

Ultima[®] VII

AND Underworld[®]

More Avatar[™] Adventures

With an Introduction to ULTIMA VII, Part 2: Serpent Isle,[™] and ULTIMA Underworld II



**Complete Coverage of the
Award-Winning Computer Games**

Caroline Spector

Forewords by

Richard Garriott and Lord British

A Lord British
Game Collection

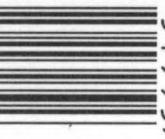
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Ultima VII and Underworld

More Avatar Adventures

Caroline Spector

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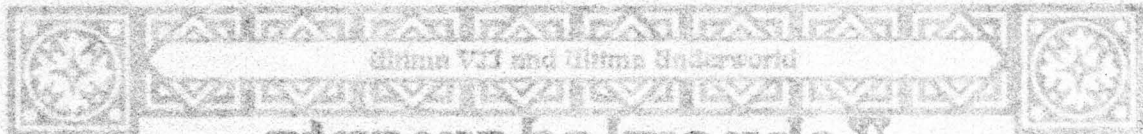
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Appendix B

Ultima VII Part Two: Serpents Isle 325

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Introduction

Last year I got my first real introduction to computer games. Oh, I'd seen them around—heck, when *Pong* first came out I was in college. (Now, there's an appalling acknowledgment of age.) But computers and computer games were on the periphery of my life.

Last year I got a phone call asking if I was interested in writing a book on *Ultima IV*, *Ultima V*, and *Ultima VI*. “Sure,” I said. “Put me on the list.” I was added (at the very bottom), but as luck would have it, everyone else was busy and the job fell to me. With Rusel DeMaria as my stalwart guide and co-author, I was launched into the wonderful world of computer games. And boy, have I been spoiled.

My first taste of computer games was my experience with *Ultima IV*. Admittedly the graphics were crude by current standards, but what did I know? I played for hours and hours at a time, got far too personally involved with the life of the characters, and ended up with a wicked case of tendonitis from using the [A] key for combat. (*Ultima IV* was a little melee-heavy.) Then I moved on to *Ultima VI*—an amazing step up in graphics and complexity. Once again, I played for hours at a time—becoming obsessive about my “Avatar-ish” qualities. “I'm the Avatar, dammit!” became one of my regular boasts.

So here I am again, this time a more seasoned player. (I've moved on to cartridge games and other PC games. Don't even ask about my Sonic the Hedgehog jones. I've been told I'm good enough to beat small children. High praise indeed!) And, I'd like to think I've become a more demanding player. I'm fortunate that I was given the opportunity to “cut my teeth” on *Ultima* games. The richness of *Britannia* continues to surprise and delight me. From the depths of the Stygian Abyss to the top of the Serpent's Spine, there's never a dull moment.

I hope this book will bring a little more of *Britannia* to light for you. Now if they would just release *Ultima VIII* ...

—Caroline Spector

How to Use This Book

The book is divided into several sections. Each game has a fictionalized walkthrough and a “down and dirty” walkthrough. Maps are provided at the end of each section.

For *Ultima VII: The Black Gate*, the critical path is presented in the fictionalized portion. There are sidequests, which help the Avatar gain experience. These are included after the main walkthrough. In the *Underworld* section we’ve chosen the most direct walkthrough.

The conversations presented in the text are, for the most part, taken straight from the game. For the sake of readability, some of the conversations have been strung together. To keep the narrative flowing in the *Ultima VII* section, the party members sometimes perform actions that in the game the entire party would perform: for example, Iolo is sent by the Avatar to pick up an object in another part of the city. Sometimes the party members act as the Avatar’s “alter egos,” making comments and deductions.

In the previous book, keywords were printed in a different font. Since *Ultima VII* and *Ultima Underworld* no longer use keywords as prompts, we’ve dispensed with them. However, the correct response choices are incorporated into the text.

A Note from Lord British

Once again peril hath come to Britannia. And, once again, the Avatar hath saved us. 'Tis a trial that mine kingdom should be so beset by evil plagues, but 'tis fortunate that the Avatar hath stayed strong in his belief in the Principles which guide us.

Know ye now that the tale told herein recounts the adventures of the Avatar some two hundred years after he united the Britannian and the Gargoyle people. His struggle to conquer the foul depths of the Stygian Abyss and rescue the beauteous Ariel is a wonder to us all. So too is his achievement in unmasking The Fellowship and the heinous designs of the Guardian.

Even as we celebrated the Avatar's triumph over The Fellowship, the Guardian was once again plotting to destroy Britannia. A sphere of darkness plunged mine castle into impenetrable night; only through the Avatar's actions were we spared. And now I have sent him on a quest most perilous—to the Serpent Isle. Only through his courage may we be saved.

The path of the Avatar hath ever been fraught with peril. So too is the telling of these tales. Heed the lessons within and ignore them at your own risk.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lord British". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Introduction by Richard Garriott

Ultima VII: The Black Gate was a departure for the *Ultima* series. As darker events shaped the world of Britannia, the need for the saving grace of the Avatar increased. With the introduction of *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, a new style of exploring Britannia emerged. With these new variations on the *Ultima* theme, the way was paved for a more complex vision of *Ultima*.

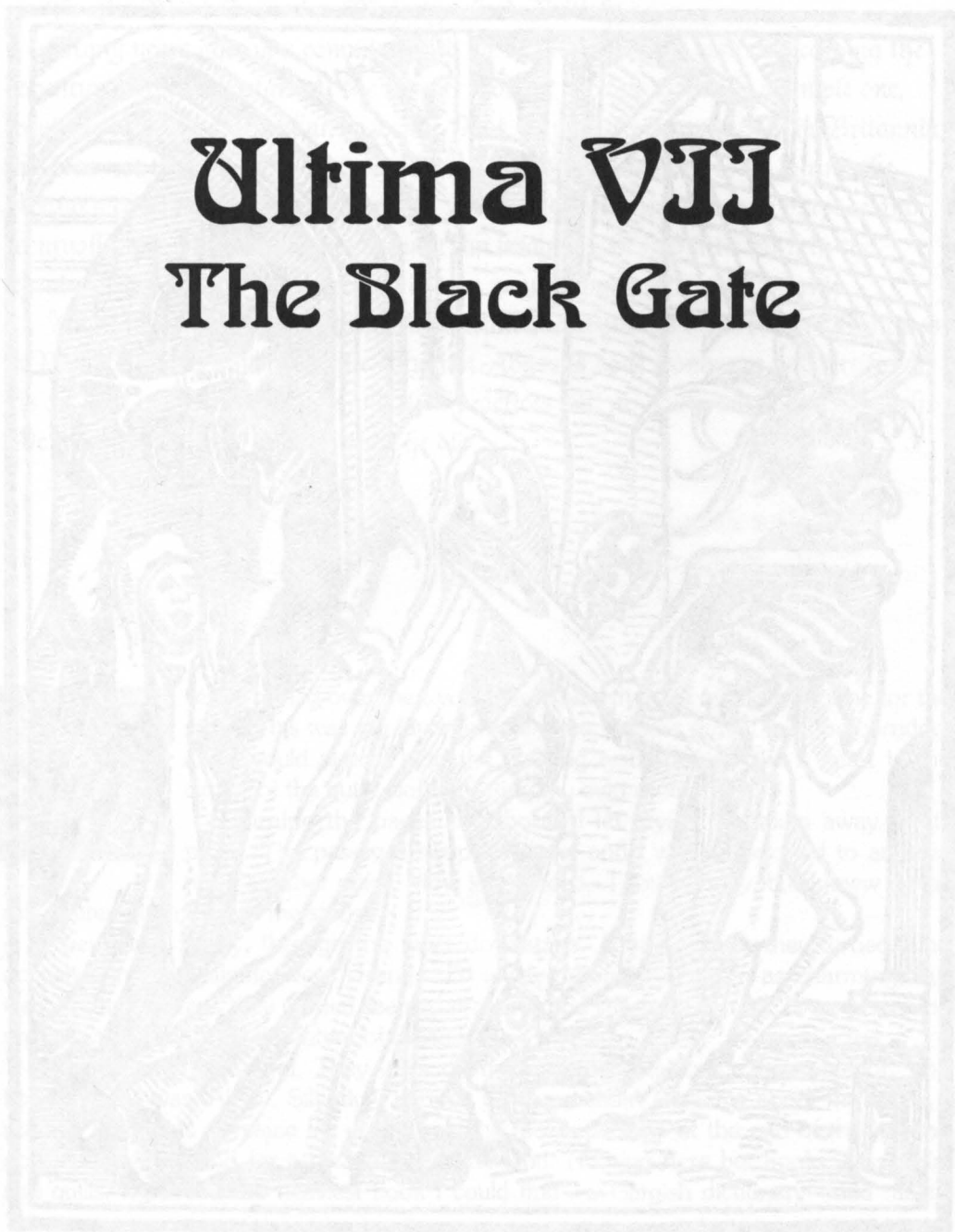
Knowing this, I was aware that there would be a demand for a complete treatment of this new material. *Ultima VII* and *Underworld: More Avatar Adventures* should address the needs of the serious Britanniaphile while conveying the story in an entertaining style.

I hope you'll find that this book makes your path through Britannia easier. Thank you for accompanying me on the adventure of *Ultima*.



Ultima VII

The Black Gate





To His Most Sovereign Majesty, Lord British:

Many years ago, you commissioned me to undertake the task of recording the adventures of the Avatar. At the time, I thought the tale would be a simple one, requiring only the skills of an academic. But, as with so many things in Britannia, this was not the case. My partner, Robert DeMain, was lost to us during the Avatar's conflict with The Fellowship. He tried to uncover their true purpose and eventually met with a fate I'm sure you can imagine. He had little faith in the legends of the Avatar, but tried in his own way to unmask The Fellowship.

What follows is the story the Avatar told me about his most recent adventures in Britannia. His sojourn in the Stygian Abyss is both wondrous and terrifying; his account of The Fellowship and their practices will no doubt turn your stomach. We were fortunate he arrived when he did.

I hope this missive pleases you.

Your humble subject,
Carlotta Stein



silence settled over the Lycaeum; I knew that the others had gone for the night. This was my favorite time—the stillness settled into the corridors and I could almost hear the building resting. I felt like a heart in the center of the quiet, softly beating my own special time.

Turning the pages of a book, I let myself be taken away by its prose. The passages swept over me and I was transported to another time, another place. How long I read, I couldn't say, but I knew it was much later when I heard the steps.

They came faintly, through the foyer downstairs. A pause, then they turned. The acoustics in the building were strange. I'd always thought of them as charming, but tonight the footsteps they carried seemed ominous and sinister. After all, I was alone and unprotected. What was the intent of those steps?

A short scuffing sound. They were on the stairs leading to the second floor. The floor where I was. Alone. Silently, I slipped from my chair. Glancing about the room, I realized there was no place for me to go. The footsteps were at the end of the hallway now. I looked around for a weapon of some kind. Nothing here but books, inkstands, and quills. I grabbed the heaviest book I could find—a Gargish dictionary—and ran to

stand behind the door. Maybe I could stun whoever—whatever—it was, and make an escape. A stupid idea, but the only one available at the moment.

The steps were outside the door. The knob turned and the door swung open. I raised the dictionary over my head and started it on a downward arc. A hand stopped it halfway.

“What are you trying to do?”

I looked up. “Avatar!” I said. “You scared me to death. What on earth are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

I released the dictionary and stuck my fists on my hips. Robert used to call this my “Don’t Mess with Me” look.

The Avatar walked across the room and dropped the book on my desk. When he turned back to face me, I saw how tired he looked. His face was careworn and drawn, but he looked stronger than when I’d seen him last. No doubt a result of his time in Britannia. When last we’d spoken, he’d told me about the strange phenomenon that occurred every time he returned to Britannia. All the abilities and talents he’d acquired on his last visit were stripped from him and he had to develop them all over again.

“I came to see you,” he said. I confess my heart fluttered a little at this. I am a woman, after all, and not totally immune to the Avatar’s charms. But just as quickly, I realized he was offering to tell me his story—the one he’d promised to tell when his adventure was finished. This was even more interesting.

“Sit down,” I said, pulling up a heavy leather-upholstered chair. I ran around to my side of the desk and pulled out a ream of paper. With a few quick motions, I whittled a new point on my quill.

“I’m ready,” I said.

The Avatar looked at me and laughed. “You always were a gossip-hound, Carlotta.”

I sniffed indignantly. “This isn’t gossip, Avatar. It’s for posterity. The tales of your deeds will ...”

He waved a hand at me. “Spare me the ode to history. I meant no offense. It’s just that after what I’ve been through ... Well, Britannia is changing and I don’t like what I see. Though I’ve saved her this time, I’m not so optimistic about the future.”

This troubled me. For as long as I’ve known the Avatar—and it’s been longer than he remembers—he’s always been positive. This attitude was new, and it frightened me. I put down my quill and poured two glasses of port from the decanter I kept on the desk. After digging briefly in my bottom desk drawer, I unearthed a box of chocolates I’d hidden from Mariah. She was a glutton for truffles.

The Avatar sipped his port, then bit into a truffle. He broke into a sublime smile. “Where did you get these? They’re delicious,” he said.

“Thanks. I made them,” I replied.

He looked at me with new respect. Two degrees, 14 books on Avatar lore, and the only time they pay attention is when they eat my truffles. *Men*. (If only Robert were here! He’d make some stupid remark right now that would drive me crazy. I miss that.)

“Tell me about what happened,” I said.

He leaned back in the chair and propped his feet on my desk.

“Well, at least take your boots off,” I said, shoving his feet off the desk.

“Trust me, you don’t want me to do that.”



I came straight here after we defeated the Guardian. I felt the need to talk about what had happened. To talk about being in Britannia when home is somewhere else—with someone who could understand.”

I looked at him sharply. “I’m glad you think I’m a sympathetic ear. Let’s start with how you got here ...”

“I thought I told you all about that when we met in Cove.”

“You did, but Robert was supposed to take the notes, and he ... he is no longer with us.”

“Did he leave?”

“No. He fell victim to The Fellowship.” I shut my eyes and tried not to cry. I’d wept buckets after we found his body. Enough tears to make me sick for a week afterward.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I can imagine what he did. I liked him. He was a bit stuffy, but he seemed decent enough.”

I smiled, trying to keep my voice from shaking. “He’d actually joined them. Said he wanted to really find out for himself what they were all about. But after he’d spent some time with them ... well, he wanted out. He got out all right.” I pressed my palms against my eyes. A horrible lump had formed in my throat and was trying to choke me. Drawing in a shaky breath, I managed to gain my composure.

“I apologize,” I said. “Very unprofessional of me.”

The Avatar smiled, but his eyes were sad. “I know how you feel. It’s hard to lose a friend.”

I nodded and took a big gulp from my glass. The port burned going down, but it gave me a moment’s distraction.

“Okay,” I said, thankful to be thinking about something else. “Let’s start from the beginning.”

The Avatar began.



Chapter One

I came back to Britannia through a Moongate. From past experience, I knew the red gates portended danger. But Britannia needed me; I suspected that from things that had happened earlier. I see that gleam in your eye, Carlotta—I’ll get to that in a while.

I jumped through the red gate without knowing where I’d arrive. The last time I’d blindly dived through a red gate, I’d almost become Gargoyle fodder. But I’ve already told you that story.

The gate sucked me into its vortex and the world turned scarlet. For an eternity I fell through the gate, surrounded by the redness as if I were floating down a vein. Then, abruptly, I was stepping out into the Britannian afternoon. I was disoriented for a moment. The feeling grew as an old man stepped before me.

His face quickly expressed shock, but that evolved into delight. He smiled at me broadly.

“Avatar! If I did not trust the infallibility of mine own eyes, I would not believe it! I was just thinking to myself, ‘If only the Avatar were here!’ Then, lo and behold! Who says that magic is dying? Here is living proof that it is not!”

Who is this crazy old man? I wondered.

“Dost thou realize, Avatar, that it hath been 200 Britannian years since we last met? Why, thou hast not aged at all!”

The old man winked conspiratorially. He whispered, “Due no doubt to the difference in the structure of time in our original homeland

and that of Britannia? I have aged a little, as thou canst see. But, of course, I have stayed here in Britannia all this time. Oh, but Avatar! Wait until I tell the others! They will be happy to see thee! Welcome to Trinsic!"

It was then that I realized with a sickening, sinking sensation who the old man was: Iolo, my friend and companion of many journeys. When I'd last been to Britannia he'd been my age and a better all-around fighter than I'd ever known. Now he was old. And what was I doing in Trinsic?

"Iolo," I began.

A slightly rotund and very distraught peasant interrupted me. "Show him the stables, milord. 'Tis horrible!"

Iolo nodded, taking on a somber expression. "Ah, yes. Our friend Petre here discovered something truly ghastly this morning. Take a look inside the stables. I shall accompany thee."

Just as Iolo and I began to walk to the stables, a fat man scurried up to us.

"Iolo! Who is this stranger?" he asked.

"Why, this is the Avatar!" Iolo proclaimed. "Canst thou believe it? May I introduce thee? This is Finnigan, the Town Mayor. And this is the Avatar!"

"I simply cannot believe he is here!" The Mayor looked me up and down, not sure whether he believed Iolo or not. He looked at Iolo skeptically.

"I swear to thee, it is the Avatar!" said Iolo.

"I am not certain that I believe it."

The Mayor looked at me again, as if he were studying every pore on my face. Finally he smiled. "Welcome, Avatar," he said.

Then, suddenly, his face became stern.

"A horrible murder has occurred. If thou art truly the Avatar, perhaps thou canst help

us solve it. I would feel better if thou takest this matter into thine hands. Thou shalt be handsomely rewarded if thou dost discover the name of the killer. Dost thou accept?"

So this was why I'd been brought to Britannia—to solve the murder in the stable. Seemed like pretty small potatoes to yank me all the way from home, but I'd been to Britannia enough to know that you don't avoid a quest.

"I would be honored to solve the murder for you," I said. I was slipping into my Britannian mode of speaking. Here it felt as natural as the gloves I wore. At home it got me some very weird looks.

"Petre here knows something about all of this," said the Mayor, gesturing at the peasant.

"I discovered poor Christopher and the Gargoyle Inamo early this morning," Petre gasped. "'Tis a horrible sight."

"Thou must see for thyself, Avatar," said Iolo. "Brace thyself, my friend. 'Tis truly a gruesome sight."

We stepped into the gloom of the stable. The stench hit us first—the coppery smell of spilled blood. I slipped in a puddle of it and grabbed Iolo's shoulder to steady myself.

"Ugly, is it not?" asked Iolo. "From what I have heard, neither Christopher nor Inamo deserved so grisly a death. Thou shouldst certainly ask everyone in town about it."

Splayed out on the floor were the remains of Christopher. His hands had been pinned down with stakes. At each extremity, a black candle had been placed. Someone had used a very sharp knife on him. Entrails spilled from the wound; his mouth was pulled into a silent rictal scream. Whoever had done this had made sure he was conscious throughout most of his torture.

Bloody footprints led away from the body, out through the back of the stable. As I followed them, I discovered the body of Inamo, the Gargoyle. He was hanging from the north wall of the tack room, his body sagging forward against the bindings that held him. The ropes cut cruelly into his scaly flesh. A pitchfork protruded from his stomach.

I'd seen many horrible things during my visits to Britannia, but this was something new. Before, the only monsters I'd encountered were creatures such as dragons and trolls. The monsters who had done this were human.

I returned to Christopher's body. On his leg was a key I'd overlooked. I picked it up and wiped the blood from it onto my pants leg, trying hard to remain dispassionate.

"What do you know about this? About Christopher and Gargoyle?" I asked Iolo.

"I haven't a clue," he replied. "I don't know Christopher and I've never spoken to Inamo. It's a shame because there aren't many Gargoyles living with humans. This will only discourage them more."

I sighed. A pitchfork in the belly was a

hell of a way to discourage integration. Outside the stables, I ran into the Mayor again.

"Hast thou searched the stables?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, trying not to remember too clearly what I'd found there. "I found a key on Christopher's body."

"Hmm, a key. Perhaps if thou dost ask Christopher's son about it, he may know what it is for."

"Who is his son?" I asked.

"His name is Spark."



Iolo led me to Christopher's house, in the northwest corner of town. As we entered, a young boy came down the stairs from the upper floor. His face was blotchy and his eyes were red from crying.

"Who art and what dost thou want?" he asked suspiciously. I noticed he had a sling in his hand.

Before I could answer, Iolo butted in. "Boy, this is the Avatar." I could tell he was getting indignant. "He has come to help you."

The boy slowly lowered his slingshot. I couldn't help admiring his attitude. His skill at handling strangers was impressive for one so young. After a few moments of sizing me up, he slowly nodded his head.

"All right, I believe thee. Thou dost look like the paintings. I apologize."

"Do you recognize this key?" I asked. I held out the key I'd retrieved from Christopher's body.

"It looks like the key to Father's chest upstairs. I'll take you there."



We followed Spark up the narrow staircase. A large trunk sat in one corner of the room. I slipped the key into the lock and, with a soft snick, the chest opened. Inside were a pile of gold coins, a medallion of some sort, and a scroll.

"What kind of medallion is this?" I asked Spark.

"'Tis Father's Fellowship medallion," he replied. "He was trying to leave The Fellowship. I know they killed him!"

"Calm down," I said. "Tell me what you know about the murder. It's no good jumping to conclusions."

Spark took a deep breath. "Last night I was having a nightmare about Father. I dreamed that he screamed, and it woke me up. I looked around the house, but he was not in his bed. I was wide awake, so I went out to find him.

"I know it sounds witless, but I dreamed that a big red-faced man was watching down on everything and ... he looked down ... and he noticed Father. That is all I remember."

"So you went to the stables and you found your father," I said.

"No, I did not find him. At least, not right away. But I did see something. I was in front of the stables. I saw a man and a wingless Gargoyle running from behind the building. They ran toward the dock. Then I went inside and found ... Father."

I looked over at Iolo. His face was pale. I imagine mine looked the same. To find his father murdered, and in such a horrible way, must have been terrible for Spark. Again my admiration for the lad grew. He was holding up remarkably well under the stress.

"I'm sorry to make you relive all this," I said. "But do you remember anything about the way they looked?"

"All I saw of the man was that he had a hook for a right hand. I cannot tell one Gargoyle from another. I could not identify him, except that he had no wings."

"That helps, Spark," I said. "At least now we have something to go on. What about this gold? Do you know anything about it?"

"The gold—I have never seen so much gold in my life. I cannot imagine why Father had it."

So much for our clues. I unrolled the scroll and read it, hoping it might provide some clue.

**Thou hast received payment.
Make thy delivery tonight.**

Not a lot of help there. Payment for what? Had he delivered the item, or was someone disappointed in the job? Maybe he'd never delivered the item at all.

"What about this delivery?"

"I know he was making something special for someone. I am fairly certain it was at his shop."

There was nothing else to be learned here, so I asked Spark's permission to take the medallion and the gold. He granted it and we went back downstairs. Iolo and I stood just inside the door to the house, discussing what to do next.

"We should investigate The Fellowship, then see if anyone else saw the man with the hook," I said to Iolo. Just then Spark interrupted.

"Wilt thou go find the man with the hook? Let me help thee!" he pleaded. His tears had stopped; his face took on a determined, forceful look.

"Take me with thee! Please! I must avenge Father's death! If thou dost not take me with thee, I will follow thee anyway!" He was

excited now. "I am an expert with a slingshot! I can strike sewer rats with almost every shot! And I am small—I do not eat much! Please take me! Please ask me to join thee!"

Iolo whispered, "I do not know about taking a child on the road with us."

At that moment, Spark let fly with his sling. His target, a small fly hovering above Iolo's head, was smacked out of the air. I laughed as Iolo yelped, jumped away, cursed, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I think we should take him along, Iolo. Just to keep the flies away."

"Yippee," shouted Spark. He was all smiles and I knew I'd done the right thing. Now all I had to do was keep him alive and find the person who'd killed his father. Yeah, no problem.

There was something else that bothered me. I didn't mention it, but Spark had said something about a red-faced man in his dreams. I, too, had an experience with that man, but not in a dream. He'd come to me back on Earth and told me that I would kneel before him just as everyone in Britannia did. I'd seen him just before the red Moongate appeared and took me to Britannia.

"Spark," I began. "I've been away for a long time and I've never heard of The Fellowship before. Why would they want to kill your father?"

"Well, at first they harassed Father and me when they came around asking us to join. I suppose they do good things. Many people like them. Father eventually joined the group after he went to Britain and took one of their tests. I do not know anything about them. I never took one. Maybe thou shouldst ask the man at the Fellowship branch, Klog. He is the head of the Fellowship branch here in Trinsic. He and Father got into an argument a week

ago when Klog and two of his friends came over to talk with Father."

"I don't know what it was about. Perhaps thou shouldst ask Klog. I do not remember what they look like. I did not recognize them. They were most likely some other members of The Fellowship."

I frowned. The Fellowship sounded both benign and dangerous. (An oxymoronic situation if I'd ever heard of one.) They did good works, but pressured people to join their organization and apparently weren't too subtle when someone disappointed them.

"Let's go see Klog," I said.



The Fellowship hall was dim and cool inside. The center of the hall was designed for worship, with two rows of pews running its length. A strangely formed candelabra stood behind the podium at the front of the room. From the doorway to our right, a portly man emerged.

"Greetings, Avatar. I recognized thee at once. Word has moved through town quickly. I had heard that thou wert here. I am Klog." He grabbed my hand and wrung it in his fleshy palm.

"Yes," I replied. "I have returned. I am currently investigating the murder of Spark's father, Christopher."

Klog placed one finger on the side of his nose and looked thoughtful. "Well," he said, "I was home all night and my wife Ellen will certainly verify that. But, as we say in The Fellowship, 'Worthiness Precedes Reward.' Christopher must have done something bad. And the poor Gargoyle Inamo! 'Tis a pity."

"I heard you argued with him."

"Last week Christopher stated that he wanted to leave The Fellowship! Canst thou

imagine? Well, we simply attempted to speak with him and alter his decision. The man verbally assaulted me and my companions with no provocation!" Klog's double chin trembled with indignation.

"So you know nothing at all about the murders," I said.

"No. Nothing at all."

"I see," I said. Something in Klog's manner made me suspicious. It wasn't anything in particular; he was just *too* nice, *too* polite, *too* sincere. "Spark says he saw a man with a hook leaving the stables. Do you know anything about him?"

Once again Klog struck his thoughtful pose. I knew the answer to my question before he spoke. "No. Nothing at all."

I decided to try another tack. Maybe this one would give me more information. "What about your friends? The ones who Christopher argued with. Maybe they know something."

"They have gone to Fellowship Headquarters in Britain. They were here delivering Fellowship funds. Their names are Elizabeth and Abraham. Perhaps you would be interested in joining The Fellowship. If you go to The Fellowship hall in Britain, Batlin can help you join."

I stared at him for a moment, trying hard to keep from showing my disgust. We were discussing the gruesome murder of a young boy's father, and this man was trying to recruit me into his organization. What a sensitive guy.

I pushed my contempt down. Whatever information I could get from Klog would help me find Christopher's killer. I needed to hang on to a detached attitude if I wanted to solve this murder.

"I confess I'm unfamiliar with The Fellowship and its teachings," I said.

Klog's face broke into a broad smile. His eyes lit with the glow of a true believer.

"The Fellowship was created to advance a philosophy, a method of applying an optimistic order of thought to one's life. The Triad is composed of three principles that, when applied in unison to thy life, can soothe the fever of a society that teaches thee to accept failure, and banishes the destructive, illusory thoughts and feelings from thy spirit.

"The first principle is to Strive For Unity. This means that we should reject divisiveness, put aside our differences, and work together for the good of us all.

"The second principle is to Trust Thy Brother. Trust is essential, for what will you accomplish if you must be divided by constantly watching each other?

"The third and final principle is Worthiness Precedes Reward. One must strive to be worthy of the rewards each of us seeks, for if one is not worthy of reward, why should one believe they should receive it?"

Spark yawned behind his hand as Klog finished speaking. Klog bored me too, but his description of the Triad made me uneasy. His "principles" almost made sense—until you thought about them.

"Well," I said, "thank you for your information. I'm sure it will help."

Klog nodded again and strolled off to attend to Fellowship duties. As we were leaving The Fellowship hall, I noticed a book, bound in green leather, lying on a table. Opening the book, I discovered that it was a copy of *The Book of Fellowship*. Its author was Batlin. As I traveled through Britain on this quest, I would find copies of this tome everywhere.

The Black Gate

We'd discovered a few things about the murder, and I decided to tell the Mayor what we'd learned. We found him in his elegant home, located west of The Fellowship hall.

"Ah, Avatar," he said, rising from his overstuffed chair. "What hast thou discovered about Christopher's murder?"

"Spark saw a man with a hook and a wingless Gargoyle fleeing from the stables just before he discovered his father's body. I think if we can discover this man with the hook, we'll find our murderer. Also, Christopher

quarreled with Elizabeth and Abraham, two Fellowship members, just before he died. I'm not sure, but there may be some connection."

Finnigan smiled. "Good progress. Perhaps you should speak to Gilberto, who was on the watch last night. He was knocked unconscious some time and might know something that will assist you in your investigation." The Mayor leaned forward and spoke more softly. "Actually, I have seen something like this before. It was about four years ago, in Britain. 'Twas before I came to

Trinsic. There was a murder with strikingly similar aspects. A body was found mutilated exactly like poor Christopher. It appeared to be a ritualistic killing. I would wager that whoever was responsible for that murder is the culprit behind this one."

We thanked the Mayor for his time and promised to return when we had more information for him.



We found Gilberto at the healer's shop. He looked much the worse for wear with his head bandaged and stumbling along on a crutch.

"The Mayor tells me you had the watch the night of the murder," I said. "Do you remember anything that could help us?"

"The murder must have occurred shortly before I was knocked out," he said.

"When was that?" I asked.

"It was just about sunrise. I was looking out to the sea. All of a



sudden, I felt a blow on the back of mine head." He winced in pain. "The next thing I knew, I was on the ground. Johnson, the guard for the next watch, was shaking me. I had been out about 10 minutes. I knew that because the sun had just peeked over the horizon. And the *Crown Jewel* had gone and sailed!"

"The *Crown Jewel*?"

"Did I forget to mention it? That was a ship that was docked here all night. I believe it was about to sail for Britain. Thou couldst ask Gargan the Shipwright to make sure. Anyway, I did not see mine attackers," the guard grumbled. "Hmm. I wonder if they jumped onto the ship! They could be all the way to Britain by now!"

"Thank you for the help," I said.

Out in the warm afternoon sun, I thought about what we'd learned. Apparently the person who'd murdered Spark's father had to be the man with one hand. He must have left on the *Crown Jewel*. But, apparently, so had Elizabeth and Abraham. And what was this strange new order, The Fellowship? The more I encountered its members, the less I liked what I saw. They were friendly enough, but mindless in their devotion—among other things.

I asked Spark to show me his father's shop, hoping I might find a clue there. He led us to a stone building in the southwest corner of town. As we entered, I heard a deep voice laughing malevolently.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?" asked Iolo.

"That laughing," I replied.

Iolo looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"I hear no laughter, Avatar," he said. "But perhaps thou hast abilities ..."

"You're patronizing me," I snapped. "I

know what I heard."

"I apologize," said Iolo. "I meant no offense."

"No, it is I who should apologize to you, old friend. I would hate to think I've lost my mind so early in our quest."

"Ah, but Avatar, thou hast always had a weak grasp on reality."

"Thanks a lot, Iolo. You're a real pal."

"Anything to assist thee," he replied.

We searched the blacksmith's shop, but the only thing we discovered was that Christopher was a terrible housekeeper. There were some coins and other useful objects, which we took. For the first time I checked through the items I carried. Whenever I came back to Britannia there was always something missing. This time was no exception. My spell book was gone, all my magical armour, all my gold—it was too frustrating for words.

What I did have was food, some plain leather armour, a dagger, three lockpicks, a map, a torch, and a backpack. Hardly an auspicious beginning. Iolo wasn't much better off. He had a little gold, an abacus (which would come in handy later on), a crossbow and bolts, a backpack, and a small amount of food. Spark was even worse off—his slingshot seemed to be his only possession.

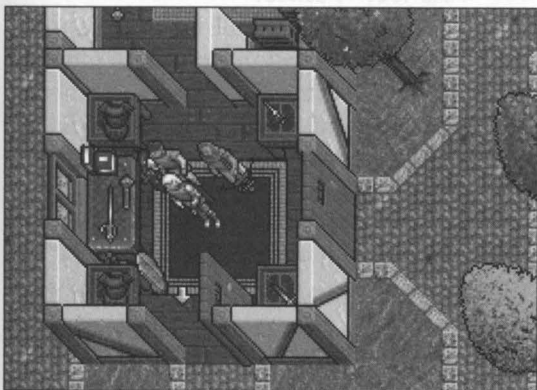
We did have the hundred gold that had been in Spark's father's chest. With no further clues to discover at the blacksmith's, we returned to Finnigan and told him the next place we needed to go was Britain.

He gave us the password to get out of town. (It's *Blackbird*, in case you ever find yourself there, Carlotta—though they might have changed it by now.) And we set off to see Lord British.

Editor's Note:

The Avatar told me later that he had discovered some useful items while he was in Trinsic, but he was loath to tell me how he had acquired them. He found swamp boots in one cottage, and apparently "liberated" them from their owner. He told me that Iolo was much distressed by this action, after which the Avatar vowed that he would try to take only those items to which Iolo didn't object.

You might also want to visit Dell the Armourer while you're in town, though he



is surly and will complain no matter how much you spend. Gargan the Shipwright has deeds for ships and sextants for sale. Since the Avatar was able to give me all the coordinates for the things he discovered, I assume he visited Dell during his stay here.



Chapter Two

es, Avatar. That's the proper direction."

I stopped in my tracks. The Voice was the same one I'd heard in the blacksmith's shop. I

didn't bother to ask the others if they'd heard it; I knew they hadn't.

"Is something wrong?" asked Iolo.

"Yes," I said. "I heard that voice again."

"What did it say?"

"That we were going in the right direction."

"Then it must be a good voice, because that's right."

"I don't think so," I said. "I think we better head south."

"But Avatar, Britain is north."

"I know, but this voice has me spooked."



"Thou knowest not where thou art going," said Iolo.

"I know," I said. We'd been wandering around south of Trinsic for a few hours. The farther we got from Britain, the worse I felt. In retrospect, I can't believe that I'd let some disembodied voice control me like that.

"Let's go to Britain," said Spark. "I've always wanted to go there. I hear Lord British's castle is the largest building in all of Britannia. He eats off gold plates and ..."

"Okay, okay," I said. "We'll go to Britain."

I turned and started northward. We'd only been walking a few minutes when I noticed a chest under a maple tree. I noticed the tree first because of its beautiful yellow leaves. It was early fall in Britannia and the leaves were beginning to turn.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Do you suppose it belongs to anyone?" asked Spark.

"It belongs to us now," I said, rummaging in my backpack for a lockpick. After two of my picks broke, I gave up and began

whacking away at the chest with my sword. It took a little while, but eventually the chest fell to pieces.

“Wahoo!” I yelled.

Heaped before us was a treasure! A full set of magic armour, magic bolts, swamp boots, gold, a ring of protection, a ring of regeneration, a fire sword, a crossbow, and a sword of defense.

We divvied up the loot between us and started again for Britain. This time, I vowed I'd ignore any remarks from the Voice.



On our way to Britain, we passed through a horribly polluted swamp and through the town of Paws. When I'd last been here, Paws had been a small but prosperous community. Now the fields lay fallow, the roads were a mess, and the houses were falling apart. Though there had always been beggars in Britannia, here the level of poverty seemed more desperate. The plight of the town troubled me, but I knew I couldn't linger to help them.

Something bigger than ritual murders was wrong with Britannia. I wondered how Lord British could have let this situation come to pass.

At last we arrived in Britain. Spark's eyes grew round as we walked along the wide, paved streets. Here things were much as I remembered them. The town had grown and prospered. I barely glanced about, knowing we would spend time here in Britain before moving on. My main concern was getting to Lord British's castle. I followed the street we'd come in on until I reached the northern part of town. There, in all its glory, was Lord British's castle. I noticed he'd added a moat (stocked with nasty creatures, I later learned)

and a tower at each corner—no doubt as defensive measures.

We passed over the bridge leading into the castle. Standing inside the small entryway was Chuckles, the court jester. Though I was wary of speaking to him—he was a notorious trickster—I greeted him politely.

“I will speak if thou dost play The Game, friend,” he said. “I must not say my name, lest I break the rule of The Game!”

“Your name?” I asked.

“I must not say my name lest I break the rules of The Game.”

“Your job?” I asked.

“I was, am, and shall be the Court ... Fool! I could give thee a clue if I wish, but for now my job is to play The Game.”

“I don't like this game,” whispered Spark. “I can't understand it.”

“Aye,” said Iolo. “He is a fool.”

“You play The Game well, friend,” said Chuckles to Iolo.

“I am not playing thy Game,” snarled Iolo.

“Not now,” said the fool.

“I think I know how to play The Game,” I said. “A joke, fool.”

“I do not think I can tell a good joke whilst I play The Game! 'Twould be hard! Hmm. Ah! I have one! Why did the hen cross the road? To get to the side she was not on!”

“I wish to stop my play of The Game now.”

“Very well,” said the Jester. “Do not lose how to play The Game. I have a clue for thee.”

“A clue?”

“Yes, here it is.”

Chuckles handed me a scroll.

“Thanks,” I said, tucking the scroll into my backpack.

We walked into the courtyard of the castle.

"Very well, Avatar," said Iolo. "How do you play this game of Chuckles'?"

I smiled, debating whether I should tell him, but I needed his help on this adventure more than I wanted to tease him.

"All the words that Chuckles used consisted of one syllable. That's why he couldn't say his name."

"That's a stupid game," said Spark.

"He's a fool," I replied. "I wouldn't expect any more."

"What does the scroll that he gave you say?"

I pulled the scroll from my backpack and unrolled it. And unrolled it, and unrolled it. I really hated Chuckles sometimes. At the bottom of the scroll was a message telling me to see the gypsy Margareta in Minoc for a fortune.

"Great," I said. "Gypsy fortune tellers. I've got to tell you, Iolo, I've never had very good luck with them."

"Maybe this time it will be different," he replied.

We made our way about the castle, looking for Lord British. We finally found him in a room in the eastern wing, talking to a serious young woman and a winged Gargoyle. He looked only a bit older than when I'd last seen him. His eyes gleamed at the sight of us.

"Welcome, my friend!" he said, embracing me. "Please tell me what brings thee to Britannia! Or, more importantly, what brought thee here?"

"My Lord," I said, "the red Moongate you sent brought me here."

I told him the story of how a red Moongate had appeared behind my house and had mysteriously brought me to Trinsic.

Lord British's brow creased as I spoke.

Finally he said, "I did not send the red Moongate to fetch thee. Someone or something must have activated that Moongate. And that is strange indeed, because we have been having a bit of trouble with Moongates as of late. In fact, we have been having trouble with magic in general!"

"What kind of trouble?"

"Something is awry. Magic has not been working for the longest time. I even have trouble creating food with magic! It must be something to do with the magical ether. There are those who say that magic is dying; what with the trouble with the Moongates and the situation with Nystul. I am beginning to suspect that they might be right!"

Lord British studied me for a moment.

"Perhaps magic will work much better for thee. Thou hast not been in Britannia long. It is possible that whatever has affected magic has not made its mark upon thee yet. Please try it. A spell book is stored with the rest of thine equipment."

"My equipment?" Hope blossomed in me.

"Yes, I have a spell book stored away with the rest of the equipment. Thou art welcome to any of mine equipment. I keep it in a locked storeroom here in the castle. Thou wilt find the key in my study."

"Where in the study?" I asked.

Lord British smiled. "Think of it as a game."

I groaned. Lord British was as fond of annoying games as Chuckles was. No doubt I'd find myself in secret passages and other nutty places before I located the equipment.

"If you didn't send the Moongate, who did?"

"I know not, but the Moongates are not functioning! We cannot use them as we have

in the past. Not only are they dysfunctional, they are, in fact, dangerous! One of my trusted sages used mine own Orb of the Moons to travel to the Shrine of Humility, and his body did shatter upon entering the gate! It only that mage in Cove hadn't gone mad!"

"Who's that?"

He leaned forward and spoke quietly. "There is a mad mage in Cove by the name of Rudyom. Dost thou remember him? Rudyom was working with a magical substance called blackrock. Before he went mad, he claimed that this mineral could solve the problems of the Moongates. I suggest that thou shouldst go to Cove and find him. Try to learn what it was he was doing with this blackrock material. It could be our only hope.

"He was a brilliant and respected mage. But something happened to him in recent years. He seemed to go completely senile. I wonder if there is a connection with what happened to Rudyom and what has befallen Nystul!"

"Nystul?"

"Err ... talk to him."

"What of Britannia, milord? It has been two hundred years since I last visited; I see much has changed. Your castle, for one."

"The state of the land could not be more prosperous. But thou hast been away for too long!" Lord British wagged a finger at me. "I am certain that thy friends have rued thine absence. 'Tis a shame thou didst stay away so long! But ... I am so very happy to see thee. Britannia is prosperous and abundant. Look around thee. Explore the newly refurbished castle. Travel the land. Peace is prominent in all quarters. Yes, Britannia has never been better. Well, almost never."

"You sound unsure."

"Well, things are indeed fine. It is the

people I am concerned about. There is something wrong in Britannia, but I do not know what it is. Something is hanging over the heads of the Britannian people. They are unhappy. One can see it in their eyes. There is nothing that is unifying the population, since there has been peace for so long. Perhaps thou couldst determine what is happening. I implore thee to go out amongst the people. Watch them in their daily tasks. Speak with them. Work with them. Break bread with them. Perhaps they need someone like the Avatar to take an interest in their lives. By the way, take my Orb of the Moons. Perhaps it will serve thee better than it has me."

"I believe the reason I was brought here had something to do with what I found in Trinsic. When were you last there?"

"I have not been down there in many years. Has something happened there?"

I told him the story of Christopher and Inamo's murder. He paled slightly, as though this wasn't at all what he'd expected.

"Murder? In Trinsic?" he looked concerned. "I have heard nothing about it. Art thou investigating it?"

"Yes."

"Very good. It pleases me that thou art concerned about my people." The king paused a moment. "Now that thou dost mention it, I have had reports of other, similar murders in the past few months. In fact, there was one here in Britain three or four years ago. The body was mutilated in a ritualistic fashion. Apparently there is a maddened killer on the loose. But I have no doubt that someone such as thee, Avatar, can find him! I do not recall many details. Thou shouldst ask Patterson, the town Mayor, about it. He may remember more."

I related my information about the man I was now calling Hook to Lord British, as well as my story about Elizabeth and Abraham and the *Crown Jewel*. I asked him if he knew anything about The Fellowship.

"They are an extremely useful and productive group of citizens," he said. "Thou shouldst most certainly visit the Fellowship headquarters here in Britain and speak with Batlin. The Fellowship has done many good deeds throughout Britannia, including feeding the poor, educating and helping those in need, and promoting general good will and peace. It is not far from the castle, to the southwest. It is just south of the theater."

"Batlin wrote *The Book of Fellowship*, didn't he?"

"He is a druid who began The Fellowship about 20 years ago. He is highly intelligent, and is a warm and gentle human being. By the way, thou must look for thy friends Iolo,

Shamino, and Dupré, of course."

Iolo stepped out from behind me. Lord British looked pleased.

"Hello, Iolo! How art thou?"

"I am well, my liege! 'Tis good to see thee!"

"What news do you have of Shamino and Dupré?"

"I do not see Shamino often, though I know he spends a great deal of time in Britain," replied Lord British. "Dupré I have not seen since I knighted him. Typical—I do the man a favor and he disappears! I heard he might be in Jhelom."

"One last question, milord. Before the Moongate came for me, I was visited by a strange being. He called himself the Guardian."

"I do not know of a Guardian. Art thou sure he really exists? Thou shouldst investigate further."



"Thank you, my liege. I hope I will be of service to you and Britannia."

He nodded and turned back to his council. As I was leaving, the serious young woman I'd noticed upon my arrival came up to me.

"Avatar, wait," she said.

"May I help you?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "My name is Miranda. I am a member of the Great Council. We are working on a bill of law today. I hear thou art traveling to Cove to see the mage Rudyom. Wouldst thou take this bill to the town Mayor and have him sign it?"

"What's the bill for?" I asked. I didn't want to get sidetracked with political details.

"Inwisloklem and I are drafting a bill to make illegal any distribution of waste products in Lock Lake, near Cove. It is quite defiled."

I knew only too well the effect of pollution on my own planet. Since I was traveling to Cove anyway, I decided to take along the document.

"Wonderful," she said. "Please bring it back to me when it is signed. We thank thee."

I stuffed the document into my backpack.

The dignified Gargoyle I'd noticed earlier stepped forward and introduced himself.

"To be Wislem," he said. "To be advisor to Lord British, and act as representative for my race here in Britain. To be honored to be in long line of advisors to the king."

"I am honored to meet you," I said.

"To be sad to hear the news of Inamo. To suggest that you visit Lord Draxinusom in Terfin and tell him about Inamo. He will know who

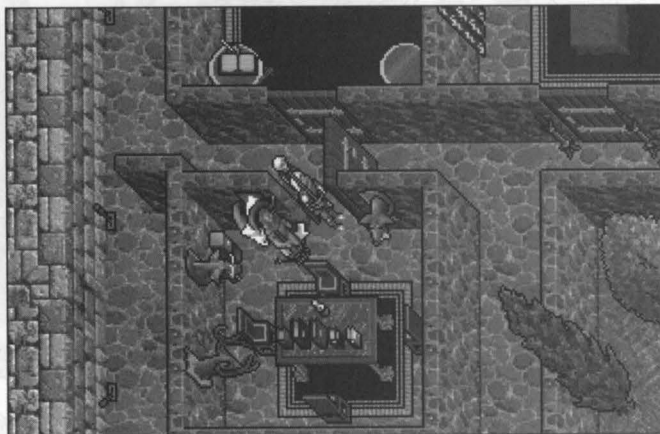
Inamo's parent Gargoyle is. To recommend you relay this news as soon as possible. To go soon and tell Draxinusom about Inamo?"

"Yes, I will."

The Gargoyle nodded as though he'd expected this answer. "To know you are reliable."



We found Lord British's study in the west wing of the castle. The key was in a small table on the west wall. In the course of finding the study, we discovered a series of secret passages that ran along the perimeter of the castle. The first switch was in a small study on the west side of his bedroom. I flipped it, and a door to the west and north opened. Spaced at even intervals along the corridor to the west were more levers. We walked along, playing with the switches and discovering how they worked. Most of them opened doors along the corridor, but a couple closed them. I made sure we left all the doors open. We'd just reached the southwestern part of the castle when Spark discovered the parrot.





He picked up a hammer that was lying next to the bird and whapped it soundly on its head.

“What on earth are you doing that for?” I asked.

“Wait,” he said.

“I’ll tell, I’ll tell,” the parrot squawked. “The treasure is at 169 South 28 East.”

Iolo and I stared at the parrot with gaping mouths. Iolo recovered first.

“What made you do that, boy?” he asked.

“We have a parrot at home,” said Spark. “When you hit him he says the same thing. I just wondered if this parrot would say something different.” Spark looked disappointed, as though he were expecting something more from the mangy bird.

“We should investigate this treasure, Avatar,” said Iolo. “There might be something of use to us on this journey.”

I nodded, but didn’t mention that the coordinates for the parrot’s treasure put it well into the southern portion of Britannia, on one of the small islands near Serpent’s Hold. How we would get there was beyond me at this point. We didn’t have a vessel and there was

no way to reach the location by foot.

We discovered stone steps leading to the second floor of the castle. Each of the southern towers had been designed to hold prisoners. I talked to a man named Weston, locked in the southwest tower. His story filled me with sadness, and I promised to intercede with Lord British on his behalf.

I was troubled by my meeting with Britannia’s king. He seemed hopelessly out of touch with what was happening in his kingdom. From my experiences with The Fellowship, I thought they were a dangerous organization. Yet Lord British seemed to think they were only good citizens. He’d heard about these strange ritualistic murders, but hadn’t pursued an investigation of them. And now this unjust imprisonment of Weston. Had Lord British’s wealth and power blinded him to the everyday realities of his kingdom? The thought disturbed me.

The storeroom was in the northwest corner of the castle. Inside we found magic boots, a bag of reagents, a spell book (with *An Nox*, *In Lor*, *Mani*, and *Vas Flam* spells), a two-handed sword, a shield, a bag with 25 gold, and a barrel containing meat. We were beginning to be prepared for the hazards I knew we’d encounter in the Britannian wilds—although I was almost as nervous about Britannian *civilization* these days.

We left the castle and made our way about the town. Everyone seemed prosperous and healthy here. Almost everyone, that is. There was a beggar named Max, but even he



seemed better off than the beggars we'd seen in Paws.

There was even a museum devoted to my previous adventures in Britannia. Inside it I found my old swamp boots, which I liberated—they were mine, after all. I also picked up the eight colored stones. In *The Book of Fellowship* I discovered two new spells: *Kal Por Ylem* and *Kal Ort Por*. By using these stones, you could return to whatever location you had marked on one of the stones. With the Moongates not working properly, I thought these might come in handy.

The Fellowship hall was next door to the Avatar Museum. I started toward it, but lolo grabbed me.

"Spark and I need libations before we enter that place. 'Tis bad enough we had to endure them in Trinsic; the head branch must be worse. Come, let's sup at The Blue Boar. Better to face boredom on a full stomach."

I shrugged and followed them to the pub. Deep down I agreed. I wasn't looking forward to trying to join The Fellowship.

The Blue Boar wasn't very crowded. We made our way to the back room, calling for food and wine.

"Thou still makest as much noise as ever," said a familiar voice.

I stopped in my tracks. Sitting at one of the long communal tables was my old friend Shamino. Though he was much younger than lolo, he was still well into middle age.

"Shamino!"

"Aye. 'Tis good to see thou hast remembered thy old friend."

"What are you doing here?"

"I heard something about an actress," interjected lolo.

I was shocked to see Shamino blush.

"Thou art a swine, lolo."

"'Tis good to see thee, too, Shamino," laughed lolo.

"Enough of this, already," I said. "Shamino, what are you doing?"

"I should be out adventuring with thee! I am weary of loitering about Britain. There is much we could be accomplishing. Where hast thou been?"

"It's a long story," I said. "You don't want to hear it now. I'm investigating a murder in Trinsic."

I told him the story and he listened intently. "I would be honored to join and help thee in investigating this matter," he said. "Oh, by the way, I have thy pocket watch." He dug into his pack and pulled out a beautiful solid-gold timepiece.

I took it from his hand and turned it over in my palm. It was still running after two hundred years. Now that's what I call a watch.



The Fellowship hall was dimly lit. Soft music played, though where it came from I couldn't say. A rotund older man approached as we entered. He was at once humble yet dignified. His eyes bathed me with compassionate warmth.

"Hello," I said. "I'm looking for Batlin."

"My name, good friend, is Batlin," he said. "It is indeed a privilege to meet the Avatar in the flesh."

This put my hackles up. Some of the people I'd spoken to didn't believe I was the Avatar. Even Spark had doubted me when we'd first met. But none of The Fellowship members doubted me for an instant. Very strange.

"I hear you started this order," I said. "I've

heard much about The Fellowship since my return to Britannia.”

Batlin smiled. “The Fellowship was formed 20 years ago, with the full approval and support of Lord British. It is a society of spiritual seekers who strive to reach the highest levels of human potential and to share this knowledge freely with all people.”

Maybe I was being superior, but it seemed to me that the reason I’d come to Britannia on my quest for Avatarhood was to show people how to achieve this very thing. I guess I was suspicious of any organization claiming to have a lock on spiritual development.

“I see,” I said, hoping to draw more information from him. “Please tell me more about your organization.”

“The Fellowship advances the philosophy of sanguine cognition, a way to apply a positive order of thought to one’s life through what is called the Triad of Inner Strength. We strive to avoid the mistakes made by mystics and sages since the dawn of time. They apply the standards of the past—such as the Virtues, for example—to qualify the present, and thus they do not perceive it correctly. We seek to examine our present lives, each on our own terms, and see the world the way it is.”

No Virtues—this didn’t sound right to me. But I had once made a mistake about the Gargoyles and their way of life; perhaps I was being hasty in my judgment once again.

“Please continue, Batlin. This is most enlightening. I confess, I feel the Virtues are of great importance.”

“They are perfectly adequate for those who feel that they still need them, for whatever reason. But no one, not even thyself, thou must admit, Avatar, can fulfill them perfectly. Therefore they are a philosophy that is ultimately based upon

failure. We have never claimed that our teachings are a substitute for the Virtues. However, ours is a belief that is based upon success, not failure. The Triad of Inner Strength is simply three basic values that, when applied in unison, enable one to be more creative, satisfied, and successful in life. The three values of the Triad of Inner Strength are ‘Strive For Unity,’ ‘Trust Thy Brother,’ and ‘Worthiness Precedes Reward.’

Once again, this sounded okay, but the more I thought about it, the less I liked it. There was no requirement for the individual to succeed; no responsibility, except to the group. It made me more uneasy than ever. I lost the train of the conversation for a moment, but Batlin had warmed to his subject and was still talking.

“When we say ‘Strive For Unity,’ it is simply our way of expressing how the people of Britannia should all cooperate and work together. A worthwhile sentiment, I am certain thou wouldst concur.”

“Hmm,” I said. “And ‘Trust Thy Brother?’”

“What The Fellowship means by this is that people are all the same and the world is, generally speaking, a supportive, nurturing place. The trust we place in each other is like the pinions that hold our society together. Quite true, wouldst thou not say?”

“Hmm,” I said again. “And ‘Worthiness Precedes Reward?’”

“Allow me to explain the meaning of Worthiness Precedes Reward. Each one of us seeks something which we desire from life, and we must strive to be worthy of that which we seek. It would be difficult for thee to disagree, I am quite sure.”

“Quite,” I said. “By the way, I hate to interrupt your fascinating description, but I am looking for two of your members: Elizabeth

and Abraham. They were in Trinsic when a terrible murder occurred a few days ago. I was hoping they might have a clue about the identity of the murderer.”

“Ah, my good colleagues Elizabeth and Abraham were just here. They left this morning for Minoc on Fellowship business. They deal with the distribution and collection of funds.”

“I would like to join The Fellowship, Batlin. I believe it is a worthy organization.”

“What?” yelled Shamino. He grabbed my arm and dragged me into a corner. “Hast thou lost thy mind? This is not a group thou shouldst join.”

“It’s not what you think,” I said. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I think not.”

“I’ll explain later,” I said. I walked back to join Batlin and the others. “I apologize for my friend. He’s very excitable.”

“Tis of no importance,” replied Batlin. “Before thou canst join, I would like to ask thee some questions.”

“All right.”

“These questions are all hypothetical. Do not let them confuse or upset thee. Question One: Thou art feeling depressed right now. Is it more likely because thou hast disappointed a friend, or a friend has disappointed thee?”

I stared at the plump man for a moment. What a dumb question. And what did it have to do with anything, anyway?

“I guess that I disappointed a friend,” I said.

“I can tell from thine answer that thou art a person who takes their responsibilities to others very seriously, and perhaps tends to put too much pressure on oneself to please others.” Batlin smiled and nodded.

“Question Two: Thou art at a feast hosted by a very high-ranking local official. Thou dost believe the food he has ordered to be served is little more than swill, and thou dost notice that the other guests certainly think so. When thine host asks if thou dost like the food, dost thou tell the truth or lie to him?”

How odd—the question didn’t have to do with a real dilemma—nothing of importance, just a mundane social situation. And the strange thing was that no matter how I answered, I was wrong.

“Tell the truth,” I finally said. After all, I was the Avatar.

“Thy response shows thou art a bluntly honest person, who mayest occasionally say things that people may not like hearing, but thine intentions are noble ones.” Batlin made a sweeping gesture with his hand. I wondered what he would have said if I’d answered differently.

“Question Three: Thou hast taken the last room available at an inn. Upon entering it, thou dost find that it is filthy. It is the middle of the night, there is no one to clean it, and there is nowhere else to stay. Dost thou clean up the room thyself, at least somewhat, before reposing in it, or dost thou just go to sleep, letting the room remain as thou hast found it?”

“Clean the room myself,” I replied.

“Thou hast revealed that thou art a person who instinctively believes they are responsible for anything that goes wrong and that it falls to thee to put the whole world right.” Batlin sighed. That sigh really bugged me. I had the funny feeling that The Fellowship was full of these vaguely worded, no-win questions.

“Question Four: At a festive gathering

thou dost tell a humorous anecdote, and thou dost tell it very well, creating much amusement. Didst thou tell this comedic story because thou didst enjoy the response that thou didst receive from thine audience, or because thou didst want to please thy friends?"

"Both," I said.

Batlin wagged his finger at me, "Nay, Avatar. Thou must choose one."

"I enjoyed the response," I said.

"Thine answer shows thou art a person who instinctively sees friends as tools to be used for thine own gratification." Batlin frowned slightly, then continued.

"Question Five: If thou wert to become a person of leisure, one who had amassed a fantastic fortune of wealth, would it most likely be because thou hast discovered an infallible method of stealing the money of others, or thou hast discovered an infallible method of illicitly duplicating the coin of the realm?"

"Hey," I said. "Neither one."

Batlin gave me a look that said "Choose."

Great thief or forger—nice choice. Or, rather, no choice at all.

"I stole the money."

"From Question Five we learn that thou art a person who instinctively believes that they are incapable of achieving success, someone who feels that they can only profit through the exploitation of others." Batlin slowly shook his head.

I was really peeved now. These questions were rotten.

"Question Six: While traveling, thou dost find a man in terrible pain. His arm has been grievously injured. A healer tending to him tells thee that the man's arm will have to be

removed and that he will require thine assistance to do it. The man says he will recover from his injury and asks thee not to let the healer amputate his arm. Dost thou heed the words of the healer, or respect the wishes of the injured man?"

"Heed the healer," I said. My mouth was set in a thin line.

"By thine answer, thou art a person who believes in mercy even when it is not an easy thing, and a person who tries to have the courage of thy convictions." Batlin gave me a knowing look.

He asked me some other questions, but I don't recall them because I was so annoyed by the whole process. At last the test was finished and Batlin rendered his opinion of my qualifications to join The Fellowship.

"Thou art a person of strong character, Avatar, but one who is troubled by deep personal problems that prevent thee from achieving thy true potential for greatness. In short, thou art precisely the type of person for which The Fellowship was created," he said. "I welcome thee to our fold. Know that the path of the Triad is not an easy one, but its rewards are bountiful. I will, of course, waive the usual sabbatical of study that is required before one achieves membership. Thou art, after all, the Avatar. However, as one of our tenets prescribes, 'Worthiness Precedes Reward.' Thou must embark on a task or two for The Fellowship before thou can be properly inducted and receive thy medallion."

Batlin handed me a sealed box. "Take this box, unopened, to Elynor in Minoc."

I took the box from his hands and passed it over to Spark to carry. What I wanted to do was get out of there as fast as I could. The Fellowship stank to high heaven and though I

felt it necessary to join them to discover their true purpose in Britannia, I felt dirty doing it.

"I'll deliver the package as soon as possible," I said.

Batlin smiled and bowed.



I drew several deep breaths of the cool afternoon air. When I finished, the others were looking at me as if I'd lost my mind. I pulled Spark's father's Fellowship medallion out of my backpack and hung it around my neck.

"You don't really think I joined, do you?" I asked.

They shrugged.

"I had to make them think I was joining to find out what they're up to."

Iolo smiled and nodded, but Shamino looked doubtful.

"'Tis a terrible risk to run, Avatar," Shamino said. "Dost thou think 'tis right to use such measures?"

"The problem is, I don't think there was any other way."

"I believe the Avatar," put in Spark. I smiled at the young boy, grateful for his belief in me.

"I think its time we head for Cove," I said.



Editor's Notes:

The Avatar found magical gauntlets outside Paws. The coordinates for the gauntlets are 74 South 8 West. They were hidden under debris. The treasure chest he found outside of Trinsic was under a tree with yellow leaves. The coordinates were 128 South 3 West.



Chapter Three

A thunderstorm appeared out of nowhere as we made our way east toward Cove. Hail and rain pelted us, but that didn't dampen our spirits. Senti whistled a cheerful tune—haven't I mentioned that we'd run into Senti in Britain? Yes, he joined us after we stopped by his shop looking for someone to train Spark. The lad was still quite green and needed more help than I could provide. I spent time training with Denby, increasing my magical and intellectual abilities and my dexterity. I was encouraged by Senti's presence in our group. He was a skillful fighter, and he was willing to train any member of the party without charge.

Halfway to Cove, we passed the Bog of Desolation. It was a foul-smelling, noxious place, which I was sure held little but evil.

"I believe the castle of the Shadowlords lies within this bog," said Shamino.

"The ones I defeated when Blackthorn was in power?" I asked.

"Aye, the very ones," he replied.

"Is it far from here?" asked Spark. His eyes had grown very wide. "I should like to see it. I have heard many tales of the Avatar's—I mean your—defeat of the Shadowlords."

Maybe it was the glow of hero worship in his eyes, or perhaps a bit of *hubris* on my part, but I agreed to make a detour and show him the castle.



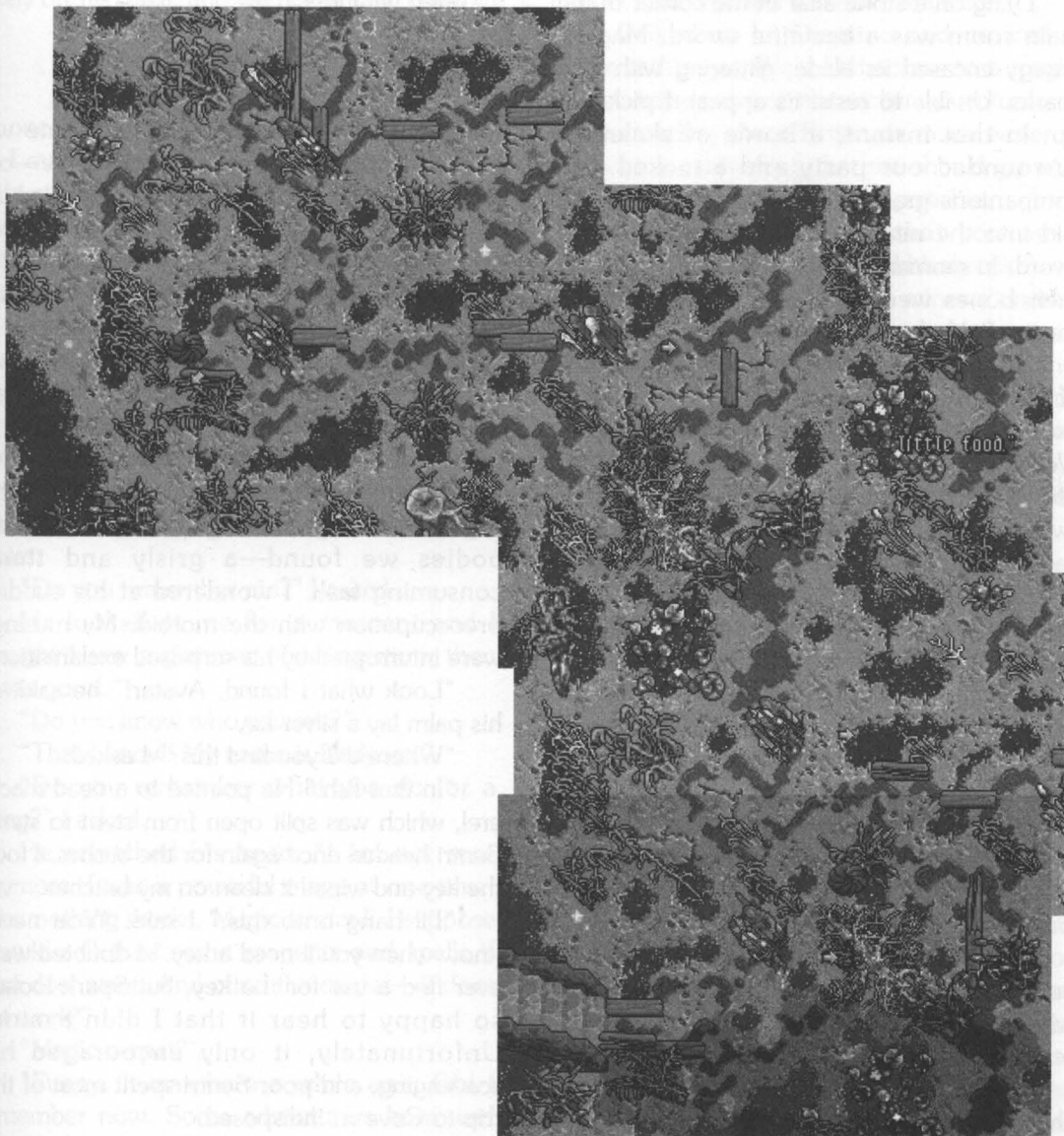
The shadows had grown long by the time we reached a place where we could enter the swamp and make our way to the castle.

The Black Gate

Though I had swamp boots, my companions did not, and I hoped I would be able to use the *An Nox* spell on them when we reached our destination.

We picked our way through the swamp,

making slow progress toward the deserted castle. As we came to a stone bridge leading to the castle, I stopped and stared at the remnants of Stonegate. The roof had been ripped away, exposing the crumbling ruins of



the once-impressive building. Crucifixes dotted the perimeter of the castle's keep; the victims' frozen features bore mute testament to their dying agony. We made our way into the castle proper, the party silent as though this place were too terrible for human words.

Lying on a stone altar in the corner of the main room was a beautiful sword. Magical energy encased its blade, glittering with blue sparks. Unable to resist its appeal, I picked it up. In that instant, a horde of skeletons surrounded our party and attacked. My companions grabbed for their weapons as I laid into the nearest skeleton with this new sword. In moments we'd routed the skeletons; their bones were scattered about us like a carrion field.

"Is everyone all right?" I asked. The rest of the party said they were fine, with the exception of a few scratches here and there. We spread out and investigated the remains of Stonegate. Our search turned up a pair of swamp boots, a magic potion, and a poison dagger. I discovered an old tome detailing the history of the castle. As I held my new-found sword, I realized that I knew its name—Magebane. This told me that this sword would be particularly lethal against users of magic.

"I think we'd best head to Cove," said Spark. He looked pale and a little drawn around the mouth. I mentally kicked myself for not paying more attention to him. Chances were that he'd never seen walking skeletons, let alone the kinds of horrors we'd found at Stonegate.

"You're right, Spark," I said. "It's time we were gone from this place. I don't care for the evil I feel here." Spark seemed relieved to hear he wasn't the only one who felt that way.

"Shall we head for Cove?" asked Shamino.

"Yes," I replied. "It's time we were there."

We made our way out of the swamp. I looked back over my shoulder for one last glimpse of the castle where so many memories lay buried. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I heard the faint cries of the lost souls we'd left behind.



Cove was to the south. To save time we headed around the edge of Lock Lake—or, rather, through the garbage that was piled on its shoreline. I kicked fish carcasses, dirty leggings, moldy bread, broken crockery, and a slew of other disgusting items out of my way. One time, I hit the bloated body of a cat. It burst open and the rat it had eaten for dinner just before it died spilled out. Senti turned green and headed for the bushes. Amazing what weak stomachs some fighters have.

Spark thought this so entertaining that he began a thorough investigation of all the dead bodies we found—a grisly and time-consuming task. I wondered at his sudden preoccupation with the morbid. My musings were interrupted by his surprised exclamation.

"Look what I found, Avatar!" he said. In his palm lay a silver key.

"Where did you find this?" I asked.

"In that fish." He pointed to a dead mackerel, which was split open from stem to stern. Senti headed once again for the bushes. I took the key and wiped it clean on my britches.

"I'll hang onto this," I said. "You never know when you'll need a key." I doubted we'd ever find a use for the key, but Spark looked so happy to hear it that I didn't mind. Unfortunately, it only encouraged his scavenging, and poor Senti spent most of the trip to Cove ... indisposed.



It was getting dark when we reached Cove. I decided it would be best for us to get some rest and food before we proceeded. My companions agreed (though Senti was definitely off his feed), and we rested until dawn.



At one time Cove had been known as the City of Love. Unfortunately, it seemed that the citizens had gotten carried away with the notion and all they could talk about was who they were in love with and who wasn't in love with them. There were more unrequited loves in Cove than you could shake a stick at. Even I was not immune ... But that story doesn't need to be told right now.

We found Rudyom in his shop in the northeastern part of town. He looked much as I remembered him, but from the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew something was amiss.

"Do you remember me?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment and I thought I saw a glimmer of recognition; then it was gone.

"Do you know who you are?"

"That I know. My name is Rudyom."

"Do you remember what you do for a living?" I asked.

He scratched his head. "I am not sure anymore. I was a powerful mage at one time! Now nothing works. Magic is afoul! I suppose I could sell thee some reagents and spells if thou dost want. And mind the carpet—it does not work!"

"Magic carpet?"

"Funny. It was here a while ago. Oh! I remember now. Some adventurers borrowed

my flying carpet a few weeks ago. When they returned, they said they had lost it near Serpent's Spine—somewhere in the vicinity of the Lost River. I suppose if thou didst want to go and find it, thou couldst keep it. It did not work very well. Perhaps thou canst make it work. I did not like the color anyway!"

I looked up at Shamino and noticed a gleam in his eye. We'd had access to a magic carpet during one of our earlier adventures; it made traveling about Britannia much easier. I knew he was thinking that we should go and look for the carpet as soon as possible.

"Lord British told me that you were investigating a substance called blackrock."

"Do not mention that foul mineral's name to me! It hast caused me much frustration! Before my mind was lost, I was conducting experiments with the infernal material. But now I cannot for the life of me remember what it was I was trying to do."

"Do you remember anything? What experiments were you trying to do?" I prompted.

"I wrote them all down in my notebook, which is somewhere around here. Thou art welcome to look at it. But stay away from that damned transmuter—it's dangerous!"

As I searched for his notebook, I continued to question him. "What's so dangerous about the transmuter?"

"'Tis that wand-like thing," he said, pointing to a slightly bent purple stick. "It was supposed to magnetize and magically transmute blackrock, but it doth not work correctly. Try pointing it at a piece of blackrock and thou wilt see what I mean. But do not stand too close! Thou art welcome to take it if thou dost want a piece of garbage!"

I placed a piece of the blackrock on one side of the room and stepped to the far

corner. Motioning the others into the other room, I waved Rudyom's wand in the direction of the blackrock.

The room was rocked by an explosion. I was blasted back on my rump and was grateful to walk away in one piece.

"Art thou all right?" asked Iolo, running back in from the other room.

I coughed and dusted myself off, waving him away. "I'm fine. I just found out what makes this stuff so tricky to work with. Pick up those other pieces, will you? I don't want to leave it lying around here when he's so absent-minded. He might blow himself up by accident." I crammed his wand into my backpack. "Besides, you never know when something so explosive might come in handy."

Gingerly, Sentri and Iolo picked up the remaining four pieces of blackrock. I decided to store them in my room in Lord British's castle. No sense in lugging them all over Britannia if we could avoid it.

I turned back to the mage. "I know it's a long shot, but are you able to sell me spells and reagents?"

He nodded, but said, "I do not understand what is wrong. My magic does not work so well anymore. But I can sell you spells and reagents."

I bought several spells from him, even some I wasn't yet able to use. I bought as many reagents as my purse would allow, then thanked him for his assistance. But he had already wandered off in a daze. I watched as he mechanically made his way about the room, making and unmaking potions.

From Rudyom's we went to visit Lord Heather, the Town Mayor of Cove.

"Hello," he said. "Lord British sent word that thou might visit us. Welcome to Cove, Avatar."

"Thank you for your kind welcome, Lord Heather," I said. This was more like it. Like the old days! "I have brought a bill from the Great Council for you to sign."

"'Tis about time that the government did something about the awful stench coming from that lake! I shall be happy to sign the bill of law! Take it back to the Great Council post haste!" Lord Heather signed the bill and handed it back to me. "It has gotten so putrid that on hot summer days the stink is suffocating. I believe that the Britannian Mining Company in Minoc is the source of the problem. Mining waste is being deposited in the Lake. Thou shouldst be glad it is nearly winter!"

"Yes," I said. "It seems that much has changed since I was last in Britannia. Britain is much larger and even Cove appears to have grown."

Lord Heather nodded vigorously.

"Britain may be the city of Compassion, but Cove has become the city of Passion. Everyone here seems to fall in love rather easily. Thou wilt find that everyone loves someone. Almost everyone, that is."

"Everyone?" I asked.

"Well, let's see ... I am in love with Jaana, our healer. And she is in love with me, of course. Then there is Zinaida, who runs the Emerald. She has an interest in DeMaria, our local bard. And vice versa. Rayburt, our trainer, is courting Pamela, the innkeeper."

"Sounds like bad theater to me," said Iolo.

"I can't imagine Jaana being in love with him," I said, feeling an unreasonable jealousy. During my quest for Avatarhood I'd developed something of a crush on Jaana. It surprised me that those feelings were still there.

"Are there any wenches of mine own age here?" asked Spark.

"Enough of that talk, boy," said Iolo.

Spark stuck his tongue out at Iolo when his back was turned.

"Where is Jaana living in Cove?" I asked.

"You'll find her at the healer's," said Lord Heather.



"Jaana?" I said. She was standing with her back to me, but I knew her immediately.

"Avatar!" she exclaimed as she turned and embraced me warmly.

"What are you doing in Cove?" I asked.

"I have been the Cove Healer for some time now, and can provide thee with mine healing services. Since magic is not reliable, I have been yearning to join a party of adventurers, such as mine old friends. I miss the old life!"

"But what about Lord Heather?" I asked.

"I understand you're, er, involved with him."

Jaana blushed. "Yes, I have been seeing our Town Mayor for some time now."

"I'd be honored for you to join us," I said.

"If you don't mind leaving Lord Heather for a while."

Jaana smiled a wicked little smile. "Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder," she said.

"Isn't that 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder?'" said Iolo.

Jaana looked at him with her eyes full of mischief. "Thou mayest use thy cliché, and I shalt use mine."

The rest of us laughed. Except Spark, who just looked confused.



There was little else we discovered in Cove.

DeMaria (who reminds me of your friend Robert, Carlotta) told us about the lovely but tortured Natassia. We visited her at the shrine, but she had no important information. I found myself strangely compelled by her, and I believe I left a little of my heart behind in her fair hands.



Editor's Notes:

The coordinates of the path leading into Stonegate Castle are 22 North 40 East. The key Spark discovered was at 2 North 47 East—though why anyone would want to go pawing through the refuse on the shores of Lock Lake is beyond me.



Chapter Four

After returning to Britain and delivering the signed document, we agreed that we should search for Rudyom's magic carpet. Oh, but there is one thing you might find of interest, Carlotta. You remember Spark's key? The one he found on the shore of Lock Lake?

Well, on our way back to Britain, we happened upon a farmer named Mack. Though Mack was considered a lunatic by other people, he was indeed in full charge of all his faculties. He told us about a hoe he'd tried to have fixed by a mage. The mage was afflicted by the change in the magical ether; instead of fixing the hoe, he'd enchanted it. It was now known as the Hoe of Destruction. Mack had locked it up in his shed, then lost the key while fishing—in Lock Lake. I couldn't believe we'd have such enormous



luck—but we discovered that Spark’s key fit the shed’s door.

Mack told us we were welcome to the hoe. Jaana asked if she could bear it. I think she liked it because it looked like a farm instrument instead of a weapon and therefore she felt more at ease using it. Or maybe she just wanted to have more clout in combat. Anyway, it solved the mystery of Spark’s key. Though how it had ended up in the belly of that fish, is, I’m sure, another story.

Rudyom told me the carpet was near Dungeon Despise on the Lost River. We traveled west from Britain until we reached the edge of the Serpent’s Spine. By carefully following the curve of the mountain range, we discovered the river. We followed the riverbank and, after a few hours’ time, we found the magic carpet. A bit further up the river was the entrance to Dungeon Despise, but we all agreed that we weren’t ready to go exploring in that place.



We touched down in Minoc, near the Britannian Mining Company. This was the

company Lord Heather had told us was polluting Lock Lake. There didn’t seem to be anyone around the office when I stepped in. I searched the place briefly, but no one was to be found. In one corner of the office I saw a chest. To my surprise, it contained not gold but silver serpent venom. From a few conversations I’d had in Britain, I knew that this was a potent and deadly drug. It was also valuable. I wouldn’t have been happy about leaving this in the hands of people

irresponsible enough to pollute Lock Lake, so I took it. Shamino and Iolo both complained, but I ignored them. I had a feeling that the venom would be important sooner or later.



East of the mining company was a small bridge that led to the sawmill. Several knots of people stood outside the building, their heads bowed close together, talking in whispers. As I approached, the groups broke apart and the people scurried away, looking fearfully over their shoulders at me. Only two people appeared to be calm: a woman in a long blue dress and a pudgy man at her side.

“Hello,” I said. “Who are you?”

The woman drew herself up with haughty dignity.

“Thou hast picked a most inappropriate time to engage in such casual conversation. Perhaps thou wouldst be interested knowing that there have been two murders discovered in this sawmill!”

I was stunned. “A murder?” I asked. “Here?”

“Two murders,” she said.

"But how were they murdered?" I wondered aloud. Could there be a connection to the other killings? "Please tell me more," I said.

"I am saddened at the loss of life but cannot say I am surprised. Frederico and Tania were antagonistic people. The same may be said of most gypsies. I have nothing against them personally, of course."

"They were gypsies?"

"Yes. Their camp is a small distance outside of town. Frederico and Tania treated all members of our Fellowship as if we were diseased. Frederico, particularly, would often bully our members. Thou dost know, it is common knowledge, that we are pacifists. He had a reputation for cruelty, even among his own people. It is not surprising he came to a violent end."

So the victims hadn't liked The Fellowship. That made them all right in my book, and made me increasingly suspicious of the woman's answers to my questions. Since I'd returned to Britannia, it seemed as if every time someone ended up dead it turned out they hadn't gotten along with The Fellowship.

"The Fellowship," I said, prompting her, hoping for more information.

"The Fellowship is highly regarded in Minoc. Why, even the Mayor himself is a member. I brought him into The Fellowship myself." She gestured to the man next to her. He nodded at us, but looked ill at ease. "He was the first new member of our local branch. Gregor, the head of The Fellowship here, directs the Britannian Mining Company. Many Fellowship members pass through Minoc."

"I was looking for two Fellowship members—Elizabeth and Abraham. Maybe you've heard of them?"

"Thou hast just missed them! They were

here collecting funds. They have moved on to Paws to visit our shelter there."

"I need to speak to the head of The Fellowship branch here in town. Her name is Elynor. Do you know her?" I asked.

"I am Elynor," she said, coolly.

"Then I have something for you," I said. I pulled the chest Batlin had given me out of my backpack and handed it over to her.

Her eyes shifted from me to the package and then back to me. "Surely thou hast been instructed not to open the package. Hast thou opened it nonetheless?"

"No," I said, trying hard not to let my indignation show.

Elynor took the package from me. "Thou hast done very well. Now, as promised, here is thy payment." She handed me 50 gold pieces, which I passed to Lolo.

"I'm also looking for a man with a hook."

"A man with a hook? I am certain I would remember having seen anyone like that, and I am positive that does not match the description of any Fellowship member this branch has ever come in contact with."

"He might have come in on the *Crown Jewel*."

"Many ships come and go in our busy port. I do not know of any one specific ship. Perhaps thou shouldst ask Owen."

"Owen?" I asked.

"He is a classic example of The Fellowship making a vast difference in a person's life. Before he joined The Fellowship, he was without confidence and ready to put aside his trade. Now he stands on the verge of being recognized as the finest at his craft in the world."

"And what might that be?" I asked.

"He's a famous shipwright. Hast thou never heard of him?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure he's a fine shipwright. But I think it is time for me to investigate this murder."

Her eyes narrowed as she spied the Fellowship medallion around my neck. "I do not think thou shouldst be wearing the medallion yet," she said. "Thou hast not been properly inducted into The Fellowship. I must inform Batlin of thy falsehood."

She sniffed, in that condescending way of hers, and strolled off. I started to enter the mill, but was stopped by the Mayor.

"I had heard thou were traveling in Britannia again, but it took mine own eyes to believe it! Welcome, Avatar!"

"And your name, sir?" I asked.

"Burnside is my name. As thou knowest from Lady Elynor, I am the Mayor of Minoc for lo these past twenty years."

"I have not been in Britannia in two hundred years," I said. "Minoc is much changed."

"Apart from this business of the murders we are a town run by commerce. Gold runs this town. As goes the money, so goes Minoc. Take this monument affair, for instance."

"A monument?" I asked.

"I am sure thou art aware of the plans for a monument of Owen, the shipwright. He is paying for it himself. I am usually against such public vanity, but The Fellowship is very much in favor of it. It increases our prestige. People will come from all over Britannia for the unveiling. Why, even Lord British himself will be in attendance! It is a special opportunity when one gets a private audience."

"Elynor said you are a member of The Fellowship."

"Yes, I wear the Fellowship medallion, given to me by Elynor. Do not worry thyself. I

shall not try to make thee join!" He laughed nervously. "Elynor tells me The Fellowship will be doing good works here in the future. I am proud to be a member of the society although I must confess to being fairly ignorant concerning thy, umm, our philosophy."

"Then why did you join?"

"I was given an honorary membership when the Fellowship branch was first opened in Minoc. I do not attend regular meetings. I hope thou'rt not disappointed in me?"

"No," I said.

"Thank heaven! I wear this medallion mainly for ceremonial purposes, as I suspect thou dost. We both see that support of The Fellowship is currently the wisest course of action politically, no matter our personal feelings."

I leaned forward. "And just what are your personal feelings?" I asked softly.

"Avatar, may I tell thee a secret?" he asked. His hands worked together nervously.

"Of course," I replied.

"Avatar, I must confess to thee that I feel The Fellowship promotes a philosophy that is dubious at best, and its membership seems to be comprised chiefly of fools and emotional weaklings."

I agreed, but didn't say anything. In my brief time in Britannia, I'd become wary of expressing my opinions to anyone connected with The Fellowship, no matter what they said about it.

I thanked the Mayor for his time, then stepped into the sawmill. Though the vision before me was horribly familiar, I was still shocked by it. Tania and Frederico had been eviscerated in the same manner as Spark's father. Behind me, I heard the boy gasp. I motioned for Iolo to take him out of this

place. But Spark refused, saying he'd stay here with me. Though I admired his spunk, I shuddered at the thought of his reliving the horror of his father's death.

Once again, I tried to distance myself from the sight before me. With as much impartiality as I could muster, I surveyed the scene, trying to discover a common thread, a clue, a hint as to why these terrible murders were occurring.

The victims' bodies revealed nothing. I turned their pockets inside out, I ran my hand along the seams of their clothes, I even opened their mouths in case they'd hidden something inside. All to no avail.

I looked around me then. Between the bodies stood a large candelabra. I'd seen one like it somewhere else, but I couldn't place it. Then I saw a silver dagger lying next to Frederico's arm. It was shaped like a serpent, with a squiggly and deadly looking blade. I picked it up and put it in my backpack. The owner of this dagger was probably the murderer.

We searched the rest of the mill, hoping

for another clue, but found nothing. As twilight approached, we agreed that no more could be learned at the mill, so we made our way to the local pub for some much-needed ale.



Smoke and laughter greeted us as we opened the door to the Chequered Cork. A few of the patrons looked up as we entered, but most were absorbed in discussions about the recent murders. We found seats at a table that was empty except for a pretty woman. I introduced myself and my companions. She smiled and introduced herself.

"I am Xanthia," she said. "I am a member of the Artists' Guild. I make and sell candelabras."

Iolo and I looked at each other. Thoughts of the candelabra at the murder were obviously crossing his mind, too.

"That sounds interesting," I said. "Please tell me more."

"I make simple candelabras, but sometimes I will do commissioned work, making more specific ones. I was hired by The Fellowship to make the candelabras for all of their Fellowship halls."

A sick feeling welled up in me. I'd suspected The Fellowship was involved in the murders, but this was virtually concrete proof.

"How did you get this commission?" I asked.

"Elynor, the head of the local Fellowship branch, showed me a picture of the Fellowship symbol and I based the design for my candelabra on that."



I described the candelabra found at the murder scene. Xanthia's eyes widened with recognition. "Yes, that is one of the candelabras I made. 'Twas in the sawmill at the murder site?"

I nodded.

Xanthia looked shocked. "How horrible! I swear I do not know how it could have gotten there! Thou shouldst certainly ask Elynor about it!"

Somehow the conversation shifted to more mundane matters. I found out that Xanthia wasn't as excited as Elynor about the prospect of Owen's statue. I also discovered that she hadn't been recruited by The Fellowship. This made me trust her more and believe more fully the things she'd told me. As we talked, the barkeep came over to our table.

"Hello, Xanthia, everything to yer likin'?" he asked.

Xanthia nodded. "Hello, Rutherford," she said. It sounded more like "Helbro, Ruberford" as she'd just taken a bite of food.

"Have you been in Minoc long?" I asked. I'd noticed he was missing one arm—a feature I'd begun to associate with pirates.

"Yep. This town's usually bloody quiet. That was until recently!" His squinting eye suddenly opened wide and stared straight at me. "Say, when exactly again didst thou say thou didst arrive in town, stranger?"

"Today," I answered. "Just after the murders. But I have heard about Owen ..."

After a moment of carefully observing me, he began to wipe the table. I waited for him to continue.

"Before this evil at the sawmill, the buzz were all about the monument. Say, thou be not from around here." He looked at me

skeptically. "Thou art not from The Fellowship by any chance, art thou?"

"No," I said emphatically.

"Just askin'! Thou dost not have to take any offense!"

"Do you know anything about a man with a hook?" I asked. I figured the barkeep would know who passed through town better than anyone.

"I know him! He be a pirate who lives in Buccaneer's Den. They say Hook is so mean he'd kill his own mudder for the right price, an' I would wager they's right. Why, I got into a fight with this Hook once. I was lucky and I escaped losin' only my right arm and still with one good eye left. It was somewhere around that time that I started having second thoughts about my career as a pirate, and now here I be. I have not seen him recently, but the description of the murder scene certainly sounds like his handiwork!"

"The last time I'd heard of his whereabouts, he was on the *Crown Jewel*. Has that ship been here recently?" I asked.

"That ship was, indeed, here of late. In fact, 'twas the night of the murders! Could there be a connection? Hmm ..."

"Do you know anything about this monument? Elynor, at The Fellowship, was telling me something about it."

"Thank goodness that with all the town at each other's throats in recent weeks we have The Fellowship tryin' to hold the town together. I be no member or nothin', but I just a-heard of all the good things they done. Feedin' the poor an' such. Oh, thou must mean thet statuer they are goin' ta build of our shipwright. His name is Owen—a local boy. I understan' it is to be as tall as a man

on horseback and shows Owen gazin' through a telerscope or some such thing like that."

"Sounds very ... regal," I said.

"Yep," replied Rutherford.

We thanked him for his help, then left his establishment. Outside, the air had grown cool. I smelled rain and the faint scent of ozone. Another storm was brewing.

"Where to now, Avatar?" asked lolo.

I thought about our options. We could continue to investigate the murders at the mill, though I strongly suspected Hook was responsible. Or we could search for Owen—who I suspected was not a master shipmaker but some dupe of The Fellowship. Or we could follow Elizabeth and Abraham to Paws. Then I remembered the scroll Chuckles had given me in Britain. It said I should seek out the gypsy Margareta in Minoc. Since the murder victims were both gypsies, this made the most sense to me.

"Let's go see the gypsies," I said.



The gypsy camp was outside of town, to the south. They were poor, with only one wagon and minimal supplies. I spoke with Sasha and Jergi, whose versions of the events leading up to the murder were quite different from Elynor's. Sasha was Tania's and Frederico's son. He was a Fellowship member, but (as I knew) his parents hadn't approved of The Fellowship. Was Hook involved with The Fellowship? Maybe doing their dirty work for them? Had Tania and Frederico been murdered to keep them from interfering with The Fellowship?

Too many questions and no good

answers. In the scroll Chuckles had given me, he had said I should ask Margareta to tell my fortune. Though the fool was often a trickster, I felt that this time there was some significance in what he said.

Margareta sat on a low stool in front of a barrel on which a crystal ball rested. She was younger than I'd expected. I'd always assumed gypsies with the "gift of sight" were old, but Margareta was beautiful, with flowing black hair and dark soul-piercing eyes.

"Hello," I said.

She smiled and motioned for me to sit on the stool opposite her. I sat, my armour clanking faintly.

"It is my job to tell thy destiny," she said.

"But I want to know more about the murders," I blurted out.

"I knew it would happen. I warned Frederico. He wouldn't listen. He was my brother-in-law. His death makes me very sad. And Tania, she was a good woman."

"I met their son, Sasha. He seems very sad."

Margareta was silent for a moment. "He has been led astray. It is unfortunate that he will realize his mistake only as a result of the death of his parents. There are many, many others like Sasha who have been led astray. For them, I see no future." She looked at me sharply. "Thou dost know what I mean. I see thou art wearing none of their medallions, but thou art not truly a member, art thou? Beware—there are those in The Fellowship that will see through thy deception. Thou wilt soon be enlightened about their true nature. But thou vanteest a fortune. Yes?"

"Yes," I said.

"The fortune will cost thee 20 gold. All right?"



"Yes."

She took the proffered coins, then peered into her crystal ball. Her eyes became black as obsidian.

"I see a woman standing by a shrine. She is in love with thee. I do not see more on this subject. I see that thou must join The Fellowship if thou vanteest to learn more about them and discover their true nature. It is not very clear ... ah, yes ... there is a new evil that threatens Britannia. I see that thou shalt have to reckon with it in the future. The crystal ball tells me that the ether of the world—the substance that controls magic—has been affected by this new evil presence. I see further that this evil presence will gain greater power during an event in the near future. This event has something to do with the planets. Seek out a man at the observatory in Moonglow to learn more about this. I see that he has a device which will be very useful to thee. See him soon, for this event is drawing near.

"What is this? I see ... I see ... thou dost seek a Man with a Hook. He is not thy true adversary, but finding him will be necessary to complete thine ultimate quest. Vait! I see that thou must seek audience with the Time Lord. He is in trouble, although I cannot see what that trouble is. The Time Lord knows much about this new evil, so do not fail to seek him out. To find the Time Lord, thou must first meet the Visps who live in the forest of Yew. They are thy best link to him. The monks of Empath Abbey may know how to contact the Visps.

"The ball has grown dark. I see no more."

Margareta looked up at me and said, "Thou dost face many dangers ahead. Take care."

With those words, she slumped and closed her eyes. She was obviously exhausted.



We spent the rest of the evening in Minoc, trying to decide which path we should follow. Sentri wanted to go after Elizabeth and Abraham. Spark thought we should pursue Hook. Shamino kept his opinions to himself. Jaana, Iolo, and I agreed that we should follow Margareta's information and seek out the Wisps. After much arguing, I got my way. We left for Yew and Empath Abbey the next morning.



Editor's Notes:

During his visit to Minoc, Spark discovered a small treasure in the garbage at the Artisan's Guild. It was in a bag in the trash bin in the northwest room of the Guild: one hundred gold, a gold bar, and 35 starbursts. In the mines outside of town he discovered the Gargoyle Fodus, who had been abusing silver snake venom. The Britannian Mining Company had been supplying him with the venom. It makes my blood boil that they so abused this poor creature.

It is worth noting that the Avatar also discovered Owen's incompetence and exposed him in time to stop the erection of his monument. Owen's ship plans were so riddled with errors that many lives would surely have been lost if they'd been followed.

The magic carpet was found at 8 North 30 West.

Chapter Five

The trip to Empath Abbey and Yew was uneventful. We used the magic carpet and made good time. As we approached to the Abbey, I noticed Shamino's smile was growing wider and wider.

"What's so amusing?" I asked.

"I have a fondness for fine wines," Shamino replied, "and Empath Abbey makes the finest in all Britannia. I can hardly wait to sample their latest harvest. Look, there's the Abbey below."

We set the carpet down outside the Abbey and made our way inside; Sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows, casting pools of gold, ruby, and emerald across the stone floors. A monk, dressed in simple robes, stood in the shadows.

"Hello," I said, trying to make our presence known. The monk stepped forward and beckoned us closer.

"I am Kreg," he said. "I am a monk here at the Abbey. I am working on an alchemical mixture."

"I didn't know the monks were involved in such pursuits," I said. "The only thing I'm familiar with is their wine." Shamino coughed behind me. "I should say, the only thing Shamino is familiar with is your wine. He just told me about it."

Kreg smiled faintly. "Well, we here at the Abbey will soon be taking a vow of silence. However, it will take some time for all of us to become accustomed to the sound of silence. Therefore, I am creating a potion that enables the imbiber to become temporarily silent. The concept is very similar to a potion of invisibility."

I frowned. "A vow of silence?"

"Well," he looked embarrassed, "after reading a book on how we compare to our predecessors, we learned that most people expect us to take a vow of silence. So we have chosen to do so, once I can make that potion. I realize that it sounds foolish, but I truly believe it will help us produce more wine. The monks' wine is renowned throughout all of Britannia—or so I thought." A puzzled look crossed his face. "Ah, well, that is no matter. Regardless, I sincerely recommend to thee to try some of our exquisite drink."

Shamino looked as though he were ready to head straight for the wine cellar. I laid a hand on his arm to let him know we should be patient. The monk had continued speaking and it took a moment to catch up with what he was saying.

"... research has reached an impasse, for I cannot determine the nature of some critical reagents. What I need is a potion of invisibility to analyze. Then I could progress from there." He looked at me hopefully. "Wouldst thou be willing to obtain a potion for my studies? It is likely that thou couldst find one easily at the mage, Nicodemus."

"Sure," I said wanting to be as helpful to the monk as I could.

He sighed, obviously relieved. "Thank thee."

It made me feel quite good that I'd be able to help him achieve his goal. Kreg nodded again to us, then drifted off toward a dark corner of the room. We continued our exploration of the Abbey. In the large west room of the Abbey we found crates of grapes and all manner of wine-making equipment. This room had a yeasty-sour smell that was not altogether unpleasant. On the opposite side of

the main hall was a well-stocked kitchen. One of the monks had been preparing *coq au vin*, and an aroma of garlic, wine, and fresh herbs hung tantalizingly in the air.

Off the kitchen was a comfortable room, furnished with a bed, a desk, and bookcases crammed full. At the desk sat another monk, a studious-looking young man, who glanced up as we entered.

"May I assist thee?"

"We've just come from Minoc and we're looking for the Wisps who reside in the Deep Forest," I said. "The gypsy Margareta sent us. Can you assist us in this?"

"I study the local flora, fauna, and geography here at the monastery. There are many beautiful plants in this area. I am



working on learning about all of them. Many different species of animals reside in the forest. I have encountered some fascinating ones in my studies."

"That's all very well and good," I said, rather annoyed at his long-winded reply. "But what about the Wisps?"

"The Wisps?" he laughed. "I doubt they exist. I realize many people seem to believe in them, but I have never seen any. If thou must know, popular legend maintains that they inhabit the forest area, near the Emps. Supposedly the Emps are able to speak with them." He shrugged. "Thou mayest look for them if that is thy wish, but I would not waste precious time myself."

"Emps? I've never heard of Emps."

"Ah, the Emps. I have not been able to glean much information about them. They live on the eastern edge of the deep forest, not too terribly far from here. They resemble apes, but only slightly. They are exceedingly shy, and will rarely feel comfortable enough to approach a human. The only way I was able to view an Emp closely occurred when I happened to have honey in my pack which I had just picked up from Bee Cave. The creature appeared, stared at me for a few minutes, and then asked—asked, I say—for mine honey. I believe they are empathic; hence their name. Quite an interesting species, dost thou not agree?"

"Very," I said, becoming interested in the Emps. "It has been quite a while since I was last in these parts. I confess I've never heard of Bee Cave, either."

"The honey from the caves is quite tasty, but rarely can one get it without a fight. Bee Cave can be a rather dangerous place. It is located to the southwest of the Abbey. But if thou art planning a trip there, beware the

giant bees that live in the caves. Their venom is very poisonous. If thou wishest, I can give thee a smoke bomb that will repel the bees for a short time. Dost thou want it?"

"Yes, thank you," I said, as he handed me a small object. "This will be helpful."

"I use my knowledge of the local landscape to aid in my studies. The better I know the locale, the farther away I can travel from the Brotherhood Abbey and still be sure I will be able to return—unlike a fellow monk of mine."

"You mean Kreg?"

"That name does not sound familiar. Perhaps he is not from this area." The monk frowned. "No, I was referring to another monk who wandered off chasing a bird. We never didst see him again."

I thanked the monk again for the smoke bomb and bade him farewell. He did tell us to visit Aimi the other monk who lived at the Abbey. Still, he had denied knowing a monk named Kreg, and I began to have second thoughts about helping Kreg.

Aimi was on her knees, pulling weeds in the garden. As we approached, she looked up, putting her hand over her eyes to block the sun.

"Greetings. I hope thy days are full of beauty," she said.

"Your garden is quite beautiful," I replied.

"My garden? I have been tending it for years now. I am a firm believer in the value of aesthetics, so I plant only flowers. Sometimes I sell them in bouquets when people want them, but I do that very rarely."

"They are quite lovely. They must please the other monks. Does Kreg like them?"

She frowned. "I have spent little time with others in the area. Thou mayest wish to speak with Taylor, for he knows much more about

the people, animals, and sights in this area than I do."

I realized Taylor was the monk I'd just met.

"I've already spoken to Taylor," I said. "He was most helpful."

She smiled. "He knows all about the geography of this region."

"Thank you for your help," I said. She waved to us and returned to her weeding.



Our investigation of the town yielded some interesting information. We made our first discovery at the prison located northeast of the Abbey. The scruffy guard, Goth, was easily bribed and gave us the keys to the prison. Unfortunately, they only opened one cell, and the prisoner inside was already dead. He did have 40 gold on him—I wondered why he hadn't bribed the guard to release him. The other two prisoners told us of unjust imprisonment, and of horrible taxes levied by the Britannian Tax Council. I tried to release them, but the key I'd bought from Goth wouldn't fit the locks on their cells.

We met Sir Jeff, the High Court Judge, who was harsh and strict. I was most anxious to be gone from under his watchful eye. I managed to catch a glimpse of his warrant and trial book. In it I found the information that a thief who had been plaguing the area went by the pseudonym Kreg. There was no doubt in my mind that the "monk" we'd met in the Abbey was the same person.

We agreed to return to the Abbey and try to find Kreg. I was surprised when he marched over to us, bold as brass, and asked if we'd brought the invisibility potion.

"You're a thief!"

"Ah! Found me out didst thou? 'Tis too bad ... for thee!"

He reached into the deep sleeve of his robe and pulled out a glittering green dagger. Within moments he'd managed to inflict poisonous wounds on both Spark and Jaana. I raced forward and struck him several times. After a few minutes of desperate fighting, he collapsed at our feet. Jaana and Spark needed immediate attention, and I quickly performed *An Nox* over them. Iolo searched Kreg's body, but found only a few gold pieces and his dagger. I gave the dagger to Spark, but he didn't want to use it. I think it's still in the bottom of his pack today.

After disposing of Kreg's body—I didn't want Aimi or Taylor to come upon it in the middle of the great hall—we finished our exploration of the houses surrounding the Abbey. Perrin lived just to the west. I studied with him, finding his knowledge in matters of intellect and magical arts to be quite superior. We visited the graveyard to the west of Perrin's house, but found nothing of real importance there. While we were there, a young woman approached one of the graves and knelt before it. Tenderly she cleared the weeds from the gravesite and neatly trimmed back the grass. She talked softly all the while, as though comforting the dead.

I was fascinated by such devotion in one so young. When she moved away from her tasks, I approached and introduced myself.

"I am Reyna," she said, brushing an errant strand of hair out of her face.

"Why does one so young come to tend a grave?" I asked.

Like a shadow, sadness crossed her face. She looked down at her feet, then back up at us. It was obvious she was fighting an urge to cry. "Several months ago, my mother passed

away in her home town. She was born here in the forests, and had asked to be buried here, near me. Every morning I come out here to visit her and set flowers by her grave. But I am the only member of our family who lives nearby. No one else is able to visit or leave flowers very often. Her grave looks so bare sometimes."

She looked off toward the horizon and sighed. "It would be nice if there were some way to have more flowers brought to her." She quickly turned and looked at me. "I am terribly sorry for rambling on like that. Please excuse me, Avatar."

I smiled, but I couldn't think how to help her with her sorrow. Then I had an idea. The monk Aimi sold flowers, and we certainly had enough gold for a bouquet. I made a vow to myself that as soon as possible I would seek Aimi out and purchase her biggest bunch of flowers for Reyna's mother's grave.

We talked for a while longer. Reyna was a healer, but she also spent a great deal of time in the forest. Her information about the town was helpful, and I looked forward to the time when I would see her again with my surprise.



Iolo suggested that we visit Yew and then make our way through the Deep Forest to find the Emps and the Wisps. Shamino wanted to stay longer at the Abbey, but he'd already spent too much time sampling their latest vintage. I was anxious to find Bee Cave and see the "deadly bees" who lived there. We laughed at the monk's fear of these insects—imagine being afraid of a little bumblebee!

Iolo's hut was just off the road leading

into town. He rushed to the door, yelling for his wife Gwenno. We were about to tease him for being so eager to see her when he stopped dead in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Look," he said.

I stepped past him and looked around the hut. It looked as though a battle had been fought there. Debris and clothes were strewn about the floor. Broken crockery littered the dining room table, and the room where Iolo made his famous crossbows was in similar disarray.

"Gwenno," I said. "Is she ...?"

"I know not," he said. "I fear the worst."

His voice shook.

"Don't go assuming the worst," I said. I began straightening the room, picking up clothes as I went. "I'm sure she's off on her own adventure." On the desk in the bedroom I found a scroll with Gwenno's signature. I handed it to Iolo. He read it silently.

"She hath taken a map to Lord British. A map of the legendary Serpent Isle." He looked up at me, his eyes shadowed with concern.

"I'm sure she's fine," I said, but I confess I was worried.

"She says I'm to finish mine quest with thee."

"Do you want to go find her?"

He shook his head. "I will honor her wishes and stay with thee until we complete our quest. But how I wish that thou couldst help me find her once we are done."

I nodded and patted him on the back. I knew that once we finished this quest I'd be swept back to Earth and Iolo would have to find Gwenno by himself. It pained me that I was unable to help my friend when he'd assisted me so often.

"I wish I could help you," I said. He said nothing, but went about the task of straightening up the hut. He said he was doing it so Gwenno wouldn't come home to a mess. Under a pile of clothes he found his old swamp boots. He gave them to Senti to wear.

We finished cleaning up Iolo's hut. He said he needed to check on his horse. To the northeast of his hut was a small stable. Inside we found Smith, the talking horse. Trust me on this, Carlotta: If you ever happen to meet him, run the other way. He's rude and not at all helpful. All the information he gave me had to do with events from the last time I was in Britannia.

Iolo took us then to meet his neighbors, Penni and Bradman. They were both trainers, and had a good-natured rivalry going between them. Iolo wanted to brush up on his archery skills and Bradman agreed to train him, although not for the full price. Bradman said he couldn't charge a master like Iolo as much as he would charge an amateur. That cheered Iolo up as much as anything could after he'd found Gwenno gone.

It was late afternoon by the time Iolo finished his target practice. The workout left him both refreshed and a much better shot. He'd regained some of his good humor and I knew that though he was worried about his wife, he wouldn't let it interfere with our quest.

"Come," he said. "I'll take thee to see mine neighbor, Tseremed. He is just across the way, on the shore of the river."

Iolo led us across the main road into Yew and down a short path. Illuminarias lined the walkway, which made me curious. I'd never seen this in Britannia before, though it was a common thing in my own world.

On the shore of the river sat a man

dressed in green. He was fishing, but he hadn't had much luck. The basket beside him was empty. He didn't seem to mind, and waved cheerfully at us as we approached.

"I am called Tseremed," he said as he stood. "Art thou Fellowship members?"

"No," I said.

"I do not trust The Fellowship," he said. "How art thou called?"

"That's not really important," I said.

"Then perhaps thou couldst introduce me to thy companions?"

I performed the standard courtesies, and I noticed how quickly my friends took to him. They kept looking at me like I was supposed to invite this stranger to join us. Before I made that leap of faith I decided to find out more about him.

"Why do you dislike The Fellowship?" I asked.

"Not long ago The Fellowship began to spread its influence throughout Britannia. In their early days they attracted many bright and enthusiastic young people, among them my love, Lady M. A woman so intelligent could not help but rise in their ranks. Her direct superior was Abraham."

He stopped speaking for a moment, trying to fight back his anger and grief.

"One black evening she fell gravely ill. According to friends of mine, Abraham forbade her to visit the local healer. By the time I learned of this, she had already passed away. She rests now forever in the Yew graveyard; may her sleep be peaceful. I searched the land for Abraham, but never found my quarry. In fact, it seems that every time I near my prey, they have already vanished! My search shall never be truly over."

"I'm very sorry to hear of your loss. Abraham sounds terrible."

"Youth is hers forever."

A silence hung over us for a moment. Then, in my inimitable way, I broke it. "We're looking for Bee Cave," I blurted out. The others gave me looks that could kill. I guess I wasn't being sensitive enough, but Tseremed seemed relieved to talk about something else.

"North of my hut is a deep bore-hole into the mountains. Within live bees of a size to rival sheep or hounds. Their wings stir up leaves as they fly, and they hum with a noise to make men flee in fear. Some have entered, never to return. Perhaps they are there still ... Death is greedy, and holds a fate for those of like intent. Many years have I dwelt by the mountains. Many spans have vanished under my roaming feet. Into the depths of the dark swamp I have gone, and to the heights of the mountains. I know the trees of the forest, and the secret places in the earth. Bees such as these may be tamed with my special arrows!"

I'd almost nodded off when the mention of these arrows woke me up.

"Special arrows?"

"I fashion my arrows from the stingers of giant bees. With them one may put a foe to sleep. I have hunted the bees on many occasions. And I like their honey. Perhaps together we might journey into the cave for some?"

"Please ask him to join us," said Shamino.

"Aye," put in Iolo. "T'would be handy to have another bowman among our party."

Spark, Sentri, and Jaana all agreed that I should ask him to join us. I extended the invitation and Tseremed readily agreed.

He led us north to the entrance to Bee Cave. I'd laughed at the locals' fears of the bees here, but after hearing Tseremed's description of them, I was nervous.

We entered the cave. Senti carried the fire sword I'd found. It lit the cave with a soft glow; I found that I didn't need to cast a spell to light our way. Tseremed hadn't exaggerated when he said the bees were big. They were huge—bigger even than he'd described. We made our way through the hive. The bees didn't bother us, much to my surprise. Honeycomb lined the walls and the air was redolent with its sweet smell. In the main chamber we found a number of jars. Though the bees still didn't approach us, I decided it was best to set off the smoke bomb and grab as much honey as we could, then make a run for it. The others agreed that this was the best plan.

The bomb went off with a huge cloud of greasy smoke. The bees moved away from the honey; I rushed forward and grabbed two of the pots. As I turned, I noticed the cloud was already dissipating. The bees noticed I'd taken their honey and began buzzing angrily. It was time to beat feet. I ran from the room, with the rest of my party hot on my heels. We dashed through the honeycombed passages with the sound of furious bees in our ears. We broke into the early evening air, sweaty and flushed, but loaded with our sweet reward.

"I've had enough fun for one day," I said. "Anyone else for a good night's sleep?"

A rousing "Aye!" went up from my companions. We made it as far as Tseremed's hut, then collapsed on the ground outside. The rest of the evening was filled with tall tales and lots of snoring. It was one of the finest nights of my life.



The next morning we made our way east from Iolo's hut through the Deep Forest. After

a few minutes' journey, the woods became strangely silent. The birds stopped singing and the wind ceased to blow.

"This is not a good omen," said Shamino.

"Look, over there," said Spark. I looked in the direction he was pointing. There was a circle of stones. I recognized it as an altar to the Virtues. In the center, on the dais, were the mangled remains of a human sacrifice. Dried blood and ichor encrusted the altar. I didn't have time to wonder what practices had resulted in the horrific ritual murders I'd been encountering. From the northeast our party was attacked by magical energy. We fell into combat positions as if we'd been fighting together for years.

A blast of energy hit me in the chest. The world went red for a moment and I heard bells. I opened my spell book and cast about for an appropriate magical incantation. None of the spells I could perform were right for the job, so I shoved the spell book back into my pack and drew my sword. Rushing forward, I flailed away at whatever moved. In a few minutes, we'd routed the enemy, which consisted of several headless and a mage. The mage had some gold, but little else. I wondered how he'd managed to create so much havoc with so little on him.

Our party was a little worse for wear, but Jaana and I were able to take care of their wounds. After everyone was bandaged, we continued into the woods, making sure to be more wary of our surroundings.

We found the Wisps' home. (I suppose it was their home. They're not really corporeal beings.) They had the most interesting collection of books, not to mention the copy of the *Lost Book of Mantras* that I'd given them years ago during one of my previous quests. But they didn't respond when we tried

to communicate with them. We'd have to find the Emps.

Like many of the wild places in Britannia, the Deep Forest was full of dangers. Headless, renegade knights, evil mages, all wandered about making trouble for anyone traveling through the forest. I was glad of my companions, because I doubted I could have survived there for long by myself.

As I was contemplating this last thought, we burst into a small clearing. The trees here were different. Their leaves were a beautiful silver-blue color. But even more remarkable were the houses built right into the limbs of the great trees. Under these constructions scurried small brownish creatures. At first I thought we'd startled some woodland animals. Then I saw that these creatures walked on their hind legs and looked intelligent. One of them stared at us intently for a few moments, then walked up closer. He pointed at the pack where I kept my honey. I reached in, pulled out a jar, and handed it over to him. With a deft flick of his wrist he unscrewed the lid and dipped his paw in. The gift must have met with his approval, because he came closer.

"You are human?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"I am Trellek. Your name is?"

"I am called the Avatar," I said. "What do you do?"

He gave me a puzzled look. "The meaning of 'job' is not clear to me. Is 'work' the word meant by you?"

"Yes."

"I am a gatherer of food. All Emps are food-gatherers. Mainly fruits are sought by us. Fruits are pleasant-tasting, like the honey you gave us!"

"I've never met an Emp before," I said. "You are not what I expected."

"I am an Emp. Saralek is an Emp. Salamon is an Emp. You," he smiled, "are a human. Saralek is my bonded-one. 'Wife' is what you would call her. My home is her home."

"Your home?"

"Silverleaf trees are our homes," he nodded.

"I want to talk to the Wisps," I said. "Can you help me?"

"Wisps are known to me," he nodded. "Wisps are found in the woods." He looked around, apparently surveying the area. "No Wisps are here for conversation."

"I want you to come with me to help me talk to them."

"Your wish is for me to travel with you?"

"Yes."

"My wish is that also. But that is not the wish of Saralek, my wife. Permission from her must first be gained."

"Very well," I said. "I'll speak to her."

Saralek was reluctant to let us take Trellek with us, but agreed that if we could get Salamon to allow it, she would consent. We found the elder Emp under her own tree. She too had a taste for honey, and I passed her my last pot.

"Hello," I said. "Are you Salamon?"

She nodded as she finished off the last of the honey. I explained about the Wisps and Trellek and Saralek, then asked for her permission to take Trellek with us.

"Permission will be given to you later. There is a task that must be performed first. There is a woodcutter who lives in the western part of the forest. Silverleaf trees are being cut down by him. Emp houses are in Silverleaf trees. Contract must be signed by woodcutter to stop. My condition is understood by you?" She didn't wait for my answer, but simply

thrust the document into my hand, then scurried off on some Emp errand.

I looked at the scroll in my hand.

"Well what do we do now?"

"We go see Ben, the logger, in Yew," said Iolo.

"Oh," I said. "Of course."



I won't bore you with the details of our journey back to Yew through the Deep Forest. Suffice it to say that we had our fair share of scars by the time we'd managed to get Ben to sign the document and made our way back to the Emps. We did manage to rout the mercenaries who were helping cut down the Silverleaf trees.

Salamon smiled as she read Ben's signature.

"Trellek is permitted to join you. You are wished luck and speed."

We thanked the wizened Emp, then made our way to Saralek's and Trellek's treehouse. I found Saralek under the tree and told her that Salamon had granted permission for Trellek to help us. Her eyes filled up with tears and she looked away.

"I am sorry. A lie was told by me. Trellek's leaving is not desired by me. Permission will not be given." Her expression changed. "What is the reason you asked him?"

"We need to speak with the Wisps," I said, trying to keep the annoyance and disappointment out of my voice.

She smiled excitedly. "Your wish is to meet Wisps?"

"Yes."

"An idea how you can be helped by Trellek is had by me. Wisps are contacted by

Trellek's whistling. A whistle for you can be made by him, perhaps. Talking with him again should be your next action."

I thanked her and went to find her husband.

"For you to talk to Wisps is still your wish?" he asked. "Then helping you is my goal. A whistle can be made by me. Correct was my bonded-one. A whistling sound is made by Emps when talking is done by us. An imitation of that sound can be created by a special whistle," he said enthusiastically. He began searching around for a dead, hollow, fallen tree branch. Shortly he found one that satisfied him. He looked embarrassed and turned his back to us. With motions similar to those of a man twisting a cork from a flagon, he fashioned a flute. After a few minutes of this, he turned around and presented the whistle to me.

"Here is your whistle."

We thanked him and went to find the Wisps.



Inside the Wisps' house, I pulled Trellek's flute from my pocket and began to play. After a few moments, one of the bobbing blue lights floated toward us.

"'You' are not the entity known as 'Trellek.' 'You' call out in the manner of the species called 'Emps.' 'Xorinia' was expecting the entity 'Trellek.' But that is not of importance. From the information 'I' have, the local manifestation before 'me' is the entity known as 'Avatar.'"

Finally, somebody who knew who I was!

The Wisp glowed brightly for a second or two. "'Xorinia' wishes to exchange information with the human entity."

"But I have nothing to exchange," I said.

"The Undrian Council seeks information regarding a certain entity by the name of 'Alagner.' 'You' have access to this information. 'I' have information regarding a certain entity which 'you' are seeking. The Undrian Council proposes a trade."

"What kind of trade?" I was recalling my previous encounters with the Wisps. They never gave you anything for nothing.

"The Undrian Council has information that there is a human entity in 'your' dimension that has been called 'the wisest man in Britannia.' This entity is known as 'Alagner' and lives in 'your' colony of 'New Magincia.' 'Alagner' has what the entity calls a 'notebook.' The 'notebook' is a collection of information. 'I' want to absorb the information in Alagner's 'notebook.' If 'you' bring the 'notebook' here, the Undrian Council will release information useful to 'you'. Do 'you' agree to the trade?"

"Very well," I said mentally figuring how long it would take us to get to New Magincia.

"Xorinia' recognizes 'your' usefulness. 'I' shall be here. Human entities will call 'my' activity 'waiting'."

With that, the Wisps disappeared.



Editor's Notes:

The Wisps' house is at 45 North 12 West. The Emps are located at 56 North 10 East. The desecrated shrine near Iolo's hut is at 56 North 32 West. There is magic armour to be found there. The mercenaries' camp is at 47 North 8 East.

When the Avatar returned to Empath Abbey to get the magic carpet, he got some flowers from Aimi and gave them to Reyna

for her mother's grave. Because his intent was to benefit another, Aimi gave him the flowers. This gesture brought the Avatar much good will.



Chapter Six

your name is Alagner. And who art thou?"

I inspected the large man in front of me. He had an erudite air and a cunning, mischievous smile. I decided the straightforward approach was the best.

"I'm called the Avatar," I said.

His eyes widened. "By the skies above! I do recognize thee! This is quite an honor! What may I do for thee?"

I explained about the Wisps and their interest in his notebook.

"They are unusually aloof creatures of another dimension. Thou wilt think they are thy friends, but they could very well be spying on thee for someone else! They have no loyalties to good or evil—all they care about is the acquisition of information. How they acquire it is sometimes honorable, sometimes not. About the notebook, since thou art on an honorable quest, I suppose I might allow thee to borrow it if thou dost give me thy word that thou wilt return it, and if thou dost offer proof of thine eagerness to learn the true knowledge of the world."

"Yes," I said. "It would be my pleasure."

"The Britannian people are becoming careless and lazy. They do not seek true knowledge. They do not respect their land. They do not respect each other. The resources of our land are being wasted. Miners are experimenting with dangerous

reagents. There is an evil in the land, and I am not so sure that it is in the people themselves." He paused for a moment, getting control of himself. "But that is another conversation." He looked at me sharply, then asked, "Dost thou know the answers to the questions of Life and Death?"

"No," I admitted. I mean, who did?

"No, of course thou dost not. Only those souls who have passed on from this life know these things. Seek out the spirit of the Tortured One. Ask him what the answers are to the questions of Life and Death. When thou dost return with the correct answer, I will believe that thou art sincere in thy quest for knowledge. Only then will I allow thee to borrow the notebook."

"And where might I find the Tortured One?" I asked.

"Alas, he is a poor soul who is doomed to haunt his abode throughout eternity. Seek him out in Skara Brae. But be careful. It is a dangerous place. I should also advise thee that thou must use *Seance* spells to speak with anyone on that island. They are all undead."

My very favorite thing—dealing with the undead.

"Before I go, I was wondering if you knew anything about an organization called The Fellowship."

He nodded, then spoke. "I left the Britannian mainland to come to the relative peace and quiet of New Magincia. I am content here because it is isolated and free from ... the filth and corruption going on in Britannia. Not many see it. The Fellowship is part of that. They are cunning and two-faced. I am working on obtaining proof of this."

"What proof do you have?" I asked.

"I am documenting this information in my notebook."

"Yes," I said. "Go on."

"It is all contained within the notebook."

"Well, thank you," I said, disappointed that he wouldn't say more. "I'll return with the answer."

"Farewell," he said, "May thy journeys be profitable."



My old friend Katrina was still living in New Magincia, so we paid her a short visit. She was only a little changed from my previous visits, something for which I was grateful. I was tired of finding my old friends ... well, old.

She wanted to come with us, but I had to refuse her. Our party was seven strong and I felt no need for another member just then.

"Very well," she said, not at all offended that I'd turned her down. "I shall stay here with my friends."

"Have you made many friends since settling here?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Alagner, who you've already met, Russell the Shipwright, and Henry the Peddler. Henry has been a very dear friend for years. He is a simple but good man who does not have an ounce of hate in his heart for anyone. I am so fond of him that I gave him a valuable heirloom."

"I had no idea you'd become so close to anyone. Is it serious?"

She smiled at me. Katrina had always been the most spiritual of all my companions—something that I occasionally liked to tease her about.

"Since he does not have much money, I gave Henry my gold locket so he could present it to his sweetheart, Constance. I have not talked to him lately, but I must confess I am worried about him. Soon after Henry left,

carrying the locket, I saw the three strangers on the island wandering off in the same direction. They come from Buccaneer's Den. I met them shortly after their arrival and we spoke briefly. Robin is the one dressed like a gambler and the other two, Battles and Leavell, appear to be bullies."

"Do you think they stole the locket from Henry?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I know not. Perhaps thou shouldst ask Henry."

"I'd like to take the time, but we really need to be off to Skara Brae."

"Very well. 'Twas good to see thee again."

We spent the night at the inn. The next morning, with more than a little trepidation, we started out for Skara Brae.



Editor's Notes:

The mystery of Henry's lost locket did involve the three strangers from Buccaneer's Den, though they did not have the locket when the Avatar asked. The barkeeper and the Mayor both had useful information about its whereabouts. The Avatar made certain that the locket was returned to Henry and that his lady love, Constance, was informed of its recovery.



Chapter Seven

Dupré and I chatted easily as the magic carpet floated over the clear Britannian sea toward Skara Brae ...

"Wait a minute, when did Dupré show up?"

"Oh, did I forget to mention that we stopped in Jhelom and found him?"

"Yes. What else did you forget?"

"We spent an evening in the Serpent's Hold, too, as I recall."

"Then why didn't you tell me about it?"

"It wasn't germane to the quest."

"Wasn't germ—look, just tell me what you did and I'll sort it out for myself."

"Trust me. It wasn't crucial to the quest."

"Okay. How about the short version?"

"Very well. We agreed to go get the pirate's treasure. You remember, the one the parrot talked about. Anyway, after we got that we made our way to Jhelom, but we got lost and ended up in Serpent's Hold."

"Go on."

"Really, Carlotta, you're so insistent at times. Anyway, while we were there, we performed a couple of small tasks for some of the local citizens."

"Such as?"

"We discovered who had desecrated the statue of Lord British. It was a simple matter really, Lord John-Paul, the Hold's Mayor, was most helpful. The barkeep, Denton, helped, and then I just followed the clues. Eventually, Sir Pendaran acknowledged his guilt, but only after I discussed the matter with the other people in the keep."

"What else?"

"Well, there was the small matter of Lady Tory's baby."

"Her baby? Let me guess. You saved the baby from wild animals."

"No, harpies, actually. They had kidnapped the babe and wanted to use him for dinner. They live near the Shrine of



Honor, south of Trinsic. We rescued the babe and returned him to his mother.”

“You’re amazing. Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“As I said, it wasn’t important to my quest, but I did feel more ‘Avatar-like’ after I accomplished these deeds. Oh, yes, there was the incident at the armoury.”

“The armoury?”

“Yes. It seems that Sir Richter, keeper of the armoury, is a bit paranoid. He hid the key to the armoury in a chest in a grotto on the south side of the island. You can only get there by boat. The key to that chest he lost. I found the key to the chest in a fish in the kitchen of the pub. It was Spark’s idea to look there. After we retrieved the chest from the grotto, we were able to arm ourselves quite nicely. I particularly liked the Juggernaut Hammer, but there was a wide array of magical deadly weapons to choose from.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, until we reached Jhelom. Are you sighing?”

“Just a little. What happened in Jhelom? And don’t talk so fast; I’m having a hard time keeping up with you.”

“Quills aren’t very quick writing instruments, are they? Where was I?”

“Jhelom.”

“Ah, yes. We found Dupré in the local pub. It was Shamino’s idea to look there first. Dupré claimed he was sampling the ales in all the pubs of Britannia. I think he was just killing time. While we

were at the pub, we met a strange man called DeSnel. He was the local trainer, and ran a school called the Library of Scars.”

“Wait a minute. Slow down ... of Scars. Continue.”

“Well, there was quite a brouhaha going on in town. It seems that the owner of the pub, Sprellic, had inadvertently angered three of the local fighters: Vokes, Syria, and Timmons. It’s quite a story. A man claiming to be the Avatar had set off the series of events that led to the conflict. Can you imagine mistaking someone else for me?”



Anyway, I managed to settle the whole affair, but I had to dupe the fighters with a fake flag. Now don't ask me about it; just write down that Klifstin made the flag. We'll leave it at that."

"But ..."

"No more about Jhelom! It's not crucial to the quest, and I've got other matters to attend to. Finding Gwenno and the Serpent Isle, for starters. Now where was I?"

"You and Dupré were talking as the magic carpet flew toward Skara Brae."

"Yes. As I was saying, we were having a lively conversation when Spark gasped and pointed downward ..."



Chapter Eight

elow us, the burnt and ruined remains of Skara Brae came into view. The terrain was blackened and nothing grew there. The once green and lovely isle looked as though a terrible war had been waged on its shores. There was no safe haven where we could land the magic carpet, and we were forced to put down on the opposite shore.

We soon found a landing with a barge tied to it. As we approached, a spectral figure appeared out of the mists shrouding the strait that divided the island from the shore.

"Hello," I said, my voice wavering only slightly.

The figure ignored me and turned away.

"Friendly fellow," said Dupré.

"P-p-p-perhaps we shouldst leave, Avatar," said Spark.

"Did not Alagner say that thou shouldst use the *Kal Wis Corp* spell on these beings to converse with them?" asked Jaana.

"Yes," I said. "He did. Thanks for reminding me." I cast the spell. A shimmering blue light wrapped the ghostly figure, then faded.

"Hello," I said.

He held out his hand and said in a sepulchral voice, "I am the Ferryman of Skara Brae. Thou must pay two coins ... to cross the Misty Channel."

"Uh, we're trying to get to Skara Brae."

He turned all the way around and pointed across the water to the west. "There ..."

"Er ... Avatar, art thou sure we need to go over there?" asked Shamino

"What's the matter, Shamino? Art thou afraid?" asked Spark.

"Of course not! I just ... well, I ... oh, never mind! Let's go!"

Iolo's eyes narrowed as he adopted a patronizing air. "And I suppose thou art without fear?" he asked Spark.

"No, sir. I am not afraid of a skeleton." As he looked at the ferryman, however, he gulped.



"Enough," I said. "Spark, apologize to Shamino. True courage means understanding when there is danger, and facing it anyway."

"Sorry, Shamino," said Spark.

"Apology accepted, Spark."

We boarded the barge and the ferryman silently rowed us across. Close up, Skara Brae was more depressing. The entire town was nothing more than a collection of ruined hovels. Even the air was gray and overcast, as though the sun refused to shine here any more. A steady drizzle of cold rain fell on us. We made our way carefully to the center of what had once been the town. Only the graveyard was untouched by whatever catastrophe had befallen the village. I noticed a shadowy figure lingering near some overgrown mushrooms. She motioned to us, then made her way into a small hut. We followed.

"Hello, strangers. Thou mayest call me Mistress Mordra." She peered at me closely. "And thou must be the Avatar."

She lifted up her hands and in one of them I saw an ankh. Words I vaguely recognized flowed from her lips. The ankh glowed brightly. She stopped chanting and the ankh dimmed. "Ah, it is good to see that the world has been treating thee well. How may I serve thee, O Virtuous One?"

"What did you do here? I mean before ..."

"I was the healer of this town before the fire erupted that shattered the lives of those here. I also dabbled in secret magical arts for a while. The fire 'twas the doom of this town, although I place no blame upon the alchemist, Caine. For I was the one who told him the recipe that I am sure will rid us of Horance the liche."

"Recipe?"

"If I tell thee, thou must be sure to get them right. Otherwise, what happened when I told that blasted Mayor will happen again.

And, while we here in Skara Brae have no more lives to lose, thou hast quite a valuable one! The ingredients necessary for the concoction to dissolve the liche are a potion of invisibility, a dose of a potion of curing, and one vial of the essence of mandrake—I have one set aside somewhere in mine house. Remember, only *one* vial of the mandrake!"

I looked about and noticed that there were three potions in the hut. A black potion of invisibility, a red potion of curing ... and another potion, which continually changed colors. This, I assumed, was the essence of mandrake. I motioned for Shamino to pick up the potions and carry them in his pack. He was wrapping them in a soft cloth to keep them from knocking together and breaking as I turned back to Mordra.

"Thou must have Caine's assistance in creating the formula."

"Is he the one called the Tortured One?" I asked. This might be the man we'd been sent by Alagner to talk to.

"Aye," she said. "'Tis him."



We found the alchemist's house a few minutes later. It was north of the town hall. Inside, a ghostly figure paced back and forth, wringing its hands and tearing at its hair.

"Uh, hello," I said, trying to get the spectre's attention.

He stared past us. Then he shuddered, as if filled with pain.

"Are you Caine?" I asked.

"I," he gasped, "am called Caine. But I have also been given an alias by my ... fellow townspeople. To them, I am known as 'the Tortured One.'" He made a sweeping



gesture, which indicated nothing. "And thou canst see why."

I looked around; I saw nothing but the remains of his shop. Depressing, but not really frightening or terrible. "No, why?"

"The flames, fool! The flames!" Again he gasped.

"Mordra told us you used to be the apothecary, and you could poss ..."

"Thou wishest to know my job? I will tell thee my job!" he shouted. "To burn here in eternal flames for my crime against the fair city of Skara Brae! That"—he paused for emphasis—"is my job!" It took him a moment, but he calmed down. "I apologize. I realize thy question was not intended to further torment me," he sighed, turning his face away from me. "At one time, I was the alchemist here."

He looked down at the ground, a remorseful expression on his face. "The flames are my punishment. Years ago, when the evil liche first exerted his reign of death over Skara Brae, the healer, Mordra, conceived of a plan to remove the creature most foul.

"She designed a concoction that would destroy the magical bonds that form the liche. The formula was presented to our Mayor, who passed it on to me.

"But," he scowled, "something went wrong when I was preparing the potion. The proportions were mixed improperly, or ... I don't know!" he shouted, fists clenched. "All I remember is the shop exploding, and the fire! The fire! All those people dead ... because of me ... because of my mistake."

"I'm sorry," I murmured. "I remember Skara Brae as it was before."

"'Twas a thriving town—before I

destroyed it!" His jaw tightened. "Why? Why, why, why!" He gasped in agony, but quickly regained control. "There were so many innocent people," he said, staring directly at me. "I cannot believe I am responsible for all their deaths."

"'Tis a terrible burden he carries," whispered lolo.

"Aye, but he is wallowing in his guilt," remarked Shamino.

"We need you to help us create to formula to destroy the liche," I said.

"Thou trusts me to tell thee the formula! After what I have done to this town? Art thou mad? I hope, at least, that thou hast checked with Mordra for the correct proportions—yes?"

"Yes," I said. "I have the potions here." I motioned for Shamino to give me the potions.

Caine shook his head in disbelief. "Thou art truly insane. But," he shrugged, "thou hast nothing to lose but thine own life. First, thou wilt need the three potions. Then, thou must place each one just below a connecting tube—the order matters not. Take an empty vial—I should have one here in my lab—and set it below the nozzle. Then turn on the burner. After but a few minutes, the mixture will form, and the filled vial will be ready for thee."

I followed his instructions. Taking an empty beaker from the shelf (I was surprised that it had managed to survive the fire), I placed it under one of the nozzles. Shamino had already uncorked the other three vials and had placed them under the other nozzles. Within moments, the fluids flowed up through the tubes and mixed together. They created a sparkling blue and white mixture which then spilled into the empty vial. I took the vial and corked it firmly. Now all I had to do was get

the answers to the questions of Life and Death from Caine. Piece of cake. Right. I told Caine about our need for Alagner's notebook, and about the answers he wanted us to find in Skara Brae.

The Tortured One looked hard at me. After a moment, he spoke. "I will tell thee what I know if thou dost agree to help me. Free me. Free all of us. Free us from the evil liche."

I sighed. It was never simple to get anything in Britannia.

"Very well," I said. "I'll try and rid you of the liche. But how?"

His eyes brightened somewhat, as if he saw the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. "Thou hast given me hope. To begin, speak with Mistress Mordra. She can tell thee how to accomplish this feat."

"But I've already spoken with her, and all she told me about was the potion. Tell me about the liche. Perhaps that would help me."

"The liche hath taken over the body of poor Horance."

"The mage Horance?"

"Aye."

This was disturbing news. I remembered Horance as being a little absent-minded, but never evil.

"Is there anyone else I should speak to about the liche?"

"Perhaps Trent. He is—was—the blacksmith. Mine one consolation lay with him, for I thought there would be at least one advantage to his death. Sadly, even that did not occur. He was once a master of all things metal. Now all he does, so I am told, is work endlessly on that blasted cage!"

"Cage?"

"I know nothing about it, other than that

it was necessary to put the liche in it before my ... potion could work on him. The liche took from Trent the one most valuable thing in the blacksmith's life—his wife, Rowena. I had hoped his death would at least extinguish his pain." He smiled sardonically. "Well, it did end his pain, in a manner of speaking. The pain is gone, but only to be replaced by his obsessive anger. The poor fool does not even realize he is dead! He thrives on his anger."

"What happened to Rowena?"

"She was all he lived for. When the liche tried to take her from him, he was consumed by the emptiness of her death. But, after his own demise"—he stared directly at me—"his bitter feelings soured even further. I suspect there is no reasoning with him now. I doubt he would believe even his own death, let alone care."

We thanked the ghost for his help. He ignored us and returned to his endless pacing and moaning.

"Where to now?" asked Jaana as we stepped outside.

"Back to Mordra, I suppose. Then perhaps we'll try and find Trent."



We found Mordra outside the graveyard and told her what we'd learned from Caine. I asked her about Trent and his wife, Rowena.

"Alas, I fear that his mind was broken by the loss of his wife, Rowena. He cannot break out of the hatred which consumes him. One day, he will be spent and his spirit will be lost forever. Perhaps Rowena would know of something that could help ... but no, she herself is in need of assistance." Mordra shook her head. "Thou must find a way to

bring her out of the liche's ensorcelment, even if only for a brief moment. I am positive she holds the key to restoring Trent to his former self. Perhaps if thou couldst find a personal article of hers—something from Trent, perhaps—and bring it to her. That might break the enchantment she is under." Mordra frowned. "I hope she can hold out a little longer, until she can be taken away from that horrible place."

"Where might we find the liche?" I asked.

"The Dark Tower lies on the north-western point of Skara Brae. There is something odd about its construction, for I find it very hard to penetrate with my magical senses. Within it," she said, "thou wilt find the Well of Souls. The Well of Souls is a powerful artifact, located beneath the Dark Tower, from which the liche draws his power. The souls of the dead are incarcerated there, doomed to the torment of Horance's all-consuming appetite." Her face was contorted with anger. "Each night, at the stroke of midnight, the spirits of Skara Brae travel to the Dark Tower and are used to infuse Horance with power to continue his dark existence. None of the others are aware when this happens, but I feel it without being able to stop myself."

"How awful!" said Jaana.

"Indeed," said Dupré.

I thanked Mordra for her help. We decided to try the blacksmith next because none of us were willing to brave the liche in his castle just yet.



The clanging of hammer on metal echoed through the silence. I stepped through the charred remains of the front door, trying hard

not to trip over the debris that covered the floor. By the anvil stood a shadowy figure. Over and over he beat upon a partly finished cage, yet never completed his task. The glow from the fire lit him with demonic radiance.

Anger radiated from him in almost tangible waves. He looked up from the cage and I saw that the fire light was coming not from the forge, but from his eyes. "I build this cage to destroy that bastard, Horance, who took my wife from me!" he thundered. For a moment I thought he was going to strike me. Then he unclenched his fists and, with a heavy sigh, returned to his work.

"I've come about Horance," I began.

His whole body tensed as I spoke. "Horance!" The name sounded like a curse. "I will see his foul spirit burn before mine eyes. Then I will laugh as he cries out pitifully for mercy." For some reason I thought I'd rather not hear that laugh.

"Mordra told us he'd taken your wife," I said.

A tear slipped from the ghost's eye and fell on a piece of the heated iron cage. It sizzled, then disappeared. "Rowena was my life, mine only joy in this world." His voice was almost tender, but then he returned to his guttural tones. "He killed her and took that joy from me. Now I am only a hollow shell of a man, burning with hatred."

"Rowena sounds wonderful," I said. "You must miss her terribly."

He held up one hand as I spoke the name of his late wife. "Please do not say that name. It takes from me a little of mine hatred, which is all I have now. Wouldst thou rob me of the one thing that keeps me alive?" It seemed he was indeed unaware that he was, no longer alive. An odd expression crossed his face. "I gave her a music box for our wedding, and

now it is all I have left to remember her by.” His tone changed. “Dost thou see what thou hast done? I cannot work when I think of her!” He returned to his work with renewed passion.

I noticed a pretty music box sitting on the table. Perhaps by playing it I could snap Trent out of his anger. The soft tinkling notes started as I opened the lid. I let the music play for a few minutes, but it had no effect on him.

“Maybe if we find Lady Rowena, she’ll be able to help us bring Trent out of his rage,” suggested Jaana.

“But the liche has her,” I said. “I don’t know if we’re strong enough to rescue her from him.”

“Avatar, there are eight of us—surely enough to defeat one old mage,” said Dupré.

“We’ll see,” I said.



The liche’s castle stood alone at the northern tip of Skara Brae. A chill permeated the air about the castle; even the sky above it was a darker gray. The steady drizzle turned icy as we approached. Desolation and despair filled our hearts as we walked to the front door.

“Perhaps I spoke too soon,” said Jaana. “There is an evil air about this place.”

“That’s the liche,” I said, trying to lighten the moment. I pushed open the front door and stepped inside.

Cobwebs covered every corner of the castle. There was no human comfort in this place. No rugs to cover the floor, no tapestries to hide the gray walls, no soft cushions on the stone chairs. Everything was gray, hard, and cold. In the center of the main hall were several granite slabs whose purpose I couldn’t fathom. Stairs at the northern end

of the room led up to a second story. Next to the stairs were two stone thrones. In one of the chairs sat a beautiful red-haired woman in a black gown. This must be Lady Rowena, Trent’s wife, I thought.

I walked to where she sat, but she looked straight through me as though I weren’t there. After a pause, she turned toward me. There was something strange about the way she looked at me, but I couldn’t quite place it. “Greetings,” she said. “I am Rowena, Lady of this wondrous Tower.” She gestured at the dank, moldering walls and the cobweb rafters.

She stared blankly for a second, then, as if on cue, went on. “I am the Mistress of the Tower. I tend to my Lord Horance’s needs and keep our place looking respectable.” After another pause: “This is a lovely tower, dost thou not agree?” Before I could answer, she continued. “Dost thou see the lovely rays of light playing across the flagstones of the floor? Water sparkles in the fountain. This is truly a beautiful place in which to live.” Her eyes were fixed upon the floor.

“We must bring her from this enchantment,” said Shamino.

“But how?” asked Spark.

“I know,” I said. “The music box. Perhaps the melody will remind her of who she once was. Mordra said something from her previous life might work.”

I sent Spark and Dupré to fetch the box from Trent’s shop. When they returned, I opened the lid and let the music play.

The music of the little box made Rowena turn her head in our direction. She blinked several times as if waking from a dream—or, in this case, a nightmare.

“I am in control of my mind for the time being,” she began, “but I know not for how long. Tell me what has transpired in the town



outside." I relayed to her what I knew of the events in town.

"My poor Trent," she said. "I cannot bear to think that he's become so hurt that he would forget our love." She wrung her hands in sorrow, then noticed something on one of them.

"Please, sir," she said. "Wouldst thou take this ring to him and tell him that I still love him? Mayhap it will restore him to the beloved Trent I knew."

She took the ring from her slender finger and placed it in my hand. I expected it to pass right through, but it rested neatly in my palm.

"Thank you, lady," I said. "We will do our best." Her eyes glazed over once gain and she seemed not to hear.

We hastened back to the blacksmith's shop.



Trent was still hammering away at the cage, and still making no progress. I held out the ring to him. At first he ignored me. Then, recognizing the ring, he took it from me and held it before him. Something in him snapped and his huge frame slumped forward. I let him cry for a while, and when he finished, I saw a remarkable change in his appearance.

The flames that had burned in his eyes were gone; those eyes were now a deep shade of blue. He looked like a new man, or rather a new ghost, as it were. "Forgive my behavior. I know not what came over me," he said. "I remember flames, but they burned no hotter than mine own hatred." He looked pained at the memory. "Thou hast seen her? Thou hast seen Rowena? And she still cares for me! Well, all the more reason to finish this Soul Cage. We must free her from Horance's vile sorcery. I will need an iron bar to complete the cage.

Several can be found in the town cemetery."

Iolo rushed out, and soon returned with an iron bar. Trent took the bar and turned it over in his hands.

"With this, I will finish it shortly. Wait here whilst I tend to the cage."

In a matter of moments, he had pumped up the forge and had completed his work. We rearranged our packs so that Tseremed could carry the heavy cage.

"Take the cage to Mistress Mordra and she will tell thee more about it and its uses."



Mordra circled the Soul Cage, as she called it, several times, as if assessing its fitness for the task at hand.

"The Soul Cage must be empowered with the might of the dead," she said. "The way to accomplish this is to go to the back of the Dark Tower, to the Well of Souls. Thou must lower the cage into the well, where the souls trapped there will lose a little of themselves to imbue it with the required power. I know this sounds harsh, but it is a necessary evil if thou wouldst see them freed." She looked at me sharply. "The next step is to wait until midnight, then clap the cage upon the recumbent form of the liche. This is the period of time in which he drains the spirits of the townsfolk in his Black Service." After a brief moment, she continued. "Finally, thou must pour a magical formula upon the liche within the cage. Be careful, for this formula is the same substance that destroyed the town."



The sky was darkening as we made our way back to the liche's castle. I hoped we would be

able to discover the location of the Well of Souls before Horance could begin his Black Mass. We made our way up the stairs to the second floor, past the still form of Lady Rowena. We took a few steps on this floor, then suddenly found ourselves transported to another place. We were standing next to a bloody altar. Lightning crashed from the sky, striking the ground around us, making a ring of fire that encircled our party. After my eyes adjusted to this assault, I saw a black-cloaked figure standing next to the dais.

It was Horance—but not Horance. Rather, a terrible parody of the kindly mage I'd once known. From the depths of the cowl shadowing his face, yellow eyes burned with

maniacal fever. An evil grin was fixed on his face, revealing shark-like teeth, perfect for ripping.

The liche practically glowed, power coursing visibly through his undead veins. I stepped forward to confront this vile-looking creature and he slowly turned to face me. As his intense gaze locked onto mine, I almost wished I hadn't been so bold.

"Avatar." A sardonic expression lit his undead features. "How may I help thee?"

I got the distinct impression that help was the last thing I'd get from the liche.

Shamino stepped nearer and whispered in my ear. "Do not trust this one. Methinks he'll cause naught but evil."



"Uh, Avatar? I am ready to go now," Spark said, cowering away from the undead creature.

"Horance," I said. "You've changed."

The liche's dry features took on a haughty appearance. "Thou mayest call me Lord Horance. It would only be prudent, as I shall one day rule all of Britannia. Surprised, Avatar? Come now. Surely thou dost not think that Lord British will stand in my way. I know how to deal with his ilk."

"Lord Horance," I said, amazed at his gall.

The liche looked at me with an expression of amused malice.

"Ah, it is good to hear such an obeisance from the Avatar. Perhaps thou wilt have a place in my New Order."

"Hey, that wasn't obeisance!"

"Why, what else wouldst thou call it? Surely thou art truly humbled by my majestic presence."

I chose to ignore that remark. "What 'New Order' do you have in mind?"

An expression of zeal lit the dead face of the liche. "Yes, Avatar. The dead will rule! I will be their leader and thou canst become an Avatar ... to me!"

"Over my dead body!" I blurted out without thinking.

"Why, Avatar. I thought that was understood. It will be my pleasure to help thee enter the realm of the dead."

"Even if you kill me, you'll still have Lord British to contend with," I said, with more bravado than I felt.

Evil is a mild word for the sneer that appeared on the liche's cracked lips. "It has recently come to my attention that a certain ore found in the Britannian surface can, if

fashioned properly, become the bane of the vaunted Lord British. I know this ore and have used it before for other purposes. I will use it once again to destroy that so-called Lord."

"Oh, please," I said sarcastically. "An ore that can kill Lord British? And what else have you used this miracle ore for?"

He gestured at the walls of the tower. "How else didst thou expect my tower to withstand the ravaging effect the ether is having on my magic?"

A harsh cackle escaped his dry throat.

"I am the illustrious Lord of the Dead, soon to be lord of all Britannia. Dost thou have any idea of the number of dead people and creatures there are? I thought not.

"The dead of the ages are mine to summon and control. The graves of beloved ancestors will spew forth their contents into an army. A special treat for the living, mine undead monsters will be. Imagine a skeletal dragon that cannot be killed. Consider a cabal of everliving mages eternally enthralled to me.

"And the most beautiful part of my plot is that, as the living die in these battles—and they will die—they will swell the ranks of the undead host. I will rule supreme—a world of the dead!"

This terrifying glimpse of his sick and twisted future caused me to recoil.

"And I will have a queen," continued the liche, now completely caught up in his mad rant. "The lovely Rowena! She is the most beautiful lady I have been witness to. She shall have eternal beauty at my side, and we shall rule together."

"We'll see about your plans," I said. I pulled my spell book out and cast *An Grav*. As I led my party from the liche's altar, I hoped he wouldn't attack us from behind. But

he merely smiled and looked at us contemptuously, as though he wanted to toy with us for a while longer.

"It is truly sad to see thee go," he said with a sardonic smile.

"Yeah, right," said Dupré.

"Feel free to explore mine humble abode," the liche called after us. "Though, have a care. My guardians are none too intelligent and will most likely assault anything living." He favored us with his death's-head grin.

I pulled my pocket watch out of my backpack. It was half past ten. Only an hour-and-a-half to find the Well of Souls, immerse the Soul Cage in it, and trap the liche.



It was half past eleven when we found the Well of Souls. It was located on the first story of the castle, through a secret passage from the northwest room. We could hear the sighs and whispers of the trapped souls. It was a mournful sound, one that pierced me to my heart.

I took the cage from Tseremed and dipped it into the well. A howl went up and the cage changed color from dull iron-gray to sparkling, shimmering blue. It was the same color as the potion we'd made. My pocket watch read a quarter till midnight when we finished.

We ran toward the main hall, where the stone pallets lay. This was no doubt where the liche would rest after his unholy mass. The clock struck twelve. Slowly, as though drawn against their wills, the spirits of the residents of Skara Brae appeared. They stood, transfixed, at the ends of the stone beds. The clock stopped chiming and the liche glided into the room. He stood and admired his array of souls, then lay down on the middle pallet.

"Quickly," I said. "The cage."

We hoisted the Soul Cage over the reclining liche and dropped it into place. I uncorked the bottle with the Mordra's potion and poured it over the cage. A great, angry howl ripped from beneath the cage. The cage turned black and a rainbow of light burst forth. With a sound like shattering glass, the cage dissolved and fell to pieces.

Before me stood Horance—the Horance I remembered from two hundred years ago. He looked a little older, but as kind and wise as ever.

"I thank thee," he said. "That dark spirit had suppressed my will for so long that I was not sure I had one left. Thou hast done a great deed for Skara Brae, for myself, and indeed all of Britannia, but then I suppose this is merely a



matter of course for one such as thee. My gratitude is thine." He bowed deeply to me. "But now, I fear that all is still not right with the world. The ether stirs chaotically outside of this Dark Tower. Were it not for some property within the walls, I fear my mind would suffer the ravages of its force.

"Now I must ask this favor of thee. The Well of Souls, at the bottom of this tower, holds many tormented souls within it and binds the spirits of Skara Brae to this island. It must be destroyed. I can only hope that thou wilt try to free them. Well, wilt thou?" He looked at me expectantly.

"Of course," I said. I could only imagine the torment of these poor souls.

Horance thought for a moment. Then he said, "When the well is destroyed, the souls within will be released to float aimlessly upon the ether for a time. I have badly wronged the Lady Rowena and her husband; I would see this wrong mended. Please lead her out of this dark place and see that she is reunited with Trent. That way they will remain together when they are released. I will know when you've accomplished this task, and then we can continue with the destruction of the well."

I told the others to stay at the tower, then I took Rowena back to Trent. She was most anxious to join him once the liche's enchantment had been broken. We reached the blacksmith's hut and she ran toward her husband. His face lit up and they clasped each other so tightly that you couldn't see where one of them began and the other ended.

Secure in the knowledge that they were happily reunited, I returned to the castle.

"I have returned Rowena to Trent," I said.

"Good, now we can get on with freeing the rest of Skara Brae. The destruction of the Well of Souls can only be brought about by

the selfless sacrifice of a spirit. A living being will not do, because the soul is tied to the body.

"Find a spirit willing to make the sacrifice for the sake of all Skara Brae. I suggest that thou shouldst ask Mayor Forsythe first, as it is his right to be considered before the others." He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

As luck would have it, most of the spirits from Skara Brae had been drawn to the castle during the liche's last dark act. I spoke with those I found there, starting with the Mayor. He was too cowardly, but he told me I should speak to all the other souls and then return to him. I did so, only to be turned down by each and every one. Even Caine refused me, claiming it was his punishment to burn for all eternity in the flames.

After I'd spoken to all the souls, I returned to Forsythe. Reluctantly he agreed to enter the Well of Souls. I led his spirit to the well, but still he hesitated. Finally I insisted, and he leapt into the well.

There was a great burst of fire, then a sound of rushing air and an echoing of voices. Then the well was nothing more than a blackened hole.

I returned to Horance and told him of my success.

"Once again, Avatar, thou hast proven that thou art ever the defender of Britannia and the innocent. I cannot adequately express my gratitude; however, please take this small token of my thanks. I hope it will help thee in thy quest."

He handed me a great staff. As I took it, I knew it was a Firedoom staff—a dangerous and powerful weapon. It glowed so brightly that it lit the night like a lantern.

"Thank you, Horance," I said.

For a moment Horance looked downcast.

"I feel that some of the responsibility for what happened in this town is upon my shoulders. For, in my search to uncover the truths of the universe, I unwittingly released that foul spirit which destroyed this town. I will spend the rest of my days in the attempt to restore this once lovely town.

"I will make it into a shining example of Spirituality, a shrine where people of good heart may live in peace and harmony. And again, I thank thee for giving me this chance. Goodbye, Avatar."

We left the castle as Horance made his way to the stairs. I realized we hadn't gotten the answer to the questions about Life and Death from Caine. What would become of our quest if he'd vanished along with the Well of Souls?

We hurried to his house where he was still wandering about, wringing his hands.

"So, thou hast destroyed the liche," he said.

"Yes," I replied.

"And thou wishest to know the answers to Life and Death."

"Yes."

The Tortured One looked hard at me. Then, smiling, he shook his head.

"I have no secrets, my foolish friend. Thou art a fool. There are no answers. Only questions." He looked as if he might cry out in pain. Then he turned away from me. "Go away now. Leave me to mine eternity."

I stared at him for a moment, then I left. There was nothing more I could do for the tortured soul; he didn't want to be helped. But I had my answer, such as it was. I could return to Alagner and get on with the quest.



Chapter Nine

I touched down outside Alagner's house. He opened the door, then leaned against the doorway, eating an apple.

"So," he said. "Hast thou found an answer to thy questions?"

"Yes," I replied. "There are no answers, only questions."

Alagner smiled. "Thou hast begun thy journey on the road to enlightenment. As thou hast heard, all is not what one has been taught by one's teachers. 'Tis a pity. Now I suppose thou dost want to borrow the notebook?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Dost thou promise to return my notebook?"

I was taken aback. I was the Avatar! Of course I would return his notebook.

"Certainly," I said, trying, but not succeeding, to keep the indignation from my voice.

"Very well. I am counting on thee to return it to me personally. No telling what misfortune may befall thee if thou dost fail to



do so. And as further incentive, I just might give thee something else which will help thee in thy quest if thou dost return it to me safely. Here is the key to my storeroom, the first building to the south of here.” He grinned slyly. “Thou must determine how to find the notebook thyself!”

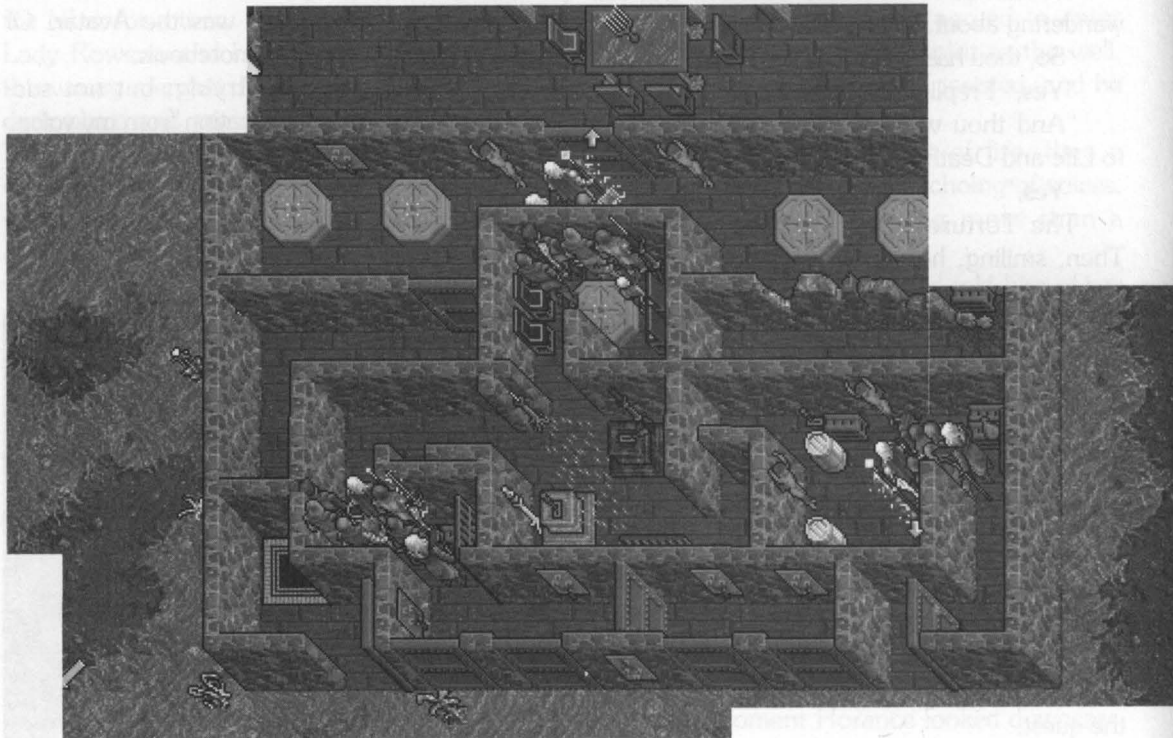
I won't bore you with the details of Alagner's storehouse. But I did make a drawing of it and how to get around in it.

I took the crumpled parchment from the Avatar. A crude sketch showed the secret switches, invisible doorways, and teleporting devices spread throughout the storehouse. If you find yourself in Alagner's storehouse, be careful of the sleep field in the center room.



Instead of taking the magic carpet back to the Wisps' house, I used the *Kal Ort Por* spell to teleport us back to Yew. I'd made a point of using the *Kal Por Ylem* spell in some of the places I thought we might come back to. I marked one stone while we were in my room in Lord British's castle. I left some of the heavier supplies I knew I wouldn't need often, and was able to come back for them whenever I wanted. This practice was also helpful when we needed to exchange gold nuggets or bars for coin.

I marked one stone at Rudyom's and another in Yew. Before we left Alagner's I marked a stone so that we could return to give



him back his notebook and retrieve the magic carpet.

Moments after casting the spell, we were standing outside Iolo's hut in Yew. We made our way quickly to the Wisps' house. I pulled the Emp flute from my pack and began to play. The haunting notes attracted a Wisp's attention. After a while, it floated over to me.

"The human entity is welcomed by 'Xorinia.' 'You' have brought the item 'notebook.' 'I' shall now absorb the information contained therein." The Wisp glowed brightly for a few seconds. The notebook remained in my hand. "I have completed my absorption of the information. 'You' may now return the item 'notebook' to the entity 'Alagner.' And now for the exchange of information and delivery of a message.

"The entity known as 'Time Lord' requests 'your' audience. 'Time Lord' is trapped at the place known as the 'Shrine of Spirituality.' 'You' can reach 'him' by using 'your' object 'Orb of the Moons' in the location directly to 'your' 'northwest.'"

"The Time Lord?" I hadn't heard of the Time Lord since before I'd become Avatar.

"The entity known as 'Time Lord' is a being from the space/time dimension. The Xorinite Dimension has been communicating with 'Time Lord' for what 'humans' call 'centuries.'

"Now for the information 'you' seek. This dimension known as 'Britannia' is under attack by an entity called 'the Guardian.' 'The Guardian' lives in another dimension. 'Xorinia' sometimes trades information with this entity. Do 'you' want to know more about 'the Guardian'?"

"Of course," I said.

"'Xorinia' has digested information about 'the Guardian' and can state the following

facts: 'The Guardian' possesses qualities which human entities label 'vain,' 'greedy,' 'egocentric,' and 'malevolent.' 'The Guardian' thrives on power and domination. 'The Guardian' takes 'pleasure' from conquering other worlds. His sensory organs are now focused on this dimension known as 'Britannia.' 'The Guardian' is attempting to enter this dimension by means of an item human entities call a 'Moongate.'

"This 'Moongate' is not a 'red' color or 'blue' color 'Moongate,' which 'Xorinia' knows is the standard form of this item. 'The Guardian' is building a 'Moongate' of the color 'black.'"

"The Black Gate?" I asked.

"The 'Black Gate' will be fully functional when the phenomenon known as 'Astronomical Alignment' next occurs. Although 'Xorinia' does not normally seek to influence actions of other manifestations, 'Xorinia' warns 'you' that if 'the Guardian' enters this dimension, it will be the end of the dimension known as 'Britannia.' 'The Guardian' is powerful in 'his' own dimension. In 'your' dimension, 'he' will be unstoppable. The Undrian Council sincerely hopes this information is useful. Transaction complete."

The Wisp floated away and I turned to look at my companions. Their faces had grown pale. I realized that though I was appalled by the thought of the Guardian's destroying Britannia, it hadn't hit me as hard as it had hit the others. The Guardian was trying to destroy their home.

"We'll find a way to stop him," I said. "I promise."



I dropped the Orb of the Moon to my north

and a little bit west. A red gate rose up and we stepped through.



"You're not going to trust the Time Lord, are you?"

The Voice was back. I'd been hearing it off and on since I'd come to Britannia. I know I haven't mentioned it, Carlotta, but at every turn this great disembodied voice had been commenting on what I was doing. Finally I started ignoring it. But that didn't stop it. I'd begun to think I was losing my mind, until the Wisps told me about the Guardian. Then I knew who was trying to psych me out.

I saw a vaguely familiar, but intimidating, figure enclosed in some kind of cylindrical cell. He looked at me intently, then spoke.

"It has been many years since we met during the time of Exodus! I have never wanted to see thee again as badly as most recently! It is about time thou shouldst arrive! I do not have eras to waste whilst I wait for thee! There is a crisis and Britannia needs thine help! I need thine help! The entire universe needs thine help!"

"In any way I can," I said. This was more like it—real Avatar stuff.

The Time Lord looked relieved. "Then I have a mission for thee. It was I who sent the red Moongate to thine homeland to lure thee to Britannia! It took every bit of my strength to make it functional, and still something went wrong. Thou didst arrive in Trinsic, which was not mine intention. It has therefore taken thee much longer to reach me than I anticipated.

"Once thou didst arrive in Britannia, the only other way I could contact thee was via the Wisps. After the considerable rest I had since creating the red Moongate, I managed

to repair the one Orb of the Moons location that would bring thee to me. I cannot roam freely through time and space, doing my work, whilst I am trapped here."

"What is the crisis?" I asked.

"The land is under attack by a powerful and malicious being from another dimension, and thou art the only one who can stop him! I have been trapped here by a trick, due to a sorcery which the Guardian has performed. The Guardian has put a wrinkle in the space-time continuum by creating a powerful generator, which has made the Moongates and thine Orb of the Moons mostly inoperable.

"Go at once to the Serpent's Spine area. Search for the entrance to a dungeon somewhere northwest of Britain. I believe it may be called Dungeon Despise. This will lead thee to the generator causing the problem. If mine hunch is correct, it will resemble a large Sphere.

"It is a magic generator that the Guardian was able to send from his world. Its purpose is to disable the Moongates. Thou must break its outer defense and enter the structure, taking the smaller Sphere floating inside. Keep the small Sphere, as it will be useful later.

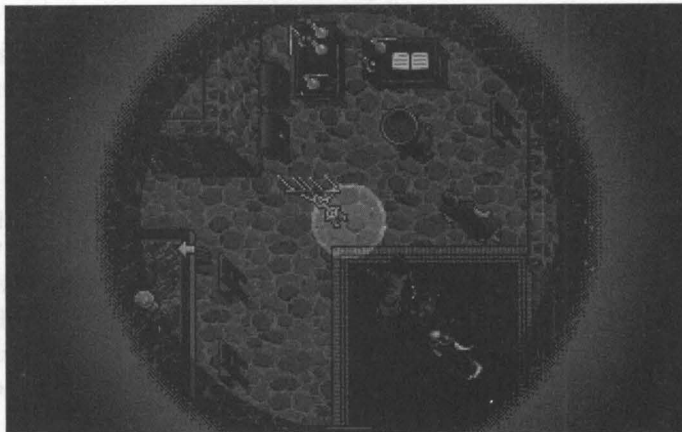
"It may have a defense mechanism. If thou canst not conquer it, return here and describe the defense to me. Perhaps I can help thee more. It might be wise to use the spells *Mark* and *Recall* to save thyself the trouble of finding thy way through the entire dungeon a second time, should thou have to travel there again."

"Who is the Guardian?" I asked. "The Wisps told me something about him."

"He is an embodiment of supreme evil. He must be stopped. He thrives on domination and control."

"I vow I'll stop him," I said. I pulled out

my spell book and cast *Recall* to take us back to Alagner's house. The reagents disappeared in a cloud of gray smoke. We were still in the Shrine of Spirituality. I blushed. Obviously magic wouldn't work here now—some great Avatar I was! With a sheepish grin at the Time Lord, I motioned to my party, and we stepped through the Moongate.



"Oh, my!" gasped lolo.

I stared at the sight before me, not willing to believe what I saw. I blinked, but nothing changed. We were just inside the threshold of Alagner's house. In front of us was Alagner, or what was left of him. He'd been murdered just like Spark's father and the two gypsies in Minoc. Then I heard it, that damned Voice.

"Thank you for the information in the notebook, Avatar," boomed the Voice. Then it began to laugh. "Demonic" is the only way to describe the sound. But now I knew who my enemy was—the Guardian. I wouldn't let him win.

"You bastard!" I said, shaking my fist in the air. The rest of my party looked at me as if I were nuts.

"Hearing the Voice again?" asked Spark.

"Yes," I said. "I'm sorry, but this has all gone too far. He's so evil. I can't believe you don't hear him. He's been commenting on everything we've done." The fear welled up in me that this was one enemy who was too strong for me. He knew everything that I did. He could even speak to me and no one else could hear. I began to wonder whether he knew what I was thinking, whether he was just

toying with me, waiting for the right moment to manifest his powers.

"Art thou all right?" asked Shamino.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my fears. The Guardian wasn't in Britannia—yet. We had to stop him before he could complete his Black Gate. I shuddered at the thought of a being as powerful as the Guardian reaching Britannia.

"I'll be fine once we stop the Guardian," I said. I turned and marched to the magic carpet. The others scrambled aboard. We were all thinking about the Guardian and his terrible power. For the first time since I'd become Avatar, I feared that I would fail in my quest—that all Britannia would be laid waste because of my defeat.



Chapter Ten

he trip to Despise was unusually quiet. Even Dupré was withdrawn and introspective, something I'd never expected to see in him. We tried to land the

magic carpet in the same place where we'd found it, but to no avail. Finally we left the carpet in Britain and made our way to the entrance of Despise by following the Serpent's Spine.

I won't bore you with the details of our trip through the dungeon, though I did make a map in case I had to go back.

After a series of wrong turns—and after being teleported about by invisible teleportation devices—we reached the generator. The massive black Sphere had broken through the floor of the cave. Across the entrance to the generator was a red Moongate.

"Here goes nothing," I said. I stepped through. I found myself several feet south of where I'd started. I repeated my steps, and every time I stepped through the red Moongate, it transported me south.

"This is getting us nowhere," I said. "We need to talk to the Time Lord."

I dropped the Orb of the Moon to the northwest and walked through.



I described the situation with the red Moongate to the Time Lord.

"The Sphere's outer defense sends thy party back to a specific position in space," he said. "Until this defense is broken, thou canst not enter the generator. Thou must find Nicodemus' hourglass." He looked thoughtful. "If I am correct in mine hypothesis, the Sphere's inner defense will involve Moongates. Look for a visual pattern to help thee solve this mystery."

"Nicodemus' hourglass?" I asked.

"It is an enchanted hourglass which will help thee if it is used at the site of the Sphere. Once I am free of the power of the generator,

thou canst summon me by using the hourglass."

"Very well," I said.



Nicodemus' house was south of Empath Abbey. We hadn't visited him during our last two visits here. With some trepidation I knocked on his door.

There was no answer.

I knocked again.

Still no answer.

Carefully, I opened the door. Standing in the center of the room was Nicodemus. He was wearing dirty robes and his hair stuck out in all directions from under his cap. He caught my eye for a moment and I could see that he was mad.

"Nicodemus?"

He whirled about and pranced up to me. "That is a very good question," he said. "Some days I can actually remember. Let's see ... today ... Yes! I am Nicodemus! Nicodemus! Nicodemus! Nico-nico-kukodamus! Ha!"

Spark stared at the crazy mage. Shamino, Iolo, Tseremed, Senti, and Jaana looked uncomfortable. Dupré pointed to his temple and twirled his finger in a recognizable gesture.

"Uh, Nicodemus," I began, "the Time Lord has sent us to find your hourglass."

"Timey Limey Lord? Hmm. I don't know him. Wait! Yes, I do. Does he have a big black mustache and three pairs of pants? No! I know who he is. He's the fellow who came to fix my sundial the other day, right?"

"Uh, no. The hourglass. Where is it?"

"This Time Lord told thee what? An hourglass! I have no blinking hourglass! Glassy

wassy hoursplassy! Ha ha ha! Wait! An enchanted hourglass? That does ring a bell. Clang clang clang! Ha ha ha! Wait! I remember. I had an hourglass. I sold it. To a gypsy. Or was it an antique dealer? I think I might have sold it to a gypsy antique dealer in Britain. Or Paws. Somewhere on that side of the land. But if my memory serves me correctly, that hourglass used up its enchantment, which is why I sold it. I suppose if the ether is repaired, I could possibly re-enchant it. Bring it to me and we'll see what we can do. I know! We can play a rousing game of chess! But only if I can deal at all times. I do not trust thee."

"Uh, thank you," I said, as I began to back out of his shop. Lunatics make me very uncomfortable.

"That poor, poor man," said Jaana as soon as we were outside. "I do hope thou canst break this wicked enchantment and return him to what he was."

Pulling my spell book and stones from my pack, I nodded. "Me too," I said. "Me too."



We looked all through Britain for an antique store, but found none. Paws was next, and it was here that we found the House of Items. It wasn't really an antique store—more like a second-hand shop.

The proprietor greeted us at the door. She was elderly, and I could tell her vision was poor.

"I'm looking for an item," I said.

"Let me see ... There is a cradle for sale. A rocking horse. A bell. An hourglass. A spittoon. A lute. A sextant. Since I am moving a bit more slowly these days, I let my customers help themselves and take what they have bought. Providing they pay me first, of

course. I do trust folks to pay me the correct amount. I am nearly blind, I am afraid."

"I'll take the hourglass," I said.

"It was sold to me by this old man who was so daft that he could not recall how to use it! I will sell it to thee for five gold pieces. Dost thou wish to buy it?"

"Yes," I said and handed her the five gold pieces.

"I thank thee. Thou mayest take thy glass."

I picked up the hourglass and studied it. Clearly it was no longer enchanted. I wondered if Nicodemus could enchant it again, but my hopes were low. I pulled my spell book and a stone from my pack and prepared to cast the spell that would take us back to Yew.



Nicodemus was wandering around outside his house as we approached. He still looked mad as a hatter. I wondered if the Guardian would succeed in invading Britannia because we couldn't get one crazed mage to enchant an hourglass.

"Nicodemus," I began, "I've bought your hourglass."

"What's this? An hourglass of some kind? Wait! It looks vaguely familiar! Thief!! This is mine hourglass! I have been looking for it for years! Where didst thou get it, scoundrel? I shall turn thee into a duck!" He intoned some spell and pointed at me, but nothing happened. "Zounds! Thou art no more a quacker than I am. Nothing works anymore. Quacker slacker wacker flacker! Ha ha ha!"

"Look," I said, becoming impatient. "Can you enchant this thing or not?"

"Enchant? Thou dost want me to enchant

this wretched thing? Thou must have the brain of a toad! Toady woody bloody coady! Ha ha ha! Do me a favor, Mister Avatar. Repair the blinking ether, wilt thou? Do that and I can enchant thy glourbllass. I mean floursass. I mean hourglass. Tell that to thy Time Lord. Thou canst also tell him he needs a bath.”

I glared at him, then turned and stomped away. Getting frustrated wasn't going to solve my predicament, but Nicodemus was about to drive *me* crazy. Then I realized Nicodemus had addressed to me as Avatar. My spirits picked up; maybe things weren't as dire as I thought. I pulled the Orb of the Moon from my pocket and dropped it to the northwest.



The Time Lord was encased in his prison. I told him about Nicodemus' madness and his inability to enchant the hourglass. The Time Lord thought a moment. “The ether must be repaired before the mages in Britannia can use magic again. I suggest that thou seest Penumbra in Moonglow. She may be able to help thee with this problem.”

“Penumbra?”

“Yes,” he replied. “She is an elderly mage who lives in Moonglow.”

“Penumbra.” Well did I remember her from my last visit to Britannia. Her ghoulish home had been the source of more than one nightmare after my return to Earth. Penumbra. Sometimes I hated being Avatar.



Chapter Eleven

“What dost thou think it means?” asked Iolo.

“I don't know,” I replied. We were standing in front of Penumbra's door. I'd tried every way I could think of to open her door, but all had failed. Then I noticed the finely burnished gold plaque at my feet.

Hammer Here To Open

it read.

“Do any of you have a hammer?” I asked. My companions shook their heads. “I guess we'll have to find one.”



“It's not working.”

“I know it's not working,” I said. I was out of breath from pounding on the plaque. Nothing had happened. There wasn't even the slightest dent in it. “Oh, never mind,” I said, throwing the hammer onto the ground next to the plaque.

“Look,” said Iolo. “The sign hath changed. Thou art on the right track.”

Pick Item Carefully To Keep Going

“The clues,” I said, “are in the statements on the signs. Shamino, give me one of those lockpicks.”

He passed the small object to me. I placed it next to the hammer. The sign changed.

A Golden Ring Of Truth Faces Thee

“Does anyone have a gold ring on them?” I asked. Once again, my companions shook their heads. “Where are we going to get a gold ring?”

“Perhaps in Britain,” said Shamino. “There is a jeweler there who makes gold rings.”

“Very well,” I said, pulling out my spell book and stones.



Grasp Not At Threads

"I'm starting to hate Penumbra," I said. I'd just laid the gold ring on the ground next to the pick and hammer when the sign changed again.

"I know none of us has any thread," I said. "Wait—isn't there a seamstress here? I remember going into her shop when we were looking for the hammer."

"Aye," said Dupré. "And a fine-looking lass she was, too."

"I hadn't noticed," I said. "Spark, will you go and ask her for some thread?"

"Aye, Avatar." He ran off toward the seamstress' house.



The Royal Mint Shall Not Hold Thee Back

"Mint? I've never seen mint in Britannia," I said.

"Maybe it doth not have to do with mint," suggested Jaana. "Perhaps it signifies something else."

"Maybe, but what?"

She shrugged.

I thought for a while, then it occurred to me. Maybe it had to do with what a mint held: gold. I reached into my pack and pulled out a gold coin. Lord British's face was stamped on one side, a picture of his castle on the other. I flipped the coin into the air. It arced upward, then fell with a small plop next to the other items I'd placed on the ground. The plaque disappeared in a shimmering blue haze. Lying on the ground where the sign had been was a gold key.

"Bingo," I said.

"What dost that mean, Avatar?" asked Spark.

"I'll tell you later," I said, fitting the key into the lock.

"Ha Ha Ha HA HA HA HA ..." An evil laugh sounded in my head.

"Bugger off," I muttered to myself. I was really beginning to hate the disembodied voice of the Guardian. I could still hear him laughing at me. I ignored him and didn't mention it to the others. I didn't want them to get spooked.

Penumbra's house was layered in cobwebs and dust. I looked around, hoping to find the elderly mage. To my east I saw a beautiful woman lying asleep on a stone bed. I walked over and shook her, hoping to find out where Penumbra was. She didn't wake. I shook her again—still no response—then I saw an orange potion on the table next to her. Orange potions awakened people, if my memory served me correctly. I uncorked the glass vial and poured the contents between her slightly parted lips.

Her eyes flew open and she turned her head, which was cradled in my arm.

"Avatar! I cannot believe 'tis thee! Thou didst come and wake me! I knew thee would!"

I realized that this was Penumbra, looking little different than she had when I'd been here two hundred years ago. Suddenly, she grabbed her head in pain. "Oh!" she cried. "Mine head! The pain! What is happening? What didst thou do to me?" She closed her eyes, concentrating. "There is a disturbance in the ether! I can feel my magical powers fading! Help me, Avatar, help me!"

I felt panic. If Penumbra succumbed to effects of the ruined ether, like the other mages, I'd never be able to stop the Guardian.

"But how can I help?" I asked.



"I need some kind of barrier to protect me from the ethereal waves. There must be a material we could use." She clutched her temples, pulling her features into a mask of pain. "Dost thou know of a material that is impenetrable?"

I glanced at my companions; they looked baffled. I thought about what I'd learned of the materials in Britannia so far. It was Horance who supplied the clue. I remembered that when he was possessed by the liche, he'd told me he was protected from the ether's effects by his castle—whose walls contained blackrock.

"Yes," I said excitedly. "I know of such a substance."

"What is it?"

"Blackrock," I said.

"Yes," she replied. "That is what we need."

"I'll be right back," I said, hoping she could hang onto her sanity until I returned.



"What do I do now?" I asked. I'd teleported back to my room in Lord British's castle, using the stone I'd marked. Once there, I picked up the blackrock we'd taken from Rudyom's in Cove to prevent him from hurting himself, and brought it back with me.

"Thou hast brought the blackrock!" said Penumbra. "I did not think I could manage much longer! Hurry! Place the pieces on the pedestals at the north, south, east, and west ends of the room! I shall wait here!"

I did as she instructed. In a moment, the pieces were in place.

"The blackrock is working! I no longer feel the painful ether!"

I told her briefly about our visit with the Time Lord, and explained why we had come.

Penumbra thought for a moment. "I feel that the damaged ethereal waves are coming from a source very near here. I suspect there is something in a dungeon on these islands that is creating the havoc. Try Dungeon Deceit. I have a strong sense that thy goal is there."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"In my mind's eye, I see a large object shaped like a tetrahedron. I am beginning to understand what this is. This generator is producing dangerous ethereal waves. Thou must find the Ethereal Ring and wear it to break the generator's defense. Now where is that ring ...?"

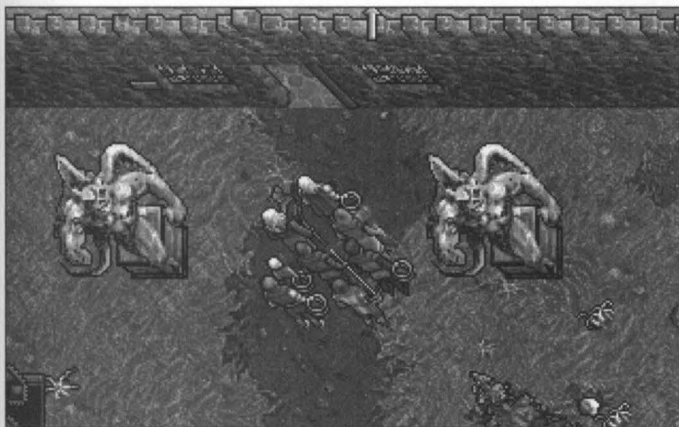
Penumbra consulted some books and cross-referenced them with a map. "I believe that the Ethereal Ring was last in the possession of King Draxinusom of the Gargoyles. Once thou hast found the Ring, thou must bring it back to me. I must perform an enchantment upon it so that it may work for thee."



Chapter Twelve

erfin came into view below. The magic carpet descended and gently touched down. We filed off and looked at the building before us. It was a regal two-story stone edifice with Gargoyle statues flanking its entrance. This must be Draxinusom's house, I thought.

I opened the double doors and stepped inside. A winged Gargoyle in his physical prime, was standing in one corner of the room. I hurried over to him, but then realized that he wasn't Draxinusom. I made a quick tour of the place. This wasn't Draxinusom's house; it was some sort of shrine to the Gargoyle Principles of Control, Diligence, and



town is planning to destroy the physical representations of the altars. To be not the same, of course, as actually destroying the basic principles of Control, Passion, and Diligence, but to be bad for us nonetheless."

"Indeed."

I knew I'd been pretty upset when someone tried to destroy Britannian altars. The Gargoyle made a small gesture and went back to his duties.



Passion. Statues of Mondain, Minax, and Exodus were prominently placed: I walked back to the Gargoyle, hoping he could help us find Draxinusom.

"Hail, human! To be known as Teregus. To be welcome to the House of the Altars. To be helpful to you in any way?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm not familiar with this place. I thought I was in Lord Draxinusom's house."

The Gargoyle shook his head. "To be caring for the altars of Control, Passion, and Diligence. To be a position of great responsibility. To be especially important in these times of trouble."

"Trouble?"

"To have been many disagreements in town lately. To be much tension between the followers of the principles of the altars and the followers of The Fellowship. To have heard rumors of threats to the altars."

"You're having problems with The Fellowship?"

"To be wary of Fellowship ideals. To be ignoring the altars in their search for unity, and to be losing respect for the old ways. To be not bad. To have heard that someone in

"This is where he lives?" said Spark. He was looking at the small hut we'd found just south of the Hall of Knowledge. It was obviously a great disappointment to him that the Gargoyle king lived in such simplicity.

"You shouldn't judge people by their houses," I said.

"I am not!" he said. "Should not a king to have a bigger house?"

"I suppose it depends on the king."

I knocked on the door. A muffled reply came from within. Pushing the door open, I stepped into the hut. The years had not been kind to Lord Draxinusom, though his demeanor was as regal and intimidating as I remembered.

"Lord Draxinusom," I said.

"To be good to see you again, old friend. To have been many years."

"What have you been doing since last we met? How did you come to this place? I have so many questions."

"To notice how the young ones no longer look to me for guidance any more. To look more to Teregus, or, more often, to those in

The Fellowship. To be living here on Terfin. To be quite comfortable for our needs. To be, however, unfortunate that it was thought necessary to isolate us from the humans. To have engendered resentment and tension in our younger generations. To remember not the old days, my friend—the days when we had to work together to survive.” He smiled, reliving old memories, then shook his head. “To have had to give up much when we moved. To especially regret selling my Ethereal Ring.”

“But that’s what we came here for—the Ethereal Ring.”

“Ah. To be, indeed, a lovely treasure. To have been quite useful. A shame, really, to have had to sell it. To have been one of my favorites.”

“How did this come about?”

“To have sold most of my treasures when we were ... uh ... asked, shall to say, to move to the island. To have all happened rather quickly, you see. To have sold most to the Sultan of Spektran.”

“The Sultan of Spektran? I’ve never heard of him.”

“Nor I, Avatar,” added Iolo.

“To have seemed nice enough, for a human. To be a bit mad, he is, even for a human. To tell you he lives on an island just to the west of us. To know, at least, that my prized possessions would be safe in his hands.”

“What makes you think it is safer with the Sultan than with you?”

“To be rumored to have one of the best-guarded vaults in all of Britannia. To be supposedly enchanted. To know not details.”

Great. A mysterious sultan with a magical safe. Wasn’t anything ever simple in Britannia? I chastised myself for such selfish thoughts. I was on a quest to save Britannia from being invaded by a supremely evil being,

and here I was complaining about a little difficulty. There was also another matter that I had to discuss with Draxinusom—the murder of Inamo.

“Lord Draxinusom,” I began, “there is another matter of which we must speak. It is about the Gargoyle named Inamo.”

Draxinusom bared his teeth in what passed for a Gargoyle smile.

“To be a fine young Gargoyle. To have been raised by Teregus, keeper of the altars. To have left town because of the tension between the altar worshippers and The Fellowship. To have been angry and distrustful of The Fellowship. To have news of him?”

“Yes.”

“To be excellent! To have seen him? To know how he is faring? To be well?”

“No, Lord Draxinusom,” I said sadly. “The news is not good. He has been murdered.”

“To be terrible news! To have been such a fine Gargoyle. To know Teregus will be heart-broken. To be wishing not for him to grieve, but to take to him the news immediately. To be better to hear it from you.”

“Very well,” I said. “I shall tell him before we leave for Spektran.”

“To bid farewell, old friend. To not be hesitating to return if there is aught else I can do for you. To be lonely here now for an old Gargoyle dedicated to the ancient ways ...”



We returned to the House of Altars. Inside, Teregus was polishing one of the stone statues.

“To be welcome,” he said.

“I have come to bring you news of Inamo.”

"To miss him greatly. To have raised him from an egg. To have been rather vocal in his disagreements with The Fellowship. To have felt it safer for him to leave." He sighed, then looked up hopefully. "To have news of him?"

"Yes," I said, trying frantically to find a way to tell him the truth.

"To be well?"

"No ..."

"To be not well? To be terrible! To think there is anything to do to help?"

"I'm afraid it is too late to help him."

"To be too late? To mean what by too late? To tell me what has happened!" He was becoming distraught.

"He was murdered," I said.

"To be murdered?" He took a step back, stunned by the news. "To be murdered? To be unbelievable. To have no real enemies!" He sighed heavily. "To tell me, please, exactly what happened."

I related the particulars of Inamo's death. He sighed again.

"To be such a waste of Gargoyle life. To be grateful if you would send news if you discover who was responsible for wanting him dead." He was quiet for a few moments—getting accustomed to the situation, I suppose. "To apologize. To need some time to grieve. Please to come back later." He turned away.

As we set out for Spektran, we were all silently mulling over the devastation of Teregus. I admired Spark again, because of all of us, he had lost the most. Yet he wasn't wallowing in self-pity; he was doing something about what had happened. He had faith that I would be able to find the person who'd killed his father. I hoped I wouldn't disappoint him.



Rain and more rain. Spektran was blanketed in clouds and overcast skies; there was a perpetual storm going on.

"Lovely weather, Avatar," said Shamino. "The lightning, 'tis an especially nice touch."

"Just don't lift your sword over your head until I'm out of range," I replied.

"As you wish."

We made a quick dash to the small fortress situated on the south end of the tiny island. There were no knobs on the metal doors, and I was wondering how we would get in when the portal opened by itself. I didn't waste any time wondering why that had happened—I was too wet and hungry to care. The others apparently felt the same way, because they were hot on my heels.

As I stood there, dripping water onto the carpets, a short man with a mad gleam in his eye approached.

"Who in the blazes art thou?" he asked. He acted as if we'd interrupted him during something very important.

"I am the Avatar."

"Of course thou art! And I am the evil spirit of Mondain, come back to wreak havoc over all Britannia. Funny, thou dost not look like an Avatar—thou dost look like a fool. What can I do for thee, Mr. Fool?"

I tried to keep my temper in check. This obnoxious pip-squeak was getting on the one nerve I had left. Then he did something odd. He turned to his left and began talking to the air.

"What? Oh, really! Thou dost think this Avatar looks like the real thing? I doubt it, Lucinda. I doubt it very much." He turned back to me and grinned.

"I'm looking for the Sultan of Spektran," I said.

He looked at me with impatience. "I am

Martingo, the Sultan of Spektran. Is that all right with thee?" He rolled his eyes. He turned to his right side and whispered again to his imaginary companion, "I believe we have an ignoramus on our hands."

Martingo pulled out a banana and began to peel it.

"You are the Sultan?" I asked.

"Come on, do not insult mine intelligence. Surely thou dost know what a Sultan is! Canst not thou see mine harem?"

"No, there's no one here but myself, my companions, and you."

Martingo looked bewildered. "Then thou must have thine eyes examined! I am surrounded by ten ..." He looked around quickly. "No, *eleven* beautiful women! Each day I enjoy a different one. Thou canst not imagine how much fun being a Sultan really is!" He leaned over and kissed an invisible cheek. "Today I am enjoying Lucinda." He grinned broadly.

"I can't believe you're the Sultan of Spektran," I said, becoming more bewildered by the moment.

"'Tis the island thou dost stand upon!" He turned to the invisible person on his left and whispered, "Thou art correct—this person really is a fool!" Then he turned back to me. "As I said, I am the Sultan here. I am the master of all of these subjects." He gestured around the room.

Iolo leaned over and whispered in my ear. "This fellow is quite daft. Be careful."

"I'm looking for an object you are said to possess—the Ethereal Ring."

Martingo looked suspicious. "Art thou wanting to steal mine Ethereal Ring?" He turned to his imaginary friend and whispered, "Thou wert right. Our guest looks like a thief." He turned back to me and smiled.

"Yes, I do have an Ethereal Ring. I purchased it from the King of the Gargoyles. What was his name?" He leaned toward the invisible companion on his right. "What? Oh yes, Draxinusom. I knew it all the time." He turned back to me. "It is in my vault."

"Draxinusom mentioned your vault," I said hoping he would take that as a compliment.

Martingo's eyes lit up. "My vault is the most protected vault in all Britannia. No one, and I repeat, no one can steal anything from my vault. I have many fine treasures here." He turned to Lucinda and bit a nonexistent earlobe. Then, as if distracted by our presence, he continued. "I collect magical items. The vault is full of them. Including this ring thou dost mention."

He smiled wickedly, then continued. "The vault's security is my secret. Feel free to try and enter it. In fact, I dare thee! If thou canst succeed in getting inside, thou art welcome to take anything!" Martingo laughed. "All thou dost need is the key!"

He laughed with his imaginary harem, as if they were all laughing with him. "I'm sure thou wilt find it!" He collapsed against his imaginary friend, laughing so hard that tears began to roll down his cheeks.

I glared at him for a moment, but realized that it wouldn't do any good. The Sultan was a complete lunatic and unlikely to be at all intimidated by a mere Avatar. I motioned for my companions to follow me, and led them upstairs from the central hall. On the second floor there were storerooms with secret doors in the north walls. While we were up there, I looked down from the small balcony to the room below. On the lower floor was a large stone safe. To the south was a pedestal with a statue of a harpy on it. Nothing particularly



frightening or dangerous that I could see. Perhaps the Sultan only imagined that he had the best-protected vault in the world. Why not, if he could imagined an entire harem?

We went back downstairs, ignoring the Sultan, who was now sitting on his throne tickling one of his invisible women. Spark looked perplexed. Shamino, Dupré, and Iolo started laughing as though they had all shared the same inside joke. Jaana ignored them, trying to rise above it. Tseremed kept asking what was so funny.

We went through the kitchen and found ourselves in the room with the safe. I was

marching confidently toward the vault when the stone harpy came to life.

“Oh, no,” I managed to get out before the harpy struck. Her talons ripped into my chest, throwing me to the ground. I thanked my lucky stars that I had magical armour on, because I probably couldn’t have stood a blow from her without it. While I struggled to right myself, she went to work on my companions. Iolo got a nasty gash in his arm. Spark managed to duck under her, but she still raked his back with her talons. He shrieked with pain and dropped his weapon.

“You unspeakable horror!” I snarled. It was one thing to go after me, but to try and kill Spark—that was just too much. I realized, watching her casually shrug off the attacks of my companions, that it would take something more than even the magical weapons we possessed to destroy her. From my pack I pulled one of the precious

glass swords we’d found in the parrot’s treasure cave. I knew of few creatures that could withstand its might. Though these weapons could be used but once, if it could save my friends, so be it.

She turned as I ran toward her. Her eyes were yellow and glowed with malice. Incisors three inches long were exposed by her hideous grimace. With a yell exploding out of me, I pushed the sword into her stomach. The blade shattered, almost drowning out the shriek of the harpy. She grabbed her abdomen, then looked at me with dumb confusion in her eyes. A moment later, she fell to the floor—dead.

I examined her body and discovered a key that fit the vault. Inside was the Ethereal Ring and little else. We hastily made our way out of Spektran. My friends were wounded and needed assistance. The quest had suddenly turned very deadly, and none of us wanted to stay any longer than necessary.



"Thou hast the Ethereal Ring? Good! I must enchant it! Quickly!" Penumbra took the ring from me and intoned a few magical words over it. After a moment, she handed it back to me.

"Now thou must go to the generator. Be sure thou art wearing the ring! It should now protect thee from the ethereal attacks. Be aware that it is functional only near the Tetrahedron. And tell thy companions to wait out of range. Thou must enter the generator alone! By the way, how didst thou happen to know to come to me about this problem?"

"Nicodemus and the Time Lord," I replied. Then I briefly told her the story about how I needed to get the hourglass enchanted.

"I see. Well, thou best be on thy way, so that thou canst indeed get thine hourglass enchanted!"



Once again, I won't bore you with my account of our trip into the Dungeon Deceit. I did find a Cyclops there who was trying to find refuge for his people. It seemed that they were in great danger of becoming extinct. There were two women in the dungeon who were interested in hurrying that event along. Deceit was a particularly treacherous place, with dragons, harpies, and acid slugs, not to

mention the headless that dwelt there. Should any of your readers venture there, they must be well armed.

We finally reached the entrance to the room containing the Tetrahedron. Though they were loath to do so, my companions agreed to wait for me in the outer hallway. The cavernous room was dark as I stepped out of the glow of the fire sword Senti held. I cast *In Lor* and the cavern leapt into view. Bursting from the floor was a massive pyramid-shaped object. It was black as night, black as a bitter heart. Even darker was the portal leading into its center. I didn't know what to expect, so I grabbed one of the glass swords from my pack and held it in my sweaty palm. I figured if I was going to die, whatever was in there was going with me.

I stepped into the blackness. All around me was a void. It reminded me of the place where the Shrine of Spirituality resided, but I didn't have time to ponder this. From out of nowhere came the monster. I'd never seen anything like it. To this day my words can't adequately describe it. I'm ashamed to admit that I gave a small yelp of surprise. Then my instincts took over. I swung the sword over my head and brought it down on the creature's skull.

The sword splintered. The monster let out a cry so harsh it hurt my ears. Then, in the next instant, it was gone. Rushing to the stand where the small Tetrahedron sat, I tried without success to remove it from its pedestal. At that moment, everything began to shake. A sound like thunder, only a thousand times louder, vibrated through me. I ran toward the portal I'd come from, hoping there might be a way back into the Tetrahedron. An explosion lifted me up and hurled me through the air. When I landed, the breath was knocked out of

me. I lay gasping for air for a few minutes, trying to clear my head and hoping I had only a few broken bones.

At last I managed to sit up. The shattered remains of the great black pyramid lay around me. In its place was a charred crater. I wondered what I would do now. What had happened to the small Tetrahedron? As I struggled to my feet (no broken bones, I was happy to note), I saw the small Tetrahedron on the floor. Snatching it up, I slipped it into my backpack, then brushed off my clothes and went to join my companions.



We returned to Yew, using the stones. Nicodemus was happy to enchant the hourglass for us. It was good to see him back to his old self. I hoped Nicodemus' transformation had been performed for the other mages in Britannia as well.

Again I pulled the stones from my pocket and cast the spell that would take us back to the Sphere in Dungeon Despise. We found ourselves standing outside the Sphere, just past the red Moongate.

"Well," I said, "here I go."

"Wait," said Iolo. "Let me go with you."

"Me too!" chimed in Spark. The others nodded their agreement.

"No," I said. "I must enter the generator alone." They agreed to wait outside the generator for me.

Taking the hourglass in one hand and a glass sword in the other, I strode through the red Moongate. Unlike the other times I'd entered this gate, this time I passed through to the other side. There was a black portal leading into the Sphere, and I quickly walked into it.

Again I was floating in the Void. I stood

on a platform with two Moongates: one red, one blue. Spread out in a circle were a series of identical platforms, each with a red and a blue Moongate. The small Sphere was in the center of the circle. How was I to reach it? I tried to remember what I'd been told, but nothing jogged my memory. The clue must lie in the gates themselves. I had to pass through a gate to reach the Sphere. Perhaps it was the sequence of gates. Maybe I needed to pass through more than one red gate. I tried that; it didn't work. Worse, I sent myself outside the Sphere.

Then I tried a series of blue gates, also without any luck. Then I attempted a sequence of red, blue, blue, red. This deposited me next to the small Sphere, which I tried to take. As I reached forward, I felt a tremor, then a loud cracking sound. The next moment, I found myself outside of the ruined shell of the Sphere. On the ground in front of me was the small black Sphere.

"Congratulations, Avatar, on destroying the Sphere." It was the Time Lord. His faint image floated before me. "I am free from my celestial prison," he said. "I thank thee. But I regret to inform thee that the Guardian engineered the Sphere such that its destruction has permanently disabled the Moongates, and thine Orb of the Moons as well. Thou canst not return to thine home by way of a red Moongate."

"What!"

"Thine only hope of leaving Britannia at the conclusion of thy quest is to use the Guardian's own vehicle for entering the land—the Black Gate. The Guardian's followers are building the Black Gate of blackrock, and will be using magic and natural elements to activate it. The Guardian plans to enter Britannia during the upcoming Astronomical

Alignment, which is imminent. That is the only time when the elements will work well enough for the Black Gate to be permeable and active. Thou wilt need a device which has the ability to vanquish blackrock. If thou hast not already encountered such a device, thou canst find something to help thee in the workshop of Rudyom the Mage, in Cove."

"I couldn't get home? What next? The only thing that kept me from despair was the hope that I could defeat the Guardian's gate with Rudyom's wand. I knew it could cause blackrock to explode."

"Before thou canst locate the Black Gate," said the Time Lord, "there is one more generator which must be destroyed. It is the device used to transmit the Guardian's voice to his followers and charm them into obeying his wishes. Look in the area near Serpent's Hold for a dungeon containing this generator. It is most likely shaped like a cube. It could very well be on The Fellowship's island east of Serpent's Hold. When thou hast completed this task, concentrate thine efforts in Buccaneer's Den. Thou mayest find clues there as to the location of the Black Gate. Shouldst thou wish to speak with me again, simply use the hourglass. Goodbye."

With that, his image dissolved and disappeared.

"I don't believe it," I said. "I can't go home."

"Maybe the Time Lord is right, you could use the Guardian's Black Gate to take you home," said Iolo.

"And what if we can't stop him—what then?"

"Then it shall not matter, for all Britannia will be destroyed," said Shamino.

With that sobering thought, we set out to find the Fellowship island.



Chapter Thirteen

high wall surrounded The Fellowship's Meditation Retreat. We'd returned to Moonglow to retrieve the magic carpet after destroying the Tetrahedron generator. The Time Lord had been right about the location of the island where The Fellowship had their retreat. I hoped he was also right about the third generator.

We landed next to the stone wall, then made our way to the building in the center of the island. A kindly-looking man with curly brown hair greeted us as we walked toward the door.

"Welcome," he said. "I am Ian, director of this Meditation Retreat for Fellowship members."

"Hello," I replied. "I've heard much about the Retreat." I hoped he'd go for the bluff.

"The activities of the Retreat consist of philosophical training and studies. The members must all grow to hear and understand the Voice that guides them down the path of Inner Strength. The exercises in meditation accelerate this process."

"A Voice?"

"It is that Voice which one hears inside. We all have the capability of hearing it. Some are able to hear it quite easily, and do not have to attend sessions here at the Meditation Retreat. Others, however, find it more difficult to hear the Voice. Then they require study at the Retreat. The Fellowship also holds the Retreat so that new members can attend and learn more about our group, get in touch with themselves, and help them to become better brothers in The Fellowship. Most of the work is done inside the barrier."

"The barrier?"

"It was set up to keep out those who are not members. Inside the barrier, Fellowship members find it much easier to hear their inner voice. Each member is given a key, which they may use at any time."

"Yes, a key. I know I have it somewhere. I guess I just misplaced it."

"Art thou a Fellowship member?"

"Yes," I said.

"I do not believe thee." He turned abruptly and walked away.

"Thou art losing thy touch," said Iolo.

"Hey, you can't win them all."



We found a cave leading to the generator north of the Fellowship building. Inside was my old friend Gorn. He told me that a Voice had been calling to him and had led him to the cave. Unfortunately, the Voice had also told him he couldn't trust me, and he abruptly cut off our conversation.

Farther into the cavern, we met a tough female warrior. She demanded to know what we were doing, and proceeded to engage us in combat. Considering our number, it was a foolhardy act. Still, I admired her courage and was saddened by her defeat.

"Avatar, you are not welcome here."

It was the Guardian's voice again. We'd just stepped into the main cavern. Before us was the third generator, an enormous Cube that had broken through the dirt floor. At that moment, an unbearable noise began. I was overcome by incredible pain. I clamped my hands over my ears, but the noise continued. Looking about, I saw that the others were also grabbing their heads. I shouted, but couldn't hear myself. With my last burst of determination before the pain could overcome

me, I staggered out of the cave.

The pain gradually lessened as we got farther from the generator. I took my hands away from my ears and discovered they were covered with blood.

"Is everyone all right?" I asked. My companions nodded, but they all looked pale and wobbly on their feet. "I'm going to contact the Time Lord and see if he can help us overcome this barrier to the Cube."

Pulling the hourglass from my backpack, I concentrated on contacting the Time Lord. At last he appeared before me and I related our problem.

"This outer defense can be conquered by using special helmets which cover your ears," he said. "The helmets must be made from a rare mineral called Caddellite. It is present in meteors. Seek out Brion, at the Observatory near the Lycaenum. He can give thee more advice on finding this mineral. The inner defense will most likely involve the Guardian himself. Do not listen to what he might tell thee."

"Don't worry," I said. "I know he's dangerous."



Topiary bushes lined the path leading to the Observatory. The Observatory hadn't been here the last time I'd visited Britannia. A short man with wire-rimmed spectacles greeted us as we entered.

"Salutations," he said.

"Hello," I replied. "I'm looking for Brion."

"I am Brion," he said.

"I was told you know where to find Caddellite."

He looked at me strangely, shrugged, and said, "Why, Caddellite is a mineral that is not

native to Britannia. In fact, it only comes from meteorites. And the last known meteor to strike the planet landed somewhere in the North East sea. Why dost thou want to know?"

"I need to make a helmet out of Caddellite."

"Thou dost want a helmet made of Caddellite?" He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Perhaps Zorn in Minoc would have the skills to build a helmet such as thou desirest. If thou findest the Caddellite, take it to him. I have heard rumors of an island that once existed in the North East sea. Perhaps my brother at the Lycaenum could help with that."

"Thank you for your help," I said. "We'll be on our way."

"Before thou dost leave, let me show thee a few of my trinkets."

We couldn't leave until Brion finished showing us his "toys." I was most interested in the orrery viewer made out of crystals. He was missing one crystal to complete it, but said if I found a crystal he would fix it. I knew that the Guardian would be coming through during the alignment of the planets. With the orrery viewer, I could keep track of how close this event was. We thanked Brion for his help and slipped away before he tried to show us more of his trinkets.

Nelson, Brion's brother (his twin brother, I might add), was working on some old manuscripts at the Lycaenum. We explained that Brion had sent us to him to ask about the location of the Caddellite. He sent us to talk to Jillian, who knew more about the lost island than he did.

She was poring over dusty tomes when we found her, and looked none too pleased that we had interrupted her.

"Greetings," she said briskly. "As usual, I have much to do. However, I can spare a

moment for thee if necessary."

"I'll not take much of your time," I replied. "We are looking for the location of an island in the northeast with Caddellite on it. Do you know of such a place?"

"Long ago there was a small continent — an island, really — called Ambrosia. However, meteorites struck it, destroying its primary city. The island was located in the North East sea. I suppose the ruins still lie far beneath the rubble."

"That sounds like the place we're looking for. Do you know anything else about it?"

She shook her head.

"Thanks for the help," I said. We filed out of the Lycaenum, a bit more discouraged than before. We had little more information to find Ambrosia besides the general direction in which it was located. I was feeling pretty out of sorts when Dupré suggested we take a break and go to the local tavern.

"Don't you ever think about anything other than drinking?" I asked a bit peevishly.

"Nay," he said. "Thou must not forget the women."

Jaana snorted, "Thou art incorrigible."

Dupré went down on one knee and grabbed her hand. "'Tis only because thou hath forsaken me, my lady."

Jaana snatched her hand away and smacked him playfully on the chest. "Thou art a villain, Dupré. Teasing a poor girl like this."

Dupré clapped his hand over his heart and put on a pained expression. "Thou hath wounded me. I must go drown my sorrows at the nearest pub."

"Thou wouldst use any excuse to drown in ale," said Shamino.

"'Tis true," Dupré agreed. "But there are few more pleasurable ways to die. Besides, the Avatar is buying."

“Hey! Wait a minute,” I said. But the others had already started off in the direction of the pub. I stood there trying to look indignant, but it wasn’t working. The idea of taking a break and resting a bit appealed to me too. So I put on my I’m-only-doing-this-because-you’ve-given-me-no-other-choice look and went off to join them.



Dupré’s idea was just what we all needed. We ate and drank and talked until the wee hours of the morning. I even managed to get the crystal that Brion needed to complete the orrery viewer from a fellow who was passing through town. His name was Addom and he sold many unique and rare items. Before we started out to find Ambrosia the next morning, I took the crystal to Brion and had him finish the orrery viewer. He gave it to me so I could keep track of the planetary alignment. When I looked into the viewer, I felt a rush of fear. The planets were beginning to move into position—we had little time to complete our quest.



“Jillian did say northeast,” I said as I scanned the water below us.

“Aye,” sighed Spark. “Thou hath asked me that ten times in the last hour.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m just getting impatient.” I looked at the orrery again. The planets had shifted slightly more, adding to my anxiety.

“Look! What’s that?” asked Shamino. He was pointing to a small speck just north of us. It slowly grew larger, finally turning into a small range of mountains.

“Does this look familiar to anyone?” I asked. The others said they’d never seen this place before. We flew over the mountain range, and below us a lush meadow appeared. I set the magic carpet down. As we stepped off the magic carpet, I noticed that strange white flurries were floating down around us. At first I thought it was snow, but it wasn’t cold and didn’t melt—just dissipated as it hit the ground.

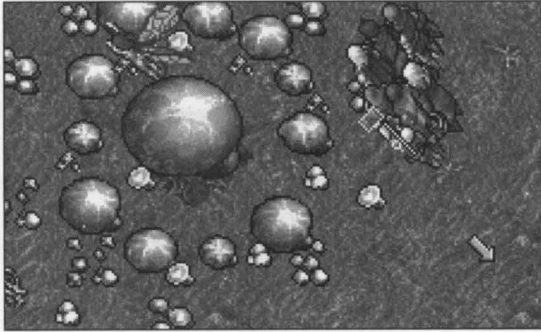
The island was circular in shape with a small inland lake—more like a pond. In the center of the pond was a large rock with a white marble building on it. All the ruined architecture we saw reminded me of ancient Greece. We investigated the small island and discovered the entrance to a cave. We agreed to camp that night and make our way into the cavern in the morning.

While working our way to the southern end of the island, we encountered a band of pirates. I had no idea how long they’d been there, but they were well armed and provisioned. Though we defeated them in a minor skirmish, I was never able to shake the feeling that we were in constant danger.

We used the pirates’ camp for our own that night. They’d left a considerable amount of food, and we feasted royally. We slept uneasily under the Britannian moons, knowing that time was now our enemy.



The sun was just appearing, and streaked the sky a hazy yellow-gold, as we made our way across the dew-wet field to the cave. Beside the entrance was a patch of oversized mushrooms. Flitting between the mushrooms was a fairy—or what I thought a fairy ought to look like. She was about three-and-a-half feet tall and was



wearing a pale blue gossamer gown. Oh, yes, she had wings. They resembled dragonfly wings, but they were definitely wings. She fluttered around me, sprinkling some kind of sparkling dust on my head as she giggled, “I love thee! Yes, I do! I love thee!”

“Hey,” I said, shaking the dust from my hair.

“Yes, my love?”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Kissme! Kissme!” She giggled.

“Don’t do it!” exclaimed Iolo. “Who knows what evil this strange creature might possess!” He inspected the sprite more closely. “Mayhap I should try it first to be sure it is safe ...”

“Hey, I’ll kiss her! She doesn’t scare me!” put in Spark. He leaned forward eagerly.

“She *doth* look rather inviting, doth she not?” added Shamino.

“My liege has asked thee thy *name*, foul creature!” said Dupré to the fairy. I gave him a look of relief. I’d begun to think all my friends had lost their minds.

“But that *is* my name! Kissme! Kissme! It is true!”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“My purpose is to spread love dust all around and welcome thee to Ambrosia! I love thee! Yes, I do!” She fluttered over Shamino’s head. “I love *thee* as well!”

“If only thou wert a little larger ...” he mused.

But by the time he got that out, she’d already flown to Spark. “Oooh, and I love thee, too!”

Spark blushed. “Aww, cut it out!”

Kissme then flew near Dupré. “Handsome man! Handsome man! I love thee! It’s true! It’s true!”

Dupré swatted at her. “Away with thee! Thou dost not love me! Thou dost not even *know* me!”

But by then Kissme was hovering over Iolo, planting a big kiss on his cheek. “Yes! I love thee! Yes, I do!”

Iolo made a sour face and wiped his cheek. “Avatar, that was the sloppiest, wettest, most ... *disgusting* kiss I have ever felt!”

“Are you saying we’re on Ambrosia?” I asked, trying to get the creature’s mind off kissing my companions.

“That is where thou art! It is true! Oh, yes! Ambrosia!”

“Ambrosia! Then it really does exist,” said Iolo.

“Ambrosia, the lost isle of Britannia! Thou art really here!” she announced. Then she giggled again. That giggling was driving me nuts. I once dated a girl who giggled like that—she never stopped, not even when we ... well, never mind. Anyway, I asked Kissme to tell me what had happened to Ambrosia.

“Ambrosia was hit by stones from the sky hundreds of years ago! Oh, yes indeed! The entire island was battered to bits! It is true!”

“What kind of stones?”

“I believe it is called Caddellite. Yes, I believe true! And I *do* love thee, it is so true! Most of it is collected in the pit where the hydra sits. Thou shalt have to ask the hydra about it. It is true!”

"The hydra?"

"The hydra is made up of three brothers—all dragons! It is true! Thou shalt be careful not to make them angry, for they have a temper! Oh, yes indeed, they do! They are very protective of their Caddellite, so speak to them about it first!" She looked over her shoulder, then flitted to me again. "Ambrosia was once very beautiful," she said. "Yes, it was! All of mine ancestors lived here then! Love dust was all around, and every day was like a jewel! Yes, it's true! Yes, thou wilt! Oh, I must kiss thee again!"

"No! Don't do it," said Iolo.

"Sheesh, here we go again!" said Spark.

"Hey, I think she's cute," said Shamino.

"If thou wouldst do it, do it quickly. We have not time to waste with such foolishness." Dupré looked distinctly disgusted with the whole affair.

"Oh, very well," I said impatiently.

Kissme placed the wettest, sloppiest, ooziest, and mushiest smack I'd ever felt on my mouth.

"Oh, yes! That was fun! I love thee! Yes, it's true!" said Kissme.

"Maybe for you," I said, wiping the back of my hand across my mouth.

"Gah. I think I'd rather take on the hydra."

"Kissme! Kissme!" giggled the fairy.



I got my wish. We found the hydra in the center of the dungeon. Of course there were some obstacles in our way, but nothing we couldn't dispatch quickly. I might add that this wouldn't have been the case if

we'd let the liche out of his prison. If ever you run into anyone trying to find Ambrosia, tell them not to release the liche.

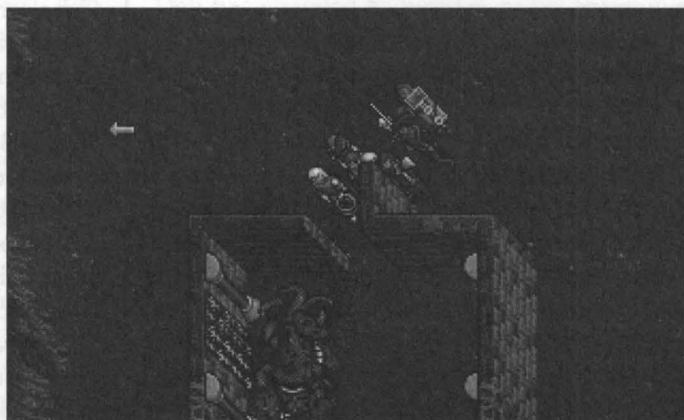
Where was I? Oh, yes, the hydra. A nasty brute, and foul-tempered. It's bad enough fighting one without having to talk to it. And with its three heads, each with a different personality, well, I was glad when we killed it. I used the *In Hur Grav Ylem* spell to dispatch it. This was the only spell I'd found that could kill a dragon outright. Of course, you had to know the seventh circle of magic to use this spell, but I wouldn't recommend facing a creature as powerful as this hydra with less experience.

A hallway led south from the hydra's lair to a small clearing. Caddellite chunks were scattered about, and a huge meteorite of Caddellite was imbedded in the ground. It sparkled and glowed blue and silver. I found it was surprisingly heavy and bulky. We had to redistribute the contents of our packs to take enough of the pieces with us to make helmets for everyone in the party. After loading up, we returned to the magic carpet.

"I'm hungry," said Spark.

"Aye," said Iolo. "I'm starving."

"Okay, okay," I said. "Let me cast a spell





and we'll eat." I pulled reagents and my spell book from my pack. *In Mani Ylem* was one of the first spells I'd bought. It was simple to cast and provided for the entire party. Except that this time the reagents went up in puff of black smoke. I tried the spell again, and still it wouldn't work.

"That should have worked," I said.

"Perhaps it's Ambrosia," said Spark.

"No, then I couldn't have killed the hydra with a spell."

"Perhaps 'tis this strange mist," suggested Iolo.

"I believe you're right," I said. "I didn't notice it when we were in the cave, but now it's back."

"What about food?" Senti asked.

"I can't cast a spell until we get away from this field. We have the Caddellite. It's best we head for Minoc anyway."



Zorn in Minoc fashioned the Caddellite helmets for us. We rested there briefly while he completed them, then made our way back to the Meditation Retreat. Donning the helmets, we filed into the cavern with the third generator.

"Avatar!" It was the Guardian's voice in my head. "You are not welcome here."

"Yeah, tell me something I don't know," I muttered under my breath. I left my companions at the threshold to the cave, bidding them to wait for me. I entered the black doorway into the Cube. Before me was a maze, with the smaller Cube at its center. I was standing on a floating platform, with no way to reach the maze. Stepping forward, I saw that a small bridge had appeared, which linked the platform with the maze.

Hidden triggers, I thought. I walked slowly to the west. As I neared the end, the bridge I'd created to the maze from the platform disappeared. The triggers not only created bridges, they also destroyed them. I'd have to tread carefully if I wished to retrieve the Cube. I soon discovered another of the maze's defenses: fireballs. At certain points along the path, these blazing projectiles would appear and inflict terrible damage on me. Halfway through the maze I had to stop and rest, gulping down a vial of healing potion I'd brought with me.

After many hours of trial and error, I managed to make my way to the center of the maze. I reached for the Cube and the maze began to shake. There was an explosion and everything went dark. When I could see again, I was standing outside the larger Cube and my friends were running toward me.

I snatched the Cube from the floor and stuffed it into my backpack. The hourglass began to vibrate and the Time Lord appeared before me.

"Avatar! The Astronomical Alignment is almost at hand! Time is running out! The Guardian must be prevented from coming through the Black Gate!" he exclaimed. "The Cube will help thee find the location of the Black Gate. With it in thy possession, those under the influence of the Guardian will be more receptive to speaking the truth to thee. Go to Buccaneer's Den. Search for the one called Hook. Talk to the so-called Fellowship. Thou shouldst have no trouble ascertaining his whereabouts there. I am sure that thou wilt eventually find the location of the Black Gate! Good luck!"

He vanished and I was left staring at thin air. I pulled the orrery viewer from my backpack and held it up to my eye. Four of

the planets were already in a row and the other few were nearing alignment. Sweat broke out on my brow. We had little time to find the Black Gate and stop the Guardian. If the Cube failed to help us find the location of the Black Gate, all was doomed.

"We must hurry," I said. "Time is running out. We leave for Buccaneer's Den immediately."



Chapter Fourteen

here to now?" asked Iolo.

We stood between the Baths, the Fellowship hall, and the House of Games. It was sort of like standing between the Devil and the deep blue sea. Time was running out fast—which made me decide on the Fellowship hall. Their hand had been visible in almost all of our discoveries about the Black Gate and the Guardian.

I led the way to the hall. Inside, it was cool and dimly lit. A jovial man approached and gave us a friendly greeting.

"I am Danag," he said. He made a sweeping bow. "I am interim Fellowship Branch leader here on Buccaneer's Den. Our regular leader, Abraham, is away on Fellowship business at the moment."

Abraham. I hadn't heard that name in a long time. He and Elizabeth had been in Trinsic when Spark's father was killed. Our journey had originally led us in search of them.

"I am looking for Abraham," I said, hoping he would tell us more.

"Abraham is one of the members of the inner circle of The Fellowship. He and his colleague Elizabeth travel the country periodically, usually distributing or collecting

the organization's funds and doing business at the other branches." The Cube vibrated. "Uhm ... er ... he is also a coordinator for executions and he cheats at cards."

I stared at Danag for a moment. This was the first time a Fellowship member had said anything negative about a superior. Maybe the Cube did make them tell the truth.

"Tell me about The Fellowship," I said.

"The Fellowship has been present on Buccaneer's Den for a long time. This is one of the oldest branches in Britannia, second only to the headquarters in Britain. Thou mayest wonder why an island of such ill repute would attract The Fellowship."

"Yes, I have."

"The founders of The Fellowship felt that the people who inhabit this island would benefit the most from our organization. Especially since we would help them build an empire of sin and gluttony out of Buccaneer's Den."

I noticed the Cube had begun vibrating while Danag was speaking.

"Amidst all of the sin, the debauchery, the piracy, the gambling, the drunkenness—The Fellowship has made its stand and recruited members to follow our principles. Buccaneer's Den has changed as a result. Long ago it was merely a hideout for pirates, scavengers, and rogues. Look around. Now it is the center of corruption in all of Britannia. The pirates are all controlled by The Fellowship."

The Cube continued to vibrate.

"And the businesses here—like the Baths?"

"It is, of course, a place where one may experience the pleasures of the flesh. All of the profits go to The Fellowship."

"The House of Games?"

"Why, it is a gambling parlor! The



Fellowship certainly takes in a bundle from that place!"

"And what about Elizabeth? I heard she traveled with Abraham."

"Elizabeth is an extremely intelligent woman who acts as Director of Special Projects. She usually works with Batlin in Britain, but she spends most of her time traveling from branch to branch." The Cube vibrated and Danag added, "She is, uhm ... also a royal she-bitch and will murder thee at a moment's notice."

"What are 'Special Projects?'"

"They might be anything from building a shelter for poor peasants to creating a new branch in a town without the benefit of a Fellowship hall." The Cube vibrated and Danag proudly added, "Our current Special Project is building the Black Gate for the Guardian. It is located at the Isle of the Avatar in our secret underground complex!"

I felt sick for a moment. Not only were they building the Black Gate, but they were desecrating the place where I'd once placed the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom. I didn't have time to dwell on this, because Danag said with excitement, "It is the gateway for our coming Lord and Master! He will be coming through in virtually a few hours!"

"Where is this complex?"

"It is inside a dungeon within the Shrine of the Codex. A barrier keeps out unwanted visitors. A special key opens the barrier, and only a few select people have one."

"Who has these keys?"

"I do not own one. The only people that do are Elizabeth and Abraham, Batlin, and Hook himself. Hook probably keeps his key in his abode."

"Where is Hook and where does he live?"

The Cube vibrated.

"Hook? He lives here on the island. In fact, his quarters are in the secret catacombs behind the House of Games. Thou canst reach it by asking Sintag the guard about Hook. Of course, thou dost know that Hook is The Fellowship's chief executioner ... along with his assistant, the Gargoyle Forskis."

"Executioner?"

"That's right. Hook does all the dirty work for The Fellowship. He was trained by Master De Snel in Jhelom. De Snel trained all the previous executioners as well. In fact, De Snel himself was The Fellowship's first executioner!"

"Where will I find Forskis?"

"I understand the Gargoyle's name means 'henchman' in Gargish. He's a tough wingless Gargoyle who helps Hook out. I believe he resides in the catacombs with Hook."

I turned away from Danag. He gave me a chipper farewell, as though everything were wonderful in the world.

"Avatar ... look." It was Spark. He'd wandered away from the party and was standing beside The Fellowship candelabra that was a fixture in every Fellowship hall.

"What is it?" I asked.

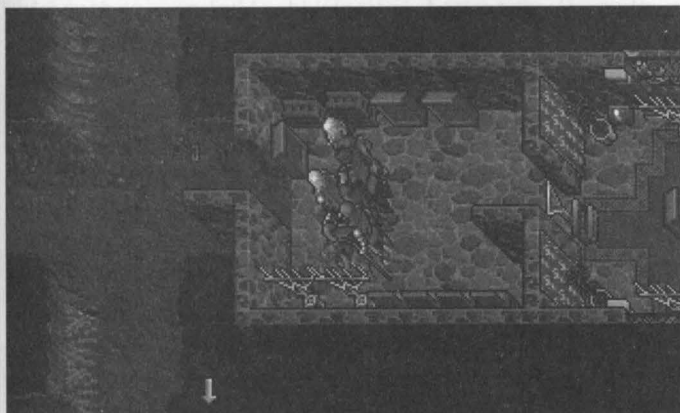
"A secret door," he replied. He pushed against one of the stones. The door swung open. Spark stepped inside, then motioned for us to follow him. I glanced at Danag, but he was completely oblivious to what was happening. The Fellowship hadn't picked him for his brains.

Spark and the others were poking around the room. It was used for storage and contained more candelabras, chairs, and several chests.

"Nothing of interest to thee," said Tseremed.

"Wait," said Iolo. "I think there is another door here."

The Black Gate



I surveyed the wall where he stood. Sure enough, the faint outline of a door was visible. "Do you see a way to open it?" I asked. Iolo shook his head.

"There must be some way," I said. "Every door has to be open. Why put it here otherwise?"

"Maybe it's operated from the other side," suggested Jaana.

"'Tis not much good to us," said Tseremed.

"Maybe I can do something," I said.

I pulled my spell book from my backpack and flipped through the pages to the *Ort Por*

Ylem spell. If all went well, I would cast the spell and the hidden switch would be thrown. Gathering the reagents together in my hand, I made the gestures and spoke the words. There was a faint click on the other side of the wall and the door swung open on silent hinges.

"What next?" asked Spark.

"We're going to find Hook and get his key, then stop them from completing the Black Gate," I replied, with more conviction than I felt. How were we going to stop them with only hours left?



We found Hook's house by following the cave to the south. I cautiously opened the door, but luck was with us and Hook was nowhere in sight. We spread out and began rummaging through Hook's belongings, trying to find the Black Gate's key. I opened his chest and found two scrolls there.

Curiosity got the better of me and I picked one up and unrolled it. My blood ran cold as I read it:

Finster	Britain	X
Duncan	Buccaneer's Den	X
Christopher	Trinsic	X
Frederico	Minoc	X
Tania	Minoc	X
Alagner	New Magincia	X
Lord British	Britain	
The Avatar		

It was a list of everyone The Fellowship had killed or were planning to kill. On the other scroll I found notes about sailing the *Crown Jewel* to the Isle of the Avatar on the next day. If we found the key, we just might be able to beat them there. And I had another task: to tell Spark that we now knew for certain who had murdered his father. But first I had to find the key. I spied Hook's backpack on the floor in the corner; inside was a large, ornate gold key.

"I've found it," I said. "We must hurry—there is little time to lose."



Chapter Fifteen

It began raining as we reached the Isle of the Avatar.

The last time I'd been here, I'd helped unite the Britannians and the Gargoyles. For all the good that had done. The prejudice that had blossomed during my last trip to Britannia had only grown more insidious. But I didn't have time to dwell on this depressing fact. If we didn't stop the Guardian, there wouldn't be anyone left to worry about such minor matters.

We were all soaked to the skin as the magic carpet landed. Taking the gold key from my backpack, I shoved it into the tall gates to my north. The key worked and the gate swung open. Before me was the Shrine of the Codex. Then I heard it. It was the Guardian's voice—laughing at me. That put my back up. I was cold, tired, and hungry. But I'd be damned if I was going to let the Guardian keep laughing at me. I vowed I'd make sure he never had a chance to laugh at me again.

To the west of the shrine was an opening in the mountains. I led the way there. The massive oak doors were locked, but once again, Hook's key opened them. We stepped into a large cavern. Before us loomed the largest chair I'd ever seen. It appeared to be carved from a single block of granite. A plaque on the ground in front of it read: "The Throne of the Guardian." Arranged around the throne were several of the Fellowship candelabras. I felt like smashing the throne and melting down the candelabras, but I pushed the thought from my mind. Getting distracted now could be fatal.

A pair of doors led from the room to our north; there were more doors to the south. We discovered a secret door behind the wall hangings. The switch that opened the northern doors was there. Just as we were about to take the northern corridor, I heard a noise to the south. Using a lockpick, I opened the southern doors. To my surprise, a young boy ran out of the shadows at me. I tried to talk to him, but he refused to answer and ran away.

We followed him, and found ourselves in a small compound. As we entered, the people there attacked us. Forced to defend ourselves, we fought them to a quick but bloody conclusion. There was nothing of great significance to discover here, so we returned to the large cavern and made our way into the northern corridor.

Memories of my passage through this dungeon are beginning to blur in my mind even as we speak. I brought you a map, Carlotta. It has notations on it. I remember ... a dragon; I believe I used *In Hur Grav Ylem* to kill it. Then there was the throne ... Should you find yourself there, be careful, for it may look as though it has not changed, but don't be deceived. We had to kill another liche. I



The Black Gate

vow that nothing is more persistent and harder to destroy than a liche.

Then we finally made it to the Black Gate.

The Guardian was preparing to enter Britannia, and who should be there to greet him but the fiends who helped set this plot in motion: Batlin, Abraham, Elizabeth, and Hook. The Guardian commanded them to kill us as he came through the gate. We fought like wild things, and for a while it looked as though my friends would not survive, but somehow we managed to overcome them. I believe Spark dealt the death blow to Hook, his father's murderer. Batlin, however, disappeared at some time during this battle.

A deep roar filled the room and the Black Gate appeared to pulse. I thought I saw the

vague outline of a body, and that was enough to compel me forward. Reaching into my backpack, I pulled out the Cube, the Tetrahedron, and the Sphere. Positioned around the gate were three stands, each bearing the imprint of one of the shapes. Quickly I set them in place. Then I took out Rudyom's wand, which I'd been carrying for so long. The only way to stop the Guardian was to destroy the Black Gate. The wand caused blackrock to explode—and blackrock was what the Gate was made of.

I held my breath and used the wand. The gate exploded, hurling me backward. An inhuman wailing cry rose and reverberated through me. I had defeated the Guardian. For now.



Forge of Virtue



another drink?"

The Avatar was beginning to show the same signs of fatigue he had displayed upon entering my room, and, selfish as it may seem, I was hoping to keep his loosened tongue in motion. I moved the decanter toward him. He smiled slightly as his eyes met mine.

"Relax, my friend. I am far from finished. There is no need to ply me with drink." Despite his words, he held his cup beneath the lip of the decanter. I hated it when he guessed my thoughts like that.

Of course, his knowledge of that made him appear even more smug when he was right.

"That's not the only reason I offered!"

"I know, I know," he said, shaking his head in dismissal as he sank forward in his seat. "Please forgive me. My weariness conceals my levity."

"Would you prefer we continue this later?" I wanted more, but not at the expense of our friendship.

He shook his head. "I am fine. Besides, I am enjoying sharing in our common home. Now"—he straightened, drawing in a breath—"about what would you like to hear next?"

"The earthquakes."

The Avatar's eyebrows knit in confusion.

"You know," I explained, "when you were contending with The Fellowship. No one I have talked to knows what caused them. The tremors simply began, and then ended. No explanation, no nothing. It seems reasonable to assume you know what happened."

"You do have good sources, don't you?" The flicker returned to his eyes. "Very well. Where should I begin?"



Obviously I didn't notice the rumblings of the quakes until after I'd returned to Britannia. The first one occurred shortly after I arrived through the Moongate. At first I assumed they were related to the reason I'd been called back, but Iolo believed otherwise. It was he who recommended that we consult Lord British.

We found him seated on his throne. We'd already taken some time to relax and investigate the changes in his castle. His mood seemed even more pensive than when we had last spoken with him, in the eastern wing.

"Yes, Avatar?" he asked, drawn from his thoughts.

"I assume you are aware of the recent rumblings throughout the land. They seem to

be increasing in frequency. Are the tremors anything of import, or am I worrying too much about inconsequential matters?"

Lord British looked at me gravely. Finally, he spoke. "The foundation of Britannia was shaken with the rising of an island. This event was no random disaster; it was one of sorcerous intent."

"An island?"

"Yes. I felt a great disturbance in the ether when this island arose from the sea. The island is none other than the Isle of Fire, where thou defeated the Hellspawn, Exodus."

"The Isle of Fire? You are talking about the very home of Exodus itself. Why ... how would it rise? When did it sink?" Looking back, I thought it was strange that I'd never noticed before now that the island was gone.

"Avatar, thou shouldst know that when I created the Shrines of the Virtues, I also set upon this island three great Shrines, dedicated to the Principles of Truth, Love, and Courage. They reside within the walls of the Castle of Fire. I never revealed this to thee before, as I thought them forever lost when the Isle of Fire mysteriously sank beneath the waves. The Shrines are meant for the use of an Avatar only, and therefore a Talisman will be necessary to use one. The Talismans are guarded by tests that thou shouldst have no problem passing if thou wishest to seek their counsel.

"If thou wishest to seek out this isle, thou mayst use my ship. It now sits upon the southern shore of Vesper and is called the *Golden Ankh*. Please feel free to use it for as long as thou hast need of it." As he spoke, he reached into a large pile of papers on a small table beside him. Judging by the disarray, he was preoccupied with his concerns for the land. He pulled one of the sheets out, checked

it, and handed it to me. It was the deed to the *Golden Ankh*.

Iolo stepped forward and whispered in my ear, "Why wouldst thou wish to go there?" I waved him back.

"Thank you for the use of your ship, milord."

"I have also focused a magical crystal to the entrance of the Castle of Fire, which I refurbished after thy battle with Exodus," he added, ignoring my comment. "Here, take it. Perhaps it will give thee some insight. Although, be warned: It is not at all stable and might be prone to shatter the nearer thou findest thyself to the location to which it is tuned."

I inspected the crystal back in my room. By peering into the gem, I could see a vision: the entryway to a fire-ravaged stone keep. I wasn't sure whether this represented the present or the future. I considered Iolo's question. Why *would* I want to visit this island, which had once housed the embodiment of evil, Exodus? Thinking of the mystery surrounding my recent summoning, it occurred to me that the benefit from meditating at these shrines might be more than a trifle. I decided to head for Vesper. To my surprise, I had Iolo's and Spark's support.

In Vesper we found the ship. She was a beauty, sailing swiftly through the choppy waters with a minimal crew consisting of the three of us. It didn't take us long to get to the island. The pit of my stomach reminded me that even though Britannia had not seen this island for more than three centuries, only a few years had passed since I'd fought for my life on these very shores. I glanced again at the crystal supplied by Lord British, but before I could see anything, it shattered into tiny, unrecoverable pieces.

I didn't recognize the castle we first saw when we landed, because it had been constructed by Lord British's masons and engineers ages ago, presumably to house the Shrines of the Principles. Many of the walls had been breached—though I could not guess when—and all had multiple scorch-markings. As we entered the main hallway, I was amazed to see how well the interior had been maintained. It was nothing like new, of course, but it presented a definite contrast to the outside.

On either side were two life-size statues of horrific beasts. Moving to explore them, we were startled by some movement in a nearby room. I raised a hand to caution the others and approached slowly. Through the doorway stepped an elderly man.

"Well met, Avatar," he said. "I am called Erethian. Although thou dost not know me, I know thee well. I have seen thee destroy Mondain's power and so defeat that misguided mage. I have seen thee vanquish the enchantress Minax. I have also seen, in a very unique way, how thou brought low the Hellspawn, Exodus." As he spoke, I noticed that his eyes were milky white.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. I was too astonished by his presence to think of a wittier response to the description of my ancient opponents.

"I am a follower of the Principle of Truth. But unlike those of the Lycaenum, I would prefer to seek out the knowledge instead of waiting for it to come to me. It is this curiosity which has brought me to this island from which Exodus, the spawn of Mondain and Minax, sought to rule the world. The books and scrolls here have taught me much of Britannia's history and other ... interesting subjects."

"Curiosity about Exodus? What do you know about it?"

"That being has become a passion of mine lately." He almost glowed with excitement. "Indeed, 'tis what brought me here. While I was at the Lycaenum, I happened upon a passage in a manuscript that described an Island of Fire. Upon further research, I found that the entity known as Exodus was not truly destroyed. The interface between its two parts and the world was merely severed."

"What do you mean, Exodus was not destroyed?" Again my stomach tightened. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear his answer.

"One part—his Psyche, we shall call it—was taken by the Gargoyles who live below us in a realm on the other side of the world. A truly fascinating culture they have, but I digress." Gargoyles living in a realm below us? I began to wonder just how long this old man had been out of circulation.

"The other," he continued, "I have here. I call it the Dark Core, because without the Psyche, it is mostly lifeless." His face took on a more gleeful appearance. I felt as if I were listening to a child describing his new toy. "I believe 'twas the removal of the Psyche from the Core that caused this island to sink beneath the waves."

"What did you mean when you said the interface was merely severed?"

His expression became unreadable. "The machine that thou destroyed was Exodus' means of communication with and control of the world. When it was destroyed, his Psyche could no longer retain its hold on the Dark Core. I have often wondered if another interface was implemented, would the Psyche return, or possibly be regenerated?" Suddenly, as if realizing where his idle musings were headed, he stopped talking.

"You said the Dark Core, as you call it, is here."

"I have found it," he said, gesturing toward the room in the eastern part of the castle, "to be quite a treasure trove of useful facts. Its sole purpose seems to be the storage of information. Much of the information is trivial—such as the detailed description of the color of the sky on a particular day eons ago—while other bits give instructions for the manipulation of the world. Within it I even found the knowledge to raise and sustain this island we stand upon. It is truly a remarkable artifact." He looked nervously in my direction. "Please, do be careful around it. Artifacts seem to have a tendency to, shall we say, disappear around thee."

Iolo cleared his throat, obviously displeased with the comment. With little provocation, Erethian went on and on about my three nemeses. Though he seemed to recognize the threats they presented to his homeland, he was fascinated by the power they attained through the exploitation of their minds. Finally I gathered the courage to ask about his eyesight.

"Does not your blindness hamper your studies?"

"Hast thou nothing better to do than bother an old man?" With this retort, he turned away, blatantly conveying his desire to end the conversation. Apparently his lack of vision was a sore topic for him.

We left him alone and set out to explore the ruined structure. As we headed toward the room that, according to Erethian, held the Dark Core, we passed another chamber. I stopped the others, then indicated that they should follow me inside. I didn't really notice the trappings of the room, because my eyes immediately settled on the three statues

standing before each of the other walls. The one to my left represented a beautiful woman; the one to the right, an armoured warrior, his sword drawn and held proudly above his head. However, the most impressive one was the image of an elderly man. The detail was exquisite! I could clearly make out the wisdom in the lines of age creasing his brow. I reached out to caress the cloth of his robe. As I touched the statue, my mind was suddenly filled with the crystal-clear resonance of an authoritative voice.

"Greetings to thee," I heard in my head. "I am the keeper of Truth. Dost thou seek the wisdom and boon of Truth?"

"Uh," I shrugged. "I suppose so. I mean, yes, of course."

"Very well. Prepare thyself." The voice fell silent. Iolo and Spark were giving me looks of confusion. Then blackness filled our eyes.

We found ourselves in a small room, with a door to the south. At least I believe it was south. My sense of direction is pretty good, even indoors. On the west wall were two plaques, written in runic. The first said, "Truth is Truth;" the second, "Only Appearances are Deceptive." Simple enough, I thought.

"What now?" asked Iolo.

"I guess we go through the door."

"Why do you think we have been sent here?"

"I believe, my old friend, that we have begun the first Test of the Shrines. If I am correct, we are here to find the Talisman of Truth." I opened the door and started walking.

I will forego the many details of the journey, though I saw many things designed to illustrate concepts of truth and deception: illusory walls, false Talismans, and island traps

that required us to ignore the evidence of our eyes. One large area was actually filled with invisible walls, creating a frustrating maze. Only by following the exploding balls of fire—dangerous as they were—was I able to make my way through the room. I found the bodies of others who had been less fortunate. In fact, the dungeon was littered with the corpses of those who, perhaps as long as three hundred years ago, had once set out to fill my shoes. Finally, when we'd gone as far as we could, we found the Talisman. We'd given up and were returning to the entrance when we came across a plaque that had made no sense to us earlier. "North is the Way," we read.

"We have gone as bloody far north as we can," muttered Iolo angrily.

I considered that. I tried to think of other clues, ones that might mean more if added to this one.

"What has been the motif for this test?" I asked the others.

"Truth?" said Spark.

I smiled. "Think a little less obvious, Spark. What was on the plaque in the first room?"

"Something about deceptive appearances."

"Exactly. We need to look start looking for things that are not here."

"Huh?" Iolo's voice echoed Spark's.

"We have seen many walls that were present only in our minds. Perhaps there is another one, one leading to the north!"

As I had suspected, we found such a passageway only ten yards to the east of the very second room. Within it was another room. When I reached for the Talisman *this* time, it did not disappear. *We* did.

I found myself standing before the statue of the elderly man once again. The voice re-

entered my mind. "Thou hast mastered the Test of Truth, and so a boon of great intellect and magical ability will be bestowed upon thee. Use—and respect—thy powers well, Avatar."

I bowed, showing great deference to the Shrine of Truth. For a few moments, I felt a tingle. Well, more of a shock, really. What was most fascinating was that, as odd as this sounds, I *could* feel my knowledge expanding. Concepts I had once had difficulty grasping became clear, and I found myself formulating ideas about subjects in which I had once had no interest. Breaking in on my thoughts, the Voice spoke again.

"Thou hast now experienced the full meaning of the Principle of Truth. The value of such is beyond measure, for Truth shall guide thee throughout thy life's endeavors." The statue's voice took on a tone of warning. "Know this Truth: the Psyche returns to the Core."

At the time, I had *no* idea what that was supposed to mean. However, my queasy feeling had returned ...



I turned next to the statue of the woman. Despite her stone features, I found her quite attractive. However, there was more than that. As odd as this sounds, I could sense that her beauty ran far deeper than simple good looks. What was that term again? *Agape* love?

"Hello," I said to the lovely statue.

An unearthly, beautiful voice sighed gently in my consciousness. "Greetings, Avatar. I represent the embodiment of Love. If thou dost seek enlightenment, thou must take the Test of Love. Its path lies through the glowing blue portal to the south."

"Please, how do we find the portal?"

No response.

"Hey," said Spark, "didst thou not hear him? He wants to know how to find the portal."

No response.

"Perhaps," said Iolo, taking the sling from Spark's raised hand, "this is not the way to the Test of Love."

I nodded. We left the chamber to speak with the elderly mage, hoping he could tell us how we might attempt the Test of Love. I knocked on his door but he didn't answer. Peering into the room, I saw nothing but an array of tomes and parchments. What else did I expect to find in the bedroom of a scholar?



We entered and began inspecting the literature. One book that caught my eye was entitled, *The Dark Core of Exodus*. It had been written by Erethian, and expanded on his previous explanation of the malevolent being's Psyche and Dark Core. I decided to take it, along with a scroll written in an unusual language about something called the Talisman of Infinity.

"Child!" Iolo called out. "Stop rummaging through the man's personal belongings!"

I dropped one of the books I was reading and looked up, embarrassed. However, Iolo's eyes were not on me, but on Spark. The boy was standing in the northeast corner, wearing a half-smile much like the silly grin on my own face. He gently set down a silver tankard on a barrel and began to move away. There was a sharp noise, like that of a mousetrap snapping shut, and a section of the wall slid back to reveal another chamber. An expression of shock appeared on everyone's face.

"How is that for assistance? Erethian shows us the way without even being present," I joked.

"Might I point out that he will be none too pleased with our disturbance? I believe we should depart quickly." That's Iolo—always a fountain of wisdom.

The room was completely empty, except for the lone blue Moongate blocking the northern wall. Iolo held out his hand, politely indicating that I should lead. We stepped through and found ourselves standing in a small enclosure. All around us were mountains. I noticed a cabin to our southwest; at the same time, Spark pointed to a statue standing in a quarry to the southeast. We chose to inspect the statue.

As we approached the figure, I noticed that there were, in fact, two figures. One,

however, was lying on the ground. Upon closer inspection I realized that it lay in pieces, broken. The standing statue had been placed beside its shattered counterpart, its head lowered in carved reverence. Despite its granite features, a downcast look was apparent on its face. Then, surprisingly, it turned and spoke.

"Why, by the stars," exclaimed Iolo, "I believe it is a creature!"

Slowly, as if with great effort, it raised its head. "Help him?" it asked carefully, pointing to the fallen statue lying near it.

"What sort of creature are you?"

"We are called stone golems ... because we are made out of stone and rock." The response was slow and deliberate.

"Made? What dost thou mean by this?" Iolo appeared truly puzzled.

"I know nothing about the process, but Astelleron once told me he used something called ... magic to give us life and ... animation." The golem paused, obviously conscious of his next thought. "He did not like his ... solitude. He said he was ... lonely."

"Astelleron? Who is he?"

"Astelleron made us. He is our master. "We were ... fashioned ... out of the rock from the quarry on this small island." Island? So that was where we were. No wonder I didn't recognize any of the surrounding mountains.

I continued my questioning. "Tell us more about Astelleron's magic."

"I do not know what ... it is, but there are many books in his house. I do not ... know what they are about. Adjhar read them. Perhaps ... there is something there about ... magic."

"You said your master felt lonely."

"Astelleron said it was how ... a person

feels when no one is around. He told us how ... happy he felt after we were ... born. He called me ... a son."

"Was that why he made you?"

"We were ... created to protect the Shrines of the Principles. Only the ... Avatar should use their power. Adjhar and I were ... keeping watch ... when the wall fell on Adjhar. And the loud noise came ... I carried him here so that I could restore him, but I do not ... know how." Slowly the creature raised its head, taking its blue eyes away from the other golem.

"How can we help you?"

"My companion ... Adjhar ... He is dying. Thou must help repair him. Please, I beg ... thee. I have a book here that Adjhar said told about ... our ... creation." It bent down and picked up a weathered tome. I took it gingerly. It was evident that the book had seen much use, for the leather covering was wearing away to reveal the wood beneath and the pages were quite dog-eared. "I already set up five ... rocks to mark a spot for the ... blood," said the golem.

"Blood!" said Iolo.

"I did not ... understand the book, but I remember ... blood ..."

"We will help." I placed a hand upon its rock shoulder. Though its features never actually changed, I swear to this day that I could see its sense of relief.

The hard part now was locating this Astelleron, or at least finding some way to learn more about these creatures. We stopped first at the cabin. No one was home, but the door was unlocked. Inside, we came across a few books, including Astelleron's journal. His notes, which were not very complete, detailed a variety of events that had eventually led to the construction of his golems. From them I

learned that Adjhar's companion, the golem with whom we had been speaking, was named Bollux. There was also mention of something he had found called the Stone of Castambre, apparently the means of giving golems the power of speech. Another tome simply described the process for creating golems—close to what we were searching for, but, since we actually wanted to *repair* one instead of create one, not close enough. An interesting connection, however, was that this book also referred to the Stone of Castambre. Then I remembered the book the golem had given me. I looked at the title: *The Stone of Castambre*, by MacCuth.

Quickly skimming the worn pages, I learned what I needed. According to the book, repairing a golem was simple, provided that one had access to the Stone of Castambre. All we had to do was cut the Tree of Life, which was part of the Stone, and place the blood around the golem's body as described in the book. Then read a quick incantation, do something with a "heart," and we were done. Of course, I was unable to make out some words covered by a smudge, but I was sure I had the gist of the ceremony.

"Oh, no!" My groan alarmed the others.

"What is it, milord?"

"The scroll, Iolo. The tome says I will find it at the back, but *see*"—I helped the book up on the last page—"it is missing."

"Is this it?" Spark grabbed a battered piece of parchment from the floor and handed it to me.

"Indeed it is!" For the first time ever, I believe, I wanted to hug the boy.

"Not to destroy this lovely scene, milord, but we still have that Stone to locate. 'Twould be nice to finish this and get on with our quest as soon as possible."

Behind the cabin we encountered a small cave full of supplies. Apparently we had come across Astelleron's storehouse. We looped around to the other side of the shack and walked toward a well.

"Excuse me, milord,"—Iolo cleared his throat—"but I do not expect we will be speaking with Astelleron any time soon." He pointed to a collection of rocks piled together against the side of a mountain. At the base was a wooden plaque, upon which were inscribed the words, "Here lies beloved father and master."

"That would explain his absence," I said. "I had wondered why Bollux did not ask his creator to repair Adjhar."

I told Spark to take the bucket from the well as we passed it. Due east was another cave. At first, this one seemed as sparsely supplied as the other, containing only a few powder kegs here and there. However, we found an exit that led to a small enclosed area outside. At the edge of the exit lay a backpack and a pick. Taking the pick, I stepped into the open air. Suddenly, the image changed and we found ourselves in yet another dungeon, this one sporting man-made walls. We followed the corridor into a little glade and were stunned by the vision before us. I can remember no setting more idyllic than what lay before us. A deer picked at the grass as rabbits hopped playfully beneath its feet; birds sang love songs to the world; and in the center of all of this sat what could only have been the legendary Stone of Castambre.

Five stones had been placed about it like the five vertices of a pentacle. The Stone itself pulsed with life and its veins were clearly visible through the layers of rock. From the top of the Stone, with roots firmly implanted within, grew the Tree of Life.

Despite the benevolent atmosphere, we could not forget our task. I placed the bucket at the base of the Stone, raised the pick, and struck the Tree of Life. It did not scream in pain, as MacCuth's tome had warned, but it did bleed. Slowly at first, but by my third blow we had filled the bucket. Hoping that would be enough, we headed back to the quarry.

Bollux was still there when we returned. Silently, I dribbled the blood on top of the rocks he had set down.

"Stand back, all," I said, unrolling the scroll.

"Wait," said Iolo. "According to the tome, a 'heart' will be necessary to perform this ritual."

Bollux, apparently distressed by Iolo's interruption, shouted, "I will give him mine!" We watched in stunned horror as the golem pierced his chest with his fingers and pulled forth a heart-shaped stone. With one final flurry of action, he dropped it on Adjhar's chest and fell to the ground, motionless.

"He gave up his heart ... so that Adjhar may live," cried Iolo. Spark just stood there with his mouth open.

After a few minutes, Iolo spoke up. "Well, not to be morbid, but I suppose the incantation should work now."

I felt around Adjhar's chest and found an indentation, where I set the "heart." Solemnly I read the spell from the scroll. Then, returning the parchment to my pouch, I chanted, "*In Ylem ... In Grav ... In Mani ... Kal Por ... Vas Flam Uus!*"

A clap of thunder sounded. Then each of the five blood spots changed into a fiery blaze. Iolo tapped me on the shoulder, pulling my attention from the sky, which I had been watching. There, slowly rising from the ground, was Adjhar, miraculously all in one piece.

"Greetings to thee, honorable one," Adjhar said. "I can but assume that my presence here was thy doing." It was readily apparent that this golem possessed a greater capacity for speech than had his brother. He stared down at the prone, lifeless body of Bollux. Quickly he looked up. "Wh-what has happened?"

I quickly related the details of Bollux's death.

"He sacrificed himself by giving me his heart ... the fool!" Adjhar's words were insulting but his tone was affectionate. "I must help him, as he helped me! Wilt thou assist?"

"Of course!"

"Very good," he said, obviously pleased. "I thank thee in advance."

"What did you mean when you called Bollux a fool?"

Adjhar shook his head. "Poor Bollux did not know of the Stone of Castambre. His sacrifice was, perhaps, unnecessary. Hast thou, perchance, come across MacCuth's *The Stone of Castambre?*"

"Yes," I said, offering the book to him. "We used it to revive you."

His red eyes seemed to reveal his hope as he took the book from me. Was it a trick of my eyes, or was he smiling?

"'Tis as I suspected. Bollux thought he must sacrifice his own heart to return my life." Had I believed it possible, I would have felt positive I'd just seen a drop of water fall from the golem's right eye. "The poor fool gave his life for mine. I can only hope I would have done the same.

"Doing so now, however, would help nothing, for once I was gone Bollux would simply repeat his act." Adjhar sighed.

"I don't mean to be irreverent," said Iolo, "but did the matter not involve death, 'twould

be a humorous sight: the two golems popping up and down as each one passed the 'heart' to the other."

My glare silenced him. "Go on," I said to the golem.

"However, 'tis not necessary, for had Bollux known what is covered by this smudge, he could have told thee that a new heart may be cut from the Tree of Life. Look here," he said, pointing to the smudged line in the tome, which was smeared with dried mud. "I remember this from before. Thou canst take the very same pick with which thou didst collect the blood and procure a 'heart' for Bollux. Of course, after thou dost place the heart upon Bollux's body, thou must again perform the same ritual of blood."

"I will be right back."

I left the others and teleported back to the glade. I found it more difficult this time to bring myself to slash the Tree. Now that I knew what to look for, however, it was easy to find the heart-shaped lump sticking out from beneath the bark. One hack and I had it in my possession. A few more and the bucket was filled with blood again. As I turned to leave, I felt a tugging in my gut. I looked back to see that the Tree had withered, its leaves changing color in death.

At the quarry, I set the new "heart" in Bollux and repeated the ceremony. I cannot explain how, but, during the thunder and fire, I think I was able to feel power return to the Tree of Life. As I faced the two golems, I noticed that they had adopted a stance more traditional for a sentry—staunch and unmoving. For a brief instant, I caught Bollux looking at Adjhar, noticeably pleased to see his brother alive.

I stood before Adjhar, waiting for him to speak. After a few moments, he said, "I was created to be one of many protectors to the

Shrines of the Three Principles. However, my duty also includes being the keeper of the Talisman of Love. Dost thou want the Talisman of Love?"

It took a minute for his words to set in.

"You had the Talisman?"

"I was put here to protect the Shrines and prevent any from acquiring the Talisman. Any except the Avatar who demonstrated knowledge and understanding of Love. The Talisman is thine." He brought a stone hand to his heart and opened a small panel on his chest. Reaching inside with his other hand, he pulled out a beautiful yellow Talisman and placed it in my palm.

"Thou hast earned this and the honors and powers associated with it. Thou art truly the Avatar." He fell silent.

Blackness quickly surrounded us and we were teleported to the Shrine Room. All three of us were standing in front of the statue of the beautiful woman.

"My heart is gladdened to learn that Love is a Principle thou dost hold dear, evident by thy successful completion of the Test of Love. Now, then, shall a blessing of quickness and skill be thine."

With that said, the statue blasted a surge of energy into my body. Never before had I felt so replenished, as if I had spent a long night luxuriating on a feathered bed, swathed in silken sheets.

"Now hast thou earnestly experienced all that is Love. 'Tis a benefit never to be taken lightly, for Love is a formidable motivator. Remember always the lessons in Compassion, Sacrifice, and Justice thou hast mastered." Her compassion never wavered as she continued, warning me, "Do have a care, Avatar, for a great evil stirs within Britannia. I know not the source."

Things were beginning to sound ominous.



The only Shrine remaining was that of Courage. The image of the armour-clad warrior, raising his sword high above his head in a symbolic gesture of triumph, evoked within me the same feelings I experience following a battle. While afterwards, perhaps, I feel regret for the lives lost, I find it impossible to describe the initial sensation of raw power after seeing my foes fall before my sweeping blade.

“Dost thou think we will find a gate that leads to Courage, as we did with Love?” asked Iolo.

“I do not know, my friend. However, we have no other course but to look.”

We left to begin our search. After a moment, we found another room behind the eastern staircase—the room Erethian had mentioned in reference to the Dark Core of Exodus! I walked in and was immediately taken aback by the sight of the large black cylindrical object set in the middle of the chamber. Iolo, too, was startled, for I heard him gasp behind me. Oddly, I could *feel* the emanation of an aura coming from it. Cautiously I approached it. At first I only *thought* I felt uneasy, but as I neared the object, I felt as if my mind were being probed. It began delicately at first, but then the waves intensified. Images of long-ago memories flitted before my eyes and old emotions resurfaced. Then the images ceased and a vast wave of power overwhelmed me. Darkness followed. I awakened to find Iolo standing over me.

“Iolo!” I reached for his helping arm and stood. “What happened?”

“I know not, milord. It took me a moment to realize something was wrong. Thou began to mutter strange things, no longer responding to my queries. And then thine eyes rolled upwards and thy knees caved in. I picked thee up and brought thee out here scant moments ago.”

I looked around and realized we were back in the entry room. Iolo seemed deeply distressed—understandably so—and Spark appeared more shaken than usual. I turned to head back to the room with the cylinder.

“Milord,” said Iolo, “art thou not aware of what just transpired? Surely thou dost not wish to return to the source of thy collapse.”

“I know this sounds odd, my friend, but I feel I must go back inside. I suspect, or rather



I hope, that I will not be affected so severely a second time.”

Iolo sent a stern glance my way, but moved to follow me. Though obviously uncomfortable, Spark stepped into line as well.

Fortunately, my supposition was correct. Though I still felt the power of the object, I didn't lose consciousness. The northwestern corner of the room was missing, but I could see another chamber past it. Apparently the destruction had opened accesses not intended for most explorers to find.

“Huh? What is this?” asked Iolo. “Why, this mirror reflects not the images from without, but—dare I say—an image from within.”

I turned to look at the mirror. Inside—and don't ask me to explain what I mean—I could see more than just a simple scene. It appeared as if the very glass were alight. Flames seemed to lick at the other side of the mirror, yet I could feel no heat.

“You have a brilliant gift for the understatement,” I said.

To my surprise, the dancing fire began to disappear into the background. Developing slowly in its place was a form. The vision began to clear and soon I was faced with a most gruesome set of teeth, just barely fitting inside a most gruesome maw, set in a most gruesome face. I'd never been more pleased to have a pane of glass between me and anything.

“Yes, Master,” said the figure. “How may I serve thee?” The wavering visage in the mirror hesitated for a moment. “Thou art not my master.” He then continued with a small bow, saying, “Greetings, Britannian. What dost thou wish of the great daemon, Arcadion?”

“What ... what are you doing in this mirror?”

Arcadion attempted to smile, but failed miserably. Instead he gave me a grimace that could have turned a dragon to stone. “I am currently in the service of one mage, Erethian by name.” I got the distinct impression that Arcadion would have just as soon ripped Erethian limb from limb as served him.

“You serve the elderly man we met in the other room?”

“He is my master”—the daemon's smile contorted into a poorly disguised scowl of hatred—“until other ... arrangements can be made.”

“I do not understand. How did he persuade you to serve him? For how long have you been in there?”

The large daemon's eyes closed as he apparently attempted to restrain the force of horrific emotions. “I have served that blind old fool for more than two hundred years!” Arcadion paused, regaining his composure. Then a thought visibly crossed his darkened face. “Perhaps thou mightest assist me to free myself of this unwanted bondage. I could prove an invaluable ally.” He paused to let his offer sink in. “Well, mortal. Wilt thou help me?”

“Don't do it milord!” said Iolo insistently.

“You can't trust something *that* ugly,” offered Spark.

I silenced them with a glare, then turned to address the daemon.

“Since I know nothing about the situation, I cannot agree to help you just yet. Perhaps if you give me more time to learn the facts—”

Arcadion looked as if he were about to force his way through the mirror, but then again mastered his incredible rage. With considerable determination, he folded his massive arms across his broad chest and slowly restored his gruesome smile.

"I can respect thy cowardice in this situation. After all, Erethian is a powerful mage, not the sort that a sheep like thyself should be trifling with." His contemptuous sneer faded as he took his leave, melding with the flickering fires.

"Milord, didst thou hear that?"

"Yes, Iolo, I did. He called me a coward. Do you think this is the Test of Courage? I mean, performing the task he was going to request?"

Iolo shrugged, then nodded.

"Then I think 'twould be wise for me to accept, no?"

"Aye," nodded Iolo.

Again I faced the mirror. "Arcádion, hear my summons. I wish to speak with you again!"

Slowly the flames faded and the fearsome visage returned, the sneer still visible.

"Run along now, little mortal. Do not pester thy betters with the idle ranting of thy tongue." At first he appeared nonchalant, but then his expression became intense. "That is, unless thou hast reconsidered mine offer. Hast thou?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I have."

A wicked look of triumph flickered across his face, then was quickly replaced by a ludicrous semblance of gratitude. "Thou art truly courageous to vow to release me. Mine eternal thanks are thine. Thou hast made quite a powerful ally this day, mortal.

"I'll need a special gem in which to house my essence when thou dost crack this prison of a mirror. There was one such gem on this island; that much I know. Find it. Bring it to me, and together we shall break this mirror which binds me to that blasted mage." His words faded as he did, leaving behind nothing but the curtain of fire.

Iolo broke the silence. "To where next, milord?"

I pointed through the shattered wall and stepped through the opening. The room was small, more so than any we'd seen so far, but at the northern end was a blue Moongate. Glancing back to confirm that my comrades were following, I stepped through. We emerged from the gate in a short north-south tunnel. I had no doubt that we were in the right place.

As before, I'll condense the events of our excursion. After the simple manipulation of some lockpicks, the southern door was open. What we saw next haunts me to this day. Outside a circle of burning candles stood a sorcerer, his arms waving wildly about. Before him lay an infant, still bloody from the sacrifice! Piles of bones were strewn about everywhere, and skeletons and the headless ambled slowly over to us. Behind the masses were two red Moongates, though nothing came through them. Later, in fact, I concluded that only the wizard could command the gates, for nothing was able to exit through them either. As we entered the fray, a clap of thunder filled the chamber and lightning flashed. Countless bodies fell, but before we could wade through the carnage, the wizard stopped his chanting and turned upon us. In the center of the circle, surrounded by a fiery mist, stood an undead master—a liche! Try as I may, I can't remember how we managed to slay all of our foes. All I can recollect is that we found the key to the eastern door upon the lifeless body of the mage.

Moving on, we encountered a variety of oversized spiders and scorpions, finding in both their lairs the levers necessary to continue. In one room we found a crystal ball. Looking through it, I was able to discover the

importance of a glass sword, which we found in the home of a nearby pair of dragons. Another puzzle involved simply switching two helmets, each from its chamber to that of the other. Finally, just past the trolls and the giant, we found our goal. Well, at least we found our goal's guardian.

In a large room there sat, waiting for us specifically, it seemed, the largest dragon I've ever laid eyes on. Don't laugh at the cliché! Clutching my sword and shield, I steeled myself for battle. As she opened her horrific mouth, I prepared to dart out of the way of her burning breath. Imagine my surprise when words, not fire, came from the creature.

"Well met, seeker. I am Dracothraxus. Thy test and, I fear, thy defeat lies before thee. For thou shouldst know that I am made immortal by the Keeper of Courage. 'Twould take a truly powerful artifact to destroy me ... one that does not exist."

The great dragon pawed the earth in expectation of our imminent battle. The stare she gave us could not be misinterpreted. Now we were to fight.

The battle was over rather quickly. Both Iolo and Spark lay bleeding on the ground. Only I remained standing. I was hesitant to tend to the wounds of my companions just then, however, because when the terrible beast fell, it disappeared, leaving no trace of a corpse. Yet in an instant it was back, this time to speak again.

"Well done, little human. Thou art as powerful as thou art courageous. Do not think that thou hast destroyed me. Thou hast merely bested me. And for this wondrous feat, I think thou dost deserve a reward. I have a truly magnificent gem that I would give to thee, if thy courage can but continue for a bit." Dracothraxus opened her mouth wide.

Within, I saw a multitude of teeth, each one needle-sharp. Near the back, I also spied a small but brilliant blue gem. Remembering the words of the daemon, I placed my hand inside the furnace that was the dragon's maw, wondering if such a small gem was worth the risk. However, the mouth did not close until after I had the sparkling jewel in my possession.

"I go now to rest, but I shall return. The door will not open until thou hast found a way to best me for good and for all. Farewell, little mortal."

Having healed our wounds with spells, I persuaded the others—quite easily, mind you—to backtrack and leave. Approaching the mirror, I called for Arcadion. He was smiling as he resurfaced.

"Thou hast within thy possession a small blue gem. It can be used to free me! Crack this accursed mirror with it! I'll enter it as I am freed!" He looked quite prepared to burst from the mirror. With a quick look at the others, I held the gem firmly in my hand and shattered the mirror.

The little gem pulsed with energy.

"Now all Britannia shall feel my wrath. I'll make them all pay for every decade I spent within that accursed mirror!" The gem glowed brighter. It seemed as if the world were going to come apart at the seams. Then—nothing.

"No!" The daemon's primal scream sounded a bit crystalline through the medium of the gem. "This cannot be! That old fool was right. I'm still trapped!" The daemon's anguished voice fell silent.

"What do you mean by 'feel your wrath?'" I demanded. Maybe this had been the wrong thing to do.

"Forgive my momentary indiscretion, master. My bitter emotions overcame my

reasoning for a brief time. I shall not let it happen again." Arcadion sounded pensive as he responded. "It would seem that Erethian was correct in his assumption that, should I enter this gem, my power would not be set free to use as I wish. Instead, it is at the beck and call of the one who possesses the gem. Wouldst thou care to partake of my power?" I could feel the hesitancy in his voice.

"No." At least not at the moment, I thought.

"Perhaps I misjudged thee, master. Mayhap in time thou canst call me friend as well as ally."

"What now?" asked Iolo, echoing my thoughts.

"We still do not have the Talisman of Courage, so we can assume there is more to the test. I suppose we should talk to the mage, Erethian. With luck, he can offer some advice."

We found him shuffling about the book collection in his room. It took him some time to notice us, though I suspect it had more to do with his preoccupation with his books than with his blindness. After a moment, I cleared my throat to get his attention. I succeeded.

"I'll never get any work done like this! What dost thou wish of me?" Erethian seemed a little peevish.

"Our humblest apologies, friend mage. We need your assistance. I have bound within this gem a being of tremendous power—or so he claims. Do you know anything about the daemon who lived in the mirror?"

"So. Thou hast made a servant of Arcadion. 'Tis good to be rid of his incessant whining. I hope that thou findest him to be as useful as I didst." His words sounded more like a curse than a warning.

The gem glowed brightly. 'Tis good to see

the last of thee, also, old man. Perhaps in another life, I shall be thy master, and thou the slave." The daemon let out a chilling little laugh.

Erethian looked a little shaken at the sound of the daemon's voice, but he quickly recovered his composure. "I think not, daemon. I am not at all sure that there is a way for thou to get out of that little gem."

"Pardon our continued disturbance, but there is more. I have encountered a terrible foe: one I can best, but not slay. I believe this to be a vital aspect of my quest. Will you help us?"

The wizened man stood frowning in deep thought, his finger on his lip, for several minutes. Finally he spoke.

"I once attempted to create a sword of great power. If thou wishest to continue my work, thou shalt have need of some few pieces of forging equipment. And a place to put them. I know just the spot. Come with me and I'll see what I can do to help thee."

With a wave of his hands, he teleported all four of us from his bedroom to the main hall, less than twenty feet away. A look of grim determination came to his lined features. He pushed up his sleeves like a blacksmith about to shoe a high-strung horse. "Careful, now," the old mage warned solicitously. "The powers I am about to release are capricious and fickle. I wouldst not like to see something untoward happen to thee."

Another wave of the arms, a few more incantations, and a well appeared. Near it sat a warm forge with a bellows beside it, an anvil, and a water trough. Little beads of sweat appeared on the elderly mage's furrowed brow. "That was a bit harder than I had expected." He paused to mop his forehead with the tip of his sleeve. "I had to redirect a small underground river for the well to tap. Now, then. Thou shalt have need of

some few tools to make use of this equipment, shan't thee?" His rhetorical question went unanswered as he once again prepared to unleash his will upon the world.

Atop the heated coals a hand mirror appeared, while the well lip became covered with flowers. Erethian was extremely displeased. Amidst muttered curses detailing the uselessness of ether and bothersome inter-dimensional beings, Erethian intoned the magical words, "*An Vas Ailem! Kal Bet Ailem!*" The mirror and flowers were replaced by a hammer and a bucket.

Erethian's face took on an ashen pallor. Despite that, he looked contented with a job well done. "As I have said, I myself once attempted to create an artifact of great power. I crafted the hilt from a dark substance that is immutable, save by magical means. The blade, however, is cast of an alloy of this substance and the purest metals known to Britannia. My artistic skills served me well enough to fashion the hilt but, alas, the strength was not in my arm to beat a good temper into the blade. Perhaps thou canst finish this great artifact for me." He pulled a poorly worked unfinished blade, with a fine hilt, out of thin air. "Fear not to touch the hilt when the blade is hot, for heat apparently does not travel well across the medium of the pure black substance. I wish thee good luck." He placed the sword upon the fire pit and wearily turned away.

From watching others in the land I'd learned enough to forge a respectable blade. I filled the trough with water, heated the forge with the bellows, then hammered an edge onto the blade. I was forced to do this more than once, each time dunking the blade in the water to harden the edge. I was amazed at how quickly the steam evaporated. Hours

later, I felt I could work no more on the sword. It seemed that I would never perfect the heft of the weapon.

I spoke again with the wizard. His mood was no better than the last time, but he became calm when I mentioned my dilemma with the sword.

"Yes, I can see how the blade would be too clumsy to swing in combat. However, if thou were to bind a magical source of power into the hilt of the blade, thou mightest be able to counteract the unwieldy nature of the sword."

The little gem sparked up at this turn of the conversation. "I believe that in my current form, I could serve perfectly well as the blade's stabilizing force. In truth, this would allow me to give thee access to some of my more dramatic powers." The daemon sounded excited at this prospect—perhaps a little too much so, I thought.

Erethian's voice was quiet as he said, "Consider well before thou bindest Arcadion into the sword. It is true that he will be able to solve the sword's problem of balance, but will he be able to solve his own problems as well?"

"This is thy choice to make. Apparently thou hast need to make this sword function, but if the daemon is thy only recourse, I pity thee. For as surely as Arcadion will be bound within the sword, thou wilt be bound to possess it. I can tell thee no more."

I was mystified by Erethian's warning, as was Iolo. However, realizing the daemon might be my only hope against the dragon, I clasped the gem to the hilt of the sword. A thunderous noise echoed and a flash of brilliant lightning filled the room. Instantly I knew it had succeeded. I lifted the blade. It felt good—I mean, really good—in my hand.

"Now," I said to Iolo and Spark, "let us complete our third test."

Easily traversing the dungeon corridors, we shortly found ourselves again in the chamber of Dracothraxus. As we entered, she sniffed the air distastefully.

"I sense my doom nearby," said the dragon. "Perhaps I am to be released at long last. I wish thee good luck, mortal. Defend thyself!" With that, Dracothraxus leaped at us, claws first.

"Arcadion!" I shouted.

"Yes, master!" The vibrancy of the daemon's voice disturbed me as it poured from the sword. "What dost thou seek of thy servant?"

"I need thy power."

"Which of my powers dost thou seek?"

"Death! Death to the dragon, Dracothraxus!" I was filled with both awe and rage.

"Ah, Dracothraxus. We meet once again. 'Tis a pity thou shan't survive our meeting this time. Perhaps if thou hadst given the gem to me when first I asked, none of this unpleasantness would be necessary."

The dragon responded with great resignation. "My will is not mine own in this matter, Arcadion. Mayhap thou art finding, too, that thy will is not thine own."

As if in response to the stinging words, the sword, more of its own volition than mine, sliced through Dracothraxus' large head. Wasting no time worrying about the terrible force I now wielded with ease, we opened the door and jumped through the blue gate. At the other end, we found a blue Talisman. Placing the Talisman in my pack, I found myself teleported before the statue of the stone fighter.

"Well done, mighty warrior! The unsurpassed Courage which flows through thy veins could be none other than that of the

Avatar. Thou hast proven thyself worthy of the reward of Courage with Valor, Sacrifice, Honor, and Spirituality. Receive it now in Humility."

For a third time I was overcome by the sensation of power coursing throughout my body, as if every muscle in my body had tensed but never released. Courage spoke again, this time in an urgent tone.

"I lay upon thee a geas, and as thou art the Avatar, thou art bound to respond. Thy quest is to seek the Talisman of Infinity. Within this castle there lies a scroll which can tell thee of its use. Go now, for time grows short."



"Erethian," I called. Again I sought the mage's advice, for the things told to me by the Shrines were quite disturbing. A cursory search of the castle indicated that he could only be in his bedroom.

"Erethian!"

"Will I ever be without these accursed distractions? What dost thou wish now?" He called through his closed door.

"I have news that will be of great interest to you."

"I doubt that, young one."

"Think not? 'Tis about the Dark Core."

"Why didst thou not say so sooner. Please come in."

He folded his book in his lap as we entered, holding one hand between the pages to mark his place.

"I believe," I said, "that the Psyche might be returning."

"Could this possibly be true?" Erethian's blind eyes lit up with unabashed glee. "What an opportunity I have here!" For an instant,

his mind left us as his imagination ran free. Then he noticed our presence again. "Now, do not let any strange ideas of destruction enter thy mind, Avatar. I shan't let thee deprive me of this chance to experience a true wonder of the world. Run along now. Is there not a wrong to be righted, somewhere else?"

"I have also been warned of a great evil here on the island." It was difficult to control my impatience.

The elderly mage frowned. "I sense no great evil, but then I never did quite get the knack of cosmic awareness. Nevertheless, don't worry thyself overmuch. These things tend to work themselves out." I felt as if I'd just been patted on the head and asked to go play elsewhere.

"Fine, old man," I sighed. "At least tell me what you know about the Talisman of Infinity."

"Ah, yes. I once had a scroll that told of a Talisman by that name. If only I could remember where I put it. Dost thou by chance have the parchment entitled *Scroll of Infinity* with thee?"

Embarrassed for having ransacked his abode, I removed the scroll from my pack and handed it to him.

"Here we are. Now, then, it appears to be written in a strange format. One might even say a code of sorts ... I have it! Apparently, the Talisman currently resides in the Great Void. A plane somewhat removed from ours. If thou wishest to gain access to this Void, thou shalt need to craft two lenses: one concave, the other convex. Light focused through the properly enchanted lenses will open a conduit between our realm and the Void. I believe this treatise speaks of three Talismans of Principle that send out a call to

the Infinity Talisman and bring it here. Once here, it would seem that its sole purpose is to coerce a powerful force into the Void." A thought was made visible by the concern on Erethian's face. "Oh no, Avatar ... thou shan't gain any more aid from me. I may be blind, but I see through thy sham. I'll not help thee send the Core into the Void." With that, he turned away and shoed us out the door.

Arcadion's voice whispered to me like a ripple crossing a still pond. "Fear not, my master. I have some knowledge of these matters."

"Tell me!"

His voice was smug; he realized my request for assistance acknowledged his power. "Yes, I can help thee if thou wishest to exile what remains of Exodus to the Void. Firstly, thou shalt have need of the lenses of which the doddering old fool spoke. Next thou must needs have the Talismans of the Three Principles. And finally, make sure that there are lit torches upon the walls to either side of the pedestal upon which the Dark Core rests.

"Where can I find lenses such as Erethian described?"

"The concave and convex lenses which thou used to place the Codex of Infinite Wisdom within the Void, I believe, now sit forgotten in the Museum of Britannia. They must be placed between the Dark Core and the torches on either side of the pedestal. And the Talismans of the Principles must be placed upon the Dark Core like wedges in a pie."

As you can guess, we departed from the island and quickly returned to Britain. Strange though it may seem, no one even stopped to question us when we lifted the lenses from their resting place and carried them out the door.

Back on the island, we headed directly for the door to the room that housed the Dark Core. In spite of the wave of uneasiness rising within me, I placed the three Talismans on the Dark Core. I can't begin to describe the feeling inside me when I actually touched the cylinder. Next I set a lens on each side of the Core, so that the torches could shine through. Before our very eyes, a fourth Talisman, the Talisman of Infinity, appeared, completing the circle.

Suddenly there was a flash of light. Then, appearing from the nothingness where the light had been, Erethian stood.

"No! Thou must not do this!" His voice was full of anguish. He raised his arms and began a powerful spell. "*Vas Ort Rel Tym ...*" He stopped mid-spell and began another, pointing toward the Talisman of Infinity. "*Vas An Ort Ailem!*" I immediately recognized the resonance of a spell gone awry. Apparently so did Erethian. A look of horror came to his wrinkled features, which appeared to become more lined by the second.

The noise of the Dark Core's explosion was beyond deafening, and the force of the blast threw all of us to the floor. When the smoke cleared, however, only three of us remained in the room. Both the Dark Core and Erethian had been destroyed.

Cautiously, Iolo rose to his feet. "I am sure that Lord British even now awaits news of Exodus' exile. It is time to leave this barren island behind."

"Old friend, I could not agree with you more."



Lord British was, as usual, seated on his throne. His mood had altered since our last

encounter, back before we had left for the Isle of Fire; this time his spirits were high.

"I felt the passing of the remains of Exodus from this realm. It has lifted a great weight from my shoulders. And so, Avatar, I cannot let this accomplishment go unrewarded. Please kneel, my friend." He held out his hand as I obeyed.

"My memory is clouded about what happened next. I do remember experiencing a sensation very much similar to what the three Shrines had given me, only this time all at once. The strength, the cunning, the speed, all these gifts bestowed by Lord British, I still carry to this day. In here." As the Avatar said this, he touched his chest and his forehead. "And never will I treasure another gift so highly."

"Not even the daemon sword?" I asked coyly.

"No, dear Carlotta. Not even the daemon sword."



But what happened next?"

"Better I should tell you what happened before," said the Avatar.

"Oh, yes, I do want to hear about your travails in the Stygian Abyss, but what happened to the Guardian? How will you get home? Where have you been?"

The Avatar held up his hands and began laughing. "Too many questions. Too little time. Which would like next? The Abyss, or where I've been—on Serpent Isle?"

"The Abyss first. Then the other."

"Very well," he said. "I was at home on Earth ..."



Town Plots

Britain



here are several short quests to be completed in Britain. None of them is required to solve the game, but each one adds a bit of interesting insight into the lives of those who live in Britannia's largest city.

In the Royal Prison, Weston will tell a tale of woe, explaining that his incarceration resulted from his need to feed his starving family in Paws. Retelling the story to Lord British will lead to Weston's freedom. Miranda, in the castle, could use some help turning a bill, concerning waste products and Lock Lake, into a law. Take the bill to Lord Heather in Cove and have him sign it. Miranda will be extremely pleased when you present her with the signed document.

Although Patterson speaks of his home life, it's his wife Judith who is truly troubled. Following Patterson to Candice's house after a Fellowship meeting will prove Judith's suspicions to be true. Confront Patterson and Candice while they're together.

Try your hand at acting while you're in the city. Find Raymundo and ask him for an audition. Before the actual audition, have Gaye make a costume for you. Once that's done, return to the theater and show Raymundo the best performance ever!

A few people will want goods from another part of Britannia. Kessler will buy vials of serpent venom, which can be procured at Morfin's or from Garritt in Paws, and also from the mines in Minoc and Vesper. Also, Boots, the royal cook, can always use some mutton. The butcher in Paws, Morfin, sells such meats. Have any gems? Sell those to Sean, the jeweler.

It's also possible to obtain gainful employment in Britannia. Willy the Baker offers his oven for use. Use some flour and water to make dough, then set that in the hearth. Once the bread has risen, Willy will pay gold for it. If farming seems a more suitable occupation, ask Mack for a job gathering eggs from the chicken coop. Every day the chickens lay more eggs. Finally, Brownie needs help picking pumpkins from the patch at the north end of his farm.

Buccaneer's Den

Though Mole and Blacktooth were once friends, it seems that The Fellowship has driven a wedge between them. However, it's quite easy to soothe hurt feelings by acting as a go-between, relaying each pirate's desire to restore his friendship with the other.

Cove

The quest in Cove will actually lead all the way across the continent. When Lord Heather mentions Nastassia and her lack of lovers, he will also recommend that you hear De Maria's tale of Nastassia's sorrow. Find Nastassia at the Shrine of Compassion, where she waits for the Avatar to help unravel a family mystery—what happened to her father, Julius. Her one clue leads to the Emps, creatures who live in the eastern part of the Deep Forest. The Emp who knows of her father is named Trellek, but you must first offer honey before he'll speak. Back in Cove, Nastassia will be overjoyed to learn that, though her father is dead, he died for a very honorable reason.

Jhelom

Though duels at noon are the norm in this town, Sprellic, the innkeeper, is no fighter. Of course, facing three such challenges has left him scared witless. His story about the swindler who claimed to be the Avatar rings true, especially since the Honor Flag of the Library of Scars is indeed missing. Sprellic is happy for any help, including Klifftin's suggestion that another banner be woven. On the battlefield at noon, the three fighters will accept either the false Honor Flag or you as

Sprellic's champion. In the latter case, however, be sure to make a bet with Ophelia or Daphne on the outcome of the duel.

Minoc

Though all the townspeople have their own opinions about the situation, virtually everyone knows that Owen, the shipbuilder, is having a monument built in his honor. Mayor Burnside will claim that The Fellowship has used its influence to aid in the construction of the statue. Gladstone, head of the Artisan's Guild will reveal his concerns about the monument. Speaking with Jakher leads to information about a ship in Owen's past that sank, taking with it the brother of a nearby hermit, Karl. Karl lives in a small house southeast of Minoc proper. Persist until you hear his story and discover that he once stole plans for a ship from Owen, hiding them in his house.

With the ship plans in hand, visit Julia and let her give you a tinker's perspective. Upon close inspection, she'll discover a major flaw in the design. Show the flaw to Mayor Burnside and he'll cancel any remaining work on the monument, making Gladstone and the other artisans quite pleased. Should Owen learn of the errors in the plans for the ship, he will kill himself.

Moonglow

Moonglow is one of the larger centers of population, which increases its tendency to attract unusual residents. One interesting individual is actually two: the twins Brion and Nelson. When the bartender, Phearcy, offers free food and drink to anyone who has gossip

about Zelda, start by speaking to the Lycaeum adviser herself. Zelda will admit to an attraction for Brion, but a conversation with him reveals that the feeling is not mutual. Ironically, it is his brother, the Lycaeum Head, who carries a torch for Zelda, something only Nelson knows. Though Zelda will be broken up about her unrequited love, she will, given the opportunity, settle for Nelson's affections.

While visiting with Brion, accept his offer of the orrery viewer. You will have to pay Addom 20 gold to purchase the necessary crystal, but once you do, Brion will give you the viewer free of charge. Addom is currently staying with Elad, the healer, but spends most of the day at Phearcy's tavern.

Since The Fellowship is fairly new to Moonglow, its presence has led to some fascinating situations. Cubolt, a farmer, is distraught about his brother's recent initiation into The Fellowship. Not only does he want Tolemac to withdraw, but he also hopes to discourage their long-time friend, Morz, from making a similar decision. While lectures to Tolemac fall on deaf ears, the advice you pass on from Cubolt will be readily heeded by Morz!

Other seeds of discontent lie within the walls of the Fellowship hall itself. Balayna, the clerk, distrusts the new branch head, but will reveal this only to other Fellowship members. Should Rankin, the branch head, be told of her accusations, he'll dismiss them, even asking for assistance in delivering to her a vial of liqueur sent from afar. If you refuse, Balayna will mysteriously disappear. If the vial is delivered, however, she will drink it, falling prey to the deadly poison within. Later you can confront Rankin about his clerk. Depending on whether she died or disappeared, he'll offer detailed explanations of plausible causes for her misfortunes.

New Magincia

Because New Magincia is a secluded island, news travels quickly. Speak with just about anyone in town and learn that three strangers—shipwreck survivors—recently happened ashore. The local shipwright knows of the ship, which was built by Owen of Minoc, and knows of the storm that sank it.

Eventually, Henry will whine about his lost locket, with which he had hoped to declare his love for Constance, the water carrier. Sam the Flower Man, who in his leisure is witness to many events on the island, remembers having seen the three strangers following Henry shortly after he acquired the locket from his childhood friend, Katrina. Sadly, Constance believes Henry to be a liar, and has developed an attraction for Robin, one of the survivors. Robin admits to having owned a locket, but, like poor Henry, has since lost it. He is far more interested in getting off the island with his two companions, and is desperate for assistance. However, Robin's friends are far less subtle than he, and fail to disguise their nefarious ways, hinting that Robin lost "his" locket after a night's revel at the local tavern.

Approached about a missing locket, Boris will admit that he filched it while serving drinks to the three strangers, planning to give it to Constance himself. However, his wife, Mayor Magenta, happened upon the locket in its hiding place and assumed it was a gift from Boris. Once she is told about Henry's misfortune, she agrees to give up the jewelry. Woe to Boris, however!

With the locket in hand, you can persuade Robin to divulge his true plans—to kidnap Constance and sell her to the Baths in Buccaneer's Den. Once he has confessed,

Robin and his cronies will attack you. By returning the locket to Henry, you provide him with the opportunity to capture fair Constance's heart.

Paws

The lower economic level of this town has brought about some rather unpleasant events recently. The buzz around town is of the silver serpent venom stolen from a local merchant. The victim, a rude fellow named Morfin who sells his venom to the apothecary in Britain, would be very appreciative of any help in catching the thief. Feridwyn, who heads the Fellowship shelter, has a lot of useful information about the townsfolk, as does his precocious son, Garritt.

Near the shelter you can find the widow Camille. She is a friendly sort, who makes her living tending a garden and growing wheat to sell to the mill. She will ask you to deliver a sack at this time, because her son, Tobias, is too busy with chores and such. On your way back from the miller's, Feridwyn will stop you to relate an interesting development. Apparently the missing venom has been found in Tobias' room. Of course, Camille insists upon her son's innocence, and two beggars who live in the shelter vouch for his character. Tobias, too, declares he is innocent, claiming Garritt framed him.

Andrew, the dairy owner, mentions that Morfin leaves his shop at unusual hours and has always been particularly concerned with locking his storeroom. Morfin keeps the key somewhere in his home. A search of the slaughterhouse reveals a surplus of venom and a ledger detailing illegal sales to the Britannian Mining Company. Morfin confesses to the

sales, and also suggests that Garritt shows signs of venom use. In addition, he gives you a key that Garritt dropped near the slaughterhouse.

Using the key to gain access to Garritt's belongings, you will find a vial of venom inside a bag within a locked chest beside his bed. Once accosted, Garritt confesses to the crime and to the frame-up.

Serpent's Hold

Lord John-Paul runs a tight keep, and his fellow knights show him great respect. Apparently this respect has worn thin. Lord John-Paul will request assistance in solving a mysterious case of vandalism. Be sure to agree the first time, because it will be very difficult to persuade him to ask a second time. John-Paul suggests speaking with Sir Denton, who is often considered the eyes and ears of Serpent Hold. Throughout the investigation, Denton will act as the focal point, helping to move things along when you find yourself stumped. Initially, Denton will mention that Sir Richter is officially in charge of determining who defaced the statue of Lord British, and that you should talk with him first.

The only thing Richter has found so far is a few chips taken from the base of the statue. Denton will recommend taking the chips to Lady Leigh, the healer, for analysis. Upon inspection, the healer will notice something odd about the chips. Apparently there are traces of Gargoyle blood on them. There is only one Gargoyle in Serpent's Hold—Sir Horffe, the captain of the guard! If Lord John-Paul is apprised of the current situation, he will chastise and punish his captain. You can also accuse Sir Horffe directly.

It will take some prodding to get Horffe to talk, but eventually he admits that he was at the statue on the night of the vandal's attack. In addition, he mentions that there was another present, who he assumes was the vandal, but that he was unable to identify the criminal. The lead does not die there, however, because Lady Tory, the druid, points out that she has noticed Sir Jordan acting unusual.

Jordan has only one comment about the incident. On the night of the desecration, he heard a woman's scream coming from the commons area. He's uncertain, but believes it sounded much like the voice of the Lady Jehanne. Sure enough, the scream came from the lovely provisioner; it was her reaction to learning that her lord, Sir Pendaran was the vandal. Confronted, Sir Pendaran, will apologize and explain the motivation for his actions. If Horffe has already been accused, Lord John-Paul will apologize to him.

Sadly, the mystery has upset many of the residents, and security has temporarily fallen by the wayside. Lady Tory's son, Ian, has been kidnapped. She suspects that the harpies inhabiting the area around the Shrine of Honor are responsible. A visit to the Shrine confirms her belief, and, once Ian is recovered, she's quite grateful to have her son back.

Terfin

Terfin is the only community that has no human residents. However, even Gargoyles have their disagreements. Take a moment to talk with Teregus at the Hall of Knowledge. He will speak of the conflicts The Fellowship has brought to the Gargoyles. Forbrak, the

bartender, can provide even more details. Obviously, both sides of the issue must be examined. Find the healer, Inmanilem, and ask him what he knows about his kin. He'll suggest a visit with Silamo, the gardener, whose attitude he seems to have changed for the worse recently.

Silamo knows nothing about the discontent of the town, but shares plenty of his own. He is far too aware of the greater respect granted to the winged Gargoyles. The one exception, he will note, is the wingless Quaeven, who seems to have benefited from his status as a Fellowship member. Neither Quaeven nor Quan, the Fellowship leader, has heard of the conflicts. In fact, Quaeven has been planning on bringing in another convert—Beta, the provisioner.

A conversation with Beta reveals that he has no intention of joining The Fellowship. However, he *has* heard of a plot to destroy the Altars of Singularity, and offers that only he and the other provisioner, Sarpling, would have the materials necessary for such a deed. Although Sarpling will deny any accusations, a search of his store turns up a scroll that implicates him and Runeb, the Fellowship clerk. Sarpling confesses if confronted with this evidence, but Runeb turns violent and attacks you.

Vesper

Though it is not the only city in which humans and Gargoyles live and work together. Vesper is the only community where the races do not coexist peacefully. Yongi, the bartender, tells a story about an unprovoked attack on one of his customers. Blorn, the victim, confirms the report, asking

for help in achieving vengeance. He mentions that his attacker, Lap-Lem, would be very hostile if the encounter were to be brought up, and suggests you make a simple surprise attack.

If you ignore Blorn's advice and question Lap-Lem, the Gargoyle will reveal the true motivation for his behavior. Apparently Blorn is in the wrong, because he was attacked while stealing a locket from the Gargoyle! When you make this point to Blorn, he admits his guilt and grudgingly returns the locket.

Blorn and Yongi are not the only two with troubles. Yvella is concerned about her daughter Catherine, who disappears from around the house each day at noon. Follow Catherine and learn that she is visiting a Gargoyle across the oasis. The Gargoyle, For-Lem, is doing nothing more than reading stories to her from the legends of his culture. He asks for silence, promising that no harm will come to the little girl. If you honor his request, nothing happens to him or to Catherine. If, however, Yvella is told where her daughter goes, she passes on the information to her husband, who eventually slays the Gargoyle historian.

Be wary when venturing into the Gargoyles' tavern, for there are two disgruntled brothers who are jobless. Blaming humans for their lack of money, they will attack if you dare disturb their drinking.

Yew

Yew is actually another collection of subplots, rather than a single mini-quest. The first one involves Reyna, the healer. Whether she is

encountered in her shop or while visiting the cemetery early in the morning, she will tell the sad story of her mother's death. In addition, she will express a wish to see more flowers brightening her mother's grave. Aimi, who tends a garden at the monastery, is known for selling beautiful flowers, and will even give them away if you mention your reason for wanting them. Reyna will be thrilled to receive the flowers, offering her healing services for half-price the next time such services are required. You can earn additional discounted healing by bringing more flowers to her. In addition, should you ever need healing after normal working hours, regardless of whether you have ever brought flowers for her mother, Reyna will inspect your wounds and cure them if they prove serious enough. She is the only healer—other than Jaana when she is in your party—who will offer her services in such an emergency.

Inside the walls of Empath Abbey, you'll find a researcher named Kreg who is attempting to make a potion of silence. To further his studies, he'll request a potion of invisibility, commenting that one can be purchased from Nicodemus, who lives nearby. The other monks know nothing of Kreg or of his experiments, and a glance at the High Court's record book will reveal his true identity. If he is given the potion, Kreg will accept it. However, he'll consume it immediately, disappearing from view. If you instead ask him for the truth about his situation, Kreg will become violent and attack.

After you help the Emps by persuading Ben to stop cutting down Silverleaf trees, none of the taverns receives any more of the material to use in making Silverleaf meal.

Down and Dirty Walkthrough



The path to solving *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* is remarkably straightforward. There are very few splits in the plot, and those few converge before the end of the game. One of your best assets from the previous games, the Orb of the Moons, does not function for most of the game. However, you can still greatly reduce your travel time by collecting a few special items after leaving Trinsic. The first is a magic carpet, which makes it possible to cross any terrain except the highest peaks. You can find this item in a small cove within the Serpent's Spine mountains, located northwest of Britain. In Britain's museum, you'll see eight colored stones, representing the eight Virtues. These stones will be very useful when you cast the *Mark* and *Recall* spell. Set a stone in Lord British's castle, one in Rudyom's house in Cove, and another in Yew, near the home of Nicodemus. Place the others wherever you wish, though locations inside some of the dungeons are recommended.

Trinsic

Priority one is to get out of Trinsic. The first thing to do is to take the key from the site of Christopher's murder. Answer Finnigan's questions and learn all the details of the murder. Find Christopher's son, Spark, at his house in the northwest corner of the town. Spark will talk about The Fellowship and about his dream. While you're at the house, be sure to take the gold, the scroll, and the medallion from the chest, and then ask Spark about these items. Then visit Gilberto, the dock guard, at the healer's to talk about what he saw the night Christopher was killed. Before reporting to Finnigan for the password to leave, speak with the Fellowship leader to find out what The Fellowship's connection is to the blacksmith.

Britain

As with most games in the Ultima series, it's always best to find and talk to Lord British in Britain as early as possible. Though he'll be surprised to see the Avatar in Britannia, he'll mention many things, including the problems with magic and the mysterious substance called blackrock. He will also be interested in having you go to Cove and contact Rudyom. As usual, he has placed within the castle a few items for the Avatar's use. Take the key in his study and find the storeroom; make sure to take at least the spellbook and the reagents. Outside the castle, Chuckles will be his usual annoying self. Solve his scroll game by flipping the scroll a third time, which will produce a hint that you should contact Margareta of Minoc fairly soon.

Don't forget to investigate the Britannian branch of The Fellowship. Batlin will offer a lot of useful information and will also administer the Fellowship test to you, if you desire. Accept his request to deliver the package to Elynor in Minoc. Search the locked chest if the opportunity arises, because the scroll inside it is very informative. There are a few others in Britain—Millie, Patterson, Gordon, and Clint—who have helpful clues. Speak with them if it is convenient. Also, feel free to open the sealed package for Elynor, though you should be prepared to accept her wrath if you do.

Cove

While it's not necessary to visit Cove immediately, its location makes it a convenient stop on the way to Minoc. Rudyom will have much to say about magic and blackrock. Be sure to take his transmuter wand.

Minoc

Here, in Minoc, is the only true split in the clue path. Is it best to follow Elizabeth and Abraham, the two travelers mentioned by Klog, or should you seek out Margareta's wisdom, as suggested by Chuckles' scroll? The choice is actually irrelevant, because you'll eventually cover both paths. For simplicity's sake, the path tracking the two Fellowship members will be discussed first.

Minoc has recently experienced a tragedy—a murder. This one seems to have been performed very similar to the one in Trinsic. Be sure to take the serpentine dagger lying near the body. Find Elynor and give her the package. From her, learn that Elizabeth and Abraham have headed off to Paws. Visit the Britannian Mining Company's headquarters and read their ledger, noting the references to blackrock.

Paws and Jhelom

Follow the two Fellowship members to Paws and ask Feridwyn about them. He'll explain that they've already left for Jhelom. Tracking them to Jhelom, learn that their lead has not been shortened—they're on their way to Britain. Before leaving Jhelom, ask the trainer, De Snel, about the serpentine dagger. His response will be quite telling, as will his violent reaction!

Back to Britain

Returning to Britain, speak again with Batlin and agree to find the chest in the dungeon Destard. Inside the dungeon, be prepared to face many dragons. You'll find the chest in a

chamber southeast of the entrance. The chest, however, will be empty. Report back to Batlin and be inducted into The Fellowship. Since, as you're told, Elizabeth and Abraham are in Vesper, follow them there.

The Chase

In Vesper, Auston will tell you that they have come and gone and are already on their way to Moonglow. The Fellowship leader, Rankin, suggests going to Terfin, where Quan claims that they've gone to the Meditation Retreat. At the Retreat, pump Ian for as much information as possible, since it's not worth following the duo to Buccaneer's Den.

The Alternate Path

Some time while you're in Minoc, find Margareta and learn your fortune. Before leaving for Yew, ask the bartender at the Chequered Cork about his missing arm.

Yew

Visit Empath Abbey and speak with Taylor about the Emps, honey, and the Wisps. The smoke bomb he offers may become useful. Take a moment to search the High Court. You should not only speak with both prisoners, but also read the ledger in the courtroom.

The Bee Cave

There are several ways to get honey from the bees. The most direct—and the least recommended—is to fight the bees. Two

better ways are either to use Taylor's bomb to put the bees to sleep, or to enlist the aid of the ranger, Tseramed, who lives just south of the caves. However, if you're already a member of The Fellowship, keep that fact from him!

The Forest

Find the Emp named Trellek and offer him the honey. That will persuade him to speak with you. Before agreeing to join the party, he'll want you to get permission from his wife. In turn, *she* will want you to consult with Salamon, the Emps' wizened advisor. She'll send you to the western edge of the forest in search of the logger, Ben. He'll agree to fell no more Silverleaf trees, and his signature will convince Salamon to let Trellek accompany you. Saralek, however, will change her mind. Tell her your reasons for wanting Trellek's company and she'll send you back to him. Be sure to tell him the same reasons and to take the whistle he gives you. Locate the abandoned building in the middle of the forest and use the whistle. The Wisps will offer you information about the mage Alagner and his notebook.

New Magincia

Alagner acknowledges his notes, but will not give them to you until you agree to travel to Skara Brae and learn the answer to the questions of Life and Death.

Skara Brae

You'll need the *Seance* spell to speak with all of Skara Brae's ghostly residents, so be sure you have it in your spell book. The Tortured

One, also named Caine, will agree to answer your questions if you free the townsfolk from the terrible liche, Horance. Your best ally here will be Mordra, because she is most aware of what has befallen the town. Visit Trent and hear his tale of woe, making sure to take the music box resting nearby. Play the box for Rowena in the liche's Dark Tower and she'll give you her wedding band. Present the band to Trent and he'll break away from his task long enough to tell you how to make the Soul Cage. Take one of the iron bars from the cemetery to help the blacksmith finish the cage's construction. Ask Mordra for the list of ingredients for the magical formula, all of which can be found in her house. With Caine's assistance, assemble the laboratory apparatus and mix the magical formula. Go to the Dark Tower and find the Well of Souls behind the secret door under the stairs. The Soul Cage must be dipped into the Well of Souls before you place it on the liche.

Place the cage over the prone liche during the Black Mass and use the formula on him. After he returns to his former self, take Rowena to Trent and reunite them. You still need to destroy the Well of Souls, but doing so will require one of the spectres to sacrifice his or her soul. Although it's the Mayor who will ultimately agree to be destroyed along with the well, you must first make the request to every other resident. Once the well is destroyed, Caine will tell you what you need to know.

Back to New Magincia

When you pass on Caine's wisdom to Alagner, he gives you the key to his storehouse, where his notebook is kept. He will stress the importance of returning the book to him.

The Wisp Again

In exchange for the information in the notebook, the Wisp talks about the Time Lord and the Guardian. Unfortunately, when you go to return Alagner's notes, you find him dead. Use his crystal ball to witness his death.

The Shrine of Spirituality

You'll need the Orb of the Moons, activated by the Wisp, to reach the Shrine. The Time Lord will send you to the dungeon Despise to find out what force is keeping him trapped. A search of the dungeon yields the discovery of a large generator, spherical in shape, located near the western edge. When you tell this to the Time Lord, he requests you to retrieve an hourglass from the mage Nicodemus.

The Hourglass

Nicodemus barely remembers the artifact, claiming that he once sold it to a vendor in Paws. A quick trip to Beverlea's House of Items in Paws gets you the hourglass. However, Nicodemus can't enchant it until the ether that controls magic is restored. The Time Lord will suggest consulting the slumbering mage Penumbra in Moonglow.

Moonglow

To gain entrance to Penumbra's house, you'll need a hammer, a gold ring, a lockpick, a spindle of thread, and some form of gold currency. Place each item next to the appropriate plaque as it appears. Make sure you have an orange potion to awaken

Penumbra. When she wakes up, she'll talk about the pain that the affected ether is causing her. Gather four chunks of blackrock, each one to be placed on a separate pedestal in her room. (You can use a mining machine from the mine in Minoc or Vesper, or get the pieces from Rudyom's in Cove.) Once she's able to concentrate again, Penumbra will direct you to the dungeon Deceit. There you'll find another generator, this one in the shape of a Tetrahedron.

The Ethereal Ring

Penumbra will send you in search of the Ethereal Ring, which is necessary to enter the Tetrahedron. Despite her suggestion, Draxinusom will no longer have the ring. However, he knows about it, including who does have it—Martingo, who lives on the island of Spektran. Possessing the greatest disdain for you, Martingo offers the rings freely, assuming you can best his guardian, a stone harpy, to get the key to his vault.

The Tetrahedron

Penumbra enchants the ring, allowing you to enter the Tetrahedron. You must have a magical weapon or a glass sword to slay the beast within. Be sure to take the miniature Tetrahedron that remains when the larger one is destroyed.

The Sphere

Now that the ether is back to normal, Nicodemus can enchant the hourglass, which you will need to enter the Sphere in Despise.

There is no monster here, but you do have to follow a set pattern for the Moongates. Red, blue, blue, red will do the trick. As you did with the Tetrahedron, take the little Sphere you find. Once this has happened, the Time Lord will contact you, asking you to return to The Fellowship's Meditation Retreat.

The Meditation Retreat

By now you must already be a member of The Fellowship. Being one gets you into the Retreat. You must enter the dungeon there and locate the Cube generator. Use the hourglass to speak with the Time Lord, who will mention the need for the mineral called Caddellite.

The Helmets

Back in Moonglow, talk to Brion about Caddellite. He will tell you about Ambrosia, where you're most likely to find the rare mineral, and about Zorn, the blacksmith in Minoc who can fashion helmets for you and your companions. Nelson knows even more about Ambrosia, including its possible location. The Caddellite is hoarded by a three-headed hydra, with which you may want to chat before slaying it. As expected, Zorn can construct the helmets.

The Cube

Getting inside is simple with the helmets. However, getting the smaller Cube is much trickier. Follow the diagram carefully. The Time Lord will provide instructions for the little Cube's use.



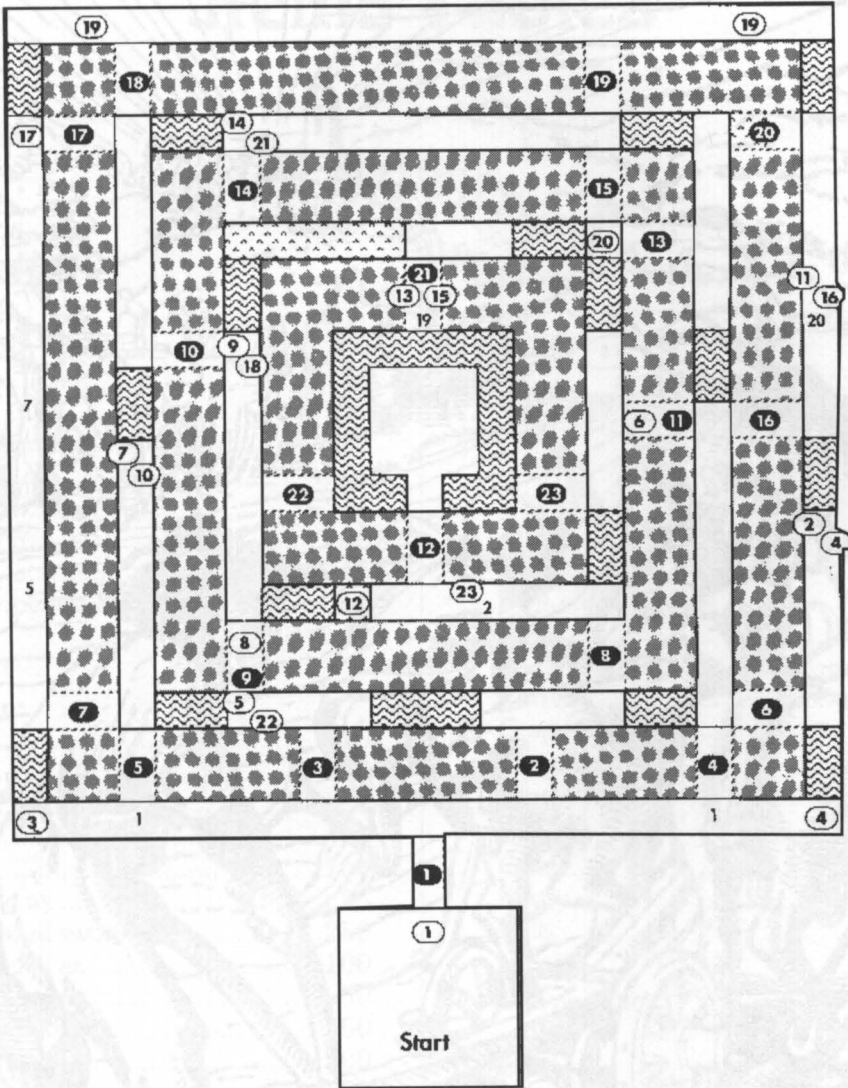
Buccaneer's Den

Keep the little Cube handy while speaking to the residents of this town, for it increases considerably the amount of information you get. Speak to Danag and ask about Elizabeth and Abraham, Hook, and a special project. Talk to any of the consorts—Roberto, Wench, or Martine—at the Baths and learn about the secret passages that populate the mountains. Sintag at the House of Games will have the key to the door leading to the passages. Inside the tunnels, you'll come across Hook's dwelling. There you'll find the Black Gate key, a scroll listing Fellowship assassination targets, and the navigation notes for the *Crown Jewel*. Should you meet them, the denizens of the dungeons have a few ancillary tidbits of advice. You can exit the passages via the Baths or the Fellowship hall.

The Isle of the Avatar

Use the Black Gate key to pass the barrier. Enter the dungeon and discover the Black Gate. Be prepared, because Hook, Forskis, Elizabeth, and Abraham will be there to stop you, as will Batlin. Once they're defeated, place the smaller generators in the pedestals around the gate to neutralize the barriers. Using Rudyom's transmuter wand, destroy the Black Gate.

Down and Dirty Walkthrough



Cube Puzzle

Number in black circles indicate temporary bridges.

Numbers in white circles mark triggers to create the identically numbered temporary bridge.

Numbers without circles mark triggers to destroy the identically numbered temporary bridge.

- Fire field
- Invisible barrier



Items Tables

Britain

Apothecary

Kessler:

Awakening	30
Curing	150
Healing	150
Illumination	50
Invisibility	100
Poison	15
Protection	150
Sleep	15
Silver serpent venom	50

Armourer

Grayson:

Dagger	20
Mace	20
Sling	20
Spear	25
Sword	100
Throwing ax	25
Two-handed sword	250
Two-handed ax	100
Leather armour	50
Chain armour	150
Plate armour	300
Leather gloves	20
Crested helm	75
Spiked shield	60

Foodstuffs

Figg:

Apple	5
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Fred:

Beef	20
Ham	20
Fowl	3
Mutton	3
Meat on a spit	3
Dried meat	2
Flounder	7
Trout	5

Kelly:

Eggs (dozen)	12
Apple	3
Banana	3
Carrots	3
Grapes	3
Pumpkin	4

Willy:

Bread	4
Cake	3
Pastry	3
Rolls	4

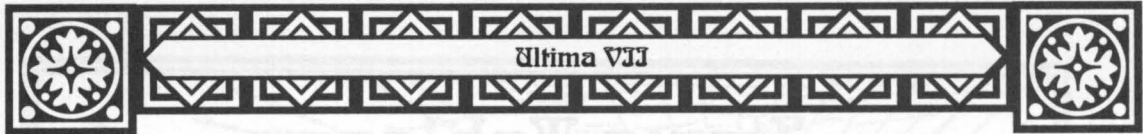
Gordon:

Fish and chips	8
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Healer

Csil:

Healing	40
Curing poison	30
Resurrection	450



Inn

Wayfarer's Inn.....10

Provisioners

Greg:

Backpack.....15
 Bag.....8
 Bucket.....8
 Hoe.....20
 Lockpick.....10
 Oil flask (dozen).....72
 Powder keg.....35
 Shovel.....20
 Torch.....5

Gaye:

Dress.....30
 Kidney belt.....20
 Leather boots.....40
 Pants.....30
 Shoes.....20
 Swamp boots.....50
 Tunic.....30

Spells

Nystul:

Black Pearl.....10
 Blood Moss.....6
 Ginseng.....4
 Mandrake Root.....10
 Sulfurous Ash.....8

1. [35] Create Food, Great Douse, Light, Locate
2. [55] Enchant, Mass Cure, Protection, Telekinesis
3. [85] Heal, Protect All, Sleep, Swarm
4. [95] Conjure, Mass Curse, Reveal, Unlock Magic
5. [125] Dispel Field, Fire Field, Great Heal, Invisibility

6. [145] Cause Fear, Fire Ring, Flame Strike, Sleep Field
7. [165] Death Bolt, Energy Field, Energy Mist, Mass Might
8. [195] Death Vortex, Invisibility All, Mass Death, Time Stop

Taverns

The Blue Boar, Lucy:

Beef.....20
 Ham.....20
 Mutton.....6
 Trout.....5
 Bread.....4
 Cake.....3
 Ale.....5
 Mead.....15
 Wine.....5
 Silverleaf.....50

The Blue Boar, Jeanette:

Beef.....18
 Ham.....18
 Mutton.....5
 Trout.....4
 Bread.....3
 Cake.....2
 Ale.....4
 Mead.....12
 Wine.....4
 Silverleaf.....45

Training

Denby:

Dexterity, Intelligence, Magic.....75

Sentri:

Dexterity.....30

Zella:

Dexterity, Combat.....45

Items Tables

Transport

Clint:

Ship deed, the <i>Beast</i>	800
Sextant.....	100

Diane:

Cart	120
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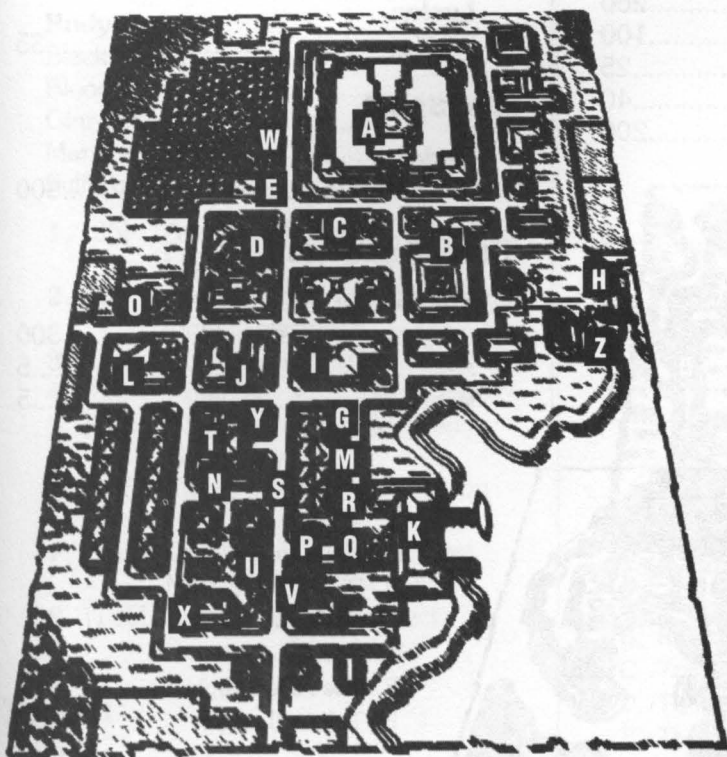
Miscellaneous

Mint:

Pays 10 gold per nugget, 100 per bar

Jeweler:

Ankh.....	200
Gem.....	75
Gold ring	100
Wedding band.....	150



- A. Lord British's Castle
- B. Mint
- C. Music Hall
- D. Royal Theatre
- E. Amusement area
- F. Fellowship hall
- G. Baker (Willy)
- H. Brownie
- I. The Blue Boar
- J. Wayfarer's Inn
- K. Shipwright (Clint)
- L. Trainer (Sentri)
- M. Provisions (Gaye)
- N. Provisions (Greg)
- O. Trainer (Zella)
- P. Jeweler (Sean)
- Q. Armourer (Grayson)
- R. Iolo's Bows
- S. Apothecary (Kessler)
- T. Healer (Csil)
- U. Fish & chips (Gordon)
- V. Carts (Diane)
- W. Royal orchard (Figg)
- X. Farmers' market
- Y. Trainer (Denby)
- Z. To egg farm (Mack)

Buccaneer's Den

Armourer

Budo:

Bow	40
Club	20
Dagger	20
Halberd	250
Sword	100
Arrows (dozen)	25
Bolts (dozen)	30
Plate armour	325
Plate leggings	200
Scale armour	100
Gauntlets	25
Gorget	40
Great helm	200

Inn

The Fallen Virgin	10
-------------------------	----

Provisioner

Budo:

Lockpick	10
Torch	5

Tavern

The Fallen Virgin:

Mutton	6
Flounder	5
Bread	5
Ale	5
Wine	5
Silverleaf	50

Training

Lucky:

Intelligence	35
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Transport

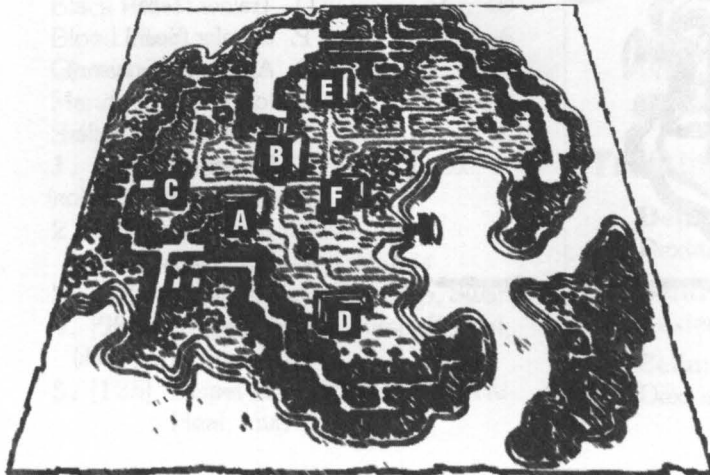
Budo:

Ship deed, the <i>Lusty Wench</i>	800
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Miscellaneous

The Baths:

Admission	300
Ale	5
Wine	5



- A. House of Games
- B. Baths
- C. Fellowship hall
- D. Budo's
- E. The Fallen Virgin
- F. Trainer (Lucky)

Cove

Healer

Jaana:

Healing	30
Curing poison	15
Resurrection	400

Inn

The Out'n'Inn	8
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Spells

Rudyom:

Black Pearl	5
Blood Moss.....	3
Ginseng.....	2
Mandrake Root	5
Sulfurous Ash.....	4

- [25] Awaken All, Cure, Detect Trap, Light
- [45] Destroy Trap, Fire Blast, Great Light, Telekinesis
- [65] Curse, Heal, Paralyze, Poison
- [85] Lightning, Mark, Recall, Seance
- [115] Charm, Dance, Explosion, Great Heal
- [135] Clone, Magic Storm, Poison Field, Sleep Field
- [155] Create Cold, Delayed Blast, Mass Charm, Restoration
- [185] Armageddon, Resurrect, Summon, Swordstrike

Tavern

The Emerald:

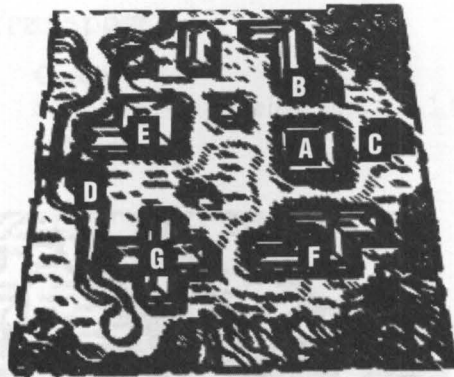
Mutton	3
Trout.....	3
Bread	2

Cake	2
Ale.....	2
Mead.....	7
Wine	3
Silverleaf.....	30

Training

Rayburt:

Strength, Dexterity, Combat.....	60
----------------------------------	----



- A. Townhall
- B. Rudyom
- C. Trainer (Rayburt)
- D. To the Shrine of Compassion
- E. The Emerald
- F. The Out'N'Inn
- G. Healer (Jaana)

Jhelom

Armourer

Kliffin:

Club	5
Dagger	10
Halberd	150
Mace	15
Main gauche	20
Morningstar	15
Sword	60
Scale armour	120
Gorget.....	30
Crested helm	150

Inn

The Bunk and Stool.....	5
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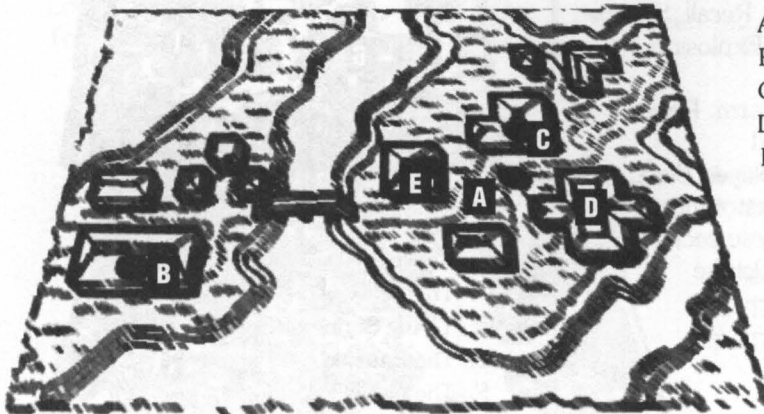
Tavern

The Bunk and Stool:

Ham	10
Jerky	25
Fish.....	3
Ale.....	2
Mead.....	5
Wine	2
Silverleaf.....	20

Training

De Snel: Combat (x2)	40
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- A. Commons
- B. The Bunk and Stool
- C. The Library of Scars (De Snel)
- D. Townhall
- E. Armourer (Kliffin)

Minoc

Armourer

Zorn:

Dagger	12
Mace	15
Sword	70
Throwing ax	20
Two-handed sword	125
Two-handed ax	70
Chain coif	80
Chain armour	100
Chain leggings	50
Plate armour	300
Plate leggings	120
Gauntlets	20
Crested helm	60
Great helm	150

Inn

The Chequered Cork	8
--------------------------	---

Tavern

The Chequered Cork:

Bread	3
Cheese	7
Grapes	2
Ale	3
Mead	10
Wine	5,
Silverleaf	35

Training

Karena:

Dexterity, Combat	20
-------------------------	----

Jakher:

Strength, Intelligence	20
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Transport

Owen:

Ship deed, the <i>Excellencia</i>	1,000
Sextant	150



- A. Artisans' guild
- B. Townhall
- C. Shipwright (Owen)
- D. The Chequered Cork
- E. Fellowship hall
- F. Trainers (Karena and Jakher)
- G. Armourer (Zorn)
- H. Sawmill



Moonglow

Apothecary

Mariah:

Awakening	15
Invisibility	90

Healer

Elad:

Healing	25
Curing poison	10
Resurrection	425

Provisioner

Carlyn:

Heavy cloak	50
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Dress	45
Hood	10
Pants	30
Tunic	30

Spells

Mariah:

Black Pearl	8
Garlic	1
Ginseng	2
Mandrake Root	7
Nightshade	6

1. Create Food	60
2. Destroy Trap	100
Cure	80
Protection	80
Detect Trap	100
Telekinesis	60
Light	40
Wizard Eye	40
3. Heal	40
4. Mark	40
Peer	60
Recall	60
Protect All	100
Seance	80
Sleep	80
Unlock Magic	100
5. Charm	60



- A. Lycaeum (apothecary, Mariah and Jillian)
- B. Fellowship hall
- C. The Freindly Knave
- D. Farmers
- E. Carlyn's
- F. Penumbra
- G. Trainer (Chad)
- H. Observatory
- I. Healer (Elad)

6.	Cause Fear	80
	Dance	100
	Clone	40
	Fire Field	80
	Magic Storm	100
	Invisibility	40
	Sleep Field	40
7.	Energy Field	100
8.	Invisibility All	100
	Energy Mist	60
	Resurrect	40
	Mass Might	40
	Swordstrike	80
	Restoration	80
	Time Stop	60

Tavern

The Friendly Knave:

Ham	10
Mutton rations	12
Trout	2
Cake	2
Ale	3
Wine	4
Silverleaf	25

Training

Chad:

Dexterity, Combat	45
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Jillian:

Intelligence, Magic	35
---------------------------	----

New Magincia

Inn

The Modest Damsel	3
-------------------------	---

Tavern

The Modest Damsel:

Jerky	12
Fish	5
Ale	2
Mead	5
Wine	1

Transport

Russell:

Ship deed, the Nymphet	600
Sextant	40

Miscellaneous

Flower bouquet	12
----------------------	----

- A. The Modest Damsel
- B. Alagner's
- C. Flower shop
- D. Townhall
- E. Shipwright (Russell)



Paws

Foodstuff

Thurston:	
Sack of flour	12
Morfin:	
Beef	2
Ham	4
Mutton	3
Andrew:	
Milk	3
Cheese	2
Camille:	
Carrots	1

Inn

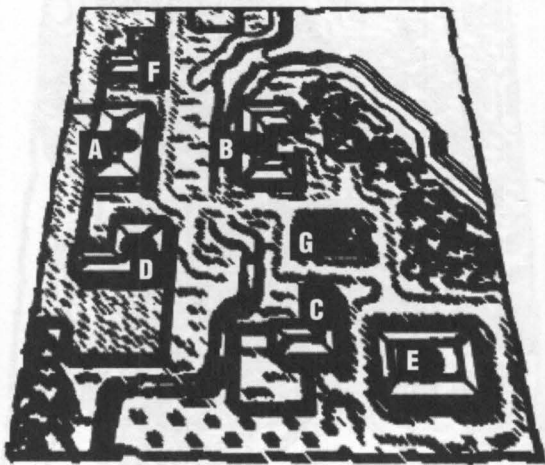
The Salty Dog	5
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Provisioner

Beverlea:	
Bell	6
Cradle	10
Hourglass	5
Lute	20
Sextant	20
Rocking horse	12
Spittoon	1

Tavern

The Salty Dog:	
Jerky	12
Bread	2
Cheese	4
Grapes	1
Ale	1
Mead	4
Wine	2



- A. Shelter
- B. Miller (Thurston)
- C. Butcher (Morfin)
- D. Dairy (Andrew)
- E. The Salty Dog
- F. Camille
- G. House of Items (Beverlea)

Serpent's Hold

Armourer

Jordan:

Bow	35
Magic bow	400
Crossbow	110
Triple crossbow	350
Arrows (dozen)	20
Bolts (dozen)	20

Healer

Leigh:

Healing	25
Curing poison	8
Resurrection	385

Provisioner

Lady Jehanne:

Backpack	13
Cannonball	10
Jug	3
Lockpick	10
Oil flasks (dozen)	60
Powder keg	30
Torch	4

Tavern

The Hallowed Dock:

Ham	15
Mutton rations	16
Trout	3
Bread	6
Cake	1
Grapes	3
Milk	4
Cheese	3
Ale	2
Mead	10
Wine	5

Training

Menion:

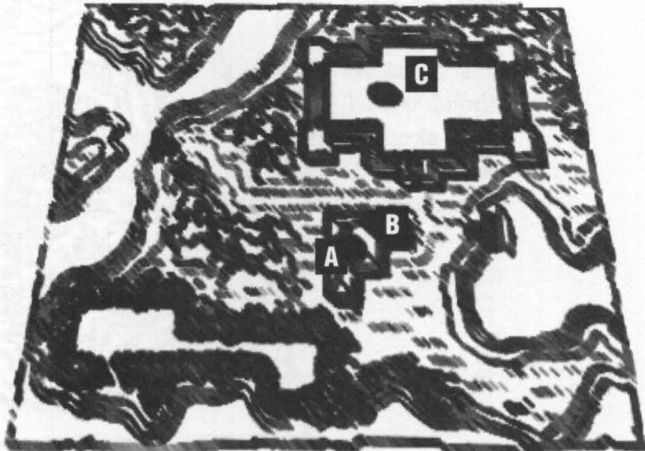
Strength, Combat	45
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Transport

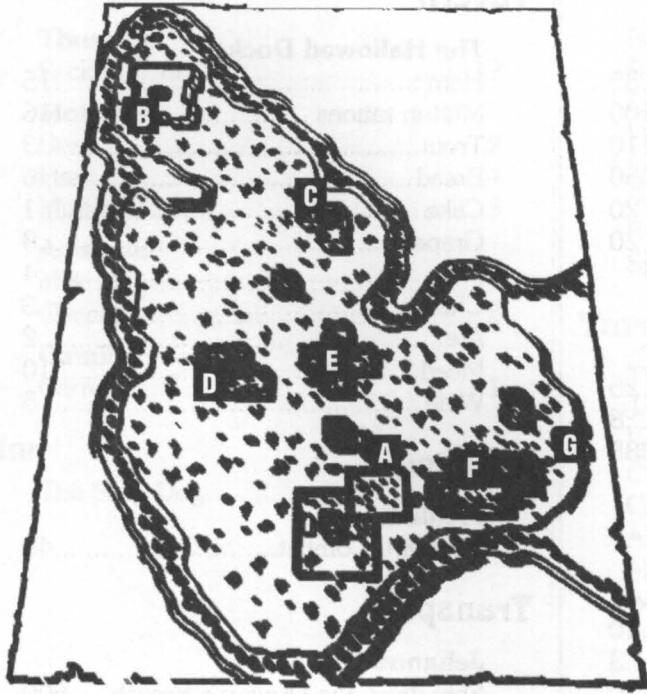
Jehanne:

Ship deed, the <i>Dragon's Breath</i>	600
---	-----

- A. Menion's
- B. Iolo's South
- C. The Hold (all other noted locations)



Skara Brae



- A. Mordra
- B. Dark Tower
- C. Alchemist
- D. Blacksmith
- E. Townhall
- F. The Keg O' Spirits
- G. Docks

Spektran



Terfin

Healer

Inmanilem:

Healing	25
Curing poison	10
Resurrection	430

Provisioner

Betra:

Bag	6
Bucket	3
Oil flasks (dozen)	72
Powder keg	35
Shovel	14
Torch	4

Sarpling:

Gold chain	20
Gold clawring	10
Gold earrings	25
Gold horn caps	30

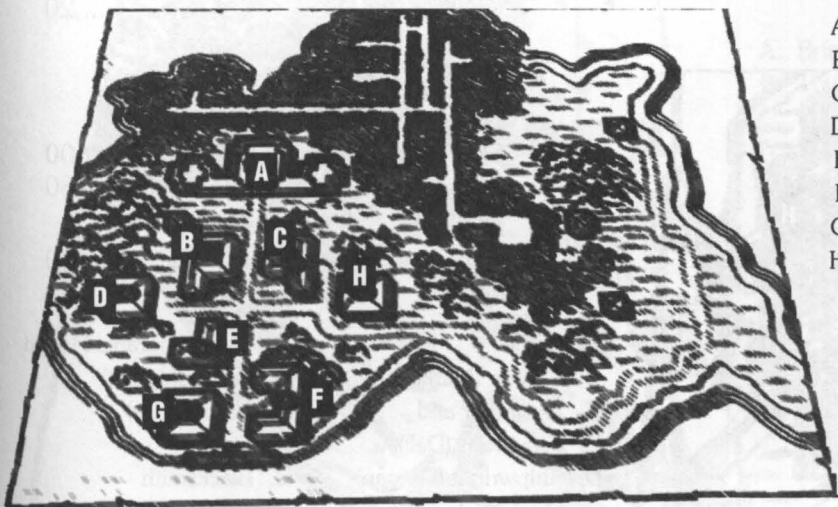
Tavern

Ham	9
Mutton rations	12
Jerky	12
Flounder	2
Bread	1
Cake	1
Cheese	3
Grapes	1
Milk	3
Ale	1
Mead	7
Wine	2

Training

Inforlem:

Strength, Dexterity, Combat	50
Intelligence (x2), Magic	50



- A. Hall of Knowledge
- B. Learning center
- C. Fellowship hall
- D. Healer (Inmanilem)
- E. Trainer (Inforlem)
- F. Gargoyle tavern
- G. Betra's Provisions
- H. Sarpling's shop

Trinsic

Armourer

Dell:

Bow	30
Club	15
Dagger	10
Mace	15
Sling	50
Two-handed sword	80
Two-handed hammer	60
Arrows (dozen)	10
Bolts (dozen)	15
Leather leggings	25
Chain leggings	35
Leather armour	40
Leather helm	25
Wooden shield	15

Healer

Chantu:

Healing	30
Curing poison	15
Resurrection	400

Provisioner

Dell:

Backpack	12
Bedroll	15
Bucket	2
Lockpick	8
Swamp boots	40
Torch	4

Tavern

The Honorable Hound:

Mutton	3
Flounder	3
Bread	2
Cake	2
Ale	2
Mead	7
Wine	3
Silverleaf	30

Training

Markus:

Combat	20
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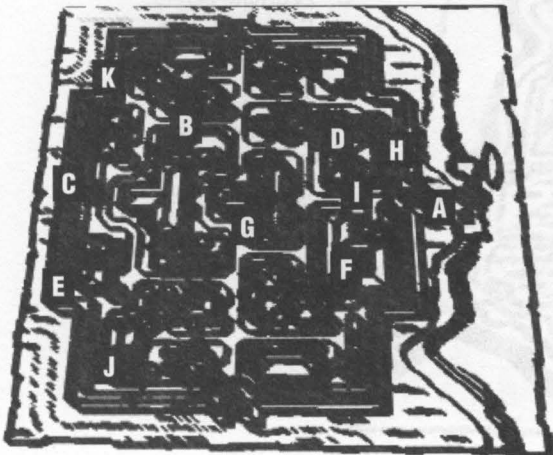
Transport

Gargan:

Ship deed, the <i>Scaly Eel</i>	600
Sextant	80

Petre:

Cart	60
------------	----



- | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| A. Docks | F. The Honorable Hound |
| B. Trainer (Markus) | G. Fellowship hall |
| C. Armourer and Provisions (Dell) | H. Carts (Petre) |
| D. Shipwright (Gargan) | I. Stables |
| E. Healer (Chantu) | J. Blacksmith |
| | K. Christopher's house |

Vesper

Apothecary

Wis-Sur:

Awakening	10
Curing	150
Protection	150
Sleep	30

Provisioner

Eldroth:

Backpack	10
Bag	3
Hoe	10
Oil flasks (dozen)	48
Powder keg	30
Shovel	10
Torch	3

Aurvidlem:

Bucket	4
Cloth	3
Jar	2
Oil flasks (dozen)	60
Powder keg	25
Torch	4

Spells

Wis-Sur:

Black Pearl	34*
Blood Moss	16*
Mandrake Root	32*
Spider Silk	20*
Sulfurous Ash	25*

* Or best offer.



- A. Britannian Mining Company
- B. Townhall
- C. The Gilded Lizard
- D. Provisioner (Eldroth)
- E. Trainier and Provisions (Zaksam)
- F. Gargoyle tavern
- G. Trainer (Aurvidlem)
- H. Apothecary (Wis-Sur)
- I. Sawmill

1. [30] Great Douse, Great Ignite, Light, Locate
2. [50] Destroy Trap, Enchant, Fire Blast, Great Light
3. [70] Curse, Paralyze, Poison, Swarm
4. [90] Conjure, Lightning, Mass Curse, Reveal
5. [120] Dispel Field, Explosion, Fire Field, Mass Sleep
6. [140] Clone, Fire Ring, Flame Strike, Tremor

Taverns

The Gilded Lizard:

Mutton rations	20
Flounder	4

Bread	4
Ale	1
Mead	5
Wine	1

Gargoyle Tavern:

Ham	10
Mutton rations	14
Cake	5
Ale	2
Wine	9

Training

Zaksam:

Combat (x2), Strength	40
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Yew and Empath Abbey

Healer

Reyna:

Healing	30
Curing poison	10
Resurrection	400

Spells

Nicodemus:

Blood Moss	3
Garlic	2
Mandrake Root	5
Nightshade	5
Spider Silk	3

- [25] Cure, Detect Trap, Great Ignite, Locate
- [45] Destroy Trap, Enchant, Protection, Wizard Eye
- [65] Paralyze, Peer, Poison, Swarm
- [85] Mark, Recall, Seance, Unlock Magic

- [115] Dispel Field, Explosion, Invisibility, Mass Sleep
- [135] Fire Ring, Magic Storm, Poison Field, Tremor
- [155] Death Bolt, Delayed Blast, Energy Field, Energy Mist
- [185] Death Vortex, Mass Death, Summon, Swordstrike

Training

Bradman:

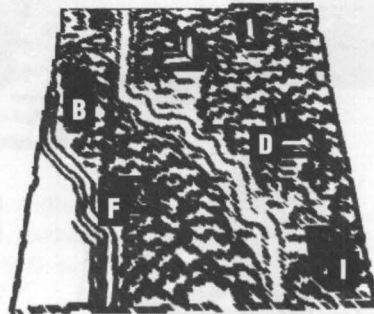
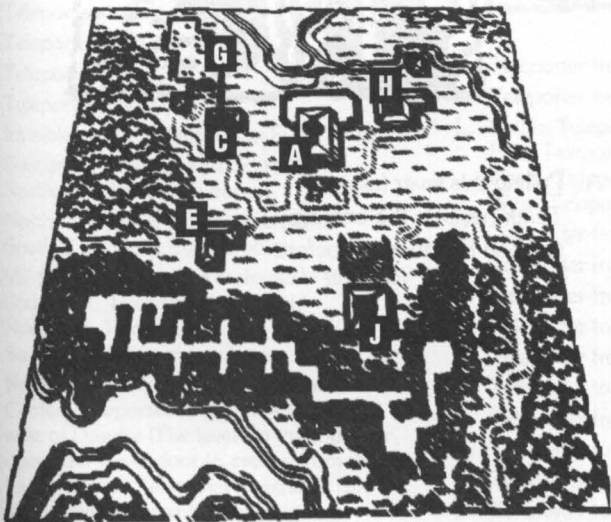
Dexterity (x2)	30
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Penni:

Strength, Combat	35
------------------------	----

Perrin:

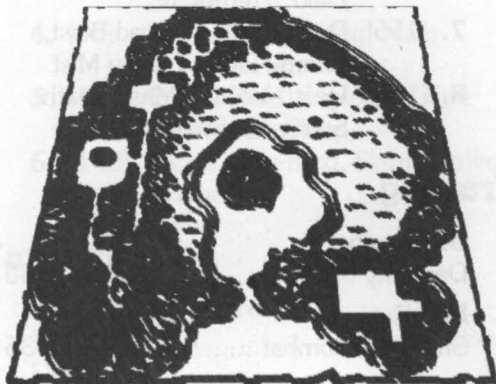
Intelligence (x2), Magic	45
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- The Brotherhood of the Rose
- Tseramed
- Scholar (Perrin)
- Trainer (Penni)
- Healer (Reyna)
- Logger
- Cemetery (Tiery)
- High Court
- Archery trainer (Bradman)
- Spells (Nichodemus)

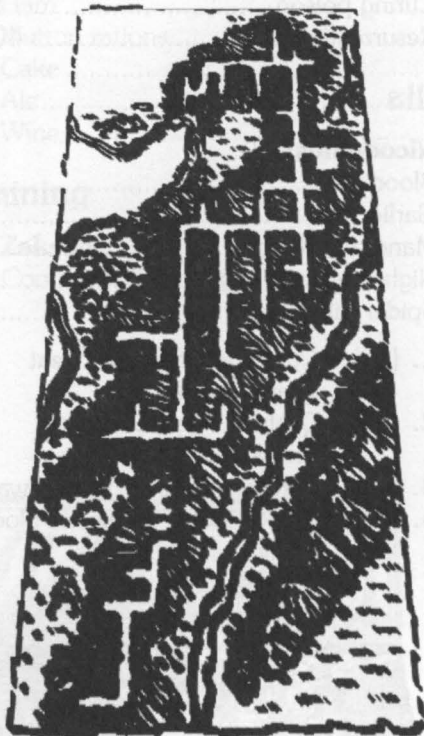
Dungeons of Britannia

Ambrosia



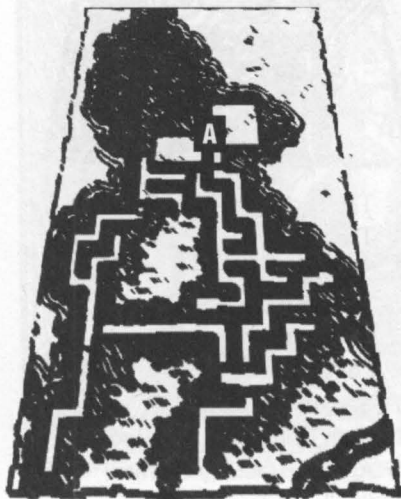
- A. Illusionary wall
- B. Door through invisible wall

Covetous

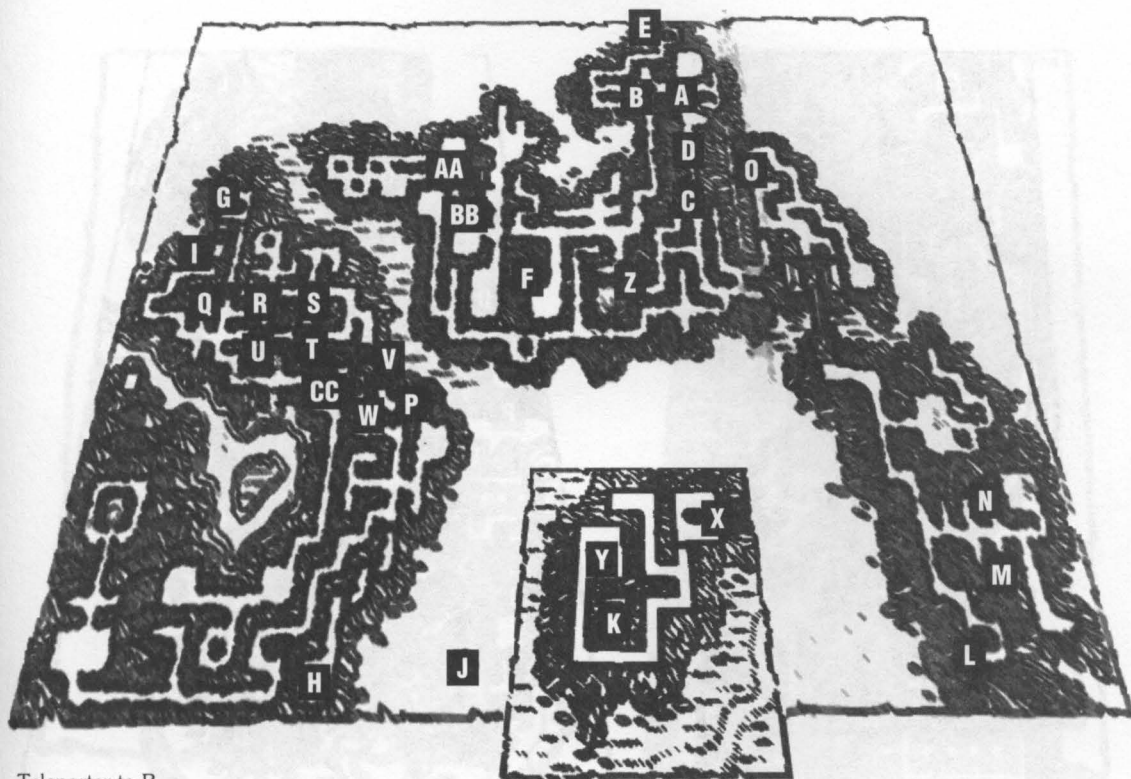


- A. Pulling this lever (using *Telekinesis*) is the only way to open the door just before it.

Deceit



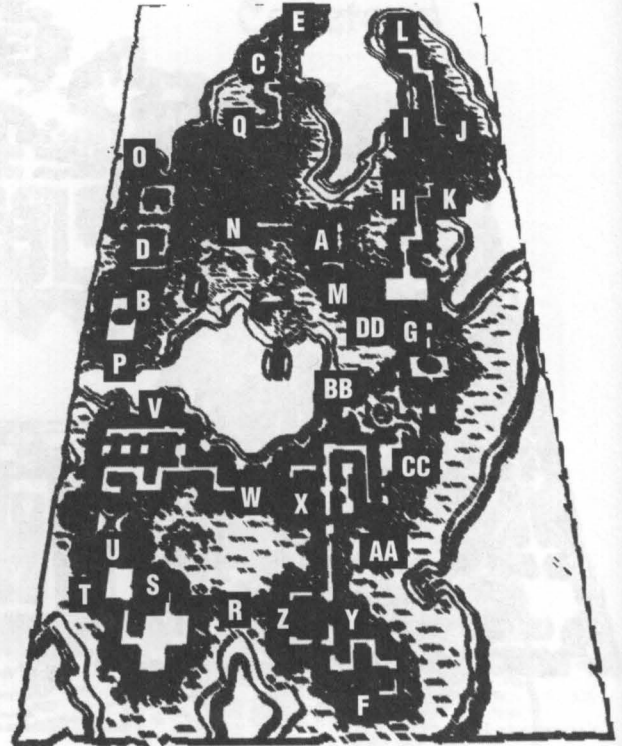
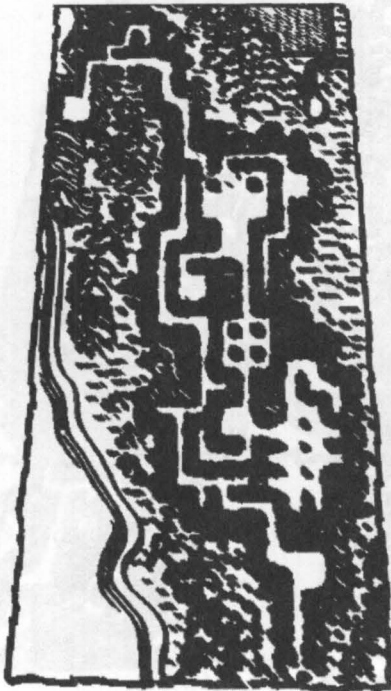
Despise



- A. Teleporter to B
- B. Teleporter from A
- C. Teleporter to D
- D. Teleporter from C
- E. Invisible path to teleporter to F: northwest
- F. Southeast: Teleporter to G: north
Northwest: Teleporter from E
- G. North: Teleporter from F: southeast
South: Teleporter from L: south
- H. (All three points are up an invisible staircase)
Southwest: Teleporter to I: north
Northeast: Teleporter to J
Southeast: Teleporter to K
- I. North: Teleporter from H: southwest
Center: Teleporter to Selwyn's tower, just west of Despise (The lever on the top floor opens the secret door to escape from the tower.) South: Teleporter to pirate's lair, at the northeasternmost tip of Britania
- J. Teleporter from H: northeast
- K. Teleporter from H: southeast
- L. South: Teleporter to G: south
East: Teleporter to M
North: Teleporter to N
West: Teleporter to O
- M. Teleporter from L: east
- N. Teleporter from L: north
- O. Teleporter from L: west
- P. Teleporter to Q
- Q. Teleporter from P
- R. Teleporter to S
- S. Teleporter from R
- T. Teleporter to U
- U. Teleporter from T
- V. Teleporter to W
- W. Teleporter from V
- X. West: lever opens door into Y
Southcentral: Teleporter to H
Southeast: Teleporter to wooded area just west of Despise and east of the beach
- Y. Door can only be opened with lever at X
- Z. Switch for door in corridor due south
- AA. Heading west, first lever opens first two doors. Second lever opens third door. First two doors shut again after passing third door.
- BB. Lever here opens first two doors at AA
- CC. Impossible

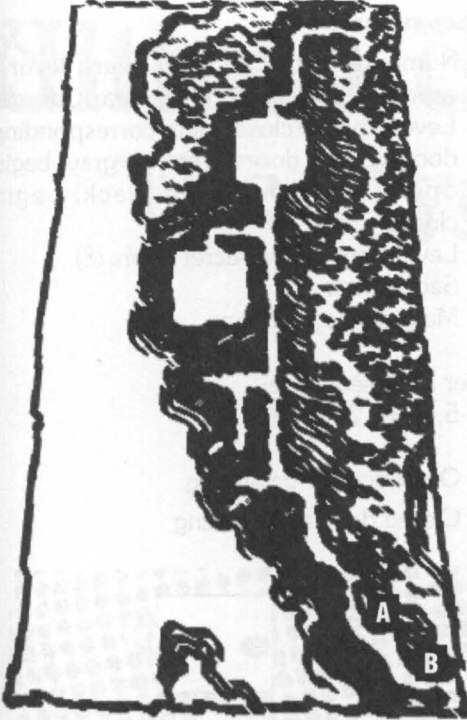
Destard

Isle of the Avatar



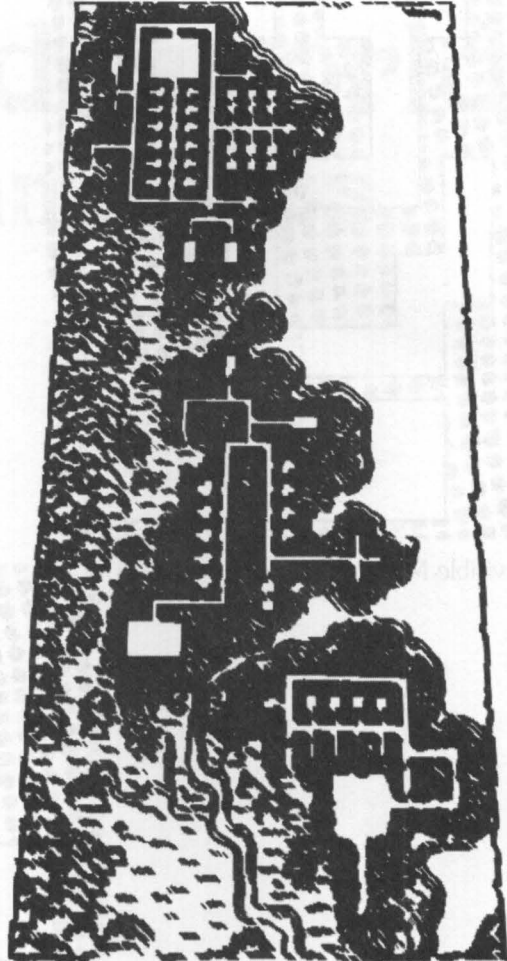
- A. Teleporter to B (and from C or D)
 B. Teleporter to C (and from A)
 C. Teleporter to A (before E is reached) or D (after E is reached)
 D. Teleporter to A (and from C)
 E. When chair here has been occupied, C teleports to D, rather than to A
 F. Teleporter to and from G
 G. Teleporter to and from F
 H. Teleporter to I
 I. Teleporter from H
 J. Teleporter to K
 K. Teleporter from J
 L. Teleporter to M: center
 M. Center: Teleporter from L
 Northwest: Teleporter to N
 Northeast: Teleporter from Q
- N. Teleporter from M: northwest
 O. Teleporter to P
 P. Teleporter from O
 Q. Teleporter to M: northeast
 R. Black Gate key necessary to open this gate
 S. Black Gate key necessary to open this door
 T. Slider switch for U
 U. Door opened by switch at T
 V. Three switches for cells to southwest; Left and right switches change door selection one door to the left or the right. Center switch opens the selected door.
 W. Switch opens east door
 X. Lever puzzle
 Y. Switch here opens sliding doors to northwest and southwest
 Z. Lever here opens door to southeast
 AA. Two levers at south each open a door to this room (Doors automatically close as you enter this room).
 BB. Lever here opens secret door out of room.
 CC. Sliding doors with hidden triggers (check under Fellowship medallion)
 DD. Invisible maze

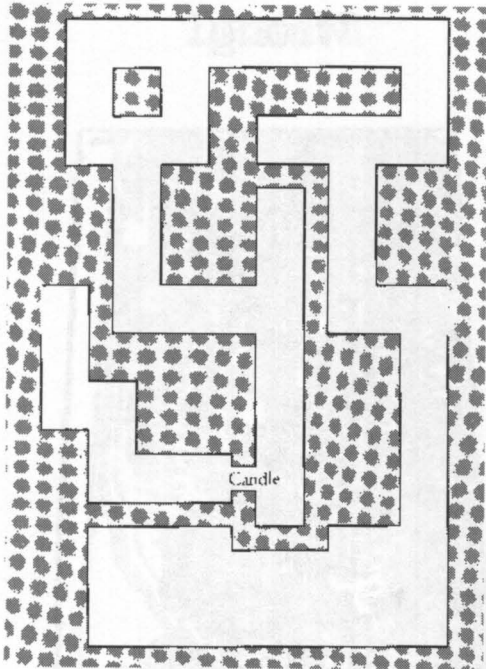
Spirit Tunnels



- A. Teleporter to (B)
- B. Teleporter from (A)

Wrong





Invisible Maze

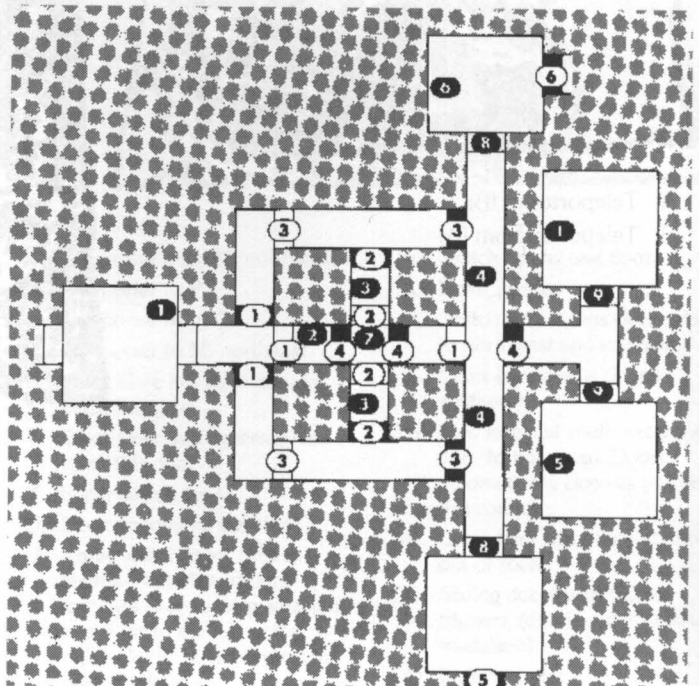
Lever Puzzle

- 1-6 Numbers in black circles mark levers; numbers in white circles mark doors. Levers open/close their corresponding doors. Some doors (those in gray) begin open; other doors (in black) begin closed.
- 7 Lever here opens secret doors (8)
- 8 Secret door
- 9 Magically locked door

Proper lever sequence:

5, 4, 6, 7, 4, 8 (or 9)

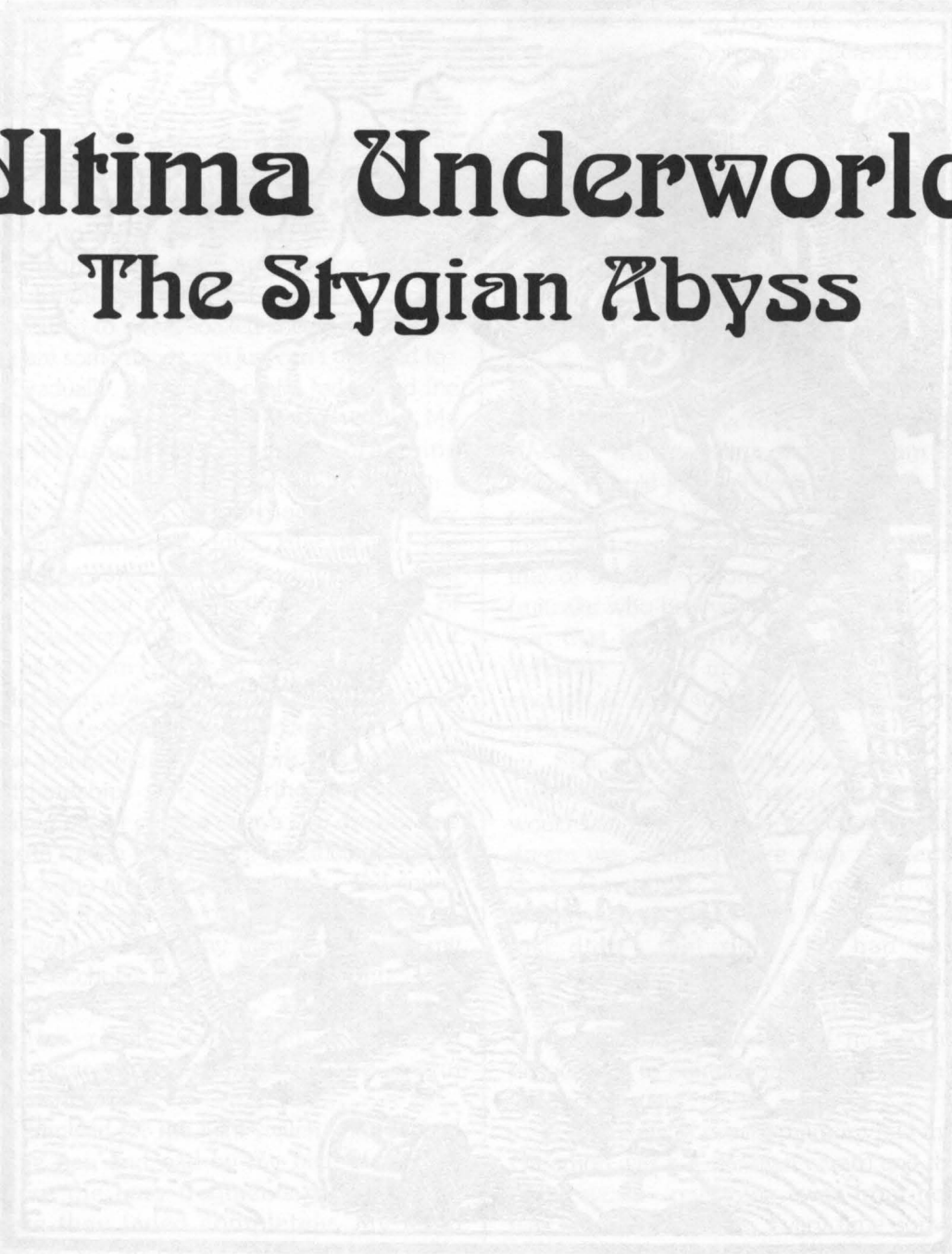
- Open door at beginning
- Closed door at beginning



Lever Puzzle

Ultima Underworld

The Stygian Abyss







Chapter 1

o! ...”

I awoke with a start, in a tangle of clammy bedding. Vague memories of the all-too-familiar nightmare began to fade even as my eyes adjusted to the early morning light. After so many nights of tossing and turning, and so many frightening visions, I should have been accustomed to sweat-soaked sheets, but I guess there are some things you just can't get used to.

Gradually, the dream realm faded and the real world took on reassuring solidity. My pulse returned to normal, my breathing slowed, and my hands stopped trembling. I shook my head. Britannia's enemies—Mondain, Minax, Exodus, Blackthorn, the Gargoyles, and countless others—had all done their best to scare the bejeezus out of me. This dream was doing a better job of it than all of them combined.

I'd been dragging around like a zombie—a tired one—since the nightmares had begun a few weeks earlier. My work was suffering. My friendships were suffering. My life was spiraling out of control over a silly dream, one I couldn't even remember. The incongruity of it struck me and I began to laugh. The sound echoed in the stillness of my bedroom like ...

I stopped short; my breath caught in my throat. “Echoed like what?” I thought. “Like the voice in my dream!” That was when laughter really took hold of me. I'd remembered something of the awful nightmare at last.

I fumbled for the light switch and reached for the pen and pad by my bed, hoping to capture the hazy fragments of the dream before they faded completely. My hand seemed to move on its own, without

conscious direction from me. The sound of the pen scratching on paper seemed too loud, as if amplified by the stillness of the hour. “This time I've got it,” I thought, but I was too late. Once again, the memories faded before I could capture them. There was just one word on the page, a word that meant nothing to me, though it would soon change my life.

The word was *Garamon*.



Regular as clockwork, the dream returned each night for several nights thereafter. Always, the memory of the dream faded before I could jot it all down, but each night I remembered a bit more. I soon figured out that Garamon was a man's name—or, rather, that of a ghost. Before you go thinking I'm a fruitcake who believes in ghosts, let me assure you that I'm no fruitcake, but I do, most definitely, believe in ghosts. I've encountered enough of them to know they exist—at least in Britannia.

Still, this was Earth, and I have yet to meet a ghost here. That being the case, it would have been logical to conclude that the dream was nothing more than a dream, and that Garamon was a figment of my imagination. It would have been logical, but it just didn't feel right. I'd had enough experience of both illusion and delusion to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Garamon was real and that he was trying desperately to contact me. For what reason, I could only guess.

Fragments of dream memory told me that Garamon was a Britannian wizard and that his home world—my home away from home—was in peril. It figures. Every time something horrible threatens Britannia, I get the call. It's

a wonder the people there don't run when they see me coming—"Uh-oh. It's the Avatar. Must be some big trouble brewing!"

Anyway, this ghostly Garamon character was powerful enough to accomplish something beyond the capabilities of any wizard I'd ever encountered in Britannia, beyond even the capabilities of Lord British himself. He was trying to contact me not just from another dimension, something I knew to be possible and, as these things go, simple, but from beyond the grave!

What was he trying to tell me? Each night, Garamon's message came through more clearly and I managed to hold on to a bit more, as if he and I were becoming attuned to one another. One night, I learned that Garamon had a brother, also a wizard, but one who'd succumbed to the dark side of the force, or the Britannian equivalent. The next night, I learned of an experiment gone awry in the Great Stygian Abyss, one of Britannia's most inhospitable dungeons, but I couldn't quite recall the details.

I felt keenly Garamon's anguish at Britannia's peril. In fact, I shared it. Once the people of that world had called me The Stranger, but now I was the Avatar, and my best friends in the worlds lived there. I was powerless. There was nothing I could do. In the past, threats to Britannia had always been followed by the appearance of a Moongate to take me there, but though I checked the circle of stones behind my house nightly, no Moongate appeared. I had no way to reach Britannia on my own. I almost began to welcome the dreams, hoping Garamon would marshal the energy needed to tell me what to do.

One night my hopes were fulfilled.



It was the beginning of the fourth night of dreaming—of starting from my bed in fright, with little memory of what horrified me so. With a sense of *déjà vu*, I began to dream, but in a moment of startling lucidity I determined that I would not forget what took place. I would remember it all.

A shimmering blue whirlpool drifted in and out of focus before me, finally resolving itself into the crystal-clear image of an elderly man. His ghostly eyes captivated me. When he spoke, his voice quavered like that of a man whose every muscle is tensed. I could only imagine the strain of communicating across time, space, and whatever barriers separate the living from the dead. Garamon's strength of will was awe-inspiring.

"Treachery and doom!" he said. "My brother would unleash a great evil upon us. Heed the words of Garamon—Britannia is in peril!"

I wanted to scream, to beg him to tell me more, but I had no voice. Clearly, I had much to learn about interdimensional communication. As this thought crossed my mind, I felt a strange tugging sensation, as if I were a kite and someone were jerking the string that kept me from flying free. I sensed that this was Garamon's doing; that if I allowed myself to be drawn further into the dream instead of waking up, he could take me to Britannia.

But as on previous nights, terror gripped me. Who was this Garamon? I had no way of knowing. Could he be trusted? Was he an enemy trying to drive me mad, or to lure me into a trap? During my visits to Britannia, I'd made many enemies. Could Garamon be one of them?

This night, I put such thoughts out of my head. Whoever Garamon was and whatever his motives, I had to reach Lord British—he

could tell me what was going on. He would know what to do. Friend or foe, Garamon was my ticket to Britannia.

I allowed myself to be drawn to him. Garamon's face whirled into oblivion and I followed.



I emerged from the void disoriented, and with the sound of a woman's screams ringing in my ears. Instantly alert, I glanced quickly about, but the room was dark and I waited anxiously for my eyes to adjust. Had Garamon deposited me in the boudoir of a now-terrified woman? Was the lady's husband or lover about to pulverize me? As my vision returned, I saw that I was safe, at least for the moment. No one threatened me. I was in a room hewn from stone. There was a pillar to my left and a bed—empty—to the right. The bedclothes were in a state of disarray. Through a window on the far side of the room I caught a glimpse of two moons low in the early morning sky—the two moons of Britannia! So far, so good—Garamon had taken me to Britannia!

But there was no time to savor my affection for my adopted home, because the awful screaming continued. Then the view of Britannia's moons was blocked by a hulking brown creature with a thrashing sack slung over its massive shoulder. The monster glared at me and growled, a low, guttural sound that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Before I could react, the beast leaped with surprising grace through the window. I no longer believed that I was the cause of the woman's distress, nor that her shrieks of absolute terror were the result of my unexpected arrival in her chambers.

I no longer cared about the peril to

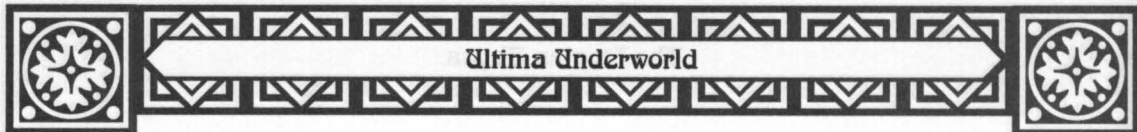
Britannia, or about Garamon's motives, or even about the fact that I was wearing nothing but my pajamas. There was a monster to be fought, a lady to be saved. Without pausing to consider my lack of armour, weapons, or a plan, I leaped toward the window, but before I took two steps, a man leaped into my path from behind the drapes framing the window. Yellow eyes burned beneath his blood-red hood. His dark-brown skin looked like leather. He seemed barely human. His voice, like something from beyond the grave, made him seem even less so.

"A visitor," he rasped, "and from far away indeed. Were he not dead, I'd suspect my brother sent thee. No matter, thou shalt serve to draw the hounds from the scent."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he paid no attention. Raising his hands above his head, he moved his fingers with unearthly dexterity. Was there something in his hands? I thought so, but I couldn't be sure. Suddenly, a blue halo surrounded him.

"Wait just a minute!" I cried, finding my voice, but he could no longer hear me. Only his glowing yellow eyes remained visible—the rest of him had disappeared. Then the eyes were gone, too, and I was alone. I rushed to the window and leaned out as far as I dared. The red wizard had teleported to parts unknown, but his ape-like friend might still be around and I could still hear the screams of the woman whose bedroom I'd invaded.

Dark mountains rose in the distance. For a moment the setting looked familiar, but I lost the thought as another scream reached me from below. The strange, shambling creature was, as I'd hoped, still in sight. It scrambled over the outer wall of the castle and rushed down a path that led toward the dark woods at the foot of the mountains. I leaped



up to the window with considerably less grace than the brown creature and prepared to jump down after it. The drop was considerable, probably deadly.

As I considered my options, I heard a cracking sound behind me. I turned in time to see the chamber's wooden door swing wide and crash against the stone wall. Four guards in red tunics and chain mail stood there, swords and spears at the ready.

"What hast thou done with our lord's daughter, Ariel?" cried the first guard as he rushed toward me. "Dropped her below to an accomplice, I'll wager. Well, he'll nay escape us. An' when we catch 'im, you'll both hang! Baron Almríc'll see to that!"

I gave some thought to jumping, but decided I stood a better chance with guards than with gravity. As they roughly hauled me away, I wondered whether I'd made the right decision.

"I'm the Avatar," I said. "The Avatar!"

"Sure you are," the lead guard replied. "I ain't heard that in days an' no one's seen 'ide nor 'air of The Avatar in two 'undred year."

They all laughed. The lead guard rapped me on the forehead with a gloved hand. His buddies laughed harder.

I failed to see the humor.



"Baron Almríc is a pompous boob ... Ariel and Corwin XOXOX ... Day ### I## IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII ... Shoud I live to see light o day agin Corwin be a dead man ..."

After two days in a dungeon, the graffiti carved on its wall were beginning to lose their charm. I hoped I wouldn't have to remain here as long as the poor fellow who'd scratched so many lines in the wall.

Each morning and evening, a guard came and shoved a wooden bowl, filled with cold, watery gruel, through a slit in the base of the cell door. It tasted terrible and there was never enough of it. (Such are the paradoxes of prison life.) My complaints fell on deaf ears, though once I managed to get the guard to grunt at me. So much for human companionship. Given the sorry state of my pajamas, I could hardly blame the guy.

When I tired of reading the walls, I passed the time by wondering where I was. Britannia, for sure, but where in Britannia? I'd never heard of any Baron Almríc, or of his daughter Ariel, or of the mysterious Corwin who featured so prominently in so much of the literature of the cell. Could there be parts of this world I'd never visited? How long had it been since my last visit to Britannia? Had it really been two hundred years, as the guard had said? The thought seemed preposterous, but I was pretty familiar with the people and places of Britannia, and yet here I was in a place I couldn't identify, having been captured by people I didn't know (and who most certainly did not know me!).

On the morning of the third day, the Grunter (as I'd come to think of my daytime associate) threw open the door of my cell and threw in a rough cloth tunic and a pair of breeches.

"Put dese on," he said.

He was the one with the sword, so I complied. Any change in routine was fine with me, but the Grunter had to spoil the mood.

"We never 'ang a man wot isn't rightly dressed," he said, laughing. I was getting very tired of people laughing at my expense. Before I could comment on his manners, though, the door swung shut and I was alone once again.

Several tense hours later, the Grunter and the lead guard from the other morning came for a visit. They shackled my hands and feet and dragged me out of the cell, through dark, twisting passageways, up several flights of stone stairs, past several pairs of well-armed and armoured guards, and finally into a large chamber not unlike Lord British's throne room. Now we were getting somewhere.

A heavy-set, bearded man sat upon a marble throne. Four more guards, alert and not a little nervous, hovered protectively nearby. A gold band circled the bearded man's brow, but couldn't completely hide the furrows there. He was as tense as his men. If the furrowed brow hadn't tipped me off, the sight of his fists, clenched tight—or of his foot, jiggling madly beneath his robe—would have betrayed him. He was doing his best to appear calm, but he was clearly a man distressed.

Ignoring me, the man turned to the leader of the guards.

"What news, Corwin?"

I turned and cast an admiring glance at the lead guard. So this was the famous Corwin, captor of so many who had preceded me in my cell. Any man so widely hated was someone to take note of. I wondered if he and Arial were really an item ...

"Forgive us, milord," Corwin said nervously. "The foul creature wot carried off poor Arial 'as escaped. A score of us gave chase, but it fled into the Stygian Abyss with 'er."

The Abyss! The foulest pit in all of Britannia! Now, at least, I knew where I was—the Isle of the Avatar! But who were these people? And wasn't the Abyss sealed forever? Corwin was still talking. Perhaps he could provide me with a clue.

"We were attacked—Goblins and worse, milord. Only three of us survived!"

"I see," the Baron said gravely. His voice quavered a bit.

For the first time, the Baron acknowledged my presence. He stared at me for what seemed an eternity.

"Sir," I said, "I am the Av ..."

"Silence!" he cried. Instantly, the tip of Corwin's sword touched my back. "Thou shalt speak only when spoken to, knave! Thou'rt naught but a scoundrel and thy words carry little enough weight here. Try not my patience."

He sank into silence and stared at the ground. I did the same.

Several moments passed. Almríc was lost in thought. I could only imagine what he was feeling. Finally, Corwin, having found his courage, tapped a heel lightly on the stone floor. The sound seemed to shock Almríc out of his reverie. He looked up at me.

"I was warned of thy coming," he said quietly. "Last fortnight, an apparition of an old, haggard man appeared in my dreams. 'Guard thy daughter well,' it warned, 'for an evil one shall come to steal her away.' I posted guards at Arial's door, but still thou didst take her from me! They say thou didst drop her to a troll waiting below."

He winced, as if imagining his daughter falling from a great height.

"Who art thou and what hast thou to say in thine own defense?"

"My lord, I am a loyal friend and ally of Lord British ..."

"And thy name—what be thy name, friend of kings?"

"My given name would mean nothing to you, but I am known to many in Britannia as the Avatar."

A couple of the guards tittered as I said this, but a withering glance from Almríc silenced them instantly. The man had a commanding presence, not unlike that of Lord British.

"Go on, now. What was thy role in my daughter's abduction? Choose thy words carefully. Thy life depends upon thy next utterance."

I felt Corwin's sword pierce the cloth of my tunic. The bastard was enjoying this. I was getting angry, but I took a deep breath and tried not to let it show. Almríc was a grieving father and I would gain nothing by provoking him.

"I am innocent, my Lord." I said. "I know nothing of the disappearance of your daughter other than this: A man in red, a mage, is responsible. He had an accomplice—a troll-like creature—but I am guilty of nothing more than trying to stop them. I, too, have been visited in dreams by a ghostly advisor. He warned of a threat to all of Britannia, a threat emerging from the Stygian Abyss."

Then an idea came to me.

"Take me to the Abyss. Though your men were driven away, I may succeed—I have braved the depths of that foul pit before. I may be able to rescue your daughter and uncover the nature of the threat to this world."

Almríc closed his eyes and fell into silence once more. Barely middle-aged, he seemed older than his years. Finally, he spoke.

"Whether thou speak truth or falsehood, I cannot say. Stories tell of the coming of the Avatar, but years have passed since he visited here. Still, if thou art truly the Avatar, then perhaps thou canst offer hope. None here can survive the Stygian Abyss and rescue Arial."

He paused, weighing his words carefully. When next he spoke, his voice filled the hall.

"My mind is set. Corwin shall take thee to the Abyss. Return with my daughter and thy innocence shall be proven. If thou dost not return, *Avatar*, then thy lies shall have brought thee low."



Corwin and the Grunter escorted me out of Almríc's throne room and into the open courtyard between the keep and the outer wall of the castle. I struggled to keep up, but I was shackled and the going was slow. We entered a low building that backed up against the castle wall. The smell told me at once that this was a stable.

Without saying a word, the Grunter saddled a horse and attached one end of a rope to the saddle. I had a feeling I knew where this was going to lead. Sure enough, he looped the other end of the rope through my chains. This was not going to be pleasant.

"There ye go, sir," the Grunter said. "All ready for ye."

Corwin smiled a toothless smile and spat at my feet.

"Unchain 'is ankles, Berke," he said. "We got a ways to travel and I want to get back by nightfall. The Avatar 'ere'll just 'ave to run."

Berke complied with his boss' command. It felt good to be relieved of the chafing ankle chains, but the feeling didn't last. Corwin clambered into the saddle and set off at a pace several times faster than I could run under the best of circumstances, which these were not.

"Open the gates, ye shiftless sacks of dung!" he shouted to his men as he dug his heels into the horse's flanks. "I'm escortin' the Avatar to the Abyss!"



The trip seemed to drag on forever. Maybe that's because Corwin dragged me most of the way. By the time we reached the Abyss I was looking forward to being locked inside. What could be worse than Corwin?

Corwin dismounted and tied his horse to a tree. I just fell to the ground and panted. Before me stood the Abyss, but—like everything else, it seemed—the dungeon had changed since my last visit. Huge, arched double doors were set into the side of the mountain itself. An insignia of some kind—Baron Almríc's, I assumed—was carved into the metal of the doors.

A bird circled overhead, a scavenger wondering if I would be its next meal. *Sorry to disappoint you, I thought, but if I die, it'll be beyond those doors and you won't be able to reach me.*

Corwin grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and dragged me to the door. With one hand on my collar, he unlocked the massive lock. The doors swung wide open, as if powered by a strange, unknowable magic.

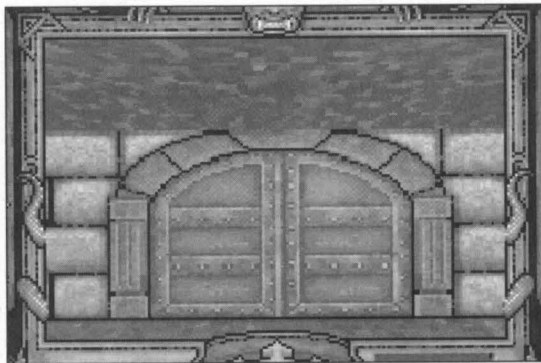
"I am the Avatar, you know."

"Sure," he said, thrusting me inside.

I turned to face him, in awe of his conversational abilities. He was silhouetted against a brilliant sunset sky. When he spoke, the words sounded like something read from a script. I got the feeling Corwin had done this before.

"This be the foul pit's only entrance. Once it is locked, none can pass. I shall shut thee in and stand guard until I hear Arial's voice from within. Otherwise, 'twill remain shut forever."

The doors swung shut behind me with a clang that reverberated for a long time. My world turned black as a starless night. The air



was foul. The temperature seemed several degrees warmer than it had outside. I was alone, unarmed, lost in the dark. But I was alive. And there was a girl to be rescued.



Chapter 2

The air was thick with dust and the place had the heavy odor of a zoo. I had often wondered how a caged lion felt. Now I knew. In the distance, though not far enough away to suit me, I could hear the flapping of leathery wings. My eyes had yet to adjust to the oppressive darkness of the Abyss. My mouth felt dry. Was there water here? Food? Weapons? How would I survive, much less rescue Baron Almríc's daughter?

I looked back toward the door, or toward where I thought the door should be, hoping to catch a glimpse of light. I thought if I could see where I was, I could formulate a plan of action. Nothing. The place was pitch-black. My heart raced.

"Be calm," I said aloud. "You've been in worse scrapes."

My voice echoed in the darkness and again I heard the sound of something flying

nearby. Okay, I thought, I may not be able to see, but I have other senses. I could still hear, and the nauseating odor of the place assured me I could still smell. My sense of touch was unimpaired. Steeling myself, I spoke again, louder this time, hoping the creatures of the Abyss would hear my resolve, shaky though it might be.

“Standing around here will accomplish nothing. It’s time to explore.”

Stretching my arms out in front of me, I turned in a slow circle, hoping to feel a wall or the door. Again, nothing. Corwin had thrust me several feet into the Abyss and I could feel nothing but the floor beneath my bare feet.

“Let’s try that again.”

I walked in a somewhat wider circle than before. Still nothing. Again I broadened the circle and ...

“Ouch!”

My toe slammed into something hard and I pitched forward onto a low platform. My hands fell upon something leathery. What was it? An animal? A rat? I don’t care how brave a person is, feeling something leathery, in the dark, barehanded, is an unnerving experience. I swallowed quickly and fought back a moment of panic. No! It felt like a backpack!

My knee was badly skinned and my big toe throbbed, but I didn’t care. Pawing through the pack, I felt the stuff of salvation. The pack, a veritable prisoner’s survival kit, contained a torch, a dagger with a dull, pitted blade, and some food. It also held a roll of parchments. With my wits and experience, and these items, I knew I could overcome any obstacle. At least I hoped so.

The floor of the dungeon was littered with stones and, as luck would have it, I was able to find several shards of flint, one of which I used to light the torch. Amazing how the

ability to see can change one’s outlook on life. Holding the flickering torch above my head, I surveyed my domain and saw that I was in a small chamber at the end of a long corridor. The huge doors of the Abyss loomed to my left. It seemed a long shot, but I figured I’d better try opening them before I did anything else. Unfortunately, Corwin had spoken the truth — they were locked tight.

Glancing around, I spotted several piles of bones and some small plants. The walls of the Abyss were made of stone; the floor, of hard-packed dirt. Through a haze of dust, I spied a roughly carved message on the wall opposite the platform on which I’d found my pack. The message read, “We attacked the entrance with all manner of tools, but it gave not a hair. It simply cannot be breached. Hence, we have resigned ourselves to die in this hellish pit — Elsinore.”

This did nothing to improve my mood, though it did pique my curiosity. Who was this Elsinore? How old was the message? Could he still be alive? And, if alive, would he be friend or foe to me in my quest?

As these questions passed through my mind, regrettably unanswered, I remembered the last item I’d discovered in the pack — the rolled parchments. Sticking my torch in the ground before me, I unrolled the documents. The first appeared to be a map, but it showed only a small portion of the room in which I found myself, as if its owner had begun to chart the depths of the Abyss but had given up almost immediately. Perhaps I’d complete the project for him or her — over the years, I’d learned the value of a good map. The other pieces of parchment were identical to the first in size and shape, but they were all entirely blank.

Returning my attention to the first sheet, I

studied the image on it while I tapped my torch on the ground, causing a shower of sparks. I waited a moment for one to cool, and picked up the small piece of charcoal. Using this as a pencil, I scratched the word *Entrance* below the picture of the room I was in. Always good to remember one's beginnings.

That done, I returned the scrolls to the pack, strapped the pack on my back, and set off down the long corridor opposite the doors of the Abyss. Having a knife in hand inspired in me a feeling of confidence almost wholly unwarranted, but, sensibly or not, I now felt ready to face the rigors of the Stygian Abyss.



Though I had no way of knowing which compass point I faced, I decided arbitrarily to designate the direction away from the Abyss' doors as north. If I hoped to map the dungeon and avoid getting hopelessly lost, I had to know in which direction I faced. Having decided that, I headed "north." Barely 20 paces beyond the entrance to the Abyss, I came upon a door and pull-chain. The door was locked, but the chain beside it looked promising. It was rusted, but a sharp tug was immediately rewarded—the door swung open with a creak capable of waking the dead. Luckily, none of them happened to be in the vicinity.

Walking through the door, I caught a glimpse of something to the left, and was pleased to find that I had stumbled upon a bag. Things were looking up. In the bag I found a cudgel, a mushroom, and several candles. I put the candles and the mushroom back in the bag, and put the bag in my pack. The cudgel required more thought. I hefted

my worn dagger in one hand and the cudgel in the other. Clearly, the greater weight of the cudgel would make it a more formidable weapon, but the dagger was light and easily wielded. I figured I could get in several dagger blows for each crushing mace attack. The cudgel found itself in my collection. I'd stick with the dagger for now.

Looking around, I found myself in a room with two doors, one to the left and one to the right. I tried them both, but they were locked. I took a few swings at each door with my dagger, but quickly realized I was doing more damage to the dagger than to the doors. Frustrated, I returned to the main corridor and headed west until I came to a dead end. North or south? Which would it be? North seemed as good a direction as any. The trip north was a short one—the corridor ended almost immediately in an alcove—but it proved profitable nonetheless. The alcove held another torch, an ax, and a bowl. These quickly found a home in my pack.

Heading south from the alcove, I made an intriguing discovery. First I came upon pools of blood and some human remains that seemed of far too recent vintage. Stepping gingerly around them, I came upon two blue stones: one with a *Jux* rune carved in it, the other decorated with an *Ort* rune. Here was something new—had never seen their like before. What could they be, I wondered. The exquisite craftsmanship that had gone into their making left little doubt that they were valuable, or had been, to the gentleman whose remains I'd just skirted. With a nod of thanks to the poor fellow, and with just a touch of guilt, I pocketed the stones and continued on my way.

I was beginning to feel pretty good about things. Just moments ago, I'd been unarmed

and virtually blind. Now I had my choice of weapons, a supply of torches, some food, and even a bowl to eat from. This was downright civilized.

Continuing down the corridor, I came to a room with a strange stone block in the center. On the far side of the block, I saw two doors, one in the north wall and one in the west wall. Of greater importance, I came upon another backpack. I'd seen whole towns in which equipment was in shorter supply than it seemed to be here in the Stygian Abyss! This pack contained a scroll, a rust-red key, four more blue-and-gold runestones—a *Bet* stone, an *In* stone, a *Sanct* stone, and a *Lor* stone—and a blue bag with a gold rune embroidered on it.

The scroll read, "Go into the Abyss knowing that I will not forget thee. As bitter as the Baron's justice doth seem, 'tis better than a hangman's noose. No matter the passing of years, I will await thy return. Yours forever, Sandra."

Another mystery—who was Sandra and to whom had she written this note? Perhaps her beloved was Elsinore, the poor soul who had carved his message beside the entrance to the Abyss. Perhaps the note had been a cherished possession of the adventurer whose runestones I'd just pilfered.

As for the runestones, I now had six of them, and a rune bag that seemed to have been designed to hold them. If nothing else, placing the stones in the blue-and-gold bag would keep them from rattling around and getting lost in the bottom of my pack. The stones gave the rune bag a reassuring heft as I bounced it lightly in my hand. Then it hit me—*Bet In Sanct!* Those were the runes that signified the *Resist Blows* spell. With the runes I now had in my possession, I could represent

many spells: *In Jux*, the *Rune of Warding* spell, *Sanct Jux*, the *Strengthen Door* spell, and others. Could these stones have been a mage's training tool—a way to teach a fledgling spell-caster the workings of magic? I reached in the bag and rubbed the stones while I thought. If only I had the necessary reagents to cast the spells! Being able to *spell* a spell seemed of limited utility ...

Two of the stones slipped between my fingers as I pondered my lack of reagents. Suddenly, I felt strangely lightheaded and the room was bathed in light, magical light far brighter than my feeble torch! I pulled my hand from the bag, the stones still nestled in my hand—*In Lor!* The symbols of the *Light* spell! Somehow, I had cast a *Light* spell without any reagents. What kind of magic was this, I wondered, as I doused my now-unnecessary torch and put it in my pack.

I quickly reached into the bag and pulled out the three stones representing the *Resist Blows* spell—*Bet*, *In*, and *Sanct*. As if of their own accord, the stones leaped between my fingers and I mouthed the spell's name silently to myself. Again, I felt lightheaded—in fact, I felt genuinely fatigued—but I also sensed that the spell had worked. A feeling of well-being stole over me, the familiar feeling of calm that descends upon those who benefit from magical protection.

By this time I was exhausted, but beaming. I sat on the hard-packed dirt floor and leaned against the hard stone wall. I was armed, I had the power of magic at my command, and before I knew it I was asleep.



As he had so often in the past, Garamon visited me while I slept.

"Thou hast arrived! They have already ... but with haste and virtue, we can ... seek out and speak to the civilized inhabitants of the Abyss. They ... end, and thy decisions and actions will ..."

As usual, Garamon's garbled, echoing speech woke me up. Also as usual, his message proved somewhat less than clear, but he had told me a few things of importance. For one thing, I now knew (or, at least, had strong reason to believe) that I was not alone here—that the monsters, as I knew from previous visits, that thrived here were kept in check by "civilized inhabitants." I had a hard time imagining anything civilized surviving for long down here, but Garamon had yet to steer me wrong. Perhaps I might find an ally or two among the inhabitants of the Abyss. That, I thought, would be a first. But these thoughts were fleeting, for now I also knew that there was reason to make haste, and I vowed to do that, starting now.



The *Light* spell I had cast earlier had faded while I slept. Grasping the *In* and *Lor* stones firmly, I cast another. Slinging the pack over my shoulder, I strode to the door in the north wall and grasped the handle, fully expecting it to be locked. I was wrong. It swung inward, revealing a small chamber. I heard something move inside. Perhaps I'd discovered some of those civilized inhabitants Garamon had mentioned. Rushing into the room, I was disappointed to find only a rat. Well, not just a rat, but one the size of a large dog! It seemed wary of me. Beyond it in the room I spied something I thought I could put to better use than the rat could—a pair of leggings.

"Nice rat," I said, sidling past it in as

nonaggressive a manner as I could muster. "I just want that armour over there and then I'll be on my way."

The rat backed into a corner, hovering protectively over a moldy wheel of cheese and a piece of meat. I began to hope this would be easy. No such luck. As I touched the leggings, the rat bared its fangs, hissed, and leaped at me. I barely had time to draw my dagger before it reared back on its hind legs, its gaping maw so close to my face that I could smell its fetid breath.

My dagger raked its flank and it screamed like a sick child. One of its claws sliced through the cotton tunic I was wearing and caught in the fabric. Again my dagger flew, this time digging deep into the creature's ribs. The rat's jaws snapped, flinging red foam through the air. The jaws snapped again as I rammed the blade of my knife in up to the hilt. Then the jaws were still and I collapsed to the ground under the weight of the creature's dead body.

Disentangling myself from the remains, I found myself breathless. As always upon my return to Britannia, I found that I hadn't retained the skills and physical abilities I had acquired during the course of my previous Britannian adventure. Given the sorry state of my health on Earth, I was lucky to be able to take out a giant rat at all. Shortness of breath seemed like a small price to pay for my life.

I brushed myself off and examined my booty. The food went into my pack. The leggings—old, damaged things I wouldn't have considered wearing under ordinary circumstances—went right onto my body. Any armour was better than nothing.

In any event, there was no time to ponder the sorry state of my arms and armour. Garamon had warned me of the need for haste, so I returned to the outer chamber and

tried the other door. Locked. Now, however, I had a key—the red key from the pack. It slipped easily into the lock and turned with only the slightest difficulty. The door swung open and I found myself staring down a long corridor, dark despite the magical light that now surrounded me.

I plunged westward into the darkness.



The corridor rose steeply and, after my encounter with the rat, each step stole a bit more of my breath. By the time the corridor opened out into a large room, the largest I'd seen since entering the Abyss, I was huffing and puffing mightily. It must have been the noise of my own labored breathing that prevented me from the hearing the shuffling footfalls of the man I nearly bowled over as I entered the room!

The man seemed strangely unconcerned about my sudden appearance, as if newcomers to the Abyss accosted him all the time.

"Hail, stranger!" he said pleasantly. "I am Bragit. What be thy business? I have not seen thee in this place before."

"I am," I puffed. "attempting to," I huffed. "rescue an innocent girl," I said.

The man's striking blue eyes shone and he smiled broadly, as if I'd just related the funniest joke in the world.

"Ah, a rescue mission, is it? Should the Baron's guards not be with thee, to aid thee in thy search? More likely one of them threw thee in here, eh?"

"Thou need'st not be ashamed of thy misfortune; thou art in the same pot with all of us now. If thou art to have a chance of surviving in the Abyss for long, thou must learn the lay of the land."

Clearly, this was one of the civilized inhabitants Garamon had mentioned. Equally clear was the fact that this man had been here for some time and had much to teach me.

"Indeed," I said, "I would be eager to learn of this area. What useful information dost thou have?"

I found myself smiling as I said this—I was slipping into the medieval argot of Britannia, something I almost never did during my visits. Maybe the two-hundred-year gap between this visit and my last had affected me in some unknown way. I'd ponder that one later. Right now, I wanted to attend to what Bragit was saying.

"First off," he said, "I would suggest picking up anything thou dost find that seems of use. Items here are scarce enough—thou wouldst be well advised to take what thou can.

"Scavenge all you want, but stealing is ill advised. Most of the Abyss' inhabitants guard jealously the few possessions that they have. Battle sites are the best for scavenging. That's why I'm here. A battle took place here not long ago, a battle between the Goblins and the above-worlders."

A battle? I saw little evidence of battle. All I saw was a soiled bedroll and some candles. Still, Bragit seemed convinced that there'd been a fight here. I wondered if this was the epic contest Corwin had mentioned in his report to Baron Almríc.

"What was the cause of this battle?" I asked.

"I do not know. It is rare that the Baron sends his men into the Abyss. It must have been important. Though, by the looks of it, the Goblins defeated them handily." Bragit was enjoying our talk, for he barely stopped for breath before continuing. "The Goblins control most of these upper caves. Two races

there are, the Green and the Gray. If they do not destroy each other, it is not for lack of trying. Be thou especially careful of the Gray Goblins. I was recently imprisoned by them for trespassing."

Hoping to keep him talking, I jumped in with a vote of sympathy.

"It must have been awful!" I exclaimed. I need hardly have bothered. I had the impression the man would have continued talking if I'd left the room entirely!

"My prison cell was evidently a converted storeroom, for it had a stock of useful items, including a long pole. Using the pole, I was able to reach a button which opened the door to my cell. I sneaked away and returned to my people. I do not think I will venture there again."

"And what of the other inhabitants of the Abyss?"

"The humans, like thee and myself, have staked out a small area in which we live in relative peace. Below us are the Mountaimen, and after that I do not know. A nasty place this is, thou canst be certain of that. In the parts of the upper caves, uninhabited by Goblins, there are giant spiders and worms. Our small group is one of the few devoted to peace."

"Where is this enclave of humans?" I had to know.

"Thou canst find my people by going west from the entrance to the Abyss, and then north. There is a small chasm to jump over, but thou dost seem to be a dexterous soul. Past the chasm is the sign of civilization everywhere throughout the Abyss: the Banner of Cabirus, marked with an ankh, the sign of the Avatar. Outside of areas marked with the Banner, thou shouldst watch thyself most carefully. Most creatures who do not respect

Cabirus' legacy are not particularly friendly."

Again, Garamon's mention of the need for haste came to me. I had to keep moving. There was no telling where Arial was by now, and I still had no clue about the greater peril of which my ghostly friend had spoken.

"Perhaps I will seek this area out," I said, hoping my new companion would take the hint that our conversation was at an end. "I thank thee for thy help."

"Good luck in thy travels," he replied as he turned and walked away.

With a sigh of relief, I pondered Bragit's words. He'd said to scavenge, and since he'd left the bedroll and candles I'd spotted before, I assumed they weren't his. I took them. Even a soiled bedroll was better than a hard stone floor. I'd had entirely too many sleepless nights recently.

What else had he said? His people were to be found west of the entrance to the Abyss and north. I'd already gone west to reach this point; to the north, I saw nothing but a wall. A corridor led further west, however, and I entered it.

A few steps into the corridor, I reached a branch point. I could continue straight ahead, west, or I could follow a corridor to the south. To the north lay a dark chasm. Wait, hadn't Bragit mentioned a chasm to the north? He had! There was no telling how deep the chasm was, but I could make out dim, shadowy evidence of something on the far side of the pit. I was pretty sure I could jump it if I got a running start. In any event, I didn't appear to have much choice.

I made my way down the southern corridor until it branched off to the right. Then I turned to the north and started running as fast as I could. At the edge of the chasm, I leaped. The landing was hard, but I'd made it

to the far side! Exhilarated, I ran through a twisting passageway, which soon opened into a small room. There, my magical light glinted off the sharp edge of a sword! As I made for it, a rat, as big as the one I'd killed earlier, lurched into view. I dispatched it easily and grabbed my prize. The sword felt good in my hand. The dagger was consigned to my pack.

The rat had emerged from a corridor that led north. I followed the corridor about ten paces, at which point it branched left and right. The choice was made for me when I saw a banner on the wall. It bore the Ankh symbol, the sign Bragit had told me to look for. I felt certain I'd find Bragit's companions here.

The door was locked tight, but again the red key allowed me entrance. As the door opened, I saw stucco walls (another sign of civilization, I thought) and a corridor that branched left, right, and straight ahead. No direction looked more promising than any other, so I arbitrarily chose to plunge ahead.

The corridor ended in a large barracks, where I encountered two men dressed in tattered clothes and battered armour. They were both armed, so I smiled broadly and hoped they were as friendly as Bragit had been.

"Good day to you, good sirs," I said, wondering if the concepts of day and night held any meaning for those unfortunate enough to be trapped below ground. Whether or not they noticed my gaffe I'll never know, for, like Bragit, they seemed pleased and not at all surprised to see me. Clearly, Almríc locked people up in here all the time.

"So, another comrade is caught by the Abyss!" one of the men said. "What was thy crime, pray tell?"

"I am accused of kidnapping a girl."

"Hmm, perhaps the same girl that I hear was carried through these upper caves by a troll."

He had seen Arial! For all the success I'd had collecting food and equipment, this was my first solid lead.

"Yes, that must be the one! Where did he take her?"

"I don't know how far the troll was planning on taking her, but given the strength of a troll, he'll not likely run out of energy any time soon."

"I must be off immediately!"

The man put his hands on my shoulders, preventing me from leaving. He was quite strong; I chose not to struggle.

"Hold on just a minute," he said, as if speaking to a small child. "Surely that girl is in trouble, but if thou dost learn the ways of the Abyss first, thou wilt surely have a better chance of rescuing her."

The wisdom of his words was clear, but I was impatient and more than a little put off by his attitude. I let my tone show it when I responded.

"And what should I know of the Abyss?"

Like Bragit, this fellow was a talker. He stroked his chin thoughtfully, cleared his throat, and began to speak with just a touch of condescension. I found it annoying, but no more so than the fact that he'd managed to restrain me with so little difficulty. He was stronger than I, and I felt compelled to listen.

"Well, thou shouldst know that most of the inhabitants of the Abyss are unfriendly. It's not so much a question of what areas to avoid as of which areas are relatively safe. Look for the Banner of Cabirus—a tapestry with an ankh, such as we have—as a sign of civilization. Any people or creatures thou dost find past the Banner are more likely to talk with

thee than eat thee. Speaking of ankhs, thou wouldst do well to search out the other thing they represent: the shrines.”

All of a sudden, I was glad I'd stuck around. Shrines? In the Stygian Abyss?

“Where can I find them?” I asked, wondering if they served the same purpose here as they did on the surface.

“When thou dost see a large, plain ankh standing on the ground, thou hast found a shrine to Virtue. It is said that if thou hast been virtuous, and dedicated to increasing thy abilities, praying at a shrine with the correct mantra will allow thee to enhance thy abilities.”

Then the shrines here were similar to the ones above ground! This was good news indeed.

“It is said that there is one in the southeast area of these upper caves,” the man continued, “but I have not seen it myself.”

My teacher seemed to be readying himself for another lecture, so I broke in quickly, hoping he would let me go this time.

“I thank thee for thy information. Now I must be off to use the advice thou hast given me.”

I backed out of the room before he could stop me. As I left, I heard him say, “Good luck in thy travels. Thou art always welcome here.”

I guess he wasn't such a bad sort.

I walked south about 20 paces and headed north toward the closed door I'd seen earlier. It wasn't locked and I entered a room with a marble floor of indigo and gold. At one time, it must have been quite beautiful, but a patina of dust now coated the floor, dulling the sheen and lending the place an aura of sadness.

Just inside the door, I saw an odd-looking

fellow, tall and thin, with stringy blond hair and a vacant look on his face. His jaw was working hard, as if he'd just taken a big bite of shoe leather. He appeared to be holding something in his right hand, but I couldn't make out what it was. He looked unsavory, to say the least—he kind of person I probably would have avoided in my other life, on Earth—but here I felt I could ill afford to ignore anyone.

I put on my biggest, brightest smile, but the smile nearly slid off my face and onto the ground when I came close enough to see that the fellow had a huge cockroach in his fist. As I approached, the man brought his fist up to his mouth and bit off a big old hunk. I nearly lost it, but kept myself going by chanting silently, “I



am the Avatar ... I am the Avatar ...” Blood and ichor bothered me not at all, but somehow the sight of a man eating a giant cockroach made me want to run screaming from the room. I didn’t think anything could be worse. Then, before I could leave, the man started to talk. Let me just say that he spoke with his mouth full. And that it wasn’t pretty.

“What is thy name, stranger?” he said.

“I might ask thee the same question.”

His face took on the most beatific of expressions as he said, “I am Gulik, called the Blessed.”

Ah, I thought. Blessed. Yes. I see. I really wanted to be somewhere else, but there was just no telling what the man might know.

“Why art thou called that?” I asked. He took another bite before answering.

“I have been called ‘the Blessed’ since my prison days, when I was considered lucky because I have a taste for cockroaches. I never went hungry, thou seest.”

At this point, it became clear to me that a change of subject was in order. I had no interest in discussing Gulik’s gastronomic habits further.

“Art thou the leader here?”

“Our leader is Hagbard. Hast thou spoken to him?”

“No. Should I?”

“Thou needs must speak with Hagbard. He alone, of all of us, retains his sanity amidst the madness of this place.”

Here was a startling bit of self-awareness. At least he knew he wasn’t sane. The first step on the road to recovery. I continued. “Before I find Hagbard, tell me, what is this place?”

“Thou art in the Great Stygian Abyss, where neither thou nor any other may ever hope to leave again. ‘Tis worse than any

prison, for there is no hope of parole or pardon, and no death so clean as an honest hanging.”

“Tell me more of this Abyss. It has changed much since my last visit.”

“As though must know, then, it was not always such. Once, a leader named Sir Cabirus (curst be his name!) had the foolish notion that this place could be colonized. When his folly caught up with him, the ‘civilization’ of the under-earth fell, and we now scabble to survive in its ruins. He died, and so escaped the punishment for his crime. Dreamers! They will be the death of us all!”

“And thyself? How camest thou here?”

“I killed a man who needed killing,” he said around another mouthful of roach. “My crime was being caught.”

At this point I began to see the wisdom of moving on. What more could I hope to learn from a confessed killer who snacked on cockroaches and acknowledged there was only one sane man among his people?

“Well,” I said, “I must be going. Where might I find your leader, Hagbard?”

Gulik pointed east, then returned to his chewing as if I’d never been there. Repelled as I was, I couldn’t help feeling a touch of sympathy for him. But sympathy wouldn’t rescue Ariel or help me find Hagbard. I set off in the direction Gulik had indicated.

I didn’t have far to go. The chamber in which I’d met Gulik was the entranceway to an ornate room, lined with columns and dominated by a pool in the center. Hagbard, an elderly man with a bushy gray beard and long, unkempt hair, was staring into the clear blue water as if lost in thought. I stood near him for a moment, unsure whether to interrupt his reverie, but he must have heard me approach.

“Hah! Another fish enters the barrel! What be *thy* crime?”

I was getting sick and tired of everyone’s assumption that I was a criminal.

“I am innocent!” I said, “I was falsely accused!”

“Innocent, eh?” The man smiled. He no longer seemed quite so annoyed. “Why, so are we all, falsely accused every one of us!”

“It grieves me to hear it. Can nothing be done?”

“Surely thou art one among us who was condemned by that pious oaf Baron Almríc. We of the Outcasts are the survivors of his intemperate justice, fugitives from the predations of the Gobs.”

“Ah, thou knowest of Baron Almríc? Perhaps then thou canst tell me of his daughter. She is the reason I am here.”

“A young girl was she, beauteous but innocent.”

“Aye, that was she. Do you know where she is? I must find her!”

“We did see her a few days ago, but she is long gone by now. A troll carried her below. Almríc’s men were in pursuit, but they proved no match for the Gobs.”

That was the second time he’d mentioned “Gobs.” What did they have to do with Arial’s disappearance?

“The Gobs?” I asked.

“Aye, the Goblins. There be the Greens and the Grays, and they are deadly foes. They make our lives more difficult still with their vendettas.”

“Which cause is just?”

“None can say. Their conflict seems to have begun at the time of the Great Collapse, when the civilization of the under-earth fell. We know only that their leaders have sworn never to agree on anything.”

“And is there aught beyond the domain of these Goblins?”

“Ah ... none who have ventured past the realm of the Gobs have returned. But rumor hath it there are worse perils below.”

“Is there anything else thou canst tell me?”

He chuckled. “There is much I can tell thee, but most has little relevance to thy quest. Of Arial I can tell thee nothing. Of the Goblins, I would say only this: Some Goblins are civilized, or nearly so. Others no longer abide the commands of their leaders, but wander the corridors in search of prey. They take from our supplies of food and are a danger as well. Would that we were rid of them!”

“Perhaps I can help thee deal with these renegades. I shall be on the lookout for them.”

Hagbard smiled at me. “Thou dost seem truly a noble sort. Perhaps thou art innocent, as thou didst claim. That makes thee quite a novelty in the Abyss! Get on with thee. Find the maiden before it is too late!”



Returning to the maze of corridors, I discovered a variety of objects here and there, some useful, some less so, but nothing of importance to my quest. In one room, due west of the Outcasts’ barracks area, I nearly ran off the edge of a precipice, but managed to pull up short before I took a nasty fall. Looking down into the depths, I saw a swiftly moving river. I wasn’t quite ready to take a swim, and I most certainly was not ready to dive in from this height. Perhaps later.

I had no idea what to do. Several people had seen Arial, but none seemed to know



where she might be. I knew there were Goblins around, some civilized, some not. Where to go? I thought for a moment, always a good thing to do when one doesn't know what to do, and remembered the locked doors I'd encountered right after my incarceration. I pulled out my map to get my bearings—the map I'd forgotten to fill in as I explored. To my amazement, the route I had traveled was clearly visible. The map had filled itself in! Here was a treasure indeed.

Marveling, I saw that, to return to the place I'd marked "Entrance," I had to head basically south, leap back across the chasm, and then head basically east. This being the Abyss, there would be some twists and turns, but the trip didn't look too bad.

All went well until I reached the chasm. I mistimed my jump and fell like a stone to the floor some 20 feet below. Luckily, I managed to land on my feet and, aside from some new bruises and a bruised ego, I was okay. Dusting myself off, I took stock of my situation. I was in a room with a locked door to the north, a small island to the west beyond a narrow stream that seemed to flow into the north and west walls of the room, and, to the south, a ramp leading up to the south. The door was locked tight and, though the ramp appeared to offer a way out of this place, what caught my eye was a small wooden shield on the island.

I jumped across the stream and grabbed the shield. It had clearly seen better days, but any protection is better than none, and it felt good strapped to my arm. As I congratulated myself on my new acquisition, one of the denizens of the Abyss decided to try it out. Something was slithering across my bare feet. Startled, I leaped back. The motion threw a three-foot-long worm into the air! Ready my sword, I sliced the creature in two with a

single blow, but the memory of its slimy touch lingered and left me shuddering.

As I composed myself, I noticed a switch on the west wall. Throwing caution to the winds, I threw the switch, wondering what would happen. I thought I heard a creaking noise and I know I felt a cool breeze. The locked door! The switch had opened the locked door. I felt sure of that. Racing to see, I slipped and fell into the stream I'd leaped across so nimbly moments ago. I was now soaked to the skin, but when I reached the door, I saw that I'd been right—it was wide open. Unfortunately, a large bat with leathery red wings, fangs as long as a man's thumb, and claws even longer had taken the opportunity to enter the room.

Before I had time to react, the creature darted toward me and fastened its gaping mouth on my neck. I felt its saliva merge with my blood. Almost immediately, a wave of nausea passed through me. Brushing the bat off, I staggered for a moment, but managed to unleash two quick blows that felled it. I fell too—the ground looked inviting. I lay there panting, wiping blood, sweat, and saliva from the wound on my neck. The room was spinning. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming need to sleep.



I slept for a long time, but when I awoke, I felt much better. The bat's attack had taken its toll—I was not 100 percent—but the effects of its poison appeared to have worn off. So had my *Light* spell. I cast another and the world once more took on a golden, magical glow. Though there was no way to be sure how long I'd been in the Abyss, I figured I was in the second day of my imprisonment. I also



knew I was famished. The food in my pack soon took care of that, but my supply was running low. I'd have to find more.

First, I was determined to get out of this room and back to the locked doors near the entrance. I had to keep moving. Arial's life depended on it and, if Garamon was right, the fate of all Britannia depended on me.

The ramp did in fact lead me back to the far side of the chasm, the side I wanted to be on. It was broken at one point and I had to leap over the opening, but the jump was a fairly easy one. Before I knew it, I was back near the entrance, by the door with the pull-chain. The door stood open, as I had left it. I returned to the locked doors that had thwarted me earlier.

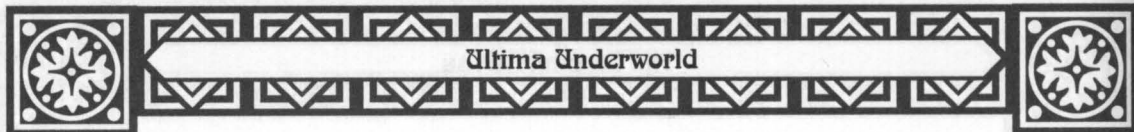
I tried the south door. Still locked. However, the red key I'd found slipped easily into the lock and I was able to open the door. Beyond, I saw a small silver tree, pulsating with magical energy of a sort unknown to me. It was rooted in a raised earthen platform. I felt compelled to climb onto the platform and touch this wondrous plant. As I did so, it withered and died, leaving a small seed in my hand. I was horrified that my touch should end the life of such a marvelous thing ... I looked about nervously, perhaps in fear that

my criminal act had been witnessed, but there was no one around. There was, however, a plaque on the wall which read: "Plant the seed of the Silver Sapling and a new Sapling will spring forth. In return for this gift of life, thou shalt be granted a new life thyself, when this one doth end."

Well, I no longer felt quite so bad. This was a tree of life! It would live again and, if the sign was to be believed, so might I. Hurriedly, I planted the seed and, as the sign had promised, the tree flourished again. I jumped from the platform without touching it. It was then that I noticed something odd. The marble path that led into this room didn't stop at the platform; it curved around to the east and ended abruptly at a wall. This didn't seem right. Why did the path continue, only to dead-end?

Experience had taught me that this pattern often indicated the existence of a secret door. A careful search was in order. It paid off. Studying the walls of this room, I found a spot in the northeast corner where the stones didn't quite line up with their neighbors. I pushed on the seam. I was rewarded by a sharp click and the sound of stone scraping against stone as the secret door swung open! Experience pays off in situations like this, and I'd been in a lot of dungeons over the years.

The path beyond the secret door led generally east, but not very far. Again, I found myself at the edge of a precipice with water far, far below. Two stone pillars jutted from the water to the north and east of the cliff's edge and I could see a door on the north wall. That was odd—a door set 20 feet up the side of a wall, with just a narrow ledge before it. Curiosity killed the cat, but it hadn't yet killed the Avatar. I was determined to learn what lay beyond that door!



In order to reach it, I'd have to leap from platform to platform. If I failed, I'd end up wet and, if the water was shallow, badly injured. I put my sword in my pack and backed up as far as I could against the south wall. Then, taking a deep breath, I ran for the edge. I landed solidly on the first platform. I breathed a sigh of relief. The surface of Britannia had rarely challenged me in this way (and I certainly never engaged in this sort of running and jumping on Earth!). This was more stressful than a room full of hostile headless.

Walking to the edge of the platform, I took a close look at my next destination—the narrow ledge before the door to the north. This would be an even tougher leap. If I didn't time it just right, I'd surely end up swimming. No sense fretting. I knew what I had to do. Again, I backed up as far as I could, took a running start, and leaped.

As soon as I left the platform I knew I was in trouble. I'd run too fast and jumped too hard to maintain my balance on the ledge. As my feet hit the ledge, my body slammed into the door and I started to slide down. My hands clawed at the ledge, but I was already falling too fast. I steeled myself for another swim and hoped the water was deep.

It was.

I bobbed in the water like a cork, despite the weight of my clothes and equipment. I swam until I found a place where I could clamber back onto dry land, then followed a path east. Along the way, I battled some bats and killed a strange brown worm. I left the worm's body to rot there but, as events would later prove, I would have been far better off if I'd taken the repulsive thing with me.

The path turned to the north and ended at a locked metal door. I tried my red key, but it had no effect. This was frustrating. I knew

there was no other way out of the water but the one I had taken and here I was at a locked door. I started beating on the door and, to my surprise, felt it give a little. I hit it again and again, feeling it give a little more with each blow, until finally it swung open.

I found myself in a room with exits to the west and north, but before I could pick a direction, I found myself under attack again, this time by a garish green worm. I soon dispatched it. During the fight, I noticed a gray key on a small pedestal and I pocketed it. One could never have too many keys, I'd learned.

I chose the western route out of the room. Soon I found myself staring at the raised stone platforms from which I'd fallen, but from the opposite side. More determined than ever to see what lay beyond that damned mysterious door, I leaped to the westernmost platform and was about to leap to the next one—the one nearest the door itself—when I saw something strange out of the corner of my eye. There was a platform in the southern wall, set high in the wall, at the same level as the other platforms. There was nothing on the platform but a switch. Never one to leave a switch unswitched, I took a detour, leaped to the switch platform, and used it. I heard the reassuring creak of a door swinging open! With renewed vigor, I leaped from one platform to the next until I could see the now-open mystery door! I leaped through it effortlessly and found myself in a stucco-walled corridor. And at the end of the corridor was an ankh. I'd found a shrine!

Remembering Hagbard's words and recalling my own experience at shrines, I prayed. After a while, I felt, more than heard, the words "Chant the mantra ..." Again, I tried to recall previous experiences and several

mantras came to me, each capable of helping me increase my skill in a different aspect of life. I knew such increases were relatively rare—I might get one chance to pray or a couple, but I'd rarely gotten more than that. What skills would I most like to improve? I might have chosen magical skills, but I decided my combat prowess needed the most work. The mantra to increase attack skills was *Summ Ra*. I chanted it and meditated on what I'd learned of combat since my arrival in the Abyss. A feeling of well-being filled me. Somehow I knew I was a more accomplished fighter than I'd been when I started. My prayers had been answered.

Though I had little hope that a second prayer would be answered too, I tried another remembered mantra, *Mu Ahm*, which allowed one to focus on one's magical abilities. The effort was futile. I had not cast enough magic or gained enough experience to see any benefit in my magical abilities. I wondered for a moment whether I'd made the right choice in focusing on combat skills, but the deed was done.

I explored the ankh chamber for a while, but found only a few plaques, engraved with the words of the most common mantras. I left the ankh room the way I'd come. (Though, in

all honesty, I mistimed one of my jumps and ended up in the water again!) Eventually I made my way back to the room in which I'd found the gray key. This time, I left by way of the north corridor. A short way up the corridor, a passageway branched off to the east. Within it, I killed another of the green slugs and came upon a crystal ball. Peering into it caused strange visions to appear.

I saw a vision of a strange world. Bizarre creatures floated through the blackness of space. A green path split the darkness, twisting and turning into the far distance. Somehow I knew that this green path led to Britannia. At this point, the vision faded. Its meaning was lost on me, but I felt sure that all would be made clear eventually.

Continuing my explorations, I returned to the main corridor leading north, following its twisting progress until it dead-ended at the water. What now? I could backtrack to the room in which I'd found my pack (was it really days ago?). There was still one door I hadn't opened there. I'd have to do that eventually. Or I could go for a swim. I sat on the hard-packed dirt floor to ponder my choices. There were lots of plants with berries on them here. I plucked one of the plants and chewed on it idly. To my surprise, it tasted pretty good. I made a mental note to pocket as many of these plants as I could—they would help solve my food shortage. Returning to my musing, I decided I didn't want to do any more swimming for a while, so I made my way back the way I'd come, leaping back across the platforms (without missing a single one this time!), back to the secret door and the room in which I'd found the Silver Sapling, and back to the room just north of that. There was another door to be opened and, for all I knew, whole new worlds to be explored.



The red key unlocked this door as easily as it had its twin to the south. I soon found myself sprinting down a long corridor, stopping only when I reached a large wooden bridge. As I paused to peer at the raging river below, I felt a sharp pain in my side, followed by an even more painful stinging in my leg. Something was pelting me with small stones!

As if of its own volition, my ax appeared in my hand and I rushed in the direction from which the stones had come. The thrower turned out to be a hideous green creature—a Goblin! It had sharp fangs and claws, caked with filth, and it moved stiffly, as if its skin were too hard and tight for fluid motion. The odor of the beast was overpowering—I now knew where the zoo-like aroma of the Abyss came from. The Goblin wore ill-fitting leather armour, in surprisingly good condition. Given the creature's obvious lack of concern for personal hygiene, I could only surmise that it had removed the armour from a recent human victim.

These observations were noted in a heartbeat, and, ax in hand, I tried to engage the Goblin in conversation. The creature only grunted. As I approached, it dropped the sling it had used to attack me from afar (a cowardly act, I thought) and began flailing away with a club. My ax, to say nothing of my skill, was too much for the beast, however, and it soon lay on the ground in a pool of blood. I appropriated the creature's leather vest and some food before moving on.

Just north of the bridge, the corridor branched west and I headed that way, angling north for a bit and then west again. A trip down a ramp along the north wall led me to the water's edge, where I found a box containing two more runestones. With these I was able to cast several more spells, including

Create Food and *Lesser Heal*. Climbing back up the ramp, I continued westward until I came to another ankh banner beside a portcullis. Beyond the portcullis stood a watchful Goblin.

He seemed calmer than the monster I'd defeated a few moments before, but no less hideous. I wondered if his mood would change when he noticed me. Well, I'd been told that the ankh banner meant the folk beyond were civilized, so I walked right up to the portcullis, meaning to open it and engage the Goblin guard in conversation. The gate was locked, but my attempt to open it attracted the attention of the Goblin.

"Yes? What your business here?" it demanded.

"Excuse me. I did not mean to intrude."

"Well, intrude you did! Out now!"

This hadn't turned out exactly as I'd planned. I wandered off down the hall a short distance to think. A moment later, I returned to the portcullis, hoping the Goblin was as stupid as I suspected.

"You again!" the Goblin said. "What you want now?"

I decided to try the direct approach.

"I wish to pass through this portcullis."

"Okay. But you be careful, Green Goblins not like messing with."

Next thing I knew, the portcullis was open and I was in the Goblin camp. A corridor stretched ahead, due north. To the right, a steeply angled ramp paralleled the corridor. I chose the high road, stopping at a door in the west wall.

The door was open, and I found myself in what appeared to be a Goblin bedroom. The occupant was at home and he didn't seem pleased about my arrival.

"Hey, you not Goblin! Why you here?"

"Canst thou tell me of the Goblins?"

"Green Goblins, yes, good. We are strongest and bravest in Abyss. Gray Goblins, they nasty and weak. You no want talk to them. Also watch out for some mean Goblins, not like our settlement. They wear red. Good Goblins near banners with funny marks. Like me."

"Where is thy leader?" I asked.

"Yah, Vernix, he king. Maybe you want talk to bodyguard Lanugo first. They in northwest, at end of high overhang path."

Finding them was not difficult. I simply searched from room to room (avoiding one unhappy Goblin whose task seemed to be guarding a locked door). Finally I came upon a golden door, opened it, and found myself in the largest room I'd seen since my arrival in the Abyss. I was on a high walkway, overlooking an open court with four pools in it. As I gaped at the glorious place (and wondered how the Goblins had built or inherited such a marvelous home), Lanugo all but ran into me from the west.

Even for a Goblin, Lanugo seemed slow-witted. A big, lumbering bear of a creature, he seemed the perfect bodyguard—intimidating, threatening, and full of that charming self-confidence born of utter stupidity.

"Tha be not bodderin' da boss, aye?" he said. I couldn't see any boss around, but that didn't seem to have occurred to the bodyguard.

"No," I said. I'd learned that directness was the only way to deal with these creatures.

"Good. It be not healty ta bodder a guy like da boss." He just stood there. The silence was awkward, so I broke it.

"Perhaps thou couldst ask thy boss if he could see me?"

"Yeah, well, I could do dat. But da boss

don' like to be boddered wid, like, practical stuff. His mind is on, uh, higher t'ings."

"Perhaps I could give thee a small gift to show my appreciation." A little bribery might work, I thought. I figured a big, strong guy might appreciate a fine weapon, so I selected one from my pack and held it out to him.

"Dontcha have any gold or something?"

He was unimpressed by my show of generosity. Unfortunately, I had no gold. Baron Almríc hadn't seen fit to give me any before imprisoning me. Awfully inconsiderate of him. I did some quick backing and filling.

"I'm afraid that thou didst misunderstood me," I said.

"Y' got plenny t' learn in da ways of courtly manners, I'd say. Okay by me—I got my stew to tend to."

Just what I needed—etiquette lessons from a Green Goblin. I turned and started to leave, but then I had an idea. He'd thought enough of his stew to make special mention of it. Maybe this was an opportunity. I turned and accosted him again.

"Oh, this guy again," he said. "What it be now? Come back for me stew, have tha? Smell brought tha? Don't blame tha, 'tis a good stew."

"What kind of stew?"

"Why, rotworm stew, just like me mudder used ta make it. Tha takes a rotworm, chops it up fine, and marinates it in port wiv mushrooms. Here. 'Tis all writ down on this."

He handed me a worn piece of parchment with childish scribbles on it. Sure enough, it was a recipe for rotworm stew. Overwhelmed by this gift, I turned to leave once again.

"I thank thee kindly," I said, pocketing the recipe. I had no idea at the time just how important that recipe would be to me later on.



Standing around talking to Lanugo was getting me nowhere, so I continued my search for King Vernix, hoping my lack of success with his bodyguard wouldn't prevent me from gaining an audience. Vernix wasn't far from where I'd encountered Lanugo and, when I did discover the king, Lanugo seemed unconcerned, as if he'd forgotten his duties. Some bodyguard, I thought. Most likely, his mind could only handle one thing at a time and, at that moment, it was totally occupied with thoughts of rotworm stew.

The king paced back and forth, back and forth, as if contemplating thoughts of world-shattering importance. If outward appearances counted for anything, he seemed a more intelligent sort than his subjects (all things being relative). In fact, he had a somewhat regal bearing. This was enhanced by the fact that he even smelled a bit better than his subjects, as if he'd bathed some time in the past several months. I was impressed.

The expression on Vernix' face as I approached told me he was somewhat less impressed with me.

"Yes?" he said, impatiently.

"Greetings, Goblin-Lord," I said, bowing low to show my respect and admiration.

When I looked up, the frown I'd brought to Vernix' face by disturbing him was even more pronounced.

"Clearly, thou art a boor," he said, "unfit for the gentle company present here. Away with thee until thou hast learned to ape the manners of thy betters!"

This was not the reaction I'd hoped for.

"I beg thy pardon, your Majesty. I had not expected to meet such nobility here." What had I done or said wrong? I had little knowledge of Goblin etiquette, as Lanugo had pointed out to me. Vernix peered at me, his face blank, his expression unreadable.

"Well ..." he said, finally, "perhaps thou canst be forgiven. This place is full of the most frightfully rude people. Thou mayest remain. What is thy need?"

"I require some information."

"Thou hast the manners of an acid slug! Get out of here!"

Vernix turned his back on me and began to pace again, as if I'd never existed. I considered just walking away, leaving the world of the Green Goblins far behind me, but I just couldn't do it. So far, my search for Arial had been a total bust and I couldn't afford to turn my back on anyone who might be able to help. Putting my pride on the shelf, at least for the moment, I trotted after the peripatetic Goblin King.

"A moment. Please. I do most humbly crave thy pardon."

When Vernix stopped to see who had spoken, he wore the same frown he'd worn the first time I'd disturbed him. The expression on his face left me wondering if he even remembered who I was. Had I really thought Vernix was smarter than his subjects? I now knew that either I was wrong or I had vastly overestimated his subjects.

"What is thy need?" Vernix said.

The direct approach hadn't worked, so I decided to flatter the guy. Maybe a little ego-stroking would loosen his tongue.

"I am here merely to partake in some small manner of thy vast knowledge."

I was ashamed of myself.

"True! I *am* rather wise, come to think of it. What dost thou wish to know?"

I thought carefully before answering. There was much I wanted to know, but I didn't want Vernix to dash off again. I decided to lay the flattery on as thick as I could.

"How came you by that gorgeous cloak?"

"It does suit me, doesn't it? I had it made especially for me. One simply doesn't find work like this underground. Well, perhaps the Mountainfolk do make a few nice things, but they tend toward metals rather than clothes. And of course the Seers—the Ancient Illuminated Seers of the Moonstone, they call themselves—they do nice work, too. But they generally tend more toward the literary than the sartorial arts."

"And this hall? It is most beautiful."

"Well, one does what one can. Of course those awful Gray Goblins took all the really nice things with them when they stole away in the night—this was just after Sir Cabirus died, you know, when things were falling apart—and we've had to make do since then. One of these days I'm going to get some poison into Ketchaval or his ugly wife (which amounts to the same thing—he's terribly henpecked, you know), and then we'll see what's what. King of the Gray Goblins, indeed! Why, he's an upstart! His father was a horse-thief! But enough of this. You wanted to know something? How can I help you?"

I was on a roll and so was Vernix. All I had to do was keep stroking him and he'd keep talking.

"'Tis very kind of thee to take time to help me, your Majesty."

"Oh, mention it not! It is so seldom that I get a chance to speak to a really intelligent person! I mean, our allies the Lizardmen are nice enough, but the poor fellows can't speak a word of the common tongue. They understand it well enough, but the poor things don't have the mouth to speak it. And their language is so difficult! I know *Sseth* and *click* mean 'yes' and 'no,' but I don't know which is which! Then there are the Knights of the Crux Ansata—they can talk well enough, but all they ever say is how many trolls they've killed. Frightful bore, even if it does help keep the pest population down—both kinds of pests, Knights *and* trolls, you know."

"It must be a trial, even for one as noble as yourself."

"Oh, indeed it is! Sometimes I wonder how I even manage. It wasn't always like this, you know. When Sir Cabirus was alive, things were ever so much better. He had all of us working together so well. A born leader was that man! When he founded this colony you could have made a wager anywhere in Britannia that it wouldn't work, but he made it so. I still think one of those bastard Grays must have done him in. There were certain items, too ... well, I suppose it will do no harm to tell thee. Sir Cabirus collected eight great Talismans, each embodying a certain Virtue—he was a great one for Virtue, was our Cabirus—and it was well known that he intended them to come to the leaders of the various groups here in the Abyss. Well, we never saw them. If they still exist, they must be lost. But I must be boring thee."

"No, not at all."

"Oh, thou'rt just saying that. I'm sure there's much more for thee to do than listen

The eastern path, though not directly related to my quest, proved most interesting. Just past the bridge, it split into two halves, one angling down, the other remaining level. I took the downward branch and came to a locked metal door. My gray key took care of the lock, and I acquired some useful items in the room beyond (though not without a struggle).

I then returned to the upper path and came upon a wooden door in the north wall. I opened it and went inside. I was on a north-south path, overlooking a large sunken room. I peered into the darkness, trying to see what the room contained, but slipped on some loose pebbles and tumbled to the ground. That was one way to find out what was in the room. In fact, the room was empty except for four evenly spaced square stone platforms in the center and three more platforms along the southern wall. The platforms didn't look ornamental, yet I could see no purpose in them. Very odd.

In the northwest corner of the room, I came to a staircase leading upward. I followed it back around to a place near where I'd fallen. There I noticed a door in the eastern wall. Again, the gray key did the trick, and I entered a small room with a strange patchwork floor of dirt and variously colored marble. On the wall were four dials. Another mystery. But this one

seemed easily solved. Throwing caution to the winds, I moved the hands of the easternmost dial one notch clockwise.

I heard a faint rumbling and then, nearby, the sound of stone scraping against stone. I moved the hands of another dial. Same result. The sound seemed to be coming from the sunken chamber outside. Sure enough, when I went outside to look (running down the stairs to the lower level for a closer look), the stone platforms had changed position.

Manipulating the dials until the hands were in just the right position allowed me to stair-step the stone platforms in the sunken chamber so that I could leap from one to the next, and then to the platforms against the southern wall. Numbering the dials from 1 through 4 as you face them, starting from the left, the correct positions of the hands were:

Dial 1: |
 Dial 2: /
 Dial 3: —
 Dial 4: \

Positioning the dials that way and leaping from the lowest stone platform to the one next to it, I eventually gained access to a small chamber high in the southern wall. Here I found much of interest, though, as I said, nothing of direct relevance to my quest.

to me natter on. And if you should happen to meet 'King' Ketchaval or 'Queen' Retichall of the Gray Goblins, be a dear and stick a knife in them, would you?"

Vernix returned immediately to his pacing. I wondered what thoughts passed through the Goblin's head.

"Farewell, your Majesty," I called to him, but he was already lost in thought and paid no heed.

I was disappointed that Vernix hadn't given me the chance to ask about Arial, but at least he'd given me a lead on the trolls. I knew I needed to seek out the Knights of the Crux Ansata. And he'd told me more about the inhabitants and history of the Abyss. But I had no idea how to find these inhabitants, nor how I might make something of the information he'd given me. With no alternatives presenting themselves, I headed back east, to the bridge where I'd defeated the renegade Goblin.

There the tunnel forced me north a bit, until I came to two bridges, one heading north, the other east. The path that proved most productive was the one to the north.



I crossed the bridge to the north, and soon came upon another pair of Cabirus' banners on the eastern wall. Civilization! Opening the door between the banners, I found myself in a room that was empty but for a portcullis in the eastern wall and a Goblin whose job was obviously to guard it. The Goblin—one of the Grays I'd heard so much about—moved between me and the doorway. It looked as dimwitted as all the other Goblins I'd met—and as tough.

"So! Who go there?" the Goblin said.

"I must speak with thy leader," I said. It seemed as good an opening gambit as any.

"Speak with King Ketchaval, hmm? And who you, who wants talk with King Ketchaval?"

The fellow seemed determined to learn my name and I saw no reason to keep it from him. If the Gray Goblins were anything like their green cousins, a little courtesy would go a long way.

"My name is Avatar."

"Avatar, eh? I think I heard of you. You new here, eh? You come to right place. Gray Goblins the most powerful group here. Good idea speak with King Ketchaval. He very wise and strong. Maybe you best talk to Queen Retichall first, though. On you go, now."

"Thank thee for the advice," I said as he unlocked the portcullis and ushered me through. So far, so good ...

The Gray Goblin camp was open and airy, or as airy as one could expect in a cave. The place was a sty, all peeling stucco walls and a mish-mash of stone and dirt floors. The concept of trash collection was clearly alien to these folk. Finding Retichall here was easy—like all of the inhabitants of the Abyss, the Gray Goblins were wary, but basically friendly. I simply approached each Goblin I met and engaged them all in conversation until one revealed herself to be the one I sought. I could have saved myself some trouble if I'd known that she was one of the few armed with a sword rather than a stout club. And she looked big and mean enough to put her sword to good use.

"Yes?" she growled. "What dost thou want, human?"

"I wish to speak to thy husband."

"And what reason hast thou for speaking to him?"

Hmm. Good question. I wanted to know

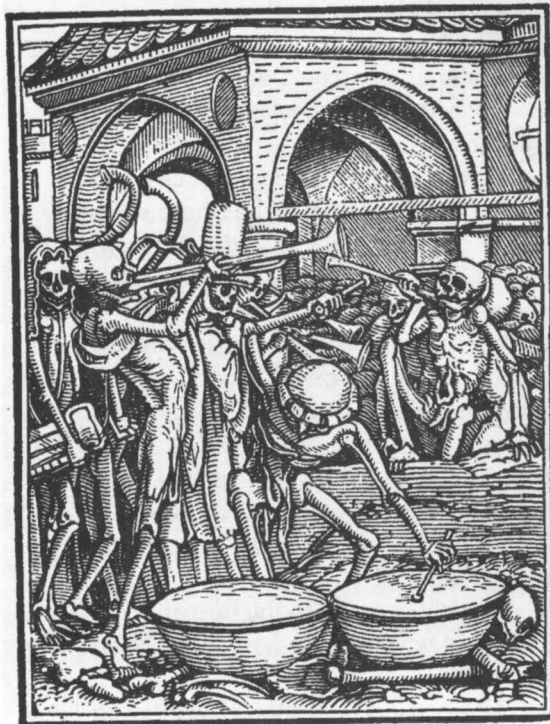
about a girl, but somehow, I didn't think this amazonian Goblin would be sympathetic to my quest. I'd had good luck with flattery before. Why change a successful strategy? Putting on my most sincere smile (and hoping humans were as much a cipher to Goblins as Goblins were to me), I said, "I wish to congratulate him on his choice of bride."

She looked tickled—at least, I think that's what the display of fangs meant. In any event, her response was positive.

"Very well, thou mayest speak to him," she said, motioning me into a room to the south. "Do not overstay thy welcome. He is a busy man."

"I thank thee kindly."

Ketcheval's quarters were no tidier than the rest of the place, though he did have his



own privy. Unlike his counterpart among the Green Goblins, King Ketcheval wasn't the least bit regal. In fact, he was a small Goblin, hunched over and looking more than a little frightened. I felt sorry for the fellow. His life with Retichall couldn't have been pleasant.

"Who be ye and what business have ye here?" he said.

After having been lectured about manners by just about every Goblin in the Abyss, I was a little disappointed by Ketcheval's abrupt manner, and my sympathy for the fellow diminished. Still, I hoped to gain information about Arial—something that seemed in stunningly short supply—so I ignored his attitude as best I could.

"I am the Avatar. I wish to speak to thee."

"I have never heard of ye. Be ye friend to Vernix?" His eyes narrowed. I considered my answer. Friend? Certainly not. And knowing the enmity between the Gray and Green Goblins, I would have been foolish to say anything but "No, I am not."

The answer seemed to please the surly monarch, but just barely.

"Hmm. Very well. Did ye speak wi' him?"

I sighed. This was getting tiresome. How much easier my quest would have been if the two warring factions had been able to see past their very few differences, as had the humans and Gargoyles of Britannia.

"Yes, I did. I spoke with Vernix."

"Poofy, ain't he?" Ketcheval said, grinning around his fangs. "Not a proper Goblin at all!"

"I wouldn't know," I said, my patience at an end. "Canst help me now?"

"What d'ye want?"

"I need to find a girl."

His hands fluttered before him, rather

poofily, I thought. "I know nothing of no girl!" he said. "I've got problems of me own."

"Such as?" I asked.

"My enemies are legion. Even the vermin here are troublesome. A great she-spider, known as Navrey Night-eyes, threatens my folk. Nor is she my only problem, though she is enough. Her web, ye know, be strong as iron, and does not burn. A Goblin caught in it will stay till he rots!"

"Terrible!"

"Indeed, 'tis not fair! Still, we must persevere. Was there anything else?"

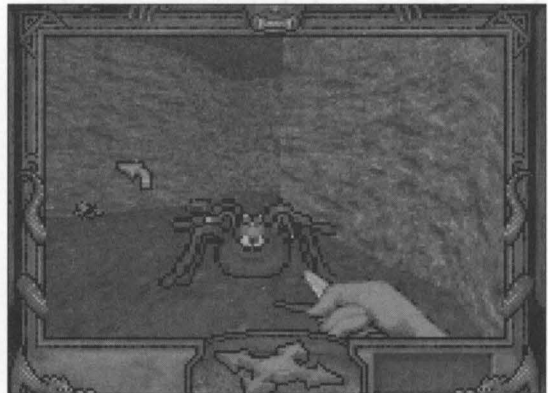
"No. I thank thee. Farewell."

And with that, I spun on my heel and stormed off. At the time, I thought the encounter a waste, but the information Ketcheval gave me about the spider, Navrey Night-eyes, would prove invaluable. What possessed me to seek the monster out, I shall never know. Perhaps my pride demanded that I accomplish something so obviously beyond the capabilities of the pitiful Goblins (whatever their color). Perhaps I hoped such a deed would cause the Gobs to treat me with the same respect they demanded from me. I don't know, but I later considered myself lucky for having sought out the beast.

I stormed out of Ketcheval's chambers, past the sentry, and right out of the Gray Goblin camp. Back in the north-south corridor, I headed north, the only direction I hadn't yet explored. When the passageway turned sharply to the west, I followed it. Several paces past the turn, I happened to spy a secret door in the north wall. Beyond it, I found a fountain with miraculous healing qualities. Though I didn't need it at that moment, I jotted a note on my ever-expanding map of the Abyss. Such information would certainly come in handy before I rescued Arial.

Unfortunately, the passageway beyond the secret door ended at the water's edge and I still didn't feeling much like swimming. I returned to the main hallway and continued westward. At the end of the corridor, I found a door and, beyond it, a maze-like collection of low passageways. The place was home to several of the most hideous and deadly spiders I could have imagined. They must have been four feet across and when they reared on their hind legs, their flailing front legs and gaping maws left me weak in the knees. My ax grew dull as I swung it this way and that, but the fur flew and the ichor ran in rivers. One by one, the spiders fell—Navrey Night-eyes among them. I gathered up the silk threads that littered the ground. I would return to the Gray Goblin camp in triumph.

As it turned out, this exercise was pretty much a waste of time, at least as far as my reputation among the Goblin was concerned. Oh, the silk would prove to be of vital importance later in the quest, but the Goblins were as surly as ever and seemed not to care that I had just rid them of their greatest foe. I might as well have been a flea for all the gratitude they showed. Such is the reward for foolish pride. Just goes to show that even the



Avatar needs to get his comeuppance once in a while.

That knowledge alone would have made my return to the Gray Goblin camp worthwhile, but I had another reason for being glad I'd come back. I encountered a Goblin, the mad Jaacar, who showed me the way to reach the next level of the Abyss.

I found him in the northwest section of the Gray Goblin camp. He wandered aimlessly among his fellows, talking to himself, occasionally cackling. The sound of a Goblin cackling is not something soon forgotten, let me tell you. I did all that I could to avoid the fellow, but he accosted me, in that annoying way all Goblins seemed to have.

"Hey! Who this? What you do?"

"I am a friend of all Goblins."

"Ha! Not Green Goblin friend I hope!"

"Of course not. I did not mean to include them."

"Yes, yes, a foul race they are. Jump into their privies on purpose, I bet, harhar!"

"Why would anyone do that?"

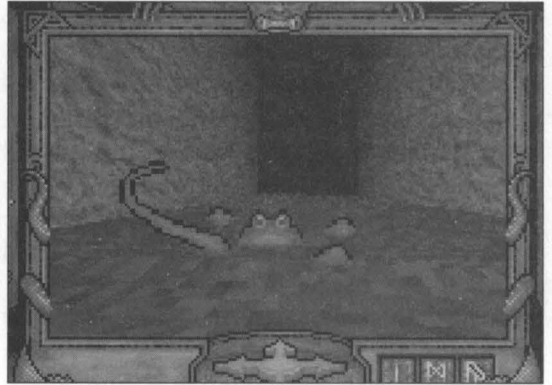
"Us Grays, we never do it on purpose—haha—but in night, I hear sometimes scream and then splash, sometimes splash and then scream. Then in morning one of us not here. Dangerous privy it is there." He pointed to the brackish water hole in one corner of the room. "I watch out if I you. Heehee."

"Well, I will be careful."

"Yes, that good idea. Don't look out, and Splash! Aiiiieeee! Gone gone gone. Heehee. Yes, you be careful. If any still alive from splash, I bet they not be too happy. You be on your toes."

"Thank you, I will be."

I don't know what possessed me to do what I did next. I walked over to the privy in the southeast corner with every intention of



giving it a look and then moving on. The stench was, needless to say, incredible. I peered into something that looked like a room with no floor. Many feet below, I thought I could just barely make out roiling water and swirling muck. I didn't even want to think about how Goblins were supposed to use this privy without falling in. As I contemplated the horror of going down a Goblin drain, one of the Goblins in the room—probably jolly old Jaacar himself—jostled me from behind and I got to experience the sensation first-hand!

I fell for what felt like forever before I splashed into deep water. The waves created by my sudden splashdown sent muck flying everywhere. I fought my way to the surface and gasped for air. Even the fetid air of the Abyss smelled sweet to me. Thrashing about, looking for land, I spotted a small patch to the north, but before I could make a move toward it, I felt a sharp stinging at the back of my neck. Spinning around as quickly as I could, I found myself face to face with a green octopus-like creature unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was trying to wrap its barbed tentacles around me. In a panic, I swam as hard as I could for land. I barely made it.

Luckily, the creature couldn't reach me here. I lay gasping and contemplating my next move, should I ever have the opportunity to make one ...



Chapter 3

I lay there panting, and coughing up brackish water, for some time. The smell of the Goblin privy permeated my clothes and assailed my senses. The taste of privy water clung to the inside of my mouth. The back of my neck burned where the tentacled creature, which still lurked a few feet offshore, had struck me. As luck would have it (and it turned out to be very good luck indeed), I had pulled myself ashore just a few feet from a fountain. Pure blue water poured from the fountain in a never-ending cascade.

I ducked my head under the fountain and drank deeply of its waters. It turned out to be another healing fountain, like the one I'd found earlier. Instantly, my neck stopped burning and the smell of the privy became noticeably less pronounced. I washed my clothes in the fountain and, when I was finished, felt wet but renewed. Unfortunately, I still had to deal with the lurker, as I had come to think of the beast in the water.

Ax ready, I inched as close to the water's edge as possible. By screaming and waving my arms around, I was able to lure the creature toward me. When its tentacles lashed out, I struck. The blade dug into the creature's flesh. Lucky for me, the lurker was stupid. Rather than move out of reach, it stayed close in, pressing the attack. Its lifeless body soon sank out of sight.

Problem one solved. Now for problem

two—where would I go from here? The temptation to remain near the healing fountain was strong, but that wouldn't get me anywhere. I pulled the map scrolls from my pack, and was surprised and pleased to learn that one of the sheets that had been blank now showed the portion of the Abyss I'd just traversed. The sheet now had the words *Level 2* on it. The magic map didn't reveal any doors or passageways leading away from my current position. If I were to continue my quest, I would have to brave the lurker-infested, privy-polluted water again.

I eased myself into the water, not wishing to arouse any more lurkers, and then swam as hard and as fast as I could, hoping I'd find dry land once again. My luck held, for I hadn't gone more than a few yards when I spied a landing to the west and clambered out of the water. I smelled of Goblin filth again, but I hardly noticed. Now that I was back on solid ground, I felt up to any challenge the Abyss might throw at me. A good thing, because a serious challenge lay ahead.

I traveled north and west for a while, and learned that I hadn't yet left the Gray Goblins behind me. They were all over the place down here, and they were decidedly less hospitable than their upstairs cousins. These Goblins attacked without warning and without mercy. The battle raged for some time as wave after wave of them came at me. If I hadn't maneuvered them into a narrow corridor where I could fight them one or, at most, two at a time, I might have had more trouble dispatching them. As it was, they served to restock my supplies and upgrade my weapons and armour. They were very well equipped and, when I was done with them, so was I.



Continuing my explorations, I came upon a stairway leading downward in the northernmost portion of the second level. I could have descended, but decided to wait. I'd barely begun to explore this portion of the Abyss and it was every bit as likely that I'd find Ariel here as anywhere else. I made a note on my map and continued on my way. When the corridor I was in reached its end, I turned south. I soon found myself running around the central shaft of the dormant volcano that is the Abyss. The central shaft had been a key geographical feature of the first level, too, and I began to think of the shaft as a landmark I could use to get my bearings, regardless of which level of the Abyss I happened to be exploring.

From the central shaft, four corridors extended: one leading north (the one I had already explored), one east, one west, and one south. Having no reason to favor one over the others, I picked the eastward passage at random. It ran straight as an arrow with but one break—a door in the north wall. Exploring the many corridors and rooms beyond this door led me into encounters with strange creatures, all of them hostile. I acquired many wondrous artifacts (including two runestones) and learned several mantras here, but found nothing directly related to my quest.

As it happened, during my non-essential trip down the eastern corridor and into the areas beyond the northern door, I found myself fatigued by combat and poisoned by the bite of a venomous spider. After making sure the area was secure, I ate some of my remaining food and went to sleep, just for a little while. That little while was enough. Once again, Garamon came to me.

"... good that thou art making headway, but hurry ... learn as much as thou art able of

the Talismans ... Cabirus created them, and thou shouldst collect all ... talk to the inhabitants of the Abyss. Some are still civilized and can help ... final hope in this drama ..."

In my zeal to find Ariel and my excitement at having been thrust once more into the adventuring life, I had almost forgotten Garamon and the greater, though still mysterious, danger to Britannia itself. I awoke with a new goal—to find the Talismans of Cabirus.

Returning to the central shaft, I headed west. A door in the north wall caught my eye, but I didn't open it just yet; I'd spotted something of far greater interest. A bit further down this passageway, I saw the banners of Cabirus flanking a portcullis in the south wall. Needless to say, I went south. The north door could wait.

Through the bars of the portcullis, I could see a short, squat man pacing back and forth—a dwarf! He had long white hair and a bushy white beard. Though clearly an old man, he was armed and wore chain armour of exquisite construction. I called to him and he stopped his pacing. Eyeing me carefully, the old fellow said, "It's been a long time since we of the Folk have seen one such as ye. I am Brawnclan. Be ye an Outcast from above, or an outsider?"

"I have recently been unjustly imprisoned."

The dwarf smiled patronizingly. "Aye, so all of ye say. Well, it's not me place to cast judgment upon ye. Behave yourself properly when dealing with the Mountainfolk, that's all we ask. What else ye do is your own business. Now, what is it that ye be wanting?"

"Hast thou news of a kidnapped girl?"

"Aye, I heard of such a thing. The Abyss isn't a safe place these days, I tell ye. Perhaps

some other of the Folk might know more about that. Is there anything else I can help ye with?"

"Canst thou let me through this portcullis?"

"Very well, ye seem a reasonable sort. Just mind your manners and ye'll nae have trouble with the Folk. Now, before ye meet the rest of the clan, is there anything else ye'll be wanting?"

There was that manners thing again! What was it with these people? Had Cabirus so totally convinced them that manners were the key to getting along? I applauded the sentiment, and marveled at the zeal with which everyone stuck to the idea, but I was getting awfully tired of being lectured about behavior by people who could barely keep themselves clean!

"That is all," I said shaking my head. "Well met, and farewell."

The old one approached and opened the portcullis. It rose silently, with none of the clanking and clattering I'd come to expect in the Abyss, and he ushered me inside. Clearly, these were people who kept things in good repair. In fact, everything in the dwarf camp was immaculately kept and in its proper place. Unlike the Goblins, these Folk had more than a little pride. Even the odor was bearable here.

I wandered south through the camp, gazing in wonder at the fine workmanship of everything I could see, and bumped right into a dwarf who looked enough like Brawnclan that the two could have been twin brothers.

"Greetings," I said.

"Ah, ye must be the Avatar of whom I've heard. What can I do for ye?"

"I seek information."

"Ah, Shak may be the one ye want. A smith he is, and knowledgeable in the ways

and workings of his trade and the world. King Goldthirst ye should seek out too, if ye wish to gain his favor."

"Perhaps one of them knows of a kidnapped girl."

"Terrible, ain't it?" he said, shaking his head and poking a toe into the ground. "I hear a troll carried a young lass below. I hope all turns out well for her. Up here, we have enough problems of our own."

"What problems?" I asked. Problem-solving is what I do best.

"Maybe ye can help us. Our mines in the southeast have been invaded by a fearsome beast, floating in the air, with many tentacles. If ye can defeat it, all Mountainfolk would be eternally grateful."

"I will go and slay it," I said. It was obviously the right thing to do. We talked for a moment longer, but he seemed to have said his piece and I had just added yet another mission to my growing list, so, saying my farewells, I continued south. The corridor soon turned sharply to the west and as I rounded the corner, I entered a splendid room, the largest and most ornate I'd yet seen in the Abyss. It rivaled even the throne room of Lord British himself.

Everything here appeared to be made of marble. The floor was a brilliant gold. Six huge columns supported the high vaulted ceiling. Well-armed dwarf guards stood close by each pillar, eyeing me carefully as I made my way toward a raised dais at the far end of the room. Upon the dais stood a husky dwarf in ceremonial armour. The gold crown topping his shock of white hair told me that this was the king. Surrounding him were several disorderly piles of gold, which seemed out of place in this perfectly ordered, immaculately kept chamber.



As I pondered this, Goldthirst barked at me, "Greetings, Traveler! I am Goldthirst, leader of the Mountainfolk. Welcome to our hall."

"Thank thee, O Dwarf-King."

Suddenly Goldthirst's face darkened.

"Call me that again, and thy tongue shall wag without thy head around it!"

He turned his back on me; the conversation was at an end, at least as far as he was concerned. I heard the king's guards moving restively behind me. What had I said or done to offend him so? Then it occurred to me—both Goldthirst and Brawnclan had called themselves "Mountainfolk," while I had called Goldthirst a dwarf. Why they might object to being called dwarves, since that was clearly what they were, I didn't know, but I wouldn't make that mistake again.

I cleared my throat and spoke quietly, "My lord ..."

Goldthirst turned, still looking perturbed. "Oh, 'tis thee again. Is there a reason for thy visit?"

I thought quickly. What could I say or do to win the fellow back to my side? Gold! The man loved gold; that was apparent from the fact that he couldn't bear to be separated from it. I decided to try a bribe.

"I have a gift for your Lordship. I trust it pleases thee."

I laid 10 gold pieces on the floor before him and awaited his response. It wasn't long in coming.

"This is indeed a goodly gift, and I thank thee for it most kindly. Wouldst care to see the treasure chamber to which it will be added?"

He eyed me carefully as he spoke, and I began to get the impression that his paranoia ran almost as deep as his lust for treasure. My answer had to be very carefully phrased.

"Only if your Lordship insists."

He grinned broadly. "Thou shalt see it for thyself! Take thee to the end of the hall from which thou didst enter and say the words '*Deco Morono*' to the guard at the door."

"I thank thee," I said, thinking that I probably could have gotten away with a bribe much smaller than 10 gold pieces.

Again he turned his back to me, signaling the end of our conversation (though this time, he was counting my 10 gold pieces over and over rather than considering how best to separate my head from my body!). Now, what had he meant by the end of the hall from which I'd entered? Did he mean to return to the place where I'd entered, or to go to the end of the hall *opposite* the place I'd entered? Going back didn't make much sense to me, so I decided to continue to the end of the hall. The only problem was that I was already *at* the end of the hall. Leaving the dais, I noticed a door set in the wall south of the raised platform. Okay, I'd start my search there.

The door was locked and none of my keys fit. The hall's layout was relentlessly symmetrical, so I walked around to the other side of the dais, assuming I'd find a matching door there. I was right. The northern door

opened at my touch and gave me access to a north-south corridor. The southern route dead-ended almost immediately in a locked door that none of my keys would open. Heading north, I was immediately accosted by an angry-looking Mountainman. Our conversation, if you could call it that, was almost humorous in its terseness.

"Halt!" he said, "Who goes there?"

"I am the Avatar."

"What is thy business here?"

"I might ask thee the same."

"I ask the questions here! What is thy business here?"

"I come on Goldthirst's business," I said. If he checked, I might be in trouble, but the Mountainfolk's king and I had parted on good terms. Maybe I could bluff my way through. The look on my new friend's face told me I might be wrong.

"I doubt your purpose here is legitimate," he snarled, "if ye know not the password!"

I had him now! Goldthirst had, in fact, given me the password.

"Deco Morono," I said smugly.

Instantly the guard's demeanor changed. His furrowed brow smoothed itself. His tensed shoulders relaxed visibly. He even tried to smile, though the attempt fell a bit short of success. Clearly, friendliness was not in this man's basic character, though he gave it his best effort.

"Greetings, noble Avatar!" he said stiffly. "Enter with honor and look upon the magnificent treasure chamber of Lord Goldthirst. Dare ye not to do any further."

He bowed and motioned me past him. I followed the corridor into a large empty room and through a door in the east wall. A twisting passageway soon led me to a precipice. There I found a piece of parchment with a very

powerful *Light* spell scrawled on it. Unsure whether it belonged to Goldthirst or not, I left it where it was. In point of fact, I doubt taking it would have done any harm, but at the time I didn't want to take the risk.

Looking over the edge of the precipice, I gazed in awe at Goldthirst's treasure room. The glow of my own *Light* spell was reflected back at me by piles of gold coins, countless gems, ornate chalices, and a thousand other wonders. For a moment, I considered jumping down into the sunken room to get a better look, but several things made me reconsider. First, the jump would have been a big one and the possibility of injury seemed good. Second, I couldn't take anything after I landed—to do so would lead to disaster, I felt sure. Also, I couldn't see any doors in the room. I had no idea how I'd get out. Finally, an Earth Golem shambled toward the precipice, watching my every move from the floor of the chamber, occasionally roaring and shaking its massive fists at me. The Golem was huge, by far the biggest thing I'd seen since my arrival in the Abyss. I doubted I could survive long against him. I decided to admire the treasure from afar.

Returning to the main hall, I gave some thought to engaging Goldthirst in conversation once again, but he looked upset about something, so I stole quietly from the room. When the corridor turned to the north, I hugged the eastern wall, rather than exiting to the west the way I'd come. The third door I came to was unlocked. Beyond it, I met a poor soul named Corby, an elderly man in the garb of a Knight. Surprised at seeing one of my own kind here in the realm of the Mountainfolk, I was momentarily dumbstruck. The look on the old man's face was one of utter sorrow.

"Hast thou come to add to my torment?" he groaned.

His voice was choked with emotion. Clearly this was a man for whom life held no joy. Finding my own voice, I replied.

"Of what torment dost thou speak?"

"Why," he said, "the torment of lost hopes ... of disillusionment."

Corby wrung his hands and paced back and forth. I sensed that he wanted to speak, but was reluctant to bare his soul.

"Tell me more," I said quietly.

"I shared the great dream of Sir Cabirus, that the Avatar's way could be pursued by all folk. We sought to gather all intelligent species here in the Abyss and teach them to live in harmony. Alas, it was not to be. The constant bickering proved too much for kindly Sir Cabirus, and he perished in his sleep. Some said he was poisoned, but I know he died of a broken spirit. His life's work lay in this place, and as he watched it crumble, his heart broke as well."

"I am sorry to hear that," I said. "Does aught remain of his dream?"

"Well, aye, Sir Cabirus did gather a number of artifacts with interesting properties. He thought the use of these artifacts might assist the colonists as they pursued the way of the Avatar. Unfortunately, the objects were misused by the folk he hoped to help."

"How so?"

"Each of the eight items gathered by Sir Cabirus embodied one of the Virtues. But those who now possess the items keep them merely for their intrinsic value, not their higher purpose."

"Then I shall find these artifacts and put them to proper use."

At this, the old man broke down and sobbed. I comforted him as best I could, but I

knew I had to be on my way. Assuring him I would do all I could to further Cabirus' dream, I continued my journey.

Though I encountered several more Mountainfolk (and found myself stymied by several locked doors), there was little to be accomplished here, so I returned to the central corridor north of the Mountainfolks' camp.

Following the corridor to its westernmost point, I found a door in the north wall. Beyond it I found a maze populated by acid slugs, a stairway leading upward and, most important, a shrine. I reached the ankh by following a marble corridor northward to its end. There I pondered my experiences thus far, and was rewarded with great insights into the nature of survival in this most inhospitable place.

Rewarding though this side trip may have been, it was only that. I was no nearer my goal than I'd been when I was pushed into the Goblin privy. Returning to the main corridor, I headed east (there being no other way to go) and came upon another door in the north wall. I had seen it before, but forgotten all about it.

Beyond this door I met a mad Mountainman named Ironwit, who asked in his unique way for my assistance. The errand on which he sent me proved moderately rewarding, netting me a runestone and a flying potion, but it was quite dangerous. The maze beyond Ironwit's chamber was hellish; it was here I first encountered the headless of the Abyss. It would be an understatement to say these poor creatures were far more formidable than I remembered! However, dangerous as the headless were, the *most* dangerous part of this quest was trying to decipher Ironwit's warning about which of two

potions I was to use at a critical juncture. If only I'd known then that green was good and red was rotten! I suffered mightily for lack of that knowledge.

After a few side trips, I set off once again to find Arial, though by this point, finding the Talismans of Cabirus was nearly as high on my list of things to do. I'd heard enough about them to know that they'd be critical to my endeavors in the Abyss. But where to go next? I had covered the northern regions of this level thoroughly and had been over every inch of the southwestern portion. This left only the southeast to explore. Making my way back to the central shaft of the Abyss, I headed south.

A corridor heading east caught my eye and I explored it, acquiring a key inset with a chipped red gem. As it turned out, this key opened several doors in the Mountainfolk's area. If only I had known about it earlier ...

Continuing south, I came upon a door in the eastern wall. To one side of the door a plaque read "Entrance to Mines." A plaque on the other side read "Helmet Recommended." I wondered if the helmet was for protection against falling rocks or against the deadly monster I had promised I would try to eradicate. I was soon to find out that the answer was "Both."

Entering the mines, I immediately found myself at a fork. Rough shafts, quite unlike the finely detailed and perfectly finished artifacts in the rest of the Mountainfolk's realm, led to the north and south. Close by the north shaft, a sign read "North Branch. Beware of Monster!" As always, the symmetry-loving Mountainfolk had placed a matching sign by the southern tunnel. It read "South Branch (to Shak)." I silently blessed the Mountainfolk for their orderliness and set off toward Shak; I

wanted as much information as I could get before I sought out the monster of the mines.

I quickly found myself lost in a maze far more devious than any I had yet encountered. My magical map proved of little use as I made my way into this maze, but I wonder if I would ever have found my way out without it. Needless to say, I consulted it often.

Memory fails me as I try to recall how long I wandered through those tunnels but, in retrospect, I could have saved myself much time and trouble if I had simply hugged the right-hand wall of the southern shaft. Had I done this, I would have walked directly to the quarters of a Mountainman by the name of Hewstone. When I found him, this friendly miner provided a wealth of information.

"Ach, ye don't look like a miner to me," he said as I approached. "Who be ye?"

"I am the Avatar, an adventurer."

"Well met, Avatar. I be Hewstone. What are ye doing in these parts?"

"I am searching for a monster to destroy."

The Mountainman looked at me as if I were crazy.

"The monster of the mines?" he said, shaking his head. "A great boon it would be if ye did defeat it, but I don't know that it can be done. A fearsome thing it is!" He removed his helmet and rubbed his matted hair thoughtfully. "Caught it once out of the corner of me eye, and I don't care to see it again. It lurks in the north part of these mines. Ye be careful, if ye truly mean to destroy it. We caused a cave-in to block its area from ours, so ye'll have to break your way through it. Is there anything I can help ye with before ye go off after it?"

I wondered how I would break through a cave-in, so I decided to ask how the miners did their work.

“Ye would be a miner, eh? It’s a tough job, ye should know that. Don’t take it up if ye have not the strength. Hard work it is, picking up a rock hammer and smashing boulders to pieces, scraping the rock over and over again, one inch of wall at a time.”

“There must be some good points to being a miner,” I said.

“Well, it is backbreaking work but the rewards are great. Gold there is for the hard worker, and I know of no substance better. Ah, the thrill of feeling one’s hammer thud solid rock and suddenly discovering a new vein! Go ye to the northern part of these mines and see for yourself the beauty of a gold mine. But watch yourself—that fearsome monster has been seen there, and

perhaps even an adventurer such as ye could not handle it.”

Hewstone eventually excused himself, saying he had work to do. I had work of my own, but before I embarked on it, I borrowed a rock hammer from the miner’s room. He had several and wouldn’t miss it, I hoped, and I thought it might come in handy. Continuing my exploration of the mines, I found myself at the mouth of a tunnel north of the place where I’d met Hewstone. A sign read “Unstable Mines.” If only I’d paid attention to the implicit warning—but I didn’t.

Foolishly I plunged ahead. Soon I heard a massive rumbling behind me. Turning, I found myself trapped by a large fallen boulder. The tunnel proved to be a dead end and I was forced to turn back, spending several hours banging away at the boulder that blocked my way back. Hewstone had been right about one thing—the miner’s lot was not an easy one. By the time I broke through the huge stone, I was dead tired, but I couldn’t afford to rest yet—not until I found a way out of these tunnels. And I wouldn’t be ready to leave until I’d found Shak and learned what he could tell me about the Abyss. And not until I’d encountered the dread beast that terrorized the Mountainfolk.

Finding Shak turned out to be easier than I’d expected. The tunnel that led to his quarters was just south of the unstable shaft. I followed its twists and turns eastward across a stone bridge, then north across another bridge, and finally south, until I saw the standard of the Mountainfolk hanging by a sturdy wooden door. Entering, I encountered a well-muscled Mountainman. Though he was barely half my height, the fellow’s arms were easily twice as big around as my own. He was hunched over an anvil, hammering at a sword of exquisite



workmanship. The room was littered with weapons, all as marvelous as the sword and all obviously treated with disdain, as if the craftsman knew he could create works such as these at a moment's notice. As it turned out, this was the case, as I would learn from our discussion and from later events.

At my approach, the fellow looked up from his work and pulled a greasy rag from his belt. He used it to mop his beet-red face.

"Greetings to ye," he said, blowing his nose loudly into the rag. "I am Shak of the Mountainfolk. What may I do for ye?"

"I need some information."

"What do ye wish tae ken?"

The Mountainman didn't beat around the bush, so I followed suit.

"What dost thou know of the Talismans of Sir Cabirus?"

"Little enough o' most, but I ken well that two o' them were smith-work. A sword and a shield they were, both fine work."

"Tell me of this Sword."

"Aye, now there was a weapon!" he said, smiling at the very thought of it. "Willful, they say, but potent beyond mortal blades. It had a sense of fair play, did Caliburn. 'Twasn't for naught they called it the Sword o' Justice. 'Twas forged by the great Flamebeard himself." He snapped out of his reverie with a start and looked down at his half-formed sword, then back at me. "Would there be anythin' else, then?"

"Dost know where the Sword lies?"

"No, I do not. Broken into two pieces, I hear it was, but where they are I canna tell ye."

He started to hammer at the sword blank again, but I approached him one last time.

"And the shield? Tell me of this Shield."

He stopped hammering at the sword and

started tapping the palm of his hand lightly. I was impressed—I would have had trouble swinging the hammer at all, yet he could swing it lightly ... and with one hand!

"The Shield of Valor it were named," he said impatiently. "Never a finer one did I see. 'Twas Blackthorne's once, or so I've 'eard tell. But it were one o' those things easier to set aside than to take up again, an' he left it when he went to become the conscience for all the world. Ach, but that were a mess. Be there aught else I can do for ye?"

"Dost know where the Shield is now?"

"Ah, I dinna ken that a' all. If ye should see it, let me know!"

"I will indeed."

While I had his attention, I figured I'd see if he was interested in bartering. He was—and though he drove a hard bargain, I left Shak's shop with both information and some very fine armour and weaponry. With knowledge and arms, I felt ready to seek out and destroy the monster of the mines.

The sign by the entrance to the mines had told me where to begin my search, so I made for it, getting lost only about a half dozen times along the way. Just past the sign, the tunnel branched left and right. I followed the right path first. I shouldn't have bothered—all it got me was a scroll that revealed a mantra, and a dose of poison from a belligerent (and soon deceased) slug. Reaching into my pack, I found some leeches I'd picked up earlier and, forcing back a wave of nausea, popped them into my mouth. They tasted terrible and felt worse, but they counteracted the effects of the poison. I could ill afford to be at anything less than full strength if I were to continue on my quest.

The other branch of the tunnel, the one to the north, proved more fruitful, though far

more dangerous. First I had to use my rock hammer to clear away an avalanche. After this, I had to stop and rest, but I was disturbed by a strange fluttering sound not too far away. Leaping to my feet, I readied an ax I had acquired from the Mountainman smith and inched cautiously into the farthest reaches of the tunnel.

Rounding a corner, I caught a glimpse of one of the most hideous monsters in creation—a Gazer! It floated in midair, its many red, talon-tipped limbs jerking spasmodically. Its smaller eye blinked nervously as it spotted me. Its huge, bilious green, central eye stared at me with a look I'd seen only in pictures of sharks or in the eyes of the undead. None of this took me by surprise—I'd seen Gazers before. But I had never seen one as large as this. It nearly filled the passageway.

Suddenly, its central eye blinked red and I felt a shock wave of magical energy. A strange keening noise filled the tunnel and echoed madly. I answered with a barely human scream and charged the beast, drawing my ax back as I ran. The blade nearly bounced off its armoured hide, but bit in at the last moment. As I withdrew it, bits of flesh and gobules of ichor splattered my new armour. The metal sizzled at their touch.

The creature's talons raked my armour. Its massive, dead eye blinked its deadly magic. My ax bit deep into the creature's flanks. I severed two of its limbs. The battle raged for what seemed like hours, but in actuality it was all over in a matter of moments. The creature exploded into a fine red mist, then disappeared. I had won.

Sinking to the ground, exhausted, I waited for my heart to stop beating madly, waited for my breath to slow, waited for the adrenaline

to leave my legs and for the fear to subside. When it did, I dragged myself wearily to Goldthirst's throne room. I didn't know whether the Mountainman chief would even care that I had done him and his people a great service, but I was damned if I was going to leave him unaware of my feat!

"Greetings, bold Avatar," Goldthirst said as I approached. "What brings thee back to our hall?"

For some reason, I couldn't just come right out and tell him. Bragging would have been unseemly, and I had no desire to cheapen my victory. I considered simply turning and leaving, but that would have been rude. I considered offering another gift, but that didn't seem right either. Why had I come? I had come as an adventurer, eager to brag about my accomplishments—not as the Avatar, exemplar of the eight Virtues. I was ashamed.

"I come in search of adventure," I said humbly. Goldthirst missed the irony in the statement and, stroking his beard, pondered for a moment.

"Perhaps we can help each other," he said. "I have need of such an adventurer as thyself. Our mines have been invaded by a terrible monster!"


"I believe that I have slain the beast already."

"I knew thou wert a hero! Was it difficult?"

"Yes. I was fortunate to have slain it."

"And modest as well! Truly, thou art worthy of this great reward! Here!"

A small, stooped member of the race of Mountainfolk scuttled forward, presenting me with a small amulet cast in the shape of a stonemason's chisel. Goldthirst drew himself to



The Strygian Abyss

his full height (which looked to be a head and a half shorter than mine) and spoke, his voice shaking just a bit with emotion.

"This was the favored tool of Great Coulnes," he said, "the best gem-cutter ever to grace our tribe. It is traditionally presented to heroes and those who excel in their craft. Thou art the first not of our folk to bear it. May it bring thee fortune. Again, our thanks."

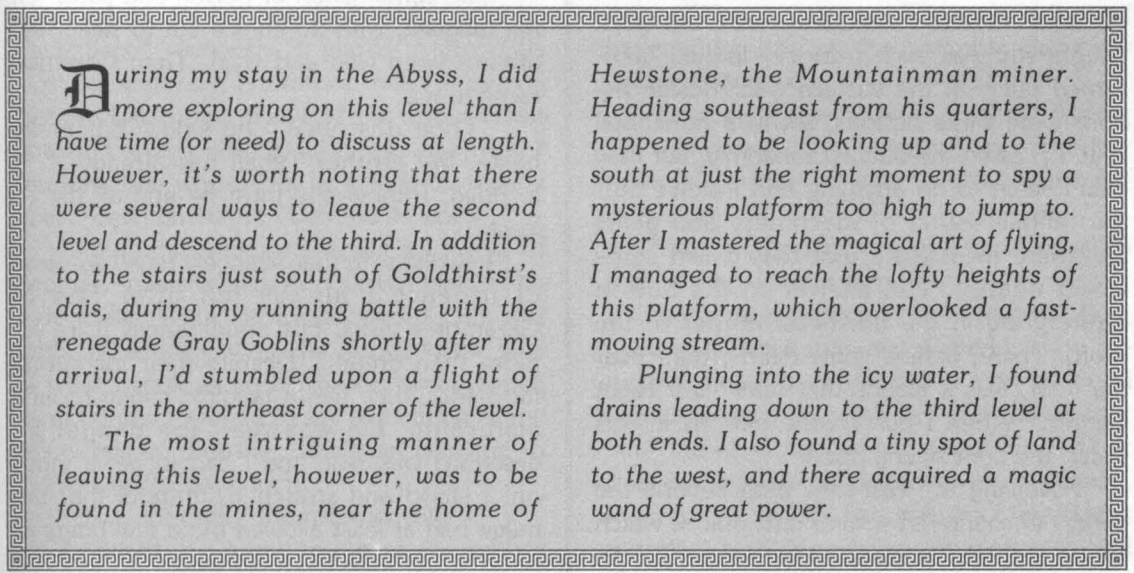
By this point, I was pretty moved myself. I had come in pride and Goldthirst, overcoming his avarice and greed, had presented me with something of great value to him and to his people. I felt humbled.

"Tis a fine gift," I said. "I thank thee kindly."

But that was not all Goldthirst and his people had to offer me. Sensing that I had won the chief's trust, I investigated the two locked doors I'd encountered earlier. The door

north of the dais remained open; the door in the southern end of the corridor beyond was as locked now as it had been the last time I'd tried it. This time, however, I had a new key, the one with the red gem set in its handle. This opened the lock with ease. In the room beyond, I found an antique flute and raised it to my lips. It made a nasty sound, but the problem was my technique, not the instrument itself. Thinking I could brighten my time in the Abyss by mastering the instrument, I took it, knowing that Goldthirst wouldn't deny me it now.

The locked door on the southern end of the dais opened easily now, too, thanks to my new key. Beyond it, I found a stairway leading down. Counting my blessings, I took leave of Goldthirst and the Mountainfolk. I had explored the four corners of this level of the Abyss. It was time to delve deeper.



During my stay in the Abyss, I did more exploring on this level than I have time (or need) to discuss at length. However, it's worth noting that there were several ways to leave the second level and descend to the third. In addition to the stairs just south of Goldthirst's dais, during my running battle with the renegade Gray Goblins shortly after my arrival, I'd stumbled upon a flight of stairs in the northeast corner of the level.

The most intriguing manner of leaving this level, however, was to be found in the mines, near the home of

Hewstone, the Mountainman miner. Heading southeast from his quarters, I happened to be looking up and to the south at just the right moment to spy a mysterious platform too high to jump to. After I mastered the magical art of flying, I managed to reach the lofty heights of this platform, which overlooked a fast-moving stream.

Plunging into the icy water, I found drains leading down to the third level at both ends. I also found a tiny spot of land to the west, and there acquired a magic wand of great power.



Chapter 4

I descended the stairs from the second level and came to a narrow corridor, which branched right before opening into an oddly shaped room. Spiny plants with bright red fruit lined the western wall. Among the plants, I spied some leeches—lifesavers down here, as I'd discovered. As I stooped to grasp the slimy creatures, I felt a sharp pain in my ankle. A small cluster of plant spines had attached themselves to my leg through my chain-mail armour.

Almost immediately, I began to feel dizzy. The plants were poisonous! How fortunate that I'd found leeches right here, but how unfortunate that I had to use them so soon. Pushing aside my armour, I removed the deadly spines carefully and placed the ravenous leeches on the open wounds. This helped some, but I still felt a bit shaky as I looked around the room.

The corridor continued north, but what caught my eye was a door—locked, as it turned out—in the eastern wall. Beside the door were three buttons, set in a horizontal row. I pressed the buttons randomly, but they didn't seem to do anything and I didn't hear the telltale sound of machinery and gears anywhere to indicate that they'd had some effect nearby. The answer to the button mystery lay in the northeast corner of the room. There, behind some debris, right near the floor, was a plaque that read "Left Right Center." When I pushed the buttons in this order, the door swung open.

Following the east-west path beyond the door, I encountered several rats, one of which bit me and left me diseased yet again. Shortly thereafter, I was attacked by a vampire bat,

also poisonous! This place was decidedly inhospitable. If everything on this level proved to be poisonous, I was in big trouble—I'd already used the last of my leeches, and though sleep could usually cure some of the worst effects of poison, I had neither time nor inclination for bed rest.

The path branched north after a time, but I first chose to follow it to its eastern end. There I found a set of stairs heading down, but I wasn't ready to descend further just yet, so I returned to the northern branch. A short distance up the north branch, I came upon two locked doors, one on either side of the corridor. None of my keys worked. As I examined one of the doors, I was set upon by a belligerent human in fighter's garb. After a brief conversation, which went none too well, I found myself under attack and slew the bandit. I took no satisfaction from the victory. It seemed a waste, despite the booty I acquired as a result.

The combination of poison and battle left me fatigued, with no choice but to sleep. My dreams were wild and vivid. Then Garamon came to me.

"Thou dost well," he said, "but make haste. My brother Tyball has already ... is terrified, I know she must be and all the ... least."

I awoke with that strangely renewed sense of urgency I always felt after one of Garamon's visits. His appearances were far more than dreams. Despite their increasing familiarity, they had a tangible reality I found disturbing. He was real, the danger he described was real, and I had to get a move on. I stood and stretched, grateful that the mage had at least allowed me a few hours of sleep before invading my dreams.

Stowing my bedroll, I continued north and

came to a wide bridge. Fetid water crawled below it. I crossed quickly, the smell of it strong in my nostrils. On the far side, I came across two locked metal doors; one on each side of the corridor. The area had the harsh, worn look of a prison. There was a third metal door straight ahead, which I fully expected to be locked too. I was wrong. It opened easily and I emerged in an east-west corridor. More metal doors dotted the north wall. I was about to try one of them when I heard a shuffling sound from the west. Whirling about, I caught a glimpse of something big and green to the west.

I ran in that direction, drawing my ax just in case. Just before the end of the corridor, I came to an opening in the south wall and entered it. There, in the room beyond, I saw something I'd seen once before, in the Savage Empire—a living, breathing dinosaur. Well, not a dinosaur exactly; more of an eight-foot-tall creature that was part dinosaur, part dragon, and part human being. As I approached, its tail twitched madly and its claws flexed nervously. It glared at me. This must be one of the Lizardmen that Vernix, the Green Goblin king had told me about. That meant I was dealing with an intelligent creature, one who might be willing to engage in conversation before I became its lunch.

Behind the creature I caught a glimpse of another, smaller room, its doorway blocked by a portcullis. Within it, a man paced back and forth. When he saw me, he rushed to the bars of what I took to be his prison and grasped them tightly. I wanted to say something to my fellow human, but the Lizardman beat me to the conversational punch.

“Bica, sor’click,” the monster said.

I racked my brain trying to remember what Vernix had told me of the Lizardmen.

Something about the sounds *click* and *sseth* ... One meant “yes” and the other meant “no.” No telling which was which. Not much to build a conversation around. I decided to play it safe.

“Uh ... Greetings,” I said.

“Tosa yeshor’click? Tosa sorr?”

Okay, so far so good. The creature hadn’t eaten me yet. And its reply had the distinct character of a question. At least I hoped a raised brow and a rising pitch indicated a question in the Lizard language.

“Dost speak my language?” I asked hopefully. The creature cocked its head in the way dogs sometimes do when they’re concentrating hard and want to fool you into believing they understand what you’re saying.

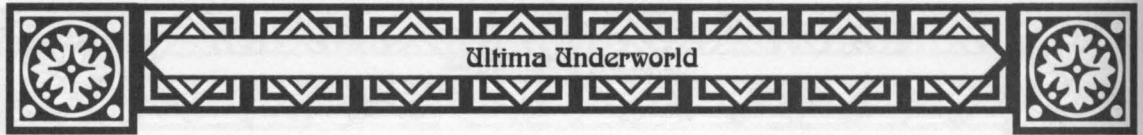
“Click,” it said, shaking its head from side to side.

Hmm. Not much to work with there, but it was a start. I knew that *click* meant “yes” or “no” and the Lizardman had understood me well enough to give an answer that made sense. This was progress. The man in the cell tightened his grip on the bars, but didn’t say anything. Very odd.

“Dost *click* mean ‘no’?” I asked, hoping the side-to-side head motion was another universal gesture (at least in this universe of two races).

“Sseth,” the Lizardman said, shaking its head up and down vigorously.

At this point, I broke off the conversation, if you could call it that, and walked back to the entranceway to ponder my next move. I suspected *sseth* meant “yes” and *click* meant “no,” but I had no way to be sure. I could just as easily have the definitions reversed. I mean, the only real proof I had was the Lizardman’s imitation of human head movements—and who was to say Lizardmen didn’t interpret



head nods and shakes in a manner totally different than humans?

At least the Lizardman seemed friendly. While I dithered, it waited patiently, occasionally scratching its chin delicately with a massive claw better suited to rending and tearing. My next move was inspired; I walked back into the room and said "Hello again."

"Bica, sor'click," the creature said.

Bica—that was the same thing it had said before. I assumed bica was a greeting of some kind.

"Bica, yourself," I said, ever the witty conversationalist. This set off a torrent of words from my new-found Lizardman friend.

"Tosa yeshor'click? Tosa sorr?"

"I'm sorry, I can't understand thee."

"Tosa thit sstresh. Tosa eppa Uργο," it said, pointing to the figure moving behind the bars. The man grasped the bars so tightly that I could see his knuckles turn white, the bones threatening to poke through his skin, but still he said nothing.

"What dost thou want?" I asked—well, whined really, frustrated at my inability to decipher the Lizardman's speech.

"Tosa eppa Uργο? Uργο sstresh tosa? Uργο sorr. Tosa sorr?" it said, gesturing wildly at the prisoner.

I had no idea what was going on, only that it had something to do with the fellow behind bars.

"Why? ..." I began, but the Lizardman cut me off before I could complete my thought.

"Uργο sorr. Uργο sorra zekka, thes'click Thepa. Thepa yethe Uργο," it said, growing more agitated with each passing moment. This was not going the way I'd hoped. I was getting nowhere fast.

"Too confusing," I said, shaking my head. "Good-bye."

The Lizardman shrugged and went back to his pacing while I walked over to the man behind bars. At my approach, he pointed to his mouth and shook his head.

"Art thou hungry?"

He nodded and made a talking motion with his hand next to his mouth, then shook his head back and forth.

"Oh. Thou'rt mute *and* hungry!"

He nodded his head unhappily.

"Here's something to eat," I said, digging in my pack and coming up with an ear of corn and a piece of meat. He gobbled the stuff down as though he hadn't eaten in weeks.

While he ate, I asked, "What is thy name?"

His eyes lit up, and with great effort he grunted out something that sounded like "Uurghoo."

"I have it. Thy name is Uργο!" I'd heard the Lizardman say that. The man shook his head sadly and gave up on name-guessing. He had other things on his mind. I watched as he mimed being in a cage.

"Art thou a prisoner here?"

He nodded sadly, then performed a complicated series of charades that seem to indicate his innocence. He mimed vicious Lizardmen grabbing a wide-eyed victim and laughing heartily as they flung him in a cell. He implored me, using gestures, to speak to the Lizardmen and get him released. He was quite a skilled mime, clearly a man of some intellectual prowess who wouldn't be hindered by his inability to speak. Unfortunately, I was less skilled at communication, at least with Lizardmen. I wanted to help him, but I didn't see how I could.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I don't understand their language."

He gestured at himself, indicating that he understood the tongue of the Lizardmen. Then he made signs that seemed to indicate that the Lizardmen understood *human* speech, but couldn't pronounce it themselves. He seemed to be saying he could teach me the Lizardman language.

"Very well. If thou wishest to teach me Lizard tongue, I will try."

He indicated that I had to supply a word, and he would translate it for me. We went back and forth for some time; I'd dredge up a Lizard word from my memory and he'd pantomime the meaning with startling ease. The Lizardman stood there patiently, watching us. By the time we were through, I felt as if I had a better-than-passing knowledge of the Lizard language, and I was anxious to test my expertise by speaking with the patient Lizardman again.

"Bica," he said.

I now knew this to mean "hello," as I'd surmised earlier.

"Bica," I replied.

"Tosa yeshor'click? Tosa sorr?"—Are you friend or enemy, he was asking.

"Yeshor 'click."—Friend.

The Lizardman's eyes narrowed and his tongue, surprisingly pink and delicate, flicked out and touched his upper lip.

"Tosa eppa Urgo? Urgo sstresh tosa? Urgo sorr. Tosa sorr?"—You see Murgo? Murgo help you? Murgo enemy. You enemy?

The Lizardman was getting agitated. He'd seen me talking with Murgo earlier and he wasn't happy about it.

"No, I'm not," I said quickly. I didn't want anything the size of the Jolly Green Giant thinking of me as the enemy!

Instantly the Lizardman's demeanor changed. He was my best friend once again.

Clearly I had no idea how the Lizardman mind worked. It was as if my saying I was friendly made it so. I wondered how a race so innocent had managed to survive in the Abyss. Then I glanced at my buddy's razor-sharp teeth and claws. That gave me a clue. Innocent or not, the Lizardman now considered me a friend for life.

"Tosa yeshor'click!" he said. "Isili Sseetharee. Sseetharee yeshor'click. Isili sstresh tosa, sseth?"—You friend! Me Sseetharee. Sseetharee friend. Me help you, yes?

"Yes!" I very much wanted Sseetharee's help!

"Urgo sorr. Urgo sorra zekka, thes'click Thepa. Thepa yethe Urgo."—Murgo enemy. Murgo steal food, hate Lizardmen. Lizardmen kill Murgo.

As if a switch had been thrown, the Lizardman flipped from friend to raging monster. I had to slow him down a bit, get him to relax again.

"No, please don't!" It wasn't much, but it was the best I could do on the spur of the moment.

"Tosa sel'a zekka isili. Isili sel'a Urgo tosa."—You give food me—me give Murgo you.

"I have some right here," I said, busily rummaging through my pack. The Lizardman's nostrils worked busily as I produced a choice piece of meat for his inspection. He turned his nose up in another all-too-human gesture.

"Tosa 'click sel'a ossli. Isili 'click sstresh Urgo."—You not give enough. Me no help Murgo.

"Sorry. Here is more."

This time I offered him the piece of meat and a fish, but that still wasn't enough. Again

the Lizardman refused my generosity. Finally I moved some distance away and pulled three stones from my runebag—the *In*, *Mani*, and *Ylem* stones, the ones necessary for a *Create Food* spell. In no time, I had more food than I could carry. (I was also dizzy from casting so many spells in such short order, but I couldn't stand by and allow a fellow human to be killed.)

I offered the Lizardman two fish, a piece of meat, two ears of corn, and three wedges of cheese. He accepted them, though still, I thought, a little grudgingly.

"Isili thesh tosa!" he said around bits of shredded food. "Tosa yeshor'click!" He crunched through the bone in the piece of meat I'd given him. "Tosa eppa isili!" Food flew everywhere.—Me like you. You friend! You visit me!

He was through talking, but I hoped to learn more from him, so I grabbed his arm. It was hard as rock. He turned his huge head toward me and I shuddered involuntarily.

"Tosa yeshor 'click," he said. "Eppa Ishtas sstresh."—You friend. See Ishtass for help.

Ishtass? Who or what was that, I wondered.

"And Murgo?" I asked. I had to know what would become of him.

"Tosa sstresh Urgo."—You help Murgo.

And with that, I heard the grinding of chains against one another and the creak of metal against stone. Turning, I found that the portcullis was open. Murgo was free! He looked at me with wild joy in his eyes and launched into a mad, capering dance of joy. Then he turned to me and signed his thanks.

"Go now and steal no more!" I said, but I don't think he heard me. Even as I spoke, I watched him scamper off down the hallway, jumping up and down with joy.

Sseetharee was already gone, leaving me alone once more. I explored this central area as thoroughly as I could, but found my way blocked by many locked doors for which I lacked keys. I did discover a small cache of supplies—including some needed runestones—due north of Murgo's cell, and there was a flight of stairs leading down just east of that. I took the supplies and made a note on my map about the stairs. I wasn't quite ready to descend yet. If nothing else, I wanted to learn what Ishtass was first.

Frustrated by the locked doors, and remembering the doorway at the north end of the room in which I'd been poisoned by the thorny plants, I hurried back there. The door was unlocked and I went through it. I found myself in a rough, swampy area—the domain of lurkers, bats and, as I discovered, the occasional human bandit. I traveled north as quickly as I could, because the smell here was overpowering. Noxious clouds floated above the stagnant water like ghosts, but I'd never encountered a ghost that smelled at all, let alone one that smelled like these clouds.

The muddy berms that rose out of the water and the ancient bridges that linked some of the tiny islands here provided precarious footing. I often slipped, soaking myself and arousing the curiosity of the lurkers that watched my every move. The journey northward was nerve-wracking. When the path took a ninety-degree turn to the right and left the swamps, I slumped to the ground, exhausted as much from stress as from physical exertion. I pulled the last of my food from my pack, ate until I was stuffed, and soon fell asleep, only to be visited by Garamon once more.

"...'tis I, Garamon, the one who summoned thee ... thou hast gotten this far. I have not much time to speak to thee. Thou

must hurry, for the moons are nearly right and my brother reaches the end of ...”

I awoke with a start. Gathering my wits, I continued on my way, wishing Garamon would just come out and tell me what it was I was supposed to be doing down here. I knew I must rescue Arial, but Garamon’s quest and the references to his brother were still a mystery to me. I walked east, staying away from the water to the south, not really paying attention to where I was going. In fact, I walked all the way to the end of the east-west path. I started to turn around to try to find a side path, when I noticed that the wall before me looked—well, odd. I couldn’t put my finger on what was wrong, literally—when I reached out to touch the easternmost wall, my hand passed right through it! Here was a mystery worth pursuing, so I walked right through the wall.

My vision blurred and I felt the gut-wrenching sensation I always feel when I teleport, but when I could see again, I was in the same place I’d started. Or was I? My map revealed what my senses couldn’t. I *had* been teleported, and now stood some distance south of the place I’d started, in a corridor that looked identical to the one I’d been in a moment earlier!

This was the beginning of a combat-filled journey for me. The twisting, turning corridors to which I’d been teleported were filled with all manner of rats, headless, giant spiders, bandits, and sundry other belligerent creatures. I fought so long and so furiously that I lost all track of time and direction to the point that, now, I couldn’t begin to describe which turns I took to find the critical parts of the maze.

Suffice it to say that there was much of importance here, though it wasn’t until much, much later that I realized how important at

least one of my encounters was. That was, of course, my meeting with the mad Zak, a poor soul who lived behind a heavy wooden door at the end of an out-of-the-way corridor. When I entered his chamber, he was huddled in a corner, mumbling something to himself, but upon my arrival, he stood right up, eyeing me warily, though without hostility.

“Hello,” he said. “My name is Zak. What be thine?”

“I am the Avatar.”

“Greetings to thee, adventurer. Did I tell thee I am Zak?”

It was at this point I began to suspect poor Zak was not all there, but I saw no point in agitating him. There was something in his look that said he could snap at the least provocation. I played along.

“Ah, yes. I am pleased to meet thee,” I said, forcing a smile to my face.

“What dost thou fear, Avatar?”

I admit the question took me by surprise. It was right out of left field. Without a thought, I found myself answering.

“Many things,” I said. “What frightens thee, Zak?”

He closed his eyes and a tiny shudder passed through him. “Oh, I fear only the darkness,” he said quietly.

“Dost fear the dark, or what might lie within it?”

“Darkness!” he said, eyes now wide open and big as saucers. “It is the root and reason of all fear!”

“Surely ‘tis no foe that can hurt thee?”

“Indeed one can combat the darkness! With weapons and armour of light!”

“Thou art mad!” I regretted the words as soon as they left my lips.

“Clearly thou art a fool! Begone, mad one, lest thy madness prove catching.”

"Wait! I spoke hastily! Forgive me!"

"Very good. Now, what brings thee here, Zak?" the poor fool said.

"My name's not Zak. It's Avatar."

"Very well, 'Avatar.' Thou canst call me 'Zak' if thou wish."

"I thank thee." I don't know why, but I was beginning to like this fellow. He seemed so alone and so frightened, so in need of a friend. "What art thou doing here, Zak?" I couldn't imagine the circumstances that had imprisoned Zak in the Abyss any more than I could imagine how he'd managed to survive here all alone.

The madman began to grin like an idiot (and, though I liked him, I had to admit it wasn't a stretch for him). He leaned toward me, his eyes glowing with some strange inner light. I could smell his sour breath as he whispered, "I collect torches, lamps, and tapers. Wouldst care to see?"

"Certainly!" I said. I had made major discoveries in stranger circumstances than these. He reached into an inner pocket of his clothes and produced a taper. From an outer pocket, he pulled a small, partly burned candle. From beneath a wooden bench, he produced an oil lantern, which slobbered as he approached me with it. In fact, I now noticed that the room was full of torches, candles, lanterns, and other sources of light.

"See?" he said, giggling, "I can even trade some with thee if thou desirest."

"Very well," I said. Magical light was fine, but mana had a way of running low and I didn't relish the idea of spending any time in the Abyss without some form of light. Zak and I dickered for a while; I eventually acquired a nearly full lantern and a lovely taper. We talked a while longer, but Zak slipped further and further into irrationality. I took my leave,

hoping he'd be all right. As it turned out, this seemingly insignificant meeting set the stage for much larger events.

At the time, I was much more pleased with my discovery of an ankh shrine in the maze. Believe me, I meditated most fervently there, and to great effect. I also discovered several caches of weapons, gold, and other sundry items that would come in handy during my stay in the Abyss. In retrospect, however, my meeting with Zak was the most important thing that happened in the area.

The first east-west passage south of the shrine jogged west and south, west and south, over and over again until it came to a dead end overlooking the water. I encountered several green Lizardmen along the way, but none had any information of use to me. When I reached the passage's end, I doubled back east, then took the first southern passage. A badly damaged locked door on my right fell easily. As I pushed the shattered remains of the door aside, I was attacked by two skeletons, but they fell as easily as the door. It turned out they were guarding a great treasure—a key decorated with a green gem. This gave me access to countless rooms in the area.

Back in the main north-south hallway, I continued moving south. It was hot and humid here, and the walls were covered with slick moss. Crossing a long bridge over the swampy water, I spied a door and, opening it, found myself in an area populated by gray Lizardmen, one of whom turned out to be Ishtass.

When I entered his room, the great gray Lizardman turned to me and said, "A greeting to you I give. Ishtass I am known as. What thing you are wanting?"

I was dumbstruck for a moment but,

recovering my wits, managed to blurt out, "Amazing. You speak my language!"

I swear I saw Ishtass' lip curl in a convincing imitation of a smile.

"Though by other Thepa the Quiet Ones my people are called, this an irony is. We alone of the Thepa your language can speak."

"And very well, too," I said.

"Not easy it is, but we try. Now, you in some need are?"

I had so many needs that picking one was difficult. I was searching for Arial, trying to figure out what Garamon wanted me to do, looking for the Talismans of Cabirus ... I decided to keep it simple.

"Who are the Thepa?" I asked.

"The Thepa my folk are. By you Lizardmen they are called."

"Interesting. Canst tell me any history?"

"Wouldst mad wizard know of?"

Mad wizard? Perhaps Ishtass knew something of the wizard who had kidnapped Arial!

"Please tell me more," I said eagerly.

"After Sir Cabirus death, mumbling wizard began upriver working. He talked with me after, as your strange tongue we know. Spoke he, who nameless remains, of a Great Sword, apart he broke."

Finally, someone who knew something of use to me! Not only did Ishtass know of the wizard, but I was willing to bet my life that the Great Sword was the one Shak, the smith, had called Caliburn, one of Cabirus' Talismans.

"Tell me more!"

"I cannot more much say." Ishtass paused and, if a Lizardman ever looked cunning, he did at that moment. "For favor I will more information get ..."

Commerce of this sort had been a steady

diet for me since my first trip to Britannia, so long ago. On Earth, there was far less of this kind of thing. In Britannia, trading favors for information, and vice versa, was a way of life. Though I was already annoyed at the delay I knew would be caused by Ishtass' errand, whatever it was, I knew I'd have to do it.

"Please tell me what favor thou dost want."

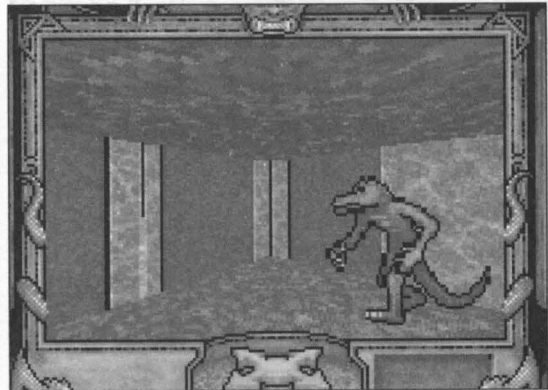
"Ossika, leader of ours, upstream traveled, a great many-armed water beast known to Thepa as *kri'kla* to kill. He returned never. Would you him find?"

"I will search for your leader!" I replied, as Ishtass had known I would. The asking was merely a formality, a nicety of Britannian culture understood by all—even Lizardmen. I pressed Ishtass for more information.

"Upstream Ossika traveled, returning never. Book of mad wizard had he, perhaps telling more. Return with news and the Quiet One will reward handsomely you."

"I shall search for Ossika," I said as I left.

And search I did. Ossika had followed the course of the underground river, which, I surmised, ringed the central portion of this level of the Abyss. Unless I missed my guess, he'd been waylaid by a lurker at some point



during his journey. That meant he—or more likely, his remains—would be near the water. I only hoped he wasn't under it, for if he was, I had no chance of finding anything of use to Ishtass.

Leaving Ishtass' chamber, I headed west and north until the path dead-ended at the water's edge. The swampy water looked none too inviting, but the sight of a lurker in the water convinced me I was on the right track. For the first—and last—time, the presence of a lurker convinced me to go for a swim.

My plan was to follow the stream as far as I could, looking for evidence of Ossika's passage. I swam for what seemed like days, dodging lurkers every few strokes. I felt sure

the swampy, stagnant water posed an even greater threat, and was amazed when I didn't fall deathly ill from having swallowed gallons of the stuff. My swim to the northern reaches proved fruitless, at least insofar as finding Ossika was concerned. It proved interesting, to say the least, in other ways, notably when I discovered a small east-west waterway near the northernmost point of the stream, at the place where the water arced right, toward the east.

There, I was momentarily distracted by a lurker. I'd found it was best just to get out of their way, so I had my head down, my arms pumping, and my legs kicking as hard as I could in an attempt to stay out of reach of the creature's grasping tentacles. What that meant was that I didn't see the Gazer floating toward me until I felt its claws rake my back. I'd already fought a Gazer and hadn't enjoyed the experience much at all. I was not looking forward to doing battle with one of these floating octopus-like creatures. They are totally without pity and fight with a cunning that seems far more than animal. I was not in the mood.

But there I was, in the water, trying to avoid a lurker when a Gazer appeared. I swam as hard and fast as I could. I headed east, but instead of turning into the main stream, I turned too soon and ended up in a narrow waterway that dead-ended at a small beach. I crawled up on the shore, gasping for breath, drawing my sword as quickly as I could (which was none too quickly at that moment). Lady Luck was smiling upon me at that moment, for the lurker, perhaps realizing in its dimwitted way that it was no match for the Gazer, had not followed me. The Gazer, of course, was hot on my trail.

The battle that followed was one of the more difficult I've ever had. I was tired and



soggy from my long swim. I hacked at the beast again and again, my sword bouncing off its tough hide as often as not. I stayed as close to the Gazer as I dared, preferring the risk of evisceration by its claws to the possibility of frying as a result of magical attack. Of course, I survived the battle and the Gazer did not, but it was a near thing and I was a long time recovering.

When I'd managed to regain my breath and tend to my wounds as best I could, I took stock of my surroundings. The beach seemed ordinary enough, but a raised platform in one corner of the area was clearly man-made. And the walls were made of cut stone. This place had been dug out of the rock by man (or by some intelligent creature). It was not natural. A book (which revealed the Fal mantra) and a green potion, lying here, provided evidence that I was not the first person to discover this out-of-the-way place. A serious search of the area revealed nothing more, and I assumed I would never learn anything more about the place. Later events were to prove me quite wrong.

I set off once again on the trail of Ossika. Swimming east now, I soon came to a beautiful waterfall, which blocked further progress. Much to my chagrin, I was forced to turn back. I swam west and then south, all the way back to my starting point, and was about to climb out of the water when I realized that the stream turned east here. I'd come this far, and I was already soaked to the skin. Might as well look for Ossika in the east—I had little to lose.

The stream ended in a pool with a waterfall at its eastern end. As I pondered the mystery of a stream that ends in a waterfall at both ends, I noticed a thin strip of land to the south. I made for it like the tired, soon-to-be-drowning man I was. Wouldn't you know it? This was where I found evidence of Ossika's

whereabouts. In fact, this was where I found the Lizardman's bones.

I didn't know immediately whose bones I saw there on the shore, but they clearly belonged to a Lizardman. Nearby, I came across a dagger, some runestones (which I placed immediately in my runebag), a book, and a scroll. The book read, "Ghastly ones broken haft have. Search for Blade in Southeast. Behind wall secrets are." This was important information indeed. Of greater significance at that moment was the scroll, which read:

Ossika,

Upon your shoulders does holding
together the Lizard folk alliance fall.
Please do not fail me.

Sir Cabisus

I'd found my man or, rather, my Lizardman, and just a stone's throw from Ishtass and the gray Lizard folk camp! I pocketed the book and the scroll and headed back to the water. Before I jumped in, however, I noticed a hastily scrawled message carved in the rock of the wall. "Ask Shanklick about crazy wizard," it read. Shanklick, eh? I'd never heard of the fellow, but I made a mental note to seek him out. Then I dove back into the tepid water and, within minutes, was back in Ishtass' quarters.

The Lizardman's eyes widened when he saw me again—after my swim, I must have looked a sight and I knew I smelled far worse than I looked—but he was nothing if not gracious.

"Again, a greeting to you I give," Ishtass said, nostrils flaring, no doubt in an

involuntary reaction to my arrival.

"I have news of Ossika!" I said, hoping to distract him.

"Please, adventurer, what Ossika news have you?"

"I have found this," I said, handing over the parchment from Cabirus outlining his instructions to Ossika. Ishtass took the scroll and read it silently. When he finished, his shoulders drooped noticeably and he looked at me with an expression as sad as any I'd seen on a human face.

"Why, yes," he said haltingly, "of this Ossika did have. Oh, what means this?"

Ishtass already knew the meaning of the message. The fact that I had returned with this, and not with the Lizardman leader himself, told him everything he needed to know. Ossika was dead.

"I found his bones in a room upstream."

"Sorry day, indeed," he said, shuddering as a dog does when it wants to shed water from its coat. He fell silent for a moment and I wondered if Lizardmen could cry. If they could, Ishtass had no intention of revealing that fact to me, for he quickly gathered himself and, when he spoke, his voice was steady, his gaze unwavering. "Sorry day. Still, thank you. Here, a gift for you is."

He handed me a small leather pouch in which I found a Wis runestone, a red potion, and a wand topped with a glowing gem. Though clearly heartbroken, Ishtass had been true to his word. Now I hoped he could help me just a bit more.

"Canst thou now tell me of the sword?" I asked.

"What you to know want?"

"Where can I find the sword?"

"Sword in two pieces broken is. Wizard took haft below. Ossika clue to blade found,

he said. Blade somewhere in our domain is, I think. More than that I do not know."

"Thank you for your help, Ishtass," I said as I took my leave.

With new keys in my possession, I spent some time exploring rooms I hadn't been able to enter before. The time I took was well worthwhile, for I found several magical items and potions in the storerooms of the human bandits I'd met earlier in the south-central area of the level. These belligerent fighters attacked without provocation, but were, I'm afraid, no match for me. I'd been in the Abyss a week and my rusty fighting skills were almost back where they'd been the last time I'd visited Britannia.

My explorations complete (or as complete as I cared to worry about at the time), I returned to the large east-west passageway near the center of the level. It was there that I encountered a red Lizardman. How many colors did these creatures come in, I wondered. I tried to engage the creature in conversation, but he didn't seem interested. Heading east and north, I came to a large area teeming with Lizardmen of all sorts. Several greens milled about on my level, while a green and some other shadowy beasts of unknown hue looked down from a walkway some 20 feet above. I had no clue as to what they were doing, but I make no claims to being an expert in the psychology and culture of Lizardmen. All I know is that I was more than a bit unnerved by the sheer number of them here. Even knowing that Lizardmen were, by and large, friendly did little to quell my fear that I might soon be dinner. Of course, my fears were ungrounded—they exhibited no interest at all in my presence and, since they seemed inclined to leave me alone, I reciprocated.

What interested me most here was a doorway in the northeast corner of the room. I had it on good authority that at least one of Cabirus' Talismans could be found in the southeast portion of this level. So far, I'd had no luck getting anywhere near the southeast. This doorway looked like my last hope. Of course, the door was locked, but the key with the green gem in it had opened just about every other lock on this level. Of course, it didn't work this time, but I had a bag full of keys, and the one with the red gem in it did the trick.

A few steps east and the corridor turned sharply south, and I found myself in what I could only assume was red Lizardman territory. The reds were all over the place. They seemed more curious or more obnoxious (or both) than the greens and grays—they followed me everywhere and I couldn't seem to avoid bumping into them. The doors and passages on the west wall of the north-south corridor in which I found myself led to useful, though by no means critical, areas. In exchange for a ruby, I learned a new spell—*Water Walk*—from the red Lizardman called Iss'leek and, in the room just south of Iss'leek, I found a shrine. Again, useful but not critical. Leaving Iss'leek's corridor, I turned north and went a few paces back to a corridor that allowed me to go further east before it, too, curved south. Now I was getting somewhere. The blade of the sword, Caliburn, was here in the southeast and I was determined to find it. I didn't have much to go on, just several people telling me the blade was in the southeast, and a book containing the cryptic message, "Behind walls secrets are." Did that mean the blade was hidden behind a secret door? I kept an eye peeled.

Lost in thought as I was, I hardly noticed

when the corridor turned west and split in half. The northern half was level, but the southern half slanted down steeply. I took the southern half, but it came to a sudden dead end and I was forced to double back. The northern half didn't seem much more promising. I hugged the north wall to avoid falling off the edge of the path, but about halfway down the length of the corridor, I found myself entangled in a mass of vines clinging to the wall. At the end of the corridor, I came to a bridge, to the left of which was a large, almost perfectly square, and obviously man-made lake. Unlike the water of the river, this lake was perfectly still and looked far deeper than the water elsewhere.

I was beginning to feel more than a little frustrated. Where was the blade? Was there a secret door? Was I any closer to rescuing Ariel and doing whatever it was that Garamon wanted me to do? I had no idea. I continued westward to the end of the path and crossed a bridge to the north. This wasn't right—I felt sure of that—so I doubled back the way I'd come. Halfway down the corridor I inched toward the edge of the path and, this time, felt myself slipping off the edge. I flailed around, hoping I could grab something—anything—to stop the fall I now thought was inevitable.

Somehow I managed to grab the vines that had caused my dilemma in the first place. The vines came loose from the wall and I found myself swinging out over the edge, with just the toe of my left boot keeping me from going right over. Desperate to keep my balance, I spun around to the right and slammed into the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of myself. Better to lose my breath than plummet to my death, I thought,

amused at the rhyme despite my dire circumstances.

As I clung to the vines, heart beating like a jackhammer, nose pressed to the cool stone, I noticed something strange. Where the vines had pulled away, there was a groove in the stone, straight as an arrow and so thin you'd never see it unless your nose was pressed right up to it. Finding my feet again, I began ripping the vines away and there, barely visible, was a secret door! Without hesitation I pushed it open, knowing the blade of the sword Caliburn was on the other side.

Unfortunately, I was wrong. All I found beyond the secret door was a lever. Still, that was better than nothing and, throwing caution to the winds, I flipped it. The noise that followed was awe-inspiring. I'd heard similar



sounds before, during visits to Niagara Falls, but never in an enclosed space like this. There was no mistaking the sound of rushing water, lots of it, and it was coming from the west.

I sprinted out of the secret room and headed west, following the direction of the sound. When I reached the bridge that crossed the man-made lake, I was amazed to discover that the lake was gone, dry as a bone. All that was left was a large, deep room with a door in its south wall. A passageway in the northeast corner gave access to the sunken room, right about where the downward-sloping, dead-end passage was. I ran back to the east and followed the ramp down and into the now-dry lake bed.

The door in the south wall was unlocked, and opened at my touch. There were, amazingly enough, dangerous creatures down here, but my adrenaline was pumping and my skills were finely honed. I would not be stopped. I finally made my way to a small room, in which I found an ankh and a healing fountain, but no sword blade. That lay in a room to the west of the shrine.

The blade reposed on a raised platform in a corner of the room. It glowed with an inner light that nearly blinded me. It was perfectly formed, the finest example of the swordsmith's art I'd ever seen. Despite the heat and humidity of the place, the blade, when I touched it, was cool. Truly this was a magical artifact. I picked it up carefully and placed it, with no small amount of reverence, in my pack.

Finally I had at least a part of one of the Talismans of Cabirus. I was ready to head deeper into the Abyss, so I returned to the very first stairway I'd found, in the south-central portion of the level. I marched down the steps proudly, filled with confidence and excitement about the quest that lay ahead.



Chapter 5

Each step I descended seemed to raise the temperature just a bit—it was noticeably hotter on the fourth level than it had been on the others. But the weather was certainly not uppermost in my mind. I had no idea what to expect down here. Would I encounter more Goblins or Lizardmen? Would they be friendly? Would I soon find Arial? I'd been in the Abyss for at least a week, I felt sure, though I had no way to keep track of the days.

To be on the safe side, I drew my sword before proceeding cautiously down the corridor at the foot of the stairs. A curve to the left brought me to a slime-covered door, which opened at my touch. The room beyond had exits to the west and north and a door in its eastern wall. I went west. There I encountered two belligerent skeletons, but a single blow felled each of them. The door to the east proved more interesting.

It opened into a long, straight corridor that led to another door, above which flew the banner of Cabirus. Civilization! I sprinted for the far door, threw it open, and entered a large room. Old, dried-out bones littered the floor along with other bits of junk. The place smelled far worse than any other inhabited area I'd found (with the possible exception of some of the Goblin camps above). All of this flashed through my mind (and my nose) in an instant. I was far more interested in the inhabitants of the place—a pack of trolls. The same creatures who had kidnapped Arial! There were at least three in the room, maybe more. In the dim light, the shambling, gorilla-like monsters looked like shadows, nothing more, but such shadows had caused my imprisonment in the Abyss.

Sword drawn and ready, I considered simply leaping to the attack, but I had found, in my time here, that talking usually paid off. And if it didn't, well, my sword would still be there. Keeping my anger in check, I approached the closest mountain of brown, matted fur. As I got closer, the size of these beasts really hit home. I was glad I'd controlled my temper.

The troll looked at me with a combination of curiosity and utter stupidity. "What you doing here?" it asked.

Again, I was amazed that a monster like this one knew my language. I marveled at the accomplishments of the late Sir Cabirus. In the Britannia I knew, few monsters seemed able—or willing—to learn human speech.

Gathering my wits, and standing as straight as I could, which allowed me to stare at the creature's rib cage, I replied, "Canst thou tell me any news?"

The troll's brow furrowed and its eyes took on a glassy quality that, I suspect, meant it was thinking. The activity did not come naturally to it. After a moment, it said, "Sneak snuck on Sethar, but he tossed him in pit."

Needless to say, this meant nothing to me and further inquiries just pushed the poor, stupid creature into longer and longer silences. In the midst of one of these pauses, I snuck off.

With little hope of success, I turned to another of the trolls and sought to engage it in conversation. This second one had a look of intelligence (all things being relative). Maybe I'd get lucky ...

"A human enters our domain," the troll said. "This is rare event. Why do you come?"

"I need some information from thee."

"Maybe. You ask question, I answer."

"Canst thou tell me about Arial?"

The troll thought for a long time before answering.

"I don't know about that."

"Well, canst thou tell me about Garamon?"

Again, there was a long pause. The troll cocked its head to one side, then to the other, then back again.

"I don't know about that."

"Okay, canst thou tell me about Sir Cabirus or the Talismans?"

This time, the creature appeared to be counting something on its fingers, pointing to one of them, then another, then another.

"I don't know about that."

"Hmm. Canst thou tell me about . . . oh, what's the use?" It was clear that this troll had no answers—or that I didn't have the right questions. It was time to try something else. "Thank you for thy help. Farewell."

"Bye, human."

I looked around the room for another promising troll. There were so many of them here. Surely one of them knew something that would aid me in my quest. In the southeast corner of the room, I saw a passageway that led south and, as I watched, a troll—another one who looked as if its IQ might climb into the double digits—wandered back there. I followed at a trot. I caught up with the troll in an empty room with a door in its southern wall.

As I got close to it, it glanced at me, then at the door, then back at me. I got the distinct impression it was guarding the door. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, it said, "Who are you? I not seen you before."

"I am the Avatar."

Suspicion left the troll's eyes, to be replaced by a blank stare. I could hear the gears turning in the creature's head.

"All sounds very confusing. Mind I call you Rodriguez?"

This took me by surprise. Rodriguez? Why Rodriguez? I couldn't see any harm in having a troll call me Rodriguez, and if that would help loosen its tongue . . .

"Not at all," I said, fighting back the urge to say, *Of course I mind, you ignorant oaf—Rodriguez isn't my name!* I even added, "Rodriguez is a fine name."

"I Rawstags. What Rawstags do for you?"

I went through my list of questions. Do you know anything about Arial, about Garamon, about Almiric, about the Talismans, and so on. All the while, the troll was glancing nervously at the door in the south wall, edging closer to it as we spoke.

Finally, I said, "Canst thou let me through thy door?"

At this, the creature brightened.

"I open door? Yes, I could. You want me to?"

"Yes, please."

The blank look and the suspicious look were gone in an instant, replaced by an avariciousness I had rarely seen.

"Maybe I open door if you give me something," Rawstags said.



Grumbling and wondering if the room's contents would warrant the effort I was expending, I rummaged through my pack and offered the troll a piece of meat. The creature turned up its nose at it. I offered it several items, each more valuable than the last, but the response was always the same—not interested.

Finally I said, "I have nothing for thee."

The creature just shrugged.

"Find something, come back with it. I may like."

Find something . . . like what? I decided to seek out the troll I'd spoken with earlier, the one with no answers. Perhaps I'd found a question for it.

"Hello again, human-who-is-not-a-Knight," the troll said when I arrived.

Here was a strange greeting. Perhaps I'd found yet another question for this troll.

"I need some information from thee."

"Maybe. You ask question, I answer."

"Canst thou tell me about Knights?"

"The Knights talk tough, but they usually keep to themselves. One nasty Knight, though. He lives in banquet hall. You watch out for him."

"Canst thou tell me about Rawstag?"

"Rawstag still a young troll, not always do what he told. You give him red gem, maybe he more nice to you."

"Thank thee for thy help. Farewell."

"Bye, human."

Okay, Rawstag liked red gems. I pulled a ruby from my pack and looked around for the troll by the door. He hadn't moved.

"Hey, I seen you 'fore," he said. "Hi, Rodriguez! What I do for you?"

"Canst thou let me through thy door?"

"I open door? Yes, I could. You want me to?"

"Yes, please."

"Maybe I open door if you give me something."

I held out the ruby I'd selected for him and said, "Here it is."

He snatched the gem from my hand and stared at it for so long that I thought he might have forgotten all about me. Suddenly, he walked over to the door, saying, "Oh, I like! Thank you." He paused to unlock the door. "Door open now. You happy?"

In point of fact, I was a little disappointed. The room beyond the door was all but empty. There was a shrine in it—always a good thing—and a scroll, but that was it. The scroll read, "The Writ of Lorne is thus. In our days of beginning we must stick together, and not allow petty grievances to stand in the way of respect." A wonderful sentiment, but of limited utility here in the Abyss. For reasons I don't entirely understand, I decided to pocket the scroll. Later, I'd be quite glad I had.

So far, the trolls had been little help, so I proceeded north. The first chamber on the right was empty (as was much of this region). The next chamber on the right was populated by hostile skeletons. I could see nothing else, except for some levers set high on the walls. I jumped down into the room, defeated the skeletons and quickly discovered that there was no way out, or none that I could immediately see. As it turned out, the levers were the secret—I had only to use a pole to nudge the lowest of them into position. This raised a platform in the room, which allowed me to reach the next lever, and so on, until I was able to leave. I felt a bit sheepish at having fallen for the trap, and at having wasted precious time.

The room into which I emerged was quite large and contained platforms at many levels.

There were some runestones at the north end and a door in the south end. This door opened into a series of chambers, in which I discovered several feral trolls, which I dispatched with ease after they attacked me. There was some useful treasure in these rooms, doubtless once the property of explorers less fortunate than myself, but the treasure was hardly worth the effort I'd expended in acquiring it.

I returned to the multi-level room and headed south. The first door in the western wall opened into a room in which I encountered two trolls, bobbing and weaving about one another rhythmically. Perhaps they were engaged in a mock battle of some kind. I couldn't tell—to my human eyes, it looked as if the two were dancing, but that seemed unlikely somehow. At my entrance, the "dance" ended and one of them looked at me expectantly, as if caught between curiosity and the urge to squash me like a bug.

"A human!" it cried. "When Sethar was younger, I beat up many humans like you. A fine troll I was!"

"Thou still dost seem very powerful to me," I said, meaning it. Though his fur was fringed with gray, indicating advancing years, this was still a huge troll. Luckily, my response appeared to please the old boy, for he smiled broadly, revealing scraggly teeth, once razor-sharp, but now dull and brown. It was not a pretty sight.

"Thank you, you nice human. Ah, those were days. Lots of glory, nice treasure. Now I happy with simpler things."

"Dost thou still have some of this treasure?"

"Hmm, let me see ... Aha! I still have dragon scales. I kill nasty dragon when I was a young troll. Big and breathed fire. It could sit

on lava forever without burning up. I kill it and save its scales. Never use them though. Now I old troll, I like simple pleasures, I no need them. Maybe if you give me something, I trade for scales."

Fireproof scales sounded like something that could come in handy. I noticed it was significantly hotter down here than it had been on the upper levels, and there was no telling how deep in this volcano I'd have to go before I was through.

"What wouldst thou like?" I asked.

"Oh, I would love wormy stew. My mother she made it when I just a little troll. You have any?"

Worm stew? I had a recipe for worm stew! That Goblin ... what was his name? Lanugo. It seemed like an age ago, but Lanugo had given me the recipe. As I had so many times in the past, I thanked my lucky stars that I was a pack rat. I still had the ragged scrap of paper on which the Goblin had scribbled the ingredients. Still, to be on the safe side, I decided to check, to make sure Lanugo's recipe matched Sethar's childhood memory.

"No, I don't have any. How is it made?"

"Hmm ... I no remember. I know you use dead rotworm. My mother knew, but she dead. Maybe someone else. Oh, that stew delicious!"

"I will try to make some," I said. Worm stew for dragon scales seemed like an excellent trade to me.

Pulling the recipe from my pack, I read it once again. I had a bottle of port. All I needed was a dead rotworm and a green mushroom. Mixed together, they spelled rotworm stew. No problem.

To make a long story short, I had to return to the upper levels of the Abyss, but I

eventually found and killed a rotworm. If only I'd picked up the corpse of one of the worms I'd killed on the very first level! How much trouble I could have saved myself! Putting such thoughts behind me, I combined the necessary ingredients in a bowl and returned to Sethar. Again, the old troll seemed genuinely happy to see me.

"Hello, you again! You bring wormy stew for me?"

"Yes, here it is," I said, offering him the bowl of reeking goo.

Sethar held the bowl of slop tenderly in both hands, bringing it close to his face and breathing deeply. An expression I can only describe as beatific appeared on his monstrous countenance.

"Oh, wormy stew, just what I love!" Cradling the bowl in the crook of his arm, he walked to a pile of junk—one of many—and dug through it until he found a small pile of red scales, huge red scales, each at least a foot across!

"Here," he said, "take dragon scales. Maybe they help you not get hurt when you go hot places, just like dragon."

I tried to imagine a place much hotter than this, but had little success. I tried to imagine a dragon big enough to have scales like the ones I now held and, unfortunately, conjured up quite a vivid mental image. I hoped I wouldn't encounter the beast ...

While I mused, the troll turned his full attention to his repast. His noisy slurping, to say nothing of the tiny gobbets of worm flesh oozing from his lips as he chewed, drove me from the room. Rather than leaving by way of the door, however, I walked to the southwest corner of what I now thought of as Sethar's room, and leaped into a pit some 20 feet deep. A foolish thing to do, you say? I agree

wholeheartedly, but I was drawn by the sight of a scroll and a bag down there, and I was secure in the belief that, even were there no exit from the pit (and I certainly couldn't see one), I could always levitate out.

As it turned out, the scroll was of little import and, though the bag did contain some runestones I needed, the most important thing I discovered was the secret door in the south wall. This opened into a narrow corridor that twisted and turned for a while before leading me into an open area, where I encountered a man in shabby armour. Like so many in the Abyss, he seemed deep in thought, pacing this way and that, but upon my entrance, a smile leaped to his lips, a smile that illuminated the room with a light far brighter than any torch.

"Hail, stranger," he said bounding over to me and pumping my hand enthusiastically. "I am Linnet. 'Tis indeed a rare pleasure to encounter a new face amongst the denizens of the Abyss. Who art thou and what hast brought thee hither?"

"I am known as the Avatar," I said. Unconsciously, I awaited some response, but none was forthcoming. Once again, I was taken aback at the apparent lack of recognition when I identified myself. Truly, it had been centuries since my last visit to Britannia and the realization struck me that all I had worked for seemed lost to time. The thought was not a pleasant one, but there would be time for regrets later.

"I must prove I am innocent of a kidnapping," I said.

"A terrible crime, indeed," Linnet said, shaking his head sympathetically. "I would fain believe thou art innocent of such, for thy face has honor in it. Thou dost wear it like few I have beheld in my many years in the

Abyss. May I help thee in any way?"

"Hast thou heard aught of a princess?"

"It is said the trolls have captured a new dweller in the Abyss. It may be the Knights can tell thee something, for they travel more of the Abyss than I."

"Tell me of these Knights."

"There is much tension on this level of the Abyss. The Knights inhabit the western area, and a pack of trolls live in the eastern reaches. Even while Sir Cabirus was alive, there was an uneasy peace between them. After Cabirus' death, there was some strife, as each group attempted to gain power over the other, but these days there is relative peace."

"And who or what threatens that peace?" I asked.



"Perhaps the greatest danger in this area now is Rodrick, known as the Chaos Knight. He lives by the old banquet hall to the north. He is the foe of both the Knights and the trolls, but neither has been able to defeat him yet. I hear that Dorna Ironfist has put a price upon his head."

I filed this news away for later. For now, I determined that I'd steer clear of the banquet hall. Not until I knew more of the situation would I venture into battle with an unknown and heretofore unbeatable foe. Also, I made a mental note to find out who Dorna Ironfist might be—either a Knight or a troll, obviously, and one of some importance. Anything more than that I'd have to learn for myself. For now, however, I wondered if Linnet could tell me anything more specific about the princess Arial. He hadn't really answered my question earlier.

"Hast thou heard news of a captive virgin in the Abyss?" I asked.

"I have heard there is to be a human sacrifice in Cabirus' old quarters on the lowest level," Linnet said. "As I told thee earlier, in their search for some new advantage over the trolls, the Knights explore more widely than I. Mayhap they can tell thee more. Still, be careful, lest thou become the next casualty in their senseless battle with the trolls."

I thanked the man for his time, but the news that there was to be a sacrifice—Arial, no doubt—compelled me to take my leave. A passage on the north end of this room ended in a stairway leading down, but, tempted though I was to rush to the lowest levels of the Abyss, I forced myself to be patient. Garamon had made it clear to me that I would need all of Cabirus' Talismans to succeed in my quest and, to this point, I'd acquired only one of them—only half of one, in fact. I returned to

The Stygian Abyss

Linnet's room and headed west, hoping to find the Knights.



My westward journey eventually brought me to a large room decorated with the ankH banners that marked the area as civilized. Leaving the chamber by a western exit, I soon came to another room with a banner on its western wall. On the wall opposite was a pull-chain. As always, I pulled the chain, but it seemed to have no effect. Shrugging, I plunged down the hallway leading west,

certain that I'd soon encounter the Knights about whom I'd heard so much.

Sure enough, I hadn't gone 20 paces when I encountered not one, but two member Knights of the Order of the Crux Ansata. My dealings with these Knights were to be of the utmost importance; fortunately, this first meeting was successful.

Both Knights turned to face me when I entered the room. They looked vigilant, but friendly, as if they knew they could handle any threat I might pose. Their confidence was inspiring. The first fellow had graying hair, but a physique that belied his apparent age. His

On my westward journey, I traveled through mazes and chambers that showed evidence of having been the sites of terrific battles, but I encountered only one human along the way to the Knights' camp. That was the poor soul Oradiner, a humble fisherman afraid of his own shadow. He offered me his fishing pole and told me of a body of water to the north that held so many fish one could cross the water on their backs! If I hadn't been able to cast Create Food spells to assuage my hunger, I'd most certainly have taken him up on his generous offer.

As it was, I took a northern detour and was very glad I did. Though I was unable to walk on water, I did go for a swim to cool and cleanse myself—it was getting beastly hot down here. Though I encountered several lurkers in the water, I was able to outpace them

each time, and to reach safety on small outcroppings of land. On one of these I found some fine armour; on another several runestones, a magic wand, and a number of other items. (Here I also discovered a secret door, and beyond that, a magical fireball scroll and a sword that, when repaired, proved quite a fine weapon.) Swimming to the northernmost end of the stream, I left the water and explored a bit, finding a stairway leading up, and in the northeast corner of the passages in the area, a room containing several more runestones and other items of interest.

Heading south again, I was pleased to find that the corridors in which I found myself led back to the battle scene I'd encountered before meeting Oradiner, and I was able to continue my search for the Knights almost immediately.

armour was old, but had been kept up far better than one might expect given the circumstances of life in the Abyss. I called a "Hello" to the fellow and offered my hand, to show that I meant no harm.

He greeted me with just a trace of surprise, but the smile on his face left little doubt that my appearance here was cause for celebration. I suspected I would like these Knights.

"Hail, stranger. Be thou a warrior?"

"Sometimes. When I needs must be."

"Assuredly thou art a kindred spirit. An' thou prove valorous, I shall bid thee join my order."

"Thank thee, I accept."

"If thou wishest to become a Knight, thou shouldst go to the south of our domain and talk to Dorna, our leader. Trust him during thy initiation, and all should be fine. Join our order and help us in our quest for honor."

"I shall seek him out. Farewell."

Before leaving, I spoke briefly with the other Knight, a beautiful and well-muscled black woman named Doris. She too urged me to seek out Dorna. I continued my westward journey.

I encountered several more Knights as I sought Dorna, but none seemed particularly interested in talking with one who was not a member of their Order. Clearly, membership in the Order of the Crux Ansata would aid me in my quest and, truth be told, I wanted desperately to become a member of the Order. I felt at home among these people. I felt at home for the first time since my arrival in the Abyss. No, more than that—I felt at home for the first time since I'd last left Britannia, some two hundred years ago.

This was a sobering thought, and one that I'd often ponder in the days and weeks that

followed. Was my life on Earth so shallow, so empty that only here, in the vilest dungeon to be found in this backward, medieval world, I could feel comfortable? Would I ever again feel content in the helter-skelter, fast-paced modern world? I doubted it. These fine and noble knights, like my good and sorely-missed companions, Iolo, Shamino, and Dupré, knew how to live full, meaningful lives. I did not. The realization left me humble, but hopeful.

It was with thoughts such as these racing through my mind that I found Dorna. As I'd been told, he was to be found to the south and west of the area. Even before he introduced himself, I knew I'd met the leader of the Order. The man stood over six and a half feet tall. His shoulders were as broad as those of noble Geoffrey, captain of Lord British's guard or of Dupré, ablest fighter in all Britannia. He had a startling shock of bright red hair and a bushy beard of the same brilliant hue. When he spoke, his voice filled the room—a booming, boisterous voice that echoed off the stone walls of the chamber. I liked the man immediately.

"Who art thou?" he asked, though I had the feeling he already knew.

"I am a simple traveler in search of knowledge."

"That is good. To learn is to better oneself. How may we advance thy knowledge?"

"I wish to learn of thy Order."

"Our goal is that of the Avatar—to advance in our knowledge of Virtue, in order to better ourselves. When a quest presents itself that will further our understanding of Virtue, we undertake it gladly. Perhaps our quests also make Britannia a better place. Unfortunately, Rodrick, one of our Order, recently abandoned his principles and took up

residence in the banquet hall to the north, calling himself the 'Chaos Knight' and terrorizing the inhabitants of that area. We sent one of our knights, Biden, to defeat him, but he has not returned. I fear the worst."

"Perhaps I could defeat him."

"That would be most honorable of thee, if thou didst truly defeat him and restore peace to our settlement. But I must warn thee that he is an opponent as dishonorable as he is dangerous, and he would not likely spare thy life were he to outfight thee."

"May I join thy Order?"

He smiled broadly, as if he'd known we would get around to this eventually. I grinned like an idiot. This fit in just fine with my plans.

"Thou wishest to join the Knights of the Crux?" he asked, eyeing me carefully. He paused for a moment, assessing my worthiness, or so I imagined. Finally he said, "Very well, thou must answer my questions to the best of thy ability, and I shall judge whether thou art worthy of admittance into the Order. Identify thyself, so I may know whom I query."

"The poor son of my mother."

"That is plain! Art thou willing to sacrifice thy life to join our Order?"

"Yes, I am."

"And dost thou submit to our Justice?"

"Indeed, I do."

"Very well. Thou hast earned death by coming here, and thou shalt have thy reward. Here is a cup, which bears within it a venom both swift and deadly. Take it and drink it."

"Very well."

I took the cup. It held a clear, odorless liquid. Breathing deep, I raised it to my lips and drank it in a draught."

It tasted like pure water. I waited for several moments, but nothing happened.

Then a voice cried out as if in mourning and a funeral dirge played. I have no idea where the voice or the music came from, but my curiosity soon gave way to overwhelming joy.

"The one who drank from the cup is now dead," Dorna proclaimed. "In his place stands an Esquire of the Order of the Crux Ansata. Tell me, wert thou afraid?"

"Yes."

"Good! To know fear is the first step to knowing Valor. Thou art now a Squire of this Order. Thy quest is to find the Writ of Lorne, a document written by one of the first Knights who settled this order in the Abyss. The document was written during the early years of the Colony, and it contains much knowledge of that time. However, it is now gone, though many suspect it is in the troll homeland. Seek it, and when thou returns here with it, a Knight of our Order thou wilt become."

"I thank thee. Canst thou tell me aught of Cabirus' Talismans? They are also my quest."

"Precious little. They numbered eight, and Cabirus did intend them to go each to one of the Leaders of the eight groups who settled the Abyss. Alas, he perished, and all eight were lost. 'Tis said they were a Book, Bottle of Wine, a Shield, a Sword, a Taper, a Standard, a Cup, and a Ring. Each was imbued with the potent power of a single Virtue, and 'tis said they confer Virtue both in the seeking and the finding. I know only of the Taper and the Standard. The Taper of Sacrifice was stolen from us only recently, and we know not its current whereabouts. As for the Standard of Honor, it is said that it is awaiting one who would perform a sufficiently honorable deed."

"Farewell, Brother, and thanks!"

I started to leave, to set off on the quest

with which I had been charged, when a thought occurred to me. The writ Dorna had sent me to find, the Writ of Lorne—I already had it! I'd been so caught up in the situation that I'd forgotten all about it. Pulling the parchment from my pack, I turned back to Dorna.

"Greetings, Squire," he said grinning broadly. "How didst thou fare in thy quest?"

I knew he was having fun with me, assuming I couldn't possibly have succeeded so quickly. He was in for a surprise.

"I have already succeeded! Here is the writ." I presented it to him.

"Thou hast done well," Dorna said, taking the parchment and laughing out loud. "Thy quest is accomplished. Well done!"

He continued speaking, but his voice took on a more serious tone. His words were halting, though no less commanding for his hesitations. It was as if he hadn't spoken these words in a very long time. I wondered how long it had been since the last Knight had joined the Order.

"Now thou art a Knight of the Order of the Crux Ansata," he said. Removing his helmet, he continued, "Take thou this helm of plate, worthy of a Knight. Would that we had a horse to give thee as well, for 'tis proper for a Knight."

"How else may I serve the Order?" I asked as I donned the helmet.

"The Order once owned a golden plate. Years ago it was stolen by a thief who I will not even describe, for he is not worth the time it would take. He fled into the maze and was not seen again. Since then, it was rumored to have been found several times. The last rumor placed it at the grave of Sir Ingvar. Find it and thou wilt rise further as a Knight."

"I thank thee. Until we meet again ..."

And with that, I took my leave, somewhat reluctantly. I had so much to do, and no idea how long I had to accomplish any of it. I had to rescue Ariel. I had to stop the evil Garamon had brought me to Britannia to deal with. I had to defeat the renegade knight, Rodrick. I had to acquire the plate belonging to the Order. Oh, and Dorna had given me a valuable clue as to the whereabouts of one of Cabirus' Talismans—the Taper of Sacrifice. I had a strong hunch that mad old Zak had had a hand in its disappearance; even if he hadn't taken it himself, I thought he might know something about the theft. I decided to head back up and visit the crazy coot.

The trip back to the third level was uneventful; I simply traded some items of little value for the Taper. Having done that, I returned to the fourth level and set off in search of Rodrick and the missing plate. Though I wanted dearly to rush to the rescue of the innocent Ariel, I still knew I would get nowhere without the Talismans of Cabirus. They had to come first. I began my search by questioning the Knights Kyle and Doris, to the east.

"It is a pleasure to see thee again, Avatar," said Doris. "How goes thy quest?"

"Canst thou help me to find the plate?"

"It is said that Rodrick, the dreaded Chaos Knight, holds a key thou needest. Behind him lies a maze with many secret places."

"I will take thy advice under consideration. Farewell."

Here was good news indeed—my two quests were intertwined. In order to find the plate I'd have to defeat Rodrick. I knew he could be found in the banquet hall somewhere to the north, so I returned to the north-south passage just west of Kyle's and Doris' chamber and began my northward trek.

The Knights' realm was an orderly, well-

kept place. There were rooms, well marked as to their functions, evenly spaced to the left and the right of the corridor. The first room on the right was that of the Treasurer. Entering, I saw an older man, his armour not as well kept as that of the other Knights. He seemed thinner, less of a physical specimen than the other Knights, too, but there was that ineffable nobility about him that I had come to associate with my new fellows.

"I am Derek," he said proudly, "a Knight and a worker. Who art thou?"

"My name is Avatar. I am on a quest."

"Ah, the adventurous life is not for me. I am content to remain here and work at my craft."

"What is thy craft?"

"I carve gems and work metals. It is hard and tedious work, especially with poor tools, but I am content with it nonetheless."

"I wish I could help thee with thy work."

"Well, if thou hast anything that would help me in my work, I would appreciate it. Perhaps thou hast collected such an item in thy travels."

I thought about that for a moment. Had I collected anything that might help a gem carver? Why, of course I had—the Gemcutter of Coulnes, given me by the Mountainman king, Goldthirst. I had no use for it, but I had a hunch its keen edge and perfect balance might be just what Derek needed. I dug it out of my pack and held out the delicate instrument out to him.

"Will this help?" I asked. The answer was immediately apparent, for his eyes lit up at the sight of it.

"Ah, that's no ordinary tool," he said, "but a true work of art befitting an Avatar! I can't take it from thee."

He tried to push it back at me, but my

mind was set and, prying his fingers open, I placed it in the palm of his hand.

"No, I insist," I said. "Take it."

"That is too kind of thee. I cannot tell thee how much it will help me in my work. Thou hast demonstrated much humility by giving away this artifact—it is only right that I tell thee of the Ring of Humility."

This was more than I could have hoped. Once again, as so many times in the past, generosity and humility yielded unexpected rewards.

"There is a room in the northwest portion of the level below us. There you will find four switches. Flip them in this order: northwest, southeast, northeast, and southwest. Be careful to stay out of the middle of the room."

I assumed that flipping the switches in this order would reveal the Ring of Humility to me and I would have questioned him further, but he had already begun working a rough gemstone with the cutter. In an instant, I could tell this gem would be—well, a gem.

"Farewell, Avatar," he said, scarcely looking up from his work.

"Farewell," I said, chuckling at the man's dedication to his craft.

Returning to the corridor, I entered the room to the north and west. A sign marked this as the room of the Armourer. There I encountered a most intriguing fellow named Feznor. He possessed a wealth of information about some of the Abyss' more interesting locales.

"Welcome, traveler. How can I help thee?" he asked.

We talked for a good long while. Feznor was a bit long-winded; several times I was tempted to get up and leave. He regaled me with the history of the colony and the origin of the Knights. (I was pleased to learn that

they came from Jhelom, and delighted to hear tales of a place I knew so well.) He told me of grand banquets in the hall where I would soon face the renegade Knight, Rodrick. He told me of the puzzling sights I would encounter as I explored this portion of the Abyss. Much of his information seemed idle chatter, but some of it proved invaluable and in the end I was glad to have heard him out.

He told me of the Puzzle of the Bullfrog in the northeast corner of the level, a puzzle crafted by a Mountainfolk woman who had a love of frogs. He described a maze in the northwest—the Maze of Silas. He told me of the door of precious levers beyond the maze. And he told me of a water-filled area to the west of the Abyss' core.

I asked him for more details about each of these wonders and he threw himself enthusiastically into the task of enlightening me.

"Past the Puzzle of the Bullfrog in the northeast," he said, "there is an entrance to the tombs below. To reach the entrance, one must traverse an area surrounded by water. It is said that by using the levers and buttons in the area, one may create a safe path to the other side. It has been years since the puzzle was created, though, and its solution is now lost. The only clue I know of is that the wand found there will restore the puzzle to its pristine state."

"Tell me about the Maze of Silas," I said. He was warming to his task now and my prompting was hardly necessary.

"The Maze of Silas is now infested with pests and littered with debris and bones, but there are said to be other things in the maze as well—hidden chambers and items of some value. The locations of these chambers and items are unknown now, however, so what they contain I cannot reveal to thee."

"And the door of precious levers?"

"The puzzle of precious levers is beyond the maze. Although the members of our Knighthood will not be specific, it is believed to be in a concealed area. The puzzle itself was built to guard the stores of the old government of the Abyss. Now, however, not one of us could tell thee what lies beyond the closed door. The workings of the levers are not understood, but 'tis said that their secrets can be gleaned through careful examination of the artifacts of our Order. I have not the patience for such research, but perhaps one who does will solve the mystery."

Finally, I asked him about the watery area.

"Near the volcano's shaft is a set of falls leading to two pools. One pool is very hard to reach, at least from our domain. But 'tis said it is simple to get there from the Lair of the Lizard-Folk. Would that one among us could speak their tongue and learn the easier route. The second pool is in a secluded spot near a fishing run south of the Abyss' central shaft."

With this information in mind, I set off once more, crossing the hall and entering the chamber of the first officer of the Knights, a woman named Trisch. I meant to take Garamon's advice literally and talk to everyone I could find. I felt sure that if Arial's life was in imminent danger, the mage ghost would find a way to let me know, and the information I was gleaning from the Knights (as from all of the Abyss' inhabitants) seemed invaluable.

The First Officer was pacing when I entered the room. Her brow was furrowed, a fact which diminished her beauty only a little. Though not large, she was well-muscled, and her weapons and armour were of the highest quality—obviously she was a fighter of some prowess, one worthy of the post of First

Officer. At the moment, she was oblivious to my presence, lost in thoughts I couldn't imagine. I cleared my throat and she looked up, brow still furrowed. An embarrassed flush rose from her neck to her cheeks. The effect was altogether flattering. Her brow became furrowed still more deeply but she greeted me courteously.

"I welcome thee to the last bastion of civilization in the Abyss, traveler," she said.

"Thou dost relieve my fears, for I thought civilization gone."

"It has been thy misfortune to travel through the other levels of this wasteland, and I am not surprised thou dost think that. However, we still abide by the dreams of Cabirus and the eight Virtues."

"I thought all had abandoned Cabirus' dream." Though the Knights seemed more interested in Cabirus than most others I'd encountered, even they seemed more concerned with day-to-day survival than with the ideals of Cabirus and the way of the Avatar as conceived by Lord British.

"No!" Trisch protested. "We work still to bring about a return to the days of the Abyss' glory. There is hope yet if the races of the colony will believe again in the Virtues and in each other. Unfortunately, I think there is little hope. Most of the dwellers in this colony have forgotten what little they may once have known about its purpose. Even the most stalwart believers now doubt. No one remembers the Virtues any more. It is a sad situation. Why, several months ago, someone came from above and stole one of the greatest treasures remaining from Cabirus' days."

"What was stolen?" I asked, thinking that perhaps I could help recover what had been lost.

"We lost many small things, mostly from storage. All of our torches and lanterns were taken. A few items of food, but mostly light sources, actually. Quite odd."

At this point, I began to suspect what had happened and who was responsible. Visions of Zak running amok among the Knights raced through my mind.

"The grave loss," Trisch continued, "was that of the Taper of Sacrifice, though. It was created by Sir Cabirus himself and imbued with Virtue. We placed it in our shrine, where we kept a vigil over it. There it remained lit for three years. But one day a man arrived at one of our guardposts. He ranted and raved, but we let him in, as common courtesy dictates, of course. He started running about and grabbing candles and such."

This was Zak, I felt sure.

"We were all too shocked to respond. Then he grabbed the Taper itself and ran off. By the time we were in armour and ready to give chase we had lost him. A tragedy it was."

I was smiling by this time, and Trisch's brow furrowed even more deeply than it had when I'd entered the room. I began to grin as her face reddened once again. I got the distinct impression that she'd soon run me through with her sword if I didn't tell her what was so damned funny.

"I believe that I have found this Taper," I said, beaming. Her demeanor changed immediately. No longer was she angry or embarrassed.

"It is in thy possession e'en now?" she said eagerly. "Could thou please show it to me?"

"Very well, here it is," I said as I removed it from my pack. At the sight of it, Trisch's face lit up as brightly as Derek's had when I'd shown him the Gemcutter of Coulnes.

"Ah! To see the taper again, this is good indeed. I thank thee for the chance to see it again." She stopped and thought for a moment. "Now that thou hast found it, it is right that thou dost keep it. Thou wilt find that the light it produces is quite steady, for it continually sacrifices of itself to produce light for thee. Cabirus imbued it with Virtue, however, and although it consumes itself constantly to provide light, it is continually replenished as well."

This was great magic indeed.

"I shall keep it then, and keep it safe," I said, as humbly as I could.

"Good luck to thee."

"Thank thee."

"And I thank thee for finding it."

Continuing north, I came to a point where the corridor branched east and west, but northward progress was no longer possible. There, I encountered a Knight by the name of Ree. She was a stunning woman with ebony skin; a band of gold circled her brow.

"Lo, fair person," she said as I approached. "Here we are in the ruins of what was once a great civilization, ruined by greed, despair, and pain."

"That sounds horrible. What happened?"

"In better times thou wouldst have seen our true glory. The splendor of our domain and righteousness of our cause were great indeed. But, alas, the environs have changed and the walls have fallen down, the just have been silenced by the desperate, and not even the strongest among us can hope to rebuild what Cabirus wrought."

"What was it like before?"

"It was wonderful. We would visit the ceremonial hall every day. Sometimes we would go below and challenge the Golem to a

test of might. There were marvelous banquets. The Mayors of towns throughout Britannia would come to marvel at our achievements. Now none can survive the dangers of this place long enough to reach us."

"What have you done to make it better?"

"We have sent Knights on many quests to make certain things better. All met with grave perils. Some met with success. Some never returned."

"I am glad to hear that some of the quests were successful."

"Yes, we made great inroads against the trolls at first. And we nearly succeeded in clearing our own demesne of headless and other vermin. Our recent quests have been disasters, though, and our Order is in trouble."

"What has gone wrong?"

"We heard rumors that a powerful mage on the seventh level of the Abyss was kidnapping and killing people. We sent a party of our most valorous Knights to investigate. They never returned. We hope to mount an expedition to investigate, but our resources are limited."

A mage! I wondered if this could be the same mage who had kidnapped Arial. I felt myself trembling as I said, "Perhaps this is the same mage I seek."

"Be thou most careful! If our Knights were unable to defeat him, he must be powerful indeed."

Ree didn't know anything about Arial or about the mage of knightly rumors. Still, I felt sure there was a connection. As I considered this, Ree turned to leave, but I accosted her again and asked her about the "test of might" she'd referred to earlier.

"A golem resides on an island surrounded by lava in the land of the Seers," she said.

"We would take our swords and shields, leap onto the island, and battle the Golem. It was indestructible, but honorable and valorous. Though it could not be destroyed, it would congratulate thee if thou didst fight well. If thou wert good enough it would sometimes reward thee."

"The Seers live below, correct?"

"Yes. If the golem still exists, he would be there."

"Thank thee and farewell."

The corridor in which I'd encountered Ree stretched east and west. I chose the western route. At the far end of the corridor, I came upon two gravestones. Between them lay two helms. As I stooped to read the names on the stones, something struck me as odd. It was a small thing, but odd nonetheless. Wherever the letter "i" appeared in one of the names carved on the stones, the dot was of a different color. Everything else about the stones seemed normal—they were plain, somber gray stones, nothing more. But the dots were carefully painted by hand. Odd.

The left stone marked the grave of one named Sir Lionir. The dot above the *i* in "Sir" was white; the two dots in "Lionir" were gold.

The right stone belonged to a Sir Avirill, whose dots were white, white, and gold.

As it happened, this seemingly innocuous oddity, and my observation of it, would turn out to be extremely significant. It was pure chance that I happened to notice it at all.

At the western end of the corridor, I had no choice but to turn north. The next room contained a veritable library of books, scrolls, and parchments. I read all of the scrolls and skimmed the book. All revealed things of importance to me. Here is what they said:

"To pass into the unseen, jump through the seen."

"The maze conceals many chambers. One is said to lead to a chamber once used by the Knights."

"The maze is locked with a key that is now thought to be lost."

"The heights of the north have a hidden counterpart."

"Lorne went to the homeland of the trolls in the hope of building a shrine."

The first several scrolls meant little to me at the time, though the last was clear. I knew now why I'd found the Writ of Lorne in the trolls' shrine chamber. At least Lorne had accomplished his goal.

The book was about the various puzzles to be found in the Abyss' bizarre architecture. One section intrigued me—the one about the Bullfrog puzzle. I'd heard enough about it since my arrival in the Knights' camp. Here is what the book had to say: "The Bullfrog puzzle has a simple solution, but there is more than meets the eye in that place." A mystery about a puzzle ... I hoped I'd see the Bullfrog puzzle for myself before I left this place.

Having read all the books and scrolls, I entered the chamber to the east of the library. There I found a shrine, where I meditated long on my good fortune. I had survived in a place where few could hope to do so. I had fallen in with a band of men and women whose ideals closely mirrored my own. I was no longer casting about hopelessly for direction; I had clear goals. I left the shrine renewed and better able to face the rigors of life in the Abyss.

Returning to the east-west corridor just south of the shrine and the library, I headed east, past the place where I'd met the Knight named Ree. Beyond a door at the far end of the corridor, I turned north. I hadn't gone far before I encountered another Knight, but one

whose armour was far from pristine. And his armour was in far better shape than he was.

The fellow had clearly been through a war. He was covered with blood, his right arm dangled limp and useless at his side, and he sat propped against the wall of the corridor, head lolling. At my approach, he staggered to his feet, ready in his heart for another fight, should one prove necessary.

To allay his fears, I sheathed my weapon and introduced myself to him. He told me his name was Biden—the very Knight I'd earlier been told was missing in his quest to find and defeat Rodrick! I noticed that Biden was coughing up blood, but he was clearly a prideful man, so I fought back my desire to offer assistance as he fought back any desire he might have felt to ask for it. I wondered if I could have been so strong under similar circumstances.

After our introductions, he said, "Avatar, thou art a member of my Order. Thou too dost strive to uphold the ideals of honor espoused by our Order. Thou dost understand the Virtues, and understand the ways of knighthood. Please listen to my tale."

"I would be happy to hear thy story."

"'Tis not a happy story, Avatar, but I shall tell it all the same."

He staggered a bit and coughed wetly, but managed to continue.

"Sir Rodrick was once a member of our Order, but abandoned the principles of our Order and now calls himself the Chaos Knight, terrorizing the entire northern area. Since to attack one with many would be dishonorable, our leader Dorna picked me to defeat him in single combat. When I reached the old banquet hall to the north, I was suddenly attacked by Rodrick, who leaped from a ledge above me and took me off guard. He attacked

relentlessly, and although I hit him several times, my own blows did little to slow him or curb his apparent anger. He taunted me continuously as we fought, and would not listen as I attempted to reason with him."

"How did the battle finally end?"

"After several minutes I was bleeding from several wounds and thinking my time was up. In desperation, I flung my sword at him. He blocked it easily, but the distraction allowed me to run from him. So that is my story. I cannot return to my home until I have eliminated Rodrick and restored our Order's honor, but it will be some time now before I am capable of fighting. So I wait here, far from the trolls and other pests, gathering my strength before I head off again."

"Thou art going to attack him again?"

"I'd give the rest of my right arm for a chance to take that rogue on again. He'd find out what sort of Knight I am."

"Perhaps I can defeat him."

"That would be quite honorable of thee. If thou dost meet the rogue and defeat him, it would not only bring great honor to thee but also perhaps save my life."

"I will seek him out," I said.

Biden slumped back against the wall. Once again I fought back the urge to offer him aid, but I did urge him to return to his fellows as soon as he felt able. Rodrick would wait—or would be dead at my hand.

I trudged onward toward the northeast, in the direction, as I had been told, of the banquet hall. The hallway was slick with blood—Biden's blood, I suspected. Once again I marveled at the fact that the man was still alive. These Knights were truly worthy companions. I readied my sword and gritted my teeth, prepared for the fight of my life. I got it.

Eventually the corridor opened onto a

huge chamber, so big that my magical light illuminated only the smallest portion of it. I could see that I stood on a walkway that overlooked a large open area. Surely this was the banquet hall and here I'd meet Rodrick. To be on the safe side, I cast the Resist Blows spell upon myself. I'd need every advantage I could get if I was going to survive against the Chaos Knight.

No sooner had I done this than I was attacked from all sides by all kinds of beasts. The room was alive with vermin. Never had I seen so many or so varied a selection of hostile creatures in one place. Before I knew what was happening, I felt the dizziness and fatigue that signaled the effects of poison. I leaped from the walkway to the lower level, landing gracelessly. My attackers followed.

My sword flew, slicing imps, giant spiders, and acid slugs to ribbons, but for each one I slew, two took its place. For each blow I landed, the monsters struck one as well. I was soon bleeding profusely, and my armour was weakened in several places. I ran for cover, but there was none to be found. With my back to the wall, I fought like a madman for what seemed like hours. Were these creatures in league with the devil, Rodrick? Was this part of his plan to defeat everyone who came in search of him? Whether he'd planned this battle or not, I had to end it quickly or I'd be in no condition to face anyone, let alone a seasoned veteran.

I fought with renewed vigor and, finally, defeated the last of the creatures. I buried the point of my sword in the ground and slumped over it, using it for support. My breath came in gasps; my heart pounded so hard I was sure it would burst. Sweat ran down in rivulets under my armour, merging with the blood from a thousand cuts. I was a mess.

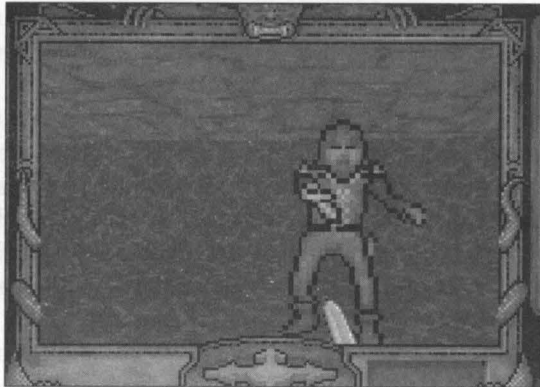
That was the moment Rodrick chose to make his appearance.

"Ha! Another has come to be defeated by the Chaos Knight!" His deep, gravelly voice boomed and echoed in the empty chamber. It was the devil's own voice. "Very well, let us see how quickly I can slay thee."

With an unearthly shriek, Rodrick leaped at me. I don't know where I got the energy to join the fray, but I jerked my abused sword out of the dirt and blocked his first mad blow. Rodrick fainted several times, laughing at my feeble attempts to block blows that never came. He seemed utterly convinced of his invincibility. I backed slowly and carefully away from him, my sword at the ready, calming myself and sizing him up. He was huge, well-rested, and well-armoured. His sword seemed to glow in the dim light. I was sick and shaking. My sword was badly damaged. Would I fare any better against this monster than Biden had?

The odds were slim and I was resigned to the certainty of my own death, but I vowed I'd die in a manner befitting the Avatar. This cocky bastard would know he'd been in a fight. Not for the first time, I entered that curious state in which time seems to stretch, in which each moment of battle seems an hour. As we danced our deadly dance, I forgot about fatigue and poison and focused my entire being on simple survival. I probed for weaknesses, analyzed my foe's strengths. He had a wicked slashing attack, but his other attacks seemed relatively weak. I found I could gain some advantage by throwing caution to the winds and hurling myself at him, attacking with a ferocity that matched his own. Clearly, he was used to prey that turned and ran or fought defensively. I put him on the defensive.

Our battle took us to every corner of the



room, and from the upper walkway to the wooden bridges, and to the passageways north and south of the banquet hall itself. I've never come closer to death than I did at the hands of Rodrick, but in the end, I struck the last blow. He fell, a look of surprise and amazement on his face. As my sword slipped between his ribs, his mouth opened and closed several times, like that of a fish out of water, gasping for air. He looked down at the sword buried in his chest, then looked up at me. I smiled grimly at him. Then the light and the life went out of his eyes and he crumpled to the floor.

I followed him.

Never before and never since have I been so exhausted. I slept there, not caring whether any enemies remained in the area, not caring if Rodrick could rise from the dead and become a shade bent on revenge, not caring if the poison in my body killed me. I slept deeply.

When I awoke, I surveyed the scene. Rodrick was still there, one leg folded unnaturally beneath him, arms splayed. His eyes were wide with amazement. I didn't bother closing them. The monster didn't deserve it. Unceremoniously, I searched his body and found a key adorned with a smooth stone of obsidian. I pocketed it. I hefted

Rodrick's jeweled sword. It was perfectly balanced, a marvelous weapon. I took it. Then I spat on Rodrick's body and left him for the carrion-eaters of the Abyss. His reign of terror was finished.

My job here was not, however. I had to find the golden plate of the Knights. I'd been told to seek out a maze in the northwest, the Maze of Silas. I'd been told a missing key could open the door to the maze. Perhaps the key I'd taken from Rodrick would do the trick. Now all I had to do was find the right door.

I left the banquet hall to the north. Blank walls greeted me to the north, east, and west, but I'd been told to look for secret doors, so I did. I found not one, but two such doors—one to the east and one to the west. I took the western passage first. Not 10 paces past the western door, I came to an ancient but solid metal door. It was locked, but Rodrick's key soon took care of that. I passed beyond the doorway and found myself in a most confusing maze.

The twists and turns tested my patience, and my new jeweled sword was put to the test by innumerable rats. But what frustrated my forward progress the most was the character of the floor here. It was a multi-level nightmare. Scarcely three feet would pass before the ground dropped beneath my feet and I found myself in a depression some two feet deep. Then another three feet beyond, and I'd have to clamber up onto a platform two feet higher than the depression. This was followed by another depression ...

I climbed and dropped, climbed and dropped, twisted and turned, and fought my way through the corridors. There were gold coins and nuggets everywhere, but I didn't care. I was making little progress toward finding the Knights' plate. I could hardly

imagine there was another maze in the northwestern portion of this level, so I was forced to assume I'd missed a secret door or something.

I searched the walls carefully and finally found several secret doors. One of them, in the south-central portion of the maze, opened to reveal the banner of the Knights hanging upon a wall. This had to be it! In the corridor beyond the banner was a door, but when I tested it, it was locked. Then I noticed two switches, one on each side of the door: a white switch on the left wall and a gold switch on the right. I wondered which one opened the door.

The fact that there were two switches gave me pause. I suspected that one of them opened the door and the other one activated a trap of some kind. At least that was my first thought. Then it occurred to me that it might take some combination of switch-throwing to open the door. Maybe the key to the puzzle lay in the color of the switches, because they were identical in every other way.

I sat down and pondered this puzzle for some time, but finally I had it. The switch colors matched the colors of the dots above the *i*'s on the gravestones I'd seen near the Knights' libraries. I'd been struck by the strangeness of painting those dots of white and gold in a seemingly random pattern. Now I was convinced that the colored dots held the key to the switch puzzle.

I paused to remember the pattern of the dots: The sequence on one stone had been *white, gold, gold*; the sequence on the other had been *white, white, gold*. I flipped the switches in that order—white, gold, gold, white, white, gold—and the door swung open!

The room beyond had a huge stone block in the middle. I skirted this; then, on the far side of it, I saw a grave, a parchment, and a

perfectly formed gold plate! I glanced at the gravestone, pocketed the parchment, and grabbed the plate.

The trip back to the banquet hall was uneventful, though I did lose my way a few times. I considered exploring what lay beyond the secret door in the east wall, opposite the one that had led to the maze, but decided that could wait until after I reported to Dorna about the defeat of Rodrick and the recovery of the plate.

Biden was still where I had left him, still too weak to make his way back home and too proud to ask for help. I left him where I found him and prayed he would be safe. Back in the Knights' camp, Dorna greeted me exuberantly, barely giving me a chance to blurt out the news that I had killed the dread Chaos Knight.

Upon hearing the good news, he said, "Thou hast killed the bastard knight who held the north of our home to be his. I thank thee for bringing honor back to our Order and clearing the villain from our homes. The action thou hast taken has proven that thou art most worthy. To reward thee for thy deeds, I offer thee the Standard of Honor, one of the Talismans fashioned by Cabirus."

This was more than I could have hoped! I'd confronted Rodrick because it was simply the right thing to do. I'd had no hope of reward, no need of it. Still, I did need the Talismans, so I accepted Dorna's generous offer.

He turned and rummaged through a large iron case, returning soon with a golden standard, which he held before me.

"Here it is. Bear it with honor and remember those who bore it before thee. Honor their memory with thy deeds, for the deeds thou hast already done honor thee in our memory."

"I thank thee," I said, "and shall take thy words to heart."

I paused to get the golden plate from my pack and, holding it before me, spoke with Dorna again.

"Thy quest is accomplished," he said, beaming. "Well done! All things that belong to the Order now belong to thee. I have opened the door to the armoury, and thou mayest go there and take items as thou dost need them to accomplish the quests and goals thou dost set for thyself."

"Now what wouldst thou have of me?" I asked.

"All that I can tell thee I have told. Seek the Virtues on thy own through what is left of our once-noble colony. Good luck and honor on thy quests."

I left Dorna and searched the armoury, taking an exquisite broadsword. I considered putting on a set of plate armour, but the weight of it was more than I wanted to bear, so I left it there, knowing I could return later if I needed it.

There seemed little more I could hope to accomplish here and, though I hated to leave the Knights, it was time to renew my quest to save Arial and prevent the terrible evil Garamon had brought me here to deal with. I considered descending still further into the Abyss by way of the staircase I'd discovered just north of the chamber of the Outcast, Linnet, but instead I decided to explore one last portion of this level—the area beyond the secret door in the north, the one opposite the door leading to the maze.

So, once again, I made my way to the banquet hall and the corridor north of it. This time, I left through the eastern secret door and soon came to a ramp that sloped upward to my right and downward to my left. The ramp

overlooked a square patch of land surrounded by water. In the northeast corner of the room was an open platform, high above the ground. I could see no way to reach it. Ascending the ramp, I found an old wooden wand engraved with the words "Wand of the Frog." So this was the Puzzle of the Bullfrog. On the south wall, just above the spot where I'd found the wand, was an eight-position lever. A matching lever was set in the west wall, along with two buttons, one above the other.

Clearly, the secret of the puzzle lay in the levers and buttons, but what was it? I pressed the upper button. Immediately I heard a grinding sound, the sound of stone scraping against stone. Below, the portion of the island closest to me had risen several feet. I pressed the lower button then, and the stone returned to its original position. I experimented with the levers and buttons for some time and finally figured out how to reach the platform in the northeast.

With both buttons in the 12 o'clock position, I pressed the top button. Then I moved both levers one notch and pressed the top button again. I repeated this over and over again, moving both levers and pressing the top button, until I had created a diagonal pathway of raised stones that led from my position at the upper end of the ramp to the raised platform in the opposite corner. All I had to do was leap from the ramp to the raised corner of the island, walk across, and leap from the island to the platform.

The platform led me to a stairway which took me to the fifth level of the Abyss. I descended with the uneasy feeling that there was more to the Puzzle of the Bullfrog than I had discovered, some secret that had eluded me, but I felt certain the secret had no bearing on my quest and I had no more time to waste.



Chapter 6

pon descending the staircase I found myself in a world of fine marble and humble stone. Far from seeming confused, however, the curious and contradictory architecture of the place gave it the appearance of a shrine, a place designed to honor mankind's greatest achievements and its humblest roots all at once.

Turning to the right from the staircase, I almost fell through a secret door in the northeast corner of the room. This discovery led me to a passageway and a wooden door, beautifully carved, which had the color of gold. A fine patina of dust covered the door, evidence that I was the first to see it in many years. It swung open easily and revealed a large room, still as the grave and silent, totally silent.

With a start, I realized that I hadn't felt peace such as I felt here since I'd entered the Abyss. Triumph, pain, joy, loneliness; all of these I'd felt, but no peace. Until now. At the far end of the room, I found the reason for my sudden sense of serenity: a gravestone upon which were carved the words, "Here lies Sir Cabirus, whose work created peace and harmony where there was none. May he rest in peace."

So this was the resting place of the man behind the marvelous Abyssal experiment. What folly it had been, what madness, to think the warring races of Britannia could live together peaceably. But what grand folly; what glorious madness. I paid my respects silently.

After a time, I headed south from the secret door and came to a room containing another grave, this one as humble as Cabirus' had been grand. Again, I was struck by the

seeming contradictions of this place. Still, it wasn't the nature of the grave that made the biggest impression on me; it was the fact that no bones lay here—the grave in this room had been desecrated. Curiosity led me to wipe several layers of dust from the stone at the far end of the grave. When I saw the name engraved upon it, a chill passed through me. The name was "Garamon."

I shuddered. This was the grave of the man who had brought me here, a man whose soul knew no rest, a man who, in ghostly form, had managed to communicate with me across the dimensions, to touch me more deeply than most people with whom I share this life. Garamon was not an animated, soulless skeleton or a wailing ghost. Even in death he remained all too human, in his own way. And here I stood, peering at his grave—or what was left of it. Who had defiled this grave? Where were Garamon's bones? What could this mean?

I pondered these questions as I continued my investigation of the area, which I quickly discovered was some kind of burial ground. Another door, this one in the southwest corner of the stairway room, opened onto a long north-south corridor. I found several graves on either side of the corridor, graves of fallen warriors, graves of the forgotten, graves of Gargoyles (all of whom, a sign told me, had fallen in a great plague that had struck the Abyss many years earlier).

Many of the graves were guarded by ghosts and skeletons, which took exception to my presence. With just a trace of guilt, I sent them back to whatever netherworld they came from. Near some of the graves I found weapons, armour, and artifacts, most of which were of little use to me. However, the only door in the eastern wall of the long



corridor gave me access to a crypt in which I found an artifact of great significance.

Beyond this eastern door, I turned to the north and entered a tomb containing the grave of—well, I don't know that I even looked at the stone and I can't now remember the name carved upon it. I was mesmerized by what I saw on the ground at the foot of the grave: a marvelous sword hilt, encrusted with a variety of priceless gems. The workmanship was exquisite, the attention to detail breathtaking. Only a bit of the blade that had once been attached to the hilt remained, its jagged end revealing that the sword had been broken violently.

I turned the hilt over and over in my hand as I searched the room for the rest of the blade. I hadn't searched long when I realized that I wouldn't find the blade in this room, but rather in my own pack! I felt sure this was the hilt of the sword Caliburn. Sure enough, when I fitted the ragged end of the blade to the bit that was still attached to the hilt, they merged seamlessly. The instant blade and sword touched, I felt a tingle in my hands and arms. Once it was repaired—and I knew I had to repair this weapon as soon as I could—this would be a sword to be reckoned with, one

without peer in this world or any other.

Leaving this room (with the two halves of Caliburn in my pack, of course), I continued south until the corridor took a turn to the east and entered a room with only one exit. Taking this, I came to another corridor, which led to a dead end. I searched long and hard, sure that there must be a secret door here somewhere. Truth be told, there was, but I was unable to find it at that time.

Somewhat annoyed, I turned back, retracing my steps to the stairs that led up to the fourth level, back across the room containing the Puzzle of the Bullfrog, back to the banquet hall where I had defeated Rodrick. I considered heading down the stairs in the southern part of the banquet hall and, in fact, had descended halfway when I realized I knew how to get the sword Caliburn repaired. Shak, the Mountainman smith, could do the job. I felt sure of it. As long as I was backtracking, I figured I might as well keep going.

The trip took a while, but eventually I made it back to Shak's quarters in the mines of the second level.

"Ach, 'tis the bold one himself! Wha' may I do for ye?" he said, looking up from the ax he was working on his anvil.

"This is in need of repair," I said, holding the two halves of Caliburn out to him. "Canst thou repair it?"

"Aye, 'tis a fine sword there. I'm afraid it's seen better days, though. Dinna fear, I'll make it whole for ye again. But I must charge ye 20 gold pieces for such fine work, paid when you pick it up."

"Very well. Here it is." I handed the pieces to him and he took them, hefting them carefully, running his thumb along the broken portion of the blade. He nodded and spoke.

"Aye, a beauty, this Caliburn," he said. "I'll have her right for ye, soon enough. Come back in an hour, and don't forget the 20 pieces of gold."

"Excellent. I shall see thee then."

I left Shak's quarters and napped for a time, though my sleep was fitful at best. I was anxious to feel the Sword of Honor in my hands. Finally, when I thought enough time had passed (but only barely enough), I returned to Shak and found him hefting the sword with a huge grin on his face. I wondered if he would part with it now, and what I would do if he chose not to. Luckily, my fears were unfounded.

"There ye are," he said, beaming, "all fixed now! A beauty she is, and good as new." He took a few swipes at the air with the sword. "Well now, do ye have the 20 gold pieces ye owe me for the work?"

"Yes, here thou art," I said, handing him the coins.

He gave me the sword and it felt as good in my hand as I'd known it would.

"Thank thee," I said. "Thou hast done more than thou knowest."

We talked a bit longer, but time was short, so I soon took my leave, returning to the third level, then to the fourth. I was heading back to the banquet hall when I remembered the stairs I'd found near the camp of the man named Linnet, just east of the Knights' area. These were close at hand, so I descended to the fifth level via this stairway instead.

I found myself facing a brick wall upon which hung the banner of Cabirus. Something moving to the left of the banner caught my eye and I rushed after it, ready for a battle or a good conversation. Either seemed possible, and I had learned to be prepared for any eventuality. I

quickly came upon a shambling mockery of a man, a Ghoul whose stench reached me long before I got a good look at him.

When I did get close enough to see him clearly, I almost regretted it. The fellow's skin was brown and paper-thin, stretched too tightly over his bones. The right side of his face drooped hideously, like the face of a wax figure left too long in the sun, and blood dripped from his gaping jaw. Whether it was his own blood or the blood of something—or someone—else, I couldn't say. Ghouls are notoriously indiscriminate about what (or whom) they eat!

I'd already pulled back my sword to strike the monster down when I noticed that he was just staring at me, impassively. No threatening gestures, no sound, nothing. I paused, remembering the banner hanging on the wall nearby. Cabirus' banners had always identified civilized places before. Perhaps this fellow was more to be pitied than hated. And he didn't seem to be armed ...

I began to speak, but the Ghoul cut me off abruptly.

"Who be you?" it said.

"I am the Avatar. Who art thou?"

"Huh. Me Marrowsuck, the tailor."

"A tailor? Thou art a Ghoul, art thou not?"

"You think Ghoul no make good tailor?" he said.

"I'd expect thou wouldst eat a tailor rather than be one." The thought was voiced before I could censor myself. I couldn't imagine a Ghoul doing more than wander around in search of flesh to eat. The idea of a Ghoul tailor seemed preposterous, especially considering the sorry state of Marrowsuck's clothes. Luckily, he took my comment as a joke.

"Very funny!" he said. "Me good tailor before, me good tailor now! What you need with me?"

I was so taken aback by this exchange that I decided to play along. I have no idea why, but, in retrospect, I'm glad I did.

"I have need of a good tailor," I said.

"Me very good tailor. What you need?"

"Canst thou make me some clothing?"

"Let me see what you got to work with."

"How is this?" I asked, pointing to a set of battered leather leggings I was carrying.

Marrowsuck eyed the garment carefully and rubbed it with practiced fingers. Amazingly enough, I began to think he might really be a tailor. He seemed to know what he was doing. After a moment, he pushed the leggings back to me.

"Me no see any good material there. You got any cloth or animal skin or something like that?"

I thought for a moment, then remembered the dragon scales I'd gotten from the troll named Sethar. I passed those over to him. The Ghoul examined them most carefully before looking at me and saying, "Me can make dragon skin into boots for you. But me also need ironsilk thread—only thread good for stitching dragon skin. Why me do that for you?"

"What dost thou mean?" I asked.

"Me no Avatar, do tough things for free! Me want good pay for good work!"

"As it should be. In what coin dost thou desire payment?"

"Me want food for my work. Just about anybody will do. Maybe a Goblin. Green ones be tender."

Choking back the bile I felt rising in my gorge, I thought for a moment. Dragon skin boots, impervious to heat, could come in

handy. The temperature kept rising as I went deeper into the Abyss, leading me to believe I was descending into the heart of an active volcano. No telling what I'd find as I descended further. I wanted those boots, but, obviously, I wasn't about to deliver up a Goblin, regardless of color, to this Ghoul. Finally, I said, "Very well. I shall pay thee in food, although it may not be a Goblin."

"Okay. Give me dragon scales and thread and then me make boots."

I already had the scales. Now I had to find the ironsilk thread I'd acquired when I'd killed the giant spiders in the northwestern section of the first level. My pack was getting very full, which made it hard to put my hands on things, but finally I found the stuff.

"Very well," I said, holding the scales and thread out to him. "Here they are."

"Okay. Come back in half hour with food and me give you boots."

"Excellent. I shall return then."

I wandered south and came to a place where the path dead-ended. Before me, several feet below the level of the path, was a lava flow. The heat rising from it made me dizzy. I stumbled back and slumped to the ground, wiping the sweat from my brow. The thought crossed my mind that I might need dragon-skin boots much sooner than I'd expected.

I passed the time casting Create Food spells. Some of the results of my castings I ate then and there. The rest I packed up, hoping I'd find something Marrowsuck would accept in lieu of Goblin flesh. When a half hour had passed, as near as I could determine, I got to my feet and headed back to the place where Marrowsuck and I had met. He was waiting for me with a pair of marvelous boots in his hands.

“Okay, me make boots,” he said. “You got food to pay?”

I offered him several kinds of food. He grabbed some of it and thrust the boots at me at the same time as he stuffed the food in his mouth.

“Okay,” he said around a bite, “here your boots. So long.”

And he was gone, leaving me to slip the boots on. They were as comfortable as any shoes I’d ever worn—cool, light, flexible, a perfect fit. To my surprise, Marrowsuck really had a gift. I gladly left my heavy, armoured boots behind.

A passageway led due east from the place I’d met Marrowsuck. Having already tried the northern and southern routes, I followed it, encountering several Ghouls along the way. Each proved surprisingly helpful in its own way. One was a fellow known as Eyesnack. To my untrained eye, one Ghoul looked much like another—same hairless head, same papery skin stretched tight over a bony frame—and at first I thought I’d run into Marrowsuck again. Only after careful examination did I determine that Eyesnack was smaller than the tailor had been, but that made him no less hideous.

“Who you?” he said. “Me no see live human here in long time.”

“I am the Avatar. Who art thou?”

“Me Eyesnack. What you doing here?”

“Eyesnack. That is a peculiar name.” I was afraid I had a pretty good idea how he’d come by that name.

“Not peculiar as Avatar! Get name from favorite food. Is tradition. Me like eyes. They small and tasty, easy to carry around, good to eat.”

“Er ... I see,” I said, feeling the bile rise in my throat yet again. “Didst thou say something about humans?”

“Me see humans here long time ago before collapse. Before Ghouls even exist. We all just humans then.”

“What did humans do here before the collapse?”

“This place was catacombs. People come to state hall for funeral, then march through catacombs and make tomb for dead guy. Me play flute at funerals. Long time ago.”

“Thou didst play the flute?” I said, amazed once more at the thought that Ghouls like Marrowsuck and Eyesnack had once led normal lives.

“Yeah, me musician. You surprised Ghoul can be musician? Me musician before me Ghoul. Me play in state hall for Cabirus all the time.”

“I’m sure thou didst play wonderfully,” I said.

“It was great,” Eyesnack said, his eyes almost alive with the memory of his past life. “Me play all kinds stuff. Me play ‘Mardin’s Song of Wonder’ lot of times. Was Cabirus’ favorite spiritual. Said that you play it in the right place, wondrous thing happen. But no one know place.”

“Really? How did it go?” The mention of a “wondrous thing” had caught my attention. I had to know how to play that tune.

“You got flute? Me teach song to you.”

“Yes, in fact I do,” I said. I’d picked up a flute back near the throne room of the Mountainman king, Goldthirst.

“Okay, let me see flute.”

“Here it is.”

“This flute should work fine.”

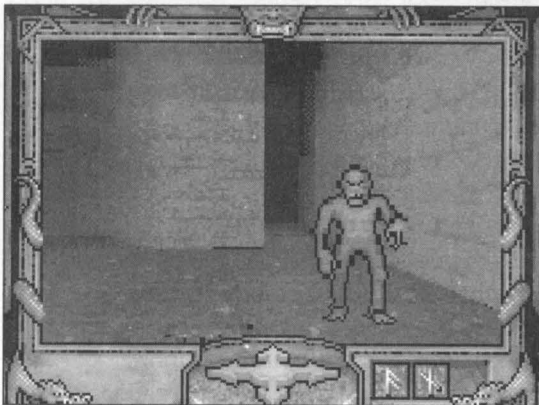
Eyesnack brought his cracked leathery lips together and touched them gently to the flute. His yellow fingers, with their blackened nails, danced delicately over the flute holes. Beautiful music filled the Abyss: first a lively jig, then a

sorrowful dirge. I was stunned. The tragedy of what had befallen the Ghouls struck me then. These had once been men, gifted men whose talents had brought joy to Cabirus and to countless others. I imagined their fear and desperation as they tried to survive in this hostile place after the collapse of Cabirus' dream. What would a tailor and a musician do? They weren't fighters. That much was clear. I was sure they'd had no choice but to survive on the remains of those buried here or those foolish enough to wander into the area unarmed.

As these thoughts passed through my mind, I realized that Eyesnack had stopped playing. He was gazing lovingly at the flute, perhaps remembering how he had once lived, what he had once been. But when he spoke, I realized that I had projected my own sorrow onto him. He felt nothing.

"Notes of tune are 3 5 4 2 3 7 8 7 5," he said, pointing to each hole as he named it. Then he put the flute on the ground and wandered off as if I had never existed. The last notes of the baleful tune faded quickly.

"I shall be sure to practice it," I said as I turned to continue my exploration of the Abyss.



The most helpful of the Ghouls was a woman named Shanklick—at least I took her to be a woman.

"Why you here?" she asked.

"I have been unjustly imprisoned here."

"You been unjustly imprisoned, hah? Sound like one of them Outcasts from above. Them always complaining that crazy baron from other side send them here as punishment. Okay with me. They tasty. But you not one of them, you down here. Who lock you up?"

"Baron Almríc."

"Almríc, hah? Yeah, me heard that name from Outcasts. Most of them locked up by that guy for some crime or other. Why he lock you up?"

"I am accused of kidnapping his daughter."

"Hey, me hear something about that. Big troll was dragging around girl a while ago. Heard she was baron's daughter."

"What would the troll want with her?"

"Me not know for sure. Maybe him want to eat her. Maybe him work for someone else."

I didn't want to consider the possibility that Ariel had been eaten by a troll. I wrote the idea off to the Ghoul's personal predilections and pursued her other theory.

"Who could he be working for?"

"Me hear some rumors, maybe me got idea who troll work for." Shanklick screwed her face up in a convincing expression of greed mixed with just a touch of contemplation. "Why should me tell you?" she said.

This was really getting exasperating. The Ghouls were the most mercenary folk I'd encountered in a world of self-centered people and creatures.

"Is there anything I can do for thee?" I said.

"Me leader of Ghouls. Me got problem, maybe you solve. One my folk has Laughing Sickness, come from eat bad brain. Me think someone give him bad brain on purpose. How me find out who? Sick one no can talk, only laugh."

At least this was a simple problem. I'd halfway readied myself for a convoluted quest that would take days, all in the hope of eliciting some probably useless bit of information from a moronic Ghoul! I pondered Shanklick's problem for a moment; the answer was quick in coming. I hoped a combination of cunning (or what might pass for it among the Ghouls) and flattery would dazzle Shanklick and convince her to spill her guts—though not, of course, in the literal sense.

"Here is a trick to catch the knave," I said. "Say thou'rt glad someone poisoned this Ghoul, because he attempted to force his attentions upon thee. When the guilty one claims a reward, seize him!"

"You real sneaky. Me like!"

"I thank thee. Now who does the troll work for?"

"Me think troll work for weird mage who live just below home of Seers. Me follow troll down eastern stair, hear Seers talk about weird mage. Troll take girl there. Me not know why."

Though I was grateful for the information Shanklick had imparted, I wanted nothing more than to be gone from this place of selfishness and cannibalism.

"I thank thee," I said hurriedly. "Farewell."

Now I had a solid lead. I'd seek out the Seers and hope they had further word of the

troll and its mysterious employer. Perhaps they could help me find Ariel before all was lost.

But before questing deeper in the Abyss, I had one more goal to achieve here—I had to find the Ring of Humility. Garamon had made it clear that all eight Talismans would be necessary to the completion of my quest, and Derek had told me the Ring could be found here, in the northwest region of this level. Anxious as I was to rescue the girl, I wouldn't leave here without the Ring.

Finding my way out of the Ghouls' area was more difficult than I'd expected. Heading north brought me to dead ends, but heading west at every opportunity eventually brought me to a central shaft that made northward progress possible. Along the way west, however, I came upon a strange area bordered on two sides by lava streams (thank God for dragon-skin boots!) and dominated by large wooden structures. The combination of wood and lava seemed a dangerous one to me, but I'd long since grown accustomed to the many contradictions of the Abyss.

Here in this wood-and-lava area, I encountered an elderly woman named Judy. She was old and haggard, though it took little imagination to see the beauty she had once been. Now, however, her blue-green robes were in tatters and her long gray hair was tangled and matted. As I approached, the old woman looked up and squinted, revealing milky white eyes. She was obviously nearly blind. I wondered how she had managed to survive here.

"Tom?" she asked. "Is it thee?"

I moved closer, close enough that she could see my face and know that I was not Tom. The hope in her eyes died as I approached.

One Ghoul I encountered was a fellow named Kneenibble, who expanded my knowledge of the Abyss and of this particular place within it. Though the information he imparted was not directly useful to my quest, it did help me to acquire some artifacts that made my life somewhat easier during my stay.

As I approached Kneenibble, he began to lick his lips in a particularly disturbing way. Despite myself, I couldn't suppress a shudder of horror at the thoughts I imagined to be going through his mind. I also couldn't help noticing that Kneenibble looked even more gaunt than his brethren, as if the lightest of breezes, (if one should ever bless this accursedly hot place) might knock him right over.

"Hey, human," he said, in a voice as thin and reedy as he was himself. "What you do here, far from home?" Though frail-looking, he was by no means shy.

"I am traveling the depths of the Abyss."

"Should no bother exploring Abyss. Not much to see now—just people try to survive. Used to be lot going on, before collapse."

"What went on here before the collapse?"

"No one lived here, but they come to state chamber, tombs, and mines. Diplomats and visitors use state chamber for talks, funerals here, too. Important

people buried in tombs. Me used to work in mines."

Another working man turned to cannibalism. Again, I marveled at how far people would go to survive, even as I felt repulsion at their actions.

"What was thy job?" I asked.

"Me have important job before collapse. Me operator of mine dispatch chamber. Only one who know combination for dispatch unit."

"What didst thou do as operator?"

"Mine dispatch chamber room where miners go be sent to work in mines. Me send miners to work by sending them to teleport room. Get put in part of mine from there."

"How does the chamber operate?"

"Need combination to use chamber. Why would me give you combination to chamber?"

"What dost thou want?" I said, sighing. Everyone wanted something down here.

"Me want fish. Bring me 10 fish, me tell you combination."

"I shall return with fish. Farewell."

I left then, considering how I'd get 10 fish. The weight alone might be more than I could carry. The way I saw it, I had two choices: First, I could go back up to the fourth level, get a fishing pole from Oradinar (if only I'd taken him up on his offer of a spare pole ...) and sit around fishing while a girl died and the world came down in ruins

around me. That option seemed singularly unappealing to me. My second option looked no better: I could cast Create Food spells, which sometimes produced fish, until I had 10 of them. Tough choice, but I finally opted for a return trip to Oradinar and a fishing expedition in the stream just north of his camp.

As it turned out, this was the right decision to make—I could have cast Create Food spells for days before coming up with 10 fish. As it was, I caught that many in a matter of hours, thanks to Oradinar's pole, and was soon back chatting with Kneenibble about the joys of fishing.

"You got fish for me?" he said, ever the conversationalist

"Yes. Here thou art," I replied.

"Thanks. People scarce recently, fish good substitute." He paused for a moment, just long enough for me to shudder at the casual manner in which he had mentioned his cannibalistic preferences. "There three dials on wall," he continued. "Each goes from zero to seven. Zero straight up, increases clockwise. Set dials to 7-2-6 from left to right. Then pull lever. Gate to teleport room then open. Walk in there, teleport to mine."

Well, he really was a conversationalist, once you got him going. But I had no time for idle chit-chat and had no desire to get too chummy

with these Ghouls, pitiful though they may have been.

"I thank thee kindly," I said, masking my repulsion. "Farewell."

I didn't know quite what to do with the information Kneenibble had given me, so I filed it all away for later use and continued my explorations. Some time later, in the western portion of this level, I encountered an elderly mage in blue robes. The man's name was Anjor and he was experimenting with things alchemical. He gave me the information I needed to put Kneenibble's information to use.

"Greetings, traveler," he said. "What brings thee to an area of the Abyss as perilous as this? Art thou on a quest, as I myself am?"

Here was something new. I hadn't yet met anyone else on a quest down here. Most everyone seemed preoccupied by the simple yet all-consuming task of staying alive.

"What is thy quest?" I asked.

"Many years ago, I began research into methods for turning lower metals into gold. During the course of my research, I discovered a new and better method that depends on a particular, very rare substance. I quest to find more of this substance."

"Tell me of this substance."

"It is a blue rock-like mineral called zanium. The only samples I have found have been on this floor of the Abyss, in

tunnels with rough-hewn walls. I believe there is a mining area in the southwest where there may be larger deposits, but I cannot gain access to it."

This first mention of the mines set me thinking that I might be able to help this fellow. And helping others had always had a way of helping me out, in one way or another. It wouldn't do simply to offer help—it was his quest, after all, and I had no desire to insult the fellow—so I tried to keep him talking. Maybe he'd ask for my assistance.

"How is this mineral collected?" I asked.

"Zanium has the property of being self-attractive. Deposits near the surface can be collected merely by walking over them while carrying a sample. In an underground environment such as this, if there is zanium present, there is likely to be some near the surface. Thus, in a sense, it is collected automatically."

"Tell me of this mining area," I said, wondering how much he already knew.

"I do not know much. There is a small room in the southwestern region that is labeled 'mine dispatch chamber.' There appear to be some controls, but I know not how to operate them."

"Is there anyone who would know about the controls?"

"Now that thou dost mention it, yes, there is one who may know something. One of those frightful Ghouls in the

catacombs used to be foreman in the mining sector. No Ghoul has spoken to me since I killed one of them in self-defense. Perhaps thou couldst assist me?"

My prayers had been answered.

"What assistance dost thou need?"

"If thou couldst talk to the miner Ghoul and discover how to operate the dispatch chamber I would be most grateful. In addition, if thou wouldst enter the mining area, brave its dangers, and collect at least 80 samples of zanium, I would reward thee with a large gold nugget created from lead."

"I will bring thee the zanium."

"Wouldst thou? Thou art indeed a kind soul!" He rummaged around in one of the deep folds of his blue robe and produced a small stone of a similar hue. He held the stone out to me. "Take this small sample. Carry it through the mine, and it shall attract more of its kind."

I took the stone. It was smooth, almost like glass, and weighed virtually nothing. I pocketed it and said, "Farewell."

It took some time to find the mine entrance, but find it I did. It was a bit south and west of Anjor's chamber. To reach it, I had to cross a lava flow, but that was no problem now that I had dragon-skin boots. The place was identified by a plaque that read, "Mine dispatch chamber. Enter only in presence of dispatch operator." Near the

plaque was a door; beyond the door was an octagonal chamber. On the north wall were three dial levers; on the west wall was a portcullis (locked, of course) and another lever.

The combination Kneenibble had given me was easy to use—the straight-up position was marked with a zero on the dial levers. I moved the one on the left seven clicks, the center one two clicks, and the rightmost one six clicks. Then I flipped the lever by the portcullis and it rose silently into the ceiling.

Beyond was a narrow corridor, which ended after about 15 feet. Between me and the far wall was an ancient scroll. This I picked up and read silently. Thank whatever gods there be that I didn't use the scroll just then! It was some kind of teleport scroll, unlike any I'd ever seen. I'd used it before acquiring all the runes to cast the Gate Travel spell, I would have been in serious trouble.

In any event, I saw nothing in this corridor that looked like a mine entrance, so I examined the walls carefully for a secret door or some other way out. I found one. The western wall was actually a concealed teleporter. I fell through it and landed roughly in the mine!

After taking a moment to get my bearings, I noticed blue stones floating in midair every few feet—zanium!

Collecting the stuff was a relatively simple matter. As Anjor had said, I had only to run past the stones and they flew into my hands. The only complicating factors were some nasty ghosts and some nastier twists and turns in the maze-like mines. Despite these obstacles, I soon found myself back in Anjor's chambers, hardly weighed down by my load of zanium.

"Hast thou found 80 samples of zanium?"

"Yes, I have."

His eyes lit up with excitement and his hands twitched anxiously.

"Excellent! May I have them, please?"

"Here they are," I said, handing them to him.

"I thank thee kindly. Return in an hour and I shall give thee a gold nugget the size of which thou canst but imagine!"

To make a long story short, I returned at the appointed time and he did, in fact, give me the biggest chunk of gold I had—or have—ever seen. It was immense. Later, I gave the stone to the Mountainman Goldthirst, and, in return, he presented me with a magnificent ax, which, though not critical to the completion of my quest, was a welcome ally in battle. Had I not already acquired the sword Caliburn, this ax would have been my weapon of choice.

"I'm sorry," I said, sincerely. "I am the Avatar. Who is Tom?"

"Ah, Tom, he was me Tommy-boy. Gone he is and now only I am left. Nevermore shall I see his face this side of Paradise. Nor am I even able to remember it, not a'tall."

"What happened to Tom, that thou dost wait here?"

"He and I were walking here, down by the lava. Tom was t' ask his master, Lord Cabirus, t' bless our marriage. He just gave me this ring. 'A hole of gold,' he says to me, 'with a plug of fair flesh.' An' then one o' them headless creatures came runnin' in, and brave Tom *would* fight wi' it. The both of them went into the lava! Ah, me Tom! And I have sat here these long years. Some o' the folk nearby take pity on me, bring me things to eat. But nary one will stay and watch wi' me for my Tom."

"Isn't it unlikely that he will return from the lava?"

"Ah, that's me Tom. Always worrying me. Ah, Tom, come up, thou'rt worrying thy Judy! Ah, me, I canna e'en recall his face, he's so long lost t' me!"

"Hast thou naught else to remember him by?" I asked.

"I had me a picture once, but 'tis lost now. Ah, me Tom! Such a bonny lad I never knew."

"Well, if I should find it, I shall return it to thee."

"Wouldst thou? Ah, thou art very kind. Bless thee."

"Blessings upon thee also, old mother."

Though at first I thought this meeting of little significance, it would result in my acquisition of yet another of Cabirus' Talismans, but that wasn't until much later in my quest.

At that time, I could do nothing to ease poor Judy's suffering, so, though I felt badly about it, I continued on my quest for the Ring of Humility.

Once I discovered the central corridor leading north, finding the chamber that housed the Ring of Humility was simple. I skirted the Abyss' volcanic core, bearing west and then north again, and found myself in a large empty room. This I left via the northern door, which took me to a corridor with doors to both east and west. The westernmost door admitted me to yet another narrow chamber, this one with a massive metal door in its north wall. This in turn gave access to a diamond-shaped chamber with a raised platform in the center.

There were switches on four of the chamber's six walls, and I knew I had found the Ring chamber. Applying Derek's instructions proved simple, though I had to be careful to flip the switches in the appropriate order: northwest, followed by southeast, then northeast, and finally southwest. When I had flipped the last switch, a ring appeared on the central platform—the Ring of Humility.

Appropriately, the Ring was elegantly simple: a slender, unadorned circle of iron. I slipped it onto my finger and breathed a sigh of relief. Now I could continue my search for Arial.

The stairs down to the sixth level were just east of the volcano's core. I descended, ready for anything.



Chapter 7

few twists and turns brought me from the foot of the stairs to a wide east-west corridor. To the east, I came upon a stone

block upon which hung two banners, each with an eye embroidered on it. Beyond the block I found only a few empty rooms. Returning to the west, I skirted several rivulets of lava that bubbled up through the stone of the corridor itself; I quickly reached the Abyss' core. There I was greeted by sights and sounds unlike any I had ever experienced: in each corner a "lavafall" roared, the flaming equivalent of the most marvelous waterfalls I had ever seen. The heat and sound, the smoke and ash, all nearly overwhelmed me as I gazed in awe at Nature's glory.

Something moved to the south and I wrenched myself from my reverie to pursue the fleeting shadow. Just south of the core, the corridor branched in three directions. It was here, at this branch point, that I caught up with a man in long golden robes. His gray beard hung to his belt and his bright, inquisitive eyes were magnified by the rectangular spectacles he wore. He seemed a studious sort, better suited to life in the Lycaemum than to existence in the Stygian Abyss. Apparently he felt quite at home here, because he greeted me with a gusto I found surprising.

"Hail, stranger!" he called out happily. "Hast thou come to enroll in the Academy?"

This seemed an odd greeting. I saw nothing resembling an Academy here.

"The Academy?" I said. "I was not aware of such an institution."

"I am not surprised, for the Academy is now closed, and few remember its days of glory." The man, whose name was Shenilor, shook his head sadly and paused to wipe his glasses clean with the sleeve of his robe. "'Tis a pity that thou wert not here when Sir Cabirus was still alive. The Abyss was a thriving settlement, and our Academy was the

center of it. Nobody seems to be interested in the higher arts any longer, though."

"Indeed, simply to survive here is quite a feat," I said.

"This is so. Since the Academy was closed, most of us have been content merely to eke out a meager existence in some small corner of the Abyss."

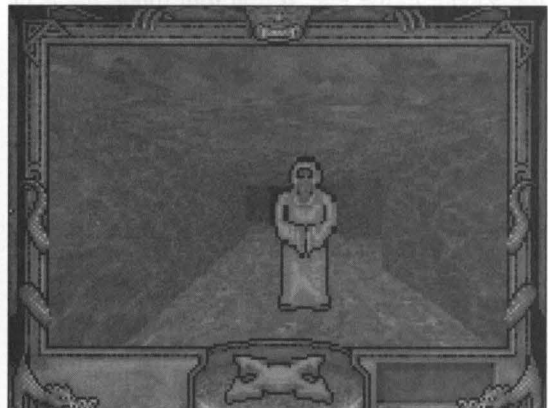
"And the Academy? Is there aught left of it now?"

"I am afraid our once-proud Academy has been infested by creatures who have no interest in the knowledge and wisdom contained there. To them, its halls offer nothing more than convenient shelter. It pains my heart to think of the Academy's decline from the days of old."

"I sympathize with thee. Surely 'twas once a wondrous place."

"Perhaps one day the Abyss will return to its former glory, but I begin to doubt it more and more. Ah, what I would not give to see the Academy restored!"

"I would not give up hope." I had little myself, but the man, so happy just moments ago, seemed now so pained by the memory of what had been lost that I felt I had to say



something. He saw through my pretense and smiled ruefully.

"It may be that thou art right," he said. "All I can do is hope."

"Does anything remain of the Academy's former days?" I asked.

"It is possible that in the old library of the Academy thou mayest be able to find some useful information. But be careful," he said, wagging a finger like an old schoolmaster. "Many monsters inhabit the Academy these days."

"Where is this library?"

"Enter the great hall of the Academy and head west. The library will be on thy left. Perhaps some of its books, and the knowledge contained therein, are still intact."

"Thank thee," I said as I took my leave.

I stood at the meeting point of three identical corridors. Seeing nothing to recommend one more than the others, I chose the rightmost path and followed it southwest. A few steps brought me to another branch to the right. Here I encountered a red-robed mage named Morlock. He was pacing back and forth when I first saw him, but stopped when he noticed my presence. He looked friendly enough, though he seemed disinclined to look me square in the eye, a trait that made me ill at ease. This feeling passed instantly as he greeted me with the exuberance of one encountering a valued friend after many years apart. These Seers—for I could only assume these folk were the Seers—were a jolly lot.

"Hail to thee, bold traveler," he said. "I am Morlock. What bringest thee here?"

"I am in search of adventure."

"Ah! Well, I believe that my fellow mage Bronus has something for me. If thou wouldst deliver it to me, perhaps I can help thee further."

I pondered this for a moment. On the one hand, the mage's offer irritated me deeply. I was beginning to feel as if I'd spent my entire life running errands for the inhabitants of the Abyss. On the other hand, each errand had brought me closer to the conclusion of my quest. Put in those terms, the decision was an easy one—I'd continue to play the role of uncomplaining errand boy a while longer.

"Perhaps I shall run across him," I said.

Morlock encouraged me to do so and went back to his pacing. I continued southwest until the corridor forked again, one path heading due south, the other west. Choosing the western route, I soon encountered two more people, a wide-eyed man named Illomo and a golden-haired woman named Louvnon. The two were together when I encountered them, deep in a conversation I interrupted with some reluctance.

"Hello, adventurer," Illomo said. "Hast thou seen my friend Gurstang?"

"Who?" The name meant nothing to me.

"My friend Gurstang, a fellow Seer. He went downstairs a few months ago and I haven't seen him since."

"What was he doing down there?"

"He was on a search for the fabled Key of Truth. He must have fallen into the hands of Tyball, the wizard below."

What luck! This fellow had given me a clue as to the whereabouts of Garamon's brother, Tyball, the mage I felt sure was responsible for the abduction of Arial—Tyball, the focus of my quest! I sensed that I had much to do before he and I met, but I was getting closer ...

Fighting back my eagerness, I said, "I shall let thee know if I find this Gurstang."

"Please do. I fear for his safety."

While I spoke with Illomo, Louvnon wandered out of the room and across the hall. I followed, not wanting to miss the opportunity to speak with her too. She was quite beautiful. Her blue robes contrasted delightfully with her long golden hair. A silver headband circled her brow, shining as if with some internal light. Perhaps I imagined this, but she was the loveliest creature I'd seen since my arrival in the Abyss and, truth be told, for some time before that.

My sudden entrance into her quarters seemed to startle her (or perhaps she was put off by my unabashed staring).

"Ah, well," she said. "Art thou a mage, as I am?"

"I dabble in the mystic arts occasionally," I replied. I blushed bright red at that. I believe it was the first (and, I pray, the last) time I used the word "dabble" in conversation.

Luckily, if she caught my bungled attempt to be suave, she didn't let on. She merely said, "Then I am sure thou wouldst be interested in my research. I am exploring the properties of mantras and shrines."

She was a thinker as well as a great beauty! I would have been interested in her

studies of the culinary uses of mud, if she'd chosen to share them with me.

"What hast thou found?" I asked, ever the conversationalist.

"It was long thought that the shrines of the Abyss served only to increase one's ability at some skill. But I have found that this is not necessarily the case. Apparently, some mantras exist that will produce objects or dispense information."

"What mantras are these?" I asked, mesmerized.

"I have not been able to discover any specific mantras with these properties. However, it is said that there is a mantra which will direct one to a powerful object."

This broke the spell. A powerful object? Could this be one of Cabirus' Talismans? I listened with rapt attention now, not enchanted by Louvnon's charms, but desperate for any scrap of knowledge I might glean from her words.

"The mantra has been divided into three parts," she continued, "which must be reassembled to produce the original word. The tale is from long ago, so I know not its veracity."

"Hast thou knowledge of any other mantras?" I asked.

"Sadly, I have no further knowledge of individual mantras. I hope that my research has been of some use to thee, however."

"We shall see," I said, trying not to stare too deeply into her eyes. I would gladly have remained there, staring, for as long as she would let me, but she had added yet another quest to my growing list. I had to learn the three-part mantra and recover the object of power she'd mentioned. I took my leave as quickly as I could. I didn't look back.

Just west of Louvnon's quarters, the path branched, allowing me to go either straight



ahead or to the right. I went right, following the path until I reached a door. Beyond it was Dr. Owl, a mage with a long white beard that came to a sharp point. Though quite old, he was one of the most striking people I'd encountered in the Abyss. He clutched his staff as if it were the only thing keeping him upright—which, I suppose, it very well may have been—but despite this, he had a presence that was undeniable.

"Ah, it is the one who hast freed my servant Murgo!" he said as I flung open the door. How could he have known about this? I assumed Murgo had made his way back here after I'd freed him from the Lizardmen, but how had this fellow known that I was the one who'd done the deed? These Seers were remarkable.

"Thou'rt more compassionate toward thy fellows than I might expect," Owl

Before leaving the chamber where I acquired the blocks of incense, I had one last encounter, one of the strangest I can recall. Two corridors led out of the chamber to the south. The westernmost of these took me to a lava flow. Crossing the boiling stream was easy—a running leap carried me to the other side. There I found myself facing a door. This was no ordinary door, however, as I discovered when I tried to open it.

The instant my hand touched the door knob, the hazy image of a human face—that of a bearded man—appeared and the door spoke!

"So! Another young fool opens a door thoughtlessly. Open, close, open, close, that's all that anyone ever has the time for. Things were not like this when I was thy age, I can assure thee of that! Well? Hast thou anything to say for thyself?"

I was, needless to say, taken aback by the fact that I was being harangued by a door, but I managed to blurt out a

response: "Excuse me ... Art thou really a door?"

"What do I look like, a drawbridge?"

Just what I needed—a living door with an attitude.

"Thy point is made," I said, unsure of just how one should deal with an angry door. "How didst thou come to be a door?"

"I once was a young human like thyself. But I grew weary of the regular folk and their immense stupidity. I was a brilliant mage, and was constantly pestered with silly questions, such as 'How does one cast Sheet Lightning?' Tiring of being hounded thus, I turned myself into a door in order to finally enjoy some peace and quiet." The door paused significantly, wooden eyes narrowing, before continuing. "Obviously, it didn't work."

"Canst thou not turn thyself back into a human?"

"Art thou implying that my power is not great enough to turn myself into whatever I want? If I wanted to, I could

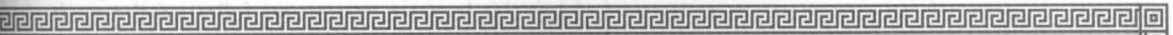
continued, not even allowing me to acknowledge his greeting. "Thy reward shall be fitting."

I stood there with my mouth opening and closing as if I were a fish. I didn't know what to say. Luckily, the fellow wasn't letting me get a word in edgewise.

"Thou canst find the Wine of Compassion in the checkerboard room to the east of the meeting hall of the Academy. Lift the

southeastern floor tile and the Wine shall be revealed."

My mouth suddenly stopped its opening and closing. He'd just revealed to me the location of one of Cabirus' Talismans! Just like that! I was stunned. The old man was silent now, and stood there looking impatient. Clearly he was waiting for me to respond. The fellow was a mage—that much was clear—so I blurted out the first response that made sense to me.



turn myself into a nutcracker and thee into a walnut! Wouldst thou like that?"

"Surely not," I said, *certain the door was more than up to the task it had described.*

"Well then, *didst thou attempt to open me for a reason, or simply because my doorknob was a bright shiny object?"*

"Thou *didst mention a Sheet Lightning spell ..."*

"Gaaah! *I cannot believe thou wouldst ask that, of all questions! I should have known better than to mention that accursed spell. If thou must know, it is cast by using the Vas, Ort, and Grav runestones. There. I hope that thou blowest thyself up with it."*

"Thank thee kindly, wise door."

With that, the shadowy face of the door disappeared, leaving me staring at plain wood once more. I hadn't anticipated such a sudden end to the conversation and had, in fact, hoped to ask the door to open for me, so I could see what lay beyond. Wondering just how dangerous an enraged magical door

might be, I touched the door lightly once more. Again the face appeared.

"Thou again!" it said. "What dost thou want this time?"

"Couldst thou please open for me?" I asked, as apologetically as I could manage.

"Very well, if it means that thou wilt not bother me again."

And with that, the door swung open.

I entered a small room, empty except for a barrel. In the barrel were several bottles of port, some food, and a red potion. But as I was wrestling with the barrel's lid, wondering if it, too, would berate me as the door had, I discovered an Ex runestone hidden in the corner. If I hadn't searched the barrel and the area around it thoroughly, I'd surely have missed it. The runestone quickly found a home in my runebag.

There was nothing more to be found here, so I continued on my quest, a bit less hungry and more secure in the knowledge that I now had the runes necessary to cast such useful spells as Paralyze and Open.

"While I am here, dost thou know of any runestones I can find?" I said. In retrospect, it was an inane response, but I wasn't thinking too clearly at the time.

"Perhaps I can help thee after all," Dr. Owl said, as if my question made perfect sense in the context of our conversation, "but first I will need to see thy runebag."

This gave me pause. My runebag was the most valuable possession I had, with the possible exception of the Talismans I had collected. I was loath to give it up even for a moment. Still, I had never heard anyone describe the Seers as untrustworthy, and this man had just entrusted to me a secret of great importance. I decided to take the chance.

"Certainly," I said, feeling anything but certain about what I was about to do. "Here it is."

He took the bag and hefted it gently, almost reverently. Looking inside, he chuckled softly—affectionately, I thought—the way a master craftsman might when examining the work of a talented but green apprentice.

"Ah, yes. A budding mage indeed. I suppose thou wouldst like to have a *Flam* runestone?"

A *Flam* stone? Of course I wanted one. A hundred uses for Fireballs and Flame Wind spells sprang to mind.

"Surely," I replied coolly.

Dr. Owl reached into the folds of his blue robe and pulled a *Flam* stone from some hidden pocket.

"Here thou art," he said, handing it to me. "I wish thee luck in using it."

"I thank thee kindly, Dr. Owl."

"Very well, very well. Now get on with thee!"

This audience had come to an end. Returning to the main corridor, I continued

west and, past another door, found myself in an open area where I was able to collect a variety of items—blocks of incense, potions, and other things. The incense, in particular, would play an important part in my quest and I was very glad to have picked some up. I left the chamber the way I'd entered and headed east, back the way I'd come.



I left the incense room and followed the path east, turning south just past Louvnon's quarters. In the first door on the right, I met a mage named Nilpont.

"I see thou art an adventurer," Nilpont said. "Art thou here searching for a golem?"

"What is this golem thou dost speak of?" I asked, wondering if it was the same golem the Knights had told me about earlier. My supposition was quickly confirmed.

"The golem was created by the Seer Lerin at the Knights' request as a test of valor. No Knights have come down to test themselves against him for quite a while now, but they used to frequently. I believe that a suitable prize awaits the one who can defeat him."

"I'm sure I can defeat him!"

I was feeling a bit full of myself at this point, having defeated Rodrick and every other foe the Abyss had thrown at me. Nilpont didn't seem to mind my arrogance, unseemly though it may have been.

"Thou canst find him by heading west from the central chamber as far as thou canst and then turning left. He's on the island surrounded by lava. Be warned—he is quite tough!"

Continuing south, I next came to a metal door in the west wall. This opened easily, and the corridor beyond led me to a stairway

leading down. For a moment I considered plunging onward, hoping to find Tyball and Arial, but I realized this would be fruitless—I still lacked several of the Talismans and I was convinced that these would prove necessary to the completion of my quest. And I still had much to accomplish here. I made a note of this location on my map and continued my exploration of the sixth level.

Leaving this area, I headed east. A long, straight corridor led me through some of the strangest terrain I'd yet seen. Stone paths ended abruptly. Sheer cliffs overlooked lava flows. Corridors merged at strange angles. Ignoring all distractions, I continued heading east and soon came to another enclave of Seers. The first I encountered in the east was Ranthru, but a meeting with Bronus in the chamber north and east of Ranthru proved to be of far greater significance.

Bronus was another bespectacled mage who looked more like a schoolmaster than a denizen of the depths of the Abyss. In his enthusiasm, too, he was like his compatriots. I wonder if the tenets of the Seers demand good humor at all times and in all things.

"Hello, adventurer. I have a book I must deliver to my fellow mage Morlock, but I have not the time to give it to him in person. Wilt thou take it to him for me?"

As I had already agreed to fetch it for Morlock, I didn't have to think about this.

"It would be my pleasure," I said.

The elderly mage smiled, his wrinkled skin dimpling in a manner that, paradoxically, made him appear almost youthful.

He rummaged through his meager belongings for a moment and returned with a book bound in leather the color of gold. A glowing sun was embossed on the cover. He held the book out to me, but as my hands

touched its butter-soft surface, his face clouded over and his gnarled hands grasped the book with surprising strength.

"This book contains very powerful magic that is meant only for Morlock," he said. "Thou must promise not to open it."

The look on his face was one of deadly seriousness. I wondered what potent magic the book contained, and regretted that I would never know.

"Yes, I promise," I said, determined to honor the man's request. The Seers had already shown themselves to be valued friends—I had no wish to alienate them.

I retraced my steps back to Morlock's quarters and found him there, still pacing.

"Hello again," he said. "Hast thou an object for me?"

"Yes, here it is," I said handing him the book Bronus had given me.

"Ah! Thou hast brought my book! Excellent!" He flipped through the pages, chuckling like a child receiving a birthday present. He seemed to have forgotten all about me and I was about to slip away, wondering whether this errand-boy stuff was paying off. Before I could leave, however, he stopped and looked up at me.

"Thou art the Avatar, art thou not?"

"Aye, that is my name," I said, wondering, first, how he knew my name and, second, where he was going with this line of questioning.

"I was simply going to reward thee for bringing me my book, but now I hear that thou hast met and slain the fearsome Fire Hydra. That eight-headed monster has long menaced our peaceable folk. Well done! Thou hast earned an even greater reward!"

Fire Hydra? Eight heads? I didn't know what the fellow was talking about. I'd met and

While the mage Ranthru didn't contribute directly to the completion of my quest, he did enhance my spellcasting abilities dramatically. For this I owe him a great debt, one that the successful completion of my quest would repay only in part.

"I have not seen thee in these parts before," Ranthru said by way of greeting. "Art thou in league with Vilus?" he asked.

"Vilus? I have not heard of such a person."

"Vilus used to be a Seer like the rest of us. A brilliant mage he was, but perhaps too much so for his own good. While exploring a method of casting powerful magic without runestones, he was overtaken by insanity."

"And where is he now?"

"Whether he be alive or dead, I know not. He took over the caves to the northeast, filling them with vicious creatures and devious traps. No sane person ventures there any longer, least of all myself." He paused and studied me closely. "Wilt thou run an errand there for me?" he asked.

"What wouldst thou have me do?" I replied warily.

"Vilus took a powerful book from the Library and failed to return it. It is named *On the Properties of Runestones*. Return it to me and I shall teach thee to use thy magical abilities to their fullest."

"It is as good as done." This seemed a good deal to me.

"I thank thee greatly. Good luck in thy travels."

My travels took me to all corners of this level, but none was more dangerous

than the area under the control of Vilus. Though I managed to avoid a meeting with the beast, I encountered his minions in great number—imps, giant spiders, bats, and, in the room containing the book Ranthru desired, a Gazer! I fought many prodigious battles in the pursuit of the tome, and suffered grievous wounds, but eventually I did acquire it.

Ranthru was startled at my return, no doubt at least in part because of my bedraggled appearance—I was much the worse for wear! When he recovered his wits, however, he seemed overjoyed to see me.

"Ah, 'tis thee again. From a distance I mistook thee for one of Vilus' servants. Hast thou found *On the Properties of Runestones* for me yet?"

"Yes, here it is."

"Marvelous! I hope that it was not too much trouble to retrieve it."

I was about to regale him with tales of derring-do, so he'd know just how much trouble the book's acquisition had cost me. Before I could do more than draw a deep breath, however, he snapped his fingers and I was bathed in a blue glow.

"There, thou shouldst find that thy spellcasting skill is greater now."

And, in fact, my casting skill was dramatically improved. It was well worth the pain and suffering involved in the acquisition of the book entitled *On the Properties of Runestones*.

I only wish I'd had the time to tell Ranthru of my great adventure, but he was instantly and totally immersed in his book and was lost to the world.

bested many a strange creature in the Abyss, but I was sure I'd have remembered an eight-headed Fire Hydra. The greater reward sounded intriguing, but not if I had to lie to get it.

"I beg thy pardon," I said. "I slew no such beast."

Morlock chuckled again and hopped from one foot to another for a moment. He was a bundle of energy.

"Thy honesty is commendable," he said, "and thy reward shall be the Book of Honesty. As Honesty and Truth are beyond Time, thou shalt find it by the key behind the hourglass."

Though I had yet to acquire any of the artifacts I'd been told about here, the Seers had certainly done right by me with the information they'd provided so far. The references to a key and an hourglass were cryptic, however.

"What can thou tell me of this Book?" I asked.

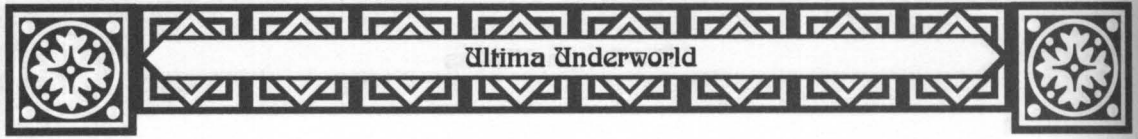
"The Book was one of Sir Cabirus' Talismans. 'Twas written by Ravenhurst of Moonglow, who collected great works of honesty and essays upon Truth. It hath great power, both intrinsically and for the wisdom contained therein."

"Thank thee," I said, eager to be off in search of the key and the hourglass and, of course, the Book. Another of the Talismans was within my grasp, but where to start? I was searching for a key and an hourglass, a loose tile in the floor of the Academy, and an all-but-invincible golem I'd have to fight for some unknown reward. And, beyond that, I had to find Tyball in order to save Arial and figure out what grave threat the evil wizard posed to the world. My head was spinning. As if sensing this, Morlock turned once again to his book, leaving me to my thoughts and my quest.

There was still a third branch of the southern corridor I hadn't explored, but with my head bursting, I decided to forego the unknown to follow some of the leads the Seers of the southwest had given me. I left Morlock's quarters and headed north up the central corridor. Past the Abyss' core, the path split: the right side sloped sharply down, the left stayed level. A sign on the wall warned that I was entering a "Dangerous Area." I laughed at this—as if any area in the Abyss could be described in any other way! Still laughing, I took the left side of the path. I had already explored the northeast quadrant, so I saw no percentage in bearing right.

I went north for a while longer, but on the far side of a large wooden bridge, below which I could see a steaming river of lava, the corridor dead-ended, forcing me to choose to continue east or west. A sign affixed to a large stone block in the eastern end of the corridor read, "To the Great Stair." A sign on a matching block to the west read, "The Academy of the Abyss." So this was the Academy. Chairs and tables here, arranged haphazardly, did hint that this had once been some sort of open classroom or waiting area. Given the monstrous activity I'd been told to expect here, I was surprised to see anything left that even hinted of humanity.

I chose the western path and explored several rooms, all filled with monsters—trolls and skeletons, mostly—but the Wine of Compassion was to be found in none of these rooms. A north-south corridor west of the waiting area proved more fruitful. This corridor opened into a room with colorful patterned walls. I scarcely had time to appreciate the beauty of the design before I was attacked from all sides by all manner of beasts. Flesh slugs, acid slugs, rotworms, giant



spiders, all seemed to fight with near-human intelligence. I ran and fought, leaped and whirled. My blade flew for what seemed hours. I positioned myself in a corridor exiting the room to the east, a position from which I could be attacked by only one creature at a time.

Finally I bested the last of them, but as I leaned against the wall of the corridor, before I could even clean the ichor from my weapon, two headless charged at me from behind. I whirled and did battle once again, taking the offensive and pushing them eastward, back into the room from which they'd sprung. When they fell, I found myself in a checkerboard room, all blue-gray and gold squares. Perhaps the attack of the headless was a stroke of luck, or so I told myself at the time. As this thought came to me, I collapsed to the floor, exhausted, and slept for some time.

When I awoke, I thought back to what I'd been told about the location of the Wine of Compassion. I felt sure it was in this room somewhere. Pry up the tile in the southwest corner of the room, I'd been told. The gold tile in the corner seemed solidly planted. I put my weight on it, hoping to feel it shift beneath my feet, but it was firm. Getting down on my hands and knees, however, I saw a tiny crack, a seam, where this tile met the others. I worked my fingers into the crack, as much as was possible, and lifted with all my strength. Finally, an inch at a time, the tile moved. There, beneath it, was a depression in which I found a red bottle emblazoned with an ankh—the Wine of Compassion.

I wrapped the bottle carefully in the Standard of Honor to keep it from breaking, and put the two Talismans back in my pack. This gave me five of the eight Talismans, and

I felt sure I was close to acquiring still more!

I left the checkerboard room the way I had come, via the western corridor. In the room with the patterned walls, I pondered my next move. I could go back north, but there didn't seem to be any percentage in that. Exits to the west and south would lead to unexplored territory. I headed south, and almost immediately entered an oddly shaped room. I was so taken with the shape of the room that I pulled out my magical map to get an overall look at the place. It was widest at the top and bottom, with a choke point in the middle. The place looked like a dumbbell. Or an hourglass! Morlock had told me I'd find the Book of Honesty by the key behind the hourglass. I was sure that I'd find a key here somewhere and that would lead me to the Book itself.

I must have explored every square inch of the room—I spent hours doing it, but there was no key to be found. The time spent wasn't a total waste, however, because I found a secret door in the southern wall. Beyond this, the path turned sharply to the right before ending suddenly. The lava river flowed bright and menacing far below, but there was a platform and another path due south of the path's end. It was a long distance away, but just close enough that I thought I could make the jump. If I missed, I'd roast in the lava, but I hadn't come this far just to turn back. Backing up as far as I could, I sprinted toward the edge of the truncated path and leaped.

Instantly, I knew I hadn't leaped quite far enough. The smell of the lava filled my head. In a moment of crystal clarity that astounded me, it occurred to me that I was sweating hard enough to douse the flaming river I would soon fall into. Then, miraculously, my hands touched the edge of the platform. My fingernails bit into the surface of the platform.

Then my hands grasped it. Then I was able to pull myself up. I couldn't believe it. I stood on the platform and shook from fear and exhaustion, but I was alive.

After taking a moment to collect myself, I looked around and found that the platform was really part of a room that jutted out over the lava. But this was no ordinary room. If anything, its shape was far odder than that of the hourglass room I'd just left. And in one portion of the room, I found the Book of Honesty. At the time, I wondered how I'd managed to find the Book without ever spying the key Morlock had told me about. Much later, when I next examined my map, I found the answer: the room to which I'd leaped was shaped like a huge key. Why Morlock hadn't just told me the secret, I'll never know. It certainly would have made my life easier.

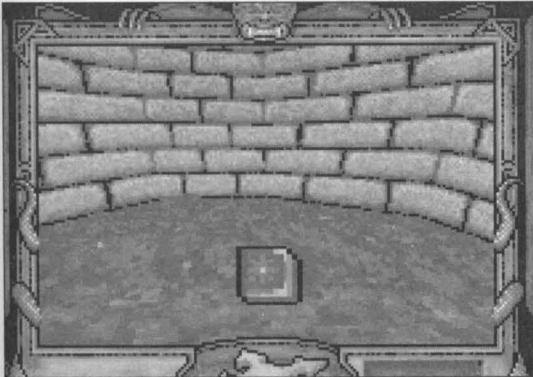
With the Book of Honesty safely in my pack, I retraced my path (making the leap across the lava with no difficulty this time, a feat I attribute to massive amounts of adrenaline). Back in the patterned room, I headed west. Soon I came to a place where the corridor widened. Here there were two metal doors. Above one was a sign reading, "Library of the Academy. Please return books

promptly!" I don't know why, but I found this wildly funny. Librarians were, I guessed, the same all over—I'd been admonished by more than a few in my time, and on more than one world, at that!

The library was, as I might have expected, filled with books—some frivolous, some deadly serious. I found one entitled *The Origin of Moongates: Do Other Worlds Exist?* and wished I could have chatted with the author. I expect I could have told him a thing or two. Another, entitled, *Volcanoes: Gates to Other Worlds*, intrigued me, given that I was exploring an active volcano (a fact kept in the forefront of my mind by the blistering heat). Another, a book in a foreign tongue entitled *Folanae Fanlo*, would prove most important to my quest, but I had no way to know that at the time and therefore paid the volume little attention.

Much as I enjoyed my stay in the library, I had no choice but to leave—time was something I had far too little of. South of the library, the path divided, surrounding a sunken room in which I found a shrine. I foolishly leaped down from the path to the floor below, there to meditate on all that I'd learned in the course of my adventure. Though this benefited me mightily, I soon found myself most grateful that I could *Levitate*—from the lower level, I could see no other way to reach the golem I'd heard so much about from both Knights and Seers. Of course, I was capable of magical levitation, but someone less practiced in spellcasting would have been in some trouble.

Leaving the lower level, I quickly found myself back in the central shaft of the volcano. This did me little good—I had an inkling the golem was back in the west—so I leaped into the molten river, secure in the knowledge that my dragon-scale boots would



protect me. Heading west, I soon came upon a large island, upon which stood the massive, unmoving figure of the golem.

The island was just south of the room overlooking the shrine. If I'd taken the more sensible route of staying on the upper level of the shrine room, I would have seen him first from the edge of a promontory on the north side of a lava lake. I can only imagine how he would have appeared—like a monstrous apparition barely visible through the shimmering haze that rose like fog from the molten rock. What a sight that would have been! As it was, I levitated up to his platform (thankful that such minor magical exertion no longer left me dizzy!) and watched in awe as he turned his massive body to face me. He was no less im-



pressive from this perspective; of that I'm sure!

As I approached, he spoke in a voice that rumbled like an earthquake and, for the first time since my quest had begun, I was truly afraid. I had fought many a man and many a monster, but here before me stood an elemental force of nature, the living, breathing stuff of the earth itself. And if his voice made me tremble, his words did nothing to reassure me.

"Hold, puny mortal!" he said. "I am thy doom!"

Afraid as I was, I called on every bit of inner strength I possessed and pulled myself together.

"Perhaps," I said.

The golem's stony lips curled in a mockery of a human smile and he laughed. It sounded like hail on a rooftop.

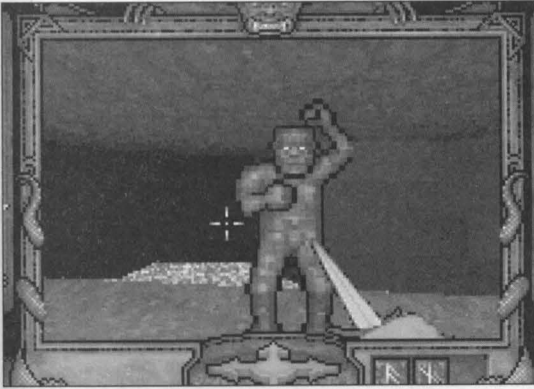
"I am what I was made to be," he said, "the greatest warrior in Britannia. If thou be not of mighty valor, turn back now and no shame will come of it. Else prepare to meet thy doom."

Curiously, the more the monster spoke, the calmer I felt. This was no mindless force of nature after all, but a well-spoken creature, a being with whom one might reason.

"And what be my reward if I succeed?" I asked.

"Thou wagerest thy life against a mighty Talisman—the Shield of Valor. Defeat me and it shall be thine. Fail and thou shalt surely die."

That was all I needed to hear. Victory would win me another of Cabirus' Talismans. With a world at stake I would brave any danger, beat any foe. I would not fail. I would not fail. I drew the sword Caliburn and thought I saw the golem's rock eyes widen just a bit as he recognized the weapon I wielded. Now it was my turn to smile.



“Have at thee,” I said, “for I fear nothing!”

The golem answered with a roar like an avalanche and charged me, his boulder-sized fists flailing the air before him. I barely had time to raise my shield, but even so, the force of his blow staggered me, and more blows followed. I was down on one knee before the battle really began.

Rolling to one side, I found that, powerful as the golem was, I was quicker. I was on my guard and ready for his next charge. I ducked and slashed across the creature’s chest. Caliburn sparked as its blade raked the golem’s stony torso. Before he could react, I dodged behind him and managed another slash across his flank, but this maneuver took me to the very edge of the island. Heat waves rose from the lava as I struggled to regain my balance, all too aware that my foe would be upon me in an instant.

He turned and charged again in an attempt to throw me into the boiling lava. I rolled out of his way, hoping momentum would carry him into the molten rock, but he stopped himself short and even managed to stun me with a backhanded blow square in my side before I could get out of his reach. Even this glancing blow rocked me. My vision went

red, and when it returned the world was a blur for several agonizing seconds.

On and on we fought. This was a battle even more taxing than my encounter with Rodrick. I landed three blows to each one of the golem’s, but my strength was no match for his. My breath was coming in painful gasps and I knew I couldn’t go on any longer when, finally, the golem held up a giant hand and said, “Hold, mortal! Thou hast bested me! Never have any shown such Valor! Surely thou shouldst be the master of the Shield!”

The creature showed no sign of continuing the battle and I was close to passing out from pain and exhaustion. I dropped to one knee in a gesture of respect for my opponent (and out of a sense of self-preservation—a few more seconds and my legs would surely have buckled). My head drooped on my weary shoulders and, when I looked up, the golem was holding a perfect golden shield before him. Inset in its face was a silver ankh. Never had I beheld such a shield!

“Thou ... art ... a ... noble opponent,” I gasped, taking the shield. “I give thee ... thy life. Farewell.”

The golem returned to his stationary pose, no doubt awaiting another knight eager to test himself. He showed no more interest in me than a mountain would. I gave myself some time to recover, then leaped back to the promontory overlooking the shrine. From there, I returned to the central shaft and headed south to the place where three corridors merged. I had yet to explore the southeast portion of this level.

Several more Seers called this area home. Among them were a mage named Dominus, who offered to identify unusual items for me, and a young woman named Delanrey, who asked me for information about the mad Zak. But one of the mages living here, Fyrgen, was

There was one other mage living in the southeast quadrant, a man by the name of Galwart. My encounter with him was not, strictly speaking, critical to the completion of my quest, but I hate to think of what could have happened if I'd lacked the advice he gave me.

Galwart stood out from his peers by virtue of his youth—the red-robed mage had a black beard, hardly flecked with gray. Despite his youth, he proved to be a powerful mage indeed, or at least a well-informed one.

"A new adventurer in our midst, eh?" he said at my approach. "Perhaps thou wouldst like to increase thy magical powers?"

Never one to turn down any offer that might speed my quest along toward completion, I said, "I surely would."

"Well, listen carefully, for I shall tell thee how to obtain a Vas runestone, the most powerful runestone there is. Go to the meeting hall to the east and shoot right between the eyes. Then put an emerald on each of the four platforms in the corners, walk back to the middle of the room, and press the gray button."

He was talking a mile a minute and I could hardly understand him.

"Thy instructions are most confusing," I said, hoping he would explain further.

"'Tis true—they are," he said, looking a bit disappointed in me. "'Tis also true that if thou canst not follow them, thou art perhaps not worthy to reap the reward gained by doing so. Good luck."

And with that, he turned away.

I left him and headed back to the

corridor leading east from the central core. In the time I'd been on this level, I hadn't seen anything that looked like a meeting hall. Shoot between the eyes? What could that mean? Where was I going to get emeralds? What pedestals, in the corners of what room? I couldn't figure out what he meant ...

I wandered back to the place where two banners hung on a large stone block. The something clicked. Shoot between the eyes—the banners had eyes on them. But what did it mean to shoot between them? I pulled a sling from my pack, fitted a stone into it, and let it fly toward the wall between the two banners. Nothing. I walked to the stone block and touched it lightly with my hand ...

I nearly fell on my face. The wall wasn't solid! I put my hand through it, then my arm. Then I took a step forward and the world went black. Next thing I knew, I felt the gut-wrenching sensation of being teleported. No telling where I'd end up. I braced myself and hoped I'd be ready for whatever the Abyss threw at me.

I emerged from the eerie darkness into a brightly lit trough—I can think of no better word for it. The trough was shaped like an X and I was right in the center of it. The walls of the trough were about as high as my head—too high to jump—but I could see that the X-shaped trough was mirrored by a path above and that there was yet another, higher level beyond that. Three nested X's, and I was in the center, at the lowest point.

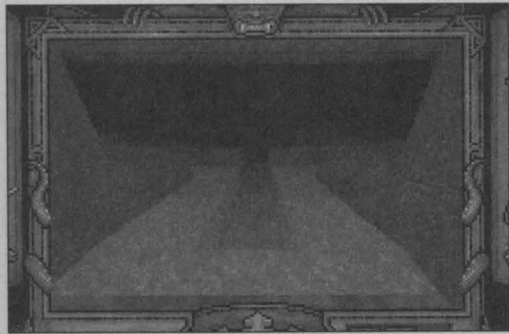
High on the wall to my left was a gray button set in a gold mounting plate.

Turning to examine the button, I caught a glimpse of something green at my feet. Six glowing emeralds lay there, amidst a pile of bones. I scooped the gems up. On the wall to the left of the emeralds was another button, this one set in a gray plate.

All of a sudden, Gralwart's cryptic instructions were beginning to make sense. I had "shot" between the eyes. I had a handful of emeralds and I saw the gray button. Now all I needed to do was find the pedestals and toss an emerald onto each. A little investigating revealed that all four arms of the X-shaped trough dead-ended. Here was a puzzle.

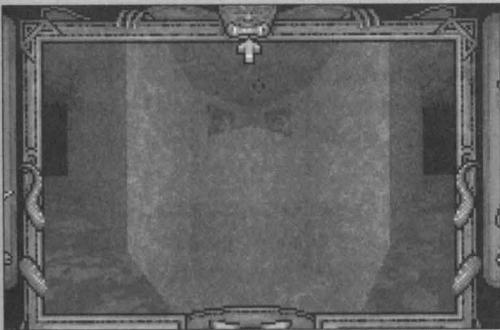
The solution was deceptively simple, but I spent a long time pondering the problem before that solution came to me. The arms of the X sloped upwards at a fairly steep angle. All I had to do was to walk to the end of one of the arms until I reached the highest point, turn to face the wall at an angle, and jump up to the next level of the X. Then I did the same thing—walked to the far end of one of the arms, turned a bit, and jumped—to reach the third level of the chamber.

This level ringed the entire room and I walked the perimeter, looking for the pedestals. I found them, one in each corner of the room. Standing in each corner as I came to it, facing the center of the room, I heaved an emerald onto each pedestal—a long throw, but not impossible—and then jumped back down to the lowest level.



Pushing the button set in the gray plate caused the Vas runestone to appear. With the runestone safely in my runebag, I wondered for the first time how I was supposed to get out of here. There was still a button to be pushed, the one in the gold plate. I pushed it. Nothing. Then I took a step forward and plunged into the magical darkness once more. Next thing I knew, I was standing between the two banners back where I had started.

Checking my runebag, I found that the Vas runestone had made the trip safely. The most powerful magic spells would now be available to me. How ironic that I acquired such power shortly before descending to a level where magic would do me no good at all!



critical to my quest, giving me clues that were vital to my recovery of the last of Cabirus' Talismans.

The dark-skinned Fyrgen was younger than most of the Seers and, I quickly learned, given to experimentation with, shall we say, mind-altering substances. When I entered his chambers, he was standing totally still with his mouth agape. He appeared to be in a deep sleep, yet he was standing up. Worried that he might be in trouble, I shook him.

"Aaah!" he screamed. "What's that?" His eyes rolled back into their normal positions, but they were wide with terror. The man was clearly scared to death. His head jerked right and left and his arms flailed wildly. I took a step back, waiting for him to calm down.

"Oh," he said when he saw I meant him no harm, "thou didst startle me. I was in the midst of a vivid dream, having just used some incense. I had a terrible vision of a great daemon."

"I did not mean to startle thee."

"It was horrible! The daemon is more powerful than thou canst imagine. I do not think he can be defeated by any mortal."

"Thou speakest as if it were real, not just in a dream," I said.

"This was no ordinary dream, but one dreamt after burning incense. Incense causes one to have vivid dreams, and they are always true in some way." Fyrgen relaxed visibly as he explained how the incense worked. "Simply pass a block of incense over a torch," he said, "to produce the smoke which, when inhaled, will cause one to dream. If my dream was of a daemon, then some daemon truly is threatening us."

"Is there nothing that can be done?" I asked.

"According to my dream, the daemon is

too powerful to be killed by any mortal. It would have to be forced into leaving this world by some other means. I hope it can be done!"

"If I meet a daemon," I said, certain now that I would, "I will keep thy advice in mind."

With that, I took my leave of Fyrgen and the Seers. I had accomplished much here, acquiring all but one of Cabirus' Talismans. I was eager to descend further into the Abyss, to seek out Tyball and to free Arial, but I was exhausted and needed rest. I had seen an empty chamber in the easternmost portion of the level. There I made camp, but sleep refused to take me. I really had no idea where the last Talisman might be, and that realization worried me.

Then I thought of Fyrgen and how he had appeared to be asleep on his feet while under the influence of incense. Perhaps, I thought, the dream-inducing effects of incense might help me sleep, too. I had several cones of incense in my pack, having collected them earlier in the southwest portion of this level, so I lit a torch and passed a cone through the flame. Smoke swirled upward. The aroma was rich, almost intoxicating. Within moments, I began to dream. I saw a beautiful jeweled chalice floating in a night sky. Upon the chalice were inscribed the letters *HN*. After a time I awakened, feeling a bit more rested and more than a little curious about the vision I'd had.

I decided to try burning another cone of incense. Again I fell into a deep sleep. Again I had a vision of a chalice floating in the sky. This time, however, the cup was made of gold and it floated in a blue but cloudy sky. The letters inscribed on this cup read *SA*.

A third cone of incense brought a vision of a sky that could have been either dawn or sunset. Another chalice appeared, this one inscribed with the letters *IN*.

I received no more visions. Was there some significance to these three visions, or to the three two-letter combinations inscribed on the chalices? I fell asleep pondering these questions and dreamed of Louvnon. I needed no incense to dream of her. Curiously, the Ghoul musician, Eyesnack, crept into my dreams as well. I kept hearing him say, "Me play 'Mardin's Song of Wonder' lot of times. Was Cabirus' favorite spiritual. Said that you play it in the right place, wondrous thing happen. But no one know place."

When I awakened, it was memories of Louvnon that allowed me to solve the mystery of my visions and memories. She had told me of a three-part mantra, capable of calling into being an object of power. I needed one more "object of power" and I'd had three visions, each revealing one syllable of what could be a mantra. I started putting the syllables together in various ways. HNSAIN? That was unpronounceable. SAINHN? That didn't seem right. INSAHN? That one had possibilities.

Now that I was well rested, I rushed to the shrine on this level, anxious to try out my newly discovered mantra. What role, if any, Eyesnack might play in the events about to unfold, I had no idea, but I felt sure even that mystery would be solved in time.

At the shrine, I discovered that INSAHN was, in fact, the correct mantra. When I recited it, I felt, more than heard, the words, "The Cup of Wonder is to the Northeast and above you." I was exhilarated. Little did I know that I was about to embark on a journey all the way back to the third level of the Abyss! On each level, I recited the mantra, INSAHN, at a shrine. And each time, I received another clue as to the whereabouts of the Cup of Wonder, Cabirus' final Talisman.

On the third level, I meditated first at the

shrine in the southeast corner. There, I was thrilled to sense the words, "The Cup of Wonder is to the Northwest." On all the lower levels, I'd been told the Cup was above me. Now I knew I was on the right level! Meditating at the shrine in the north-central portion of the third level, I was told, "The Cup of Wonder is to the West."

I searched the area around the shrine, which was at the western end of an east-west corridor, hoping to find a secret door, but the western wall was quite solid. Eventually I left the corridor. Several hours (and much swimming) later, I came to a small plot of land I'd visited much earlier in my quest. Checking my magical map, I found that this piece of land was due west of the shrine. Unfortunately, the Cup was nowhere to be seen.

Despondent, I sunk to the ground. I had searched and searched, but I was stumped. As if guided by some unknown force, I reached into my pack and got out my flute. I noodled around for a bit; the music lifted my spirits some. Then I remembered my dream, the one in which I kept hearing Eyesnack's voice saying that "Mardin's Song of Wonder" could make wondrous things happen if you played it in the right place. I had nothing to lose, so I played the notes of the song: 3 5 4 2 3 7 8 7 5. As the last note faded (along with my hopes, I confess), an object appeared in the air and fell into my hands: The Cup of Wonder! I had all eight Talismans at last!

Revitalized, I rushed back down to the sixth level, a trip that took quite some time and involved quite a lot of combat that I won't describe here. Long as the trip was, I hardly noticed the passing of time. Before I knew it, I stood before the stairs leading down to the seventh level. I descended, sure that nothing could stop me now.



Chapter 8

As soon as I set foot on the seventh level of the Stygian Abyss, I knew something was terribly wrong. At first I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was, but there was no question that something was amiss. I had little time to ponder this strange sensation, however, because I found myself face-to-face with an armed man. Friend? Foe? I couldn't tell. He just stood there, looking at me. If he was a foe, he was a cautious one, which made him dangerous.

The stranger and I stood there, facing one another, for several tense moments. This gave me the opportunity to study the man. He had unkempt black hair, a bushy beard, and a mustache flecked with gray. His most distinguishing characteristic was a pair of eyebrows as white as snow. Beneath those odd brows, his eyes seemed strangely clouded. He was swaying visibly. Drugs? Pain? Hard to tell. His right hand, rather than resting upon the hilt of his sword, was pressed tightly against his right side. The reason was soon apparent: blood was oozing between his fingers from a deep wound in his flank. I wondered how the man remained standing with his life's blood running out like that, but apparently he had a fighter's heart and he struggled not to show his weakness.

"Who art thou?" he said, coughing. "What . . . what dost thou want?"

Suddenly, my wants seemed secondary. The man needed help and, even if he proved to be a mortal foe, could do me no harm in his present state.

"Here, thou seemest hurt," I said. "Can I help thee?"

My offer of aid seemed to calm the man

and, when he responded, it was in a soft voice that held no hint of challenge.

"Canst heal my wounds? Or . . . hast thou any port?"

"I would give it if I had it," I said, kneeling beside him to bind his wounds. I did the best I could, but my resources were limited resources and I thought the man had little hope of surviving. Still, he seemed buoyed by my presence and inclined to talk. I wondered how long it had been since he had last felt the joys of companionship.

"At least thou seemest in better condition than I," he said. Then he paused for a moment, as if considering whether to continue, though pain was a more likely reason. Then apparently, he decided I was worthy of the effort and of his trust. "Here is some advice for thee: Beware, for death is everywhere!"

This seemed an obvious thing to say and I wondered why he had hesitated before telling it to me. I also found it a bit ironic that the one being succored should give advice to the healer.

"Then what art thou doing here?" I asked.

"I'm here to rescue my brother. He's in the prisons."

"Where are these prisons?"

"Several cells lie to the north and west of here. He rots in one of those."

"Who holds him prisoner?"

"He is in the clutches of the evil wizard who dominates this area. My brother came to explore this place months ago and I have not heard from him since. I believe he has run afoul of this vile and violent mage."

"Tell me of this wizard." I wondered if this could be Tyball.

"Rumor has it that he is the reason no one can cast spells on this level. Also, he uses

monsters as henchmen to guard the way to his lair. But I have figured out how to get by these guards!"

No one could cast spells on this level! That was the cause of the strange sensation I'd felt when I'd first set foot here. My mana, my magical energy, had been drained from me. I felt curiously empty and a bit afraid—magic had been a potent weapon in my attempt to conquer the Abyss, perhaps my *most* potent. Before I left this level, I would come to realize just how dependent on otherworldly forces I'd become. For the moment, however, I put such thoughts behind me—the stranger looked to be fading fast and I wanted to learn all I could from him in the time that remained.

"How can one get past the guards?" I asked.

"A medallion of passage! I had one, but I lost it while in battle in the haunted mines to the southeast. Now I am too weak to recover it, and wish only to return home. But perhaps thou . . ."

"Say no more! I will seek out these mines now."

"Is that so?" he said, smiling in gratitude. Then he began struggling to his feet. "Well, farewell, then. I will rejoin my comrades up above."

I tried to keep the man from moving, but he simply waved a hand, as if to remind me that he was not a child but an adventurer born and bred. There was nothing I could do to stop him and, truth be told, I feared he would soon join Garamon in the beyond no matter what I did. I said farewell as he limped valiantly up the stairs. To this day, I wonder what became of this noble soul.

Looking about, I saw no way to reach the southeast area I sought in order to acquire the

medallion of passage. All exits from the room led north or west. Well, that wasn't precisely the case—the southeast corner of the room ended abruptly in a sheer drop overlooking a river far below. Due east, at roughly the same height at which I stood, was a narrow wooden walkway. A prodigious leap might carry me across the gap.

Once again, I faced a jump I was not at all sure I could make. At least this time, if I fell, I would land in water rather than lava. The thought gave me some comfort (though not much), and I didn't have much choice in any event, so I backed up as far as I could go, sprinted toward the edge, and leaped. My landing was none too graceful, but I hit the bridge, which creaked and groaned under the strain. I waited for the sound of splintering wood, waited to feel my stomach lurch as I fell into the water despite a successful jump, but the bridge held fast.

Gathering my wits and looking about, I saw that the walkway extended east and south. I chose the southern route, but didn't get far before I heard a chorus of snarls and hisses and the sound of inhuman voices. Cautiously, I left the relative safety of the walkway and entered a room with a portcullis in the southwest corner. There was no doubt in my mind that the voices coming from beyond the portcullis belonged to prison guards, and I had no desire to run into them before I acquired a medallion of passage.

I was about to turn around and go back to the wooden walkway, to try the eastern route, when I noticed an opening about halfway up the eastern wall of this room. A path led due east from the opening. I moved quickly and quietly to the opening, jumped up, and ran down the path until I entered a maze of stone passages. Surely these were the haunted

mines of which the wounded man had spoken!

The word *hellish* doesn't begin to describe the mines of the seventh level. Here were none of the usual rats, spiders, and worms. Instead, the place was populated by Reapers, Gazers, Dire Ghosts, and the like! Each twist and turn brought me face-to-face with some new horror. And without magic, defeating them took unimaginable effort. Still, I survived and triumphed over the infernal maze, eventually finding the medallion lost by the stranger who had welcomed me to this level.

Medallion in hand, I headed back through the mines to the room with the portcullis, but I was not yet ready to test the usefulness of my new trinket by confronting the guards. I slipped silently out of the room via the northern exit and followed the wooden walkway to the east into a stone corridor, which jogged left before coming to an abrupt end. There were two doors leading onward from the end-point, but both were locked and I didn't have a key that would fit. Reluctantly, I returned to the portcullis room with no choice but to try bluffing my way past the guards.

As soon as I came into view, a gray Goblin with piercing red eyes accosted me.

"Eh! What you do here?" the creature barked in a voice more animal than human. "Where your medallion?"

"Here it is," I said, holding it out between the bars so he could see. He studied it intently for a few moments—a few very tense moments—while I peered beyond him, counting guards. If this Goblin didn't want to let me pass, at least I'd have some idea how many foes I'd have to face. I counted another Goblin and two hulking trolls. No telling how many more there might be, but four potential foes were more than enough.

"Hmm," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. "Okay, I open gates, let you pass. You go straight through. Not hang around here."

"Thank you, kind Goblin," I said. In general, I've found that it pays to be polite to jailers. This one didn't seem to care one way or another. He simply opened the portcullis and stepped aside to let me pass. As it happened, there were far more than two Goblins and two trolls in the area. I was glad I didn't have to fight anyone ...

The path through this area led down and to the west. Eventually I came to a watery dead end, but there was a small land area due west. All I had to do was swim across to it. Just as I was about to lower myself into the river, I noticed two bulbous eyes peering at me from a position just north of me. A Deep Lurker. And others were moving in my direction as well. Swimming now appeared to be foolhardy, so I decided to try leaping across the water. I sailed over their heads, feeling tentacles brush my legs before I landed safely on land. Another jump, to an island just north, and a short (and quick!) swim brought me back to dry land. Soon I was in a long, straight corridor, heading north. This ended in another portcullis, where I was accosted by another Goblin guard.

"You got medallion? Where be medallion?" the guard said.

"Here it is."

"Hmm." Another examination. "Okay, I open gate. You want head straight north up ramp to north gate. That way you want go. Other areas here off limits."

"Thank you, kind Goblin." Politeness had worked the first time and I saw no reason to change my tactics now, nor did I see any reason not to follow the creature's instructions. I had vowed to free a prisoner from the cells in the northwest and I was as far west as it was

possible to go. I *wanted* to head north.

Unfortunately, heading north was not as simple as it sounds. Once again, I found myself in a labyrinth of corridors that doubled back on themselves with infuriating frequency. And then there were the giant spiders, with their poisonous venom. After one particularly long northwest passage, followed by a southeasterly jog nearly as long, I came upon a strange sight: a red-robed mage standing in a corner, facing the wall. I habitually keep my back to a wall whenever possible, but this fellow obviously felt no need for such caution. Not until I tapped him lightly on the shoulder did the man, named Naruto, turn to face me.

"What brings thee here?" he asked.

I briefly considered confiding in him that I was on my way to free a prisoner but, not knowing whether he was jailer or jailed, I chose to be a bit more discreet.

"I seek to free a kidnapped girl," I said.

"Well, watch thyself. There are nasty spiders all around. My friend was just killed by one, some distance to the north." The mage said this without a trace of remorse and I wondered what sort of man he was. "He had a key that would allow one to enter a place of some importance," the mage continued. "There one might find an item that allows the owner to get through Tyball's maze."

Tyball's maze? Was I getting closer to the evil wizard? I needed more information.

"What place does the key allow one to enter?" I asked.

The mage gave me a look of exasperation.

"I said, 'twas a key that allowed one to enter a secret place. There lies an item that permits one to pass through Tyball's maze. Wert thou not listening? The entrance is in the chasm of fire."

"What else canst thou tell me of this area?"

"A mysterious Orb drains the magic from every living creature on this level."

"And that is why I cannot cast spells?"

"Indeed. The Orb drains thy power and transfers it—somewhere—where it is put to some foul purpose."

"Dost thou know who is behind this?" I asked, sure I already knew the answer.

"I know only that one mage, Tyball by name, seems immune to its effects."

"The conclusion seems obvious."

"Indeed. However, if thou dost wish to break the Orb's grasp on this area, best thou prepare thyself with means other than spells."

"How can such a thing be accomplished?"

"All I can think is, if thou canst discover whence came the Orb, and obtain from its place of origin a fragment of its substance, thou mayest be able to destroy it with that."

"This sounds an excellent idea! But who knows whence it came?"

"I know not, but I think some friends of mine, who languish in prison, discovered its secret before they were captured by Tyball. If thou canst talk to them, perhaps they can help thee."

"I will go talk to them," I said as I turned north once more.

"Good luck," Naruto said, returning to his study of the wall. Very odd, I thought ...

There were two ways out of this room, both leading east. I took the northernmost one, but it didn't go far before dead-ending in a pool of brackish water. Just south and east of the pool there was a corridor, which led to the lair of a giant spider that attacked me viciously. However, after all I'd been through, the deadly spiders seemed like child's play and I quickly dispatched this one. In its lair, close

by a pile of picked bones (which I assumed had once been the red-robed mage's late friend), I found a gray key. I pocketed it, as Naruto had suggested, and went back to the other eastward path near the mage's corner.

Predictably, he ignored me. I was dying to know what he found so fascinating about that corner, but I felt sure I'd never find out. Just one of life's mysteries. In any event, the passage I now explored turned south, then east, then north, then east before I reached a portcullis in the western wall. The guard here seemed less alert than the others I'd met—I had to reach through the bars of the portcullis and tap him on the shoulder before he'd acknowledge my presence. Once he saw me and my medallion, however, he passed me without difficulty.

There was a closed door to the east, guarded by a not terribly friendly Goblin, but there was an unguarded open portcullis to the west. Needless to say, I went west. I thought I heard one of the huge trolls in the room snickering as I left, but didn't give it a thought. Perhaps I should have trusted my instincts more. Twenty-twenty hindsight.

I entered a large square room with a closed portcullis in the west wall. Turning to ask one of the guards if I could pass through, I was just in time to see the open portcullis in the east slam shut. I was trapped! One of the trolls peered through the bars, licked his razor-sharp fangs, and started laughing.

"You just like big dumb rat in trap now."

The troll was having a terrific time at my expense and I was in no mood for it.

"Open this portcullis immediately!" I shouted.

"Yeah? Why I do that? What in it for me?"

This took me aback. I realized I had no idea what a troll might want in the way of a bribe. So I asked.

"What do you want?"

"What you got, eh? Show me, go on."

"Okay, how about this?" I said, rummaging through my pack and producing a beautiful ruby. On the surface, a ruby of this size and beauty would make a man wealthy. Not in the Abyss.

"Not enough. More!"

I dug five gold coins out of my pack, five coins of far less value than the single ruby the troll had already turned down. Maybe he'd go for the bright, shining metal, I thought.

"How about this, then?" I said, handing the coins through the bars.

The troll's eyes grew big as saucers. He licked his fangs again. I had him.

"I open gate, okay."

And he did—the west gate. The portcullis in the east, the one through which I'd entered, remained closed as the troll and the other guards scampered off, tittering. I had no choice but to head west and hope there was another way out.

It wasn't hard to figure out that I'd found the prison. The stench and the locked doors told me all I needed to know. I thought it unlikely that there was another exit to the west, but I didn't have much choice. I'd gone only a few steps when I heard vague mutterings from behind a door in the north wall. Lacking a key to fit the lock, I bashed the door down and found myself face-to-face with a raving lunatic.

"Tyball!" the madman cried as I crashed through the cell door. "At last we meet! I have been warned of thee. After years of imprisonment, I will finally have my revenge!"

"Surely thou art mad!" I said. "I am not Tyball."

"Not Tyball, eh?" The man fell silent and cocked his head to one side. "True, thou dost look rather scrawny, not like a powerful mage

at all. Let me see, a test, a test ... Aha! Now answer me truly. What dost thou know of the secret doors in the tombs?"

"I know nothing of these secret doors."

"Secret doors? Who told thee of these secret doors? Did he tell thee of the chasm of fire they lead to, as well? It's becoming impossible to keep a secret around here these days."

"The chasm of fire? Why would I want to go to a chasm of fire?" The corner-studier had mentioned such a chasm, but I didn't see any reason to mention that to the raving lunatic in this cell.

"Well," he said looking around conspiratorially, "don't tell anyone, but I hid some things over there. But that's not important."

"What things were these?"

The man's face screwed up in a convincing imitation of thoughtfulness.

"I do not remember what they were," he said. "That was years and years ago, or so it seems ..."

"Perhaps they will be useful in dealing with Tyball."

"Tyball! It is thee again!" Flecks of foam flew from his mouth as he shrieked. "Thou hast defeated and imprisoned me already. Now leave me in peace."

I crept from the room, leaving the battered door open behind me in case the poor fool wanted to escape from the dungeon.

I found many empty cells as I continued west, but in one southern cell, I came upon another prisoner, an outcast named Griffle. He seemed unnaturally thin, but his eyes were bright, the color of steel, and his mustache and goatee seemed remarkably well-tended given the circumstances. This prisoner, at least, retained some measure of self-respect.

"Who art thou?" Griffle asked. "Art thou here to take me back to the mines? But no, thou art not one of them. Art thou here to rescue us, then?"

"Of course. But it may take a little while."

Griffle chuckled ruefully. "Ah, then, a prisoner like the rest of us."

"Why art *thou* being held prisoner?" I asked, not bothering to argue with the fellow about my status.

"Tyball keeps us here. To work the mines 'til we die ... if we're lucky, that is. Less fortunate ones he takes away to work his evil magicks on."

"What dost thou mean by 'evil magicks'?"

"There are caverns to the east, filled with the dead. Victims of his dark arts, gone awry. 'Tis said not even he dares venture there now. But the dead things wait, taking their vengeance on any living thing that enters."

"Hmm. Thou didst mention being forced to work the mines. Why?"

"Who knows what we dig for? Mayhap materials he needs for his magic. But it's been days now since I've worked the mines, after what we found on the lower level ... and so few of us remain, left to rot in our cells."

"What happened there on the lower level?"

"We dug through to the level below this and hit a natural cavern. The walls were veined with gold, but that's not what we were digging for, I'm sure. It was here the fell beasts attacked us and killed most of us prisoners. The remaining few of us have been left here for days, with no food or water. If thou couldst spare a morsel ..."

"Certainly. Eat thy fill." I handed the man an apple and a drumstick from my pack. He took both eagerly.

"Many thanks! Thou art a hero as far as I

am concerned, just for sharing thy food!"

"Thou art most welcome," I said, but I don't think Griffle heard. He was concentrating on the meat I'd given him, to the exclusion of all else. "Excuse me now," I said, more out of courtesy than necessity. "I must be going."

Again, I left the door open, to give Griffle some hope of surviving. The prison corridor split, just past Griffle's cell into two paths

heading westward. I followed the southern portion.



I went west to the end of the corridor, but try as I might, I was unable to unlock or bash down the three doors I found there. I could hear voices, muffled by the thick doors, but I was unable to make out what they said.

The first cell I came to after leaving Griffle's cell held a Mountainman named Kallistan.

"Who be ye?" the dwarf said, raising his bushy red eyebrows.

"I am the Avatar. Who art thou?"

"I be Kallistan. What do ye here, Avatar?"

"I seek to rid this area of a certain evil wizard."

Kallistan stroked his red beard. "An' what proof have ye that ye're nae from the very wizard himself?" he said shrewdly.

"I am a confidant of Goldthirst's!"

Surprise raised the dwarf's eyebrows still higher. The look of surprise was quickly replaced by one of suspicion.

"Well, ye'll be knowin' the password t' his hoard, then, won't ye?" he said. His voice held a touch of hope as well as a full measure of doubt.

"Indeed I do know it!" I said, thinking back to the days, seemingly so long ago, when I'd first met the Mountainman king. "'Tis Deco Morono."

Kallistan broke out in a grin and his voice rang out joyously, his suspicion allayed. "Well, then, ye be a hero to th' Clan, an' most welcome here! What can I do for ye?"

"I need thy help to find and defeat Tyball."

He thought for a moment, then held a finger up as if to signal that I should wait a moment. Then he turned and went to the corner of his cell. There, he pushed a few rocks aside and came back holding a pale blue shard of crystal.

"Here. Take ye this splinter of crystal," he said, handing it to me. It was cool to the touch despite the oppressive heat of the place.

"What is it?"

Kallistan shrugged.

"I found it three days ago while at my labors in the mines," he said. "At night it makes a faint, eerie keening. I've heard rumors of others who've found its like, and before long they're off searching for the tombs from which it came."

Frustrated, I vowed I'd return later, shouting through the doors for those beyond to hold on to hope for a while longer. For now, however, I turned back, to explore the northern portion of the prison. As it turned out, there was only one prisoner up there, but he proved to be an important one.

"Greetings, friend," the prisoner said when I bashed down the door to his cell. "I am Dantes."


Like all of the prisoners, Dantes was emaciated, but I could tell that he had once been a formidable fighter, one worthy of respect.

"Well met, Dantes. How can I help thee?"

"Well, I wouldn't say no to something to eat."

"Certainly. Have some of my food." I gave him a wheel of cheese.

"I thank thee," he said. "Perhaps I can



"Why give it to me?"

"I believe the tombs to be of my ancient ancestors, built here long before the colony of the Abyss was formed. I've dreamt of them since finding the crystal."

"Again, why give this crystal to me?"

"The way I figure it, the tombs have been defiled by an evil presence. This entity places the crystal where it'll be found, in order to draw unwary souls to its lair. I ask ye—find these tombs and cleanse them of this evil, so that others do not fall into this trap."

"I will do what I can."

"If ye can do this, I'm sure the beast responsible will have collected a sizable hoard from his victims. Ye may find the items useful in your quest against Tyball. But beware—disturb not the tombs themselves. Search for the entrance to the south of these prisons, where the pit trap spiders prowl. Carry the crystal with ye in your search—it may prove to be helpful."

"Thank thee. I will see if thy suppositions prove to be true."

Much later, the crystal shard provided by Kallistan uncovered a secret passageway south and just a bit west of the entrance to the prison. This led to a series of tombs where I found the burial plots of several fallen fighting men. The place was riddled with secret doors and infested by a strange creature very like a ghost, but with the nasty ability to blink in and out of sight and, I believe, in and out of our plane of existence. These proved to be mighty foes, but I managed to best them. For my trouble, I acquired a fine weapon and some armour, as well as a few other artifacts. Most important, however, I fulfilled the promise I'd made to the Mountainman, who had trusted me and provided what assistance he could.

Interestingly, the tombs proved to be a secondary route to several areas I visited during the course of my adventure on this level—most notably, a chasm of fire and a room in which an imp thief gave me a crown that, ultimately, led me to Tyball's lair.

help *thee*. Thou doth seem to be in good health. Thou shouldst be able to make it over the lava."

"What lava?" I hadn't yet seen any lava here, though the heat certainly indicated that there was some nearby.

"I dug myself an escape route from my cell, using only my belt buckle. Unfortunately, the cell looks out on a lava-filled cavern, and I cannot make the leap. I have a gamy leg, as thou can see."

Truth be told, I hadn't noticed, but I now saw that one of Dantes' legs was misshapen—the result, I felt sure, of a wound left untended by his jailers. I considered offering to carry the poor soul to freedom, but realized this would jeopardize my mission and, perhaps, doom all of Britannia. I would have to leave him here to fend for himself. It was a necessary decision, but not one I was happy about. Feeling a bit guilty, I changed the subject.

"Why didst thou come down here to begin with?" I asked.

"I was a fool! Rumor had it there were mysterious tombs down here, filled with fabulous treasures. I was searching for these when Tyball's lackeys got me."

"Where are these tombs?"

"I know naught but rumors. Some say those who find the tombs become permanent guests. It seems true in my case, at least. But the treasure, the treasure is worth the risk ..."

"That much treasure?"

"Oh, that much and more! Why, I've heard tell of a knight who returned with a magical golden suit of armour. But, alas, his mind was not the same, and one day he dove head first into a pool of lava. In any event, thou must take care if thou doth enter the tombs. First, though, use my escape route, and take care to jump over the rivers of lava."

Dantes limped to the northeast corner of his cell, moving several large rocks out of the way. Then he ran his belt buckle along a nearly invisible groove that ran down the wall from floor to ceiling. Placing his shoulder against the wall, he shoved hard and the wall tumbled down, allowing access to a passage beyond. I wondered if I would have been able to cut my way to freedom with nothing but a belt buckle! He motioned me through the newly revealed exit.

"My thanks for thy advice," I said. "Farewell."

I found myself on a narrow east-west path overlooking a chasm. Heat welled up from the depths of the pit, making me momentarily dizzy. Directly across from me to the north was a small outcropping. The jump was an easy one, but the outcropping proved to be a dead end. There was a heavy metal door in the western wall, but I couldn't break through and none of my keys would fit. Filing away the knowledge of this door's existence for future reference, I jumped back across to the other side of the chasm.

I had no choice but to go east from Dantes' cell, but I hadn't gone far before I reached a dead end this way too. Clearly, the way out wasn't via the path overlooking the chasm. That left the chasm itself as the only possible way out. A series of stepped platforms took me to the bottom of the pit. Rivulets of lava bubbled up through cracks in the floor. The very rock itself hissed and popped and melted all around me. Again, I found myself with no choice but to head east. The floor sloped up dramatically and, again, I came to a deep crevasse that blocked my way. This must have been the leap Dantes, with his bad leg, had been unable to make. I took a running start at the jump and only barely

made it myself. I hate to think what would have happened if I'd missed.

The floor sloped up still further and, only a few feet past this prodigious jump, I found myself at another gap as wide as the first. I made this jump, too, but the continuation of the corridor to the east was far above my head. I stared at the wall for some time with no hope of scaling it or jumping up to the opening above it. The eastward corridor was so tantalizingly near, yet totally out of reach. Again, I had no choice but to jump down to the lava-covered floor below.

As it turned out, what I took to be a setback was actually a stroke of luck, albeit a small one. At the point where I landed, I came upon a scroll, a map actually. I had no idea where the region shown on the map was, but I pocketed it anyway. I figured I it might come in handy eventually.

At this lower level, I was able to continue east unimpeded by the terrain. Unfortunately, I ran into other obstacles far more deadly. I was picking my way through the tiny rivulets of lava, paying more attention to the uneven footing than to my surroundings. The oversight nearly cost me my life. Before I realized what was happening, I found myself face-to-face with a fire elemental.

The sword Caliburn flew into my hand, but the creature was vicious and seemed not to feel my blows. I certainly felt every superheated blow it dealt to me! Eventually I forced the creature eastward into an area where the narrow lava path opened out into what might have been a room of some sort before the lava took it over. Despite some horrible burning wounds I'd suffered in the battle, I was feeling pretty good at this point, certain that my foe would eventually fall. That was when two of its cousins rose up out of the ash and smoke!

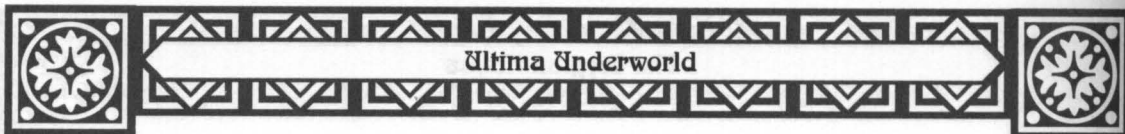
Three of these monsters would certainly defeat me, hindered as I was by the anti-magical properties of this level. I looked around for an escape route and, for a moment, didn't see one. Panic gripped me then, and I spun wildly around, again looking for a way out. There! To the south! An opening. Though it shames me to admit it, I ran. And a good thing I did, too, because there were countless elementals here. More than I could count, let alone defeat. Discretion may be the better part of valor, but there was nothing valorous in my flight. I was terrified as I have rarely been.

I fled to the south. Stone blocks rose up from the lava, making the path an obstacle course. Everywhere I looked, another fire elemental rose up. Fear, heat, burning wounds, and exhaustion had me in their grip and I ran as hard as I could, not thinking of combat, not thinking of Arial or Tyball, not thinking of anything but survival.

I dimly registered the existence of a metal door in the eastern wall, but a tentative tug at the handle revealed that it was locked. Surrounded as I was by elemental horrors, I plunged onward with no other thought than to put some distance between me and my enemies. It never occurred to me that I might be running toward a dead end, one that would surely end in my own death!

I now know what it's like to run the gauntlet. I couldn't fight, I could only run, and it seemed as if each elemental got in one good swipe at me with a fiery appendage as I passed. Luckily, none was able to corner me. If the elementals had been just a bit more intelligent—if they'd been capable of cooperation—I would have died there. As it was, I was as near death as I'd ever been.

The lava flow turned to the east and I went



with it. I ran and ran until the path ended. I could see the dead end ahead of me. With my chest heaving, I slowed and resigned myself to my fate. Behind me, the elementals drew nearer and nearer. I hoped Garamon could find another champion to complete his quest.

Then I noticed a ramp to the east leading away from the lava. Drawing on the last of my reserves, I plunged toward it, hoping the fire elementals couldn't leave the lava. I made it to the ramp and dragged myself upward, running to the end of the twisting stone corridor. When I reached the end, I slumped to the ground, trembling from fear and fatigue. For hours I sat there, wondering when I would feel the fiery heat of an elemental ready to deal me a death blow. The blow never came, however, and, amazingly, I fell asleep with my sword in my lap.

When I awakened, I was hungry but refreshed. Taking stock of myself and my situation, I decided I was really not in such bad shape after all. However, I was trapped here for the moment. The only possible way out I'd seen was through the locked metal door, which lay far to the west and north of my current position. I ate a piece of cheese and pondered my situation. It didn't take long. I had no choice but to run the gauntlet again. Now that I was rested and knew what to expect, I accepted my fate calmly.

Before heading back to the lava, I did two things. First, I downed a healing potion I'd been carrying for some time. I wanted to be at full strength. Second, I sheathed Caliburn. I couldn't fight my way to the door—that much was clear—and the sword only slowed me down. Then a thought occurred to me. Naruto had told me about a key that gave access to a "place of some importance." I had the gray key made of bone. Surely a door that appeared to be my only salvation qualified as a

place of importance! I grasped the key tightly in my hand as I trotted back to the lava.

I encountered the first elemental in the stone path near the lava flow! They weren't limited to the lava after all. How lucky I'd been that they hadn't found me as I slept! For a moment, I thought panic would take me again, but I fought it down and began running, dodging this way and that to make myself a tougher target. Then I was in the lava and sprinting, running from one stone obstacle to another, using them as cover. These were shields, not obstacles!

A fireball singed the stubble of beard I sported after so many days in the Abyss and a fiery appendage brushed my arm, but I didn't slow down. I ran and ran until I thought my chest would burst. There, ahead of me, was the door. I didn't even bother trying the handle. I simply thrust the key into the lock and turned it. A fireball caught me square in the back as I pushed against the door with all my strength. It opened!

I rushed through the door and turned to shove it closed again, but an elemental had moved into the doorway. I pushed and pushed on the door, feeling it heat up with each passing second. It was my strength against that of an elemental force of nature. For a moment I despaired. Then I thought of my battle with the golem. I had defeated forces as powerful as this before. I had saved worlds. I would not die here. Not like this. The door closed and I spun the key in the lock again. The elementals pounded at the door with fiery fists, but it held.

Backing away from the door, I began to laugh. I'd done it. I was safe. I shook with laughter until I was gasping for breath, the sound echoing crazily. I hoped the elementals could hear me. I was alive!

The Stygian Abyss

But where was I? The thought occurred to me that I might still be trapped. What if there were no way out of this corridor? There had to be. I started looking for it. The corridor I was in led east and then turned abruptly south. As soon as I turned south, a wave of relief washed over me — there was a staircase heading down. How deep was the Abyss, as reconstructed by Cabirus, I wondered. Given the lack of alternatives, I headed for the stairs, unhappy with myself for leaving so many stones unturned on the seventh level.

I needn't have worried, because as I approached the stairs, I noticed a platform cut into the west wall of the corridor, and beyond that, another one just a little higher. Noting the location of the stairs on my map, I leaped from one platform to the next until I stood before a metal door. It was locked but, again, my gray bone key did the trick. I stepped cautiously through the door, alert to any danger — and it was a good thing I was moving slowly. Beyond the door was a small square platform overlooking the terrible lava flow.

Even now, the fire elementals were pelting the platform on which I stood with fireballs. They knew no mercy! To the west and a little north, on the far side of the

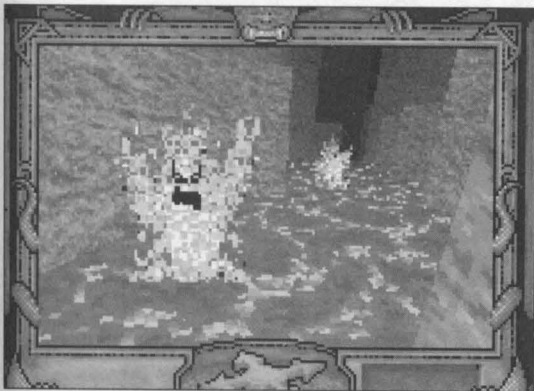
chasm, there was a corridor that appeared to lead toward the center of the Abyss, but the gap was far too wide to jump. I had no choice but to turn back.

I knew I'd made the right decision the instant I stepped off the stairs and set foot on the eighth level — I could almost feel the mana flowing back into me. I stood in a room encircled by lava. A ghost and an imp did a graceful dance above my head (at least, to my untrained eye it appeared to be a dance) and a rat scurried here and there searching for food. None of the denizens of the place paid any attention to me. Thanking my lucky stars, I took the opportunity to cast some healing magic upon myself. I soon felt like a new man.

The room in which I found myself was large, but there wasn't much to see — it was just a room with only two exits. The first was the stairway through which I'd entered; the second, a matching stairway in the southwest corner, a stairway that led to the accursed seventh level! With some feelings of trepidation, I went back up and felt sick as, once again, my magical energy left me. Still, I emerged in a part of the Abyss I'd never seen before. At least I'd escaped the blistering lava stream with its damnable fire elementals.

I was in some kind of treasure chamber. The hoard rivaled that of Goldthirst himself. Guarding the treasure were several earth golems, each looking as tough as the one I'd beaten (barely) earlier in my adventure. An imp fluttered overhead on leathery wings. To my amazement, the golems made no move against me, though I was clearly an interloper. Surprisingly, it was the imp who accosted me, but not with force. This imp spoke, and in rhyme, no less!

"Searching for something, are we?" it said. "Need to find a path? Slip up and you'll



be worm food. Victim of Tyball's wrath."

I had no idea what the creature was talking about (or, for that matter, how it came to talk at all), but at this point in my quest, the word *Tyball* was all I needed to hear. The imp had my full attention.

"Who art thou?" I asked.

The imp fluttered close enough that I could feel the warm air pulsing with each flap of its wings. The creature grinned a hideous grin and hissed, "A thief I am, a thief I'll be. With a very great prize. Have something you want, something you need. It'll open up your eyes."

"Why would you give me anything?"

The creature did a convincing imitation of a human frown and said, "The evil one, very bad. Here to hurt us all. We'll give you a gift if you're wise enough. Just to see him fall."

"What gift?"

"A crown it is, that's what we offer. The only thing for you in this room. The rest of the treasure is not yours to have. To steal it will mean your doom."

"What's so special about this crown?" I had to know how it would help me defeat the evil one, Tyball.

"A maze it is, you'll want to get through. Though many a fool it did swallow. What I have will enhance your eyes. And show you the yellow to follow."

The yellow to follow? What could this possibly mean? And what maze was the imp talking about? I had no answers, but I knew little enough about Tyball, and the imp seemed certain I'd need this crown. I decided to play along.

"So how do I know which one to take?" There must have been a half dozen crowns of various sizes, shapes, and colors in the room.

"That's the question, is it not? And one

you'll have to figure. Its one eye to help you is not bloodshot. And its size is smaller, not bigger."

"How is it that you have this crown?"

"A thief, I told you, is what I am. And a grand theft it was, I suppose. Heisted the crown, slick as can be. Right from under the evil one's nose."

"So why not just give me this crown?" I was tired of playing games, tired of riddles.

"Can't just give it to anyone. My clues you must heed. Prove yourself worthy. And control your greed."

I sighed. Clearly this game would continue a while longer.

"What other clues canst thou give me?" I asked, hoping the imp recognized exasperation in a human voice.

"That's all I can tell you. It should be enough. It's really quite simple. If you're too dumb—that's tough!"

With that, the imp flew off. I called after it.

"Wait, thou must tell me more."

"Heh, heh, heh!" it cackled. "We'll be watching."

And, true to its word, the imp hovered overhead, beating its wings steadily and laughing quietly to itself as I turned to the pile of treasure along the west wall of the room. There were gems and chains and gold coins galore. There were also many crowns. I studied them intently, sure that if I picked the wrong one, the docile golems would leap to the attack and rip me limb from limb.

Several of the crowns were large and ornate. Those I eliminated from consideration immediately—the imp had said the one I wanted would be small, not large. Of the smaller crowns, each appeared to be set with a single red stone. One, however, was set with a white stone. It took me a moment, but

the solution to the riddle was simplicity itself. The white stone was the eye that wasn't bloodshot. The crown with the white stone was the one I wanted.

I removed the Knight's helm from my head and placed it in my pack, then reached for the crown, pausing to consider the consequences of a mistake at this juncture. Caution be damned, I thought, as I snatched up the crown and put it on my head.

Nothing happened. The imp fluttered off. The golems remained all but motionless. I'd guessed right. But now what? The stairs held no appeal for me, but I didn't see any other way to leave the room. However, a closer examination revealed a secret door in the room's southern wall. Beyond it, a series of stepped platforms led me to a massive locked door. I pounded on it, but to no avail. To the west was a barred window, and just a few feet below the sill, lava bubbled wildly. I was very near the bottom of the volcano, I suspected. The heat was abysmal. To the east, a passageway led me to the beginning of a golden path.

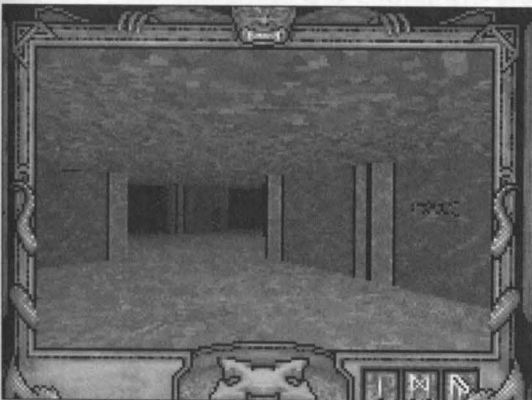
Here I paused and removed the crown so I could mop the sweat from my brow. To my

amazement, the golden path changed to gray marble. When I returned the crown to my head, the yellow path reappeared. The crown was the key, showing me "the yellow to follow," just as the imp had said! And that meant the golden path led to Tyball.

Impulsively, I took a step forward, but then stopped short. I'd been told that the key to success was the destruction of Tyball's Orb, and for that I needed some of the substance of which the magic-damping artifact was made. I had no idea where the Orb might be and I had nothing with which to destroy it. A suicidal attack on Tyball's lair might get me killed. I decided to wait until I was better equipped to tackle the mage. Rather than follow the golden path, I took a more mundane route north.

My progress was stopped almost immediately by a metal door at the far end of a large wooden bridge. I had no time to waste and the door looked badly battered. A few blows from Caliburn bashed it open. A ghostly guardian beyond fell before my blade, leaving me free to explore a large, airy cavern. More ghosts felt Caliburn's sting before I came to another battered metal door in the northeast corner of the cave. This door, too, was opened by my sword. Beyond the door, the path led to a stairway down to the eighth level. Having no other options, I again descended to the lower level.

I emerged to find myself in an area filled with all manner of vile creatures. I was soon drenched in the blood and ichor of spiders, trolls, and imps. I bested Gazers and Reapers. Their sheer numbers were enough to give me pause, but I fought like a man possessed. There was no turning back—all I could do was slog from one foe to the next and hope there was a way out of this place.



When all of my foes lay dead, or so near to death as to pose no threat, I paused to look around. I was in some kind of mine, a gold mine. Nuggets littered the floor, enough to make a man wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, but the gold held no interest for me. What did interest me were the strange gray stones I found scattered about the place. Hefting one, I felt a tingle pass through me, as if these rocks possessed some great magical power. No, not a magical power, but an anti-magical one! I was certain these were the stuff of which Tyball's Orb was made.

Though humble in appearance and few in number, these stones were far more valuable to me than any amount of gold. I gathered up every one I could find—nearly a dozen—and continued my exploration of the area. This didn't take long, there being little to explore. In the northernmost part of the area, I found another stairway to the seventh level. Again, I took a moment to heal myself and then ran up the stairs, ready now for my magical energy to fade. Ready, now, to find and do battle with Tyball!

The way back to the golden path was simple enough. When I reached it, there was no hesitation—not this time. Sword in hand, I threw myself into Tyball's maze with abandon. In fact, I found myself running at breakneck speed and, once, stepped off the path for a moment. At once, I felt my life's essence drain from my body. The feeling was like the one I'd experienced when my mana dropped upon entering this level, but far, far worse. I felt sickened and weak, the way one must feel as one breathes one's last. However, once I was on the path again, all was well. I had no desire to experience the sensation of dying—not for many years, at any rate—so I forced myself to walk slowly through the maze.

Without the imp's crown, I would have died in moments. With it, following the maze was simplicity itself. There was one safe path through it, and I could see that path, clear as day. When the path ended, I stood before a metal door, beyond which I fully expected to meet Tyball at last. To my surprise, the door was unlocked. Such arrogance! I vowed the evil one would pay for this conceit.

Beyond the door was an antechamber; beyond that, a walkway surrounding a sunken room. I stared in awe at its otherworldly architecture. The place felt ... wrong ... palpably evil. In the center of the room, an Orb rested upon a pedestal. Beyond it, at the far end of the chamber, two tapestries depicting a hideous creature unknown to me flanked a portcullis. Was that a shadow, something moving, beyond the portcullis?

Before I could determine this, I heard a sound from my right and a chill raced up and down my spine. I spun in the direction of the sound and there, floating three feet above the ground, was the red-robed mage I'd seen so many days before in Arial's room. Tyball! His eyes red with madness and fury, the wizard spoke.

"Ah, it is the Avatar! It is good to meet thee again. It is regrettable that our acquaintance must be such a short one."

"I demand that thou dost release Arial!"

"Oh, I'm afraid that that is quite impossible. I need the body of an innocent one to act as a vessel, and I am afraid that thine wilt not do. Besides, after all the trouble I went to, it would be a pity to let her go now, dost thou not think?" Seeing the look of confusion on my face, the wizard continued. "Oh, thou dost wonder why I abducted poor Arial? Perhaps I should spare thee so that thou canst see my incantation. The sight of a



daemon entering the body of a human is not one to be missed.”

“I think thou art a villain and not worthy to live!”

“Ah, but regardless of my worthiness, I am afraid that I will live, and that thou wilt not.”

And with that, Tyball’s hands twitched convulsively and lightning bolts leapt from his fingertips, exploding in a shower of sparks inches from my feet. I dodged this first volley and was about to respond when I remembered the Orb. Tyball could wait—I had to destroy it. Running behind a pillar to shield myself from Tyball’s vicious attack, I reached into my pack and pulled out one of the orb rocks I’d collected. I had no idea how to destroy the Orb, but I hoped a well-aimed rock might do the trick. I hurled the rock at the Orb, but it hit the pedestal. Damn!

I rummaged frantically through the pack for another rock while, out of the corner of my eye, I could make out the shadowy figure of Tyball, floating slowly, eerily toward me. By the time I found a stone, Tyball had reached me and was readying another electrical bolt. This one caught me in the side; the shock dropped me to one knee, the searing pain

kept me down. Fighting to stay conscious, I plucked another rock from my pack and hurled it at the Orb. This time, I didn’t miss. The Orb shattered into thousands of tiny shards. Immediately, I felt mana flowing back into my body.

Tyball shrieked. The sound was like nothing I’d ever heard. It paralyzed me. Then, seeing my weakness, Tyball made a fatal error: he moved in close, close enough for Caliburn to reach him. Still on one knee, I unsheathed the sword and, as he floated within range, thrust it up at him. The red of his robe was soon stained an even deeper crimson by the blood that poured from the wound in his gut.

I forced myself to my feet and lunged at Tyball with a fury I didn’t know I could feel, and with strength I thought had long since left me. Caliburn seemed a living thing, its blade dancing, catching the light of Tyball’s fireballs and lightning bolts as it bit into him again and again. Adrenaline surged through me, giving me renewed vigor, but Tyball had more tricks up his sleeve. A spray of fireballs far more impressive than any I had ever been able to cast exploded from his fingertips in a shower of flame and sparks, bursting just a few feet in front of my face. Had they hit me, I would have died instantly, but I don’t think a quick and easy death was part of Tyball’s plan. He was toying with me. Even so, the heat and shock left me weak and dizzy again. I stumbled for cover and cast a healing spell upon myself, thankful that I’d regained my magical abilities.

I tried several times to best him with magic, but he was so much more accomplished than I in the sorcerous arts that I quickly realized this strategy would fail. I emptied of charges every magic wand I

possessed in an attempt to keep him at a distance, but this did little more than anger him. On and on the battle raged. Tyball's magic would give him an advantage for a time, but then my blade would catch him unawares and the tide would turn my way. In the end, plain, simple brute force won the day.

Unable to best him in a wizard's duel, I changed tactics. Perhaps a physical attack would succeed where my magical abilities had not. I was enough of a mage to know that spells could be cast only if one had enough room to cast them. I was determined not to give Tyball that room. I forced him into a corner of the room and slashed at him repeatedly, but over and over he slipped free. Again and again I turned and charged him, pushing his floating form back and back until he was cornered again.

The physical approach had one disadvantage. I was tiring rapidly and knew I would have to end the contest quickly or fall. Head down, like an enraged bull, I manhandled Tyball into a corner and, while he was off balance, threw every ounce of my waning strength into a single mighty thrust. Caliburn flew once more and dug deep into Tyball's belly.

The mage slumped to the floor, eyes fluttering, mouth opening and closing convulsively. Then he spoke. His voice no longer sounded so otherworldly, so horrible. He sounded like a dying man, more to be pitied than feared.

"Thou hast doomed this world, meddler," he said. "My ritual was designed to release the creature from its bonds, then to bind it into the body of yon young lady. Thanks to thee, however, only the first part was accomplished. It is mine own fault. With my brother gone, only I could save our world. Alas, I decided to

do it in the manner which would benefit me most. Ironic, isn't it? I stood ready to save Britannia, and thou did slay me to save but a girl. The creature, this Slasher of Veils, which I sought to bind will soon escape. All Britannia shall suffer. No weapons, nor spell, no strength of mortal frame can prevail against it. And its ambitions are horrible indeed. Thou hast earned thy reward, fool. Thanks to thee, I shall not be here to see it."

He coughed and rich, red blood flowed from his mouth. He would cast no more spells. His arms relaxed around his abdomen and I could see his torn entrails. Then his eyes clouded over and he was gone. I wondered if he and Garamon would be united on the other side.

Searching Tyball's body, I found little of interest except for two keys, which I took. I looked down on my fallen foe, pondering the irony of the situation. Here was the most powerful mage I had ever encountered, a man capable of bending the forces of nature (and forces far beyond human ken) to his will. He'd devoted all of his energies to safeguarding himself against magical attack, yet he'd made no provision for a foe with a sword. So sure was he of the efficacy of his magical defenses that he hadn't even locked his door. I shook my head. The folly of it all, the futility . . .

I stood there for a moment, wondering if I might be as foolish as Tyball in my own ways, as blind to my own arrogance, my own fatal flaws. Would this blindness lead to my own downfall someday? There were no answers here and I still had a princess to save. And from the sound of Tyball's dying proclamation, I would soon confront a being—the Slasher of Veils—who could shatter worlds.

I sprinted to the portcullis at the south

end of the room and, as I expected, found the princess locked away on the far side. She held a locket in her hand. One of Tyball's keys slipped easily into the lock and Ariel stepped through the now-open doorway. Apparently Tyball, evil though he was in most ways, had treated her well. She looked painfully thin but, aside from that, little the worse for wear. As she emerged from her prison, the locket in her hand began to glow, and as it brightened, so did her smile.

"At last thou hast come to rescue me!" she said, "But now an even greater danger looms." She paused and studied the glowing amulet for a moment before continuing. "Now that I am free," she said finally, "I can use this Amulet of Travel and go to warn my father."

She clasped the locket tightly and I wondered briefly why she hadn't used it earlier to escape on her own. I surmised that the anti-magical effects of Tyball's Orb might have rendered it useless. However, as I indulged in idle speculation, Ariel continued talking. She knew more of this place than I did; knew more, I suspected, that I needed to learn. I returned my attention to her.

"We must tell everyone to flee the island



before this beast escapes and slays us all," she said, taking my hand and looking deep into my eyes. The determination I felt flowing from her belied her years. She would some day make a worthy ruler. "Would that thou canst now save Britannia as thou has saved me!" she said.

As she uttered these last words, the locket in her hand glowed still brighter, enveloping her in a warm light not unlike that of a Moongate. Then she was gone. I was both surprised and pleased at her sudden departure, for that meant I could tie up the loose ends down here without fearing for the life of a young girl.

But what to do now? Ariel was rescued and Tyball defeated. These portions of my quest were over. I had all eight of Cabirus' Talismans, but no idea what to do with them. I had learned of a grave threat to Britannia, a daemon called the Slasher of Veils, but knew nothing about it or about how I might defeat it, should the opportunity ever arise. I was, for the first time in countless days, without direction. I briefly considered returning to the surface, but I couldn't do that, not until I figured out this business of the Slasher.

If only Garamon would visit me again. He had come to me in dreams many times during my stay, but always his words had been jumbled, his message obscure. And I hadn't heard from him in some time now. Two things were certain—I was bone-tired and I needed Garamon's aid. Sleep would solve at least one of my problems. I would wake up refreshed and, perhaps, Garamon would sense my need of him and come to me.

I never expected the idea, born of desperation, to work, but work it did. Garamon did visit me once more, and the swirling, ghostly figure, a welcome friend now, set me on a new course.

"... done well," he said. "Perhaps if things had gone a different way ... but no matter, thou hast but delayed the ... The Slasher of Veils is already testing its bonds. As thou knowest, my brother ha ... ll be just as bad. As my brother knew, no mortal spell or weapon may harm it. If only my bones could be laid to rest ... I might be able to help ... not bury me in my grave, but rather hid my bones after he ... suspect they are somewhere below Tyball's caves in the southwest ... properly in my grave and many of the shackles on my power will be lifted."

Though portions of Garamon's message were garbled, as always, my mission was clear. I didn't know how burying Garamon's bones might affect the course of events to come, but the ghost had always revealed the correct path to me. If burying his bones was what he wanted, burying his bones was what I would do.

At the southern end of the walkway surrounding Tyball's chamber I found a metal door which, to my surprise, was unlocked. Beyond it, to the east, was another door, this one locked tight. One of the keys I'd taken from Tyball (the one whose handle was made from the intact skull of an imp!) opened this door, and I followed the corridor beyond until I came to a stairway leading down.



Chapter 9

If I thought I had felt heat before, I now knew I was wrong. The eighth level of the Stygian Abyss was hot enough to roast a chicken. Within moments, my breathing was labored and I was dripping with sweat. Lava was everywhere, boiling and bubbling, casting

an eerie reddish glow over everything. The place looked like hell.

The denizens of this level did nothing to convince me I was anywhere but the netherworld. It seemed as if each step I took was contested by a horde of creatures of all stripes, united only in their animosity toward me. golem and rat, imp and slug, Reaper and headless, all fought side by side—not for food, insofar as I was able to determine their motives, but for the sheer pleasure of killing. Perhaps I give these creatures too much credit, endow them unjustifiably with human characteristics, but they seemed to fight with an abandon—a joy—that unnerved me.

I had but one clue to guide me in my quest at this point: Garamon had told me that his bones were in the southwest corner of the level below Tyball's chamber. That was pretty vague and, even if I stumbled upon poor Garamon's remains, I wondered how I would know his bones from the countless other skeletons littering the floor. I'd worry about that when the time came, I decided. The southwest beckoned to me.

A wide, straight corridor led west and I followed it, leaping across narrow lava streams when they stopped my forward progress. One stream was far too wide to cross in this way and, making matters worse, the other side of the stream was far higher than my side. I stood by the stream's edge, wondering how I could get to the other side—and I knew I had to get there, because a quick search of the area had netted me some useful magic items, but no way to proceed further in my quest. Staring at the bubbling pool, I focused on several stone blocks rising up out of the molten rock. Could I leap from one to the next, higher and higher? I'd be risking a fall into the molten rock, but did I have any choice? Not that I

could see. I leaped like a mountain goat from one stone to another. I very nearly slipped and fell on several occasions, but finally, panting from the heat and exertion, I made it to the west side of the stream.

Continuing west, I passed a place where two corridors split off from the main hall, one to the north and one to the south. I dashed through these side-corridors, but didn't find anything useful. Returning to the main corridor and continuing west, I soon came to a point where I had no choice but to turn right, to the north. I followed the corridor only until I came to a point where I could turn west again, and entered a chamber guarded by a golem and several other fearsome creatures.

The beasts attacked without warning (though this didn't take me by surprise, by any means) and Caliburn flew from its sheath again, but my foes were many and I was only one man. They forced me into the northwest corner of the room, where my foot came down awkwardly on an old map case. My ankle twisted and a searing pain raced up my leg. Damn. I had to make short work of these creatures and tend to this injury. Hobbled though I was, I fought with renewed vigor and one by one the creatures fell, until only the golem was left. He parried my blows with his gray, stony arms, hardly feeling them, it seemed, but I didn't let up. Eventually, the number of my blows proved his undoing. He didn't so much die as crumble. Quite satisfying, really.

Alone again, I drank a healing potion and felt better almost immediately. Now to survey my surroundings. The map case was just one of many artifacts here. There were several runestones, including *Vas*, *In*, *Tim*, and *Sanct*, as well as a gold Ring of Invisibility (which I put on immediately—anything to make detection

by monsters less likely!). The map case contained a spell scroll. It didn't take much figuring to determine that these items had once belonged to a powerful mage. When I came upon a pile of bones in the corner, I felt certain I'd found the remains of Garamon. I was equally certain that I knew what to do with them: His grave lay empty on the fifth level. I vowed it would not remain so for long.

I returned immediately to the seventh level, with every intention of interring Garamon's bones immediately. However, just as I was about to set foot on the stairs leading to level six, a thought occurred to me: There were still prisoners locked up in Tyball's prison. I'd clearly heard voices beyond at least three locked doors, doors I'd been unable to open earlier. Now, however, I had Tyball's keys. It seemed likely that one of these would open the cells. At the very least, I owed it to the prisoners to try to free them. With Tyball dead, they'd surely be forgotten, left to starve to death. I wanted no part in that.

Luckily, I now had the keys to all of the portcullises that blocked my path, so I soon found myself in the prison complex. I headed straight for the locked cells, pleased to find



that the other prisoners, those I'd already freed, were gone. The first locked door, in the north wall, opened easily now that I had the imp-skull key. Beyond the door was a scraggly-haired fellow with dull gray eyes. He looked old beyond his years. Tyball's jailers had not been kind to him.

"Heh? What art thou doing here?" he asked.

"I am attempting to save the world from a powerful daemon."

"I know not how to help thee defeat this daemon, but I would help thee any other way I can."

"Hast thou any helpful information at all?" I asked.

"I don't know how useful it might be, but I can sketch thee a map of the immediate area."

"Please! Every little bit helps."

"Surely. Here, I'll just sketch it on the back of this old picture. The corridor goes like this, see, and there are all these little branches going off over here. We are here. Hmm, this map didn't come out very well. Oh, well, take this picture anyways. It has an inscription that says 'Tom.'"

He held the paper out to me and I took it, staring not at the map, but at the picture of the one called Tom. Tom? Where had I heard that name before? The man must have thought me daft as I stood there, oblivious to his presence, lost in thought. Then it came to me. The old woman—Judy, her name was—had been pining away for some word of her lost love, Tom. I had promised I'd return to her if I learned anything of his whereabouts. Where had I encountered her? On the fifth level, by the ghouls' area. This crudely drawn map was worthless to me, but the picture on the other side was worth its weight in gold to one who

had waited so long for her love to return.

"Surely this will come in handy," I said, truthfully. I meant to return to the fifth level anyway, to bury Garamon's bones. I would give this picture to Judy while I was there.

"Thou art most welcome," the prisoner said. "May the powers of good be with thee."

"And also with thee. Farewell."

Leaving the first cell open so the prisoner could leave, I made my way to the next cell. This opened as easily as the first, and within I found a feisty dwarf who looked none the worse for wear from his incarceration. No wonder Tyball had locked him away—he must have been a formidable foe.

"I shall tell thee nothing, thou minion of Tyball!" he said as I entered. His voice boomed—in the manner of all Mountainmen, I now surmised. Whispering was not, apparently, part of their repertoire.

"This is Tyball's blood upon my weapon, fool!" I replied in an equally loud voice. I was in no mood to be berated by people—or Mountainmen—I intended to rescue! The vehemence of my response and the truth of my words brought the fellow up short. When he spoke again, it was in a quieter voice (all things being relative) and with enough respect to appease me.

"Of course!" he said. "I have not seen thee in the ranks of his lackeys. How may I help thee?"

"Well, tell me what it is that hast brought thee here."

"I was captured while on a quest for the Key of Courage."

"That is too bad. Didst thou achieve any success?" I had no idea what this Key of Courage might be, but keys were always of interest to me.

"Nay, for even as I discovered the location

of my objective, I was captured by Tyball. He seemed to think I had been speaking with his deceased brother, ridiculous as that sounds. He would not release me. A pity, since I believed that the recovery of the three keys would help right the wrongs of this place.”

Speaking with Tyball’s brother? Then Garamon had contacted others—I was neither the first nor the only one. Perhaps Garamon had set me on one quest and this fellow on another, related, mission. In any event, it seemed we were destined to cooperate.

“I shall set thee free,” I said, “and thou canst continue thy quest.”

“No, I cannot! I am too weak now. Would that thou could continue my quest for me!”

“Perhaps . . .”

“Indeed?” he interrupted, as if I had agreed already. “Then know this: I believe the entrance lies directly north of this very spot.”

I assumed he meant the entrance to the path leading to the key or to the chamber in which the key itself was kept.

“What else knowest thou of this entrance?” I asked.

“A locked door blocks the way. But I still have the key hidden here in my cell. The key to the Key, as it were.”

“May I have this key?”

“Yes, for I have been imprisoned too long and have neither heart nor strength left for this quest. It is thine.”

He gave it to me.

“I thank thee,” I said, having determined that I’d undertake the quest. If Garamon wanted it done, and this brave soul was too spent to complete it, I’d take it upon myself.

The key felt warm in my hand, as if it were alive. There was a time when a living key would have seemed to me the most wondrous thing in creation. Yet now, after so long in the

mysterious Abyss, the living warmth of it was nothing more to me than a way to tell it from all the other keys I possessed. I slipped it into my key bag without another thought and proceeded to the final cell.

Inside, I came upon a yellow-robed, dark-skinned mage, one of the Seers. Hadn’t Illomo told me of one of his brethren, now missing? Could this be he?

“Ahh . . .” the mage whispered. “So thou must be the one who has vanquished Tyball. Good . . . good . . . I sensed his passing but feared I would die here, forgotten.”

How had he known of Tyball’s death? What magic had given him this knowledge? I wanted desperately to know, but he seemed so frightened that I thought words of comfort were in order.

“Rest easy, now. He is gone.”

“Gone? Yes, I imagine he is. But his malice lingers, does it not?”

“That is my problem. What brought thee here?”

“I am Gurstang. I ventured down here searching for the Key of Truth.”

This was the mage I’d heard of above.

“Gurstang?” I said. “I met thy colleague Illomo. He is worried about thee.”

“Illomo! So Illomo told thee about me. Good, that means I can trust thee. I think I’ve discovered the whereabouts of the key. Tell Illomo ‘Folanae.’ He’ll know where to look, and explain what to do. As for myself, I have other matters to attend to down here. Farewell.”

Again a mention of a key . . . Now I recalled that Illomo had mentioned a key in our brief conversation—the Key of Truth. That matched nicely the Mountainman’s Key of Courage. I would have wagered that I’d eventually find a Key of Love as well! Truth,

Love, and Courage, the three Principles underlying Avatarhood, might prove to be my salvation once more, as they had so often in the past.

I said my farewells and, again, left the door open, so that Gurstang might return to his people, above.

Now I had several missions to accomplish: I had to bury Garamon's bones on the fifth level. I had to acquire the Key of Courage, the key to which lay just north of my current location. I had to return to Illomo on the sixth level and say the word Folanae as a sign from Gurstang. Though I didn't have to, I wanted to give poor Judy on the fifth level the picture of Tom I'd acquired. And then I had to find and defeat a daemon of such power that even Garamon and Tyball couldn't control it.

Much as I wanted to rush right up to the fifth level to take care of business there, I decided to check out the Mountainman's statement that the key to the Key of Courage lay just to the north. There seemed to be no way to go north from his cell, but I knew from my previous visit at least one way to proceed in that direction—I returned to the no longer quite so secret escape route from Dantes' cell.

It was still open and I passed through it and leaped across the chasm to a small platform, due north. The door there was locked, but the Mountainman's key slid into the lock and I was soon charging down the corridor beyond, toward a stairway leading up. I'd never seen this portion of the seventh level. I was sure of that. Still, I wanted to go up anyway, so I ascended.

I emerged in a part of the sixth level that was also new to me. The floors were dark and rough, and the footing uncertain, but what impressed me most were the walls—they were lavafalls. Towering sheets of molten rock

flowed from ceiling to floor, from what source I could not guess, to what destination I would never know. Wondering what was holding the ceiling up, I proceeded along the path as swiftly as I dared until I came to another stairway heading up.

I doubted that this stairway would lead me anywhere familiar, but I was curious now, eager to learn whether this ascent through new portions of the Abyss would lead me to the Key of Courage or to a dead end. The corridor leading from the stairs on the fifth level was identical to the one on the sixth—lavafalls on either side and a molten rock floor—but I soon came to a spot where I had to hop down into a sunken room so vast I couldn't see the far side. What I could see was a pair of Reapers moving ominously toward me the instant my feet touched the ground.

Under the circumstances, I saw no reason to fight. I could easily outrun them, if I could just find a way out. Despite the darkness, I picked out a corridor in the west wall, but one of the Reapers blocked it. I ran past it and ducked into a corridor just south of the first and parallel to it. As I ducked into it, I turned to see if the Reapers were following me. They were not. I quickly learned why. Before I could count my blessings at having eluded the creatures, a torrent of fireballs emerged from the wall west of me! The corridor was trapped. The heat was overpowering and I felt the hairs on my arms singeing, but the first round of fireballs appeared to be the only one. When I was sure no more were forthcoming, I proceeded.

This corridor dumped me into a room full of Goblins. A Gazer floated overhead. Would I live to bury Garamon's bones, I wondered. In the northeast corner of the room, to my left as I entered, a corridor left this chamber of

horrors and I sprinted into it, not caring to waste time in what was sure to be deadly combat. At the end of this corridor—no surprise—was yet another stairway.

On the fourth level, another room, another Reaper; again, I ran. Unfortunately, I ran into a corridor quite literally carpeted with giant brown spiders. I couldn't even see the floor! Without thinking, I leaped over the first wave right onto the writhing, roiling mass of them. Needless to say, I fell.

Hairy legs, thick as saplings, trampled me. I got a good look at the slavering jaws of several spiders as they tried earnestly to make me their next meal. There were dozens of them. I reached down and somehow managed to unsheathe Caliburn, thrusting upward and feeling ichor flow down my arm. This opened up a space just big enough for me to force my way to my feet. Once I was upright, my sword arm swung mightily for what seemed hours. One of the creatures managed to clamp its hideous mandibles about my leg, actually penetrating my armour. Almost immediately, I felt the heat of its poison entering my veins. I had to kill them all quickly so I could heal myself. Eventually they all fell, as did I. I was so exhausted that I slept right there. The hard floor, the fear of Reapers nearby, the smell of dead spiders—nothing could have kept me awake at that moment.

When I awakened, I felt somewhat better—well enough, at least, to survey my surroundings. I proceeded north, running into still more hostiles: Gazers, headless, hostile mages unlike any I'd encountered before. I could have fought my way to an early grave, but instead I chose to run. Not terribly valorous, I suppose, but killing for killing's sake has never appealed to me and, while these creatures and people might have

attacked without provocation, they'd done nothing to deserve death at my hands.

Eventually, I came to one more staircase—the last in this particular series, as it happened. I emerged on the third level, on a small patch of dirt surrounded on three sides by water. Lurkers bobbed up and down nearby, as if daring me to enter their watery domain. Clouds of mist rose and floated here and there, lending the scene an air of unreality. The Reaper in the near distance, on a long, thin parcel of land ahead of me, looked real enough. I thought I could make out doors at either end of the land staked out by the Reaper, but I was too far away to be sure. I'd have to get a closer look.

Swimming to the far shore, I found that I was able to outdistance the pursuing Lurkers, but the Reaper was right there waiting for me when I reached land. I ran to the east end of the path, which, I now saw, split the lake in two, and found that I'd been correct—there was a door there, quite a massive one. Quite a locked one. I turned and saw the Reaper almost upon me. I tried to unleash a magical attack, but the creature, if such Reapers be, was already too close. I had no choice but to draw Caliburn once more. The battle was long and hard, and during the course of it I was poisoned once again, though whether by the Reaper or by a Lurker attacking from the water, I never knew.

Eventually, I reduced the Reaper to a pile of splinters and staggered to the other end of the path, where I saw a heavily damaged door. Apparently I was not the first to reach this point. Someone had nearly bashed the door off its hinges. I completed the job, though, in retrospect, I would have been wiser to heal myself before attempting anything so rash. Beyond the door, a Dire Ghost and two



deadly shadow beasts awaited me! Exhausted, and tired of combat, I pressed on, swinging my sword with abandon, taking terrible damage and dealing out a full measure of it myself.

However, I quickly realized that strength of arms alone wouldn't win the day. My three opponents surrounded me, pummeling me ceaselessly. I had to find a way to keep them all from attacking at once. A narrow corridor would have been ideal, because then I could have taken them on one at a time, but there was no corridor in sight. I had to make do with a corner. At least in a corner, they couldn't completely surround me. This proved an effective strategy, allowing me to pick my target and press home the attack against each foe in turn. I fought like a man possessed, not even knowing what I was fighting for. Eventually I was able to send the three undead creatures back to whatever netherworld they came from, though not before I suffered grievous wounds myself.

Alone in the room at last, I cast several healing spells on myself. This was no substitute for rest and proper medical care, but under the circumstances I was in no position to be picky. It did make me feel

significantly better. Looking around, I found that the room was all but empty. There was nothing here but a gold box and, in the box, a key. I hoped this was the key to the massive door at the other end of the path. If it didn't fit that lock, I'd have to call this deadly trip from the seventh level to the third a total waste.

I needn't have worried. Inscribed upon the key in tiny print was the phrase "Key to Courage," and when I reached the far door, the key turned easily in the lock and the door swung open. I don't know why I was surprised to find a hostile creature beyond the door, but I was. The golem of silver and gold metal was huge—bigger and more aggressive than any golem I'd yet faced. Luckily, it proved less formidable a foe than many. Or maybe I was just tired of being used as a human punching bag. Whatever the explanation, this lumbering brute proved no match for me.

On a pedestal in one corner of the room lay a most unusual object. I had no choice but to believe it was the Key of Courage, but it looked like no key I'd ever seen. It was made of gold and shaped like a small horseshoe with a silver bar joining the two prongs opposite the curved end. I pocketed the key. After a fair amount of searching I determined, to my chagrin, that there was no way out of this area except the way I had entered. I steeled myself for a return trip to the seventh level. My quest would continue from there.

So I ran the gauntlet once more, finding the trip down almost as dangerous as the trip up. The only truly dicey part of the trip came on the fifth level, at the "little hop" from the lavafall corridor into the room guarded by Reapers. I'd made the jump so easily on the way up that I anticipated no trouble on the way down. I was wrong. If I hadn't had a flight

potion (or something similar), I might never have made that leap. I might have been stuck there forever. Perhaps someone of greater agility than I could have made it, but I needed magical assistance. Still, I made the leap and the trip back to the seventh level in one piece, which is more than can be said of many of the foes who tried to stop me.

Back on the seventh level, I returned to the only stairway that I knew would take me back to the sixth level (or to a portion of that level that would take me back to the Seers). That was the stairway in the south-central portion of the level, where I'd met a gravely injured fighter so long ago. Back on the sixth level, I sought out Illomo. I found him where I'd left him, in his chambers across the hall from Louvnon, due east of the stairway. He remembered me, and greeted me like a long-lost friend.

"Hello, Avatar! Hast thou found my friend Gurstang?"

"Yes, I have discovered him," I said.

The man's face lit up at this news and he began rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "I am glad to hear it! He must have told thee the code word he was searching for, then!"

"Indeed he did."

"Yes? And what was it?"

"Folanae' ... Yes. That was the word."

"Hmm ... 'Folanae,' thou sayest ..." He put his hands together as if in prayer and brought them to his lips. "Perhaps ... Yes, that must be it! The puzzle is becoming clearer!"

"What puzzle?"

"Gurstang was searching for clues to the Key of Truth, a fabled object which has long been lost. Apparently it is no longer in this world, so Gurstang and I looked for possible

ways to bring it here from whatever world it is now in. The word that Gurstang found is an important clue."

"What is its meaning?"

"We were of the opinion that praying at a shrine might bring it back. I would guess that the library might contain information regarding which shrine must be used. I suspect that any tome mentioning Gurstang's word, 'Folanae,' would hold the final clue to regaining the key."

"I will seek out this information."

In fact, had I been a bit sharper of wit, a bit more clear-headed, I would have realized that I had the answer already. On my last trip to the library, I'd held in my hands a book whose title included the word *Folanae*. I'd even noted to myself what an odd title that was. As it was, I had to return to the library to refresh my memory. (Regrettably, I didn't encounter the lovely Louvnon along the way ...)

In any event, I soon found the tome, entitled *Folanae Fanlo*, in the library. I felt sure that reciting the word *Folanae* at a shrine would do nothing—if that had been the solution, Gurstang and Illomo could have called the key into being themselves. No ... *Fanlo* was it, the word that would make the Key of Truth appear.

I knew the location of a shrine on this level. It was just north of the island on which I'd bested the golem and acquired one of Cabirus' Talismans. I made for the place, pronounced the word *Fanlo*, and, to my delight, received the key. The Key of Truth resembled the Key of Courage, but it was embellished with bright green emeralds rather than shining silver.

Placing the key in my pack, I was surprised to see the Key of Courage and the Key of Truth fuse themselves together! Where

once there had been two distinct keys, there was now only one—a two-part key, which looked somehow incomplete. Clearly there was a third part missing from the whole and, once again, I felt sure there was a Key of Love somewhere. I had no idea where—or whether—I'd find it, and even if I did I had no idea what the fused keys might unlock. Here was a mystery, but one I had no hope of solving at this point, so I pushed on. The next parts of my quest awaited me on the fifth level.

I made my way swiftly to the lava stream beside which I had found Judy. There she stood still, as if she hadn't moved since my last visit here several days before. Though nearsighted and, I thought, a bit daft, Judy remembered who I was. I don't suppose she had many visitors with whom she might confuse me.

"Ah, dost bring word o' my Tom?" she asked.

"I have found a picture," I said.

"A picture! May I see it?"

"Certainly," I said, handing it to her. "Here it is."

"Aye, that's me Tom! Ah, Tom, Tom, ye're gone from me so long!"

She began weeping profusely, and a tear fell into the lava beside her. The instant it struck the surface, a gold key appeared, one that looked just like the Keys of Courage and Truth! I had been right—there was a third part of the key. This time, I was not surprised when the Key of Love, made of Judy's tears, merged with the two-part key I already possessed. Though my new three-part key looked little enough like any key I'd ever seen, it now looked whole. I suspected I would put it to good use sooner or later.

For now, however, I had one last quest to complete before seeking the daemon that

threatened all of Britannia. I had vowed that I'd bury Garamon's bones so that he might assist me in saving this world and, of equal importance, so that he might rest in peace as he deserved. With a touch of regret, I left Judy to her grief and made my way to the tombs in the northeast and, once there, to the empty grave of Garamon.

Reverently, I removed his bones from my pack and placed them in the grave, covering them over as best I could. I felt awkward, not knowing whether I should say anything, or whether Garamon would contact me and tell me what to do next. I was at a loss. Then a ghost appeared—the ghost of Garamon. This time, he came to me not in a dream, not in a vision, but in far more tangible form, and his words were not garbled, but clear and insightful. I wish I had met him in life. I suspect he would have been a steadfast friend and a formidable ally. Silently I cursed Tyball, the brother who had brought this noble soul low.

"Thou hast done well," he said, snapping me out of my reverie. "And now that my bones are at last at rest I can speak freely to thee. But my spirit cannot rest, while yet this peril remains. We must open a gate, near where the foul creature my brother summoned lies bound. We must return it to the plane from whence it came."

"Is there no other way?" I asked, thinking that perhaps I could defeat it and put an end to its existence, rather than simply sending it back where it came from.

"No other power can defeat it. Even banishing it to another place will do it no harm—may in fact restore to it its full power, if that place be like unto its own—but it will at least remove the threat to Britannia!"

Garamon's certainty convinced me. I wouldn't try to fight the beast.

"How can this be done?"

"For this I will need a great deal of magical energy. This will be no gentle luring such as brought thee here, but an unimaginable vortex of interplanar energy."

"Where can we find such powerful magic?"

Garamon grew thoughtful. It worried me that my mentor in this adventure seemed suddenly at a loss. If he couldn't devise a plan, how could I, as his agent in this world, hope to succeed? Finally, he spoke, slowly, as if thinking aloud—which, I suppose, was precisely what he was doing.

"Tyball's Orb would be perilous to use, even if it were intact. The power we tap must be carefully chosen. As thou may have guessed, I am a little out of touch with thy world. I had hoped thou might provide an answer."

I? He hoped *I* would provide the answer? I had little enough information. Garamon had at least been involved in the summoning. I was at a loss. Perhaps if I knew more ...

"What be the qualifications for what thou needest?" I asked.

"It would be best if the source were absolutely pure—my brother found the danger in tapping powers whose source thou knowest

not—and 'twould be best if Britannia herself were somehow involved."

"How dost thou mean, 'Britannia involved?'"

"'Twould help to invoke one of the Elements. We work for Britannia's succor, and we must hope she would lend what aid she could."

"Thou speakest as though Britannia is alive."

"Indeed she is, a green and living entity. Not conscious as we know it, but perhaps aware that we work to her ends. Yes, the source, which, if we are fortunate, may even wake Britannia to our aid, should be as pure as possible. Else we risk ending like my brother."

I had no wish to end up like Tyball. I thought long and hard about things of power and purity. When the answer finally came to me, I was surprised Garamon hadn't thought of it himself—he had, after all, told me repeatedly how critical the Talismans of Cabirus were to my quest. Surely they were pure and powerful enough to accomplish whatever it was Garamon needed done.

"Talismans," I said. "I have the eight Talismans of Cabirus. Surely they are pure enough!"

"Yes, of course! Those would do admirably. Now we must find a means to unleash their stored Virtue. We must find some latent source of power that can be released by applying the energy of the Talismans."

This was easy—I had felt the heat and sensed the power of the Abyss every moment since my arrival.

"The volcano," I said. "The entire Abyss is built within an active volcano. I have seen but a fraction of its power, yet even this fraction dwarfs anything conceived or created by man."

"Yes, of course!" he said again. "If all



eight Talismans be thrust into the volcano's maw, one at a time, I could ride the wave of such power to open the vortex. Ah, thou art wise as well as valorous! Wilt thou make such a sacrifice?"

"Aye, though it pains me sorely to lose such tools as these."

"Excellent! Make haste to the lowest place, where thou must cast all eight into the Abyss—hold back not one, upon thy peril! When they are consumed by earth's own fire, I shall leash the torrent to gape wide my gate. With Fortune's smile, we shall send our foe screeching back to its hell!"

"Where can I find a way into the volcano?"

"The Chamber of Virtue is located on the lowest level of the Abyss. It lies at the very center of the volcano, where the energy fields of the Stygian are their strongest. 'Tis said that a special three-part key is needed to enter, but I know not the veracity of this legend."

"I will make my way there," I said, glad now that I had acquired the three-part key. It was no legend and it would prove the daemon's undoing!

"Hurry!" Garamon said as he floated up to and through the ceiling. "There is little time to lose!"



Chapter 10

I descended to the eighth level, using the stairway in the southeast corner. The last time I'd visited this godforsaken place, I'd traveled due west, seeking Garamon's bones. This time I had a different goal—the volcano's core. I had to travel northwest. That meant my dragon-scale



boots, perhaps the most valuable objects in my possession, except for the Talismans of Cabirus, would get another workout. Leaping into the lava, I moved as swiftly as I could toward the core, but the lava, though it couldn't harm me, sucked at my feet like quicksand. The going was further slowed by near-constant attacks from the fire elementals that dominated the fiery depths of the Abyss.

Slow going it may have been, and dangerous, but eventually I reached my goal. At the very heart of the volcano, I came upon an island and, on the southwestern end of the island, a heavy stone door—a slab, really—flanked by two massive pillars. In the center of the slab, I saw a three-pronged opening, a match for my three-part key!

I had little time to celebrate this discovery, however, because the door was flanked not just by pillars, but by a pair of fire elementals. There was, it seemed, one last battle to be fought. I would not be defeated now, not when I was so close to the end. The thought became reality. The elementals fought tenaciously, but Caliburn served me as well in our last battle together as it had in all the others. I hefted the sword lightly, wondering if I'd be able to fling such a magnificent weapon

into the lava, as I knew I must. Time for such thoughts later. I slipped the three-part key into the opening and the stone slab disappeared, revealing a short passageway.

Beyond the passageway, I entered a square chamber filled with lava. And in the center of the lava was the Slasher of Veils. There was no doubt in my mind that the hideous creature I saw before me was the daemon who threatened Britannia. Never before had I felt such malevolence or, truth be told, such power, concentrated in one being. Magical energy sparkled all around it. Its red hide looked tougher than the finest armour. Its horns, claws, and fangs glowed wickedly, or perhaps this was just my imagination. Surely this was a creature capable of inspiring horrific imaginings. I admit I was shaken by the sight of this creature as I'd never been shaken before.

And yet I noticed that the creature had made no move against me—had, in fact, made no move at all. It seemed paralyzed, bound in place by a power even greater than its own! But there was no telling how long the magical binding might last. Even now, I shudder at the thought, the feeling, that I saw it move just a little.

I knew then that I would throw the Talismans into the lava. There was no question of changing my mind or of holding back Caliburn. Here was a creature whose visage will haunt me to my dying day. Here was a creature capable of destroying entire worlds. No object conceived or made by man was worth such a terrible price. Fearful that the spell was wearing off, I began throwing each of Cabirus' Talismans into the boiling pool. As each dropped beneath the surface, ever larger showers of fireballs appeared. The ground seemed to shake beneath my feet. Surely great forces were at work.

I saved two of the Talismans for last: the Taper of Sacrifice, because I couldn't bear the thought of being alone in the dark with the Slasher of Veils, and Caliburn, because the thought of giving it up hurt so. But eventually these last two joined the rest.

At the moment when the last of the Talismans sank, my world turned upside down. The Slasher rushed toward me, its attack so quick and silent that I had no time to fear my own death. Then a Moongate, or something very like one, appeared and everything began to spin—the gate, the Slasher, the entire world seemed topsy-turvy. Then, as dizziness took hold of me, I found myself standing on a multicolored platform floating in a black void. I was not in Britannia anymore.

I was completely disoriented and as frightened as I've ever been. The next moment, I experienced fear on an even greater scale, for the Slasher of Veils lashed out at me from behind. Again his attack had been silent. I had no warning. The pain of it ripped through me, nearly causing me to pass out. Somehow I managed to stay on my feet and, without conscious thought, I found myself running. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw the Slasher following. It was far closer than I would have wished.





Where could I go? The multicolored platform was small and offered no cover whatsoever. Eventually this unbeatable foe would catch me and rend me limb from limb. I fought hard to regain control. If this was to be the day of my death, I wanted to die with dignity. At this moment of resignation, I found my salvation. There were paths leading away from the platform. I didn't know where they might lead, but they offered some hope. I saw a blue path, a green path, a red path. Which one should I take?

And then, then, a vision came to me or, more precisely, a memory of a vision I'd had long ago. The Orb into which I'd gazed on the first level so long ago, a lifetime ago. It had revealed to me a green path, floating in the blackness—a green path I'd felt sure led to Britannia! I rushed to the green path; the Slasher was so close behind that I could feel its hot breath on my neck.

I ran and ran, nearly as frightened of falling off the path into the inky blackness as I was of falling into the Slasher's clutches. Horrifying creatures, the stuff of nightmares appeared and disappeared before me—huge floating eyeballs, gaping mouths, whirlpools of energy, fanged fish, and others. I ignored them as best I could, because the Slasher was

never far behind me. His claws raked my back over and over, peeling my armour from my body. I could feel my life's essence draining out of me. I didn't have long to live.

Finally I saw another platform in the distance, a green platform. On this platform stood a green Moongate. Somehow I knew that if I could just reach that gate, I could leap through and seal the Slasher of Veils in this mad world. I lunged for the gate just as the Slasher lunged for me, eager to deal a death blow.

I made it. The Slasher didn't. Again my world turned upside down. I landed hard, in a tunnel far brighter than I had grown accustomed to in the Abyss. There, ahead of me, I saw sunlight, the first sunlight I'd seen in weeks! Behind me I heard a deafening roar and looked back in time to see a torrent of lava rushing toward me. I dashed out into the open and found myself high up on the side of a mountain. I dashed down the mountainside toward the sea below, mere steps ahead of the lava. Diving into the ocean, I made for a lone boat.

This was one of the Baron's vessels. I was helped aboard by the guard's captain, Corwin. I clung to the ship's rail and stared back at the volcano. It seemed a thing alive. Smoke



billowed and massive chunks of red-hot rock flew from the crater at its peak. Lava flowed from dozens of openings in its side, running down to the sea, where clouds of steam rose and dissipated. There was no sign of the Slasher of Veils. I, we, the world of Britannia—all were safe! All except, perhaps, the innocent inhabitants of the Abyss. I felt the weight of their deaths, for I was certain only I had escaped.

Louvnon, Goldthirst, the pitiful Ghouls, the Seers, my brother and sister Knights, all were surely dead. I leaned heavily on the rail for a time, exhausted and overwhelmed by the enormity of my experience. From behind me, I heard a man clear his throat quietly. Turning, I saw Baron Almríc.

"Thou hast earned my gratitude and more," Almríc said. "Were it not for thee, my daughter tells me, we would have lost more than her delightful company. Truly I was a fool for doubting thee. Canst thou forgive a worried father?"

Of course I could. He had been as much a pawn in the grand scheme of Garamon as I had, or so I now suspected. Had Almríc not thrown me into the Abyss, I might never have been in a position to defeat the Slasher. Before I could give voice to these thoughts, however, Princess Arial appeared.

"Thou art the greatest hero ever to come to Britannia," she said. "When I returned to the surface using the Amulet of Travel and warned my father, we thought all was lost. Thou hast accomplished what none else could and saved our land."

Cabirus extended his hand to me. I took it gladly. Swiftly, the ship sailed away from the wreckage of Cabirus' dreams.

Later, when I'd returned home through the power of the Moonstone I had acquired in the Abyss, I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. For three nights after my triumphant return from the Abyss, I lay awake. This time, no dreams kept me awake, but rather excitement at the memory of all I'd lived through, all I had accomplished. How strange to return to the mundane life I led here on Earth. Britannia seemed so much more real to me; my earthly life, nothing but a dream. On the fourth night, as I drifted off to sleep at last, Garamon appeared to me once more.

"Hail to thee, Avatar. Thou hast well earned thy rest. I wish to thank thee for saving Britannia and repairing my brother's disastrous mistake. I regret that I was not able to help thee flee the island, but I was marshaling my last powers to open a gate for the inhabitants of the Abyss. They are now settling in a place called Destard. Farewell, and may Britannia never again be in such need of thy aid. Visit next time as honored guest, not as savior."

Buoyed by the news that I had not been responsible for the deaths of countless people and creatures, I hoped that some day I could return to Britannia, to see whether the colony in Destard had fared any better than the one in the Stygian Abyss. I hoped, too, that Britannia would be safe, that I would never again be called upon to save my adopted world from destruction. Somehow I knew this was a vain hope, knew that I *would* be called again, whether to save a princess or to save an entire world. Whatever their need, the people of Britannia could count on me. When the call came, I'd be ready. The thought comforted me. I slept deeply that night, and for many nights thereafter.





Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss



Walkthrough

our quest in *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* is divided into five major parts (plus a sixth, if you consider building your character's strength and learning the lay of the land to be a quest). Before you undertake each of the five major quests, be sure your character is powerful enough to handle it.

If all you want is an overview of the plot, rather than clues suggesting ways to accomplish specific goals, the section that follows is for you. If you're looking for specific answers to specific questions, go on to "Winning the Game" and look for the section dealing with the quest that's giving you trouble.

If you know you have to find a particular character, but can't seem to find him or her, go to the "Non-Player Characters" section. This section lists the name of each character, the level upon which he or she can be found, and, briefly, the role each plays in the game.

OVERVIEW

1. Talismans. Once you know your way around the first and second levels of the Abyss, you're ready to begin the search for the eight Talismans of Cabirus. You'll need all of these items before you can win the game:

- a. Taper of Sacrifice
- b. Shield of Valor
- c. Book of Honesty
- d. Sword of Justice (Caliburn)
- e. Standard of Honor
- f. Wine of Compassion
- g. Ring of Humility
- h. Cup of Wonder



- 2. Tyball and Ariel.** Find the seventh-level domain of the evil wizard Tyball. Destroy his anti-magic Orb and defeat him in battle. Ariel is a prisoner in Tyball's cell. Set her free.
- 3. Three-Part Key of Infinity.** Get the Key of Truth, the Key of Love, and the Key of Courage. Put the three parts together to create the Key of Infinity, which allows you access to the Chamber of Virtue.
- 4. Bury Garamon.** The bones of the ghost Garamon can be found in the southwest corner of the eighth level. Find them and take them to Garamon's empty grave in the tombs of the fifth level. Bury the bones in the grave and Garamon will impart important information about defeating the daemon known as the Slasher of Veils.
- 5. The Slasher of Veils.** Use the Key of Infinity to open the Chamber of Virtue and throw all eight Talismans into the lava pit in the center of the room. A gate appears and both you and the daemon are sucked through the gate into the Void. Run down the green path and through the green Moongate to trap the Slasher in the Void and win the game.

The order in which you complete these tasks is not particularly important, although, of course, you have to a) collect the three parts of the key before you can put it together, b) find the bones of Garamon before burying them, and c) collect all eight Talismans before you can throw them into the pit.

WINNING THE GAME

In the walkthrough presented below, you'll find the location of every major item and creature in the game. Locations are given in the format [L X Y]. L stands for level; X and Y are your X and Y coordinates, respectively.

In the game, press **[Alt][F8]** to find the coordinates of your current location. This calls up a display listing your coordinates in the following format:

Lev 6 @ 05.5 22.7 50 56

This means that you're on level 6 (Lev 6) at X coordinate 5.5 and Y coordinate 22.7. Ignore anything to the right of the decimal point and round up. Also, ignore the last two numbers (in this case, "50" and "56"). In the walkthrough, then, "Lev 6" becomes simply "6"; "05.5" becomes "6"; "22.7" becomes "23." Thus the location in the example above would be listed as:

[6 6 23]

The higher the X coordinate, the farther east you are; the higher the Y coordinate, the

further north you are. So, for example, if you were looking for location [6 8 25] and **Alt** **F8** showed you to be at the coordinates given in the example above, you would have to go a little east and a little north from your current location to reach your goal.

Note that the locations given for non-player characters are approximate, since characters are capable of moving around on their own.

COLLECTING CABIRUS' TALISMANS

Taper of Sacrifice

1. On level 4, a Knight, Trisch [4 15 27], tells the story of Zak's stealing the Taper.
2. On level 6, Delanrey the Seer [6 43 11] mentions that Zak has stolen her candelabra.
3. On level 3, talk to Zak [3 57 46]. He has collected lots of light-emitting items, including the Taper of Sacrifice, which he stole from the Knights. He will trade any item he has, including the Taper, but he will trade only for food or for more lights.

Shield of Valor

1. On level 2, Shak, the Mountainfolk smith [2 74 4], mentions that the Shield exists.
2. On level 4, Ree the Knight [4 14 23] tells of the golem on level 6 against whom Knights test their might and valor. He also reveals that anyone who beats the golem gets a reward.
3. On level 6, Nilpont the Seer [6 25 10] tells you where the golem is, and that the Shield of Valor is the reward.
4. Defeat the golem [6 6 26] and it will give you the Shield of Valor.

Book of Honesty

1. On level 6, Bronus the Seer [6 56 12] gives you a book to deliver to Morlock [6 30 25]. Bronus warns you not to open it, because it is very powerful. (If you do, it explodes in your face, and you have to go back to him to apologize.)
2. Give the book to Morlock. He tells you he has heard that you slew the Fire Hydra. Tell the truth and admit that you haven't slain the beast. Morlock will then give you a clue to the location of the Book of Honesty, telling you that it's by the key behind the hourglass.
3. Find the secret door in the hourglass-shaped room in the Academy [6 21 52]. Beyond it, in a key-shaped room, you find the Book of Honesty [6 10 45].



Sword of Justice (Caliburn)

1. On level 2, Shak, the Mountainfolk smith [2 74 4], tells you of the Sword, but he doesn't know where it is. (In fact, it's broken in two.)
2. To find the blade:
 - a. On level 3, talk to Ishtass [3 21 10]. He asks you to search for news of a lizardman, Ossikka.
 - b. Along with Ossikka's bones [3 26 6] you find a scroll. Give the scroll to Ishtass. He'll be appreciative and give you a few hints about the location of the blade. With Ossikka's bones you find a book that tells you the blade is in the southeast. The book also reveals that the Ghouls have the haft.
 - c. Go to [3 64 14], look at the north wall, and pull the lever. This drains the pond to the west [3 61 13].
 - d. Past the dry pond is the blade [3 72 11]. Get it.
3. To find the haft:
 - a. On level 5, talk to Shanklick the Ghoul [5 61 26]. She tells you about a secret door at [5 74 40].
 - b. Go through the secret door and you enter the tombs where the haft can be found.
 - c. Go to [5 66 61] and get the haft.

Once you have the two pieces, take them back to Shak. For 20 gold pieces, he will forge them back into the Sword Caliburn.

Standard of Honor

1. On level 4, be nice to one of the following Knights—Doris [4 15 3], Kyle [4 15 7], Cecil [4 5 5], or Meredith [4 5 2]—and he or she will invite you to join the Order of the Knights of the Crux Ansata. To be invited to join, answer the question, "Be thou a Fighter?" with response three, "Sometimes, when I needs must be."
2. Talk to Dorna, leader of the Knights [4 10 4]. To the questions beginning with "Who art thou?" give the following sequence of responses: 3, 3, 1, 1, 1, 2, 1. Dorna initiates you into the order as a squire. Give response two to be given a quest.
3. Your first quest is to find the writ of Lorne [4 73 2]. It's behind the door guarded by the Troll Rawstag [4 72 11].
 - a. Talk to Lakshi [4 72 17], who will tell you that Rawstag likes red gems.
 - b. If you don't already have a red gem, you can find one at [4 47 2].

- c. Give Rawstag a red gem and he will let you pass.
 - d. Return the writ to Dorna and you will be made a Knight.
4. Dorna sends you on another quest to retrieve a golden plate.
 - a. Kill the Chaos Knight, Rodrick [4 40 61], and get the key he carries.
 - b. Use the key to open the door to a maze [4 33 75].
 - c. The plate itself is behind a secret door in the maze [4 14 65]. (Feznor, a Knight, when asked about the wonders of this level, tells you that there are plenty of secret areas in the maze.) To open the secret door you must solve the lever puzzle.
 - d. The solution to the lever puzzle is written on two gravestones [4 4 35]. The order in which you flip the levers is S G G S S G (S = silver, G = gold).
 - e. Return the plate to Dorna and you will be made a full Knight. (You can now take any item belonging to any Knight.)
 5. Go back to Dorna any time after you kill Rodrick (*whether or not you are a Knight*) and he will give you the Standard of Honor. (*Note: You don't have to go through the quests described above, though you do have to kill Rodrick and, after doing so, talk to Dorna.*)

Wine of Compassion

1. On level 3, find the mute servant, Murgo [3 33 26], who is held captive by the Lizardmen because he stole food. He can teach you the Lizardman tongue.
2. Free him by making recompense for his crime — Murgo stole four pieces of food, so give four food items to Murgo's jailer, Sseetharee [3 31 25].

Note: If you have not already freed Murgo by the time you talk to his master, Dr. Owl [6 17 25], Dr. Owl will ask you to free him.

3. After freeing Murgo, go to Dr. Owl on level 6. Dr. Owl will give you directions to the Wine of Compassion.
4. Pry up a tile in a room in the Academy [6 33 62] and get the Wine.

Ring of Humility

1. On level 2, kill a Gazer [2 60 27] that has been terrorizing the Mountainmen, then talk to their king, Goldthirst [2 11 8]. He will give you the gem cutter of Coulnes, a great honor.



2. On level 4, Derek, a Knight artisan [4 15 20], is in need of a gem cutter to finish a work of art. Give him the gem cutter of Coulnes. He will thank you profusely and tell you how to find the Ring of Humility on level 5:
 - a. Go to a room with four switches [5 20 73]. Be careful to stay out of the center of the room.
 - b. Use the switches in this order: NW, SE, NE, SW. (Remember to steer clear of the center of the room while you're flipping the switches!)
 - c. The Ring will appear on the pedestal in this room. Get it.

Cup of Wonder

1. On level 6, Fyrgen the Seer [6 54 17] tells you that using incense will give you interesting dreams.
2. If you don't already have incense, you can find three cones at [6 12 17].
3. To use incense, first pass it over a torch, then breathe its fumes as it burns. When you do this, you'll have one part of a three-part dream. (There are three cones of incense, so you'll get all three parts of the dream eventually.) Each dream shows a picture of a cup at dawn, noon, or dusk, plus two letters: IN for dawn, SA for noon, HN for dusk.
4. Combine the letters in the order indicated by the three dreams (dawn, noon, dusk) and you get a mantra (INSAHN), which, when spoken at a shrine, will tell you the direction from that shrine to the Cup-room (e.g., "To the Northwest and below you").
5. Go to Eyesnack the Ghoul [5 66 24] on level 5 and have him teach you how to play Mardin's Song of Wonder on the flute. He'll also hint at the tune's effect. (He won't teach you unless you have a flute. If you don't already have a flute, find one in a bag at [5 47 55].) The tune is played by using the flute and pressing the number keys 3 5 4 2 3 7 8 7 5, in that order.
6. The Cup of Wonder is on the third level, in a room at [3 30 54]. However, the Cup is not in the room when you get there. To make the Cup appear, you must play Mardin's Song of Wonder on the flute.

KILLING TYBALL

1. When you have all the Talismans, go down to level 7. Various people tell you that Tyball has an Orb that prevents anyone else from casting magic on this level.
2. Fintor, a prisoner in Tyball's jail [7 24 72], will tell you about some mines in the northeast [7 70 76] where you can find the material from which the Orb was made.

3. Go to [7 70 76] and take the stairs down to an area where you can pick up some “orb rocks.” Get several of these.
4. A wizard, Naruto [7 15 57], tells you of a key [7 23 55] that lets you through a door [7 44 61]. Get the key and go through the door.
5. Find the only stairway in the area and go down to level 8. Now find another set of stairs in *this* area and go back up to level 7. The stairs take you to a room [7 46 44] that contains many crowns.
6. Talk to the imp in this room and he’ll describe the correct crown. The one you want has an inset white gem.
7. Put the crown on and you’ll see the correct path through Tyball’s maze [7 40 31]. (If you’re wearing the crown, the path appears yellow.) Make your way through to the end of the maze without stepping off the yellow path.
8. In the room at the end of the path you find Tyball [7 66 12] and his Orb, as well as the kidnapped princess, Ariel. Destroy the Orb and defeat Tyball. (Destroying the Orb is not necessary, but it does allow you to cast magic and it costs Tyball half his Vitality, making him easier to kill. You can destroy the Orb by using the stones you collected in the mines on it.)
9. When you defeat Tyball, he tells you about a daemon — the Slasher of Veils — that is about to be released on level 8. When the wizard dies, take his keys. One of these opens the cell in which Ariel is held prisoner. Free her and she will use a magical amulet to go home. She’s safe, but you have a daemon to slay.
10. Tyball also has a key to several prison cells in the northwest. In these cells are prisoners who will tell you about a three-part key.

THE THREE-PART KEY

To win the game, you must enter the Chamber of Virtue. This is locked and only a special key can open it: the Key of Infinity, which is made of three parts. Finding these three parts begins with the use of a fourth: the skull-headed key.

Skull-headed Key

Tyball’s skull-headed key opens the high-security prison cells in the northwest [7 5 65]. Go there and talk to the prisoners inside.

1. Defeat Tyball and get the skull-headed key he’s carrying.
2. Use the key to open up his prison and learn about the Key of Love, the Key of Truth, and the Key of Courage. These are the three parts of the Key of Infinity.



Key of Love

1. Talk to Bolinard [7 6 67], one of the prisoners on level 7, and he will give you the picture of Tom. (He uses the back of it for a map.)
2. Take the picture to the old woman, Judy [5 42 10]. Tell her you have the picture of Tom, her lover, who died many years ago. When you show her the picture, she cries into the lava and the Key of Love magically appears. Get it.

Key of Courage

1. Talk to Smonden [7 2 67], one of the level 7 prisoners. He tells you of the Key of Courage. He also gives you a key that unlocks a door [7 6 76].
2. Go to the door, unlock it, go through, and then go all the way back to level 3 (there's only one way up from here), fighting monsters all the way. On level 3, beat down the door at [3 4 67] into a room which contains many monsters and a key. The key opens the door at the eastern end of the room. Beyond the eastern door, at [3 14 66], is the Key of Courage. Get it.

Key of Truth

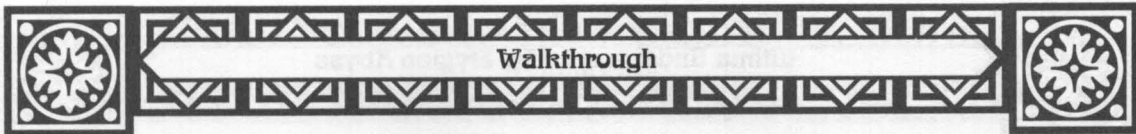
1. On level 7, talk to Gurstang [7 1 64], another prisoner who was caught while seeking the Key of Truth. He will give you a code word (*Folanae*) to say to his friend Illomo [6 25 12].
2. Go to level 6 and say the code word to Illomo. He will thank you for bringing news of his friend. He will also explain the importance of the word. There is a book in the library [6 14 56] with a title consisting of two words, one of which is *Folanae*; the other word (*Fanlo*) is a mantra.
3. Speak the word *Fanlo* at a shrine. The Key of Truth appears.

Key of Infinity

When you have the Keys of Truth, Love, and Courage, put them all in the same circle on your inventory display. They merge to form the Key of Infinity.

BURYING GARAMON'S BONES

1. The first time you sleep after you defeat Tyball, Garamon comes to you in a dream and tells you that his bones must be buried in their proper place. Find his bones



[8 2 17] and bury them in his grave [5 66 65]. This increases Garamon's power, and he can now tell you that you must use the Key of Infinity to enter the Chamber of Virtue at the heart of level 8.

DEALING WITH THE DAEMON

1. Use the Key of Infinity to enter the Chamber of Virtue [8 40 33].
2. Encounter the Slasher of Veils, but don't fight it—it's indestructible here (as you have been warned many times by many inhabitants of the Abyss).
3. Throw Cabirus' eight Talismans into the lava pool [8 40 40]. When you do so, you're sucked into the daemon's plane.
4. The Slasher of Veils follows you. Run down the green path to the green Moongate at the end of the path. Leap through it, leaving the daemon trapped. You go back to Britannia.
5. Watch the end game ...

SPECIAL ITEMS/QUESTS

These items are not essential to completing the game, but will help you along the way.

Orb of Destiny [1 72 15]

Tells player to seek green when between worlds (clue to correct path in daemon's plane)

Silver Sapling [1 44 2]

1. Get it and you get a seed.
2. Plant the seed and a new sapling arises. You'll be resurrected there when you die. (Think carefully before planting it: If you plant it on level one and you die on level seven, you'll have to make your way back down again ...)

Dragonskin Boots

These boots will let you walk on lava without taking damage.

1. Sethar Strongarm [4 61 26] will give you dragonskin scales if you're nice to him and give him rotworm stew. (Lanugo [1 4 70] can give you the recipe for rotworm stew.)



- You also need a rotworm, a bottle of port, a mushroom, and a bowl. Put the objects in the bowl and use the recipe. (If you don't already have all the ingredients, you can find a bowl at [4 75 31], a dead rotworm at [4 63 6], a bottle of port at [4 15 34], and a mushroom at [4 30 24].
2. Get spider thread by defeating the spider at [1 24 70].
 3. Give the scales and thread to Marrowsuck, the Ghoul tailor [5 42 27], and he'll make dragonskin boots for you.

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD—LEVEL BY LEVEL

This playthrough contains all the major actions you must perform to win the game. It does not include:

1. Where to find ordinary items such as weapons, armour, and food
2. How to get from every place to every other place.

Level 1

Do everything described in the tutorial found in the Install Guide that came with Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss.

West of Bragit, jump over the chasm [1 16 6] to the north and get to the Outcasts' [1 26 23] area. The red key opens their door [1 25 17]. Talk to the Outcasts, including Gulik [1 26 23] and Hagbard [1 40 23].

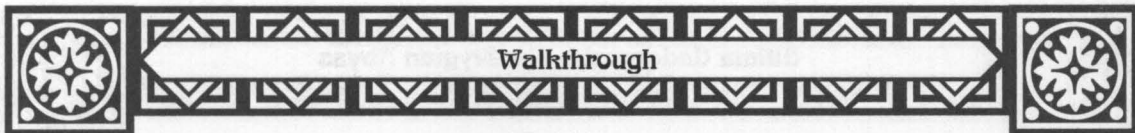
Go to the silver sapling room and go through the secret door [1 41 5]. Jump over to the button [1 61 2] and push it to open the door [1 56 11] to the shrine room; jump into the shrine room, use the shrine [1 56 21], and chant a mantra or two to increase your abilities.

Walk out of the water [1 66 2] and up the slope, break down the door [1 17 6], and fight the acid slug. Get the gray key [1 66 4]. Peer into the orb [1 72 15] in the nearby room.

Go back to the sapling room, go through the locked door to the north [1 45 13], walk down the hall to the bridge [1 45 31], and fight the renegade Green Goblin. Look in through the window [1 43 37].

Walk west from that central area to the Green Goblins' portcullis [1 17 42]. Talk to Drog and have him let you in.

Walk north along the ledge to get to Vernix (their king) [1 3 71] and his bodyguard Lanugo [1 5 66]. Talk to Lanugo first and get his recipe for worm stew. Then talk to Vernix. Be flattering and he'll give you a lot of useful information.



Now go back to the central area and go north over the bridge to the Gray Goblins' area [1 52 63]. Have Eb [1 52 64] let you in. Talk to Retichall (the queen) [1 71 67] to get permission to talk to Ketchaval (the king), then talk to Ketchaval [1 74 63].

Walk into the cell [1 70 61] in which Bragit was held. Read his note and take the pole.

Go north and then west from the entrance to the Gray Goblins' area. There's a secret door in the north [1 43 72]. This leads to a healing fountain [1 36 75]. Drink from it if you've taken any damage.

South of the healing fountain is a door to the spiders' area [1 37 67]; enter it. To the west, over a bridge, is a brown spider [1 23 66] guarding some strong thread. Kill it and get the thread.

Go back to the Gray Goblins' area. Talk to Jaacar [1 55 70] about the privy [1 57 65]. Jump down into it.

Level 2

Swim south, get out of the water [2 55 56], and walk up the ramp to the north. Walk north and west. Fight the Goblins [2 40 71], if you can take them.

Walk south to the central area and then west to the portcullis marking the entrance to the Mountainfolk's area [2 15 36]. Talk to Brawnclan [2 15 34] and have him let you in.

Go southeast and then west into the throne room. Talk to Goldthirst [2 11 10], and offer to slay the monster. Don't go after the Gazer yet—he's probably too tough right now.

If you give Goldthirst a good gift (gold works well), he'll give you a password to get by the guard to his hoard, Steeltoe [2 11 16]. Look but don't touch!

The entrance to the mines is on the east side of the passageway south from the central area [2 42 17]. Take the south passage, then turn right, turn left, walk over a bridge, turn left, walk over another bridge, and keep on going to get to Shak [2 60 4]. Talk to Shak, learn about the Shield and Sword, get things repaired if necessary.

Exit the mines and go back into the south passageway. Go north toward the center and take your first right. Fight the spider and get the key [2 55 28].

Go back to Goldthirst's room. Use the key on the door to the southwest [2 7 5] and go down the stairs beyond.

Level 3

In the first room you come to, read the plaque [3 1 9]. Watch out for the poisonous plants! Press the buttons [3 5 7] in the order shown on the plaque and go through the door. Go north when you get to a big corridor [3 40 3], cross the bridge, go through the



door [3 40 27], and take a left. Now your first left will get you to the jail [3 26 27].

Alternate between talking to Sseetharee [3 31 25] and talking to Murgo [3 35 26] until you can basically understand the Lizardman language. Give Sseetharee the four pieces of food he wants, and he'll free Murgo.

Talk to Zak [3 57 46]. Notice that he's crazy. (This being the Abyss, however, there's more to him than one might think ...)

Go back to the bridge [3 40 21] and jump into the water to the west. Go up the slope to the north [3 25 21], cross the bridge to the south, and go through the first door to find Ishtass.

Talk to Ishtass [3 21 10] and learn about Ossikka. Jump east into the water from the bridge you just crossed and head south to find Ossikka's bones along with some important documents [3 26 10]. Now you must go to the southeast, as Ossikka's scroll tells you.

Go back up the slope out of the water [3 25 21], go west, and then turn left (south). Hug the wall on your right side, jump off the cliff, and swim northwest between the walls [3 6 30]. Take a left (south), go through the door, and head back to the room where you started the level. Now go to the first bridge [3 40 21], and this time jump into the water to the east.

At [3 64 14] (in the southeast) is a vine-covered wall. Search it, open the secret door you find, and pull the lever. Now go to the bottom of the ramp [3 56 21] and get the blade [3 72 11].

Level 4

Make rotworm stew from Lanugo's recipe.

Talk to Sethar [4 61 26], give him the rotworm stew, and get his dragon scales.

Now go and talk to some knights. Trisch [4 15 27] says that someone crazy stole the Taper of Sacrifice. Ree [4 14 22] mentions a golem below. Doris [4 15 3], Kyle [4 15 7], Cecil [4 5 5], or Meredith [4 5 2] will invite you to be a Knight.

Talk to Dorna [4 10 4] and pass the initiation by answering truthfully and humbly. He wants you to find the writ.

Rawstag [4 72 11] guards the door to the room in which you'll find the writ, but he wants something from you before he'll open it. Ask Lakshi [4 72 17] about him. He wants a red gem. Give it to him and get the writ from the room beyond.

Give the writ to Dorna. Now he wants you to find a plate.

Read the gravestones [4 4 35], note the colors of the dots on the i's.

Talk to Biden [4 22 53] to learn something about the villain Rodrick.

Kill Rodrick [4 40 75]. Take his key and enter the maze [4 33 75]. Find the secret door [4 22 60], solve the lever puzzle [4 15 54] with the gravestones' clues, and get the plate [4 12 54].

Dorna gives you the Standard of Honor for killing Rodrick. He also makes you a full Knight for getting the plate, and opens the door to the armoury [4 3 12] if you want to help yourself to some nice stuff.

Level 5

Talk to Marrowsuck [5 42 27], give him the scales and thread, bring back food, and get the dragonskin boots, which let you walk on lava without taking damage.

Talk to Shanklick [5 61 16] and help her out by giving the kinder, gentler solution to her problem (hold a feast ...). She tells you about the tombs. Find the secret door [5 74 40] and enter the tombs. Get the haft [5 66 61].

Talk to Anjor [5 21 44]. Talk to Kneenibble [5 72 32] and get the combination to the puzzle that's preventing you from getting to the mines. Enter the mines [5 1 33] and get all the zanium. Give it to Anjor and get the gold nugget.

Now that you've got both halves of the sword, take them up to Shak. On the way, talk to Zak and barter for his taper, which you now know is the Taper of Sacrifice.

Kill the Gazer [2 60 27] and tell Goldthirst. He'll give you the gem cutter of Coulnes. Give him the gold nugget as a gift and he gives you a very powerful ax.

Now head down to level 4 and talk to Derek [4 15 20]. Give him the gem cutter you got from Goldthirst. Walk down to level 5 and solve the Ring of Humility puzzle [5 26 73] using Derek's instructions.

Talk to Eyesnack [5 66 24]. Lend him a flute and he'll teach you Mardin's Song of Wonder.

Level 6

Talk to Dr. Owl [6 17 25] and you'll find that Murgo is his servant. If you've freed Murgo, he'll give you directions to the Wine of Compassion. If you're a mage, get a Flam rune from him.

Get a book from Bronus [6 56 12] and deliver it to Morlock [6 30 25]. Be honest and say that you've haven't slain the Hydra. He gives you directions to the Book of Honesty.

Go north to the Academy. Get the Wine by prying up the tile [6 33 62] the way Dr. Owl told you to. Go through the secret door Morlock mentioned [6 21 70], jump the chasm, and get the Book of Honesty [6 10 45].

Talk to Nilpont [6 25 10] and learn about the golem. Now go and defeat it [6 6 26] and get the Shield of Valor.

Talk to Gralwart [6 53 25] and learn how to do the Vas rune puzzle. Do it (start by walking through a wall between two banners [6 65 37]).

Talk to Fyrgen [6 54 17] and learn that burning incense causes visions. Talk to



Louvnon [6 25 21] and learn about the three-part mantra. Get some incense, burn it, have some dreams, put the letters together in the chronological order of the backgrounds of the dreams, and you get a mantra that will lead you to the Cup of Wonder.

Chant the mantra at a shrine. Go up to a shrine on a higher level and try again. Try it on each level. By the time you reach the third, you should know approximately where to find the Cup. Go there [3 31 54], play the song Eyesnack taught you, and get the Cup.

Now you have all eight Talismans.

Level 7

Talk to Cardon [7 23 16], who tells you about a medallion you need to move freely about this level. Go southeast across the river and find his lost medallion [7 53 15].

Go through a couple of checkpoints, showing the medallion to everyone.

Talk to Naruto [7 15 57], who tells you about a key. Get it [7 23 55].

Get trapped in the prison [7 30 70]. Bribe the guard to open the portcullis for you. He won't open the one you want, so go through the second portcullis, talking to the prisoners. Fintor [7 20 58] tells you about the mines where you can find the material from which Tyball's Orb was made. Kallistan [7 12 63] gives you a crystal splinter that will help you enter some secret mines [7 25 51] if you want to. Dantes [7 7 71] tells you about a secret passage leading from his cell. Take it [7 10 72] and head east. At [7 30 76] is a map that will come in handy later.

Go to the entrance to the secret mines [7 25 51]. An entrance will open up if you have the crystal splinter. Go through the secret door at [7 32 43] and then one at [7 32 51]. Jump across the chasm. Go through the door at [7 44 61] (or the one at [7 43 65] if you fell into the lava pit). Go down the stairs at [7 46 60], then up the stairs at [8 43 52], and you'll be in the crown room.

Talk to the imp, who will give you some clues. Pick up the correct crown, which has an inset white gem. Put it on so you'll be able to get through Tyball's maze.

Go back into the lava pit and go to the east end, coming up the slope at [7 73 54]. There's a secret door at [7 74 67]. Go through, take the stairs down, get some "orb rocks" on level 8, and come back up. At [7 66 66], underneath a skull, is a key. Go through the door at [7 62 66], and another door at [7 51 52], then cross the bridge. To your left is the entrance to Tyball's maze [7 53 41]. Wear the crown and follow the yellow path through the maze. Go through the door at the other end [7 66 21] and you'll enter Tyball's room. Break the Orb with the orb rocks (by using them on the Orb) and you'll be able to cast spells again. (Also, his Vitality will be halved).

Kill Tyball. Take his keys. Free Arial. The door at [7 66 3] will let you down to the eighth level, but don't go down there yet.

If you sleep now, Garamon will appear and give you some useful information.

Now get the three-part key. Go back to the prisons on this level, and use Tyball's key to get into the maximum security area at the west end. Talk to Bolinard [7 6 67], who will give you a picture of a fellow named Tom. Talk to Smonden [7 2 67], who will give you a key to the door leading to the Key of Courage area. Talk to Gurstang [7 1 52], who will give you the code word *Folanae* to give to his friend Illomo.

To get the Key of Courage, enter the door at [7 6 114] using Smonden's key. Fight your way to level 3, get the Key, and come back down.

To get the Key of Love, talk to Judy [5 42 10] and give her the picture of Tom. She will cry into the lava, creating the Key of Love.

To get the Key of Truth, tell Illomo [6 25 12] the code word you got from his friend Gurstang. Illomo will tell you to look in the library for a book with the word *Folanae* in its title. The title of the book [6 14 56] also contains the word *Fanlo*. Speak the word *Fanlo* at a shrine and the Key of Truth will appear. Now put the three parts together to create the Key of Infinity.

Level 8

While you slept after killing Tyball, Garamon told you to bury his bones. Go north from the stairway in the southeast, take your fifth left, and talk to Carasso [8 57 55]. He gives you many hints as to the location of Garamon's bones as well as a key. The bones themselves are located at [8 2 17]. Pick them up, bring them up to the tombs on level 5, and bury them in Garamon's grave [5 66 66].

The ghost of Garamon will appear and talk about banishing the daemon. Suggest using the Talismans and throwing them into the volcano.

Go back down to level 8, go through the door at [8 66 40] using Carasso's key, and use the Key of Infinity on the door to the Chamber of Virtue [8 40 34]. Enter the Chamber, throw all eight Talismans into the volcano (one at a time), and get sucked into another dimension.

The Big Finish

Now you just need to get back to Britannia, trapping the daemon in this dimension. Run along the green path (as the orb on level 1 indicated) and go through the green Moongate. Congratulations — you have saved Britannia yet again!



NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

Here you will find a complete list of the characters you meet in the Abyss, along with a brief description of each one's role in the plot.

Level 1

Bragit [1 21 7]: Outcast. Introduces the player to the Abyss.

Drog [1 21 44]: Green Goblin sentry.

Eb [1 41 65]: Gray Goblin sentry.

Gulik [1 26 23]: Outcast.

Hagbard [1 41 22]: Outcast. Information about Goblins and the Abyss in general.

Jaacar [1 55 70]: Gray Goblin. Gives clues that the pit at [1 57 65] is a connection to level 2.

Ketchaval [1 74 63]: King of the Gray Goblins. Talks about Goblins.

Lanugo [1 4 70]: Vernix's guard. Knows the recipe for rotworm stew.

Retichall [1 71 61]: Queen of the Gray Goblins.

Vernix [1 2 71]: King of the Green Goblins. General information about the Abyss and the Talismans.

Level 2

Brawnclan [2 14 34]: Mountainman guard.

Corby [2 34 26]: Gives information on Talismans.

Goldthirst [2 11 8]: Mountainman king. Gives you gem cutter of Coulnes if you slay the Gazer.

Hewstone [2 50 5]: Miner.

Hoard Guard [2 11 16]: Lets you view Goldthirst's hoard if given the password (*Deco Morono*).

Ironwit [2 23 44]: Senile old Mountainman with puzzles.

Shak [2 74 4]: Mountainman smith. Information about the Sword of Justice and the Shield of Valor. Repairs and evaluates items.

Level 3

Bandits [3 40 11]

Head Bandit [3 47 13]

Ishtass [3 21 10]: Gray Lizardman. Gives the location of half of the Sword of Justice.

Iss'leek [3 51 35]: Gives scroll of Water Walk in return for a ruby.

Murgo [3 33 26]: Dr. Owl's mute servant. Free him and Dr. Owl tells you about the Wine of Compassion.

Sseetharee [3 31 25]: Green Lizardman. The jailer guarding Murgo.

Zak [3 57 46]: Will trade the Taper of Sacrifice.

Level 4

Biden [4 22 53]: Talks about the Chaos Knight.

Cecil [4 5 5]: Knight. Gives a useful combat mantra.

Derek [4 15 20]: Gives directions to Ring of Humility if given the gem cutter of Coulnes.

Doris [4 15 3]: Knight. Gives a useful combat mantra.

Dorna [4 10 4]: Leader of the Knights of the Order of the Crux Ansata. He lets you join the Order.

Feznor [4 3 27]: Gives hints to puzzles.

Kyle [4 15 7]: Knight. Gives a useful combat mantra.

Lakshi [4 72 17]: Troll. Gives general information on trolls.

Linnet [4 50 23]: Gives overview of level 4.

Meredith [4 5 2]: Knight. Gives a useful combat mantra.

Oradinar [4 26 12]: Tells you how to fish and gives you a fishing pole.

Rawstag [4 72 11]: Wants a red gem in order to let you past the door beyond which the Writ of Lorne is hidden.

Ree [4 14 23]: Tells about the golem.

Rodrick [4 40 61]: Defeat him to earn the Standard of Honor.

Sethar [4 61 26]: Troll. Gives dragon scales in exchange for rotworm stew.

Trisch [4 15 27]: Tells about the Taper of Sacrifice being stolen.



Level 5

- Anjor** [5 21 44]: Wants you to collect zanium in the mine.
- Eyesnack** [5 66 24]: Ghoul. Teaches you how to play Mardin's Song of Wonder on the flute.
- Judy** [5 42 10]: Creates Key of Love if shown Tom's picture.
- Kneenibble** [5 72 32]: Ghoul. Knows the combination to enter the mine.
- Marrowsuck** [5 42 27]: Ghoul tailor. Makes dragonskin boots if given spider thread and dragon scales.
- Shanklick** [5 61 26]: Ghoul. Tells you where to find the blade of the Sword of Justice.

Level 6

- Bronus** [6 56 12]: Has a book to be delivered to Morlock.
- Delanrey** [6 53 13]: Talks about Zak.
- Dr. Owl** [6 17 25]: Once Murgo is freed, Dr. Owl gives directions to the Wine of Compassion.
- Door** [6 4 2]: Teaches Sheet Lightning spell.
- Fyrgen** [6 54 17]: Speaks of burning incense and about a daemon (the Slasher of Veils).
- golem** [6 6 26]: Hands over the Shield of Valor if defeated.
- Gralwart** [6 53 25]: Gives directions to a Vas runestone.
- Illomo** [6 25 12]: Friend of Gurstang. Gives clue to the Key of Truth.
- Louvron** [6 21 16]: Gives clue about Three Part Mantra.
- Morlock** [6 30 25]: Once the book from Bronus is delivered, Morlock gives directions to the Book of Honesty.
- Nilpont** [6 25 10]: Talks about the golem.
- Ranthru** [6 53 4]: Increases casting skill in return for a book in the caves to the northeast.
- Shenilor** [6 40 27]: Talks about the old Academy.

Level 7

Arial [7 66 6]: The princess you're supposed to rescue. (She has no conversation.)

Bolinard [7 6 67]: Has a picture of Tom.

Cardon [7 23 16]: Information about Tyball and the medallion of passage [7 33 30].

Dantes [7 7 71]: Knows an escape route from his cell.

Fintor [7 24 72]: General information.

Griffle [7 14 65]: Information about level 7.

Guards [7 24 4]: Demand medallion of passage.

Guards [7 7 42], [7 32 70], [7 33 26], [7 33 67], [7 43 44].

Gurstang [7 1 64]: Gives you a code word for Illomo to find Key of Truth.

Kallistan [7 12 63]: Has a crystal splinter that opens a hidden entrance to tombs.

Naruto [7 15 57]: Information about Tyball's Orb.

Smonden [7 2 67]: Information about the Key of Courage. He gives a key to the shaft up to next level.

Tyball [7 66 12]: The villain of the piece—Garamon's evil brother.

Level 8

Carasso [8 57 55]: Gives you a key to the door near the Chamber of Virtue.



Weapons Table

<u>ARMOUR</u>	<u>PROTECTION</u>	<u>WEAPON</u>	<u>DAMAGE</u>
Antique armour	3	Arrow	as bow
Buckler	1	Blowgun	1
Chain armour	2	Bolt	as crossbow
Chain coif	2	Boomerang	1
Chain leggings	2	Bow	8
Crested helm	3	Burst arrow	bow +2
Curved heater	3	Cannon	90
Decorative shield	3	Cleaver	2
Gauntlets	2	Club	2
Gorget	3	Crossbow	10
Great helm	4	Dagger	1
Greaves	2	Dagger, poisoned	1, plus poison
Kidney belt	1	Death scythe	50
Leather armour	1	Fellowship staff	6
Leather boots	1	Fire sword	8
Leather collar	1	Fire wand	10
Leather gloves	1	Firedoom staff	20
Leather helm	1	Glass sword	127
Leather leggings	1	Great dagger	5
Plate armour	4	Halberd	10
Plate leggings	3	Hammer	4
Protection ring	1	Hammer, two-handed	9
Scale armour	2	Hoe	2
Spiked shield	2	Hoe of Destruction	20
Wooden shield	2	Juggernaut hammer	25
		Knife	2
		Lightning wand	8
		Lightning whip	10
		Mace	5



Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss



WEAPON

DAMAGE

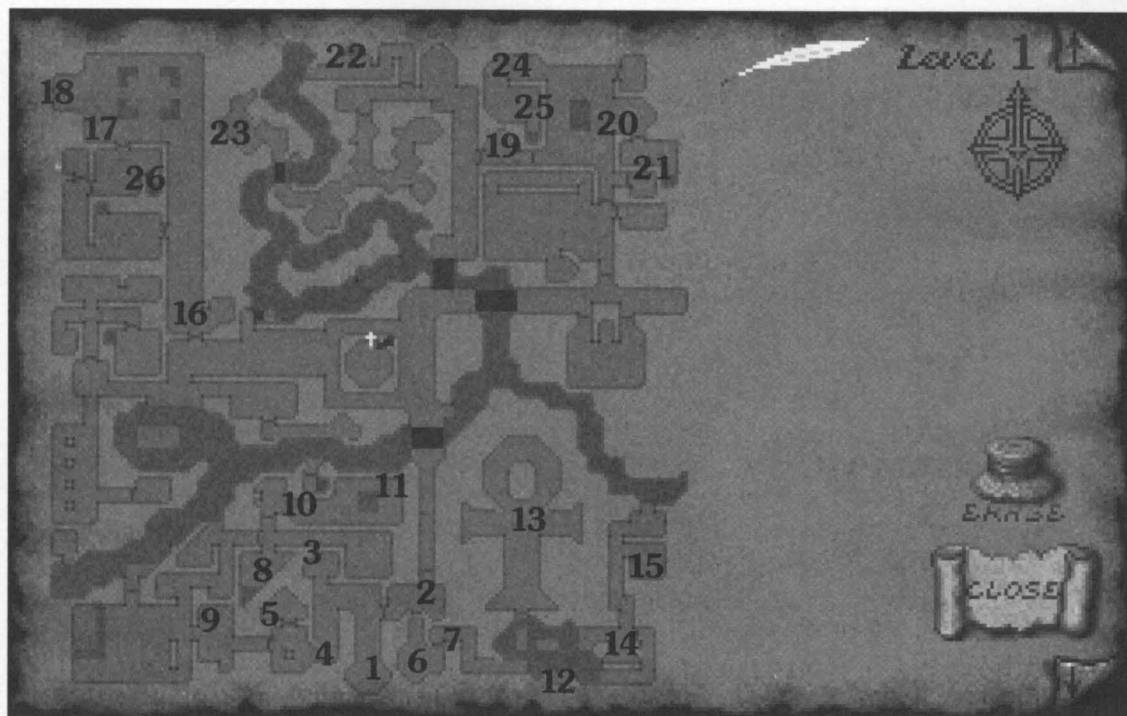
Magebane	7
Magic arrow	bow +4
Magic ax.....	8
Magic boomerang.....	2
Magic bow	12
Magic sword	6
Main gauche	2
Morningstar	5
Musket	9
Pick	4
Pitchfork.....	2
Powderkeg.....	16
Rake	2
Scythe	7
Serpentine dagger	1

WEAPON

DAMAGE

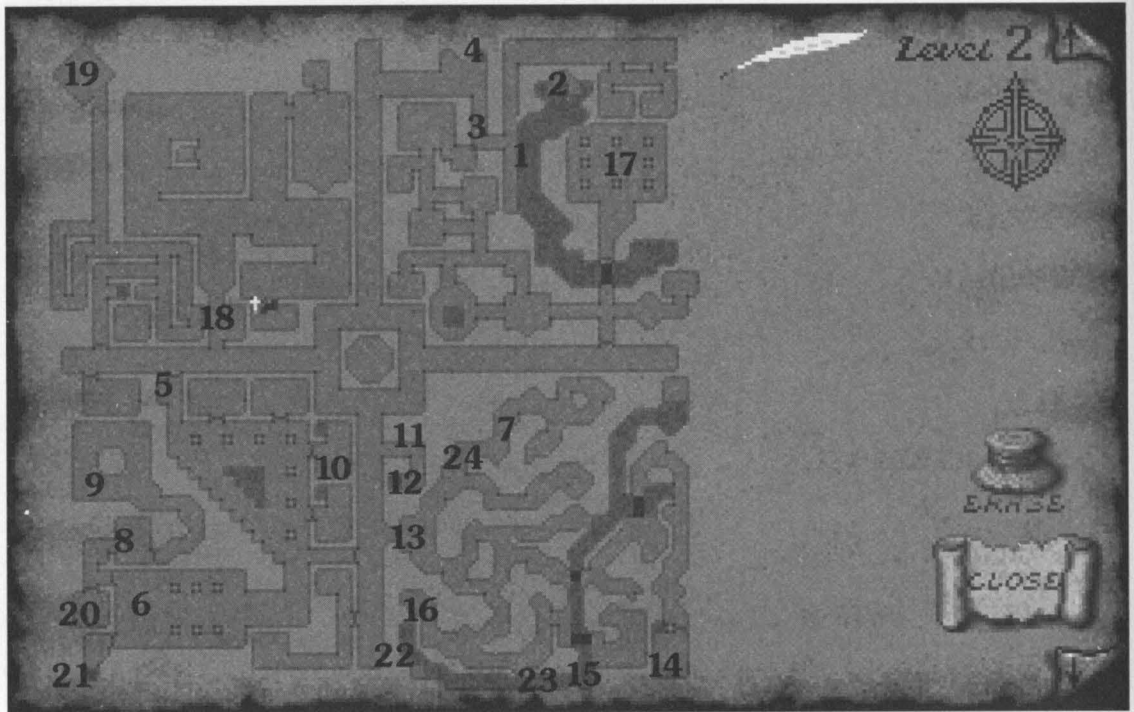
Serpentine sword	6
Shears.....	6
Shovel.....	6
Sling	3
Sword	6
Sword, two-handed.....	11
Sword, custom	6
Sword, decorative.....	4
Sword of Defense.....	6
Throwing ax	4
Torch.....	3
Triple crossbow.....	28
Tseramed arrow.....	bow +1
Whip.....	4

Weapons Table



Map 1

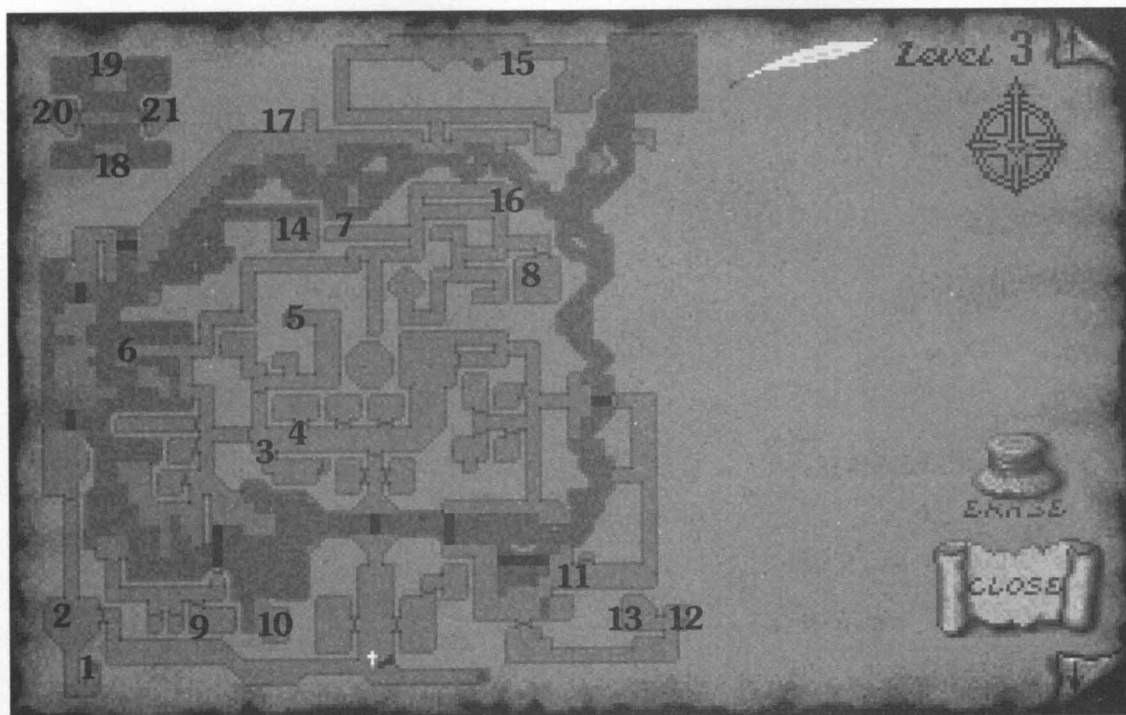
- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Entrance | 14. Key |
| 2. Bag | 15. Orb |
| 3. Torch, bowl, axe | 16. Droq |
| 4. Ort, Jux runes | 17. Lanugo |
| 5. Pack | 18. Vernix |
| 6. Silver Sapling | 19. Eb |
| 7. Secret door | 20. Retichall |
| 8. Giant cat | 21. Ketchaval |
| 9. Bragit | 22. Healing fountain |
| 10. Gulik | 23. Spider's lair |
| 11. Hagbard | 24. Jaacar |
| 12. Button (opens shrine door) | 25. Privy |
| 13. Shrine | 26. Stairs to Level 2 |



Map 2

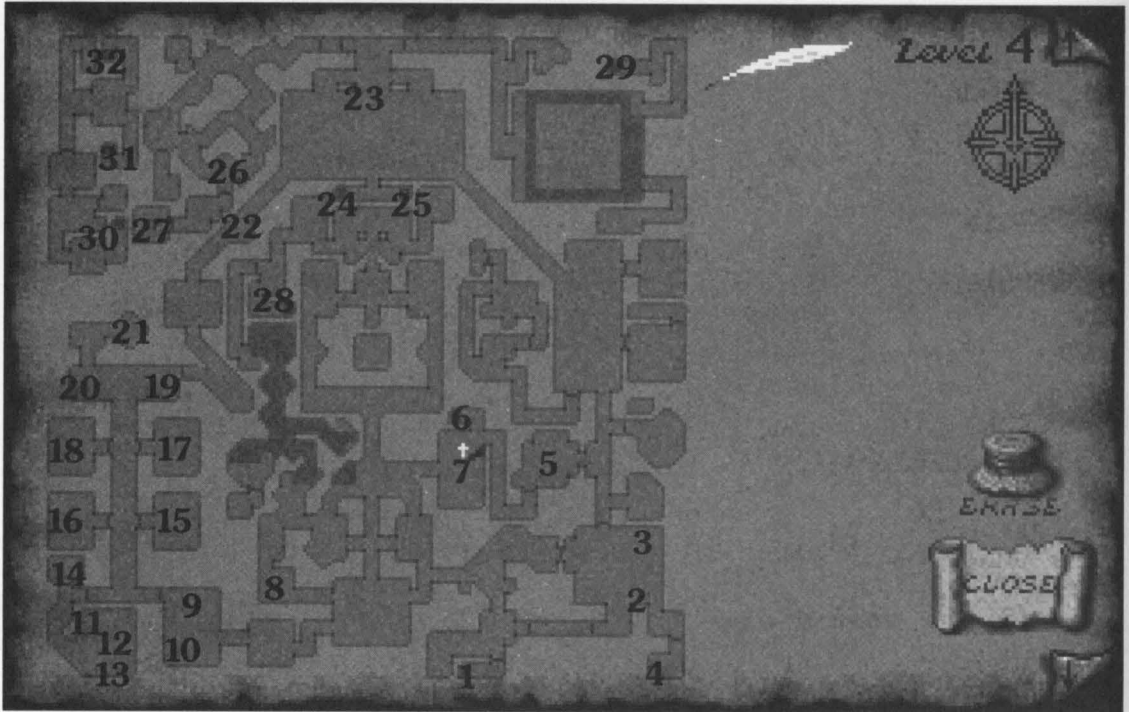
- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Privy drops you here | 13. Entrance to mines |
| 2. Healing fountain | 14. Shak |
| 3. Hostile Goblins | 15. Drain leads to Level 3 |
| 4. Stairs to Level 3 | 16. Hewstone |
| 5. Brawnclan | 17. Skeletons |
| 6. Goldthirst | 18. Ironwit |
| 7. Gazer | 19. Shrine |
| 8. Steel tie | 20. Flute |
| 9. Goldthirst's treasure | 21. Stairs to Level 3 |
| 10. Corby | 22. To level 3 |
| 11. Key | 23. To level 3 |
| 12. Stairs to Level 1 | 24. Gazer |

Weapons Table



Map 3

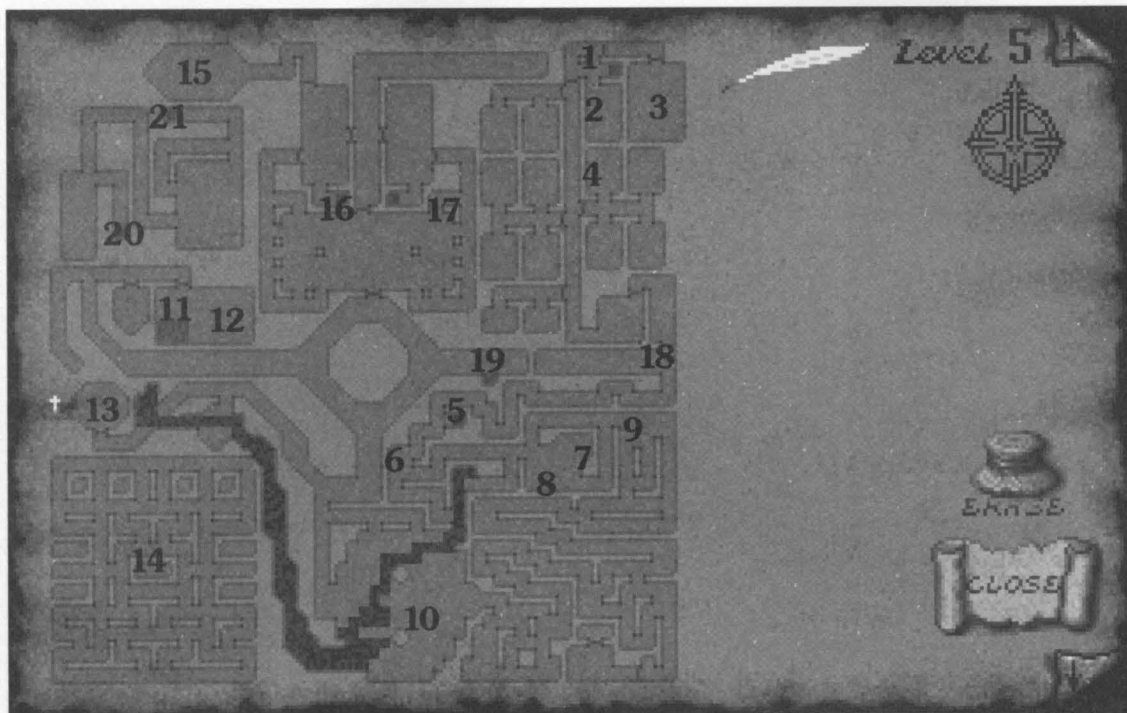
- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stairs to Level 2 2. Room with poison plants and door-opening buttons 3. Seetharee 4. Murgo 5. Stairs to Level 4 6. Key 7. Shrine 8. Zak 9. Ishtass 10. Ossika's bones | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Secret door leads to lever room 12. Shrine, healing fountain 13. Blade of sword Caliburn 14. Potion, book, Cut of Wonder 15. Stairs to Level 2 16. Teleport to 17 17. Teleport (16) destination 18. Stairs to Level 4 19. Stairs to Level 4 20. Key 21. Key of Courage |
|--|--|



Map 4

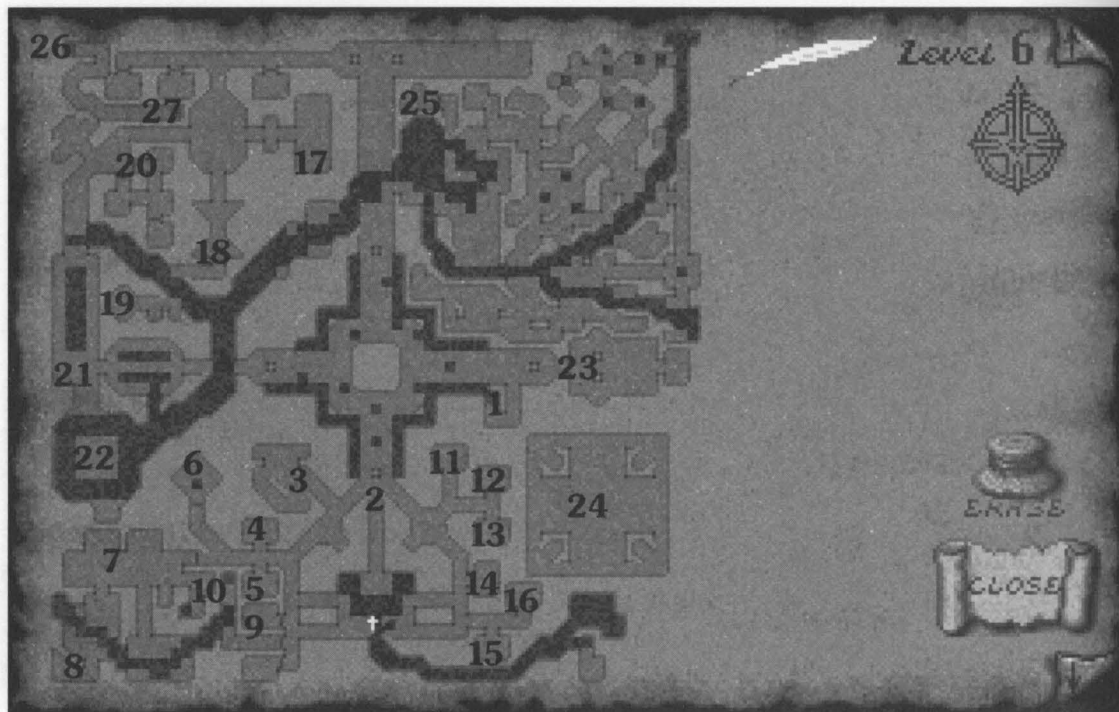
- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Stairs to Level 3 | 17. Trisch |
| 2. Rawstag | 18. Feznor |
| 3. Lakshi | 19. Ree |
| 4. Writ of Lorne, Shrine | 20. Gravestones |
| 5. Sothas | 21. Shrine |
| 6. Stairs to Level 5 | 22. Biden |
| 7. Linnet | 23. Rodrick |
| 8. Oradinar | 24. Stairs to Level 5 |
| 9. Doris | 25. Stairs to Level 5 |
| 10. Kyle | 26. Secret door |
| 11. Cecil | 27. Gold plate |
| 12. Meredith | 28. Stairs to Level 3 |
| 13. Dorna Iron fist | 29. Stairs to Level 3 |
| 14. Armoury | 30. Stairs to Level 5 |
| 15. Derek | 31. Stairs to Level 3 |
| 16. Biden's quarters | 32. Stairs to Level 3 |

Weapons Table



Map 5

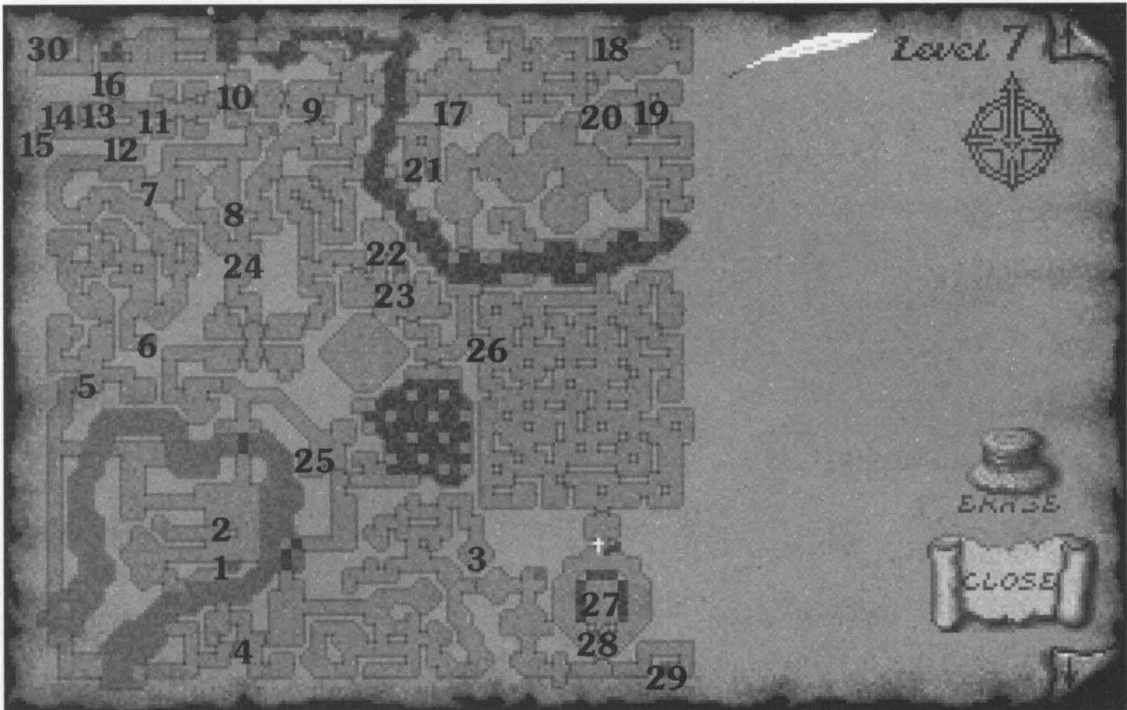
- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stairs to Level 4 2. Garamon's empty grave 3. Cabirus' grave 4. Haft of Sword Caliburn 5. Stairs to level 4 6. Marrowsuck 7. Shanklick 8. Eyesnack 9. Kneeknibble 10. Judy, Key of Love 11. Shrine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Anjor 13. Mine dispatch chamber 14. Mines 15. Rings of Humility 16. Stairs to Level 4 17. Stairs to Level 4 18. Secret door 19. Stairs to Level 6 20. Stairs to Level 4 21. Stairs to Level 4 |
|---|--|



Map 6

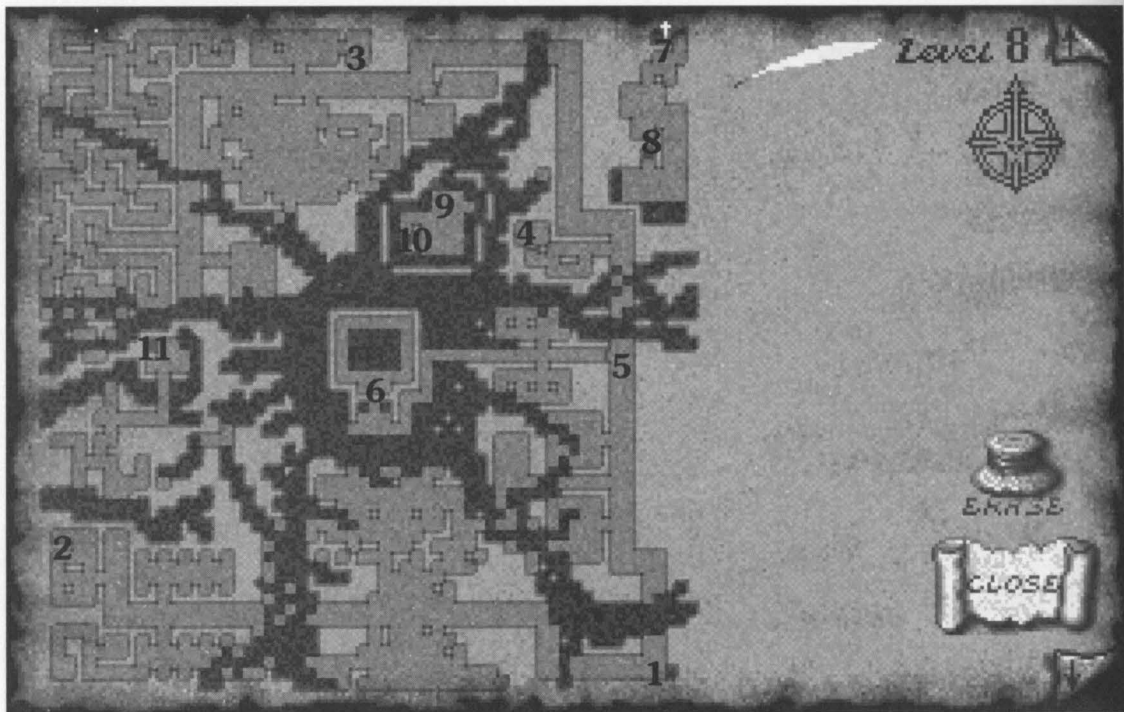
- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stairs to Level 5 2. Shenilor 3. Morlock 4. Louvnon 5. Illomo 6. Dr. Owl 7. Incense 8. Talking door 9. Nilpont 10. Stairs to Level 7 11. Dominus 12. Gralwart 13. Fyrgen 14. Delanrey | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Ranthru 16. Bronus 17. Wine of Compassion 18. Secret door 19. Book of Honesty 20. Library, <i>Folanac Fanlo</i> book 21. Shrine 22. Golem, Shield of Valor 23. "Eyes" teleport to Vas rune puzzle 24. Vas rune puzzle 25. Book—<i>On the Properties of Runestones</i> 26. Stairs to Level 7 27. Stairs to Level 5 |
|---|---|

Weapons Table



Map 7

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stairs to Level 6 2. Cardon 3. Medallion of Passage 4. Tyball's guards 5. Tyball's guards 6. Stairs to level 8 7. Naruto 8. Key 9. Tyball's guards 10. Fintor 11. Griffle 12. Kallistan 13. Bolinard 14. Smonden 15. Gurstag 16. Dantes | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Shrine 18. Stairs to Level 8 19. Stairs to Level 8 20. Key 21. Stairs to Level 8 22. Stairs to Level 8 23. Golden maze crown 24. Secret door 25. Tyball's guards 26. Beginning of Tyball's golden maze 27. Tyball's orb 28. Arial's cell 29. Stairs to Level 8 30. Stairs to Level 6 31. Stairs to Level 3 32. Stairs to Level 3 |
|---|---|



Map 8

1. Stairs to Level 7
2. Garamon's bones
3. Shrine
4. Carasso
5. Use Carasso's key here
6. Chamber of Virtue, Slasher of Veils
7. Stairs to Level 7
8. Stairs to Level 7
9. Stairs to Level 7
10. Stairs to Level 7
11. Stairs to Level 7

Appendix A

Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds



Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds



*H*is tale was finished. My quill stopped its feverish scratching at last. I knew that the Avatar was troubled by his imprisonment here in Britannia, yet I was oddly happy that he was forced to remain with us. It gave me hope that our problems could be overcome.

"I'm off to Lord British's castle now," he said. "There is to be a feast in honor of my defeat of The Fellowship. Will you be joining us?"

I nodded. "I'll see you there." Little did I know what surprises were in store for both of us.

FROM CARLOTTA STEIN'S JOURNAL:

Day 1

I arrived in Britain on the morning of the feast. Lord British must have called a day of rest for the town, because a fair was set up outside the castle. Jugglers, acrobats, fortune tellers, and all manner of other carnival types were working the crowd. The faces of the people caught my interest—in the year since the Avatar had defeated The Fellowship, quite a change had become apparent. No longer did Britons have that pinched, worried expression that I had learned to dread. All around me were happy, shining faces reveling in the joy of the day.

By presenting my invitation to the guard at the gate I gained access to Lord British's castle. I found my way to Nystul's room with only a few wrong turns. He had one of the better private libraries in Britannia. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, then both lost ourselves in the world of books.

Some time later, a nudge from Nystul roused me from my reading, reminding me that there was a feast to attend that evening. I stuck a bit of string in the book to mark my place, then took myself off to my room.

The feast was impressive even by Britannian standards. Course after course was paraded by, with admiring gasps from the assembled crowd. Contrary to my experience at many of these huge events, the food was actually good. I stuffed myself with delicacies the like of which I hadn't seen in many a year.

When supper was finished, Lord British led us all up to the roof of the castle. There,

with a wave of his arm, he ordered a display of fireworks that left us all breathless. Stuffed and well entertained, I went to bed. I was looking forward to talking to the Avatar the next day; there were a few details from his last adventure that I wanted to clear up.

I awoke the next morning with a sense of dread. The castle was unusually quiet as though a great damper had been thrown over the building. From my room I'd always been able to hear the shouts of the children as they played in the courtyard. But today there was no sound of children.

I dressed quickly and went to the Avatar's room. He had just risen and was donning his gear.

"What has happened?" I asked.

The Avatar handed me a note from Miranda. I read it over; it gave no details, only requested that the Avatar come to the throne room immediately to discuss the situation. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he began to pull on his boots.

"I think," he began at the same time tugging on a boot. It was a bit stiff and his words came out in short gasps. "That," tug, "we've been," tug, "enclosed in some sort of," tug, "black sphere."

"Black sphere?" I asked. "That might explain the strange stillness."

"This does not bode well," he said. "I cannot believe I just said that. It must be the Britannian influence."

He walked to the north wall of his room and touched one of the bricks. A secret door swung open, revealing a small storeroom.

"I didn't know you had a hidden room," I said, poking my head inside.

"I keep my runestones and such in here," he said. He gestured to me to step back and I

did. "Otherwise the maids are always moving things around and I can't find anything."

He emerged from the storeroom provisioned to go adventuring.

"Do you think you're going to need all that?" I asked.

"Probably," he replied. "Are you coming?"

I nodded and we went down to the throne room together. Lord British rose and met the Avatar as we entered.

"Greetings, Avatar. Shall we begin this meeting?"

"By all means, my lord," he replied.

"I need not tell you, citizens of Britannia, that we are near our darkest hour," began Lord British. His voice was grave and commanded the attention of everyone present in the room. "The gem that surrounds our castle is made of blackrock, a substance impervious to all physical force, which stifles magical workings within its boundaries. The Guardian has this day struck Britannia a fearsome blow, and we may be sure that he will not rest idle. Doubtless even now he is preparing an assault on the entire nation of Britannia!"

"Lord British! Cannot Lord Draxinusom of the Gargoyles rally our people against the invader?" asked Miranda.

"He will do what he can, certainly," came British's reply, "but I know not whether the humans of Britannia shall follow a Gargoyle leader."

Patterson arrived in a hurry, gasping for breath. "Well, wh-what can we do, then?" he asked.

"Somehow we must find a way to breach the gem," said Lord British. "Now, to work! Servants, take an inventory of the castle

storerooms! Nystul, Nelson, we shall have need of thy far-famed scholarly powers—you must determine how the jewel was created and how it may be destroyed. You others, warriors, and especially you, Avatar, eight times our savior, you must search the castle, above and below, for some means of escape.

“Miranda, I place thee in charge of the escape effort. Thou shouldst use the Great Hall as thy headquarters. Avatar, be sure and report to her all that thou dost learn in thy search, and heed her advice in all things.

“All Britannia . . .”

He stopped speaking and went rigid. In the center of the throne room a huge face appeared. There was only one creature with such a countenance—the Guardian.

“Yes, British, hasten to thy vain struggle. But know this—all who choose to serve me shall be spared. All who do not shall die a slow death within the walls of this castle, thy tomb. Consider well thine options, Britannians, as my armies sweep through thy leaderless nation.”

With that the Guardian’s awful laughter boomed throughout the throne room, lingering long after he had disappeared.

“You know,” said the Avatar in a low whisper to me, “I really hate that guy.”

“What now?” I asked.

“Find out what everyone in the castle knows, then see if I can find a way out of here.”



He allowed me to accompany him on his tour of the first floor of the castle. We found his old friend Iolo in the room to the north of the Avatar’s.

“There is little to say, my friend,” said Iolo. “‘Tis a fine mess we are in this time, is it not?”

“Doubtless we shall pull through, friend. When have we failed before?”

“‘Tis true, my friend! We may be thankful for this prison, inasmuch as we are safe on the inside, while the rest are trapped outside with Chuckles the Jester!”

He dropped his voice to a whisper.

“But really, Avatar, the situation is darker than most here suspect.”

“What meanest thou?”

“Dupré and I took a look down in the sewers when the gem first came up—they are crawling with monstrous vermin! The sewers were never safe, but now they are horrific! I believe he has the key, shouldst thou care to take a look for thyself.”

“I shall, my friend. But what have you been doing during the last year?”

“I spent much of my time at Iolo’s South—business is booming! If I did not miss Gwenno so much, it would have been most enjoyable.”

“Hast thou any news of Gwenno?” asked the Avatar. I noticed he occasionally slipped into “Britannianese.”

“None at all, I’m afraid, since she left on her voyage of exploration. Why did she not ask me to go along? ‘Tis most disheartening.”

“By the way,” said the Avatar, “can you train me? I fear some of my skills have grown rusty from misuse over the last year.”

“Of course! ‘Tis always a pleasure to work with thee, my friend. I can teach thee missile weapons. I have also noticed that I am a much better swimmer than thee. Or perhaps thou wouldst like some skill in appraising craftsmanship?”

"I shall return when I have the time."

We tracked down Dupré and retrieved the key from him. There was much backslapping and hailing greeting of "well-met" which I won't bother relating here. Then we went to find Nystul.

"Welcome, Avatar," Nystul said as he rose from one of the large chairs in his room. "What can I do for thee?"

"Tell me about the spell that has imprisoned us."

"'Tis a staggeringly huge spell—I had not thought even the Guardian could create such an enormous amount of blackrock—but 'tis also a very crude casting; no subtlety about it. If I had the book it was cast from, I swear I could reverse it!"

"What dost thou mean, a crude spell?"

"'Tis as if the caster had so much power that he thought there was no need to work skillfully. As it is, the ether has been violently disrupted, and I should not be surprised if there were aftershocks and side effects in our own and other realities."

"What kind of 'aftershocks'?"

"'Tis hard to predict—possibly some sort of 'echo' effect, wherein the spell effect might replicate itself on a smaller scale, like an echo repeating and dying away. 'Tis common in his castings. I shouldn't wonder if we see some smaller replica of the gem, just as we saw in his assault a year ago."

"And you think this effect might extend to worlds beyond our own?"

"The same ether surrounds and permeates all the realities. An etherstorm this size might have far-reaching effects. Such things are hard to estimate. Blackrock blocks the flow of the ether, and thus we can cast only the simplest spells within the castle."

"That is a problem. Dost thou know anything else of the castle?"

"It is important that you become thoroughly acquainted with it. However, do not omit to survey the area beneath it—some of the caves and tunnels were built centuries ago. Perhaps the depths hold mysteries worth investigating."

"I shall take thy advice."

"That is wise of thee. Some of the tunnels 'neath Lord British's castle are thousands of years old. Who knows what might be found there?"

The Avatar thanked Nystul and was about to walk away when he noticed a door leading off the library.

"I don't remember that," he said. Walking over to the door, he opened it to find an empty closet.

"That's strange," he said. "There's nothing in here." He stepped inside the closet and vanished.

A few moments later, he reappeared and informed me that the closet was really a teleporting room leading to Nystul's laboratory on the second level of the castle. He unrolled a ragged bit of parchment and exclaimed delightedly at what he found there.

"What is that?" I asked.

"A remarkable map," he replied. "On it I record where I've been and it seems to magically always have room for my many journeys. See." He turned the map around to face me. "I've got almost all of Lord British's castle mapped here, and now I'm on to the next level."

"This is remarkable. But I think I'd best stay here and assist Nystul in his research about this spell. But, I wonder if you might keep me informed as to your progress."

"I'll do even better than that, Carlotta," he said. "I shall give you the map to record after I'm finished, and in the meantime, I shall leave you notes about my progress. You can find them in my room, as I know I shall need to return here periodically."

"Very well, Avatar," I said. "Good luck with thy journey."



That evening, I stopped by the Avatar's room and discovered his first note:

Carlotta [it began],

I've had some luck since we last spoke, though it looks as though there's some trouble brewing within the castle if Lord British doesn't look out. Talk to Nana and see what I mean. I'll heard someone chanting in the throne room last night before the blackrock gem enclosed us. I haven't quite figured that out, but I'm thinking about it.

This castle has more turns and twists than you could imagine. On the second level of the castle are a storeroom and the armoury, though I can't figure out who has the key. It appears to be lost for the moment. I certainly could use some decent weapons.

On the third level begin the sewers. There are the usual assortment of nasties—rats, worms, spiders. If you ever get down here, stay away from the headless. He's dangerous. By the way, I'm sending a fellow by the name of Gissif up to the prison. I discovered he'd nicked my pocket watch during the festival—who knows what else he may have gotten away with?

I'll keep in touch.

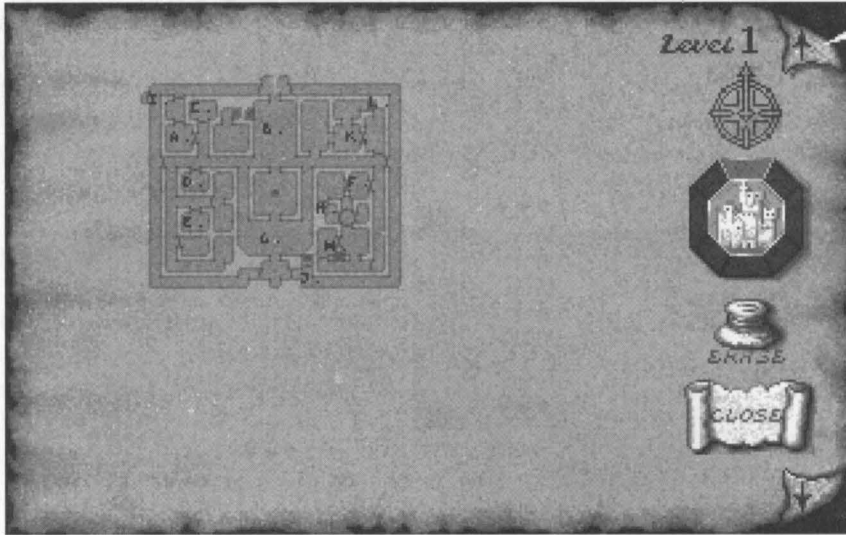
—The Avatar

P.S. I left a little something for you.

Appendix A: Ultima Underworld II

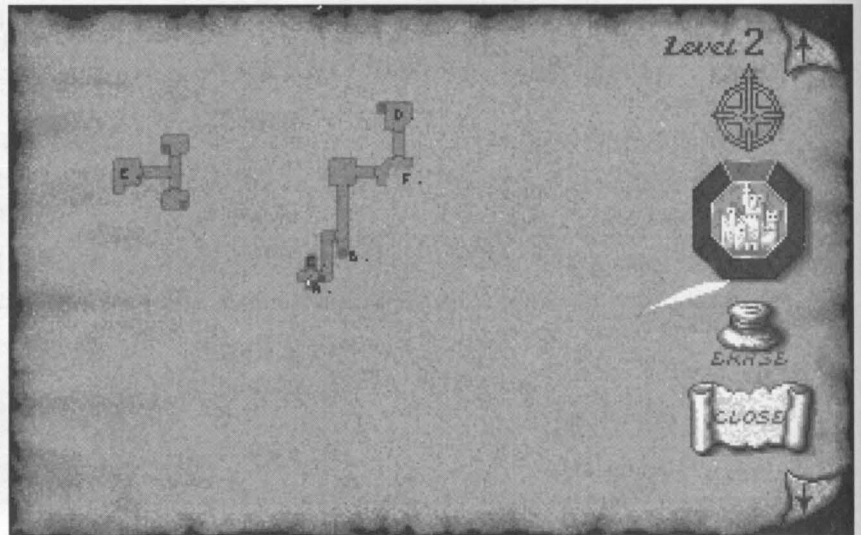
Next to the letter was a small rolled-up scroll. I unrolled it and set my inkstand on one

end to keep it flat. It was a representation of the first three levels of the castle.

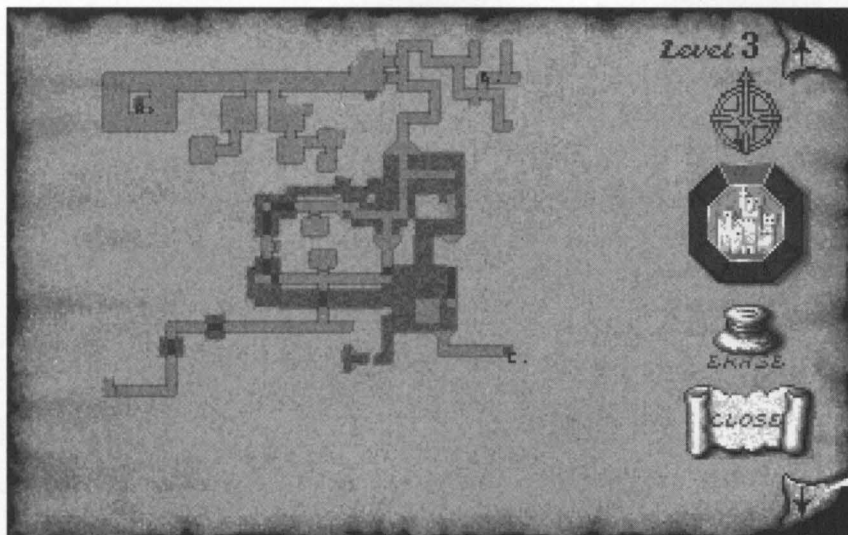


- A. My quarters
- B. Throne room
- C. Iolo
- D. Dupré
- E. Nelson
- F. Nystul
- G. Great hall
- H. Teleports to level 2
- I. Ladder to level 3
- J. Ladder from level 3
- K. Kitchen
- L. Stairs to level 2
- M. Prison

Level 2



- A. Stairs to Level 5
- B. Stairs to Level 1
- C. Ladder to Level 1
- D. Stairs from Level 1
- E. Teleports from 1 Level 1
- F. Armory



- A. Ladder to Level 1
- B. Pit to Level 4
- C. Ladder from Level 1

Day 5

I'm exhausted from the events of the last two days. First being captured here in the blackrock gem, the Avatar setting off for who knows where to help us be freed. We've all been studying and racking our brains for something that will help us get out of here.

The Avatar was right about one thing; there's definitely an undercurrent of hostility in the castle. Nana has been unhappy at her treatment for quite a while. I wonder how long she'll be patient under these new demands.

The Avatar returned some time during the night. When I stopped by his room there was another note for me.

Carlotta,

This will have to be brief. I've been down through Level four and have explored level five. I've discovered the most amazing thing—a blackrock gem in the center of Level five. Nystul was right. The gem has created an echo. But you will be amazed by my latest discovery. One of the facets allows you to be transported to another place. Before I go exploring I plan to stock up on food and supplies and to try to develop my rusty skills.

I shall try to keep you informed as to my progress.

—The Avatar

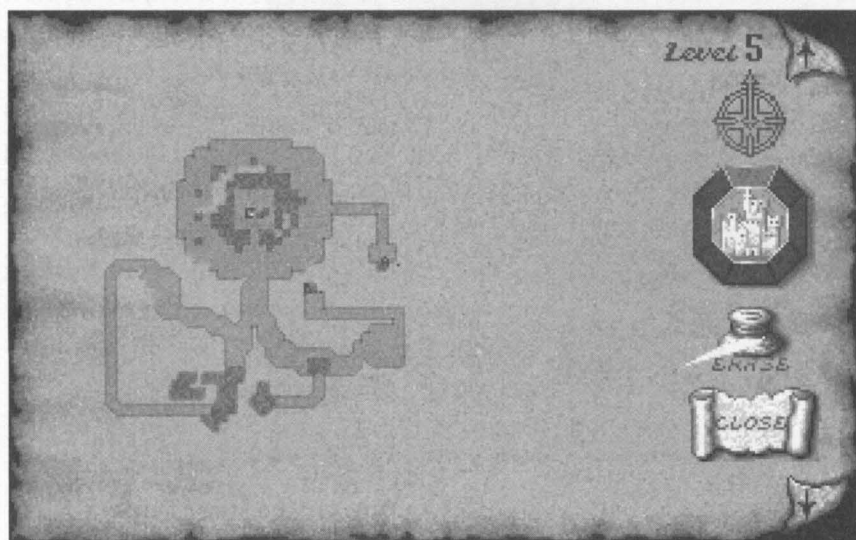
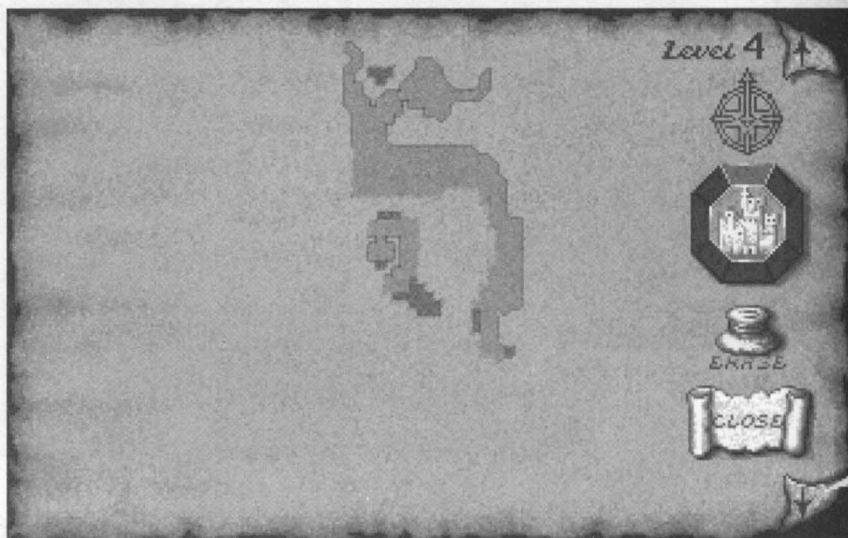
P.S. Here are the latest levels. I know what a snoop you are.

Day 7

Still no word from the Avatar. I'm worried.

Day 10

At last news, but I have no time to recount it here. The adventure continues.



- A. Ladder to Level 4
- B. Stairs to Level 2
- C. Blackrock Gem



Appendix B

Ultima VII Part Two:
Serpent Isle



Ultima VII Part Two: Serpent Isle



he door slammed open. A gust of wind blew papers off the table, tossing them about the room like autumn leaves. At first I thought the Avatar had returned, but when the figure in the doorway stepped into the light I saw it was Dupré.

He was changed. I cannot explain exactly how, but there was an aura about him that made me pause. I did notice the tired, careworn lines in his face.

"Welcome, Dupré," I said softly. "How is it that you have come here?"

"I bring news of the Avatar, my Lady," he replied as he stood across from me.

"I've heard many rumors, Dupré," I said, "of Lord British sending you, Iolo, Shamino, and the Avatar to the legendary Serpent Isle."

I saw then that the change in him was more than weariness. His form wavered like the flicker of a candle flame. Gooseflesh raced across my arms for I knew now that what stood before me was a spectral apparition of Sir Dupré.

He seated himself in the chair across from my desk.

Would he tell me the tale of Serpent Isle now? Or had he come for another purpose? I remained quiet, letting the stillness stretch between us. Long ago I learned that silence has its uses. He would tell me the tale when he was ready.

The clock chimed four o'clock. The night was still and the Lycaeum held only the sounds of ourselves and the passage of time. Dupré leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed. In a moment he began to speak ...



A storm was raging on the night Lord British called the Avatar to his chamber. Eighteen months had passed since the Black Gate had been destroyed and The Fellowship dismantled; a mere six months since the strange sphere that had imprisoned Lord British's castle had been dispelled.

Lord British gestured to a guard who placed a scroll in his hands.

"This enchanted scroll and a map to a place called Serpent Isle were found among Batlin's belongings," he said. He tossed the scroll onto the table. Smoke billowed forth as it unrolled. Above the mist hovered the Guardian's disembodied head.

"Batlin!" It was the Guardian's malevolent voice. "In the unlikely event that the Avatar stops me from coming through the Black Gate, I command you to follow the unwitting

female, Gwenno, to the Serpent Isle. There I shall impart my plan to destroy all Britannia!”

The Guardian’s face disappeared and Lord British rolled the scroll back together tightly. The Avatar told me his face was drawn and white.

“My liege,” said the Avatar, “what troubles you?”

“’Tis my worst fear!” he said. “I must send thee through the Pillars to the Serpent Isle.”

The Avatar knelt before Lord British and pledged his sword and his life to his service. As the Avatar rose, Lord British looked at him with a pained expression. For the first time in all the Avatar’s dealings with Lord British, my liege seemed truly shaken. What could it be about the Serpent Isle that so troubled him? But there was no time for such ruminations; our mission was clear. With the speed that grows from a lifetime of such adventures, we outfitted ourselves and gathered Iolo and Shamino.

In less than two days’ time, we were on our way to the Serpent Isle.



Through barren straits of ice we sailed; down canals bisecting frozen plains. At long last we spied the massive pillars that led to the fabled land. Giant stone snakes coiled around the granite columns. No human hand could have carved these, I thought. As our ship passed into the shadow of the these spires, a blue light appeared, growing outward from a single speck. It enveloped the ship in its magical energy and then the world went black. In my last thought, I wondered whether the Guardian had already won this battle before we had even had a chance to fight.



“’Twas a fearsome passage, Avatar,” said Iolo. “After we sailed between the Serpent Pillars I could have sworn we were flying ... Yet here we are on the ship. I wonder if we lost anything?”

“We may be on the ship, but the ship is on dry land,” I interrupted. “I think thou art correct, Iolo. We did fly.”

While the others were talking, the Avatar began checking his gear.

“Brrr! Dost thou notice the chill in the air?” asked Iolo. “It is much colder here than back home. I hope Gwenno brought enough warm clothing.”

“Do not worry so, old friend. We shall find thy wife soon enough,” said Shamino clapping Iolo heartily on the back. He wasn’t terribly sensitive, but Iolo was accustomed to it and understood the feeling behind Shamino’s glib remark and blustery action.

The Avatar continued looking through his belongings. His spell book was still there, as were his magic armor and weapons. I saw that we had also retained Magebane, the glass sword, and the Daemon Sword. The Avatar said that Rudyom’s Wand was still in the bottom of his pack next to the Serpent of Blackrock, which we’d procured during our last trip into Britannia’s underworld. I saw that Iolo still had his crossbow and Shamino still carried the magic bow with which Lord British had rewarded him. Judging from the bulging of my companions’ packs, our food was also safe. In all, we were very well equipped. I was feeling fairly secure about our chances against any unknowns when Iolo pointed to the sky and said, “Look! A strange storm is nearly upon us. This is certainly not Britannia!”

That was the last sound I heard as the

wind rose and began blowing leaves and dust into the air. The sky was awash with lightning and my ears rang from the thunder. A tremendous crack occurred at the same time as the lightning flashed; then my companions disappeared.



While I was swept off to a strange place, the Avatar remained behind on the beach where we had landed. The following is his account of what happened up to the point at which we were reunited.

"Damn," the Avatar said. "Damn, damn, damn, damn."

No one was around to chastise him for behaving in an "un-Avatarlike" way. In a way he was glad, because cursing and throwing a royal temper tantrum seemed to be the appropriate response. Not only had his companions disappeared, but he was holding a rock and wearing a silver ring where his magical gauntlets had been, and to top it all off, perched on his head, in the most ridiculous manner, was a woman's fur hat. He knew it must look silly because when he snatched the thing off his head, he had a moment's fright, thinking it was, in fact, some sort of small furry animal. With a muttered curse, he jammed the thing back onto his head and rummaged through his backpack.

It was no great surprise to find that he was missing his glass sword, his spellbook, and other items that he could not recall. Throwing his arms up in despair, he flopped down on the beach and cursed his bad luck. This got him exactly nowhere. After he calmed down, he stood and decided to make the best of the situation. After all, he was the Avatar, and pitching a fit wasn't going to get the job done.

South was the only reasonable direction to follow, because the mountains blocked passage in any other direction. He picked his way along the shore, calling for Iolo, me, and Shamino as he went. He'd begun to think he was the only person in this forsaken land when he saw her.

"Just as was foretold!" she exclaimed. "I have traveled a great distance to meet with thee. My name is Thoxa."

"Me?" he asked confusedly. Despite being Avatar for all these years, he was still astonished when his coming was anticipated. She looked him over, then nodded her head.

"Thou art truly the one I seek! Here is the Hourglass of Fate. Keep it with thee always, for through it the Monks of Xenka can aid thee."

She gave him a large hourglass, which he stared at for a moment. It had been only a little over a year and a half since he'd held a similar piece, which had helped him defeat the Guardian. Without a moment's hesitation, he opened his backpack and slipped it inside.

"How do you know about me?" he asked.

"I am a Xenkan monk, my son," she said. As if the Avatar would know of Xenkan monks. "As such, I have devoted my life to studying the prophecies of Xenka. The writings are clear: The Hero shall come in the last days, with Three Companions, to battle against the Evil which is in the land. Further, the Hero shall be given guidance from a Power that dwells in the Void."

"Speaking of companions, I seem to have lost mine. Do you know of them?"

"The writings of Xenka speak of the Three which shall travel with thee. Without them, thou canst not succeed. They shall be thine oldest and most trusted friends, and it is their part to share thy adventure with thee.

Thou must find them, Hero! And then never let them leave thy side ...”

“Yeah, well, that’s a bit of a problem right now,” he said. “Perhaps you can tell me more of the Power.”

“The writings are vague on this point, so that it is not certain whether the Power lives in the Void now, or merely came from that place. However, I know that thou shalt need to seek out three artifacts—a Ring, a Necklace, and an Earring. Through these ancient items, the Power shall communicate with thee. More than this I know not.”

“And Xenka? Who is she?”

“How can I explain Xenka in the short time we have? Xenka is the prophetess who receives wisdom from beyond the Void. She disappeared several centuries ago. No one knows where she went. However, in her writings, Xenka has promised to return to us when the end is near. She will then guide us once more.”

“And you think I’m the hero she spoke of ...”

“The land is in dire need of a Hero, for the end of the world draws nigh!” Thoxa gestured dramatically toward the sky. “There are storms which lash out with magical lightnings, and strange illnesses which plague the innocent. Lastly, there is the growing sense that something is wrong in the land. . .”

“Storms?”

“The storms are one of the signs that the end of the world is at hand. I know not what causes them, or how they may be stopped. Most ships have ceased to sail, for the storms strike any vessel which leaves its harbor. The lightning has the power to kill or to teleport, and sometimes it changes the nature of that which it strikes.”

That was, no doubt, what had happened

to his belongings, but what had happened to us, his companions? Had we been teleported? Or were we already dead? His heart sank as he thought about losing us, but Thoxa was still talking about the signs of the end of the world.

“The prophecies mention that a plague will come among us, to sicken the meek and the innocent.” Her voice dropped as she pointed to a gull struggling on the beach. “Hast thou noticed the dying birds? They are only the first victims. At first the disease shall strike the wildest races, and lastly the race of men.”

“You said something about a sense that things were wrong?”

“I cannot explain further. Dost thou not feel it? The sense that something is ... not right? Xenka speaks of these days as the Time of Imbalance.”

He shoved the fur cap to the back of his head and scratched his forehead. “I’d like to help you with this quest, my lady,” he said. “But you’ve given me little to go on ... Perhaps you have some other suggestions to aid me?”

“My time with thee is short, so take careful heed of my advice,” she replied. “There is a cave further south by a large red bush—its entrance is invisible. If thou canst find thy way in, it may provide more clues. Follow the coast until thou dost come to a great city. An old friend of thine awaits thee there.”

She had turned and started to go when a burst of magical energy filled the air to the east. Out of the shimmering mist came a middle-aged mage, clad in black.

“Thou shouldst know better than to meddle in the affairs of Fate, Thoxa,” he snarled. “Just by talking with the Hero, thou mayest be condemning us.”

Toxa looked surprised, then annoyed.

"We must intervene, Karnax. The very fabric that weaves the tapestry of the Cosmos may depend upon it."

"Thou art as foolish as ever, girl ... Xenka's writings are crystal-clear. Those who seek to aid the Hero shall cause his greatest calamities! I must stop thee before thou sendest us all to our doom! *Flam Mas Flam.*"

As he gestured, Toxa threw a spell on the Avatar. A wall of fire encircled him. The air around Karnax began to shimmer with magical energy. A blast of deadly force flew from his fingertips and struck Toxa. Then again, and again. She staggered, then fell. The Avatar started forward to help her, but she pushed herself up from the ground.

"She lives!" exclaimed Karnax.

"'Tis not so easy to kill me," replied Toxa, waving her hands in a pattern any spellcaster would have recognized. Karnax was now under attack. After the first few waves of Toxa's spells hit him, he teleported away.

"Quickly," she said. "Time is of the essence."

The Avatar was beginning to feel a little like Alice—whoever that is. His main clue was to look for a red bush that should lead him into a cave. He continued southward. Much to his surprise and delight, Shamino appeared after but a few moments, further along the beach.

"Avatar!" he said. "Art thou all right? I heard what sounded like the explosions of a volcano—and look at all the fire here ... I have been searching all over for thee! That storm has left me quite disconcerted. I can find neither Iolo nor Dupré. And, to make matters worse, nothing remains of the equipment that Lord British gave us! It has all

been replaced by strange items that I do not recognize. Perhaps thou shouldst inspect thine equipment as well! I shall make a list of what we have."

"That's a good idea," the Avatar said. "Here's my backpack."

Shamino pulled a small scroll from one of his voluminous sleeves and produced a quill from somewhere else. In a few moments he had a fairly detailed list of what had changed.

It read:

The list of items with which we found ourselves with after the storm: prepared by Shamino.

A pine cone (or, at least, it appears to be one)

A fine pair of sheer stockings, probably women's attire

A rock

A finely crafted ring, of silver, of a size to fit a small woman or a child

A ridiculous fur cap

Some very old and worn slippers, such as might be worn in the privacy of one's home

A strange blue egg

A crude brush

A bottle of wine—the lettering on the label constantly flickers, making it unreadable!

Strange baubles— silver disks with jewels in the center

A large skull, no doubt belonging to some large and dead animal.

An inexpensive shield, sturdy and suitable for battle

A red hunk of stone

After Shamino completed the list, the Avatar told him about his encounter with Thoxa and Karnax. They agreed that their next course should be to find the red bush and locate the cave. In just a few minutes they had reached the red bush, but there was no sign of a cave. However, the Avatar knew from long experience that the passageway into the cave must be hidden. Feeling his way along the sheer mountain face to the east of the bush, he found what they sought.

Inside the cave they discovered the bones of some poor soul. In the center of the room

was a locked chest. The Avatar was about to complain of his lack of lockpicks when he spied a small bag lying against the north wall. Inside it he found some lockpicks, which worked nicely on the chest. There was also an invisible door on the north wall, which led into another room. In this room they discovered a large stone ankh like the ones at the shrines in Britannia.

To the east of the ankh was another locked chest. Inside, the Avatar discovered a scroll that was to set in motion forces that would alter all our lives.

Dearest Drogeni [it began],

What follows is an excerpt from my translation of an ancient manuscript. The translation is crude, since I do not as yet fully understand the Serpent Runes, but I think thou wilt find this very exciting. Until we meet again,

Erstam, thy devoted servant

I write this in great haste, for I can already hear the forces of Order breaching the keep walls. I know not how this missive will survive to reach the outside lands, or, for that matter, future generations. Mine only hope is that this speedily drafted work will offer a record of our hallowed philosophy. For our culture to have any chance of enduring the ages, someone, somewhere must find this.

Please, reader, I beseech thee, spread the word of our peoples. Release the spirit of our word and learn from the wisdom of the past.

Balance—the harmony between the Principles of Order and Chaos—is the one pure axiom we hold true. All three Principles are symbolized in our hieroglyphs: The Great Earth Serpent, keeper of Balance, lies on a vertical plane, around which the two opposing serpents of Chaos and Order wrap themselves.

Chaos and Order each embrace three forces. These six forces, when combined, form

the three Principles of Balance. The Forces of Chaos are Tolerance, Enthusiasm, and Emotion; the Forces of Order are Ethicality, Discipline, and Logic.

CHAOS:

Tolerance is that which encourages the acceptance of all things.

Enthusiasm is the energy that allows one to perform great tasks.

Emotion is the ability to perceive those feelings that come from the heart, as opposed to coming from the mind.

ORDER:

Ethicality is the belief that there is great value in abiding by rules of conduct.

Discipline is the drive to complete a task and avoid the distractions that will prevent its completion.

Logic permits clear, reasoned thought, free from any instinctual biases.

BALANCE:

From the marriage between two Forces, one each from Chaos and Order, come the Principles.

Tolerance and Ethicality combine to form Harmony, the ability to be at peace with the self, the individual, and the world.

From the union of Enthusiasm and Discipline springs Dedication, that which permits one to surmount obstacles and lead others.

And finally, Emotion tempered by Logic results in Rationality, the ability to comprehend life and understand the world around us.

The Forces of Chaos and Order must ever remain in Balance, for imbalance leads to disaster. Witness the war-torn state of our world today!

As thou canst surely see, my world has been torn asunder by disregard for Balance—our dearest axiom! If thou dost thrive in a time less violent, I can do no more than plead with thee to help restore Balance to the Serpent Isle! I must end this brief explication here, for I can hear mine attackers pounding upon the oaken door downstairs. I wish thee and thy world better fortune than mine own.

—Ssitjnos, the Great Hierophant

This was certainly not what the Avatar had expected, but it reminded him of the time when he'd united the Gargoyle and Britannian people. That experiment hadn't worked very well, and somehow he knew that whatever lay ahead, it would be a difficult time for us all.



After exploring the cavern, they continued south. A short way down the beach, they came across the skeleton of a bear. Lying on the ground by its head was Shamino's magical bow.

"Look," he said. "Mine bow. Perhaps that is what happened to our equipment. Maybe it was switched with the items we have. If only we can find out where they came from."

"Yes," the Avatar replied. "It appears that that is indeed what has happened, but it will be difficult to track down such mundane things."



Shamino merely shrugged and retrieved his bow. At least one of them was feeling optimistic. After continuing south a little farther, they came to the gates of a small city. As they approached, the city guard eyed them warily.

"Halt!" he said. "Who art thou and what is thy business?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I ask the questions here. Another stranger! Most suspicious. There have not been many travelers recently."

"We would like to enter the city," the Avatar said.

The guard looked them up and down. "Art thou friend or foe?" he asked.

"Friend," the Avatar said. He had no idea really, but the guard seemed a bit dim.

"I do not know thou art a friend ... I shall let thee in, but thou must have an escort until thou hast spoken to Lord Marsten. Thou canst find him at the Crematorium, mourning for the dead. Just follow the road north. Remember, we shall be keeping an eye upon thee!"

There was a grinding noise as the portcullis opened. They stepped into the city and were immediately approached by two guards.

"Pikeman," said the guard. "Accompany these two men."

"Excuse me," the Avatar said. (The guard looked at him again, his face pulled into a sour look.) "But where are we?"

"In Monitor," said the guard. Then, as though he had warmed up to them, he continued, "The Colored Storms and the Goblins have kept most people off the roads, and so 'tis unusual to see strangers in Monitor."

"Goblins?"

The guard glared at them again, ignoring the comment.

"Suspicious, in fact ... perhaps thou art in league with the enchanter who materialized in the center of town! We promptly jailed him."

"Tell me more about this enchanter," said the Avatar.

"Thou dost show an unusual interest in this man. Speak to Lord Marsten. I shall say no more to thee about the matter."

He turned away and refused to speak again. The Avatar looked at Shamino, who shrugged. Then they continued on their way.



They discovered the Crematorium in the northwest corner of town. In a short time they located the hallway into the underground Crypts. The Mayor, Marsten, was performing a ceremony of some kind. They waited at the edge of the crowd until the service was over.

"Avatar, look," whispered Shamino. "'Tis Dupré."

It was true: I was standing to one side of the Mayor, listening to the service. I caught the Avatar's eye and nodded to him. He seemed intent on speaking with the Mayor, so I bided my time.

"Greetings, stranger," said the Mayor. "I am Lord Marsten. Thou hast come to this city at a grievous hour. We are here to entomb the ashes of this brave Pikeman Groat, as well as to mourn the loss of our Knight Champion."

A man standing to one side of the Mayor spoke up. "Astrid was the finest Knight that Monitor ever had!"

Marsten nodded at this statement, then continued, "The Goblins ambushed her patrol. They slew all but one of the Pikemen, and

took Astrid's body back to their camp—to be feasted upon and used to make their sickening trophies, no doubt! When the reinforcements came, they were mere moments too late. They managed to rescue Groat, but his injuries were too severe. Not even our healer Harnna could save him."

Another of the mourners decided to put his opinion in. "Damn the Goblins! They should be exterminated ..."

"Enough of this," snapped Marsten. "What business doth thou have with me, stranger?"

"I am interested in your fallen warrior Astrid," the Avatar said. It was clear he was uncertain as to the lay of the land and had decided to press on carefully.

"Canst thou imagine the horrors of being devoured alive?! She was a masterful warrior, and deserved a finer death than this ..." The Mayor turned away abruptly.

"Understand, stranger," said the man who had wanted to kill all the Goblins, "that Marsten and this woman were bedmates."

"You were ... close?" the Avatar asked Marsten.

"Yes, Astrid and I were bedmates. I will not say we were lovers. For we were also warriors and comrades in arms. And we knew that any time either one of us took the battlefield might have been the last time we could have seen each other. I loved her, but we were not in love. I shall always remember her. There is none to replace her, and certainly none able to reclaim the Helm of Monitor from the Goblins."

"What is the Helm of Monitor?"

"'Tis a sacred item once belonging to the Goblins. It was what gave their ancient leader, Gurnordir, the power to build the Goblin Horde. When our forefathers killed Gurnordir,

the Helm was claimed for Monitor. It has since been worn by the Knight Champion. We need to reclaim it! Else the Goblins shall again build their Horde and invade this great city."

"You wish to raid the Goblins?" asked the Avatar.

The Mayor peered down his nose at him. "I see no reason to discuss this matter with someone who is not even a Knight."

The Avatar ignored the insult—deciding, I suppose, to take another tact.

"Perhaps you might enlighten me about your city and its history," he said.

"Our people fled from their homeland when an evil tyrant united the kingdoms and sought to force his philosophy upon them. So we set sail from Sosaria, and—led beyond the Serpent Pillars by a mage named Erstam—we came to the Serpent Isle. This land was deserted then, settled only by Goblins and covered with the ruins of a mysterious ancient Serpentine civilization."

The Avatar's face paled as the Mayor spoke. Sosaria, thou knowest, had been the name of Britannia before Lord British unified it. It reminded me of the time the Avatar discovered that he had robbed the Gargoyle people of their most prized artifact, the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom, in his quest to become Avatar. 'Twas the same expression that crossed his face now—dawning comprehension that all was not as he had assumed.

"This tyrant," he said. It surprised me that his voice was so calm. "Who was he?"

"He was an evil man, and Knight and Mage alike rebelled against his tyranny. So our ancestors fled here and founded the Three Cities. British was his name. Lord British, he called himself. But we call him Beast British!"

Marsten didn't notice the Avatar's pallor.

He had warmed to his topic and was now blithering away about the Goblins.

"I vow to war upon them until the end of the world! There shall be no end to my vengeance upon the Goblins. They have robbed, pillaged, and murdered our people since our ancestors came here centuries ago. They delight in kidnapping our women and eating them alive! In the end, 'tis either men or Goblins—both of us cannot dwell here."

"The cities?" asked the Avatar, hoping to find out more about this group that had fled from Lord British.

"Three great cities were founded by those who fled the tyrant: Moonshade, Fawn, and Monitor.

"Moonshade is the City of Mages. Fawn is a city that worships Beauty. As for Monitor, 'tis the city thou art in now. 'Tis a city based on Courage."

These ideals sounded remarkably like the three Principles that Lord British espoused. What was the conflict between them?

"Please," said the Avatar, "tell me about Beast British."

"That tyrant Beast British tried to force his bent philosophical *Virtues* upon our ancestors. As magic depends greatly upon illusion, the Moon mages dismissed the value of Truth. As worshippers of Beauty, the people of Fawn saw little worth in unconditional Love. We of Monitor feel that Courage stands above his other Virtues.

"This new land was originally to be called New Sosaria, but it became known as the Serpent Isle upon the discovery of various ruins and mysterious ancient serpent writing. We know little else of the race that left its mark here."

"Ruins?"

"Thou doth see them across the land, left

behind by the evil creatures which once dwelled in this place. That fellow Krayg could tell thee more. He is most fond of taking long walks in distant places, and often sees strange sights."

"And Estram ... what of him?"

"He was a wild-eyed man, driven by his thirst for knowledge and his need for the freedom to pursue it. 'Tis said that in his studies and experimentations he did discover things that drove him insane. Others say it was the loss of a woman who was his true love that drove him mad. Today he is known as the Mad Mage. And his name is most often spoken in hushed whispers."

"Perhaps we could move on to more recent events ..." suggested the Avatar. "What are your duties as Mayor?"

"I am the Lord of Monitor, the City of Knights. There are three bodies of Knights in the city. No Command is better than another, for all warriors are equal.

"As the leader of the Leopards, this is my year to rule Monitor."

"The Leopards?"

"We are the peacemakers. The Bears and the Wolves always quarrel, but we stop them from wringing each others' necks. We bring balance to the community. 'Tis not always glorious to be a Leopard, but we are proud to do our duty."

"Then there are different Knights' guilds?"

"Every citizen of the town must become a Knight of Monitor, or be banished, when they reach the age of fifteen. The Knights are organized into three war bands, which are known as Commands—the Bears, the Wolves, and the Leopards.

"As thou hast no doubt noted, our tattoos mark us according to our Command."

I looked more carefully at him. There was indeed a tattoo of a leopard upon his forehead. In the torchlight of the cave I had thought it merely a trick of the shadows.

"With all these Knights, what, then, is the purpose of the Knight Champion?"

"'Knight Champion' is the most revered title in Monitor—more than 'Lord'! To be Knight Champion is to be the finest warrior in the land. To hone their skills, our Knights meet daily on the List Field to spar. Thus they demonstrate their martial prowess. From success in tournament and in battle, the Knight Champion is determined. He or she is privileged to wear the Helm of Monitor."

"And where might I find List Field?"

"Thou canst hardly miss the List Field—'tis the walled field in the south part of town. There is no shortage of opponents, especially if thou doth go there in the late morning or afternoon. Even strangers like thyself are welcome to spar. 'Tis good preparation for the Test of Knighthood."

"How does one become a Knight in Monitor?"

"One cannot be born a Knight, nor can the title be bestowed for money or influence. Only a worthy warrior can become a Knight. To test the worthiness of those who sought Knighthood, a special dungeon was prepared. If one can survive Knight's Test, then one is ready for Knighthood. 'Tis an honor to become a Knight of Monitor, yet 'tis also a heavy responsibility. There are many enemies in the land."

"I should like to take the Knight's Test," said the Avatar. That, at least, was something he knew he was good at—passing tests and trials.

Marsten's gaze conveyed that he doubted the Avatar's worthiness. The more fool he!

"The dungeon lies north of town, in the mountains. At the entrance, a Knight named Shmed awaits the hopeful warriors. He can explain the rules of the Test to thee, or thou couldst speak with Caladin. 'Tis Caladin's duty to instruct Knight candidates."

"Thank you. I apologize for interrupting such a solemn occasion," said the Avatar.

"'Tis nothing compared to what happened before you arrived. It was most disrespectful. The white-haired wizard appeared on top of the Crematoria, in the most reverent part of the ceremony! I ordered him jailed. We are very strict here in Monitor."

"Could this be our friend Iolo?" asked Shamino.

This brought Marsten's full attention upon them. "Explain to me thy friend's actions. Is he a sorcerer?"

"No," said the Avatar, who then proceeded to tell the Mayor some of the events that had led to our arrival on Serpent Isle.

"Then how did he appear in the middle of the funeral? Does he fly?"

"No, he was hit by lightning."

"Indeed. The storms have been known to magically displace their victims."

With that remark, it seemed that their audience with the Mayor was at an end. They waited until he had left with the other mourners before approaching me.

"Avatar!" I said. "I thought I would never find thee! When that strange storm struck, there was a flash, and then I found myself in a wilderness. Fearing to be slain by the Goblins patrolling the woods, instead took shelter in this walled city. But these Pikemen insist on escorting me to their leader!"

"That sounds much like our experience,"

said the Avatar. "But come, we must find Iolo."

"Before we go any farther, Avatar," I said, "I think we should take stock of our supplies. That blasted storm changed out all my equipment for useless refuse! Even my enchanted shield! We cannot hope to survive long without the proper equipment. Perhaps if we can find where this junk came from, we can find our good equipment. I shall prepare a list."

"I have already begun one, Dupré," said Shamino.

"Then I shall add to it."

I added the items that I had found after the storm. We left the Crematorium and made our way into the heart of Monitor.



"What happened then?" I asked.

Dupré leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. "We discovered Iolo in the town jail. He was none too pleased to be there," he said, chuckling softly at the memory. "The Avatar had to pass the Knight's Test to free him ... but I haven't time to tell you that story now. My time is running short. I must be on my way."

"So soon?" I asked. I looked up at the clock and saw that the hour was near dawn. Outside the window the sky had faded from black to a pale gray, leaving everything drab and drained of color.

"Know this, my lady. The Avatar hath only begun his trials with The Guardian. 'Tis not just Britannia which is imperiled—so too is thine own universe."

My breath caught for a moment. How much did Dupré know? What had he guessed over the years? But that seemed insignificant

now. I knew there were doorways between worlds; sometimes when one closed, another opened. My blood ran cold then as I contemplated the Guardian loose in another place. A place where magic didn't exist and belief was easily manipulated. What would happen should the Guardian appear there? What would happen to Earth? To my home?

The fear began to overwhelm me. What had begun as an academic exercise had now turned all too real.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked. "You must understand. My home ..."

Dupré's face was a mask of pain. I

remembered one of the Avatar's remarks about his companions: that they were not originally from Britannia.

"Oh, no," I said my, hand rising to my mouth. "You too?"

He nodded once.

"What shall we do?"

"I know not," he replied. Slowly his form began to dissolve. It faded to pale, then disappeared.

Alone, I sat in silence, watching a perfectly beautiful Britannian dawn as the darkness settled about my heart.

Appendix C

A Conversation with
LookingGlass Technologies
Founder Paul Neurath
and
Ultima Underworld Producer
Warren Spector



A Conversation with LookingGlass Technologies Founder Paul Neurath and Ultima Underworld Producer Warren Spector

CAROLINE SPECTOR: *Paul, let's start with you. How did you start LookingGlass Technologies?*

PAUL NEURATH: Its kind of confusing. We started almost three years ago under the name Blue Sky Productions. The purpose was to create a team to do *Ultima Underworld*, but the concept for *Ultima Underworld* actually came several years earlier in the course of playing some other games that used first-person perspective.

CS: *Games like Eye of the Beholder?*

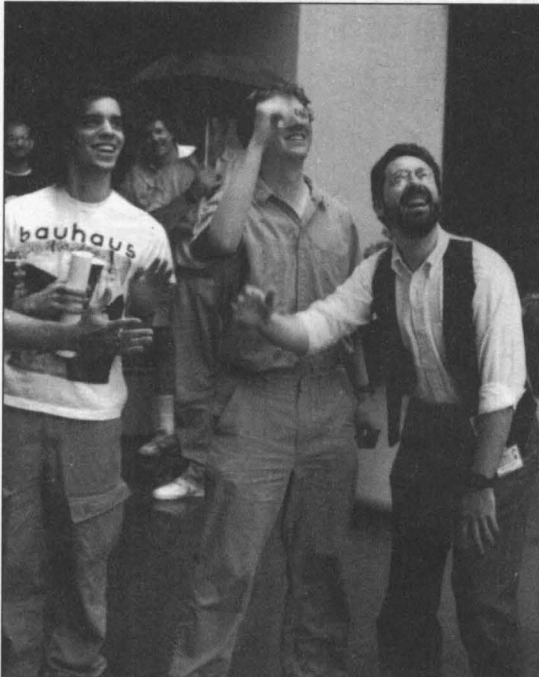
PN: Actually, even before *Eye of the Beholder*. *Wizardry* was the original one, but there were others too.

WARREN SPECTOR: Hey, Paul, don't forget that all of the *Ultima* games had first-person dungeons up until U5 ...

PN: Yes. We knew the format would work very well in the *Ultima* universe, the world of Britannia, so we came up with a concept that built from the first-person perspective but was still a true *Ultima*, with the *Ultima* characters and magic system and many of the mythical elements from Britannia in it. But we wanted to do more than that. That's where the new technology came into play.

Until *Underworld* came out, all first-person games had a somewhat abstract way of showing that you were in a dungeon or that you were really there in a 3-D world: You had a fixed perspective and if you moved forward the game would just instantaneously hop you, say, ten feet forward. If you turned, you would snap around in ninety-degree jumps. The games worked like that because it's technically less demanding to do it that way. In the earlier era of 286's and less powerful computers that's really all you could do. So it was a very reasonable approach. The limitation was that it didn't quite give you the "you are there" feel, the suspension of disbelief. We thought that was a critical element.

So the first six to nine months of the *Underworld* project was really an R&D phase of trying to research techniques that would allow us to get fluid motion and ... not what I



Doug Church, Paul Neurath, and Warren Spector releasing balloons at the shipping of Underworld: The Stygian Abyss

would call virtual reality—but a feeling of *presence* that went beyond what other games gave you. We came up with a number of solutions; the most effective one being a texture-mapping technique that allowed us to take a very simple dungeon corridor and paint the walls, almost wallpaper them, with an art rendering.

An artist would draw, say, a stone wall and we could take that stone wall and paste it right on the featureless walls of the dungeon, and then you could move through that dungeon smoothly. It was a nice mix that allowed us to play off the talents of the artist, who could draw very detailed stone textures,

marble textures, floors of tile, even other terrain types, like water—we had subterranean rivers. And that allowed the user to travel really smoothly.

Then we went beyond that. We wanted to get a feeling that you were really in this dungeon. What would you expect to do in a dungeon? You might need to jump across a narrow chasm. You might expect to batter down a wooden door. You might expect to look up if there was a precipice above you. All those sorts of physical activities. And we try to achieve, at least to a reasonable degree, that kind of freedom of motion and freedom of action. That really extended the R&D stage. It was about nine months, even a year, before we had all the underlying technology in place that allowed us to visualize this fantasy universe in a manner that we felt was appropriate and would work well and would allow the player to maneuver around and perform different kinds of actions.

Once we had that, we really began work on the game. At that stage we brought more of the design people onto the team. Before this it had really just been me, two programmers, and an artist working on the project. But after we got through the R&D we brought aboard another artist and a writer and an individual to design the dungeons and such. The focus moved to the game elements. We spent the next year actually making a game. So altogether it was about an eighteen- or nineteen-month development cycle, which is pretty typical for these projects.

CS: *I remember the last five months!*

PN: Unfortunately, so do I!

CS: *I think I lost Warren to you for about two months up there in Cambridge ...*

PN: That's right, as I recall. It's all kind of a blur now. As is typical in these projects, during the last three, four, five months we spent many, many long hours just refining the details. All the technology at that stage was pretty functional and the design was pretty complete. But there were many, many loose ends on the project. It's amazing how many loose ends you don't see until you get near the very end.

CS: Warren, how did ORIGIN get involved in *Underworld*?

WS: I think it was at June CES [Consumer Electronics Show] in 1990 that Paul showed us an early demo of the *Underworld* technology. Even then it looked really good. Fast, smooth, really slick. I don't think the physics worked then, and there was no frame around the little 3-D view window and the textures—I don't even remember for sure whether there *were* textured walls back then, it might just have been shading—anyway, you could see potential, but there was still a long way to go.

Paul and Dallas Snell, our VP of Product Development, worked out a deal; ORIGIN would publish Blue Sky's first-person, 3-D walking-around fantasy role-playing game using that technology. We certainly had a need for a game like *Underworld*—when he started working on *Ultima VI*, Rich decided to ditch the first-person dungeons that were used in every earlier *Ultima*. Everything was top-down, as if the player was looking down on the world from a bird's eye view. That left a void, one we didn't have the time, people, or technology to fill. Paul's game looked like the answer.

I was booked up when the deal was inked, so another producer, a guy named Jeff Johannigman, got the nod. I remember

looking over his shoulder as the earliest versions of *Underworld* came in—before any work really began on the plot or anything—thinking, “God, that's cool!” I was in serious lust. I mean I was still doing top-down games like *Martian Dreams* and here was the future—at least that's what I thought. I really wanted to work on it. Working with Paul was an incentive, too. I'd written the conversations for his earlier ORIGIN game, *Space Rogue* (though he went and did some serious rewriting, 'cause that's the kind of hairpin he is). Anyway, I'd really enjoyed working with him and wanted to again. Luckily for me, Jeff left ORIGIN and I got to produce *Underworld* after all.

CS: How much involvement did ORIGIN have in the development of *Underworld*?

WS: Well, all of the “real” work took place up at Blue Sky. I was prepared to do more than I did in the way of design input and the like, but it really wasn't necessary. Paul put together an amazing team. For a start-up company made up mostly of guys who hadn't ever done a game before, they did a great job. And they got volunteer help from all over the place—I have no idea how. They had MIT pals writing code for them in their copious spare time. They had what seemed like hundreds of volunteer testers. It was incredible. ORIGIN's role—through me, mostly—was to critique design proposals and versions of the game as various milestones were reached.

CS: Could you be more specific? What kinds of critiques did you do?

WS: Okay. Here's an example. The original design document called for a mega-

detailed combat system, with nine or more combat options. I didn't think there was any way players were going to notice the subtle differences among the various options and I told Paul that. We argued about it for a while, but eventually we compromised on three combat options, which I think ended up being the perfect balance between playability and realism. We went around like that on a lot of design issues.

What were some of the others? Paul and his guys wanted you to take damage when you ran into walls, which didn't sound like fun to me. We compromised on that one, too—no damage from walls, but you do take damage from falls. The Blue Sky guys went back and forth on whether you should see your character's weapon in the view window during combat. That was a no-brainer to me—it had to be there. I think they just wanted a tie-breaker on that or something. It went into the game. There were lots of things like that during the course of the eighteen or so months the game was in development.

The bottom line on this is that ORIGIN had final authority over all aspects of the game, but I don't think we ever had to exercise it—Paul and the project leader, Doug Church, and the rest hardly ever made a wrong step.

CS: *What about that last couple of months, then, the ones when you moved from Austin to Cambridge?*

WS: Well, yeah, there was that ... That was fairly typical of a producer's involvement in a game, whether it's an in-house project or an out-of-house one. I try to stay closely involved in a project at the beginning, during the design phase, and at the end, when you're

trying to wrap the project up, get it through test and so forth.

In terms of design and implementation, the guys at Blue Sky were first-rate. Even though they'd never worked on a game before—except for Paul, of course—I had total confidence in them. The one area where no one at Blue Sky had any experience was *finishing*. That requires a particular mindset. I wanted to make sure they were all focused on completion rather than perfection.

The guys were so close to the project that they couldn't even see how great it was any more. I was worried that they were too close to the project to squelch all the cool ideas you always want to add when there's no time left. That's the worst part of a project—when you get to the point where there's no time to add stuff you know would make the game even better.

Programmers are funny. They all come equipped with a little button that, when you push it, says, "It'll be trivial. Three lines of code." You just reach a point where you have to say, "No, we can't add that." I wanted to be on site to say stuff like that. Sad, really.

Also, when I talked to Doug on the phone (which I did several times a day toward the end), it seemed to me that some members of the team were working at the Blue Sky office, some were working at home, where there were fewer distractions, and some I couldn't locate at all. So I talked to Paul and Doug about getting the entire team into a private "Finish *Underworld Now*" office. One room, where everyone could work together and get the game done. It was supposed to take a couple of weeks. It ended up taking two months. But it got done.

CS: *Let's get into the nitty-gritty of*

building a game like *Underworld*. How do you build an *Underworld* dungeon? What goes into it?

PN: One of the things we did in this game—and this is a little different from what some other design groups do—was that we first constructed a comprehensive world editor, which would allow us to craft a dungeon and then populate that dungeon with monsters, sprinkle treasure about, put artifacts in the right places, script conversations for all the characters. That was all done within the editor.

In the editor, with a single keystroke, you could step out and play the game. That was real nice. It gave us a good feel for what we really had as we were designing the game, and allowed us to fine-tune the game while we were designing it. We could put together a little room, put a monster in a room, and put a treasure in it. Then we might say, “Will this really work? If I were to come in here as a big hero and try to vanquish the monster and grab the treasure, or if I was a thief and wanted to come in and steal the treasure without the monster’s being able to attack me, could this really be done?” This allowed us to step right into the game, try it out, and tweak it until it felt right.

WS: The *Underworld* editor was a real work of art. I’d love to make something like it available to players and people who aspire to careers in computer gaming. It’s a remarkable tool, one we learned a lot from here at ORIGIN. A lot of the thinking that went into the *Underworld* editor is showing up in the *Ultima VIII* editor, which is under development right now.

One interesting thing about the *Underworld* development process, looking at

it from the outside, was that lots of people got their hands on the editor. At ORIGIN, we tend to leave editor stuff in the hands of TDAs [technical design assistants], the folks who actually build our game maps. On *Underworld*, everyone got their hands on the editor, to do some world-building and game design.

Each level—correct me if I’m wrong here, but each level was pretty much wholly created by one person. The fourth level—my favorite, incidentally, because its epic flavor makes you feel like you’re doing something genuinely heroic—the fourth level was created by Doug. He mapped it; he conceived the puzzles and characters. I bet he even wrote (or at least seriously edited) the conversations. The seventh level, where you can’t use magic (which I find immensely frustrating!) was designed by Doug Wike, the primary artist on the project. It was his baby. Everybody got a level to call his or her own.

The way we usually create games at ORIGIN is that one person conceives something, another builds the map, another writes the conversations, another does the art, and so on. More like an assembly line. I’m not sure one approach is better than another, but I find myself favoring the *Underworld* way of doing things, in which each person wears many hats and has total control over his or her little corner of the world.

CS: *At one point, when we were having dinner right after you guys shipped, Doug and Zack Simpson, one of the Ultima VII programmers, were having this discussion that I could feel whizzing over the top of my head. They were talking about fudging math on the game perspective and graphics tricks to speed up play. I wonder if you*

could elaborate a bit on that, if it wouldn't be exposing trade secrets.

PN: Oh, we like to expose trade secrets. There's nothing really that revolutionary about the *Underworld* screen graphics. A lot of the techniques that we use were created in the '60s and '70s by researchers and programmers working on graphics workstations. In some cases these techniques had been forgotten, particularly the ones implemented in software.

What often happens in computer science is that early on, when you don't have hardware powerful enough, you have to design a graphics algorithm in software to solve the problem. As soon as that's done, a hardware manufacturer will come along to implement that solution in silicon as part of the hardware. Or they'll just offer so much horsepower in the hardware that you really don't need such a clever technique. And those techniques sometimes get forgotten because they're no longer necessary or particularly useful in powerful workstations, and the graphics solutions are often slower in software than in hardware. We found some very good techniques in old, dusty research papers.

CS: *Everything old is new again?*

PN: Something like that. Or we're just reinventing the wheel, with a little bit of assistance. But in a lot of ways the computer games of today, the hardware that they run on, the technology that they're trying to use, are comparable to the graphics workstation of five or ten years ago. I imagine that this trend is going to continue, and that the stuff you see at Siggraph is probably going to be in the computer games of 1998 and 1999. Something to look forward to.

But in any event, for the technology of creating a texture map in any perspective, we used all real math; we didn't really fake anything there. It's actually easier to use real math than to try to fake things. We started with an algorithm that had been published, at least in one form, years before, and we spent a lot of time tuning it. That's a kind of competitiveness programmers get into trying to figure out how quickly they can make their code operate—it's kind of a point of honor or pride for your code to be faster than the next programmer's. Often the best way we found to motivate programmers was to say, "Oh, I think that could be done a little bit better. I know someone out in California who can do this a little faster than you," even if no one had really done it ...

CS: *Gunfight at Silicon Valley. I can create a faster program than you can!*

PN: That's right. So we're constantly refining this stuff. We seem to be able to get some really good performance out of it.

CS: *So now you guys have wrapped up Underworld II. One thing I noticed about Underworld was that it shows off the first-person technology really well. All this neat visual stuff is going on. But the plot is a little thin compared to those of the other Ultimas. I hear the Underworld II plot is really solid.*

PN: No question at all. It is the most awesome plot that has ever been done for a game!

WS: And he's modest, too ...

PN: No, actually, I think the plot is better. It's better in a lot of ways.

CS: *Is it just because you were more familiar with the technology and more familiar with what you had to do?*

PN: That was a large part of it. When we went through the R&D phase with *Underworld*, we really didn't know what we'd get. We didn't know whether we could pull off some of the technology and what it would really look like in a game. And by the time we got around to the details of the plot we really were already in full swing in terms of the overall game design, and a lot of the features had already been implemented. So the plot kind of got squeezed in there. Some compromises were made.

With *Underworld II* we took a vacation of a week or a week and a half, after *Underworld* was done, and we had that copious free time to think about what we would do the second time around, with the advantage of knowing precisely what the technology could do well and what it couldn't do too well. We also had the benefit of communicating with a lot of folks at ORIGIN, with our own playtesters, and with customers who bought the game, all of whom gave us a lot of feedback on what they liked and what excited them. We tried to do a lot of listening and to incorporate feedback, to focus in on and address the complaints we heard. People said, "Boy, wouldn't it be neat if you did ice, so you could slide around?" And of course there's ice in *Underworld II*. We improved some features and we added some features.

WS: I still want juggling in *Underworld III*. Really, I'm only half kidding—that was on my wish list of things I thought would be cool in *Underworld II*. The more things you actually do in the 3-D view window, the way

you do combat in *Underworld*, the better. I thought juggling would be neat.

But that was just one of the things on my wish list—it was about two pages long. Toward the end of *Underworld's* development, Paul and I sat down and compared our wish lists and, amazingly enough, they were all but identical. A bigger view window and bigger, more detailed creature shapes topped the list. I also wanted more 3-D objects, so that you could walk into a room and know instantly that it was a bedroom or a library or a kitchen, just from the furnishings and objects you saw. In *Underworld*, I got tired of hearing the playtesters say, "Wow! A bench!" when they came across one of the few 3-D objects in the game. I also wanted to see the game make better use of the skill system, there was slipping around on ice, and I wanted a deeper plot, more closely tied to the existing *Ultima* mythos. I said I wanted to start in Lord British's castle, maybe do a murder mystery. Something that would feature the *Ultima* characters and settings. Anyway, Paul had his own features wish list, which I suppose he made up with the rest of his team. Luckily, when we compared lists we found that we agreed on most points.

PN: The greatest improvement, I think, is in the plot, because we had time to think about it and come up with a plot well-suited to the technology and to what we could present. To really highlight the difference, when we presented the plot for *Underworld* to some of the folks down at ORIGIN—Richard Garriott and Warren—they said, "Well, you know, we could work with this plot."

WS: I remember thinking that it was

okay, but that it didn't seem terribly *Ultima*-like. It needed work ...

PN: And we did work on it. And over a period of about two months we hammered on it and hammered on it until we were reasonably satisfied. Everyone knew it was sort of a compromise, but we went with it.

In contrast, for *Underworld II* we spent about a week in Boston thinking about the plot itself, came up with a two-page document describing it, came down to ORIGIN, and presented it (which took all of about fifteen minutes). Everyone said, "Great. Done." No question at all that it worked and that it was a great plot. I hope people agree when they see the finished game.

CS: *Warren was very impressed with the plot. As a matter of fact, he told me it was one of the few plots he'd read that he liked across the board, that there were no problems with it. So you obviously have figured out how to do it.*

PN: Oh, we got lucky this time. You need a little bit of luck.

WS: It may have been partly luck, but don't sell yourself short. I remember sitting in the conference room with Richard, Paul, and Doug, the first time we talked about the *Underworld II* plot. Doug and Paul started describing their proposal and all I could think was, "Yeah! yeah! That's it! You got it. That's an *Ultima!*" We threw some ideas around about the final encounters and situations, but that was about it. It was nearly letter-perfect the first time. I've produced four *Ultima* games now, and I've come up with the basic plot of a fifth, and I've never hit it the first time. I don't know anyone who has, not even

Rich. It was amazing. Even Lord British himself couldn't fault it. Every design should go as smoothly.

CS: *So can you give us some hints as to what Underworld II is about?*

PN: The game takes place exactly one year after *Ultima VII*. As Warren said, one goal we wanted to achieve with *Underworld II* was to tie it in a little more closely with the rest of the *Ultima* series, so we made it follow *Ultima VII* by one year. The game starts with a festival, a celebration of the destruction of the Black Gate in *Ultima VII*, when the player won that game, preventing the Guardian from entering Britannia and doing all that nasty stuff he wanted to do. Lord British is going to have a celebration in his castle and he invites the Avatar and all the other major characters in Britannia to attend. And, as you might imagine, there's an uninvited guest, in the form of the Guardian.

After the celebration we have fireworks and it's all very dramatic. You go to sleep in the castle. Just before dawn a giant black crystal grows up around the castle and there are tremors and all kinds of action going on. The crystal comes up and encapsulates the entire castle, which becomes a prison. So the player and Lord British and all the heroes of the realm are trapped within the castle. The Guardian's voice comes to taunt them and says that they can't escape unless and until they swear allegiance to the Guardian and allow him into their world. So that's the predicament players find themselves in. It's a good start to the game. It goes on from there — that's just the start.

There are some features I should probably also mention. The players will notice right off

(and again this is our response to some feedback) that the 3-D window you look through is enlarged significantly, so you get a much better sense of being in a 3-D world. We've also made some technological improvements to the rendering so that the texture mapping looks more precise and is faster. We're using more detailed artwork and the animations of the creatures are more detailed. We have more animations running on them. So it looks a lot more fluid and lifelike.

CS: *Is that going to be more demanding for the hardware? Are you going to need a faster machine to run this?*

PN: It's very comparable in speed. We made some technological tweaks and improvements so that the performance is faster, but there's more artwork in there slowing it down again. The end result is that it runs at a speed comparable to that of the *Underworld* game. But it looks a lot better, and that's a nice feature.

We've added a lot of new terrain and more diversity to the dungeons. I don't want to give too much away, but in this game you'll be exploring not only dungeons but different locales, including an ice cave and a floating fortress in the sky and some other locations. We wanted to get out of the dungeons; not all game play takes place in the dungeons. There's no outdoors yet, no going through woods and so on. We'll wait until the next game to do that. Each place you go in the game has a really different feel, and that's kind of nice. That's a major feature.

We have a lot of new magic spells. We have a spell that's like a heat-seeking fireball; it will go around corners chasing opponents.

And some other funky stuff that's kind of fun.

CS: *Were all of you big Ultima fans? Paul, you specifically mentioned that one of the reasons you were interested in doing Underworld was Ultima.*

PN: Yeah, I played *Ultima I, II, and III*. When *IV, V, and VI* came out I didn't have time to play them all the way through. But I enjoyed those too. *Ultima I* was one of the very first games I played, and like many people who, back in those ancient days of computer gaming, had a chance to play it, I was quite impressed. It was state-of-the-art at that stage. What is the ORIGIN motto? "We create worlds?" Even though it was a very small-scale game by today's standards, you had the feeling you were really playing in a medieval world. Like many designers, I was attracted by that. I wasted many of my college days playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and the like.

WS: Actually, I have to admit I wasn't an avid *Ultima* player before I came to ORIGIN. I played *Ultima V*, which I thought was one of the richest computer RPGs [role-playing games] I'd ever seen, but that was the only *Ultima* I played as a civilian. When I got to co-produce *Ultima VI* with Rich and work on the design with him, that was when I really came to appreciate the *Ultimas*.

CS: *How about paper role-playing? Paul mentioned that experience and I know Warren was a "paper gamer."*

WS: Paper games were basically my life for a while. Thank God I was out of college before I discovered D&D! My grades would have been shot. I started playing D&D in the mid to late '70s, right after it first came out. Later, I worked as an editor and designer for

Steve Jackson Games in the paper game field, then for TSR, the folks who publish *Dungeons & Dragons*. I've worked on a bunch of paper role-playing and board games and spent more hours playing them than I'd care to reveal, to tell you the truth.

PN: Well, my grades weren't helped by *Dungeons & Dragons*. I always had the dream of creating a computer game that would bring to life some of those experiences and really give you the feeling of what a fantasy game was like. Another source of inspiration was a lot of fantasy books and authors that I'd read.

CS: *Anybody in particular?*

PN: Well, of course, there's always Tolkien, and Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance.

CS: *High fantasy.*

PN: High fantasy. I love fantasy. It's all good stuff. But what Richard Garriott had done was really focus in on creating a world that was internally consistent and had a medieval flair to it. And, of course, he's been refining that ever since. And every *Ultima* is more and more impressive in that regard. And, yes, that attracted us to it, and of course the *Ultima* team, particularly over the last three *Ultimas*, had built up this mythology, this enormous array of characters. We felt as if they should appear more often, since *Ultimas* come out every year or year-and-a-half or so.

CS: *Not that I would say anything about that.*

PN: Well, you know, it takes time.

CS: *Well, sure, they're very big at this point.*

PN: So I felt there was certainly room to give *Ultima* another voice and to show it in a different light. The difference with the Underworld games is that they're one-character games; they're much more immediate, much more your experience in a dungeon setting or, in *Underworld II*, more diverse settings. You're right there on the line. You're in the combat—first-person-perspective combat—and you're casting the spells. It's much more immediate. If the same people who have played *Ultima VII* play *Underworld*, it's going to be a different experience for them. It was meant to be. But it is using the same themes.

CS: *It's a much more intimate game in a lot of ways.*

PN: Smaller, yes. It's a tight scale.

CS: *I don't want to use the word claustrophobic because that's not exactly what I mean, but there's something very tense about playing Underworld. Most computer games are like watching a movie, but playing Underworld is much more personal.*

PN: Well, I think that in playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, back, oh, a decade ago, the sense the players had was that they really were in a fantasy world. When they faced a monster and had a heroic battle there was really a lot at stake. In the *Ultimas* the orientation is toward large plot issues and exploring a vast continent, so there's a somewhat different take on it. But I think it says a lot for the *Ultima* mythos that it can support those different interpretations. And there's certainly a lot of material to work with.

WS: The experience you get when you

play *Underworld* is unprecedented. At least I've never felt anything like it. There are times when I turn the computer off—after you defeat the rogue knight, Rodrick, for example, or when you finally encounter Tyball, or when you're surrounded by fire elementals on the seventh level and you just know you're gonna fry—anyway, I turn off the computer and I go, "Whew! Made it!" as if I'd just really been there in the dungeon. That still amazes me. I mean, I lived with this game for a year of my life and I've played through it twice just for fun. I'm almost done with a third playthrough. I've never done that with any game before, let alone one I had anything to do with. That's an intense experience. Can you imagine what it's going to be like when we have VR (virtual reality) goggles and gloves? Players may never turn off their computers ...

CS: *So what are your future plans?*

PN: With any luck, to take some time off—more than a week and a half!

WS: I'll second that!

CS: *Well, two or three days ought to be enough to develop a great new plot ...*

PN: That's right.

CS: *So does LookingGlass have plans for the future, like virtual reality goggles or gloves or moving away from PCs and into other technology?*

PN: We don't have any plans to move away from PCs. The PC is here for some time to come. And because they're continually getting more powerful—I think I heard that every eighteen months the average PC doubles in power, or at least that it's been doing that over the last five or six years—

there's a lot of growth there, a lot of opportunities to do new things. And we're certainly not yet clever enough to take full advantage of what a PC can do, even today. So we'll continue to put a lot of effort into our PC games. We don't have any specific plans in terms of future *Underworld* games, but I wouldn't be surprised if there were an *Underworld III*.

CS: *Are there other ways you're thinking about using the Underworld technology, the engine that drives Underworld? Any other types of games?*

PN: Even when we started *Underworld*, one of our goals was to develop technology that we could use to tell stories in other genres. Science fiction is a perfect example of a genre that would work very well using that technology. Yes, there are thoughts, but as yet no definite plans to use that. I wouldn't be surprised if we did.

WS: It's safe to say that ORIGIN and LookingGlass are talking very seriously about a science fiction game using an enhanced version of the *Underworld II* technology. About a year ago, I proposed an "*Aliens meets Bladerunner meets Infocom's Suspended*" game. I'm thinking that now's the time to do it. And Paul has developed a similar proposal on his own. Doug has a cyberpunk game he's been dreaming about forever. So I think you'll see some cool SF games coming from LookingGlass and ORIGIN before too long—our wish lists are looking an awful lot alike again. That's a good sign. What form the final game will take, who knows? But it's probably safe to assume that it'll happen and that it'll be unlike anything you've ever seen before.

CS: *Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about Underworld and its development, or anything else we haven't touched on that you think is important?*

PN: Well, I think one of the significant things about *Underworld* is that for Blue Sky, which is now LookingGlass, we've had to learn how to do games as a team, using a diverse set of talents: programmers, writers, artists, designers, playtesters. That was a first for us. ORIGIN was one of the earliest in the industry, certainly before us, to start using teams. Seeing that it worked, and that it worked well, we used largely the same model. But what was different for us was that almost all the people on the *Underworld* project came from outside the game industry. For many of them this was their first job; they were coming right out of school.

CS: *Yes, but from MIT and Harvard ...*

PN: I don't know. We certainly have some very bright individuals. But what was really very encouraging was to see that after three or four months, these people who had never done games before were quickly picking up the skills and judgments and perspectives you need to do a game, and they knew what was important to do. All of them were game players, and that probably had a lot to do with it.

We also focused on getting people involved—closely involved—in the development of the project. As Warren said earlier, we don't really have anyone who's the master game designer, running the show. It really is a team effort. I think in our case that helped out, and helped get people involved in the project quickly. People learned a lot more that way because they all felt responsibility for many aspects of the game.

WS: That's something I've tried to incorporate into my own thinking, applying it to the in-house projects I produce. I saw the *Underworld* team take charge as a team. It was great. I want that same feeling of commitment and dedication on all of my projects.

PN: By the time *Underworld* was done we had a team of very talented game creators. We began to move right away on *Underworld II* and that project came along very smoothly—thanks to some bright and dedicated people, and to the fact that these people got involved from day one in all aspects of creating the games. So that's been an important part of what we do. These games are really a collaborative effort. That wasn't true three or four years ago. I find that a very satisfying aspect of the industry.

CS: *So it's much more film-like. You may have one person who has the idea, but you need a lot of other people to help you implement it.*

PN: I hope we don't become like Hollywood, though.

CS: *Oh, burning your bridges early, are you?*

PN: Well, yeah, I think people in Hollywood might agree with that. We do this because we really love doing this and because of creative expression and all that. It's very satisfying to write a game. We don't concern ourselves all that much with questions like, "Well, is this going to be a best-seller?" Licensing and money issues are really secondary to creating a game that we want to play. I hope it stays that way as the industry matures and gets bigger and the stakes go up.

I don't want LookingGlass to become a big production studio. We do want to keep intimate control over and involvement in the project.

CS: *Could each of you tell me about your background? How did you end up in computers and computer games?*

PN: It was pretty haphazard, as with most of the people in the game industry. I don't think anyone grew up saying, "Oh, I want to be a computer game designer." I wasn't even into computers particularly until college, when I had to use them to do papers and to do some research. In a computer science course I took, I met an individual named Ned Lerner and we did a game as a final project. We thought the game was pretty good. It was a 3-D space game. The teacher gave us a B-minus on it, because, as the professor said, "Well, games aren't really an appropriate thing to do for a final project." That pretty much convinced us that games were what we wanted to do. Ned and I collaborated for many years after we got out of school. Ned was the author of *Chuck Yaeger's Flight Trainer*. *Chuck Yaeger's* was a big hit for Honor Guards. There came a time when we'd been collaborating for so many years that we figured we ought to formalize it, so we merged our development groups and that's how LookingGlass started. Now we're all part of the same company.

CS: *So you and Ned are partners?*

PN: We both work on a contract basis for Electronic Arts. We are a development house, we are authors, and we will design a game and submit it to a publisher for publication. We've worked through ORIGIN and Electronic Arts for many years. Of

course, now they're one and the same—that just keeps it all in the family.

CS: *How about you, Warren—how did you get into computer games?*

WS: Well, as I said before, I started in paper games, working my way up to Editor-in-Chief for Steve Jackson Games in Austin, where I developed the TOON game from a basic design by Greg Costikyan. (Greg, incidentally, is one of the great unsung wacko designers in the game biz.) I did a bunch of other stuff for SJ Games, but TOON is still my baby, still selling strong after ten years! Then TSR made me an offer I couldn't refuse. There I was Supervisor of Creative Services (the game division), wrote a novel, developed Doug Niles' *Top Secret/S.I.* rules and Jeff Grubb's *Buck Rogers* game rules and Zeb Cook's *Bullwinkle & Rocky* game rules and a bunch of other stuff. But I missed Austin and I didn't see the paper game business evolving in any new and interesting directions.

When I started looking around for a logical career move, computer games seemed like it. As luck would have it, Denis Loubet, an artist for ORIGIN, called and said they were looking for associate producers. What a break—a computer game company in Austin looking to hire just when I needed a change. I was hired, and was made full producer in six months, I think it was. The rest is history.

As far as computer game *playing* goes, I had my Atari VCS and, later, an Atari 400 and, later still, an Apple IIc. Played a bunch of Chris Crawford's stuff and a lot of Star Raiders. Oh, a lot of things, but I was still a babe in the woods when I started at ORIGIN. In retrospect, it's a wonder they hired someone as wet behind the ears as I was, but it's all worked out really well. All I need to do

now is produce a cartoon game. I've done one everywhere else I've worked—I need to do one here, too. Anyway, that's it in a nutshell.

CS: *One last question. Why the change from Blue Sky to LookingGlass?*

PN: We changed to LookingGlass because we found out there was another game company out there called Blue Sky Software, which we hadn't heard of before, and we figured it would be advantageous to change our name. And we also figured a

change was appropriate when my group merged with Ned Lerner's.

WS: Why don't you tell them about Flying Fish? That's what Blue Sky called itself for a little while after they decided to change from Blue Sky. I thought Flying Fish was a great name for a game company! I especially liked it after you changed from Flying Fish to LookingGlass and one of your programmers started answering the phone, "Hello, Flying Glass." I thought that was classic. A great game industry story, folks ...

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