauty parlor)
124. Wayscross Inn
125. The Ivory Jack (tavern)
126. Phaesha's (boarding house)
127. Vondor's Shoes & Boots
128. The Feasting Board (eatery)
129. House Hiloar Warehouse
130. The Lame Camel (tavern)
131. Blackhand Lhalo's smithy
132. House Misrim warehouse
133. House of Kraliqh warehouse
134. The Scarlet Spear (inn)
135. The Lazy Lizard (tavern)
136. The Watchful Lynx (inn)
137. Nyaril warehouse
138. House Misrim warehouse
139. The Swinging Gate (inn)
140. The Nine Fires (inn)
141. The Three Bars (inn)
142. The Tired Traveler (inn)
143. The Wink and Kiss (tavern)
144. Thousandheads Trading Coster Warehouses (merchant company warehouse)
145. The Pork Market (yards)
146. Dragoneye Dealing Coster Warehouse (merchant company warehouse)
147. Ssantusas's (rental) Warehouse
148. Dhalgim's Yard (fuel, such as wood, charcoal, oils, kindling)
149. The Copper Cockatrice (hardware shop)
150. Irriphar's Inn
151. The Murdered Manticore (inn)
152. The World Serpent (sometimes the Wild Goose; inn)



With slow, grim determination (for I wanted the mage to see my every move and know his doom was upon him), I pulled a scroll tube from my belt. In a ringing voice I intoned the words of a spell so horrible I had never until then met a foe deserving of its excruciating pain. All moisture in the wizard's body evaporated, leaving him a withered husk.

Though I feared it was useless, I used my healing magic to stem the flow of blood rushing from Starchild's horribly injured head and neck. I then levitated the stalactite just enough to pull her free.

"Is she dead?" someone asked.

I looked up to see Trothgar standing there. My eyes froze upon his broad sword. Crimson to the hilt, it dripped bright droplets into the dust.

"The battle is won," he said, having noticed my gaze.

"She's dying." My voice was a hoarse croak.

"Do something!" he cried at me. "Use your magic! Pray to your beloved goddess. . . anything."

"I've done all I can, yet she slips away." Black despair made my movements old and graceless. But I could not remain still.

I found Starchild's staff and wrapped it in her broken, bloody arms. I turned away, for I could not bear to watch her draw her last breath.

"Furian, look!" Samkin's face held genuine awe. A tinge of blue frosted his sharp features.

Blue? I turned back. . .

The staff's crystal glowed bright, bathing Starchild in its blue light. Before our eyes, her twisted limbs mended, her wounds closed, and her bruises vanished. Her beautiful eyes flickered open,

"Why is everyone weeping?" she said.

After tending the injured, we helped drive the wagons out of the cavern. We were happy to find Pecal's daughter alive and well. Most of the bandits had been killed, as were, unfortunately, more than half of the twenty caravan guards. The surviving rogues were taken as prisoners by their former captives.

Other than Esta Starchild, none in our company had been seriously injured. On the way back to Arabel, Starchild had a revelation for us.

"While I was unconscious, I had a vision," she said.

"I must go to the shrine of Selûne in Immersea. I must

speaking with Mother Lledew. It is vitally important to our quest."

"That city is just south of Arabel," I said. "It should be an easy journey."

"We'll go where ever you wish, Starchild," said Trothgar quietly.

Her near death weighed heavily upon us. As I had already known, and the others now knew, Esta Starchild was the heart of our company. Without her, we would be rudderless, lost.

After leading the caravan home, we were greeted as heroes in Arabel. At the sight of his daughter, Pecal broke into tears. Smiling and weeping at the same time, he paid the remainder of our fee. Several other merchants who had friends, relatives, or merchandise with the caravan were most gracious, and presented us with an additional one-thousand gold coins.

Later that evening we met with the lord of Arabel, Myrmeen Lhal. She set a fine table for us, and was also most gracious. We related our tale for her. She was not surprised to hear of the Black Network's involvement, for the prisoners had already undergone interrogation. Myrmeen warned us about the Zhen-tarim, saying there would be a price on our heads. But, of course, there already was. It would only be more substantial now.

The next day we rode from Arabel. As Starchild had foreseen, something important awaited us in Immersea.



A Talk with Mother Lledew



It was early morning when we arrived at Immersea. The journey from Arabel had been a peaceful ride through pleasant countryside.

The Wyvernwater stretched out from the docks of the town. At that early hour, mist clung to the surface of the water. Bells hanging from the masts of small fishing boats echoed eerily through the fog.

Looming in the morning mist, a statue of King Azoun III graced the town center. The sculpted king held his sword high as he sat atop a rearing horse, which in turn trod atop a mound of dead rogues. A plaque read: "Azoun Triumphant."

"I'm hungry," Samkin said.

"Stuff some o' that yeller cheese ye like so much in yer mouth," barked Lorrick. "I can hear yer round belly rumblin' from here!"

"Let's stop at that inn for a hot breakfast," continued the halfling, ignoring the dwarf.

"Yes," Starchild placated the two quarrelers, "let us go in. I need to find out where the shrine is, anyway."

"From the way you spoke in Arabel, I thought you had been here before," I said to her.

"No. Though I saw it in the vision, I do not know exactly where it is. And yet, somehow I know I will find a woman known as Mother Lledew there."

The inn, called the Five Fine Fish, was cozy and warm. We ordered an extravagant meal, for we now had plenty of money.

The innkeeper's wife bustled about our table, bringing steaming plates of eggs and fresh fish. She was a huge woman, and though the day had hardly begun, she seemed haggard.

"This is fare fit for the King's board," I said to her, while helping myself to another serving of spiced sausages.

"And yer a gentleman fit to sit at his table," she replied with a gap-toothed smile. "Be there anything else I can do fer you, lovey?"

"We're looking for Mother Ledo," Trothgar said

around a mouthful of eggs. "Could you tell us where she lives?"

"You must mean Mother Lledew, sir," replied the blustery woman. "Surely I can direct you to her home, but you'll likely not find her there. She'll have risen with the sun and gone off to tend that shrine. Poor woman." Her tone lowered in commiseration.

"What is so difficult or wrong with caring for a shrine that you pity her?" asked Starchild irritably.

"Don't get yerself in a huff, missy. It's just she's wastin' her life on a pile of rocks. There's more to life, ain't there?"

With that she hefted a huge tray of dirty dishes onto her shoulder and ambled toward the kitchen, red-faced and sweaty.

Yes, I thought, surely there is more to life.

Immersea

Perched on the western edge of the Wyvernwater, Immersea is an unfortified town of about 100 structures. Several large manors stand to the south and west of the city.

Immersea is a way-town on the road, a stopover, and a fine watering-place for horses and livestock, as it abuts the endless flow of the Wyvernwater. A large inn, the Five Fine Fish, produces a potent and justly-famed ale here.

Southwest of town stands a great manor—known as Redstone for its color—which is the ancestral home of the Wyvernspur family, a group of petty nobles. This castle is also the current abode of Samtavan Sudacar, the local lord appointed by the King. Samtavan is neither local (he's from Suzail) nor a lord, and his main occupation is to stay out of the way while his herald handles the important business of the area.

Immersea is also renowned for its colorful "mist-fishers," who seem to float in the morning mists as they ply the Wyvernwater with long draglines and scoopnets.





Immersea Key

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Redstone (Wyvernsur family house) | 11. Nilil's farm |
| 2. Wyvernsur farms (minor nobles) | 12. Gulphet's farm |
| 3. High Towers (Cormaeril family house) | 13. The High Common |
| 4. Cormaeril farms (minor nobles) | 14. Nazan's farm |
| 5. Szalan's Shipyard | 15. The Five Fine Fish (tavern) |
| 6. Statue: <i>Azoun Triumphant</i> (Azoun III with sword raised aloft, on rearing stallion, bandits being trampled underfoot) | 16. The Mist Runner (tavern) |
| 7. The market | 17. Fish-cleaning shed |
| 8. Lluth's farm | 18. Halaband's Inn |
| 9. Danae's farm | 19. The Immer Inn |
| 10. Tathcho's farm | 20. Alzael's (slaughterhouse) |
| | 21. Smithy |
| | 22. Stables (rental) run by Dzulas |
| | 23. Mrastos Warehouse (rental) |
| | 24. Mrastos Warehouse (rental) |
| | 25. Nelzol's (hardware shop) |
| | 26. Chaslasse's Fine Clothing |
| | 27. Maela's (boarding house) |
| | 28. Nulalh's (boarding house) |





Before we left, the innkeeper's wife shruggingly gave us directions to the shrine. We found it easily.

Selûne's shrine was much more than a simple pile of rocks, as the innkeeper's wife had described it. It was a work of art, a labor of love and devotion.

A life-sized, painted statue of the goddess stood there. It was unique, however, for it showed two women merged into one, back-to-back. One image was that of a dusky-hued maiden with wide, radiant eyes and long tresses of ivory-white hair. The other was of a fair, yet matronly, woman late in her years.

The statue was obviously meant to stand atop a small stepped pyramid, which was not yet complete. Only the final tier of stones remained to be laid. And those stones were unique as well, for each was engraved with the prayers of Selûne's followers from all across the Realms.

"They send me their prayers," said a middle-aged human woman. She was sitting on the grass carving yet another prayer with a small hammer and chisel. On the ground beside her lay an unrolled parchment weighted down with stones.

"Greetings, Mother Lledew," Starchild said.

"I had not expected the Bearer of the Staff for some time. I am ashamed I have not yet completed the shrine. I wanted you to see it whole."

"It is beautiful," replied Starchild. "And I am glad it is not finished, for if it were, how could you add my prayer to it?"

Mother Lledew's eyes sparkled at this. She smiled warmly.

"I have something for you, sweet child."

The woman went to the pyramid. She pulled away one of the upper stones, and removed a small iron box from the depression there. Inside was a wooden scroll tube.

"This is a map showing where Crossar's Tomb can be found," she said. "It lies within the depths of the marsh to the east of Aglarond. You'll be wanting to take a ship."

"A ship?" Samkin cried.

"Mother, who is Crossar?" Starchild asked.

"I have learned much about him for you, child," she replied. Then, waving a hand toward the many prayers carved into the pyramid, she said, "Selûne has

many ears across the Realms."

"Are we really sailing to Aglarond?" asked Samkin, but he was ignored again.

"Go on, Mother," Starchild said, finally giving the fidgeting halfling a look as if to say, *be quiet and listen*.

"Nearly two hundred winters ago, Crossar was the leader of a minor cult of Red Wizards in Thay. Somehow, his cult became very important in the politics of that evil nation—virtually overnight. Though 'tis said he was a skilled mage, the sudden rise of his cult could not be explained by the wizard's own talents. There were rumors that Crossar was aided by a powerful object fallen from the sky."

Mother Lledew paused to let this last bit sink in. And well it did. Could the Tear of Selûne be within Crossar's Tomb?

"To protect his secret," the woman continued, "Crossar furtively constructed a small tower within the swamp between his homeland of Thay and Aglarond. Shortly thereafter, Crossar's power suddenly waned, and his cult fell to rival factions. The mage fled Thay, presumably to his stronghold in the swamp. The tower became known as Crossar's Tomb, as the wizard has never been seen since."

"Is that where I will find the Tear?" Starchild asked.

"Aglarond lies far to the south and east. Where does the staff guide you, child?"

"To the north and east."

"You must never doubt its guidance, for the Tear indeed awaits you in the north, in a hidden shrine." She held up one rock-chip scarred hand to forestall our questions.

"However, you will need two keys to enter. One can be found in Crossar's Tomb, protected by the dead mage's magic. It is this which prevents the staff from guiding you to it. But your staff is not powerless. It *can* guide you to the second key, for that is not so well protected."

"Are we sailing on a ship or not?" huffed Samkin.

"Yes, we are," replied Starchild, taking the map from Mother Lledew.

"Yippee!"







Taking Ship from Suzail

Surely we will find a ship bound for Aglarond out of Suzail," Starchild said.

"A ship!" piped Samkin. "I've always wanted to sail the seas. This should be a real adventure!"

"There are many who would disagree with you," I said to him. "When we are underway, remind me to tell you of the pirates."

"Aye," said Lorrick. "I hear them sea dogs have a taste fer halfling stew!"

"You don't scare me, dwarf. I've been fed to an evil treant-king, who didn't find my taste to its liking. And I slew the warrior Barstaag, saving your skin, remember? What does the mighty Samkin Silvertooth have to fear of lowly pirates?"

"Aye, indeed," mumbled Lorrick with a wry grin. "Indeed."

Suzail is a tremendous, fortified city bustling with activity. We entered through the Eastgate, making our way past the King's imposing castle to the docks.

Bublim Barboast longed to spend some time in the city, exploring its many inns and taverns. Both Starchild and Samkin were eager to be away upon the sea, however.

"Ah, I can smell the coin," said the gnome. "These people crave entertainment. A talented performer such as myself could make his fortune here, without ever needing to step beyond the city walls."

"No one is forcing you to come along," Starchild said. "No one is forcing any of you to come with me."

"Your words pain my heart," replied Bublim. "Surely you know I wouldn't miss these adventures for all the coin in Suzail, nay, nor all the money in the Realms."

"We're sticking together," Trothgar said firmly. "I don't want to hear any more talk."

And he didn't. . . for a time.

At the docks we soon found a vessel bound for Aglarond. We paid a modest sum for the voyage. However, we also had to pay for our horses, as the captain was not at all pleased about taking them along.

"They're smelly, noisy beasts," said Captain Rye.

Captain Rye was a burly, red-nosed man with a burly, red beard. I thought he was a smelly, noisy beast himself, but I forbore to tell him so.

"Will we see pirates?" Samkin asked.

"I doubt them dogs'll have much interest in us," replied Captain Rye with a wink and a grin. "We're carryin' a cargo of coal, wool, and looms. Not exactly the royal jewels!"

"We'll be makin' stops at Westgate and Saerloon to do a little tradin'. And we set sail with the tide in the mornin'. Be here at first light or you'll find yerselves wavin' at my back from the docks here!"

We took rooms at an inn near the docks, and spent a pleasant evening seeing the sights of Suzail. Bublim Barboast got his chance to perform after all, for the innkeeper was more than happy to have a talented illusionist entertain his guests.

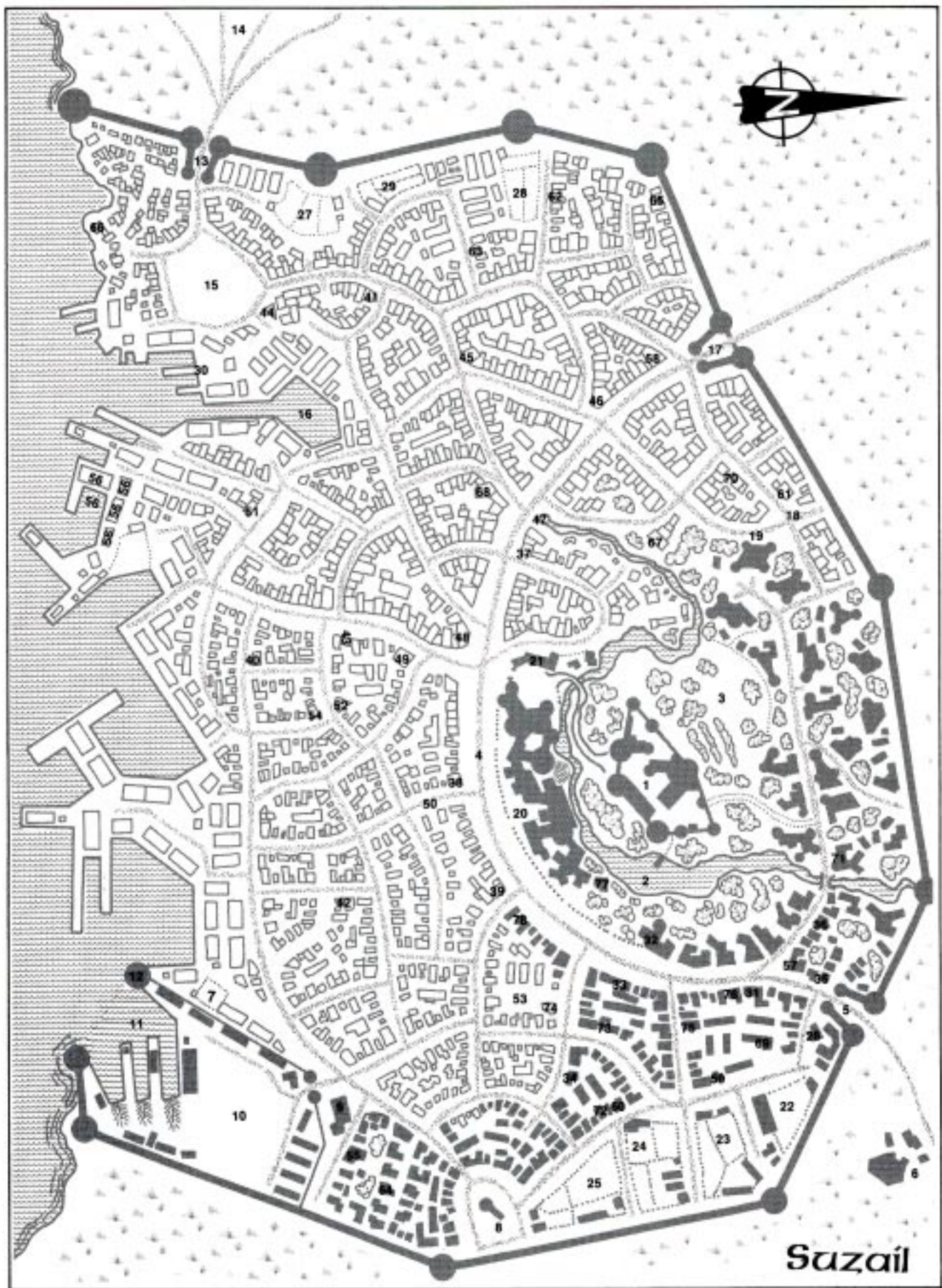
Suzail (Soo-ZALE)

Suzail is the royal capital and richest city of the kingdom of Cormyr, and home to the most important merchant houses of Cormyr. The city is dominated by the fortified castle of King Azoun IV, which is set apart from the lower city by its splendid gardens, and rumored to harbor rich burial grounds beneath.

The city is justly famous for its bazaars, its ivory sculptors, and its clothmakers. Hundreds of winters' worth of ivory—gleaned from the "Utter East" and hot jungles of the South—have found their way across the Inner Sea in great shiploads of raw tusks and fragments. Here in Suzail, the rare substance is fashioned by master carvers into inlays and goods for Amn, the North, and the Sword Coast cities.

Wool is woven as well in the Sembian city of Daerlun, but those who work looms in Suzail hold that Cormyrian work is finer, and the colors more true and longer lasting.







Key To Suzail

1. Palace
2. Lake Azoun
3. The Royal Gardens (or Floral Gardens)
4. The Promenade (the street running from Eastgate to Horngate)
5. Eastgate
6. The Nightgate Inn
7. The Market Yard
8. Market Hall
9. The Lock-Up (city jail)
10. Citadel of the Purple Dragons (garrison)
11. Royal Docks
12. Harbor Tower
13. The Field-Gates
14. The Fields of the Dead (burial ground, off-map to west)
15. The Market
16. The Basin
17. Horngate
18. Monument: *The Purple Dragon*
19. House of Lord Magister of the City Sthavar
20. The Royal Court (interconnected buildings)
21. Court Stables
22. Dragoneye Dealing Coster yards (merchant company yards)
23. Thousandheads Trading Coster yards (merchant company yards)
24. The Seven Suns Trading Coster yards (merchant company yards)
25. The Six Coffers Market Priakos yards (merchant company yards)
26. Rheuban's Stables
27. Iravan's Rental Yards
28. Trueshield Trading Priakos yards
29. Talahon's Rental yards
30. Shipyards
31. The Towers of Good Fortune (temple of Tymora)
32. The Silent Room (temple of Deneir)
33. The Royal Smithy
34. Shrine to Lliira
35. Shrine to Oghma
36. Shrine to Malar
37. The Winking Eye (tavern)
38. The Old Dwarf (tavern)
39. The Dragon's Jaws (tavern)
40. The Weather Eye (tavern)
41. The Golden Goblin (tavern)
42. The Laughing Lass (tavern)
43. Zhaelun's Stockyard
44. The Crying Witch (tavern)
45. The Leaning Post (inn)
46. The Six Candles (inn)
47. The Jaws (culvert, taking stream to basin, #16)
48. Thelmar's Inn
49. Selavar's Inn
50. Zult's (licensed moneychanger)
51. The Black Rat (tavern)
52. The Mare's Tail (tavern)
53. The Courtyard of Zathchos
54. Taneth's (festhall)
55. Sontravin's Inn
56. Skatterhawk warehouses and dock
57. Shrine to Tyr
58. The Wailing Wheel (inn)
59. Sulchra's (festhall)
60. The Warm Bed (inn)
61. Skatterhawk family house
62. House of Helver Dhasjarr (LN hm F7)
63. House of Cormmor Lhestayl (CG hm F8)
64. House of Lanneth Murg (N hm F11)
65. Tower of Argul (LN hm W13)
66. The Purple Scar (festhall)
67. House of Dolcar Dethanter (CG hf T10)
68. Danain's (hardware shop)
69. Kriyeos Lathmil's stables
70. Tower of Laspeera (NG hf W14)
71. Wyvernspur Townhouse
72. Shrine to Milil
73. Warehouse of Jhassalan (oils and perfumes)
74. Tower of Baskor, the mage (NG hm W9)
75. Warehouse of Faeri (ivory traders)
76. Warehouse of Ossper (fine cloth)
77. Vangerdahast's Tower (royal magician)
78. Blackshield Apartments (court residence)



Lorrick Takes a Quest



With the rising sun, we sailed from Suzail out upon the Lake of Dragons. Vessels of many shapes, from lands far and wide, rode the waves with us. It was a

glorious sight.

Happy as a child with a new toy, Samkin Silver-tooth scampered all about the ship, getting his nose into everything, and accosting the crew with a never-ending stream of questions. The sailors took his curiosity with kindness for a time, but their patience soon wore thin. One told the halfling he would find himself swimming with the fishes if he didn't shut his yapper. Undaunted, Samkin skipped to the other end of the ship, busying himself with something there.

Lorrick was not having such a good time. The rocking of the ship made his stomach turn. Though Starchild gave him an herbal concoction to ward off nausea, it seemed to have little effect upon the surly dwarf.

Good weather held, and we reached the docks of Westgate as evening waxed. We decided to sleep in an inn ashore, much to Lorrick's relief. Suddenly, the dwarf stopped to stare at a fisherman cleaning his catch.

"By the Nine Hells!" cried the dwarf. "Where did you get that stone, fisherman?"

The wind-worn man was using the edge of a stone disc to scale fish. He looked up, wiping a hand across his brow that left a shimmering trail of fish slime.

"My boy found it by the water," he said. "Oh, it must've been three seasons ago. 'Tis fine fer scaling fish. Never loses its edge."

"I'll be buyin' it from ye fer a gold coin," Lorrick said.

"Make that five pieces o' gold, and you've got yer-self a good fish scaler," replied the fisherman. He gave the rest of us a guilty look, as if he felt he was taking the money of a madman who knew no better.

"Done and done," the dwarf said, tossing the man the coins.

We followed Lorrick down to the water, where he carefully washed his purchase.

"Why a fish scaler?" Samkin asked.

"'Tis no tool. Can't ye see the writin'?"

Indeed, carved runes twisted along a spiral toward the center of the stone's face. At the middle, the bas-relief image of a pick and hammer crossed above an anvil. The erstwhile fish-scaler was a dwarven Dethek runestone.

Dethek Runes

Dwarves almost never write on perishable materials such as parchment. Occasionally, they stamp or inscribe runes on metal sheets and bind those together to make books. Stone is their usual medium, however—stone walls in caverns; stone buildings; pillars or standing stones; even cairns. Most often, dwarves write on tablets, which are called runestones in the common tongue.

A typical runestone is very hard rock, flat and diamond-shaped, about an inch thick. The face of the stone is inscribed with Dethek runes—in ring or spiral fashion around the edge—which typically surround a central graven picture. Thus, runestones are commonly read from the outer edge toward the middle.

The relief images can be used as seals, or pressed into wet mud to serve as temporary trail markers underground.

To a dwarf, all runestones bear some message. Most are covered with runic script, the most well-known of which is "Dethek" and translates directly into common. The runes of this script are simple and made up of straight lines, for ease in cutting them into stone.

No punctuation is shown in Dethek. Sentences are usually separated by cross-lines of script, words are separated by spaces, and capital letters have a line drawn above them. Numbers which are enclosed in boxes are dates, with the day preceding the year. There are collective symbols or characters for identifying peoples (clans or tribes) or races. If any runes are painted, names of beings and places are commonly picked out in red, while the rest of the text is colored black or left as unadorned grooves.





"May I see the runestone?" I asked him. It weighed much less in my hand than I had expected.

"It has a strong magical aura," I said. "Such runestones aren't usually magical, are they?"

"Nay, they aren't," he replied, taking the disc from my hand. "This one be special. 'Tis a key to the door o' a long-forgotten mine called Thunderholme. None o' me kin've been in those halls fer hunnerds o' years."

Turning the disc slowly in his gnarly hands to read the runes once again, and without even looking up, he said, "When we dock in Saerloon, I'll be leavin' ye."

"What?" cried Trothgar.

"But why?" added Samkin.

"I must be knowin' what became o' me kin. All I've got are legends, fer you see all the entrances to Thunderholme, both above and below, were sealed with magic long ago. And this be the key to open 'em."

"Why were the doors closed?" Bublun asked.

"The dwarves o' Thunderholme were the finest, noblest miners and metalsmiths in all the Realms. They were the favored of Dumathoin, Keeper of Secrets Under the Mountain. He swept his children away to live in paradise with him. In but a single day, the halls were empty. But ere they left, the priests sealed the doors so as none o' their wonders could be plundered. I must be seein' what's there."

I realized that for dwarves such as Lorrack, the people of Thunderholme are an ideal to be lived up to—good and noble dwarves so adept at mining and crafting metal items as to be cherished by the gods. I knew in my heart that he truly meant to leave us.

Though Westgate has many wonders, none of us were in the mood for revelry that night. No amount of persuading could cause Lorrack to change his mind. Finally, Starchild told us all to leave him be.

With the morning we set sail for Saerloon. However, none in our company, save Lorrack, were looking forward to our arrival.

Westgate

Westgate is an important port and caravan transfer-point on the overland route. It joins the Inner Sea and its lands with the West and the Far South. A large, fortified city, Westgate includes a smattering of trading companies and smaller buildings set up beyond its walls.

Westgate has fulfilled the role of trading link between the Inner Sea (east) and Sword Coast (west) for as long as humankind has been in the Inner Sea area. Once a simple stopover and stockyard, similar to Scornubel or Iriaebor today, Westgate has gained in importance as trade increased. The city has been diversifying into services such as shipyards and wagon-makers, and sideline industries, such as pottery, scentmaking, and winemaking.

Located on the southern side of the long western arm of the Sea of Fallen Stars, Westgate lies across from Cormyr. It is independent of all kingdoms and outside authority, and considered an "open city," free to all manner of trade from all sides.

The local nobility, the Lords of Westgate, are the heads of rich merchant families. As usual, all such families have long-standing traditions and feuds; run caravan companies and trading fleets on the Inner Sea; and pursue diverse business interests. Inter-family arguments and secret vendettas enliven the local gossip-mongers' tales, even as they threaten those of their objects.

Though Westgate is patrolled by a militia, recent reports speak of strife in the city by night. Whether this is merely an escalation in one family's warring against another, or instead an entirely new organization in the city, is as yet unknown.

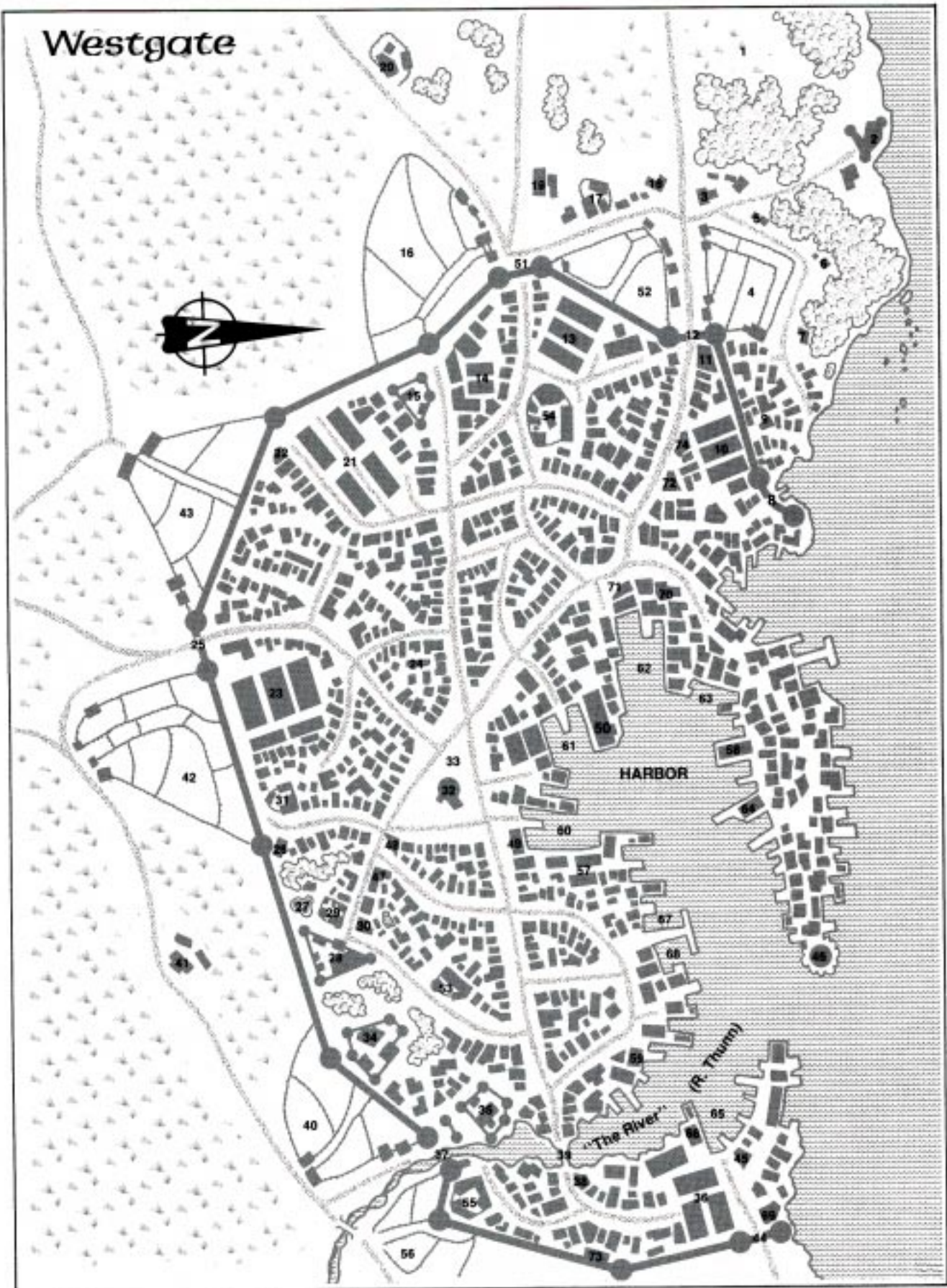




Westgate Key

1. Dhostar Vale (private park)
2. Castle Dhostar
3. The Leaning Man (Inn)
4. The Dhostar Yards
5. The Blind Eye (fence for stolen goods, ostensibly a tack, harness, and trail goods shop)
6. Thessar the Warrior's house (LN hm F10)
7. Lilda's (festhall)
8. The Water Gate
9. The Shore (drovers/wanderers/journeymen's slum)
10. Dhostar Company sheds (merchant company warehouses)
11. The Jolly Warrior (inn)
12. West Gate
13. Thorsar Company sheds (merchant company warehouses)
14. Thalavar Company sheds (warehouse)
15. Castle Ssem
16. Thalavar yards
17. The Spitting Cockatrice (inn)
18. The Empty Fish (tavern)
19. The Westward Eye (inn)
20. Gatereach (inn of good quality)
21. Ssem sheds (warehouse)
22. The Purple Lady (tavern and festhall)
23. Guldar Company sheds (merchant company warehouses)
24. Temple of Mask
25. The South Gate
26. The city watch barracks
27. The Lords' Water (pool)
28. Castle Thorsar
29. Castle Urdo
30. The House of Silks (fine clothing and jewelry, a very expensive shop)
31. The Blue Banner (inn of good quality)
32. The Tower (serves as a registry office for imports/exports, the city watch headquarters, and a jail, with dungeons beneath it)
33. The market
34. Castle Guldar
35. Castle Vhammos
36. Vhammos Company sheds (merchant company warehouses)
37. The River Gate
38. The Black Boot (inn)
39. The River Bridge
40. Vhammos yards
41. The Rising Raven (inn)
42. Guldar yards
43. Ssem yards
44. East Gate
45. The Old Beard (tavern)
46. The Harbor Tower (mariners call it the Westlight; a beacon and harbor defenses)
47. The Gentle Moon (inn)
48. Shalush Myrkeer's Shop (the largest shop in Westgate; buys and sells everything)
49. The Black Eye (tavern and festhall)
50. Urdo shed
51. Mulsantir's Gate
52. Thorsar yards
53. Castle Athagdal
54. Castle Thalavar
55. Castle Malavhan
56. Malavhan yards
57. Malavhan Company sheds (merchant company warehouses)
58. Dhostar docks
59. Thorsar docks
60. Malavhan docks
61. Urdo docks
62. Thalavar docks
63. Guldar docks
64. The watch dock (seized goods, pirate ships, ship inspections, etc., held here)
65. Athagdal docks and shipyards
66. Vhammos docks
67. Ssem docks
68. Ssem docks
69. Temple of Umberlee
70. Temple of Tymora
71. Temple of Gond
72. Temple of Lathander
73. City watch barracks
74. City watch (meeting rooms, barracks)

Westgate





Farewells in Saerloon

The voyage from Westgate to Saerloon passed much like the previous day's journey from Suzail to Westgate. The weather remained pleasant, and the sailing swift.

Saerloon's harbor was deep enough that we could tie right to the dock. While sailors lugged kegs and crates up and down the gangplank, Lorrick said his goodbyes.

"I want to be apologizin' to ye, Starchild. I said I would stick with ye to the end, but here I be, goin' back on me word. Can ye be finding it in yer heart to forgive an old dwarf?"

"As long as you continue to follow your heart, Lorrick, you have no need of apologies. May Selûne bless your life's path."

"I'll be goin' then," he said. "The rest o' ye take good care of this woman."

We all wished him well, except Samkin Silvertooth. The halfling merely shuffled his hairy feet, his lower lip trembling.

Lorrick stomped down the gangplank. Halfway up the dock he looked back, holding *Skysplitter* into the air.

"Axe high, me friends. I go."

Grabbing his pack, Samkin blubbered a stream of nonsense through his tears.

"I'm sorry, Starchild. Everyone. But I saved his life once. Remember? Who's going to watch out for him? I can't let him go alone. He'll never survive without me!"

The halfling scrambled down the gangplank, calling out to the dwarf.

"Lorrick! Wait a moment! I'm coming! I'll protect you!"

"What about your horses?" I called after them. The four of us remaining exchanged speaking glances.

"Bring up all the horses," Starchild said, smiling. "There are other ships to Aglarond."

I didn't argue. While I led the horses down the

plank, the others quickly gathered our gear. Our abrupt change of plan lightened all our hearts, but it confounded the ship's captain. He stood at the rail, bellowing after us.

"Don't be expectin' yer money back! 'Tis bad enough I had them smelly beasts on me ship. Good riddance to ye!"

"You're the smelly beast!" I couldn't resist laughing. "With all this water about, one would think you could bathe, dear captain!"

He just stood there with his mouth open and his hands on his wide hips. I had wanted to say that for so long.

Saerloon

One of the original colony cities established in the land that would become Sembia, Saerloon was known in those ancient days as Chondathan. The name Saerloon was adopted later, after the master merchant Saer, who helped establish the city economically.

An old, refined city, Saerloon features exotic architecture of varied tastes. Its buildings are festooned with all manner of cornices, friezes, carvings, and, always, gargoyles.

Lady Merelith of the Guard rules Saerloon in the name of the Council of Sembia. As in almost all Sembian towns, however, it is the merchants who truly rule. The markets (under the approving gaze of statues of Saer) ring with vendors' chants and competitive shouts.

Two powerful magical churches make their home in Saerloon, and aid the merchants with protection spells and abjuration magics. The temples honor Mystra and Azuth, and count a number of mighty wizards in their service. The city also holds shrines to Lathander, Lliira, Tempus, and Tymora.





We took rooms in an expensive inn in Saerloon. However, the innkeeper and his patrons were quite rude to Starchild at every opportunity, often muttering impolite comments under their breaths. For a tense moment it looked as though fists would fly, but Starchild calmed them down by retiring early to her room.

Trothgar wanted to find another inn. I felt we would encounter a similar attitude toward elves everywhere in Saerloon, and the others agreed. The ranger relented, and we stayed where we were.

Lorrick was in an exceptionally good mood, and thanked us heartily for coming along. The dwarf promised to show us wonders beyond compare.

"Just where is Thunderholme, anyway?" Samkin asked.

"In the Thunder Peaks," replied the dwarf. "'Tis not far from here, to the north. Let's drink to Dumathoin!"

I left my companions to their revelry. On the way to the inn, I had seen a majestic temple honoring Mystra. I missed the daily rituals and routine of my temple in Waterdeep, and decided to visit the temple here to reminisce and pay homage to the goddess in a proper church.

The temple was indeed splendid and obviously well-funded by the merchants of Saerloon. I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of one Cadellin Firehands, a human mage of considerable power and influence in the church.

"You have elven blood, do you not?" he asked me at one point.

"Yes, I do. My father was a moon elf. It seems the people of Saerloon have little use for elves."

"Aye, 'tis true, but you must understand that the history of Sembia is rife with conflicts between man and elf. I believe there is still a law banning elves from the nation, though it is seldom enforced, being used merely to irritate elven travelers. You must try to look past their prejudice, Furian, for they are a good people at heart."

I nodded in reply.

"Now, Furian Arcanus, tell me the tale of your journey from distant Waterdeep. In return, perhaps I can share a spell or two with you so that you might better serve the goddess."

I told Cadellin everything. I had no reason to mistrust him, and he did indeed teach me several potent spells, for which I was very grateful.

The following morning we Seekers rode from Saer-

loon toward the Thunder Peaks. Before leaving, we purchased fresh provisions and adventuring gear. We were ready to uncover the mysteries of Thunderholme.

Sembia

Sembia is a wealthy merchant kingdom situated east of Cormyr, on the western shores of the Sea of Fallen Stars. It is a land of rolling farms and rich plains, dominated by a handful of large, wealthy cities. Sembia is a well-run, organized nation which may in time rival the old kingdoms of the south and east. A vigilant army aims to keep it so.

Sembia's arms feature the Raven and Silver. Rauthauvyr "the Raven," long-ago founder of the realm, never ruled Sembia, but instead commanded its armies for a succession of merchant rulers. The silver coin represents Sembia's trading wealth.

Rauthauvyr the Raven, ere his death, saw that the current merchant lord had a strong standing council of merchant elders: to advise him, and to ensure that no ruler could hold on to power by force of arms. Then this far-sighted man—creator of a nation, now half-blind and infirm from old war wounds—rode north into the elven woods and disappeared. None know what happened to him or where his bones lie, save perhaps some few elder elves.

Today, Sembia is a strong kingdom, quick to defend threats to its sovereignty (such as the rise of Scardale), and first in wealth of all the western Inner Sea lands. Its ruler is called the Overmaster, and is elected to a seven-year term by a council of merchants.

The people of Sembia are considered, by other nations, so money-conscious as to be greedy. Their nation lives and dies by trade, and they know it.

Sembians toil at their labors late into the evening, long after other peoples stop. They consider themselves superior to their neighbors because they work so very hard toward a good living.

A Sembian would likely describe himself or herself as industrious, proud, diligent, cosmopolitan, and canny. Cormyreans, Dalesmen, and elves are not always so kind in their appraisals.





Thunderholme



orth of Sembia we passed through the southernmost region of the Dalelands, a realm of scattered, rural communities. In the High Dale we purchased heavy, fur-lined cloaks and gloves to protect us from the cold winds of the higher altitudes.

The people of the High Dale were not particularly friendly, glancing at us with suspicious eyes and lowered heads. I suspect this is the result of living in a dangerous country so far away from the protection of large cities.

As Lorrick led us high into the mountains, our conversation turned once again to Thunderholme.

"How will we find it?" Bublun asked. "Have you been there before, Lorrick?"

"Nay, I've never been. Them doors were closed ere I was weaned from me mother's teats."

"A wonderful analogy," I said with a laugh.

"As fer as findin' it," he continued, giving me a sideways glance, "this runestone tells the way."

"If the doors were magically sealed, how did the runestone get out?" Samkin asked.

"By the Nine Hells! Yer full o' questions this day. If I must answer, I best be havin' some pipeweed to help me recollect."

Lorrick packed his pipe. He smoked silently for a while, his brows knitted in concentration.

"If I be rememberin' the legends aright," he said finally, "some of the dwarves o' Thunderholme didn't want to go with Dumathoin. I reckon they followed different gods, but that don't sound right to me, fer how can anyone refuse Dumathoin? Anyway, not wantin' to be locked in, they left and took the keys with 'em."

"There was more than one runestone then?" I asked him.

"Aye, there be several, but all were lost. Ye see, the Thunderholme dwarves never arrived at any other dwarven home. Everyone figured they was dead."

If only we had known the truth. . .

The Dalelands

The rural communities known as the Dalelands are the heart of the Heartlands. The region is loosely defined as the nonforested areas inhabited by humanity, north of Sembia and Cormyr and south of the River Tesh and the town of Voonlar.

The Dalelands are the home of many retired adventurers and the birthplace of new heroes and heroines. These small farming communities produce brave, strong, and free-willed men and women fit to challenge the forces of evil.

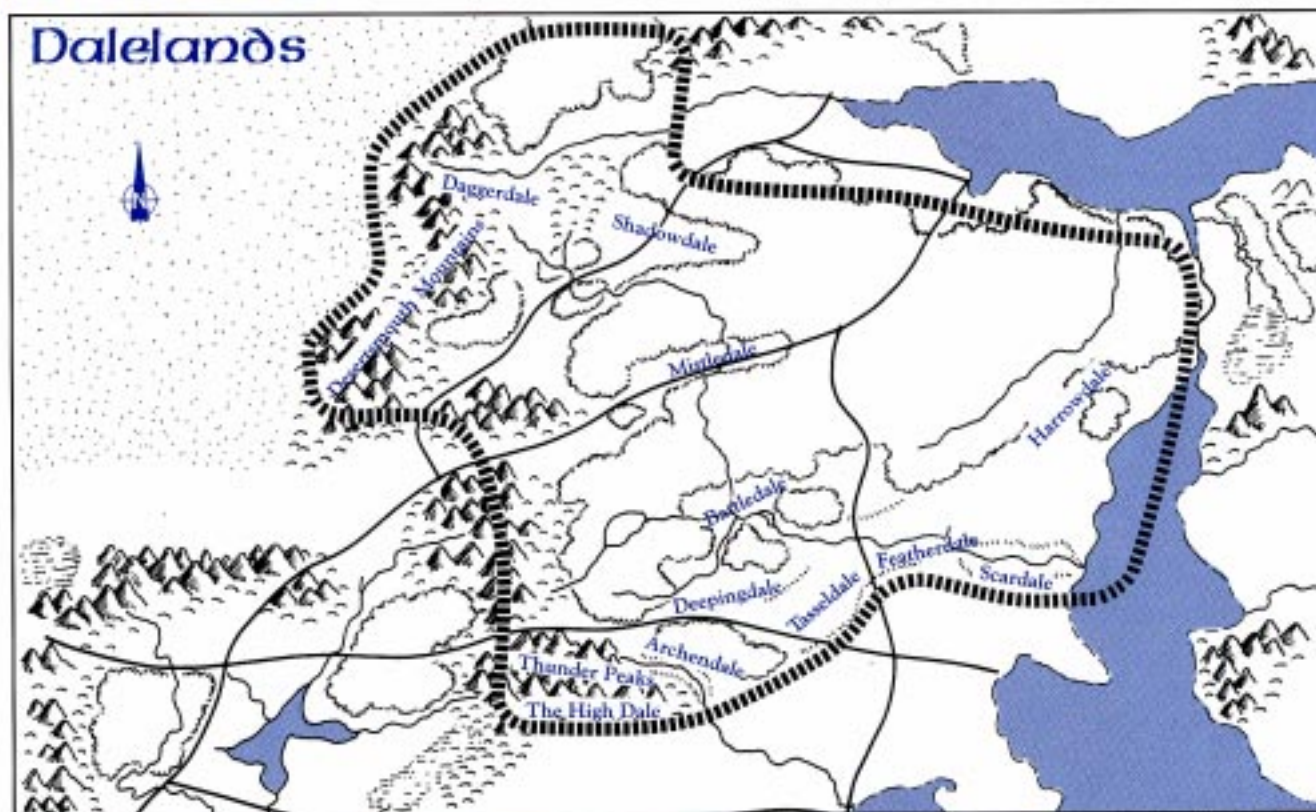
Because the natives of the Dales live on the frontiers of civilized life, they are often targets of marauding bands of goblins, flights of dragons, and the depredations of other monsters. Dalesmen value heroism and self-reliance. They tend toward a strong, almost clannish, sense of community. Dalesmen know only they can guard their own and protect their homes as these should be protected. The local community comes first, then the Dales at large, and finally the world beyond.

To outsiders, Dalesmen appear closemouthed, suspicious, and reserved. Responses are kept to a civil minimum until a stranger is identified as friend or foe. Though they are polite, it is an observant and reserved politeness.

However, once an outsider is accepted, Dalesmen are open and giving, and expect the same in return. Once counted as part of the community, one is expected to help in its defense. This is especially true of adventurers, who may suddenly find themselves the local lords.

Dalesmen prefer their government far removed from daily life. The local lord should keep out of trouble, performing only those duties that cannot be done on an individual level, such as organizing an army or ensuring the grain mill operates at a fair price.





Using both the runestone and the magical powers and ancient intelligence of *Skysplitter*, his legendary axe, Lorrick eventually led us to a sheer rock wall.

"This be it," he said proudly.

"The thin air's addled your brains, Lorrick," said Samkin. "That's just a cliff face!"

"Think ye *Skysplitter* don't know its forging-place?"

The dwarf ran his hands along the rock, scraping away a patch of lichen. He revealed a small depression shaped like a pick and hammer crossed above an anvil—the same image as on the runestone.

Lorrick pressed his disc against the depression, and the magnificent south gate of Thunderholme materialized where there had been only solid stone before. Massive portals swung open, making hardly a sound.

Stale air rushed out of the dwarven city. It reeked of death and made me wretch.

Just as suddenly, clean mountain air swept into Thunderholme to whistle down the halls. But something was not right. This was not the smell one would expect of a place that had been simply abandoned.

Still, we ventured within. We passed through

immense halls, and chambers supported by titanic pillars cut from the living mountain. Everywhere friezes depicted dwarven nobility and the daily lives of the common folk. When hammers still rang in these halls, it must have been splendid.

Indeed, there were wonders. . . and there were horrors.

We were entering a towering chamber that was once a festhall when the attack occurred. A horde of skeletal dwarven warriors poured into the hall from every direction, completely surrounding us. Among their grisly ranks lurched not only the armored remains of warriors, but as well, the bones of dwarven laborers and common folk.

The revelation of what I was seeing shook me to my very soul. The dwarves of Thunderholme had not been whisked to a dwarven paradise. They had walked these cold corridors for centuries as undead! The gates had been sealed not to keep outsiders from raiding within, but to prevent the horror inside from seeping out.

Controlled like bony puppets by some unseen evil, the skeletal horde descended upon us. Lorrick wept







bitterly as he smashed to dust the animated remains of dwarven men, women, and children.

Calling upon our faith, Esta Starchild and I blasted scores of the creatures into the beyond. And yet, they kept coming. Hundreds of them.

"We cannot hope to defeat the entire population of a city!" I cried.

"A retreat would be prudent," Trothgar said while smashing a skull under his boot.

"Who in the Nine Hells be responsible fer this horror!" roared Lorrick.

"Something terrible," Starchild replied ominously. "Something below us. I can feel it. We should be away. Quickly."

"I vote for that!" said Bublin and Samkin at the same time.

"Leave then!" Lorrick barked at us. "I'll not be goin' with ye!"

"The last time you said that we stayed with you," said Starchild calmly. "We will again. But do you want us all to die here, Lorrick?"

She then called upon her staff. It produced a blue-white glow in a wide radius. The skeletons fell back as if in great pain. They would not cross into the light.

The stalemate lasted only an instant, though the underground chill seeped to the very marrow of my bones. At last, the dwarf dropped his gaze.

"There be only death here," Lorrick said. "Let us be away from it."

Staying within the staff's light, we hurried toward the south gate. The skeletons parted before us like a sea of bones.

Once outside, Lorrick closed the massive portals with the runestone. The gates faded into a natural rock wall once again.

Swinging his great axe, the dwarf shattered the runestone with one angry blow.

"Let us speak only of the legends o' Thunderholme," he said, "fer the truth honors no one."

The ride down the mountain was a solemn one. Lorrick sank into a deep depression, and would not speak, even when spoken to. I feared for his health.

I tried to imagine what he must have been feeling. An entire city of his kind were dead. No, not dead. They were in a state worse than death, for they were undead.

The dwarves are a dying race in the Realms. There is simply no kind way to say it. And to see an entire population laid to waste. . . How much horror could Lorrick take? How much pain?

And what of Dumathoin's paradise? How could Lorrick's gods allow this tragedy to occur?

I prayed that my friend would not lose his faith, for without faith, what have we?





A Tale of Pirates

After the horrors of Thunderholme, we returned hastily to Saerloon. We were fortunate to find a ship preparing to sail to Aglarond. And twice fortunate that her captain was nothing like Captain Rye. The commander of this vessel was a handsome, courteous woman named Zarla Gerrick.

By the time we set sail, Lorrick's depression had improved. However, his dislike of the sea merely made his mood surly rather than sullen.

Our ship, a large merchant galley, was called the *Widow's Ire*. Curious, I asked Captain Gerrick about the name.

"I met my husband, Hansun Gerrick, upon these very waters," she said. "I was but a blushing maiden then, with a heart hungry to taste the sea air. He was a good man and a fine captain. He taught me well. Hansun was killed by pirate dogs five years ago."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I miss him still. He left this ship to me, and I've captained it ever since. 'Tis what my Hansun would've wanted."

Samkin Silvertooth joined us. He was excited and smiling broadly. I've never met a halfling so eager to sail the sea.

"Did I hear you say something about pirates?" he asked her. "Will we see any?"

"Nay, I doubt they'll have much interest in us," she replied. "We're carrying Saerloonian wine, fruit, and other foodstuffs."

"Well, how will they know what we've got until they have a look?"

"They have their spies, little one," she said to Samkin. "Isn't a ship leaving harbor on the Sea of Fallen Stars that pirates don't know what she's carrying. I wish they *would* try for us. I'm ready for them dogs!"

For the first time I noticed how much more armament her ship carried, as compared to that of Captain Rye's. The *Widow's Ire* boasted four ballistae and a catapult. Her crew was also much more disciplined, and obviously held great respect for the lady captain.

Though Captain Gerrick's trained crew and deadly weapons made me feel more secure, I, unlike Samkin or the lady herself, dreaded an encounter with pirates. On the open sea, with no land about, we could not hide or count on aid from shore in the event of an attack. There would be nothing for it but to put up a fight, for I was certain any pirates after us would have swifter vessels than the heavily-laden *Widow's Ire*.

Pirate Isles of The Inner Sea

One-hundred miles off the coast of Sembia, the Pirate Isles in the Sea of Fallen Stars are a large collection of rocky spurs jutting out of the water. Most islets have no formal names, being remembered only as pirate dens and havens to scavengers.

Since men first sailed the Inner Sea there have been settlements in this labyrinth of islands and rocks. While not all of the inhabitants of these islands make their living from piracy, the majority do, directly or indirectly. Men living here have always fished and raided. At its height, such raiding reached the nearby island of Presper and even the Sembian coast, as well as Procampur and Turlagol.

With their strategic location, the Pirate Isles can command all shipping moving to and from the Dragon Reach and Westgate—from all other areas on the Inner Sea. The isles are largely uncharted (except by pirates), with corsair vessels lurking among them.

For nearly 200 years, the pirates have not been strong enough to openly defy and stand against, or even attack, the ports of Sembia. But they have maintained their own defenses. The largest of the islands, Dragonisle, is solidly fortified. Two secure harbors here, defended by castles, boast rare and wondrous bombards brought long ago from Thay and the Utter South. There are several secure anchorages in addition to these harbors. Nowhere else can raiders stand and fight, nor call their own.





Five days out of Saerloon, the weather turned bad. Lashing waves and strong winds rocked the Widow's Ire. Captain Gerrick ordered us all below decks. We were happy to comply.

Lanterns swinging to-and-fro from the rafters cast eerie shadows. Poor Lorrick was virtually green with nausea.

Soon, the captain joined us. She poured flagons of strong wine for us.

"Have no fear," she said, noticing the worried looks on our faces. "The Widow's Ire has weathered worse than this little gale!

"You are always eager to hear of pirates, little one," she said to Samkin. "Perhaps a long tale will ease your worries."

"Yes!" cried the halfling.

"Well, let's see," she said, taking a seat upon a large cask. The rest of us clutched at anything within reach to steady us against the swaying of the ship, but the lady captain seemed perfectly at ease.

"The first great pirate leader was Immurk," she continued, "sometimes called the Invincible, for he was never defeated, and died of heartburst in his sixty-seventh year. No navies stood against him in those days, and though he created the want for warvessels, he also prevented their being built by means of daring raids and a wide-spread network of informers ashore. Immurk is remembered as a shrewd old fox.

"Immurk's successors were less able men. The pirates have never had a formal ruler or succession. The strongest would brawl his or her way into dominance, and hold that position by ruthless butchery, threats, and bribes. They are the lowliest scoundrels you will ever meet, if you are so unfortunate as to make one's acquaintance.

"Immurk's heirs were reckless, roaring fighters, cunning in their ways, but not the level-headed tactician Immurk had been. And so, pirate atrocities grew and pirate prudence waned, and at last the rising Inner Sea kingdoms united on the seas against the pirates, forming grand fleets of vessels.

"The leader of the pirates at that time was one Urdogen the Red, a hot-headed bear of a man. Urdogen sailed forth to crush the fleets approaching the Dragonisle, only to be caught in a trap, as ships swarmed out of every nearby port to assail his raiders.

"Urdogen was never found and no man claimed to have slain him, but his vessel, the *Raging Tears*, was never seen again.

"Oh, the pirates were not wiped out, but it was many years before the Dragonisle was again openly held against all sailing by. Then it was one Methlas, a merchant of Marsember, who quietly gathered together a small corsair fleet of skulking sailors.

"Methlas was murdered by his lieutenant, Thevren, ere the fleet was complete. Thevren was impatient for booty, and promptly launched raids on Selgaunt and Saerloon. The raids were a surprise, and successful, for Thevren was astute enough to destroy or seize any war-vessels in the two harbors.

"In the meantime, strife had flared up ashore, and no fleet was mustered to strike down Thevren as Urdogen had been struck down before him. So the pirates survived and increased their power. Thevren could not enjoy his victory, however, for he was poisoned by his lady-fair, Thilana.

"Thilana was far more prudent than her former amour. She revived Immurk's system of informers, using her female colleagues ashore, and paying well. The pirates again faded from common view, striking only when no attention would be spared for a few lost vessels.

"Thilana spent as much time ashore as on the sea, working intrigues. In turn she was strangled by another woman, Laershala of the Emerald Eyes. She was a bolder raider than Thilana, but still wise enough to keep the pirates low in profile.

"Laershala's reign was not as sturdy as her predecessor's, and since her death in battle with a Cormyrean freesail, no one person has truly commanded the pirates. Instead, various captains ally into factions behind an able leader. These factions often war and intrigue amongst themselves, uniting only against naval attacks aimed at the Dragonisle proper.

"As you can see, it is a history full of intrigue, treachery, and murder. Do you still want to meet pirates, little one!"

"No, not in the least," averred the wide-eyed halfling.







Crossar's Tomb



nce the weather improved, the remainder of the voyage to Aglarond was pleasant. To everyone's—even Samkin's—relief, we had no trouble from pirates.

Along the way we told Captain Gerrick of our quest and the events of our journey to date. She seemed very enthusiastic, and was an eager listener. I believe she felt honored that we had confided our secrets to her.

"I'll be sailing to Procampur after Aglarond," she said. "I would be happy to take you with me. I can get you well on your way north. Though I cannot remain anchored off the coast of Aglarond for too very long, I can surely wait until your return, or until I receive a message from you instructing me to sail on."

"We thank you," Starchild said. "I believe we can return to your ship within a tenday, at most two; but do not hesitate to leave if you must."

I prayed she was correct. If we took too long, and Captain Gerrick sailed without us, it might prove very difficult to find another vessel heading north from Aglarond. The prospect of trekking north through war-ravaged Thesk and the mysterious Great Dale did not appeal to me at all.

We said our farewells to Captain Gerrick along the far northeastern coast of Aglarond, near where the river bordering that realm spills into the sea. Taking our horses and gear, we rode a cargo barge from the *Widow's Ire* to Aglarond's shore.

The people of this rocky, wooded land seemed content with their humble lives. They are a rustic people, having no large cities. To the traveler willing to work for his breakfast, these simple folk are amiable, if somewhat reserved.

We decided it would be foolish to take our horses into the swamp, and found a farmer willing to stable them for a small fee. We also purchased a flat skiff, complete with poles, to make our own progress easier in the marsh. From the look in his eyes, the man we bought the boat from must have thought us mad.

Aglarond (AHG-Lah-ROND)

Aglarond is a small coastal nation on the Inner Sea, east of the Pirate Isles. It is bounded north and west by the Inner Sea, on the south by the Yuirwood, and to the east by the nation of Thay. It is one of the best-known of the eastern states to inhabitants of the North, primarily for the visibility of its ruler—the Simbul—and for its repeated battles with the Red Wizards of Thay.

A small realm that keeps to itself, Aglarond exerts little influence in affairs of state beyond its borders. It is important in the strategic balance of the Inner Sea lands simply because its continued existence prevents Thay from overwhelming the northern region.

Aglarond's strength is its current ruler, a female archmage of fabled powers, known only as the Simbul. She is also the nation's greatest danger, for the neighboring Red Wizards of Thay do not take kindly to rivals, and she draws the attention of these beings to the small nation.

Travel in Aglarond is accomplished by griffin, ship, or forest trails. The nation trades lumber, gems, and some copper in exchange for glass, iron, cloth goods, and food when freetrading vessels come to port. Aglarond, however, sends out no trading ships of its own.

Aglarond has no field army of any size, nor a navy, but within its woods the Simbul's foresters are expert and deadly troops, adept at firefighting and at using coastboats to raid by night. These foresters are equally well-trained for traveling in the treetops and fighting amongst the foliage.

The foresters' nature is alert and grim, for the menacing might of Thay is near, and Aglarond's blades are all too few. Skirmishes—with raiders hoping to win glory for Thay, or with mercenaries hired by Thay—are common.





Having a talent for piloting small craft, Trothgar poled us skillfully and safely up the river to the marsh. The place was a bug-infested mire of twisted trees and hanging vegetation.

Thankfully, the map given to us by Mother Lledew was both well written and accurate. Still, we nearly poled past Crossar's Tomb before spotting it. The tomb, which appeared more as a dome-like tower, stood upon a wide mound of moss-covered earth. The building itself was virtually overgrown with vegetation, effectively camouflaging the stones at a distance.

As it was nearly dark and a storm was brewing, we decided to camp on the mound under the shelter of thick vines hanging off the tower. We intended to look for the tomb's entrance in the light of day. None of us got any rest that night, however.

We had not even managed a meal when two-score ogres charged from the swamp. Among the beasts stood four mages. From their crimson robes and inhuman servants, I knew these to be Red Wizards of Thay.

Vastly outnumbered, we put our backs to the tomb and prepared to make a valiant last stand. Overhead, thunder boomed.

I hurled a ball of fire (one of the spells taught to me by Cadellin Firehands) into the charging mass of ogres, catching two of the Red Wizards in the blast. Alas, the magical flames passed over the mages, leaving them unharmed. However, eight smoldering ogres fell lifeless upon the wet turf.

"*Skysplitter!*" cried Lorrick, raising the axe high. A tremendous lightning bolt soared straight down from the thunderheads above, incinerating one of the Red Wizards as well as four ogres. Though strong, the mages' magical defenses were no match for the dwarf's legendary axe.

But the ogres were nearly upon us. Before any of us could do one thing more, the remaining Red Wizards struck. The falling rain changed to fist-sized hail, pelting us mercilessly. Both Bublím Barboast and Samkin Silvertooth were knocked unconscious by the stones. At least they also dropped three of the closest ogres! In nearly the same instant, paralysis gripped me. I saw that Starchild was likewise magically held.

Only Trothgar and Lorrick remained to combat the

The Red Wizards of Thay

Thay is a powerful, exotic, magical, and evil nation lying in the eastern reaches of the Realms. It is bordered by Aglarond and Thesk in the west, Rashemen in the north, the Inner Sea on the south, and the Sunrise Mountains and Endless Waste in the east. The Plateaus of Thay embrace a variety of tablelands and mesas. Best known for its rich prosperity, ancient heritage, and byzantine government, this realm is truly a magic-based society.

A loose confederation of powerful mages, collectively known as the Red Wizards of Thay, controls the nation. Evil and paranoid to the extreme, this group seeks to maintain power in its own realm while undercutting the power of those other realms it perceives as dangerous. Wizards not involved in this cult (and in particular those mages who participate in ruling rival nations) are seen as threats to be eliminated. The total number of Red Wizards is unknown.

Thay also has a noble class comprised of tharchions and tharchionesses who govern its provinces under the direction of the Red Wizards' chosen spokesmen, the zulkirs (the most powerful of their magical brotherhood). Presently, there are believed to be eight zulkirs, although only one is well-known in the Inner Sea lands—Zulkir Szass Tam.

Collectively, the Red Wizards of Thay are devoted to an expansionistic and imperialistic policy of consuming neighbor states. Internal strife among various factions and personality cults among the Red Wizards has hampered this agenda, as has the fact that the cult trusts neither mercenaries nor adventurers not of their order.

The Red Wizards and their minions use several badges. That most often seen outside Thay is a leaping red flame on a black or deep purple field. They have no desire for subtlety, wearing their crimson robes haughtily in all but the most discreet situations.



ogre horde. I knew they would be pulled to the ground and butchered by the swarm, or the Red Wizards would finish them. All was lost!

Suddenly, a peasant woman, bent with age, appeared—from nowhere! She rained down powerful magics upon the ogres. Those that were not killed outright by her spells fled into the darkness of the swamp.

Counterspells cast by the Red Wizards washed over this strange woman like harmless water. Turning her white, pupilless eyes upon them, she sent the mages screaming to the bosom of their evil god.

The old woman next turned her venerable gaze to us, leaning heavily upon her gnarled walking stick amidst the smoldering carnage. A wave of her hand, and we were healed and freed of the Red Wizards' magic.

"You may not enter the tower," she said.

"We've come a long way," I said, stupidly.

"Who are you?" asked Trothgar.

"You may call me Sylva." She seemed not to care

that we did not recognize the name. "There is a great evil locked inside the tower. You must not be allowed to free it, for it must never fall into the grasping hands of the Red Wizards. 'Tis bad enough that you have led them here."

"We believe something vital to our noble quest waits inside," Starchild protested.

"I know this, child. Your minds are open to my gaze. Your quest is indeed noble. I shall retrieve the key for you."

The crone who named herself Sylva simply vanished. Moments later she reappeared. In her knotted hands lay a plain metallic rod.

"Safe journey," she said, handing the rod to Starchild.

Her hands held high, Sylva cast a spell. Crossar's Tomb sank into the swamp—gone. She vanished as well. And did not return.

"Who was she really?" Bublím asked.

"Perhaps she was the Simbul," I said.

"Or a goddess," added Starchild.





A Night in Procampur



fter the nearly disastrous encounter with the Red Wizards, and the fortuitous intervention of the mysterious crone Sylva, we returned safely to Aglarond. To

our relief, the *Widow's Ire* still anchored offshore.

We collected our horses from the farmer's stable. He was both surprised and disappointed to see we had survived our trek into the swamp. I don't think he expected us to return, and had believed himself to be the proud owner of six very fine horses.

Captain Gerrick, however, was pleased to see us hale and hearty. She was eager to hear our tale, and we did not disappoint her.

"From what I've heard," said the lady captain, "the Simbul is a lithe young woman with silver hair, and not an old crone. However, she is an exceptionally powerful archmage and a shape-shifter. It could very well have been she who came to your aid."

"Any sign of pirates?" asked Samkin.

"Nay, but we'll be setting sail for Procampur within the hour. Perhaps I can find some for you."

Procampur (Pro-CAHM-pur)

An independent city-state, Procampur lies on the eastern shore of the Dragon Reach. High walls divide this sprawling city into districts. The slate roofs of each district display a different color.

Procampur is the richest of the independent cities of the Inner Sea's northern coasts. It is a place noted for skilled goldsmiths and gemcutters.

Ruled by a hereditary overlord with the title Thultyrl, Procampur has a strong army and navy to protect the valuable substances in which it trades from Inner Sea pirates and other nations. It has defeated Mulmaster and Sembia decisively in past conflicts, and is now allied to the neighboring city of Tsurlagol.

"No, no. I really don't want to see them any more. Honest."

We arrived safely at the docks of Procampur. Although he swore otherwise, I believe Samkin was disappointed that we didn't at least get a glimpse of a pirate ship.

Saying farewell to Captain Gerrick was painful for us all. She had become a dear friend, and fit in well with our company. Trothgar asked her if she would like to join us as the seventh member of the Seekers, but she declined graciously. Her duty lay with the *Widow's Ire*, she said.

We took rooms in an expensive inn for the night. It was nice to sleep in a bed that didn't sway from side to side.

"Where should we go from here?" Bublism asked.

"From what the staff's light has revealed to me, the Tear lies almost due north of us," replied Starchild.

"We should take the road north to Mulmaster," Trothgar said. "I've heard it is still a free city, not yet under the yoke of Zhentil Keep."

"North of here we will be traveling in very dangerous regions," warned Starchild. "The Black Network has a strong hold around the Moonsea."

"Do ye have any idea how fer north we'll be going?" Lorrick asked her.

"Not really. The staff's light gets brighter the farther north we travel. We may go as far as Vaasa."

"By the Nine Hells!" cried the dwarf. "That be a horrible place if ever there was one."

"Let's just hope we don't have to go that far," I said.

"Aren't you all forgetting something?" Samkin asked. "Mother Lledew said there are two metal rods. We only have one."

"The other lies to the north as well," replied Starchild. "The staff will guide us."

The following morning we rode from Procampur, but we never arrived in Mulmaster.





News of Impiltur

Several days' ride north of Procampur, Esta Starchild's staff led us east, off of the road. We traveled that direction for many days, passing through a wide gap between the mountains that formed Damara's southern border and the Earthfast Mountains. We had crossed into Impiltur. There were many trails to follow, and the terrain of rolling hills and grassland made for easy riding.

We stopped in many of the city-states comprising the nation of Impiltur. The people were generally friendly, yet wary of strangers, and rightly so, for they live in frontier country. The common folk were eager for news of the world beyond their borders, and in exchange told us much about their nation.

From the hearsay my hungry ears gathered in the inns and taverns, most of Impiltur's immediate neighbors are friendly and open to its citizens. One is not, however, and another is questionable.

Lothchas the bandit-lord operates in the Desertspire Mountains and the Ice Gorge to the west, where the hobgoblins lived ere their strength was broken. Our informers spoke of Lothchas as a powerful, brutal warrior with a small but fierce group of followers. His band consists of veteran rogues and killers. Those trespassing on his lands are robbed and slaughtered, and not even the Lords of Imphras II can turn the bandit-lord out.

The other neighbor is more bewildering. In the Great Dale, north and east of Impiltur, in the woods where Narfell once flourished, dwells the Nentyarch, a mysterious mage of great power. The Nentyarch is said to rule grim men and strange beasts. Of course, any villager will point out his information is third-hand at best. No one has ever seen this mage. But he is not aggressive to his neighbors, living in peace unless his wood is entered by those not invited. Uninvited guests. . . simply vanish.

I prayed our quest would not take us into the domain of either Lothchas or the Nentyarch, for blood would surely be spilled in either case. The goddess must have heard me, for the staff led us north into Damara.

Impiltur (IM-pILL-tur)

Between the Earthfast Mountains and Eastingreach bay, south of Damara, along the Sea of Fallen Stars, lies Impiltur, a nation of united city-states.

Impiltur came into being some 260 winters past, when the independent cities of Lyrabar, Hlammach, Dilpur, and Sarshel were united by Imphras, warcaptain of Lyrabar, to face the menace of hobgoblin hordes advancing from the Giantspire Mountains.

Imphras established his line as the royalty of Impiltur; the line continues to this day. Queen Sambryl, widow of Imphras IV, is currently the nation's titular head. Sambryl prefers travel and pomp to the tedious necessity of governing, however. The Queen leaves any real work to the Lords of Imphras II.

These lords, currently twelve in number, form a behind-the-scenes council of protectors. The Queen's trusted advisor Kyrtraun is the most powerful lord.

Though largely at peace, Impiltur is a war-ready realm on the frontier of civilized lands. It is on friendly terms with the neighboring realms of Telflamm, Rashemen, Aglarond, and the scattered states of Damara. Impiltur prefers not to meddle in affairs beyond its borders.

During the recent Tuigan invasion, Impiltur did not suffer attack directly, but did offer soldiers to the alliance. The waves of refugees from the west during and after the invasion have had more of an effect on Impiltur than the Horde itself. Cities were disrupted by the sudden influx of refugees, and only now return to their previous levels of peace and prosperity.

Impiltur is still a land of opportunity for the daring and hard-working. Rich new copper, silver, and iron lodes have been found north of Lyrabar and near the High Pass. Trade increasingly reaches out to Rashemen, Sembia, Procampur, and Bloodstone Pass.





A Death in Damara

Traveling through Damara was very unpleasant. It was a cold journey through a desolate realm filled with an ever-present sense of foreboding and loss. The people were likewise morose, living their meager lives with heads lowered. Damara is a poor country that has forgotten its past glories.

The farther north we traveled, the more cold and miserable the weather became. Chill fogs froze in the air. Shards of frost clung to twisted, clawlike limbs. When the damp wind blew, the ground beneath every tree and shrub was haloed with fallen ice crystals like broken dreams.

While we were able to purchase warm clothing from the Damarans, the harsh climate and generally depressing atmosphere of Damara and its people weighed heavily upon us. Morale dropped and our pace slowed.

"I don't like it here," Samkin Silvertooth said. "It's cold and empty. It feels dead."

"What would ye have us do then?" barked Lorrick. "Turn back? Give up?"

"We've been gone so long," complained the halfling. "Why do we need Selûne's Tear anyway? If she wants it so bad, why doesn't she just take it back?"

"The ways of the goddess are not for us to know, or to question," Starchild said. "We must have faith that she has good reasons for placing this burden upon us. I feel certain that all will be made plain when we behold the Tear."

"Our journey draws near an end," I said. "Starchild's staff glows brighter each passing day. 'Tis true this country is cold, the inns filthy, and the food tasteless, but we must press on. The quicker we get there, the sooner we return to pleasant realms."

"Think of the tales we'll have to tell," Trothgar said. "Bards will sing the Ballad of the Seekers in courts all across the Realms. Kings will come seeking the Seekers, asking us to help them hold their thrones and defeat their foes. We'll be famous, and rich."

"That's all fine and good," replied Samkin, "but I

still don't like it here. It feels dangerous."

If only he'd known how right he was. . .

Damara (Dah-MARR-ah)

Damara huddles north of Impiltur and east of the Moonsea. Like the Dales, the region holds a large number of petty kingdoms and small rural communities.

Until the most recent generation of humans, Damara rivaled the power and importance of Impiltur or Sembia. It maintained strong relations with other Moonsea and Inner Sea nations, and its trade banner and bloodstone trade bars could be found throughout the Realms.

In recent memory, however, Damara was invaded by Vaasa, its northern neighbor. The war lasted ten years, until the Witch-King of Vaasa defeated King Virdin of Damara at the Ford of Goliad, sweeping the last organized resistance from his path and slaying the cream of the Damaran nobility.

The Vaasan invaders captured and still rule the northern kingdoms of Damara. The southern portions have fallen into small baronies and isolated, quarreling communities. The routes between these communities grow less civilized and more dangerous each year.

The land of Damara today is cold, empty, and poor. Its once-proud cities sacked and its merchant class chased to more hospitable climes, little remains above subsistence and survival.

The people of Damara are similar to those of the Dales in appearance and attitude. It is thought that Damarans and Dalesmen spring from the same western-wandering stock.

Damarans' beliefs echo those held throughout the Realms. The locals pay special attention to Ilmater, God of Endurance and Suffering, and in particular venerate the memory of a long-dead patriarch of that faith—St. Sollers the Twice-Martyred. The symbol designating this sect of Ilmater's faith is either a blood-stained rack or Sollers' own emblem, the yellow rose.





It was in a small, rocky valley in the mountains in the northwestern corner of Damara that we found the hidden cavern—or rather, that the cavern was shown to us. The earth trembled and shook mightily for a moment, causing a small mountain of loose rock to cascade down the valley wall. Luckily, we were a safe distance away from the avalanche, and managed to keep our skittish mounts under control.

There, part way up the cliff wall where the loose rock had been, was a cave mouth. It had to be a sign, this sudden exposure. We decided to investigate.

Samkin had little trouble scampering up the rocky slope. Once arrived, he lowered ropes for the rest of our company. Starchild stayed with the horses.

Part of the cavern ceiling had collapsed as a result of the earthquake. Settling dust obscured our vision. The dust cloud also gave the horrid creature lurking within the opportunity to attack us by surprise.

I remember seeing a hulking form nearly ten feet tall, and perhaps half as wide, seemingly materialize out of the solid rock wall of the cave. The creature swatted Lorrick to the side as if the dwarf were made

of sackcloth. It then turned its many-eyed gaze upon me, and as my mind began to reel, I realized what our attacker was—an umber hulk of immense size.

My brains addled by the magical gaze of the monster, my body was no longer mine to control, and I ran off into the dusty cavern. I can still remember the anguish I felt as I listened to my friends battling the beast, and was helpless to aid them. I became so confused, I don't know how long it was before I regained my wits.

And when I did regain my senses, the cavern was ominously still—except for the quiet weeping of Esta Starchild. When I found her, my heart constricted into a painful knot. She was sitting on the ground, cradling poor Samkin in her lap.

"I heard the fighting and came up to help," she moaned through her tears. "I should have been here. I could have healed him. Somehow he knew Damara was dangerous for him."

"What's happened?"

"He's gone, Furian," Lorrick said, and I saw he, too, was weeping. "Samkin be dead."





NO! It could not be. I would not let it be.

I quelled the anguish in my heart, and summoned the calm of my spirit. I knelt beside my little friend, and I prayed.

I prayed with the fervor of a zealot. I swore such oaths as it will take a thousand lifetimes for me to fulfill.

And praise be to Mystra and sister Selûne! Samkin's eyes fluttered and he was alive!

He looked wide at all of us. And giggled.

"I saw pirates," the irrepressible halfling said. "And I was their captain!"

We all laughed like children, relief washing over us like a calm tide.

"The goddesses are with us," Starchild said, her eyes wide with awe.

"Why ye be lookin' so surprised, Starchild?" said a grinning Lorrick. "Yer the one always talkin' about faith."

Being gravely wounded and outnumbered, the umber hulk had fled through a tunnel of its own creation. Apparently, its burrowing had caused the avalanche that uncovered the cave mouth in the first place.

Fate had brought us here, and nearly done in one of our party. But we had to make a quick search before retreating. The goddesses had spoken.

From what we found, the cavern had been used as a secret storehouse for weapons, probably when the fell forces of Vaasa had invaded Damara. We found a wide assortment of weapons and armor, all rusted beyond salvage except for one.

Trothgar pulled a broadsword from the pile. When he unsheathed it, all could see that its blade was free of rust and its edge as keen as the day it was forged. Runes running along its length glowed with a dim blue light.

"'Tis magic for certain," said the ranger excitedly.

"Aye, that it is," I said. "The runes name it as Icefang."

"Look!" Samkin cried. "Did you see that?"

For an instant, as Starchild walked past the umber hulk's escape tunnel, her staff glowed bright. She returned to stand before the opening. The staff flared.

"This is the way we must go," she said.

We took as much of our provisions and gear from our horses as we could comfortably carry. The splendid steeds given to us by Duirsar, the elven lord of the Greycloaks, looked at us with questioning eyes.

"We can't just leave them here," Samkin said. "They've been so good to us."

"Let us remove their bridles and saddles," said Starchild. "'Tis time they tasted the wind upon their backs."

So our horses ran free. Their distant neighing rang like children's laughter.

The umber hulk's tunnel led us steadily north, down and deep into the mountains. Eventually, the hasty exit opened onto a system of natural caverns.

"Is this the Underdark?" Samkin asked with a slight quiver to his voice.

"Aye, that it is," replied Lorrick. "Well, the upper-most reaches of it anyway."

"I hope we're not going to be down here for very long," Bublun said.

We all agreed. But we were destined to see more of the Underdark than we wished. . .

The Underdark

There is much more to the Realms than what exists above ground. Twisting beneath the surface nations' vastness is a labyrinth of natural caverns, connected by tunnels carved by races long dead and nations long forgotten. This is the Underdark, a region as deadly as any surface wilderness.

Numerous races thrive in this maze of eternal night. Some of these include: dark elves, known as the drow; duergar, an evil subrace of dwarves; the goblin races, which prefer to occupy caverns near the surface; illithids, creatures with deadly mental powers; and beholders, perhaps the most intelligent and evil of all subterranean threats.



Clues from The Past



From the once-hidden cavern in northwestern Damara, Starchild's staff led us deep into the Underdark. We hiked through natural caverns, some immense and others quite narrow. Several times we used ropes to cross underground rivers and yawning chasms. Although we faced many tunnel intersections and cavern branches, Starchild's staff never failed to choose our path.

"We be headin' steady west," Lorrick said.

No one argued. So far underground, I had no sense of where we were, let alone which direction was west. Instead, I strove not to think of the tons and tons of rock above us.

We trekked through the Underdark at least five days (without the sun, I had only the rumbling of my belly to keep track of time). We saw numerous harmless creatures that make the caverns their home, including giant white crickets feeding upon huge mushrooms. Whether by chance, or the guidance of the staff, we encountered none of the more hostile denizens of the Underdark. However, we did see signs of them.

At one intersection, just within a passage sloping steeply downward, a plain metal plate had been spiked to the wall.

"What's that?" asked Samkin.

"Shield the lanterns a moment," Esta said.

We did as she asked, and were enveloped in utter darkness. However, my infravision soon adjusted, and I could see that the metal plate was glowing red.

"It is as I suspected," Starchild said. "The plate is a boundary marker of the drow. No doubt, that tunnel leads to their domain."

"I see nothing," Trothgar said. Of course he didn't, for as a human, he lacks the infravision that allows the rest of us to distinguish heat from darkness.

"We best be movin' on quick," warned Lorrick. "If them drow catch wind of us in their tunnels, there'll be blood a spillin'."

We did just that. A day later, the staff led us upward. At last we saw a shaft of glorious sunlight. We emerged from a narrow cleft in the side of a high

cliff, with towering mountains to our backs. North and west stretched the vast steppelands of Thar.

Thar

Thar, also called the Great Grey Lands, is a desolate, uncivilized region stretching northward from the Moonsea. Its rising steppelands end at the Great Glacier Pelvuria. A land of nomad raiders, Thar is also home to the beast-men (ogres), as well as bands of orcs.

Rumors fly that these creatures summon diabolical entities by their evil magery, to aid their causes. These tales, Vaasa's proximity, and the nearness of the great dragons, make Thar the gateway to "The Evil of the North."

Of old, Thar was an ogre kingdom. The Tharkul, or ogre king, commanded the loyalty of his own kind, along with that of yeti, trolls, and other fearsome creatures. Both cunning and mighty, the ogres were responsible for many foul deeds, including stirring up dragons and calling together their beast-man shamans to sink Northkeep.

Seventy winters ago, the last Tharkul, Maulog, was slain by the human Beldoran, and the ogre kingdom crumbled. Now that Beldoran is dead, the ogres await the day when a new Tharkul arises to unite them.

Human activity in Thar is becoming more common. Glistar, a heavily armed encampment in the heart of the Great Grey Lands, reigns as a base camp for prospectors, traders, and adventurers.

A fortune in mineral wealth lies beneath the West Galena Mountains north of Thar. Every miner and dwarf in the region knows these peaks are part of the same mountain range that once offered up the bloodstones of Damara. Traders often find isolated communities of skilled dwarves with whom they can exchange southern goods for fine creations in stone and iron. As for adventurers, they'll brave any rumor to discover lost, non-human kingdoms—even giants and orcs and ogres.





The glowing crystal set in Starchild's staff led us north through the steppelands of Thar. Though we traveled safely, we often came across signs marking the recent passage of large bands of ogres and orcs.

At one point, a small army of orcs riding shaggy ponies swept around us. We prepared ourselves for the fight of our lives, but the orcs merely sat on their mounts a safe distance away, glaring menacingly.

The orcs seemed somehow curious, as if they had come to have a look at these strange travelers in their land. Surprisingly, considering their great numbers, they moved on, and so did we.

I began to have the feeling that our progress was being closely watched, and it was an ominous, unwholesome feeling. Perhaps we are being allowed to pass safely through Thar, I thought, which would explain the strange behavior of the orc horde.

Using the powers of the staff, Starchild led us to a hidden, shadowy cleft in the mountains of northern Thar. From the simple tools, weapons, rotted furs, and cave paintings in that system of caverns, it was obviously a long-abandoned ogre stronghold.

Starchild was enthralled by the cave paintings, and asked me to help decipher their primitive symbols. We learned much indeed.

The paintings clearly depicted a Tear of Selûne falling to earth one fateful night untold years ago. Figures we interpreted as human priests were shown ceremoniously carrying the Tear from its landing site near the ogres' cave to a shrine. Starchild and I agreed that the shrine was located in the mountains farther north, in Vaasa.

As we traced the fascinating paintings along the wall, deeper into the cavern, we came upon a scene depicting battle. The ogres of this place had set forth and attacked the shrine. Though they were driven off, the ogres captured several priests, one of whom was shown holding a glowing rod—the second key. The ogres seemed to have had no clue as to the rod's purpose, for they did not enter the shrine. Or perhaps they did not have the first key.

Assuming the fell forces of Vaasa never discovered the hidden shrine, the Tear would still be there. We became convinced that the second key was somewhere near.

Recklessly, we searched deep into the ogres' former

stronghold, to the last of the cave paintings. We saw that disaster had befallen the ogre tribe. A beast had risen up from below, depicted in their primitive art as a many-legged reptile belching lightning from its mouth. Lorrick recognized the monster—he called it the behir.

The behir had slain many ogre warriors. In an effort to appease the creature, the ogre shaman had left the captured human priests as an offering to it. The Behir was not satisfied, however, and had continued to prey upon the ogre tribe. Weakened at the loss of their bravest warriors, the tribe had fled the caverns, abandoning their ancient home to the victorious behir.

Driven now, we continued still deeper. Soon, we came upon the spot the priests had been left to face their grisly doom.

In the center of the long, dark cavern stood a primitive stone altar honoring some unspeakable ogre god. Bones, no doubt those of the hapless priests, still hung loosely from shackles fixed to the altar. Other humanoid bones, these much larger, littered the cave floor all about.

Foolishly, we had assumed the behir had died years ago, or moved on to more fruitful hunting grounds. We were mistaken!

The behir skittered out of the darkness on its many legs, with a swiftness belying its tremendous size. It spat a bolt of sizzling lightning at Samkin. The nimble halfling dodged most of the strike, though his legs and feet were badly singed.

In the next instant, the behir was upon Trothgar, biting deep into his shoulder and coiling its long, serpentine body around the ranger. In horror, I watched its scaly muscles ripple as it began to squeeze the very life out of the northman.

While Starchild dragged Samkin to safety, Bublím and I blasted the creature with magical missiles, searing holes through its scales and into the soft flesh beneath.

Axe high, Lorrick charged the monster's rear. In one massive blow, he severed its long tail from its body, drawing forth a great gout of boiling blood.

The monster loosened its hold on Trothgar, who managed to free an arm, the one holding Icefang. He drove the magical blade deep into the behir's eye.



The bane of the ogres spasmed crazily, then died.

We tended our wounded, and—more cautiously—continued our search of the cavern. Among the many shards of ogre bones, we uncovered a short metal rod. We had found the second key.

Before departing, Starchild and I solemnly gathered the remains of the priests. We planned to bury them properly upon the steppelands of Thar, but that was not to be.

Three ghostly figures congealed from the shadows to stand before us. We had no fear of them. Their expressions, and the feeling we had at beholding them, were of peace and goodwill.

“We have waited many years for the Bearer of the Staff to give us rest,” said one in a faint, wispy voice.

“Who are you?” asked Trothgar.

“Our bones lie before you, Companion,” replied another. The ranger started to object, but Esta waved

him quiet.

“How may I give you rest?”

“Take our bones with you,” intoned the third.

“Take them to the shrine,” the first spirit agreed.

Smiling warmly, the three ghosts of the dead priests began to fade. Before they vanished utterly, they spoke once again, their voices becoming even more distant.

“All shall be revealed by Selûne’s light. . . the rods are one. . . may her will be done. . .”

“What did they mean?” Samkin asked after the spirits had gone.

“I am uncertain,” replied Starchild. “All will be revealed in time.”

I helped Starchild gather the bones into a pack, along with the two metal rods. Her staff then led us deeper into the caverns. . . toward Vaasa.





AT THE SHRINE



he caverns of the ogres' long-ago stronghold eventually gave onto tunnels delving into the Underdark. Once again we trod the strange grottoes and passageways of that dangerous subterranean realm.

Esta Starchild's staff led us steadily north and east. Somehow it knew the safest route, for we encountered no hostile denizens of the Underdark, which is quite unusual from what I had heard, and surely a blessing.

Eventually the passageways began to angle upward. We emerged from a cave along the mountains of northwestern Vaasa.

Pulsing brilliantly, Starchild's staff seemed eager to guide us to the shrine where the Tear of Selúne waited. Under its guidance, we continued north along the mountains. The land was wild and empty.

Still, I felt we were being watched. Starchild sensed the presence also. It was an evil presence.

Near dusk one evening, we finally crept within view of a settlement. Though a good distance away, my keen eyes could make out the forms of wretched half-human, half-beast women and children forced to tend the needs of orcs, ogres and other foul creatures. The stench from their huge cast-iron cook pots filled my nose. It sickened me to think of what boiled within those foul cauldrons. Vaasa is truly a horrible place.

"Ere Zhengyi, the Witch-King of Vaasa, was defeated," Starchild recounted later, well away from the grimy settlement, "many more humans lived in these scattered communities. His mercenary forces swelled the kingdom in those days. Evil faiths found eager ears here as well. The Witch-King's closest servants and priests were said to wear goat-headed head-dresses, though their true faith was never revealed.

"Zhengyi himself was a recluse. He would accept no envoys from other nations—or faiths. 'Tis said a contingent of Red Wizards who sought to force an audience with him were swallowed whole by the earth on the steps of Castle Perilous. But in the end,

the Witch-King was vanquished and drained of power by the hero Gareth Dragonsbane."

Vaasa (VAH-sah)

For years, Vaasa was the name of that unclaimed waste beyond the northern bounds of Damaran patrols, in much the same way that Thar begins where the swords of the Moonsea cities no longer hold sway. Vaasa is a cold, wintery, unpleasant land of rolling moors and tundra, which becomes a hazardous bog during the weeks of high summer.

Some twenty years ago, on a lonely crag near the Damaran border, arose a huge edifice of dark stone bound in iron. One night it was not there—the next, it was. From this Castle Perilous, Zhengyi the Witch-King declared mastery over all the lands of Vaasa.

Intent on making good his claims, Zhengyi soon recruited a vast army of men, bandits, inhuman tribes, and mystical beasts, and swept through Vaasa into its neighboring land of Damara. Through strength of arms and treachery, Zhengyi defeated the Damaran armies at the Ford of Goliad. He slew the majority of their rulers, including the last King of Damara, Viridin Blood-feathers. Some say Zhengyi accomplished this task with the aid of a powerful assassin operating from a secret base in the Galena Mountains.

Years later, Gareth Dragonsbane and other heroes defeated the Witch-King, and his magical fortress toppled in upon itself. Vaasa returned to its original state, a wasteland held by hostile non-human tribes.

But perhaps matters are not entirely as they were before. Dragons have been reported nesting in what remains of Zhengyi's keep. And rumors sketch a wild-eyed priest seeking to unite the goblin tribes, claiming to be the son and heir of Zhengyi the Witch-King.





Guided by the Staff of the Shard, we at last found the shrine in a hidden vale. It could have stood undisturbed for centuries.

The shrine was oval, ornately carved from a single, massive boulder. I felt certain we would find a pair of holes among the engravings, but we searched in vain.

We pried into “keyhole” after hole. Deciphering the glyphs was beyond us. Starchild’s staff offered no further guidance.

With the setting sun, a deep foreboding fell upon the company. We all sensed the evil presence then. Something was coming.

“Glorious Selûne!” beseeched Starchild.

The moon rose, its mystical light bathing the shrine. The outline of a door and a single hole became plain. A growing urgency drove us—but there was only one keyhole.

“The spirits said something about the rods being as one,” I recalled at last.

Starchild placed the metal staves end-to-end. Blue light flared. They merged into one!

Carefully, she inserted the rod into the depths of

the hole. The door swung silently open. Cushioned by velvet, the Tear of Selûne winked from a silver carrying-chest! It was truly the teardrop of a goddess.

Starchild spoke in a strange, distant voice, her face glazed with rapture. “Behold my boon. Use its power wisely. Though it is a tear of joy, it may also cause great woe.”

The elf was once again herself. She closed the Tear’s carrying-chest, and Trothgar stepped forward to heft it by its handles.

“Where now?” I asked of her.

Starchild’s smile made my heart sputter.

“Come with me into Retreat and be my husband, Furian, for my quest is done and my love for thee is freed. All that remains is for us to present the Tear of Selûne to Queen Amlaruil. She will welcome all of us to Evermeet, I am certain.”

My fondest dreams answered! I do not recall what I replied. I only hope I did not appear too much the heart-struck fool.

Our joy was too-soon eclipsed. . .





The Last Hope

Inside the Shrine of the Tear, all seemed right and good in the world. Little did we know that outside, armies collided.

Somehow forces of the Zhentarim had been following us, possibly since before we crossed the border into Thar. Then too, a power in Vaasa, perhaps that rumored successor to the dead Witch-King, took note of their presence, and sent his own force.

As we emerged from the shrine, the two fell armies tore into one another like ravening wolves after the same prize—and that prize was the Tear of Selûne!

Escape was impossible. We retreated back into the shrine, praying its magic would protect us. Outside, the battle raged.

We were trapped. Neither Selûne nor Mystra heard our pleas, for we were not whisked to safety this time, as we had been at the Battle of the Bones. Though my faith remains strong to this day, I cannot understand why they have guided us so far, only to abandon us now.

All in the company were strangely calm. We spent our remaining time talking quietly among ourselves, expressing our love and friendship for one another through tales of our past adventures.

I finally found the courage to tell Starchild I loved her. She kissed me sweetly, and I held her close.

I have not seen Esta Starchild since that fateful day in the Shrine of the Tear. . .

As I write this last entry, I am a prisoner in the deepest, dankest dungeon beneath Zhentil Keep. Whether I have been here weeks or months, I am not certain.

The forces of the Black Network defeated those of Vaasa at the shrine, though we did not know it at the time. All I remember is the shrine exploding around us. Before I lost consciousness, I believe I saw Samkin Silvertooth and Bublím Barboast slain outright. But I remain hopeful that all of the Seekers yet live.

As for myself, I suspect I was kept in a drugged slumber, for I awoke here in my cell. My injuries had

been healed, so that I might make a healthy specimen for interrogation, I am certain. Thankfully, my torturers have allowed me to keep this journal (after scribes had copied every word, of course). My constant scribbling seems to amuse them.

What of the Tear of Selûne? I can only assume the worst—that the Black Network has it and will use its awesome magics to wreak destruction and spread their evil.

Perhaps, even though I am their prisoner, I can still thwart them. Yestereve, I so angered a drunken guard that he threw his empty wine bottle at me in my cell. If I remove some of the pages from this journal, I think I can squeeze it inside the bottle. I have improvised a watertight (hopefully) stopper. There is a small refuse chute in my cell, which empties into a stream of sewage flowing beneath the keep, and then on to the Moonsea (I pray).

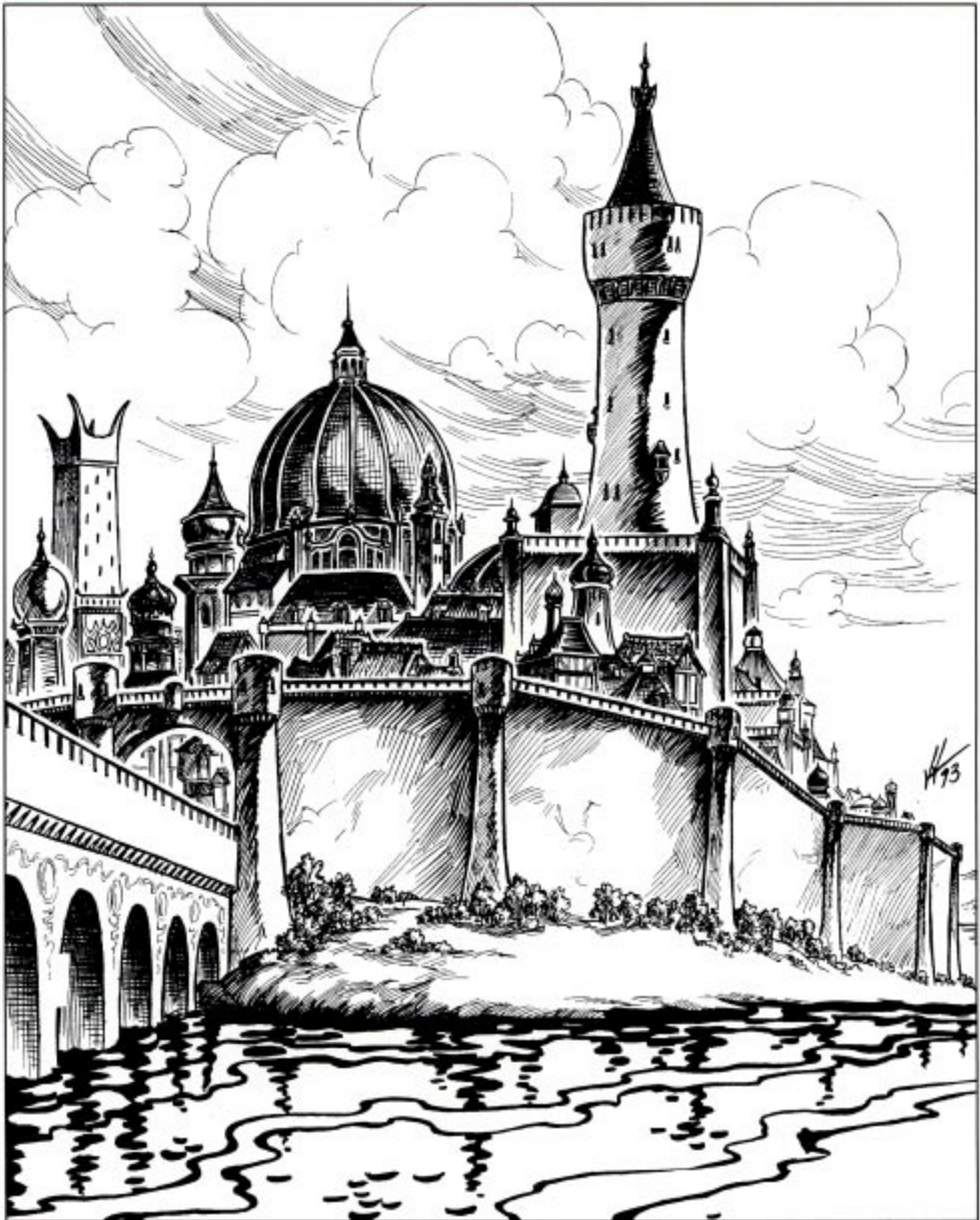
Perhaps some humble fisherman will haul this bottle in with his catch, and pass it on to someone of noble heart, such as you, dear reader. . .

Zhentil (Zz-HENT-ill) Keep

Sprawling at the western end of the Moonsea, Zhentil Keep is a large, walled city and one of the major ports on that body of water. It is dominated by a large temple complex dedicated to Cyric.

Zhentil Keep is the base of the Zhentarim, though the city and its populace are not entirely under the yoke of the Black Network. Other factions are abroad in this city. Friction between them is intense, and night-borne fighting makes venturing out after dark an especially dangerous affair.

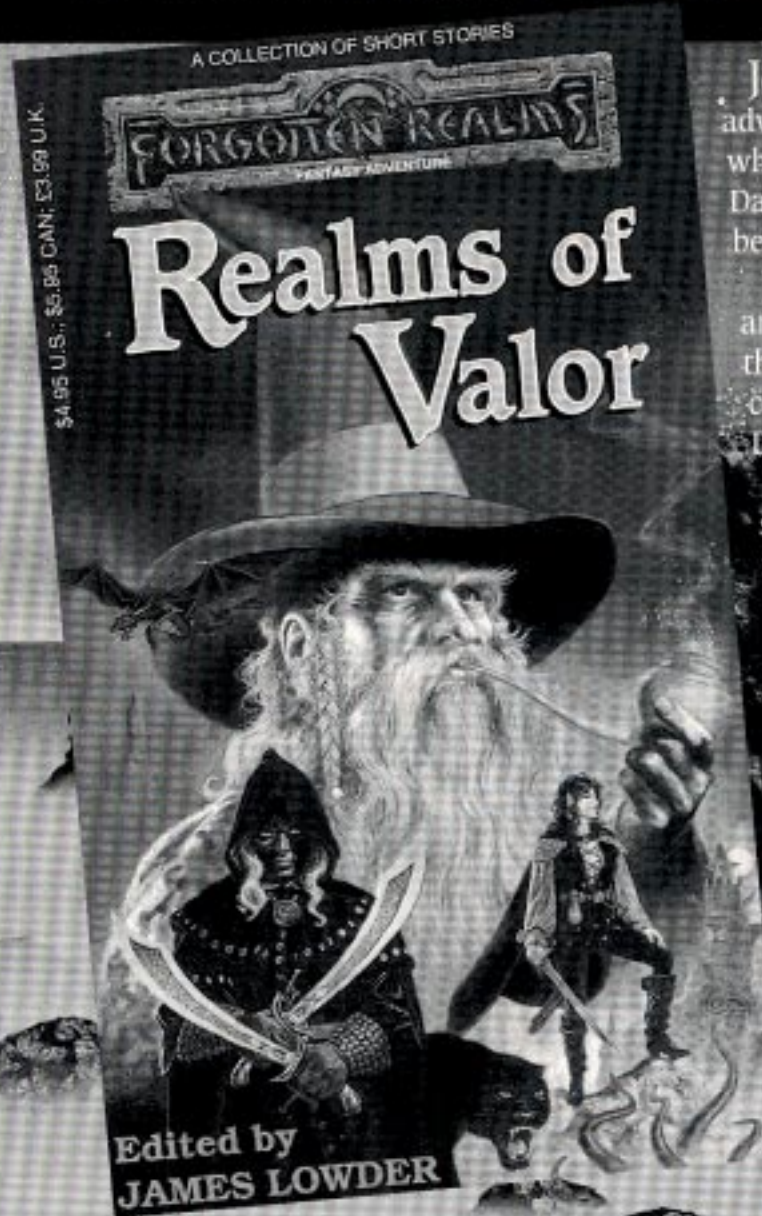
Zhentil Keep is ruled in name only by Lord Chess, a foppish, vain, overlord with a taste for gluttony. Chess is a gossipy blunderer, and though the Zhentarim have used him in the past as an ally, they do not consider him a member of their organization.





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The FORGOTTEN REALMS® Campaign setting is a richly detailed fantasy continent, known as Faerun, on a fantasy planet called Abeir-Toril. Now that you've read this introduction to the setting, how can you start playing in the Realms?

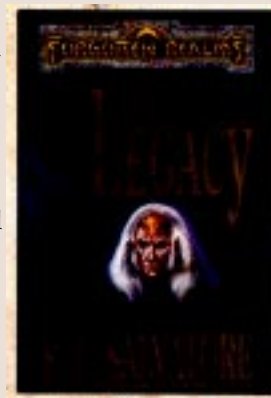
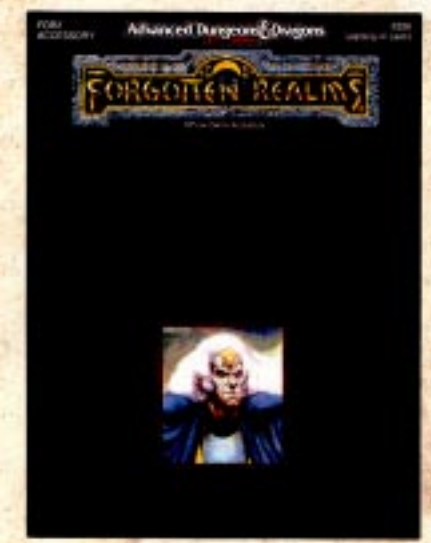
First, you'll need the FORGOTTEN REALMS Campaign Setting, the two-inch boxed set containing three booklets, four full-color poster maps, six card sheets showing various signs, symbols, and sigils to add depth to the campaign, and eight sheets detailing monsters of the Realms. One of the booklets is just for the DUNGEON MASTER™: *Running the Realms*. Another is for everyone: *A Grand Tour of the Realms*. The third focuses on one town, *Shadowdale*, home to the sage Elminster, spokeswizard of the Forgotten Realms, and the perfect home base for a new group of characters; with this book, your campaign begins!

Where do you go from here?

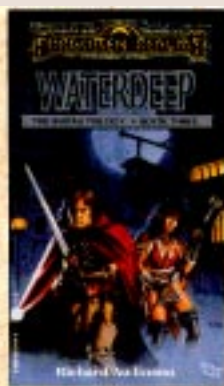
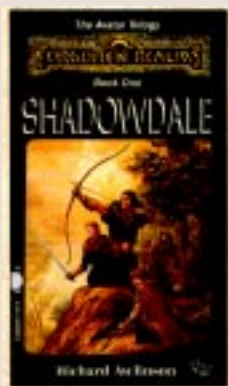
Well, once you've explored Shadowdale and its immediate surroundings, there are several options. If you are interested in dealings with underground adventure and drow, the dark elves, you will want to explore This most cities and its resident Drizzt Do-Urden, has its origins in the novels of

R.A. Salvatore: the Icewind Dales trilogy (*The Crystal Shard*, *Streams of Silver*, and *The Halfling's Gem*), and later the Dark Elf trilogy (*Homeland*, *Exile*, and *Sojourn*), followed by two hardcover novels, *The Legacy* and *Starless Night*. Its popularity

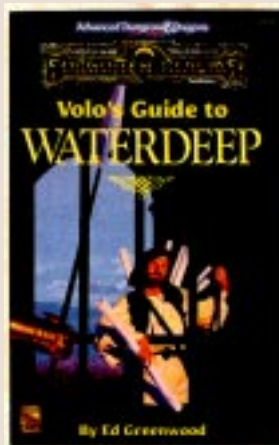
led to the production of a boxed set of game material (the aforementioned *Menzoberranzan*), written by Mr. Salvatore, Ed Greenwood, and Douglas Niles. Also in this branch of Realms product is *Drow of the Underdark*, an accessory usable in any campaign. It is not necessary to own *Drow of the Underdark* in order to use the *Menzoberranzan* boxed set, but it would help.



If you'd rather stay out of caves and drow cities, and see more of the continent above ground, choose *City of Splendors**. This boxed set details Waterdeep, the largest and grandest city in Faerun. Its four booklets and six maps provide many years' worth of game information: how the Lords of Waterdeep operate, who's in charge (and who's *really* in charge), what each ward of the city contains (and how they take to adventurers wandering about), and much much more. Related to this is the Avatar trilogy of novels and adventures, which share the same titles: *Shadowdale*, *Tantras*, and *Waterdeep*. These detail the Godswar that shook the very foundations of the Realms: the conflict in which deities died and new deities were created. Two more novels that have ties to Waterdeep are *Elfshadow* and *Elfsong**, both by Elaine Cunningham.



For the discerning adventurer, who wants to know where the very best fried sea snake is served (The Fiery Flagon, of course) or where to find rare maps, charts, and books (Serpentil Books and Folios), a copy of *Volo's Guide to Waterdeep* is a must. Written in a charming, off-handed, knowledgeable style by Volothamp Geddarm, a well-traveled roguish fellow, it is an indispensable pocket guide to the City of Splendors.



Don't think for a minute, however, that Waterdeep has no dungeons! Beneath the bustling city lie the *Ruins of Undermountain*, detailed in a boxed set of the same name. Built long, long ago by Halaster, a crazy wizard (who still wanders its halls, they say), it beckons to all who yearn for adventure and treasure. This is expanded on in its sequel, *Ruins of Undermountain II: The Deep Levels**. In this set, you'll also find adventure and treasure aplenty, to be sure, in Trobriand's Graveyard. (But perhaps I've said too much already.)

Also related to this branch is another trilogy of adventures: "*Marco*" *Volo: Departure*, "*Marco*" *Volo: Journey*, and "*Marco*" *Volo: Arrival**. In these adventures, characters will get a whirlwind tour

of the Realms, led by “Marco” Volo: yet another of those likeable rogues, but most definitely not *the* Volo of guidebook fame! The saying holds true everywhere: “It takes one to know one.”

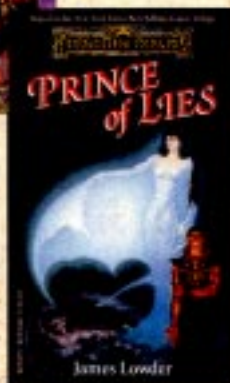
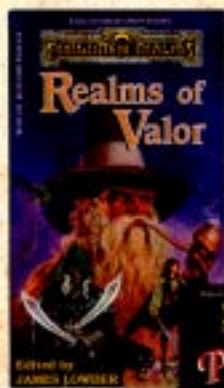
Still another direction presents itself to readers who are intrigued by the mentions of the Harpers, that mysterious, loosely-allied group who permeates the Realms and the material written on it. Members of a highly secret society, they are agents of balance: neither wholly good nor wholly evil. (“Working for good and maintaining balance are often matters of small degrees. If you wish to shape a bush, you must prune it gently, not take a scythe to it.” –Danilo Thann)

The bulk of material available on this group is in the form of novels. The Harpers books form an



open-ended series, currently comprising six titles: *The Parched Sea*, *Elfshadow*, *Red Magic*, *The Night Parade*, *The Ring of Winter*, and *Crypt of the Shadowking*. More Harpers novels are in the works.

Gaming material on the Harpers includes *Anauroch*, an accessory on the Great Sand Sea that lies just south of the Great Glacier; *Jungles of Chult*, an adventure exploring an area written about in detail in the novel *The Ring of Winter*, and featur-



ing dinosaurs (!); and *Code of the Harpers*, an accessory usable in any campaign, detailing the society of Those Who Harp, their membership requirements, their history, their magic, their ballads, and much more.

For those who want to stay in the Shadowdale area, and expand farther into the Dales, there are these accessories: *Dalelands* and *Cormyr**, each covering its area in detail, and each with a full color poster map. Also useful for this expansion is the *Ruins of Myth Drannor* boxed set, detailing the fabled City of Song and Wonder that now lies broken in the forest of Cormanthor. This once-grand center of civilization, where humans, elves, and dwarves lived in happiness and harmony, has become a deadly ruin filled with horrors unspoken; within its mythal border of living magic, spells often "go wrong" for no apparent reason. It's not a place for the novice adventurer; indeed, many seasoned veterans have crossed the mythal, and have never been heard from again.

Also supporting this branch of the Realms are the Avatar trilogy of novels and modules, mentioned earlier in this article; *Code of the Harpers*, detailed in the previous section; *Haunted Halls of Eveningstar* and *Doom of Daggerdale*, two low-level adventures perfect for beginning players and DMs, and many novels. The Finder's Stone trilogy, *Azure Bonds*, *The Wyvern's Spur*, and *Song of the Saurials*; the Pools trilogy, *Pools of Radiancance*, *Pools of Darkness*, and *Pools of Twilight*; and two standalone books, *Realms of Valor* (an anthology of short stories) and *Prince of Lies* (a novel following the story of Cyric, a man raised to godhood in the Avatar Conflict, a man now gone mad with power and the desire for revenge), all provide invaluable background information for any campaign set in the central lands of Faerun. The novels *Spellfire* and *Crown of Fire** also hold much of interest to those campaigning in this area.

Additionally, this general area is the setting for computer games from SSI: their Gold Box series, and "Eye of the Beholder III."

Game material not directly connected to any specific branch includes:

Aurora's Whole Realms Catalogue, a volume filled with everything an adventurer (or a homebody!) could possibly need. Aurora is an entrepreneur, who opened her catalogue outlets throughout Faerun; she has many exclusive agreements for special materials, like elvenbread from Evermeet and cocoa beans from Maztica. The *Catalogue* is a ready reference tool, as well, for those times when someone asks, "But what does a water clock look like? And where can I find one?"

Now, it's up to you. Choose your starting point, and begin the adventure!

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