

# CALIDAR

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## *In Stranger Skies*



Calidar Publishing

BRUCE HEARD









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Special thanks to Thorfinn Tait, without whom this project would not have been possible.



# Foreword

It's been a very long time since I last put pen to paper about a fantasy adventure for skyships. During my time at TSR, I had the pleasure and privilege of writing a series of stories about flying ships and gung-ho explorers on a quest to unveil the far-flung reaches of their magical world. Three years later, the market had evolved, the company changed, and the stories came to an end. With no option to keep the familiar heroes alive, I buried my old dreams. Out of the ashes at long last, a new tale now emerges in these pages, with another generation of adventurers and a world of their own. I am nervous and worried of course, but also excited and brimming with ideas and endless stories to tell. This first book, *In Stranger Skies*, covers an awful lot of ground, introducing a new crew and their ship. It also sketches out an entire universe, from planets, their sun, and a central world, Calidar, to a specific kingdom, Meryath, right down to the streets of its capital city. Races dwelling in this universe and their gods are depicted as well, along with a collection of skyships and mechanics to travel from the sky to space's starry vault. Though guidelines help adapt this fantasy setting to the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game, the World of Calidar isn't a game. Rather it provides a story and background information for use with any game system. With this long-overdue book, I now invite you to discover the heart and soul of this brave new universe.

Bruce Heard  
July, 2014

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# In Stranger Skies



## Captain's Log

*3<sup>rd</sup> Day of Loreath 1512, last dog watch.*

*Heading East at 9,000 ft. Wind Southwest, strong breeze.*

*Unwell and homesick crew furloughed. Reinforcements transferred from the local garrison. All officers accounted for. Aloft at last after replenishing stores. Set sail hastily and running before the wind, ahead of a massive and sudden squall line. All hands on deck.*

✦ ✦ ✦

Captain Isledemer Drake Hieronymus d'Alberran.

The sound of his own name resonated in his head. He'd heard it a million times before, and yet it felt as if it were the first time ever. Strange.

The captain examined each syllable like a familiar

trinket long ago lost and just rediscovered by the whims of fate. He knew exactly what each word alluded to. His parents had seen to that. Yet, it all seemed inexplicably artificial and mysterious.

He sensed a presence above his shoulder—something both huge and minuscule, neither here nor there. No. It was a burning, intrusive thought searching his mind. It was someone else's, of this he was certain. The idea revolted him. But as he set upon expelling the inquisitive probe, a diffuse clamor echoed around him, quickly growing into a nearly deafening roar.

A firm hand landed on his shoulder, jolting the captain from his thoughts. It was his first mate, Enna Daggart. Her frown compounded the natural severity of her face and her dark-colored skin. A wind fierce and cold whipped her long black hair. Behind her reigned pandemonium. The captain's skyship appeared to fly upward through the dimness of a tornado's funnel, pitching and rolling wildly as the crew struggled with the sails. Lightning cracked incessantly, shooting past the ship and filling the air with its actinic scent. Next to the captain

stood Ol' Babblejack, the helmsman, fighting with the ship's wheel.

"By the Stars, what is the matter with you?" Enna hollered. "The ship's being torn apart!"

Isledemer quickly shook off the bizarre thoughts creeping into his mind and, after pulling a wand from his lace-trimmed sleeve, held on to his hat lest it fly into the storm.

"Steady that wheel, Mister Belzer," he shouted, touching the helm with the slender ivory shaft. A bluish glow briefly surrounded the circular woodwork and protruding handles. Ol' Babblejack, a graying seawolf tanned from decades of sailing all latitudes, responded to the captain with a quick and thankful nod, as the spell improved his control over the large wheel.

"We must turn around! What lies ahead isn't of our world," argued the first mate. "Helmsman, hard to port!"

"Belay that order, Mister Belzer!" The captain gazed past the skyship's stern, where the giant funnel of clouds and screaming winds had engulfed their vessel. Only a far away darkness remained there. On the



opposite end well above the storm, a vague gleam beckoned.

"We cannot sail against such winds, not within this mad spiral," Isledemer answered his first mate. "We must continue to wherever this leads. I say we sail upward into the light!"

Enna pushed a wild swath of hair from her face. "Beyond this point there may be no return, Captain. Perhaps Death itself awaits us there, or worse."

"Better a possible death later than a certain one now if we turn back. Onward, I say!" On these words, the vessel lurched forward with a groan of tortured wood. As Isledemer regained his balance, the wind stole his hat. For an instant, the captain watched the brown felt and large white plume vanish before he turned to Enna. "Get to the main mast cluster at once and lead the teams there. Give sail so we may leave this infernal storm without further delay."

"We run the risk of tearing the sails and losing the masts."

"She's a good ship, Mister Daggart. She'll hold."

The first mate gave a short nod. "Aye, Captain. If we survive, there'll be the devil to pay."

As the first mate staggered away, the captain observed the skyship from the edge of the forecabin. Like others of her sort, it wasn't built as a seafaring vessel. The helm stood close to the prow, for bearing came not from a rudder at the stern. In the absence of water providing physical leverage, heading resulted instead from a device fastened solidly at the center of the ship. She was a frigate configured with nine masts, one set of three standing upright from the deck, and two other sets extending port and starboard from the hull, angled thirty degrees below the deck. Without them and in the absence of a keel, any skyship skipper worth his breath could tell that the vessel would flip over in the wind like a sack of turnips rolling down a stairwell. The crew reached the lower masts down ratlines alongside the hull—a task best

suited for those sure-footed and without fear of heights. Main masts held square sails, with triangular sheets fore and aft, and a complicated spider web of ropes. It was the other reason for the helm's unconventional placement; this many sails obstructed the line of sight from astern. Amid the raging storm, the rigging had become a shambles times three. Loose ropes and torn sails whipped angrily in the wind, eluding the crew's grasp.

"You there! Watch that clew line."

The rebellious rope suddenly flung overboard the man the captain had hailed, his screams drowned out by the din. Isledemer rushed to the side, but too late to save him. It then occurred to him that this poor fellow seemed like a perfect stranger. Yet, he knew him as a member of his crew. The disturbing feeling burrowed back into his mind. Aside from the tempest, something else struck him as very wrong. The ship was his, indeed. It always had been. Or had it? A nauseating impression overwhelmed Isledemer when doubt cast a shadow where none had lain a moment earlier. Somehow, the ship looked different, but he couldn't really tell how or why. In fact, the entire crew felt both near and dear to his heart though eerily foreign, including those he'd picked up after his previous journey. With this last realization, an even greater oddity dawned on him. He could neither remember a single one of his past expeditions, nor recall the object of his present mission or whence he'd sailed.

Dizzy with disbelief, the captain headed back to the wheel. He placed a hand on the helmsman's shoulder and leaned against him to steady himself.

"Sir? Are ye unwell?" Ol' Babblejack gazed at his commander with concern.

Tall, with dark umber hair tied neatly at the nape and whisky-colored eyes, Isledemer had always appeared self-assured and level-headed. The captain shook off his nagging worries and returned the wand to his sleeve. Now was the worst time to dither. He observed the helmsman for an instant and decided to address the obvious issue.

"I'm quite fine, Mister Belzer. The question is: *are you?*"

After a moment of hesitation, the helmsman lifted an eyebrow and answered, "Aye. That I be, Sir. Should I not?"

"I wonder. Do you know who you really are?"

"Beg yer pardon, Cap'n? I be the helmsman. Always been I have, Sir."

"Indeed you have. And do you know who I really am?"

Visibly confused, the man shrugged. "Well, Cap'n Sir, ye be... well, *the Captain!* No doubt about it."

"Indeed I am. Say, Mister Belzer, do you happen to recall your previous journey on this ship?"

Ol' Babblejack, for once, seemed at a loss for words. He drew in a breath to answer, halted, then closed his mouth, overtaken with sudden perplexity. His raised eyebrows plunged into a frown so deep it overshadowed his bright blue eyes.

"You can't recall any of it, can you?"

The helmsman's shoulders drooped at the stunning revelation. Befuddled beyond hope, he almost let go of the wheel.

"Watch your steering now and adjust the roll, Mister Belzer. No need for the ship to corkscrew into the wind." The captain pointed at a lever just before the helm. "You do remember how it works, don't you?"

"Aye, Sir. That I do."

Ol' Babblejack angled the lever one notch to port, helping the skyship straighten herself against the beating crosswinds. He pulled slightly on another one to his right, raising the ship's prow toward the funnel's axis, and adjusted a knob on a large dial in the binnacle to his left, increasing lift. With the raging storm spinning around the ship, the compass danced wildly and aimlessly.

"Straight up she sails, Sir, an' with all the lift she can spare pushin' astern."

"Well done, Mister Belzer." The captain's praise seemed to bolster the helmsman's resolve. "Hold a course true to the top of that storm, no matter what. The ship's survival depends on it."



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"Aye, Cap'n. That I will. But Sir, what about that strange..." The helmsman cocked his head awkwardly and grimaced. "Ye know what I mean t'say."

"Indeed I do. We'll sort it out later. For now, as the expression goes, we're all in the same boat, aren't we?"

Another groan rose from the hull as the vessel fought against the forces working to wrench her apart. After another look at the gleam ahead, the captain climbed down to the main deck. Three sailors got hold of the wayward clew line and yanked it down while another anchored it round a belaying pin. Despite the ship's vertical position and the horrific conditions in which they worked, the crew managed their business. The deck's enchantment involved an artificial pull keeping everyone topside, at least those not blown off into the void. The same properties extended below deck, pushing everyone toward the ship's lower levels. Such an arrangement enabled flight upside-down, if such were ever needed.

As he made his way amidships, Isledemer watched teams of sailors scrambling along the lower masts, past the side of the hull. One could only admire their bravery. Shreds of Enna's imperious voice cut through the storm's roar, ordering more sails here and fewer there, depending on which side of the ship they lay—topside, port, or starboard. She had to trim leeward sails as they luffed for lack of a direct airflow, while those windward or topside had to be eased to better seize the winds. Her choices on how much of either were crucial, as they balanced the amount of pull and steadied the ship, while preventing sheets from tearing further. The actions she ordered would help the helmsman hold his course. The first mate's talent and experience proved undeniable.

As the captain approached her, the topside main mast creaked ominously. A crack suddenly appeared at the base and quickly grew along the massive shaft. Instantly, Isledemer recovered his wand and aimed at the growing fissure that threatened to topple the mast along with the

crew still in its rigging. An iron fitting shattered and flew within a hair of the captain's face, hitting a nearby crewman in the back of the head. Simultaneously, Isledemer uttered a spell that blocked the fracture and slowly began mending the mast. Just a few paces away, Enna spotted the danger.

"Reduce the main topsail!" she ordered, and then looked up. "Mister Rivven Cripplegate! *Seize* that topsail at once if you want to stay among us!"

The bosun, easily recognizable by his flaming red hair, had joined the crew up in the rigging. He acknowledged the first mate's order and sent his mates to secure the sail. As the skyship shuddered, the edges of the masts swung back and forth. One sailor lost his grip and tumbled off. The captain recognized one Ottamus Killbound, familiar though somewhat of a stranger. By chance, he fell onto a lower starboard sail where a peer grabbed him. As Isledemer concentrated on his spell, he sensed a sigh of relief from the first mate. High above, the bosun's expression said as much.

Winds gained in speed and ferocity, and the funnel grew wider. Several windward sails ripped at once under the strain. Suddenly unbalanced, the skyship rolled nearly out of control. From the corner of his eye, the captain spotted the helmsman's frantic efforts to straighten the ship and hold her on course. Leeward sails suddenly catching full blasts of wind caused the hull to lurch even more, until a mizzenmast snapped like a dried twig. Dangling from its rigging, the debris rammed against the hull, menacing the other two masts. Crew with hatchets rushed to the side and began chopping the lines. As the skyship rolled and wove through the storm, the loose shaft swung back once more, crushing to death another illustrious unknown.

"Sky ho! Dead ahead."

Rivven, hanging from a yardarm, pointed at a spot before the ship. From where he stood, the captain just barely made out the sight through the sails, masts, and rigging in the way. Far ahead, an opening

revealed a shred of starry sky. But soon, a dark haze masked the funnel's exit.

"Brace for a squall!" the first mate hollered. "Get that loose mast off the ship, *now!*"

The blur ahead revealed itself as heavy rain falling inward from the funnel's rim. Like an inverted maelstrom, a bone-chilling, twisting downpour hurtled toward the ship, the impact nearly shattering the hull. But Ol' Babblejack flew steady as ordered. The entire vessel screamed as he forced her prow back into the flow. Enna held fast to the mast and grabbed the captain's belt as he struggled to complete his spell. With rain shooting sideways along the length of the deck, nearly blinding everyone like so many icy needles, the last hatchet severed the last line with a portentous thump, and the dangerous wreckage at last tumbled away in the wake of the ship.

Free of the dangling debris, the vessel righted herself and regained speed, her enchantment pushing her along despite the raging downpour.

Suddenly, the storm ended.

The skyship flew into a dark void, surrounded on all sides by distant stars. Behind her, the giant funnel collapsed and vanished inexplicably. The sun (or at least *a* sun) radiated far away, casting harsh light and dark shadows untempered by normal atmospheric refraction. As unnerving as the experience was, Isledemer felt he'd already been in a similar situation. The crew stood silently, looking around them and watching their commander for clues about their new predicament.

Curiously, the captain's hat, plume and all, came floating down from the topgallant and landed before the squared tips of Isledemer's cuffed boots. Eyebrows raised, he picked it up, and looked in the direction it had vanished earlier. There was nothing there but the enigmatic twinkle of stars and a subtle shimmer just past the edges of the masts, marking the limit between the ship's livable environment and the cold, deadly void beyond. The sails, however, now hung limply for lack of wind. After reshaping his



hat and placing it upon his head, he faced his first mate.

"Mister Daggart, if you please, do get the rest of the officers and crew topside."

With a glance and a brisk movement of her head, the first mate sent the bosun and a few sailors below deck. She was tall enough to look her captain in the eyes, graceful yet muscular, proud and with a natural air of authority. Few under her command ever thought of defying her. The helmsman turned to look at the crowd gathering amidships and responded to the captain's gaze with a shrug of helplessness. The vessel was stranded, adrift in space.

Wu Yuntai, the captain-at-arms, was first to come up. Unusual as an elf, his ivory face seemed as sharp as his blade, and his hair flowed from a silver ring above his head. A score of marines escorted him, dressed in impeccable red and white coats, though slightly disheveled. Swords and magical rods hung from their belts. Yuntai and his team, soldiers of some empire now forgotten by all, stood several paces opposite Isledemer.

Next came Waessail Barrooney, the fellfolk purser: a small, bespectacled, and pot-bellied fellow whose head barely reached the captain's elbow. He carried a ledger under his arm. His race's name sounded unusual yet familiar to the captain, and he dismissed that feeling like so many others piling up in his head. Then followed Ebben Rugwittle, master artificer—a gnome who stood even shorter than the purser. Horwik Pebbleborn, the dwarven master-of-engines, emerged from the companionway. As Isledemer believed he remembered, "Hoyk" always grew ill in difficult weather. This latest episode brought to his cheeks and forehead a tint greener than usual. Gumboyle Moffeecot, the cook, showed up: another fellfolk and a more peculiar one at that, with her teeth filed into sharp triangles, tattoos on all visible skin, a wooden leg, and a most curious pet by the name of "Moonsail." The tiny humanoid creature flapped its leathery wings and landed on the cook's shoulder as she offered a cup full of a steaming decoction to the mas-

ter-of-engines. The dwarf took one whiff, turned a deeper shade of jade, and hurried to the ship's railing.

The officers and midshipmen stood on either side of their captain, while the rest of the crew formed two lines closing the square. After a quick look, Isledemer determined one crewmember still missing: the master, an irreplaceable officer who served as navigator, surgeon, and chaplain, third in command in the ship's hierarchy. Rivven whispered a few words in Enna's ear.

"Will Mister Starward do us the honor of joining us?" inquired Isledemer.

"The storm has been unkind to her, Captain," the first mate answered. "She also requests permission to remain below deck to tend to the wounded."

"Very well." Without further delay, Isledemer raised his voice and addressed the crew. "Fate has decided to bring us all here this day. It did far more than this, as you have all realized by now. Adrift in stranger skies and without memory of what drove us here, it is our duty to unravel this mystery and perhaps return home. I do not believe what happened to be a random event. There is an intelligence and a hidden will behind this, which enabled us to work this ship and know each other as long-time companions would. What memories were erased from our minds and suggestions inserted in their place remain far less remarkable than the physical changes I suspect were inflicted upon crew and ship alike. A hand of cards was dealt us for a purpose as yet unclear. It is now up to us to play this game to whatever end, and I trust we shall win. Whoever we truly are, and from whichever shores we truly came, we must act as one to succeed. Do not let the strangeness of this situation cloud your judgement and resolve."

Captain d'Alberan paused to observe reactions among the crew. Some demonstrated fear, dismay, or confusion. The captain-at-arms remained ironlike. Waessail took a quick swig from a flask. Ebben, rubbing the side of his very long nose, looked perplexed by the drooping sails. The cook held the steaming cup to her pet,

who fished out unidentifiable squirming bits. Enna kept her arms crossed, waiting for the captain to continue, while Rivven suppressed whispers among the crew with dark looks. Silence returned. The captain opened his mouth to pursue his speech, when the master-of-engines loudly let loose his discomfort over the railing.

"Mister Pebbleborn!" hailed Isledemer.

"Sir?" The dwarf responded in a gravelly voice rendered even rockier as the result of his gut-wrenching performance.

"You are excused. Report to sick bay."

"Thank you, Sir."

As the captain waited patiently for the heavy-footed fellow to climb down the companionway, the bosun's glare quieted snickers among the crew. Rivven, with a temper as fiery as his hair, was notorious for sarcastic reprimands and generous whacks of his bimster as swift as they were harsh (as evidenced from the fraying at the rope's end), though rarely inappropriate.

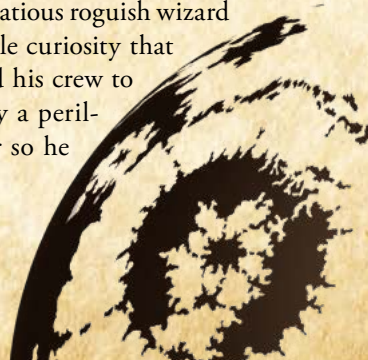
"For us to deserve a chance of success, there must be absolute discipline on board," continued the captain. "Not knowing what dangers we must face, it is best we all come to terms with a few basic rules."

Isledemer slowly paced within the congregation's square, taking time to expound his views. "Rule number one: *Do not argue with your Captain.*"

While officers slowly nodded, the remainder of the crew remained slightly more circumspect. Out of courtesy and respect, Isledemer refrained from glancing at his first mate, quite certain she'd get his drift. He continued his slow pacing.

"Rule number two: *Your captain is always right.*"

Expressions grew much more varied, a response Isledemer assumed reflected his nature as an incorrigibly adventurous risk-taker. Behind his unflappable commanding appearance stood a romantic and occasionally flirtatious roguish wizard with an insatiable curiosity that had led him and his crew to undertake many a perilous journey. Or so he





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remembered, since what these adventures had been remained painfully elusive, like pesky, stubborn words riding the tip of one's tongue.

"Rule number three: *If rule number two is in doubt, apply rule number one.* Anyone disagreeable to these terms, step forward."

As a man, the entire crew took one large step back, leaving one standing at the fore, airman Emusdae. The captain sensed something wrong with this one, aside from once again knowing perfectly well the name of a common crew member. His suspicion quickly bloomed into annoyance when the sailor raised his index finger and began in a nasal voice, "But, Sir..."

Without hesitation, Isledemer retrieved his wand and cast a spell at the man. After a short hiss, the hapless sailor vanished, only to reappear off the ship's side. The vessel's vertical pull sent him tumbling out of sight, his strangled scream cut short an instant later when he reached the airless void.

The captain elbowed his way past the crew and looked over the railing. The sailor floated away slowly, already frozen in death some distance past the tips of the portside masts.

"When did *this* character show up?" inquired the captain. "I don't recall seeing him on deck during the storm."

"Found him near the master's quarters, Sir," answered Rivven, rubbing the dark red stubble on his chin. "I thought he was part of the crew, but now that you mention it, I'm not so sure anymore."

The purser chimed in, searching through his ledger. "I'd remember it if he'd been hired. Emusdae... Emusdae..." Waessail suddenly stopped, with an "oh" of surprise and embarrassment quickly turning into dismay. He raised his head and gazed at the captain. "That name is listed here, Sir, right at the end—but all the dates are missing. Almost everything else has been

erased. I've no record either of where I bought supplies during the last port of call."

"Thank you, Mister Barrooney. We'll look

into this later. Suffice to say I don't intend to play kindly with unwarranted additions to the crew from this point on. Whoever is behind this charade had better heed my words. And while I'm at it, I shall make my final point on the matter of discipline."

The captain paced ever so slowly, inspecting the crew and dwelling by those he suspected might have "shown up" surreptitiously during or after the storm. Since none truly stood out as such, Isledemer selected one with a slovenly appearance.

"You there, Airman Anaderic I believe? Step forward."

The young man gulped and wiped a drop of sweat from his brow despite the cool and bone-dry atmosphere prevailing on the ship.

"Sir?"

The captain seemed to remember him as the son of a rice merchant, which earned him the nickname "Rice," by his mates. His taste for adventure had led him to join the crew. He gauged the sailor's mettle, and ordered: "Stand by the ship's railing."

Increasingly nervous, the man did as ordered and turned to face Isledemer.

"Remember rule number one, airman?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Good. Jump off."

Wide eyed, Anaderic gazed with horror at his commander, the first mate, and at the rest of the crew. A glance past the railing made him grow as pale as a ghost's shroud by moonlight.

"Jump I say, or I'll roast you where you stand," growled Isledemer, pointing his wand at the sailor.

Resigned to his ghastly fate, the poor man climbed over the railing, held his nose, and jumped off.

At once, the captain released a spell. The sailor vanished and reappeared a few feet above the deck, and crashed at Isledemer's feet.

"Good show, airman! Stand in line with your mates now."

As the sailor staggered back, Isledemer raised his voice and addressed the crew once more. "This is an illustration of rule

number one's proper implementation. Best you all remember it. Mister Barrooney, perform roll call if you please." The captain looked at the storm's damage and added, "Mister Daggart, you have the deck. You know what you have to do."

\* \* \*

Captain d'Alberran climbed down the forward companionway. Common crew quarters lay underneath the forecabin. The surgeon's bay was nearby, next to the chart room. A glance into the latter failing to reveal the master's presence, the captain headed to the surgeon's bay. The pungent scent of medicinal oils and herbs filled the air. A broad ray of light emanated from an enchanted overhead panel, filtering outside light over a work table at the center. Almost hidden amid the surrounding *clair obscur*, several sailors lay on bunk beds with various conditions. Most had suffered broken bones and crushing wounds. Those the master had healed with her magic stayed to recover. Others who'd been brought in later weren't as fortunate, as the master's spellcasting abilities eventually depleted. They'd have to wait until the following day, relying solely on herbal medicine to dull their pain. Their wounds had been bound and carefully secured.

In the back of the room, Isledemer caught sight of those who'd perished during the earlier ordeal. They were already wrapped in shrouds, awaiting their skyward burials. He'd have to see to that soon. Beyond the master's medical help, the departed had become relevant to her spiritual guidance. This served to remind the captain of how close life and death really were, those who'd escaped with their lives resting so close to those who hadn't. He hoped it wasn't a portent of things to come.

A snort rose from a corner. A rather rotund and sturdy character sat on a stool, a cloth over his head as he breathed steam from a bowl on his knees, filled with some medicine the master had probably handed him.



"Mister Pebbleborn!"

After another loud sniff, the dwarf flipped the cloth over his head and looked up. The captain guardedly eyed the odd liquid in the bowl, a bluish brew with small golden sparks rising slowly with the steam. The dwarf's beard, brows, and the tip of his nose glistened with the stuff.

"You look perfectly ridiculous, Mister Pebbleborn. Take that cloth off your head, if you please."

The master-of-engines responded with the tell-tale slur and unsteadiness of someone who might have had one too many.

"Aye, ssshir."

"Have you been drinking that medicine?" the captain inquired with sudden dismay.

"Wuz agshidental, it wuz... ssshir." The hiccup that followed didn't help his case.

"Do you know where the master is?"

"Ssshe wen' out an' didna come back, ssshir. I think." He pointed at the doorway behind the captain.

"Well, Mister Pebbleborn, you do seem to be back to your true self, don't you? Wipe the damned stuff off your face and return topside. Make sure the war engines are in good functioning order."

"Aye, G'ptain. Right 'way, ssshir."

"And please, Mister Pebbleborn, go to your quarters first and splash water on your face. That's an order."

With an expression of annoyance, the master-of-engines complied, handed the bowl to his commander, and stumbled out. After the dwarf's departure, the captain stuck a finger in the arcane liquid, sniffed at it, and grimaced. Anyone breathing the concoction couldn't possibly feel anything afterward, let alone airsickness. Thoroughly disgusted, he tossed the cloth atop the offending bowl, left it on the table, and exited sick bay in search of the master.

His path led him to the steering chamber after he'd checked the crew quarters. In the absence of portholes letting in outside light, the large room relied on levitating globes radiating a sallow, eerie glow. The smell of an alchemical compound distilled from coal

tar overwhelmed all others. Timber had been treated with the substance to better resist the injuries of time and of natural elements. The mechanism, occupying about two decks-worth of space, consisted of a pair of sturdy triangular structures. One was solidly anchored to the hull in a horizontal position. The other, just above, relied on gimbals connecting with the helm through cogwheels and ropes. The relative positions of brass nodes on the wooden triangles determined the ship's bearing, pitch, and roll, and whether she should ascend, fly level, or descend. If the top nodes shifted, those below would try to realign themselves with the ones above, effecting ship maneuvers. The captain briefly examined the apparatus for any damage, and followed a catwalk to another door.

He knew it led to a chapel and suspected this was probably the result of memories implanted in his mind. However hard he tried, he could explain neither the need for an onboard chapel nor the purpose for its curious location next to the steering chamber. As he remembered them, spiritual services had always been conducted topside. In any case, it would make sense for the master to be there; she was, after all, the ship's chaplain. He pushed the door open and entered. The air was heavy with the scent of incense.

The master sat before a wooden altar, a hand against the carved edge, her forehead resting upon it. Her short golden hair reflected the soft halo from two tall *ever-burning* candles erected on either side of the dais. Though dimness reigned beyond her slender shape, Isledemer observed her shoulders shaking sporadically. The sound of half-muted sobbing followed. The captain glanced over his shoulder, closed the door behind him, then placed his hat on a pedestal table by the entrance.

He cleared his throat softly.

"Something wrong, Mister Starward?"

The elven prioress stood and began turning toward her commander, but stopped first to wipe her face and take in a deep breath. Isledemer approached, unsure of

how to handle the situation. He wasn't used to members of the crew crying, let alone a senior officer.

"It would be best to let it all out, wouldn't it, Mister Starward?"

The master straightened up and visibly attempted to present an image of herself in full control despite her red nose, pinched lips, and swollen eyes.

"There's no one here but you and me. I hope you will trust my promise that whatever you say will remain in strict confidence." He smiled and added, "It's all between you, me, and... and..."

Aghast, he suddenly realized the crux of the problem. And he'd thoughtlessly blundered into the matter of things like a whale run aground. After a moment of awkward silence, he ventured a new approach. "I'm terribly sorry for missing the obvious. How clumsy of me. I should have picked up on this right away."

Arabesque Starward raised large dreamy eyes to her commander. Her celadon-colored gaze felt like infinite pools. They'd left more than one crew member at a loss for words. Unexpectedly, the desire to hold her in his arms and console her welled up inside him. That sentiment left him troubled and hesitant. Though she was physically attractive, something deeper beckoned him, something he couldn't fathom. Unsure whether these feelings were genuinely his or the result of some insidious scheme, he repressed them as surely as one would clasp a wretch in irons.

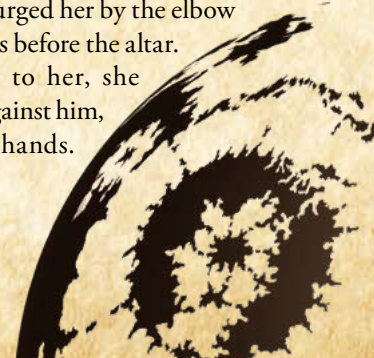
"I can't explain it," she answered in a low voice. "I just can't."

"You've become unable to reach your spiritual patron, haven't you? It's happened to all of us, I'm afraid."

Arabesque placed a hand on her mouth and closed her eyes, making the room seem darker. She nodded pitifully. It was the worst of dilemmas a prioress could face.

The captain urged her by the elbow to sit on the steps before the altar.

As he sat next to her, she leaned slightly against him, her face in her hands.





# In Stranger Skies



He wrapped an arm around her shoulders awkwardly, as if he were defying some unspoken law.

He drew her closer.

She leaned toward him.

He cursed himself.

As they sat together, he observed the smudges of dried blood marring her fingers and the white linen gown she'd worn while in sick bay. She'd had a tough time there, but nonetheless, many were those blessed by her magical healing. Perplexed, Isledemer broke the silence once more.

"You were able to use your healing spells, weren't you?"

The master lifted her face from her hands and nodded.

"Well then, if you'd really been cut off, such healing wouldn't have been possible, would it?"

Arabesque sighed softly. "That's not what troubles me. I prayed long and hard, but though I failed to commune with my spiritual liege, magic was still granted." She gazed at the captain as if she could read an answer in his eyes. "I just don't know *who* granted it."

Isledemer raised an eyebrow. "Well, I suppose that would be... disconcerting."

The master cringed. "It's so much worse. What am I to think? Who am I if not a ser-

vant of my liege? Such vows aren't so easily broken. If I accept this magic, then whom do I truly serve and for what purpose? There can be no faith, truth, or honor in this."

The captain considered her words carefully; then a thought crossed his mind. "It seems to me that if our memories and perhaps our flesh were transformed in some arcane way, our hearts still tell us what is right or wrong. I've been struggling with this throughout the storm. If deep down we'd been so thoroughly manipulated, then I should never have been able to sense these alterations, let alone their nature. I believe it is thus for a reason. We may not be able to explain any of it now, but we can still feel in our hearts what seems right. Of this, I remain convinced. Therefore, it no longer matters in whom your faith lies, but whether you do have faith at all. I know you do, don't you? Trust your heart, and it will tell you whether your faith is well placed; then truth and honor will follow—whatever they are."

The prioress, perhaps lost in her thoughts at Isledemer's words, stared strangely at him. He felt as if he were drowning in her haunting gaze. His own words rang in his head, fueling the fire of self-doubt. Doing what he suggested would lead him down a path he dearly wanted to avoid. He could not afford questionable sentiments, not as a captain, not in their predicament.

The sensation of warm lips upon his pulled him from his worries.

"Thank you," whispered Arabesque, now facing him.

Isledemer seized her hands and hesitated for an instant. "I cannot go there. I just can't."

The prioress smiled kindly. "I know. It will not happen again, I promise. But you, Isledemer, should also heed what lies in your heart, or it will devour you whole sooner than you think."

She'd used his given name, and though terribly improper, he loved the way she'd spoken each syllable.

He craved it, and loathed it just as much.

What was she really thinking? How did



she cope with it? At a loss for answers and confused, he stood and cleared his throat as if the act could dispel the conflict raging in his mind. Relief came from Enna's muffled voice and thumping footfalls on the upper deck. Isledemer instinctively glanced up. His eyes followed the curve of the woodwork arching over the mysterious altar. He turned to have a better look at it.

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

He examined the altar's polished redwood surface. A silver chalice stood at the center. A groove carved on the tabernacle encircled the vessel's base and extended in four points to another larger groove that looked strangely like their ship's outline. A deathly impression dawned on the captain that something ought to flow through these grooves, an incongruous concept that made his skin crawl.

"By the Stars, I say! With all that's been shoveled into our heads, I cannot recall the purpose of this ruddy altar to save myself." He turned to the ship's mate. "Do you?"

She ran her blood-encrusted fingers along a groove, slowly, pensively.

"I wish I could. I sense this concerns the passage of lost souls to the world beyond, but I cannot unveil its true nature, for its purpose is well hidden. I'm attracted to it undeniably, but my questions have remained unanswered. Yet, it stands here for a very good reason, like everything else that has happened of late."

Isledemer grimaced at the idea of what this really meant. The outline of his ship engraved on the tabernacle only served to evoke a sinister impression about the true nature of his vessel. He was about to add something when the door opened unexpectedly. Newsbickle, a midshipman with a long face pockmarked with acne, peered in.

"My apologies for interrupting. A sail has been sighted."

\* \* \*

Enna and Yuntai stood near the helm as Isledemer climbed up the stairs. The captain-at-arms, his hands on the railing,

observed a faraway vessel approaching by the port bow. Next to him, Enna aimed a spyglass at the impromptu visitor. She handed it to Isledemer when he reached them.

"The master?" she inquired.

"She'll be fine."

The first mate nodded briefly and pointed at the approaching vessel. "Something tells me they're up to no good."

The captain brought the spyglass to his eye and studied the intruder. Within the black circle of his augmented vision, the vessel appeared as a quad-masted warship—with four sets of three masts standing in a cruciform configuration, each at forty-five degrees from her main deck. Her crimson sails bulged with some strange wind, trimmed for close-hauled sailing.

Anticipating his thoughts, Enna explained, "She appeared from nowhere. Lucky she didn't get the drop on us."

Isledemer continued his observation. The visitor moved quickly, faster than any skyship he remembered, which he realized included only his own. He knew his vessel would be no match for the approaching man-o-war, even if she were not hopelessly adrift. Scale-like plates on the intruder's hull gave it an ominous, glistening-black appearance, compounded by a fierce-looking dragon figurehead. It took the captain an instant longer to discern a tube protruding between its jaws. Just above, on the forecastle, stood a group of warriors in plate armor adorned with long white tabards bearing black dragon symbols. Among them stood someone probably their commander, staring back through his own spyglass. Somehow, Isledemer had the feeling he'd already met him, somewhere, at some point. When the man seemed to have spotted his counterpart, he lowered his optical device and turned to address his crew. Behind him, sailors in matching colors readied war engines while their vessel's main sails dropped to clear a line of sight.

"You're right, Mister Daggart. These are no friends of ours." Isledemer collapsed his spyglass and turned to the captain-at-arms.

"Mister Wu, general quarters if you please. Have the weapons distributed at once."

As a marine drummer summoned all hands to the deck, Isledemer looked abaft. "Mister Pebbleborn!"

The hairy face of the master-of-engines emerged from behind a catapult loaded with a wicked-looking harpoon. Gone was the sparkling blue goo. The eagerness and granite-hard resolve of a dwarf preparing for battle now owned his demeanor.

"Here, Captain!"

"I trust the engines are in good order."

"Aye, Captain, they are. Let that black-hearted bandit get a good whiff of dwarven craftsmanship!"

"As you were, Mister Pebbleborn... Mister Rugwittle!"

"Sir?" The diminutive officer peered past Yuntai's legs. The gnome's bluish mane curled on his forehead but failed to cover his pointy ears. An upward-curving goatee and imperial mustache gave him a slightly devilish flair. He sported a silver-trimmed navy-blue coat, white breeches and stockings, and argent-buckled shoes.

"Do something about these sails if you please."

"My apologies, Captain, but my spells to cast wind don't appear to work, you see."

"What, what? You would have me believe your enchantment has failed?"

"Not entirely, Sir. I checked everything, and all seems as it should. It's just the air element. I've got a good nose for this sort of magic, you know, but this time it just doesn't work. Most irritating!"

"How unfortunate. Secure for combat, then."

"Aye, Sir."

As the gnome trotted away, the captain glanced at the rigging, and hollered, "Clear those main sails out of the way!"

As Rivven's voice somewhere aft echoed the captain's command, the purser approached Isledemer, nervous and fidgety. Still grasping his ledger in pudgy fingers, he wiped sweat from his balding head with a handkerchief.



# In Stranger Skies

"With your permission, Captain, I'll be lending a hand to the master. From the looks of things, she may need the help."

"Good show, Mister Barrooney." Isledemer pointed at a lanky midshipman gawking at the approaching vessel. "And take Mister Grommets with you, if you please. He looks far too excited by the impending trouble for his own good."

"Aye, Sir."

Amid the clattering of weapons being distributed among the crew, Isledemer leaned toward the first mate, keeping a wary eye on the approaching vessel.

"This is no pirate, corsair, or buccaneer."

"Aye. I'd say those uniforms are a dead giveaway," responded Enna. "Unless I'm gravely mistaken, these are knights. They don't attack without reason."

"Agreed. If it's not a random aggression, then they must have known our location from the start and, more importantly, *who we are*. Else, why would they attack? Based on their demeanor, this is no courtesy call. They will either destroy our ship or board us. Something tells me it's the latter. So much the better."

Enna aimed a dark look at the vessel. The deep black in her pupils grew intense and sinister. Her leather glove creaked as she grasped the handle of the cutlass at her waist.

"Mister Daggart, if you please, take a good team with you, the bosun, and half of those marines. Hold position by the aftcastle. I would not have any of our visitors gain way below deck."

"Aye, Captain."

"Mister Wu, you're with me. We guard the helm."

"Aye, Sir."

With a few brief orders, his remaining marines stood amidships, at the prow, and by the foremast, rods in one hand, swords in the other. The remainder of the crew took to the gunwales and the rigging.

Those with experience manned the engines, two catapults amidships, one on the quarterdeck, and another on the

forecastle, under Hoyk Pebbleborn's expert leadership. The master artificer remained out of sight. Midshipman Fablethorne, a young lady of noble birth, came running from the companionway and handed Isledemer his rapier, before rejoining her mate, Newsbickle, with the rest of the crew.

Just outside catapult range, the knights' vessel suddenly pulled up and began rolling over, earning a string of heartfelt dwarven curses.

"Mister Belzer," hollered the captain as he fastened his sword belt around his waist. "Roll hard to starboard if you please, and bring our portside weapons to bear."

"Aye, aye, Sir."

Ol' Babbiejack shoved aside the lever next to him, and spun the wheel as directed. Cogs below deck ratcheted as the steering device responded to his commands.

The aggressor, now inverted, pitched toward her quarry from above, approaching fast. Though unable to sail forth, the captain's vessel flipped to her side, presenting her portside engines.

"Release as you bear, Mister Pebbleborn!"

In anticipation, the master-of-engines bared his teeth, yellow and brown from the nuts he often chewed. He closed an eye, raised a thumb sideways to gauge the other ship's course, and kicked his war machine to realign its aim.

"Loose!" he roared.

An engine mate heaved hard on the release cord, and the giant harpoon hurtled forth. As it tore past the shimmer beyond the edges of the masts, breathable air hissed through the gap until the bubble sealed itself. The projectile dashed across the void and intercepted the approaching aggressor.

"Right up her *snotlocker*!" snarled Pebbleborn.

The harpoon's metal tip stuck fast below the prow. The master artificer had fitted a number of these harpoons to detonate on impact. Silently, a ball of flame engulfed a portion of the hull, and debris careened away.

"Well done, Mister Pebbleborn!"

The master-of-engines was too busy

directing his team while they reloaded to acknowledge his commander's praise.

The dragonship pursued her course, and a billowing plume shot from its baleful figurehead.

Enna's voice shot from the stern. "Brace for damage!"

The plume grew into a huge green glob rolling forth. The captain unsheathed his wand and uttered a spell of defense. An invisible barrier met the billowing sphere. Though the shield scattered a good part of the attack, the glob's core melted right through and past the life-preserving shimmer. A massive blast of wind accompanied the sudden loss of pressure and breathable atmosphere. In utter pain, crew and officers dropped to the deck, gasping for air. While the bubble resealed itself at last, the ghastly attack splashed against the side of the hull. A gel-like substance stuck to all it touched and burned like acid, igniting soon afterward. The ship's timber groaned, cracked, and snapped where planks and mast twisted and burned. Two airmen crouching nearby were touched as well. They rolled writhing and screaming on the deck, trying in vain to remove the deadly goo. Soon, their molten flesh revealed bones and teeth before bursting into flames.

The captain, on his knees and struggling to regain his breath, hollered in a raspy voice, "Snuff those blasted flames or we'll all choke to death!"

It soon became obvious that loose sand alone could not defeat the growing blaze on the deck and hull.

"Clear away!"

At last back on his feet, Isledemer aimed his wand and uttered a new spell. An area of dimness devoid of air spread from the center of the flames. As the magic reached its full extent, the bubble of atmosphere around the ship shuddered and began shrinking under the strain. Smoke threatened to befoul breathable air when the spell took effect. The fire weakened, sputtered, and vanished at last.

"Stand fast to repel boarding!" hailed Enna.



The dragonship had come about, and grappling hooks quickly flew the short distance between the two vessels. Hatchets fell upon the aggressor's lines, but not enough to prevent the maneuver. Soon, ropes were heaved, and the ships came together, their masts, yardarms, and air envelopes afoul of each other.

"Loose!" Hoyk thundered.

A last harpoon sprang viciously into the aggressor's flank, tearing through cloth, timber, hard steel, and living flesh. This time, the roar of the blast shook the air. Flames were doused just as quickly while two enemy engines responded. They flung steel bolas connected with barbed chains which raked the deck and reaped bounties of death and horror. An instant later, a wave of armored knights climbed over the side and clashed with the crew.

At once a towering knight made for the closest dwarven engine. Hoyk bellowed at the intruder, his neck nearly double in thickness and veins bulging as he stoked his battlerage. The knight did the same, louder and with dragon-like intonations. Not to be upstaged, the dwarf reached for an object behind his war machine, a wooden stock with a flared metal tube. Fire, smoke, and thunder belched from the contraption, forcing Hoyk to stagger a few steps back. By the time the air cleared, the knight's head and shoulders were missing. Mangled remains crashed on the deck while the master-of-engines discarded his weapon. He seized an axe in one hand and a baling hook in the other, and charged into the fray with a howl.

A dozen more knights stepped aboard, and headed for the helm.

"Hold your line!" the captain-at-arms snarled. His marines formed a screen between the knights and their commander. "Ready rods!"

The aggressors spotted the marines and raised their shields.

"Aim..."

The knights marched on, swords brandished, helmeted faces barely visible above the edges of their overlapping shields.

"Discharge!"

A volley of electrical bolts flew from the marines' rods and ensnared the intruders, crawling along their shields and creeping through articulations of their armor and their helms' ocularia. Half dropped on the spot, motionless. A few more fell to their knees, screaming and writhing. The others discarded their shields and marched on. A half-dozen more took the places of their fallen brethren.

"Give them hell!"

As his marines switched to their swords, Yuntai pointed his at what he perceived as a subcommander, challenging him. The knight took him on, the distant sun glinting starkly off the armor beneath his white tabard. He was fast and powerful. He spun his blade right and left, nearly getting past the elf's counterstrokes. With a twist of the wrist, Yuntai summoned elven magic to deflect a blow that would have cleaved right through his chest plate. As the knight struggled to regain his balance, the captain-at-arms lunged, skewering the man through the eye, right and true. Kicking his slain foe aside to free his blade, he moved on to the next.

Amid the bloody chaos, Isledemer watched, searching for the one he sensed had come for him. The captain's crew fared poorly against an armored and experienced enemy, the fight claiming a ghastly toll among his sailors. An older one was beheaded at once when another wave came aboard. Among them, Isledemer recognized through his open-face helmet the warrior who'd held the spyglass before the attack, presumably the enemy commander. The two made eye contact and headed for one another.

Three of the knights remained with their commander as the others scattered to pursue the battle elsewhere on the ship. Isledemer promptly sent two more overboard with well-placed spells from his wand, hurling them over his shoulder. Out of nowhere and hanging from a rope, Ebben swung by and seized another knight's great helm by its ornate dragon crest. As the gnome

disappeared into the rigging, the stolen piece of armor hit another foe squarely behind the head, enabling Fablethorne to kick him in a strategic spot and plunge a dagger into his neck. While this took place, Gumboyle Moffeecot swung down another rope and slammed a heavy pan onto the knight's exposed head. It must have been a mighty good pan indeed, for it rang loud and clear. The commander's companion dropped unconscious.

The captain's nemesis stopped for an instant by his fallen brother and gazed sternly at Isledemer. Without so much as another glance, he wielded his mace and swept off a marine threatening his flank. The poor fellow's body flew like a rag doll before landing on the deck, bloody, broken, and lifeless.

Ol' Babblejack, just a few paces from his captain, picked up a belaying pin and came a step closer.

"Stay back, Mister Belzer. This one's between him and me."

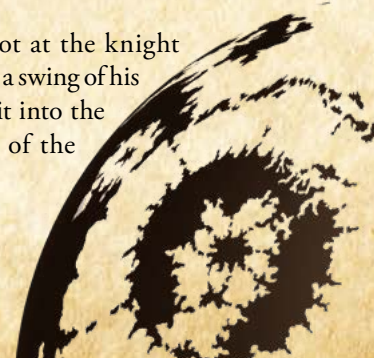
A good six feet tall, the knight commander wore dark, glistening armor under his tabard. The captain sensed his foe brimmed with feral magic, one of a beastly making. His left hand, as black as his armor and fitted with claws, radiated an unwholesome haze. With his free hand, Isledemer unsheathed his rapier, his wand resting firmly in the other.

*"En garde!"*

Undeterred by the suave warning, the knight commander advanced. Two more sailors stepped in his way. In no time, one's head was reduced to pulp while the other fell to his knees, holding his entrails after the claws had ripped open his abdomen. All things considered, the latter event proved the most disconcerting. Suddenly not quite so eager to confront his foe, Isledemer aimed his wand.

"Time for you to earn your dragon wings!"

The spell shot at the knight commander, but a swing of his mace deflected it into the rigging. A part of the





# In Stranger Skies

yardarm ripped clear off the mast, vanished, and reappeared over the dragonship's deck. The falling debris crushed a few more of the enemy forces waiting there.

With an ambivalent expression, Isledemer commented, "I say it still counts as a successful attack!"

Suddenly, the knight commander charged. In quick succession, rapier met gauntlet, wand magic deflected mace, and back again in reverse order. The captain dodged as the mace shattered the railing next to him. The fight's breathless, dizzying pace forbade any fancy magic. The knight commander turned aside several quick arcane jabs, while Isledemer ensnared or repelled his foe's weapon, fighting hard not to lose his own. They were evenly matched in skills except for the magic of the black armor, largely impervious to his rapier.

The captain danced past the foremast and round the helm, dodging attacks and looking in vain for a weakness. Unexpectedly, the knight commander pointed his gauntlet at his slippery foe and uttered an unbearable command in a guttural, raspy, and hissing language.

The captain felt a painful paralysis spread into his arms and legs. Almost suffocating, he collapsed against a stack of coiled ropes. With an expression of wicked triumph, the knight commander approached and carved an X-shaped gouge through Isledemer's shirt and skin with the clawed index of his gauntlet, centered on his racing heart. Despite the excruciating pain, the captain could manage not even a whimper.

The knight commander gazed at a distant star, and spoke a few words that sounded uncannily like a prayer. When done, he lifted his claws, aimed for the captain's heart, and plunged forth with hateful glee.

But another sword crossed his path, penetrating the black appendage clear through the knight's wrist.

"Not on my watch!" snarled the captain-at-arms.

He kicked his enemy back and resumed the

fight. It was a replay of the previous duel, but faster and nastier. The elven warrior, battered and bloodied from earlier fights, faced the knight commander, furious and partially crippled by his wrist wound. There was nothing elegant or glorious about it, each trying to slaughter the other the quickest way possible. At last, a well-placed lunge skewered the knight's thigh. But it was a mistake. The cunning knight had baited the skillful elf and gained what he'd sought, an opening in his opponent's guard. Down came the mace, crashing mercilessly through chest plate and bone alike.

Wu Yuntai collapsed in a pool of blood.

The knight raised his mace once more when a shape fell upon his shoulders. It was Gumboyle. She'd jumped off the rigging and landed on him. In a frenzy, she bared her triangular teeth and bit savagely into her foe's neck. The knight howled in pain as she ripped off a mouthful of flesh and spit it out. He seized her with his wounded hand and flung her onto the deck. Undaunted and defiant despite her wooden leg, she rolled and stood between him and the fading elf, pan at the ready, hissing wildly.

A long, forlorn call echoed from the other vessel. A lookout called out a warning in his foreign tongue. The knight staggered back a few feet, and glanced off the starboard bow. There, an enormous galley had appeared out of the sun, resplendent in gold and red.

The knight commander and his brethren fell back, carefully at first, then fast when no one else followed, dragging their wounded with them. Enna and the bosun had fought their way back from astern and grabbed Hoyk in the nick of time, struggling to hold him back. Lines were chopped off and an unseen force rammed against the hull as the dragonship pulled loose. The two vessels' air bubbles separated with an odd pop, rippling like water before settling. Maneuvering away from the approaching war galley, the knights' vessel faded into the dark void like a ghost in the night.

\* \* \*

"Quick! This way!"

Though paralyzed, Isledemer could hear Enna's voice nearby. Just at the edge of his peripheral field of vision, he saw her motioning the elven prioress closer. Gumboyle's creature, Moonsail, flew next to Arabesque, pushing and pulling her along.

She spoke a soft prayer a few paces away. Her voice warmed Isledemer's heart after the battle's horrors. She was tending to Yuntai, or so he hoped. The fate of his captain-at-arms tortured him. He wanted to lean over and see what was going on, but his body felt like petrified wood and weighed more than he could budge. His breathing came shallow and weak. The pain in his chest was worse, like a million red-hot ants gnawing through his flesh.

"Take him below deck," Arabesque ordered someone standing nearby.

Her face reappeared in Isledemer's field of vision. She gazed into his eyes and whispered with a knowing smile, "Ever the stiff one, Captain, but this is a bit much."

Stiff? Him? Come now. Whatever did she mean? Annoyed and impatient, he moaned weakly as he tried once more to move. She pulled open his shirt and grew serious. After a wince of concern, she whispered a mantra and touched his shoulder. A soothing coolness flowed in his veins, slowly fighting his body's morbid rigidity.

"Easy now," she said while her commander struggled to prop himself on an elbow. Rummaging in a pouch at her waist, she pulled out a small stick. After bracing his head against her shoulder, she inserted the wooden tool into his mouth and forced his clenched teeth open in order to pour the contents of a vial between them. The ache in his chest flared, as if someone had just poured burning oil in his wound. He almost passed out from the pain.

"It'll stop the venom... maybe," the prioress said. "You should take it easy for a while."

She gazed at the crew surrounding them. "Take him below."

"No!" Isledemer's response came through almost as a grunt.



Fighting against the receding paralysis, he got to his knees, then staggered to his feet. First mate and master helped him up as he wavered.

"Better do as she says, Captain," said Enna. "You don't look too good."

"Rule Number One if you please, Mister Daggart," he croaked. "Wu?"

"He's out of danger for now," answered Arabesque. "We'll know for sure by dawn tomorrow."

Dizzy, ears ringing in his aching head, he nodded and stepped toward the ship's bow. The fire in his chest bloomed, the elven potion fighting its own war against the knight's venom.

"Ahoy, derelict vessel!"

Despite the intervening void, the call boomed from the immense war galley, now a short distance away and above. She carried two sets of masts in a V-shaped configuration with two masts directly underneath her hull. Rows of massive oars lay motionless at her sides. Nodes similar to the ones in the steering room were imbedded in the paddles, hinting at the galley's propulsion. A ramming device protruded from her prow, like a giant serrated glaive.

Relieved that his counterpart spoke the same language, Isledemer sucked in a breath of cool air when Enna, standing next to him, nonchalantly handed him his ivory wand.

"I think you'll need that."

"Thank you, Mister Daggart. I have the ability to cast magic without it, you do realize?"

"Of course, Sir. Never doubted it."

He opened his mouth a second time when Arabesque, on the opposite side, handed him his hat.

"You wouldn't be a proper commander without it."

"Thank you, Mister Starward."

After returning the hat to its rightful place, Isledemer opened his mouth a third time, halted to check if anyone else had something of his to offer, and finally tapped his throat with the wand.

"Ahoy! To whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

"This is the commander of Her Majesty's War Galley *Eternal Glory*. State your business in these parts."

"This is the captain of the..." Isledemer stopped, realizing he didn't have a name for his ship. Gazing at the dilapidated, war-ravaged, smoldering deck and the battered crew gathered behind him, he turned back and finished his sentence. "... the *Star Phoenix*."

He glanced at the first mate who responded with a wry shrug of approval implying she didn't know either.

"I'm afraid we have no business here. A storm has blown our ship well off course."

The galley's commander, a fellow in gilded armor, leaned at the forecandle's railing. With the sun in his back, it was hard to make out his features.

"You've sailed through that vortex, haven't you, Sir?"

"We have, but not by our own design, I can assure you."

"Nobody ever does."

"I believe you have us at a disadvantage, Sir. We find ourselves unable to return whence we came."

"Your quandary is unavoidable. You are in no shape to navigate, and it would be best for neither of us to linger in these parts. Prepare to be towed to port. Help will be provided there to you and your crew. Do you have any oil left?"

A most peculiar question this was. The captain had no clue what his counterpart meant. It seemed too much a trivial query to even bring up. He gazed at the first mate and the master who responded with gestures of ignorance.

"We seem to be fresh out, I'm afraid."

After a moment of silence, the galley's commander responded, "Very well, prepare to receive a launch."

"Much obliged, Sir. Proceed as needed."

The captain turned to his officers. "Perhaps we'll get some answers after all. Let us see where this leads, shall we?"

The first mate, a hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun, kept looking at the massive galley. "Sounds fascinating, Sir,

but with your permission I'll oversee the towing process."

"Quite right, Mister Daggart. Do carry on." Isledemer placed a hand on Arabesque's arm. "Stay with me if you please. This visit may concern you."

They stood by the railing and watched a launch departing the *Eternal Glory* with four aboard. Two manned the oars, a third sat near the prow holding a small chest, and a fourth maneuvered an odd-looking tiller in the back. The mechanism seemed to control more than just the launch's bearing, somewhat like the *Star Phoenix's* own steering device.

In a few minutes' time, the launch sailed through the life-preserving shimmer and reached the midship railing. The galley's commander chose that time to maneuver his vessel. Oars began moving in a slow, rhythmic pattern, silently reorienting the massive ship. After observing the *Eternal Glory* getting under way for a short moment, three armed sailors in the launch helped a little old man step aboard.

"Captain Isledemer Drake Hieronymus d'Alberran, at your service," greeted the captain.

Bald, with a long white beard, a pearl gray robe, and blue eyes full of spirit, the old man bowed slightly.

"Nay, I'm at yours, my dear Sir—Teobram Phibbs, Prior of Istra." His gaze shifted from Isledemer to the ship's master. It lit up even more as he studied every detail of her exquisite elven anatomy.

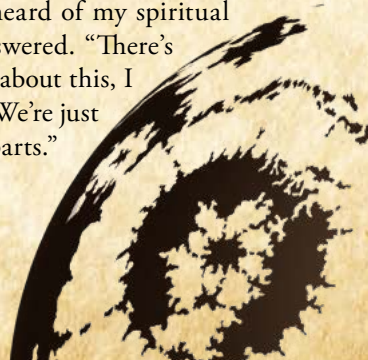
"And who, may I ask, stands next to you, Sir?"

"Ship Master Starward, chaplain and surgeon."

The prioress nodded politely, but with distant reserve.

"Positively charming. And whom do you honor, my child?"

"I could tell you, but I'm afraid you wouldn't have heard of my spiritual patron," she answered. "There's nothing sinister about this, I can assure you. We're just not from these parts."





# In Stranger Skies

The old man grinned. “Not to worry, dear. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Enna’s voice rose from the bow. “Stand by for the towing line!” The bosun’s voice echoed the warning while the *Eternal Glory* changed course, aiming to cut across the *Star Phoenix’s* bow. A thick line trailed in her wake. “Stow that launch, Mister Cripplegate!”

The prior motioned his small escort to assist Enna’s crew, and shot an interested look at the first mate before returning his attention to Isledemer.

“Well, no sense in dawdling, eh?” He handed the chest to Arabesque, watching her intently and with an amused expression.

She opened the small container and revealed a vial full of a dark red liquid. Father Teobram lifted a hand to his lips, his index finger touching the tip of his thumb as if he described a fine recipe.

“It’s the best kind that can be had in the Kingdom of Meryath. A drop of it on your salad will do wonders for your digestion.”

His words met with blank stares from both captain and master. Suddenly, the old man burst out laughing.

“Please accept my apology,” he said. “I’m being unfair and rude with my jest. I can plainly tell that your minds have been wiped of their former contents. It happens with most newcomers. Don’t know why. It’s just the way it goes. The gods won’t speak of it either—heaven knows I tried finding out. You could all have come from this very same universe and not remember a thing about it.”

“And what universe would this be?” interjected Isledemer.

The prior pointed at a spot, low on starboard. “Over there, third on the right—that tiny blue marble. It’s called Calidar, a fine world if you ask me. There’s none better anywhere close to the Mighty Soltan.”

Father Teobram indicated to the sun with his chin. “But we’re not alone here.

Others prowl this corner of the skies, looking for unsuspect-

ing newcomers like yourselves. Best we get moving.”

“Agreed, but what of that oil of yours, Father Teobram?”

“Ah yes, the oil. Let’s go to your ship’s altar and I’ll...” He then gazed at his hosts. “You *do* have an altar, I presume?”

“We do,” said Arabesque coldly. “What does it have to do with your oil?”

“It’s how one travels the Great Vault, dear. Surely, you didn’t expect we’d be *rowing* all the way home! Why, provided we lived that long, we could break our backs trying for a thousand years and never get anywhere close, sweet child! Come now, I’ll explain on the way.”

Isledemer motioned the master and the old man to follow. He headed down the forward companionway. As they crossed the steering chamber, the old man continued his explanations.

“You see, my dear child, the altar itself is non-denominational, so to speak. It doesn’t matter in whom your faith lies. I can use it, or you can, just the same—but only priors ever can. I’ll show you how in a moment. It’s a bit peculiar, but it works flawlessly—as far as I’ve ever heard, and I’ve heard quite a lot.”

The captain reached the chapel’s door and pushed it open. He sensed Arabesque’s tension as she stepped in, with Phibbs close behind. Isledemer entered and closed the door, leaving his hat by the pedestal table as he’d done earlier.

The old man hemmed and hawed, examining the wooden tabernacle. “Not bad, not bad at all. The chalice is very nice. I don’t foresee any problem.” He looked at Arabesque, who still carried the small chest. “I’ll need that oil now.”

Not entirely certain of what to expect, Isledemer crossed his arms, making sure his wand rested close to his fingers. He noted the prioress’s cautious demeanor when she pulled out the vial, ready to react at the first sign of trouble.

Phibbs eyed his hosts with a smile. “Now my friends, I haven’t come here seeking mischief. Bit old for that, really. You should

have seen me six decades ago, debonair and all that, always on the lookout for romance, adventure, and mighty hoards to plunder. Oh, I was quite good at it. Got me a goodly number of scars, too—nothing a few spells couldn’t fix, eh?”

“Mighty hoards, you say?” wondered Isledemer.

“Oh, yes. They do exist for those who can find them.”

The captain nodded pensively. “Dragons are known to possess such wonders, aren’t they, Father Teobram?”

With the expression of a cat that swallowed a bird, the old man casually shrugged. “Why, they are indeed!”

The ship lurched slightly, indicating the tow line was in place.

“Oh dear, we have little time left.” The prior of Istra picked up the vial, unstopped it, and carefully poured its contents into the chalice. “Now look closely. Observe the currents displacing the oil.”

Isledemer watched with concern, as eerie shadows whirled inside the chalice, with tiny eyes and mouths. Arabesque, her gaze growing wider than usual, gasped at the sight.

“These are spirits of the dead!” she said in a voice full of awe. “What do you intend to do?”

“It’s quite simple, really. You see, in order to travel great distances in a short amount of time, one must transcend the bounds of the physical universe. The spiritual world enables it. This red substance was discovered almost by accident centuries ago. It occurs naturally in certain rocks. It can be harvested and refined into Oil of Seith—just call it *seitha* for short. There’s just enough here for a vessel your size. With the help of a special blessing, souls trapped within the substance are freed, enabling the ship on whose altar the ritual was performed to follow them into the spiritual world. There, one becomes immaterial and can travel at amazing speeds, only to emerge into the physical world as devised by the blessing. It’s all part of a prayer that I shall teach you if you wish, my sweet child.”



Suspicious, Arabesque gauged the prior. "How is it that spirits become trapped in this substance?"

"I wish I could say. There are many theories about how this happens. The gods are quite discreet about it. By experience we know some of those who pass away go to serve their divine patrons, others go straight to the spiritual world, while still others become trapped in *seitha*. It is fortunate that mercy for the dead enables the living to travel—and your vessel to not remain forever adrift in the Great Vault."

A powerful horn bellowed outside the chamber, its long, sorrowful call barely muffled by the deck above.

"Ah! They are ready to proceed." Phibbs turned to the captain. "With your permission, my good Sir? It's quite safe for everyone aboard, I assure you."

Isledemer nodded, the tips of his fingers lingering by his wand.

"Good. We must time this carefully for our vessels to travel together. The blessing requires a minimum sailing speed to function, which explains the tow line. Your ship will require a bit of work in this respect, after we arrive."

Another mournful call sounded outside. "There we are. Behold, now."

Father Teobram muttered his peculiar blessing. As he did, the red oil bled from the bottom of the chalice, filling the grooves on the tabernacle. He completed his ritual when *seitha* connected all points of the ship's outline and began a subtle transformation. Amid twisting black flames, ghostlike figures rose from the grooves, some screaming, others moaning. Hundreds circled round the altar before climbing in all directions and vanishing through the wooden overhead.

Silence returned when the last ounce of oil vanished.

"And so it goes," chimed the prior.

\* \* \*

Following a quick tour of the ship, the captain, the master, and the prior of Istra

entered the officers' wardroom. A brass lantern stood on the table at the center of the chamber. Around the table, various drinks before them, Hoyk, Waessail, and Ebben sat glumly on progressively higher stools. A greenish glow filtered in through the windows along with the faint but haunting sound of a wind slowly rocking the *Star Phoenix*.

"What sort of dastardly trickery is this, Sir?" complained the master artificer. The three junior officers directed sinister gazes at the prior. "That fiendish galley of theirs has led us where the living ought never venture!"

"It's the way one travels the stars in this world," answered Isledemer. "I don't like it any more than any of you do, but we'll have to go along until we learn more about this universe. Where is Mister Daggart?"

"She's topside with Ol'... I mean Mister Belzer and the three characters from the other ship."

The captain gazed through a window as he considered the situation. The ship seemed to fly at a dizzying speed. Blurry silhouettes of all shapes and sizes danced in the glowing gray-green vastness outside. One of them suddenly stuck to the crystalline pane, like a ghostly lamprey. As it slowly slid out of sight, Isledemer could have sworn he recognized the fellow he'd tossed overboard earlier. With a grimace of disgust, he stepped back and decided to ignore whatever lurked outside.

The three fellows remained seated, their noses facing more or less the bottoms of their mugs, a demeanor that annoyed Isledemer all the more because his guest stood watching.

Unexpectedly, the master stepped forth and dispelled her more usual soft and dreamy demeanor. "On your feet, all of you! By the Stars, your commander's on deck and you shall respect his rank!"

The old man's lips formed an O of surprise, and his eyes sparkled with delight. Caught off guard, Hoyk staggered to his feet, attempted to suck in his prominent girth, and repressed a belch. Waessail did

the same, faring slightly better. The master artificer, chin raised in defiance, frowned and crossed his arms instead.

"I'm not even certain that you're really the captain, Captain!"

"That may be so, Mister Rugwittle," Isledemer shot back. "But until we make it to port, I'm in command. After that, you may leave if you wish. Until then, you will follow my orders and those of senior officers. Do you mean to challenge my authority, Sir?"

The purser, trying hard to appear inconspicuous, elbowed the recalcitrant gnome.

After a grunt of reluctance, Ebben climbed off his elevated stool, straightened his jacket with a sharp downward tug, and stood at attention, his goatee pointing out like a galley's rostrum.

"Misters Pebbleborn and Rugwittle, do find Mister Cripplegate and confer with him about needed repairs. I want those masts, yardarms, sails, and war engines to undergo mending as soon as we exit into normal skies."

"Aye, Captain," muttered the dwarf, and the two headed out the forward door.

"Mister Barrooney, please accompany Mister Starward. See to the wounded if you please. Thank you, Mister Starward."

"Sir," acknowledged the prioress as she stepped out with the purser.

The captain gazed for a moment at the old man. "If you'd care to follow me topside, Father Teobram."

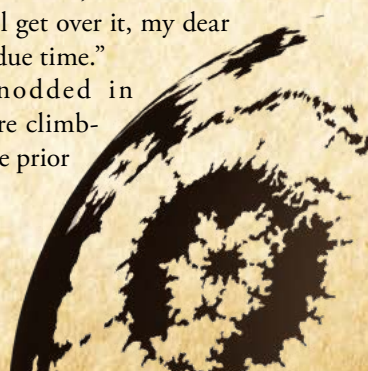
"With pleasure."

As they approached the companionway, the prior stopped. "It's really not their fault, if I may say. The crew is likely shaken by all that's happened to them."

"Unless I'm mistaken, things yet to come will likely grow even more frightening and dangerous. Survival depends on discipline. Without it, there's no ship. The sooner they come to terms with this, the better."

"True. They'll get over it, my dear Captain. All in due time."

Isledemer nodded in annoyance before climbing the stairs, the prior





# In Stranger Skies

of Istra close behind him. None of the crew appeared to be on the deck, save for Enna, Ol' Babblejack, and the prior's escort. They stood at the opposite end of the ship, by the helm. The *Eternal Glory* led the way. Around the two ships, the spiritual world's ghostly infinity spread as far as the eye could perceive. Streams of souls ebbed and flowed, swooping through the rigging, coiling round the masts, and racing disconcertingly alongside the *Star Phoenix*.

"They're harmless, I assure you," said Phibbs, "... at least so long as no one leaves the ship."

The prior's reassuring words failed to fully convince Isledemer, as he recognized many of the fallen crew crawling up the vessel's luminescent wake. Suppressing his discomfort and misgivings, he headed to the forecabin.

The helmsman stared straight ahead, busy keeping the *Star Phoenix* aligned with the *Eternal Glory*. Enna gave the captain an odd look as he approached, and cast a more suspicious one at the prior of Istra.

"Our guest's escort explained what happened," she said. Enna was about to say something, hesitated, and then added, "The ship appears to be fine. I ordered the rest of the crew below deck."

"A commendable decision, Mister Daggart."

The captain turned to the old man. "Father Teobram Phibbs, my first mate, Mister Enna Daggart."

The prior smiled and bowed slightly, a twinkle in his eye betraying a newfound admiration. "Impressive! You are very well served, my dear Sir."

With the expression of someone discovering a skunk, Enna returned Phibbs's bow, satisfying the minimum courtesy the encounter demanded. Preferring to spare his first mate the inconvenience he knew the master would have to face soon enough,

Isledemer suggested she carry on. He took the old man by the arm for a stroll by the ship's side.

"Tell me if you please,

why are we here, in this universe? Why us, Father Teobram?"

The prior lifted hands to the stars. "I wish I could say. Those like you appear at times in that region of the Great Vault. No one knows why, save perhaps Istra herself. The Royal Oracle foresaw your arrival, and Her Majesty Queen Shardwen dispatched our ship to offer assistance. A wise decision if ever there was one."

"Indeed." With the back of his hand, Isledemer tried to shoo away the translucent shape of a headless sailor drifting a bit too close. "Who were those people who attacked us? They knew where and when to find us, and seemed to have cause for aggression."

The prior's kindly expression vanished. "Black-hearted troublemakers, all of them—a true peril in the skies, if you ask me. I'm sorry we couldn't reach you sooner. Why they attacked, you wonder? Does a spider need a reason to kill a fly? Must a viper explain why she strikes? As you discovered, these are evil folk, with unholy ways and a wicked purpose. What they seek remains a mystery to us all."

Captain d'Alberan had a feeling the old man wasn't telling the whole truth. The size of Meryath's war galley perhaps wasn't the only reason for the aggressors' sudden retreat. As he considered the prior's words, he noticed a ghostly head staring at him from the deck, right at the tip of his boots. He recognized the young fellow killed during the fight against the knights.

"Allow me," said Phibbs. He muttered an incantation, and the disembodied head flew into the hands of the mutilated sailor. Staring persistently at the captain, the head moaned disturbingly before it and its rightful owner fell overboard and tumbled into the spectral tumult beyond.

"Well, my good Captain, this one appears to have some unfinished business, I'm afraid. A pity, really. He may show up again ... but not so soon." The prior pointed at the *Eternal Glory* becoming faint and hard to make out against the surrounding limbo's eerie background. "Looks like we're

about to reach the end of our journey. Do hold on."

\* \* \*

The *Star Phoenix* and everyone on deck faded into a nearly blinding light. The haunting wind, the whispers, the moans, and the distant screams died out, replaced by the cold, crisp silence of the Great Vault. The stark sunrises of Soltan against the starry void's darkness felt like daggers stabbing deep behind Isledemer's eyes. The captain held on to the railing and shook off a bout of dizziness.

"It's never comfortable returning to the world of the living," said Phibbs. "The feeling grows worse the longer the journey lasts—the dead do not let those who visit them escape so easily. Some captains prefer breaking up a long voyage into shorter segments to avoid this problem. That approach, however, is fraught with other dangers."

Once his sight had readjusted to the sun's brightness, Isledemer observed the *Eternal Glory's* tug hard on the tow line and, looming beneath her hull, a new world's immense blue and white globe. A sea of clouds on its eastern edge, ablaze with purple and gold, hailed the breathtaking rise of Soltan and the passing of a new dawn.

"Behold Calidar!"

From where they flew, the sphere featured two large continents, one to the west and the other to the east. Between them lay a curious circular region, somewhat like a gigantic crater within a ring of mountains, partially filled with an inner sea. At the center stood an immense rise whose white top betrayed the presence of glaciers. A large ocean extended far to the south.

"That ring-shaped land, right there in the center, is called the Great Caldera. It is the center of civilization. The old colonies were founded there, in what was the safest part of the new world."

Isledemer gazed at the prior of Istra, a bit puzzled. "Colonies? New World? Do you not hail from this place?"

"I do, but the main races aren't from here





at all. It is one of the many peculiarities of Calidar. You'll find many more as you become familiar with it. In truth, the three main races—humans, elves, and dwarves—have all come from Calidar's moons."

Phibbs pointed at a mottled green globe peering from behind the *Eternal Glory's* sails. "There is Aloreia, home world of the elves. If you look carefully to your right, that tiny gold piece way over there, exactly opposite Aloreia on the other side of Calidar, is Kragdûr, the dwarven *almaterra*. Behind you, you'll see Munaan, the Amber Moon, whence my forefathers came. Thanks to the advent of *seitha*, Calidar was settled centuries ago. It wasn't a peaceful process and the Three Empires have remained at odds. Since then, the old colonies of the Great Caldera have broken from their former overseers and forged other ties. Though many other islands of civilization exist in this world, most of it remains untouched, a dangerous wilderness called the Dread Lands."

Amazed at the scene, Isledemer considered himself privileged for this opportunity to gaze upon celestial bodies directly from the Great Vault without the misty blur of a world's atmosphere. It all seemed so sharp, as if he could reach out with a hand and seize twinkling gems right from the sky. In his amazement, he forgot the pain still throbbing in his chest and his misgivings about traveling through limbo. While he memorized the lay of the land in the Great Caldera's hemisphere, another thought yielded other concerns.

"The knights who attacked us, where do they dwell?"

The prior of Istra sighed with annoyance as he gazed at a dark spot, nearer the sun. "Fortunately for the old colonies, these scoundrels do not live within the Calidar Ephemeris. They come from another region of the Great Vault entirely. For lack of factual knowledge, we refer to it simply as Draconia. It is a gloomy place, much closer

to Soltan than Calidar. You'd recognize that world from its black surface marbled with gold and silver. On its outside, it is devoid of life. It is believed that all that thrives there inhabits a hollow world, protected from the injuries of Soltan's deadly sunrays. That is all we know of it, for those from Calidar who searched for a way in never returned."

Sensing the captain's mindset and the direction of his gaze, Phibbs added, "You'd be well advised, my dear Sir, to stay away from it. Expect no rescue over there, for none will be sent."

Isledemer nodded somberly. "Those knights aren't the sort to give up. So long as I prevail, they'll not be done with me, or I with them. They've learned something about me or my ship, and I want to know what. Mark my words, Father Teobram: sooner or later I shall find out, be it here or right down the throat of Draconia if I must."



# In Stranger Skies

"Hopefully, later than sooner," the prior shot back. "By then perhaps you'll have the means to make good your vow."

Isledemer nodded, preoccupied with another concern.

"There's someone I should visit in sick bay. Would you care to accompany me, Father Teobram?"

"I would indeed. Perhaps I may be of assistance."

As he approached the forecabin's railing, Isledemer noticed the master artificer's nose poking out of the forward companionway, a few paces below. Ebben's head vanished for a second, and after some mutterings, the gnome stepped onto the deck, his two other peers and the bosun in his wake.

"The deck is safe now, gentlemen," commented the captain. "You can begin repairs straight away."

"Aye, aye, Sir," responded Hoyk while the bosun turned back and snarled, "All on deck an' smartly, ye scurvy rats! Half rations for the las' one out."

While the sound of feet thundered on the deck below and up the stairs, Isledemer and his guest proceeded to the aftcastle and the officers' quarters below deck. After a soft knock, they entered the room of the captain-at-arms. Curtains masked most of the windows. Wu Yuntai lay on his bed, weak and pale. Arabesque sat next to him, checking the bandages on his chest. Waessail Barrooney stood next to her, wrinkles of concern barring his forehead.

"He regained consciousness a moment ago," said the master. Isledemer could see in her eyes that Yuntai wasn't out of the woods.

"Did someone defeat that knight?" the captain-at-arms whispered.

Isledemer knew who he meant. He was about to answer when the ship's cook appeared at the door, holding a grog of her making in a bowl, and a large greasy spoon. "Mama Goo, she cook de good poshun so de li'l cap'n an' de crew, dem 'eal fas' an' true."

The fellfolk squeezed past Isledemer and Phibbs, unceremoniously

elbowed Waessail out of her way, and sat on the edge of the bunk, her wooden leg sticking out oddly. The purser, miffed, bowed to the captain and his guest, and left the cabin. Meanwhile, the cook stirred her brew and brought a spoonful to Yuntai's lips.

"De dragonmohn, 'im bad juju. Him escape, but Mama Goo, she taste 'im blood. Mama Goo, she neva forget an' neva forgive. Now drink, li'l cap'n, an' feel betta soon."

Yuntai smiled weakly at the cook until she poured the spoon's contents into his mouth. Judging from his expression, it must have been a bitter brew indeed. Before he could recover from it, Gumboyle scooped up a second spoonful.

"Better take that medicine, Mister Wu," teased Isledemer. "Consider the alternative."

Arabesque grinned at the comment. "You know what they say: the worse it tastes, the better it heals."

"I must say," Phibbs interjected, "you've done admirably well, Master Starward, considering the apparent gravity of this man's wounds. He probably would have died if you hadn't been there. I presume you are the one who healed him initially?"

"I am."

"Splendid. If I may suggest, help is available at the Temple of Istra that will supplement your treatment and that of your excellent assistant here." The prior of Istra considered the cook with a mix of amusement and fascination. "Ancient remedies can be quite potent, though they sometimes bear unexpected secondary effects."

"I'll take your suggestion under advisement, Father Teobram. Now with all due respect, gentlemen, my patient needs rest."

"Quite," responded Isledemer. Reassured of his captain-at-arms's well-being, he motioned his guest to follow him out.

As they reached the stairs, the prior laid a hand on Isledemer's shoulder.

"Beg your pardon, my good Sir," he said in a low voice. "I couldn't help but notice the wound you bear." He pointed at the captain's torn shirt. "That's a right nasty scar you've got. I've seen others like it before."

Isledemer glanced at his chest. Though

Arabesque's potion had sealed the lacerations, they were swollen and festering.

"The one who did this to you," continued Phibbs, "he must be a high-ranking commander, possibly the grand master of his order. It is a death mark, and it will only truly heal if you defeat him. Beware of its venom. All you can do now is keep it from spreading. Whatever your ship master gave you, use it daily and without fail. I would gladly offer help, but this is one wound we are powerless to heal."

Isledemer grimaced at the sinister prospect and the pain searing his chest. A slight groan of timber rose from the hull, as the skyship changed her bearing. Soltan's bleak sunrays filtering through the companionway shifted along the bulkheads, drawing long shadows.

"Thank you, Father Teobram. I'll keep your warning in mind. Best we step out now, if you please. The ship is maneuvering anew."

The little old man removed his hand and stepped outside, the captain in his wake. Teams were hard at work on the deck, removing debris, sawing off burned parts, and mending sails. Others on their knees scoured pools of dried blood marring the deck's planking. The *Star Phoenix* was an appalling shambles, damaged from both the storm and the battle. Past her prow, the *Eternal Glory* led the way, slowly entering Calidar's atmosphere. Arching above the horizon, the Great Vault's corona of darkness yielded to the hazy light of the world beneath.

Isledemer headed at once to the forecabin. The prior paced him.

"Won't be much longer before we make it home," said the old man. "You're safe now."

"I am very grateful for your help, Father Teobram, and that of your mates on the *Eternal Glory*. Somehow I'll find a way to repay you for it."

The prior grinned. "I'm sure the opportunity will present itself very soon, my good Sir."

The sudden queasy feeling in the pit of Isledemer's stomach came as much from



the prior's answer as it did from the loss of altitude while the two vessels began their descent. The two walked past the cargo bay grating and the partially repaired war engines. On all fours with his head beneath a catapult's frame, Hoyk cursed profusely as a heavy tool struck his hand. From his efforts and the pull of his girth, his breeches ran low enough to unmask far too much of his backside, a sight both the captain and the prior decided to ignore. As the ships reached the atmosphere's lower levels, a warm marine breeze blew through the *Star Phoenix's* protective bubble, filling her sails with new life.

Already, a squabble of seagulls greeted the vessels. The flock of white-and-gray birds glided back and forth, looking for quick snacks or simply to satisfy their curiosity. As Isledemer and his guest reached the helm, a huge, four-winged gull appeared off the ship's starboard gunwale, carrying a harness and a human rider. It turned its giant yellow beak toward the galley and uttered a heart-wrenching scream powerful enough to scatter all other avians. A sailor on the *Eternal Glory's* stern deck signaled for the tow line to be released.

Acting under the first mate's direction, a handful of the crew unhooked the heavy line and tossed it overboard. Her rowers' drum beating rhythmically, the galley veered easy to port while her crew heaved the line aboard. At once a dozen more of the giant gulls approached the *Star Phoenix*. Their riders dropped lines of their own to her deck, which Phibbs's escort began securing to the ship's sides. Getting the idea, the remainder of the crew did the same at the stern and prow.

"Furl those sails, Mister Cripplegate!" hollered Enna.

Harsh and gritty, the bosun's voice echoed her order amid hammering and sawing.

Once the *Star Phoenix* was secured, the giant gulls pulled the crippled skyship, gently directing it where needed. Isledemer leaned over the railing, observing the coast below. On a large turquoise bay surrounded

by distant mountains lay a large town with a seaport. A river flowed through the city. Swaying palm trees lined golden beaches edged with the white foam of waves crashing upon the shore. As they approached, Isledemer made out temples, guild houses, and—toward the center of the city—a palace, with slender towers, monuments, well-manicured gardens, mirror-like pools, and dazzling domes. Nearby was a large arena. Long strips of ivory cloth covered its center while multicolored banners atop posts and around the structure flapped lazily in the breeze. Not far from it stood a far more curious facility. Its purpose immediately became clear to the captain as the giant gulls led his skyship closer.

Pairs of huge stone towers fitted with transversal beams served as moorings for a score of skyships unable, like his, to land easily. Curiously, there were at least as many large flying craft there as seaworthy vessels in the naval port and the adjacent shipyard, down a main avenue and past a busy marketplace. Teams of giant gulls helped skyships to and from their moorings, pulling those departing well past the skyport's vicinity before releasing them to their own devices. An immense rookery stood nearby, for the care of these large birds. "Welcome to Glorathon," announced the prior cheerily, "the royal capital of Meryath."

"Impressive. Do tell me, Father Teobram, why is it we didn't simply emerge just above the landing area? It would be quicker, wouldn't it?"

"You're right, but that is dangerous as well as against the law. You may accidentally appear within the space occupied by another vessel, causing as you can well imagine a terrible mess of wood and flesh. It's best to do this while still out in the Great Vault, where chances of collision are lowest. 'Transparating' too close to the capital may also be seen as an act of aggression. Approaching as we did enables the identity of the vessel to be ascertained, leaving airtugs in control of maneuvers. In such a way, an incoming skyship does not present much danger to the royal palace

and the city. It is strictly forbidden to fly directly over the palace for any reason, save for the queen's own skyship."

With a spark of amusement in his eye, the old man pointed at the *Eternal Glory* hovering some distance above. "This one's her flagship."

"You mean to say your queen was aboard all along?"

"Nay, my friend. When Queen Shardwen takes to the skies, much of her fleet goes along. A single ship in the Great Vault, even one as mighty as the pride of Meryath, remains at risk of an unfortunate encounter. That she sent her own vessel to rescue a stranger was a sign of great favor."

Isledemer pensively rubbed the stubble already covering his cheeks. "Why would she do that?" he wondered aloud.

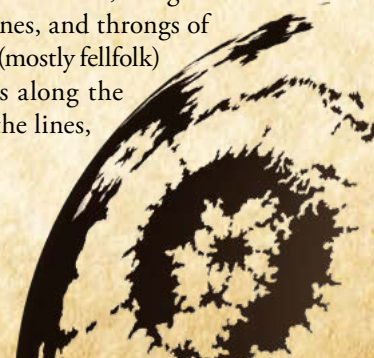
"That is something you should ask Her Majesty yourself. I wouldn't be surprised if an escort awaited your arrival."

The captain gazed once more at the approaching skyport. "Well, I can't just show up wearing these rags, can I? I'd better freshen up, and quickly."

\* \* \*

When Captain d'Alberran returned topside, he wore a blue and gold coat; the tip of his rapier was visible just below the hem at the back. Favored hat on his head, clean shaven, he marched across the deck and climbed on to the forecastle. There, his first mate awaited, similarly clad, along with Father Teobram and Ol' Babbiejack. The helmsman, uneasy with the giant birds maneuvering his ship for him, stood quietly but fidgety, and stared at each flap of their wings as if his own life depended upon them.

The *Star Phoenix* hovered between two large stone towers while sturdy wooden beams slid past the mast clusters, alongside her hull. Their work done, the gull riders dropped their lines, and throngs of skyport workers (mostly fellfolk) ran on catwalks along the beams, seizing the lines,





# In Stranger Skies

looping them through iron rings, and heaving the ship lower. The lines were secured when the captain's vessel rested upon her perch-like cradle. Within a moment, cranes atop the towers began lifting timber, planks, sails, buckets of nails, and ropes for the ship's repair. A dozen other vessels were moored all around the *Star Phoenix*, almost blocking the view of the surrounding city with a jumble of masts, yardarms, rigging, stone towers, and cranes busily handling merchandise. The smells of fresh paint, tar, new ropes, and a million others from cargoes of fruit, spices, livestock, and some yet unknown filled the air. The screams of giant gulls gliding above sounded throughout the skyport.

"Don't ye stan' there gapin' like pufferfish, ye bilge scum!" the bosun snarled to the crew. "Back to work, all o' ye!"

The hammering and sawing resumed with a new ardor. Working on the masts at a hundred and fifty feet above ground, and with a safety net in place, proved far less intimidating than doing the same amid the Great Vault's void.

Another launch from the *Eternal Glory* appeared beside the *Star Phoenix*. Amid the crew, an officer stood on the small craft's deck, wearing golden armor, his skin nearly as dark as ebony.

"Captain d'Alberran!" he hailed with a grin. "Captain Lamarr here. I'm glad to see you safe and secure, Sir. May I offer you a ride to the royal palace? Her Gracious Majesty Queen Shardwen has summoned you to her court."

Isledemer doffed his hat with a flourish despite the simmering pain in his chest. "Aye, Sir. My first mate and I will be pleased to enjoy your company."

He glanced at Enna, who nodded in agreement. Just then, Arabesque stepped from the aft companionway; two crew members behind her carried the captain-at-arms on a stretcher. Isledemer and his guest headed down to meet them.

The prior of Istra smiled. "My good Sir, if I may, I'd like to offer my own

launch to bring your ship master and her patient to the main temple. Additional care will be given to your officer there."

Isledemer gazed at Arabesque. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of the looming towers, then looked at the old man for an instant before responding with a slight nod of approval. The captain sensed she loathed the idea of spending time with lusting old Phibbs, but her patient's wellbeing came first.

"Proceed as needed," Isledemer responded.

"Release the guests' launch," commanded Enna. The bosun's voice echoed her order as Father Phibbs's escort stepped in to help.

"Mister Rugwittle!" hailed Isledemer.

"Sir!" The gnome stepped from the aft companionway, wearing a miniature version of the captain's outfit, complete with hat, plume, and diminutive rapier. He stomped across the deck, stood at attention, and saluted his commander with an all-too-mechanical gesture that made his whiskers wobble.

"Master Artificer Rugwittle at your orders, Sir!"

"All senior officers will be away shortly. You have the deck."

"Aye, Captain!"

"Carry on, if you please."

"Sir!" His chest proudly bulging, the gnome spun round and marched away to assume his command.

While Isledemer and Enna boarded Captain Lamarr's craft, Arabesque took a seat in the other with Yuntai, Phibbs, and his escort.

"Attention on deck!" hailed the master artificer. The bosun's pipe sounded the *away galley*, and the two launches departed in opposite directions.

Isledemer and Enna sat facing Lamarr.

"It'll be just a moment before we arrive, Captain d'Alberran. I'd like to take this opportunity to compliment you and your crew for your fight against the Draconic knights. I know of only a few who have done as well, coming out of the vortex and

being adrift." Lamarr's voice was a velvety bass that could just as well bellow orders across his immense galley.

"With our backs against the bulkhead so to speak, there wasn't much else to do, was there? It's a pity we lost so many of the crew." Isledemer was a baritone with a metallic edge to his pitch.

"Indeed. You will be able to hire whom you please, here in Glorathon. There are good sailors and fine blades to be had, and for a reasonable fee. They will serve you well."

"Provided of course we don't make a habit of encountering these knights."

"You'll find that many have already earned experience fighting them. Most have lost a mate or kin in other battles and seek opportunities to return the favor. Some might even join for a share of booty and glory, rather than regular pay."

Isledemer winced. "Glory-seekers can sometimes be more trouble than they're worth. I'd rather have a crew eager to follow their orders and do their duty."

Lamarr nodded. "Don't be mistaken, Captain d'Alberran. Those who'd join your crew understand discipline quite well and will follow you to whatever end. It is in their nature."

Isledemer responded with a grin. "My dear Captain Lamarr, you would make me believe your realm is made of nothing but heroes!"

The black man's booming laughter echoed in Glorathon's sky. "That is a fundamental truth in Meryath. All here are governed according to their status as adventurers and heroes. Her Majesty the Queen is greatest of them all; it is why she rules here, and I am merely her humble servant."

"Judging from the size of your vessel, you must have served her quite well."

"I've done my part of slaying and leading Her Majesty's fleet to victory. Today, I command aboard the *Eternal Glory*, and by the grace of Istra, tomorrow perhaps an empire."

As the launch maneuvered round a large marble dome, Soltan's sun rays glinted off



Lamarr's golden armor, revealing a pattern of dragonlike features—heads, tails, and wings—on his chest plate. Isledemer almost ventured a question about it when Lamarr stood.

"I beg your pardon, Sir, but we have arrived. I shall lead you to the main hall."

Four palace guards approached as the launch landed softly on a large terrace at the dome's base. Small palm trees and other leafy vegetation heavy with red flowers grew in pots at the edges, masking much of the royal compound. Sunlight glinting off their mirror-like scale armor, pairs of guards stood at attention, holding halberds straight up against their chests, as Enna climbed onto a wooden access ramp. Isledemer and Lamarr followed, the guards escorting them to a large door.

Isledemer could see a main chamber at the far end of the spacious hallway, with throngs of people coming and going. But this wasn't what caught his and Enna's attention. On the walls on either side of the pink marble passage and its stately columns hung monstrous trophies. They seemed to observe visitors with their lifelike eyes as if intruders trespassed their lairs. Magically animated frescoes beneath them depicted glorious scenes of warriors and mages fighting the previous owners of the heads. As the party walked past them, the battle sounds of the murals blared to better illustrate the heroes' feats, catching the attention of the people in the main hall. It was all the more unnerving that most of the trophies had come from dragons—blues, blacks, greens, and reds, small and big.

Isledemer gave a sideways look at Enna, whose expression seemed to match his growing concern. The presumed reasons for the knights' hostility were becoming clearer by the moment. It dawned on him that this was a realm of glory-seeking, treasure-hunting dragon slayers. And he had unwittingly become indebted to it, if not already as a de-facto ally, then perhaps as a royal subject—or at worst a captive.

Lamarr and the scintillating escort led

their party up a flight of regal stairs to the royal chamber's entrance.

"You'll have to leave your weapons here," ordered the towering captain. "It is customary when visiting Her Majesty, and altogether safer for you."

Their swords now in the possession of the attendants at the enormous, embossed-brass double doors, Lamarr flicked his hand and the portal slowly opened on its own. Just past the entrance, two ten-foot-tall alabaster statues seemed to observe the visitors and turned toward the center of the chamber, their enchanted voices booming.

"His Excellency Perithyan Lamarr, First Lord of the Fleet. Captain Isledemer d'Alberran, and First Mate Enna Daggart of the *Star Phoenix*."

Beyond them lay an immense circular chamber. Between columns standing at the periphery, beams of soft colored light flooded in through large stained glass bays. Sixty feet higher arched the colossal white dome they'd seen when they arrived. Looking down, Isledemer recognized a map of the Great Caldera and the coats of arms of its realms depicted in a large mosaic embedded in the perfectly smooth, polished stone floor. Its outer rim turned into a nocturnal starry sky. He also could have sworn that moons and some of the stars moved ever so slowly around the edge.

Opposite the entrance stood a raised dais upon a few steps, supporting a throne hewn from malachite. Sitting smartly on it, Queen Shardwen wore a long golden robe that contrasted with the ebony of her skin. Behind her head, woven into her hair, rose a delicate gold fan. On either side of the throne rested two massive tigers, unchained.

"Ah, my brother has returned at last!" she hailed. The queen stood and waved off a small crowd of visitors kneeling before her—foreigners, judging from the variety of their outfits and races. "Enough for now. We'll resume the talks later. You are dismissed."

The dignitaries, heads bowed before the monarch, backed a good 30 feet before turning away. As they walked out, they

threw intrigued, annoyed, and somewhat haughty glances at the newcomers.

Queen Shardwen stepped from her dais and strode across the chamber. "Finally, you are back! Our day has grown brighter with your presence."

Slim and even taller than Lamarr, she exuded the grace and power of a large feline. When she faced her guests, the intensity in her black eyes caught Isledemer off guard, so much so that he forgot entirely to kneel before her.

"So, these are the newcomers you have brought us!" The queen stepped between her brother and the visitors.

Somewhat apprehensive, Lamarr quietly motioned the captain to lower his head. Enna was already bowing.

Queen Shardwen grinned. "That is all right, little brother. He is short enough! No harm done."

The First Lord of the Fleet rolled his eyes as Isledemer finally caught on, removed his hat, and bowed with a flourish.

"I do humbly beg your pardon, Your Majesty. I was overtaken by your magnificence and that of your surroundings. If I may say, quite impressive."

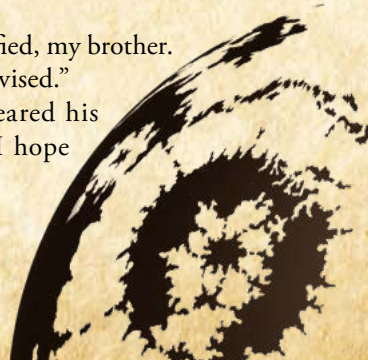
She casually motioned him to stand straight. "We agree. It is adequate and pleasurable. We are satisfied with it." She gauged the captain with interest, circled around him, and stopped to pull the edge of his coat aside. "Curious outfit. Very nice man, a little short but very nice indeed. We think he will do well."

The queen turned to Enna. "Stand up straight, girl! Not bad... not bad..." She grasped the first mate's arm and squeezed. "Well, well, we have a strong one here. Yes, she will do fine as well. And the rest of the crew?"

"A mixed bunch, but brave and skillful. The vessel will need repair. I've given orders to provide all required materials and assistance."

"We are satisfied, my brother. We were well advised."

Isledemer cleared his throat softly. "I hope





# In Stranger Skies

Your Majesty will permit me to offer my sincere gratitude for the kind assistance provided to us. With all due respect, Your Majesty clearly has something in mind regarding my ship and my crew. May I inquire as to its nature?"

"Naturally, we do. We expect our new ship and her crew to become an illustrious addition to our grand fleet. Our *Eternal Glory* has rescued you from your assailants, and subsequently salvaged your vessel, derelict and adrift in the Great Vault. It is the customary law in the Calidar Ephemeris, duly agreed upon by all sovereign realms and the three empires. Do you object to our ruling, Captain d'Alberran?"

It was as he'd feared. He'd swallowed hook, line, and sinker, and had been reeled as the morning catch all the way into Glorathon's royal fish basket.

"In all fairness to newcomers blown to the fringes of a foreign world against their best efforts, it would have helped if such legal practice had been disclosed at the time help was offered."

The queen seemed both surprised and amused. "That was hardly possible. It has come to our attention that you lay defeated on your own deck, thus incapable of making such a decision, while your companions faced imminent death."

"Quite right, Your Majesty, yet this choice still remained ours. I assure you, though unable to speak I was quite capable of making a decision, for I lay defeated only in the flesh and not in the mind. I trust that Your Majesty will extend her respect of the laws of the world whence the *Star Phoenix* hails, which grants occupants of a derelict vessel first claim upon it. Is it not so in the Calidar Ephemeris?"

Queen Shardwen gave the captain a slight tap against the cheek. "We like your style, little man! You stand unafraid and ready to defend your right. We respect this.

How do you propose to resolve your claim?"

"Perhaps the best way would be for the *Star Phoenix* to serve Your

Majesty until my debt of gratitude is repaid. Furthermore, I believe my officers, my crew, and myself, would serve Your Majesty all the better if we did so of our own free will. We are foreigners here, and for all I know, we may remain lost in stranger skies for a very long time, perhaps forever. An alliance would be more desirable whether or not a debt is to be repaid."

The queen paced slowly as she considered the offer.

"The argument is fair. It is therefore our pleasure to request one hundred and fifty thousand silver talents."

Both the captain and his first mate nearly choked at the fantastic sum.

"Surely, Your Majesty, if silver is valued the same as in my world, this is an incredible amount—if I dare say hardly payable within a man's lifetime."

The queen raised an eyebrow and gauged the captain once more. "By the grace of the gods, a man's lifetime is dependent upon his deeds. We have provided out of our own kindness of heart an opportunity to fulfill a glorious and legendary quest, which will result in a longer and brighter existence, thereby enabling time enough for the debt to be repaid."

The curious retort gave Isledemer pause. Not one to give up so quickly, he forged right along, hoping the queen would entertain a bit of bargaining. "We are as yet unused to the ways of your universe. For a meek lot such as ours, wouldn't fifty thousand be more appropriate?"

"In the event of an untimely end, we shall be satisfied that all debts are paid in full, without obligations extending beyond the grave. *One hundred thousand.*"

"Indeed, Your Majesty, but the sooner the debt is repaid, the earlier we may serve of our own free will. Our eternal gratitude will survive thenceforth. *Seventy-five thousand.*"

"The debt bears no interest and may be repaid without a specific date. *Eighty-seven thousand and five hundred talents* and not one less."

"Aye. Your Majesty drives a hard bargain but shines with generosity and magnanim-

ity. The matter is settled." After another reverence, Isledemer added, "I, Captain d'Alberran, swear on my honor to serve Your Gracious Majesty to the best of my physical and moral abilities, and to whatever ends, until such time as the debt is repaid."

"We are pleased with this development. Since you are new here, it seems fitting that we shall employ your services to survey the Dread Lands. It will enable you to become acquainted with the realities of Calidar, as well as find worthwhile opportunities to begin settling your repayment. Your objective is otherwise to look for the hidden presence of Draconic knights and report any such findings immediately."

Unexpectedly, the queen whirled and strode back to her throne. Half-way across the chamber she hailed Lamarr. "My brother, give them a tour of the Great Caldera so that they learn where we are."

"As you wish, my queen." He approached the throne, pointed at a spot on the map and, despite the soft growls of the tigers, began his lesson in local geography. "Our fair kingdom of Meryath lies on the islands, here at the very south of the Great Caldera. It rules two strategic straits leading to the Meridional Calderan Sea."

He proceeded to the southwest of the ring-shaped region. "Here, Ellyrion, our ally and heir to Munaan. The Prime Meridian crosses through their capital city, Mighty Teosopolis."

Lamarr continued in clockwork fashion along the map. "The elves of Alfdáin hold the northwest, the fellfolk democracy of Belledor lies here, on the inner northern shore, while Nordheim owns the mountains and the outer fjords of the far north. The wizards of Caldwen rule the northeast. Beneath them, thrives the Republic of Osriel—merchants and bankers all. At the southeastern tip stand the Emirates of Narwan, just across the isthmus from Meryath. At the center, the dwarves of Araldûr live deep within the great mountain. In the islands just south of there, the merchant princes of Phrydias earn their keep—half-blood elves for the most part."



Isledemer and Enna followed quietly, hands behind their backs, dutifully committing to memory all they saw and heard as seasoned skyfarers ought.

The First Lord of the Fleet stopped and made a sweeping gesture. "Everything past the surrounding crest, or just about, comprises the Dread Lands. Do not dwell there long as intruders are unwelcome. Many other realms exist out there, in isolated and well-defended parts. Some we trade with, others not so much save for parting shots. You will soon find out."

"Well done, my brother," congratulated the queen from her throne. She clapped her hands. "Well, carry on, then. And report your findings as instructed."

Isledemer wanted to ask a million other questions, but from the queen's demeanor and the double doors swinging open, he concluded their meeting had reached its end. After the appropriate salutations and reverences, he and the first mate headed out. The attendant returned their weapons, and the four palace guards escorted them back to the launch.

Isledemer and Enna watched the palace quietly as they flew away, each ruminating on their new predicaments.

Isledemer broke the silence, ignoring the crew managing the small craft. "The part about glorious deeds extending one's lifetime remains quite puzzling I must admit. I wonder what she really meant?"

Enna shrugged. "I hope it isn't what I think. We could be here for an eternity, never able to repay this unbelievable ransom."

"Well, in any case, the oath as I worded it concerns me, and me alone. The way I see it, it does not extend to the *Star Phoenix* or anyone else aboard. Promise me, Mister Daggart, to take everyone home in the event an opportunity presents itself. I'll stay behind and deal with my own fate. Honor demands no less."

The first mate gazed at the captain. Her normally dour demeanor could not suppress an expression of gratitude and a newfound respect for her commander. "Let's hope it

won't be needed. As you once pointed out to Mister Belzer, we're all on the same boat. I'll hold you to your own words, Sir."

"Very kind of you indeed, Mister Daggart." The captain took a long breath. "Well, someone recently told me that fabulous fortunes await those who can find them. If we're to incur the hostility of those Draconic knights, we might just as well benefit from it, wouldn't you agree, Mister Daggart?"

## Captain's Log

*10<sup>th</sup> Day of Loreath 1512.  
Glorathon.*

*Repairs have been completed, following earlier damage from the vortex and the battle with the Draconic knights. Healing of wounds and illnesses has run its course successfully. A few of the crew opted to leave, as recorded on the purser's muster roll; local hands were recruited to replace them and to make up for casualties. All officers remained. Records in this logbook and all written accounts predating our arrival have been erased. Complete inventory was therefore performed. The Royal Treasurer of the Kingdom of Meryath proffered adequate monies, supplies, and a few measures of seitha; new navigational maps were acquired from an Exploration Guild, paid for in full by Her Gracious Majesty; a royal charter was also drafted to vouch for the ship's mission. The *Star Phoenix* is now ready to depart on her new journey.*

✦ ✦ ✦

Isledemer leaned back in his chair and glanced with annoyance at the last six of the newly hired crew standing quietly beyond his table. After a cursory look at the purs-

er's notes regarding their backgrounds, he turned and looked out the great cabin's stern windows. A handful of fellfolk workers hurried along the narrow catwalks alongside the huge wooden beams cradling the *Star Phoenix*, answering a quiet call somewhere else in the skyport. Farther back, the side of the stone tower aft of the skyship blocked much of the view.

Facing away from the distraction, he addressed the first of the new airmen, a charming young man with large blue eyes, a boyish smile, and flashy clothing.

"Airman Dan-Ha... Skills: slinger and singer..." Isledemer looked up. "Wipe that smile off your face, Airman. This isn't a popularity contest."

The young man straightened, suddenly more serious.

"Come now. Belly in! Fill that chest! Chin up! That's the spirit. You're in the air-fleet now. Any experience with catapults?" inquired Isledemer.

"Seen trebuchets in action, I 'ave, Sir... from a distance. Am also a good scout, I am."

"So you can aim straight, can you, even from a moving skyship?"

"Aye, Sir. Aim in the dark too, I can."

"Music to my ears." The captain added a few words to the purser's notes. "Very well. You'll report to the master-of-engines."

"Aye, Sir," Dan-Ha responded, turning to leave.

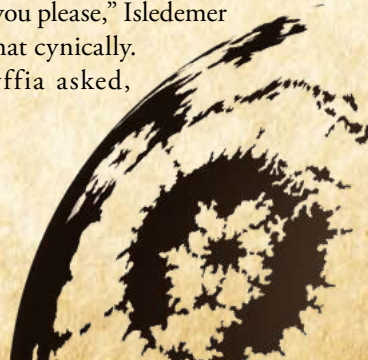
"Not now, blast you!" Isledemer growled. "You leave when you are dismissed." He looked at the next name on the list while the young man stood to attention, chin like a proud galley's ram.

"Airman Olyffia Efanas... Occupation: thief, acrobat, winged elf." Perplexed, the captain raised an eyebrow as he studied the female. "So, you have wings, this says?"

"Aye, Sir," she responded, uneasily. "But it doesn't work when I'm nervous."

"Do show, if you please," Isledemer ordered, somewhat cynically.

"Now?" Olyffia asked, blushing.





# In Stranger Skies

"By the Stars, of course 'now!' I haven't got all day, Airman."

"Aye, Sir," she responded. After turning from the captain, she concentrated with great effort that brought even more color to her cheeks and forehead. Two large wings popped into existence, ripping apart the back of her shirt. The elf then faced her commander, bashfully holding the tattered remains against her chest.

"I see," said Isledemer, rubbing his chin. "Well, we shan't have you flying around the ship half-naked. You'll be with the mastmen at the topsails. Best you report to the bosun. I'm told he's a skillful seamster."

The captain's finger reached the next entry on the purser's list. "Airman Vargr the Gullskavr..." The name almost tripped his tongue.

A glance revealed an imposing, squared-jawed, scarred, hirsute, and bearded brute wearing hides and furs, a few unidentifiable bones at his belt, and a large axe strapped on his back. He snorted loudly when Olyffia's wing tickled his nose.

"It says here you're an alchemist," inquired Isledemer, dubious.

"Aye!" The man's voice was booming and gravelly.

"All right, then. What do three ounces of powdered basilisk eye, a cup of chopped cockatrice tongue, and a quart of medusa milk, all simmered together during a moonless night, make?"

Vargr bared a row of snagged, rotten teeth, and laughed. "A potion of paralysis, that be. With an old troll's spit, a cure it'll make."

"Not bad," Isledemer commented. "You'll report to the ship's master in sick bay."

The next name on the list was one Galvin Illance, marked as muse and poet—another blond and blue-eyed young fellow warily watching the hairy brute next to him. The captain observed his fancy, almost foppish accouterment and the lute strapped on his back.

"By the Stars, man, whatever do you seek here?"

Galvin bowed with a flourish. "A life of adventure and some ineffable glory about which to compose an unforgettable ode to ravish the throbbing hearts of all, I most fervently seek, Honored Sir."

"Another blasted landlubber," Isledemer muttered between his teeth. He forced himself to look pleasant, or at least indifferent.

"So you're into strings, are you, Airman Illance?"

"Aye, Sir. I am most assuredly, if it pleases you. I'm also ferocious with bombasts and broadsides."

"Are you, now? You'll report to the master-of-engines. You'll do well with Airman Dan-Ha, here. Artillerists' mate Anaderic will show you the ropes and will tell you about proper behavior aboard the *Star Phoenix*."

The fifth recruit was a skinny and frail-looking fellow, described as Clenarius of Gabrial. Isledemer read the purser's notes and looked up with a frown. "You're listed here as a dread clan chieftain and blood-thirsty pillager on the run."

"Aye, Sir. I am, that is until said clan was decimated by the flu."

Dubious, the captain carried on. "Cleaved any skulls lately?"

"Most gleefully."

Isledemer annotated his records accordingly. "Plundered any temples by any chance?"

"As many as time allowed!"

"Would you do it again?"

"In a heartbeat."

"How many words does it take to write a scroll of invisibility?" asked Isledemer with a knowing smile.

"Not more than twenty-two, one fewer in elvish, and far too many to count in native forestfolk speak."

"Good enough. You'll report to the master-artificer. He will need your assistance to recharge the marines' combat rods—a common occurrence aboard, I might add."

The last recruit was a young lady, with short dark hair, sun-tanned possibly from

her years in beautiful Meryath, a pair of spectacles perched on her nose, and a small wooden case tucked under her arm.

Isledemer read the purser's entry. "Ermy Emberratam of the Rowm... Occupation: librarian, scribe, town crier, and clock-maker."

"I'm better known as 'Ember' in these parts," the young lady said, then hesitated. "It's my *nom de plume*." She seemed a little shy and awkward.

"You don't say," responded Isledemer with a hint of sarcasm. "And how is your calligraphy, Airman of the Rowm?"

"Quite good, Sir, I assure you." The recruit grew a bit more confident and pleased at the captain's attention. "I've learned from the best. I have my quills and ink here." She indicated the fancy case under her arm.

"Excellent. Excellent. And you are skilled with clocks, are you?"

"Aye, Sir. I am an expert."

"Quite marvelous indeed. And if I may ask, what is your favorite color?"

Ember raised an eyebrow, seemingly unsure what to make of her commander's unexpected question. "... Red, I think," she ventured.

"Perfect," responded Isledemer with a smile. "You'll report forthwith to the captain-at-arms. You are now a marine." The captain then addressed a sweeping gesture to the group of airmen. "Dismissed. Report as ordered and on the double."

After the last of the recruits stepped out and closed the door, the captain returned his attention to a stack of scrolls on his table—lists of purchases, reports on repairs and enchantment modifications, affidavits of all sorts. It was already late in the morning, and the nagging paperwork, the bane of all aerial skippers to be sure, still demanded his attention.

Despite his best efforts, he could not recall any peers from his shrouded past, but without a doubt the same amount of bureaucratic skullduggery plagued them all the same. Frustrated, he pulled his wand from his sleeve and flicked it at the piles. Dancing





to silent music, the dull literature floated about the room, circling in a snakelike procession past the captain. As each hung momentarily before his eyes, a slight twist of the wand burned Isledemer's lengthy name at the bottom with a slight golden flash. A rustle of paper followed, when the duly-read-and-signed forms alighted into new piles at the opposite end of the table.

A knock on his door pulled the captain from his concentration. The floating scrolls scattered like leaves blown by a gust of wind until Isledemer regained control of his spell. "Enter!"

The master artificer walked in. A bit startled at the sight of scrolls swirling across the room, the gnome approached the table while dodging the levitating pages.

"Good day, Sir. You asked for me?"

The captain kept his eyes locked on the pesky forms as he acknowledged Ebben's presence, modifying their path just above the gnome's head. "Indeed I have. Mister

Rugwittle, have you altered the sails as I requested?"

"Yes, Captain. I found a vessel moored nearby, heavily damaged in some battle. Mister Barrooney, who accompanied me, was able to acquire from her commander damaged sails at a bargain price. These can be easily repaired. After analysis, it appears they hold a convenient enchantment intended to trap ethereal winds. I believe this would alleviate the trouble of becoming stranded outside of this world's atmosphere. I've duplicated the effect on the remainder of our sails."

"Well done. The other vessel was damaged in battle, you say? Did you find out against whom?"

"Nay, Sir. But the damage I saw wasn't from siege engines or even of the sort our ship sustained during our last fight."

The allusion piqued Isledemer's interest, which caused a few pages to drift past the

gnome's face, tumbling over his prominent nose.

"Describe what you saw, if you please."

"Well, Sir, I observed scorch marks on the hull, burned sails, and a good number of large claw marks in the planking. Whatever inflicted the damage was no enemy ship. It's a wonder this one managed a flight back to Glorathon at all."

"Well, well, this might just be the clue I was looking for as to our next destination."

A sudden frown of concern appeared on Ebben's face. "Sailing into troubled skies is only asking for... trouble."

All too inattentively applied, a magical signature caused the bottom corner of a scroll to ignite, which the captain quickly blew out.

"It seems to me that this dragon slayer failed its mission to slay. I'd wager that somewhere out there lies a wounded dragon begging to be



# In Stranger Skies

found. And I suspect this might be reason enough for its knightly friends to pay her a visit. If they do, I want to be there, watching for them.”

Ebben’s pursed lips disappeared under his nose, painting an even more dubious expression on his face. He finally replied, “Wounded dragons are most unkind to unwanted visitors.”

“Indeed they are. But in this endeavor lies booty for all, a step toward repaying the debt to our rescuers, and a chance to learn more about our foes. If I’m right, the knights may yield clues about what brought us here and how to get back home.”

Ebben sighed. “Aye. Better start on protecting the ship against fire.”

“Indeed, Sir. Where is that damaged vessel moored?”

Halfway out the door, the gnome turned. “Close to the port’s aviary. You can’t possibly miss it.”

“Thank you, Mister Rugwittle.”

After the master artificer’s departure, Isledemer completed a few more scrolls and then waved the rest back to their original piles. There was more important and intriguing business at hand. He hurried to the main deck, where the captain-at-arms stood before a line of marines and a dismayed recruit. Isledemer headed in the officer’s direction.

“Mister Wu, a word if you please.”

The two stepped away from the marines, who remained at attention.

“So glad to see you have recovered well from your wounds.”

“I was in good hands. I owe my life to Mister Starward... and to our cook, I’m told.” A hint of discomfort surfaced in his last words.

“Indeed. And I owe you mine!”

“Duty demanded no less, Sir.”

“Nonetheless, you have my undiminished gratitude. I need to steer you away from your duties for a short time. You and I are going to pay a visit to a nearby vessel. I’ll explain as we go.”

“Very well, Captain.”

Yuntai turned to his marines and dismissed them while the captain motioned the bosun closer.

“Prepare a launch, Mister Cripplegate, and inform Mister Daggart she has the deck.”

“Aye, Sir.”

Moments later, the two officers flew from the side of the *Star Phoenix*, meandering past a forest of moored skyships.

“Apparently, our master artificer found a ship recently damaged by a dragon, or so I hope,” said Isledemer. “I need to know where this encounter took place.”

Yuntai considered the captain’s words and nodded. “We’re headed for another fight.”

“I’ve no intention of unduly endangering the ship. If we can find that creature, we can finish the work and seize whatever booty lies there. More importantly, I’m hoping the knights will show up, if they haven’t already. Time is now of the essence.”

“I understand. If we get the drop on their ship we might give them a run for their money this time.” With an expression of satisfaction, he added, “I’m looking forward to this.”

“Thought so,” Isledemer responded with a slight grin. He maneuvered their levitating launch past mooring towers, looking for the damaged vessel. “If that dragon is still alive, odds are it’s licking its wounds. That will give us a chance to approach unseen.”

“If I can get my marines to discharge their rods, that dragon ought to be knocked out fairly quickly.”

“Good. How are the new recruits?”

“They’ve all served on Meryath ships and fought dragons before, as well as these Draconic knights. Most have an axe to grind. So do I, now.”

“And for good reason.” Isledemer spotted the damaged vessel moored just past an imposing tower, and steered their craft toward it. Its name’s golden letters *Villamblard* were still readable at the stern. “We must make sure the knights’ commander is captured alive. I’m counting on you for this.”

The elf nodded, a bit more grimly than the captain had expected. Isledemer suspected he was more concerned about the knights than the dragon itself. One knew what to expect of dragons, or so he thought; at least he quietly reasoned that dragons in this world shouldn’t be so different from those elsewhere. He buried that thought as their craft reached the side of the stricken skyship.

“Ahoy the *Villamblard*!” hailed the captain.

The sawing and hammering subsided as a worker approached the side of the vessel. The crew grimly observed the visitors like patrons of a shady tavern would outsiders unexpectedly intruding upon their domain.

“A word with your commander, if you please.”

“Right here!” answered a hard voice by the stern. The officer approached. Though he’d been healed from previous battle wounds, his face and chest still bore the scars of fire. The man wore a dark red studded leather outfit, grimy, creased, and showing signs of having been worn a bit too long. A folded sleeve betrayed a missing arm, perhaps lost in battle as well. “What do you want?” he asked abruptly.

“Captain d’Alberran here, from the *Star Phoenix* moored at the other end of the port.” He designated his companion with his open hand. “My captain-at-arms, Mister Wu. I wish to ask a few questions about your recent encounter. May we come aboard?”

The dour figure gauged them before motioning to them, waiting with his hand on the pommel of his sword as the visitors stepped onto the deck.

“And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?” asked Isledemer.

“Captain Dar-Nor. Follow me to my office.” He turned and walked toward the sterncastle while the sawing and hammering resumed.

His great cabin, though more austere than Isledemer’s, was comparable—a table, an oil lamp, a few padded chairs, wooden lockers and leather benches beneath the aft windows. Dar-Nor deftly rolled up a



map on the table, sat facing his guests, and motioned them to worn-out straight chairs. Isledemer noticed with glum satisfaction a few stacks of scrolls were held in place with daggers stuck right through them. But the map that landed on the bench behind the host's back was what drew his attention.

Dar-Nor leaned back in his chair. "So, what do you want to know?"

"We've been commissioned by Her Majesty to follow up on Draconic knight activities. We suspect your recent encounter might have something to do with them. The area needs to be searched for their presence."

Dar-Nor responded with a snort of derision. "So you may help yourselves to the hoard now that I've done half the work. I think not. Anything else you want to know?"

"With all due respect, Sir, you aren't going anywhere anytime soon, if ever, with this charred hulk of yours. What if I could arrange for the cost of repairs and improvements to be paid for? Judging from the extent of the damage, your bill is likely as staggering as those mooring towers. If you wish to slay another day, here's your chance."

He could tell Dar-Nor was annoyed. "What proof do I have you can pay?"

Isledemer pulled out the *Star Phoenix's* royal charter from his coat, unrolled it, and displayed it before his host. "This is proof I act in the name of Her Majesty. I shall draft a letter of credit for your costs, which will be honored at the Royal Treasury. Name your price, Sir."

While Dar-Nor examined the charter with suspicion, Isledemer noticed Yuntai slowly moving his hand toward his sword. The elf glanced toward his captain and gave a furtive look behind him. He'd sensed an unseen presence in the room. Heeding the warning, Isledemer prepared to react.

Suddenly, Yuntai jumped to his feet, whirled, and kicked his chair in front of him. It tumbled across the chamber until it hit something invisible a few paces away. The captain-at-arms attacked immediately. Isledemer sensed movement nearby, stood, turned, and swished his rapier before him,

keeping another foe at bay. Dar-Nor roared and struggled to unsheathe his blade with his single arm. Three shapes appeared, wielding short stabbing swords, one near each of the room's occupants. Isledemer parried his foe's attack, Yuntai dispatched his, but Dar-Nor did not fare so well. He fell on his back, gurgling, foam at the edges of his mouth, his lips quickly turning blue. The killer, hunched over his twitching victim, turned his attention to the other captain.

Free to act, the elf turned on his commander's attacker and engaged him. Isledemer rushed to Dar-Nor's side. While he heard Yuntai finish off the second foe, the captain pointed his rapier at the assassin's face.

"One twitch and you're dead."

Poised to attack, Dar-Nor's killer sneered. Blood and another darker substance dripped along the short sword's curved blade, snaking down a wavy pattern in its steel. His outfit reminded Isledemer of the Draconic ship's hull, black and scaly like a serpent's hide.

"Drop your sword and back off!" Isledemer snapped.

The killer eyed Yuntai rounding the table, dropped his weapon, and slowly recoiled. He opened his mouth, bearing viper fangs that gave Isledemer goosebumps.

"Beware!" thundered Yuntai as the killer spat in the captain's direction. Acid sizzled past his face and hit a wooden bulkhead, burning through it in an instant.

"I want him alive!" shouted Isledemer.

Yuntai charged and forced the man down, his sword now pressing against his throat. The captain returned his rapier to his side and drew his wand. It was already too late for Dar-Nor, whose eyes showed that his soul had already departed. Isledemer faced the assassin.

"Who sent you and how did you get here?"

The man hissed angrily, which Yuntai squelched by pressing harder with his sword. Isledemer aimed his wand.

"You will speak or, by the Stars, I'll tear you apart, limb by limb!"

The man's gaze shifted from his captors to something behind them. The captain spun at once, in time to see a fourth assassin aiming a blowgun at him. Both he and Yuntai dodged when a dart flew out. It missed its mark and struck instead the man on the floor. The sharp projectile hit him in the face and burrowed through his skin, like a flesh-eating worm.

As Isledemer surged to his feet, the last aggressor vanished. Repressing a string of profanity, the captain turned back to the stricken man. Tendrils of rot quickly spread from the wound in his face. His eyes soon turned white and purulent while receding flesh revealed teeth and bone. After a few squirms and jerks, he too died as rot reached his brain, and maggots wriggled from his nose and ears.

Both Isledemer and Yuntai retreated in disgust.

"Bad company," muttered the elf.

"You don't say," echoed the captain. "The question is, how did they get here? I'd wager they are connected to the Draconic knights."

"I wonder if they came aboard with this ship or whether they were already here in Glorathon."

"I suspect the latter. If they'd wanted to kill Dar-Nor, they could have done this at any time, couldn't they? They were watching someone else."

Both men responded to that last statement at the same time.

"Us."

Yuntai broke the moment of uncomfortable silence that followed. "We'll have to watch our backs now, with that other one still prowling the area. I wish we could make the dead speak."

The captain shook his head. "Foes are unwilling to speak, even through necromantic means, and that Dar-Nor fellow probably has little to reveal anyway. Best we take that map of his and send a message to the queen about our encounter. I'm sure she'd want to know these sorts are loose in her streets."





# In Stranger Skies

## Captain's Log

*13<sup>th</sup> Day of Loreath 1512,  
morning watch.*

*Heading Southwest at 3,000 ft  
to Mareas Island. Wind Northeast,  
light breeze. Clear skies. Dispatched  
a warning to Queen Shardwen. Set  
sail to investigate the area marked  
on the map recovered from the  
Villamblard.*

✦ ✦ ✦

It had been a quiet few days since the *Star Phoenix's* speedy departure from Glorathon. The new crew became acquainted with their captain's command, and marine recruits were drilled continuously. Their practice with magical rods, with a recurring focus directed at hapless gulls flying nearby, kept the master artificer busy recharging the devices. Not to be upstaged, the master-of-engines installed several new war machines aboard, for which he began his own ambitious training schedule. To save on enchanted harpoons, he fashioned ad hoc projectiles fitted with on-board garbage, which the crew gleefully catapulted through low clouds. At least, it broke the monotony of an otherwise event-free flight above the Southern Calderan Sea.

Isledemer pulled out his spyglass and observed misty shores miles off the *Star Phoenix's* port bow. Under its early dawn shroud, the dark green jungle still appeared pale and ghostly. Arabesque stood by the captain's side, a large scroll tucked under her arm.

"Based on the map you obtained from Dar-Nor, this should be where he encountered his dragon—Mareas Island. It's quite a large place. Any indication on the beast's breed, Captain?"

"None whatsoever. We're not sure in what shape it was left, let alone how it may be faring now. Neither do we know exactly where the lair lies."

"Perhaps local folks might help."

"That's what I'm hoping. Better get prepared. The last part of this journey will be on foot."

Arabesque followed Isledemer as he headed to the wheel. "Am I to join the landing party?"

"You are, Mister Starward. I'm told their so-called Dread Lands can be a handful. The unexpected is to be expected, so to speak."

"As always," she responded with a grin. "I'll prepare."

Isledemer approached Ol' Babblejack and Enna. He pointed at the land emerging from the mist. "Make for those shores, over there, Mister Belzer."

"Aye, Captain."

"Mister Daggart, have a landing party prepared, well armed, if you please. I'll be going along. Keep the ship safely away from land after we disembark. I'll send a message if we need help."

"It would be safer if I went instead, Captain, *Rule Number One* notwithstanding."

"Indeed, but in this case, magic may be critical." He knew Enna was dying to get ashore; most of the crew was, at least those who'd never experienced the Dread Lands. As he headed aft, he turned and added, "Be on the lookout for unseen visitors. The previous ship here took on unwanted passengers."

After a quick tour of his quarters, Isledemer picked up the things he knew he'd need—a few potions, a small spellbook well protected against the elements, his rapier, and a few other oddities he stuffed into his coat pockets. He settled his befeathered hat on his head. By the time he returned topside, the *Star Phoenix* had reached a lower altitude. The air was heavy with the smell of iodine and the oppressive heat and humidity of tropical latitudes.

The bosun already had two launches ready to shove off. Next to them stood Arabesque, Yuntai, a dozen marines, and four sailors. A tarp covered a pack of supplies in one of the skyboats. Everyone

climbed aboard and, as the bosun's pipe sounded the *away galley*, the two skiffs flew from the *Star Phoenix's* side and began their descent.

Despite the sweltering heat untempered by the marine breeze, Isledemer's stoicism demanded he keep his woolen coat on. He focused his attention on the scene below: palm trees at the edge of the forest arching over a white sand beach and a translucent turquoise hint betraying the sea's presence. All seemed calm. A line of dark mountains stood in the distance. A few miles from shore, a thin white ribbon of smoke rose from the jungle.

Isledemer leaned back toward the crewman at the tiller. "Make for that smoke, if you please."

"Aye, aye, Sir."

The levitating skiff arched in the direction Isledemer expected to find a village, the other launch following close behind. Arabesque, who sat next to him, gazed at the captain.

"I didn't see anything on the map about natives."

"Let's hope the locals are in a helping mood." After an instant of reflection, the captain leaned once more toward the steersman. "Land short of that smoke, Mister Crokewell. Best we don't come down right in the middle of a village."

The crewman acknowledged and lowered both speed and altitude. Oddly, it seemed as if the tree tops swayed toward the launches flying just above. There didn't appear to be adequate clearings to land. Instead, a thick and unbroken tangle of vegetation stretched as far as the eye could see. As he looked back, Isledemer caught the steersman's quizzical gaze. He responded by pointing at a huge tree soaring a good 30 feet above those around it.

"Alight easily, Mister Crokewell. Do pick a strong branch, if you please." Isledemer then turned to Arabesque. "I suppose we'll have to climb down."

A glance behind him informed the captain that Yuntai understood his intent, as the other launch circled to another spot



on the colossal tree. Several crewmembers stood with ropes ready to secure their skyboats as soon as appropriate perches were selected. A flock of parrots chattered and screamed before suddenly taking off, reluctantly surrendering their lofty realm to the intruders. Monkeys hooted and howled below, jumping to safety and watching with alarm. The branches protested with ominous groans and creaks under the weight of the two vessels when they landed.

Infinitely more disconcerting was the sight of fronds slowly snaking beneath the launches and creeping over their gunwales. Crokewell grabbed a hand axe and lifted it, meaning to chop them off, when Isledemer motioned him to stay still. The captain-at-arms, some 50 feet away, did the same with his team.

After an uncomfortable moment, the vegetation steadied and came to rest. Arabesque touched one of the twined rootlike appendages, at first with the tips of her fingers, then with the palm of her hand. She whispered a few soothing elven words and looked at the captain.

"A good thing that blade did not come down. One ought to be gentle with this tree and all that grows here. There's more to this place than just timber and leaves."

"Wisely spoken, Mister Starward." Isledemer gazed at the crew. "Pass the word: *no chopping*." He then added almost to himself, "At least the launches aren't likely to fall off."

Ropes were promptly secured and all occupants began the difficult task of climbing down the hundred-and-eighty-foot-tall tree and lowering the bundle of supplies. As the descent took place, a green dimness replaced the canopy's bright sunlight. Heat and humidity grew even more stifling, along with the sickening aromas of alien nectars, wet dirt, and many rotting things. The thick foliage muffled distant grunts and squeals. Flies and mosquitoes soon earned sporadic slaps against unprotected arms and necks from everyone... except for Arabesque and Yuntai. Apparently immune to the pesky insects' attentions, they looked slightly

bewildered by the crew's reactions to the myriad stings and bites inflicted upon them.

"How *do* you do this?" inquired Isledemer with mounting envy.

The two elves glanced at each other and shrugged.

"Honestly, Captain, I've no idea," said Yuntai. "It may be your body odor."

"Do you mean to say I smell, Mister Wu?" Beyond surprise, the tone of Isledemer's response implied a bit of annoyance. Some of the crew behind him began sniffing at each other, with expressions of growing confusion.

"Well, Sir, you do... I think. I mean, like a human that is. Well, we *all* smell in some way, you know... to a point. Now dwarves, of course..."

Rescuing the captain-at-arms, Arabesque quickly interrupted. "It's a very subtle thing, Captain, really. Human folk exude a faintly sweeter scent than elven folk. It's altogether not unpleasant, though it occasionally attracts vermin."

Isledemer cleared his throat, wishing he hadn't brought up the issue at all. "I suppose they think I'm a blinking potpourri of sorts. I'll go on exuding then. Let's proceed before it gets worse."

He knew it would. Diffuse thunder rolled far away by the mountains, perhaps a portent of future relief from the heat.

After the crew strapped the supply bundle onto fallen branches and used them to carry it, the landing party slowly headed inland. With Yuntai at her side, Arabesque walked a few paces ahead, gently persuading tangles aside.

All seemed fine until, some unmeasurable time later, a thoughtless crew member stepped on the wrong thing. A vine snarled about his ankle and yanked, lifting the poor fellow a good 30 feet. Isledemer recognized his steersman.

"Mister Crokewell, do not fight back. We'll get you down momentarily."

Although commendable, the order failed to compel the steersman to stay still when leaves inside a nearby bush rolled open, revealing a multitude of feral eyes

surrounding a cabbage-sized one in the middle. Several tentacles surmounted with serrated flytrap-style mouths rose toward the squirming mate, snapping wickedly and dripping gooey sap. Distraught by the sight of the carnivorous shrubbery coming to life, a nearby marine—one of those who'd survived the vortex—promptly discharged his rod. A bolt of lightning sizzled through the fronds, causing leaves and plantlike eyes to ignite. The pseudopodia twitched violently and fell, dropping the steersman to the ground. Meanwhile, a roar of pain shook the forest. Nearby trees shuddered and repeated the call, amplifying and reverberating the chorus for miles.

"You fool!" uttered Isledemer, aghast.

Arabesque rolled her eyes. "Marines... when will they learn?"

After a glance of disapproval to the prioress, Yuntai glowered at his subordinate. "Put that rod away, Marine! You do not discharge without order."

"Bit late now," said Isledemer unsheathing his wand from his sleeve. "Trouble's coming."

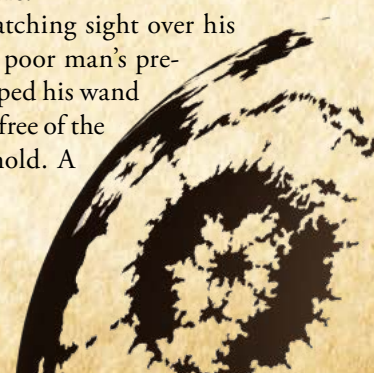
As the concert of unfathomable bellows and grunts died out, the sound of large drums answered from several directions.

"I *was* hoping to avoid this," muttered Isledemer. "All of you, back to the launches! Drop the supplies and go... Now!"

The cautious advance changed into an anxious retreat. Surrounding growth seemed to respond to the sudden trampling, lashing out and spitting thorns. Pain compounded with fear of the unknown turned the hasty withdrawal into a frenzied rout, steel slashing wildly to hack open the previous path despite orders to the contrary. Shudders rippled throughout the fronds.

"Wait for me!" hollered the steersman, limping a few paces behind the party. A leafy creeper seized him and lifted him off his feet once more.

Isledemer, catching sight over his shoulder of the poor man's predicament, whipped his wand and ripped him free of the vine's stranglehold. A





# In Stranger Skies

green blaze in the party's wake masked Crokewell's final fate but not his scream of terror as he fell. Bitterly, the captain kept up with the fleeing party.

Clothes torn, skin bleeding from lacerations and stab wounds, the party stumbled upon a group of natives blocking the way, and came to a sudden halt. The forest around them held back, as if poised to fall upon everyone.

About half the size of common crewmembers, their teeth filed into sharp triangles, their skins covered with tattoos and dyed various shades of green, these fellfolk wore no more than strings holding pieces of hide around their waists. A few adorned their black hair with shells, beads, and bones, or kept it in long topknots. Others, smartly holding ironwood maces in their hands, wore pieces of bark and skull fragments as armor. Behind them, ropes still hung from the large tree, leading to the ship's skyboats. Scores more of the natives stood in the branches, aiming hunting bows, spears, and long blowguns at the crew. An elder native, rather fat, one-eyed, and with a severe under-bite, elbowed her way through the warriors. Wearing a black-and-white-striped fur headdress with a set of antlers, she shook her staff, a gnarled wooden shaft dangling with feathers, shells, and shrunken heads.

"Great Vault!" whispered Isledemer to Arabesque. "They all look like our cook. That one must be their clan shaman."

"Let's hope she isn't shopping for live ingredients."

The concept had indeed crossed the captain's mind.

Spewing a string of irate though incomprehensible jibber-jabber, the shaman pointed her staff at the tree behind her, at the dangling ropes, and at the landing party.

"Oh dear," muttered Isledemer. "I do hope this isn't the tribe's sacred tree."

"Sorry, Captain," answered Arabesque. "I should have thought of this. I didn't see any signs."

"Let's see if I can parlay this tribal 'diplomat'

into something useful." He cleared his throat and cautiously lifted a hand. After a moment of hesitation he ventured, "*Parlez-vous Meryath?*"

Both the shaman and Arabesque stared blankly at the captain.

"What in the Stars was that?" asked the prioress.

Isledemer opened his mouth to answer and stopped, suddenly perplexed. He then commented, "I can't remember to save my life. It just came to me... Oh, blast it! I'll have to use another spell."

After a slight twist of his wand he addressed the increasingly agitated fellfolk.

"We mean no harm. We come in peace."

Defiant, the shaman stared at the captain. "De mohns in de sky, dem bad juju. Dem come withou' say, an' 'urt trees. Dem look for shiny t'ing, steal food, an' fly away."

Isledemer realized the shaman alluded to Dar-Nor's prior business with the tribe. Cursing him silently, he responded.

"We aren't the ones who did this to you. We know who did. This man is now dead."

The shaman snarled. "De mohns in de sky, dem speaka lies always. Dem pay now!"

She raised her spear and shrieked, and the mace-toting warriors began hammering the base of the large tree's trunk. It sounded like a giant drum. Trees, vines, and bushes became alive once again, falling upon the party. Tendrils whipped the air and coiled around the captain's arms and legs. Despite their hacking and screaming, the remainder of the landing party suffered the same fate. Soon, they all felt their bodies slowly being pulled apart.

Isledemer tried to utter a spell, but the pain was excruciating. The natives hooted and screamed, encouraging the plant life in its effort to dismember the intruders. Next to him, Arabesque cried out, unable to rid herself of the mad vegetation. Desperate, the captain tried to reach her. It was a futile effort. He could barely move. It seemed as if he faced certain death once more, cursing his idea to land in the Dread Lands. It all seemed irredeemably lost, until someone

stepped out from the bushes, just behind the party.

It was the cook.

Gumboyle Mofsecot, unharmed by root and vine, observed the situation for an instant and hailed the shaman. Unheeded, she clapped her hands once above her head. A blast of concentric wind rustled outward through the forest, and the foliage released its deadly grasp, dropping the crew. The natives grew silent and gauged the one-legged fellfolk.

"Dem not bad juju," the cook proclaimed. "Dem come for dragonmohns only."

Whispers rose among the tribesmen. The shaman shook her staff to quiet them.

"De One-Leg, she no Skullabash folk," she said with suspicion. "Where come from?"

"Mama Goo, she fly wit' de mohns in de sky on de big raft. She learn dem ways good an' true. She know dem not speaka lies."

Her words provoked reactions among the natives ranging from disbelief to anger. The shaman rattled her staff once more, and quieted their shouts. While she considered a response, Isledemer and his companions rid themselves of their vegetal shackles.

Now able to approach Arabesque, he whispered, "Well, we now know where our cook came from. How did she get down here?"

"She's small enough to have hidden among the supplies."

"Clever little devil. Wonder what she was up to."

The shaman spoke again, eyeing with concern the crew getting back to their feet. "Why she fly on de big canoe?"

"De Great Spirit, she put Mama Goo dere. She not say why, an' Mama Goo she not ask. De fellfolk, dem neva question de Great Spirit, only follow 'er pat.'" As she spoke, Moonsail flew down from a branch and landed on her shoulder.

After another moment of silence, the shaman nodded. "De Skullabash folk, dem 'elp de mohns in de sky only if dem give de long knives."



"But dem need de long knives to kill de dragonmohns!"

The shaman gazed at the captain. "De Skullabash folk, dem give back de long knives only when find de dragonmohns. Skullabash folk, dem show where."

Isledemer doffed his hat with a flourish. "It shall be so, Great Shaman. And then we shall leave the proud Skullabash folk alone at last. My words are good and true."

\* \* \*

Thunder rolled overhead as the landing party climbed the mountain's foothills. A native guide led the way a few paces ahead, following an invisible path through the green inferno. Isledemer stopped and took a long breath, wiping sweat streaming down his face and neck. Yuntai stood next to him, apparently dry and at ease. He gave his captain a slightly puzzled glance, and moved on. Isledemer refrained from asking how he managed to stay cool, assuming it was another elven peculiarity. He wrung his soggy handkerchief, peeled a leech off the back of his hand, flicked it away, and resumed his climb.

At the center of the party, two dozen natives bore the supplies. They'd rolled up and bundled the crew's swords in large leaves, which they carried on their backs as well.

Gumboyle limped along on her wooden leg. Isledemer fell back a few paces to walk next to her. He addressed her in a low voice.

"So, Mister Moffeecot, it would seem you'd known all along that you hailed from this world, didn't you?"

"Mama Goo, she not know at firs'. She cut off de chicken 'ead an' read de blood. Inside de blood, she find de trut'. De Great Spirit, she speaka to Mama Goo. Go to de forest she say, an' 'elp de crew. So Mama Goo, she 'ide in de supplies, an' come wit' de big capt'n. De Great Spirit, she know why but not tell Mama Goo."

"And a good thing you listened to her. You'll have to tell me more about the Dread Lands and their Great Spirit when we have

more time. Something tells me we're getting close to the object of our quest."

Moonsail landed on its mistress's shoulder and looked up at the captain. With its pointy ears and humanlike face, it seemed almost friendly, until it stuck its tongue out at Isledemer and made a facetious grimace. The homunculus spread one of its batlike wings, hid behind it while it leaned against its mistress's pointy ear, and began chattering. It then took off unexpectedly and flew into the foliage above.

Her voice one notch lower, the cook muttered to the captain. "Moonsail, 'im fly an' see de cheeky Skullabash folk wit' de dragonmohns. Dem wait in ambush an' mean to kill de big capt'n."

"I suspected as much," he answered, "judging from the one-eyed shaman's vanishing act a moment ago. I say, thank you for the warning."

Isledemer cleared his throat. Curious, Yuntai looked back. With a movement of his chin, the captain indicated to the native bearers behind him. The elven warrior heeded his commander with a slight nod, turned back, and whispered a few words into a marine's ear. A discreet message propagated itself toward the front, in moments reaching Arabesque, a few paces behind the guide.

Thunder rumbled again. Isledemer picked that instant to turn around and bare his wand, which he'd kept hidden from the natives so far. A dozen shards of blinding light shot forth, spiraling across the short distance and striking the bearers. Half of them fell while the others dropped their bundles and scattered into the surrounding jungle. Up ahead, Arabesque quickly dispatched the guide. Paralyzed, the fellfolk teetered for an instant before falling into a bush.

While a few heavy drops of rain smacked against the tree canopy, the crew tore through the bundles and recovered their weapons.

"Quick! Follow Mama Goo," the cook said as she headed off to the side. "She find anot'a way."

Isledemer approved and everyone hurried behind her as the rain came beating down. A stone's throw farther, she turned around, uttered a few words, and the foliage grew in the party's wake, masking their passage. Already, the sounds of many drums rose from the forest.

Scrambling laboriously up slippery rocks, struggling through sticky mud, and drenched under the torrential downpour, the crew proceeded.

"Where to?" inquired Isledemer from beneath his wilting hat.

Gumboyle pointed up the steep slope. "Moonsail, 'im see big crata' in de mountain. Good place for de dragon. Good place for de dragonmohns."

The terrain became rockier yet and more treacherous as they proceeded. Soon, the crew had to grasp at foliage to keep their balance on the steep slope. Cliffs and cracks forced the party to back up a few times, until Arabesque raised a hand. She'd spotted a cranny between two mossy boulders, partially veiled behind large ferns.

"There's a draft blowing out," she shared with Isledemer when he approached. "It is clean of volcano fumes. It must lead somewhere."

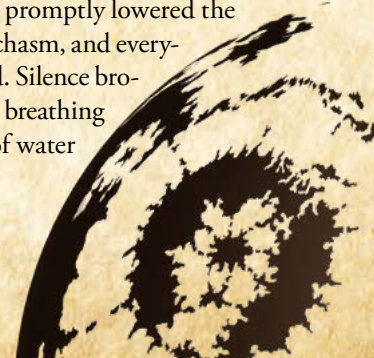
"If anything, it would be a shelter against this damned rain!" answered the captain. "Let's go in!"

Hanging on cautiously, a marine climbed down through a cascading stream. Another followed. An interminable moment later, as the sound of drums drew louder, a whistle call rose from the depths of the chasm.

The marine's voice echoed from the bottom. "I can see a passage!"

After many of the crew had gone down, Isledemer motioned the cook to come closer. "If you'll allow me," he said, as he tied a rope around Gumboyle's waist. "Wooden legs aren't ideal for climbing slippery rocks, are they?"

Two marines promptly lowered the fellfolk into the chasm, and everyone else followed. Silence broken by the crew's breathing and the sound of water





# In Stranger Skies

dripping in the dark replaced the din of the storm raging outside. Soon three balls of sallow light defeated the dimness, one from the captain's wand, and two others from Arabesque and Yuntai. Twisting between rock and stalagmite, the passage sank into the mountainside's bowels. Rainwater streamed through, pooling and cascading at the whim of jagged stones.

Oddly, the captain felt a hint of unhealthy satisfaction at the sight of the two elves as pitifully soaked as everyone else.

"I'll take the lead," said Yuntai in a low voice.

Isledemer gave him an enigmatic grin and nodded him onward.

Their trek went far longer than he'd expected or desired. The fissure ended at a ledge in a huge vertical shaft from which rainwater cascaded in a muddy curtain. Far above, it widened into an old volcano's crater through which rain came down in sheets. After snuffing his light and returning the wand to the sheath on the underside of his forearm, Isledemer cautiously approached the cliff's edge, crouched, and peered down. Some three hundred feet below lay the unmistakable shape of a dragonship floating above the dark waters of a lake. A wooden gangway led to the mouth of a cavern on the opposite side of the shaft, through which fellfolk bearers came and went, hauling leaf bundles on board like those their clan mates had used earlier to secure the crew's swords. Draconic knights stood by on the skyship, watching the bearers and the sailors as they lowered the mysterious bundles into the ship's hold.

Isledemer withdrew and, after a moment of reflection, dug into a pocket inside his coat. He retrieved a square piece of parchment and unfolded it, pleased that its enchantment had kept it dry despite his thoroughly soggy garments. He then plucked the large feather from his hat. At the sight of the sodden thing drooping,

he blew softly upon it until the magical plume regained some of its former panache. After a couple of sharp jabs in

mid-air for its arcane nib to produce ink, Isledemer wrote on the parchment.

It started with: "Dear Mister Daggart..."

When finished, the captain stuck the quill back onto his hat. He breathed upon the ink which, as he expected, vanished. Satisfied, he folded the parchment and returned it to safety.

"What next?" inquired Yuntai.

"Good question. We are going to have to climb down there."

Arabesque peeked over the edge and chimed in. "There's a narrow rim around the lake. If we can climb down to it, we can reach the cavern's mouth. That must be the dragon's lair."

"We're going to have to wait until that dragonship leaves," Isledemer observed Yuntai's annoyed expression. "She's not flying anywhere I won't be able to find later, Mister Wu."

"I wonder what they're loading," Yuntai responded. "I hope it isn't the dragon's treasure."

"Strange thing, this. I know of no dragon willing to part with her hoard," said Isledemer.

"... unless she's already dead," added Arabesque.

The captain shook his head. "Nay, I don't believe that is so. Dar-Nor would have helped himself if this were true, and I'm convinced he didn't have a farthing's worth when we spoke with him."

Suddenly, a voice resonated some distance above, shouting in the harsh Draconic language. A cautious peek revealed a native on a higher ledge. Isledemer recognized the one-eyed shaman. After she'd faded from sight, Isledemer looked below once more. The knights quickly removed the wooden gangplank while the bearers headed back into the cave. A moment later, the skyship slowly rose through the shaft.

The captain motioned the crew to take cover.

As the dragonship slowly levitated past, Isledemer aimed his wand and released a small ball of faint blue light. The magical orb meandered past the ledge and seemed

to drift toward the vessel's hull. It reached her stern, flickered, and vanished.

"There. I should be able to track these fellows now, wherever they fly."

The dragonship continued her long ascension through the shaft under the pouring rain.

"Bad time to fly," commented Yuntai as thunder roared above. "Hope she gets stung by lightning."

"Let's hope not. At least not quite yet. We have unfinished business with this man-o-war."

Isledemer ventured a few more cautious peeks overhead to ascertain the dragonship had left the crater. All seemed quiet at the bottom of the shaft, save for sheets of rain plummeting, cascades of rainwater drenching the stone, and the occasional flash of lightning above. He looked back at the crew. They had used their idle time to tie several ropes together along with a dozen of their marines' red coats to obtain the right length, and secured their masterpiece to a rocky spur. Yuntai went first. Arabesque and the crew followed.

"If you'll pardon my reach," said Isledemer to Gumboyle.

Without waiting for an answer, he lifted her under his arm and jumped off the ledge, Moonsail diving next to them. His magic kicked in at the last moment, and the captain landed softly on his feet at the edge of the lake's stony rim.

Yuntai motioned the marines to draw their rods, and began circling the lake toward the cavern's mouth. Everyone else followed until he reached the entrance. He risked a look. Seeing no reaction inside, he signaled his marines to stay back, and stepped into the cavern. He reappeared a moment later and waved everyone in.

Arabesque's light regained its strength and, though still weak, hinted at a very large chamber, one that must have been carved out of the rock with picks and magic. After proceeding deeper, they could see that it proved to be a hundred fifty feet across, with stout pillars holding its vault, some fifty feet above. Ornamental carvings could have



been the work of dwarves—perhaps this was the great hall of a lost clan's domain. A pile of bundles lay opposite from the entrance, next to an opening that led to another rough passage deeper in the earth. Isledemer suspected a mine or another way out.

Gumboyle sliced through one of the leafy packs with her knife, and a stream of large uncut gems rolled onto the floor, prompting a few whistles of amazement from the crew. These few bundles alone were worth a fortune. While the crew began stuffing their pockets, the three officers gazed at each other with concern.

"Where's that blasted dragon?" muttered Isledemer. "It certainly can't crawl out of that..." He suddenly stopped and realized his mistake. "It's a trap! Prepare for trouble!"

Yuntai quickly lined up his marines, rods and swords at the ready. Arabesque, Gumboyle, and the remaining sailors stepped back, taking cover behind pillars. Isledemer aimed his wand at the small passage, filled it with webs of sticky strands, and faced the other way. Silence returned, all eyes trying to pierce through the sheets of cascading water masking the entrance.

"Do not discharge your rods until ordered to do so," Yuntai slowly uttered. "Hold your positions."

Something ahead moved under the falling water. Isledemer strained to make out details. A human shape peered through, slipped in, and ducked behind a pillar. Another followed, heading for cover as well. More sneaked in, sporadically, at different points of the entrance, moving furtively from one pillar to another.

"Hold it..." repeated the captain-at-arms.

These weren't Draconic knights, Isledemer thought. They didn't move like armored warriors, but more like... Alarmed, he set aside his wand and pulled out his spyglass. Adjusting it for the short distance, he caught one of their foes. A man's face with viper-like fangs appeared. It spotted him and jumped into a shadowy spot.

The captain snapped the spyglass shut and glanced at Yuntai.

"Vipermen."

The elven commander grimaced at the news and quietly passed the word. "Take cover. Watch for poison attacks!"

The marines stepped behind pillars as best they could, in groups of two guarding each other's backs. More assassins filtered in, building up their forces and sneaking closer, one by one. Following a silent call, they all stepped out in full view and hollered like wild men.

"Do *not* discharge!" roared Yuntai.

The vipermen ducked back into hiding. "They're trying to provoke a response," the captain-at-arms added. "Hold your positions. Do not release your bolts until ordered."

Nonetheless, Isledemer drew his wand with the firm intention not to allow the assassins' game to go on unchallenged as they came closer. Hisses and whispers sounded from all corners of the chamber.

"Hold it! We've only got one chance at this."

Once again, vipermen jumped into sight, howling and tumbling about. This time Isledemer unleashed a score of blazing darts, each finding a mark despite the assassins' attempts to dive into shadows. Simultaneously, a wide beam of strobing bluish light shone from behind the captain. Arabesque illuminated the area ahead with a blinding ray that emitted an odd, low-pitched hum. It drew stark shadows among the pillars, shifting against the floor, walls, and ceiling as she swept the chamber. The beam reflected through the watery curtain at the entrance, turning each drop into tiny falling diamonds. At the sound of blowguns hissing from several directions, the prioress dispelled her beam and ducked as stings smacked against the wall behind her.

"Stay low!" the captain ordered.

"It's that many stings they won't be shooting at anyone else," she responded.

He knew she was right.

"Keep your head down anyway."

The vipermen tried a new tactic. Hiding in the shadows, they hooted and yowled, trying to unsettle their opponents while a few of them came closer. One made

the acquaintance of Yuntai's sword as he sneaked past the master-at-arms's pillar. He dropped without a whimper, his curved, glistening weapon clattering on the stone floor. Another came around the other side and was greeted with two metallic sounds as Gumboyle slammed a frying pan onto his knee and again across his face when he reached down to protect his leg. The marines hunkered closer together, back to back, after such an eloquent demonstration of team work.

Yuntai looked with a slight bit of confusion at where he'd seen Gumboyle last, and where she now stood. The cook grinned at him, baring her sharp triangular teeth. Where the pan had come from, Isledemer certainly couldn't tell.

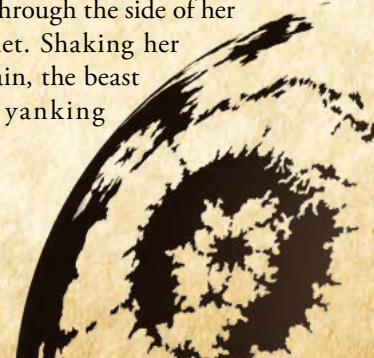
Following another unheard call, the vipermen all surged from their hiding places and rushed their foe.

"Hold the line," hollered Yuntai. "Use your blades. Do not discharge!"

A furious melee ensued, with swords flashing and deadly stings whizzing. The poison was beginning to accomplish its task all too well when an enormous head peered through the sheet of rain at the entrance, black and glistening. The beast half-crawled and half-slithered into the chamber, and began drawing a deep breath.

"Now," roared the captain-at-arms. "Blast that fiend before she melts us!"

Eager to oblige despite the assassins already exacting a grim toll among them, the marines released their bolts all at once. The attacks twisted together, like a mad braid of sizzling death that hit the dragon in the chest, charring everyone else along the way. Isledemer released his own spell, a long cord of purple light that whipped across the chamber and wound itself tightly around the beast's neck just as she attempted to breathe at the crew. Already rushing up her throat, her lethal bile bulged within her flesh and blew through the side of her monstrous gullet. Shaking her head in utter pain, the beast backed away, yanking





# In Stranger Skies

Isledemer off his feet as he tried to hold her back.

At that same instant, a gritty, rocky voice hollered somewhere on the other side of the cascading rain.

"Loose!"

Three large harpoons flew through the water and struck the dragon in the back, detonating on impact with deafening thunder. Chunks of scaly hide, horns, spikes, and horrid fleshy bits flew across the chamber. Dark blood splattered the walls, ceiling, and pillars.

The raucous and triumphant voice echoed again. "Right up her poopsie cakes! Reload!"

In disarray, the vipermen retreated, rushing back to protect the writhing beast.

"Charge!" hollered Yuntai. "No quarter! Slay them all."

Isledemer dispelled his magic and joined the fray, skewering at will until he reached the dragon. The beast gazed at him, her eyes already turning glassy. She gurgled and collapsed as he raised his rapier for the *coup de grâce*. He stared at the enormous head now lying at the tips of his boots, almost sorry for the dragon. Although she'd once been a thing of beauty, her ways were deadly. Perhaps they hadn't always been so. He leaned forward and touched her forehead.

"Be thou evil or not, may thou forever rest in peace."

Surviving crew hailed her death as the last of the assassins were mercilessly felled. Without delay, Arabesque and Gumboyle began working to save those who'd fallen. A number already lay beyond their help, foaming, their lips blue from the vipermen's poison, or their bodies rotting away from the cursed stings.

Stepping through the cascading water, Enna, Hoyk, Ebben, and a handful of sailors appeared.

Hand on her hip, cutlass resting casually against her shoulder, the first mate commented in a tone full of reproach,

"You could have saved some for us!"

## Captain's Log

*14<sup>th</sup> Day of Loreath 1512,  
forenoon watch.*

*Heading South at 9,000 ft  
above the Taslan Sea. Wind East,  
moderate breeze. Clear skies. Stowed  
uncut gems in the ship's hold and  
performed ceremonies for the  
deceased.*

✦ ✦ ✦

"I still think we could have taken more from the mine," said the master-of-engines glumly.

The officers sat at the wardroom's table with their captain. Ebben nodded quietly. Yuntai leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, rolling his eyes. Enna and Arabesque remained more uncertain. Isledemer waited patiently, slightly amused.

"It would have helped us pay off the ship's debt," added Waessail. His nose pointed at a ledger while he inscribed numbers faster than the eye could follow. "Based on my estimation of what we saw, there would have been at least ten thousand gold pieces' worth of gems, ten times as much if they could be cut, polished, and sold in the right places. I'm sure Mister Pebbleborn will concur with my findings."

"Aye," said Hoyk grimly. "I do, and that does not account for what else lies deeper."

Glowing with excitement, Ebben nodded again. "I could cut many of these gems myself. I have the skill."

"I do not disagree, gentlemen," admitted Isledemer. "However, time is of the essence. Should I remind you that tracking that man-o-war may lead us to unveil why we came to this world, and perhaps how to return to our homes? Is that not our priority?"

"Nothing wrong coming home *wealthy*," argued the purser, looking back at the captain over his spectacles.

"Filthy rich..." added Ebben, eyes sparkling like gems. "Stinking filthy rich."

"The shorter they are, the greedier they

come," muttered Yuntai. "There are grander things in life than shiny stones."

Enna chimed in. "Nothing prevents us from going back after we've had our way with these knights, and cleaning out without the risk of being ambushed. So far, no one else knows about the mine, save for the natives, and they aren't about to tell anyone else."

"Quite right, Mister Daggart," said Isledemer. "On the other hand, the knights know we're on to their hideout on Mareas Island. While they look for us there, they will not expect us on their homeworld."

All eyes suddenly converged on the captain.

"I beg your pardon, Sir?" questioned Waessail, aghast. "Do you mean to imply we'll be heading for Draconia?"

"Indeed, Mister Barrooney. You heard me well. This is where that man-o-war has traveled, and this is where we shall be going."

"But... but... this is madness," sputtered the purser. "We'll all die."

"Not if we proceed with caution, and not if we all do our duty, isn't it true, Mister Barrooney?"

"This does mean tapping into our modicum of *seitha*," commented Arabesque, "and traveling through limbo once more."

"It does, Mister Starward. Do we have enough to return?"

"Barely, Captain. Just barely."

"Good. Then, it's decided. We are proceeding. Gentlemen, take all necessary measures for the next part of our journey. Mister Daggart, you have the deck. Mister Starward, with me if you please."

The captain stood from his chair and looked down at his officers still reeling from his decision. "Do carry on now."

Isledemer and Arabesque headed toward the *Star Phoenix's* midship while the remainder of the officers climbed topside.

"Good thing you agreed to learn the ritual from Father Teobram," said Isledemer.

"He wouldn't have given me any *seitha* otherwise. That old man turned out to be very helpful, however distasteful his



manner. There is a lot more to him than he let on.”

“What do you mean?”

“A few of his acolytes were somewhat obsequious with him and coy with Wu and me. Maybe it was just an impression.”

The captain shut the door after they entered the chapel, and joined Arabesque at the altar. He observed as she whispered a short prayer, which caused a panel to open beneath the tabernacle. It revealed a crystal container carefully secured within velvet padding. The master removed it, stood, and poured a measure of its dark red contents into the altar’s silver chalice.

After watching fleeting grimaces and demented gazes animating the eddies, she looked up at her commander. “For what purpose do you suppose the knights were mining gemstones?”

“I really do not know. It seems strange that a dragon would want to part with her hoard... unless she was *forced* to do so. It is possible that she acted on behalf of a liege. It would have to be a very powerful one indeed. Dragons aren’t known to be so obedient as to give up the dearest of their possessions.”

Arabesque stared longingly into Isledemer’s eyes—pensively for her, dizzily for him. It was a disconcertingly heart-warming, beckoning sensation.

“Will you stop this!” he finally said, clearing his mind.

“Sorry. I was just thinking. As their name implies, Draconic knights relate to dragons. They either serve them or command them. I suspect the former to be correct. Being knights and priors, their association would be of a spiritual nature, and if so, it would stand to reason that their overseer attained divine or quasi-divine stature. Wouldn’t that be sufficient for a lesser dragon, such as the one in the dwarven mine, to obey unconditionally?”

“Indeed it would. Just don’t mention that thought to anyone quite yet if you please. And let’s hope we’re dealing with the *quasi*-genre. The alternative could prove most irksome.”

“Your quest is a fearsome and perilous one, my Captain.”

“Perhaps. But then something tells me nothing short of sheer heroism will garner any result, given our predicament. Someone or something has deliberately put us in this situation, and I intend to push the matter to its limits. Sooner or later, something is bound to give.”

“Let’s hope it isn’t us.”

“Let’s.”

“Which brings us back to the gems. If this overseer can bend to its will a mature dragon, how many others are there and how long has this been going on? And what under the Great Vault could this overseer want with so many gems? If I’m right, the worth of all the collected gems far exceeds the value of anything they could purchase in this world. Clearly, the more that are hoarded, the less they are worth. It’s beyond unwise; it’s absurd.”

Isledemer smiled at the elven prioress. “I learned a long time ago, though I can’t remember how long since our minds were altered, that dragons are quite smart—unwise perhaps, but never absurd. If they feel inclined to ensconce their lizardly buttocks upon towering piles of diamonds, then there must be a good reason. I suspect the gems do not have a monetary function, but another one altogether. Perhaps we’ll find out during our visit to Draconia.”

The captain pointed at the altar. “Speaking of which, you do know how to enter Draconia’s hollow world, don’t you?”

“Yes, Captain. Your scrying font clearly showed where that dragonship reappeared.”

The master returned the crystal container to the altar, secured it shut, and performed the ritual. Though he’d already seen the release of spirits, that understanding failed nonetheless to prevent Isledemer’s hair from rising on his neck at the encore performance of the *ballet-macabre*. The odd impression at the pit of his stomach also told him the *Star Phoenix* had sailed into the other world.

But there was something else.

As the spirits spun about the chapel, the captain observed their gazes. Their lifeless

eyes met with his and Arabesque’s as they had done before. They also seemed to be watching a few other things nearby. But there was nothing or no one there to be seen—or was there?

Alarmed, Isledemer stepped behind the master, retrieved his wand, and wrapped a protective arm around her waist.

“Well, Captain!” she purred, cuddling like a feline responding to his embrace. “Perhaps now isn’t the best time for...”

Isledemer did not have the time to explain himself. The sight of the door now ajar and a rustle of cloth a few steps away confirmed his fear. He uttered his spell. The chapel faded from sight just as something swished by.

A scream greeted his appearance with Arabesque on the deck. Ebben hung from ratlines, casting a spell of his own. Ol’ Babbler lay on the planking at the foot of the forecastle, his lips blue, convulsing and foaming. Next to him was the prone body of someone the captain recognized all too readily—a viperman. Enna stood next to him, swinging her cutlass wildly.

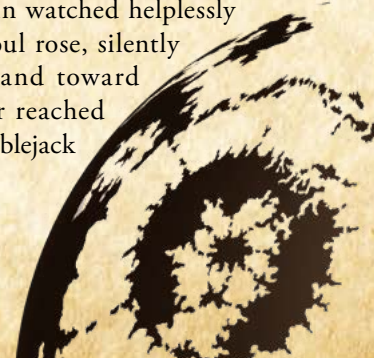
The gnome’s spell came into effect, revealing another assassin preparing to strike the first mate in the back. With a snarl of rage, Hoyk stepped from behind a catapult and hurled a hand axe. The weapon cleaved the attacker’s back with a sickly thud.

Another assassin dropped from a shroud and landed behind the master-of-engines. At once, Isledemer aimed his wand and sent the viperman tumbling overboard. Rapacious translucent hands seized him as he tumbled into limbo’s open space, and whisked him away.

“Unhand me,” Arabesque requested, trying to pull loose from the captain’s firm grasp.

“Oh. Sorry,” Isledemer muttered.

As Arabesque rushed to the helmsman’s side, the captain watched helplessly as the man’s soul rose, silently stretching a hand toward him. Isledemer reached out for Ol’ Babbler





# In Stranger Skies

in vain, and the spirit drifted away into the eerie wind. He coiled for an instant along a yardarm and tried to hold on to a sail before disappearing amid wailing throngs beckoning him.

Seething anger replaced sadness. Isledemer faced his first mate. "At least one more in the chapel," he warned her.

Appearing one by one from the companionway, iron hooks and belaying pins in hand, the bosun and a few sailors discovered the dead steersman with dismay.

"Mister Cripplegate, you have the helm," ordered Isledemer. "Keep her steady as she flies. And you there, watch the bosun's back. We have cutthroats aboard. Mister Daggart, take Misters Pebbleborn and Rugwittle with you, and go down the forward companionway. Mister Starward and I will go down astern. Order everyone else to stay put."

When Isledemer and the master approached the aftcastle, Yuntai stumbled out onto the deck, blooded sword in hand.

"They're here!" he warned. He looked past the captain, spotted the helmsman, and gritted his teeth. "Cursed be their wretched souls."

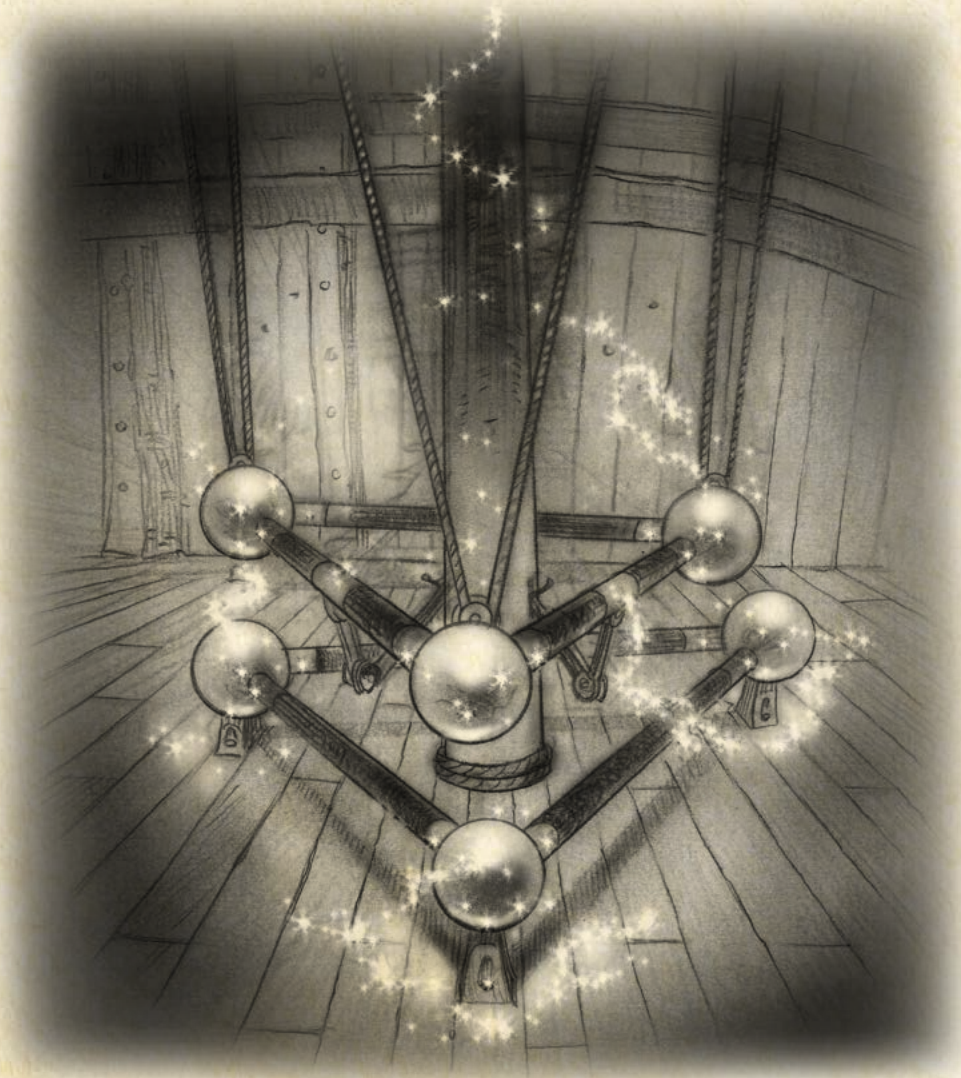
"They must have found a way on board while the ship sat at the bottom of that volcano shaft. We have to scour the decks from stern to prow. Stay close to me." Isledemer waved his wand in a circle. "This should take care of their stealthy ways. We'd better hurry now."

A tour of the stern cabins revealed no extraneous presence, and all was fine in the chapel. Banging from the adjacent chamber raised an expression of utter concern from the captain.

"Great Vault! The steering room!" Abandoning all caution, Isledemer rushed to the next door and flung it open.

At the opposite door stood Enna and her party. He cautiously leaned past the catwalk's edge and looked down. Five more vipermen, now entirely visible due to

the captain's and Ebben's magic, crouched behind the base of the framework. Two of them quickly brought



blowguns to their lips and loosed their deadly stings. Isledemer deflected his with his wand while Enna ducked past the door's frame.

"Stay back and shut your door," hollered the captain.

Holding his partially opened as stings smacked against the bulkhead, he worked on another spell. He couldn't afford to use anything that would damage the mechanism. Frantic banging resumed as the other three assassins tried to pry out one of the nodes.

"Stand back!" Isledemer told his companions as a cloud of noxious gases gushed from the tip of his wand. He slammed the door shut when the spell was complete;

coughing and gagging inside confirmed its efficiency. As the banging and smashing continued, though more slowly and erratically, the ship veered and teetered for an interminable moment.

"They'll kill us all!" snarled Yuntai. He pushed the captain aside, took a deep breath, and crashed through the door, sword in hand. Despite toxic fumes lingering in the chamber and the ship's erratic movements, the marine commander boldly charged downstairs, Hoyk jumping off the catwalk on the opposite side. They made short order of those still standing, blood spattering bulkhead and planking. Teary-eyed and hacking, they staggered back up to the catwalk.



"All clear," Yuntai managed to utter between spits and spasms.

Arabesque treated the two officers while Ebben and the captain stepped inside.

"The starboard node is misaligned," said the master-artificer. "It's gonna be hell mending it, Captain. Enchantment is required to recalibrate the node and hold it in place."

"Better get to it before the ship breaks up, Mister Rugwittle."

"I need at least a day, Sir."

"You've got an hour! If the ship strays while we're among the dead, there's no telling where we'll come out, if at all."

"Aye Captain, but I can't guarantee it'll work. The thing's liable to fall apart at the worst time. I wouldn't advise any sharp maneuvers."

"Your concern is noted. Carry on, Mister Rugwittle."

## Captain's Log

*26<sup>th</sup> Day of Loreath 1512. first watch.*

*Traversing the netherworld and approaching Draconia. No other traces of the vipermen were found aboard. Damage to the steering mechanism has been repaired. The crew has become more accustomed to navigating the world of the dead. Ghosts follow the Star Phoenix in the distance, getting closer every day. No contact has been established.*

✦ ✦ ✦

Somber, Isledemer slowly paced the stern deck, gazing at limbo's infinite immensity in the *Star Phoenix's* wake. Somewhere out there lingered Ol' Babblejack's soul, untimely victim of the vipermen's attack. The helmsman's death came as a bitter pill. It preoccupied the captain far more than the attempted sabotage to the ship's steering mechanism. Ebben and Hoyk had managed to repair that fairly quickly, but there was

nothing he could do despite all his magic to undo the loss of his crewman. Feelings of powerlessness and anger festered in the pit of his stomach.

"Dwelling upon your loss won't do you or anyone else aboard any good, Captain. Best you focus on the task to come."

Isledemer had not noticed Arabesque's presence until she spoke. After a brief sigh, he cleared his mind and faced the elven maiden. "Yes, what is it, Master Starward?"

"There's something odd with this vessel."

"Tell me something I don't know," he responded cynically.

Ignoring the jab, she explained. "The master-of-engines dropped his hammer while working on the steering device, and curiously, a second thump followed after his tool hit the planking. Thinking perhaps it was someone on the lower deck, he picked up the hammer and knocked twice. Two other thumps followed. Mister Cripplepegate went down to investigate, but found no one there."

Isledemer raised an eyebrow. "The ship may be haunted, but then, we are in limbo, aren't we? There is no telling what may be lurking among us while we linger in these parts."

"I thought of this as well," she answered. "But I've found no convincing indication that the undead are involved. I suspect it's something else entirely."

The captain gazed at Arabesque before looking down.

"Allow me." He suddenly drove the heel of his boot against the deck. A thump responded an instant later.

"I see," he said pensively. "Most peculiar. Well, as long as just a few thumps here and there manifest themselves, we should be fine, shouldn't we? I presume an explanation for this will surface at some point. How much longer before reaching our destination, Master Starward?"

"We're almost there. I must advise that leaving the ship alone once we arrive seems a terrible idea."

Isledemer straightened his coat with a sharp downward tug, and instinctively ran

his fingers against the place in his sleeve where his wand was concealed.

"My decision is final. I've ordered Mister Daggart to set sail if I fail to return within a day by the ship's hourglass, or if the *Star Phoenix* is in danger. I refuse to risk anyone else on such a dangerous mission, and furthermore, Mister Starward, the magic involved to conceal my presence cannot be extended to an escort. Therefore, I must act alone."

Arabesque, her eyes full of concern, laid a hand on his arm. "Isledemer, I..." She hesitated before continuing. "The loss of the ship's captain would affect us all deeply. It could mean the end of this vessel."

Unsure whether the ship master's argument reflected personal feelings more than strict command issues, Isledemer decided to dismiss her argument and the conflict growing inside him.

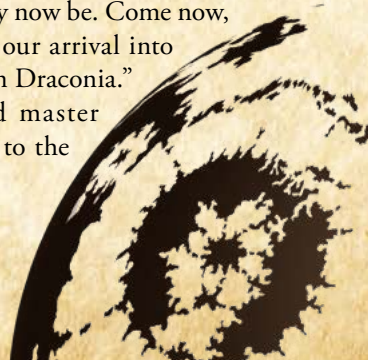
"I can assure you that Mister Daggart is more than capable of running this ship. She will do her utmost to return all of you home."

"That's not what I meant. There is more to this ship and her commander than a few odd thumps and wind in her sails. I'm convinced a connection exists between you and the *Star Phoenix*. I can't explain it, not yet, but it affects the fates of all of us aboard."

Isledemer was at a loss of what to make of the strange revelation. He sensed there might be truth in it, and it made him uncomfortable. He wanted some time away from the *Star Phoenix*, even in the midst of a hostile world, a chance to focus on something different and somehow clear his mind. A furtive smile appeared and faded from Isledemer's face before he responded.

"My dear Arabesque, I've no intention of being captured. I am the best suited to do what needs to be done, therefore, I shall go. Pray for my return. I'll gladly accept the good tidings of your spiritual patron, whosoever it may now be. Come now, let's prepare for our arrival into this star-forsaken Draconia."

Captain and master headed forward to the





# In Stranger Skies

forecastle. Enna stood by a crewman at the helm. She glanced at her commander when he arrived and checked the hourglass in the binnacle.

"It'll be just a moment now, Captain."

"Have the ship's lights doused, if you please," he answered. "All quiet aboard now."

A movement of her chin spurred another sailor to carry out the order. Only the sound of limbo's ethereal wind in the sails and the creaking of wood and ropes remained. Soon, a bout of dizziness followed, heralding the passage from the world of the dead to that of the living. The netherworld's gray-green light faded before Draconia's dimness. Isledemer and the crew observed the faint blue glows of faraway cities on the surface of the concave realm now surrounding them. They could have easily been mistaken for stars, but everyone knew better. Draconia was a hollow world whose inner sphere remained forever bereft of sunlight, a most convenient feature for intruders.

"Let's move away from this spot, shall we?" suggested Isledemer.

"Where to, Captain?" Enna inquired.

"That way." Arabesque pointed a finger toward a cluster of light. "The dragonship we've followed has landed there, at the center of that large city."

Isledemer pointed his spyglass at the designated point, and then at a dark spot nearby. "Bring us to that region over there. It looks deserted. Perhaps there are mountains."

\* \* \*

Dressed in commonplace garb and equipped as a proper adventuring wizard, the captain steered his launch toward the great city and sped ahead. Before departing, he'd cast spells upon himself and his flying skiff to travel unseen. Lowering the *Star Phoenix* had been a quiet endeavor. A

deep ravine concealed her presence as she levitated between its cliffs, adding to an enchanted net the ship's crafty gnome

deployed over the masts to thwart observation from above. Though he'd committed to memory her location, Isledemer hoped he'd be able to find his vessel when he returned, so well hidden she remained.

His quick observation of the city when entering Draconia had revealed an enormous tower with scores of booms supporting dragon warships. The immense structure seemed to be made of midnight-blue stones between which veins of pale blue energy pulsed. Following the logic that the vessel he'd magically tagged on Mareas Island was docked there, the captain decided it would be his destination.

It took several hours to reach the city. A careful approach of its massive fortifications failed to provoke a visible reaction. Having accomplished this first step, the captain set out to circle the immense tower a few times. He located the marked dragonship easily enough, but another one just below immediately caught his interest. Isledemer recognized her at once as the man-o-war that had attacked the *Star Phoenix*. Overcoming butterflies in his stomach, he approached close enough to read the name engraved on her stern—*Queen's Fury*.

A look through the aft windows revealed another sight which nearly caused the captain to draw his wand. There, conversing at a table with a female clad in studded leather armor, sat the man who'd nearly killed him and his captain-at-arms during the earlier battle. That terrible black gauntlet on his hand gave the man away. With the luxury of time to observe, Isledemer realized it was no leather gear but the living paw of a black dragon. A burning sensation coursing through Isledemer's chest scars reinforced his belief. Without hesitation, the captain maneuvered his skiff to the skyship's stern and, remaining out of sight below the great cabin, he listened through a window left ajar.

"Have our spies confirmed the newcomers' presence in Glorathon?" asked the woman. "They might still be there."

Isledemer identified the other voice as his nemesis, by the dark, almost raspy

baritone. "They have, Captain Nehet, but there's another concern. A Meryath vessel compromised one of our mines on Calidar. Her crew barely escaped its Lord Guardian and, apparently, told those very same newcomers about it."

"Didn't the *Bilious Revenge* just fly back from there, My Lord?"

After a moment of silence, the captain heard the knight commander pacing in the room. "Yes, and her crew reported an intrusion there just before setting sail. They were under orders to remain unseen, and therefore left at once with a partial load of gems. I can't help but suspect the intruders were those newcomers. The timing is consistent."

"The Lord Guardian and her servants should be able to contain the situation," said Nehet. "She also rules over nearby native tribes, doesn't she?"

"I do not share your confidence in the Lord Guardian. The newcomers might have defeated her. Our Beloved Majesty sees these newcomers as a danger. There must a good reason for this. Send messages to the captains of the *Bilious Revenge* and the *Breath of Wrath* to return there at once and secure the rest of the gems. They are to engage the newcomers' vessel, the one called *Star Phoenix*, and eliminate everyone aboard—especially the captain and his officers."

"Hail the Order!" responded Nehet. "It shall be done straight away, My Lord Azar."

"Hail," responded the commander. "Other business demands my presence elsewhere, but be prepared to cast off as soon as I return. I want to resume our search for the newcomers."

"As you command, Brother Grand Master. Our vessel is low on dragon power, and our last journey depleted our gems complement. New riches will need to be found soon for our lords to consume so they may replenish the fleet."

"Leave that to me, Captain Nehet. The mines shall be working twice as hard. I suspect a war is brewing. Have my mount readied."



Stunned at how much he'd learned in such a short time, Isledemer withdrew from the door. The cogs of thought raged in his mind. Things were starting to fall into place, although he still hadn't unveiled what they knew of him and his crew, other than a warning from their queen. He could either sneak a visit to the royal palace, wherever it was in such a sprawling city, or keep spying on his nemesis. In doubt, he opted for the latter and pushed away from the dragonship's stern. Soon afterward, the sound of large wings flapping rose from the stern deck.

The sudden appearance of a white drake overhead startled the captain. As it leaped heavily past the *Queen's Fury's* railing, it dove past the invisible launch before gaining speed and swooping away, the knights' grand master riding astride its shoulders as he would a warhorse. Without delay, Isledemer followed, his launch struggling to keep pace with the beast. He'd managed to get close when the drake looked back and screeched. After a glance from Azar in his general direction, the captain thought it more prudent to fall back. Temptation was great to lodge a nasty spell on the warrior's back. He'd never see it coming, but such wasn't the purpose of this visit. Isledemer had to learn more.

Their short flight led to a tall ornate building, some distance from the massive citadel where the skyships' tower stood. Isledemer circled above as the knight landed on a large terrace. Armored warriors seized his mount and led it to nearby stables while Azar headed past another doorway. As he waited, the captain spotted another skyship moored off the building's side. From her looks, he concluded she must be a foreign vessel. Sleek and graceful, her smooth shapes and artful decorations evoked something far more natural than any Draconic warship ever could. He turned from his observation and, when all was calm, approached the terrace edge. He tethered his skiff at a gargoyle's head and climbed over the parapet. Growls and screeches rose from the nearby stables, betraying the presence

of many more drakes within. He pulled out his wand and proceeded through the door in search of Azar.

The hallway led past a number of doors, columns, ornate tapestries, and statues of illustrious warriors. Isledemer walked slowly, as much to cover the sound of his boots on the stone floor as to keep an ear for the grand master's dark voice. Footsteps resonated around a corner. Someone (an acolyte, the captain presumed) appeared, carrying a tray with silver goblets and a carafe. Head shaven, wearing a white robe with a small black dragon insignia on its shoulder, she placed the drinks on a pedestal and knocked at a door. The voice the captain was seeking answered. Seizing the opportunity, Isledemer slipped in behind her.

Though austere, the chamber was reasonably well appointed with ornate chairs of wood and leather and a large round table, and on the walls, tapestries depicting the feats of mighty dragonships against terrifying foes. Two elves sat at one side of the table. Opposite them was Azar on a more imposing chair sculpted with reptilian motifs, waiting quietly while the acolyte served the beverages. Behind the grand master, a large white banner with a black dragon matching his own tabard hung from the ceiling, with two armored guards standing attentively on either side. Balls of pale amber light glowed from cressets on the walls, giving the chamber a reasonably pleasant feel.

When done, the acolyte left the carafe on the table, bowed, and departed. Cautious, Isledemer stayed near the door, his back against the stone wall.

The grand master broke the silence, resuming an earlier discussion. "And how do you know this?"

"We know, My Lord Azar, because we were there, too," answered one of the elves. Isledemer did not like the looks of the two visitors. Their pale skin, silvery-white hair, high cheekbones, ritual forehead scars, and morbidly haughty expressions did little to inspire confidence. The creaking, tight-fit-

ting black leather coveralls somehow made it all worse.

"Explain," ordered the knight.

"We'd spotted the Queen of Meryath's flagship traveling the Great Vault unescorted—a most unusual and suspicious thing. We'd meant to intercept it and unveil its business, but our flight encountered Kragdûras vessels which attacked us without provocation. Our ship was forced to break off, but not before the *Eternal Glory* was sighted towing a newcomer. During the following days, our informants in Glorathon indicated that this ship had fought against one of yours shortly after it appeared in that region of the Great Vault. So far, Knights of the Order haven't demonstrated a habit of attacking anyone without a reason; therefore, you must have an interest in this affair."

Azar gazed somberly at the elf. He lifted his cup to drink, eyeing his guest before responding. "And what business of yours is this, Lord Ghelrin?" he inquired.

The elf leaned forward and, his elbows resting on the table, rubbed his long, skinny hands pensively. "Well, the Tòrr-Gàrraidh bears neither sympathy for the Kingdom of Meryath, nor interest in its petty business. It is nothing more than a den of thieves with a penchant for theatrics. If it were in our power to do so, we would just as soon turn that newcomer over to you. You could take this as a gesture of goodwill from the Elves of Aloreia."

"And what else?" Azar demanded.

From where he stood, Isledemer caught a fleeting smile on Ghelrin's lips before the elf answered. "It would be mutually beneficial for the Tòrr-Gàrraidh and your Glorious Knightly Order to cooperate. We share the same dislike for the dwarves of Kragdûr and for most of the realms on Calidar. Permanent embassies on both sides would be constructive, would they not, My Lord Azar? Being much closer to Calidar, Aloreia could also help secure that newcomer, who would be graciously turned over to your custody—or eliminated, if you prefer."





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The grand master considered the elf sternly, the fingers of his human hand tapping slowly against the table's surface. "The Order and the Tòrr-Gàrraidh may cooperate for now; however, an exchange of ambassadors will require Our Beloved Majesty's approval. Your offer will be conveyed to her shortly."

Lord Ghelrin performed a slight head bow which made the shadows under his eyebrows and cheeks seem even more sinister. "It appears the high priest of Istra was personally involved with these newcomers," he added slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. "It would help greatly if the gods' interest in this matter were more clear."

Azar leaned against the back of his seat. From the knight's expression, Isledemer sensed he was either displeased with or discomfited by the statement. The second elf turned and gazed at Ghelrin, a slight vertical frown twisting the odd scars on his forehead. The elder returned his look briefly, and Isledemer could have sworn that he'd also given a barely-discernible nod. Something else was afoot.

"For this, one would have to enter the vortex and ask," the grand master responded coldly. "The Tòrr-Gàrraidh is welcome to try."

"Indeed, My Lord Azar. On a different subject, I beg your forgiveness for pointing out a more troubling and immediate issue. I'm told a fell breathing in this chamber betrays the presence of someone eavesdropping."

No sooner had Ghelrin spoken than his companion turned and uttered a quick spell in Isledemer's general direction. The captain barely had time to parry the elf's magic with his wand, sending sparks of clashing dweomers spiraling toward a tapestry. The scene of a mighty black dragon crushing an old red under her paw burst into flames. Azar roared and jumped to his feet, lifting a heavy mace leaning against the side of the table, while the two bodyguards rushed to his side.

This was all Isledemer

cared to witness. He flung the door open and ran into the hallway. Making a dash for his launch, he cursed the elves and their keen hearing.

A crash of armor rose behind him as the grand master's sentinels came storming out. A dozen more emerged from a guard room, investigating the alarm. As Isledemer sprinted past them, someone cast another spell, which the captain couldn't dodge. He felt his invisibility failing as he rounded a corner.

"There!" Azar hollered. "After him! Prepare my drake!"

Not looking back, Isledemer slammed against the door to the terrace and rushed across to the gargoyle. Taking a chance, he leaped over the parapet, landed on his invisible launch, yanked its tether off the stone ornament, and sped away. The limited nature of the enchantment on the skiff concealed only the lower portion of his body, leaving the rest plainly visible. Several angry screeches on the terrace informed him that more than just the grand master's drake were being led out of the stables. The sound of wings flapping confirmed his fear.

Heart racing, the captain rolled his launch into a steep dive. Despite Draconia's *evernight*, he had the feeling that without his spell, the drakes could easily track his flight. Wand in one hand, tiller in the other, legs locked around the bench he sat on, Isledemer aimed for a narrow street below, which he hoped wouldn't accommodate the drakes' wing span. It wasn't long before his pursuers flew hot in his wake. Unable to reach him as he followed the alley, one of his pursuers roared. Isledemer ducked around a corner as a flurry of icy shards smacked against a wall behind him, narrowly missing a citizen looking out through a window.

The captain made a sharp turn to fly under a busy arcade. Another turn led him into a vaulted passageway of the sort carriages used to reach an inner court. His reprieve lasted but a short moment, when he saw a large wooden gate barred the opposite end. Isledemer aimed his wand at once and blew the gate open. The courtyard beyond

gave him only the chance to barrel upward into sight. A screech sounded as his pursuers sighted him.

Heading toward the mountains, he sped past a tower on the city's outside walls. Arrows whizzed past, a few hitting the launch's bottom. The captain stayed low, swerving past trees, farms, and stacks of hay, then under a bridge, barely able to make out the dim features of Draconia's terrain. Just when his pursuers had gained ground, a tall forest appeared, into which Isledemer immediately dove. The slight blue glow edging the dark mass of the trees helped him duck the many obstacles in his way. He could hear the drakes spread out above, hunting for him. An occasional shower of ice, fire, or acid ripped through the branches, some much too close for comfort as he popped in and out through the forest's canopy to keep his bearings.

The mountain range wasn't far; there was hope yet. Isledemer pulled up and, as he emerged again, aimed his wand at the closest drake. It was a black. His bolt struck and promptly dismounted its rider.

"That's for my captain-at-arms!"

Keeping his head low, cringing at the thought of a projectile hitting his back, the captain tore into the mountains. Screeches confirmed the other two drakes were after him. As they steadily reduced his lead, he aimed a spell at the white. A great sphere of flames burst in its path, but the grand master had anticipated the attack and spurred his mount around the deadly conflagration. Dodging between jagged crests and cliffs, the captain played hide-and-seek with the red that was now gaining on him. A dash into a twisting canyon temporarily kept the beast off his tail. He hoped himself safe at last after banking into a narrow side gorge, when he discovered with horror its rider had picked a different passage. Isledemer zoomed though an intersection as the beast spat a fire seed. Though he'd protected himself with his wand, his skiff caught fire nonetheless. Reaching a dead end, he pulled up hard, leaving a trail of smoke behind him. In his sudden rise, the



captain nearly collided with the powerful white flying above. As he shot by, Isledemer released another spell, peppering the grand master and his mount with a shower of magical arrows.

"That's for the claw!" the captain hollered as he dove into the ravine where the *Star Phoenix* awaited his return. By then, the launch's stern was blazing and its magic began sputtering.

"Oh my," Isledemer muttered, hanging on for dear life.

The launch began a dizzying spiral that eluded the pursuing white drake's deadly shards of ice. After casting one last spell upon himself, the captain jumped off as the derelict skiff tumbled past the *Star Phoenix* and crashed into a cliff. The ship's deck grew closer with frightening speed until the captain's spell came into effect. As his fall came to a sudden halt, Isledemer landed on his feet, as light as a feather. At the sight of his startled crew, he tugged down to straighten his coat, ran a hand through his hair, and faced his first officer.

"Mister Daggart," he said in a composed voice, "we sail, *now!*"

She glanced at the two approaching drakes and nodded. "Aye, aye, Sir. Right away. Where to?"

"Out of this ravine, if you please," the unflappable captain ordered. "Mister Pebbleborn, prepare your engines for battle!"

"Already there, Captain!" the dwarf shouted back, standing at a catapult with his team. "We'll show them scrawny vultures! Come closer!"

As Wu Yuntai lined up his marines and ordered their rods to bear, Arabesque approached and took a quick look to see if her captain had been wounded. Satisfied, she asked: "I presume we are leaving Draconia."

"You presume correctly, Mister Starward."

"Shall I bless a course back to Glorathon?"

"You shall not," answered Isledemer, eyeing the red drake flying by. "We are returning whence we first came."

The elven master frowned with concern. "We have just enough *seitha* for one such journey, Sir. There will be no returning from it."

"None is intended. Carry on as soon as we have enough momentum. I'm afraid we've overstayed our welcome."

"Release!" commanded the captain-at-arms, and a volley of bolts shot through the sky, striking a mortal blow to the red. With a lurch, the *Star Phoenix* rose and sailed forth.

"Helmsman," hailed Enna. "Bring the starboard engines to bear!"

A roar of joy from the dwarf greeted the order while Arabesque hurried below deck. "Loose!" he bellowed, releasing a large javelin at the white. "Reload!" he ordered when the heavy projectile missed its mark. Pebbleborn then stepped to the railing, brandishing his blunderbuss. "You there on the featherless chicken, come and fight with honor if you dare!"

Isledemer returned his wand to his sleeve and took his spyglass from his coat pocket to search the horizon near the large city. Tell-tale shadows masking background lights betrayed the presence he feared most. Several vessels approached, maneuvering around and above. A man-o-war suddenly appeared past a nearby rocky spur and headed at full speed toward the *Star Phoenix*. The captain recognized the *Queen's Fury* as the white drake swooped round and landed on her stern.

"Damn that ship and her crew," he gritted in a low voice, retrieving his wand again. "Brace for damage!" he bellowed, and began a spell of shielding.

The dragonship released her deadly attack, spitting its magical bile at her prey. Though the spell helped reduce the damage, the billowing green sphere hit the *Star Phoenix* in nearly the same spot repaired after their first encounter, searing through wood and claiming a horrible new share of lives. A strange and powerful groan rose from all parts of the stricken vessel as if it were in pain. Alarmed, Enna and the

crew looked around them and held on as the ship lurched violently.

The first mate directed a gaze of apprehension at her captain. "This thing is alive!"

Isledemer shared the same feeling.

"Any time, Arabesque," he whispered wistfully. "Any time, now..."

\* \* \*

Hat in hand and glum, Isledemer watched the enshrouded remains of those whom the terrible breath of the *Queen's Fury* had felled. Twelve lay on the deck, awaiting commission to the netherworld's infinity. Crew and officers stood silently as Arabesque spoke a prayer for the souls of the fallen. The escape from Draconia had come at a most opportune time, the master's blessing of *seitha* taking effect before the knights could board the *Star Phoenix*. Alas, it wasn't soon enough for those whom Death had taken. Limbo's eerie wind blew through the captain's dark umber hair, lifting loose strands from his forehead in a strange, slow motion.

Arabesque ended her prayer, and the first of the deceased slid down the plank and off the railing. The others followed, one at a time, as the crew watched their covered shapes tumble into the gray-green vastness and vanish in the wake of the *Star Phoenix*. At the completion of the ceremony, the rank and file dispersed to their duties. The bosun and the first officer directed them to begin repair work on the hull, with the master-of-engines' assistance. Another group under the command of the master artificer climbed the topside masts and began removing the enchanted net that had become entangled with the yardarms during their escape from Draconia. While the captain-at-arms headed below deck with his marines, Isledemer walked toward the aftcastle with Arabesque at his side.

"What really happened out there?" she inquired.

"It seems our visit to the mine on Mareas Island struck a nerve among





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the Draconic knights. If they had cause to seek our demise beforehand, they are now even more determined to achieve that end. I'm worried this will lead to a wider conflict. Our involvement seems to have set in motion forces that may no longer be stopped."

"What do you mean?"

The captain returned his hat to its rightful place, its feather waving in an odd slug-gish dance, and gazed at the ship's master. "The knights serve dragon lords, as we'd guessed, their queen being chief among them. These dragons consume riches the knights bring them, including gems and magic, which they turn into a force imbuing the knights' skyships with the ability to travel the Great Vault. Though fundamentally different from the blessing of *seitha*, it seems just as effective."

Arabesque nodded pensively. "This implies they can't follow us into the netherworld. That's good to know."

"Quite," agreed Isledemer. "Disrupting these mines appears an effective tactic for damaging the knights' ability to act beyond the confines of their hollow world, or perhaps even to fly at all. I suspect most of these mines lie on Calidar, something worth investigating."

"It certainly explains the acrimony between their order and the dragon slayers of Meryath."

The captain nodded and motioned the ship's master to proceed up the stairs to the stern deck, then followed her. "Queen Shardwen would be pleased to find out about this, if she doesn't already know, as well as anyone else with an axe to grind against the knights."

Arabesque stopped and looked back at Isledemer. "Anyone in mind?"

"I later found out that the dwarves of Kragdûr are no friends of Draconia."

"Knowing these people's innate attraction to gold and gems, that's no surprise," the master said with a hint of amusement. "This could be useful to us and Meryath as well."

"Indeed, Mister Starward. But this also is where things become stickier. A long-standing antipathy exists between them and the elves of Aloreia, which is now turning into cooperation between the latter and the knights, if not a formal alliance with the Black Queen herself—an explosive situation to say the least. Meryath and possibly the whole of the Great Caldera lie in the middle of this."

At this revelation, Arabesque pursed her lips and winced. "We're in for a bumpy ride."

"It's been nothing but, so far," added Isledemer. "And it's about to get stormier yet, with no way out but one."

"Should I presume this has to do with our present destination?"

"You should," the captain answered.

Arabesque grinned. "Am I sensing a plan in the making?"

"Aye, Mister Starward. That you are. What troubles me is the ship's behavior before we escaped from Draconia. What under the Stars is this, and how does it fit in the grand scheme of things?"

The sound of the cook's wooden leg on the stairs interrupted the conversation. Gumboyle Mofsecot appeared at the edge of the stern deck, a frown of concern barring her forehead. Her companion flitted nervously around her shoulders as she looked up at the captain.

"Mama Goo, she sorry for coming up 'ere, but she must speak. She cut off de chicken 'ead an', in de blood, she saw de spirit of de *Star Phoenix*, good an' true. De spirit, it slowly awake now. De Big Cap'n, 'im carry part of de ship magic in 'im 'eart, an' de *Star Phoenix*, she keep part of 'im soul too. De Great Spirit, she tell Mama Goo de ship an' de Big Cap'n, dem bound toget'a."

Isledemer gazed at the cook with disbelief, and then at the ship around him. "This I did not expect. By the Stars, what else is going on? First the vessel is alive, and now this." Isledemer turned to the ship's master. "How soon before we emerge among the living?"

"It will be just as long a journey as the one that had led us to Draconia."

The captain let out a brief sigh of annoyance. "Let's hope nothing else happens while we're here."

No sooner than Isledemer had spoken, the bosun came running to the bottom of the stairs, his eyes wide with fear.

"Beg yer pardon, Cap'n. There be some rum trouble up front!"

"Mister Cripplegate, explain yourself if you please!"

"The dead, Sir... they..." At a loss for words, he straightened his shoulders. "Ye'd best come smartly and see fer yerself, Cap'n." Without further explanation, the bosun ran back to where he'd come from.

Isledemer rolled his eyes. "I should have kept my thoughts to myself. Well then, let's go find out what the new trouble is."

With cook and master in tow, he followed Rivven's path to the forecabin.

"Gangway!" he hollered as he cut through the crew crowding the deck.

A few paces past the throng, Enna stood next to the wheel, holding it steady with one hand and pointing her cutlass with the other. Opposite her, Isledemer recognized at once the ghostly figures of all those who'd died since the ship's flight through the vortex, right up to the last battle's casualties. Leading them was Ol' Babblejack, his arms crossed, gazing back at the first mate.

The captain approached Enna. "Easy there, Mister Daggart," he said softly, pushing her wrist down to lower her blade. "Let's find out what they want, shall we?"

The oddity of the situation struck Isledemer, yet with all that had happened thus far, a sense of normality prevailed in his view. His ship was alive, and the dead had awakened—why not? After all, they *were* in limbo. The presence of a valued member of his crew thought forever lost weighed heavily in his mind. He wasn't sure whether to fear or welcome his return.

"You should be resting in peace, Mister Belzer," he began. "What now do you seek here?"



Ol' Babblejack pointed silently at the wheel.

Gumboyle appeared at the captain's side and addressed him in a low voice. "De dead, dem return to serve de ship an' 'er captain, for it is de powa' of de *Star Phoenix*."

Isledemer glanced at the cook and then gazed at the ghostly crew mate. "So you want the helm, old friend. Who am I to disagree? Take your place among the crew and do your duty if that is what you must." He then turned to the fearful throng behind him. "Stand aside for your old companions. They shall remain with us henceforth, until we accomplish what is expected of us."

"Al' righ', break it up, ye scalliwags. Ye heard yer cap'n." At the bosun's orders, the crew returned to their tasks, giving sideways glances and furtive looks over their shoulders at those who not long ago had been their companions. Fear and uncertainty slowly faded as the revenants silently resumed their former duties.

Isledemer gazed at Enna, his eyebrows raised from a mix of surprise and satisfaction. "A tireless crew, without fear of death or need of food! I couldn't possibly refuse now, could I?"

"It's the payment part that worries me, Captain," she answered, eyeing Ol' Babblejack with suspicion.

"Not that they seemed inclined to make demands, mind you, I suppose we'll find out soon enough if some payment is required. Not much we can do about it until then, can we, Mister Daggart?"

"Aye. I'll keep an eye on them."

Isledemer observed his helmsman stare into limbo's distance, skillfully handling the ship's wheel.

"Well, at least we now have an expert in the matters of netherworldly navigation. I say, we just might have earned an advantage over everyone else."

A high-pitched scream suddenly tore the air just behind them. The officers spun round to see the purser turn deadly pale and faint onto the deck at the sight of the translucent helmsman.

The captain beckoned his three mid-

shipmen snickering nearby to approach. "Misters Fablethorne and Grommets, be kind enough to take Mister Barrooney to sick bay, if you please. Mister Newsbickle, make sure everyone else is apprised of the situation. Have special quarters prepared for our new crew, should they require any. Carry on, and wipe those smirks from your faces, all three of you."

He then turned to Enna and Arabesque. "We do have a long journey ahead of us. We should make the best of it. I'll be in my quarters."

## Captain's Log

*8<sup>th</sup> Day of Kragean 1512, morning watch.*

*Traversing the netherworld and approaching the emergence point linked with the site of the Star Phoenix's first entry into Calidar's universe. The ghostly crew has been working well, not showing signs of needing rest or sustenance. The living have become reasonably accustomed to their presence. Ship repair has been completed. The vessel has not manifested any new and strange behavior.*



Isledemer stood quietly near the *Star Phoenix*'s bowsprit, gazing at the immensity of the Great Vault's void before him. Off to the side against the pink and gold backdrop of the faraway Oortan Cloud, Soltan's blinding corona blazed past the edge of the great blue marble he now called home. Space's ethereal wind filled the sails as the skyship plied this region of Calidar's universe. Emerging from the netherworld had been uneventful, so much so the captain worried that they'd been blown off course somehow. He glanced at Enna when she approached him.

"What are we looking for, Captain?" she inquired.

"I heard there's a way back into the storm

that brought us here, gods willing. Therein lies the truth behind our presence in this world."

"How do you propose we force the gods to open the way? Are you willing to defy them, here and now?"

Isledemer answered while he took his spyglass from his coat pocket and searched the depths of space before him. "I am indeed, however brazen the intent. The gods play with us like mere pawns in their cosmic games. Surely something is bound to happen if the toy soldiers simply refuse to march."

"A deadly prospect for us all if the gods aren't of an agreeable disposition," debated the first mate.

"What's the worst that could happen? Toy doesn't work? Toy needs mending! Fix the bloody thing and it's bound to do the same thing all over again, given enough time. The gods are smart enough to know this. I say, this game's up, and I'm confiscating the divine dice."

"Aye. We shall see where this path leads. Better this than groping in darkness and doubt forever to find an obscure solution. How do you plan to achieve your end, Captain?"

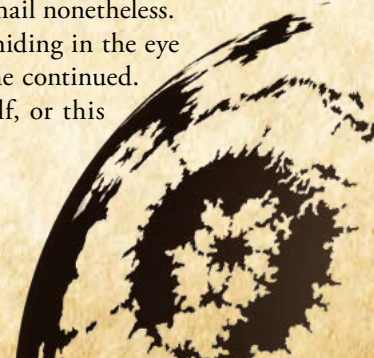
As Enna finished her sentence, the intruding presence Isledemer once felt in his mind manifested itself again, confirming his convictions. He snapped the optical device shut, returned it to his coat pocket, and pulled out the wand from his sleeve. "Allow me to demonstrate. Stand by for the toy-rebellion procedure, if you please."

After a tap of the slender stick against his throat, Isledemer addressed the emptiness before him. "Ahoy, whoever dwells in these parts!"

Though the amplified sound couldn't carry past the edge of the *Star Phoenix*'s bubble of air, the captain knew that all within many leagues around the skyship would hear his hail nonetheless.

"You there, hiding in the eye of the storm," he continued.

"Reveal yourself, or this





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ship and crew will remain here until all perish."

Enna lifted an eyebrow and stared at her commander.

Isledemer noticed her concern. "Rule number one, if you please," he said in a soft voice. He returned his attention to the emptiness of space and tapped his throat again. "I hereby deny the renewal of this ship's breathable air, condemning all aboard and myself to an inglorious end."

As his words still resonated around him, the firmament blurred, and the Great Vault grew bereft of any stars. The ship's deck vanished, and in its place appeared a stone floor extending like an infinite grid as far as Isledemer's eyes could perceive. Next to him stood Enna, or at least what he believed was his first mate, now a statue of lead with a few crude strokes of paint, a life-size simulacrum of what she'd been. The captain's heart sank when he looked behind him and saw Arabesque and the rest of his crew, all frozen like discarded playthings. Gazing into the faraway distance he sensed a shape of galactic proportions, someone whose head and shoulders vanished into space's darkness. He felt insignificant before the sheer immensity before him, yet brimmed with defiance.

"Why?" he bellowed, resentment blossoming in his chest. "Ever were they of flesh and blood? Ever were they alive?"

A distant rumble responded, at first vague and unintelligible. It grew into a multitude of voices echoing around him. "Your companions they were and again shall be. What do you seek?"

Not one to shy in the face of fear or divine manifestation, Isledemer stood fast and persisted. "Answers, by the Stars!"

"Speak."

"How did we come to this world?"

"Flaws in the fabric of reality brought you and your mates to my care, here, in this threshold to another reality. It is only a crossing point from which you return to life at the request of those who wish it."

"Who wishes it?" Isledemer hollered.

"Those who shed a fraction of their own lifeforce in exchange for your passage. Without them, all that Fate discards upon my shores remains here, lifeless and forgotten under the dust of eons."

"Who are you?"

"I am the Gate Keeper," slowly rumbled the voices. "I am it which trades the power of gods for the sakes of mortals marooned in the antechamber of what you know as Calidar's universe."

"But can you return us whence we came?"

"Such is not within my power. Flaws in this world may take you to the care of another if Fate chooses, but no one is the master of Fate."

"And to whom should we owe gratitude?"

"Istra is the name by which she is best known. She gave you the lives you were meant to have, and fitting memories. She constructed the vessel on which you travel, and to your soul bound its magic. Serve not Istra if you wish, but no one else will grant you favors. All that you have to do is prove worthy of her payment. How you spend the lives gifted upon you is yours to decide. Go now and build your own destiny."

It wasn't what the captain wanted to hear. The vision around him began blurring again.

"Wait!" Another question emerged from the crowd jostling in his mind. "Why do the Draconic knights wish us ill?"

The voices were now a mere whisper. "Such is not for the Gate Keeper to reveal."

Isledemer sucked in a breath before hollering another question when he noticed Enna looking at him, once again her normal self. The cosmic backdrop and the *Star Phoenix's* wooden deck had returned.

"You were going to say something, Captain?" she asked. At her commander's troubled expression, she added: "I think you just had a vision. Didn't the plan work?"

"Not entirely, at least not the way I hoped," he answered, crestfallen. "Whether we can return home still remains to be seen,

it appears. On the other hand, our fortunes seem to rest entirely in our hands."

"The search goes on, then?"

"Aye, Mister Daggart. I'm afraid so. It's up to us to tempt Fate by whichever device we choose."

Enna considered Isledemer's words pensively, then grinned. "Well, sounds like business as usual."

The captain nodded, somewhat relieved by his first mate's response. "For now, my friend. For now."

The bosun suddenly came running to the bottom of the stairs. "Cap'n!" he called, his eyes wide with alarm. "... Beg yer pardon, Sir," he added, removing his straw hat and bowing to Enna. "We be havin' company, stern-like. A whole world of it this time, an' not the best! Methinks trouble's a comin' fer sure."

\* \* \*

A quick march led Isledemer and his officers to the stern deck. Soltan's stark rays beaming past Calidar's eastern hemisphere revealed twenty skyships lining up in the distance. Several more materialized sporadically behind them, catching up from wherever they'd been summoned. After taking a look through his spyglass, Isledemer handed it to the first mate.

"The *Queen's Fury* is among them," he said, rubbing the wound burning the left side of his chest more fiercely than ever. "It appears the Black Queen has seen it fit to send a war fleet after us, a decision leaving me both aghast and flattered in some way."

"They're setting up in a battle line," said Enna, taking a look as well. "All of them against just us? They'll be sailing atop one another just to reach us. Any chance of dropping back into the netherworld?"

Arabesque stepped in. "Sorry, all out of *seitha*, I'm afraid. We used the last of our complement to come here."

"Dear, oh dear. We're trapped," deplored Waessail, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. "There is no safe place within reach, and each of those dragonships can



outrun our *Star Phoenix*. We're doomed to perish in the Great Vault's cold and deadly void."

"But first, we'll drench every inch of our planking with their blood," Yuntai growled. "Our rods and swords will make them pay dearly for our lives. If it's glory they seek, they'll have to come and snatch it from the hands of our own ghosts."

"Aye!" Hoyk agreed wickedly. "Let them experience a broadside of our war engines! Let them have a taste of good, solid steel! There's a dwarf here who does not mean to surrender!"

"Tut, tut!" intervened Ebben. "No sense hurrying to our deaths, however splendid, Mister Pebbleborn. We could sail in the opposite direction and buy some precious time. I suspect this living vessel hides a few tricks of her own. Perhaps I could hammer a magical nail into her poop end, on the off chance it'd spur her to sail faster."

Isledemer leaned aside to peer past topside sails and their rigging. "It'll have to be in another direction," he said. "Someone else just showed up across our bow. The spyglass, if you please Mister Daggart."

After recovering the optical device, the captain observed a comparable number of vessels emerging into physical space. The similarity ended there. These strange skyships carried no sails or visible crew. Entirely clad in steel plates bolted together, their hulls bore turrets with oversized tubes not unlike Hoyk's blunderbuss. On top of the fortresslike ships towered funnels belching clouds of hot black dust into the void.

Isledemer lowered the spyglass and looked at the crew gathering at the bottom of the stern deck. "Have any of you seen ships made of steel before?" he hollered.

"Aye, Cap'n!" answered one of the Meryath natives. "They be Kragdûras dreadnoughts, Sir. They be spittin' fire an' steel across the Great Vault."

The captain acknowledged the response and turned back to his officers. "Well, well, we may have some allies after all. These are no friends of the knights."

"The question is," interjected Enna,

"exactly whom are they after—us or the knights? This remains to be determined."

No sooner than she'd finished her sentence, the captain-at-arms pointed at the dragonships. "More are emerging, by the knights' portside."

A quick observation informed Isledemer that the latest arrival included a score of sleek and slender skyships such as the one he'd seen docked in Draconia. "I suspect these are Alorean warships," he commented. "I say, there's more to this gathering than I first thought, and I wouldn't be surprised if. . ."

He faced the Kragdûras fleet and, as he suspected, even more ships appeared there, opposite the knights', a large force of war galleys proudly flying the colors of Meryath and Ellyrion. At their fore was the *Eternal Glory*, resplendent in her golden livery and glittering under the mighty Soltan's gaze.

"And we're in the middle of it all," the purser despaired, wringing his hands. "What are we waiting for? Let's flee this place at once!"

"Patience, Mister Barrooney," Isledemer said. "There may be an opportunity to avert the worst yet. I do have a word to say, mind you. Everyone, return to your posts and be ready for action, if you please. Have weapons distributed to the crew. Mister Starward, do remain below. There may be wounded coming your way."

The captain spun round, the feather on his hat dancing in his wake as he rushed down the stern deck and headed back to the skyship's prow. Ol' Babblejack's ghost quietly bowed as his commander approached.

Without stopping, Isledemer addressed his helmsman in a calm and determined voice. "Mister Belzer, kindly steer the *Star Phoenix* athwart these fleets and steady our course before their bows."

As he reached the bowsprit, he climbed on its base and, after tapping his wand against his throat, hung on to the rigging, proud like a man-o-war's mighty figurehead.

"Ahoy all sides!" he hailed. "This is Captain d'Alberran of the *Star Phoenix*.

Fortuitous events have led our vessel to these stranger skies. I and my crew have no wish to quarrel with anyone. We merely seek a way back whence we came. No blood need be shed on our account. Return to your realms, and live in peace! What say you?"

An unsettling stillness followed, as much from the intervening void as from the lack of response while each side considered the captain's announcement. Like monstrous cohorts, the two sides stood by, poised before a momentous charge. Isledemer sensed each vessel watched for a mere twitch on the opposite end.

It was at this critical juncture that Fate intervened. It so happened that an ethereal eddy caused the sails on the topside's main mast, where the master-artificer was positioned, to luff briefly while the helmsman maneuvered the *Star Phoenix*. Shaken loose, an infinitesimal speck of celestial dust challenged nerve endings in the gnome's voluminous nasal appendage, resulting in a massive sneeze which caught the master-of-engines off guard. Startled, the latter spun round to investigate the eruption, inadvertently causing the stock of the blunderbuss slung over his shoulder to knock against a siege engine's release mechanism. Triggered free, a heavy javelin shot into the void. All eyes followed the lonely yet conspicuous projectile as it traversed the space between the *Star Phoenix* and the area occupied by the elven fleet, ending in an unfortunate ball of fire when it struck their flagship.

"Oh, dear..." muttered the captain.

The elven response was prompt and spirited.

A storm of fiery pods and giant stingers flew from the Alorean vessels.

Isledemer jumped back from his vantage point. "Mister Belzer, take us out of this furnace! Head toward the Calidaran line."

As he'd done before, the captain summoned a spell of protection to shield his vessel's exposed starboard flank.

An instant later, Alorean projectiles bracketed the *Star Phoenix's* path. Most





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missed. A few didn't. A pod struck the stern castle, ripping it apart and setting fire to the fancy woodwork.

"Douse those flames before we all choke," hollered Enna. The bosun pipe's shrill whistle tore through the sudden din, calling fire teams astern.

Two stings hit amidships. With a life of their own, they rooted themselves into the planking, working to split it loose, and sprouted tangles of razor-sharp thorns. Hoyk roared as he swung his axe, hacking through the deadly brambles to free his siege engines and teams of artilleryists already squirming in pain. From his vantage point, Ebben aimed a spell of his own, causing the enchanted growth to wither.

With a haunting moan of tortured wood and ropes, the *Star Phoenix* lurched ahead, nearly knocking Isledemer off his feet. A new ache gripped his very soul. He knew at once it wasn't from the knight's wound in his chest, but instead a deep awareness of his vessel's torment. As her magic awoke, he sensed his bond with the ship was growing stronger.

Isledemer returned his attention to the battle an instant later as the Kragdûras fleet opened fire. Flames and smoke erupted from their weapons, all bearing toward the elves. Pumpkin-sized balls of steel, some red-hot, whizzed by the *Star Phoenix*. A few shot through her bubble of life and took with them their shares of her breathable air while on their way to the dwarves' sworn enemy. A good number found their marks, drawing away the bulk of Alorean attacks. Like two faceless juggernauts, the fleets sailed toward each other.

As Ol' Babblejack maneuvered to bob and weave out of the crossfire, Isledemer glanced at the *Queen's Fury*. The sinister warship was moving fast, along with the rest of the Draconic fleet, clearly on an intercept course. It was what the *Eternal Glory* expected. The Calidaran force raced ahead, their oars beating smartly at their flanks.

"Mister Pebbleborn," Isledemer called. "Keep

the *Queen's Fury* in your sights. Aim for her masts."

"Aye, Captain!" the dwarf roared as he hurried to repair his damaged midship weapons.

Anticipating his commander's intent, Yuntai positioned teams of marines tasked with repelling any Draconic assault, taking particular care to cover access points to the lower decks. Meanwhile, the elven fleet split apart, their fastest vessels maneuvering upward, intending to dive onto the dreadnoughts, others closing the gap astern the *Star Phoenix*. The Kragdûras forces matched the maneuver, their smaller ramships swooping down and pulling up to meet the diving elves. In a symmetrical response, Draconic and Calidaran skyships did the same, locking the way afore the *Star Phoenix* and extending the battle all around her.

"Loose," bellowed Hoyk. Three harpoons hurtled toward the approaching dragonship as she released her deadly breath.

"Hard to port!" the captain hollered.

Ol' Babblejack reacted as commanded—either that, or the ship responded on her own, dodging the billowing ball of acid shooting from the *Queen's Fury*. The horrid green sphere barely missed its mark, barreling past until it hit an Ellyrian galley climbing vertically past the *Star Phoenix*'s starboard bow. It splashed on her deck, burning through the planking and wreaking havoc among the rowers beneath. Of the three harpoons, two missed and collided with dragonships in the wake of the *Queen's Fury*, while the third set ablaze one of her forward sails. Despite the damage, the Draconic flagship steadily closed the distance to her prey.

A wedge of dragonships now sailed close astern the *Star Phoenix* while Calidaran forces approached head on. Soon, several galleys soaring from beneath crashed into foes diving upon them. Masts and rigging became entangled, rams plowed into hulls, and grappling hooks flew as the warships heaved to and merged their air bubbles. Steel and magic flashing, armored knights

clad in black and white tabards clashed with garishly-adorned dragon slayers in a bloodbath of reckless violence. Fires already consumed several ships. Farther off the *Star Phoenix*'s portside, elves and dwarves fought in their own three-dimensional orgy of mutual destruction.

"Give those mangy knights a taste of their own medicine!" Hoyk snarled. "Starboard engines, loose!"

Three more javelins catapulted forth, engulfing a dragonship's underside in a blaze of flames. Clumps of debris drifted aimlessly in the nearby void, hapless victims of the raging pandemonium still clinging to the flotsam, though already frozen in death.

"Reload!" he urged after a roar of satisfaction. "The last team earns my boot up their backsides!"

"Mister Belzer, make for the *Eternal Glory*!" Isledemer commanded, watching Meryath's flagship mercilessly plow through a Draconic frigate some distance ahead. Maneuvering to avert balls of acid and warships hurtling by, the helmsman complied steadfastly.

The captain looked back at the *Queen's Fury* now quickly approaching. Out of time, he bared his rapier and strode abaft. "All hands astern! Stand fast to repel boarding!" he hollered. "Marines, do your duty! Today we avenge our dead!"

At once, more than a dozen ghosts appeared at his side, grim-faced and determined to take their captain at his word. Along the way, Enna, Yuntai and a detachment of marines joined them. As the *Queen's Fury* neared the ravaged stern, a volley of magical bolts from marines barricaded below peppered the dragonship's prow, reaping a fair share of knights at her gunwales. Moments before she reached the *Star Phoenix*, ports suddenly opened below the *Queen's Fury*'s main deck, revealing sailors armed with swivel-mounted weapons. Immediately, they spewed flaming oil, sealing the fates of those who'd unleashed their magic an instant earlier. Grappling hooks completed the maneuver, steadying the two ships.



"Release!" commanded Yuntai. Another volley of magical bolts surged from his main deck detachment, knocking down another row of knights as they boarded the *Star Phoenix*. Those who followed charged into a line of ghosts rushing at them. Swords swished. Most sliced through swirling nothingness as the undead locked their hands upon their foes' throats. A prior of the Order, standing at the dragonship's bow, lifted his symbol (a black dragon head in a circle) and cried a guttural prayer. A blinding light shot from his hand, sending the ghosts reeling.

Isledemer shut an eye and aimed his wand at the prior. A flick of his wrist sent the warrior-priest tumbling overboard to a horrid death. The melee followed in earnest, Yuntai's marines and all available hands alive and undead closing in. Amid the frenzy of lunges and parries of the two ships' crews, a great knight, clad in black glistening armor, soared from behind the dragonship's forecastle. Despite the helm covering his face, Isledemer recognized him at once as Lord Azar, his nemesis. As the Order's grand master rose past the gunwales, his white drake appeared beneath him. The beast extended her wings and, with a few powerful flaps, leaped above the melee and landed topside by the *Star Phoenix's* mainmast.

Isledemer spun round and unleashed a spell while Enna and Yuntai came to his side. With his black hand, the grand master deflected the spell as if swatting a fly.

"Your magic will not succeed against the power of the Black Queen," he claimed in a dark voice, speaking Ellyrian common. "Prepare to face your destiny." He then hissed a raspy, guttural order to his mount.

As the drake took a deep breath, the knights fighting on the stern deck fell back a few steps and guarded themselves behind their broad shields. Worried, Isledemer summoned a protection to ward off part of what he realized was coming. The white beast released a storm of ice toward the captain and the bulk of his crew fighting astern.

Despite his spell, the pain to himself and

his nearby companions was excruciating. Marines and sailors, caught between the knights and the deadly shards, suffered terribly, most dropping in death or in pain. The attack caused a number of the ghostly crew to vanish from the deck. The tide of the battle aboard the *Star Phoenix* suddenly grimmer, Isledemer cast a cord of purple light to ensnare the drake's neck, as he'd done once before. Unexpectedly, the master-of-engines walked from behind a rack of heavy javelins, a nasty expression on his face as he finished ramming *darkpowder* and shot into his blunderbuss.

"How about my kind of magic?" he growled, aiming at the knight.

The weapon erupted fire and shrapnel as the drake lifted a wing to protect the grand master. Though viciously collared, she managed a strangled screech of pain from the shot tearing through her scaly leather. Whipped hard across the chest by her tail, Hoyk flew off his feet, landed heavily on the deck, and rolled until he slammed into the ship's gunwale.

At the same time, Isledemer quickly secured the unbreakable snare to a belaying pin at the mizzenmast, and set it to remain taut. Now in disarray, his surviving crew attempted to regroup behind him, enabling a score of knights to rush down from the stern deck. Yuntai and Enna stepped into their path to protect their captain's back against the coming onslaught.

Azar spurred his drake toward Isledemer. "Prepare to meet your doom, Captain d'Alberran," said the grand master, his voice somewhat muffled by his great helm.

Suddenly, the beast came to a halt, nearly dismounting her rider. Another purple cord had appeared, ensnaring her tail. Wide eyed, Ebben crouched behind the main mast, tying the magical bind's other end to prevent the drake from advancing.

"Or not." Isledemer shot back, moving toward his foe. "'Tis I who challenge you today!"

The grand master cursed and jumped off his mount to accept the challenge. As he did, Ol' Babblejack rose through the *Star*

*Phoenix's* deck and reached for the drake's chest. Despite her torturous bindings, the beast reared angrily, slashing with her paws and flapping her wings to keep the ghostly helmsman at bay. Azar hesitated, his gaze shifting from the captain to his mount.

"Ah, ah, ah..." Isledemer taunted. "Are you turning from my challenge, old boy? Having cold feet already?"

Stung by the verbal jab, the grand master marched toward his foe. Uncertain how to defeat the mighty knight, the captain opted to keep safe, aiming to tire him first. Or so he hoped. As with their first encounter, the rapier parried the black claws while the wand's magic deflected the heavy mace in a blur of quick strikes, moves, and counter-moves. But this time, Isledemer didn't try to score a hit. He ducked and dodged, darted back and forth, and danced around the knight.

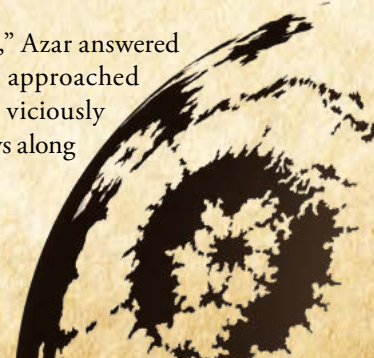
"I say, old tin can, you haven't told me why you so desire to squash me." With a flick of his wand, he flung a coil of rope into the knight's path and leaped away from the deadly mace. "Care to enlighten me, if you please?"

"The Queen demands it," Azar responded, tossing aside the rope. "And I do not question the wishes of a goddess. Ask Her yourself." As he spoke these last words, he drove down his mace with renewed vigor.

Though the blow again missed its mark, it tore a deep gash through the ship's planking and shattered part of her gunwale. The agony Isledemer experienced earlier flared again, tormenting his very soul. He couldn't help but let out a cry of pain. The grand master stopped for a moment, his gaze shifting from the damaged deck to the aching captain.

Isledemer felt the magical bond strengthening further. He staggered back a few steps to regain his breath. "Thank you for damaging my property. It shall bolster my resolve."

"As you wish," Azar answered ominously. He approached the railing and viciously dragged his claws along





# In Stranger Skies



its surface, leaving deep furrows in the wood.

Isledemer twisted from pain now flashing in his back. “Thank you. . .” he rasped. “I really needed this!”

While the captain’s game went on, he couldn’t fail to see Enna and Yuntai steadily falling back before their relentless attackers. Their heroism was doomed to fail.

“Your friends will die, Captain d’Alberran,” said Azar. “You cannot defeat the power of the Black Queen. Meet your destiny now, and your crew will be spared.”

As he finished his sentence, a familiar figure swung from a rope above the massed knights, sparks shooting from one of her hands. Smarting from their previous battle aboard the *Star Phoenix*, Azar’s

minions raised their shields to protect their heads from a notoriously deadly frying pan. Gumboyle let go of the line, ran on top of the shields, dropped a hand grenade among the knights, and leaped to catch another rope before swinging away with a scream of triumph. The following explosion took down a dozen Draconic warriors and maimed others. Several in the front rank, their shields displaced, were skewered in short order by the first mate and the captain-at-arms.

“Maybe not quite yet,” Isledemer responded.

A muffled whimper rose from behind him. Ol’ Babblejack had managed to reach the white drake’s heart and drain the last of her life force. The beast dropped heavily onto the deck, and the ghost vanished.

In a frantic rage, the grand master roared and resumed his attacks against the captain. With each blow parts of the ship flew, endlessly torturing his foe. Now on his knees, nearly out of his mind, Isledemer was unable to defend himself. Azar stood next to him, his mace pressing down against the captain’s chest, his black claws raised for the final strike.

“You have fought valiantly,” he said. “Your death will be swift and honorable.”

His reptilian hand came down—yet failed again to find its mark.

“Keep your filthy paws to yourself!” Arabesque said in the sternest voice Isledemer had ever heard from her lips. Clad in armor, the ship’s master deflected Azar’s blow with a barbed spear. The fight resumed between the elven maiden, Ebben who appeared at her side, and the grand master. As they struggled to fend off the knight’s attacks, Isledemer felt his strength return. There was something else with it, something new and strange. He could now feel all parts of the *Star Phoenix*, every fiber of her timber, every rope, and every thread of her sails.

“Enough!” he bellowed, regaining his feet. “Step back, you two! This fight ends here.”

Azar glared at the defiant and unvanquished captain. Arabesque and Ebben hesitated, their gazes going from the grand master to their commander.

“Go, I say,” Isledemer ordered. “By the Stars, this challenge stays between him and me.”

Ignoring the elven maiden and the gnome, the grand master approached the mizzenmast, aiming to strike it with his mace.

“Not this time,” snapped Isledemer. Before the blow could land, the captain sank into the ship’s deck, reappeared behind the knight, and drove his rapier deep into his arm pit.

Azar howled in pain and dropped his mace. He swung around, slashing viciously with his clawed hand, but found no one. Isledemer had blended again into the deck.



He popped back out on the opposite side and plunged his blade into the grand master's neck.

The great knight dropped to his knees, the crimson of his blood drenching his armor and his white tabard. Isledemer could see life fading from his eyes. Something else lay there, a sorrow he could not fathom.

"Whatever the reason for your queen's quarrel with me," the captain said, "it isn't of your making. You die here, before me, but you do so honorably in the service of your liege. May you rest in peace."

The grief in the grand master's eyes subsided when death claimed him. As he dropped to the deck, a mournful call belled from the *Queen's Fury*. The knights ceased their assault and gazed grimly upon their fallen commander.

Isledemer seized Azar's great helm off his head, brandished it for all to see, and tossed it onto the deck. "Get off my ship!" he howled, with a force well beyond his own.

The bitter scions of the Black Queen withdrew in good order and in silence to their vessel. The dragonship pushed back and vanished as it had done before. Others did the same, and soon all had disappeared from the Great Vault, leaving behind nothing but the flotsam of war and the myriad dead floating in the void.

"Ahoy the *Star Phoenix*!" hailed a booming voice.

Isledemer looked up. The Admiral of Meryath leaned from the *Eternal Glory's* railing, gazing down. "Well done, Captain! Queen Shardwen will be pleased. You have met Her Gracious Majesty's expectations. Your tales will be sung in the taverns and homes of Glorathon for many a night to come!"

Isledemer tapped his wand to his throat. "I say, rather grim are these tales," he answered. "Our losses are severe."

"Do you wish to be towed back to port?"

"Nay, Your Excellency," Isledemer shot back. "Once was enough. However, a drop of that fine oil of yours would be welcome!"

## Epilogue

Ethereal wind filling her sails, the *Star Phoenix* plied once more the netherworld's eerie green glow. Hats in their hands, the officers watched as the fallen were committed to eternity. As their enshrouded bodies slid down the plank and vanished in the skyship's wake, their translucent forms reappeared in back of the gathered crew—all but those of the Draconic knights. Lord Azar's tall shape was carried last to the bier. Hoyk grunted at the sight of the grand master's remains, while rubbing a large bump bulging under his greasy mane. Arabesque prayed silently for the great knight's soul before his body at last followed those of his fallen companions. At the end of the ceremony, the crew, alive or not, scattered, returning to their duties.

"An ale would be welcome now," wished Ebben.

"Your treat, I presume?" Waessail answered.

"Mine!" intervened Hoyk. "We drink in honor of our victory."

"Aye!" responded both the gnome and the fellfolk, before the trio headed below deck.

Cripplegate and two mates removed the bier while Isledemer remained, gazing pensively into the distance. Arabesque, Enna, and Yuntai stood next to him.

"What next, Captain?" inquired the first mate.

The captain returned his hat to his head before answering. "We sail to Glorathon for repairs."

Yuntai leaned against the railing. "Are you disappointed, Sir?"

"Somewhat. I was hoping for a way home."

"Many questions remain unanswered," remarked the captain-at-arms.

"Aye. That they do, Mister Wu. We owe a debt of gratitude not only to the queen of Meryath, but also to Glorathon's patron goddess, Istra." As he spoke, Isledemer glanced sidelong at Arabesque.

The ship's master looked down at the

tips of her boots before responding. "Yes, gratitude is due."

"Is it She who answers your prayers?" asked the captain.

"It is."

"...and?"

Arabesque raised her eyes, perplexed. "I cannot tell whether I'd ever honored Her before my awakening on this ship. Yet, my communion with Her has proven fulfilling and sincere. I've been given to understand that I may act freely and support this crew as I see fit."

Isledemer grinned. "A positive development to be sure."

"I believe so," the master responded. "It will take some getting used to. What of your bond to this ship?"

The captain took a deep breath, unsure what to make of his strange relation with the *Star Phoenix*. "'Tis a gift of Istra, I was told. Why? I do not know. I too will need time to explore its meaning."

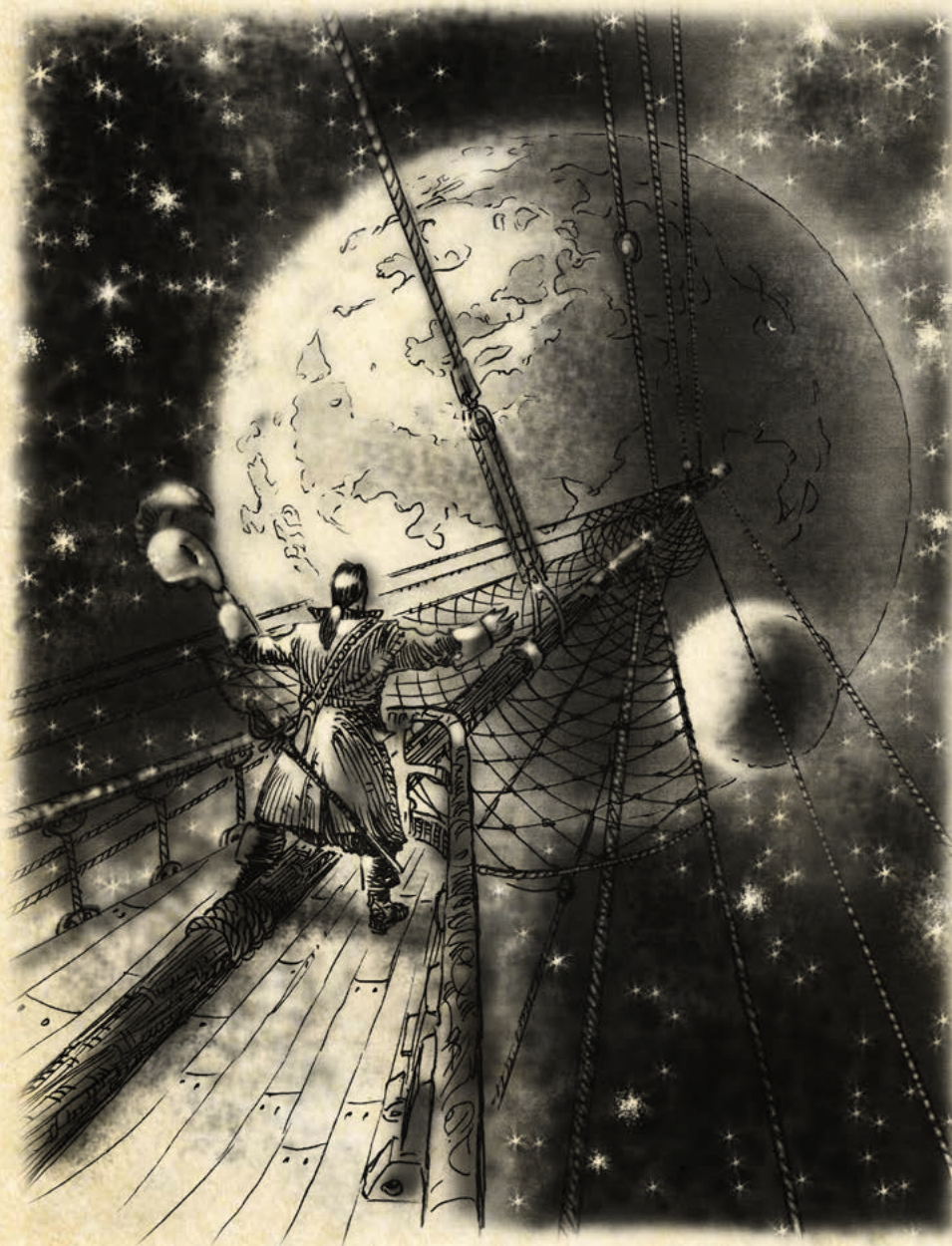
Enna crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow while she considered the words of her captain and the ship's master. "Well, it seems we now have all the time in this world to unveil more about your mysteries, and perhaps earn our way home along the way, wherever that lies—a whole new story to come. Until then, with your permission Sir, I shall resume my duties."

"Quite right, Mister Daggart. Fly steady, and if you please, fly true!"

*To be Continued*



# Calidar Universe



*In Stranger Skies* takes place in a part of Calidar's universe called the Soltan Ephemeris, named for the sun at its center. It includes three native planets and their moons, as well as a sparse asteroid belt on the outskirts called the Fringe. A fourth planet, an artificial alien world, also gravitates through the Soltan Ephemeris on an off-center, elliptical orbit, taking it well past the limits of the Fringe.

All these worlds pos-

sess living souls that generate magic. Each world soul affects people and their gods in different ways, as well as the world's laws of physics. Although most civilizations are able to sail between worlds, each does so using its own methods. The magic enabling travel through space's Great Vault limits who can do so, how often they are able to do so, and how far they can go. None of the native civilizations have the power to journey beyond the confines of the Soltan Ephemeris.

The diagram opposite shows the planets' orbits in the Soltan Ephemeris. Distances refer to the ability of Calidaran skyships to reach other worlds. More details are given later in this book about space travel (see **Skyships of Calidar**). Loreath 3<sup>rd</sup> 1512 is the local date of the *Star Phoenix's* entry into Calidar's universe.

## Calidar Ephemeris

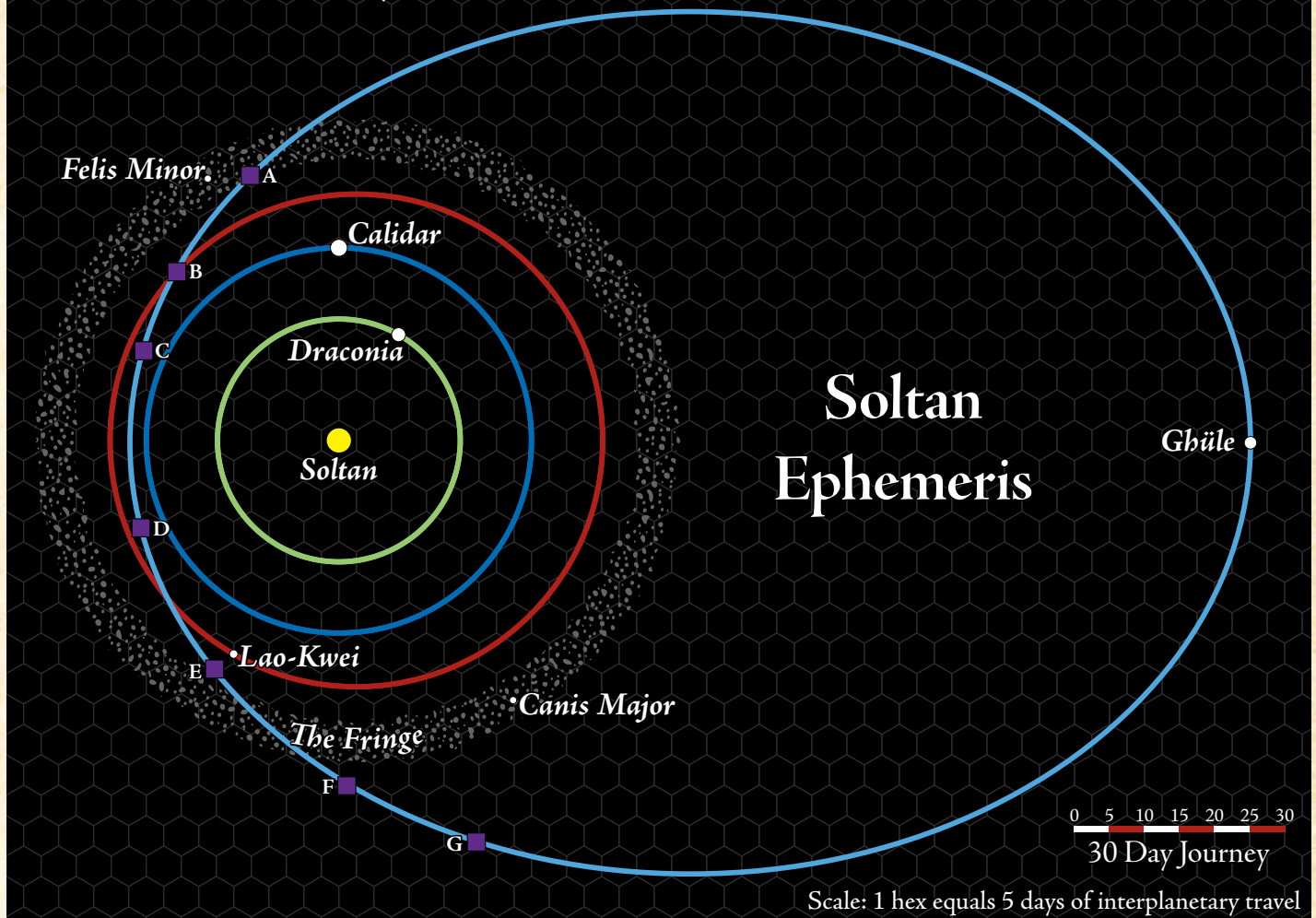
The second and largest planet from Soltan is roughly comparable to our Earth, as regards its size (about 27,000 miles in its circumference, or 43,200 km) and its seasons. It travels around Soltan in 360 days. Its land masses benefit from a variety of terrain separated by large seas covering slightly less than two-thirds of the surface. From a distance, this planet appears mostly blue, marbled with green and brown.

Calidar is the native home of the fellfolk, a humanlike race about three and a half feet tall, being hunter-gatherers who live in large clans. Though not necessarily at peace with each other, they do dwell in harmony with nature. Much of this world remains untouched by civilization, as off-world races understand it, save for a few regions. All that has not been civilized, from icy poles to equator, is called the Dread Lands. This immense wilderness benefits from the protection of Calidar's world soul. The soul's most notorious manifestation against any willful alteration of the savage environment involves the rousing of spiritual forces in physical forms. Whether made of ice, seawater, air, sand, earth, rock, lava, or vegetation, these colossal beings oppose those who seek to exploit, reduce, or otherwise harm the Dread Lands.

The largest of the so-called civilized areas comprises a ring of land surrounding an island of high mountains. Called the Great Caldera, it is seen by many as this planet's "known world." Coming mostly from



Relative Positions on the Third Day of Loreath in the Year 1512



Calidar's moons, visitors founded colonies there, which later rebelled against their off-world overseers and established independent realms. More details about this planet and the Great Caldera will follow later in this book (see **The World of Calidar**).

**The Moons of Calidar:** Three inhabited satellites gravitate nearby: Aloreia, Kragdûr, and Munaan. The first two are closest and remain on opposite sides of their mother world, taking twenty-eight Calidaran days to travel around it. Munaan lies farther out and completes its orbit in forty-two days. All three moons fully rotate in twenty-four Calidaran hours.

Each of these moons is an empire in its own right, having a sole ruler who commands all who dwell thereon. All three face

demographic challenges and see Calidar as the tantalizing solution to their predicaments. Yet, the Dread Lands do not accommodate settlers, and the former colonies, now sovereign realms, stay prudent on this issue, fostering tension between themselves and their former lieges. To complicate matters, the lunar empires are rivals; clashes in the Great Vault remain dangerous to all.

**Aloreia:** This is the native world of the elves, appearing from a distance as a hazy green orb with blue veins. Almost completely wooded, save for inland seas and polar regions, it is about the size of the Earth's moon, with a circumference of 6,750 miles (10,800 km). Aloreia spins and benefits from a twenty-degree tilt, allowing for seasons.

Several nations existed on Aloreia, but during a past century, the elves, who favor logic and pragmatism, founded an academy known as the Tòrr-Gàrraidh (pronounced "TOR-garee") to address their world's peculiar environmental issues. Over time, the academy members became an authoritarian caste with its chief regulator ruling Aloreia as a tyrant. Since then, all sovereign realms have been annexed and their monarchs replaced with governors.

The elves originally mastered a natural way of life. However, as the result of demographic pressure and Tòrr-Gàrraidh directives, Aloreia's nature has instead become enslaved to the needs of its rulers. Any change to society now



# Calidar Universe

threatens their precious forests and way of life, reinforcing the tyrant's power. Though skilled in warfare and trade, the Tòrr-Gàrraidh's greatest strength is diplomacy and an innate talent for deceiving others.

**Kragdûr:** This is the native world of the dwarves, appearing from a distance as a golden orb with dabs of white. Steep hills, immense canyons, towering waterfalls, colossal mountains, and majestic glaciers cover much of its surface with a few inland seas. It is similar to Aloreia in all other physical respects.

The Kragdûras once lived in petty kingdoms incessantly fighting each other. They became a warrior race. A great leader rose from their ranks, defeated all his rivals, imposed the recognition of Khrâlia as the head of their godly pantheon, and was made Great King. This event became the root of Kragdûr's predicament. Demographic pressure and depletion of resources are now this moon's greatest problems. As a warrior society deprived of internecine conflict, it can now only look outward to pursue its way of life. Though skilled in commerce and the exploitation of mineral resources, Kragdûr's greatest strength is warfare.

**Munaan:** The native world of the humans looks from a distance like a pale amber orb dappled with blue and silver. Munaan is most notorious for deserts, flood plains, and swamps. Aside from a few mountainous regions, it also features strips of forest along rivers and marine coasts, where trees haven't been cut down for fuel, farming, or construction. With a 9,000-mile circumference (14,400 km), this moon has no axial tilt and, therefore, no noticeable seasons.

Munaan is severely overpopulated and prone to disease and famine. The land is poor, rendered poorer yet by centuries of over-farming. Though water is present above and below ground, crops fail at alarming rates, and dust-bowl conditions have become a plague. Religion has become the way of life. The diverse realms and cultures of Munaan now pay

homage to the Holy Potentate of Nicarea, who represents the *Will of Teos*, known elsewhere as Soltan.

A fiercely monotheistic culture, the Munaani rely on spiritual fervor to cope with their many challenges. Nonetheless, their leadership is just as rash and rapacious as those of its two neighbors. Laws are oppressive, liberties few, punishments often fatal, and hardships among the masses mind-boggling when measured against the perquisites of the ecclesiastic elite. Though its culture is religiously-minded and skilled in diplomacy and warfare, Munaan's greatest strength lies in commerce and trade.

## Draconia

As the name implies, this is the native world of dragons. It lies closest to Soltan and is one of this universe's strangest worlds. With a circumference of 22,500 miles (36,000 km), Draconia lacks an axial tilt and remains tidally locked—in other words, the same hemisphere always faces Soltan. Its full orbit lasts 220 Calidaran days, without seasons or alternating periods of day and night. Its surface is bereft of breathable atmosphere and features jagged mountains, rocky deserts, craters, and vast seas of dust. From a distance, this world looks like a black sphere marbled with gold.

The critical feature lies beneath the ground: This is a hollow planet. Its inner circumference reaches 13,500 miles (21,600 km), allowing for a 1,400-mile-thick crust. Draconia's magic exerts inverted gravity from inside, preserving the world's geophysical integrity. Magma fills the layer where inner and outer gravitational forces meet, resulting in a few volcanoes both inside and outside. Though devoid of sunlight, inner Draconia does possess an atmosphere and a life-sustaining biosphere. Draconia's magic also manifests itself as radiation emanating from its center. Though beyond the perception of off-world visitors, native life reacts to this aura as Calidar's would to sun rays. Inhabitants rely on artificial



methods to track daily periods lasting thirty Calidaran hours.

The side facing Soltan (the eastern hemisphere) is always warmer, resulting in a circular region sustaining equatorial-like conditions and gradually cooling to arctic-like conditions on the opposite side (the western hemisphere). A band of temperate climate rings the inner surface, running across the north and south poles. Winds also contribute to Draconia's curious climate zones. There are no seasons in Inner Draconia. The inner world features a variety of terrain similar to Calidar, although seas tend to be inland and unconnected, as the result of natural topography.

## Lao-Kwei Ephemeris

This is the third planet from Soltan, somewhat comparable to Mars. With a circumference of 13,500 miles (21,600 km), Lao-Kwei orbits Soltan once every 500 Calidaran days; a Lao-Kweian day lasts twenty-six Calidaran hours. Its axial tilt of twenty-five degrees allows for noticeable seasons. From a distance, this planet appears reddish, with cold, dry poles.

Lao-Kwei was once a vibrant world with a unique dominant race called the *Kahuulkin*. Wars led to their once-advanced civilization's demise, and turned



much of the planet into a desert. Much later, it became home to a mix of off-world people, some from Calidar's Ephemeris and others from outer planes, struggling to return this world to its former glory. Fresh water is precious. Few remnants of the Kahuulkin survive, mostly as slaves to the newcomers, hidden beneath Lao-Kwei's surface or in the Fringe.

This planet features small and very salty inner seas, hills, mountains, and vast plains, many of which are deserted salt flats. Rivers are few and flow only seasonally. Inhabitants rely on well-water to survive. Sandy and rocky deserts abound, as well as the ruins of former Kahuulkin cities which haven't vanished beneath the ever-present red dust. Areas of toxic radiation still exist, especially around ancient ruins. Vegetation tends toward browns, while sky, seas, and rivers look reddish as a result of dust suspended high in the atmosphere.

**Kumoshima:** The moon gravitating around Lao-Kwei is home to the Cloud People, a fierce warrior culture. It appears as a large silver orb from a distance, about half the size of Earth's moon, or 3,375 miles (5,400 km) around its equator. It takes slightly more than twenty-eight Calidaran days to orbit its mother world, and spins in twenty-six hours with a twenty-five-degree

axial tilt. Fresh water covers at least four-fifths of Kumoshima's surface, the result of ancient Kahuulkin gerrymandering there.

Land includes archipelagos and one island-continent arching roughly northwest to southeast. Terrain often is mountainous, with deep valleys filled with jungle, thick forests, or terraced rice paddies. Extreme northern and southern latitudes are coolest, with harsh winters and mild summers. Cloudy weather is predominant with frequent periods of fog. Ancient legends on the mother world recount the Cloud People stealing Lao-Kwei's water. Kumoshimans do not easily part with it, for this goes against their laws.

## The Fringe

Stretching all around the Soltan Ephemeris for hundreds of millions of miles across space's Great Vault, this disk-shaped region is sparsely filled with cosmic rubble and a few dwarf planets. The entire belt as a unit takes 645 days to rotate around Soltan. It is believed that the Fringe is imbued with a world soul of its own, though it remains unclear how this manifests itself, for its effects are varied and unpredictable. These effects enable tiny realms to hide and survive there, in clusters of archipelagos or dwarf-planets, all with livable environments (at least from human standards). Laws of physics and those regulating magic, as they are understood elsewhere in the Soltan Ephemeris, may differ substantially from one area to the next. The Fringe is most notorious for harboring the dreaded Wayfarers, a race of hardy space raiders recognizable by the longships they use to ply Soltan's Great Vault. Two small worlds gravitating in the area are fairly well known: Canis Major and Felis Minor.

**Canis Major:** Known as a world claimed by *Caniseans*, a race of dog-headed humanoids, Canis Major stretches no more than 2,800 miles at the equator (4,500 km) and has no axial tilt. The land features hills, plains, rivers, and a number of large

freshwater lakes. Though cooler than the rest, the poles aren't cold enough to freeze.

This small world generates an invisible barrier just outside its atmosphere, which reduces anything coming in to one-sixth its original size. The effect is reversed when sailing out. Canis Major is really six times larger than it seems from the outside, allowing commensurate demographics. A bright light travels this barrier, ensuring periods of night and day on the surface lasting twelve hours each.

**Felis Minor:** Claimed by *Feliseans*, a race of cat-headed humanoids, this world measures 2,500 miles at its equator (4,000 km). While similar to Canis Major in many ways, Felis Minor is unique thanks to an invisible barrier beneath which time flows six times faster than on the outside. Time for non-natives sailing in accelerates only gradually, making them quite vulnerable for the first six hours. This also means that the Felisean population grows much faster than on the outside, resulting in an emigration to the Soltan Ephemeris comparable to Canis Major's. A bright light travels their barrier as well (though six times faster).

## Ghüle

Ghüle isn't native to Calidar's universe, and neither are its inhabitants. Alien gods from an outer plane built this life-sustaining vessel as a dungeon of global proportions and stocked it with a wide range of monsters, the most common including orcs, goblins, trolls, and ogres—hereinafter referred to as Ghüleans.

With a circumference of 20,250 miles (32,400 km), this world follows an off-center elliptical orbit lasting five Calidaran years. It lacks an axial tilt, and a full rotation takes forty-eight Calidaran hours. One end of its orbit brings Ghüle near the paths of Lao-Kwei and Calidar. The other takes it far outside Soltan's ephemeris. During the latter journey, this world's surface freezes under layers of ice and snow, trapping the Ghüleans inside





# Calidar Universe

their dungeon domain. Anything stranded outside will freeze to death.

As this planet approaches Soltan, huge canyons crack the ice open and release its inhabitants. They endeavor to raid nearby worlds, seeking treasures and slaves as self-respecting orcs should. Ghüle's enchantment bends the rays of light emanating from surrounding stars, making it invisible to the naked eye. This also means the surface world is completely dark. Furthermore, Ghüle may vanish from its orbit at the whim of the gods who built it, and return temporarily to its native plane where they devour treasures and slaves brought to them by their minions. If displeased, these voracious deities will feed on Ghüleans as well. Otherwise, the world is returned to its orbit at a time of the gods' choosing, at which point it resumes its orbit in Calidar's universe. This process makes it impossible to predict this world's passage near Soltan.

Millions of Ghüleans live in the dungeons. When the right time comes, hundreds of thousands of them scatter over the worlds they raid like plagues of locusts, seeking urban centers. Popular heroes, mighty monarchs, demigods, and legendary creatures of goodness are valuable prizes, well worth the terrible casualties to capture them alive. Ghüleans rely on gröns to travel from their world to nearby planets. These giant creatures, bred in captivity, enable raiders to quickly travel across space (see **Creatures of Calidar**).

Typical raiding "seasons" last from a few days to three weeks for Lao-Kwei and a month and a half for Calidar due to the relative orbital speeds of these planets. Draconia never comes close enough to Ghüle to permit raids, but a section of the Fringe may be affected when that world exits the Soltan Ephemeris. Seven points on the diagram displaying the planets' orbits show the timing and regions prone to possible raids. (A) Ice cracks open on Ghüle's surface. (B) Raiding on Lao-Kwei and its moon may begin. (C)

Raiding on Calidar and its moons may begin. (D)

Raiding on Calidar ends. (E) Raiding on Lao-Kwei ends but begins on a section of the Fringe. (F) Raiding on the Fringe ends. (G) Ghüleans are trapped beneath the ice.

## Citizens of the Ephemeris

This chapter provides a sampling of the sorts of people living in the Soltan Ephemeris. Due to space limitations, this book portrays natives of Meryath, a kingdom of the Great Caldera, as a Calidaran archetype. Inhabitants of this region are as varied as those on other worlds, often reflecting their ancestral lunar origins. As new episodes of the *Star Phoenix* adventures are published, more about other cultures of the Great Caldera will be developed.

### The Humans

Nearly as varied as the people of Earth, all humans are believed to come from Munaan. Realms great and small exist there, each of individual character, such as the fair people of Nicarea, the pharaohs of Taneth, the swamp kings of Bongor, the islanders of Talikai, the desert wizards of Gandaria, the sky-lords of Inti-Suyu, and the nomadic Wichipaw horsemen of the Wastelands. All now honor Teos/Soltan under whatever name he is best known, but not everyone feels entirely at ease with the demands of monotheism. That explains why some Munaani cultures emigrated during the moon's long history, seeking a new life on Calidar where they could enjoy greater spiritual freedom. Some failed. Others established lasting nations in the Great Caldera.

**Lao-Kweians:** Though Munaani cultures and ethnic groups abound, some vanished entirely from Munaan during the past several thousand years. According to legends, uncontrolled magic was responsible for erasing all traces of the original Yang



people, known then for their ivory-colored skin, slanted eyes, and straight black hair. They are now believed to be the ancestors of present-day Lao-Kweians. If Kumoshimans resemble their presumed ancestors, inhabitants from the red planet depart from this norm. They are much taller and lankier, with spidery, long fingers, and a skin turned red from the ever-present dust. Such features tend to recede among descendants of expatriates, while they will eventually manifest in the progeny of those who move to the red planet. If Lao-Kweians excel in magical arts, the Cloud People of Kumoshima learned long ago to control fog and clouds through which they or their skyships can hide or travel very quickly. The rivalry between the Old Turtle Empire on Lao-Kwei and tiny Kumoshima remains bitter.

**Wayfarers:** Another people who vanished entirely from Munaan were the Varangians, as the Nicareans once called them: a race of tall, fair-skinned warriors, traders, and explorers. They reappeared many centuries later in the Fringe, from where they began raiding central worlds of the Soltan Ephemeris. It is believed that their faith in other gods led to their sudden disappearance. Since then, the Wayfarers, as they have become known, have built immense longships in which they



live while incessantly travelling the Great Vault. During their journeys, Wayfarers occasionally steal miscellaneous technologically advanced equipment from abandoned Starfolk outposts. The equipment isn't always well understood, and energy charges are usually limited.

Sages have suspected that as conditions worsen on Munaan more people might go missing, but there is no telling who might be affected or when, nor exactly what lies behind such jarring events. Some have theorized about connections between faith, Calidar's world soul, and rivalry between gods.

**Meryathiles:** The multi-ethnic humans compose the majority of Meryath's population. Most are of Munaan islander ancestry, with copper skin and black wavy hair, alongside folk of fair or black complexion. Meryathiles value glory above all, a cultural aspect that has led many to become dragon slayers, treasure hunters, and consummate adventurers in general.

The realm's most celebrated heroes elect monarchs for life from their ranks. Heroes of Calidar often live very long lives, as the result of the peculiarity of this world called *Eternal Glory*. In short, heroes do not age so long as their tales are being told and common people honor their achievements. Unless slain, monarchs of Meryath can therefore stay in power for extended periods, provided they seek out mighty goals to remain worthy of their status. An aging king is likely to abdicate or be deposed.

If heroes live long enough and keep accumulating heroic deeds, they may attain demigodhood under the patronage of an established deity. This leads some heroes to shamelessly promote themselves, but sooner or later fakes are unmasked. In Meryath, business can be brisk and rewarding for bards daring enough to follow the steps of heroes and tell their stories.

**Humans of Draconia:** Their human ancestors were abducted from other worlds (if not universes) and made to serve an ancient black dragon named Sayble, also known as the Black Queen. Though humans

of Draconia aren't necessarily evil, Sayble certainly is. United by their harsh and hissing language, they feature diverse ethnic backgrounds and appearances. Most recognizable among them are the *Draconic knights*. Locked in centuries-spanning wars in the name of the Black Queen, these knights fight other dragon rulers and their monstrous armies in a quest to subdue them all.

One of the Draconic Order's goal is to acquire plunder because it is a source of magical energy. All dragons have the ability to disintegrate precious metals and stones as well as enchanted objects to generate energy, called *nérghiar*. Dragon rulers use *nérghiar* in many different ways. Sayble often confers a fraction of it on her knights, enabling their skyships to leave the confines of Draconia's hollow world and travel through space's Great Vault. The Draconic knights maintain a fragile alliance with the Tòrr-Gàrraidh, mostly against the dwarves and the dragon slayers of Meryath.

Humans of Draconia are accustomed to their world's perpetual darkness. If not protected with clerical magic, they often carry eyewear to shield their eyes from the harshness of Soltan's bright light. Humans other than Draconic knights live in this world, such as the Warriors Green serving Lordhigh Viridar, the ruler of green dragons. They will be unveiled as new areas of this universe are explored.

## The Dwarves

Shorter and stockier than elves, about four and a half feet tall, dwarves are very muscular, often barrel-chested and snaggled-toothed, and have bulbous noses. They almost invariably wear thick beards, sometimes braided, and long hair. Females adorn with beads their hair and beards, which they keep shorter than males do, and almost always braided. The Kragdúras are loud, boisterous, and as rough as their rocky world. Quarrelsome and warlike, they also enjoy mining and collecting gems and gold as a sign of status. Many dwarves have



settled what later became the Sovereign Kingdom of Araldûr, the mountain island at the center of Calidar's Great Caldera.

Though dwarves make great engineers, they lack the magical skills of other races. They counteract this weakness with magical minerals that lie deep beneath the surface of their moon, and with faith in their priors' spellcasting abilities. They also rely on gnomes, who've always been present in their world according to historical annals. Dwarven complexions vary greatly, from dark to fair depending on the region.

## The Elves

About five and a half feet tall with pointy ears, elves are generally slimmer than Calidar's humans. The Elder Tribe, the Söldor, are pale, with white or silver hair, their features made odd by ceremonial scarring. Chief among the Tòrr-Gàrraidh, they originated from Alore's underworld. Strongest in magic, the Tolarin are dark gray or black skinned, with midnight blue hair. Their domain lies in the shadows. The Meruín came from seas, rivers, and lakes. They are pale gray to silvery, with hair like mother-of-pearl. The Elëan, winged and fair of complexion, hail from the mountains. With their skin the color of natural bark and hair fiery brass to dark red, the Sherandol are wood elves. Some of the Meruín and Elëan have



# Calidar Universe



left Aloreia, along with the majority of the Sherandol, to resettle in Alfdaín.

Elves have the innate ability to commune with flora surrounding them, especially on Aloreia and to a more limited degree in the Great Caldera. On the moon, elves rely on this talent to transmit thoughts to each other very quickly. It does not, however, prevent deception.

Seen on Aloreia as a lesser folk, half-elves are slightly taller and live mostly in the Republic of Phrydias in the Great Caldera. Those have over time become skillful merchants and skyship navigators. Phrydians despise pure blood Aloreians, and relations with Alfdaín remain at best mitigated. Their fey ancestry is such that a half-elf parent most often engenders half-elven progeny. Elven blood, however, is incompatible with non-human races.

## The Fellfolk

The majority of people living in Calidar's vast wilderness are the diminutive,

pointy-eared fellfolk. This name was given them by the early colonials setting foot on this world, believing natives lived in dwellings dug beneath hillsides. Fellfolk stand about three and a half feet tall and form tribes of hunter-gatherers. Their teeth are filed to resemble those of sharks, and tattoos adorn their bodies from head to toe. Many also dye their skin to blend in with the predominant terrain, be it grasslands, deserts, or forests. Any clothing is designed with the same concern. Ethnically, fellfolk complexions vary directly with their native latitudes: fairest close to the polar regions, darkest closest to the equator.

Although some fellfolk live in burrows, many others use the ruins of ancient civilizations reclaimed by the Dread Lands during the thousands of years of this world's history. Others prefer building their dwellings high up in trees or inside them, a practical approach since woods of Calidar often feature growth of colossal proportions. Although it is possible to trade with them, natives distrust those they call "sky folk." Tribal sorcerers know the rituals to rouse the spirits of the Dread Lands and cause grievous trouble to intruders.

## The Gnomes

Smaller yet than the fellfolk, gnomes stand no more than three feet tall. Though both have pointy ears, the gnomes have much longer noses. Most live as a dominated and oppressed race either on Aloreia or on Kragdûr. As with dwarves, their complexions range from fair to dark, depending on their ancestry. Their overseers have long ago displaced their ancestral clans and determined where they lived.

The gnomes believe they were Aloreia's and Kragdûr's original native people. Over thousands of years, however, some clans evolved into elves and dwarves, outgrowing their forebears. During the past few centuries, gnomes fell victim to their rival kin. This started when the Tòrr-Gàrraidh issued a law to enslave the gnomes, seeing them as cousins of the Kragdûras. The dwarves

did the same, adopting the opposite reasoning, alluding to their pointy ears and their magical nature. Though dwarves can forge certain types of magical objects, they lack the ability to cast magical spells, making their shorter cousins very useful to them. Some gnomes have escaped to Calidar where they now endeavor to create a realm of their own, somewhere between Alfdaín and Belledor.

## The Caniseans

This race of dog-headed people originates from Canis Major, in the Fringe. They are often found on other worlds, either as traders, mercenaries, bodyguards, bounty hunters, or paid law-enforcement, and are usually trustworthy. Though Caniseans are best as warriors and religious priors, a few do excel as wizards or rogues. They come in many breeds and colors, some with very short hair, others quite furry. Their sizes vary from four to seven feet tall, averaging six. Caniseans returning to their native world usually bring back aspects of the cultures they discovered, which then become the homeworld's latest craze. Caniseans commonly trade with Wayfarers when they sail nearby.





## The Feliseans

This race of cat-headed people originates from Felis Minor, in the Fringe. Feliseans dwell in various places of the Soltan Ephemeris, wherever Caniseans do not. Although they can get along, the races bear a natural suspicion of each other. Most catfolk are at their best as rogues, spies, scouts, privateers, or explorers. The taller breeds can be formidable warriors, while others do better as priors or wizards. Somewhat moody, Feliseans value extreme individuality, an attitude reflected in their laws and leadership. They despise Wayfarers and on occasion skirmish with or ambush them. Pedigrees abound, along with a variety of fur lengths and colors. Feliseans are typically five and a half feet tall, save for a few rare individuals who can top seven and a half feet.

## The Orcs

A general term for Ghülean raiders, “orcs” tends to include goblins, ogres, and trolls. These somber, thoroughly evil folks exploit others for their own benefit. Though crude and brutal, orcs aren’t stupid, especially if led by a cunning master. The strongest, most callous and bloodthirsty among them become leaders, until someone proves stronger than they. Orcs live in rival tribes that work together only when forced to do so, in particular when facing a more powerful foe. Though they will obey a strong leader, quarrels often flare amongst them. Because of their sheer numbers, orcs dominate other Ghülean races. They are skilled at breeding monsters and training them for war, such as giant armored boars and carnivorous bats used as mounts. Orcs are reasonably good tacticians and engineers, especially when erecting fortresses and siege machines. Though a massive orcish raid on a city can be devastating, they do not wish to exterminate all; they spare enough for “future harvests.” Orcs stand five to six feet tall, around seven for leaders. They are best as warriors and priors, though a few have

limited skills in wizardry. Some may be stranded on other worlds after a failed raid, and will try to establish a tribal territory, although they hope to return to Ghüle at the next opportunity.

Half-orcs result from raids on other worlds. Native Ghüleans will enslave them if they capture them, and other races despise them. Yet, some communities tolerate half-orcs because they are fierce warriors. Six to seven feet tall, these “half-castes” do well among organized bands of brigands and pirates. Ghülean ancestry is such that a half-orc parent always engenders half-orcish progeny, regardless of the partner’s race. Though incompatible with dwarves, gnomes, and fellfolk, orcish blood will overcome elven or half-elven lineage.

## The Starfolk

Several races qualify as starfolk. They are mysterious watchers using advanced technology to travel between galaxies and observe other worlds for unfathomable reasons. Some believe they come to steal the magic of the Soltan Ephemeris, although there is no proof of this. They shun contact with less advanced races, and aren’t necessarily at peace with each other. Occasionally, alien artifacts are left behind in abandoned outposts, shipwrecks, or in the ruins of ancient civilizations, especially in the Fringe.

The Kahuulkin were starfolk, but since their civilization’s terrible demise, they have forgotten their old ways. They are now no better equipped than Lao-Kweians to deal with their harsh environment. They’ve been largely enslaved, or at best used as cheap labor. An underground movement seeks lost artifacts to learn as much as possible about Kahuul’s glorious past and, perhaps, to use them against the Lao-Kweians. Kahuulkin hideouts lie deep in the deserts or below ground.

About eight feet tall, extremely skinny, and with leathery, reddish skin, Kahuulkin feature vaguely human faces with large black eyes, and hands with four fingers



and two opposable thumbs. Sounding like sandpaper rubbed together when speaking Lao-Kweian, they normally communicate among themselves with rasping, clicking, and hissing words. They also emit sounds beyond human hearing range, as well as howls that can carry many miles. They are immune to most radiation and able to survive dehydration much longer than humans, but they can’t manipulate magic or commune with the gods. Many ancient artifacts only work when handled by Kahuulkin or certain factions among them. The Kahuulkin hope to unearth enough weapons to free themselves. While working toward that goal, they also work to trap water beneath the ground and oppose Lao-Kweian development. Not all starfolk see this as a positive development, having dealt with bellicose Kahuulkin eons earlier.





## The Divine World

### World Souls

Since the formation of the star and its surrounding worlds, magic has been embedded in the fabric of the Soltan Ephemeris. Starfolk have been studying this form of energy for eons, without ever understanding it or being able to use it. Each planet owns a pool of magic called a *world soul* that affects its core and its laws of physics. Though each world soul manifests itself in ways specific to its world and nearby moons, they all share two common aspects:

1. *The souls of people and their gods are drawn from their native world souls.*
2. *The health of a planet and its moons affects its world soul; e.g. a dead planet has little or no magic left.*

The health of a planet reflects the amount of life its biosphere can sustain minus the sum total of *cogent life* and its *depredations*. Cogent life includes all creatures able to reason. Depredations include pollution, disease, crime, and the consumption of natural resources. Calidar's world soul is a powerhouse, but on its moons, damage has occurred. On Aloreia, the elves have enslaved their flora, which goes against Calidar's nature. The dwarves have nearly stripped Kragdûr bare of its natural resources. Munaan is overpopulated and much of its land has become impoverished. Though increasingly at risk, life on these moons

hasn't yet collapsed thanks to the mother world's vitality.

Calidar's world soul fights back, however, by protecting its wilderness: the Dread Lands. This ability varies in strength and location over time. Weak spots in the Dread Lands occasionally manifest themselves during various periods before the world soul reasserts itself there. Lunar empires and other off-world cultures colonized the Great Caldera and other regions by taking advantage of these weak spots. Once settled, inhabitants can suppress world soul manifestations, but they must remain vigilant and tenacious. For unrelated reasons, some ancient civilizations that had once settled such weak spots have vanished from Calidar, allowing its world soul to reclaim these "lost" lands.

On Draconia, much of the world soul's strength is used to maintain the planet's



integrity, forcing dragons to rely on treasure hoards to boost their own magical energy.

Lao-Kwei is closest of all to a dead world, or a dying one, as the result of the Kahuulkin's civil war that ravaged their planet. Its biosphere is now weak, but fortunately its cogent population is also relatively sparse because of the scarcity of fresh water. Kumoshima is a key asset to this world's potential renaissance. Radiation remains the biggest problem for Lao-Kwei's world soul.

## Life, Death, and the Divine

When creatures die, whether on their native world or elsewhere, their life forces return to their native world souls. Though the souls of gods come from their native worlds as well, their magical powers originate from the souls of mortals who honor them. In other words, the more followers a deity enjoys, the greater its magical ability.

When natives of Calidar and its moons die, their souls follow three possible paths. The most common is their return to the world soul, from which they can be reincarnated at a later time. A very few instead become servants of gods they honored. Others, those most responsible for depredations, often end up trapped in *seitha* (a bloodlike substance found below ground), possibly for a very long time. This is their penance for the damage they caused. A netherworld also exists, a limbo retaining souls for some time before they are released to their final fates.

When refined by alchemists, priors, or monks, *seitha* becomes a crucial component of Calidaran space travel (see **Skyships of Calidar** later in this book). *Seitha* is more commonly found on Calidar than on its moons.

**The Undead:** Undead exist as the result of curses or evil deeds committed during their former lives. These "Lost Ones" crave *seitha* crude imbued with the souls of others. They occasionally devour crude as a way to reproduce, stealing yet more energy from

the world soul. Potentially, the undead can become destroyers of worlds. If they are put to rest, their energy is stored as *seitha* somewhere deep beneath the surface of Calidar or its moons.

**Switching World Souls:** Mortals cannot alter their connection to a planet for the benefit of another. However, children born on a different world than their parents become subjects of its world soul, as was the case for Wayfarers and Lao-Kweians. This is a pivotal issue for deities. Gods belong to the world soul claiming the largest share of their followers' life forces.

## Eternal Glory

Another peculiarity of Calidar is the manner in which deities come into being. Though people may believe so, gods did not create them, their world, or their universe—far from it. Mortals crafted the earliest divinities based on their beliefs, their needs, and their cultures. The magic in their souls fashioned cogent immortal entities, drawn from Calidar's world soul, to answer their spiritual needs and, presumably, to protect them. For this to happen, a long-lasting and deeply rooted faith from many thousands of people is required.

Powerful belief isn't the only way for new gods to exist. Eternal Glory comes into play with *epic heroes*. These are adventurers whose extraordinary deeds are honored by the masses. As long as their tales are told to children, sung in taverns across the land, read in popular literature, or enacted in theaters, epic heroes do not age. With time, legendary adventurers may obtain a god's patronage in exchange for service, and ascend to demigodhood. Eternal Glory is the basis for society in the Kingdom of Meryath. It also is a recurrent motivation throughout the Great Caldera and on the moons as well.

## The Gods of Calidar

The most important aspect of godhood is the link between the number of mortal

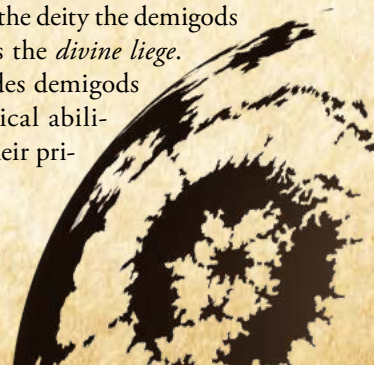
followers and the quantity of magical power earned from them. Divine motivation comes from either the promotion of one's faith among mortals or rivalry with another deity. The fundamental natures and personalities of gods are shaped by how their followers see them. This sometimes leads gods to attempt to influence their worshipers in order to alter their own (or another deity's) natures.

Gods communicate with mortals through priors. In exchange for their clergy's services, deities share some of their magical power by providing spells when prayed for. Gods reside on different planes, with pantheons often sharing the same domain. They generally do not interfere directly with the world of mortals because they've learned through experience that it provokes others to do the same, almost invariably leading to a conflict in the mortal world or between divine domains. If they must interfere, using expendable avatars is safer than intervening personally. As a general rule, only gods can kill others of their kind.

An unfortunate aspect of divine reality leads gods to see mortals as commodities. They often negotiate amongst themselves, making deals as regards the place, time, and intensity of proselytism. Gods don't just "abandon" followers who honor them, but they can lead them to seek another place to live. Proxy wars among mortals, heroes, and demigods are possible, but deities prefer avoiding such conflicts, since they almost always result in terrible losses for all involved.

**Demigods:** Demigods differ from epic heroes in that they don't need to maintain their notoriety. At this stage, they no longer age, but can still be killed by epic heroes, powerful monsters, or gods. They normally reside in the physical world, but can seek audience or refuge on their gods' planes. Demigods can accumulate mortal followers; however, any power derived from them benefits instead the deity the demigods serve, known as the *divine liege*.

The liege provides demigods with their magical abilities as well as their pri-





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ors' spells. Divine lieges benefit from this arrangement because the amount of power they earn this way exceeds what they spend on demigods and their priors.

A demigod can willingly switch lieges if a new deity is prepared to endure the former liege's wrath. A demigod can never exist without a liege and can only serve one. If banished, a demigod becomes dormant until the liege has a change of heart, another intervenes to revive the outcast, or fate brings about its death. Priors bound to a dormant demigod cannot cast spells. Demigods who die in the course of serving their lieges become gods if they have enough mortal followers (in the tens of thousands).

**Pantheons:** Deities, like mortals, form societies reflecting cultural or racial similarities. These associations are crucial because they affect the existence of divinities. Gods of the same pantheon can share the same outer planar domain and combine their strengths to defend it. The most powerful one among them, measured in terms of mortal followers (obtained directly or through sponsored demigods), heads the pantheon and collects one tenth of all lesser peers' magical power. Those who refuse to pay tribute are banished outright.

As regards general disobedience or misconduct, being cast out depends on how other members would react and whether rulers want to risk their pantheons' existence. Though they can leave a pantheon of their own free will, gods can only join another with its ruler's blessing. Departing deities take with them all their sponsored demigods.

Gods of Calidar and Lao-Kwei rarely procreate. Whether both parents are divine or only one is, newborns are demigods. If both parents are deities, their progeny may serve the two of them. It is the exception to the rule that demigods may only serve one liege. During conflicts, offspring must take sides. Godly unions and divine

progeny only exist as the result of followers imagining them, or at least accepting them as part of their beliefs.

Dragon rulers of Draconia only engender mortal dragons and dragon kin.

**Aliases:** Gods can be honored under different names in different places. Followers may not necessarily be aware of this fact. In the case of Soltan, most followers are plainly aware of his identity as Teos in Nicarea and in much of the Great Caldera, or as Arun-Te in Taneth, or again as Arun Al Malik Al Soltan in Narwan. All three names refer to the same deity; the difference lies in the followers' actions. Followers fall anywhere on the spectrum from vocal to belligerent about such things. It is the nature of mortals and their faiths.

In theory, a god can belong to different pantheons as a result of aliases. In this case, tribute is paid to rulers according to which aliases the followers worship. Members of alternate pantheons change appearances and personae as appropriate, and may reside in any of the corresponding divine domains. If conflicts of interest arise, or if pantheons become hostile to each other, hard choices must be made.

The issue of aliases can be very tricky, especially when religious factions or foreign cultures clash over different ways of honoring a spiritual patron they share. Because gods reflect their followers' hearts, they can suffer split personalities and may be unable to bring peace to both sides of a conflict—such is the case with Soltan, probably the single most powerful deity, yet one for whom much blood continues to be shed in Calidar's history.

**Fellfolk Animism:** Tribes of the Dread Lands do not worship gods, but rather believe in spirits of nature dwelling in plants, animals, rocks, fire, shadows, winds, rain, thunder, rivers, seas, and the dead. Their power comes directly from Calidar's world soul, which explains why they can live in such a dangerous place, and why their shamans can awake great spirits of the Dread Lands in times of need.

**Divine Domains:** Individual deities and pantheons live in *pocket planes* located in the Ambrosian dimension. Pocket planes are contiguous areas that individual divinities

or pantheon rulers can model to suit their needs and wishes. Only resident gods, their servants, and other beings invited in can enter a given pocket plane. Though divine domains are magically secured, warring deities could break in, but this would require concerted efforts of many gods and their armies or treachery of some kind. All these pocket planes connect with a special part of the Oortan Cloud that is used as a forum where divinities of the Soltan Ephemeris can meet safely. This place of beauty centers around a vast amphitheater surrounded with immense columns standing before the pink, purple, and gold backdrop of this mysterious nebula.



## Soltan

**Epithet:** The Sun God. **Pantheon:** None. **Aliases:** Teos, Arun Al Malik Al Soltan, and others. **Divine Domain:** Soltan's core. **Centers of Worship:** Munaan, Great Caldera; sole legal faith on Munaan, in Ellyrion, and in Narwan. **Symbol:** The sun resplendent in a night sky.



His oldest persona is Taneth's Arun-Te, focus of one of the most ancient faiths in the Soltan Ephemeris. During the thousands of years following the establishment of that faith, his influence extended to other Munaani cultures, which clashed over control of the moon and over religious issues. After many wars, Soltan gained power at the expense of all other Munaani deities. Direct or indirect consequences of these conflicts provoked the departures of Lao-Kweians, Varangians, Narwani, and many others. Kingdoms remaining on Munaan, now monotheistic cultures, have learned to tolerate each other's ways. Later on, Soltan also gained a presence in the Great Caldera, first in Ellyrion and Narwan. These two cultures, both fiercely monotheistic, still resent each other's practices. Soltan's faith is also present in most parts of the Great Caldera, alongside many others.

Soltan's divine domain is a furnace of lava and fiery storms survivable only by him or those he invites. His skin is entirely black, and his eyes golden and without pupils. He wears a long white robe draping from shoulder to foot. A large blazing aura extends from behind his shoulders. He holds a large warrior's mace capable of disintegrating most things.

**Followers:** When gazing into an open flame (a bonfire, a candle, etc.) for at least a minute, followers gain limited prescience once a day. This ability confers upon the faithful and their companions a significant bonus to their next initiative or surprise check. Bonuses from multiple followers are not cumulative, but they should affect a matching number of dice rolls.

**Priors:** Servants of Soltan only sustain half-damage from fire-based attacks. A common ceremony to honor Soltan consists of burning the heart (whole or partial) of a fallen foe in a portable brazier or a small urn. The remainder must be discarded. Their favored weapon is a wave-bladed sword or a kris, thought to represent flames. Priors gain a bonus to damage with these weapons.



## Istra

**Epithet:** Goddess of adventurers.

**Pantheon:** Calderan. **Aliases:** None.

**Divine Domain:** Halls of Ardorin. **Centers of Worship:** Throughout the Great Caldera; leading faith in Meryath. **Symbol:** A dark red hibiscus, edged in white, over a dark blue background.

Istra is a fairly young deity compared to Soltan. Meryath settlers established her faith during early colonial times, allowing her to arise from Calidar's world soul. Her faith then was against Munaani law and the chief reason for Meryath's rebellion against the lunar overseer. Patron deity of Glorathon, Istra also promotes ideals of Eternal Glory, and as a result, is the deity with the most demigods in her service. She's embroiled in a divine row with Sayble, the Black Queen of the Draconic knights, for supporting dragon slayers.

The Halls of Ardorin appear as a white palace overlooking a sea of clouds. Istra is usually represented with a large red hibiscus above her ear, clad in swirling sea waves

and pearly spray. Her hair and eyes are of darkest indigo, and she possesses the dusky complexion of Talikai islanders. Romantic and debonair, Istra favors underdogs bold enough to assert themselves.

**Followers:** When performing actions for the sake of style and panache, the faithful earn a bonus to their ability checks. These acts must be sensible and include a significant risk to the faithful. Multiple successes can go toward earning a one-time divine favor or greater experience along the heroes' career paths.

**Priors:** Once per adventure, priors may sense the approximate direction in which an object or a creature they seek is located. Any time they perform as described for followers, they can sense roughly how far what they seek is (expressed in "stones' throws" or "days' sailing.") These sensations last no more than a minute. A popular ceremony honoring Istra involves playing an endearing tune on small chimes, bells, or a wind-up music box. There are no favored weapons for priors of Istra, although if they succeed in behaving with flair, they earn a bonus to hit and damage for the rest of an encounter.

## The Gate Keeper

**Epithet:** None. **Pantheon:** None.

**Aliases:** None. **Divine Domain:** The Vortex. **Centers of Worship:** None.

**Symbol:** A silver spiral on a night sky.

Gate keepers are oddities linking various realities, including Calidar's universe. These gods don't conform to world-soul mechanics. All realities feature cosmic anomalies; in the case of Captain d'Alberran and Azar, these manifested as cataclysms that stranded them in this gate keeper's divine domain—the Vortex. Gate keepers alter the memories of those in their custody, and then offer castaways—individually or as groups—to deities willing to purchase them. Payments take the form of magic transfers, which sustain the gate keepers. Though memories can be altered to fit the buyers' schemes, the fundamental natures of



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castaways can never be changed. The Vortex allows only a one-way passage. To go back, one would have to encounter another anomaly and connect with a gate keeper situated in the desired reality—an order of cosmic enormity.

The gate keeper concept enables game masters to bring characters from other fantasy settings, heroes from traditional literature, or people from Earth's history into Calidar's universe. The extent at which their memories are altered depends on a game master's needs. If ever met, a gate keeper looks like an immense silhouette whose face remains hidden in darkness.

## Delathien

**Epithet:** The Hunter. **Pantheon:** Alorean. **Aliases:** None. **Divine Domain:** The Briarwoods. **Centers of Worship:** Alore and the Great Caldera; leading faith in Alfdaín. **Symbol:** A golden bow and arrow on a green background.

Delathien rules the Alorean pantheon. He was the first elven god, coming into existence soon after the elves became a race. Though he predates colonial times, Soltan and Thaleera (the goddess of gnomes) are both much older than he. Delathien promotes the protection and expansion of hunting grounds for elves to sustain their clans. He opposes the destruction of woods; however, his interest in earning followers led him to ignore the Tòrr-Gàrraidh's depredations on Alore. Under his auspices, the elves have sought to expand their territorial claims and promote the seeding of new woods. This encouraged Alfdaín to become as large as it is in the Great Caldera.

The Briarwoods are a pocket plane entirely filled with giant brambles. His palace and divine throne sit at the center. Blond and fair-skinned, Delathien wears pants and a jerkin of dark red suede, with a cloak, boots, and a hat of dark green leather. He usually carries a great bow capable of slaying most things.



**Followers:** Those who worship Delathien earn basic knowledge of trees and plants. A successful ability check reveals general information about a plant such as whether it is toxic and a sentient creature. Druidical priors gain a bonus to such ability checks. If not studying their surroundings, followers receive a penalty to this ability (checked secretly by the game master). Other penalties come into play, reflecting how alien the environment may be.

**Priors:** When in a forest, priors gain a defense bonus against physical and magical attacks directed specifically at them. A common ceremony involves submerging fallen friends or foes into rivers, lakes, or marshes so that they may feed the surrounding forest. Favored weapons are made of wood from the priors' native lands, giving them a bonus to hit. Elven ironwood is renowned for being as strong as the best of steel.

## Khrâlia

**Epithet:** All-Mother-Earth. **Pantheon:** Kragdûr. **Aliases:** None. **Divine Domain:** Holmring. **Centers of Worship:** Kragdûr and the Great Caldera; leading faith on Kragdûr and in Araldûr. **Symbol:** An upright golden triangle on a brown background.

Khrâlia rules the dwarven pantheon. She represents rock, mountains, the ancestral homeland, and dwarven fertility. She's about the same age as Delathien. Though she succeeded in promoting population growth on the moon, her priors now suggest more attention be given to Calidar and the Fringe for the search of new living space. Some dwarves are known to live among Varangian clans, and they honor either ethnic dwarven or Wayfarer deities as needed.

Holmring is a giant mountain surrounded with ice. Stocky and muscular, Khrâlia appears as if she were made of dark gray stone, with sapphires for eyes and ice in place of hair. Small topazes adorn the



braids on her head and cheeks. Her clothing seems made of alabaster and obsidian. She usually holds an enormous hammer capable of producing earthquakes.

**Followers:** Faithful of Khrâlia possess the basic knowledge of rocks and precious stones. A successful ability check reveals a flaw in a stone structure, alluding to a secret passage or a trap involving moving walls, floors, or ceilings. If not studying their surroundings, followers receive a penalty to this ability (checked secretly by the game master). Other penalties are appropriate when sand or mud is involved. Followers of Khrâlia gain a bonus when appraising gemstones.

**Priors:** When below ground, whether because of shifting light or the presence of walls, pillars, or stalagmites, priors earn a defensive bonus against physical and magical attacks specifically directed at them. A common ceremony involves burying fallen friends or foes with objects of value to please Khrâlia. Favored weapons are those made of steel from the priors' native forges, giving them a bonus to damage.

## Odin

**Epithet:** Allfather, god of wisdom. **Pantheon:** Varangian. **Aliases:** None. **Divine Domain:** Asgard. **Centers of Worship:** The Fringe, Nordheim. **Symbol:** Three interlaced triangles.

Although inspired directly by Norse mythology, this Odin is native to Calidar. A cosmic singularity stranded an entire island of Vikings in the Vortex. The sudden presence of so many newcomers attracted Teos's attention. He bargained with the Gate Keeper for their release, brought them to Munaan with minimal alteration to their memories, and renamed them Varangians. Divine arrogance and a singular lapse in wisdom led Teos to preserve their old Viking religion, thinking himself capable of besting it. He failed. Not only did his Varangians retain their original faith, but their culture and beliefs began spreading among the Munaan.



Annoyed, Teos resorted to creating an alias to impersonate Odin. The scheme worked, but despite Teos's best efforts it did not prevent Calidar's world soul from bringing into existence an entire pantheon's worth of deities rooted in Norse lore. The alias, true to the faithful worshipping him, failed to stop the entire culture from escaping Munaan. They reappeared in the Fringe. There, as the alias began drawing its power from another world soul, its connection with Munaan and Teos vanished over time. Odin now stands as a separate deity, ruling his divine peers from Calidar's version of Asgard. Aside from aspects specific to this universe, such as becoming a spacefaring race and wielding the occasional laser weapons, Varangians are similar to Earth's Vikings.

Asgard is a great city on a mountain, surrounded with clouds. Gods of this pantheon each have their private estates, and often meet with Odin at his palace, the largest of the domain's structures. Its roof is made from the shields of those who died in battle. Servants of the gods live in Valhalla

and Fólkvangr, both located within Asgard. Odin is a fatherly figure, majestic, bearded, but missing an eye. He occasionally travels the Fringe and other worlds of the Soltan Ephemeris in disguise. He owns a great spear, Gungnir, and rides an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. Odin remembers his origins and those of his kin, but dismisses this knowledge as it no longer matters.

**Followers:** Once per day, the faithful gain a significant bonus to an ability check involving wisdom or intuition. They must, however, be vigilant that no harm be brought to ravens and ravenlike creatures. A failure to act could mean losing their bonus for some time.

**Priors:** In what other cultures see as a barbarous act, priors must sacrifice one of their eyes (and never attempt to regenerate it). In exchange they can call upon their god's wisdom, which allows them, once per day and for an hour, to detect invisible objects and creatures. A preferred ritual consists of selecting a rune at random from a small pouch, and branding or carving its symbol into the prior's skin. The favored weapon is a spear, which provides a bonus to hit.

## Sayble

**Epithet:** The Black Queen. **Pantheon:** Formerly Draconic. **Aliases:** None. **Divine Domain:** Draconia. **Centers of Worship:** Sole legal faith among her kingdom's population. **Symbol:** A stylized black dragon coiled in a circle, on a white background.

Ancient ruler of black dragons, Sayble commands the nefarious Draconic knights. Sayble purchases potential champions, such as Azar, from the Gate Keeper. The population in her kingdom comprises descendants of these war leaders and the progeny of people abducted from other worlds. She's a manipulative and evil ruler who delights in using charm, deception, faith, and knightly obedience as tools to bend servants to her will. Draconic knights are her fanatic followers.



# Calidar Universe



Living gods of Draconia, dragon rulers have been fighting each other for control of their pantheon and its divine domain from the very beginnings. Casualties of this eons-old conflict, good dragons have left Draconia and scattered throughout Calidar's universe or the outer planes.

Though Lordhigh Viridar of Zarn has submitted to Sayble, a loose coalition of blues, whites, and reds remains

undefeated, chief among which stands the Red Dragon King.

When in human form, Sayble wears tight-fitting black leather contrasting with her skin's pearly paleness. Her hair is black. Green and marbled with gold, her irises sheathe vertical pupils and briefly vanish under nictitating membranes when she blinks.

**Followers:** The faithful can speak the

language of black dragons, and can use empathy to communicate with dragon kin.

**Priors:** Acid inflicts only half-damage on Sayble's priors. A common ceremony to please the Black Queen involves sacrificing fallen friends and foes (alive or not) by dissolving them with potions of acid. Favored weapons are maces crafted in the form of black dragon paws, which provide a bonus to damage.

## Thaleera

**Epithet:** Goddess of good fortune.

**Pantheon:** Berylean. **Aliases:** None.

**Divine Domain:** The Mounds of Berylea.

**Centers of Worship:** Aloreia and Kragdûr (illegal on both moons); the Great Caldera.

**Symbol:** A green and white lozenge with two trees, counterchanged.

Gnomes on Aloreia and Kragdûr secretly honor her as their leading deity. Her faith is more common between Alfdain and Belledor, and parts of Caldwen and Osriel. Thaleera is about as old as Soltan, but intolerance on Aloreia and Kragdûr has damaged her standing in recent centuries. She promotes goodwill and brings luck to her followers when they most need it. Though not her enemies, Delathien and Khrâlia see her as possible trouble on the moons, and they will not assist her in gaining more freedom for her followers. So far the elves and the dwarves have prevented all escape schemes, such as the ones that have affected Munaan in the past.

The Mounds of Berylea are a succession of hills thickly covered with flora of living beryl. Thaleera looks like a typical gnome, although her skin is dark green and her eyes nearly transparent. She wears a leather jerkin and pants studded with small gemstones and imprinted with a pattern of oak leaves.

**Followers:** Once per day, fate may smile upon Thaleera's faithful; players of such characters may request one specific die be rerolled (theirs or the game master's) if a score is deemed detrimental. Whatever the new score rolled is, it must be accepted.

**Priors:** Once per day, Thaleera grants her





priors a bonus to an ability check needed to solve a riddle. A popular ceremony honoring Thaleera involves burning a pinch of sage, tossing salt over one's left shoulder, knocking on wood, spinning three times, and wearing on a bracelet a small lucky charm made from remains of a defeated foe. Favored of priors, bolas give them a bonus to hit.

## The Great Turtle

**Epithet:** Lord Aó, Protector of Lao-Kwei. **Pantheon:** Lao-Kweian. **Aliases:** None. **Divine Domain:** The Celestial Garden. **Centers of Worship:** Lao-Kwei. **Symbol:** A golden dragon-turtle on a red background.

Lord Aó was one of the earliest deities in Calidar's universe. He rules the Lao-Kweian pantheon and is a great promoter of magic. Many of his early demigods started out as

powerful wizard-priors during wars with Nicarea and Taneth. He later guided their efforts to complete an enchantment that would protect the middle empire against the "barbarian kingdoms." Their spell backfired. Though it removed the threat of Munaan's holy wars, it destroyed all of Lord Ao's demigods and removed all Lao-Kweians from Munaan. They re-appeared on the Kahuulkin world, which they immediately set about conquering. Several of the fallen demigods became deities in the process.

The Celestial Garden is a place of beauty, ringed with misty mountains that one never seems to reach, no matter how long one walks. Statues of fallen heroes and demigods adorn the many lawns, pools, and pagodas. Though often portrayed as a golden dragon-turtle, Lord Aó is pale blue with golden accents and a carapace ranging from dark blue to green.

**Followers:** The Great Turtle bestows on his followers a defense bonus against all magical attacks. They must, however, be vigilant that no harm be brought to turtles and turtlelike creatures. A failure to act could mean losing their bonus for some time.

**Priors:** Once per day, priors can dismiss damage (to themselves) from a physical blow of their choice. Preferred rituals involve burning large sticks of incense, ringing a bell, clapping their hands, and reciting verses honoring the Great Leap Forward (to the hallowed new world). Priors do not have a favored weapon, but wear armor embossed with stylized turtle shell patterns, providing a major defense bonus against dorsal attacks.



# World of Calidar



The World of Calidar features four continental masses in addition to the Great Caldera, two oceans, and a great number of seas. Land covers slightly more than one third of the planet's surface. The Prime Meridian, from the traditional point of view of the old colonial powers, runs through Ellyrion's imperial capital, Teosopolis, which places the Great Caldera at the center of the map.

During its infancy, a number of asteroids marked this world's surface, leaving features known as "eyes." During the millions of years that followed, normal erosion should have erased traces of these impacts. However, Calidar's world soul reacted in arcane ways to such phenomena and preserved the eyes, the biggest of which is the Great Caldera.

Without volcanic activity present on the land mass, this term is a misnomer linked instead with the etymologies of "cauldron" and Calidar. Very deep

beneath the center of the eyes lie the remains of asteroids, rare minerals or metals with mysterious properties. Although volcanoes and plate tectonics exist on Calidar, they are in no way comparable to Earth geology. They relate instead to the cauldron of magic at the heart of the world soul.

**Naeen:** This massive super-continent lies west of the Great Caldera, stretching 10,200 miles (16,320 km) north to south. An east-west geological fault, the Aesean Duct, separates it into two main parts: Eerien in the north and Omfall in the south. Just beneath the northern Tropic of Minotaur, the shores of the Aesean Duct are predominantly arid. Prevailing winds and Calidar's tallest mountains keep much of Eerien dry and deserted, save for nomadic tribes familiar with life in the Dread Lands. Northern Omfall features thick rain forests along the equator, gradually turning drier south of the Tropic of Centaur. Narrow bands of oceanic and *Teosian* (dry-summer/subtropical) climates

define the western shores and the Islands of Obb and Lanmarroth. Eastern continental shores are generally humid.

**Dorial:** The continent east of the Great Caldera includes three regions: Laëril, Teorcas, and Urras farthest removed, with narrow land bridges between them. Shores south of the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel support tropical or equatorial climate. Because of the lay of the coasts, Dorial tends to be more humid than Naeen. Subarctic and arctic conditions prevail in the far north.

**Bellenica:** This continent lies south of Dorial. Mountains stretch outward, almost like wheel spokes. As a result, the hinterland remains arid. As with Naeen, narrow bands of oceanic and Teosian climates define the western shores, while the northeast is prone to monsoon seasons. Part of the north qualifies as dry-tropical, while the far south reaches subarctic conditions. The Vengrim Ocean lies farther east, separating Bellenica and Dorial from Naeen.



**Mormoroth:** This continent occupies the southern pole, in close proximity to southern Omfall and Bellenica. Sea currents and winds near these two land masses are fierce and dangerous to naval and aerial navigation. Much of it remains frozen year round. It features icy mountains, and an ice pack surrounds much of the coasts.

## The Great Caldera

The region consists of a giant crater some 2,500 miles across (4,000 km). A mountainous rim surrounds great plains, with most rivers flowing toward inner seas. Colossal mountains rise at the center. Through a breach in the southern ridge, the inner seas connect with the Calderan Sea Ring surrounding the Great Caldera. A second ridge marks the outer edge of the Sea Ring, 1,000-1,500 miles (1,600-2,400 km) away, forming parts of eastern Naeon and western Dorial's coasts. The Vaelian Archipelago limits the Calderan Sea Ring in the north. The southern shores include the Arm of Ule and the Mareas Archipelago, with the Penggelan Ocean lying farther south. Dread Lands manifestations are weakest within the Caldera. The world soul gradually reasserts itself across the Calderan Sea Ring and deep beneath the ground.

Sea currents in the northern hemisphere run clockwise in general and counter-clockwise on the opposite side. Predominant winds in the Great Caldera are Westerlies. The extreme northern coast is subject instead to frigid Easterlies, while Trade Winds (from the northeast) come into effect in the Southern Calderan Sea Ring. The meridional edge of the Great Caldera is generally dry, the southeastern region being the most arid.

The region features ten colonial areas. Each of these includes one sovereign nation with, in some cases, one or more vassal states. A short description is given below for the main realms, listed alphabetically. The Kingdom of Meryath is described in detail in the next chapter. Unless stated otherwise, towns above a certain size are answerable to provincial governors or heads of state

rather than local aristocracy or neighboring land owners. Mayors and city councils are responsible for levying taxes and militias needed to defend their walls.

**Alfdaín:** Alfdaín includes lands originally under Aloreá's control, which are mostly forested. The liege state is the Matriarchy of Andolien, which occupies Alfdaín's eastern half. Its capital is Mythuín. Though Andolien elves are of the Sherandol tribe, many among them bear Meruín ancestry. The majority is dark skinned, often with fiery colored hair. They favor oak trees. Each clan follows a religious ritual to select a matriarch who represents them for thirty years. These elders spend much of their time in Mythuín at the Council House where they deliberate on matters of administration and diplomacy.

The Kingdom of Lathraël holds the southwest, centered around its capital, Lathias. Of Sherandol origins, these elves are lighter skinned and favor birch woods. They are the most hostile to any Tòrr-Gàrraidh influence on Calidar. Though it is a monarchy, druids are heavily involved as advisers at the royal palace and among the aristocracy. Their goal is to ensure the health of the forest.

Fëoros, with its residents of Elëan heritage, occupies the Elëaras Range in the northwest. It is a republic with elected representatives. The capital, Aërin is a major center high in the mountains and is famed for constructing skyships. These elves favor greater openness toward their former overseers, especially regarding trade. They frown upon gnomish activism in the foothills, which seeks to establish a separate state straddling neighboring Belledor's border.

Alfdaín's challenge is that population density must remain fairly low in order to preserve a healthy balance with nature. Though elven demography progresses slowly, it does result in a desire for more space. This mindset is particularly strong among elves of Andolien and Lathraël, who see humans and dwarves as short-sighted wastrels bent on stripping bare their lands for the sake of farming, mining, and urban sprawl. The

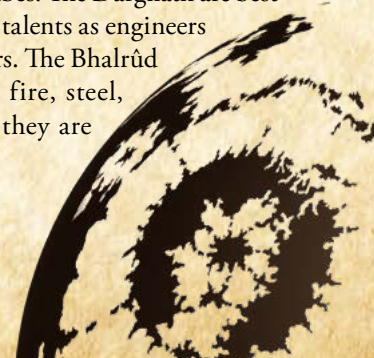
elves' other concern is any sign of Calidar's world soul endeavoring to reassert itself in the deepest parts of their forests. Of all realms in the Great Caldera, Alfdaín is the most likely location for that. Rangers are tasked with watching the woods with this in mind.

Cool and rainy, Alfdaín's west coast supports an oceanic climate. The remainder of the region features continental weather, though more temperate along the inner sea.

**Araldûr:** The dwarves of Kragdûr claim this mountain island. Urban centers in the valleys are home to a mixed population alongside the dwarven majority, including humans, gnomes, and Calderan fellfolk. Mountain cities are mostly subterranean, with immense halls and deep shafts carved directly from the rock. Light and heat comes from stones mined in the depths, which are embedded in walls, ceilings, and floors. Water from melted glacier ice or pumped from underground sources flows from the top levels, feeding fountains, canals, and breathtaking waterfalls. Great forges lie at the hearts of these cities, where dwarves fashion most of what they need. Though the Araldûras err on the side of caution when dealing with Kragdûr, they do trade gems, gold, finished goods, and raw materials for *blackstone* (preferred to power their forges) and other minerals not found on Calidar. Commerce is brisk with Belledor and Osriel, especially for food and wood.

As they explored the depths beneath Araldûr, the dwarves found traces of the celestial body that created the Great Caldera. It soon became clear that steel alloys using the outer-world metal demonstrated unique properties. Lightweight, strong, and devoid of brittleness, *araldium* personifies the old colony. It is the one thing dwarves will not willingly trade with anyone, especially Kragdûr.

The Great Mountain is a kingdom held by three main tribes. The Dârgilath are best known for their talents as engineers and stone crafters. The Bhalrûd work best with fire, steel, and *blackstone*; they are







## Legend

Prevailing winds
 Warm sea current
 Cold sea current

**Rainforest:** annual average temperature exceeds 18°C/64°F. Monsoon rains take place during Solteane and Drachean in the northern hemisphere, and during Deirdea and Seithen in the southern hemisphere.

**Savanna:** semi-arid to semi-humid climate with average temperatures above 18°C/64°F year round and a pronounced dry season. Monsoon rains may occur on the Ebon Spur, along the Arm of Ule, and the Plains of Tan.

**Scrubland & Steppes:** extremely hot summers and mild to warm winters near the tropics. Hot and dry summers, and cold winters with some snowfall prevail farther north. Both regions are subject to noticeable temperature swings between day and night, as much as 13°C/23°F.

**Desert:** temperatures vary substantially between day and night; summers reach up to 45°C/113°F, and winters as low as 0°C/32°F, depending on how close to the tropic the region lies. Rainfall is negligible.

**Teosian:** hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters prevail. Temperatures are generally moderate, with a comparatively small range between the winter low and summer high. Snowfall is very rare at low altitude.

**Westlands:** oceanic climate brings plentiful precipitation year round, with cool/temperate weather.

**Eastlands:** rainfall (and sometimes snowfall) associated with large storms prevail during generally mild winters. Summers are hot, with thunderstorms and occasional tropical cyclones.

**Heartlands:** these regions feature variable weather patterns, with hot summers, cold winters, and regular precipitation throughout the year. Summers are warmer in the south. Winters are harshest farther north.

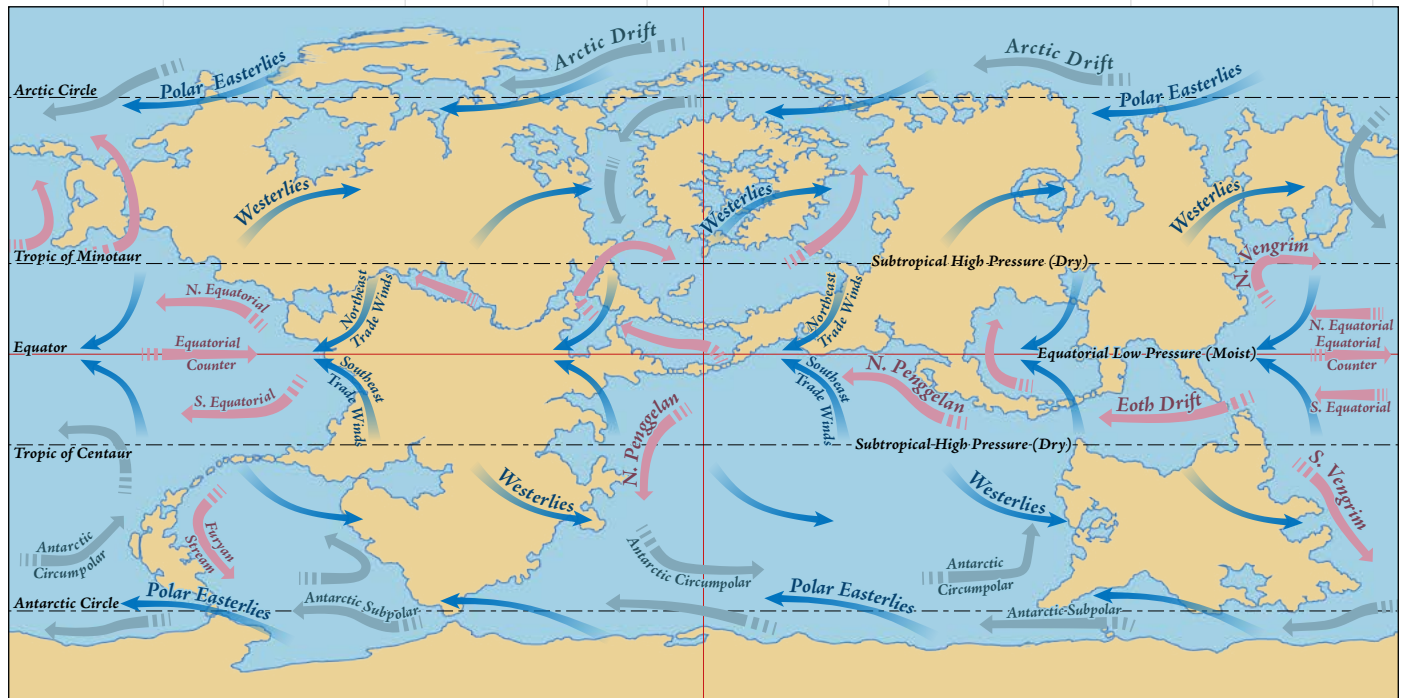
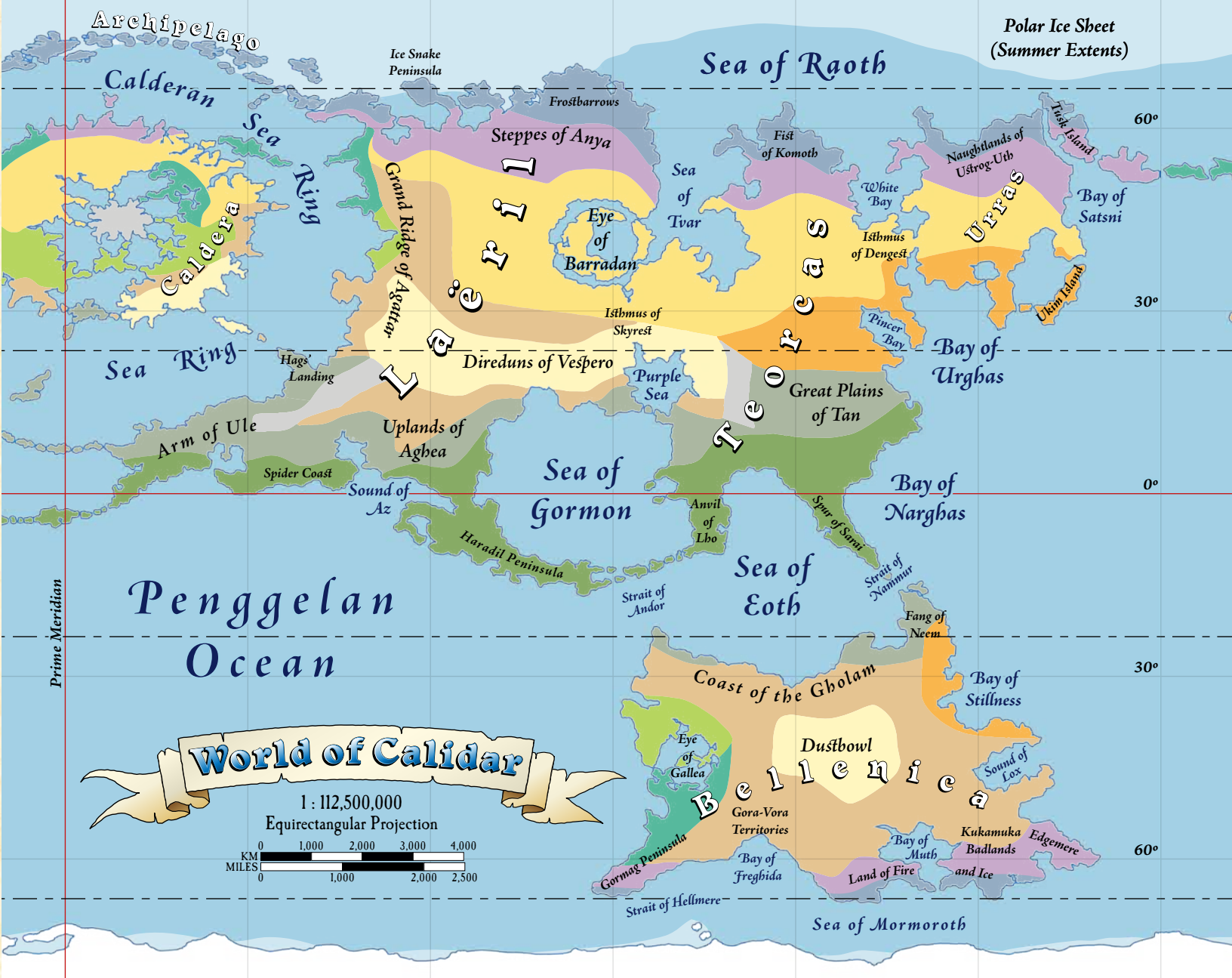
**Taiga & Boreal Forests:** these regions receive little precipitation. Summers exceed 10°C/50°F for up to three months, with permafrost in large parts of the area. Winters last up to six months, averaging below 0°C/32°F.

**Tundra:** one month is warm enough to melt snow, with an annual average temperature never more than 10°C/50°F, and extremely cold winters. Rainfall and snowfall are generally slight, yet swamps and bogs are common.

**Alpine:** above the tree line, temperature never exceeds 10°C/50°F. Depending on altitude or geographic location, highland conditions can be compared to Heartlands or Tundra, although alpine soil is well drained.

**Monsoon Regions:** during local summer seasons, winds drive equatorial rainfalls as far away as Naeen's Bay of Jeeb and southern Khargandal, as well as Dorial's Bay of Urgas and the northern fringes of Bellenia.







# World of Calidar



staunch opponents of Kragdûr influence in the Great Caldera. The Hâradhir are most skilled with commerce and the accumulation of wealth, and support better relations with their former overseers. A fourth tribe named the Khôr-Halad, a minority in Araldûr, includes descendants of the Kragdûras warrior caste. They are honor-bound to serve King Rothbrîm II. Monarchs are elected for life from one of the three main tribes, in the order listed above. Calderan dwarves are more cheerful and welcoming than their off-world kin, and enjoy a working relationship with the elves of Alfdáin.

Climate in Araldûr is generally alpine, save for the coasts which are cool and rainy.

**Belledor:** Fellfolk rule this land, the last sovereign state to claim its place in the Great Caldera. Initially, fellfolk tribes gradually retreated

from warmer latitudes as colonization gained ground. Colonial powers never conquered this cold region. Instead, many of the fellfolk who'd been employed as manual laborers in other colonies came to this inhospitable land and infused it with their off-world cultures, creating one valuing peace, good food, pipeweed, and quaint comfortable homes. These so-called Calderan fellfolk abandoned their wild ways and erected conventional cities. All other nations of the Great Caldera have recognized the Republic of Belledor as a legitimate state. Its capital, Seahollow, is now a major trading port.

Generally seen with sympathy there, gnomes are most common in the foothills. Those of Alorean ancestry generally dwell in the west, while those of Kragdûras lineage remain north. The republic indirectly supports gnomish activism, especially if elves were also willing to pledge a piece

of their land. Seahollow regards a friendly gnomish realm as a desirable buffer between Belledor and expansion-minded Alfdáin. Encroachment has been a problem.

With continental weather south of the Belledor Rim, and with subarctic conditions north of it, climate in these parts is harsh. Mountains and foothills are snow-bound four to five months per year. Rocky and desolate, the northern coast is almost uninhabited.

**Caldwen:** This is a constitutional magiocracy with rulers descended from Munaan's desert wizards of Gandaria. Those who became Caldweners believed that magic and sun were different entities, thus creating a conflict with Soltan's followers. Over time, members of the forbidden *Maghia* sect descended upon the part of the Great Caldera claimed by Gandarian wizards. Away from the Holy Potentate of Nicarea's scrutiny, they reinforced their influence there. When Ellyrion revolted against Munaan, Caldwa the Wise, Hagiarch of the *Maghia*, exploited the opportunity and joined the rebellion. She died in the conflict, and the new realm was named in her honor. She remains a revered figure.

To be a landed noble in Caldwen, one must be a wizard. The realm is divided among eight arcane colleges (Abjuration, Alteration, Conjunction, Enchantment, Illusion, Invocation, Divination, and Necromancy), plus the Grand Wizardry around the capital city. Each college's territory accommodates households based on the scope of their magical achievements, the most powerful residing in the wealthiest dominions, the lesser ones in smaller, more remote domains. Wizardly households are therefore required to relocate to appropriate estates when they become available. Titles are hereditary, so long as a direct heir qualifies as a wizard. Land associated with titles returns to the magiocracy's administration before it can be handed to another qualifying mage.

Colleges administrate lands and towns lying outside wizards' titular domains, except for Arcanial, the capital city, which remains



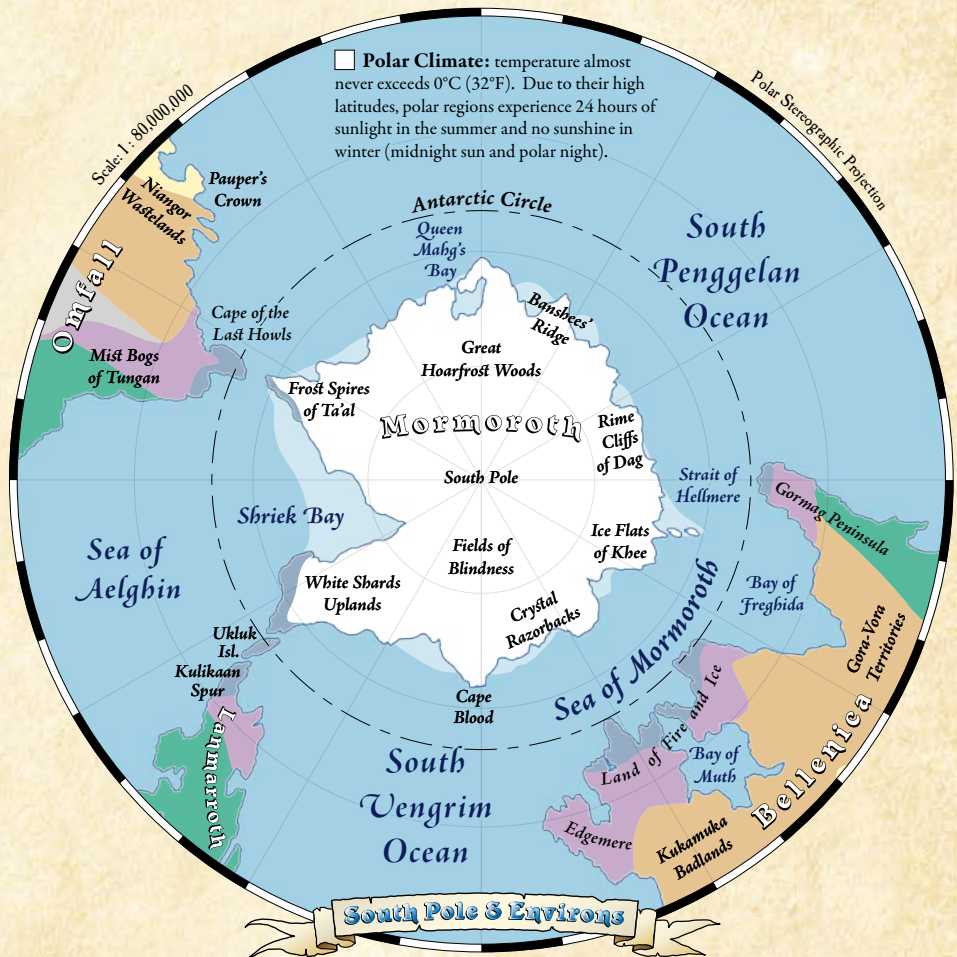
the High Wizard Chancellor's titular estate. Titled wizards elect college councilors from their own ranks. Landed gentry always has a voice in the *Upper Chamber of Magi*, in the capital city, while landless aristocracy, when elected by peers, is awarded a seat in the *Lower Chamber of Sorcerers*. The head of state is the High Wizard Chancellor. A polytheistic clergy has legal representatives in the upper chamber.

Climate in Caldwen is oceanic on the west coast, and mostly continental everywhere else except along the southeastern coast, which is driest.

**Ellyrion:** The Holy Potentates of Nicarea founded a major colony in this region of the Great Caldera. Ellyrion's capital, Teosopolis, is the point from which the cult of Teos spread. Over time, faith again became the source of conflict. The Potentates always advocated their beliefs in the most absolute and literal terms—*Teos is great, and faith in Him ever shall be whole*. In other words, one honors no one else but Teos. Trouble in Ellyrion came with the establishment of a pantheon of holy figures representing Teos's servants. A pillar of early Nicarean faith is that Munaani epic heroes could never ascend to demigodhood under Teos; instead, they became servants of their spiritual patron when they died. The consequence of Ellyrian heresy was that it enabled the existence of demigods serving Teos. Yet, when such demigods died in the service of Teos, they still did not become gods, but rather His Greater Heralds. Nonetheless, the Potentates saw this thinking as unforgivable blasphemy and a weakening of the faith, which led to war.

Colonial conflicts between Calidar and its moons were very costly because they required lunar empires to sail fleets across the Great Vault. Expeditionary forces were also prone to joining rebels because of common kinship or personal beliefs. Ellyrion's refusal to conform to Munaani orthodoxy also became the signal for other colonies to break away from their off-world overseers.

This region was originally split among three provinces. Ellyrikos, now the liege



realm ruled from Teosopolis, holds Ellyrion's southern half. It is an imperial stratocracy. Theocracy of Antiatis, the most hostile to Nicarean influence on Calidar, lies in the northeast, with Temenopolis as its capital. The sophocracy of Drakotiris extends to the northwest, and established Helioklios as its capital city. The sages are more open to rekindling relations with the former overseer. Ellyrion as a whole maintains strong ties with the nearby realms of Meryath and Phrydias. Teosopolis tends to see Osriel and Narwan as rightful vassals of Ellyrion, with which neither Osriel nor Narwan agrees. Both Alfdain and Ellyrikos are interested in expanding their lands. Relations are therefore cool among these two powers.

Climate in Ellyrion is mostly similar to Teosian weather, gradually becoming more arid along the southeast coast, with alpine conditions in the Erebos Range.

**Meryath:** See next chapter.

**Narwan:** A Tanethian sect of Arunte's faithful resented Munaani law, which enforced a number of unpopular religious views and practices. Following pressure from the Holy Potentates of Nicarea, its members migrated to what was then Eastern Ellyrion. Over time, they became the majority. When war broke out between Teosopolis and the Potentates, the sect's followers joined the rebellion and established the Emirates of Narwan. With Nicarea overthrown, the new realm adopted a style true to its own culture and beliefs.

Though they fought the same war, the emirates never agreed with the tenets of Ellyrion's beliefs. Narwani see divine servants as prophets, and they do not give their spiritual patron a physical form—Soltan in the sky is the only



# World of Calidar

divine manifestation needed. Relations between Ellyrion and Narwan are cool. However, Narwan enjoys commercial and diplomatic ties with neighboring Osriel.

This region is the driest in the Great Caldera, which is part of the reason why early Narwani selected it. Although some rain graces the western shores, the rest of the land draws its water mostly from wells. Rivers enable farming along the banks, but their level drops significantly during summer. Aridity is seen as a blessing: the light of Soltan purifies Narwan's hallowed soil, and plentiful water can be found by those with the true faith. Prevailing winds blow from the northeast, over the Osirim and Nizarim ranges. These are weak, dry winds whose moisture remains trapped in the mountains.

Narwan features five emirates. The lead emirate is Ad-Dhimah, which holds the capital city of Tel Al-Maksur, a military stronghold. The Caliphate of Fuscat is crucial, centering around the holy city of Ta'izz. The Emirate of Al-Barami is best known for its pureblood horses and racing camels, traded mostly at Khosab. The Emirate of Jhufar has a merchant and skyship-building center at Manzibar. The last emirate is Taiffah, on the east coast, with its cities of Ibbar and Al-Mukaidah. These last two are the homes of Narwani sorcerers. The nation is run by a council of wise men chosen by the emirs and advised by the Caliph of Fuscat. Currently the Emir of Ad-Dhimah, the Grand Vizier acts as the enforcer of the council's decisions. Towns are answerable to local emirs.

**Nordheim:** Varangians from Munaan began settling Nordheim independently from the Holy Potentates of Nicarea. Its narrow valleys and fjords became hideouts for sea and sky raiders. With its inclement weather and forbidding terrain, the area escaped Munaan's attention.

Nordheim includes three realms.

Steinfeld is by far the richest, and therefore the liege realm. Its royal capital city is Grimsvik.

The population includes

a good number of dwarves who adopted the local culture. They are the builders of a tunnel across the realm's narrowest point, at the border with Caldwen. A source of considerable income, this tunnel is a water canal enabling navigation from the Mørkling Sound to the Northern Calderan Sea Ring. Bergmark occupies the remote mountain areas northwest of Steinfeld. Its capital city, Bjørnstad, is a religious center, though the region has become the domain of *arkothropes*: people who favor bears and can occasionally turn into them. It is ruled by a council of jarls. The third realm, Frostholm, includes three islands north of Steinfeld. The capital city, Nordhavn, is one of the northernmost cities in the Great Caldera. Frostholm sorcerers are notorious for their skills at summoning ice spirits. Curiously, Frostholmers come closest among Calderan people to understanding the nature of the Dread Lands. Rumors suggest that the people of these remote islands are as wild and dangerous as tribal fellfolk.

None of these three realms want anything to do with Munaan. They trade with visiting Wayfarers, such trade being a cause of concern and grief in both Belledor and Caldwen. Steinfeld, however, maintains solid ties with Araldûr. Aside from being hardy warriors, Nordheimers also do well as fishermen, whalers, and hunters of great sea beasts. Dwarven engineering gives them the ability to build impressive strongholds and cities as worthy as those in the south, despite the harsh climate.

The southern coast is generally cool and rainy, with snow and ice covering the mountains. The northern side is continental to subarctic. Frostholm experiences cool, rainy summers and heavy snow in winter.

**Osriel:** Here lies a great merchant state. This peculiar land does not reflect a specific Munaan civilization, but rather a kaleidoscope of ethnicities and cultures encompassing all resident races of the Great Caldera. It is rumored that some even came from other universes. Power in Osriel is divided between landed gentry and guild masters. The former are merchant princes, while the

latter are elected by members of their guilds to administrate their business and represent them politically.

Aristocracy and upper ranks of the clergy debate matters of government and laws at Crowns Garden. Guild masters convene at the adjoining Red Robes Court. These are palatial buildings at the center of the capital city, Lorical. Both bodies vote on important decisions. Matters involving general diplomacy and the conduct of war require a two-thirds majority at Crowns Garden, in addition to a positive vote among guild masters. Matters relevant to commerce and trade demand a two-thirds majority at Red Robes Court, in addition to a nod from the princes. All other matters, such as taxation and common law, only require support in both houses. The Doge of Osriel, elected by both bodies, is responsible for executing decisions issued by Garden and Court. Military leadership is generally limited to aristocracy, but mercenary generals can be hired, especially for city militias. Experienced warriors abound in this land. Relations with Caldwen and Narwan are good, while those with Ellyrion and Nordheim remain cool. Sky raiders from the northern reaches have been a threat to merchant airships.

The mosaic-like nature of its inhabitants and their desire for plurality among faiths lie at the heart of Osriel. The polytheistic clergy owns small estates, much like the princes do. Though autonomous, urban centers are subject to decisions from Garden and Court. Aristocracy and the clergy often own private palaces (and temples) in cities nearest their lands. Trade guilds' activities are exclusively urban, leading to fierce rivalries among large towns. Petty wars between the latter, in association with neighboring aristocracies, are not uncommon.

Wealth, prestige, and faith define cities, usually resulting in the promotion of art and architecture as an expression of success. The symbol of Lorical is a great tower with seven oak trees in a hanging garden on the top. It belongs to a princely family of seven brothers. The story is that the tower



represents deep-rooted wealth, rebirth, and sustained growth over time. Legend has it that the trees' health is tied to the family's wealth.

Osriel's weather is mostly Teosian, except on the east coast, which is drier as a result of the neighboring Osrian Alps. Mountain conditions prevail at high altitude. Rain is more frequent along the west coast or in the Alps' western foothills.

**Phrydias:** This small rival of Osriel's merchant princes occupies the island south of Araldûr. It is the land of half-elves. Alfdáin elves see them as lesser cousins, while Ellyrians once regarded with suspicion half-elves who dwelled in their northern province.

When conflict with Munaan erupted, half-elves left their clash-prone mountains and foothills, and invaded Phrydias, at the time a colony of the swamp kings of Bongor. The invasion succeeded, and the half-elves expelled the colonial viceroy. Cautious to avoid the discrimination they'd faced in their native lands, half-elves became one with the local population. Though half-elfen features are dominant, a darker skin color and ethnic Bongorese traits became the norm. Other important communities of half-elves can also be found in Nordheim, Caldwen, and Meryath. Phrydians are best known for their shrewd merchants and soothsayers.

Phrydias grew to become a federated *semocracy*—ruled by oracles. The nation comprises autonomous provinces, each administered by a triumvirate consisting of an elected commoner, an aristocrat, and the head of the prevailing local clergy. The elected commoner cannot own land, but must be a native of the province and able to read and write. A commoner's tenure lasts four years. Noble houses are those owning a tenth or more of a province's land; the one with the greatest amount selects its representative for the triumvirate, usually the head of the household or an immediate family member. The highest-ranking prior of the faith with the most followers in a province represents the clergy. A 2-to-1

vote is generally sufficient to resolve a disagreement. Each triumvirate appoints an oracle to sit at the Council of Signs in the capital city of Phaeroth for a seven-year tenure. Soothsaying is a licensed profession unconnected to priors. The council expresses whether a course of action is beneficial. A former oracle elected for life by peers, the Grand Lector resolves ties and executes decisions based on the council's premonitions. This head of state handles matters of foreign diplomacy, the military, laws, disagreements between provinces, and federal taxation. Elected mayors are answerable to triumvirates rather than land owners. Phrydian bureaucracy can be daunting to those unprepared to deal with it.

Weather is Teosian throughout, more humid on the west coast and cooler at altitude. Sea currents from the Shallows rotate clockwise around the island.

## Historical Timeline

Calidar's Common Era is recognized as beginning with the first encounter between off-world races. Time is counted forward or back from that point. Stone-age fellfolk appeared on Calidar more than 3 million years BCE. Stone-age gnomes came to prominence on the moons a million years later. Gnomes engendered dwarves and elves at about 1.5 million years BCE. Humans appeared on Munaan 1 million years BCE.

Earliest Dread Lands manifestations occurred 700,000 years BCE. Up until the Common Era, lunar races gradually learned to master stone, fire, metals, and magic. By 10,000 BCE, off-world races were the dominant life forms on their respective moons. First evidence of *seitha* crude on the moons occurred circa 5,000 BCE. Modern elves built atmospheric skyships by 200 BCE. Alorean gnomes mastered the refining of *seitha* by 5 BCE, heralding the next age.

### Common Era Begins (1-195 CE):

In Year One, Alorean skyship *Elvenstar* reaches Munaan and makes first contact. Humans steal a small quantity of *seitha* from Alorean visitors. Their alchemists unveil the

refining process. Munaan skyships later reach Kragdûr. Cautious, they leave soon afterward. Elves learn about the dwarves and send a skyship. Following an elven faux-pas, their vessel is captured, leading dwarven priors to unveil the uses of *seitha*.

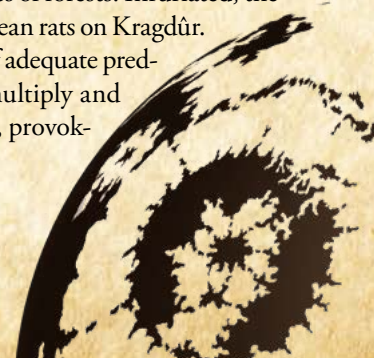
During the first two centuries, the three lunar races build outposts on Calidar. All are destroyed as a result of the Dread Lands reclaiming their lands, enemy raids, or fellfolk attacks. Dwarves and elves quickly learn to fight running battles across the Great Vault, razing each other's outposts and launching punitive expeditions. Meanwhile, Nicarea establishes itself as the leading power on Munaan.

### Infighting and Rivalries (196-372 CE):

Two centuries follow during which Holy Potentates of Munaan extend their faith and power to neighboring realms of Taneth, Gandaria, Varangia, Aó, and Bongor. Taneth is first to fall. A small community of Varangians escapes to an island northeast of the Great Caldera (207 CE). The remaining Varangians vanish from Munaan and reappear in the Fringe (278 CE). The people of Aó vanish as well, reaching Lao-Kwei in 346 CE. The first invasion of Bongor fails. The second bogs down until 358 CE when the last of the swamp kings submits.

Elven clans experience frictions over control of ancestral lands. Gnomes are caught in the fight and forced to choose sides. Elves grow suspicious of gnomes. Meanwhile, dwarves continue raiding Alorean. A scapegoat from the Hâradhir clan is accused of treachery after a failed invasion (281 CE). Over time, the dispute widens to other clans. Kragdûras gnomes are implicated and incur dwarven suspicion.

Elves destroy several of the dwarves' clan forges (326 CE). Kragdûr retaliates and dumps poison into Alorean rivers, destroying large stretches of forests. Infuriated, the elves release Alorean rats on Kragdûr. In the absence of adequate predators, the rats multiply and ruin food stores, provok-







# The Great Caldera







# World of Calidar

ing disastrous famine and disease. This dwarven plague spreads to Munaan and from there reaches Alorean in 367 CE.

As the three lunar empires grapple with dwindling populations, their economies collapse. Calidaran outposts are abandoned. Ghülean orcs make their first appearance in 372 CE.

**Dark Ages (372-699 CE):** Orcish devastation sparks more than three centuries of Dark Ages on the three moons. Conflict and lawlessness reign while lunar empires attempt to eradicate stranded orcish tribes from their worlds. Gnomes of both moons suffer the most. The secret of *seitha* is lost.

**Renaissance (700-795 CE):** Munaan is first to recover from its Dark Ages. As Nicarea reasserts its control of Taneth and Bongor, Gandaria, Inti-Suyu, and Talikai ally and attack Nicarea. Bongor betrays its liege and puts Taneth's capital, Tenkara, to the torch (711 CE). The coalition is defeated later at the crucial battle of Six Crowns, and Bongor collapses amid civil war. The coalition submits to Nicarea (734 CE). A golden age begins on Munaan as better farming methods are found and population reaches higher levels.

Dwarves emerge from chaos in 728 CE. The Kragdûras warrior caste now dominates all others after centuries of clan warfare and Alorean rodent eradication. Their clans discover the formula for *darkpowder* produced from native *blackstones*. Toting firearms, they enforce a Pax Kragdûrana on their moon, and mount primitive cannons on their skyships (768 CE). A High King seizes power and orders the clans to rebuild the old empire, lost forges, and the great mines. At peace at last, dwarven population grows.

Alorean slowly recovers from its Dark Ages (757 CE). Forests have healed, and the clans reassert control over their ancestral lands. The Sherandol discover the art of empathy with the sylvan world. Elëan clans create living skyships. Tolarin sages suggest establishing the Tòrr-Gàrraidh as a way to better manage

population growth on Alorean and preserve woodlands (786 CE).

Meanwhile, Frostholmers build outposts on the Great Caldera's mainland (715 CE). Dread Lands fail to react. A stronghold is built at Grimsvik (759 CE). On Munaan, the Nicarean Inquisition begins its work. A Munaani monk recovers lost *seitha* secrets, after which the refining of *seitha* resumes. Phobosion "the Mad Monk" shares the old knowledge with elves and dwarves while spreading the faith on their worlds (765 CE). He's later burned at the stake. Munaani explorers find that Dread Lands manifestations are weakest in the Great Caldera.

## Age of Colonialism (796-1200 CE)

**796:** First Munaani settlements of Ellyrion and Narwan. Massacres and diseases decimate fellfolk tribes during the next two centuries.

**799:** Alorean skyships observe Ellyrion and conclude the Dread Lands have become weak in the Great Caldera.

**800:** Kragdûras engineers develop steam power.

**813:** First Alorean settlements of Alfdáin. The elves fortify an outpost at Mythuín.

**821:** First Kragdûras settlements of Araldûr. The dwarves begin building a fortress at Hamarfold, using their newly found steam-power knowledge.

**837:** Ellyrion completes a great temple at Teosopolis.

**849:** First Bongorese settlements of Phrydias.

**851:** Nicarea assigns viceroys to administer three provinces in Ellyrion: Ellyrikos, Antiatis, and Drakotiris.

**858:** First Talikai settlements of Meryath. Islanders clash with Narwani migrants over the eastern island.

**865:** Eastern Alfdáin tribes adopt matriarchy as their form of government, leaving patriarchs in charge of hunting and warfare. Disputes oppose matriarchs and western tribal elders.

**866:** Ellyrian expeditionary force sides with Meryath's Talikai against a Narwani occupation force.

**867:** First settlements of Osriel from

Narwan (southern lands), Ellyrion (western coast), Alfdáin (central hinterlands), and Araldûr (in the mountains). Alorean, Munaan, and Kragdûr dispute each other's claims over the Osriel region.

**869:** Narwan and Ellyrion clash over eastern Meryath. The Holy Potentate of Nicarea, Kosyas II, *Lawbringer*, orders both sides to return home. Nicarean troops occupy eastern Meryath.

**872:** Southwestern Alfdáin tribes negotiate with Alorean to become part of a separate province.

**876:** Fellfolk tribes hold the north. Shamans manage to awaken the Dread Lands in that area.

**883:** Araldûras dwarves begin mining *araldium*.

**885:** First settlements of Nav-Gandar in the Calderan northeast. Forbidden books are smuggled from Munaan and hidden in caves beneath an outpost at Arcanial.

**887:** Northwestern Alfdáin tribes negotiate with Alorean to become part of a separate province.

**890:** Kragdûr seizes all *araldium* mines and makes the forging or use of this precious metal illegal without an official warrant. Waves of discontent rock Araldûr.

**894:** Dwarven households emigrate to the Nordheim region and offer their services to mainland Frostholmers in exchange for mining rights. Frostholm wizards oppose the decision. Local clan rulers decide otherwise.

**934:** Construction begins on a great library in Arcanial, now a vibrant city of Gandarian magi.

**962:** Construction of the Great Library of Arcanial is completed. Nav-Gandar is organized along the lines of Colleges of Magic.

**994:** Northern fellfolk shamans fail to send Dread Lands spirits into Alfdáin, Nordheim, or Araldûr.

**1011:** Southern fellfolk have either died or submitted. Remnants of the tribes survive as paid laborers or indentured servants. Animism remains strong.

**1018:** Scandal rocks the Great Library of Arcanial when forbidden books are





found there. Holy Potentate Kosyas III, *Will of Teos*, orders the library burned to the ground.

**1023:** The use of oracles and astrologers becomes prevalent among colonial Phrydian aristocracy. Construction begins on the Great Oracle at Phaeroth.

**1028:** Frostholm raiders pillage towns in northern Alfdáin.

**1034:** Gandarian necromancer Darbyes the Black assassinates Kosyas III on Munaan and escapes the imperial palace.

**1036:** Necromancer Darbyes is captured in Arcanial, flayed, and burned at the stake. His head is planted on a pike above the site of the ruined library. Unrest rocks the colony.

**1043:** The Holy Potentate Kosyas IV, *Firebrand*, orders Nicarean Inquisitors to the Calidaran colonies.

**1044:** Ellyrian and Alfdáin settlers clash. **1045:** Nicarean Inquisition begins its work in Nav-Gandar, Narwan, Meryath, and Ellyrion, spreading fear and resentment.

**1056:** Fellfolk households migrate north, taking with them what they learned in the colonies, including different spiritual beliefs.

**1058:** Frostholm raiders pillage towns in Nav-Gandar.

**1061:** Wizardly households migrate from Nav-Gandar into Osriel lands to escape Frostholm raiders and the Nicarean Inquisition's scrutiny.

**1067:** Frostholm raiders pillage towns in Osriel.

**1083:** Dread Lands weaken in the north. Encouraged by fellfolk migrants, tribal elders meet in a great palaver to decide on a new course of action.

**1085:** The Great Oracle of Phrydias is built. Colonial Phrydias experiences a cultural and economic golden age.

**1092:** Frostholmers find work as mercenaries in faraway Narwan.

**1094:** Northern Fellfolk tribes establish the Republic of Belledor, centered around its capital, Seahollow. Holy Potentate

Teosarkha II, *The Twice-Anointed*, immediately recognizes the new state, which she sees as a convenient presence in the back yards of troublesome Alfdáin and Nordheim.

**1,100:** Kragdûras dwarves develop the Fetzgrim engine, named for its inventor. Steam-powered drums filled with *force stones* enable very heavy weights to be lifted in the air.

**1112:** Dwarves begin the construction of the Dvergarveg, a tunnel across the land bridge between Nav-Gandar and Nordheim.

**1127:** Fellfolk of Belledor adopt a curious faith mixing animist shamanism with beliefs in specific deities (aliases from other pantheons).

**1130:** Frictions among Frostholmers cause a split between clans.

**1138:** Clans from mainland Nordheim take over the northern islands. They establish their capital at Nordhavn.



# World of Calidar

**1144:** Unable to reason with the sorcerers of Frostholm, Nordheim mainlanders hail the new Kingdom of Steinfeld centered around Grimsvik.

**1158:** Last recorded Dread Lands manifestation in Belledor. Migrant gnomes of Araldûr and Alfdaín form a community in Seahollow's poorest quarter.

**1188:** Söldor elves take control of the Tòrr-Gàrraidh and enforce their authority upon the whole of Alorean.

**1200:** With some gnomish assistance, Belledoran fellfolk build their first skyship, the *World Soul*.

## Wars of Independence (1201-1235 CE)

**1201:** The Nicarean Inquisition condemns the honoring of holy servants of Teos in Antiatis. The Golden Temple of Temenopolis is razed and its priors flayed and burned at the stake.

**1203:** The whole region of Ellyrion descends into civil war.

**1204:** Nicarea's Grand Inquisitor is captured at Teosion and fed to pigs.

**1205:** Holy Potentate Teosophraktes V, *the Steel-Hearted*, sends a great fleet to regain control of Teosopolis. Nicarean marines sack the colonial capital.

**1206:** Ellyrian rebels release magical termites in Teosopolis's skyport. The imperial fleet is ruined. Part of the crew switches sides; the remainder is imprisoned. The Holy Potentate loses face as Munaan's *seitha* reserves are at their lowest.

**1207:** Talikai settlers side with Ellyrion and expel Nicarean occupation forces from eastern Meryath.

**1208:** Narwan demands help from Munaan to throw out the islanders from eastern Meryath. Facing mounting unrest on Munaan, Teosophraktes refuses. Infuriated, the Narwani eject their Nicarean viceroy and claim independence.

**1209:** A faction of disgruntled generals deposes Teosophraktes in favor of a rival cousin, dubbed Polemophyles I, *The Righteous*. Civil war

begins on Munaan between loyalists and rebels.

**1210:** Narwani agitators in Osriel advocate revolt against Munaan.

**1211:** Alorean skyships take advantage of Munaan's current troubles to expand their holdings in Osriel.

**1212:** Nav-Gandarians overthrow their Nicarean viceroy and claim their independence under Caldwa the Wise's leadership. Loyalists are hunted down in the streets. The lucky ones escape on skyships.

**1213:** Worried about the elves' sudden expansion into Osriel, Kragdûras skyships intervene to expand their own possessions there.

**1214:** Elves and dwarves clash over control of the Free City of Lorical. They are now formally at war with each other.

**1215:** Desirous not to squander its own precious *seitha*, the Tòrr-Gàrraidh orders Alfdaín to build skyships and wage war locally against Araldûr. Discontent spreads among the matriarchs.

**1216:** Kragdûr orders Araldûras dwarves to prosecute the war against Alfdaín. *Araldium* miners are bought out in the name of imperial defense. Resentment is rampant in the mountain colony.

**1217:** Half-elven secessionists of Ellyrion and Alfdaín secretly convene and devise a daring plan.

**1218:** Half-elves build a tiny army and invade Phrydias. Oracles determine that world events suggest an alliance with the half-elves. The majority of the population sides with the invaders and overthrows their Nicarean viceroy. Loyalist troops surrender and join the rebellion.

**1219:** Nordheim skyships offer their services as mercenaries to the highest bidders. Half-elven migration to Phrydias begins.

**1220:** Hâradhir dwarves mutiny against Kragdûras commanders on the eve of an air battle with Alfdaín skyships. At dawn, they hail the approaching elves and announce their desire for peace. Sherandol crews betray their Alorean commanders and turn their vessels around.

**1221:** Kragdûras and Alorean loyalist

forces begin purges among the military of their respective colonies. Gnomes on both sides seem to be involved. Accusations of treachery abound.

**1222:** Sherandol matriarchs quietly send an emissary to Hamarfold to signify they do not wish war. Araldûras clan leaders strike a bargain with the emissary. Their seditious activities become public, and the mountain colony revolts against its off-world overseer.

**1223:** Sherandol matriarchs honor their side of the bargain with Araldûras clan leaders, and revolt against the Tòrr-Gàrraidh.

**1224:** Nordheim dwarves complete the Dvergarveg.

**1225:** Nicarean generals send a new fleet to repossess the *Jewel of the Empire*, Ellyrion. A combined force from Ellyrion, Meryath, Caldwen, and Osriel intercepts the attackers. Caldwa the Wise is killed during the battle, but the Nicarean armada heads back home.

**1226:** Loyalists overthrow Polemophyles I and execute him along with supporting generals. Teosophraktes recovers the imperial throne. Wichipaw horsemen pillage Nicarean wasteland communities.

**1227:** The Tòrr-Gàrraidh blames the gnomes for inciting the Calidaran revolt. It declares them a lesser race, negates their rights, and enslaves them.

**1228:** Kragdûras scout ships are spotted near Alorean.

**1229:** The Tòrr-Gàrraidh uses powerful charms to subjugate gnomes. Some are sent to infiltrate Araldûr and Kragdûr, to spy on the dwarves and sabotage their skyships.

**1230:** Alorean scout ships are spotted near Kragdûr.

**1231:** The Tòrr-Gàrraidh and King Fohrbrand II of Kragdûr both postpone striking back at Calidar, warily eyeing each other's fleets and their limited reserves of *seitha*.

**1232:** Meryath adventurers sneak into Nicarea and destroy much of the *seitha* recovered there since the 1206 event.

**1233:** Teosophraktes is assassinated and succeeded by his daughter, Teosophylakta I. She signs a peace treaty with the former colonies in exchange for the return of





loyalist priors, troops, and their skyships. With them, she rebuilds imperial authority on Munaan.

**1234:** Kragdûras dwarves unmask Alorean gnomes as spies. In doubt, they deny all rights to their own native gnomes, and blackmail some to spy on Alfdáin and Alorean elves.

**1237:** Ghüle reappears in the Soltan Ephemeris. Calidar and its moons are better prepared. Though most capitals suffer significant damage and the orcs reap their share of slaves and booty, invaders suffer massive casualties. Kragdûr and Aloreia sacrifice their *seitha* reserves to intercept gröns when they appear in their skies.

**1241:** Deadlocked, the Tòrr-Gàrraidh and Kragdûr reluctantly sign a truce, without formally acknowledging the status of Calidaran colonies. A fragile peace follows until current days.

## Calidar at Peace (1242-1512 CE)

**1250:** All Calidaran parties involved agree not to interfere with the affairs of Osriel settlers. An independent republic is established at Lorical to handle local administration and solve territorial claims.

**1263:** Satisfied that Sherandol matriarchs have averted war, Alfdáin's two other provinces recognize their leadership and pay homage.

**1265:** Concerned with their neighbors' ascendancy, Ellyrion's northern provinces

formally recognize Ellyrikos as the liege realm.

**1275:** Adventurers uncover a den of werebears in the far northern mountains of Steinfeld.

**1282:** Disappointed with their revolutionary council's ability to rule, Araldûras dwarves elect their first king, Rothbrím I. Kragdûras monarch Fohrbrand II ignores the matter.

**1296:** Nav-Gandar officially adopts Caldwen as its nation's name, changes its alphabet, and begins teaching a new language.

**1311:** Werebear disease takes hold in the far northern mountains of Steinfeld.

**1313:** Alorean skyships are fitted with organic weaponry.

**1328:** Grimsvik launches the *Great Bear-Hunting Expedition*.

**1397:** Werebears of Nordheim rid their mountains of Steinfeld armies and claim their independence. They establish the Kingdom of Bergmark and celebrate in their new capital city, Bjørnstad.

**1412:** Steinfeld agrees to protect Bergmark as a vassal state, so long as *arkothropy* remains strictly confined within its borders.

**1413:** Worried about Steinfeld's new allies, Frostholm becomes a vassal in exchange for protection.

**1428:** Nordheim dwarves build the great fortress at Trollberget, on the border between Steinfeld and Bergmark.

**1449:** Alfdáin skyships are fitted with organic weaponry.

**1451:** A Wayfarer fleet appears mysteriously outside Aloreia, intent on raiding. Despite a heroic defense, the Tòrr-Gàrraidh citadel lies in ruins and Tarkeen is sacked. Alorean elves refine their combat ships.

**1460:** Kragdûras dwarves develop Fetzgrim-powered dreadnoughts.

**1473:** A second Wayfarer fleet appears near Kragdûr. Early dreadnoughts are destroyed in the clash. Fohrbrand II dies, and his capital, Kark-Torkas, is pillaged. Bigger dreadnoughts are built.

**1484:** Bergmark law confers aristocracy to the purest werebear bloodlines. Expansion of arkothropy is strictly regulated.

**1495:** Nordheim dwarves connect Grimsvik to Bjørnstad with a series of roads, tunnels, and bridges carved from the mountains.

**1499:** A fleet of Lao-Kweian junks cautiously approaches Lorical, wishing to trade. Grateful after completing their business, the Lao-Kweians offer the doge a magnificent jade carving before their ships sail toward the Great Vault and mysteriously disappear.

**1512:** Loreath 3<sup>rd</sup>—*Star Phoenix* enters Calidar's universe.

**1512:** Kragean 8<sup>th</sup>—Kragdûras, Meryath, and Ellyrian skyships clash with Draconic and Alorean vessels in the Great Vault.



# Kingdom of Meryath

The Talikai, Meryath's first off-world settlers, are related to the sea people of Munaan. Though the latter had submitted to Nicarea in 734 CE, well before Meryath's colonization, islander kings never got along well with their imperial liege. They reluctantly converted to the cult of Teos and established it as sole legal religion to preserve their native monarchy. Resentment worsened when the Nicarean Inquisition began to enforce the cult's extreme orthodoxy on Munaan. Many islanders adorned local temples of Teos with figures represented as his servants. They were in truth aliases of native deities whose worship Nicarean law had driven underground. The Inquisition torched the offending temples and prosecuted those guilty in its customarily harsh and gruesome manner.

When explorers later found that the Dread Lands had waned in the Great Caldera, the New World became all the more attractive to the embittered Talikai. After Nicarea instigated the advent of Western and Eastern Ellyrion, Islander King Manaka III offered to finance a new colony to link the two others. Tarkos IX accepted and provided the settlers with a charter demanding supervision by orthodox priors and a native Nicarean viceroy. The disenchanted islanders went along with these conditions. The Talikai settled the region in 858. Colonists had to cope with diseases and monsters no longer attuned to the Dread Lands. The biggest problem yet lay with hostile fellfolk. Both sides sustained heavy losses before Munaan diseases decimated the native tribes, the last of which submitted in 887.

As the islanders pacified the region, they ran afoul of Narwani settlers who already lived on the nearby island of Kamearea. An unfortunate vagueness of language in the colonial charter failed to clearly establish under whose jurisdiction the island fell. Clashes among settlers flared as early as 863. Six years later, Kosyas II ordered Talikai settlers to the island's west end and the Narwani to the opposite

side at Bab Al-Narwan and Al-Masrab. Nicarean troops garrisoned the island for good measure to prevent further bloodshed.

The city of Glorathon was erected as a trading post in 860. By 960 it was a vibrant city. Though nominally devoted to the cult of Teos, many underground chapels still honored aliases of Talikai deities. Orthodox priors weren't unaware of the issue, which they dutifully reported to their masters on Munaan. Trouble returned when Kosyas IV ordered the Inquisition to the Calidaran colonies in 1043. After much injustice, Western Ellyrion revolted in 1203. Four years later, Talikai settlers slew their orthodox priors and joined the insurrection. Merion, a local hero of Meruín ancestry, became their leader. In exchange for an alliance, he convinced Teosopolis to send an expeditionary force to help defeat the Nicarean garrison on Kamearea. The Narwani were sent packing soon afterward. Eastern Ellyrion's viceroy begged for help, but unrest was rife in Nicarea at the time, and the holy potentate refused. Profoundly offended, ethnic Narwani revolted, overthrew their viceroy, and established what later became the Emirates of Narwan.

In 1225 a Nicarean fleet reached Calidar, intent on re-conquering Western Ellyrion. The Talikai joined a force of skyships from Ellyrion, Caldwen, and Osriel and helped defeat the incoming armada. Seven years later, Merion led adventurers into Nicarea and sabotaged imperial reserves of *seitha*. This event provoked the assassination of the holy potentate. His successor, Teosophylakta I, signed a peace treaty with the former colonies. In 1233 the Talikai called their nation Meryath in honor of Merion's actions and made him their hero king. Since he was of half-elven lineage, no one questioned his age.

Ghüle's second coming in the Soltan Ephemeris happened in 1237. Much of Glorathon was destroyed, its treasures plundered, and many of its inhabitants taken into slavery. Giant carcasses of orcish gröns littered the land, poisoning rivers and farmland. Stranded orcs retreated to the mountains. Despite expeditions to eradicate

them, some managed to survive in deep caves, from which they occasionally wander today. As a way to finance the rebuilding of his kingdom, Merion endeavored to raid dragon lairs on the islands. He and his band of heroes killed all but one. The king and his loyal myrmidons fell in 1301, victims of an ancient red wyrm.

Since then all heroes of Meryath have dreamed of nothing but finding this legendary beast and slaying it. In 1303 a council of elected champions and native high priors agreed that only true heroes could sit on Merion's throne. By then it had become clear that celebrated figures lived longer than common folk. Therefore, elected monarchs could remain in power as long as they didn't age. Glorathon was rebuilt in all of its present glory by 1330. In 1415 the Guild of Dragon Slayers was created. Its role was to train new slayers, promote heroic deeds, collect a share of booty for the benefit of the kingdom, centralize dragon lore, and discourage conduct unbecoming the memory of Merion the Great.

The trouble with Kamearea was never solved. Narwani families today still emigrate to the island. Though they recognize the authority of Glorathon, their presence challenges ethnic, cultural, and spiritual aspects of local life. The emirates consider Kamearea to be occupied land.

Aside from Meryath's recovery, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed the resurgence of older cults in Meryath. Though descendants of Ellyrians freely honor Teos, Istra became the realm's main faith and Glorathon's patron deity. This gradual change has strained relations somewhat between Ellyrion and Meryath.

Because of the islanders' fixation with slaying dragons, the Hero Kingdom has run afoul of Draconia in general, and Draconic knights in particular. Calidar is a good place to find precious metals and gems. The Black Queen long ago had enacted a policy for lesser dragons under her control to settle in lairs near sources of wealth. To this day, dragons remain careful not to provoke the Dread Lands to react, slowly accumulating







# Kingdom of Meryath

what they came for, and handing part of their hoards to visiting knights who take it back to Draconia. Great wyrms often beguile native fellfolk to do their bidding.

The first clash between Draconic knights and Meryath's heroes took place in 1422, when a scion of the Black Queen was slain. In 1435 the knights retaliated with a campaign aimed at destroying Meryath skyships, which is still in effect. The guild mounted a large-scale ambush in 1444, slaying a dragon and burning several dragonships. They later blew up its lair and a fortified garrison with the help of Araldûras dwarves hired for the mission. The knights struck back in 1461 with an all-out assault on Glorathon. Losses were severe on both sides and the outcome remained inconclusive. Since then, the protagonists have been fighting skirmishes, one trying to root out dragons and their minions, the other quietly scouting for new lairs and riches to exploit.

## Land and Its People

The hero realm includes four islands. Palatine and Leiliti are further divided into counties named after their main towns, for a total of eight counties and a royal domain. The latter, the richest province, stretches from Maitea Ridge to the Kaipuna area, and northward past the Karakara Swamp. The Matai-Nui and Mokunono Mountains are nearly uninhabited, save for tribal fellfolk still living in the jungle foothills. Though they submitted to the hero kings long ago, they aren't particularly kind to trespassers. The majority of the population is of Talikai ancestry, with Ellyrians and half-elves being fairly common. Welcome in Meryath, elves and dwarves cohabitate without trouble. Ethnic Ellyrians form the majority on Tahakui, while Narwani easily account for half the inhabitants on Kamearea, which they call Al-Qamar. Talikai ancestry is strongest on Leiliti, while Glorathon remains the most cosmopolitan and the center of wealth and power in Meryath.

**Vital Statistics:** Meryath stretches east to west 615 miles (990 km), from Tel-Aroon to Faarao, and north to south 577 miles (928 km), from Cape Mikihiki to the southern tip of Leiliti Island. The realm covers a land area just under 70,000 sq. miles (180,000 km<sup>2</sup>), roughly half of which is wilderness. Of 1.18 million inhabitants, more than 9/10 are rural. Humans represent 3/4 of the population, half-elves just under 1/10, dwarves and elves 1/20 each, and remaining gnomes and fellfolk about 1/40 each. Tribal fellfolk account for about 6,000 people; another 23,500 are laborers scattered among farms and towns. Some 1.2% of the population belongs to Meryath armed forces, mostly ethnic Talikai who garrison urban centers. The main towns and cities are Glorathon (28,000 inhabitants), Kalalulu (11,500), and Meryathon (11,200).

**Economy:** Meryath is an agrarian society. Food comes from farming and fishing. The most common crops include tropical fruit, coconuts, breadfruit, peanuts, several varieties of yams, sugar cane, coffee, cocoa, and pipeweed. Fish large and small as well as sea monsters often end up, in whole or in part, at local markets.

Part of the realm's economy relies on pillaging dragon lairs and any other place with forgotten riches and opportunities for heroic deeds. Returning heroes spend much of this wealth, which in turn boosts local business. This core "industry" encourages the production of weapons and armor on the isles. Demand for specialized armament and enchanted equipment is fierce and as much a mark of status among heroes as a requirement for their perilous profession. Comments such as: "Mine's bigger!" can often be overheard in taverns. Where one's legendary standing comes into play, extravagance is the norm. Looking fierce, magnificent, and unique is a key ingredient for being remembered and celebrated by the masses; therefore, successful heroes often pay a mint for the very best.

Glorathon shines as one of the best places in the Great Caldera for specialized equipment. Rare woods and plants are also

harvested in the royal domain, to which tribal fellfolk object, often provoking disputes and skirmishes in the jungle. The Matai-Nui Mountains are a source of quartz, which is also mined and sold to wizards who may need crystals as components for enchantments.

The county of Meryathon is best known for its silver and all things fashioned from the precious metal. Most of the realm's coins are minted from this ore. The county of Te-Puirea relies on copper production as one of its sources of income. Te-Puirean sea hunters are celebrated for the ivory they collect from sea monsters, and for their talent at carving beautiful ornaments. The county of Manukea produces marble from its quarries, and has become illustrious for jewelry made of coral and pearls harvested from its southern shores. The county of Manarao's fame comes from printing presses generating books about heroes past and present, as well as navigational maps and geographic gazetteers. Vellum and inks from this region are considered best, as are theatrical plays written there. Dyes from the county of Kahuhiti generate great business with Meryath's heroes and with aristocrats in nearby Ellyrion. Olive oil and goat cheeses from Kululani have also become products of choice. The county of Kalalulu specializes in raising cattle, as well as in the production of a fabled local pipeweed known as *Foggy Lulu*. Aside from excellent herbs and spices, Faamahana's sugar cane remains the main crop, generating sweeteners and a local liquor called *Auntie Sayble*—a most vile and gut-searing concoction. Although private merchants purchase goods from all the islands at fair prices and ship them to foreign places, the

Week Days	Phonetic
Ellydae	EL-ee-day
Araldae	ah-RAL-day
Nardae	NAR-day
Alfdae	ALF-day
Phrydae	FREE-day
Meryadae	MEH-ree-ah-day



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most animated and colorful market lies at Tulani's Grand Bazaar, which offers the best of Meryath and Narwan. Coffee is also a local product in high demand.

**Armed Forces:** The present monarch, Queen Shardwen, relies on more than 14,000 professional army and navy troops, mostly town and village militia. Royal household forces account for 20% of armed forces guarding towns, except Glorathon's entire garrison of 3,000, who answer only to the queen. Land forces can field sixty guild-licensed veteran dragon slayers.

Meryath's fleet includes thirteen galleys (four biremes, six triremes, and three gal-leases), seventeen sail ships (eight sloops, six frigates, and three warships), nine submersibles, and five skyships. All seaborne vessels are limited to the Shallows and the Calderan Sea Ring's coastal waters (less than 100 miles offshore). The seas outside the Great Caldera are considered unsafe, due to the presence of monsters and hostile sea-folk (marine cousins of the fellfolk). Patrols outside the Great Caldera involve skyships exclusively. Eight of Meryath's forty-four vessels hail from Glorathon, including two large skyships (*Spirit of Merion*, *Eternal Glory*) and three seagoing galleases (*Crown of Istra*, *Hero King*, *Dragonbane*). The other three skyships are the *Coral Sky* (based in Manukea), the *City of Meryathon*, and the *Kalalulu Star*. In times of war, merchant

seaborne vessels can be paid by the crown to fight. Heroes also privately own one or more skyships needed for adventuring.

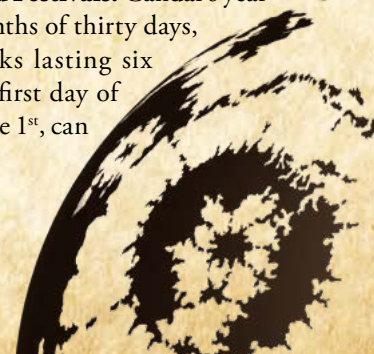
**Local Politics:** There is no aristocracy in Meryath. Popular heroes form an alternative class to traditional nobility. Sages from the Council of Deeds headquartered in Glorathon are responsible for recognizing heroes from pretenders or from those who, sadly, may have fallen from memory. Three conditions must be met to be considered a hero: 1) one must wish to claim a seat in the Hall of Heroes; 2) one's deeds must be told in the taverns, homes, and theaters of Meryath; 3) one must not age, as legally attested by Sages of the Deeds.

These sages have the peculiar power to tell whether someone is no longer aging. All current and recognized heroes are entitled to a personal vote at the Hall of Heroes to elect the realm's monarch and the counts administering the provinces, should any of these positions become vacant. A new monarch is always chosen from among the counts. As long as they retain their titles, monarchs and counts have the use of their palaces and receive a reasonable pension. All heroes, including those who may have fallen on hard times, also earn a stipend from the crown as long as they respect the laws, remain loyal to the kingdom, and generally behave themselves. Land ownership is open to anyone who can afford it.

**Present Diplomacy:** Meryath is an honored client state of Ellyrion; in exchange for protection, the hero kingdom is bound by treaty to provide military support if Ellyrion is attacked. Shardwen's stance is most favorable toward Phrydias and Caldwen. Nordheim and Belledor are predominantly neutral, seeking mostly the trade of Meryath's desirable tropical goods. Though Meryath isn't at war with the Emirates of Narwan, relations between them are tense to passively hostile. Diplomacy with Osriel suffers somewhat from Meryath's frictions with Narwan, the latter being a major trade partner of the merchant realm. Araldûr and Alfdain have grown cautious as well due to Meryath's apparent connection with Kragdûr during a recent clash with Aloreia and the Draconic knights. The attitudes of Calidaran dwarves and elves toward Ellyrion also suffered. The association of Aloreia with the Draconic knights is a major concern. Meryath's dragon-hunting culture is blamed for provoking this situation and putting the entire Great Caldera at risk of a new war, which would involve Draconia. Realms of the Great Caldera are loosely allied in the event of a major invasion from the Great Vault. Deliberately following a course of action that would lead to an open conflict could jeopardize the generally benign state of diplomacy among the former colonies. Meryath does not presently have any diplomatic contact with Aloreia, let alone with anyone on Draconia. Nicarea bears no sympathy for the hero kingdom because of certain individuals in Meryath accused by the Inquisition of crimes on Munaan (cf. *Coral Ring* in **Guilds and Brotherhoods** listed later in this book). However, Munaan has become more reserved, watching with growing interest a potential conflict developing between neighboring Kragdûr and Aloreia. That Meryath and Ellyrion might be embroiled in it makes it seem even sweeter.

**Customs and Festivals:** Calidar's year lasts twelve months of thirty days, with sixty weeks lasting six days each. The first day of the year, Solteane 1<sup>st</sup>, can

Month	Connotation	Season	Abbrev.	Phonetic
<i>Solteane</i>	Fire	Summer	(Sol.)	sol-TAY-an
<i>Drachean</i>	Dragon		(Dra.)	DRAYK-ee-an
<i>Loreath</i>	Lore	Fall	(Lor.)	LOR-ee-ath
<i>Kragean</i>	Earth		(Kra.)	cray-JEE-an
<i>Munaea</i>	Mankind		(Man.)	m-NAY-ah
<i>Vortas</i>	Homecoming	Winter	(Vor.)	VOR-tass
<i>Deirdea</i>	Sorrow/Death		(Dei.)	deer-DAY-ah
<i>Seithean</i>	Magic		(Sei.)	SAY-thee-an
<i>Aereath</i>	Sky/Air	Spring	(Aer.)	AIR-ee-ath
<i>Nubeian</i>	Cloud		(Nub.)	noo-BAY-an
<i>Calidere</i>	Water/Life		(Cal.)	CAL-a-deer
<i>Chelonea</i>	Turtle	Summer	(Che.)	che-LON-ee-ah





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be traced to the original cult of Teos. It is a day for summer games of all sorts including jousts and mock duels. Traditional Talikai holidays are equinoxes and solstices (on the third day of Solteane, Kragean, Deirdea, and Nubeian) and the coming of the new year, which is the time to visit the tombs of ancestors. At the spring and fall equinoxes, pastries are baked and dropped into the sea or into rivers to thank them for their bounty. During the summer solstice, it is recommended to fly great kites, to please the wind. For the winter solstice, one visits a sweat lodge to shed bad mana; dirty socks, old clothes, and towels used to wipe off sweat are buried or tossed into caves or mountain ravines. Meryath celebrates its Independence Day on Kragean 10<sup>th</sup> with a carnival poking fun at heroes and their foes. Mourning Merion the Great and all fallen heroes follows on Deirdea 19<sup>th</sup>. Istra's Festival happens on Nubeian 26<sup>th</sup>, a religious holiday during which processions with holy icons take place in the streets.

## Magic of Meryath

**Eternal Glory:** One aspect of magic on Calidar concerns whether creatures qualify as “heroes.” Game masters should adjudicate this issue as they see fit. Each time an adventurer returns home, the game master awards Notoriety Points (NP). Depending on the endeavor's success and the adventurer's personal actions, points range from one to five. Failure or uninspiring behavior incurs *negative* NP. If the NP total is maintained at 60 or more for at least a Calidaran year, the adventurer becomes an Epic Hero and ceases to age. After the first year of adventuring, 5 NPs are deducted at the end of every month during which the hero is mostly inactive. If the total drops below 60 at any time, aging resumes and another year must be spent regaining epic status. An adventurer's NP total can never fall below zero.

As regards Meryath's “legal” hero status, one must also rely on witnesses to ensure

deeds are indeed told in taverns, homes, books, and theaters. Henchmen or hirelings almost always accompany Meryath heroes, acting as bards and chroniclers. While some stay at home to continue publicizing their masters, others go along on expeditions. Self-promotion and extravagance are necessary parts of local culture with clear political ramifications. Paying to advertise oneself as an epic hero while aging is a crime in Meryath, subject to public ridicule and banishment.

Legendary scoundrels and malevolent monsters accumulate notoriety in much the same way. Although no longer in Meryath, the dragon that slew Merion the Great is an Epic Villain. Rather than becoming minions of wicked gods or demigods, these nefarious beings can instead turn into demons or undead creatures. Evil behavior falls under the category of “conduct unbecoming the spirit of Merion,” which disqualifies one from entering the Hall of Heroes.

The process of heroes becoming demigods rests entirely in the hands of game masters. Reaching 1,000 NP should at least attract divine attention, possibly with godly favors for every 250 if the hero has adopted a specific faith. Beware of fickle gods whose scorn and curses will burden heroes who fall short of expectations.

The various races' life spans in the players' intended game may take precedence; however, game masters should bear in mind their impact on Eternal Glory. The following averages may be more appropriate to Calidar: gnomes 280 years, elves 220, dwarves 170, half-elves 130, fellfolk 100, humans 80, and half-orcs 70.

**Personal Devices:** Magic objects are sometimes created for one specific person: usually weapons, wands, and holy symbols. Called *personal devices*, they are attuned to their owners and will not manifest their powers in anyone else's hands. The initial enchantment demands quests for rare components and much more time than “common” magic objects should require (gods grant personal holy symbols to deserving priors—mortals cannot enchant those).

Part of the owner's life force is bound to a personal device. If the device is destroyed, its owner suffers a permanent loss of vitality. Unless bestowed by a deity, only one personal device can be owned at any given time. If the rightful owner is killed, the item disintegrates or travels back to the god who created it. An undead creature may be able to retain a personal device. The owner can sense the general direction of a stolen device's location, or whether it still lies in the same plane or universe.

As appropriate to the game system used, personal devices are rated with magic adjustments, usually +1 to +4, including wands and holy symbols (on a 1-20 scale, +1 is a slight bonus while +4 is a major one, as appropriate to the intended game system). They enable owners to use an action to deflect an attack, as if they generated magic shields. They improve the owners' defenses against melee, ranged, or spell attacks according to their adjustments.

A mage's personal wand (or a prior's personal holy symbol) does not generate specific spells in addition to those the owner can cast, such as, for example, a *staff of fiery storm* which only produces this single effect. Personal wands are not needed to cast magic. Instead, they improve one aspect of the owner's spell-casting: either range, area of effect, duration, or damage in 10% increments rounded up to the next unit. As an option, a device's adjustment bonus can instead lower a target's defense against the owner's spell. These properties do not require magic charges.

## Heroes of the Star Phoenix

This accessory is aimed at leading fantasy role-playing games and does not feature a specific set of mechanics. Storytelling, flavor, and background information are the main goals. Guidelines for running characters and monsters using Pathfinder® Game mechanics are provided later in this book.



**Captain d'Alberran (human, warrior/mage):** From a high-born family of explorers and diplomats, of which he retains a certain flair, *Isledemer Drake Hieronymus d'Alberran* cannot remember his true origins as the result of his passage through the Vortex. He is willing to defy the gods in his endeavor to return his crew to their original homes. From his recent adventure, he learned that not everyone hails from the same world, which is making a dilemma of solving their predicaments. The thought that his memories were altered sickens him, and this will lead him to investigate any clues on his path, however challenging.

Wary of his magical link to the *Star Phoenix*, Isledemer is certain that it was a machination resulting from his coming to Calidar's universe. Though he finds the concept revolting, its utter oddity remains profoundly fascinating. He wonders whether the skyship truly is a living being or merely a wondrous enchantment. As a captain, he believes he'd always borne feelings solely for ships he commanded. Though his strange relationship with the *Star Phoenix* seems to uphold this ideal, his attraction to Arabesque Starward causes him great conflict because he fears it will affect his ability to command. His feelings are now increasingly torn between his ship and the elven master—a most cruel game that someone is playing with him for reasons unknown.

Behind a stern and stoic façade, Isledemer is a good-hearted man. Both fencer and mage, he fancies elegance and style over brute strength. His role is mostly to command during battles and make general decisions aboard the *Star Phoenix*. Reasonably tall for a human, with dark umber hair tied neatly at the nape, whisky-colored eyes, and fair skin, Isledemer wears a blue and gold coat, cuffed knee-high boots, and a wide-brimmed brown felt hat with a large white plume. He fights two-handed with a rapier and a personal wand of ivory.

**Enna Daggart (human, rogue):** Daughter of a merchant prince in another universe, Enna honed her skills on her father's ships, fighting pirates, negotiat-

ing business, occasionally smuggling illicit goods, while secretly preying on the competition. Stranded in the Vortex, she became Isledemer's first mate after her memories were altered. Free-spirited Enna easily adapts to what Fate puts in her path, making the best of what suits her and ignoring the rest. She questions the validity of the choice that made her second to Isledemer, seeing herself as the stronger party. On the other hand, the captain gained her respect with his bravery and when he revealed his motivations to her, shortly after they left Queen Shardwen's palace. The captain's magical link to the *Star Phoenix* challenges her feelings and her pride. She therefore has chosen to go along with the status quo—for now.

An ambitious, determined, assertive, hard-working, and no-nonsense officer, she can also prove dour, harsh, and domineering. Her closest ally aboard is the bosun, Rivven Cripplegate. Though the captain is the ultimate authority aboard, on his behalf she interacts with the crew most of the time. Tall and stern, with brown eyes and dark toffee-colored skin, she keeps her long black hair loose, held back from her face with combs. Enna wears tight-fitting pants, boots, and an ample white shirt with or without an officer's blue and silver coat. Her favored weapon is the cutlass.

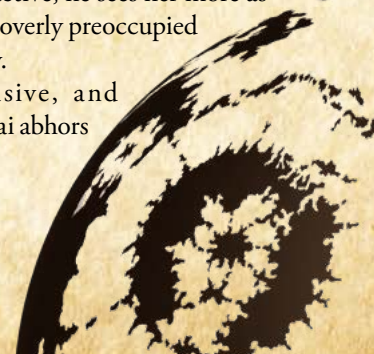
**Arabesque Starward (elf, prior):** Arabesque's original vocation was that of an elven healer by day, and an artist by night—one who embroidered tapestries. Her latest claim to fame was an immense map of her clan's realm. That she came to be the *Star Phoenix*'s master was the logical step after becoming stranded in the Vortex. Her first challenge is dealing with the shock of knowing she honored another deity than the one now answering her prayers. She is cautiously learning about her new spiritual patron, Istra, and her motivations. Arabesque also bears feelings for her captain, but wonders whether Istra planted them in her mind, and if so, why. Either way, Arabesque's reserve stems from her desire not to interfere with the captain's work or cause an awkward situation aboard. She prefers

waiting until she knows more, although the challenge of hiding her emotions can at times be painful. Her closest ally other than the captain is Wu Yuntai, whom she finds very odd yet appealing. Saving his life created a quiet friendship between the two of them.

Arabesque is an elf of great beauty. Slim and of medium height, with short gold hair and large celadon-colored eyes, she wears black boots and a blue and silver robe pleated from the waist down. Aside from her usual courteous, gentle, reserved, and intuitive ways, she sometimes gives in to superstitious and fatalistic behavior. Of all on the *Star Phoenix*, she remains the most concerned about the ultimate reason for her presence aboard. Third in rank, she has many duties, and as such she is one of the most valuable crew members. She manages the plotting of courses, as well as the ship's maps and navigational instruments, and the use of *seitha*. As the ship's prior, she also heals the sick and the wounded.

**Wu Yuntai (elf, warrior/mage):** Yuntai came from another universe. An army general related to elven royalty, he was disgraced as a result of palace intrigue. His banishment led him to run afoul of the cosmic anomaly that landed him in the Vortex. He knows that order aboard depends on discipline and respect for the captain's authority—as a career warrior, this familiar concept reassures him. Though certain his memories were altered so that he'd recognize Isledemer as his rightful captain, he has decided to give him his full support and loyalty anyway. It is now a matter of honor; the gods entrusted him with this mission, so he must make the best of it. This decision clashes with a burgeoning interest in Enna. He keeps his feelings to himself for the same reasons motivating Isledemer and Arabesque. Yuntai also connects with the ship's master because of their common elven ancestry. Though she is quite attractive, he sees her more as a distant sibling overly preoccupied with philosophy.

Brave, decisive, and pragmatic, Yuntai abhors





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insubordination and slovenly behavior. A most stubborn officer, he values pride and honor more than his own life. His elven clan features include ivory-colored skin, dark brown slanted eyes, pointy ears, and black hair flowing from a silver ring on top of his head. He wears black boots with upturned toes, blue and silver wide-sleeve tunic and pants. In combat, Yuntai dons a steel breastplate etched with a cloud pattern. He fights with a sword or an enchanted staff that shoots lightning bolts. His duties are to train and command the *Star Phoenix's* marine squad.

**Ebben Philoneas Rugwittle (gnome, mage):** A member of Isledemer's crew prior to entering the Vortex, this gnome sought employment aboard because he covets a chance to become a great skyship builder later in life. Though he's now forgotten this background, as a magic-endowed person he feels entitled to a bright future as a captain or—why not?—an admiral. That his limited stature might present a challenge does not cross his mind—rather, that very thing drives him to seek a lofty status. He chafes at owing obedience to Isledemer, but without an alternative (other than walking away, which he'd never do) he does his best to make a point of it. His experience with skyships and ability to enchant magical items make him an outstanding aerial engineer.

Ebben is one of the *Companions Three*, along with Hoyk Pebbleborn and Waessail Barrooney, who developed a friendship soon after emerging from the Vortex. He turns moody and quarrelsome with a bit too much to drink. Ego aside, the gnomish enchanter is astute, inventive, dedicated, and quite brave. On the other hand, he can also prove an eccentric and compulsive perfectionist. He oversees enchantments on the hull and sails, and is responsible for recharging the marines' magic rods and maintaining a small reserve of alchemical hand-grenades. With pointy ears and penetrating gray eyes, he sports a bluish mane forming a large curl on his forehead, an upward-curving goatee, and an imperial

mustache giving him a slightly devilish flair. He wears a silver-trimmed navy-blue coat, white breeches and stockings, and argent-buckled shoes.

**Horwik "Hoyk" Pebbleborn (dwarf, warrior):** Although he has no recollection of it, Hoyk was the chief artilleryist on a dreadnought that vanished mysteriously after he'd challenged his commander for missing an opportunity to ambush a stray Wayfarer vessel (1474 CE). When he emerged from the Vortex, he retained a working knowledge of *darkpowder* and firearms, though he can't remember why. He possesses a small reserve of the compound and his trusty blunderbuss. Hoyk isn't a complicated fellow. As long as ale and opportunities for foe-bashing remain plentiful, he'll happily keep banging along. Somehow, this feels right.

Blunt and determined as a boulder thundering down a cliff, Hoyk is a rowdy, hard-drinking, stubborn fellow. An excellent artilleryist, he also understands carpentry and metallurgy. He dreams of somehow fitting the *Star Phoenix* with giant blunderbusses. Clueless as to how this idea ever entered his mind, he feels this too seems right. Imagine his surprise when dwarven warships bearing just the thing he'd been thinking of appeared during the recent battle against the Draconic knights. Stout, with disproportionately muscular arms and a rocky voice, Hoyk sports long reddish-brown hair, a thick beard, and bushy eyebrows. His large nose shows signs of his heavy drinking. He wears a dark blue tunic and pants, with a sturdy belt holding his prominent girth, and heavy boots. Chainmail, battleaxe, and blunderbuss are never far away.

**Waessail Barrooney (fellfolk, rogue):** On Calidar, he'd be called a Belledoran fellfolk, although he came from another universe. Oldest among the crew and slightly overweight, he once saw life on a ship as a way to earn easy money without the risk from his past as a burglar, but has no memory of it since coming through the Vortex. Quite capable as an accountant, Waessail can't resist the opportunity to line his pockets whenever given a budget for the

purchase of supplies, turning around and selling whatever else he acquired to the crew at black market prices.

Jovial in good times, hand-wringing, fretful, and sweaty in the presence of danger, he will do his duty only if cornered. Though greedy and indiscreet, Waessail can prove resourceful if his source of income is threatened. He is a hearty drinker who holds his liquor better than his dwarven peer. As the *Star Phoenix's* purser, he handles the ship's accounting, the crew's payroll, the appropriation of goods while in port, and the ship stores and supplies, and acts as the captain's clerk. Bespectacled and balding, Waessail often carries a ledger under one arm. He wears a maroon jacket and knee-length pants, white shirt and long socks, and buckled shoes.

**Bugles "Ol' Babblejack" Belzer (ghost):** An old seawolf in his previous life, Ol' Babblejack earned his nickname for the odd stories he used to tell the rest of the crew. Superstitious, he always spooked his peers with tales of haunted ships, ill luck, and portents of disaster. He no longer speaks, now that he's become a ghost. Unable (and unwilling, even if he could) to leave the *Star Phoenix*, he appears at his post after sunset or when sailing across the Great Vault's airless void. The helmsman is fiercely loyal to the captain and the ship. If present, he attacks without hesitation anyone trying to harm either. If defeated in combat or put to flight, he returns the following night. Ol' Babblejack will rest in peace only if the captain is killed or his skyship destroyed. Now a translucent apparition, he stood at the time of his death as a grizzled old mariner with gray hair, bushy eyebrows, bright blue eyes, and the complexion of one who spent decades sailing at all latitudes.

**Gumboyle "Mama Goo" Mofeecot (fellfolk, prior):** A native of the Dread Lands, Mama Goo was a prominent crew member on a pirate skyship. Like everyone else on board, her memories were stripped, but she occasionally gains useful insights about herself or the *Star Phoenix* thanks to her ability to commune with Calidar's world



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soul. Mama Goo is a tribal shaman with a knack for reading the future in the blood of freshly decapitated chickens. She bears a particular liking for Wu Yuntai, whom she calls the “li’l cap’n,” and will come to his aid if he needs it. Mama Goo genuinely detests Waessail Barrooney, whom she senses to be a faithless and corrupt fellfolk. Her winged homunculus pet, Moonsail, hunts pests at night and delights in chasing gulls off the deck. Scuttlebutt has it that its prey ends up as fresh food ingredients for the crew’s dinner—Mama Goo is the ship’s cook.

Saucy, shrewd, and a good judge of character, this fellfolk can be petty, jealous, and vengeful. Tattoos cover much of her coppery skin. Though her round face, dark brown

eyes, and black hair tied in a topknot give her an endearing look, her smile reveals a row of teeth filed into sharp triangles and stained with the juice of the nuts she often chews. She wears a simple shirt and pants, and walks on a wooden leg. Despite her infirmity, Mama Goo remains surprisingly nimble and is fearless in a fight. She carries a magic frying pan, a treasure she earned as a pirate. It appears in her hand when she needs it, and vanishes when she’s done.

**Rivven Cripplegate (human, warrior):** No crew would be complete without a bosun, the first mate’s right hand. Rivven interacts directly with the crew on deck and in the yardarms, and is responsible for the maintenance of sails and rigging. As a

result of this, he also works closely with Ebben and Hoyk. With the zeal of a drill sergeant, Rivven pays particular attention to the crew’s behavior and discipline, especially recruits. He keeps a bimster at hand, a frayed and tarred knotted rope viciously applied to those straying from their duties. Rivven, former taskmaster on a forgotten privateer, dislikes Isledemer’s sophisticated demeanor. He much prefers Enna’s no-nonsense style, but obeys his captain’s orders without hesitation. Naturally suspicious, Rivven keeps a close eye on anyone approaching the first mate. Picky, hard-nosed, stolid, obtuse, gruff, blunt, and somewhat foul-mouthed, the



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bosun can be recognized by his flaming red hair and ice-blue eyes. Like Ol' Babblejack, he bears the complexion of one who has spent a lifetime adventuring under exotic suns. He wears white pants, a blue and white striped shirt, a red scarf, and a battered straw hat.

## Champions and Villains

### **Grand Master Azar (human, warrior):**

Azar's memories were altered decades ago when he traveled through the Vortex. Sayble purchased his release and inflicted upon him a powerful charm to keep him in servitude. His skills and devotion to his new mistress led him to become the Grand Master of the Draconic knights. Though not an evil man, he does the bidding of an evil deity because of her hold upon him and out of blind loyalty to the order he commands. After Isledemer defeated him, the grand master's mortal remains were committed to the netherworld where his soul now wanders, lost and confused. Servants of the Black Queen search for him there.

Taller than average, muscular, with short black hair and a closely-cropped beard ending at the corners of his mouth, Azar normally wears black plate armor and the knights' white tabard. His left hand is a black dragon paw. He favors white drakes as war mounts. The Grand Master is a rational man in most things, except his love for Sayble. Determined and quick to make a decision, he is a career warrior honor-bound to his master and to his order. Though ultimately he does the Black Queen's bidding, he prefers a fair fight or a demonstration of courage and skill to treacherous or cowardly behavior.

**Conway of the Seven Blades (human, prior):** From faraway Bjørnstad, Conway had joined the crew of a Nordheim longship seeking trade with Meryath. Like many visiting northerners, he fell in love with the tropical realm and remained behind. During the following

decade, he accompanied veteran heroes and lived to tell their tales along with a few of his own. As a prior of Odin, he fancied his role as a counselor. He learned the ways of the heroes and their thinking, which led him to become one of the Sages of the Deeds. He had another reason for adopting Meryath as his own home: Conway is a werebear. He maintains quiet ties with tribal fellfolk, from whom he purchases fermented honey from a rare breed of bees. Although it does not cure his disease, it suppresses its manifestations. He must therefore consume the honey on a regular basis. Famous quotation: "Kill the dragon to be praised. Tame the dragon to be respected. Ride the dragon, and skalds will sing your name through the eras." Conway has been a long-time supporter of fellfolk liberties. This sentiment, however, has become more mitigated after witnessing a presumed-friendly shaman collecting the souls of travelers slaughtered in the jungle, late at night. The shaman was a Soul-Eater (see **Guilds and Brotherhoods** later in this book). Conway stepped away into the fog, unnoticed and worried about the sinister business his friend was involved in.

**Kua Karatani (human, prior):** Of ancient Talikai ancestry, Kua became an epic hero after defeating a great beast of the sea that had wandered too close to Meryath. She allowed herself and her war canoe to be swallowed whole, after which—having survived thanks to a magic potion—she carved her way out, hacking through layers of monstrous innards and other creatures living therein. Since then, she has joined Queen Shardwen on nearly all her expeditions and has undertaken a few other minor personal ventures into the Dread Lands, maintaining an outstanding reputation. She was appointed Guild Mistress of the Dragon Slayers, a title awarded every few years by voting members. Her goals are to administrate the guild, see to its interest and those of its members, and enforce its rules. Kua also is a member of the Coral Ring, a secret society seeking to maintain ties with native Munaani kin and preserve the old faiths. One of their missions is to retrieve

ancient relics forbidden under Nicarean law and take them back to Meryath.

**Melchia (gnome, mage):** The Alorean gnome Melchia was a servant at the Tòrr-Gàrraidh palace in Tarkeen, the capital city of Alorean. She also worked as an agent of a secret brotherhood of Sherandol elves seeking to overthrow the Sòldor hold on power. After a failed attempt at spying on the Tòrr-Gàrraidh, she fled Alorean and was subsequently captured by Kragdûras dwarves. She revealed to them what she knew of the Tòrr-Gàrraidh's desire to form an alliance with the Draconic knights. Threatening her kin on Kragdûr, the dwarves blackmailed her to work for them. Her mission is to infiltrate northwestern Alfdáin (on Calidar) to identify elves capturing Belledoran gnomes and selling them to Alorean slavers. The purpose of the mission is to put gnomish agents under Kragdûr's control on the slavers' path so they may be taken to Alorean. Melchia recently arrived in Meryath by way of a rogue skyship.

This daughter of Siffa Bloodstone is a resourceful and determined adventurer. Her brown and green hair and wood-hued skin blend in well with a sylvan background. She wears a natural-colored blouse, long skirt, and house boots. She has an eight-legged Alorean tabby cat named Khalis as a companion and scout.

**Ono-Nui Manaroa (human, warrior):** Master Manaroa, also known as "Big Ono," is a very large man with a booming voice. Once a successful adventurer who did his share of dragon slaying, he understands the tricky lifestyle of epic heroes. The most popular ones often spend lavishly to promote themselves and, failing to find another meaningful lair to plunder soon enough, end up in debt. He learned his lesson decades earlier and wised up, buying into a banking business to earn a more regular income. Big Ono eventually stepped out of the limelight and developed his financial holdings, including land, plantations, and ship building. He became a favored source of loans to downtrodden slayers who eventually opened the door for his election as Speaker



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at the Hall of Heroes. Though he is highly respected, without his official tenure at the hall the middle-aged former hero would not be allowed to enter. Becoming a Speaker is the only way a commoner can enter the monumental edifice, let alone conduct official business there. To avoid conflicts of interests, Speakers must be former heroes who, therefore, can no longer vote or ever rise to become counts or monarchs. Now that he's gotten older, Master Manaroa quietly resents this limitation and also feels that ethnic Talikai ought to have a bigger place in the affairs of state. He is an eminent member of the Ivory Tower as well as a benefactor to the Coral Ring (see **Guilds and Brotherhoods**).

**Papanga Rangatane (human, rogue):** Queen Shardwen appointed Master Rangatane (rang-ah-TAN-eh) the Dean of the Royal Conservatory (see **Guilds and Brotherhoods**). A former storyteller himself, he now administers the powerful office entrusted to him. Loyal to the queen, he nonetheless suspects she isn't what she appears to be. On the other hand, as a true hero, rightfully enthroned, she has been a good monarch. He wonders about the day she might step down, and worries about who might take her place. As a result, he keeps to himself and observes his liege, torn by the desire to unveil her secrets and what she and her brother seek in Meryath. Blackmail is the other reason for his curi-

osity. One of his sons, Tua, relied on the assassins' guild to eliminate a rival who'd stolen the one he loved. Unfortunately, the young lass was also killed. The guild holds proof of Tua's involvement and with it forces Papanga to share information about the queen's business. He hasn't revealed his suspicions about her, but lives in fear of the guild finding out. He does, however, placate his handlers by passing along less critical information he gleans.

**Lanni Lamarr (Shardwen I—human, warrior):** The Lady of Meryath is best known for the dragons and other monsters she defeated in her long lifetime. Shardwen was known then as



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Lanni Lamarr. She adopted her royal name in 1410 CE when she became queen, making her more than 120 years old. She still appears to be in her late thirties. An able administrator and strategist, Shardwen nonetheless prefers adventuring to the interminable discussions with ambassadors and followers at the royal court. She often slips out of the palace at night to handle any covert business she deems necessary, a habit of great concern to the captain of the palace guard. She regularly leads forays into the Dread Lands, in disguise to avoid undue attention, usually after Draconic knights have been sighted there. Her acts of bravery are revealed and celebrated after the fact, but not before miscellaneous embellishments are added by her Minister of Heroic Deeds.

True to Merion's ideals, Shardwen has devoted herself to fighting dragons—just not all of them. She went a step further and took up the cause of good dragons who, as a result of their war against evil, were forced to flee their native world and scatter throughout the Soltan Ephemeris. Under her influence the Guild of Dragon Slayers was established and its rules put in place. Meryath presents a wonderful opportunity for heroes to pursue the war against evil dragons. She sees Isledemer as a welcome reinforcement, and will make all efforts to remain on good terms and keep him on her side. No official contact took place between her and King Fohrbrand III of Kragdûr about the battle of Kragean 8<sup>th</sup>. The dwarves' intervention resulted primarily from Draconic skyships nearing Kragdûr and intelligence obtained about the Tòrr-Gàrraidh's intentions (cf. Melchia, earlier).

Shardwen is a very tall black warrior whose ancestry one would imagine comes from the savanna tribes at the edge of old Bongor on Munaan—fierce warriors and tireless hunters. She owns a larger-than-life personality. Over the ebony of her skin she wears a long, scintillating, golden robe.

The contrast is striking. Behind her head, woven into her hair, rises a delicate gold fan forming a nimbus.

**Perithyan Lamarr (human, warrior):** Although he styles himself as Captain Lamarr, Perithyan's correct title is First Lord of the Fleet; he is therefore its top admiral. He often commands the *Eternal Glory*, Queen Shardwen's flagship. He normally accompanies her wherever she goes. A popular hero in his own right, Perithyan is the queen's younger brother. A colossal black warrior with a booming voice, he earned his place among slayers of evil dragons at about the same time as his sister. He earned his title after a contested vote at the Hall of Heroes, a position the Count of Kalalulu still covets. His rivals often accuse him of earning the title because of the queen's influence among heroes, a concept he finds irritating. He sometimes wishes he didn't have to remain in his sister's shadow, but his goal to protect her and support the effort against evil dragons keeps him loyal and discreet. Captain Lamarr often wears golden plate armor adorned with dragon motifs. He keeps his tightly-curved hair very short, and wears a well-cropped goatee.

**Rika Ranikoa (dragon kin, rogue):** By day a famous bard, by night a sinister master spy loyal to Queen Sayble, Rika is a dragon kin. Her Draconic name is Bara Mahog'h. First born and leader among her clutch siblings, she's a scion of a Draconic commander who mated with Sayble. Part reptilian, she bears a magic ring that conceals her true features. The ring preserves the appearances of up to three of Bara's previous victims; the spy master may delete one or more as needed. The real Rika died years ago when Bara took her life and her place.

She and her siblings came to the capital city to spy on the dragon slayers. Her first responsibility is to warn the Draconic knights about incoming Meryath raids. She also takes on revenge assassinations (see Guild of Assassins in **Guilds and Brotherhoods**). Bara has built a network of native ruffians and murderers-for-hire, which she uses to keep herself informed of who in Glorathon wants to kill whom and to earn income from facilitating her clients' evil deeds. She prefers using native hands

before risking clutch siblings. Blackmail is another tool to control beneficiaries of her trade, in turn forcing them to commit odious crimes. Occasionally, other dragon kin do find their way to Meryath to replace losses, often hiding aboard Meryath skyships returning from raids on Draconic lairs.

**Te-Kono Atuatane (human, warrior):** Master Atuatane earned his tenure as Grand Constable of *Seitha* (see **Guilds and Brotherhoods**) from Queen Shardwen. A former skyship commander and an able warrior, he manages his office with an iron fist, mercilessly watching anyone he suspects to be trafficking in raw *seitha*. He is determined to acquire his office's fair share, and put out of business those who abuse licenses they obtained from him. Several years into his tenure, information came to his attention that Master Rangatane's son might have had something to do with the unexplained death of his daughter, Pua. Since then, he's borne nothing but ill will for Tua and his father. The guild of assassins' deliberate indiscretion about Tua is part of a scheme to trap Master Atuatane, maneuvering him into attempting something rash which would lead the guild to blackmail him as well. The guild suspects that Master Rangatane hasn't been as forthcoming as they hoped. Removing the dean and entrapping Master Atuatane instead, or possibly framing the grand constable if he doesn't take action, seems like a better strategy.

**Teobram Phibbs (human, prior):** High Prior of Istra, this retired adventurer oversees the Oracle of Glorathon. Teobram's vision led the *Eternal Glory* to rescue the *Star Phoenix* shortly after its arrival in Calidar's universe. An ethnic Ellyrian, this little old man misses his early years chasing dragons and the opposite gender. Though no longer walking the Hall of Heroes, he is treated with great respect both for his legendary adventures and his current status as high prior. He actively seeks out potential heroes and facilitates their early efforts in the name of Istra. He also is an honorary member of the Red Masque, who benefit from his valuable oracular insights (see **Guilds and**



**Brotherhoods** below). Bald, with a long white beard and blue eyes full of spirit, Teobram wears a pearl gray robe and sandals. Despite his old age, the high prior is quite capable of defending himself.

## Guilds and Brotherhoods

**Forces at Work:** The main undercurrents in Meryath reflect religious, ethnic, and cultural rivalries tugging away from the center of power. Present day inhabitants include Talikai, Ellyrians, Narwani, native fellfolk, and a growing segment of immigrants from farther north. Atop this framework lies the everlasting conflict with Draconia, public anguish about defying dragons, and doubts about the establishment's dragon-slaying policy. In turn, this leads common folk to question the nature of the realm's political apparatus, the cult of heroes, and therefore the basis of monarchy itself. On the other hand, great wealth flows thanks to the heroes' activities, which benefit many people, commoners and decision-makers alike. Foes of Meryath know these issues and carefully criticize the adventurous clique. Counts and royals often see criticism as sedition.

**Coral Ring:** Exclusively Talikai, this secret society seeks stronger ties with the ancestral Sea People of Munaan. It promotes the cults of Talikai deities and schemes to recover ancient relics. Forbidden under Munaan law, such artifacts are either hidden to escape capture or locked up in the Nicarean Inquisition's dark vaults. The Coral Ring has enjoyed a number of successes at springing convicted heretics from Nicarean dungeons and smuggling sacred relics to Meryath. Some members were captured, leading the holy potentate to address complaints and thinly-veiled threats to Meryath in response to the Coral Ring's activities on Munaan. Queen Shardwen officially condemns the Coral Ring's deeds, but does not otherwise actively seek its members. Any

action on her part aims solely at avoiding a crisis with Munaan; a war with Draconia is more than enough to handle, even with a fragile and tacit alliance with Kragdûr. Both Queen Shardwen and members of the Coral Ring exploit with consummate talent the old alliance of the Great Caldera's former colonies, without being rash enough to provoke a conflict.

**Dragon Slayers:** Professional dragon slayers of Meryath are legally required to hold a license with the guild. Its objective is to promote the plundering of evil dragons' lairs, from which it earns a share. Earnings are used to find, train, equip, and entrust potential heroes to the care of active members. It isn't rare for "guild trainees" to be present in a raiding party. The guild also enforces proper rules of conduct, based on Merion the Great's legacy, and investigates the integrity of questionable heroes. It maintains the best dragon lore library on Calidar, a public museum about dragon-hunting, and a special weapons workshop. During the past fifty years, it secretly (and illegally) incarcerated a few lesser dragons in its dungeons. These beasts are used for weapons testing and other experiments. Healing services are available at the guild house, as well as living quarters for the maimed or deranged who cannot be healed and for members too old to earn a living. Some say that the guild's sprawling bureaucracy has become its worst enemy. Queen Shardwen, who is fully licensed, is closely associated with Guild Mistress Kua Karatani.

**Soul-Eaters:** Wholly subversive, soul-eaters seek the return of the isles to their rightful owners. Following the saying "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," this fellfolk brotherhood maintains covert ties with the Draconic knights, the Nicarean Inquisition, and seafolk reefers who lurk off the southern coasts. Their first goal is to oppose the cult of heroes and its monarchy. The second is to implement laws preventing the destruction of jungle. The final goal is the return of Dread Lands to the isles. Soul-eaters look for isolated victims straying into their lands and murder them. Their shamans

use magic to capture their souls and keep them in receptacles hidden in the jungle. They believe that if enough souls are freed and returned to the world soul all at once, the Dread Lands will awaken once more. Whether the scheme can work permanently remains to be seen. Nonetheless, summoning great spirits from the ground, the forest, and the sea could cause massive damage to farmland and urban centers, followed by a sudden explosion of wilderness growth for miles from where the great beasts are felled. Soul-eaters exist among tribal fellfolk and the "educated ones" living elsewhere in the realm.

**Guild of Assassins:** The Draconic knights control this criminal operation. Hired assassins are local criminals unaware of the guild's link with Draconia. Exchanges between someone seeking a rival's murder and a guild member are never conducted face to face. A word whispered in a seedy tavern will almost always find its way to the right ears. Likewise, contacts between local hands and Draconic masterminds follow the same process. Disguised as the famous bard Rika Ranikoa, its leader uses the guild as a way to gain key information about the realm's elite and blackmail it into doing her bidding. Many rich merchants have fallen into her trap. Her victims often spy on affairs at the Hall of Heroes and at the Guild of Dragon Slayers. The assassins' mission is to stand ready if another assault of Glorathon takes place, sabotaging defenses and forcing blackmail victims to betray their own people at a critical time.

**Hall of Heroes:** Aside from being a place where epic heroes gather for ceremonial occasions, the Hall is also a part of Meryath's governance. Here heroes submit their votes to elect counts and monarchs and to manifest support or opposition to new laws or to the appointments of generals, admirals, and ministers. Other than individual audiences at the royal palace, the Hall of Heroes allows the realm's elite to address the monarchy openly. Many heroes hope to reduce the power of



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the counts and the monarchy in favor of the Hall. Factions often divide the members, reflecting personal opinions. Disputes are common, and tempers quick to flare. The Speaker of the Hall is elected by peers and is responsible for keeping order in the meeting room.

**Ivory Tower:** This semi-covert network of trade houses and professional guilds represents diverse aspects of Meryath's economy. All share the desire to do away entirely with the present regime and Meryath's perilous cult of heroes. They resent not being able to use wealth to buy their way into the political apparatus. So far, their main strategy consists of paying off the debts of heroes in exchange for backing merchant interests at the Hall of Heroes. Their first goal is to have the law requiring a license to plunder monster lairs repealed, arguing it should be a free enterprise. Without this law, the Guild of Dragon Slayers would eventually vanish and control of heroes become much easier. Indebted heroes would thereafter support a series of gradual changes aimed at turning the herocracy into a plutocracy. Charms and blackmail are other tools in the merchant's arsenal of influence.

**Red Masque:** Queen Shardwen created this brotherhood to help counter the many forces pulling her realm apart. Its members are unsung heroes who desire not to be part of Meryath's government, and therefore are not officially recognized at the Hall of Heroes. Anonymous and largely unknown among society, they have sworn obedience and loyalty to the monarchy. They act as its eyes and ears, and endeavor to prevent damage to the cult of heroes and manifestations of Eternal Glory. They do not behave like secret police—they do not assassinate or commit acts of vileness to oppose evil. Yet, they remain covert and typically seek to hoist troublemakers by their own petards. Though good-natured priors (mostly Istra's), benevolent mages, and even certain charming rogues occupy their ranks, paladins are most common. At night, when on a quest to defeat

evil, they wear their customary red masks. Their primary targets of late have been the Guild of Assassins and the Ivory Tower.

**Royal Conservatory:** This office of the royal palace governs the activities of bards, actors, chroniclers, book printers, and circus owners and their employees, as well as monster handlers earning a living in Meryath. All these professions require licenses. It is illegal in Meryath to promote the deeds of heroes unless they have officially requested a seat at the Hall of Heroes. It is also against the law to hire unlicensed services to promote oneself as a hero. Those found proffering libelous or seditious contents, and their instigators, incur severe penalties.

This office concerns itself with the harboring of monsters as regards sanitary issues and the safety of Her Majesty's subjects. Therefore, ownership and use of these creatures require permits. Monsters are creatures that do not qualify as common animals or people. Humanoid beings such as orcs and goblins are considered people, but deemed enemies of the realm; not being fellfolk or any of the colonial races, they are therefore officially labeled as monsters. All such creatures kept in captivity must be registered at the Royal Conservatory, which decides whether they may be kept at all, where, in what manner, and if they may be bred or used for any purpose. Selling them requires approval and proper amendments. The Royal Conservatory retains the right to examine monsters submitted for registration and order their elimination at any time and for any reason.

Bailiffs of the conservatory have the right to verify the identity and license of anyone performing the services listed above, as well as inspect dwellings registered as harboring monsters or suspected of such. Oddly, Meryath law specifically states that keeping dragons in captivity is illegal in Meryath. The dean of the Royal Conservatory is appointed by the queen.

**Seitha Constabulary:** This office of the royal palace controls the exploitation and sale of *seitha* in Meryath. Vessels capable of using *seitha* must be registered as

such. Captains and ship masters involved with handling *seitha* must be licensed. Any raw *seitha* brought into Meryath must be declared, at which time constables collect one-tenth of the liquid. Trained dogs and other legally registered creatures are commonly used to inspect skyships and detect hidden *seitha*. Spies among ship crews may become involved if foul play is suspected. All individuals involved in refining raw *seitha* also require licenses. This office retains the right to purchase any privately held *seitha* at any time. Its mission is to maintain a reserve for military uses or for Her Majesty's needs. Collected *seitha* is stored at royal reserves in heavily guarded facilities in Glorathon and several other towns. The grand constable is appointed by the queen.

**Steel Phalanx:** This secret fellowship opposes Narwani influence in Meryath, seeking the expropriation of immigrants from Kamearea Island. Its members mostly include individuals of mixed Ellyrian-Talikai heritage. They wage a covert war with the Sword of Narwan, their sworn enemy. Unable to influence the monarchy to take a stand on the Kamearea issue, these so-called Phalangists scheme to provoke a war between Narwan and Meryath—which would result in Ellyrion's intervention. They cause mischief in Meryath and Narwan, each blaming the other for their nefarious deeds as a way to bring the immigration issue to the fore once and for all.

In reality, malevolent crones of distant Ellyrian ancestry run the Phalanx under magical disguises. Their lair currently lies in the mountain jungles of Tahakui Island. They've moved in and out of Kamearea Island several times since their struggle started. They now stoke the fires of hatred as a way to fight a centuries-old proxy war against their rivals, nefarious djinns from Narwan. A magic pool lies in a cave beneath the hills of Kamearea. Its water grants those who gaze upon it the power of prescience, which both the crones and the djinns ardently covet. They will eliminate anyone else who learns about it.

**Sword of Narwan:** This secret orga-





nization seeks to protect ethnic Narwani residing on Kamearea Island and works toward its restitution to the emirates. The Sword favors immigration to the islands while trying to placate the Steel Phalanx. They also force money from immigrants and local merchants to buy Hall of Heroes members into serving their purposes. The Grand Bazaar at Tulani generates a major portion of the Sword's income.

As with those of the Steel Phalanx, the Sword's leaders aren't whom they claim to be. Evil djinns in disguise struggle to retain their influence over the island, using their minions to fight the old crones. To seal their success, they hope to turn this small piece of land into a desert, where they are strongest. Wherever djinns stay, hot dry winds eventually follow, turning lush farmland into arid wastelands. The eastern half of the island has already become drier and somewhat more like Narwan—where many of their kin have lived for centuries, hidden in mountains and deserts, and sometimes among the people of the emirates.

## City of Glorathon

Glorathon is a crowded, bustling city abundant with money and driven by ambition. The residences of citizens tend to be tall, narrow, closely-packed buildings. Each block on the street map represents one or more adjoining edifices. Many businesses occupy a small part of larger dwellings, usually at street level. The poorest are rooming-houses or apartments, and as one moves up the social scale, the first step up is a tenementlike building of a ground-floor shop with three or four floors of small dwelling suites above, communal toilet facilities, and an exterior fire-escape-style winding back staircase connecting window to window with landings that are typically crowded with floral vines and hung with growing boxes and hanging baskets given over to herbs.

The second step up is a floor of offices

above the ground-floor shop, higher ceilings in all of the living spaces, every dwelling area having its own garderobe (interior toilet) and large balconies.

Above that are the "half-mansions," buildings that have ground-floor offices, no shops, and entire floors given over to the home of one individual, couple, or family.

And above those are the "mansions," meaning an entire building that's the home of one individual, couple, or family. Almost all mansions have balconies or terraces large enough to serve as rooms for hosting meals or as working areas for the artistic. If possible they will have interior courtyards containing gardens with or without ponds or fountains and with or without trees. If lacking trees, they usually sport landscaping of descending hanging baskets and/or vines, highly sculptural in design, often growing fruit as well as ornamental flowers.

Above mansions, Glorathans speak of private palaces with servants and architecture usually chosen or mod-



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ified by the present owner, who's wealthy enough to make changes on a whim.

Walls and bastions surrounding the city include as part of their defenses upward-pointing ballistae fitted with barbed javelins, bolas, or grapnels intended to ensnare flying creatures, especially dragons. Such defensive towers also stand within the city for the same reason. Vigilance there is the rule. The boroughs of Marble Top, Knob Hill, Makalea Park, and Sweetwood occupy the city's high ground. The Grunge, Eastport, and Kaihulu Flats are Glorathon's seedier neighborhoods. The sources of the city's river, the Tahoranui, are rumored to connect with the elemental plane of water, somewhere uphill.

**1. The Bowl of Coins:** This is the busy, bustling merchant port of Glorathon, where seagoing ships jostle for their times at the docks. For much of the year, traffic is so heavy that some vessels are always waiting out beyond the breakwater arms, moored in the Bay of Glorathon. The Amatara, or southernmost bridge over the Tahoranui, is wide and flat, with low and open stone railings—and is so low that only small open boats or rafts can get under it and reach the wharves of Merion Square (29).

So, all seaborne cargoes are loaded and unloaded here, to and from the warehouses that front these always-busy docks, where gulls shriek and swoop day and night under the lanterns, dockworkers are always on duty, and crowding, cursing, and swinging cranes are the ever present norm. At the easternmost corner of the Bowl, the launch chute of the dry dock of Malaero Master Shipwright (where new ships are always being built) slopes down into the murky harbor waters, flanked by a repair dock where damaged vessels that can still float are worked on, but everywhere else in the Bowl is given over to loading, unloading, and moving ships in and out. "The Bowl never sleeps," as the Glorathan saying goes, "and when it's awake, it's always making noise."

One ship captain aptly described the Bowl as an

"utter chaos of swift work being done over, around, and under other fast workers, amid an unending din." It's quieter and less frenetic by night, but unlike the market in nearby Merion Square, it does not close except when forced to by severe weather or warfare—and then only grudgingly and for as short a time as possible.

**2. The Taimi'umamalosi:** The fortified citadel and its attached stoutly seawalled harbor are the main military barracks, armory, and base of operations for the defending soldiery of Glorathon, the Royal Protectors. At least one skyship is always ready-moored here, fully provisioned, crewed, and armed, for swift reconnaissance or response to perceived threats to the city or its internal peace. No one can enter or depart unchallenged, and the seneschal of the citadel is a suspicious woman by nature; plainclothes Protectors leave to procure food and water for their fellow guardians, rather than having it shipped in—so there's no need for non-Protectors to enter the fortified base. Anyone attempting to do so can expect to be firmly detained and exhaustively questioned (to say the least).

**3. Tower of the Constabulary:** This small fortress on the southwestern edge of the seaport is the office of the *Seitha* Constabulary. Its cellars are much larger than the slender, grim-looking stone tower above them, and contain dungeon cells that see frequent use.

The constabulary are the most diligent and relentless servants of the Queen, and in these increasingly dangerous and politically complex times, their dedicated senior officers are training them to spy and anticipate more widely than their traditional role entails, to better guard the monarch and the safety of her city.

Any visitor to the Tower will instantly observe that this spartan, solidly built structure has been conceived for defense. Each room is exposed to arrow slits from rooms above or farther into the interior. Locked gates are everywhere, and there are no immediately obvious ways up or down

and no open "wells" or rooms connecting with the other floors.

This is due in part to prisoners being interrogated and imprisoned here, but also to the fact that two guarded and well-hidden stairs lead down through stone-lined shafts to the deepest cellar. Subterranean guardrooms prevent tunneling from the surrounding city. They form a ring enclosing storage chambers for Glorathon's precious *seitha* reserves. There are always Constabulary members walking guard duty here, and always some off-duty constables in the barracks between the guard rooms and the central *seitha* cellar, where constables stand watch over the bloodlike substance. The process of adding or taking away *seitha* is "trebled:" that is, three constables must each bear a copy of the relevant documentation and compare them; they must match—and all three are responsible for overseeing the movement, one as distant as possible and charged to summon aid at the sight of anything suspicious, and two in close attendance on the *seitha* at all times. These two are responsible for preventing unauthorized access and for watching each other. Though treachery among the ranks of the Constabulary is very rare, it is a security concern.

Unauthorized visitors are unwelcome in or loitering near the Tower. Outside of the interrogation and detention rooms, chamber pots are handy in wall holders everywhere, but private garderobes are not to be found: duty and posts must not be abandoned for mere calls of nature.

Though the fact isn't publicly known or intended to be, enough replacement parts to entirely rebuild a latticework mooring tower are stored in aboveground rooms. Two of the upper levels have their own exterior doors through which "reach out" cranes within can be extended. A stubby turret beside the main tower is actually the housing for a ready-to-fly launch, stored upright; one side of the structure is hinged to swing open like a gigantic basket, so the hidden launch can take to the skies in mere moments.



# City of Glorathon

1 : 17,500

Albers Equal Area Projection

0 0.5 1 1.5 KM  
0 0.5 1 MILE





# Kingdom of Meryath

**4. Talarstal's:** Visitors, goods-shifting merchants, and citizens moving house become very familiar with this local institution. The dockside warehouse of Nilvargars Talarstal, now grown into three joined warehouses, is given over to small-space rentals to hundreds of clients: "manygoods" storage. Got fourteen cases of swords you need kept out of the rain? Or an inherited bed, chair, and oversized mirror too large to use but too good to discard? Talarstal's will store it for you—so long as it isn't dead (and starting to smell), undead, or obviously dangerous or illegal. "I don't take slaves in cages," the garrulous, constantly cigar-smoking "Nilvurs" is fond of saying, "but I'll store the cages for you! Manacles, too!"

**5. Endaerlo's Parandras:** This bustling, echoing dockside food market occupies a high-ceilinged warehouse whose rafters would be overrun by gulls were it not for the local children armed with slings, who are allowed to keep all the birds they kill (and who presumably live on gull pie). All Glorathon knows that Endaerlo can't abide fish, and of sea-bounty he sells only shellfish, but his place is *the* best local source of exotic edibles from afar: from the sauces and pastes of Elyrikos to spices, oils, and nuts from more distant lands. The freshest herbs and spices that don't come from the nearby farms of Meryath are found in Endaerlo's rafter-high shelves, that nimble children (who proudly wear the blue caps and vests of the staff of the Parandras, though they are hired by the day or half-day) scale to fetch down goods for clients. Day and night Endaerlo's is busy, and his grown children work in shifts overseeing all the selling. Endaerlo himself supervises the buying and has done so well at it over the years that he's quietly become one of the city's largest landlords, albeit of its humbler properties.

**6. Ohallagaer's Omnium:** The dingier, cheaper rival of Ghannaster's Glorious Hall (23), this older and larger sundries (junk) shop has long been locally notorious as the crammed, ramshackle home of nigh-countless secondhand oddities.

Lijhlaer Ohallagaer (LEE-juh Oh-HAL-ah-gare) is a moon-faced, fat, smirking, oily fence of stolen goods who loves octopuses. He often wears a soaking-in-brine leather jacket upon which crawl half a dozen of the little cephalopods, which he strokes and talks lovingly to. He makes the skin of most female Glorathans crawl, but he certainly knows how to make money. It's rumored around the city that half a dozen or more citizens who went angrily to the Omnium to get money owed them just disappeared there, perhaps fed to the octopuses—or perhaps their bodies are hidden under some of the mountains of junk, putrefying or becoming mummified. Ohallagaer *does* sell brassbound hoop-topped "treasure chests" he swears are "cloaked in human hide."

**7. Waerlo's Wavehaven:** The largest and best of the sailors' rooming houses clustered around the Bowl of Coins, this labyrinthine mansion cobbled together by joining five old houses is run by the retired sailor whose name it bears. Ivlar Waerlo has a prodigious memory for city history and faces, and can regale anyone who sits and keeps him supplied with strong drink with endless ship lore and wild tales of sailors and their shipwrecks and mercantile dealings, legal and otherwise. He's seen almost seventy winters, and learned after the third one that the best way of understanding the world was to "follow the money"—so he has not only prospered, he's also the best judge in all Meryath of who's up to what when it involves sailing. His large and loyal staff love him, because he gives jobs to old salts who might otherwise have to beg. They make sure the Wavehaven is safe, clean, and hosts no lasting perils. Any tenant can always get a bowl of beef stew or a slice of roast, because Waerlo knows sailors get all too tired of fish, fish, and *more* fish.

**8. Flaer's Flaming Tankard:** A seedy sailors' tavern decorated with flotsam and wrack from wrecked ships, this cheap, harbor-handy establishment is studded with many small hearths for driving off the chill and drying wet clothing (there are even iron clamp-racks to hold wet boots over the

hearths), serves hot broth laced with spirits and straight ale or spirits, and is beloved of visiting sailors as a result. A place to unwind in, often populated by snoring, exhausted salts, it does not welcome brawlers or the curious—though the forest of small chimneys protruding from its roof makes it easy to find.

An old city rumor insists a stupendous pirate treasure is hidden somewhere in the Tankard, but the only thing of value that has ever been found there was one brick among those that make up the floors and walls discovered to be of solid gold, painted to look like the sooty mud-bricks all around it.

**9. Vulsurk's:** This windowless, rather battered dive, with drab maroon outer walls and its name deeply branded across the stout front door, is typical of the more unsavory taverns of the city. Violence is frequent, staff work armed and in gangs, and the clientele tends to be sailors, lowlifes, visiting adventurers, and hard-drinking farm laborers looking for a fight. Vulsurk was an infamous smuggler, kidnapper, and pirate who disappeared at sea over a decade ago; a succession of yellowing human skulls has been mounted over the bar and pronounced to be his, down the years since. Vulsurk's is known to be a place where sleep-causing drugs and poisons can be covertly purchased, though palace spies are said to frequently visit and watch for such transactions.

**10. Leiesoathro's Leleimama:** This backstreets establishment is typical of the seedier inns of the city. Rows of austere rooms open onto long, narrow, dingy passages with uneven floors and echoing end stairwells. Walls are thin and present little barrier to the sounds made by neighboring guests; disputes and amorous moments may often be overheard. Hot, weak sea-broth soup and teas can be had at set morning, midday, and evening times, but guests are otherwise left to their own devices; payments for rooms are cheap but must be paid in advance; rents for additional nights will be demanded in person before dusk. There are no laundry facilities. Shifts of hulking



“house guards” keep the peace in the passages, but respond only to evidence of fire, or bloodcurdling screams, from individual guestrooms. As the house saying (written on a frieze in the shabby front lobby) puts it: “We welcome heroes, and heroes look after themselves.”

**11. Ainakeamalo (Stadium):** This gigantic arena is an open-topped oval of concentric white stone benches rising around a “liwass” or battleground of fine white sand. Often referred to informally as “the Gloryground” in everyday conversation, it is a social center of the city, commonly used in the mornings for martial practice (especially archery and the wielding of other missile weapons, unsafe to do elsewhere in crowded Glorathon), and in afternoons and evenings for contests-of-arms and duels. The Queen has decreed that no flying ship can fly above the stadium without her express permission (which is seldom given, but has been granted for mock assaults involving skyships and lines to the ground).

Public baths and sanitary facilities, including large sloping floors for night-soil recycling (by combining with a mash of the diced and pulped leaves of certain wild vines, underwater to curb the stench) into fertilizer for the farms of Meryath, are located under the raked stone stands, accessed through always-open but supervised doorways around the outside of the stadium. Citizens understand that meetings in the baths or privies are going to be watched and listened to by the civic attendants, yet such contacts are frequent to discuss business dealings, dinner plans, or other arrangements.

**12. Halardikael’s Horn:** One of the more expensive and stylish taverns of the city. Readily spotted because of the giant golden hunting-horn of carved wood that gleams like metal hanging from chains over the front doors, “the Horn” is frequented by daring heroes, visiting adventurers, and anyone desiring to hire such people publicly. Enchanted against fire, the vast taproom features many corkscrew-shaped, curving pillars, stout wooden furniture capped and

sheathed in gleaming copper, and a huge array of exotic drinkables from all over the Great Caldera (and, it is rumored, beyond). A few tarts, cheese melts, and diced-meat pasties can be had, but food is very much an afterthought in this noisy gathering place. There’s no room for dancing, and an agile, alert, and numerous staff of considerable physical prowess discourages brawling.

**13. The Artrumpet:** Unlike its larger, more southerly, and newer cousin, the Amatara, this northernmost river bridge of the city is noteworthy for its carved magnificence. It is a covered bridge, a stone tunnel whose interior is sculpted into a huge and glorious carving of muscular human heroes of both genders battling dragons of all types—some of them fanciful—and sizes, that entwine and curl up over travelers’ heads and diagonally down much of the length of the bridge. Soot from torches and lanterns has blackened part of this spectacular carving, but it remains an awesomely large and lifelike depiction of savage combat.

Both sides of the bridge’s exterior are carved into the semblance of a wall of jostling faces of leering giant toads, the legendary (and hopefully long extinct) marawaut of the Tahoranui, man-eating lurkers that live in salt water, fresh water, and the brackish shallows and mud caves of the Meryath coast. The roof is smooth, and much used by the more daring youth of the city—who can readily climb the walls—as a place to sun, make love, and dive into the murky river from. The bridge ends are open arches, though there are carved holes through which chains can be strung to prohibit the passage of carts and wagons. (No one can remember when this was last done; the chains are kept in a palace cellar.)

**14. Draythraum’s:** The most popular gambling club and eatery in the city is something that changes often, sometimes thrice a season, but one glittering, extremely expensive “house of hazards” manages to maintain a high reputation, a steady clientele, and a cachet that draws curious visitors to the city month in and month out, year after year: Draythraum’s, “Where the Most Beautiful

Heroes Come to Play.” Draythraum himself is a dapper, seldom-seen creator of drinks and tavern-pourer who makes most of his money on the overpriced drinks and food. It’s notable that the roasts drenched in sauces are succulent and almost worth the steep prices charged. The gambling is honest and some of the dice and card tables have very modest stakes, though spectators throng the “Gold Pit” where the wealthiest chance wild wagers in cutthroat “Triple Deck” games designed to thwart those who count and memorize cards played. Escorts in the most expensive of garments are plentiful and welcoming, and most nights the vast club is crowded. It’s a place to see and be seen—and, it is rumored, the busiest spot in the city for covert signals and messages to be passed, despite the fact that every Glorathan knows that watchful palace spies mingle and dine here every night.

**15. The Alatark:** This is the best and most expensive inn in Glorathon. It features soaring ceilings, gleaming marble floors, luxurious furnishings, and a discreet and capable staff who see to guests’ needs at all hours. If someone arrives, departs, or gets hungry in the depths of night, they are handled swiftly, calmly, and graciously.

Featuring a roofed-over central pond surrounded by trees and a landscaped garden, the Alatark boasts six floors of suites, each with its own bathing chambers and balcony. Its kitchens cater to all tastes, but specialize in deftly prepared seafood dishes, served in individual guestrooms or the ground-floor dining room, which curves around the western half of the central garden. Private dining and meeting rooms can be rented by the morning, midday, or half-evening, and are popular among the wealthy of Glorathon for transacting business on neutral ground. The sea turtle soup and the “deep tench” (squid cooked in a cocktail of mixed spirits) are beloved of many diners.

The founder and namesake of the inn is long dead, but the short, fat, fussy gourmand Malagarczel presides over the dining room, and the tall, handsome,





# Kingdom of Meryath



urbane, and imperturbable Halartrel serves as chamberlain (*maître d'hôtel*), greeting guests personally in the high-vaulted marble lobby; he knows where to get anything in Glorathon.

**16. Northeast Gate:** This massive stone gate is a soaring, arch-topped opening between two buttresses shaped like the prows of gigantic ships. From the ground, they curve up and out to support their surmounting, deck-like pointed platforms where guards can overlook all who approach or depart from the city.

Large four-shot ballistae are mounted on both battlements, where weatherproof chests store ballista bolts, javelins, crossbows (fitted with swivel-rests

that can readily be fitted onto the platform railings), and hundreds of crossbow quarrels. These are rarely used; the guards spend most of their time looking through “eyeslan” (spyglass-binoculars) to closely observe people below, and pride themselves on remembering faces and noticing anything out of the ordinary.

The gates are copper-clad wooden doors three feet thick and counterweighted (and, Glorathan rumor insists, heavily-enspelled against fire and a secret roster of other perils). Their pinkish-orange, shiny sheets of burnished copper never oxidize. The gates can be reinforced by huge beams slid horizontally out of the buttresses, three spars in front of the doors and three behind; these can be locked into place with massive

metal pins dropped into sockets. There is also a portcullis that can be dropped from the battlement above the gate, which links the two prow-battlements to form a large U-shaped fighting deck with stone railings. The battlements are fitted with gigantic rigid ringbolts for mooring skyships above them to increase firepower, should Glorathon be under assault.

**17. The Tafalemaota (Royal Palace):** This grand diamond-shaped building is topped by a massive round white marble dome. It stands, surrounded by a smooth flagstone terrace. At the center lies a garden of short palm trees and well-tended shrubs. The terrace is ringed by a stone wall with a scalloped top; between descending arcs, it rises into spires like a crown. This wall is



pierced by two major streets: the Pulapuna, which connects the palace terrace with the northwest city gate, and the Konapua, which leads to the Artrumpet, the ornately carved northernmost city bridge over the River Tahoranui, and thence to the stadium.

At each of three ends of the cross-shaped terrace stands a stone mansion: one is given over to courtiers' offices, one is a barracks for the palace guards (with, it is rumored, a huge armory beneath), and the last is a sumptuous guesthouse for envoys, honored visitors, and their retinues. All of these structures are linked via stone-lined underground passages to the main central palace.

The Tafalemaota is built of soaring, smooth-sculpted, mottled and veined pale marble. Conjoined triads of columns project from its exterior walls, rising to support a trough overhang surrounding the dome that collects rainwater and sends it cascading down into the gardens through protruding dragon-form stone waterspouts. Between the pillars, the walls of the upper floor (the royal apartments) are studded with large windows flanking doors that open out onto exterior balconies. Below, on the ground floor, windows are absent but three wide, impressive doors open out onto the surrounding terrace on three sides of the palace, and a larger and more ornate double door faces the Konapua, opening in the southeastern wall of the Palace.

These doors are all guarded by pairs of guards in splendid armor, and all open into high and wide pink marble hallways that run straight to the heart of the palace, past chambers of state (meeting rooms, the library, a map room, garderobes, robing rooms, and retiring rooms) and up a short flight of broad steps to enormous double doors of embossed brass, depicting Meryath surrounded by the ocean, as if seen from high in the heavens. These doors open into the central throne chamber, and are guarded by warriors tasked with taking all weapons from visitors desiring to enter. On a typical day, many Glorathans and visitors stream up and down these halls on business.

The walls of the four passages are hung

with magically animated frescoes that vividly depict warriors and mages fighting and defeating dragons—blues, blacks, greens, and reds of all sizes—and above these scenes of heroism, up high on the walls, are mounted the preserved heads of the corresponding dragons; they seem to watch passersby and unnerve many. The enchantments on the frescoes cause them to emit the sounds of the battles shown when anything moves past.

The brazen doors are enchanted to repel certain magics (fire and lightning, Glorathans know, but the precise list is a state secret) and will slowly and silently open outward by themselves at a gesture from anyone wearing the right ring; many senior courtiers, the Queen, and a few guardsmen do so. Just within each doorway stands a pair of ten-foot-tall alabaster statues, flanking the entryway. They turn their heads to observe all arrivals, then announce them to the throne in booming voices as if they are heralds, recognizing ring-wearers by name but naming others only if primed to do so from afar by a ring-wearer.

Beneath the throne chamber is a cellar containing kitchens, pantries, an infirmary, a fortified "retreat," and the tunnels linking the palace with the four outlying mansions (and, it's rumored, with secret underways running to many other more humble and more distant city destinations).

Around the throne chamber are the royal apartments, occupied by the Queen and her royal household of servants and bodyguards. The many stairs up and down are accessed through hidden doors in the walls of the throne chamber, or from the chambers of state adjacent to them.

The throne chamber itself is huge and circular, and rises through the royal apartments; the central dome of the palace forms its ceiling, and is held up by a ring of slender, smooth stone columns that soar through the throne chamber. Stained glass bay windows ringing the walls beneath the dome admit soft colored sunlight, or starlight, down into the throne chamber.

The perfectly smooth, polished stone

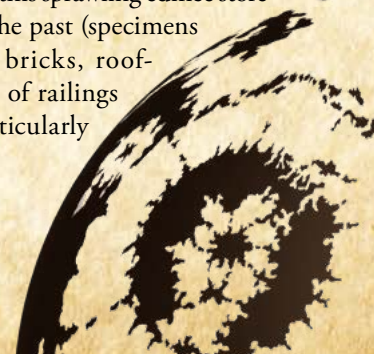
floor of the throne chamber is inlaid with a mosaic map of the Great Caldera that segues into a starry night sky all around its edges. Enchantments make the moons and some of the stars in this rim of adornment move about slowly, mimicking their apparent movements as observed in the Glorathan sky.

North of the mosaic is a round, raised, dark marble dais of four ascending steps, its uppermost level being about twelve feet across and surmounted by a simple high-backed throne smooth-hewn from malachite and facing due south. When Queen Shardwen is on it, two massive unchained tigers customarily recline on either side of it (their quarters are among the chambers of state north of, or behind, the throne).

**18. Royal Conservatory:** The largest and grandest of the buildings adjacent to the Palace compound, this is the main office of the Palace bureaucracy; hundreds of courtiers work here, and many a citizen has become lost in its six floors of linked hallways and countless offices. The name might suggest that it is a place where plants are tended, or music is practiced, but the building houses no-nonsense offices.

Glorathon is wealthy in large part due to the efforts of the tax collectors, assessors, engineers, surveyors, and other experts who work to make Glorathon ever greater. Their paper-littered, map-hung, busy offices are here, and they are workplaces, not impressive reception rooms; everyone loves a large desk, but that's because it can be stacked with more paper, not so it can be kept a bare expanse in a large office furnished to impress visitors. The secret of Glorathon's success is that its civic officials work fairly well as a team, with infighting and turf battles kept to a minimum. Managers who have in the past set their underlings to work against other city officials have been firmly and swiftly removed from office.

The cellars of this sprawling edifice store evidence from the past (specimens of old hinges, bricks, roof-tiles, and pieces of railings and piping, particularly





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things that failed or wore out prematurely), not just records—but there are rooms upon rooms of ledgers and bundled papers in stone cabinets, each room having a water-cistern at the ceiling that can be dumped open by pulling a cord in case of fire.

Like many of the grander private residences in the city, the Conservatory has its own interior courtyard with trees, a pond, and a small, well-tended orchard (lime and lemon trees in particular).

**19. Northwest Gate:** Identical in construction and fittings to its northeastern counterpart, this entrance to the city was once rammed by a skyship from within (the vessel of a lawbreaker and pirate trying to escape the city by night, in a storm). The reinforced metal ramming bowsprit pierced one of the copper-clad gates, trapping the vessel fast.

The ship was demolished long ago, but the Queen

commanded that the bow be left protruding from the gates, as a mute reminder to all that Glorathon must be ever vigilant and is strongly defended. So, the massive pointed and saw-edged metal spar, often repainted black to keep the rust at bay (and a favorite perch of gulls who befoul it), protrudes from the left-hand copper door to this day.

**20. Old Ag's House (and the Garden of Heroes Fallen):** The home, studio, and surrounding statue-crammed garden of the famous Alaglatha Normeiror. Many local children gawk at the statues of dead Glorathan heroes amid the trees and shrubs of Old Ag's garden, and kin of those commemorated often journey to see them. Most citizens of Glorathon are proud of this local landmark; it also serves as an easily-found meeting-place for visitors.

**21. Undros Peribert, Master Sculptor:** The home, shop, and warehouse of Alaglatha Normeiror's chief rival, a haughty, hand-

some, and busy sculptor of statues "to order." Peribert attracts many clients thanks to his willingness to depict them as great heroes, in stone, but his work is rushed, simple, and predictable. Still, for those who can't wait to aggrandize themselves, his speed is a big plus.

**22. Skyport:** The largest open area within the walls of the city, this bustling and rather muddy expanse of hard-trodden ground is a hive of activity night and day. Skyships tie up at any of its dozen mooring-towers, and wagons come and go with cargoes they bring or take away, loaded with just about anything imaginable.

The seven older towers are two-hundred-foot-high stone edifices. They support ship cradles of stout wooden beams between them, into which large and heavy ships, or vessels in need of repair, can be settled. Each is topped with two cranes used to move the cradle-beams into place or remove them and



in loading and unloading (often, one crane works while the other merely holds a heavy weight for counterbalance).

The cradle-beams are fitted with permanent catwalks for the use of the skyport workers (mainly fellfolk) and ships' crews. After a ship is encradled, harnesses of additional wooden-board-floored catwalks with rope handrails are winched into place around such moored vessels to facilitate shipping or repair work, and a safety net is slung from tower to tower beneath the ship to prevent deaths from accidental hundred-and-fifty-foot falls from the moored vessel's decks.

The five newer towers are spired, open-work lattices of wooden beams and metal-clad wooden spars, of varying heights, stoutly anchored on legs that extend deep into the earth. Like their taller, older stone counterparts, each is equipped with ladders, platforms, and pulley-tipped outrigger arms that facilitate the loading and unloading of cargoes, and temporary attachment to either of the port's two much wider mobile "rolling" towers comprising five open platforms (used for vessel repairs or for the movement of very large or heavy cargoes).

The port's aviary and its rather battered old wooden office stand along the northwestern edge of the open port ground, and the outer edge of this open area is ringed by a line of tall wooden poles, the "masts." The main aviary is home to the giant gulls used like tugboats and wherries to maneuver skyships into and out of mooring cradles by means of hooks, lines, and skilled riders. The office holds a smaller aviary for messenger birds and caged live avian cargo and a handful of basic bunks for stranded aerial voyagers. Its outside staircase is distinctively braced against collapse.

The towers are equipped with large vegetable-oil lanterns in massive metal cages that are either hung from the towers or suspended from lines stretched across the ring of tall masts that surround the port, and all who dwell near the skyport are used to their bright lighting shining every night.

Everything else about the port—the

casks of drinking-water, crates and barrels of cargo and ship's stores (supplies for the crews), repair materials (such as replacement masts, rudders, and sails, all of which the port keeps in plentiful stock, for their sale is a key source of city income) and the fencing that surrounds all of these materials to mitigate against casual theft—is movable, and often is rearranged to accommodate the specific vessels in port, their needs, the movements of the small flying launches to and from their parent skyships, and the cargoes.

**23. Ghannaster's Glorious Hall:** A large, crammed, hopelessly disorganized shop of exotic curios that's slowly gaining fame across the Great Caldera. Although the fast-talking, always-smiling Ilios Ghannaster may have flexible morals and definitely has poor organizational skills (he just dumps new merchandise wherever he can find space for it in his increasingly narrow and meandering aisles), Ghannaster's is *the* place to look for something unique, gaudy, tasteless, and eye-catching. Need a lampstand cast in the shape of a nymph dancing nude except for a giant pineapple balanced on her head? Or a chair of carved wood in the shape of three human skeletons, intertwined playfully? Or pink knight's armor studded with rhinestones and small round mirrors? This is the place!

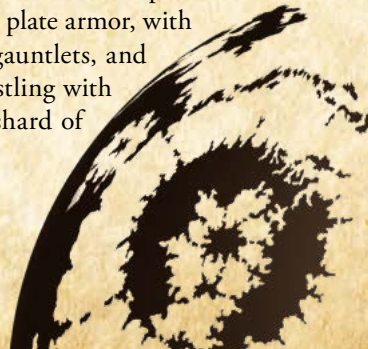
**24. Darathchasur's High Helm:** This is the most expensive armor and weaponry shop in Glorathon, a city seemingly full of shops that sell armor and weaponry. The prissy and perfectionist half-elf Haliel Darathchasur (Hal-EYE-ell Dar-ATH-chase-sur) delights in providing perfectly matching armor and weaponry to patrons from his extensive stock, rather than "letting some base charlatan of a self-styled armorer custom-make something for you that isn't really matched to your shape, size, and reach." Darathchasur and his small staff are highly trained experts who really do know weapon balance and agility while clad in armor, and Darathchasur has personally devised (or modified) many different surface treatments to make armor gleam various

hues, have patterned sheens and textures, and to resemble everything from painted cloth to a beaded layer of water droplets. And if you want your armor adorned with tasteful gems, he is *the* acknowledged master (at least in Meryath's end of the Great Caldera). He will "rush repair" damaged or marred armor—for ruinously high fees, of course.

**25. Hall of Heroes:** This huge, impressive rectangular structure has a steep overhanging roof supported by a row of fluted marble columns flanking the western and eastern outside walls that are echoed by corresponding rows of interior pillars, rising through the single vast open room that occupies the entire interior of the Hall (save for garderobes and cloakrooms at the four corners).

Here ceremonies of heroism are held by night, and by day heroes vote, debate, and meet to discuss matters of trade, politics, and personal endeavor. The Speaker keeps order, to prevent the Hall becoming a marketplace or brawling-ground, but it tends to be a noisy place where people speak their minds, often to the point of dispute. The architecture of the Hall is notable for the sculpted grappling arms and hands that entwine about the four "end" exterior columns, and the relief carvings of speaking mouths adjacent to listening ears that adorn both pediments of the Hall.

**26. The Rising Heroes Emporium:** This seedy, no-questions-asked secondhand weapons and outfitter shop has been the savior of many an adventurer in a hurry. Its laconic proprietor, Leitara Halahoi, has been known to buy or accept in trade even armor, gear, and weapons still dripping with fresh blood. The Emporium looks like a rotten, about-to-collapse warehouse, but its dark corners and chained-off side-sheds contain an astonishing arsenal and armory. One visiting mercenary who was in great haste once outfitted a ship's crew of eighty-six in full plate armor, with helms, shields, gauntlets, and all, each one bristling with weapons, in "a shard of





# Kingdom of Meryath

an afternoon,” and about twenty of them were outfitted in armor that matched. Need an exotic poisoned weapon, or one that has a hidden backup blade? Prefer your shields to have their insides a-bristle with sheathed daggers? Want armored boots that can sprout blades from their toes? Halahoi has your, uh, back.

**27. Glaerlar’s Haven:** Despite its ancient, decrepit condition (shutters fall off in high winds, and railings on stairs are not to be trusted), this rooming house is considered a desirable address because it has its own well of cool, clear, safe drinking water. As a result, only death causes changes in its clientele, which means it’s home to a settled, relatively safe community. Many retired citizens live here, which is why it’s sometimes called the “Old Heroes’ Home” (usually shortened to just “Old Heroes”) and is considered a source of garrulous wisdom.

**28. Sarathra’s Filemufale:** This comfortable, quiet establishment epitomizes the majority of inns in Glorathon: a mid-dling-priced, simple, and more than adequate place to stay. Four floors of bright guestrooms are clean, safe, and well designed but not luxurious. (Each room has sturdy lockable wardrobes, copious hooks and lines for hanging damp garments so they’ll dry, and ceiling-nets for the storage of outer-garments and carrybags, for example.) The owner and proprietor, Sarathra, sternly commands a small army of hard-working maids who double as cooks and house guards; very little goes unnoticed within the walls. A simple kitchen and communal dining room serves everyone at all hours; hip-baths can be rented for individual guestrooms, and filled by pipes from a rooftop cistern. (Over the years, no fewer than five guests have been found drowned in that cistern, but this is a topic Sarathra prefers not to discuss.)

**29. Merion Square:** In daylight hours, this is a busy, noisy marketplace, crowded with temporary stalls where the farmers of Meryath, who pole rafts or sail small and usually ramshackle craft up and down River Tahoranui to the wharves that adjoin

the square, sell their wares. These inner docks are uneven, in need of constant repair, and are sheltered from the sea; they alone are called “wharves” in the city, whereas the larger and sturdier quays of the Merchant Port are always “docks.”

Permanent structures are forbidden in Merion Square, and only one such building flanks the wharves, to the north: the crowded, warehouselike, mildew-reeking boatworks of Thantaras the Shipwright, who tirelessly makes and repairs skiffs and smaller boats.

The smell of rotten or crushed fruit and vegetables clings to the square, which can be entered via many streets but notably by the great loop of the Manakaloe, an oval avenue that connects Merion Square and the Skyport on Knob Hill’s west side. The farmers’ stalls are little better than shanties, and many of them have to be demolished and reassembled to move them—but every few months they must be moved, if only a few paces, or the owners will be fined.

**30. The Highburn Hall:** Readily located by any visitor due to its striking exterior, this is the Guild of Dragon Slayers museum of dragon hunting. From the outside, it is a tall rectangular building of many wall-buttresses that soar up into two rows of stone needles, bent inward so as to thrust up from the edges and lower slope of the roof rather than beside it. Each spire ends in a sculpted stone dragon head, jaws full agape in frozen roars of rage and terror; minor enchantments keep birds from roosting and befouling the heads with periodic discharges of minor lightnings that crackle over the heads impressively by night.

Inside, except for garderobes and cloak-rooms at the four corners, the Hall is entirely given over to one vast, high-ceilinged, echoing chamber dominated by intact rampant-posed dragon skeletons, the blackened and crushed armor of dragon hunters who died in glorious battle with one too many wyrms, and a floating gallery of severed and mounted dragons’ heads enchanted to hover aloft, but to descend upon command for closer examination. Museum curators carry

enchanted rods of office thrust through their belts, to which the heads respond. Curators take care not to activate the magic when using their rods to indicate hall features to visitors.

The Hall is said to be haunted by the whispering ghosts of more than one dragon, restless, invisible spirits that hiss the whereabouts of their hoards and secrets about those who slew them to anyone who ends up alone in any spot in the museum. The remains of would-be thieves found in the Hall over the years suggest that the place has at least one unseen guardian possessed of very large jaws (which is why no thefts have been attempted from the Hall in decades).

The staff, who are all retired dragon hunters, love to tell tales of the dragon lairs they never found, of the hoards that went unplundered because other dragons came to claim them, and even of dragons who returned from the dead for revenge. More than a few dragon hunters have begun glorious—if sometimes short—careers by paying attention to what the staff of the Hall say.

**31. Guild of Dragon Slayers Guildhouse (“The Golden Glory”):** Any visitor to the city can readily find this distinctive building; its front is shaped like a great golden dragon’s head, snout pointed up into the sky. It rises four tall-windowed floors from the street, all of its stout stone walls sloped so that they are wider at the bottom, and perhaps twenty feet narrower at the top-most floor (the windows are inset in wells, and so are vertical rather than sloping with the surrounding walls). The main block of the guildhouse has twice been extended, by wings added thrusting out from the back, to form a giant “U.” However, the wings are each a floor lower, and of different architectural styles, so many passersby mistake them for separate buildings.

Nonmembers won’t get farther inside the guildhouse than its small, gorgeous “blood-brown” marble-clad lobby (with pillars, floor stones, and walls of the high-polished swirl-patterned stone), unless they’re the guests of a guild member who accompanies them or who has named them to the staff



# Kingdom of Meryath

beforehand. The names of current guild members in good standing hang as individual gilded cast-metal name-scrolls around a huge-diameter pillar that stands between the lobby and the central staircases.

Up one flight of stairs, the guildhouse offers members two large and five small meeting rooms, all splendidly paneled in exotic woods, soundproofed, and equipped with adjacent serving-kitchens.

On the ground floor is a reception room, which gives into an inner room known as

the Registry where new members are formally enrolled (on, yes, written rolls). On the ground floor are two famous “Open Rooms.” That is, they open off the lobby, and nonmembers are allowed to enter them. One is the Room of the Rules, where the formal rules of the guild are written out on painted wooden panels and hung all around the walls. The other is the Room of the Valiant, where permanent easels and lecterns display epic accounts of the exploits of various dragon hunters, the selections

curated and changed by the guild in a complex ongoing rotation corresponding to anniversaries of the births, deaths, and great deeds of relevant members. On the ground floor is also a closed and guarded room where only members can consult the accumulated dragon lore of the guild: written accounts, maps, and artifacts brought back from hoards and the sites of battles with dragons. The rest of the ground floor is given over to a palatial feasting-hall, open to all members at any time when it isn’t booked for a specific function.

The cellars beneath the ground floor contain storerooms, pantries, the kitchens that serve the feasting-hall, and a wine cellar that rivals the Queen’s.

The top two floors of the guildhouse are strictly off limits to nonmembers, and the guild does not advertise that among the rooms here are map rooms where members can mark large table-maps with dragon sightings, the locations of finds, and the like; apartments where guild members visiting the city can stay for short periods, or to recuperate from wounds; and an infirmary for injured or diseased guild members.

Displays of dragon eggs once occupied some of the upper rooms, but they have been removed (to secret vaults) after word of their existence got out and they became a magnet for thieving attempts—and after one of the eggs, guild rumor insists, started to hatch.





# Creatures of Calidar



## Draecan

Magically crossed between giant pit bulls and red drakes, these beasts are part of the Red Dragon King's army. As big as oxen, horned, clawed, massively muscled, and mostly hairless, draecans have thick, dark red hides thickening into armorlike plates on their backs. Short, very coarse, almost spiky manes grow on their heads and shoulders. They are found mostly on Draconia, although they are known to operate in other planes of existence.

Draecans attack with their front claws, powerful fangs, or two horns on their foreheads, the latter especially when charging. Their four black eyes often provoke fear among foes the first time they encounter draecans up close. They can also detect scents as well as common canines. These battle hounds are immune to fire and can leap twelve feet upward and thirty feet lengthwise. Their baying can be heard for miles and helps them communicate with each other to coordinate battlefield maneuvers—scout, hold a line, reposition, form a wedge, advance, charge, or withdraw.

Their mental acuity lies between that of a primate and an average human being.

Draecans fight in packs of six to twelve, one of them being their leader.

Always the strongest, the head of a pack is immune to mind-altering attacks

and fear. Once draecans begin a charge, there is no countermanding that order. Either the charge succeeds, the beasts are destroyed in the assault, or their leaders are killed. If a leader is killed, its pack withdraws immediately. If a leader is disabled, survivors of the pack will kill it before retreating. During the next day, one of them will assert itself as the new leader, a process which involves some fighting and a lot of roaring.

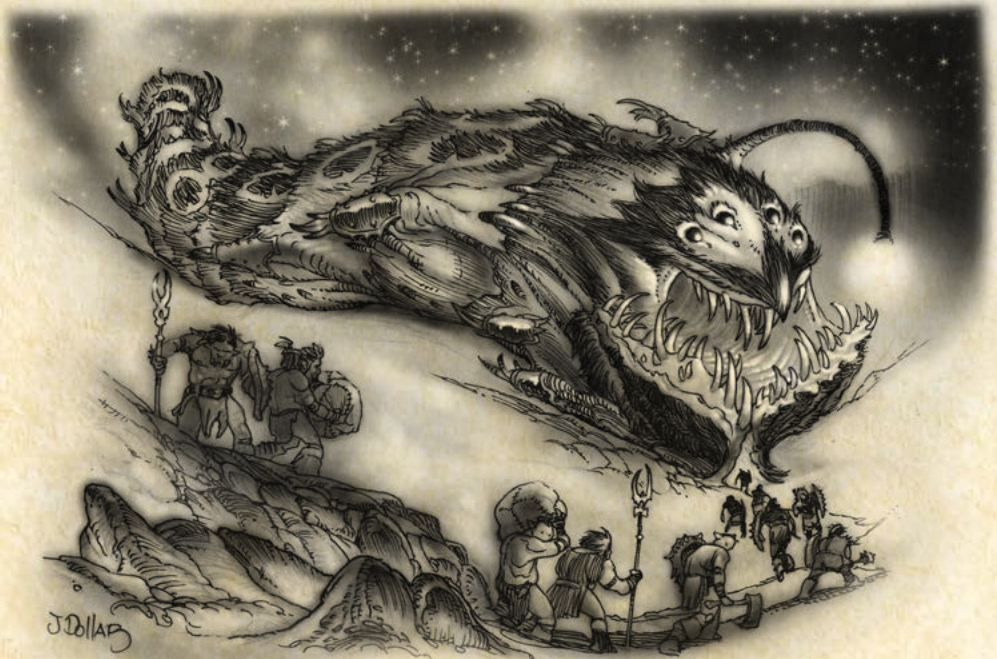
A battlefield commander controls the war packs. This beast is three to six times larger than a pack leader. It communicates

either by baying (up to a 10-mile radius) or through empathy (50 yards). Its gaze paralyzes anyone with less than an above-average mental toughness, unless war priors chanting war songs are present among the enemy. If a battlefield commander is ever defeated, the entire army withdraws until the Dragon King sends a new master.

There are male and female draecans. The latter lay eggs once in their lifetimes, in a clutch of four to eight. Those born in wilderness must be captured and brought before a dragon before they submit. Most are bred in captivity. Draecans reach maturity in four years. Battlefield commanders are magical constructs made from the flesh and bones of fallen draecans, and therefore are unable to reproduce. As such, they also qualify as undead. They retain the memories of the creatures making up their bodies and are as smart as human beings.

## Grön

These creatures are native of Ghüle, the orcs' alien world. They are colossal, grossly fat, mangy worms partially covered with gray fur except where orcs have bolted armor plates onto them. Orcish standards and the bones of defeated monsters sometimes





adorn the beasts. Like those on humpback anglerfish, appendages with glowing lures extend from the top of the gröns' monstrous heads. Two huge, greenish eyes complete the picture. Gröns vary from the size of small galleys to something large enough to swallow several thousand orcs and their war machines.

These beasts can fly, though a bit more slowly than an average skyship, and are unmaneuverable. The largest ones require miles to turn when moving at full speed, or several long minutes if hovering. Gröns can sustain flight in space's airless void for several hours before suffocating. Once outside a planet's atmosphere, elder worms use the appendages on their heads to generate wormholes and reach nearby worlds. They appear just outside their destinations' atmosphere where the wormholes end. Younger gröns travel alongside their parents and through their wormholes. If the appendage is destroyed or cut off, it regrows in one to three Calidaran years. Flying through space is the gröns' favored way of ridding themselves of vermin and other unsavory creatures dwelling on their skin.

Gröns are parasites without means of attacking anything, at least physically. Their natural life involves nesting in the deepest caverns of a world and feeding upon its natural magic core. This energy is what allows them to fly and control wormholes. When a world is stripped bare of its soul, gröns migrate to another and resume the process. Orcs of Ghüle do not allow this to happen, at least to protect their own world, and therefore keep the number of gröns within safe limits. A great many elder gröns would be needed for a long time to deplete Calidar's world soul, but they could potentially succeed if allowed to multiply.

Gröns can live more than a thousand years. They reproduce no more than once per century. Ghülean clans breed them in captivity and use them as troop transports between their world and another they wish to raid. Orcs enter through the beasts' cavernous mouths and wait inside their bodies, among hollow innards. Pups can

hold a few hundred orcs, elder worms up to several thousand. Air supply is limited but sufficient for an hour-long journey through space. Gröns stranded outside a wormhole eventually die, along with their passengers. Ghülean shamans wield spells altering the layout of organs and flesh inside their gröns, which allows them to open a passage into the beasts' heads. A shaman may stand inside a cranium and commune with the host, sensing all that it sees and feels. This allows the shaman to train the creature from its youngest age and control its flight, including forming wormholes. Gröns are the pride and joy of the orcish clans who raise them, a source of even more delight than tormenting slaves and ripping the wings off flies.

## Giant Glorathon Gull

Calidar's Dread Lands are notorious for the presence of many large flying creatures. Giant avians include gulls and other marine birds, such as pelicans and albatrosses, that feed on giant fish. These sea birds can present a danger to visiting skyships. Nonetheless, they can be captured and their progeny tamed, used as mounts, and trained to perform utility or military work. Such is the case with Glorathon's famed giant gulls.

Large enough to carry a rider, giant sea birds possess four wings—two large ones at the shoulders, and two smaller ones slightly back and below. Their ecology, behavior, and mental acuity are the same as a common-sized marine avians. Though tamable, gulls in particular are temperamental: a careless handler, even more so an approaching stranger, is always at risk of being pecked if the creature is irritated or feels threatened. Handlers spend a lifetime breeding and training giant gulls. When a handler dies or retires, associated mounts are released into the wild or put down.

Special harnesses and saddles allow riders to control their mounts' flight. The

best handlers can ride without saddle or harness, relying instead on pressing with their knees and leaning their bodies to communicate their intent. Giant gulls are mostly used to help guide large skyships to their mooring towers. The procedure calls for a ship's crew to throw lines to gull riders, who attach them behind their saddles. Nimble flyers, gulls are favored for this work. Much cheaper than skyships, giant pelicans are employed for fishing and for quick cargo delivery. Albatrosses provide excellent platforms for scouting and long range observation, sometimes carrying two riders. All three breeds can alight on water and swim on the surface.

Giant gulls of Glorathon live in a rookery where they are cared for. These enormous birds require large quantities of fish usually bought at the nearby markets. Cart loads are delivered



everyday. The smell of fish and bird excrement can be repulsive to untrained noses, and teams of workers are needed to clean the place to prevent diseases. Piles of refuse are carted away



# Creatures of Calidar

and sold as fertilizer at the market and elsewhere outside Glorathon. Handling giant avians requires a license issued by the Royal Conservatory (see **Guilds and Brotherhoods**, earlier). Gulls and their hatchlings must all carry proof of registration etched on a metal ring on their right legs.

Gulls attack with their beaks. Their scream is also quite loud and may stun anyone standing within a cone-shaped area about 50 yards long. Pelicans and albatrosses inflict twice as much damage with their beaks as gulls do.

## Mereling

Pallid, malevolent, and not more than two feet tall, these small humanoid creatures are commonly found on Draconia, working as slaves in skyports, mines, and construction sites. Pot-bellied, toothy, devoid of hair, and with red eyes bulging from misshapen skulls, they wear a few rags around their waists or ratty-looking furs in colder climes.

Originally, dragon rulers turned traitors and criminals into merelings as a punishment. They drew their life force from them

and replaced it with another that corrupted and weakened their bodies and minds. As a result, merelings cannot disobey orders given by those entitled to command them. They can be purchased on the open slave markets of Yashrem, the capital city of the Draconic knights. They can also be delegated to specific taskmasters, military figures, foremen in a mine or a skyport, the lady of a house or a governess, etc. Merelings are mischievous, vengeful creatures that remember twisted versions of their past identities. They resent their conditions and, though they follow their orders to the letter, they may attempt to distort such orders' general intent if given the opportunity. Ultimately, they cannot betray their masters outright; the mere thought of doing so causes them great pain.

Merelings do not have genders—there are no males or females. The magic at their core causes them to reproduce when they die. A creature's soul collects in a quiet spot of its owner's dwelling (under the rafters, in a room rarely used, a cellar, or a dungeon), where it turns into a leathery pod. A week later, the mereling rips its way out, complete

with past memories and identity. Such is the curse dragon rulers devised, denying their victims even the solace and dignity of death.

These hapless creatures speak the language of their masters. They also possess an empathy skill used among themselves. Though their mental acuity is that of their past identity, they no longer have the skills pertaining to their former professions. Their red eyes enable them to see clearly in darkness and, occasionally, to detect secret passages and traps. Merelings can fight (though never against their masters). Their claws are generally filthy and may cause infections if the wound inflicted is not healed within the hour. A festering wound causes a small but cumulative amount of damage on a regular basis.

## Sewer Moulder

Also known as the crapulous Alorean sewer moulder, this giant aquatic fungus grows at the bottom of a sewer chasm or a murky swamp lake. Up to a dozen barbed roots anchor its knobby, bulbous body under the surface of the water. A very long, muscular tentacle that can rise well past the surface grows on top. It supports a large knot of wriggling, slimy feelers ending with tiny suckers. A translucent core bulges at the center of the feelers.

The sewer moulder feels vibrations in the ground and in the surrounding water. When it senses something, it sends its head to investigate. The translucent bulge can emit a powerful flash capable of stunning most creatures, or at least temporarily blinding them. If the feelers detect edible prey, they attach themselves to its flesh. Tiny thorns inside the suckers inject paralyzing venom. Once a victim is disabled, its blood and life force are gradually drained. If a prey is killed, its memories survive in the moulder's fungal brain. The creature's mental acuity is that of its smartest prey. Through its head's translucent bulge, it can cast spells its victims had at their disposal at the time of their deaths.





When facing multiple foes, the head may shoot up to twenty thorns before retreating under the water's surface. If it is cut off, another regrows in a week. The mouter can generate an electrical discharge if its lower body is attacked. It can also use up to four of its barbed roots at a time to defend itself. At least four must remain imbedded in the muck below to anchor the creature.

A particularly clever mouter can impersonate previous victims. It creates fungal doubles of them, and sends them out to interact with intruders. The mouter controls these simulacra through empathy. Merely ruses to lead foes into a trap, they are fairly weak, and their true natures become apparent if they sustain any damage. Simulacra can speak any of the languages available to the original victims. The controlling mouter can see and hear through these doubles.

## Zarnese Vultron

This iridescent green, scaly creature has the body of a griffin, with feathered wings and the neck and head of a vulture. Zarn is the realm of Lordhigh Viridar, who rules green dragons on Draconia. He'd created the vultrons as part of his army to defend the skies above Zarn. At the height of his war against the Black Queen, vultrons fought

a huge aerial battle with Draconic skyships above Viridar's fortress at Tarnhùss. Casualties were heavy on both sides. Since then, the lordhigh submitted to Sayble, and units of Zarnese vultrons occasionally fight alongside her forces.

These flying creatures are slightly smarter than primates. They are able to see clearly through the perpetual darkness of Inner Draconia, at least up to 100 yards. They can breathe clouds of decay once a day, about thirty feet across. Aside from immediate damage, they cause rotting diseases to those whose stamina is insufficient to resist. The infections inflict progressive damage until healed at a temple. The clouds' effects are such that organic materials (leather, clothing, food, potions) may also be damaged. Scarring from advanced decay can never be healed. Vultrons are immune to poison and their own breath.

They typically fight in swarms of four to six individuals that concentrate on a single target before moving on to the next. The strongest in the swarm is the leader. A swarm of at least four possesses a limited ability to teleport—once a day, up to

twenty miles away (or to the closest spot if an obstacle stands there). Ten swarms form a sky horde under a hetman's control. This commander is a spellcaster that can be recognized by tattoo-like birthmarks on its skin. As smart as a human being, a hetman is the vultrons' equivalent of a prior. Though bound to the lordhigh it serves, it obtains its spells from Draconia's world soul. A sky horde has a greater ability to teleport: once a week, up to a hundred miles.

Vultrons often feed on carrion which helps them develop their breath weapons. They live in small flocks, hunting local wildlife and taking their carcasses to a common rotting pile in a crevasse or some place generally hard to reach. Males and females reproduce only a few times during their life cycles of two or three hundred years. The brightest of them become hetmans. Their calling leads them to seek out the lordhigh and serve him. The best of them are assigned to military units when summoned to war. Mature vultrons responding to Viridar's call are fiercely loyal to their master and the hetman he appoints to command them.

Though it is uncommon, these creatures can be used as mounts. The lordhigh maintains a cadre of dragon kin heroes who possess an innate bond with such mounts. The *Warriors Green* or *Viridar's Few*, as they are called, act as the lordhigh's elite bodyguard, commandos fighting behind enemy lines, scouts and champions among vultron forces. Though now allies, Draconic knights and *Viridar's Few* maintain a visceral hatred of each other.





# System Conversion

## Game System Conversion

What follows is a set of game statistics for the characters and monsters featured in this book for use with The Pathfinder Roleplaying Game. Note that in some cases, exact conversions of spells and magic items do not exist; where possible, a close approximation was included for ease of use.

**Note:** The material presented in this section (and only this section) of this book, with the exception of all character names, is Open Game Content.

## Characters

**Captain Isledemer d'Alberran** CR 13  
XP 25,600

Human fighter 7/wizard 7

NG Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +6; **Senses** Perception +19

### DEFENSE

**AC** 18, touch 14, flat-footed 15 (+1 deflection, +2 Dex, +1 dodge, +3 natural, +1 shield)

**hp** 104 (14 HD; 7d10+7d6+42)

**Fort** +10, **Ref** +6, **Will** +9 (+2 vs. fear)

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +2

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +2 *cunning rapier* +15/+10 (1d6+4/18–20), *personal wand* +2

**Special Attacks** weapon training (light blades +1)

**Wizard Spells Known** (CL 7<sup>th</sup>; concentration +11)

4<sup>th</sup>—*dimension door*, *force field* (as *shield* but larger, DC 18)

3<sup>rd</sup>—*arcane binding* (as *rope of entanglement*, DC 17), *battering ram* (as *ring of the ram*), *fireball* (DC 17), *lightning bolt* (DC 17), *protection from energy*, *tongues*, *stinking cloud* (DC 17)

2<sup>nd</sup>—*helm control* (+4 competence bonus on Profession (pilot) checks for 1 minute), *track skyship* (as *locate*

*object* but greater range), *make whole*, *web* (DC 16), *see invisibility*

1<sup>st</sup>—*void sphere* (as *rod of extinguishing flames*, DC 15), *magic missile*, *feather fall*, *unseen servant*

0 (at will)—*mending*, *amplify sound* (broadcast voice over long distances), *mage hand*, *arcane mark*, *light*

### STATISTICS

**Str** 13, **Dex** 15, **Con** 16, **Int** 19, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 17

**Base Atk** +10; **CMB** +12; **CMD** 25

**Feats** Agile Maneuvers, Alertness, Combat Casting, Combat Expertise, Craft Wand, Dodge, Eschew Materials, Improved Feint, Improved Initiative, Leadership, Scribe Scroll, Two-Weapon Defense, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Finesse

**Skills** Bluff +16, Climb +17, Diplomacy +16, Intimidate +19, Knowledge (skyships) +19, Perception +19, Profession (sailor) +19, Sense Motive +19

**SQ** armor training 2, arcane bond (*Star Phoenix*)

**Other Gear** +2 *rapier*, *personal wand* +2 (functions as a metamagic item by increasing all spell effects by +1 level, can be used to deflect magical attacks, can be used as a parrying weapon in off-hand), *hat of natural armor* +3, *ring of protection* +1, *boots of the cat*, *messenger scroll* (comes in pairs, message written on one disappears and reappears on the other)



**Enna Daggart**

CR 8

XP 4,800

Human fighter 4/rogue 5

N Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +2; **Senses** Perception +17

### DEFENSE

**AC** 16, touch 13, flat-footed 13 (+3 armor, +2 Dex, +1 dodge)

**hp** 77 (9 HD; 4d10+5d8+27)

**Fort** +8, **Ref** +7, **Will** +5 (+1 vs. fear)

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +1, evasion, uncanny dodge, trap sense +1

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +1 *cunning cutlass* +12/+7 (1d6+6/18–20)

**Special Attacks** sneak attack +3d6

### STATISTICS

**Str** 16, **Dex** 15, **Con** 17, **Int** 17, **Wis** 16, **Cha** 16

**Base Atk** +7; **CMB** +10; **CMD** 23

**Feats** Acrobatic, Alertness, Athletic, Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (cutlass), Weapon Specialization (cutlass)

**Skills** Acrobatics +16, Appraise +15, Bluff +15, Climb +17, Disable Device +16, Intimidate +15, Perception +17, Profession (sailor) +15, Sense Motive +5, Stealth +13, Swim +17

**SQ** armor training 1, rogue talents (fast stealth, ledge walker), trapfinding +2

**Other Gear** +1 *cunning cutlass* (+2 confirmation bonus against skyship sailors), *bracers of armor* +3, *earring of seamanship* (grants +2 competence bonus to Profession (sailor) checks), *messenger scroll* (see entry under Captain d'Alberran)



**Arabesque Starward**

CR 4

XP 1,200

Elf cleric of Istra 5

LG Medium humanoid (elf)

**Init** +4; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +11

### DEFENSE

**AC** 20, touch 12, flat-footed 18 (+8 armor, +2 Dex)

**hp** 26 (5d8)

**Fort** +4, **Ref** +5, **Will** +10; +2 vs. enchantments

**Immune** sleep

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** +2 *barbed spear* +6 (1d8+3/×3)

**Special Attacks** channel positive energy 7/day (DC 16, 3d6)

**Domain Spell-Like Abilities** (CL 5<sup>th</sup>; concentration +9)

7/day—touch of good (+2)

7/day—touch of law

**Cleric Spells Prepared** (CL 5<sup>th</sup>; concentration +9)



# System Conversion

**3<sup>rd</sup>**—*cure serious wounds* (×2), *magic circle against evil*<sup>D</sup>

**2<sup>nd</sup>**—*align weapon* (good only)<sup>D</sup>, *cure moderate wounds* (×3)

**1<sup>st</sup>**—*bless*, *cure light wounds* (×3), *protection from evil*<sup>D</sup>

**0** (at will)—*create water*, *detect poison*, *light*, *mending*

**Domains** Law, Good

## STATISTICS

**Str** 13, **Dex** 18, **Con** 10, **Int** 18, **Wis** 19, **Cha** 18

**Base Atk** +3; **CMB** +4; **CMD** 18

**Feats** Brew Potion, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Heal)

**Skills** Craft (alchemy) +12, Diplomacy +12, Heal +15, Knowledge (religion) +12, Perception +11, Profession (herbalist) +12, Spellcraft +12 (+14 to identify magic item properties); **Racial Modifiers** +2 Perception, +2 Spellcraft to identify magic item properties

**SQ** elven magic

**Other Gear** +2 *chainmail*, +2 *barbed spear*, *bezoar stone* (grants +2 competence check on Craft (alchemy) to make poison antidote)



**Wu Yuntai**

**CR 6**

**XP** 2,400

Elf fighter 5/wizard 2

LN Medium humanoid (elf)

**Init** +3; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +4

## DEFENSE

**AC** 22, touch 16, flat-footed 18 (+6 armor, +2 deflection, +3 Dex, +1 dodge)

**hp** 53 (7 HD; 5d10+2d6+19)

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +4, **Will** +6 (+1 vs. fear); +2 vs. enchantments

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +1; **Immune** sleep

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +1 *dragon bane longsword* +15/+10 (1d8+6/19–20)

**Special Attacks** weapon training (heavy blades +1)

**Wizard Spells Prepared** (CL 2<sup>nd</sup>; concentration +7)

**1<sup>st</sup>**—*flare burst* (DC 16), *magic missile*, *shield*, *true strike* (×2)

**0** (at will)—*flare* (DC 15), *mending*, *resistance*, *ray of frost*

## STATISTICS

**Str** 18, **Dex** 16, **Con** 15, **Int** 20, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 13

**Base Atk** +6; **CMB** +10; **CMD** 26

**Feats** Arcane Armor Mastery, Arcane Armor Training, Cleave, Combat Casting, Combat Reflexes, Dodge, Power Attack, Scribe Scroll

**Skills** Bluff +8, Climb +11, Diplomacy +8, Intimidate +11, Perception +11, Profession (marine) +12, Sense Motive +9, Spellcraft +0 (+2 to identify magic item properties); **Racial Modifiers** +2 Perception, +2 Spellcraft to identify magic item properties

**SQ** armor training 1, arcane bond (rod of bolts), elven magic

**Other Gear** breastplate, +1 *dragon bane longsword*, *ring of protection* +2, *rod of thunder and lightning*



**Ebben Rugwittle**

**CR 3**

**XP** 800

Gnome wizard (arcane crafter) 4

CN Small humanoid (gnome)

**Init** +3; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +2

## DEFENSE

**AC** 16, touch 14, flat-footed 13 (+3 Dex, +2 natural, +1 size)

**hp** 24 (4d6+8)

**Fort** +3, **Ref** +4, **Will** +4; +2 vs. illusions

**Defensive Abilities** defensive training

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** +1 *dagger* +4 (1d3+1/19–20)

**Ranged** +1 *dagger* +7 (1d3+1/19–20)

**Special Attacks** gnome spell-like abilities (*dancing lights*, *ghost sound*, *prestidigitiation*, *speak with animals*), hatred

**Wizard Spells Prepared** (CL 4<sup>th</sup>; concentration +8)

**2<sup>nd</sup>**—*cat's grace*, *magic siege engine*, *make whole*

**1<sup>st</sup>**—*animate rope*, *ant haul*, *crafter's fortune*, *jury-rig*

**0** (at will)—*detect magic*, *read magic*, *mage hand*, *mending*

## STATISTICS

**Str** 10, **Dex** 17, **Con** 15, **Int** 19, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 16

**Base Atk** +2; **CMB** +1; **CMD** 14

**Feats** Brew Potion, Craft Rod, Craft Wand<sup>B</sup>, Scribe Scroll

**Skills** Appraise +11, Climb +4, Craft (alchemy) +13, Disable Device +7, Knowledge (engineering) +11, Perception +2, Profession (artificer) +7, Spellcraft +11; **Racial Modifiers** +2 Craft (alchemy), +2 Perception

**SQ** arcane bond (dagger +1), gnome magic, metacharge

**Other Gear** +1 *dagger*, *shoe buckles of natural armor* +2 (as amulet), *ring of catnapping* (20 min. of sleep count as 8 hours' rest)



**Horwik "Hoyk" Pebbleborn** **CR 1**  
**XP** 400

Dwarf fighter 2

CN Medium humanoid (dwarf)

**Init** +1; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft.; Perception +2

## DEFENSE

**AC** 19, touch 11, flat-footed 18 (+8 armor, +1 Dex)

**hp** 23 (2d10+10)

**Fort** +7, **Ref** +1, **Will** +2 (+1 vs. fear); +2 vs. poison, spells, and spell-like abilities

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +1, defensive training

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** +1 *plant bane battleaxe* +8 (1d8+6/×3)

**Ranged** blunderbuss +3 (1d8) (12 rounds remaining)

**Special Attacks** hatred





# System Conversion

## STATISTICS

**Str** 20, **Dex** 13, **Con** 19, **Int** 13, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 11

**Base Atk** +2; **CMB** +7; **CMD** 18 (22 vs. bull rush, 22 vs. trip)

**Feats** Cleave, Deadly Aim, Power Attack

**Skills** Appraise +0 (+2 to assess nonmagical metals or gemstones), Knowledge (carpentry) +3, Knowledge (engineering) +6, Knowledge (metallurgy) +3, Perception +0 (+2 to notice unusual stonework), Profession (artillerist) +7;

**Racial Modifiers** +2 Appraise to assess nonmagical metals or gemstones, +2 Perception to notice unusual stonework

**Other Gear** +2 *chainmail*, +1 *plant bane battleaxe*, *steelfire of binding* (a small rod that can weld two pieces of metal together)



## Waessail Barrooney

CR 5

XP 1,600

Halfling rogue 6

CN Small humanoid (halfling)

**Init** +5; **Senses** Perception +15

## DEFENSE

**AC** 16, touch 16, flat-footed 11 (+5 Dex, +1 size)

**hp** 54 (6d8+24)

**Fort** +7, **Ref** +11, **Will** +5; +2 vs. fear

**Defensive Abilities** evasion, uncanny dodge, trap sense +2

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** +1 *short sword* +11 (1d4/19–20)

**Special Attacks** sneak attack +3d6

## STATISTICS

**Str** 9, **Dex** 20, **Con** 18, **Int** 16, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 14

**Base Atk** +4; **CMB** +8; **CMD** 17

**Feats** Agile Maneuvers, Alertness, Skill Focus (Appraise), Weapon Finesse

**Skills** Acrobatics +16 (+12 when jumping), Appraise +15, Bluff +11, Climb +10, Diplomacy +11, Disable Device +8, Escape Artist +14, Perception +15, Profession (purser) +11, Sense Motive +13, Sleight of Hand +14, Stealth +18,

Use Magic Device +11; **Racial Modifiers** +2 Acrobatics (–2 when jumping), +2 Climb, +2 Perception

**SQ** rogue talents (fast stealth, finesse rogue, ledge walker), trapfinding +3

**Other Gear** +1 *short sword*, *ring of invisibility*, *abacus of appraisal* (grants +4 competence bonus to Appraise checks)



## Bugles “Ol’ Babblejack” Belzer

CR 5

XP 1,600

Human (ghost) fighter 4

NG Medium undead (human, incorporeal)

**Init** +6; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft.; Perception +5

## DEFENSE

**AC** 14, touch 14, flat-footed 11 (+1 deflection, +2 Dex, +1 dodge)

**hp** 26 (4d10)

**Fort** +4, **Ref** +3, **Will** +4 (+1 vs. fear)

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +1, incorporeal; **Immune** undead traits

## OFFENSE

**Speed** fly 30 ft. (perfect)

**Melee** +1 *ghost-touch cutlass* +5 (1d6+1/18–20)

**Special Attacks** corrupting touch (Su)

## STATISTICS

**Str** —, **Dex** 15, **Con** —, **Int** 12, **Wis** 13, **Cha** 11

**Base Atk** +4; **CMB** +6; **CMD** 18

**Feats** Cleave, Dodge, Endurance, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Power Attack

**Skills** Climb +7, Fly +10, Knowledge (skyships) +5, Perception +5, Profession (helmsman) +8, Sense Motive +5

**SQ** armor training 1

**Other Gear** *ring of seamanship* (grants +2 competence bonus to Profession (sailor) checks)



## Gumboyle “Mama Goo” Moffecot

CR 3

XP 800

Halfling cleric 4

CN Small humanoid (halfling)

**Init** +4; **Senses** Perception +10

## DEFENSE

**AC** 17, touch 16, flat-footed 12 (+4 Dex, +1 dodge, +1 natural, +1 size)

**hp** 29 (4d8+8) (regenerate 1 hp/round from *bone*)

**Fort** +7, **Ref** +6, **Will** +9; +2 vs. fear

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 20 ft.

**Melee** +1 *called anarchic frying pan* +6 (1d4+2)

**Special Attacks** channel positive energy 4/day (DC 13, 2d6)

**Domain Spell-Like Abilities** (CL 4<sup>th</sup>; concentration +8)

7/day—touch of chaos

7/day—rebuke death (1d4+2)

**Cleric Spells Prepared** (CL 4<sup>th</sup>; concentration +8)

2<sup>nd</sup>—*aid*, *blessing of courage and life*, *cure moderate wounds*<sup>D</sup>, *delay poison*

1<sup>st</sup>—*bless water*, *cure light wounds*<sup>D</sup>, *entropic shield*, *remove fear*, *sanctuary* (DC 15)

0 (at will)—*create water*, *detect poison*, *mending*, *purify food and drink*

**Domains** Chaos, Healing

## STATISTICS

**Str** 13, **Dex** 18, **Con** 14, **Int** 13, **Wis** 19, **Cha** 12

**Base Atk** +3; **CMB** +3; **CMD** 18

**Feats** Dodge, Mobility

**Skills** Acrobatics +6, Climb +3, Heal +11, Knowledge (cooking) +5, Perception +10, Profession (cook) +11; **Racial Modifiers** +2 Acrobatics, +2 Climb, +2 Perception

**SQ** Moonsail (pet homunculus)

**Other Gear** +1 *called anarchic frying pan* (as a club), *coral necklace of natural armor* +1 (as amulet), *bone of regeneration* (as ring)





# System Conversion

## Riven Cripplegate

XP 600

Human fighter 3

LN Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +7; **Senses** Perception +4

### DEFENSE

**AC** 16, touch 16, flat-footed 13 (+3 deflection, +3 Dex)

**hp** 30 (3d10+9)

**Fort** +5, **Ref** +4, **Will** +2 (+1 vs. fear)

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +1

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +1 *baling hook* +9 (1d4+5)

### STATISTICS

**Str** 18, **Dex** 17, **Con** 14, **Int** 13, **Wis** 12, **Cha** 13

**Base Atk** +3; **CMB** +7; **CMD** 23

**Feats** Athletic, Improved Initiative, Intimidating Prowess, Skill Focus (Intimidate), Weapon Focus (baling hook)

**Skills** Climb +12, Intimidate +14, Perception +4, Profession (bosun) +7, Swim +6

**SQ** armor training 1

**Other Gear** +1 *baling hook*, *scarf of protection* +3 (as ring), *magical bosun pipe* (dispels mind-affecting magic in 30-ft. radius)



## Queen Shardwen

XP 307,200

Human fighter 14/wizard 7

LG Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +5; **Senses** Perception +23

### DEFENSE

**AC** 20, touch 12, flat-footed 18 (+8 armor, +1 Dex, +1 dodge)

**hp** 147 (21 HD; 14d10+7d6+42)

**Fort** +13, **Ref** +7, **Will** +12 (+4 vs. fear)

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +4

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +2 *holy dragon bane greatsword* +29/+24/+19/+14 (2d6+16/17–20)

**Special Attacks** weapon training (heavy blades +3, light blades +2, natural +1), hand of the apprentice (7/day)

CR 2

**Wizard Spells Prepared** (CL 7<sup>th</sup>; concentration +11)

4<sup>th</sup>—*greater darkvision*, *resilient sphere* (DC 18)

3<sup>rd</sup>—*arcane sight*, *seek thoughts* (DC 17), *tongues*

2<sup>nd</sup>—*protection from arrows*, *resist energy*, *detect thoughts* (DC 16), *see invisibility*

1<sup>st</sup>—*comprehend languages*, *see alignment*, *vanish*, *feather fall*, *cause fear* (DC 15)

0 (at will)—*arcane mark*, *detect magic*, *message*, *read magic*

### STATISTICS

**Str** 20, **Dex** 13, **Con** 14, **Int** 19, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 18

**Base Atk** +17; **CMB** +22; **CMD** 34

**Feats** Alertness, Athletic, Blind-Fight, Brew Potion, Cleave, Combat Casting, Combat Reflexes, Craft Magic Arms and Armor, Craft Rod, Craft Staff, Craft Wand, Critical Focus, Dodge, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (greatsword), Greater Weapon Specialization (greatsword), Improved Critical (greatsword), Improved Initiative, Power Attack, Scribe Scroll, Weapon Focus (greatsword), Weapon Specialization (greatsword)

**Skills** Bluff +20, Climb +7, Craft (alchemy) +23, Diplomacy +20, Intimidate +23, Knowledge (arcana) +23, Knowledge (local) +24, Knowledge (nobility) +23, Perception +23, Perform (oratory) +20, Sense Motive +23, Swim +7

**SQ** armor training 3, arcane bond (+2 *holy dragon bane greatsword*)

**Other Gear** +3 *golden scale mail*, +2 *holy dragon bane greatsword*, *amulet of proof against detection and location*



## Perithyan Lamarr

XP 4,800

Human fighter 9

LG Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +6; **Senses** Perception +10

### DEFENSE

**AC** 24, touch 13, flat-footed 21 (+7 armor, +2 Dex, +1 dodge, +4 shield)

**hp** 81 (9d10+27)

**Fort** +8, **Ref** +5, **Will** +6 (+2 vs. fear)

CR 8

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +2

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +1 *dueling magical beast bane barbed longsword* +19/+14 (1d8+10/17–20)

**Special Attacks** weapon training (heavy blades +2, natural +1)

### STATISTICS

**Str** 20, **Dex** 14, **Con** 14, **Int** 19, **Wis** 17, **Cha** 16

**Base Atk** +9; **CMB** +14; **CMD** 27

**Feats** Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Critical Focus, Dodge, Great Cleave, Greater Weapon Focus (longsword), Improved Critical (longsword), Improved Initiative, Power Attack, Weapon Focus (longsword), Weapon Specialization (longsword)

**Skills** Acrobatics +7, Climb +13, Diplomacy +10, Handle Animal +13, Intimidate +13, Knowledge (nobility) +11, Perception +10, Perform (oratory) +10, Ride +10

**SQ** armor training 2

**Other Gear** +2 *golden scale mail*, +2 *heavy steel shield*, +1 *dueling magical beast bane barbed longsword*, *amulet of proof against detection and location*



## Teobram Phibbs

XP 3,200

Human cleric of Istra 8

CG Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +1; **Senses** Perception +13

### DEFENSE

**AC** 12, touch 12, flat-footed 10 (+1 Dex, +1 dodge)

**hp** 39 (8d8)

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +3, **Will** +11

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** quarterstaff +7/+2 (1d6+1)

**Special Attacks** channel positive energy 6/day (DC 17, 4d6), holy lance (4 rounds, 1/day)

**Domain Spell-Like Abilities**

(CL 8<sup>th</sup>; concentration +13)

8/day—touch of good (+4)

CR 7





# System Conversion

At will—lore keeper (28), remote viewing (8 rounds/day)

**Cleric Spells Prepared** (CL 8<sup>th</sup>; concentration +13)

4<sup>th</sup>—*blessing of fervor*, *divination*<sup>D</sup>, *neutralize poison*, *restoration*

3<sup>rd</sup>—*create food and water*, *daylight*, *magic circle against evil*<sup>D</sup>, *prayer*, *remove disease*

2<sup>nd</sup>—*aid*, *augury*, *blessing of courage and life*, *detect thoughts*<sup>D</sup>, *grace*

1<sup>st</sup>—*bless*, *comprehend languages*<sup>D</sup>, *magic weapon*, *moment of greatness*, *remove fear*, *sanctuary* (DC 16), *shield of faith*

0 (at will)—*detect magic*, *guidance*, *read magic*, *virtue*

**Domains** Good, Knowledge

## STATISTICS

**Str** 13, **Dex** 13, **Con** 11, **Int** 16, **Wis** 20, **Cha** 17

**Base Atk** +6; **CMB** +7; **CMD** 21

**Feats** Combat Casting, Defensive Combat Training, Dodge, Leadership, Skill Focus (Diplomacy)

**Skills** Diplomacy +17, Heal +16, Knowledge (history) +14, Knowledge (religion) +14, Perception +13, Perform (oratory) +11, Sense Motive +16

**Other Gear** quarterstaff, *lei of charming* (as staff), *mind-sentinel medallion*, *sandals of quick reaction* (as boots), *flying chariot with Pegasus* as *flying carpet* or *ebony fly*



**Azar**

**CR 11**

**XP** 12,800

Human cleric of Sayble 3/fighter 9

LN Medium humanoid (human)

**Init** +1; **Senses** Perception +16

## DEFENSE

**AC** 23, touch 11, flat-footed 22 (+11 armor, +1 Dex, +1 shield)

**hp** 112 (12 HD; 3d8+9d10+45)

**Fort** +12, **Ref** +5, **Will** +10 (+2 vs. fear)

**Defensive Abilities** bravery +2

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.

**Melee** +1 *human bane light mace* +19/+14/+9 (1d6+7), *claw* +12 (1d4+9 plus poison)

**Special Attacks** channel

negative energy 6/day (DC 14, 2d6), weapon training (hammers +2, natural +1), poison

**Domain Spell-Like Abilities** (CL 3<sup>rd</sup>; concentration +7)

7/day—*touch of glory* (+1)

7/day—*battle rage* (+1)

**Cleric Spells Prepared** (CL 3<sup>rd</sup>; concentration +7)

2<sup>nd</sup>—*bless weapon*<sup>D</sup>, *hold person* (DC 16), *instrument of agony*

1<sup>st</sup>—*bane* (DC 15), *cause fear* (DC 15), *doom* (DC 15), *shield of faith*<sup>D</sup>

0 (at will)—*bleed* (DC 14), *detect magic*, *guidance*, *spark*

**Domains** War, Glory

## STATISTICS

**Str** 19, **Dex** 12, **Con** 16, **Int** 14, **Wis** 18, **Cha** 17

**Base Atk** +11; **CMB** +15; **CMD** 26

**Feats** Bleeding Critical, Cleave, Combat Reflexes, Critical Focus, Double Slice, Power Attack, Two-Weapon Defense, Two-Weapon Fighting, Two-Weapon Rend, Weapon Focus (light mace), Weapon Focus (claw), Weapon Specialization (claw)

**Skills** Handle Animal +18, Intimidate +18, Knowledge (dragons) +14, Perception +16, Sense Motive +19

**SQ** armor training 2, kratokh

**Other Gear** +2 *resistance full plate*, +1 *human bane light mace*, *talisman of the Black Queen* (as *cap of the free thinker*)

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Kratokh (Su)** Once per day, Azar can call upon this ability to gain god-like strength (as *bull's strength*, CL 12<sup>th</sup>)

**Poison (Ex)** Claw—injury; save Fort DC 13; frequency 1/round for 6 rounds; effect 1d4 Con; cure 2 consecutive saves.

# Monsters

**Draecan**

**CR 4**

**XP** 1,200

N Large magical beast (fire)

**Init** +0; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, scent; Perception +8

**Aura** fear aura (30 ft., DC 9)

## DEFENSE

**AC** 17, touch 9, flat-footed 17 (+8 natural, –1 size)

**hp** 47 (5d10+20)

**Fort** +8, **Ref** +4, **Will** +1

**Immune** fire

**Weaknesses** vulnerable to cold

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 40 ft.

**Melee** 2 claw +12 (1d6+8), bite +12 (1d8+8) or gore +12 (1d8+8)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** powerful charge (gore, 2d8+12)

## STATISTICS

**Str** 27, **Dex** 10, **Con** 19, **Int** 6, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 4

**Base Atk** +5; **CMB** +14 (+16 bull rush); **CMD** 24 (26 vs. bull rush)

**Feats** Improved Bull Rush, Power Attack, Skill Focus (Acrobatics)

**Skills** Acrobatics +2 (+30 when jumping), Perception +8; **Racial Modifiers** +30 Acrobatics when jumping

**SQ** baying

## ECOLOGY

**Environment** Draconia

**Organization** solitary or 6–12

**Treasure** none

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Baying (Ex)** Draecans can bay to one another in order to communicate and coordinate battlefield maneuvers, such as scout, hold a line, reposition, form a wedge, advance, charge, or withdraw. This form of communication can be heard as far away as 10 miles.





# System Conversion

## *Draecan Commander*

CR 8

XP 4,800

N Gargantuan undead (fire)

**Init** -1; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., scent; Perception +15

**Aura** fear aura (30 ft., DC 18)

### DEFENSE

**AC** 21, touch 5, flat-footed 21 (-1 Dex, +16 natural, -4 size)

**hp** 78 (12d8+24)

**Fort** +6, **Ref** +3, **Will** +8

**Immune** fire, mind-affecting effects, undead traits

**Weaknesses** vulnerable to cold

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 50 ft.

**Melee** 2 claw +22 (2d6+17), bite +22 (2d8+17) or gore +22 (2d8+17)

**Space** 20 ft.; **Reach** 15 ft.

**Special Attacks** gaze, paralysis (1d10 rounds, DC 16), powerful charge (gore, 4d8+25)

### STATISTICS

**Str** 45, **Dex** 8, **Con** —, **Int** 10, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 15

**Base Atk** +9; **CMB** +30 (+34 bull rush, +34 overrun); **CMD** 39 (41 vs. bull rush, 41 vs. overrun)

**Feats** Greater Bull Rush, Greater Overrun, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Overrun, Power Attack, Skill Focus (Acrobatics)

**Skills** Acrobatics +17 (+30 when jumping), Bluff +14, Intimidate +17, Perception +15; **Racial Modifiers** +13 Acrobatics when jumping

**SQ** baying

### ECOLOGY

**Environment** Draconia

**Organization** solitary

**Treasure** none

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Baying (Ex)** Draecans can bay to one another in order to communicate and coordinate battlefield maneuvers, such as scout, hold a line, reposition, form a wedge, advance, charge, or withdraw. This form of communication can be heard as far away as 10 miles.



## *Grön*

XP 76,800

N Colossal magical beast

**Init** -3; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +20

### DEFENSE

**AC** 30, touch -1, flat-footed 30 (-3 Dex, +31 natural, -8 size)

**hp** 409 (21d10+294)

**Fort** +27, **Ref** +9, **Will** +9

### OFFENSE

**Speed** fly 90 ft. (clumsy)

**Space** 60 ft.; **Reach** 50 ft.

**Special Attacks** fast swallow, swallow whole (6d6 bludgeoning damage, AC 25, 40 hp)

### STATISTICS

**Str** 50, **Dex** 4, **Con** 37, **Int** 8, **Wis** 11, **Cha** 5

**Base Atk** +21; **CMB** +49; **CMD** 56

**Feats** Great Fortitude, Improved Great Fortitude, Improved Iron Will, Improved Natural Armor, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Perception), Toughness

**Skills** Fly -6, Perception +20

**SQ** consume magical core, no breath, wormhole

### ECOLOGY

**Environment** deep caverns or space

**Organization** solitary

**Treasure** triple (swallowed)

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Consume Magical Core (Su)** A grön nests in the deepest caverns of a world and feeds on that planet's magical core, slowly stripping a planet of its world soul and depleting that world of its magical essence.

**Wormhole (Sp)** At will, a grön can open a wormhole in space connecting two distant worlds. The wormhole functions in most respects like a gate spell, except that the grön cannot call other beings through the wormhole, the wormhole only opens between parallel material worlds, and the duration is unlimited so long as the grön concentrates.



CR 16

## *Giant Glorathon Gull*

CR 2

XP 600

N Large animal

**Init** +3; **Senses** low-light vision; Perception +12

### DEFENSE

**AC** 15, touch 12, flat-footed 12 (+3 Dex, +3 natural, -1 size)

**hp** 22 (4d8+4)

**Fort** +5, **Ref** +7, **Will** +3

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 10 ft., fly 80 ft. (average), swim 30 ft. (surface only)

**Melee** bite +6 (1d4+6)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** screech

### STATISTICS

**Str** 18, **Dex** 17, **Con** 12, **Int** 2, **Wis** 15, **Cha** 11

**Base Atk** +3; **CMB** +8; **CMD** 21

**Feats** Flyby Attack, Skill Focus (Perception)

**Skills** Fly +1, Perception +12

### ECOLOGY

**Environment** warm or temperate seashore

**Organization** flock 5-20

**Treasure** none

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Screech (Ex)** A giant gull can unleash a piercing shriek that emanates in a 30-foot cone. All within the area of effect must make a Fortitude saving throw (DC 13) or be dazed for 1d4 rounds. The save DC is Constitution-based.



## *Mereling*

CR 1/2

XP 200

NE Small humanoid

**Init** +3; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., stonecunning 10 ft.; Perception +4

### DEFENSE

**AC** 14, touch 14, flat-footed 11 (+3 Dex, +1 size)

**hp** 5 (1d8+1)

**Fort** +1, **Ref** +5, **Will** +0

**Defensive Abilities** trap sense

**Weaknesses** beholden

### OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft.





# System Conversion

**Melee** claw +2 (1d3+1 plus disease)

**Special Attacks** disease

## STATISTICS

**Str** 12, **Dex** 16, **Con** 13, **Int** 11, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 7

**Base Atk** +0; **CMB** +0; **CMD** 13

**Feats** Skill Focus (Perception)

**Skills** Perception +4, Stealth +8

**SQ** beholden, stonecunning

## ECOLOGY

**Environment** any civilized land

**Organization** solitary or a work group of 3–5

**Treasure** none

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Beholden (Su)** A mereling is magically enslaved to its master, unable to do anything that would prevent it from following orders. It cannot even contemplate betraying its master, for the mere thought of such causes the mereling great pain.

**Disease (Ex)** Claw—Injury; save Fort DC 11; onset 1d3 days; frequency 1 day; effect 1 Con damage; cure 2 consecutive saves.

**Stonecunning (Ex)** Merelings gain a +2 bonus on Perception checks to notice unusual stonework, such as traps and hidden doors located in stone walls or floors. They receive a check to notice such features whenever they pass within 10 feet of them, whether or not they are actively looking.

**Trap Sense (Ex)** A mereling possesses an intuitive sense that alerts it to danger from traps, giving it a +1 bonus on Reflex saves made to avoid traps and a +1 dodge bonus to AC against attacks made by traps. Trap sense bonuses gained from classes stack with this ability.



**Sewer Moulder** **CR 10+**  
**XP 9,600+ (higher CR and XP for each level of spells it possesses)**

N Huge plant (aquatic)

**Init** +2; **Senses** low-light vision, tremorsense 60 ft.; Perception +22

## DEFENSE

**AC** 26, touch 10, flat-footed 24 (+2 Dex, +16 natural, –2 size)

**hp** 127 (15d8+60)

**Fort** +15, **Ref** +7, **Will** +5

**Defensive Abilities** spells; **Immune** plant traits

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 0 ft.

**Melee** 8 feelers +17 (none plus attach, paralysis, and blood drain) or 4 barbed roots +17 (1d8+8)

**Ranged** 4 thorns (up to 20 total) +11 (1d6/×4)

**Space** 15 ft.; **Reach** 20 ft.

**Special Attacks** stunning flash, jolt, spells, blood drain (1d2 Constitution), paralysis (1d4 hours, DC 21)

## STATISTICS

**Str** 26, **Dex** 14, **Con** 19, **Int** 17, **Wis** 10, **Cha** 11

**Base Atk** +11; **CMB** +21 (+25 grapple); **CMD** 33 (35 vs. grapple)

**Feats** Alertness, Blind-Fight, Combat Reflexes, Great Fortitude, Greater Grapple, Improved Grapple, Improved Natural Attack (feelers), Improved Unarmed Strike

**Skills** Disguise +15 (simulacra only), Knowledge (arcana) +18, Perception +22, Sense Motive +2, Spellcraft +18, Stealth +12

**SQ** simulacra mimicry

## ECOLOGY

**Environment** sewers, swamps and lakes

**Organization** solitary

**Treasure** triple standard

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Jolt (Ex)** Three times per day if its lower body is attacked, a sewer moulder can emit an electrical discharge in a 15-ft. sphere around itself that does 4d6 points of electrical damage to any creature in the area of effect. A successful Fortitude save (DC 21) results in half damage. The save DC is Constitution-based.

**Simulacra mimicry (Su)** A sewer moulder can create fungal doubles of previous victims that the sewer moulder can control through empathy (up to 120 ft.). The simulacrum looks, moves, and speaks

in every way like its source (Perception check vs. Disguise DC 25 to reveal its true nature), though it has no combat abilities and its true nature is revealed the moment it sustains any damage.

**Spells (Sp)** A sewer moulder can cast arcane spells it learned from its previous victims, gaining any arcane spells such a victim retained at the time of its death. Once the spell is discharged, the sewer moulder does not regain its use until it “consumes” another victim’s memorized spells.

**Stunning Flash (Ex)** A sewer moulder can emit a powerful flash that stuns its prey for 1d4 rounds unless a Reflex saving throw is successful (DC 21). If the save is successful, the prey is dazzled for 1 round. The save DC is Constitution-based.



**Vultron** **CR 5**  
**XP 1,600**

N Large magical beast

**Init** +3; **Senses** darkvision 120 ft., low-light vision; Perception +9

## DEFENSE

**AC** 18, touch 12, flat-footed 15 (+3 Dex, +6 natural, –1 size)

**hp** 51 (6d10+18)

**Fort** +8, **Ref** +8, **Will** +6

**Immune** poison

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft., fly 80 ft. (average)

**Melee** bite +9 (1d8+3), 2 talons +8 (1d6+3)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** disease (30-ft. diameter cloud 1/day), pounce, rake (2 talons, 1d6+3)

## STATISTICS

**Str** 17, **Dex** 16, **Con** 17, **Int** 6, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 9

**Base Atk** +6; **CMB** +10; **CMD** 23

**Feats** Iron Will, Skill Focus (Perception), Weapon Focus (bite)

**Skills** Acrobatics +7, Fly +10, Perception +9; **Racial Modifiers** +4 Acrobatics, +4 Perception

**SQ** swarm teleport

## ECOLOGY

**Environment** temperate hills



# System Conversion

**Organization** solitary, pair, swarm (4–8), or skyhorde (10 or more swarms)

**Treasure** none

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Disease (Su)** Breath—contact; save Fort DC 16; onset 1d3 days; frequency 1/day; effect 1 Con damage; cure 2 consecutive saves.

**Swarm Teleport (Sp)** When four or more vultrons fly together as a group, they gain a limited ability to teleport together to a new location. The ability functions in most ways like the teleport spell, except the vultrons can relocate up to 20 miles away. They can include one rider each in the process.



**Vultron Hetman, 3<sup>rd</sup>-level Cleric CR 6 XP 2,400**

Cleric of Draconia 3

N Large magical beast

**Init** +3; **Senses** darkvision 120 ft., low-light vision; Perception +9

## DEFENSE

**AC** 18, touch 12, flat-footed 15 (+3 Dex, +6 natural, –1 size)

**hp** 76 (9 HD; 6d10+3d8+30)

**Fort** +11, **Ref** +9, **Will** +9

**Immune** poison

## OFFENSE

**Speed** 30 ft., fly 80 ft. (average)

**Melee** bite +11 (1d8+3), 2 talons +10 (1d6+3)

**Space** 10 ft.; **Reach** 5 ft.

**Special Attacks** channel negative energy 2/day (DC 10, 2d6), destructive smite (+1, 5/day), disease (30-ft. diameter cloud 1/day), pounce, rake (2 talons, 1d6+3)

**Domain Spell-Like Abilities** (CL 3<sup>rd</sup>; concentration +5)

5/day—battle rage (+1)

**Cleric Spells Prepared** (CL 3<sup>rd</sup>; concentration +5)

2<sup>nd</sup>—*resist energy*, *shatter*<sup>D</sup> (DC 14), *sound burst* (DC 14)

1<sup>st</sup>—*divine favor*, *entropic shield*, *ray of sickening* (DC 13), *true strike*<sup>D</sup>

0 (at will)—*guidance*, *resistance*, *spark*, *virtue*

**Domains** Destruction, War

## STATISTICS

**Str** 17, **Dex** 16, **Con** 17, **Int** 6, **Wis** 14, **Cha** 9

**Base Atk** +8; **CMB** +12; **CMD** 25

**Feats** Combat Casting, Iron Will, Leadership, Skill Focus (Perception), Weapon Focus (bite)

**Skills** Acrobatics +7, Fly +13, Perception +9; **Racial Modifiers** +4 Acrobatics, +4 Perception

**SQ** swarm teleport

## ECOLOGY

**Environment** temperate hills

**Organization** solitary, pair, swarm (4–8), or skyhorde (10 or more swarms)

**Treasure** none

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

**Disease (Su)** Breath—contact; save Fort DC 16; onset 1d3 days; frequency 1 day; effect 1 Con damage; cure 2 consecutive saves.

**Swarm Teleport (Sp)** When four or more vultrons fly together as a group, they gain a limited ability to teleport together to a new location. The ability functions in most ways like the teleport spell, except the vultrons can relocate up to 20 miles away. They can include one rider each in the process.

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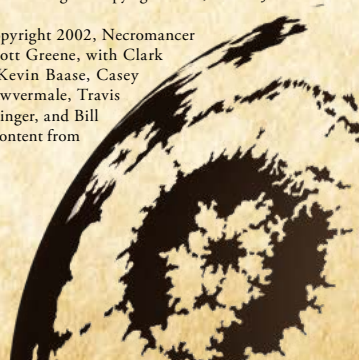
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# Skyships of Calidar



Magic enabled the construction of flying vessels. Until the advent of space travel, skyships were rarities, wondrous oddities owned by those wealthy enough to afford the staggering cost of enchantment. After Alorean, Munaan, and Kragdûr made contact with one another, it became clear that these precious vessels would become crucial tools of colonial rivalry. The same became true with the former colonies of Calidar, as well as Draconia, Lao-Kwei, and the Fringe. Though far more common today, skyships still are expensive to build and maintain, so surface navigation remains the most economic option for the trade of common goods. More than any other world's, realms of the Great Caldera favor flying vessels because of their isolation among the Dread Lands. Each power, on Calidar and off-world, jealously controls and protects its ability to travel through the air and across the Great Vault.

Skyships of Calidar possess basic levitation enchantment enabling them to hover, increase, or decrease their altitudes. Another type of enchantment generates thrust, although it is

rarely used because of the additional cost and the extra time needed to effect it. Instead, many skyships rely on natural wind power, which easily exceeds top speeds achievable by magic alone. When space travel is intended, sails can be imbued with the ability to trap ethereal winds acting like natural air currents. Seen as the more affordable and effective approach, sails remain the most common skyship designs from Calidar to the Fringe. Many skyships rely on some degree of magic to help control sails and keep crew numbers down from what would otherwise require hundreds. Enchanted ropes can drop sails or secure them more easily. Lao-Kweian skyships often use winches. Alorean's sentient ships respond to their crews' empathic commands to manage their sails.

## Atmospheric Navigation

The absence of water around a ship's hull affects its design. Skyship hulls do not need to be hydrodynamic. Rudders don't work in this context, and are replaced with magic steering devices. In the absence of rudders aft of the hull, a ship's helm doesn't need to remain astern. It is sometimes located in the forward section where sails do not block sight as much. Skyships fly because of enchantments providing lift; they aren't aeroplanes relying on air speed, wings, and ailerons to remain aloft. Lateral sails are needed to prevent skyships from flipping sideways under the force of the wind. Rather than pitch like vessels overcoming sea waves, skyships weave through the wind, rolling back and forth. Finally, because flying crafts maneuver in a 3D environment, elevated fore and aft sections aren't as important as they are for seagoing ships.

Marine vessels use the combination of wind and hydrodynamics to tack, allowing them to navigate at different angles from the wind direction, sometimes nearly against the wind. On a skyship, the levitation enchantment favors movement along the hull's centerline axis, converting much lateral wind power into forward motion.

Without this, a skyship would drift at the whim of the winds.

A common sail configuration involves three sets of masts angled 120 degrees from each other: either one set upright with two others extending downward from the hull, or the opposite, two sets rising in a V-shape and one straight down beneath the hull. The latter arrangement prevails among galleys, allowing clearance for banks of oars. Each set comprises two to four masts, depending on ship size. Vessels favoring speed often rely on a "quad" design, with masts angled 90 degrees from each other in an X-shaped configuration.

Steering comes from a magical device inside a ship and controlled from its helm. As an example, the one aboard the *Star Phoenix* is described in detail later in this chapter. A skyship's helm is more complicated than a marine vessel's because of levers or pedals needed to control lift as well as roll and pitch. A captain's biggest challenge for best maneuverability is to coordinate the efforts of the helmsman and the crew working the sails.

Skyships fitted with basic levitation do not need to land. As long as their hulls are undamaged, they can remain aloft continually. In order to embark or disembark people and merchandise, these vessels require special facilities. Most skyports in Calidar's universe involve towerlike structures with transversal beams able to secure a skyship's hull without the need to collapse its lower masts. Cranes on top take freight to and from moored vessels, while personal launches ferry crew and passengers, unless the latter insist on sharing the towers' long spiraling staircases with dock workers.

## Space Travel

Inhabited worlds in Calidar's universe possess atmospheres surrounded by cosmic void. Spacefaring crafts demand additional enchantments. The first ensures survivable conditions aboard (breathable air, heat, and passive protection from space's harsh



# Skyships of Calidar



environment) without blocking the flow of ethereal currents. Barely discernable, it appears as a flexible air bubble enveloping the entire vessel. Another key enchantment generates artificial gravity, usually aligned with the ship's deck. Smoked spectacles or masks commonly worn by the crew help shield their eyes from Soltan's blinding rays. In terms of building costs, skyships able to ply the Great Vault relate to air-worthy vessels as the latter do to marine ships. For example, if an average seagoing vessel is worth a few gems, a skyship demands at least thirty, while a spacefaring craft should exceed a hundred.

Being able to reach outer space is only one step toward reaching other worlds. Even with ethereal winds, long range travel exceeds a crew's lifetime. Another sort of magic entirely is required to bypass cosmic immensity. Ships of Calidar and of its moons rely on *seitha*. This strange substance enables vessels and their crews to enter the netherworld, an outer-planar limbo through which the souls of the dead transit before their fates are resolved. Distances there differ greatly from those of the physical world, providing convenient shortcuts. *Seitha* requires an altar depicting the skyship's general outline, and a special blessing indicating a desired destination. A vessel travels "trans-mortem" and emerges from limbo in the destination's approximate vicinity, the accuracy of the arrival point being dependent on the distance sailed and the faith of the navigating prior.

*Seitha* is precious. It appears most often in Calidar's Dread Lands, forcing prospectors to search these dangerous regions

for deposits. Tampering with crude *seitha* often triggers the awakening of a spirit lord, especially if tribal fellfolk dwell nearby. Alchemists or priors must thereafter refine *seitha*. Entering the netherworld requires a special blessing, which consumes the substance and sends souls trapped within to limbo. Therefore, *seitha* acts as a fuel which needs to be replaced, adding to the cost of space travel. This is why spacefaring conflicts often end abruptly when *seitha* reserves are low. *Seitha* is specific to Calidar and its moons. It does not exist on Lao-Kwei or Draconia, or in the Fringe. These worlds rely on different travel means.

The Soltan Ephemeris diagram listed earlier in this book (see **The Calidar Universe**), shows how fast *seitha*-using skyships can travel through space. The *five-days-per-square* timeframe is an *average* speed abstracted for fast-moving skyships like the *Star Phoenix*. Because of their ability to fly in a straight line (rather than tacking against winds), Kragdûras dreadnoughts use the same travel speed. This figure should otherwise be reduced to four days for vessels capable of higher speeds, such as Alorean clippers, or increased to six for slower ones, like Munaani galleys.

## Skyships of the World

**Alorean:** Elven skyships look like sail ships from the golden age of clippers. These are wind-powered, quad-masted, wooden vessels

built for speed, like the sailing ships of Earth's 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their style and workmanship remain unmistakably elven, emphasizing grace over function. Their organic nature and artistry often feature twisting roots and leaf patterns. These ships are plantlike beings able to heal damage and grow needed parts such as davits, boarding planks, masts, sails, weapons, etc. They draw sap from bladders on their lower decks. If those bladders are damaged or allowed to drain, ships may lose their ability to levitate and eventually will wither and die. Repairing damage, growing parts, and shooting weapons burns up sap. Elven skyships can replenish their sap while moored on the branches of colossal trees used as skyports. Without these trees, skyships must land and grow roots. Though damaged or destroyed parts can be regenerated over time, original enchantments must be replaced, which is the responsibility of the crews' master artificers. Main deck weapons often include stingers shooting harpoon-sized projectiles that turn into deadly thorns on impact, and large green bulbs with glowing purple veins. The latter spit fiery pods capable of rusting steel or burning through wood. Elves control sails and weapons using their natural empathy with organic life.

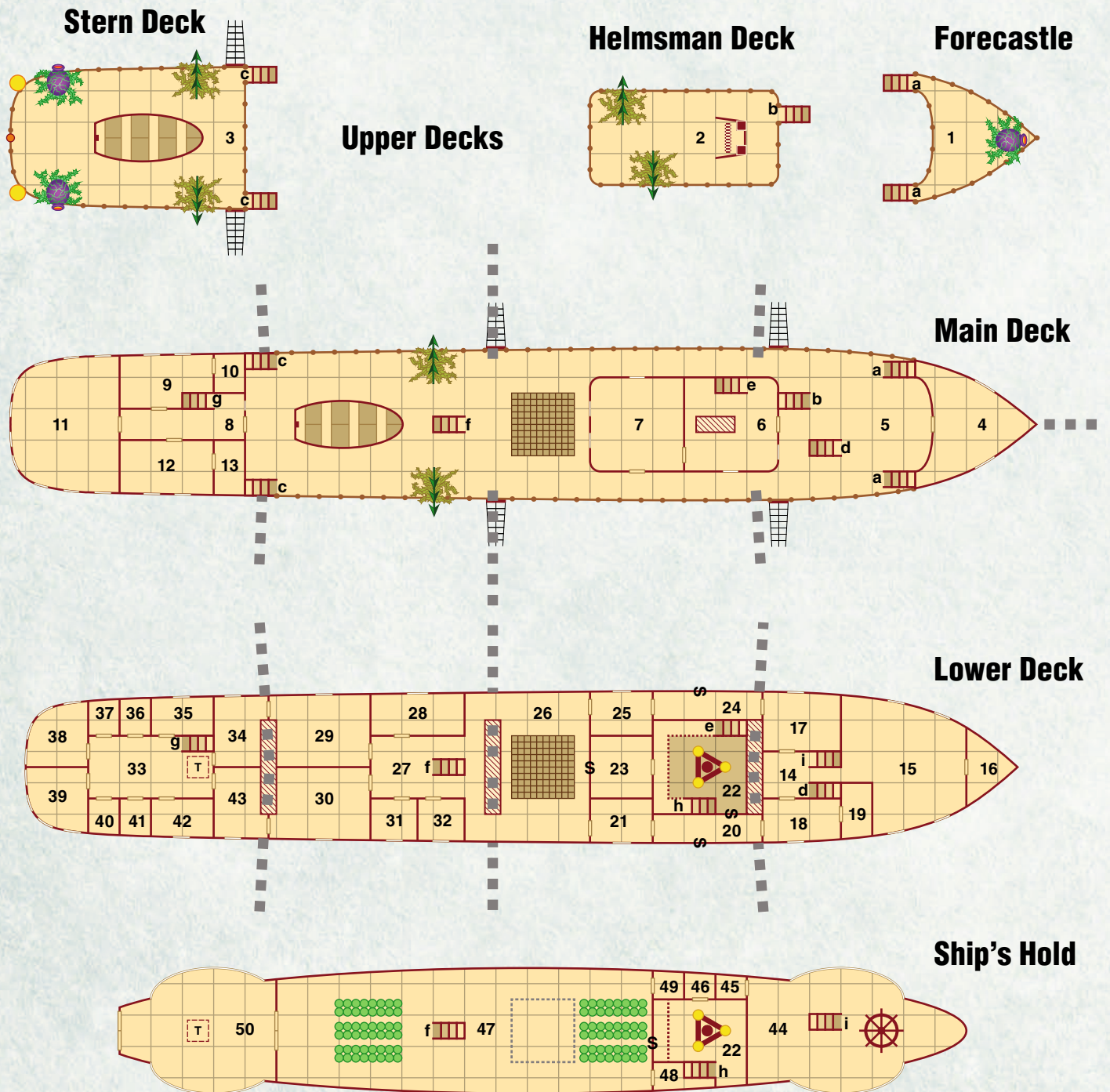
**Kragdûr:** The dwarves bear a natural dislike of navigating seas and skies. Their presence as a spacefaring people stems more from the need to defend their world than personal convictions. Neither are they skilled with the sort of magic needed to send ships soaring. Yet, theirs are



# Wind Thorn

Scale: 1 sq. = 5 ft.

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- |                          |                              |                                  |  |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Forecastle            | 13. Stowage                  | 25. Surgeon's Quarters           | 39. Tòrr-Gàrraidh Emissary                                     |
| 2. Helmsman Deck         | 14. Forward Landing          | 26. Cargo Bay                    | 40. Captain's Head   |
| 3. Stern Deck            | 15. Lower Crew Quarters      | 27. Midship Landing              | 41. Armory   |
| 4. Upper Crew Quarters   | 16. Crew Heads               | 28. Infirmary                    | 42. Guest Cabin  |
| 5. Main Deck             | 17. Masters' Quarters        | 29-30. Marines' Quarters         | 43. Captain-at-Arms's Quarters                                 |
| 6. Chart Room            | 18. Galley                   | 31-32. Midshipmen's Quarters     | 44. Anchor Room, Lower Crew Quarters, Forward Observation Deck |
| 7. Meditation Cabin      | 19. Pantry                   | 33. Officers' Wardroom           | 45-46. Stowage   |
| 8. Aft Passageway        | 20. Midship Passageway       | 34. Master-of-Engines's Quarters | 47. Main Hold & Bladder Chamber                                |
| 9. First Mate's Quarters | 21. Petty Officers' Quarters | 35. Purser's Quarters            | 48. Brig   |
| 10. Stowage              | 22. Steering Chamber         | 36. Stowage                      | 49. Stowage  |
| 11. Great Cabin          | 23. Seitha Chapel            | 37. Officers' Head               | 50. Aft Cargo Bay & Observation Deck                           |
| 12. Captain's Quarters   | 24. Midship Passageway       | 38. Master Artificer's Quarters  |  |

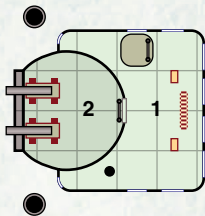
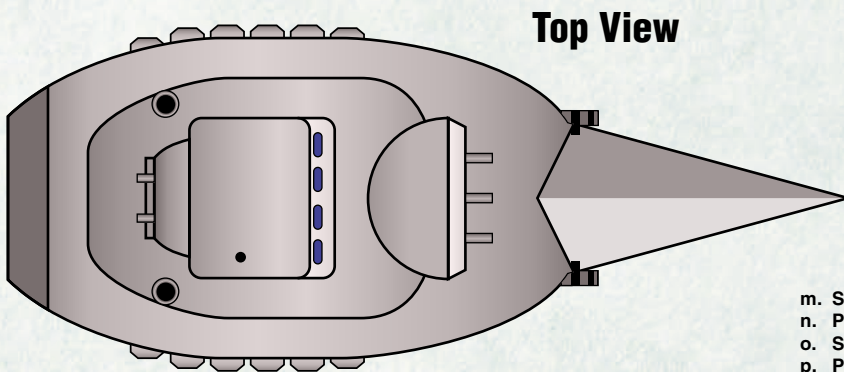
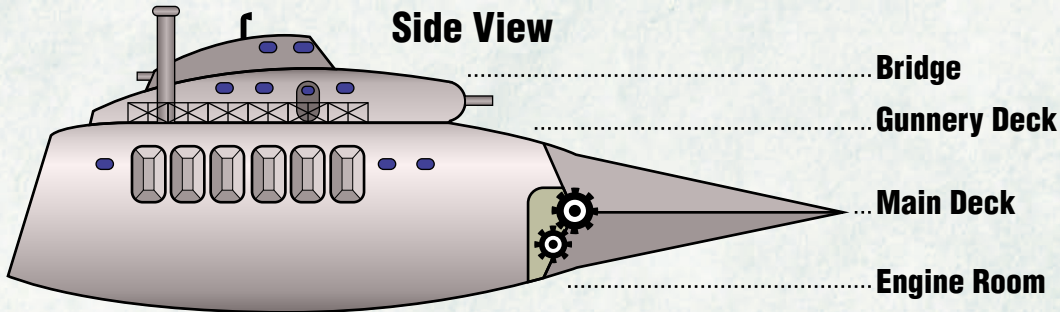


# Iron Maiden

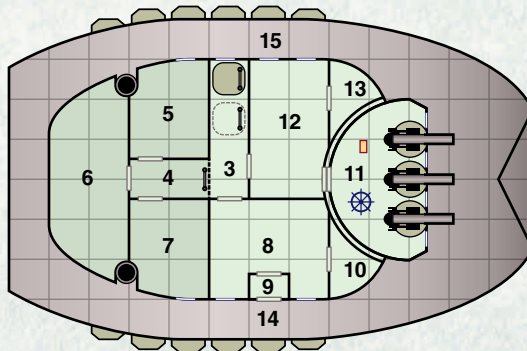
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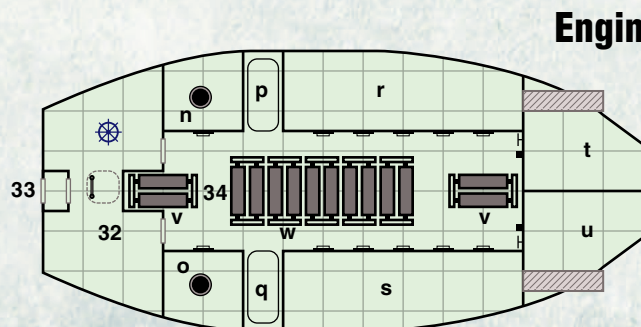
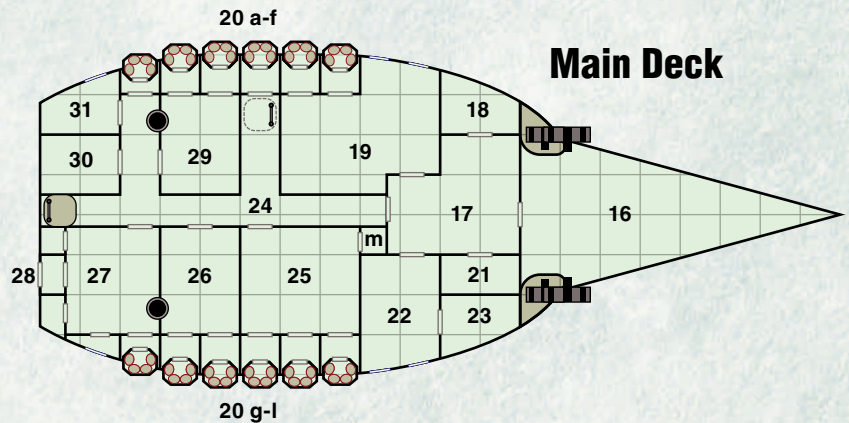
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**Bridge**



**Gunnery Deck**



1. Bridge
2. Aft Turret
3. Gunnery Deck Passageway
4. Lower Gunnery Deck Access
5. First Mate's Quarters
6. Great Cabin
7. Captain's Quarters
8. Chartroom & Ship Master's Quarters
9. Airlock
10. Stowage
11. Forward Turret
12. Powder Room
13. Stowage
- 14-15. Outside Gangways
16. Ram Boarding Chamber
17. Crew Wardroom
18. Armory
19. Crew Quarters
20. (a-f) Portside Escape Pods
20. (g-l) Starboard Escape Pods
21. Spacesuit Stowage
22. Galley & Cook's Quarters
23. Pantry
24. Main Deck Passageway
25. Chaplain's Quarters & Seitha Facility
26. Mates' Quarters
27. Upper Cargo Hold
28. Docking Airlock
29. Master-at-Arms' Quarters
30. Heads
31. Brig
32. Lower Cargo Hold and Anchor Room
33. Lower Docking Airlock
34. Engine Room

- m. Stowage
- n. Portside Furnace
- o. Starboard Furnace
- p. Portside Boiler
- q. Starboard Boiler
- r. Portside Kragnûl Hold
- s. Starboard Kragnûl Hold
- t. Portside Water Hold
- u. Starboard Water Hold
- v. Lateral Fetzgrim Engines
- w. Lift and/or Forward and Reverse Fetzgrim Engines



# Skyships of Calidar

most impressive achievements, beasts of steel, fire, and smoke reflecting the soul and heart of Kragdûr. In keeping with their love of things from the ground, dwarves fly powerful dreadnoughts whose fat bellies hold vast quantities of coal-like *kragnul* to heat boilers. Their secret lies with *force stones*, curious minerals producing a telekinetic field when placed inside contra-rotating drums. Part of massive steam-powered machines called *Fetzgrim engines* (from the inventors' name), these stones enable immense weights to be lifted. Some or all of these devices can be oriented to provide maneuvering thrust, especially in outer space where lift is less of a concern. Despite their immense power, dreadnoughts are slow, lumbering juggernauts, many of which remain in space to save on *kragnul*, rotating crews as needed.

Dreadnoughts are pressurized vessels. While valves release clouds of smoke and black dust into space, priors cast spells replenishing air and water. Dwarves sometimes rely on magnetized boots to cling to their ships' metal decks, but they prefer coercing gnomish enchanters to create gravity aboard. *Darkpowder*, called *klutnul* in dwarvish, enables main deck weapons to shoot cannonballs much like ships of Earth's age of sail; projectiles comprise large caliber rounds, canisters, heated rods, or chain shot. Cannons are mounted inside rotating turrets. Dwarves also use ramships to breach the hulls of enemy vessels, through which they send marines. Spacesuits and blunderbusses capable of firing in airless conditions are typical dwarven equipment.

**Munaan:** Human-built skyships are more varied than elven or dwarven designs. Wooden galleys are common among Munaan fleets, often bearing iron plating to strengthen their hulls. Though these are large vessels, they generally favor maneuverability over speed. Style-wise, they depend on the region of origin, somewhat like real-world 16<sup>th</sup>-century galleasses, 17<sup>th</sup>-century galleons fitted with auxiliary oars, armed catamarans, and war canoes.

This implies inverted tri-mast designs—upper masts in a V-shaped configuration

and one or more vertical masts underneath the hull providing clearance for the banks of oars. Nicarea also maintains mostly static fortresses in space. They act as skyports and supply depots.

Munaan ships rely on combinations of magic and mechanical devices as main deck weapons. Munaan projectiles often involve catapults shooting incandescent projectiles, ballistae and heavy crossbows dispatching electrically-charged javelins, and teams of spellcasters trained for combat. Magic is also used to trick the enemy. The best of Munaan warships typically have unique special powers that can be used once per day, such as turning invisible prior to a battle, or boosting their maneuvering speeds for a short distance, or raising a magic shield to deflect a set number of damage, or projecting mirror images, and so on. Nicarean admirals make it a point to keep these powers secret. As a result, one can never be too sure of what to expect when fighting against the Munaan.

**Calidar:** Vessels of the Great Caldera reflect their cultural origins, although the former colonies tend to exchange some of their knowledge with each other. This habit goes back to the colonial wars when insurgent forces recovered wreckage of defeated enemy vessels and reused what they could. As a result, native Calidaran designs are unpredictable. Though Alfdáin elves tend to prefer living ships, and Araldûras dwarves still favor big machines, both are willing to compromise. Humans and gnomes have proved far more pragmatic and use anything available, sometimes leading to bewildering concepts. Vessels rigged with gas-filled balloons and propellers, flying ships using both sail and steam-powered paddle wheels, or steel-plated combat platforms acting as floating airbases come in addition to more conventional ship designs. Riding giant avians and other flying beasts is also an available option. Dwarven pressurization enabled the construction of submersibles as well; though more expensive than traditional surface vessels, subs remain nonetheless much cheaper than air-worthy skyships.

Weapons are just as varied as the ships

carrying them for the reasons given earlier. The former colonies' strategy relies more on air-defense than outer space warfare. It is the cheapest alternative. There is no interest in invading any of the lunar empires, but there is a definite need to protect the Great Caldera against potential invasions from the former overseers. The common wisdom of grabbing *seitha* before outer world prospectors get to it also proves most grievous to the lunar empires, and is a major motivation for them to regain control of the Great Caldera.

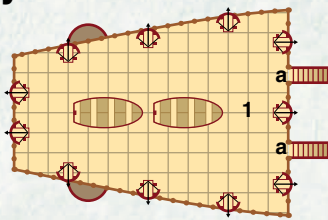
Ships of Meryath are further modified because of this kingdom's endorsement of dragon slaying. Glorathon favors ships with magic shields capable of reducing damage from breath weapons, with close defenses effective against claw and bite attacks, such as spikes, giant bear traps, barbed riggings, grappling hooks, and with a variety of specialized tactical spells.

**Draconia:** Draconic knights honor the Black Queen and adopt reptilian themes for their ships. With quad-sails and hulls covered with glossy black scale armor, their warships are slightly slower than Alorean vessels and as resilient as Munaan ironclads. Though able to outmaneuver Alorean clippers, they aren't as nimble as Munaan ships. On the other hand, these ships are fitted with a devastating acid breath weapon, usable once per battle in most cases, in addition to common deck weaponry, such as that on Munaan skyships. Aft quarters serve as stables for one or two drakes, while the stern deck provides a landing platform. Draconic space travel relies on *nérghiar*, an energy dragons generate through the disintegration of treasure. It can be stored and used, somewhat like *seitha*, except it allows a dragonship to teleport across space, providing a convenient way to sail into or out of Inner Draconia. Though most effective, it is nonetheless horrendously expensive.

**Lao-Kwei:** Followers of the Great Turtle build skyships that look like those of Earth's Far East, but are rigged for atmospheric maneuvering. This includes tri- or quad-masted Chinese junks sometimes as long as 400 feet, *yuloh*-propelled Japanese *sekibune* or *atakebune*, and Korean turtle ships. Lao-



## Sky Deck

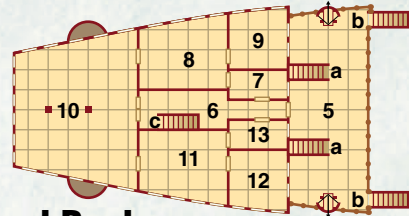


# Eternal Glory

Scale: 1 sq. = 5 ft.

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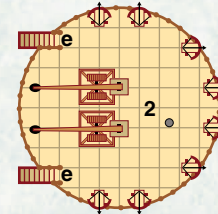
## Upper Decks



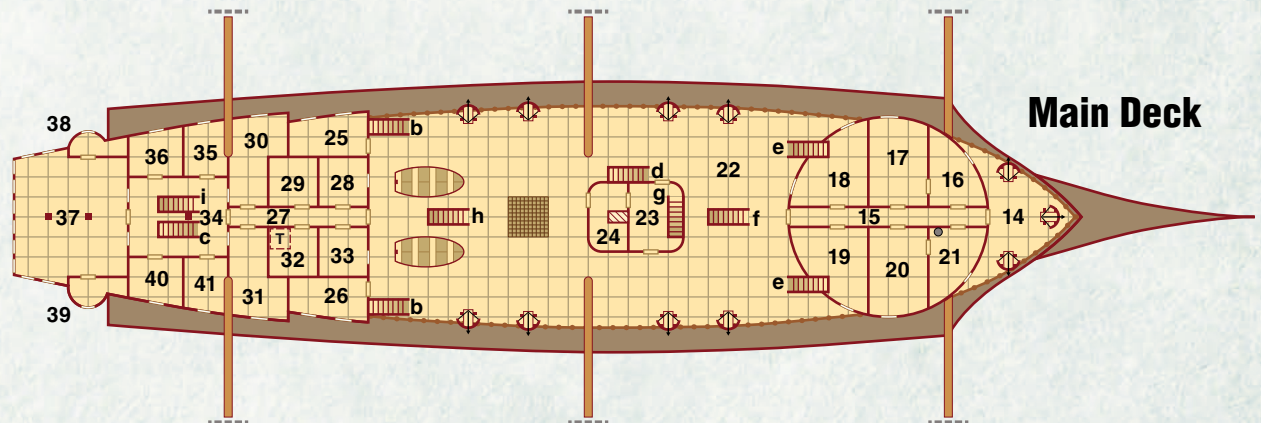
## Royal Deck



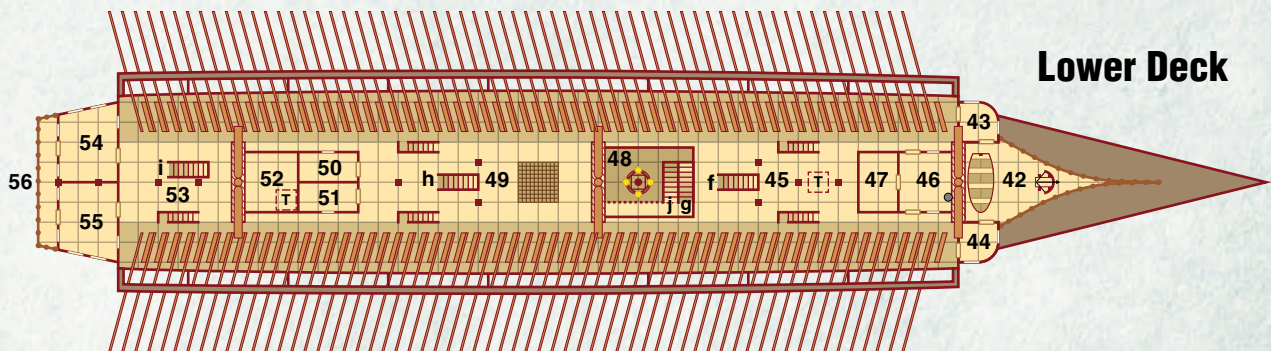
## Bridge



## Forecastle

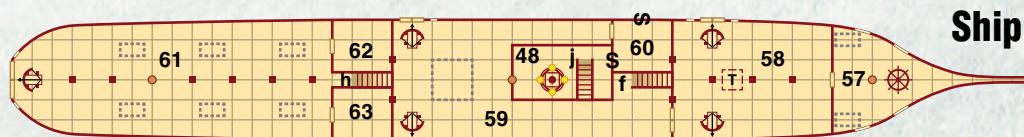


## Main Deck



## Lower Deck

0 50 100 150 200 250 300 ft.



## Ship's Hold

- |                                  |  |                                     |   |
|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Sky Deck                      | 16-17. Marines' Quarters                     | 33. Royal Secretary's Quarters      | 48. Steering Chamber                      |
| 2. Forecastle                    | 18. Infirmary                                | 34. Aft Landing                     | 49. Lower Midship Deck                    |
| 3. Midship Deck                  | 19-21. Sailors' Quarters                     | 35. Master Artificer's Quarters     | 50-51. Midshipmen's Quarters              |
| 4. Wheelhouse                    | 22. Main Deck                                | 36. First Mate's Quarters           | 52. Seitha Chapel and Stowage             |
| 5. Royal Deck                    | 23. Chart Room                               | 37. Officers' Wardroom              | 53. Lower Aft Deck                        |
| 6. Royal Passageway & Guard Room | 24. Ship Master's Quarters                   | 38. Officers' Head                  | 54-55. Petty Officers & Masters' Quarters |
| 7. Admiral's Antechamber         | 25. Master Artillerist's Quarters            | 39. Captain's Head                  | 56. Aft Balcony                           |
| 8. Admiral's Day Cabin           | 26. Captain-at-Arms's Quarters               | 40. Captain's Quarters              | 57. Anchor Room                           |
| 9. Admiral's Quarters            | 27. Aft Passageway                           | 41. Dragon Slayer Expert's Quarters | 58. Forward Hold                          |
| 10. Great Cabin                  | 28. Purser's Quarters                        | 42. Ram Deck                        | 59. Midship Hold                          |
| 11. Royal Day Cabin              | 29. Purser's Office                          | 43-44. Crew Heads                   | 60. Stowage                               |
| 12. Queen's Quarters             | 30. Admiral's Aide-de-Camp & Private Stowage | 45. Lower Forward Deck              | 61. Aft Hold & Murder Holes Bay           |
| 13. Royal Antechamber            | 31. Royal Courtiers' Cabin                   | 46. Galley                          | 62. Stowage                               |
| 14. Forward Deck                 | 32. Chaplain's Quarters                      | 47. Pantry                          | 63. Brig                                  |



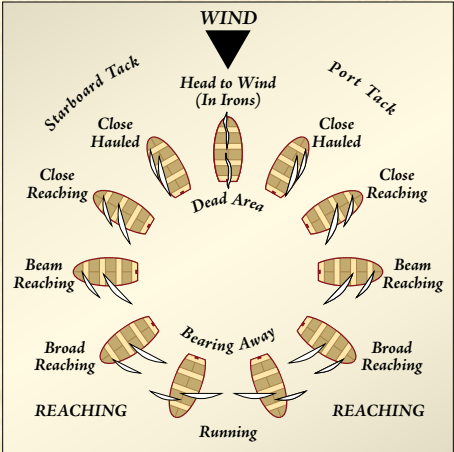
# Skyships of Calidar

Kweians have discovered red powder equivalent to the dwarven concoction, allowing cannons and their most-favored weapons: rockets of all shapes and sizes.

Though harnessing ethereal winds was easy enough, outer space voyages involve instead teleportation gates built by the Kahuulkin. After Kahuul's collapse, all these gates became invisible, and records of their locations were forever lost. Some remain in a fixed position in space while others lie in forgotten caves, ruins, or some far-flung, hard to reach places. Divination magic is needed to find them, and such discoveries remain secrets jealously kept by Lao-Kweian kingdoms and merchants' guilds. Until one travels through a gate the first time, there is no telling what its destination is and whether the gate on the other side works properly. These devices may malfunction, work only intermittently, allow only a certain number of vessels to sail through within a specific timeframe, provide one-way passage only, behave according to planetary alignments, switch destinations based on a schedule, self-destruct after being used, etc. Starfolk may also be using Kahuulkin gates and resent lesser races tampering with them.

**Wayfarers:** Norse denizens of the Fringe mastered the building of enormous longships, some with multiple decks, mechanized oars, and inverted tri-mast designs capable of trapping ethereal winds. Though they maintain many scattered settlements in the Fringe, Wayfarers can spend long periods of time in space, exploring, trading, or raiding. If caught in battle, these hardy folk prefer boarding enemy vessels. Deck weaponry is likely adapted from stolen Starfolk technology.

In his great wisdom, Odin Allfather imparted his knowledge of *fey paths* to his priors. These magical lines crisscross through space, linking worlds together and enabling those who know how to tap into them to travel at incredible speeds. Divination spells enable navigators to assess when to sever the link, which slows their ships down to their original speeds. Fey paths flow in only one direction and along an



axis, bending and stretching as destinations move through space. Intersections are few. Paths are largely uncharted, and some only function intermittently, reversing their flow when they reactivate.

**The Undead:** Calidar features ghost ships and other vessels of utter horror. These often are a mish-mash of captured vessels and dead bodies madly bundled together. Parts of elven clippers are corrupted and develop evil characteristics, such as life-draining thorns and mind-altering powers. The bones or souls of the fallen serve to fuel steam engines. Vampiric ships leech magic from vessels with which they come into contact. They often try to pass themselves off as abandoned wrecks to attack unsuspecting skyships. The master of an undead vessel may be able to use *seitha*, fey paths, and Lao-Kweian gates—but never *nerghiar* unless the master is an undead dragon. A necromancer or some other powerful evil controls all undead aboard, and possibly multiple vessels, slowly building its realm over the centuries.

## Skyship Performances

Although oared and mechanical propulsion is addressed here, this section focuses on sailing ships. Since wind-driven skyships and steam-powered flying vessels have more in common with fantasy than actual science, calculations for their speeds, climb rates, and turning radii have been abstracted for the sake of simplicity.

**Forward Speed:** Top speeds generally vary with how the various types of skyships respond to winds. One advantage they hold over seagoing vessels is the absence of water resistance, affording them greater speeds. Tri- or quad-masted designs enhance their ability to trap wind. Whereas seagoing galleys and longships have poor or no windward sailing capability, their flying counterparts do. Wind speed and ship design are the main components in determining how fast a skyship can fly. Before going further, it's important to understand how wind direction affects sailing.

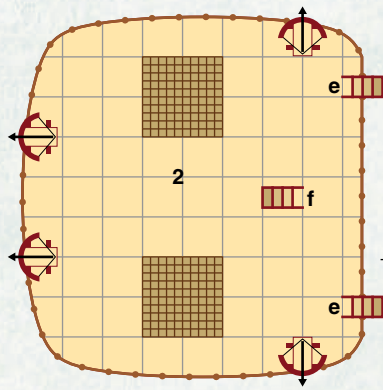
The *point of sail* is the direction in which a ship navigates relative to the angle of the wind, which is illustrated in the diagram above. A sailing ship cannot make headway when facing exactly against the wind (the ship is said to be "in irons"); a skyship is likely to drift backward in this situation. In the opposite case, when running before the wind, a skyship cannot exceed wind speed regardless of its design. All other bearings incur a modifier applied directly to wind speed. For example, a vessel on a beam-reaching course can sail at twice the speed of wind; while close hauled, it drops

Points of Sail		Skyship Origins	Powered Speed	Sail Speed Modifier
Heading	Modifiers			
In Irons	x0	Kragdûras Dreadnought	50 mph	n/a
Close Hauled	x0.5	Munaani Galley	20 mph	+0
Close Reaching	x1	Wayfarer Longship	20 mph	+0.5
Beam Reaching	x2	Lao-Kweian Junk	n/a	+1
Broad Reaching	x1.5	Draconic Warship	n/a	+1.5
Broad Running	x1	Alorean Clipper	n/a	+2



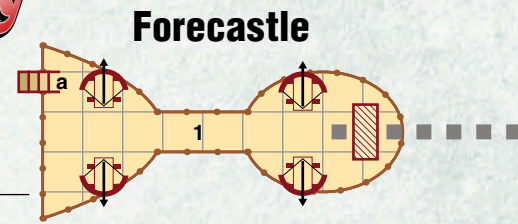
# Queen's Fury

Scale: 1 sq. = 5 ft.  
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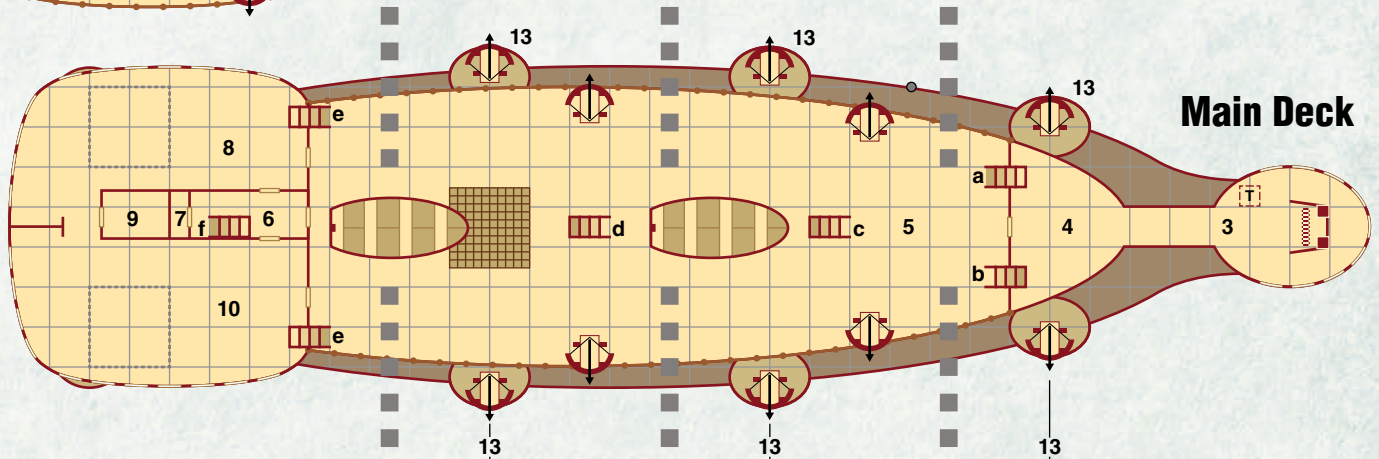


**Stern Deck**

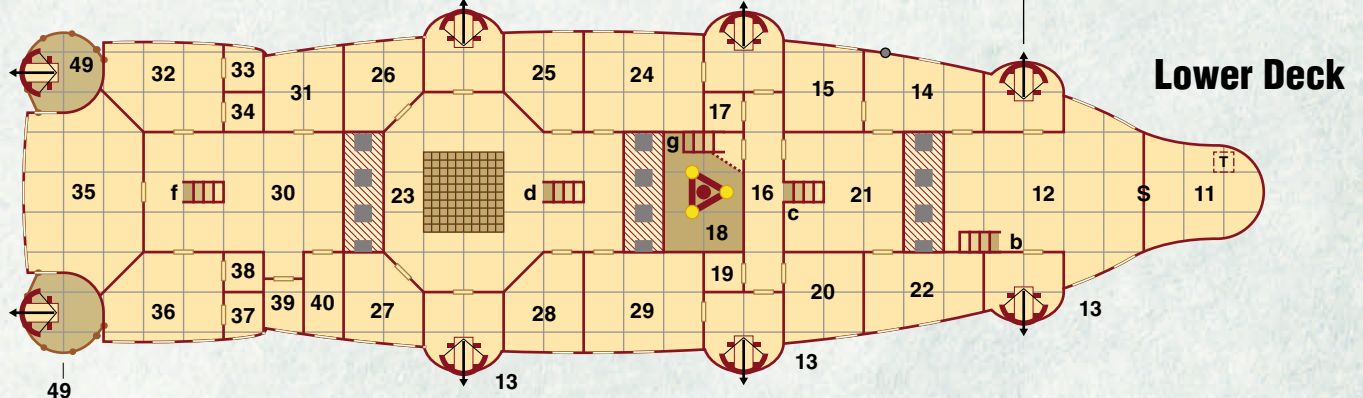
**Upper Decks**



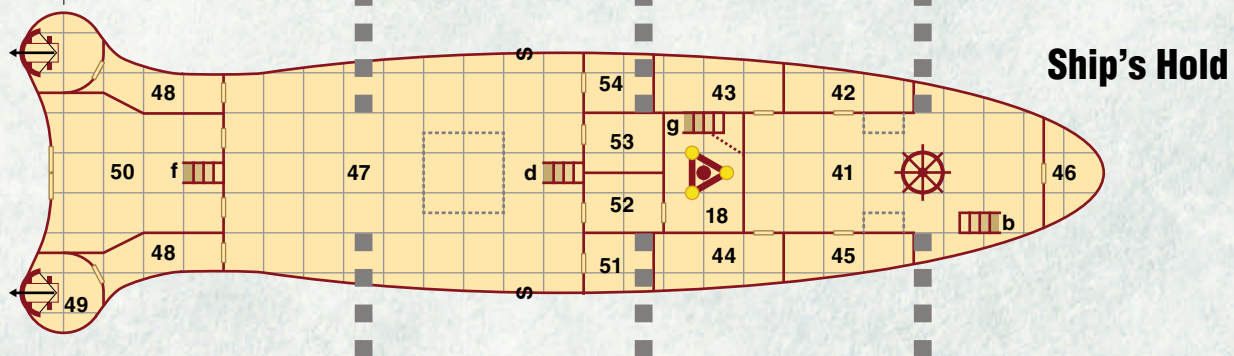
**Forecastle**



**Main Deck**



**Lower Deck**



**Ship's Hold**

- |                                      |                                  |                                |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Forward Upper Deck                | 14. Galley & Cook's Quarters     | 27. Purser's Office & Quarters | 40. Armory                           |
| 2. Drake Landing Platform            | 15. Pantry                       | 28. Captain-at-Arms's Quarters | 41. Lower Crew Quarters & Anchor Bay |
| 3. Helm                              | 16. Sick Bay Stairs Landing      | 29. Knights' Quarters          | 42 & 44. Petty Officers' Quarters    |
| 4. Chart Room & Navigator's Quarters | 17. Stowage                      | 30. Officers' Wardroom         | 43. Carpenter's Workshop             |
| 5. Main Deck                         | 18. Steering Chamber             | 31. First Mate's Quarters      | 45. Midshipmen's Quarters            |
| 6. Aft Stairs Landing                | 19. Stowage                      | 32. Guest's Quarters           | 46. Crew Heads                       |
| 7. Drake Handlers' Quarters          | 20. Apothecary                   | 33. Guest's Head               | 47. Ship's Hold                      |
| 8. Portside Drake Stable             | 21. Sick Bay                     | 34. Stowage                    | 48. Aft Companionway                 |
| 9. Stowage                           | 22. Surgeon's Quarters           | 35. Great Cabin                | 49. Lower Aft Ballista Platform      |
| 10. Starboard Drake Stable           | 23. Cargo Bay Stairs Landing     | 36. Captain's Quarters         | 50. Aft Loading Bay                  |
| 11. Nérgíar Shrine                   | 24. Knights' Quarters            | 37. Captain's Head             | 51. Starboard Brig                   |
| 12. Crew Quarters                    | 25. Master Artificer's Quarters  | 38. Stowage                    | 52 & 53. Stowage                     |
| 13. Ballista Platform                | 26. Master-of-Engines's Quarters | 39. Officers' Head             | 54. Portside Brig                    |



# Odin's Eye

## Wayfarer Marauder Class

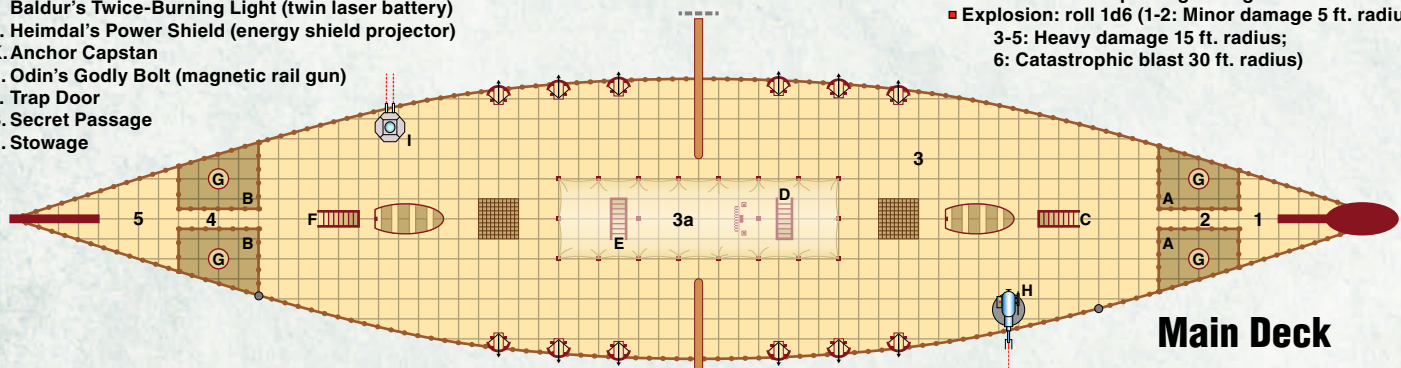
Scale: 1 sq. = 5 ft.

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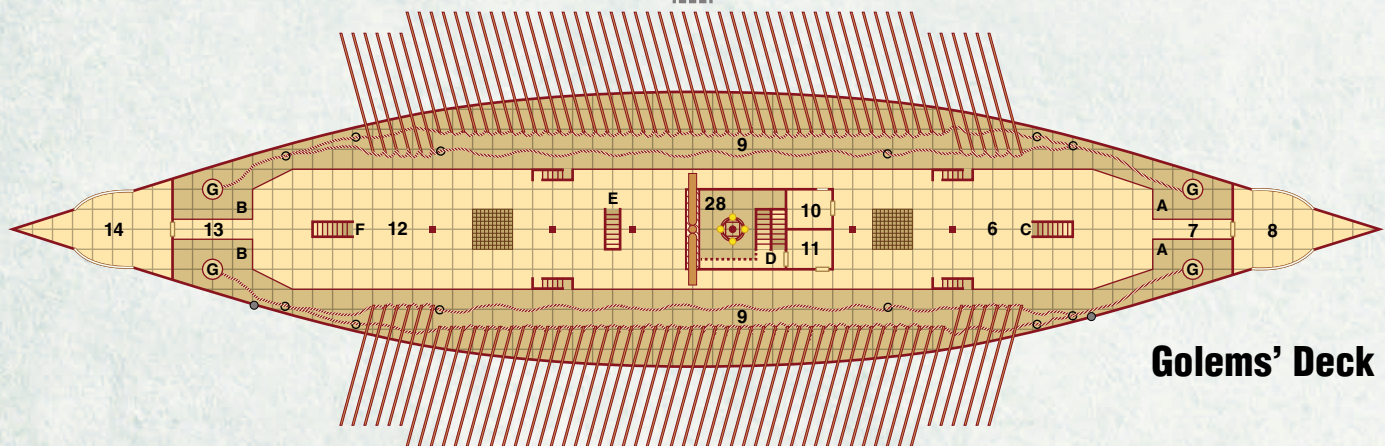
- A. Forward Golems' Pits
- B. Aft Golems' Pits
- C-F. Companionways
- G. Rowing Golem-Actuator
- H. Thor's Wrath (antimatter disruptor)
- I. Baldur's Twice-Burning Light (twin laser battery)
- J. Heimdal's Power Shield (energy shield projector)
- K. Anchor Capstan
- L. Odin's Godly Bolt (magnetic rail gun)
- T. Trap Door
- S. Secret Passage
- Z. Stowage

### Jury-Rigged Kahuulkin Technology

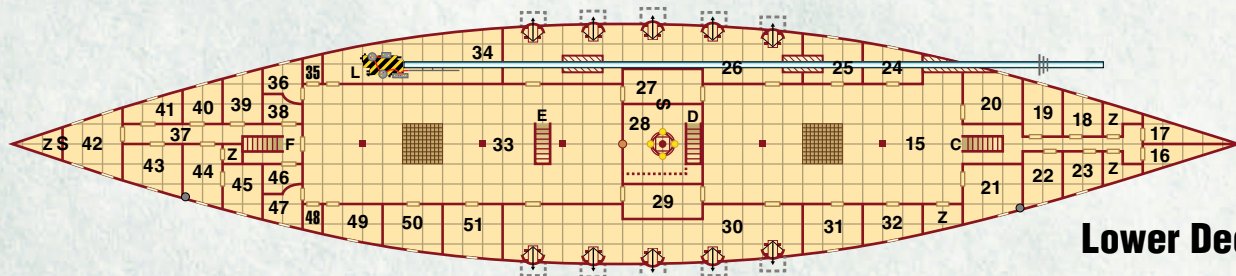
- 15% chance of running out of power after each use.
- Energy shielding lasts 1 hour per use.
- 10% chance of malfunctioning when used.
- 10% chance of exploding during malfunction.
- Explosion: roll 1d6 (1-2: Minor damage 5 ft. radius; 3-5: Heavy damage 15 ft. radius; 6: Catastrophic blast 30 ft. radius)



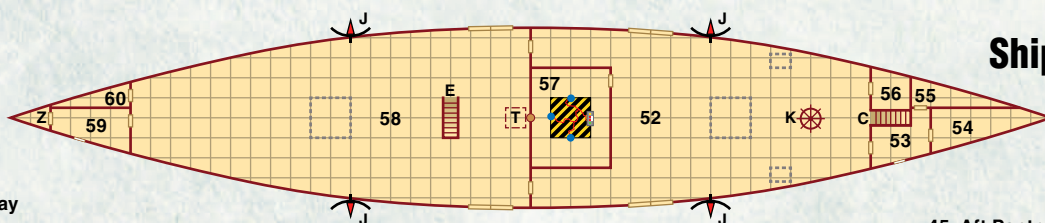
**Main Deck**



**Golems' Deck**



**Lower Deck**



**Ship's Hold**

- 1. Forward Deck
- 2. Forward Gangway
- 3. Main Deck
- 3a. Tent Area & Helm
- 4. Aft Gangway
- 5. Stern Deck
- 6. Forward Golems' Deck
- 7. Forward Gangway
- 8. Forward Observation Room
- 9. Golems' and Oars' Recesses
- 10. Taskmaster's Cabin
- 11. Chartroom
- 12. Aft Golems' Deck
- 13. Aft Gangway
- 14. Stern Observation Room
- 15. Odin's Temple Hall

- 16-17. Crew Heads
- 18-19. Shield Maidens' Quarters
- 20. High Priest's Quarters
- 21. Forward Galley
- 22-23. Shield Maidens' Quarters
- 24. Pig Pen
- 25. Goat Enclosure
- 26. Portside Ballistae Deck
- 27. Portside Ballistae Magazine
- 28. Steering Chamber
- 29. Starboard Ballistae Magazine
- 30. Starboard Ballistae Deck
- 31. Acolytes' Quarters

- 32. Midshipmen's Quarters
- 33. Free Men's Great Hall
- 34. Odin's Godly Bolt Chamber
- 35. Free Men's Head
- 36. Master Wizard's Bedchamber
- 37. Hauld's Passageway
- 38. Master of Ballistae's Bedchamber
- 39. Hersier's Bedchamber
- 40. Paymaster's Bedchamber
- 41. Healer's Bedchamber
- 42. Jarl's Day Cabin
- 43. Jarl's Bedchamber
- 44. Aft Galley

- 45. Aft Pantry
- 46. Master Carpenter's Bedchamber
- 47. Master Helmsman's Bedchamber
- 48. Jarl's Head
- 49-51. Berserkers' Quarters
- 52. Forward Ship's Hold & Anchor Room
- 53. Guard Room
- 54-55. Brig
- 56. Interrogation Chamber
- 57. Heimdal's Power Chamber
- 58. Aft Ship's Hold
- 59. Carpenter's Workshop
- 60. Armory



# Skyships of Calidar

Initial Forward Speed		Speed Loss				
MPH	KMH	None	20%	40%	60%	80%
Up to 10	Up to 15	+1	—	+2	—	—
11-20	16-30	+1	+2	—	+3	—
21-40	31-65	+2	+3	—	+4	+5
41-60	66-100	+2	+3	+5	+6	+7
61-80	101-130	+3	+4	+6	+7	+9
81-100	131-160	+3	+5	+6	+8	+10
101+	161+	+3	+5	+7	+9	+11

to half the wind's speed. These modifiers are listed in the performance chart previously in this section.

Wind strength should be considered, suggesting for example a chance for damage to sheet and masts when sailing in gale conditions. Halving sail surface to minimize the risk of damage affects speed accordingly. Navigating in violent storm or hurricane conditions will invariably result in damage, if not in the ship's destruction, as well as in the lack of ability to maintain a course other than the storm's direction. Safe sailing can be achieved with a light to strong breeze (up to 30 mph/50 kmh). Gale conditions occur between 31 and 60 mph (100 kmh), with violent storms prevailing above this range. Atmospheric wind takes precedence before ethereal currents. The latter come into full effect 11 miles up (17,700 meters).

Finally, a skyship's world of origin and design determine its sailing efficiency. This is expressed as a secondary modifier that should be added to the first—with two important exceptions: when the vessel is in irons, and when broad running. In these two cases, the secondary modifier does not apply. Speed ratings are listed in the chart on page 124.

Based on the previous chart, a close-hauled galley with a 30 mph wind moves at 15 mph ( $30 \times [0.5 + 0]$ ). A beam-reaching Alorean clipper with the same wind conditions reaches 120 mph ( $30 \times [2 + 2]$ ).

Kragdûras dreadnoughts use Fetzgrim engines for their propulsion, and largely ignore atmospheric wind and ethereal currents, reaching a 50 mph (80 kmh) top speed. Galleys and longships can rely on oars,

affording them a 20 mph (30 kmh) atmospheric speed in becalmed conditions. The tips of oars are enchanted so that pulling on them like those on a seagoing vessel produces a driving force propelling the galley. Half its rowing speed may be combined with its sailing speed. An Osriel paddle-steamer can achieve 30 mph (50 kmh) powered speed plus half a Munaani galley's sailing speed if both means of propulsion are combined. Talikai catamarans are as fast as Draconic warships, but much more lightly built and armed. The *Star Phoenix* and most galleon-style skyships are equivalent to Lao-Kweian junks as far as their flying performances are concerned. Other types of airships, such as those relying on lighter-than-air balloons or vessels with mechanical propellers, will be handled individually in later books.

**Climbing Speed:** A skyship's ability to climb is predicated upon its enchantment providing lift, including thrust from dwarven Fetzgrim engines, and its forward speed. Basic lift enchantment enables a minimum vertical climb rate of 500 feet (150 m) per minute. For simplicity, altitude is divided into level increments of 500ft. The table at the top of the page shows how many levels of altitude a skyship can gain based on its initial forward speed, and the resulting speed loss after its climb.

In the table above, a Munaani galley initially traveling at 60 mph can climb as many as +7 altitude levels in a minute, but its forward speed becomes 12 miles per hour (this includes the minimum 500ft climb). The column labeled "None" refers to climbs shallow enough not incur speed loss.

Climb rates printed in red are steep enough that they should be limited to vessels with artificial deck gravity. The speed numbers printed in green and blue concern turning maneuvers, which are explained later in this section.

*There are three classes of skyships:*

**A. Powered** (with oars or engines, such as dwarven dreadnoughts, Munaani galleys, Wayfarer longships, and vessels entirely propelled by magic)

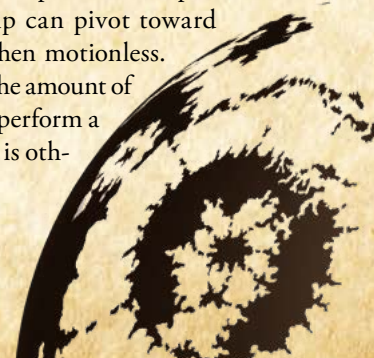
**B. Tri-Masted Sailships** (such as Lao-Kweian junks and most flying galleons)

**C. Quad-Masted Sailships** (such as Draconic and Alorean vessels)

When traveling at least 60 mph, Class B and C vessels benefit from a bonus to their climb rates. Class B vessels climb one more altitude level than those in Class A. Class C vessels climb one more level than those in Class B. In other words, a Lao-Kwei junk traveling at 60 mph can climb as many as +8 altitude levels, and an Alorean clipper as many as +9. If the modified climb rate meets or exceeds the red number listed in the far right column, the ship requires artificial deck gravity. Under the most favorable conditions, an Alorean clipper can reach the stratosphere in less than 25 minutes without losing speed; a Munaani galley can do so in just under an hour.

**Diving:** Losing altitude does not result in loss of speed. The climbing chart can be used to determine a safe rate of descent, a +1 becoming a -1. Diving speed can never exceed a vessel's maximum rated forward speed because skyships aren't aerodynamic. On the other hand, a helmsman can reduce the strength of a ship's lift enchantment (or Fetzgrim engine power), provoking a vertical drop. It is a dangerous maneuver that can result in the ship flipping over or crashing.

**Turning:** The ability to change direction is based upon a ship's forward speed and design. Any ship can pivot toward any direction when motionless. When moving, the amount of space needed to perform a 180-degree turn is oth-





# Skyships of Calidar

erwise measured in ship lengths. Sailing ships need to check wind direction after completing their maneuvers, and adjust their end speeds accordingly.

**A.** Vessels in this category require 1 ship length to turn at green speeds, 2 at mid-speed, and 4 at blue speeds.

**B.** Vessels in this category require respectively 2, 4, and 6 ship lengths.

**C.** Vessels in this category require respectively 4, 8, and 10 ship lengths.

In other words, a 60ft galley flying at low speed can make tight turns while a 150ft-long Alorean clipper flying at its top speed would need at least 1,500ft (460 meters) to turn around. Calidaran skyships do not heel like seagoing vessels when they change direction; rather, they bank toward the inside of their turns, angling their lift enchantments (or Fetzgrim power) outward to help in their maneuvers.

**Personalizing Ships:** The above mechanics are general guidelines. Individual vessels tend to have their own personalities. When designing a skyship one or more performance aspects can be improved in exchange for downgrading others. For example: A ship might be slightly faster than others when close reaching or broad reaching, but not quite as fast when beam reaching; its sail speed modifier could be slightly improved but its toughness to physical damage reduced; it may be able to turn better at the expense of its climb rate; and so on. The list of potential alterations and trade-offs is too long to enumerate here. For the sake of game balance, these changes remain under the purview of game masters to approve.

## The Star Phoenix

This ship became stranded in the Vortex a long time ago. Some of its sailors may be members of its original crew, though they do not remember this. Istra bargained with the Gate Keeper to alter the *Star Phoenix* and bind it to its new captain. It isn't known yet in what ways she changed the ship. So far, ghosts of the crew who died on this ship remain aboard. Some degree of empathy exists between the captain and the ship. Isledemer may, under certain circumstances, instantly travel through the ship's structure and emerge at another point. More will be revealed about this skyship in future episodes.

**1. Forecastle:** The bowsprit (a) extends from this open deck and helps anchor the forward masts. The ship's helm (b) is positioned behind a wooden panel. Levers and pedals help control the ship's 3D maneuvers. A compass and altitude dial stand just past the wheel. The foremast (c) stands a few feet behind the helm, along with a metal exhaust pipe for the galley (32 on the lower deck). Ratlines anchored outside the gunwales allow access to the upper and lower foresails. Two heavy ballistae (d) face port and starboard. Stairs (e) lead down to the main deck.

**2. Aftcastle:** Stairs (g) lead up from the main deck to the open stern deck. The mizzenmast (h) leans astern, intersecting with the stern deck's forward railing. Ratlines anchored outside the railing allow access to lower and upper aft sails. Two ballistae (d) face port and starboard. A large lantern (i) rises aft of the deck.

**3. Ghostly Crew Quarters:** Windows line the sides of this area. A panel can be lowered to serve as a gangplank for the forward access hatch. The upper foremast intersects the center of the room (c) along with the galley exhaust pipe.

**4. Main Deck:** Stairs (e) lead up to the forecastle. Stairs (j) connect with the lower deck (8) and the ship's hold (39).

Four midship ballistae (d) face port and starboard, on either sides of the main mast (f). Ratlines anchored outside the gunwales allow access to upper and lower mainsails. Four removable panels form a grating covering the main loading hatch (k), which opens onto the lower deck (14) and the ship's hold (39). Stairs (l) connect with the lower deck, outside the bosun's quarters (26). Two launches secured on top of one another (m) lie between the loading hatch and the mizzenmast (h). Stairs (g) lead up to the stern deck (3); stairs (n) connect with the officers' wardroom (19) on the lower deck.

**5. Captain's Quarters:** Isledemer resides here when not on duty. The room includes a bunk, a desk, bookshelves, and stowage bins alongside the windows.

**6. Great Cabin:** This large chamber serves as a day cabin for the captain, his formal office, and dining room. A sentry stands at the double doors to ensure no one enters without permission. Guests and officers are often invited to dine with the captain there. A large table and chairs occupy the center of the room. Stowage bins stand against the aft bulkhead, underneath the windows. Two ballistae may be assembled here to shoot astern.

**7. First Mate's Quarters:** This is Enna Daggart's bedchamber and office (bunk, desk, stowage bins beneath the windows). This room may temporarily house an important passenger, in which case Enna takes over the purser's quarters (25) and requests Ebben Rugwittle share his (22) with Waessail Barrooney.

**8. Forward Companionway Landing:** Stairs (j) connect to the main deck (4) and the ship's hold (39). A secret panel (S) opens through the port bulkhead.

**9. Chart Room:** Ship Master Arabesque Starward stores her maps and charting instruments here (table, chair, drafting tools, astrolabe, stowage tubes, etc.).

**10. Sick Bay:** Those too weak to stay in their quarters remain here. This chamber otherwise looks like an apothecary's shop, with pots, jars, a small work bench, and narrow bunks.

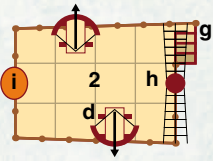
**11. Ship Master's Quarters:** Arabesque's



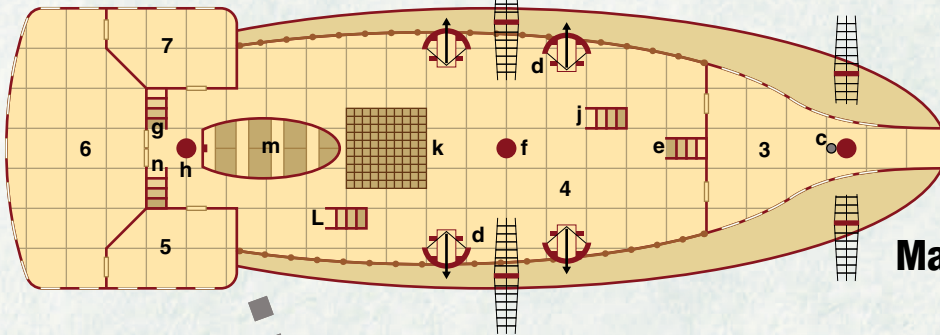
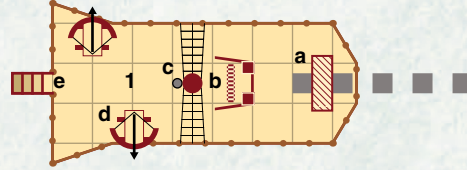
# Star Phoenix

Scale: 1 sq. = 5 ft.

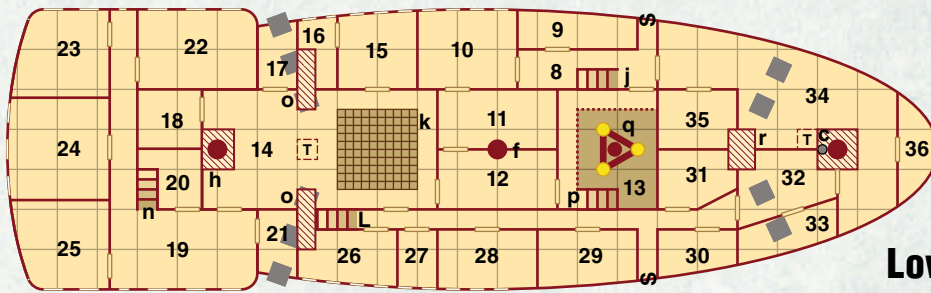
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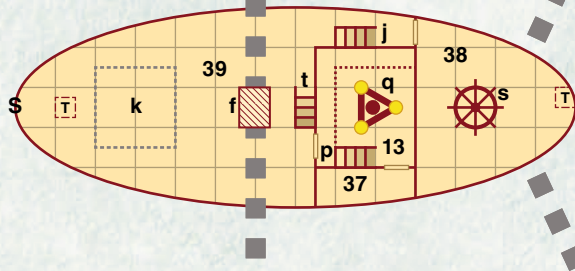
## Forecastle & Aftcastle



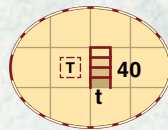
## Main Deck



## Lower Deck



## Ship's Hold



## Observation Deck

- a. Bowsprit
- b. Helm
- c. Foremast & Galley Exhaust Pipe
- d. Heavy Ballistae
- f. Main Mast
- h. Mizzenmast
- i. Stern Lantern
- k. Grating over Main Cargo Hatch
- m. Launch
- o. Lower Portside/Starboard Mizzenmasts
- q. Steering Device
- r. Lower Portside/Starboard Foremasts
- S. Secret Panel
- s. Capstan
- T. Trapdoor

- 1. Forecastle
- 2. Aftcastle
- 3. Ghostly Crew Quarters
- 4. Main Deck
- 5. Captain's Quarters
- 6. Great Cabin
- 7. First Mate's Quarters
- 8. Forward Companionway Landing
- 9. Chart Room
- 10. Sick Bay
- 11. Ship Master's Quarters
- 12. Seitha Chapel
- 13. Upper Steering Room
- 14. Stowage Area
- 15-16. Carpenter's Workshop & Stowage
- 17. Officers' Head
- 18. Brig
- 19. Officers' Wardroom
- 20. Stowage
- 21. Captain's Head
- 22. Master Artificer's Quarters & Workshop
- 23. Master-of-Engines's Quarters
- 24. Captain-at-Arms's Quarters
- 25. Purser's Quarters & Office
- 26. Bosun and Carpenter's Quarters
- 27. Armory
- 28-29. Marines' Quarters
- 30-31. Midshipmen's Quarters
- 32-33. Galley, Cook's Quarters & Pantry
- 34. Lower Crew Quarters
- 35. Mates' Quarters
- 36. Crew Heads
- 37. Stowage
- 38. Anchor Room
- 39. Ship's Hold
- 40. Observation Deck



# Skyships of Calidar

bedchamber houses a bunk, a desk, a chair, and a few stowage bins. The main mast (f) intersects with the bulkhead between her room and the ship's chapel (12).

**12. *Seitha* Chapel:** An altar engraved with the ship's stylized outline stands against the bulkhead and the main mast (f). Two *everlasting candles* burn on either side. A silver chalice is solidly secured along with the ship's *seitha* reserves underneath the altar. Since the *Star Phoenix's* last adventure, doors to this room are locked. Only the captain and the ship's master carry the keys.

**13. Upper Steering Room:** This chamber extends to the ship's hold below. A gallery runs alongside the port, aft, and starboard bulkheads, leading to stairs (p) to the lower level. At the center of the chamber stands the steering device (q). It comprises two large and sturdy triangular frames with brass balls at their points. The bottom one is fixed solidly to the lowest deck. The upper frame is articulated, allowing it to move according to the helmsman's commands. Doors to this room are locked. Only the captain and the ship's master carry the keys.

**14. Stowage Area:** The grating (k) can be removed to lower freight into the ship's hold (39). A trap door (T) allows access to the lower level. Heavy woodwork anchors the two lower mizzenmasts (o) and the bottom of the upper mizzenmast (h).

**15-16. Carpenter's Workshop and Stowage:** Workbench, carpentry tools, master carpenter's hammock.

**17. Officers' Head:** The lower portside mast runs downward through this small chamber and the outboard bulkhead.

**18. Brig:** This chamber's carpentry is reinforced and the door features sturdy metal bars (padlock, bucket, wooden bench).

**19. Officers' Wardroom:** Officers above the rank of midshipmen dine or simply pass time here when off duty (large table, chairs, appropriate to the officers' sizes). Stairs (n) lead up to the main deck.

**20. Stowage:** Locked. Captain and purser hold keys. A strongbox stands in the corner behind the stairwell (the captain has the key).

**21. Captain's Head:** See 17 for details.

**22. Master Artificer's Quarters and Workshop:** Ebben Rugwittle uses this chamber to work on enchantments, especially marines' rods which he keeps locked in a sturdy bin beneath his bunk (desk, workbench, chair, stowage bins, bookshelves).

**23. Master-of-Engines' Quarters:** Hoyk Pebbleborn dwells here when resting (bunk, table, chair, stowage bins, rack for the blunderbuss and battleaxe above the bunk).

**24. Captain-at-Arms's Quarters:** This is Wu Yuntai's bedchamber (bunk, table, chair, stowage bins, sword and armor stands, small praying shrine, lacquered incense box and holders).

**25. Purser's Quarters and Office:** Waessail Barrooney uses this chamber to keep ship's records. A sturdy safe keeps the cash needed to purchase supplies and pay the crew (bunk, table, chair, stowage bins).

**26. Bosun and Carpenter's Quarters:** Stairs (L) just outside this chamber lead up to the main deck. The adjoining passageway is restricted to petty officers, midshipmen, marines, and the ship's cook.

**27. Armory:** Locked (first mate and master-at-arms hold the keys). This chamber contains the crew's melee weaponry and a small complement of hand grenades constructed by Hoyk Pebbleborn.

**28-29. Marines' Quarters.**

**30-31. Midshipmen's Quarters.**

**32-33. Galley, Cook's Quarters, and Pantry:** Mama Goo's stove is located at the base of the upper foremast (c). A vent runs along this mast to the forecastle, which she uses to eavesdrop on conversations. The lower starboard foremast runs down from the ceiling (r) and across the galley enclosure before crossing through the pantry.

**34. Lower Crew Quarters:** (Hammocks, personal lockers, collapsible table, benches.)

The lower portside foremast runs down from the ceiling (r) and across the chamber before crossing through the starboard bulkhead. A trapdoor (T) reveals a ladder to the anchor room below (38).

**35. Mates' Quarters:** Hammocks, personal lockers.

**36. Crew Heads.**

**37. Stowage.**

**38. Anchor Room:** A capstan (s) stands in the middle of the chamber. Anchors are secured against the port and starboard bulkheads, and can be lowered through panels in the deck. A ladder stands at the forward end of the room, leading to a trap door in the ceiling (T) and to crew quarters above (34).

**39. Ship's Hold:** This chamber is usually filled with crates, barrels, and sacks, all secured with sturdy stowage nets. A grating in the overhead (k) can be removed for merchandise to be lowered in. Stairs (j) lead up to the lower deck (8) and the main deck (4). Stairs (t) allow access to the observation deck (40). Heavy woodwork anchors upper and lower main masts to the deck and ceiling (f). The two lower masts run from the ceiling down across the ship's hold, and through the outboard bulkheads. A trapdoor in the ceiling (T) with a ladder connects with area 14 above. Two large concealed panels at the aft edge of this chamber can be removed. If need be, a ballista can be assembled and positioned here to shoot out though this opening.

**40. Observation Deck:** This circular chamber can seat several people. Windows all around allow for a clear view beneath the *Star Phoenix*. Stairs (t) connect with the ship's hold (39). Stowage bins underneath the seats contain rope ladders which can be lowered through the trapdoor (T) in the deck. A heavy bolt secures this panel.



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ANOTHER EXCITING  
ADVENTURE FROM  
**RANDOM  
WIZARD  
GAMES**



ANDROID OI THE STABBER



IITHENA THE ASSASSIN



ROLAND THE PALADIN

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