

Robert E. Howard's

CONAN



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**THE SHADOW
OF THE SORCERER**

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GO BEYOND THE VEIL OF DEATH!

“MYSTERY AND TERROR ARE ABOUT US, CONAN, AND WE GLIDE INTO THE REALM OF HORROR AND DEATH,” SHE SAID. “ARE YOU AFRAID?”

Ready your blades and prepare to face evil! Travel beyond the veil of life and into worlds beyond!

The Shadow of the Sorcerer is an epic campaign for *Conan: Adventures in an Age Undreamed Of*, sending the player characters from the backstreets of Messantia in Argos to a remote island in the Western Sea, then to the wastelands of Stygia, as they seek to prevent a diabolic ritual to bring forth an ancient evil. In this grand adventure they must use their wits, cunning, and minds all at once, pitted against a merciless array of sorcerous, monstrous, and mortal foes.

If they fail, a great and powerful foe will become unstoppable, unleashing an era of horror upon the world unlike anything it has ever known!

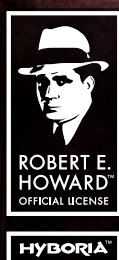
- Suitable for a group of two-to-six player characters, either at the beginning of their heroic careers or battle-hardened veterans.
- Rules for playing with Conan and his allies as the player characters.
- Descriptions of the cities of Messantia, Asgalun, and Zabhela, and the Stygian Valley of Set!
- A journey through the Acheronian afterworld in the Halls of Judgment, where souls are weighed to determine their ultimate fate!
- A gigantic cast of non-player characters, from exiled princes, treasure hunters, brigands, high priests, pirate chieftains, witch-men, alchemists, shape-changers, sea-witches, diabolical sorcerers, and ancient, immortal wizards.
- New monsters, including otherworldly specters, giant crocodiles, carnivorous lotus groves, massive albino constrictors, dread wights, and fearsome hell-harpies!
- Stunning art and maps, produced by renowned Conan artists.

This book requires the *Robert E. Howard's Conan: Adventures in an Age Undreamed Of* corebook to use.

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INTRODUCTION

THE SHADOW OF THE SORCERER

*Seas crash upon dragon-guarded shores,
Bursting in crimson moons of burning spray,
And iron castles open to me their doors,
And serpent-women lure with harp and lay.
The misty waves shake now to phantom oars —
Seek not for me; I sail to meet the day.*

— “The Singer in the Mist”, Robert E. Howard

Welcome to *The Shadow of the Sorcerer*, a campaign for Robert R. Howard’s *Conan: Adventures in an Age Undreamed Of*, comprising seven linked adventures spread across three segments. This campaign accommodates starting player characters, though it can be played with experienced heroes. It is set during almost any time during the lifetime of Conan, and while the barbarian hero has no role in the events depicted, guidelines are provided for running this campaign with Conan and his allies, if desired.

Here, an enigmatic Stygian noble named Serothos seeks to raise from the shade of an ancient Acheronian sorcerer, much as did the conspiracy against King Conan involving the sorcerer Xaltotun. The player characters are drawn into these events through selfish reasons, with different and far more personal stakes. They must defeat the ancient menace or be damned in life as well as death should they fail to stop the Stygian’s diabolical plot.

Additional information and suggestions have been provided for a gamemaster choosing to integrate further adventures into the midst of the campaign, or to utilize other *Conan* sourcebooks and adventures.



BOOK ONE: THE OPENING OF THE EYE

This book comprises three adventures. In the first, *The Fall of the House of Antaeus*, set in Messantia, the player characters enter the manse of a vanished Argossean scholar and there they come into possession of a potent magical artifact, binding their fate to it. They encounter a resourceful agent of Serothos, who becomes a major enemy to them throughout this campaign. In *The River of Souls* and *Black Wings*, the second and third adventures in this book, the player characters are drawn to Asgalun, in Shem, where they discover Antaeus’s fate and learn more of the powerful magical artefact they possess, the Eye of Acheron, which has bound them to its cursed fate.

BOOK TWO: THE TOMB OF TOTHMEKRI

Captured by pirates in *The Wine-Dark Sea*, the player characters journey across the Western Sea and must navigate the volatile interaction between the pirate crew, their captain, and their enigmatic nemesis. In the fourth adventure, *Crimson Jewels in Moonlight*, they explore a mysterious island and discover its sinister secret, amidst a backdrop of betrayal and vengeance. Finally, *Roads Beneath*

the Earth, takes them into the degenerate remnants of Tothmekri's degenerate court, where they must balance their survival against long-simmering passions and hatreds. There, they come face to face with what remains of the exiled prince Tothmekri.

BOOK THREE: COILS OF THE SERPENT

The *Wrath of Serothos*, the final chapter, details the player characters' escape from the mysterious island, their journey across the Stygian desert, and their arrival at a hidden tomb in the Stygian wasteland, racing against time to prevent the resurrection of Xhosãth, the sorcerer-king, whose coming will herald the end of days. Can they dispatch an ancient evil before its shadow falls across all the Hyborian world?

GAMEMASTERING THIS ADVENTURE

The seven linked adventures comprising *The Shadow of the Sorcerer* concern an epic plot by a mysterious Stygian sorcerer to unleash an evil of the ancient world upon the kingdoms of the Hyborian Age using a lost and powerful magic item, the Eye of Acheron. The player characters are more than likely initially drawn into the initial event of this campaign for selfish and mundane reasons (pursuit of wealth or other material gains), but quickly become tied to this grand scheme with world-shattering consequences.

This entire campaign will take many sessions to play through — each chapter of this campaign is likely the equivalent of a single session of play, perhaps more, but when it is completed, the player characters will have travelled incredible distances, seen indescribable beings and places, faced unspeakable terrors, and thwarted an epic evil that threatens all the Hyborian kingdoms.

The gamemaster should be familiar with the *Conan* corebook and read each chapter of this campaign thoroughly before attempting to run them. Additionally, it helps to be well versed in the rules for combat, as it features prominently in the sessions to come.

SETTING AND ERA

This full-length campaign is set in an undetermined period of the Age Undreamed Of, so it could take place before Conan is born, during Conan's years of exploration on his path to becoming the king of Aquilonia, or after his death. At the end of *Book Three: Coils of the Serpent*, are suggestions to adapt this campaign to another era of the

Hyborian Age. If the gamemaster is indifferent to the epoch this campaign is set in, then it is suggested that the early years of King Conan's reign in Aquilonia is as good a time as any and provides some fallback should the player characters utterly fail to stop the villains from their goal.

Other Eras

Optionally, this campaign can be set in periods of Hyborian history other than during Conan's lifetime. If the gamemaster would like to have it set before that period, little needs be done to alter the adventure. Though the villain's identity is concealed, he can also be exactly who he appears to be (see page 197 of *Chapter 7: The Wrath of Serothos*). Several options are available for a gamemaster who desires to customize the campaign in their own tastes. Only a few other elements, such as names of the rulers of Argos and Shem tie this to Conan's era.

PLAYER CHARACTERS

The Shadow of the Sorcerer is best suited for a group of three to six starting player characters, though veteran player characters are just as appropriate. It begins in the Argossean city of Messantia, so player characters would ideally be from locales suitable to that area. However, as Messantia is a center of maritime trade and travel, player characters could be from any of the many kingdoms connected to the Road of Kings, that great passage leading from the western Hyborian lands to the Vilayet Sea.

The gamemaster is encouraged to work with the players to ensure that their characters are suitable for the campaign and not especially unusual, as player characters with overtly exotic origins or far-flung homelands might find it difficult to be sufficiently motivated to continue involvement with the campaign if they do not feel overly involved; for example, a Khitan nomad would be hard-pressed to find concern for the fate of the western Hyborian kingdoms.

One option for a player character is to take the part of Thyra, the daughter of a significant non-player character, offering a significant personal stake in the resolution of the plot and a desire for vengeance. This option is detailed in the first adventure, *Chapter 1: The Fall of the House of Antaeus*, in the section titled **Thyra as a Player Character** on page 24

Introducing New Player Characters

As this is a dangerous campaign full of opportunity for player characters to be killed, guidelines are presented at several junctures for the gamemaster to help players integrate new player characters if needed. It may also be that a player character feels that they lack sufficient motivation to continue in the adventure or are woefully unsuitable for the challenges to come. These guidelines

are presented at relevant places in each chapter; with suggestions for the appropriate player character origins to better integrate into the existing party's goals and motivations to not seem jarring or incongruous.

Using Conan and His Allies in This Adventure

This campaign can even be run as a solo adventure with a player taking on the role of the mighty Conan himself, in the purest exploration of heroic adventure! This is recommended only as a solo adventure option, as the burly Cimmerian hero tends to vastly overshadow any of his compatriots. His writeup in the **Conan** corebook on pages 349–350 is usable, but writeups from sourcebooks earlier in his career — **Conan the Barbarian**, **Conan the Thief**, or **Conan the Mercenary** — provide a less competent yet still formidable version of the Cimmerian hero best for this adventure.

Allies suitable for this adventure might be Astreas (though it is unknown if they ever adventured together), Bêlit, or Valeria of the Red Brotherhood from the **Conan** corebook, or from other sourcebooks, such as Old Gorm (**Conan the Barbarian**, pages 101–102), Murilo or Nestor (**Conan the Thief**, pages 85–87), Valerius (**Conan the Brigand**, pages 85–86), or Amalric the Aquilonian (**Conan the Adventurer**, page 89–90).

LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN THIS CAMPAIGN

It is strongly recommended that all player characters begin with at least one language in common. As languages play a vital part in the rich culture of the Conan stories, information on what languages are spoken by non-player characters in the region are provided where relevant. Each non-player character writeup contains a list of the languages they know, with their native or preferred language listed first. A gamemaster who does not wish to bother with such a potential complication can assume that all relevant non-player characters speak a language shared by the player characters.

PACING THIS ADVENTURE

As the gamemaster can see even at this early point, **The Shadow of the Sorcerer** covers a lot of ground. It takes player characters from the slums and affluent neighborhoods of Messantia; through the back alleys of Asgalun and to the verdant coastline of Shem; into the holds and decks of pirate ships across uncharted seas; inside ruined castles on long-forgotten islands; belowground to caverns where few humans have trod; among the savage tribes of the Black Coast; across the haunted deserts of Stygia and the hostile streets of Sukhmet; and finally to an ancient burial-place of a millennia-dead sorcerer.

There is barely time to breathe between some of these adventures — player characters are often thrust from the ending of one chapter immediately into the events of another, and 'down time', as commonly utilized in many role-playing games, is virtually nonexistent in this campaign. From the moment the player characters meet the cursed artefact known as the Eye of Acheron, their destiny is on a countdown, and they are in a race against time with their rivals a group of highly-skilled and dedicated foes, led by what might be the most powerful sorcerer of the Hyborian world.

This is by design.

Howard's Conan stories fit into a variety of genres, with the Cimmerian barbarian hero being dropped into whatever setting happened to appeal to the author at the time, as if he were given free reign of a 1930's-era Hollywood movie set. Indeed, a quick glance through the roster of original Howard Conan stories resembles such a tour. A Western? That would be "Wolves Beyond the Border". Weird horror? "Shadows in the Moonlight". Eastern adventure? "The People of the Black Circle". Locked room mystery? Try "The God in the Bowl". Claustrophobic thriller? "Rogues in the House". H. Rider Haggard-style lost city archaeological adventure? "Red Nails". Pirate adventure? "The Pool of the Black Ones". High crusades? "Black Colossus". Courtly intrigue? "The Phoenix on the Sword".

The Hour of the Dragon, the only novel-length Conan story by Robert E. Howard, is similarly-paced, and it serves as the model for this campaign's breakneck pace and dizzying array of locales. It contains many of the above genres and switches them as rapidly as it does locales. Critics and literary scholars frequently note that one of Howard's great strengths as a writer is the driving force of the narrative, the breakneck pace and urgency felt by his heroes and the words themselves.

Conan adventures, by default, should never be leisurely affairs, where player characters have ample time to prepare, plot and discuss stratagems. There should rarely be a time where the player characters are able to stroll into town, shop, train and while away time in other idle pursuits while waiting for the call of adventure to pique their interest. Instead, they should be shoved pell-mell from one dramatic scene to another, sent reeling headlong with barely time to catch their breath from a battle to a tense negotiation or dizzying and horrible realization about the darkness of the universe they inhabit.

Like Conan himself, the player characters should be capable of immediate and dramatic action, adaptable and rugged enough to stand a variety of trials in the most trying of circumstances. Heroes (or anti-heroes) should rarely have the chance to enter a perilous situation of their own volition, with adequate preparation and forethought. Instead, it is the way that they handle unexpected adversity that marks them as worthy.

ADDITIONAL ENCOUNTERS

Though the notes for this campaign frequently offer suggestions for expansion or additional adventures that might be integrated smoothly into the overall flow of events, the gamemaster is encouraged to carefully consider the effect that these digressions will have on the overall pacing of this story arc. If the player characters find themselves frequently thinking they have time to investigate lesser events and pursue ends of their own during the events of this campaign, the urgency will be considerably diminished, and the narrative thread may be diluted or even lost outright.

If events bog down somewhat or the players are caught up in un-dramatic reflection, discussion, or debate, the gamemaster is encouraged to follow the advice of veteran mystery writer Daischell Hammet (author of *The Maltese Falcon* and many other novels), where he claimed that whenever the pacing got too slow in a story, he'd have a guy with a gun come through the door. There would be a confrontation, and from there the stakes had been raised and the story had a new urgency. The protagonist would be wondering who sent the gunman, and why, and would act on those questions.

The Shadow of the Sorcerer is full of resourceful enemies who will think nothing of using local toughs or hired mercenaries to harass and menace the player characters. The gamemaster should use this as a tool, selectively, using an occasional ambush or improvised attack as a means of picking up the pace, or pushing the player characters forward, but not overmuch to grind sessions to a halt with wave after wave of thugs and bandits, or hired assassins.

CLIFF-HANGER ENDINGS

Many chapters in this campaign can potentially be played through in a single gaming session, though some can take longer, and some groups' play styles might require more than one session to resolve. In these cases, the gamemaster is encouraged to end on cliffhangers, with the player characters facing certain peril or doom at the ending of one scene, then letting players use the time between game sessions to do their planning. A reliable means of doing this is to end with the player characters having achieved some goal, suddenly looking around or hearing oncoming attackers rounding the corner — or heading out of a building thinking they've achieved their goals, only to find outside a group of warriors with swords drawn, demanding their surrender. Calling the end to a session at such a point means that at the beginning of the next session, the players will be able to immediately jump into action, and in *Conan*, action often defines character.

One advanced narrative technique that the gamemaster might even utilize is when ending on a cliffhanger, beginning

the next session in the middle of action or immediately after its resolution. If one session ends with the player characters surrounded by a group of relatively weaker bandits, and the whole point of their introduction into the story is just to give a level of risk or to provide that cliffhanger, then recognize that they have served their point already. The next session can begin with the gamemaster describing the field of combat as if the conflict has already occurred, with the player characters wearied from the battle, but all the foes vanquished off-camera and lying dead around them. Or they can be seeking cover while archers and others try to pick them off!

Perhaps the next session can begin with a pile of bodies and only a few enemies remaining to be conquered, just as Howard set the stage in "The Frost Giant's Daughter" and "The Scarlet Citadel", bloodied from wounds, perhaps fatigued, but otherwise still able to fight. Dealing with the entirety of the battle would likely be dull but beginning in this state lets the player characters engage in this final stage of the combat.

EPIGRAMS AND FLAVOR TEXT

This campaign contains a liberal number of quotes from the poetry and fiction of Robert E. Howard. These are provided as mood-setting devices, for use by the gamemaster as desired. They are of relevance to the information provided in the sections they preface, and the gamemaster may use them solely for reference, or might even read them aloud, to set the mood of that scene and to provide potential insight or foreshadowing. Howard used this practice often, and this adventure borrows that technique by providing similar quotes. For players who are familiar with Howard's stories, this provides an instant spur to memory and can create an additional set of associations with the proper *Conan* feel.

The gamemaster is encouraged to not go overboard with this technique, as excessive use can potentially bore or alienate players. Few people like having long sections of text read aloud to them when they're there to play a game. However, reciting some of the shorter passages can serve as an excellent means of setting a mood, and is best used immediately upon starting the game, or perhaps after a break in the role-playing session. The practice is a nice reminder to players, essentially saying "We're back in that world now", much like the dimming of the lights serves to quiet theatergoers.



WHO WANTS WHAT?

A challenge for longer campaigns, especially those hinging on some element of mystery, is that it is easy to lose track of who is who, who is doing what, and for what reason. For this reason, each chapter of *The Shadow of the Sorcerer* comes with a sidebar like this one, similarly titled. This way, the gamemaster always has a quick reference about what major non-player characters appear in each chapter and what they're trying to accomplish. Though some of the conversations contain scripted elements, it is not always the case that they play out as written, so this way the gamemaster has a clear idea of what the non-player character wants to see happen.

CAMPAIGN BACKGROUND

The campaign depicted in *The Shadow of the Sorcerer* concerns the culmination of a plot to reignite a powerful magical artifact wrought by a long-dead sorcerer and use its power as a stepping-stone towards a reign of fear across the kingdoms of the Hyborian Age. The Hyborian world is ancient, steeped in millennia of history, and this plot stretches back across time. The events described below have already transpired and are presented here to provide the gamemaster with a complete understanding of what has happened, as well as to give a solid grounding with the motives of all concerned parties.

ANCIENT OF YEARS

More than four millennia ago lived a mighty Acheronian sorcerer called Xhosäth. Author of many works on dire sorcery, he had many disciples and was authoritative on matters arcane. From his home outside the ancient Acheronian city Kara-Shehr, Xhosäth was known. His name, whenever spoken aloud, was only whispered for fear he might take notice. In the night, he raised a mighty gleaming tower of crystal and white alabaster, its height an affront to the clouds, casting a shadow across the great desert. He had conquered the barrier of death and had lived many hundred years beyond a natural span, and his appearance was vigorous and healthy, in the fullness of life. Cruel and cunning, Xhosäth grew in power and influence until such a time that his enemies feared him greatly enough to act against him, and they united in conspiracy.

This league of rivals, sorcerers all, planted seeds of rumors in the ears of the members of the court of the

Acheronian King Shullat, attempting to bring the royal ire upon Xhosäth. They were successful, and Shullat turned against his onetime friend Xhosäth, seeking aid against the sorcerer from his very rivals. They spent years preparing, and plotting in secrecy against Xhosäth, crafting stratagems to counter his powerful magic. With an immense, uncountable army before them, the king and the coterie of sorcerers marched forth from Python to the tower of Xhosäth, surrounded amid the desert by a small necropolis of the tombs of slaves, consorts and disciples who had lived and died in his service.

An army so great could not approach in any subtlety, so when King Shullat and the cabal of sorcerers arrived at Xhosäth's tower, they found the source of their wrath standing before them at the open doorway to the shining tower. Fearless, his bright eyes flashing with contempt for them all, Xhosäth was scornful to his king and his sorcerer advisors, knowing their purpose and having little regard for their protestations. When he looked into the mind of the king, he knew that this parley would end only in death. Xhosäth attacked, summoning demons and magic fire to assail his enemies.

The battle was incredible, with white goutts of demon-fire washing across the ranks of soldiery, causing them to flee in dismay as the inhuman servitors of the sorcerer crawled from the sand and tore into them savagely. Spells were unleashed, and alchemical destruction scorched and blasted the sands and the armies of Shullat, rendering his soldiers to naught but twisted lumps of shattered bone and melted armor.

Eventually, though, they wore Xhosäth down, and his curses grew cracked in his throat, as the battle raged across hours, then days. The sorcerers then unleashed their secret weapon, a black jeweled pendant they had crafted specifically to be Xhosäth's bane. In secrecy, several weeks earlier, they had conspired with one of his consorts. Seeking wealth and power of her own and a place beside King Shullat as his queen, she had agreed to their terms. She took the pendant into Xhosäth's bedchamber at night and touched it to his flesh, creating a magical link between the sorcerer and those who bore him ill will. Then she returned it to their spy, who had borne it back to King Shullat's sorcerers. Then, at the peak of the battle, they unleashed it against Xhosäth.

With a dread incantation taught to them in the deepest of hells, they severed the link between Xhosäth's spirit and his form. In the depths of the black jewel, they trapped his soul, and his bodily shell fell limply to the earth, bereft of spirit and strength. The sorcerers surged forward at their opportunity and exacted their wrath upon their enemy's soulless body.

This ancient artifact of these Acheronian giant-kings, they called the Eye of Acheron, and they bore it back to Python upon a silken cushion, for none of Shullat's

sorcerers would touch it for fear that Xhosāth's wrath might strike them from beyond death. His books, they took for themselves, though they claimed the knowledge as their own, and eradicated any trace of his name across the land. His tower, they brought down with siege engines, crushing the crystalline walls and shattering the alabaster to fragments. His body, they hacked with swords and pierced with arrows for sport and left it for the black vultures of the desert to feast upon.

In the still of the night, when the last footprints of the remaining shred of Shullat's army was gone and covered with drifting sand, Xhosāth's remaining eight lovers (minus his betrayer, who had fled in the night) stole forth from the cliff-side caves nearby, where they had hidden while he fought his enemies. They bore his body into their caves, wrapping it in samite and linen soaked in herbs and unguent salves. They anointed his shattered and torn corpse with oils and painted upon it verses of love and devotion, naming him for their master, and devoting themselves to his return. Wailing for eight days and nights, they slew themselves with him, laying their bodies alongside his in state, hidden in a warren of caves sealed from the inside.

In Python, the Eye of Acheron became part of the royal treasury, a bauble locked in a thick case, thrice-bound with bands of iron and adamant, runes and glyphs of warding inscribed for any to read. Cunning traps dispensing the venom of asps were worked into its making, to deter inspection. In generations to come, the Eye was forgotten, and shortly after, the kingdom of Acheron was driven into ruin by the newer, upstart kingdoms that rose against it — Koth, Shem, now-vanished Edom and the northern barbarians all played a part in Acheron's destruction. The desert sands claimed many of the cities of this great empire, while conquerors razed others, and eventually Acheron became but a grim and vague name lost to time.

More background about Acheron can be found in the **Conan** corebook and the sourcebooks **Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities**, **Nameless Cults**, **The Book of Skelos**, and especially **Conan the King**.

MAD PRINCE TOTHMEKRI

The ruins of Acheron, however, were plundered heartily by the armies of those vanquishing realms, and like much of the treasure of Python, the Eye of Acheron was taken by relic thieves, though none were able to unlock the trapped case, or do more than score and scratch at the heavy bands which kept it fast. It passed from hand to hand, lazily, moving through history and geography, and eventually it became a part of the royal Stygian treasury, a possession of the pharaohs. None of their sorcerers were able to open the cask, and the priests of Set urged caution, so it was left alone, gathering dust in deep chambers beneath stone sphinxes

and pyramids. It was buried with kings, and then stolen by grave robbers, and made its way back to the hands of the Stygian nobility in the capital city of Khemi.

One hundred years ago the cask, as royal property, fell into the hands of Tothmekri, a prince of Stygia and son of the king. (Tothmekri is not to be confused with Thothmekri, the sorcerer-priest featured in "The Hour of the Dragon".) Tothmekri, greedy beyond imagining, had amassed a vast sum of wealth, jewels of the greatest size and purity, and it was rumored that his personal treasury rivalled that of the entire Stygian nation.

Intrigued by the layers of mystery and dread surrounding the cask, Tothmekri devoted himself to learning the secrets of the sealed chest, suspecting that it contained an ancient trove of gems or jewels. Eventually, he broke the bindings keeping the cask fast, and found inside the Eye of Acheron! Trembling with the power he felt it would convey upon him, Tothmekri placed the heavy pendant upon his neck, and in that moment his fate was doomed, a curse upon him that he would never escape though he would sail far beyond the lands of men to do so.

Xhosāth's soul, trapped within the black jewel, had long since gone mad in the intervening four millennia since he had been entrapped within it, and he lashed out at Tothmekri, his mind overwhelming the Stygian prince's soul and visiting him in a dream. They bargained and a deal was struck, one which Xhosāth had no intention of keeping. In return for Tothmekri seeking out the final resting place of Xhosāth's body and attempting to return him to life, the Acheronian sorcerer would grant Tothmekri eternal life, riches, and temporal power beyond imagining. But to accomplish this, the Acheronian would need to take command of Tothmekri's body for short periods of time, that he might accomplish these ends. The prince had little choice but to agree to this, for the Eye of Acheron could not be removed against Xhosāth's will, furthermore, the sorcerer threatened to blast with sorcery any who would attempt to remove it from Tothmekri's neck.

The Acheronian reveled in the flesh once more, though he could not assume control over Tothmekri for long, initially. As Xhosāth was not accustomed to the ways of Stygia, and did not speak their language initially, he was hard-pressed to keep up the pretense of being the young prince. Furthermore, when Xhosāth learned that the Stygians had eradicated his people, and built their empire upon the ruins of Acheron, he found it impossible to conceal his great hatred for them, and he was malicious and callous to all around him, whereas Tothmekri had been fawning, covetous and facile, but never particularly cruel.

To Tothmekri's family and servants, it was as if their prince had gone mad, suffering fits of anger, speaking in an ancient tongue, and initially displaying no signs of knowing them or the modern world. The amulet he wore

about his neck gave them no cause for succor, as Tothmekri seemed inordinately attached to it — clutching it often when he was in one of his alien moods. When Xhosāth, in the guise of Tothmekri, began sending relic hunters and treasure-finders into the wastes near ruined Python, his father, the king, became concerned about his son's motives.

Word then reached Xhosāth that his resting place had been discovered, magically warded and guarded by the shades of his consorts. His preparation to return to the caverns was interrupted by Tothmekri's anger. Tothmekri had become impatient that the Acheronian had not fulfilled his end of the bargain, and so Xhosāth chose the most direct means to elevate Tothmekri to his desired status of wealth and power — assassination of his father. It was inevitable, Xhosāth convinced the young prince, as it was clear that though Tothmekri was heir to the kingdom, the king thought him weak and shortsighted, and spoke with regret about his son's behavior.

The attempt failed, and one of the assassins was captured. Fearing what would happen when his role in the conspiracy was discovered, Tothmekri fled Khemi at midnight, taking with him his household retainers, his guard, and his treasury, racing to the harbor and commandeering a great barge. He did not even wait to assemble his children, sons and daughters of his consorts and pleasure-slaves. Enough gold was passed into the hands of the captain and crew that there was little difficulty rowing forth under such mysterious conditions — word had not spread of the assassination attempt, and Tothmekri was the son of a king, after all.

THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD

Fearing the wrath of his father, and the further influence of Xhosāth upon him, Tothmekri sought refuge as far from Khemi, from the corpse of Xhosāth, as he could go. He directed the captain and crew to sail as far from land as they could. They sailed onwards to the southwest, through night and day, until they came to a nameless island in the southernmost waters of the Western Sea, a tiny spot of land unmarked on any chart. It had everything they would need — game in the form of fish and birds and small native animals, a verdant swath of trees that swayed heavy with fruit, and enough small ponds and a cratered lake for fresh water.

Circling the island, they found a small cove, and next to it, an ancient castle of strange make, lushly overgrown and showing no signs of inhabitation. Tothmekri ordered the captain to send men ashore, and they investigated the castle, learning that it had been in ruins for many years, and that it was of Acheronian origin, perhaps the refuge of one of those giant-kings of old. It had been left, abandoned or all those who once dwelt within it had died, and would serve the Stygian prince well as a new home. He had his folks come ashore and made them begin the business of readying the castle for his

new domain. There were signs, however, of some inhabitants on the island... a slave sent to gather fire-wood went missing, and often Tothmekri's house-members could almost sense that they were being watched, or glimpse movement where no one could be found. This grew to a sense of unease in the new refuge, and Tothmekri dealt with this harshly, whipping those who claimed that the island was cursed.

Knowing that once they set off from the island, the galley crew would surely sell his hiding place for further gold, Tothmekri ordered his guards to slay the captain and those members of the crew who remained loyal to the captain. The galley's oar-slaves, Kushites all, did not care whom they served, and were happy to see the captain and his officers slain, so they agreed to serve Tothmekri's house. With fear that even his own trusted servants might take the galley away and surrender the location of his refuge, or that the island's mysterious residents would make away with it on their own, Tothmekri ordered his people to break up the galley, that its wood might be used to restore the ruined castle.

Back in Khemi, the king learned of his son's flight, and sent many ships in search of him. They had word of other vessels that had seen their course, and guessed at what direction Tothmekri may have gone, but few of these ships would sail so far to pursue, and Tothmekri and his treasure were lost to the world for years, though rumors of the treasure he had amassed and taken with him into uncharted waters continued to spread up the coast, until sailors across Shem, Argos, Zingara and more distant kingdoms all knew the tale of Mad Prince Tothmekri and his cache of jewels. Many sought him, and few who sailed so far from the Hyborian coast returned. In Stygia, the throne passed to another son, and Tothmekri's children were set out in the streets in disgrace, though their blood was still noble.

Back on the island, Xhosāth's anger at their isolation continued to plague Tothmekri, and he eventually stopped listening to the Acheronian's rage-filled shouts in his mind, his manner becoming increasingly distracted and plagued by a lack of sleep or rest. The Acheronian sorcerer's soul realized that it was trapped once more, and he bid his time, tormenting Tothmekri in punishment for their exile. The amulet containing the Eye of Acheron could not be removed by any, should Xhosāth not wish it, so it remained about Tothmekri's neck for several years. Eventually Xhosāth lost interest in his deviltry and allowed Tothmekri to remove the Eye of Acheron and place it with the other jewels in his hoard.

Meanwhile, the mysterious inhabitants of the island continued to move in secrecy, sneaking into the castle at night, and sometimes stealing a Kushite slave or one of Tothmekri's own Stygian house slaves. There were glimpses of strangers on the island, folk who did not resemble Stygians or Kushites, and wore slight garments of unknown fashion, but Tothmekri's guard could not capture one of them.

WORMS IN THE EARTH

One night, a strange woman crept into Tothmekri's bedchamber, poisoning his guards and his bedmates with paralytic darts. She woke the prince, and warned him to silence, a curved dagger at his throat. The woman claimed that she was not going to hurt him, and that she would reveal to him the secrets of the island. When Tothmekri lit a lantern to see the identity of the intruder, he beheld a woman the likes of which he had not seen. She was inhumanly beautiful, though her skin was paler than his, and her features were unlike any he had seen — making it impossible for him to place her origin.

Sinuous and with eyes almost black in the lamplight, her hair was like polished obsidian, bound into several long thick tails that hung past her waist. Nearly naked, she bore only armlets and circlets of gold and a slight shift about her waist. She beckoned to him, her lithe form swaying intoxicatingly before the prince, who had been denied the pleasures of no woman before, and yet had wanted none as much as her. Enthralled, he came to her, and they made love with a savage abandon until he lay as in a stupor.

Though she appeared to know only a few words of the Stygian language, she roused him and told him to come with her. She showed him the secret door by which she had made her way to him, cunningly worked into the stones of his very bedchamber, that led to a narrow passage taking him deep under the castle, a twisting path that intersected with many other such tunnels. Tothmekri clutched his lamp tightly, though he suspected that his mysterious guide had no need of the lamp's feeble glow — her sure step and rapid passage revealed that she could see in the dark.

The mysterious woman took him to a grand room, far from beneath the castle, and it became clear to Tothmekri that the island was honeycombed with these passages, volcanic in nature, but carven and made passable over eons. At the end of their voyage beneath the earth, she presented him to a grand, vaulted chamber, lit by lambent stones set into niches within the walls.

In this chamber sat a man, ancient beyond reckoning, in silken robes set with scales of gold and thin wafers of jade. This man bore the same features as the woman; she went to him and lay near his feet, supine though sensually. His trembling hand stroked her black hair, and he spoke in heavily accented Acheronian, as if he had not spoken for centuries.

He identified himself as Apophis, and his daughter Heqet. Others of his people, Apophis claimed, were watching, but would be revealed only when the time was right. The ancient told Tothmekri that his folk had been on the island for millennia, that it was once part of a mightier continent of the age of Valusia and the Seven Kingdoms,

when his folk had been nearly driven to extinction by a cursed Atlantean king.

The Stygian prince gasped aloud at Apophis' revelation, as he knew enough ancient history to suspect their true nature! The old man chuckled, and his features faded and flowed into those of a horrible serpentine being, human in form, yet with an ophidian head, flickering-tongued and black eyed. It was ancient; folds of flesh wrinkled at its throat and clawed hands.

Tothmekri's eyes darted to Heqet, who he had so recently made love to. She smiled enigmatically, and her father's scaled hands continued to caress her long black, serpentine braids. Apophis claimed that she, as one of his distant descendants, was human in form, and could not assume the form of a serpent-folk anymore. These serpent-folk still lived here, though their numbers were few, and they would be left alone, or would dwell in peace with Tothmekri and his folk. Apophis asked if any others of his kind had survived into the Hyborian age, and Tothmekri told him that no serpent-folk had been heard of.

They spoke, further, and Apophis and Tothmekri came to terms. All he wanted from the Stygians was breeding stock in the form of slaves, who would help them continue their race further, a lineage that went back tens of thousands of years. In return, Heqet would remain as Tothmekri's consort, and Apophis would grant onto Tothmekri even greater wealth, as it meant little to them. Further, when Tothmekri realized that Apophis was a powerful sorcerer in his own right, he inquired if the serpent man might know of a spell to remove the curse of the amulet, the Eye of Acheron, and cease the doom that lingered with it.

Tothmekri and Apophis agreed, and returned to his castle with Heqet, whom he placed in a position of power over his other pleasure-slaves and consorts, and in turn, he gave to the serpent-folk a number of his slaves, who were sent on fictitious errands into the jungle and did not return. Apophis gave Tothmekri a warded cask of sliding panels and hidden catches, ready to be sealed through a cunning mix of magic and craft. The Stygian prince placed the Eye within it, closing it and silencing Xhosãth for what he hoped would be eternity.

Trapped once more and having no voice to shout with, no ears to scream into, the mad soul of the Acheronian once more grew dormant. Tothmekri, meanwhile, slipped into a heady state of relief and pleasure, Heqet offering him succor from the years of turmoil that the Eye of Acheron had brought him. His servants, sensing that the black mood that their lord suffered from had lifted, grew more content with their lot as island castaways.

This languidness continued for several years, until all came crashing down in flame and ruin.

"Did you ever hear of Bloody Trnicos, the greatest of the Barachan pirates?" asked Zaron.

"Who has not? It was he who stormed the island castle of the exiled prince Tothmekri of Stygia, put the people to the sword and bore off the treasure the prince had brought with him when he fled from Khemi."

— "The Black Stranger"

THE COMING OF BLOODY TRNICOS

Though Tothmekri and his household had vanished from Stygia, the legend of his treasure hoard continued to dwell there, and many continued to seek him out for the riches of Khemi, hoping that the jewels were not at the bottom of some unimaginable sea.

In time, one man, an Argossean pirate, Bloody Trnicos, greatest of the Red Brotherhood, sailed a small group of ships far enough out in search of Tothmekri, and beheld a small island out in the middle of nowhere, far from the border of any chart he possessed. With spyglass in hand, he saw the smoke trails of cooking fires, and realized that the island was inhabited. He ordered his captains to retreat, out of sight, and in the dark of night, Trnicos returned, his vessels sailing quietly into the cove in which Tothmekri's castle stood.

Years had turned the Stygians soft, and they had ceased their vigilance against invaders, thinking themselves far beyond the interference of their fellow men. Trnicos and his men landed ashore, and snuck into the castle, seeing it inhabited by slaves and a few servants, little threat at all.

A hail of Barachan rockets went off into the night, and with this, Bloody Trnicos struck, his men reaving amongst the Stygians and Kushites, sword-blades red in the moonlight. The night resounded with screams, and Tothmekri's people fled over the walls of the castle. Heqet saw what was happening and opened the secret chambers,

enabling the escape of many of Tothmekri's servants and slaves. The prince, knowing that the pirates would take from him his jeweled hoard, sought to take it into the secret passage with his lover and household.

Laden with a cask of jewels, Tothmekri was caught by the pirates and killed, a great rain of sparkling gems and jewels falling beneath him, soon caught in a great pool of blood from the fallen prince. After finding the remainder of Tothmekri's treasury, Trnicos ordered his men to sack the castle, with none to be left alive. The secret passages used by the serpent-folk remained sealed, and some of the servants escaped unharmed into the depths of the island caverns.

With a portion of the jewels of Khemi in his possession, Bloody Trnicos sailed from the nameless island, the Eye of Acheron still in its warded cask amidst the other gems and jewels. Trnicos planned to hide the treasure from the eyes of those who would take it from him, for there would be many pirates coveting this wealth, and pirates most often preyed upon one another for riches. On the return voyage, however, one of his captains realized that Trnicos would not let his men live with knowledge of his treasure. One night, when they were close to land, he slipped overboard and swam to shore, stealing some gems and coins from the hoard.

For reasons unknown to him, he took the small, sealed case of rune-stamped silver, with a serpentine motif. Though he could not open it, he knew it obviously held some great treasure. The pirate captain made his way to the Barachan Islands, then to Zingara, and finally into Argos, guided for an unknown reason southward towards Stygia.

In Messantia, he was slain by footpads who wanted to see why he clutched at his belt-pouch so tightly. They found the case containing the amulet but were unable to open it. In turn, it was sold to a dealer in valuable antiquities, where it became a curiosity and ended up hidden in a stone vault with other curios. It was eventually given over to the Temple of Mitra in Messantia, where it similarly was stored without care to its contents.

There, it rested for almost a century, and Xhosath's soul slept in madness.



BOOK ONE: INTRODUCTION

THE OPENING OF THE EYE

“He was like a madman when he thought of the fabled diadem, which myths say was set with the strange jewels known only to that ancient race, a single one of which is worth more than all the jewels of the modern world.”

— “Rogues in the House”

One year ago, Tomar, a priest of the Temple of Mitra in Messantia began to catalogue the wealth in the temple’s stores, and called upon a Messantian scholar named Antaeus to identify certain relics and treasures. The scholar had an interest in such things, and the markings of this strange chest intrigued him, as they bore no similarity to anything he had seen in the Hyborian kingdoms. Antaeus bought it from the priest, who thought it was worthless or worse. He then devoted himself to discovering a means of opening the sealed case, of breaking the ward that held it in place.

Antaeus asked around and sought information on the markings, gleaning that the style of the small chest hailed from the long-passed Thurian Age, though the actual making was relatively recent. The paradox intrigued him, and the Messantian scholar contacted another scholar, a Pelishtim named Baruch, to decipher the markings on the case and determine what lay inside. With a letter from Baruch, Antaeus was able to open the case and found inside the black gem in its silver setting, the Eye of Acheron.

He suspected that the thing he had discovered was of great power and feared that it might be the long-lost Diadem of the Giant-kings, about which many legends swirled. Antaeus sent a description to Baruch, and waited, examining the pendant with his own craft and magical knowledge.

Baruch replied that Antaeus was right to be concerned and hinted about the dreadful nature of the amulet. Baruch urged him to bring the artifact with him to Asgalun, where it might be destroyed or neutralized. Suspecting the worst,

Antaeus had a duplicate made, and this he placed within the box that he took to Asgalun. He was worried about it being taken from him on the voyage to Shem and was unsure of Baruch’s intent. He did not want to take it on his person, and risk it being stolen on the way, or further betrayal from the Pelishtim. While Baruch’s reputation as a scholar was renowned, he was an unknown entity.

Antaeus’s plan was that he would meet Baruch with the false diadem in his possession and determine if the Pelishtim was honest and forthright with his warnings against its power. If he was convinced, Antaeus would send a bird with a note tied to its ankle, word to his guards to bring the amulet to him in Asgalun via the fastest route possible. The Eye of Acheron would be stored in a secret hiding place within his estate, a place only his daughter Thyra knew of. She dwelt with her deceased mother’s kin in the Argossean countryside, and her connection to him was unknown, so he arranged this beforehand with her, trusting to her anonymity. Antaeus’s letter told Thyra to stay at her home and await his message from Asgalun.

With this foolproof plan, he set forth to Asgalun by sea, using a false name to travel under.

Sensing peril to his soul, Xhosäth awoke from within the jewel and waited for an opportunity to strike against Antaeus. The Argossean scholar was too clever for Xhosäth, however, and did not afford the sorcerer any opportunity to possess or influence him. Antaeus did not even touch the diadem directly, a necessary contact for Xhosäth to seize control over a mortal host.

BETRAYAL IN ASGALUN

Antaeus was right to assume the worst, as Baruch immediately recognized the value of the item and sought to play a dangerous game of his own. He was stunned to learn that this distant, ignorant Argossean scholar had unwittingly discovered one of the most feared and powerful magic artifacts known to history, an item lost to mystery and myth. Baruch immediately sent a message about the diadem to a secret patron of his, a man named Serothos, a wealthy Stygian nobleman and rival to Thoth-Amon. Baruch offered information about the diadem of the giant-kings, as it had been mentioned in conjunction with Thoth-Amon's name before, and Baruch felt that it would serve an enemy of the sorcerer well to have such an item.

What Baruch did not know was that Serothos was merely a ruse, an identity Thoth-Amon used when he would travel and dwell hidden from his enemies. With this guise, the powerful Stygian sorcerer supreme moved through Stygia and other Hyborian kingdoms without fear from his enemies, who might strike him when he was unprepared. Thoth-Amon knew at once the power that the Eye of Acheron possessed, and who it had been in the possession of for so long, as he had sought it in the Stygian treasury himself, only to learn it had been borne away by Tothmekri a century ago.

In his identity as Serothos, Thoth-Amon contacted Semerkhet, a disaffected Stygian nobleman who was of the line of Tothmekri (a descendant of one of the prince's many sons who had not gone with him into exile) and laid before him a plan. They would recover the Eye of Acheron and with it, raise the shade of Xhosäth to life once more, and with the Acheronian's aid, crush their enemies and reclaim the throne that should have been Tothmekri's. Semerkhet set out with a handful of mercenaries to retrieve it and the cask that had contained it for so long, taking passage with a Shemitish pirate crew that he had dealt with before.

When Antaeus arrived in Asgalun, he was welcomed into the home of Baruch, who questioned him about the diadem. When the Argossean scholar revealed it to Baruch, the Pelishtim realized that it was a copy and that he had

been outfoxed. He ordered Semerkhet and his men to torture Antaeus and divine what had come of the true Eye of Acheron. Quickly, they discovered the plan, and slew Antaeus, dropping his corpse into the sewer-channels beneath Baruch's home, trusting that it would be thought the work of footpads or murderous thieves.

Seeking to double-cross his patron (not knowing Serothos's real identity) Baruch hired a famed Pelishtim treasure-seeker named Yarin to go to the house of Antaeus and find and steal the Eye. He gave Yarin the false copy of the amulet to use as identification and to potentially switch for the real one if the opportunity arose. Baruch felt his reward from Serothos would be far greater if he had the Eye of Acheron in his own possession, rather than merely pointing the Stygian's agents at it.

Finding that the Argossean had brought a message-bird with him, Baruch assembled a false note for the house guards, hoping to sway them to bring the amulet. Antaeus took one secret to his grave, that a coded phrase would reveal if it was safe or not, and that without the phrase exactly as specified, his daughter was to assume the worst had happened.

When Yarin arrived in Messantia, he discovered the dwelling-place of Antaeus, broke into the estate, but could not discover the Eye's whereabouts before the guards discovered him and chased him from the property. He escaped, empty-handed. Later, he decided to hire additional thieves or mercenaries to aid him in another attempt at robbing the house, primarily to serve as a distraction. Yarin would watch them attempt entry, alert the city guard to their presence, and then when the guards checked the hiding place of the diadem, he would return later to steal it himself.

In Asgalun, fresh from the murder of Antaeus, Baruch sent Semerkhet and his henchmen to Messantia to recover the diadem. The Stygian nobleman sailed forth with his men onboard the *Calypso*, a notorious pirate vessel captained by Gaal-Arvad. They landed near Messantia, out of sight of the city watch, and came into town seeking the dwelling of Antaeus. Meanwhile, from the inland countryside, Antaeus's daughter Thyra returned to Messantia, concerned for her father's well-being.

It is at this point the first adventure of the campaign begins...



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 1

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF ANTAEUS

...all the sea ports of Argos were cosmopolitan, and Messantia was the most polyglot of all. Craft of all the maritime nations rode in its harbour, and refugees and fugitives from many lands gathered there. Laws were lax; for Messantia thrived on the trade of the sea, and her citizens found it profitable to be somewhat blind in their dealings with seamen. It was not only legitimate trade that flowed into Messantia; smugglers and buccaneers played their part.

— The Hour of the Dragon

The adventure begins in the Argossean coastal city of Messantia, where the player characters are enticed to take part in the theft of a valuable artifact stored in the manse of a recently missing scholar named Antaeus.

Several other parties seek this artifact, an item of considerable potency, crucial to a Stygian nobleman's plot detailed in later chapters of this campaign. The player characters' patron is trying to work a deal from several angles. He knows that there are multiple interested parties and is using the player characters as his pawns.

At Antaeus' manse, the player characters may encounter some guards and servants, eventually finding the artifact. When they do so, they unwittingly set off a latent curse, tying their fate to that of the Eye of Acheron and the soul of the evil sorcerer trapped within. The Eye inflicts a vision upon them, wherein they travel to the Acheronian afterlife, seeing Xhosāth and Tothmekri as they embark on a journey down the River of Souls.

The player characters are then threatened by the arrival of some Stygians, led by one of Tothmekri's descendants, also seeking the artifact. The Stygians have taken the daughter of the scholar prisoner, using her as a hostage, assuming the player characters know her identity. During the standoff with the Stygians, the Messantian city guard

arrive, alerted by one of the other interested parties, attempting to use the commotion as a cover to discern the true hiding place of the artifact.

If the player characters stick around for this, the Stygians flee, leaving them to deal with the city guard, a sneak thief still in the house, and a recently arrived priest from the Temple of Mitra who has been dispatched to speak with the scholar.

Alternate resolutions include the scholar's daughter or the Temple of Mitra pardoning them of the theft and beseeching them that they learn what has happened to Antaeus. If they manage to hold onto the artifact and escape both the notice of the authorities, the daughter of Antaeus, and the Temple of Mitra, they return to their patron only to learn that he attempts to double-cross them.

Clues and information gathered at Antaeus' manse and from the various non-player characters encountered point to Antaeus having left for Asgalun, in Shem, a week ago, so the player characters should go there next if they want to learn how to rid themselves of the curse that has been placed upon them. Various courses of investigation or inquiry leads to the conclusion that Asgalun is the most likely place to seek riddance to the curse, and to serve the scholar's daughter.

ARGOS

Famed for its trade throughout the Hyborian kingdoms, Argos is a small yet wealthy nation with a tremendously varied population and mix of cultural influences. The population comprises two contrasting ethos — inland and coastal — each with a distinct personality. Inland folk are hard-working and suspicious of strangers, whereas the coastline breeds a more opportunistic and pragmatic sort of personality in its inhabitants. Physically, Argosseans are shorter and stockier than many of the Hyborian peoples, and are often fine traders, sailors, or pirates. Their primary god is Mitra, though Shemite and Kothic gods are tolerated. Their native tongue is Argossean, though most Argosseans speak a few other languages of their neighboring kingdoms.

The nearby Barachan Islands are home to an infamous society of pirates, and Argos exists in a perpetual state of conflict with northern neighbor Zingara's pirate ships and naval vessels, that prey their coasts, often in retaliation for Argos' own reaving along the Zingaran coast. Relations with their southern neighbor, Shem, are considerably better, and the two nations are sometime allies. Most of the rest of the Hyborian kingdoms regard Argos as a proud and avaricious country.

Sample Argossean names for men are Cadmus, Doros, Lycus, and Mattulus, while sample female names are Althea, Cyrene, Katina, and Lyra.

Messantia is described at length in *Conan the Pirate*, pages 43–45.

MESSANTIA

The port of Messantia, where this chapter is set, is the most cosmopolitan city in Argos, ruled by King Atreus from his palace. It is a trade hub for the entire western coastline, the envy of most coastal cities. The capital city of Argos, Messantia has a population of roughly 35,000 people. It is unwalled, trusting to its navies for defense from the sea, and regarding an assault by land to be inconceivable.

A broad avenue overlooking the harbor features the white mansions of the wealthy and privileged, and a mighty arena tests the battle-skills of slave and freeman alike. Messantia's port is busy with trade from across the Western and Southern Seas, particularly Shem and Kush (with whom they do brisk trade in slaves).

ADVENTURE HOOKS

The player characters need motivation to get involved in this adventure. The gamemaster is encouraged to utilize one of the following 'hooks' to integrate the player characters into

LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN MESSANTIA

As the main city in Argos, Messantia is a melting pot of Hyborian languages and cultures, with Argossean being the native tongue. Most Argosseans and other denizens of Messantia are fluent in several other languages, including (in order of frequency) Shemitish, Kothic, Aquilonian, Zingaran, Ophirian, and Stygian, or tongues from more distant countries such as Brythunia, Nemedea, Corinthian, Bossonian or others too numerous to mention.

Due to the vast slave trade, many Argosseans also speak Kushite as a common language, as they are accustomed to dealing with Kushite slaves in day-to-day life.

the events. The best hooks are those suitable to the player character's nature, such as a stealthy mission for a thief, a guard or strong-arm task for a mercenary or barbarian, an intellectual task for a scholar, a social endeavor for a noble, or one involving scouting abilities for a scoundrel.

This chapter is structured that player characters are not automatically assumed to know one another and be a part of a group. It allows for the potential that player characters will initially be at cross-purposes but nudges them into cooperation and eventual alliance towards the opposition, which does not distinguish between their individual motivations.

This may result with having player characters who are at each other's throats or competing for a similar but incompatible goal instead of being automatically allied with one another and united in purpose. An option is a little of both, where some of the player characters know (or are related to) one another (for example, a thief and a barbarian who work together or have become friends), with others who have their own reasons for involvement.

The adventure includes options for any of these preferences, including initial adventure hooks for this chapter, based on the player character's starting classes, allegiances and even religion.

The Low Road and **The High Road**, following, each present more details on how to introduce and involve player characters into this initial adventure, based on the player characters' archetypes or behavior. Thieves, rogues, and other scoundrels who have no problem with theft and/or murder in their pursuit of wealth will probably be best suited for one of the options presented in **The Low Road**, while **The High Road** describes means of involving player characters who are less inclined towards breaking and entering or killing without a noble cause.





THE LOW ROAD

Player characters like Conan himself — opportunistic but with a rough code of honor — are best enticed with wealth or material gain, or perhaps a chance for violence and adventure. Following are several adventure hooks that explore the more unsavory ways player characters can become involved in this initial chapter of the campaign. One or more of the player characters have been in this fashion, either as, as described below, to escort one or more thieves into Antaeus' manse, as muscle, or to perform the theft themselves... essentially the same task.

Hired by Publio

One or more player characters may have been hired by Publio, a well-known and successful merchant of Messantia. Publio has kept secret the fact that much of his wealth came from illicit trade with reavers and pirates (if appropriate, this also includes Conan in his guise as Amra).

The merchant dwells in the upper reaches of Messantia, in the Noble District, and area inhabited by nobles and those who made their wealth from the sea. His villa has a golden-worked gate, and a fountained courtyard beyond it. He continues to trade in somewhat questionable contraband when the risk is low and the profit margin is high, and in this case, Publio wants someone to break into Antaeus' estate and find the artifact that a copy has been made of. It was shown to two craftsmen in the Tiered Market, who boasted of it to their peers, and the talk is that it is a massive black jewel mounted in a strange silver setting. These two craftsmen made a replica of black glass and silver. Publio knows that there are others in town seeking it, and he feels that he could potentially net a sizeable profit as a middleman.

Publio initially offers 10 Gold per player character for this service, hinting that an additional bonus of another 20 Gold to the whole group (not per player character) is to be provided if there are no complications or undue attention drawn to the theft, such as the slaying of city guards. Obviously, if Publio's name is connected to the theft, there is to be no reward and he promises to do what he can to make the player characters' lives miserable and short, using his connections to see that they are jailed and do not survive a trial.

With Persuade test opposed to Publio's Discipline, player characters might be able to convince Publio to go as high as 20 Gold per player character, though he does not increase the amount of the reward. Failed attempts at intimidating Publio forces him to call his guard and threaten the player characters with time in jail if they do not comply with his request. The gamemaster is advised to adjust this amount of reward to best suit the player characters' current

finances — if they are well-off, increase the amount of cash Publio is offering.

If negotiations go badly and Publio feels threatened, assume that he can summon two to four guards, including one Toughened guard (**Conan** corebook, page 317) within earshot. As Publio lives in the wealthiest, and most well-guarded part of Messantia, actual city patrolmen are quick to arrive on the scene if drawn by the sounds of protracted combat or loud and violent death.

Unbeknownst to the player characters, Publio has little intention of paying them anything. A few days prior to Publio's meeting with the player characters, Publio was contacted separately by the Argossean treasure-finder Yarosh and Semerkhet, each of whom came to him, unaware of the other. Each asked about where to find Antaeus and what the scholar's recent activities had been. Delighted at the double commission, Publio made some inquiries, and learned that Antaeus had recently commissioned some work from a gem-carver and a jewel-smith in the craftsman's quarter. Knowing that there is considerable interest in this artifact, Publio is attempting to edge himself into the middle of this equation and uses the player characters as his pawns.

Publio's plan is as follows: if the player characters recover the artifact, Publio claims that he needs a day to assemble the necessary funds and asks the player characters to hold onto the artifact in the meantime. He urges them not to sell it elsewhere, and to remain silent, as he plans to use his contacts with the city guard and town officials to inform upon them should they deal with another fence. Publio then contacts the Stygians, who have offered him 100 Gold for information leading to the recovery of the artifact. If they do not pay him immediately or demand that he recovers the artifact for them first, then he contacts Yarosh, who has offered roughly the same for it.

Either way, Publio pays no one anything, and collects a large amount of money for pitting a few folks against one another. Player characters who try to determine if Publio is lying need to make an opposed test of their Insight against his own Persuade skill.

Publio sat at a carved teakwood desk writing on rich parchment with a golden quill. He was a short man, with a massive head and quick dark eyes. His blue robe was of the finest watered silk, trimmed with cloth-of-gold, and from his thick white throat hung a heavy gold chain.



— "The Hour of the Dragon"

KEEPING THE PLAYER CHARACTERS ON TRACK

Extended attempts at larceny, theft, or breaking-and-entering from the player characters is outside the scope of this introduction and should be either improvised by the gamemaster or quashed in favor of getting onto the meat of the adventure at hand. If the player characters continue to pursue these avenues, the gamemaster should gloss over such details by telling the players that it is assumed that their characters' petty schemes and malfeasance can be handled off-camera and are assumed to be unsuccessful, leaving this as the most lucrative opportunity they have on the table now.

Publio of Argos

Publio is an Argosesean merchant who is not above illicit dealings and cheating his rivals. He is nervous that these criminal activities will be exposed, but continues business as he always has, shrewdly, seizing opportunities where they present themselves, with little thought to the legalities or ethics of a lucrative business proposal — only weighing the risk. He has a reputation of knowing all that transpires in Messantia, earned through his extensive use of contacts and his canny ear for news and gossip. While Publio may seem to quail when threatened, he will already be calculating ruthlessly the most expedient means of achieving the deaths of those who threaten his fortune or his health. He's a fairly average Toughened non-player character, and if needed, his writeup appears in *Conan the Pirate* on page 82.

Though Publio's guards are equivalent to the standard guard Minion (*Conan* corebook, page 317) they are Ghanatan nomads from the Black Kingdoms, hired men, not slaves. Each is armed with scimitars (Reach 2, 1H, 3 , Parrying), Ghanata knives (Reach 1, 1H, 3 , Hidden 1, Vicious 1), and carry small shields. They wear distinctive yellow cloaks, were handpicked by Publio for their size, ferocity, and their hatred of Kushites. These four nomads have worked for him for many years, and he rewards them handsomely for their loyalty. They worship Jhil but are not particularly devout since coming to the Hyborian lands.

THE HIGH ROAD

But what if the player characters are noble, right-thinking, and don't take easily to the notion of breaking and entering into a scholar's place to steal something that is rightfully his? It seems hard to fathom, but it could conceivably happen. Player characters with civilized codes of honor might find such skullduggery to be terribly against their beliefs. Following are some options for gamemasters to lure these strange and quixotic, noble-spirited beasts into the campaign gently, allowing them to keep their idealism intact and their chins held high.

The Merchant of Messantia

An alternate suggestion for Publio is to play himself as a wronged, innocent victim and Antaeus as a scheming sorcerer. This is another version of the **Hired by Publio** opening (page 18), though with an entirely different spin, though the outcome is mostly the same.

There is enough gist in the rumor-mill suggesting that Antaeus is up to no good. In the Hyborian world, any eccentric scholar is inevitably suspected to be a sorcerer or on the way to becoming one. As connected to the gossip-mill as Publio is, he could easily play the angle that the artifact was stolen from the Temple of Mitra by Antaeus, who has had a fake made of it. The Temple then came to him, seeking a solution that does not connect them to any potential trouble with the law. This cover story matches with the facts almost exactly, and if Publio is using this ruse he stresses that he has been trying to locate the artifact on behalf of the Temple of Mitra, who want to keep this under the strictest of secrecy. All the conditions of the arrangement in **Hired by Publio** (page 18) remain the same, though he lets the threat go unspoken, and will hint that the Temple, and by extension, Mitra, will be hugely grateful for this holy act.

Another tactic Publio might use for player characters who are nobles or scholars is to tell them a modified version of the previous story, claiming to be a friend of Antaeus' concerned for his well-being. He has heard rumors on the street that his friend Antaeus has met up with violence, perhaps in his own home and at the hands of scheming guards. Publio presses the player characters to investigate the matter for him, and to determine what has happened to his friend. Publio has learned enough about Antaeus' manse to know there is a small hiding-chamber concealed somewhere in the library, and he suspects that the scholar may be held there, a prisoner (or worse!) in his own home.



OTHER ENTRIES

The following paths are available for other archetypes, perhaps but are less common.

In Pursuit of Knowledge

The player character might be a scholar contacted by Antaeus himself for assistance or could be a colleague of his looking into his situation. Thirdly, the player character is a would-be apprentice of Antaeus' who has just recently arrived to serve under him, arriving at Antaeus' manse during Scene 1. Finally, a scholar associated with the Temple of Mitra may arrive along with (or in place of) the priestly emissary Tomar, described in Scene V: Crossed Paths (page 43). This latter option is especially appropriate for any scholars who worship Mitra.

A Mystic Journey

Perhaps they have been drawn to Antaeus' estate or Thyra, guided by feelings that some powerful magic is about to be unleashed, or a feeling of dread about the emergence of the Eye of Acheron? Alternately, a shaman with any sort of sense of the afterworld might get the impression of a doorway opening to the Land of the Dead, the afterlife which Xhosāth's soul is at the doorway of.

Higher Allegiance

A native Messantian connected to the city government, the royal house, or with some position of authority may become involved. The city guard or even the king might be curious at the rumors swirling about the scholar's recent behavior. Perhaps Antaeus has missed an appointment with some august personage of noble or elevated status, and they have sent the player character to go and fetch him.

A player character associated with the Temple of Mitra in Messantia may be asked to investigate by Eriadne, the High Priest of Mitra (described in The Temple of Mitra on page 52), or to accompany Tomar, as described in Scene V: Crossed Paths (page 43).

Finally, someone with a personal connection to Antaeus may have come to Messantia seeking him out, in the company of his daughter Thyra. The player character might even be a relative of Antaeus or Thyra herself (see Thyra as a Player Character, page 24).

ASKING AROUND IN MESSANTIA

In this section are a few rumors that player characters might learn while asking around about Antaeus. Asking general questions about Antaeus requires a successful Average (D1) Society test or an Obtain Information Momentum spend. The gamemaster might want to make these rolls in secrecy, not telling them whether the roll was a success or a failure, keeping the issue of whether the information is truthful or false a secret.

Easy-to-discover information about Antaeus:

- Antaeus lives in a manse near the border of the Noble District. Few know him, but those who do know him as a scholar in antiquities, who translates documents and identifies relics or artifacts for a living.
- Antaeus' wife died almost 10 years ago, and he lives alone, but he has a daughter named Thyra who spends much of her time in the countryside, living with relatives in a small town in the countryside.
- The scholar keeps strange hours, sometimes up all night, other times closed in the bright of day. He often comes and goes with bundles of scrolls and books and has them delivered from all over.
- A few other folks have been asking about Antaeus lately. Can't remember whom, though.

More obscure information about Antaeus:

- Antaeus does work for the Temple of Mitra occasionally. A priest of Mitra has been seen coming and going to Antaeus' place as of late.
- He has also had some recent business with gem-carvers and jewel-smiths in the craftsman's quarter of Messantia.
- Several people are also asking around about him. A successful local merchant named Publio has been asking questions about Antaeus. Some Stygians, too. Another fellow, an Argossean, also asked a lot of questions. What's this all about?

Each Complication receives one or more of the following pieces of misinformation:

- Antaeus stole something of value from the Temple of Mitra, and the priests there have been negotiating for its return, fearful for his sorcerous wrath.
- Antaeus is secretly a sorcerer, though he puts up a secretive front as an ascetic scholar. They say he has been readying his own daughter for a sacrifice, and that she's chained up in his estate.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

In *Chapter I: The Fall of the House of Antaeus*, the following non-player characters appear, with the following motivations:

- **ANTEAEUS:** An Argossean scholar, he was hired to decipher the Eye of Acheron's markings. He immediately became suspicious about its nature. He is missing in this chapter.
- **PUBLIO:** A wealthy merchant and middleman dealing in stolen or clandestine items, he wants the Eye of Acheron for a highly demanding client, and is willing to use deceit or hire criminals to get it.
- **SEMERKHET:** An enigmatic Stygian noble and mercenary, he is after the Eye at the behest of the same patron as Publio, but is connected to it by his ancestor, Prince Tothmekri.
- **THYRA:** Antaeus' daughter, wanting to find out what has happened to her father.
- **XHOSĀTH:** A long-dead Acheronian sorcerer-priest, he wishes to be reborn into the flesh, and must sacrifice the soul of one of noble birth in the Acheronian afterlife.
- **YAROSH:** An Argossean sneak-thief, hired by a colleague of Antaeus' to recover the Eye of Acheron for himself.
- **TOMAR:** A young priest of Mitra, he was responsible for giving the Eye to Antaeus in the first place.
- **ERIADNE:** A priest of the Temple of Mitra, wanting this all to become someone else's problem.

General rumors abound in Messantia. If the player characters are asking about anything or everything that is happening, in hopes of learning some shred of additional evidence, following are a few rumors they might discover.

- The feared Shemitish pirate Gaal-Arvad is rumored to be sailing the waters of the Argossean coast. What brings him to town?
- A small gang of Stygians has newly arrived in town and are suspiciously scouting the city defenses. Perhaps they're looking for signs of weaknesses for an invasion?

SCENE I: AT THE MANSE OF ANTAEUS

For the reasons in **Adventure Hooks** on page 15, the player characters arrive at the manse of Antaeus, located in the northern Noble District of Messantia (not terribly far from Publio's villa).

The gamemaster can describe the following scene to the player characters, reading it aloud verbatim or paraphrasing, as best suits their preference.

The neighborhood is sleepy and quiet, with stone-carved lanterns at chest-height upon many corners, and few passersby on the streets. Few businesses are in this part of town, and those that are do not stay open past dark, so the only pedestrians are those who live in the Noble District, or their servants. As with many of Messantia's neighborhoods, the distant din of the sea echoes across the city, accompanied by the cool and salty tang of a middling sea breeze.

Footsteps echo on tightly spaced cobblestones, echoing in the quiet of these streets. Inside many of the manses and villas, lights shine from upper-floor windows, veiled by curtains of fine cloth, or shuttered behind ornate carved-ivory screens. The occasional laugh of a courtesan or roar of laughter is indistinct, but faintly heard.

Most of the buildings in this area are homes, villas, and mansions of wealthy merchants, hereditary nobles, wealthy foreigners, or others who made their fortunes by the sea's bounty. In parts of Noble District, the harbor is visible, long wooden peninsulas of docks stretching into the sea, with masts bare of sails as ships sit, newly-arrived and near-departure.





THE HOUSE OF ANTAEUS

This is what player characters see when they find Antaeus' manse:

Antaeus' manse itself is nestled between much larger and more impressive estates, a high and unadorned wall surrounding it. It is a smaller, narrower place, though the outer walls are clean and were fashioned with an austere, though tasteful style. Common to Argossean walls, thick ivy creeps along the top of the major wall and hangs down into the street. The gate is a sturdy one, thick and wooden doors hinged under a marble frame, old wood carved and inlaid with simple crossed patterns.

All that can be seen of the actual estate, sheltered as it is behind the high walls and thick gate, is a thick dome in the center, white stone protruding above the manse. It is not overlarge and appears to be the center of the manse. Trees project beyond the top of the wall, as well, attesting to a small courtyard in the middle of the place and surrounding the manse. A large, polished silver knocking ring hangs from one of the doors, just below a silver name-plate central to that door, and beside the gate is a small, shuttered window, perhaps for deliveries or for a guard to have the vantage of any visitors.

If the player characters can read Argossean, it says 'This is the domicile of Antaeus, Expert Scholar and Translator'. If this manse is like other Argossean estates, it is likely that there is a small guard station directly behind the gate, to the side. A successful Average (D1) Observation test alerts the player character to the presence of such a guard, from the rattle of his leathern harness and weapons and the scrape of a wooden chair or stool being adjusted for greater comfort.

PREVIOUSLY...

One quick method to get the player characters into the adventure is to begin with them as they are ready to break into Antaeus' manse. Upon appraising the situation described above, the gamemaster can then ask "What set you on this path? Was it honest work? Are you working for another? Are you in it for yourselves?" and then supply one of the introductions provided prior as a flashback.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

To make things simple, it is assumed that if together, the player characters arrive at roughly the same time, just after midnight. If player characters are not together, the gamemaster is encouraged to stagger their arrival times somewhat to enable them to observe each other entering the manse, or casing the place, and to react to each other's actions, perhaps making alliances or arrangements. This is recommended for player characters with similar motives, while player characters who have dramatically different motives (see **The Low Road** and **The High Road** on pages 18 and 19) should arrive at slightly different times.

Following is a suggested timeline of events and arrivals:

- Yarosh, the Argossean treasure-hunter (page 46), sets up a position watching the manse, concealed on a high rooftop several houses over. He observes the house with a small spyglass and watches for the arrival of the player characters. Unless a player character is specifically looking on the rooftops of nearby buildings, it is advised that Yarosh's hiding place not be discovered. If a player character does try to case the area specifically to seek out anyone hiding, roll an Observation test opposed by Yarosh's Stealth skill for the advantageous position. If Yarosh is spotted, he flees immediately through an established escape route.
- Just before midnight, three drunken guards arrive back at Antaeus' manse. At midnight, the shift changes, putting them on duty.
- At around ten minutes after midnight, a Messantian city guard patrol passes by the manse, and does not notice anything amiss. They return this way in another half-hour, a routine they follow on most nights, circling the entire Noble District with eyes alert to signs of ill-doers. Most of the time, though, it is slow and there is little of concern, so they are not particularly attentive.
- If the player characters have not otherwise specified a time to arrive, they should arrive at this time, just after the guard patrol and just before the arrival of Thyra (below). They likely enter the manse at this point.
- Just after the arrival of the player characters, Yarosh goes to find the city guard patrol, claiming that he has witnessed a break-in at Antaeus' manse from some unscrupulous-looking foreigners (if appropriate).
- The player characters inside the manse encounter each other, in a place determined by the gamemaster. They also potentially encounter the servants and

guards. The Eye of Acheron is found and the specters of Xhosãth and Antaeus appear.

- Immediately after, Thyra returns to the manse with any player characters she has been able to convince to assist her. This event might coincide with the previous events.
- Just after that, the Stygian mercenaries, led by Semerkhet, break into the manse and encounter the player characters and Thyra. There is a confrontation between the intruders.
- Yarosh and the city patrol arrive and begin pounding on the front gates. They tell him to wait outside, then go in to investigate. Yarosh then uses the ensuing confusion to sneak into the house and find a hiding place in the back storerooms. Semerkhet uses the commotion to escape as well, using as much Doom as is necessary, even sacrificing the lives of his mercenary henchmen to avoid capture.
- Somewhat later, Tomar, emissary from the Temple of Mitra, arrives. He finds the door ajar and enters, finding the situation as it has developed.

GETTING IN

There are many ways that player characters can get into Antaeus' manse. Following are the more obvious means of entry:

The Polite Approach

This method is perhaps the most obvious. If the player characters are on official business or the **High Road** (page 19), they are probably going to knock first before trying alternate methods of gaining entry. If a player character does knock, the small, shuttered window next to the gate opens and a guard peers through at them. He just woke up, somewhat flushed from drink. He demands to know what business the player characters have in his master's home. He claims that his master is not present, and refuses to let anyone enter, under Antaeus' specific orders. See **Antaeus' Guards**, page 27. The player characters are free to use any bullying tactics or coercion should they wish, requiring a successful a Daunting (D3) test.

Breaking and Entering

The front gate is sturdy, requiring a successful Daunting (D3) Athletics test to force open. If this is done, it alerts the guard immediately, and has a strong possibility to get the attention of the city guard, if they are near.

The lock to the gate is a complex and expensive one, as the business with the Temple of Mitra and the discovery



of the Eye of Acheron made Antaeus cautious about theft and paranoid about break-ins. He recently had the lock replaced, and a successful Average (D1) Observation or Craft test shows that the lock is quite recent and of high quality. This lock requires a successful Daunting (D3) Thievery test, adjusted by tools or situational modifiers. It takes a full round to pick a lock, and during this time, any

player characters doing so run the risk of being noticed by the city patrolmen.

If the player characters fail in Average (D1) Stealth tests (opposed by the guard's Senses Field of Expertise), the guard hears them. He looks out the window to see who it is, blows his whistle, or runs inside for reinforcements, as appropriate.

Over the Wall

The stone wall is high, but not oppressively so, being around a dozen feet tall. It has a thick weave of ivy vines crawling across it, picturesque but foiling the security of the manse by providing aid to climbers in the form of ready handholds. A successful Average (D1) Acrobatics test is sufficient to climb the wall without mishap, though a successful Stealth test (opposed by the Senses of the guard or the Messantian city patrolmen, below) avoids alerting the guard.

Especially-agile player characters might leap up, grab the uppermost lip of the wall, and pull or swing themselves up, a Daunting (D2) Athletics test. From there, they can help others climb with an Average (D1) Athletics test.

The Guard Window

The guard window is about a foot across and two feet high, shuttered with a sliding lock on the inside. It is made of relatively light wood and a successful Daunting (D2) Athletics test can easily force the door open, breaking the hinges and/or sliding bolt, or the lock can be picked with a successful Average (D1) Thievery test. If a guard is still at his guard station on the other side of this window, there is little chance he will not notice someone attempting to open the window or crawling through. He is a deep sleeper, but not that deep!

THYRA AS A PLAYER CHARACTER

One option might be to have a player take on the role of Thyra, daughter of Antaeus, who has information to feed the other player characters. This is a challenging role, however, and may result in the player losing control over the player character from time to time or having to sit out a session near the climax of the adventure. However, this method does much to personalize the adventure, as well as creating the opportunity for a romantic element between players rather than a player character and a non-player character, if appropriate for the group of players and the gamemaster. If this is not to the style of the player group, however, the gamemaster is advised to let Thyra remain a non-player character. Alternately, the part of Thyra can be played by a 'guest' player who does not necessarily need to show up for each session.

Statistics for Thyra are presented on page 40. The writeup of Thyra assumes she is a non-player character,

and no modification is needed should a player wish to use her as a player character. If a player is taking on the role of Thyra, they can either use her as presented, or can create a new character that is the offspring of Antaeus.

This changes the dynamics somewhat, however, and could potentially eliminate some plot elements currently presented. If this option is pursued, the gamemaster should note that Thyra's actual attributes are relatively unimportant to the adventure: what matters is her relationship to her father Antaeus and the timing of her arrival in Messantia. It is suggested, however, if Thyra is created anew for use by a player rather as a non-player character, she either be a scholar or even a priestess-in-training of Mitra. If desired, she may know some sorcery, which may become crucial later in the adventure. If another player character has these abilities, however, this is not as important.

Sneaking Around to the Back

There is another entry to the manse, around the back, in a narrow alley that serves several of the estates along this row. There is a small door here, usually bolted and locked from within. The door is average in thickness and can be forced open with a successful Daunting (D2) Athletics test, though it will undoubtedly raise some alarm, as a small bell has been attached to the opposite side to alert those inside when it is opened. Opening the locks from the outside requires a Daunting (D2) Thievery test: failure means that the bell rings and a Complication means it rings within earshot of the guard, Antaeus' or the city watch. If the player characters have made arrangements with Antaeus' treacherous guardsmen in **The Low Road** (page 18), Olus is waiting for them, silencing the bell with a small piece of cloth.

'Ware the Guard

Any of these break-in methods runs the risk of discovery by the Messantian city patrol. As noted above, their first patrol will be roughly ten minutes after midnight, and every half-hour afterwards. If the player characters are spotted by the city patrol, it is not a guarantee that they will be arrested. This depends on what activities the player characters were up to when the patrolmen see them, and how much potentially criminal activity is witnessed.

Their reaction can range from a stern warning and an admonition about being in this district after dark, to drawn swords and an immediate challenge. The gamemaster should decide how guilty the player characters look, and judge accordingly. Killing the city patrol loudly or messily is a surefire means of summoning another, and if one of them can blow a whistle to summon more help (a Standard Action), more guards arrive in the next 1d20 minutes.

City Patrolman

A patrol in these areas usually consists of between two to four patrolmen. Use the standard guard Minion (**Conan** corebook, page 317) to represent an average Messantian patrolman in the wealthier districts of town, and a Toughened guard for their captain. Alternately, for variety, the gamemaster can use the watchman Minion described on page 81 of **Conan the Thief**. They're armed with shortwords (Reach 2, 1H, 4☹, Parrying) and small shields. They're all Argossean and speak Argossean, Aquilonian, Shemitish, and Zingaran, and are also equipped with manacles and a tin whistle to summon other guards.

One member of each patrol carries a long pole with a lantern attached to the end on a large hook. The lantern-bearer can use the lantern like a staff in combat if necessary, tripping an opponent where possible. Once inside Antaeus' manse, this guard detaches the lantern and carries it one-handed, leaving the staff at the front gate as a sign to other patrolmen that they are inside.

SCENE II: THE SILENT HALLS

Once egress into Antaeus' manse is gained, the player characters should at least think to cover their tracks (closing and barring the door, covering up any blood-stains, etc.) if they have left any telltale signs of their entry. If they do not take these precautions, the next patrol along the way automatically notices something amiss. If the city watch suspects that there has been a break-in, they enter the premises and look for the ill-doers themselves, with one of their number quietly running for assistance from other guardsmen.

If this happens, they may be encountered in the chambers within Antaeus' manse, making little attempt to be silent, and frequently calling out Antaeus' name. These guardsmen are not seasoned veterans, and foolishly separate to better find the villain, thinking their culprit a single sneak-thief or desperate robber rather than a group of well-armed player characters.

ANTAEUS' MANSE

The gamemaster can read (or paraphrase) the following to the player characters:

Once inside the outer wall, Antaeus' manse appears a more modest abode than others in this district. It is a squarish manse in the classic Argossean style, with a peaked front entrance and hall, and a central courtyard in the middle, with entry along several points in the outside and into the interior garden. Fashioned of light-coloured stone and rich, dark wood, it has few windows and those are quite high, at least ten feet from the ground. These windows are high, narrow, and peaked, and some are covered with wooden shutters fastened from the inside. The manse is a tall, single floor in height, with a great double-door in front. A small cobblestone path leads to the front door, and a carefully maintained garden surrounds the house, with small stone benches and statues standing in artful array. No one is visible, though lights shine from a few of the windows.

Player characters who make a successful Simple (Do) Observation test sees one of the guards move by an open window, a lantern in his hand lighting his way as he moves through the manse. It is clear he is not paying much attention to his duty, as his head does not sway much and his attention seems only on moving forward on a route, rather than exploring for trespassers or seeking signs of intrusion. If the player characters have had encounters with the guards

previously, they will recognize the guard as Olus, an average-looking Argossean in a grey tunic and leather cap, armed only with a shortsword at his belt.

A successful Average (D1) Observation test results in the player character hearing a slight yip and a growl from the high, open windows near the back of the place. These are from the three dogs Antaeus keeps in his chambers. They are not vicious growls, though, and are merely the by-product of the dogs arguing over the disposition of a large bone. In a moment or two, the sounds fade.

THE GARDEN

If the player characters have somehow managed to make enough noise to be noticed from inside, in short order the rear door of Antaeus' manse opens and out from it surge three lean black forms, his hounds. They easily scent the player characters and run at them in earnest. A Daunting (D3) Animal Handling test can calm them: otherwise, they attack. Use the writeups for dogs, Minion version, on page 326 of the **Conan** corebook.

However, if the player characters have not alerted the guards, they can easily pass through the garden unmolested. The gamemaster can read aloud the following:

Encircling the manse is a fine garden, though in recent disrepair. The rich green grass proves a strong counterpoint to the pale stone of the manse and the interior of its walls, and high trellises support thick ropes of crawling vines and flowers. Rows of flowers give off heady perfume, and beads of wetness on everything from the night's moist air adds a surreal gleam to the entire garden as moonlight is caught and sent cascading across the verdancy.

Tall statues dot corners of the garden, portraying sage men seated upon high seats, fists set beneath chins, perhaps pondering the mysteries of the unknowable, vast universe turning silently above them. Many low benches line the paths, conveniently placed where a wanderer, lost in thought, might sit and contemplate some vast design.

It is not apparent, but Antaeus himself is the gardener, cultivating many herbs and plants of some potency. There are a variety of herbs that can be utilized in various sorcerous means, though they have mundane functionality as well: whether medicinal, dietary, and aesthetic. There are no lotus plants (of any colour) growing in this garden, however. If desired, the gamemaster can consult the rules for herbalism in *The Book of Skelos* (pages 87–93) for more about these plants, if the player characters are of a mind to try to forage plants in this garden. Alternately, an Average (D1) Survival check can scavenge 1+1 🍀 resources of healing herbs (**Conan** corebook, page 141) and a successful Average (D1) Sorcery test yields the same for sorcerous offerings.

GETTING IN

The front doors are locked and bolted from the inside, requiring a successful Daunting (D2) Thievery test to open the lock and the sliding bar. Alternatively, the doors are sturdy, requiring a Daunting (D2) Athletics test to force open. A third option is an Average (D1) Athletics test allowing a player character access to one of the windows. The shutters are not overly strong and require little effort to force one free from the light hinges and flimsy bolt. Not all the windows have closed shutters, and player characters can easily find an open shutter.

Player characters making any significant amount of noise will alert the dogs, three trained hounds that work together as a pack (see page 29). They will immediately begin barking, and unless silenced quickly, will quickly rouse the guards and servants. If they continue barking for some time, or their barks become even more intense (such as being in combat), this will potentially alert the city patrol. If the dogs bark while the city watch is within hearing distance, they arrive at Antaeus' manse within 1+5 🐾 minutes.

Knocking at the door is the most direct and honest means of gaining entry, and a silver door-knocker like the one at the front gate is mounted upon the wall aside the door frame. If the player characters knock at the door, in a minute, Antaeus' butler Ponteus arrives. If Ponteus has any reason to suspect a threat, he is accompanied by Olus (one of the house guards) and the guard dogs. If the player characters sneak through the front door, they have a chance of surprising one of the servants or guards described below. The gamemaster should choose an appropriate servant or guard depending on where the player characters enter the home.

The rear door enters the kitchen area directly and is adjacent to the door to one of the servant's quarters, that inhabited by the two maidservants (described below). The door is unlocked, as there are other means of entering the house, and the servants and guards commonly use it. At midnight, these women should be asleep.

The roof is accessible with a successful Average (D1) Athletics test, with ivy-covered trellises and numerous protrusions and ledges aplenty. It is around 20' in height along most of the rooftop, lightly slanted outwards. The library has a much higher ceiling (and roof) than the rest of the manse, with a dome that stands another 15' from the surrounding roof. There are long, glazed windows dotting most of the house, allowing light into many of the rooms. None are made to open and are thick sheets of glass set into place with mortar. Breaking one of these is relatively easy with a weapon pommel or any hard surface, and they could accommodate someone to enter but doing so would make a tremendous racket that would echo throughout the entire house.

INSIDE THE MANSE

Antaeus' manse has twelve rooms arranged around an inside courtyard, with many doors on the outside and inside, along with some short halls cutting through the manse into the courtyard. It was built centuries ago for a minor prince, and the overall theme was elegance and beauty rather than security and defensibility. Foot-thick columns are spaced throughout the manse, supporting the high roof from many places.

The rooms are furnished in the classic Argossean style, a bit out of date, and while the furnishings are not sumptuous, the owner of the home is clearly someone of considerable wealth and a taste for antiquities. Hanging curtains and tapestries adorn many walls, and small pedestals topped with curious and classic statues of humans and natural animals stand in many corners. Books and scrolls are ever-present, on shelves against many walls, stacked in piles, organized in racks and scattered across the floor in abundance and disarray. There are many tables, and all of them are covered with books, scrolls, pieces of parchment covered with a variety of languages and notes and many unusual curios and strange pieces of stone and pottery, some of worth and others of no apparent value.

It has the appearance of a library or great store-house of knowledge, once orderly and now staggering under the weight of having its stock doubled, with no place to assemble or organize anything. A player character making a successful Average (D1) Lore test sees that there is considerable worth in some of these books and scrolls, and that the curios themselves might fetch some good price to a disreputable dealer. However, sorting out the valuable, the useful-but-common, from the merely interesting is a matter of days — or even weeks — rather than hours. A successful Average (D1) Linguist test reveals that Antaeus was clearly a translator of considerable skill and breadth, specializing in dead, forgotten and ancient languages. His work-notes are tucked into books, lying beside open scrolls, and discarded upon the floor like leaves.

Antaeus has not bothered to lock any doors but that of his study and his personal chamber, and few of the doors in the manse have actual doors or locks upon them. Such is the style of Argossean architecture of the period.

Finding the hiding place of the Eye of Acheron is going to take some time, and of the player characters and their various motives and reasons for being in the manse, only Thyra has a good idea where it might be kept. She has not trusted anyone but kin with this information, asking instead to be escorted to the main library where she insists upon privacy to recover it.

Every time the player characters enter a room, the gamemaster should roll 1☹. A result of 1 indicates that a

guard is present, a 2 is a servant. A result of 3 or 4 indicates no one is present, and a ☹ means a guard enters after the player characters enter. The gamemaster should choose an appropriate servant or guard for the area. Olus and Petros are on patrol, and only Ponteus is awake by default.

The guard-dogs are Antaeus' pets and sleep in his quarters on a thick fur strewn upon the floor. If player characters enter the bedchamber or an adjoining room (see the map on page 29), the gamemaster should have the dogs make an Observation test opposed by the player characters' Stealth skill. Once awakened, they begin to bark fiercely, and all three wake and come after the source of the disturbance. They are not normally chained together — this is done when the guards have some time to go and fetch the dogs to deal with intruders.

Antaeus' Servants

Antaeus has four servants within his manse; a butler (Ponteus), a cook (Tiro) and two maidservants (Cilla and Zita). These last two run errands for him, clean and serve in a variety of capacities. All four are Argosseans, ranging from young to middle-aged. The cook and butler are male, and share quarters, while the maidservants have quarters of their own, near the kitchen. None are especially loyal to Antaeus and do not risk their lives for defense of his home, though they might steal something if there is a strong chance that they can get away with it.

Only Ponteus is awake throughout the night, as the door-butler, and the rest of the servants are getting rest while their master is away. Antaeus' orders were to never disrupt his works and books, so there is little tidying up that they can do, and the servants are served commoner fare when their master is not around. They speak Argossean, and between them they have a smattering of Aquilonian, Kothic, Kushite, and Shemitish.

Antaeus' Guards

Antaeus has six guards in total. All are Argosseans from the countryside surrounding Messantia. They all recognize Thyra, as they knew her as a girl. Two are on patrol, wandering about the house together, though sometimes separately, bored, and still a bit drunk, while another is in the small gatehouse outside. The other three guards have retired to their quarters and are readying themselves for sleep, though two are playing at dice before lying down. They can all be ready for action quickly if there is trouble or a commotion. One among the three on patrol carries a key ring holding keys to the gates, the front door, study, and Antaeus' chambers. Use the writeups for guard Minions from the **Conan** corebook, page 317, with shortswords (Reach 2, 1H, 4☹, Parrying).

TREASURES TO BE FOUND

As described above, the entire manse is full of interesting *bric-a-brac* antiquities and curiosities that might be worth something significant to a collector, but whose true value is likely to be lost on that of the average fence. If the player characters are intent on pilfering items of value, the following list, though not remotely comprehensive, can inspire the gamemaster in placing items of value for the player characters to take. The gamemaster should pick items of value from the list below based on the sort of items the player characters state they are looking for.

It is suggested that the gamemaster require the player characters to make successful Observation tests to find the items in question, with each point of Momentum yielding another item. Later they can perform any relevant tests from each item's description.

- A gold-encrusted ivory scroll-case, very fragile. A successful Average (D1) Craft test reveals that the case is worth approximately 10 Gold but opening it causes the extremely fragile scroll inside to crumble into dust.
- A thick, dark-bound book in archaic Brythunian regarding the growth of strange cults in the Hyborian countries of Aquilonia, Nemedía, Ophir, Brythunia, Corinthia and Zingara. It has no title and a successful Average (D1) Linguistics test yields that might be worth 10 Gold to a book collector.
- A small and ancient figurine of some purple stone, nearly worn to smoothness and details lost. A successful Average (D1) Lore test reveals that it is an Atlantean king, and the value is approximately 15 Gold.
- A large hanging scroll, rich with golden ink and set with small gemstones, portraying the Shemite pantheon in all its strange and terrifying variety. A successful Average (D1) Lore test identifies the gods and the relative value of the scroll at 20 Gold.
- An Aquilonian treatise on the languages of the Picts, written in antiquated Aquilonian 300

years ago by an explorer named Porcello of Galparan. A successful Average (D1) Linguistics test puts the value at roughly 10 Gold.

- A set of eleven long, slender eating utensils of ancient make, inscribed with letters in an unknown script. Made of a dull silvery metal (platinum) and set with bloodstones. A successful Challenging (D2) Lore test places them as ancient Acheronian utensils for a royal consort, worth around 15 Gold to a discerning collector, or around 3 Gold for the raw materials if chopped and sold.
- A long stone tablet, one corner broken, of a dark stone, with long lines of glyphs in various alphabets upon it. A successful Challenge (D2) Linguistics test reveals that it is a veritable Rosetta stone, describing the rules of entry into a long-vanished city of Vanara, in long-forgotten Thurian Valusia, in several languages. To a dealer in stolen goods, the item is worthless, but to a university or scholar, worth 30 Gold easily.

Attempting to pawn any of these items in any hurry yields only around 25% of the item's stated worth, and more than likely incurs the attention of the city watch. If the burglary of Antaeus' manse is known on the streets when the items are attempted to be sold, the price drops to approximately 10% the stated worth, and the fence will probably turn the player character(s) over to the city watch for a nice reward. Publio is not interested in purchasing any of these items and berates any player characters for reckless fools if they attempt to sell them to him.

The Book of Skelos, *Nameless Cults*, and *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities* each contain items or items suitable for placement in Antaeus' collection. However, given that Antaeus himself is a benevolent translator and scholar, rather than a black-souled sorcerer, the nature of items found within his collection should be on the scholarly side of things rather than a collection of high-powered magic items.

It is recommended that there be no magical artifacts, at all, as the Hyborian Age is not one where magical gewgaws and trinkets are found haphazardly.



Antaeus' Guard Dogs

Antaeus has three dogs that he keeps for companionship, and as guards themselves. They are all Argossean-bred hounds, lean and with short black hair. Each has a collar that can be attached a chain. The lead guardsman oversees them and keeps them chained as a trio. In darkness, the trinity of hounds might even be mistaken for a three-headed dog (a figure from obscure Argossean myth), a notion that delighted Antaeus while he was alive. See the **Conan** corebook, page 326.

The Entry Hall

The entry hall is wide and long, bisecting the manse entirely, passing into the open courtyard. Thin columns flank the walls, and statues of classic figures from Argossean philosophy and thought are displayed prominently upon slight pedestals. Thin banners and tapestries hang upon the walls, and the floor is marble of dark green and white, alternating squares, like a great chessboard. There are a few low benches with slight cushions upon them, specifically for Antaeus' visiting clients while they wait to meet with the scholar.

The Side Rooms

There are several side rooms in Antaeus' estate. Originally, they were set aside for family-members and household

retainers, but Antaeus has few of the first and none of the second, so they have become extensions of his research library, and storerooms for the immense collection of curios and items of antiquity that he has collected over the decades. There is little organization to these chambers — they are all scrambles of loose papers, stacks of books and scrolls upon every horizontal flat surface, dotted throughout with knick-knacks and oddments of all shapes and sizes. See the **Treasures to be Found** sidebar (page 28) if the player characters are eager to sift through the vast amount of stuff seeking some gold amongst the dross.

One of the rooms was Thyra's as a child, and though Antaeus has not disturbed her possessions, he has nonetheless allowed his own collection of items to overrun her own meagre belongings. A successful Average (D1) Insight test reveal that some of the items in one of the rooms seem out of place — many small toys and a chest of girl's clothing, long undisturbed. There is a bed made for a smaller child in this room, though the books stacked upon the bed have been there for at least a decade.

Later, if Thyra has a chance to go through Antaeus' manse, she comes to this room and picks out some personal belongings from the small chest at the foot of her old bed, mostly small keepsakes that remind her of her mother and father, in happier times.

The Servants' Quarters

Three rooms have been set aside for the guards and the servants of Antaeus' household. Though Antaeus is no miser and does not wish to force his staff to live in hardship, it is common for the wealthy to allow only sustenance-level existence for the servants, some of who have no place else to go. Rooms alone are unheard of, and even a room designated for servants is a somewhat grand gesture, as most households and manses have their servants sleeping in the kitchens, store-rooms or other places out of the way. The servants' quarters are humbly furnished, with simpler furniture and are quite a bit neater than the rest of the estate, as they are free from the almost omnipresent tide of books and paper that blankets the rest of the manse.

The largest of the three rooms is the guard's chamber, containing six humble pallets with a chest at the foot of each. A few low benches of common make are pulled up to a table in the corner, and pegs hang near the door supporting weapon-belts and cloaks. If the player characters approach this room stealthily, they find one of the guards asleep while the other two play at dice at the table, clad in their under-tunics and little else. A bottle of wine sits open on the table next to them; only dregs remain, and the two guards are a bit flushed from drink, passing the bottle between themselves. The remains of their dinners sitting on plates that have been pushed to the side, and their weapons are hanging on the pegs near the door.


Drunk, they are either Dazed or Staggered (*Conan* corebook, page 126). Each chest contains their personal effects. Near the door is a small rack for their weapons, and two crossbows and quivers of 20 bolts are readily available here.

The butler and the cook, share a chamber near the guard's room, though it is much smaller. Usually, in the evenings, the butler is awake to handle any late visitors and to attend to Antaeus should he need assistance during late-night study, as the scholar kept erratic hours. There are two low beds, and each is occupied by a soundly sleeping man. A small table sits between their beds, and on it is a wooden game-board, where they were playing thrones (a game like chess) before retiring. Several bottles of wine are sitting empty near the door: a far better vintage than the swill the guards were given. Each man has a chest full of clothing and personal effects. Neither carries or uses any weapons and flees or begs clemency from any attackers. They do not keep their door locked.

The two maidservants share a chamber together adjoining the kitchen. Both are sound asleep. There is no light in the room, and only a small skylight allows moonlight into the room. The chamber is barred from the inside. They do not always do so, but the guards' drunken return made them cautious against possible trouble, so they chose to secure their sleep against intrusion. If trespass is attempted, both women will awaken and begin screaming.

The Stygians, when they arrive, ignore the servants, after trying to open the lock and finding the door barred from within. The women have little of value, aside from small pouches of coins stashed beneath their beds.

The Private Chamber

Antaeus' chamber is unlocked, though opening the door will have the unfortunate side effect of potentially waking his three dogs, if they are there and have not already been roused by previous activity in the house. They will attack any strangers if awakened, barking loudly and eventually alerting the entire neighborhood. The city patrol (described on page 43) should arrive in 5  or at the gamemaster's choice minutes if this occurs.

Aside from the three great black dogs, the room is relatively sparse. Furnishings are simple: a large bed covered in silken bedclothes; a settee covered with books and scrolls; a small table similarly overrun; and a few comfortable chairs. A few large chests and an upright wardrobe hold Antaeus' personal belongings, but he does not keep his valuables here. The dogs sleep on the floor, in a huge swath of used white sailcloth. A skylight illuminates the room at night, and several candles and candle-stands are used for light when Antaeus is present.

The Kitchen

There is little of interest to this room unless one happens to be eager to prepare food. Long tables and a central cooking fire dominate the room. A round table with four stools provides the servants a place to eat. There are plenty of cooking implements. If for some reason the player characters need to find an improvised weapon in this room, treat any cooking knives as daggers. The fire is not active, and just inside the door is a great pile of wood. Stuck into a stump next to the firewood pile is a small hatchet. Looking around at the floor, player characters might notice a mouse or two scurrying around in the corners, beneath the tables.

The Foodstores

Located just off the kitchen, the manse's food stores are well-stocked and organized, filled with thick wheels of cheese, hanging sides of smoked and cured meat, barrels of grain and dried beans. Coils of sausage are piled high upon a table to prevent mice from gnawing at them, and a thick basket holds loaves of bread. Hanging from the ceiling are baskets full of vegetables and fruit, as well as more coils of garlic and clusters of gourds and tubers. One entire wall is given to wine and strong drink, from racks of dark bottles and jugs of fine Argossean and Kyros wine to several large casks of ale. If one were to attempt to loot the food stores, there would perhaps be 5 Gold worth of food and drink, but it would be difficult to sell them and hauling them from the place would be inconspicuous.

My beloved daughter,

I write these words in hopes that you will never have cause to read them, as my first action upon my return to Messantia will be to consign this entreaty to the fire. Should you be reading this, you may be certain that events have played poorly for me, and that I am imprisoned or worse. I have left to bring closure to matters 'twere best I had not initiated, and I fear that I have unlocked greater threat than I could have imagined. I will not provide specifics about this, and urge you that should you read this and not receive my message, that you accept that I am dead. In this, I beseech you to burn a taper in my name at the Temple of Mitra and ask that I be granted clemency and allowed into his heaven.

On the matter of this world, I surrender unto you the inheritance and ownership of this house and its contents. I urge you that should you choose not to continue my work, that the entirety of my library be sold to the Temple of Mitra, that they might benefit from this great store of knowledge. I have discussed the matter with a priest at the temple named Eriadne, and an equitable arrangement has been made that should ensure you know no time of want in your lifespan, be it lengthy and calm.

The servants, should you continue to require their services, are adequate and will likely remain loyal to you. The dogs of course were my third great love, after yourself and your mother's memory, and I trust that they will provide you with adequate companionship despite the years since you last saw them.

In Mitra's name, his blessing mingled with my own love, your father.

Antaeus

The Dining Hall

Perhaps the finest and most richly appointed room in the estate, Antaeus' dining hall is where he met with his clients, and as such, was decorated to impress. A long table of white and black marble dominates, and the chairs are ornately carved wood with cushions of white silk upon the seats. Unlike many dining halls, Antaeus' has several bookshelves as décor, each full of fine reference volumes and chosen specifically to cultivate an air of asceticism and the breadth of Antaeus' knowledge. High pedestals display statues of kneeling and seated philosophers and scholars from Argossean history, their graven eyes apparently contemplating mysteries unguessed at, or intellectual puzzles still unsolved.

In a corner, given a place of prominence and placed higher than the other statues, is a statue depicting Mitra, gazing serenely into the air, a wide scroll held open in his long-fingered hands. Alternating these pedestals are fluted columns that reach to the ceiling, decorated mid-height with bands of engraved bronze. Centered in one wall is a great fireplace, large enough to stand within should someone be so foolhardy. Currently, it is dark and empty, the ashes being neatly swept away. Rich curtains of gold-edged blue hang along the walls, and the sound in this room echoes slightly, giving it a sense of vastness. The dining hall, like the great study it opens into, has the highest ceiling in Antaeus' manse, and is illuminated from above by four skylights set into the roof.

The Great Study

Though most of the doors in Antaeus' manse are unlocked or are mere curtains, the door to the great study boasts a more complex lock, requiring a successful Challenging (D2) Thievery test, or some other means of entry. The grand double-doors to the room are stout and would require a successful Challenging (D2) Athletics test to bash down. This would make considerable noise, and easily alert the guards.

When the player characters get access to the library, the gamemaster should read the following to them:

You have likely never in your lives seen such a collection of books and scrolls. If someone assured you that every book in all the Hyborian continent was in this room, you would initially have little reason to doubt such a claim. Shelves taller than a man's head display volumes upon volumes of stacked books, folios, ledgers, albums, codices, lexicons, compendiums, quartos and octavos, atlases, and other volumes of types as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Scroll racks hold a similar variety of rolled manuscripts, great and small, ancient, and newly scribed. There are lecterns containing open volumes and large maps, and a few high stands allow scrolls to be hung and read vertically. Maps and loose sheets of vellum, parchment and other papers are to be found everywhere, and candle-stands are everywhere, great molten heaps of wax beneath them, fusing them to the marble floor.

The floor itself holds almost as much as the shelves, with stacks of books stacked at various heights, usually topped with an open volume. Several tables display works in progress, with stacks of parchment unwritten upon, and writing implements and a variety of inks sitting ready, small bottles and feathered quills in clusters across the flat surfaces.

Light shines in bright columns from windows set in the ceiling, and the room is notable for its almost complete lack of furniture other than a single high-backed chair.

This trove of knowledge is one of the finer repositories of scholasticism that might be found in all of Argos. Antaeus has guarded his trove of books, scrolls and other written works with care, and only his servants and daughter have seen the extent of his library. There are other, perhaps broader libraries full of greater riches elsewhere in the Hyborian continent, particularly in Tarantia or Stygia, but few of these places have the breadth of knowledge that Antaeus' study represents, and almost none are in private hands. It is a hidden treasure of Messantia, one that Antaeus has been careful not to reveal to any other than his peers of the Temple of Mitra. All of this will be immediately apparent to any scholar player characters or anyone with a sufficiently cosmopolitan origin.

Information about Antaeus' whereabouts and his recent dealings are scattered on the table, along with a letter addressed to Thyra, sealed with a thick glob of blue wax and Antaeus' personal seal. A copy of the letter is provided with the handouts for this campaign. If the player characters break the seal of the letter and read it, they will see that it is written in Argossean in what they may recognize (from other documents) as Antaeus' strong hand.

There is more to the letter, a block of text written in a cipher devised by Antaeus specifically to communicate with his daughter. She alone knows the key to this cipher and can read it freely, though a successful Daunting (D3) Linguistics test unlocks the code and allows the player character to read the following script:

An item of considerable value is hidden in the vault, and regarding this, these instructions are to be followed exactly. It must be handled only with the greatest of care. You are to first contact a priest at the Temple of Mitra. His name is Tomar, and he has been made aware of the existence of the item. This artifact is ancient and of potent evil. I fear that it contains some great evil, once sleeping but now awakened and aware. Tomar and Eriadne, his superior, shall know how best to deal with it. Give it freely unto them and think of it no further. Pray that your own dreams do not take you to strange shores before a fearful river. Should you be caught up in this web of madness, death itself cannot give me succor from the grief I will know.

Player characters who choose to root around in the personal papers will be interrupted by events in the next scene. More information about Antaeus' recent business and clues that can be gleaned are found in the section titled **The Scholar's Trail** on page 55.

One element that will become obvious to any literate player characters upon a close inspection of the volumes in the room is that there are no grimoires and few works on the arcane, sorcery, demonology, or other subjects regularly associated with sorcerers and evil wizardry. A successful Average (D1) Sorcery test gives the certainty that there are no sorcerous volumes at all in this library, other than in a general sense. No spell-books or scrolls of human skin, no volumes of sinister countenance. In fact, it is hardly the lair of a despicable sorcerer at all. If the player characters have been acting on the assumption that Antaeus is a sorcerer, there is absolutely nothing in this room to support that belief.

A successful Average (D1) Lore test confirms what the player characters might have already guessed, that the contents of the library are priceless to the right organization, for purchasing it entirely is beyond the capabilities of most individuals, no matter how wealthy. If player characters choose to utilize the library for research purposes later during this chapter (or this campaign, should they survive it),

they will discover that the exhaustive resources it provides serves as an academic library for Linguistics or Lore tests (**Conan** corebook, page 141). A player character fluent in more than six languages may re-roll any failed d20 from a research attempt made in this library on these subjects.

The Hidden Vault

Astute player characters may begin searching the Great Study as a matter of course, seeking out a secure place where valuables are stored. A successful Average (D1) Observation test reveals to the player character that the layout of the room has an area that is ‘missing’. An Obtain Momentum spend also reveals this. The Great Study contains a concealed room whose door is cunningly concealed by a bookshelf that slides aside to reveal a blank wall. Another point of Momentum spent shows that the blank wall is in fact a concealed panel. A small keyhole is visible in the upper right corner of the hidden panel. There are only two keys to this lock: one is in Thyra’s possession and the other was with Antaeus, when he went to Asgalun. Before his death, he discarded the key into the sewers of Asgalun, and it has not been recovered.

Opening the lock requires a successful Daunting (D3) Thievery test. It is also booby-trapped, with a small stud set nearby (concealed as a nail-head) that deactivates the trap. On a Complication, a long needle suddenly thrusts out from the lock mechanism. The needle is covered with a toxin equivalent to serpent venom, doing 2 damage, Persistent 2, Unforgiving 1. Once the needle trap has sprung, it remains locked in place, and can be easily broken off or otherwise avoided.

The door is a thin slab of marble with a simple hinge (Armor 4, Structure 10). Obviously, smashing through a marble door will make a considerable amount of noise, enough to rouse anyone in the house, but not so much as to alert the city guard outside.

Once the door is opened, the gamemaster should read the following to the player characters:

The hidden door opened, you see inside a small chamber. It is barely large enough for a person to stand in, and inside is a shelf with several small chests upon it, along with various volumes and scrolls. A few small statuettes stand upon the shelf, including many pieces encrusted with gems and precious stones. It is uncertain what draws your eyes to it, but you see a small silk-wrapped bundle around the size of a human fist upon one of the shelves.

Inside the silk wrapping is an artifact of considerable heft, a silver setting with a large black faceted jewel set horizontally into it, depending upon a thick chain of ancient make. It is likely that one or more of the player characters will recognize the item that they have been sent to recover. This item is the Eye of Acheron, a magic artifact

of immense power and sinister purpose. The boxed text below has a full description of the powers of the Eye of Acheron, and **Campaign Background** on page 7 details its darksome history.

If the player characters take the time to search the rest of the vault, they will find a small, locked chest requiring a Challenging (D2) Thievery test full of gold and silver coins and tiny cut gems in a small leather sack, worth a total of 25 Gold. A flat unlocked box contains some jewelery — a necklace and various ornaments set with pearls. A note inside the box is in Antaeus’ hand, written in Argossean, and says ‘For Thyra, when she is of age.’ These are her mother’s jewels. They are worth around 20 Gold if sold, but naturally Thyra protests if she learns that any of the player characters have them in their possession.

A series of ledgers bound in grey leather are arrayed on the shelf, detailing the extents of Antaeus’ holdings, cataloging of the items in his possession, and listing his business dealings. If the player characters get a chance later to examine these, they will learn something of what he has been up to, as described in **Antaeus’ Ledgers** on page 32.

If the player characters are wary about touching the eye (due to forewarning from their adventure hooks or the message to Thyra), they should make Simple (D0) Acrobatics tests to handle it without accidentally touching it, modified by any steps they take to avoid such contact. Gloves or cloth does not provide protection from the effects of the Eye of Acheron, as described above.

Upsetting or moving the Eye triggers the following event, described in the text below. The gamemaster should read this aloud to the player characters, as it is their first encounter with the curse that will drive them for much of the remainder of this campaign.

The instant you move the amulet, a sudden, strange sensation begins to come across all of you. The hackles upon the backs of your necks raise, and you feel as if you are being watched from a great distance, as if the study were some great celestial arena. The stands are filled with silent onlookers, the weight of their vision seemingly burdening your very souls.

Any candles or torch-flame gutter and blow out, leaving the great study eerily illuminated by the pillars of moonlight from the sky above, brighter than they were scant moments before. The room’s contents are lit strangely, with moonlight dusting silver upon all surfaces, and even your own breath steams briefly, though there is no chill in the room.

The flow of time ebbs, then stops altogether and your vision swims and blurs, and then bright, cold light shines in your face, providing no warmth and causing spots of blackness to dance briefly in your gaze. When these inky obstructions are clear, you are aware that you are somewhere else.

THE EYE OF ACHERON

This jeweled amulet contains the trapped soul of a powerful Acheronian sorcerer, Xhosāth, who has been driven mad over the millennia of his imprisonment in the jewel. It is one of the most significant sorcerous items of the Hyborian age, obscure and thought lost and buried forever. Only the greatest and most learned of scholars know of its existence, and those who know of it and its grand history would prefer to leave it buried and lost. Only the most ambitious and reckless of mortals would dare to attempt to awaken the soul trapped within. Unfortunately for the player characters, this campaign details the schemes of just such a sorcerer and his allies.

Physically, the artifact is around four inches across, carved with strange twists and tiny runic glyphs. The center of the amulet is a huge black teardrop-shaped stone, faceted and highly polished. It is set into the artifact horizontally, and the overall effect it presents is that of a dark eye. It gives a sense of surprising heft if held, though its true weight is a mere pound. The chain is almost two feet in length if measured and should fit about the neck of any player characters. A strange characteristic of the chain is that it seems to fit perfectly about the neck of any who wear it, from a huge Vanir barbarian to the slightest of Zamorian thieves. Counting the links will come up with the same number, but its length seems to accommodate the wearer in each case, instantly, though invisibly adjusting to suit them.

The Eye of Acheron's true purpose is revealed to the player characters later in this campaign. Attempts at divination or discerning the secrets of the black gem prove fruitless and, more likely, far beyond the capabilities of the player characters and their allies. The item was created primarily as a soul-trap, a means of taking the soul of a sorcerer (his shade, or shadow) and imprisoning it forever, leaving his body to wither and die. However, after millennia inside the jewel, Xhosāth's mad soul has altered and changed some of the original enchantments, and it is now a more dangerous artifact than when originally wrought, as the instrument of his downfall.

To use the Eye of Acheron as it originally was wielded against Xhosāth, both the user of the eye and the intended victim must be attuned to the artifact (see below). Once both are attuned, the wielder must enact an hour-long ritual with at least three other sorcerers. This ritual is known only to powerful demonic Patrons and must be coaxed from them through some compelling means. At the end of the hour-long ritual, the lead ritualist must make a successful Epic (D5) Sorcery test.

The others participating in the ritual are only required to succeed a Daunting (D3) Sorcery test. During this time, the ritual cannot be interrupted, requiring successful Discipline tests if those taking part in the ritual are interrupted, with the Difficulty set by the gamemaster based on the degree of distraction.

When the ritual has been completed successfully, the artifact must be touched to the forehead of the intended victim. Their soul will be drawn from their mortal form and trapped within the gem's depths. If the ritualists fail their skill tests, the ritual must be re-enacted until it is completed successfully. Any number of souls can be entrapped within the Eye of Acheron, though currently only Xhosāth is so imprisoned.

The Eye of Acheron has many other strange and arcane powers, few of which the player characters should have access to. When it was made, a chief concern was that it would become a tool for a rival sorcerer to use it and take Xhosāth's place. To prevent this, anyone who possesses it gains a weakness against other sorcerers who have handled it. This allows sorcerous users to cast spells against one another with impunity, making the wielder unable to cast any counter magic against someone casting a spell upon them. Anyone with any sort of magical sense for such things, such as the Enchanter talent, recognizes this attunement instantly.

Anyone who touches the Eye with naked flesh is at risk to becoming attuned to it, linking them with the artifact's destiny. This effect is wholly at the gamemaster's discretion and requires a point of Doom to activate. The attunement manifests as an unerring sense of direction as to the artifact's whereabouts, adding reducing the Difficulty by two steps any attempts to find it using Observation, Survival, or another skill.

Once inside the Eye of Acheron, a soul is essentially without any means of sensing the outside world, though in the intervening millennia, Xhosāth has overcome these limitations, and he is able to manipulate the world around the artifact in subtle and overt ways. He can cast sorcery spells at liberty upon those who are also attuned to it. However, the Acheronian sorcerer has long since seen the series of events which will lead his soul back to its body and wishes to assist the player characters in their endeavor. He understands that if Antaeus and the Temple of Mitra have their way, the Eye of Acheron will be destroyed and his soul with it, damned to the blackest pits of the Acheronian underworld or even worse.

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The ritual to free a trapped soul from the Eye of Acheron is like that of the trapping and requires the same hour-long duration and identical Sorcery tests with the same restrictions and guidelines for entrapment. At the end of the hour-long ritual, if the tests are successful, the eye must be touched to the brow of the body or corpse of the trapped soul. At this time, the soul will re-enter the body. If the body is alive, the being will be restored to whatever degree of health the body was currently at, soul resident within once more. If the soul is placed within a corpse, the body rises as a powerful undead being. As this newly-created undead is unique based on the trapped soul, the gamemaster should consult the description of Xhosāth on page 200 of *Chapter 7: The Wrath of Serothos*.

The Eye is a locus for those who have been drawn to it, living and dead. Semerkhet feels its call in his very bones, echoing across a long and distant bloodline. The shade of the scholar Antaeus is also tied to the artifact, and he haunts it. At times, it inflicts visions upon those who bear it (and can even taint the dreams of those near it), and they find themselves in the strange dream-like world of the Acheronian afterlife, an alternative effect of the *Atavistic Voyage* spell. Xhosāth and even Tothmekri can appear within these visions, offering up wealth and power for assistance in reuniting their souls with their mortal remains and ending their imprisonment within the Eye.

Player characters may attempt to try to discern more about the Eye of Acheron with the use of appropriate skills or talents, learning none, some, or all the following information:

- The gem and its housing were made thousands of years ago, perhaps even tens of thousands.
- Its value is incalculable, beyond the means of most kings.
- The stone is like no gem known to humankind now, and the metal is not silver, but something else, rarer, and harder.
- The workings and manufacture of this item indicate a level of skill beyond that of most current Hyborian Age smiths, and elements of its manufacture are so puzzling and difficult that it is likely that this item was not made by human hands at all, but instead in some other realm where physical laws are not as immutable as they are here.
- The runic glyphs the artifact and chain are inscribed with are a sorcerous language, perhaps long-dead or alien to the Hyborian Age. If (however unlikely) one or more of the player characters speaks Acheronian and makes a successful Dire (D5) Linguistics test, they realize that the glyphs upon the item are ancient Acheronian demonology, an occult incantation devised as some sort of binding or imprisonment.
- This very well may be the missing, near-legendary artifact of the giant-kings, an artifact of supposed great occult power. It was rumored to have been used in the downfall of a mighty Acheronian sorcerer and was sealed and hidden away from the sight of man for untold millennia. Legends had it in the hands of the Stygian nobility, kept in some vault in Khemi or Luxur, or even buried in a lost Acheronian tomb beneath the sands of Stygia.

Obviously, the Eye of Acheron is a narrative device. Its purpose is to drive the player characters into action against Serothos and Xhosāth, the curse providing them with adequate motivation to wish to see the plot through, rather than abandoning the artifact in some gutter, thrusting it upon some hapless collector, and/or selling it to a fence in some sleazy back-alley somewhere.

Admittedly, the curse is not particularly fair, but is necessary for them to experience the sense of doom that the Eye's awakening should portend.

As it is an immensely powerful artifact possessing a will and desire of its own, it should be an instrument of the gamemaster rather than a traditional magic item. The powers and qualities described above are a fraction of what it should do, and the gamemaster is encouraged to characterize it in as sinister a fashion as possible, giving off subtle glimmers and even noises from time to time, and perhaps even seemingly moving from place-to-place unseen.

For example, player characters who go to sleep with the Eye of Acheron in a belt-pouch might wake to find it about their neck, or clutched tightly in their fist, the chain wrapped about their wrist.



Each of you beholds the same thing — you are standing on a wide stone stair, leading downwards to and into a deep blue river. Colours are strange here, and while most of the world seems washed out and pale, the river is a deep, almost cobalt blue, contrasting brightly with the chalky white stones upon either bank of the river. A closer look at the stones reveals that they are skulls. The sky above is high and from it emits a horrible pale, dead light — no sun can be seen in this canopy of sky. Intensely dark clouds stir and roil, but there is no rain, no wind, and only stillness and near-absolute silence, other than the lap of water against the pale banks.

At the base of the stone stair is a barge, long and with several rows of oars. It is richly appointed, with a wide deck and a throne-like chair beneath a high awning. The colours of the boat are rich, and it is set in many places with precious metals and jewels. The make is strange, and you cannot identify the origin of the craftsmanship. You notice that there are many chests upon the barge, also ornate, and about their bases are stacked weapons, armor of ancient form, and shields and helms. Jewels and scroll top piles of gold coins and other items of immense wealth. The vessel is clearly outfitted as if for a king's funeral.

Upon the other side of the river, eight forms kneel, their arms offered up in supplication. There is a break in the line, as if one of the forms is missing. The figures are shrouded

from head to toe in thin samite robes, and beneath the cloth their forms are those of women, lush-bodied and soft, like the women of a harem or seraglio. Only their eyes and their arms are ungarbed, and their limbs are covered with the faint lines of some ornate design writ upon their flesh. Their eyes are lambent, and beautiful, but full of immense sorrow. They gesture up towards the heavens, and their wailing come across the water, a strange and lilting song full of sadness. It is a language strange to you, though the sense of tragedy and love lost needs no translation.

The player characters, should they look, are in their own garb, as it is in the real world. They can speak to one another but can do little else to the environment.

From behind you, the sound of chanting comes, singsong words in a language you do not speak. Many men come towards you in a column, clad in simple harness of strange make — featuring loincloths of cloth-of-gold and linen, thick belts made of plates of precious minerals, and high-strapped sandals of cream-coloured leather. Their faces are covered with oval-shaped masks made of hammered gold, with no ornamentation, displaying the calm features of a race of considerable beauty. The hair that hangs behind the masks is dark, and the men's skin ranges from dusky to pale.



Two of the men are dressed differently than the others. One is dressed in royal fashion, clearly a great leader or someone of note. Broad-shouldered, he has a braided black beard, and his eyes are like lambent white pools, seeming to glow like his skin. His hair is bound back, pulled from a high-peaked forehead and worked into many small tails that hang down the expanse of his back. His robes are red, deep and rich cloth; bearing twisted and convoluted designs worked into the cloth. His chest and arms are bare of sleeve, but are covered with necklaces, bands and rings of ornate make. No small man, he is broad chested and would seem a warrior-born if not for a certain means of carriage, a stance that says he deigns the use of weapons. He is not among those chanting. His attention is upon the path he walks, though he watches across the water, to where the eight women sing, and his mouth grows tight and a difficult, pained expression crosses his brow.

After the one with such regal demeanor comes another, drawn upon a chain fastened to a golden collar twisted about his neck. Unlike the others, you can see that he is a noble Stygian, tall and dark-skinned, black haired and haughty featured, his hawkish nose and dark eyes giving away his nationality. He is clad in little other than a breechclout and the chain that depends from his throat is surprisingly light, drawn in one hand by the other man. Upon his hands are many rings, and though he bears much of the arrogance of the nobility of the serpent kingdom, this man is weak... his chin is slight and fear lurks deep within his eyes. Some mighty weight hangs upon his soul, and he has the attitude of a beaten dog, led by his master's chain.

If the player characters say or try to do anything to the procession, it will become clear to them that they are not really in this world, and that this is a mere vision, perhaps a glimpse into some ancient or unknown place. They are unable to affect anything in this world, initially, and none in the world acknowledge their presence. The men in the funerary procession walk right through the player characters if they stand in the way, and nothing short of magic allows either group to interact with one another. If the player characters get onto the boat or interfere with it in some manner (such as trying to loot

the wealth onboard), it is resistant to the player characters' tampering, as if they are the ones who are immaterial. Not even a coin of it can be moved or taken.

In the rare chance that a player character speaks Old Stygian or Acheronian, they will recognize the words of the chant as a funerary dirge, spoken in the afterworld by the servants of the dead, and the wailing as being a lament for the dead, sung by the lover or lovers of the deceased.

As this procession passes you, one name is repeated from the chanting. 'Xhosāth, Xhosāth, Xhosāth...'

The men file past you, paying you no heed, and the men in masks take up their places on the rowing benches of the strange barge. The robed man steps lightly onto the boat and sits on a small stool next to the throne-seat. He turns back to the man in the scarlet robe, who seems to hesitate before setting onto the boat. The man turns back and looks up the stairs at you. His lip curls in almost a sneer, and his eyes match yours. There can be no doubt that he is seeing you. He turns, then, and steps onto the boat. The chained man, before stepping onto the boat, turns to you and his eyes beseech you. He speaks in Stygian, pleading "Free me!" The chain jerks, and the last man takes a position crouching next to his master.

In moments, the rowers push the barge away from the white stairs and it begins to move down the river, born by current and the strong backs of the rowers. A few seconds later, the light throbs and shapes begin to form in the air around you. You see shelves, columns, and the spectral shapes of the furnishings of the great study take shape in this world, growing in solidity until they are real.

You are once more in Antaeus' manse, in Messantia, in his study, moonlight pouring in through the windowed ceiling.

This has been their initial visit into the world of the Acheronian River of Souls. While it seemed strange but non-threatening, their increased proximity with the Eye of Acheron will take them there again and again, and future visits will be more interactive.



SCENE III: ILL-MET IN MESSANTIA

At this point, some (or all) of the player characters should be in the library and in possession of the Eye of Acheron, having just experienced a journey to the River of Souls in the Acheronian afterworld. As they have been doing this, several events have been transpiring elsewhere, depending on what the player characters have been up to, and what the gamemaster sets into motion. The following events are assumed to occur while the player characters are in the library:

- The Stygians, led by Semerkhet, enter the manse secretly through the back entrance (or any entrance left unattended by the player characters), and make their way to the library.
- Thyra enters the manse, seeking some sign of her father, and goes to her old room. She is immediately captured by the Stygians, who get her to take them to the Great Study.
- Yarosh becomes aware of the intruders and sneaks from the manse to go get the city guard, hoping that in the commotion, he can steal the Eye of Acheron for himself.

Unbeknownst to the player characters, the Stygians have entered the manse, slaying any of Antaeus' guards and servants they encountered (at the gamemaster's discretion). If any of the player characters separates from the rest and leaves the library, they might find the body of one of these servants, dead from a sword-slash to the throat, or with an arrow protruding from some vital spot.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE STYGIANS

Note: This encounter assumes that Thyra is not with the player characters and is being run as a non-player character. If she is a player character, the gamemaster should strive to create a diversion where she is captured. If the player characters do not leave her side, the Stygians should use one of the servant women as a hostage. Thyra does not allow harm to come to one of her father's servants, so the effect should be identical.

After the initial magical experience created by the Eye of Acheron, the gamemaster should read the following to the player characters before they have a chance to make any plans or discuss the event they just beheld:

The door to the library bursts open, and you see people moving in the hallway outside. Your senses are still a bit shaken from the experience on the river, blinking from the baleful sun of a world not your own, and you are taken aback by the sudden arrival of these interlopers.

In moments, the room fills with a group of five men in desert leathers, their dusky skin, black hair, and haughty features marking them as Stygian. Each is armed with a long cutlass and a curved shield.

Based on their regimented style of movement and the similarity of their equipment, any archer, mercenary, or noble warrior player readily identifies them as soldiers, despite the lack of any uniform or identifying sigil.

Just before the player characters initiate a battle, there is a woman's scream, and a man shouts something in Stygian from the adjoining room. There is a clatter of movement, and three more figures enter the room. Another Stygian soldier holds Thyra roughly, claspng her to his chest with a brawny forearm across her shoulders, a cruel knife drawn and its point at the soft flesh beneath her jaw. A thin line of blood trickles down the alabaster expanse of her neck. Her captor's eyes glitter with hate. Aside him is another Stygian, armed with a deadly Stygian bow. It creaks as it is drawn back, the deadly barb of an arrow-tip pointed at the player characters.

SEMERKHET, EXILED STYGIAN PRINCE (NEMESIS)

Tall and dusky-skinned, Semerkhet is handsome and lean, with hard muscles and a long reach. His forehead is broad and he wears his long hair in a bundle of braids, ornamented with gold, and a wire-enclosed chin beard. He wears Stygian travel garments befitting a noble, his weapons bejeweled and golden. His prized weapon is an Akbitanan dagger which he always keeps his hand upon. His manner is polite and calm, but he is always listening and watching. In the Stygian army, he was a good leader, and his men are loyal to him now as they were then. He speaks Stygian, Argossean, Black Coast, Darfarian, Kushite, Old Stygian, and has a smattering of Shemitish.

Semerkhet is of the royal Stygian bloodline, drawing his lineage to Tothmekri himself. His lineage impels him to seek the throne that his mad, exiled ancestor forsook when he fled Khemi. Semerkhet has mixed feelings about his heritage, as he despises his ancestor for leaving his family to the mercies of Athothis II while he took with him his vast treasures. His lineage is a secret, known to few but his own family and Serothos.

Semerkhet won prominence with the Stygian military and retired to a small coastal estate near Khemi, where he contemplated a life of hunting and idle cruelty. When

approached by Serothos, his initial response was to kill the man for his knowledge of his secret lineage. Instead, he listened, and allied with Serothos to restore his family's fortunes. He contacted a Shemitish pirate who owed him a favor, and they sailed rapidly up the coast of Shem to Asgalun, where they met with Baruch and discovered that Antaeus was en route there. When the scholar arrived without the Eye of Acheron, they tortured the truth out of him and had Baruch to send the message-bird to Antaeus' estate.

They sailed for Argos and Messantia, and have been watching the place for an opportunity to break in, ideally catching the guards with the Eye, once it is no longer hidden. Soon it will be theirs.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 11 | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 10 | 10 | |




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| Combat | 3 | Movement | 2 |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | 1 | Social | 2 |


STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 12, Resolve 12
- **Soak:** Armor 2 (Brigandine Coat), Courage 2

ATTACKS

- **Scimitar (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Cavalry 1, Parrying
- **Akbitanan Dagger (M):** Reach 1, 6 , 1H, Fearsome 2, Hidden 1, Parrying, Thrown, Unforgiving
- **"Threaten Me, Dog... and Die!" (T):** Range C, 4  mental, Fearsome 1, Stun




SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Cruel Fighter:** Semerkhet is a cunning and devious duelist, bent on causing as much pain as he can to an opponent, even if it means keeping them alive longer. When rolling for physical damage, he can split damage  between physical and mental, rolling and applying them separately. He must accept the results of the rolls, however.
- **Stygian Mercenary Captain:** Semerkhet is a skilled battle leader and gains a bonus +2d20 to any tests involving command, strategy, troop management, large-scale combat, and even battlefield movement or deployment, such as chariot-riding.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Exiled Prince:** Despite his exiled status, Semerkhet knows his way around nobility. He can spend 1 Doom to instantly gain an ally within a new court, and for 1 additional Doom can call upon their resources as if they were his own.
- **Fated:** Semerkhet brings a reserve of 5 Doom into any scene he is in for the exclusive use of him reaching his ultimate destiny. He can spend it to defend, escape, or take any action that keeps him alive, but cannot use it to attack or pursue an action that would put him at greater risk.

Semerkhet's Henchmen

These are all Toughened versions of the guard (*Conan* corebook, page 317), armed with kopeshes (Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Intense, Vicious 1), daggers (Reach 1, 3 , 1H, Parrying, Thrown, Unforgiving 1), and small shields. One has a Stygian bow (Range C, 3 , 2H, Volley). These mercenaries have come with Semerkhet from Stygia though they do not know anything of his identity, Serothos' involvement, or the true nature of the Eye of Acheron. They were given a description of what to look for and been told not to cooperate with any authorities if they are captured by the Messantian guard, with a veiled threat of Set's vengeance seeking them out should they reveal what they know. Like most Stygians, they are proud and disdainful of other races, cruel and indifferent to suffering. They are loyal to Semerkhet but flee if outnumbered. These mercenaries wear simple travelling clothes over leather armor. Their names (should any survive and be in a position to give their names) are Sethenes, Inebni, Paneb, Setep, Mekefer, Khahor, Akhmose and Inarus. They speak Stygian, Kushite, and a bit of Shemitish.

The Stygian Prince

Trailing the soldiers and their captive into the room comes another man, in finer armor and with a powerful demeanor that marks him clearly as their leader. Tall and handsome, he is as far above them as a hawk is to a group of common pigeons. With an arrogance that indicates he is accustomed to authority, he glares once at the player characters and holds up a hand in a gesture of parley, signaling his men to lower their weapons. They do so, warily.

At this time, the gamemaster should have the player characters make Simple (Do) Observation tests. Success in this reveals that this intruder bears a strong resemblance to the chained man from their vision, the one who spoke to them bidding them his freedom. There is enough difference between their features that it is clearly not the same man, but the familial similarity is distinct and unmistakable. Though the player characters have no way of knowing so, the previous man was Tothmekri, ancestor to Semerkhet, the man before them.

Semerkheth challenges the player characters, first in Shemitish, and then another language if it appears there is a language barrier. He orders them to drop their weapons, and to release the Eye of Acheron to him. The henchman continues to hold the dagger to Thyra's slim white throat, and Semerkhet glowers in anger at the player characters. He is wary of any traps or tricks and is frustrated with the distance he has come to find this artifact, only to find these remaining obstacles in his path.

Semerkheth is unused to dealing with non-Stygians in anything other than as a master, or an enemy on the battlefield, so his negotiating skills are nominal, and his interest in parlay is quite limited. If some compromise is reached, and Semerkhet is given the Eye, he then laughs and says to the Stygian holding Thyra: 'Kill her.' He turns to the others, and says in Stygian, 'Slay all of these dogs, and let us be rid of this place.'

With this command, the Stygian holding a dagger at Thyra's throat smiles widely, his dark face creasing with a show of teeth, and he tightens his grip on the dagger's hilt. The archer pulls back the bow, aiming it at the largest player character, and it creaks loudly as he does so. The Stygians howl in their harsh tongue and raise their weapons, stepping forward to slay the player characters.

At this point, unless anyone intervenes, combat ensues.

THYRA IN DISTRESS

Thyra struggles against the burly Stygian who holds a knife at her throat. If a player character does something to try to help her, the gamemaster should impose a two-step Difficulty increase to any attacks made against him, due to the cover that she provides. The archer standing next to him attempts to fire a shot at anyone who comes towards them.

If after one round the player characters have not done anything to rescue Thyra from certain death, she takes matters into her own hands. Read the following to the player characters:

The large Stygian soldier holding the beautiful Argossean woman suddenly gives a growl and thrusts her from his chest. He looks down to find a slim-hilted dagger sunk deep into his thigh, where she plunged it after snatching it from a sheath in her girdle. She stumbles and sprawls onto the ground before him, then scrambles away. The Stygian draws the blade from his wound with a grunt, and looks down evilly at her as he steps forward to do the job he hesitated at before...

Hopefully, one of the player characters tries to intervene when a defenseless person is being threatened. If none

manage to get to her in time, or make any attempt at stopping the Stygian, the events in the next section occur immediately.

THYRA, DAUGHTER OF ANTAEUS (NEMESIS)

Thyra is the Argossean scholar Antaeus' daughter, sent away to dwell in the nearby village of Sardis with her mother's kin shortly after she turned ten years old, after her mother's death. She is a devout worshipper of Mitra. Thyra is intelligent, inquisitive, with her father's curiosity. She is only 17 years old when this adventure begins and likely is impressed (or frightened) by the player characters.



Since she is intended to be a patron to the player characters, she has a relatively high amount of currency on hand: coins and gems totaling almost 100 Gold, also with a letter of credit and identifying sigil that she might show at any Temple of Mitra, along with a special pass-word known only to her and the Temple, to receive that much more.

Thyra can be encountered in one of **The High Road** adventure hooks (page 18) or **Scene II: The Silent Halls** (page 25). Alternatively, she can be used as Thyra player character. It is recommended to use Thyra's naïveté and good spirits to appeal to the player characters' better sides. She speaks Argossean, Aquilonian, Kushite, Ophirian, Shemitish, and a bit of Zingaran.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 10 | 12 | 10 | 9 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 8 | 7 | 8 | |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | — | Movement | 1 |
| Fortitude | — | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | 3 | Social | 2 |

| STRESS & SOAK | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| ■ Stress: Vigor 7, Resolve 9 | |
| ■ Soak: Armor —, Courage 1 | |

| ATTACKS | |
|--|--|
| ■ Dagger (M): Reach 2, 3, 1H, Hidden 1, Parrying, Thrown, Unforgiving 1 | |
| ■ Defiant Glare (T): Range C, 2 mental, Persistent 2 | |

| SPECIAL ABILITIES | |
|--|--|
| ■ Temple Scholar: Thyra can re-roll any failed d20 relating to researching or deciphering some bit of ancient lore but must accept the result of the second roll. | |

| DOOM SPENDS | |
|--|--|
| ■ Curiosity: When confronted with the unknown, Thyra may spend 1 Doom to gain +1 additional Courage Soak. | |

SCENE IV: THE SPECTER OF THE PAST

Suddenly, any torches or lanterns in the room flare with blue light, then gutter. Darkness seems to pass over the high windows, and a chill wind whistles through the library all at once, sending a whirlwind of papers into the air. In the center of the room, the tall and terrible figure of a man appears, pale and translucent, with a fearsome expression upon his face.

The player characters at this point attempt Challenging (D2) Discipline tests. If they fail, they each suffer 1 Despair. Similarly, the gamemaster should make this test for the Stygian soldiers and Thyra, who suffer equal penalties. Semerkhet is assumed to succeed. If all the player characters are overcome and helpless, the Stygians do not kill them, but are either similarly debilitated or flee for the time being.

This is the spirit of Tothmekri, as seen in the vision prior (page 33). He is using the Eye of Acheron to project himself into the outside world, if but for a moment, causing considerable distress to all. His presence sends the Stygians into a panic, while Semerkhet stands agog, seeing this ghostly figure of his ancestor who looks so much like him. The specter attacks everyone, without any concern for allegiance, as he does not discriminate between the player characters and the culturally debased Stygians. He does, however, spare Semerkhet his ghostly wrath, sensing some unique linkage that intrigues him.

TOTHMEKRI'S SPECTER (NEMESIS, UNDEAD, HORROR)

See page 37 for the description of Tothmekri's mortal form: his spectral appearance is similar, though larger, ghostly, and more horrific in all regards.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 12 | 14 | 14 | 14 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 10 | 10 | |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | — | Movement | 1 |
| Fortitude | 5 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 3 | Social | 3 |

ANTAEUS THE SPECTER

Though the scholar's presence looms over the campaign, he is dead before it even begins, now a specter haunting the Eye of Acheron. Through it, he attempts to guide the player characters into destroying it or using its power to lay Xhosāth to rest and foiling Serothos' quest for dark magic power. In life, Antaeus was a scholar and devotee of Mitra. He had amassed a considerable fortune dealing with antiquities from bygone ages and was an expert on ancient Acheron. Contracted by the Messantian High Temple of Mitra to examine and catalogue many of the relics and antiquities within their vaults, he discovered the cask containing the Eye of Acheron, and his actions in uncovering its true nature have inadvertently set in motion the events of this campaign.

Cautious and methodical, he was still caught up in circumstances he could not avoid, which led to his death when he went to Asgalun. Unbeknownst to those who conspired against him, his dying prayers to Mitra were heard. When he was slain by Baruch and Semerkhet, Mitra sent him back as a specter, a shade of life, to guide those who would use the Eye of Acheron against Serothos and Xhosāth. Antaeus' state is a more potent version of what Mitra did for Epimetrius the Sage in 'The Phoenix on the Sword'. Here, however, the stakes are much greater than they were in that tale, and Antaeus was a more devoted servant to Mitra than ever was Conan.

In life, Antaeus was heavy-set and had a wide, serious mouth, with long white hair worn back from a high forehead. He dressed traditionally in loose white and dark blue dyed linen robes, with a wide woven girdle. His spectral form is similar, though he shimmers in and out of solidity, appearing wisplike and ethereal in the moonlight. He does not appear during the daylight. In dreams, he will appear in his normal form.

Antaeus is equivalent to a ghost (*Conan corebook*, page 337), with a few other abilities due to the nature of his 'curse':

- He can appear in dreams as well as the physical world.
- Willpower 12, Resolve 12
- Knowledge 5
- Steely Glare (M): Sorcery 4, Range C, 5☞ mental, Stun

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 15, Resolve 19
- **Soak:** Armor 4 (Incorporeal), Courage 3

ATTACKS

- **Spectral Grasp (M):** Reach 1, 6☞, 1H, Piercing 2
- **Burning Black Glare (T):** Range C, 5☞ mental, Blinding (see below), Fearsome 2, Non-lethal, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Dread Creature 3**
- **Fear 2**
- **Feed Upon Fear**
- **Incorporeal 4**
- **Inured to Physical Damage**
- **Patron**

DOOM SPENDS

- **Blinding Glare:** If an effect is rolled with the **Burning Black Glare**, Tothmekri can spend 1 Doom to add the Blinding Quality to it.

The gamemaster should allow at least one or two rounds of this specter to wreak havoc upon the Stygians, the player characters, and anyone else present. Tothmekri cannot be harmed by much that the mortal world has to offer, and there may be little the player characters can do to him.

Tothmekri's ghastly vision settles upon Thyra, and he reaches out towards her, drifting across the room. Depending on whether she is incapacitated or the player characters intervene, it grasps her in its cold clawed hands, chilling her to the bone. She shrieks.

Suddenly, another figure interposes itself between them, appearing as if out of nowhere. This newcomer, his voice terrible and cold, booms in Stygian from all corners of the library:

"Tothmekri, son of the serpent! In the name of holy Mitra, I command you! Release her or face my wrath!"

THE SHADOW OF THE SCHOLAR

This newcomer is clad in the garments of an Argossean scholar, and anyone who has a physical description of Antaeus recognizes this as his semblance. A wave of horror fills the faces of the Stygians. They fall back in further dismay as the spectral figures face off. Semerkhet the Stygian leader is transfixed in excitement, staring wide-eyed at both apparitions.

Caught between the two ghosts, Thyra looks at the second one, finding recognition there, and stammers... "Father?"

At this, the Stygian ghost's figure seems suddenly to twist and collapse upon itself, dwindling rapidly and moving, almost instantly, across the room and into the Eye of Acheron itself.

The newcomer turns and glares at the Stygians, raising his staff as if to smite them with divine wrath.

The Stygians shout at the remaining specter, brandishing their swords futilely, but he ignores them utterly. The ghost of Antaeus turns to the player characters and Thyra and says "In Asgalun... find Baruch. The Eye must not open."

A moment later, his specter vanishes, fading into the air as if it were never there. Any Stygians who remain conscious and have not fled in terror are confused and begin shouting in Stygian, stepping up to renew the battle with the player characters.

SCENE V: CROSSED PATHS

In the middle of this, have the player characters attempt Observation tests, Average (D1) if they are not engaged in combat or Challenging (D2) if they are. Roll once for the group to determine if the Stygians notice. If they do, assume that one of their number noticed and alerted the others.

Success informs them that someone is at the front of the house: and that its front door is being broken open. Whether drawn to Antaeus' manse by the clash of weapons from the player characters' violent encounter with the Stygians, yells from the encounter with the specter, or for another reason disclosed later, six Messantian guardsmen have arrived!

THE MESSANTIAN CITY GUARDS ARRIVE

The watch bursts into the room with a rattle of harness and drawn swords. A man whose garb and air of authority easily marks him as the guard captain angrily shouts in Argossean at everyone in the room to cease fighting. He bellows loudly in a stern voice:

'Down with your weapons! Captain Abantes of the city patrol commands it!'

Behind Captain Abantes another man stands nervously out of the way of combat, clad in priestly robes and clearly no fighting-man. This is Tomar, the emissary from the Temple of Mitra. Use the writeup of the standard guard Minion for the guards (*Conan* corebook, page 317, or the watchmen Minion from *Conan the Thief*, page 81). The captain is a Toughened guard sergeant, and has a broadsword (Reach 2, 6☞, 1H, Unbalanced, Parrying), steel helmet (Head, Armor 3, Heavy), and steel cuirass (Torso, Armor 4, Very Heavy).

If the player characters lay down their weapons or step back from combat, the guards do not attack them, but will keep them at sword's point. The Stygians, however, do not speak Argossean, and continue to resist, first finishing any actions against the player characters, then against the new foes in the form of the city guardsmen. When they realize whom they now face, they turn to flee. If Semerkhet succeeded in the Observation test, in Stygian he orders his men away. If a player character can understand Stygian, this is what they hear him say:

'Flee from these meddling dogs! Meet back at the cove, or rot in this place!'

With that, Semerkhet does everything he can to escape. He is not interested in keeping hold of Thyra and leaves the Eye of Acheron to the player characters if the alternative is captivity or death. Semerkhet spends as much Doom as he needs to and thinks nothing of sacrificing one of his men to buy himself time to escape. These soldiers exhibit fanatic loyalty, as they have been threatened with sorcerous torment should anything happen to their leader. Serothos has enough of a reputation that they fear that retribution.

ESCAPING THE GUARDS AND THE STYGIANS

The Stygians are more concerned with escape than a battle, however, and do what they can to flee, using the Withdraw action if available, but even risking Retaliate actions as they try to leave the library. The guards do what they can to subdue the Stygians rather than killing them outright. If the player characters try to flee, they should be able to make a good attempt at it, though the guard patrol uses their aid-whistles to call for other guards if they are in over their heads.

The entire district quickly becomes abuzz with guards and commotion, and player characters wanting to dodge any encounters with city patrolmen will have a difficult time of it, due to the number of smaller patrols charging into the area. Assume that every 1+2☞ minutes, another patrol of city watch, identical to those described above, enters the area surrounding Antaeus' manse, all looking for anyone who looks suspicious or is out of place in the area. Using Stealth to get out of the place becomes one step more Difficult with each additional patrol.

If any of the player characters thought to try to use Thyra as a hostage, she fights back, calling loudly for the guards to rescue her. If they seem to be associated with some legitimate cause or have good and noble reason to be in her father's manse, she listens to their explanations before trying to escape or attack her captors. If they can convince her of some noble intentions (any of the adventure hooks provided on page 19 in *The High Road*) she relents and offers to escort them back to the guardsmen in Antaeus' manse, so that their names might be cleared up.

The gamemaster should consult **Thyra's Plea** (page 44) for information on how she will respond to the player characters.

THE DUST SETTLES...

If the gamemaster does not wish to run the encounter between the Stygians and the Messantian guard patrol as a mass combat, the following is assumed to happen:

- Semerkhet escapes in the commotion. This is essential. Spend whatever Doom is required to make it happen. The Messantian guards may even interfere with player character actions to stop Semerkhet, not knowing that they are aiding in the escape of a dangerous fugitive.
- One or two of the Stygians are captured by the guards, cornered and forced to surrender their weapons.
- Another Stygian escapes, and races to join Semerkhet at the secret meeting place.
- Three guards are injured, making them highly resentful of the Stygians.
- Any player characters fighting the guards and using deadly force are attacked with equal fervor by the guards and the guard-captain.

When things have settled down, Captain Abantes steps forward, brandishing an ornamented baton marking his sign of authority. He points it at the player characters and demands to know who they are, and why they are in Antaeus' home. He tells them that a concerned citizen outside saw them breaking into the manse and summoned the watch. Abantes sends one of his patrolmen outside to fetch the citizen. This is Yarosh, as noted before, who has already hidden within the manse.

Once Abantes has spoken and if the room does not erupt into further violence, Tomar, the priest from the Temple of Mitra, steps forth from the main hall and echoes the captain's command.

If the Eye of Acheron is clearly visible, Tomar tells Abantes *'That's it... the thing I have come for'*, pointing at the one who holds the Eye. If it is not visible, Tomar speaks to the captain in low tones, whispering about the artifact and suggesting that one of the player characters has it upon his person. One of the guards then returns, telling Captain Abantes that the man who tipped them off is gone.


If the player characters think to ask about the man, they get a description of Yarosh (see page 46). Captain Abantes claims that he does not need the man's testimony to make a charge of trespassing and theft against the player characters, as they are clearly doing both.

If they try to bribe or coerce the captain, they discover that he's actually open to that opportunity. Born a fourth son to an impoverished noble family in inland Argos, he has tasted the good life as a youth, and plans one day to buy a small vineyard. He would be happy for any contribution to his comfortable retirement. A successful Average (D1) Insight or Society test reveals that he's known occasionally turning the other way against risk. He investigates only if it seems safe and counsels 'waiting it out' as a primary means of resolving cases.

If she is able, Thyra steps forward and demands to be heard. See **Thyra's Plea** (page 44) for details of what she says.

TOMAR, EMISSARY OF THE TEMPLE OF MITRA (TOUGHENED)

A temple emissary, Tomar is humorless, earnest and utterly devoted to furthering the cause of the Mitraic faith. He grew up in the Messantian Temple of Mitra, an orphan adopted by the temple and put to work in the library, taught to read the articles of the faith by the priests. In time, Tomar became an archivist within the temple, he is responsible for cataloging its vast library and trove of artifacts and curios the temple has acquired.

Tomar is in his relative youth, soft and without much steel in him, with a round face and lank blonde hair. His manner is haughty and serious, and he is not entirely comfortable dealing with those outside the temple's hierarchy. He speaks several languages fluently and reads a little bit of still more. Tomar is a low-ranking priest, his attributes unlikely to be relevant, though if they are required, he is equivalent to a cultist Minion (**Conan** corebook, page 313), though armed with a staff (Reach 3, 4 , 2H, Knockdown).

THYRA'S PLEA

In answer to Captain Abantes' query, Thyra steps forward and tells him that they are in her employ, regardless of whether or not they are, or even if they have met her before. She identifies herself as the daughter of Antaeus, owner of the home, and says that she had returned to Messantia at her father's behest, to see to some business matters.

She explains to Abantes that the player characters accompanied her into her father's home, as she feared that his manse was in the process of being robbed. If Tomar asks about the Eye of Acheron, she says that until an authority can produce any effects or documentation proving ownership, it should be assumed that anything in the manse is assumed to be the property of Antaeus until it can be proven otherwise. The captain agrees with her on this matter, though he is uncomfortable defying the Temple of Mitra.

If the Eye of Acheron is visible, and the guards or Tomar has not taken it, Thyra asks that the player character in

possession of it hold onto it. If it is in the hands of someone other than a player character, she demands that it be returned to them. At no time does she handle it herself. If none of the player characters pick it up, she takes it for herself, sealing her fate with that of the player characters. When she touches the Eye of Acheron, there is a momentary pulse of light from the thing, and she blinks several times rapidly, swooning slightly. She then places the artifact about her neck and tucks it into the collar of her tunic, covering it utterly.

Her strong personality, coupled with her confident bearing, silences Tomar somewhat. Captain Abantes is loath to force her to answer any further questions. After some negotiation, Abantes and the city patrol leave, after taking any dead from the premises. Tomar, however, remains behind, urging her to surrender the Eye of Acheron over to his keeping if its whereabouts are known.

If the player characters remain, she asks them to stay until such a time as they can speak freely. Thyra is polite and deferential to Tomar but asks that he give her some time to compose herself and to consult with her companions. The priest looks suspiciously at them, and then departs, telling her that when she would learn more of that terrible artifact, she will find it in the Temple of Mitra.

When they are finally alone, Thyra turns to the player characters and asks them their names and their reasons for being in her father's manse. She does not seem surprised if they admit theft, and asks them to reveal all that they can, if they will speak openly of such things. She asks that they swear that they did not contribute to Antaeus' death.

Finally, assuming they have not injured or threatened her or left in anger, she asks the player characters to assist her, offering them coin in plenty for the capture of Semerkhet, who must have some knowledge of what has happened to her father. She says that Antaeus' spirit told her to seek someone or something named 'Baruch, in Asgalun', and she would like them to assist her in this matter.

If they continue to resist, she demands the return of the Eye of Acheron, though she does not touch it herself. She does not draw weapons or arms against any of the player characters, though if she is allied with any of them, she may call upon their aid against the others in an attempt to reclaim the property that she has been trusted with.

ANTAEUS' HOUSEHOLD STAFF

If any of Antaeus' household staff remain alive after the assault by the Stygians, they are panicked, and may even flee the manse should the player characters or the guard allow them to leave. If they learn that Antaeus is dead, and Thyra is uncertain about what to do with them, they take their belongings (and possibly any valuables they have ready access to) and leave quietly. If Thyra and the player

characters are open and communicative with them, they demand unpaid wages, perhaps even a bonus as a means of covering the danger they recently faced.

Any of the servants or guards slain are taken away by gravediggers to be buried or burnt outside of town. Thyra sees to these arrangements. Otherwise, the servants and guards have little to say to the player characters. None know anything of the Eye of Acheron. If they are asked about Antaeus' whereabouts, they recall that he went to Asgalun to consult with a friend scholar there, and would be gone for at least three weeks, if not a month. They were bidden to maintain the household as if their master was home.

THE VANISHING CITIZEN

Yarosh, as noted before, has gone into hiding. He has found a convenient nook in the manse (location chosen by the gamemaster). Finding him require a successful opposed Observation test against his Stealth skill, though he has an advantage in plenty of time to find a suitable vantage point, as well as the commotion to mask any noise he might make. No one knows he's here though, so this is unlikely to come up.

If things get too hot within the manse, however, he flees and creeps back later, when most of the player characters have fled. If Thyra has the Eye of Acheron, he may try to subdue her without being witnessed, or use subterfuge to switch the false nonmagical copy of the artifact for the real one. At no time does he attempt a full-frontal assault: he is not an assassin. Yarosh does not wish to add murder to the list of his crimes, though he may threaten and intimidate, saying that he'll commit bloodshed.

This might take the form of a visit immediately after the player characters have left or when they are returning to the manse for some reason. As they draw near, the player characters might hear one of the maidservants screaming. Drawn back inside, they find the rear door of the house ajar and Thyra comforting her servant. She and Thyra tell the player characters that a 'veiled' man was in the chamber, though he fled before they could see him clearly. This encounter could be switched to involve the guards, or even the player characters. At no time, however, does Yarosh allow himself to be seen or to draw attention to himself. He wears a scarf across his face to mask himself, in the off chance someone might recognize him from before.

This area of action is open for the gamemaster to improvise, as the actions of the player characters likely dictate what Yarosh can do. If the Eye of Acheron has clearly fallen into their hands, and he cannot find it in the manse, he follows their trail to discover what they know. He visits Publio, depending on what course brought the player characters to the manse in the first place, and eventually

realizes that Asgalun is their next stop. From there, he seeks out two allies (described in the next scenario) and begins to watch the docks, the east gate of Messantia, and Publio's estate (whichever is appropriate), waiting for them to make a move.

When the player characters' goals become evident, Yarosh and his henchmen follow suit.

YAROSH, ARGOSSEAN TREASURE-FINDER (NEMESIS)

A notorious Argossean treasure-finder, Yarosh is known for selling overpriced artifacts to the unwary. He is nonetheless highly-successful at finding true items of worth — these he passes along to more discriminating clients. He was hired by Baruch to steal the Eye of Acheron from Antaeus but has been unsuccessful thus far. He has been staying in Messantia waiting for another opportunity and has decided to create one for himself.

Yarosh's plan is to hire one or more of the player characters through Publio. When they go to Antaeus' estate to recover it, he plans to betray them, alerting the city guards to their presence. He has no intention of paying Publio or the player characters and is unaware of Semerkhet and the Stygian complication. He is very resourceful, but not very patient. He shadows the player characters and attempts to hire thugs to ambush them on their passage to Asgalun by land, and he will try to steal the Eye from them if they go by sea.

He is carrying the copy of the Eye of Acheron on his person, carefully concealed within his tunic. It alone is worth at least 20 Gold for the raw value of the components, even though a close inspection reveals that it is not magical and made of lesser stones.

He speaks several languages fluently, including Argossean, Aquilonian, Shemitish, Corinthian, Kothic, Kushite, Stygian, Archeronian, and knows a bit of Old Stygian, Ophirian, and Zamorian.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 11 | 10 | 9 | 9 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 8 | 10 | |



FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 1 | Movement | 2 |
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 2 |
| Knowledge | 2 | Social | 1 |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 10, Resolve 11
- **Soak:** Armor 1 (Leather Coat), Courage 1

ATTACKS

- **Dagger (M):** Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Hidden 1, Parrying, Thrown, Unforgiving 1
- **Calculating Bluff (T):** Range C, 3 , mental, Area, Subtle 2

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Master Thief:** Yarosh is a skilled sneak thief and pickpocket. He may re-roll up to 2d20 on any Movement tests relating to stealth or thievery but must accept the results of the re-roll.
- **Treasure Hunter:** Yarosh has an eye for value and gains an additional success on any task relating to finding, recognizing, or assessing the worth of any artifact or notable item.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Resourceful as a Rat:** Yarosh can spend Doom to offset any Harms on a 1:1 basis but doing so removes him from the immediate Zone and/or scene.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Looking back to the adventure hooks that lured the player characters into this web of destiny, the next steps may seem clear.

- If they were working for Publio (see **Hired by Publio** on page 18 or **The Merchant of Messantia** on page 19), they should feel the inclination to return to him with the Eye of Acheron.
- Consult **Returning to Publio** (following) for details on how this might play out. If they were self-motivated, they must now attempt to fence the item(s) they have taken from Antaeus' manse. **For Sale: One Ancient Artifact** (page 51) covers this eventuality.
- If they were captured by the Messantian guards, the section titled **Down by Law** (page 51) is particularly relevant.
- Finally, if Thyra's plea fell on chivalrous ears, and the player characters agree to help her, she asks them to go with her while she speaks further with Tomar, the Mitra emissary. See **The Temple of Mitra** (page 52).

If the player characters are bent on walking off with the Eye of Acheron and leaving Thyra alone in the manse,

she can do little to stop them, and instead remains there taking stock of her situation and trying to divine what has happened. The gamemaster should allow the player characters to try to sell the artifact... in a short while; they'll wish they'd spoken to Thyra, due to the nightmares that befall them. She remains at Antaeus' manse unless summoned by the Temple of Mitra or the city guardsmen, notably if the player characters end up in the jail.

The issue of ownership of the Eye of Acheron might emerge if more than one of the player characters has it and is not initially allied with Thyra. This could potentially cause conflict between them, as they may have wildly divergent plans for the artifact and might not be able to settle things amiably. Ideally, the player characters should try to make a deal, or pool resources and see what better bargaining position a larger party can leverage.

Whatever the case, the gamemaster should ask the player characters to determine exactly which of them is carrying the Eye of Acheron and where upon their person it is located. If they are taking any exceptional measures or precautions, these should be noted.

RETURNING TO PUBLIO

With the Eye of Acheron in hand, any player characters who return to Publio's villa are in for a surprise. The merchant, fearful of being linked to a scuffle with Stygians and city patrolmen, plans to betray them, turning to Yarosh to handle the matter. Rather than his original plan of switching the copy for the real artifact, he's abandoned subtlety and plans to sell the fake as well as collecting his reward for recovering the real Eye of Acheron. To this end, the treasure-finder has hired a gang of Argossean thugs to accost the player characters outside Publio's estate and seize the Eye of Acheron, returning it to him later.

As the player characters make their way to the Noble's District where Publio lives, a large group of thuggish men swagger up to them, bottles of cheap wine in their hands, making coarse jests and uncivil comments about the player characters. They attempt to surround the player characters, rudely offering them swigs of the sour Argossean wine (the dregs of each pressing sold in cheap clay bottles in the poorer districts and on the waterfront).

They smell foully, and their manner is coarse and rude. If allowed to get close, they tug at garments, commenting on some aspect of the player characters' clothing and/or armor. If the player characters are warriors, the thugs show them exaggerated respect, and if highborn, the thugs bow crudely and grovel in jest, begging to kiss rings or lick their boots. At least one of them splashes wine towards them and tries to pat it off.

Yarosh's roustabouts are all common Argossean thieves, lowlifes, wharf rats, and brothel bastards. Desperate men,

without much hope, the lure of hard coin has tempted them into Yarosh's service. Use the writeup of Minion thugs in the **Conan** corebook (page 321). There are at least two per player character.

One of their number is a cutpurse named Nareus, who is slightly more competent than the rest (see below). He tries to determine which player character has the Eye of Acheron, using Senses (opposed by the player character's Stealth skill, if it is concealed). Player characters who make a successful Challenging (D2) Insight test get a hunch that something is wrong, and that they are being purposely distracted. An Obtain Information Momentum spend lets them notice that they are being discretely searched by one of the thugs, moving rapidly between them.

Nareus makes a Movement (Thievery) attempt, opposed by the Eye-bearer's Observation. If he succeeds, he gets hold of the Eye of Acheron and quickly sidles away from the other thugs, letting them continue to distract the player characters.

NAREUS THE SWIFT (TOUGHENED)

A common Messantian thief, Nareus specializes in pick-pocketing and cutpurse work, finding most of the best picking amongst foreigners in the dock district. He is in his late teens, thin, blonde, scruffy, and poor. Yarosh hired him along with the thugs. His instructions are to race to Publio's and hand over the Eye of Acheron to Yarosh, who is hiding inside watching out for him. Nareus has been warned about touching the artifact and only grabs the chain.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|--|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 9 | 8 | 8 | 7 |
| Agility | | Brawn | Coordination |
| 10 | | 8 | 10 |
| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
| Combat | 1 | Movement | 3 |
| Fortitude | — | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |
| STRESS & SOAK | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stress: Vigor 8, Resolve 7 Soak: Armor —, Courage 2 | | | |
| ATTACKS | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dagger (M): Reach 1, 3 , 1H, Hidden 1, Parrying, Thrown, Unforgiving 1 Steely Glare (T): Range C, 2  mental, Stun | | | |

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Nimble as a Mouse:** Nareus may reduce the Difficulty of any Movement tests by one step.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Distraction:** Nareus can receive 1 free point of Doom when spending to impose an obstacle or hazard before a pursuer (**Conan** corebook, page 274).

GIVING CHASE

If the player character carrying the Eye of Acheron is successfully pickpocketed, they can make an Observation test opposed by Nareus' Movement to notice its absence. Success reveals Nareus moving away and the other thugs trying to distract the player characters from him. If any player characters shout or try to stop Nareus, he breaks into a run.

This leads to a frantic chase through the Noble's District. The thief seems to be heading exactly the direction that the player characters were going, though he is trying to lose the player characters by taking an indirect path. The gamemaster should characterize any pursuit by an armed group of player characters after a scruffy thief through the Noble's District as being highly unusual, garnering a great deal of attention from passers-by, residents and, unfortunately, guards.

This chase can be handled in a rapid manner, where the gamemaster immediately jumps to **The Fire of Acheron** (page 48), or it can be drawn out some, with a variety of challenges and skill tests to be made as the thief uses the obstacles of the city to his advantage. This chase can be made more complex using one or more of the following complications:

- Nareus leaps onto a low and ramshackle roof, whose clay tiles slide out from beneath one's feet as they try to traverse it. It requires a successful Average (D1) Acrobatics test to follow in his footsteps.
- The nimble Argossean climbs up a scalloped wall, seeking refuge atop a storehouse. Those who wish to continue after him must make a successful Average (D1) Athletics test.
- Nareus rounds a corner, finds a dark alcove and tries to hide, requiring an opposed Movement test versus the player characters' Observation test to find him.
- The pursuit leads to a wide ditch, and the bridge crossing it is a few dozen yards away. Nareus attempts to leap the ditch to throw off the pursuing player characters. The ditch is five yards wide, and Nareus

has a running start, requiring a Daunting (D3) Movement or Athletics test to cross a single jump. Failing calls for a Challenging (D2) Athletics test to grab the edge of the ditch or land in the foul water. Falling into the ditch does not cause any damage but climbing out requires a Full Action and an Average (D1) Athletics test: easier, but the character is drenched in foulness.

- A long cart laden with wine-barrels blocks the road, being unfortunately situated due to the driver's poor control of the cart's weight. Nareus sprints towards it and attempts to tumble beneath it. Following him requires a successful Challenging (D2) Acrobatics test or waiting for three combat rounds while the cart is moved out of the way. The player characters must clamber around it, taking a full round to squeeze past it.

THE FIRE OF ACHERON

Unfortunately for Nareus, and also for Yarosh, the Eye of Acheron isn't an inert object to be handled willy-nilly by just anyone, and the player characters' attunement to it has made them uniquely aware of its location. As listed in the description of the Eye of Acheron on page 34, the artifact has powers and a will of its own, powers that the player characters have limited access to. While chasing Nareus, player characters who have previously touched the Eye of Acheron now have a sense of direction as to its whereabouts. They can reduce the Difficulty of any attempts to locate it by two steps, and even any attempts to navigate or find a path towards the Eye of Acheron's current location.

It may occur to the player characters to try to use some of the powers of the Eye of Acheron if they have become aware of them. The gamemaster should review which of the artifact's powers, if any, the player characters have become familiar with. For a player character attuned to the artifact, using the powers of the Eye of Acheron from a distance requires a successful Daunting (D3) Sorcery test. It is up to the gamemaster to determine the efficacy of any uses of the Eye of Acheron's powers upon Nareus, though few are likely to have any effect upon the thief.

If the player characters do not think to do so, Xhosāth will act for them, aiding them because he wants the artifact to remain in the hands of those who are attuned to it. From inside the Eye, Xhosāth has foreseen the connections that bring his trapped soul closer to his mortal form, and it is not in the hands of a lowly Messantian thief. When Nareus rounds a corner or becomes separated from the player characters for more than a few moments, they hear a terrible, piercing cry and, if possible, a bright flash of light, as if some bright flame has suddenly flared, then died all at once.



When they arrive on the scene, they will find the charred corpse of Nareus lying prone upon the ground, his outflung arm clutching the Eye of Acheron, which gleams with a touch more brightness. Taking a close look at the corpse reveals that the fire seemed to originate from the artifact itself and erupted instantly. Player characters nervous about touching it get the curious sensation that it will not harm them.

If they are hesitating to pick it up, it rolls free of the corpse's skeletal hand, clinking against the stone cobblestones. Any witnesses to the event tell the player characters that the man came around a corner, breathless, and was suddenly enveloped in white flames that disappeared as rapidly as they appeared. Other witnesses may have run, shrieking, and it should soon become apparent that the city patrol is rapidly on their way.

Though none of the player characters have any means of knowing exactly what happened, Xhosāth had unleashed a blast of Acheronian demon-fire. If the player characters leave the Eye of Acheron where it has fallen, none of the passer-by dares touch the thing, despite its apparent worth. It is found by the city guard, who are wary of sorcery. The artifact is taken to the city jail and eventually to the Temple of Mitra when word of the stolen artifact circulates.

Once it is there, a summons is sent to Thyra, who then goes and deals with the matter as originally planned. If the player characters seek her out, she is going to the Temple of Mitra, and explains that the artifact has been recovered. From here, the gamemaster should go to the section titled The Temple of Mitra (page 52).

AT PUBLIO'S ESTATE

When the player characters arrive, Publio's gold-worked gate is locked and there is little sign of him being home. However, a successful Average (D1) Observation test reveals a rustle at a curtain on a second floor of his estate, as if someone were peering out a window that overlooks the gate. The neighborhood where Publio lives in is busier than Antaeus', and any attempts at picking the gate's lock soon attracts attention from passers-by or the city patrol. If the player characters are there for any of Publio's missions (pages 18–19), he does not admit them.

During the events of the previous section, the opportunist Yarosh raced from Antaeus' manse to Publio's estate ahead of the player characters and informed the Messantian merchant of the battle and the intervention of the city patrol. Publio, horrified by the news that his name is possibly connected with the break-in and a fight with Stygian mercenaries, orders Yarosh from his house and prepares to refute everything. The now-panicking Publio will deny any knowledge of the player characters and any task he set for them, as he does not want to be associated with thieves and brawlers.

Should they raise a ruckus, four of his own guards go out to deal with the player characters. Publio's estate gate lock requiring a successful Daunting (D3) Thievery test to bypass. The gate is reinforced and would require a successful Daunting (D3) Athletics test to force open. The walls to either side of the gate are 12' high, with a successful Challenging (D2) Athletics test to scale.

Once past the gate, the player characters enter a large courtyard built around a great fountain. If the player characters are there for **The High Road**, Publio's four guardsmen, tall and brawny Ghanata tribesmen (see page 19), come out to meet the player characters, telling them to leave immediately. The Ghanatan nomads glower and attempt to intimidate the player characters, using their Social Field of Expertise or Steely Glare attacks

If the player characters manage to convince or threaten the Ghanatans into going to speak with Publio, the merchant comes out to greet them, apologizing for the misunderstanding. First, however, he sends a servant out the back gate to find the city patrol (page 25) to rescue him from these intruders. He stalls as long as he can, offering them less money, explaining that the heightened interest in Antaeus created more attention than he would like. He would rather the player characters keep him out of any further discussions of Antaeus or the artifact. A successful Insight test opposed by Publio's Discipline reveals that he is stalling for time, occasionally glancing at the gate.

The city patrol arrives in 2+3 minutes after Publio comes out to talk. If this encounter comes to violence, the wily merchant shrieks loudly for anyone to help him. He does not fight back, instead trying to dodge, falling to the ground and pleading for mercy. When the city patrol arrives, he cries out that he has been assaulted by these ruffians and denies any prior association with the player characters. There are eight city patrolmen, and a guard captain named Captain Polemo. Use the standard city guard and guard sergeant writeups (**Conan** corebook, page 317).

Immediately, the captain orders one of his men to run back to the guard house and demands a cease of violence and tries to question everyone in the courtyard. Publio's guardsmen, if alive and questioned, support their employer's view of events.

At this point, the player characters seem pretty guilty. Any attempts at Persuade are going to be Daunting (D3) given the circumstances. Captain Polemo questions the player characters and asks why they are in Publio's estate, the Noble's District and if they are not Argosseans, why are they even in Messantia in the first place.

During this interview, the patrolman who was sent away arrives back, out of breath, and briefly speaks to Captain Polemo in quiet. A successful Average (D1) Observation test allows a player character to overhear what they are saying. The patrolman messenger tells Polemo that there is high-level interest in the activities of a group who match the player characters' appearance. They are not to be harmed but brought to speak with the magistrate. The Temple of Mitra is involved, and one of their emissaries is at the jail.

Captain Polemo and his men ask the player characters to come with them while they straighten things out. Publio does not attempt to get the Eye of Acheron from

the player characters, as he is afraid of it at this point and wants nothing further to do with Yarosh or his mysterious Stygian associates.

Unless there are further complications, the city patrol escorts the player characters to the city jail until events can be straightened out. If the player characters are cooperative, they are disarmed, and they will not be searched thoroughly. The gamemaster should use the guidelines suggested previously if one of the player characters has hidden the Eye of Acheron upon their person. If the Eye is found, the guardsman will signal to Captain Polemo, who takes it and appraises it for a moment. He takes it and places it in his pouch, telling the player characters that the item will be returned to them shortly once the situation is fully understood, assuming that they are not guilty of crimes and can demonstrate some ownership over this item, or no other comes forward claiming prior and legal ownership.

If the player characters choose to fight their way past the city patrol, they are in for a long and running battle. First, they must get past Captain Polemo and his eight patrolmen, aided by any of Publio's surviving Ghanatan guardsmen. In short order, another four-man city patrol arrives, drawn by the noise of the combat. The gamemaster should increase the odds against them until the player characters have either fled, surrendered, or are subdued and/or unconscious.

The city patrolmen fight to subdue the player characters, using their spear-hafts to attempt to trip them when possible, and grappling to drag them down, limiting the player characters' deadliness. They frequently shout orders for the player characters to cease and throw down their arms, and Captain Polemo offers them lesser degrees of punishment should they cooperate with him and go peaceably. If they choose to go down fighting, the city patrolmen do their best to make their attacks non-lethal, and the player characters are eventually overcome, and awaken in captivity. From here, the gamemaster should go to **Down by Law** (page 51).

If the player characters manage to escape Publio's courtyard and there are any living witnesses to their actions, the player characters are now fugitives in Messantia, with all the city guard seeking them. If they have killed Publio or any city guardsmen, they are outlaws, and a hue and cry is enacted across Messantia, with a sizeable reward (10 Gold) per player character. Bounty hunters and other ruffians are set upon on their trail, and it is unlikely they can leave the city in anything less than extraordinary haste.

At this point, the gamemaster should consult **Outcomes** (page 55) to determine how best to get the campaign back on track and the player characters pointed in a more suitable direction. They have not escaped the curse of the Eye of Acheron, unfortunately, and their destiny is now linked with it, and the shadow of the sorcerer has fallen upon them.

FOR SALE: ONE ANCIENT ARTIFACT

Fencing the Eye of Acheron proves a considerable challenge if the player characters decide to do so. News of the robbery at Antaeus' has spread to most of the criminal underworld of Messantia, and there are few who would dare buy such a valuable item. Fewer still of these reckless souls possess the funds necessary to pay a fraction of what it is worth. Especially worrisome is the primary market: any sorcerer in the Hyborian kingdoms would be happy to take it, perhaps even Thoth-Amon, the Lord of the Black Ring in Stygia. They may not be that interested in paying in coin, either.

If the player characters try to find a reputable fence with the ability to purchase the Eye of Acheron, have them make Daunting (D3) Society test, Dire (D4) if they have no connections to the criminal underground. Success reveals that simply put, there is no merchant in this city who would be able to raise the requisite funds in any speed, and few who would take the risk even if its price were discounted. Failing this test alerts the authorities.

If this avenue ends with the player characters alive and in custody, see **Down by Law** (following), for details on their interaction with the Messantian legal system. If the encounter somehow ends with them fleeing and almost a half-score of dead and dying city patrolmen in their wake, the gamemaster should consult the section **Returning to Publio** (page 47) or **Outcomes** (page 55 for how to handle the remainder of this adventure with the player characters so far off the track.

DOWN BY LAW

If the player characters are apprehended, beaten into submission, or surrender to the city patrol, they are taken to the Messantian city jail, a block of cells located beneath the Magistrate's Hall, adjacent to the Noble's District, conveniently the same quarter of town as Publio's estate and the Temple of Mitra. The prison is in the slums district of town (see the map on page 22). For the time being, however, the player characters should not have to worry about the prison itself, as newly-caught criminals and higher-profile prisoners are kept in the cells beneath the Magistrate's Hall.

If the player characters are here under their own volition, they are be asked to surrender their weapons upon entering the Magistrate's Hall. They are escorted into the office of Warden Cyneas (below) who acts as the investigator in this matter. If Thyra is with the player characters, Cyneas is overly courteous, as he is uncertain as to her identity but believes it best to treat her with full honors. He allows the player characters to question any captured Stygians (provided the player characters do not hurt them overmuch)

and cooperates fully with them. He has gotten word that the player characters are there for something related to the Temple of Mitra, and he is eager to have them put in a commendation about his assistance, should it come up. He even reminds the player characters of his name and urges them to remember it, should the opportunity arise.

Cyneas the Warden is equivalent to a Toughened knight (**Conan** corebook, page 318), a minor noble of no apparent worth, granted the post as punishment, and eager to better his fortune. Cyneas is tall and thin, bald and with a longish face, and utterly humorless. He has a reputation for being pitiless and willing to order violence to get the 'truth' out of the accused. It does not always have to be the correct truth, but if it suits the story given him by the guards, he is content.

If the player characters have been brought here in chains or as unwilling prisoners, they are disarmed and immediately thrust into holding cells by the jailers, who begin their interrogation with rude questioning and threats. Use the writeup of thug Minions (**Conan** corebook, page 321) for the jailers. They're former city guardsmen or soldiers who were unsuited for patrols or were brutal enough to man the jails: tough and nasty sorts, willing to go to any limit of brutality to enforce their orders.

If they do not get information out of the player characters immediately, one of them runs for the warden (see above). He arrives in a few minutes, with faint marks from sleep upon his face and looking cross from being awakened.

Here is a perfect example of how the law in Argos applies differently to people, according to their status. If the player characters have been brought to the jail unwillingly, unconscious, or in chains, they are treated as if guilty. Ignoring any information previously collected by his jailers, Cyneas demands a full accounting of names, identities, and the motives for breaking into Antaeus' estate. He informs them that they are under suspicion for the disappearance and likely murder of the scholar, and gloatingly tells the player characters that his torturers will wring the truth from them before their inevitable execution in the city's main square on the morrow.

However, if the player characters are at the jail willingly, having been escorted by Captains Abantes or Polemo, or if any of them are nobles, Warden Cyneas is polite and efficient, gaining the same information without the cruelty or threats, dutifully marking down a complete account of the player characters' statements on a sheet of vellum, to be sadly ignored by his superiors.



INFORMATION FROM THE STYGIANS

If the player characters can question the Stygians, either at Antaeus' manse or in the cells of the Messantian city jail, there are many elements that can be gleaned, depending on the method of interrogation and the degrees of success. Semerkhet's henchmen are described in **The Arrival of the Stygians**, page 38. The men speak only Stygian initially, pretending to understand no other language, though each is fluent in Shemitish and Kushite as well. Any reasonable ruse or a successful Insight test reveals that they understand these other tongues.

If the player characters are on the wrong side of the law, they may wake up in a cell alongside a cell holding the Stygians. From here, they are free to speak to them without being interfered with, or even listened to. The jailers do not care if the prisoners speak to one another, so long as they are not causing problems. A gamemaster wanting to add some level of threat to this segment of the adventure might go so far as to have the Stygians assault the player characters, even reaching through the cell bars separating them. For a greater level of tension, the player characters can even begin chained up in the same cell as the Stygians, with only the forged links of their bonds separating them.

If the player characters are assisting or cooperating with the warden or the Temple of Mitra, they are escorted into the cell and allowed to speak with the Stygian mercenaries and interrogate them to the best of their ability. Player characters with any degree of authority in this situation can even call upon Cyneas and the jailers to assist them, and the man eagerly orders his jailers to administer brutal encouragement to the captives to ease in the interrogation.

The Stygians resist any interrogation with silence and venomous retorts (opposed Fortitude tests), though if the questioning becomes more severe or goes on long enough, they eventually try to use their Social/Persuade skill to lie to and distract the player characters. For each successful skill test and additional point of Momentum spent, the player characters learn one piece of the following pieces of information, in the order that they are listed:

- The Stygian mercenaries came up from Stygia by boat with Semerkhet, a noble and former military commander. He was their leader when they were soldiers in the Stygian army.
- The boat is the *Calypso*, a Shemitish pirate vessel. The captain was named Gaal-Arvad. The ship docked some distance offshore from Messantia. They rowed ashore and walked from a hidden cove to the east of Messantia. They provide the directions to the cove.
- They were to take the amulet back to Asgalun, either by horse or by boat (as a backup plan, if they could not meet with the boat in time). Their leader Semerkhet was going to buy horses for all of them at the edge of town.
- Semerkhet is in league with a sorcerer. He told them that if they failed, their family's lives are forfeit, and that their own souls would be devoured by demons. They do not know the sorcerer's name, but Semerkhet told them that his ally is a member of the Black Ring of Stygia, feared sorcerers who secretly rule the country.
- Semerkhet's home is in Sukhmet, in Stygia, along with that of the mysterious sorcerer.

SEEKING SEMERKHET IN MESSANTIA

Trying to find Semerkhet in Messantia is impossible, though the player characters may learn that he rode out of town in a hurry — to an isolated cove several miles from the sight of Messantia in a small inlet on the mouth of the Khorotas River. There, he met with a small rowboat and was taken out to meet with the Shemitish pirate ship. Attempts to track Semerkhet through the city are extraordinarily difficult, requiring a successful Challenging (D2) Society test to discover that he fled on foot out of the Noble District, seizing a horse from a young wealthy nobleman out for an evening's entertainment. On horseback, he rode through the city and out the eastern gate.

Finding his exact trail outside of town is nearly impossible, requiring a Daunting (D3) Survival test. If the player characters are successful in this, they find that Semerkhet rode to a small cove a dozen miles outside of town, where he left the horse on a small beach. Markings in the sand indicate that a small craft, a rowboat from the size, was pulled ashore and then dragged back into the water. The horse was set loose and is still on the beach, wandering a short distance away.


THE TEMPLE OF MITRA

Player characters native to Messantia, especially worshippers of Mitra, know that the high priest in the city is Valerus. The temple is wealthy, perhaps the most in all of Messantia, and its vaults are rumored to hold much of antiquity and value. Services are conducted regularly on holy days and are austere, and lacking in the vigor other cults often exhibit. All are welcome to attend. It is forbidden for worshippers to carry weapons into the temple.



If the player characters accompany Thyra to the Temple or go there of their own volition, the gamemaster should read the following to them:

Approaching the main Temple of Mitra in Messantia can be daunting to those who have never seen organized faith at this scale. Located in the great courtyard near the Square of Anu, the temple is an enormous square building of polished marble, topped with a single spire capped by a gold pinnacle. The doors are massive and are closed at night, though open throughout the day, as it is the only public temple in Messantia. At either side, guards stand ready, clad in thick leathern jerkins and blue capes designating their holy duty and bearing ornate poleaxes. At night, there are two guards, and during the day, four are easily visible. They demand the names and purposes of visitors when worship services are not being conducted.

Use the standard guard writeup (**Conan** corebook, page 317) for the temple guards, though they are equipped with poleaxes (Reach 3, 5 , 2H, Intense, Piercing 1, Vicious 1). These are all Argosseans, and devout believers in Mitra. If the player characters or Thyra identify themselves and state their business, the guards order them to wait in the enormous vestibule, inside which hang elegant tapestries of Mitra's many great deeds and spheres of influence upon the earth. They are watched carefully, then Tomar (page 44) arrives and greets the player characters. He beckons to follow and leads the player characters into a side chamber.

As they walk, Tomar explains to them that they are to meet an esteemed priestess of Mitra, named Eriadne, who sees to the business affairs of the temple. The chamber they enter is full of long benches facing some podiums,

some sort of lecture hall. Currently, a group of acolytes sits in a semi-circle as they discuss the finer points of Mitran theology amongst themselves, overseen by a woman standing before them.

Tomar dismisses them all, and they file from the room, closing the heavy doors behind, leaving only the highest-ranking priestess, based on her raiment. The woman finds a nearby bowl of green, purple, and black olives, and makes her way to a bench where she half-reclines, propped up on her elbow as if to watch an entertainment in the arena. Tomar introduces her as Eriadne, a revered priestess of Mitra.

Eriadne, Priestess of Mitra

Though she has spent her entire lifetime in the service of Mitra, in the Messantian temple, Eriadne is surprisingly worldly. Too much for the tastes of her superiors. She is thought to lack true devotion, having achieved her position through political savvy and cunning opportunism. As she speaks, she devours a steady stream of olives, often spitting a pit out as if to punctuate a particular point. Despite her informal nature, her shrewdness in expanding the wealth and prestige of the temple has made her a popular figure. The matter of the cataloguing of artifacts was Eriadne's idea, as she would like to see the dusty archives turned into hard currency to further the temple's power and influence, and likely line her own coin-purse in the process. If required, she is equivalent to the cult leader Nemesis (**Conan** corebook, page 314), though without sorcery or any physical attacks.

Eriadne asks the player characters to describe what brought them to her. She reminds them that this is not the Magistrate's Hall, and she is no law-keeper. Tomar does not interfere, even if the player characters' story differs from what he remembers. Eriadne has a good sense for when she is not



being told the truth and can easily determine if she is being lied to or told a less-than-complete accounting of events.

If Thyra is with the group, she is deferential to the priestess, as she is a devout worshipper of Mitra. She, like Eriadne, asks questions to understand the events of the night at Antaeus' manse, and tells the player characters about how she received a message from her father bidding her to return home. Thyra explains that it lacked the code they often used to embed secret messages within the text of normal missives. She rode from her home village and arrived in Messantia the evening of the break-in. Otherwise, Thyra is silent, but is intrigued by any potential tales of misdeeds and criminal motives when relating to her father and his estate.

When the player characters are finished with their story, Eriadne bids Tomar to tell his own side of the story. The acolyte relates how he had been given the task of cataloging items found in the temple's vaults. A small, sealed cask was discovered, it was of no apparent worth and the markings on it were meaningless. Thinking it was likely worthless junk, Tomar sold it along with some other choice items to Antaeus as part of a lot.

Tomar says that last night (the night of the break-in) he was visited in dreams by a heavenly messenger, who appeared to him and warned him that "*the Eye would open*". The messenger gave unto him a vision of the sealed cask opening, and a dark eye shining out from within. The sky was full of fiery columns, and black clouds roiled above and between the towers of flame. The acolyte awoke and told Eriadne that he was going to go find Antaeus and stop whatever was to come.

Eriadne listens to all that the player characters and Thyra have to say and encourages Tomar's testimony to complete the picture of the Temple's involvement with the Eye of Acheron. She appears lost in thought for a short time, then tells them that the Eye clearly represents danger, perhaps to more than the player characters and Thyra, and that the visions are clearly a portent into some doom, a possible voyage into the Acheronian afterworld.

As Antaeus was clearly a good man, and not a corrupt sorcerer, it is most likely that the scholar was trying to discover the nature of the artifact, and possibly a means of destroying or neutralizing it. As the player characters have now been linked to the Eye, it is even more urgent that they be the ones who decipher the riddle of its making and the secret of he who dwells within it.

Eriadne orders Tomar to fetch a small pouch from the treasury, and to give it to the apparent leader of the player characters. If they are acting as if in the employ of Thyra, she then gives it to her. Inside is 25 Gold. The money, she explains, is for travelling expenses and the like, and should they discover a means of destroying the eye, the Temple of Mitra will give the group of player character each twice

that amount — 50 Gold lunas, a staggering sum of money. This is a wealthy church, and they can spare the currency.

Eriadne tells them that if Tomar's visions are indeed sent by Mitra, the re-emergence of the Eye of Acheron after being lost for so long will likely have dire consequences. The presence of Stygian mercenaries, especially one of possible noble birth, can only mean that the priesthood of Set is somehow involved. Eriadne explains that the Temple would send a delegate of their own to Asgalun, but it is unlikely that Baruch would speak with them, and if there is some magic attached to the Eye, it is best handled by those who are now in possession of it, or those who are kin to Antaeus. Whichever the case, the church of Mitra would like the item removed from Messantia as rapidly as possible.

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN MESSANTIA

As said above, player characters have their course laid plain before them, and the gamemaster should expedite them along the way to Asgalun. Robert E. Howard rarely broke his narrative stride with small digressions, and it is recommended that the gamemaster follow suit. *Pacing This Adventure* (page 5) gives strong advice against such tangencies and side-trips.

However, it is the nature of players to want to 'finish' an area before moving on, and they might feel that there is more to be done in the wonderful city of Messantia. Additional hooks might be had with further 'missions' from Publio or political adventure amongst the great Messantian merchant houses. However, these are of course outside the scope of this campaign set's plot and will likely dilute it if introduced to a significant degree.

Despite this admonition, a gamemaster ready to wring additional adventure opportunities from Messantia will undoubtedly find the material on Messantia in *Conan the Pirate* to be of use in this matter. If side adventures are proposed and embarked upon, the gamemaster is encouraged to continue to apply the effects of the curse of Tothmekri upon them, to hasten the dream-passage down the River of Souls. See *In Dreams in Chapter 2: The River of Souls* on page 59 for more information on this.

The most direct means of averting this potential straggling is for the gamemaster to remind the player characters (ideally through the mouths of non-player characters) that when the matter is resolved and the curse has been lifted, the player characters can return to Messantia as heroes, to be fêted by those they have helped, heroes of the day.

If the player characters try to negotiate for more money, Eriadne is not easily swayed. A successful Persuade test against her Fortitude Field of Expertise has her increase the reward to 75 Gold, or instead she could add favors such as becoming a Patron to one of the player characters. Such favor, she hints, would assuredly increase status in the Messantian court. Eriadne does not offer any assistance in the matter of more people or gear.

When negotiations are finished, she bestows upon them a ceremonial blessing of Mitra. At the gamemaster's discretion, a follower of Mitra gains 1 Fortune Point from this blessing, which they can keep until it is spent (continuing into the next session, if is not spent in this session). Eriadne does not force this on non-believers, and it has no effect on them even if offered and granted. Thyra accepts the blessing with any of the player characters. With that, Tomar escorts them out.

Should the player characters try any opportunistic theft while in the temple, the gamemaster is encouraged to consult Nameless Cults, page 104–105 for potential finds.

Once outside, Thyra asks the player characters what they would do next.

SPEAKING WITH THYRA

If Thyra is being run as a non-player character, she offers the player characters a share of Antaeus' estate, and any further rewards that she can bestow upon them. If her father is dead, she has inherited his manse and his collection, and could potentially offer some share of that should the player characters aid her. In addition, though the hope is slim, if her father is alive, she is certain his generosity will be great to those who have rescued him and aided his daughter in this affair.

If the player characters have not received the offer of reward from the Temple of Mitra, Thyra goes to the Temple herself, speaks with Eriadne, and makes the same arrangements the priestess would have offered the player characters directly. She only asks that the player characters treat her as a leader, and turn to her for important decisions, though she defers to their judgement in most matters if the player characters are more worldly and experienced than she is.

Her protection, also, is in their charge. Once they have discovered the fate of Antaeus, and perhaps avenged the man, the player characters are free to leave. She will see to the fate of the Eye herself, though if there is a curse, it would be in all their best interests to remain together until the matter is resolved.

THE SCHOLAR'S TRAIL

If the player characters have not searched Antaeus' study and read his notes about having had a replica made of the Eye of Acheron, it is assumed that Thyra has done this footwork for them, and reveals the following information to the player characters, perhaps during the discussion with Eriadne at the Temple of Mitra:

- Antaeus had a copy of the Eye of Acheron made, an exact though non-magical replica. Why he did this is unknown, though he left the original and took the copy to Asgalun.
- Antaeus went to Asgalun to speak with a noted scholar of Acheronian history, a Pelishtim named Baruch, a man of considerable reputation.
- He sent Thyra a message urging her to return to Messantia and to give the Eye of Acheron to a messenger he would send from Asgalun, a man named Semerkhet. However, the message was clearly a false one, as it did not possess any of the characteristics that would mark a message from Antaeus to his daughter.
- Antaeus has not returned from Asgalun yet. Though his bird brought a message, it was not from him. Thyra assumes that her father is either imprisoned or dead. Either way, Thyra intends to learn his fate, and if needed, avenge his death.

OUTCOMES

At this point, one or more of the player characters should be in possession of the Eye of Acheron, and one or more of them will be cursed at this point. The weird dream-flash when they took possession of the Eye should have been a clue about this, and Antaeus' mysterious message should have confirmed it. They should at least know the following:


- Who Thyra is and what her relationship with Antaeus was, and ideally be on good relations with her, enough to travel in her company.
- That Antaeus has disappeared in Asgalun.
- Someone (or something) named Baruch is involved.

If the player characters have escaped the ambush by the Stygians and the run-in with the Messantian patrol, there is still the matter of Yarosh's thugs and Publio's own interest in the Eye of Acheron.

The player characters, now either in the employ of Thyra or beholden by the Temple of Mitra, should be willing to embark upon a voyage to Asgalun to discover the secrets

behind Antaeus' disappearance. Even the most selfish and mercenary of them should suspect that their immortal souls are in peril at this point, and unless they wish to spend the ends of their lives in nightmare-haunted misery, they will go to Asgalun post-haste.

If for some reason one or more of the player characters are so recalcitrant as to not be willing to join the others on the trip to Asgalun, the gamemaster can, as an option, allow them to continue their lives beyond the scope of this campaign.

This should be followed by the information that the dreams worsen, and each night, any player character ignoring this call descends into the blackest pits of Acheronian nightmare. They have passed beyond the protection that the Temple of Mitra is able to provide them. In the midst of this, they hear Thyra's voice calling to them, then screaming in agony as she suffers soul-rending torment. This is followed by a succession of near-sleepless nights where they must make Challenging (D2) Discipline tests each night or suffer 1  Despair (*Conan* corebook, page 66). In time, they are driven mad, eventually found in the alleys of Messantia or whatever city they fled to, stark mad and shivering in primal horror. Deprived of sleep and barely able to function, they eventually perish in the rough care of the city jail or madhouse, alone and forgotten.

Benevolent gamemasters might use this 'ending' as a premonition, a dream that visits them each one night or a prophecy given them by a passing fortune-teller or mystic. This way, it allows any wayward player character to right their decision and rejoin their companions, attempting to seize control over their own destiny once more. If they make haste, and board a fast ship or ride with Furies at their heels, they may make it to Asgalun before it is too late.

Thyra can also be used as a redemptive figure. As the daughter of Antaeus, she is guided by her father's shade,

and can find the player characters wherever they may have hidden, drawn to them by the linking of Xhosāth's curse. She pleads with them to go to Asgalun with her, to find out more of what happened to her father, and thusly the campaign can be continued with the second adventure, *The River of Souls*.

CONTINUATION

At this point, the player characters should have ample reason to wish to continue the adventures laid out within this campaign, willingly or unwillingly. If the 'carrot' is the promise of hard coin and potential romance from Thyra, the 'stick' is the curse of Tothmekri and the mystery of the Stygians wanting to capture them alive for some nefarious purpose. Given potential arrangements with Publio, the Temple of Mitra or the Messantian authorities, the most natural course of events would be for the players to leave Messantia quickly, bound for Asgalun.

EXPERIENCE

Participation in this chapter of the adventure should be worth around 200 experience points to each player character, with a bonus of anywhere up to an additional 50–100 points to player characters who were especially clever in overcoming adversity, were strongly role-played or took strong, Howardian initiative when dealing with conflict. As the next chapter of this campaign continues immediately after the conclusion of this one, it is not recommended to handle Downtime activities like carousing, cultivating Renown, seeking a patron, etc. between sessions. Similarly, the cost of Upkeep should not be paid at this time either.



BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 2



THE RIVER OF SOULS



*I rose in fear and then with blood and sweat
Beat out the iron fabrics of my dreams
And shaped of them a web to snare the moon.*

— “Forbidden Magic”, Robert E. Howard

When this adventure begins, the player characters should be in the company of Thyra and have possession of the Eye of Acheron, a mystic artefact of vast antiquity and incredible power. The Eye has bestowed a curse upon some or all the player characters, linking their souls with the Stygian afterworld. They should be trying to remove the curse by discovering the secret of the Eye.

Guided by Thyra, they should be en route to Asgalun, the capital city of Shem. In hot pursuit are the Argossean treasure-seeker Yarosh and the mysterious Stygian assailant, Semerkhet.

OVERVIEW

With Thyra's coaxing or through information gleaned from Antaeus's house in Messantia, the player characters must take the Eye of Acheron to Asgalun. They have learned that Antaeus went to Asgalun to consult a scholar named Baruch, and never returned. The player characters have with them the real Eye of Acheron and know that Antaeus had a copy made.

In the employ of the Temple of Mitra, Antaeus's daughter Thyra, or working on their own accord, the player characters must go to Asgalun, one step ahead of those who seek them out. There are two paths — by land or by sea, each with its own set of dangers. Along the way to Asgalun, the Eye of Acheron begins to manifest strange powers, and the player characters must deal with these.

Through dreams conveyed by the Eye of Acheron, the player characters behold strange vistas of old Acheron, and

learn that it is linked to a Stygian nobleman buried on an island far to the south. The spirits they behold are drawn along a path to the Acheronian halls of the dead, to be judged. The player characters are also cursed to share the fate of the sorcerer on his way to meet the lords of death.

Along the way to Asgalun, they are accosted by Yarosh, who attempts to take the Eye of Acheron with some henchmen to assist. Clues point to their true goal.

In Asgalun, the player characters must find Baruch's estate. When they get there, it is surrounded by mercenary guards. An alternate route presents itself, a passage through the sewers beneath the city. Or they can fight their way in. Once inside, the player characters discover that Baruch's home has been ransacked. Clues point to the Stygians. Some assailants attack the player characters as they search the estate. Searching further reveals Antaeus's body, victim of a violent and prolonged death. Baruch is nowhere to be found, so the player characters must discover where he has fled.

In the meantime, their pursuers from Messantia have arrived, and the stage is set for betrayal.

ADVENTURE STRUCTURE

The early scenes of this adventure are structured based on the two paths the player characters may choose to take to Asgalun — by land or by sea. **Getting to Asgalun From Messantia** (page 58), **Upon the Sea** (page 59), and **On the Road** (page 65) detail these options. If the player characters opt for a combination of the two, the gamemaster should improvise based on the information provided.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

Chapter 2: *The River of Souls* spotlights the following non-player characters, with their agendas explained here:

- **THYRA:** Still trying to figure out what happened to her father.
- **YAROSH:** Still after the Eye of Acheron, now trying to steal it directly from the player characters.
- **CAPTAIN NILOS:** An Argossean sailor, captain of the *Zephyr*, just trying to take some goods down the coast, with a stop in Asgalun.
- **YUVAL THE CARAVANEER:** A Shemitish caravan master, trying to get some goods from Messantia back to Asgalun.
- **HEIRON:** See Yarosh, above.
- **BARUCH:** Antaeus' colleague, who wants the Eye of Acheron for a mysterious Stygian patron.
- **BEL-MERODAK:** An alchemist who knows where Baruch can be found.
- **ANTAEOUS:** His fate is revealed.

Scene I: Upon the Sea (page 59) details the oceangoing mode and **Scene II: On the Road** (page 65) is the overland voyage. **Scenes III through V** are geared to either path; and, **Scenes VI through IX** are set in Asgalun.

SHEM AND PELISHTIA

Shem is a wide country with two distinct environments: eastern desert and western meadows. The southwestern coastal reaches of Shem are somewhat flat and featureless, marked by low sandy hills and many streams reaching northward from the shore. As a result, Shem is not known overmuch for its navies or sea-trade. See **Shem** on pages 222–223 of the **Conan** corebook for more information about this country, pages 46–47 of **Conan the Pirate**, or pages 41–47 of **Conan the Mercenary** for more on Shem. Asgalun, in particular, is described in more detail in **Conan the Mercenary**.

The eastern tribes are wanderers, often nomads, while the western Shemites are grouped by clans associated with cities or geographical features. The Shemite people are divided into three major types; the eastern desert-dwelling

Shemites, the western or central 'Meadow Shemites' and the 'Pelishtim', also from the western reaches of Shem. Shemites from all three types are physically similar, with dark hair and eyes, and hooked noses. All three ethnic groups speak Shemitish and Shemites are feared across the lands of Hyboria as expert bowmen.

Eastern and western Shemites have little love lost between them, and ancient feuds and rivalries persist throughout the country. Their worship is polytheistic, with a small pantheon of local and imported gods, though Bel, patron of thieves, is particularly popular. Often a particular god is patron to a city-state, worshipped with a central temple and elevated above the other gods in worship, despite the god's actual place in the pantheon. Pteor, considered lesser than other gods, is still the patron of the Pelishtim and worshipped primarily in their lands.

Pelishtia is a region home to the Pelishtim people of Shem, a race famed for a breed of hearty crafty sorcerers and mighty warriors called the Asshuri, who wander the world in search of glory and adventure. The Pelishtim, more than other Shemites, believe in an afterlife and are superstitious in the manner of ghosts and other undead. Many Pelishtim scholars are sorcerers and know means to stave off their own mortality, living hundreds of years and growing ever wiser, even to the degree that the sorcerers of Stygia afford them ample respect. Pelishtim are otherwise similar to Meadow Shemites.

GETTING TO ASGALUN FROM MESSANTIA

The player characters must travel to Asgalun, the largest seaport of Shem, capital of the Pelishtim region and directly east along the coastline from Messantia. As the crow flies, it is around 500 miles. In the Hyborian Age, exactly two methods of travel are available — land and sea. On land, the winding roads that snake along the coastline make the

HOOKS FOR NEW PLAYER CHARACTERS

All the recommendations in **Player Characters** (page 4) apply still, so ideally, new player characters should be Argossean, Shemite, or from other nearby regions. Many hooks for introducing player characters in the first chapter can apply at this later date, such as emissaries of the Temple of Mitra (such as Tomar, from the previous chapter), scholars who were friends with Antaeus, friends of Thyra, or even mercenaries hired by her to assist on this dangerous voyage to Asgalun.

voyage around 575 miles. By sea, the voyage is a bit longer, nearly 600 miles, with an inevitable stop in Eloth, a port roughly 450 miles along the journey, but it will be a shorter and easier trip. Thyra would prefer to book passage on a ship, as it is safer and faster, but if the player characters insist on traveling by land, she acquiesces to their demands.

If the player characters opt for the sea-road, refer to **Scene I: Upon the Sea** (page 59). If they choose instead for an overland voyage, the Gamemaster should refer to **Scene II: On the Road** (page 65). Use elements from either section if the player characters choose a combined path, such as riding as far as Eloth and then booking passage to Asgalun, or sailing to Eloth and riding from there.

IN DREAMS

Some or all of the player characters cursed by the Eye of Acheron will experience unusual dreams, continuations of their experiences in the Stygian dreamworld from the previous adventure. Two of these dream-junctures are described in Scenes III and V. The gamemaster is encouraged to modify these if the player character group has changed and should exclude new player characters if they have not had previous exposure to the Eye's power.

If playing out the voyage in a day-to-day fashion, increase the number of dreams using the two segments as examples, or split the elements from these into smaller pieces and distribute them across a greater span of days. Alternately, the gamemaster could role-play these two dream segments out fully, and then allude to others, such as: *'The next few nights bring you similar dreams, and you awaken each morning feeling less rested than the day before, and with the sounds and sensations of the nightmare almost more real than the waking world.'*

SCENE I: UPON THE SEA

Messantia and Asgalun are trade partners. Merchant vessels are frequent between them, so booking passage is easily accomplished. The docks in Messantia are full of ship agents, willing to book passage at exaggerated prices. Thyra volunteers to cover all travel expenses for the player characters for sea-travel, though she lets them handle the business arrangements.

Messantia serves as a safe harbor to the pirates of the Barachan Islands, in return for their amnesty towards Argossean merchant vessels, but currently there are no Barachan pirate vessels at the docks, nothing unusual,

as it is not that common. If the player characters suggest booking passage with pirates, Thyra is extremely leery about trusting freebooters to their fortunes. She has grown up hearing tales of the savagery of the Red Brotherhood and does not relish the notion of stepping onto one of their vessels, whatever the reason. She instead asks for a merchant vessel to travel upon, for anonymity and to diminish the chance of theft from the crew. Furthermore, the Sons of Shem do not share in the amnesty extended by Messantia to Barachan ships, and will likely attack any pirate vessels glimpsed on their waters.

It normally takes an Argossean merchant vessel 10-12 days to cover 600 coastal miles between Messantia and Asgalun, with an overnight stop in Eloth for trade and to replenish the ship's stores. Compared to the 18 or so days of dangerous travel overland, the sea-road is Thyra's preferred choice of transit. She listens to any compelling reasons against such a choice, if the player characters present them, and decides with the player characters if at all possible. If they leave the decision to her, she books passage on the *Zephyr* (described below).

A PASSAGE TO ASGALUN

The most convenient vessel traveling to Asgalun is an Argossean galley called the *Zephyr*. The ship is the property of House Pompilius, a merchant family in Messantia. The *Zephyr* has an agent standing on the docks offering transit to Eloth, Asgalun, and finally, Khemi in Stygia for the princely sums of 3, 5 and 8 Gold accordingly. The agent is named Vasilos, a young Argossean in his late teens, wearing the badge of House Pompilius.

Vasilos adds another 2 Gold for each horse being transported. Thyra has her own horse, so she pays for it along with the player character horses. Depending on who the player characters are, he might be suspicious of them, as Argossean ships sail in fear of Zingaran pirates, Black Corsairs, and his job is to assess whether a passenger is a scout for those reavers. This might require an Average (D1) Persuade test if the player characters seem untrustworthy. Haggling with him may reduce the price, depending on how well they roll.

The *Zephyr's* captain, a man named Nilos, was once a captain in Argos' navies before becoming a merchant sailor, so they'll gain the safety of his years of experience. Vasilos points down the bustling docks to a firm and proud-looking Argossean merchant galley being laden with cargo. A stout, thick-bearded man is directing the activities. 'That's the *Zephyr*', says Vasilos. 'Speak to Captain Nilos and he'll see that you're taken care of. She leaves soon, so make haste down there.'

Any player characters with naval experience can negotiate free passage in return for working with the crew,

but they must then bunk with the crew and are expected to work the entire voyage. A passenger who offers to help defend the ship can get a discount of up to half, but again, they are expected to fight if the ship is endangered.

Down the docks at the ship, Captain Nilos is busy overseeing the loading of cargo; his crew of Kushites and Argosseans swarming back and forth, loading casks of Argossean wine, thick bales of white linen, pots of cloth dye and other trade goods into the hold.

Meet the Captain

Captain Nilos is a former Argossean sea captain, retired from duty and now working for House Pompilius as a merchant seaman. He does not own the *Zephyr*, but is still loyal to it and a good captain for his masters. His crew are free men, he does not often transport slaves, and he is cautious when it comes to risky cargo.

He sees that the player characters are given adequate space onboard according to their station. This is minimal, as there is little but cargo space on the *Zephyr*, though some small, cramped quarters have been fashioned by roping sailcloth walls across a section of the cargo hold to separate it into two small rooms for passengers. Horses are kept on the deck in a small pen.

The *Zephyr* is leaving in a few scant hours from the time passage is booked, so player characters are advised to either wait onboard for departure, or if they have additional business in Messantia, to keep it quick. Captain Nilos cannot be convinced to change the departure time, as he is already behind schedule, and his men are working as quickly as possible to ready the ship for departure. There are a few other passengers who have yet to arrive.

If the player characters have not already met him, among the other passengers is the treasure-thief Yarosh, who has followed them from Antaeus and/or Publio's estates, eager to get his hands upon the Eye of Acheron. He arrives with two fellow Argossean thieves, hired for this job. Yarosh introduces himself as Heiron and them as his sons Anytos and Zagreus. If asked, he identifies himself as a messenger from an Argossean merchant house he cannot identify, for reasons of privacy, on the way to Asgalun to work out some minor trade concessions with a provider of goods. Yarosh's plans are detailed further in **The Merchant of Argos** (page 61) and **Scene IV: A Thief in the Night** (page 77). This assumes that he has not been identified by the player characters. If he has, then he is in disguise, having shaved his beard and made some other attempts at changing his appearance.

His 'sons' are common thugs as described in the *Conan* corebook, page 321. Each speaks Argossean, Shemitish, Kothic, Kushite, and Stygian. They were hired by Yarosh to pose as his sons. To make it easier for them to remember their cover stories, Anytos and Zagreus are their actual

names. They do not look over-much like one another (or Yarosh), though both are obviously Argosseans. They are merely a distraction and a cover, being given strict orders to only report to Yarosh what they see.

"It was high of stern, with a tall, curving prow; broad in the waist, sloping beautifully to stem and stern. It was guided by the long sweep from the poop, and propulsion was furnished mainly by the broad striped silk sail, aided by a jib sail. The oars were for use in tacking out of creeks and bays, and during calms. There were ten to the side, five fore and aft of the small mid-deck."

— Queen of the Black Coast

The Zephyr

The *Zephyr* is almost 50 feet long and 15 feet wide across the beam, and has a crew of a dozen Argossean sailors and another two dozen Black Kingdoms rowers. The vessel is two-masted, and can sail 2.5 knots per turn rowed or under full sail. Her sails are striped white and gold; her mainsail bears the sign of House Pompilius, a blue-green fish leaping from an emerald wave. A long hold runs the whole of the vessel, full of the current cargo of wine, linen, and a variety of other goods, bound for Asgalun, Khemi, and then the Black Coast.

The rowers and crewmen sleep on the deck when the vessel rests, usually on their benches or under rain-proofed tarps set up when weather is bad. Any passengers are given quarters below decks in an area blocked off from the rest of the cargo by jury-rigged sailcloth walls (these are removed when there are no passengers). There are two of these temporary chambers, and both are cramped and equally uncomfortable, with hammocks for sleeping and rest. Horses are kept on the deck, secured, hobbled, and kept in a small pen. There is room for four horses, and Nilos instructs the owners of the horses that they must be kept calm if there is a storm, or they will likely break loose and run overboard.

If desired, the pirate captain (Nemesis) and pirate crew (Minions) from the *Conan* corebook, page 319, may be used to represent the captain and crew of the *Zephyr*. The ship itself is a galley as described on page 138 of the *Conan* core rulebook, and in more detail on 124 of *Conan the Pirate*.

Setting Off by Sea

Captain Nilos informs the player characters that the *Zephyr* will leave within a few hours. Other than Heiron and his sons, no other passengers are expected. The player characters are advised to go onboard and find their quarters, and to be

ready for departure. Once the cargo is loaded, there is little else to delay the *Zephyr* from setting off. There is little space and almost no privacy in such an arrangement, and several wooden chests have been provided for personal effects to be locked into. If anyone insists, Captain Nilos takes any valuables and locks them away in a cabinet within his own quarters for the duration of the voyage.

Without much ado, the ship is readied for departure, and the gangplank is drawn. Ropes are untied from bollards along the dock, and dock-handlers push the *Zephyr* away with long poles, heaving to ensure the ship's weight does not crush the dock. Captain Nilos gives a short shout, and a drum rhythm begins, with a wooden rustle as the oars are extended from the vessel's sides into the water. The ship begins to move, as the oars bite into the blue surface of the ocean, and it slowly glides away from the docks.

Shortly, the entirety of Messantia fills the horizon, then grows smaller until it is naught but a jagged line atop the water. Sunlight beats down upon the *Zephyr*, and soon the deck resonates with the footsteps of sailors as they ready sails for the voyage east, to Eloth, Asgalun, Khemi, and then the Black Coast.

Shipboard Life

Onboard the *Zephyr*, the player characters have plenty of free time between Messantia and Asgalun. Shipboard life can be enjoyable, restful, or it can represent the epitome of tedium, a veritable prison sentence with leagues-deep walls of water. Physically, also, some can ignore the slightly unsteady footing and the ship's continual rocking, while it will send an unfortunate few into a dark well of sea-sickness.

The *Zephyr* is nine days out of Eloth, and another three from Asgalun, and most of the way it will be within sight of the white and green Argossean and Shemite coasts. The gamemaster should ask the player characters how they plan on filling the time. So long as they stay out of the way of the ship's crew and do not obviously endanger the *Zephyr*, they are at liberty to spend the time however they'd like. Weapons practice, caring for equipment, practicing new talents, getting to know one another — these are all reasonable means of passing time.

Common diversions include gambling, music-making, dance, sleeping, watching the ship pass, and conversation. The ship crew's activity is broken up into four six-hour shifts, and the day's highlight for most is the mealtimes that come between those shifts. This is the best opportunity for the player characters and the captain or crew to interact with one another, as the *Zephyr* has no mess hall, and meals consist of food served in wooden bowls, sitting on the deck or any place that can double as a bench. Food is plain, consisting of some thick stew, hard bread, and water or watered beer. Captain Nilos opens a cask of Kyrios wine once per day at the meal equating to dinner.

HOW TO RUN THE SEA VOYAGE

As a twelve-day sea voyage is too long to roleplay the entirety of, the gamemaster is encouraged to make chronological jumps though this voyage, only dealing with the highlights of activity or opportunities for roleplaying with Heiron and his two 'sons'. The voyage can thus be presented as a series of interludes of shipboard life (see *Shipboard Life*, following), conversations with Heiron and his sons or Captain Nilos, or shipboard encounters (Events at Sea, page 63). The dream granted by the Eye of Acheron occurs in Scene III: The First Dream (page 74). During this voyage, the gamemaster is encouraged to emphasize Heiron/Yarosh's scheming and the potential for shipboard romance with Thyra. Encounters from Events At Sea can be used selectively to keep the player characters focused on reaching Asgalun.

Before reaching Eloth, the gamemaster should give the player characters a few chances for activity, even if in something as mundane as shipboard competitions with sailors, conversations with Heiron and his sons, meetings with Thyra, or some of the other happenings.

The *Conan the Pirate* sourcebook describes much about shipboard life and culture, but is not necessary.

The Merchant of Argos

In the meantime, as Heiron, Yarosh observes the player characters and Thyra to discern which has the Eye of Acheron, and how dangerous they are. He avoids all but the most casual conversations and does not let his 'sons' speak much. If the player characters try to use Insight on him, use his Fortitude (Discipline) as the opposed skill. If caught out, Yarosh claims he is on a mission of the greatest secrecy for his patron, a wealthy Messantian lord, and cannot be forced to divulge his motives. This is, of course, a backup lie, one he hopes that will diffuse further questions.

SEA LANDMARKS

Travel on the ocean is less engaging than by land, as there is often little to see other than a distant horizon and rarely a coastline. However, there are several small islands along the southern Argossean coast to break the monotony. Most of these are in a small chain of islands. Fishermen and their boats are the most frequent sight, as the Argossean coastline is well fished and provides much of the country's seafood. Quaint little fishing villages dot the landscape from Messantia to Asgalun, some of them active, others abandoned and desolate. Old ruins and retaining walls also dot the coast, remnants of bygone and forgotten ages.



SHIPBOARD ROMANCE

One opportunity for emotional investment is to encourage a romance between one of the player characters and Thyra. Though she is their employer, she is still a young woman from rural Argos, devout in her faith to Mitra and her love for a father she barely knew, devastated by his loss. She has read books about the rest of the world, but none have prepared her for the sensations and emotions of her current predicament. It is only natural that she might turn to one of the player characters, seeking comfort from either a worldly traveler, or some respite with another vigorous youth who shares her sense of adventure.

An emotional attachment to Thyra gives at least one of the player characters a compelling motive to see things through. Such a romance can add an emotional tether and encourages them to be protective of her when endangered.

There are no hard and fast rules for this situation, such as what sort of player character she might be most attracted to, who would best be suited for Thyra, and who might reciprocate her feelings, so the gamemaster should improvise as appropriate. However, no player wishes a romance thrust upon their character, and this should only be done at the player's explicit permission.

Now the shore was the edge of broad meadowlands which barely rose above the water's edge and swept away and away into the hazy distance. Here were few harbors and fewer ports, but the green plain was dotted with the cities of the Shemites; green sea, lapping the rim of the green plains, and the zikkurats of the cities gleaming whitely in the sun, some small in the distance.

Through the grazing lands moved the herds of cattle, and squat, broad riders with cylindrical helmets and curled blue-black beards, with bows in their hands. This was the shore of the lands of Shem, where there was no law save as each city-state could enforce its own.

— "The Hour of the Dragon"



EVENTS AT SEA

The gamemaster can enliven the voyage with some of the previously mentioned activities or encounters, or others as desired. Following are suggested events.

The Calypso

The watch gives out a cry, and the deck crew begin to hustle rapidly. If the player characters ask what is going on, Captain Nilos tells them that the watchman spotted a suspicious vessel, several miles ahead. He peers through a spyglass and mutters that it is Gaal-Arvad, a Shemitish sea-reaver. The player characters may have heard of him in the previous adventure, back in Messantia. A successful Challenging (D2) Lore test reveals that Gaal-Arvad is a Shemite pirate captain. He is not a member of the Red Brotherhood of the Barachan Isles, but no friend of Zingara's pirates, either. The ship he commands is called the *Calypso*, and his crew are mostly Shemites or Pelishtim, a rare group for pirates.

The player characters are asked to ready themselves for battle, and Captain Nilos orders his crew to do likewise. He has all hands slow the vessel, though continue the forward motion. Tense moments pass as the *Calypso* is tracked across the horizon, but it comes as a relief to all when the watchman loses sight of the pirate vessel, as it ventures out further to the southeast, away from the coast, until it is no longer visible. For the rest of the day, the watches are doubled. Everyone is on alert, but the pirate vessel does not return.

Dreams of Strange Waters

At mealtime, one of the player characters overhears some of the Argossean sailors speaking with one another about a strange dream they had involving a river. The sailor looks particularly tired as if he has not slept well, and a successful Average (D1) Insight test reveals to the player characters that many of the crew have similar dark circles under their eyes. The Kushites among the crew are also somewhat suspicious of the player characters, and avoid Thyra, having witnessed all of them in their dreams.

Attempts to learn this are met with stony silence, though a successful Daunting (D3) Persuade test may coax it out of them. If so, use the information provided about the dreams the player characters are having to describe what the Kushites and Argosseans are seeing. If this questioning continues, the captain breaks the discussion up and orders the passengers and crew not to speak to each other about the matter again.

Dead in the Water

A half-day later, a different watchman signals that something is in the water ahead, probably a shipwreck. The *Zephyr* creeps up closer, and sees that it is indeed a vessel, though

it has not wrecked but instead has been fired and is almost entirely submerged. Corpses float in the water around it, surrounded with a corona of broken and burnt wood, with a great sailcloth shroud wrapped about the upper portion of the mast, saved from the fire by the water. Seagulls and other scavengers flutter in a cluster above the wreckage. The Argosseans and other crewmen make the sign of Mitra and of Damballah. The captain utters a brief prayer for the souls of the dead, gone down to the bottom of the ocean, while the Kushites among the crew mutter that the dead sailors will now be food for Dagon in his sunken court.

Black Corsairs

At an appropriate or dramatic juncture (perhaps in the middle of a normal event, such as those listed below), a shout builds from the watchman and from all the sailors on the starboard side of the *Zephyr*. Off in the distance, barely visible through a mist, is a Black Corsair galley, moving rapidly. Captain Nilos orders all hands to ready for combat, and the deck thuds with the footsteps of sailors grasping cutlasses and setting up barrels full of arrows for the *Zephyr*'s few archers.

As it nears, another ship emerges from the mist — a Shemite naval galley — followed by another. Both are in pursuit of the Black Corsair bireme, and her drummers are beating a fast tempo as her rowers strive mightily to keep ahead. The galley moves to within a hundred yards of the *Zephyr*, and the Black Corsairs onboard scream insults at the Argossean crew, but they do not attack while under pursuit.

Eventually, they are lost into the mist, once more. Still pursuing the galley, the Shemite galleys pass the *Zephyr*, and her captains and crew wave and shout as they go by. When all three ships are gone from sight, Captain Nilos orders a break and breaks out some casks of wine for all, to calm nerves and soothe any appetite for bloodlust amongst his crew.

Other Events

Minor events to keep player characters engaged could come up at almost any time during the voyage, without involving any external threat.

- A particularly brawny sailor (add +3 to the Minion pirate's Brawn) is thriving in a series of impromptu wrestling matches on the quarter deck (the lowest, main deck of the ship). After throwing off a Kushite sailor with little effort, he turns and gives the largest/strongest player character a challenging glance, then back up at his captain. At this, Captain Nilos, watching from the poop-deck, purses his lips and nods in acceptance, allowing the match. The sailors hoot and shout in excitement and the wrestler gestures in invitation, saying "Let's have a dance, then." If the player character accepts, they

are expected to strip down to their breeks only and wrestle him hand-to-hand, the winner being the one to get the best of three falls. Rules for grappling are provided on page 152 of the *Conan* corebook. Outright fighting is discouraged and jeered at by the other sailors. After the match is over, if the sailor is the loser, he claps the player character on the shoulder and congratulates them on a match well-fought. At that, Captain Nilos orders a meal break, and then for them to get back to work.

- One evening, a group of sailors are clustered below decks, their hammocks pulled off to the sides, playing a boisterous game of chance using cards. They welcome any of the player characters to join them, and quickly teach them the rules of the game. The sailors are honest enough and do not attempt to cheat. While the exact rules of the game are unnecessary, tests might include Insight (reading other players), Observation (reading the movement of cards), or Discipline (to avoid being read). If a player character attempts to cheat, Thievery is opposed by the sailors' Senses Field of Expertise. The amount of coin wagered is nominal, from small pots beginning at a quarter silver piece, to a few hands that might climb up to a few Gold. If a player character has an applicable talent, it would naturally apply.
- After the evening's meal, when Captain Nilos has passed around some wine as a reward for a day well worked, several of the sailors gather on the deck to play some music. In the evening light, the ship's only illumination is from hooded lanterns, and the endless dark blue of the sky seems as limitless as the black water beneath the ship. The sailors produce a small harp, a flute, and a drum, and begin to sing some chanteys, tell jokes, and a few of the other sailors even leap in to dance a sailor's jig, amidst claps and laughter from their fellow crewmen. Thyra even joins in, to much applause. A Kushite sings a song of his native land, and though few understand the words, several of the sailors are moved. One after another, sailors are called on to sing a verse or two of some risqué ditty, or even a lament of the sea. Heiron and his sons demur from joining in the revelry, but the player characters are invited to join in whatever fashion they would care to. If any of the player characters choose to participate, Persuade or Linguistics are appropriate skills to test.
- Some of the deck crew gives a hearty cheer, and the player characters see that a half-dozen or so dolphins are racing alongside the prow of the *Zephyr*, playing back and forth across its path, chattering in

enthusiasm. These greyish-blue beasts are omens of good cheer, so their presence is heartening to many of the sailors. Heiron's two sons crowd the rail, watching the creatures frolic, while their father stands in the shade of the forecastle, glowering slightly, stroking his beard absent-mindedly while lost in thought. If asked, he claims that he was distracted with matters of business.

Eloth by Sea

Mid-day, on the ninth day, the *Zephyr* puts into port at the Shemite town of Eloth, their only stop between Messantia and Asgalun. Some cargo is unloaded, other goods wait on the docks and in nearby warehouses to be brought onboard and secured. Eloth is known for shipbuilding, with the town's main industry being focused on that endeavor. Nearly 6,000 people live in Eloth, most connected with the shipbuilding industry. Nearby docks and dry-docks are swarming with carpenters, shaping wood and constructing several ships at once. Slaves and other laborers convey stout beams of wood, where skilled craftsmen cut and otherwise shape them into frames and hulls.

Captain Nilos tells the player characters that the *Zephyr* will be in port for almost four hours, and if they'd like to set ashore, they're more than welcome to, but the ship will leave without them if they're not present. This is mostly just a warning. Unless the player characters have been particularly bothersome, the captain will order the vessel to wait, and might even send a couple of his sailors or Heiron to search for them if they do not appear when the ship is due to depart.

The gamemaster can use this as a chance for a literal stretching of legs, allowing the player characters to get into small amounts of trouble ashore. There are a few dockside taverns, offering fresh seafood and thick, frothy beer for the shipbuilder trade and the sailors who await completion of the ships and repairs. There isn't much else to the town, as it exists almost entirely to support the ship industry, but there are a few shops where general supplies and foods may be purchased.

Eloth has several inns near the docks, for the future captains and members of the merchant houses who will own the ships they sail. Thus, there is a curious mix of hardened sailors, former naval officers and wealthy investors rubbing shoulders in the tavern common rooms during the day, and when evening comes, they are joined by the craftsmen and shipwrights, thirsty and hungry from a long day at work. Guards are on hand, appointed by the shipbuilding houses, to ensure that there is little chance of drunken quarrels souring business for them.

During the day, taverns are full of sailors who have little to do but sit and drink. Some may be drunk enough

to stir up trouble with a player character without cause, or perhaps for some imagined slight, like a player character paying attention to a prostitute who they have become possessive about. There are games of chance to get involved with, and perhaps even a cutpurse may risk stealing from the player characters.

One significant event may occur during this stopover, however. Yarosh, in his guise as Heiron, may use the stop in Eloth to execute his plan. **Scene IV: A Thief in the Night** provides details on this scheme. Depending on how successful he has been, Heiron may set ashore in Eloth with the real Eye of Acheron in his possession, having switched it for the false one. In this case, he quickly steals a horse and rides for Asgalun, leaving his two 'sons' to face the potential wrath of the player characters.

After the layover in Eloth, assuming the player characters make it back to the *Zephyr* intact and before it leaves, the voyage resumes in earnest once more, with the prow of the vessel slicing into the clear blue water, leaving a split white trail in its wake. Along the shore, as the *Zephyr* sails by, occasionally riders observe the ship from camel or horseback, their features indistinct in the distance.

Aside from these brief sights, there is little else of note on the voyage. Unless the gamemaster chooses to fill the last three days at sea with encounters from **Events At Sea** (prior), the trip is uneventful and the *Zephyr* pulls into sight of Asgalun without incident. The gamemaster should refer to **Section VI: The White Towers of Asgalun** for arrival in Asgalun.

From Eloth by Land

If the player characters attempt to ride from Eloth to Asgalun, Captain Nilos mutters that he is not unhappy to see them go, due to the uneasy feelings and dreams the crew has suffered. If Heiron's theft was successful and the fake Eye of Acheron has been discovered, the player characters likely want to continue the journey on foot, pursuing the thief as rapidly as they can. See **Scene IV: A Thief in the Night** (page 77) for details on the overland pursuit of the Eye. Asking around in Eloth with a successful Average (D1)

"Argos was at peace; laden ox-wains rumbled along the road, and men with bare, brown, brawny arms toiled in orchards and fields that smiled away under the branches of the roadside trees. Old men on settles before inns under spreading oak branches called greetings to the wayfarer."

"The Hour of the Dragon"

Persuade test reveals that an Argossean man stole a horse from a dockside inn immediately after the *Zephyr* docked. A few wharf children saw him take it, and his description matches that of 'Heiron'.

If the player characters did not bring their own mounts, horses can be purchased in Eloth, though the selection is slim — there are enough horses, but their breeds are limited to common riding horses for 10 Gold (**Conan** corebook, pages 137 and 326). It should take about an hour for saleable horses to be found and negotiations to be completed. If the player characters are going on the road, refer to **Scene II: On the Road** (page 65).

SCENE II: ON THE ROAD

The most direct means to Asgalun via land is to take a ferry across the mouth of the Khorotas River, then to use trade roads along the coastline until one reaches the Asgalun River, on which lies Asgalun. This coastline is dotted with natural harbors and coves, used equally by fisherman and pirates. These roads are hazardous, running through knife-edged ravines, often used by bandits and highwaymen who prey on rich merchants and weakly guarded trade caravans. As noted above, it is a voyage of roughly 575 miles. If the player characters are mounted on light horses, the voyage may take around 18 days more or less, depending on how hard they push their mounts. Successful Animal Handling tests may increase the speed and shorten the voyage, at the gamemaster's discretion.

Thyra can purchase horses for the player characters in Messantia. She already has her own horse, from the trip from her hometown to Messantia. On the road, she covers the food and lodging expenses for stops in inns along the way. However, nights spent in proper inns will be infrequent the farther one gets from Messantia, and player characters will be forced to camp along the road some nights or ask for space in a farmer's barn. If the player characters are riding their horses hard, faster than normal speed and spending longer on the road, they should have to trade their horses or purchase new ones along the way.

A few miles north of the coastline is a great expansive sward that crosses the Argossean border, straddling both Shemite and Argossean land. There are no Argossean cities en route from Messantia to Asgalun, though there are many small villages and settlements.

It is not necessary that the player characters visit these places unless they wish to refresh themselves and stay in an inn for the night. The gamemaster is encouraged to usher the player characters along this journey, emphasizing details like rest stops, gathering supplies and the like only





as opportunities for adventure or for roleplaying. However, stops in these towns and elsewhere along the way can be utilized as opportunities to allow player characters to 'stretch their limbs' and get to know each other better if they are relative strangers, drawn together by the cursed Eye.

The continent is filled with small, nameless villages and towns and the gamemaster should present one along the way whenever convenient, if it serves the flow of the adventure and suits the player characters' needs. Any such stop can be made into a lively encounter, with thuggish townsmen, corrupt guards or even rowdy drunks in a roadside tavern. Getting to Asgalun should be the driving goal, though, and Thyra reminds the player characters of this if they are spending overmuch time dawdling along the way.

TRAVEL WITH A CARAVAN

A much safer method of traveling alone on the road to Asgalun is to journey with a merchant or trade caravan. In return for a nominal fee (2 Gold apiece, which Thyra pays), the player characters can enjoy the safety of an armed caravan. This mode of travel is almost 25% slower, however, as ox-drawn wains and a large group of bearers and guards requires more time to get going and spends more time at each stop.

Enterprising player characters might even attempt to hire onto a caravan heading to Asgalun, offering their services as mercenaries, further protection against the bandits of the road. In this case, they will be paid the sum of 5 Gold for their work as guards, free to travel with the caravan, but will be expected to defend the caravan and merchant goods above and beyond any protection they extend to their traveling companions. Thyra books passage as above with such a caravan if the player characters are guards, though she bristles at the slowness of the journey. She provides light riding horses or even secures the services of a wain and draft horses, if necessary. Most passengers on a caravan just walk, however.

A Sample Caravan

A caravan is leaving for Asgalun the next morning from the east part of town, where most caravans are provisioned and organized. The caravan master is Yuval, a Shemite, returning from Messantia taking Argossean trade goods and wine back to Asgalun. He lost some guards in town, arrested by the city watch for brawling, and he is eager to hire new ones to fill their places. The remaining guards are mostly Shemites, Kushites, a few Argosseans and even a Kothic sell-sword.

Yuval and his men are quartered at a tavern called The Golden Road, near the eastern gate. Outside, in a fenced courtyard, Yuval's men stand guard over several wagons piled high with crates, chests, barrels, casks, bundles and

other containers. Horses are being groomed and fed, their hooves checked for rocks or cracks, horseshoes replaced where needed. Camels are being watered by a small group of Shemite drovers who speak to one another in low tones and bear the stamp of being related to one another. Questions about opportunities for work or travel yield a silent gesture at the tavern's common room.

Inside The Golden Road, a small knot of men speaks in low tones, papers and manifests before them on the table they share. They turn to look at the player characters when they enter the room, appraising them. If they are not immediately approached, they go back to their business. One of them, a great heavy Shemite, bald but with a glistening blue-black beard, is richly dressed, smiling confidently as he examines the list. The others are Argosseans, merchants by their appearance. If uninterrupted, they conclude their business with a handshake, and the Argosseans leave. If the meeting is broken by the player characters, the Shemite asks the player characters to wait for a moment while he finishes dealing with these fine businessmen. That done, he turns to the player characters and asks, his voice rich and deep: 'And what can I do for you today?' He introduces himself as Yuval, a merchant and a loyal son of Shem. His caravan leaves on the morrow, and he can always use doughty warriors as guards, and will happily allow travelers to accompany the caravan.

Thyra, if she is with the player characters, makes the arrangements for them if they wish to travel accompanying the caravan. If the player characters want to go as guards, earning a little cash on the side, they should make the arrangements with Yuval on their own (see above). Yuval does not offer horses to any of the player characters, as some of his guards and bearers are on foot and he sees no reason to remove one of his regular guards from horseback.

Paid or not, Yuval warns Thyra and the player characters that if they are attacked by bandits, it would be in their best interest to help defend the caravan against enemies, for it is unlikely that highwaymen and robbers will discriminate between those from the caravan and those accompanying it. Yuval announces that the caravan leaves at the first light of daybreak the next morning, regardless of whether the player characters and Thyra are present.

Thyra says that she'll use her own horse, and offers to buy horses for those who can ride, if they do not have any. The horses that she provides will be light riding horses, not warhorses or any exotic breeds.

Yuval the Caravaneer

An experienced caravaneer, Yuval is accustomed to the trip back and forth between Shem and Argos, as well as other trade routes. He has crossed much of the Hyborean continent as part of several merchant caravans, but now has settled down for a reliable and rarely dangerous route

along the Argossean/Shemite coast. He is not above paying off bandits, but if the player characters are on hand, he will choose to fight. However, Yuval does not risk conflict with the border guards, and pays any fee they ask 'for safety'.

Yuval's Caravaneers

Most of Yuval's caravan guards are poor Argossean men who served in the military briefly and are now selling their services. They greatly enjoy caravan duty, as it means that they are not cooped up in the city, and rarely are they pressed into service. Of all the guards in the caravan, these men are the most likely to socialize with the player characters and Thyra. They are equivalent to the Minion city guard (**Conan** corebook, page 317). There are four of these guards, wearing quilted jerkins and steel caps (Soak: body 1, head 3), armed with broadswords (Reach 2, 6☞, Unbalanced, Parrying), shields (Reach 2, 3☞, 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2), and crossbows (Range M, 3☞, Unbalanced, Unforgiving 1, Volley).

Another four of his guards are former slaves, Kushite 'freemen'. They traditionally keep to themselves and do not socialize with the other guards. They are also equivalent to Minion guards, as above, but armed with swords (Reach 2, 5☞, 1H, Parrying), shields (Reach 2, 3☞, 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2), and are not armored.

The four caravan drovers are all Shemites, related to Yuval in some fashion. Each is loyal to Yuval, though most are younger and somewhat boisterous and sometimes tempers flare while

on the road together. They ride camels alongside the caravan and tend to the pack animals each evening. They are also Minion guards, wear no armor, and carry scimitars (Reach 2, 4☞, 1H, Cavalry 1, Parrying), and have Shemite bows and quivers of arrows ready at their saddles (Range L, 3☞, 2H, Piercing 1, Volley).

Finally, there are a dozen bearers, all slaves, treated accordingly. Most are from Kush, and all are resentful of the Kushite guards, who are of a different tribe. They are forbidden to speak with any of the guards or travelers on the caravan.

Lastly, Yuval's personal bodyguard is Vartan of Koth, a sellsword and mercenary of considerable experience. He has seen many of the Hyborian, Aquilonian, Argossean, Ophirian, Shemitish, and Zamoran. Vartan is equivalent to a Toughened knight (**Conan** corebook, page 319), armored in a mail coat and steel cap.

SETTING OFF BY LAND

If the player characters are heading out with Yuval's caravan, the following description covers that departure and initial stage of the voyage. If they are riding out on their own, the gamemaster should customize the description to remove references to the caravan, and instead leap straight into the encounters or briefly summarize the voyage and the high points.

The next morning, outside The Golden Road, at the break of day, where shadows are long and the air is crisp and cool



from the ocean, Yuval and his caravan readies their departure. When all are settled onto their horses, and the gear has been sufficiently loaded and secured on the wains and backs of bearers, Yuval gives it one last inspection, mounts his camel with the assistance of one of his cousins, then blows a small bone whistle to signal that it is time to go.

With that, the caravan shuffles out of the city, one of the first to depart that day. It passes through the eastern gate, guards watching it go with bored expressions on their faces. In a few short minutes, the city walls are behind the caravan, and eventually, it is little more than a small line of irregular bumps on the landscape, with the open road ahead passing hugging the coast.

A cool breeze wafts northward, across the path, from the shore to the south, and the road ahead is a well-worn brown line, small wheel-ruts filled with water from a recent rain. The low rumble of the surf provides contrast to the quiet of the plains ahead, and ahead, in the distance is naught to be seen but the regular shapes of fields, farmhouses and the occasional reservoir. Bordering it on the south is a series of coves and inlets that make a saw-edge of the coastline.

Talk on the Road

If the player characters and Thyra are traveling alone, the voyage is as swift and arduous or slow and leisurely as they choose. The first 15–20 miles or so out of Messantia are peaceful, the roads thronged with farmers and craftsmen on their way to the city for market and other business. Outside this range, small villages begin to crop up, and small inns and taverns can be found regularly.

If traveling alone, the speed and pace is up to the player characters, but the caravan requires short breaks of around 30 minutes every three hours, during which time everyone can mingle. During these stops, all riders will dismount, food and water are provided, and the bearers shrug off their heavy loads and sprawl on the ground, sometimes massaging feet or catching brief naps when they can. Those who need to step off the beaten path to relieve themselves. Watches are posted for bandits, who often prey on weary caravans.

Sometimes these breaks happen in the middle of the road or off to the shoulder, while occasionally there are established areas that are little more than wide spots in the road with abandoned fire pits. Occasionally, these areas are already inhabited, but few travelers begrudge another the chance to rest, so travel breaks can be good opportunities for learning current news or asking about the surrounding area.

Following is a list of gossip, news or current events that the player characters might pick up while on the road. As with the section **Asking Around in Messantia** (page 20), the gamemaster may require the player characters to make Social or Lore tests to learn some of the items on the list below, rewarding them with extra Momentum spends.

If the player characters are with a caravan, every rest stop becomes an opportunity for more gossip.

Easy-to-discover information gained through an Average (D1) test:

- Pirates prey upon travelers on these coastal roads, taking whatever valuables they possess, dragging them back to their ships and chaining them to oars. They use the many small coves and inlets along the coast as bases for ship repairs, hiding supplies and loot in the old caverns and abandoned mines.
- Bandits are worse than pirates, stealing all that a man has, and then slaying them outright. They inhabit old mines and quarries along the coastal road, using them as bases to strike out at travelers.
- The border guards (Shemite or Argossean) are sometimes corrupt and almost as bad as the bandits — demanding coin for safe passage and using any pretext to harass lone travelers. They've even gotten so bold as to shake down some merchant caravans as of late.

More obscure information gained from a successful Challenging (D2) test:

- The Pelishtim pirate Gaal-Arvad has been sighted along the coast of Argos and Shem. There are rumors that he has become a privateer for Stygia, doing their bidding in the waters of Argos and Shem. He was last seen sailing hard eastward, towards Asgalun.
- At a small inn, the innkeeper recalls that they saw a traveler matching Antaeus's description pass through, many days ago. He was traveling alone, on horseback, and kept to himself. The innkeeper thought it was odd that an older man went without fear of bandits or worse but said little and asked no questions. The man stopped in the inn, slept overnight, and departed in the morning.

General rumors that might be significant to the player characters based on their background, but having no effect upon this campaign are:

- Some barons and dukes of Argos are meeting and massing troops, perhaps another attempt at making war against Aquilonia.
- Stygian agents are all over Shem, extending their control into the highest levels of the monarchy, with the king a puppet to their rule.
- Hostilities are brewing between the Meadow Shemites and the Pelishtim in the areas where the desert meets the plains, at the banks of the Asgalun River.

Complications or failed tests yield the following misinformation:

- Many spies race back and forth between Shem and Argos... perhaps in preparation for war.
- Black Corsair ships roam freely along the coast, taking white slaves to sell to the Stygians. The king of Shem has made a dark bargain with both groups to allow this.
- There is something mysterious in the abandoned mines nearby — sometimes hooded figures enter them at night and use lanterns to signal to ships on the coast in code.

Scene III: The First Dream (page 74) can occur early on the voyage during one of these rest stops or during an overnight stay in an inn or campsite. **Scene IV: A Thief in the Night** (page 77) is assumed to occur at least two days later.

Landmarks on the Road

Along the way, the player characters have a scenic march as the well-trod road leads along the coast, east towards Shem and eventually Asgalun. For the first dozen miles outside of Messantia, the roads are well-paved and bordered on either side by low stone walls or well-maintained wooden fences. Behind these fences are farms owned by the great Messantian merchant houses and tended by slaves. The primary crops of these orchards are olives and grapes, harvested for oil, wine and rich purple dyes. There are other crops, but these are the most prevalent.

A mile from the east gate of Messantia is a massive and ancient cemetery, sprawling across several acres of land, with grave markers ranging from recent to those crumbling from antiquity. A high wall surrounds it, and only the slopes of the terrain beyond those walls show the jutting gravestones and crypts. A large seal of the Argosian crown emblazons the gate, and two guardsmen watch the area, expressions bored at this dismal duty posting. Nearby is a small billet, where the sounds of other guards are obvious. Under no circumstances will they allow any to enter the cemetery. Another two guards patrol the walls, marching outside the cemetery's perimeter. If required, use the statistics for Argosian border guards from page 72.

One of the soldiers is a captain, and he has the only key for access. Yuval the caravaner will urge his horses and men past the cemetery, discouraging any interest. He tells the player characters: *"It is a cursed place, those grounds... old and strange forces there. Sometimes, the dead clamber from their graves, and must be slain by those guards. Let us*

go quickly from this place, 'ere any ill-luck befalls us." He is quite sincere and is deeply superstitious of the cemetery.

As noted above, every few miles the player characters pass a small area obviously used as a campground or resting stop. These range from large areas cleared of trees and bushes, or merely small embankments on the road. Often, they are marked with large fire pits that have been circled with stones or rocks, and many of these have either small wells or are adjacent to creeks or other sources of fresh water as it runs out from inland to the sea. Every inn or tavern has a well alongside or in the outside courtyard, readily accessible for those who dwell there and a potent lure for travelers wanting to water their horses or get water for themselves. Inn-keepers usually set a child outside to watch for passers-by who stop at the wells, to alert them to potential incoming business.

Further out, along the coastline and sometimes set into the rocky cliffsides nearby, are many old mines and quarries. Some of these are still active, with slaves and free laborers working equally hard to break stones and haul them from the ground's embrace, or to coax precious metals and minerals from the depths of the earth. The rest of these mines and quarries are closed — emptied and abandoned, yielding no further riches. The quarries harvest limestone and marble, and the mines once produced iron, silver and copper, but they have been played out and are little more than vermin-haunted labyrinths or great pits in the earth, desolate and barren.

Some of the caves and mines, the caravan guards tell the player characters, are home to bandits and even pirates, and there are stories of pirate treasure secreted deeply within a few of these caves. However, nothing is known for certain, and it is unlikely that anything would be gained from traipsing about in a darkened, abandoned mine seeking some secret stash of gold and pirate booty. If the gamemaster wishes to indulge any treasure-seeking player characters, Yuval allows them to go, but continues on with the caravan. What could be encountered in these abandoned, dusty old shafts is up to the gamemaster, though the result should be that there is no treasure to be found and considerable effort and risk to discover this.

Elloth by Land

On the sixth day into Shem is the settlement of Elloth, little more than an overgrown shipping port, with few services or inhabitants not immediately involved with ship-building and the transport of sea-cargo. North of the town, woodcutters have cleared great swaths of the light forest for Elloth's shipbuilding industry. The road leads through the center of town, a simple enough place, mostly wooden buildings and few solid stone structures. Most of the activity is close to the docks, including taverns and inns, inhabited primarily

| ROADSIDE ENCOUNTERS | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|--|
| Roll | Type of Encounter | Description |
| 1-2 | Pirates | A small group of pirates has set ashore, a small landing craft beached nearby, their vessel anchored nearby. See page 72. |
| 3-4 | Bandits | The player characters are either ambushed by a group of bandits, or they spot them before the bandits waylay them. Make an opposed Observation test vs their Movement to spot them. See page 72. |
| 5-7 | Border Guards | A small group of border guards, resting or patrolling. See page 72. |
| 8-9 | Soldiers | A small detachment of soldiers, marching on their way to some distant battle or duty assignment. See page 73. |
| 10-13 | Merchant Caravan | A smallish merchant caravan (similar to Juval's) resting or in motion. See page 73. |
| 14-16 | Travelers | Others, whether peasants, tradesfolk, mercenaries, merchants, nobles and their retinues, etc. See page 73. |
| 17-19 | No encounter | Nothing is encountered for this period on the road. |
| 20 | Two encounters | Roll 2d20 separately, re-rolling any results of 17+. Combine the results as appropriate, deciding as desired the circumstances both groups are encountered, whether a fight, the aftermath of a fight, pursuit, camping together, etc. |

by merchant house representatives and sea captains who wish to oversee the building of their ships personally. The usual array of opportunists and other locals exist to help them while away their time pleasurably, preferably for hard coin. The section titled **Eloth by Sea** (page 64) covers this town in more detail.

EVENTS ON THE ROAD

The voyage can either be a relatively uneventful, handled as such: "After 18 days of hard travel, you arrive in Asgalun" and moving onto straight into **Scene III** — or it can be fraught with danger. This juncture is a wonderful resource for adventure and roleplaying between the player characters, so suggestions for adventure are provided below.

The gamemaster should call for occasional Average (D1) Observation tests as the player characters continue on the road, success meaning glimpses of faraway travelers down the road, ships off the shore to the south, or seeing wild animals in the plains dotting the low coastal land. Each day, roll 1d20 and pick a result or roll 1d20 on the **Roadside Encounters** table for each success. If actively trying to avoid encounters, make a Survival or Stealth test. For each success and point of Momentum spent, reduce the number of successes on the 1d20 roll above.

The gamemaster is encouraged to keep these rolls relatively painless and quick, and to vary the time of the encounter between the hours of the day to prevent repetition or the feeling of routine.

Pirates

A group of 2+2 Zingaran pirates who have stopped ashore in a small boat. They could be there to replenish supplies,

meet with allies on shore, venture into town undetected, or even to indulge in a bit of highway robbery. Alternately, they could be intent on waylaying travelers to replenish their own ranks. They are not foolhardy and will not attack a caravan or large armed party. They might sneak into a camp at night and kidnap a select few victims. They are equivalent to the pirate Minions from page 319 of the **Conan** corebook, or Zingaran Freebooter Minions in **Conan the Pirate**, page 71.

Roadside Bandits

These men have forsaken honest living and prey upon fat merchants and honest travelers alike, and as such are unused to having to fight much for their plunder. Bandit groups are usually small, usually between 3+2 members, and while they often have a clear leader, it is commonly the most brutal or vicious of them rather than the most experienced. Bandits are almost always either native to the area or have come there from nearby, though some were former soldiers — deserters from their homeland's armies, or perhaps even survivors of border conflicts, caught in countries not their own and preying upon the natives of the area. Bandit Minions are described on page 312 of the **Conan** corebook.

If a battle is going poorly for the player characters, they can be 'rescued' by an Argossean or Shemite border patrol (below). Bandits are rarely suicidal, and their own morale could be broken by a devastating defense by the player characters, causing them to flee.

Border Guards

Argossean border guards are barely attentive to those who pass by. All are native Argosseans, rural in origin, blonde-haired and stocky. All are young, and this is dull work for them. They have been paid off by the bandits and ignore

their depredations. They are typically encountered in groups of at least six, a Toughened captain on horseback while the others walk alongside. They are identical to the guard Minions on page 317 of the **Conan** corebook.

Shemite border guards show signs of their Stygian lineage. Taller and stronger than most Meadow Shemites, they often exploit their role to extort fees from travelers, but do not tolerate bandits. They are all mounted on riding horses, but are otherwise identical to Argossean guards (above).

Soldiers

Soldiers from Argos, Shem, or almost anywhere else are mostly the same, poorer men from the countryside who went to war because they could not support themselves by farming, or city dwellers who saw the military as the stepping-stone to a better life than the one they had. Some are conscripts, and some are volunteers, but in a short while, their outlook becomes near identical. They are all equivalent to city guard Minions (**Conan** corebook, page 317) though they may be equipped differently based on region of origin.

Argosseans are generally friendlier than Shemites, though their enmity towards Zingarans is near pathological. Due to long association with Stygia and fierce rivalry between tribes, Shemites are less accepting of outsiders and thus less likely to be hospitable towards strangers on the road. If the player characters look suspicious or dangerous, the soldiers might try to learn their business, and if they are friendly and approachable, they might allow the player characters to travel with them for a while and share other pleasantries.

Merchant Caravan

Any merchant caravan is likely to be going the opposite direction, from Asgalun to Messantia, unless the player characters are moving rapidly and pass an Asgalun-bound caravan. Regardless of their nationality, they are otherwise identical to Yuval's caravan (page 68) though with different cargo and a slightly different makeup of personnel.

If the player characters are traveling without a caravan, any merchant caravans encountered are highly suspicious of them. If the player characters are a part of a caravan, Yuval signals his own caravan to a halt, and rides forward to negotiate the logistics of the caravans past each other without incident. The player characters may be asked to intervene for this.

Travelers

There is always travel on such a great road between two major cities, and the players should be made to feel like the Hyborian world is a thriving place, with

folks going about their business and lives. This adds greater contrast to later adventures in this campaign, where the player characters are in the wilderness and nowhere near civilization. Other travelers can include farmers, drovers, tradesfolk with wagons full of goods braving the road alone, wandering mercenaries and other opportunists seeking fame or fortune in the great cities, families migrating for one reason or another, and even the occasional wandering new player character! Chance meetings on the road can be an acceptable means of integrating a new player character into a group, should both parties be amiable and approachable. There is strength in numbers, and bandits or thieves are less likely to prey on a group larger than a single traveler.

This can also be a wonderful opportunity for the gamemaster to plant seeds for future games, such as gossip about political turmoil in lands far away, foreshadowing events to occur later in the overall campaign. Perhaps that hooded and cloaked figure is a spy for a king or queen! Will that royal messenger remember the roadside fire they shared with the player characters?

One could also meet a traveler in distress, such as having been roughed up by soldiers, robbed by bandits, or even running from pirates.

Safety in Numbers

The most significant event to occur is the arrival of Yarosh and his two henchmen, posing as his sons. He attempts to join the party (or caravan) in his guise as merchant agent Heiron, traveling with two 'sons' Anytos and Zagreus. If the player characters are part of a caravan, they approach one of them early and ask if they can travel together. This should occur after the player characters have had at least one potentially-violent road encounter, and after they have seen other travelers on the road, to disarm their immediate suspicions of any thieves.

Heiron tells the player characters that they were planning to hire guards but the men they contacted never showed up. Heiron offers to pay the player characters for safe passage. Assuming they send Heiron over to speak with Yuval, an arrangement is quickly made for the privilege of allowing him and his sons to ride alongside the caravan and take advantage of their armed presence.

When Heiron finishes speaking to Yuval, the caravaner announces that the Argossean will be accompanying them onwards to Asgalun. Writeups for 'Heiron' are on page 46 and his 'sons' are described on page 60. They attempt small talk with the player characters, using the tactics in **The Merchant of Argos** on page 61. The next morning, they are ready to depart with the rest of the caravan and keep pace with the player characters especially, as there is almost no one else to talk with on the caravan.

If the player characters are traveling outside of a caravan, they approach Thyra at a rest place (an inn, a campsite), thinking to play on her sympathies. With a similar cover story, Heiron emphasizes the dangers of the road, and states that there is safety in numbers. He and his sons can fight, though they are no warriors. As he is willing to pay nearly any price to journey with them, the bargaining should be easy, and the player characters should feel like they've gotten away with a good price. Heiron pays Thyra in Gold, and once the Pelishtim are out of sight, she gives it over to the player characters to divide amongst themselves as they see fit.

Heiron behaves similarly with the player characters on land as he would at sea, though more cautiously, as he cannot rely on a caravan-master or a ship's captain for protection and has nowhere to go if they are alienated. At camps, he tries befriending Yuval or Thyra, leaving his sons to observe the player characters. The young men both pay particular attention to Thyra, which is his plan, and he visibly chastises them for this, apologizing for their youthful enthusiasm and ill manners if they have caused offense.

If the group is attacked, he and his sons defend themselves competently. Despite his age, Heiron is quite effective with his blade. If asked, he says that he has

lived a long and interesting life. But he encourages the player characters to not rely on them overmuch. Voice choked with emotion; Heiron says he does not wish to lose either of his sons to wanton violence on the road. Pressing him further on this will get a story about him being an envoy from one of the noble families in Argos, with vital information about trade issues from Messantia's merchant houses. It concerns an attempt to wrest business from one of the families who control sea-trade, so he has gone overland with this voyage. This is, of course, also a lie.

SCENE III: THE FIRST DREAM

Early on the voyage, the Eye of Acheron acts, drawing the attuned player characters and Thyra into the Acheronian dreamworld as it did in *Chapter 1: The Fall of the House of Antaeus*. It does not matter if they are on a boat or traveling overland — the dream will occur to all those attuned to the Eye. At midnight, determine which player characters are asleep, standing watch, or doing other tasks. Those who are asleep are drawn automatically into the dreamworld. The rest must make a Challenging (D2) Discipline test. If they fail, they succumb to sleep and appear with the other player



characters. Thyra is fully attuned to the Eye of Acheron and appears alongside the player characters.

Read or paraphrase the following:

Plucked from slumber, you awaken once more with the sense that you are neither dreaming nor awake, but someplace more primal. Again, your senses rebel at the strangeness of your surroundings as you find yourselves standing on the cobalt blue riverside from before. The bright, stale light seemingly comes from everywhere, and it warps and bends colour to strange tinctures. The stairs lead down to the waterside, but the treasure-laden barge you beheld earlier is missing now, no sign of its passage. The wailing women are gone, the slave bearers gone, and no trace remains of the arrogant lord or his chained captive.

As your senses adjust to the brightness and the weirdness of this world, you notice your garments have been replaced by equivalents of some ancient fashion, though comfortable in the same manner. Though you do not recognize this war-gear, it is nonetheless familiar somehow, as if you have worn it long before, and it is now restored to you. The weapons are of fine make, blades and striking surfaces perfectly-balanced, hilts and hafts inlaid with precious stones and woods, fashioned of strange metals and deadly in seeming. The armor is well made, wrought of alloys you have not seen in the Hyborian kingdoms. Your hair and beards, as well, are trimmed in ancient and barely-familiar style, with ornamentation indicating that you are of high status.

As they are now fully immersed in the Acheronian afterworld, the player characters are now equipped in the Acheronian equivalents of their own garb and armor, with their weapons being replaced with ancient equivalents. This has no effect whatsoever on game mechanics, and the items, while of Acheronian make, are the equivalent of the gear the player characters are already equipped with. Only regionally specific weapons are not translated. These include the Ghanata, Yuetschi, and Zhaibar knives (which will be replaced by daggers or short swords, as appropriate), and any Bossonian, Hyrkanian or Shemite bows should be instead treated as Stygian bows. The gamemaster should adjust other regional weapons from the various **Conan** sourcebooks as appropriate.

A successful Challenging (D2) Lore test recognizes the armor and weaponry as ancient Acheronian make. Some of the design patterns and elements were later incorporated into the kingdoms that rose in the ruins of the Acheronian empire. The nagging sense of familiarity with the clothing and armaments are from deeply buried racial memories of Acheronians. Player characters from Aquilonia, Argos, Corinthia, Koth, Nemedica, Ophir, Shem or Stygia are most

familiar with these racial memories, as their long-dead forefathers were once subjects of, and later overthrew the Acheronians.

Let this information sink in, then read the following:

As you gain regain your sense of bearings in this place, a voice sounds behind and above you. Thyra gasps at the deep, rich baritone, and her hand flies to her mouth as she looks upward at the figure that stands at the top of the stair.

"I am sorry that you have been drawn into this," the man says, "but Mitra's ways are strange and unfathomable to me." He is an Argossean, with long white hair and a high forehead. Robed, he leans upon a heavy wooden staff. You have seen him before, in the library in Messantia, though there he was frightening and awful to behold, and here he is as real as any of you in this place.

Thyra says "Father..." and springs up the stairs and embraces him. He holds her at arm's length, then turns to include each of you in his gaze.

"I cannot stay long in this place, as it is not Mitra's domain and even his power is limited here. I do not wish to awaken the powers that govern this world, so I must be brief. You were drawn here by fate, by contact with the Eye of Acheron. It is a prison, trapping the soul of an evil sorcerer of old Acheron. Xhosāth was his name. The Eye was made by his rivals, who overcame him in a battle of the darkest sorcery. Now, he senses that his time of release is near, and someone of this age is aiding him in escape."

"For centuries, trapped 'twixt existence and the shadow of death, caught in this dream-place, he could not journey beyond the realm of life yet was denied the release of eternity. Mad from his time spent in this exile, he has now embarked upon the final journey down the River of Souls, which we stand on the banks of. When his journey is at an end, he must present himself before the Lords of Death, and be reborn anew into the flesh, should he be judged fit."

"You must follow this path, 'pon the banks of this very river, and stop him, else he is reborn. You have been drawn into his world, this dream-place. Xhosāth's captive was none other than Prince Tothmekri, a Stygian lord who discovered the secret of the Eye of Acheron and inadvertently became Xhosāth's living vessel for a time. Now the Acheronian giant-king will present Tothmekri to the judges of death as his prize, a ransom to bargain with, the soul of one who would be king. That must not happen. The soul of Tothmekri must be slain, while reunited with his flesh. Only in the real world can Xhosāth's journey back to life be halted."

"The Stygians you encountered in my study sought the Eye for just such a purpose, but not to destroy Tothmekri. One of them is his descendant, and with the Eye and the sorcerous power it grants him, he and his master will seize the throne of Stygia and with the aid of long-forgotten Acheronian sorcery, Set's power will grow and spread across the land."

During this speech, Antaeus's shade can answer any questions they have, within reason. Following are some suggested answers he might have:

- If asked why the Eye of Acheron cannot simply be destroyed, he says: "If so, the soul of the sorcerer would be released at once. Untethered, Xhosâth would simply seize the physical form of a living being and wreak havoc in that body. If slain, he would be free to move from that form to another, as he is not anchored to his natural corpus. In his true form, his original flesh, he will find a home he cannot flee, and then he can be put to rest for eternity, to plague the world of life no more."
- If asked what to do exactly, he says: "You must follow the soul along the river and try to stop him from bargaining away Tothmekri's soul at the Hall of Judgement, where the river terminates. In the true world, forces are guiding you to Tothmekri's resting place, and eventually Xhosâth's own remains. In each place, you must allow the spirit to be united with flesh and strike true."
- If asked how the player characters are expected to catch Xhosâth on foot while he is on a barge, Antaeus explains: "The barge he follows is not fast, and there are many challenges ahead, instances where he will lose time. Your task is not to stop him, but to be with him when he reaches the Hall of Judgement."
- If asked 'Why us?' or some equivalent question, he replies: "Mitra works with the skeins of fate and chooses the most unlikely of vessels. I do not know whether Mitra led you to the Eye of Acheron, or chose you once you found it. It does not matter now — further speculation is mere sophistry in the face of what you must do."
- The Hall of Judgement?: "A mythic place, home to the judges of the dead. It is also called Userat Maati, the Hall of Truth, in the fields of Ament. There, the gods of old Acheron sit and weigh the souls of those who come before them, and pass judgement before setting their fate, be it some hell or heaven."
- If asked about rewards or protection from Mitra, Antaeus tells the player characters: "It is not for me to say, but know that Mitra's all-watching eye is ever 'pon you, and his saints are at work on your behalf."
- If asked about where Tothmekri and Xhosâth's remains are, he says: "The Stygian is on an island far from here, and the Acheronian's is hidden, even from the sight of the one true god Mitra."

- If asked about the change in clothing and weaponry, he explains: "Your souls are now bound to this place, and this war-gear you now bear has power here."

After a few questions, the gamemaster should cut things short:

The old man then whispers into Thyra's ear for a moment. Tears well in her eyes. Turning to leave, Antaeus says "You must follow Xhosâth in this world, along the River of Souls, as you are in turn guided by his soul in the waking world. There are perils along both paths, but this journey must be taken, and you cannot fail. Even were you to fall away from this course, you would not live to see the day of Set's triumph, as your own souls cannot survive long here once Xhosâth is freed."

"You will be summoned here again, and then you may travel this path. More I cannot say." With that, he turns and begins to limp away. As he goes, he says back to them, "Begin your voyage now... your souls can find their own way along the path. You will return here again soon enough."

The player characters can stand around, talk to one another, or refuse to do anything, or they can take his advice and follow along the shore in the direction Xhosâth's barge passed.

The baleful white sky grows suddenly darker, and colours all become black.

In a moment, you realize that you are back in the real world, newly awakened from your slumber.

At this time, the player characters cannot learn much more about Acheron, Tothmekri, or Xhosâth. If they examine the Eye of Acheron, they will see that there are several points of light now in it, one for each of the player characters attuned to it, another for Thyra. There are also two other lights, one brighter than the rest by far. Instinctively, they know that these small points of light represent themselves. A successful Dire (D4) Sorcery or Lore test can reveal some of the information from the introduction to this campaign, at the gamemaster's discretion.

Also, at the gamemaster's discretion is whether any attempts at willfully entering the afterworld have any effect, through sorcery spells such as *Atavistic Voyage* or *Astral Wanderings* (**Conan** corebook, pages 173–175), or other spells as described in **The Book of Skelos**, may work. It is assumed that these require considerably powerful and specialized sorcery, at least Epic (D5) in Difficulty. Neither will any attempts at preventing the voyage there, though the player characters can almost certainly find charlatans in Asgalun able to sell them a potion to ward off such excursions, or cast protective spells upon them, neither of which has any significant effect.

SCENE IV: A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Whether he is onboard the *Zephyr* with the player characters, traveling with them, or merely following them on the road, Yarosh is ready to act. If the player characters are sailing, consult **A Theft on the Zephyr** (following) or if on land, see **A Theft on the Road** (on page 77). Next is **After the Theft** on page 78.

A THEFT ON THE ZEPHYR

Yarosh is weighing two courses of action, depending on which is safest and most likely to succeed. He waits until the night before the *Zephyr* puts into shore in Eloth or Asgalun to act, based on the gamemaster's assessment of his options.

With the first plan, he breaks out several bottles of fine Argossean wine, and share them with his sons, Captain Nilos, and the player characters. Hospitably, Captain Nilos opens a cask or two of wine from the ship's stores. The wine is safe to drink, but characters suffer the condition Dazed while lightly drunk, Staggered if moderately drunk, and the equivalent of Blinded while very drunk (cumulative). See page 126 of the *Conan* corebook for more on these conditions. Ask any drinkers to make a Discipline test — each success reduces their state from 'very drunk' by one step.

Once all are asleep, Yarosh attempts to sneak into the quarters of the player character (or Thyra) with the Eye and switch it for the false copy. He is quite wary of it and treats it with extreme care, hiding it in his belongings until the ship pulls into port in either Eloth or Asgalun. Then, he leaves as rapidly as possible to return it to Baruch's estate, abandoning his 'sons' to their fate.

His second option is to steal the artifact but to then leave the copy with one of his 'sons' in some concealed but obvious place, framing them as the true thief. Yarosh then steals the *Zephyr*'s small landing craft and flees in the night. When a search is made for the Eye, the false one is found and the 'son' blamed. Captain Nilos has no interest in the item, and claims of supernatural powers and the like are met with suspicion.

The gamemaster should improvise one of these attempts using Yarosh's Movement Field of Expertise (Stealth or Thievery) opposed by Observation or another appropriate skill. He is not violent, but fights defensively to escape.

This scene can be run as a gripping action sequence, with one or more of the player characters waking to discover the merchant in their quarters, a knife in one hand as he creeps from the room. A chase naturally ensues. He calls for help from his sons. They appear, almost instantly, and attempt to interpose themselves between the player characters and their 'father'.

He scrambles over the side of the ship and into a landing craft... rowing off into the night. The player characters, surrounded by sailors and Captain Nilos, must explain what has happened or be wrestled to the ground as thieves themselves. Valuable time is lost while the captain demands information, and there is no second craft to follow into port. Furthermore, the *Zephyr* is far enough from shore, and it is dark enough that to swim after him would be certain death.

The next morning, the *Zephyr* sails close to the shore, where they see the small craft abandoned on the Shemitish shore, miles away from whatever city the incident occurred closest to. If the theft occurred outside of Eloth, Captain Nilos tells the player characters that they are advised to stay onboard, as the *Zephyr* reaches Asgalun before any man on foot or horseback could, if the white city is Heiron's final destination.

If they choose instead to pursue on foot, the gamemaster should go to **Eloth by Sea** (page 64) to continue with the adventure. Otherwise, the rest of the sea-voyage will continue, and as a favor, Captain Nilos cuts his visit in Eloth as short as he can, urging his sailors to greater speed and extra hours of sailing, to shave time off the transit time to Asgalun, to better enable the player characters the opportunity to arrive before the wily treasure-finder. From here, the gamemaster should go to **Scene V: The White Towers of Asgalun** (page 78).

A THEFT ON THE ROAD

If the player characters are traveling overland along the coast of Shem to Asgalun, Yarosh's attempt at theft is the same as onboard the *Zephyr*. For added drama, it should be attempted early in their trip, so the player characters are forced to pursue him cross-country.

During the evening's meal, Heiron (Yarosh) breaks out several bottles of wine from his saddlebags and shares them with the player characters and Yuval. He is uncommonly garrulous, and will take part in the storytelling and merriment, urging his sons to enjoy themselves. See page 77 for rules on drunkenness.

After everyone has gone to sleep for the night, Yarosh makes his move using his Movement Field of Expertise (Stealth/Thievery). He liberates the Eye from whatever place it is hidden and replaces it with the duplicate. He then moves as quickly as he can to his readied horse, leading it quietly from the camp, then, once clear, mounting and racing off into the night. If anyone sees him or raises a commotion, his two sons leap up to his defense. They surrender quickly if overwhelmed.

If the player characters are not traveling with Yarosh, his attempt at theft is bolder. He does not have his two henchmen, as he has little need for a cover.

If the player characters are staying in an inn, use the same method as described above with the *Zephyr* (page 77). If the player characters are camping in the wild, he tries to steal

it from them at night, creeping past any sentries or guards. He then flees as rapidly as possible, sneaking away to his horse, then heading to Asgalun and Baruch.

AFTER THE THEFT

As noted above, the player characters may at first not notice that the Eye of Acheron is a fake or is missing. Have the relevant characters (or Thyra) make an Observation test if they do not specifically check on it. If they have the fake, the chance is Daunting (D3) to tell if it is not the real one, but anyone attuned to it has this Difficulty reduced by two steps (see page 34). If it is simply missing, a simple (Do) Observation test reveals so.

Interrogating either of the two 'sons', if available, is a Persuade or Command test, opposed by their Fortitude Field of Expertise (Discipline). Success gets them to admit any or all of the following:

- Their true names are Anytos and Zagreus.
- They were hired in Asgalun by the man, who gave his name as Yarosh.
- Yarosh had them pose as his sons and gave them specific instructions about how to behave to the woman and the other player characters.
- He told them they were looking for a special diadem, a big black jewel in a strange setting, but not to take it for themselves.
- His accent and mannerisms mark him as from Asgalun.

They plead for mercy, and Captain Nilos or Yuval (depending on where they are interrogated) orders them taken prisoner, to be turned in to the local jailers at the next stop, be it Eloth or Asgalun.

SCENE V: THE WHITE TOWERS OF ASGALUN

The end of the journey is Asgalun, a sprawling cityscape of ziggurats and high towers of white stone. The city's inner wall is readily apparent, made of sun-dried brick and a contrast to the white towers. The harbor is thriving and all roads into the city are full of travelers. When the player characters arrive, it is around noon, and the sky overhead is cloudy and grey. A light rainstorm has sprung up, and distant crashes of thunder punctuate the occasional flare of lightning.

Thyra tells the player characters that she feels a strong sense of foreboding and that a part of her does not want to learn the truth. The Eye of Acheron has been working

its magic on all the player characters, and they may be feeling weary from lack of restful sleep. If the player characters are coming into the city via the overland route, the gamemaster should consult **Entering Asgalun by Land** (following), and if they are arriving by sea, refer to **Arrival by Sea** (page 79).

ENTERING ASGALUN BY LAND

If the player characters arrive in Asgalun by land, they first see the city from a mile away, standing brightly against the coastline. Several roads lead to it, and the waters outside the port are crowded with merchant ships, fishing cogs, slave-rowed biremes, and even naval galleys. The lands surrounding the city are sweeping plains, with many flocks of sheep and other herd animals graze outside, watched by impassive, black-bearded men on horses and camels. Merchant caravans wend their way into lower reaches of the outer city, where all are permitted.

At a few hundred yards from the city, the line of those entering is enough that the player characters are slowed somewhat. If with a caravan, it is greatly slowed and joins a place in line, but if they are alone, they can bypass the crowded road, though full of pack-laden beasts; wains high with goods; travelers on foot, horse or camel-back; and red-cloaked Kushite mercenary guards who stand alongside, watching the flow of traffic as it eddies around them.



Player characters from Shem or familiar with Asgalun know that the king has employed Kushite mercenaries to supplant the Pelishtim city militia. The asshuri of Pelishtia, however, are too proud to serve as mere constables and watchmen, so the choice is an undefended Asgalun or one manned by foreigners. Thus, these clusters of Kushite mercenaries stand vigil at the main roads into the city. They exude contempt for those who enter, and occasionally they seize the arm of a traveler and pull them to the side, demanding their reasons for entering the city. Some are horsed, and ride down and up the roads inspecting the oncoming visitors, seeking out notable travelers or those who seem especially suspicious. They then ride back to tell the guards at the entrances, and continue the process, seesawing back and forth along the line of those entering the cities.

One of these Kushites rides up to the player characters and Thyra (and their caravan, if they are traveling with one), and gives them a challenging, rude appraisal. He says nothing, but rides back to the gates, leaning over his saddle and speaking to a small knot of his brethren at the mouth of the road where it enters Asgalun's lower city. Thyra asks one of the player characters "What do you think that meant?" If the player characters attempt to step out of the throng entering the city, or somehow draw attention, the rider returns and demands their names and why they

LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN ASGALUN

Asgalun is Shem's major port city, and like Messantia, it is cosmopolitan enough that everyone speaks a few languages. All native Shemites speak Shemitish, and long years of contact with Stygia makes that a usual second language. The Shemite slave markets are abuzz with Kushite, Aquilonian, Argossean, Kothic, Ophirian and Hyrkanian. By the end of the first adventure, player characters will be assumed to have picked up enough Argossean to get by, and the gamemaster might also automatically rule that the transit from Messantia to Asgalun presented enough opportunity for player characters to have learned some Shemitish if they do not already possess that language.

are coming into the city. Approaching the gate as normal moves the player characters past the Kushite guards, who watch them with unconcealed disdain. A successful Average (D1) Insight test reveals that this is merely a dislike of most outsiders, not specific. The tense entry into the city passes, and the player characters (hopefully) enter without incident into Asgalun, their destination.

Kushite guards are like city guard Minions, armed with swords (Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Parrying) and shields (Reach 2, 3 , 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2).

ARRIVAL BY SEA

Coming into Asgalun's harbor is considerably less eventful than any land passage, and much quicker. The *Zephyr* has arranged for an open dock ahead of time, and will sail directly to it, ahead of other vessels waiting outside. Small dinghies dart in and out of the paths and wakes of larger vessels, bearing passengers from the ships to shore, and bringing harbor officials and assessors out to the ships for arrangement of landing privileges and dock assignments.

Guided by Captain Nilos, the Messantian merchant vessel pulls up alongside a dock. Rope hawsers are thrown from the *Zephyr*'s side and lashed by dock-men to thick wooden bollards, securely lashing the ship in place. The gangplank is set down, and Captain Nilos tells the player characters they are free to disembark. With that, he is done with them. If the two Argosseans are still onboard, they are taken ashore by sailors and turned over to the portside guards, their charges of theft detailed by Captain Nilos later.

Once the player characters leave the ship, they enter a busy port, much like Messantia's, though less formalized and much wilder, with poorer, smaller vessels and rougher crews. Most of the faces are dark, from sun-bronzed Pelishtim, Stygians, Kushites and others of the Black Coast. Physical cargos, in the form of trade goods, are the minority of what passes through

this port. Instead, the player characters see that the bulk of wealth passing through here is in the form of slaves on their way to Asgalun's famous slave markets. Slaves of all shapes, ages and races are marched on and off the docks.

Thyra beholds this parade of misery with an impassive face. She says that though she has always seen slaves in the fields of Argos, she has never seen such a display of such indifference to human dignity. "Let us go from this place now, and find Baruch as quickly as might be," she asks.

ASGALUN

Asgalun, on the northern bank of the river, is surrounded by meadowlands in a verdant patch of palm forest, with low, sloping hills to the north. It is the capital city of Pelishtia and the Pelishtim culture with a population of nearly 40,000 people. The city's main god is Pteor, worshipped alongside the other Shemitish gods.

From a distance, Asgalun is marked by great white towers and ziggurats. Its outer surrounded by a great wall, with another walled interior visible from all places in the city, the Royal Palace district. One enters the city primarily through one of its great gates, and into a sprawl of buildings and common markets. The slave blocks of Asgalun are enormous, where slaves of all types are bought, sold, and traded, often with a dismal future at the hands of their Shemite masters, who have a reputation for cruelty towards them. The city is a mix of the foul and the fair — reeking alleyways lead to shining boulevards, and gleaming towers soar next to crumbling, scum-encrusted ruins.

The city is broken into two major districts — the outer city that circles a walled inner city, whose wall is the most dominant feature of Asgalun. Entrance into the inner city is forbidden by foreigners and is home to nobles and to the king, and is patrolled by mounted Kushite mercenaries. Though it seems impregnable, there are often several secret passages into the inner city, leading into pleasure-houses and enabling the nobles of Asgalun to come and go from the inner fortress without notice from the inner wall guards. Additional information about Asgalun and Shem can be found in *Conan the Mercenary*, pages 41–47.

GETTING SETTLED IN ASGALUN

Now that the player characters and Thyra have arrived in Asgalun, the most important matter is to discover the whereabouts of the scholar Baruch and to determine what he knows about Antaeus's disappearance. Entering the city is somewhat of a shock for those who are suspicious of Stygians. The city is much closer geographically to Stygia, and the serpent kingdom's influence is evident at all levels of society. Many Stygians are visible in the streets, particularly around

the slave markets, or ducking into mysterious shops run by enigmatic Pelishtim businessmen.

Other encounters are suggested below, each steering the player characters closer to Baruch.

- If Yarosh, either as Heiron or in his normal identity, managed to gain access to the Eye of Acheron and has escaped to Asgalun, they are naturally going to want to find him also. If they ask questions about him, see **The Thief's Trail** (page 80).
- At some point, one of the player characters encounters a soothsayer, who imparts to them a mysterious prophecy. See **A Message from Afar** (page 81).
- If the player characters are particularly reckless, they may find themselves the targets of street-thieves or pickpockets, described in **Take the Money and Run** (page 82).
- Player characters who act suspiciously or cause a commotion may run into some Kushite mercenary guards. See **Getting into Trouble** (page 82).

Baruch does not openly advertise his services and has gone into hiding. A successful Daunting (D3) Society test yields the location of Baruch's home in Asgalun (page 90, modified in Difficulty as appropriate (language, any other talents, background, etc.)). This can be spread out through a bit of asking around or canvassing various shops, scholars, or other likely leads.

This is a merchant city, much like Messantia, though more of the business is on the street level, rather than through large merchant houses or shops. Almost any good or service the player characters could want is found cheaply and easily available in Asgalun.

Eventually, the player characters learn that Baruch dwells in the exclusive and heavily guarded inner city of Asgalun, and therefore they need some reason to go there, or perhaps learn of the secret passages from the outer city past the inner-city walls.

THE THIEF'S TRAIL

Asking after Yarosh (or Heiron, depending on how the player characters know him) is more of a challenge. Though he is no stranger to Asgalun, he has long hidden his identity and made few friends or allies. All he has here in Asgalun are contacts, reluctant to give him up to strangers, fearing that they will lose him as a valuable resource. If they can find anyone who knows of him, requiring a successful Daunting (D3) Society or Thievery test, the player characters learn that there is a man who matches that description who has entered town recently, though his name is Yarosh, not Heiron.

Additional points of Momentum spent provides the player characters with any of the following tidbits of information:

- Yarosh has apparently done business in the past with an alchemist named Bel-Merodak, who might be able to find him. Consult **The Alchemist's Door** (page 81).
- Yarosh stopped into a nearby wine shop. Something he said indicated that he was on his way to the inner city to meet a patron.
- There are secret entrances that go under the inner-city wall, known to nobles and their servants, so that they might come and go without the guard and king knowing their business.



THE ALCHEMIST'S DOOR

The player characters are directed to an alchemist's shop in the outer city. Finding it is a challenge, through a maze of narrow alleys, open markets and along the edge of the Kushite district, but eventually they arrive at the place described. Knocking at the door gets a quick response in the form of a smallish Pelishtim man in a thick camelhair kaftan. When the player characters introduce themselves, he gives his name as Bel-Merodak, and allows them to enter.

Inside, the place is a quiet oasis from the heat and the noise of the streets outside, though overfull with cabinets with tiny drawers, shelves of small bottles and jars, and racks of various containers and boxes. Bel-Merodak deals with alchemical supplies and petty enchantments and is well connected to many scholars and sorcerers in Asgalun. The place smells of strange herbs and chemicals. The alchemist takes a seat behind his worktable and asks what the player characters would like from him today. See his writeup below.

Bel-Merodak knows most of Pelishtim sorcerers and scholars in the area, and a successful Challenging (D2) Persuade test has him admit that he knows Baruch and where to find him, but that 'recent misfortunes' make him reluctant give this information up. Baruch is a good customer, and Bel-Merodak has heard that Baruch is in trouble with dangerous people and has been a recluse for the last ten days. An Obtain Information Momentum spend or some other means of persuading Bel-Merodak gets the address of Baruch's home.

Baruch lives in the inner city, however, and the player characters are certainly disallowed from entry. It is an area reserved for the royalty, nobles, and the wealthiest of Asgalun, and the king is particularly afraid of foreign spies. The alchemist does have a suggestion, however, and that is to seek entry through the city sewers, a popular route traveled by those who wish to avoid the guarded gates. There is an entrance nearby, he tells the player characters, and gives them directions to the place. See **The Dark Passage** (page 83). If the player characters go there, a suggested encounter is **Take the Money and Run** (page 82).

As for Yarosh or Antaeus, he knows nothing. He is awestricken if he is shown the Eye of Acheron, and at the gamemaster's discretion, he can tell a bit about ancient Acheron. See the *Introduction* (page 3–11) for more information, though it is advised not to reveal too much at once: Baruch himself is the best source for additional lore about the Eye of Acheron's past and its grim destiny.

Bel-Merodak the Alchemist

Though he is no practicing sorcerer, Bel-Merodak has made a comfortable living catering to them, selling sorcerous

supplies, offerings, and other ingredients, various potions and concoctions, and making petty enchantments of his own for sale. He is otherwise an average person, with Intelligence 11, Willpower 11, and the Knowledge Field of Expertise 4. He speaks and reads a wide variety of languages fluently and at the gamemaster's discretion, he may have any religious or sorcerous offerings, petty enchantments, as described on pages 141 and 163–167 of the **Conan** corebook. He may also have other items presented in **The Book of Skelos**. His shop is an alchemical laboratory as described on pages 141 and 143 of the **Conan** corebook.

A MESSAGE FROM AFAR

At some juncture, the player characters are pushing their way through a crowded market square, hawkers and barkers bellowing about the quality of their goods while a throng of patrons idles or strides past. If the player characters are heavily armed and armored, they are targeted by merchants more suited to their needs. The keenness of Akbitanian weapons is extolled, as is the resilience of armor crafted according to ancient Pelishtim fashion. Offers are made for introductions to attractive young Shemites, and if the player characters are carrying any sort of gear, dozens of young children come up to them and offer to serve as bearers, for a few coppers a day.

One of the player characters has their sleeve tugged upon. The gamemaster should choose an appropriate player character or pick at random. It is a Pelishtim woman, with a cloth wrapped about her eyes, indicating blindness. Her face is screwed-up in pain, as if she is having a fit of some sort. She is in peasant garments, with a shawl protecting her shoulders and head. At her side is a young Pelishtim child, clinging to her arm as if guiding her. His expression is fearful, as if something terrible is happening.

If the player character pays any attention to her, she speaks to them in a strange voice, almost singsong, heavily accented, in rural dialect of Kushite (or heavily-accented Shemitish if none of the player characters speak Kushite). She says:

"You journey under the auspice of the ancient eye, walking in two worlds. A sea-voyage awaits you, and a king's fate will join your own. Trust him. Aid him and his blood and your will shall also be done."

Then she grows silent, her features relax, and she slumps into the child's arms, barely conscious. If the player characters check on her, an Average (D1) Healing test reveals her muscles and form are extremely rigid, as if she had been doing strenuous labor and has only now relaxed. When she speaks again, it is in a normal voice, quavering and without the accent.

"What is it, Hagai? Have I been away?"

Hagai, the young boy, explains that his grandmother Nehama was once an oracle, still prone to visions, with the voices of strange beings speaking through her. She has no recollection of the message, or anything after she was seized. There is little more to learn from interrogating them.

There is no way the player characters can know this, but the old oracle was used briefly by a Kushite shaman named M'wangele, to impart a warning to the player characters. He has seen that their paths will shortly cross with his ally, Odaka, and he is doing what he can to guide the Eye of Acheron to the place it will become most useful. The player characters will encounter Odaka in *Chapter 4: The Wine-Dark Sea*, and M'wangele himself appears in *Chapter 7: Spears of the Black Coast*. M'wangele is wary of drawing the attention of Serothos, so the message is brief and cryptic.

Take the Money and Run

The player characters turn into a long alley, either trying to find their way, avoiding some other obstacle (Kushite mercenary guards, or perhaps a crowded thoroughfare). Or they're just lost. Around 50 feet down the alley, they find themselves facing a small group of 4+2☞ Shemite thugs, blocking the way through what they claim is 'their' alley. Several clay jugs of cheap wine are scattered and broken on the ground nearby. One of them knocks on a nearby wall, and 2☞ more thugs emerge from a nearby curtained doorway (minimum 2). Their leader, a thick-bearded fellow, steps forward and tells the player characters that they're trespassing and that if they'd like to spare themselves a thrashing, a donation to the neighborhood association would be welcomed. Otherwise, he says, he cannot speak for the tempers of his companions. They produce clubs and attempt to surround the player characters. They are Minion thugs, as per the *Conan* corebook page 321.

Though they attack if challenged, they are not killers, and are especially unready to die for money. If wounded and able, they stagger away, and if half their number is down, they give up and flee altogether, leaving their companions to the player characters' mercies. The Kushite guards do not intervene even if summoned. They barely care what the Shemites do to one another, and in their eyes all foreigners are less important than Shemites.

If the player characters seem to be incredibly tough, heavily armored and bewepioned, increase the number of Shemite thugs by another 1☞ or ignore the encounter altogether. It could, however, be used if the player characters split up, with this group of ruffians picking on the smallest or most defenseless-seeming group of player characters, almost definitely the one with Thyra, who seems like she has money.

Getting into Trouble

Asgalun is a xenophobic city, and her king suspects foreigners of plotting against him. Though the city is a melting pot of many cultures, it is also rife with paranoia, with deep class

and racial tensions exhibited every day in its streets and marketplaces. The mostly-foreign guard consists of Kushites with a few Pelishtim in token positions of leadership, and not all Kushites get along, causing additional strife.

Obviously illegal activities include open murder or theft, public assault on a free citizen, criminal trespass, causing offense to a guard, or entering prohibited areas such as the inner city. If the player characters commit a visible offense, the gamemaster should have Kushite mercenary guards arrive of their own accord. The Shemite residents of Asgalun do not care overmuch for these foreign mercenaries, and rarely summon them if they can avoid it. Asgalun's Pelishtim inhabitants tend to police their own neighborhoods in a manner much fiercer than even the Kushites might attempt, and they also do not wish to have outsiders meddling in their affairs and communities.

Despite their fearsomeness, the Kushites are Minion guards as per those in the *Conan* corebook, page 317, armed with scimitars (Reach 2, 4☞, 1H, Cavalry 1, Parrying) and shields (Reach 2, 3☞, 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2). They speak Kushite, Black Coast, Darfarian, Shemitish, and some Stygian, and are usually encountered in groups of three to six. A larger group is likely to have a Toughened captain — either Kushite or Pelishtim — on horseback. Those in the inner city are always Toughened, mounted, and in pairs, and those positions are coveted among them.

SCENE VI: THE INNER CITY

It should become clear by now that unless they have a convincing reason, the player characters are not going to be allowed entry into the inner city of Asgalun. If they insist on going to the sole entrance into the inner city, they find a large gate there, watched hawklike by at least a dozen Kushite mercenary guards, six on foot, the rest on horseback nearby. If the player characters make as if to fight their way through, Thyra stops them, stating that she does not think a bloodbath gets them any closer to the truth. Getting arrested is not an option.

During the day (daybreak to nightfall), the gate is open and guarded as above. After dark, it is closed and barred, with the guard reduced to half that number, with four gateguards (two inside and two outside) and two horsemen. The area is patrolled by another half-dozen Kushite horsemen and footmen, as well. Night or day, if they sound a horn hung next to the gate, another half-dozen Kushite horsemen readily arrive within 3+2☞ rounds.

The wall itself is impressive and imposing — steep and almost 20 feet tall, four feet thick and topped with a flat walkway, patrolled by four pairs of Kushite mercenary guards who walk back and forth atop it along a quarter of its

circumference. About its base is a canal a dozen feet wide, which keeps any trespassers from tunnelling through the base of the wall and makes battering rams unlikely should the city be sieged. Access to the wall-top is limited to a thick stair adjacent to the gateway, on the inside. Any attempts at going over the wall must avoid detection from these guards, or the climber may be forced to deal with them.

Following are some guidelines for some of the more likely attempts at gaining access to the inner city:

- Command could be used to intimidate one's way past, opposed by the gate-guards' Fortitude (Discipline), though they have the advantage of additional numbers, adding at least two steps of Difficulty to the test.
- Persuade can be used to cozen or bluff one's way past, also opposed by Fortitude (Discipline). Superior numbers may be utilized if the player characters deal with them in a group, but every 2 Gold offered reduces their Difficulty by one step (minimum D1). This can also be modified by the story or angle the player characters are taking.
- A Society test represents pretending to be someone of higher social status, claiming to belong there or be the guests of the nobility within the inner city. The test's Difficulty should be set by the gamemaster based on how believable the player characters can appear.
- Lore or Linguistics might be used to forge papers or some sort of invitation, the Difficulty set at the gamemaster's discretion.
- Waiting until after dark and attempting to pick the lock while the guards are not paying attention or are not at the gate requires a Daunting (D3) Thievery test, and an additional Challenge (D2) test for Stealth to avoid making noise while opening it.
- Lastly, there's always the tactic of finding a secluded spot and trying to climb over, requiring a Challenging (D2) Athletics test and a similarly Difficult Stealth test to avoid making noise while doing so.

If the player characters attempt to use the Observation (D2) skill along the wall's perimeter for some other means of entrance, they can find the passage alluded to by Bel-Merodak (in **The Alchemist's Door**, page 81). Consult **The Dark Passage** (page 83) for more information.

The players may attempt other means of bypassing the inner wall, and the gamemaster should evaluate them, devising the Difficulty and potential consequences for failure, based on the suggestions above. Ultimately, though, this is just a 'pinch point' to provide some tension, not a potential end to the investigation. A Fortune point can always provide a sufficient means of getting through, like a coach demanding

entry and conveniently blocking the guards' sight while the player characters are on hand. Or they see a noble and their bodyguard slip out of one of the concealed entrances en route to a brothel or gambling den near the docks, leaving the gate ajar.

THE DARK PASSAGE

The inner-city wall can be bypassed by one of several secret passages to the sewers that run beneath the wall. The entry the player characters have been directed towards is in the house of a once wealthy merchant family recently (wrongfully) arrested and executed for conspiracy, all their household goods confiscated. Their only crime was, in truth, allowing free access to and from the inner city and charging a small fee for the use of their cellar for this purpose. The house shared its back wall with the inner-city wall and access to the sewers beneath allowed quick passage to and from the inner city.

A subsequent fire left the house uninhabitable, but those who knew the way continue to use it for passage. Inside the house's rat-infested cellar, amidst many broken barrels, crates, and shelves long stripped for their contents and even their wood, is a well-used door. The footprints in the dust near it indicate frequent passage. Behind the door is a pitch-black passageway, from which cool air wafts.

Assuming they have a source of light, the player characters should have no difficulty navigating the passage. The area is pitch-dark, not lit at all by any source of illumination, but any light source is enough to make one's way. The passage leads a short distance to a stairwell going even further deeply into the earth, and the air grows still slightly colder. The walls on either side of the passage are composed of thick, hewn stones, and it is clear that these are the foundations of the inner-city wall itself. At the base of the stairs, the passage continues straight, the walls grow damp with condensation and the air itself becomes thick with a wet reek of soil and stale water. Drips from the ceiling above and reeking, shallow pools of water on the floor of the passage make it evident that above the player characters are the city's sewage channels. A short while later, another narrow stairway leads up, stone steps dryer than the previous passage, and the stairs double back on themselves once, until a wooden door ends the passage. Faint light shines through the seams around the door (brighter if the passage is taken in daytime).

On the other side of the door is a narrow gap between the inside of the inner wall and an ornamental stone trellis, overgrown with vines and nearly impossible to see through. On the other side of the trellis is a small garden. The gap behind the trellis is open at one end, the other is blocked by intersection with the inner wall. The gap continues along the wall for almost 20 feet, then emerges behind a cluster of vines that hang over the exit, concealing it from any but the most careful appraisal. The garden itself is a small public alcove, a circular cul-de-sac surrounded by vines, with a small pool and

some benches within it. It does not seem to have been tended in some time, and no one is nearby when the player characters enter the garden.

From here, assuming they have directions, the player characters can pass without incident in the inner city. There are many nobles and their retainers on the streets during the day, and Kushite mercenary guards are commonplace, marked by their red cloaks, but none challenge any who walk the streets of the inner city, assuming that they are there rightfully. Only if the player characters do anything foolish or obviously draw attention to themselves will they earn the attention of the guards. See **Getting Into Trouble** (page 82) or **Scene VI: The Inner City** (page 82) if necessary.

Finding Baruch's house is easy with directions from Bel-Merodak or some other source. If not, a successful Average (D1) Society test gets them some reliable directions. An Obtain Information spend lets the player characters learn that Baruch's house here in the inner city is his primary home, but he has another home on the coast that is much larger and more opulent. The exact location of that place is unknown, though. If the Eye of Acheron has been stolen from them and has already been returned to Baruch, a successful Challenging (D2) Sorcery test points in the right direction of the house, manifesting as a supernaturally confident hunch.

If any of the player characters think to ask about Yarosh, success with an Average (D1) Persuade test has a passerby remember that a man matching that description came through the inner city just the previous day on his way to the area where many older Pelishtim sorcerers dwell.

SCENE VII: STYGIAN SHOWDOWN

Baruch's house is a simple two-story structure in the inner city. His name and sigil are carved into the stone above the door, and it is in the middle of a series of smaller houses built against the inner wall — not the richer free-standing manses of the wealthier houses of Asgalun's Pelishtim nobility. It looks ancient and has in fact stood intact for several hundred years, though Baruch has inhabited it for only the last handful of decades.

- If it is daytime, no lights are on inside the house. If the player characters watch for a few minutes, they see movement pass one of the lower floor windows. A successful Average (D1) Observation test near or at the door reveals that there are people inside, speaking in a mix of Stygian and Shemitish.
- At night, the place is lit from inside with lanterns, and it is even more clear that the inhabitants are moving about the front rooms.

If the player characters attempt to bother the neighbors for any information, an Average (D1) Persuade test gives them some information. To one side is a wealthy Pelishtim silk merchant and to the other a Shemite slaver. Either of them says the same thing: the old scholar is probably home, and that he receives visitors that are scholars and priests, with some exceptions.

Unbeknownst to the player characters, Yarosh was here yesterday. If he has the Eye of Acheron, he brought it and discovered Semerkhet's henchman Akhen-Sefu there, with a group of Stygian soldiers and some Shemite mercenaries. If Yarosh didn't have it, he came to tell Baruch he had failed.

Akhen-Sefu did not wish to be discovered, so he and his men savagely beat Baruch, throwing his unconscious form into the cellar of Baruch's house, into a tunnel like the one under the inner-city walls. They did not want to kill him, as he might come in handy later, but it was easier to just incapacitate him and leave him unconscious. Yarosh awoke, barely alive, beside the corpse of Antaeus. He crawled away but fell unconscious from the severity of his wounds, and lies there dying in filthy and unpleasant conditions. See **Scene IX: In the Catacombs** (page 86) for more.

If Yarosh had the Eye of Acheron, it is now in Akhen-Sefu's possession. He awaits Semerkhet's return to Asgalun, so they can go back to Stygia together, their mission accomplished. Bored, the Shemites have looted the place and are clad in the scholar's fine garments. They have bundled Baruch's valuables to sell when the Stygians leave. They do not realize that the Stygians are planning to kill them when their usefulness is at an end.

GETTING INTO BARUCH'S HOME

The response the player characters receive differ based on how they present themselves. Surreptitious entry through the front door can be attained with a successful Daunting (D3) Thievery test, or a less subtle approach with a Dire (D4) Athletics test to just break the door down. It is easy work to scale the side of the house to the second floor with a Challenging (D2) Athletics test, into an unlocked window or balcony door. Both floors contain many shuttered windows that are not especially difficult to break or open, and all are large enough to admit a player character.

The player characters should either wait until no one is in the street, or the gamemaster should ask any climbing player characters to make a successful Average (D1) Stealth test to remain hidden and to avoid alerting those inside. A Complication might have the city guard come by unexpectedly, or cause a racket while a window shutter falls to the floor inside.

A direct approach might be made by simply knocking on the front door and demanding entry. If the player characters are so bold, there is a moment of hesitation while those inside seize their weapons and ready themselves. When the door

opens, a young, thuggish Shemite man in a blue silken robe appears. He is unshaven and unkempt and seems out of place for such a fine house. He squints suspiciously at the player characters, asking them in Shemitish what they have come for. A successful Average (D1) Insight test reveals that the man is very nervous. He invites the player characters into the house and says that Baruch is expected back shortly. They are welcome to wait for the scholar, he tells them as he encourages them to come inside, away from the heat.

Rogues in the House

If the player characters go in, they find the interior is a shambles. Books and scrolls are strewn on the floors and the place reeks of spilled wine. Suddenly, from behind the door-curtains enter several Stygian soldiers, scimitars out and leveled at the player characters, shields upon their arms. They are accompanied by more Shemites like the first, clad in what must be stolen garments. One Stygian is distinctive, a giant of a man, muscular and bald, bearing a two-handed sword. He gestures with a fist, his mouth open in a quiet snarl, and the Stygians move as if to attack!

The big man is Akhen-Sefu, equivalent to a Nemesis bodyguard (*Conan* corebook, page 313), armed with an overlarge scimitar (Reach 3, 6, 2H, Vicious 1). The Stygian soldiers are all handpicked Toughened guards (*Conan* corebook, page 317) and the Shemite thugs are Minions (*Conan* corebook, page 321). There should be at least the number of player characters in Stygian soldiers and an additional handful of Shemite thugs, at the gamemaster's discretion. The Shemites are cowards and flee if the combat turns in the player characters' favor. If so, one of them flees into the cellar beneath Baruch's house. See **Scene IX: In the Catacombs** (page 86) for more information.

If the player characters used some other means of entry, they find upstairs is also a mess, a scruffy Shemite asleep on a long divan near the door and a Stygian soldier sprawled across a large bed. The number of wine-bottles empty on the floor and the smell in the air indicates that both men are stinking drunk. A table covered with maps, journals and writing implements rests near the door to the balcony.

A successful Average (D1) Stealth test lets the player characters enter without waking them. Either or both men can be dispatched easily or ignored depending on how bloodthirsty the player characters are feeling. Below are the obvious sounds of men bickering in a mixture of Stygian and Shemitish about the results of some dice game. A stair leads down into the lower floor.

If the player characters make any noise from above, they can either have the men below make a general Senses test opposed by the player characters' Stealth, or a Complication alerts them anyway. Depending on the time of day, the men on the ground floor are eating, gambling, arguing, or some combination of all three. If attacked, they rally, but are not expecting a fight and may not even have weapons at hand.

Akhen-Sefu, however, should pay enough Doom to be ready for combat and arrives at a dramatic moment, perhaps attacking by surprise.

Akhen-Sefu

Second-in-command to Semerkhet, Akhen-Sefu is the leader of Semerkhet's group of bodyguards and henchmen. He is an excellent swordsman and soldier, having spent most of his career guarding the serpent kingdom's southern borders. When captured by Darfari raiders, his tongue was cut out and he now uses sign language to communicate with his men. The experience drove him insane, and he exhibits a deeply savage and sadistic streak. Though he uses hand-signals to communicate, he understands Stygian, Black Coast, Darfari, Kushite, Old Stygian, and Shemitish.

Crossed Purposes

If Yarosh had the Eye of Acheron, Akhen-Sefu has it now, tucked into a belt-pouch. If he does not have the Eye from Yarosh, he is not expecting anyone else to bring it to him. His assumption is that any intruders are allies of Yarosh, Baruch, or even Antaeus, perhaps seeking vengeance. A few of the Stygians know that Baruch has gone to his coastal estate, but do not know where that is. The Shemites have no further information.

Searching the rest of Baruch's home once the fight is over yields little of interest. It should become clear to the player characters that for a scholar's home, there is a remarkable scarcity of books and reference materials here. The Shemites have gathered any other valuables in this place — dishes, utensils, curios, sculptures, lamps, and the like — into several large makeshift satchels. They are wearing his finery... the items that fit at least.

The First Floor

On the floor of the sitting room is a long wooden staff of light wood. A successful Average (D1) Observation test lets the player characters remember that Anteus' ghost and manifestation in the dreamworld bore a similar staff. Thyra instantly recognizes it as her father's.

An open door in the kitchen floor leads down into the catacombs beneath Baruch's home. Like the secret passage under the wall that the player characters may have used, the cautious Pelishtim scholar had his own means of egress from his home to the outer city. More on the passage down is in the section titled **Section IX: In the Catacombs** (page 86).

On Baruch's desk are several maps, however, which may be of interest to the player characters. One is a sea-map leading to an island far to the south of Shem. Past even the Nameless Isle, the annotations on the map are in Shemitish but encoded by Baruch using a cipher. A successful Dire (D4) Linguistics test decodes these and reveals that the notes claim that the location of the island is approximate. Baruch has labelled it as the 'supposed final resting place of Tothmekri, Prince of

Stygia'. A successful Challenging (D2) Lore test provides the information that Tothmekri was an exiled noble son of Stygia, who fled with the wealth of the kingdom. His island retreat was later found and sacked by the famed Zingaran pirate Bloody Tranicos, and the wealth disappeared from the sight of mankind forever.

Other maps are of Stygia and the area once held by the empire of Acheron, with many burial sites noted. Other personal papers in Shemitish and Stygian reveal that Baruch has recently requested deliveries of food-stores to a location on the shore, immediately south of the city of Asgalun. No precise location is provided, however. A note has been left atop the desk, with the name 'Yarosh' upon it, as if left for him to find. A thick wax stamp seals it, with a stylized rune recognizable as Baruch's insignia (it is carved above the door of his home). Inside is a brief message in Shemitish stating: *"We have gone to the coastal estate. Bring the item at once when you read this."*

Further search of Baruch's home will find nothing else of value. When Baruch left the house, he took a few prized possessions with him out to his coastal property, to wait out the coming storm.

SCENE IX: IN THE CATACOMBS

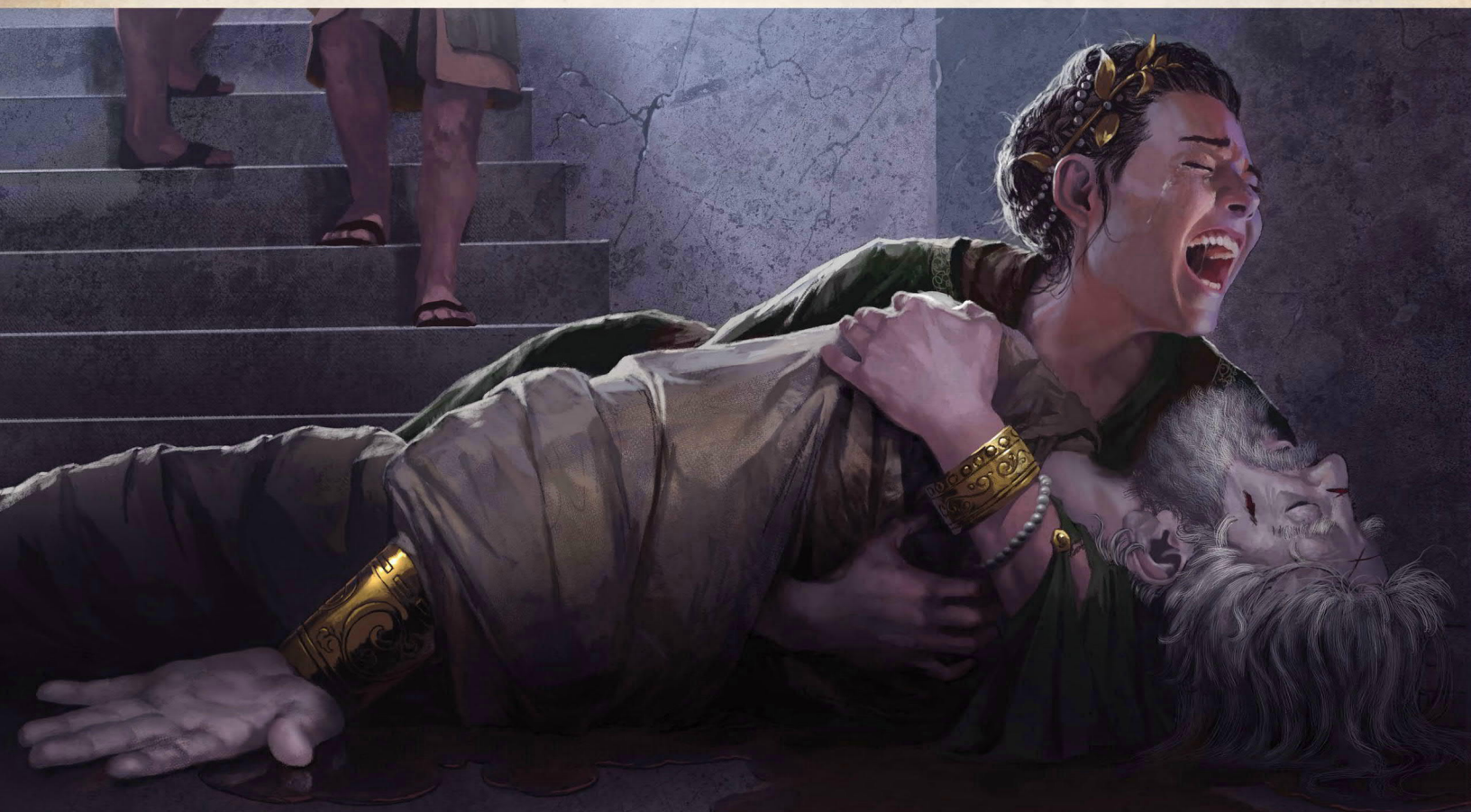
Beneath the door in the kitchen floor is an unlit stairway leading down. The player characters see a thick sliding bolt

is set into the frame, to keep those from inside out. If one of the Shemites fled this way, the door is ajar. Otherwise, when the door is opened, a tremendous stench exudes from the darkness, a horrible and potent reek of decay. Player characters who have spent much time around corpses will instantly recognize the unmistakable scent of a dead body. Down at the base of the stairs, assuming the player characters have a source of light or can see in the dark, is a sprawled form, lying face down. It is an older man, his hair white and long, clad in a long grey robe.

If the body is examined, Thyra cries out *"Father!"*

The corpse is of Antaeus, and his back is blackened with dried blood, with the wound directly over his heart. He has many other cuts, and his face bears the marks of a savage beating. There is nothing of value on Antaeus's corpse. See *Chapter 1: The Fall of the House of Antaeus* (page 14) for more about him. Thyra sobs and cradles his body, despite the stench.

The small room is like the passage leading from the outer to the inner city, with the same large stone blocks. Unlike that passage, however, it adjoins several other passages, and appears to go in at least two directions. Player characters making a successful Average (D1) Observation or Survival test see a trail of blood leading away from the scholar's form, as if someone crawled off down a side passage. A 1-point Momentum spend lets them hear the low breathing of a man, in the same direction as the blood-trail. Following that sound and the trail leads to Yarosh, leaning against a wall, bearing the marks of a beating similar to the one given Antaeus. He is barely conscious, and nearly dead. If



the player characters see to his injuries on him, he regains full consciousness and is startled to see them. He is not overly frightened: lying half-dead for more than a day, in the dark, around the corner from a corpse, has given him a relative lack of fear regarding his fate.

If asked about the Eye of Acheron, Yarosh reveals that he was hired by Baruch to find it, as the one Antaeus brought was clearly a forgery. He was to find it or take it from those who had it and bring it back here. He arrived but was overcome by the Stygians, who savagely beat him and threw him down here in the catacombs, thinking him dead. He imagines that Baruch left him some sign as to where to find him, but he did not have the chance to look for it. If allowed to live, he thanks the player characters and provides them with exact directions to Baruch's estate.

It is not far from town, immediately south of the city across the Asgalun River, near the delta, roughly ten miles away. Baruch keeps his library and workspace there and appreciates the privacy such a residence buys him. Yarosh has been there several times but has no desire to return. If the player characters heal him and force him to come along, he tells them that he does not wish to see Baruch again and will make every attempt to escape such a fate (more on this in *Chapter 3: Black Wings*). An Average (D1) Insight test proves that he is honest with this information. Yarosh is finished with this whole affair and would rather step aside and let fate finish its own plans. If the player characters ask, he tells them that the catacombs lead to the outer city, and gives them the proper directions there as well.

Thyra asks the player characters to help her bury her father properly, there is little chance of doing so in the basement. If helped, she has his body wrapped up in loose cloths and prepared to be smuggled out of Asgalun, to be buried out of the city where he died.

The gamemaster can expand the passage out of the inner city as appropriate to the player characters' escape route. If they set fire to Baruch's place and try to leave the town on the streets, they will find plenty of Kushite mercenary guards rushing towards the fire, and many of the servants in the area being sent out to help deal with the flames. Going belowground through the catacombs can be simple and uninterrupted, or it can be complicated by an encounter with some Kushite guards as they patrol the secret tunnels beneath the city walls for miscreants just like the player characters.

The catacombs beneath the home emerge in a different part of town, behind a hanging camel-hide door in a hovel in the Kushite quarter. The residents of the hovel, a family of Kushites, are used to strange folks coming and going from this entrance, and do not seem alarmed. From here, it is easy to flee the city and head on to face Baruch, on the coast of the Asgalun River. Behind the player characters, they see a thin trail of black smoke emerge from the walls of the inner city, unusual for a hot summer day.

THE FUNERAL PYRE

After the player characters and Thyra have left the city with Antaeus' body, she asks them to find a secluded spot in the rough foothills near the city, preferably somewhere off the road. She begins constructing a bier and allows any of the player characters to help her, but will not ask.

Her father's body then goes atop it, and she arranges him so that he is in a position of dignity, places golden lunas over each of his eyes, and rests his long staff in the crook of his arm. Thyra then produces a cask of lamp oil and anoints him with it, pouring it in a circle about the bier, onto it, and across the shrouded body.

She lights the bier with a torch and as it catches flame, she says a brief prayer to Mitra. Then, she tells the player characters that her father can at least rest in dignity. Strengthened by this, she says that she is ready to face Baruch and learn why the Eye of Acheron is so important.

CONTINUATION

There are not many opportunities for adventure between Asgalun and Baruch's sea-side estate, unless the gamemaster would like to have the player characters delayed in the city, or encounter unprecedented obstacles between leaving Asgalun and arriving on the coast. It is strongly recommended that there be no interlude or distraction between the events of this chapter and the next, *Chapter 3: Black Wings*. Furthermore, if the player characters are sufficiently effective and manage to achieve the necessary information required to move onto Baruch's estate, there is little reason that this chapter cannot immediately segue into the next.

However, if additional challenges are desired, check the encounter chart from **Events on the Road** (page 72), adjusted as appropriate (i.e., substitute Shemitish for Argossean). Alternately, additional adventure might be found in Asgalun on the way out, with unused encounters from earlier in the adventure used at this time.

EXPERIENCE

This adventure should be worth roughly 300 experience points, plus another 100 to reward excellent roleplaying or clever problem-solving. There isn't a lot the player characters can do to expand their abilities, though, given the narrow constraints of the course of events, but the gamemaster should allow incremental advancement as long as it makes sense.

BOOK ONE: CHAPTER 3

BLACK WINGS

*I see black temples loom against the night,
With tentacles like serpents writhed afar,
And waving in a dusky dragon light
Great moths whose wings unholy tapers char.*

— “Babel”, Robert E. Howard

In the previous adventure, the player characters have learned that Baruch, the man who knows about the fate of Antaeus and the secrets of the Eye of Acheron, hides in a villa on the coast of Shem, just south of the city of Asgalun. They may seek him out for vengeance, for answers, perhaps both. Baruch may also possess the secret to undoing the curse they have been laid under, drawing them into the Acheronian afterlife.

When Baruch contacted Serothos and told him of the Eye of Acheron, he knew he would be entering a dangerous bargain with the Stygian sorcerer. He did not expect the noble Semerkhet to arrive in Asgalun at the same time as Antaeus, the scholar who brought the false Eye to him. When Semerkhet and his men killed Antaeus at Baruch's house in Asgalun for this deception, the Pelishtim scholar knew that they would likely kill him if he got between them and their goal — the Eye of Acheron.

Baruch hired Yarosh to find it, hoping that it would earn him time and spare his life for the initial failure. He then fled to his villa on the Shemite coast, and waits with a group of asshuri mercenaries, hoping to avoid being slain by the Stygians when they regain the artifact. He is unaware that the player characters may be bringing the very thing to his door.

As the player characters voyage through this afterworld in their spirit forms, both roads converge toward one man, Baruch, holder of many ancient secrets.

ADVENTURER HOOKS

At this juncture, it is a bit of a challenge to introduce a new player character, but not impossible. Perhaps the new player character is a friend of the existing player characters and sees them on the way to the coast, or perhaps one of the player characters knows that their friend is in town and looks them up, promising them high adventure in return for assistance.

If the player characters are having a hard time handling the forces arrayed against them thus far, Thyra might hire an extra guard, or perhaps she seeks a translator or expert on Pelishtim ways and customs. A player character native to the area might be hired solely to guide the player characters from Asgalun to Baruch's villa on the coast.

Once at the villa, that 'hireling' will not be distinguished from the other player characters by Baruch or Semerkhet and shares the same fate as the rest.



FINDING BARUCH

The player characters should have directions to Baruch's villa and know that the Pelishtim scholar has fled there. If they do not know the precise location, successful Challenging (D2) Society tests give this information; many are the merchants and farmers nearby who know where the old man lives. Assuming the player characters do not seem overtly threatening or make comments about doing Baruch harm, none have any compunction about telling strangers where to find him. Baruch gets many strange visitors at his coastal villa, and a party as diverse as the player characters is not altogether unusual.

Understandably, the player characters should want to get to Baruch as quickly as possible, convinced that he may hold the key to undoing whatever curse has been laid upon them. Or they may wish to wreck vengeance upon him for the death of Antaeus. Depending on how they left Asgalun and the inner city, the player characters may have a list of crimes to their credit and be riding as fast as they can ahead of a crowd of Kushite mercenary guards, or they may have left the city quietly and without incident, escaping the notice of the authorities.

Either way, the ten-mile ride to Baruch's villa can be uneventful, save for the occasional sighting of merchants, farmers, and other typical road travellers, or it can be marked with a fierce chase, requiring several Animal Handling and Stealth tests, skirmishes with guards at their heels, and even attacks from any pursuing Stygians who may have survived the attack on Baruch's house.

The gamemaster is encouraged to make this voyage as eventful as desired, perhaps even using the roadside encounter material provided from the prior adventure, changing any Argossean nationality to Shemite where appropriate. If the player characters are eager to get to Baruch, encounters should be minimal.

SCENE I: THE VILLA BY THE SEA

With the directions provided from the alchemist Bel-Merodak, they have little trouble getting to within a half-mile of the place.

If arriving in the daytime, Kushite and other Black Kingdom slaves work the fig and date fields nearby, the foremen mostly Meadow Shemites or Pelishtim. None care overmuch about Baruch or his business and assume that anyone asking for directions are welcome guests. They gesture down the road, telling the player characters the

WHO WANTS WHAT?

Chapter 3: *Black Wings* features the following non-player characters and goals:

- **THYRA:** Now wants to know why her father died.
- **BARUCH:** Still wants the Eye of Acheron.
- **SEMERKHET:** Still wants the Eye of Acheron, but also needs the player characters and Thyra due to their connection to it.
- **HELL-HARPY:** Sent by Baruch's mysterious Stygian patron to retrieve the Eye of Acheron, and Thyra herself.
- **MYSTERIOUS PIRATES:** This crew has been hired by Semerkhet to transport him (and now the player characters) somewhere.

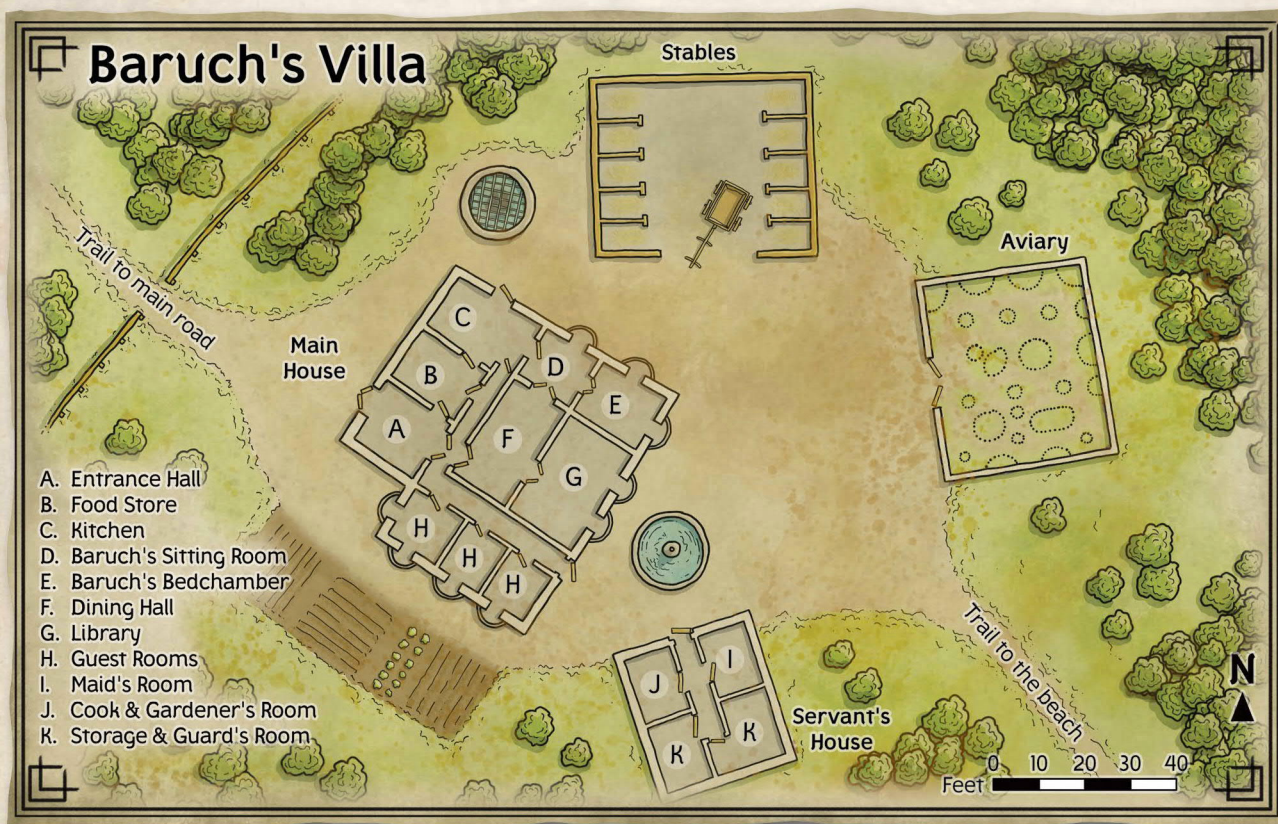
exact way and mentioning that a small carven stone at the gate has the scholar's sigil upon it.

The gamemaster can read or paraphrase the following to the player characters:

The surf crashes loudly from where it hits the nearby cliff-walls, and nearby, a natural spur of the coastline appears. It has on it a long, wooden dock, at which a smallish sailboat is moored. The coastline is a study in intense colour, sea-blue, white cliff, and the ever-bright glare of the blue sky above, a thin line of green indicating grass and light forest atop the cliff-line.

Baruch's villa itself is the end of a small road that branches from a main road into Asgalun, with few neighbors. It sits on a mid-sized plot of land on a barren stretch of the white-cliffed coastline. It follows classic Pelishtim architectural styles: a low surrounding wall and white limestone walls and red-tiled roof. Its location grants it an impressive view: a panorama of the Shemite coast, white craggy cliffs to either side and deep blue water stretching as far as can be seen. A few white sails mark fishing vessels in the distance, though the location of the villa keeps much of the neighboring coastline on either side shrouded from view.

Near it is a small orchard, and the road winds down somewhat to a flat plateau only dozens of feet above sea level. It is a secluded place, with no other structures in sight, and only the ordered rows of fig-trees show signs of other residents nearby.



At night, the place is lit by moonlight reflecting off the water and the matte white stone, with lamplight shining from inside.

A small standing stone near the gate bears the same sigil as his home in Asgalun. Player characters able to read Shemitish recognize it at once. The gate itself is not locked and is more to keep wild animals out than for security.

THE DOOR GUARD

The gamemaster should read or paraphrase the following to the player characters:

Up close, it is apparent that the villa consists of a manor house with a nearby servant house, a stable and a small storehouse. At least a dozen peacocks roam the grounds, tail-feathers fanned out in scintillant displays of blue, black, green, and gold.

An asshuri guardsman reclines in the shade near the front porch. The door is wide open. Most of the window shutters are open and thin curtains hang inside. A long, narrow garden flanks the main house, and on the other side is a covered cistern.

Player characters making a successful Average (D1) Observation test for each notice that the last building appears to be an open-roofed aviary. Any Shemite player or those familiar with Shemitish culture recognize the man as an asshuri, an elite Shemite warrior. See pages 368–369 of the *Conan* corebook for their writeup, or if more variety is desired, *Conan the Mercenary*, pages 54–55.

Depending on what time of day the player characters arrive and how much time they spend observing the villa before entering, they might be noticed by servants and additional asshuri as they go about their daily duties. After dark there is a patrol of asshuri, as everyone else has gone to sleep or otherwise retired for the evening.

If the player characters spend more than a short time outside of the grounds, an asshuri arrives, just back from hunting sea-fowl. If they are acting suspiciously, he commands them to identify themselves. Assuming the encounter does not end in bloodshed and their story is reasonably convincing, the asshuri sends them along to the house: his orders were to be wary of a group of Stygian mercenaries... not the player characters.



The Servants' House

This smallish house is similar in design to the main house, but humbler. Inside dwell Baruch's four servants and, temporarily, the asshuri mercenaries he has hired to guard against the Stygians. It is also used for storage. Of Baruch's Shemitish servants, the only notable one is Malak, his personal assistant. The others perform the tasks of gardening, cleaning, and cooking. None of them know much about their master, as he forbids them from entering his private workroom within the estate.

The Stable

The villa's stable is a basic building with gated stalls where individual horses are kept, also filled with tools for maintenance and care of the horses. Barrels of feed and grain are kept there as well. A small four-wheeled wagon is parked in the stable, with harness for two horses. Currently, eight horses are stabled here — six are riding horses belonging to the asshuri and the other two are the wagon-horses. Generally, at least one or two of the asshuri are in the stables for various reasons.

The Garden

South of the house is a reasonably-sized garden. A variety of flowers, vegetables, squashes, legumes, and some fruits grow here. During the day, a servant is likely here tending to the produce.

The Fountain and the Cistern

The fountain, which draws from an underground stream running into the sea, is carved to resemble several long-legged storks, the water emerging from their bills and splashing into the basin below. The cistern is more utilitarian, a two-foot-high circle of stone, four feet in diameter, with a wooden lid covering its opening.

The Dock

On the shore behind Baruch's villa is a small inlet, accessible only through the villa's land due to high cliff walls and almost-impassable geography on either side. The inlet is formed of a break in the craggy shoreline, where sand and earth have spilled in to make the beach. Atop the break is Baruch's villa, and a trail winds down the steep shore to the waterside. In the middle of the inlet stands a small dock, roughly 20 feet long and five feet wide. At it is moored Baruch's rowboat.

GAINING ENTRY TO THE MAIN HOUSE

The asshuri at the front door is asleep, making it easy enough to walk up, reducing any Stealth attempts by two steps of Difficulty. A successful Average (D1) Persuade or Command test has him drop his guard and call for Malak — Baruch's butler — to escort the player characters inside. Alternately, if the player characters are just there to speak with Baruch and do not mean him harm (yet), they can explain themselves.

If attacked, the guard calls and the rest of the asshuri arrive soon after, armed and ready for combat. They are unlikely to listen to any attempts at Persuade at this point, and defend the place while Baruch and the servants inside barricade themselves in his study or flee through the back down to the waterfront and rowboat.

The gamemaster should determine the outcome of alternate approaches, ruses, or attempts at sneaking in.

Visitor Courtesy

If coming in through normal means, the butler Malak appraises the player characters and Thyra, and offers them a place to store their weapons and gear, next to the door. Those wanting to go heavily-armed into Baruch's presence are discouraged politely. If the player characters insist on carrying weapons further into the home, the guard summons a couple of other asshuri who accompany them into Baruch's presence.

INSIDE THE MAIN HOUSE

Assuming the player characters have not fought their way inside, Malak leads the player characters into a dining room. The house interior, as they pass through, is elegantly furnished, with small statues and other objects d'art resting upon pedestals for decoration. A thick carpet of Aghrapuran make dominates the floor. Malak gestures for the player characters to enter and make themselves comfortable within. His master Baruch, he informs them, will join them shortly.

It is opulently furnished but otherwise without much of interest. The point here is to impress clients with his success and his taste, not to engage or distract them. The walls and windows are covered with rich curtains, the floor with several carpets, and a long, low table dominates. There are few pieces of furniture in the room, but many thick floor cushions. Dining and meetings are held here in the fashion of nomadic Shemites, and the room approximates the magnificence of a great nomadic chieftain's tent. A low-hanging chandelier illuminates it with a compliment of flickering candles, and the smell of various aromatic herbs fill the air from where they sit in small bowls along the edge of the chamber. A fine harp sits in a cradle near the wall, a Stygian type called a semsemia.

Before the player characters get into any mischief, the side doors open and into the room walk two asshuri guardsmen. A man follows them, older but spry, bald and with a jutting, prominent nose and thick white eyebrows. Eyes like chips of black stone glimmer with keen intelligence and cunning. His face is narrow and his skin sallow; chin jutting sharply as his nose. He sits down stiffly, his joints obviously paining him. Though he is not an old man, neither is he young. He gives a perfunctory smile, his mouth like a knife-blade, and he states aloud to all of you:

"I am Baruch. Welcome to my home. What has brought you here?"

See **Scene II: The Serpent's Den** (page 94) for on how things go with Baruch.

BARUCH

A Pelishtim scholar, ruthless businessman, and a secret sorcerer. He has served as one of Serothos's contacts and allies for decades, without knowing the truth of the Stygian's identity. The breadth and depth of his knowledge of ancient, fallen Acheron is widespread, and sorcerers and scholars alike come to Asgalun to consult with Baruch on these matters. His primary contact in Asgalun's outer city is the alchemical supplier Bel-Merodak.

Baruch has sought much of his life for secrets of immortality, and the Eye of Acheron is rumored to hold the key to this knowledge. When Antaeus contacted him regarding the Eye, Baruch lured the scholar to him, contacting his own sorcerous patron Serothos and hiring an Argossean treasure-finder, Yarosh, to seek it out if it would not come to him.

Baruch is over 120 years old, but his alchemical studies have slowed his aging enough that he seems but in his sixties. He speaks Shemitish, Acheronian, Aquilonian, Argossean, Black Coast, Demonic, Hyrkanian, Kothic, Kushite, Old Stygian, Ophirian, Stygian, and Zamorian, and can read and write more languages whose spoken forms have been long forgotten.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 11 | 13 | 12 | 13 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 7 | 6 | 7 | |

FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| Combat | — | Movement | 1 |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 4 | Social | 2 |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 6, Resolve 15
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 2

ATTACKS

- **Stiletto (M):** Reach 1, 3 ☞, 1H, Hidden 1, Parrying, Thrown, Unforgiving 1
- **Stygian Black Lotus Powder Tube (R):** Range C, 4 ☞, 1H, Hidden 1, Persistent 1, Piercing 3 per dose
- **Veiled Threat (T):** Range C, 5 ☞ mental, Non-lethal (Dazed), Subtle 3 (in conversation)

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Ritual Sorcerer:** Baruch secretly practices sorcery and knows *Atavistic Voyage* and *Astral Wanderings*. He has crafted many petty enchantments and can prepare other spells and counter-magic if given time.
- **Scholar and Translator:** Baruch can re-roll any d20 that fails a success when trying to divine something about an item, text, or aspect of history and the world gone by.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Trick Up His Sleeve:** Though he is no true alchemist, Baruch is well-steeped in the use of the lotus in its many forms and may spend 1 Doom per dose of black lotus powder after the first.

The Rest of the House

Should the player characters find some reason to leave the dining room and poke around Baruch's house without accompaniment, they may run into servants or asshuri guards, who are alert whenever strangers are visiting. The other rooms are as follows.

The Library

Baruch's archives consist of hundreds of bound volumes and scrolls, arranged in racks and kept on high shelves with many curios and drafting supplies. There is but a single table, covered with writing implements and volumes devoted to Baruch's latest work. A successful Challenging (D2) Lore or Sorcery test reveals that the contents of this library are of considerable value, both to the layperson and to serious scholars. It contains volumes and scrolls in nearly any language the player characters are likely to know (and some they will definitely be unfamiliar with). If the opportunity were to present itself, it could serve as an academic library for the Lore and Alchemy skills (see the *Conan* corebook, page 141–142).

If the player characters manage to gain access to Baruch's library, a successful Daunting (D3) Observation test reveals a hidden door worked into the wall, opening into his sorcerous sanctum, where he performs magic.

Baruch's Sanctum

Inside here is a ritual circle upon the ground, a small altar consecrated to Ibis, a Stygian god of enlightenment, knowledge, and magical mysteries. A silvered dagger sits upon it in a silken sheath, along with a matching silver bowl. Two leather-covered spell books complete the collection containing 4+2 ☞ spells of the gamemaster's choice in addition to those known by Baruch. One is in Shemitish, the other in Old Stygian. A silvered mirror hangs upon the wall. The sorcerous works here make this an excellent personal Sorcery library (as above).



SCENE II: THE SERPENT'S DEN

Prior to entering, Baruch observed the player characters through a spy-hole in his dining room. He fears that they are agents of Serothos or Semerkhet. The gamemaster should note how the player characters behaved and what they said to one another while waiting for him, so Baruch has made some informed guesses about them. If there is a noble in the group, he speaks to them as its leader, but also favors any fellow Shemites.

If threatened, the ashuri leap to his defense. Baruch despises violence, and shouts for everyone to stop fighting. Thyra also does not want bloodshed, so she commands the player characters to stand down unless their lives are at risk. Baruch begins:

"I sense that you have come far to see me. Your faces and garments mark you as strangers to this land, and outsiders. What can this humble servant of knowledge grant you?"

He orders his servants to bring some refreshments and some better wine, then urges the conversation to continue, pouring himself a glass of the wine and drinking first, demonstrating its safety without stating so blatantly. Unbeknownst to the player characters, he has prepared a pitcher of wine with a sleeping draught in it for use later.

TALKING WITH BARUCH

The player characters get different responses based on how they interact with Baruch, and the approach they take. This can be roleplayed or handled through skill rolls, or a combination of the two, where Difficulties are adjusted by the gamemaster as appropriate based on the conversation.

- Trying to bluff or mislead him is handled with an opposed Persuade versus his Senses Field of Expertise (Insight). If they fail, he immediately suspects they are in the employ of Serothos or Semerkhet, and begin to ask questions of his own to determine what they are up to.
- Reasoning with him plays much into his own goals. Unfortunately, that goal is to dupe the player characters and take the Eye of Acheron for himself, so all the talking and hospitality gives him more opportunity to slip a sleeping draught into their wine and render them helpless.
- There is only so far Baruch can be pushed by intimidation, given his current paranoia. This is a Persuade test opposed by his Fortitude Field of Expertise (Discipline). Failure has him call his guards.
- Playing it quiet and trying to learn from him requires a successful Insight test opposed by his Fortitude Field of Expertise (Discipline). He is a skilled liar.

Questions and Answers

Following is the information Baruch provides if asked appropriately or otherwise convinced to reveal the truth, with clarifications in parentheses:

- **About Antaeus:** *"I was contacted by your father" (he indicates Thyra here) "about a certain artifact he wished me to examine. Unfortunately, I did not speak with him directly. He sent word that he was coming to Asgalun, but I had already left my home there to retire to the coast. Sadly, I never met him."*
- **About Antaeus's Death:** *"My condolences go in hand with my outrage! He was said to be a brilliant scholar, and will be missed amongst his peers." A successful Insight check versus this Bluff attempt reveals that he is laying it on a bit thick here.*
- **Antaeus' Death:** *"I am shocked and bewildered! I feared that Antaeus had met some ill-fortune upon the road, but to hear that such a crime happened in my home is too much! Tell me how you dealt with the miscreants responsible for this act! Oh, that such a tragedy on my own property!" (He knows what would have happened to Antaeus if he ran into the Stygians.)*
- **The Eye of Acheron:** *"Antaeus came to Asgalun to show it to me. The artifact he described could have been many things, but I wanted to be certain. If so, it is worth a great deal. Alas, though, it was likely taken by the devils who slew the man!" (He doesn't know who has it, but has his suspicions it's either with Yarosh, the Stygians, or the player characters.)*
- **Ghosts and the World of the Dead:** *"Astonishing! How can this be? What have you fallen into? I am afraid that this is beyond my comprehension. I am a mere scholar and translator, no sorcerer." (He is a sorcerer and knows exactly what the Eye is capable of.)*
- **Accused of Murder:** *"May Pteor, god of my people, freeze the blood in my veins and choke the breath from my body should I swear falsely here. I did not kill your father, nor did I wish him slain. I did not contribute to*

the circumstances of his death, other than to bring him to Asgalun. In this, I also must claim innocence, as I bid him to send me the artifact through a courier. I did not imagine that he would come to Asgalun with it." (He did not kill Anteus but knows who probably did, and he did not care how he got the Eye.)

- **Suspicious about the Eye?:** "The Eye of Acheron has achieved a kind of infamy. Many are the sorcerers and antiquarians deceived about fakes, and countless are the fortunes spent on forgeries. None has ever been shown the true item." Baruch is telling the truth here.

A Plea for the Truth

At some juncture in the conversation, Baruch asks the player characters to speak plainly and tell him why they have come. By this time, he suspects that they have the Eye of Acheron with them, and if the player characters do not offer it or tell him that they have it, he says to them: "I sense that you come with a great power upon you, that you walk in two worlds at once. A shadow has fallen upon you, and you seek answers, though you may not know the questions. Let us deal honestly here... if you have the thing of which I speak, show it now."

If the player characters deny having it, Baruch changes tactics, allowing the player characters to guide the conversation.

The Eye Comes Forth

If told that the player characters have the Eye of Acheron, Baruch immediately asks to see it. If allowed, he marvels at it, explaining that he has heard rumors of a curse. "If this is the true Eye of Acheron, we are in the presence of a mighty tool of magic, one that might change the fate of kings, and sway the destiny of entire lands. The gods themselves watch those who possess this artifact."

Baruch tells them the Eye's history, from the dark time of its making to the point where it passed from history into the treasure store-houses of Stygia, as detailed in **Ancient of Years** (page 7). The gamemaster is encouraged to summarize that information, allowing for the player characters to break in with questions and commentary.

During the telling of this story, Baruch calls for more wine. This pitcher is identical to the others consumed earlier, though this one has been laced with a sleeping draught, a powerful narcotic laced with a combination of Khitan purple and Stygian black lotus tincture (instead of in gaseous form) (**Conan** corebook, page 166). He has prepared for this by dosing himself with an antidote to nullify the lotus' effects on himself, allowing him to resist the sleepiness and retain his wits. At this point, though, before the player characters begin to feel the effects, they are interrupted by a scratching at the window, and a cracking as the glass begins to break.

SCENE III: THE THING IN THE WIND

"What have you brought?" Baruch screeches at the player characters. "What curse has come with you? Defend me, my asshuri!"

Suddenly, the window to the dining room bursts inward and a dark form crashes into the room, bringing with it an ill wind and a stench unlike anything the player characters can identify. The thing that presents itself is some sort of demonic creature, almost humanoid but with great, batlike wings and long clawed hands, a bald head covered with an ugly, vulpine-toothed beak. Baruch shrieks in horror, and his asshuri fall back in dismay. The thing makes a beeline for the person holding the Eye of Acheron if it is visible.

HELL-HARPY (HORROR)

Nearly eight feet in height, covered with lean muscle stretched over a bony, apelike frame, with a slight potbelly and two huge wings, joined to its long, clawed arms. Its feet are seemingly as prehensile as its hands. The creature's head is vaguely avian, but with a toothed beak. Its dull grey flesh is tough-looking, dusted with thin black hair. Its lambent eyes seem to glow golden in the dark. This horrific creature can be summoned from ancient Acheronian tombs and were used as messengers and winged assassins, drawn forth by long-forgotten sorceries. It does not speak any language but understands basic commands in Old Stygian. This particularly nasty specimen has been summoned by Serothos and ordered to assist Semerkhet in recovering the Eye.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 10 | 6 | 6 | 10 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 13 | 14(2) | 13 | |




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| Combat | 4 | Movement | 3 |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Fortitude | 3 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 19, Resolve 13
- **Soak:** Armor 4 (Tough Hide), Courage 3 (Horror)

ATTACKS

- **Taloned Grasp (M):** Reach 2, 8 , 1 or 2H, Grappling, Parrying, Piercing 2, Vicious 2
- **Wing Buffet (M):** Reach 3, 6 , 1H, Knockdown, Non-lethal (Stun), Shield 2
- **Ghastly Cawing (T):** Range C, 5  mental, Area, Stun

DOOM SPENDS

- **Fleeting Shadow:** The hell-harpy can spend 1 Doom to exit the zone it currently inhabits with someone once it has successfully Grappled them. If it uses the Withdraw Action, it exits Close Range with the desired victim without incurring a Retaliation (*Conan* corebook, pages 116–117), and if it does so without taking a Withdraw Action it can spend 1 additional Doom per opponent to prevent them from making Retaliate Actions at it. The next round it may spend 1 Doom more to leave that adjacent zone, at which point it may make its escape without fear of pursuit.
- **Inevitable Return:** Even if slain, the gamemaster may revive the creature with the expenditure of 1 Doom. In this condition, it cannot attack and can only defend itself and withdraw, using the **Fleeting Shadow** Doom spend.

The creature fights fiercely, but ultimately its goal is not to kill the player characters. Instead, it is driven to lay its clawed hands upon Thyra and bear her back to Stygia and its diabolical master. However, it initially seeks the Eye itself, perhaps causing the player characters to believe that this is its true goal. To this end, it focuses almost entirely upon first fighting to get the Eye, then suddenly turns to Thyra and does everything within its power to seize her and take to the air.

This is its sole purpose here, to seize the daughter of Antaeus and eliminate her as a potential threat. Even if defeated, it will suddenly rise again dramatically and seize her, bearing her through the window and into the air. This is an excellent dramatic way to end the scene, with Thyra crying out in surprise and horror as she is borne away into the night.

The asshuri, on the other hand, die in numbers sufficient to make the player characters understand that this is no ruse of Baruch's. The Pelishtim is just as surprised — and afraid — as they are, though he has a clear idea where the creature came from and who it will return to.

SCENE IV: DOUBLE-CROSS!

When the hell-harpy has been driven away, the effects of Baruch's sleeping draught begin to take effect. In the heady moments if he is alive, the Pelishtim scholar looks at the player characters carefully, assessing their state. As described in the *Conan* corebook, page 166, the effects of the lotus are paralytic and serve to reduce the chance of falling asleep. All the player characters should now make Epic (D5) Resistance tests to resist the initial effects of this slow-acting poison, with each failed d20 serving as one step of Difficulty towards any physical or movement actions.

Anyone affected should feel their vision darken, limbs begin to stiffen, and sound becomes distant and echoes strangely. Baruch asks *"What ails you, mighty heroes? Is something amiss? You seem unduly fatigued. Perhaps some sort of venom from the creature, yes?"* Any player characters who have failed their subject to the drugged wine immediately pitch to the ground at this point, either unconscious or paralyzed and unable to do aught but watch and listen. A Complication on this roll means they dash themselves as they fall, crashing and entangling themselves in a curtain or hanging tapestry.

If by some miracle she is still present, Thyra falls to the floor, unable to move.

Paralyzed, the player characters can only speak, and then requiring a Daunting (D3) Discipline test to do so. A physical action requires a Dire (D4) Resistance test, but will be slow, clumsy, and feeble.

Any remaining asshuri immediately step up with their swords or bows drawn, menacing any who are still standing, keeping them away from Baruch. He seems to be concerned, but is stalling long enough for the draught to render them unconscious. If the Eye is still with them, he takes it from the player character who possesses it, dangling it before his eyes and watching his own dark reflection within.

Baruch cackles that now with the Eye in his grasp, he can use its power for his own. If the player characters no longer have it, he tells his guards to drag them to the coast and dump them into the ocean. *"Let the sharks claim them."* The guards grab them and begin to haul them through the doors, but stop right as they get outside into the night.

Any aware player characters can make Average (D1) Observation tests, increased by two steps of Difficulty if they are under the effects of the lotus draught. Success results in the sight of more than a dozen men or more advancing up the south path from the ocean. They are dressed in the garb of sailors, though a mix of tattered finery and sea garments marks them as pirates. Some of the men are Shemitish, the rest are Kushite. All are armed, and their weapons are bare in their hands.

The asshuri and Baruch are surprised by their arrival. Baruch slips the Eye of Acheron into his tunic. One of the pirates steps forth, saying in Shemitish, “*You know who sent us. We’ve come for the item... and them,*” gesturing at the player characters.

Baruch nods abruptly. “*They’re yours to take. My regards to your master. They did not have the item you seek. All they could offer were lies.*” Obviously, Baruch is lying, hoping that the player characters do not interfere with his gamble and that the pirates will take him at his word, distrusting anything the player characters have to say.

The player characters, if able to speak, are free to offer their denials or interfere, though they will find a difficult audience in the already suspicious pirates. If any capable player characters choose to fight the pirates, the gamemaster should go to **Scene VI: Last Man Standing** (page 97). If they are unable to resist, the gamemaster should instead skip ahead to **Scene VII: A Recent Enemy** (page 98). If the group of player characters is split (some are conscious, some are out cold), the gamemaster should use both scenes in order.

PIRATES OF THE CALYPSO

The pirates are a mix of Shemites and Kushites picked from the crew of the *Calypso*, a hardened group of killers. Though they have many cultural differences, the Shemite and Kushite crew work together with grim discipline, instilled by their leader, Captain Gaal-Arvad. They have been ordered to take the player characters prisoner, alive if possible, and attempt to use subduing tactics on them rather than kill them outright. If Baruch’s own bodyguards stand in their way, they happily kill them. They were only expecting the scholar, but do not hesitate to slit throats if necessary, to please their captain.

There is a dozen of these pirates, more in a second wave if they are overcome too easily by the player characters. Alternately, the gamemaster can add in one or more of the ‘named’ crewmembers of the *Calypso* such as Captain Gaal-Arvad or his second-in-command Nim-Akum. Either is more capable and a greater threat to the player characters.

The Shemite pirates are greedy and bloodthirsty men, exiled to hard lives of raiding and pillage on the waters of the Western Ocean. The Kushites are exiles themselves, not Black Corsairs, whom they regard with some hatred. All are Minion pirates (**Conan** corebook, page 319), additionally armed with Shemite bows (Range L, 3☹, 2H, Piercing 1, Volley). If given the chance, some can run back to their boat to get nets (Range C, 2☹, 2H, Area, Grappling, Improvised, Knockdown, Non-lethal, Thrown). Between them they speak a variety of languages.

THE HYBORIAN RAILROAD

At this point, the adventure requires that the player characters become the captives of the villains, separated from their patron. Otherwise, there is little reason why they would choose to requisition a boat and seek out the island where Tothmekri met his doom, or, for that matter, engage in the events of the rest of the campaign.

This is traditionally called ‘railroading’, where the player characters have little chance to do other than follow a particular predetermined course. In this case, insult is added to injury in the form of what is also sometimes called a ‘capture’ scenario, where the player characters must be made captive for the plot to continue.

Some players hate this, but it can occasionally be necessary. If the players complain about being railroaded, the gamemaster can break the narrative to explain that this is a necessary turn of events, and that future activities will involve considerably more player character control. A reminder that even the mighty Conan was regularly temporarily felled by his enemies, tricked, or otherwise overcome and captured.

Give each of the player characters a Fortune Point for their patience as compensation for the railroading plot element of being duped and captured, above and beyond the normal beginning amount to begin with for the next session. This ‘give and take’ is a balancing factor, a message from the gamemaster effectively saying “*I am limiting your freedom here, but later you will have more control over your destiny.*”

SCENE V: LAST MAN STANDING

At any sign of violence, Baruch orders his asshuri to stay back. The pirates circle the player characters, brandishing their weapons exaggeratedly. Their leader warns the others in Kushite, “*They’re not to be slain. Take them alive!*” With this, the pirates surge forward.

The player characters must fight against pirates armed with nets, Baruch’s asshuri, or both groups fighting over them! The gamemaster should allow them to make a dramatic, desperate stand against superior numbers, if desired. As with all combats, emphasise the terrain and the setting, such as gravel underfoot, wan moonlight shining through stormy clouds, a drizzle of rain shining on the combatants, and the crash of distant surf. The villa’s peacocks have returned, the eyelike patterns in their fans watching in silence.

The pirates use superior numbers to capture the player characters, flanking them, disarming, grappling, sneak

attacking, tripping, knockouts, etc. Finally, Baruch can step forward, weaving his fingers together in a hypnotic spell to put the player characters to sleep. At this point the gamemaster should end the combat, with the player characters captured.

SCENE VI: A RECENT ENEMY

The player characters have all been subdued or captured by the pirates, Baruch's draught, or some combination of these factors. If they were unconscious due to the drugged wine or being subdued, they have been taken to the hold of the pirate ship *Calypso*, where they were immediately chained and put into a makeshift brig. If they are awake and captured, they have their hands tied by the pirates. They are searched, disarmed, and led by ropes down to the shore where a landing craft is waiting for them.

If still with them, Thyra is separated from the group at this point. If she has been captured by the hell-harpy and spirited away, there is no sign of her in the night sky.

They are loaded onto the landing craft under heavy guard, with their unconscious companions brought along and held at knifepoint as safeguard against escape attempts. The pirates say little to them — they have been ordered to keep them unharmed, an order they take seriously, but only begrudgingly so. Ahead of the lifeboat, any awake player characters see the dark shape of a pirate vessel, anchored offshore.

This is the *Calypso*. Her captain, Gaal-Arvad, welcomes them.

You are roughly brought onboard the ship, clearly a pirate vessel, swarming with Shemitish and Kushite brigands. You are shoved into the center of the main deck, where a circle of pirates watches you warily, weapons readied, the moonlight shining off their eyes. A voice shouts out from the forecastle, saying "Back, men! They're not to be harmed yet. We're paid to take them, not cut them down."

A man steps down the short stairs from the forecastle, clad in finer garments than the ruffians on the deck, an air of confidence exuding from him. Though he is short and thick-bodied, he moves with catlike grace, and his eyes sparkle with some inner mischief. His crimson coat is long and of recent fashion, ruffs surprisingly clean, silver buckles and trim catching white in the moonlight. He is Shemitish, black-haired and bearded, with pale skin. When he draws near, you catch the faint odor of some exotic perfume, as if he were a courtier or dandy.

Though his long fingers boast many rings, they play lightly upon the hilt of a sheathed scimitar with the air of a man who is skilled with its use. He removes his flop-brimmed black hat, and gives an exaggerated, sweeping bow at all of you.

*"Welcome to the *Calypso*", he says. "I am Gaal-Arvad, the captain of this fine ship."*

He moves closer, inspecting each of the player characters but remaining out of reach. As he does so,



you see a Shemitish woman, all in robes of night-black samite, come to the forecabin stair and look down upon the player characters and her captain.

(If he has the Eye of Acheron, he holds it upright, and it gleams unnaturally in the moonlight, almost as if alive with dark fire. He tucks it into the thick silken girdle about his waist, patting as if to see that it is safe.)

Any complaints or threats are met with a polite laugh, as if they amuse him greatly. He beckons at one of the pirates, a tall and dangerous-looking Kushite, a cold look in his eyes and many scars upon his bare pate and chest.

"Nimaku," he says to the big man. "Take our guests to their quarters. Show them the best hospitality we can offer."

With that, the pirate captain steps aside and the man, clearly his second-in-command, barks orders at the pirates, who surge forward and drag you below deck, into the darkness...

Any player characters injured seriously have their Wounds tended to by the Shemitish woman, Sarayene (page 104). Though Semerkhet is not especially charitable or generous, he is nonetheless cautious about those chosen by the Eye of Acheron, and does not wish to take any chances. As he is not as overtly bloodthirsty as many of his countrymen, he does not see special harm in letting the player characters live and reveal what they know.

A RUDE AWAKENING

After a while, when the player characters are all asleep (from the sleeping draught, or the ministrations of Sarayene), they are awakened by a splash of cold water upon their faces. The gamemaster should read or paraphrase the following:

The brace of cold water wakes you, delivering you suddenly into sharp awareness. The weariness of the road, and your conflicts are still in your muscles, and you have additional soreness from lying upon bare wood. A glimpse around shows that you are in a dark room, and the sounds and sway of the floor below you indicate that you are in the hold of a ship, upon the sea.

Thyra is nowhere to be seen.

A clinking movement as you shift reveals the presence of chains fixed to manacles upon your wrists, separated by a foot of chain. These chains are linked to others that depend from the walls, where they are set into thick rings. Each of you is chained a few feet apart. There are others in the hold with you, men that you do not recognize... most of them Kushites, probably slaves. Some are awake and watch you silently, while others remain asleep.

In the center of the room are two men, one of them a pirate holding a bucket and a lantern, and the other, standing out of the light, the shadow of the first man upon him, blocking his features from view. He steps forward now, into the amber lantern-light, and his features are made visible at last. The

tanned skin, jet-black hair, and obsidian eyes mark him as Stygian, and a second look reveals that he is none other than the captain who led men against you in Antaeus' library.

He smiles, showing an even row of white teeth above his pointed beard. "Thank you for bringing this bauble to me. Now we shall see where it takes us."

With this, he dangles the Eye of Acheron from his hand, and it catches the lantern-light strangely as it sways from its silver chain. The room seems awash in its reflections upon the walls, and in the darkness, the black jewel gleams with an unnatural light, reflected in the mirth from the Stygian's eyes.

The gamemaster should end the scene and the session on this cliff-hanger. Plans for escape and additional conflict can begin with the next adventure.

OUTCOMES

If for some reason the player characters are not rendered insensate by Baruch's treachery and manage to defend themselves against the hell-harpy and avoid being taken by the pirates, the gamemaster must consider alternate endings to this chapter.

Other Entries (page 20) of *Chapter 1: The Fall of the House of Antaeus* covers various solutions to this potential derailment of the plot. Additionally, **The Hyborian Railroad** (page 119) deals with the potential for forcing a turn of events to end with the player characters overcome and captured. Despite the lack of player agency, this is the recommended ending for this adventure, providing the smoothest flow into the next section of the campaign.

CONTINUATION

This adventure ends with the player characters taken to the *Calypso* as prisoners. If the gamemaster chooses not to end this chapter that way, **Other Entries** (page 20) presents other options for the adventure to continue. Given the urgency of their predicament, player characters should be unwilling to undertake side missions or other distractions at this time, even if they possess the freedom to do so.

EXPERIENCE

This chapter of the adventure should net the player characters around 300 experience points, with up to another 100 for outstanding roleplaying, leadership, or contributions to the enjoyment of others. They have few options for how to spend these points, and the gamemaster should veto anything that seems unlikely to be picked up within the course of events.

BOOK TWO: INTRODUCTION



THE TOMB OF TOTHMEKRI



*The ancients knew me.
They reared shrines and altars
And I taught them dim, dusky wisdom.*

— “Serpent”, Robert E Howard

This section of the campaign, *The Tomb of Tothmekri*, takes the player characters to a remote island in the Western Sea where they encounter a terrible, ancient legacy and come face-to-face with their unseen enemy.

CHAPTER 4: THE WINE-DARK SEA

In captivity on the *Calypso*, a Shemite pirate vessel, the player characters discover more about the ancient legacy they have become a part of, and Semerkhet's own plots are revealed to them. They learn they are sailing to a mysterious island where an old Stygian renegade prince sought refuge. The presence of the Stygian onboard and the uneasiness of their fate at the hands of his allies causes the pirates of the ship to threaten mutiny, with the player characters caught in the middle!

The conflict is interrupted with the arrival of a Black Corsair reaver ship, attacking in the midst of a strange, sorcerous fog. Led by a famous Kushite king, Odaka, the ship rams the *Calypso*, crippling it momentarily, but withdraws after a display of sorcerous power. Semerkhet attempts to enlist the player characters as his allies but is interrupted by treachery from his hired crew and captain, who seek Tothmekri's treasure for themselves!

The pirate ship is caught in a fearsome gale at sea that crashes it against a rocky outcrop and begins to sink — when all onboard are visited by mysterious, half-human swimmers. The player characters and other survivors awaken on the shore of a mysterious island... whether it is their destination is unknown.

CHAPTER 5: CRIMSON JEWELS IN THE DUSK

Stranded on this remote and uncharted island, the player characters must deal with the other castaways — pirates and escaped slaves alike. The struggle for survival dominates, with the island presenting many mysteries and curiosities, including signs of inhabitation. The denizens of the island, hidden and unknown, do not appreciate their trespass, strike from darkness, harrying all of them. This may form unlikely allies as the pirates, former slaves, and player characters deal with the menace that assails them in the night.

Using their wits and negotiation skills, or leadership and combat prowess, the player characters must survive the conflict between the castaways, each of whom would like to see the others dead. The renegade Semerkhet offers the player characters a deal — together they will recover the missing Eye of Acheron and attempt to negotiate with the island's mysterious inhabitants.

Semerkhet leads them into a secret warren beneath the island's surface, and into a trap, where the player characters realize that they are in a great arena, with the degenerate descendants of Tothmekri's court watching in amusement.



CHAPTER 6: ROADS BENEATH THE EARTH

Victorious against gladiators and a giant serpent, the player characters are spared by Meketre, Tothmekri's heir, and offered the courtesy of the fortress. He meets with them later and asks for their assistance in his bid against the island's king, Apophis, descended of the original denizens of the island. He claims that his lover, Hequet, supports him in this, but he is afraid to do it without outside aid. After this meeting, the player characters can explore the fortress and learn more of its sinister, serpent-haunted secrets.

They are then brought before the King Apophis and are shown a feast with the rest of the island's court.

Semerkhet is displeased about the current situation. Identical in appearance to his cousin Meketre, they are instant rivals. As the feast continues, M'wangele is brought in and seated, and provides a magical weapon for them to use. Hequet brings in a sealed case and reveals it to be the mummy of Tothmekri, taunting both Stygian princes. The island's rulers are unmasked, and Apophis reveals that he has the Eye and sends the player characters to the afterworld.

There, they encounter Xhosāth and Tothmekri in the Hall of Judgment and make a fateful decision about what price will be paid for Xhosāth's passage. A sacrifice is made. They are freed and return to the island once more, just as the Kushite chieftain Odaka and his Black Corsairs, allied with the remaining pirates, attack the fortress to finish what Bloody Trnicos started...



BOOK TWO : CHAPTER 4



THE WINE-DARK SEA



Now they had left all charted coasts behind and were plunging further into that unknown billowy waste ordinarily shunned by seafarers, and into which, since the beginnings of Time, ships had ventured, only to vanish from the sight of man forever. All known lands lay behind them, and day upon day the blue surging immensity lay empty to their sight.

— “The Pool of the Black One”

This adventure begins with the player characters and Thyra in the Acheronian dream world, their spirit-forms in pursuit of the soul-barge of Xhosath upon the River of Souls. There, the sorcerer attempts to bargain with the Lords of Judgement to be set free from the Eye of Acheron and be allowed to return to life. Along the River of Souls, the player characters face several challenges and learn more of the nature of the dreamworld and the enemy they will face.

They awaken into captivity, with the *Calypso* having travelled far from the Hyborian coast, heading towards a mysterious island said to be ruled by Stygians, directed there by their mysterious captor, Semerkhet. This is not a popular decision, as the Shemitish and Kushite pirate crew hold no great love for Stygians and are wary that they will be enslaved themselves.

In the hold of the *Calypso*, they meet a mysterious old Kushite wizard, a man named M'wangele, who tells them he sent the strange message to them in the streets of Asgalun, speaking through the Shemitish seer. He says that he has been separated from his magic staff, and was captured by the pirates, but has been able to summon aid.

There are ample opportunities for the player characters to exploit this state on the pirate vessel, and to seize control over the situation and their own destinies. A mutiny threatens, with tempers boiling over. The player characters confronted with a choice to join either side of the conflict.

As this is occurring, a Black Corsair galley full of howling Kushites arrives on the scene, led by a famous Kushite war-chief. It attacks the *Calypso*! The player characters are in the middle of this all, with ample opportunities for heroism

and bold action. A massive storm appears, summoned by the Shemitish witch, and the Black Corsair galley is forced to break away, disappearing into the wind and raging sea, perhaps sunken.

Eventually, the *Calypso* recovers, is repaired, and the original journey is begun anew. The pirate vessel limps towards land, barely seaworthy and crashes against a stony spur of land. All onboard are thrown around, some overboard, and the doomed crew is visited by the swimming forms of smallish humans who bear less semblance to man than some other, scaled race.

Drowning, the player characters are pulled into the dreamworld once more, learning more about their purpose and seeing the possibility of success. When they awake, they are on the shore of some mysterious island, but they do not know if this is the place they seek.

THE CALYPSO

The *Calypso* is a two-masted galley, fast moving, with a single bank of oars manned by Kushite rowers. This galley has been everything from a merchant vessel, privateer, to a pirate ship for several masters. Crafted in the famed shipyards of Argos, taken by Barachan pirates, then captured by a Shemite crew and renamed the *Calypso*. Gaal-Arvad has been its captain for five years now.

It is roughly 120 feet long from stem to stern, and 40 feet at its widest point. It can sail roughly five knots per turn (about 5.75 miles per turn, or around 35 miles per hour, depending on the wind conditions), and its rowed speed is a

bit less than half that, also depending on weather conditions and crew performance. The vessel has a minimum crew of 60, with the current crew complement being around that many pirates of Shemite or Kushite origin (the gamemaster should assume that this figure allows for any pirates slain by the player characters during the previous adventure), and another 40 slave rowers.

The *Calypso* has two cargo holds, one full of supplies, the other partially full and host to the player character captives, along with M'wangele. A small dinghy used for landings is lashed to the forward port side of the hull.

The area below decks is cramped and smells of salt, mold, sweat, and old wood. Ceilings are low, passages are narrow, and every spare inch of wall space is covered with tools, supplies, shelves and hanging bundles of food and extra sailcloth and rope. There are two levels below the deck and castles (the raised forecastle and aft castles). The crew quarters are in the front, or stern, of the vessel, directly above the forecastle. Here, the crew sleep in hammocks, tightly-packed side-to-side and top-to-bottom. Their possessions are stored in small footlockers on the floor, which double as seats when the crewmen eat or entertain themselves. There are two large crew quarters, one above the other, with approximately 30 pirates assigned to each. Though there is some level of equality on-deck, the Shemites and Kushites generally keep to themselves, and the upper crew cabin is primarily full of Shemites, and the lower full of Kushites, with a few exceptions.

The captain and officer's quarters are in the rear (or aft) and are more spacious and better appointed. The captain's room has a proper bunk, a table suitable for dining and maps, and a large wardrobe, with several chests used for storage of treasure and valuables. The player characters' gear has been placed in one of these chests, though the crew has looted their weapons. Captain Gaal-Arvad shares his quarters with the witch Sarayene. The officer's quarters are next to the captain's room, and are also full of bunks and chests, but less crowded than the crew-quarters.

A cabin has been set aside for the captain's noble guest, the Stygian captain Semerkhet. The Stygian has little in the way of personal gear, other than his armor and weapons, and onboard, he goes unarmored. He has a copy of Baruch's map to the mysterious island, taken from the scholar's home in Asgalun. He is reluctant to release it to Gaal-Arvad's care, and thus must be present whenever any navigation matters are discussed. He always keeps the Eye of Acheron with him, though if he is seized, it may be hidden in his quarters instead.

On the lowest deck are stowage and cargo, and a reinforced crew space is used for the rowing slaves and is even more crowded and less comfortable than the standard crew quarters. This area is wet and echoes with the creaks of the entire ship, and water often soaks through the timbers inside. There are around 40 oar slaves currently onboard

the *Calypso*, with three of these men in the makeshift brig with the player characters. Beneath the slave chamber is the bilge, a hollow between the bottom of the ship and the lowest level, an area typically infested with rats and other vermin.

It is equivalent to a galley as described in the *Conan* corebook, page 138, or in *Conan the Pirate* (page 124).

WHO WANTS WHAT?

Chapter 4: The Wine-dark Sea, features the following non-player characters, with the following agendas:

- **GAAL-ARVAD:** A Shemitish pirate, captain of the *Calypso* hired to transport Semerkhet to a mysterious isle in the distant Western Sea.
- **SARAYENE:** The captain's love, a Pelishtim weather witch.
- **NIMAKU:** The *Calypso's* Kushite first mate.
- **SEMERKHET:** He wants the player characters to behave so he can get them to the island.
- **M'WANGELE:** A Kushite magician, here for inscrutable reasons.
- **ODAKA:** A Kushite king. His ship the Bahari is in pursuit of the *Calypso*.

THE CAPTAIN AND CREW OF THE CALYPSO

As noted on page 97, the Shemite and Kushite crew are standard Minion pirates, as described on page 319 of the *Conan* corebook. Following are the three more notable members of the crew, and their backgrounds.

Captain Gaal-Arvad

Gaal-Arvad is a skilled pirate captain on his way to becoming wealthy or dead. Once a merchant sailor, he lost everything to pirates in a vicious attack, he joined their ranks and worked his way up until he was capable of destroying those who had wronged him. By then, he had nothing to return to and set his path firmly on the road of sea and slaughter. He has refused to join the Barachan Pirates and regards the Zingarans as his mortal enemies.

He always seems amused by some inner jest, a twinkle in his eyes, as if this were but a game to him. He wears the latest in court finery plundered from the trunks of his victims and has woven rubies into his beard. Despite his dandyish appearance, Gaal-Arvad is a deadly swordsman, cunning and well-versed in the duties of being a pirate

captain. At his hips are an excellently wrought Akbitanian cutlass of Shemite make and a matching dagger, each gold-hilted and set with rubies. He is equivalent to the Nemesis pirate captain, described in the **Conan** corebook on page 319.

First Mate Nimaku

Gaal-Arvad's first mate Nimaku is a somber, tall Kushite, with eyes like unfathomable pools, giving away no warmth or light. Charged with discipline on the *Calypso*, Nimaku is pitiless and efficient, able to mete out ghastly torture without flinching. He is easily the most feared man onboard, even more so than the captain. In battle, he is almost a berserker, his eyes wild with violence and a terrible, deep laugh issuing from his throat as he assails his enemy. Many have tried to kill him, but he is seemingly indestructible. Nimaku is a Nemesis bodyguard (**Conan** corebook, page 313).

Sarayene

Born into an obscure sect of Pelishtim weather-witches devoted to Ashtoreth, Sarayene was expelled from her order for blasphemy. Early in her career, she met up with the dashing pirate captain Gaal-Arvad and has been with him ever since. Though often pirates dislike magic, she has brought them much in the way of plunder, using her command of the elements to their advantage. She is a Nemesis version of the sorcerer from page 321 of the **Conan** corebook, with the spells *Enslave* and *Venom on the Wind* (**Conan** corebook, pages 177–179, and 187–189).

Pirate Crew

The pirate crew of the *Calypso* is made up almost entirely of a mix of coastal Shemites and Kushites of various tribes. Though the crew members encountered near Baruch's villa were entirely Shemites and Kushites, a handful of other nationalities are represented amidst the pirate crew, including Argosseans, Zingarans, and a few others of the Hyborian kingdoms. They are described fully on page 97.

Galley Slaves

These slaves are from a variety of tribes of the Black Kingdoms. They are ill-treated, kept in check only by the stern discipline of their pirate masters. In addition to their hatred of the Shemites, they are equally contemptuous of the free Kushite pirates who swagger alongside them and treat them with even more focused cruelty. All are male. They are chained and watched carefully, rarely allowed away from their rowing berths. Life for these slaves is miserable and filled with fear, as they spend most of their time in a rat-infested hold waiting to be let up to the oars — where they must endure backbreaking labor under severe conditions. The reward is another day of labor and captivity, perhaps an early death. It would take little for a charismatic leader to convince them to revolt against their captors.

Black Rats

Most pirate vessels are infested with a variety of vermin, including rats, though these are a hardier breed, drawn to the strange magic that Sarayene wields. Tougher and a bit larger than average rats, these are all black and their eyes gleam almost yellow in the half-light. The oar slaves are fearful of them, as they have seen too many of their own chewed on and infected by these rats. They do not immediately threaten or attack player characters directly, though they might nibble at the garments of unconscious or helpless victims. They are equivalent to the Minion vermin swarm described on page 332 of the **Conan** corebook.

SCENE I: THE WEIGHT OF AGES

The player characters awaken now from the ending of the previous adventure. If they were knocked unconscious by the pirates, or drugged by Sarayene, the result is the same. If neither of these events occurred, the gamemaster should tell the player characters who are not asleep that they have simply drifted off in their captivity, penned in the darkness of the hull of a pirate vessel.

Read or paraphrase the following to the player characters:

You are once more drawn into the Acheronian dreamworld, a reunion between your conscious, waking mind and your dreaming soul. Only when you are here do you realize the sense of inner emptiness ever-present when you are thus split.

Thyra, though she is no longer with you in the waking world, is here alongside you.

You do not know how long you have been walking, but the small landing behind you is long out of sight. From that place set sail the funerary barge of the long-dead sorcerer Xhosâth and his captive, the rebel Stygian prince Tothmekri. At Antaeus' bidding, you set forth after the sorcerer, clad in armor and regalia of ancient make.

Though you have not eaten or drunk since you have come to this place, you feel no need for such mortal sustenance. All the pains and aches that assail your corporeal forms, wherever they lie, do not intrude on your form in this place, and for the moment you are grateful for the ease.

Above you, the baleful white sky beats down upon the landscape like a great hammer, oppressive and leeching all colour from your surroundings. The river is to your right, while you walk a well-worn path next to it.

Your sandaled feet are confident and find easy purchase on the loose gravel and powdery earth, and though you may be wracked with doubt and concern while awake, here all thoughts seem purer, more direct and your concerns clearer.

As the scholar told you, you must follow the River of Souls to its terminus. There, at its end, are the Userat Maati, the Halls of Truth, where sit the lords of death and judgement. Antaeus, Thyra's father, told you that you did not need to stop Xhosáth's voyage to this place, but to match it and be present when he puts his case before the Acheronian gods there.

The sorcerer plans to bargain his freedom with the soul of one who would be king, that of the renegade Prince Tothmekri. Instead, you must somehow see to it that this does not happen, and that the prince's soul and form are to be reunited and his mortal remains destroyed. How you will accomplish this is not altogether clear.

Any wounds the player characters may be suffering from in the real world are not reflected here, so they are in their peak health and physical condition. Furthermore, the nagging presence of the Eye of Acheron, so long a strange presence in their minds, is absent, and it is as if a great weight has been shrugged off all at once.

The player characters may wish to speak to Thyra and ask her how and where she is. This depends entirely on what has happened to her.

- If she was spirited away by the hell-harpy, she tells them that she was borne for many hours in the creature's horrid grasp, chilled and terrified in the high air. She lost consciousness after a time and surmises that her mortal form must still be in its clutches.
- If she was captured and taken by Baruch, she says that the old man drugged her. She has little idea what has happened to her, yet she knows that she is being moved somehow. Every time she nears wakefulness she is drugged again, the cloying scent of lotus still in her nostrils, even here in this dream world.

Far ahead in the distance ahead of the player characters is a row of cliffs that stretch across the horizon. The river's bright blue course leads directly to this range. A small city of some sort stands at the base of the mountains, and the river runs through the midst of it. An immense gate looms at the end of the river, and it seems as if the river itself is barred from passing through this gate in the side of the mountain. The city and the gate are miles away, but the air is eerily clear enough to allow such a vision at so great a distance.

Thyra's counsel is that they continue to the city to see if they might find passage through the mountain and onwards to the fields of Ament and the Hall of Judgement.

Attempting to skirt the city and climb the cliffs becomes less and less feasible as the player characters gain a greater look at it. The row of cliffs splits the landscape in half, as if a wall, nearly 150 feet high in places, higher in others but never lower. Estimates about the difficulty of the climb are easy to make, and even a Cimmerian hillman would be hard-pressed to scale that face.

Thyra looks at it and says, "We cannot scale that wall. Even were we to make it to the summit, how would we follow the course of the river? Who knows if the mountain above matches the course of the River of Souls below? Let us see how we might follow the river."

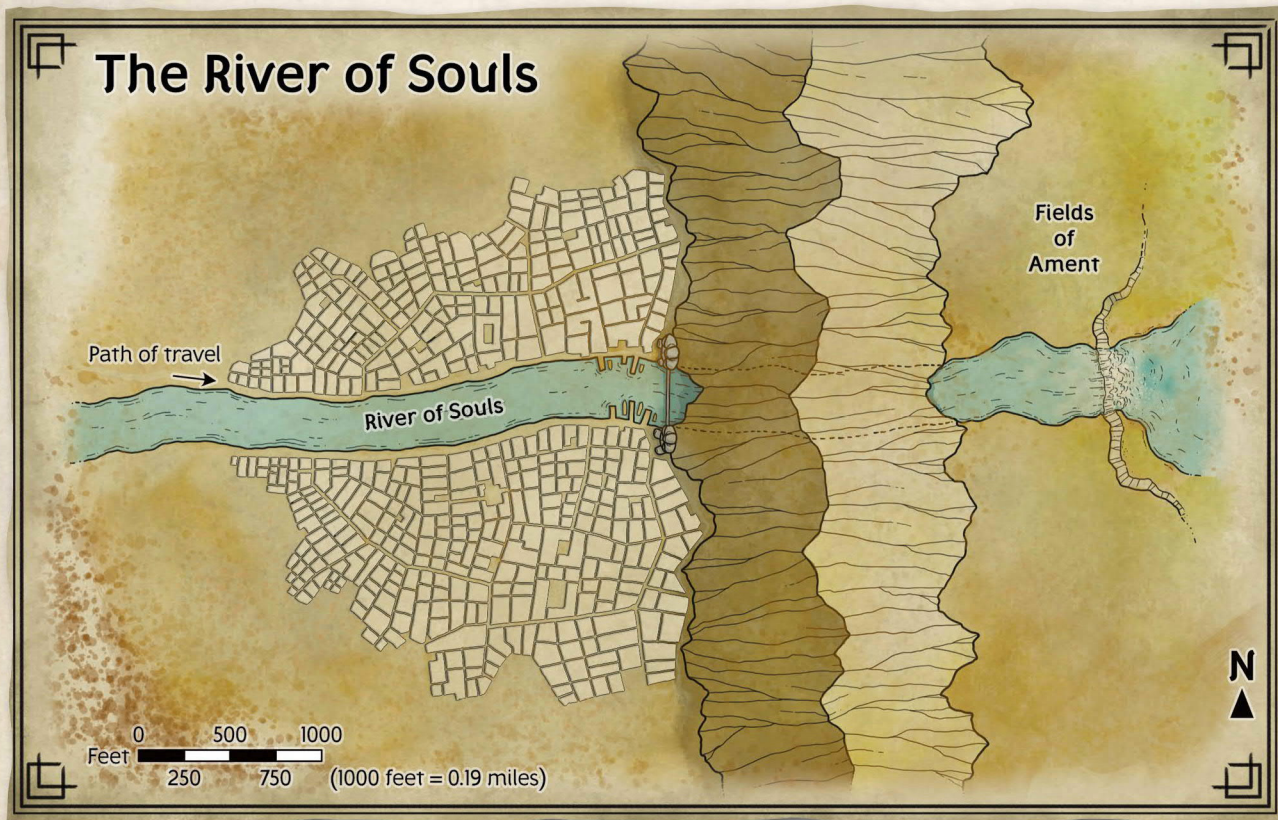
DON'T DRINK THE WATER!

In the event that player characters are submerged in the River of Souls or try to drink from it — and the gamemaster should emphasize that despite having no food or drink, they are neither hungry nor thirsty here — the water of the River of Souls has the following effects:

- **RESTORATION:** The water of the River of Souls immediately restores all lost Resolve and eliminates 1 ☹ Trauma and 1 ☹ Despair.
- **OBLIVION:** Each time a player character drinks of the water, a curious light-headedness comes over them, and they find themselves having a hard time remembering things. All Intelligence, Personality, and Willpower tests are increased in Difficulty by one step per drink for the remainder of the time in the Acheronian afterworld. At five additional steps of Difficulty, the player character becomes a blank slate, amnesiac and unable to remember anything other than basic information about how to eat, clean themselves, etc. They may speak normally, but any communication depending on remembered information is simply gone.

These effects are solely while the player characters are in the afterworld and do not affect their mortal forms. If desired, the gamemaster can lessen the penalty to Difficulty by one step between scenes.

A successful Counsel roll made against a Difficulty equal to the player character's current Difficulty penalty reduces the penalty by one step per point of Momentum earned and spent on that roll.



THE CITY OF THE DEAD

As the player characters continue along the riverward path, they realize that the relation between time and distance are not as they are in the real world, taking far more time to arrive there. Finally, the player characters arrive at the outskirts of a sprawling city of perhaps several hundred buildings, great and small, many single-storied. All are wrought of white stone. The place is disquietingly free from vegetation — no trees, vines or even weeds break up the monotony of the place.

The gates themselves are giant, towering above the city, almost 60 feet high, flanked by two great stone statues of grotesque figures, their musculature subtly wrong, carved designs wrought into the stone of their making that could be scales, hair, or some other substance. Their faces are strange, and the light glares brightly enough to erase any details, though these are not human likenesses.

The place is inhabited, men and women in simple garments of white moving about its streets and courtyards. Some carry bundles, while others mill about in public spaces. The citizens' features are mostly unfamiliar, similar to those servants who preceded Xhosāth and Tothmekri onto the funerary barge. Their dark hair is worn in strange fashions, their garments are of unusual cut, though of the same styles Thyra and the player characters themselves now wear.

A successful Daunting (D3) Lore test informs that a city of this like has not seen the light of the Hyborian sun for countless years, perhaps even millennia.

The gateway itself is set into the very side of the mountain, and the lower section of it is an elaborate series of bars that do not impede the water's flow through the gate. Above the river-gate is another great gate, this one of iron-banded wood, nearly 40 feet across. The river itself flows directly into the mountain, disappearing in darkness. At its base is a small dock — near are several small barges. Curious figures stride on that dock and on those barges, something inhuman in their appearance. On the opposite side of the river is another similar dock: the city dwellers must apparently ferry across at that place, for there is no bridge between the two halves of the town.

If they near any of the city-dwellers, the player characters go unnoticed. Attempts at interfering with the people meet the same result as was towards the servants on Xhosāth's funeral barge (page 33), the folk being immaterial and the player characters being made of some mortal stuff, even in this dream world. The people continue to go about their daily business, speaking in an unfamiliar tongue (Acheronian) and give no indication of noticing the player characters.

The player characters can wander around the buildings and attempt to interfere all they like. The strange folk of this place walk straight through them if they block the way, and neither party seems to have any sensation from the experience, however strange.

THE GUARDIANS OF THE GATE

At the base of the gateway, when the player characters draw near, they see that the figures who man the dock and the gate through the mountain are not human at all. Nearly seven feet tall, their heads are those of jackals, their shoulders thick with muscle, their limbs more those of beasts than men. They wear scaled armor, cloaks of dull white, swords slung over their shoulders or on their hips, and large shields upon their backs.

If the player characters make any attempts at subtlety, a Stealth test is opposed by the jackal-creatures' Senses Field of Expertise. If expecting to get the same lack of interaction from these beings as the city people, they are in for a surprise. When the player characters approach the creatures, one stops and stares right at the player characters, shouting at them in Acheronian, the harsh and alien syllables sounding even more strange coming from the canine jaws.

Several other jackal-men turn and notice the player characters, and leap from the dock to the river's edge and move forward, hair bristling and clawed hands upon weapon-hilts. The one who spoke earlier steps forward, black lips curled back from white fangs, dark eyes on the player characters. He issues another order in Acheronian and points away, down the river the way the player characters have come, as if ordering them to leave. There are an equal number of these creatures to the player characters, including Thyra, and several more on the opposite side of the river.


These are Anubites, guardians of the gate. They can see the living and the dead and are there to ensure that the living do not pass. They take this duty seriously. They do not understand why the player characters, clearly not dead and not Acheronian, are here, but still the Anubites do not allow any mortals to pass.

Unless someone can speak Acheronian, it is likely that this encounter descends into violence. Unlike the other beings in the city, these creatures can interact with the player characters, and are equally solid should they be touched.

THE DREAMWORLD AND DAMAGE

In the Acheronian afterworld, damage taken is 'real' in that place. Player characters can be slain, healed, etc. just as in the real world, but damage is handled differently. The player characters must keep track of their spirit body damage and Harms separately from their mortal versions.

When returning to the real world, any damage to Vigor incurred in the afterworld is applied to Resolve, and any Trauma becomes Despair.

If a player character is 'slain' in the afterworld through Wounds or Trauma, they instantly awaken in their body in the real world, as if dead. The player can restore Wounds at a cost of 1  (minimum 1) per point of Fortune spent. The gamemaster may introduce life-saving measures from helpful non-player characters in this case.

If in the dreamworld, the player character is knocked unconscious, they return to the real-world unconscious, as if knocked out there.

Vigor damage and Wounds in the real world are not carried over from the real world into the afterworld, but Resolve damage and Trauma are.

The Anubite leader raises a horn from its neck and blows on it, a sad and mournful note echoing across the expanse. On the other side, the creatures scramble down the dock to a barge that stands waiting at its end. When it becomes certain that additional enforcements are on the way, the creatures draw their kopeshes and menace the player characters. The leader points back down the River of Souls with his blade and growls a challenge.

After the horn is blown, it will be another five rounds before more Anubites can pole their barge across the River of Souls and race up the docks to the combat. A second barge is soon to follow. Should the player characters defeat the initial group of Anubites, they can easily get to the first barge before the second group arrives at the dock, though the jackal-creatures leap from their barge to engage the player characters in combat on the river itself.



ANUBITES (TOUGHENED)

These jackal-headed creatures are tall, with thickly-muscled torsos and lean arms and legs. They are covered head-to-toe in extremely short, grey or brown fur that lies flat like that of a greyhound. Their ears protrude upwards, and their long snouts boast white, sharp teeth. Their front hands are long and manlike in form, with prehensile fingers that allow them to use weapons with full proficiency, though their legs joint backwards like those of a dog, and their feet are more like the paws of an animal. Anubites are brutal and follow a pack mentality. Once they roamed the deserts of what is now Stygia, now extinct and long forgotten, their bones gone to dust while humanity was crawling back from apedom. Anubites may have other roles, including sorcerers and priests, but these are combatants.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 9 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 10 | 10 | |




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 2 | Movement | 2 |
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 2 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 10, Resolve 9
- **Soak:** Armor 3 (Scale Armor), Courage 1

ATTACKS

- **Kopeshes (M):** Reach 2, 6 , 1H, Intense, Vicious 1
- **Curved Shields (M):** Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2
- **Fierce Yawp (T):** Range C, 3  mental, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Night Vision**
- **Pack Fighting:** Anubites are particularly good at fighting together. If one performs an Exploit action as a Standard Action, any adjacent Anubite within the same zone fighting the same foe gains the benefits (*Conan* corebook, page 115–116).

DOOM SPENDS

- **Shield Sweep:** An Anubite, when attacking with its shield, may spend 1 Doom to automatically activate its Knockdown effect before rolling. If an effect is rolled, it merely does additional damage.

INTO THE MOUNTAIN OF NIGHT

The gate at the base of the river is opened and closed through two wheels, one on either side connected to each half of the gate. These wheels stand flat and have thick spokes radiating from them, with leather-wrapped grips for the ease of use. Thick chains are coiled about the wheels, and lead to a pulley-like mechanism above each gate. The gates can be opened independently and is relatively easy to figure out.

Once unlocked, a wheel must be turned, an action requiring a successful Challenging (D2) Athletics test. More than one player character can assist in this task. When a wheel has been turned enough, the gate rises and allows small ships to pass through. For larger vessels, both lower gates and even the upper gates must be opened. The mechanisms for opening the upper gates are visible on a platform nearly 30 feet above the docks, accessible by a stone stairway. The opened gate can then be locked in place, and a barge or other vessel let go to drift into the mountain, drawn by the current.

The barges are simple affairs, carved wooden platforms with four corner posts, each of which contains a lantern set into the wood. A copper amphora of lantern-oil rests in the corner of the barge, and two long poles rest across the barge, set into grooves for easy access. When utilized, these poles reach the ground of the river, and enable the pilot to shove the raft across the river, ferrying the passengers from one dock to another. Unlike everything else in the city, the player characters are quite able to manipulate these barges and steer them to effect.

Taking charge of a barge and going down the river's path is the only real choice. Inside the mountain, a line of torches burns on either side of the river, clearly delineating its path, and reflecting off elaborate frescoes or murals upon the walls. Swimming in the river is dangerous, requiring a Challenging (D2) Athletics test. Failure sweeps the character away downriver under the mountain, likely to drown. Handling a barge is much easier and no great skill is needed to steer one, with an Average (D1) Athletics test sufficing. Failure or a Complication indicates the barge is at the whim of the current, and floats downriver, perhaps roughly, of its own accord.

Whether the Anubites follow is up to the gamemaster. They are guardians but have been commanded never to desert their position. If a longer or drawn-out fight is desired, the gamemaster should allow one barge of 4–6 Anubites to continue after them, perhaps drawing near in the darkness and forcing the player characters to fight, barge-to-barge, requiring Average (D1) Acrobatics tests to remain standing, and perhaps a Challenging (D2) Acrobatics test to leap from one barge to the next. The Anubites see perfectly well in the dark. If the pursuing barge-load of Anubites is defeated, the player characters have achieved a clean getaway.

Once the player characters are set upon the river's course, the gamemaster should now read or paraphrase the following:

Though your awareness is firmly here, you feel as if something is calling to you, drawing you back. You hear a singsong voice muttering something in Kushite, and the words are almost as if a rope has been looped about you, pulling you away from this strange afterworld. Suddenly, the voice stops.

A near-phantasmal sense of being touched ripples through your form, and you get the disquieting sensation of being in two places at once. Then, you enter the darkness of the river's course through the mountain, and your vision goes black.

Though you saw torchlight before you entered the tunnel, now they seem farther and smaller than before. There is a tremendous sense of lightness, as if some part of you is soaring above and away from the river's surface, and the only similarities between the two worlds is the sense of movement...

SCENE II: RATS IN THE HOLD

The gamemaster should read or paraphrase the following:

As your ethereal spirit and mortal flesh are united again, your vision sharpens and adjusts to the darkness. The rocking of the hull, the dank fetid smell of the ship below-decks reminds you of your surroundings, caught in the hold of the Calypso as it sails to an unknown destination.

In the dark hull, you see a figure crouched before you, and another lying on the ground, as if insensate. The upright one holds a long blade, gleaming in the scant light shining through the cracks in the ceiling above. As the figure nears [one of the player characters], the blade comes closer, and the light catches the figures's eyes as he narrows them, cruelly.

What are you doing?

It has been more than a week since the player characters were captured, and the Calypso has sailed deep into the Western Ocean, far from the shores of Shem, Stygia, and even the Black Coast. In this time, the player characters have been mostly left alone and unconscious, caught in timeless dream-sleep. An old Kushite man is chained in the hold along with them and has been watching the player characters.

In all of this time, the player characters have been unconscious, chained with their wrists together, each chain

attached to thick rings set in the center of the deck, with enough slack in their chains that they are not suffering any further pain or difficulty. They have been fed light broth and given fresh water and tended to by Sarayene, who recognizes their trance. Muscles feel stiff and unused, but otherwise the player characters feel only the pains of wounds brought from the afterworld.

As it happens, a pirate of the Calypso's crew was sent below deck to check on the captives and saw them as they roused. The old Kushite man was singing to them in some song in his language. The pirate struck the old man in the head and grasped one of the player characters, thinking to give them a little cut to see if they'd snap out of the trance.

If the player character opens their eyes or reacts, the pirate leaps back in surprise, cursing in Shemitish. If the player character would like to play dead and see what happens, he must succeed in an opposed Resistance test against the pirate's Senses Field of Expertise to avoid reacting when the pirate cuts them a bit on their cheek to check for a sign of life. See page 97 for a more information about the pirate.

Attacking the pirate is certainly possible, though the player character suffers three step increase to Difficulty to any attacks made while chained up. If the player character tries to use the chains, consider them Improvised weapons with the Grapple Quality. However, the pirate has no wish to fight, as he was told not to injure the captives, and will be disciplined if he disobeys. He does everything he can to back away and escape. Such a fight makes noise enough to alert the other pirates, unless a Daunting (D3) Stealth test is made in addition to subduing the pirate. If defeated, he has only his poniard, and no keys.

If the pirate talks to the player characters — or another arrives in his place — he whispers hoarsely to them: "Who are you? What does the Stygian want from you? Where is he leading us?"

Assuming that the player characters are not overly antagonistic, they can learn quite a bit at this point. The pirate, Lamech, is willing to trade titbits of information with them. Depending on the circumstances, a successful Persuade test may be required, or handled through roleplaying.

The gamemaster should pick and paraphrase the following pieces of information as appropriate.

"You've been asleep for nine days. The Stygian and the captain's witch have tended to you. None of us thought you would rouse."

"The Stygian is named Semerkhet, an exiled noble fallen to ruin. He must be desperate, otherwise he'd have no use for the likes of us!"

"The Stygian booked passage with us in Khemi. We brought he and his mercenaries to Messantia and then Asgalun. There were others in Messantia, but only he returned."

"No, we don't know where we're going, and none of us like it overmuch. The Stygian keeps muttering about an island beyond the Nameless Isle, but we want no part of it. Our captain is a fool if he trusts the Stygian."

"Many suspect that we won't be coming back from this trip, if the Stygian has his way. We're leery about this journey, but the captain says that the reward will be more treasure than we can dream of."

"The captain has ordered that you not be harmed, at the Stygian's behest. He'll want to be speaking with you more later."

"Ah, the old man there... he's some sort of shaman the Stygians brought with them, taken on the coast of Zabhela, in Kush. They said he surrendered to them, giving them his staff for safe-keeping. He's too old to be of much use, so the devil knows what the Stygian wants with him."

The pirate does not volunteer much more than that, though his initial questions indicate that he and the other pirates are curious about who the player characters are, what business they have with Semerkhet, and why they are being kept alive. The trance-like state is a cause of suspicion, but he does not ask questions where sorcery is concerned.

Eventually, he leaves to go report their status to his master.

TAKING STOCK OF THE SITUATION

The hold is roughly 20 feet wide and almost the same in length. The ceiling is just over six and a half feet high, with many thick beams supporting the deck above. Only a single door leads from the hold. In the center of the ceiling is a large open portal covered with a mesh of thick ropes, allowing light and fresh air inside. The sky above is cloudy and overcast, with little to indicate the time of day other than 'daytime'. The player characters' manacles are roughly a foot apart, and another yard-long chain links them in a T, ending in a ring in the floor affixed there with a padlock. A basin to the side is full of water, with a wooden ladle floating in it.

There is a near-constant stream of activity above; thuds of footfalls; the creaking of the hull and masts; and rude banter in Shemitish and Kushite. The ship is moving, from the feeling of the waves crashing, the rowing drums, and the thrust of the ship every time the oars are drawn.

The player characters' possessions have been taken from them, leaving them with only their clothing. Money and other items of value have been taken by the captain and

locked in his quarters, while the crew has appropriated any weapons of apparent value. The rest went into a bundle in the ship's makeshift armory.

Getting out of the manacles takes either a Daunting (D3) Thievery test to pick the lock (increased in Difficulty by the lack of tools, the relative darkness, and being chained with the selfsame manacles). The player characters are positioned far enough apart that they cannot aid one another. Alternatively, a brute-force approach can be applied with a successful Dire (D4) Athletics test. Again, this must be done alone.

If any of the player characters are attuned to the Eye of Acheron and seek to discern its location (see page 34), they at once sense its presence nearby upon the *Calypso*, somewhere at the other end of the vessel.

The unconscious Kushite man chained with them is tall and bone-thin, seasoned and gnarled like an old walking stick. His thick bush of hair is stark white and fans back from his head, and he wears leathern bands and copper disks twined about his neck and in his hair. His garment is a simple stretch of cotton cloth, wrapped about him many times, emblazoned with a twisting, striped pattern of yellow and red.

He can be tended to, with an Average (D1) Healing test, plus two additional steps of Difficulty for the conditions (in a darkened ship's hold, chained, no medical supplies other than a nearby basin of water). Success wakes him up.

Once awake, he takes a long look at the player characters, and in Kushite, or whatever language they speak, and introduces himself.

"I am M'wangele of the Makonde. I have been waiting for you. There is much to speak of, and little time to tell it."

M'WANGELE OF THE MAKONDE (NEMESIS)

Descendant of a long line of Kushite magicians, M'wangele is almost a century old, and thin as a spear-haft. He has watched over the tribe of the Makonde, and knows the secrets of the sky, the earth, and the sea, and all the animals and plants that dwelt between them. He has seen the birth of most of the denizens of his village. M'wangele is a pilgrim as well as a shaman and has traveled extensively throughout his life. In lotus-induced trances, he speaks through time to the spirits of his ancestors, and to his descendants. He was most recently the mentor to the great chief Odaka, but upon receiving a mystic vision indicating where he must go, he left the village, journeying to Zabhela on the Kushite coast, and surrendered to Semerkhet and his Stygians, who were waiting for the *Calypso*.

Sensing that the old witch-finder would be useful, Semerkhet confiscated his staff and dragged him along, chaining him in the hold of the *Calypso*. He has traveled with

the ship since, and though he is without his most potent artifact, he is able to avoid Sarayene's notice and secretly cast his mind across the vale of time and space, to witness the threat that the Acheronian sorcerer Xhosāth presents. Destiny, he will tell the player characters, has put him into their path.

If they ask, he says that he has an item that he must give them, an ancient staff that might help them in their struggles against their foe. It has been taken from him and is in Semerkhet's possession now, but he knows that it finds its own way to where it is needed, eventually to return to those of his line.

He speaks many languages, knowing a bit of almost every language of the current age.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 12 | 11 | 13 | 14 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 8 | 7 | 8 | |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | — | Movement | 2 |
| Fortitude | 3 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 3 | Social | 3 |

| STRESS & SOAK | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| ■ Stress: Vigor 7, Resolve 17 | |
| ■ Soak: Armor —, Courage 3 | |

| ATTACKS | |
|--|--|
| ■ Gaze of Ages (T): Range C, 6 mental, Stun | |

- | SPECIAL ABILITIES | |
|--|--|
| ■ Ancestral Memory: M'wangele is the inheritor of wisdom from his ancestors and his descendants, and can speak to them at times of crisis, as well as being guided by their wisdom. As such, he is often in exactly the right place at the right time, and once per session may automatically succeed at a task as if he had spent a Fortune point to do so. | |
| ■ Kushite Magician: Though he is not a witchfinder, M'wangele is nonetheless a powerful magician and knows the following sorcery spells: <i>Astral Wanderings</i> , <i>Atavistic Voyage</i> , and <i>Placate the Dead</i> . Given time and resources, he can craft petty enchantments. The copper bangles woven into his hair and garments are also equivalent to sorcerous offerings, and are sacrificed once per spell. | |

DOOM SPENDS

- **Attuned to the Staff:** Though he is separated from it when first encountered, M'wangele has a magic link with his staff and can spend 1 Doom to summon it to his side when needed, though it will appear as if circumstantially (i.e., floating ashore, found and carried by someone else, etc.).

M'wangele knows little about Tothmekri, the Acheronian afterworld, or even the Eye of Acheron. What he does know can be summarized as follows:

- The player characters have been caught up in a curse where a mortal sorcerer is trying to free the spirit of another, more powerful sorcerer, from the Eye.
- The soul is immortal and cannot be destroyed while it is in the Eye. It can, however, be destroyed in the mortal world.
- The staff is a powerful tool against spirits and is said to have been carved from the wood of the first tree that ever grew on the Earth. It is thus one of the few things that Xhosāth fears.
- His staff lets the bearer harm undead creatures, such as ghosts and embodied souls. He has used it on many occasions to exorcize demons and spirits from mortals they possess.
- It carries power into the afterworld and one who falls asleep with it in their hands can take it with them there. It can also journey with a sorcerer who casts magic to let them journey into the past or other worlds, leaving their body and projecting their perception to these other vistas.

Any player character with at least 1 Focus in Sorcery automatically recognize that he is speaking of the spells *Astral Wanderings* and *Atavistic Voyage*. A successful Dire (D4) Lore test conveys the legend of such a staff, passing through different masters throughout the ages, described differently but always with the same powers.



SCENE III: UNKNOWN WATERS

Just as things are getting interesting, the door opens again and some Kushite pirates move in, abruptly unlocking M'wangele's chains from the ring in the floor and escorting the old man out. They are surprisingly gentle with him, though it is uncertain whether this is respect or caution. When they are done and the old man is gone, another man walks into the room... the Stygian, Semerkhet, his hand upon the jeweled scimitar at his belt. In his other hand is a stool, which he places down in the center of the room, looking at the player characters with naked curiosity upon his face.

If the player characters are attempting to, or have progress towards, breaking free, he fights defensively, withdrawing immediately, and calls for more pirates to back him up. Surrounded by a wall of spears and cutlasses, the player characters have the choice of certain death or to let themselves be chained up again — with additional chains this time — at which point the discussion continues.

“Hear me. Again, we meet, and I still have not told you my name. I am Semerkhet, a former captain in the army of Stygia. I am the descendant of Tothmekri, onetime heir to the Stygian throne. Do not incur my wrath. While I am a patient man, in this place I have little time and few options. All of you, however, are less free than I am, and your survival depends entirely on your actions and the words you speak here and now.”

“I would like to know more about you and how you came to cross my path. Tell me everything and this will go much better for all of you. What brought you to Baruch's door? What has bound your fate to mine?”

If they ask about the Eye of Acheron's location, Semerkhet tells them: *“I would not keep such a potent thing upon my person. It is safe, and you will not lay eyes upon it again until the time has come for you to serve me.”* He does not elaborate further on this.

“Shall we speak plainly?” he asks.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DEVIL

With this, Semerkhet questions the player characters on who they are, how they came to seek the Eye of Acheron and what connection they have with Antaeus. Unless he was made aware in *Chapter 1: The Fall of the House of Antaeus*, he does not know that Thyra is Antaeus's daughter. He is genuinely curious what drove the player characters to journey to Baruch's home in Aagalun, risking peril to infiltrate the inner city, and to again

seek the scholar's hideout on the coast. As the questioning begins, Semerkhet inquires as to the identity of the second phantom that assailed he and his men in Messantia, and whether it was a sending or some illusion.

This section should be played out less like an interrogation and more like a simple conversation. Though he shares much of the Stygian contempt for non-Stygians, he is also worldly enough to realize that the player characters are potentially a valuable source of information and it would be best to gain the information he needs from them willingly, rather than under duress.

Semerkhet does not use force or even threaten violence upon the player characters. He is a soldier, not a torturer, and he is also wary of the effect that sustained violence upon the player characters might have on a crew already suspicious of his presence.

The conversation that ensues between Semerkhet and the player characters is ideally done through roleplaying, with tests used if necessary. The gamemaster should pay attention to how these are used and adjust his response accordingly, allowing for the use of Momentum spends like Create Opportunity, Obtain Information, Improve Quality of Success, and Increase Scope of Success.

Skills that may guide the player characters' participation:

- **Insight:** Listening to Semerkhet; attempting to see what his motives are; etc.
- **Lore:** Trying to connect the pieces of information he volunteers with old bits of lore or history; volunteering enough information to make him reveal more; etc.
- **Observation:** Watching to see his reactions; estimating his capabilities and habits; etc.
- **Persuade:** Coaxing more information out of him; convincing him of the truth (or a falsehood); appealing to his emotions or reason; etc.

Semerkhet is described on page 38. Any opposed rolls should be based on his Social Field of Expertise.

Semerkhet is extremely curious about the connection the player characters have with the Eye of Acheron. He confesses that though he would rather slay them outright, he suspects that there is more to what is transpiring than he can see. He mentions his 'ally in Stygia' but does not name Serothos — the name would mean little to them anyway — and tells the player characters that he has gotten word from Stygia that the player characters are to be kept alive for some future use. Semerkhet is honestly uncertain about what purpose they are to serve, though he admits that their lives are likely to end when this purpose is revealed. A successful Insight test regarding his attitude toward the pirate crew reveals that he holds them in no regard whatsoever and has no loyalty to any of them.

Semerkheth is curious where they drifted off to and will ask for as many details as he can about what is happening to them. If the player characters mention any of their experiences in the Acheronian dreamworld with the spirits of Xhosāth and Tothmekri, he is interested in whatever information the player characters provide about this. Clearly, their role in this is one beyond his ability to comprehend.

Semerkheth dismisses any questions about the hell-harpy that attacked Baruch's garden. He claims that it was a sending of his Stygian ally and does not elaborate, other than to hint that more could be coming. He does not know exactly where Thyra was taken, but says "likely to Stygia, from whence the beast was sent."

If asked, Semerkheth tells the player characters they are traveling to the island where his ancestor sought refuge from persecution, and eventually died. He tells the player characters of how Tothmekri grew mad under the influence of the Eye of Acheron, fled Khemi with his household, eventually arriving on the island that became his tomb. Right now, the *Calypso* is going to that selfsame island.

Unlike previous versions of this story the player characters may have heard, Semerkheth knows what happened after Tothmekri's arrival on the island, wisdom granted him through a demon-spawned vision granted by Serothos. The gamemaster should summarize the narrative provided in the sections **The Island of the Dead** and **The Coming of Bloody Tranicos** (page 9 and page 11), as desired.

Semerkheth is a competent narrator but his information is secondhand and vaguely skewed. He is unaware of Xhosāth as the reason for Tothmekri's insanity. He discounts his ancestor's madness, claiming that the Stygian prince was unjustly accused of attempting to kill his father, and thus history has attributed this aspect to his character. A successful Insight test at this reveals he is extremely uncomfortable about any suggestion of hereditary madness.

As for the island itself, Semerkheth has no idea what they will find there, save for the burial place of his ancestor, and perhaps the descendants of that once proud household.

At an appropriate juncture in the conversation, shouts of alarm come from above, interrupting them. Footfall scrambles and pounds on the deck, and Gaal-Arvad's voice rings out:

"To arms, mates! We are pursued!"

At this, the door is thrown open and two Shemitish pirates bring M'wangele roughly, setting the old man down and chaining him once more to the bring in the floor. One of them turns to Semerkheth and tells him: "The captain wants you on the deck immediately."

SCENE IV: HUNTER AND PREY

A successful Challenging (D2) Observation test yields the faint sounds of additional drumming in the distance, audible even over the commotion onboard the *Calypso* as her crew readies for a fight. Enough of the pirates hear the sound to know what it is.

"It's the Black Corsairs!"

M'wangele smiles widely, delight sparkling in his eyes. "My king. He has come."

The rowing drums of the *Calypso* intensify and the ship creaks with each oar-pull, and the noises from above deck are those of a ship preparing for combat.

A short while later, the ship's first mate Nimaku enters the hold, another pirate alongside him bearing an awkward canvas bundle.

"Against the wishes of your host, my captain offers you a deal. Fight alongside us, and you will live. You can join our crew after the battle, or we will set you free when we see the mainland again. The Black Corsairs have sworn a blood-oath to destroy the Calypso and all aboard it. Do not think that they will spare you. The alternative is that we use the old wizard and you as our hostages. Then we kill you if they draw near."

If they look over at him, M'wangele nods in agreement, his mirth evident. If they ask his opinion on the matter, he cackles and says it is true, that his king will likely kill everyone on the ship. A successful Average (D1) Insight test yields that he is lying for their benefit. It may occur to any of the player characters that being armed and unchained grants them far more opportunities than does remaining below in the hold while others fight above.

If they agree, Nimaku unchains them, and the pirate spills the bundle down upon the floor: their weapons and armor. They take M'wangele with them to go chain him to the secondary mast above, and leave the player characters to arm themselves.

If the player characters refuse outright, one of the following may ensue:

- Nimaku has a squad of pirates pull them out of the hold and chains them up on the deck, around the secondary mast, alongside M'wangele. As he orders his crew about, Captain Gaal-Arvad swaggers over and tells the player characters to "Pray to your gods to avoid catching an arrow. And pray for our victory. They'll kill the lot of you just as quickly as any of us."

- They can remain in the hold for the rest of the battle and listen to the sounds of arrows thudding into the hull and screams back and forth as the two ships near one another. Go to **The Arrival of the Bahari** (following) at this point.
- The player characters can make an attempt at escape, using the guidelines provided prior.

Asking any of the pirate crew available about the Black Corsairs yields the response that the *Calypso* has raided up and down the shores of Kush for years, taking many slaves to fill their rowing benches. Captain Gaal-Arvad has many enemies, and those enemies have long memories, but he does not know why any Black Corsair vessel would be this far away from the mainland.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BAHARI

The player characters emerge onto the deck — whether in chains or with weapons in hand — and see something strange: a dense fog has surrounded the entire ship, limiting vision dramatically. The captain urges the rowing drums to cease, and the ship grows silent. Even the drums and

singing from the Black Corsair vessel are mute. The pirate crew look in every direction, wondering where it might be at, holding shields warily.


Captain Gaal-Arvad has donned a scaled corselet, and the black-cloaked woman stands near the door leading into the fore hold, her arm lightly stroking the wooden frame, watching M'wangele with catlike suspicion. Semerkhet has also girded himself for battle, his eyes glinting with fury at seeing his captives on the deck. It is obvious to the player characters that this was not his idea, and he is none too happy about it.

None of the pirates of the *Calypso* pay further attention to the player characters at this point unless they draw attention to themselves. Any player characters with skill or Focus in Sailing note that the sails hang limply now, a near complete lack of wind. Many of the pirates mutter fearfully about this fact, as the wind was strong mere moments ago.

Semerkhet turns to Sarayene, his Pelishtim witch, and asks, *"This fog... is it a sending of yours?"*, to which she replies in a languid voice. *"Nothing of mine. I sense a presence there... something I can counter, I think."* She nods towards M'wangele, *"That one knows, I think."* The old man smiles. Sarayene goes down below the decks.



At this, a successful Challenging (D2) Observation test from the player characters yields a sound of creaking echoing upon the water, echoed many times, and a guttural bark in Kushite. "Down!" shout many onboard the *Calypso*, shrinking back behind their shields against the fusillade of arrows that arc through the fog toward the ship and its all-too-blind crew.

Anyone on deck equipped with a shield should attempt an Average (D1) Parry test or can seek cover by dodging with the same Difficulty. Though the defenders are unaware of the direction the attack is coming from, there are also many arrows, and few are directed at any one of them. Anyone struck takes 4  damage, and a Complication means that they take a second arrow.

The drums of the Black Corsair vessel begin again, startlingly nearby. Suddenly, out of the fog, it looms:

With a chorus of fierce howls, the Black Corsair galley emerges from the thick fog and races towards the Calypso. It is a slender sea-serpent, with two rows of oars on either side, rising and falling to the rhythm of the drummers, who stand at the aft castle and beat upon great drums. Its thick bronze-shod prow shows many scars and gives evidence to many successful such attacks.

The Black Corsairs shout insults as they draw their bows back again for another volley of arrows, while others shake leaf-bladed spears in triumph. Their glares are pitiless, their thirst for vengeance evident as it approaches.

Kushites onboard the Calypso seem to know it, for a name comes from their lips, with no shortage of fear and surprise: "It is the Bahari! King Odaka's galley!"

From its positioning as it nears the Calypso, the Bahari intends to ram the Calypso!

Standing near the prow is a huge man clad in a leopard-skin loincloth and cloak of sky-blue, directing the vessel forward. A long-bladed tulwar is in his hand and something about him indicates that this can be none other than the ship's captain, this king they call Odaka.

The shout goes out: "Brace for impact!"

There are two combat rounds before the Bahari's rammed prow smashes into the *Calypso*. Some pirates throw themselves to the deck rather than be knocked down. Others attempt to secure handholds against the collision. Shouts of dismay surround them. The gamemaster should ask the player characters what they intend to do if they are free to act. They can attack, but their actions are unlikely to have any effect upon what happens next. If any of them target King Odaka, he is sheltered enough by the prow of the Bahari that arrows glance off it harmlessly.


The gamemaster should read or paraphrase the following to the player characters:

The impact occurs with a mix of rapidity and slowness, as if time were at bay for a moment, then released all at once. The Bahari grows so close that you can make out the features of its crew who stand ready for the crash. Her oars have been drawn and momentum sends her forward. Time seems to eddy like a low river, and then suddenly, there is a flurry of movement and sound all at once as time rushes back, flooding you at once with sensation.

The sound is the loudest you have ever heard, as the two ships crash together at an angle. The Calypso's oars shatter as the Black Corsair's galley passes over them, and her hull crunches as the Bahari strikes it with timber-shattering force. The dinghy, caught between the ships, is broken almost into splinters and disappears in a shower of wood fragments. Men from both ships are thrown from rigging, bowled across the deck as if toys being tossed aside by angry children.

But that is not the worst of what happens. Shaken terribly by the collision, the mainmast of the Calypso groans and creaks, and with a tremendous shriek of wood coming asunder, the thick beam lolls and breaks free of its seating, shattering the deck around it as it falls, cutting through the deck as it goes.

Rigging whips across the deck, catching men in its wake as it falls across the deck of the Calypso and onto the Stygian galley. More terrified screams fill the air as slaves and crewmen alike are crushed beneath the weight of the mast, and it slowly grinds across the hull of the galley before sliding into the sea, trailing a shroud of sailcloth and dangling lines that whip and snap as they separate and follow.

The player characters must make Daunting (D3) Acrobatics or Athletics tests, modified by whatever precautions they took, to avoid being thrown to the deck and taking 3  damage. On a Complication, the player character is thrown overboard. It should be assumed that Gaal-Arvad, Nimaku, Semerkhet, and M'wangele are all thrown about but do not go into the drink.

From belowdecks emerges Sarayene, and she beckons at the sky, her voice uttering a chant that, though indecipherable, hurts the mind and ears. The fog that enshrouds both vessels churns and darkens. Then, wind pelts both ships, followed by a torrent of rain which crashes into all with staggering force. Everyone falls back at this sudden turn of fortune.

Thunder booms with an immediate crash as a jagged flare of lightning flashes into blinding existence, striking the hull of the Bahari and sending several Black Corsairs falling away, killed instantly. A cry of dismay emerges from their own number and, evaluating the situation, the galley's captain orders a retreat.

Some of the pirates engage the Black Corsairs, but they are clearly at a disadvantage. The Black Corsairs, however, do not press their clear superiority, and use their spears primarily to keep the pirates at bay while some of their number push against the hull of the *Calypso* with poles to separate the two ships.

The player characters can take part in this skirmishing if they desire, or opportunistically seek to turn against the crew of the *Calypso*, but they are not provided with the chance to go from one ship to the other.

NAVAL COMBAT

If desired, the gamemaster can use the rules for naval combat from *Conan the Pirate* to play this encounter out in greater detail, though it is not necessary. The purpose of the ship clash is not to determine its outcome, but to ultimately cripple the *Calypso* in preparation for the next sequence of events in the campaign, and to have the *Bahari* exit to remain a plot element for later in the campaign.

The *Bahari*, her captain, and her crew are described in additional detail on page 176. Though the *Calypso* and *Bahari* are both quite different in configuration, they are both galleys — the *Bahari* a war galley fitted with a bronze ram (*Conan the Pirate*, page 111).

King Odaka, from his position at the prow of his galley, gives a shout, and her rearmost rowers push back, withdrawing the *Bahari* from the great wound it has dealt the *Calypso*. Her Black Corsairs launch another barrage of arrows — make appropriate Parry tests to avoid being struck as before. Any attacks against them can draw blood and may even cause fatalities, but does not affect their retreat.

The Black Corsair vessel pulls away and soon retreats into the fog again, with a chant of “*Odaka! Nyoka-Bahari! Odaka! Nyoka-Bahari!*” mixed with the drums, until the ship vanishes into the midst. Eventually, its sound is lost and the *Calypso* is alone to the sounds of its own miseries.

The rain lessens, but thunder continues to flash in the fog. Seemingly guiding it, Sarayene sways as wind whips her sheer black gown about her lithe form, one arm pulling heaven’s wrath from the storm itself and the other directing it to her enemies.

M’wangele, sprawled in an ungainly pile upon the deck, sits up and chuckles to himself, as the groans of the dying surround him. Shouts from Captain Gaal-Arvad are echoed to the crew to scramble and begin making repairs as quickly as possible before the *Calypso* sinks in the dark ocean.

Sarayene, having cast the great magic, collapses all at once. In a moment, the thunder and storm abate, and the

fog thins, leaving the *Calypso* alone on the water, with no sign of the *Bahari*.

Semerkheth helps Sarayene to her feet. She exchanges a glance with her captain and then goes belowdecks to recover. M’wangele is taken back belowdecks and chained once more in the hold. If the player characters acted even nominally in defense of the *Calypso*, they are told that they are to remain in the hold, but will not be chained any longer, and that bedding is to be provided them. They can keep their weapons but are not to act against the crew.

If they resisted or were otherwise passive about defending the ship, they are returned in chains to the hold, as before.

SCENE V: ADRIFT ON STRANGE TIDES

What do the player characters do from here? Depending on their behavior before the conflict, they may have their freedom, at least temporarily. Semerkheth will not make a move against them, though he is not happy about them being armed and free.

The starboard fore hull has taken considerable damage from the impact, and below-decks pirates and slaves scramble to bail water as it fills the bilge (the part of the hull below the waterline).

As for the immediate predicament, the *Calypso* is not seaworthy, and there is a scramble to assess damages and attempt shipboard repairs. If the player characters have any skill with Sailing or Craft, the *Calypso* is in dire need of their aid and it will be welcomed by the captain and other crew. The first order of business is to stem any leaking from the hull breach, the second to free the mainmast from the hull and secure it on the main deck. The amount of damage it caused belowdecks is considerable and it cannot be re-seated without bringing the ship ashore. Repairs are considerable and will take several days at least.

If any of the player characters are unsuited for shipboard work, they are either asked to tend wounds (for those with ranks in Healing) or given the grim task of gathering the dead, tying them up in sailcloth shrouds with stones near their feet to weigh them down. A short prayer from the captain and they are shoved overboard, their corpses sent along as offerings to the watery lair of Dagon and his consort, Derketo (the Kushites call her Derketa). Dead rowing slaves, of which there are many, are merely shoved overboard and left to drift away.

After this, the crew is angry at their losses and slightly bewildered at the course of events. They are wary against the looming threat of the Black Corsair galley, as they are not eager to wage such a terrible fight again. Pirates

prey on merchant vessels or coastal towns, not warships from the Black Coast. Distrust is emerging between the Shemite and Kushite pirates, as it is evident that some of the Kushites know the name Odaka and hold him in some reverence.

A short while after the bodies are consigned to the deep, ominous grey fins slice the water's surface. Sharks have scented blood, and the scene of the fierce predators ripping into the bodies of the drifting slain is horrible to behold. With the rough violence of the earlier events of the day, this is a ghastly reminder of the mortality looming above the heads of all aboard.

The wind Sarayene summoned with her sorcery does not return, and the surface of the Western Sea remains placid. Before too long, the skies darken with night, and the *Calypso* drifts upon a dark and seemingly infinite sea.

EVENTS WHILE STRANDED

The gamemaster can introduce several additional events during the day of the repairs and the first night while stranded, instilling a sense of panic in the player characters and the rest onboard the *Calypso*. Following are suggestions to break up the monotony of what will be a few days of hard work.

King of the Black Corsairs

Asking any of the Kushites about Odaka is immediately met with suspicion, but a successful Average (D1) Persuade roll gets them to reveal that he's a famous Kushite adventurer who waged many battles against the Stygians, the Shemites, and slavers in particular. He claimed a land of his own in the Black Kingdoms, and his ship, the *Bahari*, is famous up and down the Southern coast. Why he would be so far from the coast and what he wants with the *Calypso* is a mystery.

Asking M'wangele about him yields a bit more. Odaka is the king of the Makonde tribe of coastal Kush, M'wangele's own tribe. He is both surprised and pleased if it is him whom Odaka has come for, but perhaps the king thought he was captured rather than surrendering. Despite this, Odaka holds no love for Shemite pirate ships, nor slavers, and he is especially wrathful for Kushites who prey upon their own people.

Knives of the Deep

Perhaps a pirate (or one of the player characters) is in the water alongside the *Calypso*, making repairs, when a shark is spotted, moving rapidly towards them. Do they fight or try to scramble aboard? The latter will take time they may not have! Alternately, the shark can menace a pirate working with the player character. The pirate shouts for help, and the player character in the water must make a

difficult choice: save themselves, rescue the man, or listen to the pirate die terribly. If desired as an encounter, sharks are described in *Conan the Pirate* (page 75). Otherwise, the shark can merely act as a force of nature.

Shipboard Encounters

The player characters, should they wish to make allies among the crew, are able to do so with successful Persuade, Insight, or other appropriate skills. It might be also that one or more pirates lost a friend to the player characters, perhaps due to events at Baruch's estate, and they may choose to take out their vengeance, cornering them below-decks or in a cargo hold. Or it may be overt, in the form of an open challenge to combat, unarmed or beweaponed. If this occurs, crowd the hall or choke off access to the scene of the fight and choose a champion from one of their own.

SCENE VI: NO HONOR AMONG THIEVES

On the second night, the player characters are summoned to the deck of the *Calypso*.

Morale is low, so earlier that evening, the captain ordered double rations for all, and broke out several casks of strong Argossean wine, to the raucous applause of the crew. Crew spirits were enlivened somewhat by the extra food and drink, and some of the pirates even danced and sang various sea-chanteys, drumming their feet upon the deck in simple rhythms. Gaal-Arvad watched them from the foredeck, his dark eyes glittering and a curious smile upon his face. As always, Sarayene was at his side, her fingers playfully stroking his beard and curled black hair.

It has become clear there is great tension between the captain, the crew, and their Stygian patron. This has now come to a head, as the player characters see when they reach the deck (either in chains or of their own accord).

A circle of torches illuminates the deck, and the pirates crowd one another, their current animosity lost in the babble of curiosity. Gaal-Arvad stands smiling, his arms akimbo, and Sarayene stands languidly nearby, her eyes unfathomable.

Two pirates drag someone forward with a woolen sack over his head. It is pulled off to reveal the tousled visage of Semerkhet, cursing in Stygian, his arms tied behind his back. He hisses at the captain in Shemitish.

"What is this betrayal?"

In response to this, a cacophony of hoots and shouts from the pirate crew are echoed by boots and bare feet thumping on the deck. None know what is to happen, but

all are happy to see the Stygian in chains. He thrashes, and cutlass blades thrust towards him, keeping him in place.

A pirate pushes up next to the captain, placing something in his hand.

Captain Gaal-Arvad waves the crew down, silencing them.

"My crew," he shouts. "We have suffered plenty, but it will be worth it in the end. This Stygian dog has led us across the Western Sea on his own errand, but we are no lackeys. He has not been forthright with us... have you now?" (the latter directed at Semerkhet)

"The place we are going will make legends of us! There is wealth beyond measure ahead! You've heard of the Treasure of Black Tranicos, aye? The king of pirates!?!? There is much you do not know about the tale. Bloody Tranicos did not find all the jewels of Khemi when he left Tothmekri's island. No indeed. Tothmekri looted the entire treasure of Khemi... a handful of ships laden with jewels, gold, finery... when he left Stygia. Legend has it that Tranicos took back only one ship's worth, and never returned. That leaves enough treasure remaining to make pirate kings of all of us!"

Some of the pirates ask how the captain knows, and he gestures again to quell their doubt.

If the real Eye was stolen by the hell-harpy in the prior adventure, this could either be the false copy. If both are unavailable, rephrase his speech to emphasize the map more than the treasure.

The captain unwraps the cloth in his hand, revealing the Eye of Acheron. He holds it at arm's length overhead, so all can see it. All go quiet. Semerkhet snarls at this and thrashes around, but the threat of death keeps him still.

This dread artifact has led them across this nameless sea — it coruscates with some inner light, the facets catching torch and moonlight and casting it back, awash across the faces of all on the deck.

He then holds up the cloth the Eye was wrapped in, revealing it to be a map, covered in writing in Stygian. "And here we have our way to find it!"

"Is this the proof you need, then?" bellows Gaal-Arvad "Is this not worth the risks we take?", he shouts again, his voice thundering above the din of the unquiet crew. "It is for treasure such as this that we sail! Treasure such as this will make kings of us all!"

A different dream flickers through the mind of each pirate there, fueled by fierce thoughts of handfuls of gems and fountains of gold. The legends of the wealth of Khemi and Bloody Tranicos are known to all pirates, and the thought of a similar hoard rallies the pirates to unity. Smiles break across faces and cheering begins.

Over his protests, Semerkhet is taken below decks, likely to face the same indignity the player characters did when they were brought onboard.

The captain turns to his weather-witch and bids her: "And can you get us there?" he asks.

She smiles for the first time in days.

"Aye, my captain and my love. There will be wind."

A roar erupts from the crew, stamping and shouting in savage greed and glee.

Later, if the player characters attempt to examine the map, they need to succeed in a Daunting (D3) Persuade test to convince Gaal-Arvad to show it, modified by whatever their current situation is. If they ply him with drinks, he might be more willing to talk. It is identical to the map in Baruch's villa (see page 85), though slightly more accurate.

Ominously, though, is the emblem of a serpent wrapped about the island, a large and staring eye within its open mouth. Perhaps it is merely a slightly fanciful, if sinister, decorative element?

AMIDST STORM-TOSSED FURY

Several hours after, however the euphoria of that night and dreams of avarice come to a sudden and abrupt halt as a massive storm hits the *Calypso*, a rushing wall of darkness lit from below by spikes of lightning. Howling, hurricane winds rock the wounded vessel, and the waves it sits upon become choppy, rising and falling savagely.

At once, preparations are made for survival; hatches are battened down; sails stored; the deck cleared of loose items; the makeshift repairs to the hull reinforced as best can be done in the short time allowed.

With an ominous rumble, the storm smashes into the *Calypso*, the vessel frail before its wrath, battered and limping already. The hull creaks in a hundred places as it is tested by wave and wind, and water sluices across the deck, finding many paths in.

This tempest is greater than any of you have experienced. The *Calypso* offers no comfort, and pirates brace the patched hull from within, bailing bilge at speed, though the effort seems for naught as the hull fills inexorably with dark water.

Similarly, rowing is of little avail. Slaves pull upon them, but the waves jerk oars from hands, snapping them back with bone-crushing force. In moments, the oars are withdrawn and all onboard the *Calypso* huddle and wait for the storm's fury to abate.

Any player character foolish enough to venture above-deck must make a successful Daunting (D3) test or immediately go sprawling and sliding across the deck. As the waves increase in force, the test increases to Dire (D4), and then at times Epic (D5). Failing this test sends someone onto the deck, soaked and sore. A Complication puts them into the water, likely to drown in darkness.

Anyone on deck witnesses the following:

The captain and the helmsman are lashed to their posts, with a few others using ropes tied about their waists as they scramble across the deck to attempt to steer the ship. They bellow at one another just to be heard, though they stand only yards apart. When Gaal-Arvad sees you, he gestures for you to return to below-deck, and then points ahead at the prow of the vessel.

Sarayene stands at the prow just behind the figurehead, rocking as if one with the ship, her supple white form swaying as if a reed, her billowing about her head, golden ornaments her only garments, as her samite shift billows loose in her clenched fist, a silver dagger in her other hand. She is shouting something into the storm, but it cannot be heard. She draws the dagger's bright edge across her white wrist. Red flows freely and she holds her wound over the head of the carved wooden maiden upon her prow. Blood drops down its carven hair and is splashed into the sea.

THE HYBORIAN ROLLERCOASTER

The ending of this section of the adventure is a jackhammer assault on the senses, collision to betrayal to shipwreck all in a brief span of time, with only a brief lull between for the characters (and their players) to catch their breath.

The player characters may feel that they are amid forces beyond their control, a natural sensation given the circumstances. Reassure the players that they will soon become masters of their own fates shortly enough, and that even Conan suffered from forces beyond his ability to wrestle.

It is in the face of inescapable destiny that heroism is fastest forged, and the combination of shipwreck and storm have re-set the board.

A moment later, her chant grows in fervor, her voice raw and broken. Her god has not heard her plaintive cries. Another, more sinister force is at work. The storm roils above and about the Calypso, great black tendrils of cumulus shifting as if the shrugging of some ancient, batrachian horror from the epoch before history, before even the forefathers of mankind crawled from primal slime.



The storm pulses, almost with some primal force, and then, for the briefest of moments, an eye seems to open in it, a portal to some vision of profound and primeval chaos.

Any player characters who see this must make a successful Daunting (D3) Discipline test. Failure yields 4 mental damage with the Stun Quality.

The storm is unnatural and the vision it imparts to those on the *Calypso* is one of unimaginable chaos, the howling primordial gulf that dwells beyond the thin veneer of the world, where vast, cyclopean beings of ancient evil stir as they near the dark moment they will wake, rise, and devour the world.

A second later, Sarayene looks back at the captain, terror evident in her wild-eyed gaze. Her mind has broken. Though a moment ago she seemed to sway out of balance, out of syncopation with the Calypso, and she does not even see the mighty wave that sweeps her from the prow. Where she stood is suddenly, shockingly empty.

Gaal-Arvad shouts, though in the storm his anguish is lost.

If a player character is stunned, they collapse on the deck and are hauled to safety by pirates.

At this, the full weight of the storm hits the Calypso, and it is certain to be destroyed. It is as if a great tendril of storm and wind reaches out for any on deck, trying to pull them into the stormy deep. Mere rope is no match for the elemental force of the hurricane, and even those tied fast are pulled away.

In the holds below deck, pirates utter a litany of prayers to a veritable pantheon, naming Bel, Ishtar and her celestial handmaiden Ashtoreth, Pteor, Anu, Derketo, and more, even cries of mercy to fearsome Damballah and to Dagon. However, words falter in the face of the squall and go unheard amidst the violence of the living sea.

THE DEATH OF THE CALYPSO

The gamemaster should read or paraphrase the following section to the player characters:

Suddenly there is a great pitch, as if the Calypso hits a swell greater than any previous, and when the prow of the ship comes down, it is with the force of a thunderbolt, an immense crashing that nearly deafens all onboard. The ship shakes as if dropped from on high, and both pirates and slaves alike shout in pain and fear as the hull of the vessel splits and the cold water rushes inwards from all angles, dousing lamps instantly. The ship has struck something, its hull has shattered and broken, and in an instant of jumbled vision, you see wet and jagged stone, almost like an axe-blade, shearing through the bulkhead and severing the ship in twain.

You have only a moment before the water closes around you and you are left only with whatever breath you can hold!

The player characters should attempt to make Daunting (D3) Athletics tests to get free from the hull of the *Calypso* and to the surface before drowning. They are joined in a

... AND A CAST OF THOUSANDS HUNDREDS DOZENS

A gamemaster dismayed with the large cast of non-player characters in this chapter should revel in this opportunity to winnow the cast to a more manageable size. A horrible catastrophe like a shipwreck is a spectacular device to kill a swath of nonessential characters at once. Of the crew of the *Calypso*, only Semerkhet and M'wangele are required for future chapters.

However, the gamemaster shouldn't go too far overboard in ridding the slate of bothersome non-player characters. Having rival power blocs amongst the pirate and slave Kushites and the Shemites presents a well of opportunity to form alliances and play one group against another, as well as establishing a roster of easily slain non-player characters for dramatic emphasis.

It can be immensely satisfying for the player characters to outwit, outfight and gain revenge on those who have wronged them, particularly the pirate crew. Non-player characters can also arrive later at any point in this or the next two chapters, when others have been slain, just arrived on the island or only finding their way to the action.

It is recommended to whittle the non-player characters down to a far more manageable group for each faction, but not to eliminate any single faction altogether. The wild card are the former slaves. Odaka's Kushites are far more likely to sympathize with them than with their captors.

pell-mell rush of others, slaves and pirates all, scrambling for freedom like the black rats that infest the vessel. Success allows them to free themselves through their own strength, while failure keeps them trapped below the decks in the rapidly collapsing bulkhead of the pirate ship. At this point, virtually all the compartments of the *Calypso* are flooding.

Read or paraphrase the following to any player characters who remain trapped below-deck or are in the process of rescuing another.

The occasional flash of lightning shines brightly through the holes in the hull, revealing a surreal range of vision as the contents and crew of the Calypso swirl about you in the water. The dead show blank expressions, and their limbs move lazily with the current eddying through the hold, and all manner of small items drift in your view.

With a start, you see movement from a corner of your vision, and turn to behold pale forms swimming towards you! One grows near. It is a human, grasping your arm and pulling. He turns his face towards yours, allowing you to see his features clearly. You almost lose your breath as a strobe of lightning from above gives you a clear view of his face, and for a moment you think he is not human, eyes black and features curiously smooth.

Others of his ilk seem to fill the waters around the wreck of the Calypso, and you see their pale forms darting, shark-like, around the floating survivors. You blink against this uncanny sight, and then your vision darkens, and then brightens once more until you can no longer see the waters, the wreck, or the storm-ravaged skies above.

The movement of the waves seems to lull you almost hypnotically, and you are drawn away, as if by unseen tides. Where will you awaken next?

OUTCOMES

This chapter should end with the player characters, Semerkhet, M'wangele, and the pirate crew and slaves all on the mysterious island, their numbers scattered. Many events with variable outcomes have occurred in this chapter, but the most important element is that everyone is on the island and that there are enough non-player characters to present some challenges and factionality.

EXPERIENCE

Though the player characters have spent much of this chapter in captivity, there are nonetheless many means for adventure. Between their interaction with Semerkhet, the ventures into the dream world of the River of Souls, and the opportunities on the ship, the player characters have had a lot to do. Award each 300 experience points, with 100 more for exceptional roleplaying and problem-solving. As with prior chapters, the opportunities for developing new talents and expanding beyond the avenues presented onboard the *Calypso* should limit the way experience points are spent, however.



BOOK TWO : CHAPTER 5

CRIMSON JEWELS IN THE DUSK

What dreams had they that shaped these uncouth things?

Before these gods what victims bled and died?

What purple galleys swept along the strand

That bore the tribute of what dim sea-kings?

But now, they reign o'er a forgotten land,

Gazing forever out beyond the tide.

— “Easter Island”, Robert E. Howard

OVERVIEW

The player characters are now on the island of Tothmekri, the very place their captors were attempting to reach. Like the player characters, other survivors were rescued by the strange half-men denizens of the island. These creatures have now fled into the jungle and to their warrens below the earth, leaving the human survivors on the beach disoriented and uncertain as to their location.

There are now three distinct factions of survivors; the player characters; the pirates; and the now-free rowing slaves. Gaal-Arvad has survived, and still has the Eye of Acheron. Semerkhet has survived as well, and is in hiding, waiting to see how things play out. M'wangele, as well, is seemingly missing.

The island contains many strange wonders and evidence suggests it is inhabited, though its denizens remain aloof and unseen. The highest priorities are likely to be exploration, finding food and drinkable water, or some combination of those two things.

The first night on the island is filled with commotion, as the island's denizens creep into the camps of the sleeping castaways and abduct some of them, slaying them in terrible and silent fashion, leaving their bodies where they will be found to strike fear into the hearts of their allies. One of those captured is Gaal-Arvad, and the Eye is taken by them and returned to its place in their treasury.

Attempts at tracking the Eye lead the player characters to an ancient fortress hidden in a cove on the other side of the island. Ships of old Stygian making stand at the ready. Guards on the walls there bear Stygian arms and armor. Without sufficient number or siege equipment, it is near-impossible to siege the fortress, and the player characters should find themselves stymied at this point.

Sight of a fire upon the beach leads them back to find Semerkhet waiting for them. The Stygian offers an alliance with the player characters, claiming that he is their only chance at freedom. He knows the old secrets of Tothmekri's fortress and can get them inside, to retrieve the Eye and perhaps a means by which they can find their way home once more.

Do they dare trust him?

ADVENTURE HOOKS

It is a challenge to integrate just any new player character into the flow of events at this point if a new player wishes to join or a previous player character has been killed. The newcomer could be drawn from the ranks of the freed rowing slaves, one of the pirates, or perhaps having had an abject change of heart and throwing their lot in with the player characters.

SCENE I: DOWN THE RIVER

The player characters awaken in the Acheronian afterworld again, transitioning from drowning in the storm-tossed night in the Western Sea to the placid, slow-moving River of Souls within the mountainside, within a seemingly endless underworld voyage.

Read or summarize the following to the player characters:

You have been on this River of Souls for hours — or has it been days? It is difficult to tell. The darkness is impassive, lit only by rows of torches that sputter to either side of you, set into the walls, burning ceaselessly, never seeming to lessen or go out.

The current bears you along inexorably, with only minimal effort from the barge's steering poles or rudder required to keep you from colliding with the walls of the tunnel. The passage is not straight, and thus only the torches before and after you are visible in the darkness, and you have seen no signs of a place to put to shore. Just walls and small flickering bits of flame.

If they chose to pull a torch from the wall during their passage, there is no resistance. The torch is nearly

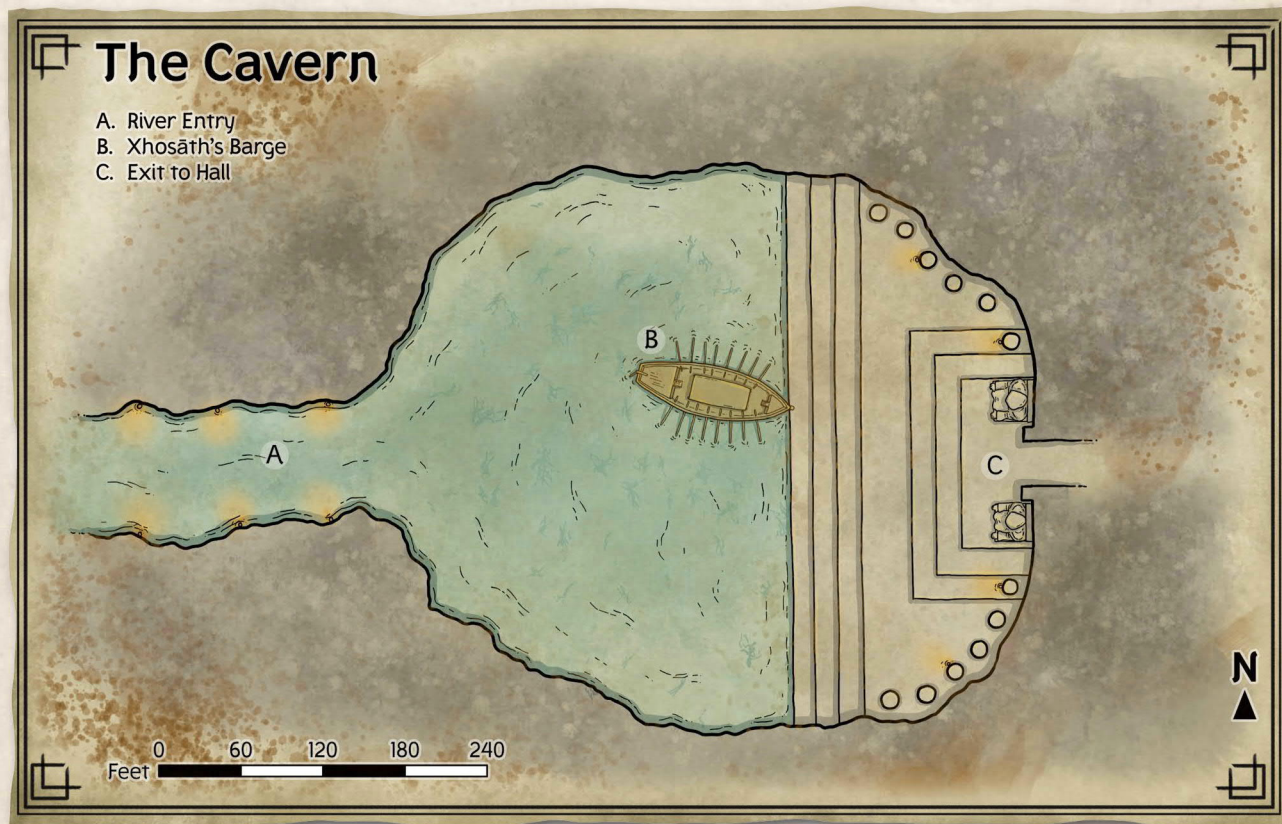
the length of a man's arm and consists of reeds bound together with woven loops of other reeds, common as any found in the mortal world. Thrusting one into the water extinguishes it, but despite how long it burns, it does not seem to diminish in length. It gives off a suitable amount of warmth for a normal torch.

Thyra, here with them again, is subdued. She can say little of what has happened to her, as she has been in a lotus-induced state since she was taken away. She remembers, however, the terrifying flight over the lands

Next, the voyage seems to be coming to an end.

And then the barge rounds a corner... and you see it all at once, a vast cavern yawning before you, lit from above by some strange light that apparently cuts through the entire mountain. Its far wall is carved into the living rock and stands several stories high. The tunnel and river end at the base of wide stairs at its foot, the water's ultimate destination a mystery. Where does it go from here?

Immensely tall statues of seated humans loom to either side of a dark doorway in the wall. Hooded, their features are lost in shadow, and they stand as if in judgment. All is made of pale stone, standing in contrast to the dark rock of the walls of the cavern you have passed through.



Most notable, however, a barge is already there, the decks empty and apparently abandoned. Its hull scrapes against the stone stairs slowly with the current. This is the vessel you have followed along the River of Souls, that which bears the Acheronian sorcerer and his princely captive.

Your barge enters this cavern slowly, borne by the currents.

You feel your journey in this world is nearing its end.

THE THING IN THE DEEP

An Average (D1) Observation test causes the adventurers to notice something horrific. The dark waters beneath the barge are filled with murky shapes, pale and moving slightly. Looking carefully reveals that they are human bodies, men and women, pale and drifting, seemingly without life, several yards beneath the water's surface. They are clad in the garments appropriate to noble households, but those of servants, retainers, and guards. Perhaps they were left here behind when their masters reached this final portal?

One turns and its eyes are blank, its expression agape. Perhaps they were always there, but now they are made visible by the light shining overhead. They give no indication of any movement on their own but continue to undulate as if guided by currents unseen. In the real world this would cause some sort of horror or distress, but here it all seems vaguely unreal and does not require a Fear test.

However, something dark, a large and sinuous form nearly the length of the barge itself, swims through the corpses. It approaches rapidly and the bodies part as it pushes through them effortlessly. The player characters have a single round to either make a Daunting (D3) Sailing test to get the barge to the steps or it will be upon them in the water.

If they make it to the steps, the thing emerges in the next round and attacks immediately. If they do not make it to the steps, it tries to clamber onto the barge where it sits in the water, seeking to capsize it where it can pick off the player characters one-by-one.

Either way, its shape becomes obvious as it emerges from the water, a huge, black crocodile, its eyes yellow and gleaming with savage intent. Its jaws gape wide, revealing dagger-sized white teeth, and it moves to attack!



GIANT CROCODILE (NEMESIS)

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 8 | 4 | 6 | 8 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 7 | 13(1) | 3 | |



FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| Combat | Movement |
|-----------|----------|
| 2 | 1 |
| Fortitude | Senses |
| 2 | 1 |
| Knowledge | Social |
| — | — |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 14, Resolve 8
- **Soak:** Armor 3 (Tough Hide), Courage —

ATTACKS

- **Snapping Jaw (M):** Reach 2, 6 , Grappling, Unforgiving 2
- **Tail Slam (M):** Reach 2, 6 , Knockdown, Stun (cannot make this attack against a grabbed target)

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Aquatic:** This creature can hold its breath for up to thirty minutes before requiring a Fortitude test.
- **Ambush Predator:** It gains 2 bonus Momentum on Movement tests when in water. Further, it reduces the cost of the Interrupt Doom spend by 1 when it begins its turn hidden and submerged beneath a body of water.
- **Drowning:** When in water, if it successfully grabs its prey, the grabbed creature will begin to drown. See the **Conan** corebook, page 127, for details on drowning. This is in addition to any damage the creature inflicts on its grabbed enemy.
- **Inhuman Brawn 1**
- **Sluggish Gait:** It cannot take the Sprint Action outside of the water.

The creature fights to the death, attempting to pull adventurers under the river's surface and killing them there, but using its immense bulk on the steps to deadly effect. See page 140 in the event a player character is slain here.

Fighting on one's knees upon the steps adds one level of Difficulty to any movement-based tests (including any combat actions involving running or stepping forward). In the water, the player characters must make Average (D1) Athletics tests to swim successfully and fight at the same time, and only thrusting-type hand weapons (daggers, short swords, spears, etc.) are of any use. Each point of armor a



player character is wearing of metal armor increases the Difficulty of the swimming test by one level of Difficulty.

When it is slain, the crocodile horror slides down the steps or vanishes beneath the water. The gods of the Hall of the Dead will bring it back to life at a later juncture, but it does not trouble the player characters any further.

As they see it go, a curious sight awaits them. At the base of the stair where it goes into the water, a long, black, and straight piece of wood clacks against the steps again and again as it drifts back and forth with the current. Examining it reveals it to be a long staff, more than a yard in length, its shaft carved with strange, indecipherable runic markings. One end tapers, almost to a point, and the other is carved into some sort of catlike head, though of no breed known of by any of the player characters. If any of the player characters pick it up, it is of hard wood, almost like iron, but weighs surprisingly little. As they do examine it, the player character holding it hears a cackle as if from the wind. It is the voice of the strange Kushite magician, M'wangele. It has a strange feeling, this staff, a thing of power that may yet have potency even in this strange world.

The cat-headed staff and its properties are described further on page 169.

The shadow-haunted, high-arched doors of the Hall of the Dead loom before the player characters. Dare they enter?

SCENE II: AWAKE AND ALIVE

The player characters awaken on an island, barely recovered from the trauma of the *Calypso's* shipwreck. There is no sign of the strange people that pulled them out of the wreckage. Read or summarize the following to the player characters:

*You awaken on the bright white sand of the beach. Surrounding you is a constellation of pieces of broken wood and flotsam from the *Calypso*, and off in the distance a large piece of the hull is visible amidst a jagged row of stony teeth.*

Over the splashing of waves on the shore and bird-cries rise the groans of other survivors, scattered hundreds of feet along the length of the shore. Some stand upright, others are seated, while others lie still, unconscious or dead.

All seem dazed and incoherent in the wake of the disaster you have all survived.



Taking stock of the situation reveals the following information:

- Among the missing is Semerkhet. If any player character asks after him, they will learn that no one has seen him.
- The Eye of Acheron is missing. If any of the player characters try to sense its location and make a successful Average (D1) Sorcery test they realize that it's within a couple of miles of them, and an Average (D1) Survival test points out that it's to the south.
- Any weapons that were sheathed are still in their sheaths, and anything in pouches or otherwise secured is safe and has not been lost. There should be enough in the way of weapons in the sheaths of the dead, though, that anyone can find any hand weapon or improvised club easily enough. Bows on the other hand are not that easy to find.
- On the beach are a few, some, or many other survivors from the shipwreck, their nature at the gamemaster's discretion. There are many bodies of pirates and rowing slaves alike.

The beach is described fully in the section titled **The Beach** (page 129). As the player characters regain their bearings and assess the situation, they hear shouts coming from within the forest, within a hundred feet of where they stand.

RED-HANDED VENGEANCE

If they go to investigate, they see two slaves being shouted at by a Shemitish pirate (perhaps Lamech, if he survived), brandishing a cutlass at them. He is yelling at them to rejoin the others, and not to flee into the woods. Just because the *Calypso* has sunk, they are not free men. When he sees the player characters, he turns to them for support, expecting them to join him in rounding up escaped slaves. As he does so, another couple of rowing slaves come from the beach to investigate the noise, followed by a Kushite pirate. One slave holds a rock, the other a short axe.

What do the player characters do? Uninterrupted, this confrontation escalates rapidly. It is easy to see the lines being drawn here; the rowing slaves bear no love for the Shemites or the Kushite pirates. Life on a remote, seemingly empty island is better than being forced to row a ship, and they have little time to plan a response. The player characters are the only group not represented in this direct cycle of hatred and retaliation, and thus are the wild cards.

If the player characters do nothing, the fight immediately turns bloody.

Depending on how they want to handle things, they might be able to talk either party down with a successful Challenging (D2) Persuade or Command test, or even Melee if they choose to stop a fight once it has begun. The player characters are free to choose whatever group their sympathies lie with, though word spreads quickly about their intervention or non-intervention in this initial skirmish.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

Chapter 5: Crimson Jewels in the Dusk has a much smaller cast, with simpler goals:

- GAAL-ARVAD: Now shipwrecked, he is distraught and mourning his ship and his lost love.
- NIMAKU: Maybe he's alive? Maybe not.
- SEMERKHET: He wants the player characters to cooperate and be betrayed like good pawns.
- PIRATES OF THE CALYPSO: They've fallen to factionalism, along both racial lines and those in support of the captain and those who are angry at him for leading them to the island. They want to escape and with the gold they were promised.
- FORMER CALYPSO ROWING SLAVES: They would like to stay free and be left alone, ideally to find a means of returning to their homelands.
- M'WANGELE: Now waiting the delivery of a magic staff.
- ODAKA: He's looking for M'wangele somewhere on the island.
- THE ISLAND'S MYSTERIOUS DENIZENS: These strange folk strike in darkness and watch, learning who dares intrude upon their island.



SCENE III: SURVIVAL AND EXPLORATION

This section of the adventure can be as long or as short as required, with a bit of exploration, negotiation, hunting, or scavenging for food and drink, or even playing rival factions against one another. Unlike prior chapters, there is a much more open, 'sandbox' element to this chapter, where the player characters are assumed to explore and guide themselves.

The gamemaster should anticipate that this sequence is freeform by design. The player characters have been cooped up for long enough in a ship, so it is time for them to reclaim their own freedom of choice. There are only a few obvious choices about what to do next.

The player characters are likely to want to learn more about the environment they are trapped in. Skills that they may utilize in doing so include the following:

- **Athletics:** Swimming out to the wreck of the *Calypso* and looking for valuables or necessary items; climbing tall trees to get a better vantage point; etc.
- **Command:** Getting survivors to work together; etc.
- **Craft:** Making improvised weapons and shelter; etc.
- **Observation:** Scouting and learning more about the island and its features; searching for weapons and armor; etc.

- **Persuade:** Convincing survivors not to kill one another; etc.
- **Stealth:** Sneaking around; ambushing other survivors; etc.
- **Survival:** Finding edible plants and drinkable water; identifying healing herbs; finding shelter; tracking humans and animals on the island; etc.
- **Warfare:** Building traps to stop any intruders; securing shelter against intruders; group tactics; etc.

CIRCLING THE ISLAND

Common sense might dictate establishing the size and geography of the island by circumnavigating it, rather than merely plunging inland. This is sensible, though areas of the coastline are less accessible than the beach. The island's coastline is rocky in places, some of it composed of sheer cliffsides with crashing water at the base, difficult to scale.

As the map does not go into the level of detail required for such exploration, the gamemaster should roll 1d20 and consult the following chart each ten minutes of walking, to determine the next shift in shoreline terrain. Some map locales (such as the Emerald Cove) specify a particular type of terrain and should override the d20 roll. Movement rate should be adjusted based on the terrain the player characters pass through, and the gamemaster may introduce hazardous terrain as in the *Conan* corebook, pages 111–112.

ISLAND MOVEMENT

| Roll | Terrain Encountered | Modifiers |
|-------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | Grassy and Firm Ground | Normal movement rate. |
| 2–5 | Firm Beach | Movement speed halved normal walking speed. |
| 6–9 | Wet Beach | Movement speed slowed to a quarter normal walking speed. |
| 10–11 | As Prior Roll (or Beach) | As prior roll, or as beach (pick one type). |
| 12–13 | Jungle | Movement speed slowed to a quarter normal walking speed. |
| 14–15 | Rocky Terrain | Movement speed halved normal walking speed. |
| 16–17 | Very Rocky Terrain | Movement speed halved, must make Simple Acrobatic (Do) tests to remain standing. |
| 18–19 | Difficult Terrain | Obstacles must be overcome with a successful Average (D1) Athletics test or backtrack, circle around and roll again. |
| 20 | Dead End | Cliffside or impassable terrain, must backtrack, circle around and roll again. |

ENCOUNTERS ON THE ISLAND

As the player characters make their way across the island, the gamemaster should periodically call for Simple (D1) Survival tests to see if they encounter any of the other castaways or any wild animals. A roll of a Complication means that they may even run into a native of the island or see some undeniable sign of their presence (see **The Masters of the Island**, below).

At opportune times, however, the gamemaster should introduce each of the following encounters, in this exact order:

- Sighting of the *Bahari* off the shore (see page 138).
- Finding M'wangele (page 138)
- Encountering Odaka and his crew (see page 139)
- Encountering Semerkhet (page 140)

Native Creatures

As the player characters explore the island, they might encounter any of a variety of creatures, brought forth from the **Conan** corebook or additional **Conan** sourcebooks, particularly **Horrors of the Hyborian Age**. The **Conan** corebook lists wise old birds, rat swarms, snakes (constrictors, venomous, or giant versions of each), giant spiders, vermin swarms, and unnatural creatures like malign plants. The gamemaster should also assume a plethora of smaller and more harmless creatures, such as insects, smaller nonvenomous snakes, birds, etc. that

thrive throughout the island without interference from humans. These can be used as desired, for flavor or for the occasional surprise, such as a thrashing in the brush being little more than a pack of mice.

The Masters of the Island

The first day the player characters are on the island, Tothmekri's descendants and the serpent-folk remain hidden in their fortress and the warrens beneath the island, respectively. However, they are actively watching the castaways, and slay any who encounter them. This is done with subtlety: a non-player character might walk around a thick patch of bushes or otherwise go out of sight for a moment, then disappear. The island is riddled with secret warrens and tunnels, and it is possible to move secretly almost anywhere if one knows the way.

The serpent spawn are trying to divine which, if any, of their unwanted visitors make adequate additions to their society, and which of them should end on the sacrificial altar or in their gladiatorial games. They have captured Semerkhet and are interrogating him about the nature of the intruders.

Humanoid Encounters

The gamemaster should roll 1d20 each hour the player characters are on the island, consulting the following chart for an encounter, or just pick a desired encounter that seems appropriate. In some cases, an actual scene is suggested as the encounter.

| HUMANOID ENCOUNTERS | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Roll | Type of Encounter | Description |
| 1–5 | No encounter | No encounter. |
| 6–9 | No encounter, but observed. | No encounter, but a successful Average (D1) Observation test indicates that they are being watched from afar. An Obtain Information Momentum spend on that roll gives them a fleeting glimpse of something moving, or some brightened eyes that blink from the shadows, but they are unable to find the watcher. |
| 10–12 | Kushite slaves | A few slaves, hiding from their former masters. Alternatively, see Scene IV: The Dreaming Horror (page 137). |
| 13–15 | Shemite pirates | A few pirates (page 177), looking for food and water. Alternatively, see Scene VIII: An Uneasy Truce (page 139). |
| 16–18 | Kushite pirates | A few Kushite pirates (page 177) looking for food and water, or looking for Kushite slaves to join them. |
| 19 | Roll twice more | Roll two times more and combine the results (such as 'Kushite slaves from the <i>Calypso</i> and Shemite pirates'), ignoring and re-rolling this result if it is rolled again, using basic encounters that are not scenes. |
| 20 | Serpent spawn warrior(s) | A few serpent spawn warriors (page 146). They either flee or attack immediately. |

Finding Food and Fresh Water

The priority should be finding sources of food and water. The island is surrounded by salt water that cannot be drunk safely, so other sources are required, likely inland. A successful Average (D1) Survival test (DC 10) yields a few small pools of water, enough to survive on for a day. On a Complication, the player characters are not the first to find the pool. Roll on the Humanoid Encounters table above or pick an animal type using it. Adjust the tone of the encounter accordingly.

Food is another matter. The island is apparently teeming with life, so finding small birds or animals to hunt and kill is relatively easy, provided the player character has a rock or other missile weapon, or can use Craft to fashion some sort of snare or trap. This can be handled with an Average (D1) Survival test for finding a game animal, or if desired the gamemaster can characterize the hunt, calling for Observation, Stealth, and Melee or Ranged Weapons to kill it.

Fishing, on the other hand, is the easiest and safest means of gathering food, and it is for this reason that the denizens of the island rely primarily on a diet of fish. An Average (D1) Survival test should be fine for this, though again, the initial fishing can be handled with a Simple (D0) Observation test to spot a fish large enough to grab or spear, and a Challenging (D2) roll to catch or kill it.

There is ample wood and dead brush around canopy to start and sustain a fire for some length of time. A Simple (D0) Survival test is enough to get this started. A benefit from starting a fire is that the player characters now have torches.

TOTHEMKRI'S ISLAND

Neither Baruch's nor Semerkhet's maps named the island. Tothmekri named it 'Nesus' an old Stygian word simply meaning 'island'. Its true name, the one the serpent-folk use, is unpronounceable by humans. Similarly, places described in this chapter were named by Tothmekri and his followers. Unless the player characters speak to one of the island's inhabitants, they do not hear any of these names.

Nesus is described in four quarters (northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest), beginning with the northeast where the player characters begin upon the beach. The following scenes are assumed to occur in the order presented, adapted as required.

THE NORTHEASTERN QUARTER

The player characters begin in this section, on the northern beach. The water to the east is strewn with wreckage from the *Calypso*. A portion of the vessel's prow is perched on several jutting, jagged rocks. To the east and west are long stretches of beach that turn with the curve of the island. Immediately inland are stony outcroppings and low mountains covered with thick green foliage. This ends at a mountain somewhere near the island's center.

The Beach (A)


This white sandy beach stretches a quarter mile to the west and almost a mile to the southeast. Scattered along it are shells, seaweed, and driftwood. Stone ridges and outcroppings protrude from the sand. The beach is around 200 yards thick at its widest, a graceful slope of white sand leading into the ocean. The water has a turquoise hue, brilliant and sparkling in the sunlight. To the south is the jungle. As noted in **Scene I: Awake and Alive** (above) there are many footprints nearby, evidence of the strangers who pulled the crew from the wreckage. All are barefoot and most are smaller than a full-grown man's foot in size.

Following the Footprints

Player characters attempting to follow the footprints into the jungle must make a successful Average (D1) Survival test. An Obtain Information Momentum spend puts the number at nearly two dozen, easy to track as they move across the beach and regroup. Once the tracks reach the edge of the jungle, however, the tracks split into many smaller groups of one to three members. Some head straight along the shore to the west, some inland to the southwest, and others immediately south. Following any of these tracks is more difficult and the gamemaster may call for additional Survival tests or additional Momentum spent for further success.

The most obvious set of tracks leading to the west take player characters to the **Valley of Bones** (page 131). A Dire (D4) Survival test reveals that the southeast tracks continue along the foliage line to the southeast quarter of the island, before leading to a winding path that heads to the **Fortress of Tothmekri** (page 132).

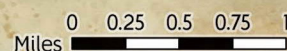
The Grasping Water (B)

The waters around the jagged reefs are full of dangerous undertows, due to tunnels and volcanic rock formations beneath the waves. These make swimming risky, and any swimmers who enter through this region to the Teeth of Set must make a successful Challenging (D2) Athletics test or be caught up in the undertow and dragged underwater. On a failure, the swimmer is dealt 2  points damage from the violent abrasion across the rocks below and risks drowning (*Conan* corebook, page 127). On a Complication, the swimmer is pulled into one of the warrens of volcanic tunnels underwater and emerges in a location of the gamemaster's choosing.

The Teeth of Set (C)

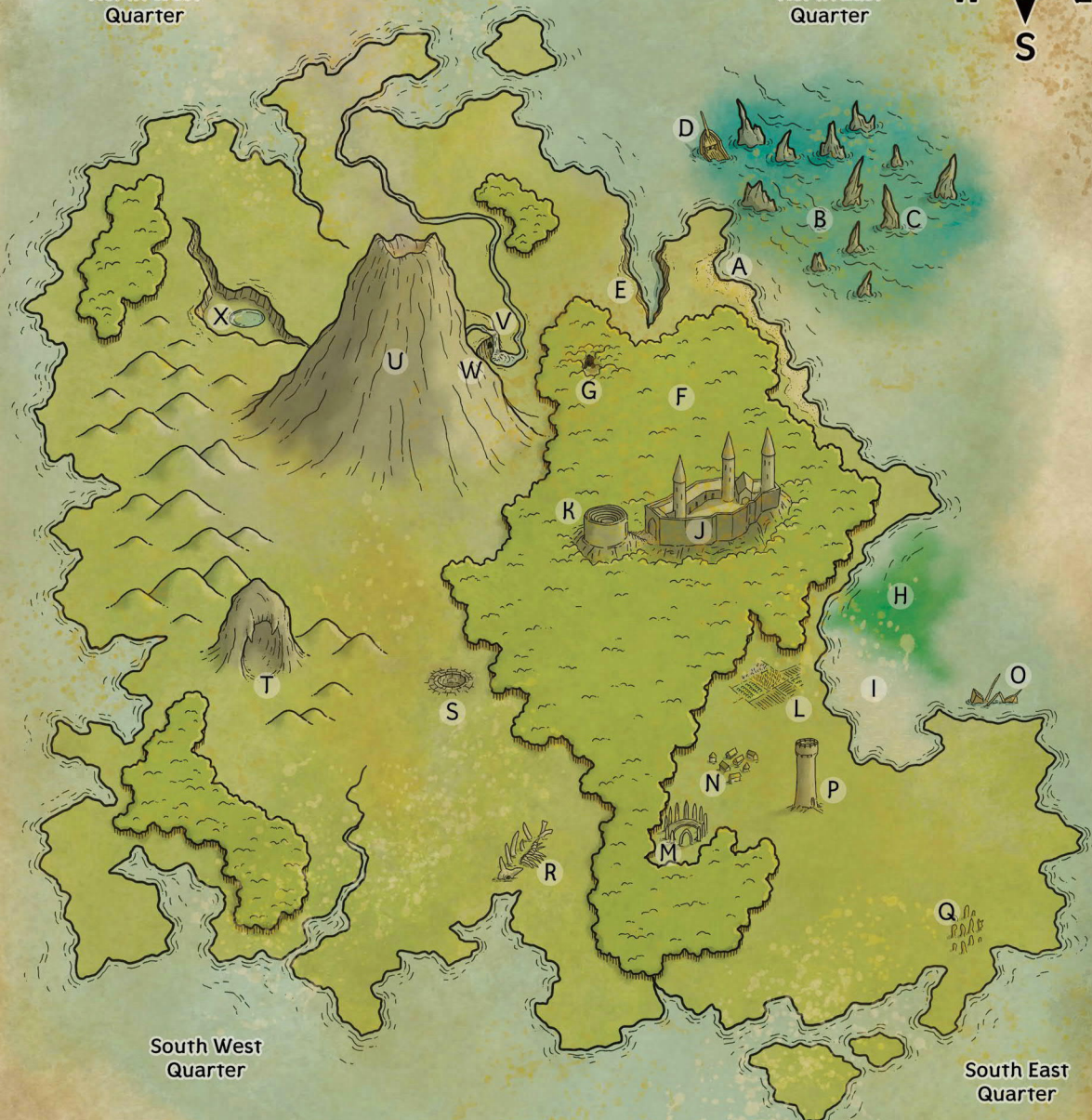
These jagged stony reefs are where the *Calypso* met her end. They jut from the ocean's surface, many more below remaining unseen and ready to tear through the hull of an unsuspecting vessel. They can, however, provide solid purchase if climbed upon. A successful Average (D1) Athletics test allows a player character to clamber to do so, if desired.

The Island of Tothmekri



North West
Quarter

North East
Quarter



South West
Quarter

South East
Quarter

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A. The Beach | G. Mouth of Typhon | M. Shrine of Set | S. Well of The World's Hollow |
| B. Grasping Water | H. Emerald Cove | N. Old Settlement | T. Serpent's Mouth |
| C. Teeth of Set | I. Shining Fields | O. Wreck of the Khebentiu | U. Slumbering Giant |
| D. Wreck of the Calypso | J. Fortress of Tothmekri | P. Watchtower | V. Curtain of Mist |
| E. Valley of Bones | K. Theater of Death | Q. Southern Peninsula | W. Hidden Cave |
| F. The Jungle | L. Dreaming Fields | R. Bones of Giants | X. Valley of the Sky |

The Wreck of the Calypso (D)

The wreck has left a beggar of Gaal-Arvad, a captain now without a ship. Much is broken and submerged, but a section of the starboard (right) hull remains intact above the waterline hundreds of yards offshore but visible from the beach. Swimming out to the wreckage is a Challenging (D2) Athletics test, but swimmers must pass through the Grasping Water (above), with its additional hazards.

Up close, the vessel is in sad shape, less than half her hull still intact. She is securely speared upon the Teeth of Set (above). Most of the port (left) side has been sheared away, now open to the ocean. The figurehead juts proudly still, wooden eyes gazing up at the bright sun. The foredeck and port cabins are undamaged and only partially submerged in water, though the contents of even the sealed rooms are tossed everywhere. No bodies are in the wreckage: even those slain in the crash are missing. This is notable to anyone with a sailing background.

The rest of the ship is underwater, and those wishing to recover items from inside must make successful Challenging Athletics (D2) tests to move throughout the sunken ship, and a successful Challenging (D2) Observation to find what they are looking for. The Eye of Acheron is not here. The gamemaster should deal with any further exploration and salvage with a combination of Athletics and Resistance rolls (for extended periods underwater).

Foodstuffs are submerged in salt water, but items like cheeses, meats, fruits, and vegetables are otherwise edible. The fresh water casks are flooded with seawater. Stopped wine jugs are still salvageable. Scavenging raw materials such as wood, rope, sailcloth or other substances is easy to

The gamemaster may want to make things more challenging with the appearance of a black octopus (**Conan the Pirate**, pages 76–77) on the first or a later visit. Eager to explore a new environment, it has made its home in the ship. Player characters entering the vessel should make a Challenging (D2) Observation test to notice the cephalopod, which surges out of hiding and attacks!

The Jungle (E)

Directly south of the beach is the jungle, beginning abruptly, a verdant canopy that has seen no axe in millennia. The jungle flora is light near the beach and gets denser inland. Within 50 feet of the tree line, it is incredibly thick, requiring an Average (D1) terrain test (**Conan** corebook, page 111). Hacking at the foliage with a blade slows movement speed but makes for a more comfortable passage. Later travelers can enjoy the new-made path.

There are few natural paths in the jungle and the island's denizens have made few of their own. Thus, it is quite easy to get lost in the jungle, and player characters may need to make Simple (D0) Survival tests (D0) to avoid getting lost. Failure means that the player character is either in the middle of jungle or ends up somewhere else (gamemaster choice). A Complication should result in an encounter.

The Valley of Bones (F)

Near the beach is one of the few obvious non-natural paths, with footprints going to and fro, the ground clearly packed with much use. This might be the first sign of civilized life the player characters encounter here. The path leads to the edge of a deep ravine almost a quarter-mile in depth, leading out to the sea. The sea crashes at the end of it, echoing throughout the ravine. It is rocky and rough, as if a slice were cut out of the island by some giant knife.

The sides of the valley are crossed with pathways natural and hewn into the rock and present a ghastly display of death. Here are all the bones of the creatures sacrificed by the inhabitants of the island, with clear signs of ritual death worship. Some are white, some blackened with age and covered with mold and foliage. But these remains are not discarded haphazardly as if in a garbage pit — instead, it is an elaborate arrangement of bone and skull, following arcane and baffling patterns, with an obviously inhuman disregard for their former configurations. Only a few of the skeletons are human, the rest belong to animals.

The Mouth of Typhon (G)

Hidden in the thicket is a twisted cavern mouth, so overgrown that only a successful Challenging (D2) Observation test notices it. After five minutes of hacking and pulling at vines to it, the player characters see a triangular cave entry roughly ten feet tall. Surrounding it are small totems and wards emblazoned with skulls and other symbols relating to death. Any player characters able to read Old Stygian and succeeding in a Challenging (D2) Linguistics test recognize a series of symbols naming this as the 'Mouth of Typhon'. A successful Average (D0) Lore test identifies Typhon as an old and no-longer-worshipped minor Stygian god associated with protection of the dead in the afterlife, represented as a rotund being with a hippopotamus head. Many are the warnings against grave robbery.

The mouth of the cavern is 20 feet deep then takes a right-angled turn into a larger chamber. Inside it is pitch dark unless player characters have torches. Illumination reveals a central chamber an irregular 50 feet across with a roof of almost 35 feet at its highest. The walls and ceiling are painted with Stygian hieroglyphs depicting the passage of the soul into the afterlife. The images on the walls should be familiar to the player characters, resembling the Acheronian afterworld the player characters' souls now dream through. It is highly abstract, corroded badly over time, and yields few clues to the nature of the true afterworld geography.

Also, the stone walls and ceiling are honeycombed with small holes one to three inches across worked into the imagery. Each of these holes goes deep into the rock face, farther than light can penetrate. The holes are quite smooth, as if polished and shaped.

This is the burial cavern for Tothmekri's original settlement, though his descendants have not used it for a century. Unlike the Valley of Bones, these remains are mummified and preserved intact. There are over a hundred mummies here. They are arranged carefully in various crevasses of the cavern (the nobles), and on the floor in rows (favored servants). The rest were discarded in the Valley of Bones.

Some of the noble mummies bear grave jewelry of gold and precious stones. Near the heads of some in the most favored positions are small wooden boxes, inlaid with beaten copper. Opening any of these reveals drinking cups of crystal, small plates, carved stone scarabs, and silvered hand mirrors. A successful Average (D1) Lore test identifies these as Stygian graves, using traditional burial traditions, improvised and much humbler than would be in Stygia, but not particularly ancient.

A player character choosing to loot the dead has a veritable banquet of options. The grave jewelry consists of armllets, wristlets, neck collars, circlets, headdresses, crowns, diadems, hair ornaments, scepters, and earrings, and boxes of ritual items for the afterlife, all made of gold, copper, bronze, silver, lapis lazuli, turquoise, etc. Any effort whatsoever yields as much value in Gold as they can carry.

This sacrilege does not go unnoticed, however. Shortly after anyone takes anything (as opposed to merely disturbing and examining it) the player characters should make Average (D1) Observation tests. Success means that they hear a slight rustle and faint hisses echoing from many points in the room, as if they are surrounded. Then the small holes in the walls and ceiling begin to produce a variety of small and large albino snakes, wending their way sinuously into the burial chamber. Dozens upon dozens of them at once, torchlight glistening upon their pale scales and in their crimson eyes!

These are all vipers, venomous Minion snakes (*Conan* corebook, page 330), and are too many to count. They advance and menace the player characters, attacking any in the burial cavern. The vipers never leave the cavern, however, and remain for at least another hour before returning through the holes in the wall.

THE SOUTHEASTERN QUARTER

Here is where Tothmekri first landed in their sole surviving ship, the *Khebentiu*, attempting to sail into the shallow cove and running aground. Later, they freed it and moved it to a berth further away from the cove and the fortress. From almost any point in this quarter, the most visible landmark is the unimaginably old fortress that looms over the cove. Tothmekri's descendants still live here, their surroundings ancient even to them.

The Emerald Cove (H)

Deceptively shallow, vegetation within the water is a deep green, a stark contrast with the white sand. A successful Simple (D0) Survival test reveals many tracks of the natives of the island as seen prior. They go in every direction, indicating that this is a frequently used area.

The Shining Fields (I)

Off the Emerald Cove is a shimmering expanse of water, the shallowest portion of the watery shelf, and is the richest for sea-life. White coral directly beneath the surface make the water sparkle with an iridescent glow. Near the water's edge large posts are driven into the ground; reed baskets hanging upon them. These are of Stygian design and stink strongly of fish, temporary storage for fishing. The waters teem with silvered and many-coloured fish.

The Fortress of Tothmekri (J)

Perched upon a great rocky face, this fortress juts far above the surrounding jungle canopy. An irregular teardrop in shape, it is massive, though crumbling, some of its walls and inner towers broken and fallen. Most of the accessible outer walls, however, are still intact. A wide trail leads up to it from the beach, though this path puts those who walk it within range of two walls upon which natives patrol, vigilant against intruders. It is fashioned of basalt, common to the island, in strange architectural styles unfamiliar to the player characters.

A successful Dire (D3) Lore test indicates that the fortress is ancient, beyond even the Acheronian era, its style of making unseen in the Hyborian world for thousands of years, if at all. Overgrown with weeds and vines, it seems as if it has been uninhabited for centuries, perhaps even millennia.

This fortress was built long, long before the Hyborian Age, when the kingdoms of Valusia and Thule had yet to fall to the Cataclysm, but it is no human redoubt. It was built by the serpent-folk when they fled to the ends of the earth to escape extermination at the hands of humanity, led by a vengeful Atlantean king, the one called Kull. The serpent-folk built this fortress and tunneled through the earth, connecting it to an underground maze of volcanic lava tubes, too numerous to count and unimaginably complex to map. It suited their needs perfectly, and the ophidian humanoids settled in for a wait of further millennia, until they might rise once more and attempt to seize the reins of the world in their scaled grasp.

In time, as they sailed forth to expand their empire, the navies of Acheron discovered this keep. Seeing their arrival, the serpent-folk fled into the underground tunnels, sealing them off from entry and discovery.

The Acheronians claimed this mysterious fortress as an outpost in their empire, blind to the secret warrens beneath their sandaled feet... and the sinister creatures that dwelt therein.

One night the serpent-folk emerged and slew most of the Acheronians but kept some alive. They learned these new humans' language, stole their very likenesses in the fashion of their kind, and once again took on the semblance of human form.

In years to come, Tothmekri, finding an ancient Acheronian map describing the outpost, sought refuge there when he was deposed. Looting his own treasure, he fled there in several vessels, particularly his flagship, the *Khebentiu*. He eventually met his doom in this fortress, though his bloodline lives on. See page 9 for more on their history.

It is still eminently defensible, as the gate is secure and strong, the walls are steep enough to stop any but the most skilled and dedicated of climbers. The only visible entry to the fortress is a steep, weed-choked stairway that leads from a decrepit and barely visible road. It hugs one curved wall of the exterior and leads to a narrow gate sealed with huge wood and iron doors that are shut. From the vegetation surrounding and on them, they have not opened in years.

A successful Challenging (D2) Observation test shows that the walls near the gate are still patrolled, judging from the occasional helmeted head peering over periodically or the visible spear points moving along the wall-top near the gate.

Attempting to climb one of the exterior walls elsewhere is a Dire (D3) Athletics test and puts a climber in full view of the wall guardians. It would be the height of folly for any of the player characters to assault the fortress, emphasized by the forms of several dead Kushites and Shemites, the ground riddled with arrows and their corpses pin-cushioned with leaf-feathered shafts.

Now, alerted to the trespassers on the island, Tothmekri's descendants watch the walls with bows and spears at the ready, though they hide from sight unless someone attempts to breach the walls. They have a near-inexhaustible supply of ammunition, near-complete cover, and a ready supply of food and water, along with passage to and from the fortress undetected.

At nights, player characters can see light emanating from fires inside, illuminating black wafts of smoke. The gate is locked, and the unseen guards will not open it or respond to any outsiders. Even if somehow goaded to response, the reply is a mix of curses in debased Stygian with many words not familiar to anyone who speaks the language.

A map and full description of the fortress is provided on page 153-156.

The Theater of Death (K)

Adjacent and connected to the fortress is an amphitheater. The Acheronians assumed it was for gladiatorial battles, and in it pitted themselves against their slaves, jungle creatures, and even themselves when there was nothing left to kill. When the Stygians arrived, they continued this tradition for Tothmekri's amusement, though the dwindling number of slaves and sailors did not last long.

Formed like a great bowl with high sides, the pit is around 50 feet across, the steep walls at the base nearly 15 feet high. Heavy wooden gates lead from the interior into chambers beneath the seating, which surrounds the arena. Thick metal rings set into stone blocks flush with the ground are spaced regularly around the combat floor: securing chains for more challenging battles.

In a central point is a great dais, surrounded by once covered galleys, complete with curtains and cloth awnings. Now these formerly opulent booths are rotten and exposed, filled with insects and spider webs. See page 154 for a map of the Theater of Death.

One exterior entry into the theater is concealed in a rocky, vine-grown cleft outside the fortress, and allows a single path straight from the jungle exterior onto the floor of the arena. It leads into a narrow, winding, wet natural tunnel with a few small branches that lead nowhere, eventually to a gate at the arena entry. This was used by the Acheronians to allow survivors of gladiatorial battles their freedom, only to hunt them later in the wild jungle.

Player characters trying to access the fortress through the arena must climb the outside walls then fight their way past four guards watching the walkway between the two structures. The outside walls of the Theater of Death are steep, nearly 30 feet tall, requiring a successful Challenging (D2) Athletics test to scale. The passageway between the arena and the fortress is narrow, only six feet wide, and 40 feet long, with a guarded gate at the place where it enters the fortress. The gate is not locked, but is secured by a sliding bar on the inside. To get past the door requires either a successful Challenging (D2) Thievery test or a Dire (D4) Athletics test to bash the door down.

Two guards watch the gate from the inside and two others guard the walls. See page 146 for their descriptions.

The Dreaming Fields (L)

Immediately to the south are farmlands filled with plants brought by Tothmekri's household, not native to the island but still cultivated. Of special note is a patch of black and yellow lotus flowers, still thriving. Indeed, lotus production has increased steadily as Tothmekri's descendants frequently use it to ease the horror of their existence. These flowers give the fields their name, as the product of the blossoms allow a dreamlike state that helps the island's denizens ignore the interminable boredom of their lives, and to escape the rot of their entire society. See the *Conan* corebook, page 166, for more about the lotus.

The Shrine of Set (M)

This is relatively new, built by Tothmekri, and was the center of their worship. This altar has run crimson with blood spilt in Set's name, sacrifices from all ranks of Tothmekri's household, including the sailors and captain of the *Khebentiu*. It is used for worship regularly, though sacrifices are rare.

It is a ring of light grey obelisks surrounding a flat stony half-moon shaped floor at the base of a great protruding stone. A great altar of black stone stands in the platform's center, five feet before the stony wall, and a sculpted arch looms overhead, almost 20 feet above the jungle floor. The arch is shaped to resemble the head and tail of a giant snake, nearly two feet thick at the head, with one side of the arch being the head and the other its tail, forming an uninterrupted arc, an Oroboros serpent. Anyone able to speak Stygian or with any Focus in Sorcery recognizes the place as consecrated to Set.

The altar itself leaves no doubt as to its purpose, a circular platform almost nine feet across and four feet high, bounded with a carved stone serpent which winds from the base of the altar up to its surface, with the head protruding above at one side. Its mouth is gaped wide, fangs spaced enough to hold the head of a sacrificial victim within. Four thick stone pegs are spaced to tie

a victim down, limbs spread wide. Immediately above the altar is the arch's intersection of Set's head and tail.

The obelisks are etched with Stygian bas reliefs, disturbing images depicting depravities in Set's name. Many also show a curiosity — amid the humans is a humanoid figure with a serpent head.

If any of the player characters touch it, read or paraphrase the following:

As your fingers brush the altar's surface, it is surprisingly cool for being in the sun for most of the day. You have a brief, fleeting glimpse of horror, almost as if you are present. Strong hands hold you down upon the altar, those of a cluster of men and women both sun-darkened and others strangely pale. The dark-skinned ones have black hair and eyes: Stygian by their features, while the pale ones are often hairless and resemble the strange ones who pulled you from the Calypso.

Though your mind screams at you to struggle, a lassitude infects you, as if your body is not yours to control. A man in an elaborate, ceremonial robe steps forward with a small bowl. He reaches into it and presses a handful of something dark and velvety over your mouth and nose. You breathe deeply of the black lotus, and a heady sense



of euphoria suffuses your being. Your head is thrust into the open jaws of the serpent, your wrists and ankles tied.

You look up to see the arch above, the serpent swallowing its own tail. Set is everything, encompassing all.

The man with the bowl steps into view again, upside-down to your field of vision. In his hand is a knife and he speaks a litany of phrases in some unknown, hissing language, harsh and seemingly impossible to shape with the human throat. The knife flashes towards you, and shouts of dark glee fill your ears, almost before you feel the pain of the wound. Darkness takes you as you begin to suffocate. Something warm and wet is at the back of your neck, running into your hair.

The robed man stands above you once more. You have the curious sensation of seeing two things at once — for his head is that of a man but also that of a monstrous serpent.

With a start, you awaken from this brief reverie, and you know that in that moment, you travelled some gulf of distance — a glimpse through time, perhaps?

But did you behold the future or the past?

Further contact with it, even someone who did not experience this vision, yields nothing unusual. The altar feels like normal sun-heated stone to anyone else touching it. Though it is not a magical artifact, it is imbued with the misery and horror of millennia of sacrifices that have been performed upon it over the eons.

Like the **Mouth of Typhon** (page 131) this shrine is not without guardians. If the player characters linger, an Average (D1) Observation tests reveals that the jungle has grown eerily silent, the hissing of serpents faintly audible. There is movement in the thick grass around the shrine. Anyone remaining in the area is attacked by dozens of pythons (constricting Minion serpents) soon joined by a giant python (a giant Toughened constricting serpent emerging from the altar serpent's mouth. Writeups for both appear in the **Conan** corebook, pages 328–329. These creatures do not leave the area defined by the shrine.

The Old Settlement (N)

When the *Khebentiu* first was stranded upon the island, Tothmekri's followers made a crude settlement before moving into the old fortress. They built huts and other less sturdy structures, until tropical storms drove them to the fortress. Now overgrown with weeds, few of the original huts remain, little more than poles protruding from the ground with rotting reed bundles scattered near them. Now it is home to just some lizards and snakes. There is nothing of value here, the only thing out of the ordinary being that some of the hut frames look like milled and shaped wood, carved as if they were once part of a ship's hull.

The Wreck of the *Khebentiu* (O)

On the beach near the old settlement are the blackened beams of the *Khebentiu*, the Stygian galley that spirited Prince Tothmekri and his household out of Khemi, ahead of his father's assassins. Much was scavenged to build the settlement, but some portions remained. To prevent any from attempting to build a new vessel, Tothmekri ordered his followers to set fire to the rest.

The ship's length and breadth are evident from the size of the timbers: a successful Average (D1) Sailing test reveals that it was almost 150 feet long, perhaps 40 feet across, a massive vessel capable of holding more than two hundred passengers and crew (slaves and sailors) and considerable cargo as well, but not ideally suited for long oceanic voyages. That it made it this far is testament to the craftsmanship of those who built it.

The Watchtower (P)

This tower is one of the few edifices erected by Tothmekri's folk still intact and in use. Each day, two guards (page 146) climb this rickety tower and watch the horizon for any approaching vessels, approaching from the east. It has a limited field of view, but the serpent-folk know that so vast are the distances that approach from another direction is impossible. Many bare footprints surround the base of the watchtower, most of them leading back to the fortress. There is little up on the tower if it is unmanned.

The Southern Peninsula (Q)

This peninsula forms the lower wing of the crescent shape of the Emerald Cove, jutting outward for almost a mile. There is little of interest here aside from a wide variety of tree-trunks into strange carved idols, taller than a man in height, resembling crude proto-humans and other primitive creatures. There are almost 50 of these idols, ranging in size from six to eight feet in height. A successful Challenging (D2) Lore test reveals that these idols depict no god worshipped or even remembered in the Hyborian world at this time. For reasons unknown, all who have dwelt upon this island have left these statues alone, and they have stood inviolate for millennia.

THE SOUTHEASTERN QUARTER

This quarter of the island is farthest from where the player characters begin, and is the most dangerous to them, inhabited by serpent-folk hunters and watched from secret locales across the area. Anyone here regularly has the sensation that they are being watched. The serpent-folk have many secret vantage points, and attack smaller groups who venture alone here.

The Bones of Giants (R)

This ancient skeleton, half-buried in the sandy beach dates before the arrival of Tothmekri's folk. It is massive, a leviathan more than a hundred feet from tail-tip to the point-toothed snout. The skull itself is over 10 feet long, large enough to hold a full-grown man standing in its mouth. Many teeth are gone, now spearheads, knives, and other tools. A successful Average (D1) Lore test reveals that this creature is unknown to any Hyborian Age bestiaries, and only sea rumors mention creatures of such size.

The Well of the World's Hollow (S)

This stone well is the holiest place of the serpent-folk, containing the remnants of human sacrifice (Acheronian and Stygian), though used less and less with the passing years due to the lack of subjects. Innocuous in appearance, it consists of a stone ridge leading to a well with a deep shaft, a dozen feet across and so deep that the bottom cannot be seen, even at the height of day with the sun directly overhead. It rises nearly a foot from the jungle floor and is clear of clinging weeds. The well shows the same alien handiwork as the Shrine of Set, also with a great serpent motif.

Anything dropped into it eventually splashes, indicating its depth. The well itself passes through the subterranean chambers running under the island and even deeper, beneath the earth where ancient primeval monsters nibble at the roots of the world. Inside the well the walls are slick with slimy mold, impossible to climb. Entering the pit means certain death.

A player character wishing to dare this must make an Epic (D5) Athletics roll. If they fail, the gamemaster should declare that they are gone, dead, fallen unimaginable depths into a place from whence they cannot return, swallowed by the cold chill earth.

If a player succeeds in this roll, they must spend a Fortune point to survive. In this case, they are climbing down and lose their grasp, sliding down a side tunnel into utter blackness, taking 10 damage. There is a scramble of movement in the darkness; a strange hissing voice, and suddenly a multitude of scaly hands will seize the player character.

The player character's fate after this point will become apparent later. The gamemaster should read through *Chapter 6: Roads Beneath the Earth* to find a suitable place to reintroduce them.

The Serpent's Mouth (T)

Guarded and watched by a band of serpent-folk warriors, this main entrance to their kingdom leads directly into their greatest hall at the heart of their warrens. It is hidden well, requiring a successful Daunting (D3) Observation test to even notice, even if looking for it directly. Hiding in the foliage nearby are four serpent-folk warriors (page 146) and inside are another half-dozen serpent-folk, ready to

defend their home if required. They are not normally so vigilant, but the presence of the survivors of the *Calypso* has put them on guard. The caverns of the Serpent's Mouth are described fully on pages 157-158.

THE NORTHWESTERN QUARTER

This quarter of the island is the largest and most mountainous, though it has many areas of natural beauty that are still accessible. Despite the proximity to the Serpent's Mouth and the other inhabited areas, few of the island's denizens have much reason to come here.

The Slumbering Giant (U)

This dormant volcano is steep and requires a struggle to scale to the pinnacle, a journey taking several hours of rough work and hard ascent, requiring a series of three Challenging (D2) terrain tests (*Conan* corebook, page 111). The basin of the volcano has no active lava, but the hardened crust still emits warmth. Spending too long in the basin causes 2 damage with the Area, Persistent 2, Piercing 3, Subtle Qualities. See page 274 in the *Conan* corebook for additional Hazards that might be appropriate. Beneath the volcano is the nexus of the massive and bewildering maze of lava tube tunnels running under the island.

The Curtain of Mist (V)

The most striking area of natural beauty on the entire island is a waterfall fed from a pool high upon the volcano, splashing across several rocky tiers before splashing into a great misty pool at its base. The vista is often dazzling, the thin wet layer catching sunlight and illuminating everything. Aside from the spectacular natural beauty here, the only other notable element is a cavern hidden behind the waterfall (described below). A successful Daunting (D3) Observation test spots the cave mouth, though one could just find it by walking through the water.

The Hidden Cave (W)

Behind the waterfall is a cavern leading into the island's caves warren. Too distant and inconvenient to be of interest to the serpent-folk, it allows unguarded access into their deepest caverns and grottoes. The cavern labyrinth itself is described on pages 157-158.


The Valley of the Sky (X)

The island's sole mystery that cannot be attributed to the serpent-folk, the Acheronians, or even the Stygians, this great chasm is a rent in the side of the island that has become a valley. It has little vegetation and is a near-perfect wedge in shape. At the bottom is a geographical oddity, too regular to be happenstance — a perfectly circular pool almost a

hundred feet across. When viewed from above, the moon's reflection in the water fills the entirety of the surface, shining so bright it almost seems a column of light radiating upwards to the moon. That is disquieting to the serpent-folk, who do not relish outdoor spaces, and they never visit this place.

SCENE IV: THE DREAMING HORROR

Not far from their location, the player characters hear a terrible groan, as if from one being tortured. If they investigate, they find a small wild grove of black lotus flowers, redolent with heady fumes. Slumped amidst them is a barely conscious Shemite pirate, pressed against the trunk of a tree, wrapped by vines that seem to pulse and rustle of their own volition. Surrounding him, protruding through the grass are many white bones, broken and clean of flesh.

Anyone entering this little grove must attempt a Challenging (D2) Resistance test to avoid falling under the effect of the lotus blossoms. Failing this causes unconsciousness for 2  hours (minimum 1). Succumbing to this dream-sleep causes a lotus vision, a primordial view into the screaming abyss of time and space.

The gamemaster has considerable leeway in what dreams will be imparted to the player characters in this scene. One option might be to take them back into the Acheronian afterworld, where they may have another encounter along the path to their confrontation with Xhosãth and Tothmekri. They may gain a glimpse into the past, wherein the secret history of the island is relayed to them in a highly figurative manner, based on information provided throughout this adventure that would be otherwise unknown to the player characters. Still another option is to grant the dreamer(s) a glimpse at any of the histories of the island that are otherwise unknown.

The lotus 'grove' is a single creature, a semi-sentient version of the malign plant as described on pages 340–341 of the *Conan* corebook, weaker but still a Nemesis.




DEMON LOTUS

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 7 | 7 | 5 | 7 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 5 | 10 | 6 | |
| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
| Combat | — | Movement | — |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 11, Resolve 8
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 2


ATTACKS

- **Ensnaring Tendrils (M):** Reach 3, 4 , Grappling
- **Engulf (M):** Reach 1, 4 , Fearsome, Unforgiving 1
- **Unearthly Presence (T):** Range C, 2  mental, Area

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Carnivorous:** The plant can consume living flesh through its tendrils, leaves opening to reveal fanged mouths. These are too slow and fragile to damage a combatant, but can devour a sleeping and immobilized target within days, consuming them to the bone.
- **Feed Upon Fear**
- **Inured to Disease**
- **Inured to Poison**

DOOM SPENDS

- **Mind-drain:** The gamemaster can spend 1 Doom as a Standard Action against a grabbed target. The target must succeed in a Discipline test or suffer 4  mental damage with the Vicious 1 Quality. The Difficulty for this test is equal to the number of Doom points spent. An effect rolled also makes the target suffers the Dazed condition.

If uninterrupted, the vines continue to embrace and crush the Shemite pirate. If the player characters are all overcome by lotus fumes, at the gamemaster's discretion they are either rescued by others (M'wangele, Semerkhet, or even Odaka and his crew, from the following sections). Or they are found by the island's denizens and taken straight to the arena (see page 133).

Investigating the grass in the grove reveals that not all of the bones are human. Some are from boars, large lizards, and what look like giant snakes. Some skulls look mostly human, strangely shaped, perhaps those of the figures that pulled the player characters from the sinking *Calypso*. A successful Average (D1) Observation test turns up some improvised weapons — fire-hardened wooden spears, knives of long sharpened rock fragments, clubs. One knife is made from a tooth of the leviathan skeleton on the southern shore (page 136). A single golden bangle is also here, an ornament of Stygian manufacture and design, set with small plates of lapis lazuli and worth almost 5 Gold.

SCENE V: THE SIGHTING OF THE BAHARI

At a point where the player characters are either on or near the beach, or at a vantage point where they can see the ocean water, they see the clear and unmistakable form of the Black Corsair vessel, the *Bahari*, cruising offshore, moving slowly as if looking for something. Unfortunately, no effort on their part can get it to come to shore, and the *Bahari* gives no sign that it has seen or noticed the player characters.

SCENE VI: FANGS IN THE NIGHT

This scene is not set in a particular place or at a specific set of conditions, but on a time. It occurs on the first night the player characters have spent on the island. In this scene, the island denizens attack the player characters, no matter where they are taking refuge. The denizens have been hiding all day, watching and biding their time. Nightfall is when they act.

Several small groups of warriors (page 146) steal into areas inhabited by the different factions — Shemite pirates, Kushites pirates, and Kushite slaves — and slay one or more of them, then flee. They leave the player characters alone but abduct and slay one or more non-player characters sharing a camp with them, if any. Player characters on watch who succeed in an Observation tests opposed Movement Field of Expertise of the denizen. If successful, the player character has a warning of their approach, perhaps seeing fleeting figures in the trees approaching them furtively. If detected, the offspring flee and go to another camp, or return to their warrens.

Some of the bodies are mutilated and left where to be discovered, hopefully demoralizing and frightening the intruding humans. The gamemaster should improvise these discoveries based on circumstances, adjusting the gruesomeness as appropriate.

Other bodies end up elsewhere, perhaps upon the altar at the shrine of Set, or one or more of their personal effects are left at the base of the Well of the World's Hollow. Still others are never seen again. At the gamemaster's discretion, these abductees may yet live, imprisoned by the serpent-folk. If this option is utilized, the gamemaster should consult the next adventure and choose where they are at.

These murders incense the factions on the island, some of whom are unaware that the island is inhabited. They blame their most hated enemies and potentially try to

'rescue' their missing companions from them or take revenge in brutal fashion.

While a full description of the hybrid human/serpent-folk offspring is on page 146, for reference they are equivalent to savage Minions as described in the *Conan* corebook, page 320.

SCENE VII: WAITING FOR THE STAFF

The player characters, while near any stretch of beach, see a trail of smoke coming from the beach. There, they find a small campfire burning, a solitary figure tending it. If they approach, they see that the person is none other than M'wangele, the wily Kushite magician from the Calypso's hold. He is roasting a fish on a sharpened stick, looking utterly unconcerned about anyone finding him. Nearby is a sharp-edged rock and the sand is covered with fish scales.

If the player characters address him, M'wangele smiles and happily greets them. He bids them to sit and offers them some of his fish, telling them that the roasted skin is particularly tasty. (He's right.) He asks how they are faring.

If asked how he came to be there, he says that he was washed ashore after the wreck and found his way to this spot. He is waiting, he explains, for his staff to return. The Stygians took it and kept it on the boat somewhere. It is out there somewhere, he says, pointing at the ocean, and is making its way back to him.

If the player characters recall that they found a black, cat-headed, carven staff in the Acheronian afterworld, the magician beams.

"That's it! You will need it there. But it is also needed here. So, I must wait for it."

The magician apologizes if they ask him to help them further, but it is vitally important that his staff make its way back to him in the mortal world. The player characters can wait with him, but there is no telling how long it will take. It could be days, depending on the current. He is not concerned, as he has all the time in the world. He will be safe enough here.

Before they go, however, he frowns and tell them the following piece of information:

"I have listened to the spirits of wind and wave here as they whistled and shrieked through the trees and crashed against the shore. They spoke of a great and powerful omen."

"Soon... a prince and a king will die. They did not know their names, as they cannot tell humans apart. But these deaths have been foretold and their souls are forfeit."

"Be wary lest their doom fall upon you."

More than this, he does not say, or will not venture if he does know.

SCENE VIII: AN UNEASY TRUCE

This scene should occur as the player characters are walking sometime after the first night of raids by the serpent offspring. As they continue along their path, a voice yells out for them to stop where they are. The voice belongs to one of the Kushite rowing slaves. He claims to have a bow trained on them and will kill them if they threaten him.

If the player characters attack, they must make a Challenging (D2) Observation test to find the Kushite in the dense jungle thicket. He is 50 feet away (in an adjacent zone) and can get another shot with his bow before anyone can reach him.

If they identify themselves, when he sees who it is he attempts to make peace with them. He holds his bow in the air and shouts for mercy. If betrayed, he defends himself against the player characters, joined by two other rowing slaves hiding him. They are armed with poniards and one has the Shemite bow, with a full quiver of arrows, scavenged from the *Calypto*.

If a parley is offered, the three former slaves step out of the forest. They explain that they have been seeking allies from their crew to launch an attack against some of their fellow tormentors. They saw, they say, a group of Black Corsairs from the *Bahari* wading ashore down the beach not far away but could not find them again. Further discussion reveals that they are, to a man, relatively at peace with the dizzying turn of events that has led them from being rowing slaves to being free men marooned on a remote island.

They tell the player characters that there were originally two more with them, but those were slain during the night, their bodies left headless just outside the edge of the camp. The Kushites believe it was the work of the Kushite pirates, who always hated them due to old tribal rivalries.

The rowing slaves are thirsty for revenge and know where their enemies are camped nearby. With the player characters to help, he tells them, the group could easily overcome them. If the player characters do not wish to take part in such an activity, the slaves depart, leaving them with the warning that their choice will haunt them.

If the player characters are aware of the nature of the mysterious assailants, a successful Average (D1) Persuade test convinces the slaves to sway their course from vengeance.

If the player characters agree to go along with them, a quarter mile away the situation is as described. Six pirates have made a small encampment, a common base while they

seek food and water in the jungle. There is little to this camp — a natural clearing with a small fire and some rocks and logs to sit on. Examining the situation further shows that among their number are two Kushites and two Shemites, one of them none other than Gaal-Arvad himself, if he yet lives. If not, it is another Shemitish pirate. These four are terrified of another attack, as they suffered themselves in the night's assault.

How the player characters deal with the situation should be improvised by the gamemaster, based on their course of action. If the player characters plan for an ambush, an opposed Stealth test is suitable. Trying to negotiate or perform some other ruse could call for Persuade, as appropriate.

If some sort of peaceable arrangement is met and the player characters speak with him, Gaal-Arvad tells them that he woke on the island shore, like the others. He relates that the strange figures searched him as he lay on the shore, coughing and choking on sea-water he had swallowed, but very much alive. His last memory was them finding the Eye of Acheron on his person, holding it aloft, and speaking to one another excitedly. He swooned, and lost consciousness.

SCENE IX: ODAKA ARRIVES

At some point when the player characters are moving through the jungle, have the one with the highest Survival skill Focus attempt a Challenging (D2) Observation or Survival test (player choice). Success with the Observation test reveals that there are figures hidden in the nearby trees, either hiding or ready to ambush, and a successful Survival test indicates the telltale recent tracks and disturbance of a small group of people, perhaps moments before. A Complication has them blunder into the next scene.

If they are not alerted to this encounter, an arrow suddenly whistles past one of the player characters' head and strikes into the trunk of a nearby tree. A male's deep voice calls out in Kushite, Shemitish, or whatever language seems more visibly appropriate to speak to the player characters.

"Take another step and die."

At this, several men press forward into the area, surrounding the player characters with a ring of leaf-bladed spears. They are Black Corsairs, a mix of male and female Kushite warriors, and with them is their leader, OdaKa. The big man presses forward and addresses them, his hand upon the hilt of a wide-bladed sword thrust nakedly into his sharkskin belt. Among these strong and tall warriors, he is nonetheless a giant, moving with confidence and deadly

grace. His head is bald and fierce intelligence glints in his eyes, many scars from untold battles crossing his form.

"I am Odaka. You are no pirates, but you were with them on your ship. Explain yourselves."

Despite his brusqueness, the man radiates immense charisma and it is clear how he has made a reputation for himself. Odaka is respectful to the player characters, but has little patience for deceit or bluster. If asked why he and his crew are on the island, he says that he has come for his magician, M'wangele. He and his men are grateful if told where to find M'wangele. If asked about how the Bahari was able to find the *Calypso*, or the mysterious fog, he explains.

"M'wangele once gave me a wind-devil trapped in a bag. He had fought it for seven days and nights and finally tricked it into climbing into the bag. He sealed it in and bound it with the cords made from the guts of a hyena. He wrestled

from it a promise that it would serve the one who opened the bag once to earn its freedom."

"M'wangele spoke to me through the voice of one of my wives, telling me where to find him. So, we set sail, with my bravest warriors, here to the end of the sea. I saw your ship on the horizon and opened the bag. The wind-devil emerged and I coaxed from it the fog. We were not expecting the storm. We had no desire to sink our own vessel rescuing our magician, so we withdrew. We circled the island, seeking a place to put to land, and now we are here."

No matter what sort of a bargain is offered, the Black Corsairs are not interested in joining with the player characters or having the player characters join them.

They withdraw, moving toward the location M'wangele is in, or whatever direction the player characters told them to go.

Black Corsairs are described on page 177 and Odaka is on pages 131 and 139. Odaka is not written up as his fate is fixed, and not subject to the whim of dice.

WHO IS ODAKA?

The Kushite warrior-king Odaka is a tribute to the late sword-and-sorcery author Charles Saunders (1946–2020). Odaka is cast in the mold of Saunders' most famous creation, the mighty barbarian Imaro, protagonist of a series of stories and novels written between 1981 and 2017. Imaro was often referred to as 'the Black Conan' by critics and by Saunders himself.

SCENE X: DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

At some point, the player characters can make a Simple (Do) Observation test to see a thin trail of black smoke rising above the tree line near the beach. There is something irregular about the smoke, as it pauses a bit, gaps, then another long trail, a gap, a small plume, gap, etc. until it is clear some sort of code is being used. Any pirate or sailor recognizes at once that this is a signal fire, a smoke code used by Barachan pirates. If no one knows this code, they can get it from any of the Shemitish sailors, or a successful Daunting (D3) Sailing or Linguistics roll decodes it.

"Parley on beach. Truce. Semerkhet."

The origin of the of smoke is easy to find: a section of beach not far from where they first woke up. When the player characters arrive, Semerkhet waits for them, sitting comfortably on a rock, using some palm leaves to fan the



smoke. When he sees the player characters, he holds his hands up in a gesture of truce. He is alone.

If the player characters attack, Semerkhet shouts for assistance, and several Kushite pirates — Kushite warriors equal to the number of player characters plus a few (page 177)— run out from further down the beach. Preparing for betrayal, he made them an offer that appealed enough to throw their lot in with him. If challenged, he fights defensively until they arrive, then flees. Despite this, he tries to emphasize to the player characters that he does not wish harm upon them, and he can make a deal that may save their lives.

If the player characters are in the mood to kill Semerkhet immediately, the gamemaster may move the location of this scene to one where he is not immediately visible or accessible. They might arrive and find an arrow in the sand leading to a rocky cliff-face nearby, with the Stygian perched atop it out of reach by any hand weapons and sheltered against missile weapon fire. The following discussion might be had at this safe distance, keeping him alive for later.

Assuming the player characters do not immediately attack Semerkhet on sight, he tells them he has an offer they might want to listen to. A successful Average (D1) Insight test reveals that the man is honest about this, but an Obtain Information Momentum spend reveals that he is not being entirely forthright with them. If threatened by the player characters, he will summon the Kushites described prior, but again, prefers them to surround and protect him while negotiating, not to kill the player characters. He claims that he is disappointed at the show of force.

Semerkhet tells the player characters he knows of a way into the fortress of the folk of the island, a part of the map Gaal-Arvad did not find. He has it committed to memory, and its secret dies with him. He thus proposes that the player characters' only hope of survival is to work with him. They all share the same goals: escape and recovery of the Eye of Acheron, and he has little interest in it now that he is here. His patron — whom he does not and will not name — bid him to restore the artifact to this island to its original owners, and he has done exactly that. His work, he says, is done. He has no curiosity about this part of his legacy, having sensed it is little but ruin and degeneracy, and he's ready to loot what he can and return to his home.

Semerkhet knows as well as they do that the Eye of Acheron is not in the ocean, and that the natives found and have it. If asked how he knows this, he says that he also has a sense for the thing's presence. *"It has pulled me into this damnable web of sorcery, as well."*

The people of the island know about its secrets, he is certain, and if the player characters are suffering the Eye's curse, the natural place to rid oneself of it is here. Tothmekri's tomb is here, hopefully undisturbed, even if looted by Tranicos

long ago, but perhaps returning it to him would free them of the curse. He does not think that Tothmekri had any sorcery of his own, and the idea that his ancestor might be some sort of threat is laughable, even to him.

The island's natives, Semerkhet says, found him as he was seeking food. They made as if to kill him, but then when they took a good look at his features, they babbled something that sounded like his name. They bowed reverently to him but backed away the way they had come. He gave chase but lost them in the jungle. He takes that for a sign that they know who he is or at the very least, respect his lineage.

As for the uncanny appearance of the islanders, he surmises that it is possible that they simply became inbred with the dwindling of their population. He does not know what time has wrought upon them, or if even those are the descendants of Tothmekri at all.

As for other factors, he has little interest in the fates of any of the pirates (despite having promised his Kushite allies some amount of treasure and their lives), and the appearance of the Black Corsairs does not interest him as anything other than a means to an end, perhaps a method of getting off the island.

About M'wangele, he says, he is not entirely certain why the Kushite magician surrendered himself to he and his men, but he took it as a sign of good fortune and thought that the presence of a Kushite hostage would come in handy. He did take the man's staff — a curious thing of black wood with strange carvings upon it, topped by an ungainly animal head of some sort — but left it in his cabin. He has no idea what happened to it when the *Calypso* sank.

As a reward, Semerkhet offers the player characters an equal share in any wealth that might be gleaned from the encounter, should they survive and escape the island. He is certain that a means might be found. Perhaps with the assistance of the island's natives, a boat might be fashioned, or they might simply prevail upon the Black Corsairs and offer a share of the treasure in return for being returned with them to the coast of Stygia, or Kush, or anywhere in the Black Kingdoms. Anywhere but here.

Ultimately, Semerkhet's bargaining position is that he knows of a secret way into the island and is the last living descendant of Tothmekri. If they are captured, they apparently hold him in enough regard that they do not wish to harm him. He thinks that they can use this to their advantage, and perhaps he can exert some sort of control over them. He is, after all, a pure son of the bloodline of Prince Tothmekri of Stygia, and thus by right is their natural leader.

Semerkhet asks if the player characters agree to these terms. He is willing to negotiate further and allows for precautions to be taken, even surrendering his poniard,

but he absolutely does not allow himself to be bullied or threatened, such as being bound or having a blade at his throat. This arrangement only works if the player characters consider him an equal in all matters, or even act as he is their leader. If the island's denizens get a sense that the player characters are threatening him, they may kill them just to 'rescue' him.

If the player characters agree, Semerkhet proposes that they make their entrance into the fortress under the cover of night, to minimize the chances of being seen. He knows where their treasury within is at, where they would naturally store the Eye of Acheron. Once in, they can take as much as they can carry and cut a deal with the Black Corsairs to buy their passage back.

The player characters are likely to suspect he is up to no good. The gamemaster should allow them to make another opposed Insight test versus Semerkhet's Social Field of Expertise but spend enough Doom as Momentum to increase the Difficulty. If the discussion is being had at a distance, the Difficulty should already be modified by Distance, Difficult Terrain, and Social Factors, making it Epic (D5) in any case to read his true intent. Success means that they sense that the Stygian is concealing information from them at the least and being dishonest at the most.

In fact, he is lying outright. His encounter with the island's denizens was more involved, and they took him into their fortress via a hidden way. The wily Stygian has already met with the offspring of his ancestor and knows what their nature is. With their leader, he has made a bargain to cooperate with them to lead the player characters into a trap. The gamemaster should refer to **What If They Don't Fall for It?** (right) for guidance on what to do if they reject his offer.

SCENE XI: THE COURT OF TOTHMEKRI

With a truce in place, Semerkhet leads the player characters to a rocky outcropping near the western side of the fortress, an area not visible from the walls (see **The Theater of Death**, page 156). He says that this was in the old map he had describing the general layout of the fortress. The Stygian moves aside some vines to reveal a tunnel leading slightly downward and towards the fortress. He has a makeshift torch ready and gives it to whomever takes the lead. Near the entry, the walls are covered in creeping vines. The tunnel is natural, narrow, and with a few small dead-end tangents.

At the end of the corridor is a metal gate made of crossed bars, still intact after all this time, standing open.

WHAT IF THEY DON'T FALL FOR IT?

The final scene of this chapter depend that the player characters take the Stygian up on his offer and go with him into the fortress, risking betrayal.

If his is revealed and the deal is rejected, there are still options.

If the player character's attitude towards Semerkhet is such that they either refuse his offer or are so distrustful towards him that the whole offer simply doesn't make any sense, the gamemaster should instead have the player characters stumble across him as he leads his small group of Kushites into the very self-same passage he intends to lead the player characters in (see **The Theater of Death**, page 133). Unbeknownst to the player characters, this is an intentional ruse where he is trying to be followed, drawing the player characters into a trap.

Alternately, the player characters could find the secret entrance described above into the arena on their own, not needing the Stygian to guide them through. The player characters are still unaware that Semerkhet has signaled the inhabitants of the fort to their presence and told of the link to his ancestor. Thus, they are anticipated. When they arrive in the arena, the sequence of events in *Scene XI: The Court of Tothmekri* (below) occurs, though Semerkhet is on the same dais as the ruler of Tothmekri's descendants, waiting for them. He shouts a sardonic comment that the player characters would have met the same fate had they trusted him.

Beyond the bars is a great chamber of some sort, a circular amphitheater that has fallen into ruin. This is the **Theater of Death**, described on page 133. If the player characters insist that he go first, he does so and crosses the sand-covered arena floor. If they let him hang back, he does so, and grabs a rope hanging near the door, immediately to be hauled upwards, out of the arena's floor.

Suddenly, the metal gate swings of its own accord and clangs loudly shut and a metallic bolt rasps downward, sealing it shut. On the other side of the arena floor are several other gates, all closed. From atop the walls come many points of strange green light, flaring as if alive, filling the arena with strange luminescence.

The player characters realize that they have an audience, hundreds of people, the progeny of Tothmekri's court, looking at the player characters with a mix of human and inhuman eyes. Many others of their ranks appear human, particularly Stygian or Kushite in countenance, though the majority of those who watch bear a hideous, almost serpentine cast to their features.

One of those of Stygian appearance is dressed in finery as suits a king, seated upon a higher chair in a pavilion at the head of the arena, where it links to the fortress. Sitting on a smaller throne to the side of the Stygian king is a woman of exquisite beauty, though her features are marked with an obvious cruelty. She is of no race the player characters will be familiar with, though the similarity between her race and that of Xhosāth, from the dreamworld, is obvious. She licks her lips in anticipation of the violence to commence. On the other side of the king sits a young man, notably similar to Semerkhet in appearance, leaning forward with a savage glee stamped upon his features, his hands clasped and rubbing together in anticipation.

A moment later, Semerkhet emerges on the dais next to the apparent king, a smile upon his features. As he steps into the pavilion, even in the weird green light the likeness between he and the young man becomes even more obvious. One would mistake them for twins, if not for their difference in garb and posture.

Semerkhet looks to his counterpart, then raises his hands and addresses all:

"Let the games begin!"

The audience roars with bloodlust!

CONTINUATION

This adventure segues immediately into the next. However, if the gamemaster would like to extend the time spent exploring on the island, there is plenty to do here. Too much time, however, and the narrative push is lost. The player characters' main goal should be finding the Eye of Acheron and ridding themselves of its curse.

EXPERIENCE

This chapter has much higher stakes than the previous and more opportunities for experience point gain. If the player characters were inventive in their exploration of the island and dealing with the other survivors, award them each 400 experience points, and those that were exceptional in a properly Howardian fashion should gain an additional 100–150 points. Spending these experience points, however, is a different thing, and the gamemaster should approve the purchasing of any talents that seem unlikely to have been gained in the current circumstances.



BOOK TWO: CHAPTER 6



ROADS BENEATH THE EARTH



The barren branch shakes down the withered fruit,

The sea's faint footprints on the strand erase;

The sere leaves fall on a forgotten lute,

And autumn's arms enfold a dying race.

— “Autumn”, Robert E. Howard

Stranded on the island where the Stygian prince Tothmekri met his doom, the player characters discover a strange and terrible fortress ruled by Tothmekri's degenerate ancestors, descendants of the Stygian prince

and his household. Betrayed by their enemy, the Stygian Semerkhet, the player characters are trapped in a deadly gladiatorial arena with their fellow castaways, forced to battle who knows what?

WHO WANTS WHAT?

Chapter 6: *Roads Beneath the Earth* features the following non-player characters, with the following agendas:

- **SEMERKHET:** Trying to stay ahead of the game, pitting himself against his cousin Meketre.
- **PRINCE MEKETRE:** One of Tothmekri's direct descendants, eager to take control of the island and sacrifice Semerkhet to free Tothmekri from judgment.
- **KING APOPHIS:** A sinister sorcerer king of the island, secretly one of the serpent-folk. He doesn't care about any of the humans — his own people or the castaways, but he would quite like some of that magical power the Eye of Acheron can provide.
- **HEQUET:** Apophis' daughter, one of the serpent-folk and consort of Prince Meketre. She's bored, cruel, and would happily pit her lover against
- her father and seize control if they wipe each other out.
- **GALLU:** A giant monster serpent, wanting to slay.
- **TOTHMEKRI:** Trying to avoid judgment in the Halls of the Dead. If he can convince Xhosāth to take another of his line as an exchange, he can go free.
- **XHOSĀTH:** Seeking to trade the life of a noble prince to the Judges of Life and Death to free his soul from the Hell it is intended to inhabit.
- **M'WANGELE:** Still waiting for his missing staff.
- **ODAKA:** Looking for M'wangele, but also eager to destroy some ancient evil.
- **PIRATES AND ROWING SLAVES:** If any are left, they just want to survive.

OVERVIEW

The player characters are thrust into the heart of Tothmekri's degenerate kingdom, tricked into competing in his gladiatorial games. Surprisingly, they are spared by the court after surviving a gladiatorial battle and allowed limited freedom within the fortress. Bored by centuries of seclusion, Tothmekri's ancestors relish the distraction the newcomers provide.

The player characters learn that Tothmekri's spirit, trapped within the Eye of Acheron, must be awakened by Semerkhet and none other. With soul and body united, Tothmekri can finish the voyage down the River of Souls and be freed from Xhosāth's clutches. Semerkhet, haunted by his ancestor's spirit, wishes to see this through. The player characters must decide whether to help their enemy in this ritual of restoration, or to repay him in turn for his prior treachery.

They meet the primary members of the court: the ancient king Apophis, and consort Hequet, and Meketre, the last fully human descendant of Tothmekri and an instant rival to Semerkhet. As the player characters explore the strange fortress, they discover that there is no clear sense of unity among the degenerate court and may be caught up in their decadent politicking.

As things come to a head, the Black Corsairs lead a fearsome assault on the fortress in search of their missing magician, M'wangele, infiltrating the secret passages beneath the island's surface. Drawn between two worlds at once, the player characters must survive the threat of the risen dead.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

The player characters' motives for this adventure should be utterly clear — survival and escape from the island. How to deal with the Eye of Acheron and their curse is not clear when this adventure begins, however, so this is something they need to reckon with.

As with the prior chapter, a new player character could potentially be drawn from the castaways of the *Calypso* or even one of the Black Corsairs. The members of Tothmekri's court are too inhuman to be suitable as player characters.



"The snake-people were the last to go, yet at last men conquered even them and drove them forth into the waste lands of the world, there to mate with true snakes until some day, say the sages, the horrid breed shall vanish utterly. Yet the Things returned in crafty guise as men grew soft and degenerate, forgetting ancient wars."

— "The Shadow Kingdom", Robert E. Howard

TOTHMEKRI'S COURT

The current members of Tothmekri's court consist of a mix of roughly two hundred souls dwelling in the ancient fortress. They are as follows:

- **King Apophis:** The ruler of the island, one of the serpent-folk in human form. He is described on page 161.
 - **Princess Hequet:** Apophis' daughter, another of the serpent-folk in human form. See page 162 for more on her.
 - **Prince Meketre:** The oldest living descendant of Tothmekri, and a rival for Apophis' throne. He is described on page 162.
 - **Courtiers:** Tothmekri's heirs, the grandchildren of the exiled prince and his many wives, almost entirely human.
 - **Warrior Caste:** The militant guard for the court, elevated servants and bastard children of the nobles.
 - **Servant Caste:** Offspring of Tothmekri's servants and retainers, all human.
 - **The Scaled Ones:** Half-human, half-serpent-folk, they bear the marks of this ill-fated union, and grow more degenerate and inhuman with each passing generation. They dwell entirely in the warrens beneath the fortress and the island, and largely stay out of the affairs of the court.
 - **The Serpent-Folk:** Though few, they are the original denizens of the island, hiding here since the Thurian Age, and hold the true power. Most of these serpent-folk are hundreds of years old, some even more so.
- Each group is described in additional detail below.

COURTIERS, TOTHMEKRI'S HEIRS

Tothmekri's direct descendants, born of distaff yet regal Stygian blood, though only superficially touched by the serpent-folk bloodline, they have nonetheless adopted much of its inhuman aspect. They do little but exist to be served, idling their time in casual cruelty and indolence. The intellectual pursuits they pursue are limited, and thus there is little for them to do but turn on one another, with petty grievances and exaggerated social contrivances helping pass the time. They spend much of their time in lotus dreams, game-playing, or partaking in other fleshly indulgences. They are beginning to show their strange serpent-folk bloodline in their features.

They dress in the remnants of Stygian finery, centuries out of date, copied inexpertly where possible. They are beginning to show the signs of the inhuman influence upon their bloodline, however, which many go to lengths to conceal, using makeup, jewelry, or clothes to hide this. Though they are 'noble' by descent, they have no culture of nobility, no sense of social grace. They are nonetheless blood-kin to Semerkhet, and the familial resemblance is strong between them.

They are generic Minion humans, with no other notable characteristics or talents. There are perhaps a dozen of them in total. If needed, they have Society 1 and Senses 1, with Vigor 4 and Resolve 4, and any weapons they might use are wielded inexpertly.

Sample female names for them include Min-Khat, Hathor-Maat, Nebt-Het and Tef-Nut, and sample male names include Amen-Ophis, Menmet-Ra, Re-Harat and Seth-Nakht.




WARRIOR CASTE

The offspring of Tothmekri's Stygian personal guards, the warrior offspring enjoy a life almost as luxurious as does the noble caste. Meketre uses them as overseers, to keep the other servants in line, and despite the solitude and lack of any outside threat, they continue to drill and practice, often using slaves in the gladiatorial games. Rarely do they deal with outsiders, but they wear armor and bear weapons that remain from those brought over by Tothmekri so long ago.

Achoris is the current captain of the guard, dispensing orders and discipline amongst their ranks. Sample female names for others include Auset, Keket, Neema and Zahra, and sample male names include Khafara, Nuru, Salih and Thabit. There are roughly three dozen at this time, though the gamemaster may adjust this if necessary.

They are equivalent to the savage Minions described on page 320 of the **Conan** corebook, with the following modifications to their equipment. Their bows are quite

old, and in addition to the Fragile Quality, any roll of a Complication with a Ranged Weapons attack causes them to break. The warriors are also presented on page 149.

- **Soak:** 3 (Scale Vest, Helmet)
- **Kopesh (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Intense, Vicious 1
- **Shield (M):** Reach 2, 3 , 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2
- **Stygian Short Bow (M):** Range C, 4 , 2H, Fragile, Volley

SERVANT OFFSPRING

The descendants of Tothmekri's court servants, as of yet untainted by the serpent-folk bloodline. They are of a mixture of Stygian, Kushite, and Black Kingdom heritage. Cruel entertainments of Meketre's court, combined with the serpent-folk's appetite for human flesh, has caused considerable attrition amongst them, and their lifespans are short and filled with fear. The servant caste spends much of its time serving the noble caste, gathering and preparing food, among other duties. They know that among their number move true serpent-folk, but do not know who the infiltrators are, and thus their paranoia and fear is paramount.

They are generic Minion humans, with no notable characteristics or talents. If needed, they have Fortitude 1 and Senses 1, with Vigor 5 and Resolve 4. Examining any of them reveals that they bear the telltale signs of punishment and torture upon their bodies. They are not permitted to use or carry weapons, save for the twisted amusement of Meketre's gladiatorial games, in which they are pitted against one another for the delight of his jaded court.



There are at least eighty of them at this time. Sample female names include Anat, Chione, Mesenkhet and Nekhbet, and sample male names include Adom, Heru, Khaldun and Senusnet.

THE SCALED ONES

This last caste strongly exhibits the traits of their serpent-touched heritage, and are shunned by Meketre and his court, exiled to utter servitude in the most demeaning of tasks (fishing, diving, etc.) or meaningless existence in the warrens beneath the island. They are smaller than most humans, entirely hairless, and can in no way pass for human based on their appearance, with pale skin and inhuman features. They are adept in the water and move with inhuman sinuousness. It is they who rescued the castaways of the *Calypto* from drowning.

They are not given human names, as the Stygian court barely deigns to deal with them, and the serpent-folk below do not communicate with them in anything but

cold contempt and cruel orders. They are equivalent to degenerate Minions, as presented on page 315 of the **Conan** corebook, though equipped with razor-edged knives and their own sharpened teeth. There are countless scaled ones beneath the fortress.

- **Knife (M):** Reach 1, 4 , 1H, Hidden 1, Thrown, Unforgiving 1
- **Fanged Bite (M):** Reach 1, 3 , Fearsome 1, Persistent 1

THE SERPENT-FOLK

The serpent-folk are among the oldest denizens of the Hyborian kingdoms, though they have been driven into hiding and have lurked at the fringes and deepest places of the world for millennia. They thrived in the primeval epoch before even the Thurian Age, and even in that pre-Cataclysmic time they ruled the world as man struggled from primordial slime to eventually assert dominion over all the surface lands. Then, the serpent-folk ruled in secret, guiding the destiny of mankind, using strange magic to mask their appearance and appear in the semblance of men.

The human kingdoms fell unwittingly into their thrall, until the serpent-folk, perhaps rashly, attempted to seize

the throne of Valusia. In doing so, they met their greatest adversary, the Atlantean named Kull. Aided by Pictish wile, the barbaric usurper king exposed the serpent-folk for what they were, drove them from Valusia, and vowed to rid the Seven Kingdoms of their existence entirely. His campaign against them was nearly successful, and humankind grew complacent, believing that they had expunged the last of the serpent-folk from the world.

This proved to be false, as the serpent-folk had merely been driven further underground than ever before, their dark rituals almost forgotten in their haste to survive. Many degenerated and became bestial, interbreeding with 'lesser' races — including humankind — and losing much of their former power. Other serpent-folk became despondent, entombing themselves within great edifices at the edges of the world, leagues beyond humankind's domain, and waited for a brighter age to dawn where they could emerge and continue their great work. Still others, though, went into hiding and brooded, growing in malignance and foul craft, by necessity allowing their bloodlines to become tainted by contact with humanity. All the while, though, they maintained their ancient strength and will to rule over the soft race of humankind.

The serpent-folk of Tothmekri's island belong to this latter stock, led by their leader Apophis, one of the last of the serpent kings.



Those that have survived this long are still wily and possess great intelligence, though much of their sorcerous might has been lost. They are still bound by the strange weakness of their kind, unable to say or bear the hearing of the words 'ka nama kaa lajerama' due to the shaping of their jaws and throat. It is thought that the physical pain this phrase causes them is an ancient curse, some failsafe set forth by the gods who guided mankind from their dominance. This phrase was used in ancient Valusia and times beforehand to identify true men from the serpent-folk, and should a player character learn it, it could be used to identify and weaken them once more.

The ancient Acheronians fought — and thought they had conquered — the original inhabitants of the island, but had less luck exterminating them than did Kull and his allies. These serpent men escaped extermination, survived the Cataclysm, outlasted the Acheronians, and assimilated the Stygians. Centuries of inbreeding these humans has yielded a horrible race of hybrids, their bloodline evident in nearly all the offspring of Tothmekri and his court.

After all these years, few within the settlement have seen one of the serpent-folk unmasked. They are led by Apophis, ancient even among their kind, a powerful sorcerer, yet barely able to move. Blinded and transformed by corruption, his mind is nonetheless as keen as it is steeped in evil.

Only a handful of true serpent-folk remain, and those who do continue to mask themselves in human form, having slain and replaced members of the court and the servant caste, adopting their guises to infiltrate with the humans. Their presence is known, but their identities are concealed, a situation that adds to the abject paranoia in Apophis' court. The gamemaster should utilize them carefully, perhaps introducing one when a 'normal' human is slain, revealing their true nature.

Serpent-folk are described in additional detail on pages 84–85 of the **Conan** sourcebook *Kull of Atlantis*. The ones on Tothmekri's isle have lost some of their sorcerous abilities — particularly the ghostly slave and alchemical weapons Doom spends — over the course of time, though all are nonetheless still powerful foes.

Should any of them require it, the names they provide are Sarduris, Upis, Arubani, Shelardi, and Tehu. It is extraordinarily difficult for a human to tell the difference between male and female serpent-folk, and they adopt whatever illusory guise suits their purposes at the moment.

SERPENT-FOLK DENIZEN (NEMESIS)

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 11(2) | 9 | 10(2) | 10 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 14 | 9 | |

FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 1 | Movement | 2 |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 3 | Social | 2 |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 15 Nemesis, Resolve 11
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 4

ATTACKS

- **Dagger (Melee):** Reach 2, 7 , Unbalanced, Parrying
- **Envenomed Bite (Melee):** Reach 1, 6 , Persistent 4
- **Hissing Display (Threaten):** Range M, 8 , mental

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Fear 1**
- **Inhuman Awareness 2:** Serpent-folk identify each other through scent and have a strong ophidian scent when not disguised. Although they lack external ears, their hearing is extremely acute, sensing vibrations through their inner ears and bodily bones. They always hear a person approaching before it sees them. These same finely tuned senses allow them to determine mood and intent of anyone near them.
- **Inhuman Personality 2**
- **Sorcery:** All serpent-folk can fling a web of sorcery about their faces, as an actor dons a mask, so that they resemble anyone they wish to. This works in much the same way as the *Form of a Beast* spell (**Conan** corebook, pages 179–181). This mask only falls upon their death or when they wish it to.
- **Venom:** If a serpent-folk's bite inflicts a wound it numbs the location with a paralyzing venom. Any tests made using the numbed location are at two steps of Difficulty higher than normal. If the location is the torso or head, all tests are affected. As a Standard Action, a victim can make a Daunting (D3) Resistance test to shrug off this effect. A minimum of one test must be made every day. Failure causes the character to suffer a Wound as the numbness begins to affect the rest of the body. Those with the Healing skill can make a similar test at the same Difficulty to assist in overcoming this venom.
- **Weakness:** The phrase "Ka nama kaa lajerama!" cannot be said by serpent-folk, and it undoes the magic of their sorcery, immediately ending any spell effect currently active, including their illusory masks

SCENE I: THE PIT OF DEATH

Following Semerkhet's betrayal, still as fresh as his command for the gladiatorial games to begin, several shadowy figures upon the stands leap down, into the arena. They immediately engage the player characters, curved blades at the ready!

Back inside the arena, the other gates are suddenly opened from the inside, and thrust into the arena floor, others stagger into the light, a handful of fellow castaways from the *Calypso*. The audience begins to chant in some language, unfamiliar to any of the player characters.

There are as many gladiators as there are player characters and castaways. They fight to the death or until unable to fight. They fight as one or more Mobs in combat (*Conan* corebook, pages 306–307) and use the Interpose action when appropriate.

WARRIOR CASTE GLADIATORS (MINION)



| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 9 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Agility | | Brawn | Coordination |
| 9 | | 9 | 9 |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 1 | Movement | 1 |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 5, Armor 3 (Scale Vest, Helmet)
- **Soak:** Resolve 5, Courage 1 (Degenerate)


ATTACKS

- **Kopesh (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Intense, Vicious 1
- **Shield (M):** Reach 2, 3 , 1H, Knockdown, Shield 2


SPECIAL ABILITIES


- **Pit Fighting:** A gladiator is accustomed to fighting in this arena and knows it well. They may Withdraw as a Minor Action (instead of a Standard Action) and gain an additional +1d20 when performing any Retaliate Reaction performed while within the arena.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Dirty Tricks:** Upon a roll of an effect, a gladiator can spend X Doom to activate an additional attack such as throwing sand in the eyes of an opponent, causing them to slip in the sandy footing beneath, etc. This instills a Condition (*Conan* corebook, page 126–127) such as Blind, Hindered, or Staggered, with X equal to the  of damage or the additional steps of Difficulty imposed.

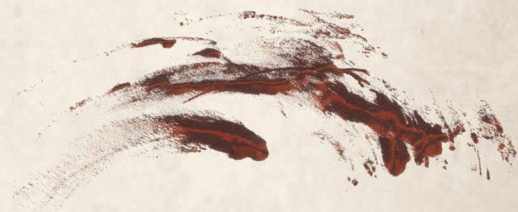
As the battle goes on, the player characters may be surprised to hear the audience cheering and gasping whenever any serious injury is delivered, even when one of their own gladiators are dispatched. The player characters have no means of knowing this, but the audience is so jaded from all-too-infrequent battles with slaves or wild animals that the sight of any real fight is a cause for celebration.

To expedite the treatment of non-player characters, rather than rolling for each individual attack and parry, the gamemaster should roll 1  on the following table once per round per non-player character, castaway and gladiator alike:

| GLADIATOR BATTLE | |
|---|--|
| Roll | Outcome |
| 1 | Injured, but not seriously. |
| 2 | Incapacitated and down, but still alive. |
| 3–4 | No effect. |
|  | Killed. |

When the battle is over, the older man gestures lazily. With a mechanical rasp, a circular gate barely a foot in diameter on the wall slides to one side. The crowd grows hushed. A moment later, something pale and scaled begins to move inside the darkness, then like lightning it strikes, fanged maw opening, and engulfs one of the pirates whole in a single horrible bite. He barely has a moment to scream before he is a wriggling lump in its throat. Its full length emerges, a monstrous albino snake, crimson-eyed, nearly fifty feet from head-to-tail.

Even Semerkhet is taken aback by the sudden appearance of this primeval horror. It rears above the player characters, hungry for more!






GALLU, THE MOTHER SERPENT (NEMESIS)

This monstrous creature is a beloved pet of the court, a massive and terrifying serpent thought to be mother to many of the ophidians that haunt the warrens beneath the island and elsewhere on the island.



| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 8 | 3 | 6 | 8 |
| Agility | | Brawn | Coordination |
| 12 | | 14 | 7 |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 3 | Movement | 3 |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |

| STRESS & SOAK | |
|--|--|
| ■ Stress: Vigor 15, Resolve 9 | |
| ■ Soak: Armor 1 (Scales), Courage 4 | |

| ATTACKS | |
|--|--|
| ■ Bite (M): Reach 2, 7  | |
| ■ Envelop (M): Reach 2, 7  , Grappling | |
| ■ Constrict (M): Reach 1, 7  , Unforgiving 2, only on Grappled targets | |

| SPECIAL ABILITIES | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ■ Dread Creature 3 | |
| ■ Fear 2 | |
| ■ Monstrous Creature | |

| SPECIAL ABILITIES | |
|---|--|
| ■ Swallow: Once per round, Gallu can spend 3 Doom to swallow a target instead of causing damage with its bite. The swallow attack itself has Reach 1, 5  , Fearsome 3, Grappling, Persistent 3, Stun. | |
| ■ Thrash: If dealt a Wound, Gallu may spend 1 Doom to make an immediate Retaliate Action against the attacker (5  , Area, Knockdown, Non-lethal). | |

As it attacks, a drumming starts from the stands, feet rhythmically stamping as the audience chants in Old Stygian. The serpent mother fights until it is severely wounded (all Vigor gone, 2+ Wounds), at which point it attempts to Withdraw, fleeing back through the gate and tunnel it emerged from.

If it is killed, the audience is stunned, the entire arena going silent, then erupting into exclamations of shock and angry babble. A dozen guards leap to the edge of the arena, short Stygian bows pointed downward at the player characters and any other survivors. The bows creak as if in unison, when a voice shouts out in a strangely accented Stygian: “Hold!”

The young man who could be Semerkhet’s twin stands and holds his hand up, causing all within the stands to pause, the archers turning to him waiting for instructions.

“They have earned their freedom. None have bested the Mother Serpent before. Perhaps they have other virtues to offer. Other... entertainments.”

He turns then to the woman and the man sitting near him, and the apparent king nods. He then orders the guards:

“See to it that they are given quarters and shown our hospitality. They should be treated with respect and all courtesy this humble court can muster. Let them be presented to us in the throne room when we request it. It is not often that we receive such a novelty as guests, so let us be gracious hosts.”

“Lay down your weapons, my guests. You will not be harmed. I offer you all courtesy of our court. I am Prince Meketre, of the noble line of the kings and queens of Stygia. My father was Nenhotep, son of Tothmekri. Welcome to our court.”

A successful Average (D1) Insight test reveals that he is in fact sincere, though he is concealing something, perhaps some hidden agenda. Standing nearby, Semerkhet seems to be surprised at this turn of events. The lips of the noblewoman — a princess, perhaps — curl wryly, as if with delight at the prospect of the novel and the unexpected. He orders that the player characters be taken to his own chambers, fed and given every comfort that they require.

With that, a dozen guards leap down into the arena and a gate opens. They surround the player characters, asking for their weapons, beckoning them to follow into the darkness behind the gate.

SCENE II: WHAT LIES BENEATH

The player characters and any surviving non-player characters are led through a long tunnel and through a series of gates, attended by guards like those accompanying them. To either side are barred cells, long emptied. The whole place is illuminated with strange fist-sized stones set

into small niches into the walls just above shoulder level. The escort at the lead brushes his hands upon them as he goes and as he does so, green light flares into being. These green fire-stones are common to many ancient ruins of Acheron and older, and the craft of their making has long since been lost. Anyone paying attention may notice that the guard at the lead does not seem to need them for light, either practiced at moving in these tunnels or possessing extremely keen vision in pitch darkness.

The procession leaves the tunnels and enters what must be the fortress' inner courtyard, a long, narrow space with terraced steps as it slopes upward. Several towers of unusual architecture jut above the walls. Many are the small buildings upon either side of the courtyard space, leading up to what seems to be a regal hall from its outward semblance. Though less overgrown and decrepit than the outside, the interior of the fortress is nonetheless in shabby condition, walls crumbled or otherwise born down by the ever-crushing weight of ages.

Though it is night, it seems as if all the fortress' denizens are out to observe the player characters' entry into their home, this redoubt that has no doubt been as remote as it is lonely for generations. A glimpse back shows that the arena the player characters recently emerged from reveals that from the arena led a wide staircase and that their passage was followed above by the strange, doomed court, some scrambling to get ahead of them. Others, though, have stepped out of the buildings, and torches crackle and sputter in the night air, honest light rather than the dismal lambency of the green stones below.

As the player characters are escorted forward, they see more guards, servants, and courtiers emerging from the buildings along the way, passively watching them go. Any Focus in Society or Lore informs the player characters that these folks are clad in dress and fashions appropriate to a Stygian noble's household, though outdated and shabby with wear, inexpertly copied or repaired. Many wear slight masks, veils, use fans to conceal their features, as well as extensive use of makeup. A successful Challenging (D2) Insight test made against any of these folk reveals that they seem shy, almost ashamed of their current state, though many also stare openly at the player characters as if they have never seen an outsider.

The guards speak little to them, and only in strangely accented and somewhat antiquated Stygian. A few know some words in Kushite and Shemitish, but commands are limited to single-word answers and questions are tersely answered, if at all.

Glimpses around at the rest of the fortress reveal that it is indeed ancient and does not seem to have been wrought by any culture currently active within the Hyborian kingdoms or beyond. Decorative motifs, worn by age, are alien, and any architectural flourishes that might identify the builders

are long gone. A casual estimate puts the fortress' age to before the founding of Stygia, and a successful Average (D1) Lore test reveals that they are in fact older than even ancient Acheron, likely dating to the pre-Cataclysmic age. The denizens of the court are clearly squatting in the ruins of a much grander and more ancient people, apparently long vanished.

At this point, if any remaining crew from the *Calypso* — pirates or slaves — are still around, they are separated from the player characters and taken into another structure nearby.

INTO THE LAP OF LUXURY

The player characters are ushered through the fortress to an intact building near the main hall, and led through the doors, through curtained doorways, and enter a large and opulent room with a large circular central bath within it, easily four yards across and a yard deep, its mostly intact mosaic tiles a welcome relief to the somber greyness of the rest of the fortress. The room's walls are painted with bright colours and curtains, though worn and faded with age, hang throughout the chamber. Surrounding it are alcoves with curtains drawn back, filled with well-crafted wooden furniture. Several servants follow the player characters into the chamber, one of them ordering the others to warm the tub, to bring fresh garments, toiletries, and food.


Stoppers are pulled from stone chutes leading into the bath, and immediately hot water jets forth into the tub, the steam smelling vaguely of sulfur. Servants light bundles of aromatic herbs to mask that acrid scent, and soon smokey steam fills the chamber. Other doors lead from the room, but servants discretely close and lock those as they enter. A suitable variety of fresh garments are brought forth, a mix of Stygian old garments and some of more recent make, less expert and fancy in design. The servants gesture at the large square tub, and leave the player characters to their bathing.

Food and drink are brought soon after and placed on knee high tables alongside long low couches. There is fresh water and a powerful, heady dark liquor made from aromatic herbs, fiery but pleasant enough to the taste. Anyone making a successful Challenging (D2) Observation or Alchemy test tastes that the liquor, though potent, does not seem to be drugged. The food consists entirely of fresh fruit and seafood, easily recognizable, and it is served on a mix of wooden and golden plates. The goblets set before the player characters are golden as well.

Examining any of the servants reveals that they are human, a mix of Stygian and Kushite heritage, and their accent is similarly outdated and affected. A successful Daunting (D3) Linguistics test reveals that while this is not Old Stygian, it is nonetheless not a recent dialect and is one favored by the court several generations ago, perhaps

altering through lack of any contemporaries or outside speakers. Like the guards, their speech contains a mix of Kushite words and some other terms that seem old and out of date. See page 146 for more about the servants.

Any questions are met politely but without much elaboration. The clothes date back at least a century, to Tothmekri's court, including some more recent copies. They do not reveal much about the inner workings of the court, other than to identify the king as Aphohis and the woman as Hequet, Prince Meketre's consort. They excuse themselves to give the player characters time to relax, clean themselves, and eat and drink.

Other furnishings are minimal. Braziers provide light, some chests contain clothes and a large variety of personal effects befitting a prince (Semerkhet's, inherited from Tothmekri), and even a rack with a suit of antiquated Stygian armor, kopesh, dagger, and helmet. Though chased in gold and of the highest quality (an additional  in damage, 1 additional armor point), they show few signs of regular use. Another desk holds a few books and scrolls, all in Stygian. No writing implements are present.

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE PRINCE

After the player characters have some time alone, the doors open and several new guards and servants file into the room, accompanying Prince Meketre. Upon seeing them, he smiles and spreads his arms broadly, though he is apparently still ill at ease dealing with strangers. He takes a seat on one of the couches, picking a piece of scarlet fruit from one of the golden bowls and pouring himself a deep goblet of the fiery liquor.

Again, he welcomes the player characters, and asks if the accommodations are to their satisfaction. His own chambers are adjacent, he explains, and they are being shown the same level of comfort he enjoys. He does not apologize for the battle in the arena, but explains that he had been deceived by Semerkhet, his newly discovered cousin. It is apparent that he is not especially pleased with the set of circumstances and does not relish the appearance of another of Tothmekri's heirs.

A Dangerous Proposition

Guards station themselves at the doorway, and he speaks in low tones, as if he does not want to be heard by them. Rather than reading it all aloud in one go, the gamemaster should paraphrase the following conversation based on the player character questions and responses.

"I must speak frankly and make an offer to you. As you can see, my own position at court is a curious one. We are ruled on the island of Nesus by Apophis, but he is no Stygian,

and it is not seemly for one of Tothmekri's line to bow to any king. It is not possible to return to the mainland, to reclaim my inheritance. I cannot strike against him, for fear of loyalists who move unseen among the court, and those who would not support me if I claimed the throne myself."

"How do I trust you? Because I know what you have encountered in the other world of the dead. I know that you follow Tothmekri's soul and that you are caught up in the enchantment of that strange black jewel. I am no oracle, but Tothmekri himself has spoken to me in visions. He fears the judgment that he faces in the Halls of the Dead, and he resents being a slave to an Acheronian wizard."

"As for our history... yes, this is the household of Prince Tothmekri of Khemi, onetime heir to the Stygian throne. Treachery turned his father, the king, against him, and he was forced to flee with his household across the Western Sea to this island, Nesus. He had learned about it in a crumbling clay tablet found within the archives at Khemi. Tothmekri took with him his considerable wealth, ships laden with gold and jewels, as well as enough guards and servants to survive for decades. They barely made it to the island and soon after, claimed this fortress. Perhaps it was some ancient redoubt of the empire of Acheron, perhaps older still. The inhabitants of the island, few that they were, nonetheless held onto the place, a curious people untouched by the world's movement and the turning of the ages."

"Tothmekri was, I admit, a madman. He lost his mind in exile and burnt his flagship to prevent any from returning. He took one of the island people as his mate and fathered my own father. In time, though, he met his end when a group of pirates came out of the sea. How they knew where it was, I will never know. They stormed the fortress and slew many, the rest of the household taking refuge elsewhere on the island, in the volcanic tunnels that run beneath it. They returned to a looted palace, but much of their wealth was concealed, and remains here still. Years later, our people have yet to recover from that dastardly raid. Who they were, we do not know, but King Apophis says that the name of their captain was named Tranicos the Red-handed."

"As for the current rule here... Tothmekri, though a prince, had no interest in claiming this island, thinking it beneath him. He swore a pact to the island's 'king' that he would remain a guest only, and thus his household came to serve a hereditary king, whose descendant you have met. In that bygone time, a curse was wrought, a bargain agreed to by all concerned, that should one of Tothmekri's line betray this pact and claim the throne without being rightfully offered it, a curse would befall him."

"King Apophis, however, lacks a male heir, and will not designate me as the next king. I have no desire to risk the curse falling upon my own head by moving against

him, and thus I come to you with a proposition. Should something befall the king, should he become incapacitated or be unable to rule... then the crown would pass to his only child... the princess Hequet."

"I have the means of freeing you from this curse of the jewel. Hequet is no stranger to the magical arts, and she has access to her father's secrets. If she aids you, you might never again be drawn into the afterworld. She would see me take the throne, even if only to rule a kingdom so minor as this. Perhaps, eventually, we might take what remains of our fortune and return to the world. Even if I were still to remain in exile, it would be an exile amongst men, and not alone and forsaken beyond mortal thought."

"As for my apparent cousin Semerkhet, I am convinced he cannot be trusted. He came to us and was captured skulking around. Only his resemblance to me kept him alive. Tothmekri's shade told me to expect your coming, and when asked, Semerkhet offered you up as participants in the tedious bloody games Apophis continues to insist upon. Even now my cousin conspires with Apophis to betray his ancestor. He believes in nothing save for himself, and he would seize what power he can at whatever cost, no matter what happens to Tothmekri's soul in the afterworld."

At this, the prince bids them to consider his words carefully, to sleep on the matter, and that they will be presented to the court in the morning. They are free to explore the fortress, but must be accompanied wherever they go, to avoid any misunderstandings, of course.

Meketre leaves, giving the player characters the freedom to rest upon any of the low, padded couches and floor cushions, likely a far more luxurious accommodation than they have had since they left Messantia.

Exploring the Fortress

True to his word, the player characters can leave the bath chamber if they wish and go exploring the castle, though a group of two guards attempts to go with them at all times (see page 146), standing a respectful distance from them, also conveniently allowing one of them to flee if need be. One of the guards keeps in his hand a silver whistle, ready to call for additional help if threatened. If the player characters simply kill their chaperones and stash the bodies, they should find some means of silencing the men before they can signal for help.

If they attempt to sneak out, several high windows can be reached from inside Meketre's salon with a successful Average (D1) Athletics test, allowing entry onto nearby rooftops and eventually to the courtyard. A successful Average (D1) Stealth test is required to avoid being heard. This gives them the full run of the fortress interior, and they can also walk along the outer wall-top.

In the middle of the night, not much is happening, and most of the doors are closed, or drapes have been drawn over the houses and chambers of the fortress that lack solid doors. Some servants move discretely throughout the grounds, but this seems to be in the course of their regular duties. Every so often, a muffled groan or devilish laugh sounds from a curtained alcove, and from time to time a curtain is drawn or a window left open to reveal one of the fortress' denizens watching the player characters as they explore. There are few places they can go without drawing some sort of attention. See the description of the fortress (following) for more information.

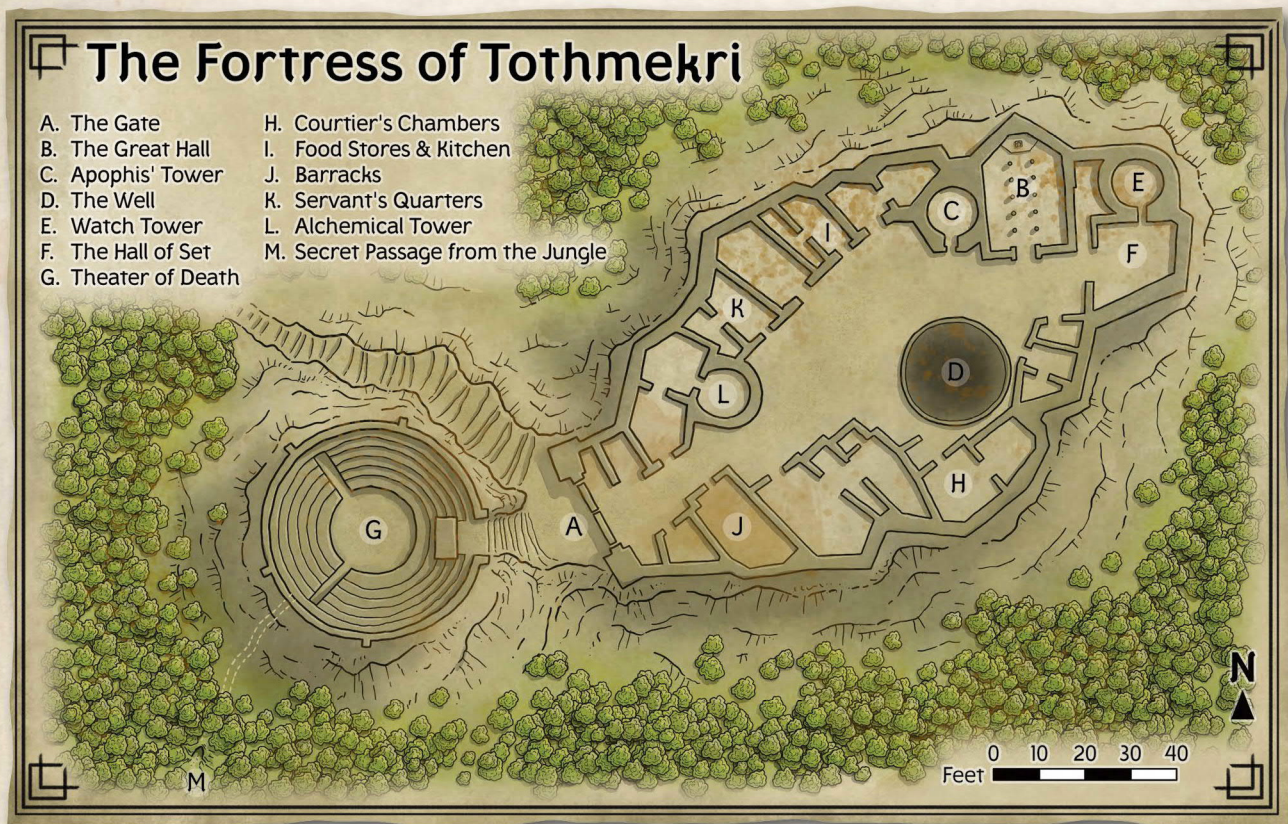
THE MYSTERIOUS FORTRESS

Described in additional detail on page 154, this structure was fashioned out of basalt by the serpent people tens of thousands of years ago and shows its antiquity. Some portions outside the main wall have crumbled and are overgrown, and new-made walls erected to replace them. Roughly a third of the fortress is in complete ruin through the inexorable force of time: vines infiltrate and crumble the walls, attrition through the elements; and human intervention as well, with bricks and stones from one area being salvaged, weakening one structure to shore up another. The overall sense here is that though this place may outlast yet another age of humankind, it has been forgotten and is in decline, evidenced by its inhabitants as well as its condition.

Though the rocky promontory itself is formed of volcanic basalt, it is not volcanic in and of itself, and is a remnant from eruptions hundreds of thousands of years ago from The Slumbering Giant (page 136). Beneath the fortress is an incredible warren of natural and shaped tunnels and chambers. Some are functional in purpose, such as for storage and water, a great many are for the entombment of the dead, while others are for purposes either inscrutable or long forgotten.

One element of the fortress that should be evident with any exploration is that it has been appropriated by several cultures over the century, each painting or otherwise attempting to erase the influence and prominence of the prior one. Serpent-men motifs were carved away and largely removed by the Acheronians, and the Stygians in turn painted over and tried to remake the fortress in the semblance of a remote Stygian noble palace such as Tothmekri had once inhabited.

Though they did not dwell here, Trancos and his pirates definitively left their mark upon the place, as well, stealing much of the visible wealth from the walls and possessions of its inhabitants, prising gems free from their housing in the architecture, and otherwise



taking as much as they could that was not affixed too firmly to remove or inaccessible. Fires set by the pirates caused considerable damage, as well, and even to this day, generations later, soot cakes the interior spaces of some of the chambers of the fortress, abandoned after the raid.

Below are the main structures, and a table at the end provides a random description of various chambers within the structure should the player characters decide to explore the castle unsupervised.

The Outer Walls

The defensive wall surrounding the fortress is somewhat primitive and built in a Stygian fashion. Rather than a sheltering retaining wall, the top of the wall is flat and broad, with plenty of room to walk upon. Generally, anyone climbing up the wall or fighting upwards is at a serious disadvantage. The walls are not well-kept and crumbling in places. If the player characters are sneaking around on the top of the outer wall, the gamemaster should require an Average (D1) terrain test for the unsteady footing and a similar Stealth test to navigate it quietly. Failure means that the player characters must double back or go around another way, while a Complication indicates that they either fall or dislodge enough stones to cause a racket.

The Gate (A)

The sole exterior entrance to the fortress is a gate winding outside the arena, closed by a large iron-and-wooden door barred from the inside, closed for decades. The entry is a juncture with the pathway below that which connects the arena to the rest of the fortress, and above it on both sides are usually stationed at least two warriors (see page 146), armed with spears and Stygian bows.

Opening the gate while the guards are there exposes the player characters to at least two rounds of arrow fire and requires a Dire (D4) Athletics test to draw the rusted bar and force open the rusted doors, overgrown with thick vines and stuck fast. Only a Dire (D4) Stealth test can mask the sound that makes, a great metal shriek and wooden scrape against stone, audible to anyone awake and within earshot.

The Great Hall (B)

The seat of power in the fortress, this is the throne room for the serpent-folk King Apophis and has been for thousands of years, though he and his folk were driven into hiding during the Acheronian's brief reign. The hall is high-vaulted and narrow, somewhat claustrophobic given the extreme height of the ceiling. Slits in the upper walls admit rays of light, but most of the hall's illumination is provided with a combination of hanging braziers and regular placement of green fire-stones, giving the place a smoky, strange light.

The whole chamber is worked with old Stygian and Acheronian patterns, many of the decorative frescos and mosaics upon the walls have been defaced with gems and precious stones prized out where they once shone brightly. The sensation is a bit unsettling, as many of these depicted noble Stygians whose eyes have been gouged out — the result of Tranicos' greedy pirates and a lack of any ambition to restore or replace them.

The most prominent features of the room are a high-backed throne with lesser chairs set to either side of it, and a long table before where dines the court. Many small alcoves line the walls, where lesser members of the court dine. Corridors lead to a kitchen, servant quarters, and into Apophis' tower, adjoining.

Apophis' Tower (C)

The serpent-king's personal abode, this tower is still sumptuously appointed, and the doors are solidly locked, barred from within at night. This would require a Dire (D4) Thievery test to bypass, and the ground floor contains a staircase that winds down into the dark warrens beneath the fortress and continues upward into the tower floors above. Each floor is roughly eight yards in diameter, and the tower itself is four stories high.

The ground level is largely empty, though when the king sleeps at least two trusted warriors are on duty at all times (these are likely serpent-folk in human guises, see page 147). Upon the first floor is a sitting room with comfortable couches, furnishings, and here the king dines. The next floor is given to his private chambers, a bed that seems more a nest than a proper human bed, chests of clothing, and the like.

The uppermost floor is a ritual space, the floor emblazoned with mystical diagrams and etchings that were old when first humankind crawled out of rude apedom. Stains in the cracks of the stone floor indicate that it is used frequently and that blood sacrifice is often utilized here. Racks of scrolls and tablet stands display a veritable archive of magical knowledge, most of it in the serpent-folk tongue of Aklo. This strange, curious script is almost certainly like nothing the player characters have seen before. Recognizing and deciphering it is a Dire (D4) Linguistics test, which reveals that this sorcerous library is vast and contains nearly any spell a sorcerer would want to cast. In game purposes, the contents of the library can serve as a reference library for Sorcery (*Conan* corebook, pages 141 and 143). However, in addition to the Resolve cost for learning any serpent-folk spell, the sorcerer earns a point of Despair when learning the spell. This can be removed through the normal means but is a characteristic of sending the human mind into the dark, alien pathways required by serpent-folk magic.

If encountered in his chambers, King Apophis first appears as an infirm old man, enfeebled and barely able to move, but if threatened, he quickly sheds his human guise and moves with terrifying speed and cunning. A curious hole in the wall of each chamber leads into a narrow, vertical shaft, an escape route for the serpent-king should he be threatened.

The Well (D)

This large, central well is a straight drop down into unfathomable depths. No surrounding wall or ridge blocks entry to it, and there is also no pulley, no rope, nor are there any buckets or troughs alongside. A successful Average (D1) Observation test looking down into the well reveals that the surface seems to be moving considerably. Anyone foolhardy enough to climb into the well discovers that what seems to be water is in fact a living surface of countless water-serpents (Minion venomous snakes, *Conan* corebook, page 330) over a relatively shallow supply of water. Many small chutes and drains lead from the well and allow them to come and go.

A successful Obtain Information Momentum spend reveals that there is a body down there, covered in the blanket of snakes. Should some means of identifying them become available, it is one of the Shemitish pirates, his body grotesquely swollen from hundreds of envenomed bites. Below the carpet of serpents are many, many more bones, all human.

The Watch Tower (E)

The highest spot on the island other than the near-dormant volcano, the watch tower always maintains a steady vigil of one servant, night and day, but has little else of interest. Inside are mostly filled with spiders and small snakes, and vines crawl up its side inside and out. A spiral staircase winds up throughout its interior around a central column, opening to a single covered chamber on top, open upon all sides. A single bronze gong hangs there, and any servant who does not signal the approach of a ship — or a pirate fleet! — expects a summary execution, even after all these years.

The Hall of Set (F)

Built across from the entry to the Great Hall, this is a small temple to the Old Father Serpent, the Stygian patron god of Set. Unlike other rooms and facilities within the fortress, this has been maintained and is in good condition, with lurid murals on the walls depicting the snake god encircling the world, an apocalyptic Ouroboros. The walls are covered with mosaics depicting Set and are also inscribed in Aklo, the serpent-folk tongue. Rather than vertical columns inside, a winding serpent motif fills the room going up and down the walls, to a large serpent-head that looms over the sacrificial altar. Braziers normally light the place, but it is currently empty and dark.

A single altar stands at the head of the chamber, its surface pocked and stained from many blood sacrifices, with channels cut into the stone to drip into golden basins. A successful Challenging (D2) Observation test reveals that the altar has been used recently, the blood in the drain channels relatively fresh.

Anyone of Stygian or Kushite heritage, or anyone with Lore Focus of 2+ automatically knows that having a sacrificial altar to Set is nothing remarkable and is in fact part of usual high holy days. As Set is the patron god of the Stygian people, the presence of this temple, while sinister in and of itself, is culturally appropriate, even expected, rather than being a dark secret.

The Arena/Theater of Death (G)

The arena is described on page 133. Further exploration within its under-chambers reveals almost a dozen cells of various sizes, with gates either missing or replaced with wooden bars. Some of the cells have collapsed, some still contain the skeletons of humans from the court abandoned there to starve and die, as there is no other prison or jail within the fortress. Old racks of weapons still exist here, a variety of short swords, spears, shields, and some old metal helmets and scale hauberks in poor condition.

Courtiers' Chambers (H)

Apophis' courtiers spend most of their time in idle cruelty or a lotus-drugged haze. Their quarters are appointed sumptuously with the remains of the finery that Tothmekri's court brought with them, that which was not appropriated by the pirates. They have replaced some of the furniture with crude replicas, but their lassitude is such that they would rather exert themselves torturing servants with lash, brand, blades, or more insidious methods, than attempt to better themselves with learning or any other activity. For the most part, though, if the player characters enter one of their chambers after dark, they are asleep on couches, bowls of lotus-petals nearby. Servants may be on hand, still ensnared for their abuse, or they may have been slain, their bodies cooling and ignored until other servants can come and bear them away.

Food Stores and Kitchen (I)

This chamber contains both normal food stores (fruits, vegetables, dried meat and fish, etc.) and what meager grains come from the island, but also is where the lotus is prepared for the noble courtiers. Large clay barrels contain some of the fiery herbal liquor favored by the island's denizens, as they have little luck at growing grain for beer or grapes for wine. Other than that, it's an average food preparation area, with the usual assortment of kitchen cooking and serving implements.

The Barracks (J)

The barracks house most of the warrior-caste of the castle, with a common room and table for eating and a small lavatory pit outside. As time has winnowed the number of warriors to a small number, each warrior has a small personal space divided by a clay brick wall, though there is little more than a wooden bed, a basin for water, some clothing hung upon wooden pegs, and a rack for any currently unused weapons and armor.

Servants' Quarters (K)

Rudimentary and under-furnished, these are basically small dormitories with several beds apiece. Over the years, they have been decorated a bit and show some signs of personalization, but for the most part these quarters are wholly utilitarian. A few secret caches of food, valuables, or even a weapon might be found, but they are regularly discovered and confiscated. Paranoia is rife among the servants, for good reason, as their numbers are regularly infiltrated by serpent-folk temporarily stealing their guise and reporting any irregularities to Hequet, who sees to the discipline.

Alchemical Tower (L)

The onetime dwelling of Tothmekri's personal alchemist and physician, now mostly deserted save for a small area where lotus petals are dried and readied for various preparations. A stone table sits in the center of the room, topped with a single slab of marble. The walls are lined with shelves and nooks, each with jars of clay, glass, and metal, all filled with desiccated herbs and plant matter, or the residue of medicines whose potency has long since passed. At any given time, there are bowls with at least ten doses each of black and yellow lotus (*Conan* corebook, page 166) being prepared into tinctures for use. Several wooden boxes once held medical and surgical tools, but most have been taken for use on the uninjured and soon-to-be-injured. Despite the age, there is enough salvageable material here that anyone desiring to use it as an Alchemy laboratory or a Healing facility (*Conan* corebook, page 141) can find enough to serve 1 ☞ uses (minimum one).

Other Chambers

To determine the nature of a chamber within the fortress, roll 1d20 twice or pick desired results, modified as appropriate. If a copy of *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities* is available, the gamemaster is encouraged to supplement this ruined fortress with material found therein.



FORTRESS CHAMBERS

| Roll | Furnishings | Roll | Inhabitants |
|-------|---|-------|--|
| 1-4 | Choked with so much rubble it is nearly impossible to enter. | 1-4 | None. |
| 5-7 | Mostly empty, save for some detritus common to empty spaces. | 5-7 | Spiders, snakes, small birds, or perhaps only the sign of their spoor. |
| 8-9 | Abandoned, full of burnt furniture, empty and cracked seashells, animal bones, rubble, weeds, etc. | 8-9 | 2 🐍 (minimum 1) servants (see page 146). |
| 10-12 | A workspace, either carpentry, metalwork, weaving, netmaking, or some other craft. | 10-12 | 2 🐍 (minimum 1) courtiers (see page 146). On an effect, accompanied by 2 🐍 servants (see page 146). If only a single courtier is present, they are in a lotus-induced stupor. |
| 13-15 | Chamber in use, though not currently occupied. Furnishings are humble, likely a servant's sleeping place. | 13-15 | Fresh human corpse. Roll 1 🐍: 1-2 means they are from <i>Calypso</i> ; 3-4 is a member of the household staff; a 🐍 is one of the Black Corsairs from the <i>Bahari</i> . |
| 16-17 | Once quarters, now a torture chamber. A stone slab is in the middle of the room, and rings set into the floor, walls, and ceiling provide ample places to tie a captive. Various sharp and cruelly fashioned torture implements are arrayed upon a low stone table. Braziers provide light and heat for causing pain. | 16-17 | Lots and lots of snakes, a Minion venomous swarm of vermin (Conan corebook, page 332). |
| 18-19 | Rubble containing the skeletal remains of those who died in Tranicos' raid. Broken skulls stare hollowly at the player characters. | 18-19 | A large Minion serpent, coiled and sleeping. Roll 1 🐍: 1-2 venomous; 3-4 constrictor; 🐍 one additional serpent (roll again for type, adding serpents if this result is rolled again). See Conan corebook, pages 328 and 330. |
| 20 | Unsteady floor. Some items of gold are visible against the far wall, and entry into the space causes a collapse into one of the chambers below the fortress. Make a Daunting (D3) Acrobatics test to avoid falling through and taking 4 🐍 damage. See page 157 for more information. | 20 | Ghostly slave of the serpent-folk. This 'shadow of the lost' was slain by one of the serpent-folk and is now its servant in the afterlife. Equivalent to a normal ghost (Conan corebook, page 337), it may be quite faded (from Acheron) or more recent (Tothmekri's court). |

THE WARRENS BELOW

The entire fortress sits atop an old volcanic promontory and is riddled with caverns, lava tubes, and other tunnels carved by human and inhuman hands. These are too complex and too many to detail (see the map on page 154) and instead should seem a nightmarish warren of twisting, darkened passages in which nothing is certain and any manner of horror could be encountered.

Many small entrances to the warrens are dotted throughout the fortress above, concealed behind curtains, secret panels in the floors, or otherwise hidden in alcoves. Some are shaped and sculpted, natural entries into the

under-chambers such as might exist in any castle or stronghold in the Hyborian Age, while others have clearly been made after the fortress' building, and bear witness to its true masters.

It is in these warrens that Tothmekri's court took refuge while Bloody Tranicos and his reavers raided the castle, but now the tunnels have been given over entirely to the hybrid beings called the scaled ones (see page 146).

The nature of the warren itself is that the walls and chambers are either one of three types, and if needed the gamemaster should roll 1 🐍 to determine which: 1-2 natural basalt and igneous rock; 3-4 carved by Acheronian

hands and perhaps later by the Stygians; 🐍 clawed into the very rock by serpent-folk, the walls scored with many sharp ridges. Throughout the warrens are small tubes breaking off from the main channels where the scaled ones have clawed small nests, dark bolt-holes less than a human's height where one or more sleep entwined.

When exploring the tunnels, the most overwhelming impression is that of an animal nest, foul-smelling to most humans. Scales litter the floor everywhere, and bones are so prevalent that they are often crushed underfoot. There is no illumination here save for the occasional beam of sunlight or moonlight from a high ceiling that opens to the surface, rarely enough to admit much more

than a few meager rays and some tiny bit of fresh air. The player characters should never feel comfortable there, and at any moment they might encounter one of the scaled ones moving through the darkness or emerging from one of the bolt-holes unexpectedly, seizing someone by the arm or leg.

The gamemaster should call for frequent terrain tests here, usually either Average (D1) or Challenging (D2), and the conditions of being pitch dark, unfamiliar, and confined may increase the Difficulty of many tasks. Whenever desired, the gamemaster should roll 2d20 on the following table, as above with the surface of the fortress, to determine the purpose of any particular section of the warrens and who its inhabitants (if any) are.

| WARREN CHAMBERS | | | |
|-----------------|--|-------|--|
| Roll | Furnishings | Roll | Inhabitants |
| 1-4 | Empty. | 1-4 | None. |
| 5-7 | Mostly empty, save for some trash, including human bones. | 5-7 | A scaled one sleeping. |
| 8-9 | Storage for human supplies, long since abandoned. | 8-9 | 1+1🐍 of the scaled ones, carrying a human corpse. |
| 10-12 | Nest where the scaled ones sleep in a pile of filthy refuse, old tattered clothes and curtains and tapestries from the fortress above, and rushes of dried grass. | 10-12 | A few small snakes or perhaps only the sign of their spoor. |
| 13-15 | A rotting human corpse, half-eaten, weeks old, clad in the garments of one of the castle servants. | 13-15 | Lots and lots of snakes, a Minion venomous swarm of vermin (Conan corebook, page 332). |
| 16-17 | Fresh human corpse. Roll 1🐍: 1-2 means they are from <i>Calypso</i> ; 3-4 is a member of the household staff; a 🐍 is one of the Black Corsairs from the Bahari . | 16-17 | A large Minion serpent, coiled and sleeping. Roll 1🐍: 1-2 venomous; 3-4 constrictor; 🐍 one additional serpent (roll again for type, adding serpents if this result is rolled again). See Conan corebook, pages 328 and 330. |
| 18-19 | Abattoir, where humans are hung from hooks set into the ceiling and prepared for consumption. Only one hangs here at this time. The gamemaster should determine if they are alive, and what their identity is. | 18-19 | Ghostly slave of the serpent-folk. This 'shadow of the lost' was slain by one of the serpent-folk and is now its servant in the afterlife. Equivalent to a normal ghost (Conan corebook, page 337), it may be quite faded (from Acheron) or more recent (Tothmekri's court). |
| 20 | A shrine to Set, similar to the one described on page 134 but festooned with hundreds of skulls of every sort, tucked into niches in the walls and bearing silent witness to the all-encompassing power of Old Father Serpent. | 20 | One of the serpent-folk in human guise, either a servant, courtier, or warrior-caste from above. |

SCENE III: NIGHT FALLS ON NESUS

The following encounters are intended to be relayed if the player characters explore the fortress once left alone by Meketre. The gamemaster should introduce them as desired. The weather is unkind, and though it lacks the fierceness of the prior night, angry clouds move across the sulfurous moon and light rain falls incessantly. The gamemaster may adjust appropriate tests according to poor lighting and poor weather (*Conan* corebook, page 97), remembering to also enforce these penalties to any non-player characters.

GATHERING STRAYS

The player characters either see or hear the following at a distance with an Average (D1) Observation test. If they are still in the quarters assigned to them, they may hear this from outside their chamber.

Heading up the courtyard from the direction of the arena, a group of warrior-caste guards (page 146) carry two unconscious castaways from the *Calypso* with them, one Shemite and one Kushite (a pirate or rowing slave, gamemaster's discretion). The men's mouths loll agape, their eyes wide and staring, but their chests rise and fall with regularity, as if they are aware of their circumstances and fearful. Which is true. Their bodies are otherwise slack, the warriors carrying them between them like hammocks by their wrists and ankles. A veiled woman whom the player characters have not seen yet approaches the group.

They speak in Stygian in hushed whispers for a moment, then all go through the open door of another chamber adjacent to the courtyard, taking the men with them. The woman follows them, then draws a curtain over the entry.

There are five of the warrior-caste guards, and the woman is one of the serpent-folk (see page 147), disguised as a courtier named Itakari. If followed, the player characters find the chamber the group went into is empty. If interrupted, they flee as rapidly as they can through the self-same doorway, but leaving the curtains flapping with their rapid passage.

Searching the room and succeeding with a Challenging (D2) Observation test reveals a disguised stone door set into the floor on a swivel. Pulling it back reveals an aperture in the floor and an extremely narrow, winding staircase going down. If followed, see page 157 for more on the warren of tunnels beneath the fortress.

If stopped, the woman tells the player characters that these captives are of no concern and will be cared for.

They were found within the lotus garden and succumbed to its heady fumes. The woman and the guards do not wish violence, but do not wish to surrender their captives.

If the guards and her are slain, the two men are revealed not to be drugged but have been poisoned with serpent bites. If they can be roused to speak with a successful Challenging (D2) Healing test, they reveal their names as Turgan (the Shemite) and Z'wane (Kushite). They say that they slept, then felt sudden pains from serpent bites. Then they were almost instantly surrounded by these strange warriors, who brought them here, leading them through a hidden passage near the arena.

ARROWS IN THE NIGHT

The player characters hear a clatter from nearby and find a dead warrior-caste guard upon the ground near the base of the wall, his body transfixed by three well-aimed arrows to his left arm, his chest, and one through his throat. The latter was undoubtedly the fatal one. He has clearly fallen from atop the wall, his helmet and spear lying scattered nearby. No one has yet noticed his death.

An examination of the arrows reveals that they are characteristic to those used in the Black Kingdoms. If the player characters took any arrows in the combat against the *Bahari* (page 114) they are identical. A look over the wall and a successful Challenging (D2) Observation test reveals nothing out of the ordinary.

Nearby, the player characters hear two people approaching, speaking to each other quietly in the debased Stygian common to the denizens of the island. What do the player characters do?

THE VEILED EYE

Any attempts to find the Eye of Acheron fail. It has been secreted away by Apophis within his tower, triply warded with protective circles and charms to avoid detection, and he spends much of the night engrossed in a mighty spell to awaken it and prepare a spell of his own making. This will become apparent in the next scene (page 160).

NIGHT CALLS

At some point the player characters should become aware of guards looking for them if they have given them the slip or snuck out through the salon's window. They should have ample time to make their way back to their quarter before the guards find them. If they do return and alert the guards to their presence, they will be asked to return to the salon and to remain there until summoned in the morning.

SCENE IV: AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING

The next morning, the weather is as dismal as it was the night before, but little can be done about that. After presenting themselves and preparing a bath for morning ablutions, two servants bid the player characters follow them. Outside is a squad of a dozen warrior-caste guards (or all that remains) ready to escort them with full honors to the king's hall. If the player characters are suspicious of some sort of ambush, the gamemaster might remind them that they could have been slain at any point in the night, and the guard and servants are dressed in their finest regalia, an odd choice for a trap.

The group is led through the long, narrow courtyard up the slope to the great hall. If the player characters explored it in the evening, they see that it has now been transformed, full of life and activity. The dusty floor has been swept, the high vaulted chamber aired out, and aromatic herbs burnt in honor of the distinguished visitors from so far away.

The player characters are led and asked to stand before the Prince Meketre, his consort Hequet, and King Apohis. Meketre they know, clad in his finest tunic and golden ornaments, his hair and skin gleam with oil, his eyes darting back and forth from the player characters to the King and to his consort, Hequet.

The monarch, they see, in the full light is revealed to be ancient beyond days. His head, bereft of any hair, is wrinkled considerably, his skin like old parchment that has been cleaned and re-used many times. The king's voluminous robes are covered with enamel and gold plates and must weigh almost as much as a suit of armor and are so rigid that he has wizened within them, shrunk so that his thin wrists and neck have ample space. His eyes, though, are black and seem to be sharp, and he whispers to Hequet, who sits next to him.

Hequet is a stark contrast to the energetic, fidgeting prince and the venerable noble she defers to. Tall and comely, sensual in demeanor. She wears little but bangles of precious metal on her limbs, and a slight shift of samite to cover her torso. Her waist-long hair has been bound into several thick, rope-like braids that coil about her shoulders, woven and bound with gold wire. Her voice is husky and low, and she gives off an air of decadent sexuality. She appraises the player characters with a frank and appreciative eye, male or female, and her wide mouth curves wickedly, flaunting her interest in them despite Meketre's presence. She toys with a goblet of liquor, licking her lips slowly as she sips from it. She speaks, after an uncomfortable silence.

"Strangers. It is our wish that you be made welcome within our court. Consider this a sanctuary from the storm. Eat, drink... be welcome. We have much to learn from one another."



Before them, the long table is set with an astonishing variety of food, fresh and prepared fruit, flat breads seasoned with herbs, boiled eggs, bowls of some sort of porridge, and small birds baked in clay. More of the strong liquor is available, though watered for daytime consumption. The player characters are beckoned to take their seats. Hequet assists King Apophis to a seat at the head of the table, and Meketre sits beside him.

From one of the side chambers, Semerkhet enters with a guard at each arm, and he seems ill-at-ease with the situation. Meketre glares at him, and the two are seated across from one another, a curious mirroring of the two, so similar in semblance but so different in spirit. Hequet, on the other hand, sits alongside one of the player characters. The gamemaster should decide which of them is the most appropriate target for her attention.

Other seats soon fill with other nobles, servants file in with eating implements, and the feast begins.

APOPHIS, KING OF THE SERPENT-FOLK (NEMESIS)

One of the last kings of the serpent-folk, he has been alive for tens of thousands of years, perhaps even from the time before the Cataclysm. He has seen the rise of the Hyborian world upon the ruin of Acheron, the dawn of the age of the sons of Bor, and fully anticipates seeing the age of mankind swept away in time. His intellect is astounding and alien, and he is cautious beyond measure, with the long-term survival of his race his highest priority. With the arrival of Tothmekri and the Stygians he mixed their bloodline into his own, creating the scaled ones (page 146), a strange half-breed line of serpent-folk and human. When the time comes and the generations have grown stronger in their legacy, he will teach them to mask their features in the old way and send them from their island redoubt and have them infiltrate the world of men once more, to bring their empires to shattered ruin.

Even in his serpent-folk form Apophis is ancient, his life prolonged through sorcery. When he unmask, he is just as wizened, just as shriveled, as his human guise appears to be. Apophis has forgotten more languages than the player characters know all counted together, as well as fluent Stygian, Shemitish, Kushite, and a smattering of other current tongues.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 11(2) | 14(2) | 12(2) | 14(2) |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 7 | 8 | 7 | |



FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | — | Movement | — |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 5 | Social | 3 |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 7, Resolve 17
- **Soak:** Armor 2 (alchemically treated robes), Courage 5 (ancient evil)

ATTACKS

- **Envenomed Bite (M):** Reach 1, 3 , Persistent 4
- **Web of Words (R):** Range M, 9  mental, Area, Piercing 2, Subtle 3
- **Hypnotic Glare (T):** Range M, 9  mental, Blinding, Stun
- **Hissing Display (T):** Range M, 9  mental

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Dread Creature 3**
- **Fear 2:** In serpent form only.
- **Illusory Mask:** Apophis can fling a veil of sorcery about his face, resembling anyone he wishes, akin to the *Form of a Beast* spell. This mask only falls upon his death or when he wishes it to and is innate to all serpent-folk.
- **Immortal Sorcerer:** Apophis has access to most human spells, and keeps *Astral Wanderings*, *Atavistic Voyage*, *Commune with the Wild*, *Enslave*, *Form of the Beast*, and *Venom on the Wind* at the ready. This latter spell is what he used to found the *Calypto*. He knows far more spells than any human would be able to, and additionally his library contains references to serpent-folk sorcery undreamed of by mortals.
- **Inhuman Awareness, Intellect, Personality, and Willpower 2** (all)
- **Venom:** If his bite inflicts a wound, it numbs the location with a paralyzing venom. Any tests made using the numbed location are at two steps of Difficulty higher than normal. If the location is the torso or head, all tests are affected. As a Standard Action, the victim can make a Daunting (D3) Resistance test to shrug off this effect. One or more such tests must be made every day. Failure causes the character to suffer a Wound as the numbness affects the rest of their body. A Healing test at the same Difficulty can assist in overcoming this venom.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Weakness:** As with other serpent-folk, he cannot say or stand to hear the phrase “*Ka nama kaa lajerama.*” If this is uttered in his presence, he loses his human guise and is momentarily paralyzed, all mental actions increased by two steps of Difficulty. Any spell he has active are immediately ended, including his illusory mask.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Ghostly Slave:** Anyone he kills suffers a horrid fate if the gamemaster spends 1 Doom as the person dies: their ghost becomes his slave, doing his bidding for the rest of eternity or until he is killed. These ghosts equivalent to normal ghosts (**Conan** corebook, page 337). Tothmekri is a special case, and he has bartered him to Xhosāth for the promise of favor when the Acheronian sorcerer rules the earth once more.
- **Ophidian Form:** If threatened, Apophis can spend 2 Doom to transform himself as a Standard Action into a great serpent (a Nemesis version of the giant venomous serpent, **Conan** corebook, page 320). Another point of Doom gives him a nearby bolthole to escape into, provided he is in his fortress.

HEQET

Daughter of Apophis and a serpent-folk, Heqet was Prince Tothmekri’s lover, and has been the consort of each of his line. Now she has promised Meketre that she will bear him a son as well, toying with the human at her father’s behest. She is Meketre’s closest counsel, instilling in the princeling an acute paranoia borne of her making. As such, she keeps Tothmekri’s descendant obedient. As for the rest of his court, in them she provides her folk a continued source of fresh breeding stock, and occasionally food. Though she is nowhere nearly as old as Apophis, she still has centuries of life in her.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 11(2) | 10 | 12(2) | 11 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 12 | 9 | |




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| | | | |
|------------------|---|-----------------|---|
| Combat | 2 | Movement | 3 |
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 3 | Social | 3 |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 14, Resolve 13
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 4

ATTACKS

- **Unearthly Blade (M):** Reach 2, 7 , Vicious 1
- **Envenomed Bite (M):** Reach 1, 4 , Piercing 2, Persistent 4
- **Hissing Display (T):** Range M, 8 , mental

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Serpent Man:** She possess the following special abilities: **Fear 1, Inhuman Awareness 2, Inhuman Personality 2, Venom,** and **Weakness** (these latter two abilities are identical to those from her father).
- **Illusory Mask:** As her father (see page 161).
- **Sorcery:** She possesses the following spells: *Commune with the Wild, Dismember, Enslave, and Haunt the Mind.*

DOOM SPENDS

- **Ghostly Slave:** As her father (see page 161).
- **The Last Bite:** Hequet can spend X Doom to add the Unforgiving X Quality to any successful use of her **Envenomed Bite** attack, effectively giving it the Intense and Vicious X Qualities. She uses this only as a last resort.

MEKETRE (NEMESIS)

Last direct descendant of Tothmekri (other than Semerkhet) and the leader of the Stygian court, Meketre is decadent and terrible, human only in form. From his birth he has been cursed, the serpent tainting his very soul. Denied his right to rule by the presence of Apophis, he has been bred to believe that but for fate, he would be king of all Stygia. Thus, he has an inordinate faith in his destiny, believing that one day, he will return to Stygia and claim his throne, to walk the great deserts there as its monarch and living god. Until then, he behaves as he imagines a true Stygian ruler would, days spent in the idle torture of his servants and encouraging petty disputes between the members of his court.

His semblance is such that he is a near-identical twin to Semerkhet, though without the iron vitality that his cousin has earned. Meketre sees the Stygian noble as a threat to his own realm, and as a failure, incapable of seizing the destiny that should have been his.

Meketre bears himself with considerable authority, though he is obviously insane, his mind filled with feverish

cruelty and childish dreams of self-importance. He is a courtier in all but name, not particularly skilled in anything but wanton malice. From time to time, however, he pits himself against slaves in the arena for sport, and thus knows a bit of weapons-craft. His ambition is to use the player characters as proxies in his act against Apophis, who he does not recognize is his very own grandfather.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 8 | 8 | 9 | 8 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 9 | 10 | 10 | |

FIELDS OF EXPERTISE




| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 1 | Movement | 1 |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | 1 | Social | 1 |



STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 11, Resolve 9
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage —

ATTACKS

- **Guard's Kopesh, Seized (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Intense, Vicious 1
- **Ornamental Knife (M):** Reach 1, 4 , 1H, Hidden 1, Improvised, Unforgiving 1
- **"I Am a Prince of Stygia!" (T):** Range C, 2  mental, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Cup Everflowing:** Meketre is a devoted hedonist, urging others into his revelry. He adds +1d20 to any attempt to influence others when he is able to ply them with drink, lotus, or other sensual pleasures.
- **Twist the Knife:** A skilled torturer, Meketre can re-roll any failed d20s when using Combat to Obtain Information.

DOOM SPENDS

- **"To Me, My Guards!":** Meketre can spend 1 Doom to summon one of his hand-picked, warrior-caste guards (see page 146), or 3 Doom to summon a Squad. They arrive at the beginning of a round after the Doom is spent.

THE SERPENT THAT SPEAKS

Course after course of food is brought out and the nobles of the court seem incessantly curious about the novelty presented by these strange, foreign gladiators and voyagers. All speak Stygian, some speak Kushite, and some speak some bits of Shemitish, all with the same debased accent from long separation with native speakers. They speak wondrously about the player characters' victory in the arena and want to know more about their voyages, especially the turn of events that brought them to the island. Any mention of captivity has them look askance at Semerkhet, who is locked in an uncomfortable dance of words and daggered eyes with his twin.

Ultimately, the purpose of this meal is not to make welcome the player characters (as seems obvious) but to gauge their mettle and allow Apohis to weaken their will, learning what they know about the Eye of Acheron, which he possesses and has concealed within his robes. Thus he begins with a lengthy recitation of his court's genealogy, emphasizing that they inhabited the island from time before even Acheron, and he asks each of the player characters to describe their own lineage and any exploits of notoriety or

fame. He is curious especially about the outside world, and asks many questions, opining about the vast changes the world has seen since his ancestors last walked the 'Eastern Continent' (as he calls it).

However, when Apophis speaks to the player characters and the court at large, he uses the *Web of Words* attack against them, so subtly that they may not even notice that they are being attacked. The gamemaster should note their Courage Soak and their Resolve as it is lost, telling the player characters that they are feeling a bit confused, disoriented, even placid. Only a successful Daunting (D3) Observation test belays his true purpose. If the player characters lose considerable Resolve, they might find themselves accidentally answering questions with more honesty than intended, or finding themselves somewhat drunken, whether they imbibed the liquor or not. No one else of the court seems to be having this experience, though.

Hequet is flirtatious and genuinely curious about the player character she has selected as the focus of her attention, and as she does so, she incurs the occasional glance of Meketre, scowling as he looks away from Semerkhet.

At this point Meketre sidles over to the player characters, telling the one Hequet speaks to that weapons have been prepared and are ready for them. If they wish to aid him, they will have their chance soon. He gives a sidelong glance at the doors to the hall, then a conspiratorial look at Hequet.

She nods, then stands and claps. *"A gift for our guests!"* The doors to the hall open. Into the chamber files a group of servants, carrying a large wooden box, nearly three feet in each dimension. It is born on two poles running along its sides before and after, and the wood is dark, inlaid with stylized hieroglyphs and markings, set between panels of gold, lapis lazuli, and other gems. Meketre smiles and looks to the player characters with anticipation.

Following the two guards comes two guards bearing between them a slender, ungainly form. It is M'wangele, the Kushite magician, shrugging against their rough handling of him. He seems disheveled, but unharmed. One of the two guards carries with him the dull black, cat headed staff the player characters found in the afterworld. He takes it to King Apophis, who handles it gingerly and cradles it in one arm.

The other guard thrusts the old magician into the seat vacated by Hequet. Quickly, M'wangele dips a finger into her vacated cup and begins writing something on the tabletop with his fingertip.

Hequet steps up to the wood and gilt chest, moving her hands along it, adjusting the gold panels and tracing patterns along the wood. It opens, then, the front and top opening. Inside is revealed the form of a man, seated with his feet before him and his arms crossed atop his knees. His head faces downward, into his lap. Golden ornaments cover his limbs but most of the clothing that once covered his form is gone, fallen to dust, hanging in threads from

his shoulders and the golden girdle at his waist. The man's skin is the colour of teak, darkened and desiccated, almost as if there is no moisture, no life-blood coursing within it.

Meketre gives a gasp of surprise. *"You dare defile my ancestor's remains? What do you think you are doing, woman?"*

The court erupts in a commotion, and the word *"Tothmekri!"* is gasped from more than one mouth. At the head of the table, King Apophis cackles, his voice ringing through the hall over the susurrations of excited voices. *"You thought you could betray me, fool? Suffer along with them."*

The rest of the warrior-caste guards draw their blades and attempt to form a ring around the player characters. See page 146 for their descriptions, if the player characters attempt to fight them. The guards, however, are attempting to subdue, not slay, and adjust their tactics to reflect this.

M'wangele points at what he has written (pick a language the player character speaks) and hisses in the ear of the player character. *"Speak these words, as I have made them. Speak them loudly!"*

The player character looks at the tabletop and sees upon the tabletop, the following words written in liquor, gleaming against the stone:

"Ka nama kaa lajerama."

If the player character speaks these words as written (no roll is necessary), King Apophis, Hequet, and a few others of the court, servants, and guards alike reel suddenly and it is as if their faces have become unveiled. Instead of their mortal guises are the heads of hissing, fang-mouthed serpents!

The courtiers scream and fall back in surprise and dismay. It is apparent from their reaction that they had no idea of the true nature of their liege and their prince's consort, much less members of their own ranks. Most especially stricken by this revelation is Meketre, realizing what he has laid beside each night, what intimacies he has confided her with. He shrieks and makes his way for the hall doors. Semerkhet, meanwhile, grasps an eating knife and kicks back from the table, ready to defend himself if he can.

Hequet shrieks in pain, writhing from the dread utterance, and from the curtained alcoves to each side of the hall burst dozens of the hairless, pale humans, their black eyes and rows of pointed teeth all the more horrible in the full light of the hall. They surge forward, pushing past the guards and clutching at the player characters with fingers ending in short bony claws.

Though apparently struggling with intense pain, Apophis reaches into his robe and removes the Eye of Acheron from it, holding the jewel high. It shines in the brazier-light and he speaks words in an ancient language of sorcery. It flashes, and the player characters' vision goes dark all at once, as if a shroud has been dropped over the entire room.

They awaken somewhere else...

SCENE V: THE HALLS OF JUDGEMENT

Sent to the afterworld by King Apophis' spell, the player characters return to the doorway gaping before them in the great river cavern. Thyra is with them again. If the player characters tell her about all that has transpired since she last saw them, she murmurs "Strange are the makings of this world. I wonder how much of it is real? Time passes differently for us... perhaps this world is not the same for each of us?"

She asks about the workings of the court on Tothmekri's island. Sometimes, she says, she feels like she is in both places at once, perhaps an effect of the Eye of Acheron's influence and the steady dreaming state caused by the lotus she has been fed continually since being taken. She asks the player characters how much time has passed, saying that she has little sense of time.

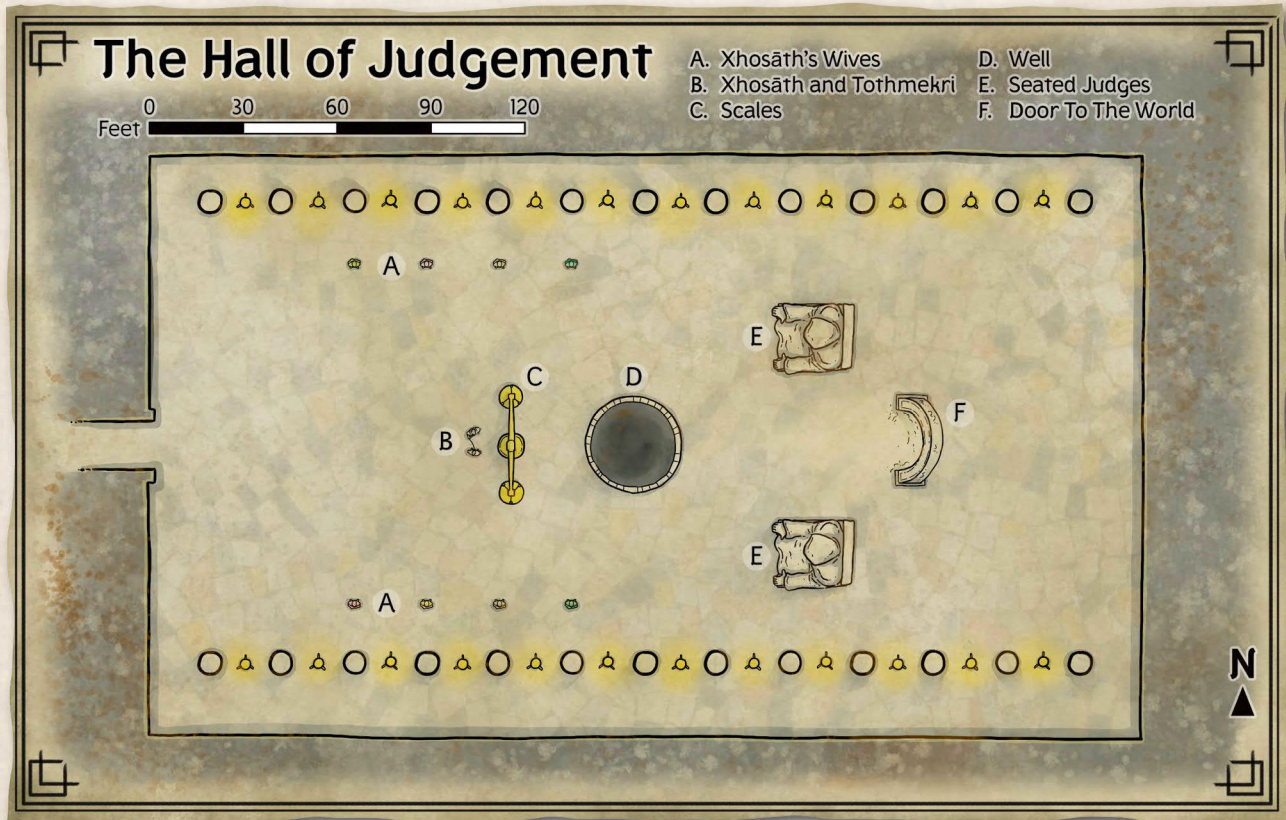
Thyra relates that her mortal body is in a caravan of some sort, striking deep into the desert. Early in her journey, she remembers them leaving a great city from the street noises outside but they have been traveling for a very long time. She is being borne in a covered litter or wagon, and occasionally when she stirs, she sees bright sunlight

outside and rich golden sands. She cannot move, however. Occasionally a man tends to her, a tall dusky-skinned man with dark hair, Stygian by manner. He does not harm her, but he forces her to drink a sweet, cloying liquid down her throat. That puts her to sleep again. "The Valley of Set!" she exclaims, remembering. "I heard him arguing with the drovers, who did not want to enter. They claimed it was ill-luck to venture there and demanded more pay. That's where he's taking me! The Valley of Set!"

The doorway to the Halls of Judgment stands before the player characters. Passing through, they find themselves in a long, dark corridor, narrow and high, open at the end. Light is visible on the other side. The walls are featureless, but any light source reveals that they are emblazoned with murals depicting the soul's passage through the afterlife.

As the player characters reach the final doorway, the gamemaster should read or paraphrase the following:

The passage opens into a vast hall, rectangular in shape with great columns supporting the roof on all sides. Unlike the interior of the tunnel, this is all marble and stone, brilliantly patterned in precious minerals, enamels, metals, and painted with a dazzling array of colour and texture. The hall is lit with rows of braziers set between each of the columns, though they produce no smoke.



Sitting in two thrones near the end of the room are two huge humanoid figures, their features covered in hoods, though it is difficult to tell if they are vast in size or merely have a presence that distorts the viewer's sense of scale. One is clearly male, the other female, the heads enshrouded by their hoods do not seem to be those of humans.

Between the two thrones, on the other side of the hall, is another doorway like the one they have passed between, though light seems to shine brightly from it. A large circular well is set into the ground before them, and before that is a golden scale, half again the height of a man, its two platters empty.

Eight women stand alongside the long walls, four to a side, and their voices undulate with a low, dirge. They are clad head to heel in robes and veils mask their faces. You have seen them before, with the funerary barge, the sorcerer's many wives.

Standing next to the scale are two men: familiar enough, for you have seen them before, and followed them all this way. One is the tall, broad figure of Xhosāth, the Acheronian sorcerer who wrought the Eye of Acheron itself. In one hand he holds a golden chain, which leads to a collar about the neck of the other man, a regal Stygian who shows fear within his eyes. Though he is chained about his neck, his wrists are otherwise bound. From his resemblance to his two grandsons, this can only be Tothmekri. Both glance back at you when you enter, but pay you no further heed.

There is a rustle behind you, and you see Antaeus standing there, leaning upon his staff, watching the proceedings. Thrya rushes to embrace him, which he returns with some warmth. The Messantian scholar turns to you all.

"We cannot interfere yet. The sorcerer is bargaining for his soul. His sins must be weighed and must be balanced against his heart. But he seeks to offer Tothmekri's heart, his soul, in his stead. Wait and watch..."

One of the robed throned figures gestures, and the side of the scale closest to Xosath fills with a dark mote, like a candle's light made of darkness. It grows quickly, until it fills the scale, tipping it until the metallic dish is as low as it can possibly go, almost touching the floor. It is difficult to read the Acheronian's expression, but a clear glint in his eye indicates that he is not altogether surprised and, in fact, is likely enjoying the experience of the magnitude of the evil he has committed in life.

He speaks in Acheronian. If any of the player characters understand this tongue or can succeed in a Daunting (D3) Linguistics test, they hear him say the following:

"I make no apologies for my acts in life and acknowledge no sin. My soul has spent an eternity bound within a jewel, and I demand my freedom. I present this soul, that of a prince, as an offering."

At this, the other figure on the second throne gestures at the scale, and Tothmekri's body writhes. A bright golden light coalesces out of his body and moves to the other side of the scale, similar in appearance to that of Xhosāth's manifested sins but nowhere near the same size, and light where it is dark. It moves somewhat to balance against Xosath's weight of sin, but is still unable to equal the enormity of the other man's evil-doing.

As if with intense pain Tothmekri himself raises his arms and speaks in Stygian. An Average (D1) Linguistics test or fluency in Stygian lets the player characters understand the following:

"I was a prince of Stygia and my lineage is known. Though unjustly exiled, I still bear that noble office and thus does my living descendant. I offer one of those souls in my stead."

Two motes of golden light appear before the two, and though there is no way to distinguish them, you get a sense of the presence of both Meketre and Semerkhet, Tothmekri's grandsons. The prince's eyes widen... he was unaware of a second descendant. He makes to pick one and the robed, throned figure raises a hand. The prince chokes, as if the words are frozen in his throat.

The Judge of the Dead gestures past the Acheronian and the Stygian, directly at the player characters. Antaeus says to them:

"This is a surprise. The judges are giving you the choice. You know both men. Which of Tothmekri's descendants takes his place? Who will be traded for Xosath's soul? Speak quickly. The Judges of the Dead have little patience for mortal limits."

The player characters then must make a choice. Do they indicate that Semerkhet's soul should take Tothmekri's place upon the scale, or Meketre's? Or both? Antaeus feels that any of these choices is acceptable. He knows that whoever is picked will go the Acheronian hell, of which little is known but one can imagine the intensity of eternal suffering it represents.

Whatever they indicate, the appropriate soul (or souls) flies to the scale, replacing Tothmekri's own. It drifts through the air to flicker and float before him but does not reenter the prince's body. Or they can simply refuse to pick, in which case Tothmekri's soul remains where it is and the other two disappear. The scale, however, does not tilt significantly enough to outweigh Xhosāth's darkness.

The figure then gestures at the player characters. Are they expected to volunteer to sacrifice themselves for this judgment?

Antaeus' voice rings out in Acheronian (anyone who has already made the Linguistics test or speaks Acheronian understands this). He pushes past the player characters:

"I petition you, o lords of judgment. I am a humble scholar of no great lineage, but I offer my own soul as well. Let us balance the scales."

With that, his own spirit exits his body and joins the glowing ones upon the other side of the scale from Xhosāth's sins. The scales righten, and equal. Antaeus turns to Thyra and the player characters, and says:

"You must find and destroy Xhosāth when he is manifest in both flesh and soul. His evil lingers beyond time, and even another eternity within the jewel cannot dim his malignance. He will eventually escape. I put it upon you to stop him. Take the Eye of Acheron. Find his mortal remains. Let them unite and then end them forever. You are not defenseless..." he says, indicating the cat-headed staff. *"...that is a powerful weapon against the dead."*

The enthroned figures nod, and at once the glowing souls upon the scale vanishes, as does Antaeus. Thyra gasps. Xhosāth drops Tothmekri's chain and strides between and past the two thrones. He enters the doorway filled with light and vanishes. Though he is still trapped within the Eye of Acheron, he no longer faces judgment in the Halls of the Dead. He can be restored to his mortal body, and reborn into the world of humankind.

Tothmekri looks around, as if glad to be free, and looks back at the player characters. The glowing mote of his soul hovers in the air before him for a moment longer, then plummets into the well. Tothmekri screams and the player characters feel their bodies being pulled, as if back to the mortal world again.

They are done here.

SCENE VI: TOTHMEKRI'S LEGACY

The player characters awaken in their bodies once again with Prince Tothmekri's scream still echoing within their ears, one of many as they hear the clash of weapons and tumult of wild combat. They awaken to whatever positions they held when they were cast into the afterworld. Though it has only been a scant minute since they went away, much has happened.

- The warrior-caste are engaged with a fierce battle against a group of attackers made up of Black Corsairs, pirates from the *Calypso*, and even former rowing

slaves, fighting alongside their former captors. If Captain Gaal-Arvad lived until now, he is dead upon the ground, his chest reddened with blood.

- The courtiers and servants are either attempting to defend themselves against this wild tumult, hide within the corners and alcoves of the great hall, or attempt to escape, pushing their way past the attackers or trying to find other escape routes.
- His human guise shed, as well as his pretense of feebleness, King Apophis stands, the black staff held in one hand, and reaches out at one of the Black Corsairs with a strange gesture of his scaled, clawed hand. A moment later, the man screams and falls to the ground, his throat a bloody ruin.
- M'wangele has found a safe place under the table and watches the battle from this vantage point. He is no combatant, and this is no place for an old man.
- The scaled ones, the weird half-Stygian, half-serpent-folk, are falling in great numbers to the combined might of the Black Corsairs and the pirate crew.
- Odaka, the war-chief of the Makonde, captain of the *Bahari*, fights alongside his men, his blade red to the hilt and a wild look in his eyes. He moves as if to make his way across the great hall towards the serpent king.
- Hequet is nowhere to be seen. She seized one of the pirates and dragged him away into a concealed corner. She killed him and has taken his garments and his semblance, and fights alongside the Black Corsairs and pirates, but without much effort.
- Depending on how they resolved the weighing of the souls, either Meketre, Semerkhet, or both lie sprawled upon the ground, their bodies lifeless. Or perhaps both are still unharmed, spared the damnation offered by the karmic bargain.
- If the Stygian mercenary captain is still alive, he fights a defensive battle against the pirates and the warrior-caste guards.
- If the Stygian prince yet lives, he hides behind a column, directing the warrior-caste servants at the intruders.

The sound of the howl that followed the player characters from the afterworld, though, is of primary concern, emerging from the mummy of the Stygian prince, suffering the immense horror of awakening after a century of torment into a desiccated corpse. It shudders, then stands, the unearthly cry fading into an insensate growl. It looks wildly around, then recognizes the player characters, and moves toward them!

TOTHMEKRI'S WIGHT (NEMESIS, HORROR)

The withered remains of Tothmekri were mummified and preserved with the limited means available to his court at the time of his death. Covered in grave cloth that was once the finest of his garments, and adorned with ornaments of gold and precious stone, Tothmekri's wight is near-skeletal, desiccated and what little flesh he has remaining is hardened and leathery. He is extremely dark and wrinkled, his eyes soulless and empty. When his soul is restored to this form, an unnatural golden light shines from his eyes. His stiff movements emit creak like that of old and stiffened leather. With all lost, he fights with wild abandon and attempts to destroy any who cross his path.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 8 | 8 | 10 | 10 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 8 | 11(2) | 8 | |

FIELDS OF EXPERTISE



| Combat | 4 | Movement | 1 |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Fortitude | 5 | Senses | 2 |
| Knowledge | 1 | Social | 3 |



STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 13, Resolve 10
- **Soak:** Armor 3 (Treated Body), Courage 2

ATTACKS

- **Claws (M):** Reach 1, 6 , Fearsome 3, Grapple, Intense, Piercing 2, Stun
- **Tothmekri's Curse! (T):** Range C, 6  mental, Stun, Persistent 2

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Dread Creature 3**
- **Fear 2**
- **Feed Upon Fear**
- **Flammable:** As a mummy clad in old grave wrappings, Tothmekri is quite vulnerable to flame. Any attack using fire — and there are many braziers within the great hall — have the **Piercing 2** and **Persistent 2 Qualities**. Additionally, being set afire sends him to a paroxysm of rage, and once he takes any Wounds from fire, he attempts to stagger out of the court and plunges into the well outside (see page 155).
- **Inured to Cold, Fear, and Pain**
- **Slow and Powerful 2:** Tothmekri's mummy has **Inhuman Brawn 2** but cannot use this special ability for any test involving speed.
- **Unliving**

DOOM SPENDS

- **Soul Rend:** If Tothmekri successfully grapples a foe and does mental damage with his claws, he can spend 1 Doom per round to inflict 1 Despair upon that character. This damage automatically bypasses any Soak.
- **Unstopping:** If reduced to 0 Vigor, Tothmekri can spend 1 Doom to restore his Vigor and Resolve to full. Any Wounds that have not been inflicted by fire can also be regenerated for the cost of 2 Doom each.

The appearance of the reanimated mummified founder of their dynasty is, unsurprisingly, no comfort to Tothmekri's court, and they shriek in horror and dismay as the fiend moves through the great hall, seeking vengeance upon the living.

When he is defeated, the Black Corsairs order Tothmekri's body dragged outside the great hall, hacked to pieces, and burnt, if it has not already occurred during the combat.

THE CAT-HEADED STAFF

For it is older than the world and has known the terrible hands of strange, dark pre-Adamite priests in the silent cities beneath the seas, and has drawn from an Elder World mystery and magic unguessed by humankind. There were strange kings and stranger priests when the dawns were young, and evil was, even in their day. With this staff they fought the evil which was ancient when their strange world was young, so many millions of years ago that a man would shudder to count them.


— “The Footfalls Within”,
Robert E. Howard

Players familiar with Robert E. Howard’s Solomon Kane stories are likely to recognize this staff, given to the Puritan adventurer by his sometime ally, N’Longa, an African shaman. This staff is perhaps one of the oldest artifacts in the world, said to have been wrought from the wood of the first tree. It is indestructible and figures strongly into many destinies, moving throughout the aeons as if of its own volition.

Marked in languages that were ancient before even the Thurian Age crawled into existence, it has been reshaped slightly throughout its existence. Ancient

beyond imagining, it is made of black wood carved its length with strange heiroglyphs and wavy, runic markings. Tapering at a point at one end, its pommel has been carved into the semblance of a cat-like being, though not one of any breed that is known to the Hyborian world. It is as hard as iron, though it is not so heavy as might be imagined.

It has a variety of strange and unnatural powers. With it, one can:


- Lie down and be visited in dreams by the shaman who gave it. This happens in a strange dream-world of fog and night. Essentially, this is a special casting of the *Atavistic Voyage* spell, *Wayward Journey* alternative effect, with the staff automatically providing 3 Momentum.
- Use it as a weapon against the undead. The staff acts as a light club (Reach 2, 3 , 1H, Stun, Knockdown) but against creatures with the Undead category, it has additional potency, with the Intense, Piercing 3, and Vicious 3 Qualities. Driving it into the flesh of undead creatures renders them unto dust and bone.




MANAGING THE PANDEMONIUM

The gamemaster is encouraged to keep this battle quick and brutal, costing many lives on each side. Ultimately, though, the overwhelming ferocity of the Black Corsairs, the desperation of the castaways, and the relatively demoralized state of the island denizens. Many of the scaled ones flee below the fortress, while others of the court attempt to find refuge within its many crumbling chambers. See page 157 if the player characters seek to go underground after any of the notable non-player characters. Depending on tastes and enthusiasm from the gamemaster and the players, this can be handled with narrative or it can become a tense, white-knuckled edge-of-the-seat hunt eradicating the scaled ones and the serpent-folk infiltrators throughout the castle and across the island.

Ultimately, the Black Corsairs and the pirates are not here to kill everyone and only fight those who resist them. Odaka sought to rescue M’wangele and the player characters and offered the pirates passage back to the mainland and a reasonable share of the loot if they aided him.

If desired, the gamemaster can handle all non-player characters as was done in the gladiatorial battle. Rather than rolling for each individual attack and parry, the gamemaster should roll 1  on the following table once per round per non-player character combatant:

| GREAT HALL BATTLE | |
|---|--|
| Roll | Outcome |
| 1 | Injured, but not seriously. |
| 2 | Incapacitated and down, but still alive. |
| 3-4 | No effect. |
|  | Killed. |

Otherwise, assume that the battle is a background event that eventually resolves in favor of the Black Corsairs and their allies, and with many of the court slain, wounded to incapacitation, surrendering, or fleeing elsewhere into the fortress or outside its confines into the island itself, to be lost to this narrative.

SCENE VII: THAT WHICH REMAINS

As the battle with Tothmekri and his last court has ended, the important elements left to resolve are the confrontation with King Apophis, the fates of the twin descendants of Tothmekri, the disposition of the Eye of Acheron, the fate of the cat-headed staff, and the final deathblow performed by the disguised Hequet. Each is described below.

THE SERPENT AND THE LION

Odaka, on the other hand, is ready to battle the serpent king and reclaim M'wangele's staff. He is glory bound, and immediately engages the inhuman sorcerer. If the player characters assist, all the better. If facing overwhelming odds, Apophis transforms into a great serpent and attempts to escape through a convenient chute near his throne. He then flees into his tower or into the warrens, whichever is the most suitable, and readies his defenses. Though steeped in an eternity of evil, he is not feckless and does not throw his life away needlessly.

TOTHMEKRI'S HEIRS

How did the player characters resolve the choice in the Halls of Judgment? Did they choose to sacrifice Meketre, Semerkhet, neither, or both? Depending on what choice they made, the appropriate figure lies dead upon the floor of the hall, a silken cloak thrown over their face (or faces, if it is both). Pulling this aside reveals a face frozen in a rictus of unimaginable terror, so unsettling that one of the pirates had to cover it. Seeing this requires a Challenging (D2) Discipline test, with failure resulting in the character suffering two Despair (**Conan** core rules, page 66).

If either of the two lives, they have no idea what transpired in the afterworld, so they do not know what fate they avoided. They react appropriately to this turn of fate according to their role, should they yet live.

- Meketre is glad to have the island rid of Apophis and is somewhat distraught looking for Hequet, who has apparently vanished (see below). He is upset at the beggary of the kingdom he now inherits, but as long as some of his court remain and he is allowed to retain some measure of wealth (more still is hidden away, a fact he does not divulge), he accepts the terms of any new status quo.
- Semerkhet tries to throw in his lot with the Black Corsairs, or the crew of the *Calypso*, but none of them will take him. Seeing little to be gained by parleying

with the player characters, he makes as if to leave, daring the island's terrors on his own. Ultimately, the only way off the island is with the *Bahari*, and Odaka will have none of that.

“None But I Shall Rule...”

If both live, the gamemaster should have Semerkhet choose his own fate and try to leave the hall, only to be attacked from behind by Meketre, seizing a cutlass from one of the Shemitish pirates and attempting to thrust it into his cousin's back. The exiled princeling will have no one here to potentially rival his petty throne and cannot countenance the chance that Semerkhet might return one day to destroy him. If allowed, Meketre kills his cousin in an ignoble blow. Semerkhet, though a superior fighter, is caught unawares and is already wounded from the prior battle.

If the player characters interfere, Odaka suggests that the two men be allowed to duel for the honor of surviving and taking the crown. Initially, Meketre attempts to have one of the warrior-caste fight on his behalf, but this is laughed uproariously by the pirates of both vessels. He turns to the player characters, offering them the chance to revenge themselves against the one who betrayed and led them here. Meketre reminds them that he spared them the arena and has dealt with them with hospitality and — in his mind — honesty.

The gamemaster can handle this narratively (quick and painless), can play it out as an actual combat between the two (dull for the players to watch if it is just non-player characters), or let two of the players handle the roles of the princelings — the island exile and the mercenary captain — letting the dice fall where they may. Meketre is described on page 162, and Semerkhet on page 38. Treat any Momentum as Doom if they both fight one another.

Likely, the mercenary will mop the floor with the hedonistic noble, but the island princeling attempts to fight as unfairly as possible, using the Exploit action, seizing a cup of liquor from a nearby table and dashing it in his cousin's eyes, etc.

When the battle has ended, a triumphant Meketre is embraced by his courtiers, and taken away to be treated, should he have been injured. If Semerkhet survives, he staggers over to the throne and seats himself, declaring that he is the new king of this island, wherever the hell it is. None challenge him on this, and in truth, he would be a better king than any they have had.

THE EYE AND THE STAFF

Whether Apophis has been defeated or has transformed himself into a serpent and fled, the Eye of Acheron is left behind in the clutch of his scaly hand or alongside

the robes he shed like — dare it be said? — a serpent's skin. At first, one of the Black Corsairs makes as if to seize it for themselves, but M'wangele stops them. "That thing", he says, "is the worst sort of magic. Let them take it." he says, indicating the player characters. If they handle the artifact, it still pulses with even more malignancy. Xhosāth is eager to be freed.

As for the staff, it remains where it lies. The Kushites — Black Corsairs and pirates alike — know not to interfere with a magician's implements, and any Shemite pirates have no interest in it, as it is not chased with gold or studded with gems. In fact, given the opulence of the increasing pile of loot being accumulated, it looks rather shabby by comparison.

If the player characters try to give the staff back to M'wangele, he returns it to them ceremoniously, telling them:

"It found its way to you in the other world, and now it is here for you in this one. It has served my line for many generations. It will find us again, but you need it now. If you live when your own quest is complete, return it to me in the village of the Makonde."

HEQUET'S FINAL STRIKE

As described on page 167, in the aftermath of the celebration Hequet disguises herself as one of the pirates of the *Calypso*, taking on their guise and gliding through the rest of the battle. She waits until the final outcome, likely ending in the rout and utter domination of the court, and then makes her way subtly over to the side of Odaka. Then, in a moment of revelry, she attacks from surprise. The gamemaster should describe this by paraphrasing or reading the following:

The strange and terrible denizens of the fortress have been defeated, and the captives are being ordered into places where they can be watched. The fiery liquor favored here has been brought out and goblets passed around.

The pirates and Black Corsairs alike pillage the place in earnest, finishing the job that Bloody Trnicos left unfinished so long ago. Gold in all configurations is piled high on the central table, together with all the other valuables the invaders can collect. Bodies are dragged from the room, wounds tended to. New allies are made, for it is clear that they must all sail together on the Bahari

After speaking to some of his Black Corsairs and the Kushite pirates and former slaves, Odaka offers to let them join his crew. Many surround him, embracing their new captain. The warrior-chieftain then gasps, and then falls to his knees, clutching at his shoulder. The ones surrounding him step away.

Blood is on his hand, and his eyes are glazed, confused. He slumps forward, falling headlong onto the ground, his body convulsing. Everyone around him is shocked at the sudden infirmity from one so powerful, looking each way to see what has happened.

Hequet, in her guise as one of the pirates, has bitten Odaka, injecting him with her most powerful venom, using her *The Last Bite Doom* spend. See her writeup on page 162 for more information. The gamemaster should spend as much Doom as it takes to ensure Odaka's demise here (or can simply rule that it happens).

It takes a moment to get to the man, and a quick search of his body with a Challenging (D2) Observation or Healing test reveals two puncture wounds upon his shoulder, with yellowish foam oozing from them, the bite of some venomous creature. M'wangele rushes to his side, but the venom is so intense, aided by some foul sorcerous potency, that it quickly slays the mighty king. If the player characters attempt to get involved and can somehow win the trust of the Black Corsairs who surround him defensively, it is still to no avail.

A wail goes out amongst the Black Corsairs, and a young woman falls to her knees next to him, cradling the doughty warrior in her arms. Any player character asking is told that this is Mattai'a, his daughter, a fierce Black Corsair in her own right.

SCENE VIII: THE DYING FLAME

The next scene begins on the beach near the wreck of the *Khebentiu* (page 135). It is evening. The crew of the *Bahari* are transporting their newfound wealth to the low galley, anchored within a short swim from the shore. The new members of the crew, the few surviving members of the *Calypso*, work alongside the Black Corsairs in this, the former rowing slaves made free men by Odaka's order. Past tensions between the pirates and rowers have been erased by the fraternity of the sea and the promise of the wealth they now carry.

Mattai'a offers the player characters passage to Zhabela, on the Kushite coast. If they have explained their destination is the Valley of Set, they are told that it is some distance inland to the west and slightly north of Karnath, which is just up the coast from Zhabela. From the Kushite city they can strike their way northwest, and it is a far more welcoming place than the Stygian port.

By vote, Mattai'a is now the captain of the *Bahari*. Though she knows they will not take her up on it, she



offers the player characters places within their crew. They impressed her father enough that he would have done so himself. She has one final act to do here, one which brings her no great pleasure.

Odaka's body has been placed upon a bier on the beach, the shields, spears, and swords of the slain Stygian exiles piled around it, his body enshrouded in the silken robes of Apophis. The heady scent of the potent liquor drunk by the island's denizens is on the wind, as the king's bier has been doused with the stuff, along with lamp-oil. A selection of valuable items surrounds him, picked by Mattai'a herself. A king's share of the treasure, to be taken with him into his own afterlife, much different than the one the player characters have experience of. The Kushites sing and stamp the sand, banging their spears against their shields in a final ritual to send their great chieftain away with.

With little more ceremony, Mattai'a thrusts the torch into the midst of her father's bier, and it immediately becomes a pyre. With that, she gestures to the player characters, they make their way to the *Bahari*, waiting in the waves for them, ready to bear them back to the

mainland. All are ready to put this cursed island behind them, to let it rot in isolation and despair. They have a long voyage ahead of them, and time is of the essence.

From the darkness within the tree line of the jungle, many eyes — human and otherwise — follow their passage away, across the waves.

WELL-GOTTEN GAINS

The *Bahari* has the loot equal to that which Trnicos took back from the island long ago, as much as the galley can carry. The player characters are afforded their share, plus additional gifts granted by Mattai'a, of a nature to be determined by the gamemaster. This is at least 100 Gold per player character in gold furnishings, adornment, currency, and gems, enough to set them up with a comfortable estate in civilized places, or ships of their own.

This wealth has bulk, however, and is not easily transported. They must determine how to deal with it before their adventure is at an end.

OUTCOMES & CONTINUATION

This chapter should end with the player characters all onboard the *Bahari*, destined for the port city of Zabhela on the Kushite coast. The Eye of Acheron is still a prison, but now Xhosāth is free from judgment, able to be restored to the flesh. The voyage upon the River of Souls has come to its conclusion. They have the Eye of Acheron and M'wangele's cat-headed staff, one a critical artifact and the other a potent weapon. There are no other easy means of leaving the island, other than perhaps constructing a ship over the course of weeks. In this time, Serothos will have moved to the next step in his plan, and Thyra is likely to be dead.

EXPERIENCE

Surviving this chapter is a massive achievement, as it has taken the player characters significantly along the path to the resolution of the campaign, whether they realize it or not. If the player characters took part in the downfall of the serpent-folk and the destruction of the wight of Tothmekri, award the normal experience award per session (300 points) but add an additional 200 to that for having participated in such monumental events. Powerful roleplaying, outstanding feats of heroism and other notable achievements should net any deserving player character an additional 200 or so experience points.

DOWNTIME AND CAROUSING

Their ability to spend these over the following days of sea travel onboard the *Bahari* is limited, though, so they may be curtailed somewhat in what new talents they may purchase. Similarly, should the gamemaster wish to have a Carousing phase at this point, the group is assumed to stay together.

- Upkeep does not need to be paid, but the benefits from it are not gained.
- Unless any of them wish to make a patron of Mattai'a, there is no chance to do this here.
- Trade, rumors, and cultivation of Renown are possible, but are solely within the *Bahari*'s crew.
- Any rewards or losses from gambling are doubled, due to the amount of ready cash available and the propensity for pirates to play recklessly.
- Full recovery is possible, using the normal rules.

Pick suitable carousing events from those provided in the core book (page 295–298), adapted for the conditions, or from those suggested in *Conan the Pirate*. Similarly, the amount of Trouble they can get into is limited and should be administered carefully.



BOOK THREE: INTRODUCTION



THE COILS OF THE SERPENT



*This is not earthly — from what darkened world,
What shadowed planet, what inhuman sphere
Come such wild dreams, such fearsome fantasies?*

— “Secrets”, Robert E. Howard

Book Three: *The Coils of the Serpent* concludes *The Shadow of the Sorcerer*, a campaign that has taken player characters from Argos to Shem, across the Western Sea to a nameless island, and now across the haunted sands of Stygia.

CHAPTER 7: THE WRATH OF SEROTHOS

Borne by a Black Corsair ship, the player characters land in Zabhela, and can make their way across the savannahs of Kush and the sands of Stygia, or to the city of Karnath and then to the Valley of Set. They are granted one final gift from M'wangele, a potent charm. They must then trek

across the pitiless Stygian wasteland, braving soldiers and bandits alike. Aided by an unlikely ally, they reach the Valley of Set, but are visited in the night by an unexpected, if familiar foe, who takes from them that which was most precious to them.

The campaign comes to a roaring conclusion with the final confrontation, wherein the player characters must locate Xhosāth's final resting place, witness his resurrection and then slay him, and thwart the sorcerer named Serothos, who seeks to claim the Acheronian's power, and with it to rule over Stygia, bringing a new age of darkness to the Hyborian world.

Armed only with an ancient staff and an uncertain charm, can the player characters succeed?





THE WRATH OF SEROTHOS



*Hinged in the brooding west a black sun hung,
And Titan shadows barred the dying world.
The blind black oceans groped; their tendrils curled
And writhed and fell in feathered spray, and clung,
Climbing the granite ladders, rung by rung,
Which held them from the tribes whose death-cries skirled.
Above, unholy fires red wings unfurled —
Gray ashes floated down from where they swung.*

— “The Last Hour”, Robert E. Howard

OVERVIEW

Onboard the *Bahari*, the player characters land in Zabhela, on the Kushite coast, not far from the Makonde village where the vessel's new captain and crew are from. Parting ways, they must then equip themselves to either go north to Karnak and then across the Stygian desert to the Valley of Set, or they can go there directly.

They may encounter challenges on the way, chief among them the Stygians themselves. They cross paths with a group of desert raiders and outlaws, who offer to aid them. With these newfound allies, the player characters continue to the Valley of Set, where Xhosāth is entombed.

One night, just as they near the ancient ruins, a massive windstorm strikes the group, and in the midst of it, the Eye of Acheron is stolen by one of their allies, possessed by Serothos from afar and forced into doomed service.

They arrive in the Valley of Set to find a small garrison of Stygian soldiers and laborers, striving to unearth an old Acheronian tomb, where Xhosāth's remains are interred.

There, the player characters must infiltrate the ritual in which Serothos attempts to use the Eye of Acheron to draw from it the soul of the Acheronian sorcerer and take him as either a patron, or bind him and leech his power.

Armed with only an ancient cat-headed staff and a minor enchantment, the player characters must pit themselves against an Acheronian revenant as well as a Stygian sorcerer and his army.

ADVENTURE HOOKS

At this point, if a player character has been slain, integrating a new one into the campaign at this point presents considerable challenges, given the urgency to keep moving. However, there are some opportunities, as described below:

- There are the remaining members of the crew of the *Calypso* (Shemitish or Kushite pirates all), now offered berths upon the *Bahari*, but perhaps disinterested and willing to be newfound allies with the player characters. Conan's own adventures are full of such pairings.
- It may be that the remaining player characters found an unlikely ally amongst the Black Corsair crew of the *Bahari*. They may not want to serve under Mattai'a, and thus are willing to strike out with the player characters. In this case, they are all Kushites or other Black Kingdoms nationalities, and are likely pirates, possibly archers, barbarians, or even nomads.

- Mattai'a might also throw in with them herself (see page 177). She is eager to make a name for herself, and she certainly hates Stygians and their serpent-haunted sorcery. She is a Kushite noble warrior, the daughter of a king. In this case, she sends the *Bahari* to the Makonde village and continues along with the player characters.
- The player characters are set down in Zabhela, the only Kushite port city of any note. There, they might hire a guide through the Stygian wasteland, potentially a nomad or barbarian from anywhere in the Southern Kingdoms.
- Zabhela is also a mixing pot of ethnicities, cultures, and professions. Almost anyone might be encountered there, from old friends and rivals. Such coincidental meetings are also rife within Conan's adventures and not to be dismissed. Fate has a way of throwing the best allies together.

Ultimately, the greatest challenge for introducing a new player character at this stage is that the odds seem long, the risks incredible, and the chance for fortune utterly unknown. If the player characters confide in the challenges ahead and what has already transpired, a sane person would look for the nearest door and exit through it as quickly as possible. But player characters in *Conan* are made of sterner, more venturesome stuff, and the opportunity to destroy an ancient evil and save the world is exactly the sort of thing that reputations are built upon.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

Chapter 7: The Wrath of Serothos has narrowed to the endgame, moving all of the lesser pieces off the board. Now only the following remain:

- **THYRA:** Captured and drugged. Wants escape and vengeance.
- **SEROTHOS:** Wants the Eye of Acheron now that it grows near. Plans to sacrifice Thyra, incarnate Xhosāth into mortal form, and bind and control him to rule the world!
- **XHOSĀTH:** Wants to be free from the Eye of Acheron, to inhabit his mortal flesh once more, to wreck vengeance upon the world that destroyed him.
- **HARKHOUF:** A new force, he is a rebel and has a strong hatred for Stygia's sorcerous theocracy. He would love to weaken the cabal of sorcerers known as the Black Ring, of which Serothos is a member.

ENCOUNTERS ON THE WAY

If the gamemaster plans on introducing additional challenges to harry the return of the *Bahari*, the gamemaster can introduce horrific weather, sea monsters, and rival pirates or Black Corsair vessels. Stygian slavers prey upon the Kushite coast, seeking human merchandise to swell their coffers at the slave blocks of Karnath, Khemi, Asgalun, and even as far as Messantia or Toragis. Additionally, the Stygian navy is also quite aggressive and patrols coastal waters far beyond its own borders.


The *Conan* sourcebook *Conan the Pirate* contains many potential plot seeds, encounters, and other details of life on the salt road and its inherent dangers. As with other chapters this late in the campaign, it is advised to use such diversions sparingly, to avoid lessening the driving need to rescue Thyra and stop the looming apocalyptic reincarnation of an ancient evil.

THE BAHARI AND HER CREW

Her name means, in the tongue of the Makonde, 'sea voyager', and she is one of the finest examples of Black Corsair shipwriting ever made. The *Bahari* is over 120 feet long and 16 feet wide at the bow. When fully crewed, it hosts 75 Black Corsairs, each serving as a rower and warrior. Fast and sleek, the galley has two banks of oars on each side, one offset from the other. The deck has raised castles fore and aft, and the prow features a strong, sturdy bronze-supported ramming keel, used to smash through the hulls of lesser ships. Above this ram, a striking serpent has been carved. Cabins are beneath the aft castle, and the cargo hold runs the length of the vessel. With all the rowers at work, this vessel easily outpaces many.

Should the gamemaster wish to use the *Bahari* in naval combat, the rules for such are to be found in *Conan the Pirate*

ATTRIBUTES

| Sailing Range | Crew (+ Passengers) |
|---|---------------------|
| 7+ days | 75+ (40+) |
| Impact Damage | Maneuver |
| 3  | — |

STRESS AND SOAK

| Soak | Structure | Breaks |
|------|-----------|--------|
| 2 | 12 | 5 |

QUALITIES AND NOTES

- **Qualities:** Galley, Shallow Draft, Ship.
- **Stowage:** —
- **Notes:** Ram.

TIME AND DISTANCE

The exact location of Tothmekri's island and its distance from the coast of Kush is deliberately vague, to dissuade any sort of meticulous travel reckonings. The gamemaster is encouraged to characterize this as 'several days' rather than provide a precise figure. The urgency will not be emphasized with a countdown, and the chance of the campaign going astray if such calculations are performed are great.

Similarly, the vagueness of the timeframe makes it all-the-more reasonable for the player characters' arrival in the Valley of Set to be that much timelier. Serothos' ritual takes place when he gets his hands on the Eye of Acheron, not 'at midnight on the seventh day' or some fixed timeframe that has a huge chance of being missed entirely or arrived at too early.

Should more detail be required, the section on *Travel Times* on page 140 of the *Conan* corebook defines average travel times as being roughly 30 miles per day for someone walking or on horse- or camel-back. Given the distance to reach the Valley of Set, this puts the trip at about eight and a half days.

If the player characters wish to make better time — and they certainly should feel the pressure to do so — the gamemaster should ask for Animal Handling tests to keep their animals fed and maintained, and for Resistance tests of their own to avoid Fatigue, setting the Difficulties by the degree of exertion above and beyond a 'normal' pace. The gamemaster should consult the rules for Fatigue (*Conan* corebook, page 79–80) if desired. The rules for Forced March in that section may also be of use.

Ultimately, however, rigidly adhering to the grind of fatigue, encumbrance, and overall exhaustion is likely to be as dreary for the players as it is for their characters and should only be utilized as a dramatic emphasis. If the player characters find themselves suffering too dramatically, the gamemaster should by all means give them a temporary and restorative respite, perhaps at a strategically placed oasis, a long-forgotten well within some forgotten ruins, or even a caravan of merchants or soldiers with their own supplies that can be taken or bartered for, whichever is convenient.

MATTAI'A, CAPTAIN OF THE BAHARI (NEMESIS)

Odaka's heir, Mattai'a takes command over the *Bahari* upon his death. She is a popular leader and an excellent sailor, with a fanatic crew of reavers at her back. She is lean and swift where Odaka was mighty and broad. Like the rest of the Black Corsairs, she wears various bangles and ornaments won through piracy and single combat. A

javelin and shield are always at her hand. Untested thus far as a leader, Mattai'a is generally more calculating than the rest of her wild Black Corsairs.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 10 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 10 | 12 | |





FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| Combat | 3 | Movement | 2 |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 2 |
| Knowledge | 1 | Social | 2 |


STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 12, Resolve 13
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage 2


ATTACKS

- **Cutlass (M):** Reach 2, 6 , Unbalanced, Vicious 1
- **Javelin (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Fragile, Piercing 1, Thrown (Medium)
- **Sea Bow (R):** Range L, 5 , 2H, Piercing 1, Volley
- **War Cry (T):** Range C, 4 , mental, Area, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Strength from the Sea:** Mattai'a is used to combat at sea and only suffers penalties in the roughest of weather.
- **My Ship is My Castle:** On the *Bahari*, Mattai'a always has Light Cover, with 2  Soak against ranged weapons.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Fearsome Reputation:** At any point in an encounter, she can spend 1 Doom (Repeatable) to add 1  mental damage of her **War Cry** attack.

The Bahari's Crew

The term 'Black Corsair' is often applied to any of the various reavers and pirates from the Southern Islands, Kush, or elsewhere along the Black Coast, but these are Kushite in particular, mostly from the Makonde village tribe. They practice strict pragmatism onboard their ship, with the weak being culled and thrown overboard, and disputes settled by death-duels, surrounded by a chanting ring of their brothers-at-sea. Typically, Black Corsair ships rarely stray from the coast, but Odaka's quest for his ally and friend took them into waters far from the sight of land.

They are all Minion pirates as per the **Conan** corebook, page 319, armed with javelins, bows, and shields equivalent to those born by Mattai'a. If a more accurate writeup is desired, Black Corsairs are also described on page 71 of **Conan the Pirate**.

Under normal circumstances, they have little to do with the Kushites who sail with foreign pirates, but such was the force of charisma of their chieftain and captain, and his heir, that they are willing to accept non-Makonde as fellow crewmates.

SCENE I: SPEARS OF THE BLACK COAST

The *Bahari* is about to put into the port of Zabhela, on the northern coast of Kush not far from the area that Stygia claims as its own. Down here in the south, 'borders' are less defined and are largely empty and unclaimed. Fifty miles up the coast is Karnath, a Stygian city like many, oppressive and unwelcoming to others, and from Zabhela the player characters can hire or purchase riding animals and supplies to make their way northwest across northern Kush and then into Stygia, to the Valley of Set.

It has been several long, anxious days of travel, though far less eventful than the passage on the *Calypso*. The addition of fresh fruit and the fiery liquor from the island is a welcome addition to the normal seafaring rations. The newly intermingled crew has come together and long hours have been spent gambling and exchanging stories, making new allies, singing sea-songs, and so on. Many tales are told of Odaka's bravery and his epic adventures, and the player characters get a better sense of the man and the legend he had inspired. Treasure won from the island is placed within a cargo hold and secured, less against thievery and more to keep the crew from fighting over their shares and distracting themselves.

Despite early friction, the former slaves from the *Calypso* are treated as equals among the crew of the *Bahari*, even sitting alongside their former owners at the *Bahari's* rowing benches. Freedom and wealth can smooth over many differences, and upon the sea road there is little place for recriminations or bad blood between shipmates.

The night before the galley reached sight of Zabhela, the old Kushite magician M'wangele approached them on the deck, signaling that he wished to talk. In one hand he holds an unsheathed dagger, its blade of Akbitanian steel.




"Last night, as I slept, I had a curious dream. In it, I was visited on my favorite beach by a robed man, old like me, but from the north Hyborian kingdoms. He spoke to me. He was no holy man, no priest, but like one. I could tell that he was also no true man at all, but one who wore that form to put me at ease."

"We sat on the beach together and he told me to give you something. He wrote it into the sand and made me remember it, bidding me to give it to you and get it right. Give me your sword if you will see it."

The magician then offers to scratch an enchantment upon one blade of each of the player characters. If they allow him, he sits on a bench and uses the blade of the Akbitanian dagger, stronger and harder than normal steel, to scratch the same shape into the blades of their weapons, near the hilt. It is a bird, wings spread wide and tail flared, forming a sort of inverted triangle. Any player character worshiping Mitra, having visited the Temple of Mitra in Messantia, or possessing Lore Focus of 1 or more knows that this is the phoenix symbol of Mitra himself.

When he is finished, he turns upwards, squinting into the dark. *"There, old man. I have done all I can for them."* He does not know exactly what the enchantment is supposed to do, but he knows that the phoenix and the serpent are the deadliest of allies, and this might aid them against the evil they will face in the days ahead.

The Blessing of the Phoenix

When this blessing is emblazoned upon a weapon, it does not make it any more durable, any more like to strike a foe, but it allows the weapon to bypass any magical Soak possessed by a creature of the Outer Dark or in Set's service, and also does an additional +3  against the if any damage is inflicted. This enchantment continues even if the item is broken, though destroying the sign of the phoenix itself will remove the blessing.

Hold This for Me...

If the player characters have indicated their immediate plans to Mattai'a, she purses her lips and looks to the cargo hold where the spoils of Tothmekri's court have been stored for safety. She then offers to hold it for them.

"You may find that carrying such wealth makes you a target in Zabhela, and there are few I would trust to leave it with there. That weight will slow you on the Stygian desert. I offer to guard your shares with my honor and my life. The Bahari returns to the Makonde village, to the south, on the morrow. We will carry what you leave us with, and it will be safe for you when you come to visit us on your return. On this, you have my oath."



This is likely the best option for the player characters, as lugging around bags of highly visible loot is bound to draw a lot of attention in a rough port city like Zabihela. An Insight test reveals that she is telling the truth and intends to honor her offer. If they ask instead to take the smallest carryable amount of treasure, they can instead settle for 75 Gold in the form of gems and jewelry. Less, but easier than coming back for more later.

ZABHELA AND KUSH

As the *Bahari* approaches, Zabihela becomes less and less appealing. A small city, the docks are infested with large black rats, and all manner of illicit goods and services are prominently on display. A wide variety of ships are docked there, and from the looks of their crews, they are mostly pirates or desperate merchants wishing to risk robbery for the last sales that might be gleaned this far south. This is not all it is good for, however, and the docks themselves are a thriving and boisterous hub of activity, traders and merchants haggling with one another over bales, bundles, bushels, and barrels of goods brought from inland or being sold to be transported back there. Rare items like peacock feathers, ivory, rare woods, diamonds, and slaves, all bartered and sold upon its decks and within its markets.

Zabihela is a popular trading port for Shemite merchants, who use it as a base to send caravans into Stygian cities like Sukhmet and beyond, sending Kushite slaves northwards and eastwards into Stygia, Shem and other Hyborian nations such as Argos. Like the rest of the nation, Kush is ruled by the Chagas, their hereditary leader caste tracing their lineage back to Stygian settlers of long ago. Despite this connection, Kush and Stygia are alternately at war and allied, often on a tribe-by-tribe basis. Most of the people, however, are native Gallahs, far more numerous yet continually oppressed. This state keeps the country at a simmer of tribal, racial, and caste-based tension. Gallah-caste Kushites are tall, ebon-skinned giants, while the Chaga are even taller and lighter-skinned, though slenderer than the Gallah and darker than the dusky-skinned Stygians.

Most Gallah worship Jullah, a gorilla-god, who opposes the Chaga's patron deity Set, though along the coast are many shrines to Derketo, the Shemite Queen of the Dead. The Chaga are almost always worshipers of Set. For this reason, the player characters may wish to avoid any discussion of killing serpent-folk openly.

If the gamemaster wishes for more information about Zabihela and Kush, the country itself is described in the **Conan** corebook (pages 241–246) and in **Conan the Pirate** (pages 50–51) particularly Zabihela. Kush is also described in **Conan the Adventurer**, pages 41–42.



PARTING WAYS

The *Bahari* puts to port in Zabhela's docks, and some few Kushites of the *Calypso's* crew — pirates and former rowers alike — depart and strike out for their home villages, laden with riches from their shares of the island's booty. Mattai'a urges them to be circumspect about their wealth, and certainly to get out of the city as quickly as possible and to show it to no one. With that, they are gone. Meanwhile, Mattai'a's second in command, a veteran warrior named Qwara, goes into the market to begin converting some of their wealth into supplies to replenish those used on the journey to and from the island.

With that, M'wangele and Mattai'a bid farewell to the player characters.

MOUNTING AN EXPEDITION

The Valley of Set is roughly 250 miles away from Zabhela. The player characters have two choices about how to reach the Valley. The first is the most obvious and relatively 'safest', to purchase horses or camels and supplies in Zabhela and strike directly to the northeast, crossing the Kushite lands and entering Stygian deserts, hoping to avoid that kingdom's Stygian soldiers. The second option is to go to the north to Karnath, a Stygian city where strangers are not welcome and then attempt to purchase mounts and supplies there. To accomplish any of that, they would need to disguise themselves as Stygians or somehow rely on merchants who would not turn them in to the theocratic authorities.

Unless the player characters are foolhardy to the point of suicidal, the direct approach is the sanest and the one that is presented here. Should the player characters choose the less obvious of the two options, the gamemaster is encouraged to utilize materials found in *Conan the Pirate* (pages 48–49) which describe coastal Stygia and Karnath in particular.

Provisioning

The markets in Zabhela are well-stocked enough that any manner of goods might be found there. Though it is a relatively minor port compared to Khemi, Asgalun, Messantia, or other cities to the north, it is nonetheless easy to find anything that is required for an extended overland crossing.

The gamemaster should consult the rules in the *Conan* corebook for finding and procuring items (page 136–137), assuming Zabhela's markets have everything from Availability 0–2, with rarer items of Availability 3–4 potentially findable, depending on their nature. Prices for items with higher Availability should be adjusted upwards at the gamemaster's discretion.

Provisions are easy enough to assemble, and any player character with a Survival Focus of 1+ knows how and what to purchase, and how much, for a voyage to and from the Valley of Set, relying on the occasional stop at a watering hole or oasis, but carrying enough to not rely on them *overmuch*.

If the gamemaster feels like adding more uncertainty to this aspect of the adventure, have the purchasing player character make an Average (D1) Survival test to equip the group for the journey there and back. Failure means that they have inadvertently purchased tainted/spoiled supplies or not enough and may be subject to starvation and thirst, potentially leading to Fatigue (see the *Conan* corebook, page 79). Success means that the player character has not only bought the right amount of food, water, feed, and other necessary supplies, but also bartered for clothing optimally suited for the desert clime. See the sidebar on **Time and Distance** (page 177) for more information.

In all, these supplies cost a grand total of 18 Gold per player for the trip there and back. A successful Average (D1) Persuade test knocks the price of that down to 15 Gold, and every additional point of Momentum reduces the price by another 3 Gold. Prices for supplies can be found on page 141 of the *Conan* corebook.

Mounts are recommended, and while the camel is better acclimated to the desert environment and is a better choice, horses are also acceptable for a journey of this length. Camels cost 8 Gold apiece, and Stygian-bred riding horses accustomed to the desert cost 10 Gold. A war horse is out of the question, as they are simply not durable enough and require too much food and water to sustain themselves on a march like this. If it were part of a large caravan or an army, perhaps, but a small group like this is limited to the choice of animals. It is generally recommended to have an extra mount for every two riders, to bear additional supplies and water. Both types are plentiful within Zabhela's markets. As above, a successful Average (D1) Persuade can reduce the costs by 2 Gold apiece, with each point of Momentum spent reducing it by another Gold. Page 137 of the *Conan* corebook contains more on mounts and their limits: camels are described in the corebook on page 325, while riding horses are on page 326.

Additional weapons and/or armor to replace any lost are also easily found within the teeming markets of Zabhela, as there are as many mercenaries as there are penniless adventurers who sold their kit to make ends meet. Almost any standard weapon might be found, shields are plentiful, and armor up to Availability 3 is readily available. Generally, the amount of time to fit armor with Availability 4 is so great that it would delay departure significantly. Reloads for most missile weapons are in plenitude.

Other supplies and/or equipment, such as torches, kits, and resources, should have their Availability determined by the gamemaster, potentially requiring Society tests with the Difficulty based on the rarity, as appropriate.

ASKING AROUND

Should the player characters ask about their potential destinations, this is what they can find out with a successful Average (D1) Society or Lore test.

The Valley of Set

This ancient burial place has entombed the nobility of Stygia for entire dynasties, generation after generation, dating back as long as there is recorded history. The monuments in this valley range from massive pyramids all the way to small, humble fields of grave markers and mausoleums full of the urns of cremated commoners and laborers who built the edifices in the Valley.

It is surprisingly verdant for a region in the desolate Stygian wastes, surrounded with scrub plains, small grassy stretches, and even groves of palm trees. The Set priesthood is said to control the place and enact secret rites within it, but few are the witnesses who can offer any proof.

What is certain however is that it is built upon ruins far more ancient than Stygia's founding, dating back to the mighty empire of Acheron, and even further back. Old magic lingers in this place, haunted tombs and shrines to forgotten gods best left alone.

Karnath

Karnath is said to be considered one of the oldest human cities in the world. The Stygians believe that humankind originated here, pale-skinned people predating even Acheron. Even still, their bloodline is visible within some of the city's populace, who are pale for Stygians and often have blue eyes.

The city itself is built upon ancient ruins, mostly vanished, but strange idols were found there and were worshiped by some of the city's folk, despite the theocracy of Set attempting to stamp such heresy out.

Despite its favorable placement along the coast, its fishing fleet rarely trades or exports with other cities throughout the rest of Stygia. Many Stygians consider Karnath barely a Stygian city at all, and some would happily cede it to the Kushites if they would take it, which they will not.

Hiring a Guide

It may be that the player characters decide to hire a guide to escort them across the savannahs of Kush and the hot sands of Stygia. This is an excellent means of introducing a new player character if need be. A successful Average (D1) Society test finds a local guide, an average Minion scout, using the Minion bandit writeup on page 312 of the **Conan** corebook. Spending more Momentum for an improved quality of success yields the same guide, but they add +1d20 to any Survival checks made while traveling.

In either case, it is a Gallah Kushite named Apraku. He bears the marks of a Stygian slave and claims to know the country well, having escaped it long ago.

Getting Directions

Asking any trader or Stygian in town (and there are many of each) yields the location of the Valley of Set without any test required. It is roughly a third of the way across the country heading east, and mid-way north to the northern border. A single Gold used as a bribe provides enough information about landmarks in the region that an Average (D1) Survival test should be able to navigate the player characters to the right spot.

Hitting the Road

Unless the player characters have gone out of their way to attract attention, or somehow a test while in town resulted in Complication, there should be little stopping them from leaving almost immediately.

If the gamemaster wishes to complicate their departure, a group of city guards may approach them, asking a lot of awkward questions about where they came from, where they're going, etc. Use the Kushite guards from Asgalun, as described on page 78, for this instance.

They may attract the attention of some wayward thief, perhaps in an eerily similar encounter like that in the streets of Messantia so long ago. Use the writeup of the Minion thug (**Conan** corebook, page 321) for this sort of encounter.

Alternately, they have attracted quite a bit more attention than they desired, and their voyage out of Zabehla is quickly followed by an ambush by local bandits who saw their profligate spending in the city's markets and suspected there was a great deal more wealth to be taken. A large group of bandit Minions (**Conan** corebook, page 312) may be encountered in this fashion.

Finally, though, they are able to put the city behind them and move into this, the final phase of their journey.

SCENE II: ACROSS THE SAVANNAHS

While crossing Kush, the gamemaster should emphasize the vastness of its savannahs and scrub plains. The fierce sun, the sense of enormity of the great sky above... all these point to a land that has not been civilised or conquered, as have the Hyborian lands to the north. The high grasses of the savannah sway gently in the near-constant wind or are crushed almost to earth beneath howling winds from approaching storms. These areas offer the rawest of nature in its most primal form, majestic and without reserve.

There is little to hold back when describing weather in this area — storms should be primordial, as if the wrath of some vengeful god. Rainstorms are pelting torrents that threaten to wash away even the earth below the player characters' feet, and everywhere are the lightning-blasted stumps of once-mighty trees, now burnt cylinders jutting bleakly into the sky as a reminder of the power that lies above.

Insects, too, are an elemental force capable of affecting the terrain, from great black clouds of flies that can be seen from thousands of feet away, to termite hills that cluster like drab villages.

Travel from Zabhela to the land claimed by Stygia involves crossing roughly 70 miles of savannah, grassy veldt, and patches of light jungle. There are few deep rivers, none that cannot be waded across. This part of Kush is relatively flat, with few landmarks or distinguishing features — instead, the terrain is lightly hilled and sloped, with looming cliffsides and bluffs in the far horizon.

ENCOUNTERS IN KUSH

Crossing Kush is no easy matter, certainly no stroll across idyllic Poitain with her fields of lavender and pleasant vineyards, or the overcultivated farmlands of docile Brythunia. The countryside is dangerous, and Kushites are known for their contempt for those of other tribes. In addition to the threats from the local Tewase tribesfolk, there are also natural dangers in the form of many fierce animals who hunt the savannahs.

Furthermore, as noted prior, the fierce weather comes in the shape of storms that graze and rumble across the grassy expanses like packs of great gray beasts, striding the land on tall legs of lightning, leaving scorched trees and dead animals in their wake. Torrential rain, great storms that blast the sky... all are as common as they are sudden.



If desired, the gamemaster can require Average (D1) Survival tests for each of the two days remaining in Kush. This represents searching for edible vegetables and grasses,

hunting small animals (or eggs), and searching for sources of fresh water. Though not necessary, supplanting supplies in this fashion adds +1d20 to any later Survival tests relating to handing food and drink.

If the player characters are relatively weak or in poor condition, or the gamemaster does not wish to dwell overlong on the voyage inland from the Kushite coast, this section can be skipped with a simple declaration such as: *"After several days of hard travel across the savannahs of Kush, the grasses eventually fade and you find yourself in the Stygian desert."*

If, however, the gamemaster would like for the journey across Kush to be eventful and a potential source of adventure each half-day in Kush, the gamemaster should call for an Average (D1) Survival test. If they fail this test, the gamemaster should pick an encounter from the list provided below and characterize it properly, giving the player characters adequate time and opportunity to make appropriate Observation tests to potentially avoid the encounter altogether.

Some of these encounters are not necessarily benign and could be even sought by the player characters while in search of food, water, or seeking shelter.

- The player characters come across a great herd of dull brown, wide-horned cattle, grazing at a thin stream swollen from a rain on previous days. Unless a player character feels like testing their might against a thick-necked bull, there is no reason to engage them.
- A small pack of 4+2  wild dogs is snarling and fighting amongst themselves for scraps of a large piece of carrion — the grisly remains of an antelope slain and eaten by larger predators. Use the statistics for Minion dogs provided on page 326 of the **Conan** corebook.
- A large pack of 6+4  hyenas, yapping at a small calf they have separated from its herd. It is bleating with fear as the hyenas circle it with their devilish, almost human cackle. Use the statistics for Minion dogs provided on page 326 of the **Conan** corebook.
- A herd of antelopes, grazing in a grassy veldt. If the player characters disturb them, they sprint away with astonishing speed and grace. Hunting one down might be an exhilarating activity and would provide fresh meat but might take the player character some distance out of the way, and potentially into additional danger.
- A leopard sunning itself upon the thick bole of a bare-limbed tree. There is really not much reason to disturb it, however.

- A small group of 1+2 🐾 lean and rangy Kushite horses, wild and their coats matted with mud. They could be captured but taming them would likely take a considerable amount of time, unless a Daunting (D3) Animal Handling roll can be made to calm them down enough to approach.
- A group of impalas with coats of a rich brown and tawny pattern, their horns whorled and tall. They leap away gracefully if approached, or even looked at too vigorously.
- A broad-leafed tree, its branches a verdant green, dotted with splashes of colour in the form of dark red globe-like fruit. A successful Daunting (D3) Survival or Alchemy test identifies these as the dreaded apples of Derketa, a fruit whose juice is an extraordinarily deadly poison. If an apple is consumed or a target is stuck by a weapon poisoned by one dose of this juice, the victim takes 4 🐾 damage, Persistent 4, Stun. Armor does not count against the venom if an attack delivering it does Vigor damage. Even handling an apple of Derketa requires a successful Average (D1) Acrobatics test to avoid splashing some juice on one's hands, causing 1 🐾 damage to the naked skin.
- A herd of giraffes, male, female, and calves, grazing amongst some trees, nibbling the uppermost branches. They are skittish and run if surprised or threatened.
- A small flock of vultures clustered about a veritable carrion banquet: a dead elephant whose flesh has been gnawed by several packs of animals previously. The stench is incredible, and the vultures give off raucous cries as they pull ragged strips of flesh from the elephant's putrefying hide. They squawk and caw at anyone approaching and threatening their feast.
- A largish herd of black and white-striped zebra as they race across the savannas, fleeing something unknown. Perhaps another predator? Or are they fleeing an encroaching storm?
- A group of human forms at a distance, armed with spears and bows. Based on information from Mattai'a or from the locals in Zabhela, these are Tewase tribesfolk, unfriendly to trespassers. They were once allied to the Makonde, but recently become fierce rivals due to some rift. They do not carry shields, so it is likely that they are hunters. The Tewase watch at a distance. If approached peaceably they parley with the player characters, though are ill at ease. Tewase hunters are equivalent to the tribal warrior Minions described on pages 78–79 of *Conan the Adventurer*. If the gamemaster lacks that reference, use an

appropriate alternative from those provided in the *Conan* corebook. They speak Kushite and, reluctantly, some Stygian. If attacked or threatened, they flee, only to return in great numbers.

If desired, the gamemaster can pick additional creatures or even supernatural ones, but a good tactic is to contrast the supernatural horrors encountered on Tothmekri's island, and whatever awaits, with creatures natural, however deadly or innocent.

SCENE III: THE BURNING SANDS

The gamemaster should read aloud the following to the player characters:

Two days out from Zabhela, you reach a transition between the environments, marking what most regard as the Stygian border. Here, the savannah goes to meager patches of grass and scrub and becomes increasingly sandy, until the great, vast flat desert plain lies ahead. In the bright sunlight, the trackless expanses of sands seem to shine, and the sky is clear and pale above, immobile and uncaring for the souls it stands above.

Directions to the Valley of Set are straightforward and it should be easy to find. From there, you must find the resting place of Xhosāth, the Acheronian, buried amidst these ancient Stygian tombs and pyramids. If you turn back unimaginable horrors may manifest in the world, subject to the whims of the Acheronian and his apparent patron, this mysterious Stygian sorcerer.

You wonder what Thyra's fate is, if she yet lives, and that thought hopefully stirs you to movement. With a kick and a jerk of the reins, you spur your mounts ahead, into the wasteland of the Stygian desert.

STYGIA

The player characters should know most of this, but it is provided as additional reference for the gamemaster and for convenience.

Stygia is a once-mighty kingdom that originally stretched as far north as Brythunia and the Karpash Mountains, but now has dwindled in size and influence to a shadow of its former glory, turning inward and strange, worshipping dark gods and hating all foreigners. A rigid theocracy, the kingdom is closed to outsiders, and it maintains an iron-fast control over trade to and from the southern Black Kingdoms as a mainstay of its economic strength.

Stygia has two capital cities — one royal and one religious — in Luxur, home to King Ctesphon IV, and in Khemi, site of the major Temple of Set. Luxur is also home to the mighty Stygian sorcerer Thoth-Amon, leader of the Black Ring of magicians, who has many rivals said to covet his power and his position within the theocratic court.

Most of Stygia is desert, with some grasslands and fertile river valleys, particularly around the Styx River, on its northern border. As a onetime part of the vast Acheronian empire, Stygia is dotted with ancient Acheronian ruins and remnants of that once great culture, and many Stygian sorcerers and priests seek forbidden lore, shifting through the sands of aeons past for secrets of ancient occult knowledge.

The Stygian ruling caste is dusky-skinned, dark-haired, with strong features, though some of them have skin ranging from brown to ivory. Stygian commoners are a mixture of many other races, from Shemite, Black Kingdom or other racial stock, including the conquered remnants of the Acheronian people. Legends have it that an ancient race known as the Lemurians spawned the Stygians, though none know this for certain. Other legends identify the ruling caste of Stygians as offshoots of the former giant-king rulers when Stygia was part of Acheron's mighty empire.

Stygians uniformly worship the Serpent God Set, though other gods are worshipped to a lesser degree. They believe in a complex afterlife leading to resurrection and

build immense edifices to their gods and to ancestors, as well as great tombs for their kings and wealthy nobles.

ACHERON

A long-vanquished and fallen empire that flourished from 10,000 to 5,000 years ago and covered much of the western part of the continent, Acheron was destroyed by the early influx of the Hyborian settlers, who drove them into near-extinction in a war that waged for two millennia, finally resulting in Acheron's fall nearly 3,000 years ago.

In Stygia, Acheronians were worshipped as giant-kings until they were overthrown, and legends claim that their blood runs in the veins of the current ruling caste. Acheronians were feared as mighty sorcerers, knowing strange sciences and arts that have since been lost to humankind. Their capital city was purple-towered Python, a city whose exact location has never been divined. Acheronian ruins dot the continent, and a fragment of their people still exist, scattered and marginalized in various kingdoms.

Acheronians were tall and had pale white skin and glossy black hair, with pale eyes that seemed to glow. Especially powerful sorcerers were said to have faces that seemed to emit a soft glow. Acheronian women were voluptuous and often intoxicatingly beautiful, and both sexes were prone to corruption and madness. They worshipped Set, like the Stygians, and believed strongly in the afterlife, in resurrection and made many preparations to thwart the bony hand of death.



The Stygians were an ancient race, a dark, inscrutable people, powerful and merciless. Long ago their rule had stretched far north of the Styx, beyond the meadowlands of Shem, and into the fertile uplands now inhabited by the peoples of Koth and Ophir and Argos. Their borders had marched with those of ancient Acheron. But Acheron had fallen, and the barbaric ancestors of the Hyborians had swept southward in wolfskins and horned helmets, driving the ancient rules of the land before them. The Stygians had not forgotten.

— *The Hour of the Dragon*

More information about Acheron and Acheronians can be found in the **Conan** corebook, pages 195–196 and additional material on them is found throughout *The Book of Skelos* and *Ancient Ruins & Cursed Cities*.

CROSSING STYGIA

As prior, the gamemaster may wish to simply summarize the crossing of the Stygian desert to move the plot along towards the final act of the campaign. The voyage across Stygia should not seem a death-march against impossible odds, with creatures and foes boiling out from behind every rock at regular intervals. Instead, encounters should be varied to present the player characters with a panorama, emphasizing the terrain and its character, as described above.

Unlike the Kushite savannahs, the Stygian deserts are remarkably empty save for small animals native to the extremely hot and arid climate. Snakes and lizards, various insects, tiny foxes, some birds, and not much else. Few are the cacti or clumps of grass, and dune after rocky ridge and escarpment is all the scenery one can take in, dotted by occasional ruins that may have been Acheronian palaces, or simply way-stops along the road through this desolate wasteland. All the while, the merciless sun beats down upon the player characters, glaringly, blindingly hostile. Nights, however, see the temperatures plunge to surprisingly cool conditions, almost bracingly cold.

The gamemaster may call for the occasional Average (D1) Survival tests across the next few days of the journey. Upon a failure, they come across one of the following sights:

- The corpse of an escaped slave, probably Stygian, riddled with arrows and left to wither in the dry sands. A group of vultures is hard at work erasing all traces of identify from the body.
- An oasis, but not a particularly good one. It is little more than a muddy crater with some small grass growing nearby. If one has a lot of patience and doesn't mind some mud, it could be a place to refill water-skins, however.
- An oasis appears in the distance, wavering in the heat. Approaching it reveals that it is a mirage, an illusion born of desperation or madness.
- A dead camel, its saddle pulled off and lying next to it. The personal effects are scattered across the sands, and a trail of footprints leads off, then abruptly stop.

On a result containing a Complication, the gamemaster should have the player characters encounter either the tracks of a Stygian patrol, or the patrol itself. A successful Average (D1) Observation test lets them see the patrol before it sees them. Failure means that the patrol is upon them before they see it, and a Complication means that they have unfortunately run into a patrol tracking them, having encountered their trail and following them to see who dares trespass the 'trackless' desert.

Stygian Patrol

For the first couple of days, the player characters run the greatest chance of inadvertently encountering a Stygian patrol, either guarding against Kushite raiders, or seeking to track down escaped slaves trying to reach Kushite territory.

Stygian patrols consist of at least six men, all clad in linen and scale armor, usually armed with kopeshes, small shields, and Stygian bows. Some patrols are partially on horseback, and some even accompany chariots. Most are Minions with a single Toughened captain or charioteer. Stygian chariots usually host two soldiers: one driver and the other a combatant, firing arrows or flinging javelins at any nearby foes. Stygian chariots used for patrols are light and are described on pages 138–139 of the **Conan** corebook.

If player characters are finding themselves in need of supplies, Stygian patrols are always well-provisioned.



STYGIAN SOLDIER (MINION OR TOUGHENED)






| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 8 | 7 | 8 | 8 |
| Agility | | Brawn | Coordination |
| 9 | | 9 | 9 |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 1 | Movement | 1 |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |


STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 5 (9 Toughened), Resolve 4 (8 Toughened)
- **Soak:** Armor 3 (Linen and Scale Harness), Courage —

ATTACKS

- **Kopesh (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Intense, Vicious 1
- **Shield (M):** Reach 2, 3 , 1H, Knockdown, Stun
- **Javelin (M):** Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Fragile, Piercing 1, Thrown (Medium)
- **Stygian Short Bow (R):** Range C, 4 , 2H, Volley
- **Haughtly Glare (T):** Range C, 3  mental

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Cavalry:** A Stygian soldier mounted on horseback or in a chariot receives an additional +1d20 to attack rolls and adds +1  damage to all successful Thrown weapon attacks.

SCENE IV: SONS OF THE DESERT

On the morning of the sixth day towards the Valley of Set, the player characters pass through a narrow canyon. Its shade provides a welcome respite from the overhead sun. A successful Average (D1) Survival or Observation test reveals the signs of many tracks, belonging to camels, horses, and men alike. This is a well-traveled location, unusual for someplace so remote.

If the player characters succeed Challenging (D2) Stealth tests, they manage to make their way to a ridge from which, peering around, they see the following scene:

A group of four Stygian soldiers have surrounded two men fighting back-to-back. The soldiers circle them warily,

jabbing at them with javelins and kopeshes, trying to break through their guard. One stands back with a bow, readying an arrow and seeking a clear window of opportunity.

The defenders are dressed in desert robes, black and voluminous, and they fight with scimitars and daggers. At their feet are several other men, dead, dressed as they are, and scattered throughout the immediate area are the bodies of several more soldiers, dead or dying.

As you watch, one of the Stygian soldiers hanging back draws a bow and launches an arrow. The shaft flies true and strikes one of the two in the chest, causing him to drop to his knees. His ally glances down, then gives an enraged, impassioned cry and leaps forward at the soldiers, fighting as if he does not care whether he lives or dies.

Do you do anything?

If the player characters intervene, use the description of Stygian soldiers on page 186. The man is a desert bandit, an outlaw (see below). The soldiers are focused on killing these few bandits, so an ambush can be devastating, perhaps wiping them out in relatively short work.

DESERT BANDIT (TOUGHENED)

A culturally mixed band of exiles and malcontents, these outlaws detest Stygia's oppressive state religion of Set worship and have been driven into the desert, with no place for them in Stygian society. Or they are foreigners, who for one reason or another, have chosen to remain in Stygia. Outsiders and castouts all, they have thrown their lots in with a charismatic nomad named Harkouf, the so-called 'Black Vulture'. They are rugged men and women, united by a code of fraternity and survivalism, allied against a common enemy. Though each knows that they will inevitably be destroyed by their own countrymen, they take each day as a gift. Some worship gods native to their lands such as Adonis, Bel, or Derketa, some older Stygians gods such as Ibis, while some of the Stygians still worship a more benign aspect of Set. They hate the theocracy, not the Old Serpent himself.

If the player characters spend more time with the bandit gang — as is described in the pages that follow — the gamemaster may wish to name them. Suitable names for men include those that follow (below) and others such as Ankhef, Henuka, and Sammut, and potential female names could be Hrere, Meryt, or Timat.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 8 | 8 | 8 | * |
| Agility | | Brawn | Coordination |
| 10 | | 10 | 10 |




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 2 | Movement | 1 |
| Fortitude | 1 | Senses | 1 |
| Knowledge | — | Social | — |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 10, Resolve 9 (8 Toughened)
- **Soak:** Armor —, Courage —

ATTACKS

- **Scimitar (M):** Reach 2, 5 , 1H, Cavalry 1, Parrying
- **Stygian Short Bow (R):** Range C, 3 , Volley
- **Steely Glare (T):** Range C, 3 , mental, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Ambush Tactics:** Bandits are seldom inclined to fight fair, relying on sneak attacks and skulduggery to triumph. Their familiarity with such tactics grants them 1 bonus Momentum on all Movement tests to gain surprise at the start of a combat.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Sons of the Desert:** Harkouf's desert bandits know well the Stygian badlands and can exploit it to their advantage. They can spend 1 Doom to get an automatic success on any Movement or Senses tests while in the desert.

The desert nomad instantly turns to his wounded companion and attempts to remove the arrow shaft. If spoken to, he gives his name as Udumu, and claims that the wounded man is Khefi, his older brother. A close look reveals that they bear some resemblance. Any assistance with a Healing test, Daunting (D3) Difficulty, can restore the man to enough health to be transported. If not, his brother dies. Udumu takes this stoically, then strips Khefi's corpse of any weapons and items of value. He retrieves several horses tethered nearby, and slings the corpses of the dead men over one of the horses' saddles, tucking their valuables into a rolled cloak so they won't be spilled.

Udumu asks the player characters what has brought them so far out into the wastes, where few typically venture. Of the Stygian soldiers, he claims that the soldiers have been hunting his band for many months. He must return to his camp and tell his followers that they must move. If the soldiers are this close, it is time to find a new home. He



does not go into more detail but tells the player characters that they are welcome to accompany him to their camp. Udumu claims that the player characters will be treated with respect and as honored guests: any enemy of the serpent-worshippers is an ally of he and his desert brethren.

If the player characters choose not to intervene, the man is shortly slain after his mad rush at the soldiers. They hack his body with their blades and quickly ensure that the other wounded man is also dealt with in the same fashion. As the players watch this, they hear a galloping of many horse-hoofs on the rocky canyon floor, moving quickly toward them. A moment later, three more desert nomads, clad identically to the slain, race into the clearing, striking at the soldiers as they pass. They are excellent horsemen and adept with their blades, and with a combination of rapid movement and fierce, devastating strikes, they swiftly eliminate the rest of the Stygian soldiers. If the player characters choose to get involved, they turn the tide that much quicker.

The three newly arrived nomads then demand of the player characters the same questions. Their names, should they be asked, are Neshrut, Qakare, and Amasis. They ask the same questions Udumu would have asked (see above), and follow with the same invitation, taking the bodies of their slain fellows with them as they go, securing the corpses to horse-backs and similarly stripping them of weapons and valuables before doing so.

The Stygian patrols, they tell the player characters, are likely out in force. These bandits would not be here alone, especially on foot, and others are almost certain to be nearby.

AN ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

The desert nomads lead the player characters through the narrow, winding caverns to a small camp in an area that expands into a rocky and irregular dead-end. Near its mouth, a few archers stand at the ready, bows taught, but relax when they see who has come. The camp consists of tents and a few open caves. Camels and horses are tethered near the entry, and the camp hosts a band of desert nomads, wearing white, multi-coloured, or black desert robes.

In the camp are several dozen men and women, from a variety of tribes and cultures. Most are Stygians, but among them are desert Shemites, Kushites, even some Darfari and

Keshani. They all sit around the smallish campsite with a covered campfire, eating goat meat from silver bowls and passing around waterskins. A variety of languages fill the air, but have a shared familiarity that belies their eclectic mix. Many have weapons near at hand, and the camp looks well-lived-in.

When the group arrives bearing the corpses of their allied bandits, there is much wailing. The bodies are removed from the saddles and taken away to have burial rites spoken over them, but aside from shrouding them within their robes, there is little preparation, no burials for these poor souls. There is little time for such formalities, and after word is passed of the attack by the soldiers, the bandits immediately begin to break camp, assembling their gear and disassembling tents.

One of the nomads strides over to speak with the player characters. From the confident stride, he gives every impression of being the group's leader. This is Harkouf, the group's leader (see page 189).

"You are no friends to the army, like the rest of us. I offer you the sanctuary of my camp, though..." he looks around, "we must find a new place now. Though we are Stygians, we are exiles, enemies of the cult of Set. My name is Harkouf... my enemies call me 'the Black Vulture', for reasons of their own."

"Where are you going that you should cross this desert?"

If the player characters attempt to mislead him, make an opposed Persuade test versus his Senses Field of Expertise. Spend Doom as desired. If the players are successful, he takes them at their word but suggests that they are perhaps lost or understandably unwilling to trust strangers in this land. *"The Stygian deserts are treacherous, to be certain, and candor can be as unwise as pouring one's waterskin onto the sand,"* he says with an easy grin, apparently quoting an old saying.

If the player characters indicate that they journey to the Valley of Set, he beams. *"As it happens, there is an old camp we seldom use within a half-day's ride of the Valley. We have many, but that one seems as good as any. Ride with us if you wish. There is safety in numbers, and we can guide you around any of the patrols. There is a reward upon my head, and the soldiers would like to collect it. Consider my offer. You will get no better out here."*



HARKOUF, THE BLACK VULTURE (NEMESIS)

Harkouf is a Stygian rebel, born a son of nobility and now an enemy of the Serpent Kingdom. Born into nobility, he went into the military. His father was a regional governor who made a ruling against the cult, and the reprisals cost him his life and household. The sole survivor, Harkouf fled into the desert, and found allies who shared his desire for vengeance. He rejects the dominance of the Set cult, not out of its tendency towards evil, but because it has made his country fearful and complacent, suffering under a corrupt and totalitarian theocracy.




Harkouf's bandits number almost fifty — minus those killed — a group of rough and hard-living nomads, accepting all into their ranks, from escaped slaves, wandering mercenaries, and even foreigners who hate the Stygian theocracy as much as they do. They prey on supply caravans, and occasionally raid slave traders who venture across the desert. Eventually, he believes, he and his followers will find a Stygia where they can live as free men, out from the dominance of the Set cult.


The Stygian army that hunts him call him 'the Black Vulture', portraying him as a corpse-picker and scavenger rather than a revolutionary.

| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
|------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
| 11 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 11 | 10 | 11 | |

| FIELDS OF EXPERTISE | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------|---|
| Combat | 3 | Movement | 3 |
| Fortitude | 2 | Senses | 2 |
| Knowledge | 1 | Social | 2 |

| STRESS & SOAK | |
|---|--|
| ■ Stress: Vigor 12, Resolve 14 | |
| ■ Soak: Armor 2 (Brigandine Jacket), Courage 2 | |

| ATTACKS | |
|---|--|
| ■ Scimitar (M): Reach 2, 6  , 1H, Cavalry 1, Parrying | |
| ■ Stygian Short Bow (R): Range C, 5  , Volley | |
| ■ Steely Glare (T): Range C, 5  , mental, Stun | |

| SPECIAL ABILITIES | |
|---|--|
| ■ Cavalry: A Stygian soldier mounted on horseback or in a chariot receives an additional +1d20 to attack rolls and adds +1  damage to all successful Thrown weapon attacks. | |

DOOM SPENDS

- **Son of the Desert:** Harkouf knows well the Stygian badlands and can exploit it to his advantage. He can spend 1 Doom to get an automatic success on any Movement or Senses tests while in the desert.
- **Bandit Chief:** When following his orders or fighting alongside him, all Harkouf's men gain 1 Courage Soak. He can also spend 1 Doom to re-roll all failed d20s for tests in matters of leadership, inspiration, and maneuvering, but must accept the results of the second roll.

If the player characters have a guide with them (see page 181), the guide indicates that he has heard of these bandits, and that they are relatively trustworthy. The Stygian theocracy has sought to exterminate them for some time, representing a fringe but growing element of resentment at their dominant presence in all aspects of Stygian life.

In the meantime, he offers the player characters water and shade, then goes back to coordinating his band's strategic withdrawal. Though Harkouf's camp contains almost 50 men, they assemble their gear with haste and in scant minutes they are ready to ride, the camp as empty as if it were never there. If the player characters choose not to accompany them, Harkouf seems disappointed, but shrugs it off, wishing them safe passage upon whatever path they take.

If the player characters choose to strike out on their own, move to **Scene V: The Hungry Sands** (page 190), eliminating all reference to the bandits and merely having the player characters find the oasis on their own and camp there (or anywhere desired).

If they continue with Harkouf and his bandits, continue with **On the Road** (following).

ON THE ROAD

Riding along with the bandit gang proves to be a wise choice, as they know many of the byways and can lead the player characters through this rocky region, avoiding some of the natural dangers as well as the Stygian patrols. This becomes evident at several points where outriders return and divert the group from their path, reporting back that a large host of Stygian soldiers are on the move eastward. The brigand band changes course and avoids both the larger force and some of its smaller scouting parties, chariot-borne Stygians moving rapidly sweeping the area back and forth ahead of the larger army.

Harkouf is fascinated by the player characters and rides alongside them, asking them as much as they will venture. A charming rogue, his bandits find him a good leader as

well as a fierce warrior. An Average (D1) Insight roll made against him reveals that he is being straightforward with them. Though he is a bandit and likely has killed many, his own rude sense of honor means that the player characters, as his guests, are to be dealt with fairly. Such is the custom of the desert.

If the player characters mention anything about Serothos or the Black Ring, Harkouf knows quite a bit of use, as he has a wide information network of spies and informants in all the major cities throughout Stygia, and pays well for information that can be of aid in his activities.

- Serothos, he says, is said to be based in Karnath, near the border of Kush. He favors the city specifically for its distance from Khemi and the court. There he can act with impunity, with none to meddle in his ways.
- The sorcerer's origins, like many, are shrouded in mystery, but few have ever seen the man, even his supposed fellows of the Black Ring.
- He is said to have a bitter rivalry with Thoth-Amon, the leader (or former leader, depending on the era this campaign is run) of the Black Ring.
- Supposedly, Serothos was hideously disfigured by a demonic pact he made, and thus hides his visage from his fellow sorcerers, though others say that he was maimed and his visage ruined in a sorcerous duel with Thoth-Amon.
- With such an enemy, he maintains his secrecy, and rarely acts in a public fashion.
- He is said to command an army of night-demons who do his bidding, flying forth from his tower in Karnath.
- Some others claim that there is no such man at all, and that he is little more than a tale concocted to frighten the superstitious.

"But of course, who can know what darkness hides in the heart of a sorcerer, what strange logic they follow, and what goals they chase? What, if any of that, can be trusted?" he concludes, sardonically.

If asked about the Valley of Set, the bandit leader can provide any of the information from page 193, but also adds that in the past two weeks his bandits saw a caravan making its way to the Valley of Set. The destination was guess-at, but there is little else of note in that direction. It left from Karnath, a force consisting primarily of laborers and some small number of mercenaries. Now there has been work out there as King Ctesphon readies his own pyramid for his eventual burial, but those efforts are much grander. This had the look of a lesser force, and there were far too few slaves to be doing much building of note.

Of the Stygian force at large, Harkouf is a bit confused. He says that they have harried many a caravan and given much of their spoils to the downtrodden and poor among Stygia's citizenry but have been treading the sands with a relatively light step lately. It is odd that such a force would have been marshalled so recently to seek them, but there can be little other reason a group of soldiers would be out here so far from habitation. "What — or who — else could they be after?" he says with a curious expression.

Should the gamemaster wish to expand this section of the adventure, perhaps with additional encounters or threats, or explore the makings of a brigand band in greater detail, the **Conan the Brigand** sourcebook is an excellent resource for such efforts.

SCENE V: THE HUNGRY SANDS

True to his word, just before nightfall, the bandits reach a camp at an oasis amid the Stygian desert. The winds have been growing in intensity and dust blows steadily in gales across the desert, a storm the bandits call a *simoom*. It forces all within the group to keep heads swathed in their hooded djellabas to keep the sand out.

Despite this, Harkouf (and the guide, if present) tells the player characters that they have made excellent time and are within a day's ride of the Valley of Set. A night's camp and some hours of riding in the morning and they will be there. Though the Valley is relatively large, it should not be difficult to find whatever it is they are looking for. His band begins to unpack and set up tents near the oasis. It is a meager one, a splash of verdancy in the desert, with several palm trees, a small patch of grass, and most importantly, a small pool of relatively clear water. Though warm, it is welcome, and once the dust and sand settle, it is quite drinkable. Near the oasis juts the remnants of what might have been a caravanserai in ages past, but it has been lost to the sand and little remains but exposed flagstones and rubble where once were sheltering walls. The bandits make their camp amidst these ruins, as they offer some slight shelter from the *simoom*.

The sandstorm, uncommon but not unheard of in this time of year, makes things difficult to continue much further, and without the stars to navigate by, it would be the height of folly to continue through the night. In the morning, Harkouf promises, he will escort them himself to the Valley if need be. He offers them the use of his own tent. "It is no trouble," he says, "I can sleep standing up, if need be."

THE THING IN THE NIGHT

Night falls quickly, the winds of the simoom daunting spirits somewhat, so that rather than a convivial dinner together, the brigands are forced to subsist off their rations, a modest meal consisting of dried figs, strips of seasoned goat from the feast earlier in the day, hard cakes of barley, water strained and tubers dug from around the pool itself. Despite this, the mood is light.

One of Harkouf's outriders returns from a reconnaissance mission and tells the bandits that the Stygian army is bivouacked within a few hours of them. Their paths are likely to converge at the Valley of Set, but they are far enough away, on the other side of a long rocky ridge, that it is unlikely they will come across them in the dark. Harkouf, a former soldier in the Stygian army, concurs. They will remain in their camp, guards at the ready. Rarely do they risk going into the desert alone in the dark.

Some of the brigands indulge in games of chance, others sing low songs to their friends, and the kind of easygoing camaraderie that exists among such folk is present here. Depending on what efforts the player characters have made to befriend the bandits, they are welcomed into their merriment. Wine and beer are shared, toasts are made to those who died that morning.

Particularly charismatic characters may find themselves approached by members of the desert band, offered whatever comfort might be found together. The men and women of this gang are as independent as they are pragmatic and think little of such activities. And in the desert winds, much that men and women do is destined to be forgotten, so let them find what diversions they can while they yet live.

When the guards have been assigned, fires damped as much as possible to avoid being spotted across the desert, the rest of the bandits and the player characters gone to sleep. Soon after, the simoom gradually increases in intensity, and the flapping of tents and braying of camels and horses grow louder over it until most within the camp are awake.

Any player character attempting a Challenging (D2) Survival test realizes that this sandstorm is unusually intense, and from the surrounding roar and lack of a clear direction indicates that it seems to be unnaturally focused on their location. The ground itself seems to shake. A successful Dire (D4) Sorcery test indicates that this could indeed be a creation of magic, whether a spell or even the manifestation of some malign will. If a player character is a sorcerer with the *Fury of the Elements* spell, they recognize its effects.

Wracked with the effects of this great and powerful storm, the bandits and player characters stagger about, trying to hold onto tents to keep them from blowing away, securing animals lest they flee and become lost and die in the storm. Visibility is almost nonexistent, and the howling winds and stinging dust burns the eyes and chokes the throat. Finding one's mounts within this sandstorm requires a successful Challenging (D2)

Observation test. Calming them is a similarly Challenging (D2) Animal Handling test. Failing either of these tests means that the mount has escaped and cannot be found, or breaks free and flees in terror, into this hellish *simoom*. As for personal effects, these are easy to secure but take time and effort and occupy one's full attention.

Buried Alive

The gamemaster should ask each of the player characters what they are doing, and when the player character carrying the Eye of Acheron is in a suitable position, read or paraphrase the following to them and anyone adjacent to them (within the same Zone):

Pelted by sand and grit, you push against the wind and try to keep your footing. The ground seems to slide under you, as if standing in the sand while the current goes, when you realize that the ground is indeed moving under you, pulling at you. You have but a moment when it grasps you, drags you beneath the sand, tearing at you in every direction, crushing you within its rough weight.

This sending should pull additional bandits into the ground as well, for dramatic emphasis, so it does not seem overtly directed at the player character bearing the Eye, though it is.

This is a 3-point sending of the *Open the Ground* Momentum spend of the *Fury of the Elements* spell (**Conan** corebook, pages 181–182). Player character may attempt to resist this with a struggle using their Athletics or Acrobatics in an opposed roll against a Sorcery/Knowledge Field of Expertise TN of 17, Focus 4, with one re-roll of a failed d20 for this test (or TN 15, Focus 3, depending on the identity of the sorcerer that cast the spell, see page 197). Failure means that they are buried within the sand, taking 2☹ with the Stun Quality, and are buried alive! Spend all the Doom needed to make this happen.

The tight-packed sand moves around you, tightening unnaturally, almost as if bands are being drawn about you. It moves past, and for a moment you have a sense of a presence there, something down here in the dark rough with you. Then it is gone.

See the **Conan** corebook, page 112, for more information about falling. Though the distance is greater than Close, the damage is lessened as it is not technically falling so much as it is being dragged underground.

Climbing out of the sand requires a successful Daunting (D3) Athletics test and can be aided by another. The gamemaster should pay attention to whether any other bandits were drawn into the sand, as the player characters may be haunted by their dying cries if they are not also drawn forth from the desert's fierce embrace.

As the *simoom* continues to roar around them, the player character bearing the Eye of Acheron now realizes with that the artifact is gone, pulled from their garments while they were buried within the sand. Their robes are torn and if it was on a chain, their skin bears the abrasion of having that chain broken. Searching for the Eye within the ground yields no success. It is simply gone, taken deep within the ground, perhaps spirited away on some strange, telluric current.

Shortly after, the *simoom* dissipates, but the sky remains cloudy and indistinct, a dull black tapestry across the roof of the world. The night resonates with cries of dismayed bandits that are echoed by terrified animals. Some of the bandits are dead, choked by the invasive sand, and camels and horses are scattered as far as the eye can see, the remnants of the camp thrown about like toys after an angry child's tantrum.

Harkouf staggers over to you, his blade naked in his hand and a wild, confused look in his eyes. "What malediction..." he gasps, "was that?"

If the player characters explain their suspicions, Harkouf grows calm and still. He orders his bandits together, telling them to find and calm their animals and to rest while they can. Together, he says, they will ride for the Valley of Set. Now, should they wish it so, the player characters are members of his band, and a strike against them is a strike against them all. In the morning, they will ride and when they find him, they will deliver their vengeance upon the sorcerer who set this awfulness upon them!

SCENE VI: INTO THE VALLEY OF EVIL

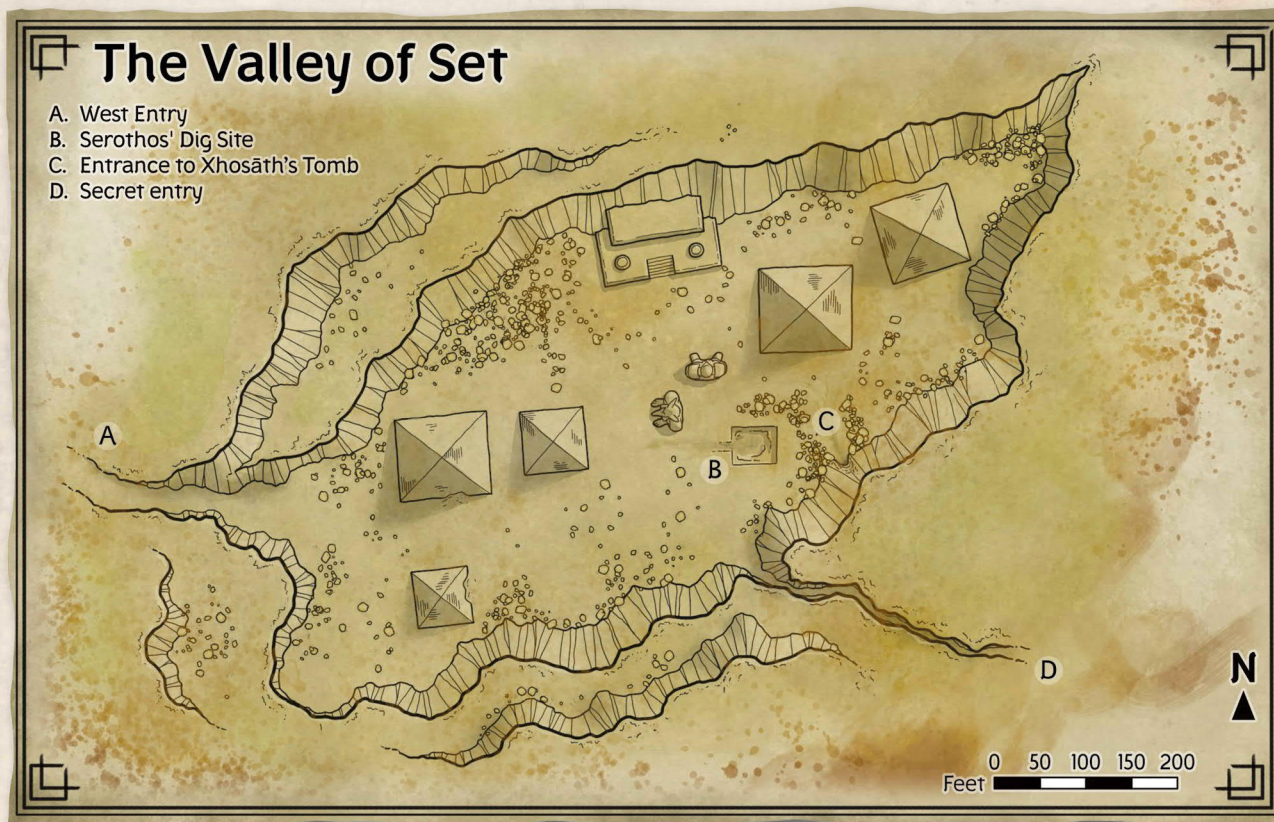
Any player characters still attuned to the Eye and attempting to sense its direction can, with a successful Daunting (D3) Sorcery test, get a sense that it is to the northeast of them, almost assuredly in the direction of the Valley of Set.

If the player characters want to go immediately, Harkouf demurs and attempts to convince them to do otherwise. If they ride out without visibility, they may be lost, or worse, run into the Stygian army out there, not that far away. Despite this, he provides directions if they demand it. There are no stars to navigate by, and visibility is limited, but with a successful Dire (D4) Survival test the player characters can find their way to the Valley of Set.

Harkouf speaks with the player characters privately. If they have not told them of their purpose, he demands to know. He will not betray them, but would like to know why a sorcerer struck a blow against them. What have they done to deserve such attention?

Once or if he learns about the true nature of the threat the player characters face, he glowers. He despises the Black Ring almost as much as the theocracy of Set, and thus is willing to throw in with the player characters and fight, perhaps even dying, alongside them. He will put it to his





brigands and let them each decide whether they will ride with him against such fell sorcery.

If the player characters wait with the rest of the bandits, then barely hours later, when the sun is but a glow on the horizon, the Black Vulture and his brigands are ready to ride. They take only their weapons and minimal food with them, and secure and hide the rest, with a small number of those unable to ride due to being wounded in the storm. Harkouf asks the player characters what they plan to do, offering his suggestions for strategies.

When all is decided, the bandits and the player characters ride on, spurring their animals to near-reckless speed, all the more ready to fight and end this menace to themselves, to Stygia, and to the world at large!

THE VALLEY OF SET

From a distance, the Valley of Set is rather nondescript, a vast valley of desert and rock, dotted with scrub plants, relatively flat and featureless, but the massive wedges of pyramids and other structures loom, buildings so large that they dwarf any structures the player characters are likely to have seen in this world. They are deceptively close, and the sun rising in the east limns their edges, making them even more mysterious, casting the sides facing the player characters entirely in darkness. Older and smaller steppe

pyramids also figure prominently into the skyline, mixed with the occasional obelisk or squared column.

Fortunately, there are many rises and falls to the landscape outside the valley and the bandits can approach discretely, tying their horses and camels nearby and walking the rest of the way. Gathering on the western ridge of the Valley of Set, they peer into the vast basin strewn with monuments to death and the afterlife. Harkouf provides more information about the Valley's features if a guide is not present.

From a vantage, they can surveil the entire valley, as the slow march of the sun rises and illuminates it to greater effect. Massive, seated colossi with impassive features tower over the entrances to wall tombs, and smaller clusters of free-standing structures house lesser nobles and court officials who were important enough to be buried here but not so much to gain grand edifices. In yet humbler places are tiny group graves containing the jarred mummies and ashes of those who contributed to the building of the monuments within the Valley — architects, overseers, and slaves alike — with their bodies' conditions based on the degree of their status.

Off to the north one of the newer, unfinished pyramids is being built, that belonging to King Ctesphon, the current ruler of Stygia. Currently work has ceased, as the king has ordered all his laborers to another project, a folly of his

in Luxur, several days' march to the north. The Valley of Set is described in additional detail on page 32 of **Conan the Adventurer**.

Harkouf points off in the distance, at the eastern wall of the valley, however, and squinting, the player characters can see in a rubble-choked area a large encampment has been established, many white tents dotting the area and small fires already lit. In the center of the camp, a larger and more ornate pavilion stands, lit from within. Figures move around, and the clink of tools and scrape of stone echoing across the valley indicates that work of some sort is being done here, but unlike most of the efforts in the Valley of Set, this is to unearthen someone — or *something* — rather than to entomb them within the earth.

Harkouf (or the guide) knows of a way to skirt the southern stretch of the Valley and a cleft in the rocks by which one could approach from the east. He surmises that if the inhabitants of that camp are aware of the player characters and the bandits, as they almost definitely are, they would not be expecting an approach from the east, and would instead be watching the west, exactly where the bandits are.

Suddenly, the player characters hear from among the bandits a murmur. Curses are sounded. Harkouf barks a question at them, and one points west into the distance. A successful Challenging (D2) Observation test reveals a wide cloud of dust rising there, as if from a large disturbance. Instead of a storm, though, it is the telltale sign of an army on the move. It is the Stygians that the bandits thought were searching for them, but who are in fact on their way to this place. They are approaching rapidly, their chariots racing in the lead.

Any carefully prepared strategies or plans must either be put into action now, expedited, or abandoned entirely, based on the escalating threat the Stygian army presents. Harkouf orders his brigands to act quickly. The time to act is now.

THE HOSTS OF STYGIA

Arrayed against the player characters are the mercenaries and laborers hired by Serothos to excavate the old Acheronian tomb, and the looming threat posed by the arrival of the Stygian army.

Serothos' Forces

Though he is no general, Serothos has hired a small force of Stygian mercenaries to protect his camp and the labors within, and also to enforce discipline. Twenty Stygians of common birth, former soldiers to a man, they served years in the military and have little else but their sword-arms and the wits to wield them. They are clad in leather harness,

supplemented with metal caps and shields. They're all equivalent to Minion Stygian soldiers (page 186).

Serothos also purchased a group of almost fifty slaves and skilled laborers to do the excavation to find and unearthen Xhosāth's tomb, and they have been put to backbreaking effort the past few weeks, digging in multiple places around the Valley of Kings seeking for the true final resting place of the Acheronian sorcerer. They are a mix of Stygian, Kushite, and Dafari slaves, all superstitious and concerned about the effects of digging around in these haunted ruins and disturbing "*the gods only know what*".

When the adventure begins, he has sent almost all of the slaves away from the ritual site, ordering them to toil needlessly in another part of the Valley of Set, with only eight remaining, picked for their part in the dread ritual he is about to commence.

Stygian Soldiers

The army approaching has been sent by the governor of Karnath at the urging of Thoth-Amon, in his role as the Master of the Black Ring and placed highly among the hierarchy of the priests of Set. Though he does not dwell within Karnath, he nonetheless has enough political clout that a messenger can make this happen for him. Led by a Stygian general named Teth-Nakht, the army believes that it has been ordered to chase down a group of foreign assassins on their way to Luxur, diverting into the Valley of Set for nefarious purposes.

In fact, the Stygian sorcerer who had them dispatched was eager to ensure that the player characters were either captured or slain, the Eye of Acheron returned to him as soon as possible, so he set the soldiers to false purpose to search along the way from the coast. There are roughly 80 of them, with ten chariots and twenty horsed officers.

They are all equivalent to the Minion Stygian soldiers described on page 186, with the officers and charioteers being Toughened.

XHOSĀTH'S HAUNTED TOMB

Forgotten by history, the final resting place of the Acheronian sorcerer is no mighty edifice to grandeur, a stairway to eternity or a monument to his greatness. No, nestled amidst a plenitude of crumbling Acheronian ruins, once mighty towers are now aught but rubble. A small section of the valley's wall has been dug away exposing the old cavern in which the Acheronian's body was laid to rest by his eight wives after being violently mutilated and defiled by his enemies (see page 7). Together, they lay down with him and perished, their souls waiting alongside his for eternity, so great was their love for their magnificent husband and sorcerous conqueror.

When Serothos' laborers found the correct cavern and the sorcerer recognized its significance, he beheld a curious sight: a man's body, bearing the markings of many deep wounds and arrow-wounds, as if mutilated savagely long after death. Despite this, his corpse was as intact as it was the day he likely died, many centuries ago. Emblazoned upon his still white skin were many runes and patterns of magical import, whose meanings are lost, but it was obvious to Serothos that these treatments kept Xhosāth's body intact throughout the years. The man's corpse was surrounded with bone fragments intermingled with jewelry, ornaments that likely were worn by the man's household staff or his wives, who likely were slain with, and buried alongside, him.

What Serothos so casually dismissed was that these remains, these fragments of time-blackened bone, were those of Xhosath's eight wives, who had entombed him themselves, and that their spirits, even after all these centuries, were still potent and aware. They did not interfere with Serothos as he took Xhosath's body in all reverence to be cared for and dressed in garments befitting a king, but they also watched and waited, to see what could come next.

Also unbeknownst to Serothos was that Thyra, daughter of Antaeus, a scholar of Messantia, had awakened within his captivity and learned the extent of his plans, puzzling them out through careful study of his magical notes and diagrams left within his tent while he was away overseeing the construction of his ritual space. She found the remains of the eight wives, and when they manifested before her, she made with them a pact to ensure that their beloved would not suffer the indignity intended him.

See page 196 for more on Thyra's intervention.

THE RITUAL SPACE

In the long, jet-black shadows of several high yet broken plinths of ancient make, Serothos has set up his ritual space. Slave laborers cleared rubble away from a circular arena roughly ten yards in diameter. A large, dull black slab of porphyry has been placed within its center, covered with a drape made of the skins of black serpents sewn together with golden thread.

Surrounding this stone bier in the sands are small bowls of gold, silver, platinum, and carved of emerald and jasper. Platters are set upon short columns to be filled with ceremonial offerings of food and drink. Smaller basins smolder already, with aromatic resins and incense to purify and make ready the space for a grand enchantment. A pattern has been drawn in black sand that stands in stark contrast to the dun and tan of the sandy basin floor, forming a roughly circular design of two concentric rings, the space between filled with runes and arcane glyphs of sorcerous purpose.

Inadvertently, or perhaps made a slave himself of the unseen and fickle hand of Fate herself, Serothos has picked none other than the very space in which Xhosāth was brought from his tower and destroyed by his enemies, his lifeblood soaking the earth in this exact place so long ago.

Barely noticeable in this elaborate arrangement are eight small disturbances in the ground within the circle, near the stone slab, as if some small items were secreted therein and concealed hastily...

THE EASTERN APPROACH

The advice given by Harkouf is sound, and after a circuitous route south and back north to emerge to the east of the Valley of Set, the player characters can now approach through a narrow, rocky cleft in the walls, broken and so narrow in places that a full-grown man can barely pass through.

Harkouf and the player characters should be in the lead, scouting the way for the others, who stand ready to defend against a rapid retreat along the same path should it become necessary. There are enough men-at-arms within the excavation site to give them pause. Though the bandits outnumber the warriors by at least two to one, there are many slaves and skilled laborers present, and who knows how such folk would react if violence broke out?

Harkouf points out that the encroaching Stygian army approaches rapidly, having just entered the Valley of Set to the west, near where they were just at. It would be best if this work were done quickly, before they are caught between a rock wall and a sea of swords.

As the player characters and bandits approach the camp and Serothos' ritual space, the gamemaster should have anyone in the lead make an Average (D1) Observation test. If they are successful, they hear someone picking their way through the rocky crevasse before them, between them and their destination. It is impossible to see who, so jagged is the path ahead. This newcomer is just around the corner, approaching carefully but without stealth. What do they player characters do?

If the roll is a failure, they are unaware of the person ahead, and turn the corner blindly and come face-to-face with an unexpected, if familiar face!



AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

It is Thyra, brandishing a long-hafted mattock defensively and clad in a ragged shift, the same garments she wore when the player characters last saw her, in Baruch's estate back on the coast of Shem. She is emaciated, as if she has barely eaten for some time. Dark circles are under her eyes and she sways unsteadily, but holds the tool with its blade angled at the nearest person, ready to strike, though from her posture the effort will send her tumbling.

"Am I aught but dreaming? Is this another damned lotus-bred hallucination? How are you here? Reveal your true forms, phantoms, or by the holy name of Mitra I will cleave you for taking on those very forms... and die for it!"

If the player characters identify themselves and convince her that it is truly them, she collapses into the arms of the nearest one, fraught with the heady blend of fatigue and relief. Harkouf raises an eyebrow. *"You know her?"* he asks if he has not been told of her existence. *"Strange are the paths of Fate."*

'Overjoyed' might be a hyperbolic assessment of Thyra's feelings, but it is not that far from accurate. She embraces each of the player characters, clasping their arms, pressing them to her as if re-establishing herself and them in the mortal world. She explains that since she last saw them — *"How long has it been, in this world?"* — she has been in a drugged stupor, consuming more lotus than the most desperate of addicts from some Zamoran den of iniquity.

However, Thyra explains, that she was able to find a way out of her predicament and has much to tell them and very little time in which to do so. Serothos has the Eye of Acheron, she says, and his ritual is about to start, timed so that the awakening of the Acheronian sorcerer will be as the sunlight crests the eastern cliffside as it rises, shining down upon the space he has prepared for Xhosāth's resurrection. She was fleeing, hoping that the intervention she had wrought would thwart the Stygian's ambition, but now that the player characters are here, they can return and put paid to this scheme if it does not go awry.

Thyra offers to explain as they go and relays to the player characters the events that befell her since they last were together in their mortal forms. If the gamemaster has decided to use Serothos' suggested identity, she can reveal to them that she has suspicions that the sorcerer is not who he seems to be. Then, she asks if they have brought any food with them, as she is astonishingly hungry.

Harkouf squints across the Valley of Set, grimaces, and tells the player characters *"Be quick. The army approaches and makes haste. Their riders and chariots will be here soon,*

then their host. I will go to my bandits and get our mounts. We will see each other shortly on the field of battle... or in the next world. Now go!" With that, he vanishes back the way they came.

THE MAIDEN... DISTRESSED

Though she has been unconscious and 'offscreen' for the past few chapters, a captive of Serothos, she has served the sorcerer in one important fashion: to draw the Eye of Acheron to him and with it, his ability to withdraw Xhosāth's soul and complete his ritual. Despite this relative incapacity, she has now been able to turn the tables on her captor.

Since being captured by the hell-harpy and borne to Serothos' tower, she was imprisoned by the Stygian, who kept her drugged with lotus tincture served in a nutritious broth, rather than have to deal with her. She cannot say much about his appearance, as he wears always a bronze mask fashioned with hawklike features, and has never seen him without it.

Thyra says that she was trundled along on the expedition to the Valley of Set like a piece of furniture, awakening periodically when the lotus wore off. Between her dreamlike visits to the afterworld and these moments of clarity, she was barely aware of the passage of time.

One day, though, she dreamt that she was on a beach looking out at an endless sea, a jungle behind her. She heard a voice nearby, whispering her name. Sitting on the sand was a tall, wild-haired old man in half-ropes with a wily grin upon his wrinkled face. He put a finger to his lips and told her *"Wake now, child, but be silent. Watch. Do not drink what they give you. Wake, and be patient. Help will come, but you must do what you can on your own."*

When next Thyra woke, she spat out what she could of the broth when she was alone, and slowly she gained her senses. Since then, she took stock of the situation and learned all she could. She continued to feign her drugged and suggestible state, coughing up the lotus extract when fed it. When the Stygian sorcerer was gone to see to the excavation, she pored over his magical notes, his tomes and scrolls, and his arcane workbooks and learned all she could about the history of the Eye of Acheron and Serothos' plans.

If the gamemaster is using Serothos' suggested true identity, Thyra also mentions that she has also discovered that he may not seem to be who he is named.

At night, when Serothos slept in the pavilion and she in an adjacent side chamber within it, she stealthily crept out and explored the excavation site, discovering its secrets. When she saw the array of sorcerous glyphs meant to contain the sorcerer, she sought a means of fouling the binding spell in its making.

SEROTHOS REVEALED

The players may be thrilled, and their characters dismayed, to learn that their enemy in this adventure is nothing more than a figment, a false identity cast to mislead his enemies. 'Serothos' does not truly exist and is but another guise for the Stygian sorcerer Thoth-Amon, Master of the Black Ring. Depending on when this campaign is set and whether it hews to the chronology of the stories set forth by Robert E. Howard, this can be at a time when Thoth-Amon reigns within Stygia and has yet to run afoul of his rivals who humble him and turn him into an exile.

Alternatively, it can be in that period after he has reclaimed the Ring of Set, but his fate is yet to be determined. He finds the guise of Serothos a useful tool to acting without drawing notice and pitting the identity as a rival to himself helps muddle the matter even further. A rival of Thoth-Amon's should naturally shy from being seen, lest they draw his wrath or incur the displeasure of the entire Black Ring.

Howard himself never speculated on Thoth-Amon's doom, leaving it open for interpretation. Despite much pastiche pitting them as rivals, the sorcerer seemed barely interested in Conan's existence in "The Phoenix on the Sword", and likely far more invested in his rivalry with Kalanthes of Hanumar, an enmity described in "The God in the Bowl".

Thoth-Amon, in all his sinister glory, is described on page 357 of the *Conan* corebook. The Serpent Ring of Set, his most potent artifact, is described there.

However, if the gamemaster feels that having the premiere and most dreaded sorcerer of the Hyborian Age as the nemesis for this adventure, then 'Serothos' is exactly who he is, an up-and-coming sorcerer of the Black Ring and an enemy to Thoth-Amon, daring even more than his enemy ever did. See below for a description of the 'true' Serothos.

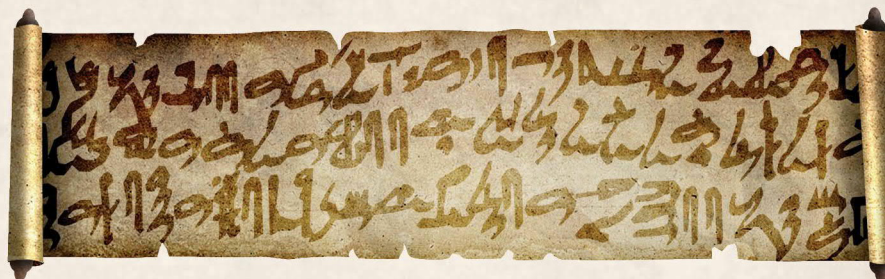
Serothos, Sorcerer of the Black Ring

This Stygian noble is the only son of Nebantos, a once-powerful Stygian sorcerer destroyed by Thoth-Amon decades ago on his own path to becoming the Lord of the Black Ring. The sorcerer's son survived, and in him was lit a fire of hate for Thoth-Amon. Serothos embarked on a journey across Stygia and to the East, learning the magic of other lands, until he felt he was ready to unlock the secrets of the ancient sorceries of Acheron, with which he would truly become the greatest sorcerer of the Hyborian world.

He returned to Stygia and assembled a web of contacts, seeking to find an edge or ally against Thoth-Amon. The Lord of the Black Ring was powerful, however, and had few enemies of note remaining. Calling to demonic servitors, Serothos learned a name that few demons would dare to utter aloud, even in Hell itself. That name was 'Xhosāth of Acheron.' Even just this name cost him much, a hideous disfigurement of his features that forced him to wear a mask at all times, out of shame and humiliation.

Discovering more about the long-vanquished sorcerer, Serothos learned of the Eye of Acheron and its true nature as the prison of Xhosāth's soul. He set agents to seek it, waiting for years. When Baruch contacted him with knowledge of its whereabouts, he dispatched another of his chosen allies, Semerkhet, to Messantia to recover it. With it in his grasp, he plans on binding Xhosath to his will, and setting the Acheronian and his sorcery against Thoth-Amon, challenging him for supremacy within the Black Ring. Allied with the magical might conferred by this deathless sorcerer, Serothos plans a new age of terror with he as its ultimate master.

This version of Serothos is a Nemesis version of the sorcerer described on page 321 of the *Conan* corebook, adjusted for his Nemesis status, with the *Dismember*, *Enslave*, *Raise Up the Dead*, and *Summon a Horror* spells, with his Resolve reduced accordingly.



Finding the cavern in which the remains of Xhosath and his eight wives were discovered, she located the remains of his wives, little more than fragments of bone. She collected all of their remains, mere fragments, and hid them in the sands of Serothos' ritual space, within the circumference described by his binding circle.

Thyra is no sorcerer, but she hopes that it is such that when the Stygian raises the Acheronian from the dead, he will in fact also unite the sorcerer with the spirits of his wives, who are not constrained by the spell. Their names and identities are long forgotten, save to her, and cannot be commanded by any sorcerer. The Stygian, knowing no human compassion or companionship, would never consider that Xhosath's wives would be of importance to him, and disregarded them entirely.

Thus, when Serothos draws the soul of the sorcerer from the black gem and unites it in life, he may unwittingly bring back into the world eight spirits who are both tied eternally to the sorcerer, but are free to act of their own volition.

This, she concludes, is what she has done while the player characters have made their way to her. But now, she looks up at the sky as it brightens with light above them... there is no time.

SCENE VII: DAWN OF ETERNITY

*My ruthless hands still clutch at life —
Still like a shoreless sea
My soul beats on in rage and strife
You may not shackle me.*

— "A Word from the Outer Dark", Robert E. Howard

As the player characters and Thyra approach the ritual site, they are approached by a group of six of Serothos' hired mercenaries, who do not recognize them but are on the lookout for the escaped Argossean woman from their master's tent. To the east of the camp is the ritual site, and the Stygians are interposed between the heroes and their destination. The mercenaries, hands on weapons and wary looks on their faces, swagger forward and beckon for the intruders to stop.



“Halt!” their apparent leader commands in Stygian. “Put down your weapons and surrender her to us.”

These are Minion Stygian warriors (see page 186) led by one Toughened example. If any are allowed to flee or raise an alarm, the rest of the mercenaries, another handful, come running from the ritual space, arriving in two rounds, and attack without hesitation or any offer for surrender.

As blades are bared and the specter of death hangs waiting in the air, ready to feast, two horns blare loudly from the ritual space. The spell has begun.

THE RITUAL COMMENCES

A shout goes out from the ritual space in Stygian, first a chant of supplication that is a part of any worship service to Set, then another voice speaks, deep and full of power, these words uttered in Old Stygian. If any player characters know this tongue or succeed in a Dire (D4) Linguistics test, this is what they hear spoken:

“I name myself Thoth-Amon, and as the Master of the Black Ring and a high priest of the Great Serpent Set it is my will that this gem be a prison no more. The gate between life and death be opened to me. What spirit that inhabited this ancient flesh be allowed to return to this world from the next and be restored fully to it.”

Thyra can translate it for them if they do not understand.

The player characters should arrive on the scene after having dealt with the mercenary guard, they see a tall, broad-shouldered man with a bronze mask, sculpted with hawklike features, clad in green and gold robes. In one hand held aloft is the Eye of Acheron, and it gleams in the sunlight, brighter than is natural. His other hand holds a long blade with a serpentine blade, painted red with blood.

The sorcerer, Serothos (or Thoth-Amon if this is now known), stands at the head of a black stone bier, upon which lies the body of an alabaster-skinned man, wounds aplenty upon the parts of his skin that are exposed. He is dressed in Stygian finery, and his eyes are open, if insensate.

Kneeling around the ritual space in a wide circle spaced at its edges are eight Stygian women, slaves clad only in loincloths and ceremonial jewelry, hands resting within bronze basins filled with blood. Their heads are down and from the utter stillness and slack of their bodies, each is undoubtedly dead. The rest of the area is as described on page 193.

The Eye of Acheron pulses one more time brightly, and shatters, causing the sorcerer to drop it, wincing and pulling his hand back in pain. His dagger clatters to the gravel below his feet, and the artifact lands upon the

bier, smoking as if blasted by lightning. A black radiance emerges from it, floating about the supine body. A moment later, it enters through the man’s chest, passing through flesh as if it were a sieve. The white-skinned man’s eyes suddenly gleam with light and his chest shudders, a great wracking breath being pulled in.

At this point, the Stygian army reaches the excavation camp, and Harkouf’s own brigands ride out to meet them, sweeping through the valley like the very desert wind, the simoom, that assailed them so recently. They race to intercept the Stygian cavalry and chariots, who swerve to meet them. Weapons raised and angry yells sound as they collide in battle.

If the player characters intervene at any point during this ritual, the gamemaster is encouraged to try to delay them with the arrival of more Stygian mercenaries or perhaps even a response from Serothos himself, using any of his normal array of sorcerous gifts. See page 197 for more on Serothos’ identity and his sorcerous powers. He likely uses spells like *Dismember* or *Enslave* as his immediate means of attacking.

As another precaution, Serothos has also summoned his hell-harpy, who waits nearby, perched in the shadows cast by one of the stone colossi seated nearby, looming high within the Valley of Set. See page 95 for a description of that monstrous creature. It gives a fearsome screech and dives into the fray if its master is threatened.

Meanwhile, almost unnoticed, eight swirling motes emerge from the ground amidst the eight sacrificial slave women and enter their bodies as well. Their chests rise and swell in unison, and their heads slowly begin to rise.

The masked sorcerer’s attention, however, is fully upon his injured hand and the figure on the bier. Xhosāth sits upright, the wounds raw and gaping across his body slowly closing, then fading as if they were never there. He gets to his feet, and looks around the circle, his gaze settling on each of the sacrificial slaves where they kneel. He nods and turns to face Serothos, his intended master.

At this, Serothos speaks again, this time in low, modern Stygian. His voice is hurried, without the certainty as before.

“I name myself Thoth-Amon, and as the Master of the Black Ring and a high priest of the Great Serpent Set it is my will that this man, now united in flesh and spirit, be bound into my service. He stands within a ring I have scribed with promises to you, o Serpent King and to your dark and terrible brethren. Encircled as such, he is to become my slave, enslaved to my will and bent to serve my commands alone. As is marked the circle surrounding him, so shall his confinement be in his eternal servitude.”

A cruel smile crosses Xhosāth's lips then, and though his features are pale and his eyes lambent, it is as if a terrible darkness crosses his features. The eight women surrounding the two sorcerers stand, their hands reddened with their own blood, and the bronze bowls of their own lifeblood are now empty, having washed away the binding circle where they stood. He reaches down and picks up the serpent-bladed dagger, stained with blood, testing its point with a fingertip.

"No," he says in Stygian. "I think not."

XHOSĀTH, SORCERER OF ACHERON (NEMESIS, HORROR)

Reincarnate, Xhosāth is broad-shouldered and powerful of frame, his face lambent and eyes glowing. Though he was clad in red robes and accoutrements suitable for his status as an Acheronian sorcerer of note, his new patron Serothos has provided him with Stygian garments befitting royalty, to show the newly risen sorcerer his respect. Gone are his trappings, but the power that the sorcerer emanates is obvious.

He is unaware that Serothos plans to bind and contain him, to make him but a combination of sorcerous patron and servant, extracting from him the knowledge of ancient Acheronian demon wizardry and necromancy. Once this becomes apparent, the Acheronian will inevitably react in fury.

ATTRIBUTES

| Awareness | Intelligence | Personality | Willpower |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| 12 | 11 | 13 | 13(2) |
| Agility | Brawn | Coordination | |
| 10 | 11 | 10 | |




FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

| Combat | — | Movement | — |
|-----------|---|----------|---|
| Fortitude | 3 | Senses | 3 |
| Knowledge | 4 | Social | 3 |

STRESS & SOAK

- **Stress:** Vigor 14, Resolve 18
- **Soak:** Armor 5 (Sorcerous Preservation), Courage 3

ATTACKS

- **Sacrificial Blade (M):** Reach 1, 5 , 1H, Unforgiving 1
- **Incandescent Blast of Sorcery (R):** Range M, 8 , 1H, Blinding, Fearsome 2,
- **Doom of Ages (T):** Range C, 7 , mental, Area, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Beloved:** His resurrected wives attempt to shield him from harm. Any attacks against him must go through one or more of them.
- **Denizen of a Demon-haunted Age:** Trained in an age of much more powerful sorcery than this, Xhosath may re-roll any failed Knowledge test made for sorcery but must accept the result of the second roll.
- **Dread Creature 5**
- **Fear 1**
- **Inhuman Willpower 2**
- **Inured to Cold, Disease, Fear, Heat, Pain, Poison**
- **Patron**

DOOM SPENDS

- **Acheronian Sorcerer:** Xhosāth knows any spell the gamemaster feels he should have. Additionally, he can spend Doom to power spells on a 1 for 2 basis.
- **Counter Magic:** Xhosath knows almost any spell that any mortal sorcerer is going to throw his way and has likely deconstructed the spell down to its first principles. When able to use counter magic in a Struggle, for 1 Doom can re-roll any d20 that fails, but must accept the result of the second roll.
- **White Demon Fire:** Xhosāth can spend 2 Doom to add Incendiary 2 and Spread 2 to his **Incandescent Blast of Sorcery**.

A DUEL OF SORCERY

If the scene has transpired as described above, the player characters are caught up amid a sorcerous battle between the greatest sorcerer of Stygia and the greatest sorcerer of demon haunted Acheron, whose evil and magical might far outstripped anything seen in the Hyborian Age since. What will happen?

The player characters are not without their own magical assets, in the form of weapons emblazoned with holy Mitra's sign of the Phoenix and with the ancient, cat-headed staff of M'wangele, an item of considerable potency against the undead.

Serothos bears a potent magical artifact (see page 197) at his disposal. His hell-harpy, mentioned prior, may also be utilized as a last-ditch escape method, swooping in to snatch him up and bear him away should he be severely outmatched or about to be defeated. If he is killed, however, the creature can also be utilized as a means of bearing away his corpse, potentially allowing him a miraculous means of returning as if from the dead in a later adventure.

Xhosāth, described prior, is an accomplished sorcerer and can use any spell from the *Conan* corebook as well as any the gamemaster may wish to introduce from *The Book of Skelos* or any other appropriate *Conan* sourcebook. He remembers the player characters from the afterworld and will scornfully destroy them as casually as he would an insect that stands on the path before him. The true target of his anger is Serothos, for his effrontery and disrespect. Defeated, all the enchantments that preserved his body for eternity end and he shrivels instantly until becoming little more than wizened skeleton.

The reincarnated spirits of Xhosāth's eight wives are Toughened ghosts (*Conan* corebook, page 337), but bear malice only to Serothos. They will die — again — defending their lord and love, Xhosāth, and only attack the player characters if they threaten him. They do not attack or threaten Thyra.

The battle between the Stygian army and Harkouf's bandits can be resolved as the gamemaster sees fit. A downbeat ending might have the desert warriors beaten by the army, captured, or otherwise driven away, forcing the player characters to flee once the fight with the sorcerers is concluded. A more satisfactory resolution would be to have them survive, or even at the last moment be able to arrive within the ritual space, perhaps Harkouf adding his own sword to the battle royale, or helping the player characters escape certain death if things go poorly for them.

CONCLUSION AND CONTINUATION

Standing in the ruins of Xhosāth's tomb, perhaps littered with the corpses of Serothos, his guards, and the desiccated remains of the Acheronian sorcerer himself, the player characters should in all likelihood feel that they need to get out of Stygia in a hurry. Fortunately, in the Black Vulture they have an ally and his brigands may be a valuable resource to help this happen without difficulty.

If the gamemaster wishes to continue from here, this could involve a running battle with the player characters pursued by a vengeful Stygian army, or even a last-ditch strike from Serothos, if he escaped. If Serothos was indeed Thoth-Amon, then the Black Ring is now going to undergo a significant crisis without their leader, and the player characters may even witness a rival claimant arriving on the scene, ready to claim the Ring of Set for themselves.

Thyra, daughter of Antaeus, is stranded in the middle of Stygia and likely needs some sort of assistance getting somewhere safe. Though she has demonstrated her capabilities, a trek across a strange desert alone is more than can be reasonably expected. The player characters

could return with her to Messantia, or find another port and help set her upon her way home.

There is also the matter of Baruch, the Pelishtim translator in Asgalun, and his treachery that led to the death of Antaeus and so many more. Will the player characters help Thyra bring him to justice, and see that she has vengeance?

As for material wealth, if they return to the Makonde village, they have the shares of the spoils from Tothmekri's island, enough Gold to last any normal person for quite a while, though they will no doubt find plenty of opportunities to spend it on carousing or other ventures. Social Standing (*Conan* corebook, page 19) may also increase marginally, at least temporarily. Mattai'a is looking for brave new sailors to join her Black Corsairs. Do the player characters want to take her up on that offer?

Harkouf, if he survived the battle at the Valley of Set, might be looking for more brigands to join his band. Perhaps a stint of normal banditry might be just the ease after a heady adventure such as this!

The Eye of Acheron, should it be recovered, is worthless now, save as a keepsake. Blasted by magic and its sorcerous potency gone, it is now warped and burnt, as if intense heat were applied to it, capable of even harming a gem. The casing is similarly wrecked. But if one stares too long into it... is there within its deep darkness a tiny flickering mote of light?

A PLACE TO CALL ONE'S OWN...

Though none of the player characters are likely to have earned a Holding as a result of these adventures (*Conan* corebook, page 295), the gamemaster may choose to have Thyra offer them her father's manse in Messantia (described on pages 22) for their use as a base of operations. She has little interest in remaining there full-time and assuming the player characters are willing to pay the upkeep on it (25 Gold per month will keep the existing staff fed and paid and the tax assessors from seizing it). From here, the player characters have a detailed home base in one of the most thriving and vital cities along the Western Sea coast, a wonderfully central base for adventure.

For a gamemaster with access to *Conan the King*, this counts as a Manor, but without any of the associated land, and does not generate income (see pages 78–79). However, the benefits of Antaeus' estate as a research facility are considerable, for sorcerous or lore-based characters.

EXPERIENCE

Surviving the climactic chapter of *The Shadow of the Sorcerer* is quite an achievement. The player characters have crossed hundreds of miles of sea and land, battled terrible foes among the living and the dead, seen vistas no living person has beheld, and hopefully thwarted the resurrection of an immensely deadly foe who would have wreaked havoc upon the Hyborian world for untold ages to come.

Any player characters who have survived the events of this chapter and destroyed the Acheronian sorcerer Xhosãth should be awarded 500 experience points above and beyond the normal per-session rewards. This is a significant amount of experience, but an epic evil has been overcome and that is a tremendous thing in and of itself. Player characters who were instrumental in the resolution of this final chapter or whose roleplaying contributed greatly to the spirit of the game should be granted another 200 bonus experience points.

Additionally, the conclusion of this epic should be cause enough to award the player characters an additional Fortune point above and beyond their current maximum, depending on how much they contributed overall to the campaign's resolution.

Award them each an increase in their Renown (*Conan* corebook, page 303), with the reward being adjusted based on the current Renown of each individual player character. Those with reasonably high Renown (3+) should gain only a single level at most, and those with low Renown (-2 to 1) might get a boost of one or two levels.

From here, the player characters should feel they have accomplished something significant, thwarting the plans of the most powerful sorcerer of the Hyborian Age, and preventing the resurrection of a deathless sorcerer-king from bringing a new age of terror into the world. They should be able to lay for a while, enjoying the material and emotional rewards from that achievement.

*Man is a fool and a blinded toy —
The Fire still flickers and burns,
Though the cobra coils in the cup called Joy,
And ever the Worm returns.*

— “Hope Empty of Meaning”, Robert E. Howard





CAMPAIGN MAPS



Antaeus' Estate



- A. Antaeus' Chamber
- B. Food Store
- C. Kitchen
- D. Maid's Room
- E. Hidden Vault
- F. Great Study
- G. Courtyard & Garden
- H. Thyra's Room
- I. Chef & Butler's Quarters
- J. Dining Hall
- K. Entry Hall
- L. Library & Study
- M. Guard's Room



Argos

Zingara

Pottain

Argos

Sh

Messantia

Eloth

Asgalun

A. Land Route
B. Sea Route

Baruch's Villa & Surrounding Lands



0 25 50 75 100
Feet

N

To Asgalun

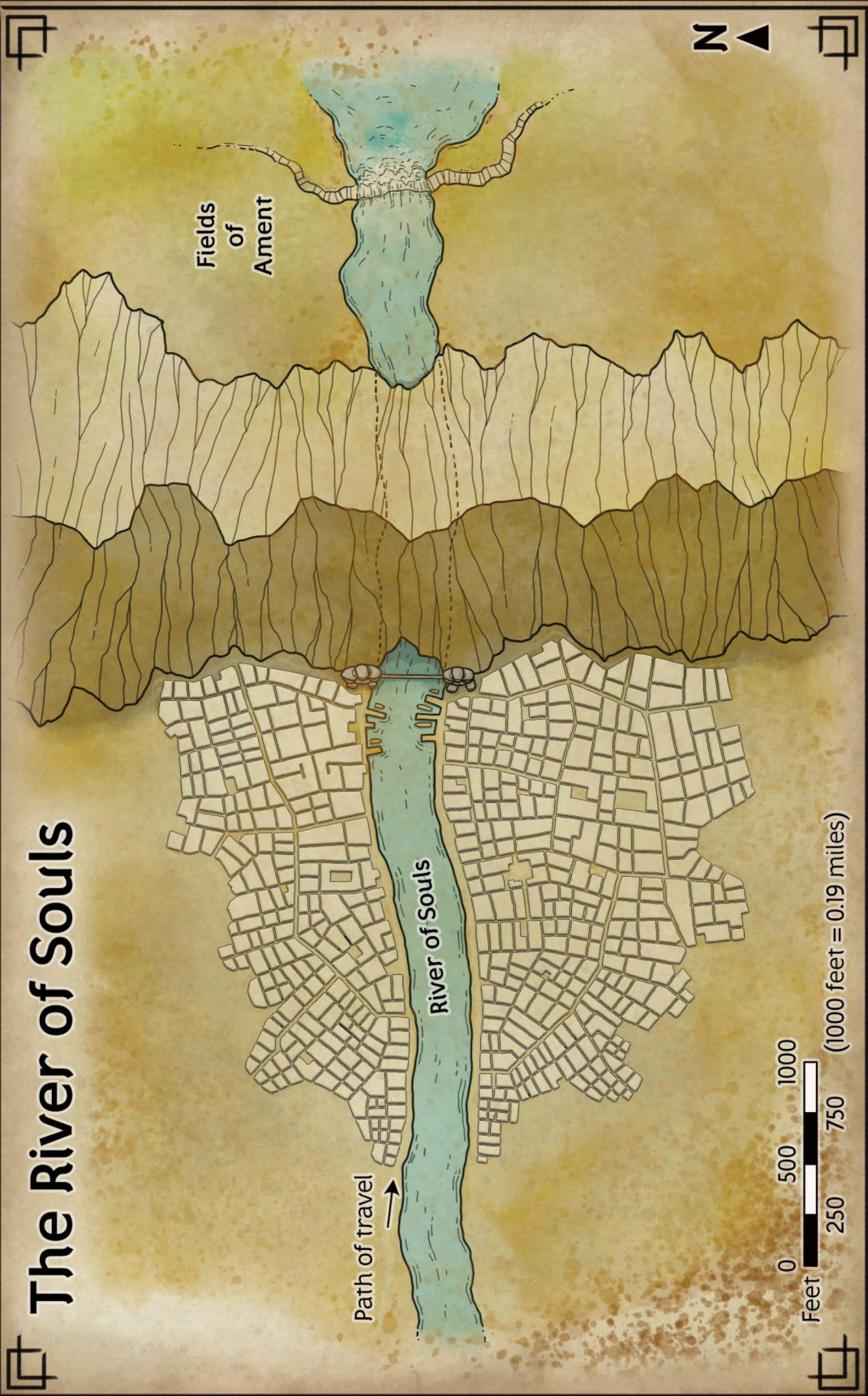
Western Sea

Path to the Main Road

Baruch's Villa



The River of Souls



Fields
of
Ament

Path of travel →

River of Souls

0 250 500 750 1000
Feet (1000 feet = 0.19 miles)

N

The Island of Tothmekri

Miles 0 0.25 0.5 0.75 1



North West Quarter

North East Quarter



South West Quarter

South East Quarter

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A. The Beach | G. Mouth of Typhon | M. Shrine of Set | S. Well of The World's Hollow |
| B. Grasping Water | H. Emerald Cove | N. Old Settlement | T. Serpent's Mouth |
| C. Teeth of Set | I. Shining Fields | O. Wreck of the Khebentiu | U. Slumbering Giant |
| D. Wreck of the Calypso | J. Fortress of Tothmekri | P. Watchtower | V. Curtain of Mist |
| E. Valley of Bones | K. Theater of Death | Q. Southern Peninsula | W. Hidden Cave |
| F. The Jungle | L. Dreaming Fields | R. Bones of Giants | X. Valley of the Sky |

The Fortress of Tothmekri

- A. The Gate
- B. The Great Hall
- C. Apophis' Tower
- D. The Well
- E. Watch Tower
- F. The Hall of Set
- G. Theater of Death

- H. Courtier's Chambers
- I. Food Stores & Kitchen
- J. Barracks
- K. Servant's Quarters
- L. Alchemical Tower
- M. Secret Passage from the Jungle



The Cavern

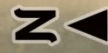
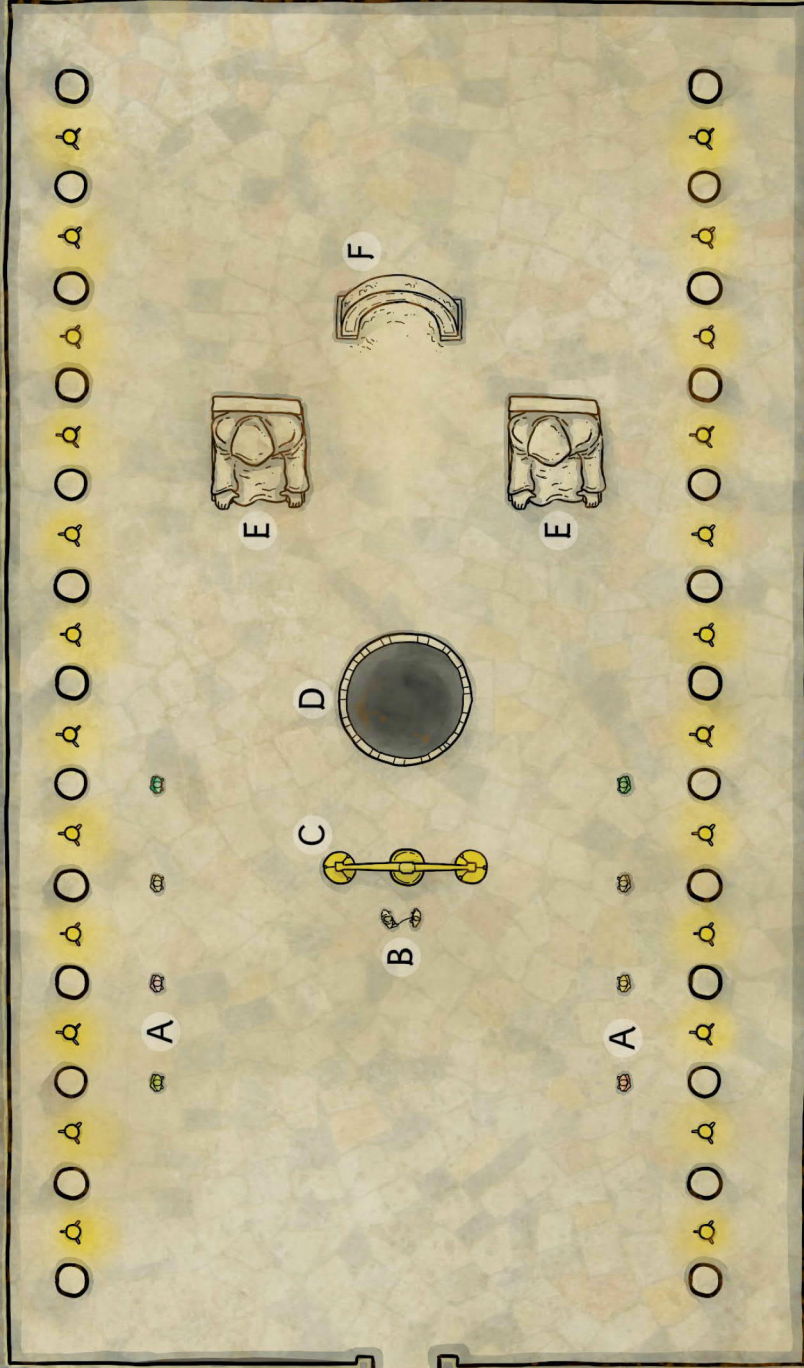
- A. River Entry
- B. Xhosāth's Barge
- C. Exit to Hall



The Hall of Judgement



- A. Xhosāth's Wives
- B. Xhosāth and Tothmekri
- C. Scales
- D. Well
- E. Seated Judges
- F. Door To The World



The Valley of Set

- A. West Entry
- B. Serothos' Dig Site
- C. Entrance to Xhosath's Tomb
- D. Secret entry



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