

SHADOWS OVER EKUL

BY UMBERTO PIGNATELLI



BEASTS & BARBARIANS
Golden Edition
UMBERTO PIGNATELLI





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A Sword and Sorcery Savage Worlds adventure for a party of four Seasoned-Veteran characters

Ulesir Shah, Lord of Shan'Amman, a coastal city in southern Ekul, is going to marry the beautiful Karmella, daughter of the powerful Lord of Teluk'Amman, in a dynastic marriage that will bring prosperity to both cities.

But someone, or something, scares Ulesir so much that he dare not leave his well-protected palace to travel north and take his legitimate bride. The marriage becomes more unlikely with every passing day...

Only a group of diehard scoundrels can aid the prince in this delicate situation.

Mysterious assassins, the treacheries of life at court, and a dark prophecy await the heroes in this epic adventure in the shadows of the Iron Mountains.

BEASTS BARBARIANS

A Sword and Sorcery Savage Worlds setting

BY UMBERTO PIGNATELLI

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Massimo Campolucci (my uncle) for being the first, real Dhaar,
Simone Ronco, Polliotti Yoshi (my friends) for fighting alone
against the Valk demons.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Shadows Over Ekul*, the fourth adventure of the *Beasts and Barbarians* Savage Words setting!

To play this adventure you need a copy of the core rules of *Savage Worlds* and the *Beasts and Barbarians* Golden Edition.

This scenario is designed for a party of four Seasoned or Veteran heroes, with some experience (35-40 Experience Points is ideal), but it can be easily modified for parties of different size and experience by following the instructions in the Golden Edition.

If you want, you can play it with characters of your own design. Otherwise, you can download a set of pregenerated heroes for free from the same store where you bought this adventure.

If you don't use gaming terrain, you will find handy to have gaming stones and several copies of Burst Templates to represent specific terrain features in fights.

The parts in italics are intended to be read aloud or paraphrased by the Game Master to the players.

Now, if you want to play this scenario, stop here. The following sections are intended for the Game Master only.

Instead, if you are the Game Master, keep reading and prepare to venture into the Lands of the Dread Sea.

RECOMMENDED CHARACTERS

This scenario requires a number of skills. Besides a couple of good fighters, because

Ekul is a dangerous place, heroes with good Persuasion and decent Charisma will be quite useful, because in many situations the group will have to persuade, cheat, and fast-talk NPCs.

Heroes with Leadership Edges will also be useful, because the characters will have a key role in a mass battle. In addition, a character with good Climbing, matched with the Acrobat and/or Savage Edge, will have a real chance to shine in the last part of the adventure.

Although all these skills are useful, none are absolutely necessary to play the scenario.

INVOLVING THE CHARACTERS

The heroes, who must have a reason to work together (for example, they were a team in a past adventure), start the scenario in Ekul's coastal city of Shan'Ammar. As the city is on the trade route from Syranthia to Lhoban (the Gold Route), there can be many reasons why the party has stopped here.

BACKGROUND FOR THE GAME MASTER

The southwestern part of Ekul, which lies in the shadows of the Iron Mountains, is a pleasant region, different from the desert lands of other parts of Ekul. The Ironshadow River periodically floods the nearby fields and its rich mud makes the crops plentiful. King Eku of Ekul has kept the old imperial noble families in charge of the various minor cities and fiefdoms dotting the land, and this is probably the main reason for the general prosperity of the region.

The city of Shan'Ammar, built by the mouth of the Ironshadow River, is a typical example. It lives off trade across the Brown Sea and enjoys self-sufficient agriculture and general peace.

At least, this was the situation until six months ago.

Tulim Shah, the old ruler of the city, had two sons: Ulesir, the eldest, from his legitimate wife, and Korras, from a mountain woman he met during a campaign against the periodically rebelling populations of the Iron Mountains.

Tulim Shah was a just man and took his illegitimate son to live in his palace in Shan'Ammar — a decision he came to regret later.

Ulesir is a mild-tempered, even fearful man, very sophisticated and overly civilized, while Korras is a vengeful, hot-tempered warrior, with the blood of the Iron Mountains flowing strongly in his veins.

Tulim Shah died seven months ago, and Ulesir became the new ruler. Thirsting for power, Korras tried to challenge him, but Ulesir, despite his temper, was no fool. He foresaw his brother's rebellion and had him arrested and locked in the palace's dungeons the very day of his coronation.

Before being locked away, Korras promised in front of the whole court that he would one day kill his brother in a frightful way but, in chains as he was, his words troubled no one.

A month later, Korras somehow managed to escape. He reached his homeland, the Iron Mountains, and, at the head of a clan of Mountaineers (the local population), he started to ravage the lands of Shan'Ammar.

Korras' men are increasing in number, because many tribes have joined his rebellion, and their raids are growing bolder and more dangerous every day. They have no mercy and torch everything they cannot steal. Korras claims he will stop only when he has torn Ulesir's entrails out and taken his rightful place on the throne of Shan'Ammar.

In truth, Korras' escape from prison was aided by the Keepers of the Black Flame, an order of evil monks that left Lhoban centuries ago and now dwell in a monastery deep in the Iron Mountains. They have a very peculiar reason (see below) to support Korras' claim.

Besides not being a warrior himself, Ulesir Shah simply doesn't have enough soldiers to stop Korras' ravagers. If he doesn't find enough troops very soon, he will lose this battle in a matter of months.

However, there is a way for Ulesir to gather new forces. His father was a far-sighted man and made an agreement with a powerful neighbor, Tokarim Shah, lord of the city of Teluk'Ammar, betrothing Ulesir to Tokarim's daughter, Karmella.

Tokarim is an old Valk warrior, a faithful follower of King Ekul, who begrudgingly gave up the old Valk customs to become a more or less civilized man. He is more than ready to lend his soldiers to his son-in-law after the wedding, but he wants Ulesir to come to Teluk'Ammar and marry Karmella with a traditional ceremony.

Teluk'Ammar is only a week's journey from Shan'Ammar, but Ulesir is terrified at the mere thought of leaving the protection of his palace, fearing the rage of his bastard brother. So, until now, the marriage has been delayed using various excuses. In the meantime, Korras is ravaging

the lands of Shan'Ammar, the people are growing desperate and Tokarim is losing his patience. Ulesir must definitely overcome his fears and go to Teluk'Ammar if he wants to keep his crown (and his entails, of course).

This is the situation when the scenario starts.

The Keepers' Motivations. In the Keepers' monastery, deep in the Iron Mountains, a supernatural fire burns, the Black Flame, which is the center of the monks' evil meditations.

Now the flame is faltering, and it will soon go out unless it is fed with the soul of the Divided Man, a creature that cyclically reincarnates. The ritual must be performed every century, and the monks have been

reading ancient texts and so on, to discover the identity of the actual Divided Man.

In particular, they have found out that the Divided Man of this particular century is actually two different individuals, Tulim Shah's sons, Ulesir and his step brother Korras. The monks are only pretending to support Korras. They want to have him with them when they sacrifice Ulesir's soul, because only the vital essences of the two brothers combined will kept their unnatural Flame alight.

An Unwilling Bride. To further complicate things, Karmella, Ulesir's wife-to-be, has no wish to marry a foreign man because she is in love with her cousin, Jirro, who loves her dearly too.

They will try in every way to avoid the wedding and to spend their lives together.



PART 1: A PRINCE'S LIFE

THE DRAGON OF THE REPENTANT BLACKSMITH

The scenario starts with the heroes doing what they are best at: carousing.

The Repentant Blacksmith is one of the most ill-reputed taverns in Shan'Ammar, full of foreign mariners, scoundrels, and assorted lowlife.

This makes for a perfect place to enjoy a little feasting, and indeed you are doing just that.

A bunch of Lhoban sailors have challenged you, (name of the strongest character), to an arm wrestling contest, and now their champion, a tough guy named Dragon, is ready to crush your arm and grab the fat purse at stake.

People are cheering and betting, and the Jademen mariners are encouraging their comrade with wild cries. You size him up: he is a bald, tough guy, with a dragon tattoo on his biceps. He empties his big tankard and grabs your hand with an iron grip. You see the dragon on his arm becoming bigger and bigger when he contracts his powerful muscles.

Winning that purse will be no easy task...

The contest is about to start. Let the group choose which one of them will compete. The other characters will be able to support him by shouting encouragements, and so on.

Bets. Before the real action begins, the characters can place bets on their comrade, if they want. The odds depend on their friend's Strength value. If he has the Brawny Edge, consider his Strength a step higher. The maximum bet is 50 Moons. Naturally, if they want, they can also bet on the Dragon; in this case reverse the odds.

STRENGTH VALUE	ODDS
d4	10:1
d6	5:1
d8	2:1
d10	1:1
d12	1:2
d12+1	1:5

The Purse. The purse for the winner is quite fat: it contains 250 Moons.

Arm Wrestling. The contest is handled as follows. Take a piece of paper and draw three columns. The right column represents the Dragon, the left column the hero, while the middle indicates a situation of balance.

Place three tokens in the middle column; they represent the starting position of the contestants. Then, every round, the contestants make an opposed Strength roll. For each success and raise, the winner can move a token from a column to the one next to it, up to a maximum of two tokens moved every round. If a character manages to have all three tokens in the opponent's column, he wins.

In addition, at the end of each even round, the wrestlers must make a Vigor roll, with -2 for each token in their column. If they fail, they suffer a level of Fatigue (which wears off at the end of the competition). An Exhausted character immediately loses

the competition, regardless of the numbers of his tokens in the opponent's column.

The crowd's support. Encouraging, provoking, and even insulting the wrestlers is permitted, and can affect the outcome of the competition. The supporters can make a Persuasion, Intimidation or Taunt roll (their choice) every round. For each success and raise they can give +1 or -1 to the Strength or Vigor roll of one of the two contestants. This part can be lot of fun if the party role-plays it. Feel free to grant a +2 bonus to the roll for outstanding insults and encouragements shouted by the players while in character.

The Dragon and the Mariners. The Dragon is a Wild Card with Strength d10 and Vigor d6. The supporting sailors make two group support rolls every round with Intimidate d8 and a Wild Die.

Unfortunately, the competition is doomed to end in a bad way.

If the hero wins, read the following part.

You slam the Dragon's arm onto the table with all your strength! You have won! You rise up to grab your purse, but one of the mariners shouts: "You cheated! I saw it!"

And then all hell breaks loose!

Otherwise, read this part.

The Dragon, with a mighty roar, slams your arm onto the table. "Whoaagh!" he roars "I won!"

Then, one of the customers, who probably bet on you, (hero's name), shouts: "No, you cheated! I saw it!"

And then all hell breaks loose!

TAVERN BRAWL!

The heroes, the mariners, and the customers, are going to be involved in a wild tavern brawl!

This combat is meant to be a way to settle a dispute, but nobody really wants to kill the others, so some special rules apply (see below).

The combat area is the tavern's main room, a 12" by 12" square, full of tables (see below), with a main door (2" wide) to the street along the southern wall and a secondary door to the kitchen along the northern wall.

Place the heroes roughly in the middle of the room and place the Customers and the Mariners all around them.

The fight ends after four rounds or when all the opponents go down.

(M) Lhoban Sailors (1 per hero +2): See page 62.

(M) Customers (1 per hero +2): Use Commoner stats. See page 59.

(WC) The Dragon (1): See page 65.

TERRAIN AND PROPS

• **Tavern Brawl Code:** Tavern brawls are usually furious fistfights, so, as long as no hero draws a weapon (using improvised weapons is allowed), nor will the other fighters. For this reason all the damage dealt during the brawl wears off automatically in a couple of hours. The first hero unsheathing a weapon immediately loses a Bennie and this behavior causes opponents to draw their blades.

• **Total Confusion:** During a brawl, it isn't easy to focus on your opponent. For this reason the Customers attack the party if they are dealt a black card, while they attack the Mariners if they are dealt a red card. This changes every round.

• **“Gimme that Purse!”:** The purse is the reason for the fight, so both parties want it! The character who has the purse immediately gains a Bennie. Handing the purse to another character grants him the Bennie too, but nobody can gain more than one Bennie in this way. The purse can be thrown (Range: 3/6/12) and catching it requires an Agility roll. The purse begins in the hands of the contestant who won the arm wrestling contest.

• **Tavern Tables:** Place up to six tables (2" by 3") inside the tavern. Each of them grants Light Cover and count as Difficult Ground. Each table is full of props that can be used in a fistfight, such as tankards, plates, and so on. They count as Improvised Weapons (Str+d4) or can be used to grant +2 to a Trick, but in this case they are destroyed. Any character in contact with a table can grab a prop of his choice (it counts as an action).

ARRESTED!

The fight ends abruptly.

The tavern's door slams open and a harsh voice shouts: "In the name of the Shah! What is happening here?"

You and your opponents stop, surprised, fists still in midair. The person speaking is the chief of an athletic-looking group of soldiers. But she is no common guard, rather a gorgeous, black-haired woman warrior. All her "men" are women, and they are staring at you with cold eyes, weapons ready to strike if you dare move.

You recognize their armor: they are Ascaian Amazons!

The Amazons quickly assess the situation and then proceed to arrest you.

There is no point resisting, because the Amazons are very well armed and the heroes have exhausted all their energies fighting the Mariners. If the party really wants to fight, the battleground is the same as above. All the characters are Fatigued.

(M) Amazons (4 per hero): See page 57.

(M) Cassandra, Amazon Commander (1): See page 59.

The Amazon Commander, Cassandra, removes your weapons but luckily she doesn't put you in chains. Then you are taken away.

Prison! What a horrible way to finish off the evening!

Then you notice that you aren't being taken to the city's dungeon.

You stop in front of the palace. The Amazons are taking you to the residence of the Shah, the ruler of this city. By all the gods, the situation must be worse than you thought! Could it be you exchanged blows with someone important during the brawl?

The guards lead you into the marble palace. It is a very luxurious place, oozing wealth from every corner, and it is heavily guarded too. You notice soldiers everywhere, and all of them are Amazons.

The city ruler must have a lot of cash to pay all these mercenaries, and he must be really troubled too, given that all the windows are protected with metal bars.

You are made to wait in an antechamber, and then the Amazon Commander calls you: "In here." You are led into another room, while all the guards, except Cassandra, wait outside.

In the chamber there are two people: a short, plump man, dressed like a bureaucrat, who stares at you intently, and a second figure sitting on a dais, his face hidden in the evening shadows.

"The reports were correct, my Lord," the plump man says in an amazed tone.

"It is incredible, Marduk. If I did not see it with my own eyes, I would not believe it." The man in shade says, sounding equally amazed.

The Amazon Commander deeply bows and says "My lord, these are the people you were looking for."

"Thank you, Cassandra. We can always rely on you," the short man replies.

Then, with a deep frown, he addresses you for the first time: "Strangers, the guards here say you destroyed a tavern at the docks, wounded several people, and in general caused much trouble. Here in Shan'Ammar we make sure the laws are respected, so many months of hard labor await you. But his Lordship," and he points at the man in the shadows, "Ulesir Shah, Lord of Shan'Ammar, is a forgiving person, and he will pardon you if you accept a task he has for you."

The heroes surely prefer a dangerous mission to spending their days breaking rocks. So they are supposed to accept or, at least, to ask for more information.

"Your task is simple," Ulesir says. "You must be me," he stands up and points his

finger toward you, (choose one of the heroes). It is amazing; the two of you are almost identical!

THE DOUBLE

The key of this scenario is that one of the heroes bears an amazing resemblance to Ulesir Shah, lord of the city, and he will be required to impersonate him in a dangerous and delicate situation.

To add more fun to the scenario, the Game Master should choose the most unlikely character as Ulesir's double. Prince Ulesir is a mild, learned man, so a rowdy barbarian or similar character is a perfect choice. From this point on, the hero impersonating Ulesir will be referred to as "the Double".

As long as he is not discovered, the Double has the Noble Edge for free. In addition, he receives several sets of rich robes and all the accessories he will need to properly impersonate his role.

The other members of the party are given other roles, so they can stay with him and protect his life (see the "Courtly Roles" sidebar).

THE PROPOSAL

When the party recovers from the surprise, Marduk and Lord Ulesir explain further.

"Lord Ulesir came to power six months ago, and has many enemies," Marduk says. "The most dangerous one is his stepbrother, Korras, a bloodthirsty madman who rejected Ulesir's authority. He now leads the savage Mountaineers of the Iron Mountains, who are ravaging the country. Korras once swore he would personally kill the Shah, and in the last few

months many of his men have tried, so his Lordship cannot leave the protection of this palace. On the other hand, he lacks the manpower to effectively fight Korras's pillagers.

The situation can be resolved: Ulesir's father arranged for him to marry Karmella, the daughter of Tokarim, Lord of the city of Teluk'Ammar, a week's journey from here. Tokarim has a good army, mostly Valk cavalrymen, and he is ready to send his troops to fight for Ulesir. But Tokarim is also a very proud and stubborn man: he wants Ulesir to travel to Teluk'Ammar and marry his daughter as tradition dictates.

The wedding has been delayed but Tokarim is growing very impatient, so it is time to act. You must travel to Teluk'Ammar disguised as the Shah, marry Karmella, and bring back bride and soldiers as soon as possible. Naturally Tokarim must know nothing of this trick, otherwise he will be mortally offended, and his rage can be terrible!"

COURTLY ROLES

The rest of the party needs a reason to remain by their friend, so they are given specific roles. Some ideas are listed below, but the players and the Game Master are free to invent other roles.

- Food Taster
- Court Poet
- Dancing Master
- Hairdresser
- Butler
- Bodyguard
- Priest
- Scribe
- Fencing Master

The heroes (who will act as additional guards and members of the Prince's entourage, see sidebar) will travel on a Hawk Ship of the Amazons, who are Ulesir's personal guards, and Marduk will accompany them, to avoid false steps and to deal with diplomacy. If they accept, they will be rewarded handsomely: Ulesir Shah is ready to pay each hero up to 1,000 Moons.

Only Marduk, Ulesir and Cassandra, the Amazon Commander, will know that the person travelling as Ulesir is actually his double.

If the party accepts, they will board the Blue Arrow tomorrow morning. If they refuse, well, breaking rocks in the penal colony can be very tedious indeed.

AN ASSASSIN IN THE NIGHT

The Blue Arrow is a typical Amazon Hawk Ship. Long, with a shallow draft, excellent both on the open sea and in shallow water. It is manned by a crew entirely made of highly-trained Amazons, led by Cassandra, the black-haired woman who arrested you at the tavern. Another group of Amazons remain in the palace to protect the true Ulesir, but the armed women on the ship seem more than able to protect you, should any danger arise.

Besides your group, the Amazons and Marduk, Ulesir's counselor, there are also two young servant boys onboard, by the unlikely names of Tallo and Vallo, and Guatu, Ulesir's personal cook. Prince Ulesir usually travels with a lot more servants, but the other roles are impersonated by you.

The ship also transports several crates containing wedding gifts for the bride

and her father. They are locked, guarded, and seem extremely precious.

The crates are constantly guarded by two Amazons and are locked. Only Marduk has the key, and he sees no reason to open them for the heroes. The crates contain assorted stuff (jewelry, gowns, and precious objects worth 3,000 Moons in total). Trying to open the crates during the travel might be a nice side occupation for greedy and bored heroes.

The first day at sea passes quietly. The ship is fast and the river placid. The Amazons are excellent oarswomen and they keep a very constant pace. This gives you time to enjoy the landscape: the riversides are well tended and dotted with thriving farming villages, which is hard to believe in an arid country such as Ekul.

"Tomorrow the landscape will change," Marduk warns you. "The influence of Shan'Ammar only extends so far; then we'll be in contested zones, where we are likely to find trouble," he adds, a cloud passing over his plain face.

This is the perfect moment for some roleplaying. Remember, our heroes are playing the part of a sophisticated prince and his entourage, so they must stick to their role, even if they are rowdy barbarians. Life at sea allows many funny situations, some of which are detailed in the sidebar "It's Hard to Be a Prince!"

The first real problem crops up late in the evening on the second day. Pick a character at random and read the following part.

If noblemen always dine like you did this evening, you could easily get used to it! It is late and you go up on deck for some fresh air, to better digest the abundant food. The Blue Arrow doesn't move dur-

IT'S HARD TO BE A PRINCE!

For most of the mission, the Double, as well as the rest of the party, must pretend they are someone else: a sophisticated lord and his entourage. Ulesir Shah has a lot of habits an adventurer probably doesn't have. They can be used to improvise some funny roleplaying situations while on the Blue Arrow, or later, at the court of Tokarim Shah.

Perfect Manners. *Ulesir Shah behaves impeccably, especially at the dining table.*

Supreme Elegance. *Ulesir Shah always dresses with great decorum and style.*

Lordly Speaking. *Ulesir Shah speaks to people with particular grace and appropriateness.*

Poor Fighter. *Ulesir Shah is known to be wholly incapable of wielding weapons. If the Double wants to go unnoticed, he must behave in the same way.*

Dancing Lessons. *Ulesir Shah is taking dancing lessons to improve his technique. The Double must do the same.*

Singing, Poetry and Arts. *Ulesir Shah has a melodious voice and is also a fine poet. Usually people who want to gain his favor ask him to recite one of his poems or sing a song. He is also an art lover.*

Weak Drinker. *Ulesir Shah isn't a strong drinker and, the few times he drinks, he becomes rather wild.*

Very Chaste. *Ulesir Shah is used to being surrounded by gorgeous girls and is quite indifferent to them.*

Vain. *Ulesir Shah is very proud of his appearance and the fairness of his skin. He avoids sitting in the sun, and bathes daily with perfumed water.*

SHAN AMMAR RUMORS

The heroes are allowed a Common Knowledge (-2) or Knowledge (Ekul) roll to check what they know about Shan'Ammar. Every entry below includes lesser information. So a character who scores a raise also receives the information of the success entry, and so on.

Failure. *Shan'Ammar is a medium sized city on the coast of the Brown Sea. It is a rather busy commercial port and the countryside along the Ironshadow River is very fertile and intensely farmed.*

Success. *Shan'Ammar is going through a bad period. Savage tribes from the Iron Mountains, the Mountaineers, are pillaging the countryside, and that is why Ulesir Shah is hiring mercenaries. But the war against the raiders is not going well, because the Shah keeps his small army within the city or in its immediate surroundings.*

Raise. *The leader of the Mountaineers is Korras, Ulesir's half-brother. Korras challenged Ulesir's authority, which led to his imprisonment. He managed to escape and swore to kill Ulesir and seize power. Korras's mother was a Mountaineer woman and many say all the mountain clans are flocking together under his banner.*

Two Raises. *Nobody knows how Korras managed to escape from the dungeons of Shan'Ammar. One day, his cell was simply found empty and the jailers killed, without any apparent wounds but with an expression of pure terror on their faces. Allegedly, several black-hooded individuals were seen around the city's prison that night.*

ing the night; it is anchored in the middle of the river. A sentinel, standing still with her spear, watches the riverbanks.

Ask the hero to make a Notice roll. In case of success, he immediately understands that there is something strange in the Amazon sentinel. In case of failure, he discovers the fact only after a few minutes. The sentinel is actually dead, her neck broken, and she has been artfully propped against her spear. She is still warm, so she can't have been dead for long. Wet footprints are visible all around. A stowaway has come on board! The hero must immediately raise the alarm, warn the other characters, and try to follow the wet footprints or rush to the Shah's cabin.

Raising the alarm allows the character to have d6 Amazons on his side during the second part of this scene; alerting the other characters allows the whole group to catch up with the assassin, while following the tracks requires a Tracking roll. In case of success, the hero understands that the mysterious assassin hasn't gone below deck but has moved along the bulwarks, from where he can easily get to any of the ship's cabins!

Naturally the assassin has reached Ulesir's cabin, where the second part of the scene starts. For each of the actions mentioned above performed by the heroes before they rush to the Double's cabin, a round passes inside the cabin (see below).

MEANWHILE, IN THE SHAH'S CABIN...

While the other heroes realize that an assassin is on board, the Double is in terrible danger. Read the following part to the Double's player:

You are in your beautiful cabin, sipping a nightcap of exquisite liqueur. You don't know how long this situation will last, but you have decided to enjoy every bit of it. Then you start getting undressed to go to bed but a sudden bad feeling makes you turn around. You notice that the curtain of your cabin's window is drawn and a person dripping with water is looking at you. He is bald, tall and skinny, and looks like a Jademan. He stares at you with malevolent intensity. In his right hand he holds a strange stone amulet and he raises it toward you. You try to move, or at least to shout, but you realize you can't!

At the start of this scene, the party is split in two: the Double is inside the cabin, trying to fight the mysterious assassin, while the rest of the party is outside, trying to get inside the cabin.

The door is blocked — not closed, by a supernatural force (evoked through the terrible meditations of the Keepers of the Black Flame, in the Iron Monastery). It is quite sturdy (Toughness 8(2)), and the heroes can bash it in with weapons or brute force. This is considered a Dramatic Task based on Strength. It doesn't have a fixed duration, but the door will open after the heroes gather four successes and/or raises. No more than two heroes each round can work on the door.

When they manage to get inside, they can help their friend.

The Shah's cabin is a 6" by 6" room, with a 1" door along the southern wall (through which the party rushes in), and French windows along the northern wall (where the assassin shows himself). The Double, in the meantime, is in serious danger: before dealing Action Cards, he immediately suffers the effects of the stone amulet's Paralyze Power (see the Black Flame As-

sassin's stats on page 58). Then, the fight goes on as normal.

The Black Flame Assassin doesn't attack the Double physically; he only uses the Soul Leech ability of the stone amulet he carries. He switches to active attack only if threatened by the other members of the party. His is a suicide mission: even if the odds are against him, he'll fight to his last breath.

(WC) Black Flame Assassin (1): See page 58.

TERRAIN AND PROPS

• **Rich Furniture:** The Shah's cabin is full of very expensive furniture: a big bed, a wardrobe, a dresser, and other assorted pieces. As a rule of thumb, consider the rich furniture as having Toughness 6 and granting Light Cover.

MANY QUESTIONS, FEW ANSWERS

When the assassin is killed, Marduk, Cassandra and several other Amazons storm in and the party can reconstruct the events.

The killer is unknown to everyone, but his Lhoban origin and a strange tattoo on the back of his neck, resembling a stylized black flame, can help identify him. Characters born in the Iron Mountains or heroes with the Enlightened Arcane Background are allowed a Common Knowledge roll to discover the following information. Otherwise, Marduk provides the same piece of knowledge.

"The tattoo identifies this man as a Keeper of the Black Flame, a member of a mysterious sect of evil monks, who live in the Iron Mountains where they rule

the Mountaineers.” Marduk says in a troubled voice.

“We suspected they secretly supported Korras,” the counselor continues, “and this only confirms our suspicions.”

If a character with a monk background examines the strange amulet with a Common Knowledge roll, he realizes it is very similar to a Prison Stone, an artifact used to capture demons’ souls, but he has never heard of it being used to steal the soul of a man.

Other heroes can find this information with a Knowledge (Arcana) (–4) roll.

“From now on we must be very careful,” Marduk sighs. “If the Keepers decide that someone must die, they will stop at nothing.”

As nothing else can be done for now, the heroes can go back to their beds.

DEATH ON THE RIVER

The night and the following day pass without any further trouble. The Blue Arrow leaves the civilized regions and enters the savage lands between Shan’Ammar and Teluk’Ammar.

On the third day, the ship is traveling on the Ironshadow River. The sentinels keep a constant eye on the hills on both riversides, but nothing happens during the morning.

Some funny roleplaying (see the It’s Hard to Be a Prince sidebar) situations might present themselves, before things become serious again.

In the afternoon, the Blue Arrow reaches the very heart of the hilly area, where the rivers goes through narrow gorges.

While you are crossing a particularly narrow and sheer gorge, a nasty surprise catches you unawares!

IN THE GORGE

Heroes with the Danger Sense Edge can use their ability in this situation. If successful, they automatically ignore any personal damage described below.

Someone is throwing boulders and stones off the top of the cliff, raining a deadly avalanche down onto the ship. You must duck for cover!

The characters must make an Agility (–4) roll or suffer 2d6 damage. But not everyone on the Blue Arrow is as lucky as they are.

With a daring maneuver, the helmswoman of the Blue Arrow manages to avoid a very big boulder, but a stone hits her right in the head, and she goes down on the deck, unconscious or dead.

“The helm!” Cassandra shouts from the other side of the deck. “Take the helm or we are dead!”

Now without anyone in charge, the Blue Arrow is yawing wildly, while the boulders keep falling. You are closest to the helm and must act now!

One of the heroes must take the helm and move the Blue Arrow outside the gorge, before it is completely destroyed. The situation is managed as a Chase, with no real pursuer: it is only a mad race against time to get out of this situation alive.

It is a Standard (five rounds long) Chase.

Deal Action Cards to the heroes as normal, except the helmsman. He receives an action card too, but he always acts last. The card he receives is only used to determine what danger the ship must overcome in the current round (see below). The other members of the party, during their turn, act according to their normal initiative order, and can perform various Supporting Actions (described below) to indirectly aid the helmsman.

During the helmsman's action, the Game Master, ignoring the normal obstacles rules, checks the Falling Boulders tables (described below), using the helmsman's Action Card as reference. The table describes dangers that the helmsman must avoid by making a Boating roll with a certain penalty. In case of failure he, the ship, or the crew suffer the listed damage.

(M) Blue Arrow, Amazon Hawk Ship (1): See page 65.

FALLING BOULDERS TABLE

CARD VALUE	EFFECT
2-3	Rain of boulders! They deal 4d6 damage (AP 6, Heavy Weapon) to the ship. Each success and raise on the Boating roll reduce the damage inflicted by a die and by 2 AP.
4-5	Very big boulder! It deals 3d8 damage (AP 4, Heavy Weapon) to the ship.
6-8	Medium boulder! It deals 2d8 damage (AP 2, Heavy Weapon) to the ship.
9-10	Small boulder! It deals 2d6 damage (AP 1, Heavy Weapon) to the ship.
J	Falling debris. The debris isn't big enough to damage the ship, but causes 2d6 damage to all the members of the party.
Q	Dust. The falling stones have raised a lot of dust. Ignore the suit of the card. In the next round all the party's and helmsman's rolls suffer a -2 additional penalty.
K	The Helm is Hit! A rock is intentionally thrown to hit the helm. If the roll to avoid it is failed, the ship suffers a permanent -2 to Boating rolls, until the helm is repaired (2d4 hours and a Repair roll).
A	Against the Rock Wall! The ship sways very close to the side of the gorge, with the risk of breaking most of the oars. In case of failure on the Chase Boating roll, during the next two rounds the Helmsman is dealt two cards from the Action Deck and must choose the worse one.
Joker	Safe Moment. No falling boulders this round! The helmsman also receives +2 to all his rolls.

CARD SUIT	BOATING ROLL MODIFIER
Spades	+2
Hearts	0
Diamonds	-2
Clubs	-4

SUPPORTING ACTIONS

The other members of the party must help the helmsman as they can. Here follows a list of possible useful actions, but others can be devised by the players. Each action basically requires a certain Attribute or Skill roll. For each success and raise the helmsman receives +1 to his Boating rolls.

Except for the “Rowing” and “Generic Sailor” actions, only one character can attempt each specific Supporting Action per round.

Watch the Gorge to Spot Falling Boulders. Notice roll.

Shouting Orders to Un-shake Amazons from Surprise. Intimidation roll, +1 to the roll for each Leadership Edge owned.

Rowing. Strength roll.

Climbing a Mast to Unfurl a Sail. Climbing roll.

Generic Sailor Action. Boating roll.

THE BATTLE OF THE GORGE

You are safely out of the gorge! The Amazons, dusty and shaken, look at you with wide eyes, in mute recognition of the fact that they wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you.

All the heroes should receive a Bennie now, to reward their heroism.

But there's more trouble on the way. One of the Amazons shouts: "Alarm! War canoes incoming!"

So you understand that the boulders were only half of the ambush. Four large war canoes, till now concealed by the riverbanks, are rowing fast to intercept the Amazons' ship.

You can see the sailors' fur coats and painted faces.

"Mountaineers!" Marduk shouts in terror. "Men of Korras come to kill my lord!"

"We cannot go back." says Cassandra, now by your side: "The boulders are still falling. But we cannot escape them either, we are too slow. We must fight. Amazons! Let's show these dogs the color of their own blood!"

As one, the warrior women unsheathe their blades.

There is a small but deadly battle coming. If you prefer a quick resolution of this scene, you can handle it with the Mass Battle Rules, as described in the sidebar. Otherwise, you can run it partially on the tabletop, as described below.

The river is flowing from north to south and the Blue Arrow is moving northward (upstream). The heroes' ship is at the center of the area and the four canoes come from two, five, seven and eleven o'clock.

The river is quite wide here, so the canoes start 24" away from the Blue Arrow. They are moving at maximum speed (Pace 8), so they'll reach the heroes' ship in three rounds.

During these early rounds hand Action Card to each hero and to the Blue Arrow's crew as well as one to each of the canoes.

The party can use the early rounds in a constructive way: shooting the catapult (see the Blue Arrow stats) or trying to take down the helmsmen of the canoes are both good ideas.

The canoes aren't very sturdy, so the catapult can destroy them dealing a single Wound. When this happens, all the men aboard try to swim to the riverbank (consider that canoe eliminated).

Taking down the helmsmen can be tricky: each of them is under Medium Cover (+2 Toughness) but, if he is Shaken, the canoe advances only 4" until he recovers. If he is killed, the vessel drifts 4" in a random direction until someone else takes the helm (usually after a round).

The Mountaineers use their bows to cover their advance. Heroes receiving a black action card are considered hit by Suppressive Fire. The ship's bulwark grants Medium Cover (+2 Toughness) for Suppressive Fire purposes, but only if a hero explicitly says he is ducking to avoid being hit.

At the start of the fourth round, the enemies are likely to board the Blue Arrow, and things will get Close and Personal. The heroes will face an easier fight if they have managed to destroy some of the canoes.

(M) Blue Arrow, Amazon Hawk Ship (1):
See page 65.

(M) Mountaineers' Canoes (4): See page 66. Each of them is manned by a crew of 15 Mountaineer Warriors.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The Mountaineers board the Blue Arrow even before the hulls of their canoes touch your ship. One of them, a burly fellow wearing a cape of gray fur, shouts: "Go on! Kill them all, but save the Shah for Korras' knife! And let the others die in the Black Flame!"

The heroes must face the direct assault of Gray Fox, the leader of the attackers, and his fellows. In the meantime, the Amazons are fighting too: the outcome of their fight is the same as the heroes' (if they are defeated, the ship is lost).

THE BATTLE OF THE GORGE (MASS BATTLE VERSION)

Mountaineers

Leader: Gray Fox – Knowledge (Battle) d4

Forces: 10 Tokens

Amazons

Leader: Cassandra, Amazon Captain – Knowledge (Battle) d8

Forces: 7 Tokens (–1 for each Wound the ship has suffered till now)

Battle modifiers: The Amazons can use their ship's catapult in the first three rounds of mass battle (+3 to Battle rolls).

Morale modifiers: The Amazons cannot retreat (+2 to Morale rolls).

The battle ends when the Amazons are defeated or the Mountaineers repelled.

The battle area is small and crowded: a 9" by 9" square in which the Blue Arrow and a canoe are colliding.

The two vessels are parallel, positioned along the north-south direction. The canoe takes up the 3" by 9" eastern part of the map, and the Blue Arrow the 5" by 9" western part. The middle 1" by 9" is the gap between the ships, and any character falling into the gap risks being crushed (see below).

Place the Mountaineers half on the canoe and half on the Blue Arrow, close to the gap.

The heroes and their allies instead start wherever they want on the Blue Arrow's side of the map, but no hero can start in contact with an enemy.

The assailants' tactic is quite straightforward: switch to melee weapons and kill everybody. If the Double is involved in the fight, he will be their main target but they'll use only the flat of their swords against him (-1 to Fighting rolls).

(M) Mountaineer Warriors (2 per hero + 2 for each canoe not sunk): See page 63.

(WC) Gray Fox (1): See page 60.

(M) Amazons (1 per each canoe destroyed): See page 57.

TERRAIN AND PROPS

• **Slippery Deck:** Whenever a character is dealt a deuce, he and all the other characters in a Small Burst Template around him must make an immediate Agility roll. In case of failure, the ship's movement makes them slip d4" in a random direction (all in the same direction). If this causes

them to cross the gap between the two vessels, they fall in.

• **Gap Between Ships:** The gap between the two vessels counts as Difficult ground. If someone falls in (because she is pushed or thrown in, loses her footing or suffers the effects of a Trick), she suffers 2d8 damage for each round spent in this awkward position. She can regain solid ground only with a Strength (-4) roll.

If the heroes capture Gray Fox, they can question him.

"Korras," Gray Fox says, "is now chief of all the Mountain Tribes. He has promised a great reward to the man who will bring him his hated stepbrother alive."

"Most likely to kill him with his own hands." He adds with an evil grin.

This is very strange news indeed: Korras is known to want Ulesir dead, not captured alive.

"So, all the Mountaineers within a week's ride will be after us," Marduk says gloomily.

If questioned about the Keepers of the Black Flame, Gray Fox remains completely silent. With a Smarts roll, the heroes understand that the brave warrior is too afraid to even speak of that elusive confraternity.

PART 2: A TROUBLED WEDDING

Luckily the Blue Arrow is approaching the borders of Teluk'Ammar. Few men dare face the wrath of Tokarim Shah: the old Valk warlord is known to be a ruthless soldier and even the Mountaineers usually think twice before trespassing into his lands.

In the late afternoon on the fourth day, the Blue Arrow reaches the port of Teluk'Ammar.

Teluk'Ammar is a walled city of average size, surrounded by a hilly region. The architecture is typical of Ekul, with tall towers, minarets and so on.

You notice a large crowd at the docks. They have been waiting for you.

"My Lord," Marduk says, "are you ready to meet your bride?"

A HOT BLOODED HORSE

A welcoming committee awaits the party, but Karmella isn't among them. There are many dignitaries of Teluk'Ammar, mostly second generation Valk with proud, sharp features. Despite being richly dressed, their bejeweled swords and beards cannot hide what they really are: warriors.

One of them, a tall man with a somber face, steps forward and introduces himself to the party.

"I am Jirro, Maquen of Teluk'Ammar. The Shah apologizes for not being here

in person, but his many duties have kept him at the palace. He asked me to escort you there. We have brought horses, if you'd like to ride. It is a short trip to the palace."

Not exactly a very warm welcome. The title of Maquen, as every character of Valk origin knows, means "general of the cavalry", a very important position in the Valk society. If no hero knows this, Marduk whispers it to the Double. He also adds that Jirro is Tokarim Shah's nephew and his right hand.

The horses given to you aren't the small ponies you expected, but a bigger breed. In particular, a servant brings forth a fierce and beautiful white stallion for Ulesir Shah.

"This is Cloud," Jirro says. "The best horse in my stables. I hope you can ride it into many battles. Consider it my personal gift."

Then, a one-eyed warrior gives the Maquen his horse so that he can personally deliver the gift to Ulesir Shah.

"Thanks, Ruman Gask," says Jirro.

The whole group sets off for the palace. A guard of honor surrounds the dignitaries. They are impressive warriors with black leather armor and curved swords. They too ride horses a little bigger than normal Valk ponies. From their scars and their faces, you understand they are veteran soldiers, not ceremonial troops.

Jirro escorts the party through the city but speaks very little, the bare minimum to avoid discourtesy. Any hero with a Smarts roll can understand that the man isn't very fond of Ulesir Shah. In truth,

as the party will discover soon, Jirro is in love with Princess Karmella, a feeling that is reciprocated, and he wishes he could marry her himself. Tokarim's decision to have her marry a foreigner really upset him, but he hasn't given up yet: he'll do everything in his power to prevent the wedding.

With the help of his most trusted friend, Ruman Gask, Jirro has already set his first trap.

Cloud, the horse given to the Double, is a mad beast, and it has also been drugged, so now it is ready to go berserk. Jirro doesn't actually want to have his rival killed: given the importance of horsemanship in Valk culture, being unhorsed in front of the whole population of the city will be a major blow to Ulesir's reputation.

Read the following part out to the group.

You are advancing among the crowd along the streets of TelukAmmar. You are amazed by how many people have come to see your arrive. The guards are doing their best to keep the citizens at a distance, but many people shout a blessing, some other touch your robes, glad to be able to say they have approached the Shah of Shan'Ammar.

Then, the unexpected happens. A dog slips past the guards and starts barking at Prince Ulesir's horse. Cloud's reaction is extreme. The mighty beast rears up, whinnying and kicking out. A soldier riding next to Ulesir is thrown out of his saddle. At this point the beast runs toward the crowd, while everyone desperately tries to get out of harm's way.

Panic breaks out!

The Double must do his best to save his skin and avoid damaging people and things. The rest of the party can run after him, trying to help their friend.

This scene is handled as a Standard length Chase, based on Riding, apart from the hero on Cloud, who uses the beast's Agility d10. The horse receives an Action Card independent from the rider. The obstacles the Double will face (see below) are based on the horse's card.

The Double, instead, must make a Riding roll each round. In case of success, he gains a Soothing Token, two with a raise. In case of failure, he gains no token, while only with a 1 on the Riding roll, regardless of the Wild Die, he is unhorsed, suffering 2d6 damage and ending the scene unsuccessfully.

On the other hand, whenever he manages to gain five or more tokens, he successfully stops the horse. The Beast Master Edge grants +2 to these Riding rolls.

If they manage to follow him, the other members of the party can aid him with cooperative Riding Rolls, if they get in Close range: story-wise it means they try to grab Cloud's reins, sooth the beast and so on.

The wild horse crosses several parts of the city, each with a particular twist. So, for this scene ignore the standard Obstacles rules and instead use the list below.

If not soothed, Cloud gallops till the end of the Chase. If the Double avoids being unsaddled, he manages to save his face at least.

CLOUD'S WILD ESCAPE TABLE

ROUND	EFFECT
1	Crowd. Cloud gallops through the crowd gathered to welcome Ulesir. The Double must make an additional Riding (–2) roll. In case of failure, Cloud severely hits a pregnant woman (if the card face was red), a poor old man (if it was black).
2	Bazaar. The mad horse gets to the bazaar! The Double and the pursuers must make an Agility roll to avoid crashing into the stalls (2d6 damage). By accepting a multi-action penalty, any hero can make another Agility roll to grab a prop of his choice. If a suitable narrative description is provided, the prop gives +2 to a single roll made during the Chase.
3	Narrow Passage with Steps. Cloud is now in a very narrow alley. What's more the street has a very dangerous downward slope, with several slippery steps. The heroes must make a Spirit roll at the start of their action. In case of failure, they can do nothing but grab the mane of their mounts (no Chase or soothing roll allowed).
4	Gardens. Cloud enters the city gardens, a labyrinth of narrow paths and well tended plants. The pursuers can try to find a shortcut, to intercept the stallion. During the next two rounds, the pursuers (and only they) can use Smarts as the Chase skill.
5	Pool. The mad horse stops abruptly by a pool in the gardens, but first it tries to unhorse its rider one last time. It is an opposed roll between Cloud's Strength (d12+2) and the highest of the Double's Strength or Riding. The Double can also add +1 to the roll for each Soothing Token he has. After this last attempt, Cloud calms down and starts drinking placidly from the pool.

Whatever the conclusion of the scene, Jirro and the guards get there when the horse's escapade is over. Their faces clearly betray their real feelings: they are grinning if the Double has been unsaddled, or they are very impressed if he has managed to stay on the horse.

"I am very sorry, noble Shah. I thought this horse was fully broken, but it is not so. Those responsible for this terrible oversight will be punished, I can assure you."

If the heroes examine the horse, they notice Cloud is frothing at the mouth. With a Healing or Lotusmastery roll (+2 if they have a gladiatorial background), they un-

derstand the beast has been drugged with the Orange Lotus of Fierceness, a concoction given to beasts in the arenas to enhance their ferocity.

If the characters look for Ruman Gask, the person who brought the horse forth (and actually drugged it), they cannot find him anywhere.

Finally you get back in the saddle and soon reach the palace. Tokarim Shah and all his court await you in the courtyard. The old Valk warrior has gray hair, but his trim body and steely gaze prove that he hasn't yet succumbed to old age.

Lord Tokarim's attitude is influenced by how the Double has behaved with Cloud.

Hostile: If the double was unhorsed and some passersby were hit. Tokarim is very upset with the Double, whom he now considers shamed. The Double loses a Bennie for that reason.

Uncooperative: If the Double was unhorsed. In this case Tokarim is quite upset with Ulesir because he didn't prove himself as a great warrior.

Neutral: If the Double managed to stay in the saddle till the last round, but didn't sooth the horse. Tokarim thinks his behavior was adequate but not completely satisfactory.

Friendly: If the Double soothed the horse, but someone was hit during the scene. Tokarim is pleased; his future son-in-law proved to be a brave warrior and he hopes to have strong grandchildren one day.

Helpful: If the Double soothed the horse without any help and nobody was hit in the scene. For Tokarim this man is a real Valk warrior, and Tokarim himself will acquire respect and honor by joining his house to Ulesir's! The Double gains a Bennie.

The official welcome is quite impressive, but the future bride isn't here to meet her husband-to-be. Let the heroes make a Notice roll, in case of success they see the following scene.

In the middle of the turmoil, you see a veiled figure, standing on a balcony above the courtyard. Her face is concealed, and yet you feel her stare on you. When you look up, she immediately turns around and leaves, followed by her maids.

THE FEELINGS OF A PRINCESS

The wedding will take place in four days. Nothing very important happens in the meantime: Marduk and Tokarim discuss the details of the marriage proposal and the Double is officially introduced to his future wife. This is a pure roleplaying scene and Karmella's true feelings should emerge clearly.

You are in the garden of lemons, a secluded area at the very heart of the palace. The scent of the lemon flowers mixes with the sweet notes played by a group of cymbalists.

Princess Karmella is here with two maids, her inseparable companions. As before, she wears a veil, as unmarried women traditionally do in Ekul. But instead of concealing her, the see-through material only enhances the attractiveness of her curvaceous body and dark eyes.

Princess Karmella orders the maids to serve fruits to her future husband and his entourage.

Karmella is an educated princess, but she is quite temperamental too. She doesn't know her future groom (they met only once when they were both very young), and she doesn't want to marry him, because her heart already belongs to another man, her cousin Jirro. If directly questioned about her feelings (or if someone politely rebukes her for her lack of enthusiasm), she says:

"I know what my duties toward my father and my country are. Though my heart bleeds, I know what is expected of me."

After these words she politely withdraws to her quarters with her maids.

Besides the scene above, the heroes will also have to deal with numerous social commitments. You can role-play a few so that the adventurers can get to know the main NPCs of the story (Karmella, Tokarim, Jirro, and Ruman Gask). Each event is summarized below, with a description of what the Double must do to avoid embarrassing himself. In case of failure, Tokarim's initial attitude (see previous section) drops by a step. A raise improves Tokarim's attitude by a step. However, it can never go below Hostile or above Helpful.

As some situations are more complex than others, the Game Master can decide to handle them as Social Conflicts, assuming that the opponent's skill is a d6 plus a Wild Dice.

The other members of the party can freely interact in these scenes, depending on their role. In addition, with they can learn some interesting gossip (see the Gossip Table sidebar).

SOCIAL EVENTS

Presentation of Wedding Gifts (Persuasion). Ulesir Shah and his future wife receive gifts from the dignitaries of Teluk'Ammar.

Courtly Hunt (Throwing or Smarts). Ulesir Shah, his future wife, and several courtiers enjoy a hunt with hawks and falcons in the forest immediately outside the city. They are heavily guarded.

Ball (Agility, applying Charisma modifiers). An evening ball is held at the palace, with local nobles and dignitaries. Ulesir Shah must dance with Karmella and several other ladies.

Endless Discussions on Political Matters (the lower of Vigor and Smarts). For several

hours, Ulesir Shah, Tokarim, Marduk and other counselors discuss pointless matters — at least, the Double thinks so — such as moving borders, commercial treaties, and so on. The roll is made to avoid falling asleep.

The evening before the wedding, as the custom requires, a great banquet is held in honor of the future husband.

DANCE WITH THE SNAKES

The feast organized for the future husband is lavish: more than a hundred of people are attending and delicious dishes keep coming out of the kitchens. It is a great party, but only a mere shadow of what will happen tomorrow, for the actual wedding. Celebrations like this tend to become quite rowdy and embarrassing and this is why it is attended by men only.

Dancers, acrobats, and storytellers entertain the guests, while alcohol flows abundantly. In particular, the groom's cup is constantly being refilled with Balait, a type of liquor made with horse milk. To respect the Valk tradition, he must get drunk on Balait so that tomorrow night, if it pleases the gods, he'll beget a son who'll have horse blood in his veins.

The occasion is very merry and frequent toasts are made in honor of Ulesir, Tokarim, the birth of many strong sons, the alliance between Shan'Ammar and Teluk'Ammar, and so on.

At a certain point, a servant whispers something in Tokarim's ears. The old warrior stands up and, apologizing to his guests, leaves the banquet, but orders everybody to continue to feast.

This is just the occasion Jirro and his followers were waiting for.

GOSSIP AT THE COURT OF TELUK AMMAR

There is chance to discover one or more piece of gossip. It is handled with a Persuasion roll, the heroes hear a piece of gossip for each success and raise they score. The Persuasion roll suffers -4 if the Double fails his scene roll (the situation is so embarrassing that nobody really wants to be seen speaking to the player character). Roll a d12 on the following table to check the gossip. Some items are false, others are true.

The exact situation where the heroes discover each item is left to the Game Master.

D12	COURT GOSSIP
1	Princess Karmella is in love with her cousin Jirro (TRUE).
2	Tokarim Shah is very ill, and probably won't survive the summer. Only drugs keep him alive (FALSE)
3	Ruman Gask is Jirro's best friend. He saved Jirro's life during an ambush by the Mountaineers a year ago. He isn't a Valk or a man of Teluk'Ammar and very few things are known about his past (TRUE).
4	Jirro has always wanted Tokarim Shah's crown. He'll do anything to have it (FALSE).
5	Jirro's cavalrymen are more faithful to the Maquen than to their Shah. In case of a power struggle, they'll be on Jirro's side (TRUE).
6	Princess Karmella recently had an affair and she is pregnant (FALSE).
7	Tokarim Shah is a good friend of Eku, King of Ekul (TRUE).
8	The Mountaineers haven't been threatening Teluk'Ammar for some months. Maybe Tokarim Shah made a secret truce with them (FALSE).
9	Several shady figures were seen in the city the week before Ulesir's arrival (TRUE).
10	Tokarim Shah plans to return to the old demon worshipping religion of the Valk and to claim lordship over the whole kingdom (FALSE).
11	Solembar, second general of the Shah, should have been the Maquen, but the Shah gave the title to his nephew even if he doesn't deserve it (FALSE).
12	Solembar, second general of the Shah, is a very faithful man. He taught Jirro everything he knows and is very pleased the young man is now the Maquen (TRUE).

THE TOASTS

In a most casual way, one of Jirro's men stands up and proposes this toast:

"To the prudence of a man who has women guarding him!"

The guests, mostly very drunk, laugh wildly. It is a not-so-veiled allusion to the Double's Amazon guards.

At this point, one of Prince Ulesir's companions (one of the player characters) is required to stand up and propose a toast in response. The Game Master should inform the players of this custom. Very clever toasts should be rewarded with a Bennie (and they will probably make Jirro quite furious).

Then, another warrior asks for another toast:

"To princess Karmella who rides like a man, and to a man who will never be able to ride like a woman".

The guests laugh heavily, but this is a terrible insult — the warrior is saying that Ulesir Shah isn't able to ride, which for a Valk means he is no man at all.

The heroes are once again required to respond with a suitable toast. Depending on how good the players are with words, the Game Master can prolong the exchange of veiled insults for a while. Finally, Jirro himself asks to speak but his words aren't mocking; he is blunt and extremely insulting.

"This foreign sheep, dressed in silk and satin, is not a man. I shall not let our princess be given to one who cannot even wield a sword."

Naturally, no prince can bear similar insults without replying. The Double is forced to answer in some way and this is exactly what Jirro was looking for:

"So, you say you are a man? I say you and your lackeys are nothing more than stray dogs, not deserving to lick the piss of my horse! If you want to prove me wrong, here and now, play with us, play the Dance of Snakes like the men of Teluk Ammar do!"

At this point the guests, even the most heavily intoxicated, fall silent. The challenge has been set and the matter must be settled. The heroes cannot turn back, even Marduk whispers to them that they must act or Ulesir's reputation will be tainted forever.

THE DANCE

Jirro claps his hands and servants are hastily sent to find what is needed, while the tables are cleared away to make room for the contenders. The servants come back

bringing twelve closed baskets. Judging by their worried faces, the content of these baskets must be dangerous.

An old man, with strange tattoos on his naked chest, advances with a sort of long flute in his hands.

"A snake charmer!" Marduk whispers.

The baskets are placed so as to form a sort of circle around the improvised arena.

"The rules of the dance are so simple, even a puny dog like you can understand them." Jirro says "You and your lackeys fight against me and my men in the circle, while the charmer plays. His music will awake the snakes in the baskets. When the music ends, the snakes will be free, and they'll attack the dancers. Pray to your gods before entering the Circle, I don't think you'll come out alive!"

The fighters are bare-chested and armed only with a sword or a dagger (their choice). If they carry no weapons, the Valk supply them.

The battle area is a circle, 12" in diameter. Reading the perimeter of the circle as the face of a clock, place a gaming stone at every hour, which represents a basket containing a snake.

Place the heroes inside the circle within 2" of its southern perimeter. Jirro and his men are within 2" of the northern perimeter.

The first round, after all the opponents have acted, the snakes leave their baskets and move 1" toward the center of the circle. The beasts are slow, charmed by the music, so they don't attack and they don't use their First Strike Edge, unless a character steps, or is pushed, on a snake.

The music ends abruptly when a Joker is dealt or when all four Kings of the Action Deck are dealt

(keep the Kings aside to keep track of this event). From now on, the snakes are alert and receive an Action Card. They attack the closest character.

The fight usually ends when all the men of either team are down, but this time it ends when either Jirro or the Double is severely wounded (three or more Wounds taken). Obviously, leaving the circle once the Dance has started is considered shameful and the coward is thrown back into the circle by the crowd.

A noteworthy fact is that Ruman Gask isn't among the Trusted Swords, Jirro's men. Don't mention this information explicitly, reveal it only if a player asks about Ruman.

(M) Charmed Snakes (12): See page 59.

(M) Jirro's Trusted Swords (1 per hero -1): See page 61.

(WC) Jirro, Maquen of Teluk'Ammar (1): See page 61.

TERRAINS AND PROPS

• **Push and pull:** A common technique used during the Dance of Snakes consists in causing an enemy to fall onto a snake. So, a character scoring a raise on the Fighting roll can decide to renounce his bonus damage to push an opponent 2" in a direction of his choice. If, as a result, the opponent comes in contact with a snake, he triggers its First Strike Edge. If the attacker still hasn't used his entire Pace, he can decide to follow his enemy.

THE SHAH'S PUNISHMENT

The following part is written assuming that the heroes are winning the Dance. If it is not so, change the description accordingly.

Your blade is raised to deliver the killing blow to the Maquen when a thundering voice freezes you: "What is happening here?"

Lord Tokarim has returned and orders this folly to stop. Anger reddens his face, especially when he is told exactly what has happened. The Shah apologizes to his future son-in-law and publicly puts his nephew to shame: "If you were not blood of my blood, now I'd drag you behind my horse around all the city, stupid fool! You have shamed us all! I know why you did it! Karmella and my throne will never be yours! You feel like letting off some steam, don't you? Take your followers to the old Tenebar fort on the western border, and start renovations so that we will no longer fear the Mountaineers' attacks from that direction. I want you in the saddle this very night. And don't come back until explicitly summoned!"

Under Tokarim's cold gaze, Jirro and his men leave the palace at once, while the court watches in shock.

After Jirro's departure, Tokarim smiles again and has some news for the court: "A very important person arrived here a short while ago. He is a personal envoy of King Eku of Ekul. The King, who is a friend of our city, has shown us his favor by sending this holy man to celebrate the wedding."

The king's envoy comes in. He is peculiar fellow: an old, plump Jademan monk, dressed in plain robes, with a long, thin beard. He smiles and bows in front of the court.

The monk is a nice fellow, called Philosopher Jimpah, and his presence at the wedding truly is a great honor for both noble houses involved.

The court and its lord celebrate the newcomer, while Jirro leaves, beaten and almost forgotten.

THE WEDDING

The wedding ceremony is far from uncomplicated. The preparations start early in the morning: the kitchens work at full capacity and both the bride and the groom must go through lengthy rituals, attended only by their closest servants: baths in horse milk, purification rites, dressing ceremonies, and so on. This wedding includes traditions both of Valk and Ekul religion.

In particular, the Princess's apartments are closely watched as no man can see her before the ceremony.

Finally, everything is ready and the solemn wedding is held at midday in the main hall of Tokarim's Palace, in front of the whole court.

Jimpah kindly entertains the groom while he waits for the bride in front of the altar: "Are you worried, my Lord?" he asks with an earnest smile.

Give the players some time to role-play this situation, if they want, and then go on.

Finally the bride arrives. She is dressed and veiled in the most beautiful garments: gold, silver, ivory and jewelled embroidery make her dress shimmer, and she is the very image of purity and beauty. She walks in slowly, escorted by a number of handmaidens throwing flowers in front of her, while the sound of cymbals marks her step. Her blue eyes are hypnotizing behind the veil and she stares at Ulesir with intensity.

The Double, and only he, can make a Smarts (-4) roll to remember that Karmella's eyes are black, not blue. This will give him a hint about what is going to happen.

The ceremony is short and very sober. The union is celebrated in the name of all the

gods and for the Enlightenment of the couple and everyone present.

"Now you can remove the veil from the bride" Jimpah says.

You finally lift the veil over Karmella's face, only to discover that...the girl isn't Karmella but Serah, one of her two trusted handmaidens!

Everyone gasps.

"By all the demons of my ancestors!" Tokarim swears so loud that his words thunder across the astonished hall. In a surge of rage, he draws his sword to cut off the girl's head on the spot.

The heroes should stop Tokarim before he commits such an atrocity. If they don't, Jimpah will.

Serah throws herself at the Shah's feet and confesses: "Oh my lord! I did it because your daughter, whom I love so dearly, ordered me to. Karmella fled last night. Ruman Gask, Jirro's best friend, came before dawn to take her to Jirro. Karmella resisted for a while then she gave in. She always wanted to marry him and seeing no other way to do it, accepted Ruman's plan. Karmella asked me to impersonate her during the wedding, to buy her some time. I beg you, don't kill me! Everything I did I did for Karmella!"

Tokarim curses and swears like a true Valk warrior:

"In the name of all that is good and evil, I'll have the head of my nephew on a pike and my stubborn daughter married, in chains if need be! Generals! Gather the army! We must be ready to leave in two hours!"

He doesn't explicitly say it, but the Double, his followers and the Amazons are more than welcome to go with him. Philosopher Jimpah follows them too, even though only as the King's observer.

PART 3: THE ENEMY IS REVEALED

BROTHER KILLS BROTHER

Jirro is very popular in the countryside, and he has at least one hundred cavalrymen with him, all trusted swords who have fought many battles with him. So, Tokarim wants to crush him as fast as possible: if Jirro isn't stopped from marrying Karmella, he could even try to overthrow his uncle and become lord of Teluk'Ammar!

The Tenebar Fort is a ruined fortress, a three days' ride to the northeast. It was built to defend an important mountain pass to Syranthia, but several landslides blocked the road, making the fort useless, so it was abandoned fifteen years ago. Sending a man like Jirro to the Fort means banishing him from public life, an appropriate punishment for his outrageous behavior at the banquet.

But Jirro, taking Karmella, has openly rebelled and the fact that he holds a fort might complicate things. If he manages to repair the fortifications, it won't be easy to take Tenebar and a civil war could erupt!

This is why Tokarim wants to hit him fast and without warning. The force that he has managed to muster in such a short time is only slightly larger than Jirro's, so the heroes' and the Amazons' aid is more than welcome.

Nothing very important happens during the ride to Tenebar. The only noticeable fact is that Jirro has left no sentinels on the road. Tokarim's generals suppose that it's because he doesn't have any men to

spare. The truth, as will be explained later, is that Jirro isn't expecting any attack, because Karmella isn't with him!

The army rides for three days with hardly any pauses. The occasional farmers and herders you meet stare at you with surprise. Seeing a full army passing through their land is quite an event, seeing two in a few days is something they'll speak of for many a year.

By speaking to them, you discover that Jirro's men are a day and half ahead. When your army approaches the mountains and is a few miles from the Fort, the whole area is immersed in thick fog.

"This is a good thing because it prevents Jirro from seeing us from afar," Tokarim growls. Despite his rough attitude, the grizzled Valk warrior seems ten years older than two days ago: the treachery of his daughter and nephew has shaken him deeply.

The army stops a few miles from the Fort, and a war council is held in Tokarim's tent.

The heroes are invited to attend the council along with Jimpah and Marduk.

Solembar, Tokarim's second in command, has some news: "The scouts report that Jirro's men are rebuilding the Fort, but it will be a long task. Only certain parts of it are watched, the main tower and couple of minor buildings. The rest of Jirro's men are camping outside the Fort."

"In any other situation, I'd send a herald to parley, but in this case we cannot afford to lose the element of surprise," Tokarim says. "I want to strike before that son of a bitch manages to gather all his troops inside the fort and crush him!" The

Shah bangs his fist on the table so hard everything seems to shake.

In this part of the scenario the heroes are among the leaders of the little army and can help Tokarim and Solembar in preparing for the battle. Jirro (and Karmella if she is with him) is probably in the main tower, because the Maquen's banner flies on its top.

Tokarim's plan consists of attacking on two fronts. The cavalry (the biggest part of the army) will charge the encampment outside the fort, killing as many enemies as possible while they have the advantage of surprise.

Meanwhile, a group of men will stealthily climb the walls of the Fort from the east, where nobody expects an assault. Their task will be taking the Fort's gate, so that Jirro's men won't be able to retreat into Tenebar.

"These men must be brave and strong, because the battle depends on them. They'll be attacked by troops from both inside and outside the Fort before we can secure the encampment and go to their aid," Solembar says.

This is the perfect role for the heroes and the Amazons. The Valk are excellent mounted troops, but poor infantrymen. With a Common Knowledge roll any character can understand this (+2 to soldier or warrior type heroes).

Tokarim would be very pleased if his future son-in-law and his hirelings (the other heroes) took charge of this group. The written scenario supposes that the group accepts, if this doesn't happen, the Game Master should find some other exciting role for the heroes during the battle.

Some ideas for other roles are suggested in the "During the battle..." sidebar.

DURING THE BATTLE...

Though the battle is designed to put the heroes in a very important position, the players might refuse their role of leaders (because their characters aren't great warriors or they don't want to take unnecessary risks). After all, they are paid to attend a wedding, not to fight a desperate battle.

Here are some ways to get the heroes involved in the battle in other roles.

-The Infirmary. *Heroes with Healing skills can help save the lives of the wounded.*

-Tokarim's Bodyguards. *Although Solembar is the general leading the army into battle, Tokarim decides to fight too. The man is enraged, so he takes unnecessary risks. The heroes must defend him so that he doesn't get killed.*

-The Messenger. *A messenger from Teluk'Ammar (see Aftermath) arrives as the battle is raging. He sees the heroes, who must lead him to Tokarim at once because he has news that can stop this unnecessary bloodshed.*

ASSAULT ON THE TENEBAR FORT

This scene supposes the heroes decided to lead the incursion to take the Fort's gate. During this scene, the party can rely on a handful of allies. To keep everyone involved, give each player which character isn't joining the battle the control of an Amazon.

It's a foggy night. The gods, or the demons, if you believe what the Valk say, are on your side. You lie flat on the ground behind some bushes, fifty yards away from the Fort's eastern walls, where nobody expects an attack.

"We are ready." Cassandra whispers next to you. The black mud she has on her face makes her look strangely attractive.

Then a wolf howls in the distance. It is the signal: time to move in!

The heroes and the Amazons must perform a series of actions to take the Fort's gate. To make things easier, Cassandra and her soldiers make a single group roll each action. In case of failure, the group receives a certain number of Alarm Tokens. The number of tokens will matter in the second part of the scene.

Run to the Walls. The attackers must run as silently as they can to the walls of the fort. Each hero and the Amazons must make a Stealth roll. If the group gathers more than one failure, it receives an Alarm Token.

Throw the Grappling Hooks. To reach the battlement, the group must throw grappling hooks and then climb up the wall. The whole group has four grappling hooks. The group must make four Throwing rolls (maximum one for each character). A failure means a hook has missed the target. In this situation, if the players so wish, the Amazons can roll individually (but without a Wild Die). If two or more rolls are failed, the party gains another Alarm Token.

Climb the Wall. The heroes and the Amazons must make a Climbing roll to reach the battlement. The roll has a -1 penalty for each grappling hook that missed the target in the previous step (they must climb more quickly because they have fewer ropes). If the group collects more than one failure, they get an Alarm Token.

Ghosts on the Battlements. The heroes and the Amazons are on the battlements.

A single sentinel is patrolling the area, luckily on the other side of the walls. If they manage to walk unnoticed to the Fort's gate, they have almost succeeded. Each hero and the Amazons must do another Stealth roll. If any of them fails, they receive an Alarm Token.

Alternatively, a hero with a ranged weapon can try to take down the sentinel. He is 30' away, in Dim Light conditions, but the hero has the Drop. The sentinel is an Extra with Toughness 6(1). If he is killed, the heroes gain no Alarm Token in this round. If the hero doesn't manage to kill him, the guard shouts (+1 automatic Alarm Token).

Dispatching the Sentinels. The heroes are now at the gate, watched by two bored and sleepy sentinels. Taking them down is no problem, but it must be done quickly and smoothly. The heroes make a cooperative Fighting or Shooting (their choice) roll, with a penalty equal to half their current number of Alarm Tokens. The Amazons count as a single Wild Card for cooperation purposes. In case of success, they dispatch the sentinels without much noise. In case of failure, the sentinels get killed but they scream, and the party receives 2 Alarm Tokens.

BLOOD AT THE GATE

You have just managed to take the gate when you hear shouts from the encampment. The cavalry has attacked! You notice a lantern being lit in the main tower of the fort. You must be ready, because your position will soon be the hottest of the whole battle, with warriors trying to break in and other warriors trying to push you out.

The Fort's gate is an opening without doors (the gates were destroyed years ago and Jirro's men haven't replaced them yet). The area where the heroes stand is a sec-

tion of wall along the east-west axis. The gate, a 6" wide opening, is in the middle and the heroes must defend it. Visibility is poor, so the battlefield is limited to 12" north and south (due to the fog). The courtyard of the Fort lies northward, while the encampment is to the south. On the right hand side of the gate there is a small guard room (3" by 3" with a 1" door) where the party can take refuge if the situation turns ugly.

This is a "survival" battle lasting 12 rounds, but don't tell the heroes about this time limit, since not knowing how much time they must resist will spice up the battle. In fixed rounds, groups of enemies appear

or some special event happens, as detailed below. Unless differently stated, all the enemies appear at the visibility limit (12" north or south).

When you come to round thirteen, go on with the Aftermath scene.

(M) Amazons (1 per hero): Under the control of the players. See page 57.

(WC) Cassandra, Amazon Captain (1): Under the control of the players. See page 59.

(M) Jirro's Soldiers (Variable number): See page 62.

ENEMIES TABLE

ROUND	ENEMY/EVENTS	COMING FROM	NOTES
1 st	Jirro's Soldiers (2 per hero)	North	Only if 4+ Alarm Tokens
2 nd	Jirro's Soldiers (2 per hero)	North	+1 enemy per Alarm Token
4 th	Jirro's Soldiers (2 per hero)	South	
5 th	Sniper!	North	See below
7 th	Ballista!	North	See below
9 th	Riders! (2)	South	See below
10 th	Jirro's Soldiers (2 per hero)	South	Desperate: +1 Fighting rolls

Sniper! A very good archer (a Right Hand Soldier with Shooting d8, Stealth d8 and the Marksman Edge) is on the battlement, 12" northeast of the heroes and under Heavy Cover (+4 Toughness). He shoots and then takes cover every round. If the heroes don't want to be wiped out, they must go and dispatch him.

Ballista! On the northwest battlement, 24" away from the heroes, there is ballista loaded with arrows. The ballista is manned by two of Jirro's Soldiers and they fire once every two rounds (Range: 24/48/96, Damage: 2d6, AP 1, LBT) until it is captured or destroyed. Due to the heavy fog, the heroes can only guess where the ballista is.

Riders! Two Valk warriors on horseback try to break into the Fort! They charge and their mounts also attack (see the Warhorse stats in the Savage Worlds core rules).

TERRAIN AND PROPS

• **Cover:** Near the heroes' position there are several objects that can be used as cover:

- Two 1" by 1" water barrels (Medium Cover, +4 Armor), near the gates.
- A 1" by 2" table in the guards room (Light Cover, +2 Toughness).
- A 3" by 3" cart full of hay in the courtyard (Heavy Cover, +4 Toughness, catches fire on 4-6 on a d6), 6" away from the gates northward. Two men can move it by 2" each round.

AFTERMATH

Finally you hear the sound of many horses coming from south. You are ready to face another assault, when you understand that they are your friends. Solembar is leading them.

"You did a good job," He says. "Now let us take care of the main tower."

The heroes must make a Vigor roll now, to avoid a level of Fatigue.

Solembar's men swarm into the courtyard, ruthlessly killing who resist. Jirro and his most loyal men have barricaded themselves in the main tower. "The Shah wants to see you." Solembar adds. "Go at once."

You are with Tokarim Sha's in a tent when Jirro is dragged in front of him, in chains and severely wounded.

"He killed three men before we got him," Solembar justifies the wounds of the prisoner.

Tokarim ignores the General and rudely questions the prisoner: "You, traitorous dog, where is my daughter?"

Jirro is stunned with pain, surprise and fear, but still manages to groan: "Karmella? My lord, I obeyed your orders. I haven't seen her since the night of the banquet!"

Tokarim is quick-tempered, and his Valk blood runs hot: "You dare lie to me? My horse! Where is my horse? I'll drag you around in the dust until you confess!"

Just then a messenger, who has been riding all night from Teluk'Ammar, get to Tenebar with important news for the Shah.



THE MESSAGE

The messenger, dusty and breathless, bows in front of Tokarim. "A bird carrying this message arrived at the palace's aviary yesterday morning, my Lord."

Tokarim reads it and turns pale, then he hands the message to you.

Give the players handout 1.

"Tokarim,

Your daughter is safe in my hands and she will remain unharmed if you do what I command. You have something I want: my hated half-brother, Ulesir. Bring him to the Anvil of the Rusty Lake on the last night of this moon. When I am done with him, I will be the legitimate Lord of Shan'Ammar and ruler of all the tribes of the Mountains. And I'm sure you'll consider me a worthy husband for your daughter. Do as I order and you'll see her again soon. Disobey, and her soul will be given to the Black Flame.

Korras, Lord of Shan'Ammar."

Ruman Gask has been working all along for Korras and the Keepers of the Black Flame, as a spy in Teluk'Ammar. He convinced Karmella to leave the palace of her father but, once outside, he kidnapped her and took her to his masters in the mountains.

The news is too much even for Tokarim: his daughter is in the hands of a bandit; he has almost killed his only nephew by mistake. The old man stares at Ulesir and says: "My daughter... your wife... save her!" and then he goes down, overwhelmed by grief.

POWER VACUUM

It is now time for the heroes to take over. Jirro is going to be tortured and, despite their personal feelings toward him, the heroes should stop this order from being carried out. The first character to do so should be awarded a Bennie.

But the main problem is that Tokarim is so ill that he cannot issue any order or take any decisions.

The heroes have several options now:

1. They can simply go away. If they decide the situation is too messy, they can slip out of Tokarim's tent *immediately* and safely leave the camp. The scenario ends here, but the party will not have any reward and probably they'll be hunted down by both Tokarim and Ulesir's Amazons, creating a nice, unexpected scenario.
2. They can go and look for Karmella. This is the way true heroes behave, especially altruistic ones. Depending on how hard this decision is for them, they should receive a Bennie too. In this case, you may want to play the Alternate Scene described at the end of this section.
3. They can stay with the army and wait for the situation to develop. This is probably the most reasonable option, so the main story follows this line.

Give the heroes some time to roleplay what to do with Marduk and Jimpah. Then, General Solembar speaks.

"Lord Ulesir," General Solembar says, "the situation is very difficult now and the troops must see us united in this terrible moment. So I ask you and your attendants to go to your tent, rest and pray your gods for Tokarim Shah. Surely you

are tired and hungry. My men will provide you with anything you need."

You are led outside Tokarim's tent.

Let the heroes make a Smarts roll. In case of success they understand that their role has changed: they are not useful allies anymore, but precious hostages, who can be used by the ruler of Teluk'Ammar, whoever he is now, to get Princess Karmella back. Tell the players that their heroes are deep in the encampment of Teluk'Ammar, surrounded by the whole army, so trying to escape now is not possible.

The tent assigned to the party is large and comfortable; they can eat, rest, and so on. In addition, if they are wounded, they are visited by a skilled medic (Healing d10, Healer Edge, still counts as being in the Golden Hour).

The whole day passes in forced inactivity. The heroes are well looked after but cannot leave their tent. The sentinels outside are very polite, but very firm too. Give the players some time to worry about what's going to happen; then, at dusk someone visits them.

Philosopher Jimpah enters your tent. The plump man stayed back during the battle and the following events, and you have almost forgotten about his presence. He sits down and begins: "I have been with the Shah till now. He is strong, but it is too early to understand if he'll make it and, if he does, he'll never be the same man again."

Then he drops his customary smile and speaks frankly: "I heard what the generals were saying too: they believe the best thing to do is hand you over to Korras. It would be reasonable if you were the real Ulesir. But I wonder what Korras will do to Karmella when he discovers you are only a double."

Despite his appearance, Jimpah is no fool and, being a master monk, he has sensed the Double's identity. Yet, his duty was only to celebrate a dynastic wedding, so he kept the news to himself.

But the recent events and Korras's reference to the Black Flame have changed everything. The Keepers of the Black Flame are a thorn in the side of every good monk of Ekul (see sidebar) and having a chance to weaken (or even destroy) them is very appealing for him.

So he has a proposal for the party.

"I feel you are no common people, and I could certainly use your help. Here's my offer: I'll help you escape, but in exchange you'll help me set a trap at the Rusty Lake and free the princess. Otherwise you can wait to see what Solembar and the other generals plan to do with you" He adds with a sharp smile.

If the heroes accept, Jimpah takes care of everything.

It is the dead of night when the fat monk comes back. He wears plain grey robes and for the first time you see him with a weapon, a strange carved staff.

"We can go." He whispers.

You leave the tent silently. The sentinels are on the ground, dozing. A wineskin lies nearby. "I am always amazed by what Lotus can do when you mix it with someone's wine." Jimpah says with a boyish grin, picking up the wineskin.

The heroes must make a Stealth roll to leave the camp. In truth, nothing serious is going to happen now. If they fail the roll, a soldier stops them, but Jimpah persuades him he is leading the party to the generals' tent, and the group can leave the encampment without any problems.

Outside the camp, you find your horses, saddled and fully packed. "We must hurry." Your guide says. "Solembar will surely send someone after us when he discovers we've fled." You spur the horses and gallop into the night.

ALTERNATE SCENE

If the heroes left the encampment on their own, they are reached by Jimpah. He offers to join forces to save the princess. In this case he doesn't have anything to give the heroes in exchange for their help, so it is entirely up to the characters to accept or decline. If they accept, he leads them south, to the Rusty Lake; otherwise, the adventurers can go their own way.

AMBUSH AT THE RUSTY LAKE

You travel south for a whole day and night, barely pausing to rest the horses. "The last night of the moon is tomorrow, we must hurry." Jimpah says during one of your brief stops while smoking his clay pipe. Despite his fat appearance, the monk doesn't seem to suffer any fatigue, even if he hardly slept more than you.

All the heroes must make first a Riding roll and then a Vigor roll. If they failed the Riding roll, the Vigor roll suffers -2; if they scored a raise, it is made with +2. In case of failure on the second roll, they suffer a level of Fatigue, which wears off after a day spent out of the saddle (probably during Part 4).

You arrive at the Rusty Lake at dusk on the second day. You've been lucky so far, because nobody has come after you from the north, but you constantly keep your eyes open.

THE KEEPERS OF THE BLACK FLAME

This sidebar contains some information about the mysterious Keepers of the Black Flame. The heroes can acquire this information in various ways (Jimpah can tell them, for example).

The Keepers are a mysterious order of exiled monks who came to Ekul from Lhoban centuries ago. They are followers of the Obscurement, a doctrine according to which a man can attain perfection through vileness and depravation. Due to their beliefs, they had to leave Lhoban and took refuge in the Iron Mountains.

Here, the first fugitive monks found something amazing: a flame made of pure darkness that seems to burn without any fuel. They immediately understood that it perfectly represented their evil philosophy and started worshipping it. Thanks to its amazing powers they managed to subjugate a number of Mountaineer tribes and ordered them to build a massive Monastery on the spot where the Dark Flame burns, to protect and venerate it.

As time went by, they discovered that the Black Flame actually requires a very special type of fuel to continue burning: human souls. So, they started kidnapping both travelers and people from Ekul, aided by the Mountaineers who know that, without other victims, the Keepers would certainly sacrifice members of their tribes to feed the Flame.

The Keepers play a major role in local politics but they don't openly rule over the Mountaineers. They only indicate a "preferred chief" among the various candidates and their favor currently goes to Korras, Prince Ulesir's evil half-brother.

In truth the monks have a secret reason to support Korras, which will emerge during the last part of this adventure.

The good monks of Ekul know about this dark sect but so far they haven't managed to locate the Monastery because, when captured, the Keepers' hirelings prefer to die rather than reveal the location of their holiest site.

The Rusty Lake is a body of water at the foot of the Iron Mountains, roughly half way between Teluk'Ammar and Shan'Ammar. It is fed by a waterfall, more than three hundred yards high, coming directly from the Iron Mountains' peaks. Even from your distant position you can see the falls and hear the far-off rumble they cause. Despite the water, the entire area is barren and the few trees seem covered by a thin layer of rust.

"The water coming from the mountains is very rich in minerals," Jimpah explains. "So the lake is cloudy and the mineral particles settle on everything, making the place a little gloomy. It is about two miles long and quite meandering. It feeds the Rust River, a tributary of the Iron-shadow River."

By the lake there is a small rocky area, where a square black stone stands, broken in two. The road leading south toward Shan'Ammar and north toward Teluk'Ammar passes right by the stone.

Jimpah leads you there.

"This is the Anvil," Jimpah says pointing at the square stone. "The rock was hit by lightning in a distant past and is considered holy to Hulian, the Smith God of the north. This is the place the message mentioned."

The party has no idea if the kidnappers will come from the north, south, or even from the lake. They have roughly an hour to explore the area (with a cooperative Survival roll). In case of success, given the rocky nature of the lakeside, they find places where to take cover and wait unseen (see below)

Jimpah unpacks his horse and extracts a tinkling package. "Korras said he wants

you chained. So I have brought these, just to be safe."

In Jimpah's plan, the Double should stand near the stone, chained. Jimpah will play the role of jailer, while the other heroes must hide somewhere nearby. In truth, the chains have broken manacles and the hero can easily get free (this counts as an action). In dire need the chains can be used as weapons (Str+d4, Reach: 2, Improvised Weapon). Jimpah wants to trade Karmella for the Double and then, when the girl is safe, attack the kidnappers to free the Double, if possible. So, he needs the heroes to hide nearby and be ready to act.

When everything is ready, go on with the following part.

The night is quite clear, so you see the kidnappers from a distance: a war canoe emerges from the fog on the lake.

"Be ready." Jimpah whispers, without moving a muscle.

The crew of the barge includes a number of Mountaineer warriors and a woman wearing a hood. The warriors, armed with bows, are watching the lakeside, looking for trouble.

The canoe comes closer only if the Double, chained or restrained in some way, is visible.

The canoe stops and a gangplank is put down. Ruman Gask, the traitorous dog, seems to be the man in charge. "Hand Ule-sir over and I'll let the girl go," he says.

When the Double goes aboard, Ruman pushes the girl forward. At this point, all the heroes are allowed a Notice (-4) roll. The Double, being closest to the canoe, rolls without penalty. In case of success,

the characters understand the girl isn't Karmella but only a person with a similar build. This is a good moment to attack: if the heroes rush out now, the opponents must roll for Surprise. If no hero detects the deception, Jimpah does and he shouts:

"That's not Karmella! She's an impostor!"

At this point, the heroes can attack but the enemies aren't Surprised.

Deal action cards to everyone. The battle area is a portion of the lakeside, 24" by 24". The eastern 10" by 24" area is solid ground, while the western 10" by 24" area is water. The middle area, 4" by 24, is low water and counts as Difficult Ground.

The kidnappers' canoe is 14" long by 6" wide and is connected to solid ground via a 1" by 4" gangplank.

Ruman Gask is on the canoe by the gangplank, with the Monastery Guards next to him. The other kidnappers are scattered around the canoe.

The Double and the girl are standing at either end of the gangplank.

Jimpah is placed within 3" of the gangplank.

The other heroes start under cover (see below).

When the Double is on the canoe, Ruman shouts to his men to leave. At this point, all his non-engaged troops man the canoe (see below).

The heroes should prevent this from happening. Ruman Gask and his men are fanatics, so they fight ferociously. At the end of the battle, there is only one survivor, the girl impersonating Karmella.

When Ruman Gask receives the final blow, he whispers:

"It is pointless. In the end, the Black Flame will be fed."

And then he dies with an evil grin on his face.

(WC) Jimpah (1): See page 62.

(WC) Ruman Gask (1): Use the Black Flame Assassin stats, adding medium armor (+2) and a bronze sword (Str+d8). See page 58.

(M) Mountaineer Warriors (2 per hero): See page 63.

(M) Monastery Guards (1 per hero): They are Henchmen, See page 63.

(M) Girl: Use the Commoner stats. See page 59.

TERRAIN AND PROPS

• **Lakeside Cover:** The heroes start the battle under cover (stones, bushes and so on). This means that they choose where to position themselves on the battlefield. If they succeeded in the Survival roll, they found or created cover within 12" of the eastern border of the battlefield; otherwise, the cover they found must be within 6" of the same border. Each shelter is 1" by 3" and counts as Medium Cover (+3 Armor).

• **Manning the Canoe:** The bad guys' canoe is propelled by long poles, except near the shore. If four Mountaineers manage to use an action in the same turn, they can push the vessel 1" away from the lakeside by using the long poles (Str+d6, 2 hands, Reach 3, Improvised Weapon).

• **Canoe Props:** The deck is full of the assorted things that can make the fight more exciting, such as ropes, barrels, and so on. As a rule of thumb, place up to eight gaming stones on the ship's deck. Each of them represents an undefined prop. A character can grab one of the props and, after describing it, can gain +2 to a single Trick or use it as a handy Improvised Weapon (Str+d4 to Str+d6, Game Master's choice).

THE HIDDEN STAIRS

After the battle, the heroes can question the girl. She bears a passing resemblance to Karmella, enhanced by her hairdo and garments.

"My name is Tarima," she says. "I am a slave, kidnapped by Korras's men in the countryside of Shan'Ammar some months ago."

The girl sobs while she speaks of what she had to suffer as a captive. "At the beginning, I was held in a village of barbaric Mountaineers, who did anything they wanted to me. But then they took me to a gloomy place called the Monastery of Shadows, where the monks did unspeakable things with my mind and body."

The girl shivers.

"Some days ago Ruman Gask, who was a monk himself, though in disguise, arrived at the Monastery, bringing a princess, Karmella.

Korras, who is a protégée of the monks, promised me freedom in exchange for my collaboration: I had to pass as Karmella, to be free again. I accepted wholeheartedly, nothing was too much to leave that evil place."

Tarima doesn't know the way to the Monastery and the Mountaineers' village, because she was gagged and blindfolded, but she knows the trek didn't take very long.

"We walked for a few hours along mountain paths and, in the last part, they took my blindfold off because we had to go down very steep steps cut into the rocks. The stairs are hidden behind the waterfall and led us to a small cove, where the canoe was waiting."

Jimpah is very excited. Until today the location of the Monastery of Shadows has been a secret, and the Keepers of the Black Flame are a constant threat to Ekul. The old monk is determined to seek out the Monastery and free Karmella.

The party boards the canoe and, after rowing for only twenty minutes, they get to the stairs. A cleverly concealed passage (which Tarima can locate) leads under the waterfall and then the heroes find themselves in a protected cove, behind the curtain of water.

The cove is empty but a series of steps in the living rock goes up to a narrow cornice, just below the water falling.

"Ruman Gask left some men at the top to guard the way," Tarima warns the party.

The heroes must first climb up and then dispatch the sentinels. Going up isn't very difficult (given the handholds in the rock): any hero must make a single Climbing roll, and only with a critical failure does he fall, suffering 3d6 damage. If a hero fails the roll but without a critical failure, he must make a Vigor roll or be Fatigued. The Fatigue disappears after five minutes of catching his breath.

Trouble starts in the last 6". The heroes must be very quick if they want to catch the sentinels by surprise.

The cornice is 6" by 6". The heroes come from the southern side, which borders the void. The handholds are only 1" wide, allowing a single character to pass, and are placed halfway along the southern border. On the opposite side, there is a narrow passage, a 1" wide tunnel, leading away from this place.

The sentinels are placed roughly in the center of the area, around a small fire (1" wide). The constant roar of the water is so loud that all Notice rolls to detect sounds are made with -4.

The heroes begin this combat climbing up. Place their miniatures in single file, in the order they prefer. The first hero is 3" away from the top, while the others are below him. Until he reaches flat ground, each hero can move at half his Pace without any need to roll. If he wants to move at full Pace, he must make an Agility roll. In case of failure, he moves only half the distance but, in case of critical failure, he falls suffering 5d6 damage.

The sentinels must check for Surprise, because they truly don't expect to be attacked in this place!

(M) Mountaineer Warriors (4): See page 63.

TERRAIN AND PROPS

- **Slippery Ground:** The 1" by 6" area along the southern border, which borders the abyss, is very slippery. Any character Shaken or Wounded while standing on it must make an immediate Agility roll or fall. A falling Extra automatically dies in a terrible way, while a Wild Card manages

to cling to the border of the cliff. With a Strength (-4) roll, which can be cooperative, he can regain solid ground.

ON THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

After dealing with the guards, the party can move on.

A small passage in the rock leads away from the cornice and emerges in a small hidden clearing among the mountain peaks. Ruman and his men left their yaks and their gear here.

The air is quite cold here, due to the altitude. A narrow path winds off deep into the mountains.

The heroes can reach the village of the Mountaineers by following their trail (a single Tracking roll is required) or by questioning one of the guards if some have survived (with an Intimidation roll to get a truthful answer). Otherwise, they can set the yaks free: the beasts are smart enough to go back to their warm shed in the village, and by following them the group will find the Mountaineers' village.

The packs on their beasts' backs contain a number of useful things: some food, assorted climbing gear (ropes and so on), and spare clothes typically worn by the Mountaineers, such as woolen mantles with deep hoods, decorated scarves of yak fur, and long trousers of sheep skin.

The heroes will need this gear to enter the Monastery of Shadows (see The Fortified Village, in Part 4).

PART 4: THE MONASTERY OF SHADOWS

THE FORTIFIED VILLAGE

You march for several hours. The air is cold and bitter, but not as cold as you expected at this altitude.

"We climbed a long way," Jimpah says. "Now we are quite high. These mountains remind me of Lhoban. I should have realised the Keepers would choose such a place for their hideout."

After a while, your path joins another one, a little larger, and by proceeding along the latter you reach your destination in less than an hour.

The fortified village of the Mountaineers is built on a large terrace on the far side of the deep valley you are in now. A steep road is the only way in and, to make things worse, it is flanked by a stone wall and protected by a gate, guarded by sentinels.

"A few good soldiers could hold that gate against a large army for weeks," Jimpah frowns.

There is a second terrace several hundred yards above the village. A strange building stands on it, its features completely different from the architecture of the village. There are pagoda-like towers and crammed buildings huddled together to form a structure unique in its kind.

"That's the Monastery," Jimpah says. "If we want to rescue Karmella, we must find a way in, and it won't be easy."

There is something spooky about Monastery that you cannot quite define, but after a while you understand the mountain above it keeps it in constant shadow, so that it is never exposed to direct sunlight. It is a place of perpetual darkness, no light comes from its narrow windows, and it seems lifeless.

While you are surveying the Monastery, a loud gong from deep within the mournful building echoes through the whole valley. Then, you see a black cloud rise from it and swoop down the entire valley, like a huge, malevolent hand.

"Bats!" Jimpah orders. "Quick, let's hide behind these rocks! These beasts could be something other than they appear!"

The beasts pass over your head, apparently without noticing you, and then return to the dark domes of their cursed home.

A single, twisting passage leads from the village to the Monastery.

The party must reach the village and, from there, the Monastery. There are basically two ways to accomplish this: the cliffhanger way or the sneaky way.

THE CLIFFHANGER WAY

Any hero with Climbing d6 or more is automatically aware of the following option; the Game Master should inform the player about it.

From where the heroes are now, it is possible, though quite dangerous, to climb the steep valley side and then, with a last, daring climb, reach the Monastery directly, without going by the village. This plan requires two things: a skilled climber to open the way for the others by finding safe handholds and appropriate climbing

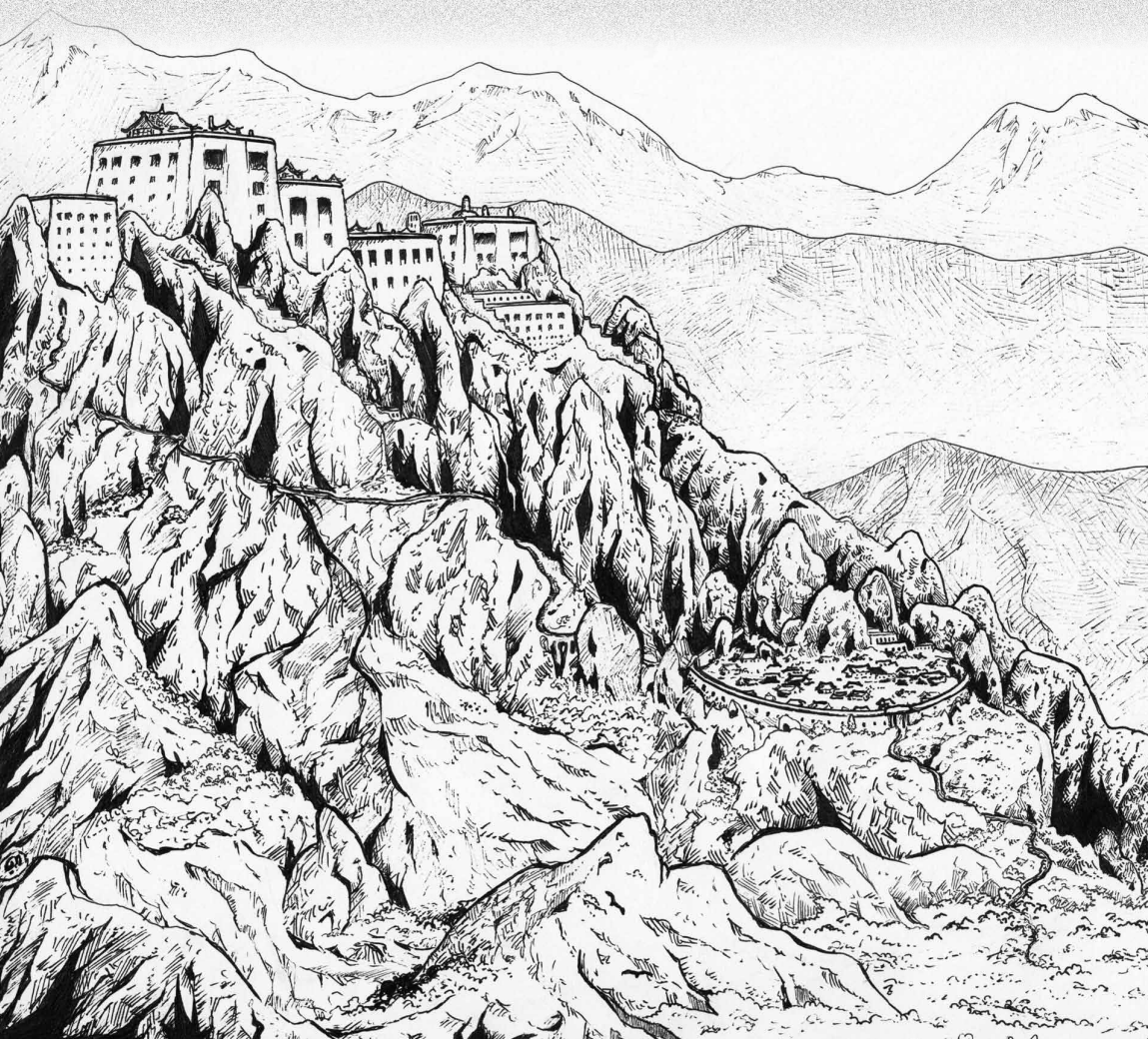
gear (which the heroes found in the previous scene). Climbing as a roped party will minimize risks.

This scene is handled as follows. First, place ten markers on the gaming table to form a track, each representing a portion of the dangerous way. Place a counter on the first marker, representing the group's initial position. Then, the hero the group has chosen to lead the way makes a Climbing roll. With a success, he *might* be able to move the group marker one step forward along the track (two steps with a raise). But before he can do that, the other members of the party must prove they can follow him. Each of them must make an

Agility or Climbing (+2) roll. For each two failures scored by the group, the number of steps forward is reduced by one.

Instead, if a 1 is rolled on the skill die, regardless of the Wild Die, the hero slides down but, thanks to the ropes, he only hits the rock wall, suffering 2d6 damage. In addition, the rest of the group must make a cooperative Strength (-4) roll to help him back to safety.

In addition, some portions of the climb present different levels of difficulty. When the heroes reach certain markers, certain scripted events happen, as described below.



Free Climbing Path Events

Marker 3 – Inverted Surface. This part is extremely dangerous. When the group gets to this marker, every hero must make an additional Climbing roll (this doesn't count as an extra action). In case of failure, he slides down suffering 2d6 damage, and must be rescued with a Strength (–4) roll.

Marker 5 – Bats. When the heroes come to this marker, the gong in the Monastery sounds again and the bats swarm into the valley. Deal a card from the Action Deck to each hero: those who receive a black suit card are attacked by the bats, suffering 2d4 damage. Given the awkward position, nothing can be done, except curl up (+1 Toughness) and endure the bites. Each bitten hero must be dealt another card the next round: if this card is black, the attack continues for another round. Friends of the attacked heroes can try to scare off the beasts with an Intimidation roll. Characters with the Beast Friend Edge aren't attacked by the bats.

Marker 7 – Sharp Rock. Before rolling to advance, the leading hero must make a Notice (–2). If he is successful, he sees that a sharp rock is cutting into the rope and might sever it. If he fails, roll a d4 and from now on consider the rope as cut after the hero corresponding to the number rolled (so, if 3 is rolled, the rope is cut after the 3rd character in the line). The two roped parties must act independently (with a leader and so on) until they all reach a point when they can start climbing together again (marker 8).

Marker 9 – Above the Village. The heroes are now just above the village and each of them must make a Stealth roll, in addition to the other rolls. If the group scores more than two failures, they are spotted by the people in the village (for example

they cause a boulder to fall). A group of four sentinels come to investigate (group Notice rolls) and, in case of success, raise the alarm in the village (see sidebar).

THE SNEAKY WAY

The sneaky way consists in trying to enter in the village through deception. The heroes have enough clothes to disguise themselves as Mountaineers if they want (found on the yaks).

Observing the situation for a while, the heroes notice that several groups of Mountaineers are coming to the village. There seems to be a gathering of some sort or other special occasion.

The heroes are right. Mountaineer chiefs from remote villages are coming to swear their allegiance to Korras, now that his victory is almost certain. The party can wait till dusk and then join one of these groups or simply reach the gates and pretend they are members of one of the delegations that has just walked in.

Fooling the sentinels requires the heroes to be adequately disguised (so, wearing garments found on the yaks) and to devise a reasonable story. This situation is handled through a cooperative Persuasion roll, deeply influenced (from +4 to –4) by how well it is roleplayed. If the party arrives a few moments after another group saying they have fallen slightly behind their companions, the roll is made with +2. If they arrive alone, the sentinels are more suspicious (–2 to the roll). In case of success, the heroes are admitted to the village and sent to the Common Hall. If they aren't persuaded, the guards attack the heroes. If the party manages to kill them in two rounds or less, they have a slim chance to enter the village unnoticed (but the absence of the sentinels will be

noticed in 4x5 minutes), otherwise the Alarm is raised (see sidebar).

(M) Mountaineer Warriors (4): See page 63.

Once inside the fortified village, the heroes are on their own. A brief description of its various locations, provided in Appendix I, can be used by the Game Master to devise some encounters. There are many strangers in the village today so, unless the heroes attract attention to themselves, they are likely to pass unnoticed.

The heroes' main concern is reaching the Monastery but the northern gate is heavily guarded (see Appendix). So they will probably go to the Common Hall to devise a plan. After an hour, almost all the strangers have gathered in the Hall, so, if the heroes are still wandering around the village, they will be noticed.

When the heroes are in the Common Hall of the village, go on with the following scene.

The Common Hall is a big wooden hut, smelling of sweat, smoke and sheep's droppings, but at least it is warm. Long low tables are arranged all around with sheep's skins to be used as cushions, and many Mountaineers are sitting in silent groups.

Judging by how they are looking at each other, many of these men must belong to enemy clans and a truce of some sort has been made. If the Game Master wants to reinforce this idea, he can add a few tense episodes between the groups. If the heroes sit on their own, they are left in peace.

After you sit down, some shy Mountaineer women, wrapped in heavy clothes, serve you a hot soup of mutton and mountain

THE ALARM

If the heroes are discovered while trying to sneak into the village, the Alarm is raised.

This means that every round the group must draw a card from the Action Deck and check if some reinforcements come to their current location. If the party manages to dispatch the guards before new ones arrive, the Game Master should decide, depending on the situation, if they have the chance to hide somewhere.

The guards engage the intruders using non-lethal attacks, because they have been ordered (as the party will discover in the last scene of the adventure) to capture any trespassers alive. The prisoners are then brought to the Monastery's dungeons (see next scene), stripped of all their belongings, and locked in a cell, from where they'll be taken to Korras. Things will get tougher for the heroes: they'll have to escape the dungeons, find some equipment, and so on.

Concealing Items. *If the heroes are captured, they can try to conceal something small (nothing bigger than a dagger) on their persons. To successfully do so, they must win an opposed roll between their Smarts and their capturers' Notice.*

CARD DEALT	GUARDS
2-4	No guard
5-8	Mountaineer Warriors (2)
9-10	Mountaineer Warriors (1 per hero)
J-Q	Mountaineer Warriors (2 per hero)
K-A	Monastery Guards (1 per hero)
Joker	Keeper of the Black Flame (1)

garlic. It isn't very tasty but at least it warms your bones. You notice that alcohol is banned from the table.

Then, the heroes have to wait for several hours. If they want, they can use this time to talk to the other guests, basically discovering that they are here to pay homage to Korras, who will soon be the ruler of all the Mountaineers.

An hour before midnight, the gong in the Monastery sounds again and the people in the Hall start murmuring. Then, some monk guards, Mountaineers wearing the same armor as Ruman Gask's soldiers, come in. Their leader, a stocky fellow with a fanatical light in his eyes, speaks to the gathered crowd.

"Tonight you'll witness the power of the Black Flame and of Korras, Lord of all the Mountains. Put on your cloaks and be ready to follow."

All the Mountaineers bow their heads. Then, lifting their hoods against the cold temperature, they make their way to the Monastery of Shadows. You quietly join the procession.

ENTERING THE MONASTERY

This scene starts whenever the group manages to reach the Monastery, which can happen in three ways:

1. **The party successfully sneaks into the Monastery.** If this is the case, the heroes notice the gate is unguarded and ajar, which is very strange. The reason is explained below: thanks to the powers of the Black Flame, the Keepers have been spying the actions of the group and want them to come right to the Monastery, into the wolf's den.
2. **The party successfully pretended to be part of a village delegation** (see The Sneaky Way above). In this case, the heroes stay at the end of line when they are led into the Monastery, so that they can sneak away to look for Karmella.
3. **The party is captured by the guards, and then sent to the Monastery.** In this case, they are thrown into a cell in the Monastery's dungeons and they must break out. Otherwise the Kindling Ceremony (see below, the Soul of a Divided Man) will start with them bound and gagged.

If the characters manage to enter the Monastery of Shadows using method 1 or 2, they should be rewarded with a Bennie. They'll surely need all the Bennies they have in the next part of the adventure.

EXPLORING THE MONASTERY

The Monastery of Dark Shadows is a true labyrinth, full of dark corridors, strange halls, and so on.

The goal of the heroes, however, is not to explore the whole monastery but to find Karmella and leave as fast and as smoothly as they can.

So, the exploration of the Monastery is handled in an abstract way.

Each exploration "round" (roughly equal to fifteen minutes in real time), the heroes make a cooperative Smarts roll. Characters with the Watch Your Back! Edge add +1 to the roll.

With a successful roll, the group acquires an Advancement Token, two with a Raise. If the leading hero rolls 1 on the Smarts roll, regardless of the Wild Die, he gets

lost and the group loses an Advancement Token.

When the party gathers twelve Advancement Tokens, they find the prison where the Princess is held, and you can go to the Freeing Karmella scene.

In addition, after the roll, the Game Master draws a card from the Action Deck and runs the event below. The events refer to specific places or situations the heroes will encounter while exploring the palace.

Note: If the heroes are captured and taken to the dungeons, they start this scene from entry Ten in the table below.

MONASTERY OF THE SHADOWS SCENES TABLE

DEUCE – DEAD GARDEN

You cautiously enter a small courtyard in which the monks have built an artificial environment of rocks, sand, and dead trees.

“A dead garden!” Jimpah whispers, with an expression of terrible pain on his face. “These evil souls have created their own twisted version of a Lhoban garden, a place of purity and calm. This is... an abomination!”

Indeed, despite being a perfect display of sand, rocks and branches, the garden conveys a feeling of terrible spiritual suffering, as if something was tearing your soul apart.

Any character with the Sorcery or Enlightenment Arcane Backgrounds must immediately roll on his arcane skill. In case of failure, the terrible spiritual pain caused by this place makes him lose d4 Power

Points (which are recovered normally). If the drawn card is red, several novices are busy meditating in the garden. They count as Inactive guards and, if the party is stealthy enough, they can be avoided. The dead garden is 12” by 12” and the novices start 6” away from the party.

(M) Novices of the Black Flame (1 per hero): See page 63.

THREE – COLONNADE OF BATS.

You walk down a colonnade flanking the inner courtyard of this mysterious building. The ceiling is tall and dark and the cold wind of the mountains howls between the columns, making you very uneasy.

The party previously noticed that the gong sounds at given time intervals and an enormous swarm of bats swoops into the valley. Many of the bats are now resting under this colonnade and they attack the heroes if disturbed. If the players explicitly say they are moving silently, they must make a Stealth roll. If they collect two or more failures, they awake the beasts. The same thing happens (without any need to roll) if they move carelessly. The colonnade is 18” long and 6” wide, with two 2” wide openings along its smaller sides. The party is placed in the middle of the area, while the bats (hanging from the tall ceiling) begin 6”+1d4” away from the group.

(M) Swarm of Shadow Bats (1 per 2 heroes): See page 65.

FOUR – GONG

You come to a great open platform on the top of a tower. From this high position you can see the whole valley and many parts of this intricate monastery, but the thing that catches your attention is the

large bronze gong placed in the middle of the platform and decorated with disgusting scenes of torture. It is the very gong you have been hearing every few hours!

If the card dealt to the heroes is black, the gong's platform is now deserted. From this higher position they can take a good look at the rest of the Monastery (they can make a cooperative Smarts roll, gaining an Advancement Token for each success and raise). If the card is red, they aren't alone: the Gong Ringer, a deformed giant of a monk is here, ready to do his job. He attacks the party immediately!

(M) Gong Ringer (1): See page 60.

FIVE – WHISPERING LIBRARY

This room is almost totally dark. It is quite large but crammed with ropes hanging from the ceiling. There are hundreds of them, long enough to touch the ground. You notice they bear many knots and strange things are tied into the knots: little pieces of wood, bones, and so on. The ropes are strangely smooth, and with disgust you understand they are made of human hair!

Jademen monks preserve knowledge using a strange form of writing named Lhoban Secrets. They are lengths of ropes with knots on them, each combination of knots having a particular meaning. The Keepers of the Black Flame use a similar method to preserve their evil wisdom, but their artifacts are made with human hair, bones and so on. This dark room (Dark condition) is a massive library, with hundreds and hundreds of ropes. On a stone block in the center of the room (used as a lectern) there is a very long rope made of white hair. Any hero who knows the Lhoban Secrets language (or Jimpah, if no hero does) can “read” an extract.



It says:

"The Flame made of purest Darkness must be fed once every century with the soul of a Divided Man. Without this holy offer, it will go out and leave us defenseless against light. For this reason, your every breath, dream and heartbeat will be devoted to the quest of finding the Divided Man. Today, tomorrow, forever."

The text probably makes little sense for now, but its meaning will be clear at the end of the adventure.

SIX – THE SLEEPING ONE

The corridor you're in is dusty and seems unused. It leads to a round hall without windows. Two small braziers provide a very faint light and what is burning in them has a strange, penetrating smell that makes you dizzy. An old man is sitting on a dais in the center of the room. His robes are so thick and elaborate his tiny body almost disappears in them. He is by far one of the oldest people you have ever seen: his white hair is long enough to touch the ground. He seems to stare at you perfectly still, but you suddenly understand that his eyes are closed and the pupils you see are tattoos on his closed eyelids.

This man is the Sleeping One, a mesmerist so powerful and wicked he is feared even by the other monks, who leave him alone to meditate. Any character, with a Knowledge (Arcana) or Knowledge (Religion) roll (both at –2) recognizes his eye tattoos as the signs of a master soul bender, a person trained in the wicked art of enslaving the spirit of others. If the heroes leave him alone, nothing happens, and the party can go away freely. If awoken, he uses his powers to take control of the heroes' minds (*puppet Power*) and make

them fight among themselves, while he levitates out of reach (*fly Power*).

(M) Sleeping One (1): See page 64.

SEVEN – SUFFERING PRISONER

You understand what this room hosts as soon as you steps inside. It is a torture chamber, where the evil lords of this place practice their disgusting skills on helpless victims. Hot irons and racks are the mildest things you see around. The room is empty, but the metallic smell of fear and blood permeates everything.

If the party decides to explore this room more thoroughly, they find a small closed metal door (Toughness 10) that must be bashed in or lockpicked.

What the heroes see inside goes beyond their wildest imagination. All the heroes seeing the following scene, except the ones with a torturer background must make a Fear check or be Nauseated till the exploration of the Monastery is over.

A man, or something that was once a man, lies on the ground. His bones seem to have been melted and he is now only a heap of shapeless flesh with a twisted mouth and terrified eyes.

"Tumanpu!" Jimpah cries. "Is that really you?"

"Jim... Jimpah?" The man whispers.

Tumanpu is a monk and friend of Jimpah's. He was captured by the Keepers months ago and has been tortured ever since. Feel free to roleplay the tragic reunion between Jimpah and his friend.

The body of Tumanpu is dying, but not his mind. With his last strength, he whispers something very important.

"The Divided Man! They see everything in the Flame! They found him! Tonight! It will be tonight!"

Tumanpu is beyond saving and asks to be released from his suffering, but Jimpah's beliefs stop him from taking a life. If a hero helps Tumanpu find peace, he is immediately rewarded with a Bennie. Otherwise, Jimpah is moved to pity and he deals the blow, but suffers -2 to Enlightenment rolls for the rest of the scenario.

EIGHT – KITCHEN

If you think that monks, even evil ones, are ascetic and frugal people, well, this room is enough to make you change your mind. The place is huge. Steam and the smell of numerous different dishes, some of them rather strange, fill the air. A towering figure, busy moving a big cauldron full of rice, angrily speaks to you:

"How many times do I have to tell you? The servants must wait outside the kitchen! The soup isn't ready yet!"

The Kitchen of the Monastery is run by an enormous chef with a terrible temper. When he sees the heroes, Surukan — that's the chef's name — mistakes them for servants. With good roleplaying and a Persuasion roll, the players can try to use this to their advantage to find out where the Princess is being held (getting directions allows the party to immediately gain an Advancement Token). Otherwise, they can Intimidate Surukan to obtain the same information. Despite his braggart attitude and huge size, Surukan is a coward and will not try to fight but, given the chance, he'll try to alert the guards (see the Jack entry).

NINE – BUSY SERVANT

Let the heroes make a Notice roll. In case of failure, they hear nothing and keep going. With a success, they hear two voices speaking in a corridor nearby and overhear the following conversation:

Old servant: "Jinzu, you lazy moron, you are late once again!"



Young Servant: "I am sorry, Pelai; I was busy feeding the bats..."

Old Servant: "A lame excuse, as usual! Now, take these towels to the Princess, before I have you whipped!"

Young Servant: "As you command!"

Then you hear hasty footsteps coming your way.

At this point the party has two options.

They can hide somewhere and try to shadow Jinzu, the young servant, to the place where the princess is held. If they choose to do so, the advancement mechanism changes. Instead of a cooperative Smarts roll, the party makes a cooperative Stealth roll opposed by Jinzu's Notice (d8). In case of success, they automatically gain 3 Advancement Tokens each exploration round, regardless of raise results. In case of failure, Jinzu spots them and tries to warn a group of guards (see the Jack entry). While following Jinzu, the party can avoid most encounters; draw a card, but the corresponding event occurs only if the card is a club.

Otherwise, the party can try to capture Jinzu and force him to take them to the Princess. If captured, Jinzu seems to cooperate. The heroes do not need to roll to advance; they automatically gain 2 Advancement Tokens each exploration round, but they also draw two cards and the Game Master chooses the lower one, because the novice is intentionally trying to lead them into trouble and escape as soon as he can.

(M) Jinzu (1): Use the Novice of the Black Flame stats, but remove the Arcane Background, because Jinzu isn't a very dedicated student. See page 63.

TEN – MONASTERY DUNGEONS

This entry is written assuming that the heroes are locked in the dungeons because they were captured in the previous part of the scenario. If it isn't so, change the descriptions and situations accordingly.

You are in cold, small cell, full of filth and dirty straw on the floor. It is a truly disgusting situation.

The heroes are locked in separate cells. Each cell is the same and holds two heroes.

The cells' doors are sturdy (Toughness 8) and obviously locked (a Lockpicking roll is required to open them and unless, the heroes have manage to hide some lock-picks on their bodies, the attempt is made with -4). The dungeon is a long corridor (18" long by 2" wide), with small cells (3" by 3") on both sides. The only way out is through the jailers' room, 6" by 6".

The heroes can devise many ways to leave this place. Lockpicking the doors or luring a guard into their cell and beating him are the most obvious. The guards aren't the smartest guys in Ekul, but they know that prisoners are tricky so, if they have to enter a cell, they do it in pairs. If the heroes manage to break out, they can find all their equipment in the jailer's room, except any precious items or relics (they can be found in Korras' room, see the Ace entry), and can start exploring the Monastery from this location.

If the party doesn't manage to break out, at midnight they will be bound and dragged to the Black Flame for sacrifice (see The Soul of a Divided Man scene) and, given the situation, their chances of survival will be very slim.

The other cells are empty.

(M) Jailers (3): Consider them Mountaineer Warriors with Smarts d4 and without any armor. See page 63.

JACK – GUARDS

The heroes come face to face with a group of guards! Both sides roll for surprise, and the results apply as normal. If a member of the party has the Danger Sense Edge, remember to take it into account. In case of success, the heroes aren't surprised at all. The guards are usually met in a 12" by 4" corridor or a 8" by 8" room (Game Master's choice), and they begin d4"+2" away from the heroes. Feel free to add covers and props as you see fit (at least two 1" by 2" Medium covers, granted by assorted furniture). Each three rounds of fighting, draw an additional card from the Action Deck. If a face card is dealt, another group of guards has heard noises and comes to investigate.

(M) Monastery Guards (1 per hero): See page 62.

QUEEN – ENCHANTED DOOR

You get to a large corridor that ends with a massive gate made of two panels. The gate is closed and lacks any visible handle, but instead it has a sort of short metal bar that can be fully rotated (like a clock's hand). Each of the two panels is divided in two parts by a geometrical pattern, so the whole gate has four different quadrants, each painted with a different symbol.

The four pictures are the Lhoban symbols for the four elements. Clockwise from the right top corner, they are: earth, water, air, and fire. In the middle of the door, a short sentence is written around the strange metal bar: "From your feet, through the enemies first, and moving to the friends

later". If no hero knows the Lhoban language, Jimpah translates it.

Any character, with a Knowledge (Arcana) (–2) roll, understands that this strange artifact is an Elemental Gate. In other words, if opened incorrectly, this door can lead to places where beings made of pure energy roam. If opened correctly, the door simply leads to the other side.

The wisest decision the party can take now is to turn back and find another way. In this case, the group loses any Advancement Tokens gained in this exploration round plus two more.

Otherwise they can try to open the door. The secret is in the metal bar: it can be rotated and, when it reaches the exact center of a quadrant, it clicks into place thus selecting that quadrant. Selecting the four elements in the right sequence opens the door, but a wrong sequence has a very bad effect: when the door is opened, a wave of elemental energy (fire, air, sand or water depending on the last element selected) hits all the creatures within 6" of the door. They must make an Agility (–2) roll; in case of failure they suffer 2d8 damage.

The right sequence is: earth, air, fire, water.

In case of success the party manages to open the door (gaining 3 additional Advancement Tokens). Any player who significantly contributes to resolving the riddle should be awarded a Bennie.

KING – BEJEWELLED STATUES

You are in a heavily decorated corridor. The walls, the ceiling and the floor are painted with geometric patterns that remind you of stormy clouds or a rough sea. The corridor is lined with round alcoves

and in each there is a life-size statue of a monk sitting cross-legged.

The resemblance to living people is amazing but their eye sockets are empty, showing that the statues are probably hollow inside. To add to their accuracy, the statues are dressed with precious-looking robes and covered in jewelry, such as rings, earrings, pendants, prayer beads, and so on.

The Enlightened Ones usually cremate the bodies of their dead ones, but the Keepers of the Black Flame have twisted this tradition. They have their bodies consumed by the fire of the Black Flame and what is left is placed in a human-sized earthenware statue reproducing the features of the deceased monk. These statues are then dressed with rich garments and jewels and placed in the small alcoves along this corridor.

The corridor is 12" long and there are 12 2" by 2" alcoves, six on either side, each containing a statue.

The statues are harmless but, if someone approaches to try and steal their rich decorations, the ashes of the monks contained within unleash their dark power.

If a hero tries to steal from a statue, he must make a Stealth (-4) roll, with +2 if he has the Treasure Hunter Edge. In case of success, he rolls a d6 and multiplies the result by 50. It is the value in Moons of the assorted jewels he has managed to steal. If the hero rolls a 6 (only the first time), he finds a nice opal pendant, which is a minor relic granting its wielder the Luck Edge.

In case of failure, black smoke rises through the statue's hollow eye sockets. It is semisolid and extends a sort of tentacle

to attack the unlucky thief and all the other living beings in the corridor. The tentacle has Fighting d8, damage: 2d6, Reach 6, touch attack. It also has the Ethereal Monstrous Ability (but its eerie caresses cause intense pain) and cannot be harmed in any way. The only way to defeat it is to destroy the head of the statue which it belongs to (Toughness 5). Moreover, at the end of the tentacle's action, draw a card from the Action Deck. If a face card is dealt, the statue in the next alcove is also awakened.



ACE – SECRET PASSAGE

While exploring a room, the heroes make a Notice (-2) roll and, if any of them is successful, they find a secret passage!

Regardless of the result of the roll, just then they hear someone coming into the room. The newcomers are a group of guards (see the Jack entry). If the heroes have found the secret passage, they can enter it and leave unseen. Otherwise they must fight the guards as normal.

If the party explores the passage, read the following part.

The passage is dark and silent, and you wonder if hiding here was a good idea after all. But then you start hearing voices and see a glimpse of light. They come from a small fissure in the wall, from where you can spy into a nearby room without being seen.

You are looking into the bedroom of someone very important. You understand this from the luxurious bed, decorated furniture and tapestries on the walls. A few rugged Mountaineer warriors are standing in the room drinking wine and waiting for another man, probably their chief, who is putting on his armor aided by a servant.

The scarred face of the chief seems familiar and, when you hear the other men's words, you understand why.

"So, after tonight, you will be lord of Shan'Ammar. Are you excited, Korras?"

"Shut up!" Korras growls. Then he turns to his servant: "And you, secure that buckle if you want to keep your head!"

The heroes are looking at the very man that has caused them so much trouble!

Once Korras is done, he and his men leave the room. The Game Master is free to decide if the heroes hear other tidbits of conversation that can give them some hints about what is going to happen in the next scene. When Korras leaves, the heroes can try to find a way to enter the room of their archenemy.

There is no door but, knocking on the wall, they find a spot where the stone and mortar were replaced by a wooden panel (probably during some renovation work). Smashing the panel is quite easy (Toughness 6). In Korras's room the heroes find all the relics taken from them (if they were captured), plus money and jewelry worth 1,000 Moons in a coffer. Hanging on the wall there are also a couple of useful weapons (a bronze long sword and a great axe, made of the same material). In a leather satchel hanging from the bed there are also some useful Lotus concoctions: Blue Lotus of Reinvigoration (*healing* potion, cast with a raise – 2 doses), a flask of Kirem Liquor (*boost trait*: Strength), and a Teardrop of Gis (a hollow sling bullet filled with a *burst* concoction, see the *Beasts and Barbarians Golden Edition*).

JOKER – SAFE ROOM

This room is a sort of warehouse. Nobody has been here in a while and it would be a good place to rest a bit.

The heroes can stay in this unused room unnoticed for an hour. They can catch their breaths and heal minor wounds. Thanks to the Joker, Healing rolls have a +2 bonus.

Managing Redraws. If the party picks the same card more than once, they find nothing dangerous or interesting during their exploration, but gain +2 to the next advancement roll, unless they draw a club.

In this case, they meet a group of guards (as per the Jack entry).

FREED KARMELLA

Finally, the heroes find Karmella's quarters.

You open the elegant door in front of you and stop on the threshold of a large room in semi-darkness. For a moment you contemplate the woman that has cost you so much pain and effort. She sleeps in an enormous four-poster bed. She must be having a nightmare, because she tosses and turns, a pained expression on her delicate face. A thin silver chain secured to the wall and locked around her slender wrist keeps her captive.

The room where Karmella is sleeping is almost totally dark. Only a small gap in the ceiling lets some light in. The reason is simple: the room hosts two guardians, of a type that shuns the light.

When the heroes step into the room, the terrible Bat Hounds, great dog-like beasts, attack them.

The battlefield is Karmella's room, a 8" by 8" hall with a single 2" wide opening halfway down the southern wall. Karmella's bed (2" by 2") is placed in the center of the northern wall. The attackers try to stay hidden in the darkness as long as they can before attacking the unfortunate character entering the room.

(M) Bat Hounds (2): See page 56.

TERRAINS AND PROPS

• **Dark Area:** The whole room is in Dark light condition, except for a Small Burst

Template centered on Karmella's bed, where visibility conditions are normal.

• **Assorted Furniture:** Besides the bed, there are a closet (1" by 2"), a wardrobe (1" by 2") and a water basin (1" by 1"). All this furniture has Toughness 6 and can be used as props in combat.

THE BLACK FLAME

After fighting the Bat Hounds, the heroes wake Karmella up. She is confused because of the drugs given to her that have played many strange tricks on her mind, but she recognizes her future husband (the Double).

"Oh, my Lord," she murmurs, "you shouldn't have come here. It is a trap!"

Trap or no trap, the heroes have found the girl and can now leave, after breaking the chain that is holding her (Toughness 8).

Leaving the Monastery isn't as easy as it might seem.

You have just left Karmella's prison when the gong is sounded three times.

"Something's happened," Jimpah says, with urgency in his voice. "We must move on."

Striking the gong three times is a warning that radically changes the pace of life in the Monastery: groups of guards start patrolling every area, making the heroes' escape a lot more difficult.

At a certain point, while you are cautiously crossing a room you haven't seen before, you spot a group of guards coming right your way. There are many of them.

The guards haven't seen the heroes yet, so they have some time to find a hiding place. Let the heroes make a Notice roll. If anybody is successful, the group spots a dark passage. If no hero sees the passage, Jimpah does.

"Come on!" The fat monk says, leading you into the dark corridor. Going on, the passage ends in one of the strangest rooms you have ever seen.

It is a wide, round hall, with tall walls and a sort of gallery, like the ones you see in theatres or Imperial arenas, running along the whole perimeter. But the strangest thing is in the middle of the room: a massive flame, at least five yards tall and made of pure darkness, rises from a fissure in the ground!

The flame is erratic and flickering, as if it were about to go out, but it continues to burn without anything visible fueling it. Despite its absolute blackness, you can see an image within it, as clear as a painting.

The scene depicts six men and a woman in a room, in front of a strange flame. The figures are moving as if in a real-life scene... hang on, you are looking at yourselves!

The characters realize they are looking at themselves in this very place, as if spying through the eyes of a malevolent observer.

"The Black Flame!" Jimpah murmurs. "The Black Flame of the Keepers! It is true then that it can see anything going on in these mountains! We must leave!"

At that point, a deep, evil voice is heard behind you:

"Too late."

THE SOUL OF A DIVIDED MAN

The newcomer is a tall, bald man, with a large scar on his face. He has come down the same passage you've used. He is accompanied by a group of monk guards and Mountaineer Warriors.

Despite his rough appearance, Korras, the evil mind behind this whole mess, bears an unmistakable resemblance to Prince Ulesir.

"My hated brother," he says, "I never imagined you'd be able to wield a sword one day but, when I watched you kill Ruman Gask, you surprised me, I must confess." He points his finger toward the Flame.

You understand you have been spied through the Flame for quite some time.

"I thought about sending someone to capture you but, well... you foolishly came all the way here by yourself. So, why bother?" he adds with an evil smile.

"Well, brother. Now you are here, and we have a little matter to settle. You see the Black Flame? It is faltering after centuries of perpetual burning. The Keepers, masters of this place, know the reason: once every century it needs a soul, a very specific one, the soul of a Divided Man to keep burning. And you, my brother, are the Divided Man of this century!"

Just then you notice tall, gaunt figures on the balcony, monks hundreds of years old come back for the rite. They are the oldest members of the order and are here for the Rekindling of the Black Flame. They raise their skeletal hands holding stone amulets, like the ones possessed by the assassin on the Blue Arrow and by Ruman

Gask, and they point the evil objects at the Double.

"And now, it is time to die!" Korras says, with an evil smile on his face, while the monks direct the power of their wicked weapons against the party.

This is the last battle of the scenario, in which the party will face Korras and the evil Keepers of the Black Flame.

The battle area is the hall of the Black Flame, a domed hall 18" in diameter with a single 3" wide exit placed at six o'clock. A 2" wide balcony runs along the entire perimeter of the room. Access to the balcony is granted via two small staircases (2") placed at three and nine o'clock.

In the middle of the room there is the Black Flame (see below). Place the four Keepers of the Black Flame on the balcony, at eleven, one, four, and eight o'clock respectively.

The heroes begin the fight in the middle of the room, within 3" of the Black Flame.

Korras and his guards begin within 8" of the entrance, but at least 6" from the nearest hero.

This battle has a number of twists and unexpected events, which are scripted below.

Phase 1 (round 1). Korras and his guards attack the heroes (except the Double, who is left to the Keepers). Half of the Keepers use their terrible Drain special ability against the Double, half against Korras!

When this happens, read the following part.

"What is going on?" Korras screams, terrified.

"Fool!" Jimpah spits. "The soul of a Divided Man means that two people shares part of the same spirit: in this case you and your brother! The Keepers will sacrifice both of you to the Flame!"

"No! It cannot be!" Korras shouts, full of anger.

Phase 2 (round 2). The battle takes a new turn: the Monastery Guards attack Korras's Mountaineers, while the Keepers continue to use the Drain Power against the Double and Korras. This goes on until both the Double and Korras suffer a level of Fatigue caused by the Keepers' Drain power. At this point, Phase 3 starts.

Phase 3 (the Double and Korras are Fatigued). Read this part when the Double is fatigued due to the effect of the Drain power of the Keepers.

You feel intense pain, as if your very soul was being torn from you, and this is actually what is happening: your spirit is draining away from your body to feed the Black Flame. The strange fire blazes and roars, satisfied for a moment, then it sputters and start to fade again.

The Keepers, the guards and everyone else stop, amazed and terrified at the same time.

"You live in darkness, and darkness has blinded you!" Jimpah thunders. "You haven't seen that this man isn't Prince Ulesir? He is only a double and his soul cannot rekindle your flame! You have polluted it, and now it is going to die!"

Terror appears on the Keepers' ghastly faces!

Then, as one, they raise their amulets and point them at themselves.

"They want to feed the Flame with their own souls!" Jimpah shout. "We must kill them before they do!"

At this point, Phase 4 starts.

Phase 4 (The Flame is Going to Die). All the Keepers are automatically Shaken and from now on they receive an individual Action Card. During their action, they use their Feed the Flame Special Ability. If within four rounds they manage to feed the Black Flame with at least seven levels of Fatigue, they die but the Flame keeps burning. At the start of the next round 15 Monastery Guards will storm into the room and, seeing their masters dead, they will try to butcher Korras and any surviving hero.

If the Keepers don't manage to Feed the Flame with enough energy within the four-round limit, the heroes win. Go to The End.

(M) Monastery Guards (1 per hero + 2): See page 62.

(M) Mountaineer Warriors (1 per hero): They are Korras' personal bodyguards. Raise Fighting to d8. See page 63.

(WC) Korras (1): See page 62.

(WC) Karmella (1): Use the Commoner stats. Add the Very Attractive and Noble Edges. See page 59.

(WC) Keepers of the Black Flame (1 per hero): See page 63.

TERRAIN AND PROPS

• **Black Flame:** The Black Flame is a weird anomaly in this world. It resembles a normal flame but it is perfectly black and burns without any fuel, except the souls

that the Keepers throw into it. Any character who physically touches the flame suffers 2d10 damage due to intense cold. This damage ignores any type of non-magical armor. A Small Burst Template can be used to represent the Flame on the battlefield.

• **Balcony:** The balcony counts as Light Cover (+2 Toughness) from ranged attacks. A hero can reach the balcony without using the stairs with a single Climbing roll (which costs him 4" of Pace).

THE END

When the last Keeper is dispatched, the Black Flame shrinks becoming, if possible, even blacker.

"Let's go!" Jimpah shouts, and you are more than ready to do so.

You have barely left the room and you are running down the corridors as fast as you can when the Black Flame explodes. You sense a sort of black wave passing through walls and solid objects as if through air. Strangely, you feel nothing.

The characters are shrouded in unpleasant darkness for a few moments, but they aren't truly affected by the wave. However, the true believers of the Black Flame (the other monks, the monk guards and the Mountaineers) suffer different consequences: they become blind, as if the terrible obscurity of the Flame had found shelter in their minds and eyes.

Suddenly all your enemies start moaning and crying desperately:

"Help me! Help me! I am blind! I am blind!" This is the call you hear from everyone you meet.

In the meantime, the bats fly around wildly.

"Let's leave this cursed place!" Jimpah urges you.

The heroes, Jimpah and Karmella leave the mountains and travel back to the waterfall. The funny thing is that Karmella really starts liking the Double, now she knows he isn't the man she has to marry.

When you reach the Rusty Lake, you see a cloud of dust in the distance. It is a small army coming from Shan'Ammar. Prince Ulesir leads it... well, he is actually in a little well protected van surrounded by his most trusted guards.

When the vanguard of the small army meets you, you are hastily sent to the Prince. Many soldiers watch in amazement as the exact double of their lord stands, dirty and battered, in front of them.

Prince Ulesir, seated in his heavily protected litter, shows in his sophisticated way the concern he feels for his wife's safety: "My dear, when Marduk sent a message bird to say you were in the hands of that evil brute, I had to do something! I gathered my soldiers and rushed to save you." He adds in an affected tone, before continuing. "I am happy these brave men saved your life and they will be greatly rewarded. Now, my wife, take your seat by my side." Ulesir points at a decorated litter next to his."

Karmella sighs and then, ragged and dirty as she is, she climbs into her rightful place.

"My dear, you might want to take a bath before joining me for the dinner!" adds her husband, with a slightly disgusted face.

The heroes will be rewarded handsomely (Ulesir can be persuaded to give each of them double the sum agreed before: 2,000 Moons), but they will also be asked to leave quickly. Tokarim is recovering from his illness and a second army, led by his generals, is approaching. Prince Ulesir doesn't want anyone asking embarrassing questions about someone who looks just like him...

CREATURES AND NPCs

AMAZON

A trained warrior-woman from Ascaia, the Amazons' Island. It isn't uncommon for the Amazons to be hired as mercenaries, because they are known to be very skilled and absolutely loyal. Ulesir Shah has hired a goodly number of them and has also paid for the use of the Blue Arrow, an Amazon Hawk Ship. This Amazon is part of its crew.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d6

Skills: Boating d8, Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Intimidation d4, Notice d6, Riding d6, Shooting d8, Throwing d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7/8; **Toughness:** 7(2)

Edges: Amazon, Combat Reflexes.

Hindrances: Code of Honor (Amazons), Loyal.

Gear: Short bronze sword (Str+d6), medium armor (+2), feathered helm (+2,

head only), spear (Str+d6, used one handed), medium shield (+1 Parry, +2 Toughness vs. ranged weapons), bow (Damage: 2d6, Range: 12/24/48, RoF: 1).

BAT HOUND

This very rare creature, similar to a big dog with a bat-like head, lives only in the deepest caves of the Iron Mountains. If taken from its den as a pup and properly trained, it can become a very faithful guard.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6 (A), Spirit d10, Strength d10, Vigor d10

Skills: Fighting d10, Notice d8, Stealth d10.

Pace: 7; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 9

Special Abilities

- **Bite or Claw:** Str+d6.
- **Iron Jaws:** A Bat Hound that manages to bite its opponent lets go only when its victim is dead. If the Bat Hound scores a raise in the Fighting attack, it has managed to catch its opponent in the deadly grip of its jaws. The opponent counts as Grappled and suffers Str+d6 damage each round until he manages to free himself. A Bat Hound cannot use this ability in combination with Pounce.
- **Pounce:** Bat Hounds often pounce on their prey to best bring their mass to bear. They can leap 1d4" to gain +4 to their attack and damage. Their Parry is reduced by -2 until their next action when performing the maneuver however.
- **Radar Vision:** Bat Hounds ignore penalties for all types of light.
- **Size +2:** This specimen weighs over 400 pounds.
- **Weakness (Light):** Bat Hounds are very sensitive to light. Normal light conditions cause them severe discomfort (-2 to all trait rolls), and light based Tricks gain a bonus of +2 against them.



BLACK FLAME ASSASSIN

This evil monk has trained for many years in the deadly arts of assassination. He is fanatically loyal to the Keepers of the Black Flame and will do anything in his power to accomplish his task: drain the soul of Ulesir Shah, so that it can be used to feed the Flame.

Obscure Powers. The Assassin is a monk trained in the Obscurement, a doctrine just like that of the Enlightenment but with opposite philosophical motivations.

Stone Amulet. This strange artifact, crafted with a technique known only to Keepers of the Black Flame, drains the spiritual essence of an individual, killing him and storing his soul until it is fed to the Black Flame. It must be "attuned" to the person on which is need to be used ("the Chosen Victim"). In this story, its power works only against Ulesir Shah (and in limited ways on his Double, given the great physical resemblance).

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d8, Spirit d10, Strength d8, Vigor d10

Skills: Climbing d8, Fighting d10, Intimidation d8, Knowledge (Arcana) d6, Knowledge (Religion) d6, Notice d8, Obscurement d10, Stealth d8.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 7

Edges: Arcane Background (Obscurement), Power Points, Improved Martial Artist, Monk (militant), New Power, Thief.

Hindrances: Death Wish, Loyal.

Powers [20 PP]: *deflection* (swift moves), *smite* (deadly touch).

Gear: black robes, stone amulet.

Special abilities:

- **Stone Amulet – Paralyze:** When he sees the amulet, the Chosen Victim must make

an immediate Spirit (-4) roll or be paralyzed (Shaken). Paralyzed characters cannot move. Rolls to recover from Shaken suffer -4. Once recovered from this effect, the Victim becomes immune to it.

• **Stone Amulet – Soul Leech:** The wielder of the amulet, with an opposed Spirit roll, can try to steal the soul of the Chosen Victim. If the Victim loses the opposed roll, he gains a level of Fatigue (a part of his soul is actually sucked into the amulet). If Incapacitated in this manner, the Chosen Victim dies in a number of rounds equal to his Spirit die. Only destroying the amulet (Toughness 6) allows him to recover the Fatigue (at the rate of one level of Fatigue each round). This power works within 6" of the Chosen Victim.

• **Immolation in the Black Flame:** Thanks to a powerful meditation technique, the Keepers of the Black Flame can witness an assassination attempt through the eyes of the Assassin himself, and they won't allow him to be captured alive, if things go bad. When the Assassin is Incapacitated, with their powers they automatically snatch away his soul, killing him on the spot.



CASSANDRA, AMAZON CAPTAIN

This beautiful, black-haired woman is the commander of the Amazons Ulesir Shah has hired. She is also the captain of the Blue Arrow. Despite being very professional, she has mixed feelings toward men and never wants things to become too close and personal with them.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Boating d8, Climbing d8, Fighting d8, Intimidation d6, Knowledge (Battle)

d8, Notice d6, Riding d6, Shooting d8, Throwing d8.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 8/9; **Toughness:** 8(2)

Edges: Amazon, Armor Use, Block, Combat Reflexes, Command, Hold the Line!

Hindrances: Code of Honor (Amazons), Loyal.

Gear: Bronze broadsword (Str+d8), medium armor (+1), feathered helm (+2, head only), spear (Str+d6, used one handed), medium shield (+1 Parry, +2 Toughness vs. ranged weapons), bow (Damage: 2d6, Range: 12/24/48, RoF: 1).

COMMONER

A common person. You can tweak the stats to represent a specific individual.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d6, Vigor d6

Skills: Fighting d4, Knowledge (specific trade) d6, Notice d4.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 4; **Toughness:** 5

Gear: Improvised weapon (Str+d4, -2 Fighting rolls).

CHARMED SNAKES

These poisonous cobras, natives of the desert, are particularly sensitive to music. This is why they are captured to be used by snake charmers all over Ekul.

Attributes: Agility d10, Smarts d4 (A), Spirit d6, Strength d4, Vigor d6

Skills: Fighting d6, Notice d4.

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 3

Special abilities:

• **Fast Reactions:** A Charmed Snake attacks targets with incredible speed. It is considered as having the First Strike Edge.

• **Poison:** Charmed Snakes are usually partly drained of their venom, so their victims don't die on the spot. Any character bitten by such a creature must make a Vigor -2 roll or suffer a level of Fatigue. Multiple levels of Fatigue can lead to Exhaustion and, eventually, death.

• **Quick:** Charmed Snakes can discard any action card below 5 and draw another, but they must keep the second one.

• **Size -2:** They are quite long, but also very thin.

• **Small:** Attacks against Charmed Snakes have a -2 modifier.

GONG RINGER

This hideous man — if you can call him a man — surely has Nandal blood in his veins. Larger than any normal person, only he has the strength to use the huge mace needed to sound the Monastery's gong, a task he trained for since infancy and which is the very center of his existence. For some strange reason, he has a single eye in his forehead. Nobody knows if this monstrosity is human or the offspring of some deranged pre-human race. The Gong Ringer cannot speak, because his tongue was cut out when he was a child.

Monastery Servant: The Gong Ringer is a Henchman.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d12+2, Vigor d10

Skills: Fighting d8, Intimidation d8, Notice d6.

Charisma: -2; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 10

Edges: Improved Nerves of Steel, Sweep.

Hindrances: Loyal, Ugly.

Gear: Huge bronze mace (St+d10, 2 hands, -1 Parry, AP 2).

Special abilities:

• **Scary Face:** The one eyed face of the Gong Ringer is so hideous that it causes a

Fear Check to everyone who sees him for the first time. • **Size +3:** The Gong Ringer is three times the size of a normal man.



GRAY FOX

This burly Mountaineer warrior is a braggart who is trying to make a name for himself among his people. He owes his name to his famous gray fox cloak, about which many stories are told.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d10

Skills: Boating d4, Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Notice d4, Survival d4, Shooting d6, Taunting d10, Throwing d6.

Charisma: -2 ; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 8 (1)

Edges: Command, Distract, Loincloth Hero, Sweep.

Hindrances: Arrogant.

Gear: Bronze battle axe (Str+d8), bone dagger (Str+d4), shield (+1 Parry, +2 Toughness vs. ranged attacks), Gray Fox cloak (+1, see notes).

Special abilities:

• **Gray Fox Cloak:** This cloak, which also includes a hood shaped like a fox's head, has been used continually by Gray Fox for the last five years and so it is rather worn. It grants +1 Armor without preventing the use of the Loincloth Hero Edge. On the flipside, it smells quite strongly and wearing it causes -2 Charisma, due to its constant stench. It is considered a Relic.

• **Mountain People:** The Mountaineers are said to have goats' blood in their veins. For this reason, they don't consider slopes and mountain terrain Difficult Ground and receive +1 to Climbing rolls.



JIMPAH

Jimpah is a plump, pleasant Jade-man in his fifties. Born in Ekul to a family of Lhoban immigrants, he returned to his native country to be educated in the City of Clouds. Despite his harmless appearance, Jimpah is a very powerful Enlightened One and a trusted counselor of King Eku of Ekul. Jimpah has long been troubled by the elusive Keepers of the Black Flame, but has not yet managed to find their secret hideout. Now, he has the opportunity to find them and wipe them out once and for all.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d8, Spirit d10, Strength d6, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d8, Healing d8, Enlightenment d10, Knowledge (Religion) d8, Notice d8, Persuasion d8, Riding d6, Stealth d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 5; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 6

Edges: Arcane Background (Enlightenment), Healer, New Power (x2), Philosopher, Power Points (x2).

Hindrances: Obese, Vow (destroy the Keepers of the Black Flame).

Powers [25]: *Boost trait* (meditation), *deflection* (supernatural perception), *fly* (heroic jumps).

Gear: Whispering staff (Str+d4, 2 hands, +1 Parry, Monk Weapon, see the *Beasts and Barbarians* Golden Edition), plain robes, 2 Green Lotus of Regeneration potions (imbued with the *healing* Power).



JIRRO, MAQUEN OF TELUK AMMAR

This tall Valk warrior is the nephew of the Shah of Teluk'Ammar and general of the city's cavalry. He has earned his rank not because of his noble birth but thanks to his prowess and courage. Somber and at times

even grim, he loves Karmella, daughter of the Shah and his cousin, whom he wants to marry despite his uncle's opposition.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d10, Notice d6, Riding d10, Survival d4, Shooting d6, Taunting d6, Throwing d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 7 (1)

Edges: Block, Born in the Saddle, Command, Combat Reflexes, First Strike, Natural Leader.

Hindrances: Loyal, Stubborn.

Gear: Bronze Long Sword (Str+d8), shield (+1 Parry, +2 vs. ranged attacks), dagger (Str+d4), Valk composite bow (Range: 15/30/60, Damage: 2d6+1, AP 1), medium armor (+2).

JIRRO'S SOLDIER

An average warrior serving under Jirro, Maquen of Teluk'Ammar.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d4, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d6

Skills: Fighting d6, Notice d4, Riding d8, Shooting d6, Taunting d4, Throwing d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5/6; **Toughness:** 6 (1)

Gear: Bronze short sword (Str+d6), dagger (Str+d4), Valk Composite Bow (Range: 15/30/60, Damage: 2d6+1, AP 1), light boiled leather armor (+1), shield (+1 Parry, +2 vs. ranged attacks).

JIRRO'S TRUSTED SWORD

This Valk warrior has ridden, fought, eaten, and drunk with Jirro and is absolutely loyal to him. He has sworn a blood oath to protect Jirro's life and is more than ready to fulfill it. He is a Right Hand.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d8, Notice d6, Riding d10, Survival d4, Shooting d6, Taunting d6, Throwing d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 7 (1)

Edges: Block, Combat Reflexes.

Hindrances: Loyal.

Gear: Bronze short sword (Str+d6), dagger (Str+d4), Valk composite bow (Range: 15/30/60, Damage: 2d6+1, AP 1), light boiled leather armor (+1).

Special abilities:

• **Trusted Sword:** A Trusted Sword uses the Fanatics setting rule, but only to protect Jirro. If by doing so the Trusted Sword dies, Jirro and all the other Trusted Swords gain +1 to damage rolls till the end of the next round.



KORRAS

Korras is the evil half-brother of Prince Ulesir. A strong warrior and a very ambitious man, he will do anything to achieve power, including siding with the evil Keepers of the Black Flame. Korras has a long scar on his face, which he got while he was held prisoner in Shan'Ammar's dungeons — one more thing Ulesir must pay for.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Boating d4, Climbing d6, Fighting d10, Knowledge (battle) d6, Notice d6, Stealth d6, Streetwise d6, Survival d6, Shooting d6, Throwing d6.

Charisma: -6; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 8; **Toughness:** 10 (3)

Edges: Armor Use, Brawny, Brute, Command, Frenzy, Noble.

Hindrances: Arrogant, Bloodthirsty, Ugly.

Gear: Bronze Heavy armor (+3), bronze long sword (Str+d8), dagger (Str+d4), small shield (+1).

Special abilities:

• **Mountain People:** The Mountaineers are said to have goats' blood in their veins. For this reason, they don't consider slopes and mountain terrain Difficult Ground and receive +1 to Climbing rolls.

LHOBAN SAILOR

These Jademen are members of the crew of the Sung Pa, a Lhoban mercantile ship. They are in Shan'Ammar to deliver some cargo and to carouse a little, of course.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d4, Spirit d6, Strength d6, Vigor d6

Skills: Boating d6, Climbing d8, Fighting d6, Intimidation d4, Notice d4, Throwing d4.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5/6; **Toughness:** 5

Edges: Acrobat or Martial Artist.

Gear: Lhoban knife (Str+d4, AP 1).

MONASTERY GUARD

This Mountaineer warrior received additional training in the Monastery of Shadows, which turned him into a fanatically loyal minion. His only allegiance now is to the Black Flame.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Boating d4, Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Notice d8, Survival d4, Shooting d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 8(2)

Edges: Block, Combat Reflexes

Hindrances: Loyal.

Gear: Polearm (Str+d8, 2 hands, Reach: 2), medium armor (+2), bow (Damage: 2d6, Range: 12/24/48).

Special abilities:

• **Monastery Trained:** The Monastery Guard is fully trained in exotic fighting techniques. So, when he scores a raise on the Fighting roll, he rolls d8 instead of d6 additional damage.

MOUNTAINEER WARRIOR

A savage fighter of the southern Iron Mountains. He is fiercely independent and respects nobody, except his own chief, Korras and the Keepers of the Black Flame.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d4, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d6

Skills: Boating d4, Climbing d6, Fighting d6, Notice d4, Survival d4, Shooting d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 6/7; **Toughness:** 6(1)

Edges: Brute

Hindrances: Arrogant.

Gear: Bronze curved short sword (Str+d6), bone dagger (Str+d4), shield (+1 Parry, +2 Toughness vs. ranged attacks), furs (+1), bow (Damage: 2d6, Range: 12/24/48).

Special abilities:

• **Mountain People:** The Mountaineers are said to have goats' blood in their veins. For this reason, they don't consider slopes and mountain terrain Difficult Ground and receive +1 to Climbing rolls.

NOVICE OF THE BLACK FLAME

This young monk has not yet completed his training. Though he lacks the impressive skills of his masters, the Elders, he is a vicious fighter nonetheless.

Obscure Powers. The Novice is a monk trained in the Obscurement, a doctrine just like that of the Enlightenment but with opposite philosophical motivations.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d6, Vigor d6

Skills: Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Notice d6, Knowledge (religion) d6, Obscurement d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 5

Edges: Arcane background (Obscurement), Martial Artist.

Hindrances: Loyal.

Powers [5 PP]: *boost trait* (eyes become entirely black).

Gear: monk vest.

Special abilities:

• **Monastery Trained:** The Novice is fully trained in exotic fighting techniques. So, when he scores a raise on the Fighting roll, he rolls d8 instead of d6 additional damage.

• **Monk in Training:** The Novice isn't a fully trained monk, so he has fewer Power Points and his powers never get the additional effects of scoring a raise.



KEEPER OF THE BLACK FLAME

This evil monk is a Keeper of the Black Flame, an individual gone so far along the path of Obscurement that he can no longer be considered human. Tall and gaunt, he exists only to feed and worship the Black Flame.

Obscure Powers. The Keeper of the Black Flames is a monk trained in the Obscurement, a doctrine just like that of the Enlightenment but with opposite philosophical motivations.

Keeper's Amulet. This strange artifact, crafted with a technique known only to Keepers of the Black Flame, drains the spiritual essence of an individual and feeds it directly to the Black Flame. It works only within 24" of the Black Flame.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d8, Spirit d12, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d10, Intimidation d8, Knowledge (Arcana) d6, Knowledge (Religion) d6, Notice d6, Obscurement d12, Stealth d8.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 7

Edges: Arcane Background (Obscurement), Martial Artist, Nerves of Steel, New Power, Power Points.

Hindrances: Death Wish.

Powers [20 PP]: *boost trait* (deep concentration), *deflection* (I am not here!), *smite* (deadly touch), *obscure* (spewing darkness).

Gear: black robes, stone amulet.

Special abilities:

- **Size +1:** A Keeper of the Black Flame is almost seven feet tall, with elongated, gaunt features.

- **Keeper's Amulet – Drain:** The owner of the amulet can use it against a living being to drain away the target's soul and feed it to the Black Flame. To accomplish this, the Keeper must make an opposed Spirit roll vs. the victim. If he wins, the victim is Shaken; if he wins with a raise, the victim suffers a level of Fatigue, which cannot be recovered until the Black Flame is destroyed. Being Exhausted in this way leads to death. When two or more Keepers use this power on the same opponent in the same round, they make a single cooperative roll.

- **Keeper's Amulet – Feed the Flame:** The wielder of the amulet can willingly try to feed his own life energy to the Black Flame. To do this, he must perform a Spirit (-4) roll. In case of success, he suffers a level of Fatigue (two with a raise) that is transferred to the Black Flame (put one or two tokens on the Flame to keep track). A person Exhausted in this manner dies.



SLEEPING ONE

The real age of this man is unknown. Some say he is centuries old and dwelled in the Iron Mountains even before the construction of the Monastery of the Black Flame. Others say he came from Lhoban with the first wave of exiled disciples of the unholy doctrine of the Obscurement. Regardless of his true origins, he has followed the path of Obscurement for so long that his feelings and his spirit are no longer human. Even his fellow monks fear him and leave him alone, undisturbed in his meditations.

Obscure Powers. The Sleeping One is a monk trained in the Obscurement, a doctrine just like that of the Enlightenment but with opposite philosophical motivations.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6, Spirit d12, Strength d4, Vigor d4

Skills: Fighting d8, Notice d8, Knowledge (religion) d10, Intimidation d10, Taunt d10, Obscurement d12+1.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 5; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 4

Edges: Arcane background (Obscurement), Martial Artist, New Power (x2), Power Points (x3).

Hindrances: Elderly, Habit (likes inflicting pain and manipulating others).

Powers [30 PP]: *deflection* (I am not here!), *fly* (levitation), *puppet* (hypnotic gaze), *telekinesis* (mind over matter).

Gear: monk robes, prayer beads.

Special abilities:

- **Hallucinogen Lotus:** The powers of the Sleeping One are enhanced by the Lotus burning in the two braziers next to him. Kicking the braziers over causes the concoction to burn poorly and lose its effect. When this happens, the Obscurement of the Sleeping One drops to d8.

SWARM OF SHADOW BATS

These small, black beasts are a malevolent race of night predators, usually found only in the deepest caves. The evil power of the Black Flame has corrupted and tainted them, so that they have become an extension of the Flame itself. This is why, when the gong of the Monastery is sounded, they take flight and look for victims. Everything they kill nurtures the Black Flame hidden in the Monastery of Shadows.

Swarm: This swarm covers the area of a Medium Burst template. Each wound it suffers (or if it splits, as described below) causes the template to shrink to a Small Burst template.

Attributes: Agility d10, Smarts d4 (A), Spirit d12, Strength d6, Vigor d10

Skills: Notice d6.

Pace: 10; **Parry:** 4; **Toughness:** 7

Special Abilities

- **Flight:** Bat swarms fly at a Pace of 10 and have a Climb rate of 4.
- **Split:** This swarm is clever enough to split into two smaller flocks (Small Burst Templates) should its foes split up. The Toughness of these smaller flocks is lowered by -2 (to 5 each) and their Agility is lowered by a die step.
- **Hundreds of Bites:** A swarm of bats inflicts hundreds of tiny bites and scratches every round on its victims, automatically hitting and causing 2d4 damage to everyone caught in the template. Damage is applied to the least armored location (victims in completely sealed suits are immune).
- **Swarm:** Parry +2; as the flock includes dozens of creatures, cutting and piercing weapons deal only half the standard damage. Area-effect weapons work normally.



THE DRAGON

A bald and muscular Lhoban mariner, known for his great strength. He might not be the smartest guy around but don't tell him so if you don't want to end up with several broken bones!

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d4, Spirit d6, Strength d10, Vigor d6

Skills: Boating d6, Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Intimidation d8, Throwing d6.

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 6

Edges: Brawny, Improved Nerves of Steel, Martial Artist.

Hindrances: Clueless.

Gear: Reinforced Club (Str+d6).

VEHICLES

BLUE ARROW, AMAZON HAWK SHIP

The common Amazon warship is long, thin, and has a shallow draft, so that it can also sail in shallow waters, like rivers. The figurehead of these ships usually resembles a bird of prey and the hull is painted to look like a bird's plumage. In particular, the Blue Arrow is a very swift ship that has been through many tough battles against pirates and has earned the reputation of being a lucky vessel.

Acceleration/Top Speed: 2/16

Toughness: 15(4)

Crew: 10+15

Armaments: Small Catapult (Range: 24/48/96, Damage: 3d6, RoF: 1, SBT, Heavy Weapon, manned by two mariners).

Notes: Heavy Armor.

Special Abilities:

- **Lucky Ship:** The helmsman of the Blue Arrow can use the Helmsman Edge to soak damage to the ship even if he doesn't have the Edge, but to do so he must spend 2 Bennies for each use. Members of the crew and passengers within 12" of him can lend him their Bennies but for this purpose only.

- **Very Maneuverable:** Amazon warships are very maneuverable; they don't suffer penalties on the open sea and generally grant +1 to Boating rolls.

MOUNTAINEERS CANOE

A war canoe, manned by oarsmen.

Acceleration/Top Speed: 1/8

Toughness: 9

Crew: 5+10

HANDOUTS

HANDOUT 1 KORRAS'S LETTER

Tokarim,

*Your daughter is safe in my hands
and she will remain unharmed if you do what
I command. You have something I want: my
hated half-brother, Ulesir. Bring him to the
Anvil of the Rusty Lake on the last night of
this moon. When I am done with him, I will
be the legitimate Lord of Shan' Ammar and
ruler of all the tribes of the Mountaineers.
And I'm sure you'll consider me a worthy
husband for your daughter. Do as I order
and you'll see her again soon. Disobey, and
her soul will be given to the Black Flame.*

Korras,

Lord of Shan' Ammar

APPENDIX I

PLACES OF INTEREST

FORTIFIED VILLAGE OF THE MOUNTAINEERS

Government: Theocracy (governed by the Keepers of the Black Flame)

Ruler: Elder Monks

Population: 200 (typical population: 50)

Military Forces: 100 Mountaineer Warriors (typical military force: 10 Mountaineer Warriors)

Religion: Worship of the Black Flame

Imports: Food, metal.

Exports: Weapons, wool.

General Description. The existence of this fortified village is one of the best kept secrets in Ekul. The village is built high in the mountains of southwestern Ekul, not far from Teluk'Ammar and Shan'Ammar, two important cities of the kingdom. However, the rulers of the two cities don't even suspect that this settlement exists. The Fortified Village supplies servants, food and equipment to the Monastery of Shadows, built on a terrace some hundred yards above the village.

The most important features of the village are described below.

Walls. The village walls are six yards tall and very steep (–2 to Climbing rolls). They are built on the very edge of a natural ter-

race, making the village almost impregnable. The walls are usually patrolled by two Mountaineer Warriors (four at night).

Southern Gate. This gate is the only way to access the village from the valley. It is very sturdy, Toughness 10 (2), and usually watched by four Mountaineer Warriors.

Watchtower. A two-store building, the tallest in the village, used as an administration center. A veteran Monastery Guard is in charge here, usually with five warriors. The tower is now overcrowded, since it houses 20 warriors.

Common Hall. This low building is the village tavern. It is managed by a group of women.

Northern Path. This path is the only way to ascend from the village to the Monastery of Shadows. It is constantly guarded by a patrol of four Monastery Guards, who are ready to give their lives to prevent intruders from reaching the Monastery.

Forge. Jazgro, a muscular Mountaineer smith, and his four apprentices constantly forge swords, spears and arrow tips. The weapons are of poor quality, because they are produced hastily to equip all the Mountaineers. The forge keeps working well into the night.

Well. A stone well supplying the villagers with water. During the day many women come here.

Stables. Goats and yaks are kept in this stone building at night. At dawn, a group of herdsman takes the beasts to graze in the valley bottom, and they come back shortly before dusk.

Houses. Several stone houses where the commoners live. They are of very poor

quality, with a single room warmed by a fire of dried yak droppings. At any given moment, there are $d6-2$ people in each house.

Food Storage. This is a series of small, interconnected buildings, where provisions are stocked. Usually guarded by a single, lazy man.

Warriors' Training Ground. The central square of the village, a muddy place where the monthly market is held, has now been turned into a training ground. During the day there is always a group of $2d6$ Mountaineers who train under the supervision of a veteran member or a Monastery Guard. Any character coming here has a 1 in 6 chance of being stopped and questioned. If his answers are believable but unsatisfactory, the character might be forced to join the troops and train for a couple of hours.

Women's Quarters. The servants of the monastery practice celibacy, at least officially, so women usually live in separate houses. With the arrival of many warriors and would-be soldiers, several prostitutes have also turned up, making the women's quarters busy and overcrowded.

Brewery. This circular building in the northeastern part of the city is where goat's milk is distilled and turned into Balait, the infamous liquor the Mountaineers love so much. The Brewery is always watched by at least one Warrior.

Makeshift Barracks. Something in between barracks and tents, these eight structures can house from ten to fifteen men each. They now accommodate many of Korras' veterans as well as new supporters.

THE BOOK OF LORE: EKUL

This section expands the background information about Ekul found in *Beasts and Barbarians Golden Edition*. It is mainly addressed to the Game Master, but he can decide to share part of it with the players, especially if one of them comes from this vast land.

ABOUT THE NAME

Ekul is a made-up name. This region, before the Valk conquest, was simply called Southern Zandor, and the administrative capital of the region was called Zandora. But, when Eku, third son of Dhaar, and warlord of an impressive horde of mounted warriors, invaded the land, the citizens of Zandora, wanting to avoid the fate of other cities razed by the Valk, overthrew the local authorities and willingly offered the crown to Eku. To appease his barbaric spirit, they renamed Zandora and the whole kingdom after the new, young ruler.

Many say this is the reason for the Valk warlord's enlightened government but, as explained below, it is actually only a small part of a much more complex story.

GEOGRAPHY

Foreigners tend to consider Ekul a single, vast desert, but that isn't entirely true. Certainly, the central part of Ekul is a desert, but there are many other geographical features, described below.

THE NORTHERN GRAZELANDS

The area bordering Zandor, a strip going from the Iron Mountains to the River of Tears, is characterized by rolling hills. The spring rains turn them green with tall grass, which cows and horses are particularly fond of, and the air, in this season, fills with the scent of flowers. In the summer, the hot air from the desert is blown this far and the green grass becomes brown and golden. Cows and horses must be taken westward, to the foot of the Iron Mountains, where the grass remains fresh all year round, while sheep and goats are brought in to replace them. In the fall, great fires often start in the now totally arid pastures. Both beasts and men fear their destructive power and only the most skilled Valk shepherds can stop the cattle from causing terrible stampedes. The Valk call the fires Mek Ullah, meaning "the vengeance of a demon", and the most superstitious ones believe that they are caused because the old demonic worship has been abandoned.

Whatever the cause, these malevolent fires have been appearing much more frequently in the last few years, especially in the eastern Grazelands near the cursed city of Collana.

THE JEWELS OF EKUL

Between the Grazelands, the Black Heart Desert and the Ironshadow Lands, there is an area blessed with good climate and fertile soil. This land is called the Jewels, and the most precious gem encased in it is the city of Ekram, the capital of the kingdom. All around it, the land is characterized by low hills full of wheat fields, olive groves, and trees laden with fruit — a true blessing for the whole kingdom. The Jewels are populated by true Ekulians, who own the farms, but many Jademen from Lhoban have started settling here too. They are humble and work hard, but a few of them have become rich enough to buy the farms where they work and their power in the area is due to increase.

THE BLACK HEART DESERT

The very center of Ekul is a harsh, unforgiving, desert, dotted with ruins that are said to be the lairs of the evil Sakrha (see below).

Only very few creatures live in this cursed land, and they are mostly dangerous and hostile. For the reasons above, the majority of people avoid the desert and the main roads to reach the coast take wide detours around it, to stay away from its heat and from the infamous Black Spring, which lies at its heart.

The Black Spring is a pool, where a very dense, black liquid springs from the ground. This foul-smelling substance, called rock oil or Blood of the Demons, can be burned in lamps or used for similar purposes, but it is no use in quenching the thirst of travelers stranded in the desert, because it is very toxic.

The only people interested in the strange substance are the emissaries of Gis, City of Alchemists. The King of Ekram has granted them access to the Black Spring to collect a certain amount of rock oil.

Around three times a year, caravans led by veiled strangers dressed in black, the Veiled Caravaneers of Gis, travel to the Black Spring and then cross the whole of Zandor back to Jalizar where they embark the reeking liquid to its final destination, the City of Alchemists.

It is said that the Veiled Caravaneers are protected by the very magic of Gis, and no bandit, even the savage Valk of Zandor, dare assault them.

Rumor has it that near the Black Spring there is a gloomy fortress of black stone, built in a single night by the Alchemists' magic. Nobody knows if it really exists, because the Veiled Caravaneers of Gis constantly patrol the desert and quickly drive away any stranger.

Many people wonder what the Alchemists do with the oil and why it is so precious to them, but the fees paid by the Alchemists fill the royal coffers and no one wants to question this profitable trading relationship. A fact that very few people know is that the Alchemists of Gis not only pay in gold but also supply the kingdom with the Ghostly Flame, the substance burned on the guarding pillars around Collana (see page 83).

THE IRONSHADOW LANDS

The Ironshadow River starts among the highest peaks of the Iron Mountains and separates western Ekul from the rest of the country. Most of it is navigable, and the lands around are generally fertile, also

thanks to regular floods that leave a thick layer of very fertile mud on the fields. However, this area is not as developed as one might expect. The floods of the Ironshadow tend to be unpredictable and dangerous, and many small cities have been destroyed during such events. Moreover, the Iron Mountains are populated by rebellious tribes of Mountaineers. They are part Kyrosian and part Eku mountain men but many believe there is also Nandal blood in their veins. These barbarians have never fully accepted the authority of the king, and periodically rebel. So, in the Ironshadow Lands there are medium sized cities, governed by strong dynasties, capable of controlling only the lands just around the main settlement. Shan'Ammar and Teluk'Ammar are two of the biggest cities in the region, though Shan'Ammar, being on the coast, is also considered a Coastal Town (see below). Travelers are warned: if they wander into the Ironshadow Lands, they must be ready to defend their lives.

THE COAST AND THE ISLANDS

The coasts of Eku are densely populated. Dozens of settlements have been built here because the land is green and the bays ideal for mooring ships.

These cities, called Coastal Towns, are mostly inhabited by Jademen immigrants, but their rulers are old Imperial families or officers appointed by the King, with the exception of a couple of settlements now ruled by Jademen.

The Coastal Towns, except the bigger ones like Shan'Ammar, do not profit from the trade between Kyros and Lhoban. With the decadence of the Iron Empire, the Lhoban merchants no longer use the Im-

perial Route through Zandor, preferring more direct routes through less dangerous lands.

So, the Coastal Towns have concentrated on fishing and farming and many canals have been built. These canals, unlike those in Tricarnia, contain seawater, which can be used only to grow certain water plants, especially salted watermelons (see below), and to harvest crabs, mussels, and other seafood, which the immigrants from Lhobanport are fond of.

The islands in front of the Coastal Towns are verdant and wild, and populated by tribes of primitive men, some dangerous, others peaceful. Today, however, they serve as bases for the pirates to launch attacks on the fleets sailing along the trade routes. The King of Kyros, the madman Ganymedes II, has recently made an official complaint to King Eku, saying that the pirates must be eliminated and insinuating that Eku actually supports them, an accusation which the son of Dhaar has disdainfully dismissed.

FLORA AND FAUNA

Eku being quite a diverse environment, every region has its own animal and vegetable species. The most peculiar ones are detailed below.

THE NORTHERN GRAZELANDS

The Grazelands are renowned for their fresh grass, excellent for cows, horses and other grazing beasts. This land has very few trees but plenty of tubers and other

root plants, many of which are edible. There are also flowers of many types, from giant sunflowers to the Cavalry Bugler, a creeper that chokes all the other plants and is poisonous to horses. The Valk weed it out as soon as they see it, but the Ekulians appreciate it because with its nectar the local bees produce very tasty honey.

Bees are very common in the Grazelands, from very small ones to the feared Striped Soldiers, as big as dogs and equipped with an impressive sting. Luckily, they are usually peaceful, unless threatened.

Two creatures of the Grazelands deserve further attention: the Horsesucker and the Uakawa.

The Horsesucker is more of a legend than a real creature. In summer, horses, cows and other beasts are sometimes found dead with round punctures, the size of a coin, on their neck. The killer is said to be the infamous Horsesucker, as big as a pony and with a long snout ending in a suckers. The Horsesucker is a carnivore that feeds almost exclusively on blood. It can imitate the whinny of a horse and the mooing of a cow with great skill to lure its prey. When the unfortunate beast is close enough to see the Horsesucker's watery eyes, it is paralyzed by its gaze. At this point, the predator wraps its snout around the beast's neck and drains its blood.

No one has ever actually seen a Horsesucker, but the legend is widespread throughout the Grazelands. In addition, lone herders have also been found dead, their neck bearing the typical punctures of the Horsesucker.

The Uakawa, instead, is very real. It is similar to a marmot but larger (maximum three feet long) and much furrrier. It can walk on both four and two legs and has

almost humanlike hands with four fingers and an opposable thumb. Plus, the Uakawa can actually speak. Among themselves they use a language made of whistles and many gestures but they are able to speak human tongues too.

The Uakawas live in large families, from ten to a hundred individuals. They dwell underground but come out to look for food (especially tubers) and sleep in the sun, which they enjoy a lot. When a clan is out in the open, one specimen always keeps watch. If it sees a threat, it lets out a long whistle, and soon the whole clan disappears underground. The extent of their tunnels is unknown but they certainly

HERO'S JOURNAL: HOW THE UAKAWA LEARNED TO SPEAK

There are many legends about how the Uakawa learned to speak. The most popular one says that one day a wandering monk from Lhoban, called Ton Pa, climbed a tall stone in the middle of the Grazelands to meditate. He remained in meditation, absolutely still, for many days, and the curious Uakawas came to visit him. The little beasts, fearing for the holy man's health, brought him tubers and other plants to eat. To show his gratitude, the Enlightened one started speaking to them, especially their young ones, particularly the bold and playful ones. One day, Ton Pa spoke some words in the ear of a youngling and the beast, to his great surprise, answered him in his tongue!

From that day on the Uakawas spoke human tongues. The monks have great respect for them and say that they have gone further than many men along the Path of the Enlightenment.

branch out far, some say as far as the Black Heart Desert.

The Uakawas are very shy and, when they see humans, they usually flee. The reason is simple: they are mercilessly hunted for

their thick fur, especially by the Valk, who also consider their meat a delicacy. So, the Uakawas often dig small holes in the ground and cover them with grass, as traps to break the Valk horses' legs.

In some cases the Uakawas enjoy peaceful relationships with men, especially wandering monks (see sidebar) and a few Ekulian herders. These people say the Uakawas are a primitive but very intelligent race, with a complex social structure. Moreover, all the Grazelands dwellers know that the Uakawas can smell fire from miles away. When they do, they emit a peculiar whistle that can be heard all around and helps save both the people and their cattle.

A DISTURBING HYPOTHESIS

Justinus the Red, wandering painter and Syranthian Sage, spent much time at the court of King Eku. His studies eventually led him to make an incredible hypothesis, revealed in this passage from a letter sent to his mentor, Velastios of Syranthia:

"...finally the pieces of the mosaic are falling into place and all thanks to my attentive eye.

First, a few months after our terrible adventure with the Sakrhas, I remembered while they looked so familiar. They have the same physical frame as the Ukarwa, the intelligent animals of the Grazeland. They even speak a similar language and have four digits, of course.

Second, about the thumbs: I noticed that a local deity of unknown origin, Yallara of the Many Faces, is depicted with the same physical feature. Strange fact, isn't it?

Third, during our unwilling exploration of the ruins in the Black Heart Desert I made some sketches of paintings, statues and other forms of art around. Well, they are the same as the ones found in the Land of Idols, hundreds of miles south of here!

This supports my supposition of a great, pre-human civilization spanning this whole area in an unrecorded past and..."

Unluckily the fragment stops here, and the rest of the scroll is unreadable.

THE BLACK HEART DESERT

The Black Heart Desert hosts very few forms of life. Plants are almost unknown in this land, except some cactuses and very deep tubers.

As for animals, besides many types of snakes, the most fabled beast of the Black Heart Desert is the Stone Lizard, a forty-foot-long reptile with a very unpredictable temper. Like chameleons, the Stone Lizard can change color and blend in perfectly with the scarred landscape. When a prey, such as a desert mouse or even a coyote, approaches, the Stone Lizard extends its three-yard-long tongue and snatches it. Some specimens are big enough to attack men, but luckily they are quite rare.

Another beast typical of the Black Heart Desert is the dromedary, similar to a camel but with a single hump. The people forced to cross the desert and the Veiled Caravaneers use it as their mount. It is docile and able to withstand the harsh climate. The legends say the dromedary was

originally a horse. Then, a holy man coming from Lhoban used it to travel in the desert. The horse, exhausted by the weight of the monk, developed a big hump on its back and complained loudly with its rider. To repay the beast for its effort, the monk touched the hump, which became full of water and fat making it able to go without eating and drinking for many weeks.

Another peculiar creature of the Black Heart Desert is the Sakrha. It is not an animal but a short humanoid, four feet tall, usually dressed in rags and speaking a weird hissing language. Under their rags, the Sakrhas have piebald, gray skin and red eyes, and they are hideous to look upon. They have no real digits but four strong stumped claws. The Sakrhas loathe the sunlight and live in the ruins dotting the desert. Some say that under the ruins there is a huge network of passages, linked even to the sewers of Ekul. It might be just a legend, but the Sakrhas are sometimes seen, mixed with other beggars, in the poorest areas of the capital. They are petty thieves and occasionally sell strange artifacts and old stone tablets coming from their desert ruins. They are very attracted to human women, especially white-skinned ones, and sometimes kidnap or buy an unfortunate girl, who disappears forever in the dark mazes below the desert...

THE COASTS AND THE ISLANDS

The Coasts host many forms of marine life, some originally from here, others imported from Lhoban by the immigrants.

With regard to plants, one of the most important is the previously-mentioned Salt Watermelon. It is a giant lily from the Lhobanport area that produces floating

fruits similar to melons. These vegetables keep for months and are rather salty, because the plants filter the seawater and concentrate the salt in their fruits, while the desalinized water is stored in their leaves. The leaves are collected and the water squeezed out of them is used for irrigation. Collecting the leaves is heavy work, usually performed by the humblest Jademen.

Moving on to animals, one of the best known is the Gladiator Crab, which can reach the size of a small cart. Its tender meat is delicious and its thick carapace is used to craft light and durable weapons and armor. The Gladiator Crab is also famed for its bad temper. It is a vicious beast and with its pincers it can sever a man's limb. If an egg is hatched in captivity, the newborn Crab can actually be tamed. A tamed Gladiator Crab can be sold to the arenas at a very high price and it is a very nasty customer for any gladiator because it is extremely skilled in parrying blows. Wild Gladiator Crabs, instead, are made to fight in the arenas and illegal fighting pens of the Jade Fingers, but they are much easier to defeat if one knows where to hit them.

Among the imported animals, the Spined Eel is a curious crossbreed between a giant eel and a pike fish, which can grow to three yards long. The Spined Eel is a voracious predator; it eats anything, from small fish and water lily roots to people fishing for mussels. The first specimens were imported by the Jade Fingers, who threw them into people's fish farms to "persuade" them to pay for protection. Having no other predator than man, the Eels multiplied and started destroying the local fishing economy.

POPULATION

In no other country do people of such different origins and races live together in relative peace. This is particularly true during the enlightened reign of king Eku, but it has been a recurring feature in Ekulian history. The locals have survived countless invasions and wars by simply assimilating strangers among them. They did it with the Zandorians in ancient times, with the Imperials later, and with the Valk less than a century ago.

This is why Eku is generally known as the “Land of Integration”.

EKULIANS

Defining who the “true” Ekulians are is difficult, because this race is now a mix of very different bloodlines and traditions integrated into a pre-existing base. The typical Ekulian is of average height and build, with pale complexion that tans rather easily when exposed to sunlight and, for some reason, rarely gets sunburned. They tend to have jet-black to dark brown hair and harmonious bodies. The men usually sport neatly trimmed beards, while the elders have very long, tidy beards. They use a variety of garments, depending on their profession; the most common materials are cotton and leather as well as wool imported from Lhoban. Ekulian women are rather beautiful, and a common compliment to girls in the Dread Sea Dominions is: “You have the eyes of an Ekulian woman.” In fact, they have very beautiful eyes, enhanced by a special type of make-up called Silverwater. Ekulians are quite protective toward their daughters and wives, and the women usually wear a headscarf in public. If you “accidentally” see a young

woman unveiled, it means she expects you to court her.

JADEMEN

The Jademen represent the second biggest ethnic group in Eku. In certain areas, for example the Coastal Towns, they almost outnumber the true Ekulians and the other races. There are two types of Jademen in Eku, the Children of the Two Suns and the Waterbringers.

This is more of a cultural division than a racial one, but it deeply reflects the two groups’ mentalities and customs. The Children of the Two Suns are immigrants come to Eku from Lhoban looking for work, but they plan, sooner or later, to return to their own country. They work very hard and send all their money back to their families in Lhoban. They never truly integrate into local society, and often speak no other language than Lhobanite. This is why many of them fall prey of the Jade Fingers or other criminal organizations that exploit them as cheap laborers. The Children of the Two Suns usually live in enclaves, sometimes occupying large neighborhoods in the major cities. They eat Lhoban food, marry Lhoban women and actually live as if they were still in Lhoban. The greatest concern of a Child of the Two Suns is to gather enough money to pay for his body to be transported back to Lhoban and receive a proper burial. These burial transfers are a huge business, almost completely in the hands of the Jade Fingers.

The Waterbringers, instead, left Lhoban to start a new life abroad. No work is too humble for them and they often start their career as Waterbringers, carrying huge buckets full of water from the rivers to the cultivations in the Jewels or working

as mussel farmers in the channels of the Coastal Cities. But, through their hard work, they soon achieve a better economic position and many of them are even rich. A Waterbringer speaks the Ekulian dialect very well, dresses and behaves like real Ekulians, and his main goal is to integrate himself into the new society, perhaps even marrying someone who is not of the Jademen. Many Waterbringers become influential but they seldom take part in political life, preferring to act through Ekulian intermediaries. They do so because they do not want to attract the unwelcome attention of the Jade Fingers and also because they come from a land where political power is traditionally held by monks with little participation by the masses.

The Ekulian Jademen look no different from the ones described in the *Golden Edition*. The only noticeable difference is that the Children of the Two Suns dress and behave like true Lhobanites, while the Waterbringers dress and behave like the Ekulians.

CIVILIZED VALK

The Valk were the last to arrive in Eku, and did so as conquerors. Thirty nine years have passed from the coronation of Eku as King of Eku, and the two new generations of Valk born in Eku are very different from their ancestors. From a completely nomadic race, they have become semi-nomadic. Knowing the nature of his own people, King Eku has given them vast lands in the Northern Grazelands, where the Valk clans can lead their customary life. In this way, he has achieved two goals: creating a defense against the savage Valks of Zandor, and keeping his own rapacious followers away from the peaceful Ekulians and Jademen of the southern lands. The nomadic Valk soon

THE JADE FINGERS

The Jade Fingers is an outlaw organization, whose members are almost all Jademen. For centuries, it has managed all criminal activities in Lhoban and it has branched out into any land where Jademen are present.

Organized in families, the Jade Fingers get their name from the nasty habit of severing the last phalanx of their subjects' fingers if displeased with their behavior. Then, the missing parts are replaced with cleverly made jade replicas. Their leaders, called the Honorable Men, get their revenues from blackmailing, prostitution, the slave trade, Lotus smuggling, and a vast array of other criminal activities, including illegal emigration from Lhoban to Eku. Honest Jademen fear the Jade Fingers and will do anything to avoid their rage. Some say that the Jade Fingers are also behind the acts of piracy in the Brown Sea.

started to build encampments to be used in the winter and, mainly through marriage, they have developed strong bonds with Ekulian citizens and farming communities. So, during the winter they stay in the town but, when spring comes, they roam the Grazelands with their big herds. This has caused a slow transition in eating habits, clothing, and general customs.

But the greatest change in Valk culture is caused by the Sharp Knife Law, King Eku's decision to banish all the Valkyrie from Eku, under threat of death.

Without the terrible demon worshipping women in charge (and given the excellent quality of life in the Grazelands which has made the clans prosperous), the warlike disposition of the Valk has greatly diminished. They are still a warlike culture, but

the open disdain for other civilization has turned into cautious curiosity and, in certain cases, tacit acceptance of new, better customs. King Eku has managed to persuade the Valk, or at least some of them, that they are the guardians of this land and their task is to protect their civilized and less warlike wives and sons: "We are the shepherds, and our task is to protect the herds" King Eku always says to his war chiefs.

Naturally not all the Valk are happy with the new situation. Some, especially the old warriors who still remember the bloodbaths of the Dhaar era, sadly say: "We came to this country for women as elegant as horses, and we get horses as elegant as women."

The horses of the civilized Valk, in fact, are now quite different from their traditional ponies, and this is a clear sign of how their way of life has changed. Through crossbreeding, they have become taller, stronger and more elegant than the steppe ponies, but what they have acquired in sheer force, they have lost in endurance. In a few generations these new breeds of horses will not be able to bear the harshness of nomadic life and the Valk of Eku will be at a disadvantage if they ever have to face their Zandorian cousins.

Physically, the new generations of Valk are slightly different from the common Valk. They are a little taller and heavier and their new eating habits have made them stronger. But this is a mixed blessing, since a heavier man tires his horse faster. They have almost abandoned the tradition of self-inflicted scars on the face and many have grown beards. They still like leather garments, but many now use cotton and wool, softer and warmer. In addition, their armor has come to include a lot more

metal than before and their swords are longer and heavier.

IMPERIALS AND ZANDORIANS

Today these two ethnic groups are a minority in Eku, but they are still very powerful and influential. Zandorians and Imperials are descendants of the bureaucrats leading the Iron Empire when it was at its most powerful. Yasmine, Eku's beloved wife, was herself the daughter of the old Imperial Governor at the time when Eku was only a province of the Empire.

The Imperial and Zandorian families of bureaucrats and nobles were competent in their task of ruling the various cities and regions of the empire, and this is why King Eku left most of them in their place. Nevertheless, he forced these families to have their daughters married to Valk chiefs faithful to the crown and their sons to Valk princesses, so that their influential fathers-in-law would protect their possessions. It might seem a strange way to integrate the Valk into the pre-existing structure, but it has worked very well: for the Valk the concept of family and clan is very important, and protecting a son-in-law's possessions is a natural behavior for the savage warlords.

MOUNTAINEERS

The Ekulians use this term to refer to the mixed clans of semi-barbaric people who live in the southern Iron Mountains, near the Ironshadow Lands. The Mountaineers descend from Ekulians and Kyrosians and, if some ancient tomes in the Library of Syranthia tell the truth, they also have some Nandal blood in their veins. The Mountaineers live in fiercely independent clans and have always refused to accept

the authority of the King of Eku. Nobody knows their exact numbers, because they live in scattered villages and mountain caves. The various tribes often fight one another and only when a charismatic chief manages to unite them (which happens every 25 years or so) do they become a real threat.

It is rumored that a mysterious order of evil monks coming from Lhoban has managed to impose its rule over the clans, and this will certainly cause serious trouble in the Ironshadow Lands.

RELIGION

Eku is very tolerant on religious matters. Anyone can follow their own religion, with a single exception, detailed in the Sharp Knife Law sidebar.

The Zandorian and Imperials worship the Divine Couple, the official religion of the Empire. But this faith is quickly fading, because Faberterra is far and the beliefs of the Lhoban monks are gaining ground.

The true Ekulians worship a mix of ancient local gods, the most important one being the **Master of the Seven Rags**, or Beggar God, a very ancient deity in the guise of a tramp come into the world to share the sufferings of man. The tenets of the faith are respecting others, helping the poor and stoically enduring pain. The followers of this god mostly belong to the lower classes. Some Syranthian sages say that this god is an idealized depiction of the wandering monks of Lhoban, but no one knows for sure.

Another, though far less popular, divinity is **Yallara, Goddess of the Many Faces**. Yallara is usually represented as a woman

THE SHARP KNIFE LAW

This is the hardest law King Eku has ever had to enforce. It is a law made by a Valk warlord for Valk warriors and it is very short and clear:

"You cannot worship any demon and you cannot allow a Valkyria to walk free in Eku. If a Valkyria is found, she must immediately be killed with a sharp knife and all her blood spilled on the soil to appease the souls of the innumerable people killed in Collana. Ignore this law and you'll be subject to the same treatment."

with four arms whose body is divided into four parts. Each part is depicted as belonging to a different race: one is yellow like the Jademen, another white like the Ekulians and the Imperials, a third is black like the people of the Ivory Savannah, and the fourth is short and squat, with four digits. Yallara is the Goddess of the many identities and mistress of change. Her followers are said to be able to change shape, they can become men or women, young or old, pretty or ugly depending on her will. The adepts are very secretive about their faith but say that Yallara ensures change in the world and protects the universe from stagnation.

The Jademen, as well as a growing part of the population, follow the philosophy of Enlightenment. The monks of Lhoban have King Eku's favor, so they are free to spread their beliefs among common men. Some people follow the path of Enlightenment in a very mundane way, like the Waterbringers who seek wealth and power, while others try to improve themselves through meditation and fasting. The monks rarely judge and never interfere: they show the path, but everyone must move along it at their own pace.

The Valk are an exception. King Eku outlawed their old religion, so they have had to find a new one. Some of them are starting to listen to the words of the Lhoban monks, while few are exploring other religions, but they find them inappropriate to their own martial culture. So, most Valk are leaning toward atheism: they don't worship any god because, after having survived the demons, they need no divinities.

A small, secret minority has never truly accepted the Sharp Knife Law. They still worship the ancient demons but do it at great personal risk because, if caught, they'll have to face King Eku's wrath.

POLITICS

THE DREAM OF A DYING KING

When Dhaar, the mightiest Valk warlord in recorded history, attacked Collana, Eku, king of Eku, hadn't been born yet. His mother gave birth to him seven months later in a Valk encampment in Zandor.

This is why Eku should not feel any personal responsibility for the terrible things that happened in Collana, caused by the Valkyries' unholy rites.

But he does, and has all his life. The guilt of what his race did to the poor citizens of Collana devours him.

A few days after he became king, an old monk called To Jin asked Eku if he and his brethren would be allowed to do something about the demons residing in the haunted city. Eku, surprised, asked for more information, because he did not know how serious the situation still was.

To answer his question, To Jin took him to visit the outskirts of Collana. When the King came back he was a different man. First, he passed the Sharp Knife Law, then he gave the monks permission to do all they could to contain the disaster of Collana. Third, he did everything in his power to turn his kingdom into a place of peace and security. The monks helped him in this task, as did the Ekulians, some of the old Imperials and, strangely, some of his fiercest warlords, who showed equal abilities as men of peace as they had as men of war.

Now on his deathbed, Eku can go over the deeds of his life and honestly say to himself he has done his best.

Nevertheless, he cannot die in peace, because too many things still trouble him, as explained below.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

It is impossible to understand Eku's problems without knowing a little bit about its social organization. Eku's government is a form of loose feudalism. Given the size of the kingdom and the need to keep a constant defense force along the northern border to prevent Zandorian Valk incursions, this is the best solution. The various cities are governed by nobles, called by the ancient title of Shah, which literally means "administrator and speaker of the law" but has come to be a rough synonym of "prince". The Shah is the absolute ruler of his country but he must pay tribute to the King and muster soldiers when needed. The title has not always been hereditary, but today it is mostly passed from father to son, and only in few cases has King Eku removed a Shah from his position, usually for blatant incompetence or open rebellion. When doing so, the King

has used the harsh methods typical of the Valk, so that very few would dare challenge his authority again.

The last deposition of a Shah dates back to thirty years ago, and now very few believe that from his deathbed Eku would be able to react with the same strength.

THE ISSUE OF SUCCESSION

King Eku has been very unlucky in his personal life: he got married only once, to Yasmine, his beloved wife who brought him the throne as dowry. When she died many years ago, he never wanted to marry again or even take a concubine, preferring to embrace chastity and meditation, as taught by the Lhoban monks.

He had two sons and a daughter, but they have all died and only a granddaughter, Yasmine, survives. The girl is sixteen years old and everyone says she is exactly like her grandmother both in appearance and in spirit. Were she ever to ascend to the throne, she would be a great queen.

Sadly, this is hardly going to be the case: when her grandfather dies, his various enemies will swoop down onto Eku like hungry vultures.

THE FALCONS OF THE NORTH

Not all the Valk clans are happy about the new customs their king has imposed them. Some actually don't even want to have a king. In ancient times, a Valk warlord led his men to war but after the battles the various clans separated again and each was absolutely independent. But things have changed: Eku rules as a decadent western monarch, and no Valk is free.

THE FALCONS OF TAKRA

Takra is a Zandorian Valkyria. Six months ago she led her clan across the borders of Eku to raid the cattle, as the Zandorian clans have been doing for many years. The Civilized Valk were ready and a minor battle ensued. Takra was captured, and the leader of the Civilized Valk, a strong warrior named Urrah, bewitched by her savage beauty and the fierceness she showed in battle, violated the Sharp Knife Law, allowing a Valkyria to walk free in Eku.

In few months the witch gathered around her a vast group of Ekulian Valk who openly rejected the King's authority. Naturally the faithful clans promptly moved against the traitors, but the Falcons, as the men of Takra call themselves, were supported by the Zandorian Valk and quickly crossed the border, avoiding direct confrontation. They sometimes trespass into Eku engaging in minor fights, which they usually win.

In this way they have gained the support of many young warriors, who abandon their civilized life to join the Falcons...

Another displeasing fact is the role of "good shepherds" the King has assigned to them: a Valk warrior is born to pillage and raze, not to lead men like the Ekulians, who cannot defend themselves and hence deserve to die.

Third, the demons were harsh gods, but they were Valk gods. Outlawing the ancestral cult has left a void in the souls of many Valk, which cannot be filled by the bland philosophy of the yellow men or by the decadent gods of the westerners.

These dissidents have so far kept a low profile, fearing Eku's rage. But now that the old man is dying, they are becoming bolder. They called themselves the Falcons and their leader is named Takra (see sidebar).

THE JACKAL OF THE WEST

Another enemy is ready to strike when King Eku dies: the Kyrosian king, Ganymedes II. For reasons unknown, the mad king believes that Eku is his personal enemy and that hordes of his Valk warriors are ready to invade Kyros.

It is true that King Eku never showed much love for Ganymedes, but he never wronged him either because trading with Kyros is important for Eku.

A VERY PERSONAL FAVOR

King Eku has been on his deathbed for almost ten years. Daily message birds fly from Eku to Kyros, sent by spies, but till now no news of the much awaited death has come.

The reason is that the old man isn't ready to die yet. His lands are still troubled, the future of his beloved granddaughter is uncertain, and the curse of Collana haunts him.

The Alchemists of Gis supply the ninety-year-old king with a daily tonic, made with the strangest and weirdest Lotus. The drug isn't perfect: it cannot make him young again or preserve his body, but it keeps him alive and his mind as sharp as ever.

Naturally the concoction cannot be used forever and sooner or later nature will take its course. That day the story of Eku will change.

Ganymedes's hate might stem from the fact that, three years ago, his counselors tried to arrange for him to marry Yasmine, Eku's granddaughter. Eku politely turned down the offer, which greatly enraged Ganymedes.

Today, given their own internal problems (see *Beasts & Barbarians* #2), the Kyrosian cannot attack Eku directly, but they are covertly aiding the Falcons of Takra with both money and weapons.

THE VEILED CARAVAN

Eku does have enemies, but luckily it also has friends. One of the most important is the Veiled Caravan organization.

The power of the mysterious city of Gis, city of Alchemists, hides behind the façade of an ordinary trading guild. The Veiled Caravan has supported King Eku for years, both financially and with their own magic, and a permanent Caravan Envoy now resides at the royal palace.

The Alchemists are not supporting Eku out of altruism. They want the rocky oil from the Black Oasis and having a peaceful country under the rein of a capable man is in their interest. So, they supply Eku with the Ghostly Flame burned around Collana (see below) and, in addition, grant King Eku a very personal favor (see sidebar).

THE MONKS

King Eku has always been very curious about the Path of Enlightenment, and it is no secret that he joined this creed many years ago.

Many years ago, when he was still young, he also visited Far Lhoban and personally met the Enlightened One, an encounter that forever changed his life.

When he came back to home, he surrounded himself with monk counselors. Many of his old advisors, especially Valk veterans, raised more than an eyebrow, but it was soon clear that, despite exerting a certain influence, the monks didn't change Eku's attitude. The King listened to their words but he never openly favored their opinions over those of others.

The only thing King Eku did to open support the monks was the Edict of the White Belt. The edict contained two very important points. First, any monk bearing a white belt, the sign identifying the humblest caste of the Enlightened Ones, has the right to walk any street without paying any tax and can freely drink from any well. It might seem only a minor advantage but it proves how important the Enlightened Ones are in Eku today. Second, the monks were allowed to build a big monastery in a location of their choice in Lhoban. Strangely the monks haven't done this, preferring a wandering life in foreign lands and in the many Jademen communities, or choosing to watch over Collana or live at the King's court.

The importance of the monks in Eku is destined to increase when the King dies, because their candidate to succession will very probably become the new King. So far, the monks haven't shown particular favor toward any Shah or Valk lord, so they will most likely support Princess Yasmine.

COLLANA

Collana is Eku's biggest problem, so it deserves particular attention. The city, razed by the Valk in 2450 ASF, is the epicenter of a massive demonic invasion. Nobody truly knows what has happened in Collana, but most people say the Valkyrie have summoned an entity of enormous power, probably a Demon Lord.

The problem is that the creature is most likely still there, and it isn't alone.

Eku and the eastern reigns survived to that day by pure chance: a week after the terrible assault a group of wandering monks went to the ruined city hoping to find some survivors of the Valk's rage.

What they found was far, far worse: they weren't able to enter the walls and they barely managed, with the force of their souls, to create a sort of barrier around the city, from which nothing can get out.

The monks are skilled at trapping demons, as they have been doing it for centuries around the Land of Idols. But the being imprisoned in Collana is a hundred times stronger than the ones in the southern ruins and keeping it trapped has required a huge effort and the sacrifice of many monks.

For twenty years, while the Valk invasions raged, the monks came to the cursed city individually from the faraway mountains of Lhoban. But the situation became more and more difficult: the evil force slowly started to seep out of Collana, corrupting first the land, then the animals and the people.

There are rumors of people living five days away from Collana who suddenly go mad,

TYPICAL DANGERS IN COLLANA

In truth there is no "typical" danger in Collana. The evil in the city is too cunning to use the same powers twice, but here are several ideas evil Game Masters can include in their Ekul based stories:

-The Possessed Ones. *People living in cities that are as far as five days away from Collana suddenly go mad. They start speaking and behaving evilly, possessed by tainted beings coming from the evil city. A way must be found to cure this plague.*

- Blood Rain. *Huge, reddish clouds coming from Collana bring heavy rains that seem made of real, hot blood. It is a sticky and slimy substance, but seemingly harmless. Yet, who knows what effects this rain will have on plants, animals, and ultimately men?*

-The Howling Beasts. *The monks do their best to keep the demons at bay, but sometimes a small evil being slips out. A few months ago an ordinary jackal suddenly turned out to be a terrible beast and it somehow managed to create a whole pack of beings similar to it. Now the grasslands and roads around Collana are no longer safe.*

-The Worshipper. *The city is said to be haunted by a demon lord — a terrible threat to any sane man but also a way to achieve great power for any sorcerer willing to gamble his soul. A powerful practitioner of the Dark Arts entered Collana with his hirelings a few weeks ago and managed to leave unharmed! What happened inside the city? And, more importantly, what has led the sorcerer back out of the city?*

crying that the demons of Collana are inside them, and commit all sorts of wicked acts.

Then Ekul got a new King, not surprisingly a Valk, but surprisingly a caring Valk. With Eku's help, the monks managed to build a series of pillars around Collana, each of them hosting a monk, a Stylite, in constant prayer. A white fire burns in a brazier at each monk's feet, produced by a Lotus concoction from the faraway city of Gis. The Ghostly Flame, as the white fire is called, is hated and feared by all demons.

These remedies have so far kept the demons at bay, but it is only a way to put off the unavoidable. Strangely, the evil influxes from Collana seem to grow stronger in the summer, as the wild fires in the Northern Grazelands clearly prove.

But there is yet another problem: not only do the demons try to get *out of* Collana, but at times people also try to get *into* Collana. In fact, many believe that a great abundance of gold and other treasures left by the Valk awaits anyone brave enough to come and get them.

The monks try to dissuade the greedy treasure hunters from entering the city but cannot physically stop them. Till now none of them have ever come out again.