

# A CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURE

in the World of  
STEVEN BRUST'S  
JHEREG

## DZURLORD

by  
Architects  
Adventure



US/56410-3 ★ \$3.50  
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# DARK DEEDS IN DRAGAERA

"First I'm murdered. Then Lazarus the healer revives me—then *he's* murdered. Verra be damned! *Nobody* does that to a Dzurlord and lives!" So Lord Hargen sets out to avenge his murder. And, being a Dzur hero, he probably *will*. Messily. Dzur do that. But . . . why was he killed? Suppose Hargen asks (Dzur *don't* do that).

Suppose the killer was under orders, and his boss had orders, and *his* boss . . . suppose Hargen's death was only one piece in a conspiracy that leads from floating castles to Teckla slums, from the land of the dead to the Empress' palace. Lord Hargen knows how to kill or be killed—but if he wins the *wrong* battle, Dragaera is doomed . . .

CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURES are authorized interactive novels compatible for Advanced Dungeons and Dragons™ level play. Constructed by the masters of modern gaming, CROSSROADS™ feature complete rules; *full use* of gaming values—strength, intelligence, wisdom/luck, constitution, dexterity, charisma and hit points; and multiple pathways for each option; for the most complete experience in gaming books, as fully realized, motivated heroes quest through the most famous worlds of fantasy!

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

**DZURLORD**

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DZURLORD

# INTRODUCTION

By Steven Brust

THERE IS AN orange-red overcast that hangs over the Dragaeran Empire.

Standing near the eastern border, there are, indeed, times when the overcast will break and you can see a blue sky, or a gray overcast, or white clouds, or a yellow sun, or bright stars. Other times, with a strong wind from the west, the Easterners will see orange-red instead of blue or gray or white.

The overcast may, if you are so inclined, be considered pollution. It is the result of sorcerers casually using magic for war, pleasure, and taking out the garbage for something like two hundred thousand years.

Sorcery is not unusual within the Empire; it is the norm. The question is not, "Are you a sorcerer?" but, "How good are you?" If, like a Dragaeran, you will live two- or three thousand years, you might have time to get very good.

Think big.

The population, amount of land, wealth, power, and culture are big. The continent on which the

Empire rests is roughly the shape of Europe, but twice the size, and the Empire encompasses (at the moment) more than half of it. Easterners (read: human beings) make up the rest. But we are not concerned with human beings, because there are very few within the Empire, and they are small (rarely even six feet tall), short-lived (sixty years is old), and weak.

We can also forget about the Teckla, who make up more than ninety-five percent of the population. They are a peasant class, and it is a very rare one indeed who has enough sorcerous skill to do more than an occasional fertility spell. The study of sorcery takes time, and the Teckla are too busy eking out a living to have the leisure to study sorcery or anything else useful.

Teckla? Well, they are one of the Seventeen Houses. Houses?

Every Dragaeran (with a few sad exceptions who are cross-breeds) is born into one of the Seventeen Houses. Each House is named for an animal, and has certain characteristics bred into it. Each House takes a turn, in order, at being the ruling House, and the closer your House is to ruling, the higher your status in society (except, again, the poor Teckla, who are rather sneered at even when in power, which they only acquire through revolution).

The House of the Phoenix is in power now. The Phoenix represents decadence and rebirth. The next House to take the throne will be the Dragon. The Dragaeran dragon is a large reptile which does not breathe fire. As a general rule, it doesn't need to. It is



distinguished by tentacles with which it can pick up psychic impressions from other animals. The House of the Dragon represents war.

Next is the lyorn, which looks like a medium-size golden-haired dog, except for the horn sticking out of the middle of its head. The Lyorn represents tradition.

The tiassa is a large panther with batlike wings, and the House represents catalyst and inspiration.

The next House is the Hawk, and to a Dragaeran, a hawk is anything from a goshawk to an eagle. The Hawk's characteristic is curiosity.

The dzur is a large, black tiger, and represents heroism.

The issola is vaguely storklike, with a sharper beak and darker colors, and represents courtliness and surprise.

The tsalmoth is somewhat bearlike, and is known for unpredictability and tenacity.

The vallista is an amphibious creature living around streams and ponds, and the House is that of construction and tearing down.

The Jhereg, which, along with the Vallista, shares the bottom of the Cycle right now, is a small flying, poisonous reptile that lives on carrion. It represents corruption.

Starting back toward the top of the Cycle (though, in its movements, heading down) is the House of the Iorich. The iorich is a large, slow-moving, river-dwelling reptile. It is an herbivore, but is also known to follow (sometimes for weeks), track down, and kill

anything which attacks it. This House represents justice and retribution.

The chreotha is a large foxlike creature, whose saliva can be used to build a web strong enough to ensnare a Dzur, and, sometimes, a Dragon. The Chreotha represents the trap.

The yendi is a desert-dwelling sand-snake. Its bite is so subtle that few animals (or people) will realize they've been bitten until, a few minutes to an hour later, the victim will collapse. The House of the Yendi represents subtlety and misdirection.

The House of Orca is mercantilism and the vicious side of business.

The teckla is a salt marsh harvest mouse, and the House of the Teckla represents cowardice and fertility.

The jhegaala lives in the swamps, and starts as an egg, becomes a large moth, and then a very large toad, passing through a few other stages in between. The House represents metamorphosis.

The athyra is an owl-like bird. It is capable of emitting subtle psychic signals which cause its prey to come to it, or make its enemies fear it. The Athyra is the House of magic.

Except for the Teckla, all Houses are considered "noble," although this has greater or lesser meaning depending on the House.

A few hundred thousand years ago, or so the story goes, an accident happened to the godlike Jenoine who lived on Dragaera and whose genetic experi-

ments led to the tribes which eventually became the Seventeen Houses. What remains is a large Sea of Chaos, in the northeastern part of the Empire.

The Empire began when the Imperial Orb was created, which allowed the Empress to draw power from this chaos. Every citizen of the Empire has a link to this Orb, and it is from this that sorcery is done. The amount of power is, for all intents and purposes, unlimited, although doing a great deal of sorcery will cause fatigue that may lead to the power getting out of control, with unfortunate results.

It should be noted that every citizen, through the Orb, can instantly reach the Emperor or Empress (at the moment, Empress Zerika), but this is rarely done since it means instant death to anyone who bothers the Empress needlessly.

There is, incidentally, no armor as such, though a few sorcerers can accomplish similar effects. The most common weapon among Dragaerans is the hand-and-a-half sword, which they wield in a fairly primitive manner. The cultural feel of the society should be thought of as Western Europe around the time of the Reformation.

The other thing worth mentioning is that, about four hundred and fifty years ago, there was an attempt to take the throne that failed, resulting in a small Sea of Chaos where the old capital was and two hundred years of Interregnum when sorcery didn't work. It ended something like two hundred and fifty years ago when Zerika took up the Orb, and society has been rebuilding itself since then.



# INTRODUCTION AND RULES TO CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURES by Bill Fawcett

FOR THE MANY of us who have enjoyed the stories upon which this adventure is based, it may seem a bit strange to find an introduction this long at the start of a book. What you are holding is both a game and an adventure. Have you ever read a book and then told yourself you would have been able to think more clearly or seen a way out of the hero's dilemma? In a Crossroads™ adventure you have the opportunity to do just that. *You* make the key decisions. By means of a few easily followed steps you are able to see the results of your choices.

A Crossroads™ adventure is as much fun to read as it is to play. It is more than just a game or a book. It is a chance to enjoy once more a familiar and treasured story. The excitement of adventuring in a beloved universe is neatly blended into a story which stands well on its own merit, a story in which you will

encounter many familiar characters and places and discover more than a few new ones as well. Each adventure is a thrilling tale, with the extra suspense and satisfaction of knowing that you will succeed or fail by your own endeavors.

## THE ADVENTURE

Throughout the story you will have the opportunity to make decisions. Each of these decisions will affect whether the hero succeeds in the quest, or even survives. In some cases you will actually be fighting battles; other times you will use your knowledge and instincts to choose the best path to follow. In many cases there will be clues in the story or illustrations.

A Crossroads™ adventure is divided into sections. The length of a section may be a few lines or many pages. The section numbers are shown at the top of a page to make it easier for you to follow. Each section ends when you must make a decision, or fight. The next section you turn to will show the results of your decision. At least one six-sided die and a pencil are needed to “play” this book.

The words “six-sided dice” are often abbreviated as “D6.” If more than one is needed a number will precede the term. “Roll three six-sided dice” will be written as “Roll 3 D6.” Virtually all the die rolls in these rules do involve rolling three six-sided dice (or rolling one six-sided die three times) and totaling what is rolled.

If you are an experienced role play gamer, you may also wish to convert the values given in this novel to those you can use with any fantasy role-playing game you are now playing with. All of the adventures have been constructed so that they also can be easily adapted in this manner. The values for the hero may transfer directly. While fantasy games are much more complicated, doing this will allow you to be the Game Master for other players. Important values for the hero's opponents will be given to aid you in this conversion and to give those playing by the Crossroads™ rules a better idea of what they are facing.

## THE HERO

Seven values are used to describe the hero in gaming terms. These are strength, intelligence, wisdom/luck, constitution, dexterity, charisma, and hit points. These values measure all of a character's abilities. At the end of these rules is a record sheet. On it are given all of the values for the hero of this adventure and any equipment or supplies they begin the adventure with. While you adventure, this record can be used to keep track of damage received and any new equipment or magical items acquired. You may find it advisable to make a photocopy of that page. Permission to do so, for your own use only, is given by the publisher of this game/novel. You may wish to consult this record sheet as we discuss what each of the values represents.



## STRENGTH

This is the measure of how physically powerful your hero is. It compares the hero to others in how much the character can lift, how hard he can punch, and just how brawny he is. The strongest a normal human can be is to have a strength value of 18. The weakest a child would have is a 3. Here is a table giving comparable strengths:

Strength	Example
3	A 5-year-old child
6	An elderly man
8	Out of shape and over 40
10	An average 20-year-old man
13	In good shape and works out
15	A top athlete or football running back
17	Changes auto tires without a jack
18	Arm wrestles Arnold Schwarzenegger and wins

A Tolkien-style troll, being magical, might have a strength of 19 or 20. A full-grown elephant has a strength of 23. A fifty-foot dragon would have a strength of 30.

## INTELLIGENCE

Being intelligent is not just a measure of native

brain power. It is also an indication of the ability to use that intelligence. The value for intelligence also measures how aware the character is, and so how likely they are to notice a subtle clue. Intelligence can be used to measure how resistant a mind is to hypnosis or mental attack. A really sharp baboon would have an intelligence of 3. Most humans (we all know exceptions) begin at about 5. The highest value possible is an 18. Here is a table of relative intelligence:

<b>Intelligence</b>	<b>Example</b>
3	My dog
5	Lassie
6	Curly (the third Stooge)
8	Somewhat slow
10	Average person
13	College professor/good quarterback
15	Indiana Jones/Carl Sagan
17	Doc Savage/Mr. Spock
18	Leonardo da Vinci (Isaac Asimov?)

Brainiac of comic-book fame would have a value of 21.

## WISDOM/LUCK

Wisdom is the ability to make correct judgments, often with less than complete facts. Wisdom is knowing what to do and when to do it. Attacking, when running will earn you a spear in the back, is the best part of wisdom. Being in the right place at the right

time can be called luck or wisdom. Not being discovered when hiding can be luck, if it is because you knew enough to not hide in the poison oak, wisdom is also a factor. Activities which are based more on instinct, the intuitive leap, than analysis are decided by wisdom.

In many ways both wisdom and luck are further connected, especially as wisdom also measures how friendly the ruling powers of the universe (not the author, the fates) are to the hero. A hero may be favored by fate or luck because he is reverent or for no discernible reason at all. This will give them a high wisdom value. Everyone knows those "lucky" individuals who can fall in the mud and find a gold coin. Here is a table measuring relative wisdom/luck:

Wisdom	Example
Under 3	Cursed or totally unthinking
5	Never plans, just reacts
7	Some cunning, "street smarts"
9	Average thinking person
11	Skillful planner, good gambler
13	Successful businessman/Lee Iacocca
15	Captain Kirk (wisdom)/Conan (luck)
17	Sherlock Holmes (wisdom)/Luke Skywalker (luck)
18	Lazarus Long

## CONSTITUTION

The more you can endure, the higher your constitu-

tion. If you have a high constitution you are better able to survive physical damage, emotional stress, and poisons. The higher your value for constitution, the longer you are able to continue functioning in a difficult situation. A character with a high constitution can run farther (though not necessarily faster) or hang by one hand longer than the average person. A high constitution means you also have more stamina, and recover more quickly from injuries. A comparison of values for constitution:

Constitution	Example
3	A terminal invalid
6	A 10-year-old child
8	Your stereotyped "98-pound weakling"
10	Average person
14	Olympic athlete/Sam Spade
16	Marathon runner/Rocky
18	Rasputin/Batman

A whale would have a constitution of 20. Superman's must be about 50.

## DEXTERITY

The value for dexterity measures not only how fast a character can move, but how well-coordinated those movements are. A surgeon, a pianist, and a juggler all need a high value for dexterity. If you have a high

value for dexterity you can react quickly (though not necessarily correctly), duck well, and perform sleight-of-hand magic (if you are bright enough to learn how). Conversely, a low dexterity means you react slowly and drop things frequently. All other things being equal, the character with the highest dexterity will have the advantage of the first attack in a combat. Here are some comparative examples of dexterity:

<b>Dexterity</b>	<b>Example</b>
3 or less	Complete klutz
5	Inspector Clouseau
6	Can walk and chew gum, most of the time
8	Barney Fife
10	Average person
13	Good fencer/Walter Payton
15	Brain surgeon/Houdini
16	Flying Karamazov Brothers
17	Movie ninja/Cyrano de Bergerac
18	Bruce Lee

Batman, Robin, Daredevil, and The Shadow all have a dexterity of 19. At a dexterity of 20 you don't even see the man move before he has taken your wallet and underwear and has left the room (the Waco Kid).

## CHARISMA

Charisma is more than just good looks, though they



certainly don't hurt. It is a measure of how persuasive a hero is and how willing others are to do what he wants. You can have average looks yet be very persuasive, and have a high charisma. If your value for charisma is high, you are better able to talk yourself out of trouble or obtain information from a stranger. If your charisma is low, you may be ignored or even mocked, even when you are right. A high charisma value is vital to entertainers of any sort, and leaders. A different type of charisma is just as important to spies. In the final measure a high value for charisma means people will react to you in the way you desire. Here are some comparative values for charisma:

Charisma	Example
3	Hunchback of Notre Dame
5	An ugly used-car salesman
7	Richard Nixon today
10	Average person
12	Team coach
14	Magnum, P.I.
16	Henry Kissinger/Jim DiGriz
18	Dr. Who/Prof. Harold Hill (Centauri)

## HIT POINTS

Hit points represent the total amount of damage a hero can take before he is killed or knocked out. You can receive damage from being wounded in a battle, through starvation, or even through a mental attack.

Hit points measure more than just how many times the hero can be battered over the head before he is knocked out. They also represent the ability to keep striving toward a goal. A poorly paid mercenary may have only a few hit points, even though he is a hulking brute of a man, because the first time he receives even a slight wound he will withdraw from the fight. A blacksmith's apprentice who won't accept defeat will have a higher number of hit points.

A character's hit points can be lost through a wound to a specific part of the body or through general damage to the body itself. This general damage can be caused by a poison, a bad fall, or even exhaustion and starvation. Pushing your body too far beyond its limits may result in a successful action at the price of the loss of a few hit points. All these losses are treated in the same manner.

Hit points lost are subtracted from the total on the hero's record sheet. When a hero has lost all of his hit points, then that character has failed. When this happens you will be told to which section to turn. Here you will often find a description of the failure and its consequences for the hero.

The hit points for the opponents the hero meets in combat are given in the adventure. You should keep track of these hit points on a piece of scrap paper. When a monster or opponent has lost all of their hit points, they have lost the fight. If a character is fighting more than one opponent, then you should keep track of each of their hit points. Each will continue to fight until it has 0 hit points. When

everyone on one side of the battle has no hit points left, the combat is over.

Even the best played character can lose all of his hit points when you roll too many bad dice during a combat. If the hero loses all of his hit points, the adventure may have ended in failure. You will be told so in the next section you are instructed to turn to. In this case you can turn back to the first section and begin again. This time you will have the advantage of having learned some of the hazards the hero will face.

## TAKING CHANCES

There will be occasions where you will have to decide whether the hero should attempt to perform some action which involves risk. This might be to climb a steep cliff, jump a pit, or juggle three daggers. There will be other cases where it might benefit the hero to notice something subtle or remember an ancient ballad perfectly. In all of these cases you will be asked to roll three six-sided dice (3 D6) and compare the total of all three dice to the hero's value for the appropriate ability.

For example, if the hero is attempting to juggle three balls, then for him to do so successfully you would have to roll a total equal to or less than the hero's value for dexterity. If your total was less than this dexterity value, then you would be directed to a section describing how the balls looked as they were skillfully juggled. If you rolled a higher value than

that for dexterity, then you would be told to read a section which describes the embarrassment of dropping the balls, and being laughed at by the audience.

Where the decision is a judgment call, such as whether to take the left or right staircase, it is left entirely to you. Somewhere in the adventure or in the original novels there will be some piece of information which would indicate that the left staircase leads to a trap and the right to your goal. No die roll will be needed for a judgment decision.

In all cases you will be guided at the end of each section as to exactly what you need do. If you have any questions you should refer back to these rules.

## MAGICAL ITEMS AND SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

There are many unusual items which appear in the pages of this adventure. When it is possible for them to be taken by the hero, you will be given the option of doing so. One or more of these items may be necessary to the successful completion of the adventure. You will be given the option of taking these at the end of a section. If you choose to pick up an item and succeed in getting it, you should list that item on the hero's record sheet. There is no guarantee that deciding to take an item means you will actually obtain it. If someone owns it already they are quite likely to resent your efforts to take it. In some cases things may not even be all they appear to be or the item may be

trapped or cursed. Having it may prove a detriment rather than a benefit.

All magical items give the hero a bonus (or penalty) on certain die rolls. You will be told when this applies, and often given the option of whether or not to use the item. You will be instructed at the end of the section on how many points to add to or subtract from your die roll. If you choose to use an item which can function only once, such as a magic potion or hand grenade, then you will also be instructed to remove the item from your record sheet. Certain items, such as a magic sword, can be used many times. In this case you will be told when you obtain the item when you can apply the bonus. The bonus for a magic sword could be added every time a character is in hand-to-hand combat.

Other special items may allow a character to fly, walk through fire, summon magical warriors, or many other things. How and when they affect play will again be told to you in the paragraphs at the end of the sections where you have the choice of using them.

Those things which restore lost hit points are a special case. You may choose to use these at any time during the adventure. If you have a magical healing potion which returns 1 D6 of lost hit points, you may add these points when you think it is best to. This can even be during a combat in the place of a round of attack. No matter how many healing items you use, a character can never have more hit points than he begins the adventure with.

There is a limit to the number of special items any

character may carry. In any Crossroads™ adventure the limit is four items. If you already have four special items listed on your record sheet, then one of these must be discarded in order to take the new item. Any time you erase an item off the record sheet, whether because it was used or because you wish to add a new item, whatever is erased is permanently lost. It can never be “found” again, even if you return to the same location later in the adventure.

Except for items which restore hit points, the hero can only use an item in combat or when given the option to do so. The opportunity will be listed in the instructions.

In the case of an item which can be used in every combat, the bonus can be added or subtracted as the description of the item indicates. A +2 sword would add two points to any total rolled in combat. This bonus would be used each and every time the hero attacks. Only one attack bonus can be used at a time. Just because a hero has both a +1 and a +2 sword doesn't mean he knows how to fight with both at once. Only the better bonus would apply.

If a total of 12 is needed to hit an attacking monster and the hero has a +2 sword, then you will only need to roll a total of 10 on the three dice to successfully strike the creature.

You could also find an item, perhaps enchanted armor, which could be worn in all combat and would have the effect of subtracting its bonus from the total of any opponent's attack on its wearer. (Bad guys can wear magic armor, too.) If a monster normally would



need a 13 to hit a character who has obtained a set of +2 armor, then the monster would now need a total of 15 to score a hit. An enchanted shield would operate in the same way, but could never be used when the character was using a weapon which needed both hands, such as a pike, longbow, or two-handed sword.

## COMBAT

There will be many situations where the hero will be forced, or you may choose, to meet an opponent in combat. The opponents can vary from a wild beast, to a human thief, or an unearthly monster. In all cases the same steps are followed.

The hero will attack first in most combats unless you are told otherwise. This may happen when there is an ambush, other special situations, or because the opponent simply has a much higher dexterity.

At the beginning of a combat section you will be given the name or type of opponent involved. For each combat five values are given. The first of these is the total on three six-sided dice needed for the attacker to hit the hero. Next to this value is the value the hero needs to hit these opponents. After these two values is listed the hit points of the opponent. If there is more than one opponent, each one will have the same number. (See the Hit Points section included earlier if you are unclear as to what these do.) Under

the value needed to be hit by the opponent is the hit points of damage that it will do to the hero when it attacks successfully. Finally, under the total needed for the hero to successfully hit an opponent is the damage he will do with the different weapons he might have. Unlike a check for completing a daring action (where you wish to roll under a value), in a combat you have to roll the value given or higher on three six-sided dice to successfully hit an opponent.

For example:

Here is how a combat between the hero armed with a sword and three brigands armed only with daggers is written:

### BRIGANDS

*To hit the hero: 14    To be hit: 12    Hit points: 4*

*Damage with                      Damage with*  
*daggers: 1 D6                      sword: 2 D6*

*(used by the brigands) (used by the hero)*

*There are three brigands. If two are killed (taken to 0 hit points) the third will flee in panic.*

*If the hero wins, turn to section 85.*

*If he is defeated, turn to section 67.*

### RUNNING AWAY

Running rather than fighting, while often desirable,

is not always possible. The option to run away is available only when listed in the choices. Even when this option is given, there is no guarantee the hero can get away safely.

## THE COMBAT SEQUENCE

Any combat is divided into alternating rounds. In most cases the hero will attack first. Next, surviving opponents will have the chance to fight back. When both have attacked, one round will have been completed. A combat can have any number of rounds and continues until the hero or his opponents are defeated. Each round is the equivalent of six seconds. During this time all the parties in the combat may actually take more than one swing at each other.

The steps in resolving a combat in which the hero attacks first are as follows:

1. Roll three six-sided dice. Total the numbers showing on all three and add any bonuses from weapons or special circumstances. If this total is the same or greater than the second value given, "to hit the opponent," then the hero has successfully attacked.
2. If the hero attacks successfully, the next step is to determine how many hit points of damage he did to the opponent. The die roll for this will be given below the "to hit opponent" information.

3. Subtract any hit points of damage done from the opponent's total.
4. If any of the enemy have one or more hit points left, then the remaining opponent or opponents now can attack. Roll three six-sided dice for each attacker. Add up each of these sets of three dice. If the total is the same as or greater than the value listed after "to hit the hero" in the section describing the combat, the attack was successful.
5. For each hit, roll the number of dice listed for damage. Subtract the total from the number of hit points the hero has at that time. Enter the new, lower total on the hero's record sheet.

If both the hero and one or more opponents have hit points left, the combat continues. Start again at step one. The battle ends only when the hero is killed, all the opponents are killed, or all of one side has run away. A hero cannot, except through a healing potion or spells or when specifically told to during the adventure, regain lost hit points. A number of small wounds from several opponents will kill a character as thoroughly as one titanic, unsuccessful combat with a hill giant.

## DAMAGE

The combat continues, following the sequence

given below, until either the hero or his opponents have no hit points. In the case of multiple opponents, subtract hit points from one opponent until the total reaches 0 or less. Extra hit points of damage done on the round when each opponent is defeated are lost. They do not carry over to the next enemy in the group. To win the combat, you must eliminate all of an opponent's hit points.

The damage done by a weapon will vary depending on who is using it. A club in the hands of a child will do far less damage than the same club wielded by a hill giant. The maximum damage is given as a number of six-sided dice. In some cases the maximum will be less than a whole die. This is abbreviated by a minus sign followed by a number. For example, D6-2, meaning one roll of a six-sided die, minus two. The total damage can never be less than zero, meaning no damage done. 2 D6-1 means that you should roll two six-sided dice and then subtract one from the total of them both.

A combat may, because of the opponent involved, have one or more special circumstances. It may be that the enemy will surrender or flee when its hit point total falls below a certain level, or even that reinforcements will arrive to help the bad guys after so many rounds. You will be told of these special situations in the lines directly under the combat values.

Now you may turn to section one.

# RECORD SHEET

Hargen, Dzurlord

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Strength: 14

Intelligence: 10

Wisdom: 8

Constitution: 15

Dexterity: 15

Charisma: 13

Hit Points: 18

Items Carried: Sword, Chainmail

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\* **1** \*

It was a knife that killed him, while he walked along a corridor at Castle Black. It struck him sharply in the side, thrown by some unknown assailant, and he felt his lifeblood leak out around it as he slumped, faint, to his knees. Had he tried to pull the blade out, his blood would have flowed out all the quicker, so he left it jammed between his ribs, bare inches from his heart. The floor had come up to meet him then; the musty odor of the carpet was the last thing he remembered.

A spider slowly spins its web, making its way down from a corner of the room. Barely awake, Hargen notices all of this detachedly, and then notices that he is, in fact alive. He lets his eyes drift slowly across the room, assessing it with the studied measure of a Dzur hero.

In one corner of the large, high-ceiling room there is a door slightly ajar, through which he can glimpse a flight of stairs. Taking stock of the room he mentally notes several bookcases filled with equal portions of books and dust, and two wide tables spread with scraps of parchment covered with notes and what can only be half-finished experiments.

Beside the couch on which he lies, Hargen can hear someone making noise. He is pleased to find he can



turn his head. A familiar face comes into view: his friend Lazarus, the healer.

"Good morning, then," Lazarus says, wiping his hands on a towel which seems to be wrapped around a hard, long object. "How are you feeling?"

"Like death warmed over," Hargen says. "Was I . . ."

"Oh, yes. Quite dead. In fact," Lazarus continues, laying the towel—and the object—on a side table, "it was *very* close. I stumbled across you in a hallway, covered in your own blood. It was almost Deathsgate Falls, my friend Hargen."

Hargen reaches instinctively to the place the blade struck, finding a jagged tear in his tunic. Underneath, he can only feel a faint scratch that might once have been the puncture of a knife.

"All taken care of." Lazarus walks across Hargen's line of sight toward a small kitchen off one side of the room. "I could use a cup of tea. Would you like a cup?"

Hargen mutters assent. His mouth is terribly dry. He sits up carefully, fighting off a wave of nausea. Finally he swings his legs to the floor, pulling himself into a sitting position.

Hargen looks around at the clutter and the impedimenta of the healer. As his eyes light on the discarded towel, a thought occurs to him: that the towel, just a few feet away, probably conceals the very weapon that murdered him.

The knowledge that he had been killed does not trouble Hargen overmuch. A hero cannot easily pur-

## Section 1

sue his craft without acquiring a few enemies. He has fought wars, and he has fought duels. He has even died a few other times along the way. But this time there is a difference. It was no duel: it was an assassination.

And the only clue to his murder is wrapped in a towel less than ten feet away.

Fighting off dizziness, Hargen hauls himself to his feet, staggering resolutely to the side table as Lazarus reenters the room with the tea tray. "No!" the healer cries, but Hargen has already turned aside the fold of cloth and grasps the knife that is lying there—

—and everything happens at once:

As soon as Hargen's hand touches the knife, he senses a sorcerous flux in the room—

The air shimmers just behind Lazarus, and a man materializes—medium height, brownish hair, but with a knife in hand that almost shimmers with a wicked gleam—

Lazarus drops the tray, turns to face the intruder, and begins murmuring a spell—

Before Lazarus can complete the incantation or Hargen can take a wobbly step forward, the assassin slips a blade between Lazarus's ribs.

Lazarus crumples to the floor, turning as he falls to face Hargen. His eyes are wide, almost pleading, looking from Hargen to the blade. Then the life leaves them.

As the assassin looks up from his work, Hargen realizes that this is no ordinary contract assassination, but one with strong sorcerous powers.

## Section 1

“Now”—the assassin turns to Hargen—“you’re next.” The assassin moves almost too fast for Hargen’s muddled senses, kicking the knife from his hands and lunging for Hargen’s heart.

But Hargen, trained by the House of Heroes, fights by instinct. Hargen’s arm shoots out and grabs the assassin’s wrist, pushing it up and aside with raw strength. Slowly, very slowly, Hargen begins to force the blade down and away from him. The assassin, in total command just moments ago, watches, with disbelief, the Dzur force the blade closer and closer to his heart.

With a sudden burst of strength, Hargen lurches the blade forward and into the assassin’s chest. The assassin’s mouth forms an “oh” as he grasps Hargen’s hands, trying to force the blade out, but the weapon has already done its work.

Hargen lets the body fall as he leans against the wall for support. He spots the knife that murdered him, kicked away in a corner, and tucks it into a pocket of his tunic.

*If Hargen leaves immediately, turn to section 50.*

*If Hargen searches Lazarus’s office for clues, turn to section 28.*

# \* 2 \*

Breathing heavily, Hargen rises from his knees. All around him lie dead Dragaerans. The treacherous Orcas, Tollifer and Saan, were the last to be slain. Revenge is sweet.

He looks toward the corner of the room and sees the man he had glimpsed earlier, before the fight. Ignoring the pain from his injuries, Hargen challenges him: "Is your name Esteban? If you lie to me, friend, it will be your last mistake."

The man appears to collect himself. "I am Esteban," he says quietly, holding his head high, "the man who murdered you. You are not as easy to kill a second time, I see."

Hargen approaches him, his blood-stained sword held at ready. He stares at Esteban for a silent moment, then says, "We meet again. But now the tables are turned, and I will make sure that *your* death is quite permanent."

"I am certain that you will," Esteban says. He seems to have lost his nervousness completely. "But maybe it's not too late to strike a deal. I have some information which might interest you."

Another trick, thinks Hargen, but I should hear him out. With any luck, I may even pick up something useful. "What information?" he asks. "Does it concern the Sorceress in Green?"



Esteban chuckles confidently. "That bitch has nothing to do with it at all. Who put that thought into your thick skull?"

Hargen advances, raising his sword.

"Hold it. I know who wanted you killed and why. Kill me, and you'll never know. Is that what you want?"

Never a quick thinker, Hargen does not know what he wants. He came here seeking only revenge for his murder, but what if there is indeed more? It could be a trick, for once he gives his word to spare Esteban's life, as a Dzur he must honor his commitment.

The thought of possible treachery lingers in his mind like water in oil: what if this man has another card to play? Never trust a known killer not to cheat, his teachers once told him. And yet, can he dare not listen to him?

*If Hargen decides to kill Esteban, turn to section 93.*

*If Hargen decides to spare Esteban, turn to section 73.*

\* **3** \*

Hargen finds Morrolan in the small room off his library, sitting in a comfortable chair facing the door, a glass of wine in his hand.

"Good day, my lord," Hargen says, bowing as much for courtesy's sake as for his own.

### Section 3

"Good day, Hargen. I'm glad to see you once more." Morrolan pours him a glass of wine, beckoning Hargen to sit. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"I am . . . just recently returned from the office of my friend Lazarus."

"Lazarus. How is Lazarus?"

"Dead," Hargen states baldly.

"Dead?" Morrolan has the glass at his lips, but he puts it down. "Is there any chance of—"

"No. He was stabbed with a sorcerous blade as he finished revivifying me."

"Revivi—! Who killed you?"

Hargen takes a deep breath and holds back his frustrated bellow. "I don't know; I was killed here at Castle Black."

Hargen waits for Morrolan to say something, but the Dragonlord remains quiet, although his eyes have gone flinty as stone.

"I do not know who killed me," Hargen repeats, "but I *do* know of a person who was looking for me the night of my death. Lady Teldra mentioned him to me; his name is Esteban."

"Esteban. . . . I know an Esteban." Morrolan thinks for a moment. "I do not know where he lives, but I have heard of a place where he sometimes . . . conducts business." Morrolan mentions an address, a warehouse in the wharf district of Adrilankha. "The large doors at wharfside are likely to be well guarded, but there is another access from a back alley. You may

find it boarded up, but that should present no problem to one such as yourself.”

“Will it be protected?”

“I would expect teleport blocks, at the very least. I can send—”

Hargen cuts him off with a shake of his head. “I am Dzur, and I must ransom my honor, and that of my House. I am sorry, my lord, but I can accept no help.”

“Stubborn Dzur. Very well, then.”

*Turn to section 70.*

## \* 4 \*

They teleport to the plaza before the Imperial palace. As soon as they have regained their equilibrium, Sethra strides forward toward the guarded entrance.

“I am Sethra Lavode,” she announces to the startled guard. “This is Lord Hargen of House Dzur. We have urgent need to speak with the Empress.”

“The Empress is very busy, Lady,” the guard replies. “If you have an appointment—”

“Idiot!” She draws her dagger and holds it out, a few feet from the guard. “Do you know what *this* is? Do you know who I *am*? Get out of my way!” She strides forward, Hargen behind her.

They can see the uncertainty grow in the guard’s eyes. “V-very well,” he says at last, apparently recognizing the great weapon for what it is. “I will take you

## Section 5

to the audience chamber. This way," he says, gesturing toward the open doorway.

They pass through the tall, ornately-chased bronze doors at the end of the hall and stride down a long corridor, exiting through another set of doors, to emerge into an enclosed garden. Concentric rings of greenery and wild flowers shrink to a tiny plaza of soft grass and a miniature waterfall.

The guard motions to them to step to the center of the grass. Hargen gives him a curt nod and steps over the garden rings. Turning, he sees that the guard has already withdrawn to the doors, standing before them at parade rest.

Turning once again, he sits on a hillock of green grass. The tinkle of the waterfall is quite soothing. But he has not come to be soothed. Instead, he closes his eyes and reaches for contact with the Orb as he feels Sethra doing so as well.

*Turn to section 107.*

## \* 5 \*

Eyeing the imposing figure of the Dragonlord warily, Hargen harkens back to the Lyorn's words of warning. "Don't let Adron's shade talk you into straying from the path," the record keeper had said, his squeaky voice rising in emphasis. Looking into the intense eyes of the man who once killed tens of thousands of

Dragaerans at a single stroke, Hargen decides there is indeed wisdom in the Lyorn's warning. "Stay away from me, murderer," Hargen shouts, brandishing his blade. "Nothing you say can sway me from my quest, Adron. I want none of your blood on my hands. So begone, shade, back to the chaos that spawned you, before I dispatch you there *myself*!"

It is impossible to tell whether the look on Adron's face is one of disappointment or disdain, for the shade makes no response to Hargen's scathing assault. Instead, the spirit simply fades into the mist, leaving Hargen alone again once more.

Pleased with his own courageous performance, Hargen strides ahead with confidence, certain that Adron's departure has removed the last obstacle from his path. For several moments it appears his optimism is justified as no other spirits emerge to challenge him. He makes steady progress toward the other side of the great valley.

Suddenly Hargen's battled-trained senses detect the sound of soft footfalls padding up behind him. "I thought I told you to leave me alone!" he shouts as he whirls to take a defensive position. But the opponent facing him is not the shade of Adron, but a burly, blond-haired Dzur with a longsword in his hands—and Hargen's own face.

As Hargen stands frozen in surprise, his twin rushes to the attack, leveling a slashing blow at Hargen's midsection that Hargen barely has time to block with his own blade. Shifting to the offensive, Hargen twists

## Section 6

to one side and slashes at his opponent's legs, only to see the other react with equal quickness and evade the blow. Eyeing his enemy with new respect, Hargen realizes that he truly has a fight on his hands.

*If Hargen continues to fight his double, turn to section 82.*

*If Hargen uses Sethra's talisman against his double, turn to section 95.*

## \* 6 \*

The path goes on and on, winding sometimes and other times going straight, worn smooth by the tramping of innumerable pairs of boots. Except, Hargen thinks to himself, this time the boots are on the feet of a living man.

At last the path passes beneath the arching branches of old, impossibly gnarled trees. It opens out into a clearing almost free of the mist that has played at his feet during his entire journey. In the clearing is a small, neat house, looking terribly incongruous in this barren land. It is as if some great wind swept down across the Hill District in Adrilankha, picked up one of the quaint, immaculate little houses there, and dropped it beyond Deathsgate Falls.

After the gruesome trials of this bleak land, the little house is inviting. Hargen strides confidently up

to the door. To his surprise, it opens easily, and he finds himself in a front hallway. He is immediately struck by the sense of order and neatness here. Slowly Hargen proceeds into a wide, high-ceilinged room. He looks about him with curiosity at the four walls covered by shelves with stacks of scrolls on them. His eyes come to rest on a desk and chair in the corner of the room with a scroll opened on it and a man sitting behind the desk, writing. From where he stands, Hargen can tell that he is a Lyorn.

Even here beyond Deathsgate? Hargen asks himself, amused. Ah well, he thinks, once a Lyorn, always a Lyorn.

Without looking up, the Lyorn rasps out, "Name and House?" in a tone of utter boredom.

Hargen, taken back by the question, does not reply. The Lyorn looks up and gives him a sharp look. "Come on, come on, I haven't got all eternity—"

The Lyorn stops suddenly and looks at him with shock. "Wait a moment . . . You! Dzur!"

Hargen looks around, nonchalantly.

"I'm talking to *you*, that's right. What are you doing here? You'll *ruin* my records. Come on, speak up, then!"

"I am here to inquire of the whereabouts of Lazarus of House Athyra," Hargen answers.

"For what purpose?" the record keeper asks. "People don't just walk in here every day, asking for someone or other. There are protocols—precedents . . ." The little Lyorn sputters, "Damn



## Section 6

you, Dzur, if you want to contact a shade, why didn't you hire a Verra-be-cursed necromancer?"

"I am here to search for Lazarus because he has information that is important to me," Hargen answers after a moment. "My reason for taking this path is—is—unimportant." He walks across the carpeted room toward the Lyorn, who, he notices, is actually that short standing up. "I need to know where Lazarus is, and I need to know it now, and I will find out if I have to search every scroll in the place."

Knowing best what will horrify the Lyorn, he walks to the nearest shelf and begins to pull a bundle of scrolls from it.

"No, no, no!" Mindless of the danger, the little Lyorn scurries out from behind his desk and grasps the scrolls in his hands. Hargen, caught unawares, has moved his hand to his blade, but realizes that the record keeper means him no personal harm. "Very well, very well," the Lyorn says. "What was the name, then?"

"Lazarus of House Athyra."

The Lyorn mutters under his breath, but he sets to work, unrolling a huge scroll almost bigger than he is. "And when did this Lazarus die, and how?"

Hargen tells him, and the Lyorn begins to scurry from place to place in the room, picking up and putting down scrolls at random, muttering under his breath and grumbling all the while. At last he seems to find what he is looking for.

"Ah, yes . . . Lazarus. I remember now." The

Lyorn scratches the back of his head. "Lazarus came through here several days ago, cursing a blue streak—something about a dumb Dzur without the sense of an Easterner—or was it an Easterner without the sense of a Dzur?" He sees Hargen bristle, but hurries on. "No matter. Whatever it was, he was angrier than a jhegaala in heat, and it took hours—hours, mind you!" The Lyorn waggles a finger almost directly under Hargen's nose. "Hours to get all of the paperwork filled out. He claimed that if he ever got his hands on the idiot that caused his death, it would be the last thing that he would ever feel. As I understand it, he had just revived this particular teckla-brained fool, avoiding a trapped blade, but the patient had somehow touched it and set off the trap, dropping a teleport block and letting in an assassin—"

"Enough!" Hargen shouts, and the Lyorn is suddenly silent.

"Well," the Lyorn says after a moment, "you *did* come here for information." He fixes Hargen with a stare. "Say, I wouldn't suppose . . ."

Hargen spends several moments studying the toes of his boots. "Yes, Lyorn, I was the one."

"In all honesty," the Lyorn says, "don't you think it would be more courteous to wait until after you die to apologize? I'm sure that he'd be calmed down by then."

Hargen does not reply, and the Lyorn adds, "Really, I think it's the *least* you could do. You know, *die*." Then, as he looks at the anger smoldering in Hargen's

## Section 6

eyes, he decides that it would probably be best to discontinue this line of conversation and falls silent.

"I need to know," Hargen says in slow, measured tones, "where Lazarus is now."

"Well, I'm not quite sure. He could be anywhere. Well, *almost* anywhere."

"Do the best you can."

It is wisely said that the best way to win a fight with a Dzur is not to get into one. The Lyorn may be dead, but he's looking forward to an eternity as record keeper. Realizing that Dzurs are not known for their patience, he gives this hurried human instructions so that he may follow the path Lazarus took.

"When you leave this house," the Lyorn begins, "follow the path that leads away from Deathsgate Falls. Walk a bit, and then take the first left fork that you see. Both the path and the fork are clearly marked; you should have no trouble finding it. As you walk, the ground will slope slowly downward. Follow this for several minutes, and *do not stray from it*, for there are many poisonous plants, and fierce animals, and sudden, unexpected drops that you will not see because of the mist. The trail will get very rocky and rough as it climbs into the hills. Now, be *very* careful to remain on the path here. There are hounds, who will not trouble the dead, but who will take a great interest in, er, live meat, if they can reach you.

"After you reach the hill's summit, you should find a series of rocky steps, seventeen of them. Carefully climb down, and you should be in the Valley of

Adron. His shade might even be there, but *don't* let him talk you into straying from the path. Somewhere in that valley—or perhaps the next—is where your friend Lazarus was intending to stay.

“Did you get all of that?”

“I did. And thank you.” Hargen looks up—and notices that the Lyorn seems to have disappeared. He waits for a moment, to see if this is temporary, but at last decides that it is not. Reviewing the directions and landmarks in his mind, he walks to the door and lets himself out.

*Turn to section 54.*

## \* 7 \*

The door that the guard defends must protect something—or someone—important, Hargen reasons; chances are that other defenders will be lurking nearby, within earshot if the guard were to call. Hargen must pick his opportunity carefully, and when it comes, he must not fail.

Minutes pass as he waits. At last the guard sighs, stretches, and begins to pace the corridor. When he comes close to Hargen's hiding-place, the Dzur strikes!

*For the first round of combat, Hargen surprises the guard, and the guard may not make any attack.*

## Section 8

*To hit Hargen: 13 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 9*  
*Damage (sword): 1 D6-1*

*If Hargen defeats the guard in one to three rounds, turn to section 63.*

*If the combat takes longer than three combat rounds, turn to section 44.*

*If Hargen loses the combat, turn to section 29.*

## \* 8 \*

The next hours are exquisite torture for Hargen. Never has the Dzurlord felt less heroic as he sits idly at the foot of the great willow, suffering in silence—for Lazarus will still not speak to him—while he shares the healer's vigil. Due to the strange nature of the environment, Hargen is uncertain about exactly how much time passes as he waits, though it is long enough for him to eat most of the food that he had taken from Sethra's cupboards. Finally Hargen can make out the sound of footfalls drawing near, and he looks up to face the approaching figure of the Empress of Dragaera.

Though Hargen has met the Empress only once before, at a royal reception over five years ago, there can be no mistaking her appearance, for Zerika cuts a most striking figure, even for a Dragaeran. Tall, slender, and still youthful, the Empress's most striking

feature is her sparkling golden eyes, which perfectly match the color of her long flowing hair and offset the pale color of her complexion. At the moment, however, those eyes are clouded over with an unmistakable sadness that pierces Hargen's own heart like a knife blade. The Orb has surely been stolen—and it is all Hargen's fault.

Zerika walks over to the base of the tree and peers intently upward into its tangled branches as Lazarus clears his voice to speak. "I fear that this time, Empress, you will not find what you seek here. Despite what you have been led to believe, the thieves who stole the Orb are not madmen bent on its destruction. Their purposes are darker, and more devious—but known to me."

Zerika eyes both Hargen and Lazarus with an appraising glance, then smiles weakly. "You're Lazarus the healer, I presume. Sethra Lavode sent word to me two days ago that she had reason to believe your death was a portent of something evil, and that I should be on my guard. She said she might have important proof forthcoming, but it never appeared; so I ignored her claims—perhaps to my eternal regret. So tell me now, Lazarus, all that you know of these foul deeds, and the men behind them."

As Hargen looks on uncomfortably, Lazarus tells the Empress the whole story of his involvement with the plot to steal the Orb. He winces at the healer's unflattering account of the Dzur's own role in the events of the past week, and watches Zerika's eyes

## Section 8

widen at the mention of Meraste the Yendi. As Lazarus concludes, Hargen can see that Zerika's mood has clearly brightened as she mulls over the import of the tale. "So the Easterners and their prophecy of doom for the Empire is little more than an elaborate cover for Meraste's attempt to make the Yendi the only House capable of performing sorcery. His scheme is clever, very clever—yet his cleverness may yet prove his downfall. If Meraste plans to substitute a facsimile of the Orb for the real one prior to the Easterners' ceremony of destruction, then he must have the fake hidden somewhere close to the place the Orb has been taken. With two such unique objects in close proximity, the Orb should be extremely susceptible to a spell of affinity, cast here where it rested for so long. Yet, in order to generate enough power to project such a spell effectively, I shall need assistance. Will you aid me, Lord Hargen, and add your strength to mine?"

Hargen is completely taken back by Zerika's request. "I, Empress?" he stammers in response. "You've heard what a botch I've made of trying to ferret out these culprits so far."

Zerika's response is a hearty chuckle that puts Hargen surprisingly at ease. "Your old compatriot, Lazarus, has suffered from your mistakes, but he has also greatly exaggerated your failure. I'm sure even he would admit that you've tried your best. And it's often said that anyone who counts on a Dzur for common sense deserves what he gets. Yet I—and the



Empire—need you now, and all the heroism you can muster. Will you help?”

Though it occurs dimly to Hargen that Zerika’s remark about Dzurish sensibilities was somewhat less than flattering, and that sorcery is hardly his strong suit, the hero somehow feels that he could more easily sprout wings and fly than refuse the Empress her request. Perhaps that is the nature of royalty, he thinks—the reason they were born to rule. Bowing low before Zerika, Hargen declares in a solemn voice, “My mind and soul are yours to command, Empress.”

Several more moments pass by as Zerika and Lazarus prepare a small altar of stones at the base of the willow. Finally all is in readiness, and the trio are seated in a circle around the base of the tree. “You may find concentration difficult at first, Hargen, without the power of the Orb to focus your energies. Just try to let your mind roam freely and link your will to mine. Are you ready?”

Nodding nervously, the Dzurlord closes his eyes and enters a trance. He quickly discovers that Zerika’s warning is an accurate one. Without the reassuring presence of the Orb, his powers seem weak and directionless. Soon, however, Hargen senses the thread of Zerika’s own sorcerous might filling the cavern, drawing him toward it like a beacon. Locking in on the Empress’s spell, the Dzur feels their linked minds straining outward into the world of the living, searching for some trace of the Orb. As the miles

## Section 8

stretch past in seemingly endless profusion, Hargen feels a sense of concern growing in the Empress's mind, along with an insistent tugging as Zerika adds more power to the spell. Soon Hargen feels himself becoming lightheaded as Zerika pushes still farther outward, scanning the eastern reaches of the Empire and beyond. And yet again, the Dzur feels the harsh probe of Zerika's mind on his, demanding still more power.

As the landscape whizzes dizzily by beneath him, Hargen finds that his pulse is racing, and his breath is coming in short painful gasps. Grimly he realizes that if the spell takes much longer to complete, the strain of Zerika's demands on his poor sorcerous powers could well kill him. As the unspoken demand begins to build within his brain once more, the Dzurlord knows he must decide now whether to give up or continue on.

*If Hargen withdraws his energies from the spell, turn to section 76.*

*If Hargen continues to aid Zerika, turn to section 83.*

## \* 9 \*

Hargen realizes that he has precious little time to waste so he attempts to focus his attention on the Imperial Orb to fashion a simple teleport spell. He pictures in his mind an image of the street outside, hopeful of arriving in time to catch the perpetrators, and draws on the Orb's power—and nothing happens.

Hargen is having trouble breathing now, and his mind seems to wander as he tries again to complete his spell. His thoughts scatter and drift backward, to his youth, his friends and rivals . . . parties at Castle Black and dark murder in its corridors . . . awakening in Lazarus's office, and then fighting with his murderer . . . and at last he sinks to his knees, unable to concentrate any longer. Dimly it occurs to Hargen that the Easterners must have hired someone to place a teleport block around the house. Even more dimly, his failing mind ponders the thought that the plotters should not have the sorcerous might to erect a block strong enough to stop him. As he blacks out, his mind absurdly links to the Imperial Clock as it solemnly chimes the hour . . . the hour of his death.

*Turn to section 29.*

# \* 10 \*

After considering the problem, Hargen decides that going to Castle Black may be the way to get the most information. Lord Morrolan has an extensive spy network, reasons Hargen, so he should be able to help me, if I can convince him. Besides, I was killed in his castle—he owes me a favor.

After linking to the Imperial Orb for a quick teleportation spell, he arrives at the main courtyard of Castle Black. The huge, black doors await him. As he proceeds through them and into the castle proper, he sees Lady Teldra, who greets all guests, talking to someone else.

She nods to him and says, “Good evening, Lord Hargen. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

He simply returns the nod and continues down the hallway toward the grand ballroom . . . and the never-ending party. The room is, as usual, teeming with Dragaerans of all Houses; conversation and the tinkling of glass fill the air.

Hargen greets the few acquaintances he sees, but does not linger. He is searching for the lord of the castle. He stalks the floor in a circular path, and when he gets back to the main doorway, he realizes that Morrolan is just not there. Nevertheless, he looks around one more time—and spots Sethra the Younger in a corner of the room, staring out into the crowd.

He makes his way to her and says, “Good evening,

my lady." He glances back over his shoulder. "This seems to be a bigger gathering than usual, don't you think?"

"Why, Lord Hargen," she replies, ignoring his remark, "visiting the fleshpots? Throwing your fighting trim to the winds?" She chuckles softly to herself while Hargen uncomfortably shifts his weight back and forth between his feet.

He interrupts her, trying to remain polite. "I don't see Morrolan here. Do you know where I might be able to find him?"

"What would he want with you?"

"It is *I* who have business with *him*, my lady. Now, if you could . . ."

"I believe, warrior, that he went up to the library with two Easterners at the beginning of the evening. He might still be up there, for all I know. Now be a good Dzur and run along—I have things to do."

"Thank you, Lady Sethra. Perhaps we shall meet again before the night is through."

"Don't count on it."

Hargen congratulates himself for squeezing this information out of Sethra the Younger. Grabbing a drink for himself, he heads for the stairway that leads to the library. Business with Easterners? he thinks as he walks up the dimly lit hall. What business could Morrolan possibly have with Easterners? Surely, it cannot be all that important.

But his thoughts are disturbed by the sound of voices, which grow stronger the closer he comes to the library. Rounding a corner, he sees an open door, light

## Section 10

pouring out into the dark corridor, and the shadows of three figures reflected on the opposite wall.

Standing just outside the door, he hears a voice say, "This book is one of the few left in the Empire, so surely you can understand why we're being cautious. It's very valuable."

"I am aware of your concern," says another voice that Hargen knows is Morrolan's. "However, I will have to examine the book to see if your claims are true before I will pay you a single silver."

Morrolan is too polite to these lying Easterners, thinks Hargen. Far more than they deserve. I would *take* the book if I wanted it and run them through with my sword if they complained.

With a gulp, he finishes off the last of his drink and realizes how long he has been standing outside.

Finally, he decides he has to take some action.

*If Hargen enters the room and interrupts the meeting, turn to section 77.*

*If Hargen enters quietly and listens to the conversation, turn to section 103.*

# \* 11 \*

A sudden prickling of intuition tells Hargen to seek a less traveled entryway into the Paths of the Dead. Veering aside from the well-marked trail that leads up the falls, Hargen advances cautiously along, looking for an alternative route. Without a trail of any sort to guide him, the trek is an arduous one, crossing thickets of brambles that tear at Hargen's arms and legs, and rocky ledges that seem ready to give way beneath him, tumbling him to a certain death. After a long time of fruitless searching, Hargen is almost resigned to admitting his intuition was pure folly, and to try the falls again.

Just at that moment, Hargen notices a patch of unnatural brightness glinting out from behind the falls. Moving closer, the outline of a small natural cavern becomes visible. Hargen presses forward with new vigor and reaches the entrance without mishap. Inside, the air is cool and moist, and great stalactites descend from the ceiling, creating an irregular path into the cave's interior. As Hargen follows this passageway back into the mountainside, it steadily narrows and darkens, finally coming to an apparent end at a point where two enormous pillars block the way. Taking out a torch from his pack and lighting it, Hargen steps back in surprise—for the obstacles barring his progress are not stalactites, but a pair of immense black-winged jhereg, almost five times nor-





mal size, their undead bodies perched on a rocky ledge.

Before Hargen can react to this astonishing sight, he feels the tug of telepathic contact touch his mind. *"Who are you, and why do you invade the last sanctum of the jhereg? Have you come to be our dinner, or merely to spoil our sleep?"*

*"I wish to pass within,"* Hargen replies. *"I have a vital mission to perform among the Paths of the Dead."*

*"Oh, really,"* croaks the second jhereg, its telepathic voice as somber as a tomb. *"We decide what is vital here, mortal, and what is not. If you wish to pass the jhereg gate, you must satisfy its guardians. And, Dzurlord, you may find the price too high."*

Hargen eyes the uneven walls of the chamber around him and the two great creatures that loom before him. One thing, he decides, is certain. The only way to go farther is to get past these creatures, one way or another.

*If Hargen elects to bargain with the jhereg for passage, turn to section 34.*

*If Hargen elects to fight his way past the jhereg, turn to section 78.*

*If Hargen elects to use the talisman against the jhereg, turn to section 111.*

# \* 12 \*

If only I can slip back into the commotion of the party, Hargen thinks.

He moves through the guests, using them as cover as he works his way around to a spot behind the odd pair.

Eventually he is in position. Standing behind a tall Dragaeran, he steals a glance and sees them right in front of him. They are scanning the crowd with anxious expressions. Good, he thinks. They've lost me.

Hargen finds that he can also make out their whispered comments.

The thin one is speaking. "... sure that Esteban said he was supposed to be dead? He looks pretty healthy to me."

"Sure, I'm sure, you clip-winged hawk. The question is, what are we going to do now?"

"Well"—the skinny fellow scratches the top of his head—"if we can find him again, we could try to trick him into coming back with us to the hideout, and then the gang could overpower him and kill him for good this time."

The large man fingers his sword idly, his eyes shining. "Tell me that again."

His companion blinks his eyes a few times and starts in anew. "If we can trick him again, he can try

to find a way back to the hideout . . . and the gang . . . could kill us . . . and get it over with . . .”

“Never mind, I know *exactly* what you mean,” the fat one says.

The other smiles, quite pleased at his contribution. “So now what do we do?”

“Why, we find him, of course. By the way, do you remember the way through the maze?”

“Yes, the key is a ‘little red lightning bolt.’ It’s just my way of remembering. *Little Red Lightning bolt*—L, R, L, or left, right, left—the key through the maze!” His face, which has been clouded in concentration, breaks into a smile.

Even his friend is impressed. “OK, let’s go find him. Let *me* do the talking, all right? You get the teleport spell ready, just in case.”

Hargen feels he has learned enough. It is time to meet them. He stands up straight and wanders casually in their direction.

The two Orcas spot him. The fat one reaches for his arm. “Excuse me, good sir, but I couldn’t help noticing you with the Sorceress in Green. My friend and I have some information about her that we think you will find most interesting. I believe this information would be extremely helpful to you. Of course,” he continues, “everything has its price.”

“Of course,” answers Hargen, grinning knowingly.

“Do you think we could go somewhere to discuss this matter? The balcony, perhaps? There are too many ears in this room, if you understand me, sir.”

## Section 12

Hargen looks from him to the thin man. "What did you say your names were?"

The large man answers. "Forgive me, my lord. Allow me to introduce myself and my associate. My name is Tollifer, and this is my friend Saan."

Hargen shakes their hands and introduces himself. "By all means," he says finally, "let's go to the balcony where we can discuss business."

The three Dragaeran make their way through the crowd. Tollifer turns to Hargen and says, "Here we are, my lord. After you."

Hargen considers the doorway in front of him, then replies, "Pray indulge my fancy; you first."

"Very well," mutters Tollifer. "Saan, after you."

"Nonsense, Tollie. You first."

Tollifer boxes Saan's ears and pushes his skinny companion through the drapes. Tollifer follows, then Hargen. The fresh air clears his mind; he is ready for action.

As soon as all three are on the balcony, with the drapes drawn behind them, Hargen draws his sword and dagger and presses in. "Fools," he says menacingly, "you thought to outwit a Dzurlord? Now feel the bite of my anger instead."

"Tollie!" cries Saan. "Help!"

Tollifer draws his own sword and dagger. "Get back, Saan," he shouts, but it is too late. Both are engaged in the combat.

*Hargen has the initiative for the first round. If Saan is still alive and not directly engaged after four combat*



## Section 13

*rounds, then he teleports himself and his friend away. Hargen must fight Tollifer first. The characteristics are:*

*To hit Hargen: 12 To be hit: 9 Hit points for each: 10 pts.*

*Damage for each hit: 1 D6+1*

*If Hargen kills them both, turn to section 64.*

*If they escape, turn to section 41.*

*If Hargen is killed, turn to section 29.*

## \* 13 \*

The light of battle ignites in Hargen's gaze, kindling an equal fire in the guard.

"Son of a Verra-be-damned teckla!" roars Hargen. "Idiot brother of a pox-ridden, limping lyorn liar—get you from my path!" He shoves back, a good deal harder, and sends the hefty guard stumbling into the wall.

Staggering backward, howling for aid, the guard suddenly quiets as his head violently cracks against the wall, but his cries have brought more guards spilling out into the hall. The foremost of them throws himself at Hargen, and then the Dzurlord disappears under a wave of assailants.

"Let—me—free!" Hargen, struggling under the weight of four chunky guardsmen, is trying desperately to draw his sword. "I—must—protect—the—



Orb!” He throws himself to one side, dragging the entire struggling mess with him. “Let me talk to—*uunh!*”

A guard’s fist catches him directly beneath the ear, and the world turns green and spotty for a moment, but he drives his elbow into the man’s midriff. Hargen feels the man’s weight drop away, only to be replaced by someone heavier and more direct. This time, the guard’s blow lands directly between his eyes.

Hargen drops in his tracks. Dimly he feels himself being turned over by the point of a boot and feels as though his soul is swimming out of him with the movement. Then his nausea disappears under the light of a great thought: Why not warn the Empress directly through the Orb?

As rough hands manhandle him to his feet, and he is slung over someone’s shoulder, he reaches out and calls directly to the Orb, demanding speech.

*Roll 1 D6.*

*If the roll is greater than Hargen’s Luck value, turn to section 55.*

*If the roll is equal to or less than Hargen’s Luck, turn to section 81.*

# \* 14 \*

The Feast of Verra is one of the great holidays in the Dragaeran calendar, and Adrilankha always rises to the occasion, being the capital of the Empire. The holiday's principal event is a great parade which stretches from the Royal Palace to the wharfside, where people pay homage to the great statue of Verra that stands offshore, holding a torch that symbolically lights their way with wisdom. On the night before the Feast, many of the city's inhabitants are up late, making final preparations for the procession and revelry which follows. Consequently, no one pays undue attention to a small patrol of guardsmen as it moves along the docks toward a certain riverside address.

The house is much as Hargen left it, apparently uninhabited save for a dim light shining from the upstairs window. The guards let the Dzurlord take the lead as he climbs the steps as before, pushes the door open, and walks through the hallway.

"They are upstairs," Hargen says quietly, pointing to the door.

The heavy-set sergeant who leads the eight guardsmen sent on this mission beckons to two of them. "Cover any rear entrances," he says. "Lead on, my lord."

Hargen, feeling the ichor of heroism coursing

through his veins, yanks open the door and rushes up the stairs, six Phoenix Guards on his heels. Through the open door above, he can hear the Easterners' loud, surprised voices, and the tramping of feet—but it is already too late.

There are about fifteen Easterners milling about in the hall upstairs, and Hargen is surprised at the skill they show with their thin blades. Still, they are no match for a well-trained patrol of Dragaerans, and there are soon corpses all around. Seeing that matters are well in hand here, Hargen pushes forward to the end of the corridor.

Opening the door, he finds himself in a small, low-ceilinged room, furnished with two chairs and a small wooden table with rickety legs, draped with a ragged green cloth like the sort used on shareba tables in Jhereg gambling parlors. But there are no coins or tokens on this table—only a single leatherbound book. Poised at the room's only window is a wiry blond Easterner, rapier sheathed at his hip.

"Lord Hargen, I presume," the man says with a sneer as Hargen steps toward him—and instantly recognizes the voice to be that of Alexei, the ringleader of these treacherous plotters. "You've done far better than I ever would have expected from one of your House, Dzurlord. Damn that bungling Jhereg assassin for failing to eliminate you in the first place. But at least I'll have the pleasure of dispatching you myself before I fall." Drawing his rapier, the Easterner leaps to the attack.

## Section 15

### ALEXEI

*To hit Hargen: 11 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 12*

*Damage with rapier: D6+1*

*If Hargen wins the fight, turn to section 112.*

*If Hargen loses this fight, turn to section 29.*

## \* 15 \*

Having spent his whole life as a fighter, Hargen cannot give up now just because Lazarus claims escape is impossible. After all, the healer has miscalculated before. Otherwise, he wouldn't be dead in the first place. "I'll show you, you stubborn Athyra," Hargen calls at Lazarus's retreating figure. "I'll save the Orb and leave you to spend the next thousand years waiting for Zerika to show up!" The healer makes no response; he just keeps walking until he disappears over the horizon.

Knowing of no alternative route to the surface beside the one he took to get here, Hargen begins to retrace his steps. As he treks across Adron's valley, no shades accost him, yet at the very edge of his senses, the hero can almost swear he can hear dim laughter echoing across the fog-laden air. Reaching the edge of the valley, Hargen trudges back up the seventeen steps to the great hill's summit, only to receive a nasty surprise on his arrival—for there is no sign of the path that formerly led down to the monolith. Though the Dzurlord searches for several moments for some sign

of his trail, he is finally forced to give up in disgust and forge ahead overland in the direction he believes to be correct.

Before Hargen has advanced more than a hundred yards down the slope, he begins to hear rustling in the brush behind him. Quickening his steps, Hargen peers back anxiously and sees the source of these sounds. A slavering pack of a dozen wild dogs is rushing down the hillside toward him in headlong pursuit. Seeing that flight is useless, Hargen looks to find the highest possible ground to make his stand. The Lyorn warned me about these creatures, he thinks grimly to himself as he draws his sword. But there's nothing to do about it now but fight.

### HELLHOUNDS

*To hit Hargen: 12 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 6*

*Damage with bite: 1 D6*

*Three dogs will attack Hargen each round; whenever a dog falls in combat, another will take its place at the beginning of the next combat round. The creatures will fight until all twelve are killed.*

*If Hargen wins the fight, turn to section 42.*

*If Hargen loses the fight, turn to section 53.*

\* 16 \*

When it gets dark, Hargen decides to lose himself in the shadows of Andrilankha and visit a Jhereg tavern. Even though Jhereg will be there, he knows that he has no guarantee that any information will be gained—and that Jhereg don't like outsiders.

Taking a deep breath of the fresh evening air, Hargen walks as casually as he can into the smoke-filled main room of the Gelded Sphinx.

Hargen walks over to the bar in a lazy arc, which takes him past a few extra tables and gives him a view of the majority in this common room. As Hargen approaches the bar, looking for money in his pouch, he glances over at the nearby corner booth. In its dark recess, Hargen notices a single figure seated, looking past him toward a dart game. Easterner, Hargen thinks. Too small for a Dragaeran.

After buying a mug of the sludge which passes for beer, Hargen strolls over to the corner booth and unhesitatingly slides into the opposite bench. His quarry is blocked from a quick exit, and the tall booth behind Hargen protects his back.

The young man looks over at one of the empty tables, and then raises an eyebrow at Hargen. "Well?" he says.

"Friend of mine got himself killed at Castle Black a few days ago, Easterner," Hargen says. "His name is Wassan. Maybe you've heard that name before? Or heard someone use it lately?"

"Mmmm . . . perhaps." The other takes a slow mouthful of his drink, looking unconcerned.

After a few impatient moments, Hargen puts his cards on the table. "Look, kid, I don't want trouble. I like life, my friend likes life, and I'm damn sure you enjoy life too. Right? Now, I'll pay you real gold if you can help me. If you can't, I'll buy you a drink and leave you alone. Okay?"

"What do you need?"

"Names, places, the usual. As I was saying, my friend got himself killed two days back; when I visited him, he asked me to find out who and why. He can't figure out who'd be fool enough to off him."

"You mean to say someone might have killed him just for the fun of it? Seems a little odd."

"Adrilankha is full of people who'd kill just for the fun of it, friend. Still, he *does* have enemies of his own."

The young Easterner looks Hargen straight in the eye. "What's his name? The real one?"

"Hargen," he replies, hoping that his appearance is not well known.

"Sorry," the Easterner says and starts to get up. "No way."

"Why?" The flippancy is gone from his voice, and the young man freezes.

"No way, Dzur." The Easterner brazens it out, looking around the room. "Not even for big money. I don't want anything to do with it!"

"What are you talking about?" Hargen asks hoarsely.

"The crazy bastard killed the healer who saved him



## Section 16

from Deathsgate. The Left Hand has a price on his head, for Verra's sake. Best stay well away from your friend, or stay well hidden. That's all I know, Dzur."

"I need to know more—I'll pay—" Hargen is desperate, but the Easterner has stood up.

"Thanks. But no thanks," he says, moving to leave.

Hargen drives the side of the table into the young man's stomach, pinning him in place. "I'll give you five seconds and two choices, kid. Tell me what you know or I'll beat it out of you!"

The young man snarls, "I don't know anything you could use—uunhff!"

Hargen's hand catches him by the throat, and Hargen's fist is battering the young man's face. After sinking a few hits, Hargen pauses. "Has your memory improved now?" he asks.

"Ugh'n'llzzz tuch," the young man chokes. Hargen eases the grip on his throat.

"I don't . . . know anything," he manages to spit out, along with some teeth.

Hargen drops him to the floor and walks to another table, where two disreputable-looking Jhereg scramble to get away. He picks the nearest one and repeats his question with the same unsatisfactory results.

He is approaching a third when he feels a plucking at his sleeve. He whirls to face this potential assailant, and finds himself face to face with a fashionably dressed young Jhereg.

"A moment of your time," the man says with a silken voice. "I believe I can help you."

Several of the patrons take advantage of the pause

to slip quietly from the room. Unheeding, Hargen and the well-dressed man sit at a table.

"You know," the other says, "you could probably beat up everyone in here and still not get the information you need."

"I won't know until I finish," Hargen retorts. "What of it?"

The young man smiles and folds his hands on the table. "Getting information isn't just a matter of asking the right question, my lord Dzur," he says. "You have to ask the right people."

"Such as you?"

"For instance." He spreads his hands on the table once more, face up. Though the wrists are trimmed with lace, the man's hands clearly show that he wields a weapon regularly. "Of course," he adds, "there is a price."

"There always is."

"I think, also, this is not the place to discuss it. There are too many . . . curious ears. Especially after your display of strength and dexterity."

"You have another suggestion?"

The other man beckons to him, and Hargen stands. They each toss a silver coin on the table and leave the tavern.

The young man walks silently around the front of the tavern and into a blind alley. Hargen glances up quickly: no windows overhead, no unwanted company.

The young man names a figure more reasonable than Hargen would have expected. Hargen reaches

## Section 16

into the pouch beneath his tunic and draws out the coins, which disappear at once.

"The man you are looking for is named Esteban," the young man says. "You probably don't know him personally, though he knows you."

"Is he known at Castle Black?"

"As far as I know, yes. But his usual haunts are far from there. You could find him at—"

Something whizzes past Hargen's face. The young man gurgles and slumps to the ground, his blood seeping between the paving stones. Hargen turns to face two men, one of whom is frantically cranking a small crossbow, while the other is hefting an ax like he knows what to do with it. With a growl of frustrated anger, Hargen leaps into the fray, his sword ready.

### *CROSSBOWMAN*

*To hit Hargens To be Hit: 12 Hit Points: 6*

*AXMAN: 12*

*Crossbow bolt: 1 D6 damage; ax: 1 D6 damage.*

*Crossbow fires every other round.*

*If Hargen wins the fight, turn to section 22.*

*If Hargen is killed, turn to section 29.*

\* 17 \*

Accepting the deference of the shopkeeper as his due, Hargen strides into the back room. The room is a little more elaborate than he would have expected. A shabby velvet curtain is tied back from the door, revealing two quite serviceable chairs drawn up to a round three-legged table, and on the table, a round-bellied bottle of the promised wine, with two mismatched, but uncracked, goblets.

"Please, please, my lord, sit and I will pour." The proprietor fusses around Hargen as the hero settles into one of the seats.

"By Verra, shopkeeper!" Hargen says, "your files must be huge indeed if it will take the whole bottle to find them!"

The proprietor merely ducks his sweaty face in a nod and pours a glass of the wine. Hargen picks up the glass, taking a cautious sip, for the wines of the lower classes can be dangerous to a hero's palate. And promptly takes another—the wine is rich and fruity, a wondrous thing for a mere shopkeeper to have. Taking a refill, Hargen finds himself hoping the sharp-nosed assistant will take a long time to find the papers.

When Hargen looks up again, he finds himself staring at two shopkeepers. When the image steadies fuzzily, he realizes that the wine is having an unrea-

## Section 17

sonably strong effect on him. He tries to stand up to demand an explanation, but finds his knees buckle beneath him.

Off to his right, a sudden movement catches Hargen's eye; a robust Easterner has stepped out of the shadows at the back of the room. Unable to rise, nearly unable to think, he glassily watches the man approach. "Good," the man says with a smirk, "the fool is nearly unconscious. We can dispose of him easily; the note will express his drunken remorse over killing his friend, and we will have quieted all suspicion of our activities."

Hargen summons the desperate strength to reach for his sword, but the Easterner bats his hand away easily, knocking the blade across the floor. As the Dzur looks on in helpless horror, the man draws a thin dagger from his waist and places it at Hargen's throat. Hargen's flesh crawls as he realizes that it is a Morganti blade.

Then there is all the pain in the world as the Easterner plunges the blade into Hargen's throat. The Morganti awareness ensnares his soul and yanks it from his mind, together with his life—and Hargen learns what it is like to die screaming.

*Turn to section 29.*

\* 18 \*

A Dzur does not sneak. Ambling forward, Hargen tries desperately to look like he belongs here. But as when he's halfway between his starting point and the guard, the latter draws himself up and raises his weapon hand. "Who's there?" the guard says loudly. "What's the password!"

Damn it all, Hargen thinks, they have passwords! "Mfghrfl here," Hargen mumbles. "Uh—let me remember—give me a moment—wine to drink . . ."

"That's a moment you won't get," replies the guard, looking hard at Hargen. "Intruder!" he shouts as Hargen leaps toward him, his blade drawn and stabbing.

Suddenly the door behind the guard opens, and more armed men emerge.

"Kill him!" shouts a voice from beyond, and though Hargen cannot see its owner, he knows it must be Esteban. Wading into combat, he knows that the odds are against his survival, but he is determined to take some of these Teckla with him. Unfortunately, he receives a stunning blow from behind; as Deathwish drops from nerveless fingers, he hears the sound of laughter in his ears as blackness descends on him for the last time.

*Turn to section 29.*

\* 19 \*

Hargen realizes that he will have little chance of penetrating the billowing clouds of smoke, and that his chances are getting slimmer by the second. But slowly, a thought creeps into his head. He dashes back into the room, frantically searching for water.

Hargen slaps at the sparks landing on his clothes—excellent fuel for the fire! He almost doesn't spot the water pitcher, he's so distracted. He takes a precious moment to sniff and make sure it's really water and not some potent drink. He upends the pitcher over his head, drenching himself with the blessedly cold liquid. Thus protected, he has the few extra moments needed to make it to the room's only window, his only chance to escape.

Tugging at the window ledge, the Dzurlord is not surprised to find it locked. Shrugging against the hand that fate has dealt him, he takes a few steps backward on the flaming floor and then hurls his mighty body at the window . . .

There are a few moments in a man's life when he wishes he can't think; flailing through the air in a cloud of broken glass is one of them. All too swiftly the ground comes up to meet him, only to be interrupted by a cart filled with hay.

Dzur and cart both survive the rough introduction. After a few seconds with the wind knocked out of



him, Hargen sits up, sword ready for any assailants that might come his way. Instead of assailants, however, he sees a familiar figure running into the alley where the cart is parked: Vladimir Taltos, the Easterner Jhereg Scum who serves as Morrolan's security advisor at Castle Black.

"Lord Hargen," Vlad says, helping the Dzur rise from the cart and aiding him in brushing damp straw from his hair and clothing. Hargen notices that the Easterner is having a bit of trouble suppressing a smirk, but he decides to let it pass. "What happened in there? Can't you heroes leave any building you enter standing?"

"Some thrice-damned Teckla set the thrice-damned building on fire, Taltos. With *me* inside. But I did get something." He reaches inside his sodden shirt and carefully draws out the scrap of parchment that has only been slightly moistened by the encounter with several gallons of water. He hands it to Vlad, who quickly scans through it. "What do you make of this?"

"Easterner prophecy," Vlad says, looking away, and then skeptically up at the sky, as if a ray of crystalline light might come down and strike the spot. "Load of nonsense that's been around since before my grandfather was a boy. But still . . ."

Hargen can barely hold back his impatience with this discourteous Easterner Jhereg, but he can ill afford to leave any stone unturned. "But still *what*, damnit . . ."

## Section 19

Vlad's smile plainly indicates he is relishing the discomfort he is causing Hargen. "But still, my lord, there was a very bad harvest in the East last fall, and there seems to be an epidemic of some kind in the coastal villages. And Morrolan told me of a tornado that touched down on Dzur Mountain this spring, ripping up trees and silting up rivers—ah, well, though, we don't put much stock in that sort of thing, do we?"

"I . . . don't know," Hargen replies, and he truly doesn't. This has been a mystery from start to finish, but finally it has become clear that his friend Lazarus was on to something really major and was killed because of it.

Vlad's voice cuts through his momentary reverie. "Truly, Lord Hargen, if you do give any credence to this prophecy"—the Easterner hands the damp parchment back to him, and Hargen places it carefully next to his chest—"there is one person who can advise you better than all others."

"Some Jhereg witch, I suppose?" the Dzurlord snaps.

Vlad appears to struggle with annoyance or anger and wins. "No, Hero. Someone far more powerful than a sorceress of the Left Hand. I refer to the mistress of Dzur Mountain herself, Sethra Lavode. My advice to you, if you will take it, is to go to Dzur Mountain and ask Sethra's guidance."

It may not help, Hargen thinks. But, then again, he corrects himself, brushing still more straw from his shirt, what other alternative do I have?

*If Hargen takes Vlad's suggestion and goes to Dzur Mountain, turn to section 46.*

*If Hargen rejects Vlad's suggestion and returns to Castle Black for guidance, turn to section 106.*

## \* 20 \*

For the first time, Hargen wishes he had not insisted on going off alone. Morrolan could certainly have talked the Phoenix Guards into letting him in.

He shrugs his shoulders, realizing that he will have to do it himself, and ambles toward the guard at the door, keeping his hands tucked into his pockets. He tries to put on an innocent face, hiding the turmoil he feels.

Phoenix Guards are, by nature, obnoxious and overbearing, and this one is a typical example. He watches Hargen approach, one eyebrow arched. Before Hargen comes as close as sword-length, the guard raises his hand and says, "No one is permitted entry, Dzur. If you know what is good for you, you will find somewhere else to be than the scene of a murder."

"A *murder*?" Hargen asks, trying to sound shocked and surprised. "But . . . my friend Lazarus lives here."

"*Lived* here, you mean," the guard corrects, then looks him over. "A healer with a *Dzur* as a friend? I would have expected him to have had better sense than *that*."

## Section 20

Hargen swallows the insult, though it is difficult. "But we were to go to Castle Black together tonight."

At the mention of Castle Black, the guard's tone changes.

"Wait here, Dzur. Do not move. I will go and get the captain; perhaps you can be of some help by answering questions."

Hargen waits nervously, resisting the impulse to peer down side streets for assassins. Presently the guard returns, with another, more ornately dressed guardsman alongside, a Dragon, who is introduced to Hargen as the captain.

"You are a friend of Lazarus the healer?" the Dragonlord says.

"Yes . . . yes, I am. I am Lord Hargen. I demand to see the body with my own eyes. We were to go to Castle Bl—"

"I have been told of your busy social calendar," the captain interrupts. "But you'll not get farther until you cooperate and answer my questions. Is that clear, Dzur?"

"Quite clear," Hargen replies, his teeth gritted.

"Very good." Hargen notices that the other guard is writing down his name.

"Well then, Lord Hargen," the captain says, "what was your intention in coming here tonight?"

"Lazarus and I were to go together to Castle Black." He licks his lips nervously; his answer is being noted.

"Did you visit Lazarus often?"

"Yes, we are—were—close friends."

"When was the last time you saw the healer Lazarus alive?"

"About two weeks ago," he answers levelly. There is a long pause as the captain eyes him up and down. Hargen tries to keep his expression impassive.

"Did the healer have any specific enemies? Were there any black marks in his background—business deals gone bad, dealings with the Jhereg, anything of that sort?"

"I . . . know of no such matters," Hargen replies. "Everyone has his enemies, I suppose, but Lazarus was a healer and well respected. I can't imagine who might want to kill him." He knows this statement will have the ring of truth to it; he *still* has no idea who might want to kill Lazarus.

The captain thinks about this statement a long time. "Whoever killed your friend was slain as well. The body is inside, along with that of your friend. If you can identify the killer, please do so. Otherwise, just stay out of our way. And for Verra's sake, don't touch anything!"

The place is not much different from the way he left it. There are still signs of his struggle with the assassin, and Lazarus's body is still sprawled in the middle of the floor, his face contorted in the rictus of death.

There are six or seven Phoenix Guards, moving from place to place in the room. They do not seem to be conducting a search just yet, and it seems to Hargen that they could not have found the letters—they may not even know they exist. But how will he get a chance to look around?

Lazarus's blind eyes gaze up at him from the floor.

Suddenly something catches Hargen's eyes: a scrap of brightly colored ribbon peeking out from between

## Section 20

two books on a crowded bookshelf. With the keen eyes of a Dzur, Hargen can make out that the ribbon holds together a packet of parchment scraps, certainly the right size to be letters. But how will he get to them—or get them out of the office undetected?

“If you’re done grieving for your friend, Dzur, we have better things to do than to baby-sit you,” the captain says.

Hargen rises to his feet, holding his tongue, thinking rapidly. He tries not to glance directly at the bookshelf that holds the parchment.

Suddenly fate intervenes. There is a loud scream from the street below—the sound of someone being attacked, perhaps; this is not, after all, the most savory part of the city. The guards in the room, including the captain, rush to the window. The captain issues orders, dispatches two guards to investigate. Meanwhile, Hargen glides to the bookshelf, grabs the packet of letters, and tucks them into his tunic. By the time the guards turn their attention again to him, he is walking toward the door.

“Dzur,” he hears, and stops, just as he reaches the entryway. He turns, hoping that the letters are well concealed.

“Yes?”

“Do not leave the city,” the captain says. “We will certainly wish to question you further on this matter.”

“Yes . . . Yes, Captain. I am at your service.” Without another word he turns on his heels and leaves,

intending to review the letters and unravel the mystery one step further.

*Turn to section 90.*

## \* 21 \*

It seems to go on forever, the clanging of steel echoing across the moors of this dead land. Each shade is more grim than the next, though as Hargen fights hero after hero, with scarcely time to catch his breath, they blur into one, indistinguishable from each other. Though he has little time to ponder on this, Hargen realizes that it is the greatest of indignities for a Dzur hero to become no more than a cipher of his House, a hero with no name. Death, he had always been taught, was a glorious thing, and even if the hero could not be returned to life, he would live on through the tales of his exploits.

As he fights these seventeen nameless dead, not a word is exchanged. Grimmer still, as he delivers the killing stroke each time, the shade rises from where it lies and walks to the side of the clearing, to watch in silence as the next opponent takes his place. Finally Lord Talasar himself enters the lists, and he is the most difficult of all: a grimmer, more determined, and more powerful hero than all of the others. But he, too, makes a fatal mistake, one that—perhaps—only a living hero could exploit. As Hargen prepares to



## Section 22

deliver the killing stroke over his prone opponent, Lord Talasar holds up his hand.

"Enough," Talasar says. "You are victorious, mighty Lord Hargen. You have fought nobly and well. The world truly has little to fear if heroes such as you are there to champion causes and right wrongs. Truly, you have earned the right of passage through the land of the dead. Follow the path before you; it will lead you to the house of the record keeper of the lands of the dead."

"I thank you for your challenge to combat, my lord," Hargen replies, with what he hopes is a courtly bow. He helps the dead Emperor to his feet, sheaths his sword, and sets off into the mist, leaving Lord Talasar and the shades of the jealous dead behind.

*Turn to section 6.*

## \* 22 \*

With the two assassins dead at his feet, Hargen turns to his Jhereg contact and finds him quite dead, a crossbow bolt neatly piercing his neck. He fights down the surging fury, striving to think clearly.

At least, he thinks as he cleans his sword on one assassin's tunic, his killer has a name now. Esteban. It is not a name he recognizes, but he hopes that Morrolan will.

As he walks out of the alley, carefully watching for other potential assailants, he looks up into the cloud-

filled sky and picks out the shadowy shape of the airborne castle. He calms himself and reaches out to the Orb for power, slowly fashioning a teleport spell.

Moments later, a *whoosh* of air is the only evidence that Hargen was just there.

*Turn to section 58.*

\* **23** \*

The Sorceress in Green turns away, but Hargen speaks up, "My lady." She turns back to him.

"Yes?" she says. "You want something else? Directions to the lavatory, perhaps?"

Hargen lets the remark slide; he is after something more important. "No, but I *would* like to ask you about someone you may know whom I haven't seen tonight."

"I may and I may not, Dzurlord." Again, she slides him that sidelong look. "Who is this man of mystery?"

Hargen sighs and says, "Have you ever heard of Lord Esteban?"

"Of which House?"

"I . . . can't remember. He was here the last time I was."

The Sorceress in Green pauses. "Esteban . . . No, I can't remember anyone by that name. Are you sure that's his name?"

"Yes, quite sure." Actually, he is not sure at all, but

## Section 23

that is the only name he has. "You've never heard of him before, my lady?"

"No, never." Her small smile has been replaced with a pout of pique.

"I understand. Well, thank you for your indulgence, my lady."

"It was my pleasure, Lord Hargen. Feel free to bother me with your problems anytime." She whirls around and disappears into the crowd, not looking back.

If she is lying, Hargen thinks to himself, there is just no way to be sure. Damn. Another dead end.

He glances around, considering the great hall . . . and all the guests in it. He is approximately two-thirds of the way through the room from where he started, and yet he is no closer to discovering any clue to the whereabouts of Esteban, his killer.

There must be a clue here, somewhere, he tells himself. There *must* be. He heaves a mighty, warlike sigh.

That is when he notices them for the first time. Two men—two Dragaerans, both wearing the colors of House Orca—stand some ten meters away, watching him intently. One is a thin little fellow, his nose and chin as pointed as a spear. His hair is thin and rises from his head in little wisps. No warrior, this one!

The second is a round, lumbering figure with at least three chins. Still, he sports a sword and looks like he knows what to do with it.

The incongruous pair *does*, however, seem to be

interested in Hargen's activities. Or may be intrigued by his very presence.

Hargen watches them out of the corner of his eye. Could these two Teckla-droppings be the key to the puzzle that he hopes to solve? They do not appear threatening, and yet, he knows, cunning and fighting ability can take many shapes and sizes.

Perhaps they can be more help than the Sorceress in Green.

But how should he handle them? He can either march up and ask them their business, or try to get close enough to overhear their conversation.

*Turn to section 12.*

## \* 24 \*

Uncertain of both his footing and direction Hargen decides to hold his position and wait for this insidious mist to clear. Finding a small rock outcropping nearby, he sits and removes his pack, and stares glumly into the distance for signs of a break in the weather. But as the minutes drag by, the fog just seems to become more and more impenetrable. Soon Hargen realizes that he can no longer see even the pack at his feet. The thick mist fills his nose and lungs, making him cough and hack violently. Finally the Dzurlord realizes that he must attempt to move onward again, regardless of the risks, before he suffocates.

## Section 25

Using his sword like a staff to test the ground ahead of him, Hargen starts to edge his way cautiously forward. The earth beneath him feels slippery, like an icy pond in winter; soon Hargen realizes that the path itself has narrowed to a frighteningly thin ledge. Although it must be his imagination, Hargen could almost swear that the wispy tendrils of the fog are grasping at his ankles, trying to pull him off balance as he attempts to thread his way across that narrow bridge of rock.

*Roll 3 D6.*

*If the total is equal to or less than Hargen's Dexterity value, turn to section 27.*

*If the total is greater than Hargen's Dexterity value, turn to section 69.*

## \* 25 \*

Hargen considers his options, while Zeber awaits his answer. He knows that he can defeat any Jhereg in a fair fight. On the other hand, there are hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Jhereg out there, waiting to make him into Dzur stew. If he were to disappear—drop out of sight—and return some weeks from now, he might be able to investigate the murders without having to fend off an attack every half hour.

“My lord, it seems to me that I would have a greater chance of solving these murders, and thus gain greater

honor for myself and the House of Heroes, were I to wait some little time before returning to the hunt.”

The veins in Zeber’s forehead swell visibly, and his eyebrows draw down. Shoving his chair back with a crash, he stands and stalks around the desk to Hargen.

“Since you choose to hide, Hargen, so be it! But the House of Heroes will not hide you. Hand me your sword!” Daunted, Hargen draws the sword from its sheath. Zeber brings the blade crashing down over his knee and, though it’s good metal, breaks it. “You are stripped of your title and your name. You are unworthy to bear them any longer. Your other kin shall decide whether you shall retain your lands or honors. I banish you from this House, Hargen, and name you Teckla.”

“But, my lord . . .”

“Teckla.” Zeber’s voice drips its loathing. “Out of my sight before I slice you into strips!”

Dejectedly Hargen leaves the house, knowing that he has made the wrong decision, one that cannot be undone. Abandoned by his House and clan, personally dishonored and unworthy of the name Dzur, he realizes that he has become a despised Teckla, by his own hand, and must live out his miserable life in total disgrace.

THE END (0 points of a possible 100)

## Section 26

# \* 26 \*

In the darkness, Hargen feels himself drifting gently downward for what seems like an eternity. The sensation alternately terrifies and exhilarates him, with both feelings ultimately giving way to an overwhelming sense of tranquility. Dimly he recalls that there was something important he had to do, but it no longer seems to matter now. Hargen gives himself over to the gentle rhythms of the darkness and leaves all thought behind him for a time.

Finally his eyes open, and he sees, instead of the grim vistas of the land of the dead, a comfortable, well-apportioned bedroom. The bright light of day is streaming in through an open window. Outside, he can hear the sounds of music and cheering in the distance.

The door to the room opens, and Empress Zerika enters. The Imperial Orb is moving in a slow circle around her head as she walks, her regal dignity somewhat compromised by a gentle smile.

Hargen tries to rise, but finds himself unequal to the task. Zerika reaches his bedside and takes his hand.

"Most noble Hargen," she says, "I am glad to see you awake once more."

Hargen gestures weakly toward Zerika's head. Even in his condition, he can feel the power generated by the Orb. "I take it we succeeded."

"Indeed we did, most loyal Dzur. With your help,



and that of Lazarus. Poor Lazarus!" She pauses, and a shadow seems to cross her face. "Alas, there are some laws that even I am not permitted to break.

"With his, and your, help, we did indeed summon the Orb from the mountain fastness of the villain Meraste. With the Orb close at hand, it was an easy matter to give him the only justice he deserved." Her fists clench. "Rounding up the other conspirators was just as easy. But the honorable acquittal of your duties as a loyal subject made it all possible.

"Dzurlord," she says simply, "you have saved the Empire with your efforts. Name what you will as reward."

Hargen looks up at the face of the Empress. Moments ago, she was speaking of justice and vengeance against traitors; it is hard to believe that she can gaze upon him so beneficently now. Visions of wealth, riches, women, dance through his brain, but he forces himself to think, instead.

Minutes pass, and the Empress waits. Finally, the Dzurlord's head rises. "Empress, Lady Zerika, the honor of having safeguarded your person, power, and Empire is sufficient. If you would name me a reward, I would leave it to your wisdom to choose one you deem fitting."

Zerika's eyebrows rise, but Hargen sees that she is flattered by his words. Now it is her turn to think. Soon she looks at him with a smile. "Then, Hero, I will pronounce your reward."

Hargen feels a mental tickle, then suddenly realizes that he is now hearing Zerika's voice through the Orb.

## Section 26

“Hear, my citizens, that Lord Hargen of House Dzur has saved the Empress, the Orb, and Adrilankha itself, from deadliest chaos, and the machinations of one Meraste of House Yendi. . . .” With a rush of pleasure, Hargen realizes that Zerika is broadcasting his story to all who can receive it through the Orb.

“Therefore,” she concludes, “tomorrow shall be held the Feast of Hargen, and it shall be coupled with the Feast of Verra in history.”

Hargen feels a little dazed. His career as a hero is now launched, off to a flying start. He looks up again as the Empress speaks, this time only to him.

“We are well pleased with your choice and loyalty, Hargen Dzurlord. You will ever be a friend to Zerika, and the House of the Phoenix. Sleep now, and know that your glorious deed will be sung of as long as I rule this Empire, and hopefully much longer.”

As Hargen drifts off into sleep, he smiles, realizing that soon he will be well enough to pursue his career once more. Were he to do no more deeds in his life, he would have made his mark, a noble and prominent member of the House of Heroes.

THE END (80 of a possible 100 points)

\* **27** \*

Despite the arduous conditions, Hargen perseveres and reaches the other side of the bridge of rock without incident. The footing seems more secure here, and the contour of the terrain less uneven. As Hargen scans the horizon, he believes he can see a break in the fog bank up ahead. Encouraged by these positive signs, the warrior begins to increase his pace. Soon there can be no doubt that the mist is lifting.

As he attains the summit, Hargen is presented with an excellent vantage, though it is hardly a cheering one. Hargen has little trouble locating the staircase described by the record keeper. After refreshing himself with a sip of water, Hargen begins to warily descend the seventeen steps, half-expecting them to fold like an accordion beneath his feet. But all remains quiet, and by the time Hargen reaches the valley below, he has begun to relax.

The floor of the valley is flat and barren and covered with a blanket of, yet again, more mist. Though the path ahead is little disturbed by use, it appears well marked and easy to follow. Hargen starts to quicken his pace, feeling that the end of his quest is near.

Suddenly Hargen sees a spectral figure looming ahead. Even without the Lyorn's instructions, Hargen would have no doubt whom it must be: the face is none other than that of the Dragonlord Adron, whose

## Section 28

attempted overthrow of the decadant Phoenix Empire four hundred years ago transformed the capital city of Dragaera into a sprawling chaos and hurled the entire Empire into a long dark age during which the art of sorcery was temporarily lost.

The shade is that of a tall, gaunt man, with piercing eyes that are as remorseless in death as they were in life. Though he bears no weapons of any kind, his very look and stance exude intense power and purpose that even Hargen finds a bit daunting. Gliding to a halt a few feet away, Adron eyes the Dzurlord with an imperious gaze. "Well, well, well. What brings a Dzur to abandon the living and seek out Adron's Valley of Desolation?"

*If Hargen chooses to stop and speak with Adron, turn to section 65.*

*If Hargen chooses to ignore Adron and pass on into the valley, turn to section 5.*

## \* 28 \*

As the fever of combat recedes, Hargen sits down on the edge of the bed and tries to sort out the bizarre events that have taken place. First, I am murdered in the supposedly inviolate sanctum of Castle Black. Then Lazarus mysteriously learns of my situation, and rescues and revives me. Then, minutes later, an assassin somehow gets past the magical blocks sur-

rounding the healer's home and almost succeeds in killing us both. And here I sit now, without the vaguest idea why anyone would want either of us dead.

After a few moments' thought, Hargen realizes that there might be a clue to this mystery somewhere in this very house. Still shaky, he begins to search through Lazarus's office, hoping to find something that might explain it all.

The office is cramped and musty, cluttered with the various implements of the healer's art: powders and potions in glass and masonry jars, swatches of cloth colored with stains, bunches of herbs and plants with both sweet and foul scents, and remains of unfinished studies and projects.

Now, lying dead on his own surgery floor, impaled by a blade, Lazarus will never finish them.

Five minutes, or perhaps ten, pass like an eternity while Hargen pokes among the stacks of parchment and the partially eaten meals, the half-open books and just-begun experiments. In the street outside, he can hear shouting and the sound of booted feet running on the cobblestones.

Suddenly, something peeks out from between two books on a crowded shelf—a bundle of parchment held together by a scrap of brightly colored ribbon. Intrigued, Hargen pulls the bundle from the shelf and finds himself in possession of a collection of letters, written in two different hands, completely unlike Lazarus's handwriting.

Perhaps this is what the assassin was looking for,

## Sections 29, 30

Hargen thinks to himself, tucking the letters into his tunic, while footsteps run up the lane toward the building.

*Turn to section 113.*

### \* **29** \*

Hargen felt pain, but it was nothing compared to the shame of knowing that he had failed. He, who was descended from a line of Dzur heroes that stretched back for generations, had died in disgrace. His name would not be remembered—except, perhaps, as an example to young Dzur of a failure. Now all that was left for him was to wait in the land that lay beyond Deathsgate Falls, and hope for rebirth. Though now he would probably be born as a Teckla.

THE END

### \* **30** \*

The corridor is narrow and long, and Hargen follows it for a good distance, descending gradually. Abruptly he comes to another intersection. As he peers cautiously around the corridor to the left, he notices a

guard some feet away. The guard is leaning against a door and looks bored. Not for long, Hargen thinks, for he is tired of corridors.

*If Hargen decides to creep up on the guard, turn to section 7.*

*If Hargen approaches the guard directly, turn to section 18.*

## \* 31 \*

Hargen teleports directly to the courtyard of Castle Black, Lord Morrolan's fortress, which in an awesome display of magic floats majestically in the clouds northeast of Adrilankha.

Before him stand the great doors, huge, carved, and black, the only entrance and exit to the castle as the main body of the fortress is protected by a powerful teleport block. Unbreachable flying buttresses extend from the castle walls to the edge of the clouds, encircling the courtyard, impressive in their size and age. Behind him, the ground slowly drops away, formless cloud waves lapping at a rocky shore.

As Hargen approaches, the doors noiselessly swing open. Lady Teldra, Lord Morrolan's receptionist, waits for the Dzurlord to cross the threshold before welcoming him. She speaks, as always, with a soft voice full of sincerity and warmth.



## Section 31

"Greetings, Lord Hargen. It is a pleasure to see you looking so well. Our doors are forever open to honorable Dzur such as yourself. In fact, many of the guests have been asking for you."

Hargen marvels anew at her ability to unmistakably mean what she says. Her compliments have eased his tension, and his knuckles relax their grip on the hilt of his sword. "Thank you, Lady Teldra. It is comforting to know that some things—like this castle and all that goes with it—never change."

"Oh, Lord Hargen, did Lord Esteban eventually find you? He was looking for you during your last visit with us."

"Esteban?" Then it hits him. Esteban might be his murderer, or at least know something about what happened to him. It is too much of a coincidence to be anything else. The murder weapon will be all the proof he needs . . .

"Lord Hargen? Are you all right? You look a bit pale."

"No, I'm fine, thank you." Now, where should he go next? To see Morrolan to tell him what has happened? Certainly Morrolan would want to be informed. The murder of one of his guests is a serious offense. Or should he do the honorable Dzur thing and find Esteban himself? The killer *could* be here, basking in the glory of his recent success . . .

"Should I let Lord Morrolan know that you are on your way to see him?" asks Lady Teldra. "Or would you like me to escort you to the grand ballroom?"

*If Hargen decides to go see Morrolan, turn to section 3.*

*If Hargen decides to go to the party, turn to section 61.*

\* **32** \*

Hargen approaches cautiously and then listens carefully at the door. He hears nothing. He tugs at the door, pulling it quickly open, his sword at the ready—

—But instead of facing a corridor, or a room, Hargen finds himself face to face with a dirt wall! He hears a noise behind him and turns to see a large slab of stone slide out from one of the niches in the wall. Damn! The corridor is sealed behind him before he can even react. Hargen is trapped in the darkness!

*Turn to section 94.*

\* **33** \*

For an instant Hargen's breath hangs like stone in his throat, then he straightens in outrage.

"Madam," he says coldly, "I came to you with thoughts of help and counsel. Instead, I am met with mockery. I had not thought to find in you an enemy of the Empire."

Sethra never moves, but her voice and smile have again turned to ice. "My condition is plainly not to

## Section 34

your liking, Hero, but unless you first fulfill the quest, I cannot reveal anything of this plot to you. For the Empire's sake, this is the only way to find out what you know—unless it is your courage, not your pride, that is affronted.”

Hargen's blade is already half-drawn before he even notices. He forces his fingers to relax his grip on the sword's handle and pushes it into the scabbard. “It may please you to make merry of my courage, Madam. But there is no way you will use me for a whim of your own, when I must speedily complete this work. Good day.”

Not trusting his precarious hold on his temper—And yes, dammit, on his offended dignity!—he rises stiffly, bows, and shows himself out. Once outside, he reaches out for the Orb and teleports himself back to Castle Black.

*Turn to section 115.*

## \* 34 \*

Maintaining his composure against the sudden rush of bile in his throat, Hargen tries to broadcast a sense of calm along with his telepathic message. *“It is said that jhereg drive a hard but fair bargain. What do you wish of me?”*

The jhereg's response carries a razor-sharp edge. *“Relax, Dzurlord. Our undead state leaves us quite disinterested in the kind of fare your flesh and bones*

*would provide. But our children who yet live in the lands of your great Empire still require food. If you would pass by us, you must agree to intertwine your fate with theirs and swear on your hero's word that once each year, on the anniversary of this day, you will go into the wilderness, slay a dzur, and summon the jhereg to feast on its remains."*

The temerity of this demand enrages Hargen. *"How can you ask me to kill the noble beasts who are our namesakes, without cause?"*

There is silence for a moment, broken only by the flapping of wings as the first jhereg adjusts itself on its rocky perch. *"We are carrion-beasts, Dzurlord, born to live off others' misfortune. It is the only coin we can accept. What is your answer?"*

*If Hargen accepts the jhereg's bargain, turn to section 104.*

*If Hargen refuses the jhereg's bargain and decides to fight his way past, turn to section 78.*

## \* 35 \*

The corridors Hargen travels now are dark and cavernous, but Lazarus's mapping seems to hold true. Three times the chambers he enters are inhabited by spirits who appear to be in a perpetual state of anguish, gnashing their teeth and wailing piteously. Keeping one hand always near his swordblade,

## Section 35

Hargen concentrates on maintaining the sorcery that shields his presence from them and moves past them without incident.

Moving onward, Hargen enters a long, twisting corridor with many small side branches. Hargen can see several ghostly forms ahead of him, walking silently along the corridor in both directions. Hargen focuses his attention on the closest of these, a slender male who appears to have been little more than a teenager when he met his death. Suddenly a second figure darts past the first, snatching the purse from the latter's belt. Hargen looks on in puzzlement as the first spirit makes no attempt to pursue the second, but turns instead into one of the side corridors himself. Hargen's confusion only increases when he notices that the thief has slowed his pace to the same slow gait of the other occupants of the hall—and is himself robbed moments later by a third spirit who emerges from another side passage.

After watching this same tableau unfold over and over with minor variations, Hargen finally realizes what is going on. Plainly, the corridor's inhabitants were common street thieves, muggers, and pickpockets. Here in death, they can apparently think of nothing else but continuing to ply their trade—with the strange terrain of the Paths of the Dead providing the perfect environment to oblige them.

Entering the corridor, the Dzur puts even more mental effort into maintaining his spell of concealment, realizing that the senses of thieves are often heightened compared to those of normal men. As he

moves along, Hargen must stop frequently to avoid becoming entangled in the constant play of thief and victim that continues on around him. Despite all his precautions, Hargen's fortune suddenly fails him about two-thirds of the way down the corridor.

As he pauses to let one pair of shades act out their crime ahead of him, he feels a clammy body crash into him from behind. Turning, Hargen sees a tall, thin man dressed all in gray sprawled a few feet away on one knee. "Intruder!" the gray man hisses, his dagger out and pointing at Hargen. "Seize him!" At the sound, other thieves nearby stop as well and stare in Hargen's direction.

Wheeling about, Hargen realizes he has scant seconds to react. He trades the concentration needed to maintain his spell for ferocious strength as he draws his sword and charges forward. His first rush carries him past the first crush of foes, who are slow to react to the interruption of their age-old ritual. But he can hear their unnaturally soft footsteps hurrying behind him. He increases his speed, knowing he is in a footrace to the end of the corridor. Skewering one thief who steps into his path, Hargen races on, maintaining a slim lead over his growing mob of pursuers.

Finally reaching the end of the maze of corridors, Hargen calls forth a last burst of speed and crashes into the middle of an open space. He leaves behind the sound of the thieves' footsteps and a glance back assures him that he is no longer being pursued. Breathing like an exhausted teckla, he looks around and finds himself in the midst of a large cavern, thirty

## Section 35

feet and more in height, that is rimmed with several natural balconies of rock. At the far end of this chamber, Hargen can make out a dim shaft of sunlight filtering through a narrow crevice in the wall. Between him and the crevice, however, are clustered nearly a hundred undead, who appear to be looking Hargen over with a very hungry air.

Hargen needs no assistance to tell him that this is the moment when all else fails. Even his Dzurish skills and heroic stamina can not withstand this many foes. Yet still he holds off using the talisman, fearing that its range may not be sufficient to cover all of this vast cavern.

Rushing to the very center of the cavern, Hargen draws his sword and waits for their attack. The dead silently converge on him from all sides, and Hargen fights like a man possessed, driving back those who draw too close, slashing, thrusting, and kicking. Whirling like a lyorn, his sword its horn, the Dzurlord manages to hold his first crush of foes at bay, and the rest of the undead host is able to close in on the lone man.

But his foes are relentless, untiring and watching him with ever-growing hunger. The front line closes tightly around him, raining on him a hail of blows that takes its toll. One such blow drives Hargen to his knees, and he knows that it is now or never; another such impact will leave him senseless and prey to their hunger. Diving to the ground, he rubs the pearl on his right hand.

Instantly the very air around Hargen explodes in a



flash of white heat that temporarily blinds him. The smell of seared flesh permeates the cavern, as the undead scream in blistering, horrible agony. In mere seconds, all is silent once again.

When Hargen opens his eyes, not a trace of his opponents remains, although the smell of roasted flesh still lingers. He looks down at himself and finds that he's untouched, safe and sound. Shaking his head in wonder at the sorcerous might required to forge such a weapon, he rises to his feet. Moments later, he is within the crevice, clambering up and through the cavern wall, and soon finds himself back in the real world, on solid ground at the base of Deathsgate Falls.

Hargen lets loose a victorious shout that echoes his joy through the valley. But this moment swiftly passes, for there is much to be done, and Hargen has no idea of how much time has passed since he entered the land of the dead. After bidding a silent farewell to Lazarus, Hargen takes his bearings and concentrates on visualizing the black walls of Sethra's abode.

*Turn to section 62.*

## \* 36 \*

The address given him, Hargen realizes, is in a particularly unsavory part of town—the Easterners' quarter. Given the sequence of events so far, and the involvement of Easterners in the plot, this is hardly a surprise.

## Section 36

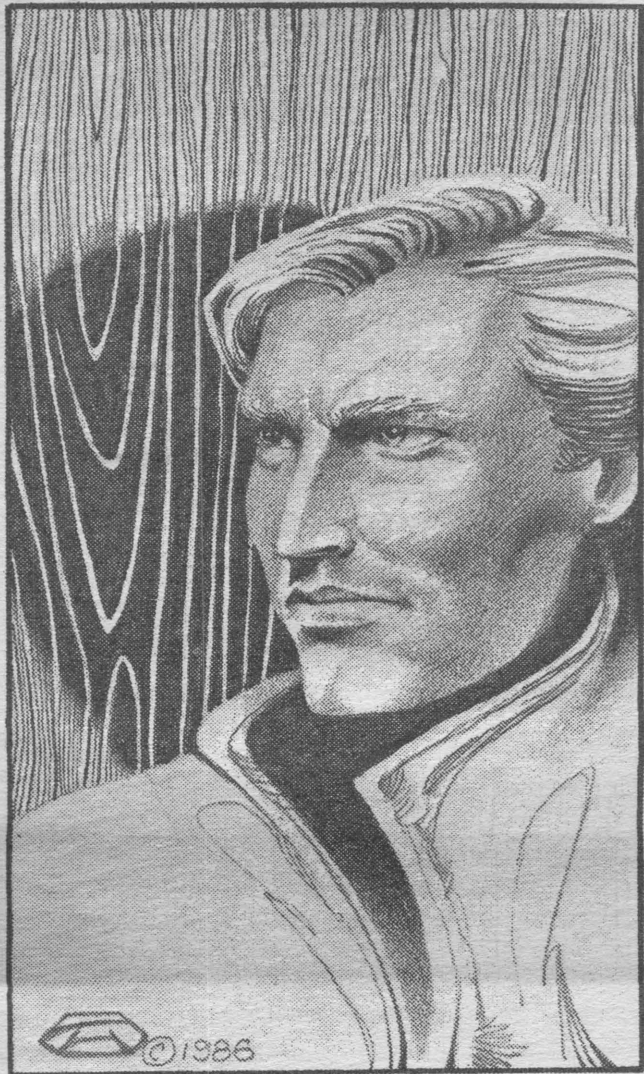
Actually, Hargen thinks to himself as he makes his way along, "quarter" is an altogether too kind a word for this neighborhood; "ghetto" would be better. The streets he walks along are utterly filthy, since Easterners do not use sorcery to clean them. Were Hargen not a steadfast Dzur hero, he might easily retch at the smell. As it is, his stomach feels more than a bit queasy as he arrives at River Street.

If it were possible for a place to be considered unfashionable in this squalid area, this location would probably qualify. The building is a run-down brown-stone townhouse, with a flight of narrow, cracked stone steps leading to a heavy oak front door. Hargen climbs the steps quietly, two at a time, and tries the door without knocking.

It is apparent that the door might once have been able to lock, but that time is clearly past. It sticks a bit, but Hargen applies his shoulder to it and lurches rather abruptly into a short, narrow hallway. As he twists to regain his balance, he draws his sword with a single fluid motion—but no one seems to be about.

Hargen takes a moment to examine his surroundings. He is in a narrow hallway which ends at another door. It is dim and unlit, but for the light from the outside. Its walls are covered by wallpaper in a faded floral pattern; the air is musty, smelling faintly of cooked cabbage and Eastern red pepper. The silence is disquieting.

Slowly Hargen approaches the inner door, listening carefully for any noise from behind or above. Without



## Section 36

letting go of his sword, he bends down and peers through the keyhole. Beyond, he can see a flight of cramped stairs leading upward. Standing once more, he tests the door with his hand, and it opens readily.

He suspects a trap, but doesn't really care—his murderer might be here somewhere. With all the stubbornness and determination only a Dzur hero can muster, he starts confidently up the stairs. Suddenly he hears voices above him. Cloaking himself in the deep shadows of the staircase, he creeps slowly up toward the closed door at the top and cocks an ear to the conversation.

"... It's too late to get out now," a voice says. "You're already in over your head, like it or not. We have to carry this thing through."

"But what if the prophecy is false?"

"What do you mean false? Listen, you scum-sucking little coward—"

"Patience, patience, my friends," a third, smother voice interrupts. "We all embarked on this effort for a single reason: to achieve our common goal of overthrowing the Empire. We hate it to a man, each for our own reasons, all of them good ones. The prophecy is most certainly true, and we will carry out our part to make sure of it."

"But, Alexei, how can you be so sure?"

Hargen's ears perk up when he hears the name of one of the men he is seeking. As he inches a bit closer, this third voice—Alexei's voice—pauses to sigh loudly enough for Hargen to hear it clearly, then continues. "Must I go through this again? Ah, very well. We

all know the prophecy. Three things must happen before the Empire is overthrown: a great storm must lower over Dzur Mountain, a famine must scourge the East, and the clouds which leave our skies forever overcast must part on the Feast of Verra.

"The storm happened early this spring. I understand that the old witch herself, Sethra, was so frightened she hid in her crypt, clutching that damn Morganti blade to her undead breast. And we know from our friends and relatives in the East that the spring harvest has been an utter disaster thus far, and the famine has stricken us harder than even the Dragaerans realize.

"Now the Feast of Verra is less than two days away. I truly believe that the clouds will open, and that a beam of light will descend from above and strike Zerika's palace. It is then that we shall strike, just as we have planned."

"It's likely to be guarded," one voice says after a moment.

"Of course it's guarded, for Verra's sake," says another. "It orbits around Zerika's head."

It, it, suddenly everything makes sense to Hargen, crouching there in the darkness. An Easterner prophecy has foretold the end of the Empire, and these plotters are determined to make it come true—by stealing the Imperial Orb, the source of all sorcerous power!

"We will assemble here twelve hours before the Feast begins," Alexei says. Hargen suddenly realizes that the group above is dispersing, and that he must

## Section 37

quickly decide what to do. He has but two choices—to leave now and take what he has learned to the Phoenix Guards, or to try and save the Empire himself, by putting an end to these worthless Easterners and their treasonous plot.

*If Hargen elects to attack now, turn to section 102.*

*If Hargen goes to the Phoenix Guards, turn to section 99.*

## \* 37 \*

“I am Hargen of the House of Dzur.” His voice tolls out his rank and lineage, and he can see the guard’s truculence weakening. “I carry a dire message for the Empress—a threat to the Orb, a threat to all Dragaerans! Let me pass.”

Now he can see the uncertainty growing until finally the guard swings his eyes away from Hargen’s and says gruffly to his fellows, “I will escort him to the audience hall. There he can call to the Empress through the Orb. If she listens, fine and good. If not, I’ll need you two to help me clean up the mess.”

Turning back to Hargen, he jerks his head toward the end of the hall. “This way, Dzurlord.”

Hargen follows, chagrined at forgetting in his haste that he could reach the Empress through the very Orb he is trying to save.

They pass through the tall, ornately chased bronze doors at the end of the hall and stride down a long corridor, exiting through another set of doors, to emerge in an enclosed garden. Concentric rings of greenery and wild flowers shrink to a tiny plaza of soft green grass and a miniature waterfall.

The guard motions for Hargen to step into the center of the grass. Hargen gives him a curt nod and steps over the garden rings. Turning, he sees that the guard has already withdrawn to the doors, standing before them at parade rest.

Turning once again, he sits on a hillock of green grass. The tinkle of the waterfall is quite soothing. But he has not come to be soothed; instead, he closes his eyes and reaches for contact with the Orb.

*Turn to section 81.*

\* **38** \*

Staggered by a blow, Hargen suddenly finds himself falling backward, off balance. The hero he fights is more than willing to take advantage of his mishap and presses forward, delivering another blow, and then another. Hargen knows that the end must surely be near.

Suddenly he remembers the talisman he is wearing around his neck! It can only be used once—but his need is great, for the Dzur Hero presses forward



## Section 39

against him, Hargen's blade desperately blocking the blow, warding off the inevitable.

He rubs the talisman with his free hand, and there is a blinding flash of white heat, and a burst of smoke. When it all clears and he can see once more, he is alone. The ghoulish crowd that blocked his path has vanished into the mist. He is completely alone, standing on the foggy moor, silent but for distant sounds, like murmuring in unknown tongues.

His way clear to proceed, Hargen slowly sheaths his sword and proceeds along the path open before him.

*Turn to section 6.*

## \* 39 \*

Hargen considers his options, while Zeber awaits his answer. He knows there are hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Jhereg out there, waiting to make him into Dzur stew. But he also realizes that there is no way for him, as a hero, to turn his back upon his killer. Those behind the deaths will not be able to hide forever from his just revenge.

“I will find the scum if I have to turn Adrilankha inside-out to do it,” he replies, grasping the hilt of his sword.

Zeber, his liege these many years, never seems to smile; he has always been a stern and hard taskmaster. Yet Hargen knows that Zeber holds genuine affection

for him, and that he has just reinforced the older man's confidence in him.

"It is a wise and honorable decision, Hargen," Zeber says. "You have chosen a difficult quest, but it is a proper one for a noble hero such as yourself. My blessings go with you."

"Thank you, Lord Zeber."

"Where do you plan to begin your search?"

"I thought it best to go to the place of my murder—Castle Black. I hope to speak with Lord Morrolan; perhaps he will be able to give me some information."

As Hargen bids Lord Zeber good-bye, he knows that he has made the right decision, and that regardless of the outcome he will have acted in the most honorable way.

*Turn to section 31.*

\* **40** \*

Deathsgate Falls are at the far end of a long, steep box canyon. They cascade from the top of a sheer cliff and split two-thirds of the way down, where a rock projects from the mountainside. In the center of the rock is a great wrought-iron gate. Along the left side of the falls, a clearly marked set of seventeen times seventeen steps leads upward to where seventeen stepping-stones cross a level place in the water to the gate.

Even from where he stands, Hargen can see a group

## Section 41

of shadowed figures beyond the gate: dead, waiting in patient despair to be reborn. From where Hargen stands, he can see the crowd looking at him, as if to say, We envy you your life, Dzur. Why do you come unbidden to Deathsgate?

It is a gray and depressing scene; the air is misty and cold, and all around, Hargen can feel an aura of despair and desperation. The land is nearly barren, covered only sparsely with brownish grasses. There is a stench of decaying matter that nauseates Hargen, reminding him of the middens of a castle. He has much the same feeling he has had when wandering through the Easterners' quarter in Adrilankha—not only from the awful stink that seems to seep up from the very ground, but also from the hopelessness of the place, as if something, once mighty, was thrown down here, never to rise again.

*If Hargen elects to climb the stairs and enter the gate, turn to section 96.*

*If Hargen wishes to search for an alternate entrance, turn to section 11.*

\* **41** \*

In the middle of a ferocious swing, both men disappear. Hargen's momentum pulls him around in a full circle, his blade cutting thin air.

Verra damn them all, Hargen thinks, I forgot one of them is a telepath. By now they are Verra-knows-where, and another opportunity is lost.

They have escaped the might of his wrath once more. All he can show for his efforts is that he is sure that Esteban is his killer. And he knows the way through the maze of Esteban's hideout, if he can ever find it.

The only thing left to do is to pay Morrolan a visit and hope that the Dragonlord can help him. Anger and frustration boil in his chest. Sheathing his sword, he turns and leaves the balcony.

*Turn to section 3.*

\* **42** \*

Surveying the carnage around him, even the ever-modest Hargen is amazed at his own extraordinary prowess. Many a Dzur would have fallen here today, he thinks to himself with pride. But I dare not—and will not—fail.

## Section 43

Turning back to survey his surroundings, Hargen is rather unsurprised to find that the trail has reappeared off to his right. "Go ahead, do your worst!" he snarls at the empty air. "None of your tricks will stop me from completing my task."

But the rest of Hargen's journey is uneventful, as not a single undead appears to bar his path. Soon he finds himself back at the entrance to the Paths of the Dead, blinking as his eyes adjust to the bright sunlight that beats down on Deathsgate Falls. Breathing a long sigh of relief, Hargen steps out onto the ground, and turns his thoughts back toward Dzur Mountain and Sethra Lavode.

*Turn to section 62.*

## \* 43 \*

Mumbling to himself, Hargen reaches the bottom of the stairs. He cannot believe Morrolan is wasting his time dealing with Easterners. *Easterners!* The lowest scum of the earth, and they are more important to the Dragonlord than *he* is? It cannot be true. There must be something more. . . .

Hargen is so wrapped up in his thoughts that he is oblivious to everyone around him. He meanders toward the party, head drooped under the weight of thought, when he bumps into somebody. He keeps moving silently.

"Excuse *me*, Dzur. I should have seen you coming and gone the other way."

Hargen stops in his tracks, startled, and sees it is Sethra the Younger he has bumped into. "Oh, Lady Sethra, I'm sorry. I guess I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"Obviously. Tell me, what is it that's stuck in your overworked brain? Something Morrolan told you?"

"Not exactly. I *wanted* to talk to him, but he brushed me off to speak to two Easterners."

"And you find this strange," she says.

"Very strange," says Hargen. "What can the Easterners have that Morrolan would want so much?"

"You are a guest in his castle, and yet you question his actions? Not very appreciative, I'd say, but then again, you are a Dzur, aren't you?" She smiles at him contemptuously.

Hargen frowns his reply.

Sethra continues, "From what I understand, although I'm not the detective you are, the two showed up with a book containing information about pre-Empire sorcery." She walks away from him toward a hallway bench.

Hargen follows behind her and asks, "Sorcery? What could *they* know about sorcery?"

"Not very much, I assure you. Easterners practice a petty kind of sorcery they call witchcraft," she says as she sits down. "This book won't help them at all, so they most likely wish to pawn it off to Lord Morrolan. And he'll buy it, too."

## Section 43

"If it's that valuable, they probably stole it," says Hargen with a sneer. "Are you sure that Easterners know nothing of sorcery?"

"First you question Morrolan, and now you question me? You need not worry your mind about it. All you need to remember is that the power of the Imperial Orb is the power of the Empire—the source of all our magic. It is too strong to be defeated, so we cannot lose, especially against an opponent as meek as the Easterners." She stands. "Good-bye, Hargen, and stop following me around." She walks away, not looking back.

He sits down, trying to decide what his next move should be. Sethra seems quite confident, he tells himself, but I still don't trust those two Easterners. That they are wandering around Castle Black with books on sorcery doesn't make me feel any less suspicious, either.

Suddenly an inspiration strikes, and an idea begins to form in the dark recesses of his mind. He knows what he has to do.

*Turn to section 88.*



\* **44** \*

Suddenly the door behind the guard opens, and more armed men emerge. Hargen can hear the sound of running feet coming from the darkness.

“Kill him!” shouts a voice from that darkness, and though Hargen cannot see its owner, he knows it must be Esteban. Wading into combat, he knows that the odds are against his survival, but he is determined to take some of these Teckla with him. Unfortunately, he receives a stunning blow from behind; as Deathwish drops from nerveless fingers, he hears the sound of laughter in his ears as blackness descends on him for the last time.

*Turn to section 29.*

\* **45** \*

When Lord Talasar, Dragaeran Emperor Verra-knows-how-many-Cycles ago, finishes speaking, Hargen inclines his head. “Regrettably, Emperor,” Hargen says at last, “I must choose another path.”

He rubs the talisman, and there is a blinding flash of white heat, and a burst of smoke. When it all clears and he can see once more, he is alone. The crowd surrounding Hargen has faded into mist. He is suddenly alone, and the silence echoes around him.

## Section 46

The path before him is partially concealed by the swirling, ankle-level mist, but it is clear. Hargen takes this as an omen and strides slowly forward, the dim landscape full of unclear, half-imagined shapes that remain (perhaps fortunately) just beyond his ability to perceive them.

*Turn to section 6.*

## \* 46 \*

The foyer of Sethra Lavode's home is black and stark, like the mountain that surrounds it. Jet-black candles provide a dim, eerie light that reflects off the rough-hewn walls, casting shimmering patterns across Hargen's sight. Turning up his collar to keep out the biting chill of the cool, dank air that permeates the room, the Dzurlord eyes Lady Sethra and tries to blot out the memory of the last hellish hour.

It was a well-known fact that Sethra, the undead enchantress and oldest surviving soul in the Empire, was not loved by all. From time to time, when her necromantic activities ran too far afoul of the wishes of the ruling House, the lady had even been declared a traitor, and a bounty had been placed on her head. During such times, it was not uncommon for Dzur heroes to come here, to Dzur Mountain, to seek her destruction. It had not occurred to Hargen that Sethra would think him to be just another in that long procession—an oversight that had nearly cost him his

life just now, before he convinced her that he came to speak, not to fight.

From the high-backed chair opposite, Sethra watches the Dzurlord for several moments before speaking. "What brings you here to disturb my researches, then, sprat? You said something about urgent business."

"Lady, I have come to you for aid in defeating a threat to the Empire."

Sethra's eyebrows raise themselves a fraction. "A threat to the Empire? Indeed."

Her faint smile makes Hargen uncomfortable. He feels that she is making fun of him in some obscure way, but he can do nothing about it but squirm surreptitiously in his seat.

"I have uncovered a tangled plot among enemies of the Empire—worse, among Easterners—that is aimed at threatening the very life of our realm. But I must confess"—he grits his teeth, loath to admit that he cannot do everything—"that I have not the knowledge to uncover the whole. The plot hinges on a prophecy written long before I was born. None save yourself can tell me what I need to know."

"And what is that, pray tell, Lord Hargen?"

"Why, to find out exactly what the conspirators are attempting to do. That the Empire is threatened is clear. That I am bound to protect it is also clear. But I do not know what the threat is and I am useless until I learn more about it."

Then the entire story pours out of him. As he speaks, Sethra lets her chin sink onto her hand; even

## Section 47

after Hargen finishes, she remains sunk in deep reflection. The walls of Dzur Mountain, carved from the living stone, glitter behind her. Gradually Hargen notices that the glitter has changed to a sparkling pattern that dances about, casting shadows and outlines of shapes against the walls. With a start, Hargen realizes that the images he sees are Sethra's memories, and that ages are peeling back from the present as she seeks deeper and deeper into her past.

Hargen tries to follow them, but finally abandons the attempt—the scenes are flickering too fast—and he relaxes into his chair. Gradually his eyes close, and he dozes, while the lights of Sethra's past flicker and shine above her unmoving figure.

*Turn to section 66.*

## \* 47 \*

Despite the dangers that may lurk in this infernal fog, Hargen decides that delaying his quest might be even more risky. Using his sword like a staff to test the ground ahead of him, the Dzur starts forward again, slowly picking his way along the broken terrain. The fog remains impenetrable as he continues on; glumly the hero begins to consider the notion that the mist may somehow be trailing him, testing his courage like the undead spirits who hounded him earlier.

Hargen's thoughts are abruptly interrupted when he finds himself at the edge of a sheer ledge that

extends as far to either side as he can see. Picking up a handful of small stones from the ground around him, Hargen begins to toss them out into the fog, trying to locate the other side of the crevasse. When his pile is exhausted, he pauses to ponder. If his senses are not deceiving him in the fog, the opposite ledge is only a few feet away. But the price of any miscalculation is likely to be fatally high, for the Dzurlord is certain that the distance to the bottom of the crevasse is immeasurable.

Still, there seems to be precious little alternative to taking the great leap of faith. Lodging his sword firmly in the baldric on his back, Hargen finds an approach that is relatively flat and free of rocks. He carefully paces off the distance. Gathering his strength and courage for one great effort, he rushes up to the ledge and launches himself into the mist.

The few moments Hargen is airborne seem like an eternity as his mind quickly imagines every possible doom that could claim him. But disaster does not come. His feet touch down on the opposite ledge and his momentum carries him clumsily to the ground, scraping his arms and legs on the rough stone. Brushing himself off, Hargen notices that the fog around him has already begun to lift.

*Turn to section 27.*

Upon careful consideration, Hargen decides that Taltos is the better choice. After all, who better to get information about Easterners from than another Easterner?

After a long walk through several of the grimmer districts of the city, Hargen finally finds the Blue Flame. He has never had reason to spend time in this part of town, so finding the place is a bit of a nuisance.

Opening the heavy tavern door, Hargen finds himself in a dimly lit room containing a dozen long tables and two rows of smaller, more private booths along each wall. The early evening light slanting over his shoulders shows him the place is about half-full of raffish characters.

Slimy Jhereg, he thinks, always waiting for the chance to try and rob you. As he walks up to the bar, he adds to himself, Well, they'll find this Dzur no easy victim.

Before the tavernkeeper can ask his pleasure, Hargen announces loudly, "I am looking for a Jhereg named Vlad Taltos."

"Vlad Taltos? I know no Taltos," says the bartender.

Hargen slams his fist down on the bar and yells, in subtle Dzur fashion, "You have two choices. Either bring me Taltos, or I'll bring these filthy walls down about your ears!"

## Section 48

Busy shouting, Hargen fails to notice a young man slip out of the room. He continues to berate the barman, and everyone else in range. Soon, however, he does see three men enter the tavern and approach the bar. Two of them appear no different from the rest of the tavern crowd, but the third is unusual. Though his mustache marks him plainly as an Easterner, he wears the gray and black of House Jhereg. The most striking feature about the man, however, is the large, gray-winged reptile coiled around his neck. A jhereg, the carrion-beast of the wilderness. The crowd respectfully makes way for him to pass.

"I understand you're looking for me," says the Easterner in a confident tone.

Hargen turns and gives the speaker a measured glare. "You are Vlad Taltos?"

"I am," replies Vlad amiably. "I hear you've been manhandling my help. I run a respectable tavern, sir; disciplining the help is my province, not yours. If you have something you wish to speak to me about, I suggest we sit down and discuss it over a bottle of wine like the civilized citizens of the Empire we are. If not, there are plenty of gutters outside where you might feel more at home."

*If Hargen sits down, turn to section 87.*

*If Hargen takes offense at Vlad's remarks, turn to section 80.*



## Section 49

# \* 49 \*

The decision, Hargen concludes, is clear: Here in the bowels of Dzur Mountain, home and namesake of his race, there can be no turning back. Strengthened by this new resolve, Hargen springs from his seat.

“I will perform the task you have asked of me, and will discover what Lazarus knows of this affair; have no fear on that score, Lady. But I must warn you that you should be well prepared to keep your end of the bargain when I return, or even your sorceries shall not save you from my wrath.”

Sethra snorts in response and lets her right hand drop to rest on the hilt of her dagger, Iceflame. “Yes, I can imagine that you might try to kill me, wouldn’t you?” She smiles, and it chills him. “I don’t suppose you have any idea of just how many Dzurlords—and others—have come to this mountain to do just that and have been changed into wild jhegaala or yendi for their trouble.”

In the flickering shadows of the room, Hargen sees the look of the predator cross Sethra’s face, a look that gives her pale features even more of a Dzurish cast. Perhaps the rumors of the sorceress having Dzur blood flowing in the veins of her undead body *are* true.

But the old woman’s clear voice brushes aside further speculation. “Still, I have no intention of reneging on our bargain, Lord Hargen. In fact, it is my

hope that you will accept two gifts from me to aid you on your dangerous journey.” From somewhere deep within the folds of her robes, Sethra reveals a silver bracelet set with four stones of jet-black onyx.

“Put on this bracelet before you descend Deathgate Falls and never remove it until you leave the Paths of the Dead. While you wear it, the bracelet will reduce the effect of the damage you sustain in combat.”

*(Note: the bracelet will subtract one point of damage caused by any successful attack. It will not, however, function if Hargen's hit point total is reduced below 0, and it will never raise the hero's total hit points above their original level.)*

“You believe then, Mistress, that I will have to fight my way through to reach Lazarus?” He slips the bracelet onto his right wrist.

“No one can say for certain what shades from his own, or past, lives a Dragaeran may meet along the Paths of the Dead—or how he will respond to them. Yet it should hardly be surprising that many of the inhabitants of that shadowy land would envy those who yet live . . . or, perhaps, blame the living for the misfortunes that brought them there. They are a vengeful lot, as you can imagine.”

She sighs heavily, then continues. “When skill and luck fail you, Lord Hargen, you may use this token.” She holds out a slender silver ring, set with a single, perfectly formed black pearl. “This pearl is a mighty

## Section 50

talisman, filled with powerful energy. If you should rub it, it will release these energies and destroy all enemies that oppose you at that moment. But use it wisely, for its powers can be used only once, and you may face more than one dangerous foe before you emerge from the land of the dead."

Hargen bows courteously, slightly embarrassed by his earlier threats in the face of this largesse. "Thank you for these gifts, enchantress, though I doubt whether I will need more than my trusty sword arm to win my way to Lazarus's side. If you have no more advice for me, then, perhaps I had best get on my way."

"If you are ready, Lord Hargen," Sethra replies, "I will teleport you there . . . now." As Sethra's voice fades into the distance, Hargen exhales softly and opens his eyes—and looks out upon the grim tableau of Deathsgate Falls.

*Turn to section 40.*

## \* 50 \*

Hargen is well aware that the Empire is full of plots, though he has had little experience with such devious machinations. However, even he can recognize his precarious position, with two men dead on the floor beside him, killed by a blade bearing the psychic imprint of his own hand on its hilt.

Hastily, Hargen searches for another exit. In the healer's tiny kitchen he finds what he seeks, a door leading to the alley behind the house. Whispering a silent prayer for Lazarus's soul, he slips out the doorway into the empty alley beyond, escaping into the bustling afternoon street traffic of Adrilankha.

After a few blocks Hargen notices that although he does not seem to have been followed, the street crowd is avoiding him. Slowing his pace from a trot to a brisk walk, he gives himself a quick once-over and realizes what he looks like: a pale, blood-spattered Dzur, sweaty and disheveled, with eyes still half-clouded by battle frenzy. It's no wonder the street Teckla are staying well out of his way.

Not wishing to attract more unfavorable attention to himself, Hargen draws on the Orb to fashion a simple spell that disguises his true appearance, and he adds a short-range telepathic block for good measure. Perhaps even now someone is watching and waiting for the proper moment to thrust a blade between his ribs . . .

Hargen snaps out of his reverie. Death seems to dull the senses. Looking around, he discovers that he's been following his usual route from Lazarus's house to his own. After consideration, he decides that home is as good a place as any to take stock of his options.

He doubles back on his own trail several times before he comes to his own front door, confident that no one has followed him. He goes through the elaborate ritual of preparing the house for unexpected

## Section 50

guests, then he settles into his favorite chair with a glass of wine, to relax and think.

“Well, now what?” Hargen asks himself. “Should I go to Dzur House here in the city, or track the killers directly?”

Suddenly, the Dzur hero’s stomach growls, and he calls for his manservant to fix him fresh bread with herb butter and a good ripe cheese. Nothing like food to stress just how wonderful living is. He knows that death, for a Dragaeran, need not be permanent. Nonetheless, there are ways for even a Dragaeran—even a member of the House of Heroes—to die and never wake again.

The thought that some Jhereg, or even some Teckla, might have dared to try to kill him permanently as he walked through the halls of Castle Black causes a red mist to rise before Hargen’s eyes. He calms himself only by imagining the fate of his murderer: spitted over a slow fire, perhaps.

After a great deal of thought, Hargen realizes that he has only a limited number of options. He has enemies pursuing him who must know he isn’t dead, since their assassin didn’t return. They will probably not be so careless again.

Unless he finds them first, while they are still being careless.

The most obvious place to start looking is Castle Black, where he was killed. Perhaps Morrolan, the Dragon who owns Castle Black, can help him unravel this riddle. On the other hand, direct investigation of

the city's underworld might turn up some clues, and perhaps flush his murderers into the open, where he could kill them like the teckla they are. Of course, this too might not be good for his health.

*If Hargen decides to hide out at the House of Heroes for a time, turn to section 60.*

*If Hargen goes to Castle Black, turn to section 31.*

*If Hargen decides to investigate the underworld, turn to section 16.*

## \* 51 \*

Clearing his throat nervously, Hargen shows Lazarus the black pearl ring on his right hand. "Sethra told me to rub the pearl when all else failed, and all my enemies would be destroyed."

"That's perfect," Lazarus chortles, rubbing his hands with unsuppressed glee. "Now I can show you a way out of here—"

"Not exactly, Lazarus," Hargen interjects, looking more than a bit sheepish. "Sethra told me the talisman would work only once—and I had to use it getting here."

If Lazarus were not already dead, the apoplectic look on his face would have convinced Hargen that the healer was about to have a stroke. "You—you—you stupid Dzur!" he screams, pounding on Hargen's

## Section 51

chest with both fists. "Can't you damn heroes do anything right? Without the talisman, there's no way for you to escape this place, for word of your presence will have traveled to every corner of this forsaken land, and brought forth all the dark shades who hate life and the living. The Orb—and perhaps the whole Empire—is doomed."

Chastened by this violent reproach, Hargen makes no attempt to block the healer's blows. He does not speak until the latter turns away from him in disgust. "I'm sorry, Lazarus. Really I am. But surely there is something we can still do?"

"There is only one course left to us now. The desperate path which brought me here in the first place, before you came along to torment my vigil with false hopes. A short way beyond this spot lies a place called the Halls of Judgment, where stands a gnarled and ancient willow, whose overgrown limbs and roots are said to have a life of their own. This tree was the resting place of the Orb during the long days of the Interregnum, until Zerika came to the Paths of the Dead and defeated Adron's shade in combat, exiling him to the misty valley you have just passed through. I believe that Zerika will return here if the Orb is stolen, to attempt to locate through sorcery where it has been taken. I intend to await her there, in the hopes my knowledge can aid her in her search. You, fool, can do whatever you like." Without the slightest sign of farewell, Lazarus turns on his heels and stalks off toward the north, still muttering and cursing to



himself. Hargen stands at the pool's edge watching the healer's retreat, trying to decide what he should do next.

*If Hargen follows the healer, turn to section 8.*

*If Hargen ignores the healer and attempts to make his way back to the surface, turn to section 15.*

\* **52** \*

Hargen fights with passion and ardor, quickly dispatching three of his foes, but soon he finds himself outmatched and outnumbered. Though he lays about him with stronger strokes, he is unable to fight them all off, and ultimately can fight no more, faint from loss of blood. Four of the heavies, two on each side, catch him and hold him firm, and through a reddish haze of blood, Hargen can see Alexei stand up and walk toward him, flipping a dagger in his hand.

"You proved to be far more clever than I had expected, Dzur," Alexei murmurs, casually cleaning his nails with the dagger. "Frankly, I did not expect you to even get this far. But it does not matter now, for no one will ever learn what you have heard."

"Morrolan . . ." Hargen mumbles, through teeth clenched with pain.

"That arrogant fool will surely be among the first to die when his precious castle drops out of the sky. It

## Section 53

appalls me, Dzur," he says, sneering, "how Morrolan and his friends"—he intones the word with a particular distaste—"can sit up there playing clever games with life and death while we Easterners are forced to live here in squalor."

"What you deserve—" Hargen snarls, but he is rewarded by a swift knee in the groin that almost makes him pass out.

"Now, now. That is no longer for you to judge, Dzur." Alexei laughs, grasping Hargen by the hair and pulling his head up. "We have waited hundreds of years for this opportunity, and we will more than compensate for all of the harm done to us." He takes the blade in his hand and points it at the Dzurlord's face, as if to show him how sharp it is. "I think that it is time that we put you out of your misery."

With a single thrust, Alexei jams the blade into Hargen's left eye. Even before the stroke reaches his brain, Hargen feels himself falling through a blackness full of pain that he somehow knows he will feel for eternity.

*Turn to section 29.*

## \* 53 \*

As Hargen falls, the hound's deathblow tears through his throat and severs his vocal cords, leaving him unable to scream his last futile cry of rage. The only consolation the Dzurlord has is that his death comes

quickly. Darkness pours over his senses, numbing the pain that courses through his veins as his lifeblood drains onto his final battleground.

*Turn to section 29.*

## \* 54 \*

The route indicated by the Lyorn is flat and featureless, and stretches on farther than the eye can see. As Hargen starts to make his way along it, he soon finds his way blocked by a score or more undead who seem to appear out of nowhere. Some of these figures jeer at him as he passes; some wink and cackle the giddy laughter of the mad, and still others simply stare in blank wonderment at the presence of a living being in their midst. Though none of these looming shades accost him, their presence casts an oppressive air over the entire area. Hargen quickens his pace to a brisk walk in an attempt to push through this crowd, only to find that his pursuers follow suit. Within moments he is traveling at a near trot, and barely holding down the urge to panic and bolt. Finally Hargen leaves the last of his ragtag followers behind and finds himself blessedly alone.

After pausing briefly to catch his breath, Hargen continues on with renewed vigor. The cavern floor before him has begun to slope perceptibly upward, and the air has become cool and damp. Moving past a side passage blocked by debris, Hargen realizes with a

## Section 54

start that the “passage” is actually an underground stream that has been completely clogged with silt. Venturing out into the streambed to investigate, the Dzurlord quickly finds himself knee-deep in a thick, grasping ooze that seems to deepen with each step he advances. Unable to imagine the kind of force that would be needed to bring a river to such a complete standstill, Hargen is soon forced to admit defeat and turns his steps back to the main path.

Again Hargen travels for what seems like miles, all the while steadily climbing higher into the bowels of Deathsgate. The pathway grows more irregular, strewn with rocks and ruts that make rapid travel difficult. A few hundred yards farther along, yet another obstacle is added as Hargen finds the way ahead obscured by patches of thick white mist that give the pitted landscape an even more surreal appearance. After almost stumbling headlong into a ragged hole in the path, Hargen pauses to ponder whether continuing on is in the Empire’s best interest.

*If Hargen elects to push onward, turn to section 47.*

*If Hargen decides to wait for the mist to clear, turn to section 24.*

## \* 55 \*

"Yes?" The voice is cool, distant. "Who is yelling through my Orb?"

"I, Hargen of House Dzur. Majesty, the Orb is in danger." Shaken and nauseated, the Dzurlord sticks as closely to the point as he can. His concentration is wavering as he is carried by the guards, and he clings grimly to his warning.

"In danger? Ridiculous. *I* would know it. The Orb would sense it. This makes no sense, and I have no time for nonsense." Hargen feels a wave of heat flash over him and realizes how perilously close he is to being annihilated for importuning the Empress.

"Not if the evildoers are hidden by the same pre-Empire sorcery that created the Orb," he blurts.

For the first time, doubt enters the cool voice. "What evildoers are these?"

"Dragaerans using an Easterner prophecy to try and pull a palace coup. Majesty, *please* protect the Orb! They are trying to unleash—"

His contact is broken as a shudder runs through the mental link. It does not seem to come from the Empress.

His impression is confirmed a moment later as he is dropped violently to the ground. When his vision clears, he sees the guards bolting toward the far end of the hall, with more of them pouring through from outside and vanishing toward the end of the hall.

He reaches once more for the mental link and is

## Section 56

horrified to sense it as a thin thread through a mad confusion. "Empress!" he yells both mentally and aloud.

*Turn to section 59.*

## \* 56 \*

The combat is short and fierce, but Hargen, with his Dzur training, proves himself by far the superior of a Phoenix Guard. He defeats the guard with a single blow to the chest, sending him toppling into the street . . . but not before he can cry out. Hargen turns only to face even more guards emerging from the office at a run.

"The murderer's back to claim his spoils," one of the guardsmen exclaims. "Well, you won't have your chance. Kill the mad dog!" he yells.

In the frenzy of combat, Hargen attacks furiously, but finds it almost impossible to stand against his multiple attackers. Should have thought of this, he thinks, as one of them lands a blow to his head that sends him crashing to the ground.

As if from far away, he hears the voice of the commander berating the one who struck him. "You blasted Teckla-brained fool, you'll have killed him for good with that blow!"

"But-but, Captain—"

"But nothing, you idiot! Get a healer here right away!"

But already Hargen feels himself falling into an endless pit of black, and he knows with an awful certainty that this time there is no escape from an eternal, lasting death.

*Turn to section 29.*

\* **57** \*

Though he fights valiantly and well, Hargen cannot avoid a blow dealt him by one of the heroes. As consciousness slowly trickles out of him along with fresh blood upon the barren plains of the land of the dead, Hargen overhears one of the seventeen remarking on the poor quality of heroes these days. Regrettably, they are the last words he will hear as a living man.

*Turn to section 29.*

\* **58** \*

Hargen teleports directly to the courtyard of Castle Black, Lord Morrolan's fortress, which in an awesome display of magic floats majestically in the clouds northeast of Adrilankha.

Before him stand the great doors, huge, carved, and black, the only entrance and exit of the castle as the main body of the fortress is protected by a powerful



## Section 58

teleport block. Unbreachable flying buttresses extend from the castle walls to the edge of the clouds, encircling the courtyard, impressive in their size and age. Behind him, the ground slowly drops away, formless cloud waves lapping at a rocky shore.

Always awed by the beauty of the scene, Hargen must remind himself, I am here for a purpose.

He knows that a man named Esteban is his murderer, and he has Esteban's dagger as proof. All he must do to avenge himself and his House is to find this mysterious Dragaeran who would dare kill a Dzurlord in Castle Black. His fate is already sealed. Hargen's sword will surely have its chance to taste flesh before this day is over.

As Hargen approaches, the doors noiselessly swing open of themselves. Lady Teldra, Lord Morrolan's receptionist, waits for the Dzurlord to cross the threshold before welcoming him. She speaks, as always, with a soft voice full of sincerity and warmth.

"Greetings, Lord Hargen. It is a pleasure to see you looking so well. Our doors are forever open to honorable Dzur such as yourself. In fact, many of the guests have been asking for you."

Her compliments hit their mark, and Hargen feels his tension ease, but only slightly, for he cannot—will not—allow himself to be swayed from the task at hand. The question now facing him is where to find the murderous Esteban. But, he thinks, certainly Morrolan would want to be informed first. The murder of one of his guests is a serious offense.



## Section 59

Teldra interrupts his thoughts. "Can I direct you somewhere? To the party perhaps, or to see Lord Morrolan?"

"Out of my way, Lady Teldra! I have important business with Lord Morrolan!" Caught by thoughts of honor, he storms past the bewildered lady and into the castle proper.

*Turn to section 75.*

## \* 59 \*

Reaching through the tenuous link, he catches glimpses of a dreadful turning, whirling mass of brightly shot nothingness. Then the link snaps altogether, and Hargen finds himself shut into his own skull as a despairing cry resonates through the hall.

Guards rout back through the hall, scattering toward any exit they can reach. Lapping through the door after them is a sparkling mass, gouts of brilliance leaping high out of it. Wherever the gouts land, objects melt and disappear.

The Dzurlord, with a terrible fascination, watches the mass of chaos absorb more and more matter. A small splash, landing near him, wakes him from his tranced observation. Through a partially dissolved wall, he sees Empress Zerika fighting a wave of attackers. Suddenly he sees the Orb hovering around her wink out of existence—and then reappear again, careening crazily in a wild orbit far above her head. It

seems subtly different to him, but he is not sure whether it is simply his eyes playing tricks or some real change. Reflexively he reaches for the Orb to teleport away.

And the Orb is not there.

Hargen rises blindly to his feet, but it is too late. As he watches, the Empress teleports suddenly as the Orb disappears. But chaos has surrounded him, devouring everything with ravenous, unreasoning greed. Even as Hargen leaps for a safe foothold, he sees that the last piece of solid floor has been covered by the sea of madly whirling light, and he plunges feet-first through a window into nowhere.

THE END: (40 points out of a possible 100)

## \* 60 \*

Hargen uses a teleport spell to go to the great fastness of the House of Heroes. He can confer with his lord there, he thinks, and be able to avoid Jhereg and their dishonorable habit of attacking by surprise from concealment.

It is not so much that he was killed, he muses, it is more a matter of not knowing exactly *why*. Dying is a part of life, especially the life of a hero, and the trade of healers includes the difficult and lucrative talent of revivification.

He just doesn't remember having insulted someone

## Section 60

at Castle Black that night. Maybe, he thinks, it is someone with a grudge.

But strong enough to kill him in Castle Black? Hargen has as high a quotient of self-esteem as any hero, but he hardly thinks a chance insult from him would be enough to provoke an attack that might lead to a Dragon-Jhereg war.

After waiting impatiently for some time, Hargen is admitted to Lord Zeber's audience chamber. It is an office well suited for a Dzur hero: spartan, efficient, and highly uncomfortable. The desk is large and mostly empty, except for a small, tidy stack of parchment to one side. Behind the desk is a straight-backed wooden chair, and Lord Zeber is sitting in it. He inclines his head toward Hargen as the servant pulls the door shut.

"It is good to see you, Hargen," Zeber says. "What can I do for you?"

Hargen tells his lord of his recent death and concludes by explaining that he feels somewhat unsafe in Adrilankha. "If I pursue Lazarus's killer immediately, my lord, I expect that Jhereg will pursue me with Morganti steel. Furthermore, it hardly seems likely that I could gain honor in combat with such a dishonorable opponent."

Zeber thinks about this for a long moment. "You feel," he says at last, coldly staring at Hargen, "that the matter should be ignored?"

"Well," Hargen replies, "perhaps not *ignored*, my lord, but postponed. I would presume—"

“Do not *presume*, Hargen. It is most unseemly for you to suggest that you would turn away from such an honorable task as seeking your friend’s murderer.”

“But, my lord, the Jhereg scum will have disappeared into Adrilankha’s underworld by now.”

Hargen watches Zeber’s hands form fists on the table. The elder Dzur looks up at him, teeth clenched. “Then you will take Adrilankha apart, Hargen, peeling it like an onion, until you expose the vermin who committed the murder. He has the advantage of anonymity, while you are a Dzur hero. If you choose to acquit yourself like one, that is your choice. If you choose to acquit yourself like a Teckla, that is also your choice. Your kin will judge you accordingly.

“Well, Hargen? What will it be?”

*If Hargen decides to hide out until the matter blows over, turn to section 25.*

*If Hargen decides to pursue his killer, turn to section 39.*

## \* 61 \*

The hallway leading to the ballroom is empty. At this time of day, the party must be in full swing, thinks Hargen. Good. I need only enter and mingle aimlessly, with an eye peeled for anyone suspicious.

He does not know what Esteban looks like, and that is a disadvantage. However, the element of surprise is

## Section 61

still very much on Hargen's side. If his murderer believes him dead, then Hargen's living presence might cause him to give himself away.

He smiles to himself as he nears the great hall, placing his hand almost casually on the hilt of his sword. This could even be fun, he tells himself.

He stops just outside the open door, scanning the room. He can't resist making a dramatic entrance, on the off-chance of provoking a horrified reaction. It would make his task that much easier, but as he enters, he only sees a sea of faces, too many to detect individual reactions. Resigned, he realizes that it is time to move on and mingle.

He steps away from the entrance and joins the party, keeping himself keenly attuned to the guests surrounding him, moving slowly and deliberately through the crowd toward the refreshment table. He is not hungry, but it is as good a place as any to start.

Acknowledging other Dzur and casual acquaintances, Hargen floats in and out of conversations, gradually making his presence known. No one seems surprised to see him, and everyone is cordial. Maybe, he thinks, maybe I *should* have checked in with Morrolan first.

At that moment, however, someone taps him on the shoulder from behind, and he whirls to face . . . the Sorceress in Green, grinning wryly at him, holding a glass but never drinking. Her green gown flows down from her shoulders in an elegant, flamboyant fashion.

"Good evening, Hargen. You don't seem to be enjoying yourself."



Hargen knows who she is, of course, although she has never approached him before. "Good evening, my lady." He bows politely. "A pleasure to see you again. Forgive my appearance. I am merely . . . looking for someone."

"Oh, but the pleasure is all mine." Her strangely hypnotic eyes seem to glow with a light all their own. She raises her glass to him and says, "You seem to have misplaced your drink, my good Dzurlord. Certainly your, um, business cannot be of such importance that you have forgotten that this is a party. Or perhaps there is another reason?"

"I simply have not made my way to the refreshments yet. Too much conversation, I'm afraid. The price of popularity," he lies. It is not usually a good practice to lie to women of power, but he cannot say he wishes to disturb Morrolan's party. That would be a terrible breach of etiquette.

"Popularity, yes. It is a terrible burden." She smiles lazily, looking down her nose at him. "How is your friend, Lazarus? I do not see him here tonight."

The question catches Hargen off balance. Lazarus, his poor dead friend . . . "Why do you ask?" he finally stutters.

The Sorceress smiles again, this time broadly. "I only thought to be polite. Are you two no longer on speaking terms? You seem upset by the mention of his name."

"Oh, no. It's just that I have not seen him for some time." He pauses for effect, gathering his wits. "Have you?"

## Section 61

"I'm afraid not." She slides a sidelong look at him. "He hasn't been at the party, I believe, since *you* were last here."

She *must* know something, Hargen tells himself. But what? She is too powerful an adversary to question like a scared Teckla; she could destroy him with a gesture. There must be another way to get information about Esteban from her, if she truly knows anything. But how?

Trained in direct action rather than subtlety, Dzurlords are left to muddle along in the art of charm as best they can. Hargen finds this somewhat of a disadvantage at the moment.

"Well, Lord Hargen, it has been exciting talking to you, but now, if you will excuse me . . ."

*Roll 3 D6 and subtract one from the total.*

*If the total is equal to or less than Hargen's Intelligence value, turn to section 23.*

*If the roll is greater than his Intelligence value, turn to section 110.*

\* 62 \*

With forced calm, Hargen reaches out with his mind and draws upon the Imperial Orb to fashion a teleportation spell. As he concentrates on the shadow-filled audience chamber within Dzur Mountain, it becomes more and more real, until he can almost feel it take shape around him.

“Hargen.”

He opens his eyes and finds himself face to face with Sethra Lavode. All around him the candles flicker and the shadows in the room dance. Sethra, though undead, is different in form and in kind than the many dead he has experienced in the past few days, and her pale form seems beautiful by comparison.

He bows respectfully this time, realizing that heroic bluster would be out of place now.

“I have returned, Lady Sethra.”

“I can see that,” she says, smiling a bit. “And you have reached Lazarus, and learned what he knew of the conspiracy against the Empire?”

“Indeed I have, Madam.” He describes to her all that Lazarus has told him, concerning Lord Meraste, the Yendi behind the Easterner plot to overthrow the Empire.

“Lord Meraste, eh? Well.” She stands, and it seems to Hargen that the light in the room grows brighter as

## Section 62

she does so. "I have watched many Emperors come and go, Hargen. I understand more of the pattern of the Cycle than most Dragaerans—living or dead. There is a reason for the way in which we govern ourselves, and no Yendi scheming will be able to overthrow it.

"I suspected Yendi involvement, you see, from the first time I heard of this plot in a chance conversation at Castle Black. It was apparent, however, that my intervention would make the Yendi behind it fade into the woodwork, leaving the Easterners to die on their own. I knew that if you were able to reach Lazarus and have him tell you all that he had learned, you would find the answers to your questions. Now, Lord Hargen, all that remains is to bring those answers to the Empress herself."

"I am ready to do so," Hargen replies.

Sethra steps down from the dais. "Just so," she says and offers her arm to him. He takes the cold hand in his own. "For something of this magnitude, you should go to Zerika in person. And you shall have my company in this task."

"Lady Sethra," he says, glad to be back in the land of the living, "it will be a pleasure."

*Turn to section 4.*

\* 63 \*

Stepping quickly over the guard's body, Hargen kicks open the door, his weapon at the ready. He finds himself in a small study, with a writing table and two chairs. In one of the chairs sits the man who must be Esteban, his murderer. Letting a grin curl his lips, Hargen steps forward.

"Prepare for Deathsgate," Hargen says. "You thought you could hide from me here." He steps forward. The assassin pushes himself away from the table.

"You . . . might not get out of here alive either, Dzur."

"It does not matter and you know it well. You certainly will not leave alive. Your stay beyond the Falls will be permanent."

"No. Wait. Stop, good Hero." The assassin lays his hands clearly in the open. "There is more to this plot than meets the eye. Let me live, and I will tell you all of it, not just your part."

"You bluff, scum," Hargen replies, still approaching. He knows that people will do anything to save their miserable lives.

"No—no, lord," the murderer says, visibly sweating now. "There is far more to it." He smiles nervously. "Spare my life, Lord Hargen, and you will know everything."

## Section 64

*If Hargen decides to spare the man, turn to section 73.*

*If Hargen ignores his entreaties, turn to section 93.*

# \* 64 \*

In the course of the fight Hargen kills both Tollifer and Saan, but not before he receives a blow to his head that causes him to pass out afterward. Hargen awakes in Lord Morrolan's library and demands to know what else has happened.

"You what?" Hargen asks indignantly.

"I revived them." Morrolan is sitting at his desk in the library, while Hargen stands incredulously in front of him.

"Where are they now? Tied down somewhere, I hope."

"Relax, Hargen. You should have told me what happened to you before you took matters into your own hands. Then I could have helped you and avoided this entire situation. Now you're stuck with it. Besides, we might yet learn something from those two."

"The only thing I want to know is where Esteban's hideout is. I'll take it from there, Lord. Revenge is mine and I claim the right."

Morrolan chuckles. "Calm down, Hargen. I realize you want to avenge your murder, but we may get more information than just where this Esteban is holed up. I find it hard to believe that someone killed you, a

Dzur hero, here at Castle Black—of all places—just to arouse your anger. And mine.” He sinks back into his chair, trying to piece together all the random information that Hargen has revealed to him.

“If you want to see our ‘guests,’ you have to promise to control yourself. I’ll have no more unnecessary violence in my keep.”

“Listen, I just want to get my hands on them. . . .”

“Do you promise?”

“How can I when they . . .”

“Do you *promise?*”

Hargen takes a deep breath. Once he gives his word, he must honor his commitment, as Morrolan knows. “All right,” he says finally. With Morrolan, there is just no other way.

Morrolan nods briskly. “Good. Then follow me.”

They leave the room and proceed to a set of narrow stairs which lead to a tower room. Tollifer and Saan are roped down to a large table facing the lone window, which shows nothing but a strangely hypnotic darkness. Hargen forces himself to look back to the two prone figures.

“Well, gentlemen,” says Morrolan, “we will ask you some questions which I would advise you to answer if you value your lives.”

Tollifer painfully turns his head toward his friend and says bitterly, “Here’s another fine mess you’ve got me into.”

Hargen smiles; he likes having an advantage. “Where is Esteban’s hideout?” he asks.

They remain still, eyes darting about the room.



## Section 64

"Do you know what this is?" Morrolan holds up a dagger glowing a faint green. "It's a Morganti blade."

The simple statement strikes the captives like a blow. Instinctively, they shrink back into the tabletop.

Hargen asks again, "Where is Esteban's hideout?"

"He'll kill us if we talk," cries Saan.

"*We* will kill you if you don't," says Morrolan.

Tollifer sighs; his mountainous stomach rises and falls like waves in a storm. "You'll set us free if we tell you?"

Morrolan says, "I never said that. I will allow you to *live* if you tell us. Otherwise . . ." His voice trails off as he takes a step forward, the dagger poised.

"Wait!" says Tollifer. "The hideout is in an old abandoned warehouse in the wharf district of Adrilankha."

"And what about the maze?" asks Hargen.

"What maze?" asks Tollifer, but as the dagger is raised again, Saan shouts, "Left, right, left! Just take those turns and you'll be fine!"

Now Hargen knows they are telling the truth. He is content. "All right, Morrolan. I've got what *I* came here for." He moves toward the door.

"Just a minute, Hargen," Morrolan says, not turning. He asks the pair, "Are you really of the House Orca? You wear its colors."

"No," says Tollifer ruefully.

"Of which House are you then?" continues Morrolan, unrelenting.

"We're . . . we're not of *any* House," says Tollifer.

"We're cross-breeds," says Saan, somewhat proudly. Tollifer winces.

"Why was I killed?" asks Hargen impatiently, dismissing Morrolan's line of questioning.

Silence.

"Why was I killed?" repeats Hargen, louder this time.

"We . . . we don't know exactly," Tollifer begins slowly, but Saan finishes for him, rushing his words before the Morganti blade can be raised against them. "It has something to do with some letters that Lazarus the healer had. You were killed to set up Lazarus's murder, but you must have escaped afterward. We don't know anything about that. I swear it!"

"Tell us about the letters," says Morrolan.

"All we know is that Lazarus has some letters in his office that we were supposed to get. But when we got there, we found Phoenix Guards all over the place. We decided to wait; that's why we came here. We never expected to see Hargen, but we . . ."

"What's in the letters?" presses Morrolan.

"We don't know," answers Tollifer, but when the Morganti dagger is shown again, he shouts, "Wait! Wait!" He pauses for a breath. "It has something to do with two Easterners, Alexei and Boris, who were plotting something or other. That's all we know. Honestly."

Hargen advances on them. "You're hiding something. Come on, now, what is it? Tell me quick, before I . . ."

## Section 65

Morrolan calls, "Hargen! I believe they are telling the truth. There is nothing more they know. Come, let's go back down to the library where we can talk." He exits with Hargen dragging his feet behind him.

Back in the library, Morrolan says, "There *is* more, Hargen, but it's not to be learned from those two. It seems you have a choice to make. You now know where Esteban's hideout is. You can avenge your death.

"But you also have a chance to find out what is really going on. You, and most likely only you, can get into Lazarus's office and find those letters. You were his close friend, weren't you? The letters must still be there; our two boys didn't pick them up."

*If Hargen decides to go to Esteban's hideout, turn to section 70.*

*If Hargen decides to go to Lazarus's office, turn to section 74.*

## \* 65 \*

Though Hargen remembers the Lyorn's warning about Adron, he also recalls Sethra's words back at Dzur Mountain: "Look for help in unexpected places." If this is truly Adron's Valley, perhaps he knows what lies ahead.

"My business is not here but beyond, Lord Adron. I seek a former comrade who is said to dwell in the

lands at the other end of the valley. Will you let me pass?"

"I would not dream of stopping one who wears the tokens of Sethra Lavode. Is she well?"

"She appears well, my lord."

"Excellent, excellent. But before you hasten off, there is something you should know about my little realm. Everyone who passes through the Valley of Desolation comes to a point where they must face and conquer the dark side of themselves. Somewhere out in the mist, there is a man with your face, your sword, and your reflexes. If he defeats you in combat, he, not you, will become your reality, and you will cease to be."

"But how can I be certain of defeating myself?"

"You cannot, if you follow your normal style of fighting, for he knows your tactics as well as you do—better in fact, since his mind will not be subject to the occasional errors in judgment all mortal men are prone to. To triumph, you must stretch your mind to think beyond your normal fighting discipline, and let your instincts take control."

"Yes, that's true," Hargen murmurs, though Adron's words in fact leave him confused and quite unconvinced. "I will remember your advice, if I do come across my undead double."

"Trust me, Dzurlord. You will." And with these words, the shade dissolves into the all-pervasive mist.

Unsettled by this encounter, Hargen trudges on across the valley, lost in thought. If not for his battle-trained senses, the warrior would never have

## Section 66

had time to react to the telltale sound of a sword being softly withdrawn from its scabbard behind him. Wheeling quickly, Hargen barely has the chance to twist away from the blade of a blond-haired Dzur before it finds a home in his ribs. Drawing his own blade, Hargen pivots to face his opponent—Lord Hargen.

*If Hargen elects to follow Adron's advice, turn to section 109.*

*If Hargen decides to ignore Adron and employ his usual fighting style, turn to section 72.*

## \* 66 \*

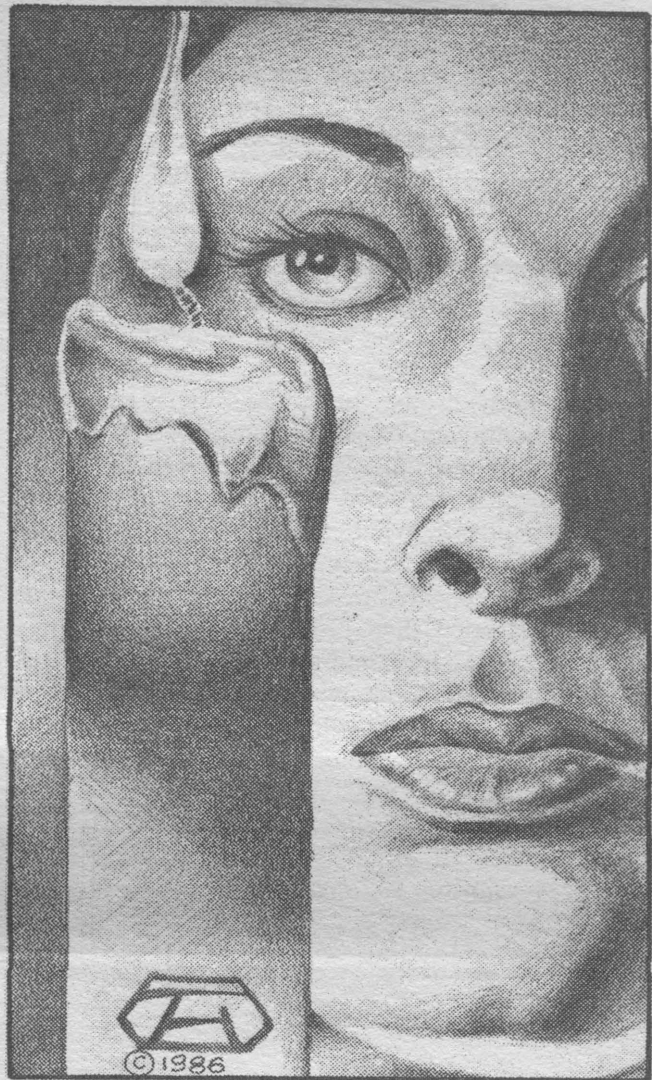
“Lord Hargen.”

Reluctantly Hargen opens his eyes. Then he catches sight of the lady Sethra, and pulls himself hurriedly erect in his chair.

Sethra's eyes are still distant with memories, warming slowly to the present.

“Lord Hargen,” she repeats, “I have no easy solution for you. While you have slept, I have searched my memory, exploring many possibilities.”

The outlines behind and above Sethra's head glitter and swarm, flickering too fast for Hargen to see anything precise, then settle into a continuous downward rush which foams and pools, lost in a cloud of many-colored mists.



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## Section 66

However, his wonder is erased in his dismay at Sethra's next words. "I will not reveal either the reasons of the plotters, or even what their plot is and how you can counteract it, until you find Lazarus."

Stunned, Hargen says, "But—I told you—he's dead."

"Nevertheless, these are my terms. Until you do as I say, you will receive no more help from me. If you do not wish to agree, go elsewhere for your information."

Hargen is silent for a moment. Find Lazarus? He can see no way through this riddle. Bitterly he rues the moment he thought of asking Sethra's help—bitterly acknowledges that he, a Dzur hero, a weaponsmaster without peer, is stumped and made helpless by the powers of sorcery. What can he do when confronted with the powers of sorcery?

"Much, Hero," Sethra says quietly. Hargen looks up at her, startled, then, bitten by suspicion, shoots a quick look above him, half-expecting to see the glitter of his thoughts dancing over his head.

"But find Lazarus? I could only seek him beyond—Oh, no . . ." Hargen's voice dies in disbelief.

Sethra bends an unfathomable look upon him. "Beyond Deathsgate Falls, Dzurlord."

*If Hargen refuses to go, then turn to section 33.*

*If Hargen accepts this task, then turn to section 49.*



\* **67** \*

Staggering away from the corpse of the overgrown octopus at last, Hargen backs, trembling, against a corridor wall and peers anxiously at the surface of the water, fearful that the creature may have a mate. When after several moments nothing emerges, he gathers his courage and cautiously moves forward. In the back of his mind, Hargen realizes that the sounds of his desperate struggle have not brought anyone out to investigate. Where is Esteban? Sword still at the ready, the Dzurlord creeps up a short stairwell like a huge hunting animal, poised to strike.

The passage at the top of the stairs is dry, but otherwise indistinguishable from the last. Hargen is aware that water is dripping off his trousers onto the corridor floor, leaving a clear trail of his route, but he sees no way to avoid it. He moves on resolutely until he comes to a second intersection. Down the left-hand passage, he can see yet another oak door, apparently secured by a simple latch; the right-hand corridor leads out of sight.

*If Hargen turns to the left, turn to section 32.*

*If Hargen turns to the right, turn to section 30.*

## Sections 68, 69

### \* 68 \*

It was said of the Feast of Verra that year that the celebrations were more festive, the decorations brighter, and the entertainment more colorful than ever before. The Empress Zerika, with the Orb circling her head, made the pilgrimage by barge to the base of the great statue and opened the celebration.

Though he still mourns for his friend Lazarus, Hargen is filled with joy by the festivities, enjoying the celebrations perhaps more than he ever has in the past. Though no one would ever know of his valorous actions, the Dzurlord knows that he has truly saved the Empire from possible doom. In years to come, Hargen would always say that as Zerika passed by him along the parade route, she turned her head gracefully aside and smiled at him, as if to say "Thank you."

END (60 points of a possible 100)

### \* 69 \*

The misstep happens in a fraction of a second—so quickly that Hargen cannot really say for certain what caused it. The Dzurlord tries to reach out and grasp the edge of the ledge, only to feel it crumble away

beneath his fingers. As he plummets headlong down the cliffside to his doom, Hargen is surprised at how far he falls before he strikes the jagged rocks below with a sickening, fatal thud. His last thought is, How convenient, dying in the land of the dead.

*Turn to section 29.*

## \* 70 \*

The warehouse is located in the wharf district of the city. Hargen, in his fury, would prefer to march straight in and confront this Esteban, but he realizes that it would be more prudent to wait until evening when he may be able to slip in unnoticed.

Hargen passes the remaining daylight hours in a tavern directly across from the warehouse itself. It is a popular, rowdy place. Although Teckla unheedingly jostle him in the crowd, he saves his anger for Esteban. His grim expression isolates him; no tables near his are occupied.

When the evening's entertainment begins, Hargen drifts toward the exit. The tavern's other patrons join in a rousing chorus and stamp out a beat that is more than loud enough to cover Hargen as he enters the alleyway alongside his target.

The side entrance is boarded up, as Morrolan had thought. Hargen pulls the carelessly hammered boards away easily to reveal a door without knob or

## Section 71

latch. As he gently pulls it open he listens, but hears only the faint echo of the chorus. It is much darker within the warehouse than on the street.

Hargen takes a few tentative steps into the building and finds himself swathed in darkness. It takes a few moments for his eyes to adjust, but he can make out a flight of stairs ahead of him. Drawing his sword from its sheath, he uses it to probe ahead as he moves down the stairs, listening carefully for approaching footsteps.

When he reaches the bottom of the stairs, a torch, hung in a wall cresset, shows him a long hallway, which splits at the end into two branches leading left and right.

The passages are wide enough to readily permit the passage of a single man; two men, however, would find it a tight fit. The ceilings are supported by strong oak beams, but the walls and floor are dull reddish brick. Hargen feels as if he is inside an oven.

*If Hargen decides to go left, turn to section 89.*

*If Hargen decides to go right, turn to section 100.*

## \* 71 \*

Hargen bends down and wipes his blade on the shirt of the sentry, and steps over him and through the doorway into the inner room. Taking a closer look around him, the Dzur notes that the room is sparsely

furnished with a few empty shelves, two well-worn chairs, and a small wooden table with rickety legs, draped with a ragged green cloth like the sort used on shareba tables in Jhereg gambling parlors. But there are no coins or tokens on the table, only a single leatherbound book.

After checking carefully around the room for hidden passages and trapdoors, Hargen turns his attention to the book. It is clearly a fine example of the high art to which the Dragaeran Empire has raised book-making: the heavy leather binding is finely tooled with exquisitely worked symbols and is securely stitched, and though the book bears no title or inscription, it does have a single red semiprecious stone set in the center of the front cover. As he looks at the book—scrupulously avoiding touching it, since it might well be protected—the gem catches the lantern’s flickering light and scatters it across the tabletop.

Though not an accomplished sorcerer, Hargen possesses modest skill, and takes the time now to cast a spell of warding over himself before reaching for the tome. Hargen tenses for a possible attack, but nothing happens, and after a moment, he begins to examine the interior of the book more closely. Just like the outside, the inside is a remarkably fine piece of work that appears to present a thorough history of Kieron the Conqueror. He begins to flip through the illustrated and illuminated pages when a small scrap of parchment suddenly slips free and starts to float lazily toward the floor. Hargen reaches out and snatches the paper from the air, and peers at it. The page is badly

## Section 71

weatherbeaten, and faded with age, but still legible enough to read:

And ye will know the time has come when a plague strikes the Eastern lands, and a storm lowers over Dzur Mountain. Then shall an omen come to you on the Feast of Verra. The clouds will part over Dragaera, and a great beam of crystalline light shall strike the palace of the Long-lived Ones. Then shall the men of the East step forward from the shadows and strike the blow that will lay the Empire low.

Hargen tucks the parchment inside his tunic pocket, not really knowing what to make of it. Plainly this is the prophecy of doom he has heard of, the prophecy that has brought these Easterner plotters together to this place to plan the Empire's overthrow. But he is still no closer to figuring out what it is that Alexei and his colleagues are plotting. He tries to imagine what single act could possibly lay an entire Empire low, especially an act that a ragtag group of Easterners could perform, when suddenly he hears noises of several pairs of running feet in the hall outside. He leaps across the corpse and into the hall, just in time to see the door to the stairs being slammed. As he runs quickly down the hall, he can hear it being bolted and barred from the other side.

Hargen shouts a cry of anger and hurls himself against the door, but it refuses to budge. Then, turning to look back the way he came, he notices the

smoke. Black and thick, it starts to pour up through the floorboards, already obscuring the end of the corridor from his view. He realizes then that while he was up here searching, someone outside has lit the place afire and has blocked the only exit down!

There are not too many things that a Dzur hero fears in his lifetime. Heroes are a special breed, who refuse to acknowledge the potential for defeat—even in the face of a potentially undefeatable foe. A Dzur with a sword in his hand, it is usually said, fears nothing. Unfortunately, a sword will do little good against a fire.

Trying to collect his thoughts about what to do, his eyes already streaming from the acrid smoke that surrounds him, Hargen tears a strip of cloth from his shirt and covers his mouth: Crouching down, he holds tightly onto his trusty sword.

*If Hargen attempts to use a teleport spell to escape the burning building, turn to section 9.*

*If Hargen attempts to find another exit from the building, turn to section 19.*

\* **72** \*

As Hargen matches his opponent swordblow for swordblow, he decides that Adron's suggestion of giving up his normal fighting strategy is purest folly. His double is far too strong and agile to risk holding



## Section 73

back any of his combat skills. Besides, Hargen thinks snidely, the last time Adron employed any tactics, he sent the whole Dragaeran Empire into a tailspin that took two hundred fifty years to recover from.

*Turn to section 82.*

## \* 73 \*

One more lying scum, Hargen thinks. He cannot hurt me. Yet, perhaps, he does know something that might prove useful. "Very well, I grant you your life. Tell me what you know. But first, pull your shirt down over your arms."

"My shirt?"

"That's right. Do it now, Jhereg."

The murderer slowly pulls down his shirt, making a wondrous clinking sound as he does so, and reveals several knives strapped to his forearms.

"As I suspected." Hargen steps forward and places the point of his blade against the throat of the other man. "Don't move an inch; just tell me all you know."

"It is a . . . complex plot, Lord Hargen," Esteban says, "to fulfill an ancient prophecy."

"What sort of prophecy?" Hargen asks.

"An Easterner prophecy, I believe. An ancient belief that, in a year of great storm over Dzur Mountain and a terrible famine in the East, the heavens

above will part and a beam of pure light will strike the Imperial Palace."

"So?" asks Hargen, wondering how anyone can believe such nonsense.

"They believe, in that year, the Empire itself will be laid low."

"Nonsense," Hargen replies, furious at being lured into such a tall tale. He presses the point of the sword against Esteban's neck, drawing blood. Esteban freezes and sweat pearls on his brow. "Now, the truth," Hargen demands.

"It *is* the truth, Lord!" Esteban protests frantically. "There is a plan—"

"What sort of plan?"

"A—I do not know, Lord. I was only hired to . . . to kill you, and then to arrange for the healer to find you. Others were to do the rest."

"Why kill Lazarus?"

"He knew too much."

"I want *names*, you scum!" Hargen shouts.

"Alexei," the murderer replies. "And—and Boris," the man adds hastily. "Two Easterners. They hired me and told me where to find you."

"When do they plan to strike?"

"On the Feast of Verra," the man replies quickly.

"And what will they do, then, to overthrow the Empire?"

"I—I do not know." Esteban's eyes are wild and the vein over his temple is throbbing in uneven bursts.

After one has been a hero for some time, there are

## Section 73

many things that are second nature. Among the most important is the ability to judge the credibility of another man's statement—especially when one's blade is pointed at his neck.

“Very well,” Hargen says at last. “I have spared you, scum, as I have promised. A Dzur hero's word is his bond. Now, get out!”

Without any hesitation, Esteban runs for the door and disappears.

Hargen ponders his choices in the light of his new knowledge. He can either return to Castle Black and lay the entire matter before Lord Morrolan, or he can poke around on his own and try to find out something more.

Or, since Alexei and Boris are Easterners, perhaps he can turn up some information from the Easterner Jhereg who serves Morrolan, Vlad Taltos. He knows that Taltos owns a tavern somewhere in the city, the Blue Flame.

*If Hargen goes to Castle Black, turn to section 10.*

*If Hargen goes to the Blue Flame, turn to section 48.*

## \* 74 \*

As Hargen makes his way back to Lazarus's office, retracing the steps he took not so long ago, he lets his mind review the many satisfying ways he will do away with his murderer—*when*, not if, he captures him—after this little matter of picking up the letters is finished. Time passes very pleasantly until, with a start, he finds himself standing before Lazarus's office. A look around tells him a guard is prominently posted outside the street entrance to the office and also at the back stairs, which he used to make his own escape.

Hargen realizes that he has three choices: to dispatch the guard and make his way in, to try and talk his way past the guard, or simply give the matter up as too complicated and go after his own murderer.

*If Hargen decides to fight his way in, turn to section 84.*

*If Hargen decides to talk his way in, turn to section 20.*

*If Hargen gives up and goes after his murderer instead, turn to section 70.*

## Section 75

# \* 75 \*

Hargen finds Morrolan in the small room off his library, sitting in a comfortable chair facing the door, a glass of wine in his hand.

“Good day, my lord,” Hargen says, bowing as much for courtesy’s sake as for his own.

“Good day, Hargen. I’m glad to see you once more.” Morrolan pours him a glass of wine, beckoning Hargen to sit. “To what do I owe the honor of this visit?”

“I am . . . just recently returned from the office of my friend Lazarus.”

“Lazarus. How is Lazarus?”

“Dead,” Hargen states baldly.

“Dead?” Morrolan has the glass at his lips, but he puts it down. “Is there any chance of—”

“No. He was stabbed with a sorcerous blade as he finished revivifying me.”

“Revivi—! Who killed you?”

Hargen takes a deep breath and holds back his frustrated bellow. “I don’t know; I was killed by an assassin here at Castle Black.”

Hargen waits for Morrolan to say something, but the Dragonlord remains quiet, although his eyes have gone flinty as stone.

“As you know, Hargen,” Morrolan says, “my castle is a sanctuary. Who dies in Castle Black dies only on *my* terms, and in the way *I* decide. Those who choose to affront those rules affront me.”

“Lord Morrolan,” Hargen pleads formally, “I have suffered mortal insult here. My honor must be restored, and I seek your aid.”

“It would be *my* pleasure to aid you in the restoration of your honor. Do you have something in mind?”

“I went to a tavern yesterday evening. A Jhereg tavern. I have obtained a name that could well be the name of my assassin. Now, all I need to know is where I can find him.”

“And his name?”

“Esteban.”

“Esteban. I *do* know a Jhereglord by that name.” Morrolan reflects. “I do not know where he lives, but I do know where he might be found.” Morrolan mentions an address, a warehouse in the wharf district of Adrilankha. “The large doors at wharfside are likely to be well guarded, but there is another access from a back alley. You will find it boarded up, but that should present no problem to one such as yourself.”

“Will it be protected?”

“I would expect teleport blocks, at the very least. I can send—”

Hargen cuts him off with a shake of his head. “I am Dzur, and I must ransom my honor, and that of my House. I am sorry, my lord, but I can accept no help.”

“Stubborn Dzur.” It is Morrolan’s turn to shake his head. “Very well, then. Keep me informed.”

*Turn to section 70.*

## Section 76

# \* 76 \*

As the strain of the spell intensifies, Hargen realizes that his meager efforts to aid the Empress are really doing very little. And what if the spell were to fail? Lazarus and Zerika would be here in the land of the dead, with no recourse, and no way to reach other help.

Through the haze that seems to grip the vision of his mind's eye, Hargen sees a desolate stone tower perched like an aerie above a rugged mountain pass. With a start, he realizes that this area is one of the primary transportation routes connecting the Empire with the Eastern lands. Could this be the Orb's hiding place?

He hears the voice of Zerika, strained through the spell. "Hold fast, Dzur! The Orb is at hand!" The next moment the vision shifts to a large candlelit chamber inside the tower. Hargen can see several Easterners sitting around a long rectangular table, arguing animatedly. At the head of the table, however, is an extremely tall, blond man, a man who Hargen suspects probably bears the name Meraste.

As the Empress moves in for a closer look, Hargen notices that the scene before him appears to be clouding over. Realizing that Zerika must be losing control, fearing what will happen next, he withdraws completely from the spell. Opening his eyes, he can see Zerika turning to him in horror, and his friend



Lazarus collapsing to the ground. The vision of the Dragaeran and his Easterner companions vanishes from his mind.

“Fool of a Dzur!” she shouts at him, seemingly torn between attending to the healer and berating her subject. But she realizes that there is little she can do for a dead man.

She paces back and forth for a moment. “The Orb is in the hands of that scum-sucking Yendi. Through your actions, Hargen, we have lost it, and the Empire is doomed. Our only chance, Hargen, and we have lost because of you.” She bristles with anger. “I cannot find any punishment so great as to leave you behind here, in the land of the dead, as a living, breathing man, so that those who have died nobly and honorably may rend your flesh. I will leave you, then, to the tender mercies of the dead, including your friend, the noble Lazarus.” With a flourish of hands, Zerika vanishes, though the image of her scowl remains for a long time.

THE END (60 points of a possible 100)

\* **77** \*

All this waiting has rubbed Hargen’s patience raw. Hargen decides that his need for Morrolan’s advice should take priority over a bargain with Easterners. With a swagger in his step, he enters the library. As he

## Section 77

does, one of the Easterners jumps back in surprise. Morrolan, who is intently pouring over the pages of an ancient book, looks up, startled and annoyed, and sees the Dzurlord.

“Good evening, Lord Morrolan,” begins Hargen, “I was hoping that you—”

“Lord Hargen,” Morrolan curtly cuts in, “I am quite involved in a discussion with these gentlemen at the moment. I would like to hear your story, but I really must finish this business first. I suggest that you rejoin the party downstairs and I will look for you afterward. Good-bye.” Then he turns his attention back to the book on the table.

Hargen is left standing, his words caught in his mouth. He looks from Morrolan to the Easterners one of whom grins at him, while the other continues to shrink away. With all the dignity he can muster, Hargen turns and leaves the room. He apparently has no choice.

He can barely believe how he has been treated. Morrolan, he thinks, would rather talk to Easterners than speak with me? How can that be? I must try to find out what is going on.

Troubled, he descends the stairs. He has much to think about.

*Turn to section 43.*

\* **78** \*

Appalled, Hargen wrenches his sword from its scabbard and rushes forward, staying low to the floor of the cave. "The only thing you'll get from me is cold steel, demonspawn!" Taking advantage of the surprise generated by his sudden charge, the Dzurlord lands the first blow as his blade sinks deep into the unnaturally preserved flesh of the first jhereg's batlike wing. Screeching in anger, the wounded creature launches itself at Hargen, straining to bury its razor-sharp talons into the warrior's face. Using the stalactites as a natural shield, Hargen evades the jhereg's first strike and whips around with his weapon at the ready—for he knows full well that it is not the jhereg's claws, but the bite of its poisonous teeth that can bring a sudden and permanent end to his quest. Parrying a second slash, Hargen sneaks a look anxiously over his shoulder to locate the second jhereg—and discovers that the tight quarters of the cavern keep it effectively out of action. Thank the Empress for small favors, Hargen thinks to himself as he prepares to go back on the offensive.

### JHEREG

*To hit Hargen: 11 To be Hit: 12 Hit points: 8*

*Damage with claws: 1 D6-2*

*Damage with bite: 1 D6+1*

## Section 79

*The jhereg get an attack each combat round with their claws; if the claws hit successfully, they also make a bite attack. Only one jhereg may attack at a time, with the second one entering the fight the round after the first falls.*

*If Hargen wins the fight, turn to section 6.*

*If Hargen is killed, turn to section 29.*

*If Hargen elects to use the talisman against the jhereg at any time during the fight, turn to section 111.*

## \* 79 \*

Though he is not sure whether he can prevail against the seventeen champions, Hargen is honored to engage in combat with these ancient and noble warriors. He is not sure of their lineage, though their claim to membership in the House of Heroes is more than enough credentials for him. Clearly, he thinks, they guard the way into the land of the dead as a reward for the noble way they perished. By the style of their clothing, some of them might even date back to the era of Kieron the Conqueror!

"The battles will be joined as duels," Lord Talasar announces as the first of the seventeen steps forward. "The traditional rules of the *pas des armes* apply. Acquit yourselves as heroes," he concludes, and steps apart.

<i>To hit Hargen: 12 (warriors)</i>	<i>To be hit: 10 (warriors)</i>
<i>To hit Hargen: 11 (Talaras)</i>	<i>To be hit: 11 (Talaras)</i>
<i>Damage: 1 D6+1 (warriors)</i>	<i>Hit points: 9 (warriors)</i>
<i>Damage: 1 D6+3 (Talaras)</i>	<i>Hit points: 14 (Talaras)</i>

*(Note: Hargen must fight seventeen heroes consecutively. Between each bout, he will have one grace round to recover damage inflicted. Otherwise, damage will be cumulative from bout to bout.)*

*If Hargen defeats all seventeen Heroes, turn to section 21.*

*If Hargen is killed during a round, turn to section 57.*

*If at any time Hargen decides to use the talisman, turn to section 38.*

## \* 80 \*

Hargen's blood boils as he thinks of the Jhereg's impertinence. His insolence to a Dzur hero is unthinkable and must be punished!

"I would not share a drink with you, you misbegotten scum, if you were the last man on earth!" Hargen roars. "You and your entire race should have been exterminated centuries ago. To think that I thought *you* might be able to help me."

As Hargen bellows, the two Jhereg who entered with Vlad reappear at his side. The Dzurlord's outburst, however, continues unabated.

## Section 80

“Even now the stench of your presence makes me ill. Your smell is worse than jhereg droppings.”

With this last insult, both of the Jhereg begin to advance toward Hargen but stop at Vlad’s signal. This offhand gesture is the last straw for Hargen.

“So, you think you need no help, eh? We shall see about that!”

Hargen rushes at the pretentious Easterner with blood in his eye, determined to teach him a lesson in etiquette. Vlad holds his ground, however, and makes a quick flick of his wrist. Before Hargen can react, he feels a pain in his chest, and looks down to see a blade protruding from his tunic, oozing blood. Enraged, he lunges at Vlad, only to watch the latter slide deftly out of the way. Hargen crashes into a table and falls roughly to the floor. He is slow to rise but rise he does, again trying to lunge at the Easterner. The result is the same, but after the second fall, the Dzur finds that his vision is becoming blurred. As he tries to rise one more time, his strong limbs wobble. He dimly sees all three figures approaching.

“At least he’ll keep quiet,” he hears, as all goes black.

Turn to section 105.

## \* 81 \*

"Empress, hear one of your loyal subjects."

For a long moment he waits, and fears that she does not hear. At last, a distant voice coolly inquires, "What loyal subject seeks me?"

"Hargen of House Dzur."

"Dzur," the voice muses. "A loyal House. Son of Tereldon, perhaps?"

"Nay, Madam." Hargen feels the grip of worry tighten. How to speed this exchange of courtesies and drive home the danger in which they stand? "Son of Hadron Selgara. Empress, I must speak plainly and clearly. There is no time for the mincing of words between us. The Orb is in danger, today. An alliance of Dragaerans and Easterners seek to destroy it and release Chaos—"

"Hush, Hargen. Do not speak; open your mind. If this is as urgent as you say, I must take it from your mind. If you play me false, though . . ."

A flash like lightning traverses Hargen's body. For an instant, his heart is stopped in his chest, and his staring eyes see nothing. Then it vanishes, leaving his limbs tingling unpleasantly with the Empress's threat.

Suppressing the tingle of apprehension, Hargen opens his mental barriers and waits. A flurry seems to touch his mind and passes. He waits some more, and then the same cool voice muses, "Pre-Empire sorcery, eh? Well . . ."



## Section 81

The mental touch vanishes. Hargen waits several minutes, then ventures a respectful, "Empress?"

"Shut up," the voice advises. "I'm working."

The voice carries conviction; Hargen shuts up. He waits without thinking, idly watching the drifting water bubble hurry down the tiny stream.

"Hero, pay attention." The voice has returned and is verbally nudging him. "See what your warning has done."

With no sense of motion, Hargen finds himself thrust into the center of chaos.

A tall, lovely Dragaeran stands before him, concentrating on a group of four Dragaerans some distance from her. Hovering behind her is a milky sphere which radiates a soft glow.

The Empress raises her hands and murmurs something in a measured tone. The tallest of the little group jerks erect, and even at this distance, Hargen can see the sweat stand out on his face. The Empress frowns. Extending one arm in front of her, she gathers the fingers into a fist and strains them shut, murmuring.

And the ground shivers and quakes beneath the group and a twisting coil of nothingness creeps from toward them. The four yell, long ululations of despair, which crescendo as the nothingness touches first one, then another, then all of them. Slowly, it absorbs them, and then twists and turns, seeming to seek more.

The Empress pulls her hand open with great effort, and the nothingness eats itself and disappears. She lets her hand drop, and her head droops.

Hargen, impressed by the control of what he has just seen, sinks to one knee and bows his head in renewed fealty. The movement startles the Empress; she straightens, but then relaxes when she sees who it is. Hargen realizes that she has forgotten all about him.

"Dzurlord," she says simply, and the cool voice is warmer now, and tired, "you have saved us all with your timely warning. Name what you will as reward."

Hargen stays on his knees, thinking. Visions of wealth, riches, women, dance through his brain, but he forces himself to think, instead.

Minutes pass, and the Empress waits. Finally, the Dzurlord's head rises. "Empress, Lady Zerika, the honor of having safeguarded your person, power, and empire is sufficient. If you would name me a reward, I would leave it to your wisdom to choose one you deem fitting."

Zerika's eyebrows rise, but Hargen sees that she is flattered by his words. Now it is her turn to think. Soon, she looks at him with a smile. "Then, Hero, I will pronounce your reward."

Hargen feels a mental tickle, then suddenly realizes that he is again hearing Zerika's voice through the Orb.

"Hear, my citizens, that Lord Hargen of House Dzur has saved the Empress and the Orb, and Adrilankha itself, from the deadliest of enemies. With a rush of pleasure, Hargen realizes that the Empress is broadcasting his story to all who can receive it through the Orb.

"Therefore," she concludes, "tomorrow shall be

## Section 82

held the Feast of Hargen, and it shall be coupled with the Feast of Verra in history.”

Hargen feels a little dazed. His career as a hero is now fairly launched, off to a flying start. He looks up again as the Empress speaks, this time directly to him.

“We are well pleased with your choice and loyalty, Hargen DzurLord. You will ever be a friend to Zerika, and the House of the Phoenix.”

There is not even a puff of air as she vanishes, the mark of her subtlety in sorcery. Behind him, a guard clears his throat. “If you will come this way, sir.”

Still in a daze, Hargen follows the guard back through the corridors, out into the wide hall, and down the even wider steps. There the guard leaves him, and Hargen walks out into the precious daylight, warm and golden on his shoulders, to pursue his fortune where it will take him.

THE END (60 points out of a possible 100)

## \* 82 \*

As the clash of steel rings out across the desolate valley floor, Hargen launches himself on what can only be called the fight of his life.

### HARGEN'S TWIN

*To hit Hargen: 11 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 22*

*Damage with sword: 1 D6+2*

*If Hargen wins the fight, turn to section 101.*

*If Hargen loses the fight, turn to section 29.*

*If Hargen elects to use the talisman against his double at any time, turn to section 95.*

\* **83** \*

Though his eyes are clouded by the strain of the spell, Hargen's mind is clear. The recovery of the Orb is far more important than the life of any one man, himself included. As he gives himself fully over to Zerika's control, the Empress flashes him a short telepathic message. "Hold fast, Dzurlord. I sense that the Orb is near."

Through the haze that seems to grip the vision of his mind's eye, Hargen sees a desolate stone tower perched like an aerie above a rugged mountain pass. With a start, he realizes that this area is one of the primary transportation routes connecting the Empire with the Eastern lands. Could this be the Orb's hiding place?

The next moment the vision shifts to a large candlelit chamber inside the tower. Hargen can see several Easterners sitting around a long rectangular table, arguing animatedly. At the head of the table is an extremely tall, blond man, a man who Hargen suspects probably bears the name Meraste.

As Zerika moves in for a closer look, Hargen notices that the scene before him appears to be

## Section 84

clouding over. For a moment he has the sensation of floating weightless in midair, aware of his surroundings but no longer a part of them.

Suddenly the Dragaeran looks up and appears to be gazing directly into Hargen's eyes. Rising to his feet, the Yendi closes his eyes and makes a rapid series of gestures—then a searing rush of pain strikes Hargen between the eyes, and everything goes black.

*Make a roll on 3 D6 against Hargen's Constitution value.*

*If the result is equal to or less than his Constitution value, turn to section 26.*

*If the result is greater than his Constitution value, turn to section 91.*

## \* 84 \*

Hargen realizes that trying to talk his way in is useless so he walks slowly toward the front door, trying to seem a casual passerby. Suddenly, in a single, fluid motion, he draws his sword and hurls himself into an attack!

### GUARDSMAN

*To hit Hargen: 12 To be hit: 12 Hit points: 10*

*Guard'sman's sword does 1 D6+1 damage.*

*Hargen has surprise on the first combat round.*

*If Hargen is killed, turn to section 29.*

*If Hargen wins, turn to section 56.*

\* **85** \*

About to comply with the proprietor's invitation, Hargen catches a strange gleam in the man's eye as he waves the Dzur toward the door. Taken aback, Hargen decides that there is something a bit suspicious about this whole affair. He stands stock still, to the shopkeeper's evident dismay.

"Is anything wrong, sir?" the Teckla asks.

Hargen wonders to himself if he just imagined the calculation in the man's gaze moments before. "No, but I've remembered that I've an appointment to keep; there's no time to be loitering about with Teckla drinking wine."

This time, the hero is sure that a frown flickers over the old man's rheumy features. His suspicions roused, Hargen strides forward and tears aside the curtain from the doorway. The furnishings of the room look innocent enough—two chairs and a table, set invitingly with a flask of wine and two glasses. But the peaceful scene is ruined when two ruffians, one with the sharp-nosed face, materialize from either side of the door with cudgels in their hands.

Drawing his sword, Hargen lets his battle instincts take over. A quick stab and backhanded twist rips the sharp-nosed one from gut to collarbone. The other

## Section 85

has not even turned to flee when the Dzur's quick blade transfixes his heart.

Hargen whirls, lithe as a hunting dzur, at the noise of a step from behind. The owner is attempting to sneak up behind him; clutched in his bony fist is the dagger from the window—the one with the triangular carving.

The Dzur, nimble for all his brawn, catches the hand as it descends and wrenches the dagger from it, throwing the shop owner against the wall. Holding the squirming Teckla easily with one hand, he draws his own dagger with the other and presses it against the greasy throat.

"I'll tell you what," Hargen says softly. "You tell me what I want to know, and I'll let you live. I won't even kill you first. If you don't"—and here he moves the dagger to the shopkeeper's temple—"not even the Necromancer will be able to revive you."

The shopkeeper's face goes gray. He struggles, but freezes as the Dzur's dagger presses more sharply into his skin.

"Wh-what do you want to know?" The shopkeeper's voice is strangled by his fear.

On a hunch, Hargen asks the question that weighs most on his mind. "Alexei and Boris. Who are they? Where are they?"

"No!" the shopkeeper gasps; his pasty face loses even its gray color and goes terror-white. "They'll eat my soul!"

"I can kill your soul now. Tell me and maybe you'll have time to hide." As the man stutters, Hargen



shakes him against the wall like a rat and thunders, "Tell me!"

The shopkeeper shivers and his sweat soaks Hargen's hand. Words pour from him like river fish. "There is a place—in the Easterners' quarter—an old abandoned brownstone—that they use as a meeting place. I-I-think it's on River Street."

"What are they planning to do?" The Dzur hero thinks of slapping some breath back into his victim, but the poor man is already wheezing, forcing his words past the gasps.

"I don't know, honest. I'm not a principal player in this, but it has something to do with the Empire, something very important to the Empire—" He pauses to stare at Hargen with eyes full of fear. "Please stop them, or they'll surely kill me."

The shopkeeper's panic-stricken babble cuts off in a ghastly moan of pain as Hargen bashes his head against the wall, tired of his whining flow of words. The Teckla's unconscious body falls heavily to the ground, but Hargen is already leaving the shop, absorbed by thoughts of a possible meeting with Alexei and Boris.

*If Hargen goes to the brownstone immediately, turn to section 108.*

*If Hargen waits until nightfall before going to the brownstone, turn to section 36.*

## Sections 86, 87

### \* 86 \*

Finally, Hargen is able to remove enough of the stones in the wall to make an opening large enough to ease through into the recessed area, where the trap wall had once been located. Filthy and exhausted from his efforts, he lies still for several moments, letting his lungs drink in the fresh air. One more indignity I owe Esteban for, he thinks to himself. Rising angrily to his feet, Hargen walks back down the corridor to the intersection, and turns down the other fork.

*Turn to section 30.*

### \* 87 \*

Though Hargen feels his blood surge at the Jhereg's veiled insult, he fights to keep his temper down. He needs this cocky Easterner's help—for now. "A wise suggestion," Hargen mutters as a waiter quickly appears at Vlad's elbow and escorts the pair to a booth in a quieter corner of the room. In a moment he returns with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"So tell me, Taltos," Hargen asks, in the deprecating tone he usually reserves for his servants, "how do you come to call yourself a Jhereg, and have one as a pet?"

"My father bought our Imperial citizenship over

twenty years ago," Vlad answers with thinly veiled patience, taking a sip from his glass. "But Loiosh I got myself by bargaining with his mother, and raised him from birth. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious, Taltos, about how strong your ties to Dragaera are. The matter I have come to speak to you about concerns Easterners who may represent a threat to the Empire. As a Lord of the House of Dzur, I must be sure you will not abuse this confidence for your own financial gain."

Vlad flashes Hargen a smile that contains a glint of malice. "I assure you, Lord Hargen, that I have always given House Dzur all the respect it deserves. Now, how may I serve the Empire?"

Taking a deep breath, Hargen begins his tale. He describes the events that have recently taken place, including the contents of the letters, though he leaves out any mention of his own presence at the murder scene.

For several minutes Vlad listens in silence. Hargen begins to get upset, thinking that Vlad has lost interest. When he has finished, Vlad remains quiet until Hargen says, his voice beginning to rise, "Have you anything useful to say about this, Taltos, or have I just wasted my time talking to a deaf post?"

"No, Lord Hargen, you did not waste your time. However, a matter as delicate as this must be handled in an appropriate manner. I have some resources at my disposal that can perhaps be put to use on your behalf."

"What do you mean?"

## Section 87

"You are looking for two individuals. If you were to seek them out personally, it might attract enough attention to force them into hiding. If I use my own resources, your chances of finding them will be much improved. If you wish my aid, I offer it freely."

Hargen thinks to himself, Just like a Jhereg, always hiding in the shadows. Still, he does appear to know what needs to be done and does work with Castle Black. Though I don't trust him entirely, I will wait and see what he can produce.

Out loud, he says, "Very well, Taltos, I accept your offer. What should I do in the meantime, while you are out looking?"

"Go home and wait. It shouldn't take too long to find some trace of their whereabouts, especially if one of them has been living in Adrilankha for some time. Once I have some information, I'll get in touch with you."

"Very well. I will await your results with interest. If I do not hear from you within a day, I will come here looking for you."

If the Jhereg notices Hargen's veiled threat, he ignores it. "Agreed. And I don't think an entire day will be necessary."

Pompous vagabond, Hargen thinks to himself as he finishes his wine. Next time, he will not find me so easy to deal with. The Dzurlord's mood is not improved by the discovery that Vlad has left him with the bill for their drinks.

The hours after Hargen returns home pass with interminable slowness. "He'd better not have tricked

me," he repeats to himself over and over as he paces about his spacious living room, imagining a variety of painful revenges he will inflict on the Jhereg if he fails. Finally, however, a messenger—the same boy who served them at the Blue Flame—knocks on the door and hands Hargen a brief note.

"It took longer than I expected," the note reads. "For your foes have covered their tracks well. Nonetheless, I have learned that the Easterner called Boris has been seen on several occasions entering an old brownstone on River Street. Perhaps you can find the information you seek there."

Though Hargen remains suspicious of Vlad's motives, this brownstone is his first concrete lead. He decides he must follow it up, regardless of the possible consequences. But should he go there immediately, or wait until nightfall?

*If Hargen goes to the brownstone immediately, turn to section 108.*

*If Hargen waits and goes to the brownstone after dark, turn to section 36.*

\* **88** \*

The hours pass, and still Morrolan has not come downstairs. Hargen has formulated his idea into a course of action. Now all he has to do is wait.

Morrolan, he thinks, was no help to me tonight. I'm

## Section 88

getting tired of waiting, so I suppose I'll have to do everything myself.

Hargen takes a position in the shadows by the bottom of the stairs and waits for the Easterners to come down. After a short time, he hears footfalls on the marble and the murmur of conversation from above. He sees Morrolan and the two Easterners reach the bottom of the stairs and decides it is time to make his move.

He casually saunters out of his hiding place toward the group. As he bids Morrolan a good evening, he bumps into one of the Easterners and spills a glass of wine on his jerkin. "Sorry," he slurs, trying to act drunk. "Too much wine, I think." He makes a sloppy attempt at brushing off the Easterner's clothes.

The Easterner backs away from him—a drunken Dzur is not usually a good person to run into—and says, "Th-that's all right, Lord."

Morrolan interrupts, laying his hand on Hargen's shoulder, "Are you in control of yourself, Hargen?"

"Yes, Morrolan," he says, "I only had an accident. Can't you see?" While he is talking, Hargen watches as the Easterners leave. They go quickly, not looking back.

"By the way," says the Dragonlord, "did you wish to see me about something?"

"No. Not anymore. I took care of it myself; it wasn't important after all." He thanks Morrolan for his kindness and takes his leave. The Easterners are already gone when he gets outside. He makes sure no one has followed him.

No one has.

Drawing from the Imperial Orb for power, Hargen concentrates on his memory of the Easterners. For a moment, it glows in a swirl of energy and then dissipates. An image of a storefront (a pawnshop?) comes to him, and he knows that is where he will have to go. The spell has been successful.

I may not know who they are, he thinks, but now I know where I can find them.

*Turn to section 114.*

\* **89** \*

The corridor to the left coils back and forth like a snake. In the dim light, the Dzurlord imagines menace around each corner—yet no one emerges to assail him, and the only sound he hears is the incessant drip of water somewhere in the distance. Finally he comes to a second intersection. He can see, down the passage to the left, an oak door, secured by a single latch; the path to the right is freshly rutted, as if a heavily laden handcart had recently passed that way.

*If Hargen turns to the left, turn to section 32.*

*If Hargen turns to the right, turn to section 30.*



Lazarus's office is less than a mile from his own apartments, but Hargen makes it a longer trip by cutting through side streets and alleyways to shake off any trackers. When he finally shuts and bolts the door behind him, he conducts a thorough search of his own rooms. At last he slumps into an armchair and lets the tension seep out of him.

Reaching into his tunic, he draws out the packet of letters and undoes the bright ribbon. What could be in here worth dying for? he wonders to himself as he begins to examine the contents.

He slowly flips through the letters. There are two correspondents, both with names that suggest Easterner ancestry. The first of them, Alexei, is from out of town, and writes in a spidery, cramped hand, while the other, Boris, writes from Adrilankha in a bolder, sprawling script. A quick scan suggests that Alexei is the brighter of the two, as his writing sometimes lapses into weighty discussions of the many faults of the Empire and of Dragaerans in general, though Hargen begins to question Alexei's intelligence when he reads of a prophecy of doom predicting a great storm over Dzur Mountain and a famine in the East. To Hargen, naturally, Easterners lie somewhere below vermin on the scale of things; he can well afford to take this invective all in stride. Yet it offers no clue to

explain why a Dragaeran assassin might come after Lazarus with a blade.

Hargen's frustration rises. A Dzur hero always finds it difficult to sit about waiting, and Hargen feels like hurling the letters into the blazing fire to assuage his anger. He gathers them into his lap—

—And suddenly a line of text seems to leap out of the page atop the pile, commanding his attention: "Thus the Empire will be laid low forever."

Taking the single sheet in his hand, he reads through the letter carefully. It is from Alexei to Boris, and its date is less than ten days before Hargen himself was killed in the corridor in Castle Black.

"At the Feast of Verra we shall strike," Alexei writes. "We shall damage the Dragaeran fools more severely even than Adron's Disaster, and this time they will not have the means to recover. And when chaos rolls across their precious Empire, and sorcery no longer functions, it is we who shall at last reign supreme . . . Thus the Empire will be laid low forever."

The Feast of Verra is only a few days hence, Hargen knows. There is clearly little time to lose—but what can he do?

Slowly, the Dzurlord reviews what he has learned so far. There is a major plot of some kind against the Empire, about which Lazarus somehow learned, which involves two Easterners, Alexei and Boris. Clearly they had Lazarus killed, in hopes of recovering these incriminating letters. If Hargen had not

## Section 90

killed the assassin, he would be dead as well, and this plot would have been carried out with no one to head it off.

But now Hargen has a chance to foil the Easterners' scheme, and avenge his friend's death. Yet there are also many important questions still unanswered. Is Hargen's own death part of the plot? Where did the Easterners get the power needed to break through Lazarus's defenses? And, most importantly, what nefarious act do the conspirators hope to pull off at the Feast of Verra that would "lay the Empire low"?

Plainly the best way to get these answers is to locate and capture Alexei and Boris. And, try as he might, Hargen can think of only two ways to accomplish this feat.

He could return to Castle Black and speak with Morrolan. Or he could try to find out something about the Easterners by asking the Easterner Jhereg who serves as security chief at Castle Black—Vlad Taltos. Taltos is seldom at Castle Black, but Hargen is aware that the Jhereg owns a tavern in a lower section of Adrilankha, the Blue Flame.

*If Hargen goes to Castle Black, turn to section 10.*

*If Hargen goes to the Blue Flame in search of Vlad, turn to section 48.*

\* 91 \*

In the darkness, Hargen feels himself drifting gently downward for what seems like an eternity. The sensation alternately terrifies and exhilarates him, with both feelings ultimately giving way to an overwhelming sense of tranquility. Dimly he recalls that there was something important he had to do, but it no longer seems to matter now. Hargen gives himself over to the gentle rhythms of the darkness and leaves all thought behind him for a time.

Finally the Dzur is roused from his reverie to the sound of a familiar voice. "Damn it, Hargen, you're not going to spend the rest of eternity just floating, are you? Zerika still has a lot to do and can't wait around here forever to say farewell."

Opening his eyes, Hargen sees that he is lying on his back under the willow, in the Paths of the Dead, with Lazarus and the Empress standing nearby.

"Lazarus," the Dzur growls, trying to focus his hazy thoughts. "What happened? And why are you talking about eternity, and saying farewell?"

"Perhaps you'd better let me handle this, healer," Zerika murmurs softly but firmly, brushing past Lazarus to bend over Hargen. "Lord Hargen," she says, "the strain of our enchantment proved too much for you. Though we tried our best to save you, we could not. I am truly sorry."

## Section 91

Though this news surprises Hargen, it somehow does not shock him as much as he would have expected. Further contemplation is driven to the background as the Empress continues to speak.

“Hopefully, Lord Hargen, you can take some comfort from this: Our efforts were successful in revealing the hideout of the traitor Meraste. I expect to capture him and his Easterner cohorts by nightfall. When the Orb is recovered, both you and Lazarus will be hailed as heroes, and will be given the highest honors the Empire can bestow. Now, I must go, for there is much to be done. But I thank you again, for the sacrifice you have made.”

As Zerika's figure recedes into the distance, Hargen lets her words run through his head. Truly, he *is* a hero, giving his life to save the Orb. And it pleases Hargen greatly to think of future generations of Dzur learning his name, along with the other names of famous heroes, just as he did in his youth. Since one must ultimately die, it is only fitting that one die nobly.

THE END (80 points of a possible 100)

## \* 92 \*

Hargen shows Lazarus the black pearl ring he wears and tells him Sethra's words concerning it. "Rub the pearl when all else fails, she said, and all your enemies will be destroyed. But she also warned me that its power could only be used once. If all the lost souls on the Paths of the Dead will truly seek to prevent me from leaving this desolate place, will even the talisman be enough?"

Lazarus surprises the Dzurlord with a hearty laugh. "Perhaps there is hope for you yet, Hargen," he says, still laughing. "You have done well to avoid using the talisman before this. Now you surprise me further by showing the foresight to think *before* you act. As you surmised, even a talisman as powerful as Sethra's magic could create has its limitation. Yet, if luck is with us, there may be a way."

Lazarus begins to sketch a simple map in the dirt by the shore of the lake. "Nothing that abides in these lands is completely reliable, including the terrain, but there are basically only three routes that will lead you to the surface. Two of these are the judgement gate and the jhereg gate, back toward the way you came in. Both of them are likely to be blocked by angry souls who by now have heard of your passing. Taking either of those routes would place you in jeopardy with no chance of aid. Using the talisman to destroy fifty foes is useless when so many more lie beyond.

## Section 92

“The third route lies beyond and below us, deep in the bowels of the earth. Few of the dead even sojourn there, and those who do are among the most ghastly villains the Empire has ever produced. If you cast a spell over yourself to avoid detection, and move cautiously along this path, I believe you can make it almost to the surface before you have to fight. Between the talisman and your own inborn fighting talent, that should be enough.”

Filled with optimism by the healer’s words, Hargen feels a rush of energy surge within him. Surely this is the stuff of legend, the source of songs, a quest to truly test a Dzur’s heroic mettle! To back away from such a challenge would be unthinkable.

“I will do what must be done to save the Empire—and to avenge your death, Lazarus—never fear.”

Lazarus’s smile now bears the bemused, rather affectionate look he so often had in life. “Yes, Hargen; I think you just might do that. Verra speed you to your destination and glory.”

*Turn to section 35.*



\* **93** \*

Hargen's rage burns deep within him, but the anger grows stronger, rushing to escape. Starting as a low growl, it vents itself in a frenzied scream from his warrior past.

He lifts his sword, steps within range of Esteban, and swings—a mighty blow—all in one deft movement. This is what Dzur are meant to do; this is what they do best. The blade catches Esteban's head just below the ear. It is messy, but swift and final.

The primal scream subsides, and Hargen moves in to examine his target. Esteban is dead. No chance for revivification, as his brains are sloppily scattered across the floor among shards of skull.

The satisfaction Hargen feels is strong. Revenge is sweet, and it is finally his. He has righted the wrong, and so his murder will no longer plague him with dishonor. He has avenged his death.

THE END (30 points of a possible 100)

## Section 94

# \* 94 \*

The Dzurlord moves cautiously, groping for the slab. Putting all of his strength into the effort, he tries again and again to force the stone aside, but he fails.

Sitting heavily on the dirt floor of his crude prison, Hargen's anger slowly subsides into cold rage edged with despair. Clearly brute force will not get him out of this trap—he will have to think his way out. If the stone slab will not budge, perhaps some other part of the room will yield more willingly. He feels through his wet shirt that the wall he's leaning against is not solid stone, like the others he has walked beside, but rather old masonry. This may be his chance!

Taking out his dagger, Hargen begins to chip away at the wall. The mortar is old and cracked, and yields readily to his efforts. Grimly the Dzur realizes that he is also fighting against time as well, for the air around him is growing increasingly stuffy, and his breath has started to come in short gasps.

*Roll 3 D6 against Hargen's Constitution value.*

*If the roll is equal to or less than his Constitution value, turn to section 86.*

*If the roll is greater than his Constitution value, turn to section 97.*

**\* 95 \***

As Hargen's fingers rub the surface of the black pearl, the air around him explodes in a flash of white heat that temporarily blinds him. As the smell of burnt flesh fills the air, Hargen hears the anguished screams of a voice too much like his own as the power of the talisman courses through his double. Then, seconds later, he finds himself sinking to his knees as his own insides ignite with searing pain before he loses consciousness.

*Mark nine points of damage on Hargen's record sheet. If this is sufficient to kill Hargen, turn to section 29. Otherwise continue reading the remainder of this section.*

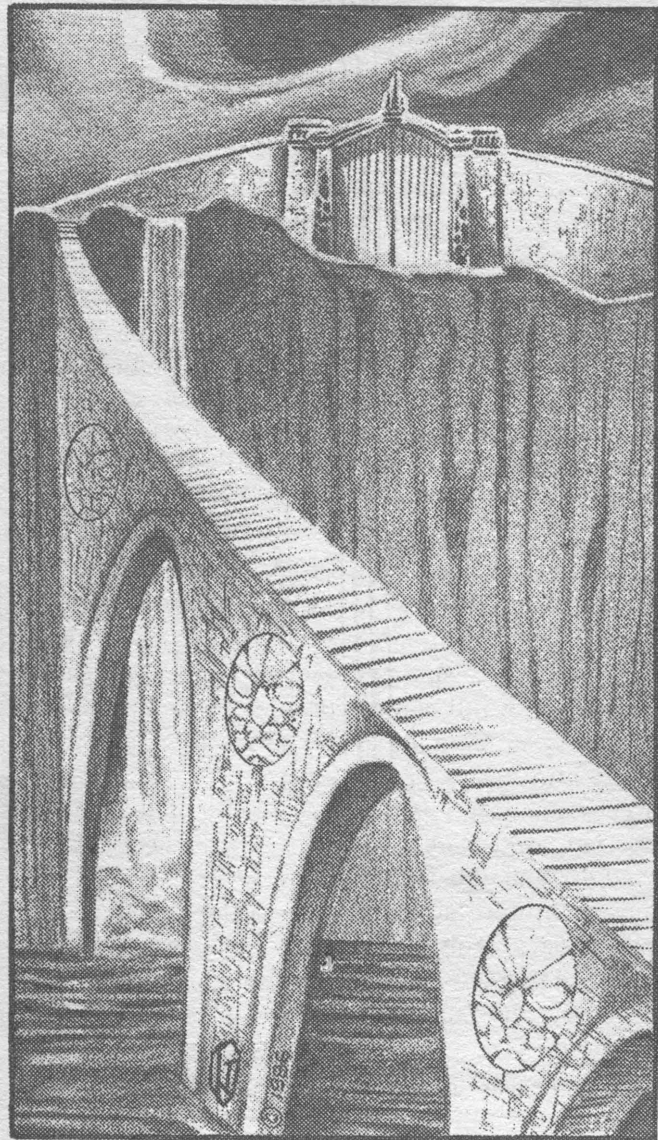
When Hargen awakens, it is all too obvious to him now that the duplicate Hargen was somehow drawn from his own body and that destroying it with the talisman was not a good idea. Unfortunately, this realization does not make the pain that still courses through Hargen's body from head to toe any easier to bear. Dragging himself gingerly to his feet, Hargen surveys the area around him and notices that the mist that had overhung the valley has disappeared.

*Turn to section 101.*

A Dzur hero is taught to always have a wellspring of resolve to draw upon. Hargen reaches out and draws his about himself like a cloak, and he begins to climb the long set of steps that run beside the falls to the great gate. He deftly leaps from stone to stone across the one level spot in the falls and finds himself standing before the great gate. It stands open, invitingly, as though the shades beyond seem reluctant—or unable—to step back into the land of the living. As he passes through and thus among them, they crowd around him, trying to touch his living flesh, trying to feel what it is like to be alive again, or perhaps only to have something warm and alive near them for a time, in this cold and desolate land.

As he continues to walk slowly and purposefully into the misty darkness beyond the gate, the group around him grows in size. They crowd closer and closer, their vacant eyes staring at him somehow, their thin, pale arms reaching out to touch his arms and his face. He fends them off gently and then more forcefully as they jostle him. He stops for a moment as several of the shades cut off his avenue of advance, and he turns to see that they have also blocked his retreat.

A living man among the shadows of the dead, he is trapped in an ever-growing circle, and for the first time he begins to feel fear grow in the pit of his stomach.



## Section 96

The dead begin to murmur to themselves in pleasure as they crowd nearer to Hargen. He can see them all close up now, looking as they last did in life: victims of the sword cut or the deadly pox, some without limbs or organs, but all resolved to reach him, to touch him . . . to possess some of his life for their own.

Then, just when he feels as if he will be crushed in the press, the dead back away from Hargen, turning in fear and parting before him. But before he can take a single step forward to continue his quest, he sees a group of well-armed ghosts making their way forward toward where he stands. The murmuring stops in the crowd and is replaced by an even more frightening silence.

The crowd gives way to the men-at-arms like mice surrendering territory to powerful cats. Without speaking, the group approaches Hargen, to stand before him in full battle array. As the silence lengthens, Hargen takes an opportunity to study those before him.

They are Dzur, there is no doubt of that. Their muscled arms would indicate their warrior backgrounds, and the faces they wore in life bear that unusual upward slant peculiar to the House of Heroes. Hargen notes that the leader is wearing clothing of a style popular before the Interregnum.

At last, the leader of the group speaks. "I am Emperor Talasar, of House Dzur. To go beyond this point as living flesh, brother of my House, you must fight me and my sixteen followers, Dzur champions

all. If you are fortunate—or skillful—enough to do so, you may pass unmolested through the lands of the dead. If you fail . . . you need think no further about leaving this path alive.”

Hargen looks about him, at the expectant, silent dead all about him, and then at the captain of the seventeen Dzur heroes before him. He realizes then that, even if he wished to turn back, that choice had not been offered him.

*If Hargen decides to engage in combat with the seventeen Dzur heroes, turn to section 79.*

*If he decides to use the talisman given him by Lady Sethra, turn to section 45.*

## \* 97 \*

Though he digs furiously, Hargen finds that he has only succeeded in consuming the remaining air in the passageway. He tries to press on against his rapidly increasing dizziness, but finally finds the effort too much. Sinking to the ground as his head spins, the Dzur's last living thoughts are unpleasant ones—for Esteban has won!

*Turn to section 29.*



## Section 98

### \* 98 \*

Madly he reaches out for the Orb and concentrates, striving to place himself next to it, so that he can protect it bodily, but instead he seems to bounce off a wall. The next moment he finds himself sprawling, breathless, in the palace's front hall, surrounded by suspicious guards.

"Let me through!" he bellows, scrambling to his feet. "The Orb is in danger! I must warn the Empress!"

A huge hand pushes him back roughly, and he hits the floor once again. "What do you mean, danger?" asks the guard who shoved him, smiling unpleasantly. "The Orb floats near the Empress as it always has. There is nothing wrong with it. Who are you to come in braying of danger to the Orb, heh?"

*Roll against Hargen's charisma value.*

*If the roll is greater than its value, turn to section 13.*

*If the roll is equal to or less than its value, turn to section 37.*

## \* 99 \*

Over the decades that Hargen has been a hero, he has learned several valuable lessons, sometimes at the cost of a temporary interruption in his life and career. One of those lessons, one which probably marked the boundary between impetuous youth and mature herohood, was that heroism was far more than charging in blindly and laying about with one's sword, especially if one might be far outnumbered and has other options available.

Hargen knows that he has heard at least three or four distinct voices above him, and that the odds are good that there are a few more up there, since Easterners, like dogs, tend to run in packs. He is more than a match for even half a dozen Easterners, especially if they are trained merely in inadequate fencing techniques, but ten or more might be a few too many for even him to handle. If the Empire is truly in danger—and it seems all too likely that it is, even though it is merely Easterners plotting its downfall—then prudence, as much as he hates to admit it, seems the best course.

Hearing footfalls in the hallway above, the Dzurlord quickly reaches out to the Imperial Orb and feels its power flood through him. He rapidly fashions a teleport spell and finds himself in Issola Square, several dozen blocks away, facing the nearest barracks of the Phoenix Guards.

## Section 99

After regaining his bearings, Hargen walks quickly up to the barracks door, where two Phoenix Guards, resplendent in their gaudy uniforms, obstruct the entrance.

"I am Lord Hargen of House Dzur. I wish to speak with the captain of the guard," Hargen says, straightening to his full height.

One of the guards nods and beckons Hargen to follow. Hargen walks with the guard along a narrow corridor, hung with portraits of noble-featured Dragaerans in guards' uniforms, and follows him through a set of ornate double-doors.

"Lord Hargen of House Dzur to see you, Captain," the guard says brusquely and departs, shutting the doors behind him.

The captain, a barrel-chested Dragon, motions Hargen to an armchair and takes one himself. From the open balcony door beyond, the Dzur can hear the sound of tramping feet on a parade ground below.

"To what do the Phoenix Guards owe this honor, Lord Hargen," the guardsman growls at last.

"I have come to report a threat to the Empire, Captain. Do you know of an Easterner named Alexei, or perhaps one named Boris?"

"There is a fellow named Boris who works as a small-time enforcer in the Easterner ghetto, Lord Hargen. Of what interest could a man of such dubious credentials be to one such as yourself?"

"I have evidence to the effect that he is a member of a group of Easterners seeking to destroy our Empire by stealing the Orb."

"Surely you are not serious," says the captain. "Easterners could not possibly do such a thing."

"I expect them to try, Captain. They are seeking to fulfill some sort of prophecy." Hargen calmly relates what he has just overheard, and all that he has learned since he left Lazarus's office, which seems to be an eternity ago.

"This is hardly *proof*—"

"The Phoenix Guards cannot round up a group of Easterner scum without proof of guilt? Would you wait for them to steal the Orb and plunge the Empire into chaos?"

"Really, Lord Hargen, there is no need—"

Hargen begins to rise from his chair angrily, but forces himself to remain calm. "Captain. Good Captain. I overheard the conspirators agree to meet at their hideout"—he mentions the address where he has just been—"twelve hours before the Feast of Verra begins. If your guardsmen will join me there, we can round up the whole lot. Consider this, if you will: if my story is . . . somewhere short of the truth, you will have taken a dozen or more thieving scum from the streets of Adrilankha, and no harm will be done to honest citizens of the Empire.

"If, on the other hand, my story is true, your quick action will surely make you a hero in the eyes of our good Empress. I would say, sir, that you truly cannot lose."

The Dragon thinks on this for a moment, but Hargen can guess from the look on the captain's face how it will turn out.

## Section 100

“Very well, Lord Hargen,” he says at last. “We will round up this group of ne’er-do-wells. Just in case.”

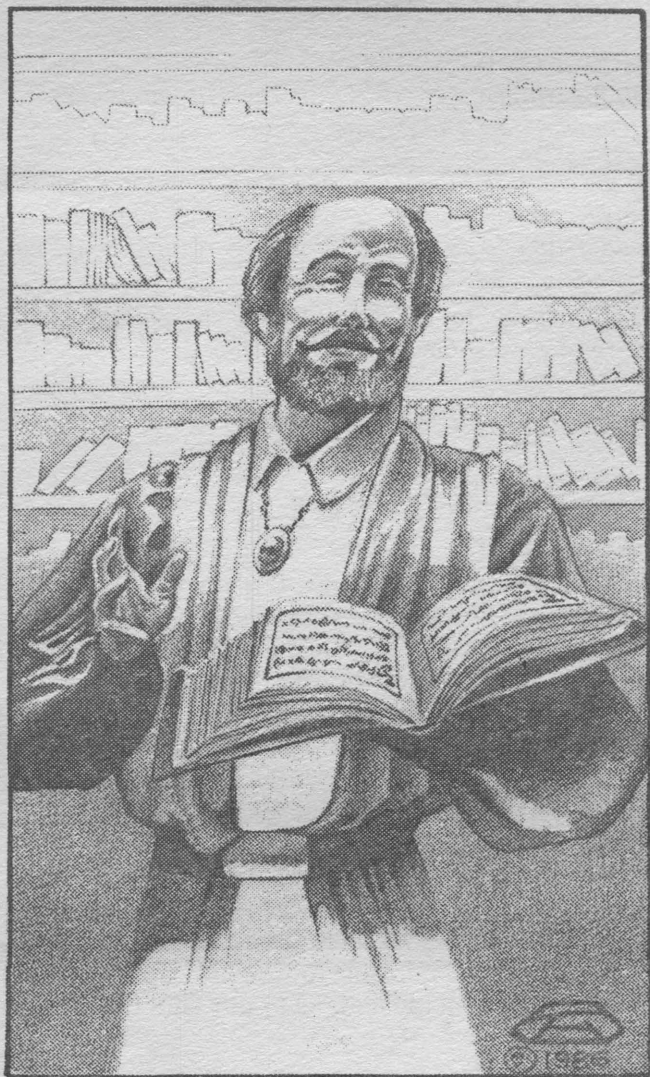
*Turn to section 14.*

## \* 100 \*

The hallway to the right bends sharply around a corner into a somewhat wider, dimly lit corridor inset with nooks and crannies. Dangerous territory. After stealthily advancing another thirty feet or so, Hargen comes to a closed door secured by a heavy padlock; a set of keys hangs from a hook across from the door. The Dzurlord edges cautiously forward, sword in hand, and places his ear to the door, but he can hear nothing but the steady lap of water somewhere in the distance.

His curiosity gets the best of him. Who knows what Esteban guards with such care! Hargen unlocks and unbars the door and swings it back, revealing steps down to a short, dark passageway. The air within is damp and musty, and the floor of the passage appears to be hip deep in water.

Ah, well, nothing wrong with getting a little wet, Hargen consoles himself as he wades into the murky pool. But before he can move a few feet, he hears a splash off to his right. His worst nightmare comes true as a gigantic tentacle lashes out and grasps him around the waist, dragging him inexorably forward toward the ugly beak of a horrifying creature!



## Section 101

### GIANT OCTOPUS

*To hit Hargen: 12 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 15  
Tentacles do 1 D6 damage per turn.*

*If the creature should damage Hargen on three consecutive combat rounds, it will drag the hero into its mouth and do an additional 1 D6 chewing damage per round.*

*If Hargen is unable to defeat the creature, turn to section 29.*

*If Hargen defeats the creature, turn to section 67.*

## \* 101 \*

With the clearing of the mist, Hargen can see that the valley ahead narrows to a steep, rocky defile that leads down to the banks of a pleasant lake. Clambering down the slope as quickly as he can, Hargen is glad to leave the bizarre realm of Adron's shade behind him. Stopping at the water's edge, Hargen bends over to take a drink—and finds a dozen faces staring up at him unblinkingly through the lake's dark waters.

Backing away, the Dzur sees that the bottom of the lake is covered with bodies, their arms and legs contorted in death. "By the Demon Goddess! What has brought these poor souls to this sad pass?" Hargen murmurs out loud, unable to turn his eyes away from this grim tableau. "Is nothing in this land free of foul surprises?"



"They're victims of drowning, you teckla-brained idiot! They're more comfortable there!"

Even before he turns, Hargen knows that the high-pitched voice behind him can only belong to Lazarus. But never before has he heard the healer's voice colored with such hatred.

"They're the souls lost at sea, never found, or never considered to be worth revivification. I wish to Verra your assassin had drowned you instead; then I would never have made the mistake of saving your misbegotten life!"

"Lazarus!" Hargen opens his arms wide. "Lazarus, I've found you at last. I'm sorry about what happened to you. I'm sorry I played any part in your death. You know that if I could undo it, I would."

Lazarus looks precisely the same as he did in his last hour, down to the robes he was wearing, except that his eyes are now bulging in their sockets, his hands are balled into tightly clenched fists, and his face is beet-red. "Sorry! . . . Part you played! . . ." He sputters in near apoplexy, striding back and forth in front of Hargen like a jhegaala.

"*You* were the Verra-be-damned murder weapon. You murdered me as surely as if you shoved that blade between my ribs yourself. From the moment I learned that you had been killed, it was obvious that you were the bait to bring me out into the open, outside the web of my defensive spells. But I came out anyway, because you were my friend, and because letting you die would have violated everything I believed in.

## Section 101

“When I wasn’t immediately attacked, I knew that they had been more clever than I had thought. They had obviously planted some mechanism on you that would deactivate my defenses. It was child’s play to deduce that the trap was in the very blade that killed you and that I had to avoid setting it off. After all, even if I couldn’t disarm the blade without alerting my enemies that their plan was discovered, it would no longer be a threat to me.

“Until my fool of a patient decided to get up off his bed and poke around my surgery!”

The healer’s tirade stings Hargen to his soul. Never has he felt less like a hero, and more like a fool. “I am truly sorry, Lazarus. I never meant to harm you; I thought I could help. And I did at least kill your assassin before he could steal some of your letters.”

“You did, eh?” Lazarus’s knotted brow smooths somewhat. “Well, that’s something saved, at least. I suppose I should have known better than to get friendly with a Dzur in the first place.” His eyebrows slant upward, and he looks at Hargen inquisitively. “But why indeed have you come here, Hargen? Surely not to be berated by a dead man?”

“I found out about the Easterners who were plotting to overthrow the Empire, and I started to make some investigation. When I learned how far their ambition reached, Vlad Taltos suggested I go see Sethra Lavode—and Sethra asked me to come here and find out what else you knew about what they’re plotting.”

“Is the Orb still safe then?” Lazarus asks anxiously,

his voice quickening with anxiety. "Has Zerika been told to double the palace guards for the duration of the Feast of Verra?"

Hargen stares open-mouthed at Lazarus, unable to believe his ears. The Orb is the target! He had been so close to the answer himself, and yet . . . "But, Lazarus," he manages, "how can a raggle-taggle band of Easterners hope to steal the Orb? They haven't enough sorcery between them even to set their watches, let alone snatch the Orb from over Zerika's head!"

Lazarus groans as his eyes flash angrily. "You haven't learned a thing from this entire disaster, have you, you pea-brained idiot! Easterners alone could never steal the Orb, but Easterners aided by Yendi sorcerors just might pull it off."

"Yendi!" In Hargen's brain the light begins to dawn. "But there was never any trace of Yendi involvement."

"Of course not. A Yendi would never leave a straightforward trail. No, the signs were in what wasn't there: the fact that Alexei, the apparent brains of the conspirators, needed to take time before answering his associates' questions about the theft, the question of where the Easterners got the capital to finance their plan in the first place. Most important of all, there was the fact that no one I talked to seemed to know where their age-old 'prophecy of doom' had come from in the first place. All together, these little flaws were enough to set me digging deeper, in search of a bigger plot."

## Section 101

His sharp gray eyes now vividly alight with excitement, the healer continues his thoughts. "I suppose I could have hired some jhereg to trail the Easterners, in hopes that they would make contact with their employer. But I decided that the key to the whole puzzle was the prophecy.

"I spent several days sifting through the records of the Lyorn, trying to find the first mention of the desecration of the Feast of Verra. Finally I found what I was seeking, buried in the text of an otherwise unnoteworthy local history from one of our outlying provinces—an Eastern province. And it turned out the town's historian that year was a Yendi named Meraste, who just happens to be presently residing in Adrilankha, working with a trading company that imports Eastern goods.

"When the names of Alexei and two of his associates turned up on that company's payroll, I felt certain I had my man."

Lazarus is barely pausing to draw breath; the words push out of him in a torrent. All his thinking on the subject, dead and alive, is welling out of him unstoppably.

"I knew I had to move carefully because my proof was circumstantial, and Meraste is much respected in the Empress's social circle as well as being a powerful sorcerer. In watching him, I actually came to develop a grudging respect for the man as well. He is bold as brass and absolutely convinced that his centuries-long crusade is justified.

"You see, Hargen, Meraste argues that the cycle of

Dragaeran leadership has become outdated and inefficient, certainly not an unreasonable contention. We switch from House to House without any sort of continuity, while the methods that each House uses to pick its future Emperors are often little better than random rolls of a die.

“Meraste believes that only one House should rule the Empire and control the power of the Orb—the House of Yendi. His plan is to have the Orb stolen in such a way that the rest of the Empire believes it to be utterly destroyed and stops relying on it as the focus of their sorcery. Then, later, after the furor has died down, Meraste would bring out the Orb from its hiding place and make its power the private preserve of the Yendi.

“Somehow Meraste learned I was on to him, and that I had gotten hold of the letters between Alexei and Boris. From that point on, it was a game of yendi and issola, in which I somehow managed to stay one step ahead. Until *your* intervention gave Meraste the opening he needed. But now you can make up for your blunder, Dzurlord! Take this story back to Sethra and thwart Meraste’s grand scheme once and for all!”

Hargen has been so intent on committing Lazarus’s story to memory that its end takes him by surprise. “Yes. To Sethra. Right away. I’ll just tell her and she’ll . . . um . . . hmm. But how do I get back to Sethra?”

“What do you mean?” Lazarus says.

“How do I get out of here to tell Sethra what you’ve just told me?” Hargen asks patiently.

## Section 102

Lazarus looks at him with genuine surprise. "Surely Sethra gave you some magical means of making your escape? I don't know what kind of trouble you had reaching me, but I can tell you this—the dead do not let any leave this place, or if they must, they don't leave them untouched."

*If Hargen has not yet used the talisman, turn to section 92.*

*If Hargen has already used the talisman, turn to section 51.*

## \* 102 \*

Appalled by the effrontery of these foul scum, Hargen decides he must not take the chance of any of them escaping. He charges up the stairs and bursts the door open. He finds himself in a short hallway with an open door at the other end. There is a sentry standing there, but he is so surprised by Hargen's approach that he is barely able to react to the Dzur hero's attack. A single sword-swipe dispatches him, and Hargen bounds into the room that the sentry had been guarding.

The room is lit by a large lantern set on a small wooden table with rickety legs, draped with a ragged green cloth, like the sort used on shareba tables in gambling parlors. Two chairs are pulled up at the table, with Easterners sitting in them. To his dismay,

Hargen notices that the room is also filled with other ruffians, some with weapons in hand, some with weapons at the ready.

One of the seated Easterners looks up at him and smiles nastily. "Why, if it isn't Lord Hargen," says the voice the Dzur recognizes as that of Alexei. "How nice of you to join us."

Alexei turns toward the assortment of roustabouts, toughs, and muscle standing about him. "Kill him."

### EASTERNERS

*To hit Hargen: 13 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 9*

*Damage with rapier: D6*

### BORIS

*To hit Hargen: 12 To be hit: 12 Hit points: 14*

*Damage with mace: D6+2*

### ALEXEI

*To hit Hargen: 11 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 12*

*Damage with rapier: 1 D6+1*

*The Easterners will attack Hargen one at a time, followed by Boris, then Alexei.*

*If Hargen wins the fight, turn to section 112.*

*If Hargen loses the fight, turn to section 52.*



Though his patience has been rubbed raw by all the waiting he has had to endure, Hargen realizes that hasty action *could* cause a problem. The last thing he wants is to arouse Morrolan's anger—he needs his help. A good warrior, his teachers taught him years ago, never makes enemies out of friends.

Besides, reasons Hargen, I'm curious to see what these Easterners have which could make Morrolan want to see them in the first place.

Quietly he slips into the room. Both Easterners glance up at him, startled; Morrolan takes notice of his entrance, but continues to examine a large book which sits on the table. Moving past them, Hargen takes a seat by the window. Knowing that he is being watched, he tries to act disinterested.

"So, gentlemen," says Morrolan as he continues to look at the book, "can you tell me how you were able to find this book? It's really quite rare."

Both men look at each other, then one says, "Not much to tell, really. I saw it in a pawnshop in our part of town. I knew the owner, so I asked him if I could show it to you." He pauses a moment. "Your hobby is well known, Lord. Anyway, he agreed, with the condition that I bring along his helper as a witness." He points to his companion. "If you buy it, I split the money with him."

"Do you know what this book contains?" asks Morrolan.

"No, not really, but I know it's about some kind of sorcery. That's why I brought it to you."

Morrolan's voice takes on a respectful hush. "This book has to do with the sorcery used before the founding of our Empire. This kind of information is very old, and not much is known about it. So I have a strong interest in the book. What is its price?"

The two Easterners confer, and after a bit of bargaining, they settle on a mutually agreeable sum. Morrolan shakes their hands, and they leave, jiggling gold Imperials.

Hargen, who has been listening to the entire exchange, feels that there is something amiss. The whole thing just went too smoothly, he thinks. Like it was planned this way.

Morrolan walks over to the Dzur hero after storing away his newest acquisition. "Good evening, Hargen," he says as he sits down. "I noticed you waiting here in the corner. Is there something *I can do for you?*"

"Yes, there is, but first I have a question: Do you really believe that story those Easterners told you?"

"Why do you ask?" replies Morrolan.

"I've never known Easterners to have anything valuable that they did not steal. I think they're hiding something."

"Perhaps," says Morrolan, "but does it matter? I have the book now, and at a good price. How they got

## Section 103

their hands on it doesn't concern me. Besides, what has value to some may not to others. Easterners would have no use for books about sorcery, is that not true?"

"Yes," concedes Hargen.

"Now what can I do for you?"

Hargen tells his story, including all he knows about Alexei and Boris, and then hands over the dagger that was his murder weapon. Morrolan examines it silently.

After a few long minutes, Hargen asks, "What do you make of it, Lord?"

"Unfortunately, this knife tells me nothing. If I may, I'd like to keep it."

"Not if that's all you can tell me!"

"Patience, Hargen. I am as anxious to catch your killer as you are. If he turns out to be a Jhereg, it will mean war between our Houses." He returns the dagger and continues, "As for you, you should never, *never*, underestimate me. It so happens I have procured the address of the shop the Easterners spoke of. If you have any suspicions about them, then I suggest you go there. In the meantime, I'll see what I can uncover on this end with the information you've given me."

Hargen stands and says, "Thank you, Lord; I *will* follow your advice. I can't say I like it, but I seem to have no choice." He turns to leave. "And please, keep me informed if you find anything."

"Certainly," says Morrolan.

*Turn to section 114.*

\* 104 \*

Though Hargen rebels at the very thought of a noble dzur slain to feed jhereg, he realizes that his quest is far more important than the lives of a few beasts, however noble they may be. *"I accept your bargain, guardian,"* Hargen growls telepathically as his hand edges reflexively toward the hilt of his blade. *"Now, may I pass?"*

*"Yes, Dzurlord. May your life be long, and your quest successful."*

Hargen cannot help but chuckle to himself. Of course you wish me well, you old vulture. If I die down here, your descendants will never get any free meals. But he broadcasts respectfully, *"Thank you, Grandmother. May your children live long and hunt well."*

Without leaving their perch, the two jhereg lift their wings, creating a small opening through which Hargen can barely squeeze himself. Cursing under his breath, Hargen pushes past the jhereg and on down the passageway, glad to leave them behind. He comes at last to a flat, featureless plain, across which a path leads away, out of sight.

*Turn to section 6.*

\* 105 \*

For what seems like an eternity, all is dark and quiet. At first he feels nothing, but slowly his senses begin to awaken. Finally he hears the sound of his own breathing, then the rustling sound of shoes against the floor.

I live is his first thought. Hargen attempts to open his eyes but is blinded by the brightness of the room. Taking a moment to allow his eyes to adjust, he looks around. Seated facing him are Vlad, Morrolan, his cousin Alieria, and Sethra Lavode.

Morrolan looks stern.

"This argument between you and Vlad will not continue in Castle Black, Lord Hargen. However, you are welcome to stay until you are fully healed."

"Be thankful that Vlad brought you here," Alieria cuts in, "for it saved your life. You must now rest and not strain yourself, however, if you do not wish to perish again."

"But I have important matters to attend to," begins Hargen.

"We are aware of your situation. You may rest in peace, knowing that all will be taken care of," says Morrolan.

"But how? I've only been here a short time."

"You've been here over a week, Hargen, recovering from the poison on Vlad's blade," Alieria informs him. "By probing your mind, we learned the nature of your problem; and by using a combination of Vlad's

and Morrolan's abilities, we have located the assassins."

Hargen is too shocked to speak. He slowly becomes aware that his hasty reaction at the inn has not only cost him the chance to avenge his friend but also any honor or fame that might have come from solving the mystery himself. Slowly his head falls back onto the pillow in abject defeat.

Morrolan speaks again. "When you are stronger, we will tell you the entire tale. But now you must do as Alieria tells you."

THE END (35 out of a possible 100 points)

\* **106** \*

Sighing, Hargen holds his sword up and the sunlight glints off the blade. "Friend," he says in a low voice, "maybe even you can tell me what the dreadful truth of this matter is. I am a brave and valiant man, no flattery in that. But I need more now than just bravery and valor; I need brains, more brains than I have. Much as it shames me, I should return to Castle Black and beg Morrolan for his aid.

"This is a time when the Empress should be served by someone much cleverer than me." Hargen's voice sinks almost to inaudibility, and he winces from the truth he perceives in his words. Sighing again, he holds his sword up wishfully before sheathing it,

## Section 107

reaches out for the Orb, and teleports himself back to Castle Black.

*Turn to section 115.*

## \* 107 \*

“Empress, hear your loyal subjects.”

For a long moment they wait, and Hargen fears that she does not hear. At last, a distant voice coolly inquires, “What loyal subject seeks me?”

“Lady Sethra Lavode and Hargen of House Dzur,” Sethra replies.

“Dzur,” the voice muses. “A loyal House. Son of Tereldon, perhaps?”

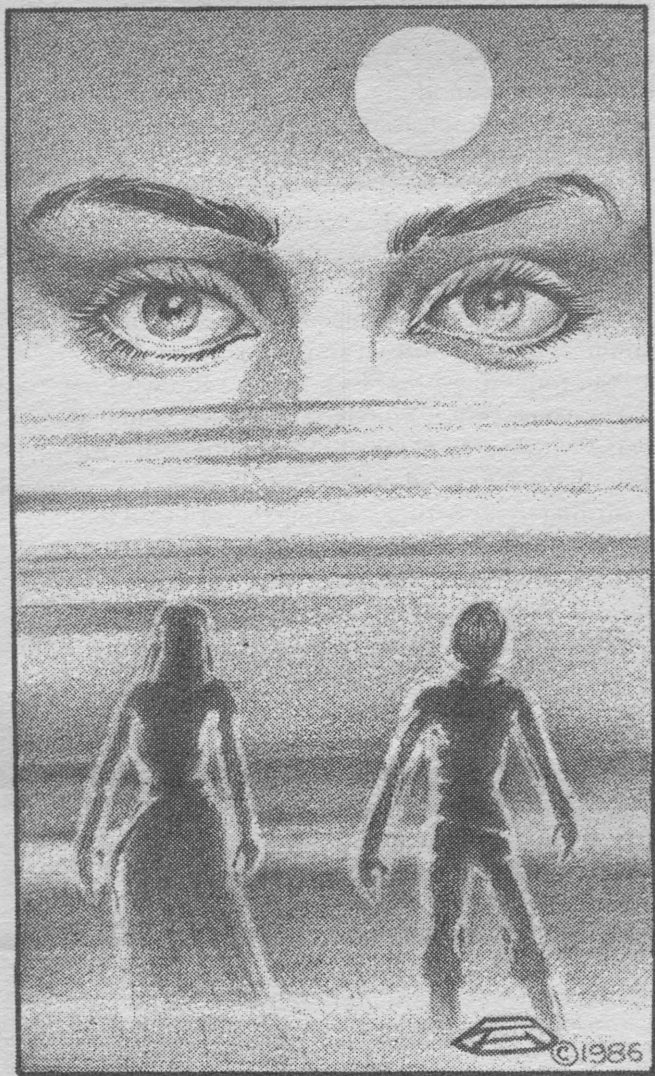
“No, Madam.” Hargen feels the grip of worry tighten. How to speed this ritual exchange of courtesies and drive home the danger in which they stand? “Son of Hadron Selgara. Empress, I must speak plainly and clearly. There is no time for the mincing of words between us. The Orb is in danger, today. An alliance of Dragaerans and Easterners seek to replace it with a false Orb and release chaos . . .”

He can feel Sethra’s cold gaze upon him, and he halts the flow of words, but the Empress interrupts before Sethra can speak.

“Hush, Hargen. Do not speak; open your mind. If this is as urgent as you say, I must take it directly from you. If you play me false, though . . .”

A flash like lightning traverses Hargen’s body. For





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an instant his heart is stopped in his chest, and his staring eyes see nothing. Then it vanishes, leaving his limbs tingling unpleasantly with the Empress's threat.

Suppressing a tingle of apprehension, Hargen opens his mental barriers and waits. A flurry seems to touch his mind and passes. He waits some more, and then the same cool voice muses, "Pre-Empire sorcery, eh? Well . . ."

The mental touch vanishes. Hargen waits several minutes, then ventures a respectful "Empress?"

"Shut up," the Empress advises, "I'm working."

The voice carries conviction; Hargen shuts up. He waits without thinking, idly watching the drifting water bubble hurry down the tiny stream, occasionally turning to see Sethra standing there, lost in thought.

"Hero, pay attention." The Empress has returned and is verbally nudging him. "See what your warning has done."

With no sense of motion, Hargen finds himself thrust into the center of chaos.

A tall, lovely Dragaeran stands before him, concentrating on a group of four Dragaerans some distance from her. Hovering behind her is a milky sphere which radiates a soft glow. Its twin, faintly dimmer and a fraction smaller, sits in the air over the tiny group.

The Empress raises her hands and murmurs something in a measured tone. The tallest of the little group jerks erect, and even at this distance, Hargen can see the sweat stand out on his face. The Empress frowns. Extending one arm in front of her, she gathers

the fingers into a fist and strains them shut, murmuring.

And the ground shivers and quakes beneath the group. Their Orb shivers in response, and a twisting coil of *nothingness* creeps from it. The four yell, long ululations of despair, which crescendo as the nothingness touches first one, then another, then all of them. Slowly it absorbs them, and then twists and turns, seeming to seek more.

The Empress pulls her hand open with great effort, and the nothingness eats itself and disappears. She lets her hand drop, and her head droops.

Hargen, impressed by what he has just seen, sinks to one knee and bows his head in renewed fealty. The movement startles the Empress; she straightens, but then relaxes when she sees who it is. Hargen realizes that she has forgotten all about him.

"Dzurlord," she says simply, and the cool voice is warmer now, and more tired, "you have saved us all from chaos with your timely warning. Name what you will as reward."

Hargen stays on his knees, thinking. Visions of wealth, riches, women, dance through his brain, but he forces himself to think, instead.

Minutes pass, and the Empress waits. Finally, the Dzurlord's head rises. "Empress, Lady Zerika, the honor of having safeguarded your person, power, and Empire is sufficient. If you would name me a reward, I would leave it to your wisdom to choose one you deem fitting."

Zerika's eyebrows rise, but Hargen sees that she is

## Section 107

flattered by his words. Now it is her turn to think. Soon she looks at him with a smile. "Then, Hero, I will pronounce your reward."

Hargen feels a mental tickle, then suddenly realizes that he is hearing Zerika's voice through the Orb.

"Hear, my citizens, that Lord Hargen of House Dzur has saved the Empress, the Orb, and Adrilankha itself, from deadliest chaos, and the machinations of one Meraste of House Yendi. If you are listening, Meraste, know well that the hour of doom for you and your coconspirators is at hand. . . ." With a rush of pleasure, Hargen realizes that Zerika is broadcasting his story to all who can receive it.

"Therefore," she concludes, "tomorrow shall be held the Feast of Hargen, and it shall be coupled with the Feast of Verra in history."

Hargen feels a little dazed. His name as a hero is now launched, off to a flying start. He looks up again as the Empress speaks, this time only to him.

"We are well pleased with your choice and loyalty, Hargen Dzurlord. You will ever be a friend to Zerika, and the House of the Phoenix."

"I have also Lady Sethra to thank," he begins, turning to the pale sorceress—

—But she has vanished, as if she had not been there at all. He notices that the Empress, too, has disappeared; there is not even a whoosh of air as she goes, the mark of her subtlety in sorcery. Behind him a guard clears his throat. "If you will come this way, sir."

Still in a daze, Hargen follows the guard back through the corridors, and out into the wide hall, and down the even wider steps. There the guard leaves him, and Hargen walks out into the precious daylight, warm and golden on his shoulders, to pursue his fortune where it will take him.

THE END (100 points out of a possible 100)

\* **108** \*

The address given him, Hargen realizes, is in a particularly unsavory part of town—the Easterners' quarter. Given the nature of events so far, and the Easterner involvement in the plot—whatever it is—this hardly seems a surprise to the Dzur.

Actually, Hargen thinks to himself as he makes his way across the city, "quarter" is an altogether too kind a term for this neighborhood; "ghetto" would be better. The streets he walks are utterly filthy, since Easterners do not use sorcery to clean them. Were Hargen not a steadfast Dzur hero, he might easily retch at the smell. As it is, his stomach feels more than a bit queasy as he walks along River Street until he finds the building he seeks.

If it were possible for a place to be considered unfashionable in this area of the city, this would probably qualify. It is a run-down brownstone town-

## Section 108

house, with a flight of narrow, cracked stone steps and a battered oak front door. Hargen climbs the steps quickly, two at a time, and pushes at the door.

Though it appears that the door might once have been able to lock, that time is clearly past. It sticks a bit, but Hargen applies his shoulder to it and lurches rather abruptly into a short, narrow hallway. Twisting to regain his balance, he draws his sword with a single fluid motion—but no one seems to be about.

The Dzur pauses for a moment to examine his surroundings. The hallway beyond, which leads to another door, is dim and unlit, save for the light streaming in from outside. Its walls are covered by wallpaper in a faded floral pattern; the air is musty, smelling faintly of cooked cabbage and Eastern red pepper. The silence that hangs over everything is disquieting and is interrupted only by the sound of children playing somewhere.

Slowly Hargen approaches the inner door, listening carefully for any noise from behind or above. Without letting go of his sword, he bends down and peers through the keyhole. Beyond, he can see a flight of cramped stairs leading upward. Standing once more, he tests the door with his hand and finds it opens readily.

He suspects a trap, but doesn't care—his murderer might well be here somewhere. With all of the stubbornness and determination only a Dzur can muster, he walks quietly up the stairs, looking for a target for his sword. He does not have to wait very long.

Beyond a doorway at the top of the stairs, Hargen

can see the shadow of a lone Easterner sentry, framed in the fading sunlight. Crouching low, he measures the scene with a practiced eye, estimating the number of steps between him and the sentry, and the length of time it will take to traverse them. Clearly, he thinks, whatever this fellow is guarding must be important—yet he must strike quickly, before the guard has the chance to alert any others to his presence. Taking a final deep breath, the Dzur springs forward, reaching the sentry in four long strides.

### SENTRY

*To hit Hargen: 12 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 11  
Damage with rapier: 1 D6*

*If Hargen is victorious, turn to section 71.*

*If Hargen is defeated, turn to section 29.*

## \* 109 \*

As the two trade swordblows back and forth across the silent valley floor, Hargen quickly realizes that his double is truly his equal in both strength and dexterity, and handles his blade with the practiced skill of a veteran. Twice, Hargen finds himself cut as he fails to react quickly enough to his opponent's assaults. When he barely avoids a disemboweling lunge, Hargen decides that Adron's advice may be the only way to avert defeat.

Backing away from his foe, Hargen assumes one of



## Section 109

the classic Dragaeran fighting positions. With grim pleasure, he sees his double approach in the perfect corresponding defensive pose. Running through his possible options, Hargen selects a straightforward combination thrust-parry-lunge that is one of the most basic in his repertoire, but leaves his foe with a similarly limited choice of responses. Following through the motions of the maneuver by rote, Hargen tries to let his mind roam freely, looking for some opportunity to exploit. To his frustration, he finds himself still thinking in the common patterns of his training, and once again pays the price of his human fallibility as his double's riposte cuts into the meaty flesh of his left forearm, drawing heavy blood.

His twin now presses his advantage, forcing Hargen to retreat steadily. With a flash of insight, Hargen sees his chance before him. Feinting to one side, Hargen ignores his foe's slash and counterfeint and dives to the ground, whipping the full weight of his body into his double's legs. As the double goes down, Hargen launches himself at his duplicate's torso, bringing his sword down toward his opponent's chest. His double reacts quickly and tries to use his brute strength to force the point of the blade aside. But Hargen will not be denied. With a final burst of adrenaline, he slams the sword home, slicing through his counterpart's flesh and turning his vital organs into a mess of blood-spattered jelly. A second quick stroke finishes the job, leaving Hargen weak and exhausted.

It is several moments before Hargen regains enough strength to rise again. When he does, he notices that

both the mist and the body of his twin have disappeared.

*Turn to section 101.*

## \* 110 \*

The Sorceress in Green turns away to melt into the crowd. Her movements are casual, yet quick and wonderfully graceful.

Hargen hesitates, which proves costly as she is lost in the churning sea of taller Dragaerans.

Hargen feels he has failed, gaining nothing useful and perhaps placing himself in further jeopardy. If only he had been able to ask her about Esteban! But *how* can she be involved? What would she gain?

Around Hargen the party continues. He is in the midst of hundreds of people, and yet he is alone, with no one he can trust.

Suddenly there are two men at his elbows. The one on his left is a skinny little fellow with a pointed chin, grinning dimwittedly. The other, a rotund man, stands on the right, fiddling with a loosely tied cravat. Both wear the colors of House Orca, although neither look particularly like that House. Surely neither is a warrior.

The large one speaks first, his eyes sparkling. "Excuse me, good sir, but I couldn't help noticing you with the Sorceress in Green. My friend and I have some information about her that we think you will

## Section 110

find most interesting. I believe this information would be extremely helpful to you. Of course," he continues with a grin, "everything has its price."

"Of course," says Hargen.

"Do you think we could go somewhere to discuss this matter? The balcony, perhaps? There are too many ears in this room, if you understand me, sir."

Hargen looks from him to the thin man. "What did you say your names were?" he asks.

The large man answers. "Forgive me, my lord. Allow me to introduce myself and my associate. My name is Tollifer, and this is my friend Saan."

Hargen shakes their hands and introduces himself, bewildered by what he has seen. He weighs his chances of getting useful information from this odd pair. "By all means," he says finally, "let's go to the balcony where we can discuss business." Oh, well, he tells himself, I can't afford to pass anything up.

The three Dragaerans make their way through the crowd to the balcony. Tollifer turns to Hargen and says, "Here we are, my lord. After you."

Hargen considers this, then replies, "Pray indulge my fancy; you first."

"Very well," mutters Tollifer. "Saan, after you."

"Nonsense, Tollie. You first."

Tollifer boxes Saan's ears and pushes his companion through the drapes, out onto the balcony. Tollifer follows, then Hargen, who finds that the fresh air seems to clear his mind.

"So," says Hargen, "what kind of information do you have about the Sorceress?" He asks Tollifer, who

seems to be the brains of the two, but Tollifer is looking at Saan, who is standing off to one side, his face screwed up in concentration. As the Dzurlord turns to look, he realizes, too late, what Saan must be doing.

A teleport!

The next thing Hargen knows, he is in a small room surrounded by ten Dragaerans, including Tollifer and Saan, with their blades ready.

"Kill him!" shouts Saan. "He is the Dzur Esteban killed before."

With a roar, they rush at Hargen. The last thing he sees before entering the combat is a devilish-looking man watching from a corner.

Esteban? Hargen wonders.

*To hit Hargen: 12+ To be hit: 10+ Hit points for each: 10*

*Damage for each hit: 1 D6*

*In the combat, the charging men have the initiative for the first turn. Three can reach him and so get free attacks, with no defensive bonus added in for Hargen. The characteristics for all ten opponents are:*

*If Hargen wins the combat, turn to section 2.*

*If Hargen loses the combat, turn to section 29.*

## Sections 111, 112

### \* 111 \*

Upon rubbing the talisman, Hargen instantly feels the air around him explode in a flash of white heat that temporarily blinds him. The smell of seared flesh permeates the cavern as the agonized screams of his undead foes echo in his ears. Within scant seconds, all is silent. Not a trace of Hargen's opponents remain, though Hargen himself is unharmed. The thought of the sorcerous power that went into creating such a weapon causes even Hargen to cringe. "To think that I told the enchantress I would kill her if she betrayed me. What a fool I was!"

Shaking his head once more in wonder, Hargen again begins his descent into the caverns, keeping one eye constantly peeled for other enemies or some clue to the whereabouts of his fallen friend.

*Turn to section 6.*

### \* 112 \*

Standing over the fallen but still-living form of Alexei, Hargen takes his blood-spattered sword and lays it against the Easterner's throat, relishing the shiver that goes along the latter's body as he does so.

"So, Easterner scum. Thought you were mighty clever, trying to steal the Orb? You'll enjoy the feel of the Empress's justice."

"I'm not afraid to die," he says.

"Dying?" Hargen laughs. "That will be the least of it, you worthless teckla-dropping. The Empress's justice will be nearly *done* with you by the time you die. I expect that the Questioners will want to be very thorough, and will make sure you tell them all you know. I will be in attendance as well, to make sure you receive just payment for all that was done to me—and to my friend Lazarus—to further your damnable plot. It was doomed from the beginning, Easterner. You could never win."

Alexei looks up at Hargen—and spits in his face.

"I think for that you shall pay now," Hargen says coldly, drawing his sword back. "The Questioners may extract the truth from you with necromancy, if they so desire."

Hargen's blade moves in a flashing arc and slices through Alexei's neck, scarcely slowing down as it passes through. The headless body slumps over, and the head itself flies through the air, landing in the corner of the room, turned to face Hargen with a look of profound surprise and horror.

*Turn to section 68.*

## \* 113 \*

A Dzur hero has nothing to fear, Hargen thinks to himself, and he bends to examine the knife used by Lazarus's assassin.

There is a sharp clap at the streetside door, but

## Section 113

before Hargen can reach it, it is kicked down and two men, dressed in the ornate uniform of the Phoenix Guards charge into the room.

"I am Hargen, of House Dzur," Hargen begins, "and I can explain—" but the guardsmen pay no attention. They survey the scene haughtily—the two corpses on the floor, one still oozing blood. Hargen looks at himself—his soiled, disheveled clothes splattered with blood, and the blade that he has just pulled from Lazarus's lifeless body still held firmly in his right hand.

"I don't think any explanation is necessary, *Lord Hargen*," sneers one of the guard. "Will you come along quietly, or do we have to use force?"

Hargen knows that the Empire is full of plots. Perhaps, he thinks to himself, these guards are implicated somehow in the death of Lazarus. They arrived so quickly—

"I don't know what is going on here," Hargen says, as the guardsmen begin to approach him slowly, one from each side. "But I'm going to find out who killed Lazarus, and who killed me, and you're not going to stop me."

Using the lightning combat reflexes for which the Dzur are renowned, Hargen fells one assailant with a flying kick, crashing him into a bookcase which topples down on him. Turning his attention immediately to the other, he lashes out with the blade, raking a long and bloody gash across his opponent's face.

"You bastard—" the other begins, hurling himself at Hargen. But the Dzurlord has readied his knife



once more, and he parries the Dragon's wild swing, then thrusts the point deep into his opponent's mid-section. The guard opens his mouth to scream, but no sound comes out, and he crumples to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Hargen quickly wipes the blade on the second guardsman's tunic and rushes out the door, realizing that he must get away from the scene.

But, just two steps beyond the doorway, his skull explodes in a million shards of lancing pain. As he feels himself topple loosely down the stairs, the last thing he ever sees is a huge bear of a guardsman, with a blood-stained mattock in his hand, grinning at him as he falls.

*Turn to section 29.*

## \* 114 \*

Hargen finds himself in a lower-class commercial district. Despite the early afternoon hour, the street is barely traveled. Approaching the pawnshop, the Dzurlord leans forward to peer in through the dusty front window—and pauses in astonishment.

Under his hand, behind the window glass, lies a twin of the dagger that slew him. The ornamental carving on the hilt even has the same odd triangular shape that first caught his eye.

Hargen turns and brushes angrily through the door of the shop in a swift movement. With a magnificent

## Section 114

flourish, he bellows, "Where does that knife come from?"

The proprietor, a frail Teckla, looks at him in some dismay. "You mean the smallish knife there, with the extra fillip and the tassel?"

"No, fool," Hargen growls impatiently. "I mean that knife with the triangular carving. I have seen only one other like it."

The proprietor's eyes narrow as a professional smile covers his face. When Hargen leans over the counter toward him, he leans away with a hint of calculation in his glance.

"Those blades are comparatively rare these days. Did you say that you had a friend with one?" he inquires, his eyes flicking back and forth over Hargen's physique.

Hargen grunts. "In a manner of speaking. It was found sticking out of my back a few days ago. I would very much like to know if you have sold any blades of that type recently."

"Oh, dear." The proprietor, quite taken aback, coughs and pounds himself on the chest. "Yes. I do see your problem. Well. *Hrrr-hummmm*." He blinks and clears his throat several times, then breaks down into a full-fledged coughing fit. Spitting out a final, explosive "*Ptagh!*" he turns back to Hargen. "My apologies, sir, the catarrh has caught hold of me. Let me just ring for my assistant; he can look that information up in my record books. If you will just accompany me, I will pour you some wine and you may wait in comfort in my back room."

He reaches out and yanks a trailing bellpull; after a few moments, a sharp-nosed face sticks itself around the corner of the door. "Master?"

"Find me the papers on the dagger in the window," the proprietor orders briskly.

"The smallish one, with the fillip and tassel?"

"No, idiot, the one with the triangular carving. Ask Hueck to help you if you can't find it. And set out some wine in the back room."

The face disappears. The proprietor, turning back to Hargen, invites him with a bow to enter the back room.

*If Hargen accepts the proprietor's invitation, turn to section 17.*

*If Hargen declines the invitation, turn to section 85.*

## \* 115 \*

Standing moments later in the front hall of Castle Black, Hargen has just been greeted by Lady Teldra when he sees Alieria, Morrolan's cousin, descending the long main staircase.

"Lord Morrolan is not available just now," Lady Teldra says smoothly, "but perhaps Lady Alieria can help you. She is privy to many of her cousin's councils."

Hargen restrains a shrug, not at all anxious to discuss his problems. Alieria, meanwhile, has caught

## Section 115

Lady Teldra's last soft words and turns to Hargen. "Lord Hargen," she says, "what a pleasure to see you. Have you come to see Morrolan? Was he helping you with something?"

Hargen nods. Alieria, one eyebrow lifted in mild curiosity, says, "Is it a private matter, or might I help?" Her eyes twinkle roguishly, and the arch lift of her voice suddenly makes clear to Hargen that she expects to hear some tale of lovelorn maids, or spicy intrigue.

Angered at her lightness when he is wrestling with such serious matters, he snaps, more sharply than he intended, "Only if you are better at riddles than I am, my lady."

Alieria, nettled at his sharpness, snaps back, "I am counted a fair hand at riddles, Dzurlord. What does yours say?"

"How could the Empire be laid low at one blow?" Hargen quotes the line of the prophecy that most troubles him, but Alieria merely laughs triumphantly.

"That's easy. Take away the thing that holds us all together, and we'd go down like ninepins."

Hargen frowns, unable to see the solution that is obvious to her.

"What else, Dzur? What common well do we draw our power from? What connects us all, and even tells us the time of our days?"

"Verra be damned!" Hargen is so startled that he doesn't even see Lady Teldra flinch at his language. "It's the Orb!"

"Your riddle is solved, Lord Hargen. Go tell your

asker, and collect your forfeit. But don't tell her another woman solved it for you!"

"The Orb! How could I not think of the Orb! Verra! The Teckla scum could even now be preparing their charms to destroy it and bring chaos on us all!"

*Turn to section 98.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ADVENTURE ARCHITECTS is a writing consortium specializing in the design and preparation of materials for the adventure game industry. Founded in 1983, the group has produced several role-playing supplements, including *Thieves of Tharbad* for Iron Crown Enterprises, the *Legion of Superheroes Sourcebook* and *Night in Gotham* for Mayfair Games, and the *MechWarrior* role-playing system for FASA Corporation.

Adventure Architects is: Richard Meyer, Walter Hunt, Lisa Hunt, Evan Jamieson, Bill Scammell, Mark Bloom, and Christine Ivey. The group is based in Maldon, Massachusetts.



## ENTER THE ADVENTURE

The Dzurlord slams his fist on the bar, yelling, "Get Vlad Taltos, or I'll bring these walls down about your ears!" Suddenly there's a blade in his face—held by an Easterner who wears the black and grey of House Jhereg...and a live jhereg coiled about his neck. "Perhaps we should discuss this in a gutter," Vlad says softly. "I'm sure you'd feel more at home..."

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