

A CROSSROADS™ ADVENTURE

in the World of
LYNN ABBEY'S
RIFKIND, DAUGHTER OF
THE BRIGHT MOON

WARHORN

by
Dana
Kramer



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DREAD DANGER IN DRO DARIA

Rifkind's student Scatha suddenly has a hideous vision: the wizard Drukor has stolen the Lost Horn of the War Horse of Heaven and will, within a month, use it to unleash the Demons of the Unnamed Realm. Unless Scatha can recapture the Warhorn.

Scatha possesses the witch-power *tal*, weapons training from the warrior-women of Chatelgard, and gifts from the gods . . . but she is young, untested, innocent to many of the perils and dark magics of Dro Daria. Will her skills and powers be enough for Scatha to survive monsters, bandits, slavers, half-humans and gods, as the warrior-woman strives to reach the distant Asheeran Waste . . . and a fatal confrontation with a consummate master of absolute evil?

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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.

WARHORN

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To Bill F., for giving me the break,
and having faith in me;
to Lynn, for trusting me
to muck around in her wonderful world;
to Bill R., for sticking it out,
and for mostly staying off my computer,
even when his was down.

RIFKIND: AN INTRODUCTION

by Lynn Abbey

WELCOME TO DRO Daria—the world I built for Rifkind, the heroine of *Daughter of the Bright Moon* and *The Black Flame*. I imagined Rifkind first and knew her long before I got around to putting her world together. She was a rebel from vast, treeless steppes who had learned swordmanship and claimed the unswerving loyalty of a warhorse stallion in defiance of her clan's sacred traditions. She had been taught healing by Muroa, a hermit priestess, and initiated into the mysteries of the Bright Moon. Her relationship with her family was as bad as any teenager's could be and yet she would have sacrificed herself in a hopeless pursuit of vengeance after they had been massacred by a rival clan. But Muroa sent the young Rifkind far beyond the steppes' horizons to the cultivated lands. There, unable to understand the subtlety of civilization, she became a pawn in an ambitious man's political schemes. She outwitted him and

everyone else to become a sorceress of earth-shaking power. Along the way she discovered friendship and felt the first faint stirrings of love.

In short, Rifkind was much more interesting than any mere landscape ever would be, but I needed a place for her and I didn't want that place to be Earth. So I came up with Dro Daria—an absolutely unforgivable mangling of the Cornish words for Land of the Dawn. It was little more than a circle of a continent floating in an ocean whose size I frankly still do not know.

A circular pattern, however, dominates Dro Daria. A desert called the Death-Wastes sits at the center of the continent. The Asheera—those vast, semiarid upland plains where Rifkind was born and raised—completely surround the Death-Wastes. Beyond the Asheera, at the outer edge of the circle, is what Rifkind and the rest of the Asheerans rather disdainfully call the Wet-Lands (it snows in the Asheera during the winter but it rarely, if ever, *rains*). The Wet-Landers, however, think their fertile lands along the coast are the only portion of the continent worth calling Dro Daria, and they call themselves the Dro Darians and have less complimentary names for Rifkind's people.

Two outbursts of mountains disrupt the circular symmetry of Dro Daria. In Glascardy, on the eastern coast, a massive range of mountains comes almost to the ocean's edge. Vast forests replace the farmlands. The lowland Dro Darians consider the mountain-dwelling Glascards to be as wild as the Asheerans (and almost as disreputable). The

Glascardy mountain range is a substantial heaping up of dark gray granite, but the other Dro Darian mountains, the Lowenrat peaks, are an isolated cluster of volcanoes along the southwestern arc of the continental island.

I console myself these days with the knowledge that Rifkind wouldn't understand her world any better if it were a well-constructed planet rather than a jury-rigged one, but I pity any intrepid Darian scientist who ever tries to start the Scientific Revolution in his homeland. There is no logic to the geology, ecology, or weather on Dro Daria, everything simply *is* and mere mortals must adapt or perish. Luckily I had the foresight to make Dro Daria a world where magic was rampant and the gods had a long history of meddling with everything—especially the weather and the shape of the landscape.

There are lots of gods hovering over Dro Daria; some of which are worshipped and seem to provide a slight measure of aid or benefit to their worshippers. The Asheerans acknowledge only one deity whom they call simply the Goddess of the Bright Moon or the Bright One (in contrast to the Dark Moon, Vitivar, whom no one worships). Muroa and Rifkind bear the mark of the goddess's favor in the form of a silver crescent on their cheeks, but there is no formal religion on the steppes. The Bright One's priestesses are healers, and although Rifkind has called on her goddess for aid, she is well aware that Dro Darian mortals are always at a disadvantage when dealing with their gods.

The Wet-Landers have a more organized religion revolving around Mohandru, the Weeping God. They have rituals, festivals, as well as a large and wealthy priest class. The official myths claim that Mohandru is the father of all life and that he weeps because his mortal younger children are treated so badly by the elder gods. The power of the Mohandrist priests seems to increase whenever times get bad in Dro Daria; so as your adventure begins, the worship of the Weeping God is widespread, especially in the Wet-Land areas.

Mohandru is less popular in the Glascardy mountains—not because the Glascards disagree with the official myths but because they see no evidence that all those tears are having any beneficial effect. Their noble lords, the Overnmonts, have lived for eight generations in the huge fortress called Chatelgard—but the Overnmonts did not build Chatelgard. They merely found it and, after recognizing that it protected the key passes into the dense forests of the Glascardy interior, they occupied it. The Overnmonts and those under their immediate protection dwell safely amid the wind-swept granite. Others are not so fortunate and their misfortune can be laid squarely in the hands of the gods.

Humanity is not the first race to make its home on Dro Daria although the earlier ones have left only their stone ruins, like Chatelgard, and their gods behind. Above the treeline, where the air is thinner, the Lost Gods dwell in a disgruntled eternity. Ordinary men who by accident or design

linger too long in the unprotected mountains, especially in winter, are driven mad—transformed into the savage, cannibal hunters the Glascards call Mountain Men. Those who in some unpredictable way please the Lost Gods are drawn into the mysteries of the mountain cults and may even be granted an audience with one of these ancient deities.

Rifkind, once her exile's journeying had brought her to Chatelgard, was drawn to the high peaks and established an uneasy friendship of sorts with the black-scaled shape-shifting god who called himself Hanju. There is no doubt that Hanju retains his power or that he is one of the elder gods who drives Mohandru to tears; there is also no doubt that eons of isolation have left him more than a bit mad. His affection for Rifkind led him to reevaluate his low opinion of humankind; he is easier to find these days and generally helpful to those he likes. Still, he *is* a god and from the hints he has let drop in his half-mad conversation the Dro Darian gods, like the ancient Greek gods, settle their rivalries on mortal battlefields.

The vast fenland called the Felmargue was the site of one of these battles; the Death-Wastes was another. In each case the opening skirmish came when mortal magicians were seduced into assuming the powers or talismans of the gods. It would seem that the warhorn, itself, might be such a talisman. If it fell into the wrong hands and its sounding became the excuse for the Dro Darian gods to involve themselves in another Armaged-

don, it might mean the end of humanity on Dro Daria.

Rifkind, herself, has never been comfortable with the notion that her actions could have such far-reaching consequences. She has, to her own way of thinking, enough trouble keeping her own life in order without taking on responsibility for the well-being of all Dro Daria. Her greatest ambition has always been to be left alone to live her life as she sees fit; perhaps this lack of world-conquering ambition is why the gods have so frequently sought her out. Friends and teachers throughout the *Daughter of the Bright Moon* and *The Black Flame* have attempted to make her aware of the impact she has on those around her. Their efforts fall on deaf ears.

Not that Rifkind is an ignorant barbarian—although the cultured aristocrats of the Wet-Lands have made that mistake more than once. Simply moving their herds from one well to the next has taught the average Asheeran as much about navigation as Christopher Columbus ever knew, and Rifkind, who is, after all, an initiate to the mysteries of a moon cult, knows a good deal more than the average Asheeran. She need only close her eyes and listen for the voice of her patron goddess to know the locations of both of Dro Daria's moons and all the stars visible in its heaven. Rifkind *never* gets lost and the stories Scatha hears about her aunt are as much about Rifkind's long journeys as they are about her other powers.

And Rifkind does have other powers which are about evenly divided between the magical, which

are as dangerous as they are useful, and the practical, which she would willingly teach to Scatha. As a rather small woman—I figure she's about four feet eleven inches and weighs about one hundred pounds—Rifkind is at a considerable disadvantage in Dro Daria where, just like here on Earth, strength tends to be a function of size. She has learned, often the hard way, that a woman who would be a warrior is wise to practice with both a sword and a knife—but wiser still to acknowledge her physical weakness and use her wits to avoid a fight whenever possible.

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:

Intelligence	Example
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 dá 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 him 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 constitution. 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:

Dexterity	Example
3 or less	Complete klutz
5	Inspector Clousseau
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
daggers: 1 D6*

*Damage with
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 1.

RECORD SHEET

Scatha, Warrior-Woman of the Quais

Strength: 13
Intelligence: 12
Wisdom/Luck: 14
Constitution: 15
Dexterity: 12
Charisma: 12

Hit Points: 20

Items of original equipment: broadsword, shield, knife, leather splint armor, flint and steel, twelve copper pennies, cloak.

* 1 *

The huge crow swoops, watching the farmers moving like dark insects through the golden sea of grain. Giving them only a cursory thought, she flaps her shining midnight wings, gaining a new draft of air spiraling invisibly upward from the sun-warmed land, swooping and wheeling to the hill where the ruins lay.

She settles onto a chunk of stone which had once been part of a wall, lifts her head and caws shrilly. Far below, in a pool of black liquid fire, her cry is echoed by a ripple in the magical stuff. Here is a place older than the gods, save for the ancient Landmother. Here is a place where only a few short years ago, the heavens were rent in a struggle to suppress nameless powers hungry for a world to own.

Here lie the remains of Domhnall, the last to inhabit this place, his body protected by a dolmen of stone. If living eyes could see him there, he might seem ancient and shrunken, but a moment later his body may glow like some ethereal being, a blond youth of startling beauty observed in slumber.

The bird finishes her preening, rises to the sky once more, and sails to the fields seeking a meal of ripe grain.

Nearby, a tall blond woman stands supervising a group of youths who are harvesting the rich crop.

Section 1

Spying the bird, she stoops and picks up a stone, and hurls it at her target with power and accuracy. But the crow flutters off unharmed, cawing triumphantly.

"Go away, Lady Crow. We have nothing for you," the woman calls after her, throwing a second stone for good measure.

"Isn't she the totem of the War Goddess?" a boy asks.

"Yes, indeed, but her mistress is quite used to hunger." The blond woman, Linette, knows first-hand what living through a war can mean. She has been both a poor peasant and has lived as a queen, and she went hungry both times.

Linette sighs as the crow disappears, but the bird has stirred her memories of the past. Brushing back a stray wisp of hair which has escaped her long braids, she shakes away the thoughts.

"Back to work now," she gently chides the children and herself, but adds, "Tonight I'll take you all out to see the Crow Goddess and her brother, the Great War-Horse. This is the best time of year to see those constellations."

After a hearty meal of stew and bread, the youngsters clamber around Linette.

"Take us to see the stars, Aunt Linny."

"Please, you promised."

Linette helps clear away the last of the wooden bowls, wipes her hands on her apron, and leads the small herd of children outside. A number of the grown-ups forsake a second mug of ale and join their children.

Section 1

The velvet of the night sky is unspoiled by the light of either the Bright Moon or her darker companion, Vitivar. The stars pulse with an expectant excitement, as though they were greeting these fragile, transient humans.

"There is the Crow." Linette points to the three stars which outline the right wing, and the two which mark the left. "See the bright red star which is her eye."

The youngest children stand in rapt wonder, the older ones vying with each other to name the stars they have been shown before.

"Follow the wing. There! There is her brother, the Great War-Horse. He is horned, and can speak through his rider's mind."

"Just like Turin?"

"Yes, dear, just like Lady Rifkind's war-horse. But Turin is only a child of the Horse God."

"Show us the black horn."

Linette smiles. Most of the children have heard the tale time and again.

"The bright star of the right horn is visible, but a greater star lies at the tip of the other. It is so powerful that the very light of the stars which comes to its Hold to serve it never leaves.

"When the Lost Gods created the gods we know now, some wished to gain power over the rest. They conspired to capture the War Goddess and force her to aid them in battle. But she refused. They bound her and threw her into a tower. But her brother found her and freed her. They were both in human form then, but when she was freed she

Section 1

turned again into a great black bird, and he into a war-horse.

“As he galloped to safety, an evil demon seized him by the horn. He whinnied in fear and pain. His sister flew to his aid, fought the demon, and slew him. But in his death struggle the demon tore loose the horn. The sound of their battle attracted the attention of the wicked gods, who had been searching for the goddess and her brother. They flew to the place, shrieking with glee that they had trapped the holy pair.

“But the goddess seized her brother’s mane with her talons and flapped her wings with all her might and main. They rose into the night sky, and sought the protection of the Eldest of the Old, whose realm it was. They were granted sanctuary, and now they make their home among the stars.

“But the horn fell to earth, where it was found by a servant of the god Mohandru, who carved it into a warhorn. It is said that if a holy priest or priestess sounds the horn in time of danger, the very gods will appear to aid in battle, but if an evil man or woman sounds the horn, the Hungry Gods who lie in the earth awaiting their freedom will emerge and destroy the world.”

Linette has told the story many times before, but this time she feels a stirring of the mind powers called tal. She had lost these powers years ago when she had attempted to heal the man she loved in opposition to the Laws. The Landmother herself had come to her and taken the talents from her. But so much had changed. Perhaps the Landmother has forgiven Linette for her youthful errors.

Section 1

A wave of memories overwhelms this woman, who has returned to the simple life of the farm. She lives again the fear she felt when she heard her parents were killed by brigands on a mountain road. Again she relives the terrible journey to Chatelgard, with its cold storms and fevered dreams, in the company of Rifkind, the terrifying and wonderful Asheeran warrior and witch who saved and adopted her.

The flashes from her past dance faster now. How delicious were her first lessons to test her magical powers. How powerful was her headstrong determination to use them as she wished. She wonders, Was that so wrong? What do the gods know of survival, or dying, that they should judge us so harshly?

Oblivious to her companions in the freshly mowed field, Linette is swept up into the wheel of the sky. How like a wheel is my life, she thinks. I started as a farmer, and perhaps I shall end as a farmer, but the journey that brought me here . . . How wondrous.

She remembers, with bittersweet pain, her time with Lord Humphry. To be virtual mistress of Chatelgard, and even Glascardy, well, that was something. But after the frightening magical battle when Rifkind destroyed the great sorcerer An-Soren, and Humphry had grabbed for the throne . . . She shuddered. Linette had shared Humphry's every battle and hardship with pride, until that evil creature Krowlowja bewitched him. Linette did not want to remember the final death march to the land of the Quais, a fetid bog of

Section 1

oozing stinking gases that hid gruesome creatures which killed but did not die. But the memories forced themselves on her.

And there was Rifkind, again doing battle with the evil power which Krowlowja released, and which Humphry coveted. All for the Well of the Black Flame. All for the power to create whatever one could think of or imagine. Poor Humphry. He wasn't even human when he died.

But the final battle had lifted the cursed land from the bog, and blessed it with rich soil and a willing people to farm it. Here Linette had found her place, teaching her childhood skills.

Here I am, back on the farm. And happy, but for one thing. Linette is quietly crying, as the stars spin above her.

It's not fair, she thinks fiercely, I don't want power, and I don't want to be a queen, but I didn't deserve to be made head blind. Give me back my tal powers, she cries to the stars, please give that back. Please.

Linette fishes around in her apron pocket and withdraws a tiny black glassy stone, a piece of the Black Flame. The Quais call it Memory Stone and use it for seeing their past, and their future, as well as for linking their lives when they were not one people but isolated groups who lived and died on floating barges.

She stares into it, praying silently, Please let me see something. Please.

The stone is even blacker in her hand than the sky is black above her head. Now she can see a light emanating from the stone, and a face of a girl no

older than she had been when Rifkind had found her.

She recognizes the face, Scatha, the girl of the Quais who had followed Jovan and Jenny to Chatelgard.

"Scatha, Scatha." Her mind seeks out the child half a world distant. "Scatha, can you see the stars? Can you see the Great Horse? Can you feel the power of the black star which guards the horn?"

The image fades. Only a few moments have passed and none have even noticed her psychic absence as she withdrew into the tal state.

Thank you. Thank you, Linette sighs. Now she is complete again. Her strong will and determination have become an asset to the Quais people, her people, and she is filled with peace and pride. The chill of the night breaks her reverie.

"Let's go in before we all freeze out here," she says, trying to sound as matter of fact as bread and butter, wiping the last tears from her face.

Scatha saunters in from the practice field. She has acquired a new bruise or two, but she has also learned a new leg blow. She stops in the kitchen, grabs up a handful of little nut cakes, and runs for it as the cook bolts after her in hot pursuit, brandishing a wooden stirring spoon.

"Out of here, you thief! Those are for tonight. What will Lord Ejord say if we haven't enough for guests!"

But Scatha, with her long legs clad in leather trews, easily outdistances the fat cook who is encumbered with skirts, petticoats, and an apron flapping around her short, stocky legs.

Section 1

Scatha, not even winded, makes her way along the long corridors of Chatelgard, toward Jenny and Jovan's chambers. She pops the last of the cakes into her mouth and brushes the crumbs from her hands and mouth. The young cookie thief glances around nervously as she nears the corridor which leads to the formal council chambers and private meeting rooms where the politics and policies of Glascardy are made.

The chances of running into Ejord are slim, and the chance he would notice or care that she had stolen a few nut cakes was slimmer, but it was best not to chance being on his wrong side.

She sighs, thinking about Lord Ejord. She likes him, a lot, and wishes that he liked her, but it doesn't seem like she has a chance. Jenny says it is because Scatha is so like Lady Rifkind, and that Ejord has never forgotten her, even though he has a beautiful wife and a dear baby daughter.

I'm never going to fall in love and be that silly, she vows to herself. She is so lost in her thoughts that she doesn't see the white-robed and hooded priest turning the corner of the corridor until she runs into him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she splutters, turning apple red with embarrassment. She reaches out to steady the priest but only succeeds in knocking him back against the wall. Mortified, she steps forward to grab him by the arm before he falls. This sends him tumbling to the ground. She helps him up and tries to dust off the smudges from his white garment.

"Please, child. Please. No harm is done, but if



Section 1

you do not stop trying to help me, I may not live to sing my evening office!"

"Oh, I didn't mean . . ."

"Of course you didn't. Bless you, child."

He waves his hand above her head, turns, and rushes down the hall.

Scatha stands there a moment, going over what has so suddenly happened, hoping to convince herself that she didn't make a complete fool of herself. She prays to all the gods she can think of that the priest is not going to see Ejord, and if he is, he will not mention her. She is failing on all counts. The priest rushes down the hall to the chamber Ejord always uses for important guests.

Scatha is tingling with panic as her imagination runs wild with potential disaster. What if Ejord sends me back to the Quais? she worries. I'll never be a warrior. What if he blames Jovan for bringing me here? Or Jenny for encouraging me to fight?

The sixteen-year-old girl has worked so hard, proving her worth to every boy in the training class, and the arms-master as well, by besting all the rest of the class in running, climbing, sword practice, despite the fact that she is the smallest, and one of the youngest. Not to mention how bravely she has put up with the endless variety of pranks designed to make her quit. She often wondered if the boys didn't sit up nights thinking of things to make her life hard. But she has hung on. Nonetheless, it all hinges on the Lord of Chatelgard. If Ejord had reason to send her away, well, that was that.

Now this pesky thing with the priest! Good sense is telling Scatha to turn around and mind her

business, but uncertainty, and perhaps a little curiosity, impels her to follow the holy man down the hall. Curiosity wins and she tiptoes to the door of the room he entered and presses her ear to the keyhole.

"... Guardians of the horn since time out of mind. (Murph, mumble, mumble) could have entered the inner sanctum. (Mumble, mumble) can't tell you how we protect (mumble, mumble)."

Scatha presses her other ear to the door in an effort to get in a better position to eavesdrop. This is the most interesting thing she has ever heard! The speaker, probably the smudged priest, is pacing back and forth. Between the sound of his footsteps and the lack of sound when he is pacing away from the door, Scatha is frustrated at not hearing much of what is going on.

This must be something important. Priests don't pace. They usually just sit there looking smug! she muses, and strains even harder to hear.

Now Ejord's voice. "I wish you well. I certainly have no doubt that there are things beyond the knowledge of mortal men, but I for one will not commit the lives of my troops nor the resources of this land to a search for an artifact. I have known well at least one of these 'sacred' animals and there was nothing godly about him. A magnificent beast, yes. A god, no. His horn, if you were foolish enough to try to remove it, or lucky enough to succeed, would have made a dandy hunting horn. No doubt it would have called all my woodsmen for a quarter mile. But the Lost Gods? Ha!"

Scatha leans harder on the door. She must get

Section 2

closer if she wants to hear the priest's answer.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 3.

If the total is greater than the value on the record sheet for Scatha's Dexterity, turn to section 2.

* 2 *

The priest's voice gets louder and resonates in a manner Scatha would never have guessed the pale little man could muster. "Consider your words well, my lord. Should you fail to aid us in this holy cause, we shall cast you under interdict."

Scatha feels prickles of fear on the back of her neck. Under interdict! No priests would come to marry folk, or hold festivals, bury the dead, or perform any other rites. If Mohandru was angry with Ejord, well, then all of Chatelgard would be cursed with him. Scatha shifts closer to hear Ejord's answer when suddenly, too suddenly to run for cover, the door handle turns, the door is pulled open with a firm jerk, and she tumbles into the white-robed priest. He staggers, holding the door handle for dear life, but they both fall back into the room, landing together in an untidy and undignified heap.

Scatha, with fighter reflexes she wishes she had

Section 3

used a moment before, manages to roll off the floundering priest. For one brief moment Scatha thinks of bolting, but realizes that would not help much. She bounds to her feet and offers a hand to help the priest up. He looks very angry, and somehow Scatha is not surprised.

“What are you doing here?” The ice in Ejord’s voice might bring winter a month early this year.

Scatha stares at her feet, studying the scuff marks on her boots very carefully.

“Well?” he insists.

“Nothing. I wasn’t doing anything.” Why do I always say such stupid things to him. No wonder he doesn’t like me, she thinks to herself, miserably.

“Run off and make yourself presentable for dinner.” Ejord’s tone has softened. If Scatha only had the nerve to look up, she would have seen a half smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes, but she is too embarrassed, and too frightened that her dream of being a great warrior like Rifkind is about to end. As fast as politeness will let her, she runs down the hall to the corridor leading to her small room.

Turn to section 4.

* 3 *

The priest’s voice gets louder and resonates in a manner Scatha would never have guessed the pale little man could muster. “Consider your words

Section 3

well, my lord. Should you fail to aid us in this holy cause, we shall cast you under interdict.”

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Oh, dear gods, Scatha thinks as she jumps back with a fighter’s trained reflexes, I’m going to get caught. She bolts down the hall, trying not to notice the ringing sound of her scuffed boots as they slam against the stone floor. As she reaches the corner at the end of the corridor, the priest pulls open the door with a determined jerk, and strides into the hall, just in time to spy the leather-clad girl dashing away. Ejord, too, sees her. He shakes his head slightly as a half smile comes to his lips and a twinkle to his eyes.

Scatha is still thinking about her collision with this powerful and important guest, fretting that she may have been seen. She worries that her dream of being a great warrior like Rifkind is about to end as she runs down the hall to the corridor leading to her small room.

Turn to section 4.

* 4 *

Scatha pushes open the wooden door, slams it behind her, quickly pulls off her boots, and flops down on her bed. She wishes she could bunk with her young swordbrothers, but that is impossible. The best she can do is live as much like the rest of the trainees as she can. Her bed is a simple soldier's cot, with the same two blankets of coarse brown wool issued to any of the boys. She knows the small hearth will warm her room more than the single great stove at the end of the barracks far below, but that can't be helped. Worse yet, Jenny insists that she wear dresses and sit at table with the lesser relatives of the household, and even learn to sew and dance. But Scatha, politely but firmly, puts her foot down at the lovely warm-colored rugs and tapestries which Jenny offered her to cheer up the tiny room.

The first chill of winter has left a skin of frost on the stone ledges of the windows of the great rooms below, but up high in the keep it is still warm. Scatha lies on the bed, breathing in the privacy and quiet, for once grateful for a room of her own. Her heavy brown hair glints red in the golden late-autumn sunshine pouring in through the leaded glass panes of the small, high window. Finally relaxing, she dreamily watches the shadows of the

Section 4

leaves on an ancient vine as they dance on the whitewashed plaster walls and disappear onto the dark brown timbering.

A looming shadow startles her out of her reverie. She jumps up and spins toward the window. But it is only a crow, sitting on the ledge staring in at her.

"Sorry, Mother Crow. No crumbs left for you."

With a caw, the bird flies off. Scatha is left with an odd empty feeling as she watches it go.

Scatha opens her chest and pulls out "girl clothes" for dinner, but stops to finger her old blue leather pouch, which holds all her best things. On impulse, she draws out the Memory Stone which she inherited from Pasca, the first of the Quais women to fight, and the first to die in the great battle which reclaimed the land of the Quais from the curse which had drowned it.

"Honored Memory Stone," Scatha began uneasily, "I really don't know how to use you, or if you will be angry if I do, but please, please tell me what to do to make Ejord proud of me."

She stares into the fist-sized black stone. It seems so ordinary, looking more like a piece of chipped black glass than a magical gift. Disappointed, she starts to put it down when suddenly her hand tingles. The stone in her hand has begun to glow, its opaque blackness fading away until it's transparent. She stares in wonder as figures are formed out of the shining glow.

"It's Aunt Linette! And my friends from home! I must be dreaming."



Section 4

But this dream is so real that Scatha can hear Auntie Linny telling the stories of the stars, the one about the Lost Horn of the Horse God. Linette looks at her from out of the stone and calls out softly, "Scatha, Scatha."

Scatha drops the stone with a sharp gasp. The sound of it clattering on the floor brings her out of her reverie. Picking up the stone gingerly, but not looking at it too directly, she stuffs it back into her pouch. With the pouch securely tucked in the chest, she quickly dresses for supper and dashes out of the room.

The place of honor beside Ejord at the high table is empty. Ejord is dressed in his second-best tunic, richly embroidered in reds and golds, and the food is clearly holiday fare. The quiet tension in the hall announces loudly that something has gone wrong. Scatha muses that she may be the only person in the hall besides Ejord who knows that the special guest was to be a very angry and slightly disheveled priest. Even the gentle and gracious presence of Ejord's lady fails to cheer the evening.

A freckled red-headed lad from the barracks is serving at Scatha's table, part of the training of a house karl, and one of the tasks denied to Scatha. Each time he brings a course to her place he sarcastically calls her "my lady Scatha" and bows to her with an exaggerated flourish. Scatha is mortified by his pointed teasing. The last course is a creamed pudding, usually Scatha's favorite, although tonight she wishes dinner were over. As her

tormentor comes to her place he trips, and very handily pours the creamy mess right down her back, pardoning himself with a "How clumsy of me, dear lady!" Scatha, ready to die of embarrassment, feels the cold slop ooze down her back as everyone waits for her reaction. She turns on him, fiercely whispering, "I'll get you for this." But as she turns the pudding splashes onto her table-mates. Their sympathy quickly turns to anger. Everything is going from bad to worse. She clumsily climbs out from the long bench and dashes out of the hall.

This has been the worse day of my life, she thinks as she washes off the pudding, slips into a sleeping robe, and climbs into bed. But sleep only brings dreams, terrible dreams, of crows and battles, and all manner of scaled demons: some which swoop down on her, talons outstretched; others which crawl up her legs, biting her flesh away. She wakes up screaming, her legs and arms still aching from the bites and scratches of her dreams. Knowing she'll never get back to sleep, Scatha lights an oil lamp from the coals in her hearth.

Neither moon is in the sky. The crow is back, staring at Scatha from the window ledge. Unreasonably frightened, Scatha goes to the corner of her room farthest from the window, using her bed to blot out the staring eye of the crow which glows like a coal from her grate. But it is no good. The eye of the crow burns into her thoughts, and she hears a voice in her mind, a voice which cannot be denied.

Section 4

Stare into the stone, it commands. *Stare into the stone*. Scatha obediently opens her small chest and pulls out her tattered blue pouch.

All the while she is obeying the demanding voice, two other voices are quarreling inside her mind. One is saying, rationally, *Perhaps my magic stone is good for something besides scaring me. Perhaps its magic will protect me. After all, it was Pasca's and she was good and kind and brave. The stone couldn't be less than its owner, could it?* While the other part is screaming, *You ninny, don't look!*

But the commanding eye in Scatha's mind wins out, and Scatha peers deeply into the glowing stone in her hand. And in it, Scatha sees a vision.

The wizard Drukor stoops over his smoking brazier, throwing nameless things onto the coals which sputter and smoke. The dark power of his spirit makes him appear larger than his wizened frame. Few could withstand a look from the eye which always squints out from an ancient scar. He spits into the sizzling stench, and with gestures and unheard words, the smoke solidifies into a creature so evil, so ugly, dripping such putrid venom, that the very beetles, rats, and lizards which scurry along the floor of the wizard's cave scuttle to hide. At its master's command, the black dripping thing oozes down the cave's passage and into the night. It flies to the nearby temple where the holy horn is kept. It slithers into the hallowed place, breaking the magical wards of centuries, its very presence



Section 4

instantly killing the holy guardians of the horn. Grasping the scared relic in what cannot quite be called a hand, it retraces its path to the cave where its master waits. Drukor commands the creature to drop the horn, and, before the demon can betray its master, Drukor destroys it as swiftly as he had created it.

Drukor grabs the horn and holds it aloft in triumph, shouting with mad glee, "Mine, mine. The horn is mine."

He bends over a scrying bowl and stirs the water.

"The conjunction is but one month away. Mmmmm. The temple in the middle of the Asheeran Waste is the place. Aha! I should have guessed it. And when I blow this horn the power of the gods will be mine; the demons of the Unnamed Realm, my army; and all men of this world, my slaves."

Scatha is shaking and sweating with fear as the vision fades, Drukor's uncanny laugh ringing in her ears. Oh, this is scary, she thinks as she draws her legs up, her bony knees almost touching her chin. Magic is something uncommon and mysterious; something Scatha has rarely come across in her young life. Magic is a tool of the powerful, and this wizard seemed strong indeed. And evil. But Scatha couldn't understand why she had been sent this vision. Slowly the pattern of the last few hours crystallizes in her mind. The priest's mission, her two encounters with the Memory Stone, all lead

her to the same thought. She had asked the stone what she could do to make Ejord proud of her, and the stone had answered: save the world. Great. She must reclaim the horn, and within a month.

Scatha dresses in her leathers, packs just a few things, carefully tucking the stone with its pouch in her pack, and sneaks down to the armory. There she takes a sword and a small shield.

She has no food, but it is too risky to raid the kitchen. She has no horse, but she is afraid to wake the stable boy. There are but a few copper pennies in her pouch, but she could always win at rolling knuckle-bones in the barracks, and she hopes she'll be able to do so at inns on the road.

She slips out of a chink in the wall past the night watch and plunges headlong into her quest.

By dawn, Scatha is footsore and weary—and starving. How could I have run away on a dream, and a bad one at that? she wonders plaintively. No plan. No idea of where I am or where I'm going. I've got to be out of my head!

The night was warm for the season, but now a fog is beginning to roll in. With it comes a *chill which* could herald an early snow or a killing frost. How different were the semitropical bogs of her childhood from these savage mountains.

Within minutes she can barely see the road under her feet, although occasional gusts of wind clear the fog enough for her to see the giant black shadows of ancient trees lining the road. Enveloped in the eerie whiteness, she wanders off the road a

Section 4

few times before she discovers the trick of walking on the edge of the road to keep from losing herself in the blinding cloud. The fog rings with a frightening hum. She hears her feet crunch along, but she feels as if she is not moving. This is becoming a nightmare. Frightened and tired, Scatha stops and rests by the side of the road. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, she soon dozes off.

The sound of men and at least one horse approaching up the road wakes her up.

"I can't see you, Jessed." The words swirl through the mist without direction.

"Karl, can you see me? Here. Hold the end of my cloak."

"Quiet, both of you. Where are the rest?"

"They stopped a while back. Can't see them anymore. Brel's tits, can't see anything."

"Walk by the edge. Follow the loose gravel. It will keep you on the road. Inn should be ahead pretty soon."

"Better be. Holy Vitivar, I can't take this much more."

Scatha hears the voices coming closer. She is cold and lonely and could use some companions on the road. And maybe these men can spare some bread. On the other hand, these are dangerous times, and the forest is still full of bands of brigands left homeless from the recent wars. Thank Mohandru, at least these don't seem to be a band of the half-human, half-animal Mountain Men. But still, she wonders if she wouldn't be better off traveling alone. They are approaching. She must decide soon.

Section 5

If Scatha decides to approach the strangers, turn to section 8.

If she decides to hide, turn to section 7.

* 5 *

To the desert lord's credit, he withstands the mind-searing insanity of the light storm, although the madness in his eyes reflects the nameless terrors he sees crowding the tent. But still he shouts orders to his terrified kinsmen and slaves.

"Send for Arlis the Healer," he bellows, his face involuntarily twisting itself into a horrible smile.

But it is too late. Already the evil oozes across the desert in a madness more terrible than the storm. The tribal witch never comes, as all in the camp are consumed by the hunger of the unnameable creatures released by Drukor's desire.

Turn to section 29.

Section 6

* 6 *

To the desert lord's credit, he withstands the mind-searing insanity of the light storm, although the madness in his eyes reflects the nameless terrors he sees crowding the tent. But still he shouts orders to his terrified kinsmen and slaves.

"Send for Arlis the Healer," he bellows, his face involuntarily twisting itself into a horrible smile.

"There is no need, Lord. I am here."

The old woman strides in with a poise Scatha has not seen in the other desert women, nor is her face covered. But it is her eyes which blaze with unearthly power, eyes like that of the Master of the Dark Brethren, but eyes also like that of the witches and elders in the dungeon. The healer's eyes bring Scatha back to sanity, and the warrior tells the wisewoman of her quest.

"I know the place we seek. It is not far," the old woman proclaims. Turning to a young woman who accompanies her, she orders, "Bring my student warriors, mounted and armed, and any prisoners who are able and willing to go."

The leader winces, but does not argue.

"And Harold, the prisoner with the hair the color of sand," Scatha shouts after the girl, "and my sword and armor!"

In brief minutes they are all mounted and riding into the storm. Arlis breaks the silence of the ride,

Section 6

if riding through screaming wind, alive with nightmare colors and demons of the mind, can be called silent.

"What god do you serve, child?" the healer shouts at Scatha.

"What do you mean?" the warrior-maid shouts back.

Arlis looks puzzled, and a little shocked. "You mean you have come all this way and you don't even know who has chosen you?"

"Well, maybe Hanju," Scatha says, and offers a brief explanation, although simple conversation takes all her effort in the insistent wind.

"A Lost God? No," Arlis argues, frowning. "From what you say you are lucky he didn't kill you somewhere along the way, by accident if nothing else. He is not the kind of god I mean."

"Is it important that I know?"

"Perhaps." The old woman begins to chant, oblivious to the screaming wind and swirling colors.

The repetitive rhythm of the woman's rough voice draws Scatha from the fury of the storm, and she finds herself so still she feels as though she is part of the sand and the rocks, and not on a wild ride mounted on a horned war-horse.

Then she feels herself floating, but when she looks down, she sees herself huddled on the saddle, gripping the steed's reins and mane for purchase as they gallop across the dreamscape of the storm-blown desert. Her spirit spirals upward. Cold wind streams past her, and she hears the flapping of great

Section 6

wings. Are they her wings? She can almost feel her arms outstretched, beating up and down, and the pleasant pull as her feathers press against the wind. Then it is as though the wings are under her arms, supporting her as she glides through the darkness.

Suddenly she is standing before a woman, a woman whose long black robe does not hide the muscled body of a warrior. Just as suddenly the robe dissolves and the woman is dressed in black leather armor, with shining golden rings sewn on it. Long black hair cascades out from under a beaked helmet.

“Do you not know me, my child?” Her voice is authority itself. “Why have you not called on me?”

Scatha stands in silent terror. Finally she manages to croak out an answer. “Please, Lady. I’m sort of new at this. What did I do wrong?”

“Wrong!” The goddess’s voice fills the void. “You have insulted me. You have called on Mohandru, and that old villain Hanju, Brel, and a dozen more. Who called you to this quest? Who has stood by your side this entire time? Did you once call my name? Did you once pray to *me*!”

Scatha’s fear has melted into anger. “Pray to who? And just where were you the dozen times I faced death, and despair? Were you in the mountains? Where were you when the Dark Brethren captured me? Damn you, who are you?” By now she is shrieking with rage.

Still shaking with fury she stares defiantly at the goddess, but the goddess is smiling. “I chose well, my little battle raven. I am Morigu, Lady of Battle.

You are mine, and," she adds more gently, "I am yours. Summon me in your greatest need. You serve me and you serve my brother."

"The Crow Lady!" Scatha exclaims.

The goddess's laugh resounds and reverberates in the void, echoing down the corridors of the warrior-woman's mind. The dream-time passes, and Scatha returns to her body, gripping the charging war-horse for dear life. They rein to a halt as a ruined temple comes into sight.

"This is the place," Arlis says, pointing her staff at the crumbling building.

Scatha shouts orders to the riders. They form up in a standard Dro Darian wedge, which calls for some serious discussion with the Asheeran warriors, who are used to charging in a line, their major tactic being enthusiasm. They trot toward what appears to be the entrance.

"Prepare to charge. . . . Charge!"

The unit breaks into a gallop. The eerie wind blows up with renewed violence, like the insistent intensity of a bully's assault, and the charge peters to a walk as the horses and riders mill about in confusion.

One of the Asheeran warriors throws his hands to his head and begins to scream. "Stop them, they are crawling on me," he moans, sliding from his mount and writhing on the sand, tearing at invisible vermin.

"Stop it." Arlis's voice cuts through the madness, and her touch banishes the nightmare vision.

"The horses are worse off than we are. Dismount.

Section 6

Damn it, dismount," Scatha orders fiercely. On her command the unit dogtrots to the entrance of the ruin; only Arlis's screaming threats keep them sane.

As Scatha jogs along she sees the sand turn the most beautiful blue, with highlights of ruby and gold. It swirls around her ankles, becoming living tendrils. A voice in her head calls seductively to her to lie down and sleep, sleep forever. Warmth caresses her body, promising peace. She enters her own private hell, where the tranquility she yearns for brings only death. With vague knowledge of Arlis's help, her consciousness fights against that which seeks to bind it. Through eyes not quite her own, she can see her men fighting visions, but still the warriors somehow stay together. Soon they are at the gap where a thick door once hung, and then, without stopping, they are through it.

Inside, in a huge chamber, by an ancient altar, stands a robed wizard, the great horn at his lips.

"Stop him!" Scatha shouts.

In a mad rush they converge on him. He pauses, turns, and almost nonchalantly sets down the horn on the altar and reaches for his staff.

Great words of power issue from his mouth, and a beam of blinding light blasts from the jeweled tip of his staff. Arlis shouts back an incantation, but her words sound weak in comparison.

As they watch in horror, an army of monstrous demons materializes from the wizard's words.

Scatha stands mesmerized, then shakes her head to break the spell of fascination.

"Attack. Kill them. They can be killed," she

Section 6

orders. Her voice breaks the spell for her men, and the unit attacks. Drukor once again lifts the horn to his lips. Scatha rushes toward him, cutting down creatures in her way. She can almost see the first burst of sound begin to stream from the great curved horn. As it blares out, the ground begins to roil under her, sending her reeling back. The floor of the chamber cracks and splits, spitting up clouds of noxious gases and revealing a churning hell of molten living rock.

She looks in horror as the spewing, burning rock manifests itself into huge, horrible demon gods, creatures whose burning eyes and evil purpose dwarf the creatures which Drukor conjured, demons rising on wings, crawling on clawed feet, shrieking, slobbering venom, tumbling out of the red-black ooze which rolls out of the chasm.

In the midst of this chaos stands Drukor, his arms thrown back in triumph, his face twisted in fiendish laughter.

If Scatha has a Gift of Hanju left, and she decides to use it, turn to section 115.

If Scatha has a Gift of Hanju left, and she decides not to use it, turn to section 116.

If Scatha does not have a Gift of Hanju left, turn to section 116.

Section 7

* 7 *

Yearning for companionship, Scatha starts to get up to go out to the road and hail them down, but she just can't do it. Something inside her, her "little voice," is screaming warnings. A girl alone in the forest! She must have been crazy to think of just walking out there and saying, "Hello, my lords. Would you care for a companion on the road, and by the way, may I have a hot capon and a mug of ale at your expense?"

As they approach her, she grabs her pack and dives for the hollow by the edge of the road.

"What's that?" one of the men asks.

"What?"

"A noise. I thought I heard a noise."

"Probably a rabbit." The men laugh.

Scatha has hidden none too soon. They are almost in front of her now. She blesses the fog. If it was a clear night, she would be practically in plain sight.

Remember that Wisdom is also the Luck of the Gods. Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 11.

If the total is greater than her Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 9.

* 8 *

The dark shadows of three men, one leading a horse, stumble into view. She cannot even make out their faces.

A woman alone in the mountains, she argues with herself. I guess in this stuff I might pass for a boy. But the stories about the Mountain Men keep shouting in her mind. This is probably the stupidest thing I have ever done in my life. As she gets up and steps out into the road, the thought hits her, This may be the last stupid thing I ever do in my life. But it is too late to go back now.

"Hello there," Scatha shouts, making her voice as deep as possible.

"Who is it?" The men stop, and make an unmistakable move even in this fog: They reach for their swords.

Turn to section 10.

* 9 *

"I tell you, Karl, I heard a noise, and no rabbit, or even a deer."

They stop directly in front of where she is lying in the ditch in a bed of wet foxtails, trying to hold her breath. A blade of the grass flutters up her nose.

Section 10

She feels a sneeze coming. She tries to stop it but can't.

"Achoo!"

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 11.

If the total is greater than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 21.

* 10 *

Scatha freezes. Now she may have to test her warrior skills for the first—and possibly the last—time. Driven by the importance of her quest, she knows she has to stay alive.

"I got caught in the fog. Going to see, uh, uh, my mother. Uh, that is . . . my 'prentice master, um, let me, um, go home. My mother is sick. Um, dying." She finishes with a flourish.

None of the men answer. The silence is deafening. The leader hands the reins of his horse to another fellow and comes up to her, his hand still on his sword.

"Really, boy?"

"Yes, sir. May I join you till we get to an inn or village? Kind of scary in the fog alone. I've heard that Mountain Men have been seen nearby."

Section 11

The leader is a huge man, with a black curly beard. He wears a black wool cloak with the hood pulled up, but Scatha can clearly see an iron cap and mail shirt underneath. He stares at her out of unnerving light blue eyes. She doesn't like him at all.

“Dying mother, eh!”

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Charisma value, turn to section 14.

If the total is greater than her Charisma value, go to section 13.

* 11 *

“There, again! I told you.”

Just then a puff of wind clears the fog a bit. Scatha lies so still she can hear her blood pound. The men are looking around. They are not more than three feet from her.

The leader is a huge man, with a black curly beard. He wears a black wool cloak with the hood pulled up, but Scatha can clearly see an iron cap and mail shirt underneath. He is staring in her direction out of unnerving light blue eyes. She doesn't like him at all.

Scatha prays silently to every god she has ever

Section 11

heard of for the fog to come back twice as thick. Her prayer is answered, and the white mist locks her in before she is seen.

"It is nothing." The deep voice is now no more than a foot or two from her. "Keep moving."

The frightened girl lies silently by the road, sobered by the near encounter. Not that this quest is a lark for her, but the sight of these grim men has given new meaning to the word danger. She lies by the road awhile until she is sure they are gone. Who in Brel's Hell were those bucks? she wonders, reviewing the incident in her mind for some clue.

"Oh, Holy Mohandru," she exclaims aloud, "they said there were more of them down the road!"

She is torn between hiding until the second half of the party passes her and pressing on. Damn it, I just can't spare the time, she thinks. I could wait here all day. Better to risk moving on, but I will have to stay sharp and listen for them. Still debating with herself, she clambers back onto the road, but it is some time before she can stop herself from starting at every innocent forest sound.

The fog has burned off a little. It is still gray and damp, but Scatha has relaxed enough to make reasonable time. Scatha's old boots crunch along the gravelly path. The fog is still patchy, blowing in wisps of white which surround her now and again. Scatha stumbles along until a loud cracking sound brings her up short in a wave of fear. I'm getting light-headed, she thinks. Come on, girl, she chides herself, you've not been fasting for a week. It has

only been one morning. But nonetheless, she knows she is feeling funny. She looks around at the forest edge. Maybe she will find something to take the edge off her hunger and thirst. She wanders off the road and stops to look and listen. She hears a stream nearby, and she knows there will be wild berry bushes near it, and maybe some late-summer fruit the birds have missed.

Sure enough, berry bushes, heavy with the blue-black fruit she loves, lie almost within reach, growing in rocky crevices all the way down to the streambed which lies at the bottom of a rocky ravine. It takes the warrior no time at all to climb down to them. Balanced on a small rock, she reaches out to pick a particularly fat juicy berry.

The rock slips from beneath her foot, and she and a cascade of small rocks start to roll down toward the stream, picking up momentum as they go. She reaches out to catch a small tree as she thunders past, but misses.

Whomp! She slams into a log, driving a branch into her side. She cries out in pain and pulls herself free.

This is going to hurt, she mutters to herself as she pulls out the branch and binds the deep gash. But she is angry with herself for getting hurt so stupidly.

At least I'm going to get something out of this, she reasons. She eats a handful of the berries, and gratefully splashes her face in the cold sweet water. Finally she faces the struggle back up the hill to the road.

Section 13

Roll 1 D6 to determine damage to Scatha.

Turn to section 16.

* 12 *

A wave of nausea hits first, then dizziness sends her to the ground. The brave girl lies helpless as the poison works its way into her body and paralyzes her inch by inch. All the strength in the world wouldn't help now, and Scatha knows it.

Turn to section 29.

* 13 *

The leader throws back his head and laughs, but the laugh is cold and hard, and not at all reassuring. Scatha reaches for her sword.

The smile fades from the leader's lips.

In tones as icy as winter he steps aside and says, "Karl, do me the favor of skewering this peasant."

"With pleasure, my lord."

Karl, a wiry little man with a red mustache, draws his sword and springs toward Scatha.

She parries his swing and spins to counterpunch his blow as he passes her. He is quick and skilled, but he has not reckoned on skill in a "peasant." Scatha knows he will not make that mistake again.

Section 14

But she has gained the time to pull her shield loose from her pack. Karl's next blow bounces harmlessly off the shield rim.

KARL, A BLACK RIDER

To hit Scatha: 12 To be hit: 12 Hit points: 7

Damage with sword: 1 D6 (The fog is going to make clean targeting a little hard for both sides.)

If Scatha is killed, turn to section 29.

If she kills Karl, turn to section 22.

* 14 *

The leader throws back his head and laughs. He plants his hands on his hips and stares at her out of his soul-searing blue eyes. Scatha reaches for her sword.

"There is no need for that, boy," the leader says, with a thin smile. "Sick mother, uh, dying!" he mimicks her. Then he laughs again. By now the other men are laughing also.

"All right, my little runaway, or thief, or whatever you are. You may follow along with us. But mind your manners and stay out of the way." His voice has taken on an icy chill.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Scatha replies. It takes little acting on her part to sound relieved and grateful.

She drops back and tags along behind. The fog

Section 14

has burned off a little. It is still gray and damp, but at least they can make reasonable time now.

By midmorning the sun breaks through. The sky is a brilliant azure blue and puffy white clouds sparkle in the crisp air. The dark green humps of moss set off the delicate pale gray-green of the lichen crusting the north side of the black tree trunks along the road. Pale yellow-green streamers of moss hang from the branches, and all the forest is bejeweled with shimmering drops of dew, the legacy of the fog.

Scatha can almost forget her fear and the events of the morning when she stops to listen to the chatter of birds, but the dull thud of boots and the sound of men's voices behind her remind her again that she is in strange company, alone and very much outnumbered. The other half of this mysterious party is finally catching up.

Fighting an urge to jump off the road into the nearest ditch, Scatha tries to make herself inconspicuous as she steals a glance behind her. There are four men jogging in double-time, their black-hooded cloaks flapping out behind them.

Karl and Jessed stop and shout to them, but their leader yells, "Keep going, you sluggards. Those cowards will catch up or not as they will."

Soon the other four join the party, breathlessly exchanging gossip with Karl and Jessed until the leader puts a stop to it with a roar of "shut up!"

One of the newcomers is staring at Scatha as they quickly march along. He whispers something to Karl. Scatha can hear Karl whisper back,

Section 15

“... some lost lad ... sick mother ...” The newcomer guffaws but is silenced by a look from the leader.

The road has been descending and leveling for the last hour, and there are now broad leaf trees mixed in with the stands of pines.

At the next bend of the road, but still in the distance, Scatha can make out the inn-yard wall, a weathered and dilapidated affair of stone with large wattle patches. Hopefully when they arrive at the inn she can escape from this unwanted company. Scatha sighs with relief, even though there is a good half hour's journey down the road. She has avoided conversation with the hooded and cloaked men, but the skinny one has darted looks at her all day.

Oh, no! Here he comes again, she worries. Her curious companion has stopped by the roadside. There is no way to avoid him if she goes on.

If Scatha decides to duck into the woods, turn to section 30.

If Scatha decides to bluff it out, turn to section 31.

* 15 *

A wave of nausea hits first, then dizziness sends her to the ground. The brave girl lies helpless as the poison works its way into her body and paralyzes her inch by inch as she drifts into a coma.

Section 16

Roll 1 D6.

Subtract this number from the number of days left before the conjunction. Also use this number to heal Scatha by this many hit points, up to but not above her original number. After all, the long sleep has to be good for something!

Turn to section 103.

* 16 *

Nervously Scatha walks down the road, sometimes breaking into a jog. The knowledge that there are men coming up the road behind her drives her on. She stops, now and then, to silence the crunch of her boots on the gravelly road and listens. Nothing so far.

The sun breaks through. The sky is a brilliant azure blue and puffy white clouds sparkle in the crisp air. The dark green humps of moss set off the delicate pale gray-green of the lichen crusting the north side of the black tree trunks along the road. Pale yellow-green streamers of moss hang from the branches, and all the forest is bejeweled with shimmering drops of dew, the legacy of the fog.

Scatha almost forgets her fear and the events of the morning, so entrancing is the chatter of birds, when she hears the dull thud of boots and the sound of men's voices behind her.

In a flash, the young warrior is off the road, over the ditch, into the forest, and huddled behind a tree

in a tangle of branches and debris, and none too soon.

It is a miracle of Mohandru that they have not seen her dash into the woods. There are four men, all cloaked and hooded in black, but the dark mark on their faces stands out clearly as they pass her.

She takes no chances, waiting a long time on the rich loam under the tree before setting out again.

But the near encounter has left her jumpy as she continues, and she finds herself wondering if there are still more groups behind her. Perhaps this was only the vanguard of an army of black-robed soldiers.

The road has been steadily descending and there are now broad leaf trees mixed in with the stands of pines. The ground is almost level as she rounds a bend and she sees an inn-yard wall, a weathered and dilapidated affair of stone with large wattle patches. But the best sight of all is the blessed inn.

Turn to section 17.

* 17 *

Scatha would run to the inn compound if she had the strength, but by now all her adventuring has taken its toll. She is shaking from shock, exhaustion, and her wounds.

The first thing she sees as she stumbles through the inn-yard gate is the bearded leader's horse tied to a post. What irony, she thinks as she backs into

Section 17

the shadow of an old twisted oak in the yard. The wall was built to keep brigands out.

Scatha surveys the courtyard, trying to decide if she should bolt back into the woods, or find a refuge here. The stables lie along the west wall, the main house along the east, the kitchens in the wing to the left of the massive public room.

"Are you all right, lad?"

With a surge of fear Scatha spins around to meet the owner of the voice, drawing her sword as she moves.

"Easy, easy." A large burly boy, about seventeen or eighteen summers, with ash blond hair falling into his eyes, is backing away from her.

"Thank Mohandru, you're not . . ." The relieved girl groans and drops her sword with a clatter to the cobblestones, following it with a crash.

When her eyes flutter open, the blond lad is kneeling next to her, fumbling to unbuckle her leather hauberk.

"No, no." Scatha weakly tries to push him away. "Don't let them find me. Please hide me. Please."

"You're bleeding. You're hurt. I can carry you in, boy." The blond lad's face is creased with concern. "I'm sure the innkeeper won't turn you away."

"No. The men who came here . . ."

"In trouble with them? I'm not surprised. They didn't seem a proper lot to me, either. All right. But I will bring help. But first . . ." He sweeps her up, carries her to a room behind the stables, and puts her in his bed.

She doesn't remember falling asleep, and it seems as if no time has passed when she hears

whispering near her. She reluctantly forces her eyes open. There is someone vaguely familiar standing over her, but the wounded and weary girl cannot remember who it is. But then again, she isn't having much better luck remembering who she is, or where she is.

"Well, child," says the familiar-looking man, who is deftly unbuckling her armor. "You seem determined to force me to commit this robe to the sacred flame." He is now cutting away her shirt and underlinens, and splattering himself with blood in the process.

"Oh, you!" Scatha exclaims.

"He's a girl!" stutters the blond boy, who is standing behind the white-robed priest, blushing.

"Of course she is a girl, and a very brave one, I suspect. There, there. Don't move." He fumbles around in a small pack, seizes a vial, and scuttles to the small hearth fire. Muttering some incantation, he pours the oily contents onto the coals. Blue smoke fills the room with a calming fragrance. Returning to the bed, he gently places his hands on Scatha's wounds. One by one they glow, aching almost more than she can bear. When she doesn't think she can bear the pain any longer, it fades away. Suddenly without the pain she has lived with for hours, the young soldier feels both weary and elated in a delicious way. But the relief does not last as the terrible responsibility of the quest rolls back over her like a dark fog. And that reminds her of the black-cloaked band.

"Those men," she demands of the priest, "who are they?"

Section 17

"They are the enemy, child. One of the enemies, and there are many. They are members of the Dark Brethren, but not true initiates of Vitivar. An-Soren was the last of those, or so we think. But his followers still exist, even though he does not, at least in this world.

"An-Soren," he lectures on, "was the evil sorcerer who was defeated by the lady Rifkind at the beginning of the last great war. So perhaps they also seek the horn. It would return them to power."

"But what brings you to this place, child? Did Ejord send you away, or did you run away? No, don't lie. I know you overheard me when I begged your lord for help."

Part of Scatha wants to babble the whole tale to the Mohandru priest, but part of her doesn't want to tell anybody anything.

The priest puts his hand to her brow in a fatherly gesture of blessing, but as he does he freezes and a look of amazement washes over his face.

"You have tal. You have the witch gifts. If it were any other time I would take you to our temple for training before your power was turned to evil, but I do not question my god. If you seek the horn, I will not hinder you. May Mohandru forgive me if you are not as good as you seem."

He rises to his feet and turns to the blond boy, who is staring at the two with no little awe and much confusion. "Would you go with her? Protect her? Aid her?"

"Just wait a moment," Scatha bursts out. She is quite well again and her spirit is returning. "I don't

want some big lug of a stableboy traipsing after me."

"Well, that's fine with me. I'm not sure I want to run off from a good job to protect some *girl!*"

The priest is paying no attention to the two. He takes a pouch from his belt and gives it to the boy.

"There is some gold. Blessings rarely buy dinner."

"I don't need your protection," Scatha answers hotly.

"You didn't look so great when you came falling in here," the lad shouts back.

"I knew there was a reason I came to Chatelgard. I thought it was to seek Ejord, but it was to find this girl. Oh, how wise my god! Man must not question the will of the gods. Even priests forget this." He lectures on, half to himself, half to the pair, who are paying no attention to *him* at this point. They are too busy arguing.

"Well, if you have something important to do, I'm not going to let you go alone," the lad shouts at her.

"*Let me!* Oh, yeah?" she yells back, pushing herself up from the bed.

"Oh, yeah! You even talk funny. I bet you aren't even from around here. Wherever you're going, I'll bet you'd get lost without me," he adds. By now they are nose to nose.

"I'm not going to stay around here very long, so I don't need your help. And give me that pouch!" she bellows, grabbing for his hand.

"Children, children. *Silence!*" The priest is

Section 17

standing in the middle of the small rustic room looking like a giant white bird flapping his arms and shaking his head.

He turns to the lad. "You may do as you will, but I will feel much safer if the safety of the world lies with more than one warrior."

Scatha notes to herself that he did not say one girl and feels very pleased. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have company.

"All right, he can come. But I'm in charge," she adds with nonnegotiable determination. "This is silly. Don't you work here? How can you come with me, anyhow?"

"That's no problem. The innkeeper is my uncle. He usually sends me home after the snows hit to save wages until spring. I'll just ask to leave tomorrow, before the weather gets worse. He won't care, and I don't care, anyhow. I've always wanted to go down the mountain and see the world."

It is soon settled that they will leave the next day. Scatha is impressed when the priest buys two horses for them. The lad, whose name is Harold, will ask his uncle to provision them, and packs his few possessions, including his quarterstaff, and his bow and arrows.

Restore Scatha's hit points.

Turn to section 18.

* 18 *

Miserably Scatha sits huddled on Harold's bed, wrapped in a cloak, looking out the unglazed window. The big wet fluffy snowflakes are blowing in, and they are no longer melting on the hard dirt floor. Soon she will either have to shut the shutters and sit hiding in the dark or poke up the small grate and risk Uncle Innkeeper noticing and finding his unpaid guest.

Absentmindedly she reaches for the wooden bowl on the rough table by the bed, but it has long been scraped clean of the hot stew Harold smuggled to her.

"Brel curse it! We should have been out of here hours ago," she bellows, throwing the offending bowl against the far wall. Harold had suggested that they wait for a break in the snow, saying that it was unseasonably early even for the mountains, but it doesn't look any better to her now, and she is not going to wait until spring!

Cold and stiff from the inactivity, and restless, she gets up, listens at the door, but hears nothing but the normal stable sounds of horses snorting and shuffling in their stalls. She bites her lip, takes a deep breath, pulls back the bolt, and opens the door, wincing at its loud creak. Letting out her breath in relief, she quietly pads her way through the stable and across the cobbled yard to the inn.

Section 19

“Get your gear,” Harold whispers back. “We have horses packed and tied down the road by the first bend, past the big oak.”

“Who *are* you?” the leader bellows as he strides up, pushing aside the innkeeper.

Scatha bolts to the door. The horsemen are outside dismounting by the stables.

“Stop! Stop her. Mohandru spy. Stop!” the leader commands as he bounds after her, but she has slipped by him. Sprinting her way across the courtyard, Scatha is trying to figure out what the glint of metal she just saw means.

Gods no! Another throwing knife. Doesn't he ever run out?

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 19.

If the total is greater than her Dexterity value, turn to section 20.

* 19 *

The leader's hand is a blur of motion. Scatha feels the *whoosh* of wind slash past her shoulder as she zigzags her way across the courtyard. The newcomers are scrambling after her. She dodges into the stable, runs into Harold's room, and bolts the door.

Section 19

They are right behind her, slamming into the door. The timbers are bending with each assault. It will not be long.

She pushes the bed to the window, grabs her pack, and tries to shove it through. The shield strapped to it makes it a tight fit. It jams in the window frame. The first door timber gives way. She shoves again and the pack is through. Snatching her sword, Scatha hops to the ledge, slithers through, and jumps to the ground.

Taking a moment to look back at the small window, she hopes it isn't big enough to let any full-grown men through. Hastily she gathers her gear and runs around the inn to the woods. She can hear the pounding of blood in her ears. The curve in the road is ahead of her. The oak is on the other side. She doesn't look; she just dashes across the road, sliding the last few feet and rolling behind the oak. The horses are there and so is Harold.

He's panting. They both fight to quiet their breathing as they hear the sound of horsemen gallop past their hiding place and down the road.

Turn to section 27.

Section 21

* 20 *

The leader's hand is a blur of motion. The dagger flies from his hand seeking Scatha seemingly with eyes of its own.

Scatha feels the thump, and staggers. Then she feels the pain.

Roll 1 D6 for damage.

Turn to section 28.

* 21 *

"There, again! I told you," the man protests as a puff of wind clears the fog a bit. "There! There he is." Excitedly the man points directly at her.

They think I'm a boy, Scatha realizes. Well, that solves the problem of my virtue—but not the problem of living to a ripe old age. No help for it now. She gets up and steps out onto the road.

"Hello there," Scatha shouts, making her voice as deep as possible.

"Who are you?" The men make an unmistakable move, even in this fog: They reach for their swords.

Turn to section 10.

* **22** *

Scatha feigns a blow to Karl's leg. He drops his sword to block it, just as she had hoped. She turns the blow deftly in the air, and brings her sword up, severing Karl's neck in one back-wrenching thud. Her first kill. Battle-lust makes her blood run hot, and she waits, cat-patient, for her next attacker.

The leader strides toward her, throwing back his hood. Painted on his cheek is a dark symbol. Scatha noticed the same on the late Karl. The leader starts to draw.

"Lord," the other man calls to the leader. "Karl was my cousin. Let me."

The leader nods and reaches for the reins of his horse as the other man draws and approaches her.

"If you cannot carve this dog-meat, Jessed," the leader shouts at him, mounting his steed, "the Dark One won't save you in this life or the next."

Scatha is shaking with a rush of energy. The practice yard was never like this. Every move, every blow, must be right. Her life, and the lives of Ejord and all of Dro Daria depend on it. She sees with a clarity new to her. She moves with a purpose she has never before felt. But she knows deep inside her that her strength is limited. She has not eaten. She has slept little. She has been frightened and drained by the psychic tal force she has experienced. But she pushes away all thought as Jessed rushes toward

Section 23

her. All thought, that is, except the wordless calculations of his every movement.

He fakes a swing to her head, forcing her to blind herself behind her shield. He raises his blade to cleave her in two.

JESSED, A BLACK RIDER

To hit Scatha: 14 To be hit: 13 Hit points: 7

Damage with sword: 1 D6

If Scatha is killed, turn to section 29.

If Scatha kills her foe, turn to section 23.

* 23 *

Scatha drops her shield in time to see the descent of the Black Rider's blade. Nearing the last of her resources, she manages to raise her blade to protect herself. Oh, gods, lost and known, let me block it, she prays. The sword deflects the mighty blow, but at a price. Scatha's wrists are twisted painfully, and her blade is snapped short. Her enemy rushes at her again, swinging for her ribs. She steps out of the way, but slips on a wet patch of grass. Falling to the ground, her feet kick up as she goes down. Her foot lands on something soft. It is the back of Jessed's knee. He tumbles down on her. She feels a sharp impact on her injured wrist as she hears the scream. He has impaled himself on the squared edge of her

Section 24

broken sword. Not a pretty sight. She lets go of the hilt and kicks her way free, scrambling to her feet. Karl's sword is lying not a foot from her feet. She snatches it up just as the leader gallops past her, his sword drawn.

With a mighty crash his blade descends.

(This battle is a one-roll combat; that is, they will take one swipe at each other and stop fighting. This is not to the death unless either of them gets lucky on the first blow.)

LEADER

*To hit Scatha: 16 To be hit: 16 Hit points: 16
Damage with sword: 1 D6*

If Scatha is killed, turn to section 29.

If she survives, turn to section 24.

* 24 *

Karl's blade is heavier than her broken blade, but not too slow or heavy to heft into position with the incentive of an armed rider bearing down. The additional mass of the blade absorbs the shock of the blow, but Scatha feels sharp pains in both her wrists nonetheless.

She reels back from the blow, managing only a weak riposte. She spins to face the return charge,

Section 24

but the black rider gallops off down the road without looking back.

She collapses onto the road, near the bodies of her two enemies. I should bury them, the exhausted girl thinks without enthusiasm. Oh, gods, I can't take the time. She calculates that it will take her most of the morning, and she keeps thinking about the quest. It has become much more real and less a dream since her encounter with these men. Who were they? She thinks back, trying to concentrate.

"Oh, Holy Mohandru," she exclaims aloud, "they said there were more of them down the road!"

That cheerful thought spurs her to activity. She drags the two bodies off the road and covers them with pine needles and brush. She starts to throw their packs in with them, but realizes that they might have things she dearly needs. Feeling a twinge of guilt at stealing from the dead, she rummages through their packs, taking the money pouches and food wallets. Finally she tosses the packs next to the camouflaged corpses.

"Whoever you prayed to, may they claim you," she prays quietly over the bodies. "And thank you for the sword!" she adds, shouldering her pack and starting down the road.

The fog has burned off a little. It is still gray and damp, but at least she can make reasonable time as she goes on.

Turn to section 16.

* **25** *

The dragon god rises from the pit, flicking off the puny humans with a casual ripple of his shimmering body. Scatha grimly hangs on and drives her sword tip between two rows of scales. The dragon arches to see what petty annoyance still troubles him, bringing his massive golden eye to within inches of Scatha's face. The warrior screams at the god in frustration. Her sword is jammed securely in the scaly armor and there is no way to free it.

The great beast almost casually draws back his head and opens his mouth, revealing row upon row of needle-sharp teeth and a viperous forked tongue. Then he exhales. Scatha screams in agony as the wall of flame hits her.

Turn to section 29.

* **26** *

The sword rakes the demon's soft underbelly, sending a shower of its stinging acid blood over Scatha's face. She squeezes her eyes shut against the stuff, trying to mop it off with her forearm. But she has blinded herself to the mage demon's next attack. She feels a sudden blow to her hand as the creature

Section 27

bats her sword from her grip with its claws. She forces her burning eyes open, just in time to see the end. The beast drops from the ceiling, talons outstretched, striking her full in the chest and driving her to the ground.

Turn to section 29.

* 27 *

“Now what, O wise one?” Harold sits with his back to the giant tree as snowflakes rapidly encrust him with a crisp layer of white.

“We are going to Asheera.”

“What! Are you nuts? If the desert doesn’t get us the barbarians will. Oh, fine! I get hooked up to some crazy girl on a mysterious magical quest and she wants to get us both killed or enslaved by . . .”

“No, really. We have to.”

“Why?” Now Harold is looking really worried. He is wondering whatever made him listen to the priest in the first place.

“Let me show you . . . if I can.” Scatha pulls the blue pouch from her pack and removes the stone.

“So? It’s a rock.”

“No, wait.” Scatha prays desperately that the stone will do something. Maybe having Harold along is a good thing, maybe not, but right now company is cheering. After all, she thinks, after a lifetime on the Quais barges with my whole family

around me, or living in Chatelgard, being alone takes some getting used to.

Holding the stone up between them, she addresses it. "Honored Memory Stone, show me—us—where to go next."

Nothing happens. Harold begins to lose interest. Squinting with effort, Scatha stares harder and harder into the cold black surface. The stone begins to glow.

"Look at that!" Harold shouts, leaning closer.

"Shhh!"

The glow gives way to a swirling mist, which slowly clears. As the two adventurers stare into the stone a landscape appears, of a thin, scrubby forest abruptly giving way to an endless expanse of burning sand. It almost looks as if the desert border was carved from the land by a giant sword point. Now the two young people can make out moving figures, the first a single man running with all his might toward a rocky shelter. A horse lies dead behind him. Three horsemen, all in black-hooded cloaks, ride in pursuit. The figures move like tiny puppets on some miniature stage, a child's show on Festival Day, but in deadly earnest. The silence of the play makes it all the more chilling.

Scatha discovers that by willing herself closer, the vision rushes up to her, as if she were a bird swooping down to see the ground. Now she can make out the faces of the actors in this terrifying play. The man who was running is now cornered near a heap of boulders. It is the wizard Drukor,



whom she has seen in the stone before. Only this time he is not looking so triumphant. Drukor stares, terrified, at the charging horsemen, then the mad look comes over him. He raises his hand and flings out blinding balls of fire. Two of the horsemen fall. Scatha is just as glad she cannot hear the death screams of the burning men, nor the shrieks of the dying horses. It is terrible enough to watch them toss and writhe their lives away.

The remaining rider throws back his head in a silent shout and charges again at the wizard. With the agility of an acrobat, Drukor somersaults out of the way, and then leaps back over the horse, kicking the rider sharply in the head.

Scatha is fighting back hysteria at these dream-like antics when she sees that the rider is bleeding from his mouth and nose. Soberly she watches him slip from the saddle to the ground. There is no doubt. He is dead. Drukor, his face twisted in a laugh which the watchers cannot hear, bounds onto the rider's mount and gallops away deep into the desert.

The vision fades.

"Wow! Can you do that often?" whispers an awed Harold.

"Of course I can," Scatha answers tartly, quickly recovering her composure as she packs away the stone. At the same time she profoundly thanks and apologizes to the gods who control the stone, whoever they are.

She continues, "Now you see that we must get to the border as quickly as possible."

Section 27

"I still don't understand. But I do know that those horsemen from the inn will be back when they realize they have lost the trail. There is a shortcut to the lowlands, although I can't guarantee that we can make it if the snow continues. It goes straight over that."

He points to the magnificent mountain range to their right. The peaks, many white even at the end of summer, are lost in the clouds.

"But first you have to tell me why I'm risking my life for you, Scatha. I don't really understand all of this."

"Fair enough." She tells him all that has gone on, and is pleased enough when Harold interrupts now and then with eyes as big as dinner bowls when he discovers that she actually lived at Chatelgard, and studied arms skills, and even knows Lord Ejord. ("Oh, yes, Uncle Ejord. He is very nice.")

At nightfall they make a lean-to from an oiled skin and ropes which Harold had the forethought to pack. They tie the horses in what shelter they can find and start a small damp fire which sputters weakly and smokes a lot. But the food tastes wonderful, and they even boil up water for herb tea.

"My plan," Harold explains, "is to use the temples of the mountain cults for shelter. I don't know exactly where they are, but everybody who has been over the mountain says they are each about a day's journey apart. I know that in Lord Ejord's father's time, all could use them without fear if they did no harm. I've also been told they are

Section 27

haunted places, but it's better than staying outdoors unprotected. Do you know about the Mountain Men?"

Scatha shudders. "Mountain beasts is more like it. Last winter we saw the remains . . ." She shakes her shoulders as if to shake away the memory. "Never mind. Yes, I know about the Mountain Men."

"With any luck they won't be too hungry, or too wild yet. But with this early a winter, who knows? Been a strange year all around. At least if we reach the temples at night the Mountain Men won't attack us there."

The next morning they break camp in a driving snowstorm. By midmorning they are well up a twisting narrow and slippery road which clings to the mountain's edge. Scatha and Harold have dismounted and are leading the horses. Neither talks, but they use all their strength to steady the snorting and slipping mounts.

Scatha looks up as an ominous rumbling begins.

"No!" she shouts, throwing her arms over her head. An avalanche of rock is tumbling down the slope straight at them.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 33.

If the total is higher than her Dexterity value, turn to section 34.

* 28 *

Scatha feels the slick warmth of her own blood. Run. Run. Run, she commands herself with each lung-burning breath. Slowing down will cost her her life.

The newcomers are scrambling after her. She dodges into the stable, runs into Harold's room, and bolts the door. Her enemies are right behind her, slamming into the door. The timbers are bending with each assault. It will not be long.

Wincing in pain, she reaches for the dagger in her shoulder, but cannot grasp it. Holy Mohandru, she whimpers, as she struggles for a grip on the hilt. Got it! she groans, and yanks it out, tearing more muscle in the process. She uses the knife to cut off a piece of blanket and manages to stuff it into her armor to staunch the bleeding. Her cloak and leather armor have probably saved her life.

Pushing the bed to the window, she clambers up with her pack and tries to shove it through. But the shield strapped to it makes it a tight fit and it jams. The first door timber gives way. Panicked, she shoves again, and the pack is through. Finally she grabs her sword, hops to the ledge, slithers through and jumps to the ground.

Looking back at the small window, she hopes it isn't big enough to let any full-grown men through. Shaking with pain, the wounded woman gathers her gear and runs around the inn to the woods. The

Section 29

pounding of her blood in her ears drowns out sound and thought. The curve in the road is ahead of her. The oak is on the other side. She does not look; she just dashes blindly across the road, sliding the last few feet and rolling behind the oak. The horses are there and so is Harold.

He is panting. They both fight to quiet their breathing as they hear the sound of horsemen gallop past their hiding place and down the road.

Turn to section 27.

* 29 *

Scatha stares into a red void. The pain is gone, her body numb. Shadowy pictures dance before her eyes, but she cannot even think what they mean. A young man, with hair like ripe corn, a crow, a great warrior woman, Ejord, yes, she knows that face, folks from the Quais, those she has loved. Now she sees other shadows, horrible ones, a wizard looming over her, hawklike, turning into a winged demon, now another powerful sorcerer, mad, raging. Black gods, scaled, furred. It is a confusing nightmare.

“Oh, gods, forgive me. I tried.” She sinks into the peace of death, knowing that the fate of her world is doom.

This quest has ended in failure. You may attempt the quest again, hopefully with a happier outcome.

Section 30

You may wish to increase her skill level (which will also increase her hit points). To start again, turn to section 1. Good luck!

* 30 *

The rest of the party is jogging quickly, playing a no-win game of catch tag with their leader, who has ridden ahead. Scatha decides she likes this snake even less than the leader. Trying not to show her increasing fear, the lanky girl saunters along the road, edging closer and closer to the woods. But she never stops watching Snake out of the corner of her eye, hoping he will lose interest. No help for it. He hasn't taken his eyes off her. Well, here goes! she thinks, and ducks around a tree and bounds down the embankment into the woods.

The stones and dirt fly under her as she speeds down toward a stream in a ravine below. Suddenly she feels her feet tackled out from under her, and sees the ground rushing toward her face. Gasping for air after the impact, the young fighter kicks her way loose and rolls over to face the scrawny man.

Subtract one hit point of damage from Scatha's total.

Turn to section 32.

* **31** *

The lanky girl saunters along, trying to be as nonchalant as possible, but she is edging toward the opposite side of the road. As she passes the skinny man, he moves to her, cutting her off.

“Well, lad,” he says in an oily voice, “been on your own long?” He puts an arm around her shoulders. Now really terrified, Scatha shakes him off, breaking into a run and jumping down the embankment. But the snake-eyed man is on her like glue. Suddenly she feels her feet tackled out from under her. The air slams out of her lungs as she hits the ground, loose rocks biting painfully into her. The young fighter kicks her way loose and rolls over to face the scrawny man.

Turn to section 32.

* **32** *

The first thing she sees is the knife in Snake’s hand. The second is a hungry leer on his face.

“What a pretty find, *lad*.” The last is so sarcastic she knows her bluff’s been called. “I haven’t had a woman for weeks. This will feel so good,” he croons as he lunges at her.

Section 32

For a split second Scatha is paralyzed with fear. Then the anger rises in her like a living thing. She is a warrior. She is Pasca's kin, Jenny's foster-daughter, but most of all a woman formed in the mold of Rifkind herself. No dirty brigand is going to have his way with her! She blocks his knife thrust with her arm, powers a punch to his ribs, coming up with her knee to his jaw as he doubles over.

Backing out of range, Scatha drops her backpack and draws her sword. Snake shows no signs of running, but charges at her, shouting obscenities. She waits for his charge, stepping aside as he stabs at her. Her sword is poised in position over her head. She strikes down, the blade twisting in her hands slightly, sending a shot of pain up her arms. The blow is not clean, but effective enough. It bites deep into his neck. He twists loose and stabs at her again, driving the knife into her ribs, but her armor absorbs the force and, although bleeding, she is still very much alive.

Scatha swings at him again, and this time the blow is clean, the blade humming as it slices the air, thumping into the man's body. He falls dead.

Scatha can hear one of Snake's companions call out from the road. Then she hears the leader's voice. The men move on. She goes down to the stream and washes her face in the cold water. Noticing the blood running along her sword, she wipes the blade clean and sheathes it. She shudders as she thinks of the dead man, but is not sorry she removed him from the world. She wonders how

many more like him she will have to face before this quest is over.

Still shaking from her first real battle, Scatha listens for sounds of the other men coming after her, even though she knows they won't. I've got to unwind. I've got to relax. She thinks of what she was taught by her old arms-master. He said to eat, if you can, and drink something. It takes the edge off the battle-rush. She drinks from the stream, then finds and eats a few late-summer berries, but she can hardly choke down the food.

The wound aches but is tolerable. Going out of her way to avoid the brigand's body, Scatha climbs back to the road and continues on toward the inn.

Roll 1 D6 and subtract this number from Scatha's hit points.

Turn to section 17.

* **33** *

"Move!" Harold bellows, but Scatha is already dragging the terrified animal up the path with a strength she never knew she possessed. They slam themselves against the rock wall as the curtain of stones and ice spills down past them. The noise is deafening, nature's show of strength stupefying.

Finally it is over. They stand, slowly stretching

Section 34

cramped muscles, paralyzed for a moment as the knowledge of how close their deaths were sinks in.

Turn to section 35.

* 34 *

“Move!” Harold bellows, but Scatha is already dragging the terrified animal up the path with a strength she never knew she possessed. But the horse swings its head in a frenzy, sending the straining girl skidding on the slushy snow toward the edge of the mountain path. Frantically Scatha clutches at the reins, trying to steady herself, but the horse has lost its footing. Harold stares in horror, unable to reach them. Scatha is the first to roll off the edge, her bleeding fingers finding no hold on smooth rocks. The reins are still twisted around her wrist as the horse slides past her and down the mountain. Girl and beast are lost in a shower of stones and ice as the leading edge of the avalanche crashes over them.

Roll 2 D6. Subtract this number from Scatha's hit points as damage she received from the avalanche.

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If she is still alive, turn to section 36.

* **35** *

Soon they forget the terror of the avalanche in the harsh reality of the driving snow and bitter wind.

"Look, there. What is that?" Scatha shouts.

"What? I can't hear you." The howling wind blows away their words.

"There! Again! Harold, I see something moving." She huddles close to him, shouting in his ear, and points down the mountain behind them. "It's Mountain Men. I'm sure of it."

"I see something, too. Look ahead," he shouts back, "that big black blob. It must be the first temple."

If they decide to run for the temple, turn to section 37.

If they decide to fight, turn to section 38.

* 36 *

The horse has managed to scramble to a firm foothold and is hanging on, despite the rocks which rumble past. But Scatha has been jerked to an unceremonious and sudden stop. She lies helpless as she is stoned by the mountain. She wonders what sin she could have committed to deserve such punishment. Rocks rain down on her head, her neck, her whole body, bruising her terribly. She knows she can't give up, and so slips into a twilight of unremitting pain, where the pause between rock hits is as long as a lifetime and as short as the blink of an eye. Finally it stops. Harold climbs down to reach her. He lifts her head tenderly under his arm.

"Are you all right?"

Scatha is dazed. She moves her legs experimentally. Thank all the gods, they move. But she feels a sharp pain in her knee, and another in her shoulder.

"I think so," she lies bravely.

"I'm going to try to move you. Tell me if anything hurts."

Scatha laughs until the tears stream from her eyes, even though each breath brings new worlds of pain. "Everything hurts, Harold."

He pulls her to her feet. She leans heavily on him.

"We'll have to go back, Scatha."

"We can't, Harold. At least I can't. You know that."

Section 37

He sighs wearily and helps her back up to the road. Then he hauls the horse up. The animal is limping slightly. Harold knows he will have to drag the injured creature along. To leave the beast is to condemn it to sure death.

They, too, have come close to death, but have survived, wounded but alive. It is time to move on.

Turn to section 35.

* 37 *

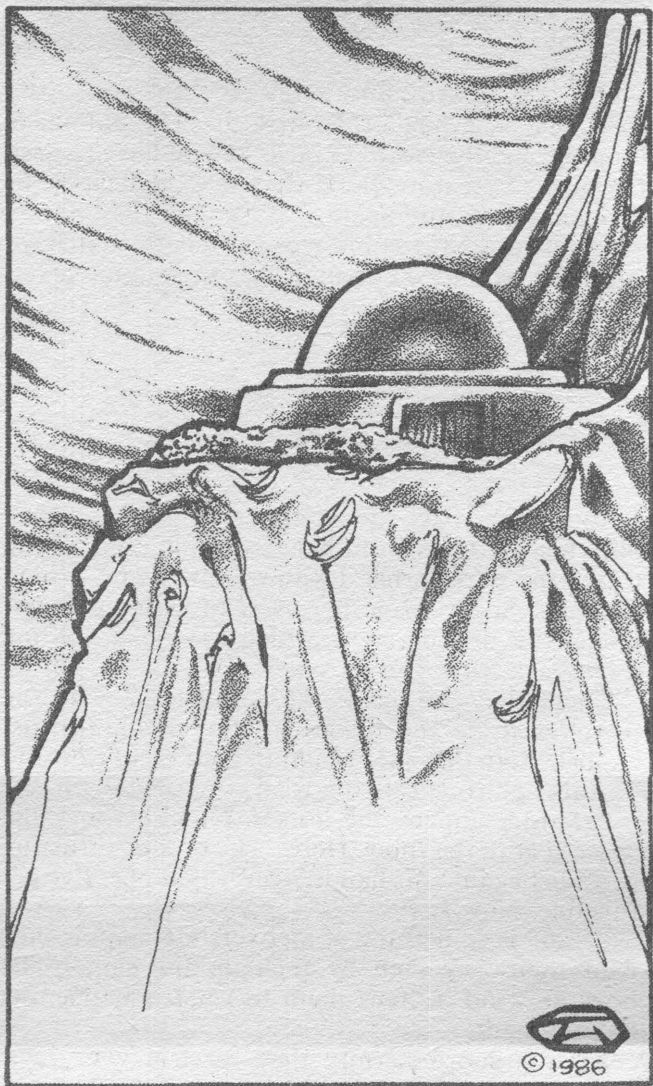
Scatha turns back down the road. She squints, blinking the tears from her streaming eyes, trying to see the dark forms. I know I saw them. Where are they? She mops at her eyes. At least she is not facing the driving snow which has been holding them back from finding sanctuary.

There they are again. Three, at least. Can the travelers drive the horses up the mountain fast enough? Can they face a fight in their condition and on this tightrope called a road?

"Harold, unpack the horses. Quickly, bury the spare gear in the snow. Here," she orders, thrusting a saddlebag into his hands, "carry that one. I've got this one. Now *run!*"

"Run" is something of an overstatement as they fight their way inch by inch up the slope. The howling wind deafens them to what is happening behind them.

After a short eternity they reach a wide level



space. The black blob ahead of them defines itself into a domed stone building within an encircling stone wall. There is no gate, only a gap in the wall, but Scatha feels safer as soon as they are inside. Even the wind seems less fierce as they quickly make their way across the small courtyard and pull open the door of the temple, frantically scraping away the snowdrift which blocks it.

Turn to section 39.

* **38** *

Scatha turns back down the road. She squints, blinking the tears from her streaming eyes, trying to see the dark forms. I know I saw them. Where are they? She mops at her eyes. At least she is not facing the driving snow which has been holding them back from finding sanctuary.

There they are again. Three, at least. Can the travelers drive the horses up the mountain fast enough? Can they face a fight in their condition and on this tightrope called a road?

The young warrior reads the situation, calling forth everything she learned from her arms-master at Chatelgard, and in the practice *mélées*. This is no war game. This is real. She hears her arms-master's voice growling in her head, "You use what you've got." We've got the horses. They will provide some cover. Is it enough to get to the temple? she

Section 38

considers. She shoots a glance back up the mountain. A blast of wind blinds her. No! It is stand and fight or run and die, she decides.

“Wait here,” she shouts at Harold over the wailing wind. “Let them come to us. When they hit, don’t try to hold ground. Back up toward the temple. Any chance they have a flanking party behind us?”

“Probably not,” he shouts back, “they are not too bright. But they are mean.”

The first of them shambles into view. He’s swinging a club. Harold pulls his quarterstaff free from his pack. In his haste the saddlebags fall free and hit the ground. Scatha draws her sword.

The road is too narrow for more than one-on-one combat.

“This one is mine,” Scatha shouts. She ducks the Mountain Man’s first swing and sweeps her blade up to her opponent’s armpit.

Mountain Men (and women, for that matter) are simply dumb. But they are strong, and fearless (fear takes imagination). They have a low chance of hitting anything, especially what they aim at, but hit hard.

MOUNTAIN MEN

To hit hero: 16 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10

*Damage with the Mountain Man’s club: hand:
2 D6*

*Damage to Mountain Man by Scatha’s sword:
2 D6*

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If she kills the Mountain Man, turn to section 44.

* **39** *

Scatha falls to the ground, her limbs quivering with exhaustion. The weary girl hears Harold collapse next to her, but rolling over to face him takes too much effort. She lies there until her hands and feet warm up enough to feel the throbbing of frost damage.

Squeezing her eyes shut and pretending not to hear doesn't hide the scuffling outside, and a horrid sound: half whinny, half shriek.

Harold, pointedly ignoring the sounds outside, drags himself up and starts to strip off his soaked boots and clothes.

"Off with your boots!" he commands. "I'll start a fire. We have to get dried out and warmed up before frostbite can do any real damage."

Scatha slowly struggles to follow his orders. She knows he is right. But she can't stop thinking about the horses.

Harold puts his arms around her.

"Don't think about it, Scatha. I was already cutting their tack loose before you told me to. We didn't have much choice. And maybe they got away. It was their only chance. And ours."

Scatha reaches out and hugs Harold back. "I

Section 40

know you're right, but it's just awful. It's all just awful."

"Shall I help you with your boots?" he asks shyly.

"No, thank you," she answers, but adds as a hurt look that can't be hidden spreads across Harold's face, "it's all right. I'll be fine. Really." She manages a reassuring smile.

Turn to section 40.

* 40 *

Harold goes off to strike a fire in the hearth. There is a neat pile of wood, and the fire has already been laid, in accordance with the unwritten rules which govern the use of these places. They, too, will leave the temple cleaner than they found it, although travelers are only expected to replace the wood and food stores if they are able.

Scatha lays out her wet gear by the fire and drags the two salvaged saddlebags to the hearth.

"Well, we have dry socks, and oh, thank the gods, my pouch. From now on I wear it." She starts to tuck the blue pouch into her shirt.

"If your magic rock is in there, you should keep it nearby. Can we look at it? Maybe it will tell us how we can get out of here alive. I doubt those Mountain Men will be content with horse steaks for very long."

"They eat *people*?"

"That's what the stories say, and I believe it. The mountain does it to them. The cult priests who worship at these temples don't seem to be affected. But travelers who get lost up here but don't die become like them. They must join the bands of Mountain Men after they become like the rest of them. A cousin of mine disappeared three winters ago. I hate to say it, but I always hoped he died instead of becoming one of the *them*. I guess you haven't been at Chatelgard very long. The Overnmont family has cleared out nests of Mountain Men for years."

"I only came to Chatelgard a year ago. I am of the Quais people. After Lady Rifkind waged the war which restored our land, I followed Lady Jenny home with her husband. He is a Quais, too. I want to be like Rifkind. I want to be a warrior."

"Why? Don't you want to get married and have children?"

"And get beaten by my husband, and grow old before my time tilling the land and birthing brats? No."

"Not all marriages are like that." Harold is thoughtful for a moment as he considers her. She was awfully satisfying as a companion in arms—even if she was a girl. "I don't see why you would have to give up being a warrior. My father fought in Ejord's army and he didn't give up being my father. Or running a farm. And he never, ever would even think of hitting my mother. For one, he loves her. For another, she'd break his head for him if he tried."

Section 40

"Well, maybe." Scatha doesn't feel very comfortable talking about this. She pulls out the stone, mostly to change the conversation.

She holds it out on her palm, its glassy black surface glistening in the flickering hearth light. But nothing happens. She shrugs and puts the stone away, feeling disappointed. She hopes Harold won't say anything about her failure.

They settle in for the night, making up a small hot meal out of their now-meager supplies, rounded out with some stores from the temple. Scatha settles back on her damp but warm cloak and looks around. The stone altar stands by one wall, half hidden in shadow. Above it is carved the face of the god of this place. Scatha stares, fascinated, at it, but can only make out the hawklike profile, and the eyes which look more and more alive the more she stares. She forces herself to turn away.

Scatha and Harold chat for a while, but are both too tired for much planning. Soon they stretch out on bed rolls and fall asleep.

Scatha is standing in a warm swirling cloud. Two red spots glow before her, imparting a pink glow to the mist, drawing her closer and closer. She has no will; she feels no movement. She simply drifts closer to the eyes. Now she can see the face around those eyes, the stone face above the altar, but no longer stone. It comes loose from the wall and floats down to her. No, now it is not a face, but a man. Only not a man. The hawklike face is clearly not that of a bird but a lizard. The body is sinuous, beautiful. It shimmers green, blue, black, violet.



Section 40

His arms are long and end in clawed hands. His legs are muscular but graceful, and as he walks toward her she can see that he balances himself with a tail which grants him an arrogant yet elegant suppleness. He is wonderful and terrible at the same time. Scatha can feel him talking to her in her mind.

Who are you, child? You seem familiar and yet not familiar. Do I know you?

I am Scatha, of the Quais. Scatha feels a chill of fear. Can she tell this god of her quest? Can she keep it from him? *Who are you?* she asks timidly.

Who am I? He looks almost puzzled and he glances around with unnerving reptilian jerks. Then a smile creeps to his mouth. *Now I remember. I am so old, it is all as one to me. I am Hanju. You call me a Lost God. I am the last of my kind. The mountain is mine. If I will it, you are mine. Ah, yes. The other. Her name is Rifkind. She will return to me, perhaps. You are like her. But too young. You are still too young for me. Perhaps you will return to me. What would you receive from me? I would gift you.*

Scatha's mind reels. What to ask for? She starts to pray for guidance and then laughs at herself. Who shall she pray to in the presence of the last of the Lost Gods? She sighs and begins.

Great Lord, I seek the return of the Lost Horn of the War-Horse of Heaven. An evil man would destroy the world, when the heavens burn in a certain way, and the time is short. We, my friend and I, are but mortals, and not very wise ones. Will you help us in the quest?

Hanju stands silent for a while. Scatha is ready to

cry. What if he is evil and will destroy her? What if he is displeased with her? She hasn't had much experience bargaining with gods. But he nods and speaks.

I cannot leave my mountain and live. But you are what your people would call good. I am pleased. Perhaps this will help. Put out your hand.

Scatha does as she is bid, and three shimmering pearls appear on her palm.

The god and the mist swirl away. As they go she hears, faintly, *Return to me, Scatha. Return to me.* It is not a command by a powerful god, but a plea. Scatha is touched by the loneliness in his cry. Perhaps she will return to him when her quest is over.

Scatha awakens, and looks up at the stone face, now no more than a carved figure dimly illuminated by the thin, watery morning light streaming in from the few narrow windows.

"Harold, are you awake?"

"Mmmmm."

"I had a dream. Oh, gods! It wasn't a dream. Look!" In her clutched fist are three pearls.

While they break their fast, she tells Harold of her experience with Hanju.

"Fine. Did he tell you how to use them?"

"No."

"There are only three. We can't afford to waste one trying to find out. I guess we just guess when the time comes, whenever that is."

Harold's dispassionate attitude toward her meeting, talking to one of the greatest mysteries of her

Section 40

world, infuriates her. "Maybe we don't know how to use them, but we have them," Scatha shouts hotly. "I don't see you getting any help from anybody."

"Oh, yeah. And where would you have been in the storm alone?"

Scatha says no more, but she is angry at this unwanted companion. And she has no interest in getting married to anybody, ever, and what business was it of his?

The storm has become more gentle, but has not stopped. Fine powdered snow drifts to the ground, tirelessly building drifts which will become more dangerous than the wind if they do not move on soon. They pack, replace the wood in the fireplace, and tidy the sanctified shelter.

As they leave Scatha turns back at the door, looks up at the stone face and bows deeply, praying quietly. *Thank you, Hanju. Perhaps I will return.*

You may use the Gift of Hanju anytime you are offered the option. You will find out what they do if and when you choose to use them. Just remember that Hanju is a very old god and hasn't had much business with humans for thousands of years. He is a little bored and a little whimsical. On the other hand, he seems to like Scatha. But his memory isn't too good, and you never know with gods. Good luck!

Turn to section 42.

*** 41 ***

As the tail arches over to sting her she grabs for it, hanging on by little more than her fingernails to the horny plates which armor the beast. The tail flicks back up, Scatha's body flying and snapping like a pennant in the breeze, but she bravely hangs on. The beast flicks its tail again, and again Scatha is danced up and down like a puppet. Her grip is slipping, and she knows she must do something or she will again be helpless in the sand. As the tail arches low over the creature's back she lets go and drops down. Lying flat and using the plates on its carapace for handholds, she crawls up toward its head. Straddling its neck and gripping tight with her legs, she grasps the sword firmly with both hands, points it down like a huge dagger, and drives the point through the scorpion's eye and into its brain. She is flung away by its death convulsions, but she feels the stinger graze her leg as she tumbles to the sand.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Scatha's Constitution value, turn to section 15.

If the total is greater than her Constitution value, turn to section 12.

* 42 *

Scatha and Harold don't talk much most of the morning, partly because of the cold and the snow, but mostly because Scatha doesn't want to encourage Harold to be protective and coddle her. The strong-willed girl fought long and hard to earn some respect from her swordmates at Chatelgard. She knows she's going to have to do it all again with Harold. Boys are so stubborn about some things! Not that she doesn't like him. In fact, if he could keep from treating her like a kid sister, she'd like him a lot. . . .

Her daydreaming is swept away. *Something* is watching them. She drops back to walk next to Harold.

"Do you see something, or *feel* something strange?" she asks uneasily.

"Yes, the last few minutes I thought I heard something crunching in the snow. It's stopped now."

"I feel watched," she insists.

"Yeah, that's it. Me, too. Just keep walking."

Scatha nods in agreement, but shudders at the thought of another attack so soon.

They keep plodding down the road. The next temple should be about a day's journey from the last, but they are on foot now, and going even more slowly because of the snow. There is a good chance

that even if they don't encounter any more bands of Mountain Men, they will have to camp in the snow.

"Look, there!" Harold points to a shadow which scuttles across the road some yards ahead of them.

Scatha sees it as it disappears into the snow. "Oh, Great Mohandru. Here we go again."

But the attack does not come and they warily continue along the twisting snow-covered mountain road as the morning passes into afternoon, and the afternoon into dusk.

"No help for it. We'll have to camp," Harold says.

"No. We press on as long as we can."

He shrugs but does not argue. Soon it is too dark to see the road.

"Scatha, this is stupid," Harold finally bursts out in exasperation. "I know you're as tough as I am, but we're both going to get killed walking off the edge of this mountain if we go on."

"Can we light a torch?"

"With what!"

"Branches. There are bushes in the snow all along the road."

"I'd be game to try to light a campfire with that stuff, but a torch will either be too wet to burn at all, or it will be too twiggy to stay lit long. Please, Scatha, maybe you can keep going but I'm ready to fall asleep on my feet."

She sighs, and shrugs, resigning herself to the fact that he is right about this.

Harold senses that she wants to give in, and presses his advantage. "We passed a wide place in

Section 42

the road with some shelter about fifty yards back. Let's go back there. We might even get a fire started. I'd feel safer against attack with a fire. They say those creatures are as afraid of fire as any mountain bear."

Scatha agrees and they return to the place. It is better than they could have hoped. They find a shallow cave.

Scatha quickly starts a smokey fire.

"That's really amazing, Scatha. I can't get wet wood going that fast."

"There are tricks to it. Remember, my people lived in bogs. I've had a lot of experience lighting fires on rafts floating in swamps, even in the rain," she explains, surprised at how pleased she is by Harold's praise.

They make a minimal camp, one they can break quickly. But they do take time to pile up the drifting snow to increase their shelter, and hold in what little warmth the brush fire gives off.

"I'll take the first shift," Scatha offers, stifling a yawn.

Harold does not argue and is asleep in minutes. All is quiet in the nighttime forest, and Scatha listens to its peaceful sounds. She's lulled by the interplay of the fire against bare tree branches, casting playful shadows across the snow. Harold looks almost handsome in this light, she thinks, playing a game of "what if . . ." with herself. Suddenly the shadows turn into real shapes.

"Harold!" Scatha screams, jumping clumsily to her feet. He scrambles up, his bow already in his hand. He thanks his favorite deity that he salvaged

Section 43

it from the gear scattered outside the first temple, although the stomping of the terrified horse left him but a scant dozen unbroken arrows. But his quarterstaff is gone and much missed.

Scatha's sword is in her hand as she dodges the blow of the first of the man-beasts to reach her, and swings down at his exposed neck. He crashes to the ground. But there are more, many more, darting into the firelight. Harold draws his bow, nocks an arrow, and fires. His target clutches his chest, screaming inhuman cries, and falls. Harold snatches up a firebrand and threatens off two more. But there are more and more screaming and crowding into the circle of light. One swings a sword at Scatha's exposed back.

"Behind you!" Harold bellows.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 51.

If the total is greater than her Dexterity value, turn to section 48.

* 43 *

Scatha is sprinting for all she is worth, but the damn sand grabs at her like hands, and she isn't gaining any distance.

I didn't come all this way to be killed from

Section 44

behind, she decides desperately, and she turns to meet the thing. It arches over her, blotting out the sky, its dozens of spiny arms weaving and reaching for her, snapping its claws with sharp little clicks. The mandible doesn't click at her. It grinds!

She swings and jabs, but the damn thing is not only larger than a house, it is in its element, and she is not in hers. It crashes down to crush her, but she rolls out of the way. She can see the silhouette of its tail with its deadly stinger arch over to reach for her. She scrambles to her feet, dodging and striking, all at the same time.

GIANT SCORPION

To hit Scatha: 12 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10

Damage with claws: 1 D6

Damage with mandibles: 1 D6

Damage with stinger: 2 D6

The Scorpion attacks once each type per round.

If Scatha is killed by the scorpion, turn to section 50.

If Scatha kills the scorpion, turn to section 41.

* 44 *

The next hulking half-human charges at them, screaming a bone-shattering wail. In the split second as he comes in, Scatha coolly assesses possible strategies: Can I block this bullock? Or do I duck?

Section 44

Is there room to duck? But her body is already in motion, and she slams against the mountainside to avoid the hulk. She involuntarily winces at the *whoosh* as Harold's quarterstaff flashes past her and bats the monster off the edge.

Boy, am I dumb, she thinks as the next one charges her. A plan is clear to her as she shouts to Harold, "Use the staff like a pike, behind me. No, stay behind. I'll provide the shield wall."

"All one of you?" he shouts back.

"Trust me."

She manages to grab the reins of one of the milling horses, and drags him in front of her as the next creature hits. The horse takes the impact of the charge and panics. He snorts and rears up, dragging Scatha, still holding the reins, with him.

Harold has caught on to the plan and is smartly stabbing at the wild man with the end of his quarterstaff. The creature falls back with each thrust, only to throw himself against the staff again and again. Even without the horse or Scatha as cover, he is holding his own.

But Scatha is in trouble. The horse is slipping, and Scatha with him.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 45.

If the total is greater than her Dexterity value, turn to section 46.

Section 46

* 45 *

Scatha feels the pack horse lose his footing. She drops the reins, but as the rearing, sliding, whinnying animal flings his head in terror, he strikes her, sending her sprawling toward the edge. She grabs for something, anything. Her hands close on the saddlebags on the horse's flank as the poor beast slides over the edge. The bags come off in her hands. By now she is only holding on by a handful of brittle, dead weeds which have been exposed by the passage of the sliding animal. Somehow she manages to throw the saddlebags back up to the road and dig the fingers of her now-free hand into the frozen soil. It holds, and she starts to scrabble her way back up to the road.

Turn to section 49.

* 46 *

Scatha feels the pack beast lose his footing. She drops the reins, but as the rearing, sliding, whinnying animal flings his head in terror, he strikes her, sending her sprawling toward the edge. She grabs for something, anything. Her hands close on the

saddlebags on the horse's flank as the poor beast slides over the edge. The bags come off in her hands. Clutching the bags mindlessly, the scared girl reaches for the edge as it slides past her, using her right hand and dropping her sword. Scrabbling for a handhold every inch of the way, she slides painfully down the steep slope, gaining momentum. Oh, please, Mohandru, Brel, anybody, help me, she prays with every missed branch and boulder.

Suddenly she stops hard against a rocky outcropping. She leans her head back against the cold rock wall, and breathes deeply. I hate mountains, I hate towers, I hate high places, she groans to herself. But this is not the land of the Quais, and she forces herself to face the climb back up the hill, where, by the sound of it, Harold is still fighting hordes of wild men.

But when she looks down at her feet wedged into a crevice in the rock, it is all she can do to keep from screaming. All she can see is mist and sky. Nothing more. Below her lies a sheer wall.

She aches all over. She is still holding the saddlebags. Good sense tells her to drop them. But, damn it all to Brel's Hell, she lost her horse. She is not going to lose everything else, even if it means her own life. With the spunky determination which is so characteristic of her, she declares, They called me stubborn at home. Well, they never saw stubborn. Slowly, inch by inch, she starts crawling up the steep slope, back up to the road and the fight,

Section 47

the bags hung over her shoulder, her fingers painfully digging into the frozen slope for purchase.

Turn to section 49.

* 47 *

I'm not going to fight that thing! she thinks as she scrambles back. The scorpion swings its head, looking for breakfast. All the little voices in Scatha's mind are screaming for attention, and none of them is saying the same thing. Run! Don't move! Her will is voting for run, her good sense for don't move. She freezes, thinking very small and unappetizing thoughts. It doesn't help. The thing is quite nearsighted, but it can smell a bug at a hundred yards. It lurches at the hapless girl.

Oh, hell! She breaks into a run.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 75.

If the total is more than her Dexterity value, turn to section 43.

* **48** *

Harold shouts, but too late. Scatha is struck and flung off her feet.

Roll 1 D6 for Scatha's damage.

If she dies, turn to section 29.

If she survives, turn to section 52.

* **49** *

She drags herself onto the road edge. Harold is down but struggling to hold off the huge wild man straddling his body. The wild man rips Harold's staff from his hands and breaks it like a twig. Scatha knows the sword is somewhere. She feels along the ground, warily watching the fight. There's something. Damn! It isn't the sword. It's the saddlebag. The Mountain Man is about to bash in Harold's head.

Shouting a war cry, Scatha swings the bag at the man-beast. He turns, climbs off Harold, and rushes at her. Harold grabs up the other saddlebags, which are still lying in the road. He bats the wild man

Section 49

from behind, sending him spinning toward this new attacker, forgetting Scatha. She hits him again, and again he turns, and again Harold strikes at him, driving the wild man rushing back and forth between them. The Mountain Man is red with rage. He rushes Harold in earnest. Scatha finally sees her sword and dives for it. Then she runs, with all the strength she has left, into the howling snow and wind, and drives the blade into the last of this party of Mountain Men.

But even now they see dark shadows darting from one rock to another as more of these untiring beasts prowl the blizzard for food.

Scatha and Harold back up the road toward the looming temple. As if at a signal they both turn and break into a run for the sanctuary. The domed stone building lies within a circular courtyard surrounded by a low stone wall. They bolt through the gap in the wall, across the snowy courtyard, and pull the door of the temple open, kicking away the drifts of snow which block it shut. They slam the door behind them and collapse on the floor.

Scatha falls to the ground, her limbs quivering with exhaustion. The weary girl hears Harold collapse next to her, but rolling over to face him takes too much effort. She lies there until her hands and feet warm up enough to feel the throbbing of frost damage.

Squeezing her eyes shut and pretending not to hear doesn't hide the scuffling outside, and a horrid sound: half whinny, half shriek.

Harold, pointedly ignoring the sounds outside, drags himself up and starts to strip off his soaked boots and clothes.

“Off with your boots!” he commands. “I’ll start a fire. We have to get dried out and warmed up before frostbite can do any real damage.”

Scatha slowly struggles to follow his orders. She knows he is right. But she can’t stop thinking about the horses.

Harold puts his arms around her.

“Don’t think about it, Scatha. There was nothing more we could have done to save them.”

Scatha reaches out and hugs Harold back. “I know you’re right, but it’s just awful. It’s all just awful.”

“Shall I help you with your boots?” he asks shyly.

“No, thank you,” she answers, but adds as a hurt look that can’t be hidden spreads across Harold’s face, “it’s all right. I’ll be fine. Really.” She manages a reassuring smile.

Turn to section 40.

* 50 *

It’s not the pain. It’s the frustration that hurts. Scatha’s blows are getting weaker and sloppier, not just from the terrible injuries, but from knowing that it is all over. The creature’s chitinous mandi-

Section 51

bles close around her, crushing her. She can hear her spine snap, and where she felt her legs is now only a horrible burning. She never feels the stinger send the venom into her body, but she can feel the paralysis in her throat and chest, and she cannot breathe.

Turn to section 29.

* 51 *

Scatha lunges out of the path of the club. She turns and swings at her foe.

Mountain Men (and women, for that matter) are as dumb as shovels. But they are strong, and fearless (fear takes imagination). They have a low chance of hitting anything, especially what they aim for, but a clean hit is a hard hit.

MOUNTAIN MAN

To hit hero: 16 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10

Damage with club: 2 D6

Scatha does 2 D6 damage with her sword, and swings first.

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If Scatha kills the brute, turn to section 53.

* **52** *

Scatha is stunned but alive. The blow was hard, but the clumsy delivery turned the blade as it struck. She rolls painfully out from under the angry creature's second attempt to kill her. She scrambles to her feet and swings at him.

Mountain Men (and women, for that matter) are as dumb as shovels. But they are strong, and fearless (fear takes imagination). They have a low chance of hitting anything, especially what they aim for, but a clean hit is a hard hit.

MOUNTAIN MAN

To hit hero: 16 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10

Damage by the Mountain Man: 2 D6

Scatha does 2 D6 damage with her sword, and swings first.

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If she kills the beast, turn to section 53.

Section 54

* 53 *

Scatha manages to kill the first of the Mountain Men, but she is confronted with several more. She must decide whether to use one of Hanju's pearls or rely on her own skills as a warrior.

If she decides to use one of Hanju's pearls, turn to section 60.

If she decides to rely on her own skills as a warrior, turn to section 54.

* 54 *

Three more Mountain Men shamble toward her. Scatha risks a quick glance toward Harold. He is holding his own, but won't be much help in holding off this newest bunch. She backs herself into a crevice. She should be able to climb out of range if she has to, but at least she only has to face one of these creatures at a time from here. Oh, Lost Gods, she thinks, at the last minute, what if they have long weapons, spears, or pikes. I'll be a sitting goose! The young veteran is beginning to learn the subtleties of tactics. But the time for lessons is over, and luck is with her. The first of the creatures strikes at her with a Brel-be-damned heavy mace.

MOUNTAIN MEN

To hit hero: 14 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 7 each

Damage with heavy mace: 2 D6

Scatha does 2 D6 damage with her sword.

Roll for three Mountain Men foes, one after the other.

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If Scatha kills this batch of three, turn to section 55.

* 55 *

Scatha manages to kill all three of the Mountain Men, but over the pile of bodies she can see many more ready to charge her. Again she considers whether to use one of Hanju's pearls or not.

If she decides to use a pearl, turn to section 60.

If she decides to continue fighting, turn to section 56.

* 56 *

The pile of bodies in front of Scatha both provide some vague cover and cause her to feel trapped in the crevice. With each new opponent, the terrible strain and fear yield to the savage joy of battle

madness, but then are replaced by greater anxieties. Now more of these creatures crowd in to attack her. The warrior sets her jaw, tenses in readiness, and the battle begins again.

MOUNTAIN MEN

To hit hero: 15 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 7

Damage with whatever the Mountain Man has in hand: 1 D6

Scatha does 2 D6 damage with her sword.

Roll for three more opponents, one after the other.

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If she survives, turn to section 57.

* 57 *

Somewhat miraculously Scatha kills all three of her opponents, but the toll on her is extreme. She has suffered numerous wounds and is close to total exhaustion. She sees that there are only a few Mountain Men left to fight, but she is not sure if she has the stamina for it. Again, she considers whether or not to use one of Hanju's pearls.

If she decides to use a pearl, turn to section 60.

If she decides to keep fighting, turn to section 58.

* **58** *

I've got to get out of here, Scatha thinks, desperately scrambling over the bodies of the fallen Mountain Men. She sees Harold being pushed toward the edge by several of the beastly creatures.

"Harold, hang on," she shouts, breaking into a run, "I'm coming!"

The swordswoman drives her sword between the ribs and into the heart of one of the attackers. Quickly pulling her blade free, she rushes to Harold's side, shouting commands.

"I'm here," she yells, blocking a blow meant for Harold. "You go high. I'll go low. Now!"

Two swords flash in the thin winter sunlight. The confused man-beast watches dumbly as the blades mete out his death, his great club dropping harmlessly to the ground.

But the endless supply of creatures rolls on. Harold and Scatha are now fighting back to back. The edge is too near for comfort, and the road is too narrow for escape. A thing that was once a man, his long red hair filthy and matted, his back crooked from an old injury, growls at the girl, and swings down at her with a double-bit ax.

MOUNTAIN MAN

To hit hero: 16 To be hit: 8 Hit points: 8

Section 59

Damage with whatever the Mountain Man has in hand: 1 D6

Scatha does 2 D6 with her sword.

Roll for three combats.

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If not, turn to section 59.

* 59 *

Scatha's arms are so tired she can't lift her sword. She is leaning against a boulder, breathing heavily, the cold air burning her lungs.

"Harold, are you alive?"

"Barely." (Pant, pant.) "I'm over here." (Pant, pant.)

"Are there any more?"

"Can't see any. Brel's Hell. If there are, I'm dead. I can't swing another blow." (Pant.) "Picked up a good sword. Heavy, but good." (Pant, pant.) "Always wanted to be a swordsman." (Groan.)

"Hurt?"

"All over. You?"

"Same."

They stumble to what is left of the fire. Scatha throws a couple of branches on, but it sputters weakly.

"I don't know if I can go on." Harold is bruised

and bleeding in a dozen places. "What we need is a good magic spell, like the one the priest did on you."

Scatha draws the pouch from her shirt. She feels inside. There is her Memory Stone, and, yes, one of the pearls slips into her fingers. There are only three. Can they afford to use one? Besides, she doesn't have the faintest idea what they do. But they are both so hurt. This could help. Perhaps it could have helped end the battle which brought them to this. Using magic and gifts from the gods is all new and very confusing.

If Scatha decides to use a Gift of Hanju, turn to section 61.

If Scatha decides not to use a Gift of Hanju, turn to section 62.

* **60** *

Scatha reaches her hand into her shirt where she has hidden the pouch. Her fingers tingle as they warm inside the sweaty leather armor. She feels the Memory Stone, then digs deeper. There, there is one. The pearl slips into her hand.

"Harold, hold them off."

"I'm trying!"

A large creature, even more crazed than the others, leaps at her gibbering sounds that are not

Section 60

quite words. She blocks his blow, deflecting his sword past her, springs to one side, and throws the pearl toward the fire.

Oh, please, Hanju. Let this work, she prays silently.

Nothing happens. Scatha is livid, fighting like one of the mad creatures herself. She is shouting at the top of her lungs into the cold night air as she cleaves through the endless supply of Mountain Men. "Damn you, Hanju. How could you? I hate you. You can't have me. I won't come to you dead or alive. When the horn blows it will destroy you too and I'm glad."

Suddenly a flash erupts in the camp, lighting up the night like a million torches. Scatha is thrown to the ground. She can see Harold sprawled out a few feet from her. The fireball mushrooms out into a thing of beauty and terror, red and gold richly shadowed with dove gray and soot black.

As the explosion puffs on and on, Scatha covers her ears against the thunderous bangs that accompany each new blast. She looks in awe, the searing heat tingling on her face. Is it her imagination or is that the face of Hanju, laughing with each crashing boom?

Soon the fireball fades to a wispy glow, with only a few scattered sparks dancing in the smoke.

"Are you all right, Harold?"

"Yes. You?"

"Fine, I think."

As they crawl toward the fire, they see that every one of the Mountain Men is dead. The two adven-

Section 61

turers lean against each other, quietly enjoying shared camaraderie. The snow has stopped and the stars twinkle in the crystal night.

"Harold, how do you feel?"

"Fine. Why?"

"I mean, are you really fine? I feel healed."

"You're right. The gash on my arm is gone." He is groping at all the wounded places on his body. "And the sprained knee, and . . . Well, all of them."

"Me, too."

The fire sparks and blazes into a warm, cheery glow. Scatha curls up next to Harold, feeling relief and almost happiness at the successful battle.

"I don't think we will have any more trouble tonight."

They both sleep, safe and dreamless, until the dawn.

Restore all of Scatha's hit points.

Turn to section 63.

* 61 *

"Please, Scatha. Do something. I'm dying." Harold does not look like the robust, brave youth who helped Scatha at the inn. Even in the flickering light the waxy sallowness of death can be seen on him. Scatha moves to his side, cradling his head.

Section 61

What if it won't heal? What if Hanju is jealous. He did want me to stay with him. What shall I do? Do I throw it, or feed it to Harold, or what? Scatha remembers the priest who healed her. He threw the herbs into the fire. Then he placed his hand on the wounds. Well, here goes. Please, Hanju. I need this help. And while you are helping, I'm not in much better shape than he is.

This is no understatement. Scatha is dizzy with exhaustion and loss of blood. She throws the pearl into the fire. Nothing happens.

Horried, and angry with desperation, she gasps out, "You worthless, no account god! How can you? It's not fair. Rot, damn you. When the world ends at least it will take you with it."

Slowly a spiral of silver smoke rises from the faltering cold fire. At first she thinks it is no more than the last gasp of the wet wood, but it twists and turns into brilliant blue patterns in the air. She can almost imagine she sees the face of Hanju, and she is sure she can hear thunderous laughter.

Now the smoke twists toward her, engulfing her. She feels her wounds heat up as they did when the priest healed her. She reaches out to Harold. Perhaps Hanju will save her, but, by all the gods, she will save Harold. She places one hand on his brow, the other over his heart. He glows with the unearthly blue glow. As she feels his body warm, she sees the bruises and lesions glow and disappear.

The spiraling light fades. The snow has stopped. The stars twinkle in the cold crystal air. The fire sparks and blazes into a warm cheery glow.

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Scatha curls up next to Harold; almost relaxed with post-battle glow.

"I don't think we will have any more trouble tonight."

They both sleep, safe and dreamless, until the dawn.

Restore all of Scatha's hit points.

Turn to section 63.

* 62 *

All of a sudden another band of Mountain Men attack Scatha and Harold.

"Harold, hold them off," Scatha yells.

"I'm trying!"

A large creature, even more crazed than the others, leaps at Scatha's gibbering sounds that are not quite words. She blocks his blow, deflecting his sword past her, springs to the side, and cleaves his head off in one clean and mighty swing. Her arms move like creatures with a mind of their own. She knows what to do. All the fears and doubts melt in moments of action.

Scatha is possessed, fighting like one of the mad creatures herself. She shouts at the top of her lungs into the cold night air as she cleaves through the endless supply of Mountain Men, "Damn you. I hate you all. You can't have me, dead or alive. I

Section 62

won't join you and I won't be your dinner. You can't keep me from my destiny. I must find the horn. I *will* find the horn."

Another lurches at her, a creature that was once a farm woman. Scatha stabs at her, but the woman keeps coming, pressing Scatha to the mountain wall. Harold finishes off his latest attacker and runs to Scatha's aid, driving the point of his newly acquired sword into the back of the crazed Mountain Woman.

Scatha slumps, exhausted. They seem to be out of Mountain Men for the time being. The exhilaration of the fighting still dances in her mind, but her body has had it for the day.

"I always wanted to fight that way. The arms-master fights like that, all the time. He told us it would come, someday. Someday I would be out there in a war and it would be as if all my opponents were moving in honey, and I was moving like fire. It's true. I hope it happens again. It's wonderful."

Harold is also glowing with pride despite his wounds. He is reverently cleaning the sword. "I too had a dream. But the dreams of farmers' sons don't often come true. My father fought as a footsoldier in the war. After the war was over, he wished to stay a soldier, and even to earn rank. But he was told that farmers had to go back to the land or risk being declared outlaw. I, too, wished to be a soldier. Now I have my dream. I will not give it up."

As they crawl toward the fire, they see that every one of the Mountain Men is dead. The two adventurers lean against each other, quietly enjoying

Section 63

shared camaraderie. The snow has stopped and the stars twinkle in the crystal night.

The fire sparks and blazes into a warm cheery glow. Scatha curls up next to Harold, enjoying his warmth and honest humanity.

"I don't think we will have any more trouble tonight."

They both sleep, safe and dreamless, until the dawn.

Turn to section 64.

* 63 *

When Scatha awakes she finds Harold sitting by the fire. He is reverently cleaning his new sword, a gift of the Mountain Men.

"You asked me once why I joined you on this quest. Well, part of it is that I was brought up to protect girls . . . No, let me go on. I've learned you can care for yourself and I sort of like you for it. Honest. But there is another reason I came. I, too, had a dream. But the dreams of farmers' sons don't often come true. My father fought as a footsoldier in the war, and after the war he wished to stay a soldier, and even to earn rank. But he was told that farmers had to go back to the land or risk being declared outlaw. I, too, wished to be a soldier. Now I have my dream. I will not give it up."

Turn to section 64.

* 64 *

The morning is glorious, the thin winter sun casting pale gold highlights on the fresh powdered snow. The sky is bluer than can be believed by poor mortals. The breakfast fire crackles cheerily, shedding a warmth that is already not needed in the sunlight, and the smell of the simple gruel is more delicious than a Midwinter-Day feast.

They both feel rested and refreshed, and not like two people who have braved storms and enemies and are on a quest to save the world. But the peaceful time must end, and Scatha and Harold break camp and face the new day.

The bodies of the Mountain Men lie scattered over the narrow battlefield. Harold stops and bends over one, rolling him over.

"Oh, dear gods," he gasps.

"What's the matter?" Scatha asks, looking down at the body. Through the dirt and shaggy hair, she can see the sandy-haired young man this corpse once was.

"Remember I told you about my cousin who disappeared into the mountains, and how we hoped he had died rather than becoming one of the beasts? Well, he's dead now."

"Harold, I'm so sorry," Scatha says, gently laying her hand on his arm.

They stop to cover the body with snow. It is all they can do. The ground will not thaw enough to

dig in until summer, and in some summers, not even then.

"I just realized that all of these creatures were once somebody's cousin, or mother, or husband," Scatha says, looking down at the makeshift grave and shuddering. "We may owe Hanju for his gifts, but this place is not good for mortals. Let's get off this mountain as fast as we can."

They slog down the road, making good time considering the drifted snow and the fact that each of them is burdened with saddlebags. By midmorning they reach the temple they should have reached the night before. They stop to replenish their supplies and eat in safety, then push on.

"You know we probably won't reach the next temple by nightfall," Harold says.

"I know and I don't care. All I care about is going faster. I had a peek into the Memory Stone back there, and I saw Drukor, and I saw the two moons growing closer to conjunction. We may not be in time whatever we do. But I cannot risk not trying."

But by what seemed some miracle, they do spend the night sheltered from the weather, and worse. By the day after they are well on their way down the other side of the mountain, the side warmed by the winds which come off the great desert wastes of the Asheera. Here, there is not much snow to slow them, and they are soon hiking down forested hills.

After a lunch of dried meat strips, Harold sits, whittling a stick. "You should get into some proper clothes," Harold suggests.

"Proper?" she repeats, arching an eyebrow.

"Yes, proper. Girls don't dress like that down

Section 64

here. They will probably think you are Asheeran, or worse," Harold answers coolly, ignoring Scatha's sarcasm.

"So?" Scatha answers defiantly. "Rifkind is Asheeran and—"

"Exactly, and they probably would think she was a witch even if she wasn't a warrior, which is strange enough. . . . Down here, that is. Easy, Scatha, easy." He ducks the handful of leaves she throws at him.

"No. I won't wear girl clothes," she insists.

"As you wish, but it may cause trouble and that will slow us up," Harold adds seriously. "Think about it."

Scatha fumes as she troops down the road. It is true that we will be less noticed that way. I could try to pass for a boy again. No, that isn't sure enough. And my leathers could use some sewing and patches. Oh, well.

"Harold, if it will make you breathe easier, I'll do it."

"Do what?"

"Wear a skirt, rabbit-brain! But only until we are over the border. By the way, where do I get this skirt?"

As if the gods are listening, the next turn in the road reveals a small farm not far off, and flapping in the breeze is a line of fresh wash.

"There!" Scatha points to it in triumph. "Let's go down and ask the family if we can buy some clothes."

"Buy? No, we'll have to steal them. These folks

Section 65

don't have but one or two sets of clothing. It's not a grand estate like Chatelgard. Besides, I don't think we can explain you. Farmers are slow, but not stupid. They'd know in a shot you are not some simple local girl. They'd take you for a witch for sure. Trust me."

They argue the pros and cons of being seen by the farm family. Finally they agree on a plan.

If they choose to try to buy clothes, turn to section 65.

If they choose to try to steal clothes, turn to section 66.

* 65 *

"I still think this is a big mistake," Harold grumbles as they approach the farm.

Two small children are in the farmyard, a girl of about five or six who is throwing grain to the fowl, and a toddler who is crawling around after her. When the girl sees the strangers she scoops her baby brother into her arms and staggers off to the house.

"Mommy, Mommy, strangers."

"Now we are in for it," Harold whispers. "Let me do the talking."

A large red-faced farm woman comes to the door, shoves the children in roughly, and shouts at

Section 65

Harold and Scatha, scowling, "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Please, Mother. We came over the mountain, my bride and I, to find my uncle. He promised to 'prentice me when I wed."

"Mmm." The housewife looks unconvinced. "Why is your bride dressed like that? More like a footsoldier than a maiden, if you ask me."

"Yes, Mother. It was to protect her from brigands, we thought to dress her as a boy. My brother gave us the clothes."

"So, what do you want?"

"We lost most of our belongings running from the Mountain Men. She needs some proper clothes before we can go to my uncle's house." Harold puts an emphasis on proper that makes Scatha wince, but she says nothing.

"I'll trade you for the leather armor. My youngest son could use that."

"No," Scatha protests, but, biting her tongue, adds more modestly, "I promised my brother-in-law to return it next spring."

The farm woman scowls at them, apparently making up her mind about them. Finally she wipes her hands off on her apron and shakes her head and says, "I don't like your looks. Get off the farm."

Scatha doesn't particularly want the peasant's clothes, but she is not about to be kicked off the property like some beggar without a struggle. But this will take strategy, not force.

The tough young swordswoman puts on her sweetest and most maidenly smile and pleads, "Oh,

Section 66

Mother, I would feel so *ashamed* meeting my dear husband's kin looking like this. Please, we can pay you a fair price for a shift and skirt. It would mean so much to me." Scatha actually sheds a tiny tear, much to Harold's astonishment.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Charisma value, turn to section 67.

If the total is greater than her Charisma value, turn to section 68.

* 66 *

They start down toward the farm and its laundry line. They move cautiously. It is still too far to tell for certain how many folk are in the farmyard, and no way to tell how many are in the farmhouse. They settle into a large clump of tall grass for some serious reconnaissance.

"I'm sure that is a child, a young one by the way she moves," Scatha says. "And a baby with her, or maybe a small dog . . . No, that is a child," she adds, squinting to get a clearer look.

"Are you sure there are women's clothes on the line?"

"Yes, besides, either a shift or a man's shirt will do, and there are several shirts. And I think that

* **67** *

The farm wife eyes her, then breaks into a wide grin.

"Very well, girl. You can have my daughter-in-law's very best skirt and shift, and I'll throw in a bodice for good measure. But it will cost you five pennies."

Scatha thinks this is outrageous for a set of rags, as she is sure they will be. Harold reaches for the pouch of gold the priest gave them, but she places her hand over his to stop him.

"Oh, husband dear, don't use our household *pennies*, when I can use the pennies my father gave me." She fixes him with a meaningful look.

He bends over to her and whispers, "Don't you think you are spreading the butter pretty thick, wife dear?"

She quickly produces five pennies from her pouch. But the farm wife's sharp eye has watched the exchange between them.

"Now, while I take your new garments from the chest upstairs, come into the house and let me feed you a good hot meal. There is a cauldron of stew on and bread. Maybe even a drop of beer."

She throws her huge arm around Scatha and shepherds her into the farmhouse, with Harold trailing behind.

When the woman has gone to fetch the garments, Scatha urges, "We have got to get out of here,

Harold. I'm sure she knows we have money. When her husband and sons get back from the fields, we could be in big trouble. I don't want to kill these people."

The small girl child totters up to the table carrying a coarse dark loaf of bread. Harold looks at the child and then nods in agreement to Scatha.

The woman comes down with the clothes. Scatha was right; they are rags. And she also knows that the girl whom she bought them from will never see a penny of the payment.

The blushing bride excuses herself and goes upstairs to the common sleeping room and quickly changes clothes, belting up the skirt, which is too long. She rolls her armor carefully and regretfully stuffs it into her bags. It is bulky and heavy when it is off, and she thinks, miserably, I hope we don't get into a fight. Between these damnable skirts and the weight of the armor, I'm not going to be good for fighting or running.

With a final tug and pat, she is satisfied she looks the part of a peasant maid and goes downstairs where a hot meal of turnip and onion stew, with a few bits of wild mushroom and herbs, is waiting. Whatever doubts the travelers have about this household, there is no doubt that this hearth provides good, hearty food.

After supper, the farm woman says, "I will make up a bed for you two upstairs. You must be weary, and when I was a bride I would never turn down a chance for a little extra cuddle." She adds this last with a suggestive gesture and a broad wink. Scatha catches Harold's eye, and they both fight down a

Section 67

giggle. Maybe the woman is really being kind. It is tempting, Scatha thinks. Harold imperceptibly shakes his head no and Scatha subtly nods in agreement.

"Thank you, Mother," Harold begins, with the authority of a new husband, "but we cannot stay. We are already long overdue at my uncle's, and he will be concerned."

"One night won't make any difference," the woman replies, shoving Harold toward the steep stairs.

Scatha grabs Harold's arm and drags him back toward the door, snatches up all their goods, and they bolt out the door.

"Thank you, Mother," she shouts behind her, "but we really must go."

When they reach the road, they both have to stop to catch their breaths, especially Scatha who is stooped under the extra burden of her armor and long skirts.

They look back and see four tiny figures approaching the farm. The farmer and his family are back from the fields.

"I'm glad we didn't overstay our welcome," Scatha says.

"Me, too," agrees Harold, "although they might have meant us no harm."

"Ha," Scatha laughs, "and you were the one who suggested the only safe way was to steal the clothes. You were right. No more extra risks."

Turn to section 69.

* 68 *

"I don't know what you two are up to," the farm woman shouts at them, shaking her fist in a very believable manner, "but I don't want any brigands or thieves on my farm. Now, get out. Go get your disguises somewhere else."

She makes a threatening move at them, and they both turn tail and run for the road.

The two heroes are panting hard as they lay sprawled out under a tree some distance from the farm. Scatha bursts into laughter.

"We managed to beat Mountain Men and head off Black Riders, and we were just driven off by an old woman and two babies. Oh, well!"

Harold chuckles. "We still have the problem of clothes. If we had hoped to steal her wash, by now I'd warrant it's in the house, or at least guarded by one of her brood. We're back to where we started."

"There must be an inn or village along this road somewhere. I guess we should just try the story again. I'd bet a merchant or serving wench would be more willing to take our coin without asking questions."

They continue on, and by midday they come to a ramshackle inn.

"Wonderful!" Scatha exclaims sarcastically. "I don't know if I'd trust anybody here to feed me a crust of bread. Are you sure I can't just bluff it out wearing my armor?"

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“Pretty sure.”

They enter the inn. Inside there is a serving wench scrubbing a table, while a local denizen of the inn sleeps in a corner.

“Hello, the inn!” Scatha calls.

The girl looks up. “All we have is bread and cheese. The soup is cooking, but won’t be ready for hours yet.”

“That’s not what I wish to buy.” Scatha tells the girl what she needs, without bothering to make any excuses. The girl does not ask any questions but agrees enthusiastically to sell her oldest clothes for the sum of five pennies, which will more than outfit her in a style she never expected.

Within the hour the two are back on the road, well fed on cheese, bread, fall apples, and beer, although Scatha mutters a long string of bitter complaints as the skirt hampers her stride, and her armor, now packed on her back, causes a further burden.

Turn to section 69.

* 69 *

The rest of the day and the next are uneventful, except that they are coming to civilization, if one can call it that. The small villages are heavily shuttered, and even the merchants are surly. Scatha has slit the skirt so that she can reach her sword, which she has hidden underneath. Harold is now

carrying her shield since they agreed that would be easier to explain. Scatha feels very vulnerable and is getting angrier and angrier that she has been deprived of armor, and to some extent weapons, and is left helpless for no better reason than her gender.

Scatha and Harold are finally within sight of the walls of the border town, Isinglas, but have arrived after nightfall. The town gates are locked and they decide to wait until morning rather than make themselves an annoyance to the gate guards.

Camped by the edge of a field, they decide to risk a small fire and hot meal, buying provisions from a nearby peasant and his plump wife.

Scatha sits leaning back against her pack, munching on a still-sizzling sausage, which is spurting delicious, spicy juice with each bite. "How long do you figure we have been on the road?"

"About ten or eleven days."

"That's what I figure, too. I wish I could remember what the priest told us about the conjunction. As near as I can tell we have about twenty days left . . . Let's say fifteen to be on the safe side."

"Try the Memory Stone. Maybe that will tell you."

"I tried it yesterday. Nothing!"

They had been avoiding contact with strangers as much as they could, except to buy food. Once, a man in a dark-hooded cloak galloped past them on the road. It was still a topic of conversation between them whether or not the man was just a traveler in a hurry or if he was part of some sinister gathering of the Dark Brethren. Scatha was sure she

Section 69

had seen the characteristic dark mark on his face as he rode past, but Harold insisted she was making it up, or it was only a birthmark or a mustache or something else just as innocent.

"Harold, are you sure you want to go into the desert with me?" Scatha asks, trying to sound casual. The young warrior is still troubled about taking her friend with her. "I'm really glad you came with me this far, but, well, I can't ask you to face the kind of danger I expect to find there."

"You're not asking me. I'm volunteering," Harold answers cheerfully, but firmly.

"No, really." Scatha is struggling to put into words all her concern for her friend, and her fears about what lies ahead, and she knows she is making a botch of it.

"Really, Scatha," Harold interrupts, "we've talked about this before. You may have found out about this first, and maybe you are the gods' chosen champion. I would not doubt that one minute. But if this Drakor, or Drukor, or whatever his name is, lets all the evil beyond the worlds loose on us, no one will be safe, and no one will be a bystander. I'm proud to help, and I'll take my chances with you anytime."

Scatha is moved almost to tears but says only, "Thank you, Harold. I'm proud of your help, and I'm glad of your company."

The next morning they join the small crowd of travelers who wait at the town gate, and are soon passed inside by the bored young guard.

They find themselves an inn, and spend the next

several days shopping. Scatha has asked the innkeeper if there is an astrologer in the town ("So that my husband and I can start a family on a lucky day."), but there is a decided reluctance to talk about anything that smacks of witchcraft. Now she's glad she is dressed anonymously.

After another endless shopping trip, they turn up the Street of Coppersmiths, the stench of the Street of Tanners still in their nostrils. They have purchased water bags, a canvas lean-to, fresh flint (although Scatha has no idea what they will use for firewood in the desert), and the dozens of other things they will need. Scatha has gotten a lead on an astrologer, and they have been told that three streets down from the leather shop a horse fair will be held today. Two steeds, and some foodstuffs, and they will be ready to face the Asheera.

"The woman in the leather shop told me that her brother is leading a caravan across the Asheeran waste, near where we need to go. He leaves tomorrow. She told me his name and suggested a fair price to offer him to join the caravan," Scatha tells Harold as they approach the horse fair.

Already the sellers are parading their animals, and a few early deals have been made. Harold goes to look at a sturdy shaggy chestnut. Scatha is again glad to have him along. His skill in horse-trading would make his parents proud.

"Harold, the star gazer lives near here. Why don't I go ahead and see him, and I'll meet you back at the inn. I really have to know when the conjunction is before we can make any further

Section 69

plans; although you might contact the caravan leader anyhow and fix a price in case we want to leave with him."

"Makes sense. See you later," he says, adding, "and be careful."

"Aren't I always," she rejoins, grinning, but Harold's face shows the concern he has for this brave lady.

Scatha wanders down the Street of Weavers, casually looking at wares in shops and stalls. The alley between the last silk merchant, and the first rug dealer. Here it is, she thinks, slipping unnoticed down the narrow lane. She knocks at the green door as instructed and is admitted by a watery-eyed man, who is visibly uneasy. Gods, Scatha muses as he escorts her in, these magic-haters certainly have everybody terrified.

"How can I help you, child?" the old man asks, his voice quivering and his limbs shaking as with palsy. He sweeps a clear space on his table, pushing aside charts and fascinating brass instruments of his trade. "A babe, perhaps, or a wedding?"

"No, Father, it is not that. I would like to know when next the two moons join in conjunction."

The old scholar's face turns white. He looks fearfully back at the curtain to his sleeping room. "Leave!" he whispers desperately.

Her first thought is to protest, arguing that she will not tell the authorities of his sorceries, but she realizes that something else is wrong. She starts to reach for her sword through the slit in her skirt as

Section 70

the curtains part and two looming figures in black cloaks leap out to grab her. She lunges for the door, sending her chair crashing over.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is less than or equal to Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 72.

If the total is greater than Scatha's Dexterity value, go to section 74.

* 70 *

Scatha practically skims along without her feet touching ground, zigzagging to avoid rocks and holes. She dares not look back. I wonder if they are going to chase us all the way to the Asheera? she wonders. The road is ahead. So is Harold. They both bound onto the road, snatch up the saddlebags, and keep running as fast as they can. Finally they stagger to a halt. There is no one behind them.

"I think we had better not push our luck, and keep moving."

"Agreed," pants Harold, but it is some minutes before either of them moves.

Scatha is the first to grin and break into a laugh, but soon they are both howling with mirth, and relief.

Section 71

“I think I was more afraid of that woman with the pitchfork than I was with the Mountain Men and the Black Riders together,” Harold chortles.

They continue chuckling as they go down the road, recounting the Tale of the Laundry to each other. By midafternoon they finally feel safe enough to stop and eat something from the dwindling supply in their packs.

Scatha changes into the hated “girl clothes,” rolling her armor into a bulky bundle and stuffing it into her pack, muttering as the skirt hampers her stride. Her armor, now on her back, is a further burden.

Turn to section 69.

* 71 *

Scatha's feet hardly touch the ground as she runs up the meadow. She can hear the shouts of the farm folk behind her, getting louder as they close the distance. She is losing her wind, and slowing down. She is just about to drop the stolen clothes and make a last effort when she stumbles on a stone and sprawls painfully on the ground. She struggles to rise, but a huge, callused paw of a hand grabs her by the shoulder and slams her back down.

“Let go, let go. I'll pay for the clothes. I can explain.”

"Oh, you'll pay for them, all right."

She is hauled up to face a bear of a man. This oaf would make a fine candidate for a Mountain Man, Scatha thinks as she quickly tries to assess her chances of talking her way out of this.

"Why are you dressed like that? Have you no shame?" The farm wife, red-faced and coarse, is shouting at her. Scatha thinks how like the cook at Chatelgard she is, and takes an immediate dislike to the woman.

"I know why, woman," the man answers. "She is a witch."

"No." Scatha tries to protest, but she is cuffed roughly in the face. The farmer twists her arm behind her painfully, pushing it high up her back. She's shoved forward, forced to walk quickly or fall to the ground. Witches aren't treated like ladies, Scatha observes to herself.

She now notices that two of the farm folk have not followed her, but gone after Harold. But he has gotten a good headstart, and they are returning to the house, angry and empty-handed.

When they arrive the older lad says, "Father, the other got away." The way the boy flinches tells Scatha much about this "loving" family.

"No matter," the man bellows importantly, "he will come back for her, and then we will get him."

They tie Scatha to a fence post where she can be seen from across the meadow, an obvious lure to Harold.

"Get used to it, witch. They will tie you to a post

Section 71

when they burn you," the older son taunts as he cruelly pulls the ropes on her wrists tight.

Scatha, not used to such ill treatment, finds her pride leaping to tongue before common sense. "I'll see you and your family burn in hell before I'm dead," she hisses.

"Watch yourself, witch, or I'll burn you before the magistrate passes judgment," the boy says, cracking her across the face.

Like father, like son, you bully, Scatha thinks, but gives him no chance to hit her again.

"See what she has. Maybe she has gold," the farmer orders the boy. The son leers at her, wetting his lips with the prospect of searching her, but the farm wife pushes him aside.

"I'll do that. You keep your hands off the witch. They can *do* things to men."

The woman gropes and pokes none too politely around Scatha's belt, looking for money. She finally spies the bulge under the armor where Scatha has hidden the blue pouch. The woman roughly jerks it out. Scatha's heart sinks.

The man growls, "Give it to me," and snatches it from his wife.

He empties out her treasures into his hand and inspects them suspiciously. He picks out the Memory Stone and tosses it aside. Then he picks out one of the pearllike Gifts of Hanju.

"Mmmm, this might be worth something."

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you," Scatha warns.

The farmer's bushy eyebrows shoot up as he shouts, "Witchcraft!"

"Don't throw it!" But it is too late. The big pearl arcs up into the air, hovering for a moment at the apogee, shimmering against the clear blue sky.

And then it explodes. The sky is covered with showers of lightning, but lightning in the most brilliant and fantastic colors. Balls of sparkles follow, like giant dandelions of colored light. The show continues growing more wondrous.

The farm folk are shouting and yelling and running aimlessly around the yard. Scatha notices that the lights are very pretty, but they are not doing anything very useful except scaring the wits out of this generally witless family. She knows the show won't last, and she is still tied to a post, and when it is over these people are going to be dangerously furious.

The light show seems to be ending, billows of sweet-smelling smoke settling to the ground. Suddenly out of the smoke a figure appears.

"Harold!"

"Don't move." He is slicing away her bonds. "There, you are free. And take this."

He hands her a sword. His is already unsheathed. When the smoke clears the family is no longer facing a helpless victim, but two very competent and armed warriors.

The older son, the bully, makes a run at Scatha. "Here, witch. Give me that before you hurt yourself."

Section 71

Scatha's code of honor won't allow her to kill a witless peasant, no matter how much he deserves it. But she does use the flat of her sword to whack him in the head, hard enough that he falls senseless to the ground.

"We will leave with no killing, if you back off."

The farmer has pulled a long knife, almost a short sword in length and mass. The remaining brother has grabbed a pitchfork, and the two women have armed themselves with hoes.

"Don't let them flank us," Scatha shouts to Harold. "Separate."

Harold obeys, circling away from Scatha, forcing their opponents to divide. The two women move toward Harold, their closer target, leaving Scatha to face the two men.

FARM FAMILY

Scatha combats the farm father first. His family does not interfere.

To hit Scatha: 13 To be hit: 11 Hit points: 8

Damage with knife: 1 D6 (father)

Damage with sword: 2 D6 (son)

If she kills her opponent start second combat with the farmer's son.

To hit Scatha: 11 To be hit: 14 Hit points: 7

Damage with pitchfork: 1 D6 (son)

Damage with sword: 2 D6

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If she kills her foes, turn to section 73.

* **72** *

Drawing her sword and deftly tucking up her skirt, she rushes toward the door. Fumbling for the latch she feels one of the men grab her, but she kicks her foot back into his kneecap. She hears him groan as he falls into his companion. She gets the door open and dashes to freedom.

Startled locals stare as the breathless girl, brandishing a broadsword, bounds out of the alley into the busy street. Scatha grins sheepishly, holding the sword out of sight by her side as she ducks into the crowd, making her way toward the horse fair. Glancing around, she can see the black-cloaked men stalking her, but she is hidden by the crowd.

The horse fair is going full swing by now, and many townspeople crowd around the best livestock. This is great for protection, but how can I find Harold in all this? I won't. I'll hide at the inn, she plans, but the chilling thought strikes her that someone told the Brethren that a girl was looking for an astrologer, and it might be the innkeeper as easily as a merchant.

But as people surge from one auction to the next, she spots her quarry.

"Harold!" He turns, trying to locate her. She starts to call to him again when she hears a voice commanding her to freeze, and she stops in her tracks.



The voice is as much in her head as something she hears. It oozes into her mind and will. She strains to run, to escape, but she feels like she is swimming in thick mud. The voice goes on, insistently, "Come to me, girl."

Obediently she turns. A group of four Dark Brethren stand next to her, the two guards, the big bearded leader whom she has met before, and another. But it is not the leader whom she fears the most. Her eyes rivet on the other man in black. He is thin to the point of being gaunt, with hawk-sharp features. But it is his eyes. They burn into her as she is inexorably drawn to him. The big bearded man seizes her.

"Now, now, Athelstan," the oily one chides, "always so physical. You must learn that there is more power in the mind, my son."

"Yes, my lord," Athelstan growls, but he does not loosen his grip on her.

But the bearded man's savage hold is not needed, as Scatha sags stupidly, totally ensorcelled by the hawk-faced man's voice. Look at all the pretty horsies, she dreamily thinks as she stares across the marketplace. Why is that man running toward me? He'll frighten all the pretty horsies.

"Scatha!" Harold's frightened voice snaps the spell and she struggles to get free, but Athelstan's viselike grip holds her firm.

The Dark Lord turns toward Harold and points a bony finger at him. A blue flame sears out past Scatha, who struggles to turn her head to see what is happening. She hears Harold groan, and then a

Section 72

thud. The townspeople who have gathered around move back, offering her no help as she is carried away by the Dark Brethren.

Tied and blindfolded, she is thrown into a cart and covered with straw. It seems like hours of painful thumping along before she is yanked from the cart, dragged along cold stone floors, roughly untied, and thrown into a cell.

Scatha sits miserably in the small dark room. She has tried to break open the door until her hands were so bruised she couldn't move them. She doesn't even know how long she has been in here. She slept twice, and found gruel and water each time she awoke. The first time she did not eat or drink, but the second she felt so weak and dehydrated that she decided to risk it. So far there have been no ill effects.

She hears footsteps. She flattens herself behind the door. The door opens.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 76.

If the total is greater than her Dexterity value, turn to section 80.

* **73** *

The farmyard is littered with the dead and injured. Scatha, looking down at the tormented faces, is filled with rage at the needless destruction she has wrought. These are peasants, poor peasants, and her warrior's honor tells her that she should defend, not kill, those less skilled than herself. There must have been a better way. The swordswoman knows that there is a lesson to be learned this day, one which she must never forget.

Lowering her bloodied sword, she turns to Harold, whose face is as pale and drawn as her own. "I never wanted it to be this way. Really." Her voice trembles and she clears it before she can go on. "Are all farmers like these here, ready and willing to kill anyone different from themselves?"

"No, Scatha," he answers gently, watching the only unharmed farm girl herding the frightened children into the house. He has made orphans today, and these children's lives will never be the same. There is nothing he can do that will give them back what he has stolen from them.

Trying to make sense out of the carnage, he continues, "My family is not like this. The lowlands were hardest hit by the war. After years of invading armies sweeping through the land, these people feel they can trust no one. Maybe they're right," he adds bitterly, shaking his head. "In any case, swordswoman, we will have to be more

Section 73

careful until we reach the desert, or there will be more death.”

“Who would have thought the desert would represent safety? These are strange times. Let’s go.”

“What about your clothes?”

“I couldn’t wear them. We’ll find others.”

She gathers up the blue pouch, the Memory Stone, what remains of the Gifts of Hanju, and her few other precious things, and tucks them back under her shirt.

They go back to the road and retrieve their hidden saddlebags and packs.

“There must be an inn or village along this road somewhere. I’d bet a merchant or serving wench would be willing to take our coin without asking questions.”

They continue on, and by midday they come to a ramshackle inn.

“Wonderful!” Scatha exclaims sarcastically. “I don’t know if I’d trust anybody here to feed me a crust of bread. Are you sure I can’t just bluff out wearing my armor?”

“Pretty sure.”

They enter the inn. Inside there is a serving wench scrubbing a table, while a local denizen of the inn sleeps in a corner.

“Hello, the inn!” Scatha calls.

The girl looks up. “All we have is bread and cheese. The soup is cooking, but won’t be ready for hours yet.”

“That’s not what I wish to buy.” Scatha tells the girl what she needs, without bothering to make any excuses. The girl does not ask any questions but

Section 74

agrees enthusiastically to sell her oldest clothes for the sum of five pennies, which will more than outfit her in a style she never expected.

Within the hour the two are back on the road, well fed on cheese, bread, fall apples, and beer, although Scatha mutters a long string of bitter complaints as the skirt hampers her stride, and her armor, now packed on her back, causes a further burden.

Turn to section 69.

* 74 *

Pulling her skirt up, fighting to untangle the sword, she stumbles toward the door. Fumbling for the latch, she feels one of the men grab her, but she kicks her foot back into his kneecap. She hears him groan as he falls into his companion. She gets the door open and is about to dash to freedom when she hears a commanding voice say "Freeze!" She is frozen in her tracks.

The voice is as much in her head as something she hears. It oozes into her mind and will. She strains to run, to escape, but she feels like she is swimming in thick mud. The voice goes on, insistently, "Come to me, girl."

Obediently she turns. Two more Dark Brethren have entered the room; one is the big bearded leader whom she has met before. But it is not this man whom she fears the most. Her eyes rivet on the

Section 74

other man in black. He is thin to the point of being gaunt, with hawk-sharp features. But it is his eyes. They burn into her as she is inexorably drawn to him. The bearded man seizes her.

"Now, now, Athelstan," the oily one chides, "always so physical. You must learn that there is more power in the mind, my son."

"Yes, my lord," Athelstan growls, but he does not loosen his grip on her.

They drag her out of the small dwelling and back toward the square, Scatha going obediently with them, ensorcelled by the hawk-faced man's command.

Look at all the pretty horsies, she dreamily thinks as they cross the marketplace. Why is that man running toward me? He'll frighten all the pretty horsies.

"Scatha!" Harold's voice snaps the spell and she struggles to get free, but Athelstan's viselike grip holds her firm.

The Dark Lord turns toward Harold and points a bony finger at him. A blue flame sears out past Scatha, who struggles to turn her head to see what is happening. She hears Harold groan, and then a thud. The townspeople who have gathered around move back, offering her no help as she is carried away by the Dark Brethren.

Tied and blindfolded, she is thrown into a cart and covered with straw. It seems like hours of painful thumping along before she is yanked from the cart, dragged along cold stone floors, untied, and thrown into a cell.

Scatha sits miserably in the small dark room. She

Section 75

has tried to break open the door until her hands were so bruised she couldn't move them. She doesn't even know how long she has been in here. She slept twice, and found gruel and water each time she awoke. The first time she did not eat or drink, but the second she felt so weak and dehydrated that she decided to risk it. So far there have been no ill effects.

She hears footsteps. She flattens herself behind the door. The door opens.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 76.

If the total is greater than her Dexterity value, turn to section 80.

* 75 *

Scatha is scrambling for all she is worth, but the sand is grabbing her like hands, and she isn't making much distance. She glances back to see the creature arching over her for the kill. It strikes and misses, Scatha rolling out of the way and down the small dune. She can't see it, so it can't see her. But it can smell her. She clammers to her feet and starts to run, grateful for the stretch of crusted sand which is giving her the footing to sprint to some advantage. As she runs she can feel the creature

Section 76

thrashing behind her. It has turned away, seeking some easier prey, but as it leaves, its tail sweeps past her and she can feel the stinger rake her leg.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Constitution value, turn to section 15.

If it is greater than Scatha's Constitution value, turn to section 12.

* 76 *

Scatha tenses to spring past her guard. She knows timing will be critical, too soon and he will grab her, too slow and it would be a fight. Her sword is gone, and so is her pouch. Hand-to-hand combat is a slow and often losing proposition for both parties.

The guard moves cautiously into the room, looking around, his sword half-drawn. Scatha's mind screams at her body, *Now!* She slams the door into the man, sending him reeling against the door-frame.

She lunges past him, her heart pounding as she almost expects to run into a hall full of his companions, but the hall is empty. Running wildly and choosing her route blindly, she can hear the shouts of the guard calling for assistance, and the sound of his feet pounding up the hall after her. She chooses

a left-hand corridor and runs on. The sound of the chase fades behind her and she slows to a cautious walk. Wherever she is, she is no longer in the city. This place must be as large as Chatelgard.

Turn to section 77.

* **77** *

Scatha comes to a staircase, hesitating while she decides if she should go up or down. She has no idea where she is, or even if she is above or below ground level. Shrugging off her indecision, she plunges down the stairs. It is dark in the stairwell, and dangerously hard to see the steps. Scatha is about to go back and get a torch from the hallway above when she sees the bluish glow of daylight, and she feels a breeze of fresh air. Perhaps there is a way out.

It's only a matter of time before they find me, she thinks. I have got to get out. Oh, Mohandru, how long do I have left before the conjunction?

At the bottom of the stairs there is but one corridor, and the solution to the mystery of the light and the breeze. There are narrow slits in the walls, and weak daylight filters in. She tries to climb to them but the walls are too smooth, and the windows too high. She looks down the corridor. At the end is a heavy iron-bound door.

Cautiously, the trapped girl approaches the door and listens, but hears no sound. Experimentally she

Section 78

pulls down on the latch and is astonished to find it unlocked.

Her eyes adjust to the dark room, illuminated only by the faint light of the corridor. Inside lie piles of chests, moldering rolls of carpets, and the miscellaneous storage of years of accumulated booty and personal wealth. Everything is covered with a thick layer of dust and cobwebs.

Something catches her eye, something wonderful. It is the hilt of a broadsword. Her heart is thumping as she pulls and strains to unearth it from the jumble of junk which buries it.

Oh, please, gods, let it be unbroken, she prays. It is. She hefts it. It is heavy, but the balance is beautiful. She whoops with pleasure as she swings it. She feels whole again.

There is nothing more here for her. She returns to the staircase and begins to climb.

Congratulations! Your hero has just obtained a +2 sword. (See rules for its effect in combat.)

Proceed to section 85.

* 78 *

Scatha lies dirty and bruised on the floor of the cell. Her head is still throbbing. She is not only tired but depressed. There has not been any food or water for a while, either.

"Scatha, you must not give up," she chides herself, using the sound of her own voice for company. She drags herself to her feet and searches the small cell for the hundredth time for any tool any weapon.

"Oh, damnation!" she cries, striking the wall, then yipping with pain at the new bruise on her hand. As she sucks the self-inflicted wound, something strikes the ground and rolls by her foot. It is a stone the size of her fist. Excitedly she examines the wall, but there is no gap, only the indentation where the small stone has broken from its mortar.

It's not much but it is all she has. She settles down to wait.

Before long she hears footsteps, just one pair of feet as near as she can tell. She can hardly breathe as she waits to hear the lock turn. A big guard, with a club in one hand and a bowl in the other, enters.

Scatha lies on the floor of the cell, her skirt pulled above her knees. She doesn't have much experience, but she hopes she looks seductive, and she pretends to cry.

"What's the matter?" the guard grunts.

"I'm so frightened and lonely." She looks up from under her lashes at the hulking brute.

"Lonely, huh! Well, I can take care of that." He leers at her, and tosses away the bowl.

She knows she can't let him jump her. He's just too big and heavy to fight off. She gets to her feet and approaches him, smiling sweetly, and swinging her hips suggestively. It's working. He stands still, enjoying the show. He grabs for her. As he does she

Section 79

rushes him, slamming him on the temple as hard as she can with the rock in her hand.

He falls back groaning, holding his head in surprise. Dark blood is seeping past his fingers and down his arm. She strikes at him again, this time smashing into his face. He groans again, holding his broken nose.

She darts past him and into the hall.

It takes the guard a second to realize what has happened, but he is soon after her.

She hears his feet pounding down the hall, but she can't take any time to look. She must lose him. She turns down a left-hand corridor, choosing blindly. The guard has gone for help. She can hear him shouting, and soon he is joined by more shouting guards. She chooses another corridor and runs on. By now the sound of the chase has faded. She slows to a cautious walk. Wherever she is, she is no longer in the city. This place must be as large as Chatelgard.

Turn to section 77.

* 79 *

Scatha already knows that the damn sand is grabbing at her like hands, and she isn't gaining any distance by trying to run for it.

I didn't come all this way to be killed from behind, she decides desperately, and she turns to meet the thing. It arches over her, blotting out the

sky, its dozens of spiny arms weaving and reaching for her, snapping its claws with sharp little clicks. The mandible doesn't click at her. It grinds!

She swings and jabs, but the damn thing is not only larger than a house, it is in its element, and she is not in hers. It crashes down to crush her, but she rolls out of the way. She can see the silhouette of its tail with its deadly stinger arch over to reach for her. She scrambles to her feet, dodging and striking, all at the same time.

GIANT SCORPION

To hit Scatha: 12 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10

Damage with claws: 1 D6

Damage with mandibles: 1 D6

Damage with stinger: 2 D6

Scorpion makes one attack of earthtype per round.

If Scatha is killed by the scorpion, turn to section 50.

If Scatha kills the scorpion, turn to section 41.

* 80 *

Scatha tenses to spring past her guard. She knows timing is critical, too soon and he will grab her, too slow and it will be a fight. Her sword is gone, and so is her pouch. Hand-to-hand combat is a slow and often losing proposition for both parties.

The guard is now moving cautiously into the

Section 81

room, looking around, his sword half-drawn. Scatha's mind screams at her body, *Now!* She slams the door into the man, sending him reeling into the doorframe.

She darts past him, the hallway in sight. She feels the guard's hand close on her wrist as he jerks her back into the room. It is now her turn for pain.

She twists her arm free, swinging her arms above her head, slamming them down onto both sides of the guard's neck. He grunts, but he keeps coming.

I must keep crowding him. I can't let him get out his sword, Scatha plans. She keeps darting at him, throwing body punches and groin kicks, trying to maneuver her way around him and near the open cell door.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 81.

If the total is greater than Scatha's Dexterity value, turn to section 82.

* 81 *

Using the tricks of her arms-master, the warrior-maid feigns right, then left, then right again. The big, slow man is half a pace behind her. She has made an opening! Surprised and delighted, she

thinks, It works! It really works! as she darts through the door and down the hall.

It takes the guard a second to realize what has happened, but he is soon pounding down the hall right behind her.

Choosing blindly, she turns down a left-hand corridor, the sound of the guard shouting for help too close for comfort. More shouting guards join the pursuit, but she has lost them for the time being. She has also lost herself in the tortuous maze of corridors, and she slows to a cautious walk. Wherever she is, she is no longer in the city. This place must be as large as Chatelgard.

Turn to section 77.

* **82** *

The guard sees her glance at the door, and a grim grin spreads across his face.

"No way out, little girl," he spits at her and draws his sword. "You are lucky the Master wants you alive, or I would have some fun carving you." He strikes the side of her head with the flat of the blade.

The pain spreads from Scatha's temple through her head and neck. She gasps as little golden sparkles fill the black tunnel forming in front of her, and she falls, unconscious.

The pain explodes anew as Scatha opens her

Section 82

eyes. There is another guard standing over her and slapping her awake.

"Leave me alone," she manages to mumble.

"The girl is awake, Master."

Scatha rolls over to her side, holding her head. She is lying on a carpet, the brightly woven flowers mocking the stark humorlessness of the group of black-robed men to one side of the room. In their midst, on a throne of a chair, sits the gaunt Master.

He leans forward, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, then says mildly, "Come here, girl."

"No."

The man laughs. "We shall see." He snaps his fingers at one of his followers, who hands him a pouch, an old, battered blue leather pouch. The Master empties the contents into his hand.

He fixes Scatha with a hard, glassy stare. "Where did you get this piece of the Black Flame, witch?"

Scatha is silent.

"You will use it for me, one way or another." He picks through the other small objects. Never taking his eyes off her, he lifts out a pearllike Gift of Hanju.

"What is this, child?" The Master's voice is growing perceptibly more chilly.

Scatha won many a penny playing cards with the lads in the barracks. She has no intention of giving anything away now. "A pretty. A Midwinter's Day gift. I intend to have it set in a ring."

"Liar!" The Master's face is white with rage as he rises to his feet. "You will obey me." His voice bites into her mind as it did at the horse auction. She

Section 83

struggles against it. He is holding the pearl out to her, shouting over and over again, "You will obey me. Tell me what this is."

She fights to avoid the Master's eyes. If she looks at him she knows she will be lost to his will. She stares at the pearl. It seems to glow slightly. She feels waves of its power. If only she could touch it. Is she strong enough to reach its power with only her mind?

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 87.

If the total is greater than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 83.

* 83 *

Scatha feels within herself for that part of her mind called tal. She finds it, and with a brief thought toward Hanju tries to harness her untrained energies. She stands, hopefully nonchalant, as she seeks to gain control of the pearl.

Scatha can almost feel it working. Just a little more. The Master's eyebrows are knit with effort. Suddenly he realizes what Scatha is focusing on and snaps his hand shut around the pearl.

She utters a little cry as her source of power is cut

Section 84

from her. She shakes with effort and despair, drained of energy.

"We will continue this game later. Next time I will let Athelstan use his ways awhile first." The bearded man at the Master's right grins without warmth.

Scatha is again dragged off, this time by three guards, and thrown back into her cell.

Roll 3 D6.

Again Scatha is depending on the Luck of the Gods. If her total is the same as or less than her Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 78.

If it is greater than her Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 98.

* 84 *

Damn it all, she reasons. I just about died getting out of that place; I'm not going back for anybody!

She steps out into the sunlight and starts down the path, feeling the warmth and smelling the musty sweetness of the fields. But she keeps hearing the cries for help. What if Harold is in there? she argues with herself. He wouldn't leave you. On the other hand, what if this is just another sorcerous trick? But the mage is dead and Athelstan hasn't

the brains to set a trap. He is only a bully, not a sorcerer . . . I think. . . . He is probably halfway to the land of the Quais by now.

She has stopped and without thinking turned back to the hold.

"I cannot leave anyone here to die. Trap or no trap, I will chance it," she says firmly, and starts back up the path. From nearby in the field, a crow caws triumphantly.

Drawing her sword as she enters, she cautiously goes down the stairs. There is a row of barred cells, and in them are prisoners, mostly old women. When they see her they renew their piteous cries for help.

"Quiet, quiet. I'll get you out."

A quick search reveals a great key hanging on a hook by the door. She opens the cells, and the broken old people come forth, the weaker helped by the stronger.

One woman is not so feeble. She is not young, but she has an ageless strength about her. She approaches Scatha.

"You are the one in my vision. I am a Baleric seer. I, too, know of the horn. You are the chosen hero of the gods."

Scatha, still weary and wounded, just stares at the woman. The woman's melodious voice makes the quest sound so marvelous, and all it has been is a horrible test of strength and will. Overwhelmed, Scatha bursts into tears.

"A lot of good that has done me. I don't know

Section 84

where I am. I don't know where I'm going. I don't know how many days I've got to save the whole damn world. I don't know if I can even make it."

The woman reaches out and catches the exhausted girl in her arms. "Child, child. We will help. The Dark Brethren gathered up every priest and priestess, every witch and seer they could find. They feared we would find the horn before they did. And they searched for you."

"The mage is dead. I killed him. The Dark Brethren have fled."

The seeress looks at Scatha in awe. "*That* I did not see! Someday when there is time, and the battle is won, I would dearly love to hear the tale of that, child. But now you are our last hope."

The seeress and Scatha, accompanied by the group of adepts, leave the keep of the Dark Brethren. In a sunny field they give Scatha arcane secrets from each of their disciplines, which will help her on her quest. They draw her maps. They tell her spells, mostly simple ones, for she has not the control to use the more complex. But the most important information comes from an old man who is a star gazer.

"Child, you have but ten days left, counting today."

The seeress draws a bottle from her robes. "Here, Scatha. I have one last gift for you. I hid this in a spell of invisibility, and used as little as I could. It is a bottle of healing waters. Use it sparingly, only as you must."

Scatha thanks them all, and with their blessings

Section 85

still ringing in her ears she sets out for the border, and the desert beyond.

The bottle contains five sips of potion, each healing one hit point. The healers of the adepts have healed Scatha before she sets out, so you don't need to use any yet. Use the potion whenever and wherever you wish even during a combat, so long as Scatha is alive. It won't revive her if she is dead. She can drink it all in one combat round.

Make a chart to keep track of days elapsed.

Go to section 102.

* 85 *

She climbs the stairs, listening for guards, but she is alone. The long corridor is lined with doors, probably an officer's billet, Scatha guesses, or rooms for servants. She cautiously tries the latch of the first, but it is locked. Compulsively she tries each one in turn, not quite sure what spell is forcing her to rattle doorknobs when she is an escaped prisoner of an evil religious cult and on her way to save the world! The last door is unlocked.

She was right about one thing. It is an ordinary sleeping chamber as near as she can tell. The high window is shuttered, and the light from the hallway is not much help. Whoever lives here is not much of

Section 85

a housekeeper, she thinks, stumbling over the untidy pile of stuff on the floor.

"Ow," she yips as she rubs her shin. But there is something familiar about the thing she tripped on.

Oh, Brel bless it. A shield! She claims her booty and turns to leave the room. But the compulsion comes on her again and she returns to her rummaging. Maybe there is a pair of trews and I can get out of this damn skirt, she rationalizes.

There is indeed a pair of trews, and not too large at that, and a clean shirt. And something else, too wonderful to be hoped for.

"Mail! A mail hauberk. Oh, bless the gods."

It's some soldier's armor. He must have left it after a practice or a skirmish. I'll bet there is more, she thinks, her heart thumping with excitement. She soon locates a mail coif and steel cap. The arm and leg armor is, unfortunately, too large for Scatha, but she does not complain at her luck. A leather belt, to hitch up the mail and serve as a sword belt, completes her armor.

She smiles as she imagines the former owner of her new shield and armor when he finds nothing but a torn old shift and skirt in his room.

She returns to the corridor. The compulsion to search is gone and she returns downstairs.

The gods must be working overtime for Scatha. She now has +3 armor, and a +1 shield. Is there a sneaking suspicion she may need all the help she can get?

Go to section 90.

* **86** *

Another endless, featureless day has passed. Scatha, her lips already cracked, sets off on her night trek, sighting on the star which the old man pointed out. Ironically it is the star marking the two horns in the constellation of the War-Horse.

The night creatures are beginning to emerge from their sandy burrows for their evening hunt. Scatha is just as glad she didn't know how lively the desert was the first night she slept here, and is glad to be awake when the wildlife is about. She has also discovered snakes and lizards are good eating, if you are very careful to avoid the poison glands.

The best discovery came when she speared a toad, and her sword glowed red and funny all over. She shook the toad off, only to discover that no scavenger would get near it. After that, she used her spell sword to test food.

Near her, the sand begins to shift and stir, and she poises to spear the animal on tonight's menu. If she nails it just before it is out, she has the best chance. On the open sand these things are damnable fast. A dark speck gives her the target, and she thrusts down with her spell sword, but it skips harmlessly off a hard shell. And it begins to glow red and funny all over.

All at once, with horrifying speed, the whole area is quaking and churning as a pit forms around the emerging beast. Scatha scrambles back, barely

Section 87

keeping ahead of the death trap which ripples out toward her.

The giant arches and twists itself to the surface. Oh, dear gods! A scorpion! she gasps. The thing must be forty feet long, and it is angry.

If Scatha decides to run away, turn to section 47.

If Scatha decides to fight it out, turn to section 79.

* 87 *

Scatha feels within herself for that part of her mind called *tal*. She finds it, and with a brief thought toward Hanju tries to harness her untrained energies. She stands, hopefully nonchalant, as she seeks to gain control of the pearl.

Scatha can almost feel it working. Just a little more. The Master's eyebrows are knit with effort. Suddenly he realizes what Scatha is focusing on and snaps his hand shut around the pearl.

But it is too late for him. The golden rays escape from between his fingers.

The Master's face is twisting in pain. He can resist the searing object in his hand no longer. With a scream of rage he flings the Gift of Hanju to the ground. It continues to glow as Scatha crawls over to it and plucks it from the rug, holding it gingerly between her thumb and forefinger.



Section 87

The Master, still grimacing with pain and rage, stands frozen to the spot. None of his minions are moving. Some of them are staring at their Master in fear. The rest are staring at Scatha with awe.

Holding the pearl before her like a talisman, she scoops up her other possessions and stuffs them into her pouch and slowly backs out of the room, holding back the black horde with the glowing pearl.

Once out of the room she slams the door shut and starts to run down the hall. She wonders, as she chooses corridors at random, how long the spell will last. When she puts the pearl away, she wonders, Does that count as using the gift? Oh, dear Mohandru, or rather dear, dear Hanju. What if I pull it out again and it doesn't work?

Scatha comes to a staircase, hesitating while she decides if she should go up or down. She has no idea where she is, or even if she is above or below ground level. Shrugging off her indecision, she plunges down the stairs. It is dark in the stairwell, and dangerously hard to see the steps. Scatha is about to go back and get a torch from the hallway above when she sees the bluish glow of daylight, and she feels a breeze of fresh air. Perhaps there is a way out.

It's only a matter of time before they find me, she thinks. I have got to get out. Oh, Mohandru, how long do I have left before the conjunction?

At the bottom of the stairs there is but one corridor, and the solution to the mystery of the light and the breeze. There are narrow slits in the

Section 87

walls, and weak daylight filters in. At the end is a heavy iron-bound door. No way out—and a fine place to be trapped. Thinking of the guards who just may be on her trail, Scatha tries desperately to reach the windows. But they're too high, and the walls too smooth to gain purchase.

Cautiously, the trapped girl approaches the door, the only way out. She puts her ear to it and listens, but hears no sound. Experimentally she pulls down on the latch and is astonished to find it unlocked.

Her eyes adjust to the dark room, illuminated only by the faint light of the corridor. Inside lie piles of chests, moldering rolls of carpets, and the miscellaneous storage of years of accumulated booty and personal wealth. Everything is covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs.

Something catches her eye, something wonderful. It is the hilt of a broadsword. Her heart is thumping as she pulls and strains to unearth it from the jumble of junk which buries it.

Oh, please, gods, let it be unbroken, she prays. It is. She hefts it. It is heavy, but the balance is beautiful. She whoops with pleasure as she swings it; with a sword in her hand she feels whole again.

There is nothing more here for her. She goes back to the staircase and begins to climb.

Congratulations! Your hero has just obtained a +2 sword.

Proceed to section 89.

Scatha is now enough of a veteran that she knows that this could be a trap, but she also knows she cannot leave anyone in this godforsaken place. And she has killed the Master of this place. The mind is as much a weapon as the body; swiftly evaluating Athelstan, she is almost confident that he hasn't the brains to set a trap. Without a leader he is probably halfway across the countryside by now, anyway. She will chance it.

Drawing her sword, she cautiously goes down the stairs. There is a row of barred cells, imprisoning mostly old women. When they see her they renew their piteous cries for help.

"Quiet, quiet. I'll get you out."

A quick search reveals a great key hanging on a hook by the door. She opens the cells, and the broken people come forth, the weaker helped by the stronger.

One woman is not so feeble. She is not young, but she has an ageless strength about her. She approaches Scatha.

"You are the one in my vision. I am a Baleric Seer. I, too, know of the horn. You are the chosen hero of the gods."

Scatha, still weary and wounded, just stares at the woman. The woman's melodious voice makes the quest sound so marvelous, and all it has been is

a horrible test of strength and will. Overwhelmed, Scatha bursts into tears.

"A lot of good that has done me. I don't know where I am. I don't know where I'm going. I don't know how many days I've got to save the whole damn world. I don't know if I can even make it."

The woman reaches out and catches the exhausted girl in her arms. "Child, child. We will help. The Dark Brethren gathered up every priest and priestess, every witch and seer they could find. They feared we would find the horn before they did. And they searched for you."

"The mage is dead. I killed him. The Dark Brethren have fled."

The seeress looks at Scatha in awe. "*That* I did not see! Someday when there is time, and the battle is won, I would dearly love to hear the tale of that, child. But now you are our last hope."

The seeress and Scatha, accompanied by the group of adepts, leave the keep of the Dark Brethren. In a sunny field they give Scatha arcane secrets from each of their disciplines, which will help her on her quest. They draw her maps. They tell her spells, mostly simple ones, for she has not the control to use the more complex. But the most important information comes from an old man who is a star gazer.

"Child, you have but ten days left, counting today."

The seeress draws a bottle from her robes. "Here, Scatha. I have one last gift for you. I hid this in a spell of invisibility, and used as little as I could. It

Section 89

is a bottle of healing waters. Use it sparingly, only as you must."

Scatha thanks them all, and with their blessings still ringing in her ears she sets out for the border, and the desert beyond.

The bottle contains five sips of potion, each healing one hit point. The healers of the adepts have healed Scatha before she sets out, so you don't need to use any yet. Use the potion whenever and wherever you wish, even during a combat, so long as Scatha is alive. It won't revive her if she is dead.

Make a chart to keep track of days elapsed. Go to section 102.

* 89 *

She climbs the stairs, listening for guards, but she is alone. The long corridor is lined with doors, probably an officer's billet, Scatha guesses, or rooms for servants. She cautiously tries the latch of the first, but it is locked. Compulsively she tries each one in turn, not quite sure what spell is forcing her to rattle doorknobs when she is an escaped prisoner of an evil religious cult and on her way to save the world! The last door is unlocked.

She was right about one thing. It is an ordinary sleeping chamber as near as she can tell. The high

window is shuttered, and the light from the hallway is not much help. Whoever lives here is not much of a housekeeper, she thinks, stumbling over the untidy pile of stuff on the floor.

"Ow," she yips as she rubs her shin. But there is something familiar about the thing she tripped on.

Oh, Brel bless it. A shield! She claims her booty and turns to leave the room. But the compulsion comes on her again and she returns to her rummaging. Maybe there is a pair of trows and I can get out of this damn skirt, she rationalizes.

There is indeed a pair of trows, and not too large at that, and a clean shirt. And something else, too wonderful to be hoped for.

"Mail! A mail hauberk. Oh, bless the gods."

It's some soldier's armor. He must have left it after a practice or a skirmish. I'll bet there is more, she thinks, her heart thumping with excitement. She soon locates a mail coif and steel cap. The arm and leg armor is, unfortunately, too large for Scatha, but she does not complain at her luck. A leather belt, to hitch up the mail and serve as a sword belt, completes her armor.

She smiles as she imagines the former owner of her new shield and armor when he finds nothing but a torn old shift and skirt in his room.

She returns to the corridor. The compulsion to search is gone and she returns downstairs.

The gods must be working overtime for Scatha. She now has +3 armor, and a +1 shield. Is there a

Section 90

sneaking suspicion she may need all the help she can get?

Go to section 91.

* 90 *

Now what! she thinks as she surveys the now familiar corridor. I guess my only choice is to go back the way I came.

She starts back down the hall, shield up and sword in hand. She hears shouts ahead.

Damn! But there is nowhere else to go, except maybe dash up or down the stairs and hide until she is cornered like a rat. Resolute, she throws her shoulders back and stalks down the corridor.

Maybe she's overconfident or just tired, but her fighter's awareness is ebbing. Rounding a corner, she is confronted by a dozen or so armed men, jogging at her in a wedge formation; one man on point, two behind, and columns of three following.

Classic, she evaluates. And invincible! There is no time to run, no place to run. This is it. She readies to receive the charge.

But a familiar unctuous voice calls out, "Halt."

The unit stops, not losing their formation. A well-trained band of soldiers. Too bad.

The Master of the Dark Brethren winds his way through his soldiers, sinuous as a serpent. He points his finger at her. "Come to me, child."

Section 91

She smacks the flat of her blade on the face of her shield with a satisfying ring, the traditional gesture of challenge. His spell is not working this time.

She raises the sword. Hanju's puppies! It's glowing. Her fear vanishes. It's a spell sword. Maybe this is not so hopeless after all.

"Attack her," the Master screams, not able to bear defiance.

The men obey, but slowly.

"Are you afraid of me now, Oh great magical Master?" Scatha taunts. She points the sword tip at him. A great blue lightning bolt streams out and knocks him clean off his feet. Even Scatha is impressed.

The soldiers back off. A small object flies from the magician's hand and lands on the floor halfway between them.

Scatha recognizes it. My pouch! She darts up, grabs it, and retreats a few paces.

Turn to section 92.

* 91 *

Now what! she thinks as she surveys the now familiar corridor. I guess my only choice is to go back the way I came.

She starts back down the hall, shield up and sword in hand. She hears shouts ahead.

Damn! But there is nowhere else to go, except

Section 91

maybe dash up or down the stairs and hide until she is cornered like a rat. Resolute, she throws her shoulders back and stalks down the corridor.

Maybe she's overconfident or just tired, but her fighter's awareness is ebbing. Rounding a corner she is confronted by a dozen or so armed men jogging at her in a wedge formation; one man on point, two behind, and columns of three following.

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"Are you afraid of me now, O great magical Master?" Scatha taunts. She points the sword tip at him. A great blue lightning bolt streams out and knocks him clean off his feet. Even Scatha is impressed.

The soldiers back off. She hears a small thud at

her feet. She darts a glance down. Damn, why now! she grumbles. She had tucked her precious pouch under her new belt, and it has slipped out and fallen to the ground. She carefully stoops down, never lowering her guard, and scoops it up into her sword hand.

Turn to section 92.

* **92** *

The mage is screaming at his men as he clammers to his feet. "Cowards! I'll turn you all into slugs."

He turns his full attention to Scatha. "You think that toy will help you? Do you want to see my power, little one? Do you? Then see my *power!*"

He stretches up his arms, his cloak billowing out dramatically around him. Before the astonished and terrified troops, he grows larger and larger, changing shape as he grows. The hawklike nose is now a black horny beak. His sparse, stringy hair turns to thin spikes. His hands have become claws and the cloak giant wings. The thing the mage has become fills the corridor.

The black demon hisses down at her, spewing sickly yellow slime which steams and bubbles as it lands on her shield.

The pouch is still stuffed in her sword hand. She reaches down to tuck it into her belt. Wait! I still have the Gift of Hanju, she realizes. She gropes at

Section 93

the pouch to feel the contents through the leather. The Memory Stone is there, and so is a small round object.

But can I trust it? The more she has thought back to her encounter with the god, the more enigmatic his motives become. She has to decide what to do—and now!

If she decides to use the Gift of Hanju, turn to section 94.

If she decides not to use the gift, turn to section 93.

* 93 *

The demon's laugh has turned to shrieks so inhuman that she can barely remember that this was a man only moments before. The creature swoops down on her.

He crashes against her shield, sending her sprawling to the ground; the pain in her shield arm is almost unbearable. Another like that and she will not even be able to lift the shield, assuming that there will be anything left of it to lift.

The creature rises to swoop again. This time she slashes at it with her glowing sword.

MAGE DEMON

To hit Scatha: 11 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10

Damage with claws: 2 D6

Damage with sword: 2 D6

Section 94

If Scatha succumbs to the mage demon, turn to section 26.

If she kills the demon, turn to section 99.

* 94 *

She fumbles to draw out the pearl and holds it aloft, clutched in her thumb and forefinger. She presses against the hilt of the spell sword. The sword glows. The pearl glows. She cries out, "In the name of Hanju, last of the Lost Gods, Ancient of Ancients, Lord of the Mountains, begone." She throws the pearl at the demon.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 96.

If it is greater than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 97.

Section 96

* 95 *

The pearl spins in the air like a miniature sun, falling to the ground . . . and fizzles out. Both sides stand stunned for a moment. The demon emits a blood-freezing laugh.

Scatha stuffs the pouch back into her belt, sighs, and braces herself for the attack to come.

Turn to section 93.

* 96 *

The pearl spins in the air, glowing like a miniature sun. It pulses as its brightness increases.

Oh, my gods. Scatha throws herself to the ground, curling up into the smallest ball she can, covering herself with her shield.

The pearl explodes. She can feel the searing heat around her, but it doesn't seem to cause her pain.

The screams of fear and anguish are shattering. She feels lumps of something hit her shield, and she can hear wet plops all around her. She does not need to look. The demon, and probably all of his men who had not fled, are raining around her in disgustingly bloody gouts.

When all is quiet again, she gets up, shaking the bits and pieces from her shield. Very quickly she

Section 98

leaves this place of horror, stepping carefully to avoid that which she barely can stand to look at.

Turn to section 101.

* 97 *

One can never tell what dealing with the gods will bring.

Roll for Wisdom/Luck again. Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 95.

If it is greater than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 100.

(Isn't dealing with Hanju FUN?)

* 98 *

The days have faded into night, the nights to day. All Scatha could do she has done. But there is no escape from time. The conjunction is at hand. She has failed.

Turn to section 29.

Section 99

* 99 *

The thing is tiring itself out, slamming against the roof and walls, doing itself as much damage as Scatha is. But Scatha is tiring fast. She is still on her feet, but barely standing. The demon again swoops at her, its bat wings throwing up turbulent clouds of dust as it flies.

Scatha braces herself against the wall, and the sword against her tensed stomach muscles. The creature slams into her, and the sword. As the point drives into its belly, Scatha twists the blade and draws a cut across the creature's gut. It falls at her feet, spurting out its caustic yellow blood.

She steps back from the spreading pool of slime and spins to meet the attack of the demon's followers.

But she is alone. They have fled.

Turn to section 101.

* 100 *

The pearl spins in the air like a miniature sun. The demon twists its serpentine neck and watches it with glowing beady eyes. Then it screams a scream that sounds like "Mine." It snaps the holy object from the air with its beak.

Now the monster begins to glow.

"Damn you, Hanju," Scatha screams in frustration, but the god in his mountain does not hear her. He dreams of a wonderful serpentine body so like his own, and he dances and writhes in madness and fury, snapping and biting at the little lives around him, blind to Scatha and her prayers.

"I'm not giving up. Do you hear? I'm not giving up."

The demon's laugh has turned to shrieks so inhuman that she can barely remember that this was a man only moments before. The creature swoops down on her.

He crashes against her shield, sending her sprawling to the ground; the pain in her shield arm is almost unbearable. Another like that and she will not even be able to lift the shield, assuming that there will be anything left of it to lift.

The creature rises to swoop again. This time she slashes at it with her glowing sword.

MAGE DEMON

Combat proceeds as follows. Hanju has a very short

Section 101

attention span, so that this increase in the demon's power only lasts two rolls.

To hit Scatha: 6 To be hit: 18 Hit points: 20

Damage with claws: 3 D6

Damage with teeth: 3 D6

After two exchanges the values are:

To hit Scatha: 11 To be hit: 10 Hit points: 10 (If the demon has already received 10 hit points from the previous two rounds, he will die from the next blow, if Scatha lives to deliver it.)

Damage with claws: 1 D6

Damage with teeth: 1 D6

If Scatha dies, turn to section 29.

If Scatha kills the mage demon, turn to section 99.

* 101 *

Scatha wanders in the maze that is the keep, looking for a way out. She has found an outside wall with a window she can reach, and this has helped her to orient herself. Finally she reaches the ground floor, and the main entrance. Ignoring exhaustion and pain, she throws herself against the front door with the enthusiasm of a maid embracing a lover.

A sight dearer than gold greets her. Freedom! Rolling fields rich with ripe grain lie before her.

Section 102

Taking a deep breath, exalting in her victory, she is about to finally leave this hell-hole when she hears a plaintive wail, the voice of a woman. It is soon joined by other voices, echoing up from a stairwell. She hesitates.

If Scatha decides to go back for the prisoners, turn to section 88.

If Scatha decides to leave hold, turn to section 84.

* 102 *

Scatha pushes on with her newly healed body and renewed spirit, but even the blessings of so many holy folk have their limits, and it's finally time to make camp.

She crossed the border just after nightfall. Crunching along in the still-warm sand by the light of the Bright One for some hours, Scatha is surprised to discover the desert gets cold at night. She curls up on the ground, praying to every god she can readily think of that there are no dangerous creatures nestled below her, nor hidden dangers of shifting sand. She falls asleep, painfully aware of how little she knows of the waste.

She awakens as the sun's light just begins to turn the night sky to a dove gray. She takes a sip of the water she was given, and eats a little. She draws out

Section 102

her pouch and knife and withdraws a stick, the newest of her treasures. On it are ten scratches for the ten days until the conjunction. She scratches out the first one.

As she puts back the stick, she feels the Memory Stone. She realizes with a twinge of guilt how little she has thought of Harold since she was captured, but now she misses him terribly.

She looks into the stone and calls softly, "Harold, Harold. Are you still alive? Did I only bring you to an early grave?" But the stone reveals nothing. She puts it and her memories away. The desert is no place to waste tears on anyone.

She sights on the sun, as she was taught by one of the wise old folk, and starts what she hopes will be the last trek of this quest.

She slogs along in the sand. She soon learns where the sand is soft and shifting, and where there is a crust to make her journey quicker. But there are no easy places. At midday the sun scorches her. The mail is searing hot to the touch. She discovers that she can use a spare shirt from the pack of oddments the rescued wise ones collected for her to cover her iron helm, and the shield strapped to her back is used as a sunshade.

She wishes she knew more about the movement of the moons and the stars. If she did, she could plan to travel totally by moonlight and rest during the day. But she does not, and she is afraid to risk any delay. So, except for the hottest part of the day when she hides under her shield and sleeps, she pushes on as long after dark as she can. Another day passes.

Remove a total of two days from your chart.

Turn to section 86.

* 103 *

Scatha is groggy when she wakes up. She digs her way out of the drifting sand which has almost buried her. Her gratitude at being alive is minimized as she sits up to the throbbing of a dehydration headache that would kill Brel. Her sword is still next to her, but her pack has been found and looted by some rodent's sharp teeth. This reminds her of the scorpion, and she shudders. But one waterbag is intact, the almost empty one. She finishes the last of the precious liquid, figuring that it will not do her any good sitting in the bag.

She does find the stick with the scratches, but she has no idea how long she has been unconscious. Angry and frustrated, she flings the thing away. She sights on the midafternoon sun, and decides to try to make up some distance by daylight.

She dutifully slogs along for the next hour or two until a dust cloud ahead draws her attention. Climbing up a sand dune, she tries to make out what lies below. It is a caravan or Asheeran raiders? She needs water and food, but is it worth the risk of capture?

The cloud is thick, and not moving. The wind shifts and she hears familiar clangs and shouts. There is a battle going on. Now she can make out

Section 104

men fighting and frightened animals packed with goods. A caravan is under attack.

If Scatha decides to help the caravan, turn to section 104.

If she decides to wait it out and sneak away, turn to section 105.

* 104 *

Scatha stumbles down the hill of sand, rolling part way, her feet threatening to slip out from under her at every step. This is slower than pushing through a snowbank, she thinks in frustration as she slips and slides toward those under siege.

Finally in range, she cuts down an Asheeran from behind, saving a caravan guard from the wicked curved blade aimed at his neck.

Her battle senses sharpened by experience, the swordswoman shield-blocks a blow which she sees only as a flash of light to her left, sword-blocking another from the right, shattering the sharp but fragile Asheeran blade with her sturdier broadsword. She takes a position back-to-back with a guard from the caravan, and they withstand the waves of Asheerans, terrible with their sun-bright blades, and fierce black eyes staring out from gaudy headgear. Scatha and her companions cannot hold out long against these fierce tribesmen, their disre-

gard for the searing dry wind proclaiming their mastery of the desert and any who dare venture into their realm.

It is soon over. The caravan is overrun, and those who are not wounded are captured and bound. The wounded are not so lucky. The desert is unyielding to the weak.

“Ho! This one is a woman!” an Asheeran calls out to his kinsmen, disarming Scatha and tying her hands behind her.

“Leave her alone,” cries out a very familiar voice.

“Harold!” Scatha screams.

One of the captors comes to where Scatha is held, tethered by a rope like an animal.

“Don’t hurt her. Don’t hurt her,” Harold pleads until a blow to the head silences him, and he falls to the sand.

“What have you done to him.” Scatha screams.

The man towers over her, pinching her face in his massive hand. “Not half of what we will do with you if you are not quiet.” He roughly jerks her by the rope tether. “She is mine for the time being.”

He turns her over to a boy, obviously his servant. He orders that she be taken to his tent to be washed and dressed by his women.

Roll 1 D6 to determine how many hit points of damage Scatha received before capture.

Go to section 106.

* **105** *

Scatha lies hidden, watching helplessly as the caravan is overrun by the Asheeran tribesmen.

I can't afford the risk, she thinks to herself over and over again. If I fail in this quest what good will saving a few lives do? But it doesn't help much as she lies bleakly watching the carnage. Soon it is over. The healthy are tied together for the march to the slave block. The wounded are not so lucky.

As the prisoners are led away behind the riders, Scatha notices one—a large, burly lad of perhaps eighteen summers with ash-blond hair which falls carelessly over his eyes.

"Harold!" she gasps. "Oh, gods, how cruel you are!" she exclaims, her resolve to be sensible and loyal to her quest melting like snow in the desert sun.

Torn by conflicting loyalties, she knows she cannot abandon him, but she also knows she cannot give up her holy duty, either.

Perhaps if I follow them . . . they are headed the way I need to go. Please, Mohandru, please, if I have a chance to free him, and the others without failing . . . Oh, please, she prays.

She follows them to their encampment around a desert well and hides in the nearby rocky outcropping.

Section 105

At nightfall she crawls to the edge of the camp where the slaves have been penned. They do not seem to be guarded. Neither are the horses. If I can free them, Harold and I could get away on horseback in the confusion, she plans.

She slips down to the fence around the pen when the big mistake in this plan hits her: The horses, oh, gods, the horses. They are the horned ones, the children of the god whose horn is the cause of all this trouble, horses like Turin, the lady Rifkind's mount. Now she remembers what she had heard about Turin. These horses speak to their riders' minds. That's why there were no guards. They guard themselves. She turns to run, but it is too late. The camp is filled with shouts and pounding feet as the riders run from their tents toward the coral, summoned from their sleep by the psychic warnings of their steeds.

With a calm which even surprises Scatha, she turns and runs toward the protection of the rocks muttering, "Oh, well. Nothing lost in trying."

Subtract one day from your chart.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Dexterity value, go to section 111.

If the total is greater than her Dexterity value, turn to section 112.

* **106** *

For most of the next day Scatha sits tied to a tent post. The inactivity gnaws on her nerves; her imagination runs rampant. Finally she is to be taken before the headman of her captors.

"Don't speak unless you are spoken to," one of his wives tells her with a slap. "And remember to keep your eyes lowered," she adds with another blow.

Scatha is led into the presence of the headman. He is seated on pillows, picking at a tray of dried fruits.

She stands for a long while, but he ignores her.

Finally she cannot stand it any longer. She bursts out, "Lord, forgive me. They told me to be silent, but you must listen to me." She has gone through this speech in her mind so many times, but now in this man's presence she is struggling for the right words.

He raises his eyes, scowling at her.

She falls to her knees. "This is a holy thing I speak of. You are in danger. We are all in danger. Please hear me."

Subtract one day from your chart.

If Scatha's time has run out, turn to section 114.

Section 107

If Scatha still has time on her side, roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Charisma value, turn to section 107.

If the total is greater than her Charisma value, turn to section 108.

* 107 *

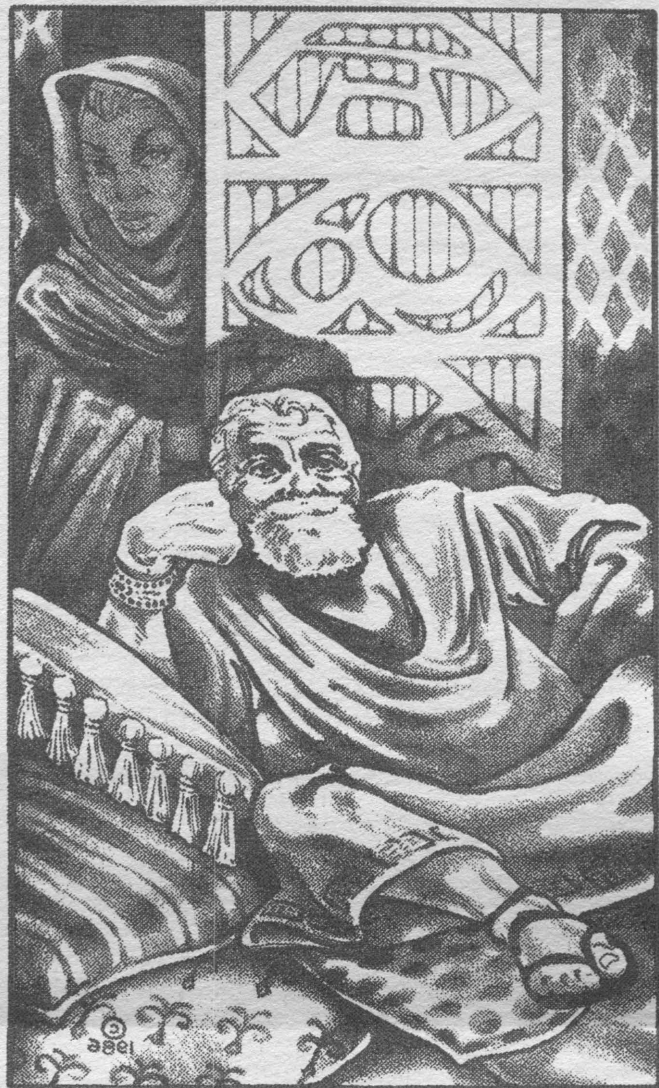
The Asheeran lord says nothing, but stares at her as her words peter out and she stares helplessly at him.

He claps his hands three times and a slave woman glides out from behind a curtain.

"Bring Arlis," he commands. He resumes his meal, ignoring her again.

Scatha is beside herself with impatience. She uses all her strength of will to control herself.

Soon the slave returns, followed by an old woman. This woman's face is not covered as the other women's are, and her stride is bold and self-confident. Scatha stares into the woman's eyes. They are deep wells. She has seen eyes like this before. The Master of the Dark Brethren had such eyes. Her heart sinks. But the seeress who I saved had eyes like this, too. So did some of the holy priests and priestesses, she argues with herself.



"Arlis," the lord begins, surprisingly polite, "if you would, I ask you to search this woman's soul. She claims to have a holy purpose. There is something about her which is not ordinary. I will have no sorceresses in my camp, but neither will I oppose the purposes of the gods."

The woman almost rudely grunts at him, but picks and pokes through the many bags and pouches which she has hanging from her belt. She throws a handful of dried roots in the smallest brazier in the tent, sending out billows of fragrant smoke, and then chants an incantation.

The lord is looking less and less at ease. Almost as if to defy the priestess's power he interrupts her spell, reaching under his pillow and drawing out Scatha's blue pouch. "We found this with her."

The old woman contorts her face as if she will shriek at him for the interruption, but just as suddenly turns her attention to the pouch, snatching it from him and pouring out its contents into her hand. She snatches up the Memory Stone and holds it out to Scatha. It glows softly.

"Where did you get this?"

"It is mine, by right of birth. Well, sort of. It was the possession of one of my kinswomen. I am of the Quais people. It is a stone of the Well of the Black Flame." Scatha tells them of her quest.

The old woman hands the stone to Scatha with a gentle reverence and turns on the lord, shrieking at him.

"You do whatever she tells you to."

Section 108

Scatha is stunned at the sudden change of events. She fights back tears of relief.

"I will aid you," the Asheeran lord declares. Swiftly he orders her weapons returned. Perhaps to make amends, he sends six of his finest young warriors to accompany her. Arlis will also go with her, as a healer as well as a seer.

Scatha asks with fear, "The young man captured with me, does he still live?"

She is taken to where the prisoners have been secured prior to their sale as slaves. Harold is among them. He is freed, along with another three of the young soldiers, making up a unit of ten.

Turn to section 113.

* 108 *

"Will you not obey me? I will have you beaten and beaten again until you do," the Asheeran lord shouts, his face red with rage. The veins in his neck stand out. He claps his hands and guards appear.

"Take her back."

They drag her back to the tent, heedless of her pleas that they just listen.

No one notices minutes later when a slave girl slips from the tent and runs out into the desert toward the outcropping of rocks nearby.

Subtract one day.

If ten days have now elapsed, turn to section 98.

If there still is time left, turn to section 109.

* **109** *

Scatha shouts herself hoarse trying to get anybody in the camp to listen. She continues for hours heedless of the savage blows the other women rain on her at the command of their annoyed master. Finally, too exhausted to resist, she is tethered to a tent pole. Alone, crying with anger, Scatha struggles to free herself, but the massive center pole of the large tent is designed to withstand sandstorms and the girl cannot budge it.

Hours later Scatha is awakened from a troubled sleep by a rustling sound. She sees a crack of moonlight spill in under the hem of the tent. Someone is sneaking in. She waits, expectantly, to see if she is saved, or if the master has sent an assassin to finish her.

An old woman crawls in and stands over her, staring at her.

The woman's face is not covered as the other women's are, and her stride is bold and self-confident. Scatha stares into the woman's eyes. They are deep wells. She has seen eyes like this

Section 109

before. The Master of the Dark Brethren had eyes like this. Her heart sinks. But the seeress who I saved had eyes like this. So did some of the holy priests and priestess, she argues with herself.

"I am Arlis, seer and healer of these ignorant people," the old woman says with a toss of her head. She whisks a pouch out of her belt, an old blue leather pouch, and as quickly empties the contents into her hand.

"Where did you get this?" she demands of Scatha sharply.

The Memory Stone glows in Arlis's hand.

"Where did *you* get it," Scatha shouts back, straining at her bonds.

"No matter," the woman answers more mildly, "but if you wish to know, I have a student who is a slave here. She brought it to me. But now answer my question."

"It is mine, by right of birth. Well, sort of. It was the possession of one of my kinswomen. I am of the Quais people. It is a stone of the Well of the Black Flame."

She tells her tale once more. The woman stares at her again. Then she shakes her head and grunts once or twice.

Finally she gets up and walks to where Scatha is tied and adeptly draws a knife.

Oh, gods. All this, to end here? Scatha moans, bracing for the final agony. The woman stoops swiftly, knife held out. Scatha can't help herself. She flinches, squeezing shut her eyes. Make me

Section 109

brave, Mohandru. Don't let me scream, Scatha prays.

The woman cuts Scatha's bonds and hands her the Memory Stone reverently; next she gives her the old blue pouch, its contents intact.

"I will help you. There are some young warriors who are loyal to me, for reasons which concern our gods but not you. We will find your armor and weapons and be on our way. I know the place you seek."

"The young man who was captured with me, does he still live?"

"If he does he awaits sale. We will go and see."

Scatha crawls out of the tent behind the old woman, and they silently make their way to a holding pen. Harold is there with three other young men, the prisoners who were healthy enough to fetch a good price. They are swiftly freed and accompany the woman to the cave which is her home, in the rocks near the encampment. The slave girl is sent to summon the six warriors of whom Arlis spoke, and to steal the weapons and armor which Scatha, Harold, and the others will need.

Turn to section 113.

Section 110

* 110 *

"This is the place," Arlis says, pointing her staff at the ruins below them. "We will camp here. There is a well there," she adds, jabbing her staff at a patch of desert, "to which I have rights from my mother's family."

They eat and drink, using this quiet time to check and recheck their weapons before the final assault.

They plan their attack. They see no one outside the ruins. Either they have beat Drukor to the place, in which case all they need to do is hold it until after the conjunction, or he is within. They should strike at once.

It is never easy to meld a group of soldiers into a fighting unit of one mind, yet Scatha knows that this is what must be done if they are to be victorious. She coaxes, cajoles, and threatens, finally convincing the free-spirited Asheeran warriors to adopt the Dro Darian's wedge formation. She leads her ragtag band down from the sheltering rocks across the desert floor to stand before the gates of an ancient temple.

"Prepare to charge. . . . Charge!" she shouts.

The unit breaks into a run. Abruptly men fall to the ground in a disordered heap, the back lines overrunning the front line, rebounding off each other with undignified grunts.

"Fall back. Regroup," Scatha commands.

They mill around, about twenty yards from the temple while Scatha, Harold, and Arlis confer.

"He has sealed the place with magic. I will try to break this wall," Arlis declares. She falls to her knees in a trance, moaning and mumbling, jabbing at the air with her staff.

It seems like hours before Arlis rises again, gaunt and shaken. Without a word she walks to the temple, her arm stretched out before her. She, too, stops abruptly and returns.

"There is nothing I can do."

"Nothing you can do!" Scatha is screaming at her. "I'm not giving up now."

"No. Listen, child. We can either wear ourselves out and use every piece of magic you have in that pouch of yours, and beg every last favor of every god or goddess either of us serve, or we can wait. With the conjunction will come a light storm. I had hoped to avoid this, for light storms are the most terrible curse of this place. But it will disrupt the energy barrier. I'm sure of it. What I am not sure of is if we can attack in that time of madness."

They return to their camp by the well to wait.

The uneasiness of waiting gives way to a more sinister sense of apprehension. Without warning the air grows unnaturally still and brooding, and the sky turns blood red. The heroes watch uneasily as the Dark One slides its shadow across the Bright One, even as the Bright One, turning a bruised purple, caresses the sun, which bursts into blinding brightness at the celestial kiss of death. It in turn fades to gray as it yields in subjugation.

An eerie wind blows up, not blowing with the

Section 110

clean violence of a sandstorm, but with the insistent intensity of a bully's assault.

One of the Asheeran warriors throws his hands to his head and begins to scream. "Stop them, they are crawling on me," he moans, writhing on the sand, scratching and tearing at invisible vermin.

"Stop it." Arlis's voice cuts through the madness, and her touch banishes the nightmare vision.

"We must move now," she whispers in Scatha's ear, but Scatha is already jumping to her feet and issuing orders.

They dogtrot to the barrier; only Arlis's screaming threats keep them sane.

Scatha sees the sand turn the most beautiful blue, with highlights of ruby and gold. It swirls around her ankles, becoming living tendrils. A voice in her head calls seductively to her to lie down and sleep, sleep forever.

With one part of her brain she can see her men fighting visions of their own, but still the warriors stay together. They are at the barrier, and then without stopping they pass through it. They enter the ancient holy place.

In a huge chamber, by an ancient altar placed precisely in the middle of the room, stands a robed wizard, the great horn at his lips.

"Stop him!" Scatha shouts.

In a mad rush they converge on him. He pauses, turns, and almost nonchalantly sets down the horn on the altar and reaches for his staff.

Great words of power issue from his mouth, and a beam of blinding light blasts from the jeweled tip

of his staff. Arlis shouts back an incantation, but her words sound weak in the still-reverberating chamber.

As they watch in horror, an army of monstrous demons materializes from the unholy noise.

Scatha stands mesmerized, then shakes her head to break the spell of fascination.

"Attack! Kill them. They *can* be killed," she screams, near hysteria. Her voice breaks the spell for her men, and the unit attacks. Drukor once again lifts the horn to his lips. Scatha rushes toward him, cutting down noisome creatures that block her way almost without thought. She can almost see the first burst of sound streaming from the great curved horn. A cacophony blares out; the ground begins to roil under her feet, sending her reeling back. The floor of the chamber cracks and splits, spitting up clouds of noxious gases and revealing a churning hell of molten living rock.

She looks in horror as the spewing, burning rock manifests itself into huge, horrible demon gods, creatures whose burning eyes and evil purpose dwarf the creatures which Drukor conjured, demons rising on wings, crawling on clawed feet, shrieking, slobbering venom, tumbling out of the red-black ooze which rolls out of the chasm.

In the midst of this chaos stands Drukor, his arms thrown back in triumph, his face twisted in fiendish laughter.

If Scatha has a Gift of Hanju left, and she decides to use it, turn to section 115.

Section 111

If Scatha has a Gift of Hanju left, and she decides not to use it, turn to section 116.

If Scatha does not have a Gift of Hanju left, turn to section 116.

* 111 *

She runs in the dark, avoiding rocks and soft spots in the sand with intuition she didn't know she possessed. She has, miraculously, outrun them, and she hides among the rocks, fighting to quiet her breathing in the clear, crisp air.

She lies there until morning, when she finally dozes off. She wakes with a start as she feels a hand on her shoulder. She rolls to her back, protecting her body with the shield which is still on her arm as she reaches for her sword.

Over her stands an old woman. Scatha stares into the woman's eyes. They are as deep as wells. She has seen eyes like this before. The Master of the Dark Brethren had eyes such as these, eyes that speak of powers unknown. Her heart sinks. But the seeress who I saved had eyes like this. So did some of the holy priests and priestesses, she argues with herself.

"I am Arlis, seer and healer of these ignorant people," the old woman says with a haughty toss of her head. "Come."

She leads Scatha to a cave in the rocks. A slave

girl brings them food, and water sweetened with fruit.

Scatha sits warily, planning her escape. But this woman seems pleasant enough, although she never stops staring at Scatha with her all-knowing eyes.

"What brings you here, child? You were not with the caravan, were you?"

"No, Mother," Scatha answers, using the polite title of address for the woman.

The woman narrows her eyes and suddenly stabs a finger out, pointing at the blue pouch at Scatha's belt. "What is in there? I feel it. I feel magic."

Scatha slaps her hand protectively over the pouch and tenses to spring to her feet. But she feels herself growing dizzy. The food? The drink? The eyes? she thinks thickly.

When she awakes the woman is holding the still-glowing Memory Stone in her hand. She hands it reverently back to Scatha. "So you are chosen to save the world, are you? Well, you will not do it alone." She slaps her hands to her knees as she rises to her feet. "We have much to do and little time," she adds with determination. "There are some young warriors who are loyal to me, for reasons which concern our gods but not you." She starts to send her student to summon the men, but Scatha stops her.

"There was a young man captured with the caravan. He is my comrade-in-arms. Is it possible to free him?"

"Easily. One of my warriors is the son of the headman. He has claim on as many slaves as he

Section 112

wishes. He will claim the one you describe and any others who are able to fight.”

Scatha describes Harold, and the student girl leaves to summon the forces.

Turn to section 113.

* 112 *

She runs for all she is worth, but she is cut off, and forced back to the slave pen. She draws her sword and squares off against the encircling tribesmen. But they have the clear advantage as they toy with her, striking her with spears and swords, never to kill, only to cut, until she is bleeding from a dozen wounds. Then they rush her, and she is quickly pinned to the ground.

“Ho! This one is a woman!” an Asheeran calls out to his kinsmen, disarming Scatha and quickly tying her hands behind her.

“Leave her alone,” cries out a too-familiar voice.

“Harold,” Scatha screams.

One of the captors comes close to Scatha, who is lying on the ground tethered like a piece of livestock.

“Don’t hurt her. Don’t hurt her,” Harold cries out until a blow to the head silences him, and he falls to the sand.

“You bastards!” Scatha screams.

The Asheeran towers over her, pinching her face

in his massive hands. "If you are not quiet, you will not enjoy your life," he says, roughly jerking her by her bonds. "She is mine for the time being."

He turns her over to a boy who addresses him as Master and orders that she be taken to his tent to be washed and dressed by his women.

Roll 1 D6 to determine how many hit points of damage Scatha received before capture.

Go to section 106.

* 113 *

Scatha and Arlis are honored to ride on the horned war-horses behind their riders. Harold and the other non-Asheerans who have been freed are forced to run across the hot sands.

They stop in the heat of the day, and erect a sunshade. While the men doze, Scatha sits talking with Arlis.

"What god do you serve, child?"

"What do you mean?"

Arlis looks puzzled, and a little shocked. "You mean you have come all this way and you don't even know who has chosen you?"

"Well, maybe Hanju." Scatha tells of her encounter with the god.

"A Lost God." Arlis looks at Scatha in a new light. She scratches her head and frowns. "No.

Section 113

From what you say you are lucky he didn't kill you somewhere along the way, by accident if nothing else. He is not the kind of god I mean."

"Is it important that I know?"

"Perhaps." Arlis begins to chant. Scatha finds herself so still she feels as though she is part of the sand and the rocks. She couldn't move if she wanted to. She feels herself floating, but when she looks down, she sees herself sitting quietly under the sunshade. Her spirit spirals upward. Cold wind streams past her, and she hears the flapping of great wings. Are they her wings? She can almost feel her arms outstretched, beating up and down, and the pleasant pull as her feathers press against the wind.

Suddenly she is standing before a woman, a woman whose long black robe does not hide the muscled body of a warrior. The robe dissolves and the woman is dressed in black leather armor, with shining golden rings sewn on it. Long black hair cascades out from under a beaked helmet.

"Do you not know me, my child?" Her voice is authority itself. "Why have you not called on me?"

Scatha stands in silent terror. Finally she manages to croak out an answer. "Please, Lady. I'm sort of new at this. What did I do wrong?"

"Wrong!" The goddess's voice fills the void. "You have insulted me. You have called on Mohandru, and that old villain Hanju, Brel, and a dozen more. Who called you to this quest? Who has stood by your side this entire time? Did you once call my name? Did you once pray to *me*!"

Scatha's fear has melted into anger. "Pray to

who? And just where were you the dozen times I faced death and despair? Were you in the mountains? Where were you when the Dark Brethren captured me? Damn you, who are you?" By now she is shrieking with rage.

Still shaking with fury she stares defiantly at the goddess. The goddess is smiling. "I chose well, my little battle raven. I am Morigu, Lady of Battle. You are mine, and," she adds more gently, "I am yours. Summon me in your greatest need. You serve me and you serve my brother."

"The Crow Lady!" Scatha exclaims.

The goddess's laugh resounds and reverberates in the void. Before Scatha can ask another question, she finds herself in her own body, under the sunshade, in the Asheeran Waste. Arlis is looking most pleased.

"Now that *that* is settled, it is time to wake these lazy men and move on."

They travel until well after moonrise and then camp the rest of the night.

Subtract one day. If you have reached ten, do not fear, for the Luck of the Gods is with you. You are approaching your goal, and you have a few hours before the conjunction.

Turn to section 110.

Section 114

* 114 *

Scatha holds her breath, listening to the little sounds of the tent creaking in the wind, the lord of the tribe breathing, her heart beating. But even as he begins to make the most important decision in the history of man the wind stills to a brooding and eerie silence. The air turns blood red as the Dark One slides its shadow across the Bright One. The Bright One, turning a shade of purple like a day-old bruise, caresses the sun which bursts into blinding brightness at the celestial kiss of death. The sun fades to gray as it yields in subjugation.

"It is true. You are a holy one. Ah, shame of my fathers, is it too late?" the desert chief cries and moans as the madness of the light storm strikes.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 6.

If the total is greater than her Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 5.

* **115** *

Gifts from the gods are precarious things.

Roll 3 D6.

If the total is the same as or less than Scatha's Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 117.

If the total is greater than her Wisdom/Luck value, turn to section 118.

* **116** *

Whatever magic she may have to use to stop this horror, Scatha knows one thing for sure. She knows her skills as a swordswoman. She leaps at Drukor, the spell blade shining in her hand. Before he can react, she slices his gut open, and follows that blow with a chop to the neck. Drukor falls to the floor in thirds, dead.

Scatha's soldiers cheer, but even though they are cutting down the demon gods as fast as they can, still more form from the red-black ooze. It is clear that the battle is in no way won.

Turn to section 119.

* **117** *

She reaches for her pouch. She feels for the Gift of Hanju. Whatever the Crow Goddess has told her, Scatha has some magic up her sleeve and she has every intention to use it. She pulls out the familiar pearl.

"Hanju, if you ever wanted to help me, now is the time," she cries out, and throws the pearl at Drukor.

The pearl flies through the air, striking the wizard in the chest. As it hits it explodes, tearing Drukor's chest open, blowing a dozen or more of the demon gods into bloody rags.

"Thank you, Hanju," Scatha shouts to the cheers of her brave soldiers, who are cutting down the creatures as fast as they can.

But the creatures keep forming, and it is soon apparent this is nothing but a brief respite in a long battle.

Turn to section 119.

* **118** *

She reaches for her pouch. She feels for the Gift of Hanju. Whatever the Crow Goddess has told her, she has some magic up her sleeve and she intends to use it. She pulls out the familiar pearl.

"Hanju, if you ever wanted to help me, now is the time," she cries out, and throws the pearl at Drukor.

The pearl flies through the air and sparks once with a tiny puff, falling dull and lifeless to the ground.

Drukor is laughing hysterically as he points to the useless thing at his feet.

"You would try to stop me with *that!*" he shrieks.

Turn to section 116.

* **119** *

A dragonlike thing more huge than any other rises from the glowing pit. It fixes its eyes on Scatha and hisses fire at her.

She puts up her shield, but even one blast of the creature's breath scorches it. Scatha swings at its mighty neck, but her blade bounces harmlessly off

Section 120

the tough scales. Harold and two other soldiers are at her side.

THE DRAGON GOD

To hit Scatha: 10 To be hit: 12 Hit points: 15 (Actually the thing has 45 hit points, but Scatha's companions are doing a fair piece of damage to it, as well.)

Damage with fire: 2 D6

Damage with claws: 3 D6

Type of attack alternates each turn.

Don't forget that Scatha may still have some of her healing potion left. She may use it during combat if she needs to.

If Scatha is killed by this powerful monster, turn to section 25.

If against all odds Scatha and her brave warriors kill the dragon god, turn to section 120.

* 120 *

"The eye, the eye. Strike for the eye." Arlis's voice cuts through the deafening shrieks of battle.

Scatha's arms are so weary she can hardly hold up her sword. Her shield is gone. Holding the hilt of her sword with both hands, with one last great effort she leaps up and drives the blade into the beast's eye.



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It writhes back toward the oozing pit, dragging Scatha with it. She struggles to free her blade. It shrieks in fury, sending streams of fiery poison spewing throughout the chamber as it twists and tosses its serpentine neck in pain. She wrenches her blade free and the creature falls back into the burning chasm.

But even as it is consumed in the fire, another more terrible creature begins to form from the living, burning rock.

Scatha staggers back, surveying the hopeless and endless battle. Her brave force is down to half strength by now. Those who remain cannot fight this out alone. But where is there a reserve to call? Who will come to her aid?

She hears a little voice in her head demanding attention through the noisy clamor of the battle. *Call on me in your greatest need.*

“Morigu, Lady of Battle, *help!*”

With a clap of thunder, a huge black form appears over the pit. As Scatha watches, the figure shape-shifts before her eyes: now a fearsome bird, tearing with bloodied knife-sharp talons; now a great warrior woman, slashing demons with endless strong and sure blows of her shining two-handed sword.

The goddess turns a scathing look at Scatha.

“Damn you, Scatha. I can’t keep this up all day. Use the Black Flame.”

Black Flame! Oh, the Memory Stone, Scatha realizes. She fumbles for the rock in her pouch.

"What do I do with it?" she shouts, but the goddess is too busy to answer.

"Oh, damn. Here goes." Scatha sighs. She lifts the rock above her head, trying to remember everything she knows about the Black Flame. It makes stuff, she remembers, food, clothes, anything you think of.

She thinks as she prepares to fling the stone toward the flaming pit, This is like the stories of getting three wishes, only I've got just one.

She tosses it. As the rock disappears into the hole, she shouts, "Close the crack. Take back the demons."

Even as she says the words, she prays that she hasn't said anything wrong, anything that will harm Morigu, or Mohandru, or any of the gods who are loved and who help so many.

The demons are falling back into the pit. The few which are still crawling and flapping around the chamber are slaughtered by the remnant of her small army. Even Arlis is batting at the things with her staff, shouting curses at them.

The crack is pulling together, and the black ooze is retreating. Finally the heat and red glow of the crack is gone, and only a crusted scar shows where the doomsday horror was. The earth has healed itself.

Scatha stands numb, the sword trailing from her hand.

"Thank you, Morigu," she gasps.

"That was exhilarating," the goddess pronounces

Section 120

with an almost girlish smile. Then she points at the dead warriors. "They are mine."

Arlis, her arm around the still-warm body of one of her men, turns on the goddess. "No, these are not yours."

The goddess glowers at her, and then says, "You are right. They serve another. You may have them back."

One by one, at the touch of the Battle Goddess, the cut limbs crawl on their own and reattach themselves to the scattered bodies, the gaping wounds close, and the dead begin to groan, gratefully complaining of their human pain.

"But this one is mine." The goddess points to Harold who lies lifeless, his chest laid open by a giant claw. "But I can wait," the goddess adds, touching him with her life-giving mercy.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you." Scatha is by his side, looking up at Morigu with tears in her eyes.

"Come, Scatha. Take the horn, and him," she points at Harold, "and come with me."

They leave the temple. The conjunction and the light storm have long since passed. The sun has dropped to the horizon.

Morigu caws in the tongue of the ravens. Scatha hears the sound of great thundering hooves. A huge black horse rides over the desert, a great horned war-horse with only one horn.

He halts before Scatha, the foam from his ride still on his muzzle. He bends his head before her.

"You are right, Great Friend. This is no thing for

us to keep," says Scatha as she presses the missing horn in place.

Morigu gently touches it. "Be healed, my dear brother." Before them stands a magnificent blond-bearded man, armored for war, his helmet bearing two horns. "Sister, it has been too long."

The gods shift again to their animal forms. Scatha mounts to the back of the Great Crow. Harold is privileged to ride the War-Horse, who has taken a liking to the brave lad.

They ride beyond the world, flying in the airless iciness of the stars for a timeless eternity. They spiral downward toward a mountain keep.

"Chatelgard!"

The two heroes are left outside the gate. With a salute as to peers, the two gods fly heavenward.

That night, seated at the high table in the great hall, Ejord and his guests, including the priest of Mohandru, listen with wonder as the young heroes tell their tale.

"I regret the loss of the horn, but the gods, as always, are right. Men are not able keepers of such a powerful object," the priest sadly admits.

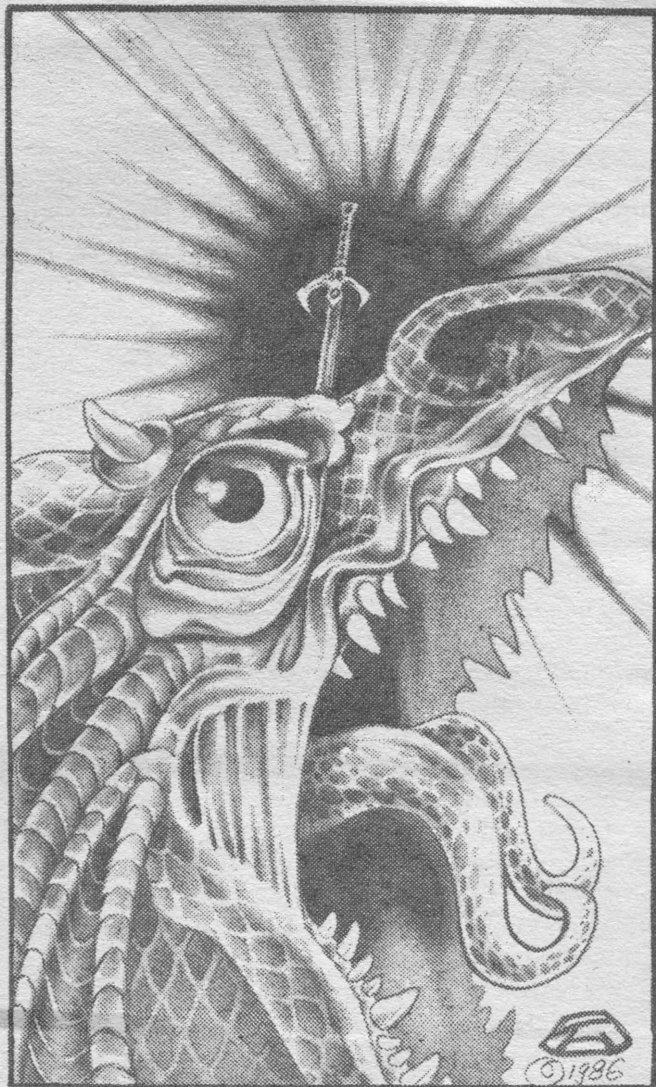
Finally alone, Harold puts his arm around Scatha as they brave the chill winter air.

"What will you do now?"

"You know I must leave. I have much to learn of this goddess of mine."

"I feared so. I will miss you."

"Oh, Harold, you are not rid of me yet. You heard the goddess. She and her brother have



claimed you, too. We shall have more adventures together. I'd lay a bet on that."

"I've been asked to stay here and train in arms. I'll wait for you." He looks up at the constellations, the Crow and the War-Horse twinkling especially bright this night. "Do you think we will have to save the world again?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Scatha says, laughing, and to Harold's amazement, grabs him in a great big hug, and gives him a kiss, an unsoldierly kiss.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dana Kramer was born in New York City, May 10, 1940, the offspring of an actress—turned literary agent and editor—and an actor turned professor. She has spent most of the intervening years deciding what to be when she grew up, an occupation which has led her to graduate study and publication in oceanography, genetics, human ecology, education, and drama, and employment in nuclear chemistry, data retrieval, clone office work, acting, photography (free-lancing in Europe), directing (the Marin Renaissance Pleasure Faire, among others), and, of course, writing, and pursuing study in music, a variety of holistic health techniques, half a dozen martial arts, painting, and achieving knighthood and a viscountcy in the Society for Creative Anachronisms. She has three teenaged children, who are secretly pleased with their eccentric mother, and currently is living with a long-suffering husband, who valiantly survives much silliness, a very bright wolf-hybrid, and a not-too-bright, but sweet, German shepherd.

ENTER THE ADVENTURE

Shaking with fury, Scatha stares defiantly at the goddess. But the goddess is smiling. "I am Morigu, Lady of Battle, Lady of Crows. I chose well, my little raven. You are mine, and I am yours. You serve me." The goddess's laugh echoes in the warrior-woman's mind, and Scatha returns to her body, gripping her charging war horse for dear life...

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