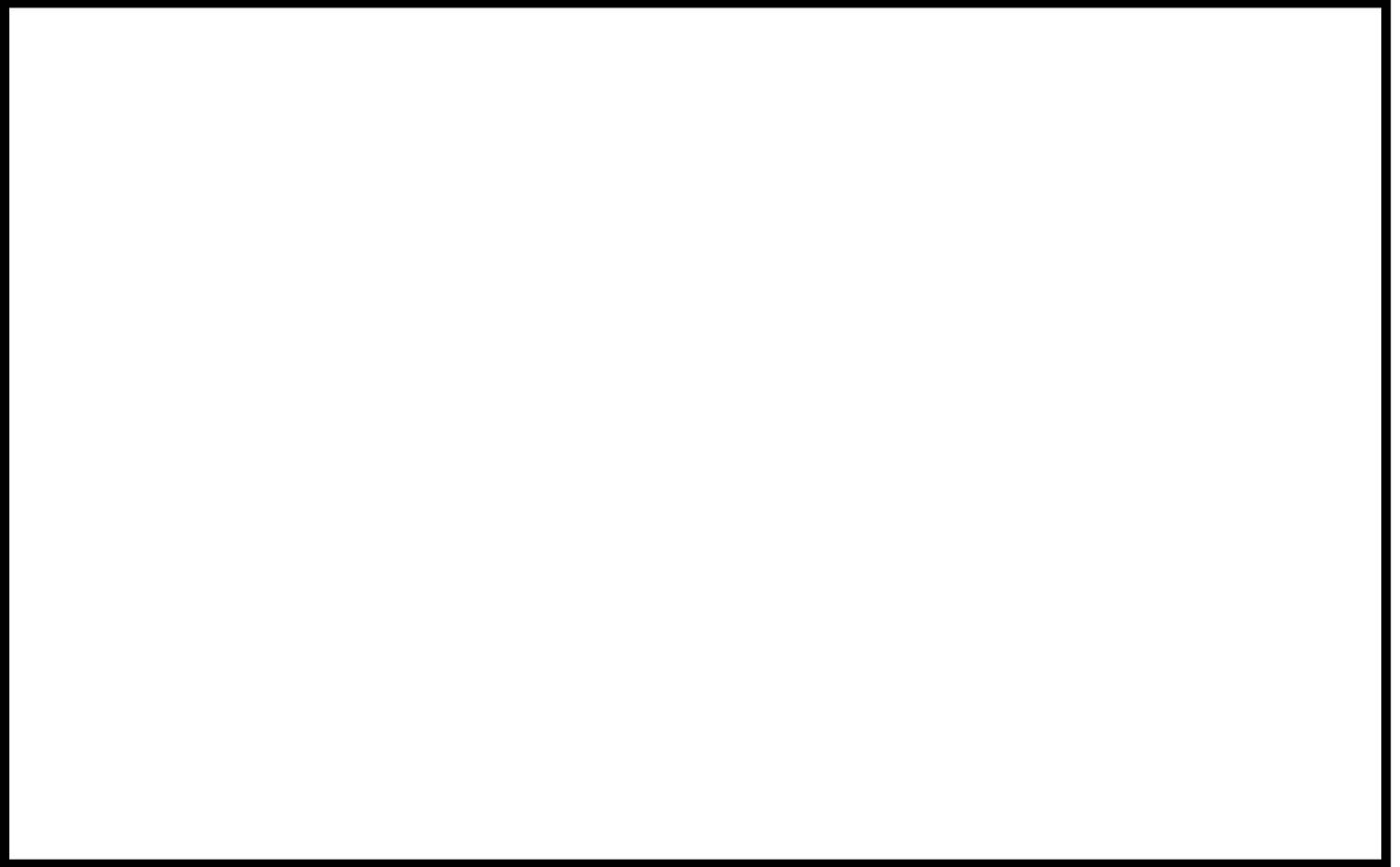




To Ride With Giants

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Book Seven of the Lost Books of Talislanta

To Ride With Giants

Overview

A grand journey across the wastelands, starting in Akmir, then traveling to the Hadjin Ruins, next the Library at Jalaad, and finally to the Kharakhan Ruins. A quest for something lost, something Archaen, something very valuable in a practical sense. This journey will familiarize the intrepid with much of the Wilderlands landscape, and provide plenty of opportunity to tempt those who might waver from the path. This module could be part of a larger campaign in which a successful conclusion could initiate considerable changes in the favor of whomever ends up with the final prize at the end. Along the way, the Player Characters will encounter famous personages, dichotomy of civilization, and unhealthy portions of dangers native to the central lands of Talislanta.

Player Characters of all levels are suggested for this module, with the understanding that the base PCs given in the 4th edition Talislanta core book will likely have a very difficult challenge ahead of them. More experienced PCs will have considerably less trouble at the beginning, but even they will be sorely tested by the end. The Non-Player Characters presented are already set up to participate in the adventure, though they are presented in very basic format for maximum flexibility. Game Masters should read through each Chapter before running them, and work closely with players to introduce them into this module. Experience for each chapter should be awarded before the next chapter begins so PCs can fill in any gaps in their abilities or skills.

Suggestions

While portions of this module concern happenings within the safety of city walls, most of the module will be spent out in the wilds. Therefore, it is suggested to the GM

that characters with Wilderness skills be given additional consideration. Game Masters are encouraged to create as much "wastelands ambiance" as possible, as appropriate for each chapter, perhaps with music in the background.

In the first few chapters, water will be a large concern for most PCs and their mounts as they travel through the hot desert lands. GMs are encouraged to keep this in mind when equipping the party and keeping those PCs with appropriate experience in these matters informed about the water needs of the group. In the latter portions of the module, aberrant weather will become a factor, and GMs should take time to familiarize themselves with the details of such from the 4th edition book.

GMs should also take time to familiarize themselves with any additional material they have on the Wilderlands, including the entries present in 4th edition Talislanta core book. Note that the module starts in a remote location, so some amount of background information on how the PCs got there is important. Note that area descriptions also speak of additional wildlife that is not part of the planned encounters in this module.

There is every possibility that experienced PCs may have been through the Wilderlands before, and GMs should take the character's previous experiences into account when running the module at any given point. This could include the knowledge of where to find resources (like water, shelter, etc.) that are not normally found by those simply wandering about.

There are several possible conclusions to this module, and a great deal of flexibility has been included for ease of Game Mastering, and experience should be awarded after each Chapter.

Chapter One

“Humble first steps”

Here the story begins, and GMs should be ready to introduce the PCs to each other, or should have already. The game mechanic is left to the GM, and should fit as well as possible into their character concept. The exact date has also been left nebulous, so GMs may fit this module into their existing games without issue.

***The Wilderlands Road:** This ancient and decrepit thoroughfare runs the length of the Wilderlands of Zaran, from Kasmir in the west to the Quan Empire. Once paved with sturdy hexagonal stones, the roadway now lies in ruins. It is unsafe in many places, and is often rendered impassable during the time of the spring rains.*

*Easternmost of the Seven Kingdoms' wilderlands outposts, **Akmir** stands at the crossroads between the city-states of Maruk and Hadj. This archaic, walled fortress is regarded by professional men-at-arms as the most dismal of assignments. Situated far from civilization, Akmir is beset by harsh climatic conditions, wild beasts (such as omnivrax and malathropes), and clans of marauding bandits. Consequently, the fortress is manned by the dregs of Talislantan society: Jhangaran mercenaries, Arimite knife-fighters, renegade Ur clansmen, half-men, exiles, and so forth. Akmir also serves as a way-station for travelers in need of shelter, and is regularly frequented by Djaffir merchant tribes and Orgovian traders.*

This covers the general location, and should give the players a point of reference, having the Talislanta map open (or at least visible) will help even more. Be sure to impart

a chaotic feeling here, including dangerous people and rough living. By far the most obvious form of order here will be squads of Jhangaran patrolling what few streets there are, assisted by the occasional mercenary (Arimite or Ur) or Thrall Warrior. All patrol members will use the base archetype as their template. The following reading will help set the scene for the players.

Akmir is like no civilized city, and while the walls are thick, the hospitality is very thin. Rough figures of unsavory types move about in the cramped and dusty streets, and most smell worse than they look. The eyes of those met are filled with pain, some from obvious problems like crippling wounds or disease, and others with something more spiritually disturbing. The background of grumbled words and angry shouts often drowns out normal conversation. Everywhere there are weapons, dangerous persons, gloomy doorways, and the unimaginably filthy alleyway.

By now the PCs should at least be in the same general location, either moving through the street, at a nearby merchant's stand, or something like that. Note that while conditions are generally unclean, the majority of disease is kept in check by the local healers, but it is still not a very healthy place to be. Some attempt should be made to avoid the over-used meeting in a tavern stereotype, all too common a place for drunken vagabonds to plan their next crime against all creation. Ensure that all PCs have complete character sheets, including gear, skills, and at least some idea of their backgrounds in place by now. A good idea would be to include

some Akmir-resident NPCs that some of the PCs are already familiar with, or have at least had some dealings with. Encourage some introductory role-play here, to help the players get acquainted with each other's PCs, though obviously depending on the way you set the situation up not all the PCs may actually be in each other's presence when the first encounter occurs. When you feel the time is right, and the players are ready to begin in earnest, move on to the "hook" reading below...

First Encounter:

"The rabble parts nearby, as a ranting Cymrilian in dusty green robes begs for help from anyone who might pause to listen. Something about his aging physique suggests he once led a softer life than the rest of the exiles here, and his words are those of an educated man. He rambles on about some great treasure that he knows how to find, though by the reaction of the crowd it's obvious they do not believe a word of it. Many shake their heads, murmuring about madness inflicted upon those who dabble in strange magical pursuits, and they turn away. Spotting your hesitation, the grubby babbler lurches in your direction..."

Enter "Cryptoculous," the crazed Cymrilian in the street, who is the "hook" for the module to begin. He is not a threat to the party, and will flee if attacked screaming for help. This will attract the attention of a few squads on patrol, should the players decide to start some trouble.

- Obviously, the crowd has heard his insane babbling before, and none are willing to waste their time listening to the sordid details that Cryptoculous desperately wants to be heard. He can barely survive providing minor boons in the form of

Cryptomantic spells, but is otherwise destitute.

- **Cryptoculous needs someone willing to take him to Hadj, so he can go back to "the dig" and retrieve some tome he seeks there.**
- None of the caravans headed that way will let him tag along, given the ominous nature of Cryptoculous' past, his need for constant supervision, complete lack of funds, and his endless chatter about all manner of obscure subjects.

If the PCs question Cryptoculous at length, they can discover some interesting facts (which he'll be more than glad to submit to spells of truth-seeking in order to validate his belief of these bit of information).

- Role-play Cryptoculous as marginally insane, with strong hints of manic obsession concerning his quest, and the insurmountable fear of being alone for any reason. Cryptoculous is a good man who has experienced terrible things, and seeks to redeem himself.
- **Cryptoculous knows the location of a casket that holds the ancient tome, describing in detail the whereabouts of certain ancient Archaen artifacts.** The personage was the record keeper for his noble lord, and had the book buried with him in the hopes that in the afterlife he could help his dabbling master regain those lost artifacts. These items were the inventions of an obscure Archaen seer who sought to create a means of limitless communications between distant places. While Cryptoculous will admit the artifacts are not likely to be anywhere near Hadj, he is vehement that the tome is the genuine article, and that the catalogue was created after the Great Disaster (so the

locations of the items would still be in existence).

- The dig Crytocolous was on was ended by some terrible assault, resulting in the complete decimation of the crew save Crytocolous himself. The victims were found killed in all manner of horrific and imaginative ways, and some members of the dig are still unaccounted for. Crytocolous was technically cleared of responsibility for the murders, as many were committed by means unavailable to him. The only seer to actually visit the site was driven completely mad by what was sensed, and then brutally killed the next night by Astral Stalkers. Suspicion and fear still follow the old man about; most consider him cursed at best, and a mad killer at worst. Crytocolous has no conscious memory of the event, and was not allowed to return to the site.
- The particular tomb Crytocolous was helping to investigate belonged to a certain ancient noble who supposedly dabbled in arcane things, and came to a sticky end by such. Heavy tolls were paid to the living descendants for the privilege of opening the tomb, the exact amount never having been revealed. There are still rumors of unquiet spirits, which may haunt that tower. The family has barred further digs for the time being, so Crytocolous expects some difficulty there. He is completely oblivious of the political damage that ensued after his departure from Hadj...

Obviously, while Crytocolous himself does not possess the vital information, he knows where to find it.

The ability for any nation to communicate instantly over limitless distances would be an immense advantage, and so Crytocolous holds extremely valuable information. So now the

PCs have the choice of either brutally extracting the information they need from Crytocolous (not very heroic), or taking him to Hadj where he can lead them to tome (the focus of this the first section of this module).

- Torture is not an accepted form of entertainment in Akmir, so the first option holds considerable risk for the offender (death by torture). The second option is perfectly acceptable, and even encouraged by the local authorities as they tire of Crytocolous a little more each day. Crytocolous also wants to uncover the tome and the artifacts in person, as proof that he was right all along, and thus regain his status as a respected Archeologist.
- If the PCs agree to help Crytocolous, then it's just a matter of getting to Hadj. Let the PCs make the arrangements, perhaps with some vaguely helpful suggestions from Crytocolous who will be exuberant about the prospect. Presuming none of the PCs have a windship in their back pocket, likely the trip will be made on the ground to Hadj. Patrols in the immediate vicinity of Akmir are heavily armed and numerous, so chance encounters with all but the most elusive and fearsome opponents are slim at best. Perhaps a full day or two of travel out from Akmir, the party will have its first run in with the local inhabitants of this area...

Ravenger Encounter:

"You start awake to the hissing and thumping of landing creatures in the dead of night, their lithe shapes loping into your midst. Terror drives your sleepy limbs into action as the Ravengers seek out and attack their chosen prey, while others lurk nearby as if studying the unfolding assault. There is no time to prepare, only the sudden struggle to survive. Are you predator, or prey?"

Include one Ravenger per mount, beast of burden, and PC in the party. Adjust ability level of Ravens, as the GM deems necessary.

The Ravens will concentrate half their number on keeping the combatants busy, while the rest attempt to drag away some of the mounts and any beasts of burden loaded with food. As this encounter occurs at night, be sure to include modifiers for fighting at night for all combatants.

Once the Ravens have lost half their number and/or hit points, they must pass a WILLPOWER check to continue the attack each round. Those who fail will steal something resembling food if they can, and then seek easier prey elsewhere.

Once the pests are driven off or slain, let the PCs do as they please, since to the victor go the spoils of conflict. Once the watch is reset, allow whomever is on guard to make a PER check at -7, with Stealth or Guard as the base skill used. Success will spot the dark leathery shape loping away into the night, Partial will get the feeling that something else is out there (for a short while), Failure or worse notices nothing. A Critical Success will note the backward-curved white horns of a Malathrope on the fleeing beast...

A few more days of travel will bring the group to the border of a particularly desolate region of Talislanta, on the southwestern side of the road. While it is not the party's destination, it bears attention as an area to be carefully avoided:

"The Desertlands: This stretch of parched terrain, located to the southeast of the City State of Danuvia, is one of the most desolate regions on the continent. Nothing grows here, for there is no water. The only creatures who can tolerate these environs are horned devil-men and sand demons, neither of which require moisture to survive. Both require sustenance, however, and so hunt each other relentlessly. Scattered across the landscape are the remnants of several ancient civilizations, along with the skeletons of unlucky travelers and their beasts; all almost perfectly preserved due to the excessively hot and dry climate."

Here is a particularly good place to have the PCs meet up with some of the main local merchant-types, the Djaffir.

A typical Caravan will include roughly twenty one to thirty (20+d20) Aht-Ra carrying goods (cloth, precious stones, herbs, red iron, art, books, etc.) and supplies (water, weapons, and food). There will be at least one Djaffir per two Aht-Ra, and these caravans will usually be guarded by half their number again in troops (20+d20 divided by two, round down), most likely mounted on their own Aht-Ra or Equus (usually a mix of the two).

All Djaffir will use the standard base archetype, with roughly one third their total number being female (the Djaffir generally keep the womenfolk away from dangerous pursuits as best they can, and riding with a caravan in Talislanta is dangerous business).

The encounter should be relatively sedate unless the PCs provoke the Djaffir intentionally, and the GM is encouraged to have the Djaffir relieve the PCs of some loose cash for anything they might need.

A day or two along this stretch of the road, a terrible calamity will strike the party, the Malathrope is back, and this time he brought bigger friends:

Omnivrax Encounter:

"From out of the darkened east comes the sound of swift and heavy paws racing along the ground, and an evil gleeful cackling! Before you can draw breath, the long sinuous shape of a Malathrope streaks through your troupe, leaving foul spoor in its wake. Then they come, a pack of the feared predators, Omnivrax! The Malathrope led them to you, of that you are certain, whether or not you will survive the evil prank you are not sure..."

Include one Omnivrax per two PCs in the party. Adjust their ability level as the GM cares to. Make PER checks for the Omnivrax, a Full Success indicates that Omnivrax notices something worth investigating among the party (wagon wheel, shiny shield, dung, etc.). Critical Success means the Omnivrax in question attacks the party; any random victim will do nicely, mounts and beasts of burden included. A Partial Success means that Omnivrax noticed the party, but is simply too focused on the Malathrope to stop for a bite. Failure means the beast is oblivious to anything but the fleeing Malathrope, and Mishap indicates the Omnivrax turn away completely and runs off into the night alone. Any Omnivrax engaged in combat fight until dead.

The Malathrope will continue to lead straying Omnivrax from this pack back to the party until there are none left, whether having been slain or gotten lost. Any direct assault upon the Malathrope will incur its personal wrath, woe be to the attacker for they will suffer this horrible creature's attentions until it is slain. It will shadow that person for the rest of it's unnatural life, causing mayhem and terror all around the person until it finds a way to ensure the prey dies before it does. Malathropes are highly intelligent and cunning; so this could be the start of a most unfortunate relationship. If the group kills off all the Omnivrax present, the Malathrope will

cackle with glee at the resulting carnage, and then go find a not too distant perch to sit and stare at the party from. Any attempted approach or attack will result in the Malathrope fleeing to a safe distance, and then lurking around until just before dawn. The Malathrope will then go hide far off in the Desert Lands until the next night...

Presuming the party survives the Omnivrax pack attack; the Malathrope will now follow the group along. It will plot and scheme, aloud and close enough to be faintly heard by the group. **The Malathrope will try to guide other dangerous creatures (Lopers and Enim being the most likely) into the party's path, testing the PCs defenses, seeking weakness.** The rest of the trip is open for additional encounters as decided by the GM, though it is suggested that they not be quite as deadly as the encounters already given. Each night, the Malathrope slowly refines the plan to kill the party, and then feast upon their still- beating hearts...

The City State of Hadj:

Days later, after the road splits off towards Carantheum, the City State of Hadj will come into view to the south. If the PCs have not eliminated the Malathrope, it will hound them until they reach the city. The Malathrope will cackle, chattering that no city is safe from it, but that it would rather play with the party undisturbed. It will wait for the party, watching for them to emerge from the city, and plan for their return...

*"The independent **City State of Hadj** is located south of Djaffa, in the Wilderlands of Zaran. It is home to the Hadjin, a fabulously wealthy people of lofty and elevated airs. The Hadjin Ruins, situated adjacent to the city, are a great attraction to itinerant adventurers, who come here in droves to tour or explore the ruins (the Hadjin charge a fee for such privileges, which do not come cheaply)."*

Outside the city, there are very few patrols (Jhangaran warriors usually), but a small crude stockade surrounding numerous tents lies near the northern gate. It has no name, but is somewhat safer than sleeping in the wild should the party arrive after suns-down, and the Gates of Hadj are closed until sunrise. Here the merchants provide their own security, likely consisting of a few Dracartans (Scout archetype) or Djaffir (standard Merchant/Bandit archetype). Here the accommodations are spare, but the nightlife somewhat vibrant, and the food or wine is cheap. The hosts make most of their money caring for the beasts which for any reason must remain outside the walls of Hadj for a time.

At the gate, once the PCs wait in line to get in, an entry fee of one gold lumen is being charged for each sentient humanoid and beast entering the city. This is a new development, galling to more than one person wishing to enter Hadj. The guards are completely unforgiving however, and will simply not allow anyone to enter who has not paid the fee.

The guards consist of a few Mercenary Thralls (base archetype), a couple of Danuvian Viragos (base archetype), a gaggle of Jhangaran Spearmen (spear, leather armor), and the leader, a Farad gate master (Procurer template). The GM decides their exact numbers, which probably vary a little from day to day.

- If they are assaulted by superior force, the Farad will call for aid from the city watch. Then, d20/4 rounds later, a few squads of the city watch will arrive to assist. Some squads will be led by a Thrall in full kit, and followed by ten Jhangaran Spearmen. The others will be led by a Danuvian Virago in full gear, and followed by another ten Jhangaran Spearmen. If this is not enough to quell the problem, the city

watch will call out for help, d20/5 rounds later a squad of Farad Mercenaries lead by a Farad Mage will arrive as a stalling force. Then, d20/4 rounds later, some squads of twenty Jhangaran Archers (led by a Virago) will appear, followed each round by another identical squad until ten squads are engaged. As this is now a major threat to Hadj security, the gladiators will be called out, a mob of exceedingly lethal warriors of all stripes, including the near-legendary Saurian Gladiators. At this point, if the party has not been subdued, then everyone else flees their presence for as long as they are in Hadj.

“The walls of Hadj hide the splendor of the city from the surrounding regions, all the more certain to draw coin from a traveler’s purse just to see the awe-inspiring interior. Here many of the inner streets are swept twice daily, while the slums breed all manner of diseased parasites in the filth settled there. From portions of the city, great cheers of joy and excitement echo off the buildings, filling the air with their power. Yet not far away in rude dungeons, the moans for the dying are the only song to be heard. In Hadj one can garner a king’s ransom, or die slowly in a filthy gutter, forgotten like so many others.”

Now the PCs can experience the dichotomy of civilization at its peak, lavish mansions, diseased gutters, fine discussions of philosophy, gladiatorial arenas, perfumed masquerades, and back alley stabbings.

- Crytoculous will want to seek out the “Great House of Baloniste” immediately, and his Urban Background will lead him straight to the Noble Quarter, where the guards will halt the party. **The guards are humorless Arimites, who insist that no Baloniste house is present in the Noble Quarter.** Trouble here will be answered by city watch guards, in a matter of just a

couple of rounds by many squads of various sorts, so forcing the way in is inadvisable.

- **Some asking around of the local populace will reveal that the Baloniste are now “Hajan,” having lost their nobility to some sort of scandal involving their ancestral tombs a while back.** They were removed from the Noble Quarter, and sent to live among the common Hajan in the Residential Quarter. This will come as a complete shock to Cryptoculous of course, but he will not give up so easily. While the Baloniste House still retains control over the tombs, their loss of face may take generations to regain. **Obviously, the party is in the wrong place, and will need to go to the Residential Quarter to find House Baloniste.**

Once found, the still lavish manse retains no small amount of décor, with a garden, tapestries, potted plants, and the like all about. Wealthy personages in other lands live like this, and call their lives good; one can only imagine what the Hadjin live like. The party will be met at the door by Arimite guards (standard Knife-fighter template), who will alert the residents of visitors, including the visitor’s identity. Initially, the group will be invited in, and asked to wait in the foyer. Here ample seating and a stone table await guests, along with a ceramic pitcher of water and some glasses to drink from. Then, in a few minutes, several Jhangaran Spearmen and the Arimites will enter, flanking Hajourn. **Fury will be obvious on Hajourn’s face, and he is quite ready to have the entire party slaughtered in cruel revenge.** This is a very tense situation, and should be handled carefully, or dire consequences will almost certainly ensue.

- **If the worst occurs, Hajourn will order his troops to kill Cryptoculous, and anyone who dares to defend him.** Hajourn will then retreat to the balcony above (with Loke and some Jhangaran Spearmen), and be ready to summon the City Watch if his guards are obviously losing the fight. The fight will be a source of great amusement for Hajourn, if the house guards are winning. Hajourn has no reservations about having any survivors thrown in the dungeons of Hadj for spilling blood in his house (a legitimate crime in Hadj), truly a terrible fate indeed. Inmates are often dead from any number of causes long before their case is heard in the Hadj courts, and a common sentence is to be allowed to fight for freedom in the Gladiatorial Pits...

“The nobility of Hadj have taken recently to betting heavily on gladiatorial combats, and the most outrageous sums can be had on the more impressive fights. Those nobles with the best betting instincts or advisors can gain great social rewards, as well as wealth.”

- **If the party manages to cool off the situation, likely through the fact that Cryptoculous is essentially innocent of any wrongdoing, then perhaps a deal can be made.** The party must prove to Hajourn they can uncover the truth about what happened at the tomb, and end the mystery that essentially demoted his family. Hajourn will permit a return trip to the tomb in this case, for a fee of one thousand gold lumens (or treasure of equal value, his Kasmiran Moneylender accountant will Appraise any items as needed), and he reserves the right to claim any items brought forth from the tomb. The party has little choice but to pay the fee and journey to the tomb, especially as Hajourn will insist that an “observer” is to go with the group to the Ruins of Hadjin.

If the party cannot raise the funds immediately, then they will either have to go earn the money or leave poor old Crytoculous in Hadj.

Once terms are agreed upon, Hajourn's Farad Litigator will draw up the contract, which all parties involved must sign, and payment must be made then. Loke will be the Observer, along with several Jhangaran Spearmen as guards (total number at least equal to the number of PCs). The party is left to it's own devices to gather what tools and resources they require for the dig, but the contract is clear that the dig must start within the week, and end no more the three weeks after it starts at the tomb.

- **Astute PCs might try to contact some of the surviving investigators who previously inspected the site;** they have all met their ends in various messy and/or painful ways shortly after the Baloniste family was ejected from the Noble Quarter. This list includes at least twenty unnamed Jhangaran Spearmen, A Sindaran Investigator, two Yitek, several Danelek slaves, and a Monad. **No direct ties to these events can be traced back to House Baloniste, all of the bodies were reduced to ashes, and those remains scattered to the wind.** This is very suspicious, but the lack of a demonstrable evidence trail keeps Hajourn safely out of the courts. Worse, even attempting to contact the spirits of the investigators proves futile, as they have been destroyed after leaving their bodies by means unknown.

Presuming there will be at least one wagon or cart (to carry food, water, camping gear, and digging tools) in the group, the journey will take at least two days to make, possibly more depending on the weather. **Make sure the dig fee has been paid (1000 gold lumens) before the party is allowed to**

set out. Here in the desert region between Hadj and its tombs, it is extremely hot and dry, so some care must be taken by the PCs to ensure the party does not suffer overly much before even reaching the tomb in question. Once the area is reached, then read the following...

*"The area comprising the **Hadjin Ruins** is actually a vast burial ground littered with stone towers, each a mausoleum, in which are interred the remains of the Hadjin's early ancestors. The Hadjin provide tours of the ruins, and allow individuals to explore the mausoleum towers should they choose to do so. In either case, a fee must be paid to the City State of Hadj."*

This area is well patrolled by mercenaries often mounted on Winged Aht-Ra, so there should be few if any encounters on the way to the tomb. However, this will grant the party a chance to get to know one of Hajourn's closer allies, Loke. This will unlikely be a pleasant experience though, as the rugged Ur mercenary has little more than contempt for most beings, and she much enjoys her ability to physically intimidate humanoid males of most kinds. Overall, none of Hajourn's employees are inclined to talk much, and most certainly not interested in conversation about their employer. Loke will do her best not to start any trouble for now.

The Tomb:

"The tomb itself is a large weathered spire of dark gray rock; relatively unimpressive when compared to its much larger neighbors, thrusting up through the sandy ground some fifty feet or so. Its surface was once a mosaic of bas-relief and carvings, now long since weathered into unidentifiable irregular surfaces. The entrance is being covered by a large round disk of black stone set upon a ledge at ten feet above the surrounding ground. It seems to be merely resting on the ledge, only the stone's immense weight holding it in place. The ramshackle remains of a wooden ramp lead up to the closed portal, barely wide enough to admit one person along its length. The wind blows almost constantly, lashing everything around with grit and dust. Framing the family tombs lie the mountains beyond..."

*"The **Topaz Mountains** run for hundreds of miles in a wavering line of cliffs and precipitous peaks, separating the Dark Coast from the Wilderlands of Zaran. Covered in thick jungle along the lower altitudes, the mountains are home to numerous strange creatures and beings, including batranc, manrak, chasm vipers, Nagra spirit trackers, and satada; the latter, having made their way into the region via the Dead River, a dry gorge which extends like an ugly scar across half the continent. Topaz crystals weighing up to twenty pounds have been found in these mountains."*

Considering the local weather conditions out here, the stone towers are often extremely hot, enough to burn those unprotected who touch the stone (DR 1). Just standing close to a tower is enough to see the heat waves rippling on their surfaces.

Once the party gets their camp laid down, they can open the tomb with a special gold "key" which Loke holds. The portal is otherwise impossible to force aside with brute strength, and warded on the inner surface against all manner of assault. Touching the key to the door rolls the stone aside, revealing the dusty seven-foot high passage within. The passage is littered with shards of broken wood dowels, which were used to disable the traps that are now active once more.

Hopefully the party has brought someone familiar with the Traps Skill, or something close to it, since the variety of slashing blades, spring loaded spikes, and ankle crushing foot falls inflict d20 damage each (some traps are deteriorating, others are still strong).

Another danger here is the possibility of disease, as many of the traps have never been cleaned, unspeakable filth still clings to many of them.

The entrance passage is some thirty feet deep, and lined with these deadly devices (the exact number is left to the GM), so care must be taken. The inner stone door must be manually pushed aside (total STR +10, or 350 pounds of pressure) to reveal the entry chamber. Additionally, there are no ready handholds, but a few cleverly disguised holes provide places to insert bars that could be used for such a purpose. There are no lights in this area of the tomb, so the party must provide all illumination.

"This octagonal room contains no less than seven doors, each one covered in arcane symbols. The smooth stone floor is bare, as are the finished walls. Even here, the sounds from outside are muted. The ceiling is painted with an amazingly intricate pattern of astromantic significance; it is a representation of the various known dimensions in relation to each other. The cold floor tiles are carved from basalt, lending an eerie feeling of walking upon the night sky, littered with a sea of tiny white flecks resembling stars. Crytoculous will insist upon studying all seven doors and the painting before proceeding onward into the tomb from here. He says he remembers that the whole room is one big trap, and the correct door must be used if the tome is to be found, or be hurled into another dimension."

This process will take the rest of the day, and deep into the night. Crytoculous will want most of the party to remain outside until he deciphers the puzzle, and finds the correct door.

- Attempting to push open any one of the doors activates the trap, a mighty arcane vortex (Arkon's Twister) that sweeps everything in the room into another dimension (GMs choice)!
- Attempting to open more than one door is fruitless (the doors will not open and are warded in similar fashion to the main entrance), but does not activate the magical trap.

Some time deep in the night, the old fellow will fall asleep, and will remain so until nearly high suns the next day...

Manrak Encounter:

"The only warning comes in the droning sound of wide insect wings, and then they are upon you. Out of the blazing suns they dive down to their food, you. Chitin covered hides and faceted eyes travel in a blur of motion, the Manrak have come. With no real cover for you to hide in, they have the advantage of mobility and blinding speed. The rasping sound of those hungry poisoned mandibles and creaking claws are things you can only hope you live to forget about."

Include one Manrak per three PCs, rounding up. They will attempt to paralyze any combatants before chasing down any fleeing animals. If at any time, they suffer a total of half of their initial hit points, roll a WIL check for them each round:

- **Critical Success** sends them into a blind rage, fighting until they die (no further WIL checks).
- **Full Success** means they will fight for one more round.
- **Partial Success** prompts them to back off for one round before returning; but this time seeking wounded prey only.
- **Failure** indicates the Manrak in question will go after a non-combatant mount instead.
- **Mishaps** ensure that Manrak will flee the fight, and return to its hive to heal.

Surviving party members will note that Loke ran into the tomb just before the attack, and will be found in the passage with her weapons drawn. She does not bother to explain anything, but simply stows her weapons, and goes to roughly wake Crytoculous. He awakes with a start, exclaiming that he has the answer, and calls for the rest of the party to join him in the entry chamber. When the PCs arrive, he'll ensure that only seven additional persons are in the chamber, allowing no others to remain or enter. He then

arranges everyone into a particular pattern in the room (a total of seven positions), and stands near the exit.

"Crytocolous speaks particular phrases in Archaen describing the various dimensions in relation to one another, and the corresponding representations over each person's head begins to glow softly. The chant grows louder as Crytocolous intones the ancient family name of Baloniste, and the symbols on the painting drift into a sort of vaguely recognizable pattern which points to a particular door. Crytocolous cackles with glee, and strides proudly over to the door which was indicated by the pattern, his eyes all a- twinkle."

He will tell the party to be on their guard, as he fears whatever may have attacked his compatriots before may still lie within the tomb itself, and does not want to repeat his previous experiences of the results of that attack. He'll insist the party be ready for work, including any tools they brought along for the dig, and plea for care to be taken not to set off any mechanisms which may block off parts of the tomb – particularly the exit. Loke will choose to remain here "as backup," and has the Jhangarans stay in the camp to guard it.

"Once his statements are acknowledged, Crytocolous will trace a previously invisible rune upon the door, and it will vanish into thin air! Beyond the doorway is a spiraling stair, leading both up and down. The stair itself is easily five feet wide, with roughly seven feet of headroom throughout, and carved of the same dark gray stone that appears on the outside of the tomb. The dank cool air of the dark stair seems faintly tinged with some vaguely unpleasant scent, the exact nature of which escapes identification."

Crytocolous knows the noble lord and his immediate family will be located "upstairs," and suspects the loyal recorder's vault is actually below among what would be the revered servant's graves. PCs may want to go up in the hopes of finding some valuables (or "investigating past events," as they may claim), but Crytocolous urges a trip into the lower chambers instead.

"Down Below..."

This section describes the areas below the octagonal chamber, and should only be used if the players proceed down the stairs. You may skip forward to the next section labeled "Up Above..." should the PCs turn in that direction first. Those who follow Crytocolous into the lower chambers will find the following:

"At the bottom of the twisting steps, a small landing ends abruptly in a heavily decorated door. The silvery tracings bear out a once beautiful design, but it has been terribly marred long ago by what appear to be claw marks of some kind. Closer inspection reveals the markings to have been made by mannish hands and ferocious intention. On the left, a large silvery wheel is set into the wall, obviously meant for opening and closing the door. The floor here is smeared with something tarry, black, and exceptionally foul smelling."

Those experienced with the undead will recognize the "tell tale signs" of a Necrophage's attempt to break into the chamber beyond (PER and applicable Skill check). The wheel requires a STR check to turn, but still functions well enough to get the door to open enough to squeeze an average sized humanoid between the stone doors (about a foot or so). Large humanoids (GMs call) and objects at least two feet in all dimensions cannot pass through the partially open doorway.

"Within the doorway, a roughly hewn stone hall splits off away from the door in two directions. The floor is smooth, but unfinished. Where the two halls meet, about fifteen feet in front of the door, is a large statue of an ancient Archaen warrior or guard, girded for battle. The statue is dusted with age, but is completely intact, and very heavy. The decorative painting on it has faded almost completely, but the faint shades are still visible. The walls and roof are simply unfinished, but both are of solid stone. The halls are some forty feet wide, ninety feet deep, and roughly ten feet tall. The same interior stone is found here as above in all cases. Lining the walls are horizontal niches, the majority of them occupied by only remains of the dead. In the middle of each hall, a procession of carved sarcophagi hold the centerline; most are carefully inscribed with ancient runes and decorations. Each one is topped with a heavy and thick stone lid, and all appear to be undisturbed. The faint musty smell of the long dead drifts in the stale air here, and only your own sounds break the pervading silence."

Cryptoculous will insist no one touch anything until he is sure the statue is deactivated, it seems it is enchanted to "come alive," and kill all intruders if a certain command phrase is not spoken before it. Cryptoculous knows the phrase, and deactivates the statue at the first opportunity. The graves contain only the most simple of treasures of metal and stone (only a few gold lumens worth at best), as all else has long since rotted into dust.

Cryptoculous will closely inspect each of the sarcophagi, and will declare much frustration when he does not find the final resting place of the record keeper! It seems to Cryptoculous the record keeper's grave may have had special significance, and is probably located elsewhere.

Cryptoculous is wrong though; the record keeper's grave is actually behind the

statue, on the opposite wall from the doorway, where the two halls meet. It is a vertical niche, in which the record keeper's coffin is hidden behind a permanent illusion (about Level 10) made to look and feel exactly like the surrounding wall.

PCs should be encouraged to poke about on their own in the search for the record keeper's grave, as leaving the servant's mausoleum only ensures it will not be found. If the PCs find the niche, read the following to whoever peeks behind the illusion:

"A large white marble sarcophagus stands before you, it's cover engraved to appear as a tall stern Hadjin dressed in luxurious ancient garb, resplendent with detailed jewelry and a large tome in his hands. This pristine image is unmarred by time or even dust, and appears to have been freshly polished to your eyes."

The grave does actually contain the Record Keeper, and the tome Cryptoculous spoke so often of. Indeed, it seems the record keeper was also buried with some rather expensive jewelry (several hundred gold lumens worth) and a magical writing pen of antiquity (also worth some considerable coin, especially to the right collector).

Unfortunately, there was a magical rune inscribed upon the inner surface of the sarcophagus cover that reactivates the statue if the cover is removed from the sarcophagus!

Statue Encounter:

"Even as you rejoice in your find, the sound of grinding stone interrupts your celebration, and the rune upon the inner surface of the sarcophagus lid fades from view. The statue turns upon your number hefting its deadly weapon in righteous fury, and unfeeling eyes seek out the first victim!"

The statue will have the same abilities as an Earth Demon, except it will lack any Geomantic Order spell ability. It is less than twenty feet from the sarcophagus when it is activated. The GM, in accordance with the overall strength of the party, should determine its level. This guardian will fight until all intruders in the halls are dead, or it is destroyed. It has no black diamond heart to reward the victor with though.

There is nothing else of interest in the lower chambers unless the GM chooses to place something there, and the PCs are free to exit the tomb immediately if they so choose. Loud altercations may alert the possible inhabitants of the upper levels.

“Up Above...”

If the party chooses to explore the upper areas of the tomb, they are well within the bounds of the contract to do so. The upper levels are presented in the order they would be encountered as one moved up the stairwell.

Second Floor: here are the graves of the important servants of the house.

“There is a door leading off the stairwell, which is not barred or locked in any way. Beyond is a small sort of “common room,” decorated with the remnants of tattered hangings, all far beyond proper viewing. Several open arches lead into the side chambers, each holding a servant’s coffin. In the ancient tradition, each one was laid to rest with the tools of their trade. The cook lies in a small room with a wide variety of utensils, knives, ladles, and such. The next chamber holds a gardener, along with shears and clippers, trowels and long dead potted plants.”

The GM is encouraged to come up with a few other servants as well, but there is unlikely to be anything of value here. In general most items are decayed nearly to dust or beyond, some are unrecognizable, and the

rest is merely drifts of dust on the floor. **The Third Floor** is a little more interesting:

“The next door adjoining the long stairwell is forged of black iron, although it seems to be slightly open, as though someone forgot to close it completely. The sturdy portal creaks open to reveal a large two- tiered gallery, a singular tall chamber packed with moldering relics of a bygone age. The dull gleam of gold and gems catch the eye, peeking out from the decrepit remains of various gaudy works of art. A fine layer of dust clings to everything, and only a single shattered goblet on the floor betrays any disturbance of this chamber in many long years.”

The goblet was dropped by a previous digger, an act of shock and horror at the scene of a compatriot being ravenously disemboweled and eaten by two Necrophages. Magical investigation might reveal this, depending on the magical options available to the PCs. The chamber does hold some considerable treasure in the form of precious metals and stones, all must be dug out of the rotting materials surrounding them, and the exact amount is left to the GM.

Among the treasure lies a small collection of mostly broken clockwork devices, many shaped like small animals (like avir mostly). One of them still functions, a wind-up avir, which when activated flies in a circle which chirping an ancient tune. Another is some sort of wide-eyed lizard caricature, which is not functioning but could be repaired by a skill technomancer (- say- difficulty rating 10). When functioning, it detects movement within 75 feet, and lets out a chime like sound as an alert. The other exact details of the devices are up to the GM.

One item of interest lies in a small golden box, a magical brass urn – the result of the Imprisonment Sigil of the Seven Sigils of Power (“Imprisonment” from the

Sorcerer's Guide). It contains an ancient Enim, who is quite mad by now.

If the PCs find a way to free him, he will simply run screaming out of the tomb, knocking anyone in his path aside, and fleeing into the desert never to be seen again. The urn will vanish into thin air if the Enim is freed. Otherwise this curio is quite valuable, in an arcane sense, and could fetch a handsome price in many places...

"The spiraling stairs finally end in two large brass and silver bound black iron doors, each one with a large black iron ring as a handle. The doors are not barred, and open silently with but a gentle push. Within, a swirling pattern of colored lights and sound assaults the senses, and ancient tune bleating eternally to pulsing lights all around. The large chamber is three levels tall, and beyond gaudy in décor. It seems to be some sort of ancient ballroom, and the party is still going on. As if frozen in time, dancers stand all about in mid motion, fully bedecked in all their finery. Fully a third or more of the dancers are dressed up in artistic interpretations of extra dimensional entities of every stripe. Even ancient and moldering as they are, the costumes are magnificent, and richly detailed. Oddly, the desiccated corpses are relatively pristine, unmarred by the horrible habits of Necrophages. Decorative tables laden with decanters and glasses are all about. Rich tapestries have long since fallen to the floor and rotted into dusty messes, but the huge hanging crystal and silver chandelier is in perfect condition, lacking even corrosion."

It is here that the party must take the most care, for at the opposite side of the ballroom on the top level is a huge black obsidian mirror trimmed in brass and silver. This ancient item has been left "on," and occasionally denizens of other dimensions wander in.

They do not often escape though, as the solid walls and bound door tend to keep them

from doing so. The GM is encouraged to introduce the party to a favorite extra dimensional beastie of their choice. Some suggestions include, Necrophages, Ghosts, Erx, and Astral Stalkers.

The mirror is firmly set into the wall, but could be freed with considerable effort, and is worth a small fortune to some. The source of the lights and sound are a variety of enchanted crystals in the chandelier, items of some worth to certain collectors.

Presuming the party has located the tome, Loke will urge them to return to Hadj within a day of finding it, at spear point if need be. Since Loke has the authority to call upon the services of the mercenary patrols, and even the City Guard of Hadj in the name of her master, any attempt at delays of escape will likely prove dangerous as well as unsuccessful (remember, Loke can usually tell if the PCs are lying to her, or if they are about to attack). She also has no reservations about attacking Crytoculous as well, so that no one present will be able to translate the tome's contents. The return journey should be relatively swift and uneventful, taking roughly three more days depending upon weather.

Conclusion:

Back at the House of Baloniste, Hajourn will insist on seeing EVERYTHING the party gathered from the tomb, including the tome. Loke will attest to the tomb being cleared of dangerous creatures, thus opening the way for further digs. If the brass urn is present, Hajourn will take custody of it, along with some of the most expensive intact jewelry. **At first he will also take possession of the tome, an act which will send Crytoculous into a frenzy to regain the tome, if only verbally.**

Knowing the tome has immense value to the old Cymrilian, Hajourn will savor the moment, and then make an offer to the party: if they swear to take Loke with them in their

search for the fabled items listed within the tome, and send Loke back with at least one of the items they find, Hajourn will return the book to Crytoculous. Loke will know if they make any false statements, so they have little choice.

Crytoculous will agree of course, since he needs more time to study the tome. **The remaining party may choose to decline, but this leaves the old mage alone with Loke, obviously a very dangerous thing for old Crytoculous.** He will plead with any hesitant PCs to come with him, as much to ensure some of the treasures listed in the tome come back to civilization as to protect him from Loke, who will doubtless take everything. PCs are of course free to end this module here, leaving poor old Crytoculous to his fate at Loke's hands, and spend their gains in Hadj as they see fit.

Hajourn will be glad to hear the acceptance of his conditions, and says he would like to make arrangements to hasten the party on to its next destination. He will invite the PCs to stay in his home, while Hajourn attends to the matter and Crytoculous studies the text. The PCs now have a few days to explore the City of Hadj, until the GM feels it's time for Crytoculous to be done. In Hadj practically anything is available for a price, if you know where to find it, or know someone who does.

At the appointed time, Crytoculous will assemble the PCs, and tell them they must travel to the Library at Jalaad. There he says the tome will guide them to several works that detail the exact locations of the lost treasures, which include a fabulous magical arch mage's robe (said to confer great arcane knowledge upon the wearer), a bountiful cauldron which could make endless food, one of the lost tomes of Sorcery (a work of immense magical significance, a work derived directly from some of the missing pages of the Archaen Codex), a mighty crystal globe

which could control the weather within many miles, a magical windship which could change in size from a skiff to a windship of war, a powerful seeing stone which can be used to communicate with other seeing stones, several legendary weapons, and a tome which supposedly held the secrets to utilizing the Witchgates..!

Hajourn will then offer the party the services of a windship, run by an old Cymrilian "friend" of his. Since this is a rare chance to possibly cut a great deal of time off the trip, it will be almost certain the party will accept, especially since the captain is a sincere fellow unlike Hajourn.

The introduction to **Captain Cylostion** will be a simple affair, and the captain will take on "this little errand" for Hajourn without hesitation, apparently to pay back some favor to Hajourn. Cylostion will seem to be most gracious to Hajourn, but Loke knows he hates Hajourn, and perceptive PCs may pick that up.

"The Soaring Avir is the main transport for traveling Hadjin dignitaries, and is crewed by a much talked about Cymrilian crew. Their exploits of years gone by are the stuff of legends and lore in the Seven Kingdoms, and wind ship crews everywhere seek to achieve such feats. They have braved the icy winds of the north while traveling to places like Altan and Rhin, rescued endangered citizens of the Seven Kingdoms from various places and perils, and won several of the most coveted prizes in the Windship Races during past Magical Fairs. The captain himself is said to have earned the favor of the Wizard King for certain covert services to the crown."

Within hours, the party will be packed up and on the *Soaring Avir*, introduced to the crew, and off to Jalaad and the adventures there...

NPC List:

Crytocolous

An older Cymrilian mage, a graduate of the Lyceum, Master of Runic Ciphers and Arcane Lore, and a dabbler in Archeology. His world was shattered by some encounter he had while on a dig in the Hadjin Ruins. His discovery both ensured the horrible death of his crew, and shattered his sanity. A passing mercenary patrol found Crytocolous wandering alone, and brought him back to the City of Hadj. A source of embarrassment, he was sent away, ending up in Akmir destitute and alone.

Occasionally, his madness gets the better of him, and he entreats all who just might listen to his ranting about the great treasure hinted at in his infamous dig.

INT +4 **PER** +2

WIL 0 **CHA** 0

STR -1 **DEX** -1

CON -1 **SPD** -1

CR -1 **MR** +6

Hit Points: 18

Skills: Arcane Lore +10, Etiquette +6, Fashion +5, Ride (Equus) +6, High Talisman +10, Low Talisman +7, Archaen Language +7, Nomadic Language +4, Urban Background +7, Barter +4, Haggle +4, Analysis +5, Antiquarian +5, Cartography +3, Cryptography +5, Geography +3, History +5

Cryptomancy: Reveal +9, Ward +12, and Defend +3

Wizardry: Alter +3, and Illusion +2.

Gear: ragged robes, ragged hooded cloak, worn leather shoes, cracked leather belt and pouch.

Cylostion

The dashing older captain of the “Soaring Avir,” a fine windship in his service. He enjoys the company of the royalty of Hadj,

and the lucrative business such associations bring. Cylostion is a Swordmage, though these skills are somewhat neglected. While he may seem to be happy with ferrying the wealthy on tours of the Ruins and Tombs, he secretly longs for adventures of days gone by. His act as the dashing captain is becoming tired routine, and his crew are beginning to see through the lie.

Cylostion's manners are perfect, his clothes the height of fashion, and ludicrously expensive jewelry adorns his features. His Cymrilian roots are strong and pure, his family is well known for having taken part in the coupe that drove out the Tanasians. As such, he still holds his rank in Cymril, and is currently assigned to Hadj for “diplomatic courtesy”.

INT +1 **PER** +1

WIL 0 **CHA** +1

STR +1 **DEX** +1

CON +1 **SPD** 0

CR +3 **MR** +3

Hit Points: 23

Skills: Urban Background +8, Climbing +6, Swim +3, High Talisman +9, Low Talisman +10, Archaen +9, Etiquette +8, Fashion +6, Ride (Equus) +6, Longsword +6, Dagger +4, Brawling +3, Evade +3, Guard +3, Tactics +5, Cartography +3, Cultures (Seven Kingdoms, Desert Kingdoms) +5, Diplomacy +3, Espionage +3, Appraiser +3, Merchant +3, Pilot (Windship)+10, Arcane Lore+8

Wizardry: Alter +4, Heal +4, Illusion +4,

Aeromancy: Move +7, Conjure +7, Attack +4.

Gear: Expensive/Fashionable Clothes, Lightening Longsword (Aeromantic Attack +10, 3/day, 50ft range Red Iron), Soaring Avir Windship, Spyglass, Medallion of Arcane Shields (Wizardry Defend Aura +10, 5 round duration, 3/

day, silver), and Spangalor Tunic (Red Iron).

Antagonists:

Hajourn Baloniste

His once Hadjin family reduced painfully to Hajan status, Hajourn seeks elevation at any cost. As the eldest surviving male, he still holds sway over the tombs of his ancestors, and will only allow them to be reopened if proof of the perspective diggers skill to elevate him once more is absolute. He most certainly would not normally let Crytocolous embarrass him again, and will scheme relentlessly to kill the old mage if he should return to Hadj. Hajourn keeps a number of unsavory thugs in his employ for such dirty work.

INT +2 PER +2

WIL 0 CHA -1

STR -1 DEX 0

CON -1 SPD 0

CR -3 MR +1

Hit Points: 17

Skills: Administrator +12, Etiquette +8, Fashion +9, Arcane Lore +3, Antiquarian +7, Appraiser +8, Diplomacy +7, Litigator +6, Cook +7, Ride (Equs) +5, High Talislan +10, Urban Background +7, Barter +5, Haggle +5, History +5, Gambling +5, Underworld +5.

Gear: Costly Silk Clothes, Heinous amounts of cash, slaves, and employees, Mansion in Hadjan Quarter of Hadj.

Loke

An Ur renegade bounty huntress with a reputation for bringing prey back alive, if perhaps somewhat damaged. She will be a growing thorn in the PC's side, as Hajourn insists that Loke be part of the expedition, or no dig will occur. Loke could care less about

some trinket, her job is to ensure Crytocolous is brought back to Hadj for Hajourn to use or kill as he sees fit.

Loke enjoys brawling in particular, a skill well developed, and much feared by witnesses to her prowess. Worse, Loke's opening move is almost always a crippling blow of some sort (eye jab, knee kick, dislocated joint, etc.), and "Dirty Tricks" is her best game. Loke displays an almost pathological dislike of insects of all kinds, a trait that she refuses to discuss the origins of. Naturally, Loke's pay will be considerable, and doubled if whatever Crytocolous seeks is brought back as well...

INT -2 PER 0

WIL 0 CHA -2

STR +5 DEX -1

CON +5 SPD -1

CR +5 MR -1

Hit Points: 39

Skills: Ur Club +4, War Axe +8, Dagger +6, Brawling +8, Mounted Combat +2, Command +4, Engineer (Siege) +4, Coerce +4, Underworld +7, Ride (Ogriphant) +5, Northern Language +10, Low Talislan +9, Wandering Background +7, Climbing +3, Swim +3, Evade +5, Shield +5, Tracking +5, Survival (Desert, Wastelands, Mountains) +5.

Gear: Black Iron Shield (DR 30), Partial Black Iron Plate (PR 6), Leather Halter and Loincloth, Red Iron War Axe, Arimate Luckstone, Firewalker Ring (Wizardry Ward vs. Fire and Heat, Continuous, Silver w/small Firegem), and Hunter's Charm (Shamanism Conceal +10, 3/day for 5 rounds).

Concluding thoughts:

The feel of this adventure will be one of grand traveling adventure, with elements of cloak and dagger, as well as a surprise ending (perhaps).

The first portion will be getting to know Cryptoculous, and getting him safely to Hadj. Next will be the challenge of getting past Hajourn, and investigating the tomb. Then the PCs turn north, and via wind ship fly to Maruk, where the wind ship must stop for various reasons. From there, the journey goes towards Jalaad, where the final clue will lead the party towards the mysterious Kharakhan Ruins.

The Hadjin tomb will likely be haunted by some Necrophages, and a Ghast which have staked out the tomb as a lair, relatively isolated from the Underworld, but accessible through an Obsidian Mirror present in the upper tomb. The Ghast might actually have the spirit of the Hadjin noble records-keeper bound as a plaything, only to be set free once the Ghast is slain. Clues gained here will lead to Jalaad, and creepiness will be the main theme...

To get to Jalaad, the PCs will board a wind ship headed for Maruk, and become involved in further plots with the wind ship's crew. Aerial encounters, grand vistas, and shadowy dealings will be strong here. Award experience as needed after the first chapter, and encourage that it is to be used before starting the second chapter.

Chapter Two

“Danger on high...”

“The cool air drives the windship northward; passing far above the dangerous lands below, and yet threatens to tear the thin sails at any moment if it chooses to. To the north, far over the Sanctuary Mountains, the sweeping vista is lost in the perpetual storms with ravage far away lands. As a sailing ship would pass by an island, so the windship flies near huge clouds, so close you could almost reach out and touch them. From here the heavens are truly more vast and amazing than anywhere else. Few would wonder why windship crews are almost always fully manned; little you could imagine can equal this fantastic view from the sky.”

Here in the vast sky, the PCs and Crytoculous will have some time to rest and study as they see fit, and get to know the crew of the *Soaring Avir* a little better. **Loke will spend much of her time “wind sick,” either expelling her previous meal or trying to lie very still in her bunk.** The crew is hearty and comfortable with guests onboard, they seem to just be glad to be in the air again.

Cyrstania the First Mate will attempt to be the party’s hostess, seeing to the guest’s reasonable needs as she can. She seems to be a capable and perceptive woman, one who could be trusted in a time of need. Amorous advances in her direction will be deflected by her personal interest in **Cytrosos** (a member of the crew), and her immovable stance on “dallying with customers”.

The first day or two should be spent getting settled on the windship, and generally pass without major incident. Be sure to include CON checks for those unused to windship travel, and keep the crew fairly cheerful and helpful to engender a sense of security in the players.

Batranc Encounter:

“The dreamy kite-like shapes of the Batranc seemed to float so lazy in the distance a moment ago, and now more akin to some demon-spawned spearheads they streak down towards your flimsy vessel. From on high they seem to shriek in anger at the clumsy and soft prey who would dare to fly in their sky, and you know instinctively they intend to teach you a lesson in respect.”

Include at least one Batranc per three PCs, with a minimum of three total. These creatures are defending territory they intend to use for mating, but are not driven by their full mating instincts just yet. They will need to make a WIL check once half of their hit points are gone, and every round thereafter to continue the fight. Those who fail will dive away from the windship, a sign of defeat well known by the crew. GM should determine the Ability Levels of the Batrancs as needed.

Once these beasts are dealt with, if the PCs acquitted themselves well against the attackers, Cylostion will take them aside. He will explain that while it is possible for the windship to get to Jalaad, it would be very unlikely to return at all or land anywhere safe. Cylostion plans to drop off the party in Maruk, and apologizes for not telling them earlier.

- If the PCs made a poor show of assisting in driving off the Batranc, Cylostion will simply drop the party off in Maruk, and flatly state that this is as far as his windship can go.
- If the PCs show that they are now more closely allied with Cylostion, a new

enemy will mark them for death, **Cytrosos**. He has several days left to knock off (perhaps literally) at least one of the PCs or Crytoculous, and implicate Cylostion. Cytrosos is no fool; he will likely wait until both the Captain and First Mate are not around to make his move against the party. The GM is encouraged to be as devious as possible, remembering that Cytrosos is an experienced operative who rarely makes mistakes of any kind.

It is likely some “unfortunate events” may befall the party and or crew on this journey, setting the stage for Cytrosos to discredit the captain. These might include one of the crewmen falling overboard due to a poorly tied safety line, someone being blown overboard by an unexplained “blast of wind,” an unexplained problem with the ship’s levitational gear, one of the crew who was not well-liked by the captain is found brutally slain, or some other dire omen which foretells of certain terrible calamity to come. These are just a few suggestions for the GM to use...

While not in a direct combat situation, unprepared PCs are in very real danger of being killed while Cytrosos is near them. The results of these attempts are best left to the role-playing of said events. Even if the entire affair does not play out before the windship reaches Maruk, read the following to the players:

“The City State of Maruk purportedly lingers under an age-old curse, a theory that cannot easily be dismissed. The city is a shambles: its once-prosperous orchards, and farmlands are barren; its people, forced to sell ogront dung in order to earn a living, are all destitute and dispirited. The ruling council of Maruk has offered a reward of one hundred thousand gold lumens to anyone who can remove the curse, if indeed there is one. To date, all attempts to rectify the situation have been for naught.”

“The one thing that recalls this place most to the mind is that almost unidentifiable smell of impending decay and waste. As though nothing fresh existed there, and yet the horrid stench of death has yet to fully mature. It hangs, subtle in the air, an inescapable oppressive scent. All around the rotting city bathes in it, and the pathetic people breathe it. Filth is caked on everywhere, dirt and mud creeping into everything, and the relentless dust is in the air. Only the powerful stench of Ogront dung can truly overpower it, and here such is plentiful, and the inhabitants are hawking this merchandise. You long for the endless fresh breeze of the sky aboard the windship.”

The *Soaring Avir* will be present for a few days while repairs are made, and then will return to Hadj. This will give the PCS a little extra time to nail down Cytrosos if they have not already. The reverse is also true, so if Cytrosos has not been identified as the culprit, the PCs will still be in danger.

Since the journey to Jalaad is a dangerous one, the PCs will likely need a guide, someone who knows the surrounding lands well, particularly towards the east.

None of the locals will be interested in crossing the ancestral lands of the Za, but they say there is someone who travels that stretch of land here in the city. Those of low Constitution beware, Maruk harbors a high likelihood of diseased contact for the group, and the GM should make that fact plain as a warning.

The party will be directed to a crumbling building with no small number of smelly drunks inside. **In the far back corner, the singular large grim figure steadily chugging grog awaits them.** His pale features and long ragged black hair do little to liven his sullen countenance. His well-worn and scarred chain and plate armor have seen better days, and a lethal looking broadsword lies sheathed on his

table alongside several empty tankards. If asked about him, the bar tender will effectively relate:

"The inhabitants of Maruk are extremely cautious around the bounty hunter called 'Rune,' it seems he completed a hunt here, and the resulting carnage is still whispered about. As proof, a mass grave containing at least a dozen locals lies just outside the city walls. Rune would not speak of the incident, saying only that it was a matter of 'unfinished business'. Eyewitnesses will say he chased a figure in black robes over the eastern wall into a slum area, and then into a small crowd. Those in the crowd are now residents in the mass grave, and the few who witnessed the final confrontation have nightmares about that which they will not speak of. Some have been unable to speak ever since, and a few others have fallen into trances that they have not recovered from. Rune has been in his tankards for some time now, and shows no sign of leaving yet. No one has dared to try to throw him out of the city, although they would be glad to see him go."

It seems Rune is a Xambrian, and a particularly frightening one at that. He knows his way across this area well, and can be "hired as a guide and bodyguard, if the price is right," but none of the locals know what Rune charges for such services. This leaves the players to ask Rune what he wants in exchange, encourage lots of role-playing here, as the players try to lure Rune out of his tankards.

Rune is of course trying to keep silent the voices in his head in the simplest way he seems to know how, barrels of strong drink. However once Rune understands where the PCs want to go he'll sober quickly, deciding to silence the voices by dropping off these fools at Jalaad, and then going on to Mount Omen.

Rune should be role-played as rather gruff and grim, but not actually rude. He is a grizzled veteran who has seen too many

fresh faces like the PCs die foolishly, and even though that has hardened his heart, Rune is still essentially a good man forced to do terrible violence on occasion.

Rune will agree to take the party across the "Bandit Lands," for the meager price of one gold lumen per day, per person. He'll want at least twenty gold lumens up front, just to cover his bar tab, and then he'll be ready to go. He'll show the party to the only Equis Trader in town (a grubby Marukan of dour disposition), where they can get mounts to ride, and to pick up his ragged old Greymane. From here he'll go to "pick up a few things," and will meet the party at the Eastern Gate when they are ready. One glare will be given as the only warning not to follow him, and then he leaves.

Rune probably agreed to take on this job because he needs the money: hunting reincarnators doesn't exactly pay very well. A loner, Rune will not socialize with the characters. In the main journey, he would prefer to eat/sleep/ride apart from the PCs. If addressed, he answers in as few words as possible. If Rune has any sense of humor at all, it is definitely black humor.

Once the party is ready to go, having bought what meager supplies they can from the scant market square in Maruk, they should be easily be able to find the East Gate. Note that one of the vendors (a Pharesian Peddler) is selling an item of some note, a small non-magical Archaen clockwork device made mainly of brass which always points north, and has various navigational uses built into it (say +5 on all Guide/Navigation type checks). The peddler will charge what ever he thinks he can get from the party for this item; the exact amount to be charged is left to the GM. The Gates will be open during the day, and Rune will be waiting from the party outside the city walls. About three days of travel across fairly rugged terrain lie ahead, and GMs are encouraged to throw in several of

their own encounters in this area, with the intention of providing only very light challenges.

*"The wind-worn peaks of the **Maruk Mountains**, lying to the north of the City State of Maruk, are believed to be rich in precious stones, such as black opal. The folk of Maruk will not enter these regions, which they say are haunted by Kharakhan giants, manrak, and bandit tribes."*

Note that a few lone Kharakhan Giants are likely to be about, and only of the most unsociable and or insane sorts. Manrak will likely provide the most dangerous encounters, as the main Za encounter lies further ahead.

Rune will be remarkably unsocial, and will only intervene in a fight when a party member is in mortal danger. At this time, Rune will move with superhuman speed and power to subdue the attacker in question, utilizing his considerable Mystical powers to impressive effect. Oddly though, he does not kill anything that he does not have to (i.e., he will kill Manraks who refuse to leave the party alone, but most others will likely be influenced into simply seeking easier prey or rendered VERY unconscious).

Under no circumstances will Rune even draw his Soul Blade in defense of the party. The lone exception to this rule is his mount, if Rune's beloved Greymane is attacked, Rune will not hesitate to "transcend" the offender by any means at his disposal. Rune will decline any treasure gained after any combat, but will except food offered to him.

During this time, observant PCs may notice some things about Rune. He does not seem to actually sleep, and will be alert at all times. Rune barely eats, will always choose to remain downwind of any fire, and too far to utilize the fire's warmth. Rune never removes his armor, and his only sword is kept within easy reach day and night. Rune's graymane does not socialize with the other Equis, and

only speaks to Rune in low tones so as not to be overheard. Rune keeps a round shield of some kind, but it is always covered with a ragged cloth, and he never seems to use the shield for anything. Questions regarding these things will only be met with a gruff: "None of your business."-type response.

At the end of the three or so days, and perhaps a pause in the random encounters, read the following:

*"**The Oracle** is a sheer pinnacle of blue and violet porphyry which overlooks Serpent Pass, in the Wilderlands of Zaran. According to legend, an ancient mystic lives high atop the summit of the Oracle, at a point obscured from view by a bank of clouds, or mist. Three trails lead up to the top of the mount, each affording potential climbers with its own distinct set of hazards and disadvantages (the aerial route, while seemingly more direct, is considered ill-advised due to the presence of wind demons). It is widely believed that the great mystic who lives atop the Oracle knows the answer to all questions; past, present and future."*

Rune will actually nod reverently once towards the pinnacle of rock, and then ride on even more grimly than before, as though expecting something bad to happen. He will not speak of the significance of his act, replying only with stony silence or a hard glare. **Rune senses the approaching battle, and is trying not to make any attachments to the party, even though he may actually appreciate the party in some way by now.** Cryptoculous would never be able to survive such a climb anyway, so any thoughts of actually visiting the Oracle will have to wait for another day.

Za Encounter:

Now the journey to Jalaad begins, and the terrain looks to be getting a little easier to cover, so it should take about two days to

reach Jalaad. But before the suns have set on the same day as the party passes by the Oracle:

"The thunder of charging Equis draws your eyes to the swiftly approaching dust cloud and line of equis, each one bearing a yellowish savage figure. Bandits or raiders, it matters little, as the Za rarely take prisoners and none you know of have lived long enough to tell of such an ordeal. You know you have scant time in which to prepare a defense, as any equis in full charge covers much ground in mere moments. The attackers split at a distance, intent upon preventing your escape as their archers draw out many bone bows. Za always "feather their prey" first, and then close in for the kill, you have been told at least that much. Crude shouted derisions fly even faster than the arrows, which now arc toward your flesh. In the face of this oncoming storm, Rune stands forth. Dismounted, he steps to the fore, and like some waking dream slowly draws the ominous blade from its sheath, his face dark with anger. The screeching sound of its razor edge being drawn slices through the din, a terrible sound none of you shall ever forget."

The Za raiding party numbers at least one mounted Za Raider per party member (NPCs and PCs included), and an additional twenty Za warriors have come for Rune! The Za warriors are intent upon Rune, they will only defend themselves if attacked by party members, but will concentrate upon killing Rune otherwise. Even as they approach, they will shout: "Blood for Blood!" and charge Rune directly. Each one of these Za will fight Rune to the death, ignoring the most grievous of wounds until death claims them. Those with the time to observe Rune in combat will see him fight like a demon possessed madman, as though he had somehow unleashed an unspeakable fury from within, his foes will gain no mercy at all this day.

Should the party try to assist Rune, they will find the Za to be very dangerous veterans of impressive skill and fortitude (double all archetype skills).

The other Za will not interfere, but will attack the remaining party members instead. They will circle the group, raining arrows upon them until either they run out of shots (each Za carries d20 arrows), or they see that their arrows are not causing any visible damage (perhaps the party hides behind something or erects a Barrier spell). Then they will switch to their swords, and close in for the kill. They will gladly gang up against those who stand forth, mercilessly slaying everyone they can. They will try to take pains not to outright slaughter stray Equis, but an Equis who gets in their way will be rewarded with a slash as a dire and singular warning.

Za suffering more than half their hit points lost must make a WIL check to remain in the fight, or "go back for reinforcements" if they fail. Overall though, the Za Ability Level and numbers should be roughly equal to the party, ensuring a tough and telling battle.

Rune can only come to the party's aid after he has dealt with his own attackers, but depending on how the party's battle is going, the GM could bring Rune in as needed. **Optionally, the GM is welcome to let the PCs fight for themselves, taking the chance that this could very well be their last encounter.** Rune's survival is "in the script," as he has no qualms about retreating when he is in danger of being killed, and his access to impressive mystical powers ensures successful combat all the more (although he would never use those powers to directly kill a foe, he will use his powers to defend and heal himself or others). Obviously, the PCs should be protecting Crytoculous, as he is vital to the research at Jalaad.

Presuming the PCs survive this encounter, those left alive are likely to have earned some visible respect in Rune's eyes, and he will be a little more open with them. Given, Rune will still be a bit grim and abrupt, but at least he will be willing to engage in some brief conversation now. Rune is haunted, hard-bitten, distant, and he drinks/takes intoxicants to try to keep from hearing the voices of his ancestors in his head, but his unsociable nature will lighten perceptibly.

If the group lingers, they will spot the approaching scavengers that will likely be showing up soon. Vile Avir and Ravengers will descend upon the dead within hours, leaving bones in their wake at best.

Roughly two days later, the **Ruins of Jalaad** will come into view at the southern end of some extremely rough terrain, to the north the landscape seems to grow very rugged indeed, perhaps even tortured by unnatural forces:

*"The crumbling ruins of the ancient city of **Jaalad** are located near the Zaran Mountains, in the Wilderlands of Zaran. Though long since stripped of most of its hidden treasures by many generations of Yitek tomb-robbers and Za bandits, the Library at Jalaad remains relatively intact. This is primarily due to the efforts of a cabal of Callidian cryptomancers, who have endeavored to protect the facility's store of iron tablets since the time of The Great Disaster. Individuals who wish to explore the Library may do so only under the watchful eyes of the Callidians, who deal sternly with looters and vandals."*

*"The rugged peaks of the **Zaran Mountains** are the refuge of the Za bandit tribes, who hole-up in these parts in order to elude patrolling Dracartan desert scouts. The Za are believed to have numerous hideouts in the Zaran Mountains, where they temporarily store excess loot, equipment, and slaves. The region is rich in black iron ore and certain, small types of semi-precious stones. Vasps and manrak from the nearby Volcanic Hills are also fairly common here."*

Once safely within the Ruins, and near the Library (one of the few intact structures), Rune will bid farewell to the party. Depending on how well the PCs got along with Rune, Rune may simply decline the remainder of his payment, saying his poor old graymane can't carry much more anyway. Otherwise, he expects to be paid, and will take by force what he is owed if the party refuses to do so. He needs to travel to Omen, but says no more on the matter, and departs.

This leaves the party alone at the Library of Jalaad, where they will find a small encampment in an adjacent building. A few Djaffir Merchants, a couple of Dracartan Scouts, and some Yitek are present. The camp is well established, and has obviously been here for several weeks at least. Various members of the Djaffir and Yitek are here studying at the Library, and the Dracartans are providing protection (for the Djaffir specifically, though they are on good terms with the Yitek as well). Aside from the Yitek, this is a lively bunch, glad to receive weary travelers as guests, campmates, and potential customers. The GM is encouraged to create a few personalities of their own to populate the camp and interact with the PCs. In the distance to the east, a smoldering country looms:

"The Volcanic Hills: This region is marked by twisted mounds of stone, craters, rivers of fiery magma, and both dormant and active volcanoes. The race of Saurans inhabits this area, which is also home to the hive-colonies of Raknids (deadly enemies of the Saurans), land dragons, azoryl, fearsome vases, and manrak. The Volcanic Hills are rich in firegems, precious stones valued for their beauty, as well as their reputed magical properties."

The Djaffir have an assortment of firegems, small artifacts from the Ruins of Jalaad, much mochan, a few musical instruments, a few spare Aht-Ra, some red iron, some raw glass in sand form, and some contraband rubbings of some assorted texts from within the Library itself.

Savvy haggling and bartering is a much-loved pastime among them, so encourage lots of role-playing here. Food and water are shared, if sparingly, but are free to those who do not over-indulge or are rude. Games of chance or skill, dancing, and music, along with plenty of mochan in the morning occupy much of their time. Generally speaking, they are just glad not to be out in the Wilderlands proper.

Cryptoculous, if he survived to this point, will be keen to get into the Library as soon as possible. He will of course insist upon getting cleaned up before entering the Library, so as not to offend the Callidians. This may cause some stir, as the inhabitants of the camp are not the sorts to use up their precious water for such frivolous purposes.

Once Cryptoculous (or whomever may have taken his place or chooses to go with him) is ready, he will enter the Library with the tome, and those willing to set aside their arms and armor are welcome to go with him. **Layers of powerful-triggered Cryptomantic spells protect the Library; so forced entry should simply not be an option.** Even the

suggestion of doing so is likely to cause the doors to be closed for the remainder of the day, and will attract the ire of both Cryptoculous and the camp's inhabitants. Those unable to control their urges will likely die upon those warded doors or at the hands of those from the camp, whichever comes first.

Those who proceed within will find the Callidians to be helpful to the polite, and curt with the rude. The price for entry varies depending upon the impression given to those on duty at the door. The Callidians usually charge one gold lumen per guest per day, more to those who may be undesirable or irresponsible for any reason. Any who display familiarity with rare works or advanced arcane knowledge will likely be treated more casually, though perhaps not if they fail to display reasonable manners in the eyes of the Callidians.

"The smooth gray granite floor reflects a great deal of the magical illumination from above in the form of arcane glowing globes suspended from chains overhead. The interior holds rows upon rows of ancient iron tablets rest in stone shelves on the lower level, and great stone steps lead up to the second floor. There, less durable items are kept in a complex organization, scrolls, books, rubbings, crystals, and the like. While there is plenty of room to move about, the entire place feels like some great press of arcane information, crushing out the green plains and open sky. The occasional rustles of clothes on stone or whispered word are the most common breaks from the permeating silence."

The Callidians provide no materials, food or drink for impolite visitors. Food and drink are strictly prohibited from the upper level, but permitted to the polite guests on the lower level. Prices are high for a relatively limited

menu, but the Callidians know these items are precious and so feel no remorse about the cost. Arms and armor, or the casting of any sort of potentially damaging magic is even more strictly prohibited within the Library. **Violators not killed while being ejected are forever barred from returning into the confines of the Library for all eternity, no exceptions.** There are always at least three Callidians on duty, one at the door, and one on each floor. When it is known that there are guests about, three or more additional Callidians usually are roaming the Library to keep things in hand. The odds of Loke (if she has lived this long) being admitted into the library are probably the lowest of all the PCs.

Cryptoculous will likely spend a week or so doing his research, leaving some time for the PCs to either relax at the camp outside, or perhaps to some of their own studying inside. The GM is encouraged to determine how long the research should take, perhaps granting the PCs a chance to learn some things while here (perhaps expending some saved experience to pick up new skills). Once the GM feels it is time to move on, Cryptoculous will emerge from his research with some answers. **It seems most of the items have already been claimed in years past, but a few remain unaccounted for.** These include a huge cauldron that could make food, one of the lost tomes of Sorcery (a work of immense magical significance), and a mighty crystal globe that could control the weather within many miles. **Of these items Cryptoculous says that two of them most likely lie to the north, the cauldron among the Kharakhan Ruins, and the globe in the Shadow Realm.**

Now the time comes for a hard choice. Cryptoculous has essentially proven his point; the tome existed, and referenced certain works in the Library of Jalaad that have been verified. The Callidians have prepared a document to this effect. He can now return to the Seven Kingdoms and reclaim his lost

credentials. However, in order to truly gain from this venture, he knows he should at least try to bring back one of the lost items. **So the party may turn back now, but to go on, that would be the bravest thing in the spirit of discovery to do.** Cryptoculous' impassioned speech will at least garner cheers from the other people of the camp, and it's obvious the old man intends to go even if he must do it alone.

- If the PCs choose to head home, the adventure ends here, again likely leaving Cryptoculous and Loke to complete the quest, not a very optimistic ending. Loke will most certainly overpower the old mage, and haul him back to Hajourn and some terrible fate thereafter.
- Should the PCs show such character as to bravely join Cryptoculous in this quest, they will have forever gain the friendship of Cryptoculous, and may proceed on to the next chapter. Be sure to spread around some experience points here, perhaps some extra if they PCs chose to join Cryptoculous...

NPC List:

Cyrstania

First Mate and second in command aboard the *Soaring Avir*, she is a trusted ally of the captain, and the crew believes more than just an employee to him. Cyrstania suspects there is an unfriendly someone among the crew, but has yet to discover who. Her feelings for Cytrosos (a member of the crew) are strong, but she holds them in check while on duty. She too dislikes Hadj in general, and would like to find other places to hone her skills, but would not abandon her ship easily. Once past Cyrstania's stern exterior, she is a trustworthy person who will gladly help the PCs for the good of all. Her personal tastes include a silver sword, tight pantaloons, and rather daring men's shirts (worn unbuttoned and tucked into her belt or sash).

INT +1 **PER** +1

WIL 0 **CHA** +1

STR 0 **DEX** +1

CON +1 **SPD** +1

CR +3 **MR** +3

Hit Points: 23

Skills: Urban Background +7, Climbing +6, Swim +3, High Talisman +9, Low Talisman +10, Archaen +9, Longsword +6, Dagger +4, Brawling +3, Pilot (Windship) +7, Arcane Lore +6, Etiquette +6, Fashion +6, Ride (Equus) +6, Sarista Language +4, Guard +3, Diplomacy +3, Streetwise +3, Underworld +3, Appraiser (Windships, Treasure) +3, Scout +3

Aeromancy: Move +7, Conjure +7, Reveal +4.

Gear: Expensive silk clothes, Silver Longsword (Wizardry Defend Aura +10, 3/day, 5 rounds), Ring of Command (Wizardry Alter +6 to Command Skill +2, Continuous, gold).

Rune

An aging Xambrian Wizard Hunter of extensive reputation and deadly skills, Rune has served to enact his ancestor's revenge innumerable times. He is equally feared and respected by all sane beings, for few mortals have killed so many dangerous foes, and yet remain alive to carry on. Rune is considered by many to be a wanted criminal, though the many bounties upon his head remain uncollected. Rune's wide array of skills and abilities makes in a most capable and dangerous man. He is usually found either drinking heavily in the worst possible taverns, or hunting relentlessly after some doomed soul.

INT +1 **PER** +2

WIL +1 **CHA** -1

STR +1 (+4) **DEX** 0

CON +1 **SPD** 0

CR +4 (+7) **MR** +3

Hit Points: 18

Special Ability: Dispel Magic +8

Skills: Spiritblade +6, Dagger +6, Brawling +3, Evade +3, Guard +3, Tactics +3, Tracking +10, Stealth +10, Traps +6, Interrogate +10, Arcane Lore +4, Underworld +10, Streetwise +3, Espionage +3, Survival (Wilderlands) +8, Ride (Equus) +10, Low Talisman +10, Archaen +4, Elder Tongue +4, Nomadic +4, Xambrian +9, Guide +3, Scout +5, Wandering Background +7, Climbing +6, Swimming +6, **Mysticism:** Reveal +9(+16 total), Influence +6(+13 total), Move +12(+19 total), Alter +12(+19 total), Defend +12(+19 total).

Gear: Ring of Prowess (Cryptomantic Alter CR +3), Black Iron Partial Plate Armor (PR 6), Silver Gauntlets (Wizardry Alter STR +3), Enlightened Tamar (Mysticism Alter: Mysticism Order +4), Silver Spiritblade, Black Iron Shield (Ward vs.

Reincarnators upon grasping,
Continuous), black ragged cloak,
Greymane (Level 8), and leather clothes.

Antagonist:

Cytrosos

A Tanasian Mystic plant among the crew of the *Soaring Avir*, his mission is to find a means to discredit Cylostion, and take over the windship for Tanasian use. Cytrosos will take every opportunity to steal items (and implicate Cylostion), or kidnap Crytoculous. He also keeps the wind ship's first mate under his sway, but only as a useful tool in his eyes. He is careful not to do much that would call attention to himself, especially when he is studying a potential victim. Cytrosos is a sly and dangerous man with ample skills to get the job done, and the burning desire to succeed. His mastery of Mysticism is surprising considering his overall dark personality, but then he did not learn it from such an enlightened being as an Ariane.

INT +3 **PER** +2

WIL +2 **CHA** -2

STR -1 **DEX** 0

CON -1 **SPD** 0

CR -1 **MR** +5

Hit Points: 18

Skills: Arcane Lore +6, Etiquette +7, Ride (Eques) +4, Cultures +4, High Talislan +10, Low Talislan +9, Archaen +9, Nomadic +4, Sign +5, Rural Background +7, Climb +3, Cook +3, Dagger +2, Assassinate +5, Evade +5, Legerdemain +5, Cryptography +5, Espionage +5, Interrogate +5, Lip-Reading +3, Sabotage +5, Stealth +5, Streetwise +5, Traps +5, Underworld +10

Mysticism: Influence +9, Reveal +9, Defend +6, Alter +6, Illusion +6, Summon +6.

Gear: Common clothes, Black Iron Dagger, a few pathetic personal items.

Concluding thoughts:

This chapter is just a warm up for the dangers ahead, yet with each passing day it becomes more critical that Loke be gotten rid of somehow. She will relentlessly antagonize the party, ignore their orders, take what she wants, and generally cause unrest. The longer she is around, essentially the more damage she will do the party's cohesion. She will not bother Rune though, nor will she say why. If the party actually starts to fall apart, then she will attempt to assume leadership, and things can only get worse from there.

Crytoculous is essentially on the adventure of his lifetime, after having suffered the most terrible setback he could imagine. Until he emerges from the Library at Jalaad, he is a fairly desperate old man who knows this is his last chance to make things right for himself and his family's name. Only after actually discovering that some of the items might still be around does he truly become a hero.

Chapter Three

“The adventure truly begins.”

So the PCs have chosen a long and noble quest to regain an ancient artifact or three, and Crytoculous is beside himself with joy. Loke is considerably less exuberant; not being familiar with this area makes her a little nervous, which will manifest as even worse behavior than usual for her.

Here is where the aberrant weather and lack of proper water supplies becomes a problem; GMs are encouraged to make at least daily checks for current weather conditions. The Black Wind is of particular note, those randomly transforming vapors can spell doom for the entire party if they are caught unprotected (by Barriers/Auras/Wards).

Between Jalaad and Omen, the GM is encouraged to add in a few encounters of a minor nature, likely some small groups of Za who have plenty of reasons not to get killed if they can help it. Perhaps one or two encounters with some Araq, but nothing too challenging yet...

Three to four days into their march, and after at least one encounter with a small (two or three) party of Araq on foot, read the following to the party:

“For a long while now, quiet has settled like a cloud over the meager group, and each knows the gnawing fear of being watched by uncounted and restless dead. The chilly breezes at night seem to invade your dreams where half heard voices whisper of some nameless terror that stalks your soul.”

Few have slept well in days, and the temptation to nap while moving is tempered by what unspeakable horrors lurk behind dreaming eyes. Even the Za have long since left you alone, choosing to stay clear of such cursed places. Some try to ignore it, but everyone feels it just the same. The eyes of Omen are upon you...”

“Omen is a cursed region, avoided by most Talisnantans. In ancient times, the Necromancer-Kings of Quaran erected on this site a mountain of skulls nearly a thousand feet in height, representing untold millions of victims. The mountain still stands to the present day, and is sometimes visited by descendants of the Quaranians' victims (such as the Xambrians), who seek commune with their departed ancestors.”

As the party journeys north, they have some choices to make. As they proceed, they will come to the edge of the Sad Plains, but remain apart from the Volcanic Hills. They may proceed northward, remaining in between the Sad Plains and the Volcanic Hills as well, but this will certainly mean they encounter plenty of Araq.

“Sad Plains: Rows of aged and pitted stone statues, each portraying one of the Necromancer-Kings of ancient Quaran, separate this region from the Sursian Plains (q.v.). Otherwise, the two areas are distinguishable from each other only by the great emptiness and featurelessness of the Sad Plains.”

On this site the nation of Xambria once stood, its cities shining brightly in the light of the twin Talislantan suns. Now, nothing remains, all trace of this once-prosperous civilization having been obliterated from the face of the continent over a thousand years ago by the merciless armies of the Quaranians. Since that time, the area has remained uninhabited except for wild beasts, such as ogront, land dragon, and malathropes. Marauding bands of Araq and Kharakhan giants sometimes pass through the Sad Plains, but few if any choose to linger for long in this place, which retains a strange and mournful aura."

Whether or not the party chooses to avoid the Sad Plains while moving northward, do not hesitate to proceed to the next unfortunate event:

"Near the high suns, a double hiss alerts you to danger, and only just in time. From around the nearby boulders and ravines the Araq urge their twin-headed steeds to feast upon your flesh! You are in the lands of the Araq, and they do not take prisoners."

Include one mounted Araq per two PCs, plus one additional Araq on foot per NPC present if any. The Araq will approach for medium range (GM determines exact range), giving the party only one round to react before arrows start flying. All Araq fight to the death, but the Duadir will flee if they suffer half their hit points in damage. The Duadir might flee if they suffer roughly one quarter their hit points, and fail a WIL check (and no Araq stops them). The Araq will start by trying to shoot any mounts at least once each (in order to slow them down), and afterwards engaging in melee as needed.

Survivors now know what to expect when the Araq approach in force, and should react accordingly to this threat to all living things. If the PCs use the Sad Plains to avoid the Araq, then it is suggested that they only

encounter one or two more bands of Araq (at roughly half the previous numbers), if not then feel free to add in encounters as the GM sees fit. Soon the party will come to the following areas:

"Sursian Plains: South of the forests of Tamaranth lie the Sursian Plains, an arid grassland pock-marked with holes and craters. Here can be found the remnants of the once-mighty kingdom of Sursia: the twisted and charred hulks of terrible siege engines, the ruins of blasted stone towers, and shards of fused metal and glass. Ferran bandit packs live in tunnels dug beneath the plains, which form a network connecting many of the region's larger craters and crevasses. Gigantic ogronts wander mindlessly about, grazing on dry grasses, while azoryl glide across the sky high above. Aside from the presence of such creatures as these, the area often resembles a ghostland."

"Ruins of Quaran: Despite the combined effects of centuries of time, the elements, and the cataclysmic upheavals resulting from the Great Disaster, the ruins of Quaran still stand as grim reminders of a dark and nearly forgotten age. Here, amidst the stark stone towers and blackened effigies, once flourished the most sinister empire in the annals of Talislantan history. Generations of occultists, black magicians, and tomb-robbers have come to this place, to sift through the ruins in search of the Quaranians' dark and macabre secrets: cursed tomes, diabolical artifacts, instruments of torture and death, and things too terrible to describe. Many articles have been retrieved from the ruins, often to the great regret of those who have found them. Countless others still remain buried in tombs, vaults, and underground pits, awaiting discovery by those who covet infernal knowledge above all other considerations."

"The Plaguelands: The Plaguelands is a cracked and barren plain, laid waste untold centuries ago by some unknown catastrophe which possibly occurred in conjunction with The Great Disaster. It is a widely-held belief that any living thing which passes through the Plaguelands will be changed, or mutated, in some unpredictable manner. According to the stories told in neighboring Maruk, these purported mutations may take any number of bizarre, and often frightful, forms. Consequently, few intelligent creatures will willingly venture into this foreboding region."

GMs are encouraged to add in their own encounters in these places as the party moves through them, or not as the case may be. **This is a lonely and savage place, haunted by dangerous denizens, and freakish weather.** Note that by passing through the Sursian Plains, the party may bypass the worst of the Plaguelands...

Shortly after departing the Sursian Plains or as the PCs pass the northern edge of the Ruins of Quaran read the following:

"The cool breeze and solitude are your companions now, the wind winding through the brutally broken landscape, and death hovering at your shoulder. To the north hang dark clouds, distant yet somehow threatening, day and night. The roving bands of Araq have become thick, as though sensing the presence of prey, but the small canyons and sheer cliffs impede easy routes of attack. To the east, countless plumes of smoke and ash drift skyward, and the rare distant roar of a land dragon echoes forth. Bones of innumerable sorts litter the rocks here, as though they grew from the barren ground itself. Shade is easily had until the suns are high, and then little respite from the heat can easily be found."

Only the most hardy of plants reside here, each one seemingly home to some sort of poisonous or unpleasant pest. To the west, tempting mountains rooted in forest and clear skies,

Very near by is an ancient volcano of ancient legend, now certainly a possible temptation to get the PCs in even more trouble should they choose to explore it:

"Modor's Tomb: In Ariane folklore, the Kharakhan giant, Modor, was buried somewhere inside this inert volcano, along with a store of stolen wealth reputed to exceed one hundred thousand gold lumens. The process of locating Modor's Tomb presents many difficulties. First, the prospective adventurer must make the descent into the volcano (a two hundred foot drop, at least), hoping that the volcano remains cooperative in the meantime, and does not suddenly show signs of activity. Second, it is necessary to locate the single correct doorway (amongst seven possible choices) allowing entrance to a passage which leads to the tomb. The other six doors are warded by devious trap-mechanisms. Moving a one-ton slab which blocks the entrance, it is possible to gain access to the tomb itself. Once inside, one should be swift afoot, for touching so much as a single coin of Modor's treasure will supposedly "bring the deceased giant back to life". Provided that these steps have been taken, and that one is able to elude the pyro-demons and earth demons which also inhabit the volcano, the intrepid adventurer will have made his or her fortune, and may retire to a life of leisure."

Whether or not the PCs choose to approach the dormant volcano, the following encounter is their next major event to appear out of the mist, fog, smoke, or darkness of night:

Encounter:

"As if your nightmares had truly come to life, the ghastly monster shuffles forward. The dripping, drooling, wheezing, snarling tangle of flesh and bone approaches. This horror from the Plaguelands has come to show you the face of mind numbing terror; of what you may become should the Black Wind catch you here. Twisted limbs and billowing flesh heave forward again, as some sense of self-preservation scrabbles through your paralytic fear; and you know this monster will not die easily."

This horrible beast should crawl from the GM's most imaginative nightmare, and be as insane as possible. Its exact statistics should remain nebulous, and it should have one definite weakness (likely some form of magic the PCs have access to). It has been following the party's trail for days, and is hungry, obsessed, fixated, or all of the aforementioned. The creature should be close enough to initiate combat in the same round as it is seen. Only if the party flees upon mounts with high SPD (say +6 or more) should they be able to escape this abomination, as it should be able to effectively hunt them down otherwise. This struggle for survival should be made to be exiting and tension-filled, and the beast should not die without inflicting some serious fear of abominations in general upon the PCs.

Give the party only a day to recover before moving on to the next section. **Ensure that clean water and food needs are addressed, as it has been some time since the party has been in a city where these items can easily be had.** The PCs now enter a new area, one with even more unpleasant prospects:

"Kharakhan Wastes: This ruined expanse of barren wastes is inhabited by the Araq, a misanthropic hybrid species combining the worst attributes of saurans and men. Kharakhan giants sometimes pass through these areas, searching the towering ruins for usable weapons and gear or hunting for land dragon and other large prey"

Here the GM is encouraged to add in additional encounters with Araq and their Duadir mounts, concentrating upon small highly mobile units in nearly constant motion. There should be signs of struggle, both ancient and recent everywhere. **The terrain here is extreme, with canyons, ruined towers, cliffs, boulders, and caves scattered everywhere.** The party is nearing its destination, and should be ready for just about anything, except perhaps this as they get about half way across the Wastes:

Kharakhan Giants Encounter:

"You hear the thumping sound of their approach, which could not be possibly hidden. A low rumbling growl of the mounted Behemoth fills your mounts with fear; instinctively they know a mighty predator when they sense it. Strangely, this beast is not alone; several Ogriphants also bear their great masters into your presence. Astride each creature is a mighty Kharakhan warrior, bearing colossal arms and armor, encircling your group with titanic muscular power. The Kharakhan's potent mounts all sport simple patchwork armor; even so they are a rare and frightening sight indeed. Known for being voracious savages, the Kharakhan Giants presence alone is enough to make the civilized whisper prayers to their gods for salvation."

The scarred Kharakhan leader astride the massive mount looks over your modest band, taking keen measure of each one in turn as the behemoth sniffs hungrily in your direction. An aura of grizzled experience surrounds him, the unmistakable figure of a strong leader of great warriors. Leather creaks as he nudges the incredible armored monster forward a little, and you pray to live these next few moments well."

Here the PCs may face their greatest challenge, how to appease the Kharakhan giants without ending up in the stewpot!

The exact number of Kharakhan Giants is up to the GM, but should be at least 1 for every 3 total persons on the party. Violence will certainly lead to some casualties among the party, and only the most powerful of characters could hope to drive off these mighty guardians (use the base Kharakhan Giant archetype, double all skills, Ogriphant mounts sport PR 4 patchwork armor, and add Giant Longbow Skill +5).

Observant PCs may notice more than a few of the giants actually have huge bows and massive arrows, an unusual weapon choice for Kharakhan Giants who generally prefer melee where their great strength is most useful.

Kull is a wizened mercenary and leader, he will not be fooled easily, and can be a most formidable opponent indeed if his ire is raised. After fighting for so long, the PC should effectively lay down their weapons, and brush up on their negotiation skills!

Note that some members of the party may draw his immediate suspicion, including Rajan, Ahazu, Araq, Kang, Aamanians, Imrians, Mangar, Ur, Farad, or Chana. This will be countered by the presence of other sorts among the party including Ariane, Gryph, Members of the Seven Kingdoms, Djaffir, Dracartans, Kharakhan Giants, Danuvians, or Zandir

Warriors (but not Charlatans). Others are regarded rather neutrally, even gruffly if they show a lack of respect. **Anyone who makes an aggressive move will essentially initiate combat, quite possible his or her last mistake ever.**

Kull will ask what the party's purpose here is, from whomever dares to address him. Should the PCs show themselves to not be enemies or to at least be harmless in Kull's eyes, they will likely be invited to camp with the Kharakhan for the night. This is most unusual, but Kull wants this to happen for several reasons. He would like to know about what's going on beyond his lands, and to keep an eye on these unusual visitors to his home. The other giants will not speak with the strangers unless spoken to, and then only the most briefly required replies would be given. Kull's warriors do not yet trust any outsiders, and will want to know Kull trusts them before they show any signs of kindness.

PCs with the Underworld skill may have heard of Kull working out of Cymril in years past (skill check with at least a -10 modifier) for a shadowy group known as the Adamant Rasp. Little is known about them, and even less is known about their mysterious leader. The group was known to have provided reliable counter intelligence on Aamanian spies in the Seven Kingdoms to the Wizard King, uncovered Farad conspiracies involving Windship Arcanology, and halted several Rajan assassination attempts on prominent healers from Zandu to Danuvia.

Their methods were brutal and effective, often with the assistance of a figure going by the name "Drukh the Needle". Kull was apparently in charge of security when the Adamant Rasp participated in activities in the wilds beyond the Seven Kingdoms, which was rather often. Cymrilian authorities are still keen to know the identity of the group's leader, as it is rumored that this personage may have had some sort of covert dealings

with the Mirin just before the group seemingly disappeared completely, and members of the Adamant Rasp seemed to have had access to unusual amounts of black adamant.

What Kull is doing out here is certainly a mystery, one that could bring rewards to a bounty hunter if Kull were brought back alive to Cymril. If questioned about his past, or the Adamant Rasp, Kull will only fall silent. Persistent inquiries will likely make him angry, and the party would not like Kull when he is angry...

Here is one of the best places to reward excellent role-playing by the players, as Kull is like his kind, very perceptive when it comes to figuring out who is telling the truth.

- If the PCs convince Kull they can trust them, he will allow them to accompany him to the Kharakhan Ruins.
- **If the PCs fail to convince Kull by dawn, he will order them to turn back, or be slain.**
- If Loke is still with the party at this point, Kull will simply not allow her to proceed any farther. Her options are to stay in camp until the rest of the party returns, leave, or die.
- **If Cryptoculous is present, he will do anything he can to convince Kull to allow the old mage to go search the Kharakhan Ruins for the artifact.**

If the PCs succeed, then Kull will escort them to the Ruins while he decides what to do about the party. **Kull is keeping secrets; he knows no outsiders must be allowed into the ruins proper, lest they discover what is happening there.**

While Kull is contemplating this, several days of travel remain ahead across the very rough landscape, so he knows he still has time to make a final decision. By the morning of the next day, trouble finds the assembled group:

Land Dragon Encounter:

"As you come around the bend in the canyon, having just broken camp, a terrifying sight greets your eyes; a huge Land Dragon has caught your scent! The mighty beast bears many arrows from Araq bows, and wounds on its legs from the Araq's traps, and perhaps associates you astride your mounts with that pain. One thing is certain, you are all in very serious danger."

The female Land Dragon is near to laying her eggs, and has been harassed by small parties of Araq for days now. Her mood could only be described as psychotically murderous towards any non-Land Dragon. Kull and his warriors recognize her state and the arrows in her hide. They know to fear her wrath, and even Kull's mighty Behemoth mount is not interested in tangling with a pregnant, wounded, and very angry female Land Dragon. It should be pretty obvious that this creature is large and powerful even among its own kind (over all ability level should be near maximum).

If the party backs away slowly, and perhaps drops enough food, she may leave them alone instead of crushing everyone. This is certainly Kull's plan, as he actually likes Land Dragons (since they eat Raknid eggs, killing lots of Raknid in the process), and would dearly love to live long enough to hunt down the Araq who have been hurting her. **If all goes well, the party will NOT engage this fearsome monster in combat, and live to see another day.** If they make that mistake, the Land Dragon will fight to the death in her berserker rage.

If the party manages not to get smashed and eaten, Kull will order his warriors to spread out, searching for signs of the Araq who are almost certainly close by. **If the PCs did anything to provoke the Land Dragon in the last encounter, he will order them to**

camp under armed guard until he returns to deal with them.

Observant PCs will note Kull's grim determination to kill the Araq responsible for tormenting the Land Dragon, likely the first real show of hatred from the massive Kharakhan leader. Kull's Warriors will be only too happy to oblige, mentioning how good Duadir meat is on a spit over a large fire. **This is a good opportunity to prove trustworthiness to Kull as well, by helping the Kharakhan eliminate the Araq.**

Within an hour or two, one of the Warriors (or a PC) will locate the Araq on the move, following the trail of the Land Dragon (she's still bleeding a bit). Kull chooses a wide ravine as the ambush site if the Araq remain unaware of the party (this will certainly be the case if one of Kull's warriors spotted the Araq), intent upon a frontal assault sure to crush the hated pests. This leaves the PCs the option of preventing the Araq from escaping, observing from a safe distance (along with at least one Kharakhan Mercenary to keep an eye on them), or participating in the assault. Once the plan is agreed upon, give the PCs the chance to provide helpful ideas for the ambush.

Araq Encounter:

"The trotting Ogriphants break into a full charge as the warriors raise their weapons on high, and hold their shields before them. Kull in full battle gear roars from the back of his charging mount, a most fearsome sight indeed, especially for those in his path. The Araq party erupts into chaos, some trying to fire arrows as others attempt to flee from the wall of fury bearing down upon them, the hunter has become the hunted."

If the party does not assist, but only observes, tell a tale of grim battle where the Kharakhan ruthlessly slaughter the Araq and most of the Duadir. Casualties are relatively high among the Kharakhan, with one killed and several badly injured. All the ogriphants will have been injured, one so badly it will not likely survive to see the next dawn. Kull will have suffered some wounds, but is more hurt by the PCs not even trying to help, and the loss of one of his beloved kin.

If the PCs engage the foe, Kull will see this and be convinced at least Crytocolous should be allowed to see the Kharakhan Ruins. How the party acquits itself against the Araq will determine if the PCs are to be allowed to go any farther. The Araq number some twenty or so, plus one mounted Araq per PC and Kharakhan Giant involved in the fight. Bravery, strength, and cleverness in battle are well regarded by the Kharakhan in general. Displays of such will be the best way to convince Kull the PCs are trustworthy. Given the additional trouble the PCs could cause for the Araq, it's likely the Kharakhan Giants will not suffer much in the way of harm, and will likely be much friendlier with the PCs afterward.

If the PCs attempt to escape from their guard, interfere against the Giants, or deceive the Kharakhan in any way, Kull and his

people will hunt them relentlessly until they have left the Kharakhan Wastes.

If the PCs flee from the fight without good reason (like suffering grievous wounds), Kull will order them to leave the Wastes or die by his hand. Attempted magical Influence will only likely get the caster killed, by Kull's warriors if not Kull himself, as the Kharakhan Mercenaries are well aware of the power of magic to bend the mind.

After the battle is over, the Kharakhan will go about making camp, taking care to burn all the Araq bodies, and to slaughter the Duadir for their meat. The camp will be made at least 100 yards from the site of the combat, upwind and out of view. They will post at least one sentry at all times, while others help bind everyone's wounds.

So now Kull knows something about the party, one way or the other. Either he will send them packing back where they came from, or allow them to journey on. If the GM thinks the party has done well enough to earn Kull and his Warrior's trust, then proceed on to the last portion of this module. Otherwise, the module essentially ends here, with either the party being slain for resisting Kull's commands, or goes home empty-handed.

Concluding thoughts:

From Maruk onward, the party will be assisted by NPCs (Rune and Kull), as this region is by far the most dangerous portion of the quest (especially if Loke is still around).

Cryptoculous, if he is still with the party will be in great spirits, constantly babbling about the wondrous things that lie ahead. Here the party will meet Rune, and perhaps a little bit about him.

On the way to Jalaad, Za raiders will harass the party, and Rune will leave for Omen once the PCs reach the Library. There, Cryptoculous will work on his research, leaving the party effectively alone for a few days. After the party departs Jalaad, they will meet Kull, and proceed north towards their goal. They will only get to the Ruins by convincing Kull they are trustworthy.

Chapter Four

“Epilogue”

PCs who have made it this far are now veterans, having earned respect if not trust from the Kharakhan Giants. Only gross misconduct at this point will get them in trouble with their hosts, and those who show themselves to be good tellers of tales and lore will earn even more respect. The GM is encouraged to add one or two last encounters before the party reaches the Kharakhan Ruins as the GM sees fit to do.

Another two or three day’s travel will bring them hither:

“Kharakhan Ruins: Blackened by firestorms, the cyclopean ruins of Kharakhan are among the most remarkable and strangely disquieting sights extant upon the Talislantan continent. The megalithic structures, some towering over four hundred feet in height, appear to have been built by and for a race of veritable giants. The same is true of artifacts and objects recovered from the ruins: silver coins four inches in diameter, ten-foot long swords, rings the size of bracelets. Though scholars have long been fascinated by the Khar-akhan Ruins, thorough archaeological research remains a remote possibility for the foreseeable future. Bands of marauding Araq prowl the ruins and surrounding environs, as do Kharakhan giants - monstrous creatures who may be descended from the original inhabitants of this region.”

Here at last Kull halts the group before they enter the ruins, more than one hundred yards away. His warriors proceed in, but Kull dismounts, and pulls his riding gear off the behemoth. **He tells the party to make camp, lay down their arms, and rest for a bit.** He

will say no more for now, but simply stands watch over the group alone. Within minutes, perceptive PCs will likely notice the faint sounds of low voices coming from the ruins, along with the bray of ogriphants. Kull’s behemoth will nudge playfully at Kull, and the two will wrestle briefly before the behemoth charges off obviously very happily.

Within an hour, the distant sounds will become more distinct, and Kull will rise to greet his kinsmen who are to come:

“From the ruins, the sounds of the ogriphants grow louder, and the rumbling of a mighty Kharakhan War Wagon is heard as it comes out of the Ruins. Instead of a troupe of grim warrior giants, the wagon is festooned with shields piled with food, large barrels and pitchers of drink, and no small number of man- sized Kharakhan children! The wagon is surrounded by Kharakhan males (bearing relatively little weapons and armor), and from within the wagon comes the strange tribal song of what could only be womenfolk! The entire procession grinds to a halt some yards away from your camp, and the party disgorges from the wagon to settle all about your little band. The Kharakhan greet Kull with both joy and respect, it is a celebration of his return. Kull introduces you to his family and kinsmen, and this is his tribe.”

Here the Kharakhan will test the group’s social and physical endurance with tribal interactions and games. There will be tale telling, drinking and eating, friendly wrestling matches, and ancient riddles. Kull will proudly introduce the PCs to his two daughters, a rare boon among his kind. Also it

seems Kull brought with him the knowledge of bow craft, and has been teaching his brethren to use them as well. The festivities will go on deep into the night, sorely taxing the endurance of the PCs (CON checks as the GM sees fit). **Here will be the chance to gain new allies and friends, a rare thing in these savage lands.** Slowly through the night, the young and adult females will return to the ruins, where they are safer. When dawn comes, in the light of the second sun, read the following:

"An older Kharakhan will step forth, gray-white long hair braided down her back, long old cloth robes on her stooped shoulders. Her steady gaze looks over your group, carefully considering each one in turn. She then hands a large sack to a reverent Kull who turns and offers it to you."

This is the point where Crytoculous (if he still lives) would break down and cry, as he would think it's the treasure he sought for so long. The "Ancient One" who handed Kull the items will remain behind to answer questions and tell tales during the morning feast. Anyone who unwraps the item will find a set of quartz tablets and a large translucent obsidian seeing stone, not the cauldron in Crytoculous' research. When asked about the cauldron, Kull will say that the cauldron must stay where it is, but the magic stone can go as the party has earned it and the trust of the Kharakhan Giants who have no use for it.

Obviously, this is as close as Crytoculous is going to get to what he wants, and he will be perfectly happy with that. The party is welcome to stay here a few days to rest up (a week at most), and the Kharakhan will gladly load them up with supplies for their return afterward, along with a few spare bits of "junk" from the Ruins (GMs discretion, though the Giants will not likely part easily with precious metals like silver, adamant, red

iron, or brass. The same goes for precious stones, especially black diamonds.), if they want them. When the party is ready to go, Kull will stand before them. **He will swear each and every one of the remaining group members to absolute secrecy about what they have seen here, or they may never leave the Ruins alive.** The party is welcome to spin a tale of digging through the Ruins, but no mention of the Kharakhan living here is to be made.

Those who take the oath will have to give a lock of hair or other personal item to the Ancient One, so she may "bind your words that no foul magic may take your memories from you". Observant PCs will note that the young Kharakhan warriors maintain a near constant patrol around the Ruins; children come and go freely among the Ruins under the watchful eyes of the adults. It seems the Kharakhan Giants have chosen a stronghold of their own.

NPC List:

Kull

A brawny Kharakhan Giant with a wide and grim reputation as a powerful mercenary, currently having the peculiar honor of heading up his own loose group of kinsmen as warriors for hire. Kull has been seen as far away as Cymril, though his activities have been focused in the northern areas of the Wilderlands for several years now. There are rumors of his past associations with shadowy groups and personages of whom he will not speak, but it is well known his word is an unbreakable bond. He is an older but powerful leader of mighty warriors in some of the most dangerous areas of Talislanta. Kull tends to wear his gray-streaked hair in a long braid bound with leather thongs (called a "queue"), like the Kang do.

INT +2 PER +6

WIL +7 CHA +7

STR +8 DEX +2

CON +9 SPD +2

CR +7 MR +1

Hit Points: 59

Special Abilities: Skin = PR1, Fists = DR6 +STR, Smell Men at 50ft, Unaging, and Nightvision.

Skills: Battlemaul +16, Giant Great Sword +16, Giant Warwhip +16, Giant Sauran War Axe +16, Giant Longbow +16, Shield +16, Brawling +16, Mounted Combat +16, Weaponer +18, Low Talisman +10, Drakken Glyphs +4, Nomadic Background +7, Ride (Ogriphant, Behemoth) +18, Climb +7, Cultures (Seven Kingdoms) +18, Streetwise +18, Underworld +18, Command +7.

Gear: Bracer (Alter CON +5), Torc (Alter DEX +5), Belt (Alter STR +5), Bracer (Alter SPD +5), Ring (Alter PER +5), Ring (Alter CHA +5), Pyromantic Black Iron Battlemaul (DR=16+STR, Pyromantic Attack +16 on every Hit, two-handed), Giant Black Iron Sauran Warwhip (DR=20+STR, two-handed, Wierded), Black Adamant Giant Shield (max DR=120), Giant Red Iron Sauran War Axe (DR=20+STR, one-handed), Giant Black Adamant Partial Plate (PR=18, 100 pounds, STR +6 required), Leather clothes, Leather backpack, Leather pouches (4), Behemoth Mount (Level 11, with riding gear).

Concluding thoughts:

From here the party can decide to return to civilization or not, as this is the end of the module. PCs have either perished horribly (or in glorious combat), or earned the trust of the last of the Kharakhan Giants. Be sure to award plenty of experience points for role-playing, good ideas, “stump the judge,” and clever ideas or tactics.

Rather important to the Kharakhan, the party now knows of their secret stronghold, such as it is. This is a matter of trust, a very serious matter to the giants, and to break that trust could be the final stroke which sends them into extinction.

The tablet will be both a set of instructions on use and the creator’s notes on how the communication stone was made, a great boon to whoever claims it. The spell will be Wizardry based, communication only, but with a far greater range than currently possible for all but the most powerful mages or even Seeing Stones. Audio-only or visual-only contact, range at 49 miles per level, but still only capable of being linked with up to six other like-enchanted stones. The stone itself will be enchanted for scrying, not communication, but at roughly 490 miles range as a tenth level Reveal spell...

Bestiary

Batranc

Batranc are kite-winged predators native to the skies above the Wilderlands of Zaran and much of Talislanta. A true avian species, batranc spend their entire lives in the air. They are able to glide effortlessly on the winds, riding the air currents as a sailing ship rides the waves. During the spring mating season, flocks of these creatures can sometimes pose a navigational hazard to windships.

Batranc prey on other avian creatures, including avir, Stryx, and ravengers. They will never attack creatures on the ground, but will sometimes snatch individuals from high places such as towers, battlements, and treetops. The creature's grasping tail is its main weapon, both for attack and defense. Its fangs are used primarily to devour prey, which it does by holding the victim in its tail and rending it to bits.

Much has been written of the batranc by Talislantan poets and balladeers, who have long been fascinated by the dual nature of these creatures: beautiful to watch as they sail across the skies, yet as cold and deadly as the most savage land or sea-dwelling predators.

INT -6 **PER** +6

WIL +4 **CHA** n/a

STR +2 **DEX** +6

CON +1 **SPD** +8

Size: 30'+ wingspan, 10' long, 140 lbs.

Ability Level: 4-8+

Attacks/Damage: Fangs: DR 6, Tail used for grasping only

Special Abilities: Can remain airborne indefinitely

Armor: None

Hit Points: 32

Behemoth

Behemoths are giant, quadrupedal predators that range the Desertlands of Danuvia, the Wilderlands of Zaran, the Plains of Golarin, and parts of the Kang Empire. The creature's natural armament includes an inch-thick layer of tough, leathery hide, with a mantle of rock-hard bone encasing the cranium. The latter form of defense is of particular importance to these great beasts, who have been described as "living battering rams."

The behemoth's method of attack is simple and straightforward: the creature charges towards its intended victim at full speed, intent upon a head-on collision that will knock down and incapacitate its prey. If its initial attack is successful, the behemoth will then attempt to kill its victim by goring it with its long tusks.

Behemoths normally prey only on large creatures, such as aht-ra, land lizards, megalodont, and durge. However, they have also been known to ram into wagons, land arks, and even duneships; it is believed that these beasts are attracted by motion and by loud noises. Behemoths occasionally engage in fierce territorial battles with mangonel lizards, their struggles often lasting for hours.

INT -9 **PER** -2

WIL +5 **CHA** n/a

STR +9 **DEX** -5

CON +9 **SPD** +2

Size: 18'+ in length, 10' at shoulder, 4,000-5,000 lbs.

Ability Level: 5-12

Attacks/Damage: Ram: DR 30, Trample: DR 25, or Tusks: DR 17; one attack per round

Special Abilities: Armored skull is virtually impervious to damage, ram attack knocks victim down

Armor: Cranium, PR 15; Hide, PR 3

Hit Points: 60

Duadir

Duadir are a mutated species of reptilian that ranges throughout the Wastelands, hunting in groups of up to a dozen individuals. They normally prey on crag spiders and land lizards, though they will attack even land dragons when driven by hunger. Each of the duadir's two heads is capable of attacking independently. The talons of their hind legs are even more dangerous and are used to slash prey.

Duadir are swift runners, easily able to match an equus stride for stride. They lack endurance, however, and can only travel at top speed for about a mile or so before becoming exhausted. The creatures are trained as steeds by the Araq, who accomplish this feat by the cruel treatment of Duadir hatchlings.

INT -7 **PER** -4

WIL +5 **CHA** n/a

STR +4 **DEX** +2

CON +5 **SPD** +7

Size: 10'-11', 600-900+ lbs.

Ability Level: 5-11+

Attacks/Damage: **Bite:** DR 16, two attacks;

Claws: DR 10 or Tail: DR 8, or entangle

Special Abilities: Two heads can attack independently

Armor: Scaly hide, PR 2

Hit Points: 37

Habitat: Wilderlands of Zaran, Volcanic hills, Kharakhan Wastes

“Earth Demon” (Tomb Statue)

Obviously not the normal sort of “Earth Demon,” this Tomb Statue is an animated guardian, not a true demon. Its statistics will be close enough for the purposes of this module.

INT -1 **PER** -2

WIL +5 **CHA** n/a

STR +8 **DEX** -5

CON +10 **SPD** -2

Size: 6'-6'2," 1,000+ lbs.

Ability Level: 6-13

Attacks/Damage: Fist: DR 19; up to three attacks

Special Abilities: Immune to suffocation, Influence, normal heat or cold, and poison.

Armor: Stony exterior, PR 8

Hit Points: 40

Enim

Enim are greater devils that come from the lower plane of Oblivion. The Wastelands of Zaran harbor a number of these creatures, whose presence may be attributed to legends of an ancient magical portal located far beneath the earth. On their home plane, Enim are employed as servants by powerful arch-devils; in Talislanta, they dwell in caverns decorated with stolen finery and precious stones, and they appear to enjoy a much more leisurely existence.

Outside of their domiciles, Enim are most often encountered in pairs. They enjoy cruel sport, particularly “stone-throwing,” the object of which is to crush living creatures with boulders at long range. Enim also have a fondness for wine, which they drink by the barrel with little apparent effect. Their main vice is gambling, however, for Enim are unable to resist any wager that they believe

they can win. No stakes are too high for these hideous giants, who sometimes allow captured creatures a chance to escape their stewpots - providing the intended victim can best them at some game of chance.

INT +6 PER +1

WIL +7 CHA -5

STR +8 DEX -3

CON +10 SPD -3

Size: 12'-15', 800-1,200+ lbs.

Ability Level: 11-25

Special Abilities: Wizardry with four Modes at Ability Level, night vision, immune to most non-magical attacks, harmed by brass weapons at double damage, detect astral/ethereal/invisible presences at range of 100 feet

Armor: Hide, PR 3

Hit Points: 55

Equs

Equs are a hybrid of mammal and reptile prized as steeds throughout the continent. They are quite intelligent, and have their own language, called equan. Some few are even able to speak the languages of humanoids, though a natural tendency toward secrecy forbids most equs from boasting of this ability. In the wild, they travel in herds of up to about sixty individuals.

There are four sub-species of equs: the common and reliable graymane; the swifter but less durable silvermane; snowmanes, built to endure frigid climes and sure-footed on ice or snow; and coal-black darkmanes, aggressive and spiteful creatures who often attack other equs on sight.

INT -3 PER +3

WIL +4 CHA -3*

STR +3 DEX +3

CON +2* SPD +7*

*(SPD +8 for silvermanes; CON +1 for silvermanes; CHA -7 for darkmanes)

Size: 5'+(at shoulder), 400-600 lbs.

Ability Level: 5-10

Attacks/Damage: Kick: DR 13, Bite: DR 5

Special Abilities: Ability to converse in

Equan (some few Equs are also known to speak humanoid languages), immune to cold (snowmanes only)

Armor: Scaly hide, PR 2

Hit Points: 35

Ghast

Ghasts are horrific entities believed to hail from the dark, uncharted regions that lie in proximity to the Underworld. Their presence on the material plane is attributed to the legendary black magician, Mordante, who - deliberately or inadvertently - opened a magical gate into the nether realms, allowing hordes of these creatures to gain access to the continent of Talislanta. On the material plane, ghasts often haunt ancient graveyards, tombs, and battlegrounds, sites which are perhaps most reminiscent of their vile home plane. They are most common in Khazad and Werewood, where they are known to prey upon living creatures of all sorts, including even banes and werebeasts.

Though frail and unhealthy-looking, ghasts possess fearsome strength, and cannot be harmed except by magical means. Possessed of a diabolical, and often insane, intelligence, they are known to covet enchanted items and to converse with unseen spiritforms, the skulls of their victims, and even themselves. These foul creatures usually hunt by night, spending the daylight hours lurking in crypts and underground barrows, staring into the darkness.

INT +5 PER +8

WIL +8 CHA -7

STR +7 DEX -5

CON +10 SPD +2

Size: 7'6"-8', 160-200 lbs.

Ability Level: 16-30

Attacks/Damage: Claws: DR 13

Special Abilities: Necromancy with five Modes at Ability Level, night vision, detect invisible/astral presences (range: 100 feet per level), harmed only by silver or magical weapons and spells.

Armor: None

Hit Points: 42

Land Dragon

Land dragons are massive reptilians indigenous to the Wastelands and Volcanic Hills. Land lizards, ogriphants, and crag spiders are the favored food of these huge beasts, luckless travelers serving to augment the land dragon's diet as the opportunity arises. The largest and most powerful of these creatures are known to attack raknid colonies, tearing through the fibrous hives in search of juicy eggs and larvae.

Land dragons have been domesticated by the Saurans, who outfit them with battle towers and train them for use in warfare. Aggressive by nature, the giant quadrupeds are well-suited to this type of activity, and can easily batter down stone fortifications. Land dragons have long been hunted by Araq, who kill their young for food and use terrible dragon-traps to maim mature dragons. As a result, the species is believed to be on the verge of extinction.

INT -9 **PER** -5

WIL +8 **CHA** n/a

STR +12 **DEX** -4

CON +8 **SPD** -3

Size: 40'-50'+, 6-10 tons

Ability Level: 6-12

Attacks/Damage: Bite: DR 22, Trample: DR 28, Tail: DR 32, Battering Attack: DR 42

Special Abilities: Impervious to heat and flame

Armor: Body plates, PR 8; thick hide underside, PR 3

Hit Points: 75

Malathrope

Malathropes are terrible predators found throughout the Wastelands and other wilderness regions. Sorcerous hybrids, they are possessed of a sinister intellect and exhibit a marked tendency towards violent and destructive behavior. Like demons, they require neither sleep nor rest and are always active.

Malathropes kill not only for food, but apparently to satisfy some grisly carnal urging; they prey upon creatures of all sorts and show a decided preference for devouring prey alive. The bite of a malathrope delivers a potent neuro-toxin which heightens its victim's response to fear, a condition from which malathropes seem to derive a sadistic pleasure. They exhibit a maniacal disregard for danger and will not hesitate to attack groups of armed individuals, or creatures larger than themselves. The naturalist Thystram noted that "the beasts emit a horrid, hissing laughter even after suffering the most grievous wounds, as if seeming to mock - or perhaps welcome - their own death."

INT +5 **PER** +4

WIL +7 **CHA** -9

STR +4 **DEX** +4

CON +4 **SPD** +10

Size: 6'6"-7', up to 3'6" at shoulder, 400+ lbs.

Ability Level: 8-16

Attacks/Damage: Attacks/Damage: Bite: DR 8 +poison (CON roll at -5 or victim is too terrified to offer resistance), Claws: DR 10; total of two attacks

Special Abilities: Speak in tongues, night vision, immunity to magical influence/control, detect presences at range of 20 feet

Armor: Hide, DR 2
Hit Points: 52

Manrak

Manrak are a species of winged, humanoid-insect hybrids native to the Wilderlands of Zaran and other neighboring locales. The Talislantan variety averages between six and seven feet in height, their iridescent wings spanning approximately fourteen feet from tip to tip. The manrak's body is encased in a hard, armored exoskeleton, typically bright crimson in color.

Manrak prey mainly on smaller reptilian creatures such as immature Saurans, land lizard hatchlings, dracs, and chasm vipers. They are air borne hunters, hovering at altitudes of fifty to a hundred feet and scanning the surrounding terrain. When a manrak spots a likely victim it descends from the sky, dropping swiftly upon the unsuspecting creature and injecting it with a potent paralytic venom. Both the manrak's claws and fangs are capable of injecting this toxin, which is often fatal to weaker sorts of creatures. Once its victim has been incapacitated in such a manner, the manrak will begin to feed, tearing its prey to bits with its powerful mandibles.

Manrak are social creatures, living in groups of up to thirty individuals in underground nests. They are extremely foul-tempered and will attack Men and even larger creatures without apparent provocation. Their enemies include raknids, vaspas, and giant land kra. Sauran war clans burn manrak nests whenever they can be found.

Thystram prescribed the following precautions when traveling in areas frequented by manrak: "Avoid wearing bright colors such as yellow and red, to which these dangerous insectoids are quickly attracted. Similarly, do not leave open jars of jam or honey about, as these too are a temptation. Lastly, and most importantly, never throw rocks or shoot arrows into a manrak nest."

INT -6 **PER** +5

WIL +3 **CHA** -9

STR +4 **DEX** +6

CON +4 **SPD** +6*

*(SPD +6 airborne only; +1 on the ground)

Size: 7 ft. long, 240-320 lbs.

Ability Level: 1-10

Attacks/Damage: Fangs DR 6, Claws DR 8
+ poison (see Special Abilities)

Special Abilities: Flight, paralytic venom
(causes heart failure and death within one minute to those with CON ratings of -1 or lower; otherwise, roll vs. CON or be paralyzed for 5d20 rounds)

Armor: Armored exoskeleton, PR 4

Hit Points: 20, +1 per level

Necrophage

Necrophages are humanoid entities that hail from the darkest depths of the Underworld. Old legends to the contrary, they are not ghosts or spiritforms, but corporeal scavengers that have been known to slip into the material plane by means of magical gates and rifts, drawn by the scent of death. Here, they haunt crypts and burial grounds, feeding upon the bones and remains of the dead. Necrophages can detect the scent of bones, corpses, and corpses at distances of up to two miles, and they are always hungry.

Nauseating to behold, necrophages dress in rags stolen from the bodies of corpses and speak in harsh, rasping whispers. They are found in great numbers in Khazad, but may be encountered in a variety of places, including graveyards, abandoned ruins, and battlefields. Nocturnal by nature, necrophages huddle in underground caves and crypts by day. As they never sleep, their gnashing and mumbling may sometimes provide warning of their presence to those who venture too near their haunts. Driven by their horrible craving for

carrion, necrophages are strangers to fear. Many, in fact, are utterly insane. They are also proven carriers of a variety of unpleasant ailments and contagious diseases, including corpse-rot.

It is a known fact that only silver or enchanted weapons will suffice to kill a necrophage. Other types of weapons can be used to cause physical damage to a necrophage, though even dismembered, the bodily parts of a necrophage will continue to attack; a disconcerting sight indeed to any who have witnessed such an occurrence. Rajan necromancers collect the severed hands and heads of necrophages, which - invested with unnatural sentience - are said to have numerous uses.

INT -2 PER +2

WIL +3 CHA -7

STR +4 DEX -2

CON +5 SPD -1

Size: 6'4"-7', 120-180+ lbs.

Ability Level: 5-11

Attacks/Damage: **Bite:** DR 8, **Claws:** DR 10 (CON roll to resist contracting disease known as "corpse- rot")

Special Abilities: Harmed only by silver and magic, night vision, detect scent of carrion or bones at range of two miles, dismembered body parts may continue to attack.

Armor: None

Hit Points: 25

Ogriphant

Ogriphants are ponderous quadrupeds native to the land of Urag and the forests and jungles of northern and western Talislanta; a shaggy-haired variety called the wooly ogriphant is known to dwell among the Northern Reaches. In the wild, ogriphants are usually placid, though they can become quite aggressive during the mating season. With their long tusks, horns, and great body mass,

these creatures are more than capable of defending themselves against most types of predators.

Ogriphants have been domesticated in several lands, where they are used primarily as burden beasts, to help clear jungle or forest land, and as transportation. In Urag and other places the beasts are trained for use in war and outfitted with plate armor and wooden battle towers. In some places, ogriphants are hunted for their ivory, which brings up to ten gold lumens per pound.

INT -7 PER -1

WIL +3 CHA n/a

STR +10 DEX -8

CON +7 SPD -2

Size: 8'-9' at shoulder, 2,000+ lbs

Ability Level: 3-6

Attacks/Damage: Tusks: DR 20, Trample: DR 30

Special Abilities: Trunk can be used to grasp objects

Armor: Hide, PR 2

Hit Points: 67

Omnivrax

The omnivrax is a ferocious predator native to the Wilderlands of Zaran and other woodland regions of Talislanta. The creature derives its name from the fact that it will eat almost any living organism, including plants, wild beasts, humanoid beings, or even others of its own kind. Omnivrax are highly-adapted to a predatory existence. They have excellent vision and can see clearly even in total darkness. Their sense of smell is so acute that they can follow the faintest tracks and trails without difficulty. The omnivrax's hearing is such that it can perceive the sound of another creature's breathing at distances of a hundred feet or more.

The physical characteristics of the omnivrax are likewise exceptional. A full-grown adult is capable of dragging a land

lizard to the ground, or running down even the swiftest graymane. The omnivrax's claws and fangs can easily slice through the toughest hide or rip wooden planks to shreds. The natural armament of these creatures affords them protection similar to the best chain mail. They are utterly fearless and will readily attack even such dangerous predators as exomorphs, malathropes, and behemoths. If the omnivrax has a weakness, it is that the creature's intellect can in no way compare to its great ferocity. Tales of omnivrax attacking statues, or even their own shadows, are not unknown.

INT -11 **PER** +6

WIL +6 **CHA** n/a

STR +7 **DEX** +2

CON +6 **SPD** +7

Size: 8'-9' long, up to 4'6" at shoulder, 600+ lbs.

Ability Level: 6-12

Attacks/Damage: Bite: DR 15, Claws: DR 19; total of two attacks

Special Abilities: Can subsist on any organic substance, tracking by scent at Ability Level +PER, detect prey by sound/scent (range: 100+ ft.), nightvision.

Armor: Exoskeleton, PR 5

Hit Points: 46

Ravenger

From an evolutionary standpoint, the ravenger is certainly one of the more opportunistic Talislantan life forms. Ravengers thrive in water, on land, or in the air, and they are found throughout the continent. They have both lungs and gills and are able to modify their body temperature and metabolic rate to suit almost any climate. The ravenger's wings, tail, and sail-like crest are equally useful with respect to undersea or airborne navigation. Furthermore, they are capable of bipedal ambulation on land and are sure climbers.

Compensating for their lack of a single, specialized talent, ravengers possess an almost single-minded determination to survive. They can subsist on almost anything, including wild beasts, carrion, vermin, and refuse. Ravengers will steal prey from other creatures if given the opportunity, and some habitually follow predators such as omnivrax, behemoths, and sea scorpions for this very purpose, or to scavenge bits of uneaten food. Relentless hunters, ravengers are nearly impossible to deter once they have marked a creature or other food source as theirs. If unsuccessful in its initial attempt to obtain sustenance, a ravenger will return again and again to try anew. In this respect, these creatures can be quite resourceful and even ingenious.

INT 0 **PER** 0

WIL +4 **CHA** -3

STR 0 **DEX** 0

CON 0 **SPD** 0

Size: 6-6'6," 140-175 lbs.

Ability Level: 1-10

Attacks/Damage: Bite: DR 4, Claws: DR 6

Special Abilities: Ability to thrive in practically any environment, heat or cold inflicts only half damage, flight, and swimming

Armor: Hide, PR 2

Hit Points: 18